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THE WORLD'S #1 VIDEO GAME MAGAZINE



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AFTERGLOW®

Hardware Matters. Or It Doesn't



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

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

The Nintendo Wii U launch on November 18 raises a number of interesting questions about hardware power and its necessity for great gaming. Nintendo obviously stepped away from the CPU/GPU arms race with the relatively underpowered Wii, and this strategy continues with its newest platform.

It's hard to say Nintendo made the wrong choice. As I write this, I worry that I need to explain Central Processing Unit and Graphics Processing Unit to the uninitiated. And that's just the surface of today's technologies. Try on these mouthfuls for size: floating point operations per second, triangle rendering power, and per pixel particle effects. That's just the beginning of the techno jargon used when evaluating a computer's power.

Nintendo understands there is another important question to ask when developing a game – is it fun?

Pac-Man wasn't made on a supercomputer. The phone in your pocket dwarfs the technology that Pac-Man was created on back in 1980. High technology isn't required for great gaming, and Nintendo knows that fact. The company also knows that no one can imitate its unique approach to game development. When you get a Nintendo platform, you know you will get great games starring industry icons.

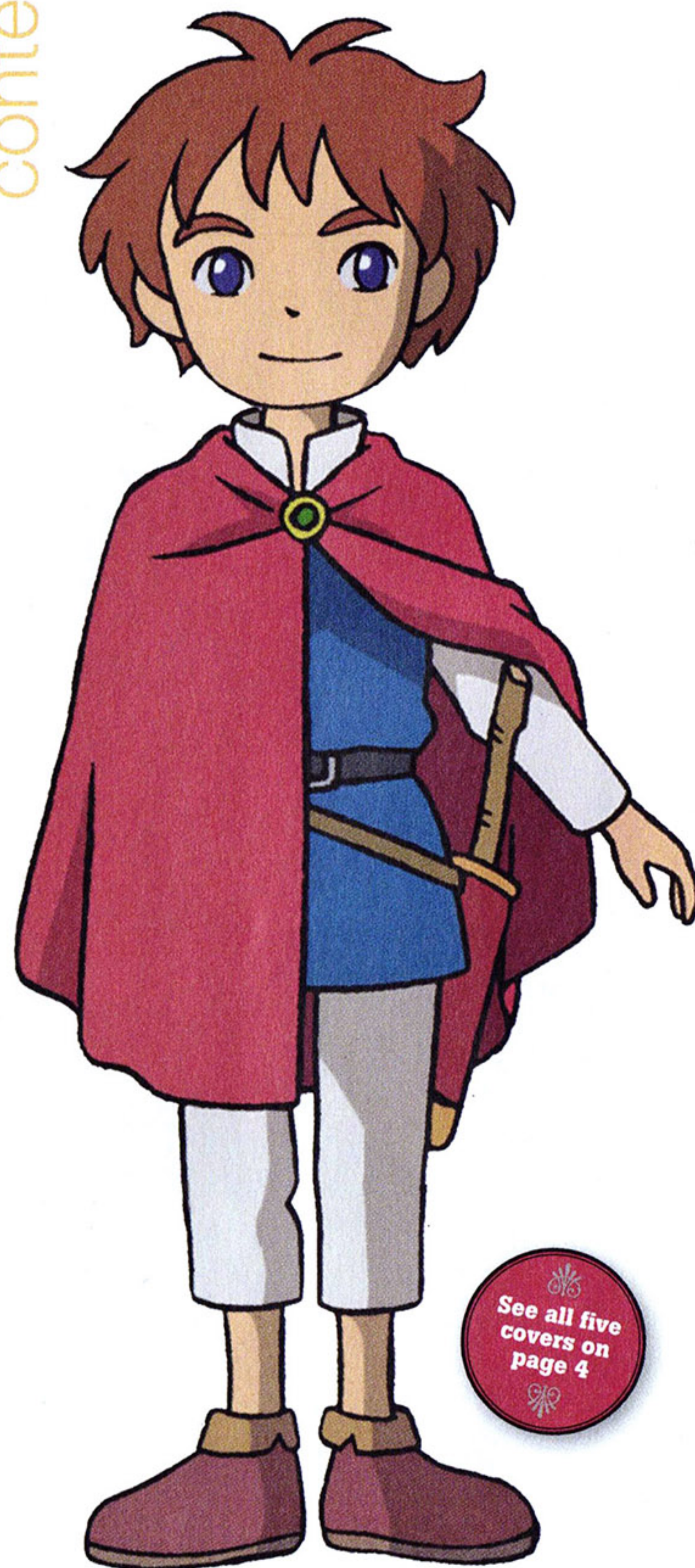
Even though powerful hardware isn't a necessity, I admit that I love computing power. I know that the studios that make many of my favorite games – be it Gearbox, 343, Epic, Irrational, or any of the others that I admire – will create their upcoming masterpieces on the latest and greatest hardware, and I want to experience those games in the best way possible.

Game creators will always strive for the best, just as car manufacturers continue to make faster and faster cars for highways that have 55-mile-per-hour speed limits.

There is no right or wrong in the argument. People like what they like, and great games will be made with and without bleeding-edge computer graphics. However, I know when given the option it's in my nature to pick technology that pushes the envelope. Some would say I'm a graphics snob, and maybe I am.

It's in Nintendo's nature to pick design over tech. You say "toMAYto," I say "toMAHto." I'll play good games wherever they may be.

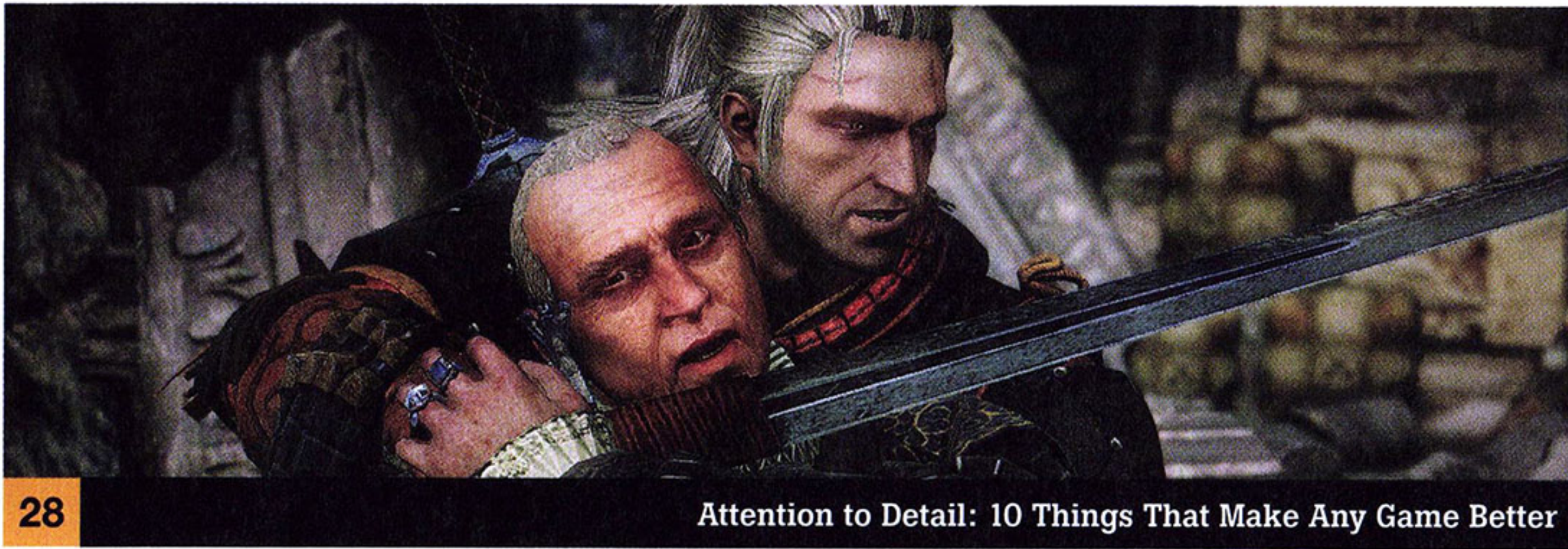
112 contents



» 50

Five Under the Radar Games to Watch

Everyone knows about the huge releases that are set to dominate the holiday season and the beginning of next year, but what about the games that are worth taking a look at that don't have the same marketing muscle behind them? This month we're highlighting five games we want to ensure don't pass you by. Check out our features on Metro: Last Light, Fuse, Ni No Kuni: Wrath of the White Witch, Dead Island: Riptide, and Beyond: Two Souls.



28

Attention to Detail: 10 Things That Make Any Game Better



24

Lost RPG Franchises, Where Are They Now?

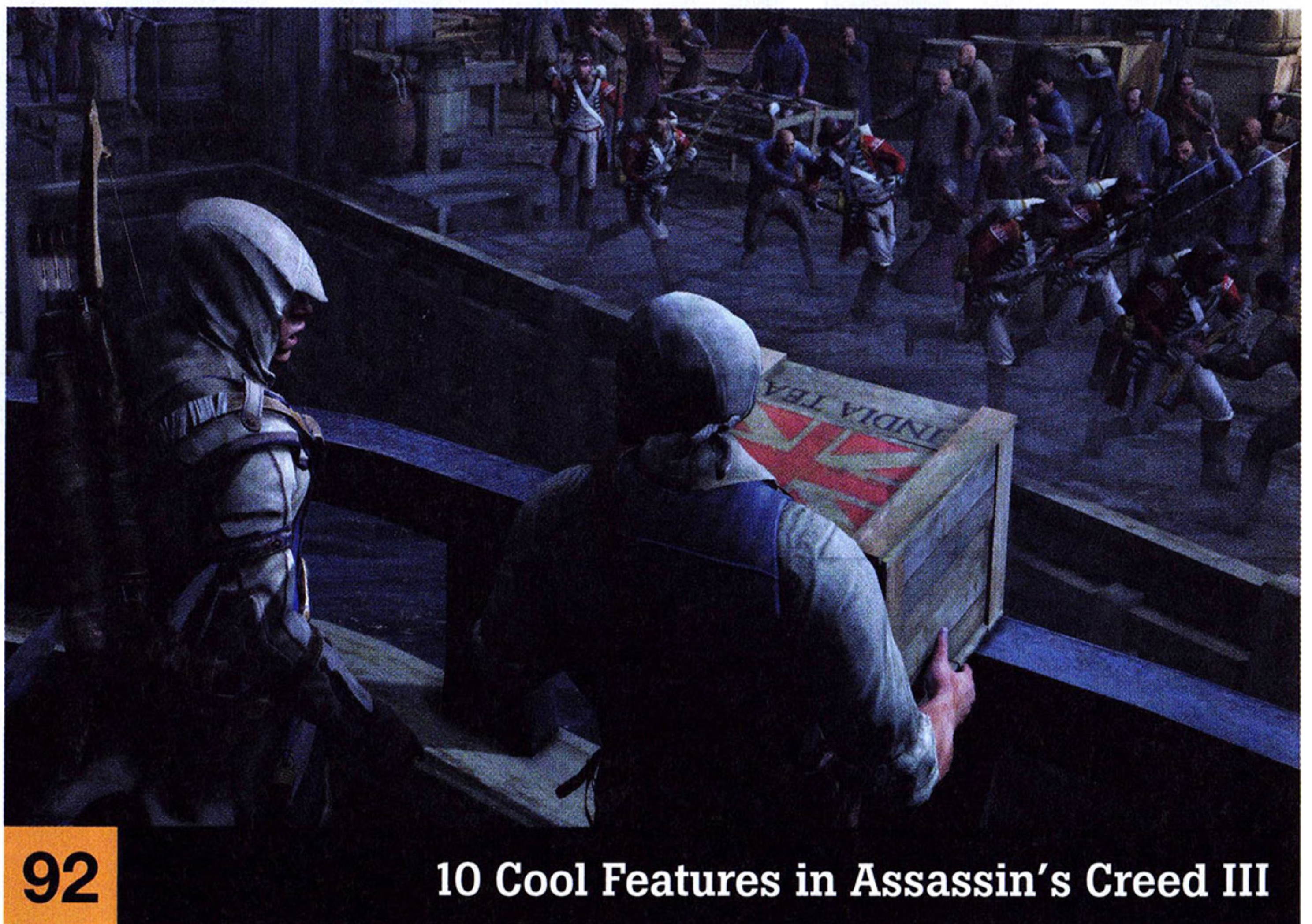


118

XCOM: Enemy Unknown

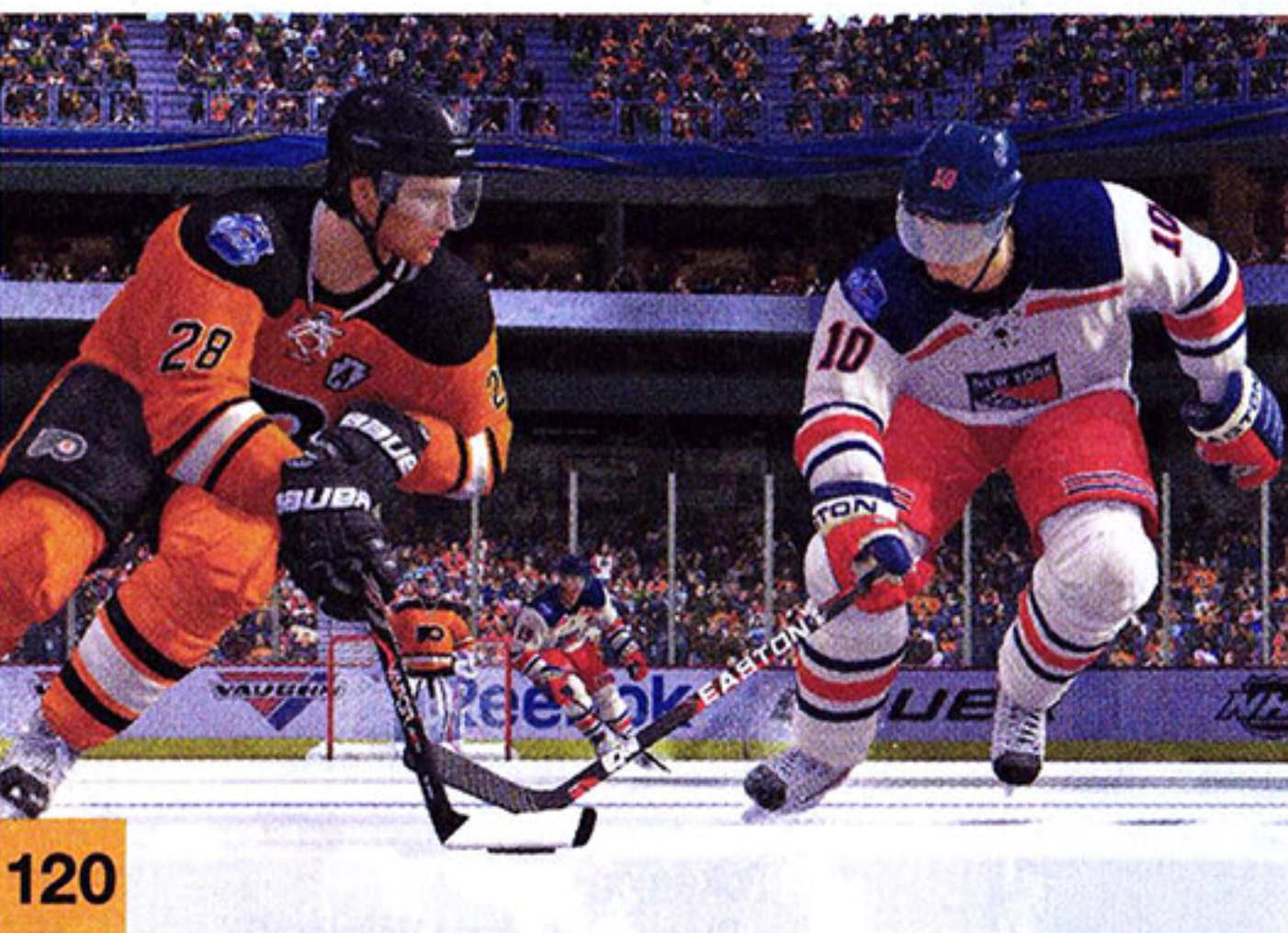


14



92

10 Cool Features in Assassin's Creed III



120

regulars

» 6 Feedback

Readers remind us of the cooperative titles we left off of our list of best co-op games, place Ouya on a pedestal, and tell us what is wrong with the video game industry.

» 14 Connect

We have new Wii U information including price and release date, we take a look at how Steam is moving to your television, and we find out what happened to all of our favorite RPG franchises of the past.

» 98 Previews

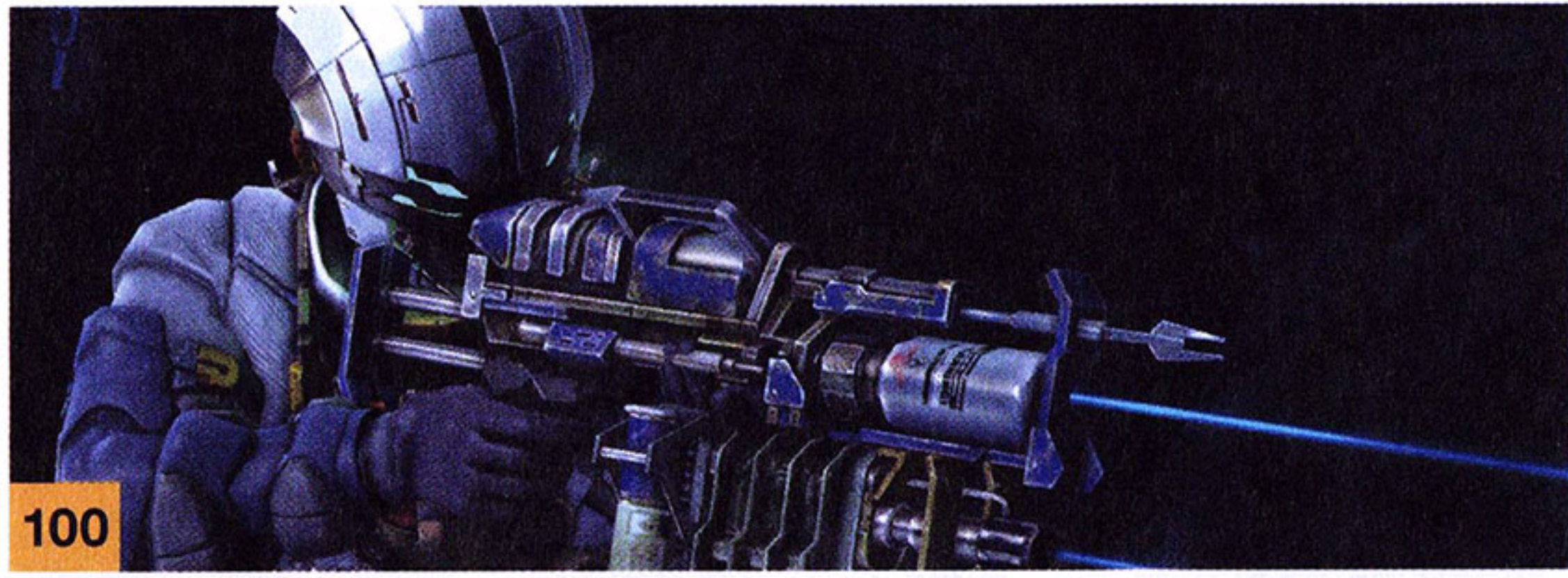
We spent a ton of time exploring the jungles of Far Cry 3, played with Isaac's gun customization options in Dead Space 3, and created our own assassination contracts in Hitman: Absolution.

» 116 Reviews

This month we strategized against the aliens in XCOM: Enemy Unknown, found out if Resident Evil 6 lives up to expectations, danced our hearts out, and played Pokémon's first true numbered sequel.

» 132 Game Over

This month, we're taking a look at the classic PC full-motion-video puzzle game, 7th Guest. It was a huge hit when it released, but few had faith in the game considering its troubled development.



100



115



105

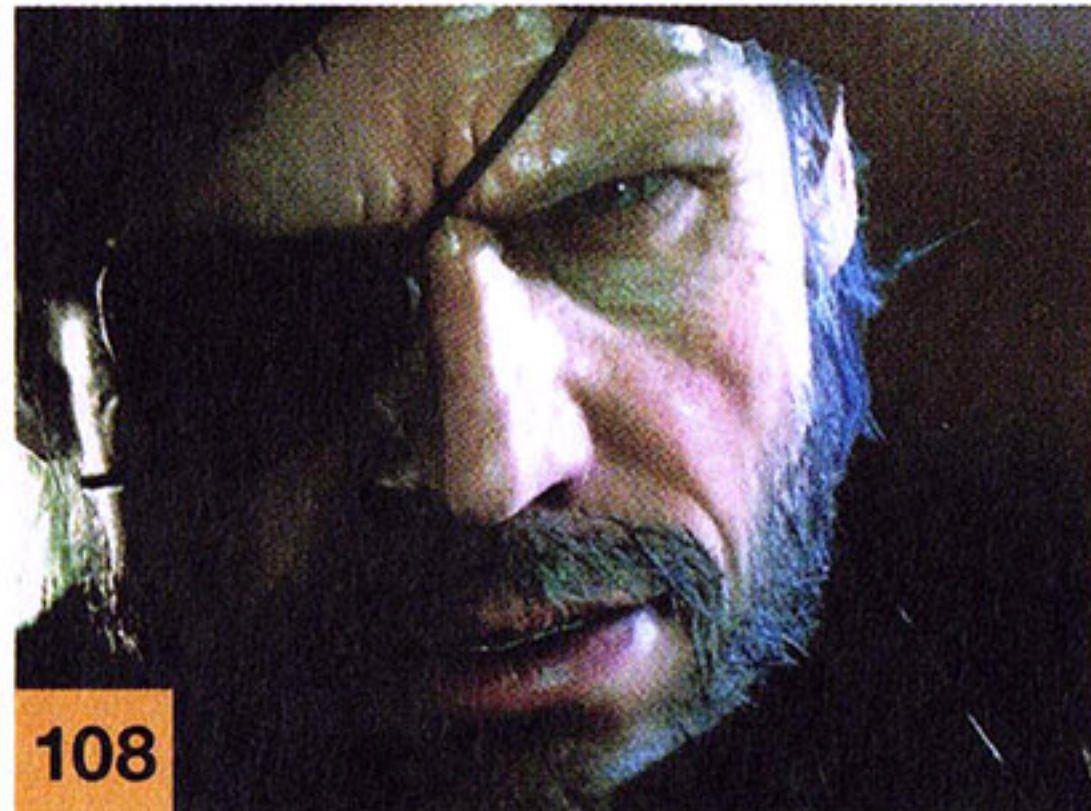


46

Gear: Headset Roundup



123



108



114

Medal of Honor: Warfighter



98



Metro: Last Light
(p. 52)



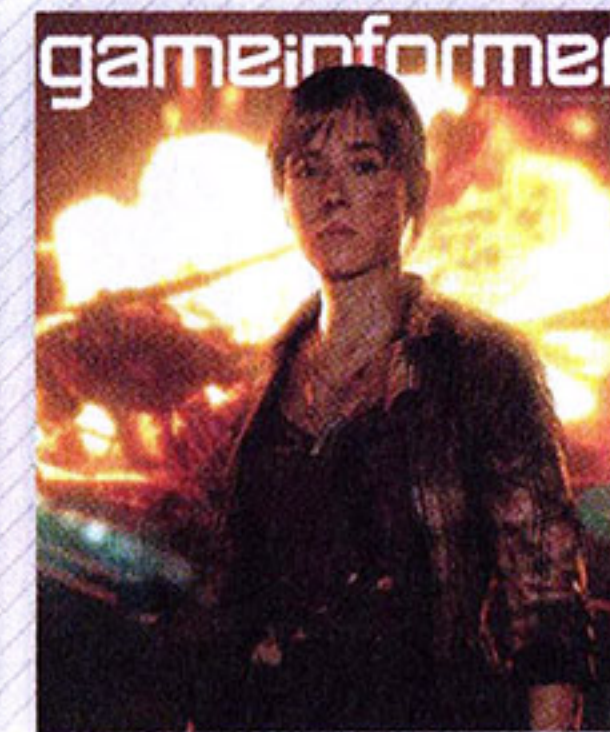
Fuse
(p. 60)



Ni No Kuni:
Wrath of the White Witch
(p. 68)



Dead Island: Riptide
(p. 76)



Beyond: Two Souls
(p. 84)

Our Five Under the Radar Covers

We think all five games featured in our cover story are worthy of more attention, so we're giving each its own moment in the spotlight. This month's issue has five different special-edition covers, showcasing our favorite under-the-radar games. To read more about them, flip ahead and start getting excited for what the end of this console generation has in store.

games index

Aliens: Colonial Marines	104
Beyond: Two Souls	84
Blade & Soul	111
Company of Heroes 2	110
Counter-Strike: Global Offensive	126
Dance Central 3	123
Dead Island: Riptide	76
Dead or Alive 5	126
Dead Space 3	100
Deadpool	105
Disney Epic Mickey: Power of Illusion	115
Double Dragon Neon	119
Dragon Quest X	115
F1 2012	126
Far Cry 3	98
FIFA 13	121
Final Fantasy Dimensions	126
Forza: Horizons	106
Fuse	60
Hitman: Absolution	102
Jet Set Radio	126
Joe Danger 2: The Movie	119
LittleBigPlanet Vita	125
Mark of the Ninja	123
Medal of Honor: Warfighter	114
Metal Gear Solid: Ground Zeroes	108
Metro: Last Light	52
Need for Speed: Most Wanted	107
NHL 13	120
Ni no Kuni: Wrath of the White Witch	68
Omerta: City of Gangsters	112
Pokémon Black and White Version 2	124
Pro Evolution Soccer 2013	121
Resident Evil 6	122
Retro/Grade	126
Sacred 3	109
Tekken Tag Tournamanet 2	126
Tokyo Jungle	126
Walking Dead Episode Three: Long Road Ahead, The	126
XCOM: Enemy Unknown	118



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This month in Feedback, readers complain about omissions from our top 30 co-op games list, defend Ouya from the haters, call out bad industry practices, and demand we only cover the things they want to read about.

Celebrating Co-op

Thank you for publishing a co-op issue! I truly feel like developers are missing out on a huge market of co-op couples out there. Once Gears of War had been drained of its entertainment, we spent lots of time and money trying to find a replacement. Although we found Left 4 Dead, Portal 2, and Army of Two, there were many more times when we turned over a box case to find that local multiplayer was not listed. Thank you for recognizing how important local multiplayer is and how many teams are out there!

Kelly Prescott
via email

I loved your top 30 co-op games list. Looking through it brought back memories, from solving test chambers in Portal 2 with my friend, to blowing off zombies' heads with my cousins in House of the Dead 2. Going through the list and saying, "Oh, I remember that one!" or "That one was fun!" at almost every entry made me realize that sitting down to play a game with a friend or family member has been an equally – if not more – important part of my gaming career as going it alone.

Robert Potmesil
via email

A number of readers wrote in to compliment us on our co-op issue – almost as many as those who wrote in to complain about games missing from our list. Just kidding! Way more complaints were submitted.

Let the Gripping Begin

I'm not going to be the only one who complains about your top 30 list, but when you listed World of Warcraft as number 9 on the list, I was appalled. Much better co-op games have more than double the players of WoW, like League of Legends. League of Legends demands players work together if they want to have any chance of winning. WoW can be played solo.

Taylor Clements
via email

First, I love your magazine. Second, Resident Evil 5 should have been in the top 15, at least. Halo should have been number two or even number one. Super Mario should have been in the top 10. Contra, Castle Crashers, and Smash TV should not have been included

at all. That's just so ridiculous, you silly, silly people.

Cynthia L. S.
Yoakum, TX

One game in particular was not mentioned on your top 30 co-op games article that I feel should totally have been included, as this game nearly ended two friendships of mine. That game is The Adventures of Cookie and Cream for the PS2. Please mention in your next issue how this game can ruin a friendship!

Phil Riedinger
Columbus, OH

In case you were wondering, the responses to our co-op list definitively prove that people still have their own opinions about things. Go figure.



Contact Us

feedback@gameinformer.com

Wait and See

As someone who doesn't own a mobile/tablet device and who prefers gaming on a 50-inch HDTV instead of a 15-inch laptop, I am actually excited for the Ouya. I have missed out on a large number of highly praised games and apps, but Ouya could be the platform that finally brings them to me. I love the low price point and the requirement for developers to offer free content as well; the biggest reason I don't buy a lot of games is the fear that I won't enjoy them and regret my purchase later. I really think the naysayers and detractors need to give the Ouya time and see what happens.

Julie Holden
Tucson, AZ

You're right, Julie; it's too early to judge Ouya's potential. But that applies as much to the supporters heralding Ouya as a revolution as it does the doomsayers. The makers of Ouya must overcome a lot of difficult hurdles to convince developers and consumers that their console is better than every other Android device on the market. We hope they can accomplish their goal, but until we see it in action, consider us skeptical.

Mana Maniacs

Oh man! Thank you so much for the tribute to *The Secret of Mana* (Square's *Unsung Opus*, issue 233). You captured everything I cherish about this game: the fantastic music, the environments, the quirky gameplay, and the three-player mode – which was totally worth buying the multi-tap for. *The Secret of Mana* has been my favorite game since I first played it 15 years ago, and I was so happy to see this dedication to it.

Zac Hubert
via email

I wanted to thank you for the article on *The Secret of Mana*. I grew up with it (it being the only good game I had at the time) and developed a love for not only the game, but RPGs and video games in general. The article brought a smile to my face and drove me to bring my SNES out again for an all-night gaming session.

Tristan Noack
via email

Discovery in Skyrim

While reading your Top 10 Loading Screens list (issue 233), I was stunned when I read the *Skyrim* entry. I immediately jumped up from my bed, ran to my computer, and started up *Skyrim*. When the loading screen popped up, I spun the iconic dragon for the first time. Perhaps it's because of how quickly it loads on PC that I never noticed the control over the loading screen before. Or maybe I'm just an idiot. I'll let you decide.

Michael Mueller
via email

We've reached a decision, but we'll politely keep it to ourselves. You're welcome.



Short Answers to Readers' Burning Questions

"How long do you think it will take before *Sleeping Dogs* sues *Watch Dogs* for using their title?"

Considering they're different titles, probably a long time.

"If I gave you a pizza, could I have a free GI issue?"

YES.

"I need entertainment for my party. Would you guys send Ben to my house?"

You must really hate your guests.

Quantified!

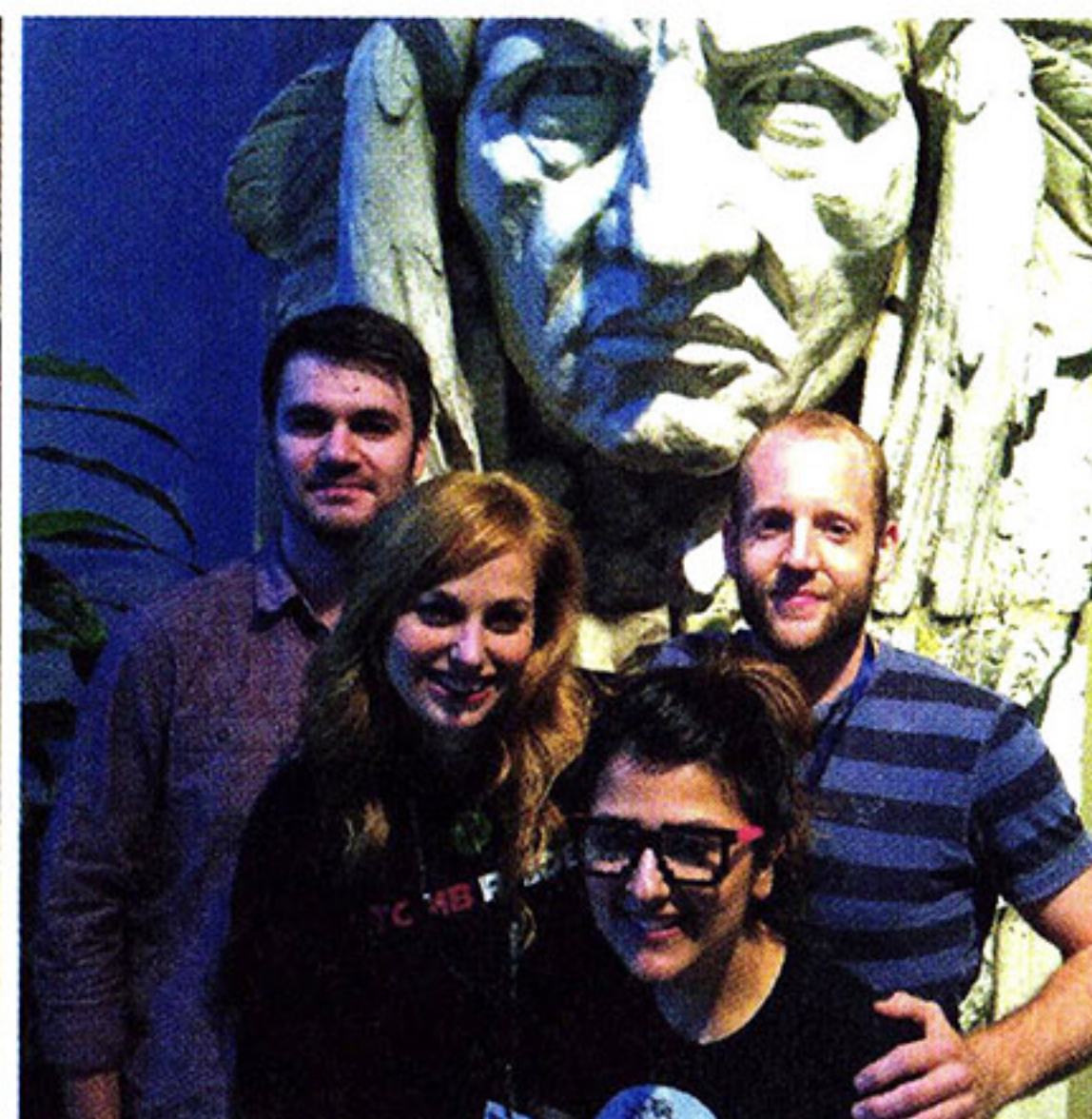
This month, three readers stated the creeper in the *Minecraft* entry of our co-op list looks like a part of the male anatomy. If you agree, please see your urologist; something is terribly wrong with you.

Strangest Compliment of the Month

"The co-op issue is so awesome it rivals *Huckleberry Finn*."

Question of the Month

When a game lets you choose between stealth or going in with guns blazing, which method do you pick and why?



(Left) This month the video game industry illuminati flew out to Minneapolis to watch Bertz and his fiancée Claire tie the knot. Congratulations!

(Right) Tim's trip to PAX became a GI alumni party when he met up with Hidden Variable Studios' Nick Ahrens, Crystal Dynamics' Meagan Marie, and Harmonix's Annette "Annoying Glasses" Gonzalez.

CANDID PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

GI SPY

continued on page 10

feedback 7

ASSASSIN'S —CREED— III

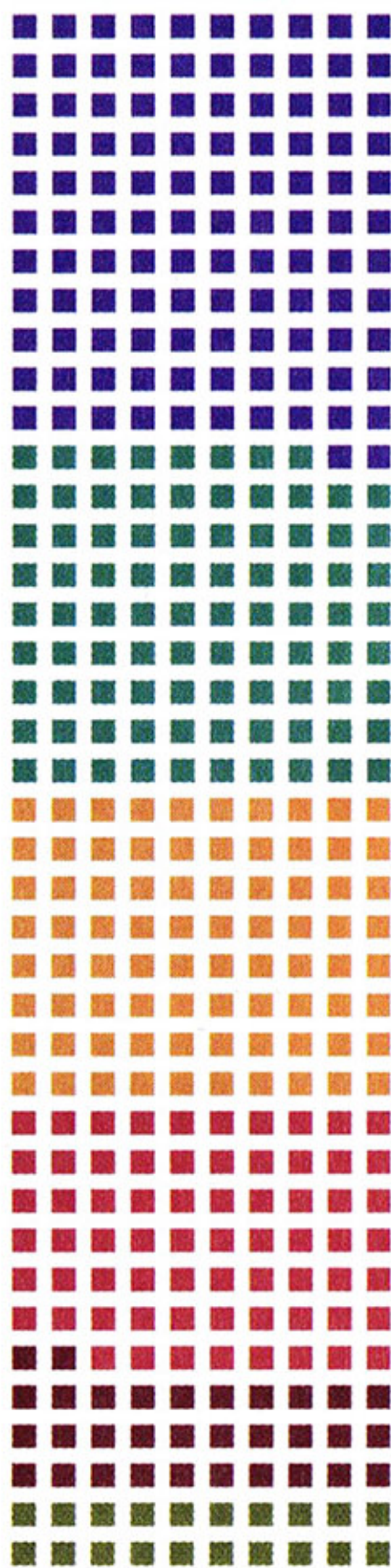
OCTOBER 30

IGNITE THE REVOLUTION

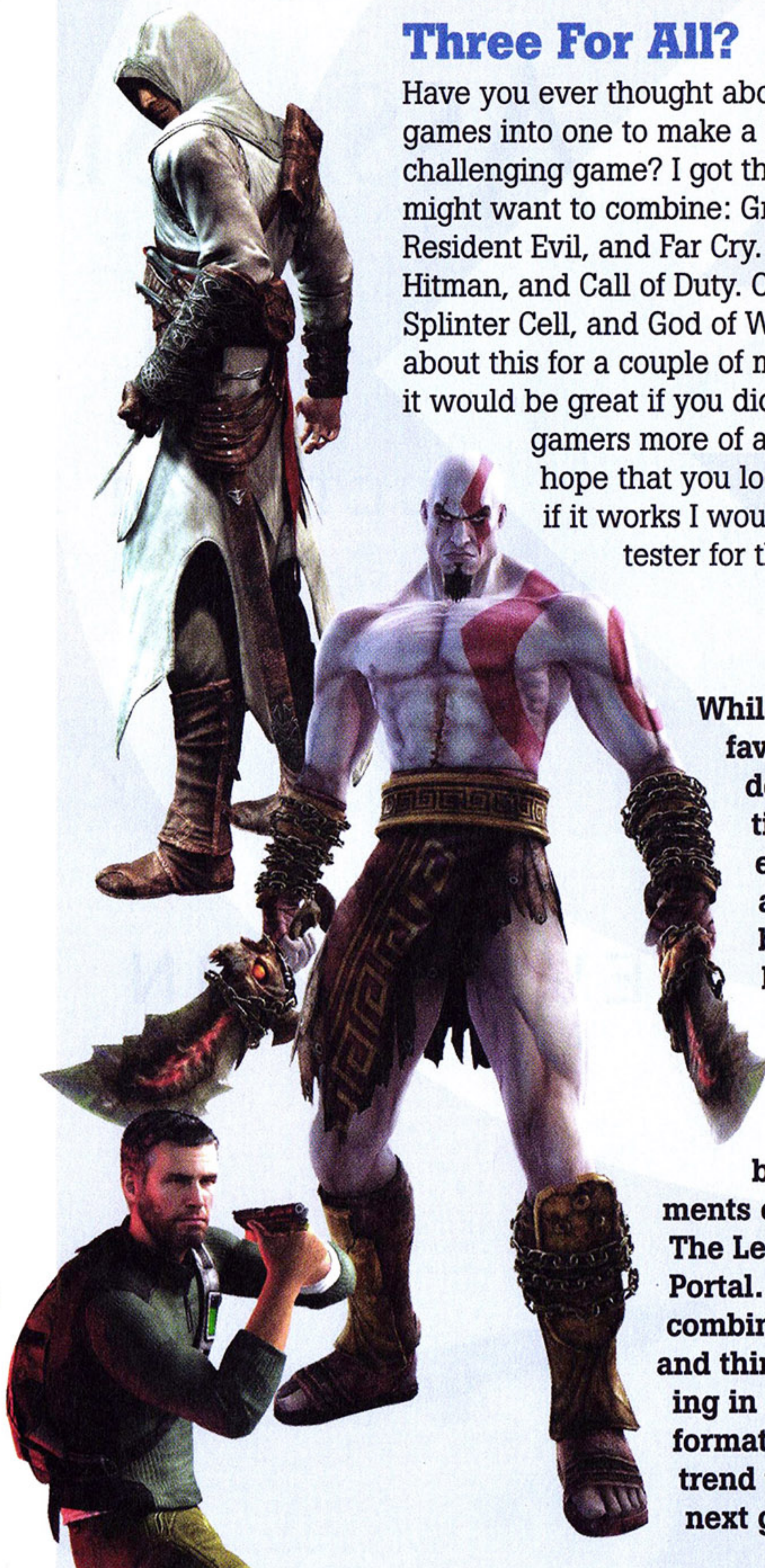


UBISOFT

Top Co-op Games You Said We Forgot



- COD: Zombie Mode **28%**
- Secret of Mana **22%**
- ToeJam & Earl **20%**
- Star Wars Battlefront **17%**
- Bubble Bobble **8%**
- X-Men Arcade **5%**
- Kane & Lynch **0%**



Three For All?

Have you ever thought about combining three games into one to make a better or more challenging game? I got three games you might want to combine: Grand Theft Auto, Resident Evil, and Far Cry. Or The Last of Us, Hitman, and Call of Duty. Or Assassin's Creed, Splinter Cell, and God of War. I was thinking about this for a couple of months and thought it would be great if you did this to give us gamers more of a challenge. So I hope that you look into this, and if it works I would be glad to be a tester for those games.

Suny Fowler
via email

While combining our favorite IPs would no doubt be epic, getting all of the necessary developers and publishers on board is impossible. Luckily, some games do it without the names. Darksiders found success blending elements of God of War, The Legend of Zelda and Portal. Sleeping Dogs combines melee combat and third-person shooting in an open-world format. We expect this trend to grow in the next generation.



It's Just Business

In issue 233, we asked gamers what business practice in the video game industry they would change and why. On-disc DLC, online passes, and annual sequels were popular complaints. Here are some more responses:

The biggest issue for me is when games have to be played online, even if they're single-player games. Why shouldn't we be able to play games we paid for if the Internet goes down?

David Fairbanks

The video game industry tends to release a slew of high-profile games all at once and then go through huge dry spells. My friends and I would be willing to buy more new games if they didn't all come out in November.

Kristopher Keithley

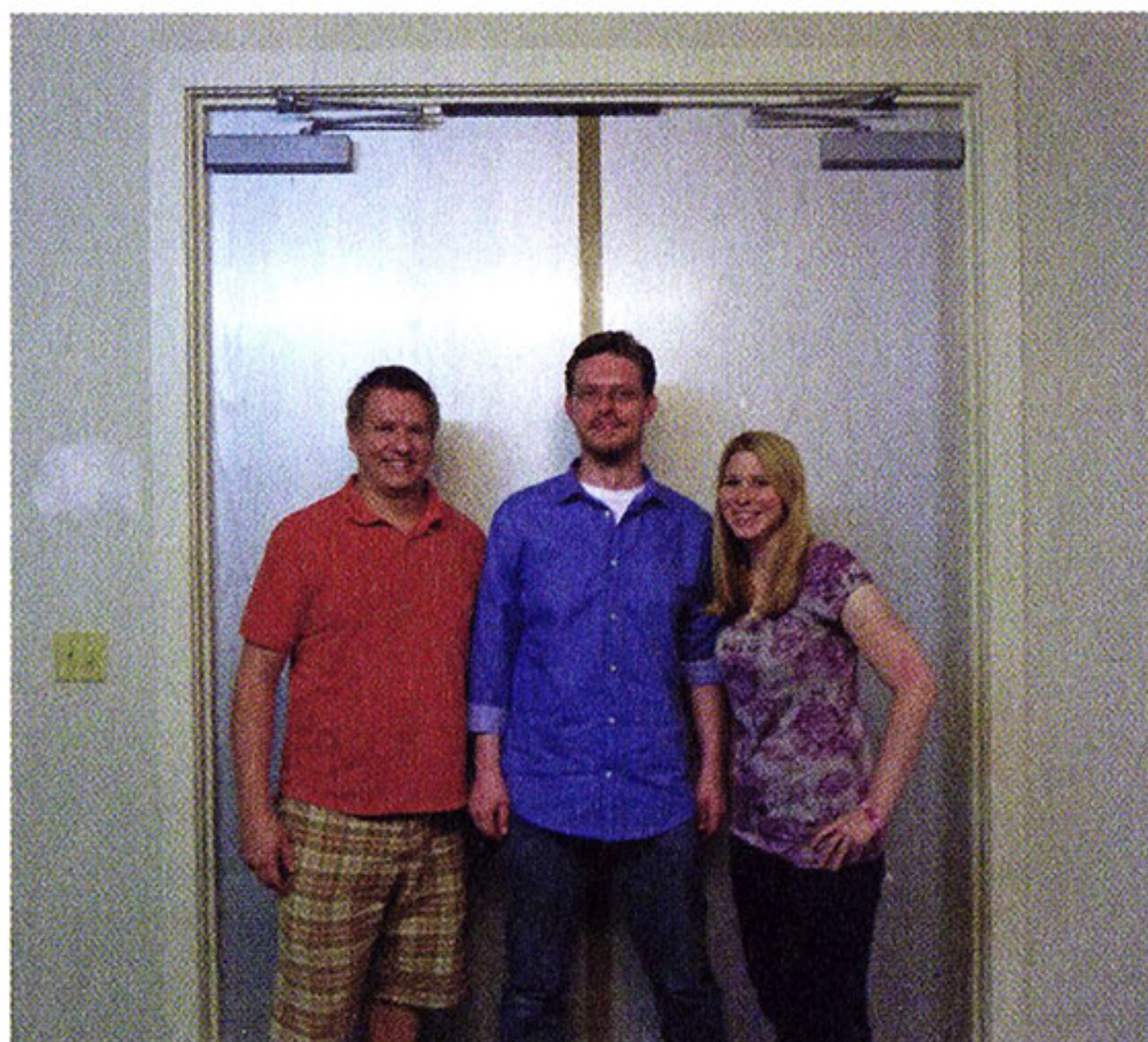
I would get rid of using a red tinge and/or a black and white filter to indicate damage. Even in games where it's handled well, it's annoying and makes them harder to play. Poor implementation can make a game unplayable. Health bars cannot return soon enough.

Dan L.

I can't stand the practice of having half-naked women in so many games. It's a creepy trend that started with Lara Croft's breasts getting bigger with every game, and now it's to the point that they might as well be naked. I have two young daughters and am not comfortable letting them play some games. Let the weirdos get a porn mag if they want, but leave it out of games.

Brian Miller

(Left) Miller and Kim teased DTP Entertainment's Matthias Finke with the age-old question, "What's behind GI's silver doors?" Answer: The elevator. **(Right)** Some serious business was afoot when Adam met with Relic Entertainment's James McDermott at Gamescom.



GI SPY

continued on page 12

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Intense Violence
Sexual Themes
Strong Language

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PS3

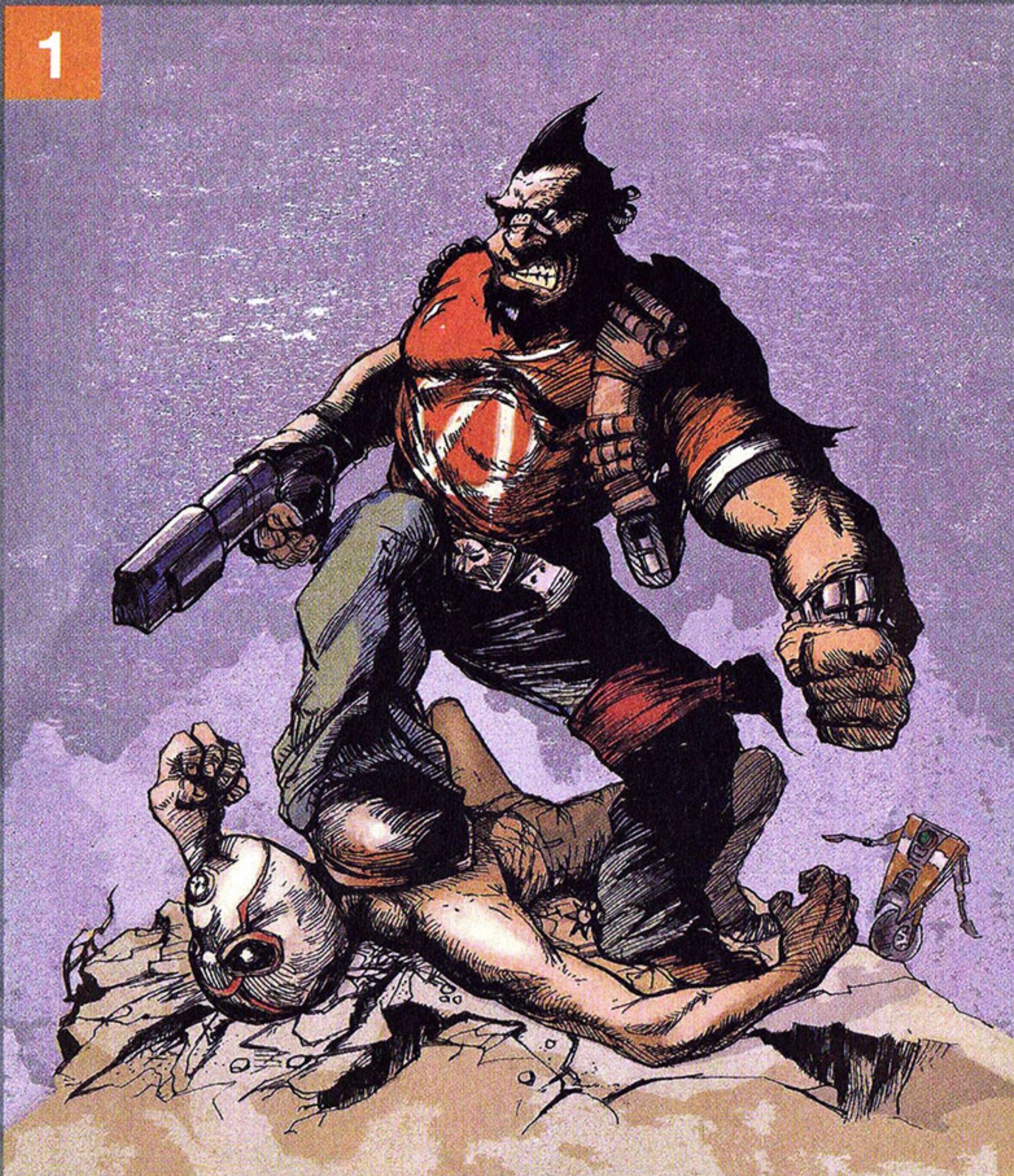


XBOX 360



UBISOFT

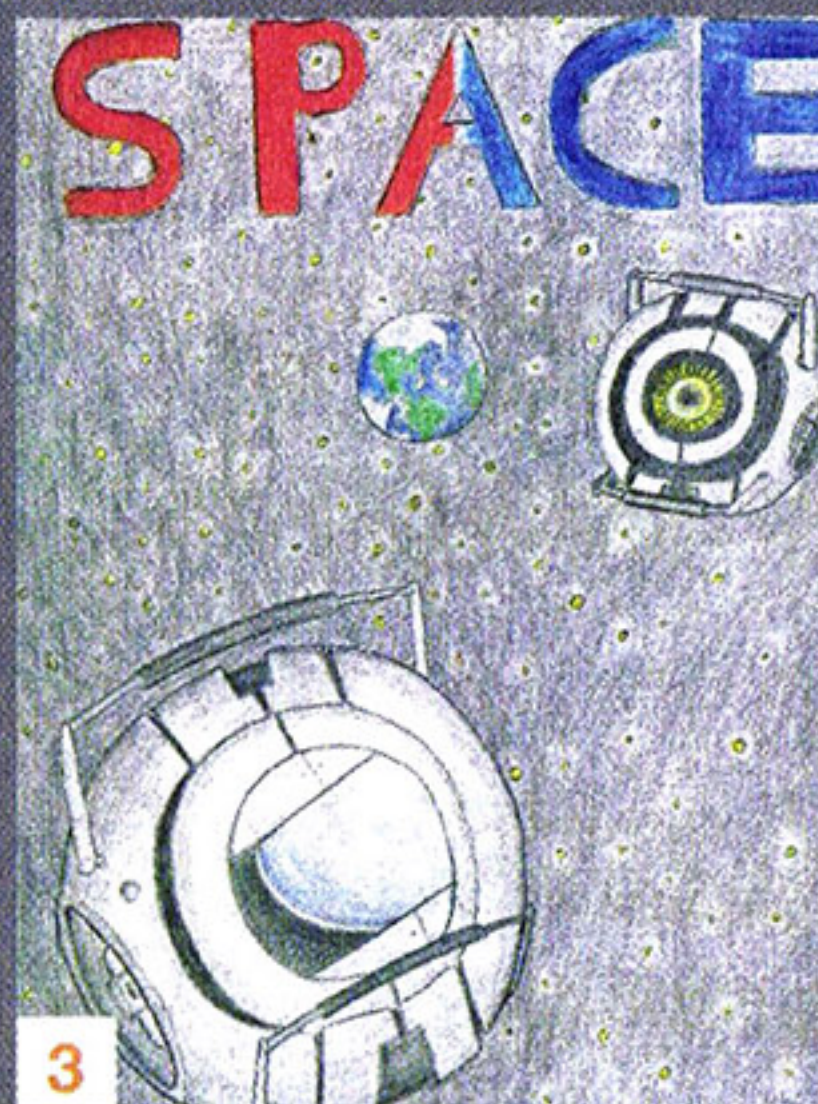




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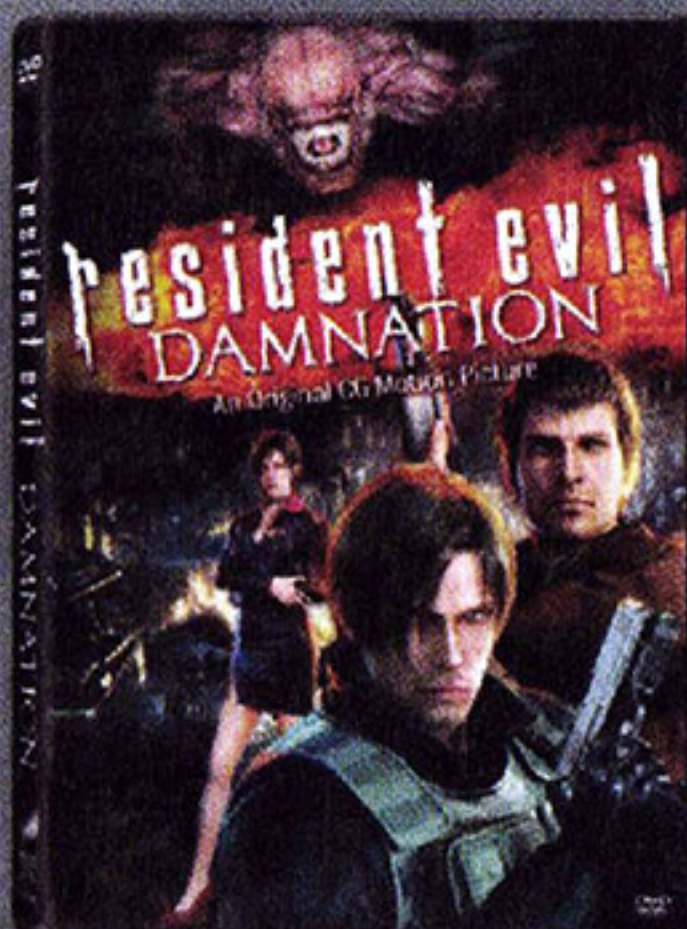


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4

This month's winner will receive a copy of Resident Evil Damnation on DVD.



WINNER 1 Paul Tong *Just once, can a bandit get on a piece of art without being stomped into the ground or blowing his own brains out?*

2 Tucker Rossi *Baby Yoshi tries to think of a way to save his unborn brothers from being heaved at Shy Guys by their father.*

3 Nicolas Maglieri *Considering Portal 2 has been out for over a year and a half, we wonder if that Space Core is getting bored out there yet.*

4 Joshua Burylo *Ganon survived a sword in his forehead. We're pretty sure lightning, the Master Sword, and light arrows won't stop him either.*

Corrections:
In issue 234, we listed the wrong development studio for WildStar (Massive, pg. 32). Carbine Studios is the developer, not Carbonite, and the company is based in Aliso Viejo, CA and not Austin, TX as originally reported. Game Informer regrets the error.

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GI SPY

continued from page 10

(Left) Andy and Reiner took a break from manning the GI booth at this year's GameStop Conference to chat with Chair Entertainment's Laura Mustard.

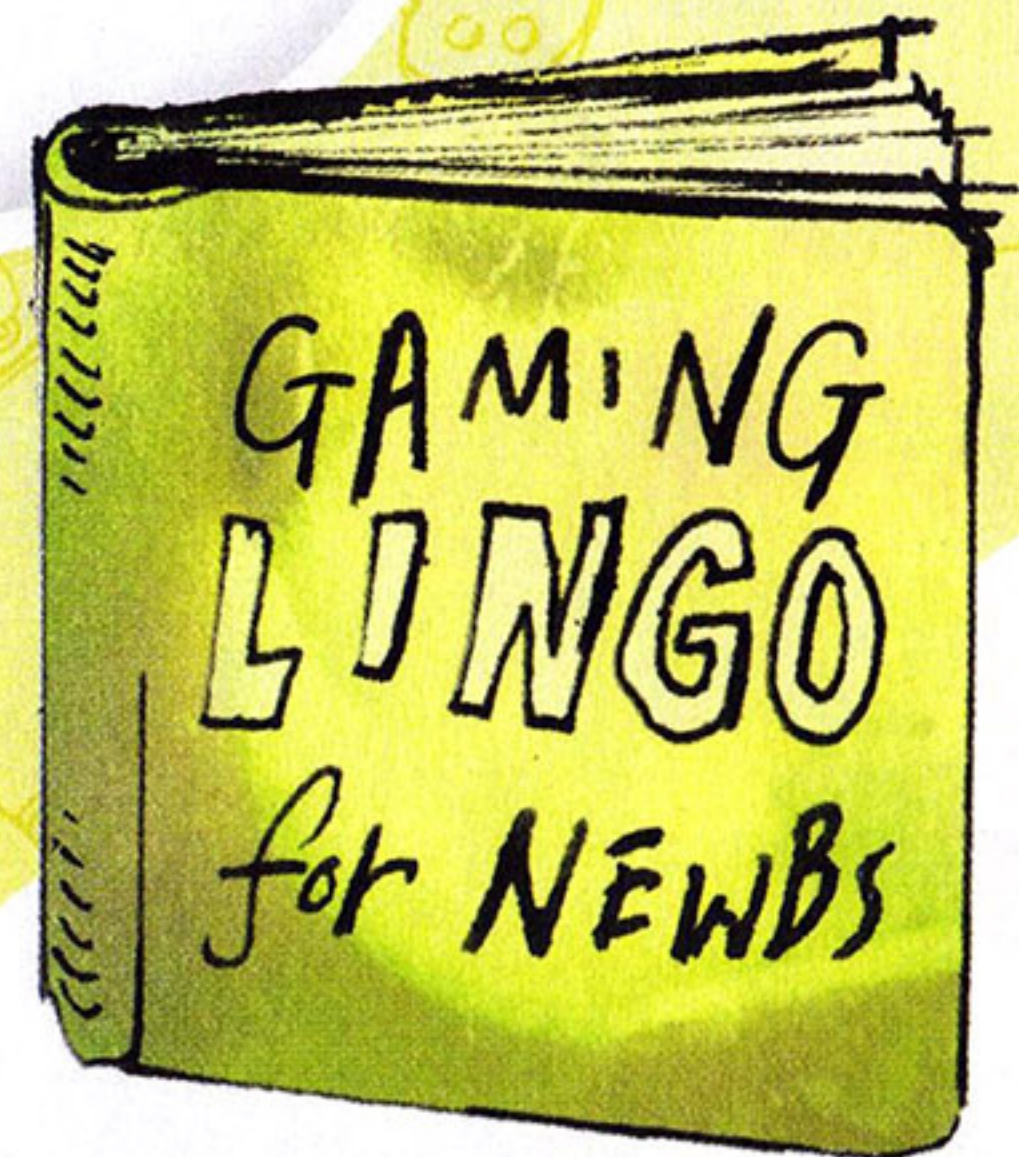
(Center) They also caught up with Warner Bros.' Remi Sklar and Kehau Rodenhurst.

(Right) Thanks to Borderlands 2, 2K's Sarah Anderson and Gearbox's Steve Gibson and Randy Pitchford had one of the most popular booths at the show.



IMHO, OUR MOBILE APP MAKES IT SO EASY TO PWN YOUR QUOTE, YOU COULD ALMOST BE AFK.

WHY YES, I DID TAKE A GAMING LINGO COURSE!



IF YOU ASK ME, GETTING A QUOTE SHOULD BE SO EASY A **NEWB COULD DO IT.**

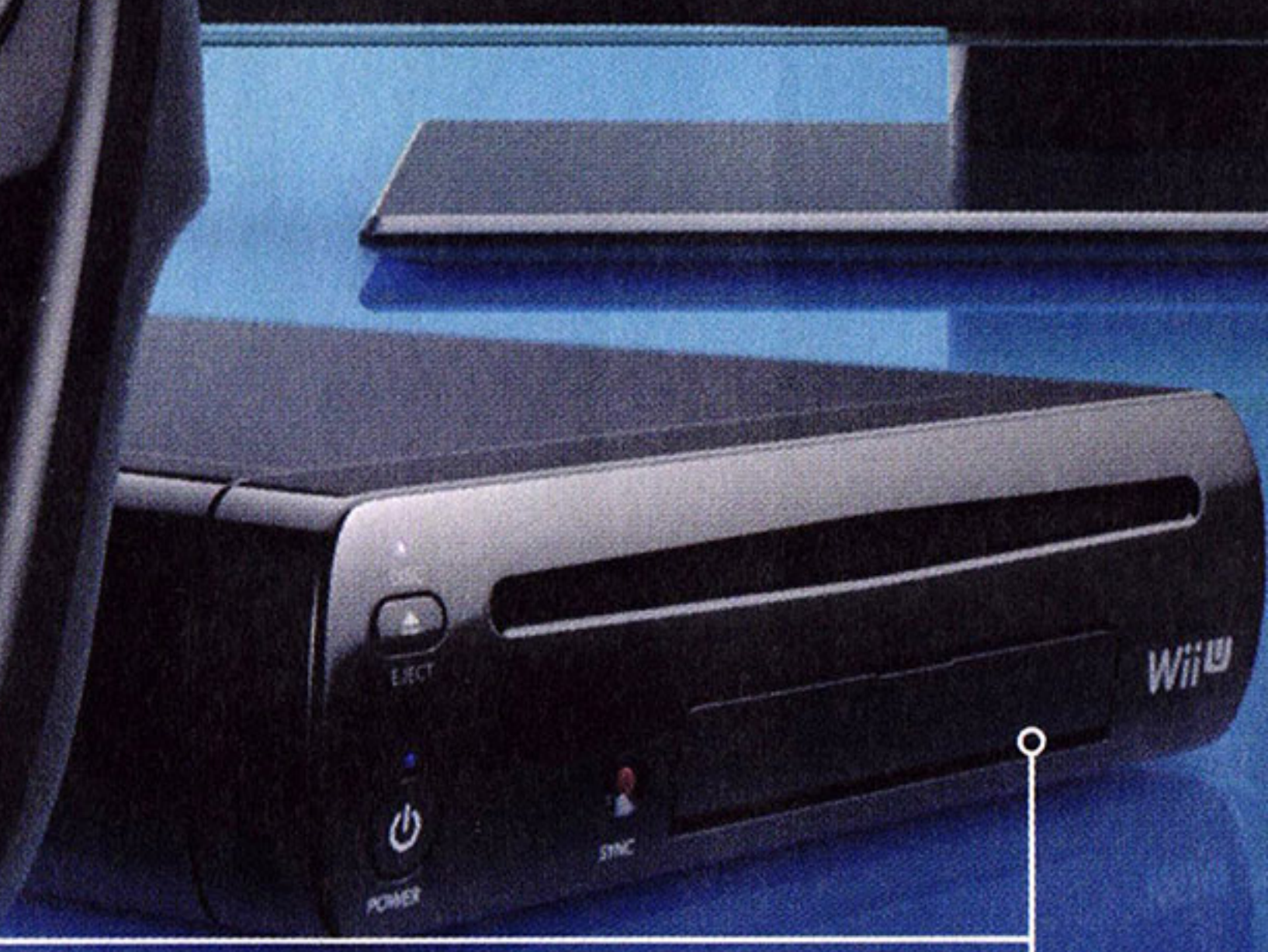


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connect



NOTABLES

- 18 big picture mode pumps steam into your living room
- 20 gamer: the race to one million gamerscore
- 24 lost rpg franchises: where are they now?
- 28 attention to detail: 10 things that make any game better
- 36 afterwords: darksiders ii
- 37 all ages
- 48 opinion: the plunge: the risks and rewards of indie game development

Basic Set \$299.99

- White Wii U system with 8GB internal storage
- White Wii U GamePad with stylus
- Wii U sensor bar
- AC adapters for console and GamePad
- HDMI cable

Nintendo's Next Big Thing

Wii U Price & Release Date Revealed

Nintendo finally announced the price and release date of the Wii U. The console will make it just in time for the holiday season when it hits store shelves in North America on November 18. The lower-priced version comes in at under \$300, but price is just one component of the console. Gamers and industry analysts alike have assessed the value of both versions of the system and the larger implications they may have for Nintendo.

by Matthew Kato

Michael Pachter, managing director of equity research at Wedbush Securities, previously said that Nintendo couldn't price the Wii U higher than \$250, but he told Game Informer that he didn't think the system's \$299 minimum price point would be a problem...for now.

"I think they're doing the smart thing, because there are at least a couple million hardcore fans who will buy the thing at any price," he says. Pachter believes that Nintendo will manufacture approximately one million units a month through the holiday season, and estimates that each territory (North America, Japan, and Europe) will only get a little over a million units to sell during that time. This will likely result in console shortages and desperate customers.

When supply catches up with demand, Pachter believes that's the real test of the viability of the two price points. "It'll do well for six months, and then we'll see," he says. In an investor's note, Pachter also says that he expects a price cut for the Wii U by the end of 2013, assuming that competitors Microsoft and Sony aggressively price the Xbox 360 and PS3, respectively, to try and undercut Nintendo's new system.

The Wii U's minimum \$299 price point includes the signature GamePad controller, but some gamers are surprised by the paltry 8GB of internal storage (although the system supports additional, external USB storage).

You can currently buy an Xbox 360 with 250GB (or a 4GB Xbox 360 that includes a Kinect) for the same price, or the new-look 250GB PS3 with Uncharted 3 for \$269. Even the \$349.99 edition of the Wii U only comes with 32GB. The fact that this version includes Nintendo Land makes it the likely de-facto choice for many consumers.

Perhaps the system's largest hurdle with consumers will be software. It's not that the Wii U's current software lineup through the

platform's launch window isn't good enough (see page 17) – quite the contrary – but many of the games are also available on the PS3 and Xbox 360. Jesse Divnich, vice president of insights and analysis for market research firm EEDAR, thinks that third-party support for the Wii U will – like previous Nintendo consoles – be the key.

"The success of the Wii U comes down to third-party support," he says. "We feel confident that Nintendo will develop its own compelling software that will drive initial sales; however, any long-term success will come from third-party developers creating unique and compelling content for the Wii U."

Divnich believes that now, more than ever, developers are stretched thin between a variety of interactive devices, including phones and tablets. This puts a strain on companies' creativity, and could endanger third-party support of the Wii U and limit how studios make use of the GamePad and other unique features of the system. "Without first-party support it is financially irresponsible for developers to create exclusive content for just one device," he says.

Despite the future challenges for the system, Wedbush Securities' Michael Pachter is probably right about one thing: The Wii U will sell out this holiday season. Where it goes from there comes down to how the multi-functional GamePad, software lineup, and features like Nintendo TVii capture the imagination of consumers.

The Specs So Far

Video Output: Supports 1080p, 1080i, 720p, 480p, and 480i. Compatible cables include HDMI, Wii D-Terminal, Wii Component Video, Wii RGB, Wii S-Video Stereo AV, and Wii AV

RAM: 2GB – 1GB for gaming and 1GB for system memory

CPU: IBM Power-based multi-core processor

GPU: AMD Radeon-based high definition GPU

Storage: 8GB internal flash memory (Basic Set); 32GB internal flash memory (Deluxe Set). Also supports SD memory cards and external USB storage

Media: Wii U and Wii optical discs. Wii U optical discs have a 25GB storage capacity

Networking: 802.11b/g/n Wi-Fi connection.

Ports: Four USB 2.0 connectors – two in the front and two in the rear – that support Wii LAN Adapters

Wii Compatibility: Nearly all Wii software and accessories are backward compatible with Wii U

Audio Output: Six-channel PCM linear output via HDMI connector, or analog output via the AV Multi Out connector

Energy Efficiency: Wii U uses specially designed power-saving features to lower its energy consumption

Learn to Share

Nintendo says GamePad controllers won't be sold separately until some time in 2013, although no launch window games need one. Standalone GamePads are being sold in Japan for 13,400 yen (approximately \$172).

Deluxe Set \$349.99

- Black Wii U system with 32GB internal storage
- Black Wii U GamePad with stylus
- All accessories of the Basic Set
- Nintendo Land
- The Deluxe Digital Promotion (through 2014): This lets you earn and redeem points for digital shop downloads
- Wii U GamePad Stand
- Wii U GamePad Cradle
- Wii U Console Stand

Wii U Launch Window Games & Bayonetta 2

Nintendo still won't say which games will be available on day one, but characterizes the launch window as the time period between November 18 and March 2013. The company expects more than 50 Wii U games to release during that time, which will retail for \$59.99. Some versions of games could be less or more.

Apart from the list of games below, including heavy hitters like Call of Duty: Black Ops II, Nintendo announced plans to publish Platinum Games' Bayonetta 2 as a platform exclusive. No release date for the game has been revealed.



Assassin's Creed III

Nintendo

- New Super Mario Bros. U
- Nintendo Land
- Ninja Gaiden 3: Razor's Edge
- Sing Party
- Lego City: Undercover
- Wii Fit U
- Game & Wario
- Pikmin 3
- The Wonderful 101 [formerly Project P-100]

505 Games

- Funky Barn

2K Sports

- NBA 2K13

Activision

- 007 Legends
- Call of Duty: Black Ops II
- Transformers Prime
- Wipeout 3
- Skylanders Giants
- Cabela's Dangerous Hunts 2013
- Rapala Pro Bass Fishing

Capcom

- Monster Hunter 3 Ultimate

D3

- Rise of the Guardians: The Video Game
- Ben 10: Omniverse
- Family Party: 30 Great Games Obstacle Arcade

Disney Interactive

- Epic Mickey 2: The Power of Two

Electronic Arts

- Madden NFL 13
- FIFA Soccer 13
- Mass Effect 3

Frozenbyte

- Trine 2: Director's Cut

Gaijin Games

- Runner2: Future Legend of Rhythm Alien

Majesco Entertainment

- Zumba Fitness Core

Maximum Games

- Jett Tailfin

Namco Bandai

- Tekken Tag Tournament 2 Wii U Edition
- Tank! Tank! Tank!

Sega

- Aliens: Colonial Marines
- Sonic & All-Stars Racing Transformed

Shin'en

- Nano Assault Neo

Tecmo Koei

- Warriors Orochi 3 Hyper

THQ

- Darksiders II
- Wheel of Fortune
- Jeopardy!

Two Tribes

- Toki Tori 2

Ubisoft

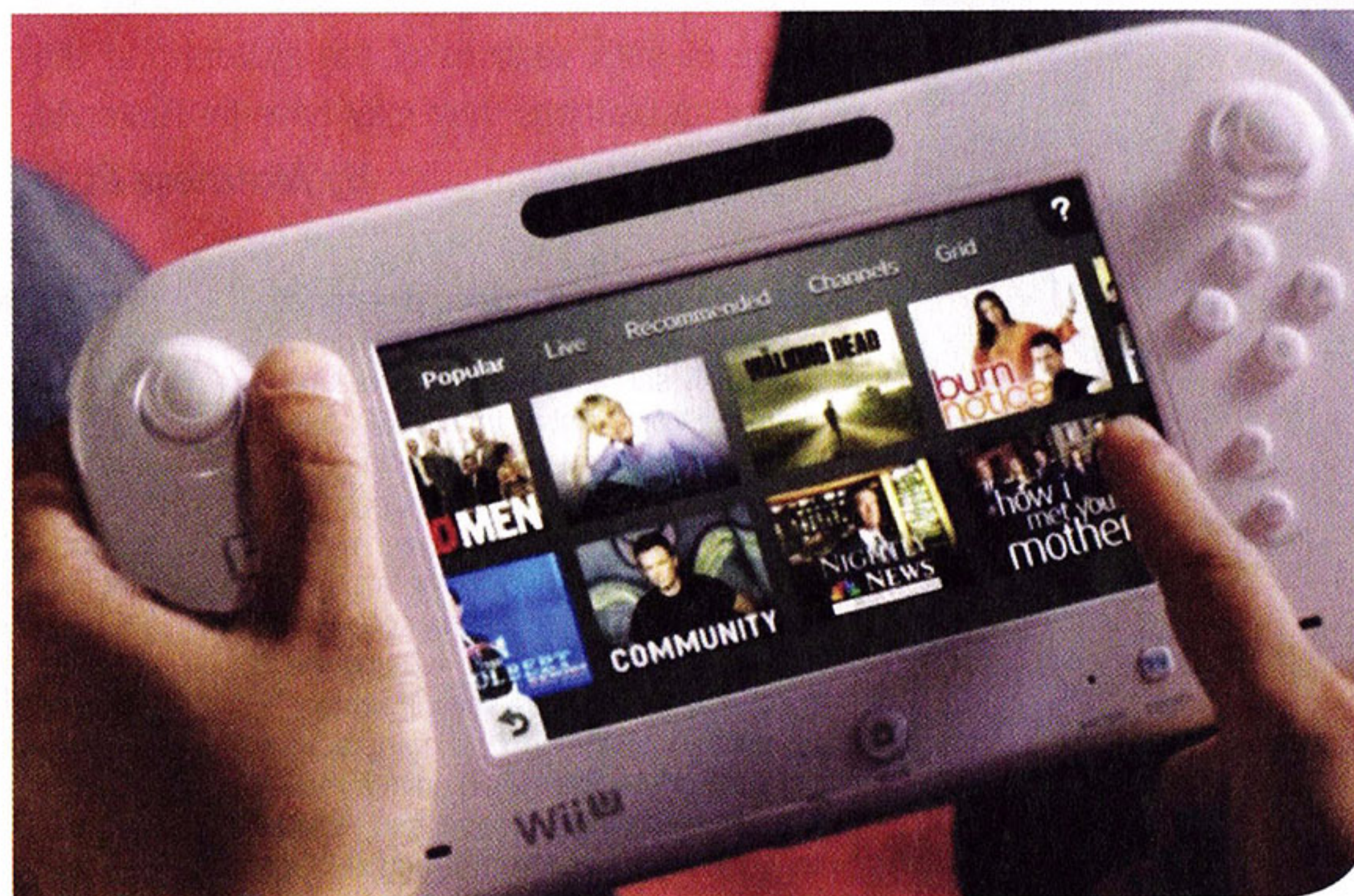
- Assassin's Creed III
- Just Dance 4
- Marvel Avengers: Battle for Earth
- Rabbids Land
- Sports Connection
- Your Shape: Fitness Evolved 2013
- ZombiU
- Rayman Legends

Warner Bros. Interactive

- Scribblenauts Unlimited
- Game Party Champions
- Batman: Arkham City Armored Edition



Zach Fountain, director of network business for Nintendo (left) shows off Nintendo TVii with NOA president Reggie Fils-Aime



Nintendo TVii

The Wii U's most alluring feature is the GamePad, which can show different content than what's on your main TV screen. The system takes advantage of this through the media streaming features of Nintendo TVii. The free service lets you use the GamePad as a remote for accessing Nintendo TVii features (the controller also acts as a universal remote), but also to show supplemental info such as stats for sports events and social media feeds.

By searching for media content on the GamePad, Nintendo claims it will show results from your DVR, live TV, HuluPlus, Netflix, and Amazon Instant Video. Nintendo hasn't specifically announced which companies' cable and/or DVR boxes it supports, although a

statement from the company says it supports "any cable or satellite service." Your favorite content is easily surfaced, and each Mii profile on the system can have its own preferences.

While you're watching a TV show, sporting event, or movie, you can interact with the media via the GamePad through "interactive moments." This might be a poll that pops up on the controller or a chance for you to comment on something that's just happened, whether it's a big play in a football game or a dramatic turn of events in your favorite show. If you choose to interact, your comment or poll answer blasts out to Facebook, Twitter, and your Miiiverse. You can also see other's comments, even if it's regarding something that happened before you started watching TV. ❖

WE ARE THE BRAVE.

WE ARE THE FREE.

WE ARE UNITED.

OUR TIME IS NOW



GUILDWARS



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Big Picture Mode Pumps Steam Into Your Living Room

Valve has taken a giant step toward getting its digital distribution service, Steam, in users' living rooms. Months back, the company confirmed interest in creating a home console. Since then Valve posted a job listing for an industrial designer to help inject some "innovation in the computer hardware space." Big Picture Mode is Valve's first official test of the waters. The sleek UI is built with a controller in mind, allowing Steam users to browse their digital game library, surf the web, and chat with friends without clicking a mouse. The beta has hiccups, but Big Picture Mode's impressive level of polish has us excited for Steam's future as a living room centerpiece.

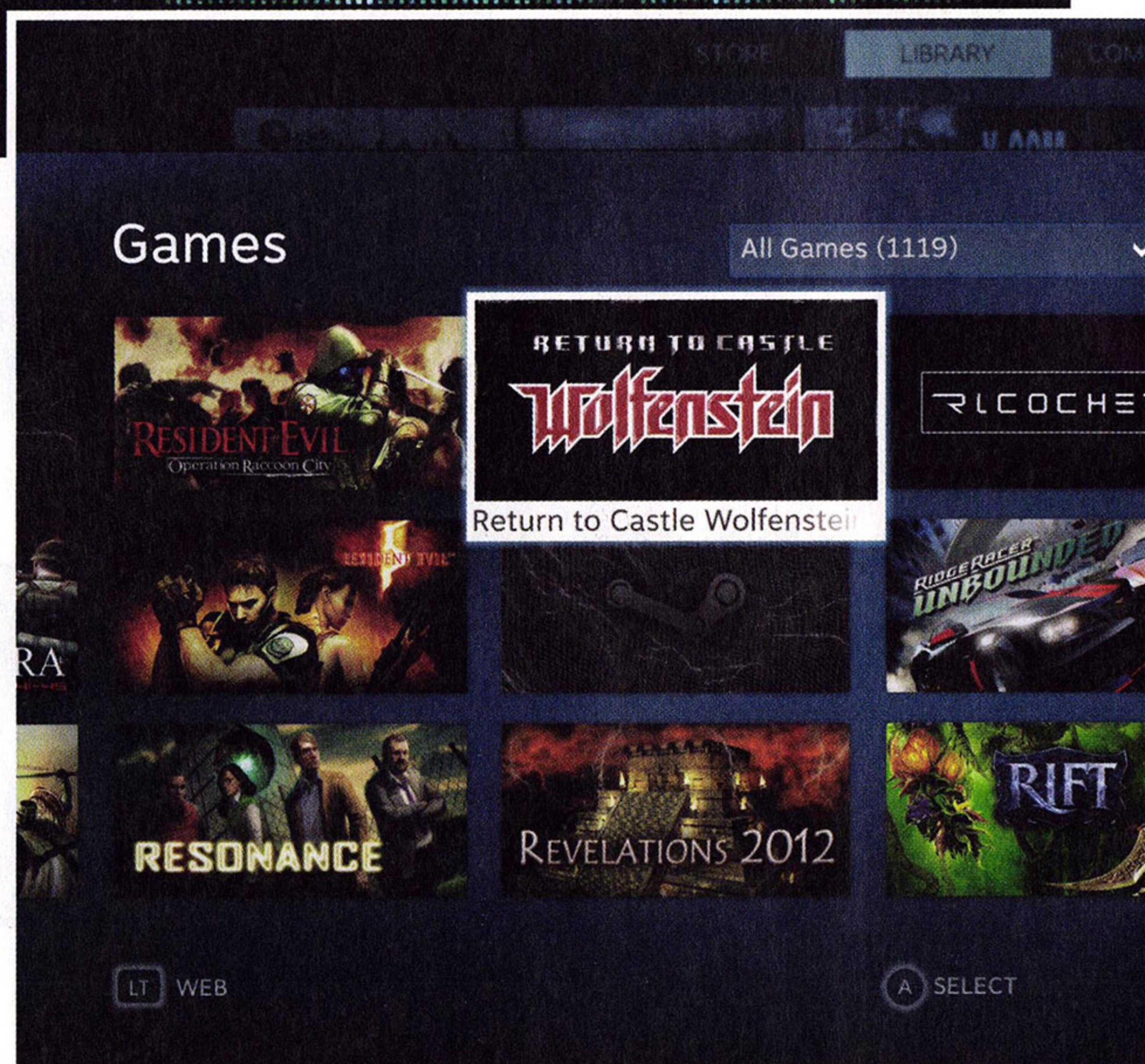
ALL YOU NEED IS A CABLE

To get started you simply connect your computer and TV with an HDMI, VGA, or DVI cable. After opting in to the beta, you click the Big Picture button in Steam and it instantly scales to your TV.

GOODBYE MOUSE AND KEYBOARD, HELLO CONTROLLER

You can use the old PC standbys to do everything, but the main goal of Big Picture is to make navigating Steam a comfortable experience. I simply plugged in my wired Xbox 360 controller to get going, but third-party software exists that makes your wireless 360 or PS3 controller compatible. Perusing games or chatting with friends reminds me of the Xbox 360's smooth blade-cycling dashboard. Browsing through a collection of faux box art is much more satisfying than a stark list.

Valve's daisywheel replaces the standard keyboard. This intuitive interface makes typing game names and chat messages as easy as using a skill wheel in games like Mass Effect. The core experience is great with a controller, but keep your mouse and keyboard handy during the beta to click the pesky prompts that pull you out of the interface.

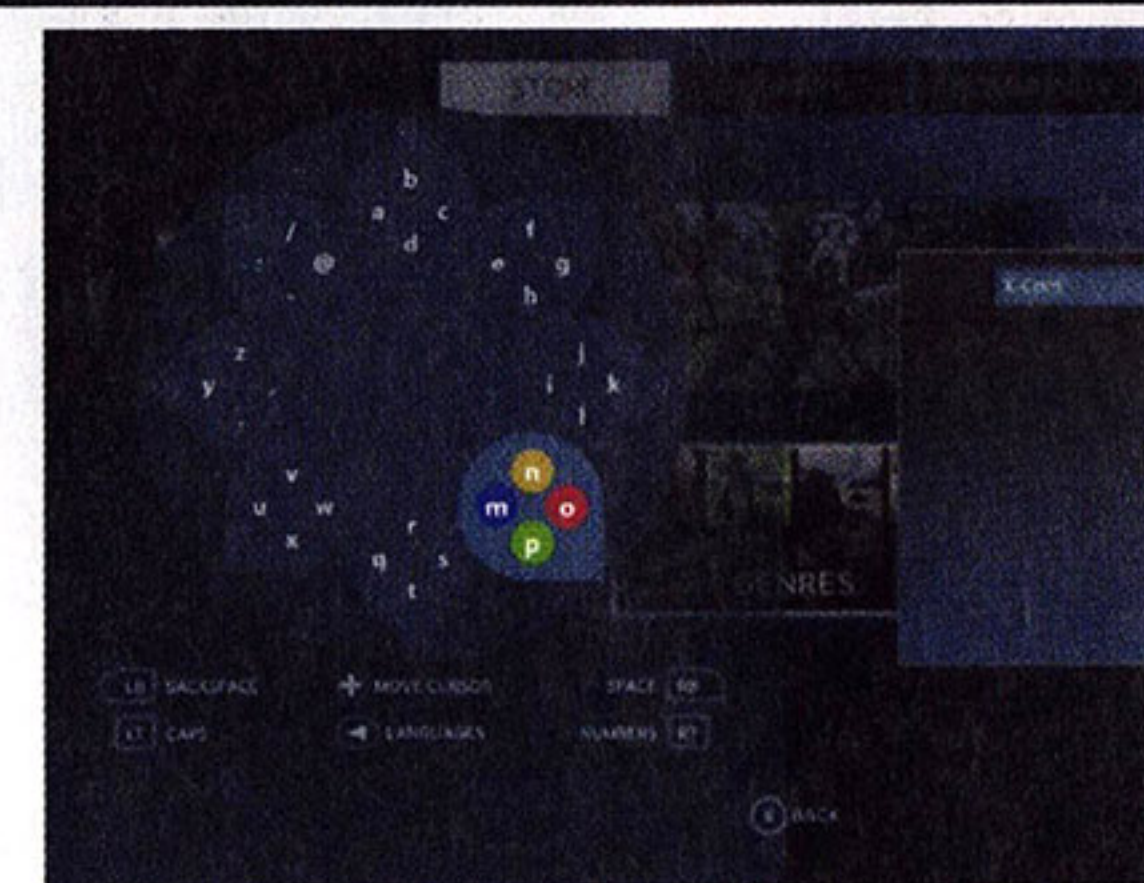


FIRST-PERSON INTERNET BROWSING

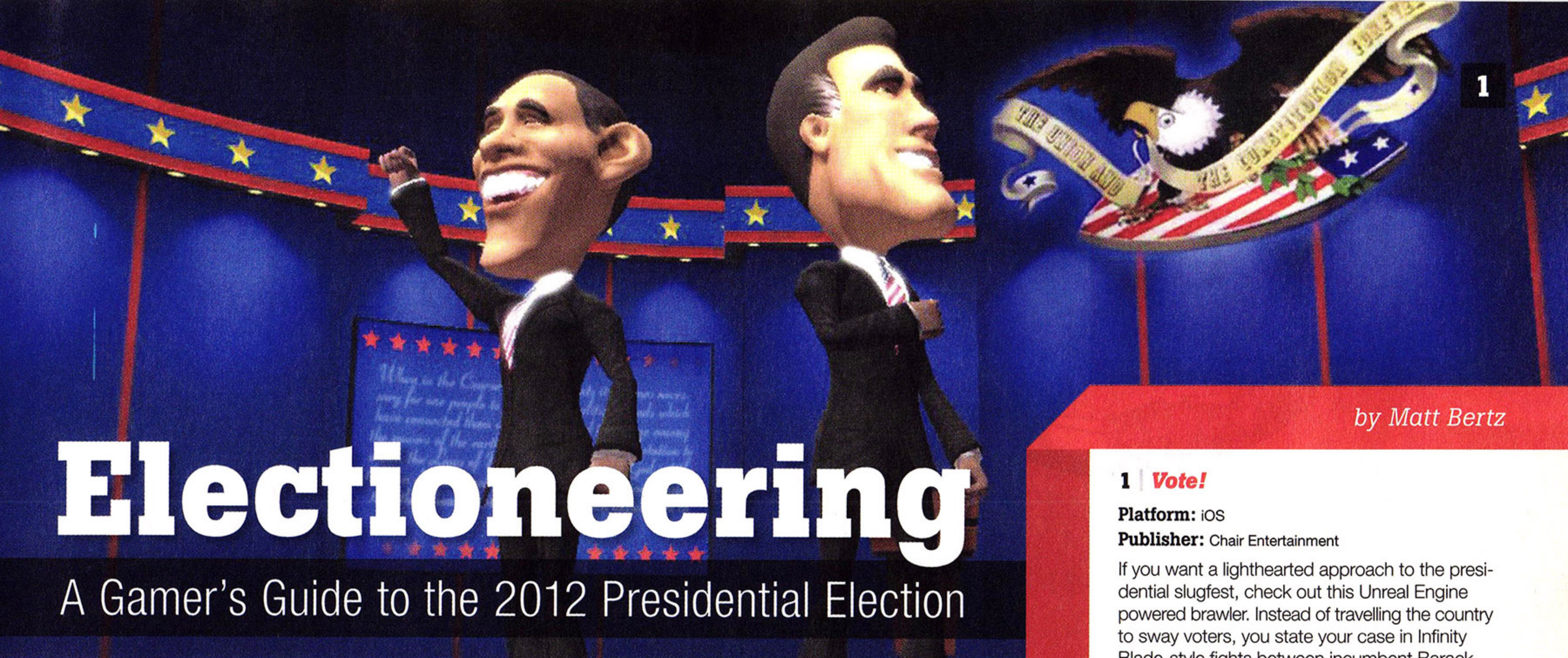
Visiting popular sites like Facebook, Google, and Reddit is easy thanks to reticle-based browsing. You guide the reticle across the website with the left analog stick and zoom in and out with the right. The action feels natural, but zooming is choppy and certain websites don't scale correctly in this early beta version.

NOT ALL GAMES ARE CREATED EQUAL

Most modern games have built-in support for controllers. Games like Deus Ex: Human Revolution and The Walking Dead automatically recognize your controller, which makes jumping into the game from Steam seamless. Older games, like Star Wars: Dark Forces or Oddworld: Abe's Oddysee, require a mouse and keyboard to configure the controller. Some games don't support controllers at all. Keep this in mind when you kick back on your sofa with just a gamepad.



by Tim Turi

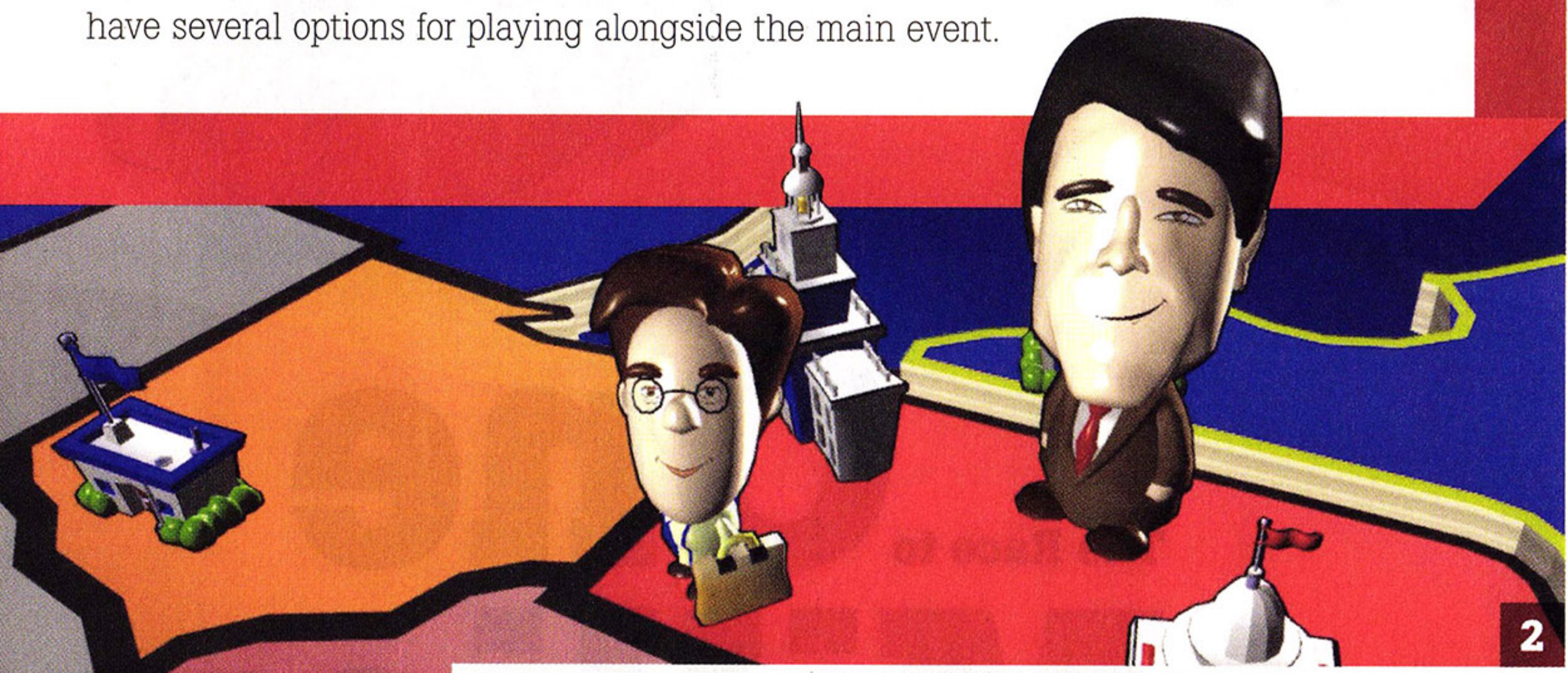


Electioneering

A Gamer's Guide to the 2012 Presidential Election

by Matt Bertz

It's that time of year when the television waves are overflowing with smear campaigns, the media scrambles to fact check all the lies, and "the soul of America is at stake." Welcome to the 2012 presidential election! As a red-blooded gamer, you have several options for playing alongside the main event.



Get Informed with the Xbox Live Election Hub

In an effort to better inform the gaming public about the issues at stake in the 2012 presidential election, Microsoft has partnered with NBC News, Rock The Vote, *The Atlantic*, and others to create an election hub on Xbox Live. In the lead-up to November 6, the channel will feature live-streamed town hall meetings, coverage of the political debates, and information on voter registration. On voting day, the channel will cover the election results as the ballots are counted.



1 | *Vote!*

Platform: iOS
Publisher: Chair Entertainment

If you want a lighthearted approach to the presidential slugfest, check out this Unreal Engine powered brawler. Instead of travelling the country to sway voters, you state your case in Infinity Blade-style fights between incumbent Barack Obama and challenger Mitt Romney.

2 | *The Political Machine 2012*

Platform: PC
Publisher: Stardock Entertainment

Test your political mettle with a current or past candidate of your choosing, or build your own Manchurian super candidate from scratch. After outlining your political agenda (both moderate and extremist positions are available), you take the campaign trail to win over the populace and lock down electoral votes. Only a volatile cocktail of raising the right issues at the right time, fundraising, and smearing your opponent when he or she is vulnerable will earn you the Oval Office.

3 | *Comedy Central's Indecision Game*

Platform: iOS, Android
Publisher: Comedy Central, 2K Play

Think you're smarter than the average member of the opposing party? Put your smarts on the line in this asynchronous quiz game that pits Democrats, Republicans, and independents against one another in a quest to collect electoral votes across the country.

4 | *Election Game 2012: Race for the White House*

Platform: iOS, Android
Publisher: Lunagames

Consider this a diet version of *The Political Machine*. Playing as either Obama or Romney, you vie for the control of the West Wing by making television appearances, investigating your opponent, and making tough moral fundraising choices.



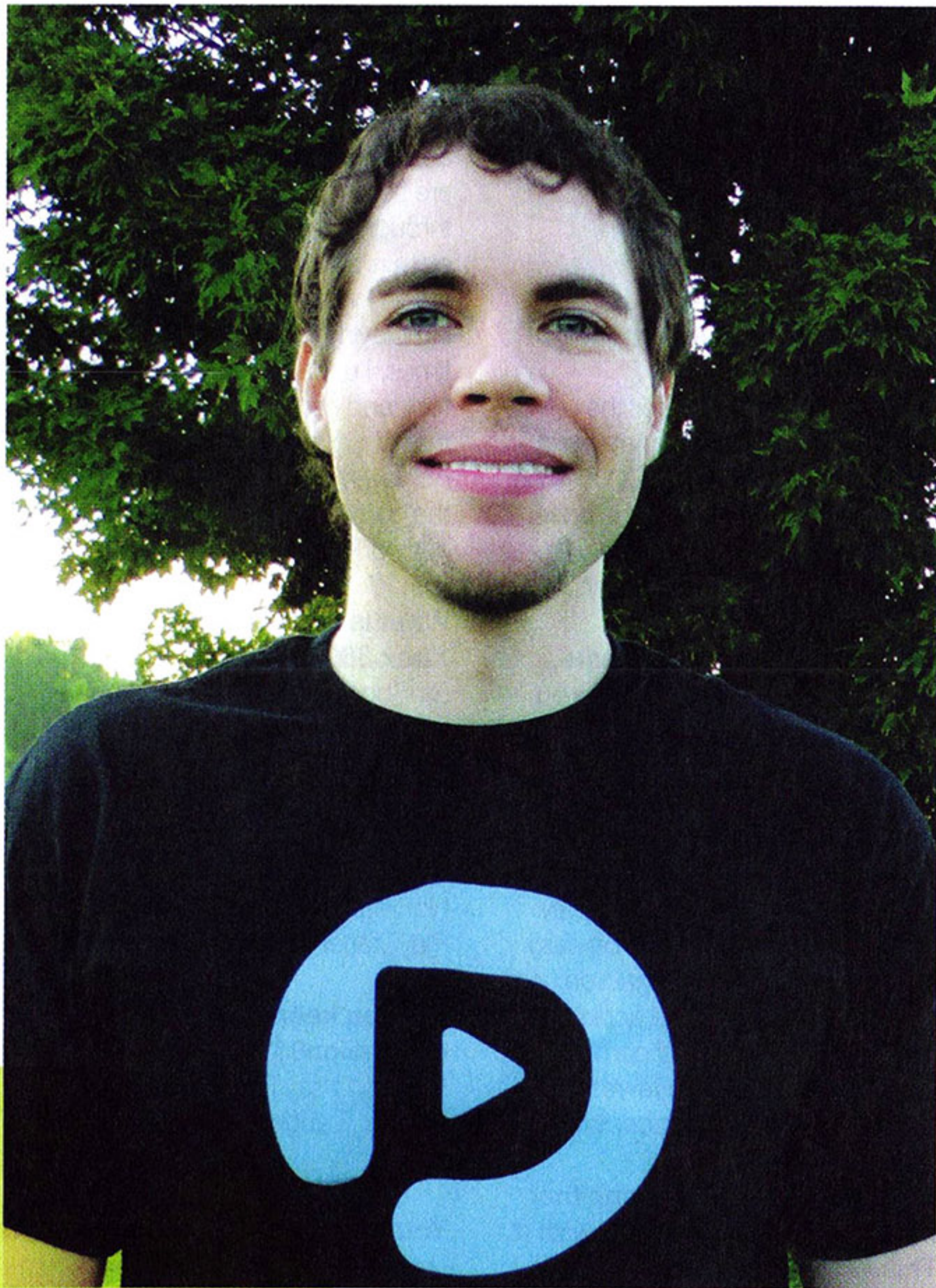


The Race to **One Million Gamerscore:**

In the old days, gamer bragging rights were measured by initials in an arcade machine's high score list. Today, gamerscore on Xbox Live is the new standard. Two men are currently locked in a race to see who can achieve the ultimate gamerscore milestone: one million points.

Raymond Cox is determined to be the first. Stephen Rowe just enjoys playing games. We talked to both of these achievement junkies about the race that could become the most gripping video game competition since *The King of Kong: A Fistful of Quarters*. **interviews by Andrew Reiner**

Who Will Be the First?



Raymond Cox

Achievements are a full time gig for you right now?

It's kind of a work-in-progress type of deal. After being contacted by people, they want to sponsor me and have me endorse stuff. I was actually writing freelance for IGN for a little bit last year. Stuff like that is what has enabled me to get by. But really, I'm just getting by with it.

You're getting by with sponsorships?

Well, not exactly. I haven't gotten exactly what I've been looking for. There's been broken promises. I don't want to sound like sour grapes, but people promise you some stuff, and then it never comes to fruition. But I'm currently partnered with Duxter.com and I'm excited to be working with them.

When did your quest to reach a one million gamerscore begin in earnest?

I was going crazy even before I had the idea of pushing it to a place where no one has gone. I think it was around August or September 2008 when I started thinking about getting to one million gamerscore.

How many hours do you sink into video games each day?

If there was an estimation, I would

say six to eight hours a day for the last six or seven years or however long it's been.

What are the most time-consuming achievements you've earned?

I recently played *Inversion*. It has this multiplayer achievement called "Feats Don't Fail Me Now," where you have to do all of the multiplayer [challenges] – kind of like *Gears of War*, where you have to get all of the rewards and medals. That achievement took like 560 hours. I still don't know why I did it. I just wanted to get that one done for some reason.

What's the game you've put the most time into? Is it *Inversion*?

Seriously, I guess it was *Gears of War*. Getting to 10,000 kills... I think I worked on that for three or four months at least. There are some other ones like *Battlefield's* 10,000 kills, too.

Did you play *Final Fantasy XI*, the game people claim to be the hardest to get any achievements in?

I didn't touch that one. I'm not going to touch it.

Do you have a list of games you can go back to for achievements?

I kind of feel that way about all of them. If the servers aren't down, or the games aren't broken, I feel like I can go back and get them at any point I want to. But I keep moving forward because I like playing all of the new games.

Do you buy or rent?

I do both. I buy, and use Gamefly. I buy quite a few games. You have to buy the Japanese games. You can't really rent those.

Do you have an American, Japanese, and European Xbox 360?

I have all three.

That probably means you've played the same game three times.

I think I did that with *Enchanted Arms* when it first came out, but one of the versions was glitched so you could only get 700 gamerscore in it. In 2006, there weren't many games coming out, so I couldn't keep putting my gamerscore up. At that point I figured, "Why not play some multi-system games?" I don't really like doing it. I love playing all of the new stuff.

Did you enter in the cheat codes to get the easy *Fallout 3* PC achievements?

I did not.

What advice can you give to achievement hunters?

Obviously play *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. That's an easy 1,000 points. On top of that, early on [developers] didn't really know how to implement achievements into games, so they would just throw out five achievements for 1,000 gamerscore. Look at a lot of the games that came out in the first part of this generation. *NBA 2K6* and *College Hoops 2K6* are easy points. Achievements got more sophisticated as time went on. They got harder and longer.

When you boot up a game, what do you do?

I'll probably just start playing. If I look at the achievements, I'll skim the list to see if there's an achievement to beat it on the hardest difficulty, I'll start it right away on the hardest difficulty. That's the only thing I'll really look for, especially if it's a good game that I've been looking forward to. If it's a bad game that I know I won't enjoy and play just for achievements, I'll look at the entire list so I don't miss one of those suckers.

I'm guessing you use online strategy guides for occasional help.

Yeah, at some points I'll do that. I like starting games right away, and

usually there's not a lot of information out there. It usually takes a few weeks for people to get all of the information and tips up. I'll look at them, but not right away. I like the achievements, but I'm more concerned with enjoying the game.

You have about 250,000 gamerscore to go. Where do you want to be by year's end? It's gotta be over 800,000.

If Microsoft launches a new system next year, are you going to stay on Xbox 360 to reach your goal, or would you move over to a new system that sets your gamerscore to zero just so you stay current on games?

That's a good question. Since I like playing the new stuff, and I would love seeing a new system, and have played so much on 360, I would probably just go over to the next system. I would have to.

Do you think gamerscore will carry over to the new system?

I'm 85 percent sure that they will carry over. I'm not worried. (laughs)

What is your favorite game on Xbox 360?

Mass Effect 3. Even though I'm a big multiplayer guy, I have to go with *Mass Effect 3*.

Do you have any interest in PlayStation 3?

None whatsoever. I don't even have one. I got sucked into Xbox 360 and saw no reason to go over there. Yes, there have been a few crumbs here and there like *Uncharted* and other games I would like to play. I just don't have the time to get into that. I'm trying to do this.

Are you keeping an eye on Smrnov, the person right behind you in on the gamerscore leaderboards?

I'm aware of him, and we're friends on Xbox Live. I've talked to him quite a bit, but I can't really be worried about what he's doing all the time.

Let's say his gamerscore gets closer to yours. Would you put in a couple of extra hours to distance yourself?

Oh, for sure! I think I'm going to be the first person to 1,000,000. I really do.

What are you going to do when you reach 1,000,000?

Man, I'm going to celebrate. That's the first thing I'm going to do. I don't know what I'll do then. A lot of people think what I'm doing is easy. There's a reason not many people are where I'm at. Smrnov is the closest one. He's the only competition. Everybody else is way too far behind to even catch up.



XBOX 360 HANDLE Stallion83

AGE
29

HOMETOWN
near Knoxville, TN

OCCUPATION
Sponsored Gamer

GAMERSCORE
750,465

FIRST ACHIEVEMENT
EARNED ON
November 21, 2005

AVERAGE POINTS
PER DAY
301.88

GAMES PLAYED
1,154

ACHIEVEMENTS EARNED
IN GAMES PLAYED
82 percent

WEBSITE
1MillionGamerscore.com



Stephen Rowe

XBOX 360 HANDLE
smrnov

AGE
37

HOMETOWN
near London, Ontario

OCCUPATION
Database Consultant

GAMERSCORE
733,519

**FIRST ACHIEVEMENT
EARNED ON**
December 12, 2005

**AVERAGE POINTS
PER DAY**
297.58

GAMES PLAYED
1,474

**ACHIEVEMENTS
EARNED IN
GAMES PLAYED**
63 percent

When did your quest to reach one million gamerscore begin?

I started gaming when the Xbox 360 first came out, but I wasn't too into the achievements. I was probably six months behind Raymond, and when he really clicked on those. For me, it's about finishing games. The endgame isn't 1,000,000. One of the things about the old-gen systems: You never really knew when you were done with a game. Did you have to play it on every difficulty? A lot of those things, you maybe wouldn't go back and try in a game. The achievement kind of gives me that, "I finished this game and had everything laid out for me by the developers." I know when I can move on from a game.

Does this mean you are going for 1,000 points in each game opposed to playing as many games as you can?

It's not that I'm not willing to do a partial play on a game, but I don't sell or get rid of that game until I've actually finished it.

How many hours a week do you spend playing games and getting achievements?

That's a difficult question. I kind of dabble in gaming during the day, but I have a full-time job so it's not really full-time play, but my Xbox is on. It's really the evening and weekends that I do most of my focused gameplay. I probably spend – actively playing – 20 hours in the course of a week.

How often do you play games on your Japanese and European Xbox 360s?

Depends on what I am doing. Sometimes there are gamerscore competitions, and there are a lot of quick point games to be had on the Japanese consoles in particular. I usually dip into [that library] if I need points quickly. Often what happens with those consoles is you end up playing the same game three times. So, a lot of people who think you are a cheater will see BioShock on your gamertag three times. What they don't realize is that you've played the full game three times.

How many games have you gotten 3,000 points in?

It depends on the publisher. It's not a huge list. I would say a dozen or less.

You brought up scoring competitions. Walk me through one.

There are a couple of them. Some people run them through trueachievements.com. A lot of these guys run them for the sake of friendly competition, and things like that. Prizes are all out of pocket for them. They aren't usually sponsored events. There was one last year that ran the full length of the year. They ended up having over 50 teams in it, and a weekly elimination for the lowest scoring team. I actually ended up winning that one. You basically have to score every week. As it gets toward the end, and there are fewer teams, the competition ramps up in terms of how many points you have

to get because everyone is fighting for the prize positions at that point.

Did you enter the cheat codes to get the Fallout 3 PC achievements?

Yes, I did.

Do you know what your million-point achievement will be?

I see what is available for the milestones. I try to do something interesting for every 100,000; something that lands right on the nose. I think I did Iron Man one year, and Iron Man 2 the next year.

When you start a new game, what is your strategy? Do you look at achievements first?

Absolutely! [Laughs]

Do you always set the game to the hardest difficulty?

No. Sometimes it's better to play through the harder things on easy, and then go through it again on hard. It really depends on the achievements. With my limited gaming time I have to focus on the fewest amount of play times possible.

Have you run into a game that made you say, "I'm done with it. This won't be worth it"?

Bullet Witch has a one-point achievement for playing through the game on the hardest difficulty. I still have the game, but haven't gone back to it. I did say I'd go back to it later.

What are some of the hardest achievements you've earned?

Getting number one on the leaderboards for the first Ghost Recon. Also, Chromehounds had a very active online community. Getting those achievements was almost as political as much as it was gameplay related.

Did you get any achievements in Final Fantasy XI?

Not yet, but I am thinking about it. They've apparently revamped the game so you can actually play it on PC and link it to your gamertag.

Are you worried gamerscore won't carry over onto the next Microsoft system?

They'll have it for sure. They know how popular it's been. I think they'll have the games on the next system be worth more. My guess is 2,000 out of the box per game.

What are you playing right now?

Conflict: Denied Ops...the German version, but that's just because I'm getting ready for scoring next week.

What do you mean?

I'll play to the point of the last checkpoint. When the competition starts next week, I'll finish that last checkpoint to get a couple hundred points.

What advice can you give achievement hunters?

Use the resources on the web that are available to you like X360A.org and Trueachievements.com. There are some great places that do walkthroughs, too. My personal preference is a text-based walkthrough. When I watch a video, I kind of think I'm playing through the game three times. I understand they are a great tool, and I appreciate the people that put in the time to do them. True Achievement has a ratio on each of the games that tells you if they are easy or hard for achievements.

What is your favorite Xbox 360 game?

BioShock...the first one. [Laughs] I didn't hate the second one. It's not like they ruined it.

Any interest in PlayStation trophies?

Not really. I'm not a fan of the PlayStation 3 controller.

Are you keeping an eye on Stallion83?

I wouldn't say I am keeping an eye on him. [Laughs] I'm aware he's there.

You're pretty close to him.

I get asked often if I don't pass him simply because of an agreement between the two of us. The real answer: The points I put up depend on the games I play. Not how close I am to him.

I imagine this competition is going to intensify next year.

Yeah. People have been saying that for a long time. When I started scoring, what really got me interested in it was the competition. One of the sites had a head-to-head league where you had eliminations week-to-week based on the team you were playing. That's kind of when I really got interested in doing this. At that point, I think he was quite a bit ahead of me. When I started scoring faster, a lot of people thought I would blow by him. Completing games takes a lot longer than just throwing down a lot of points.

Where do you want your gamerscore to be by year's end?

There's a [gamerscore league] coming up. I plan on doing a lot of scoring there. I don't think it would be outside the realm [of possibility] to be over 800,000.

Do you want to be the first person to 1,000,000 gamerscore?

That milestone isn't the thing for me. As long as I am having fun doing it, and like the way I'm doing, I'm going to keep at it. ♦

Head to www.gameinformer.com for further updates on Raymond and Stephen's quest for 1,000,000 gamerscore



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Lost RPG Franchises Where Are They Now?

Do you remember the series that made you fall in love with RPGs? The blindsiding betrayal of Suikoden, the stunning storybook visuals of the Mana games, and the thrilling cancel attacks from Grandia's battle system all helped define the genre. Glancing around store shelves today would hardly resurrect these memories, since many of these formative series are absent this generation. We investigated what happened to some of the well-known RPGs of yesteryear and put our odds on their resurgence. Everybody loves a comeback, but just in case, we also provided alternative current-gen games to fill the void.

by Kimberley Wallace

Mana ▶

Last Seen:

The World of Mana arc of the franchise spawned three US releases. The last was 2007's *Heroes of Mana*, a real-time strategy RPG, which left middling impressions, similar to the other World of Mana releases.

Current Status:

Besides releasing *Secret of Mana* for iOS, Square has kept quiet about the series' future, but at least the company recognizes its classic titles have a fanbase.

Odds:

10:1 - Series creator Koichi Ishii, who produced or directed practically every Mana game, left Square Enix in 2007 to form his own development studio, Grezzo Games, Inc. The future looks grim with Ishii gone and the last entry's poor reception. But there's a glimmer of hope: Square still owns the rights, and recently trademarked "Circle of Mana." A future entry in the series? Fingers crossed.

If you like, play:

The Last Story (Wii)



◀ Suikoden

Last Seen:

We haven't seen a main entry in the series since 2006's *Suikoden V*. In 2009, *Suikoden Tierkreis*, a side story in the Suikoden world, released for the DS to a mixed reception.

Current Status:

Doubt about the series' lifespan surfaced when Konami developers told 4gamers.net in 2011 that the Suikoden team disbanded, with many moved to other projects. But Konami provided hope when they released *Tsumugareshi Hyakunen no Toki* (another spin-off) on PSP in Japan this year.

Odds:

50:1 - The fact that the PSP re-releases of *Suikoden I* and *II* were never localized doesn't show much faith in the series' status in America. Add in the side entries not measuring up to the series' standards, and it's hard to stay optimistic. But maybe all this series needs to light fire again is a new main entry. You hear that, Konami?

If you like, play:

Radiant Historia (DS),
Growlanser: Wayfarer in Time (PSP)

Shining ▶

Last Seen:

Shining Force EXA's release in 2007 is the last time the Shining franchise graced our shores.

Current Status:

Not seeing a release since the PS2 era has made the series fade into obscurity in the U.S., although the franchise is still strong in Japan. Four additional console games have hit that region, and that's not including a slew of mobile and arcade releases.

Odds:

US: 100:1, Japan: 1:1 - The fact that the handheld releases haven't made it over to the US speaks volumes about Sega's view of the potential here. Reality check: While Japan received a new Shining game this year, the U.S. hasn't seen an entry in the last five years.

If you like, play:

Fire Emblem: Shadow Dragon (DS), Tactics Ogre: Let Us Cling Together (PSP)



Shadow Hearts ▶

Last Seen:

In 2005, Shadow Hearts: From the New World altered the series' dynamic by abandoning its main protagonist from the first games, Yuri Hyuga. This led to some growing pains with a new cast.

Current Status:

Aruze Entertainment (now Universal Entertainment Corporation) owned developer Nautilus during Shadow Hearts' run, but announced the dissolution of the studio in 2007.

Odds:

1,000:1 - We're confident in saying this one is over, since the Shadow Hearts rights remain with Aruze. The company has since ventured in a different direction, focusing on pachinko and slot machines. At this point, we're more likely to see a Shadow Hearts pachinko machine than another full entry.

If you like, play:

Lost Odyssey (Xbox 360)



Wild Arms ▶

Last Seen:

In 2009, the strategy/RPG Wild Arms XF changed things up for the franchise by being the series' first portable game. However, 2007's Wild Arms 5 was the last numbered entry in the series.

Current Status:

Media.vision had their hands tied working on the Chaos Rings games for iOS and Valkyria Chronicles III for the PSP. A rumor circulated about a Wild Arms 6 announcement at Tokyo Game Show in 2009, but nothing ever materialized.

Odds:

25:1 - With Media.vision working on other projects, the series appears to be on the back burner. A new entry depends on Sony, since it owns the franchise, and we're not sure if Wild Arms' sales are up to Sony's expectations.

If you like, play:

Legends of Heroes: Trails in the Sky (PSP)



.hack ▶

Last Seen:

The .hack G.U. series ended with Redemption in 2007, but the .hack world still lives on in anime and manga, even in North America.

Current Status:

The .hack series hasn't been abandoned – a fighting game called .hack//versus is currently in development for PlayStation 3 (though no North American release plans have been announced). Japan also received a PSP title in 2010 called .hack//link, which was closer to the series' RPG roots.

Odds:

25:1 - .hack still has gusto in Japan, and the fact that the anime and manga have so much to build off opens the door for new video game concepts. But the real question is whether the series still has a place stateside.

If you like, play:

Xenoblade Chronicles (Wii), Phantasy Star Portable 2 (PSP)



Grandia ▶

Last Seen:

The series vanished after Grandia III's 2006 release, which kept pace with its furious combat but let down players with annoying characters and a vapid story.

Current Status:

The last we heard anything about Grandia was the announcement of an MMO in 2004. The title changed production hands a few times, and eventually saw an open beta release in 2009. Grandia Online never debuted in North America, though, and Japanese servers were shut down in September.

Odds:

75:1 - With Grandia Online shutting down and developer GameArts working on GungHo's Ragnarok titles, we're not likely to see a new Grandia any time soon.

If you like, play:

Penny Arcade's On The Rain-slick Precipice of Darkness 3 (Xbox 360, PC)



Breath of Fire ▶

Last Seen:

Breath of Fire: Dragon Quarter for the PlayStation 2 (2003) is the series' last outing. The game was a departure for the Breath of Fire series, which divided critics and fans.

Current Status:

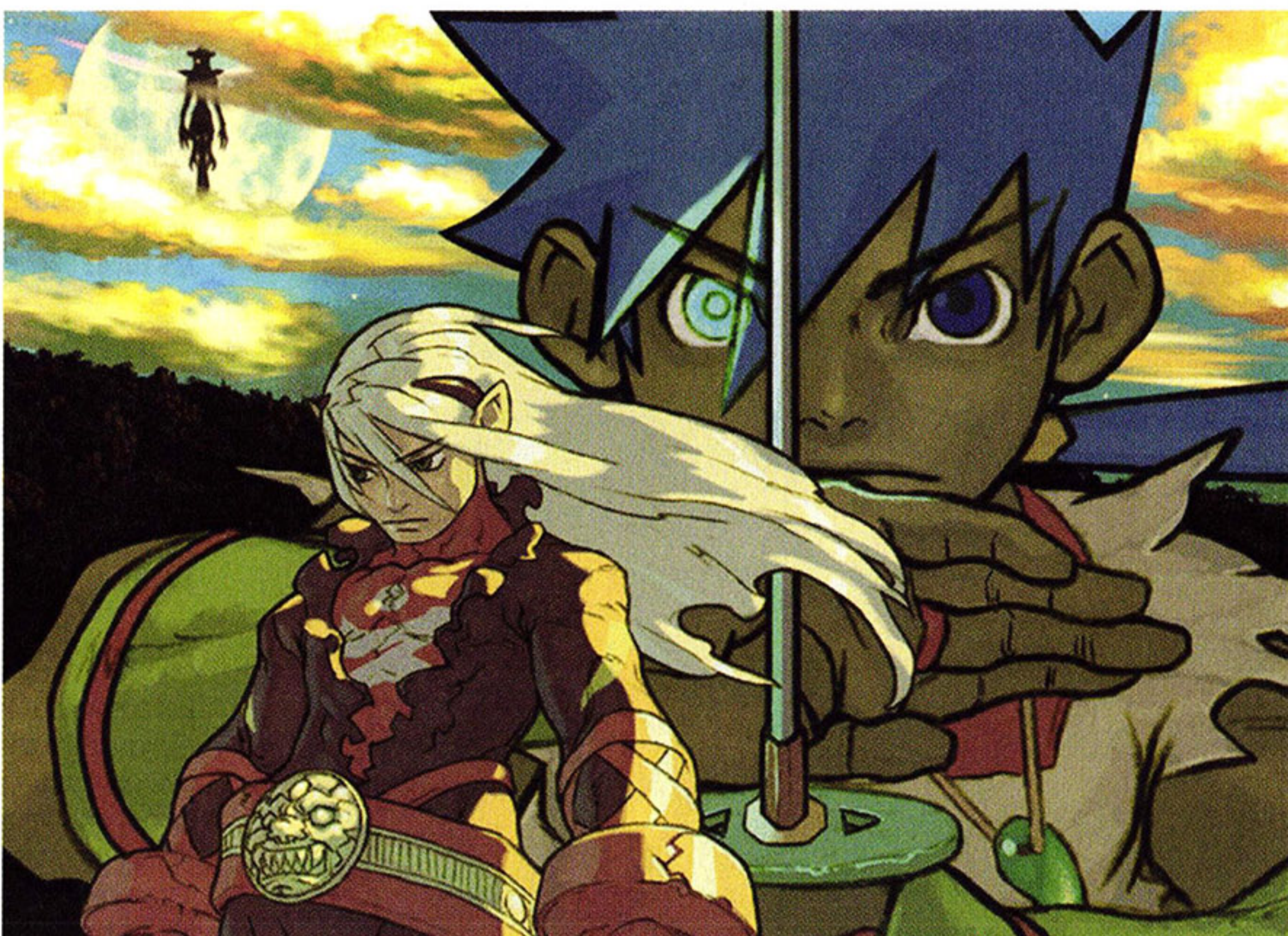
Capcom is open with how it feels about the potential of the series. In 2009, Capcom USA vice president of strategic planning Christian Svensson confirmed on Capcom's official message boards that series is a "resting IP."

Odds:

100:1 - In a 2008 interview with 1UP, former Capcom executive Keiji Inafune said, "There are currently no plans on making a new Breath of Fire game." Finances seem to be at the root of it, with Inafune citing a lack of resources and a flagging market as the reasoning. If Mega Man Legends 3 can't even see life with Capcom, we're not hopeful for a new Breath of Fire.

If you like, play:

Golden Sun: Dark Dawn (Nintendo DS) 



Attention to **Detail: 10** Things That Make Any Game Better

by Joe Juba

GREAT IDEAS ARE THE FOUNDATIONS OF GREAT GAMES, and no one can deny that developers today create many entertaining concepts. Even so, sometimes the simple things get overlooked. Every gamer has stopped in the middle of playing and wondered why a developer failed to include an obviously useful feature. Not better loot, different powers, or other game-specific adjustments – we’re talking about top-level interface, design, and usability decisions. These 10 features should be in every game, minimizing confusion and maximizing your ability to customize your experience. All of them are possible, and have been implemented in multiple titles already; now we want to see them consistently applied and standardized across all genres.

Control Customization

Developers try to find the optimal control scheme for their own games, but the default solution doesn't work for everyone. Maybe you like the dash and jump buttons reversed, or maybe you have a physical disability that makes the default options impossible to use. Whatever the case, console games usually don't offer the option to tune the control scheme to your liking. Sometimes gamers want to do more than just invert the Y-Axis, and there's no good reason why we aren't given that freedom.

Be like: PC games **Not like:** Most other games

Good Autosaving

Gamers don't like losing progress. That's why a decent autosave system is a necessity in any modern game. Once upon a time, managing your save file was part of the challenge, but those days are gone. Whether you enter a new area, finish a tough fight, sell some items, or just allocate some skill points, the autosave should kick in. Of course, gamers should still have the ability to manually save whenever we want, but replaying 20 minutes of previously completed content shouldn't be the penalty for forgetting.

Be like: Saints Row: The Third **Not like:** The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim

Pausing Cutscenes

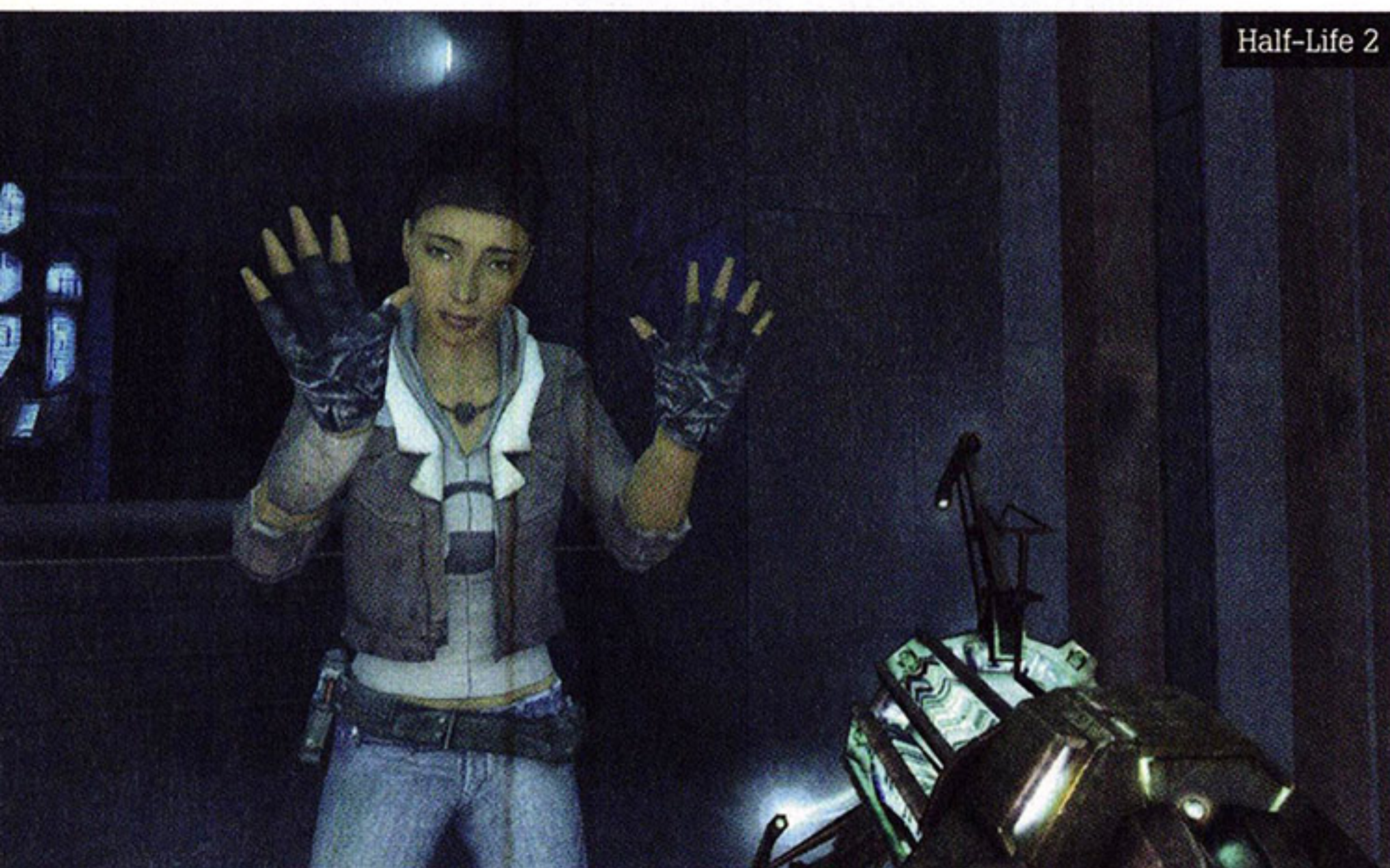
Uninterrupted gaming time is great, but sometimes we have to deal with phone calls or other unforeseen distractions, and we don't want to worry about whether trying to pause the game will result in inadvertently skipping a story-critical cutscene. Here's how this needs to work: When you press start, whatever is happening on the screen pauses. Dialogue? Cutscene? Big-budget rendered cinematics? All paused, not skipped.

Be like: Castlevania: Lords of Shadow **Not like:** Grand Theft Auto IV

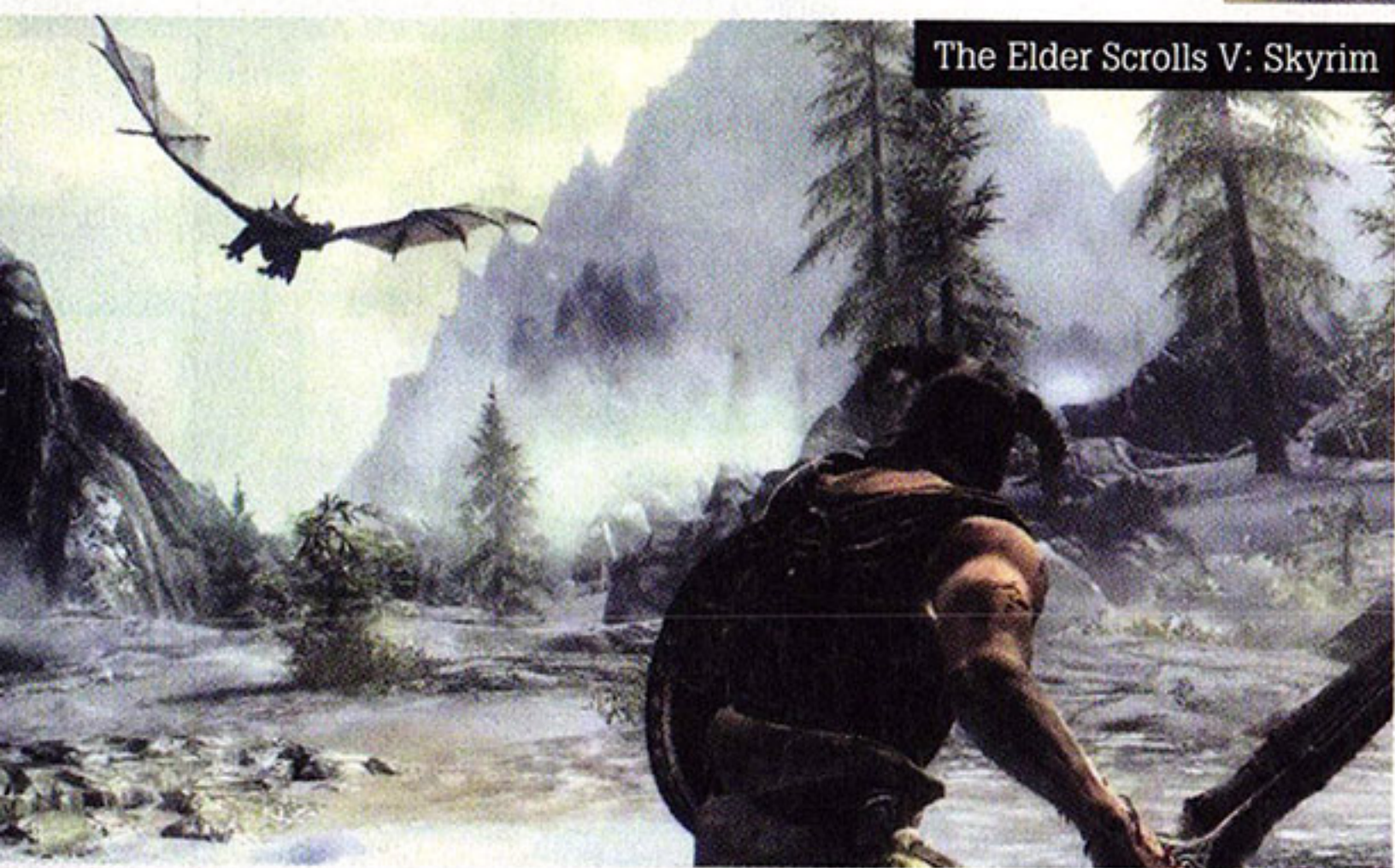
Skipping Cutscenes

Let's say that you don't want to pause a cutscene – you want to skip it entirely. This should be an option from the pause screen, where an extra button press lets you skip over whatever non-interactive part you may be watching (including regular dialogue). This option should be available whether or not you've already seen the event in previous playthroughs or attempts. Some people don't care about the story, and others don't want to scroll through the same conversation multiple times as they try to beat a challenging section.

Be like: Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots **Not like:** The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword



Half-Life 2



The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim



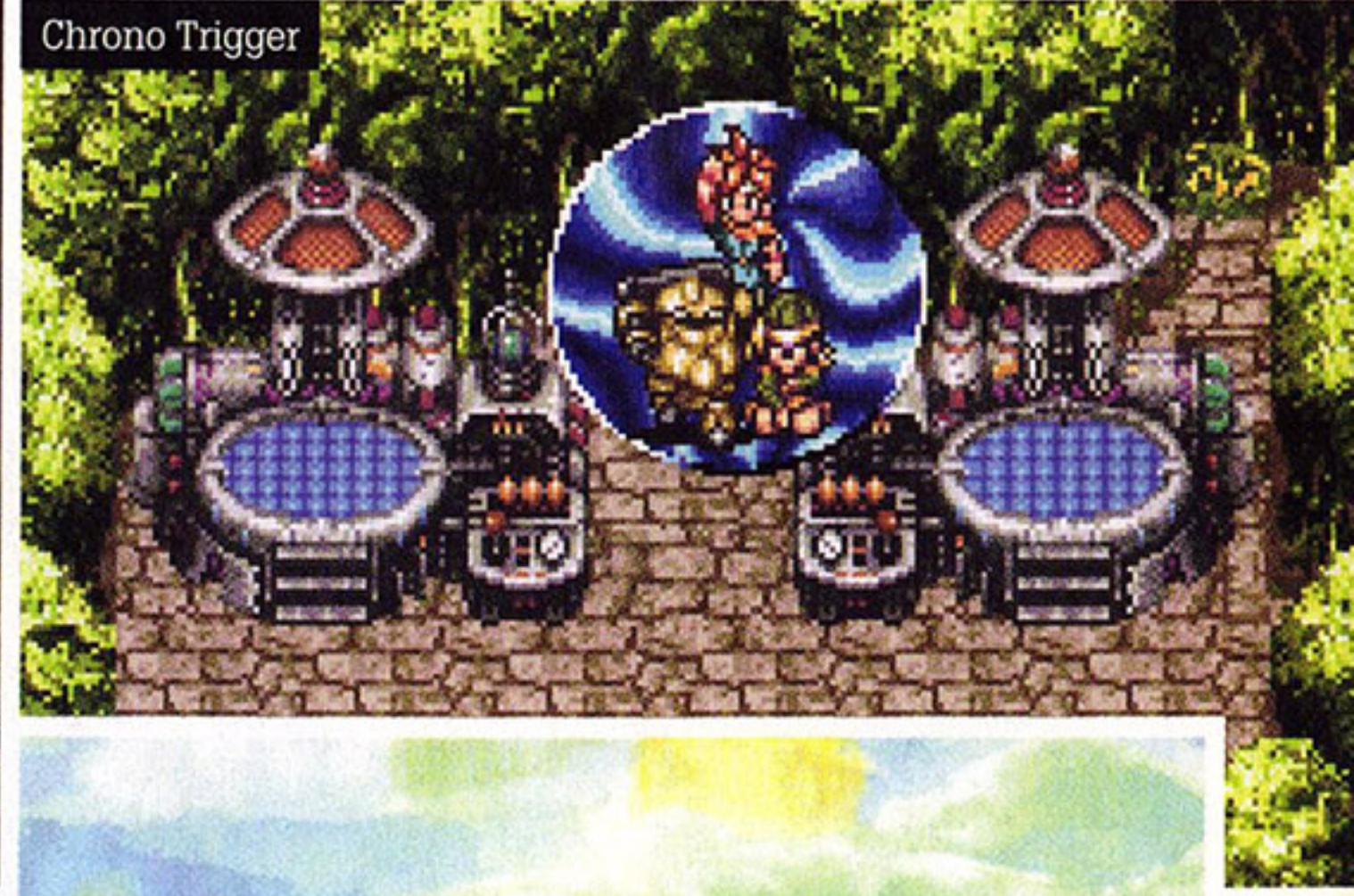
Castlevania: Lords of Shadow



Singularity



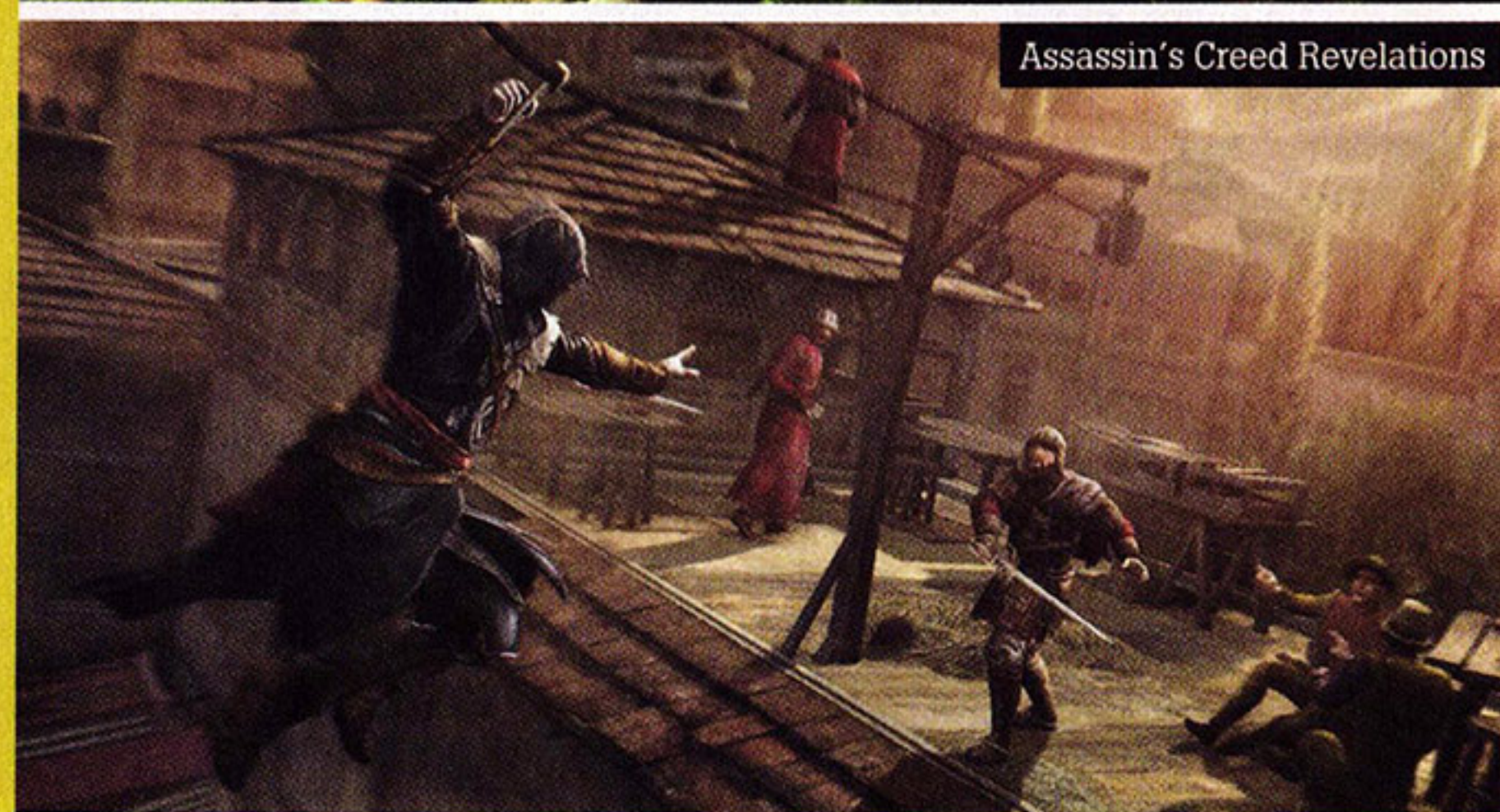
Metroid: Other M



Chrono Trigger



Braid



Assassin's Creed Revelations

Brightness Adjustment

Video game artists spend their time making worlds and characters look as good as possible. Unfortunately, televisions don't display these graphics exactly the same way. To play the game as the designers intended, we need two things: in-game brightness adjustment and a reference image to ensure the brightness is set properly. Ideally, the game should prompt us to optimize these settings right away, but placing it in an options menu is also acceptable. If you make us manually adjust the brightness on our television instead, you've totally blown it.

Be like: Mass Effect 3 **Not like:** Metroid: Other M

Reward Subsequent Playthroughs

Gamers spend hours grinding levels, earning weapons, and finishing side quests, but sometimes we still want to keep playing. An option to carry over an end-game save to a brand new playthrough can breathe new life into subsequent runs. Maybe all of the items and stats are transferred, or maybe just some extra bonuses and unlocks. Anything is better from just starting over from scratch. Yes, this may disrupt (or completely break) the game balance, but if we've already beaten it, is that really a problem?

Be like: Chrono Trigger **Not like:** Dragon Age: Origins

Decent Captions

First and foremost, deaf gamers require subtitles in order to play and understand a game, so that should be enough to standardize this feature. For everyone else, it helps to be able to read names and places – especially if a game is set in some crazy fantasy universe. Maybe keeping the volume down will avoid disturbing people nearby. Either way, just adding text for what characters are saying isn't enough; it needs to be synced properly so we aren't reading words before they're said, and it should be attributed to the character speaking (or color-coded) to avoid confusion. As video game stories get more complex, being able to read every word ensures that no one misses out on the action.

Be like: Portal **Not like:** Singularity

User-Considerate DRM

Piracy is a problem, and video game publishers are trying to fight it. Unfortunately, some methods seem designed to punish people who actually buy the game more than those who try to steal it. Always-on online connections, especially for single-player games, cause big problems (and lost progress) with the slightest connection hiccup. We're not saying that publishers don't have the right to protect their product, but it shouldn't come at the expense of the paying customer. It hurts the people who want to support the game most, and that isn't acceptable.

Be like: The Witcher 2 **Not like:** Ubisoft circa 2011

Cut Back on Tutorials

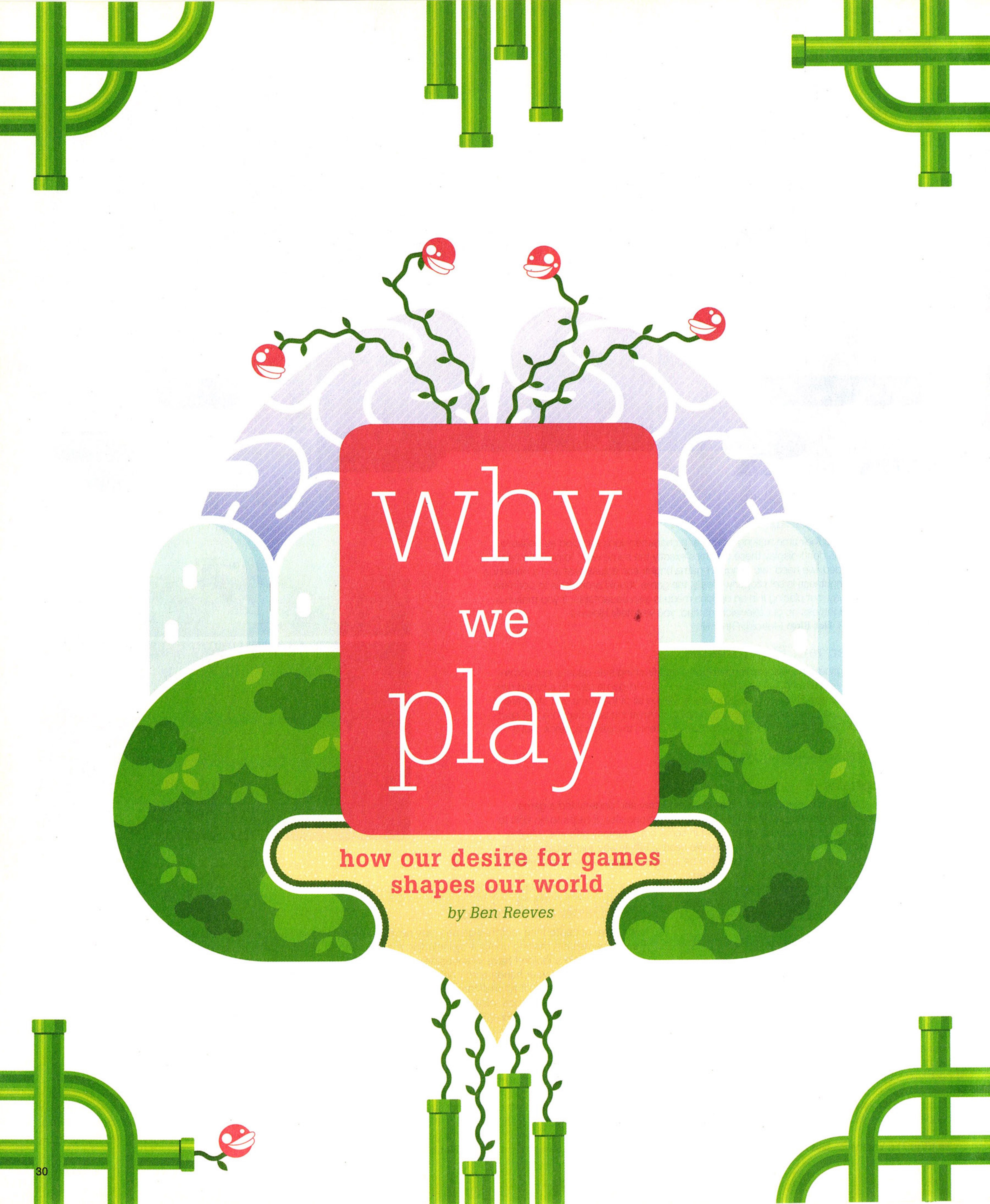
We have accepted the fact that games may never come packaged with hefty manuals again. The problem is that some games are making up for it by including massive tutorial sections early on instead of letting players jump into the action. We shouldn't have to set aside a three-hour block every time we want to start a new game just to get to the point where our hands aren't held. An interactive in-game manual could bear some of that weight, letting us practice skills if need. If tutorials are necessary, keep them short and unobtrusive. Gamers aren't idiots, so have a little faith in our intelligence, please.

Be like: Braid **Not like:** Final Fantasy XIII

Credits

This one has three parts. First, all games should have credits at the end – not just kick you back to the title screen. Seeing the action fade out and the credits roll is a great chance to decompress and reflect on the recently conquered game. Second, developers need to carefully consider who really needs to be in the credits; the idea is to give due credit to the people who created a game, not every single person in a multi-national corporation. Third, give us the ability to skip (or speed through) the credits is a must. Not that we will skip them every time, but long credits can easily add 20 minutes to a gaming session, which is a lot if things are already running late or if you've already beaten the game several times.

Be like: Super Smash Bros. Melee **Not like:** Assassin's Creed Revelations



why
we
play

how our desire for games
shapes our world

by Ben Reeves

three invisible needs

Gamers often throw around the term “escapism” when talking about their hobby, but this is a hollow explanation for what actually motivates us to play games. In fact, the word “escape” contains some negative implications – suggesting that those who play games feel a need to break free from the mundane slavery of their reality. We enjoy retreats to other realities – ones more fantastical than our own – but we aren’t always driven to play games because we are trying to escape our lives. The real motivations for play are far more complex, and games fulfill several real-world human needs in a number of positive ways.

After earning his Ph.D. in clinical and social psychology from the University of Rochester, Scott Rigby helped found Immersyve, a research company designed to examine some of these basic human needs and discover what makes video games so appealing. After collecting several years’ worth of behavioral data and conducting numerous in-house studies from companies like Sony, Activision, and Warner

Bros. Interactive, Rigby feels Immersyve has nailed down a few key motivations behind our addiction to fun.

“We all have basic psychological needs,” explains Rigby, who detailed gaming’s intrinsic allure in his book *Glued to Games: How Videogames Draw Us In and Hold Us Spellbound*. “These needs operate all the time – when we’re at work, or when we’re engaging in a softball league, or on weekends while we are playing a video game. These needs are always operating. Games perfectly target several of these needs.”

According to Rigby, Immersyve’s complex needs-satisfaction metrics narrow down to three basic categories. The first of these needs is a need for competence – that is a desire to seek out control or to feel mastery over a situation. People like to feel successful, and we like to feel like we’re growing and progressing in our knowledge and accomplishments. This need plays out in real life when people decide to

switch careers or go back to school because their current job isn’t rewarding or challenging enough. It’s also easy to see how video games make us feel more accomplished. Every time we level up in *Final Fantasy* or defeat a challenging boss in *God of War*, games are fulfilling our desire to feel competent.

Our second psychological need is autonomy: the desire to feel independent or have a certain amount of control over our actions. This need pervades nearly every facet of our culture. The drive toward autonomy is why people instinctively dislike being manipulated; it’s why imprisonment is a punishment, and why we feel an innate urge to rebel against slavery. This need explains why game series that offer players a wealth of free choices – such as *The Elder Scrolls* or *Grand Theft Auto* – are so popular.

“The terrible twos are a great example of the need for autonomy,” Rigby says. “It’s not terrible for the kid. It’s terrible for the parent who

has to listen to their kid say ‘No’ all the time. What is that kid doing? The kid is showing their autonomy. They want to be in control of their destiny, and they’re verbally flexing that muscle for the first time.”

The final psychological human need is relatedness. We like to feel like we matter to others, and we like to feel like we are making a significant contribution to society. In a 2003 study, the University of Massachusetts Medical School discovered that people with altruistic tendencies generally have higher levels of mental health and less overall life stress.

It’s easy to see how gamers can fulfill this need for relatedness by playing games with friends online, but oddly enough, Immersyve’s studies have found that this need for relatedness can be met even if gamers are interacting with people who are not real. “The way that games are written, this need can generally be met when players are talking to an in-game character,” Rigby says. “That’s why a lot of quests are often structured around helping a particular NPC find an item or collect a treasure.”

Over the centuries we’ve gravitated towards experiences that make us feel more competent, more autonomous, and more related because these experiences make us feel good and keep us mentally healthy. These needs can be fulfilled in any number of ways: through work, school, friends, sports, and hobbies. However, sociologists are beginning to understand that video games are one of the most seductive of all of these activities because they fulfill our psychological needs more efficiently than almost any other activity.

games are work

Imagine this: A man sits down at a desk and pulls up a database of numbers. He looks through the database and compares a list of numbers from one column to a list from another column. He takes a certain number from one cell and reallocates it somewhere else. He clicks a few buttons, waits a few seconds, and then repeats the process. Then he does it again and again. This man could be performing spreadsheet accounting work, or he could be crafting in *World of Warcraft*.

At their most basic levels, work and play look a lot alike. The difference between the two is that games couch this kind of work in a fiction that makes them enjoyable. A game’s narrative makes our choices feel significant enough that we buy into the game emotionally, and the feedback system encourages us to keep working.

People often view games as the opposite of work, but some sociologists believe games are an idealized form of work. “Most people find work rewarding; we have built-in emotional reward centers that encourage us to complete tasks,” says Andrew Przybylski, Ph.D., a lecturer at the University of Essex whose papers have appeared in journals like *Psychological Science*.

This built-in desire to feel accomplished is what so often pushes sports stars to come back to the game after retirement. People don’t like to be idle. Work meets our three invisible needs in some of the same ways that games do. Games are just more efficient satisfiers.

“The connection to how hard we work is often mismatched with the feedback we get from the real world,” Przybylski says. “Sometimes we think we really knocked it out of the park, and really you just phoned it in. Other times you might have burned the midnight oil, but no one seems to give a crap. One of the things that’s really powerful about video games is the level of connection

gamers have spent countless hours saving princesses, dodging bullets, and dismembering Grecian monsters. What drives us to keep coming back to these experiences? Researchers around the world have spent decades measuring the effects games have on our society: how they encourage or discourage violence, inspire creativity, or nurture laziness. However, people rarely ask why we play games in the first place. What drives us to collect coins, snipe aliens, or scale the walls of ancient tombs until three in the morning?

Psychologists and sociologists are only now beginning to understand why the human ability to play is so powerful. But unlocking the mystery behind this desire may do more than help us understand our obsession – it could reshape and improve society in powerful ways.



between how hard you work and the feedback you receive for your behavior.”

Games are more consistent at rewarding us for the choices we make, and they also provide a diversity of choice that the real world doesn't provide. Gamers can go places and enter into situations that are closed off to them in real life. Games are immediately rewarding, providing instant feedback when we do something right, and telling us how well we perform every step along the way. These highly tuned feedback systems are the key to turning video games into an indispensable tool for bettering our future.

students of the game

It's difficult to predict exactly how our society will unlock the power of games in the coming decades, but video games have already influenced the fields of science, education, and business. An examination of how these disciplines have profited from gaming concepts could give us a glimpse of our future.

We've exploited one of gaming's most useful applications for centuries. Chess was used in the Middle Ages to teach war strategies to noblemen. In the '70s, computer games like Oregon Trail did a better job of getting kids excited about American history than most history professors. Today, hundreds of web portals like Kidsknowit.com offer teachers a reservoir of tools to help educate students. Games are an indispensable learning tool, but we've only begun to scratch the surface of their teaching potential.

“Almost all educational games suck,” says Iowa State University professor Douglas A. Gentile, who has spent his career researching how video games affect children. “They don't put nearly the same level of attention and resources into them as something like Halo. I'd be surprised if they get 1/100th the resources Halo does. So much of the public debate about games has been sidetracked by tragedy. We wring our hands about the cause of violence in society, and there really is no one cause. Our ability to move forward with intelligent approaches to studying and discussing games really keeps getting sidetracked by media violence.”

Many modern – even violent – games might be better teaching tools than we realize. The Assassin's Creed series allows gamers to explore classic locales sprinkled with real historical details. Rocksmith teaches people how to play guitar, and The Typing of the Dead improves horror fans' typing skills. The upcoming indie title Code Hero even hopes to teach young programmers how to design games.

“I think games can provide a framework for understanding contemporary issues such as governmental budgets and spending,” Przybylski says. “I'd bet SimCity veterans have a less distorted view of current city/state/federal expenditures compared to the general public.”

building blocks of a better world

While games help us learn about yesterday, they could also be used as a building block for making a better tomorrow. Several businesses have already taken the “sticky” qualities that make video games engaging and applied them to traditionally mundane tasks.

Gamification is a buzzword often tossed around the conference tables of Fortune 500 companies. The concept promotes the idea of rewarding virtual currency to consumers who complete simple tasks. Foursquare users are familiar with the concept of gamification and its slow drip of new badges and awards. However, gamified services don't meet our invisible needs on the same level as mainstream video games. Instead of razzle-dazzling customers with extrinsic baubles and badges, in the near future, businesses may fine-tune their feedback systems in a way that tickles our psychological needs. Someday, filling accounting spreadsheets could be more like playing World of Warcraft. But games are already helping people get better at their jobs in a lot of practical ways.

“There are a number of great studies showing that first-person shooters increase our visual perception and help gamers pick information off of a screen quickly, which is the kind of skill that an air traffic controller needs, for example,” Gentile says. “A couple other studies with microscopic surgeons show that surgeons who have played games in the past are better at advanced surgical skills – that gaming is, in fact, a better predictor than how many years of training they've had or how many surgeries they've performed.”

Aside from the physical benefits of gaming, video games excel at setting clear goals and showing a player's progression towards those goals. This approach already radiates across the social networking scene where progress bars litter sites like Facebook, LinkedIn, and Spotify. Other businesses have developed feedback mechanisms that allow customers to track their progress towards improved social, financial, and physical health. Unique puzzle games like Foldit and EteRNA encourage problem solvers to fold the structure of selected macromolecules in different ways, which will help further scientific learning and possibly cure diseases.

The playful nature of video games lowers the barrier of entry for people to get behind new social causes. For example, the simple online quiz game Freerice has encouraged gamers to collect more than 90 billion grains of rice for the World Food Programme. Much like Twitter allows its users to interact with celebrities and businesses unlike any other medium in history, future game-like services and tools could encourage new kinds of social team building, allowing users to voice their opinions and affect societal change in myriad new ways.

“No one believes that every facet of our lives would improve if it adhered to the rules of video games. Life can't be all fun and games, and sometimes effort is needed to produce results. Some work is just work. However, most industries and human endeavors may prosper if they do a better job meeting the psychological needs of their audience. No form of human expression understands needs satisfaction better than video games.”

When used correctly, video games hold the potential to show us the world through a different set of lenses – to craft experiences that engage our mind both cognitively and socially, and ultimately make us feel like an active participant in shaping our destiny. Do we need a better reason to play games? ♦

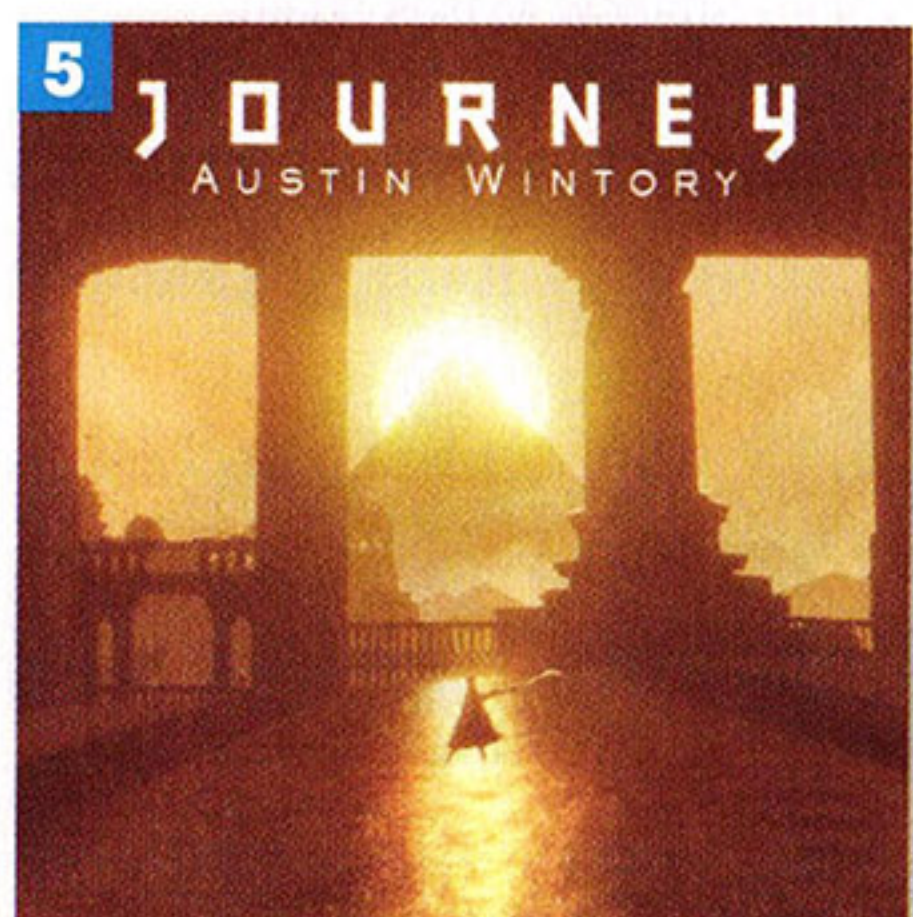
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Sound Check

Recent Game Soundtracks Worth Hearing

by Matt Miller

While many modern games release with an instrumental score, some musical soundtracks rise above to be artistic experiences in their own right. Give a listen to one of these excellent albums to gain a new appreciation for the increasingly sophisticated art of game scoring.



1 BASTION

BY DARREN KORB

No soundtrack on this list offers a more unusual aural experience than Bastion. Guitar, dulcimer, and other folk sounds reappear throughout the tunes amid a continuous flow of drum-heavy synthesizer work. Discordant and distorted effects give way to bluesy harmonies. While the mostly instrument-driven score won't disappoint, the plaintive "Build That Wall (Zia's Theme)" (sung by Ashley Barrett) serves as the heart of the game.

2 BATMAN: ARKHAM CITY

BY NICK ARUNDEL

Low strings and horns dominate Arundel's dramatic take on the Dark Knight's adventures. A repeated four note melodic motif weaves in and out of the score; Batman's enemies may change, but the hero's indomitable presence is always there to stop them.

3 DARKSIDERS II

BY JESPER KYD

Previously known for his memorable Assassin's Creed scores, Kyd's atmospheric two-disc soundtrack for Darksiders II is structured to echo Death's journey across worlds. Listen for the ethereal qualities of the first disc, which transition into the exotic dark tonalities of the second disc's descent into the realms of demons and undead.

4 DEUS EX: HUMAN REVOLUTION

BY MICHAEL MCCANN

Sweeping synths, electronic effects, and the occasional vocal solo form the bedrock of McCann's pumping soundtrack for the cyber-noir world of Deus Ex. The surprising mix of traditional and modern instrumentation speaks to the game's divergent themes of spirituality and technology. The dichotomy is especially striking in the main "Icarus" theme that opens the score.

5 JOURNEY

BY AUSTIN WINTORY

Wintory's breathtaking accompaniment to thatgamecompany's Journey never ceases to amaze throughout its nearly 60 minute length. Pay attention to the use of individual instruments to accentuate potent moments of discovery; as the journey reaches its conclusion, the entire orchestra swells into the final crescendo.

6 KILLZONE 3

BY JORIS DE MAN

Any of Joris de Man's stunning Killzone scores (he composed all three) are worthy of your attention, but you may as well start with the excellent third installment. A full orchestra leads to some big moments. The overpowering sound accentuates the frequent steps back into delicate violin phrases. The most classically cinematic of all the selections on this list, this soundtrack offers ample evidence of the quality of music being produced in the medium today.

7 STARHAWK

BY CHRISTOPHER LENNERTZ

Even if you never played the multiplayer-focused sci-fi title, music enthusiasts should find something to appreciate in the Starhawk soundtrack. Seamlessly melding classical orchestral scoring with guitars that tap an unmistakable Old West flavor, Lennertz's buoyant and rhythmic melodies go a long way toward selling the distinctive sci-fi soldier meets cowboy gunslinger style.

top ten

PRISON BREAKS
by Jeff Cork



01

The Chronicles of Riddick: Escape from Butcher Bay

Getting out of Butcher Bay isn't a breeze, but Richard Riddick made it look relatively easy. He expertly navigated through the prison and its various factions, taking out guards and his fellow prisoners with shivs and cunning brutality.



02

The Suffering

Prison isn't supposed to be fun, but it's worse when you're facing both hard time and horrifying monsters. In this survival-horror cult favorite, players helped Torque reconcile his troubled past (or not) while he battled inner demons. Players could help determine how clean Torque's conscience would be as he escaped Carnate Island.



03

P.O.W.: Prisoners of War

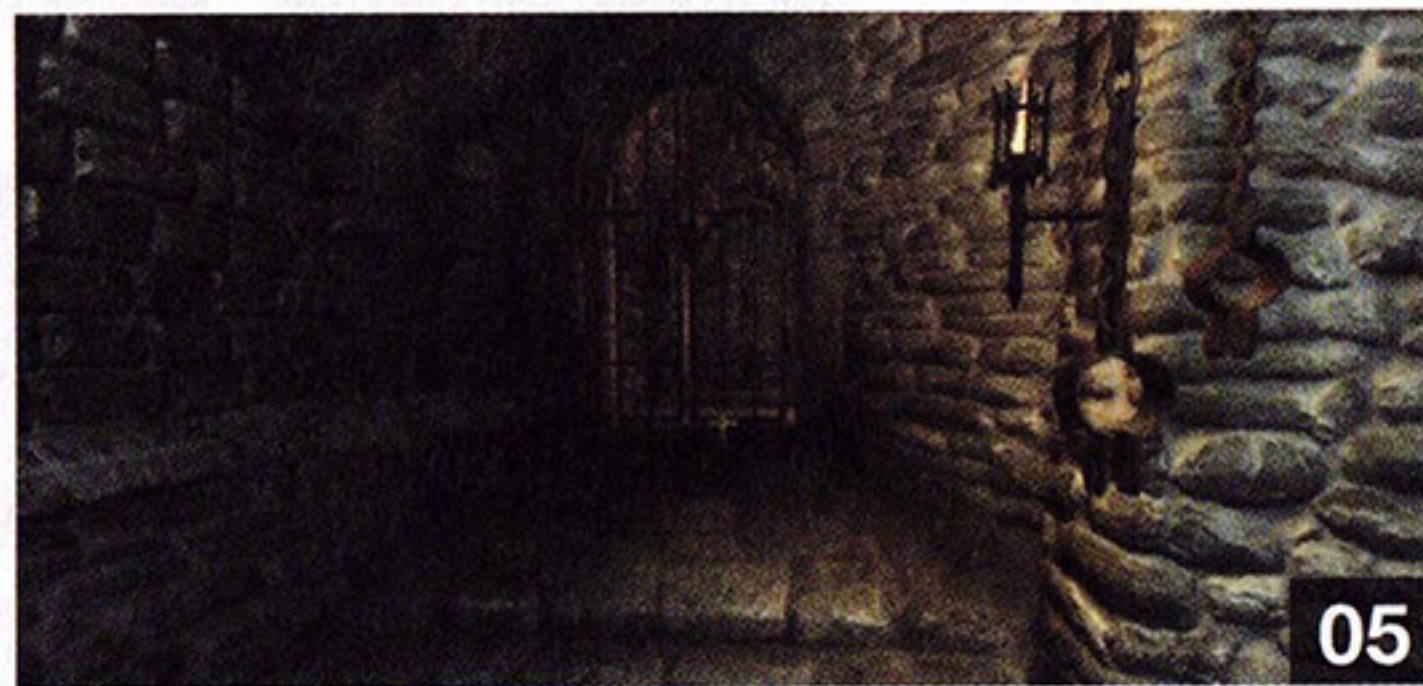
This arcade beat 'em up starts with a literal bang, as your heroes escape a cell thanks to some presumably well-hidden explosives. Other than lighting a fuse, there wasn't any buildup to the escape — but they don't leave the compound until they breach the enemy base and take out the main villain.



04

Ico

Early in his adventure, Ico's titular hero meets up with a mysterious girl named Yorda. The pair works together to escape an oppressive prison-like castle filled with puzzles and shadowy creatures. It was like making your way off Alcatraz, only with a much crueler warden.



05

The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion

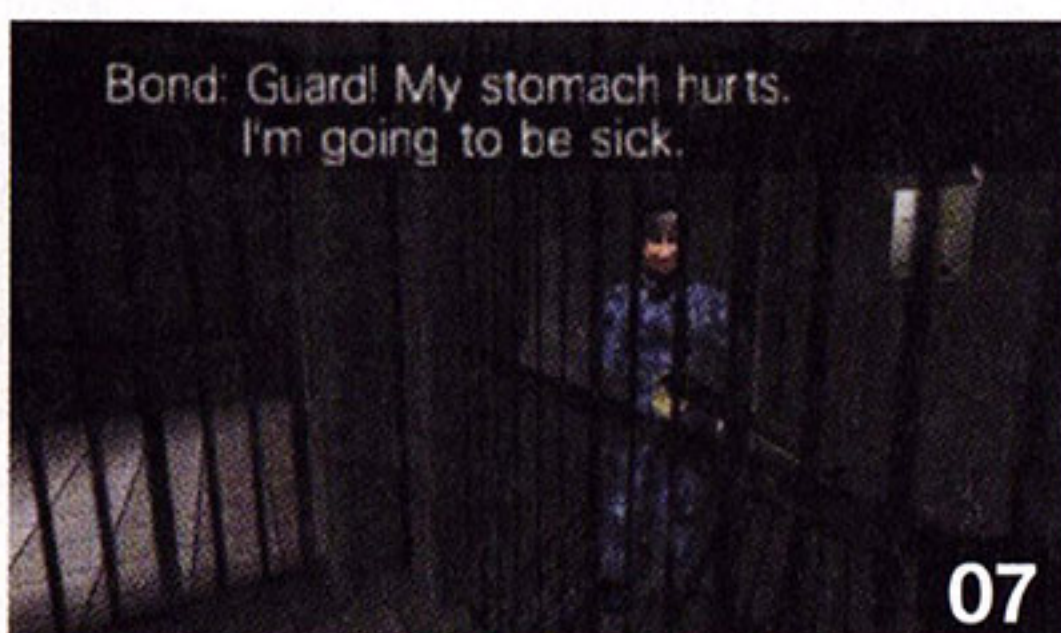
When you're looking to break free, an inside man is invaluable. The only thing better than that is having the freaking emperor on your side. Uriel Septim VII helped the player flee from the Imperial City's dungeon and, just as critically, the obnoxious jerk in a nearby cell.



06

Metal Gear Solid

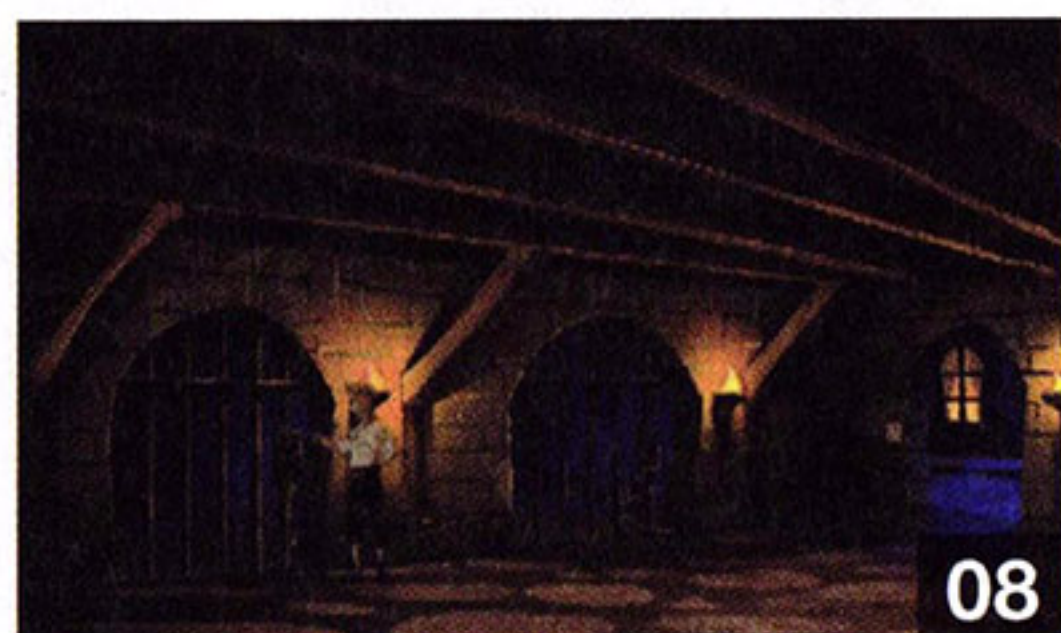
Otacon pays Snake a visit in jail, giving the hero rations and a bottle of ketchup. The bottle doesn't contain a file, but Snake is a resourceful guy. He's able to pour it over his prone body, fooling a guard into thinking he's got a mortally wounded prisoner on his hands. One knockout punch later, and Snake is free to explore Shadow Moses again.



07

GoldenEye 007

James Bond is a bit of a gadget guy, which comes in handy when he finds himself imprisoned. His classy timepiece does more than fire lasers — it's also a powerful magnet. Of course it is. After doing his best to convince a guard to let him go, Bond gives up and zaps a nearby key. Sometimes the most obvious solution is the best.



08

The Secret of Monkey Island

Guybrush Threepwood enlists the help of a prisoner, Otis, throughout his adventure on Mêlée Island. Eventually, our pirate pal helps Otis escape using an unorthodox strategy: melt the cell's lock by pouring industrial-strength grog on it. There's a reason most civilized people won't touch the stuff.



09

Fable

Open-mic poetry readings are rarely pleasant experiences. Imagine having to win a prison race to earn the privilege. That's just what your Fable hero had to do. With victory came a private audience with the prison warden, and a chance to find a hidden key in his office. Freedom couldn't come soon enough.



10

Final Fantasy XII

The Nalbina Dungeons were a fearsome place, providing one of the game's more difficult challenges. It was up to players to reunite their scattered party, solving puzzles and avoiding the powerful Judges. The victory was all the more satisfying considering Vaan and company had to do much of the fighting unarmed.

The Good

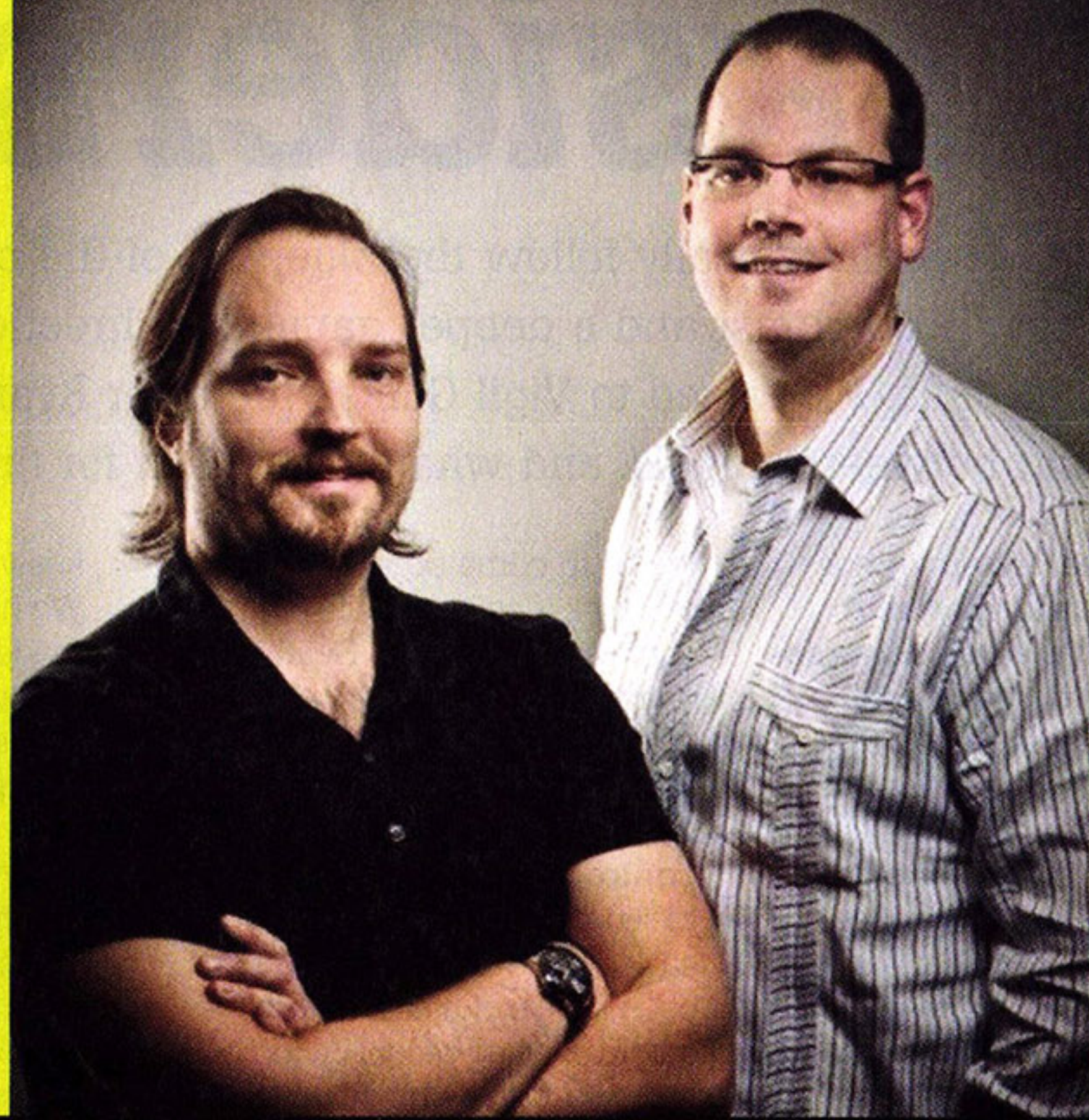
DRAGON AGE III INQUISITION™

EA AND BIOWARE announced Dragon Age III: Inquisition. The game uses the Frostbite 2 engine as a foundation, and has been in development for two years. While EA isn't offering hard details yet – including the game platforms – BioWare studios general manager Aaryn Flynn says the developer has taken user feedback from both previous Dragon Age games into consideration. Dragon Age III: Inquisition is scheduled to hit in late 2013.

THE GOOD, THE BAD, & THE UGLY

BIOWARE co-founders and doctors Greg Zeschuk and Ray Muzyka have announced that they are retiring from the company and the industry. Muzyka is moving into the realm of charitable activities through social entrepreneurship, and Zeschuk is pursuing a love of craft beer, among other initiatives. By the sound of it, neither are expecting to return to video games any time soon. On behalf of Game Informer, we wish Greg and Ray the best of luck in their new pursuits, and thank them for their many contributions to the medium.

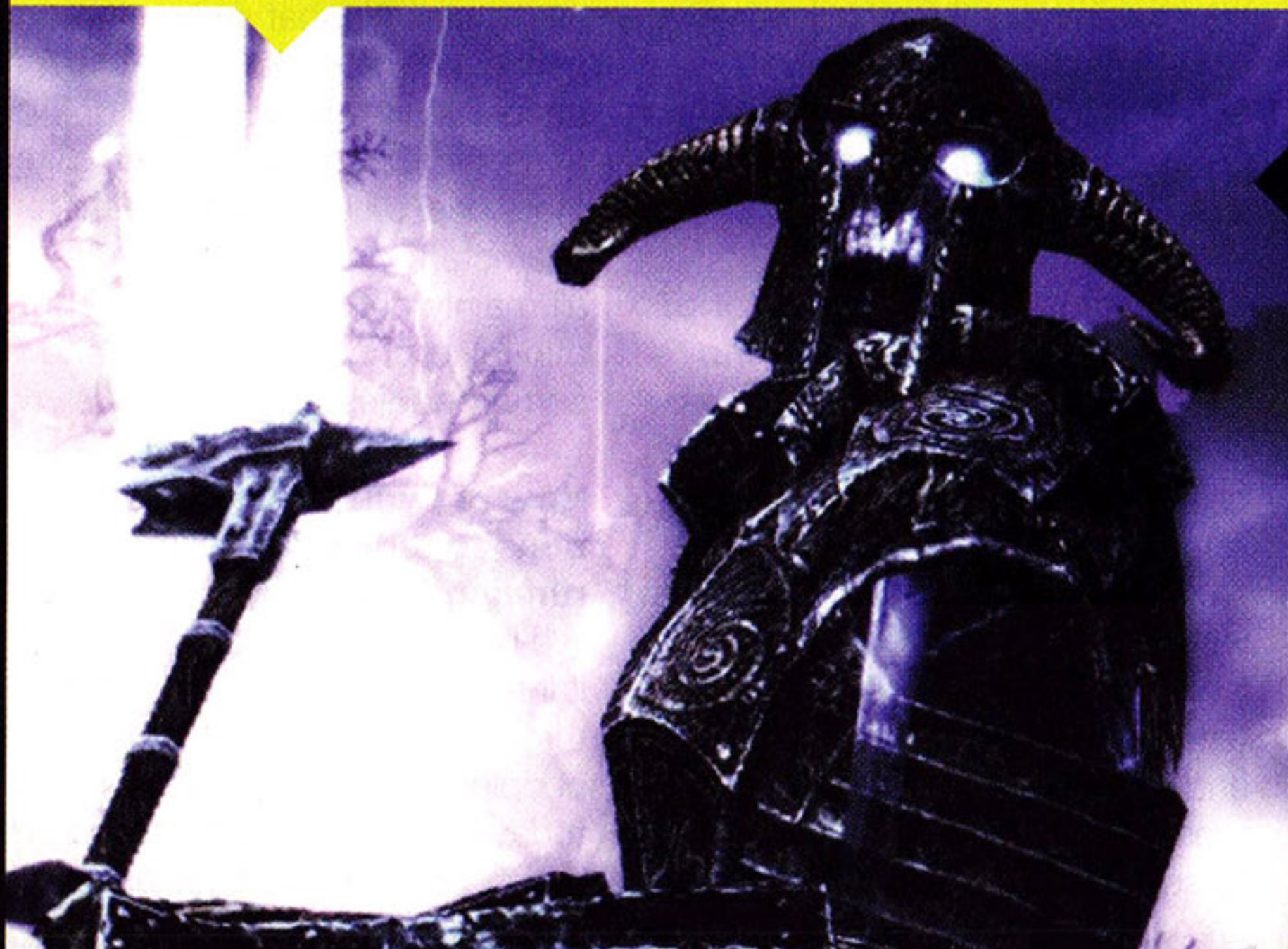
The Bad



Quotable

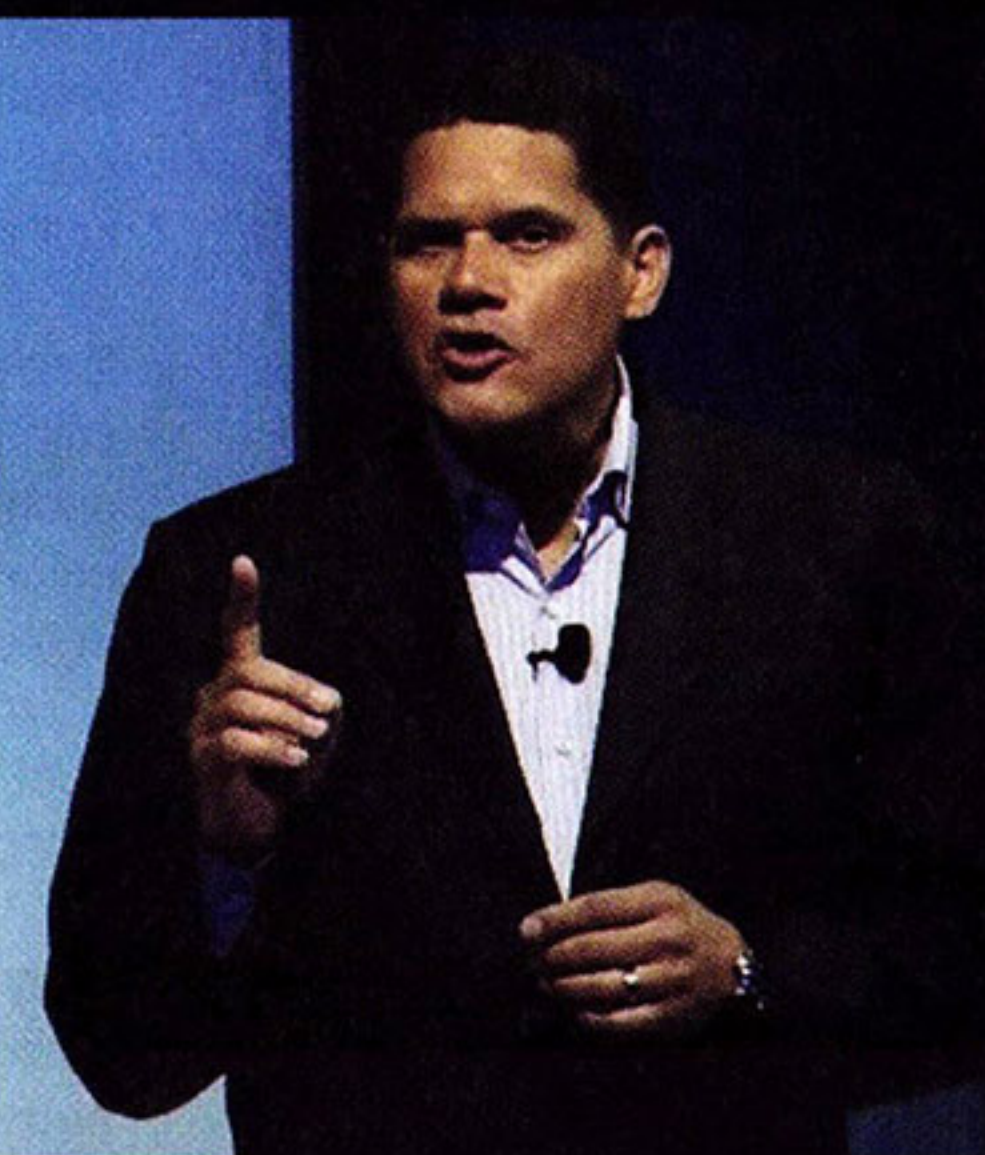
“...I can assure you that this launch library, beginning on day one, will be the strongest for any Nintendo home platform in our history.”

The Ugly



BETHESDA

Game Studios still hasn't figured out the PlayStation 3 as of the time of this writing. Both Bethesda and Sony are working on bringing Skyrim DLC to the console, but Bethesda vice president of PR and marketing Pete Hines recently tweeted: “There's no quick/easy solution.”



— Nintendo of America president **Reggie Fils-Aime** expresses confidence in the Wii U launch software



Darksiders II

Video game sequels typically follow the blueprint of the core game. Darksiders II offers a new protagonist and a deeper gameplay direction – yet still hits the right notes for fans. We talked to Vigil Games producer Ryan Stefanelli about the dramatic shift between sequels, and what comes next for the series.

The first game ended with a tease of War returning and reuniting with his fellow horsemen. Did you contemplate going in this direction for Darksiders II?

Actually, we didn't. We sort of made the decision before we were done with Darksiders, possibly before we had come up with that ending that people liked so much. We knew we would be focusing on another Horseman for Darksiders II, mainly because we just felt like it was kind of a shame with so many cool Horsemen as characters to just focus on one. We knew we wouldn't be able to do multiplayer for the second game, so we went with Death, who was our close second choice as the main character for the first game. It wasn't until people started reacting to the ending of Darksiders – which was cool – that we even thought about going with War again.

Why did you create a parallel sequel that covers a lot of the same ground, as opposed to continuing the story from another character's perspective?

If we were going to pick the story up from that point, it was going to need all four Horsemen, and we felt like the strings we would have

to pull to come up with an excuse of why it was just Death felt more contrived than telling Death's story during that same time period.

Was it difficult to make a different character with a similar control blueprint?

Making Death feel different was easier than we anticipated, just because his character is so different. Everything he did in combat and traversal stemmed naturally from the way he looked and the attitude he was given when the story was written. Doing a second main character is difficult just because of the differences, but pulling it off and differentiating him from War was pretty easy, despite keeping the similar control scheme.

How much iteration went into creating the dungeons?

The dungeons are the element of the game that gets iterated on the most. Combat gets a ton, but there were entire prototype dungeons that got scrapped. Dungeons get pretty far along, and we make significant changes based on our own play experiences with feedback from focus groups. Nailing that dungeon formula was the single biggest challenge in Darksiders. For Darksiders II, we felt like we

knew what we were doing there. We had a pipeline in place that made sense, and got stuff done quickly, giving us the time to iterate on them without completely blowing up our schedule.

How did prototyping dungeons on their own affect designing the overworld?

The overworlds in Darksiders were basically just glorified rooms or big play spaces. Improving that overworld space was our biggest challenge. Fleshing it out and making it interesting was something I think even now, if we had more time to flesh out, we would have. Sometimes when we would cut a dungeon, we would cut an entire overworld section.

How difficult is it to put a lot of the game's content off to the side for people to discover, as opposed to including along the critical path?

A few of the side dungeons – the smaller side dungeons – probably went on and off the critical path two or three times each. It's really tempting, especially toward the end of a project, where you are pressed for time and you want to squeeze out every second of gameplay time you can. We stuck

to our guns and kept as much of it as side content as we could.

People are asking for New Game Plus to be open-ended, allowing for more than two playthroughs. Any chance we'll see this in a future update?

I will fully admit that we were surprised by the reaction people had. I was pleasantly surprised, though, as it means people are playing the game. As much as we talked about it being something we wanted to do, there are a lot of factors as to the people we have available – the timing, the cost – all that stuff that might make it prohibitive. We'll see how the chips fall. It's something that we'd love to do.

How do the forthcoming DLC packs fit into the story?

They are basically side quests within the Darksiders II universe, taking place in that same time period. All three [DLC packs] tell deeper stories about some of the quests in Darksiders II. They give more backstory to some of the characters you meet. They are all mainly dungeon focused, but they also provide new loot and some goodies.

How are you addressing the bugs that people are running into?

We have our own team testing it internally. We are also going through forums to find bugs people are reporting. We're even today looking at some issues and making sure we address all of them if we can. ♦

Microsoft Makes Big Strides Toward Interactive Television

by Jeff Cork

Interactive TV is one of those things that pops up every few years before quietly slinking back to its cave. The concept is simple enough – adding gameplay to what’s otherwise a completely passive experience – but nobody’s been able to pull it off. Grainy footage, laggy inputs, and flat-out poor content are just a few of the roadblocks that have stopped interactive TV in its tracks. I’ve watched this technology since its embryonic phases, back when multimedia was still a buzzword, and I’d all but given up on the idea. It looks like I should have been more patient.

Microsoft quietly announced partnerships with Sesame Workshop and National Geographic last year, but I wasn’t sure what to expect from the pairings. As it turns out, the first games from those deals are not only great picks for families, but also anyone interested in seeing how interactive TV has evolved. The technology behind Kinect Sesame Street TV and Nat Geo TV is quite slick, avoiding the stiff Dragon’s Lair-style interactions that have marred past attempts. I’m equally enthusiastic that it’s being used in games that I share with my kids.

Kinect Sesame Street TV

Double Fine did an admirable job of bringing Sesame Street to the Xbox 360, though *Once Upon a Monster* was conceived as a video-game interpretation of the show rather than a faithful recreation. Kinect Sesame Street TV is, for all practical purposes, Sesame Street – from the familiar opening song to its Elmo’s World closing.

Each of the eight episodes skillfully blends live action and interaction. During the course of a 30-minute show, your kids might help Grover toss spilled coconuts into a box (a counting drill in disguise), help Ernie pull one over on perpetual grump Bert, or watch as Elmo learns that getting big may not be as fun as he’d imagined.

The show has always incorporated pseudo interaction, with characters asking kids questions, pausing for a few beats, and then pretending to confirm the answers. Now, kids get immediate feedback for hollering at the TV. One recurring segment features live-action story sequences from the show, with a twist: Objects are hidden in the backgrounds, and viewers have to shout out “Picture!” when they spot them. Then a friendly camera character pops up and takes a snapshot of the item. It’s entirely optional, giving viewers a way to interact with what would otherwise be entertaining (though static) clips.

My kids had a lot of fun with Kinect Sesame Street TV, with Elmo’s World being the biggest hit. These fast-paced and silly sequences use the Kinect camera to put players into Elmo’s crayon-fueled imagination. It doesn’t just show kids in the center of a virtual stage, either. Instead, their images are constantly being

morphed, shrunk, and visually manipulated. Parents know that hearing their kids laugh is one of the best feelings around, and these sections never fail to fill my TV room with streams of giggles. My favorite moment was when my sons were shrunk into tiny figures that popped out from behind sandcastles.

Kinect Nat Geo TV

Kinect Nat Geo TV follows the same live-action footage blended with gameplay outline as its Sesame Street counterpart, though it’s not as engaging. This channel is geared toward slightly older kids (it’s rated E10+ as opposed to Sesame Street’s EC), which exposes its biggest flaw: The game’s developers don’t know how to merge the National Geographic license and educational interactivity. Concepts like counting and recognizing pictures are easier to translate to gameplay than more abstract ideas such as how animals get their food or prepare for winter. The video content is fascinating and insightful, but the minigames aren’t as tied to the lessons. Fishing while wearing a virtual bear suit is goofy fun, but it won’t teach your kids anything aside from the fact that wearing a virtual bear suit is goofy fun.

Even though Nat Geo TV may be lacking from a strictly educational perspective, it more than makes up for those shortcomings with a wealth of video extras. The package (and Sesame Street) includes access to hours of additional video content online, provided you’re an Xbox Live Gold member. The footage is not interactive, but your family can enjoy it long after you’ve played through the episodes a few times. ♦



DECISIONS, DECISIONS

Kinect Nat Geo TV and Kinect Sesame Street TV are available in stores or online through the Xbox Live Marketplace. Each eight-episode bundle retails for \$29.99 (or 2,400 Microsoft Points). Individual episodes cost \$4.99 (400 Microsoft Points).

Nail the Perfect Heist in Monaco

by Matt Miller



Pocketwatch Games has been working on Monaco for a long time, but there's no shortage of excitement for the project. The game nabbed the coveted Seumas McNally Grand Prize at GDC in 2010, and its quality has only grown in the subsequent years. I played a recent build, and was instantly entranced by the stylized approach to cooperative stealth through the lens of a classic heist film.

You can play Monaco's campaign solo, but its most striking feature is the option to hop in with up to four players. You can play together locally on one screen, or everybody can have a screen to themselves via LAN or online. Each of your friends can adopt one of the eight character classes, each of which has one or more special talents. The locksmith gets through doors faster, the mole can tunnel through walls, the redhead can seduce guards, and the pickpocket has a pet monkey who automatically gathers loot. To achieve the best results (and the fastest times) you should customize your team to confront the specific challenges of each stage.

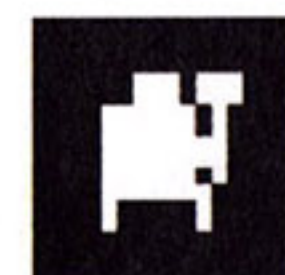
Starting with a prison escape and escalating from there, each level charges the team with a new objective to steal or infiltrate. All kinds of threats wait to ruin your stealthy approach to the prize; guards patrol with a watchful eye, rotating laser detectors stand ready to sound alerts, and dogs sniff you out. Each level introduces a new challenge, and several familiar hiding places like bushes and ventilation shafts help you avoid detection. The game succeeds

by making the sneaking and the inevitable escape into fun and tense experiences.

You need to see Monaco in action to appreciate its visual style. The blocky pixelation hides some sophisticated tech, especially in the lighting department. A top-down perspective gives a perfect view of the surrounding map, like the blueprint criminals peruse before beginning a job. While you can tell where rooms and doors might be in the rooms ahead, you don't know the details of the space until you have line of sight with your flashlight. A guard may be stationed behind the pillar up ahead, but you won't see him until he steps into your field of vision. During my playtime, I experienced an exciting game of cat and mouse when a suspicious guard caught my movement out of the corner of his eye, offering me just the distraction I needed to sneak around the other way.

As you play through the story, you gather loot scattered across the area. Some of the most plentiful cash is only recoverable by veering into dangerous locales that would otherwise be inadvisable. The reward? Each area you completely clear unlocks a level of a new, more difficult "boss" campaign. More than once I found myself returning to a dangerous room or corridor just to grab that one last coin.

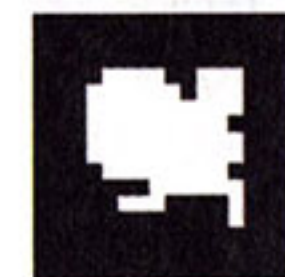
Monaco has been floating tantalizingly out of reach for years now, but Pocketwatch is finally nearing the end of its long development. Get ready to experience the thrill of the heist on Steam and Xbox Live Arcade when the game hits in the first quarter of 2013. ♦



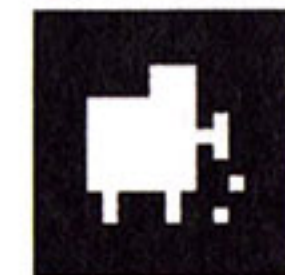
THE MOLE



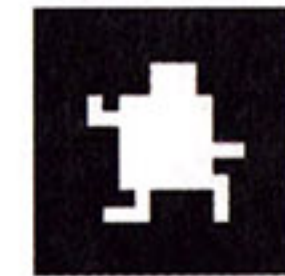
THE GENTLEMAN



THE PICKPOCKET



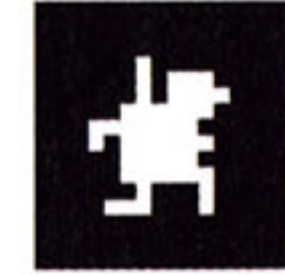
THE CLEANER



THE LOCKSMITH



THE LOOKOUT



THE HACKER



THE REDHEAD

Looking for more on downloadable and independent games? Visit gameinformer.com/impulse for regular updates, reviews, and previews. For more in this issue, don't miss our reviews of *Joe Danger 2 The Movie* (p. 119), *Double Dragon Neon* (p. 119), *Mark of the Ninja* (p. 123), and our scores for *Retro/Grade*, *Jet Set Radio*, *The Walking Dead Episode Three: Long Road Ahead*, and *Final Fantasy Dimensions* on p. 126.

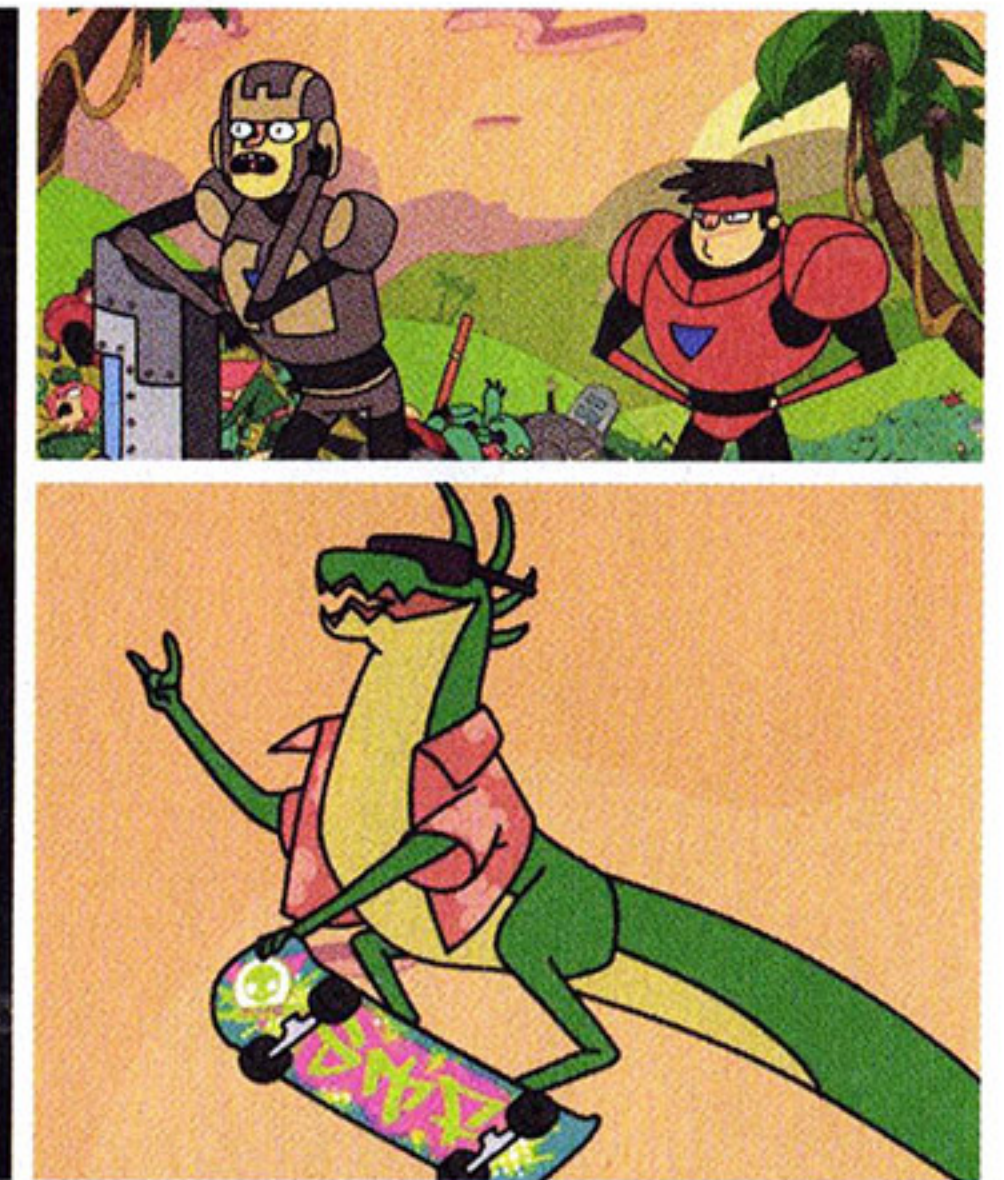
The Best Indie Games of PAX Prime 2012

by Tim Turi

Super Time Force

Platform: Xbox 360 Developer: Capy

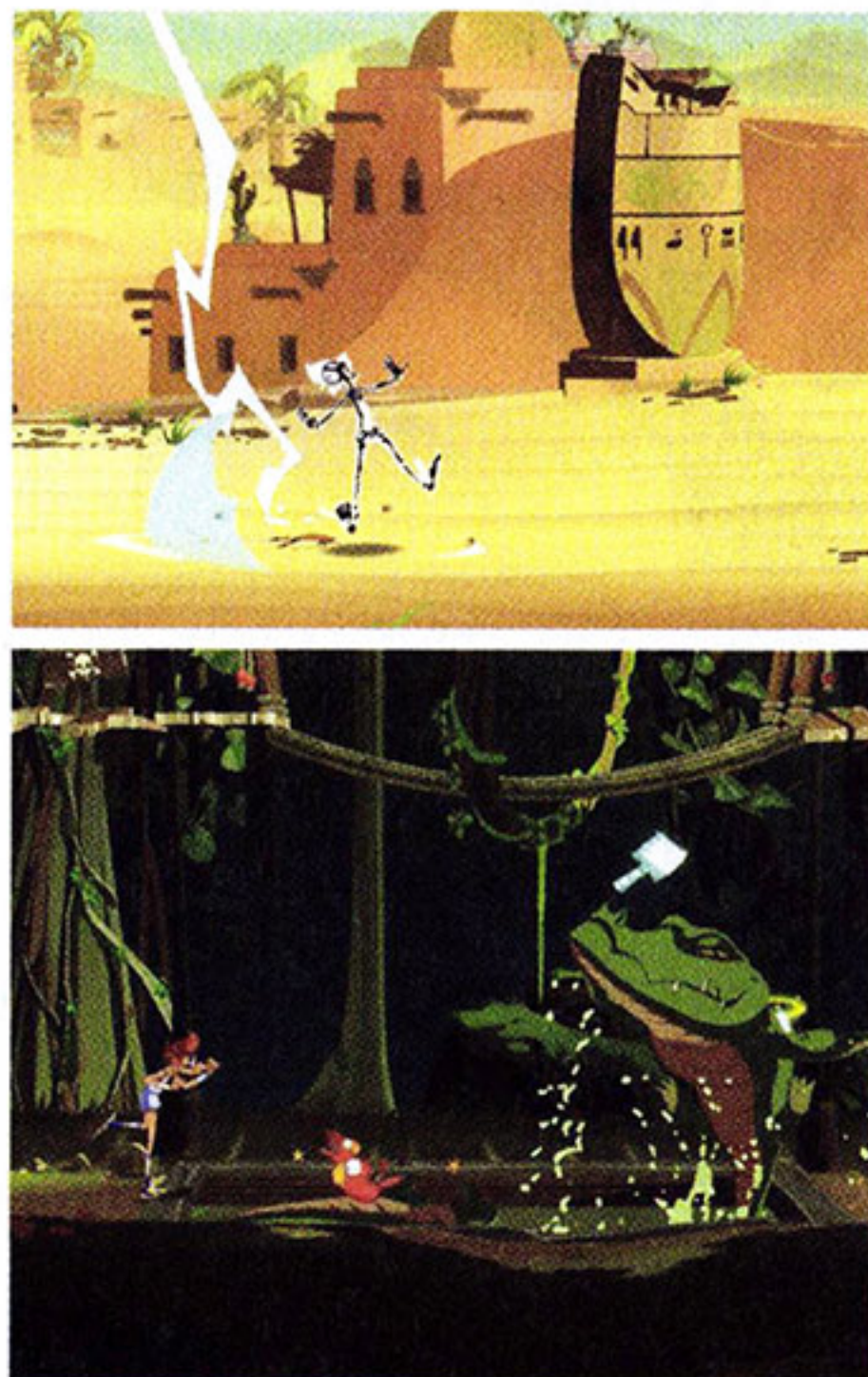
Mixing the humor of *Adventure Time*, *Braid*'s time travel, and *Contra*'s blistering difficulty may not sound like an obvious combination, but developer Capy nailed it. Players choose between four characters on an adventure that spans war-ravaged cities and back to the age of the dinosaurs. Classes include a machine gunner, sniper, shield-bearer, explosives guy, and dinosaur. Each death rewinds the game to your last checkpoint, and then you begin playing again alongside the ghost of your former self. After many deaths, the screen is filled with your ghosts and their deadly gunfire, which still affect enemies in the present. To call the game chaotic is understatement, but it's a fun ride.



Harold

Platform: Xbox 360
Developer: Moonspider Studios

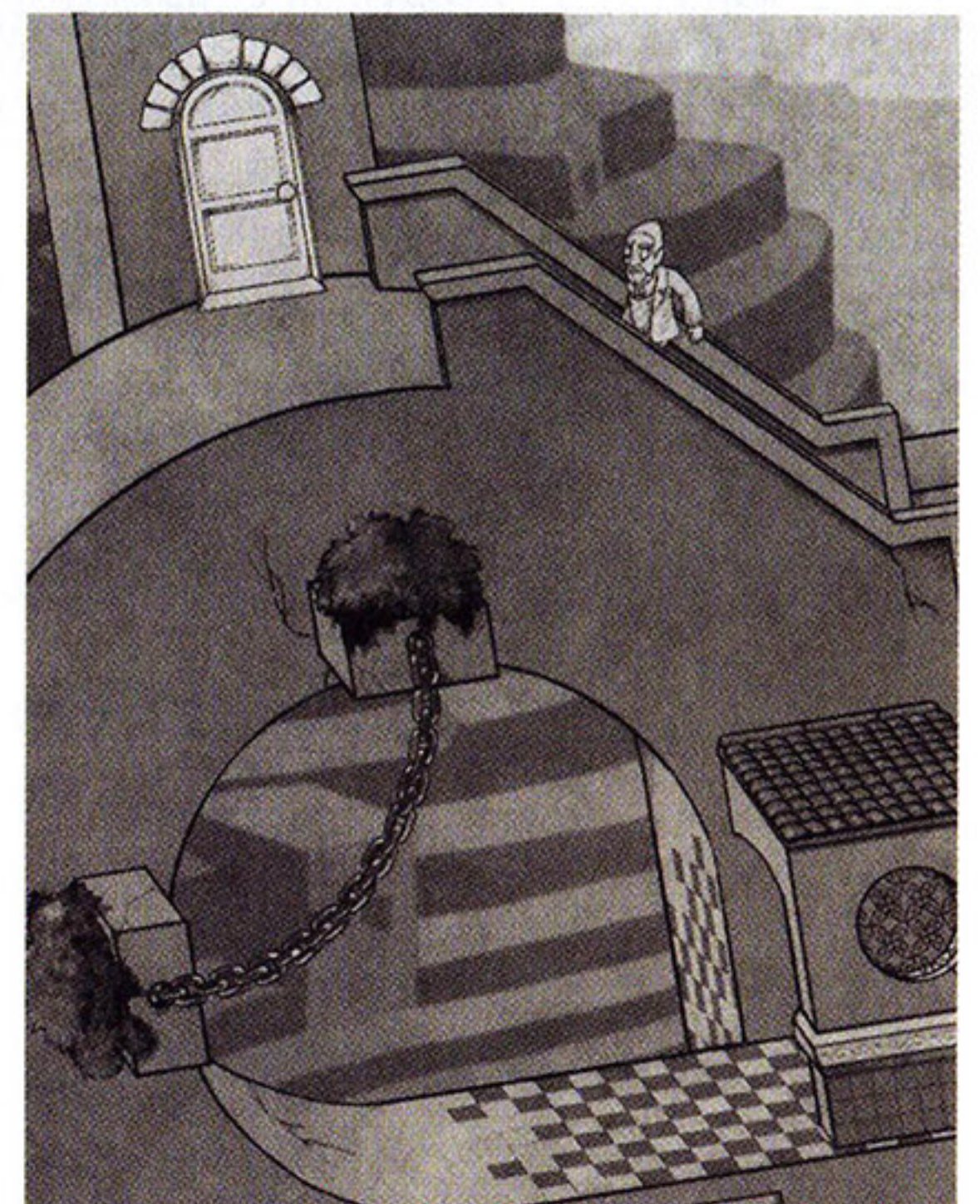
Guardian angels have it rough. They do all the hard work while we clumsy humans get all the credit. Harold is your stereotypical, uncoordinated nerd. It's up to you as his guardian angel to guide him through a series of races filled with perilous pits, quicksand, and other hazards. Players primarily control the environment, lowering bridges and sliding ledges to help Harold while hindering his competition. Moonspider's talented artists have created smooth animations that rival Disney.



The Bridge

Platform: PS3, Xbox 360, PC
Developer: Ty Taylor & Mario Casteneda

This ambitious indie title combines striking sketchbook-style visuals with mind-bending puzzles inspired by M.C. Escher's artwork. Your goal is to lead the protagonist from the beginning of the puzzle towards a door. Simple enough, but you can only steer your character by rotating the puzzle structure. In some instances, a gigantic boulder blocks your path and you must guide it down an alternate route without squishing you. One puzzle requires you to spin the entire level 360 degrees, which causes a boulder hanging from a chain to swing pendulously onto a switch. The developers are promising nearly 50 levels of brainteasers when the game hits.



Charlie Murder

Platform: Xbox 360
Developer: Ska Studios

The morbid, ink blot art style of Ska Studio's games returns in this four-player brawler. The game stars a punk band battling against legions of zombies. You can team up with friends to fly broomsticks through the sky, desecrate living corpses in graveyards, and even bring the band together for a rhythm-based jam session. We love the tight controls and crusty look of the *Dishwasher* series, and adding more friends to a similar experience can only make it better.



Dragon Fantasy: Book II

Platform: PS3, Vita
Developer: Muteki

This tribute to the 16-bit era combines the standout elements of the Super Nintendo's best games. Combat is reminiscent of *Chrono Trigger*, world travel takes place in faux-*Mode 7*, and you can team up with three buddies for online multiplayer. Even better, this PS3/Vita game supports Sony's Cross Play initiative. Buying one version scores you the other for free, and you can transfer your save data between systems. What RPG fan wouldn't love to take a game on the go for some impromptu grinding?





GUILD WARS 2

by Adam Biessener

Guild Wars 2 is the best MMO I've played in years.

It's not perfect, and it doesn't turn genre convention on its ear as much as the pre-release rhetoric from NCsoft and ArenaNet might have led you to believe, but this ambitious and well-executed MMORPG artfully marries the twin design tenets of rewarding same-faction cooperation and providing hardcore, skill-based PvP competition.

This is cast in the mold of the EverQuest/World of Warcraft lineage of MMORPGs, but with several key innovations. Some parts of the game, like the big-ticket World vs. World combat, are leagues beyond anything available in competing titles. Others, like the leveling process, are familiar but so dramatically improved over genre standards that you'll have a hard time going back. ArenaNet's unusual take on players' personal storylines, on the other hand, is a half-baked shell of a feature that functions poorly. On balance, though, Guild Wars 2 is an exceptional game worth every penny of its sticker price and more, despite its lack of an ongoing subscription fee (see sidebar).

The incredible scale of the world is striking. Capital cities stretch out to the horizon. Handcrafted adventuring zones are packed full of content, and are as gigantic as they are numerous. ArenaNet has almost entirely avoided the cut-and-paste trap that some MMOs fall into; every corner you turn brings an arresting new vista full of unique

visuals. From the overall art direction to the tiniest animation, Guild Wars 2 is one of the best-looking games I've ever played.

After the initial buzz from the presentation fades, a deeper and more permanent love affair with the mechanics is clear to take root. Combat is still a matter of pressing hotbar buttons, but the need to aim most attacks instead of having them automatically seek their targets lends battle a dynamic edge lacking in similar MMOs, even newer ones like Rift and Star Wars: The Old Republic. All but the most basic fights ask more of players than other MMORPGs do, from dodging out of nasty charge-up attacks to adapting tactics and skill priorities to each encounter.

The limited skill bar is the other key to the combat system. Unlike World of Warcraft and its brethren, where a high-level character often has upwards of three dozen skills and items that need to be fired off in particular sequences or situations to coax optimal output from your hero, you're limited to 10 total skills plus a unique class feature or three. As in the original Guild Wars, you're largely free to fill those 10 slots with the skills you like or need to fulfill your role in a group. Every one of the dozens of combinations I've tried across several classes is suited to a unique playstyle, and the design of each individual skill and overall class has thus far prevented anything approaching a "cookie-cutter" build from becoming dominant in any sphere.

The most impressive accomplishment of the

combat and skill design is how it obviates the very idea of a "skill rotation" that is endemic to most other hotbar-combat MMOs. Picking the right time to hit your buttons is what makes a player skillful, rather than finding the "correct" build in an online guide and burning the optimal ability rotation into your muscle memory. Along with the ever-present emphasis on ground-targeted effects, positioning, and dodging, the combat and skill design invites players to keep their eyes on the battle instead of playing the interface.

I wasn't sold on the idea of removing the traditional tanking and healing roles, especially as someone whose favorite content is difficult group dungeons and raids, but so far my earlier skepticism is proving unfounded. The concept of giving every player a heal skill and making everyone responsible for their own health bar is working out brilliantly. Having a decent mix of damage- and support-focused characters in a PvE or PvP group is still helpful, but the line is pleasantly blurry. I'm not convinced that dungeon-style content is plentiful or good enough to hold my interest in the long-term, but Guild Wars 2 makes up for that in many other ways.

How content is structured is as important to an MMO as good fundamental mechanics are. Guild Wars 2 follows the same blueprint in this regard: Determine the core goal that this style of MMORPGs have been chasing since their inception, and come up with a new, better approach. The results are excellent.



Guild Wars 2's leveling experience is unparalleled. The dynamic event system takes the place of questing, and holds several advantages over traditional designs. The window dressing of a quasi-living world falls apart about halfway to level cap as you realize that the game effectively trades static spawns for longer, more scripted spawn cycles, but it's still a superior system. More importantly, combining the dynamic missions with the ability to meaningfully engage in content without having to find a quest-giver is a wonderful change.

The content is good enough and so intertwined that it's not uncommon to wander into an event (which the interface makes dead simple to do), be pulled into a series of further encounters and scenarios, and not notice until an hour later that you've trekked across most of the zone and gained a level and a half. The generous cooperation mechanics – you always get full credit for killing an enemy or completing a task, no matter if you started, finished, or helped a bit in the middle of other players also participating – mean that you're always glad to see and work with other players. Larger events are basically pick-up raids, though like most leveling content they are tuned such that any old group of players can complete it without any meaningful communication.

Crafting, exploring, questing, and plain old fighting are all rewarded with copious amounts of loot and experience. Whatever activity strikes your mood or playstyle, you can make meaningful progress by engaging in it. Taken all together, leveling is a silky-smooth, enjoyable experience full of opportunities to scratch most MMO player itches from fighting tough one-on-one battles to exploring treacherous jumping puzzles.

The one black mark on Guild Wars 2 is the poorly written, shoddily executed, badly conceived

personal story solo-instance adventures that sprinkle your journey from level 1 to 80. Having some control over the course of the tale is neat, but ultimately pointless when the story itself is this bad. I could forgive the middle-school D&D campaign dialogue and narrative if the missions were cool. Rather than helping storied heroes save the world, though, I have thus far found myself either cursing buggy scripting that makes it difficult or impossible to complete objectives, or bored to tears slogging through generic waves of enemies. In every case, I've done a lot of eye-rolling while fast-forwarding painful dialogue. The decision to include terrible single-player RPG bits in this otherwise brilliant MMO is a baffling one.

PvP is the final piece of the Guild Wars 2 puzzle, and it's a big one. The ambitious World vs. World design is amazing. Servers battle each other on gigantic, persistent, open-world zones built specifically for large group combat complete with towering fortifications and powerful siege engines. WvW can be a bit of a crapshoot, as hooking up with a group doing something interesting is dependent on your server, the day of the week, and even time of day. When you do find a group (or even better, organize a crew of your own), the excellent combat mechanics make it some of the best PvP in the genre. Like everything else, engaging in WvW is amply rewarded with loot, experience (though everyone's base stats are boosted to level-cap values in WvW), and achievements.

Structured PvP is a separate, e-sports flavored option where everyone has every skill unlocked and wears gear with equivalent stats on it. Matches are objective-based and take place on servers akin to the way a competitive shooter

like Battlefield works. The progression hook is much weaker here, though, as the only rewards are cosmetic items for use in more structured PvP. And, of course, the all-important achievements and bragging rights that dedicated PvPers do it for.

Guild Wars 2 is a shining, impressive achievement that will shape the MMORPG space for years to come. The personal story is bad, yes, but that's a tiny sliver of the overall package. The execution of the rest of the game is nearly flawless on a level that only a handful of studios have ever achieved, much less in a massively multiplayer setting. The ambitious and unique retooling of genre conventions reveals a level of thoughtfulness on ArenaNet's behalf that only the top tier of game developers can aspire to. We're going to be playing and talking about this one for a long time. ♦

A RESPECTFUL BUSINESS MODEL

In lieu of a monthly subscription fee, Guild Wars 2 has an in-game shop where items are sold for real-world currency to supplement the income provided by sixty-dollar box sales. Out of all the cash shops I've seen in online games, I like this one the best. Not only is it almost entirely avoidable if you don't want to spend money (bank slots and bag slots are the only things I'd consider de-facto required), but the real-money currency is available for purchase with in-game currency. The exchange rate is dependent on the game-wide economy, but so far the effective gold prices for items and services have been comparable to the investment required for similar items in MMOs that lack cash shops entirely. Until and unless ArenaNet has a dramatic change of heart with regard to how it runs the cash shop, its inclusion is way more than a fair trade for the lack of a monthly fee.

interview



Riot Games CEO Brandon Beck (left) pictured with co-founder and president Marc Merrill (right)

Photo credit: Ed Carreon

A League of Their Own

Longtime friends **Brandon Beck** and **Marc Merrill** founded Riot Games in 2006 and later released League of Legends, which is now one of the most popular games in the world with over 11 million monthly players. We spoke to Beck about Riot's massive success and how the company is building for the future.

interview by Jim Reilly

How do you explain your success?

It has a lot to do with the focus on our players and a focus on understanding what the gaming community wants. That starts by being hardcore gamers ourselves. One thing that's pretty unique about Riot is that just about everyone you meet in any position at the company is going to be a very serious gamer with an extremely long track record of games played. If we're not in the office and we're not sleeping, we're spending an awful lot of time playing games. Actually, if we're in the office, we might be playing games as well.

What are your thoughts on the state of the games industry right now?

The world is definitely changing a lot. As a result, it's forcing games to change and to innovate. It's creating a lot of friction for us as developers because there are more platforms we have to pay attention to. More tools and technology are at our disposal, which is a good thing for innovating and advancing gaming, but it creates a burden of responsibility for us to figure that out and potentially modify what we've historically done. I don't think hardcore gaming is going anywhere. I don't think console gaming is on the cusp of dying. I don't think PC gaming is going anywhere, in fact I think it's on the rise. I think there are going to be new ways to experience games on more platforms than we've ever seen before, and it's going to be really interesting.

The competitive gaming scene is becoming bigger and better every year.

Some games have always been incredibly competitive. Your interactions with those games as a player are not too dissimilar from your experience in a sport where you get a bunch of teammates together and play against another team. You win or you lose and you play again, not because you're seeking to unlock some sort of narrative or advance through some linear progression scenario, but because you want that same exact competitive experience.

I think the emergence of a competitive scene is the natural extension for those types of games. If you're committed to playing something competitively it's fun to know there's a top level of play, a level to aspire to, and a level to watch with awe.

Where do you see competitive gaming going in the future?

I think competitive gaming is going to grow increasingly more mainstream. Right now, particularly in North America and Europe, it's sort of a novel idea. Some people are still surprised it exists. But we've seen other markets quick to adopt competitive gaming in serious ways, like in Korea where gaming has been televised for a number of years. With competitive League of Legends, when we're on live TV, we've often competed for the top of prime-time ratings with sports like soccer.

We don't see competitive gaming replacing those sports anytime soon, but we do think it's something that's going to make its way into the mainstream psyche and that's really cool.

What are some of the priorities right now at Riot Games?

We're a young company, and we're really focused on continuing to build our team and build a high-quality product in League of Legends and improving the experience across a number of dimensions simultaneously for our players.

How much pressure is there to create new games and expand your portfolio of products?

Right now there's not a ton of pressure. That's something that's going to happen organically. Certainly there are a ton of really creative ideas floating around the company in various phases of development. You're certainly going to see more games from Riot, but the focus right now is definitely on helping League of Legends reach its potential.

Is Riot Games going to be defined as a company that only makes competitive games, or do you see yourselves exploring other genres?

It's not clear yet whether or not we would exclusively focus on competitive gaming. Certainly competition and deep online play is in our DNA. A lot of our favorite parts of online experiences are the player-versus-player components. Nonetheless, we like cooperative experiences and rich, high-quality products that are uncompromisingly core. What you will see from Riot in the future is certainly going to be focused on games for gamers.

Do you see yourselves broadening out to other platforms?

We don't really focus on platforms. We think about platforms after we think about the games we want to make. If a certain platform were to enhance the experience of our product, then we'd certainly entertain how to leverage that platform to help deliver the experience.

PC is the best way to deliver our League of Legends experience, and we don't think it would be high quality and compelling enough on other platforms. That's not to say it couldn't be done, but it wouldn't meet our bar. We have no plans to take League of Legends to any other platforms in the foreseeable future, but it's possible that other games could be multiplatform.

The free-to-play business model for games continues to grow. Is it the future or is it one of several business models that will exist?

I think free-to-play is one of several business models. The whole appeal of free-to-play to us is there shouldn't be a one-size fits all model. Free-to-play isn't the answer for every game. It really comes down to the content itself and finding a model that provides players with the most choice and the most value. In some cases that will be free-to-play as we know it, and in some cases that will be novel ideas that we haven't come up with yet.

What do you think the games industry will look like 10 years from now?

I think it's going to be substantially different in 10 years. I think there are going to be a lot of new names and faces of companies that are just emerging or haven't emerged yet. A lot of the old guard of gaming who don't change and adapt are going to fade away. I think what's going to matter more than ever is product quality. Great marketing isn't going to make up for a bad product. Great products aren't really going to need that much marketing because distribution is becoming more ubiquitous and less important. Players can spread the word about a product more quickly than ever before.

I also think companies are going to have to be way more adaptive to what their players want and be better listeners than they have been historically. That's going to keep us all on our best game and keep developers honest. I think with that pressure is going to make better and better products. ♦

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

1998

FRIENDSHIP

The two become close friends and gaming buddies, often trekking out to Los Angeles' Koreatown for all-night game sessions at PC cafes

2004

LAN PARTY

Brandon and Marc become roommates post-college, spending most nights fueling their shared passion for online PC games on side-by-side gaming rigs

2006

A NEW VENTURE

The duo co-found Riot Games, determined to ignore the conventional "wisdom" of traditional game publishers and carve their own path

2009

LEGENDARY BEGINNING

Riot self-publishes League of Legends in October to critical and player acclaim

2010

HOT START

League of Legends reaches more than one million downloads within three months after launch; industry accolades continue rolling in

2011

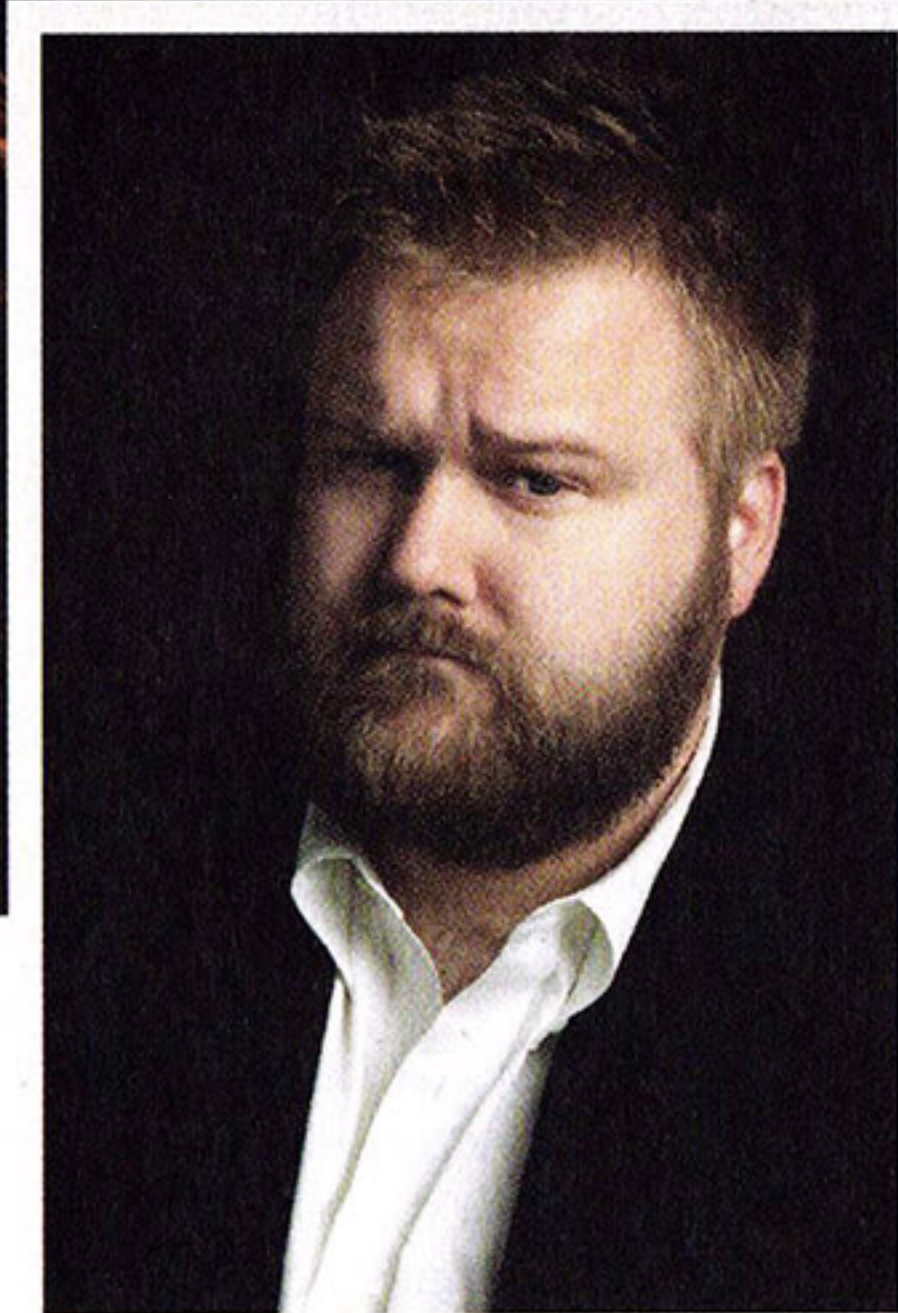
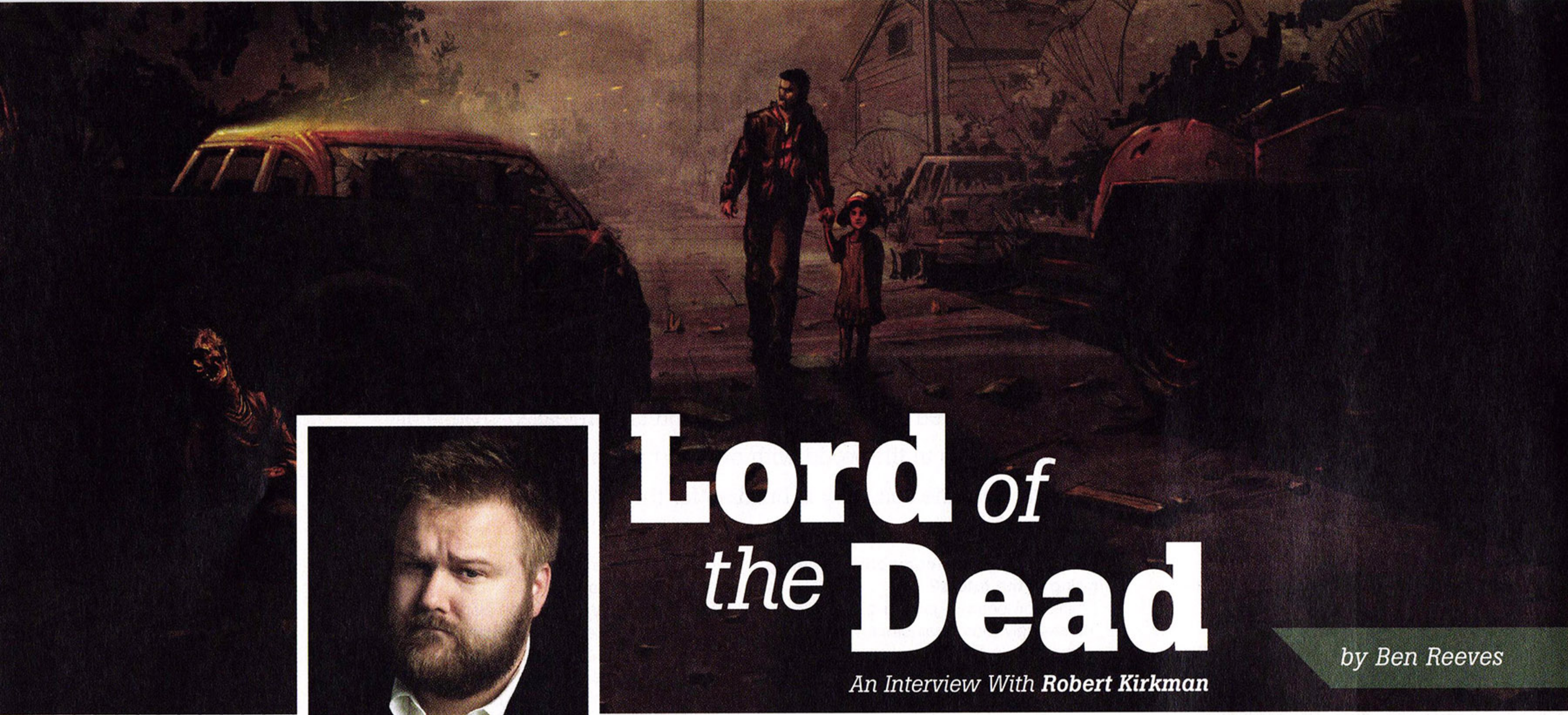
BANNER YEAR

Brandon and Marc receive Ernst & Young's Entrepreneurs of the Year award, Brandon is named to *Forbes*' "30 Under 30" list, and League of Legends grows beyond 11.5 million monthly active players and four million daily players

2012

A PHENOMENON

League of Legends is one of the most-played online PC games in the world, with an unprecedented global Season Two championship prize pool of \$5 million, twice-weekly tournament broadcasts shown on Korean cable TV OGN, and World Championships taking place in October



Lord of the Dead

An Interview With Robert Kirkman

by Ben Reeves

The Walking Dead has been a very successful property. Does its success ever surprise you?

It's kind of crazy. When I pitched *The Walking Dead*, I pitched it as the zombie movie that never ends – the story to tell on paper that would go for years and years as we watched people survive a zombie apocalypse and grow and change over time. But at the time, I hadn't done anything that hadn't been canceled. I had no confidence that *The Walking Dead* would survive past issue 12, so I crammed a bunch of story into the first issues. I blew through that Shane storyline in the first six issues because I didn't know if the book was going to last.

Were you familiar with Telltale's work before you started collaborating with them on the Walking Dead game?

I played their Strong Bad game. I like their approach to puzzle-based storytelling. I thought they were more focused on telling a good story, and I thought they were good at engaging the player in the narrative. That's what interested me in making a Walking Dead game. They came to me with a proposal that involved decision-making and consequences rather than ammunition gathering or jumping over things; I was impressed by that. The only thing that's really special about *The Walking Dead* is the human characters and the narrative that they exist in. It's all about drama and loss, so I felt like doing a game

The Walking Dead started out as a black-and-white comic book that narrowly avoided early cancellation. Since then the property has grown into a transmedia behemoth. *The Walking Dead* trades consistently land in the top 10 sales charts. The AMC television show based on the property is basic cable's highest-rated series, with last season's finale drawing 9 million viewers. Telltale's *The Walking Dead* adventure games became the developer's fastest-selling series. Creator Robert Kirkman has shepherded *The Walking Dead* through its many incarnations, so we talked with him about the property's gaming future, what makes zombies so popular, and why we'll never see a Mega Man/*Walking Dead* crossover.

with that focus, but that wasn't something that I knew was really possible. When Telltale came and told me about the way that making decisions changed the game and the way that players would be forced to choose between two bad decisions and how the survival aspect of *The Walking Dead* would actually be brought to the forefront – that's when I was sold on the game.

How involved did you get during the development of the game?

With anything *Walking Dead*, I try to be as involved as I can, which is not always as much as I would like to be. With *The Walking Dead* television show, I'm in the writer's room. I work on that show every day, but I come from comic books. I'm not an expert in TV, so I'm able to allow other people who are experts in television to take the lead and run the show and really do it justice. I've taken that stance with Telltale. I don't really know the world of video games as much as they do; I don't know what works and what doesn't work, so I've been kind of the godfather, saying, "This is what *The Walking Dead* is about and this is what I think is its secret." Then they turn all that stuff

into a video game. I've been kind of hands-off, but I'm impressed with the brilliant storytelling and with how good this game has turned out, which is really a testament to how talented their writers are.

How involved are you with Activision's *The Walking Dead* game?

That's actually something that AMC is heading up and it's based on the television show. I'm not as involved because that's their thing. I'm looking at stuff. I'm aware of its existence. I know Activision is working very hard to make a cool-looking game and I'm hopeful it will be something that is worthy of the *Walking Dead* brand, but it's not something that I'm actively, intimately involved with. Telltale's game is based off the comic book, so I have a bunch more control over that than I do with what AMC does. I know there is a quote out there where I said, "It would be dumb to do a first person *Walking Dead* game because there are so many that it wouldn't be something that would be competitive in the marketplace, and you'd always be compared to *Left 4 Dead* so why bother." I don't think AMC read that quote. But I will say that

this game is very much the Dixon brothers' game. These two characters don't exist in the comic, so the ability to play as those characters and learn more about those characters, who are very popular in the show, could actually push this game over the top and make it a worthwhile experience. That's what I'm hoping on.

If you had one dream property you could work on, what would that be?

I love Spider-Man, so I'd love to work on that with the freedom that I have on the books I write now. I love Mega Man too, but honestly, I like creating new properties. I think it's a lot more exciting to create the new Spider-Man than it is to tell new stories for a character that was created 60 years ago. I think it's important to generate new ideas and stories that generations of people will enjoy for years to come.

I know Archie is doing a Mega Man and Sonic crossover in its comics. Maybe you could write a Mega Man/*Walking Dead* crossover.

I think that would be the stupidest thing ever. ❖

Kickstarting a **REVOLUTION**

Double Fine started a trend when it announced its Kickstarter adventure game project earlier this year. Franchises once thought dead and buried were given new life through the crowd-supported platform. We spoke to Double Fine founder **Tim Schafer** about the state of the games industry, how Kickstarter affects the studio, and where games are going.

What are some trends you're noticing in the games industry right now? The console market is struggling right now.

I don't think consoles are going away. I think people are holding their breath waiting for the new consoles to come out and not investing a lot in original franchises right now. Things that are changing are the emergence of games as a service, free-to-play, and people expecting games to be live now and stay with them. Some of the big companies have had varying degrees with how agile they are with that. Some seem to be really slow while others are embracing it very quickly. It'll be interesting to see.

Some predict the console market will rebound once new consoles are released. Do you think about what the future holds for traditional console gaming?

It's hard to predict what the fans want, but I can see some pressures from the inside are far as what developers want. It's not about the hardware or the number of polygons; those are all important, but the big thing that's driven a lot of us to PCs recently has been the openness of the platform. Consoles are much more closed and locked down. It's harder for a smaller developer like us to make a patch. All the things we want to do are harder right now on consoles.

That's not a technical problem, that's a bureaucratic and a business problem. If the companies make it as appealing as things like Steam is right now for us, or the Humble Indie

by Jim Reilly

Bundle, those are just great places for us to put our games as a small company to actually make money. If they can become as appealing as those things there's no reason why the consoles can't be just as vibrant and an exciting place to be in the future.

It's been a few years since your studio shifted focus to create smaller games. How has that been going?

Doing smaller things has created a lot of opportunities for people in the company. The agility of it has also kept us alive in a changing market. If we had bet everything on the consoles and didn't have anything else, that'd be scary. But we do have a mobile branch and people working on PC stuff. We're really platform-agnostic. We've been able to do that because we have multiple smaller teams that can try out something new like Kinect, meanwhile another team can be investigating mobile and another team can keep our traditional Brütal Legend engine working on consoles and make something with that.

Doing smaller games has been an essential survival tool for us to be nimble and react to the industry as it changes.

Double Fine doesn't typically do many sequels. Why is that?

Actually, Happy Action Theater is the first game to have a sequel that shipped [Laughs]. Full Throttle was a big hit and they asked me for a sequel but they didn't push too hard. There's always some new idea you have. There's always some other game I want to make. Now, with smaller teams, we can do both. Someone can work on a sequel while others are doing new games.

Has the result from your Kickstarter project been what you thought it was going to be?

It's been great because it's been a combination of the documentary and also our backer forums. We have this exposed, transparent production process where

people are seeing the game come together and having a part in it. It was really scary at first having the cameras on while we're having a meeting. And as we've had those, you get to realize the world isn't going to end if you say something weird on camera. You relax as you go and it's a way I'd like to do all games now. When something great happens on another project I realize no one's going to see that moment.

What do you think of the Kickstarter revolution going on right now?

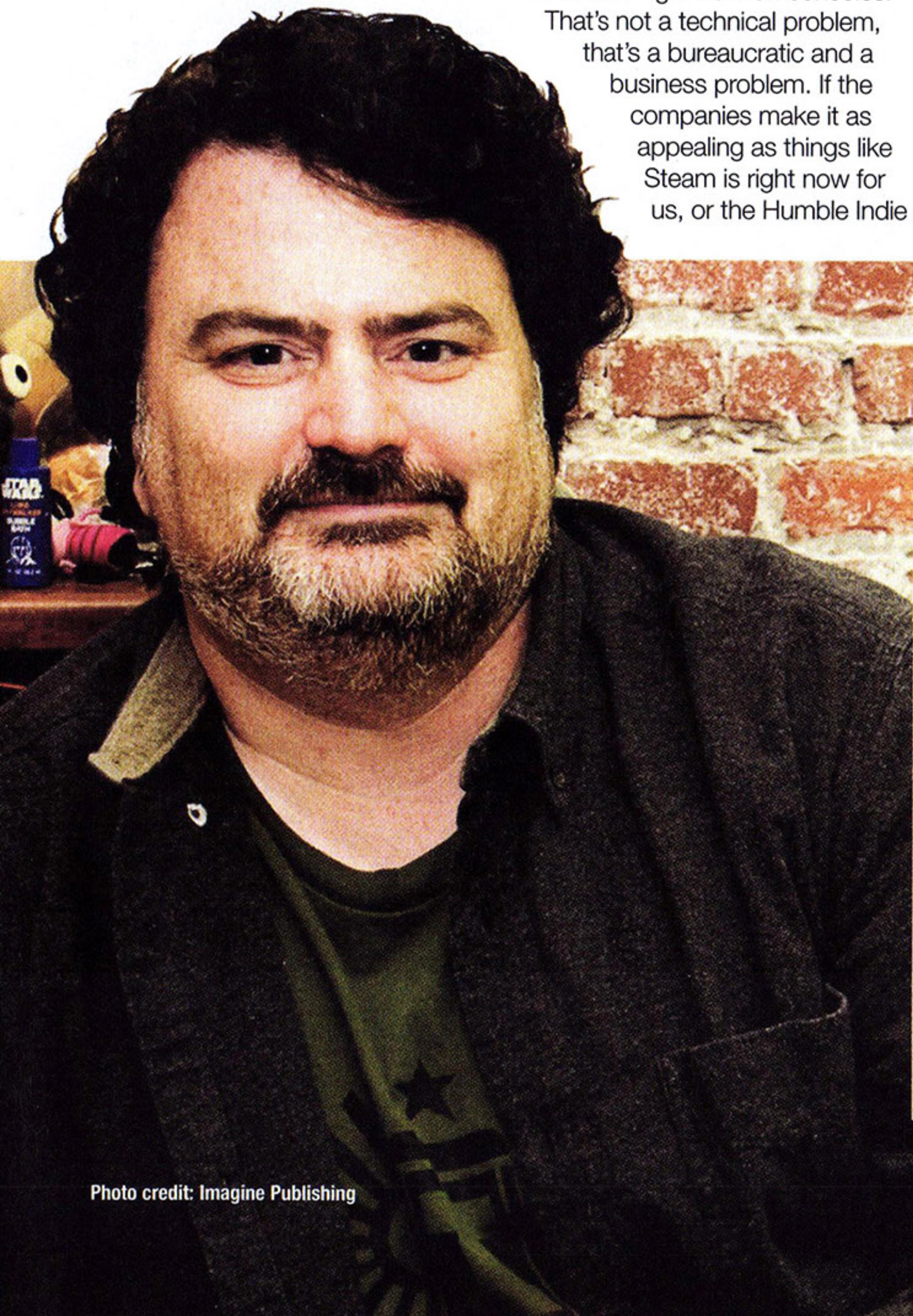
It's just part of this new way of doing business where creative people can interact directly with their consumers. We don't necessarily need these big, bureaucratic companies in between us. It doesn't completely change the industry, but it opens up the doors for a lot of projects that were previously thought of being too niche to fund.

What does the future of Double Fine hold in terms of IP ownership?

We always wanted to own our IP, and we've managed to do that most of the time. Except for Iron Brigade. That's still a thorn in my side. We'll still own our IP more and more in the future. One of the reasons why we went to smaller projects because asking for a budget for a Brütal Legend-sized game in the future, I would have to give up the IP. If you're basically making something and giving it away to a publisher, it's like they hired you to mow their lawn. It's just not the way the world should work.

What do you think the future of gaming will be like?

I'm not very good at the future – that's why we stay as limber as possible with the company because we really don't know what's going to happen. I was on a panel recently with Cliff Bleszinski of Epic Games and he said VR helmets, so I'm going to say VR helmets. We're all going to play games with VR helmets. ♦



Head Start

Game Informer Headset Roundup

by Ben Reeves & Jason Oestreicher



1 **Astro A50**

The Astro A50 comes at a premium price point, but get what you pay for. The simulated 7.1 surround sound is amazing, the MixAmp lets you balance the game and chat volumes, to your liking, and it hooks up wirelessly to whatever system you own. We love the crisp microphone, and the breathable mesh ear cups are great for extended play sessions. The A50's sharp edges are uncomfortable while worn around the shoulders and its ear cups bleed some sound, but these are minor complaints about an otherwise harmonious audio experience.

OUTSTANDING ■■■■■■■■■■

\$299.99 | astrogaming.com



The Warhead is built like a tank



2 Tritton Warhead XBOX 360 RUNNER-UP

The Xbox 360 has many great headset options, but the Warhead sets itself apart from the pack with amenities. The Warhead is built like a tank, so you don't need to worry about breaking it. This headset syncs directly to your system so you don't need the cord between the controller and headset like the rest of the "wireless" options, and it gives you onscreen prompts about battery life. It doesn't pack the audio punch of some of the other headsets, and its rigid plastic headband makes the ear cups slightly uncomfortable, which are definite knocks on such an expensive headset.

VERY GOOD

\$299.99 | tritonaudio.com

3 Sony Pulse Wireless Headset PLAYSTATION 3 RUNNER-UP

The sound fidelity may not stand up to the Astro A50 or Turtle Beach headsets, but the Pulse harmonizes well with the PS3. Great sound, sturdy construction, and ease of use make this headset a stellar accessory. Even though it doesn't have true 7.1 surround sound, its Virtual Surround Sound (VSS) system is an adequate replacement. BassImpact technology translates bass impact into sound — effectively strapping a rumble pack to your head. Unfortunately, both features are PS3 exclusive.

SUPERB

\$149.99 | store.sony.com



This hyper-stylized headset gave us a few headaches



4 Turtle Beach Ear Force XP500

The XP500 covers all the major bases: great sound, a variety of equalizer options, breathable mesh ear cups, and a good noise-canceling mic. Sadly, it falls flat in some non-essential areas. The sound occasionally pops or drops at a range around five feet, and it lacks a rechargeable battery.

AVERAGE

\$269.95 | turtlebeach.com

5 PDP Afterglow Wireless

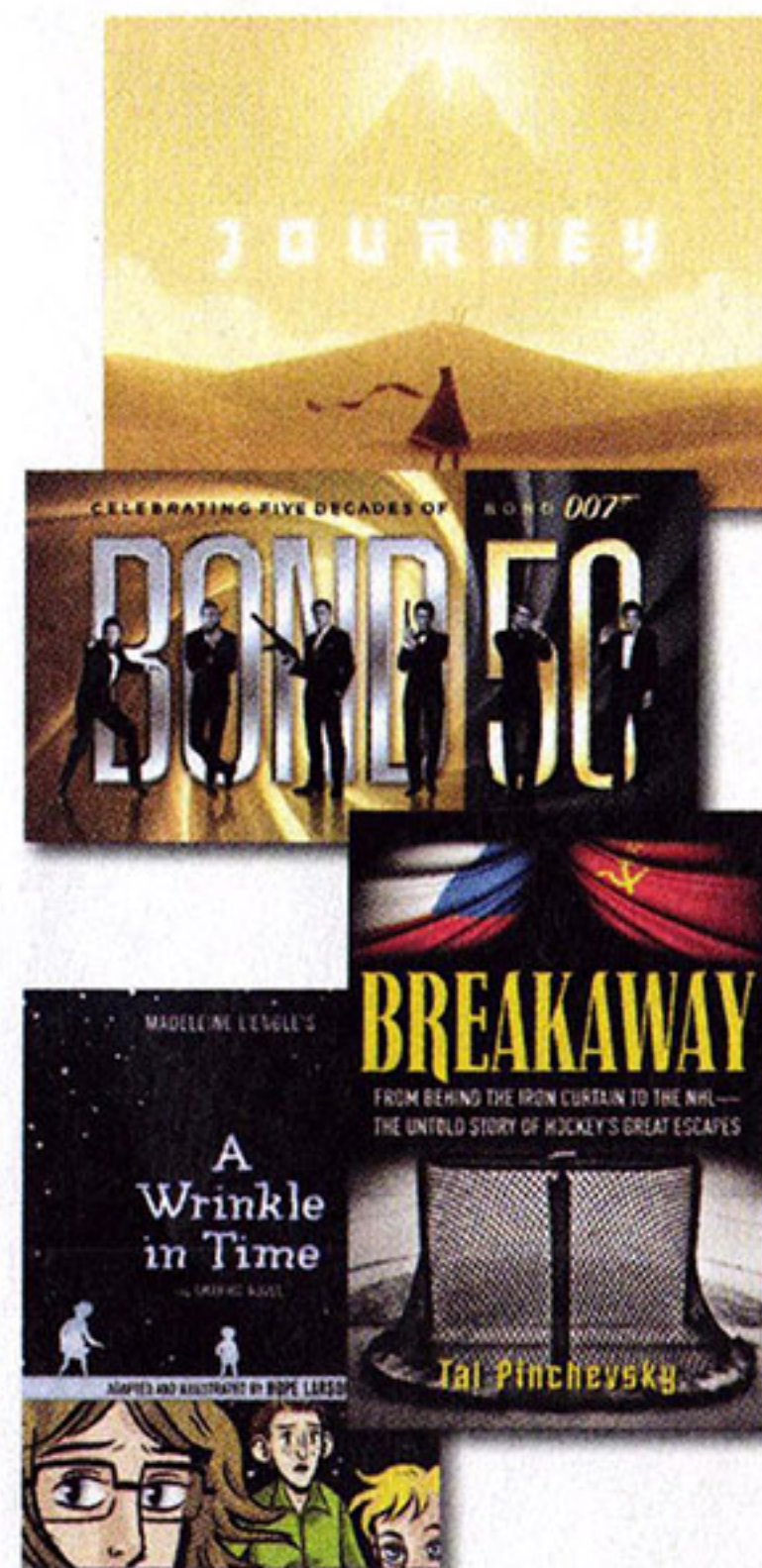
This hyper-stylized wireless headset gave us a few headaches — mostly due to the stiff, non-adjustable fit and a microphone boom that does not extend to mouth and picks up a lot of interference. However, its solid sound quality and low price make it a reasonable choice for those with a limited budget.

LIMITED APPEAL

\$89.99 | pdp.com



Media Shelf



THE ART OF JOURNEY BY MATT NAVA

Designed and written by Journey's art director, this is a behind-the-scenes exploration of the stylistic influences, narrative devices, and game design goals that make Journey one of gaming's most visually striking titles. A companion smartphone app gives readers additional information and a view of in-game models.

\$60.00
shop.bluecanvas.com

BOND 50: THE COMPLETE 22 FILM COLLECTION

James Bond is getting old, but he's still got swagger. Relive all of Bond's greatest moments with this Blu-ray collection of all 22 official James Bond films. The set also features a dossier of more than 122 hours of bonus features.

\$299.99
007.com

BREAKAWAY: FROM BEHIND THE IRON CURTAIN TO THE NHL — THE UNTOLD STORY OF HOCKEY'S GREAT ESCAPES BY TAL PINCHEVSKY

Part hockey history tale, part espionage thriller, this book chronicles the risks many Eastern European hockey stars took to escape communism and realize their dream to play in the NHL.

\$27.95
wiley.com

A WRINKLE IN TIME: THE GRAPHIC NOVEL BY HOPE LARSON

Hope Larson adapts and illustrates Madeleine L'Engle's classic children's tale about a young girl who faces off against a dark force and saves our universe.

\$19.99
macmillan.com

The Plunge: The Risks and Rewards of Indie Game Development

By Greg Kasavin, creative director, Supergiant Games

It's Friday well past noon and I'm sitting in front of my PC in the t-shirt I slept in last night. My kids, six and two, are loud, and they're making a mess of my wired Xbox 360 controllers a few feet behind me. I'm not doing a good job taking care of them and I'm not getting much done either. Yes, friends: I am an Independent Game Developer, capital I, capital G, capital D. Having done this for a couple of years now, I can finally say it with a straight face. I get to make games for a living, work when I want, and (more or less) how I want.

I guess this makes me the luckiest guy in the world. I'm a big believer in luck. How could I not? I used to play D&D. I'm lucky because I never could have reached this point if not for the people I work with, as well as my family. All I've done is try to make the most of opportunities that have come my way. Trying not to let down the people you care about is a powerful motivator.

Gaming is constant in my life. I've been playing them for as long as I can remember, and wanted to make them since I was an eight-year-old kid getting my mind blown playing Ultima IV on an Apple II. In high school I started writing about games; since I spent so much time playing them I wanted to feel productive. I really wanted to go to E3, so I thought maybe I could masquerade as a member of the gaming press, which worked. This led to some small-time writing gigs, dabbling with websites, and eventually an internship at GameSpot, where I ended up working for 10 years. Only then did I finally get into game development.

I've since worked at Electronic Arts, as a producer/designer on a major game franchise, and at 2K Games, where I was a publishing producer on an ambitious shooter years in the making. At my current job as creative director at Supergiant Games, a small group of friends and I made Bastion (left), which has done well enough to let us stay in business long enough to see if we can make something else worth a damn.

Getting to this point has been quite a ride. After GameSpot I took three consecutive pay cuts as I changed jobs. When I worked at EA for nearly

three years, I was living apart from my wife and baby daughter for two weeks at a time – for various reasons we never ended up relocating to Los Angeles and I just kept commuting. During the year I was at 2K, I worked with a team based in Europe and was on site there for as much as a month at a time, again leaving my wife to do the real work. When I finally gathered up the guts to join my ex-EA friends who'd already been working on Bastion out of a house for about a year, I needed to mooch off of my parents for the first time since I was in high school.

People sometimes ask me for advice about how they can make games on their own terms, or how I'd suggest going about getting started making games, and so on. But the older I get (I'm 35 now) the less advice I feel like I can offer. When I look back at my career – I guess I've been doing this stuff long enough to call it a career – I see no lessons there. Nothing can be prescribed or is worth repeating. In fact, I've gone about my career in a very irresponsible fashion: I've mostly gone with my gut.

My gut is pretty annoying sometimes. It caused me to exit perfectly reasonable circumstances for want of something more. It told me not to settle for perfectly reasonable situations that just don't feel right. It keeps telling me that if I'm going to spend such a large percentage of my life doing work, then I may as well do work that's intellectually and creatively fulfilling.

Joining a small independent game studio when I had two kids and a mortgage was a scary undertaking. But it was the right choice for me. The game industry offers no stability. I needed to impress this upon my family to earn their support. The risky option is the safe option. It sounds like a paradox but it isn't.

Saying the small-studio thing is the best way to go is tempting, since I've done the best work of my life here, had the most autonomy, and ultimately felt most fulfilled. But it's misleading to make the statement general. I love my job because of who I work with and what I work on.

I wouldn't be here if not for my experience at a big studio. At EA I shipped three games in less than three years. I also met the guys who went on to co-found Supergiant. Our friendships and bonds formed through tough circumstances and prepared us for the tougher circumstances we eventually faced trying to build our own game. While I was on the publishing side at 2K, I gained a real empathy for what a publisher has to go through trying to create a top-notch retail game. Sometimes that process puts a publisher and its developers into difficult situations. Being independent is a way to potentially avoid those types of conflicts and stay focused on the game-making, which is how I want to spend my work time.

Above all, I love that games are my job, and I'll keep busting my ass for as long as I can to keep it that way. ♦

Greg Kasavin is creative director at Supergiant Games, a small studio based in San Francisco. For the studio's debut title, Bastion, Kasavin wrote the story and built many of the levels.



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



02



06
Halo 4



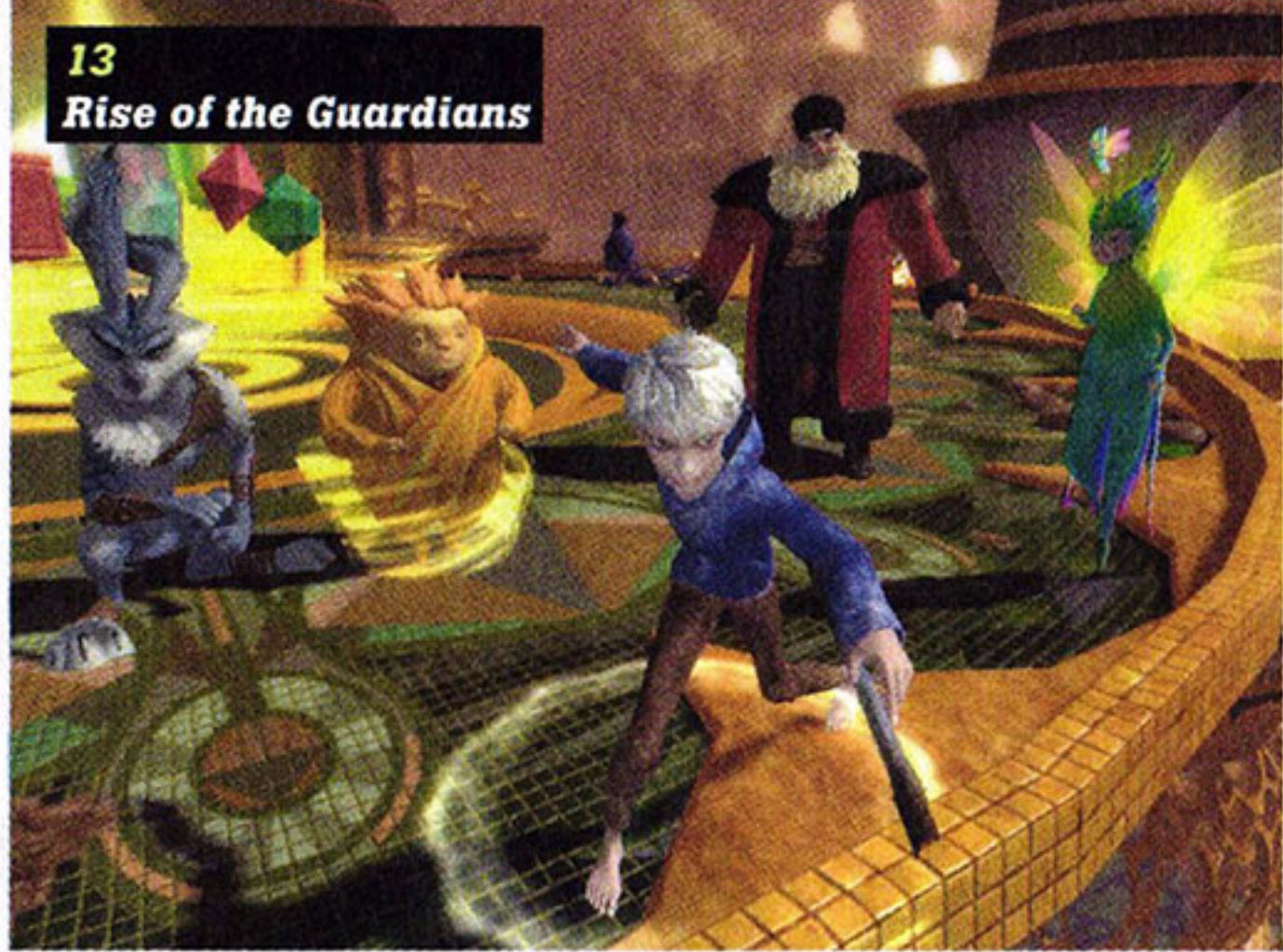
07.1



07.2



09



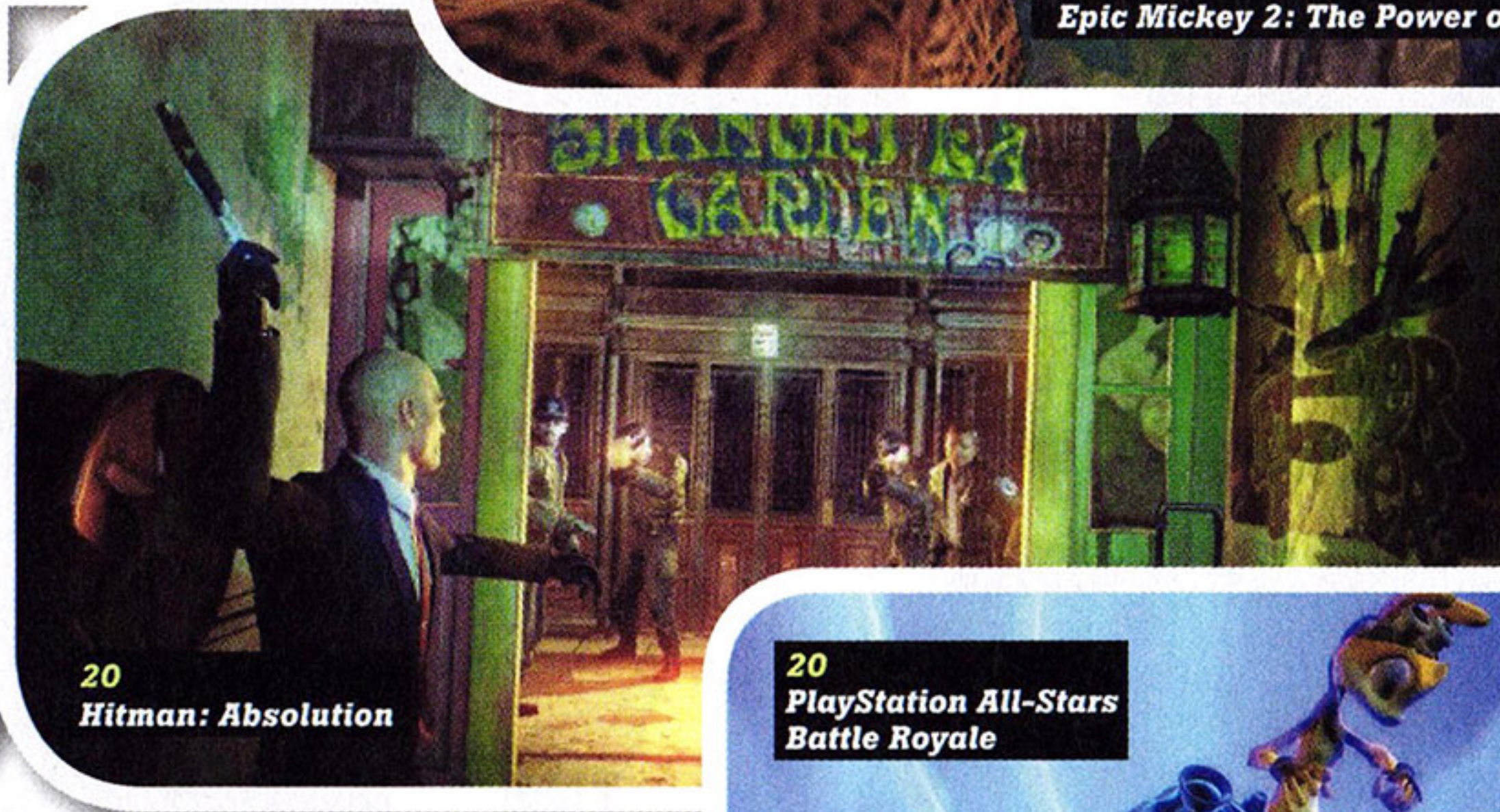
13
Rise of the Guardians



18.1
Epic Mickey 2: The Power of Two



18.1
New Super Mario Bros. U



20
Hitman: Absolution



20
PlayStation All-Stars Battle Royale

November

02 Wreck-It Ralph Opens
Almost every video game movie is terrible, but that's usually because the scriptwriters don't understand the source material. Disney clearly did its research for *Wreck-It Ralph*, today's biggest theatrical release. This movie features cameos from gaming all-stars like Q*Bert, Bowser, and Zangief as it tells the story of a fictional villain named Wreck-It Ralph (voiced by John C. Reilly). Even though it's not a Pixar movie, this is one animated feature gamers should check out.

06 New Releases

- Dragon Ball Z: Budokai HD Collection (PS3, 360)
- Halo 4 (360)
- LittleBigPlanet: Karting (PS3)
- NASCAR: Inside Line (PS3, 360, Wii)
- Winx: Magical Fairy Party (DS)

07.1 Rotworld Rocks
Swamp Thing and Animal Man have been knee-deep in the rot for over a year. They've wisely sought out each other's help and are making their way to Gotham City in DC Comics' fantastic crossover event *Rotworld*. This story continues today in *Swamp Thing 14*, which features something you'll never see again: Swamp Thing beating up a worm with a leaf.

07.2 Your Deadpool Entry Point
A Deadpool video game is on the way next year, courtesy of High Moon Studios. If you've always admired this deadly prankster from afar, Marvel Comics is launching a great jumping on point today with a new *Deadpool* comic series written by comedians Brian Posehn and Gerard Duggan.

09 Bond, Please Be Good
Even the best James Bond movies can be ridiculous. Today marks the release of *Skyfall*, Daniel Craig's attempt to redeem himself as 007. *Quantum Of Solace* wasn't great, but at least it didn't have some guy with diamonds embedded in his face. For the sake of the Bond franchise, we hope this entry is more *Casino Royale* than *Die Another Day*.

11 New Releases

- Paper Mario: Sticker Star (3DS)

13 New Releases

- Adventure Time: Hey, Ice King! Why'd You Steal Our Garbage?! (3DS, DS)
- Ben 10: Omniverse (PS3, 360, Wii, 3DS, DS)
- Call of Duty: Black Ops II (PS3, 360, PC)

- The Hip-Hop Dance Experience (360, Wii)
- Monster High: Skulldimate Roller Maze (Wii, DS)
- Nickelodeon Bubble Guppies (DS)
- Nickelodeon Dance 2 (360, Wii)
- Nickelodeon Team Umizoomi & Dora's Fantastic Flight (DS)
- Power Rangers Samurai (360)
- Rabbids Rumble (3DS)
- Rift: Storm Legion (PC)
- Rise of the Guardians (PS3, 360, Wii, 3DS, DS)
- Sims 3: Seasons, The (PC)
- Victorious: Taking the Lead (Wii, DS)

16 Twilight Breaks Hearts
The last *Twilight* movie hits theaters today, which means Hollywood's most-beloved young couple, Robert Pattinson and Kristen Stewart, won't be on screen together again any time soon. At least they have their unwavering loyalty and devotion to keep them together off the set. All Hollywood lovebirds should follow in their footsteps.

- 18.1 New Releases**
- Assassin's Creed III (Wii U)
 - Batman Arkham City: Armored Edition (Wii U)
 - Call of Duty: Black Ops II (Wii U)
 - Darksiders II (Wii U)
 - Epic Mickey: Power of Illusion (3DS)
 - Epic Mickey 2: The Power of Two (Wii U, PS3, 360, Wii)
 - ESPN Sports Connection (Wii U)
 - FIFA Soccer 13 (Wii U)
 - Funky Barn (Wii U)
 - Game Party Champions (Wii U)
 - Just Dance 4 (Wii U)
 - New Super Mario Bros. U (Wii U)
 - Ninja Gaiden 3: Razor's Edge (Wii U)
 - Nintendo Land (Wii U)
 - Rabbids Land (Wii U)
 - Scribblenauts Unlimited (Wii U)
 - Sing Party (Wii U)
 - Skylanders Giants (Wii U)
 - Sonic & All-Stars Racing Transformed (Wii U)
 - Warriors Orochi 3 Hyper (Wii U)
 - Wipeout 3 (Wii U)
 - Your Shape Fitness Evolved 2013 (Wii U)
 - ZombiU (Wii U)

18.2 The Wii U Arrives
Nintendo fans who were quick enough to pre-order a Wii U before they sold out will be starting the next generation of gaming today – or selling it to their slower peers on eBay for a tidy profit. Either way, someone has a lot of Wii U launch titles to play.

20 New Releases

- Hitman: Absolution (PS3, 360, PC)
- Persona 4 Golden (Vita)
- PlayStation All-Stars Battle Royale (PS3)
- Sonic & All-Stars: Racing Transformed (PS3, 360, Vita)

24 Mojang is Going to Disneyland!
You now have a reason to visit the Magic Kingdom...in Paris. On November 24 and 25, Mojang and the Minecraft community take over the Disneyland Resort in Paris to mingle, attend panels, and above all else, party at this year's MineCon. The question on everyone's mind: What will these attendees do when nightfall hits?

V



Five Under The Radar Games Worth Watching

Conventional wisdom claims the middle class of console games is dead. As production budgets and development staff sizes rose dramatically over the past decade, it became

harder for publishers to squeeze profit out of second-tier games. Selling a couple hundred thousand copies of a game no longer paid for the initial investment. In today's console world, if you're not selling millions you're not making your money back, which is why cult favorites like *Mirror's Edge*, *Singularity*, and *Bulletstorm* still don't have sequels.

Even if a game is greenlit, not every project is granted the multi-million dollar marketing budget that you need to create a mass-market groundswell. *Dead Island* sold more than four million copies, and Quantic Dreams' *Heavy Rain* was a critical darling, but we still don't expect to see Super Bowl commercials informing the larger public of their follow-ups any time soon. This is why, rather than announce a new game this month,

we turned our focus toward five games that deserve a better fate than slipping through the cracks. As the console generation winds down and new games become scarcer, we think these five titles promise unique experiences that justify keeping them on any hardcore gamer's radar. Here they are in no particular order.

I *Metro: Last Light* 52

II *Fuse* 60

III *Ni No Kuni: Wrath Of The White Witch* 68

IV *Dead Island: Riptide* 76

V *Beyond: Two Souls* 84



IN THE DARKNESS, A FLICKER OF HOPE

by Jeff Cork

Platform
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • PC

Style
1-Player Shooter

Publisher
THQ

Developer
4A Games

Release
Q1 2013

If you aren't familiar with the name *Metro 2033*, you're not alone.

The post-apocalyptic game shared more core elements with survival horror than the gung-ho military games that have come to define the first-person shooter genre. Ammunition was rare – its scarcity made it the in-game currency – and players had to keep tabs on their gas mask filters and hand-crank their flashlights. In short, *Metro 2033* wasn't like many games on the market.

"I think it's fair to say that when THQ acquired it, they didn't really understand what they had in their portfolio," says creative strategist Huw Beynon. "I think they saw it as an Eastern European curiosity and not a great deal more."

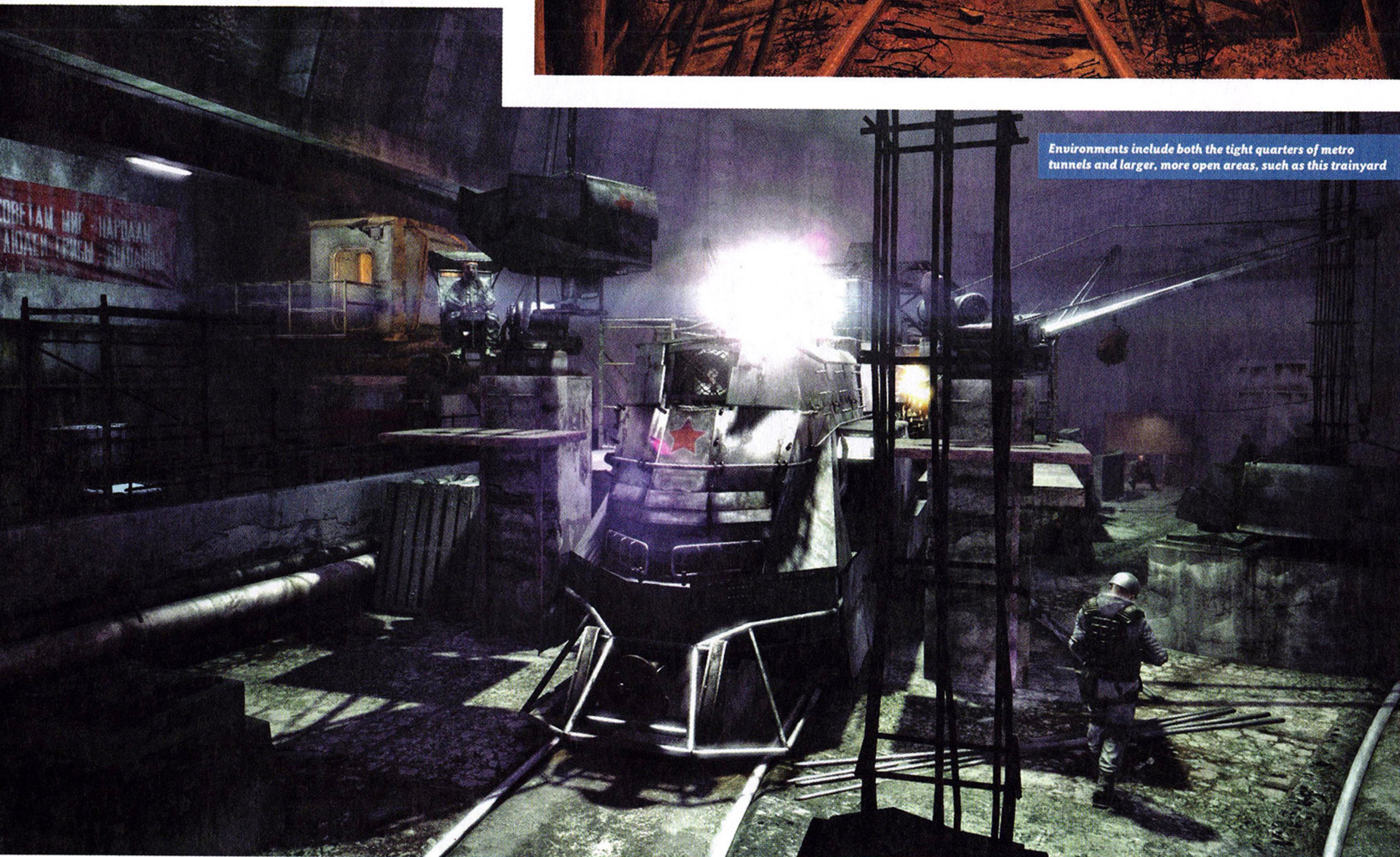
The lack of publisher support (and polish) hurt the game from a technical perspective. However, players who looked past dodgy AI and the occasional graphical hiccup responded favorably to the tone and survival-based gameplay. *Metro 2033* is grim even by post-apocalyptic standards, but Ukraine-based developer 4A

Games delivered something rare: a game for grown-ups. The world feels grounded and rooted in its own reality, even as players encounter mutants and supernatural elements.

Metro: Last Light



THQ is treating the sequel, Metro: Last Light, with the attention it deserves. Beynon says Metro 2033 did “phenomenally well” for the publisher, and THQ sees even greater potential this time around. “The intention isn’t to dumb the game down in order to reach this mythical mass audience,” he adds. “This is a core game, and we think there’s a huge audience for a game like this – and we didn’t reach it as well as we could have the first time around. It’s a mature, sophisticated gamer’s game, and I think it’ll feel like a breath of fresh air.”



Environments include both the tight quarters of metro tunnels and larger, more open areas, such as this trainyard

A QUICK RECAP

Fresh air is a luxury in the series' fiction. The story takes place in Russia after a catastrophic nuclear war. Some of Moscow's residents took refuge in the city's subway system, which shielded them from missile strikes and the subsequent fallout. Metro 2033 begins two decades later, as players take on the role of Artyom, a young man who was taken to the metro system

as a baby. Artyom is warned that mysterious new entities, known as Dark Ones, are moving toward his station. He has to brave the mutant-infested metro tunnel system and the city's radioactive surface if he hopes to save his community.

Artyom's journey takes him to a military installation known as D6. Without delving into spoilers (we've saved those for our sidebar on page 57), the situation may not have been as simple as it was originally explained, and its solution comes with a heavy toll.

"If in the first game he's this naïve young man whose eyes are opened through his journey through the metro, at the start of Last Light he's like a teenager who's returned from his first tour of Vietnam," says Huw Beynon. "[He's] completely unprepared for the situation that he was thrust into, and is essentially damaged by

his experience."

One of the contributing factors to Artyom's condition is the current state of humanity. Approximately 40,000 survivors have hunkered down in the metro, but that's only part of the story. Dangerous factions have emerged, including hard-liner communists (the Reds), Nazis, bandits, and scavengers. A group known as the Rangers sees themselves as the good guys. "They're the self-styled warrior Knights Templar of the metro," Beynon says. "Not everyone sees them that way, and there's plenty of resentment."

When we last saw them, the Rangers had moved into D6, but not before the installation was cracked open and plundered. One stolen prize in particular has the potential to change what little life remains in the metro and beyond.

continued on page 58

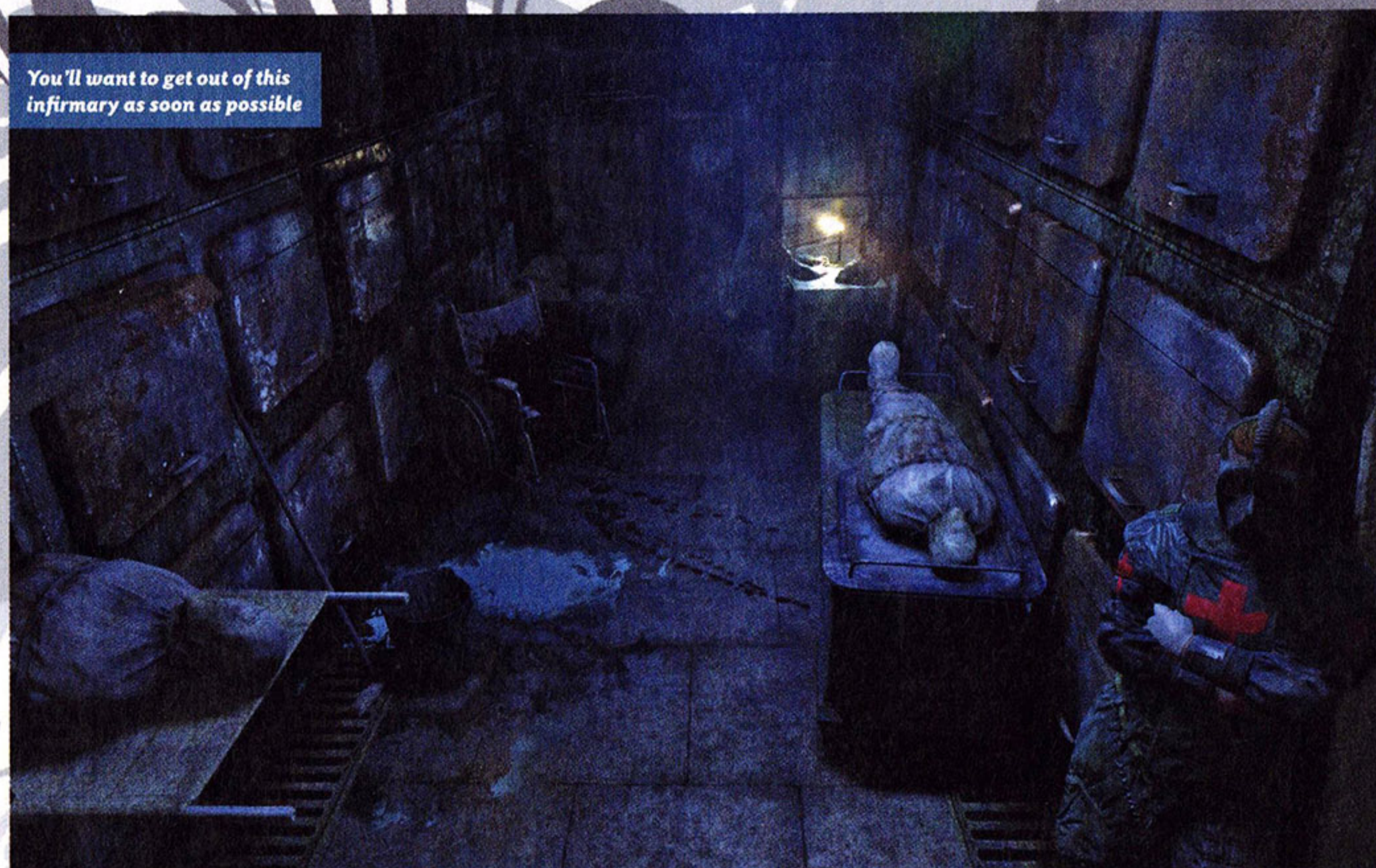
How It Began

Author Dmitry Glukhovskiy formally published his novel *Metro 2033* in 2005, but drafts of the dystopian story circulated online as early as 2002. Several game studios approached Glukhovskiy looking to adapt the novel, but he wasn't convinced until 4A Games came along. Formed by members of the S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl team, 4A Games' take on post-apocalyptic Russia convinced Glukhovskiy the studio was the right choice.

Glukhovskiy wrote a follow up to the story, *Metro 2034*, but *Last Light* goes in another direction. "In terms of form and structure, [2034] is very different from 2033," says creative strategist Huw Beynon. "It's not really suited for an adaptation. It was really at his suggestion that we developed a completely new branching storyline that acts like a true narrative sequel to 2033. It continues Artyom's story."

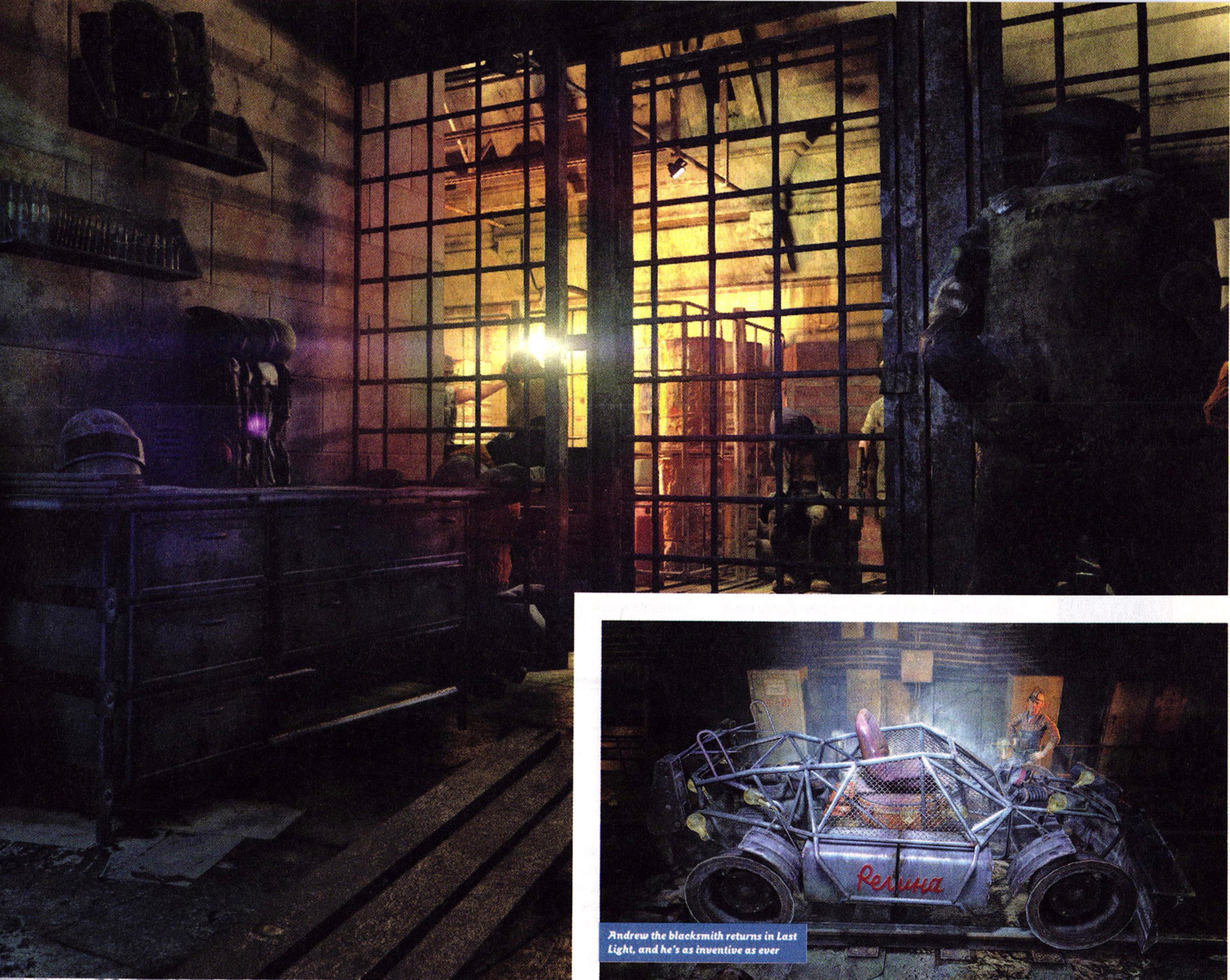


Artyom typically finds himself in the crossfire of a larger conflict



You'll want to get out of this infirmary as soon as possible





Andrew the blacksmith returns in Last Light, and he's as inventive as ever

Where We Left Off

This section contains Metro 2033 ending spoilers. Tread carefully.

Metro 2033 featured two endings, one of which was buried behind a series of obscure tasks and qualifications. In the easier-to-get ending, Artyom works his way to a military installation known as D6. There, he's tasked with using a missile's targeting system to eradicate the Dark Ones' home – and their psychic influence. When we leave Artyom, he sits at the top of D6, watching the fiery blast. He seems more contemplative than triumphant. "To this day I wonder, when we burned the Dark Ones from the face of the earth, was something lost as well...?" he asks.

The other scenario, known as the Enlightenment ending, is more optimistic. Artyom sides with the mysterious Khan, who senses that the Dark Ones aren't entirely malevolent beings. After hearing a dying Dark One calling out for peace, Artyom destroys the missiles' guidance system seconds before the missiles are launched. It ends on a hopeful note, with Artyom saying that while he doesn't know if he was the first to communicate with them, he won't be the last.

Metro: Last Light uses the first ending as canon. That doesn't necessarily mean the Enlightenment ending is a complete bust, however. It provides a look into the Dark Ones' motivations before the species was seemingly eradicated. It also shows that at least one Dark One was at the bottom of the D6's tower and presumably survived along with Artyom. Those elements could be entirely ignored in Last Light, but judging from what we've seen, something is causing hallucinations that are undoubtedly familiar to Metro 2033 veterans.

continued from page 55

BENEATH THE SURFACE

Our demo starts with a reunion. Andrew the blacksmith, who we last saw smuggling Artyom into a warzone, pulls a tarp off one of his prized creations: a new railcar. The vehicle looks a bit like a dune buggy, with a frame made of welded pipes and crowned with light bulbs. Since Artyom is borrowing the vehicle to delve deeply into the metro's tunnels, those light bulbs are critically important.

We climb into the vehicle, say goodbye to our old friend, and plunge into the darkness. The atmosphere is as unsettling as ever; each shadow and flicker of light makes us wince in anticipation. Eventually, Artyom's way is blocked by a gate. We hoist ourselves out of the vehicle and put on our gas mask. If we want to get to the neutral station city ahead, we're going to have to restore power to this dead zone.

The situation doesn't look any more promising when we open the door to a maintenance area. The walls are lined with webs, and our headlamp's beam catches the tail end of something darting into a hole. To our right, we hear a moist crackling sound. Whirling around, we see a cluster of knee-high eggs splitting open. We don't wait to see what's hatching – a quick burst from our Bastard (a cobbled-together submachine gun) reduces it all to a lifeless pile of gray paste.

Artyom's progress is blocked by thick webs,

which we burn away with our lighter. It's clear that we're not the first person to have attempted this route. An adventurer's corpse is sprawled on the ground, and we frisk it for valuable ammunition. Along the walls, Artyom spies the web-covered silhouettes of other victims, some of which pulse unnaturally. We hear something skitter nearby. The scene is so tense that it's almost a relief when we're attacked. The enemy is a terrifying mix of scorpion and spider, and its armor plating makes our initial burst of gunfire an expensive waste. It's not immune to fire, however, and flames turn its exoskeleton a lobster-like red. We flip the switches on a nearby fuse box and the hall lights scare the creatures back into hiding.

The deeper we go, the more unsettling the situation becomes. The creatures have completely colonized the maintenance tunnels. The corridors are claustrophobic, and the more open areas simply provide more room for the enemies to scamper in. Artyom eventually finds the gate controls, and not a moment too soon. He uses his headlamp's hand crank to feed the mechanism enough power to creak open.

We take the railcar farther into the tunnel before noticing that the tracks are moving closer to the surface. Light scatters through holes above, and we can see the shadows of mutants keeping pace with our cart. We look up and see a drizzle of rain is falling. It accumulates

on our gas mask, and Artyom swipes it off with his gloved hand. The section ends as we reach the surface.

THE HUMAN ELEMENT

Metro 2033 is a great example of a game that tells a rich story largely through the action. Players don't endure endless cutscenes or read volumes of text to understand what is going on. Instead, characters provide exposition in natural-sounding snippets that didn't seem like monologues.

"I think that's one of the things that people really loved about Metro 2033, and they're really going to love about this," Beynon says. "This is a narrative-driven game. By that I don't mean that it's a bulls--- story that explains why you're flung from an ice level to a jungle level."

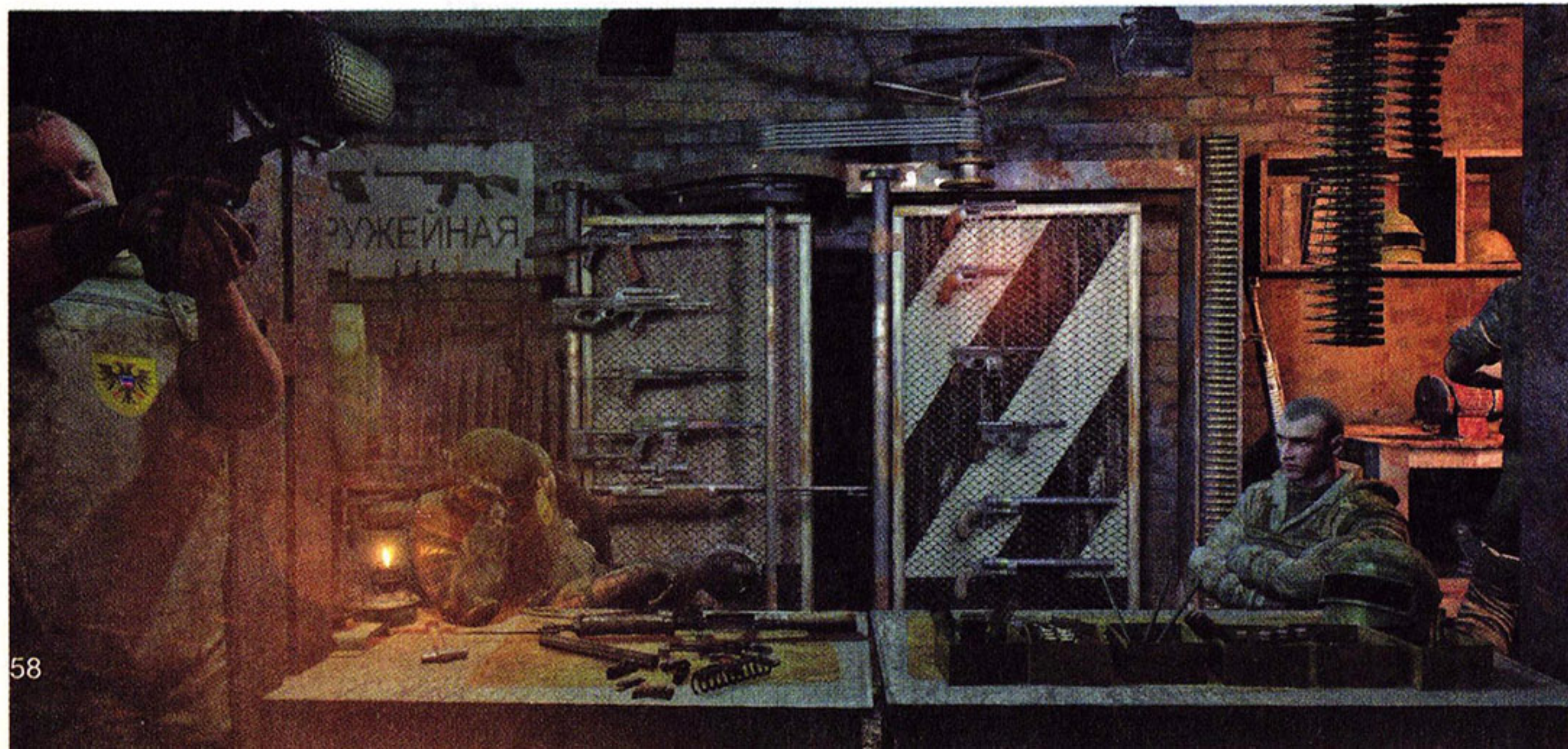
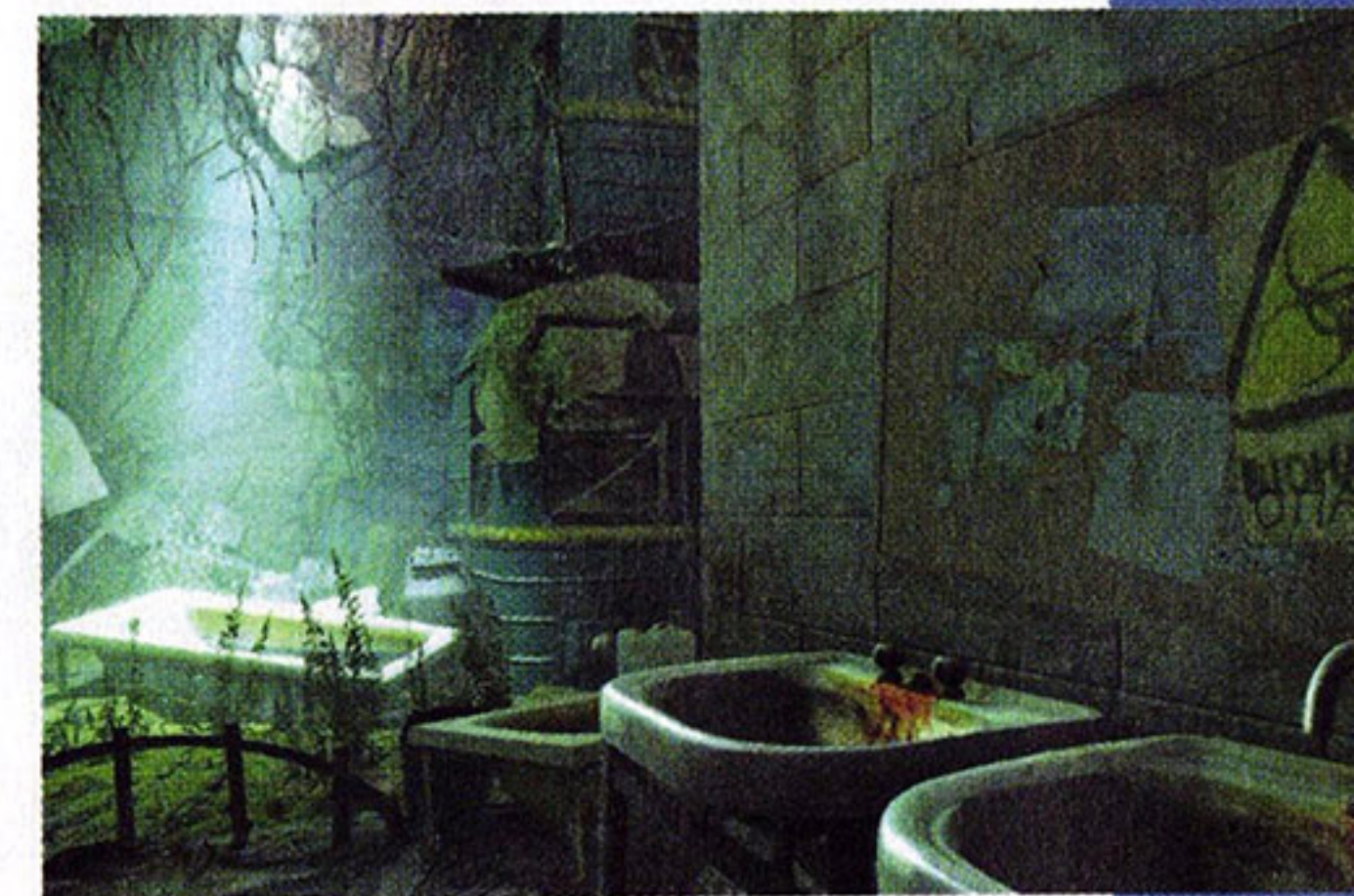
All Systems Go

Metro 2033 isn't for the faint of heart, in more ways than one. The tense atmosphere is heightened with the very real fears that Artyom's equipment could fail at any given moment. Players have to monitor their oxygen levels, ensure their gas masks don't get smashed in combat, and even hand-crank their flashlight to keep it operational. Though THQ says it's shooting for a broader audience with Last Light, the gameplay isn't getting unnecessarily streamlined.

"We have this philosophy that players want to be given more stuff," says creative strategist Huw Beynon. "They don't want games to be dumbed down. So long as you introduce these mechanics sensibly and in an interesting way and you explain to the player how to use them, they can learn all this stuff. They love having all of these tools at their disposal; they love having to take into account all these different systems."

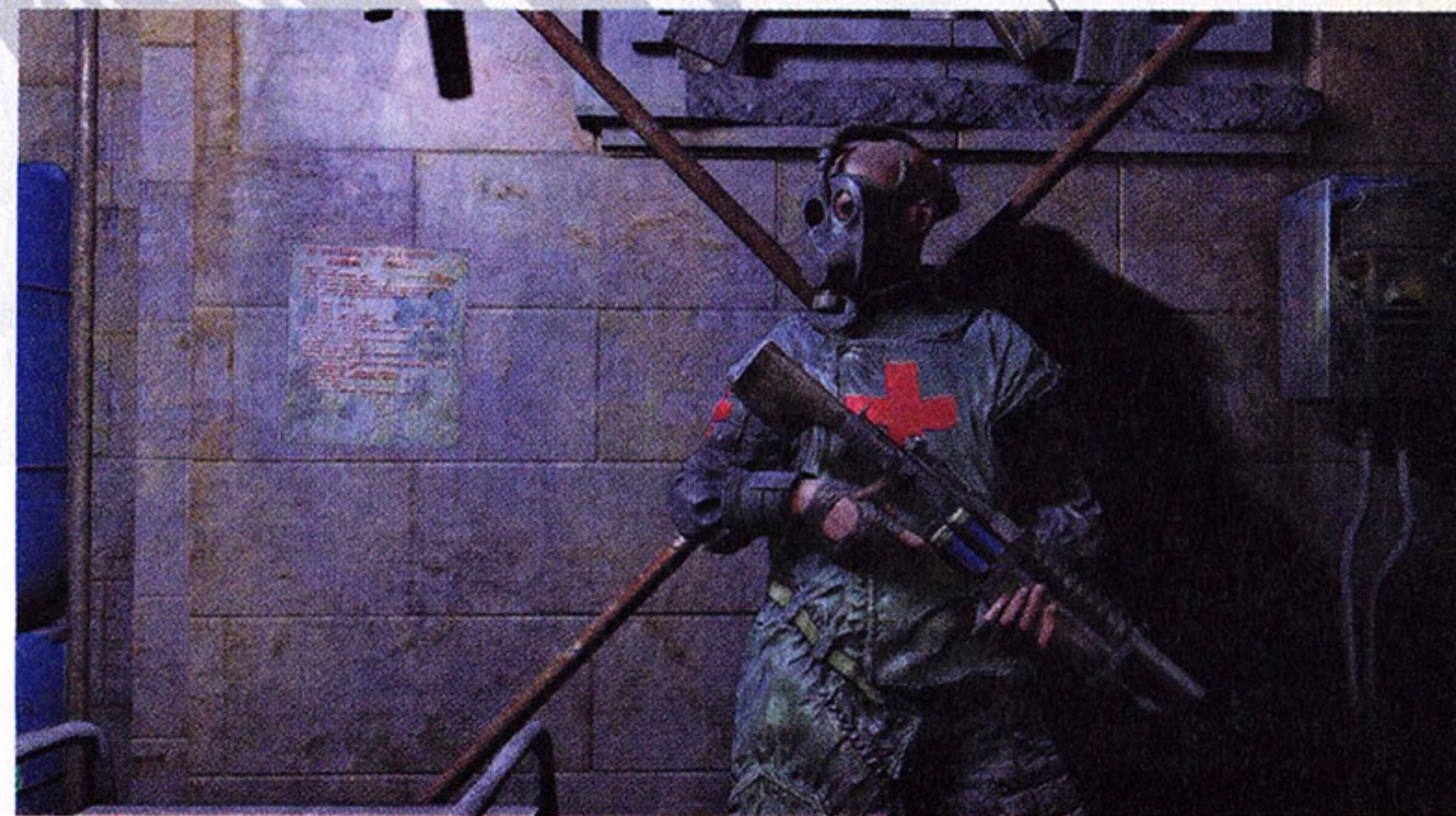
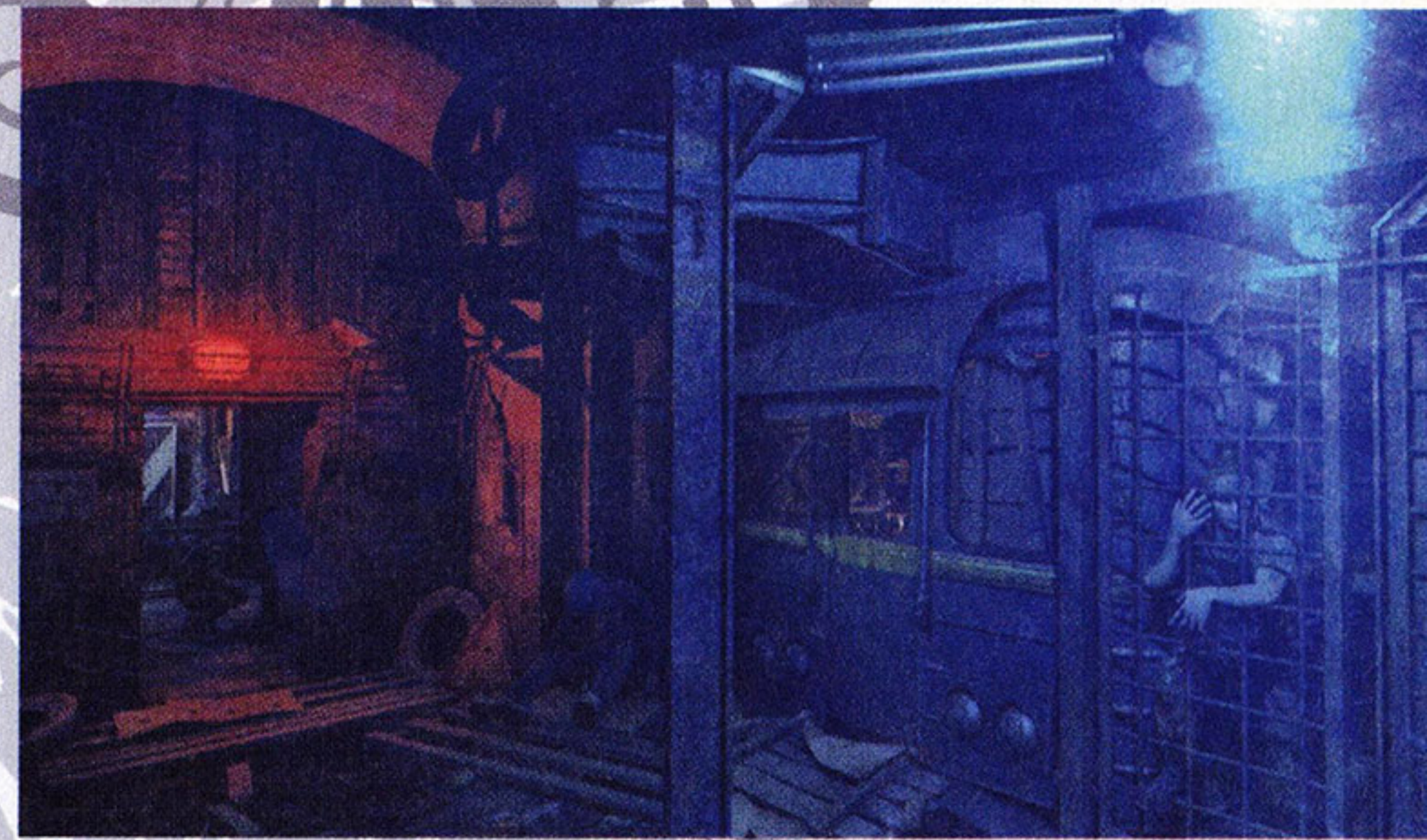
In Last Light, 4A Games is changing the way that air-filter levels are communicated (a new digital, wrist-mounted display), and adding better feedback to gunplay. Now you know when you hit flesh thanks to sprays of blood and appropriately meaty sounds. Hit armor plating and you hear pings and see sparks. If anything, the game has even more systems in play – for instance, masks get obscured with moisture and gore, and players have to swipe them clean.

Perhaps the biggest systemic change comes with the weapon-upgrade system. In Metro 2033, players upgrade their firepower with preconfigured firearms. In Last Light, players can modify weapons themselves, trading out different scopes, extended magazines, silencers, barrels, and more. Additionally, players can now carry three weapons of their own choosing. If you want to forgo a pistol in favor of something heavier, you're welcome to do so. "You can carry around three heavy weapons, but you might not be able to find the ammo necessary to sustain them," Beynon cautions.





The Reds found a bioweapon stashed with the D6 military outpost, and they're clearly not afraid to use it



Andrew uses his railcar to smuggle people around the metro system, but you can take it on a solo ride



We see some of that invisible exposition in one of the hub areas, tentatively called the circus. Something has gone horribly wrong in this station; it's been transformed into an infirmary, with sickened people crammed into the area. Wails and phlegmy coughs punctuate the stale air. As with Metro 2033, players are free to linger and listen to incidental dialogue. Much of it is written by novelist Dmitry Glukhovsky, who penned the books the series is based on, and none of it is mandatory.

Artyom works his way through the tight corridors, picking up snippets of conversations along the way. A doctor chides an afflicted colleague for not wearing protective gear, saying there isn't anything he can do at this point. In a large sealed tent, doctors scan an unconscious patient with an uncharacteristically futuristic-looking device. Here we learn what's going on for the first time.

Before the Rangers settled into D6, the Reds made off with a bioweapon. Their plans for this weapon are as brutal as they are logical. The faction has exposed the station to the virus as

a test bed. Once it spreads, they swoop in, put the station under quarantine, and take it over. In addition to gaining a valuable chunk of the metro system, the survivors see the Reds as their saviors.

Artyom knows the truth, but he seems reluctant to expose it – at least for the time being. Perhaps he knows that revealing the Reds' plans could create a reaction among survivors even deadlier than this bioweapon. Or perhaps he's grown weary of getting involved in these factional disputes.

Even after living through a horrific cataclysmic event, humans can't seem to stop killing each other. Rather than see their near-annihilation

as a chance to rebuild a united civilization, the survivors continue to seek out violence. Attacks from mutants and the threat of the Dark Ones can't even stop the fighting.

In spite of this unending conflict, there are flickers of hope in the metro. People have shown ingenuity and resilience by creating homes, vehicles, and, of course, weapons from scraps. It would be too pat to have one man unite the remnants of civilization, but perhaps he may spark a greater hope among those survivors. ♦

Head on over to gameinformer.com/undertheradar all month long for Metro: Last Light bonus content



INSOMNIAC GETS SERIOUS ABOUT CO-OP

by Dan Ryckert



Fuse

After finding success with the PlayStation-exclusive franchises *Spyro the Dragon*, *Ratchet & Clank*, and *Resistance*, Insomniac Games is venturing outside its comfort zone. The development studio revealed its newest IP – *Overstrike* – at E3 in 2011. Featuring goofy humor and an art style reminiscent of *Team Fortress 2*, this multiplatform EA Partners title created a buzz amongst shooter fans tired of realistic games that take themselves too seriously. Flash forward to over a year later, and those same gamers are raising their eyebrows over the announcement that *Overstrike* is now *Fuse*.

While the humor is less slapstick and the visuals changed, our recent time with the game at Insomniac's Burbank studio left us confident that the changes shouldn't concern those initially intrigued by the new title.

► **Platform**
PlayStation 3 • Xbox 360

► **Style**
1 or 2-Player Shooter
(4-Player Online)

► **Publisher**
Electronic Arts

► **Developer**
Insomniac Games

► **Release**
March

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A couple of years before the *Overstrike* debut trailer, another four-player cooperative shooter made waves with a dramatic change in direction. Gearbox Software's *Borderlands* debuted with a realistic art

style, but it eventually shifted to the more lighthearted and cartoonish experience that greeted players upon its release. At first glance, *Overstrike*'s transformation into *Fuse* is a shift in the opposite direction. While wry dialogue replaces the slapstick tone, action fans shouldn't worry about *Fuse* turning into a "shooter with a message" like *Spec Ops: The Line*. *Fuse* is focused purely on explosive action, creative weaponry, and working together as a team.



Fans of Resistance or Ratchet & Clank know all about Insomniac's novel brand of weaponry. This trademark plays a pivotal role in Fuse as well, but it's tied into the narrative more than in previous franchises. As the titular element, the mysterious substance called Fuse drives the weapons and abilities of the player-controlled Overstrike 9 group. It also serves as the object of desire for the antagonistic private military contractor called Raven.

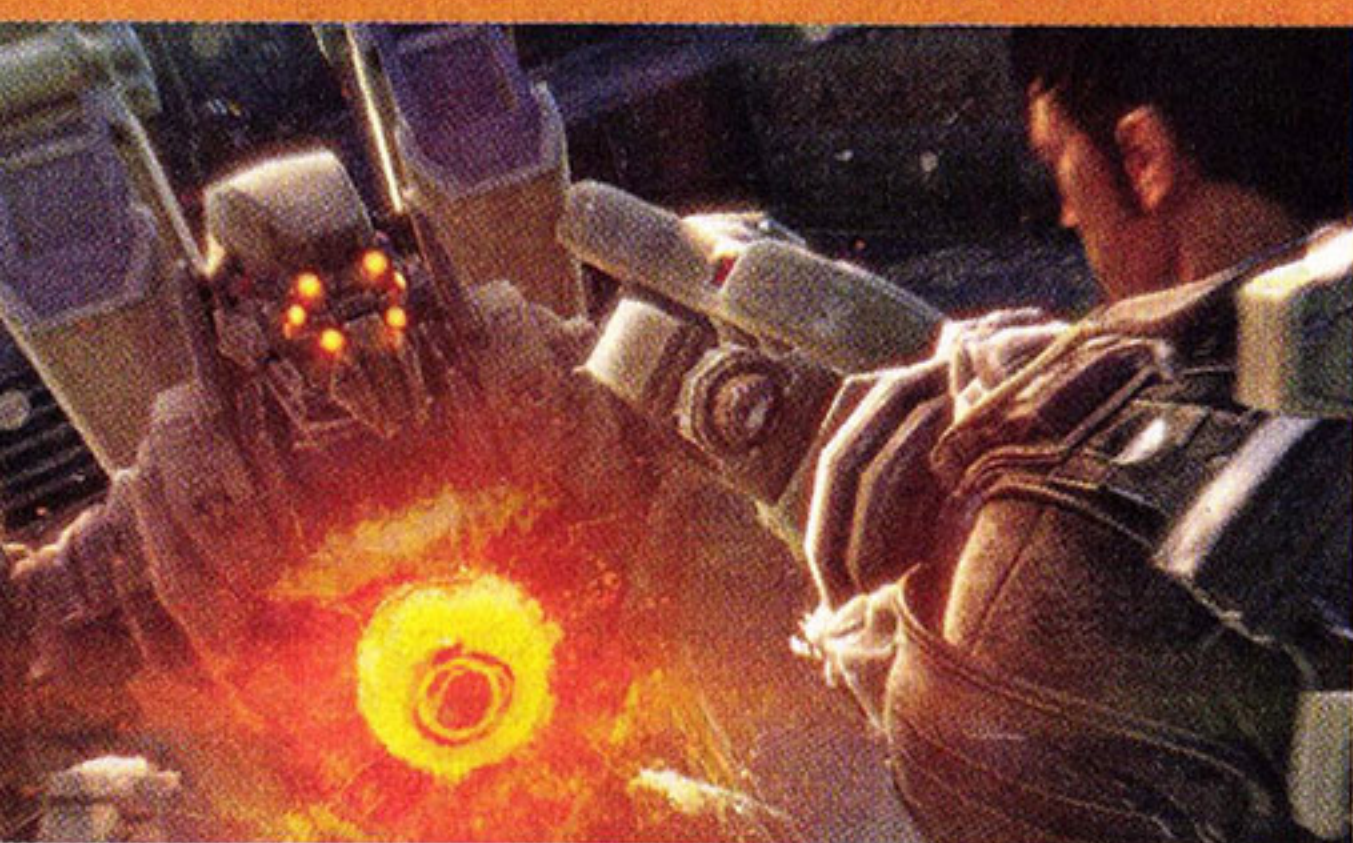
A SOURCE OF POWER

First discovered in 1947, the U.S. has experimented with the alien element Fuse for decades deep within the Hyperion research facility in the Nevada desert. When the base unexpectedly goes dark over communications channels, the Overstrike 9 team is called in to investigate. Unbeknownst to them, U.S. Senator William Fable also recently visited Hyperion to deliver a giant disabled robot known as an Enforcer. He planned to have the scientists research the technology, but it soon reveals itself as part of Raven's plot.

When the Overstrike chopper arrives at Hyperion, the deadly machine ambushes them. The Enforcer kills the helicopter pilot, causing the team of four to crash land. It takes off into the Hyperion base, and the Overstrike mercenaries begin their pursuit.

Most of the facility is in various stages of disrepair thanks to the Enforcer's rampage, but Overstrike 9 eventually comes upon an untouched lab with crucial contents. Here they get their first glimpse of Fuse's capabilities.

As the team approaches a console at the center of the room, they discover four experimental weapons under glass. These Fuse-powered guns shape the core differences of the four characters. Dalton grabs the mag shield, which allows bullets to pass through from behind but blocks any incoming projectiles from the front. Naya gets the warp rifle, which destroys enemies with singularities. Jacob's arc shot gives him more range than his partners, and functions like a crossbow. Izzy's shattergun crystallizes foes, making them an easy target for the rest of Overstrike 9.



Overstrike 9

Each of Fuse's four classes features a distinct weapon with two firing modes. In addition, each of them can unleash a special Fusion ability once they've killed enough baddies to fill a meter. This character spotlight showcases what each person brings to the table.



Dalton Brooks

Weapon: Mag Shield (Fuse + ferrofluid)

Range: Short-to-mid

Primary Fire: Unlike other characters' abilities, Dalton's mag shield doesn't automatically expend ammo as you use it. Instead, this shield only ticks down the ammo count as it blocks bullets and projectiles. As the tank of the group, Dalton can charge forward into hostile territory and use his mag shield as a protective barrier for the rest of the team. With the press of a trigger button, he can also blast the collected bullets and shrapnel forward into enemies.

Secondary Fire: Dalton's secondary fire button drops a shield onto the battlefield, allowing him to move around while still leaving protection behind. With one shield placed, he can still hold another in front of him as he moves.

Fusion Ability: Once he activates Fusion, Dalton can repeatedly perform mag shield blasts without having to wait for bullets and grenades to become stuck in it.



Jacob Kimble

Weapon: Arc Shot (Fuse + liquid mercury)

Range: Mid-to-long

Primary Fire: While it doesn't feature the fastest fire rate, the arc shot is great for dealing damage over distance. It's essentially a crossbow, and can be used to pin enemies to walls.

Secondary Fire: Once bolts are shot, you can press a button that makes them explode into streams of molten mercury. These streams can melt through flesh, armor, and shields, and are great for setting up traps. If you know a few enemies are about to enter through a doorway, you can prepare by shooting a few bolts into the wall above the entrance. Once they walk through, you can kill enemies by giving them a hot mercury shower from above.

Fusion Ability: Jacob's arc shot ammo automatically explodes on impact, meaning that every shot ends with several streams of mercury damaging anyone around it.



Naya Deveraux

Weapon: Warp Rifle (Fuse + antimatter)

Range: Short-to-mid

Primary Fire: Naya's warp rifle creates singularities within enemies, and she can chain them together with some skill. Once an enemy is peppered with a few warp rifle shots, he begins to glow. If he's killed in this state, a black hole appears and explodes, damaging any nearby foes. By making several enemies glow at once, their black holes chain and explode in sequence once one of them dies. The warp rifle also fires faster the longer the trigger is held in, but it can overheat if held too long. With some experience, players can feather the trigger when it's near overheating, keeping the fire rate high.

Secondary Fire: Fuse allows Naya to cloak herself, making her ideal for stealthy close quarters kills.

Fusion Ability: With Fusion activated, Naya's warp rifle is always at max fire rate. In addition, any explosions created by singularities have a larger blast radius.



Isabelle "Izzy" Sinclair

Weapon: Shattergun (Fuse + black melanite)

Range: Long

Primary Fire: Izzy's shattergun crystallizes enemies and lifts them several feet into the air, making them an easy target for your teammates.

Secondary Fire: If teammates are downed in the field, Izzy can immediately revive them at range thanks to the shattergun's healing crystals. Anyone within its circular pulse is revived if downed, and wounded teammates quickly recover health.

Fusion Ability: Izzy's chain range increases during Fusion, meaning enemies are at an even greater risk of becoming crystallized if one of their buddies is too close. In addition, deadly crystal shards explode from victims once they're shattered.



Facing heavy fire at the end of a narrow pathway? Send Dalton and his mag shield out front for protection

Soon after the gang discovers their new toys, the reason for the Enforcer's rampage becomes clear. He served as the tip of the spear for Raven, a Trojan horse deployed to lead the way toward a Fuse cache known as "the Source." After they understand that Raven is attempting to acquire the Source, Overstrike's mission changes from investigating the facility to destroying the cache before its enemies can reach it.

As Overstrike 9 heads toward the Source, they use their new weapons for the first time in a live firefight. After taking out several squads of Raven contractors, they arrive at their destination. The Source is sealed in a large, silo-like container, and Izzy starts to plant a bomb on its side. Before she can finish the job, a three-pronged throwing star whizzes by her head.

She turns to see Raven soldiers aiming down

at her from an elevated position. Among them is Mei Lin Mao, a high-ranking Raven captain who has a lengthy profession and romantic history with Dalton. She tells Dalton that he looks good, and then reveals her hostage, Senator Fable. Dalton considers taking out the hostage to eliminate Mei Lin's leverage. Jacob yells, "What are you doing? You can't shoot a senator!" Dalton replies, "Why not? I didn't vote for him."

Dalton eventually settles down and realizes that fighting back in this situation is useless. Overstrike 9 has no choice but to submit to Raven, and the enemy successfully acquires the valuable supply of the deadly element.

Your enemy gradually becomes deadlier as they learn the ins and outs of Fuse, making the need to eradicate the Source all the more urgent. Riot guards upgrade their standard shields to those that resemble Dalton's mag

shield. New infiltrator enemies appear on the scene using cloaking technology.

CHOOSE YOUR OWN EXPERIENCE

Presenting gamers with multiple classes in a shooter has its advantages, as we've seen in games with great replay value like *Borderlands*. However, that franchise ties you to one character per playthrough. You can enlist the help of other classes in multiplayer, but solo gamers are stuck with whoever they selected at the outset of the file. If you're playing *Fuse* by yourself or with any fewer than three other players, the "leap" feature gives players character variety throughout the campaign.

When fewer than four human players are present, *Fuse* fills in the rest of the classes with bots. At any point during the action, a player can hop into the shoes any of the other AI characters. If you're playing split-screen with a friend, either of you can hop into either unused class whenever the situation calls for it.

As you leap, you earn XP for the character you're currently controlling. Your play determines the strengths and weaknesses of your team, so plan accordingly. If you're a fan of Jacob, you can spend the majority of your time earning XP with him, making his arc shot a force to be reckoned with. However, this comes at the expense of the rest of your team's skill trees. Alternately, you can divide your time amongst the four members of the team and make them all competent soldiers, but no single one will be particularly powerful.

The Ecstasy of Gold

During Insomniac's Powerpoint presentation, the studio moved past a slide that may have hinted at an unrevealed mode or feature. It showcased a huge pile of gold bars with a soldier and a question mark on either side of it. We didn't get any hint about what it meant, but it could be another multiplayer mode or a currency system that the developer wasn't ready to discuss just yet.

Lethal Enforcers

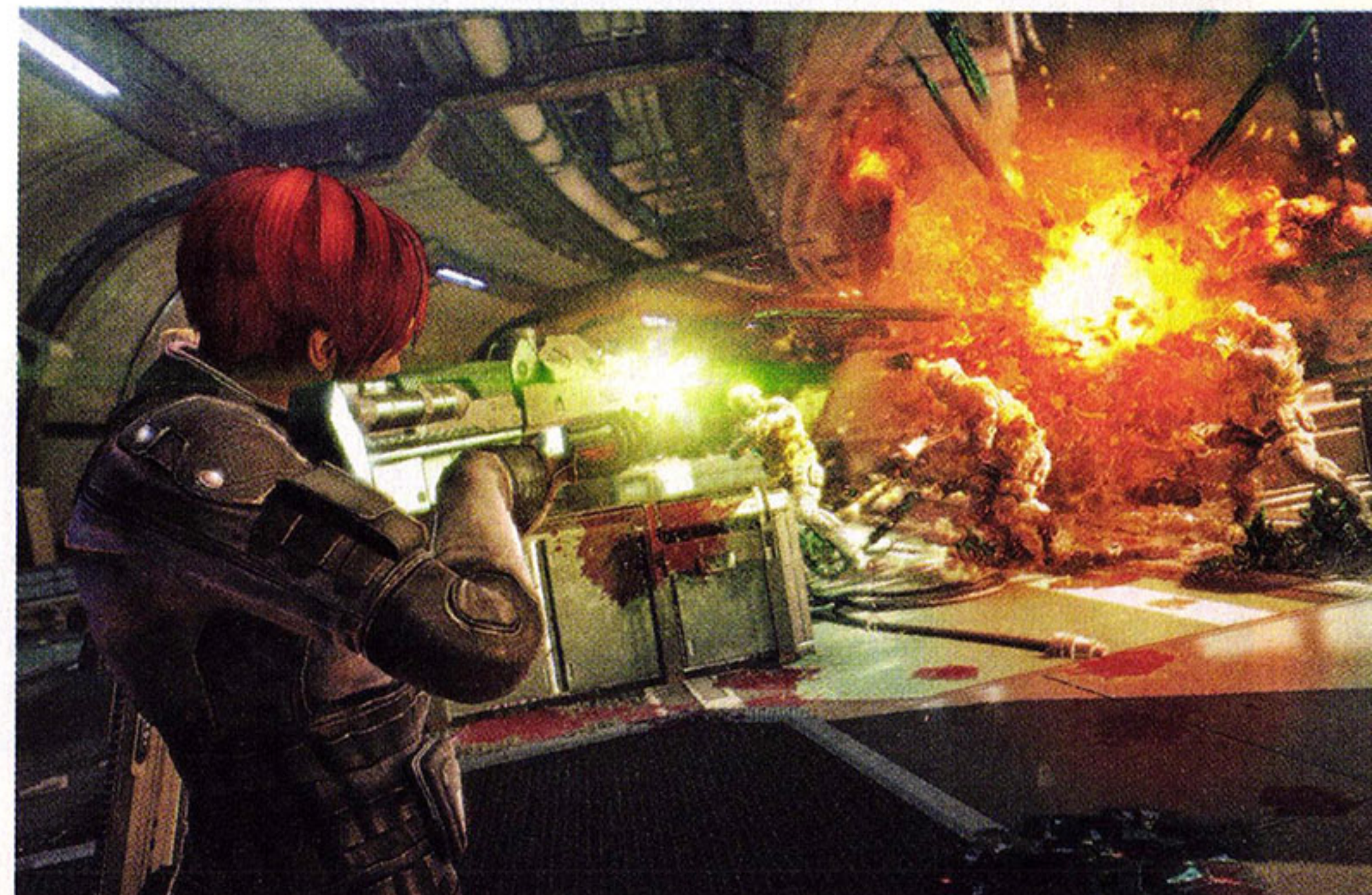
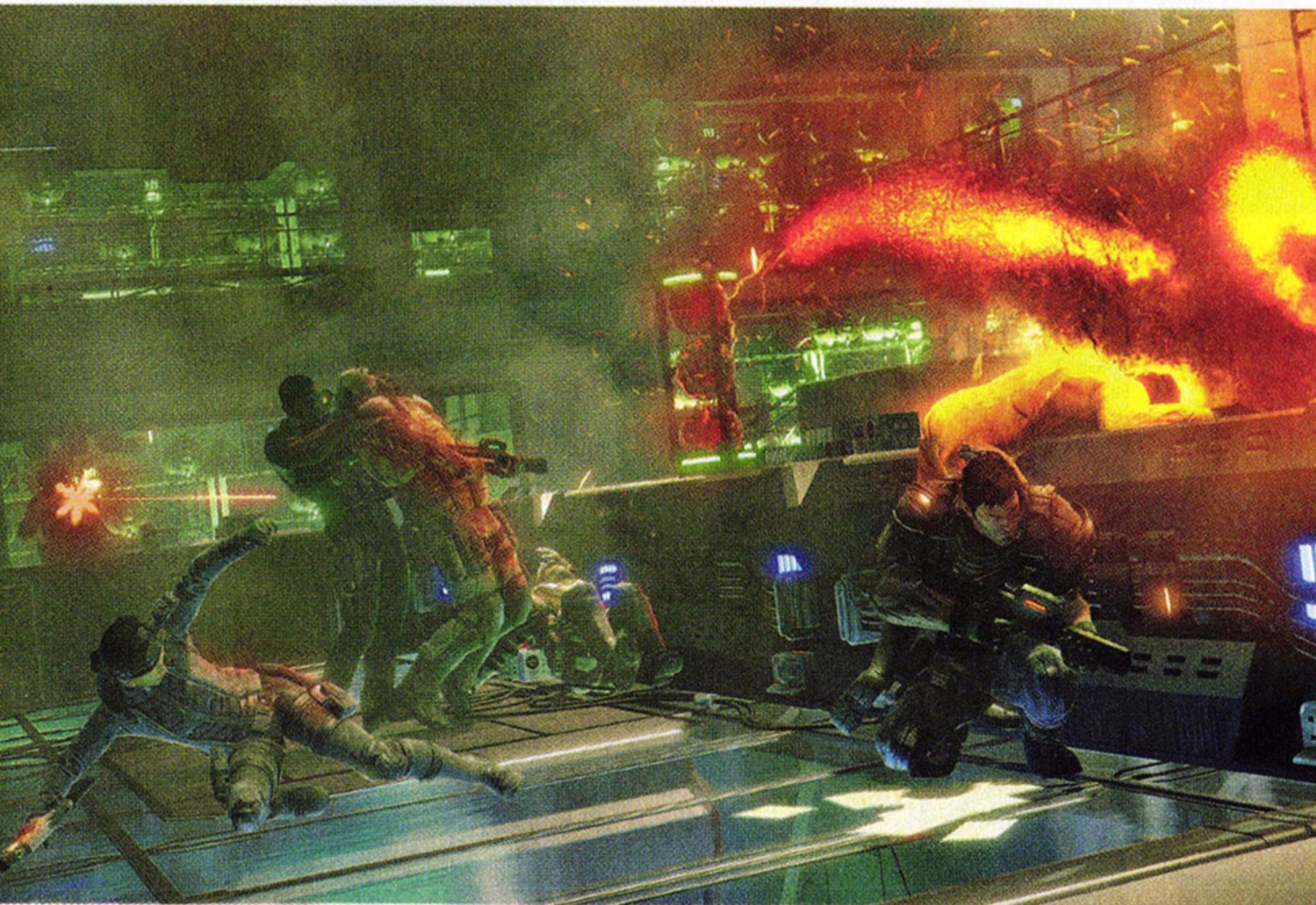
An Enforcer leads the Raven charge into the Hyperion base, and they're also frequent enemies throughout the game. I had a chance to fight one, and it was no pushover. Enforcers stomp and swipe at you if you get too close, fire arm cannons at you at any range, and occasionally retreat to high ground to unleash a volley of heat-seeking missiles. At some points, it shoots shackles at the members of Overstrike 9. If you get caught up in these, it picks you up and begins charging a "core blast" from its chest. This instantly disintegrates anyone it hits, so it's crucial that your team responds quickly and attacks its open chest cavity.



Naya's warp rifle creates miniature black holes that damage nearby foes

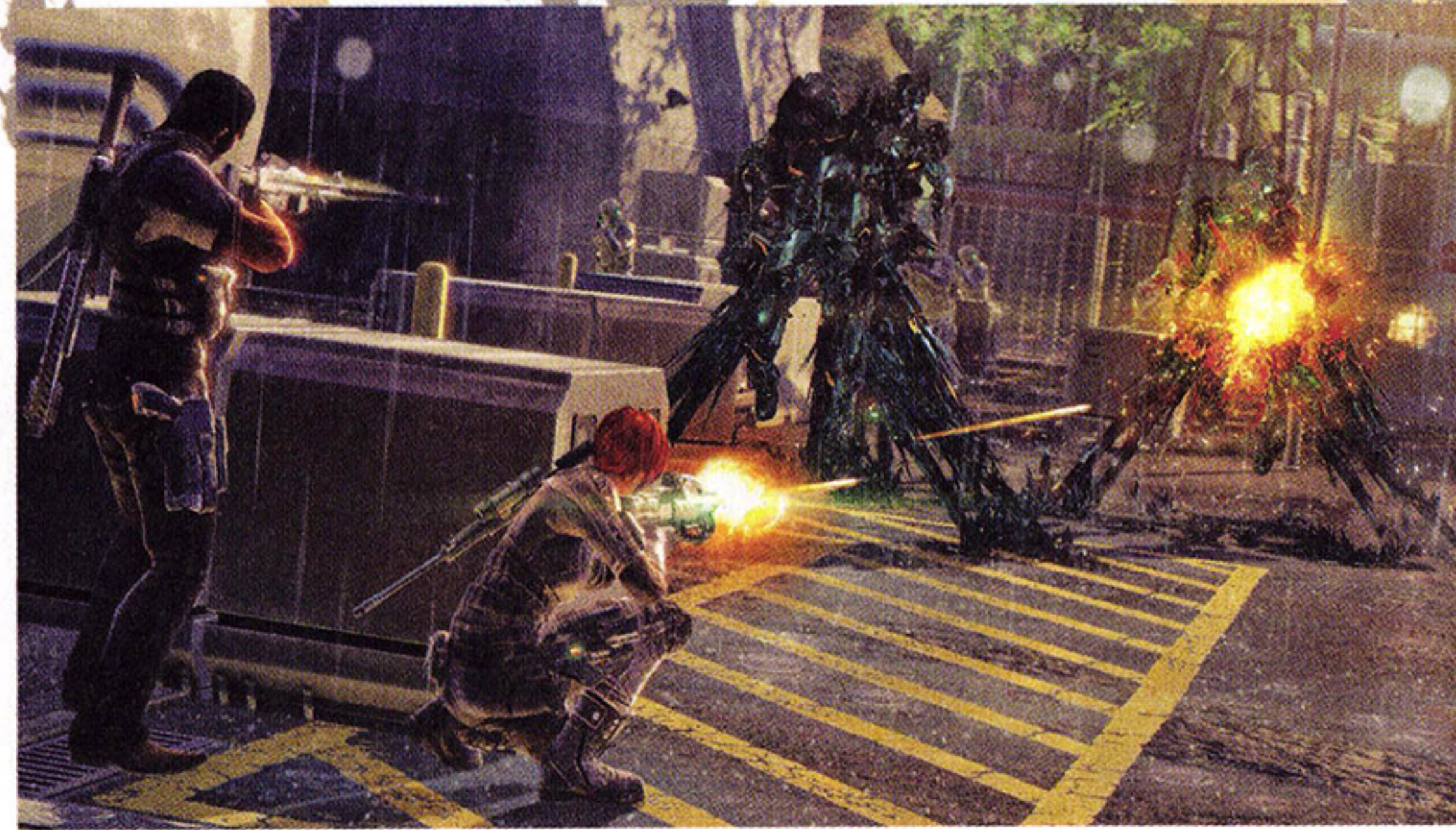


You'll want to utilize all of Overstrike 9's talents to take down the Enforcer





It's not all explosions and firefights. You can pull off the occasional stealthy kill





Rounding Out the Cast

Overstrike 9's foursome are clearly the stars of Fuse, but we caught wind of a few other characters that you'll meet in the campaign.

Lyndon Burgess

A former CIA agent, Lyndon Burgess left official military duty to form Overstrike. He still has plenty of valuable contacts from his former career, and he assists Overstrike 9 and gives them mission briefings.

Captain Sovlenko

This Raven captain became obsessed with the possibilities of Fuse, and began using it to experiment on his own mind. He's learned how to induce hallucinations with the element, and players must endure these at various points. Each class has its own specific hallucinations, which Insomniac hopes will boost replay value.

Luther Deveraux

We saw a brief glimpse at a cutscene that occurs later in the game, and it implied that Overstrike's contract to destroy the Source is eventually canceled. They still want to pursue Raven in order to stop a deadly global arms race, but they fear their leads to the PMC have run cold. Naya's father, Luther, is a Raven operative, and Overstrike 9 intends to find out what he knows.



Need a better position? Use the leap feature to assume control of a different character

NO "I" IN FUSE

Co-op is a major selling point for many of this generation's shooters, but even with several diverse options for players to choose from, Insomniac feels no one has tapped the full potential of cooperative play. "When we started working on Fuse, we noticed that a lot of the games coming out were just shooters with co-op instead of co-op shooters," says senior gameplay programmer Doug Sheahan. Each of the four classes may have its own feel, but players need to use the powers in conjunction for maximum effect.

Let's say you're playing as Jacob. You earn a handful of Fuse points for scoring a headshot


with your arc shot, but you can earn more if you coordinate with a partner. If you take the same shot from behind Dalton's mag shield, both of you earn a teamwork bonus. You can string even bigger multipliers together by getting more teammates involved in the action. If Izzy crystallizes an enemy through Dalton's shield, and then Jacob shoots through the shield at the trapped enemy, all three characters are rewarded handsomely for their team tactics.

At this stage, Fuse combines Insomniac trademarks like fast-paced action and novel weaponry with an intense focus on teamwork. Some may make Borderlands comparisons

since it's a four-player shooter that showcases multiple classes and wacky weapons, but they're missing the point.

"Instead of going with a crazy number of weapons, we wanted to focus on a small number and make them work really well for co-op," says Insomniac's president and CEO Ted Price. From what we've seen, changes to the title and tone of Fuse shouldn't get in the way of Insomniac's goal of creating a great co-op experience. ♦

To check out a tour of Insomniac and interviews with the Fuse team, head to gameinformer.com/undertheradar



III

A COLLABORATION TO TANTALIZE YOUR IMAGINATION

by Kimberley Wallace



Ni No Kuni: Wrath of the White Witch

they often surpass Disney movies at the box office. Once Japan's best-kept secret, the studio inked a deal with Disney for worldwide distribution rights in 1996. Since then, Ghibli has rolled out one hit after another, with movies such as *Howl's Moving Castle*, *Ponyo*, and *My Neighbor Totoro*. *Spirited Away* earned an Oscar for best animated feature, the only foreign film to earn that acclaim. In Japan, *Princess Mononoke* won picture of the year at the Japanese Academy Awards, the first animated film to ever receive the honor. This sterling reputation is hardly unfounded; anybody who has seen a Ghibli movie can tell you that a magical world awakens, almost like your childhood imagination is set alight.

Studio Ghibli films have captivated audiences for years, earning praise in both Japan and the United States. In fact, Hayao Miyazaki's animated works are so popular in Japan that

Platform
PlayStation 3

Style
1-Player Role-Playing

Publisher
Namco Bandai

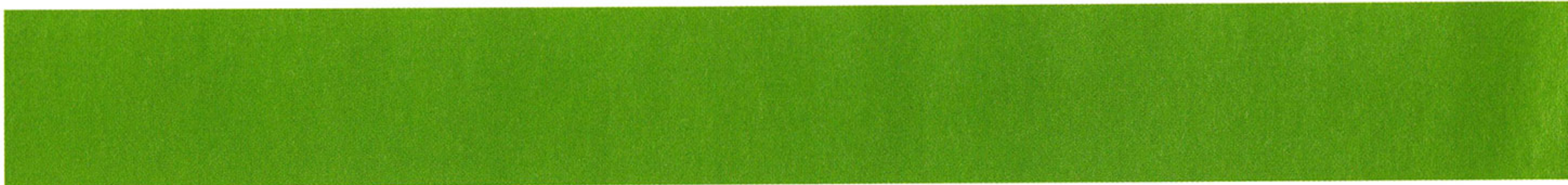
Developer
Level-5

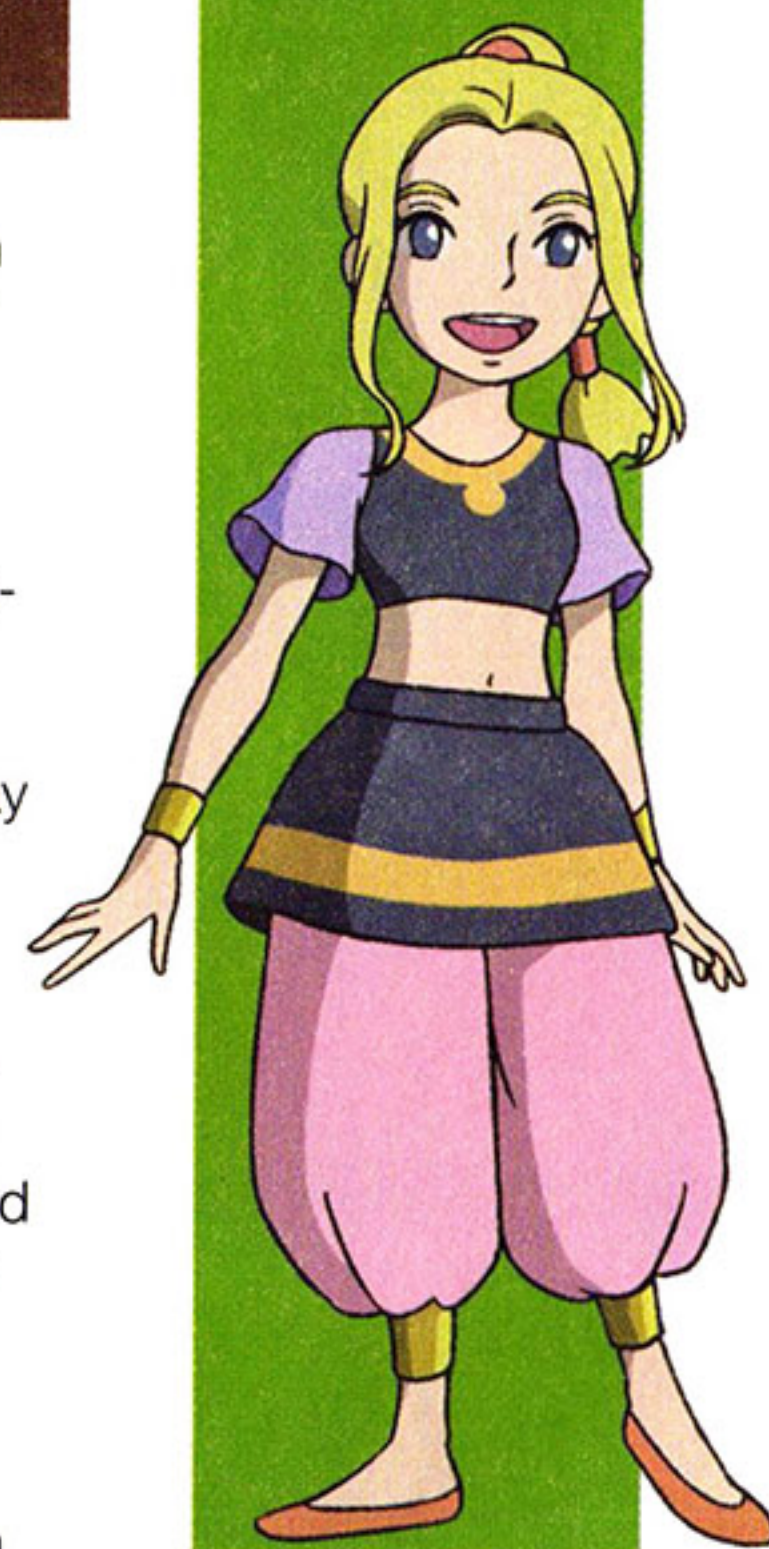
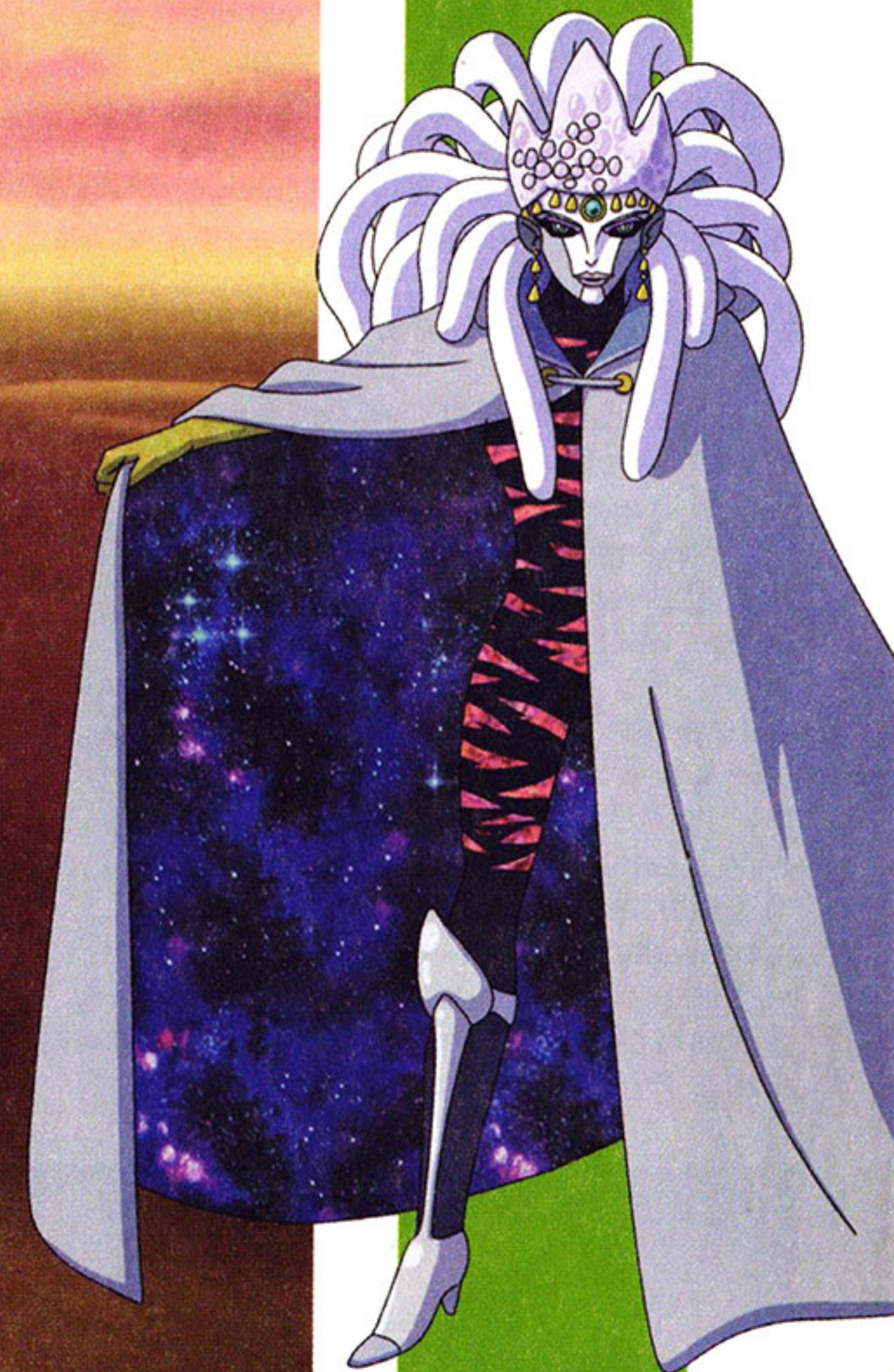
Release
January 22



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For years, fans have fantasized about stepping into one of these majestic lands, which Ghibli never fails to gorgeously illustrate with bright hues and extensive detail. Thanks to Ni No Kuni: Wrath of the White Witch, a collaboration between Studio Ghibli and revered role-playing game developer Level-5, that dream is finally a reality.





STUDIO GHIBLI AND LEVEL-5 COME TOGETHER

Level-5 is no stranger to creating memorable games. The studio developed *Dragon Quest XIII* and *IX*, along with the *Dark Cloud* and *Professor Layton* franchises. Level-5 is not afraid to take risks, as it proved with *Jeanne D'Arc* and *Rogue Galaxy*, underground hits that still receive praise today for their innovation.

Level-5 began work on *Ni No Kuni: Wrath Of*

The White Witch to celebrate the company's 10th anniversary. "We didn't even have a sales target in mind; it was just something we really wanted to make that had special meaning for us," says Level-5 president and CEO Akihiro Hino. As fate would have it, Hino met Studio Ghibli producer Toshino Suzuki, and after a few discussions, Studio Ghibli signed on to produce *Ni No Kuni's* animated cutscenes.

Hino knew bringing in Studio Ghibli would raise expectations, and worked with his team non-stop to get everything just right. Level-5 constantly replayed and studied Studio Ghibli films for comparison, focusing on character movement and colors, right down to getting the shadows perfect. Studio Ghibli gave the same effort right back. "The entire production, from the preliminary storyboards, all the way through placing the artwork on film, is all beautifully drawn with no cutting corners," Hino says.

"I could really feel how much pride they take in their handiwork at each stage in the process."

A STORY FULL OF HEARTS AND SOUL MATES

It's clear that Level-5 and Studio Ghibli remember what people love about the movies and have adapted it to *Ni No Kuni: Wrath Of The White Witch*. This extends to using an everyday backdrop and realistic main character. Oliver, our protagonist, is a typical play-by-the-rules type of child – the kind you don't have any negative thoughts about, but wish was adventurous every once in a while. He finally breaks the rules after persistent nagging from his friend Phil, and sneaks out of the house to test drive Phil's new self-constructed mini-car.

Something goes awry, and it leads to the death of Oliver's mother, shaking the core of his world. No different from themes at the helm

The Ghibli Legacy

Studio Ghibli was born in 1985, shortly after the success of Hayao Miyazaki's *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*, an animated post-apocalyptic fantasy adventure based off the first two volumes of his seven-entry manga. Using that critical acclaim as a springboard, he founded Studio Ghibli with fellow filmmaker Isao Takahata.

Critics immediately praised Studio Ghibli films for their beautiful art style, exceptional score, strong female protagonists, imaginative worlds, and philosophical themes. The studio won a string of Animage Anime Grand Prix awards for *Castle in the Sky*, *My Neighbor Totoro*, and *Kiki's Delivery Service*. Studio Ghibli's latest film, *From Up On Poppy Hill*, premieres in the United States this March.

of most Studio Ghibli films, this is a tale about growing up, facing the world's cold realities, and finding the strength within to overcome its hardships. "We see the complete transformation from child to adult here, as he grows up and learns to care for others," Hino says. "We really hope that younger players, or anyone who might be heading into or are now experiencing their teenage years, will be able to appreciate and enjoy the theme."

Oliver's trials start off demurely enough, but suddenly his stuffed toy, Mr. Drippy, springs to life – with a lantern attached to his nose. He tells Oliver there's a way to change his mother's fate. Apparently, attached to each person in Oliver's world is a soul mate in a parallel universe. They may have completely different roles in each world, but their souls are intertwined, so events that happen to one can influence the other. Oliver's mom has a soul mate still living in another world, but she's trapped. If they can free her, there's a chance his mother may awaken.

As the "pure-hearted one," Oliver is the only one who can save the world from its impending doom. The "White Witch" then comes out of

nowhere, like a sneaky villain, with her medusa-like dreadlocks, vowing Oliver's death. She hires Shadar, who steals pieces of people's hearts, to execute him. The White Witch and Shadar sporadically weave in and out of the narrative, never completely letting you know the reasoning behind their ill will, but providing more clues with each appearance.

To gain strength for his showdown with Shadar, Oliver must journey between the real world and the alternate fantastical world. He searches for people with an abundance of certain traits in their hearts, such as enthusiasm, in order to help those lacking. Using his magical powers, Oliver takes the emotional overflow and bestows it upon those who are deficient, righting Shadar's wrongs.

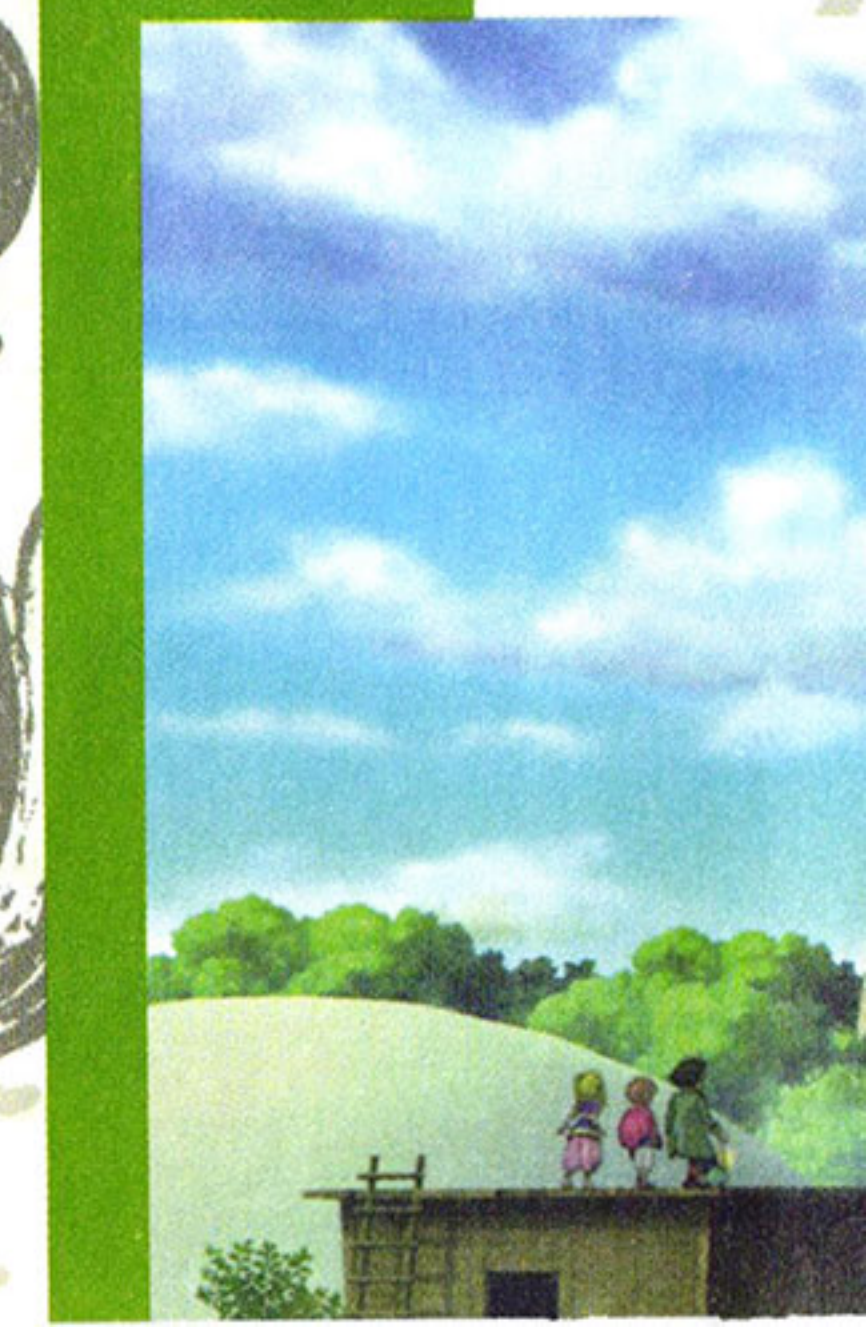
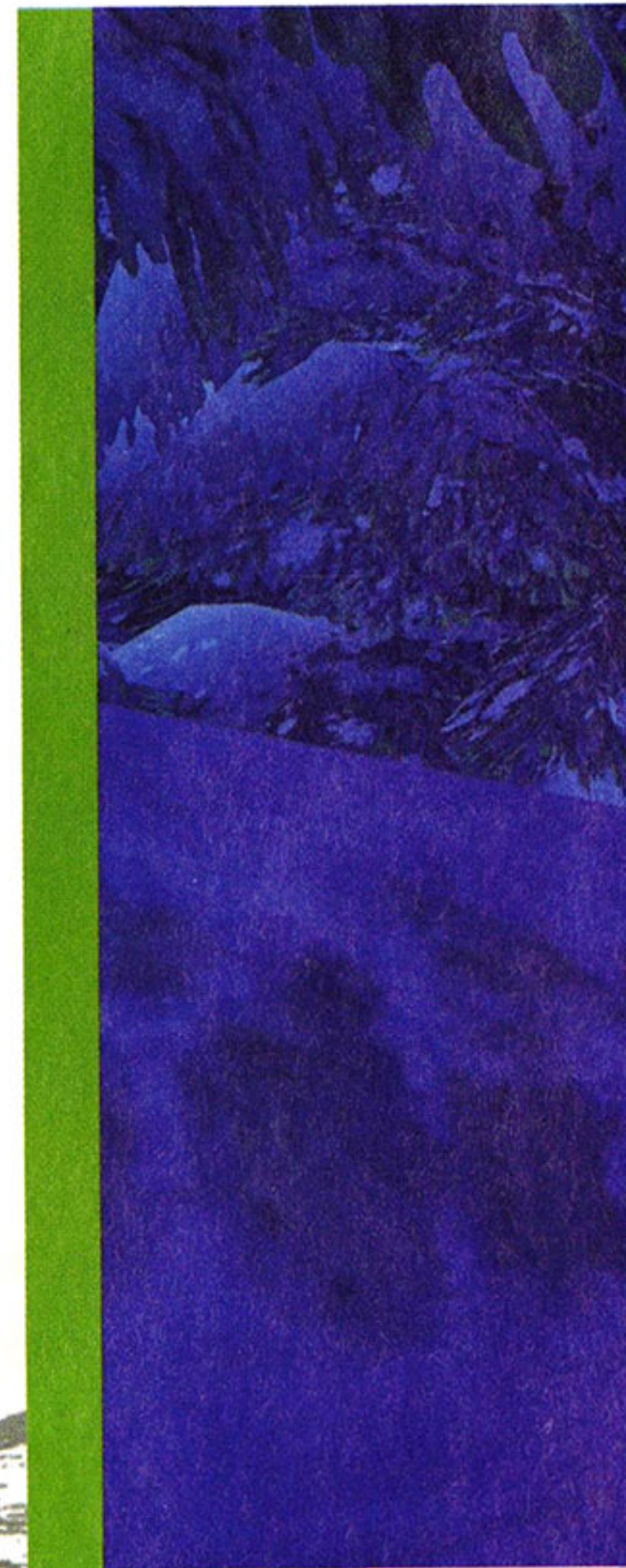
CLASSICAL RPG INFLUENCE

While Oliver's emotional trials are sure to attract many, Level-5 also built an RPG to satiate those looking for an experience that mimics the days of yore. Sprinkled throughout are plenty of throwbacks to classic RPGs, such as *Dragon Quest*, right down to losing a percentage of your money if you die in a dungeon. Random



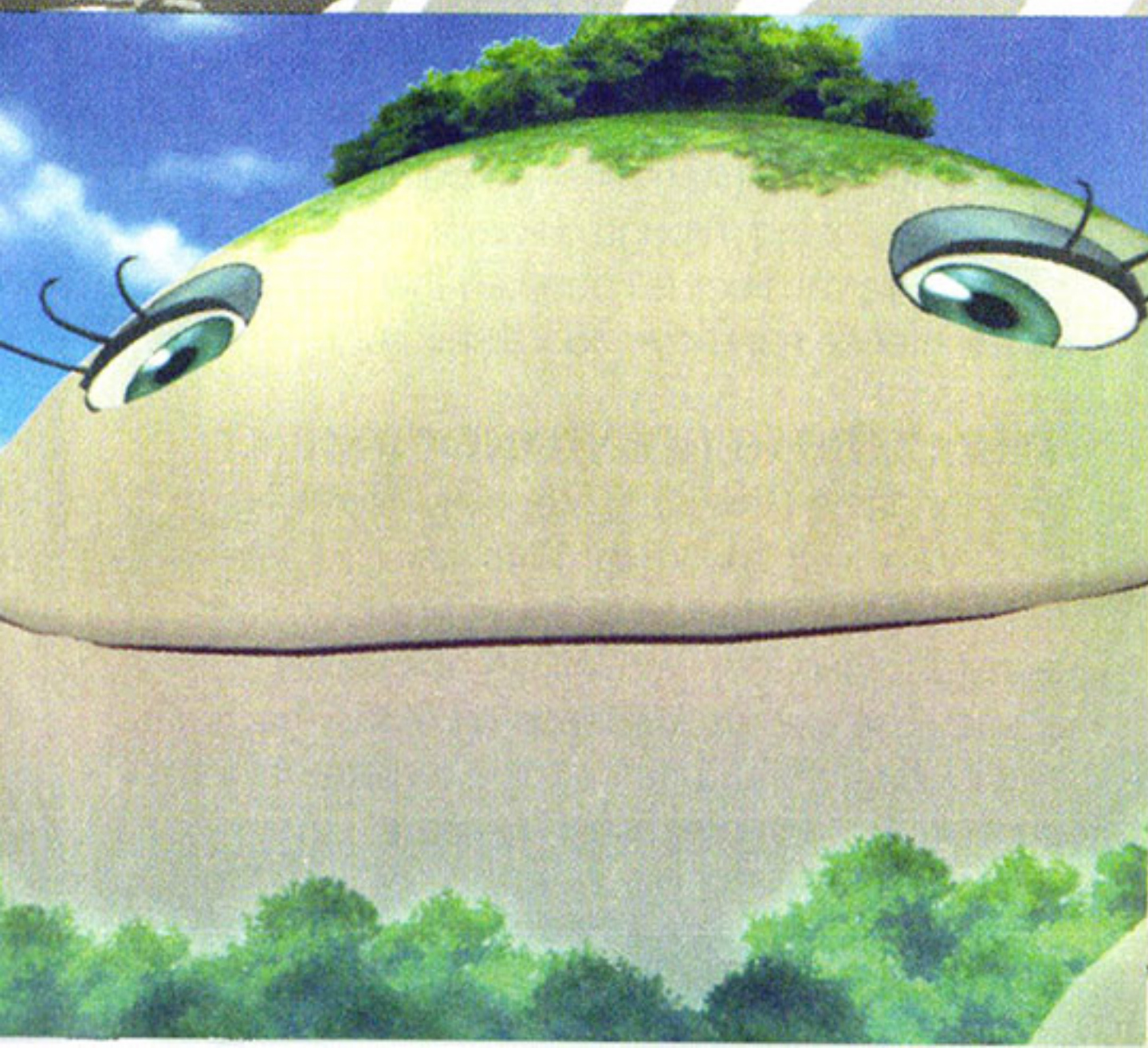
enemies roam the world map and dungeons, charging at you as soon as they detect you. However, sneaking up on enemies gives you a preemptive strike in battle. This works both ways – if enemies attack from behind, they get the advantage.

Combat preserves the traditional party-based battle system, while twisting elements up to make it more than mashing buttons. You select your action at the start of each turn: attack, magic, defend, item, or escape. Additionally, Oliver and party have free-range movement to better dodge attacks and to pick up health and mana-restoring orbs called glims. Glims are more likely to spawn with successful use of the battle system. Life-saving glims also occasionally appear to help you perform miracle attacks or fully restore your hit points.





Oliver's expressions capture the urgency and plight of his journey around every bend

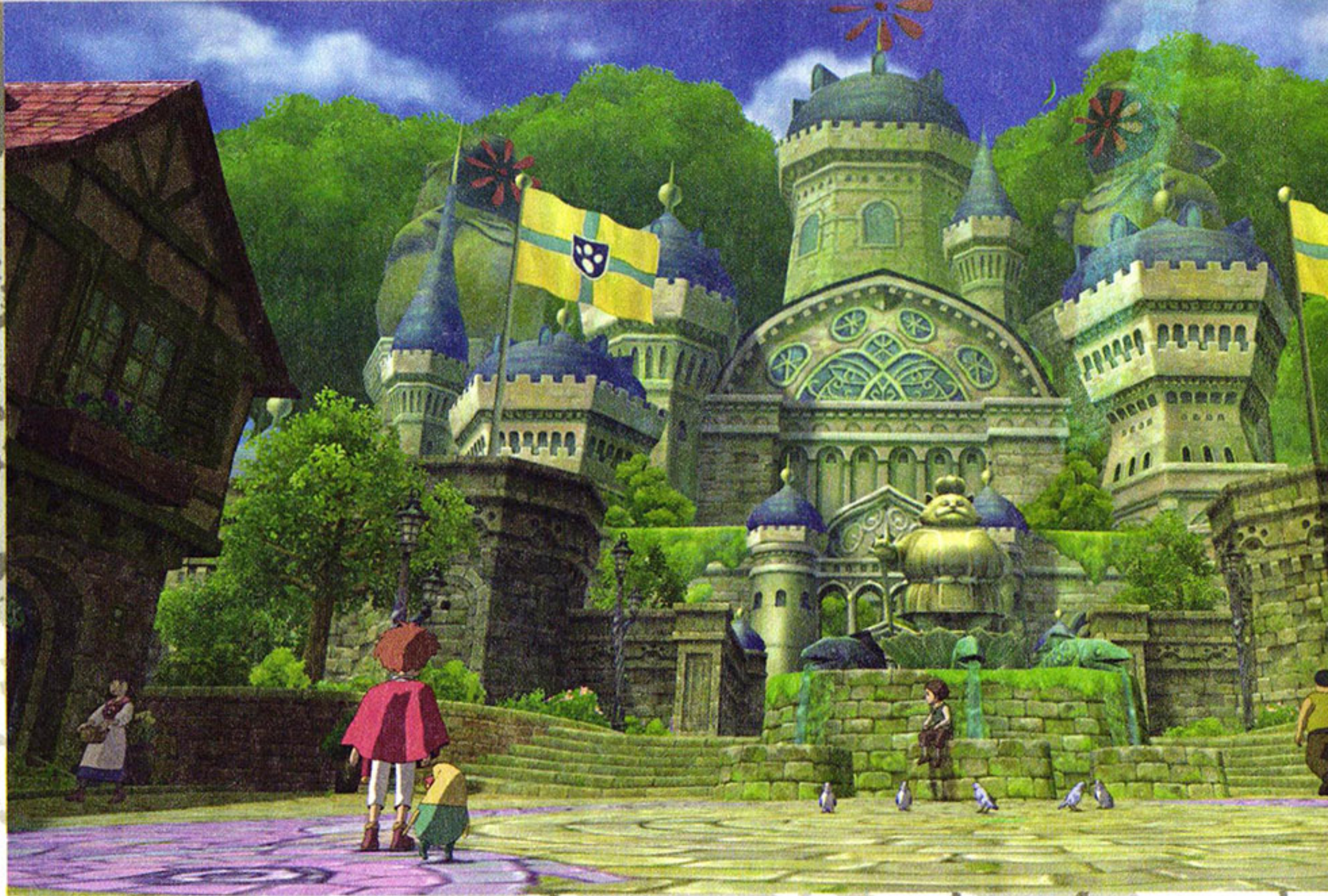


The High Lord of the Fairies

Dolls coming alive have always been a childhood fantasy, but Mr. Drippy – Oliver's main sidekick – is anything but what you'd expect. With his thick Welsh accent, he's crass with a dry sense of humor, and has a quip for every occasion. Mr. Drippy says exactly what you're thinking, but would never dare say out loud. He made me grin more than a few times, especially when calling Oliver a "cry-baby." Considering how dramatic some scenes are, the lines are a nice way to add levity to some of the heavier themes.



The White Witch in all her glory; she's a sneaky one



The adrenaline-pumping combat requires you to pay attention; if you strike enemies right before they perform an ability, it cancels their action. Additionally, hitting the attack command as it flashes blue performs a counterattack. The battle system doesn't reward button mashing, so take advantage of counterattacking and canceling attacks or your work is cut out for you.

Defending is also vital to survival, often making or breaking boss battles. These encounters have an intensity that matches their grandiose design; they require different strategies for success, like striking certain areas because of extra protective gear or evading moves to open an attack window. "The player becomes like a commander of a small army, waging an intellectual battle as well as a physical one, as he

actively changes his strategies to keep up with the tides of the battles," Hino says.

The dungeon puzzles also remind me of classic RPGs, with many revolving around the different magical abilities Oliver receives throughout the journey. Some puzzles are more difficult than others. Sometimes the game doesn't tell you how to go about solving a puzzle, and other times the explanation is so cryptic you're still not sure what to do. For instance, I was locked in a room with a puzzle and no instructions. After trying to figure it out, I asked a bird for a "hint," and only then was I given the basic directions for how the puzzle works.

One dungeon made me undertake a series of trials to prove Oliver is worthy of taking on Shadar. These trials reminded me of Shadow

Hearts, where I demonstrated my wits, strength, and teamwork abilities. One put me through puzzles where I had to position statues according to riddles, while another had me using both analog sticks simultaneously to control two characters going through different maze-like paths while the floor fell beneath them. That's some intense hand-eye coordination.

THE CHILD-LIKE WONDERMENT

As a longtime Ghibli fan, stepping into Ni No Kuni: Wrath Of The White Witch is unforgettable. It transports you to your childhood self: eyes full of wonder with infinite possibilities ahead. The experience feeds off of the magical and inviting world, often adding a dash of wonderment in each area, such as large



Your New Best Friends: Familiars

Pokémon, move over! New battle companions are in town, complete with the famous Ghibli design that warps real-world animals into fantastical creations. Once you recruit these little critters, controlling them during battle grants you their special abilities known as “tricks.” You share HP and MP with your familiars, but each has an individual stamina gauge; once it depletes, they’re forced to sit out until it restores. In real time, you switch between Oliver, other human party members, and familiars. Your challenge is commanding only one party member on the field at a time and strategically switching between them.

Familiars also grow by feeding them certain foods, like choco-

late or pie. Depending on the food, you increase traits like evasion or magical defense. Taming monsters occurs in battle. Once you impress them enough with your combat prowess, a heart appears over their head, and then you serenade them for recruitment. Metamorphosis is also available once familiars reach a high enough level. After feeding it a special food, your familiar grows into a souped-up, new-look version of its former self. You want to use this strategically, since metamorphosis returns familiars to level one, but once you level your new-and-improved buddy it becomes much powerful than if you never metamorphosed.

mushrooms suddenly growing as staircases in forest areas. “The world you’ll explore has the warmth of an animated feature film,” Hino says. “It draws you in and makes you just want to travel through this vast, fantasy setting.”

The ambient music sets up scenes strongly – majestic trumpets play as you explore, and violins speed up to create tension while you inch closer toward boss battles. “Our aim was to make you feel like you aren’t just playing any ordinary game, but are experiencing a gaming masterpiece with the high quality and standards you’d expect of a movie that features Ghibli’s animation and Joe Hisaishi’s music,” Hino says.

Besides the eye-popping visuals and feeling of being transported into your own private childhood fantasy, Ni No Kuni also looks to fill the console Japanese RPG void. It blends much of what made the genre popular in the first place and introduces some much-needed refinements to the traditional battle system and extra depth with monster recruitment. The changes don’t turn the genre on its head, but

the mix of classic and modern influences are a happy medium for both the hardcore and casual fan.

At the end of my seven hours with the game, I knew something rare lies in the experience of Level-5 bringing Ghibli to life. After interacting with the world, I got chills watching the

animated cutscenes. For the first time, I was a part of the journey, instead of casually observing from a distance. That’s a special feeling. ♡

Visit gameinformer.com/undertheradar for an extended interview with Akihiro Hino and videos of Ni No Kuni: Wrath Of The White Witch



Ni No Kuni captures the childhood wonderment perfectly



IV

COME HELL AND HIGH WATERS

by Tim Turi



Platform
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • PC

Style
1-Player Action
(4-Player Online)

Publisher
Deep Silver

Developer
Techland

Release
2013

Dead Island first captured the attention of gamers with a stunning, macabre CG trailer. Though the game looked nothing like the gripping teaser, the satisfying melee combat and rewarding, level-based progression wowed gamers to the tune of more than four million copies sold. Despite Dead Island's success, Techland's winning formula has room to improve. The first game contained annoyances like disappearing weapons, finicky pathfinding, and dumb NPCs. Dead Island: Riptide continues Techland's quest to make the best

open-world, RPG-infused, first-person zombie game by adding defense scenarios, a new playable character, and a nice coat of polish to the features that made the first game great.

Dead Island: Riptide





Dead Island ends with our heroes, Sam B, Xian, Logan, and Purna escaping the tropical, zombie-infested island of Banoi on a helicopter. A record-breaking monsoon was gathering throughout the first game, which plays a key role in Riptide. The sequel begins with the original four survivors landing on a huge military ship before the storm hits. For reasons Techland is reluctant to share, the group is locked away in the brig with the ship's cook, John Morgan. The infection eventually hits the ship and the protagonists escape their prison. They fight their way through unrelenting waves of zombies and ocean water before the ship is lost to the monsoon.

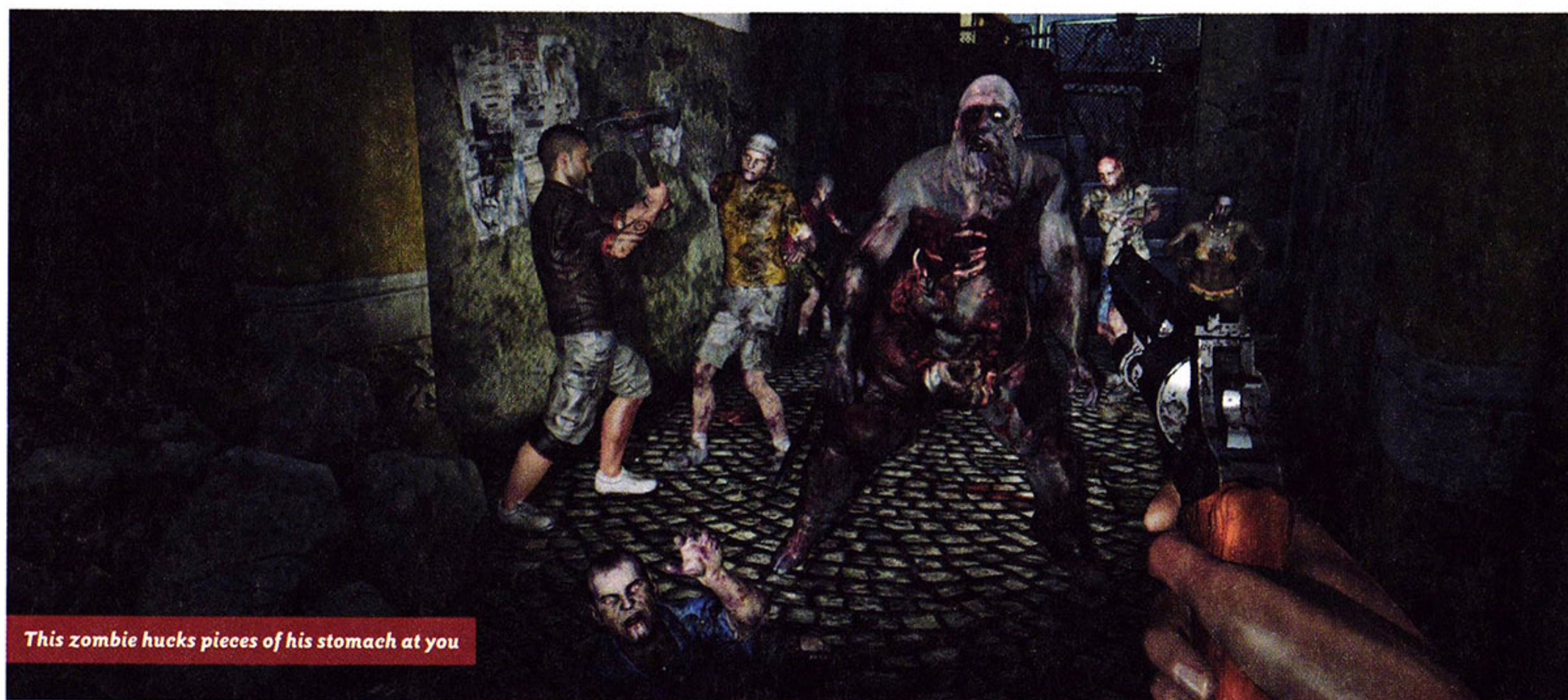


Some time later, the survivors wash up on the island of Palanai. Located in the same archipelago as Dead Island's Banoi, Palanai is filled with beautiful, untouched jungles that have been flooded by the monsoon. The violent weather has turned the normally crystal waters swampy. The island's main destination is Henderson, a resort that caters to rich yachtsmen rather than Banoi's MTV spring break crowd. Palanai's lush flora and postcard vistas are even more breathtaking than the sights of the first Dead Island.

HOLDING DOWN THE FORT

Safe houses serve as sanctuaries from the undead and quest-collection hubs in Dead Island. In Riptide, players must establish and protect these shelters. Early in the game, players find an outfit of soldiers holed up in the ruins of an old church after the viral outbreak dealt a fatal blow to their rescue mission. This church serves as the quest hub in this section of the game, and players must drain the flooded catacombs to create a passage elsewhere. The group sets out in a boat to search for supplies to fortify the church against the waves of zombies that are sure to be attracted to the water pump's noisy motor. Main characters that aren't controlled by other players hang back at the safe house, and AI takes control of them during zombie attacks.

The soldiers tip you off that a downed military chopper might have some turrets and other supplies. Cruising in your boat keeps you safe from the walking undead, but some floating



This zombie hucks pieces of his stomach at you

corpses can spring into action and cling onto your boat. Towing multiple foes slows down your vessel and leaves you susceptible to other dangers, so it's vital you knock them off by brushing up against trees and other obstacles.

After the survivors set up the church's perimeter with the recovered turrets, mines, and chain link fences, a new breed of zombie makes an appearance. The defenses keep the throngs of undead at bay, but one shambles up to the fortifications with its entrails hanging from a gaping stomach wound. This wretch tosses decaying pieces of himself at the survivors fighting behind

the barricades. This ranged pest, along with the threats lurking underwater, should teach players to prepare for anything.

Hoarding and apocalyptic disasters go hand in hand, but Techland wants players to go all in with their precious resources during these hold-the-line moments. Burning through all your explosives, ammunition, and throwing weapons is not only cathartic, but it frees up your inventory for the new goodies. These undead sieges can last over 20 minutes, so it'll take everything you've got to survive.

continued on page 82



Import City

Move over, BioWare. Techland is letting players import their Dead Island characters into Riptide. You can start off on Palanai just where you left off with your favorite Banoi survivor. Techland is still pondering whether you can hang onto your favorite weapons. If you didn't get a chance to play the first Dead Island, now is a great opportunity to start leveling your future Riptide character. Techland removed Dead Island's level-based co-op restrictions with a post-release patch. This means a level 40 character can play with a level 2 character and each player fights appropriately powerful enemies. Of course, the higher-leveled character is still stronger thanks to advanced skill tree progression. Riptide also benefits from the same indiscriminating co-op, so you're free to play with anyone at any time.

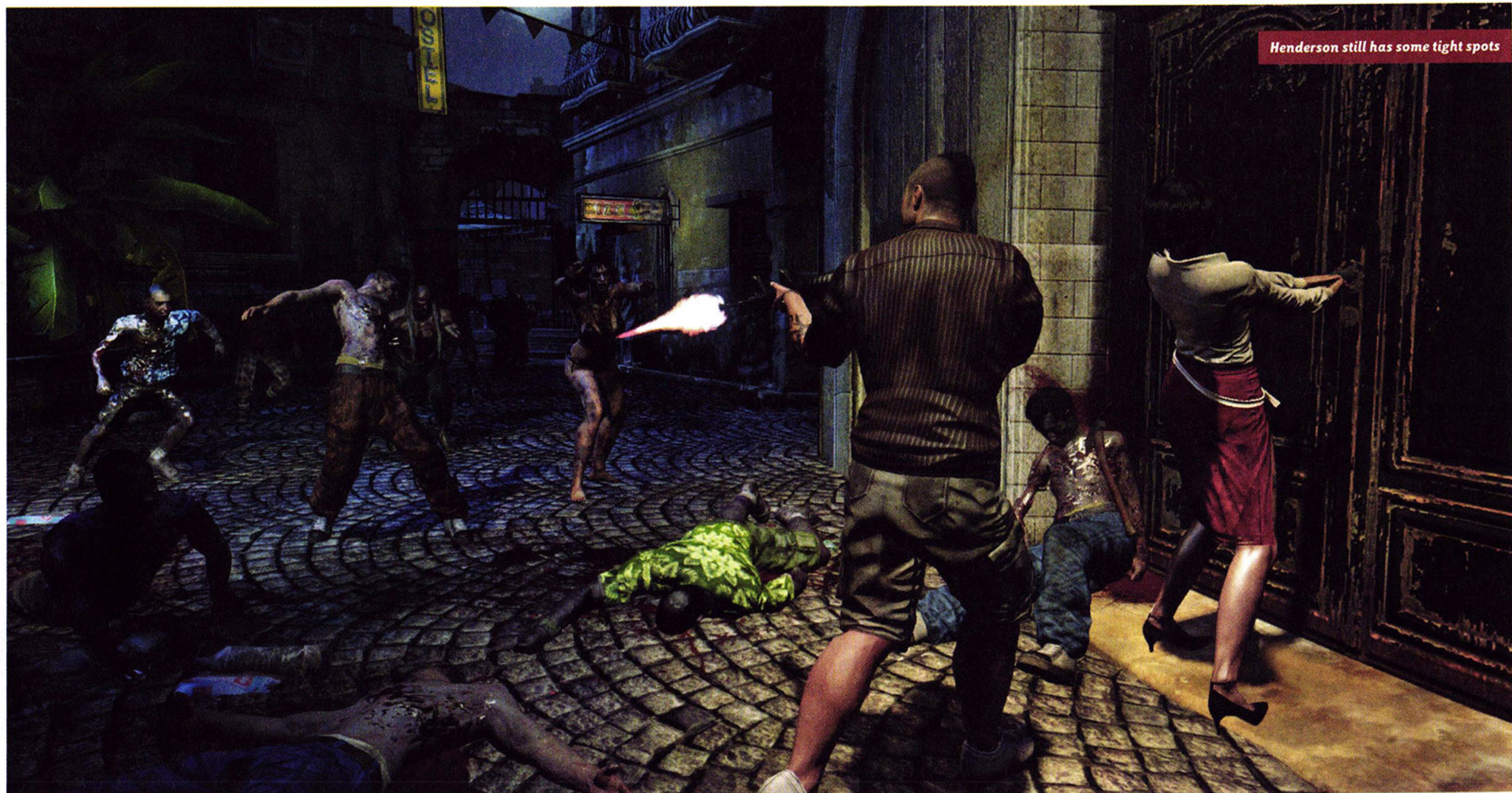


Yes, It's a Sequel

Confusion has spread over whether *Dead Island: Riptide* is downloadable content, a spin-off, or a full-fledged sequel. The game is a full-featured sequel that will be available in stores. Think of the game as *Dead Island 2* to make it simple.



Techland wants to make mines satisfying



Henderson still has some tight spots



continued from page 79

PARADISE LOST

The survivors eventually arrive in the luxurious town of Henderson. Techland isn't saying much about the trip to the city, except that you reach it via a ferry that comes under attack. Henderson makes Dead Island's city of Moresby look like a shantytown. Unlike Moresby, which was in rough shape even before the zombie outbreak, Henderson is Palanai's gem. The Mediterranean-themed port city is a place of untouched beauty before players arrive. Unlike the claustrophobic and repetitive alleyways of Moresby, Henderson opens up into large plazas with unique landmarks like ornate fountains.

But Henderson can morph into a waterlogged hell in a heartbeat. The raging monsoon

always reminds you of nature's wrath. Riptide's dynamic weather system can generate into overcast skies, light rain showers, or full-blown storms at any moment. When the torrential rains hit, the water kicks up off flooded streets and visibility drops to dangerous levels. Heavy rain can obscure lurking zombies, so you're better off finding shelter during storms.

Riptide's lush port city features more verticality than Moresby. For example, players can flee up a fire escape to evade a pack of undead giving chase through a blinding storm. One fire escape leads into a swanky movie theater, complete with plush red carpets and a smattering of zombies. The steady patter of rain reminds players that the storm is still going strong, adding an oppressive air to the cinema. This spacious interior would've required a loading screen

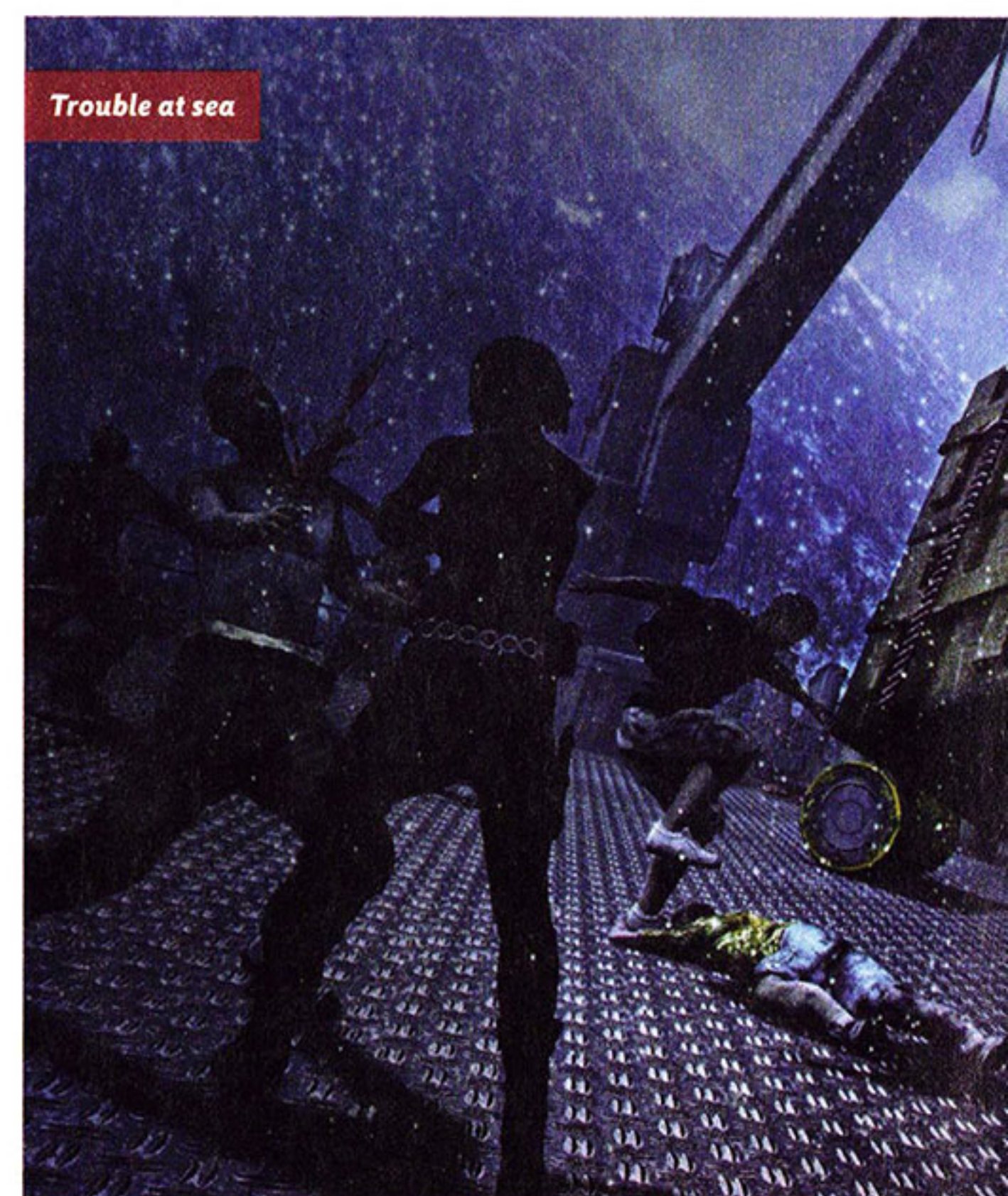
in the first Dead Island, but what I've seen of Riptide indicates that moving into buildings within Henderson is seamless.

Heading for high ground is a great way to avoid packs of the undead, but if you want the best supplies you may have to wade in deadly waters. The low, flooded areas of Henderson are swollen with floating corpses that could reanimate at any moment. At one point you can trudge into waist-high waters to retrieve a message in a bottle. The S.O.S. begins a



A New Survivor

Meet John Morgan. Raised a Navy brat, John followed in his family's footsteps and joined the U.S. military. Unfortunately, he could only land an unglamorous role as a ship cook. Hungry for more recognition, John began training himself in hand-to-hand combat. We don't know why he ends up in the brig, but the chance encounter with the original Dead Island survivors leads to the first real application of his skills. John uses rapid-fire punches and kicks to mow through the undead. Maybe now we'll finally have a reason to try out the brass knuckles.



Trouble at sea



possibly lucrative side quest, but at the risk of being torn apart by zombies. Going after prizes like this is a gamble, because a sudden storm could obscure the threats and make it tough to get back to safe ground alive. In the first *Dead Island*, the jump kick was a great way to knock zombies down and open them up for a head stomp. But what happens when you lose sight

of your enemy under the murky waters? Do you kick blindly into the morass or run like hell?

WEAPON OF CHOICE

Eventually you must kill a lot of zombies. Brutal melee combat remains the backbone of the game. Weapons like machetes and baseball bats can still be upgraded and modified with elemental attacks like electricity and fire. New weapon proficiency bonuses reward players for using specific types of weapons. For example, if a blunt weapons expert wants to use blades, eventually they gain a bone-breaking impact characteristic.

Techland listened to player feedback regarding firearms, which many feel come into the game too late and aren't fun to use. Ammo is still scarce, but guns appear earlier in the campaign and pack a bigger punch. Finding and firing your first, long sought-after gun in *Dead Island* is cathartic, but not viscerally satisfying. Thanks to *Riptide's* improved physics engine, you can now aim a shotgun at a zombie's legs, fire, and watch the limbs disintegrate as the living corpse does a macabre front flip. Limbs and blood frequently fill the air, resulting in one of the most violent zombie games I've ever seen. The improved physics also make it easier to boot a zombie off a bridge or trip one up with a tossed propane tank. My favorite undead blunder involves a zombie tripping over a fallen tree branch and smashing its head open on a rock.

Riptide's subtle but important changes, such as more realistic physics, are evidence that



All four playable characters return from *Dead Island*

Techland wants to refine the base gameplay established in *Dead Island*. When I reviewed *Dead Island*, I saw the potential for one of the most immersive and rewarding zombie games imaginable. Techland isn't shoving a ton of new gimmicks and modes into *Riptide*. Rather, the developer is polishing the rock-solid premise to make it even easier to spend hours of your life killing zombies and leveling up. ♦

Visit gameinformer.com/undertheradar for an interview with Sebastian Reichart, creative producer, and a round table discussion with Techland about zombie/survival games





V

GAZE INTO THE OTHER SIDE

by Bryan Vore





Beyond: Two Souls

Beyond: Two Souls debuted at E3 as part of Sony's heavy-hitting press conference flanked by The Last of Us and God of War: Ascension. Like Heavy Rain before it, Beyond is the cinematic brainchild of Quantic Dream head David Cage. It follows 15 years of the life of Jodie Holmes (played by Ellen Page) as she learns to live with the blessings and curses of being connected to an invisible supernatural entity she calls Aiden. Players experience the story through the eyes of both characters, trading off Jodie's Heavy Rain-style controls with Aiden's ability to pass through and interact with physical matter. Behind closed doors demos at E3 showed Jodie on the run from police, but we've gone a step further and seen all of the branching paths available from this sequence. Read on for this extensive breakdown and an interview with David Cage.

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Platform
PlayStation 3

Style
1-Player Action/
Adventure

Publisher
Sony Computer
Entertainment

Developer
Quantic Dream

Release
2013

DISSECTING A SCENE

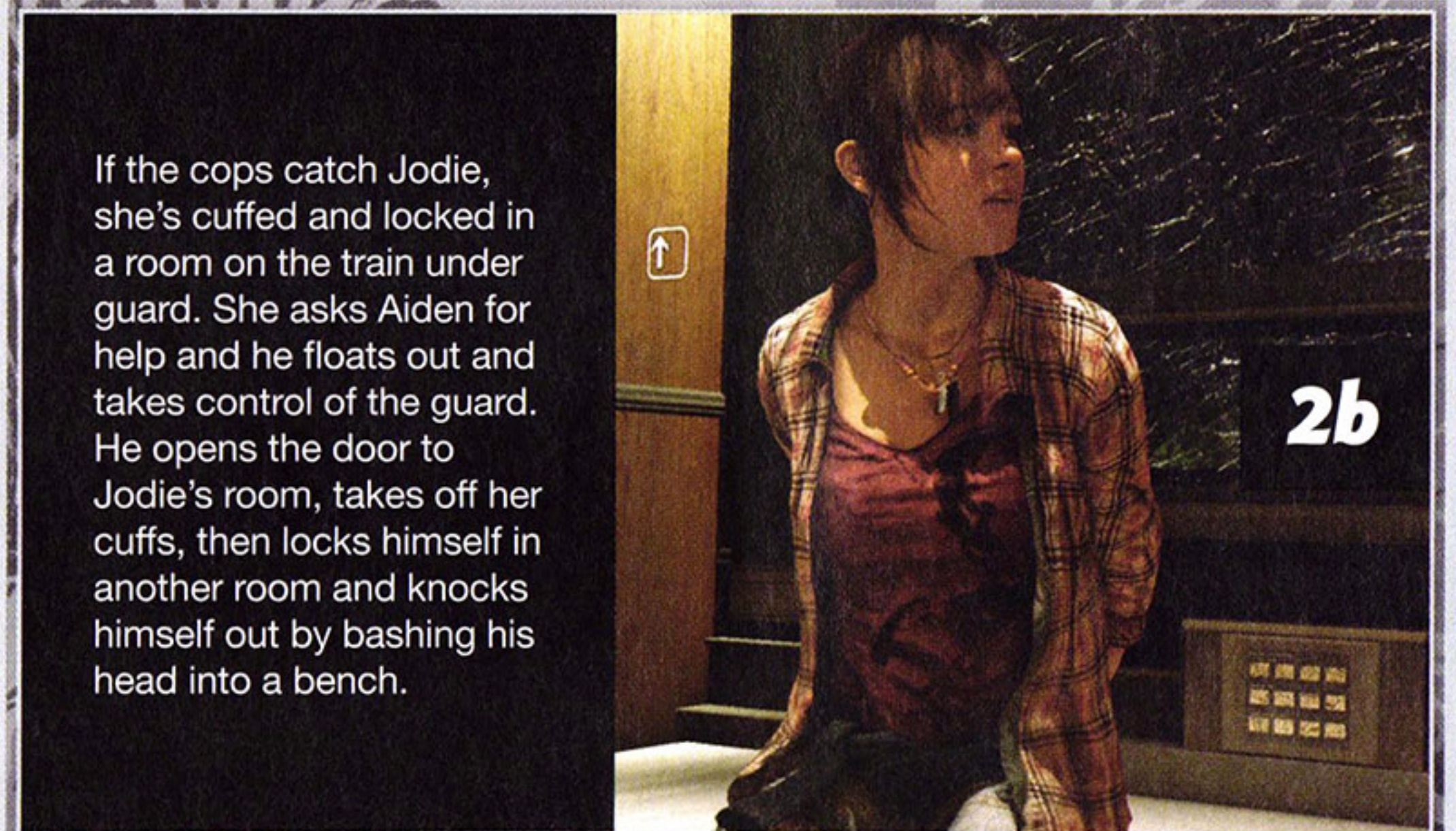


The demo begins with Jodie asleep on a train. At one of the stops, several policemen board and begin asking passengers for identification. At this time, players control Aiden and can float around the train car. If you want to be helpful you can knock over Jodie's water bottle or bag to wake her up before the cops get to her. Otherwise they'll wake her up and ask for ID. She pretends to comply, but smashes her bag into the cop's face and takes off down the aisle. Both options result in a chase scene where you take control of Jodie.



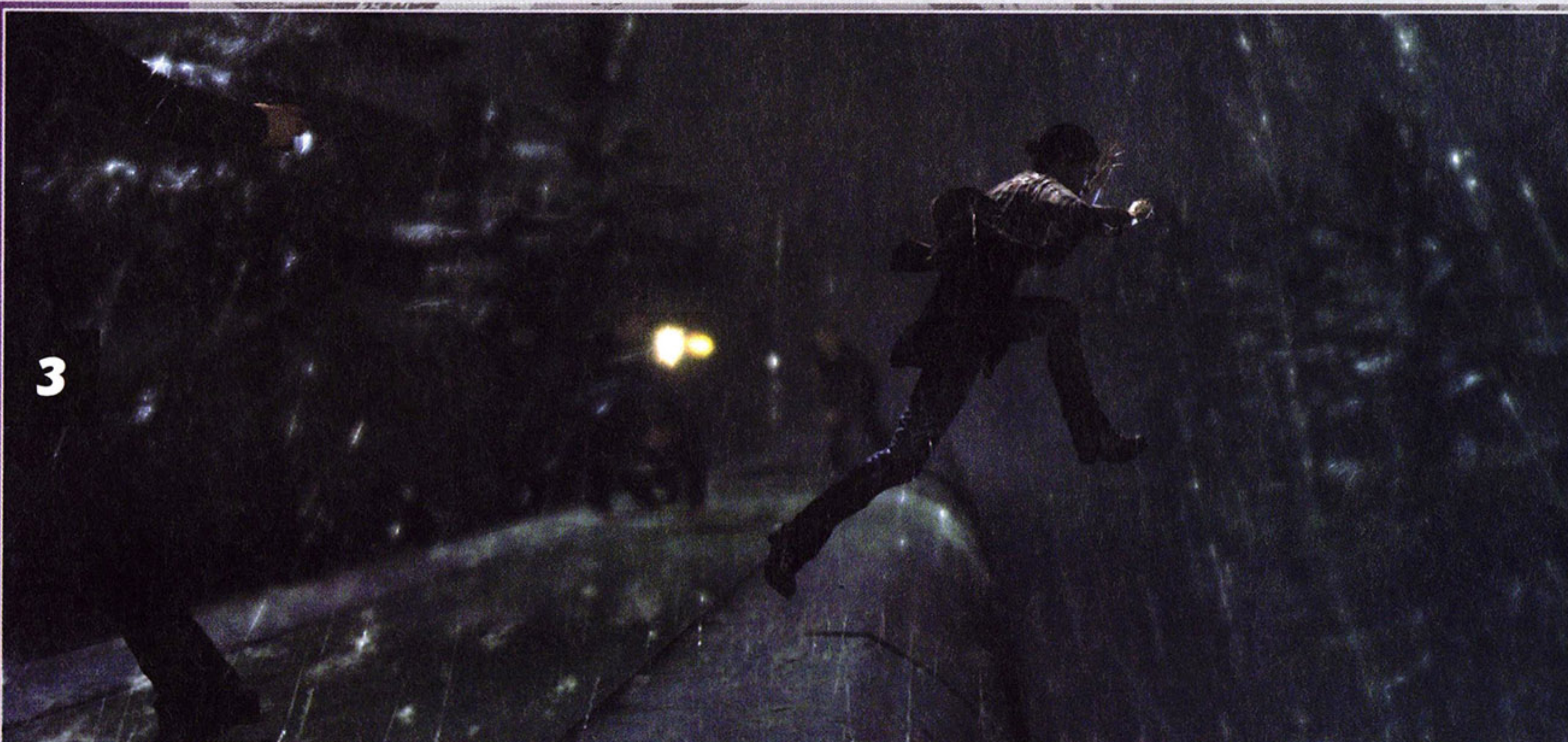
2a

After evading or beating up the pursuing policemen, Jodie asks Aiden to either blow out a window or a ceiling hatch so she can climb up to the roof of the moving train.



2b

If the cops catch Jodie, she's cuffed and locked in a room on the train under guard. She asks Aiden for help and he floats out and takes control of the guard. He opens the door to Jodie's room, takes off her cuffs, then locks himself in another room and knocks himself out by bashing his head into a bench.



3

Jodie dodges and beats up several cops on top of the moving train. When surrounded she jumps off, relying on Aiden to create a shield to cushion her landing.

4



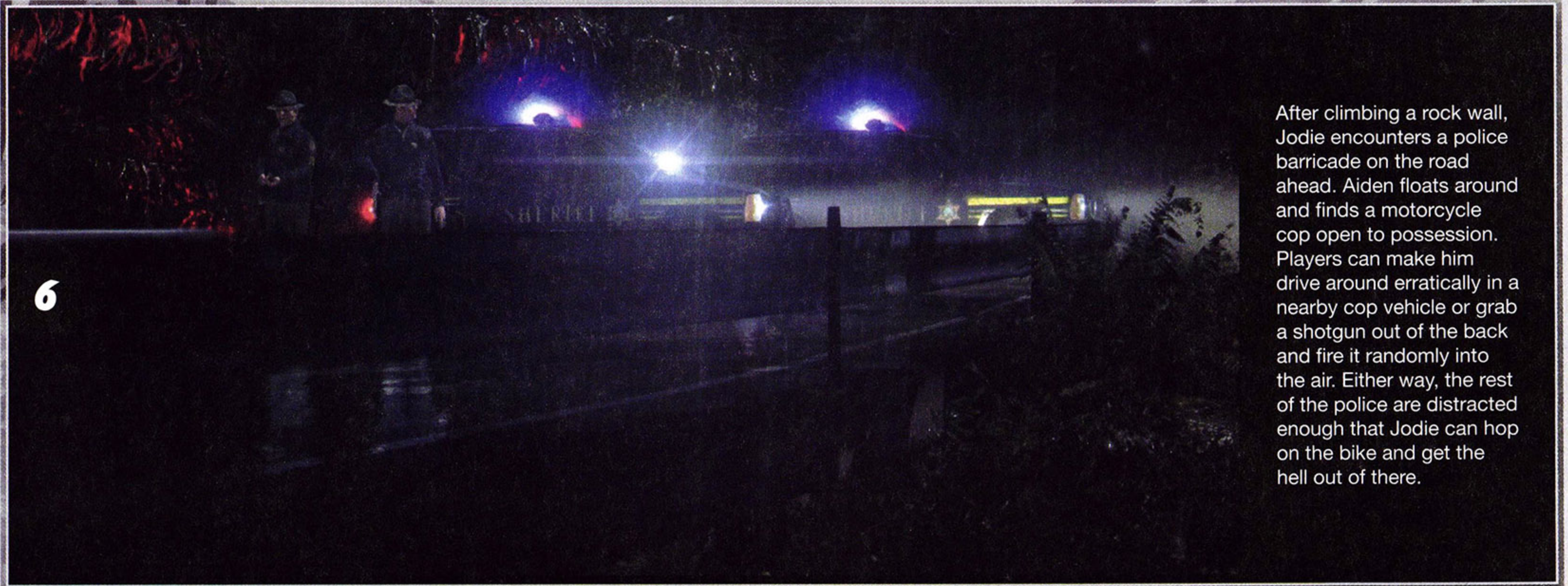
Jodie darts down a wooded hill as police shouts and dog barks echo through the trees behind her. At the base she wades into a river as a helicopter light shines down. If you take too long getting across, she's shot from behind and disappears under the water. After a beat, she reemerges at the shore clutching her shoulder and continues on.

5



Soon after, a police dog tackles her to the ground and she's surrounded by several more. Successful quick time inputs fend off the canines with stick and rock attacks. Otherwise, all the dogs will pile on her, biting her arms and legs until Aiden yells at them in his unintelligible language and scares them off.

6



After climbing a rock wall, Jodie encounters a police barricade on the road ahead. Aiden floats around and finds a motorcycle cop open to possession. Players can make him drive around erratically in a nearby cop vehicle or grab a shotgun out of the back and fire it randomly into the air. Either way, the rest of the police are distracted enough that Jodie can hop on the bike and get the hell out of there.



7

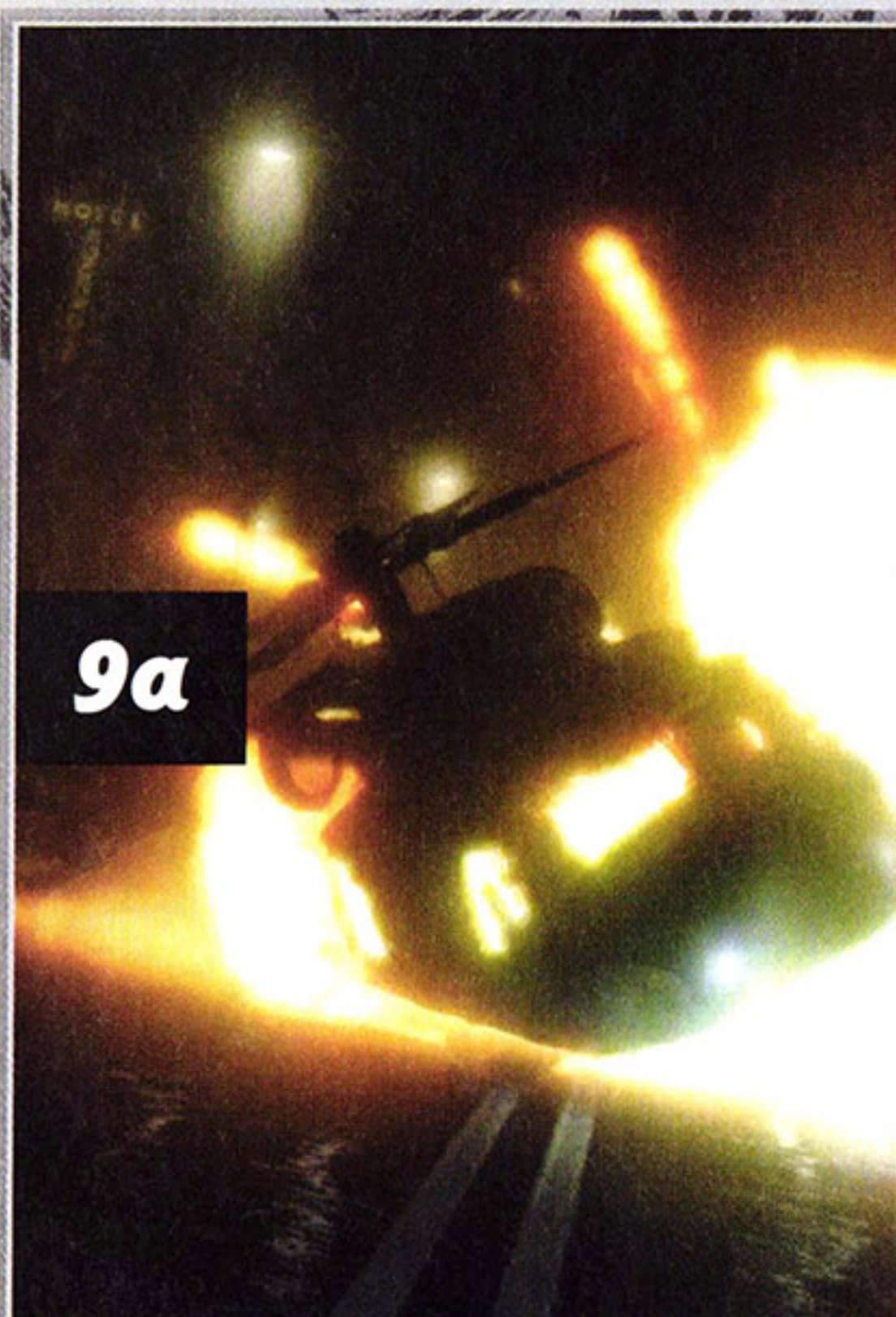
Jodie speeds through a twisting mountain road as a chopper light shines down on her. She screeches to a halt at a bridge that bottlenecks into another police barricade. With no other choice, she revs up the bike and speeds towards the police. Aiden forms another barrier around her as bullets bounce harmlessly away. She busts through and heads toward the nearest town.



8

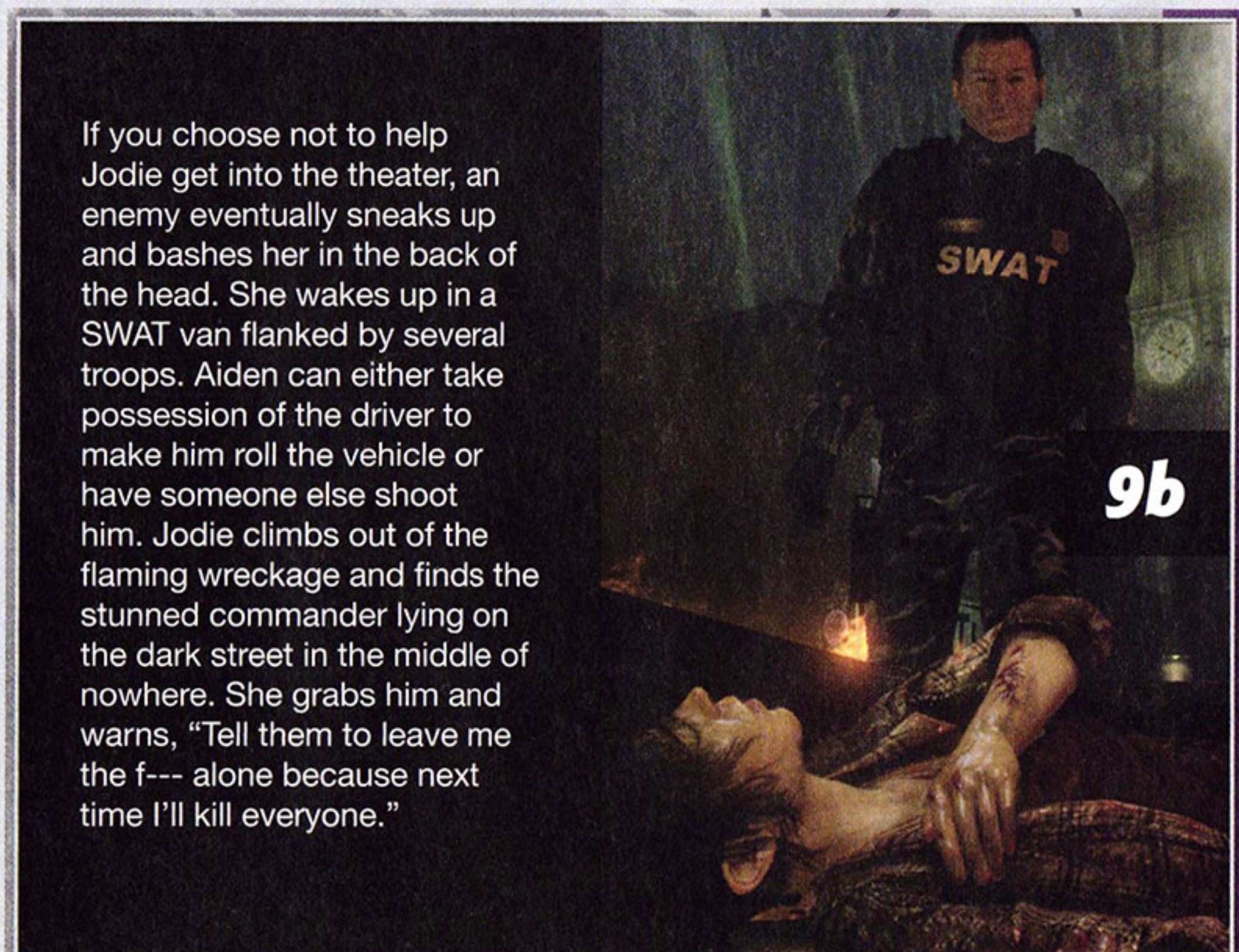
As Jodie rides into what looks to be an evacuated town, her bike is shot and she wipes out. SWAT team members emerge from rooftop hiding spots and pull up in a series of armored vehicles. She limps behind a nearby car for cover and calls on Aiden for help. Here, he's got the most freedom and power yet as you dismantle the SWAT team piece by piece in any order you like. You can possess a sniper and make him walk off a roof, or shoot a few ground troops before getting shot in retaliation. Maybe you'd prefer to take control of a street level foe and shoot his buddies before turning the pistol on himself.

The clocktower looming above can be smashed and brought down on a cluster of guys. How about that gas station? You could spray fuel everywhere and then break the neon sign to rain sparks down and cause an explosion. This same result can be reached by making an enemy toss a grenade at the station. Aiden can also force someone to drive a SWAT van into a storefront, crush guys under a flipped car, or simply choke an enemy to death. Players can only choose a few of these tactics before enemy forces are sufficiently reduced to trigger the next scene.



9a

Jodie runs toward a movie theater and tries opening the doors, but they're locked tight. If Aiden chooses, he can blast open the doors to let her in. She starts pushing a vending machine to block the entrance and commands you to create a diversion. Back on the street you can flip a few cars and make the chopper pilot crash in a fiery explosion. Now that the coast is clear, Jodie walks up to the commander sprawled on the ground. She grabs his collar and threatens, "Tell them to leave me the f--- alone because next time I'll kill everyone."



9b

If you choose not to help Jodie get into the theater, an enemy eventually sneaks up and bashes her in the back of the head. She wakes up in a SWAT van flanked by several troops. Aiden can either take possession of the driver to make him roll the vehicle or have someone else shoot him. Jodie climbs out of the flaming wreckage and finds the stunned commander lying on the dark street in the middle of nowhere. She grabs him and warns, "Tell them to leave me the f--- alone because next time I'll kill everyone."



TALKING WITH DAVID CAGE

Quantic Dream co-CEO David Cage writes and directs all of his company's games. We spoke with him about his latest project, *Beyond: Two Souls*.

As someone interested in cutting-edge technology, what appeals to you about developing *Beyond* at the end of a console lifecycle compared to waiting for whatever comes next?

Actually, I am not that interested in technology. I like what it allows me to do on the creative side, but any technology, no matter how good it is, is only a tool. It is the pen to write the book, but not the book. If you have no vision and no idea, the best technology won't make your game any better, just as the best pen won't make a great book. But if you have something to say, it gives you the means to say it better. Regarding *Beyond*, I feel fortunate to be making a game at the end of this console cycle. This is the moment where we will have the largest installed base. PlayStation 3 is still a very powerful console, and we discovered on *Beyond* that we could do much more with it than we initially thought. I think that with *Beyond*, people will be surprised at what the console can do.

The demo for *Beyond* is full of action. Will there also be some of the more mundane, everyday life moments that we saw in *Heavy Rain*?

Each game is different and each one should have its own voice. I chose a specific approach in *Heavy Rain* to involve the player. I made him share the daily life of the characters to put him in their shoes, so by the time something dramatic happens to them, the player is involved as he feels he intimately knows them.

In *Beyond*, I also want to achieve emotional involvement from the player, but I use different techniques. The game takes place through 15 years of the life of Jodie Holmes, which allows us to show her at different ages in different situations, giving the feeling at some point that you know her like a real person because you know where she comes from, and what she went through. You were here in the happy and difficult moments of her life.

The game will feature personal and intimate

moments, but also very epic and spectacular ones, each scene using a different tone, different mechanics, different emotions.

I understand that *Beyond* is going through some interface changes?

I don't want to reveal too much now. The game is changing a lot and we continuously experiment and iterate until quite late in the development process. The previous games we made changed a lot between alpha, beta, and master.





You've spoken about how you kick around story ideas for years before writing them and then spend a year writing the script. What does the rest of the studio do while you're conceptualizing and writing the next game?

We have a process that is now well in place. I know it takes me roughly a year to write a new game. We use this time for the team to start developing technologies, tools, and pipelines for the next title. Although the project is in the writing, I usually have a pretty good idea of what I am going to need, and the team has its own wishes.

For *Beyond*, the team thought they could make a much better engine than *Heavy Rain*. They wanted a totally new animation engine, a new FX engine, and to use physics much more. I wanted performance capture and specific features for the entity. Everything was implemented while I was writing the script.

I hope that gamers will see how much we progressed since *Heavy Rain*, and we hope that *Beyond's* tech will be seen as one of the most advanced on this generation of consoles.

With performance capture such a large part of *Beyond*, did you extend that to the dogs that appear in the demo?

We have played with many different techniques in *Beyond*. We have motion captured about 160 actors and stuntmen through 12 months of shooting. We captured a one-year-old baby, a 70-year-old lady, kids, teenagers, and many very interesting and talented actors coming from very different horizons. We have also captured animals, sometimes in mo-cap, sometimes used rotoscoping, and we have of course used key framing.

Some games with a lot of violence, like the *Metal Gear Solid* series, offer a non-lethal path through the game. Is it possible to play through *Beyond* without killing anyone?

I am not a particularly sensitive guy. I watch violent movies or TV series, I am comfortable with horror, sex, blood, from Tarantino to Cronenberg, from Carpenter to Nakata. But I must confess that I am less and less comfortable with violence in video games in general.

Many important ideas change in this period of time where all the data comes together, the scenes become playable, and we can find new ideas and test new things. We are in the process of making very significant interface changes to make it even more fluid, more intuitive, and more playable.

How would you compare working with Ellen Page to working with David Bowie on *Omikron: The Nomad Soul*?

Working with David Bowie has been an amazing experience, the kind you only have once in a lifetime. He is much more than someone extraordinarily talented; he is one of the last true legends.

Ellen and David have a lot in common. They are both very talented persons only interested in creating something new. They were both incredibly professional, easy to work with, hard-working, and risk taking. Both were also similar in that sense that once they made the decision of working on the project, they fully trusted me and never asked for changes or control. That's a real responsibility when this kind of person trusts you; you have no choice but to give your very best.

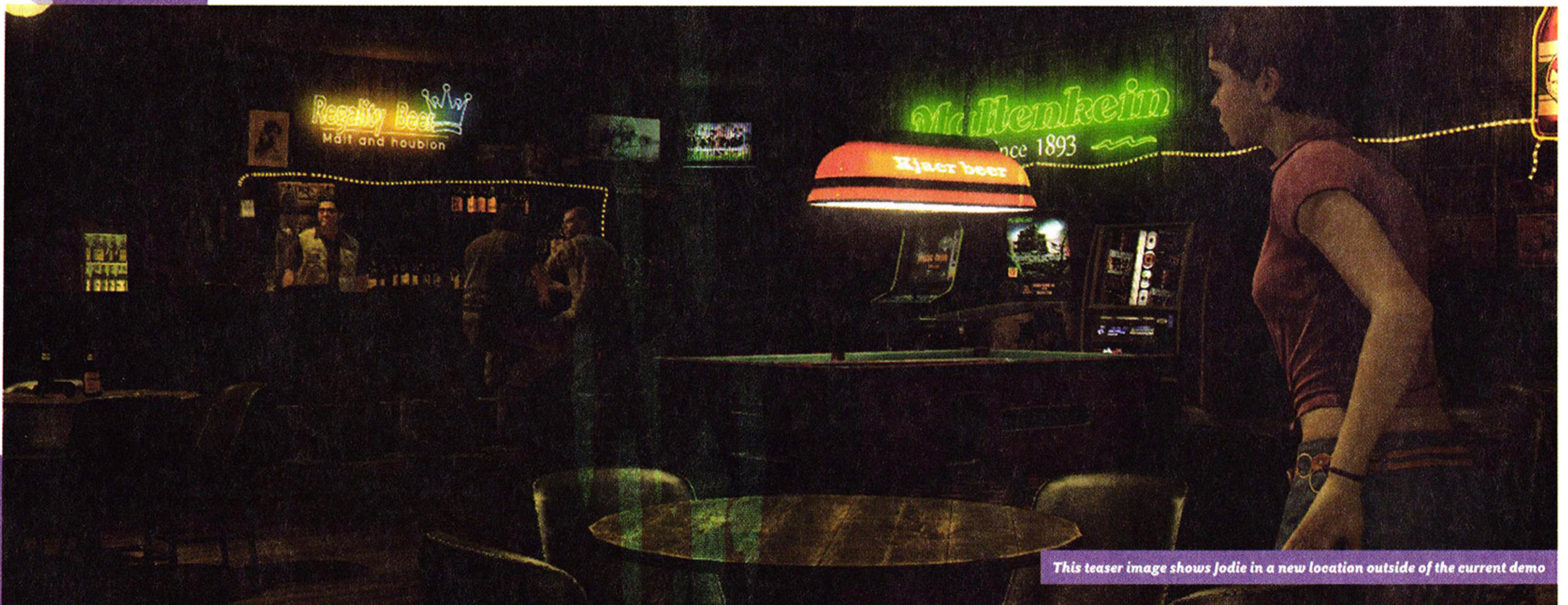
Regarding Ellen, she has been absolutely fantastic. She is for me one of the most talented actresses of her generation. She makes me

think of the young Jodie Foster. In fact, Jodie Foster inspired the name of the main character, Jodie Holmes. They have the same strength inside, the same ability to "show their soul."

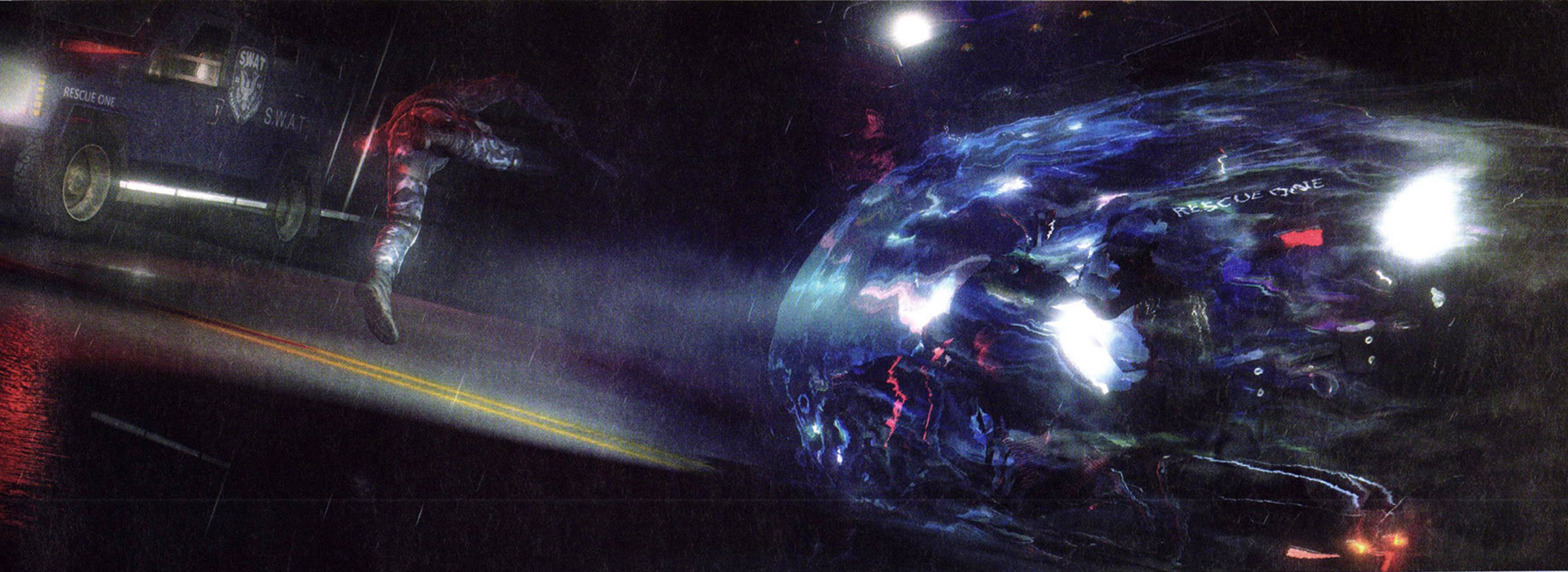
Ellen worked incredibly hard on *Beyond*. She is not just a name on the package, she gave everything to make this character special and real. We shot together for four incredibly intense weeks. She laughed, she cried, she got angry, depressed, happy; she actually lived the life of Jodie Holmes in four weeks on stage. She said it was like shooting four movies at the same time.

We've seen Jodie with longer hair and a shaved head. Which happens first chronologically?

This is one of the key features of the game. You change and you get older, especially when you take a character between 8 and 23. She changes a lot. In *Beyond*, Jodie always looks different. She has different haircuts. She's a different size. She has different faces. She has different clothes. It always reflects where she is in her life and what stage she is. What state of mind she's in. Every single scene will have a different appearance of Jodie. So the chronology is a very important aspect of the game. I'm sorry, but I don't want to talk too much about it.



This teaser image shows Jodie in a new location outside of the current demo



David Cage [right] discusses a scene with actors Eric Winter and Ellen Page



The big difference for me is that in good films, violence is usually used in context and has a meaning. It tells you something about the characters, it is a part of the journey the director invites you to make. In many games, violence is just gratuitous. There is something very vulgar about it, although it is supposed to be “cool” and “fun.”

What I try to do is to use violence the way it is used in other creative mediums. I put it in context and use it to tell something about the characters, make the player go through an emotional rollercoaster. But I never glorify violence, I never use it gratuitously, I never emphasize it more than necessary. In *Heavy Rain*, there is a scene where one of the main characters has to cut his finger to save his son. I never showed the finger, there is almost no blood, but the scene is still very intense and violent. Most of all, it is put in context and it carries meaning. I am fine with violence in context, but when it is just there to impress kids, it makes me feel uncomfortable.

Not many studios can afford to release only four games over the course of nearly 15 years. How does Quantic Dream make this work in this modern gaming climate?

Releasing as many games as possible was not a goal of ours in any way. I make games by passion, and I don't necessarily think about

how much money the studio will make in return. I never wanted to do work for hire. I always refused to follow trends. I never did sequels, and always worked on games I designed and profoundly believed in. I know how fortunate I am, and this is probably a situation that would appeal to many designers.

How I did that is no secret: I try to design games that are different and unique. I have one of the most talented teams in the world, and we work like hell to release the best games we can. We are really passionate about what we do, almost in an old-fashioned way, in a time where developing Facebook games or iOS Apps to make quick money seems to be the new promised land for everyone.

Each title we released sold three times more than the previous one, which gave us time to iterate on the next new idea and also confidence that we were on an interesting path. Our development budgets are relatively low, and all the money we receive from the publisher goes into the development to make the best title we can. Don't ask me how, but this strategy has managed to make Quantic grow from a little unknown French indie developer 15 years ago to a quality development studio with a 200-plus staff working exclusively on ambitious original titles for a major console manufacturer such as Sony.

There is only one rule you need to keep in



mind for this simple strategy to work: You need to make each game a success – at least a critical success – otherwise everything can stop right away. This is a high-risk strategy, but I am genuinely interested in this medium and I want to continue exploring and discovering what I can do with it. Like in a casino, I can keep playing as long as I am successful. That's how I see my life as a creative person. I am in this industry to make something true and unique, not to make money and be cynical. Some days, I think I am really stupid, but I just do what I believe in and I was lucky enough to have people supporting me so far. ♦

Check out gameinformer.com/undertheradar for more on *Beyond: Two Souls* and the other games in this cover story.



10 COOL FEATURES YOU DON'T KNOW ABOUT ASSASSIN'S CREED III

by Matt Miller

If you've followed our coverage of Assassin's Creed III, you know the game is incredibly ambitious. Ubisoft Montreal is introducing a new hero in Connor, a new setting in Revolution-era America, and new ways to explore the untamed frontier through the wilderness and ocean. It's a big game. However, in our recent playthrough of an early version, we discovered a wealth of secrets Ubisoft has kept under wraps until now.

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

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

» **Publisher**
Ubisoft

» **Developer**
Ubisoft Montreal

» **Release**
October 30 (PS3,360)
November 18 (Wii U)
November 20 (PC)

THE HOMESTEAD

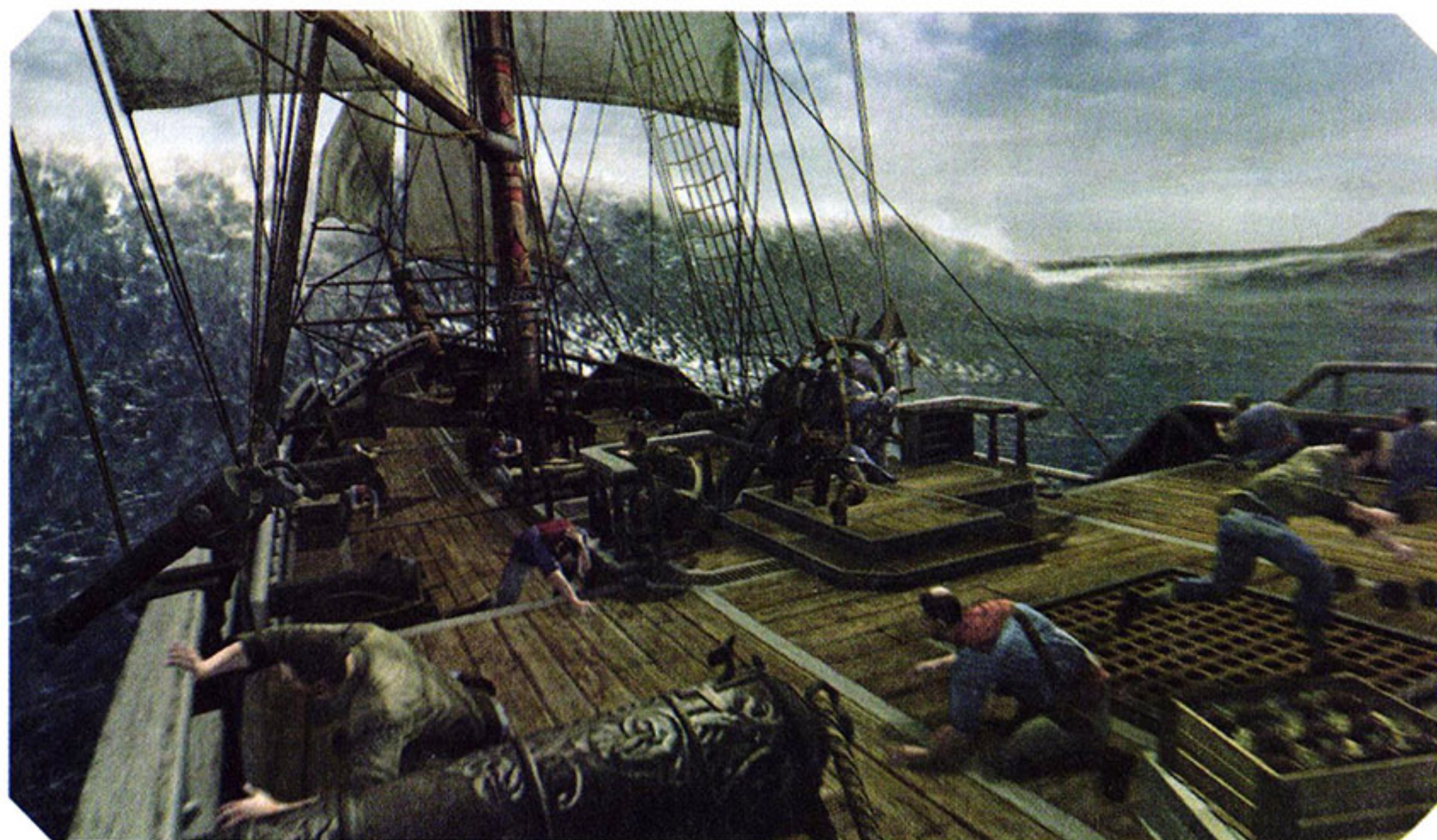
Remember how much fun it was to manage the Monteriggioni villa in *Assassin's Creed II*? Take that concept and blow it out into a full-fledged game area complete with missions, characters, and extensive opportunities for exploration, and you have the Homestead. Connor lives near Davenport, Massachusetts, in a house beside his mentor, an old man named Achilles who initiates our hero into the ancient Assassin order. Early on, the house is an isolated building in the wilderness. However, the area begins to blossom as Connor uncovers its secrets. Homestead missions are scattered around the large wilderness near his house, and each introduces an individual who will eventually settle in the area. Connor meets a young huntress named Myriam who has been shot and injured by poachers in the area. After carrying her back to the house for medical care, Connor heads into the woods to methodically eliminate the invasive poachers. When the mission ends, Myriam agrees to settle in the area and hunt, trading her pelts and meat with her neighbors. She establishes a shack of her own on the property, and her artisan skills become available for your crafting endeavors.

Eventually, your homestead is a customized playspace that speaks to your adventures throughout the world. As you complete missions and other objectives, mementos are placed within your house. A secret room in the basement (entered by pulling a candle sconce) holds your weapons and outfits. The nearby harbor serves as home base for your ship, the *Aquila*. Over time, more workers and artisans like Myriam come to the area and interact with you and one another.



THE UNDERGROUND

Fast travel in recent incarnations of *Assassin's Creed* has been about purchasing one more in a long list of buildings. But what if your fast-travel network was built through gameplay? *Assassin's Creed III* explores the mysterious real-life history of Masonic tunnels built beneath New York and Boston, and uses those tunnels to introduce a new gameplay loop. Connor finds entrances into these tunnels throughout the world. Enter the tunnel, and you're plunged into darkness. A lantern lights the way through the labyrinthine underground complex and you find secret puzzles left behind by the Masons. Some might be lockpicking challenges. Others use light and shadow. We encountered a piece of old Masonic text linking religious symbols to different directions on a compass. By shining our lantern through moveable frames, specific light patterns could be thrown up onto the wall to solve the puzzle. These puzzles open up exits into other areas of the city, and from then on, Connor can fast travel to unlocked locations.



PIRATES, SHIPS, AND TREASURE!

It's no secret that *Assassin's Creed III* is delving into naval gameplay, but until now we didn't know much about how it fits into the wider game.

Naval controls are intuitive, but with enough depth to keep things fun. A tap of a button changes speed between full stop, half-sail, and full sail. The faster you're going, the less maneuverability you have. Your mini-map shows wind direction, which can also affect movement. Left trigger or L2 fires a pinpoint cannon that is great for taking out smaller ships. Right trigger or R2 fires off a less accurate, full broadside of cannons that can devastate multiple targets. Finally, tap X or square and your crew will take cover from incoming fire, dramatically reducing damage to the ship's health meter.

We encountered three major threads that account for the bulk of the naval experiences in the game. The most straightforward are privateer missions, in which Connor leads his crew into battle to retake an area of the sea from nefarious elements. These one-off battle missions usually involves ship-to-ship battles and some unique objective. A second thread is a dedicated storyline about the Templars and a historical figure named Nicholas Biddle, a well-known naval officer of the time.

The third naval-connected game element is all about pirates and hidden treasure. Hidden chests all over the game world contain special trinkets, which can be given to a scruffy individual named Pegleg who resides at your Homestead harbor. In turn, he gives you a letter related to the infamous pirate, Captain Kidd. Each of these letters guides you to a different island in the Atlantic where a torn piece of a treasure map may be found. Locate all six to reach the long lost-treasure. These platforming-focused missions take over the role of the Lairs of Romulus in *Brotherhood*, but with a pirate vibe.



SYNCHRONIZATION

Synchronization has always been a concept in the Assassin's Creed universe, built around the idea of replaying historical moments exactly as they happened. The new game moves to make the system more nuanced and worthy of replay. Most missions in the game include multiple optional objectives; I saw options like completing three ledge assassinations during a mission, or remaining undetected throughout an infiltration. At the end of the mission, players are given synch points based on performance.

From the pause menu, the DNA tracker tells you how many synch points you've earned on each mission, and you can always replay a mission for a higher score. As you gain synch points, you gain extras like additional artwork or new outfits for Connor.

Synchronization emerges as a concept akin to experience points. It's not about passing or failing, but degrees of success in a given encounter.

ALMANACS

Benjamin Franklin sustains his place in history for many reasons, including his popular "Poor Richard's Almanacs." In a fun diversion as you explore the world, you find scattered pages of Franklin's almanacs where they've become stuck in a doorframe or beneath a barrel. Inevitably, these pages come unstuck and flutter away on the wind, and Connor has to catch them.

These free-running challenges offer a chance to run across the rooftops in a twist on the chase missions of previous games. The pages you find unlock additional crafting recipes, like Franklin's unusual musical instrument, the glass harmonica, which can then be set up in your Homestead.

Almanacs are one of several low-priority optional side missions that can be tackled at a player's whim. Courier missions we encountered set us up to bring mail between acquaintances. Delivery missions had us bringing items like food and pelts to other areas of the map. Finally, assassination jobs offer a quick taste of hunting and silencing an unfortunate target.



CLUBS

We knew Assassin's Creed III included something called clubs, but our time with the game revealed a breadth of content. By engaging in activities around the game world, you attract the attention of individual clubs, and new more complex activities open up.

Hunting, thievery, exploring, and fighting all have dedicated clubs. For example, the hunting club is built around finding and hunting unique animals in each of the many parts of the frontier; four animal types exist in each of the Frontier's zones, and the club challenges you to track them all down. Alternately, uncover enough viewpoints, and you are approached by Daniel Boone and the explorer's club. After joining, you'll find wilderness campfire locations scattered through the world. Here, members of the club sit and tell tall tales, and Connor sets off on missions to disprove popular legends from the time period, including everything from debunking a famous sea monster to proving UFO sightings false.

BOARD GAMES

Feel like you need a break from all of that running through trees and killing soldiers? How about an early pioneer-era board game? In a small-but-fun twist, Assassin's Creed III includes three historically authentic games.

Checkers should be familiar to almost everyone. Identical pieces move diagonally around the board, aiming to jump and capture an opponent's pieces. Nine Man's Morris is a less-familiar game where two players each have nine pieces to lay on a board with 24 spaces, while variations like Six Man's Morris and Twelve Man's Morris change the board size. Placing and subsequently moving the pieces each has its own strategy. Finally, Fanorona is a strategy game played on a grid of diagonal and perpendicular lines. By moving pieces into intersections of the grid, you can knock off an opponent's pieces on the same line on which you moved.

All three are interesting, and you can play all of them against AI opponents at points scattered around the world of Assassin's Creed III.



THE NEW BROTHERHOOD

The option to summon your Brotherhood of Assassins returns, but a lot has changed. Recruiting new Assassins begins with liberation missions; Connor sets out to liberate individuals from oppression wherever he finds it. I defended a man being harassed and assaulted by overly pushy tax collectors. The man I defended is a named character with a unique skill set, and that first meeting set up other encounters with him as we completed more liberation missions. Eventually, I completed a final special mission, and he pledged his loyalty to Connor.

Both Boston and New York have three districts, and each has its own potential assassin. As they join your team, you can call on them for aid, but with more nuance than in previous installments of the series. Like the weapon wheel on RB or R1 that pulls up all your tools and weapons, LB or L1 now calls up your Assassin's wheel, where you designate the activity you want your team to enact. Each new member teaches his ability to the rest. As always, you can call down an assassination. In addition, you might have one of your allies incite a riot, or dress as a redcoat to provide a covert escort. Another option has your ally act as a bodyguard, intercepting attackers before they reach you. Put another way, your team of Assassins can now perform any of the abilities once required by recruiting mercenaries, thieves, or courtesans, but you have access to them at any time.

Your six named allies will level up as you use them, but you can also send them out on contracts. Pause the game (no pigeon coops necessary) and you can pull up a map of the eastern seaboard. Send out allies to complete a contract, and they return with money, crafting materials, and XP to help improve their abilities.

FORTS

In a cool nod to the Borgia towers of previous games, Connor reduces Templar influence across America by eliminating Templar-controlled forts. These well-protected locales are worth confronting for the big rewards.

Each fort requires three objectives for completion: kill the fort's commander, blow up its stockpile of ammunition, and lower the flag over the fort. Complete all three and the fort becomes a new wilderness fast travel destination. You also reduce taxes on your trade convoys and acquire a big cash reward. What's that about trade convoys? Read on.

THE ECONOMY OF THE NEW WORLD

Like many game systems in Assassin's Creed III, making money has been revised into a loop with deeper involvement from the player. Instead of buying up property across every city, Connor makes his money through a trade system that is part of America's burgeoning economy.

Trade begins at the Homestead, where Connor's workers produce goods for his stockpile, all of which can be acquired at a reduced rate. Whether in your home or at one of many general stores scattered across the world, Connor can pull up his accounting book, examine his stockpile, and set to work crafting and trading.

Crafting starts with a recipe, acquired through quests, contracts, and other events in the game world. Each recipe requires you own certain base materials, like a wolf pelt or a cut of oak lumber. A recipe also requires certain artisans; without Lance the carpenter, I wasn't able to make any barrels. Once I crafted that barrel, along with a wagon to carry it, things moved from crafting into trading. Convoys can head out over land or sea, but they are at risk if you haven't cleared the lanes of opposition. At sea, that means completing privateer missions. On land, it means finishing liberation missions.

Trade is still viable if you haven't opened up the trade routes, but there's a wrinkle. Your trade convoy is a real object moving through the game world, and a higher risk means it might come under attack. A message arrives warning you of the impending ambush, and you have two options to avoid a total loss of your investment: Send your Assassins to stymie the attack, or travel there yourself and fight off the attackers. In addition, yours aren't the only convoys on the road. While exploring, you might encounter a group of redcoats and militia fighting over a convoy one of them is escorting. After the battle, what's to stop a lone Assassin from heading in, finishing off the remainder, and claiming the spoils?

Engaging in trade was largely optional during my time with the game, but the monetary rewards also appear to be huge.



» Platform
Vita

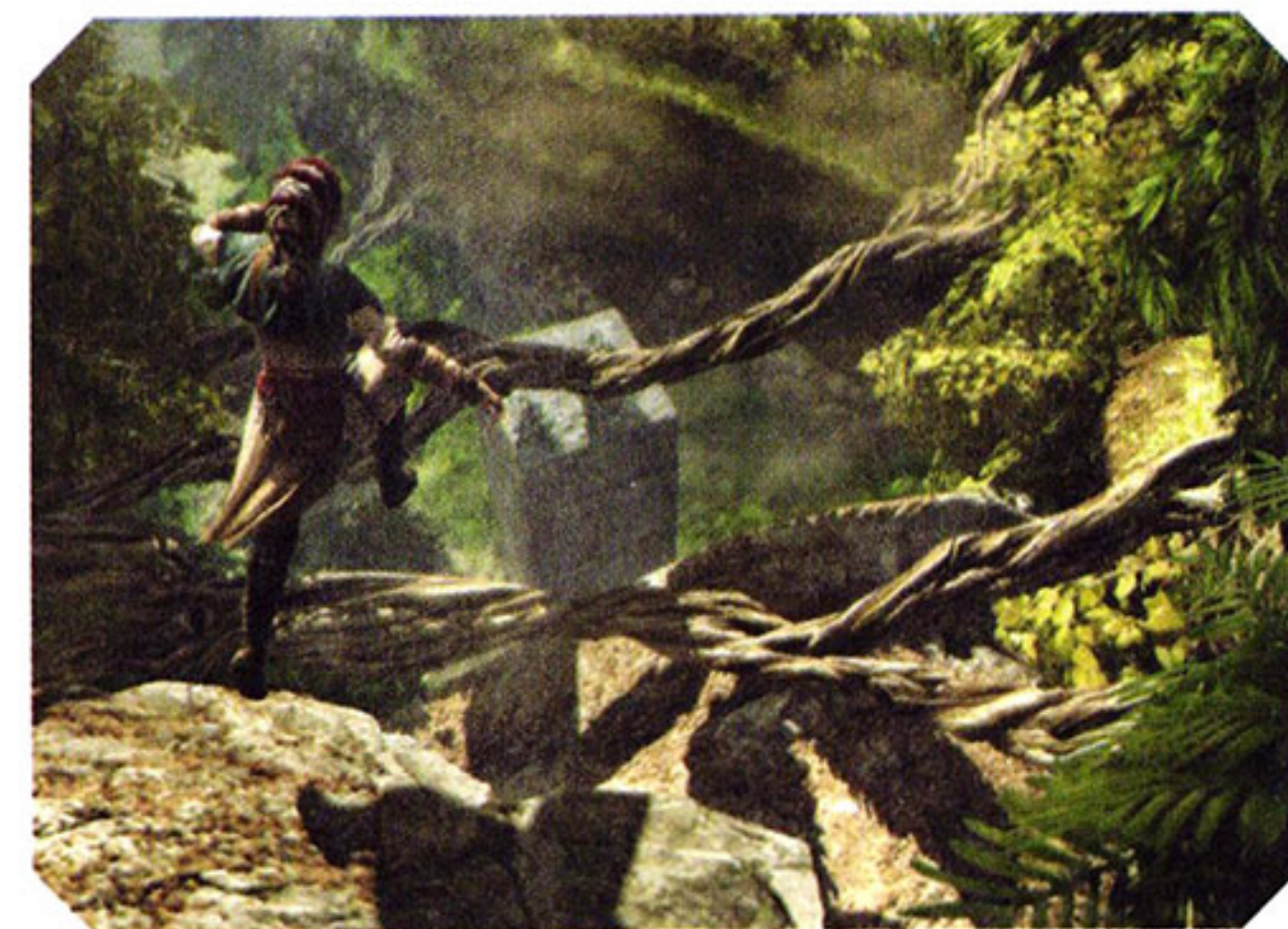
» Style
1-Player Action

» Publisher
Ubisoft

» Developer
Ubisoft Sofia,
Ubisoft Montreal

» Release
October 30

...AND 5 MORE FROM ASSASSIN'S CREED III: LIBERATION



"We don't know all the details yet, but Aveline's adventures don't occur in a vacuum, isolated from the storyline of the companion console game."

PERSONAS

Personas are a fundamentally new concept within the Assassin's Creed fiction which takes advantage of Aveline's distinct background and story. As a woman of mixed race who also has access to significant financial resources, Aveline has no compunctions about exploiting deception to advance the goals of the Assassins.

Aveline has access to three personas as she wanders New Orleans and the surrounding bayou, each represented by a change in abilities and clothing. The Assassin persona is her most common toolset, characterized by extreme flexibility of movement, combat durability, and access to her full spread of weaponry. When a more high-profile approach is required, Aveline dons the lady persona. While in the constraining dress styles of an affluent New Orleans woman, her mobility is dramatically limited, but she gains the ability to charm her way past many of the soldiers and other obstacles that would stand in her way. She also has a few extra tricks up her sleeve, like a parasol that doubles as a gun. When her fine dresses might be conspicuous, she can adopt the persona of a local slave. With this disguise in place, she can slip unnoticed past opponents or incite a riot with the local populace.

Players can purchase new buildings where Aveline can change her dress and persona, and each of the three personas offer different paths to completing objectives. In addition, each persona includes multiple unlockable outfits that change Aveline's look, just as players have been able to do with other heroes in the earlier Assassin's Creed games.

NAVAL TRADE

In the story of Liberation, heroine Aveline is the daughter of a rich Frenchman who made his career in shipping. As Aveline develops her abilities as a member of the Assassin order, she simultaneously uses her family business to expand her influence, specifically through a dedicated system of naval trading.

From an old warehouse that has been converted into a swanky headquarters, players can pull up a map of shipping opportunities along southeastern North America. In the beginning, you have a single ship to export purchased goods. Products like sugar, cotton, and molasses each have a designated price per unit at each port, and you want to send your ship to ports where your products can be sold at a profit.

The path between each port is marked on the map with a percentage chance of storms, hurricanes, and pirates. Players have to weigh the threat of a dangerous route against the benefit of a high purchase price at the end of the line.

As your trading company grows, you can purchase new ships with their own speed, cargo space, and hit points, leading to a diverting money-making minigame between more standard missions.



ERUDITO

Some players may recognize the name Erudito from earlier Assassin's Creed projects as an individual or group intent on sabotaging the efforts of Abstergo around the world. Erudito plays a major role in Liberation.

The entire Assassin's Creed III: Liberation game is meant to be an interactive propaganda product produced by Abstergo to whitewash history. As you play the game, you experience Aveline's memories minus key plot points that might paint the Templars in a bad light. In fact, you'll never hear the word Templar in the standard version of the game.

However, Erudito has hacked into the game, and is aiming to show you the real truth. At key story moments, a voice interrupts and asks you to track down a nearby "Citizen E." These are fake people that were never part of the historical record. Find them with Eagle vision and kill them, and you unlock the real version of events, which often leaves the Templars/Abstergo looking like the bad guys.

COMBAT

Liberation adds a unique cinematic style of assassination into the repertoire. Build up your meter by performing assassinations, and you can trigger a chain kill to take out up to four enemies. To do so, you begin the chain kill by freezing time, and tap each individual you want to target on the Vita's touchscreen. When you're done, Aveline erupts into a flurry of motion to take out each enemy in turn. My time with the game also revealed an exciting array of new weapons that feel different from previous Assassin's Creed games. Whether a silent kill with a blowgun, a brutal machete kill, or Aveline's medium-range whip, there are a lot of new options to explore.

INTERACTION WITH CONNOR

We don't know all the details yet, but Aveline's adventures don't occur in a vacuum, isolated from the storyline of the companion console game. Ubisoft confirmed that one mission sends Aveline to New York, where she meets up with Connor, and the two work together to complete the job. If you have an Assassin's Creed III save on your PS3, you can even unlock the ability to play the Liberation mission with Connor. ❖

Never played the earlier Assassin's Creed games? Hop online to gameinformer.com and get caught up on the story up to this point so you'll be ready for Assassin's Creed III and Liberation when they both release on October 30



Far Cry 3

Get to know the toys in your sandbox

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

» **Style**
1-Player Action
(16-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Ubisoft

» **Developer**
Ubisoft Montreal

» **Release**
December 4

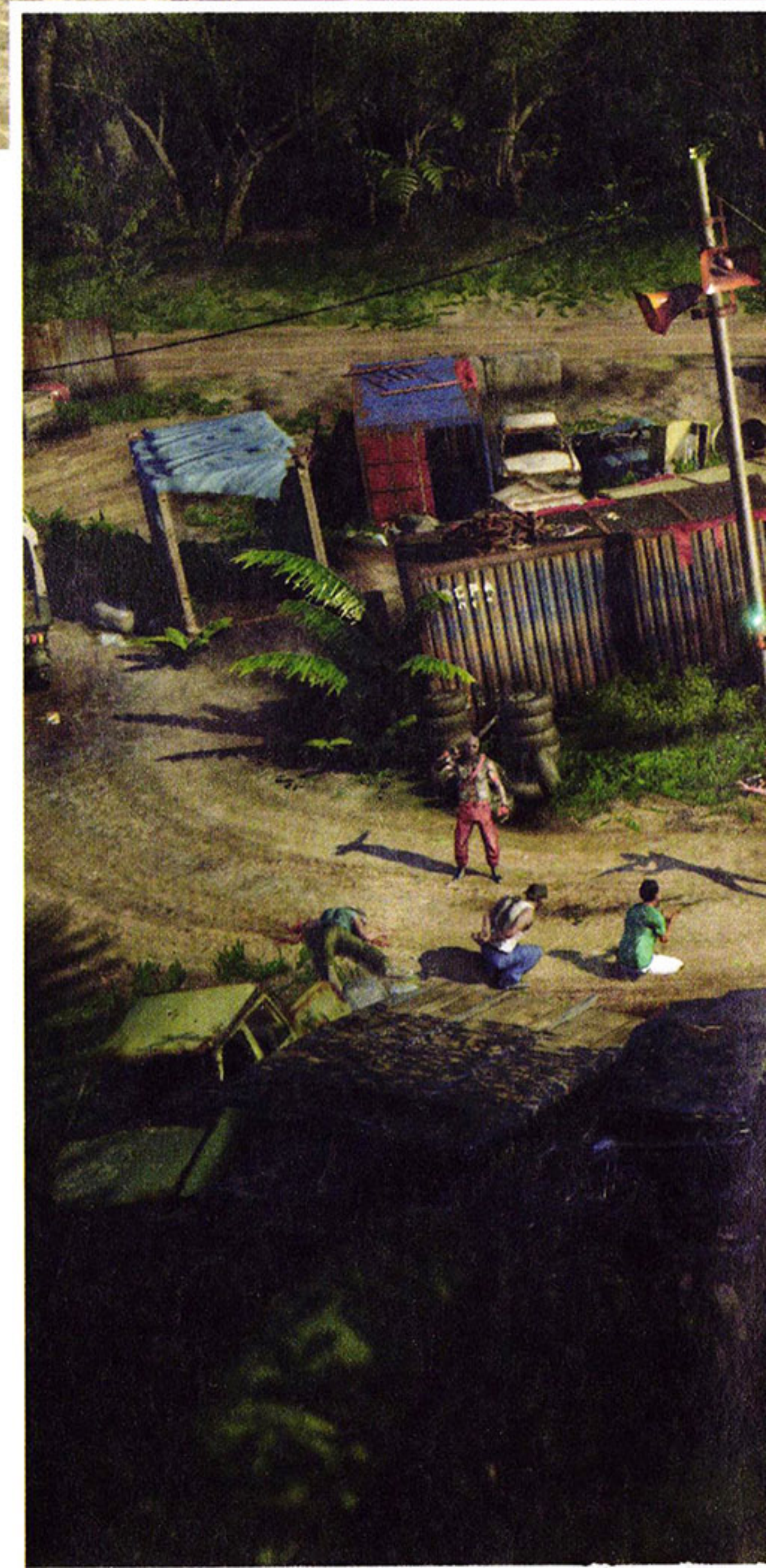
Far Cry 3 hero Jason Brody isn't much of a survivalist when he first arrives on Rook Island, but he's a quick learner. As players upgrade his abilities and skills throughout his journey, he becomes less of a tourist and more like one of the island's crazed locals. This kind of adventuring takes a psychological toll, but we're ignoring that for the time being and focusing on the positives.

Combat Arts and Crafts

Players earn experience points for the usual things – headshots, kill streaks, clearing out areas without raising alarms – which can be spent on skills in three main categories. Skills under the heron banner focus on long-range and aerial attacks. For instance, an early skill allows you to cook grenades before you toss them. Shark abilities are more in-your-face, allowing you to chain bombastic melee take-downs. If you're more interested in subterfuge and taking advantage of the environment, you should invest in skills under the spider heading. As you advance through the various skill trees, Jason's on-screen tattoo expands as a

visual record of your increasing power. Ubisoft says players can max out each of the three categories before the adventure ends, which should satisfy completionists.

While traveling through the wilderness, you can treat the environment like your own personal big-box superstore. The island is home to a variety of flora and fauna all ripe for the taking. Some ingredients are easier to come by than others – plants tend to put up less of a fight than animals do. The map shows where a few noteworthy critters tend to hang out, which helps, but you still have to search on your own. After you take out a target (or "if you take out a target," in the case of deadlier creatures like tigers and komodo dragons), you can skin your prize with your trusty knife. Skins can then be used to craft items such as holsters, wallets, and rucksacks. When you start out, Jason can only hold one firearm at a time; finding the raw materials for a holster upgrade should be priority number one. Harvesting plants allows you to create medicines and potions – including concoctions that give you the ability to stay underwater longer or resist the ill effects of fire. That last one is important.



Fire When Ready (Or Not)

Video gaming pyromaniacs have a soft spot for Far Cry 2's impressive fire effects, and for good reason. It was one of the first games to capture the element's chaotic essence. Setting the savannah ablaze was an effective – and dangerous – way to take out hostiles. If you weren't careful, you could be overwhelmed by your own burning hubris. Far Cry 3 expands fire's effectiveness in subtle and significant ways.

Nobody likes being on fire. People and animals go to great lengths to avoid becoming barbecue, and they behave the same way in Far Cry 3. Chucking Molotov cocktails at clusters of pirates is effective, if not predictable. Flaming arrows add flair to the action, but they lack a little something as well. Fire can be a scalpel, not just a bludgeon. Why not take advantage of an animal's innate fear of fire, while also nudging it toward a meal? It's possible to use flames as a herding tool, pushing beasts into enemy encampments. Once a tiger outpaces the flames, for instance, it may turn its attention toward the panicked humans. While they're tangling with one another, you're free to pick enemies off at your leisure.

Overall Insanity

Even the more structured segments of Far Cry 3 contain a ridiculous amount of flexibility. That point struck home during my extended hands-on time with the game. I take a deceptively straightforward mission: Find a warlord and assassinate him with a knife. As with nearly everything else I experience, things go wonderfully out of control in a hurry.

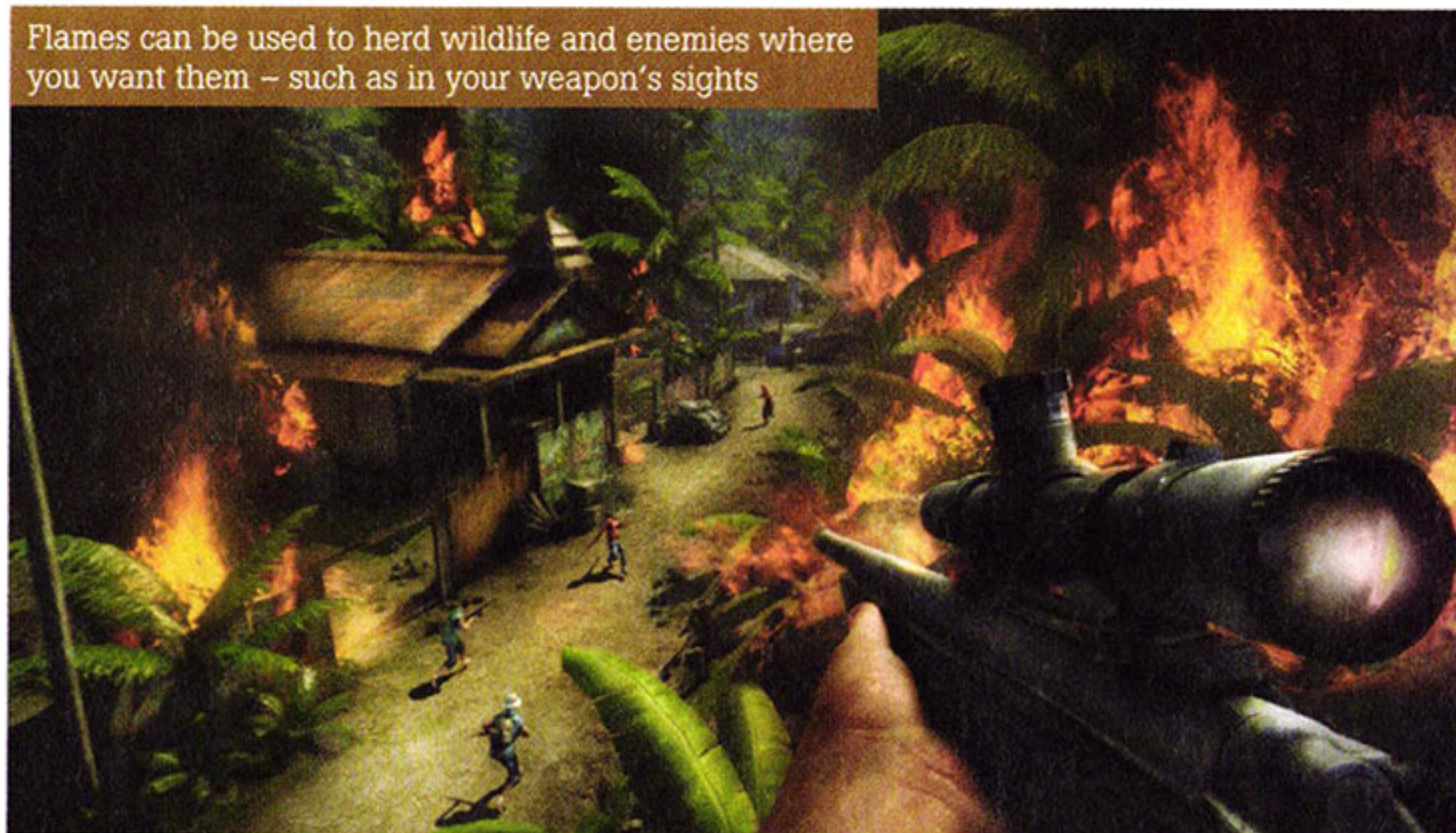
Rather than use the obvious stealthy approach, I ride straight into the enemy's beachfront camp. A few guards patrol the outside of the ramshackle outpost, and I try to run them

down with my jeep, rolling out of the vehicular missile at the last second. I take out one of them, but the other dodges. In the resulting confusion, I stab another one of the men in the back, taking him out with a single hit. I try to pull off the same maneuver on his friend, but he knocks me to the ground with the butt of his rifle. When I get up, I know I am in big trouble. Everyone in the camp starts using me as a target, and a few of them have clearly practiced their shot. I do my best to avoid the gunfire and sprint toward my target. A few slashes later, I'm ready to make my escape.

The bullets have taken their toll, and the most obvious escape routes are covered. That leaves one option: the ocean. I jump into the water and swim toward a nearby rock. While underwater, I notice the remains of a small boat and a collectible relic. When I clamber onto the stone, I look down at the sea and see a trio of sharks circling the tiny island. Wonderful. I move into a sniping position and take out a couple of the guards before running out of ammo. I'm short on alternatives, so I take my chances and dive into the water, hoping that I don't end my adventure in a shark's belly.

Luck is on my side (finally), and I run back through the hornet's nest that I created. The screen grows increasingly redder as I hop back into my jeep and tear away from the fray. Once I reach a safe distance, I bandage my wounds and do what comes naturally – drive back into the camp. I should have left well enough alone. I run over a guard and take his ammo, but his compatriots eventually give me what I deserve. A few seconds later, I respawn back in a friendly camp. You'd think I would have learned my lesson, but I immediately head back to the same camp. This time, however, I have flaming arrows. What could possibly go wrong? » **Jeff Cork**

Flames can be used to herd wildlife and enemies where you want them – such as in your weapon's sights



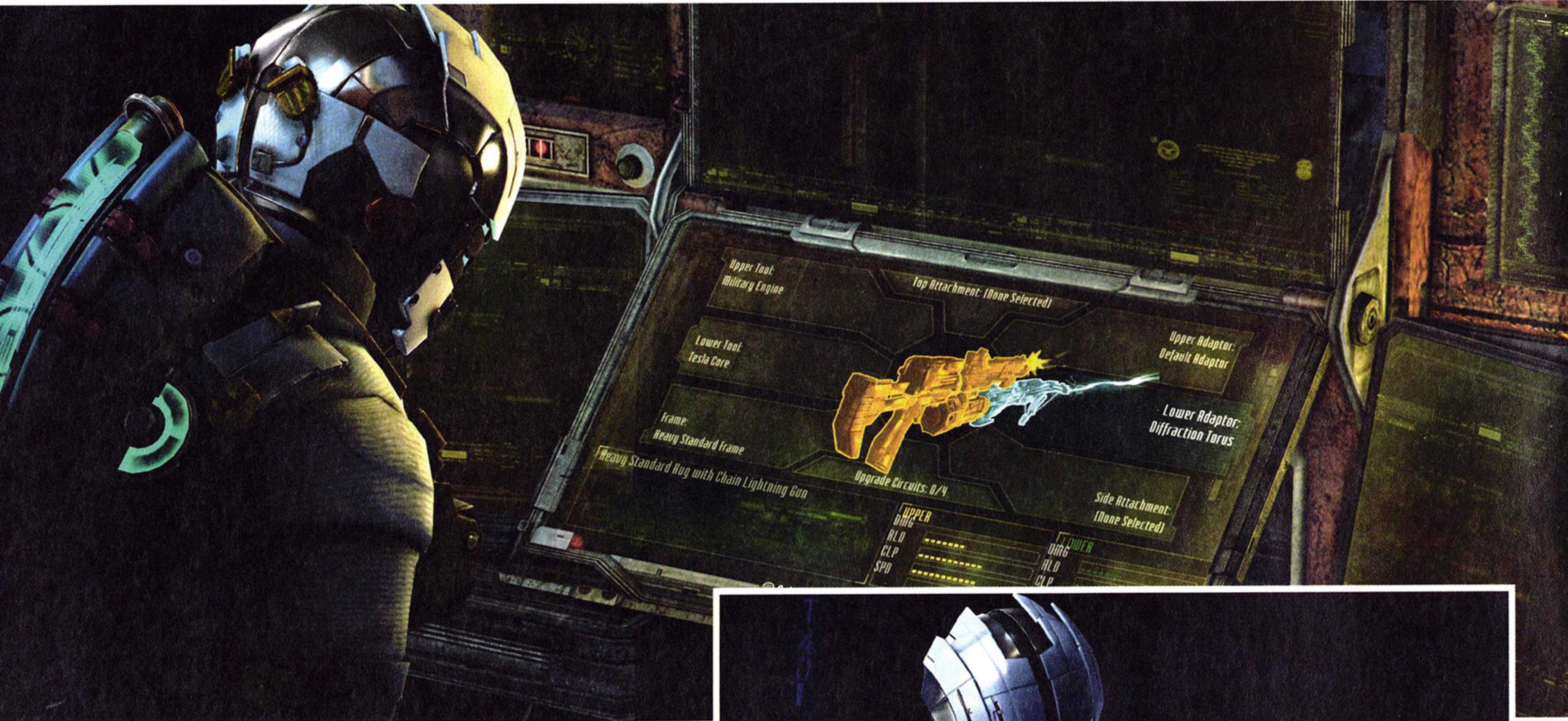
Clear out an outpost, and it'll prevent enemies from spawning in the immediate area



Far Cry 3 features a full poker simulation, for those rare times when you're tired of creating mayhem

Dead Space 3

Isaac's weapon crafting gets creative



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

» **Style**
1 or 2-Player Action
(2-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Electronic Arts

» **Developer**
Visceral Games

» **Release**
February 5

Dead Space hero Isaac Clarke is a known gun tinkerer, frequently boosting his weapons' ammo capacity, damage rates, and reload speeds. For the latest entry, developer Visceral Games is scrapping this node-based upgrade system and starting over. Isaac still relies on old favorites like the plasma cutter and ripper in combat, but now you can combine both into a single necromorph-slicing machine. Read on to find out how a little weapon creativity goes a long way on the chilling new planet of Tau Volantis. » **Bryan Vore**



Frame

Before you get too carried away with wild weapon combos, it's important to select the right frame for the job. The two options on display so far include the compact frame for one-handed guns and the heavy frame for two-handers.

Primary Tool

Now the fun starts. If you've collected the necessary parts, you can choose from an arsenal ranging from a flamethrower to the necromorph-impaling telemetry spike. Here are some examples we've seen so far.

- **Pneumatic Torch** - An incendiary device fueled by compressed gas
- **Military Engine** - A military weapon used by S.C.A.F. forces
- **Plasma Core** - A cutting tool that fires ionized plasma fuel
- **Tesla Core** - An engine for high-current electric welding
- **Telemetry Spike** - A mining tool that fires tempered alloy bolts
- **Survey Charge** - A seismic tool that fires explosive canisters
- **Rip Core** - A short-range suspended saw blade tool
- **Hydraulic Cutter** - A bayonet-like cutting tool, used for clearing large areas



Primary Adaptor

This is essentially a barrel that augments the primary weapon. The tesla core, for example, can be changed from a focused beam to a bouncy bola, sticky electrified bola, or an arcing electrical current that can spread among multiple targets. Every weapon type has this amount of variety and more. Here are a few examples:

- **Precision Adaptor** - Focuses effect or projectile for increased accuracy and lethality
- **Compressor** - Compresses effect or projectile into a more compact, intense form
- **Directed Suspension Field** - Enables kinetic suspension of effect or projectile
- **Diffraction Torus** - Allows effect or projectile to spread around the point of impact
- **Directed Ejection Field** - Fires effect or projectile in short, forceful impulses
- **Rail Accelerator** - Accelerates effect or projectile at high speed with penetrating force

Top Attachment And Side Attachment

As you can see from the examples below, these two add-on slots offer a range of supplemental abilities that can make you more deadly in combat or help out your co-op partner.

- **Ammo Box** - Automatically reloads after last shot
- **Ammo Support** - Increases ammo efficiency for self and partner
- **Ammo Sweeper** - Automatically picks up nearby ammo
- **Damage Support** - Increases partner's damage with all weapons
- **Full Zoom Scope** - Prototype military scope for advanced long-range aiming
- **Medic Support** - Health packs consumed by self also heal partner
- **Safety Guard** - Prevents user from taking damage from his own weapons
- **Scope** - Military scope for long-range aiming
- **Acid Bath** - Coats projectiles in acid that does damage over time
- **Electric Charge** - Electrifies projectiles to cause small amounts of voltaic damage
- **Flame Glaze** - Adds fire to projectiles

Secondary Tool And Adaptor

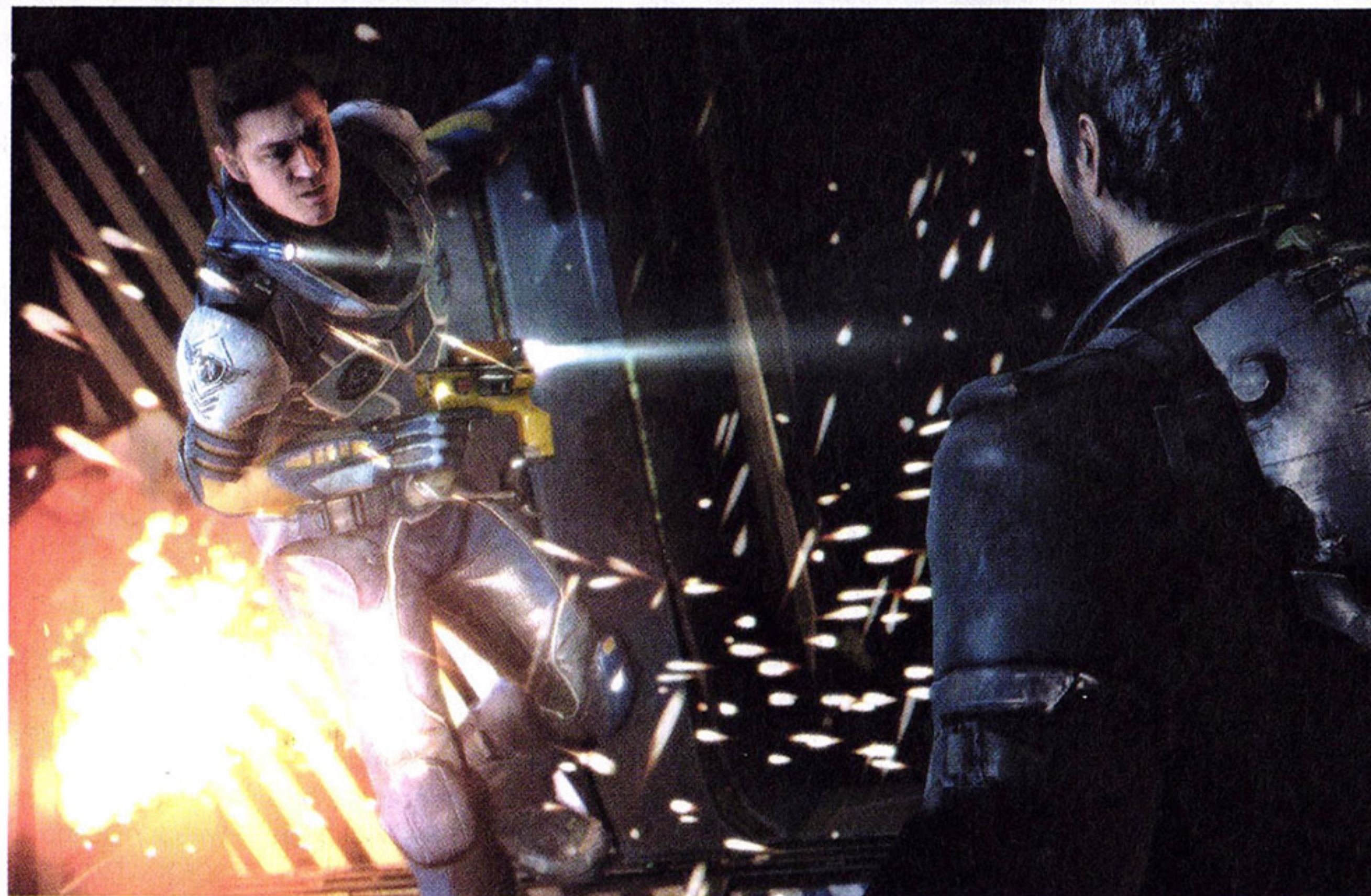
Using the same list of options you have for the primary gun, you can add a different weapon effect on the secondary fire button. This is where the real creativity comes in. Will you combine long and short range attacks? Maybe you want to have scoped acid shots. They're all options.

Upgrade Circuits

Mixing and matching unique weapons is a nice option to have, but what if you want to improve a combo you already like? Upgrade circuits work much like the old power nodes, offering improvements to damage, rate of fire, reload speed, clip size, and more.

Blueprints

Once your custom weapon is complete, you give it a name and a custom blueprint is generated. You can share your concoctions with co-op partners, but EA wouldn't say whether it's building an online platform for sharing them with the rest of the world. If you're concerned that crafting could be too distracting to the campaign, blueprints are also scattered throughout the game so you can simply tap a button, get a new weapon instantly, and be on your way. These range from traditional weapons like a simple sniper rifle to a chain gun/rocket launcher combo.





Hitman: Absolution

Create your own hit in Contracts mode

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

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Square Enix

» **Developer**
IO Interactive

» **Release**
November 20

Hitman's globetrotting adventures always offer creative kill options for dispatching Agent 47's targets. Once the missions are over, however, players don't have much reason to return to the game. IO Interactive has created a variety of challenges and collectibles to help boost Absolution's replay value, but the most exciting addition is the new Contracts mode, which allows players to create and share their own missions.

Wannabe game designers should limit their expectations from the get-go; Contracts mode isn't an actual level editor, and you can't edit objects in the environment or the behavior and routes of NPCs. Instead, you select a level from the main game and choose your own targets while playing it. You can select up to three NPCs for assassination by marking them with the press of a button. After you make your decision, you simply continue playing through the level, killing your targets however you see fit and escaping via one of several exits. Once

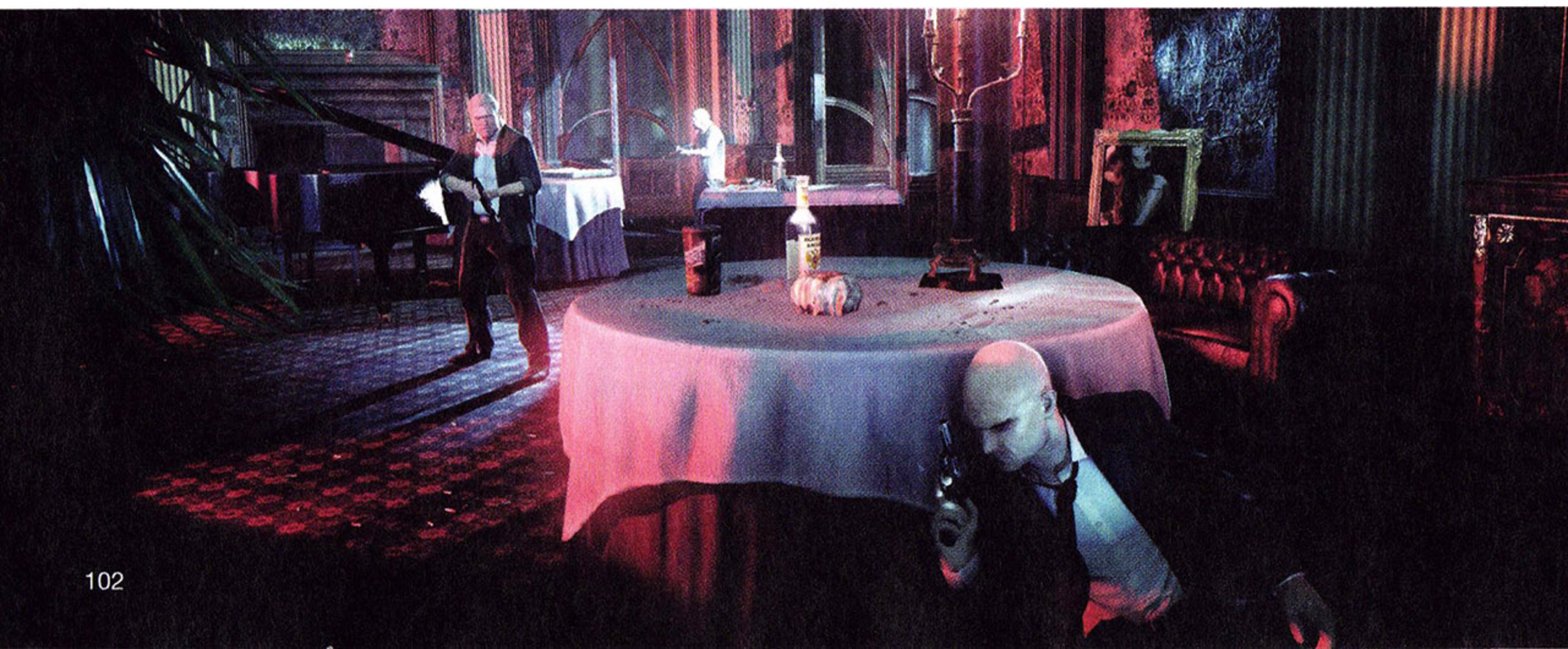
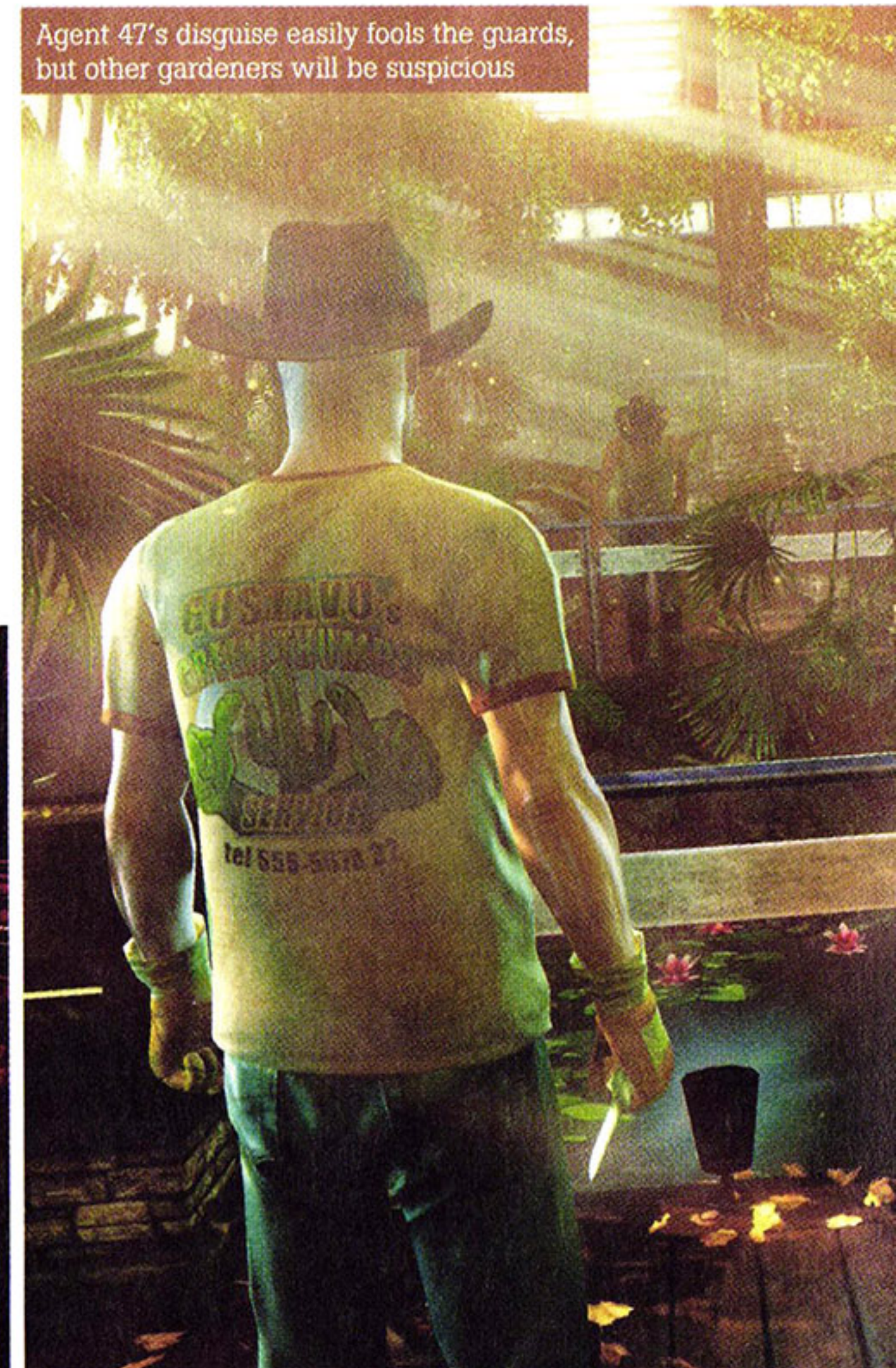
you finish, the game automatically sets the rest of the conditions, assigning a base pay for how difficult the mission is and what bonuses players can earn for completing your contract. These include using the same disguise and weapon as the contract creator when offing specific targets, as well as performance-based bonuses like not being spotted by guards, only killing the targets, and killing the targets in order.

I create my first contract in Absolution's Chinatown level. The story mission involves killing a drug kingpin located in the center of the level, but I opt for something a little trickier. While taking a quick lap around the crowded market, I select three of the chefs manning different food booths in the area. Now it's just a question of deciding how to kill them.

In an isolated alleyway, I sneak past a distracted guard and enter a drug dealer's second floor apartment. In the story mission, the dealer meets the kingpin to sample some of his product, but in my contract he's just another "inno-

cent" bystander. I knock him out and stash his body in a trunk, then grab his sniper rifle from the table. One of the chefs is just barely visible from window overlooking the market, and I take him down with a single headshot. The contract is now solidified: Future players will receive a bonus to their score if they kill Nan Er with a sniper rifle while wearing 47's suit.

Agent 47's disguise easily fools the guards, but other gardeners will be suspicious





Unfortunately, a police officer on the street spots me through the window; guards are now looking for a suspicious bald man in a black suit. I flee into the stairwell, only to run into another officer responding to the gunshot. I feign surrender and then disarm him when he approaches, knocking him out in the process. I drag his body to a nearby dumpster, throw him in, and steal his clothes. Lucky for me, no one is looking for a suspicious bald cop. However, I've already blown two of the potential bonus conditions: not being spotted and no disguise changes.

On my way to the next target, I notice a hatchet sticking out of a crate. I pick it up without anyone noticing. Making my way to the second stand, I pull out the axe and hurl it at the unsuspecting chef, lodging it into the back of his head. The second contract is set: kill Wei Peng with an axe while dressed as a police officer. Axe Cop is born.

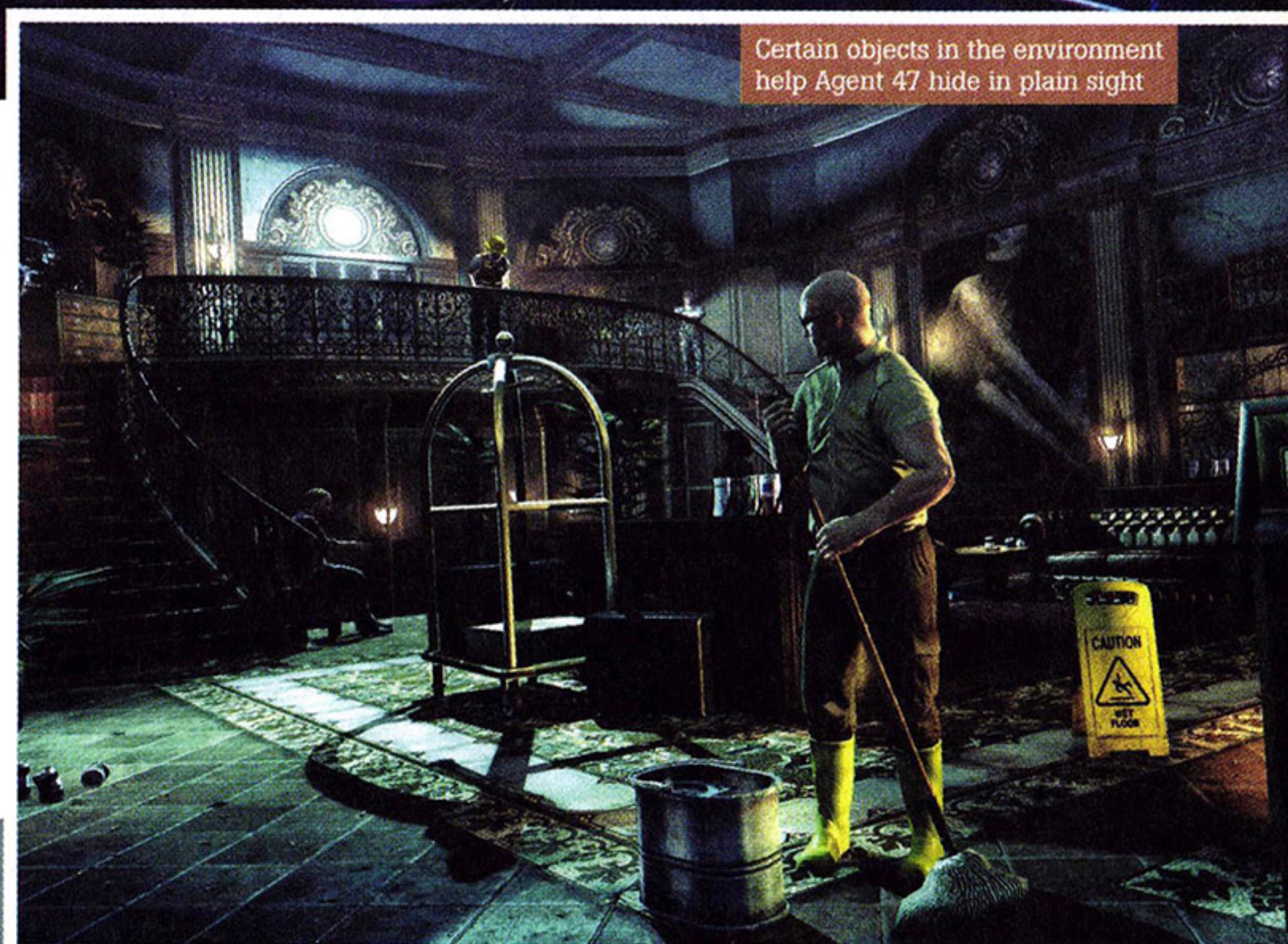
Despite my apathetic attempt to remain stealthy, a dozen civilians see the gruesome kill and every officer in the vicinity closes in on my location. Instead of taking on the entire police force, I decide to scrub the third hit, unmarking the lucky cook from across the market as I run toward one of several exits. Leaving through the backdoor of a restaurant sets it as the only escape route for the contract. Additionally, when future players kill their last target, a bonus countdown timer begins. The faster you get out, the higher your final score.

Although my first contract ended up a complete mess, the process pleasantly surprised me. Creating a contract is just as fun and challenging as playing a normal level – since that's essentially what you're doing – and your performance affects the final value of your contract. Once you're done tweaking the description for your mission, the contract is uploaded for the world to play and rate. Built-in leaderboards

show who is the best at your mission, and you can also issue competitions to your friends, which the game records in a log. You don't just get bragging rights for beating contracts, either; the money you earn can be used to buy extra weapons and disguises to use in future contracts.

Replayability has always been one of Hitman's biggest shortcomings. While I still think this aspect of Absolution's success depends on how many levels the final game contains, Contracts mode gives fans a new and addictive way to share Hitman's deadly sandboxes. » **Jeff Marchiafava**

See video of Contracts mode in action at gameinformer.com/mag



Certain objects in the environment help Agent 47 hide in plain sight



Here the player has marked an unfortunate NPC for assassination. Killing him and escaping will create the contract for other players to try



Aliens: Colonial Marines

Xenomorphs meet Left 4 Dead

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

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

» **Publisher**
Sega

» **Developer**
Gearbox

» **Release**
February 12

A single xenomorph annihilated all but one member of the *Nostramo's* crew in *Alien*. Scores of the extraterrestrials nearly wiped out an entire squad of heavily armed soldiers on LV-426 in *Aliens*. In both of these instances the humans didn't want to exterminate the menace; they simply wanted to escape with their lives. Gearbox is tapping the Alien films' frantic struggle for survival with the new Escape mode. I only lasted six minutes during a recent hands-on session.

Like *Left 4 Dead's* competitive multiplayer, *Aliens: Colonial Marines* pits four marines against packs of four constantly respawning,

player-controlled xenomorphs. The marines' goal is to make it from point A to point B on planet LV-426 with at least one human still alive. The xenomorphs must stop them. Cooperation and communication are imperative for both teams to win. Each match consists of two rounds, one for each species.

I suited up as a space marine and selected a classic pulse rifle and pistol combo. Aiming down the gun's sights and taking down pouncing aliens is simple, snappy, and satisfying. Gearbox has perfectly captured the weapon's hyperactive Xerox printer sound. Even the ping of your motion tracker sounds



spot-on, which makes spotting lurking xenomorphs feel authentic.

High-tech military gear is useless without teamwork. My crew found the greatest success when we were within a few feet of each other and constantly checking our blind spots. Keen eyes can help you gun down any charging xenomorph or kill acid-spitting variants lurking in the distance. My end came when I spent too long gearing up instead of keeping pace with my squad. I only got about half my pulse rifle clip into the charging xenomorph before it pounced. Like facing the Hunter enemy from *Left 4 Dead*, pinned players are doomed unless a teammate intervenes.

Gearbox isn't ready to let players try out the xenomorphs yet, but promises satisfying controls that let you harness their preternatural mobility to climb walls and ceilings. Alien varieties include standard xenomorphs, charging armored units, acid spitters, and more. The merciless aliens can also see through walls, allowing them to quickly swarm solitary marines.

Aliens: Colonial Marines has been delayed several times, but all that time in development appears to be paying off. Fans of the sci-fi horror franchise can look forward to multiplayer deathmatch, Escape mode, a four-player co-op campaign, and progression that spans all the modes. Now that we finally have a concrete release date, it's safe to start getting excited. » **Tim Turi**

The atmosphere would make James Cameron and Ridley Scott proud.





Deadpool is bizarre. Case in point: This bouncy castle actually ties into one of Deadpool's mission objectives



Deadpool

Activision sounds off about Marvel's merc with a mouth

Marvel's Deadpool is one of the most eccentric characters in comics. He is a mercenary who is friends with both heroes and super villains. He has a mile-a-minute mouth and a grating personality, yet his fans find him charming. He's a hand-to-hand combat specialist with a penchant for big guns and explosives. And he's completely bonkers. After earning his own monthly comic series and appearing in titles like *Marvel vs. Capcom 3* and *Marvel Ultimate Alliance*, Deadpool has finally earned the right to star in his own game.

In the comics, Deadpool regularly references his comic creators and talks to his readers. Developer High Moon is incorporating this concept into the game itself. Deadpool not only comments on how well players perform during combat, but the game's narrative centers on the idea that Deadpool has taken over a video game studio and is working to design the "most kickass" Deadpool game possible.

"During the game, he might turn to you and make a wise-crack about how well you are doing playing him, or make fun of you for how badly," says Sean Miller, game director at High Moon Studios. "It's been a long time since I've laughed this much while making or playing a video game."

The game's most recent demo starts with Deadpool accepting a contract to assassinate a media mogul. As Deadpool works his way through the billionaire's high-rise, he shreds through several security guards. Deadpool's ADD-riddled personality comes through in his combat style, which is erratic and fast-paced. After running down a hall firing two pistols at a group of guards, he might perform a spin attack with dual katanas or grab a sledgehammer and knock together a few heads. As Deadpool dances through combat, he builds up a series of combo bars that unleash room-clearing special moves such as a spinning sword attack.

One of Deadpool's powers is a healing factor similar to Wolverine's. This makes Deadpool nearly invulnerable, but he isn't indestructible; he slowly falls apart as he suffers damage during combat. Players can either wait for the missing limbs to regrow or pick up his missing chunks and reattach them. When we asked Miller if Deadpool's healing factor makes the game more difficult to balance, he shared an interesting opinion about the state of modern gaming.

"Really, how is this different from any other video game out there? We've become used to the idea that 'my character' can soak up damage and miraculously recover from multiple gunshots, or if I actually die, I just respawn at my last checkpoint. Just because I can take a lot of damage doesn't mean I can't lose – and Deadpool hates losing."

Deadpool breaks the fourth wall as often as he break noses, but that could be one of his game's most distinguishing characteristics. Given High Moon's pedigree working on licensed titles like *Transformers: Fall of Cybertron*, we expect this game to be a polished experience full of comedic action and dazzling explosions. » **Ben Reeves**

» **Platform**
PlayStation 3 • Xbox 360

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Activision

» **Developer**
High Moon Studios

» **Release**
2013

Balancing Humor

Humor isn't an easy thing to inject into a game. Deadpool is known for talking a lot, and players will be able to hear the voices inside his head, which creates the possibility of Deadpool overload. We asked game director Sean Miller what the studio is doing to make sure the humor stays fresh.

"The key is that Deadpool wants to be a likable guy. He's been through a hellish life, and like many of us, the jokes he cracks help lighten up some pretty serious business. The game won't be an endless stream of repetitive one-liners – he's playing the game with you, so his thoughts and jokes are in the context of what you are both experiencing. He just lets out who he is, unfiltered – something none of us get to do in our day-to-day lives."



Forza Horizon

Find your rival

- » **Platform**
Xbox 360
- » **Style**
1-Player Racing
(8-Player Online)
- » **Publisher**
Microsoft Studios
- » **Developer**
Playground
Games
- » **Release**
October 23

Forza Horizon, set in Colorado, may not hop around the globe like the regular, sim-based franchise, but the more time you spend with the game the more you uncover. Horizon works on two levels. You can play it like a story-based racing title where you have to take down various drivers entered into the Horizon Festival (complete with cutscenes and voice overs), or you can roam the map looking for adventure, hidden treasure, and whatever trouble you can find. The two aren't mutually exclusive, and the way the game freely offers both is part of the fun.

Whether you're going through the Festival races (including Showcase Events where you might race against a plane, for example), looking for "barn finds" (gift cars randomly placed in the environment), or trying to beat the scores and times posted by online friends, you're earning popularity points. You get these points whenever you show off a skill like catching air, wrecking stuff, drifting, and passing cars. These earn you credits, push your popularity level, and also satisfy 15 different kinds of sponsorship

challenges (which also have various levels).

One of my favorite uses of popularity points is for outposts. Once found, you can fast travel to these points on the map. You can do this for free if you complete the outposts' three skill challenges. Although most challenges are based on feats you earn popularity points for, similar to Atari's Test Drive: Unlimited series, it also offers a fun photo challenge that requires you to take a photo of your car under certain criteria.

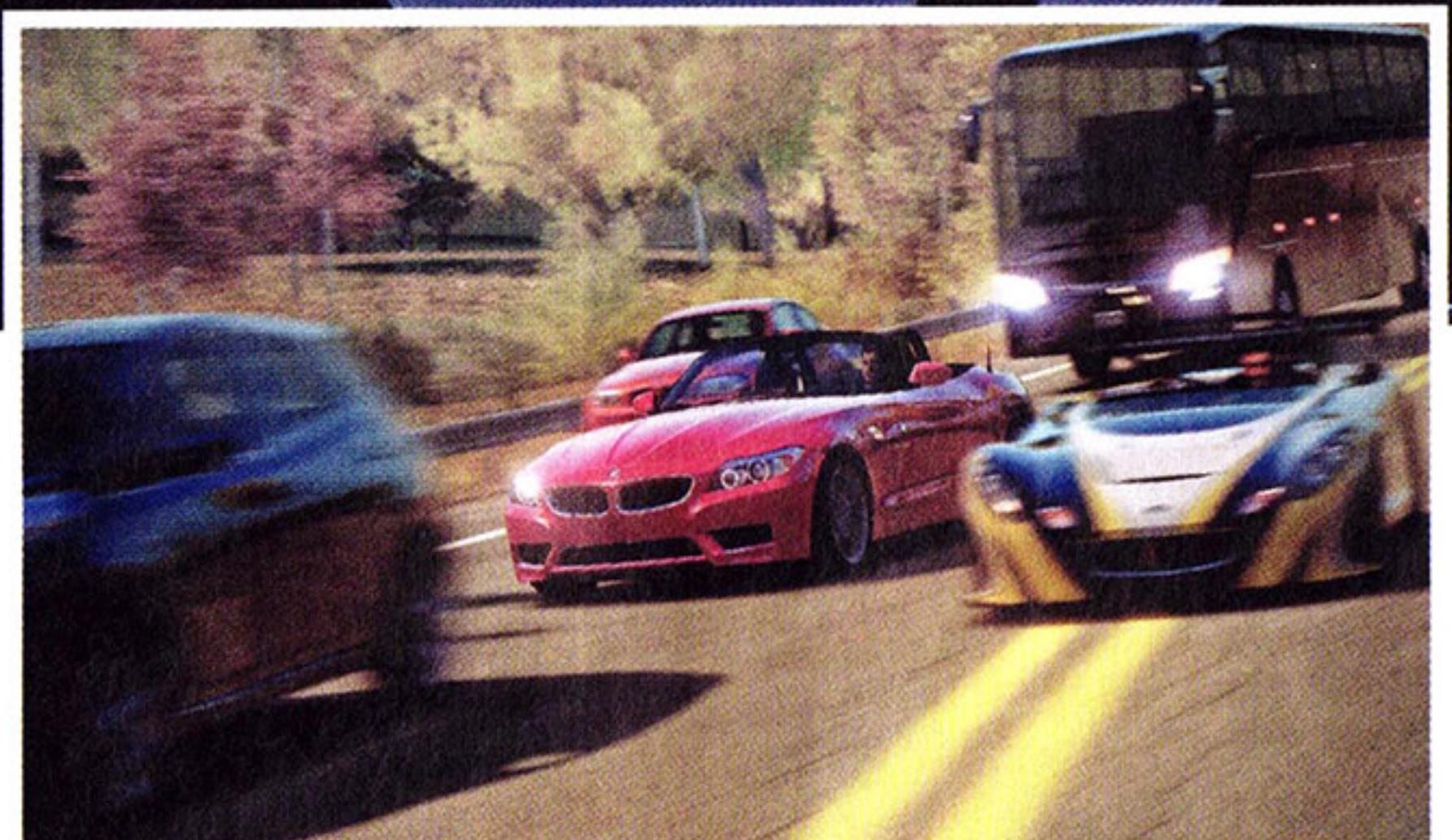
The game offers other lighthearted moments through the barn finds, smashing up to 100 discount signs alongside roads to receive a percentage discount at the upgrade store, and the speed traps placed on certain roads that clock how fast you're going. This time is posted online for anyone to beat.

Despite the open structure, some aspects are surprisingly restrictive. Horizon posts all your feats online for friends to challenge, but unlike Test Drive: Unlimited your friends' avatars don't populate your world and you can't challenge

them to races on the spot. Similarly, you can race Horizon Festival racers point-to-point when you come across them in the game world, but Festival events are not triggered in this manner. Finally, while you earn popularity points for smashing gates and are encouraged to explore the world, impenetrable rails often border the road and many areas are inaccessible.

Regardless, these restrictions do not overshadow the pure amount of racing Horizons offers. From mixed-surface off-road/tarmac races to nighttime point-to-point grudge matches against rivals, the map offers many options. It's easy to get caught up in a particular loop; maybe you want to keep beating online scores or just race whatever Horizon participants you meet on the road. Go ahead, there will be plenty of other cars out there waiting to race you. » **Matthew Kato**

For a taste of the game's first hour, head to gameinformer.com/mag



Car Customization

The Forza series is known for its extensive decal options – which Forza Horizon also has – but another aspect of Horizon also caters to car lovers. Buying cars and winning them via races is a fun way to keep up with the Joneses, but you can also upgrade any car you already own to keep it competitive.

Races have car class restrictions, so you can upgrade any old jalopy at Dak's Garage to raise its class. This can be done by either manually tweaking specific parts of the car or by buying an upgrade package. These either jump your car up to the next class, or raise you to the ceiling of your current one. This is important because like Forza Motorsport, you might want to keep cars of certain makes/models, classes, and drivetrains for events with those specifications.



Need for Speed: Most Wanted

Two familiar race concepts combine

In 2008's *Burnout Paradise*, Criterion Games opened up a huge fictional city, filled it with events, and then sweetened the deal by letting players invite their friends to join in the fun. The new *Need for Speed: Most Wanted* brings a return to the crazy police chases and street race vibe established by the 2005 game of the same name, but adds more than a few touches reminiscent of *Burnout Paradise*. The result feels like a bizarre but entertaining cross-breed produced by the two long-running series.

I spent several hours touring *Most Wanted*'s sprawling city of Fairhaven. The game drops me right into the action without any pause menu navigation; the entire experience is meant to be seamless between events, changes in vehicle, and upgrades to your ride. Tapping the d-pad pulls up a simple menu with options to set a

new race destination, and the mini-map immediately reflects my new objective. As I explore the city in my Porsche, I eventually come across a lonely looking Lamborghini on the side of the road. Taking possession of the new vehicle is as simple as stopping by it and pressing a button. A majority of vehicles are available in this way from the very beginning.

Each of the cars and trucks has its own set of races to complete. When I perform well in a race, I unlock additional upgrades to apply to that vehicle. I apply them on the fly even as I drive away, like a new set of offroad tires or some nitrous. In addition, every activity I complete – from winning a race to slamming a competing vehicle into the wall – grants speed points, which move me closer to confronting the 10 rival *Most Wanted* racers around the city.

All the while, the police are on my tail if I engage in illegal driving (which, to be fair, is most of the time). Cop chases are a big part of gameplay, and the aggressive police are more than a match for my driving skills. Getting away from pursuers is harder than in previous iterations of the series, and players need to think strategically about how to get around roadblocks, avoid spike strips, lose tailing cars, and avoid big ramming SUVs. Police chases can crop up if one of them catches you doing something wrong, but they also interrupt ongoing races, adding an additional layer of challenge.

Criterion's new approach to online play rolls together with the single-player game. Up to eight players can hop into my world and compete, or just mess around in the open world playground of Fairhaven. The focus is on constant competition with friends; distance of jumps, race times, and unlocking cars are all options for one-upmanship. Criterion has also introduced new race playlists, so a group of friends can queue up a sequence of events, and the whole group will go from one meet-up to the next. Like the single-player experience, multiplayer occurs seamlessly without the need to depart your game, and engaging in multiplayer events rewards the player with speed points.

Most Wanted wastes no time getting players into the thick of racing, and exploring without the need to dive into external menus is refreshing. Along with the robust and freeform multiplayer experience, I'm hopeful that Criterion might have a *Need for Speed* game with legs long enough to keep players involved for months after release. » **Matt Miller**

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

» **Style**
1-Player Racing
(8-Player Online [PS3, 360],
12-Player Online [PC])

» **Publisher**
Electronic Arts

» **Developer**
Criterion Games

» **Release**
October 30

A wide variety of vehicles is available, and you can change your ride at any time



Metal Gear Solid: Ground Zeroes

Snake's latest mission raises new questions

» **Platform**
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360

» **Style**
1-Player Action/Adventure

» **Publisher**
Konami

» **Developer**
Kojima Productions

» **Release**
2013

Despite being one of the central figures in Metal Gear lore, Solid Snake's retirement isn't keeping fans from getting more installments. Series creator Hideo Kojima clearly has big plans for continuing the story of Metal Gear's other main character, Big Boss, in the newly announced Ground Zeroes.

First unveiled in trailer form, Ground Zeroes is an open-world stealth game focused on individual missions and larger environments. This is a departure from the cinematic approach of previous entries, but the open world and day/night cycle should provide plenty of opportunities for players to explore the new structure. Gameplay details are still scarce, but the reveal trailer has no shortage of mysteries for fans to puzzle over.

Is it a next-gen title?

Though the graphics are gorgeous, Konami says Ground Zeroes is a multiplatform, current-generation project. However, Kojima has talked about the Fox engine that powers Ground Zeroes as being "scalable," which could indicate a next-gen release similar to the way that certain games released on two generations of hardware when the Xbox 360 first came out.

How is Hideo Kojima involved?

Unlike some other titles bearing the Metal Gear name (most notably the upcoming Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance), Hideo Kojima is personally overseeing the development of Ground Zeroes. This is a good step toward establishing some early gamer confidence in the title.

What is XOF?

The military group that runs Camp Omega (where Chico and Paz from Peace Walker are detained) is called XOF. Yeah, "Fox" backwards. These soldiers are working against Big Boss, so it's probable that they are aligned with Zero and/or one of his puppet organizations. Though the scarred man who appears to lead XOF could be a new character, many fans speculate that he is one of Big Boss' supposedly dead foes from Peace Walker – possibly Hot Coldman or Vladimir Zadornov.

Why is Big Boss back with FOX?

FOX is the covert organization that Naked Snake (before he was Big Boss) belonged to during the events of Metal Gear Solid 3. At the time, Major Zero led the group. However, over the years, Snake drifted apart from FOX and formed his own army-for-hire called Militaires

Sans Frontières (Soldiers Without Borders). Why Snake would abandon his comrades and rejoin his enemies is a question Ground Zeroes needs to address.

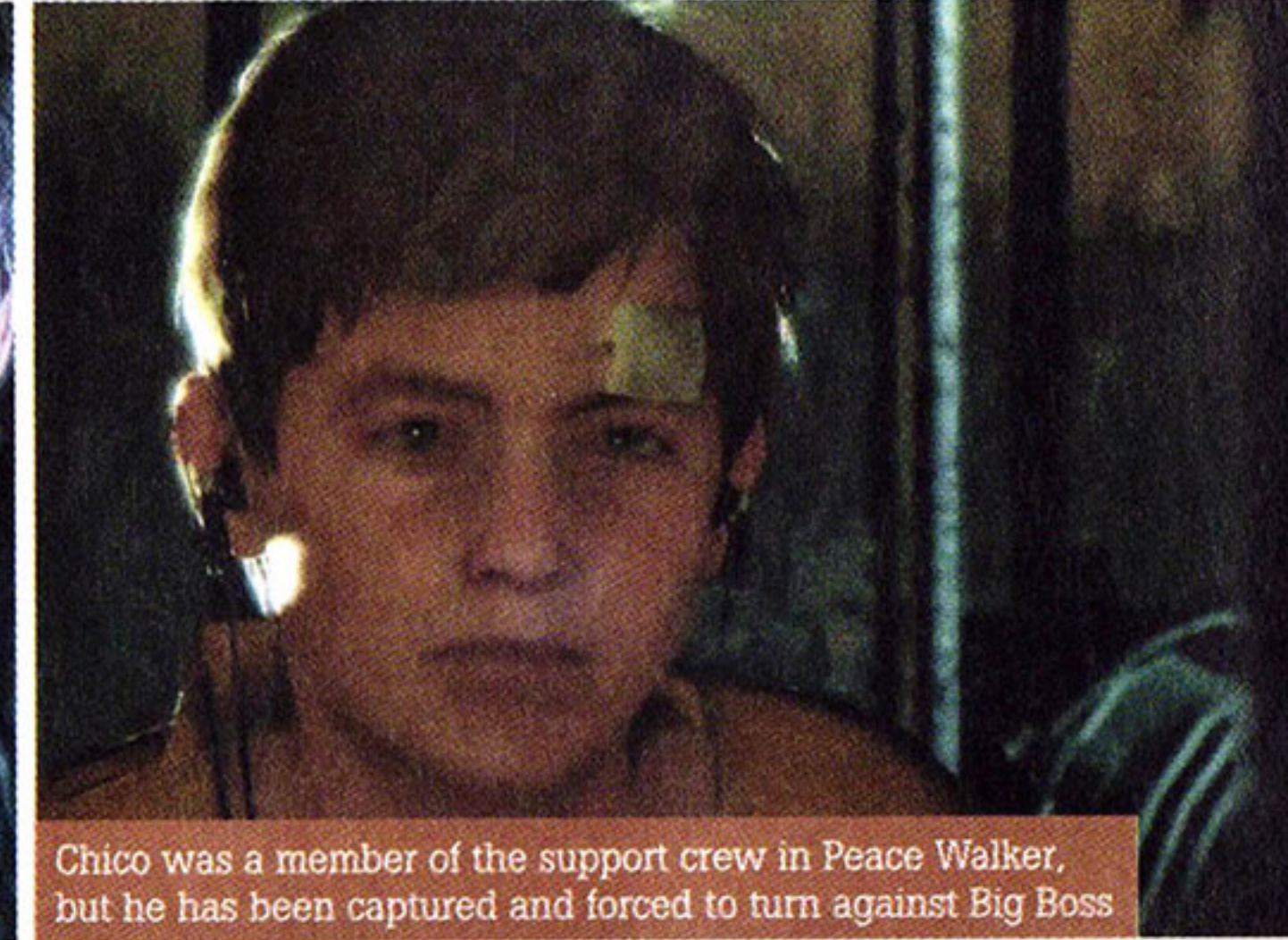
How will this connect to MGS 5?

Hideo Kojima has referred to Ground Zeroes as a prologue to Metal Gear Solid 5. That could imply a few different things. Ground Zeroes could be a full-fledged entry in the series, featuring a story that sets the stage for the next title. On the other hand, Ground Zeroes may be a shorter game that just gives players a taste of the mechanics and ideas in store for the future of Metal Gear. Either way, fans of the series have something to look forward to. » **Joe Juba**

Watch the Metal Gear Solid: Ground Zeroes reveal trailer at gameinformer.com/mag



The XOF leader's face is scarred, so he could possibly be a familiar character that fans just can't recognize



Chico was a member of the support crew in Peace Walker, but he has been captured and forced to turn against Big Boss



Sacred 3

Putting more action into the action/RPG formula

Sacred 3 tackles a fundamental question: What does a plus-six sword really mean for gameplay once you scratch through the obvious numerical value? Usually, it translates to higher numbers popping over enemy heads – until those enemies scale up to match your character's progression. Keen Games is aiming beyond the "same game, but more of it" target with Sacred 3. Instead, the studio says it's scrutinizing and overhauling fundamental elements from the past few games.

The new approach is obvious from the moment you launch the game. The camera is tightly zoomed in on the action, which makes the combat immediate and dramatic. Sacred 3 is still a role-playing game with behind-the-scenes number crunching at its core, but it emphasizes action more heavily this time around. Battles are dynamic and visceral, with the large characters whirling through clusters of enemies while using environmental advantages. For instance, the agile Ancarian lancer pokes and slices opponents with her double-bladed staff, pausing to push a few unfortunate foes off a mesa and down to their doom.

The Safiri berserker is a more traditional melee-based character, who hurls himself into clusters of enemies with little regard for his own safety. The game is designed with cooperative play in mind, and characters can interact in more meaningful ways than just trading items. Players who work together can chain their abilities together with devastating results. For example, the lancer can use a combat art that stuns small groups of enemies. That's a perfect setup for the berserker's charging attack, which knocks around the enemies it doesn't outright kill.

Keen Games is trading Sacred 2's sprawling, open vision of Ancaria for a more focused setting. "Focused" is often marketing speak for



The camera is positioned closer to the action in Sacred 3, which makes the combat seem more immediate



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

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

» **Publisher**
Deep Silver

» **Developer**
Keen Games

» **Release**
2013

"smaller," but in this case trimming some fat may ultimately help the game. The developers plan to provide variety and direction instead of plunging players into vast (and largely empty) spaces. Areas are still relatively open, with multiple paths ripe for exploration. The comparatively smaller scale allows for more impressive camera work, zooming on points of interest and highlighting areas with a cinematic flair.

Keen also tweaked Sacred 3's quest structure to address complaints from past games; characters practically wore out grooves between areas hoofing between towns. We haven't yet

seen how Keen plans to structurally expand quests, but we remain optimistic. It would be a shame if the revamped combat system merely strung together the same old grind of fetch quests.

We still don't know a lot about Sacred 3 at this point – including how casters handle themselves in the field – but the new direction has a lot of promise. Diablo III turned off some fans of the old-school isometric dungeon crawlers with its updated sensibilities, and we're interested to see if Sacred 3 garners the same response. » **Jeff Cork**





Company of Heroes 2

The new fog of war changes everything

» **Platform**
PC

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

» **Publisher**
THQ

» **Developer**
Relic Entertainment

» **Release**
2013

A few months ago, Relic gave the first glimpse of its upcoming World War II real-time strategy sequel. I wasn't blown away. I love Company of Heroes, but the first showing of its successor looked like an incremental improvement of a six-year-old game – not an amazing pitch. All that jaded disappointment is burning in a pile of discarded preconceptions now that I've played a pre-alpha build of the game. The new environmental effects and rebuilt sight mechanics are exactly the kick in the pants the real-time strategy genre needs.

Like the original, Company of Heroes 2 is a micromanagement-focused tactical RTS that approaches realism as closely as possible while still holding gameplay paramount. Cover is practically required for infantry to avoid being shredded on the battlefield, shooting tanks in the rear is the right way to take them down, and blowing apart a building is a perfectly valid way to clear the path for an armored offensive. Keeping an eye on the strategic level is still important, but good low-level tactics win far more Company of Heroes matches than out-producing the enemy does.

Making line-of-sight follow realistic rules instead of being a simple radius around each unit sounds like a small improvement, but it completely changes the way you approach tactics. Holing up a squad of riflemen in a restaurant in a cramped alley is a great defensive maneuver, but they can't see anything further than the street in front of them. Controlling a high vantage point isn't just good scouting – with the long ranges of artillery and other field guns, it's mission-critical. A tall fence isn't merely soft cover; it's 100-percent foolproof stealth for your units if the other guy doesn't have eyes on the other side.

This one simple-seeming change alters

the entire complexion of a match dramatically, making good tactics even more intuitive. Crossing a city crawling with hostile infantry sucks. Instead of imposing a simple penalty to accuracy, now smoke grenades provide real cover because enemy troops literally can't see your guys through the cloud. Getting infantry out in the field into protected vantage points that give good visibility is a major tactical coup, letting your heavy weapons accurately target enemy positions and provide covering fire for further advances. Combined arms tactics are a huge part of modern military doctrine for a reason, and that is reinforced more strongly than ever in Company of Heroes 2.

Blizzards are an interesting addition to the game, and lend a peculiar rhythm to certain maps. Any infantry not in a vehicle, garrisoned in a building, or near a bonfire (which engineers can construct on the fly) slowly lose body heat. If their temperature gauge empties, their health bar quickly follows. Given the omnipresent need to have ground-pounding scouts out to effectively advance on enemy positions, it's incredibly difficult to mount an offensive during a snowstorm. Regrouping, ordering new troops and equipment, and preparing for clear skies dominate blizzard periods. Your opponent won't be expecting an attack, so if you can pull off an assault under cover of inclement weather you'll have the all-important element of surprise.

Relic earned gamers' trust with 15 years of solid games, and I'm glad to recant my earlier doubts about Company of Heroes 2. One simple hands-on session was enough to convert me back to the Relic flock, and this is now one of my highest priorities for 2013 strategy gaming. » **Adam Biessener**

As always, the details and animations of individual units Relic fits into its games are world-class



Personal touches like troops shouting, "Haha, f--- you!" when they score a kill bring the battles to life





Blade & Soul

A martial arts MMORPG for grown-ups

No one questions NCsoft's success in its native South Korea, but since the company's inception in 1997 none of its Korean-developed MMOs have gained a reliable foothold in North America. Its Western-developed title *City of Heroes* had a good run, and *Guild Wars* and its just-released sequel from Seattle-based ArenaNet have found success, but the company's Korean games have yet to click with Western

audiences. NCsoft's newest effort, *Blade & Soul*, targets Americans' long-standing love affair with martial arts action, a play the company hopes finally persuades gamers to pay attention.

Blade & Soul mimics the wire-fu antics of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* to deliver a traversal system unlike anything we've seen in MMOs. Within the first five minutes of our hands-off demo, a freshly created swordmaster is using the Qing Gong (Korean for "light body") movement system to gracefully navigate the environments. Her Swift Dash ability lets her sprint around a sleepy village at warp speed, while Glide enables graceful soaring between high rooftops and towering cliffs.

The martial arts inspired combat is also promising, with a small hotbar à la *Guild Wars 2* making sure that the interface takes a back seat to action that is grounded in MMORPG basics but reaches for *Street Fighter*. The swordmaster in our demo, for example, uses a parry/riposte move that deflects incoming attacks and punishes foes with a brutal counter provided the player hits a small timing window.

Blade & Soul's environments provide otherworldly gorgeous backdrops for the action, but the presentation excels when showing off the bombastic martial arts animations. A freeze spell from the magic-using force master class doesn't just stop an enemy in its tracks; it shoots out twin serpentine ice dragons that wrap the target in their crystalline embrace. The destroyer class doesn't just smack bad guys with a big axe, it launches them dozens of feet into

the air and follows up with leaping smashes reminiscent of Dante's acrobatics in *Devil May Cry*. The kung fu master class combines a dizzying array of assaults from every body part into a whirlwind of pain.

Team Bloodlust has put a lot of effort into the extensive voice acting and cinematic dialogue cameras, but what we've seen of the story thus far more resembles a hackneyed anime revenge fantasy than the classic tale of the Monkey King. Plucky younger sisters blast saccharine sweetness, angry young men charge into unwinnable battles, sultry demon princesses taunt powerless heroes, and ancient masters hold mountain-crushing power in their wizened bodies. Still, *Guild Wars 2* is the latest wildly successful MMORPG to prove that poor narrative isn't the kiss of death in this genre (see page 40).

Blade & Soul checks off all the boxes it is expected to: team-balanced instanced PvP, optional open-world PvP, guilds, and all the rest. The game is beautiful, Qing Gong is a killer feature in the making, and combat looks at least on par with the current crop of next-gen MMORPGs. This looks as likely as anything ever has to finally smash through the Korean-American cultural MMO divide where so many other games have failed. » **Adam Biessener**

» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
Massively Multiplayer
Online Role-Playing Game

» **Publisher**
NCsoft

» **Developer**
Team Bloodlust

» **Release**
TBA

Crossing the Cultural Divide

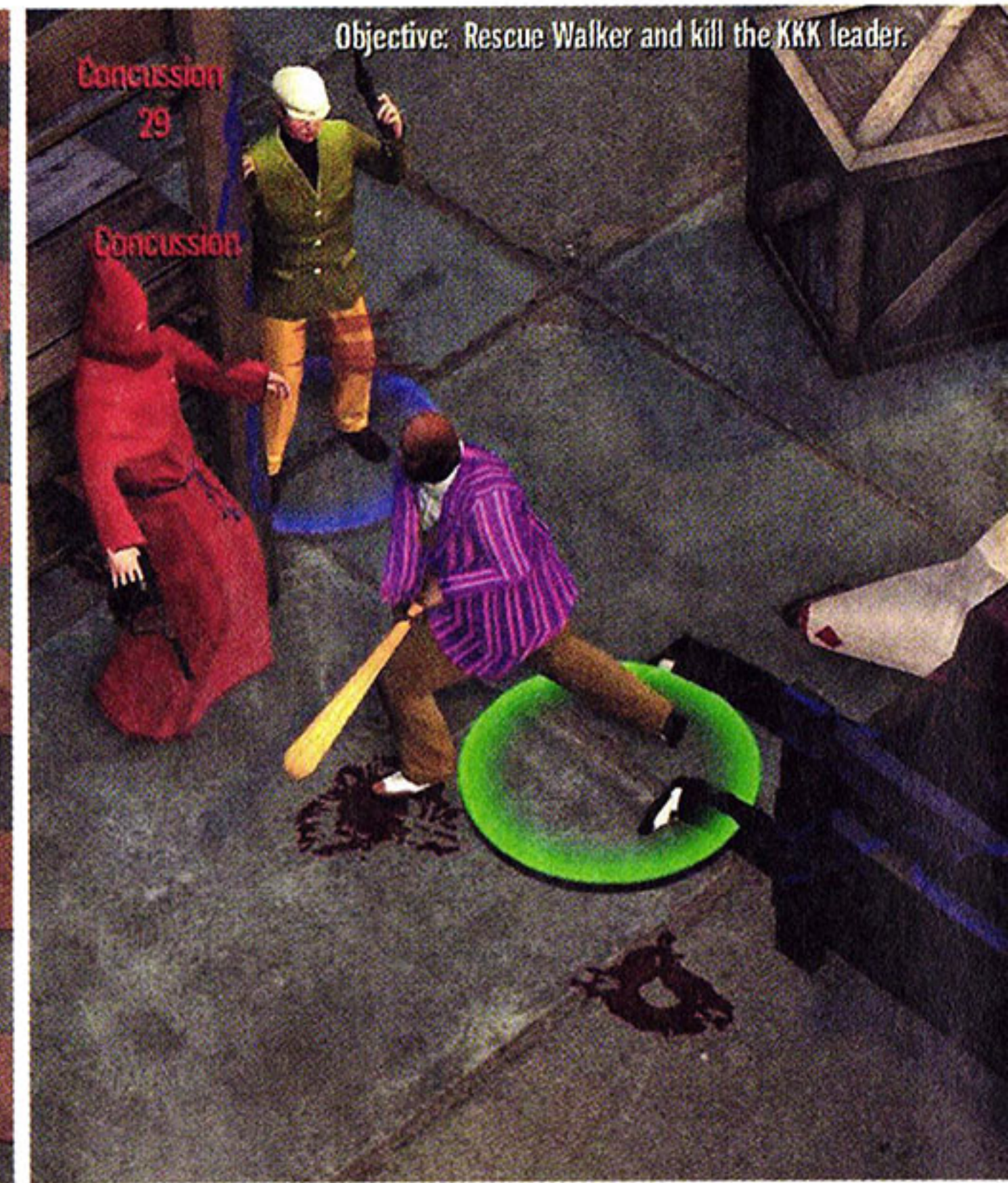
The way *Blade & Soul* brings high-flying martial arts combat to the massively multiplayer space looks fantastic, but NCsoft has tempted us before with gorgeous Korean-developed games only to dash the hopes of Western gamers with suspect mechanics and painful grinding requirements. Even though the game is already a hit in Korea, with over 200,000 concurrent users putting it in the ballpark of other Korean hits like *Tera* and *Aion*, that's no guarantee of Western success. The company's approach to *Blade & Soul* is refreshingly honest in how it grapples with these historical problems; the official FAQ even has an entry reassuring people that it's not going to be like *Aion*.

NCsoft is investing in the infrastructure as a solution to some of those issues. The North American live team, which is responsible for localization, post-launch operations, and development, is based in Seattle and has access to a suite of tools that can change the American version of the game on the fly. If players feel that it takes too long to level, for example, the team can make it faster independently of the Korean version. Drop rates too low? Seattle can boost them without developing, testing, and deploying a patch. This may sound like inside baseball – who cares how it happens, we just want a fun game to play – but any MMO veteran can attest to the fact that changes never come as quickly as players like, no matter how simple they sound. Streamlining the process of making and keeping the Western version in line with player expectations could be a vital piece of the puzzle.



Omerta: City of Gangsters

Cleaning up the streets with dirty money



» **Platform**
Xbox 360 • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Strategy

» **Publisher**
Kalypso Media

» **Developer**
Haemimont Games

» **Release**
November 9

Fresh off the boat from Sicily, two brothers aim to carve out a new life in Prohibition-era Atlantic City. The boring good-guy brother joins a police force increasingly embattled by gangsters, distillery operators, speakeasy owners, and assorted thugs. The smarter, more interesting brother builds a mob of his own from the ground up. Thankfully, you play as the second sibling in *Omerta: City of Gangsters*.

Part economic sim and part tactical role-playing game, *Omerta* is a new project from Tropic studio Haemimont Games. You build your gang and criminal empire in real time on a detailed map of Atlantic City, managing economic investments and interpersonal relationships. However, you won't become a feared and respected gangster without getting your hands dirty. Once the planning is in place, big-ticket actions like bank heists zoom down to a turn-based tactical mode similar to *XCOM* or *Jagged Alliance*.

Gangsters must earn a living, and in *Omerta* that's accomplished by trading goods, opening shady businesses, and, of course, stealing from people. The wide-open strategy lets you proceed as you see fit, building the criminal organization of your dreams. Speakeasies are great sources of dirty money, but they need to be defended and supplied, and the cash



they generate must be laundered. Bank heists deliver an influx of cash, provided you can pull them off without grievous bodily harm to your crew – and so long as the heat they generate doesn't lead to your arrest before you can pay off a dirty cop to destroy the evidence.

The tactical layer of the game is a turn-based squad combat simulation. Each character's stats determine his or her speed, accuracy, number of action points available, courage, and more. Different types of shots do different things, so you can spray-and-pray with a tommy gun to create widespread panic or crouch down and take a precise pistol shot at an armed guard. Sound and awareness are crucial. Patient players can walk into the lobby of a bank and silently knock out guards with melee weapons like brass knuckles before the alarm is raised. Since they are so different from Haemimont's previous work on *Tropico*, I have some concerns about the tactical battles. Still, the potential is there.

Omerta is a complex strategy game at heart,

but Haemimont is trying to put a personal face on it. Each member of your gang has stats that increase as he or she levels up and unique talents that can be used in various facets of your organization. Persistent characters like dirty cops and greedy bishops request your assistance or offer exchanges of goods or favors, and their opinion of you changes based on your actions. Neutral characters like independent distillery operators even present a human element, as they warm up to you for buying their products or become angry when you open competing facilities.

Playing a preview build of *Omerta* left me with such a positive impression that I'm not even upset that Haemimont isn't putting all of its efforts toward the next *Tropico* game – high praise coming from someone who dumped an embarrassing amount of time into that series. *Omerta* has a lot of disparate parts that need to work together to fulfill its promise, but Haemimont's strong track record gives me confidence that they can pull it off. » **Adam Biessener**

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Medal of Honor: Warfighter

Can a renewed focus on storytelling restore honor to this once-proud series?

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

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

» **Publisher**
Electronic Arts

» **Developer**
Danger Close

» **Release**
October 23

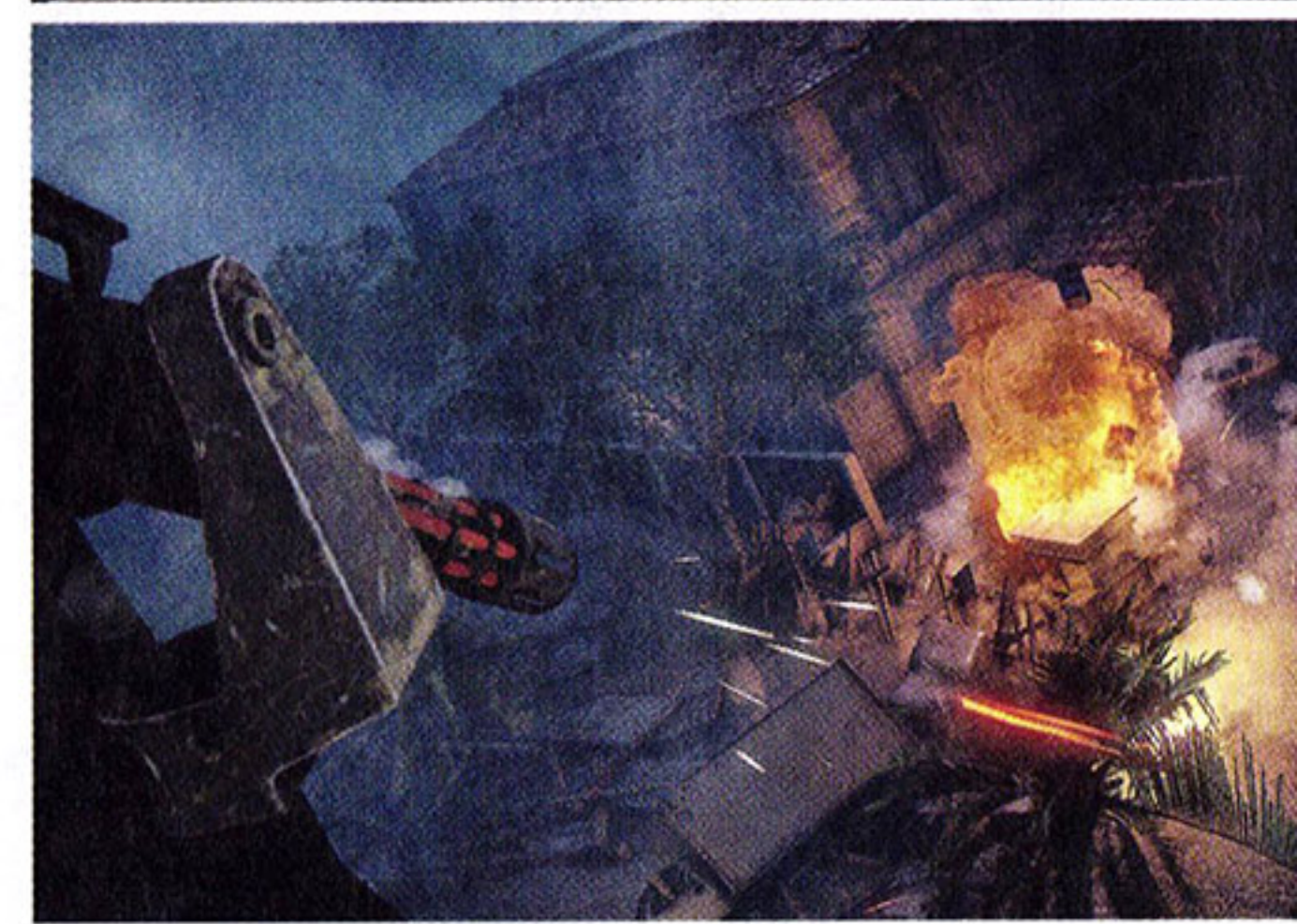
Danger Close wants Medal of Honor: Warfighter to improve every facet of 2010's mediocre entry, and one of the major areas in need of development was the narrative. For the sequel, Danger Close brought on Tier 1 Operators to help develop a story based on real people and events. Twelve Special Forces units across ten countries have helped shape Warfighter's multiple protagonists and globetrotting story. We played through a slice of the single-player campaign and got a taste for the personal story of Preacher, one of the conflicted protagonists from the previous game.

Following the events of Medal of Honor, Preacher questions why he's fighting. He wants to spend time with his wife and child instead of killing terrorists across the world. However, his white picket fence reality is shattered when a terrorist bombs the subway his family is scheduled to take to meet him. Preacher recalls catching a glimpse of an old enemy riding a departing subway moments before the attack. The man is Khalifa, a target Preacher's crew failed to assassinate when working with the Filipino anti-terror force. Preacher is stunned when his family, who he presumed dead, visits him in the hospital as he's mending from the bombing injuries. He realizes that their safety is the reason he fights, and decides to suit up once again as a

Tier 1 Operator.

My hands-on time as Preacher takes place in Isabela City, an impoverished area being rocked by a monsoon. I trot into the knee-high water armed with a standard issue tactical assault rifle on a mission to kill terrorists. The meat of the scenario involves fierce shootouts in flooded plazas and warehouses. You can aim the assault rifle with the iron sights or a mid-range scope, and you can cycle between them without exiting the zoomed-in perspective. Gunplay feels on par with other big-budget shooters, but bullets that chip away concrete walls and wood make each weapon feel more powerful thanks to the Frostbite 2 engine. Destructible cover can work against you, as well. Thankfully Warfighter lets you cautiously lean out from behind cover using the precision of an analog stick, adding some finesse to the tired whack-a-mole style shootout.

The single-player demo concludes with a helicopter ride above a swarm of hostiles, with you as the gunner. Blasting away enemies from a chopper is nothing new to military shooters, but the Frostbite 2 engine accentuates the massacre with geysers of shattered stone and splintered wood. Warfighter appears to be a by-the-numbers shooter, but Danger Close's renewed focus on storytelling and the power of DICE's Frostbite 2 engine may be enough to win over gamers. » **Tim Turi**



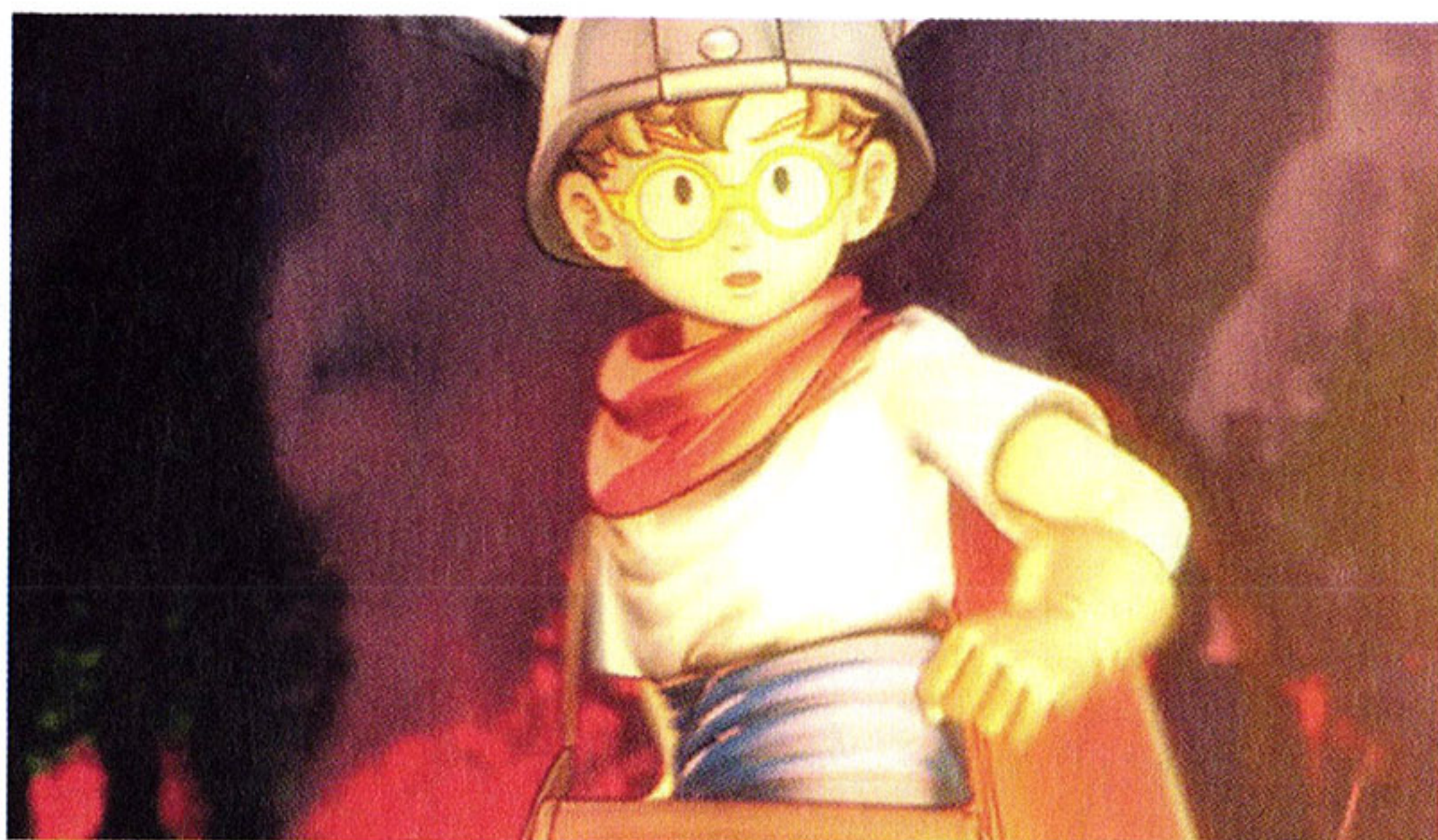
Cover is destructible thanks to Frostbite 2



No military shooter is complete without a chopper

Dragon Quest X

Getting ready to slime online



For its tenth iteration, Dragon Quest celebrates in style with an MMORPG exclusive to the Wii and Wii U. Wii users in Japan stepped into the slime-infested world this past August, but with the Wii U launch on the horizon, we're hoping North American fans also gain admittance.

Dragon Quest makes sense as an MMORPG, since the series focuses on exploring the world and unlocking its hidden treasures. This installment is no different, pulling out all the stops with an expansive world called Astordia, spanning five continents populated with distinct races. You begin the game as a human, but eventually you can switch to an ogre, weddie, elf, dwarf, or puklipo. No matter the choice, you encounter snowy mountaintops, bright islands, and evergreen forests, as well as some familiar and new monsters.

Dragon Quest X doesn't stray from the series' traditional battle system, letting you choose your command before execution. Similar to other entries, enemies are visible on the map, so you know what's coming. A skill point system for weapon proficiency is in place, and distributing a certain amount of points unlocks different skills unique to each weapon. Myriad classes are available, including warrior, monk, martial artist, thief, mage, and minstrel. Quests play into your character selections, with unique missions for each class, race, and continent.

In true MMO fashion, Dragon Quest X lets you play with others, having three slots for party members. If you want to play solo, you can select the option for an AI party where you pick your allies' classes. Additionally, Dragon Quest X makes your interaction with the world matter. Walk by a fight and start cheering a party on, and you increase their tension for more powerful attacks.

Plenty of what we love about Dragon Quest is right here to share with others in an immersive world. For now we stay on pins and needles, waiting for an announcement regarding a North American release. » **Kimberley Wallace**



- » **Platform**
Wii • Wii U
- » **Style**
Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game
- » **Publisher**
Square Enix
- » **Developer**
Square Enix
- » **Release**
TBA



Epic Mickey: Power of Illusion

A cavalcade of Disney cameos

Epic Mickey: Power of Illusion is a companion to the upcoming Epic Mickey 2, but dramatically sets itself apart. Some elements are shared between the games, like the ability to create and delete objects using paint and thinner, and the plethora of Disney characters. Power of Illusion takes the Disney cameo collection a step further by featuring characters from all over the Disney universe, not just Mickey's traditional play pals. If the first few levels are any indication, Kingdom Hearts will have to step up its game if it wants to keep up with the number of Disney appearances that Power of Illusion promises.

The game begins with the evil witch Mizrabel and her Castle of Illusion suddenly appearing in Wasteland. Oswald the Rabbit calls on Mickey for help after spotting Minnie in the castle. The castle serves as a hub for the assorted levels Mickey must explore, and it also stores all the characters you find during your travels.

Recognizable faces from just about every Disney property are hidden throughout the levels. During my brief time with the game I saw Goofy, Scrooge McDuck, Beast from *Beauty and the Beast*, a few members of the Lost Boys, Peter and Hook from *Peter Pan*, and Rapunzel from *Tangled*. After finishing two levels, a Disney rep told me I had bypassed three additional characters, so developer Dreamrift isn't being shy about packing the levels full of surprises. As you collect characters, they take up residency in the castle's many rooms, which you can visit and upgrade in order to unlock power-ups and additional missions.

Power of Illusion feels like an old-school platformer in the best way. Creative director Peter Ong is a huge fan of the original Illusion games that appeared on Sega consoles, and the influence shines through Power of Illusion's design. After spending time with Epic Mickey 2 and Power of Illusion, I am more excited about Mickey's hand-held adventure than his console one. » **Kyle Hilliard**

- » **Platform**
3DS
- » **Style**
1 or 2-Player Platforming
- » **Publisher**
Disney Interactive Studios
- » **Developer**
Dreamrift
- » **Release**
November 18



reviews



gameinformer
GAME OF THE MONTH

118 XCOM: Enemy Unknown

Firaxis' remake of the PC classic for consoles and computers alike hits all the right notes. Find out how a turn-based strategy game brings some of the highest tension and terror this generation has seen on page 118.

THE SCORING SYSTEM

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

AWARDS

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

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XCOM: Enemy Unknown

A remake that lives up to its legendary provenance

9.5

gameinformer
GAME OF THE MONTH

gameinformer
GOLD

Style 1-Player Strategy (2-Player Online) Publisher 2K Games
Developer Firaxis Games Release October 9 ESRB M

PS3 • 360 • PC

» Concept

Defend the earth from a terrifying alien invasion with global strategy and boots-on-the-ground tactical genius

» Graphics

The Unreal Engine 3 graphics won't win any technical awards, but the presentation does a great job of making turn-based strategy visually interesting

» Sound

Michael McCann's futuristic score is exceptional. The voice work is competent, but too limited

» Playability

The occasional line-of-sight problem is a price worth paying for this otherwise excellent minimalist interface, which works equally well on gamepad or mouse/keyboard

» Entertainment

The XCOM team's love for the unapologetic hardcore PC games of old is matched by its unwavering dedication to making the world and events personal and immediate in a way the strategy genre has never achieved

» Replay Value High



Turn-based games have a thin line to walk in order to keep players engaged. XCOM: Enemy Unknown pulls players in so many different directions with both threats and opportunities that making the tough choices it demands is as difficult as stepping away from the nail-biting situation onscreen. Defending against XCOM's mysterious alien invasion is one of the most challenging, intense gaming experiences of this generation.

Preventing Earth from succumbing to invading extraterrestrials takes place in two phases. In the strategic view, you must manage limited time, money, and material resources to outfit your soldiers with up-to-date equipment, expand satellite coverage across the globe to keep civilian panic levels under control, invest in XCOM's underground infrastructure, and extract whatever secrets you can from captured alien artifacts. This layer is more of an interstitial break between the randomly generated tactical missions, where the true heart of the game lies.

Firaxis' outstanding design strips away every last vestige of tedium from combat while maintaining the agency that makes the original such a classic. Though each soldier's actions are constrained to a basic list, the tactical possibilities are as broad as your imagination: Park a sniper up on a roof and bait the enemy into his killzone, set up behind heavy cover and breach a wall with a rocket, or occupy the enemy with suppression from cover while flanking with a second team.

Implementing these strategies is fast and easy thanks to XCOM's clear, uncomplicated interface. More importantly, the tactics that work make sense on an intuitive level rather than being a function of learning internal math. As I got

better at the game, it wasn't because I learned how many tiles a sniper rifle needs between shooter and target to negate its close-range aim penalty. I became a better commander because I learned when to retreat instead of pressing the attack, the value of covering a reloading soldier, and to fire off limited-use abilities whenever they might grant an advantage.

The AI understands these tactical truths as well. I was pleasantly surprised to notice no bad moves on the aliens' parts except for those easily explained by the enemies not knowing my troops' locations. They have to scout your positions just like you have to find them, which you can and should use to your advantage.

Toward the end of the 20 or so hours a play-through takes, you engage the aliens on more even terms with plasma rifles and psionic powers of your own. With the exception of the lackluster final mission, XCOM maintains its difficulty throughout. More and tougher aliens appear, terror missions push you out of your tactical box by forcing you to save civilians, and a few set-piece missions at certain points in the narrative present unique challenges. Even with a demigod of a sniper who guns down two enemies per turn from across the map and mind controls anything that dares to get close, a single sloppy turn is all that stands between success and failure. Nobody is ever truly safe in XCOM.

As much as I appreciate XCOM's outstanding balance and tight design, the game could benefit from more variety across the board, and not just because I saw maps repeat (albeit with different spawn locations) more often than I'd like. Restricting the new equipment you can research largely to guns that do more damage and armor that grants more health is disappointing. The

endgame super-armors that let you fly and turn invisible break the mold, but where are the flamethrowers, the flashbangs, the incendiary rockets, the crazy alien weapons that have no analog in earthly technology? Even the psionic abilities you eventually unlock within your operatives have sadly straightforward effects.

Occasional line-of-sight problems are the only blemishes on XCOM's otherwise rock-solid technical execution. Sometimes you don't get a shot on an alien that looks like it should be there, or run into a cover bonus when you thought you had an enemy flanked. Losing a squaddie because it looked for all the world like he could shoot an enemy (who instead turns around and splatters him) is far more frustrating than eating a death due to your own poor decisions.

Multiplayer is a barebones deathmatch mode where two players beat up on each other with squads of soldiers and/or aliens customized up to a set point value. The first turn of contact tends to determine the victor given combat's extreme lethality. Only a handful of maps are available, and there's no persistence or ranking structure. I don't see any appeal to the multiplayer other than playing a couple rounds with a buddy just to see what commanding mutons and chryssalids is like.

Both of XCOM's layers present life-or-death conundrums to which there is no right answer. No matter what you pick, something or someone is going to suffer for it. This kind of tension and terror rarely occurs within mainstream gaming, and almost never with this level of skill in the execution. Don't let the "turn-based strategy" moniker scare you off; XCOM is a singular achievement that every gamer deserves to experience. » Adam Biessener

The Edge

The PC version is slightly superior thanks to improved textures and resolution and drastically lower load times, but those are minor differences. XCOM plays equally well with mouse/keyboard and gamepad, and features identical content across all three platforms, so grab it for whichever system you prefer.

Joe Danger 2: The Movie

The stuntman expands his repertoire

Style 1 to 4-Player Action/Racing Publisher Microsoft Studios Developer Hello Games Release September 14 ESRB E

Joe Danger 2 welcomes you with a smile, sends you hurtling into stage after stage of craziness, and doesn't let up until you put the controller down. It's rollicking, silly, and challenging in equal measures, and never fails to up the ante with more and different things to do. The constant variety and frantic speed is commendable, but it loses some of the focus of its predecessor as a result. Stack on a preponderance of unforgiving timed chase sequences, and this sequel can sometimes frustrate even while it entertains.

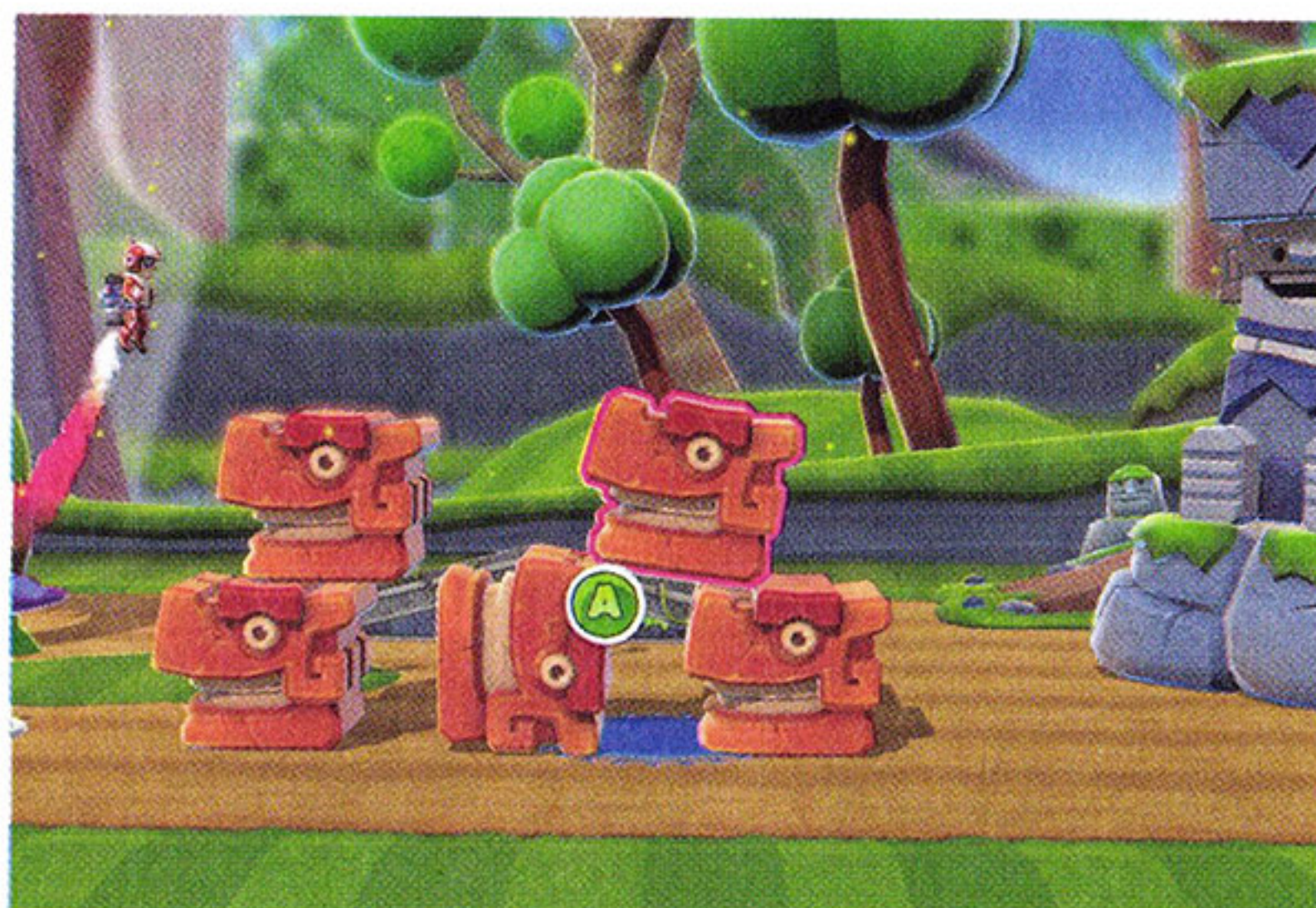
You may recall Joe's stunt-bike antics from his first outing, and more motorcycle fun is present in this follow-up. You also ride unicycles, skis, snowmobiles, ATVs, and jetpacks. Each of the dozens of levels has its own twist; if it's not a new vehicle, then you're using an established vehicle in a new way, like flinging newspapers at crooks while riding your bike.

Levels are filled with obstacles, hidden coins, jump pads, speed boosts, goofy enemies, and a diverse array of background items and sets. As you weave and leap between challenges, you also aim to complete objectives, from nailing a fast time to collecting all the hamburgers. Repeat playthroughs are enjoyable thanks to the numerous goals to complete.

The many vehicles and backdrops are

entertaining, but the constant change-ups can prevent you from getting comfortable with your vehicle. The campaign's bigger stumble is an increased focus on chases, timed sequences, and long spaces between checkpoints. That race down the ski hill away from the broiling avalanche is fun the first time, but redoing the first half of the course on the 20th time is a pain. Fast reflexes and infinite patience are in higher demand this time around, and that's not to the game's benefit.

Thankfully, Hello Games offers so many cool extras that you can always take a break from a tough stage to try something else. A whole second campaign of "deleted scenes" offers up the wackiest and most difficult stages. A small-but-fun set of local four-player competitive tracks has friends punching and jockeying for the finish line. Ghost images and leaderboards let you compete against your online friends' best scores. Perhaps most importantly, Joe Danger 2 includes a simple-to-use but highly flexible level editor to make your own tracks. These tracks



can be shared online, and new tracks from around the world can be downloaded at the press of a button, dramatically expanding the game's shelf life.

Hello Games has crafted another riotous game that fits comfortably between the racing and platforming genres, but this second installment leans closer towards the former. This might scare away some more casual players. If you love the quest for that perfect course run, and you don't mind working for it, Joe Danger's movie adventures won't disappoint. » **Matt Miller**

8.25

360

» Concept

Race and jump your way through a bevy of obstacle-laden courses

» Graphics

Bright and colorful, but sometimes the constant visual activity distracts from the action

» Sound

A few thematically-tied musical melodies enhance the movie homages. I could do without the shouting director

» Playability

Controls are tight and responsive. Different vehicles each have their own tricks to learn

» Entertainment

Varied and rambunctious, but less focused than its predecessor

» Replay Value

High

Double Dragon Neon

The Lee Brothers rescue Marian and their dusty franchise

Style 1 or 2-Player Action Publisher Majesco Entertainment Developer WayForward Release September 11 (PS3), September 12 (360) ESRB T

Since its arcade debut in 1987, the original Double Dragon has appeared on countless consoles, inspired a terrible cartoon show and movie, and spawned a mix of excellent and awful sequels. For Double Dragon Neon, WayForward (Contra 4, A Boy and His Blob) and Majesco team up to offer a fresh take on Billy and Jimmy Lee's brawling adventures while using many classic elements.

I don't want to spoil where the wild and crazy story goes, but Neon is full of moments that elicit fist pumps and laughter and is gleefully free of the constraints of reality. The Lee brothers resemble a more ass-kicking Bill and Ted (of *Bill*

and *Ted's Excellent Adventure* fame) with their '80s surfer accents and propensity for high fives and air guitar. The main villain, Skullmageddon, is a lovably dorky mix of He-Man's Skeletor and Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles' Shredder.

The battle system adds new layers to the classic formula while retaining the signature simplicity. Traditional kick and punch buttons are joined by a separate grab button, which is surprisingly only used for throws. I can't believe that knees and elbows to the head are off the table. At least the spin kick is well-represented as part of the new mixtape system. Billy and Jimmy can equip two tapes at any given time. One offers a

passive boost to stats alongside your choice of stronger weapons and other bonuses. The other "Sosetsitsu" mixtapes are all special attacks like fireballs and lightning.

The more tapes you collect from fallen enemies, the stronger the brothers get. Mid-level shops allow you to buy specific tapes, and the Tapesmith can boost level caps. While I enjoyed experimenting, I kept drifting back to the health absorb and spin kick combo. And it would be nice to shop outside of the levels themselves.

Naturally, playing this game with a friend is the way to go. The launch version of Neon sadly doesn't feature online play, but we're assured it will be patched in later. I'll believe it when I see it.

The game's 10 missions are fun while they last, but some may be let down by the relatively brief campaign (two-plus hours). Long-haulers can sink a bunch of time into maxing out tapes and tackling harder difficulties, but there's not much outside of that.

The strength of Double Dragon Neon lies in its cartoony homage to the brawler genre and the time period in which the original game released. Some of that charm may be lost if you're not familiar with the references, but the solid production and mechanics have a universal appeal. » **Bryan Vore**



8.25

PS3 • 360

» Concept

This is not a remake of the classic Double Dragon arcade game. It's a fun all-new take

» Graphics

The hand-drawn look blends with polygonal character models to great effect. I only wish the Abobos' heads were a little more oversized

» Sound

The amazing soundtrack touches on practically every '80s genre and reimagines several Double Dragon classics

» Playability

I miss knee and elbow grapple attacks, but the mixtape system adds a new level of combat variety

» Entertainment

You can tell Neon was created with love for the original games.

» Replay Value

Moderate

NHL 13

A great skater runs into offseason trouble

8

PS3 • 360

» **Concept**

Reinvigorate a stalled sports franchise with a great new skating mechanic and revamped franchise mode

» **Graphics**

The attention to detail with player faces makes this the best-looking NHL game to date

» **Sound**

Gary Thorne and Bill Clement either need to be replaced or get back into the recording studio to get some new material. We've heard 90 percent of this commentary repeatedly over the last several years

» **Playability**

The True Performance skating is a dramatic improvement over last year's skating engine

» **Entertainment**

With the labor strife between the players and owners, this may be the only place to see the NHL in action

» **Replay Value**

Value: High



Style 1 to 6-Player Sports (PS3), 1 to 4-Player (Xbox 360) (12-Player Online) **Publisher** EA Sports **Developer** EA Canada **Release** September 11 **ESRB** E10+

Owners and general managers willingly circumvent salary cap rules and sign players to \$100 million contracts, but they argue that the NHL is in dire straits despite generating record revenue for the past seven years. Now the league is moving toward its second lockout in less than a decade, which means EA's NHL series may be the only place to see your team hoist the cup this year. Though NHL 13 is in no danger of losing a season, it has its own formidable issues with virtual upper management as well.

For the past few years the Be A GM mode has been undermined by sketchy AI logic that resulted in questionable trades, restricted free agents sitting out entire seasons, and teams stashing legit NHL players in the minor leagues. To address these issues, developer EA Canada spent a lot of the offseason trying to give these wayward AI-controlled teams smarter brains. While bone-headed decisions happen less frequently in NHL 13, they still occur enough to shatter the illusion that you're competing against the likes of GM whizzes Ken Holland and Ray Shero. Teams let highly touted prospects pass through waivers mid-season, trade for a player only to put him on waivers the next day, and favor skating career minor leaguers over giving prospects ice time in the AHL. Even the players suffer from brain damage, demanding ridiculous contracts at the back end of their careers and sitting out entire seasons when nobody matches their asking price.

EA Canada's rewritten trade logic also suffers the same broken results. Teams more accurately enter fire sale mode at the trade deadline when they are out of playoff contention, but

they typically only offer over-the-hill veterans or prospects years away from making an impact. AI-driven GMs also stubbornly hold on to positional surpluses and brazenly offer trades nobody in their right mind would make.

If you don't want to contend with the broken GM logic, you can head online to compete with friends in GM Connected, a new online franchise mode that gives you most every feature you have in the offline Be A GM mode. You can coach a team, play traditional versus games, join Be A Pro-style online team games with five other human players on your squad, or build an AI to compete for you while you work on improving the roster. This is a great addition to the NHL franchise, but the menu navigation is painfully slow and league commissioners lack the tools to make their jobs easier. If you want to play in a single-player league, I suggest skipping GM Connected altogether and sticking to the offline Be A GM mode because it can take over 10 minutes to sim CPU games and process transactions each play period. Compared to Madden, which advances instantaneously and has no menu lag, NHL performs like it just got done with a bag skate.

Like the NHL's current collective bargaining woes, these franchise mode gaffes undermine the stellar action on the ice. Thanks to a revamped skating system, tweaks to the AI strategy, and smarter goalies, this is the best playing NHL game of this generation. It may seem unforgiving to newcomers, but if you play the game like a real NHL team – dumping and chasing, cycling the puck, and peppering the net with shots through traffic – your efforts are appropriately awarded. Being able to turn

on the jets to blow past defenders gives the game a more realistic sense of speed, and EA Canada smartly made it tough to shoot at high speeds to prevent players from abusing the feature. Thanks to AI improvements, defenders forecheck with more effectiveness, have very active sticks, and are generally well positioned, all of which results in more turnovers in the neutral zone. For the first time in years, the five-hole is open for business as well, so you don't always need to shoot that perfect corner shot or execute an otherworldly deke to beat a goalie.

The major knocks I have about the gameplay this year are largely physics based. Players get knocked down from behind far too often, and the puck physics are wildly inconsistent to the point of being unbelievable. Sometimes the puck loses all momentum when clanging off a post, dropping directly downward. Other times it ricochets off goalie past like it's being shot out of a cannon. Refs also call don't call enough penalties, even when the slider is maxed out.

As is the case in nearly every sports game, the slew of other modes jam-packed onto the disc only received minimal improvements. None of the minor tweaks makes or breaks the experience like the broader strokes painted by the gameplay and franchise mode changes.

Like its namesake league, NHL 13's stellar on-ice product is compromised by the questionable decisions of the men at the top. I've never had more fun competing between whistles, but once you skate off the ice and take a seat as the general manager, the poor AI driving the other teams breaks the fantasy. » **Matt Bertz**

Pro Evolution Soccer 2013

Neither promotion nor relegation



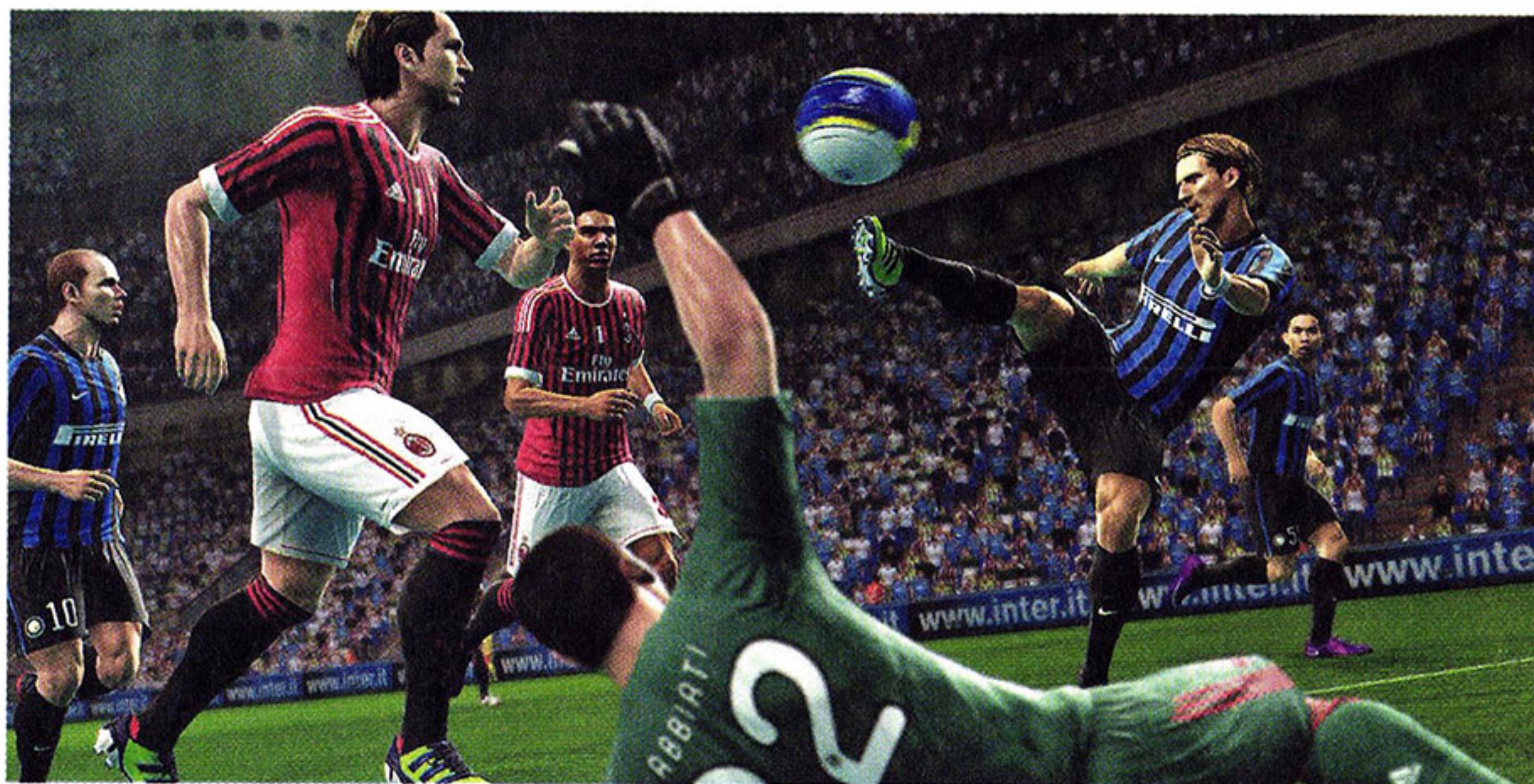
Style 1 to 7-Player Sports (PS3), 1 to 4-Player (Xbox 360) (8-Player Online)
Publisher Konami **Developer** PES Productions **Release** September 25 **ESRB** E

8.75

Like other sports franchises in the past, Pro Evolution has already hit its stride as this console generation comes to a close. This year's game doesn't feature any big surprises. Instead it makes subtle changes around the edges that take the franchise in new directions.

The changes to the Master League career mode are tactical: sticking to its strengths, minimizing weaknesses, and trying new strategies. Pro Evo 2013 highlights the club and player licenses it has by letting you start out your career with any club in the game, and not just fictional ones as in years past. It also bolsters its considerable player attribute data and progression/regression with equipment and training items you earn online and off. I love this addition because, although it's improbable that a pair of cleats confers better stats for your players, it shakes up the normal career mode. Konami balances this by limiting the number of slots you have for skill-changing gear.

Unfortunately, Master League axes last year's communication and Chairman feedback systems, which gave confusing and annoying feedback, instead of fixing them. The player morale system could also use work. I benched star players and they were still happy as clams. Finally, the mode still doesn't let you play international



fixtures (although you can in the largely unremarkable Become a Legend mode).

The series' top-flight gameplay remains solid and is bolstered by a few new controls. Manual shooting is only for the hardcore, but manual passing has a handy arrow icon that helps you place devastating through-balls and passes into space. This is where where PES shines. AI players could be a little more aggressive in cutting

out through-balls, but they're helpful in clearances and in creating offensive chances.

In the great football war, Pro Evo may come up short to rival FIFA when it comes to an across-the-board feature set, but I think the gameplay is better in Konami's title. With this iteration Konami is inching the franchise forward by both refining its product while not being afraid to try new things. » **Matthew Kato**

PS3 • 360

» Concept

PES 2013 is mainly about refinements, but the new equipment system is a cool step forward

» Graphics

The running animations are still a bit stiff, and the graphics are solid but don't wow

» Sound

The crowd does a nice job of responding to the flow of play

» Playability

From new manual controls to different ways to trap the ball, the series continues to layer on options for those who want to use them

» Entertainment

The series is still solid on the pitch, and the Master League continues to evolve

» Replay Value

Moderately High

FIFA 13

FIFA 13's form varies



Style 1 to 7-Player Sports (PS3), 1 to 4-Player (360) (22-Player Online)
Publisher EA Sports **Developer** EA Canada **Release** September 25 **ESRB** E

8.75

Every transfer period you hear about the big clubs spending staggering amounts of money to bring in new talent. Maybe it works, maybe it doesn't. Befitting its status as one of Electronic Arts' biggest titles, the company has lavished many features on the series. I love a lot of FIFA 13, but as well put together as the game is – with the licenses, online features, and gloss – the gameplay is both beautiful and frustrating.

FIFA's gameplay is capable of free-flowing, graceful play that replicates real-life action and gives you all kinds of tactical gameplay options. Other times, players' actions – particularly when

a free ball is contested – are pre-determined by animations that are oblivious to the circumstances, player physics, and your controller inputs. Sometimes you may slide tackle a loose ball instead of shooting it on goal because the game logic has already given "control" of the ball to the defender even though it's still in free space. On defense, this is frustrating when you expect your player to clear the ball.

These moments of inauthenticity stand in contrast to FIFA 13's otherwise laudable improvements. The new AI offensive runs open up the attack, playing along the touchlines is now possible, variable first touch adds a welcome element

of uncertainty, and the Complete Dribbling controls (similar to FIFA Street) are easier to perform and arguably more useful than the skill moves. This year I even had more control over headers in the middle of the field – although headers and play inside the box in general remain a mess of shoddy logic and bad play. Seeing players trip over themselves also demonstrates that the physics still need work.

The feature set is bolstered by international duties in career mode (the player path is particularly fun since you never know if you're going to be in the lineup), and tweaks to the title's online modes. Although the series still lacks the full-fledged online franchise offering (which every other EA Sports game has now), FIFA 13 adds relegation/promotion in the 11 vs. 11 and Ultimate Team play modes, and the fun Match Day mode modifies player form based on real-life performances and highlights big matches every week.

FIFA 13 captures a lot of the passion and pageantry of world football, but beneath the surface its gameplay flaws can hinder the beautiful movements that truly make the sport great. » **Matthew Kato**

PS3 • 360

» Concept

Improvements in many areas give this game a sheen. But some of the gameplay still feels scripted

» Graphics

I didn't notice much difference from FIFA 12

» Sound

The up-to-date Match Day commentary is cool, and the results updates in Career mode are hypnotic

» Playability

The series still suffers from bad defense in the box and pre-determined animations. The manual controls can help, though

» Entertainment

FIFA 13 has a lot of recommendable features, and only a few problems hold it back

» Replay Value

Moderately High



Resident Evil 6

Incredible co-op with a few kinks

8.75

PS3 • 360

» Concept

March the series into summer blockbuster insanity, enhance player mobility, and pump in a ton of content

» Graphics

The gory detail on zombies' faces is impressive, and the huge explosions are stunning

» Sound

You'll roll your eyes at the one-liners, but the music and monster noises are a treat to the ears

» Playability

Moving while shooting is easy to pick up, but the slide mechanic takes time to master

» Entertainment

Expands on what made Resident Evil 5 a great co-op experience

» Replay Value

Moderately High



gameinformer
SILVER

Style 1 or 2-Player Shooter (4-Player Online) Publisher Capcom Developer Capcom Release October 2 ESRB M

When Resident Evil 2 arrived on the PlayStation back in 1998, the ambitious game astonished me. Protagonists Leon and Claire each had two full scenarios that filled in story gaps in the other, *Pulp Fiction*-style, resulting in four unique, complementary playthroughs. Fast-forward to 2012 and Resident Evil 6 offers three full-length, intersecting, two-player cooperative campaigns along with a slew of bonus modes. The sheer wealth of satisfying gameplay and insane set pieces has me hooked like RE 2 did back then.

Story took the backseat for most of Resident Evil 4 and 5, but this title attempts to refocus. Unfortunately, it's tough to follow for anyone who hasn't been keeping up with the drama since the Mansion Incident. Wesker's son Jake is the Poochie of the Resident Evil universe; his one-liners and edgy 'tude will make you grind your teeth. The story may be a mess, but I had a lot of fun with the ridiculous way it stitches together adventures through undead catacombs, infected Chinese streets, and war-torn European cities.

Capcom left stiff controls behind for Resident Evil 6, and the resulting gameplay feels great. Gamers have been moving and shooting simultaneously for a long time, so the change was long overdue. New enhancements like dodging, sliding, and firing while prone take getting used to, but are indispensable once mastered. You can switch between gunplay and fist-cuffs in a snap, allowing you to settle into a rhythm on the battlefield. Jake can uppercut zombies, knee thrust mutant lizards, and deliver charging palm strikes to packs of foes, resulting in the

series' most satisfying melee to date.

While Capcom expanded hand-to-hand combat, it also woefully streamlined managing your arsenal. Instead of upgrading weapons, you invest in a collection of perks like enhanced melee damage or reduced recoil. It's a cool concept, but a set of overpowered skills trivializes any experimentation.

Resident Evil 6 provides some of the best two-player co-op this generation has to offer. You can team up via online, split-screen, or system link to mow down a staggering variety of enemies and survive unbelievable disasters. The new J'avo enemy undergoes random mutations in real time, keeping battles fresh and unpredictable. One standout moment involves flying a jet while watching Piers' back with machine gun fire as he plants bombs on a huge ship. The game shines brightest during two-player co-op, but single-player is much improved from Resident Evil 5. In the last game, you had to constantly babysit an AI partner that would leech your resources. Now item drops are independent for each character in both single-player and co-op, and your AI partners are invincible. Having a companion that isn't a complete buffoon is a relief.

Capcom has loaded an unprecedented amount of content on one disc, but I ran into a

few issues during my playthroughs. Most annoyances involve struggling with the zoomed-in camera in a couple cramped corridors, or getting hopelessly lost in a blinding snowstorm. The most frustrating bug I encountered makes a boss unbeatable during Leon's co-op campaign (it's fine in single-player), marring the otherwise excellent climactic battles. Capcom promises to fix some of these issues with a day-one patch, but we reviewed the game on the disc.

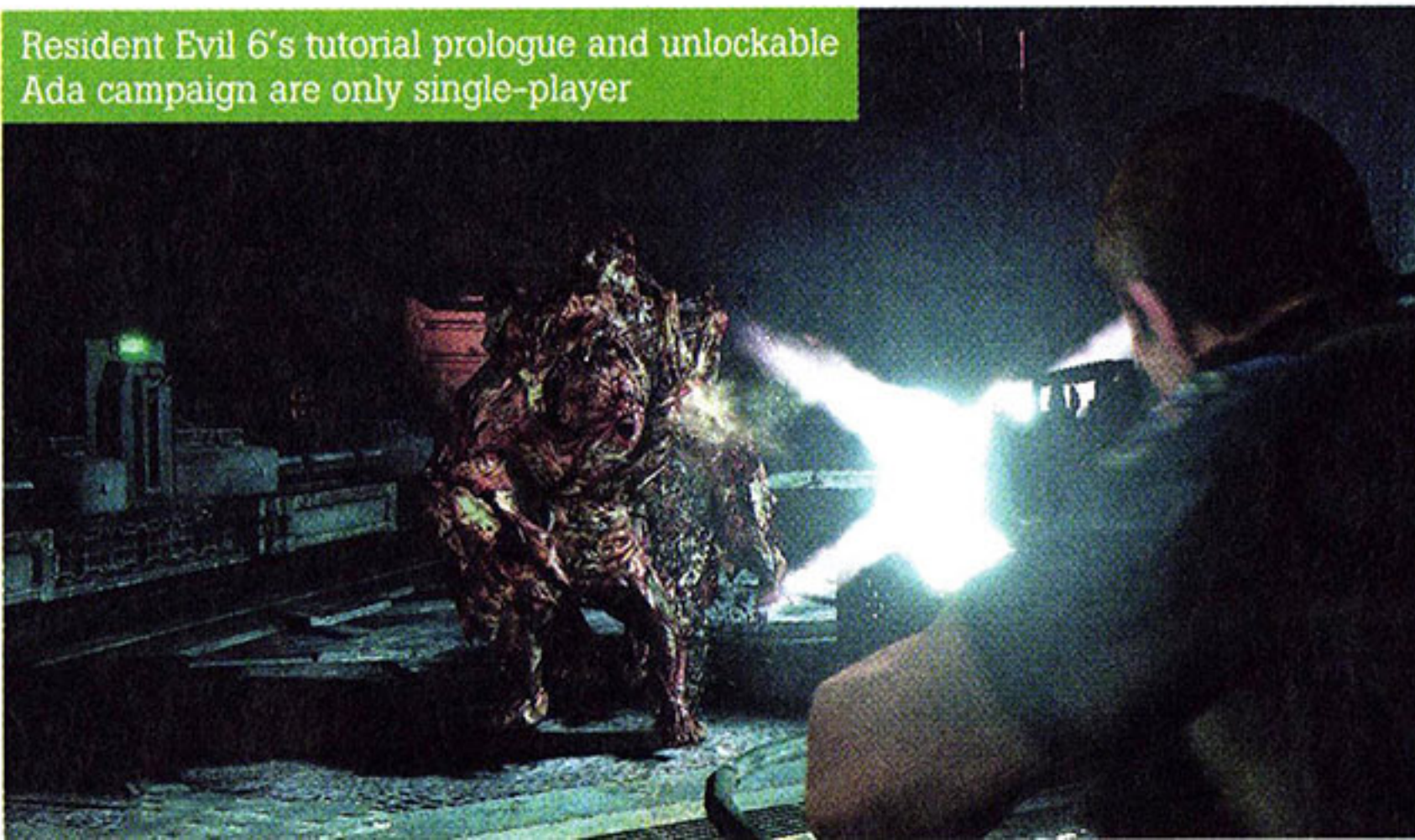
Over the years, the tone of the Resident Evil series has morphed from a George Romero horror flick to a Michael Bay summer blockbuster. That metamorphosis into insane action is front and center in Resident Evil 6, and bringing a buddy along for the chaos is great fun. The game's minor flaws don't hold back the decadent experience from being an unhinged, flaming rollercoaster ride. » **Tim Turi**

Read an extended review at gameinformer.com

Two Players or Four?

Players can be randomly matched up with others online for brief four-player co-op sections, or opt to allow strangers to infect their campaign as monsters. We reviewed the game before everyone else started playing online, so we couldn't thoroughly test these peripheral modes. If our hands-on time with them changes our impressions, we'll update our review online. If not, consider this the definitive critique.

Resident Evil 6's tutorial prologue and unlockable Ada campaign are only single-player



Mark of the Ninja

Classic stealth with a 2D twist



Style 1-Player Action Publisher Microsoft Studios
Developer Klei Entertainment Release September 7 ESRB M

9

Mark of the Ninja may be an indie-developed downloadable game, but there's nothing small about its scope or ambition. This deep and highly replayable title embraces its roots in the stealth genre, but excels in a 2D space. Klei Entertainment nails the fun of sneaking around by giving players frequent choices about where to go and how to proceed, turning every confrontation into a puzzle that needs to be solved, and making the payoff for killing (or not killing) irresistible.

You are a ninja, and you have accepted the Mark. The toxic tattoo eventually drives its bearer mad, but it also imparts superhuman powers to confront your clan's enemies. When your task is done, you have sworn to end your own life before you lose touch with reality. Klei wrings a lot of nuance and twists out of this setup, and I'm surprised by how much I enjoyed the narrative arc. Storytelling is further aided by the gorgeous visual style, which accentuates your brutal attacks from the shadows.

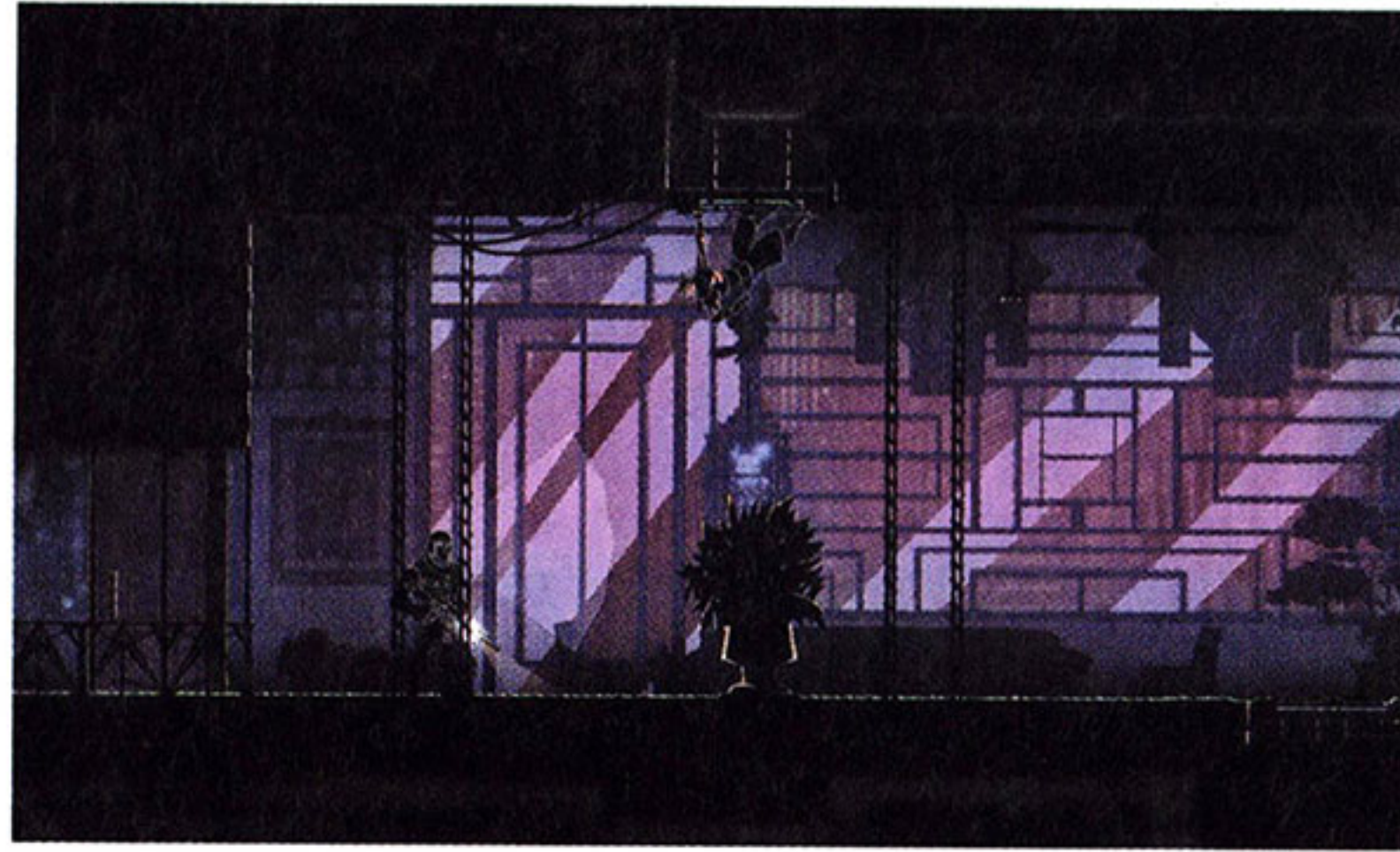
Mark of the Ninja embraces deliberate pacing by eschewing the recent trend of bringing action into every stealth game. The game rewards patience and punishes lack of observation with nearly certain checkpoint restarts (which are thankfully never far back). Sound and light are not your friends. Appear in a lit

area within view of a guard, and you're spotted. Every sound in the game produces a circle that radiates from its source, and anyone within the circle is alerted. These two factors, and your ability to control both of them, result in hours of varied encounters and dramatic escapes. Blow out a light with a dart to distract one guard, stealth kill a second foe before he can shout for help, and lure a third to his death in the spike trap you just silently set in his path. Moving on gets progressively more complicated, and the final levels serve up labyrinths of traps, bad guys, and navigation challenges.

Every action, from the rewarding stealth kills to punishing you for setting off an alarm, results in an adjustment to your score. This leads to increased upgrade points to improve your character. The allure of upgrades makes you strive for perfection in every level; don't be surprised if you restart checkpoints just to try to nail that one kill better the second time around. In addition, Mark of the Ninja offers ample reason to replay; you get one set of rewards for being a murderous force of

vengeance, but a mutually exclusive reward for being the shadow that kills no one and never alerts anyone. Challenge rooms, unlockable outfits, and new equipment all feed the drive to play better. A fun new game plus challenge awaits the most hardcore ninjas.

Tense, strategic, and hard to put down, Mark of the Ninja is one of the welcome surprises of the year. If you miss the heyday of pure stealth-focused games, or you never played a great stealth game and wonder what all the fuss is about, Klei Entertainment just snuck out of nowhere to offer you a weekend's worth of fun. » **Matt Miller**



360

» **Concept**
Fulfill your ninja fantasy as you leap, kill, and sneak through a twisting tale of retaliation

» **Graphics**
Animation is brought to life through the imaginative interplay of light and shadow

» **Sound**
Moody music and excellent voice acting keep you in the game

» **Playability**
Great flexibility of movement and a wide variety of attacks are easy to use thanks to context-sensitive button mapping

» **Entertainment**
The best stealth game in years

» **Replay Value**
High

Dance Central 3

Kinect's best franchise continues its quality streak



Style 1 to 8-Player Dancing Publisher Microsoft Studios
Developer Harmonix Release October 16 ESRB T

8.75

Dance Central is one of the few series in the Kinect's lineup that fosters excitement for what the motion-sensing device has to offer. It's no surprise that Dance Central is consistently the best selling Kinect game. Even with its success, Harmonix makes sure that the formula doesn't wear thin. Dance Central 3 is more than just new songs and new dances; it's easily the best entry yet.

Dance Central 3 makes you an agent of Dance Central Intelligence, a time-traveling dance-crime

fighting organization. The conceit of the ridiculous story has you collecting assorted dance crazes of past eras. Finding the crazes lends traditional video game mentality to a series that has normally been about simply having a good time. Gamers love collecting and finding hidden things, and seeking out the crazes scratched that itch for me.

Dancing through the eras means the song selection is much more diverse than previous entries. Dance Central usually sticks with modern

dance anthems peppering in only a few classics. In Dance Central 3, you dance to '70s hits like Gloria Gaynor's "I Will Survive" and '90s classics like Vanilla Ice's "Ice Ice Baby." Artists like 50 Cent, Nicki Minaj, and Katy Perry also make appearances, taking care of the expected modern tunes.

Along with the traditional one-versus-one dancing of the first two installments, you now take part in Crew Throwdown. The traditional "who can dance better?" battle exists here, but it's more than just that. A dancing version of "Horse" shows up, where players have to recreate each other's moves. One mode is solely about striking poses. The variety keeps the game fresh and keeps the laughs coming.

In normal situations, I don't dance. Deep in the recesses of hidden hard drives, video exists of me making a fool of myself at my wedding, but that is the closest I have ever come to dancing in public. With Dance Central, I don't mind jumping right up and waving my arms and legs around like I know what I am doing. I have always enjoyed Harmonix's dancing franchise, and Dance Central 3 is the best experience I have ever had with Kinect. » **Kyle Hilliard**

360

» **Concept**
Dance your way through the eras learning dance crazes of the ages

» **Graphics**
Dance Central boasts some of the best animation of any game, not just dancing video games

» **Sound**
The music is all dance-worthy, and the bits of original music used in the menus are excellent

» **Playability**
Kinect frustrations show up here and there, but compared to other Kinect titles, Dance Central 3 is flawless

» **Entertainment**
Even non-dancers can't help but get absorbed in Dance Central's infectious rhythms, and 3 is the best of the series to date

» **Replay Value**
High



Pokémon Black & White 2

Not quite worthy of the number 2

7.5

DS

» Concept

Give Pokémon its first numbered sequel by picking up the story and adding a handful of new features

» Graphics

Visuals are between the second and third-dimension without settling comfortably into either. The art direction, however, is as inviting as ever

» Sound

You will hear familiar Pokémon sound effects and tunes. You will either love them in all their nostalgic glory or play with the volume down

» Playability

The stiff non-diagonal grid movement returns. Some elements of the menu system are confusing, but there is nothing that can't be figured out after some light tinkering

» Entertainment

Pokémon has added new features that change small aspects to each release, and for better or worse, this still feels like Pokémon. It's a familiar and addictive romp

» Replay Value

Moderate

Style 1-Player Role-Playing Publisher Nintendo/The Pokémon Company Developer Game Freak Release October 7 ESRB E



The Pokémon world is a strange place. The people you meet either want to fight you or give you free stuff, and both kinds of people chase you down the moment you cross their line of sight. It's a bizarre world, but it is an inviting one, and time flies by as you get absorbed.

Pokémon games typically get two color-themed releases, and then a third a few months later named after another hue. I assumed that Pokémon Gray was the logical follow up to Black and White, but we were all surprised when Nintendo and Game Freak announced a direct sequel. Despite the number 2 that appears after the title, these games feel more like the Gray we expected.

You take on the role of a new trainer who sets off in his or her own journey two years after the events of Black and White. You cross paths with characters from the original, as well as the villainous Team Plasma, but for the most part, this is a separate story rather than a continuation. It hits all those saccharine notes of friendship and fighting for what's right without anyone ever being in real danger – everyone makes their Pokémon fight all of their battles for them, after all. The story introduces you to all kinds of different trainers with distinct looks and interesting personalities, something I have always appreciated in the Pokémon games. Even if they only have a sentence or two to say, I was always interested.

Like Black and White, the world is 3D with 2D elements, battles are fully animated, and you occasionally have up to three Pokémon battling at once. There are a number of aesthetic changes to the sequel, including redesigned

gyms and characters to account for the two-year storyline gap. All of the impressive online trading and battling features also made the transition. These are all great features that work well with the Pokémon formula, but none of them have expanded in a tangible way for the sequel.

Movie-making sequences are among the new additions, and they involve a slowed down battle where the player has to input combat commands in a certain order. After completing the fight, you can head over to the theater and watch the finished product. So you battle slowly, and then re-watch the battle you just fought in normal speed. As one of the few brand new elements of the sequel, this mode could have helped set the experience apart. Instead, it offers so little that it may as well have been cut. Thankfully, players can skip it entirely and pretend it isn't there.

Nintendo and Game Freak don't introduce any new Pokémon this time around, another strange choice for a supposed sequel. A few classic Pokémon roam the world of Unova, though. I openly chalk it up to nostalgia, but when I see Pokémon like Psyduck or Rattata show up in the field, I get excited. Not many of the recent Pokémon inspire the same emotion. Tepig (my choice of starter), Purrloin, Drilbur, and Minccino (who rivals Pikachu in cute factor), all have simple designs that are clearly based in the real world, but most lack the elegant simplicity of Pokémon of the past in favor of being bizarre and slightly terrifying.

This latest entry benefits from the long line of previous releases that have iterated on and perfected the original Pokémon games that

released in 1998. It's still incredibly addicting to catch 'em all, and seeing your Pokémon evolve is one of the most rewarding forms of leveling up in any RPG. So many little things make these games fun that it's tempting to forgive their stubborn opposition to experimentation, but the lack of innovation is disappointing. I know that's a common complaint about Pokémon these days, but it has been earned through years of Nintendo and Game Freak sticking to the same formula. Black & White 2 has a title usually reserved for sequels that add new features and expand the experience, but it doesn't live up to that promise. » Kyle Hilliard



Black or White?

Black Version 2 and White Version 2 are sold separately, and are largely the same game. The main difference comes down to certain Pokémon being more common or only being available in one game or another. For example, you can only catch Mr. Mime in White, while Beedrill is exclusive to Black. Also, each title has its own specific version of the legendary Pokémon Kyurem.





LittleBigPlanet PS Vita

Sackboy conquers another Sony system



Style 1-Player Platforming (4-Player Online) **Publisher** Sony Computer Entertainment **Developer** Double Eleven/Tarsier Studios **Release** September 25 **ESRB** E

8.75

Vita

» **Concept**
Even with a different developer, LittleBigPlanet's imaginative platforming shines in a game packed with variety and novel level design

» **Graphics**
Even the most discerning players will have difficulty distinguishing this from the PS3 games

» **Sound**
This series consistently has some of the most diverse music in the industry. How many games would license tracks by the jazz/rock cult heroes Tortoise?

» **Playability**
With each successive game in the series, the original's floaty character movement gets turned down another notch

» **Entertainment**
Double Eleven and Tarsier prove they can match Media Molecule's ingenuity and visual flair

» **Replay Value**
High

I'm a big fan of Media Molecule's LittleBigPlanet franchise. This latest entry, the first one for Sony's fledgling Vita handheld, is a collaboration between multiple studios. While that sounds potentially troublesome, the game is so in tune with Media Molecule's inventive design style and offbeat sense of humor that you'd never know it wasn't made by the creators.

LittleBigPlanet Vita preserves some of the subtle design changes Media Molecule implemented with sequels and spin-offs. The first game's floaty movement physics often led to a cheap death for Sackboy. Over time, these "realistic" physics have been dialed back in favor of more exact, Mario-style movement. It's a good decision.

This new adventure packs more variety in the form of one-off gameplay sequences, new tools, and vehicles. From grappling sequences to a challenge level where you turn the Vita on end for a slot racing contest, there's always a clever design around the corner ready to surprise you. The only major complaint I have is the boss battles are too routine and sometimes frustrating due to the series' odd insistence of having limited lives during the fights. For the rest of the game, you have unlimited checkpoint continues.

On any platform, LittleBigPlanet is a hell of a platformer. However, it was

made specifically with the Vita in mind. The game makes the best use of the touchscreen I've seen yet; it doesn't force you into wonky control schemes. Instead, you can use it to quickly hit switches or "poke" out platforms for Sackboy to jump on using the rear touch panel. The developers consistently find novel uses for the touchscreen that feel organic. This was the most I've actively used the touchscreen in quick-action sequences, which had the unfortunate side effect of pointing out that the Vita's touchscreen is not nearly as accurate or sensitive as those of most smartphones. The lack of responsiveness led to a few unnecessary deaths.

The game also features the groundbreaking creation tools that fans have used to release over seven million user-created levels since the first game released. Vita owners can't access any previously created levels, but due to some nice features that allow you to use iPhone-style "pinch" controls to resize, manipulate, and place items with the touchscreen, LBP Vita has the best creation mode in the series to date so eventually levels shouldn't be hard to come by.

While LittleBigPlanet has clearly settled into a comfortable groove, it's still one of the best pure platformers on the market. LittleBigPlanet PS Vita is another stellar entry on Sackboy's impressive resume. » **Matt Helgeson**



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Darksiders II	9	Oct-12
Devil May Cry HD Collection	8	May-12
Dirt Showdown	7.5	Jul-12
Dragon's Dogma	8.5	Jun-12
Dyad	8.25	Sep-12
FIFA Street	7.25	May-12
Game of Thrones	6	Jul-12
Ghost Recon: Future Soldier	7.5	Jul-12
Gotham City Impostors	8	Apr-12
Grand Slam Tennis 2	8	Apr-12

Inversion	6	Aug-12
Journey	9	Apr-12
Lego Batman 2: DC Super Heroes	8.25	Aug-12
Lollipop Chainsaw	7.5	Aug-12
Madden NFL 13	8.25	Oct-12
Major League Baseball 2K12	6.75	May-12
Mass Effect 3	10	May-12
Max Payne 3	9.25	Jul-12
MLB 12: The Show	8.75	May-12
NCAA Football 13	8.75	Aug-12
Nexuiz	6	May-12
Ninja Gaiden 3	6	May-12
Papo & Yo	8	Oct-12
Persona 4 Arena	8.5	Oct-12
Prototype 2	8.5	Jun-12
Quantum Conundrum	8.5	Aug-12
Rainbow Moon	7.75	Oct-12
Ratchet & Clank Collection	9.25	Oct-12

Resident Evil: Operation Raccoon City	6	May-12
Ridge Racer Unbounded	6.75	Jul-12
Risen 2: Dark Waters	5.5	Oct-12
Rock Band Blitz	8	Oct-12
Silent Hill HD Collection	8	Apr-12
Skullgirls	8	Jun-12
Sleeping Dogs	7.75	Sep-12
Sniper Elite V2	8.25	Jul-12
Sorcery	6.75	Jul-12
Spec Ops: The Line	7.75	Aug-12
Starhawk	7.5	Jul-12
Street Fighter X Tekken	8.75	May-12
Test Drive: Ferrari Racing Legends	6.5	Aug-12
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 13	8	May-12
Transformers: Fall of Cybertron	9	Oct-12
Twisted Metal	8.5	Apr-12
UEFA Euro 2012	6.75	Jun-12

Walking Dead Episode One: A New Day, The	8.25	Jul-12
Way of the Samurai 4	6	Oct-12
World Gone Sour	6.75	Jun-12
Yakuza: Dead Souls	7.75	May-12

XBOX 360

Amazing Spider-Man, The	6.75	Sep-12
Armored Core V	6.5	May-12
Asura's Wrath	8.5	Apr-12
Awesomenauts	8.5	Jul-12
Binary Domain	7.5	May-12
Blades of Time	4.5	May-12
Borderlands 2	9.75	Oct-12
Darksiders II	9	Oct-12
Deadlight	8	Oct-12
Devil May Cry HD Collection	8	May-12
Dirt Showdown	7.5	Jul-12
Dragon's Dogma	8.5	Jun-12

Dust: An Elysian Tail	8.75	Oct-12
Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim - Dawnguard, The	8	Sep-12
Fable Heroes	4	Jul-12
Fez	9.25	Jun-12
FIFA Street	7.25	May-12
Game of Thrones	6	Jul-12
Ghost Recon: Future Soldier	7.5	Jul-12
Gotham City Impostors	8	Apr-12
Grand Slam Tennis 2	8	Apr-12
Hybrid	6	Oct-12
Inversion	6	Aug-12
Kinect Star Wars	5.5	Jun-12
Lego Batman 2: DC Super Heroes	8.25	Aug-12
Lollipop Chainsaw	7.5	Aug-12
Madden NFL 13	8.25	Oct-12
Major League Baseball 2K12	6.75	May-12
Mass Effect 3	10	May-12

the score

8 | Counter-Strike: Global Offensive

Platform PS3 • 360 Release August 21 ESRB M

Global Offensive offers a tried-and-true experience at a reasonable price, even if its gameplay isn't for everyone. Gamers introduced to the shooter genre in more recent years may be frustrated with some of its trademarks (no instant respawns, no down-sight aiming, a lack of persistent progression, etc.). – Dan Ryckert

6 | Dead or Alive 5

Platform PS3 • 360 Release September 25 Rating M

Dead or Alive 5 can be a solid fighter when you're settling into a good match, but the overall package just doesn't deliver what a sequel should. This series simply hasn't progressed in the same way that its peers in the genre have. – Dan Ryckert

7.5 | Final Fantasy Dimensions

Platform iOS Release August 31 Rating N/A

Dimensions has most of the key components that comprise a classic Final Fantasy title, like crystals, airships, and a job system. But without the spark to bring all those pieces to life, it feels more like an imitation than a return to the glory days. – Joe Juba

7.75 | F1 2012

Platform PS3 • 360 Release September 18 Rating E

I like the way the new modes try to accommodate new players, but we've seen these features before in other games. Instead, I'd like Codemasters to further flesh out the life-as-a-driver career mode it has left relatively untouched since it took over the F1 license two years ago. – Matthew Kato

8.5 | The Walking Dead Episode Three: Long Road Ahead

Platform PS3 • 360 • PC Release August 28 ESRB M

Walking Dead Episode Three is a well-crafted emotional roller coaster. At points I found myself hating one or more of the characters, but 10 minutes later, I couldn't help but sympathize with them. – Ben Reeves

8 | Retro/Grade

Platform PS3 Release August 21 Rating E

Retro/Grade is a weird but admirable attempt to rekindle the popularity of a genre that has fallen out of favor. Though the timing of its release may be off, fans of games like Amplitude and Guitar Hero shouldn't overlook this one. – Kyle Hilliard

8.5 | Tekken Tag Tournament 2

Platform PS3 • 360 Release September 11 ESRB T

Tekken Tag Tournament 2 doesn't overhaul the franchise's format, instead opting to retain the series' already-solid gameplay and avoid extraneous modes that detract from the core fighting focus. Even with a somewhat bare-bones online offering, it's still one of the most refined fighters on the market. – Dan Ryckert

7 | Tokyo Jungle

Platform PS3 Release September 29 ESRB T

Forget zombies – when the apocalypse strikes, Tokyo will be overrun by the animal kingdom, not the undead. While surviving in this hellish city-turned-zoo is more repetitive and boring than you might hope, it still provides enough quirky fun to keep you going. – Jeff Marchiafava

6.5 | Jet Set Radio

Platform PS3 • 360 • Vita Release September 11 (PS3), September 19 (360) October 16 (Vita) Rating T

While Sega clearly put some effort into this reissue, an HD coat of paint can't correct the Jet Set Radio's fundamental control flaws and repetitious design. This may sound like heresy to Dreamcast faithful, but it's the truth: This game wasn't that good in the first place. – Matt Helgeson



Max Payne 3	9.25	Jul-12
Minecraft Xbox 360 Edition	8.75	Jul-12
NCAA Football 13	8.75	Aug-12
Nexuiz	6	May-12
Ninja Gaiden 3	6	May-12
Penny Arcade's On The Rain-Slick Precipice of Darkness 3	8	Sep-12
Persona 4 Arena	8.5	Oct-12
Prototype 2	8.5	Jun-12
Quantum Conundrum	8.5	Aug-12
Quarrel	8.5	Apr-12
Resident Evil: Operation Raccoon City	6	May-12
Ridge Racer Unbounded	6.75	Jul-12
Risen 2: Dark Waters	5.5	Oct-12
Rock Band Blitz	8	Oct-12
Silent Hill HD Collection	8	Apr-12
Sine Mora	8	Jun-12
Sleeping Dogs	7.75	Sep-12
Sniper Elite V2	8.25	Jul-12
Spec Ops: The Line	7.75	Aug-12
Spelunky	8	Sep-12
Splatters, The	8	Jul-12
Steel Battalion: Heavy Armor	3	Aug-12
Street Fighter X Tekken	8.75	May-12
Syndicate	8	Apr-12
Test Drive: Ferrari Racing Legends	6.5	Aug-12
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 13	8	May-12
Tony Hawk's Pro Skater HD	7.5	Sep-12
Transformers: Fall of Cybertron	9	Oct-12
Trials Evolution	9	Jun-12
UEFA Euro 2012	6.75	Jun-12
Walking Dead Episode One: A New Day, The	8.25	Jul-12
Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings - Enhanced Edition, The	9.5	May-12
World Gone Sour	6.75	Jun-12
Wreckateer, The	7.5	Oct-12
Zuma's Revenge	8	Sep-12

Wii		
Last Story, The	6	Sep-12
Mario Party 9	5.75	May-12
Xenoblade Chronicles	9.5	May-12

PC		
Botanica	8.25	Jul-12
Civilization V: Gods & Kings	8.5	Aug-12
Diablo III	9	Aug-12
Endless Space	7.25	Sep-12
Game of Thrones	6	Jul-12
Gotham City Impostors	8	Apr-12
Krater	6	Sep-12
Legend of Grimrock	7.25	Jun-12
Mass Effect 3	10	May-12
Nexuiz	6	May-12
Orcs Must Die 2	9.25	Oct-12
Penny Arcade's On The Rain-Slick Precipice of Darkness 3	8	Sep-12
Quantum Conundrum	8.5	Aug-12
Resident Evil: Operation Raccoon City	6	May-12
Resonance	8	Sep-12
Risen 2: Dark Waters	6	Jul-12
Sins of a Solar Empire: Rebellion	8	Aug-12
Spec Ops: The Line	7.75	Aug-12
Syndicate	8	Apr-12
Total War: Shogun 2 - Fall of the Samurai	9.25	May-12
Tribes: Ascend	8.5	Jul-12
Tropico 4: Modern Times	8.5	May-12
UEFA Euro 2012	6.75	Jun-12
Vessel	7.75	May-12
Walking Dead Episode One: A New Day, The	8.25	Jul-12
Warlock: Master of the Arcane	6.5	Jul-12
Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings - Enhanced Edition, The	9.5	May-12

NINTENDO DS		
Aliens: Infestation	8.25	Nov-11
Cars 2	7.75	Aug-11

Dragon Quest Monsters: Joker 2	7.5	Oct-11
Kirby Mass Attack	8.5	Oct-11
Pokémon Conquest	7	Aug-12

PSP		
Final Fantasy IV: The Complete Collection	8.5	May-11
LEGO Star Wars III: The Clone Wars	6.5	May-11
Patapon 3	6.75	Jun-11

3DS		
Dillion's Rolling Western	8	May-12
Heroes of Ruin	6	Aug-12
Kid Icarus: Uprising	7	May-12
Kingdom Hearts 3D: Dream Drop Distance	8.25	Sep-12
Mario Tennis Open	8	Jul-12
New Super Mario Bros. 2	8.25	Oct-12
Resident Evil: Revelations	9	Feb-11
Shinobi	6.5	Feb-11
Spirit Camera: The Cursed Memoir	5	Jun-12
Theatrhythm Final Fantasy	8	Sep-12

VITA		
FIFA Soccer	7.75	Apr-12
Gravity Rush	8	Aug-12
Lumines: Electronic Symphony	8	Apr-12
Metal Gear Solid HD Collection	7.75	Aug-12
MLB 12: The Show	8	May-12
ModNation Racers: Road Trip	7	Apr-12
Mortal Kombat	9	Jun-12
Ninja Gaiden Sigma Plus	7	Apr-12
Rayman Origins	8	Apr-12
Resistance: Burning Skies	7	Aug-12
Ridge Racer	5	May-12
Sound Shapes	9	Oct-12
Super Stardust Delta	8	Apr-12
Ultimate Marvel vs. Capcom 3	7.75	Apr-12
Uncharted: Golden Abyss	8	Apr-12
Unit 13	6.5	May-12



gameinformer

Volume XXII • Number 11 • Issue 235

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Horror Story

An Oral History of **The 7th Guest**

by Ben Reeves

When Trilobyte founders Graeme Devine and Rob Landeros sat down to make their first game together, they knew they had the perfect idea. Using the untapped potential of CD-ROM technology, they planned to incorporate full motion video of live actors into a horror-themed puzzle game. Their intuition proved correct. Upon its release in 1993, *The 7th Guest* was heralded as a technical marvel, selling more than two million copies and pushing sales of CD-ROM drives through the roof. Bill Gates even called it a “new standard in interactive entertainment.”

However, behind the scenes, *The 7th Guest* was the eye of a developmental tornado. Fraught with delays, budget issues, and technical challenges, the game drove apart the two friends who came together to create it. Devine and Landeros set out to design one of the best horror games ever made, but the development process turned out to be the most terrifying experience of all.

VIRGIN INNOCENCE

Graeme Devine: In the early '90s, Mastertronic – which was eventually bought by Virgin Games – called me and said, “Do you want to come out to the States for six weeks? No one there knows how to turn on a Commodore 64. It's all business people.” I was, like, “Sure. That sounds like a ton of fun.” That was 24 years ago. I never went back.

Rob Landeros: I met Graeme while working for Virgin Games. He was head of the programming department and I was head of the art department.

Devine: We were stuck in a room for nine months together, almost 18 hours a day. We got along great. We had a lot in common. We would sit and watch movies like *The Shining* over and over and over again, and when we'd come to the end of it we'd look at each other and say, “Let's watch it again.”

Landeros: Graeme and I decided to make ourselves the self-appointed heads of new technologies. [Laughs] We might have even had cards printed. We'd have our boss pick up our ticket and hotel room, and we'd jet off to Chicago, New York, L.A. – wherever they were holding a convention.

Devine: We were at a conference in New York, and everyone was demoing CD-ROMs. A lot of people were touting their fast text search engines, which could search encyclopedias in two seconds. They weren't tapping the technology. Both Rob and I saw it was capable of doing much, much more.

Landeros: After going to four or five of these things, I was feeling a little conscientious about having such a good time on my boss' dime, and I told Graeme that we should really file a report or something.

Devine: We got out a paper napkin and wrote down some ideas.

Landeros: We both loved David Lynch's *Twin Peaks*. We wanted to create a weird, scary, off-the-wall, mystery like that.

Devine: Virgin Games had also just bought Melbourne House, which had the rights to *Clue*. So at the airport in New York City, we sat and thought about making a game of *Clue* based around *Twin Peaks*.

Landeros: It was Graeme's fault that we didn't stick with the *Twin Peaks* thing. He came up with this outline of an evil toy maker who trapped children's souls in dolls. I don't know where he got that, but in a few weeks we had a 20-page document about the story, the game design, a few puzzles. The game would be in black and white and go to color as you moved the mouse



As the buzz for *The 7th Guest* continued to build, everyone wanted it. Sega was looking to put it on their Sega CD system, but Nintendo beat them to the punch, licensing the game for consoles just so Sega couldn't have it

around. We handed that pitch to Martin Alper, the president of Virgin Games, when he came in one morning. He walked back 45 minutes later and said, "Let's go to lunch."

Devine: Basically he said, "I'm going to have to fire the two of you, because there's no way in hell you're ever going to make that game. It's got failure written all over it. Cartridges are going to be the future of Virgin Games." Then he went, "But I will give you a contract to go make this game." Virgin thought it would be, like, a calling card product – an experiment with brand new media – like a trophy product.

Landeros: I thought it was strange that he let his head of programming and his art director to go form their own company. But by the time we got back from lunch we realized we were free agents.

Devine: Martin said, "I will let you go make this game on the following conditions: One, we actually make a floppy disk version of this game. That's what will make profit. Two, I can come visit you all the time, so you will not move more than 30 or 40 miles away. Three, you only have six months to make this game." Those were the three rules. We broke them all.

SETTING UP SHOP

Devine: We didn't know of anyone else doing what we were doing. People on the board said, "The 7th Guest is impossible! It's entirely impossible to have animation come off a CD-ROM with any kind of quality." CD-ROMs at the time gave you 150k/second. Now if you get that downloading from the Internet, you get upset. It took the full power of the CPU to give you 150k/second on most machines. The general thinking was that we were doing a fool's errand.

Landeros: Graeme wrote a video player program that would play double normal resolution and played smooth even after video compression. That was the basis for our game engine.

Devine: We filmed the live action sequences in two days above a comic book store in Medford, Oregon. We hired a Shakespeare Society in Ashland, and a film and video society that was an offshoot of that.

Landeros: We were kind of hands-off because we didn't know about filming and video. It was very much like we were playing the role of executive producers. There's no way you can pull off that kind of production today. Today it would take weeks of planning and weeks of casting and costumes and so forth. But somehow, we managed to get it together inside a week for only \$24,000. It was absolutely incredible. It was so cheaply done.

Devine: The actors performed against a terrible blue screen that wasn't even blue; it was blue paper. That's why the ghosts in *The 7th Guest* have this fuzzy line around them; we couldn't actually get rid of the entire blue background. In the end, it became a feature.

Landeros: Graeme handled all the programming, but I was a fan of puzzle game magazines so I worked on all the puzzles. Our team was small; there were only a couple other people on staff. Six months in, we were still struggling to finish. Then we went to CES in Las Vegas, because Graeme had decided to demo the game for Martin Alper. That's when everything sort of changed.

Devine: Martin didn't want us to show the game at CES, but we turned up with a build, and Martin wanted us to show him the game using a computer that was demoing Monopoly. However, we were out in the open, so people started to crowd around us. Soon the booth was crammed full of people.

Landeros: I remember showing up late to the show – around 1:30 in the afternoon. Before I even got to the conference somebody said, "Rob, congratulations, man. You've got a hit." I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "Everybody is talking about *The 7th Guest*. There are crowds around your booth."

Devine: Along came Roberta Williams from Sierra and she was blown away. She came back with her programmers and said, "See, I told you this stuff was possible, and you didn't believe me!" That's when Virgin realized that we really had something here.

Landeros: Leaving the show, Graeme and I looked at each other and said, "Well, my gosh, we are sitting on something. We got a tiger by the tail here."

Devine: During the plane ride back to Oregon, we were both absolutely distraught. Now we really had to finish this thing.



Terror in the Trenches

Graeme Devine did not enter into the world of game development easily. Before he moved to the United States and started working for Virgin, Devine tried to start his own company in England. The trials of game development were nothing like what he expected.

"One of my partners got addicted to cocaine and he kind of fell off the face of the planet with quite a lot of the money," he says. "Then I made a game for the ZX Spectrum and it sold a bunch. I actually had £25,000 in my bank account in England, which back in 1982 was like a gazillion dollars."

Unfortunately, this was not the end of Devine's trials. His partners took all of this money out of the bank account without talking to him, which prompted the budding programmer to leave the company. Devine packed up all of his equipment and left, but his partners weren't happy to see their star programmer walk out the door with most of the company's computers.

"They threatened to break my legs and to make me disappear...all sorts of nasty things," he says. "When you are an 18-year-old that can seem pretty intimidating. One day they came to my house to threaten me, and my dad hid behind the door with a golf club, just in case things got rough. Thankfully, they sat down and we worked it out. Then I started the second company, because games are in my blood."

Barely Enough Time To Say "I Do!"

The 7th Guest's development was so harried that Rob Landeros barely had time to fulfill his obligations outside of work – such as getting married. Landeros made a promise to his girlfriend that if she moved up to Oregon with him when he started work on The 7th Guest that he would marry her, but throwing together a celebratory bash proved difficult given the time he was devoting to the game.

On Valentine's Day in 1992, Martin Halper and a couple executives from Virgin traveled up to the Trilobyte offices to hold conference about The 7th Guest. Around lunch, Landeros got up from the table and excused himself. When Landeros returned several hours later and was asked about where he'd been, he explained that he'd walked across the street into a district court and got married.

When we asked Landeros about this tale, he just laughed and said, "Yeah, that's how busy I was."

KILLER SUCCESS

Devine: At that point, it cost \$100 to burn a CD-ROM, and we were burning dozens of them at the office. The game shipped with two discs, so we had to get the CD crossover actually working. The final puzzles, the upstairs puzzles that led up to the attic – none of those were actually coded.

Landeros: Our initial budget was \$400,000. I think we ended up costing maybe \$650,000 or something like that. At that time, it was a huge budget.

Devine: We were very, very poor when we were making The 7th Guest. We had to save up and beg to buy this 100MB hard drive that we connected up to a server for transferring files. There wasn't even enough room on that drive to have the whole game on it at once. We had to save stuff out to a tape and then load it back in for the various rooms. It was a laborious process. The game was supposed to be done in six months.

Landeros: In the end, The 7th Guest took us about two years. We were up nights working hard at the end. It is amazing when I look back on it now how quick you can work when you've got something to do.

Devine: Games didn't take that long back then. The previous game I'd made was for the 8-bit Nintendo, and we spent not even a month on that. Maybe six weeks total.

Landeros: There was something in the hunger of wanting to make that game that actually made it possible with the actual setup that we had.

Devine: Virgin Games had set the price of the game at \$100, and it came out with this huge box. I guess it's like a modern collector's edition. We didn't think that would sell. Yet, at the end of the first day, I think Martin called us from Virgin and said, "We completely sold out across the country."

Landeros: The 7th Guest was so successful that everyone wanted it. I think Nintendo bought the rights to it, but they never did anything with it. It was more like a preemptive strike against anybody else.

Devine: Sega had approached us because they wanted The 7th Guest for their Sega CD system, but Nintendo licensed it first – knowing full well that nothing Nintendo ever did would ever be able to run The 7th Guest. We also licensed The 7th Guest to the Phillips CDi, and that version actually came out. We licensed it for the 10D Viz, which I don't think ever shipped, and we licensed it for the Apple Pippin, which I don't think shipped either. If something had a CD-ROM on it, they called us.

Landeros: There was never any work done on the floppy version.

Devine: Virgin made most of the money off that game. We weren't doing too bad; we were doing okay. We got a royalty for sales of The 7th Guest. But it wasn't much of a royalty because it turns out we were terrible at negotiating contracts.

Landeros: The 7th Guest was very successful, so there was a lot of pressure to make a sequel. Of course, then there was too much pressure with The 11th Hour. That's the one where we really screwed the pooch.



THE BEGINNING OF THE END

Devine: Initially we wanted to go make a sequel called Egypt. We had grand plans for a completely different IP. But Martin called up and said, "You guys are absolutely freaking crazy if you think you are doing anything but The 7th Guest 2."

Landeros: We started working on The 11th Hour before The 7th Guest was finished. Graeme was finishing up The 7th Guest so he didn't have much time to be involved in The 11th Hour in the beginning. I think he was not interested in the first place, because he didn't feel like it was his.

Devine: As a company, we thought we could do everything ourselves. We thought we could publish the games, we thought we could have an IPO, we thought we could do our own PR. We thought we were invulnerable.

Landeros: Graeme was having a hard time putting The 11th Hour all together. Everyone was sitting on their thumbs just kind of waiting for months and months. By the time it came out, The 11th Hour was incompatible with Windows 95, which had just released, so that was a huge technical issue.

Devine: The 11th Hour was not received well. It was a bit of a disaster. My head got too big. I'm not going to speak for Rob, but I know we both felt we were invulnerable, we were untouchable.

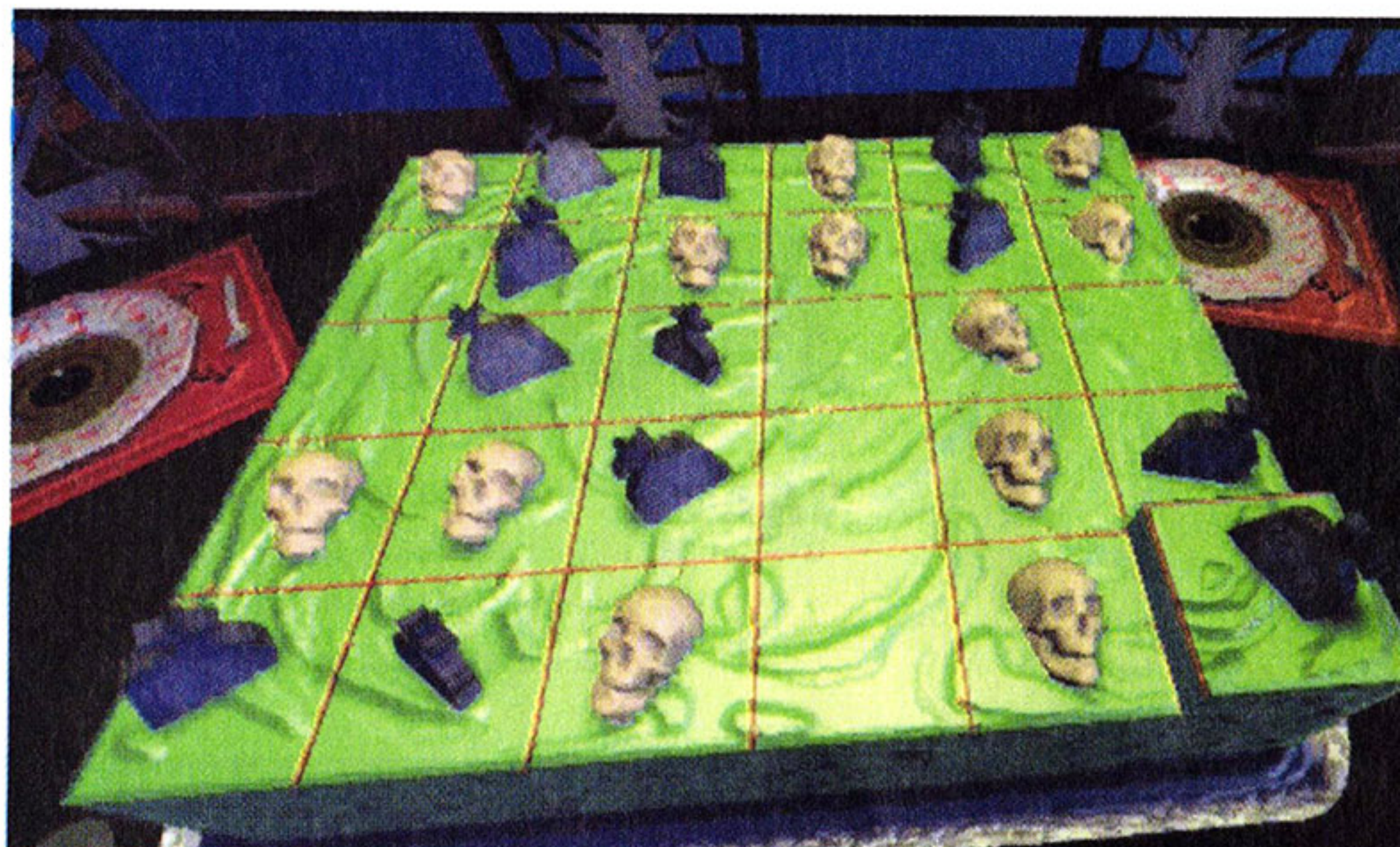
That's when we started down a dark path.

Landeros: I was fired from the company by the board of directors because Graeme and I had different visions about where we wanted to go.

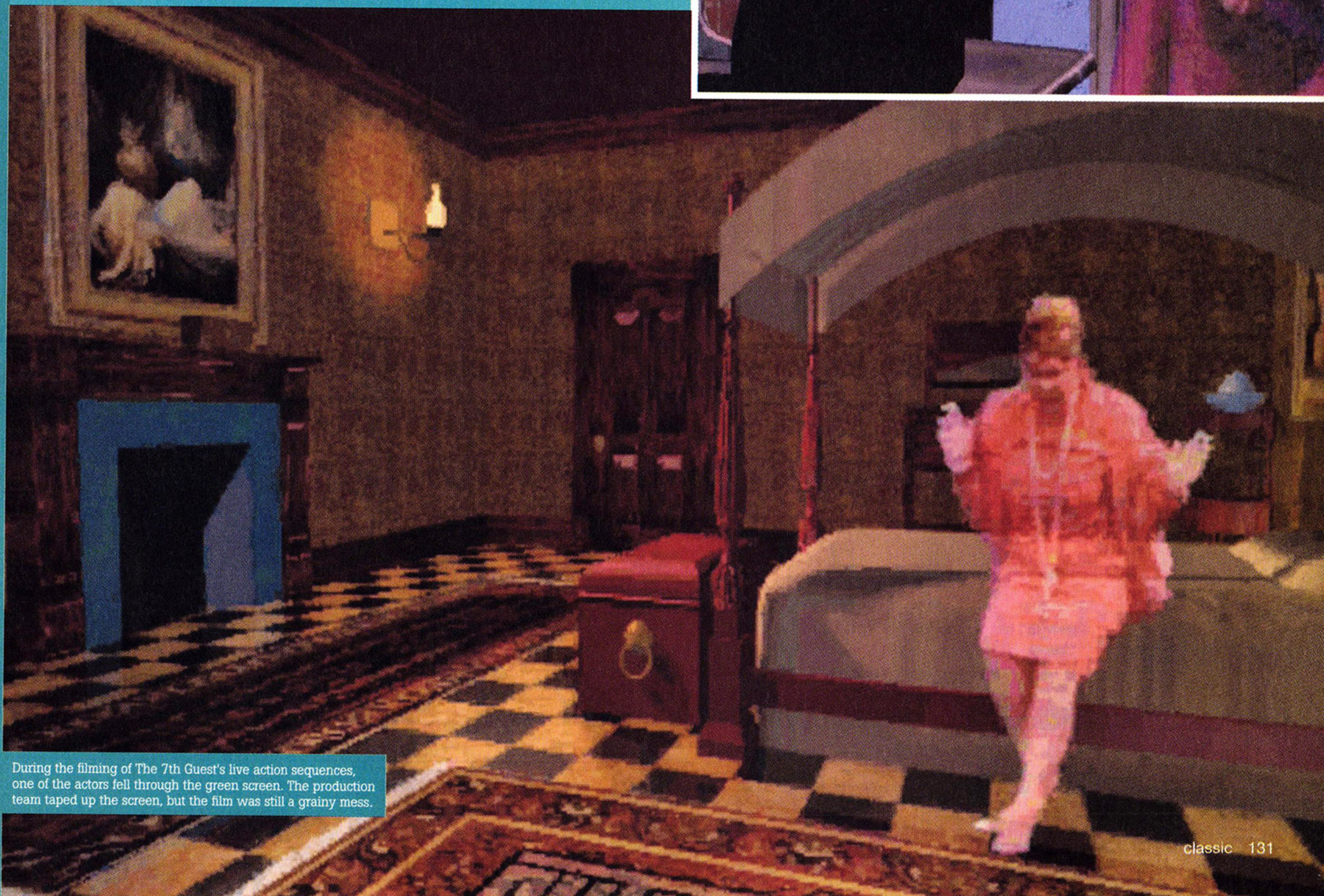
Devine: Trilobyte ended when Rob left. I remember coming in that day, and I was going to quit. I was done with Trilobyte. I was just going to leave with absolutely nothing and give it all to Rob. I came in and told the board member who was at the office and they had this emergency board meeting, and the result was basically, "We fired Rob." That was not a good day. That was a freaking awful day and a wrong thing. I should have stuck to my guns and left. That was the beginning of the end, because...yeah, I won, but I didn't want to win. I wanted to leave. I was unhappy with the company. At that point, the company was done, although it went on for another two years. After the studio finally closed, I sold Rob the rights to everything Trilobyte ever made for a dollar. I wanted done with it. It was an albatross around my neck. People say I'm stupid for selling it for a dollar, but it probably saved my life. It's good to let go sometimes.

Landeros: We talk a little bit, now. Not much.

Devine: Enough time has passed that you just work it out...you can't hold onto the past forever. I've forgiven him. I don't know if he has, but I would love to go out and have a beer with him and catch up on the times. It feels like it was a different life now. I think we've both moved past it. ♦



Rob Landeros was a big fan of puzzle magazines, so he took many of his favorite puzzle concepts and incorporated them into The 7th Guest



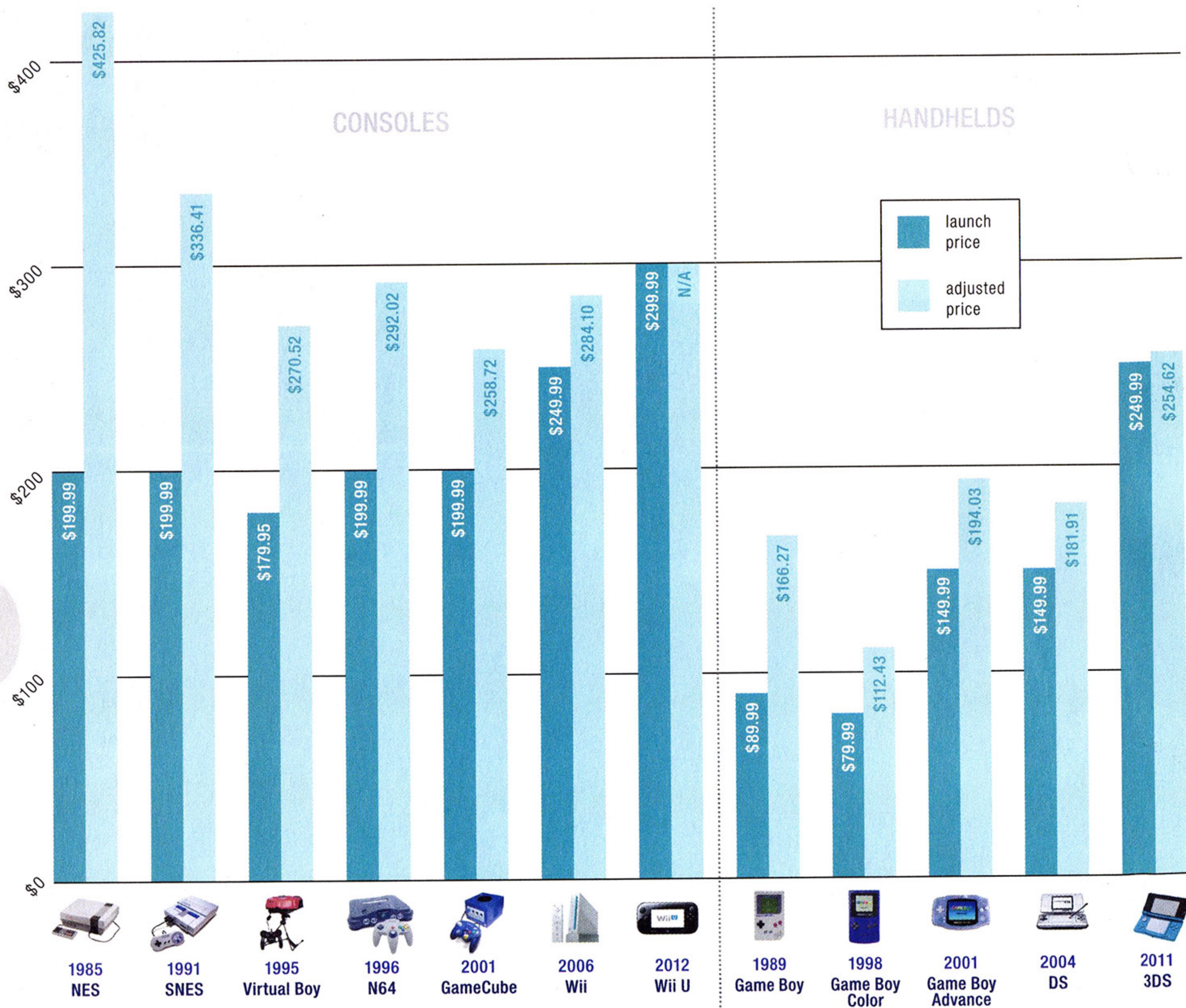
During the filming of The 7th Guest's live action sequences, one of the actors fell through the green screen. The production team taped up the screen, but the film was still a grainy mess.

Nintendo Console Launches Adjusted for Inflation

With the Wii U on the horizon, we thought it would be eye-opening to see how much each Nintendo system would cost when its launch price is adjusted to today's dollars. Using the Bureau of Labor Statistics Consumer Index Calculator, we found

some surprising increases. Those 1985 Nintendo Entertainment Systems sure were expensive in the scheme of the economy at the time, but still not as much as Sony's 2006 PlayStation 3 launch, where the console ranged from \$499 to \$599.

by Kimberley Wallace



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Issue 235 • November 2012



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