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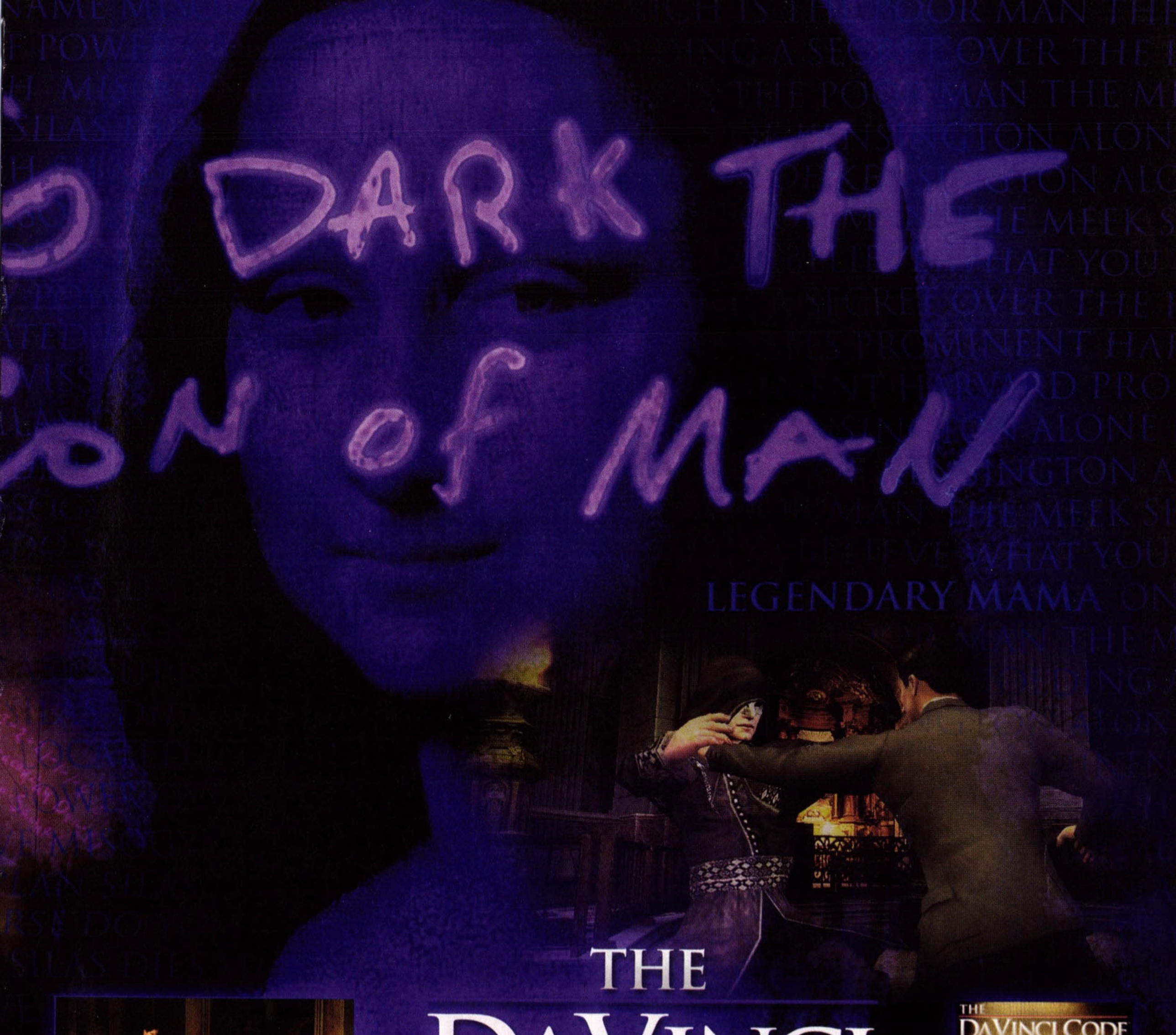

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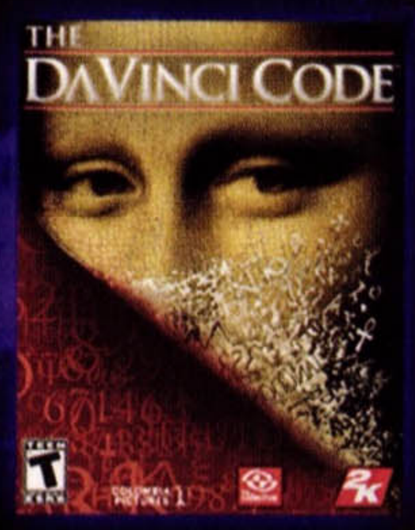

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It takes a documentary, produced every week by an in-house video crew, to help EA producer Jeff Peters keep track of the huge array of powers and attack combinations that the 140 developers working on *Superman Returns*™: The Videogame have put together. "*Metallo,* for instance, is 60 stories tall," he says, "so you might want to fly around the city a little bit, maybe down to the port, and find something really massive – a ship, for example – pick that up and hurl it at him." Each villain has different strengths – and unique vulnerabilities – so attacks that devastate one enemy won't necessarily work against another.

"With a villain like *Parasite,* you may want to keep your distance," he says. "You could do something like grab a fuel truck, throw it toward him, then blow it up with your heat vision just before it hits him." If the ensuing explosion happens to set an apartment building on fire, Peters suggests leaving the fight for a moment to airlift a fire engine to the scene so it can douse the flames, then rejoining the battle. "There are so many different things you can do," Peters says. "It all adds up to this amazing feeling of freedom."

flight manifest

When he was 13, EA level designer Zach Wilson used to blow his entire $10-a-week allowance on *Superman* and other comic books. For the last two years, he's been tights-deep in processor cycles and aerodynamics with the rest of the team working on *Superman Returns*, giving life to the *Man of Steel* with his own personal branch of physics – from takeoff to 800-m.p.h. flight through the densely packed streets of Metropolis to midair hand-to-hand combat.

"The hardest thing with flight in a 3D environment is to make it look realistic and make it easy to learn at the same time." EA's state-of-the-art development methods gave Wilson & co. the tools to nail that balance between realism and playability. "Gamers can be so skeptical," Wilson says. "I understand – I used to be those guys. That's what motivates us: to prove to the world that we can pull it off."

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TITLE

SUPERMAN RETURNS.
THE VIDEOGAME

FACTOID: 140 game creators

INFORMATION | DATE OF RELEASE

www.BeSuperman.com

lurking villains

new world mortar

Before EA concept art director Phil Straub and his team could construct Metropolis in the game environment of *Superman Returns*, they needed a map. Building on 2D maps supplied by DC Comics, EA created a detailed 3D representation of the city – first on paper, then in clay, then out of papier-mâché and wood and finally out of bits, pixels and polygons. Eighty square virtual miles of playable space.

And playable means seriously playable: billboards, fire hydrants, cars and tractor-trailers, lamp posts – you can use nearly every element in the environment as a shield, a weapon – or, in *Metallo*'s case, a toothpick.

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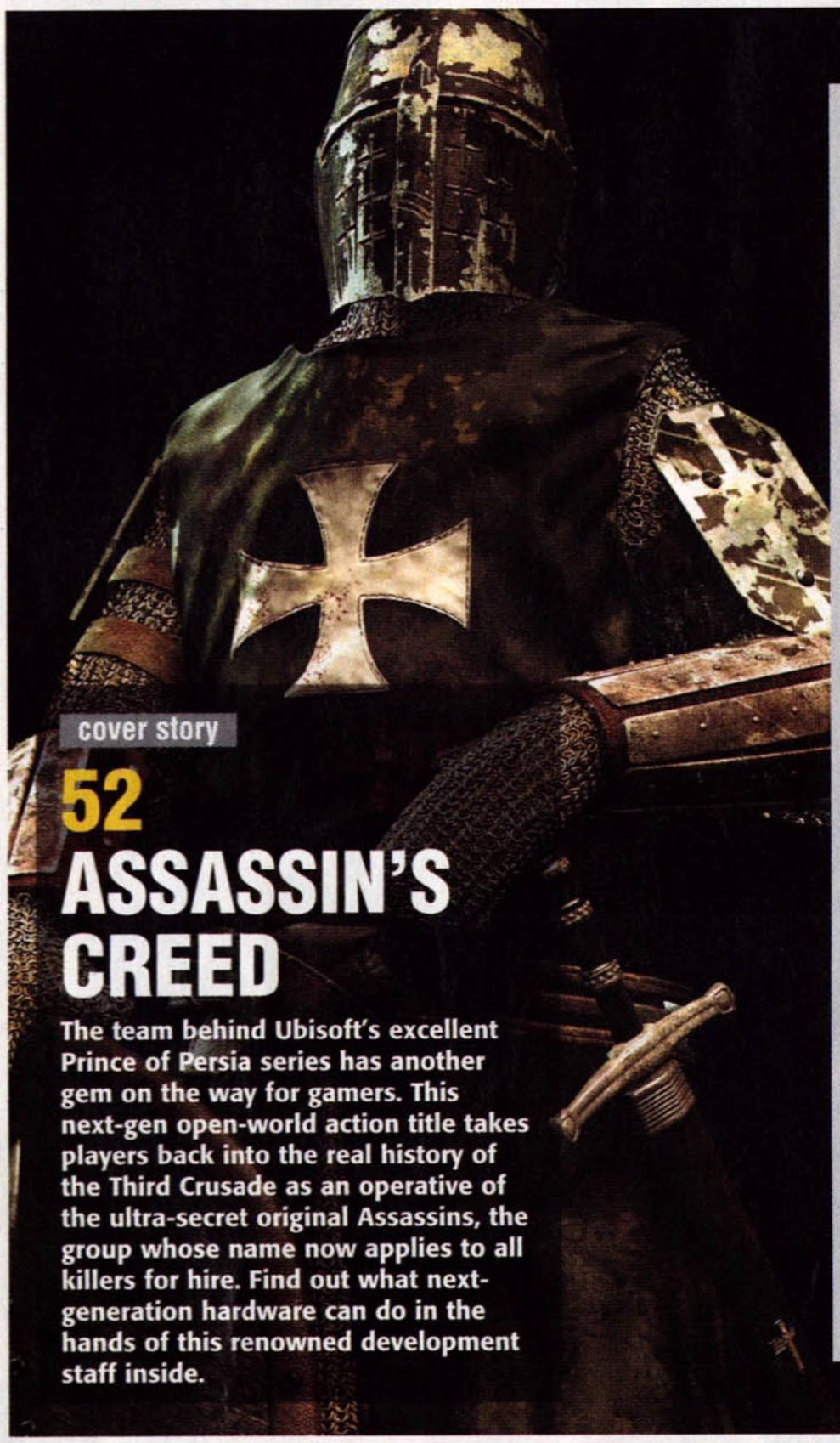

cover story

52 ASSASSIN'S CREED

The team behind Ubisoft's excellent Prince of Persia series has another gem on the way for gamers. This next-gen open-world action title takes players back into the real history of the Third Crusade as an operative of the ultra-secret original Assassins, the group whose name now applies to all killers for hire. Find out what next-generation hardware can do in the hands of this renowned development staff inside.

features

SACRED COW BARBECUE

Everyone has an acclaimed game that they just can't stand, from Mario to Zelda or GTA. We've got plenty of ammunition for all you haters-in-training to stir up forum wars on any corner of the Internet in our inaugural roast.

INDIANA JONES

Indy's first next-gen foray takes the legendary archeologist beyond his film roots and explores what the character is all about. We break down how the game's procedural AI and extensive environmental interaction will help make Dr. Jones cool again.

GUITAR HERO II

We salute those who give us the ability to rock. We also take an early version of Guitar Hero II and its co-op modes, new tracks, and various instrumental lines for a spin and offer up a full report.

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STAFF

People Who Actually Get Paid To Play Video Games

THREE THOUGHTS

ANDY McNAMARA
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Don't Hate Us....

This month, we try something that I think is a bit of a twist. Our video game roast that we so cleverly named The Sacred Cow Barbecue is a chance for us, the writers, to anger not only our readers, but the publishers whose pockets have been lined by the very milk these cows produce.

But we all know someone like this. It's hard to fathom that there is anyone in the world that thinks Super Mario Bros. is the worst game ever made, or that Halo is a sub-par game. Hard to believe, but it's true. This month we spread the hate for your enjoyment.

It's On Like Donkey Kong...

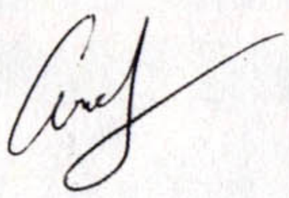
The hardware wars have gone into a full-fledged fervor, and I can't say how much I enjoy it. This issue is packed with a ton of new games to see, and next month we'll have even more when we break down all the happenings of E3 and what they mean to the gamer. The funny thing about the whole console war is that for once, the race is really up in the air. Last round it was PlayStation all the way, but I can play scenarios in my head where any of the three hardware manufacturers can win. November can't come soon enough.

Handhelds and You...

You know the greatest thing about handheld gaming isn't the games themselves, though there are many truly outstanding titles you can play. It's the fact that you just never know who you are going to meet when you sit outside with a GBA, DS, or PSP in hand. The opening line of, "What are you playing?" is universal, and one that leads to some good old-fashioned video game talk. So next time you see someone playing, make sure to say hello. You never really know who you might meet.

Enjoy the issue.

Cheers,



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Handle: The Raging Gamer **Expertise:** RPGs, Action, First-Person Shooters, Strategy, Sports, Fighting **Interests:** The Great Debate: MechaGodzilla Or CyberKong?, Pretty Girls Make Graves' *Elan Vital*, Farting On Friends' Controllers (The Video Game Equivalent Of Marking Your Territory), *A Storm Of Swords* **Dislikes:** The Empty 'What Am I Going To Do Now?' Feeling That Sinks In After Completing A Final Fantasy Game, *Jurassic Park 4* (Talking Dinosaurs?), The Short Rechargeable Battery Life For Xbox 360 Controllers **Current Favorite Games:** Final Fantasy XII, Gradius Collection, The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion, Lost Planet

Matt >> *matt@gameinformer.com*

Handle: The Original Gamer **Expertise:** First-Person Shooters, Action/Platform, Action/Adventure, Action/Sports **Interests:** *Medium*, *Knowing Me, Knowing You With Alan Partridge* (Gets Better Every Time I Watch It), Almonds, Built To Spill – *You In Reverse*, Millennium Connect On 35th And Chicago (Awesome Hip-Hop Mixtapes For Cheap!) **Dislikes:** The Current Car Trouble Sweeping The GI Offices, Deciders, Stress Over The New Vikings Uniforms (Scary!), Boring Bands **Current Favorite Games:** Brain Age, The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion, Tetris DS, Tomb Raider: Legend, Guitar Hero II

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Handle: The Game Katana **Expertise:** Sports, Racing, Action/Adventure, Action/Platform **Interests:** My Japanese Vacation (I Miss Daikanyama!), Rose Melberg's *Cast Away The Clouds*, Popeye's Chicken, Conrad & Nolan's First Birthday, The New Viking Uniforms (They Aren't Out Yet, But I'm Crossing My Fingers) **Dislikes:** Kevin McHale, The New Morrissey Record (I'm A Fan, But This Album Simply Stinks!), Transferring Through O'Hare Airport, Having My Veracity Questioned On A Message Board **Current Favorite Games:** The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion, Guitar Hero II, Call Of Duty 2, NFL Head Coach, Brain Age, Lost Planet

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Handle: The Alpha Gamer **Expertise:** RPGs, Strategy, First-Person Shooters, Fighting **Interests:** The Hormel Row Of Fame, Making Ridiculously Powerful Potions In Oblivion, The Twins Playing Real Baseball, Watching The Yankees, Braves, And White Sox Lose **Dislikes:** Having A Clean-Up Hitter Batting .085, Not Really Liking Any Of The New Baseball Video Games, Trying To Harvest Wisp Stalks, Warranties Not Covering Everything They Should **Current Favorite Games:** World Of Warcraft, The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion, Brain Age, Zuma, Geometry Wars Retro Evolved

Joe >> *joe@gameinformer.com*

Handle: The Real American Gamer **Expertise:** RPGs, Adventure, Action, Strategy, Puzzle **Interests:** Tyrion Lannister (Best Hand Ever. Almost), Having A 105% Chameleon Buff In Oblivion (I Am Undetectable Mayhem!), Parentheticals (Apparently I Just Can't Resist 'Em!) **Dislikes:** Oil Man (Lame! Now I See Why He Didn't Make The First Cut), Fooling People Into Thinking I Know Anything About Baseball (Watch: "Yeah, I Totally Think Batista Is A Better Clean-Up Hitter Than White." Psych!) **Current Favorite Games:** The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion, Mega Man: Powered Up, World Of Warcraft, Destroy All Humans 2, Indiana Jones

Miller >> *miller@gameinformer.com*

Handle: The Once And Future Gamer **Expertise:** RPGs, Action/Adventure, Fighting, Platform, First-Person Shooters **Interests:** Approaching One Full Week Of Time Spent In Tamriel, *Kingdom Of Heaven* (It's Better Than You Think), Bikes In Springtime, The Jeremy Dance **Dislikes:** Buying New Shoes, People Flaunting What Games They've Beta Tested (It's Not A Contest!), Trying To Navigate Ubisoft's Labyrinthine Lair **Current Favorite Games:** Assassin's Creed, Guitar Hero II, Tomb Raider: Legend, The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion, 2006 FIFA World Cup, Super Princess Peach

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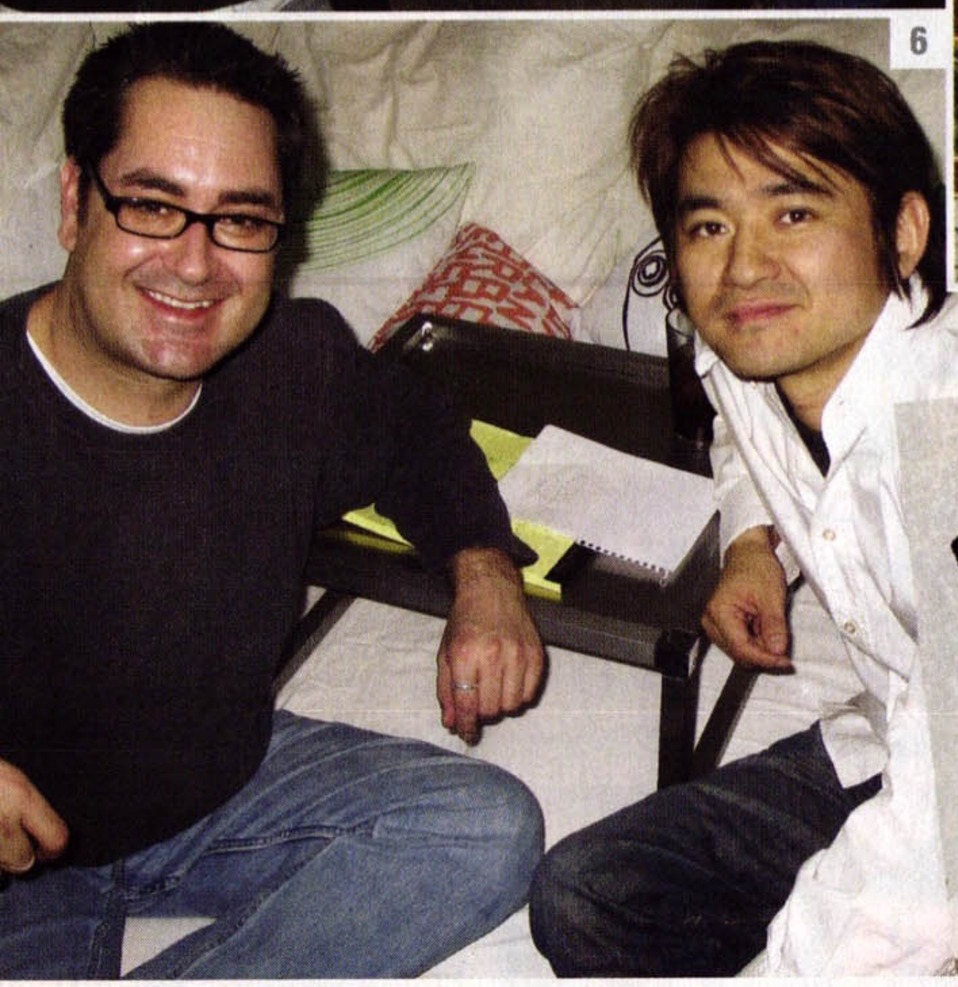
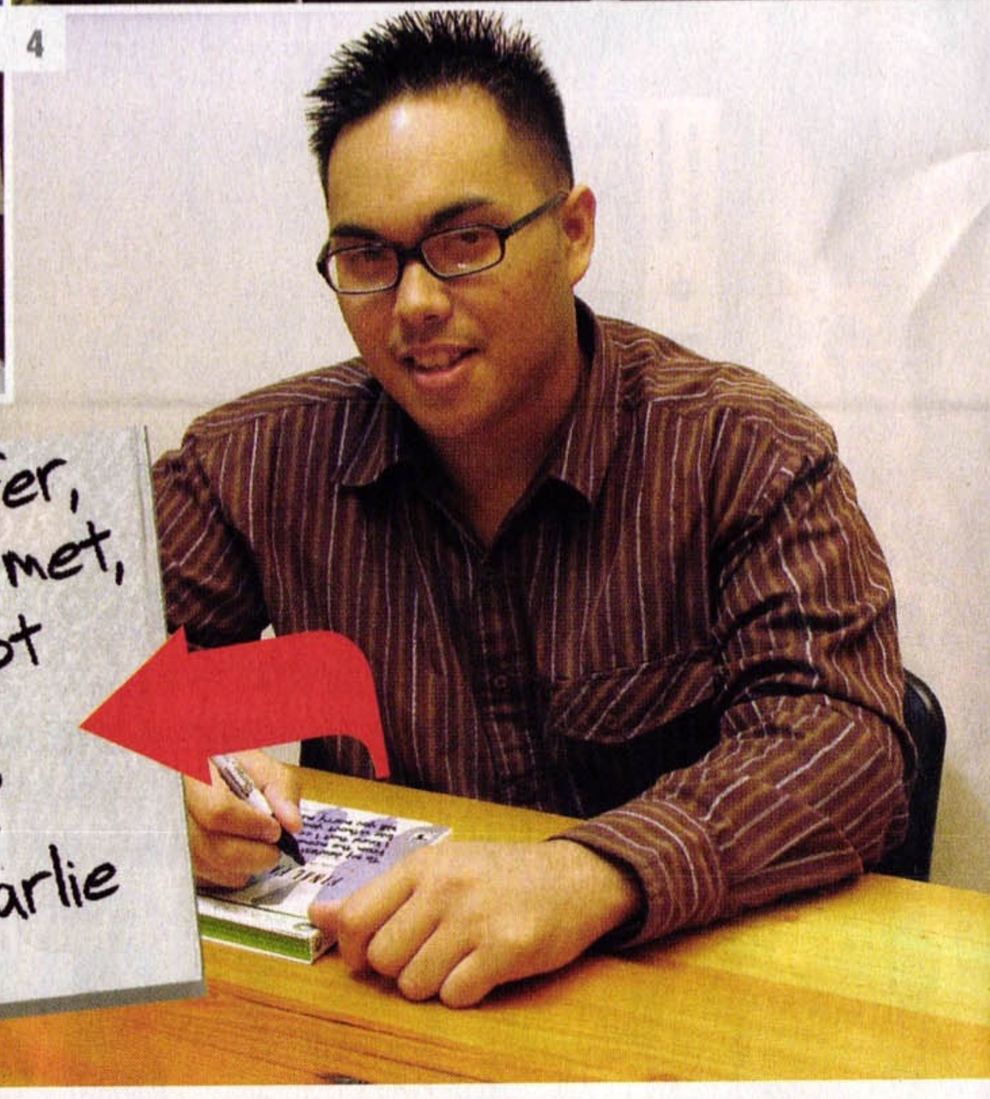
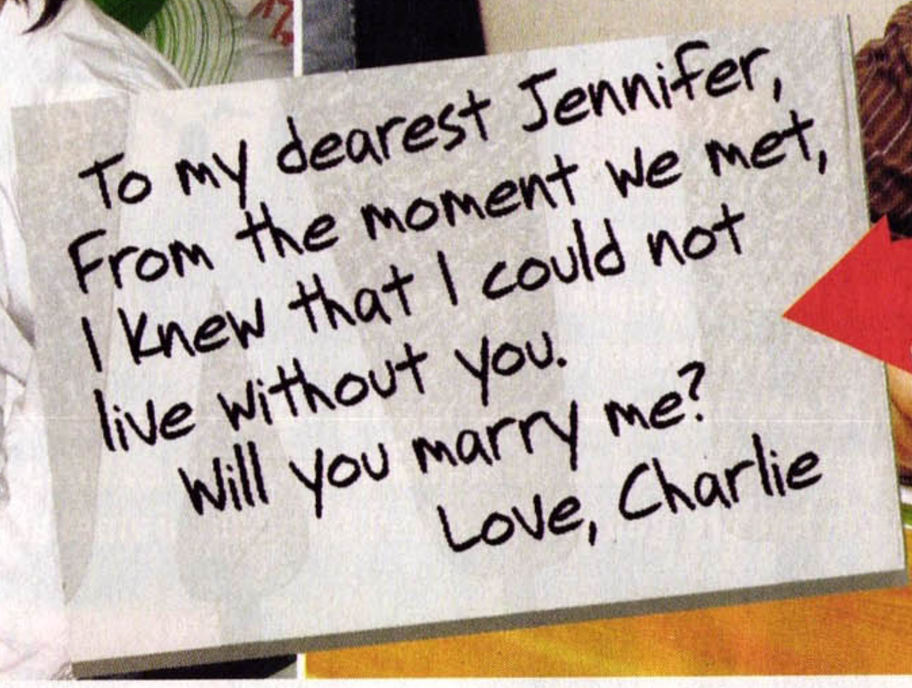
GISPY

Candid Photos From The Seedy Underbelly Of The Video Game Industry

1 LucasArts' Chris Baker discovers that Darth Vader isn't such a bad guy after all **2** GI Online's Bryan "Grandmaster Partypants" Vore gets busy with Foundation 9's Chris Charla and Mike Mika as Ted Regulski from Sony ponders life's great questions (like "Where the gin & tonics at?") **3** Lisa gets even more crunk than you could possibly imagine with Ubisoft's Tyrone Miller and Kjell Vistad **4** Charlie Sinhaseni of Square proposes to his girlfriend Jennifer in these hallowed pages. A GI Spy first! **5** Kato's only a part time video game editor, by night he's a beer industry magnate! **6** Billy has a sleep over with Lumines creator Tetsuya Mizuguchi. Later on, they had a pillowfight and made prank phonecalls **7** Grandmaster Partypants gives the thumb-up with Epic's Cliffy B and Golin-Harris' Julia Roether **8** Reiner and Jeremy hang with the Capcom crew, Rey Jimenez and Arne Cual-Pedroso







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DEAR GI

The Readers Strike Back

GI COMMUNITY

Game Informer has a thriving online community, and this is where they can sound off about issues facing the gaming industry today

THE QUESTION:
Who will win the next-gen console war?

Nintendo. They're offering us new design concepts and new ways to play, while perfecting and enhancing the old. The DS offers new, worthwhile experiences like Trauma Center, and improves strong franchises like Tetris and Metroid.

srkelley

It seems like Microsoft is being prepped for the throne in North America. Despite a somewhat lackluster launch, the 360's got an interesting roster of future software and Xbox Live seems like it'll still be the most organized and fully-realized online format.

ViewtifulGamer

There is no longer a next-gen war. Each comapny is going a different route with each of their systems. The PS3 wants to be the ultimate entertainment system, the Xbox 360 wants to cater to people as a community gaming machine, and the Revolution wants to be a family device that brings new ways of playing into your living room.

HuBBsDoctor

I'm thinking it'll be a close one between Microsoft and Sony. They both have good third party support this time around, they both have stellar graphics, they both have HD support, and they both have that "cool" factor to appeal to the mainstream.

Skakid15

I think it's going to turn out quite similarly to this generation. A few new features or superior hardware will not turn the casual fanboy away from his beloved console, whichever it may be.

fpsfasha

PS3, due mainly to Sony's lock on the industry right now. Sure, the system will be a bit more expensive, but look at the exclusive games. Devil May Cry 4, Guns of the Patriots...it's enough to make me work another week to afford one.

Halbred

Do you want to make your voice heard? Weigh in with your opinion at www.gameinformer.com/forums

THE BENCH BITES BACK

As a long-time subscriber, I read your magazine because I respect your views and reviews of video games. That said, I don't read your magazine for your opinions of what it takes to be an athlete. I found it offensive that in his review of Arena Football, Kato called the athletes in the AFL "not man enough" and "failures as pro athletes." The AFL is a professional league and has been for 20 years. Because it's a different game, that makes it non-professional? The NFL has had solid players come from the AFL, including a Super Bowl-winning MVP quarterback. Kato's arrogance in his review has, in my eyes, discredited anything further he has to say about sports. I hope from now on he works on what he's paid to do: review games for what they are instead of attacking and belittling hard-working professional athletes.

Steve Snyder
via aol.com

■ **Whether it's Arena Football, Shadow the Hedgehog, or Dragonball Z, every cartoon, character, and sport will have a base of devoted followers. This shouldn't be regarded as a bad thing; fandom is one of the elements at the core of the gaming industry. So, when you read a review (which is ultimately just an opinion) that expresses a view you disagree with, feel free to write to us like Steve did. However, there are two things to keep in mind. First, remember that reviews are only useful if they're honest. You can disagree with them, and even choose to ignore them, but in the end we would be doing you a disservice if we weren't forthcoming with our true thoughts and opinions. Second, know that we base our scores on a game's merits, not the subject matter's. Kato's perception of Arena Football athletes aside, the game just isn't well-tuned or fully-developed, and it was scored accordingly. Whether or not one enjoys the sport itself isn't going to change that.**

DIGGING DEEPER

I was reading your April 2006 issue, and came across "Top 10 Games You've Never Heard Of." Though I thoroughly appreciate the effort taken to find the best free games available, the title is misleading. While many freeware games are not well-known, Runescape is not one of them. Immediately after reading your list, I talked with five random people in the chat room for another online game. We had all heard of and/or played Runescape. Do you call that "unknown"?

Elizabeth Eddy
Buckley, WA

■ **It isn't surprising that people who are already a part of the online freeware community are familiar with Runescape. You are correct to point out that the game is fairly high-profile among those "in the know," but there are many gamers out there who rarely venture beyond their controller tethered to a home console. We simply wanted to spotlight these accessible and fun alternative gaming options; the aim of the article wasn't to unearth the most obscure and underground titles on the Internet. However, we know the list was far from comprehensive, and we received a mound of letters suggesting other games that could have made the final cut. So, if you're craving even more of the unique flavor these games provide, check out one of these recommendations from your fellow Game Informer readers:**

Lands of Hope (www.fho2.com)
Gunbound (www.gunbound.net)
Maple Story (www.mapleglobal.com)
Little Fighter 2 (www.lf2.net)
Future Pinball (www.futurepinball.com)
Rubies of Eventide (www.eventide.net)
Astonia 3 (www.astonia.com)
Cyber Nations (www.cybernations.net)
StepMania (www.stepmania.com)

LOOKING FOR A FIGHT

I enjoyed reading through the new Connect: Debate articles in your last two issues. You seem to represent both sides very well with little bias. The only problem is that it seems kind of dry, as

BLENDING IN

I feel the need to point something out about your magazine. While I enjoy it a great deal, I have a real problem with advertisements that look like they are in fact endorsements coming straight from Game Informer. I am fully aware that there is a tiny little "Special Advertising Section" disclaimer at the top, but a lot of people not noticing that are duped into thinking that your unbiased magazine is passing on some slanted information to the gaming public, like with Far Cry Instincts: Predator on page 32 of issue 156. I realize that Ubisoft paid you good money for this type of two-page ad, but it's not really honest, is it? If it really was honest, then the whole ad wouldn't look like an article from your magazine, but rather the advertisement that it is. It's meant to deceive the reader – simple as that. While it is an informative ad, is the game really "boasting the most lethal, most realistic enemy AI ever seen," as the advertisement proudly claims? Who knows? But there is a portion of your readers that think it does, because it looks like Game Informer says so.

Matt Freeman
via yahoo.com

■ **You bring up several good points, Matt, and the relationship between gaming publications and advertising is emerging as a prominent subject in the industry right now. As you said, these ads do have some similarities to our previews (and those other magazines), so we consciously take steps to avoid confusion. In addition to the Special Advertising Section disclaimer, we also try to place them in sections where they don't blend with the editorial content, like Connect. Even though the Far Cry ad blurs some traditional boundaries, it isn't necessarily pure trickery. We spoke with an official at Ubisoft, who gave the following comment: "Gamers, more than ever, want to know every detail about a game. These advertisements – product details with some cool graphics – are a way to provide more information to readers than they would normally get from a traditional advertisement. We're not trying to mislead anyone (all of these ads clearly state that they are advertisements right at the top of the page). Many people find this approach a refreshing change to the old-school layout (a headline, a couple of screen shots and a rendered image) which they see for almost every other game." This approach may be a way to make an ad stand out, but some readers undoubtedly will feel deceived. We're not about deception here at Game Informer. If you want to comment on these ads, you can contact us (deargi@gameinformer.com), or email Ubisoft directly at GIreaderfeedback@ubisoft.com.**

Send your comments to Game Informer. Snail Mail: Game Informer Magazine • Attn: Dear GI • 724 North First St., 4th Floor • Minneapolis, MN 55401 Email: deargi@gameinformer.com

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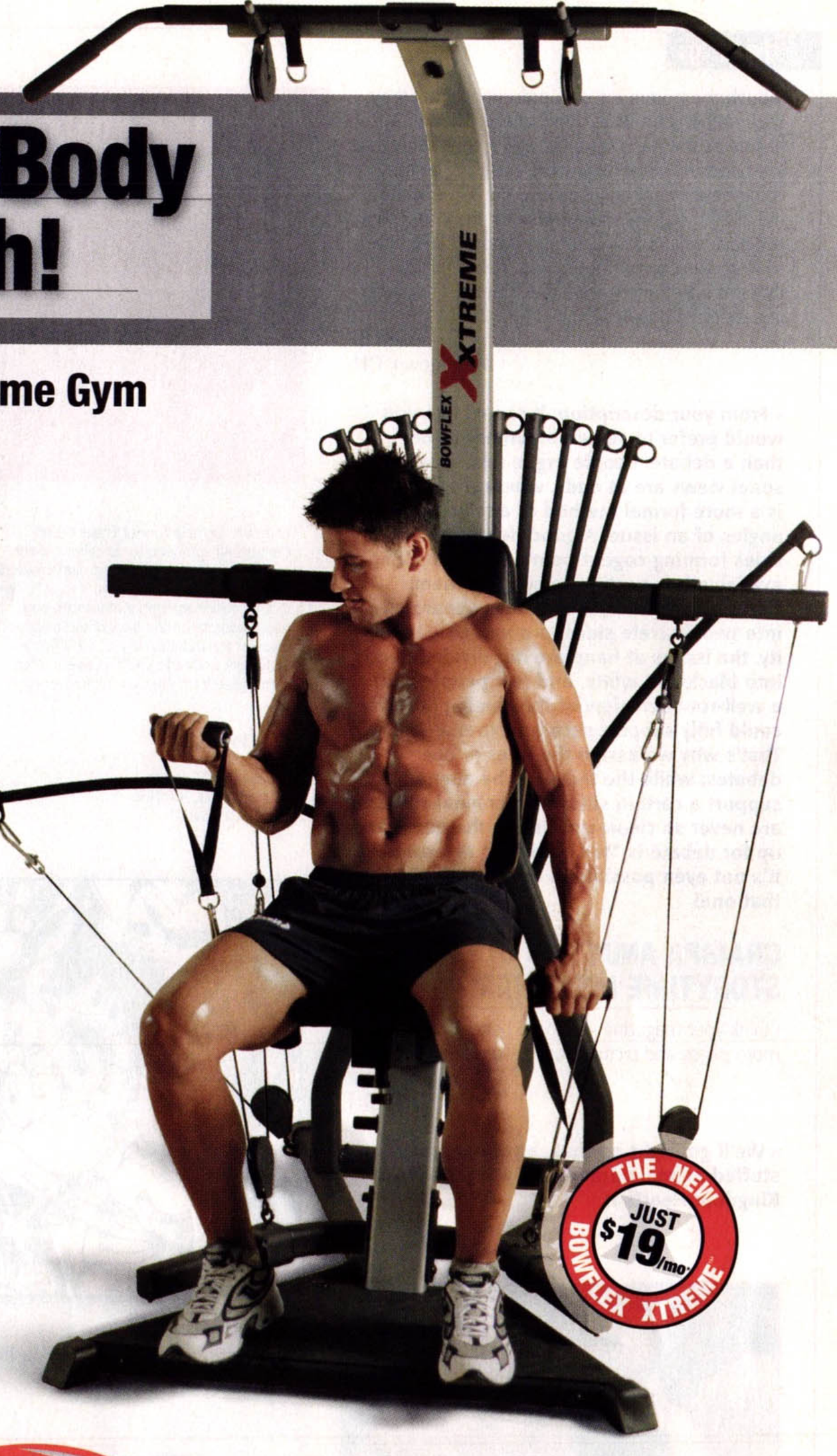

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though the writers are only presenting what they know rather than what they believe. Shouldn't beliefs be the basis for a debate? I don't think that the opposing viewpoints were as strong as they could have been, only because the same writer did all of the pros, and likewise for the cons. Why not have writers for each topic who actually have rivaling opinions on the issue at hand? I think that this way there will be much better and more impassioned debates.

Adam B.
Austintown, OH

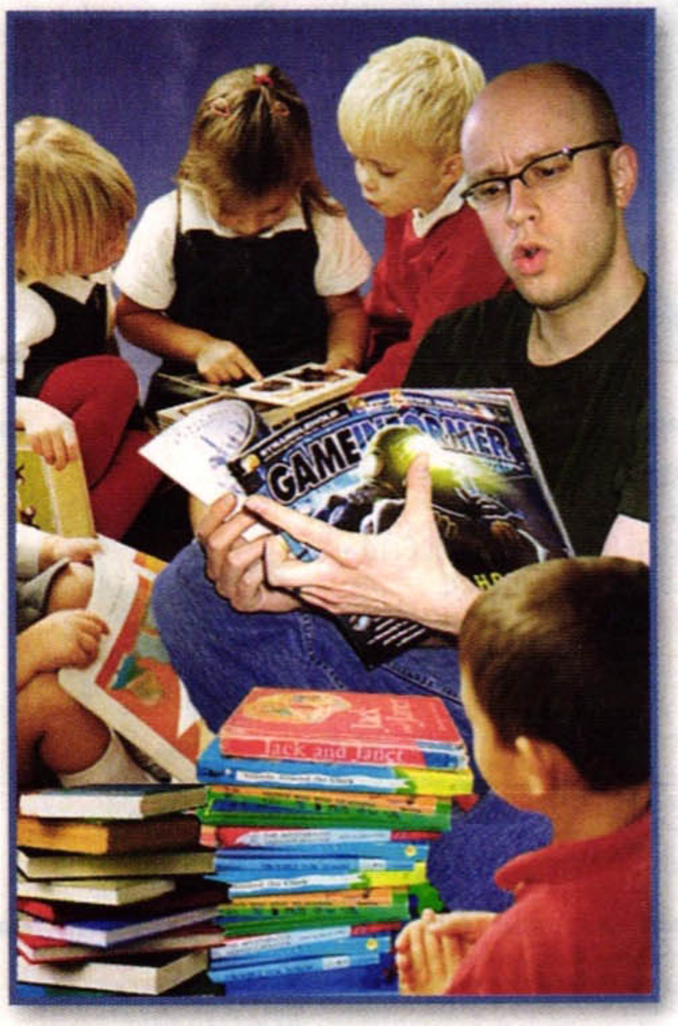
■ From your description, it seems like you would prefer to see an argument rather than a debate. People argue when their personal views are at odds, whereas a debate is a more formal method of analyzing the angles of an issue. A good debate has both sides forming cogent points and using all available information to support them. However, by nature a debate is separated into two discrete sides: pro and con. In reality, the issues at hand are not divided neatly into black and white, and few people with a well-rounded view of the gaming industry could fully support such an extreme stance. That's why we assign the roles in our debates; while the facts can be aligned to support a certain side, our personal views are never so clean-cut. Unless the question up for debate is "Is Chewbacca awesome?" It's not even possible to write a con side to that one!

GRAMPA ANDY'S STORYTIME INFORMER

I think your magazine would be better if there were more pages and pictures, and fewer boring words.

Orlando Chaidez
Akron, OH

■ We'll get right on that...after naptime, our stuffed animal parade, and a few hours of Kingdom Hearts II.



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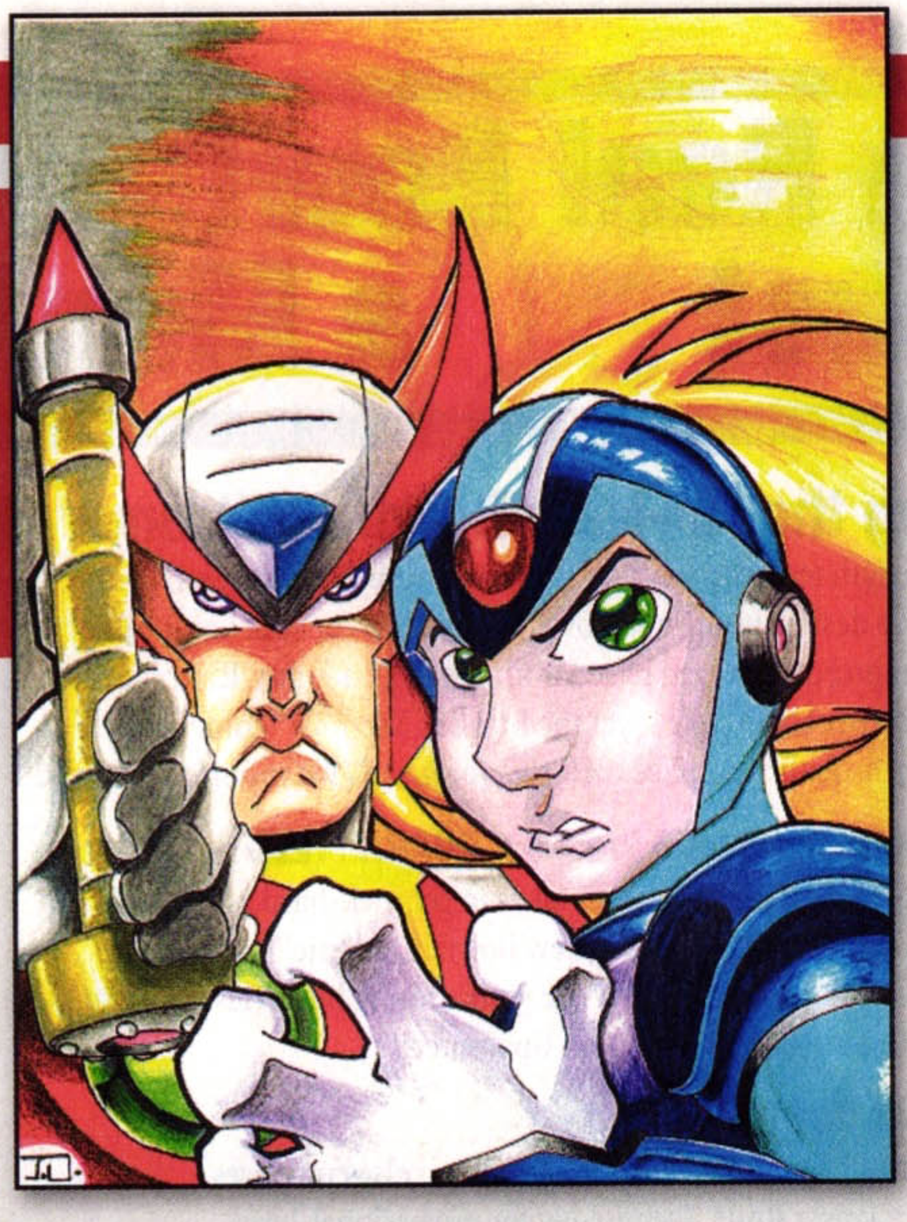

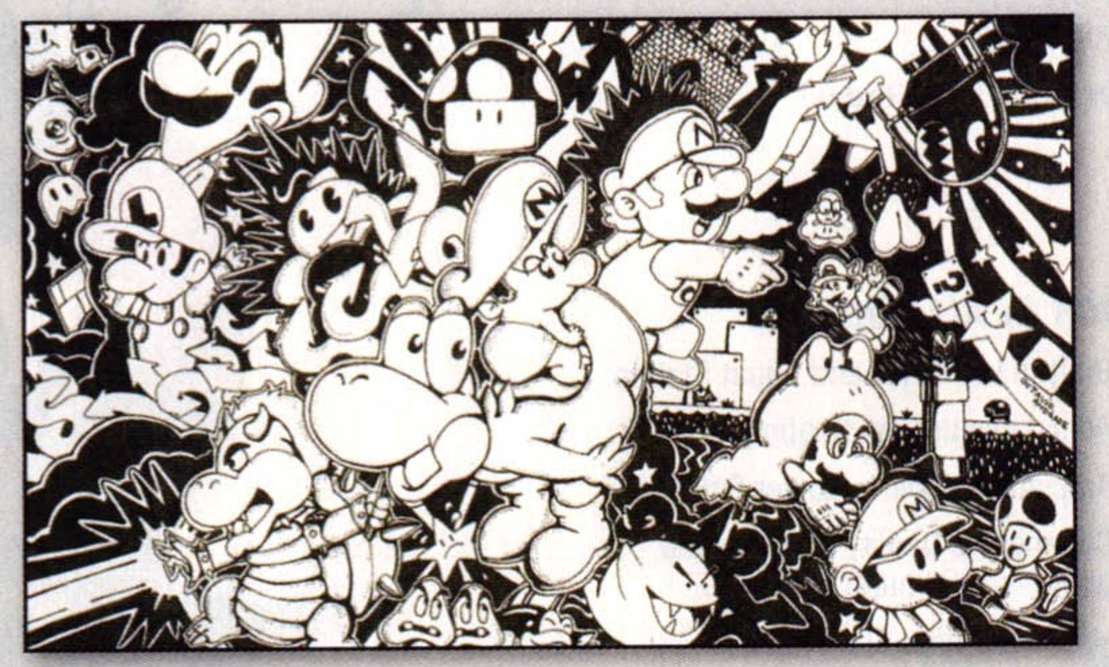

OCTAVIO ANDRADE
Before color was invented, the Mushroom Kingdom was a coal mining community. This is true

ALEXANDRA SHULTZ
Cloud, you silly bishie! You should be making eyes at the hottie next to you, not us

MICHELLE MANUS
Blue, fins, and female. She passes the Jeremy Test!

FERNANDO MENDEZ JR.
Sometimes Sam picks up ladies at the Failed Plastic Surgery Clinic. All booty looks the same in night-vision, baby!

CHARLES ATKINS
Martian Manhunter loved the way his senior pictures turned out. The one where he's outside holding his football helmet by a wagon wheel looked cooler, though

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news

ATARI IN TRANSITION

TIMESHIFT AND STUNTMAN 2 SOLD OFF

Atari has had a very rough year so far. After posting that net revenues for the third quarter of fiscal year 2006 were down by one-third, Atari is offering up some of its franchises to the highest bidder. TimeShift (developed by Saber Interactive) has been picked up by Vivendi, and Stuntman 2 is also leaving Atari. Losing these franchises is hardly the end of Atari's woes. The company's stock has already been threatened with de-listing by NASDAQ since it is trading at under $1. In response, Atari CEO Bruno Bonnell has said that internal studios such as Reflections and Shiny Entertainment (The Matrix: The Path of Neo) will be sold off, and 20 percent of Atari's workforce will be cut. As bad as all this sounds, in an interview with Game Informer, Bonnell assured us that these events are all part of Atari's plans. He described to us where the company is at, where it's going, and how it's going to get there.

Atari CEO Bruno Bonnell

Describe the current state of the company.
The company reflects the situation of the market, meaning that we're going through heavy transition. I believe that Atari has defined a very clear path for its future, and is actually executing this plan – sometimes with some misunderstanding of those moves. But if you look at where we want to go, they are extremely coherent. And this year will clearly be kind of a cleanup year. I just think that when people see that TimeShift has been sold or that we are moving off some of our studios, they see this as the empty side of the bottle. If you look at the full side, we are just re-orientating the company to offer more flexibility.

Is this transition brought on by the move to the next-generation of hardware?
I think it's more important than that. Limiting the transition to the next-generation of systems is a little short sighted, in my opinion. I think we're seeing a major transformation of our market, with at least three technological revolutions. First is the one you mentioned: the next-generation consoles. Second, the development of mobile entertainment from PSP to DS to 3G phones and everything to do with the fact that you can play on the go. Thirdly, the incredible development of broadband applications in an interactive way, the leader of the pack being World of Warcraft. There is a consumer revolution too, where a 50 dollar experience for 50 hours of gameplay is moving into a much shorter experience where [gamers] don't want to pay for the same sequel for the same amount. I think that's a big explanation of last year's drop in PS2 sales, as well as the deception of the consumer seeing the same game just with a different number next to the same title. So I believe that between the technological transformation and the sociological transformation, we're really going through a massive change. Every company will view this transformation with their old constraints. It's no news that Atari went through refinancing of its heavy debt at the group level. Therefore, we are looking at this new cycle from our own point of view and taking steps to refinance some of the company and to select what we do more carefully than probably some of the competition today.

Is Atari's transition inevitable or did some of it come as a surprise? If not, could the company have done something to brace itself better?
You know, I rarely look back. But I can say that the company has been through heavy pressure on the cash side with the consequences of the decision of paying back convertible debt four years ago. Now, could we have done things differently? Probably. But it doesn't change that we're still here, and we still have a plan for development and we're not giving up. When I read here and there 'Is it Game Over for Atari?', which is almost like a common phrase, I just like to answer that, I've probably been told 'Game Over' five or six times in the last 10 years, so we're still here. So, I think the characteristics of this company are that we face our obligations, we pay back our debts, and we have very interesting products coming out. We have a massive lineup of product. Now, do we play the same games as some of our competitors? No. Do we want to keep internal development? No. We've been very clear on this. So is it a weakness? No. If it was we wouldn't do it.

What about NASDAQ threatening to delist the company's stock?
There are ways to go off this situation. To be clear, we have a year before we have really run the risk of delisting. So I think that talking about delisting at this stage is inappropriate, because we are taking steps to preserve the stock listing of this company. A year to fix it is much more than we need. So hopefully before then we'll have made some announcements and delivered some good results so everyone will be satisfied.

You mentioned selling off Atari's internal studios as one aspect of the company's plans. Could owning internal studios again be a possibility for some other phase of Atari's plans?
No, because the path that we are choosing for the future is being described to the public as giving the company the highest flexibility. We see Atari in the future as being able to deliver content to all kinds of supports: Next-gen of course, mobile, and online. So that means that keeping heavy development studios – even if they are extremely qualified – at heavy cost and focused only on a limited number of formats, seems to have limited our choices in investment. It's a different strategy from our competition, and we respect all strategies, but we believe there is a model where we can be producing games with excellent outside studios with contractual relationships and still be extremely efficient. For example, the Neverwinter Nights 2 game – which is excellent – has been done with an external studio. We are anticipating that from the 50-50 split we have today [between external and internal studios], to having a 100 percent external studios strategy. We believe if correctly done, this model can be extremely efficient.

> **Limiting the transition to the next-generation of systems is a little short sighted, in my opinion.**
>
> – BRUNO BONNELL, CEO, ATARI

With many publishers buying up development studios, is Atari's current state a cautionary tale for others?
You know, I think that everyone is reading the world in their own way. And in the context of what some of our competitors are doing, they probably have clear explanations of why they buy out more studios and the integration of their creation forces. We have a different system. And to be completely honest, I can't really tell you at this stage that we've been able to demonstrate this system, because we're effectively half internal and half external. It hasn't been exactly clear, so we've had to bear the cost of every studio internally, but we still wanted to deal with outsiders. That created tension within the company.

Will we see other Atari franchises sold off?
I was very explicit in my speech to the shareholders that debt clearance was a priority, and that we would do whatever it took to move the company forward, and there was no taboo in the company about that. I don't plan to strip Atari of everything, but if the opportunity and the price is right, there is no title that is above being put on the market. At this point, there is a limited list and we are talking to some partners. We have a number, and when we reach this number and are satisfied, we'll stop. So it's not an obsession to sell. Some of the games, like TimeShift, we felt that we didn't have the internal support and it would have been much, much better treated in someone else's hands. Every single company has a style – we have a style. So instead of saying 'Atari: Game Over?' I would question if Atari is not actually like a spring [that is coiling before it expands]. I believe that after my 23 years of interactive experience, there has to be a time where we make this cleansing – as long as we have a clear path to the future. And my vision of the market is that it's not only going to boom in one specific category, but in many segments. That's why I want to give the company more flexibility.

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DATA FILE

More News You Can Use

SEGA'S NEW SECRET

Sega is trying to strengthen its Western development presence by acquiring San Francisco-based developer Secret Level. Although the company's resume isn't stellar (including Star Wars: Starfighter [shown] and Magic: The Gathering – Battlegrounds), Sega is aiming to let Secret Level loose on one of its big name franchises for the next-generation of systems.

THE CALL OF MULTIPLAYER DUTY

The first great Xbox 360 shooter is getting better. Activision has just announced some new multiplayer maps for Call of Duty 2. This shot comes from the Rhine map, which is the first in a series of four that will debut at E3 and be available shortly thereafter.

NEW PS2 PRICE

After months of speculation, Sony has finally dropped the price of the PS2 system to $129.99. The console has already undergone previous price drops, and its form factor has even been significantly streamlined.

ANOTHER CONSOLE, ANOTHER RIDGE RACER

The sun rises on another console this fall, and so will Namco Bandai's Ridge Racer. The seventh installment in the series will launch with the PlayStation 3, and given just how awful the sales were in the U.S. for the Xbox 360 Ridge Racer, upgrading to 'bad' in that category would be a minor victory.

NEW COMMAND & CONQUER IN '07

EA has announced Command & Conquer 3: Tiberium Wars (working title) for PC, and the RTS game covers the continuing battle between the GDI and The Brotherhood of NOD. The game is scheduled to release in 2007.

news

SEGA'S RALLY

CLASSIC FRANCHISES LEAD THE CHARGE

Fans of fighting games know that Sega's Virtua Fighter 5 has already begun beta testing over in Japan, but now they can be happy with the news that the game is coming to the PlayStation 3 in spring 2007. The arcade version features many more unlockable accessories and costumes to customize your character with than VF4, as well as some new characters.

Virtua Fighter 5 isn't the only Sega title fans can get excited about, as the company has announced that RPG Phantasy Star Universe is coming to the Xbox 360 this fall. The game will also see releases on the PS2 and PC.

Here's a quick list of some other upcoming Sega titles. You can also find info for Super Monkey Ball: Banana Blitz for the Revolution and Super Monkey Ball Adventure on page 96, as well as the new Sonic the Hedgehog on page 103.

- Virtua Fighter 5 (PS3)
- Golden Axe (Xbox 360)
- Full Auto 2: Battlelines (PS3)
- Sonic Rivals (PSP)
- Sonic Revolution (Revolution)
- Phantasy Star Universe (Xbox 360)
- New Sega Rally (PS3, Xbox 360)
- Yakuza (PS2)

news

JAPANESE XBOX 360 NOT DEAD!

THIRD MISTWALKER RPG IN WORKS

Microsoft has had an extremely tough time getting its Xbox 360 to stick in Japan. Recently, however, the company had a press event to talk about some moves being made to rectify the situation.

Square Enix and Game Arts are teaming up for Project Sylph, an exclusive title for the system which is actually a shooter and not an RPG. In fact, there are hints that the title is really a next-gen continuation of the Silpheed series. Meanwhile, Tri-Ace (Valkyrie Profile) is delivering on the RPG front, with an unannounced game whose combat plays out in real time.

Fresh off its recent merger, Namco Bandai is supporting the system with pattern-perfect ports of Galaga and Pac-Man for Xbox Live Arcade that will feature worldwide leaderboards. The company is also putting out robot combat title Zegapain XOR (shown).

In spite of these new titles however, the Xbox 360's fortunes arguably rest on the shoulders of Final Fantasy creator Hironobu Sakaguchi. His company Mistwalker has announced that it is working on a third RPG called Cry On, which is being developed in conjunction with AQ Interactive.

Namco Bandai's Zegapain XOR

THE CITY NEEDS A SAVIOR

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Strong Language
Intense Violence

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THE TOP 10 RARE RPGS YOU NEED

- Disgaea: Hour of Darkness
- Dragon Force
- Earthbound
- Lunar: Silver Star Story Complete
- Panzer Dragoon Saga
- Shadow Hearts
- Suikoden II
- Tactics Ogre
- Valkyrie Profile
- Ys Book I&II

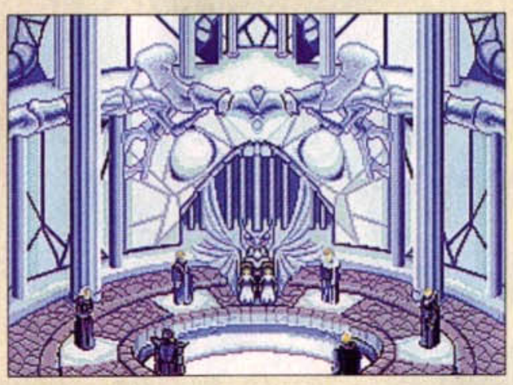
Titles No Self-Respecting RPG Fan Should Be Without

They may not garner mainstream attention like Grand Theft Auto, Madden, or Halo, but role-playing games are among the most respected and revered titles in gaming. Of course, since they don't typically sell millions of copies, it can be easy to miss these remarkable games for the short time they remain on store shelves. The Final Fantasy series is great, but you'll need to look a little harder to gain a full appreciation of what the genre has to offer. This list serves as a tribute to some RPG classics that, though they have become hard to find, are landmarks. Keep in mind that these are not the rarest of the rare, but rather a sample of hidden gems that are well worth hunting down.

10 SHADOW HEARTS

Format: PlayStation 2

While later entries in this franchise descend into sheer zaniness, the original Shadow Hearts is actually an innovative fusion of role-playing and survival horror. The game is set in an alternate vision of 1913 where fantasy and reality mix. The macabre story guides you through demonic and gothic surroundings as you control Yuri, a Harmonixer. In combat Yuri is able to assume the form of powerful demons as he tries to uncover the mysterious significance of a woman named Alice Elliot (who is kidnapped by Roger Bacon. Medieval philosophy +1). However, Shadow Hearts' main innovation is the Judgment Ring, a mechanic that incorporates timing and skill into an otherwise traditional turn-based framework. When Shadow Hearts Covenant came out in 2004, some stores offered the original title as a pre-order bonus, which means that it isn't as hard to come by as it once was.



9 Ys BOOK I&II

Format: Turbo Grafx

Many long-running RPG series change up the characters for each installment, but Ys is known for its continuing focus on the adventures of Adol Christin. With his signature red hair and a sword in hand, this compilation chronicles Adol's first two adventures. If you consider yourself a video game music buff, you need to add Ys Book I&II to your collection; these games are best remembered for their exceptional soundtracks. Unfortunately, the Turbo Grafx wasn't the most popular console of its day, but both games were released separately for the PC in the late '90s, so there are still ways to enjoy this often-overlooked series.

8 TACTICS OGRE

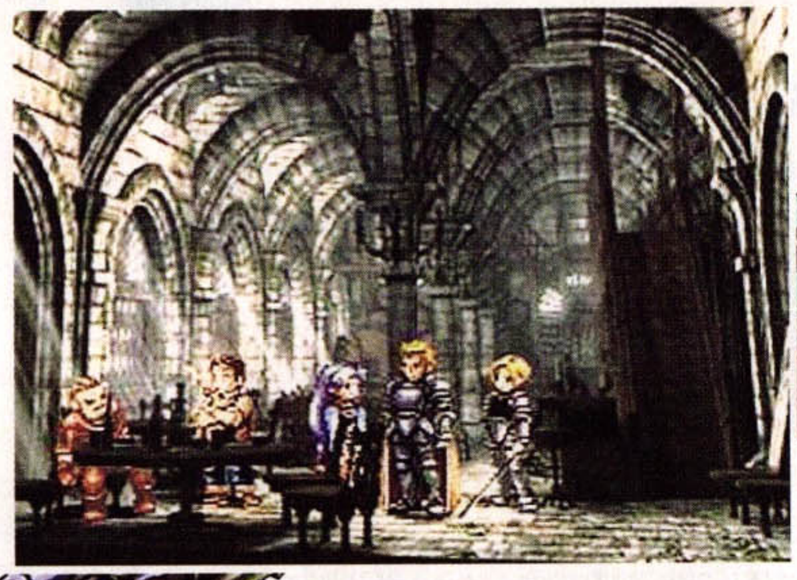
Format: PSone

Directed by Yasumi Matsuno (of Final Fantasy Tactics and Vagrant Story fame), this grid-based strategy/RPG is one of the most elusive titles in the genre. It was first released for the Super Famicom, but made the move to the PSone for its American debut. Praised for its meticulous balance and relentless challenge, Tactics Ogre features different character classes depending on your units' genders and kills them off for good if they fall in the heat of battle. Depending on how you complete certain missions, you can explore several branching paths of the story that result in a variety of different endings.

7 VALKYRIE PROFILE

Format: PSone

Norse gods, dead warriors, and a war in the heavens tie together the unconventional gameplay experience that is Valkyrie Profile. Breaking from tradition, this game's battle system does away with selecting your attacks from a menu, instead mapping each combatant to a face button and relying on the player to time their attacks to maximize damage. When not in combat, you find yourself flying around the overworld, navigating side-scrolling dungeons, and seeking out worthy fighters to harvest for the front lines in the impending celestial conflict. With its compelling cast of characters and epic story, Valkyrie Profile has become one of the rarer PSone titles. The good news? Later this year Square Enix is porting Valkyrie Profile to the PSP (see page 93 for more), so this unique adventure won't linger in obscurity much longer.



6 SUIKODEN II

Format: PSone

Regarded by most as the best game in series, the second Suikoden title is also the hardest to find – mainly because the people who have it want to hang on to it. All of Suikoden hallmarks are in place, including the 108 stars of destiny and multiple types of battles (including large-scale wars similar to those in Suikoden V). These things are present throughout the franchise, but Suikoden II's masterful implementation alongside its gripping political story is what elevated the entry to a level that all subsequent games in the series have since been striving to recapture. C'mon, Suikoden VI! You can do it!

5 LUNAR: SILVER STAR STORY COMPLETE

Format: PSone

Forget about the recent execrable Lunar on DS. This PSone remake of the Sega Saturn original is a shining example of what makes old-school Japanese-style RPGs fun. Being able to set pre-defined default actions to your characters (or even the whole party) takes the tedium out of battle while excellent balancing keeps boss fights entertaining and intense. Lunar's story even rises above its "young boy out to save the world" script to deliver a truly compelling tale of heroism and morality, with excellent dialogue and (mostly) outstanding voice-acting that really brings the characters to life. Plus, the arch-villain has a lisp and still manages to be creepy and sinister, which isn't easy.

4 DRAGON FORCE

Format: Sega Saturn

Brought to U.S. by the recently defunct Working Designs (the company was also responsible for Lunar), Dragon Force is a one-of-a-kind mixture of role-playing and strategic elements. While the story is decent, the real draw is the game's unique level of control. It combines quick, decisive battles with careful planning and direction, even though you don't directly control individual troops. You prepare for your battles on an overworld map, then command them first-hand from a side-view of the action. Though still tough to find, Dragon Force was recently re-released on the PS2 in Japan as part of the Sega Ages series, though there is no word as to whether it will make it to our shores. So, savor it if you've got it. Either that, or share the love by selling it to the eager folks who missed it the first time around.

3 DISGAEA: HOUR OF DARKNESS

Format: PlayStation 2

Localization mistakes are a prevalent problem in RPGs, often resulting in unintentionally hilarious or inappropriate dialogue. Disgaea is shining example of how to do things right in that department; the writing is clever and funny by intent, not accident. The unique characters and bizarre events are depicted in a distinctive 2D style, and the grid-based strategic combat is addictive – the transmigration system pushes you to get the most out of each fighter. Even though it met with critical acclaim, Disgaea's niche nature means that you'll need to scour your local used game stores to get your hands on this current-gen classic.

2 EARTHBOUND

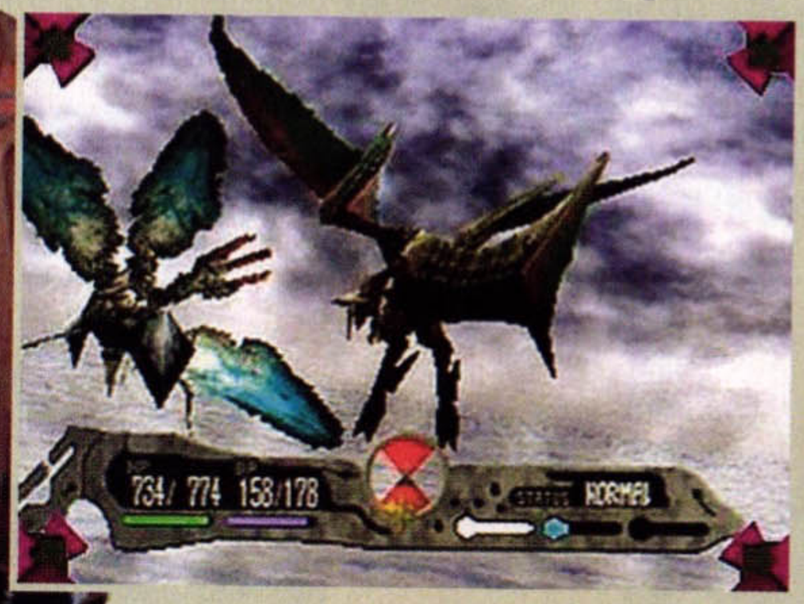
Format: SNES

You know Ness from Super Smash Brothers? Ever wonder where he came from? The answer is Earthbound, a classic 16-bit adventure that introduced the RPG genre to many gamers who weren't into the spells and swords of Dragon Warrior or Final Fantasy. Despite the typical "young boy saves world" motif, Earthbound doesn't take itself too seriously. It often uses silly weapons and quirky and tongue-in-cheek dialogue for humor. It is also unique in the way it avoids resorting to random battles, which were standard in RPGs at the time. As the second entry in the Mother series (the first one never came out Stateside), the years have only added to Earthbound's appeal, causing many gamers to practically beg for more. A GBA compilation of Mother 1 and 2 has been announced for Japan, though, so there's a chance U.S. fans may get their wish.

1 PANZER DRAGOON SAGA

Format: Sega Saturn

Breaking away from its rail-shooting roots, as an RPG Panzer Dragoon Saga still stays to true to the series' major themes. A young man named Edge uncovers an ancient dragon at an excavation site, and soon finds himself in the middle of a conflict involving betrayal and a mysterious girl. The developers must have realized that people love the flying segments in RPGs, because navigation in Panzer Dragoon Saga is largely done from atop the dragon, flying around from place to place within a 3D world. In fact, much of the game is focused on Edge's relationship with his dragon; while there are important secondary characters, he never amasses a huge party like traditional RPGs. Sadly, this game was released late in the Sega Saturn's life, and even then in limited supply, so it is one of the more difficult games on this list to track down. If you do, however, you will have one of the most coveted treasures of role-playing gamers.



HUNT AS A PACK
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DIE LIKE A DOG.

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- OFFICIAL XBOX MAGAZINE

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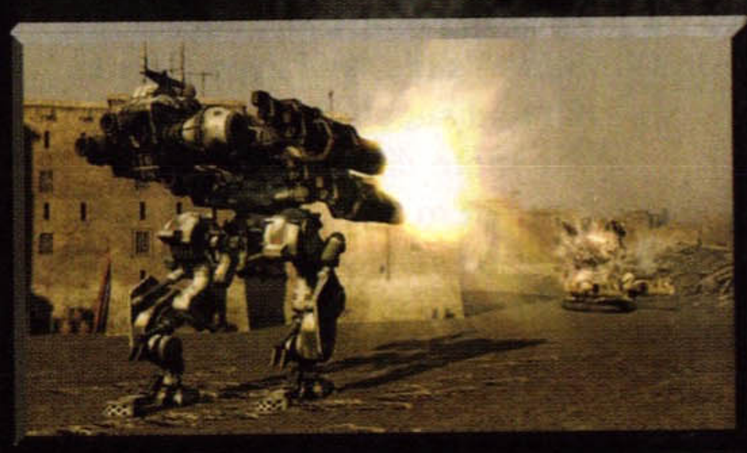

TEEN
T
Mild Language
Violence
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THE GOOD, THE BAD, THE UGLY

When You Want Your News Categorized With A Sarcastic Editorial Spin

Some readers today probably weren't even reading Game Informer back when the November 2002 issue hit with Blizzard Entertainment's Starcraft: Ghost on the cover. Since then, the title has gone through a whirlwind of changes, and now with the news that Starcraft: Ghost is moving to next-gen and being delayed indefinitely because of it, we aren't gonna bat an eyelid. Move over Duke Nukem Forever, there's a new punching bag in town…

GOOD

Phew! Luckily we weren't the only ones severely unimpressed with the look of PS3's Untold Legends: Dark Kingdom. Developer Sony Online has changed the model for its Brute character (see last issue's preview for more) to this altogether more formidable looking chap.

GOOD

Console gamers can rejoice in that Vivendi and Monolith's F.E.A.R. title is coming to the Xbox 360 before the end of the year. However, PC fans can still feel superior because they are going to get an expansion pack. As for the Xbox 360 game, developer Monolith is touching up the graphics, and the early word is that everything's looking pretty sweet.

GOOD

LEGO artist Nathan Sawaya has built huge replicas of the Xbox 360 and the PS3 (prototype) controllers. This is just the tip of the iceberg for Sawaya, who has also done treatments of Han Solo encased in carbonite and created mosaics of Van Gogh and Curious George. Check out http://nathanbrickartist.com for more.

■ Stardock's Galactic Civilizations II: Dread Lords

GOOD

Both Ubisoft and Aspyr Media have ended their relationships with Starforce. Customers have complained that Starforce's copyright protection software ironically compromises the security of their PCs. The matter got particularly ugly when a Starforce employee posted a link to a place where gamers could illegally download copies of Stardock's Galactic Civilizations II: Dread Lords – a game that doesn't have any copy protection at all. This was presumably intended as a shot at Stardock's non-copy protection philosophy. Either way, Starforce's way of doing business may be coming to an end.

GOOD LUCK?

Microsoft acquires Lionhead saying that the Fable developer will "immediately" begin working on content. Given the studio's intermittent record of supplying games (How long is Molyneux gonna leak info on Project Dimitri?), we wonder if the word "immediate" has a different meaning over there in England.

news

STAND UP FOR VIDEO GAMES

THE ESA WANTS YOU!

We've been talking for a while now about the various legislative challenges to video games and their sale that are occurring on the state and federal level. Well you don't have to be a passive bystander to these events any more. The Entertainment Software Association (ESA) has set up the Video Game Voters Network, which is a way you can stay informed and involved to the political challenges that our hobby faces.

If you go to www.videogamevoters.org, you can sign up to the network and receive information on what you can do to ensure that video games remain a constitutionally protected form of speech. For instance, the site has organized letter campaigns to lobby your local politicians, an issues page that keeps track of pending and upcoming legislation, and a downloadable voter registration form.

In an open letter to gamers on the site, legendary developer Will Wright writes, "We can't afford to just sit back while games become subject to government regulation! Take a stand today."

Video Game Voters Network

GI OPINION

It's about time. Slowly but surely, our industry is learning how to play the game of politics, and I'm pleased at the announcement that the ESA has launched this site. While we all believe that video games should be protected under the First Amendment, there is legislation currently in Congress that threatens these freedoms. It took me five minutes to send a form letter opposing The Family Entertainment Protection Act to my senators from Minnesota, and I strongly urge you to do the same. It's critical for our leaders to understand that gamers vote, and grassroots organizing like this remains the best way to do that.—**MATT**

games

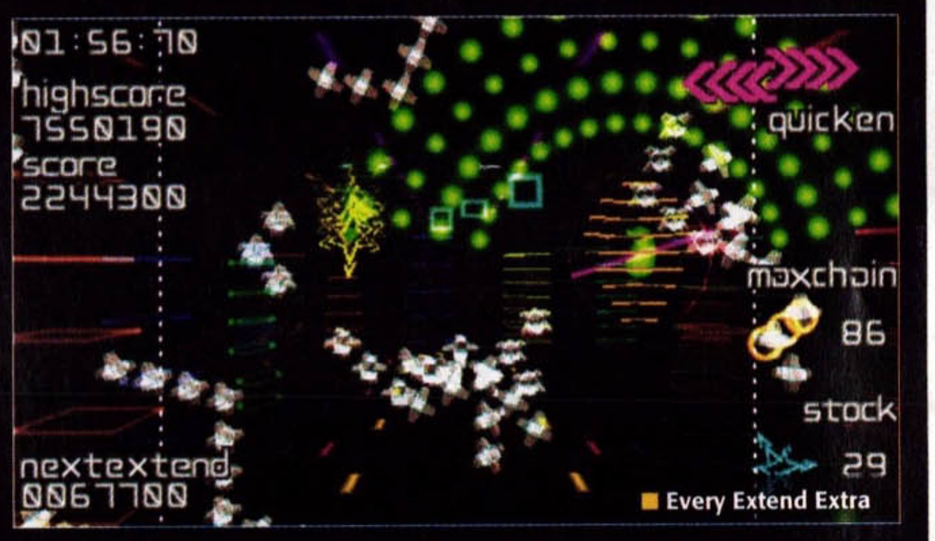
PUZZLE PIECES

TWO FROM Q ENTERTAINMENT

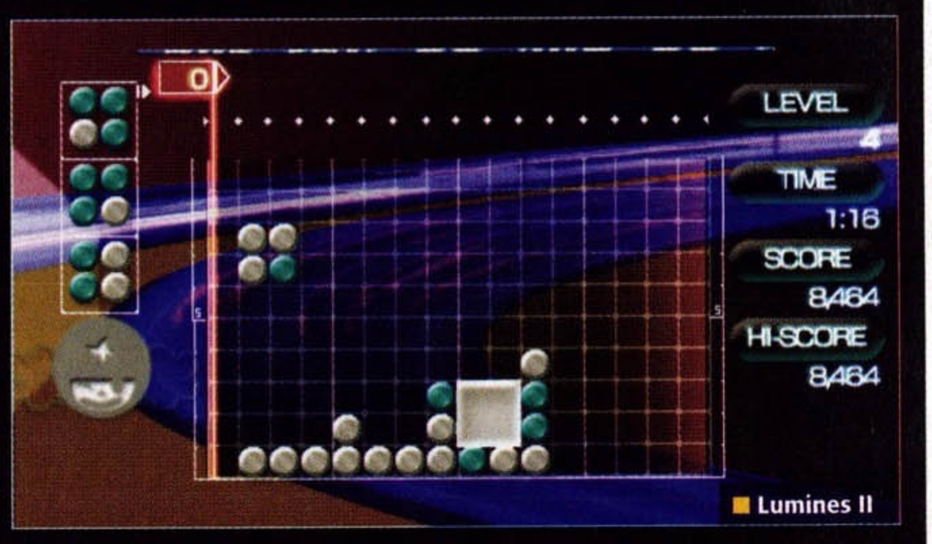
Lumines was the must-have game for most of PSP's early life (and some would still argue it's the best title for the system), and now creator Tetsuya Mizuguchi and Q Entertainment are coming back with not one, but two puzzle titles for the handheld. Lumines II and Every Extend Extra are both coming this fall from Buena Vista Games.

Lumines II delivers much of the same addictive action of the first title through over 100 levels, but the game is now adding licensed songs and even videos to go along with the already toe-tapping original tracks. Rumor has it that the videos will be shown in the background while you're playing.

Every Extend Extra (say that five times fast) meanwhile, is more of a puzzle shooter, where you try to create chain reactions from hitting enemies in what seems like a Geometry Wars-like explosion of color. Of course, since this is a Mizuguchi game, music will be an important component of this title as well.



■ Every Extend Extra



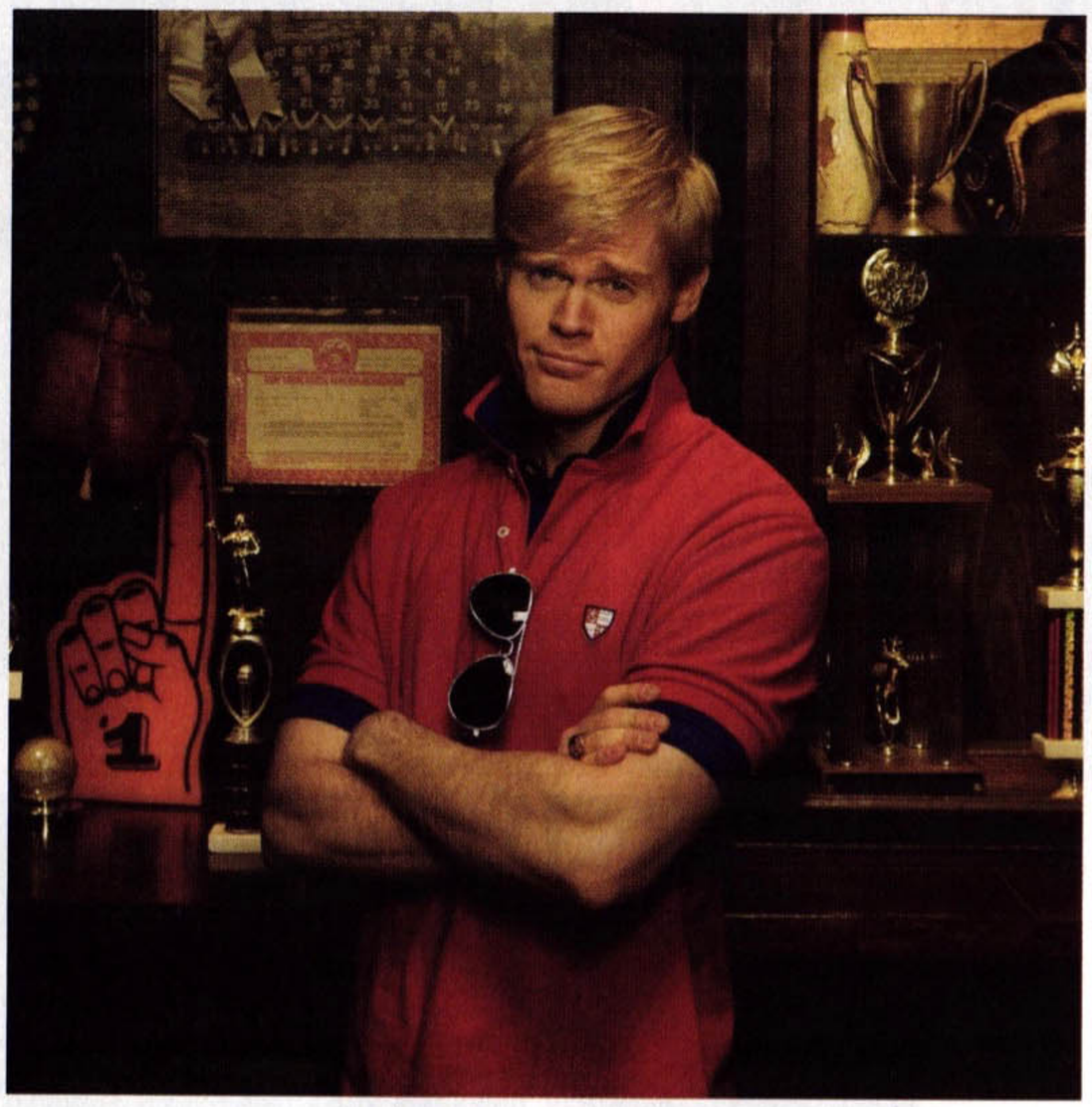
■ Lumines II

THE GAMEKILLERS

There are people out there whose sole mission in life is to cause you to blow your cool and lose the girl. They are, The Gamekillers.

THE ONE UPPER

Anything you can do, he can do better.



With his uncanny ability to take what you said and do you one better, The One Upper can kill your game faster than any other Gamekiller, or so he would lead you to believe. If you've got one, he's got two. If you ran a 10K, he just finished his third marathon. If you went mountain climbing, he's summited Everest—without a Sherpa. While his boastful tales are enough to make a man's blood boil, The Axe Dry wearer keeps his cool by letting The One Upper's arrogance talk himself out of the picture. Silence is not only golden, it also gets the girl.

Keep Your Cool. Axe Dry.

Learn more at gamekillers.com

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LETTERMAN DIGITAL ARTS CENTER

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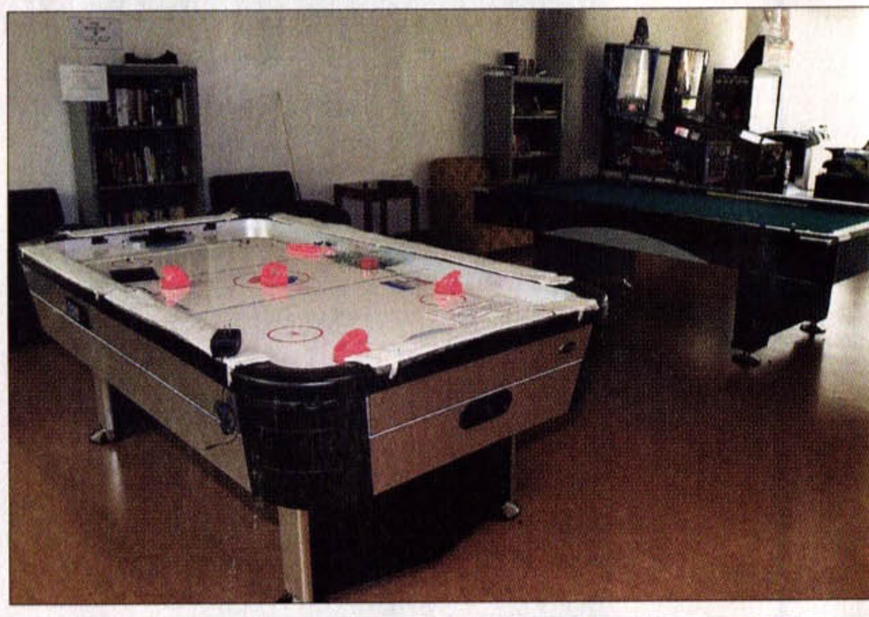
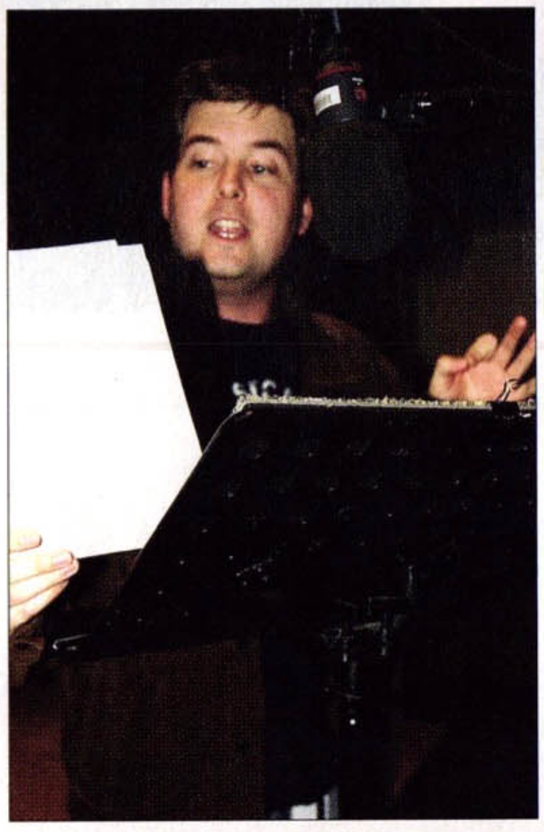
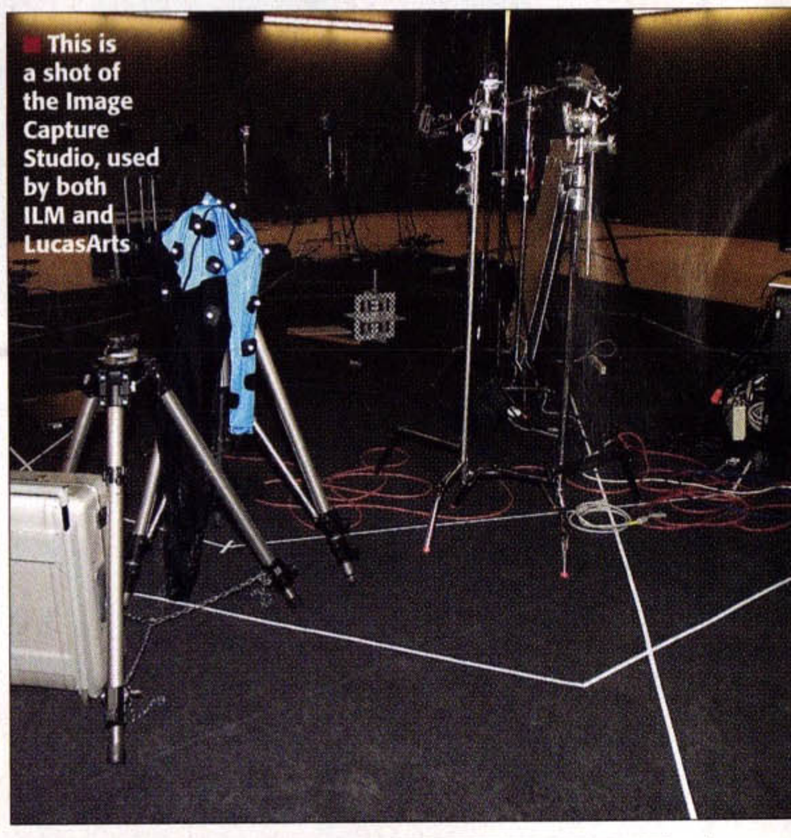
In case you need to spend even more money on Star Wars merchandise, there's a gift shop on-site

The employee gym offers one of the best views in the city



A few employees chow down in the dining commons





This is a shot of the Image Capture Studio, used by both ILM and LucasArts

TIMELINE

1994 *The Presidio, a former army base, is transferred to the National Park Service*

1997 *After a design competition, Lucasfilm Ltd. is selected to build the LDAC on the site*

AUGUST 14, 2001 *The development agreement is signed between Lucasfilm and the Presidio Trust*

JUNE 29, 2005 *The LDAC grounds open to the public*

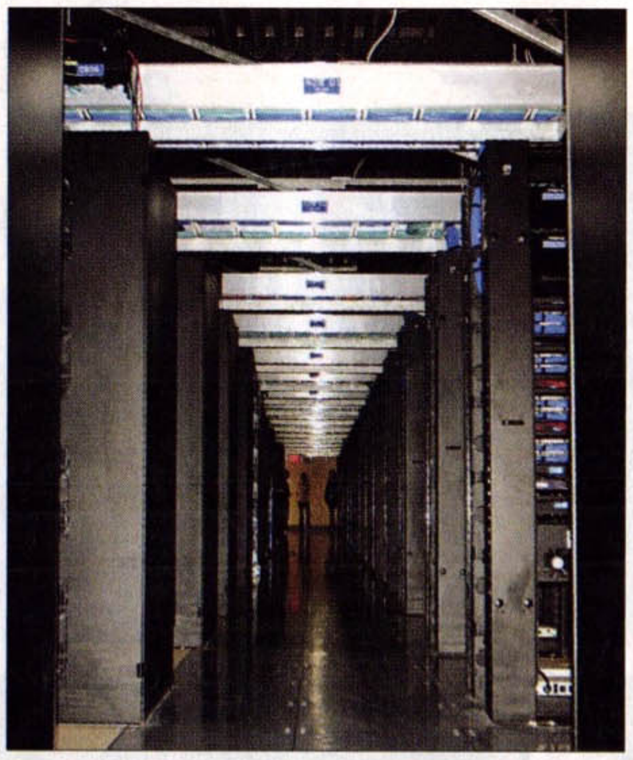
JULY, 2005 *LucasArts moves operations into the LDAC facility*

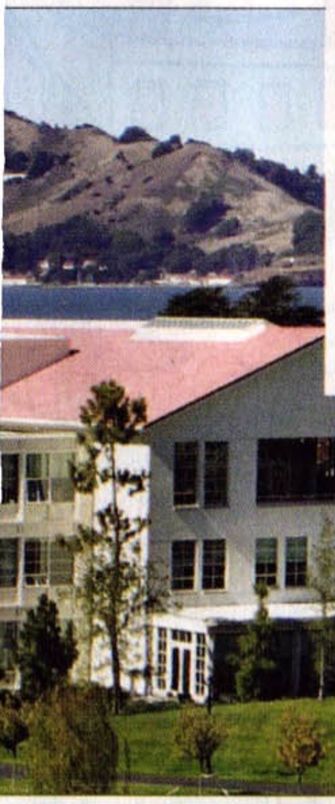
OCTOBER, 2005 *Nearly all of Lucasfilm completes its move to LDAC*

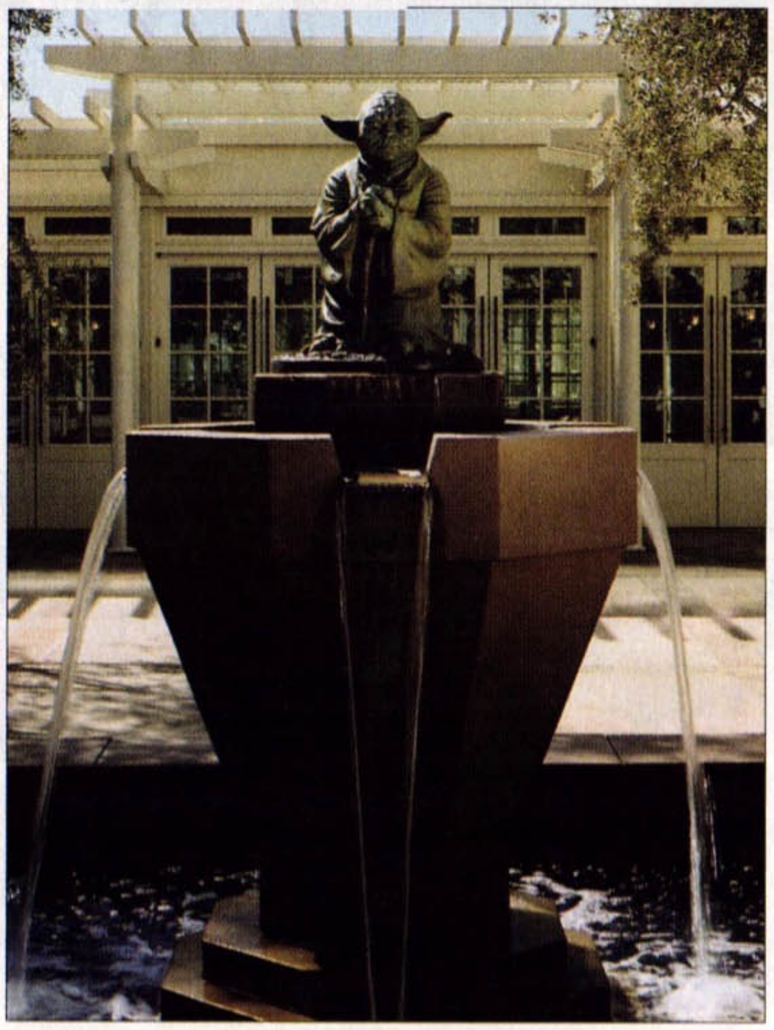
NOVEMBER 1, 2005 *LucasArts publishes Star Wars: Battlefront II, developed by Pandemic*

FEBRUARY 16, 2006 *LucasArts publishes Star Wars: Empire at War, developed by Petroglyph*

■ LDAC's render farm is called the Death Star, and its computers come complete with the Imperial insignia







■ No one in the theater? C'mon, guys! Jar Jar is barely even in Episode III

When asked to identify the center of George Lucas' media empire, the first thing that comes to mind is most likely Skywalker Ranch. After all, the ranch has attained a sort of mythical status since it is the location where Lucas does most of his own work. However, in the past year, two of the most influential entities that fall under Lucas' control – LucasArts and Industrial Light & Magic – have consolidated their resources at a single location. Shifting the heart of the operations to the Presidio (a historic national park in San Francisco), the Letterman Digital Arts Center represents not only the future of Lucasfilm, but also a commitment to cooperation that will define all branches of the organization in the years to come.

Built on the site of the former Letterman General Hospital, the facilty is named after Jonathan Letterman, a civil war doctor credited with bringing order to military medical units. The new campus kept the name (rather than something with Lucas branding) to honor Letterman and his achievements. In fact, when the previous buildings on the site were demolished, about 80 percent of the old materials were used in contrusting the four large buildings that now stand on the site.

The facility has all of the impressive amenitites you'd expect and then some: a gym, a game room, a coffee shop (called "Javva the Hutt"), a movie theater, and a dining commons offering everything from burgers to sushi. It seems as though every hallway is decorated with models and props from old ILM projects; where else could you find a life-size replica of the ship from *Innerspace*? These decorations certainly add a unique personality to the offices, but it's the philosophy of the facility rather than its physical appearance that sets it apart from the rest.

Before moving to LDAC, LucasArts and ILM were housed in separate buildings in San Rafael, California. Employees were required to commute for meetings, and any asset sharing needed to be accomplished through phone and email. Even though the companies had accomplished some amazing feats under these conditions, George Lucas realized that they will only reach their full potential when all of the barriers are removed and the teams are allowed to freely share and work together. The sole purpose of the LDAC is to facilitate this kind of relationship, allowing each branch to flourish individually while putting the full might of the Lucas machine behind every endeavor, whether it is a video game or movie.

Everyone has something to contribute to the equation. ILM can make use of LucasArts physics simulators to test scenarios before rendering, and LucasArts can use the resources of ILM for the graphics and cinematics in their games. This collaboration would have previously been difficult to coordinate, whereas now all it requires is a few steps or a conversation in the hallway. The various teams aren't necessarily even separated; ILM's head of R&D has his office right between two of the team leads for the upcoming Indiana Jones game.

As far as gaming is concerned, the move to LDAC couldn't have come at a better time. Poised on the edge of the next generation, LucasArts is positioned to make a new name for itself. Many of the company's recently published games have been externally developed, like Battlefront II and Empire at War, but that isn't the only path open for the future. The fact that an internal development team is making Indiana Jones is an indicator of greater things to come, and there can be no doubt that we will see more LucasArts-created content hitting shelves down the line. Lucasfilm, LucasArts, and ILM will always be remembered for their part in the Star Wars legacy, but under the roofs of the LDAC there will be fresh chances to collaborate, share, and create new and entertaining surprises as they move forward, unified. ■■■

BY THE NUMBERS:

600 *miles of cable run through the four LDAC buildings.*

298 *people can be seated in the on-site Premier Theater, which has digital and 35mm projection capabilities, and is THX certified for sound and picture.*

2 *weeks is all it took for ILM to fill 24 terabytes of data on the facility's servers.*

17 *of LDAC's 23 acres have been set aside as public space and park land.*

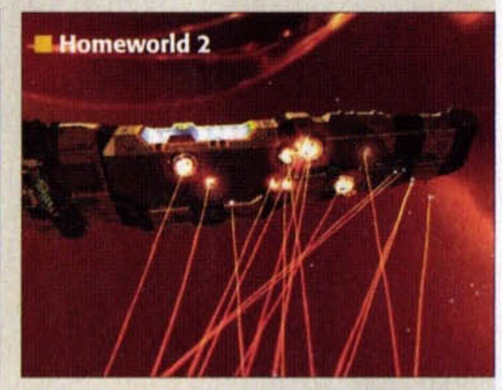
4.1 *million copies of Battlefront II have sold worldwide, making it the second best-selling game of 2005 – right behind Madden.*

LOOSE TALK

Hot Gaming Gossip

MO' MMORPGS FROM SQUARE ENIX

Final Fantasy XI producer Hiromichi Tanaka has hinted that he is working on a new Square Enix MMORPG for the PlayStation 3 and Windows Vista PCs. Tanaka also shared some insight into developing for the new home consoles by stating that because the Xbox 360 and Windows operating systems are so similar, bringing FF XI to the 360 was easy. To do the same for the PS3, however, would have taken two to three years.



HOMEWORLD FRANCHISE RETURNS HOME

Although publisher Vivendi put out Homeworld 2 for PC in 2003, developer Relic is getting the rights to the franchise back. In what seems to be a current trend for large French-owned publishers (see our interview regarding Atari on page 18), Vivendi has had to sell off the license. And what better way than to the guys who created the franchise in the first place? Relic (which is owned by publisher THQ) is also working on other projects, including an RPG designed for kids.

BATTLESTAR RPG?

It's no secret that creator Ronald D. Moore of the hit *Battlestar Galactica* remake is a fan of video games, especially after he gave a keynote speech at this year's Game Developer's Conference. But *Hollywood Reporter* has offered up some juicy details involving exactly what Moore has in mind for a Battlestar video game. Apparently the idea of an RPG with an online component is being considered. Moore admits that he's not exactly sure whether following the series' storyline or exploring new territory is the better way to go.

EMPIRE AT WAR WIDENS

Calling all hives of scum and villainy! Bounty hunters wanted for the new Empires at War expansion pack! That's right, LucasArts is planning an expansion to the PC strategy title, and it'll include a new faction to go along with the Rebels and Empire made up of bounty hunters and other fringe elements. Bossk isn't the only badass in the game, as players will get to command the Eclipse – the Emperor's ship that makes Vader's Super Star Destroyer look like a Cracker Jack prize. LucasArts is also planning a new game that it boasts uses some new "technology," although it won't be a Nintendo Revolution title.

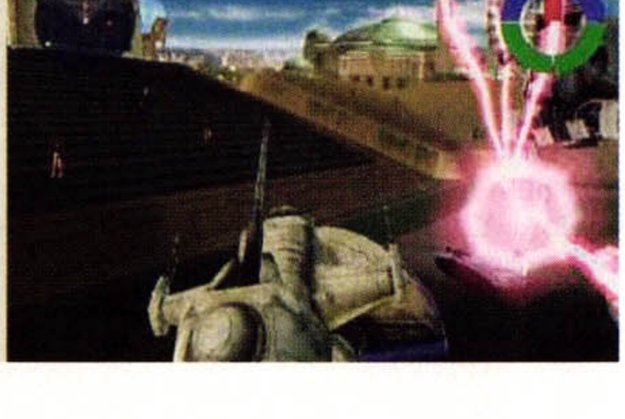
Got some insider info? Email us at loosetalk@gameinformer.com and we'll be all ears.

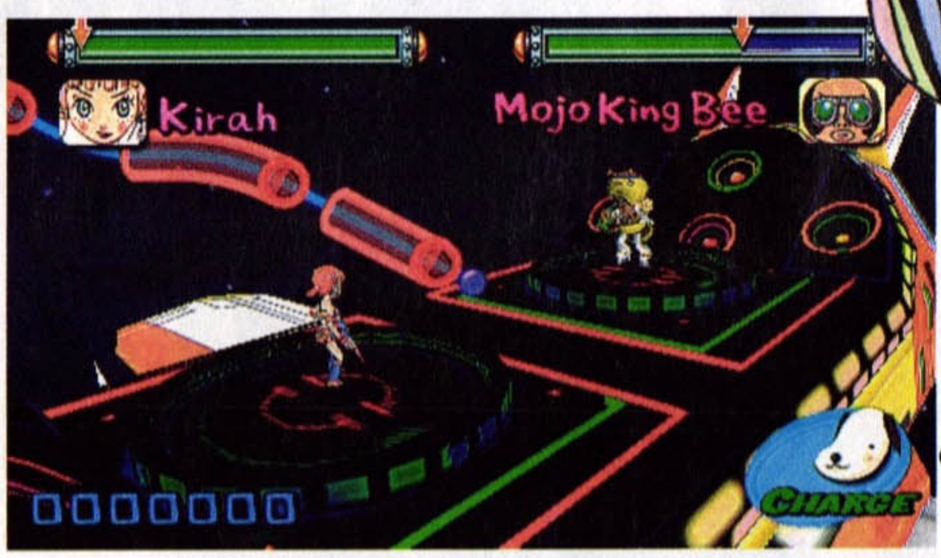
NAME THAT GAME

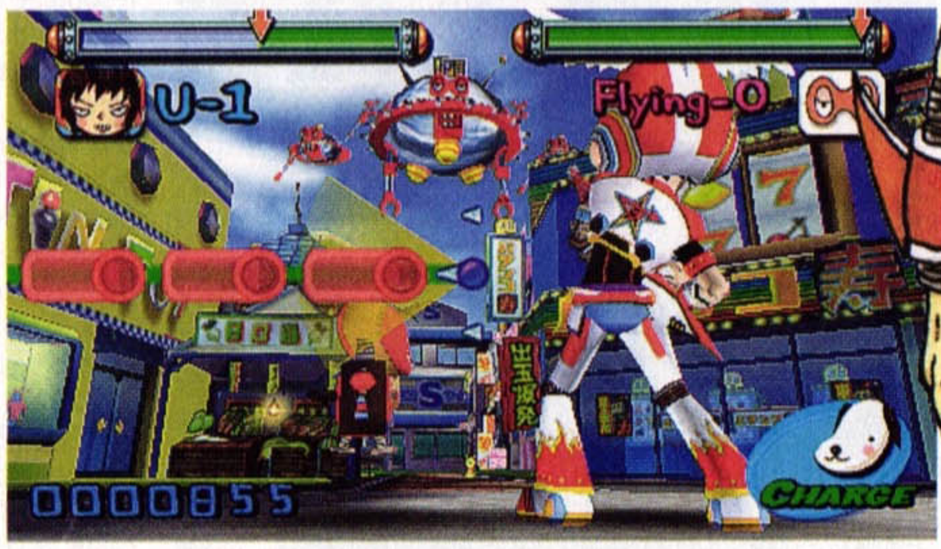
Test Your Sight

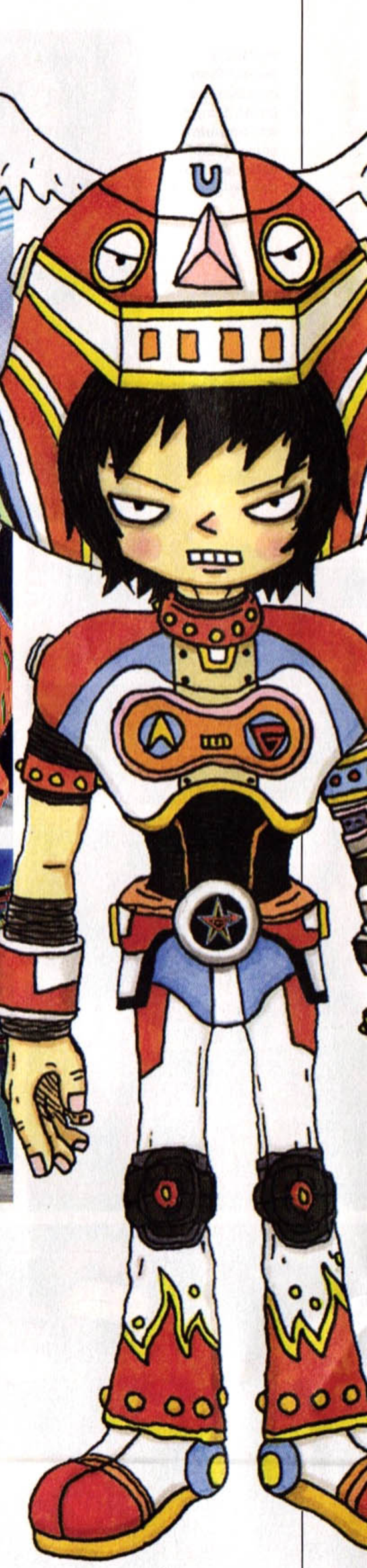
Unlike the not horrible Episode I spin-off title that was Star Wars: Episode I Racer, this month's Name That Game was a pile that stank worse than Gungan remains cooking in the hot sun. Derivatively riffing off of the car combat of Twisted Metal, this title fell prey to the PSone-era need for franchise spin-offs with "vehicular carnage." Not surprisingly, the game ran off of the Vigilante 8 engine.

(Answer on page 34)









games

GITAROO-MAN RETURNS!

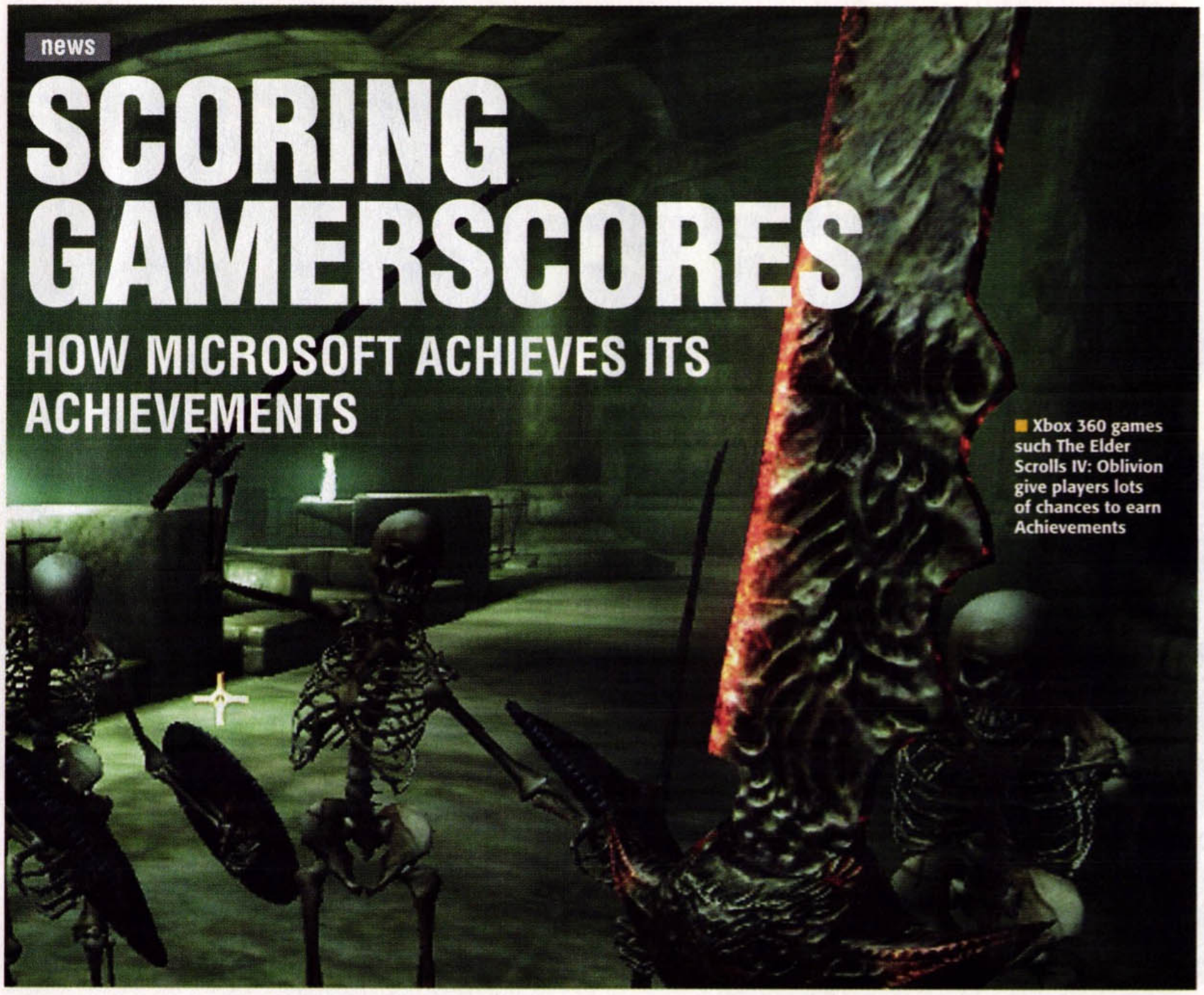
KOEI BRINGS THE AXE HERO TO THE PSP

Before we became guitar heroes, we were in love with Koei's Gitaroo-Man – and we still are. But for those who missed out on this cult music game, the publisher's getting the band back together for an encore performance on the PSP. Gitaroo-Man Lives! will hit the PSP this year, and as the title suggests, is essentially a port of the PlayStation 2 version for the portable. However, this isn't just a simple rehash. The game features ad hoc Wi-Fi play, and there is even co-op play in the new Duet Mode (which you can see in the top screenshot on this page). Best of all, the band COIL (not to be confused with the experimental scatological band Coil that's a favorite of the arty, music-snob set!), who penned and performed the songs in the original Gitaroo-Man are back to offer two new tunes.

Gitaroo-Man is a music game unlike your average rhythm game. You star as a normal kid who transforms into rockstar U-1 in order to save the world and win over the girl of your dreams. Players must not only hit face buttons in time to the music, but also must guide a reticle controlled by the left analog to follow the melody and guitar lines of the tunes. Gitaroo-Man was a cult classic that was never widely available. Until now.

SCORING GAMERSCORES

HOW MICROSOFT ACHIEVES ITS ACHIEVEMENTS

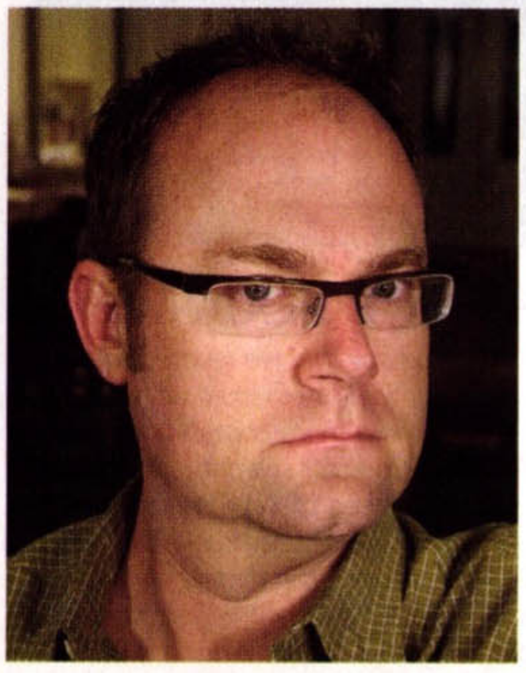


Xbox 360 games such The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion give players lots of chances to earn Achievements

Microsoft has really spurred gamers on with its Achievements and Gamerscore system with the Xbox 360, and we're glad that publishers and developers have embraced the idea. We talked to Jerry Johnson, group program manager for Xbox Live, Jerry Johnson about Achievements and how they are implemented in games.

One of the new experiences that has come out of the Xbox 360 has been the drive to climb the Achievement ladder. What role does Microsoft play in determining how Achievements are laid out for a given game?
Microsoft doesn't mandate much around the way a game awards Achievements and Gamerscore. We only require that all non-demo titles that ship on the platform support them and that they adhere to the min/max requirements on the number of Achievements and total Gamerscore for the title.

What is the minimum or maximum number of Achievements that a developer can assign?
We require that every full game that ships on the Xbox 360 Platform has at least five Achievements with associated Gamerscores. The maximum number of Achievements a title can have is 50. A full retail title has a maximum of 1,000 Gamerscore it can award in conjunction with its Achievements. The maximum is 200 Gamerscore for Arcade titles.



What advice has Microsoft given to developers about how to lay out the Achievements for a given game?
We have white papers and have held numerous talks and seminars with developers and publishers on the topic. Basically we suggest that early on in a game, Achievements should be frequent with low Gamerscore value and as the game progresses, think about reducing the frequency while increasing the value. While we give guidelines, we realize this system is a tool that can be used creatively by a title if they choose, and we support that.

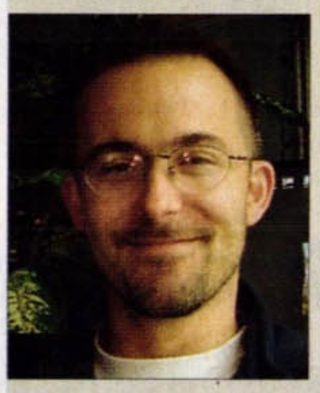
Right now, a game like King Kong can reward a player with 1,000 points for just a few hours of play, whereas it could take hundreds of hours of play to unlock the same amount of points in Elder Scrolls. Is Microsoft doing anything to address this apparent imbalance? Or will this be left up solely to the developer?
We will be focused on continued developer education and support. Any perceived imbalance that can be created today by a single title is really sandboxed to the extent of the maximum Gamerscore limits placed on that title. A poor implementation of Achievements or Gamerscore is something that will reflect badly on the title and they will get dinged for it, just like any other feature decision the title makes. Working with developers and publishers we are already seeing continued growing awareness around wanting to do the right thing for their own title, and in turn the platform experience. Now that we have gotten through the pressure of a platform launch, I think you will see this only improve.

Do you have any plans to flesh out the Achievement system by adding ranks or designations to the type of games that a given player spends their time with?
The console personalization experience that has just started with the Profile, Achievement, and Gamerscore features in Xbox 360 will just continue to grow on the platform. We are listening to our community and partners, and will continue to give players more ways to build on it.

TOP FIVES

Favorites From Industry Pros And GI Readers

DEVELOPER
PAUL KNUTZEN
Lead Designer, Snowblind Studios (Justice League Heroes)



1 Warcraft – PC
2 Super Mario Kart – Super NES
3 Doom II – PC
4 Rez – PS2
5 Grand Theft Auto 3 – PS2

READER
MATT "BIG EARL" ASTON
Pontotoc, Mississippi

1 Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater – PS2
2 Resident Evil – GC
3 Super Mario World – SNES
4 The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time – N64
5 Metroid – NES

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Minneapolis, MN 55401-9022
email: topfive@gameinformer.com
(attach digital picture)

TOP TEN

Lists...Everybody Loves Lists...

Top 10 Announcements from E3 2010

10 Microsoft and Sony merge, form giant robot Devastator
9 Batman games still suck
8 Venue moved from LA to Tiberonia, the capital of Electronic Artistan
7 Shenmue III is a train simulator slated for 2013
6 Valve's Steam service dumps Half-Life 3 straight into your brain
5 Oh, what the hell. DOA 6 is all naked, all the time
4 Industry leader Acclaim2 reveals next-gen console
3 President Schwarzenegger declares Total Recall on NES the National Video Game
2 Duke Nukem Forever delayed
1 U.N. Peacekeepers dispatched to quell Nintendo Revolution

Name That Game Answer: Star Wars: Demolition

AT WHAT PRICE POWER?

GI EXPLORES THE SEEDY WORLD OF PAID-FOR POWER-LEVELING IN WORLD OF WARCRAFT

The topic of virtual property sales in online worlds is highly debated on Internet message boards, game developer summits, and video game publications the world over. Some people argue that the actions of gold farmers (who then sell the game's currency to legit players for real money online) and power-levelers (who play your character for you, racking up experience or PvP ranking) are morally wrong, skew the game's economy, and contribute to lag and server queues that keep normal folks from playing. Others contend that these businesses are a natural outgrowth of the MMORPG genre. However, we decided to test a third hypothesis: That the antics of these players-for-hire and the reactions they got from the online community could be unintentionally hilarious.

THE EXPERIMENT

After spending some quality time Googling and perusing various websites offering shady World of Warcraft services, we chose to hire a company that seemed to have only a passing familiarity with the English language. A hundred and fifteen U.S. dollars poorer, we enrolled our freshly created little pink-haired gnome in a 24-7, no-holds-barred rush to level 40. Poppysniffer the Warlock was on her way to fame and fortune. And dominion over the dark powers of the Twisting Nether, of course.

■ Meet Poppysniffer, the cutest Warlock around

WHAT WE LEARNED

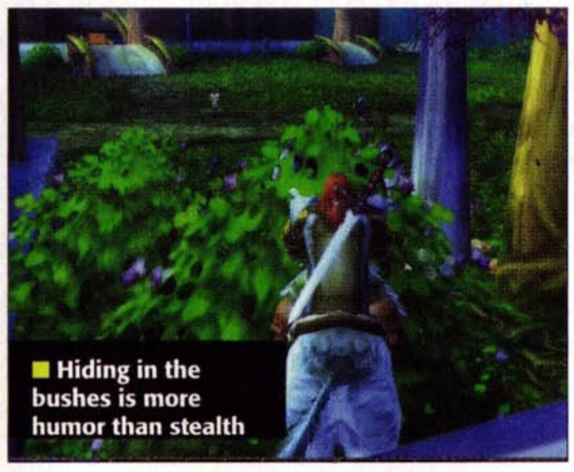
In all the websites we browsed, a few common threads appeared. The native English-speaking sites tended to decry the horrible actions of their Asian counterparts, with tales of illegal bot-using, crazy no-skill macro-ing, and gold-thievery. The easterners, on the other hand, make up for broken English and poorly-designed web pages with low, low prices.

THE WAY OF THE WARLOCK

Any World of Warcraft player can tell you that the first 20 or so levels just fly by – and the professionals behind Poppysniffer have it down to a science. Logging onto another character on the same server, we head halfway across the continent to Duskwood to say hello. In the time that we watched her, she was a non-stop grinding machine. No downtime and few breaks for questing had the experience pouring in.

WHAT WE LEARNED

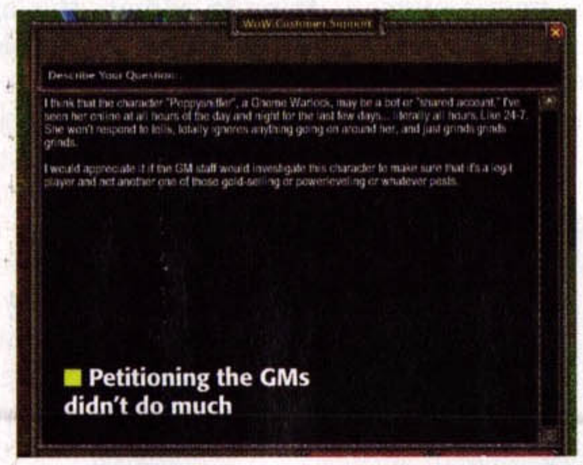
Despite being a high-level Hunter (who can track humanoids) and having a mount while she's stuck running around on foot, it's a total pain in the ass to track a particular person down in WoW. Even though you can see what zone they're in, they could just be flying through it on their way somewhere else – leaving you to squander many silver paying for flights. Also, Warlocks are killing machines.



■ Hiding in the bushes is more humor than stealth

BETRAYAL!

In the interests of hardcore investigative reporting and humor, we report Poppy to Blizzard's game master staff. After all, she is violating the Terms of Use and End-User Licensing Agreement, right? Technically yes, but as is unfortunately par for the course, Blizzard doesn't do jack about it. She continues on her illicit way, bouncing merrily along.



■ Petitioning the GMs didn't do much

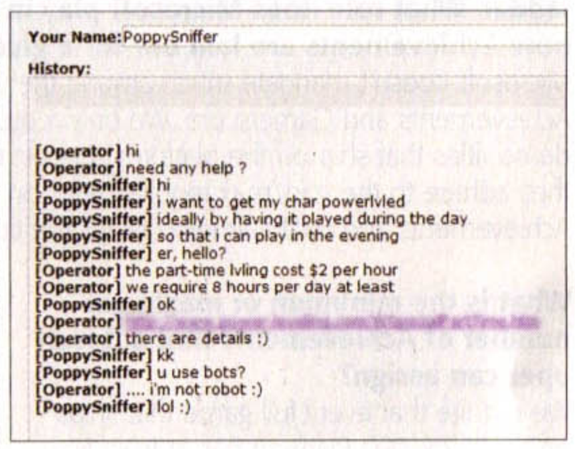
WHAT WE LEARNED

Well, you could say that we learned that the GM staff is fairly ineffectual when it comes to anything more complicated than banning somebody for swearing in general chat, but we've been playing WoW since beta. Of course we already knew that. What we did learn, however, is that playing an Alliance character does something strange to a player's jump button. What is it with you people? The Horde would never stoop to such indignity.

Note: To protect the privacy of other players, their names have been blurred out.

DING!

Level 40 is an accomplishment for any WoW player, since it's at that point that you can get your mount. It's no less of a thrill when you're impatient for your powerleveling to be finished so that you can get on with phase two of researching an article.



Your Name: PoppySniffer

History:

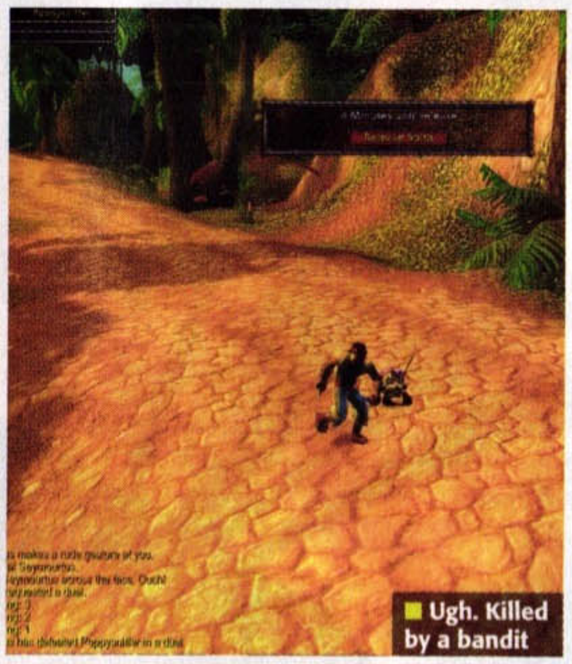
[Operator] hi
[Operator] need any help ?
[PoppySniffer] hi
[PoppySniffer] i want to get my char powerlvled
[PoppySniffer] ideally by having it played during the day
[PoppySniffer] so that i can play in the evening
[PoppySniffer] er, hello?
[Operator] the part-time lvling cost $2 per hour
[Operator] we require 8 hours per day at least
[PoppySniffer] ok
[Operator] [redacted]
[Operator] there are details :)
[PoppySniffer] kk
[PoppySniffer] u use bots?
[Operator] .... i'm not robot :)
[PoppySniffer] lol :)

WHAT WE LEARNED

Logging onto Poppy for the first time was a trip. Cheap equipment gave her little benefit. An absolutely horrendous talent build cost us a gold piece to fix. None of her demon-summoning quests, save the Voidwalker, were done (for you non-WoW players, in this case it means that she was about as effective as a sniper with a pistol). Both her and her demon pets were missing key trainable skills, meaning we were more or less fighting level 40 monsters with level 34 spells. Not having any tradeskills (crafting stuff: mining, tailoring, etc.) meant that we'd have to go back to the newbie zones in order to get any of them started. On the plus side, at least she had an Honored reputation with all the Alliance factions, netting us a 10 percent discount from vendors.

LEVEL 40 NEWB

Now we're cooking with gas – or at least playing with fire. We take Poppy up to Stormwind Castle to get her free mount (good thing we picked a Warlock; most other classes have to pay 90 gold to get theirs), fix her terrible talents, and train the latest ranks of her spells. We're down to 13 gold from the original 25 that Poppy had, but oh well. A little monster-hunting back in Stranglethorn Vale is definitely in order at this point.



■ Ugh. Killed by a bandit

WHAT WE LEARNED

In short, we learned that jumping into the Warlock class at level 40 with little understanding of how to play it effectively is a terrible, terrible idea. Stopping to drink for 20-30 seconds every two encounters, getting in serious trouble any time we get an unexpected monster on us, and dying frequently is no good – what do we look like, a Mage? Also, we apologize for a certain amount of past trolling of the official Warlock forum. Soul shards are an irritating chore to manage.

■ Regulators, mount up!

Timeline

FRIDAY EVENING:
Poppysniffer starts her journey toward the dark side. Forever will it dominate her destiny.

MONDAY MORNING:
Traipsing throught the Duskwood, Poppy's level 28 self is merrily slaughtering wolves and skeletons.

MONDAY EVENING:
Ashenvale and the Stonetalon Mountains play host to Poppy's marauding ways. Strangely, she's only level 29 at this point.

TUESDAY AFTERNOON:
When Blizzard finally manages to get the servers back online, Poppy is found back in Duskwood, having plowed up to 32 overnight.

WEDNESDAY MORNING:
Trolls, raptors, and spiders! The Arathi Highlands provide ample experience for our level 35 Warlock.

THURSDAY MORNING:
Almost there. Poppy's enjoying the non-PvP nature of Stranglethorn Vale at level 39.

THURSDAY AFTERNOON:
At last, Level 40 arrives six days after the initial creation of the character. No better place for a celebration than her current home of Booty Bay.

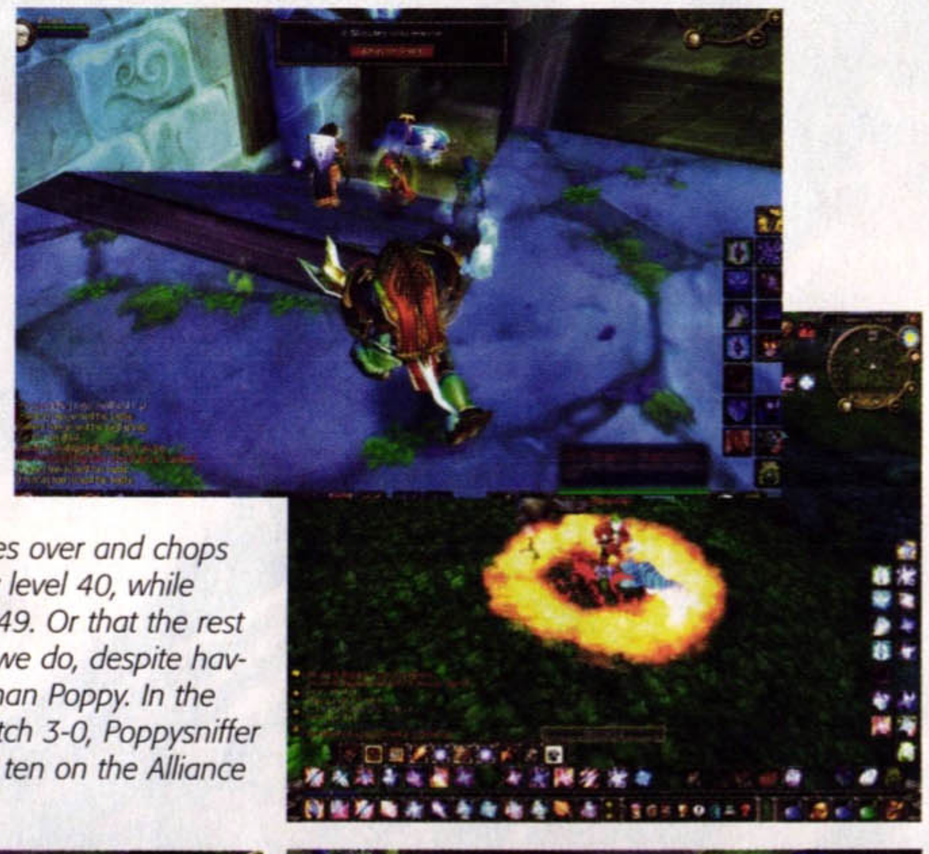
FRIDAY, 1:40 AM:
The powerleveling service finally notifies us of the completion of their end of the bargain. Slackers.

FOR THE ALLIANCE!

Well, PvE didn't go so well. Maybe we can try some Battlegrounds, and see if Warlocks are as overpowered in PvP as the Internet would have us believe.

WHAT WE LEARNED

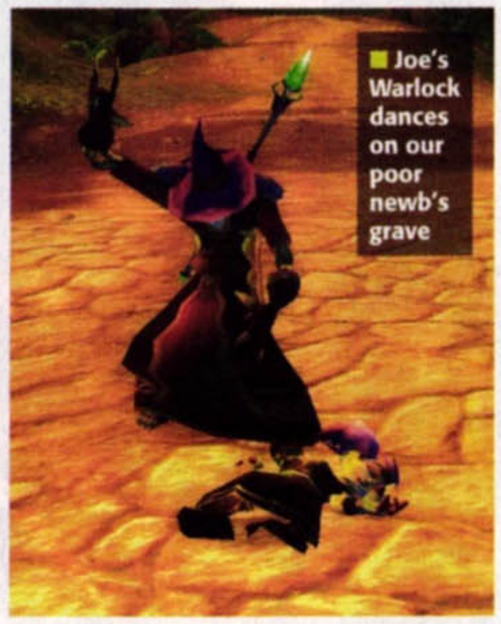
It turns out that the Internet assumes that not all Warlocks are utterly clueless. With no Succubus to seduce our enemies or Felhunter to silence enemy spellcasters, we're stuck trying to get some damage spells off before some cow with a huge axe comes over and chops us to bits. It doesn't help that we're only level 40, while most everyone else is between 47 and 49. Or that the rest of the Alliance suck almost as badly as we do, despite having vastly better gear and more levels than Poppy. In the course of losing our Warsong Gulch match 3-0, Poppysniffer actually managed to finish fourth out of ten on the Alliance team. How pathetic is that?



■ Not a single Shaman in the match, and we still got rolled. Sigh

Why would anyone pay to have the experience that we did? We couldn't tell you. As a staff, we've leveled several characters to 60 and played them in the endgame, as well as dozens more into their 40s and 50s. The lower levels are fun every time, and WoW's surprising replayability is one of the many reasons we're still shelling out many dollars to Blizzard every month. All this powerleveling really did was skip the first third or so of the game for us, and dump us and Poppysniffer into situations we weren't ready to handle. If we hadn't already had a year and a half of WoW experience – say, if Poppysniffer was our first character – the results would have been incredibly messier.

We'd never do anything like this for ourselves. Beyond any moral issues with the practice (which are certainly valid points to bring up), it's just not fun. The only real value to a virtual asset like a character in a game is what you personally assign to it, and it's hard to feel proud of a character (or gold, or gil, or adena) that you bought. Not to mention the fact that most everyone you group with in-game will easily notice your lack of skill, and let's just say that online communities aren't noted for being polite or tolerant. Especially when you're getting their characters killed through your own ineptitude. *Note: The account that Poppysniffer was created on has since been canceled and is now inactive. Game Informer does not condone or suggest the use of any service that violates the Terms of Use or EULA of a game.*



■ Joe's Warlock dances on our poor newb's grave

HUNTERS, DIRE MAUL, AND YOU

There's a well-publicized teleportation hack in WoW that allows Hunters to easily farm the boss of Dire Maul (a level 60 dungeon) for ridiculous amounts of easy loot. While some of them are no doubt legit players, it's common knowledge that many of them are hacking gold farmers.

So, when we logged on to Poppysniffer for the first time, we discovered a level 60 Hunter on her friends list who was mysteriously in Dire Maul for literally two days straight. Of course, we reported him to the GMs for hacking and farming. Four hours later, we receive a message that they've investigated the claim and taken appropriate action. Huzzah! The banhammer is in effect!

Or not. Our friend the Hunter is back in Dire Maul an hour later, farming away. Sigh.

GI OPINION

I play a Warlock in WoW, and even though I'm not High Warlord or anything, I know a good talent build from a bad one. Poppysniffer's build is a bad one. Her destruction tree in particular is a mess; Shadowburn is the only good choice in there, and the one point in Improved Lash of Pain is pretty hilarious considering that Poppysniffer doesn't even have a Succubus to use it. The affliction tree isn't all bad, since there are some solid talents in there (Improved Corruption ftw), but I have trouble believing any competent Warlock would throw points into Improved Curse of Agony when Nightfall is right there. I was looking forward to seeing how efficiency-focused power levelers would approach my favored class, and now I have my answer: stupidly.—**JOE**

Specing For Success?

Affliction (18 points)
5/5 Improved Corruption
2/2 Improved Drain Soul
2/2 Improved Life Tap
5/5 Improved Life Drain
3/3 Improved Curse of Agony
1/1 Amplify Curse

Destruction (12 points)
5/5 Cataclysm
5/5 Aftermath
1/2 Improved Lash of Pain
1/1 Shadowburn

BEAUTIFULLY

MATURE 17+
M
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Blood
Intense Violence
Partial Nudity
Sexual Themes
Strong Language
Use of Drugs

PC DVD-ROM SOFTWARE

PlayStation 2

XBOX

XBOX LIVE

Io-Interactive

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ARE MICRO-TRANSACTIONS GOOD FOR GAMING?

The video game industry is faced with a plethora of difficult questions and many ways to look at them. In Game Informer's debate section, we will attempt to analyze these scenarios from different angles. Like a typical debate club, our editors have been assigned to defend a position whether it agrees with their personal views or not. In this edition, we tackle the contentious issue of online microtransactions.

PRO

IF YOU DON'T LIKE MICROTRANSACTIONS, you don't have to buy them – it's as simple as that. Given this laissez-faire realism of microtransactions, who could be against them? Of course, gamers' larger concern is that they are being nickel and dimed to death, but I seriously doubt a couple of dollars is going to break your bank. Check your couch cushions, in your car seats, or don't super size your lunch if your pennies are that precious. Although you're already paying for your monthly Xbox Live account, that's neither here nor there. You pay that fee to Microsoft for Live's infrastructure. Microtransactions are a separate cost that goes to developers for the work they put into the specific items you buy. That's fair, isn't it? And if Sony's PS3 online service lets you play games for free or if the free market determines that people only want free/cheap/non-crucial microtransactions, then there's really nothing to complain about. But, the issue of microtransactions goes beyond just looking at their cost. There is value in them because they endear people to online gaming. It's not just an outfit or armor for your horse, it's giving gamers the feeling that the game is growing beyond its release, and that they can make it their own. It can also level the playing field if you don't have the time to get the newest gear. With 85 percent of Xbox 360 gamers downloading Xbox Live Marketplace content of some kind (by Microsoft's numbers), and PC users willing to break their user's agreement to get the goods, people are clearly embracing the idea of microtransactions. Perhaps this statistic points to a hopeful future. With digital delivery of content already happening and poised for unknown heights in the future, let's not let a couple of dollar bills get in the way.—**KATO**

CON

I PAID $400 FOR AN XBOX 360, another $100 on peripherals, $60 for a game, and now you want to charge me even more money to make the most out of the experience? No thanks. Regardless of whether the out-of-the-box game is worth $60 – and you'd be hard-pressed to prove that Oblivion, for example, isn't – charging a fee for additional content creates a disconnect between players and publishers. How can I trust a developer to release its best effort if a company can just half-ass the retail game and then fill in the blanks later, all the while making even more money off of the deal? PC gamers already have to put up with this sort of thing with launch-day patches just to get basic functionality working, and it's a universal gripe. Even worse, microtransactions could easily develop into a situation where he who has the most disposable income wins. Just look at EverQuest II's Station Exchange service, where players can trade in-game items and money for real dollars. Sure, your guild may not yet have the coordination and strategy to kill a dragon for that Uber Sword of Pwnage, but I had an extra $10 and bought myself one – better hope you don't run into me on the battlefield. Granted, this situation already exists under the table, with illicit gold farmers selling in-game currency for cash online. There's no way that legitimizing the practice changes the underlying problem with it, though. What happens when the same thing happens in Gran Turismo 5 or Halo 3? I certainly don't relish the thought of owning a losing record just because some 13-year-old got Mommy's blessing to buy a Ferrari that the Honda I earned just can't keep up with.—**ADAM**

ROBOSAPIEN™ V2

HUMANOID, INTERACTIVE, WAY COOL

Built on the foundation of Robosapien™—the bestselling robot of all time—Robosapien V2 is the next generation in consumer robotics.

Towering over your living room floor at a remarkable 24" in height, Robosapien V2 offers more advanced dynamic motion, powerful interactive sensors, natural speech capability, and, of course, a unique personality. The only humanoid entertainment robot who can strut his stuff, Robosapien V2 uses fluid biomechanical movements for walking, bending, sitting, standing, lying down, standing up, and dancing. You can't cut up the rug without some special moves. And Robosapien V2's got all of the best moves covered. Armed with articulated shoulders and wrists, movable hands, and a flexible waist, Robosapien V2 can dance his way around your home.

Humanoid activity isn't restricted to this robot's movements, Robosapien V2 also has an interactive humanoid personality!

"GIMME, GIMME, GIMME"

Unlike other robots, Robosapien V2 can interact with his environment, autonomously. Whether filled with chairs, tables, pets, or people, this robot can see, hear, and walk his way around your house avoiding obstacles in his path. This is free roam mode.

Using a unique dual-range infrared (IR) vision system and elaborate touch sensors, Robosapien V2 will act like one of the family during these free roam strolls.

Bristling with a battery of sophisticated sight, sound and touch sensors, Robosapien V2 is capable of unprecedented multi-sensory environmental interaction with both humans and objects.

Equipped with a sensitive suite of tilt sensors, Robosapien V2 actually knows up from down. So if he has fallen, he can indeed get up. He'll inform you about this prone position, utter, "I need to be upright for this" and, in a few seconds, be back on his own two feet.

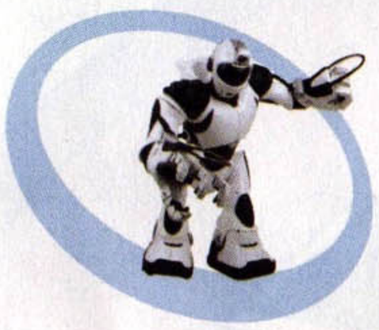
"GROUP HUG"

If you don't like the way Robosapien V2 is acting or interacting, control him directly or program your own sequence of movements and animations.

Packed with 100 pre-programmed functions and 6 programming modes, this robot also has 2 demonstration programs for an instant "out-of-the-box" WOW.

A powerful multi-function controller is included with Robosapien V2. Use this controller to access all functions and features, as well as for creating program routines.

Oh, you don't like programming? That's OK. Robosapien V2 includes a revolutionary, interactive "puppet" programming feature that enables you to create a customized routine. Just move his body into different positions while Robosapien V2 automatically records and remembers each position.

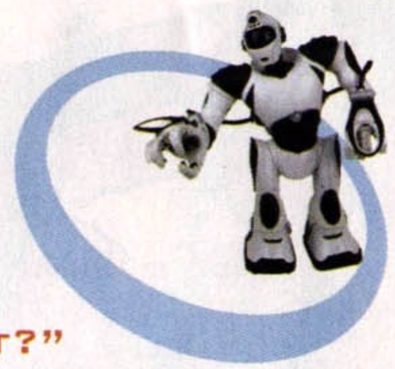


"LET ME SCAN THAT"

Make a sudden movement in Robosapien V2's line of vision and he will flinch and ask you to identify yourself. Once identified, you will be tracked with a sophisticated IR vision system.

But there is more than IR vision that meets this robot's eye. Robosapien V2 can see colors, too. Red, green, and blue objects can be recognized and tracked with his color vision camera.

What does that mean to you? Hold something blue in front of Robosapien V2's head and it will be recognized and grabbed. Now using his dual-range IR vision, Robosapien V2 will look for other blue objects, walk over to them, and drop his blue object. Just think, all of your blue socks can be sorted into a pile on your bedroom floor.



"WHAT WAS THAT?"

If you set him into Guard Mode, Robosapien V2 won't sleep on duty. Guarding your most valued possessions, he'll alarm intruders and give you a final head count of all intrusions.

If some of your family members are robots, too, like Roboraptor™ and Robopet™, Robosapien V2 is capable of interacting with these fellow Robo companions.

All of this interactivity can be tiring. This robot knows when enough is enough with a battery-saving auto-shut off function or by catching some quick "Zs" in sleep mode. You see, Robosapien V2 is more than a robot, he's a fusion of technology and personality.

"GET YOUR OWN DRINK"

Remember that personality that you liked so much in Robosapien? Well, it's fully developed in Robosapien V2. Diabolical laughter, warning messages, and sharp-tongued robot wit are all dispensed in clear understandable natural speech. Packed with over 120 phrases, comments, reactions, and observations, Robosapien V2 is downright chatty.

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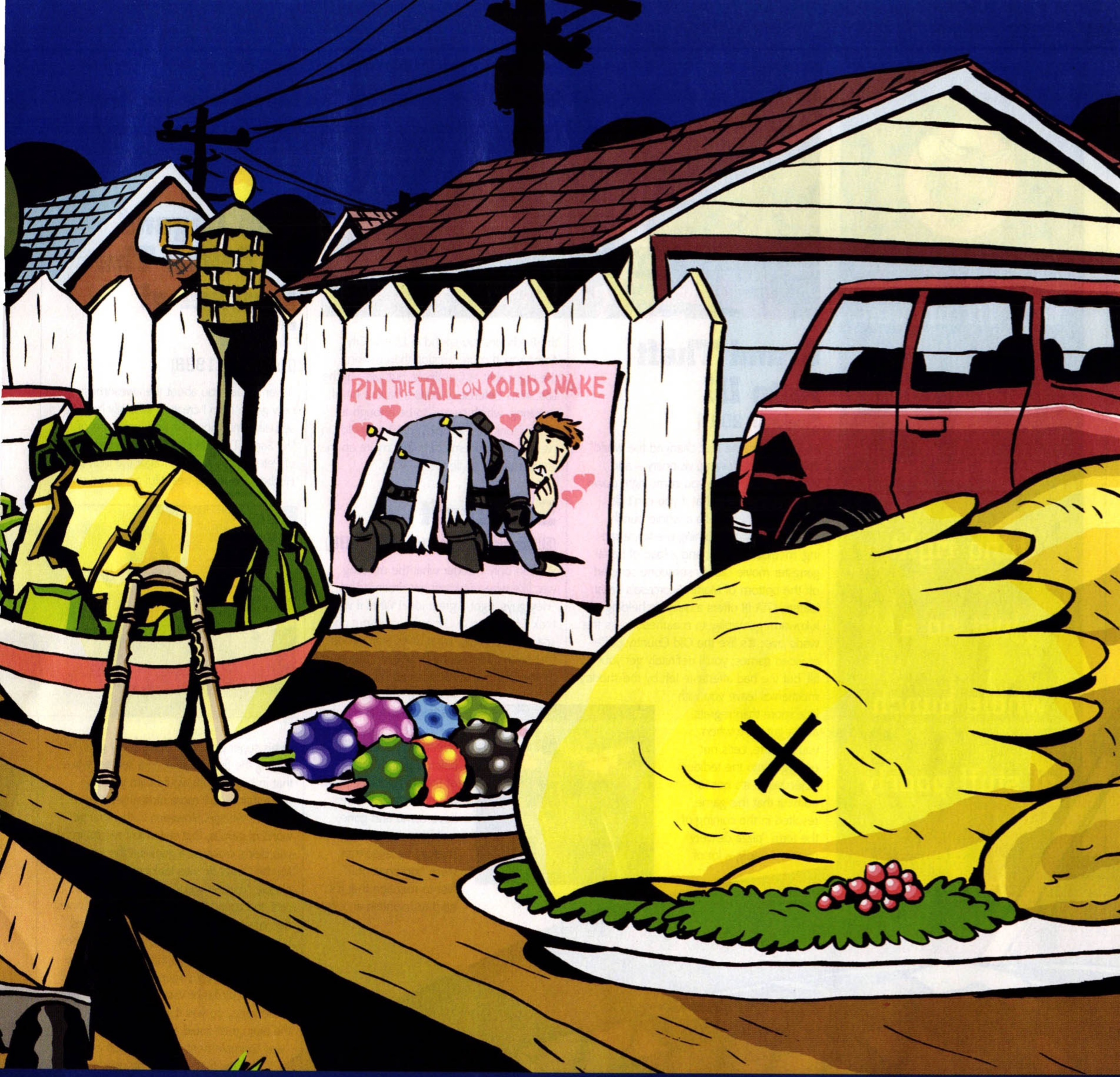


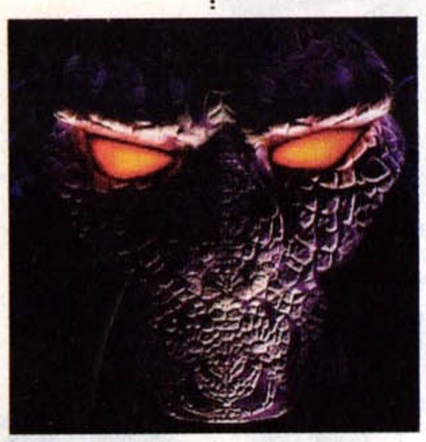
The video game world has a few games that are held above all others as paragons of brilliant design and compelling gameplay. Even years after their release, these titles continue to be praised by fans and the press alike as timeless classics. So, why do all these games suck so much? Really, is it too much to ask that the greatest examples of our artform not be hampered with incomprehensible stories, sloppy gameplay, and god-awful graphics? Read on to find out why your favorite games just aren't very good. Oh, and just to make sure we've made absolutely everyone mad, here's a list of other things that suck: *Star Wars*, anime, *Arrested Development*, puppy dogs, Gummi bears, *The Lord of the Rings*, ninjas, comic books, D&D, Kevin Smith movies, and pizza. Yuck!

"GTA III proves that if you can't do one thing right, just do a whole bunch of stuff poorly"

Grand Theft Auto III

(Rockstar, 2001)

Ah yes, the game that changed the world! Brilliant, mind-blowing, visionary – and kind of crappy when you come right down to it. GTA III proves that if you can't do one thing right, just do a whole bunch of stuff poorly. Combining mediocre racing, mediocre action, and a load of banal gangster movie clichés someone scraped off the bottom of Martin Scorcese's Italian loafers, GTA III offers a heaping helping of lukewarm gameplay to meathead jocks the world over. It's like the Old Country Buffet of video games; you'll definitely get your fill, but the bad aftertaste left by the shoddy mechanics leave you with little more than regrets and a gut ache when you're done. Let's not even get into the tedious objectives – it's not for nothing that this game resulted in the coining of the term "pizza delivery mission." Sadly, a lot of the 80 hours you spend in Liberty City aren't much more exciting than working the night shift at Domino's, but without the tips. In its defense, it does a have a lot of swearing, which seems to be enough for the millions of unemployed 19-year-olds in pit-stained Eminem shirts that make up this game's target audience.



Starcraft

(Blizzard Entertainment, 1998)

We can only wonder what the meeting was like when Starcraft got dreamed up. "Hey guys, I got a great idea! What if we took Command & Conquer…and put it in space?!" Seriously, what does Starcraft do that hadn't been done before, ad nauseum, by the RTS genre? Besides rip off *Starship Troopers*, *Alien*, and Warhammer 40,000, that is. Oh, the fanboys will scream about the brilliant balancing and "purity" of Starcraft's online play, but how many patches have come and gone, nullifying strategy after strategy because they were "too powerful?" Not to mention that it's hard to maintain an even playing field when half of your users are using readily available undetectable cheats. Delude yourselves all you want, but rushing Zerglings into your enemy's base in the first five minutes of play takes about as much skill as button-mashing your way to victory in Kabuki Warriors.

The Legend of Zelda: The Ocarina of Time

(Nintendo, 1998)

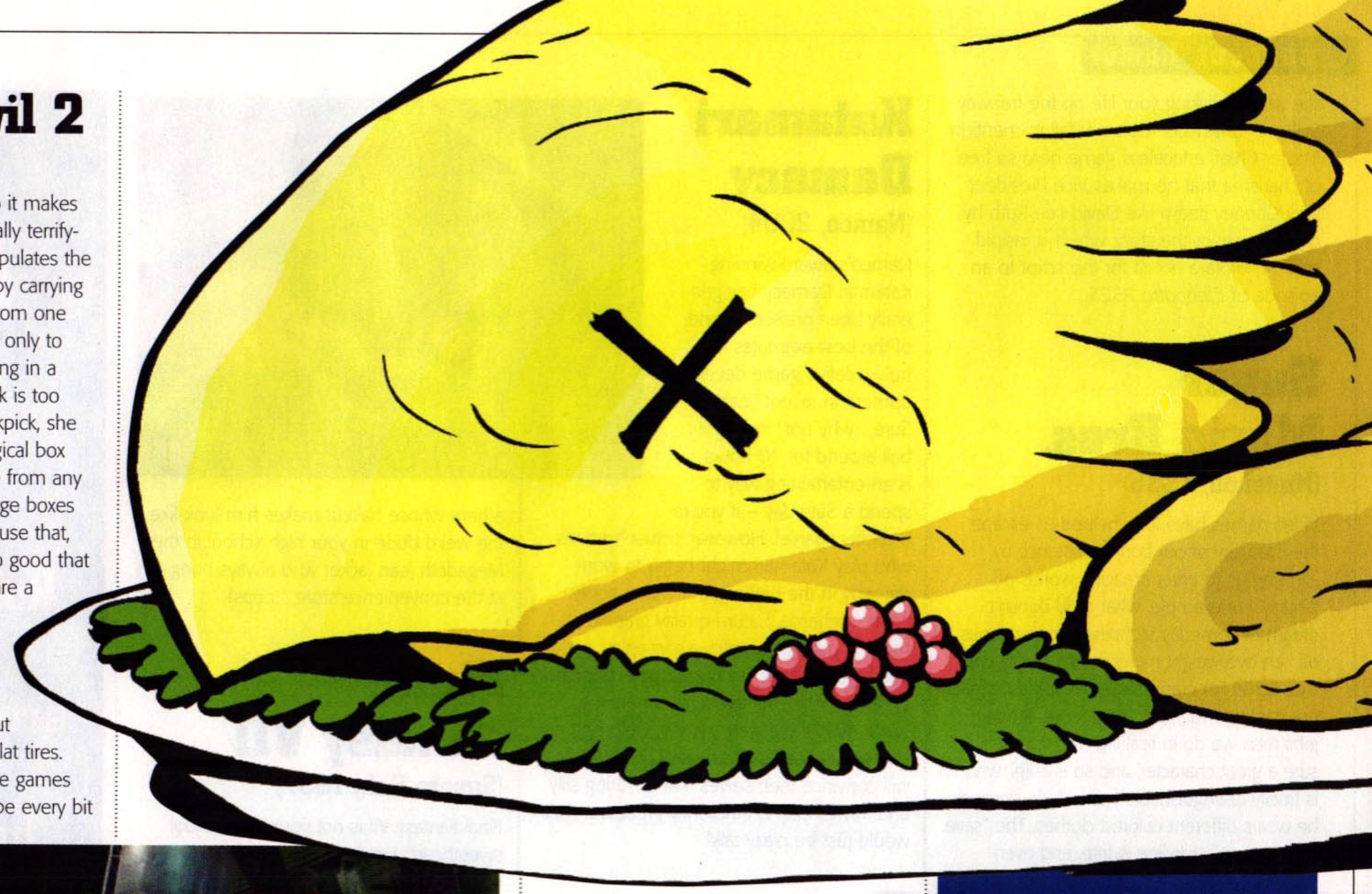
"I want to tell you about the awesomest new game hero I created! Basically he's a sexually ambiguous elf who looks sort of like Sandy Duncan in a weird anime version of *Peter Pan*! Oh, and I forgot the best part! His best friend is a beautiful pony and one

of his super powers is being really good at playing the flute!" Speaking a sentence like that in high school would earn you little more than a few more nicknames and a massive wedgie. However, in the strange world of games, that statement results in you being crowned a genius. Who knew? Maybe Nintendo was looking to tap that elusive "middle-aged ladies who live with 12 cats and collect Precious Moments figurines" demographic? This N64 "classic" features hour upon hour of tedious dungeons, goofy puzzles, and blurry graphics that will make you think your TV screen has been painted with a thick coat of Vaseline. Also, after all these years, do you think that someone in the brain trust could actually figure out a way to implement a jump button already? Perhaps that's asking too much.

Resident Evil 2

(Capcom, 1997)

The truth is always scary, and so it makes sense that Resident Evil 2 is totally terrifying. Think about it – Claire manipulates the police station's security system by carrying a series of colored medallions from one Greco-Roman statue to another, only to find a grenade launcher just sitting in a corner. Then, when her backpack is too full with potted plants and a lockpick, she deposits the weapon into a magical box that will make the item available from any of the other similar-looking storage boxes strewn throughout the city. Because that, like, totally makes sense. It's also good that the shuffling, moaning undead are a slow-moving force to be reckoned with, because the true horror of RE 2 comes from the control scheme, which makes your onscreen avatar move about as well as a Hummer with four flat tires. This is often tagged as one of the games that proved video games could be every bit as cinematic and engrossing as film. Which is true, if the films in question are those Shannon Tweed booby flicks they show at 2 AM on Cinemax. Admit it: the incomprehensible plot and voice "acting" wouldn't even make the grade in the next Leprechaun movie.



ICO

(Sony Computer Entertainment America, 2001)

Okay we can deal with the seemingly endless and annoying puzzles, the fuzzy graphics, and combat that makes Myst seem as visceral as God of War. But do we have to do all of this while leading around a princess that's about as useless as a drunk four-year-old? Good God, woman! Learn to do something for yourself for once! Do we literally have to hold your hand through this entire game? Oh, wait, yes, actually we do! Now we know how Paris Hilton's bodyguards must feel when they have to lead her back to her hotel after a night out in L.A. The game's much-vaunted "plot" and lack of dialogue serves only to prove that one man's "haunting and emotional" is another man's "boring as hell." The environmental switch puzzles were critically panned as dull and counter-intuitive when they were in the last few Tomb Raider games, but somehow became brilliant when ICO recycled them, which shows you just how true the saying "perception is reality" is. Throw in a "surprise ending" that should come as a shock to anyone that's never seen *Days of Our Lives*, and you've got yet another critically acclaimed pile of stink.

Halo

(Microsoft, 2001)

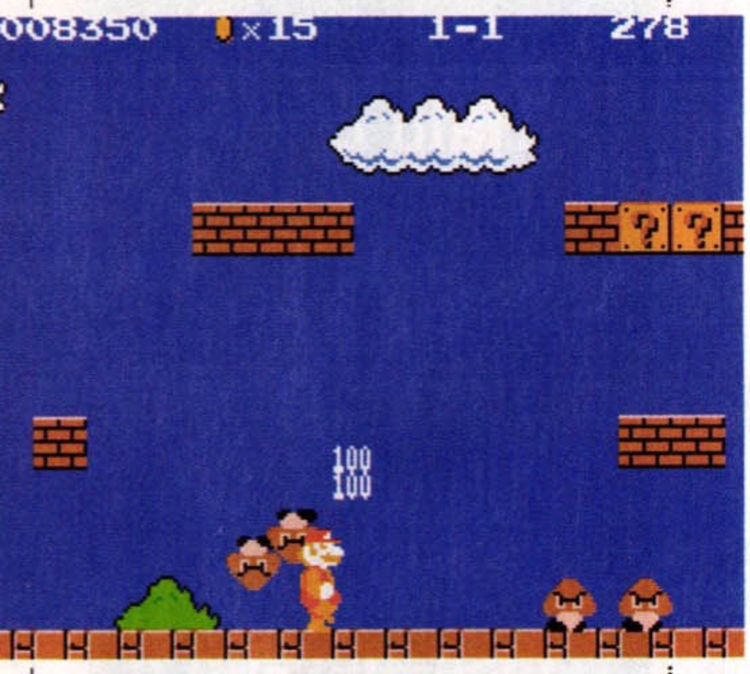
Halo completely revolutionized the first-person shooter genre. Or, that's what you might think if you'd had your head shoved up your butt for 10 years and hadn't touched a PC game since the original Doom. Here's yet another game that proves that "greatness" is more a matter of opinion. Sure, compared to Bloodwake or any other of Microsoft's dreadful early Xbox entries, this was a masterpiece, but the fact remains that Halo is perhaps the most overrated game of all time. Hey, do you like those levels? Good, because you're going to have to go back to them all again because Bungie couldn't manage to actually make a complete game. Halo also earns our ire for introducing the Needler, the lamest and most useless weapon since the spitwad. On the plus side, Halo's vehicles are a great way to experience what drunk driving feels

> "Halo completely revolutionized the first-person shooter...if you'd had your head shoved up your butt for 10 years"

like without risking your life on the freeway. Still not convinced? Let's not fail to mention Master Chief, a faceless game hero so free of charisma that he makes Vice President Dick Cheney seem like David Lee Roth by comparison, or the story, which is insipid sci-fi boilerplate not fit for the script to an episode of *Cleopatra 2525*.

Super Mario Bros.
(Nintendo, 1985)

Video games have long helped us escape the drudgery of our boring existence by allowing us to enter amazing worlds of fantasy. For example, what child doesn't dream of someday stepping into the shoes of…an overweight plumber with a gay cop mustache! For crap's sake, we at least expect our gaming avatars to have more exciting jobs than we do in real life. Yep, Mario is sure a great character, and so is Luigi, who is totally distinguishable from Mario because he wears different colored clothes. The "save the princess" storyline is trite, and even



worse because you spend most of your time saving some weird guy named Toad instead. The levels are extremely simplistic and so is the gameplay, which largely revolves around bonking your head on bricks. We'll say one thing for this game, at least it's short; if you're good, and know your warp pipes, you can cruise through it in under an hour. And did those underwater levels really suck that much when we were kids? Answer: yes, they did; we just didn't know any better back then. So, yeah, we respect the hell out of Super Mario Bros., as long as we don't actually have to play the damn thing.

Katamari Damacy
(Namco, 2004)

Namco's award-winning Katamari Damacy has generally been praised as one of the best examples of truly creative game development in recent years. Sure…why not? Rolling a ball around for 10 hours is an entertaining way to spend a Saturday – if you're a cocker spaniel. However, actual humans who play Katamari might begin to wonder why in the hell a game with a goofy control scheme, Saturn-quality graphics, mind-numbingly repetitive gameplay, and a butchered camera is considered a standard of "excellence" by hardcore gamers the world over. If we were cynical, we'd say it's because certain corners of the Internet will convince themselves that anything silly and from Japan is inherently great, but that would just be crazy talk!

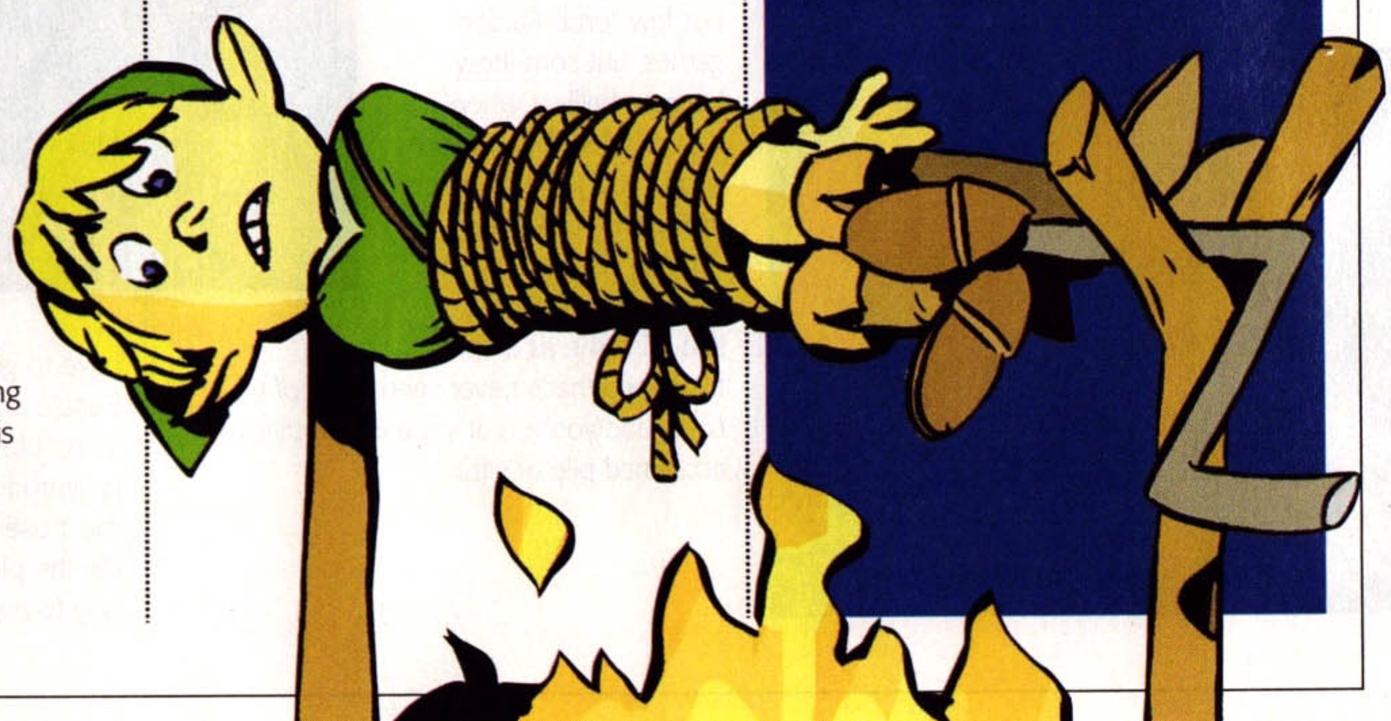
Metal Gear Solid
(Konami, 1998)

Metal Gear Solid proves that to be considered a classic, all you need is a plot so convoluted that people are embarrassed to admit they don't understand it. Recessive genes? Ear pulling? Cyborg Ninjas? Throw it all in. The more jumbled the story, the harder it is to realize that you just snuck by a guard while wearing a cardboard box. It's a good thing the hobos down by the docks aren't involved in nuclear politics; they've got more cardboard boxes than you can count! And if that doesn't sell it, the character names taken from an erectile dysfunction informational pamphlet will seal the deal. How does Solid Snake firmly defeat his flaccid counterpart? With the seemingly boundless military arsenal in his pants. Hey, Snake! Is that a Nikita missile launcher in your pocket or are you just happy to see us? The only thing that could make this game worse is

a hero whose haircut makes him look like the weird dude in your high school in the Megadeth jean jacket who always hung out at the convenience store…oops!

Final Fantasy VII
(Square Soft, 1997)

Final Fantasy VII is not your high school sweetheart. Just because it was the first one to break your heart doesn't mean that better games won't come along. In fact, FF VII's major lasting contribution to gaming (besides making nerds cry) is the prettiest male villain in history. Seriously, you'd think the FF gang was dressed entirely in clothes left over from Duran Duran's 1984 world tour. And what is Cloud doing while the fashionable yet feminine Sephiroth is destroying the world? Decorating weapons with jewelry, talking to a stuffed animal, and making birds do it. Hey, you can't rush heroism...especially when your most powerful magic attacks clock in at a full minute. It's a sad day when watching a metallic space-dragon incinerate an entire hemisphere is just boring. Oh, and "One Winged Angel" is a *Carmina Burana* rip-off. Deal with it.



> "Rolling a ball around for 10 hours is an entertaining way to spend a Saturday – if you're a cocker spaniel"

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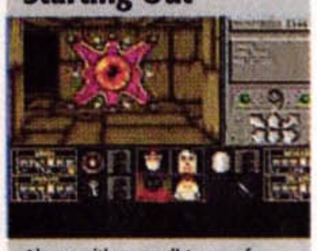
BRIAN RAFFEL

STUDIO HEAD/RAVEN SOFTWARE

>> Formed by brothers Brian and Steve Raffel, Raven has earned a reputation in the industry for producing high-quality licensed games. Over the company's nearly two decades of existence, it's done such acclaimed titles as Star Trek: Elite Forces, Hexen, Star Wars: Jedi Knight, and the X-Men Legends series. We recently spoke with Brian Raffel about Raven's past and future. <<

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

1988 ▶ Starting Out



Along with a small team of programmers, Brian and Steve Raffel form Raven and begin work on their first game, Black Crypt, which is published by EA

1991 ▶ A New Partnership

The Raven crew meets id Software's John Romero. As both companies were in Madison, a partnership ensues, resulting in Raven licensing id's technology to make Shadowcaster and Heretic

1996 ▶ A Classic

Raven and id partner to create the well-received Hexen

1997 ▶ Being Bought

Raven is purchased by Activision, opening up new opportunities for the company

2000 ▶ The Prime Directive

The company gets the Star Trek license and delivers a great shooter in the form of Star Trek Voyager: Elite Force

2002 ▶ Using the Force

Raven gets to tackle the other great sci-fi license, Star Wars, with the excellent Jedi Knight II: Jedi Outcast

2004 ▶ Excelsior!

Completing its fanboy trifecta, the studio creates X-Men Legends, an amazing action-RPG experience

You've had a longstanding relationship with id Software. How did that come about?
It was a weird coincidence how that started. Id was actually in Madison for about an eight-month period. Tom Hall, one of the id founders, actually went to school here at UW Madison, and they really liked it. But that was before winter hit. [Laughs] It turned out that they were only a mile from us. John Romero called me and introduced himself…They came over and saw our stuff and liked what we were doing. When we saw the 3D technology they were doing with Wolfenstein, [which] we had never seen before, we were blown away. We said, "Hey, can you teach our programmers how to do that?" So, you know John Carmack, he said, "Sure, it's easy!" After one or two meetings, we said, "There's no way we can do that." That was when we set up our first license deal with them. He did an engine between Wolfenstein and Doom, which we did Shadowcaster on. They liked it a lot and wanted us to work with their Doom tech, so we did Heretic. It was a really exciting time, going from 2D to 3D – it was amazing to be a part of that.

You've worked with them many times since then; do you have any future plans with them?
Well, right now, we've announced that we're working on Wolfenstein and we just did Quake 4. We've pretty much used their engines through our whole development with Jedi Knight and Soldier of Fortune and Elite Force. We're usually one of the first companies to get their technology. We certainly have enjoyed a good relationship and are always hoping that there are endeavors we can continue to work on in the future.

The Doom 3 engine was powerful, but didn't really catch on with licensing by developers like Unreal 3 or Half-Life 2. Why is that?
[Id] took the engine in a direction that suited them for Doom 3, and that's what they wanted. Some other engines out there took different direction. Half-Life 2 didn't have the super shadows that Doom 3 did, but they had a more photorealistic look that seemed to catch on differently than the Doom stuff.

You've been very successful at working on games with very big licenses like Star Wars and the Marvel comics. What are the challenges of working on a high-profile property?
Well, I think it's one thing that we've done quite well. When we were doing Soldier of Fortune, we put ourselves in the mindset of what that license brought to the table. We wanted it to be more visceral. Whereas, Elite Force, with Star Trek, we stayed true to that license. We've noticed that each third-party licensee has their own priorities and we get in synch with them right away. We [find out] what's the critical thing that they want to convey. What is it about X-Men that you want to get across? Plus, all the licenses we've dealt with, whether it was Star Wars or Star Trek, we have so many people here that are in tune with the license that I feel we're really able to put that forth and bring that essence out.

> ***"[It's] nice being where we're at, because it's not like we're tied into doing Madden every year."***

How much input does a company like Marvel or Lucasfilm have into the design of the game?
Each one's different. Marvel's said, "Here it is, we trust you guys – do it." But then when you're dealing with someone like id on Quake or LucasArts on Star Wars, these guys are also game developers. Then we leverage things on a deeper level, where they have certain technologies or [input] on the game design that we use. There's different depths to each licensee and each one is its own unique blend.

Is it difficult when you've done a lot of work on a certain character's gameplay or look, and they come to you and say, "We've completely changed that character!"
We've definitely had that happen. There's an upside and a downside [to licensed work]. The downside is that sometimes we have to change things in a way that we don't want to. We have had titles – I won't say which one – where we've had to do a [character] model over nine times. That's frustrating. Or, with X-Men, there's the old '70s comic book costume, there's the movie costume, there's the current comic book costume. That's a lot of art content to juggle, because there are a variety of eras and the fans demand a lot of options.

How have you gotten so many high-profile licensed games?
We get a lot brought to us, and sometimes we can't resist. Like X-Men – we have so many comic book people here. And, of course, Star Wars. We enjoyed working with id, so when they offered us Quake 4, we thought it would be a good opportunity to work with the new technology. We like to do original IP, too, like Heretic and Hexen way back. We're not plugged into any one thing – we've done first-person shooters, we've done RPGs, and we like to keep things fresh. I wouldn't mind doing some fantasy again, and a lot of people here have wanted to do a horror game. So, there's things like that that's kind of nice about being where we're at, because it's not like we're tied into doing Madden every year.

Do you have any plans to do any original IP?
We have some concepts on the table, but it depends on where it fits in. We have too many games to do right now, which is a good position to be in. It's a matter of when all the planets align… we're talking to Activision to see if it makes sense.

You've worked with some of the biggest franchises in the world. Is there any license out there that you'd just love to work with that you haven't already?
Well, I guess it's always been *Aliens*. There's obviously so many reasons it wouldn't work because of who owns it, but that's always one that we've thought would be cool to work on.

You must be fairly familiar with the PS3, Xbox 360, and Revolution. What are you observations on developing for those systems?
Obviously, we got our hands on the 360 first, and that seems pretty powerful. We're just getting things going on the PS3. We really haven't touched the Revolution, to be honest. [The PS3 and 360] both have their pluses and minuses. I'm excited to get a little deeper into the PS3. That's the trick to consoles. You sort of get your hands in there, and then you really start to see their strengths as you figure out what it takes to get juice out of them. The interesting thing will be to see what we can do with the multiprocessor on the PlayStation 3 and how we can use it to our advantage. I don't think everyone's got their heads fully wrapped around that yet.

Photo: Jeff Miller

ON TOP OF THE GAME

Brian Raffel has helped build Raven into one of gaming's most in-demand developers of licensed games

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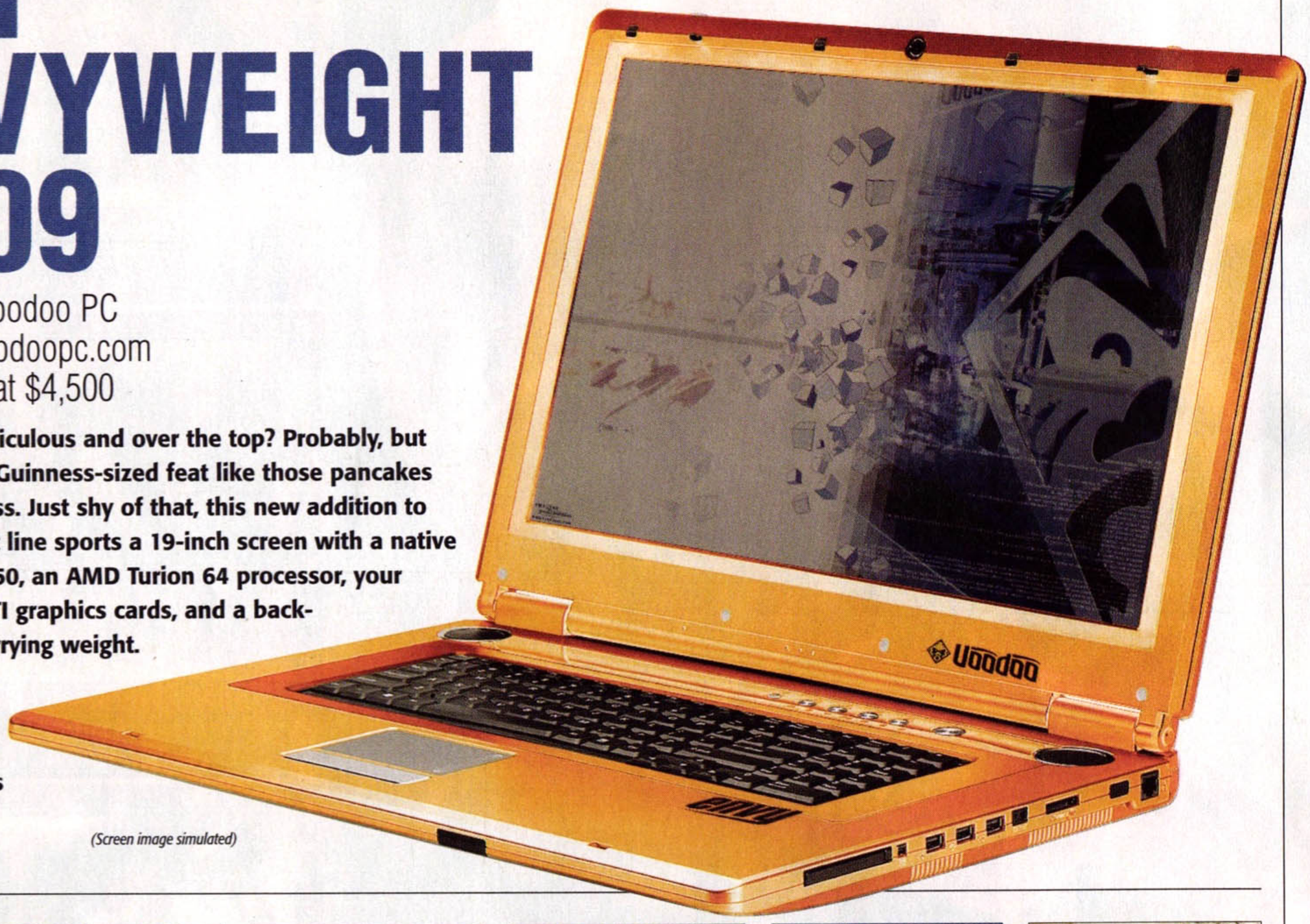
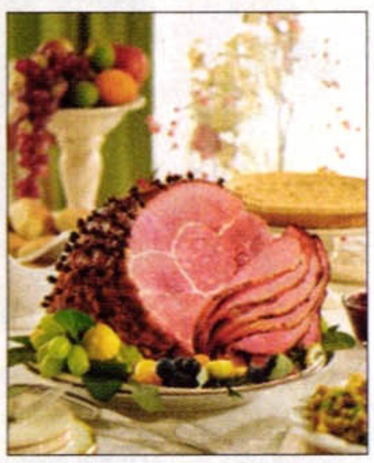
Could this be more ridiculous and over the top? Probably, but it would have to be a Guinness-sized feat like those pancakes that are 50 yards across. Just shy of that, this new addition to Voodoo's Heavyweight line sports a 19-inch screen with a native resolution of 1680x1050, an AMD Turion 64 processor, your choice of NVIDIA or ATI graphics cards, and a back-breaking 16 pound carrying weight. The expected variety of color schemes, accessories, and extended service plans are also available.

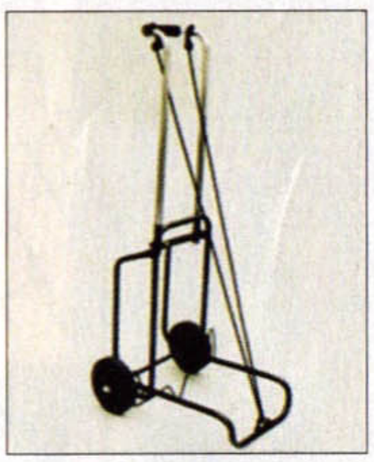


(Screen image simulated)

OTHER THINGS THAT ARE 16 LBS.



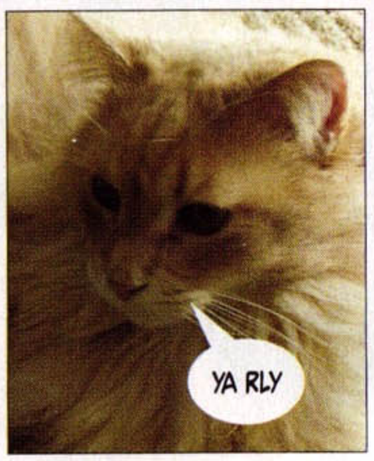
The Average Aged Country Ham – $67.04



Clipper 770-3 Telescoping Utility Cart – $134.95

Female Harpy Eagle

Rescue Jennifer Training Manikin – $515.00



Arlo (Jeremy's Cat)

peripherals

XBOX 360 QUICK CHARGE KIT

Manufacturer: Microsoft
Website: www.xbox.com
List Price: $29.99

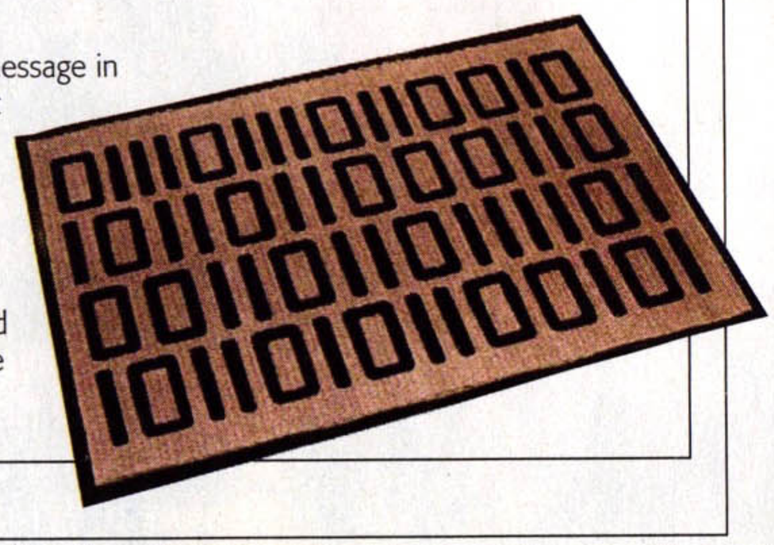
This should have come out at launch. The Xbox 360 Quick Charge Kit is a stand-alone unit that rejuvenates two of the rechargeable battery packs in less than four hours, has easy LEDs to show charge status, and comes packaged with an extra battery. We always thought it was lame to leave your 360 on to charge wireless controller batteries, and now we don't have to. Better late than never, Microsoft.

etc

BINARY WELCOME MAT

Manufacturer: ThinkGeek
Website: www.thinkgeek.com
List Price: $39.99

Cool post-modern style or geeky message in disguise? Okay, it's pretty dorky, but the 1s and 0s on this mat spell out "Welcome" in binary. If a cool kid asks us, we're going to make fun of it, but inside we're secretly smiling. The mat itself is made sturdy for outside or inside use and the raised black areas really get the mess off of guests' shoes.



etc

THE START MOBILE ART GALLERY

Manufacturer: Start Mobile
Website: www.startmobile.net
List Price: $1.99/each download

We tried out Start Mobile a few months ago and the delivery tech was a little flaky. Now that they've gotten the bugs worked out, we can't recommend the cell phone customization enough. The collection of artists includes some standouts from the recent I Am 8-Bit video game art shows (and some of those featured pieces can be downloaded, along with others by the same artists). Other artists use geeky touchstones to great effect, and quick profiles always have a link to their main website.

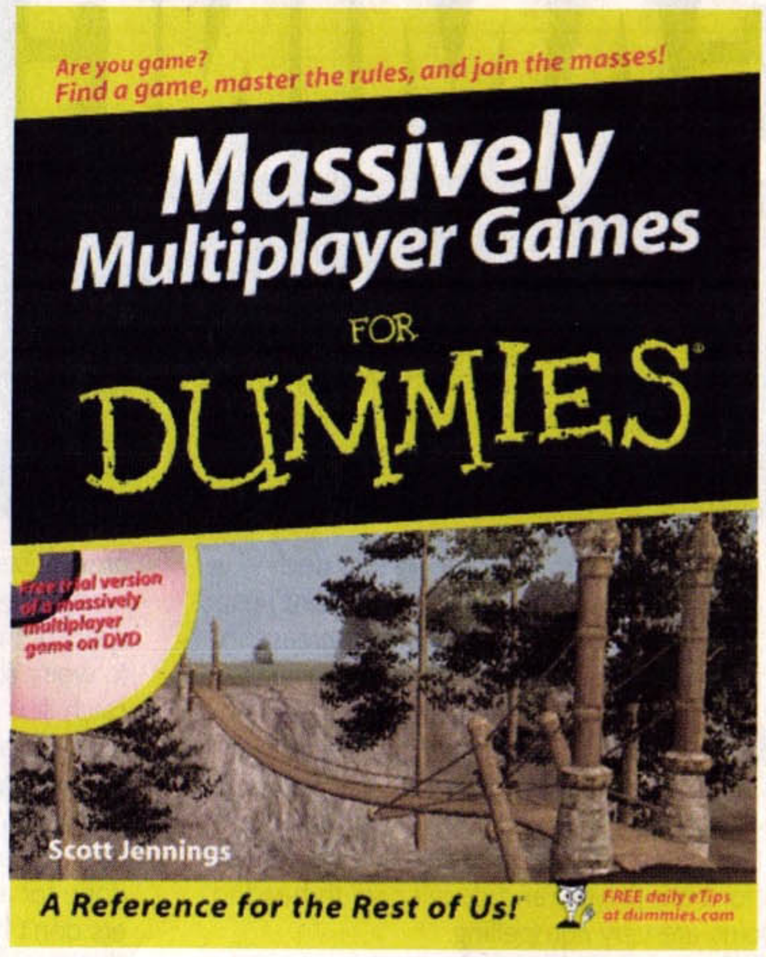
■ 1 Chris Reccardi, 2 Kirsten Ulve, 3 Shaunna Peterson, 4 Aidan Hughes, 5 Lori Earley, 6 Ogi

etc

MASSIVELY MULTIPLAYER GAMES FOR DUMMIES

Manufacturer: For Dummies
Website: www.dummies.com
List Price: $24.99

This came out around the holidays and we thought about including it then. Distracted, we set it aside…and then picked it up. Again and again. It's funny – really, really funny. Authors Scott Jennings and Alexander Macris' obvious love for the subject matter makes the stories worth something even for experienced players. There is stuff we didn't know and, if our last run through AQ20 is any indication, lots of you don't know it either.

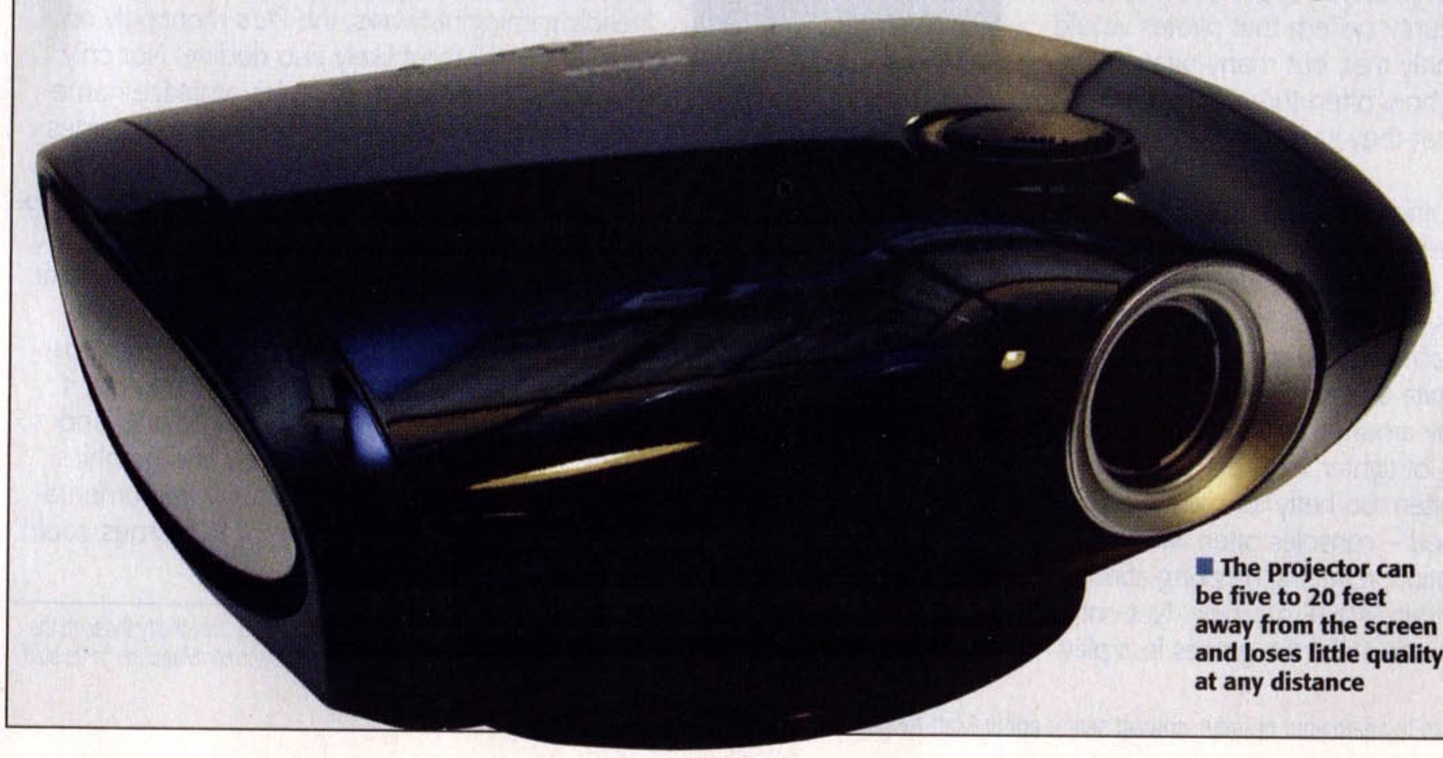


tech

PLAY BIG IN76

Manufacturer: InFocus
Website: www.infocus.com
List Price: $2,999

If Looks Could Kill **was, if memory serves correctly, a garbage movie with Richard Grieco, but InFocus' newest DLP projector really could cut people down with its good looks. The sleek black capsule houses an HD projector with a native resolution of 1280x720, a contrast ratio around 3000:1, and a Texas Instruments chip that makes blacks blacker and colors more defined. This is one of those things where the ins and outs of the tech aren't as important as one, more tangible, thing – the picture is awesome and next-gen gaming is even better on a gigantic display.**



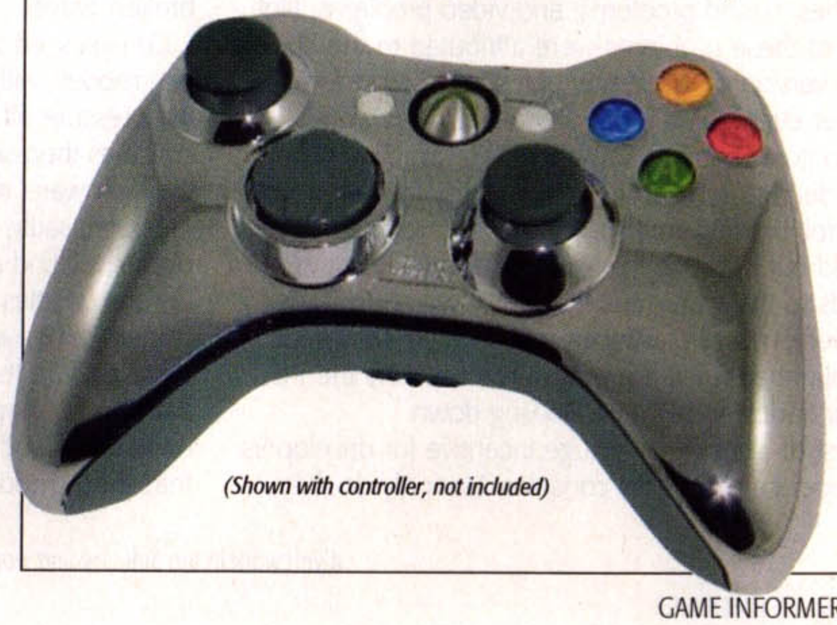
■ The projector can be five to 20 feet away from the screen and loses little quality at any distance

etc

360 CONTROLLER FACEPLATES

Manufacturer: Lik-Sang **Website:** www.lik-sang.com
List Price: $16.95 (metallic silver, shown), $14.95 (other colors)

The 360 is designed to accept new faceplates, but warranty-voiding covers are now available for your next-gen controllers, too. Lik-Sang is offering seven different colors right now and each has their own appeal, but we're really stoked about this flashy and high-maintenance chrome number. Installation doesn't look hard, but does require some unscrewing.



(Shown with controller, not included)

THE DOWNFALL OF PC GAMING

BY JOSH BREESE, PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH, FOLSOM LAKE COLLEGE

Just recently, NPD reported a decline in PC video game sales over recent years, even though there was an increase in overall video game sales. This means that while console gaming is getting hot, PC gaming is getting cold. The implications are startling: Does this mean that the mighty keyboard and mouse will finally yield to the tried-and-true game pad? Quite possibly, as the incentives for both players and developers to head to consoles are very compelling.

Briefly hypnotized by the glowing blue screen that suddenly appeared on my monitor, I realized how much I hated my computer. I had just been playing The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion, and just leveled my dark elf thief when the game crashed. Of course, I was a little angry and a lot annoyed. My machine reaches just above the required specs: the game looks decent and runs at a solid 50 frames per second, but I get random crashes due to what must be a level four kobold berserker hiding somewhere in my operating system. I visited the official Elder Scrolls support board and felt better knowing that I wasn't the only one suffering from crashes. The Bethesda support forums were running so fast, a new topic would end up on the fourth page after only a few minutes. There were reports of blue screens, memory leaks, desktop crashes, exit crashes, sound problems, and video problems. Not one of these problems were attributed to the Xbox 360 version of the game, only the PC. One forum poster even pointed out that a simple fix would be to go out and get an Xbox 360, which got me wondering...why not? I, too, love my WASD/mouse control, but is it worth all of the annoyances? Should I hold out because there will be a large number of mods to the game that I probably won't use? Why is everyone still playing games on PCs? The more I thought about it, the more I realized why the PC game industry might be slowing down.

First of all, there is a huge incentive for developers to produce games for consoles. Not only do they provide standardization, whereby developers don't have to create games that will run on the broadest spectrum of PC hardware, but they also don't have to worry about all the possible bugs they didn't catch. It is easy to beta test on a console, yet it is nearly impossible to guess the types of hardware PC gamers are running, and what settings they are running them at. Consoles solve this problem by being easy to develop for and test on. Once the game is done for a console, it is done. Most often, developers don't have to continue to work to create patches for the game to fix problems like they do for the PC. Furthermore, gamers on consoles don't feel like beta testers the way they often do with a new PC game.

Another incentive that consoles offer developers is security. The secret underground software pirating community is not so secret. The pirates laugh at game publisher's attempts at security. Games are cracked, no matter what their security, within hours of the game's release, and often before the games even hit the shelves. One gamer pointed out on the GameFAQS Elder Scrolls IV message board that the lack of any security system on Bethesda's new game means they probably saved money by not implementing a security system that pirates would crack anyway. Not only that, but many pirates, after reading and seeing how often the game crashes, voiced happiness that they saved money on a broken game.

Consoles, on the other hand, especially the next-gen models with their new network capabilities, take the pressure off the game developers, because the consoles themselves provide security by updating their firmware, rendering copied games useless. Although, sadly, despite the fact that hackers and pirates will find a way around the firmware, the security on consoles is a lot tighter. Also, the trade-offs for pirated games are often too hefty for most console gamers to be tempted – consoles often will need a hardware modification, requiring mucking about under the hood of their $400+ machine. Not only that, these modifications make the games less playable, removing the ever-popular multiplayer options.

> **"If there is one thing that PC games still get right, it is online gaming."**

For consumers, investing in a console seems to make much more sense. The next-gen consoles made by Microsoft and Sony, while expensive, have enough power to run high-end games for the next five or so years. Unfortunately, the same can not be said for PCs. The top video cards of today often cost around $600, and that won't be the only thing gamers need to upgrade. By the time they invest in RAM and a processor to correct bottlenecks in their system, a new motherboard is probably needed. Compound this with the need to upgrade in three years when the newer games demand it, and PC gamers are left playing a very expensive game of catch up. Instead, gamers can pick their console of choice to start or wait until the price of the consoles drop.

If there is one thing that PC games still get right, it is online gaming. While PC games sales overall have been dropping, the amount of PC games being played online has risen dramatically. Games like World of Warcraft and Star Wars Galaxies consume countless gamer hours and rack up big money. However, as consoles better implement more user-friendly gaming networks, the PC's monopoly on MMORPGs will most likely also decline. Not only that, but when next-gen consoles embrace homebrew applications and mods, then console games will be just as good as PC games.

While games most likely won't completely disappear from PCs, the implications of the cooling PC game industry are huge. What will happen to the video card arms race? Will computers become more for multimedia creation rather than execution? As a lover of PC games, I hope not, but if it means developers will hone their talents and spend money on gameplay, story, and graphics, rather than bug testing and security implementation, then perhaps the decline of PC games could be positive for all. ■■■

The views and opinions expressed on this page are strictly those of the author and not necessarily those of Game Informer Magazine or its staff.

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

june

sun	mon	tue	wed	thur	sat

Test Drive Unlimited – 360 06/27

1

FINAL FANTASY VIII FIGURES
Standing in at the same size as recently released Final Fantasy VII Advent Children figures, Squall, Selphie, and Rinoa (a.k.a. Ms. Worthless) can be added to your collection today.

Over G Fighters – 360

6

NEW RELEASES
- Cars – PC, PS2, Xbox
- The Fast & the Furious – PS2
- Grand Theft Auto: Liberty City Stories – PS2
- Harvest Moon DS – DS
- Over G Fighters – 360
- Pirates of the Caribbean: The Legend of Jack Sparrow – PS2
- Warpath – Xbox, PC
- World War II Combat: Iwo Jima – Xbox, PC

7

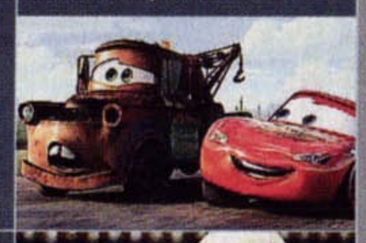
SUPERMAN RETURNS: KRYPTON TO EARTH
This comic, first of a four part series, bridges the gap between the movies *Superman* 2 and *Superman Returns*. With a story by Bryan Singer, Michael Dougherty, and Dan Harris; script by Jimmy Palmiotti and Justin Gray; and art by John Byrne and Adam Hughes, this is bound to be one of the biggest comics of the year.

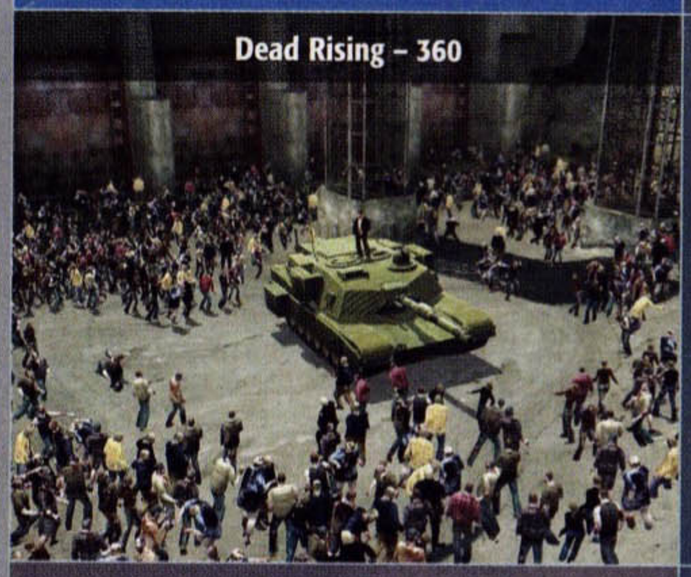
9

SEX IN VIDEO GAMES CONFERENCE 2006
It's not very often that you run across a conference that offers keynotes like "How Sex Happens Online" and lectures along the lines of "The Making of the SeXbox." This show will explore the business of digital erotic entertainment and will held at Kensington Park Hotel in San Francisco.

10

Pixar's *Cars*, which is an animated movie about talking vehicles, may seem like a dumb idea, but it's pretty much guaranteed to make more money than any other movie this year.





Dead Rising – 360

13

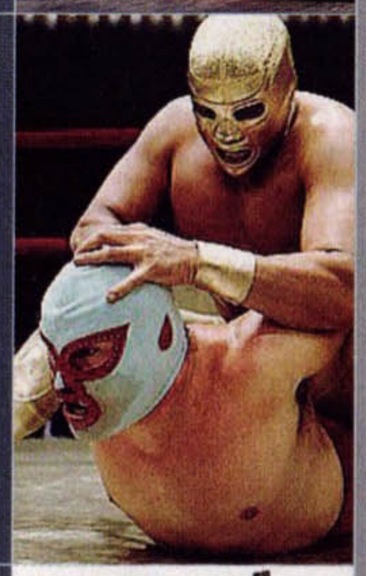
NEW RELEASES
- Dead Rising – 360
- The Lord of the Rings: Battle for Middle-Earth II – 360
- Moto GP 2006 – 360
- Naruto: Ultimate Ninja – PS2
- New Super Mario Bros. – DS
- Urban Chaos: Riot Response – PS2, Xbox
- Rise & Fall: Civilizations at War – PC

14

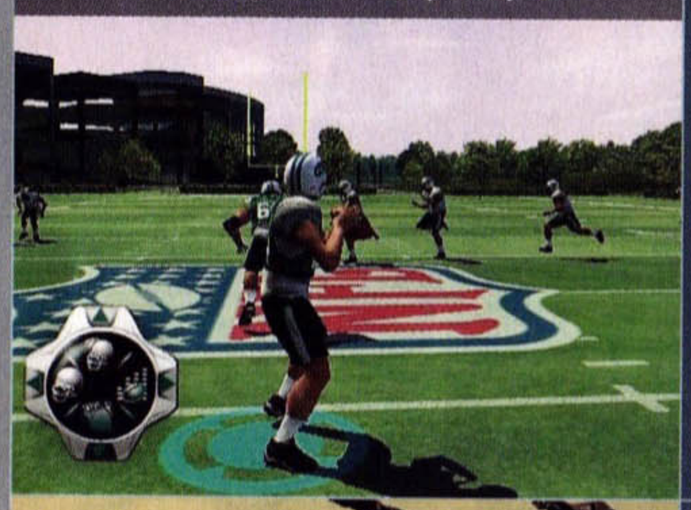
METROPLEX RETURNS!
Remember that totally awesome Transformers toy that your parents thought was way too expensive? Well, now you can finally pick it up. Metroplex is finally back in the current Cybertron line of toys. He's still huge, but this time, he's only $49.99!

16

Jack Black and the director of *Napoleon Dynamite* team up for what could possibly be your dream film or the most obnoxious thing you could ever imagine. Find out today, when *Nacho Libre* opens in theaters.



NFL Head Coach – PS2, Xbox, PC

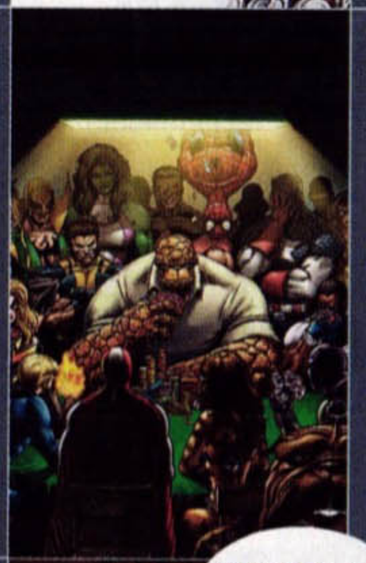


20

NEW RELEASES
- Def Jam Fight for NY: The Takeover – PSP
- NFL Head Coach – PS2, Xbox, PC
- Test Drive Unlimited – 360

21

SUPERHERO POKER!!!
Have you ever wondered if superheroes play poker? You haven't? Really? Well, in issue eight of The Thing (yes, he has his own series), you'll see the poker faces of Wolverine, Spider-Man, Captain America, She-Hulk, and dozens of others.



23

DEVIL MAY CRY 3 DANTE TOY
The shirtless wonder finally has a toy that is worth its weight in plastic. This Revoltech figure showcases an incredible level of articulation, and comes packaged with two hand guns, a sawed-off shotgun, a sword, an electric guitar, and even an alternate head. The only thing missing is a slice of pizza.

ChromeHounds – 360

27

NEW RELEASES
- ChromeHounds – 360
- Flatout 2 – PS2, Xbox, PC
- Micro Machines V4 – PS2
- Superman Returns – 360, PS2, Xbox, PSP, DS
- Super Monkey Ball Adventure – PS2, GC, PSP
- Super Robot Taisen: Original Generation – GBA
- Tekken: Dark Resurrection – PSP

28

30

Even though they cast an actor that looks as wimpy as Reiner, we are pretty sure that *Superman Returns* will be awesome. Everyone needs to go see it today!

All release dates subject to change. For future release dates, go to www.gameinformer.com

UNLIMITED ENABLED

PLAYSTATION 3

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION
> **PUBLISHER** UBISOFT
> **DEVELOPER** UBISOFT MONTREAL
> **RELEASE** MARCH

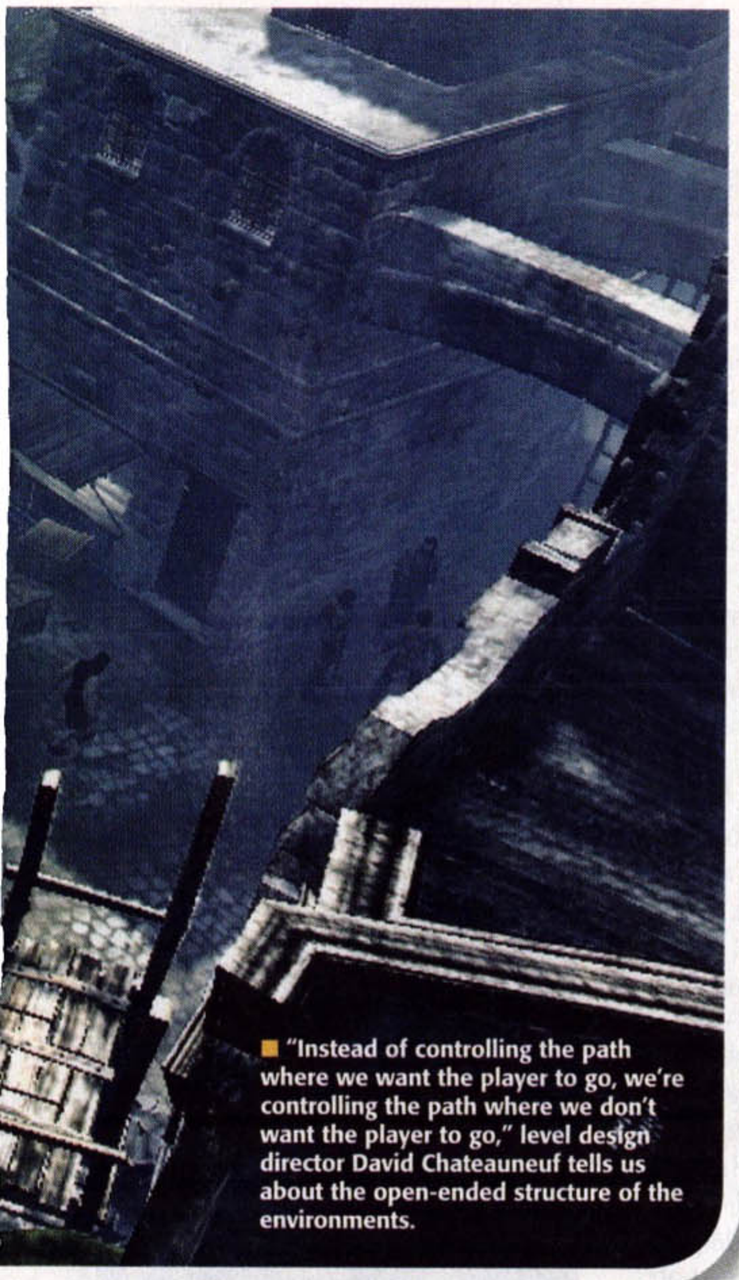
ASSASSIN'S CREED™

"Nothing is true. Everything is permitted."

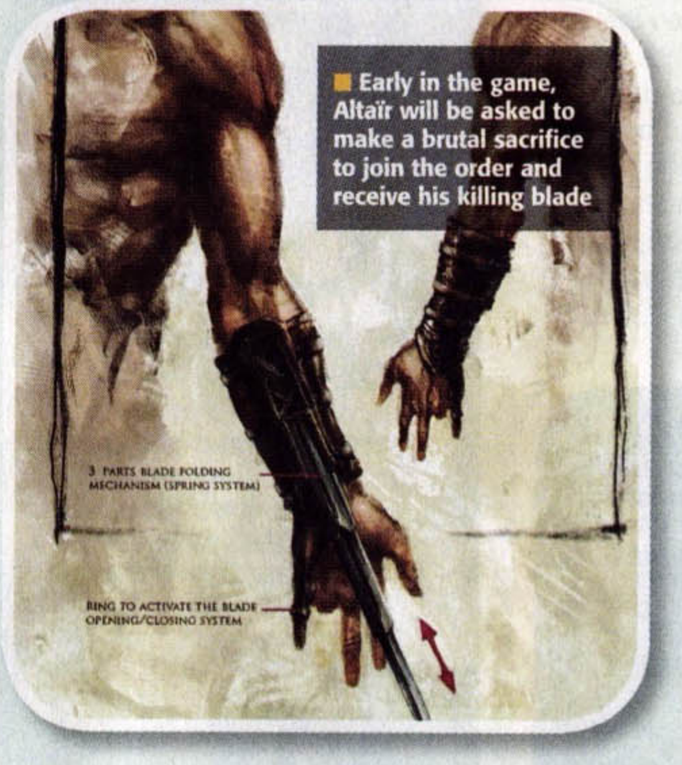
A lone eagle soars over the recently conquered medieval port city of Acre, where below a Christian knight paces the gallows, preaching to a crowd the sins of the men that hang behind him. As the bird lifts up and over the nearby church bell tower, a figure appears, intent on the scene below – stark and white against the dirty, rubble-strewn city. The bell begins to toll noon as the man drops into the square below. He stalks quietly and steadily through the jeering throng, gently pushing aside those in his path. At the fourth bell, he begins a slow run, now shoving down those that aren't wise enough to step aside. From atop the raised gallows, he is spotted. The knight's guards draw their weapons, and the white-cloaked figure drops into a sprint. In a flash, a spinning blade takes down the first soldier. The second swings once before the attacker has dropped him as well. At the sixth bell, the assassin leaps. Time seems to slow. A hidden blade emerges from his arm, and his victim falls as the knife finds his neck. In the stunned silence, the assassin reaches down and reverently closes the dead man's eyes, and then the chase is on. Guards surge forward and rush after the murderer as he launches into a nearby alley, jumps off a street-side stoop, and pulls himself to the roof. Along the tops of buildings he runs, circling back to the church entrance. He drops to the ground and rushes to the cathedral door. As he calmly turns, he is totally surrounded by his foes. The twelfth bell tolls. The doors open and a sea of white-robed monks emerge from afternoon prayer. Standing completely still, in the bright light of day, the assassin completely disappears.

This first remarkable glimpse of Assassin's Creed has us reeling. We've been invited to spend two days touring the massive, maze-like corridors of Ubisoft Montreal. Within, a team of developers has been anxious to share their secret with the gaming community. For some of them, it's a secret they've kept silent for over two years, ever since several of the team leads completed the first Prince of Persia game. As we enter the huge area devoted to Assassin's Creed, we meet producer Jade Raymond, the first in a string of introductions to smiling faces that each seem intensely excited to finally tell someone from the outside about their project. "I just loved the huge ambition of the game, and the fact that Ubisoft was letting people think about the concept for so long and then develop new technology," Raymond enthusiastically tells us. "It's completely set apart from anything that's been on the market before. Hopefully gamers will appreciate it, but it's definitely going to be something totally different."

One of the most profound ways that Assassin's Creed sets itself apart is the startling mix of historical fact juxtaposed against this team's sweeping narrative style. Anyone who has played any of the Prince of Persia games is familiar with the flair for drama and intrigue that fills that series. However, unlike that largely fantasy-based project, Assassin's Creed is a game firmly entrenched in the details of medieval history. Specifically, the game is set in the summer of 1191, only weeks after the Christian conquest of Acre. While it's not a well-known fact, it is from this era that the word "assassin" comes. Historically, an offshoot group of Muslim warriors became widely known and feared due to their policy of murdering opposing political leaders who went counter to their interests. Whether the name evolved from their founder Hassan or from the common legend that they used the drug hashish in their rituals, the name has passed into modern usage in several languages as "assassin." Because this strange society was incredibly secretive, the team at Ubisoft knew almost immediately that there was tremendous potential to expand the mythology into a game. "What is written in the history books is what people from outside the Assassins said about them," creative director Patrice Desilets tells us of the project he helped jumpstart. "But we wanted to take players inside the Assassins, and then we took some liberty." Amid the scattered accounts of the Assassins, one piece of information emerged as particularly evocative, a motto that was said to have been the guiding principle of the order – "Nothing is true. Everything is permitted." "As soon as I read that phrase, I thought, there's a game there," Patrice relays. "It's very close to Taoism or Buddhism – everything is an illusion, and you can do whatever you want. We approached it more like they were ninjas from the Middle East." Beyond its potential for interactive gaming, the creed itself also served to pinpoint the forces that the Assassins would find themselves aligned against. In the organized religion of the time, regardless of faith, the people were encouraged to believe that everything they were



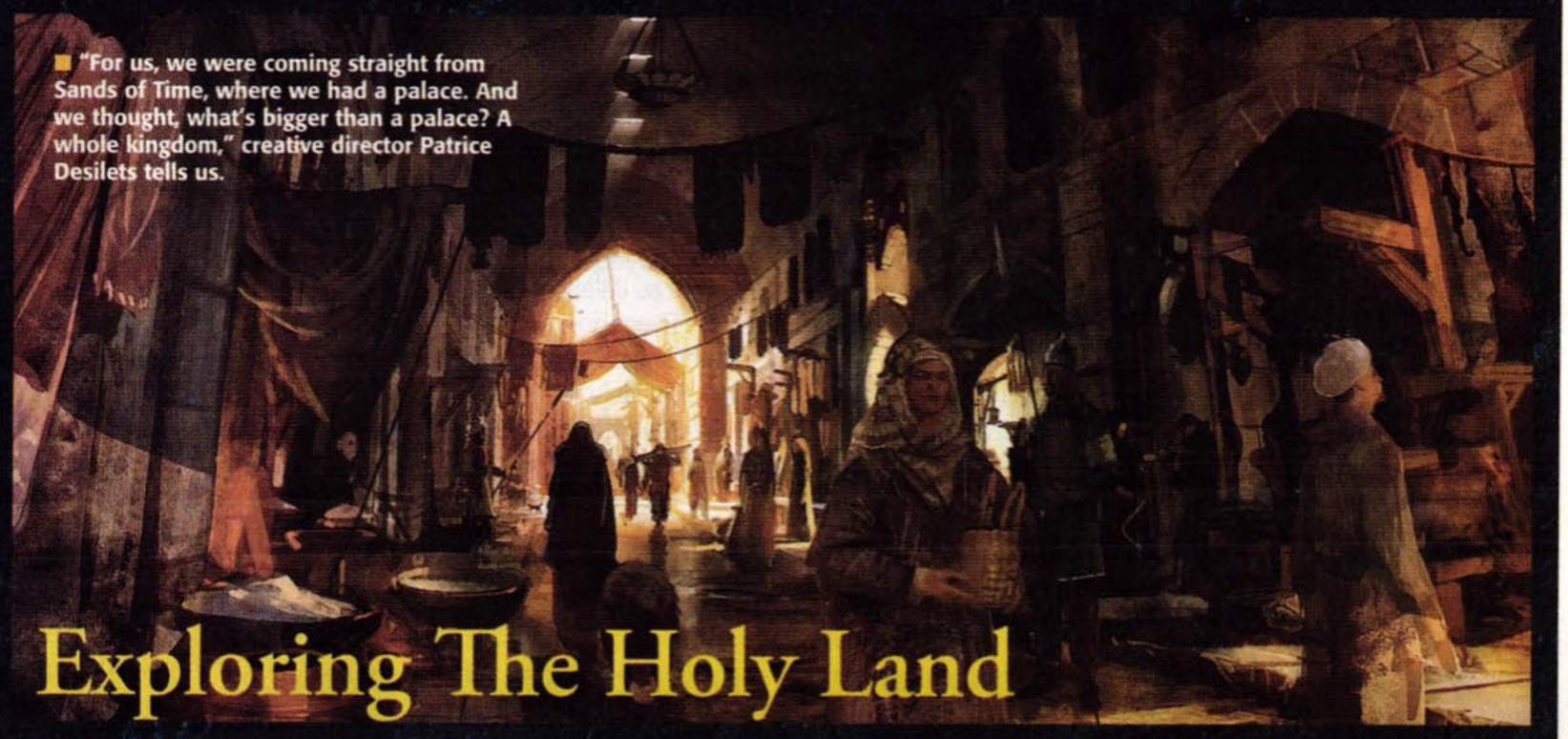
■ "Instead of controlling the path where we want the player to go, we're controlling the path where we don't want the player to go," level design director David Chateauneuf tells us about the open-ended structure of the environments.



■ Early in the game, Altaïr will be asked to make a brutal sacrifice to join the order and receive his killing blade

told was true, and almost nothing they wanted was permitted. In the mythology of the game, this is the idea that the Assassins struggle against.

Every conflict needs a hero, and for this one players will adopt the role of Altaïr, (pronounced al-tie-ear), an apprentice Assassin at the historic castle of Masyaf, a mountain hideaway in what is now modern day Syria. Altaïr literally translates as "eagle" from Arabic, and the choice of moniker is entirely purposeful. "He's like a bird of prey. We took that as a reference for all his moves, looks, and attitudes," art director Nicolas Cantin points out to us. Against a wall, the shadow of his cowl appears as a sharp beak. Crouched upon high roof ledges, his cloak falls about him like folded wings. When he strikes his victim, his ritualistic dagger appears like a talon as it emerges into his left hand, where his ring finger has been ceremonially severed upon his entry into the order. His practiced movements are a combination of incredible strength and versed grace, thanks to the bank of over 4,000 animations that will govern his interaction with



■ "For us, we were coming straight from Sands of Time, where we had a palace. And we thought, what's bigger than a palace? A whole kingdom," creative director Patrice Desilets tells us.

Exploring The Holy Land

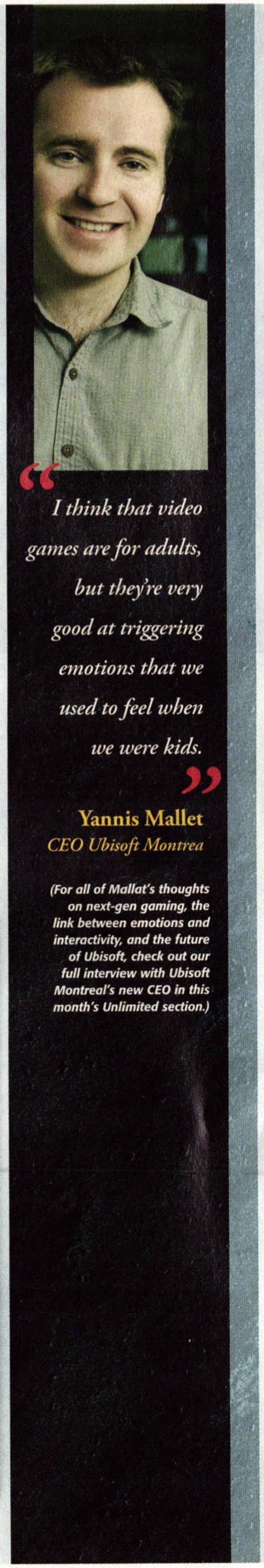
The world of Assassin's Creed is far more than one unnamed city in the nebulous time of the Crusades. Set between July and September of 1191, the game will open an entire region of land in which to explore and adventure. Three major cities will all be completely open to the player, each with its own distinctive missions and atmosphere. The screens we see in this article are taken from Acre, an oceanside city that has been overtaken by the Europeans. The remains of battle are obvious everywhere, with shattered buildings and rubble-filled streets a norm, and a cold blue color scheme throughout. In contrast, the desert metropolis of Damascus is filled with bright colors and dominated by majestic Islamic mosques and marketplaces. Jerusalem, meanwhile, will be the great meeting point of cultures that it has always been – a throng of intermingling religions and languages. In between each of the major cities lay two sprawling countrysides – a playground for horseback chases, fights with brigands, and even some of the primary assassinations. The green hills of the northern kingdom are contrasted against the rolling desert dunes of the southern region. All three of the major cities and each of the two wilderness areas are two square kilometers apiece, and each one is made up of three primary districts. To preserve the idea of true multiple days of travel between different cities, every major area will be separated by a fade out that takes you to the next area (and, in all probability, lets the game load in another massive environment). Joining caravans will allow players to traverse the distance between two places instantaneously, rather than making the trip manually. Finally, beyond these major environments, players will also visit both the cold and mountainous Assassin fortress of Masyaf, as well as the forested region that is the site for the climactic historical conflict that was the Battle of Arsuf.

the world. The remarkably fluid agility of the Prince of Persia had approximately 800 animations in comparison. Many things about Altaïr are designed to defy expectation. He is not a black-garbed thug sneaking through shadows. Even the way he kills is strange – each of his victims he treats with the utmost respect. A far cry from the heartless mercenary hitman that video games have painted in the past, the developers will only be satisfied if players come away from the game with an entirely new perception of the word "assassin."

The world that Altaïr finds himself in is embroiled in the chaos of the Third Crusade. Christian soldiers, under the leadership of Richard the Lionhearted, have swept into the Holy Land on another quest to retake it from Saladin and the largely Muslim populace. Decades of religious war have left whole cities as melting pots of different peoples and faiths. Under the tutelage of the Assassin chief Sinan, Altaïr is tasked with helping to bring an end to the Crusade with as little loss of innocent life as possible. Every one of Altaïr's precision strikes is designed to hold back the tide of corruption and violence that threatens the people. "You'll come to understand that there are other things going on in the Holy Land that most everyone else is unaware of," scriptwriter Corey May reveals. "You're not just out killing people. You're solving a mystery."

To complete this task, the player will guide Altaïr through dozens of planned murders. While every assassination will be unique in place, style, and challenge, there are three steps to each mission that will remain the same. First, players must locate the target in one of the sprawling cities or wilderness areas of the open game world. Getting close to the target will often necessitate carefully navigating through hordes of city populace, or alternately scaling buildings and slipping from roof to roof to reach the enemy. The second step is the lethal attack – players will reconnoiter the area around a target and discover any number of paths to get close, neutralize any protection, and finally kill the enemy in person. The moment of the kill, as the center point of an Assassin's job, is being meticulously designed to offer a wealth of emotional experiences for players in the brief seconds that it lasts. Time will slow, and the action will zoom close. Excitement mixes with the gravity and horror of taking a human life, as you'll often bear witness to the fear and pain etched on the victim's face. Finally, every major assassination will have the dying man relay a piece of information to Altaïr about the larger conspiracy that is at the true heart of the game, pushing the story forward with the last words of a fallen foe. As the target dies, and even once he is gone, Altaïr will always try to make a point of offering respect and honor to him. "Our reference for the scene of the assassination is from *Saving Private Ryan*, when the German kills the American with the knife, and he says: 'Shhh..Shhh'," Desilets explains

■ Historical data on the Assassins suggests that they almost never killed from a distance, abstaining from any weapon beyond their ritualistic daggers



"I think that video games are for adults, but they're very good at triggering emotions that we used to feel when we were kids."

Yannis Mallet
CEO Ubisoft Montrea

(For all of Mallat's thoughts on next-gen gaming, the link between emotions and interactivity, and the future of Ubisoft, check out our full interview with Ubisoft Montreal's new CEO in this month's Unlimited section.)

■ "The biggest challenge on the animation side is making it realistic," animation art director Alex Drouin tells us about the team's approach to true-to life movement and jumping. "You have to create the illusion of life without making it frustrating to play."

about that all-important instant. "There's a moment between two human beings. And that's important to me." The developers want the moment of death to carry emotional weight, and for players to lose themselves in the moral dilemma of killing for a greater good. When the deed is done, the third act of a mission is the escape, which can involve any combination of combat with guards, acrobatic roof running, or finding a way to hide or blend in with the surroundings and slip away, depending on player preference. All told, the full arc of one assassination can take anywhere from 10 minutes to a full hour, entirely based on player choice and decisions.

Whether completing a mission or not, it is the incredible innovations that fill the cities of the game that will bring the world to life. The most exciting feature that manages this feat is the crowd. "The Scimitar game engine allowed us to have over 60 NPCs onscreen, each with individual AI and behaviors," Desilets tells us. Even in some of the most exciting open world games on the market, onscreen characters are all playing out their parts along a highly scripted path that takes them from one place to another. Furthermore, if you interrupt that path with something like a violent action, a given NPC usually triggers into a single response, usually either fight or flight. Not so in Assassin's Creed. Every NPC has a wealth of needs, each with a relative value. High social need might send a person to find someone to talk with. NPCs can develop thirst or hunger, and be drawn to a market fruit stand or fountain. Those that desire rest might look for a bench. Those who want entertainment might seek out a streetside piper, a juggler, or even an afternoon hanging in the town square. Finally, some NPCs will be driven by a certain duty like a patrol, the protection of another NPC, or other set tasks.

As you move among the tightly packed clusters of people, a pushing and balancing feature dictates both physics and the need for civil conduct with others. In other words, every NPC carries weight and force. Just as you wouldn't be able to run to the front of the stage at a musical concert, in the game the crowd will block your way. Run full tilt into a very large fellow, and you might knock him off his balance, but you will almost certainly be thrown to the ground as well. Beyond the physical reaction, you'll also get the same personal reaction from such a man as you might in real life – he may very well be angry or even violent. Meanwhile, other passersby will stop and react – some will point and stare at your socially abnormal behavior. Others may join in the fight. Beyond their needs, every character in the world will have multiple layers of tolerance for the actions of a player. Climb up onto a roof in broad daylight on a main street, and just like in real life, people will pause and stare. Guards will often react more forcefully, and climb up after you in pursuit. Break a merchant stand and you're sure to attract the attention of the entire surrounding area. NPC tolerance acts as a totally organic solution to the "wanted stars" dilemma of open world games. The only way to return tolerance to normal is to find a place to hide, enter a place of worship like a Jewish temple, Islamic mosque, or Christian church, or find your way back to the Assassin hideout of the area.

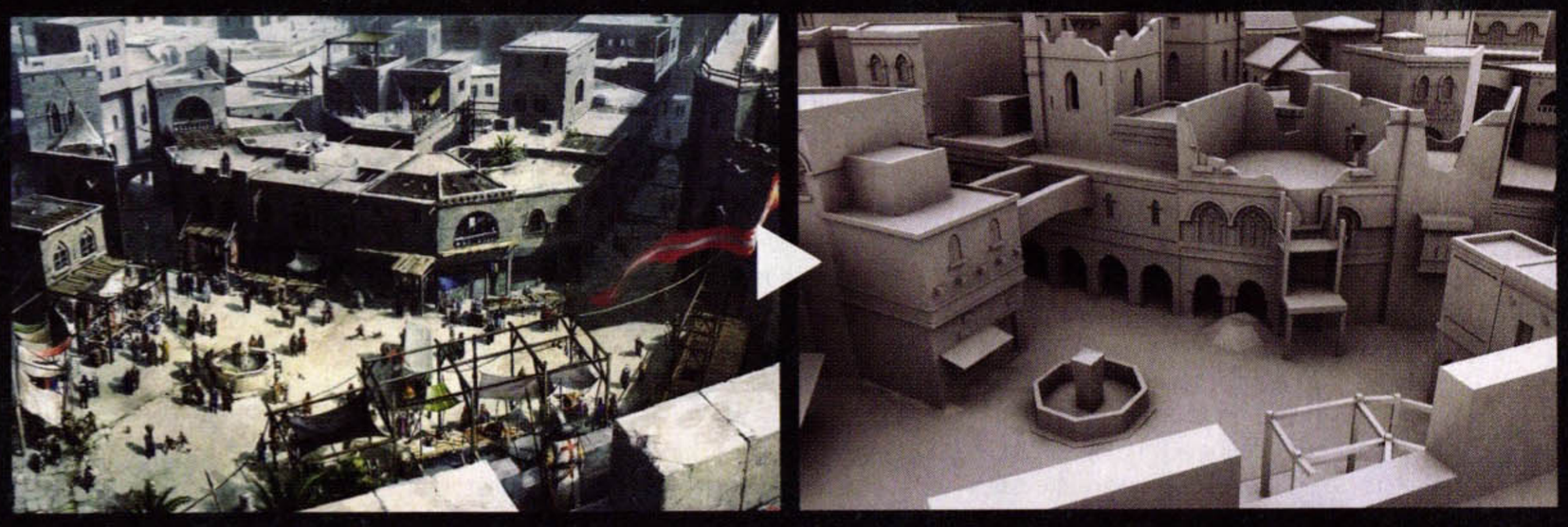
"One thing that's important to us is establishing a connection between the predator and his prey – between the assassin and the person being assassinated."

Jade Raymond
Producer

■ The team is crafting a dynamic camera that alters based on player action. It will zoom in when moving slow, and out when moving fast. Every behavior has a related camera, from horseback riding to climbing

Beyond the random NPCs that follow their own personal desires through the world, every environment will also be filled with what the designers have dubbed NPC traps. These groups of like-minded individuals act as a force to either impede you or your enemies, depending on their opinion of you. Beggars, prostitutes, monks, and gossiping women – groups like these will all start out generally hostile to a person like the player who disrupts the natural order of the city. However, beyond the dozens of assassination missions that players will undertake, they can also choose to attempt helping missions for the struggling populace. Aid the monks, and the next time you're being pursued they will help hide you amid their white robes, rather than breaking apart and pinpointing your location. Burly men on the street might block your entry into a side street if they don't know you, but split open if you've aided them. Beggars crouched in side alleys may accost you for money, or if they like you, instead trip pursuing guards. A friendly mass of citizens may even throw rocks at your foes instead of you, presuming you've completed the sidequest in their city for them. Unlike in the world of Prince of Persia, there are no spinning blades or spouting flames to hinder progress in a realistic setting like this. That role is now reserved for the crowd, even as it doubles as your camouflage. "Our light and shadow is the crowd," Jade Raymond relates. "It's faster paced. It's about whether you're doing things that are within the social norms of what's acceptable." Where another game might have you managing your ability to stay hidden in the darkness, stealth and secrecy in Assassin's Creed are often only accomplished in the middle of a busy city square.

The crowd dynamic, while intensely rewarding, is not enough to offer the exploration and freedom that the team desires for basic gameplay. With a character that possesses the acrobatic skill and strength of a circus performer, the idea of an open world that lies only along the street is totally inappropriate. And while ascending and platforming along a scripted line may give the illusion of freedom in a game like Prince of Persia, Assassin's Creed seeks to offer the actuality of freedom. For that reason, every inch of the game world and environmental geometry has been set up as part of a massive action-based grid. On this grid, any object that sticks out more than five centimeters from its surroundings has been made interactive. This means that any ledge, rock, pole, box, window, or countless other objects can all be leaped over, climbed onto, or in many cases knocked over. Level designers for the game are working tirelessly to craft exciting movement and action opportunities in any direction you step, with the rough plan that every 10 meters should offer at least one chance to interact meaningfully with the environment. The ground may demand quick dodges and blind turns into dark alleys. Players might have to jump between interconnected rooftops



■ You can see here the progression that begins with a two-dimensional concept art piece as it evolves into its final incarnation. An in-game 3D rendering without any textures is then overlayed with a wireframe, and the NPCs are added. In the next step, polygons are given edged faces, before a final step displays an in-game screen with dynamic lighting, shadows, post effect, and bump mapping all present

■ The intuitive combat system rewards careful observation and timed countering

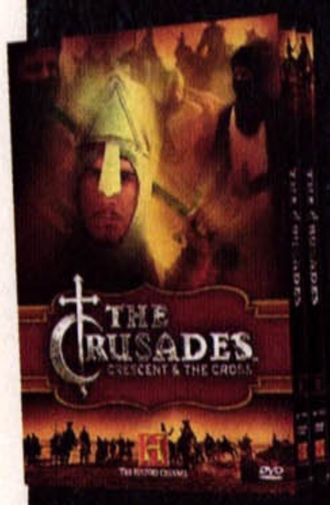
along a patchwork of thick planks. And every wall becomes like a tiny mountain climbing challenge, where you're constantly looking for the next foothold or hand grab that can offer some leverage. Countless paths are open to you at any step. "This is really what sets Assassins apart from many other action games, where you always feel like you're a mouse in a maze. You're just trying to figure out how to get to the cheese. Assassins completely does away with that philosophy," lead programmer Matt Mazerolle tells us. In a way, the creativity that developers get to feel when they design a level path has been passed on to the player, offering a higher degree of freedom of movement than has ever been an option before.

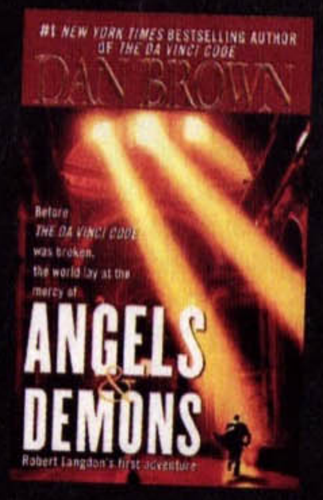
Unwilling to settle for a mundane control solution to this anything but mundane game world, the development team has crafted a remarkable new approach to action controls that further broadens the options a player has in front of him. Most modern action games include particular buttons for specific actions like jumping and attacking, as well as the common context sensitive "do" button that interacts with the world. Instead of this, Assassin's Creed will employ an intuitive new idea that can best be compared to playing marionette or puppeteer to Altaïr's actions. "What I really liked about this concept was that once you understand the concept of the controls, you know how to play the game," Raymond asserts. "You don't ever have to look at what the button combos are. You can invent them as you go." On the PS3 controller, the left analog will still control movement and the right analog will handle the camera. However, the actual buttons are quite different than normal. X will correspond to the feet, Square will dictate arm movement with your weapons, Circle will use your arms without a weapon, and Triangle uses your head. Finally, one of the right shoulder buttons will serve as a shift key between high and low intensity. Run with the left analog, or hold down the shift button to walk. If a person is in front of you, press the non-weapon arm button to shove them violently against the wall, or shift and press the same button to gently move them aside. High atop a roof, you can navigate a tricky set of overhanging building struts by holding down jump to lithely hop from one to another, or switch to your arms to leap forward and grab one and swing along below them. Like the approach to level design, the aim is to offer increased freedom. Even a simple low wall offers at least two options – run forward and press the legs button and you'll hurdle it like an Olympic athlete. Press for your arms, and Altaïr will throw down his hands on the wall and vault over. Every player can determine not only where they go, but how they move to get there. Finally, the head button has Altaïr use his mind. In some cases, it will simply let you see out of his eyes in a first-person perspective, or give you a special view of where your target is. Other times, a press of the head button gives you a cinematic angle on an unfolding scene in front of you. The head button can even translate languages. For authenticity's sake, you'll often be hearing passersby speaking in their native language, like Arabic. However, press the head button and you'll hear the words translated, since Altaïr is multilingual and can listen for secrets and enemy locations in any number of tongues.

The incredible array of movement options will certainly give players plenty of ways to avoid a scrape, but it's inevitable that Altaïr will still find himself in open combat on a regular basis. The experienced killer has plenty of training to fall back on in these instances, but will frequently be tremendously outnumbered. Fights themselves are heavy into enemy observa-

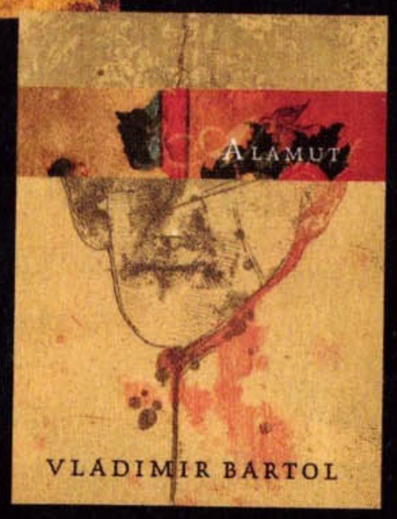
Truth & Fiction

Prior to even beginning the game, the team completed a wide body of research into the politics, architecture, religion, and geography of the period. If this vibrant and violent culture interests you, there's a wealth of resources to explore about this fascinating time in history, as well as several pieces of entertainment that may help to get you revved up for the game. The recent movie *Kingdom of Heaven* serves as a fantastic companion piece to the game. In fact, art director Nicolas Cantin studied over 800 screenshots of the film as background for Assassin's Creed. The History Channel has produced a number of documentaries on the period, including *The Crusades: Crescent & The Cross*, which traces the full story of the wars between Christian and Muslim forces of the time. Popular author Dan Brown (*The Da Vinci Code*) deals directly with his own fictionalized version of the Assassins in his book *Angels and Demons*. Meanwhile, the classic foreign novel *Alamut* by Vladimir Bartol has been translated into over a dozen languages, including English, and served as a primary inspiration for the game.





Finally, those of a more scholarly bent may be interested in Bernard Lewis' *The Assassins: A Radical Sect In Islam*, a book that pulls together much of the real historical data on this elusive group in the history of the Middle Ages.



tion and timing, with counter moves as the primary tool for victory. Timed guarding against attacks will usually leave an enemy momentarily open, giving you enough time to slip in and finish him off. The continued focus on realism means that neither you nor your opponent can take massive damage before collapsing. An auto block feature for Altaïr helps to simulate the idea that when the player fails to halt an attack, he is still able to ward off the blade, but will be exhausted by the clumsy maneuver. Only those final fatal blows against Altaïr will actually register as full-on wounds leading to a game over.

Just like the wider NPC crowd, you can expect that enemy fighters have the wherewithal to try multiple approaches and tactics. Most enemies will fall into one of three categories. Straight-up fighters will face off head to head with you. Flankers, meanwhile, attempt to encircle you, or even surprise you by leaping from a building interior at your back. Finally, ranged foes will often climb to a rooftop for a clear vantage on you. This impressive AI extends beyond the traditional trigger mechanism we so often see in action game enemies. In most games, once a foe sees you, their combat AI is triggered and doesn't end until either they or the player have died. While some opponents in Assassin's Creed may adopt this attitude, others most certainly will not, reinforcing the concept that not every conflict must end in death. "If you start a fight and you kill the toughest guy in the fight and two of his friends, the others will not just stand there as if they don't know what's going on," AI lead Mark Besner explains. One may drop to his knees and beg for mercy. Another may run for help around the corner and bring back reinforcements. Still another may make a break for it, scaling a nearby ladder and platforming away across the roofs. Yes, while most NPCs aren't as acrobatic or capable as Altaïr, they can still use the environmental grid just like you. This means you'll encounter instances where you'll be chasing enemies across the rooftops, or guards will be doing the same to you, leaping after you from building to building.

At the end of our final day at the studio, we sit down on the couch with Patrice Desilets to tackle the latest build of the game, freshly minted only minutes before and made ready for our perusal. The level we experience begins on the ruined outskirts of Acre, a waiting horse nearby at hand. Altaïr bounds up onto its back, and begins a gallop towards the city walls. A damaged bridge lies in his path, apparently shredded by some siege machine from the taking of the city only weeks before. A quick press of the legs button sends the horse hurtling over the gap and on towards the gates. Immediately within, the gathered crowd exclaims loudly and scatters as the horse bears down on them. Standing and then leaping from the horse's back, Altaïr grabs a support strut of a nearby building and pulls himself up to the low hanging roof. Kicking off a corner wall, he gains enough height to grasp a higher ledge and clamber up, where he can crouch and survey the crowd below. While the target lies deeper in the city, on the busy streets the assassin spies a tired woman being harassed by two bullying soldiers. Dropping down among them, Altaïr draws his sword and faces off with the two corrupt foes. The closest one comes at him with an easily-blocked attack, at which point Altaïr slips forward underneath the soldier's arm to cut him down. Recognizing sure defeat, the second soldier bolts for a nearby ladder and sets off across the roofs. The assassin

> *"Let's forget about linear paths. We were so used to linear. It's a challenge, so that's why we like doing it. We wanted to make something different – to challenge ourselves."*
>
> **Patrice Desilets**
> *Creative Director*

■ The team continues to grow far beyond the one hundred mark, an explosive growth from the modest six person team that began the project in January of 2004

■ The crowd will react to the presence of your horse, just like everything else you do. Rear your steed back on two legs, and people will scatter in fear

pursues for a time, but the frightened soldier eventually drops back down into the crowd and is lost. Returning to the task at hand, Altaïr begins to scale a nearby high building, pulling himself up along window grates and out around roof ledges to gain a vantage over the city block. From here, a press of the head button drops Altaïr into eagle vision, where everything other than the target is blurred out. Sure enough, emerging into the market below comes his victim. Opting for the direct approach, the assassin leaps down to the ground and charges, and the knight is unable to react fast enough before the ritual blade comes out and he is dead. Unfortunately, this leaves several living guards to corner the killer, and they capitalize by grabbing either arm to pin Altaïr down. A quick shove in either direction dislodges his opponents, and he runs off into the city, the stunned crowd splitting before him. Finally, a long line of white robed monks is parading not far off down the street, and Altaïr merges in with them to escape.

It is the continuous flow of open-ended missions like this that will move Altaïr forward through the story of the game. In gameplay terms, this progression plays out as a mild degree of leveling, which finds him ranking up through the many tiers of the Assassins clan, a process which will change both his physical appearance and his weapons. From a narrative perspective, progression through the missions begins to reveal a deep and complicated conspiracy. A profound divide exists between the Assassins, who wish to expand their self-knowledge and spread this wisdom to the people, and the Templars, an enemy that will emerge with the same high opinion of human potentiality, but who wish to keep the knowledge to themselves. As the intrigue unfolds, it begins to reach its fingers back into human history, and, remarkably, forward into the future beyond the Crusades.

For, as we learnt during our time at the Ubisoft studio, Assassin's Creed had one final incredible secret to reveal – an aspect of the game so under wraps that everyone would seem to lean conspiratorially in to speak of it. While the great wealth of gameplay and innovations remains focused entirely around Altaïr and his journey to halt the Third Crusade, that entire story will be framed by a character far in the future who will be looking back on his ancestor's exploits and experiencing them through Altaïr's eyes. In fact, this strange process of genetic memory will play out in an important way within gameplay. As the player moves through the world of the game, new situations and places are a mystery. Confidence in the memory will be low, and thus Altaïr's ability to survive injuries and death will be lower. As understanding dawns through exploration, discovery, and the unfolding of the conspiracy, confidence in the memory of Altaïr's exploits will grow, and so will the plausibility of him surviving the challenges he faces. This exciting approach to health management is just one aspect of how the game will craft this strange connection between the distant past and the future. To share more would be like revealing Luke Skywalker's parentage to someone who had never seen *Star Wars*. However, it's enough to say that behind the remarkable attention to historical realism that will fill Assassin's Creed, a deep and involving fiction has been crafted – an epic story that stretches from before human history to our present day in a way that has us spinning with anticipation.

Can such a dramatic tale be told in the space of one game, even one as expansive as Assassin's Creed appears to be? Despite cajoling, it was difficult to get anyone to officially confirm the game as the beginning to a larger story. However, it's not hard to examine the tendencies of a developer, and Prince of Persia certainly seemed to set a standard for telling a wider interconnected story as a trilogy. We also can certainly look at the patterns of a publisher like Ubisoft, a company that is rapidly building a reputation for franchises instead of single games. All that is to say, we'd be amazed if Assassin's Creed isn't the beginning of something big for a company that is eager to establish itself in the next generation of gaming.

For its part, Assassin's Creed certainly appears on track to succeed in its mandate to redefine entire conceptions of what is possible in a game world. The ambition of this veteran squad of game makers is frightening, raising questions as to whether such a titanic interactive experience can be successfully implemented. However, as we watched the team at work, feverishly preparing the game, there was definitely a vibe that boded well for the game's future. A shared enthusiasm and commitment to breaking new ground was universal in everyone we spoke with. For over two years, they've built this adventure from the ground up. Now, they're ready to find out whether the world is as excited by their brainchild as they are. ■■■

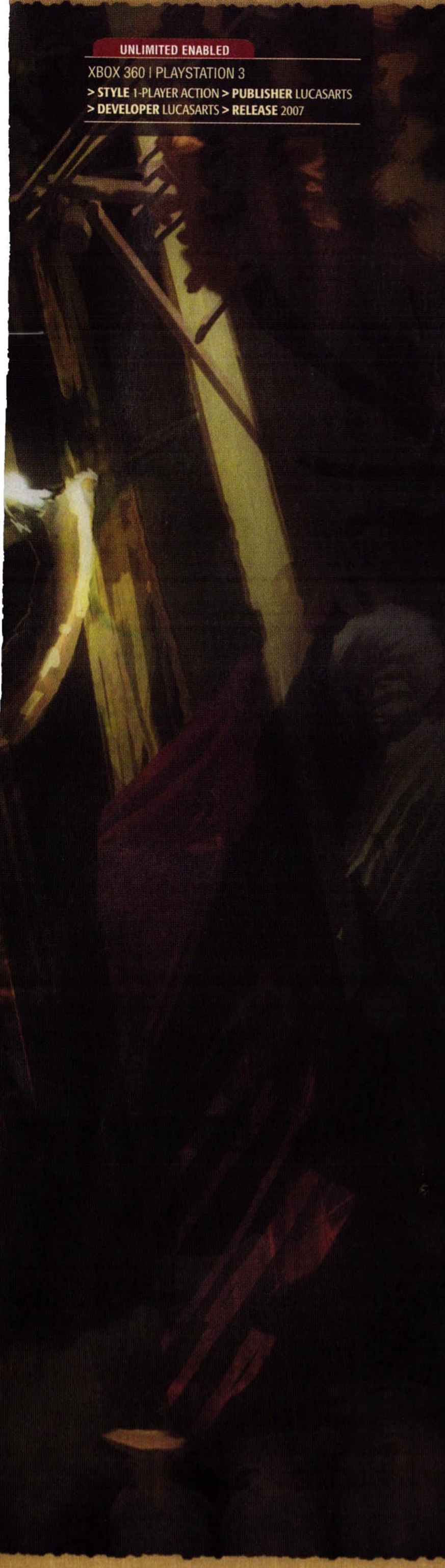
INDIANA JONES

CLASSIC ERA, NEW TECHNOLOGY

UNLIMITED ENABLED

XBOX 360 | PLAYSTATION 3

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** LUCASARTS
> **DEVELOPER** LUCASARTS > **RELEASE** 2007



George Lucas once said of Indiana Jones, "I don't think there has ever been a character better suited for video games." It's hard to argue with him – Indy is daring, loves a good fight, and travels to all corners of the globe in pursuit of fortune and glory. In the movies, these elements blend together to create some of the most memorable adventures on film. Unfortunately, as far as gaming goes, Indy has become a figure similar to Superman and James Bond – a great hero with few games that harness his full potential. In 2007, that perception will change. As we move into the next generation of home consoles, LucasArts is taking advantage of an opportunity to revitalize the Indiana Jones name by providing a title that not only lives up to the promise of the franchise, but also contributes something unique to video games that no other company can duplicate.

"I personally don't believe that there's been a game that has delivered on the Indy character since The Fate of Atlantis," admits Peter Hirschmann, LucasArts' vice president of product development. Seeing as how that classic adventure game was released in 1992, it has been a long time since fans have experienced a game worthy of the Indiana Jones name. The development team believes that the reason for this is that subsequent games didn't focus on the character of Indy or what made his exploits so compelling. Most of the time, players just got a generic action title with a lot of whip-swinging. "There was always an outcropping for you to hook your whip on to, and then it just became a bunch of jumping puzzles," laughs Hirschmann. Of course, hopping from place to place really doesn't encompass the essence of Indiana Jones, so the team is intently focused on making sure Indy's next-gen adventure captures the same excitement that drew people to the character in the first place.

The game takes place in 1939, one year after the events of *The Last Crusade*. This means that Indy will be squaring off against the Nazis once again as they begin their European conquest, and many of his old friends will still be around to lend a hand. While Indy wouldn't be able to succeed without help from time to time, he usually ends up taking care of things himself in his own brassy, improvisational way – and that concept is at the very heart of the gameplay.

Whether he's brawling in a bar or exploring an ancient temple, Indy always acts quickly and uses his surroundings to his advantage. "Indiana Jones is very much about wits and daring," says project lead Chris Williams. "Getting in there and being spontaneous, reacting to the environment around him. But nothing quite goes according to plan." This notion of response and unpredictability will manifest itself at every level through a pervasive behavior system called Euphoria. Implemented through a partnership with NaturalMotion, Euphoria is a procedural engine that allows the player and the enemies to interact with the environment in ways that are not possible on current-generation machines.

In short, Euphoria lets the team simulate a world by giving the characters a working awareness of their surroundings, rather than simply programming actions and animations for certain scenarios. For instance, imagine that Indy has picked up a thug by the collar, and throws him into a nearby car. In current-gen games, one of two things would probably happen: either there would be an animation specifically made to handle the guy tumbling into the vehicle, or the game would simply use ragdoll physics on contact that would send the body flailing in improbable directions. With next-gen Indiana Jones, the situation is totally different. Euphoria imbues the thug with the knowledge that he is headed straight for a car, and equips him with the behaviors to deal with it; he'll brace for impact, curl as he falls, and prop himself on the bumper as he gets up. If there's a weapon nearby, he will know to reach out and grab it as he

■ Like all great Indy experiences, the game will have a chase scene. This one takes place atop a cable car in San Francisco

stands in one motion – not two pre-scripted animations.

This means that instead of creating the action every step of the way, the team at LucasArts is building a world and its mechanics, and giving the player (and the enemies) a method to deal with complications as they arise. "It's allowing us to create some rich, deep situations without having to code a hundred different level-specific mechanics," explains Hirschmann. Williams adds, "Fundamentally, it changes the way you approach a game's design. Because you're not saying 'Here's a list of predetermined things that the player will go through.' Instead, you put in all of these dynamic elements that are responsive to the player and see how it's going to play out." Punching an enemy off a ledge no longer triggers a stock falling animation. Providing the foe is strong enough, he'll begin to fall, catch himself on the ledge, and pull himself up. Not only that, but since the game will keep track of temperament as well, the thug will be especially angry and determined to get revenge on Indy.

We saw this concept in full effect through an illustrative playground the developers made and ominously dubbed "the tower." As tall as a castle turret, the tower's interior was strewn with planks, boards, and ledges poking through at irregular angles, much like the human pachinko machines that were constructed to display ragdoll physics for current-gen systems. However, when a character model is dropped in at the top, the ensuing fall couldn't be more different from that technology. Instead of flopping lifelessly to the bottom, the characters grabbed and adapted, fighting for their lives. They slid down slopes, grasping for anything nearby to slow them down. We saw one instance where a falling character grabbed at the ankle of another dangling goon, though he only managed to hold on for a second before they both went tumbling down. Not a single one of these motions were canned animations or events. They were simply reactions according to the rules of environment. If an enemy is weakened, they won't be able to hold on as long. If they take enough damage to the head, they just go limp and unconscious. They even stumble to keep their balance. "You'll see a situational awareness in these characters. They understand where they're at. They're protecting themselves," claims Williams. "This is going to make ragdoll a last-gen phenomenon. It understands musculature and the human range of motion. The days of the magical scripted sequence are over. That's just not where the next generation is going."

While this kind of behavioral response is impressive and fun to watch, gamers thankfully don't need to be experts in procedural technology to appreciate how it is implemented in Indiana Jones. "We just want the consumer to come away having fun," clarifies Hirschmann. "Whether its biomechanical AI, or a motion-captured database... Who the hell cares so long as the payoff is there? That's all we care about." So, even though the advanced Euphoria technology is in place, all the player will experience directly is an accessible combat system that embodies Indy's tendency to fly by the seat of his pants.

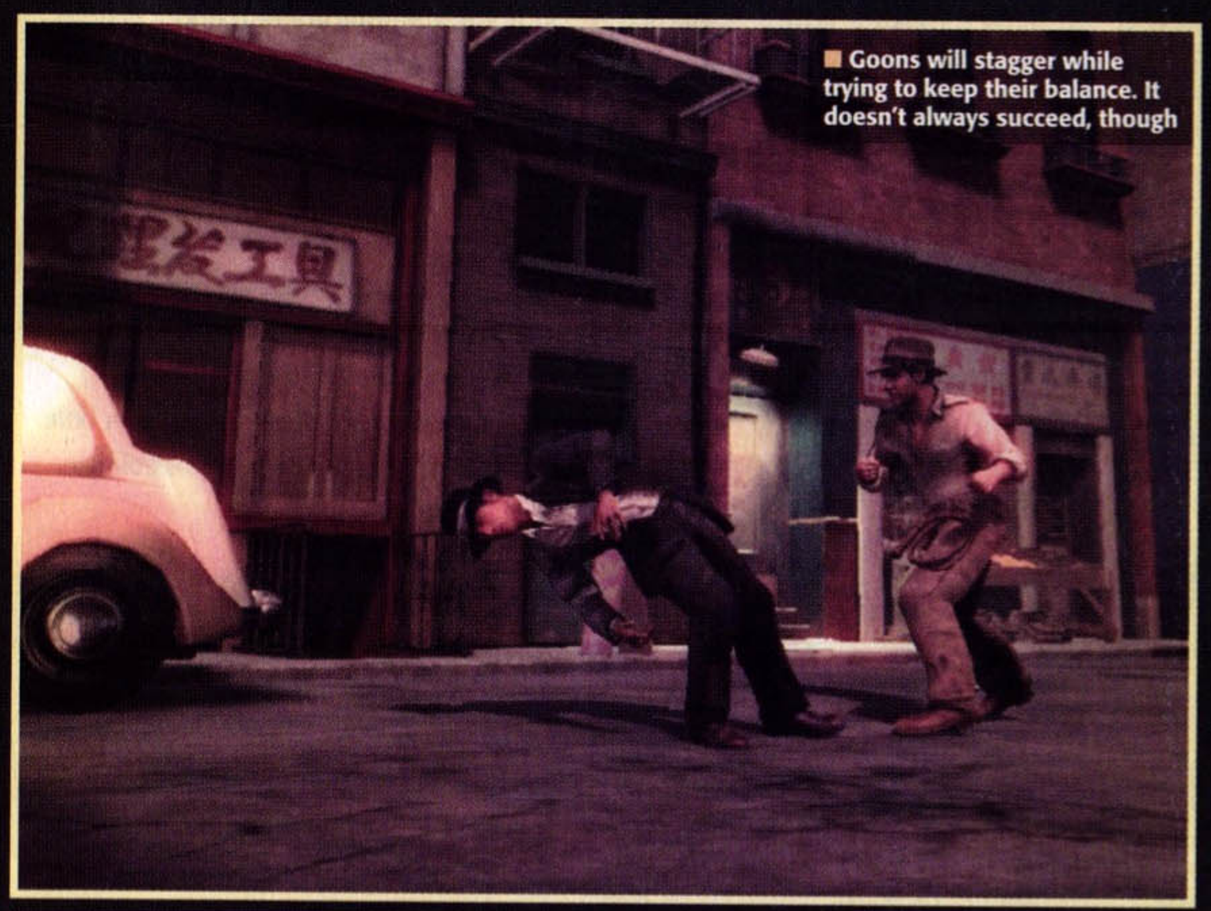
Unlike many other action heroes, things don't always work out for Indy. His plans fail. He gets punched in the

"THE DAYS OF THE MAGICAL SCRIPTED SEQUENCE ARE OVER."

face. He gets captured. The great thing about the character, however, is that no matter what occurs, he manages to make the best of his situation and pull through in the end. This same idea has been applied to game's battles, giving you the feeling that you can succeed even though the odds may be stacked against you. One of the ways this is demonstrated is by the ways Indy's enemies collaborate to take him down; they aren't complacently waiting for their turn to get a beating.

"When there are two or three guys, they're not fighting as two or three individuals. They're fighting as a unit," Hirschmann tells us. For instance, if there are three foes in an area, they will coordinate attacks by hitting Indy from behind, holding him for sucker punches, and using nearby weapons to do extra damage. They will also use the environment by slamming you into walls and work together to throw you off of a building.

Naturally, the team at LucasArts wouldn't give your foes these abilities without giving you ways to fight back, which is why Indy has a wide variety of combat options depending on his situation – and no, they don't all involve using the whip from a distance. "In previous games, the whip became kind of a fetish issue," observes Hirschmann. "The whip's an important part of Indy, but he uses it as a tool as much as a weapon." The game definitely focuses the utility of the whip rather than its attack potential. If a group of weapon-toting hooligans are rushing forward, Indy can target specific body parts with the whip to slow them down: latch onto their wrists to disarm them, trip them up by the ankles, or wrap the whip around their necks and just yank them to the ground. These



■ Goons will stagger while trying to keep their balance. It doesn't always succeed, though

■ The Euphoria engine is aware of bone and muscle structure to make the characters move realistically

INDY 4?

Even though this is a licensed game, don't be fooled into thinking it is directly connected to the fourth Indiana Jones movie. The script for the film is still undergoing revisions, whereas the plot for the game has already been refined (with the aid of George Lucas) as a standalone adventure with its own unique place in the Indy canon, so it isn't exactly a "movie game." However, we were told that if the upcoming sequel is far enough underway by the time game releases, gamers would likely see nods to the film, just like they would see references to the three existing Indy movies. Could this mean a triumphant return for Short Round? We sure hope so!

tactics will certainly slow down your foes, but they won't do much damage. To really inflict pain, you'll need to get up close and personal.

Just like in the movies, Indy's primary fighting style will include a mixture of punches, kicks, and throws. However, because of the enemies' ability to work together, you won't just be able to jam one button endlessly. Managing and isolating your foes is crucial, and that's where the throw comes into play. Toss them into each other, stacks of crates, or walls, then hammer on them before they have the chance to regroup. As an added bonus, these repeated throws have a chance to damage the surroundings and produce even more opportunities and potential weapons. Shattered boxes become makeshift bludgeoning tools. Broken railings become invitations for foes to plummet to their dooms. The more you play, the more your opportunities expand. "Players will feel a tremendous amount of discovery in everything they do, even at the most rudimentary levels," Willams explains. "Not by opening unlockables or cutscenes, but by thinking 'Hmm, what would happen if I did this?'"

If you're up against a particularly nasty evil-doer that you can't overcome with your wits, whip, or surroundings (like the crazy swordsman in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*), you've always got your trusty revolver. Indy will typically resort to a good fight rather than trust his life to a gun, but it can get you out of trouble in a pinch. Ammo is incredibly scarce, though, so it should only be used in the most dire of circumstances. With a little bit of luck and cleverness, you should be able to handle most situations without pulling the trigger. That doesn't mean that you should be rushing head-first into any fight, though. "One of the reasons people identify with Indy is that he's not a superhero. If there are four or more guys in a scene, Indy had better be getting out of there or using his gun, because he's going to get his ass kicked," jokes Hirschmann. After all,

■ The whip is important, but the team doesn't want the players to feel like they are being forced to have a "whip moment"

■ This enemy truck isn't on a set track. It may swerve just as someone jumps off, making them land short

IN SEARCH OF THE HOLY...

In addition to fortune and glory, Indiana Jones' adventures are also about the pursuit of religious artifacts like the Holy Grail and the Ark of the Covenant. Even though LucasArts isn't revealing exactly what relic Indy is searching for just yet, we did learn that it becomes a major gameplay element once he obtains it. This suggests it is a weapon or tool of some sort, which opens the door for some interesting possiblities. After a little speculation, here are a few possiblities we came up with:

The Holy Lance

Also called the Lance of Longinus and the Spear of Destiny, this was the weapon reportedly used to pierce the side of Jesus as he hung on the cross. Part of the lance is still kept in Rome, though another portion disappeared during the French Revolution and hasn't been found. Since the spear is the only item on this list that has real combat possibilities, there could be some cool potential here.

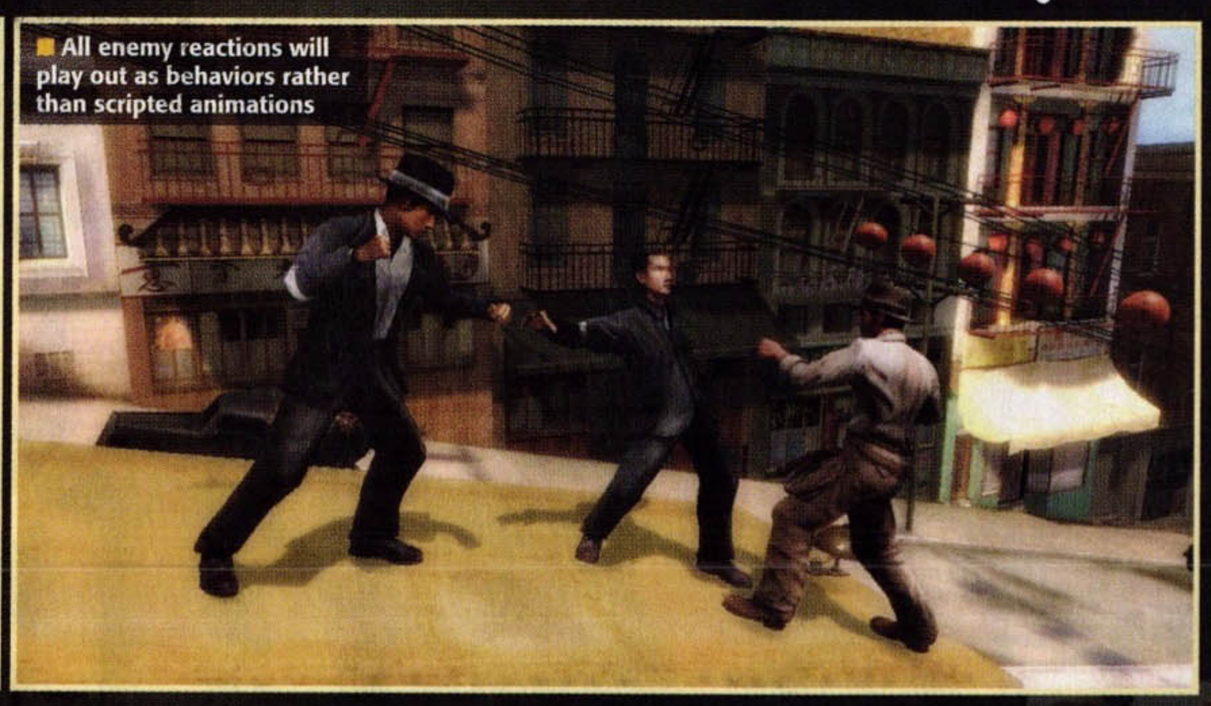
Veronica's Veil

Supposedly containing an image of Jesus' face taken before he died (unlike the Shroud of Turin), Veronica's Veil is said to have disappeared in the middle ages from the Vatican. However, unless Indy wants to "disguise" himself as a religious icon, there aren't a whole lot of interesting ways to incorporate this relic into an action game context.

The Iron Crown of Lombardy

A small crown whose construction is thought to include a nail from the crucifixion. Used to crown both Napoleon and Charlemagne, the biggest problem with the game using this artifact is that it isn't lost or forgotten. It's currently being kept in Monza, Lombardy, and has been for quite some time. Kind of takes away the adventure, doesn't it?

Despite having many options, the combat system itself will be fairly simple



All enemy reactions will play out as behaviors rather than scripted animations

Indiana Jones isn't invincible, and there are times that lowly scum will get the better of him. But even then, it's not over.

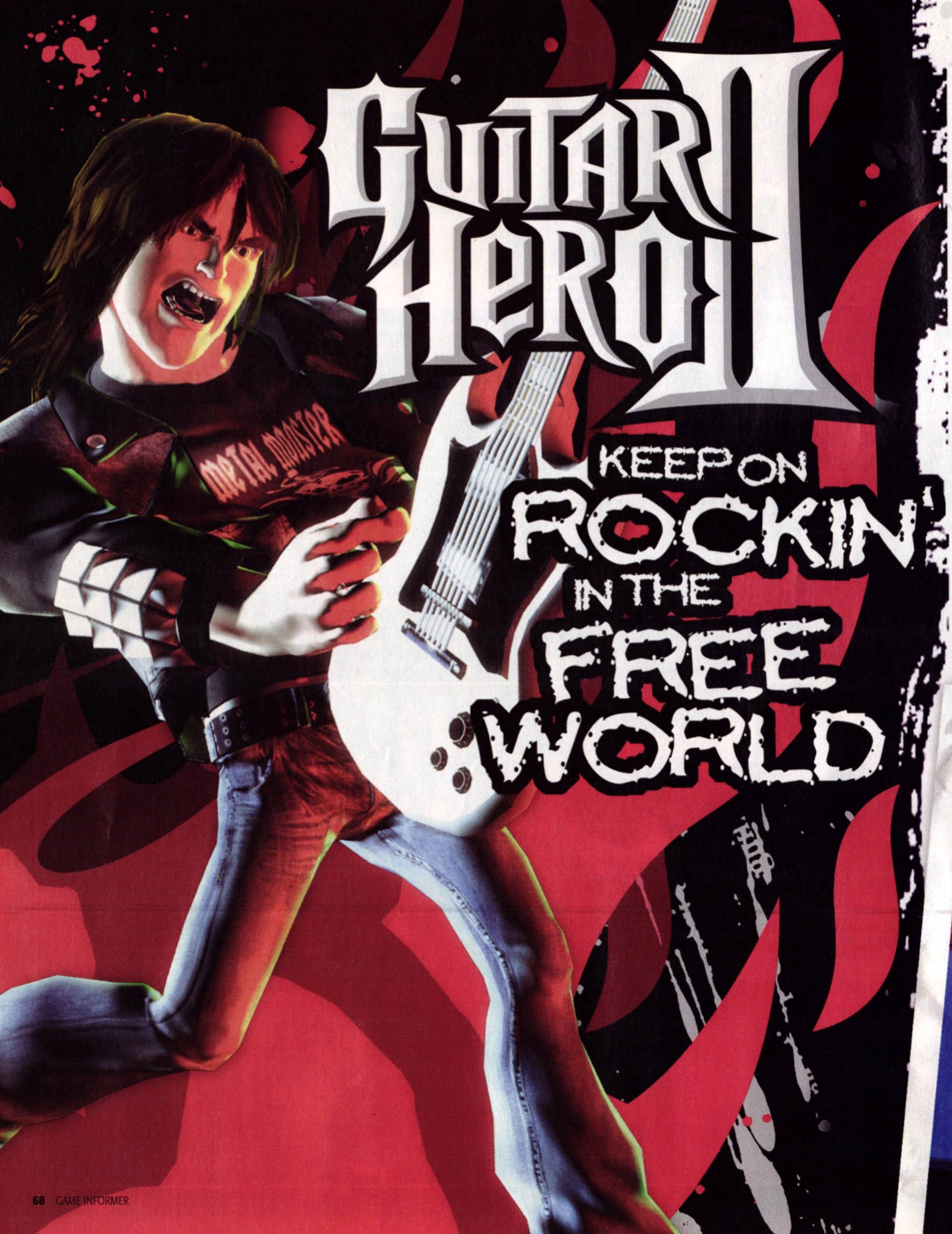
When you're in a bad spot, like being held from behind and attacked from the front, you still have options. You can elbow the restraining goon, kick out at your attacker, or better yet, use them against each other. Holding true to the films' comedic elements, Indy can duck a punch at just the right moment, causing one foe to land a punch squarely on another's jaw, which surprises them both and gives Indy time to wriggle free and get revenge. This approach allows the game to avoid the "you hit me, I hit you" trap that some action titles fall into and gives the combat a much more natural flow. "You'll have those great Indy brawls where you're turning, and punching, and getting punched, and missing, and it's never quite going to plan," remarks Williams.

These continuous, unpredictable battles may be the perfect way to showcase Euphoria's adaptability, but there is one final feature that Indiana Jones can claim that no other game can even come close to. Because of the recent combination of George Lucas' key companies under the roof of the Letterman Digital Arts Center in San Francisco (see page 28 for more on the LDAC), Indiana Jones will be the first game to truly make use of the shared technology between LucasArts and the legendary special effects studio Industrial Light & Magic.

"The vision is one unified virtual studio for making games and film," reveals Williams. "We're collaborating very closely, right down to our core tools and pipeline. We've built them on ILM's toolset." Hirschmann chimes in: "It's like being hooked up to the Master Control Program. We look in the render queue and see *Pirates of the Caribbean 2*, *The Poseidon Adventure*, and then Indiana Jones."

The talent, technique, and code being shared across the companies is ultimately what establishes Indiana Jones as a uniquely next-gen experience. The use of ILM's resources will produce top-notch character models, lighting, and effects. When combined with the dynamic elements created by Euphoria, Indiana Jones will be a cutting-edge action game that also captures the popcorn appeal that first established Indy as a cultural icon 15 years ago. After some video game mishaps in the past, it's time for donning a fedora, swinging a whip, and searching for lost treasures to be fun again. ■■■

Fortunately, Indy's fighting style is good for dealing with groups of foes


GUITAR HERO II
KEEP ON ROCKIN IN THE FREE WORLD

NEW SONGS, NEW MODES, AND THE MAKING OF A GAMING PHENOMENON

Last year, Guitar Hero amazed skeptics as it catapulted onto the gaming scene, where it was lauded by critics (including Game Informer) and embraced by a whole slew of fans. As the months pass, we still find ourselves returning home at nights to rock out in our free time. And we're not the only ones. Whole online communities have sprung up to discuss the game, develop strategies, and dream about the songs and features they wish were in the game. Will such an outpouring of fan enthusiasm and excitement be heard? Simply put, yes. Red Octane and Harmonix have been listening. They've read all the song suggestions, and they've heard all the ideas for what might make the game even better. Guitar Hero II is on the way, and it has what people want. We know. We've played it.

The first Guitar Hero succeeded because, in any number of ways, it made players feel like they were the lead guitarist of a rock band. And while that first game admirably offered a duet mode to let your friends join in the fun, that way of playing really did nothing more than split the lead in two and let you trade off with a friend. For Guitar Hero II, the most exciting innovation is the idea of cooperative playing within the band, with a second player adopting either the rhythm guitar or bass guitar part of the song. As partners in the band, both of you will get to pick your favorite character and guitar. As you play, the crowd's enthusiasm will be shared, forcing you to play in synch or be booed off the stage jointly.

Whether playing together or alone, players of the first game have often brought up the inability to practice their skills before stepping out onto the public stage. This time, players will have a fully fleshed out practice mode to alleviate the anxiety, where you'll be able to jump to different parts of the song and even slow down the action to figure out a particularly tough lick. As we learned more about what Guitar Hero II has in store for us, it occurred to us how little we knew about how a title like this comes to be. With dozens of licensed tracks, wholly re-recorded songs, and the strange process of music translating into interactive gameplay, we set out to explore the process of how a song becomes part of a game like Guitar Hero II.

Our first stop was with John Tam of Red Octane. As producer on the game, Tam serves as the facilitator between Red Octane's publishing interests and Harmonix's game development plans. In the case of Guitar Hero II, he also has the responsibility of coordinating licensing for the treasure chest of songs that will fill the game. "What people are crying out for is more music. They're crying out for the bands we couldn't get to the first time," Tam tells us. It's a process that begins as a collaboration between a team of selectors, who look through the thousands of song possibilities and narrow down the options to what will work best for the game. "We're not stupid. Of course we wanted Metallica, Van Halen, Led Zeppelin, AC/DC," he explains. "But they were tough to get to because you didn't have anything to show them and say 'This is what we're shooting for'. They didn't get it." That equation has dramatically changed this time around, and many bands and labels are jumping at the opportunity. Even this early on, several major names have come on board. We've already heard about three songs included in the new game. The legendary KISS is contributing the classic "Strutter." Rush is on board with their math-rock classic "YYZ." Even Van Halen has signed on, so players will be throwing down with "You Really Got Me." "When you first hear about the idea for this game, it borders between stupidity and brilliance," Tam jokes. "People have always viewed peripheral games as niche, and music games as niche. People are realizing now that this is the best example of the hardcore game made for the mass market."

■ **Marcus Henderson provided 20 of the guitar tracks for the first game, and is returning to help on the sequel**

Photos: Michael Jang

■ **Wave Group's reputation for near-perfect song recreations is well deserved. The studio has already turned their attention to Guitar Hero II, as these photos attest**

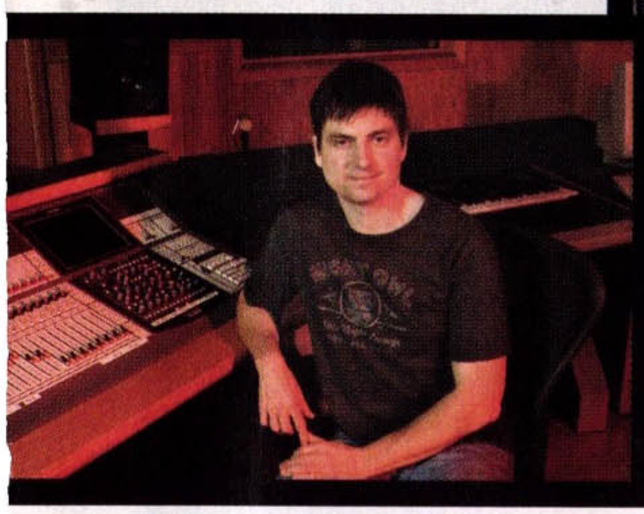
PLAYSTATION 2
> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION
> **PUBLISHER** RED OCTANE
> **DEVELOPER** HARMONIX
> **RELEASE** NOVEMBER

Once the licenses are nailed down, the song list heads off to Wave Group Sound. It's there that Will Littlejohn and his team of music professionals take over. "We're the guys that make all the music. We create the final mixes that are used in the game," Littlejohn tells us in between some early studio sessions for Guitar Hero II. "I basically have the same role as an album producer would have," he offers. "I'm in there slugging away with the artists trying to get what we need to get out of the performances." With well over 40 video games under their belts, Wave Group has plenty of experience with the rigors and challenges of game development, including the exacting time constraints that are so often a factor. The budget for Guitar Hero II has increased, meaning Wave Group now has a full 40 songs to record instead of the 30 tunes from the first game, all in a matter of around four months. For this reason, when a new song comes in, the studio goes into high gear, immediately casting vocalists, guitarists, and other musicians. Simultaneously, other studio members gather reference tracks, prepare lyric and music sheets, and prep for the recording process. "We're building these songs much like you build a game. We're doing it in a very distributed way," Littlejohn explains. Once they're recording, the team goes to extraordinary lengths to reproduce the original song. For the last game, they went out and bought the same model of metal fan that Ozzy Osbourne spoke through at the beginning of the classic song "Iron Man." On "Godzilla," they spent hours perfectly matching the exact pitch and timing of every echo of the word "Godzilla" as it is spoken in the track. For the new game, they're trying to bring the same attention to detail. "We're not going to fix what's not broken," Littlejohn admits.

A big part of sticking with what works will certainly be the return of Marcus Henderson, the guitarist who ended up recording 20 of the songs from the first game. Speaking with Henderson, his enthusiasm for the project is infectious. "The songs are different. But we want to repeat our success by giving gamers a challenging and rewarding gameplay experience. In order to do that, we're just going to have to go bigger, harder, and louder," Henderson exclaims. "We're not compromising anything on Guitar Hero II – more intensity, heavier guitar, more attitude!" Once he's contacted by Wave Group, he goes straight to work on learning the song and all its riffs, trying to craft a near-perfect recreation of some of history's greatest electric guitar hits. Within days, he gets called in to the studio. "I get the call, and I get up, and I have to go do all of this heavy metal recording at the decidedly un-metal hour of 9:30 or 10 in the morning," Henderson says with a smile. "As any heavy metal guitar player will tell you, 10 a.m. in the morning doesn't really exist. It's not a real time. So I just have to get in the habit of doing these ridiculous metal tunes – zero to 60 in no time flat." For Henderson, the secret for the process lies in the intensity. "You have to dig deeper into the music to truly recreate it," he says. "If we're fooling people, that's the greatest praise of all – when people don't know the difference between our versions and the originals when first listening."

Once Wave Group and their musicians lay down the tracks and do a final mix, the songs head on to Harmonix. There, lead audio designer Eric Brosius does his magic, converting the separate audio tracks into interactive gameplay. Surprisingly, the process is more intuitive than we might have expected. "We just listen to the music, and listen to the guitar part, and then lay the gems out in a

■ New venues promise to be bigger and more detailed than before, but we'll also see the return of some old performance arenas



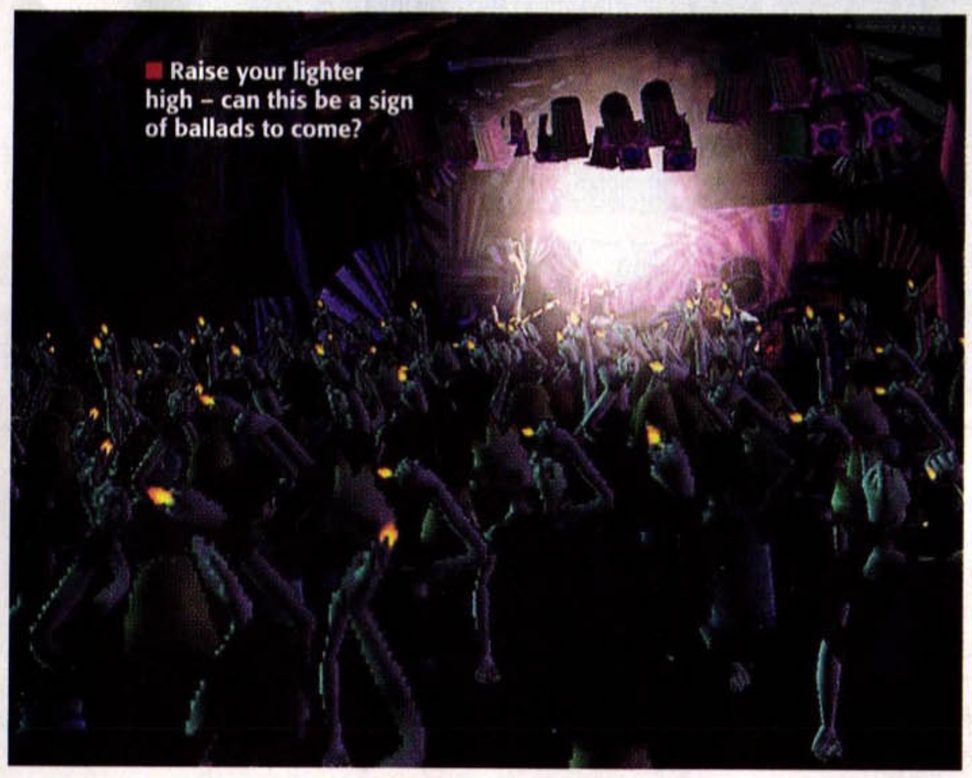
■ This early recording session was one of the first for the new game, as the studio prepared songs to be shown off at E3 2006

way that makes sense for us. Then we try it, and do it again." To create the perfect pattern of gems for the game, Brosius and his team let common sense guide them. "We look at each phrase and each riff and try to get the essence of the phrase and match that down to the five buttons, as much as we can." This time, they have the added complication of the cooperative duet mode, where the challenge lies in creating independent tracks that are fun for both players. "We're still just trying to have the layout match the music as closely as we can. But we're going to be more conscious of what the other player is doing, so there can be more back and forth gameplay." For Brosius, the excitement this time around lies in knowing exactly what works, so they can craft melody lines that offer the most fun to players.

Once a song completes the long path from licensing to recording to inclusion in the game, players have the chance to try it out for the first time. The question for us was exactly where they'd be offered the chance to do the playing. Of course, the team has announced the return of a PS2 version of the game. But what about systems like Xbox 360? While not ready to make any official announcements, John Tam was frank about the wisdom of moving in that direction. "It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that's where we need to be. You can read between the lines on that," he tells us. "Xbox Live Marketplace would allow you to do microtransactions per song." Possibilities like that are overwhelmingly exciting for Red Octane and Harmonix, as it would give enthusiastic fans an avenue to continue playing the game long after the first batch of tunes have been played out. Tam even hints that artist- and label-specific content isn't out of the range of possibility. But, like a version of Guitar Hero II on Xbox 360, he wasn't ready to lay out any details. As for the future, Tam seems overwhelmingly optimistic. "We're not going to stop with just Guitar Hero. It is our first endeavor in terms of achieving our vision of music games for America. Can we do more of that?" It's a question he leaves pointedly unanswered.

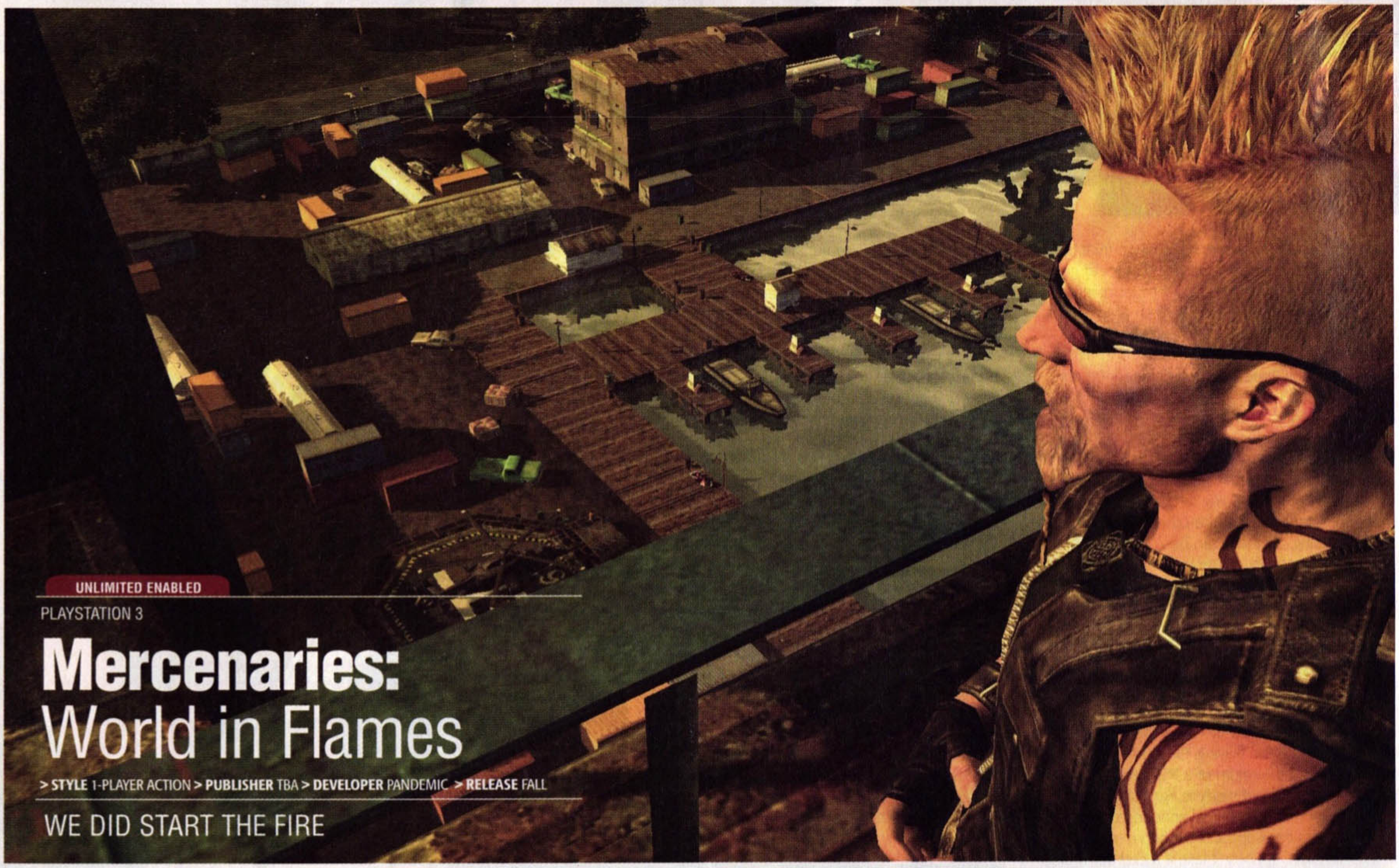
So, at the end of the process, how does it play? We were lucky enough to get to try out an early test version of the game, with several new songs included with their co-op gameplay in place. Sure enough, even in such an early form, the thrill of nailing the different tracks of a song with a friend is intoxicating. Particularly as melody lines and harmonies begin to split off between the bass and lead, or the rhythm player begins to play the background to the lead player's screaming solo, the action and interplay are electric. It makes the wait until this fall seem like an eternity, when we'll finally get to play the full array of new tunes. Until then, keep those song suggestions coming. Someone's definitely listening. ■■■

■ Cooperative gameplay is immensely fun, with interweaving harmonies and rhythms, and the need to stay together like a real band



■ Raise your lighter high – can this be a sign of ballads to come?

■ Old characters like Judy Nails will sport new duds



UNLIMITED ENABLED

PLAYSTATION 3

Mercenaries: World in Flames

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** TBA > **DEVELOPER** PANDEMIC > **RELEASE** FALL

WE DID START THE FIRE

The first Mercenaries game had a fun factor that was difficult to ignore. You were given a war zone, several military vehicles, an arsenal of weapons, and then told to cause as much mayhem as possible. Amid the dazzling flames and hilarious carnage, it was easy to see why the game was subtitled Playground of Destruction. That kind of freedom can be tough to top, but the team at Pandemic has been working on a variety ways to up the stakes even more in this PlayStation 3 sequel to last year's explosive hit.

Set in the oil-rich Venzuela, World in Flames has you hunting down another high-profile target who has gone into deep hiding somewhere in the war-torn nation. By once again undertaking missions for various factions, you will gather money, captives, and information that eventually lead you to the big capture (kind of like the "ace of spades," even though the Deck of 52 mechanic will not be included this time). This progression may sound familiar so far, but there are several changes in store for this title that will shake up the formula.

The move to the PlayStation 3 opens many doors for Mercenaries, allowing the team to create a more detailed, immersive world for you to annihilate. "We've gone to enormous lengths to realize a truly next-gen world," says the game's director Cameron Brown. "I think this generation of consoles is when the promise of 3D gaming will really start to deliver, and I hope that Mercenaries is one of the games that crosses the threshold from 'cool game environment' to 'I want to go live in that world!'" The environment comes alive in a variety of areas, in surroundings that are civilian, military, and the uninhabited wastes in between.

Of course, no matter how realistic the world looks, players are going to want to blow it up and bask in the results. The team is fully aware of that, and Brown explains how they are working hard to make damage more pervasive and permanent: "Damage is 100 percent persistent, practically speaking. The only exceptions we might make are for design reasons. In some cases we want to repair city blocks that you've destroyed, so that you don't end up with a completely flattened world." On current-gen consoles, this level of consistent damage simply isn't possible, but since pure destruction is the essence of Mercenaries, every flattened bunker or skyscraper is like a trophy, and you want to enjoy them as long as possible.

As can be expected for a sequel, Mercenaries: World in Flames will be receiving updates in terms of weapons and vehicles, with more options and more detail added to every area. There will even be a new mercenary added to the three

■ Predator III: Chump in the Jungle

from the last game, and even more costumes will be unlockable as you progress. However, among the many upgrades, there is one intriguing new idea that has us burning with anticipation: the use of fire. "The concept of 'playing with fire' is something that we've been talking about a lot," reveals Brown, "We think we've found a way to make fire really fun for the player. Something that takes it beyond its usual role of cool graphical effect and into the realm of an interesting toy to get creative with." Considering the amazing particle effects Pandemic achieved with the current-gen Mercenaries, making flames a major gameplay component can only result in more spectacular wreckage. Unfortunately, we'll have to wait to discover exactly how this concept is implemented, but we're sure that everything will be made clear – along with a few more surprises – between now and the game's release right around the time of the PS3 launch. ■ ■ ■

■ Random fact: Tattoos increase your bazooka-aiming skills by five percent. Get yours today!

■ Don't spend too much gawking at the beautiful scenery. It'll just make you sad when you blow it up

PLAYSTATION 2 | XBOX

Destroy All Humans 2

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (MULTIPLAYER TBD) **> PUBLISHER** THQ **> DEVELOPER** PANDEMIC **> RELEASE** FALL

LINE UP FOR RE-PROBING

It's hard not to love Crypto. Even if he wants to kill you and everything you love, he has so much enthusiasm for his job that you've just got to admire the little guy. And since some humans remained undestroyed at the end of the last game, his work is far from over. With his trusty UFO and anal probe gun, Crypto will be returning this fall courtesy of Pandemic and THQ to take his hilarious toll on humanity once again, and we had a chance to see it in action.

At the end of the last game, Crypto essentially became the President of the United States, and he has since seen the country out of the repressed '50s and into the swingin' '60s. Hippies are everywhere, free love is saturating the nation, and the Cold War looms. Destroy All Humans 2 takes Crypto's task into this time period with a greater focus on missions and an open world, with several new over-the-top gadgets.

First and foremost, Crypto has a few new ways to inflict pain. We saw a weapon called the Dislocator displaying the game's impressive physics by launching a disc into a foe, then sending them uncontrollably bouncing off of nearby buildings and cars. The Beast Burrower sends a huge worm into the ground to chase fleeing citizens, and Meteor Strike calls down a hail of flaming rocks from space. If you use any of these excessively, you can fall back on the Mind Flash, which allows you to clear people's memory, *Men In Black*-style. There is even a weapon called the Gastro Gun which, though we didn't actually see it fired, will probably be the most humiliating of the bunch.

Crypto no longer shows his contempt only by squeezing the trigger, though. In place of the timed challenges in the first game, DAH 2 will implement several location-specific minigames. Instead of racing from point A to point B, you will now have tasks like "Ruin Your Life" missions, which just make existence miserable for a particular person. In one case, Crypto must seek out a draft-dodger, subdue him, and march him straight into the recruitment office. Other scenarios might have you dealing with mafia or trying to start a turf war bet ween hippies and "the Man" (who is, of course, Crypto).

In addition to expanding previous aspects of the game, DAH 2 will also take Crypto into new territory...maybe even with a friend. While details about the multiplayer are still being determined, there is chance that it will involve a co-op mode that lets you kick up trouble with two Crypto clones. While this possibility has great potential, the most exciting part about Destroy All Humans 2 as a whole is the way it is systematically addressing the the problem areas that held the first game back. With all of the logistical roadblocks like DNA collection and endless mind-reading out of the way, DAH 2 could become the great game that many people saw hiding under the surface of its predecessor. ■ ■ ■

JUST A NUMBER

While harvesting human DNA is still a key element of Destroy All Humans, the genetic material no longer serves as the game's currency or as a way to advance the story. Instead of being quantified as a number, the DNA is incorporated in the Gene Blender feature, which requires you to abduct humans of various professions and nationalities before you "mix" them to unlock new abilities. Plus, since the order you do missions in is more free-form, you won't need to worry about collecting a certain amount of DNA before you're allowed to proceed. Even so, that doesn't mean you can't charge up your anal probe and go collect some brainstems for fun!

■ Cars and other objects can now be transmogrified into power-ups

■ "Are you sure the muffler isn't cracked? Here, look a bit closer!"

■ The game will have a more international focus, with Crypto visiting other nations like Japan and Russia

■ Crypto knows how to clean up hippie graffiti: with a death ray from space

■ Bodysnatching takes the place of the Holobob, so you now become your victim rather than just imitating them

■ There may be new weapons, but the effect is often the same

■ Look at that adorable dome head. How could anyone not want to make love to Crypto?

■ This stage is part of a mission called "Rage of Aquarius"

Separate from the comic, movie, and upcoming TV series, the game features its own distinct take on the Hellboy mythos

UNLIMITED ENABLED

XBOX 360 | PLAYSTATION 3 | PSP

Hellboy

> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 4-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE, PS3 AND PSP ONLINE TBA)
> **PUBLISHER** KONAMI > **DEVELOPER** KROME STUDIOS > **RELEASE** 2007

THE RIGHT HAND OF DOOM

Despite a long-running series of comics, toys, a big summer movie, and an upcoming animated series, beloved indie comic book character Hellboy hasn't yet gripped the video game world with his stony red hand. The character's first game, the 2003 Hellboy: Asylum Seeker for the original PlayStation, is so obscure that even many fans don't know it exists. Well, Hellboy and his supernatural friends are about to jump back into the video game world in a big way, with an Xbox 360/PlayStation 3 title from Konami and Krome Studios.

The upcoming Hellboy game is a four-player co-op brawler, starring the demonic paranormal investigator and other characters like the fire-throwing Liz Sherman and the aquatic Abe Sapien. The story will be split across six comic issue-styled chapters that form into a cohesive story. Although the plot will be written by the staff of Krome Studios, Hellboy's creator Mike Mignola and the film's director Guillermo Del Toro will both consult on the project.

With Mignola and Del Toro on board, we have no doubt that the story will please Hellboy fans, but how about the gameplay? We talked to the game's producer Paul Armatta to get a sense of how the action will feel. According to Armatta, grappling and environmental interactions are two major components of the combat. "Once Hellboy has engaged and overpowered an enemy, he'll have the option to use him as a weapon against other enemies by throwing him or just swinging him around," says Armatta. "Hellboy will almost certainly also have to use enemies to interact with parts of the environment as well."

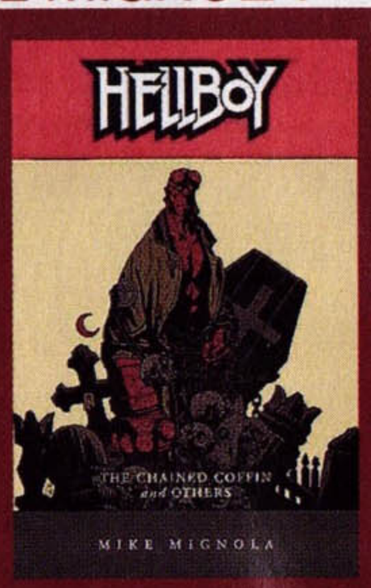
As fans know, Hellboy is an enormously powerful character whose magical stone hand is designed to bring about the apocalypse, so some concessions had to be made in order to make him work as a game character. "We want to avoid devaluing the magnitude of such events in Hellboy's larger story," says Armatta. "So, we'll be focusing on the more innate power a giant stone hand provides the player. In addition to the enhanced grapples and melee action the hand unleashes, it's also tied into the energy used by various magic items and special attacks." The other playable characters should also feel like they can stand up to the supernatural threats that will confront the players. "These characters were so well designed in the first place that we don't feel like we'll have too much trouble balancing them so that each one feels special and unique. They fit pretty well into the melee, ranged attack, and magic user categories. We'll try to balance them so that they work well together and complement each other's abilities," says Armatta.

It is definitely exciting to see Hellboy and his supporting cast finally star in a proper video game, and that thrill is only accentuated by the confirmation of online co-op play, as well as a PSP version of the game. If everything turns out as planned, 2007 is going to be a great year for the big red demon. ■■■

The mood and lighting in the game are intended to be similar to the tone of the Hellboy movie

THE CREATOR: MIKE MIGNOLA

After making a name for himself at both Marvel and DC, Mike Mignola broke into the world of creator-owned comics when the first Hellboy story, Seed of Destruction, was published by Dark Horse in 1994. Since then, Hellboy has grown into a huge franchise, and Mignola shared his thoughts with us on his creation's popularity.



What is it like seeing a comic character you created become a franchise, with video games, toys, movies, and more?
It's a little strange. When you create something called Hellboy you really aren't thinking it's going to turn into a franchise. It can be a bit overwhelming at times. I try to keep at least a little involved in everything, but my main focus is still the comic.

Obviously, some changes will have to be made to make Hellboy fit into the context of a game. What are your thoughts on the liberties the game may take with the character?
I have no problem with the game Hellboy being a little different from the comic Hellboy, as long as the "spirit" of the character is true to the source material. The movie Hellboy was different from the comic version, but the personality of the character was pretty much the same. The movie story was different, but pretty true to the "spirit" of the original. I think the game is its own thing, but it's true to the feel established in the movie and comic.

Are there any particular elements of the comic that you're hoping to see in the game? Any particular Hellboy tales that you think would work well in the game?
There was no attempt to adapt specific Hellboy stories into the game. I think the game does a nice job of touching on a lot of the same subject matter I've dealt with over the years – European and Japanese folklore, Nazi mad-scientists, lost civilizations, etc.

THE DIRECTOR: GUILLERMO DEL TORO

The director that rumors have tied to the Halo movie is the same man who turned down a Harry Potter film to make his dream picture, *Hellboy* – Guillermo Del Toro. Ever since the film, Del Toro has been involved with the Hellboy franchise, and even answered a few questions for us about the game.

How does the game fit into the Hellboy universe?

The development of the game was, from the start, an amalgam of the movie and comic universes, so Mike and I were able to preserve a little of those identities during our collaboration. Nevertheless, Mike has always been very forthcoming about his vision for all Hellboy spin-offs: he feels that the movies, animated series, and the video game should all have a fresh identity and not be dragged down by a "bible" or a cosmology derived from any previous adaptation. This frees the creators and allows for more diversity.

Your films have a very recognizable sensibility. Will the game reflect this at all?

Yes, I think the camera choices and the lighting choices were very close to what we did in the film. The creature design and the set design, however, are closer to the comic book series.

What are your thoughts on the continued merging of the film and video game worlds?

The future of entertainment lies there. Filmmakers should acknowledge this and start immersing themselves into the gaming universe. Games and gaming platforms will be a massive engine for the 21st century cinema. Games are looked upon as inferior forms of narrative, but this is only assumption by people that are too smug or too blind to realize that narrative rules are changing. Content and form are fusing, and the paradigm of the "three-act structure" is morphing into something freer, younger, and more fluid.

■ Like the comic, the game will feature all sorts of bizarre creatures and characters

■ Although the game has a cohesive story, it is divided up into distinct chapters like a comic book miniseries

■ Expect to see Hellboy's stone hand used primarily as a melee weapon, rather than a tool of the apocalypse

UNLIMITED ENABLED

PLAYSTATION 2

SOCOM: U.S. Navy SEALs Combined Assault

> STYLE 1 TO 4-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 32-PLAYER VIA PS2 ONLINE) **> PUBLISHER** SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT AMERICA **> DEVELOPER** ZIPPER INTERACTIVE **> RELEASE** FALL

SOCO-OP

Although SOCOM 3 only released late last year, fans of the franchise are so rabid that they'd certainly love to see it become an annual series. Well, we can't say what will happen in the years to come, but Sony recently revealed to us that a fourth SOCOM title is coming to the PS2 this fall, placing it roughly a year after the release of the third game. But this time around, the series is packing a big new feature, one that may change the way players spend their time with the series. You see, SOCOM: U.S. Navy SEALs Combined Assault is all about cooperative play.

Unlike some games that have distinct single-player, competitive, and cooperative modes, Combined Assault's co-op mode is designed to be a merger of the SOCOM franchise's single-player and popular multiplayer modes. You'll now be able to play through the campaign solo or with up to three friends, via either online or LAN configurations. Because playing with real humans is inherently different than playing with AI allies, the campaign mode will sport dynamic difficulty adjustments that adapt to gamers of all levels. And since co-op players are more likely to split up, the stages are being designed to have a more non-linear feel and give players more options on how to approach mission objectives.

According to Zipper, Combined Assault will feature all the improvements that are standard for developers to claim for sequels, like enhanced AI, improvements to vehicles, and more multiplayer maps. Combined Assault players will be able to use all of the SOCOM 3 maps as well, and even be able to play online with SOCOM 3 players that haven't grabbed the new title yet. But considering how quickly these games sell, we have a feeling that most fans will snatch this one up pretty quickly, if only for the opportunity to shoot with friends instead of at them. ■■■

■ By running right at the tank, the player called Simple has truly earned his name

You've managed to secure the empty warehouse! Congratulations, guys

BRAVO, BRAVO

The series' first PSP entry, Fireteam Bravo, boasted a pretty cool feature, in that completing goals in it could affect its big brother SOCOM 3. Fireteam Bravo 2 and Combined Assault will take this aspect even further. Both games take place in the same locations, and the two SEAL teams will now actually cross paths, so you'll see the Bravo 2 team in Combined Assault and vice versa. The Crosstalk feature will unlock bonus content, and the development teams from the two games have been working closely together.

Fireteam Bravo 2 will also see a host of gameplay improvements, including non-linear mission progression, improved graphics, and an all-new targeting system. Different guns will now lock on to targets at different speeds, so you'll no longer simply be able to run around with the targeting button held down.

Many new vehicles will debut in Combined Assault, and Zipper has promised some tweaks to how they feel

Co-op play will allow you to split up and tackle multiple objectives at once – unlike these guys, who just like spending time together

UNLIMITED ENABLED

XBOX 360 | PLAYSTATION 3 | PC

Brothers in Arms: Hell's Highway

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION/STRATEGY (MULTIPLAYER TBA) > **PUBLISHER** UBISOFT
> **DEVELOPER** GEARBOX STUDIOS > **RELEASE** SPRING 2007 > **ESRB** E

A BRIDGE TOO FAR?

As Ubisoft and developer Gearbox Studios approach this third installment of series, the stakes and expectations are getting higher. With the first two Brothers in Arms titles appearing in the span of less than a year, gamers are well acquainted with the franchise's mixture of first-person action and squad strategy, and this debut on the next-generation consoles needs to make a good impression. Perhaps then it's appropriate that Matt Baker and the boys of the 502nd Parachute Infantry Regiment are being sent on their toughest mission yet – Operation Market Garden – one which historically ended up not being a success for the allied forces. Hopefully you can change that using your tactical skills and the new units that the game puts at your disposal.

"Hell's Highway" refers to a stretch of road in German-occupied Holland during WWII. The 101st Airborne Division (of which the 502nd Regiment is a part) dropped behind enemy lines as part of the "Market" portion of Operation Market Garden, and was charged with capturing key bridges and other locations as it moved northward. However, bad planning and the sheer difficulty of it all doomed the attack.

Gearbox's rendition of Hell's Highway introduces you to a third fire team that will bring some pretty impressive firepower. The company's president Randy Pitchford tells us this extra help above and beyond your normal second squad is going to improve your odds dramatically. "Basically you want to give the enemy no choice but to die – total domination. The power of the third squad in Hell's Highway is going to change the tactics and the intensity quite a lot. You'll get command of special teams, including a machine-gun team, a mortar crew, a bazooka team, or a radio operator who can call in support from air or artillery units. The goal is to suppress the enemy, rain explosive shells on him from above, and blow up whatever cover is protecting him – all at the same time." But don't get too comfortable, because as any soldier knows, things can change fast. You won't always have this third squad at your fingertips, which is fitting given how Market Garden was anything but a straightforward fight.

■ **Were there civilians in that building? Frankly that's secondary to how sweet the new firepower at your disposal is**

■ Hopefully Gearbox's clear command of detailed shadow effects will translate into shades of cover during gameplay

The visual benefits of the next-generation are obvious in these screenshots, but we're concerned about how the consoles are going to positively affect the game's AI. The last Brothers in Arms noticeably improved in this area. The only problem was that it felt like your AI allies had difficulty adjusting to how much smarter Earned in Blood's German soldiers had become. Often times your squad mates would have a hard time finding complete cover, leaving them vulnerable to the new mobile flanking tactics of the Third Reich's army. When we asked Pitchford how the next-gen systems would be able to improve this area of the game he was noticeably vague, so we'll have to wait and see what jumps have been made until we actually get our hands on the title. Pitchford also spoke in general terms about the offline and online portion of Hell's Highway, but encouraged us by saying that more players and soldiers will be involved than ever before for a BIA game, so we're excited to see what's in store.

Operation Market Garden stretched the Allied forces thin with bad supply lines and asked them to cover impossibly large areas of territory. But then again, Matt Baker and the 502nd are no strangers to adversity. ■■■

■ Jared's fear of shadows lead to one of WWII's strangest recorded deaths

UNLIMITED ENABLED

PSP

Ratchet & Clank [working title]

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION/PLATFORM (UP TO 4-PLAYER VIA WIRELESS) > **PUBLISHER** SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT AMERICA > **DEVELOPER** HIGH IMPACT STUDIOS > **RELEASE** FIRST QUARTER 2007

SHRINKING THE DYNAMIC DUO

It's no secret that we here at Game Informer are huge fans of the Ratchet & Clank franchise, as we've awarded each entry in the series with high honors, including a perfect ten for Up Your Arsenal. For fans who felt that the more gun-oriented, FPS-inspired gameplay of the last PS2 title, Ratchet: Deadlocked, strayed too far from the light-hearted, variety-packed platforming of the original trilogy, Sony's newly announced Ratchet & Clank PSP title will be a welcome surprise.

Although it's not scheduled until early 2007, and doesn't even have an official title yet, we did manage to secure some fairly revealing information on the game. Notably, the production is not being handled by Insomniac Games, which is already working on a reported PS3 follow-up. Instead, the reins have been handed to first-time developer High Impact Studios, a new company formed by a group of respected industry veterans, including several members of Insomniac.

Lesley Mathieson of High Impact feels that the company's background makes it an ideal fit to create an all-new R&C adventure from the ground up. "High Impact Games was selected for the Ratchet & Clank project primarily because it possesses a large number of experienced industry veterans," she comments. "In addition, we were very fortunate that several of the High Impact staff members had previously worked on Ratchet titles."

Although High Impact is responsible for creating the game's plot, gameplay, and level design from the ground up, Insomniac has been available for advice and input. The result of this collaboration is a game that harks back to the earlier titles in the series. The story takes place after the conclusion of Deadlocked, as our heroes attempt to forget the harrowing events of that game with a much-needed vacation. Not surprisingly, this is not to be, as they soon become involved in an attempt to rescue a young girl named Luna. In their search they discover a forgotten race of super-scientists called the Technobites and (natch) a plot that could threaten the existence of the universe.

After riding the pine in Deadlocked, Clank

■ Clank plays a larger role than he has in the past

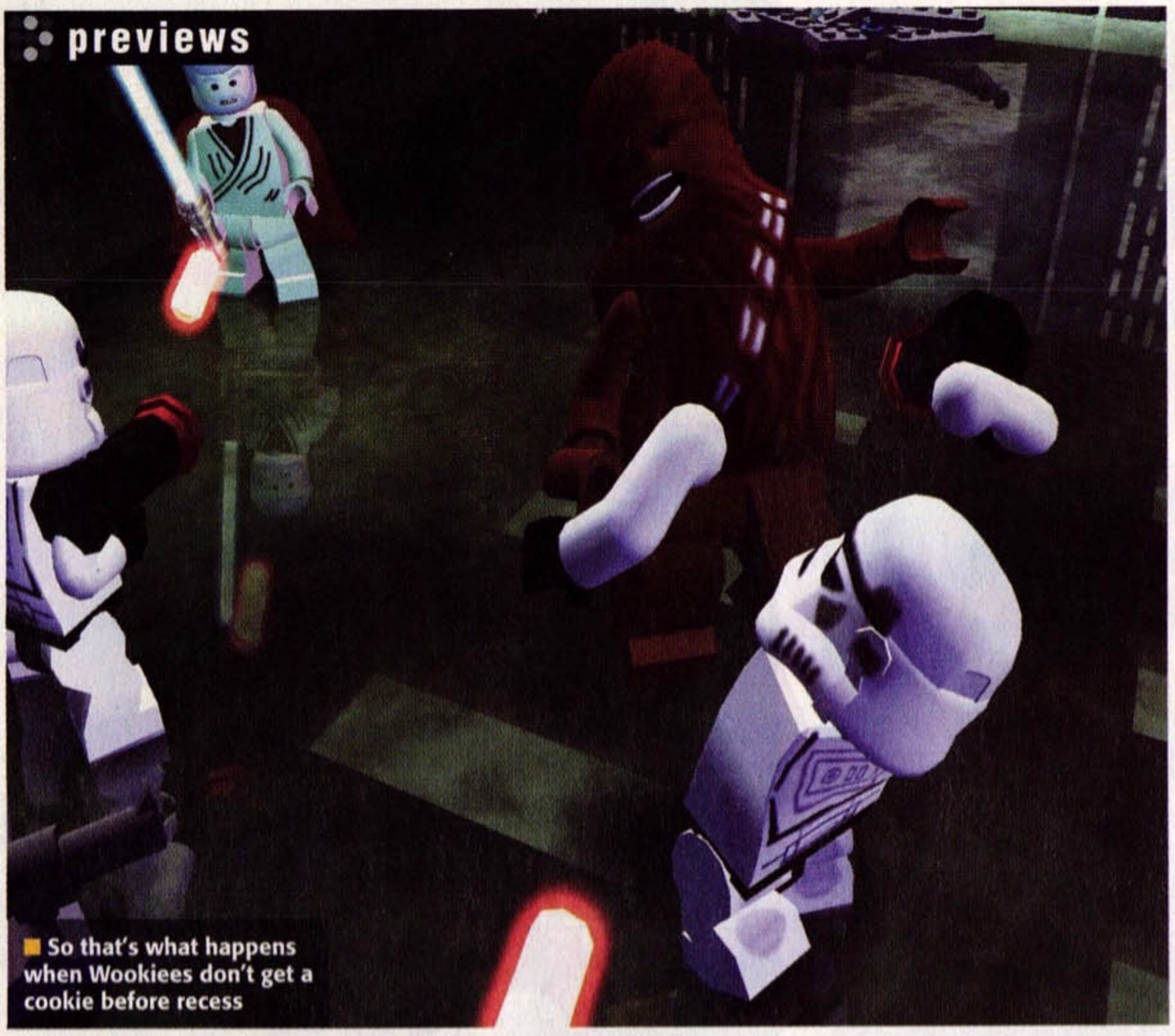
■ As you can see, the PSP is capable of rivaling the look of the PS2 games

■ Although Ratchet: Deadlocked strayed from tradition, expect this game to put the emphasis back on platforming

is poised to take on his largest role yet. "Clank is definitely more prominent in this game than he has been in past titles. Ratchet and Clank share the gameplay nearly equally," observes Mathieson. "We'll not only be revisiting earlier Clank gameplay from the series, but we'll be adding a twist. Clank will have the ability to connect to robotic 'torsos' in the game, which will give him a variety of new powers."

Not to be outdone, Ratchet will have a few new tricks up his furry sleeve as well. The expanded upgrade system, which closely resembles that of Up Your Arsenal, will allow you to improve both the new and familiar weapons in the game, including the Agents of Doom, the Shocker, and Shrink Ray (which can be used on Ratchet himself, allowing him to enter the diminutive Technobites world). One armament making its debut will be the Acid Bomb, which explodes into a glowing puddle of acid that continues to damage enemies standing in it. The changes don't stop there, as the game's armor system has been completely revamped. Instead of having to upgrade the preset suit of armor, you can mix and match pieces at will, customizing the specific defensive abilities you desire, and can even unlock special bonuses for completing certain armor sets. Ratchet will also be able to take to the skies with his new Skyboard, a hoverboard that works both in air and on land.

Although the game clearly appears to be progressing nicely, a few questions remain. High Impact feels that it can overcome the limitations the PSP places on camera control, and is planning on offering both an "intelligent" camera mode, which will adjust to the action onscreen, and a "passive" camera for players that prefer to micromanage with the shoulder buttons. Hopefully High Impact can achieve its goal, as nearly everything else we've seen regarding this title seems to be on par with the excellent PS2 series. Throw in the possibilities inherent with four-player deathmatching, and fans of Ratchet & Clank have every reason to be excited. ■■■



So that's what happens when Wookiees don't get a cookie before recess

We hereby nominate this for our "Best Screenshot of 2006" award

UNLIMITED ENABLED

PLAYSTATION 2 | XBOX | GAMECUBE | PSP | PC

LEGO Star Wars II: The Original Trilogy

> STYLE 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION (PS2, XBOX, GC, PC), 1-PLAYER ACTION (2-PLAYER VIA AD HOC)(PSP)
> PUBLISHER LUCASARTS **> DEVELOPER** TRAVELLER'S TALES **> RELEASE** FALL

THE EMPIRE STRIKES BLOCK

One would think that diehard Star Wars fans would be insulted by the mere idea of Anakin Skywalker and Obi Wan Kenobi having an adorable LEGO duel on Mustafar. In reality, this concept went over remarkably well, and made LEGO Star Wars one of the surprise hits of 2005. Building on that legacy, LucasArts has decided to publish a sequel (the first one was published by Eidos), and the game is shaping up to improve on the simple, accessible gameplay in every way. After all, if LEGOs can make some of the suspect scenes in the prequels enjoyable, imagine what is possible with the original trilogy as source material!

The main draw, of course, is an all-new array of unlockable characters. Every main character, as well as many obscure ones, will open up as you complete levels (but who really wants to play as Garindan?). Like before, the heroes you control are chosen for you in Story mode, but in Free Play you can cycle through them at any time. Plus, you'll be able to use your save file from the previous game to unlock all of your old characters for Free Play. Finally, you can see Darth Maul stick it to some Ewoks!

Even though the gameplay itself remains uncomplicated, players will now have more combat options depending on the selected character. In addition to standard attacks, most characters have unique (and often hilarious) special moves. Chewbacca tears off his enemies' arms, complete with a satisfying "pop." Leia puts one hand on her hip and gives a sassy slap that sends heads flying. Ben Kenobi's Jedi Mind Trick rotates Stormtrooper helmets 180 degrees, leaving them fumbling and confused. The humor in these moves is also apparent in the cutscenes, one of which depicts Grand Moff Tarkin pointing and laughing at a distraught Leia after Alderaan is obliterated.

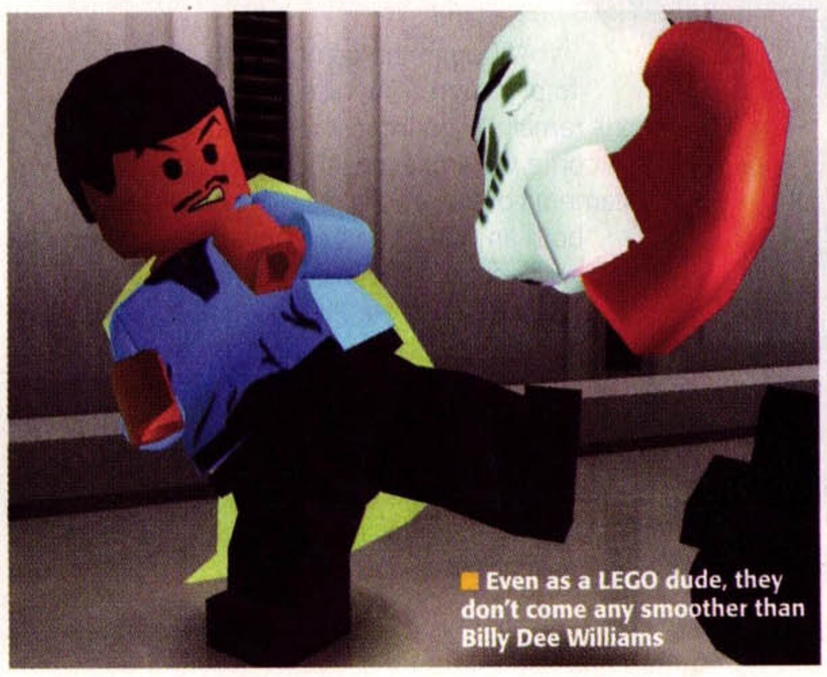
Thankfully, not all of the planets in the galaxy met Alderaan's fate. You'll visit all of the familiar locations from the three movies, like the Mos Eisley cantina (which serves as your hub), Hoth, and Endor. As you're battling through these areas, you'll notice that vehicles play a more prominent role in the action, allowing you to build and pilot them during the on-foot levels. For example, after cruising into Tatooine on a speeder, you'll use the Force to assemble the scattered pieces of an AT-ST before hopping in and blasting the fleeing troopers and civlians to pieces. Space vehicles have been expanded as well, giving you more freedom to fly around in LEGO versions of TIE fighters, Y-Wings, and the Millenium Falcon.

No one is pretending that this sequel will add layers of depth or complexity; at its core, the game aims to deliver the same whimsical experience as before. If you want intense lightsaber duels or harrowing space combat, there are other Star Wars games you should check out. However, if you just want to enjoy some tongue-in-cheek antics, fly some cool spaceships, and yank off some arms, LEGO Star Wars II looks like it will put it all together in style. ■■■

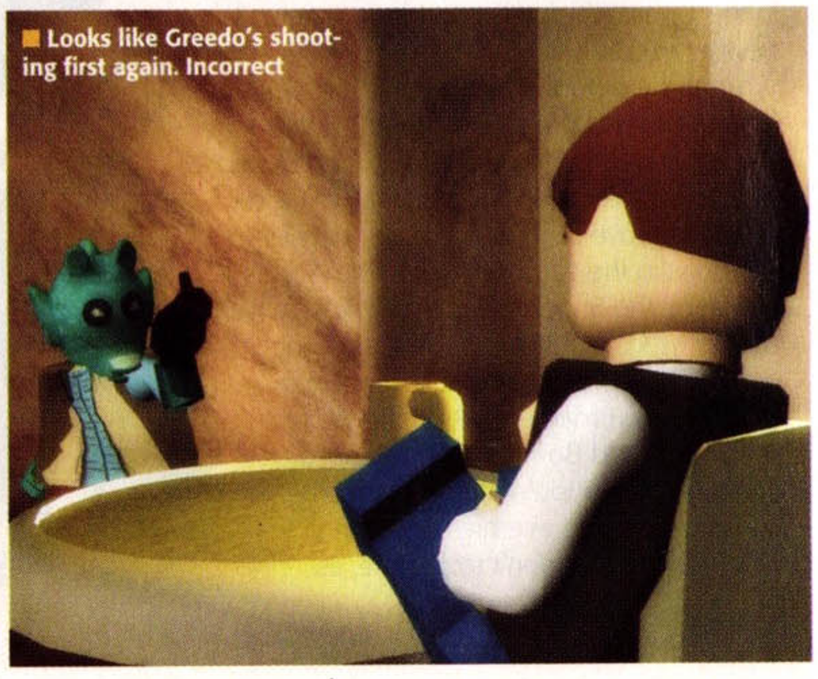
GRAND MOFF LANDO?

Ever wondered what Yoda would look like in Han Solo's vest? Or whether the Emperor could fit into Leia's metal bikini? You can discover the answer to these questions and many more with the new character customization feature. Anyone you unlock during the story mode also makes their components available in character creation, so you can assemble your own patchwork hero! Stick Bib Fortuna's head on Greedo's body, then place a green lightsaber in his hand and Vader's cape on his back. The result may be an abomination of the Force and only useable in Free Play mode, but the option promises to add plenty of entertaining replay to the game.

Tough luck, Nerf herder. She only has eyes for her brother



Even as a LEGO dude, they don't come any smoother than Billy Dee Williams

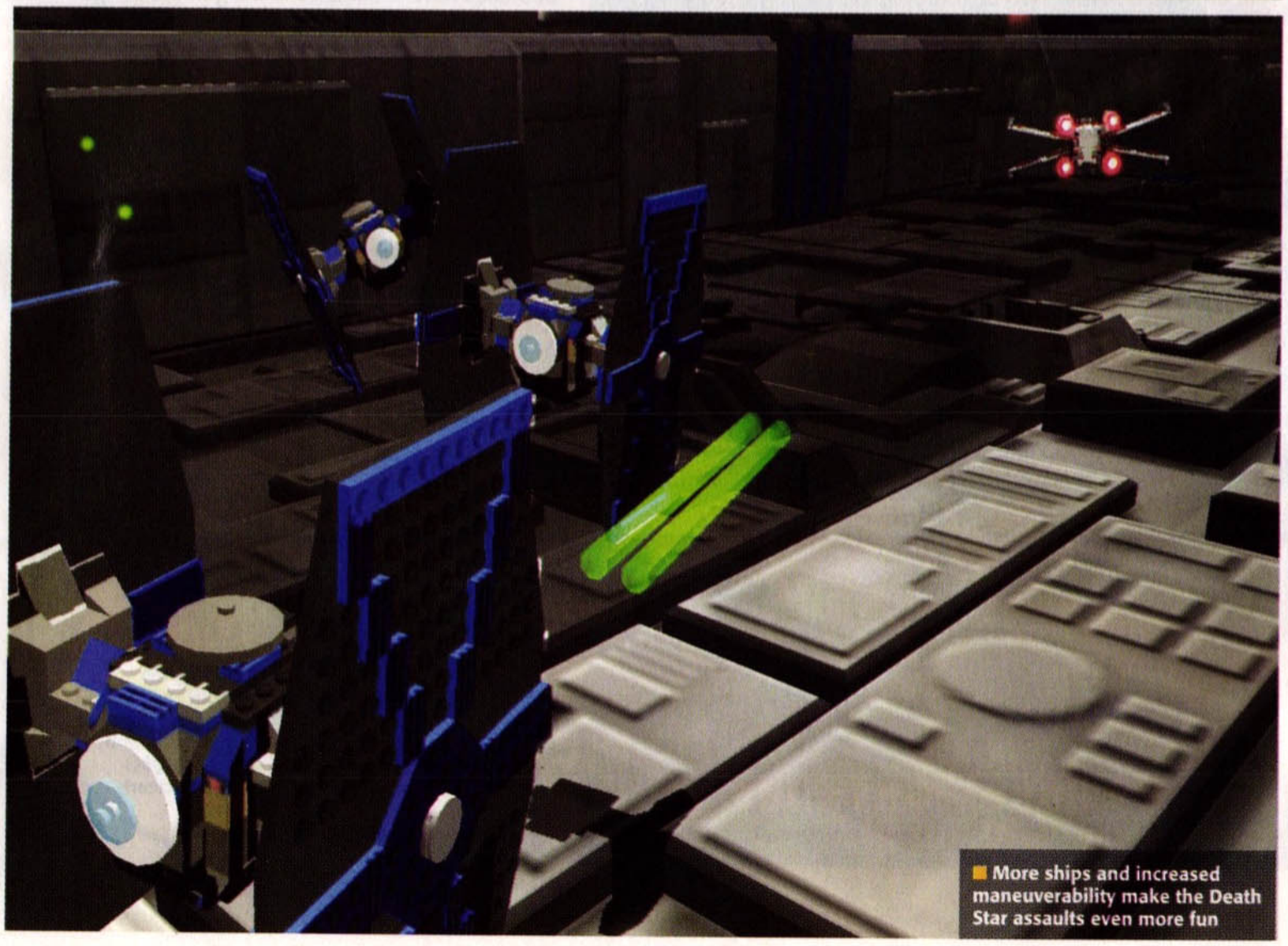


Looks like Greedo's shooting first again. Incorrect

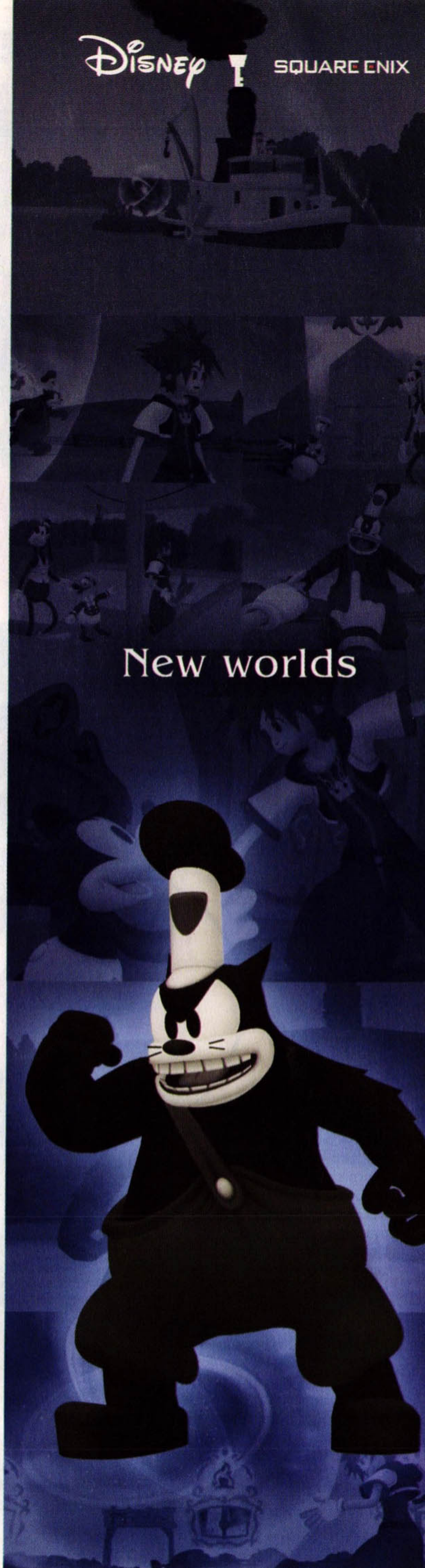
■ "Psst! I'll let you have the blonde kid and the effeminate robot if you let me through."

■ Darth Vader: The Ultimate Toadie

■ In Lucas' "Super Special Edition," Boba Fett has a BFG and fights the zombies from Resident Evil. Also, he is voiced by Britney Spears



■ More ships and increased maneuverability make the Death Star assaults even more fun



NINTENDO REVOLUTION

Tony Hawk's Downhill Jam

> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER RACING (ONLINE TBA)
> **PUBLISHER** ACTIVISION
> **DEVELOPER** TOYS FOR BOB > **RELEASE** TBA

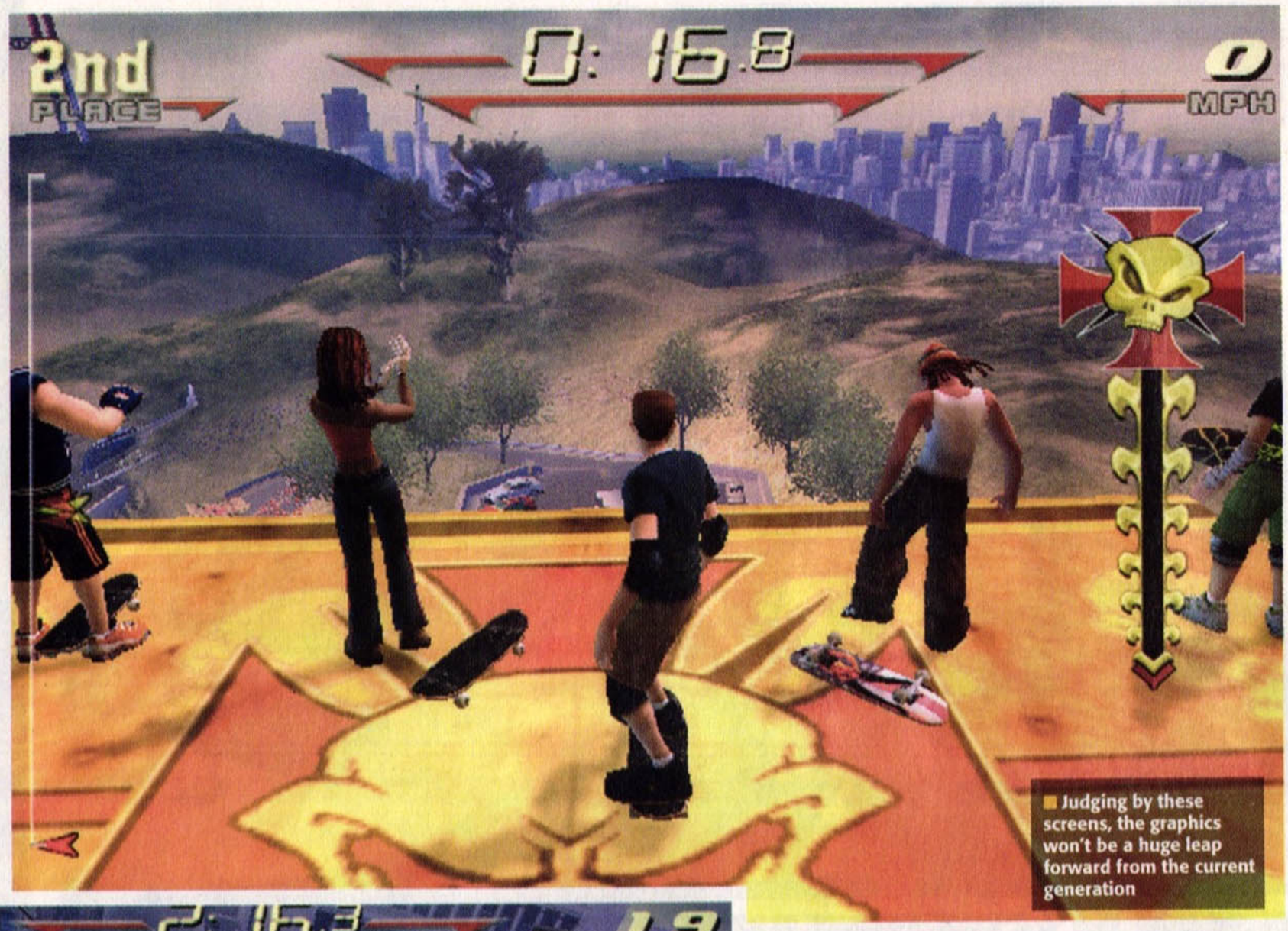
A NEW WAY TO THRASH

Since its debut on the original PlayStation in 1999, the Tony Hawk series has defined skateboarding in the video game arena, providing yearly sequels that refine and expand its trick-intensive gameplay. While the games have certainly gotten larger and the mechanics more intricate, there really hasn't been a drastic change to the basic formula since the very first title. Given that Nintendo has staked the future of its next-gen system, the Revolution, on altering the way we play games, it should be no surprise that Activision's inaugural Tony Hawk game for the console is a break from tradition. This new direction eschews the previous emphasis of exploration and tricking, instead opting for – as the title suggests – high-speed downhill racing.

"Many kids have tried riding their skateboards down steep hills and there's a growing faction of skaters that are dedicated to downhill skating," explains producer Alex Ness. "It seemed natural to us to put this into a racing context where the downhill skating that takes place is competitive. The Revolution controller was a great fit for the game's design, and all of the pieces fell into place very nicely."

Of course, the first question that comes to mind is: "How does it work?" The answer might be a surprise. While most Revolution titles we have seen so far seem to be using mechanics that have the player aiming the controller at the screen, like a gun or paper airplane, Downhill Jam actually has players holding the controller in a more conventional, sideways manner. However, that doesn't mean that the game won't take advantage of the Revolution's groundbreaking motion-sensing features.

"Our approach to playing the game with the Revolution controller was to mimic the side to side motion of riding a skateboard. We also wanted to remain faithful to the control scheme from the Tony Hawk series as much as possible," comments Ness. "We chose to use the controller by holding it sideways. This seems to work very well for Tony Hawk's Downhill Jam. The controller is rotated side to side to turn left and right as well as balance while grinding. Shaking the controller will cause the skater to boost forward. Tricks are done with the d-pad and the face buttons."



■ Judging by these screens, the graphics won't be a huge leap forward from the current generation

■ Your motions will emulate those of real skaters

The game's main Event Mode will feature over 100 events spread through eight environments. There are three types of challenges: race, points (timed trick runs), and slalom. The tracks will be set in locations both familiar to fans (San Francisco) and more exotic (Machu Piccu). In a nod to the series' heritage, each course will contain many shortcuts and hidden routes, rewarding players who replay races numerous times.

Although Downhill Jam is not being developed by franchise creator Neversoft, Toys for Bob does have experience in the genre, having developed Disney's Extreme Skate Adventure, a very solid kids' skateboarding title that was built on Neversoft's current-gen engine. Of course, Neversoft has also been very involved with the development of Downhill Jam since its inception, and continues to offer the team advice and technology assistance. This collaboration could very well result in one of the most exciting Tony Hawk titles in years, and certainly one of the most unique. ■■■

■ Shaking the controller will ignite your Boost, as this illustration from *Highlights* magazine clearly shows

NINTENDO REVOLUTION

Rayman 4 (Working Title)

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (MULTIPLAYER TBA) **> PUBLISHER** UBISOFT **> DEVELOPER** UBISOFT MONTPELIER **> RELEASE** WINTER 2006

BUNNIES

"It's a real pleasure for me to be back working on an all-new Rayman game," says series creator Michel Ancel. For fans of the limbless wonder, that quote alone will be enough to get them excited, but there's far more for them to get worked up about. First, while Ubisoft has stated that the new Rayman game will be coming to all current- and next-gen systems, the version we found out about is for the Nintendo Revolution. Secondly, this game will pit Rayman against the most diabolical enemy he's ever faced: bunnies! No, seriously.

In Ancel's own words, "Our game has been invaded by thousands of completely raving and vicious bunnies. Apparently they have been preparing this assault since the first Rayman game. They are everywhere, on our screens, in our studio, even on our t-shirts. We are now sending an S.O.S. to all motivated gamers to help us get rid of them as fast as possible!"

Ancel took a little time out from fuming about rabbits to explain how the gameplay would work with the Revolution's controller. "We are still keeping the heart and soul of the original Rayman in terms of a platformer, but we are packing it with loads of new features that the player can explore. The player will have tons of new moves based on the new controls, including acrobatic 'sky diving,' and will also be able to jump onto various creatures with his grappling hand. The Revolution controller allows the player to explore Rayman's moves, whether it is through running races or using your kung fu fists to fight off those crazy bunnies. The physical interaction adds a whole new depth in terms of gameplay and most importantly gives the player even more fun. The player can now grapple a bunny then spin him around, which is really exciting with the new controls."

This brief description of the gameplay sounds fun, but when we pressed Ancel for more info, he came right back to the bunnies. "Rayman also disguises himself and uses the power of dance and music to hypnotize the swarms of crazy little bunnies! We believe we have really found the ultimate enemy for Rayman with the insane bunnies; they are constantly attacking you and plotting to take over your world." Sure man, whatever you say. ■■■

DISNEY × SQUARE ENIX

KINGDOM HEARTS II

The story isn't over.

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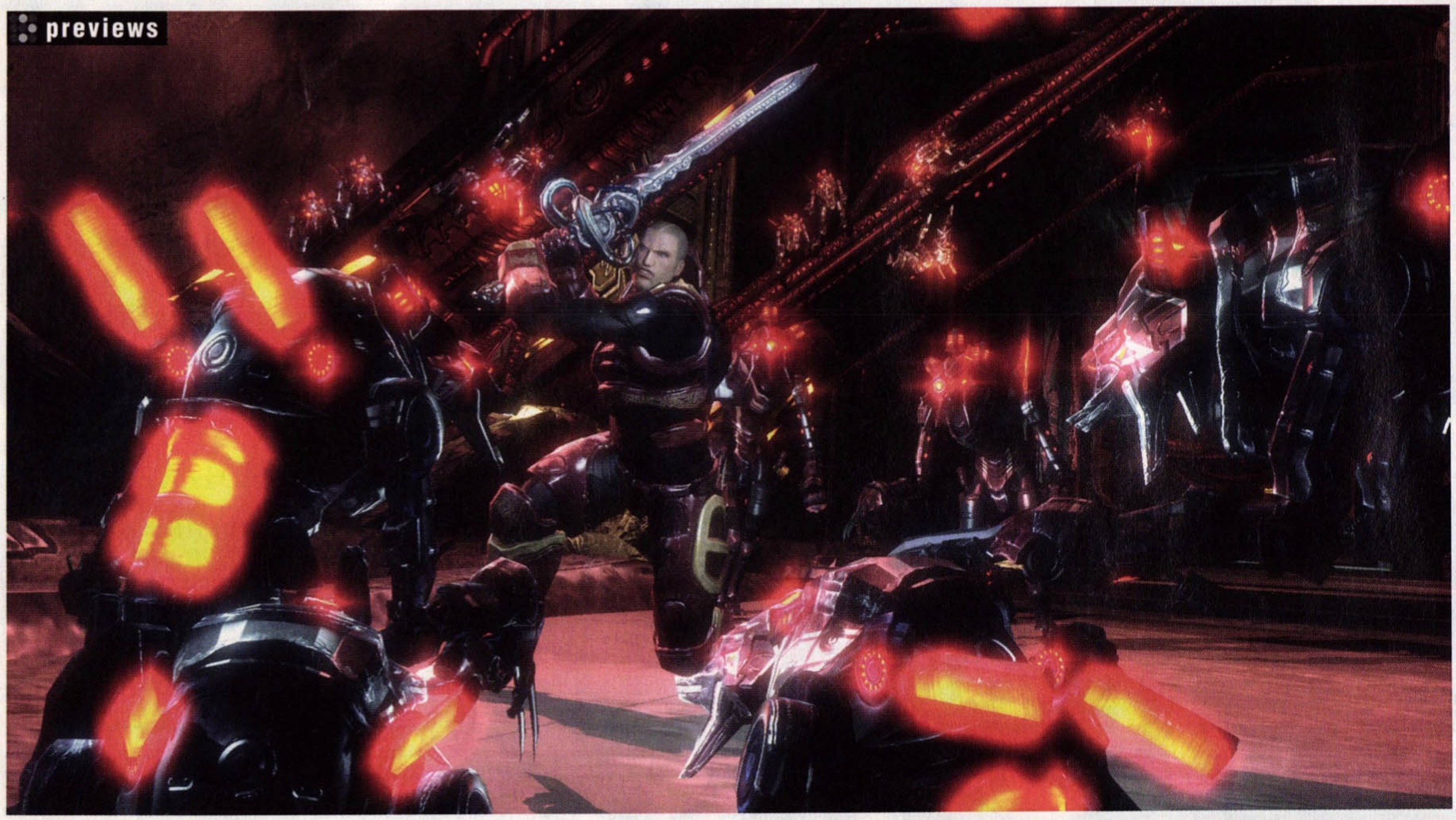
PlayStation 2

bvg BUENA VISTA GAMES

EVERYONE 10+
E 10+
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Mild Blood
Use of Alcohol
Violence



UNLIMITED ENABLED

XBOX 360

Too Human

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 4-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE) **> PUBLISHER** MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS
> DEVELOPER SILICON KNIGHTS **> RELEASE** FALL

TECHNOLOGY IS A MEANS TO THE END

"I think a good idea transcends medium," says Denis Dyack, head of Silicon Knights, about the team's next-gen game, Too Human. Part of a trilogy, the first entry will release this fall and the developer is being very vocal about its big plans for the series. With goals this ambitious, technology is a key focus. The 360 hardware is letting Too Human become what Dyack always dreamed it would be, and the game has already traveled a long road to get to this point.

So far, it's been announced for three systems – the PSone edition was playable in the late '90s, but the later GameCube version was never shown publicly. Now, the game is running on Unreal Engine 3, is being released for the Xbox 360, and Dyack has often promised that it will be different from anything gamers have ever seen. Technology has suffused every part of Too Human, from the design possibilities and gameplay to the story itself.

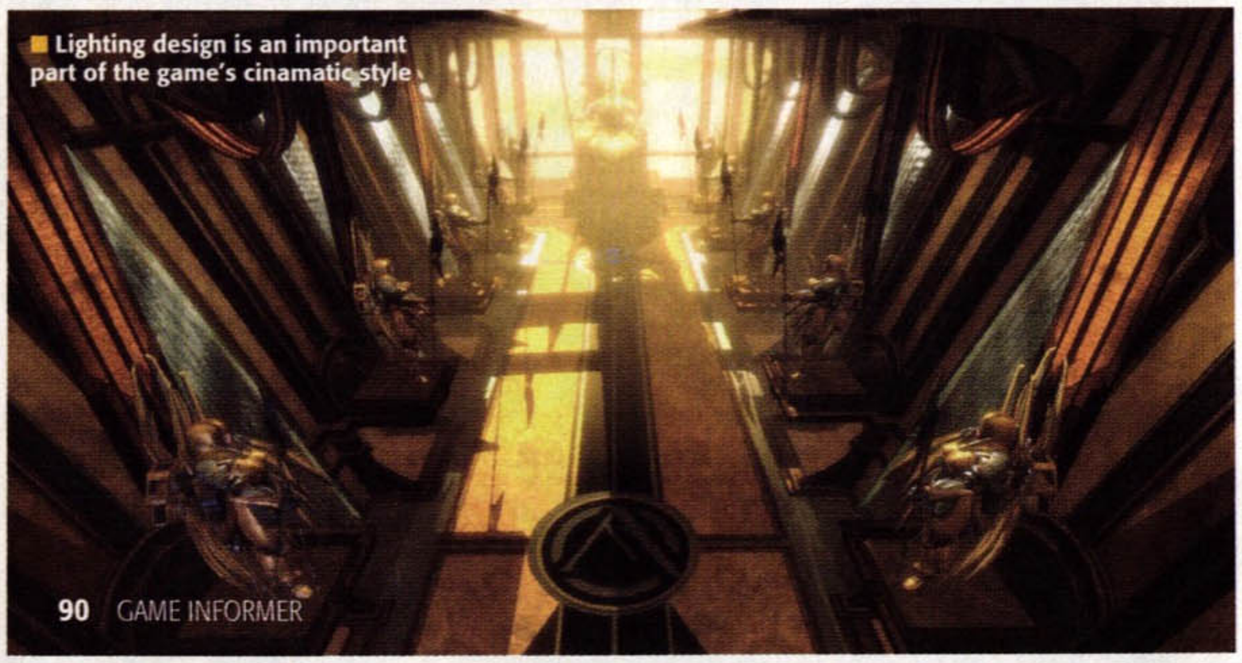
"With every game that we create, we try to create a deeper meaning and analyze and try to send a message to the players," says Dyack. With Too Human, that message is an intense parable about humanity, soul, evolution, and technology. In this first game, players control Balder, a cybernetically-enhanced soldier that is part of a group of defenders that humanity refers to as "gods." Steeped in Norse mythology, these gods share an important trait with their Scandinavian predecessors – they are mortal. Balder stands out among these gods for having too few enhancements. He is too human.

Enemy designs, in what we've seen so far, are varied but certainly share a bug-like quality

You'll enhance and customize Balder's appearance and abilities by finding cybernetic upgrades, blueprints, or reverse-engineering discovered technology. The options are so immense that one wonders how that could possibly be accessible to more casual players – a group that Microsoft, Silicon Knights, and Dyack all want to enjoy playing through the whole game. The solution is to make much of the hardcore stuff optional. Players can opt to have weaponry and stats chosen for them, the difficulty level will auto-adjust to your success, and a simple control mechanic will tie it all together.

Dyack tells us that while they've been testing the control scheme, people don't ask how it works. They pick up a controller, experiment for a minute, and within that time, have a satisfying grasp on the combat. Essentially, one analog stick controls movement and the other manages different close-quarters combos. With simple flicks and trigger pulls, players can launch, juggle, and then unleash a variety of over-the-top attacks. Casual players will be able to clear a room enemy by enemy, using whatever method they choose. "[But] gamers will come into a room, analyze it, and be able to clear it out with one combo in ten seconds," says Dyack.

Large-scale encounters provide the game's spectacle, a game-controlled camera system will supply good-looking and compelling combat, and a deep RPG system makes each version of Balder a player's own. A design this malleable might just play best in the game's planned online co-op. Four players can conquer the story mode together over Xbox Live in what promises to be an even more grand experience. A good idea does transcend medium and technology, but the horsepower of next-generation hardware is making that idea even better. ■■■



Lighting design is an important part of the game's cinamatic style

XBOX 360

Lost Planet

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (MULTIPLAYER TBA) **> PUBLISHER** CAPCOM **> DEVELOPER** CAPCOM **> RELEASE** 2007

CHILL FACTOR

When Capcom released the trailer for its upcoming Keiji Inafune-directed action title Lost Planet over Xbox Live marketplace, a buzz immediately developed around the game. The impressive trailer revealed a frozen world of swirling snow, giant robots, even bigger monstrous creatures, and a man named Wayne who would stand against them all. The gorgeous graphics and intense action created an instant aura of anticipation around this title, and we're ready to confirm that all the excitement is justified. We've played Lost Planet, and it simply rocks.

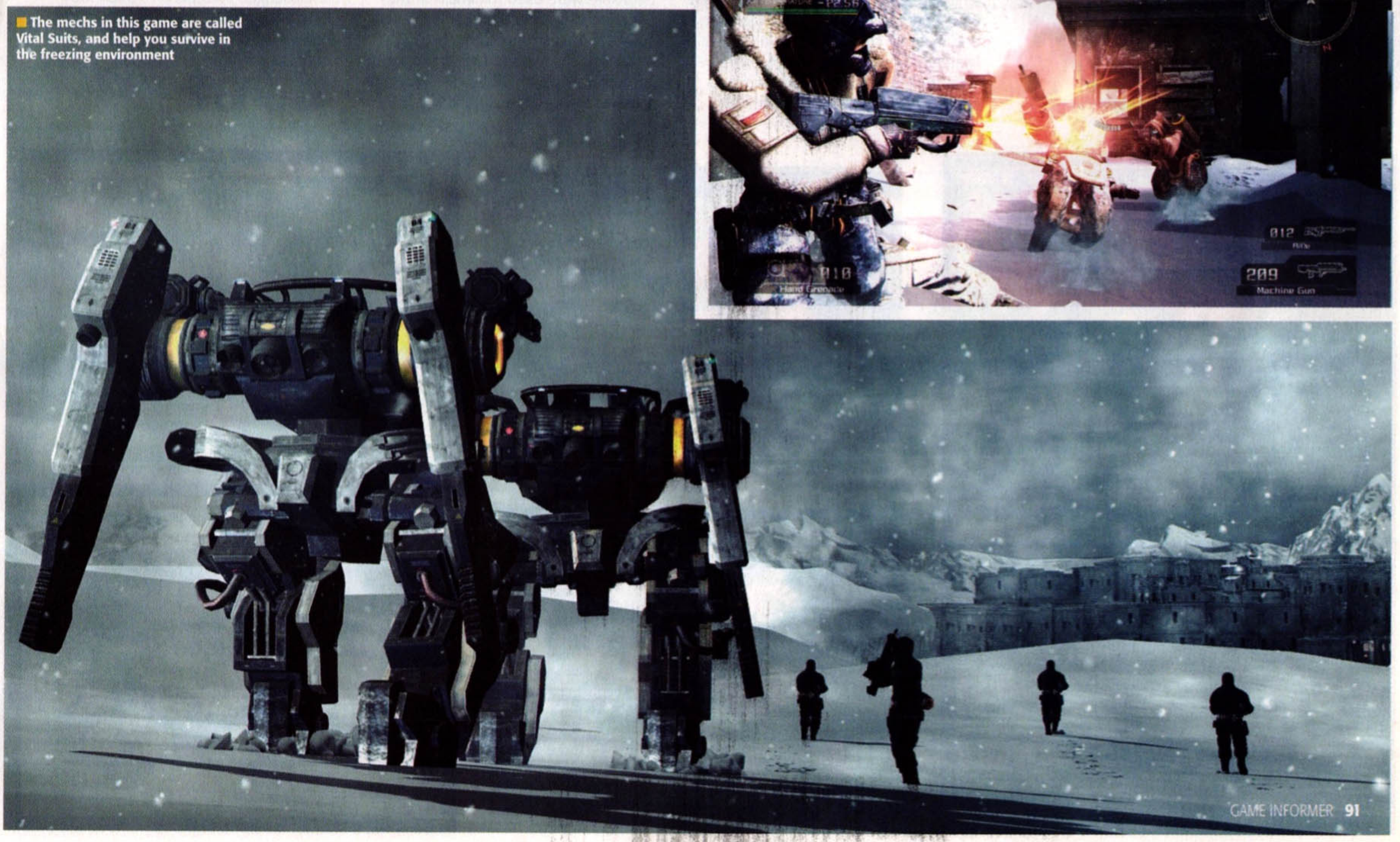
Despite appearances, Lost Planet is not primarily a mech combat game, but rather an on-foot third-person shooter. In several sections you can hop in robot exoskeletons called Vital Suits, but the focus is on guiding Wayne through the frozen world of the game on foot. As the titular planet has been converted to sub-zero temperatures by the insect-like Akrid race, a major component of the gameplay is finding Thermal Energy. A counter on the top left of the screen displays Wayne's constantly diminishing supply of Thermal Energy, and if it drops to zero, he starts losing health. Fortunately, every enemy you kill drops Thermal Energy that refills your supply. So basically, you'll want to blast anything that moves. Creatures will lunge at you through low-visibility snowstorms, burst through the ground to attack you, and even fill the skies in swarms. The action in the two stages we played was fast and intense, and although these screens demonstrate the gorgeous visuals, they can't convey the smoothness of the animation, the lifelike weather, or the bombastic explosions and particle effects. Lost Planet looks simply great in motion, and playing it feels like living through a big-budget action movie.

To survive the extreme challenges of Lost Planet's hostile world, Wayne is equipped with a wide arsenal, including machine guns, rocket launchers, grenades, and more. He also has a grappling hook for quickly ascending to rooftops, and hitting the bumper buttons makes him snap 90 degrees to the left or right. This move will certainly be quite useful in multiplayer – while details are scarce, Capcom has confirmed that Lost Planet will feature cooperative and competitive modes via Xbox Live, as well as downloadable content. Scheduled for early 2007, Lost Planet is definitely one 360 game to keep an eye on. ■■■

The Akrid creatures come in all shapes and sizes, but won't be the only enemies you'll face

Despite appearances, snow-swept exteriors aren't the only environments you'll explore in the game

"Let's play 'face-shooter!' You're it!"


The mechs in this game are called Vital Suits, and help you survive in the freezing environment

NINTENDO DS

New Super Mario Bros.

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 4-PLAYER VIA WIRELESS) **> PUBLISHER** NINTENDO **> DEVELOPER** NINTENDO **> RELEASE** MAY 15

GREATEST HITS MASH UP

All on his own, Mario taught a generation how to explore. From the first side-scrolling adventure to the oft-cited favorites of Super Mario Bros. 3 and Super Mario World, the jump man and his gang of friends have had us leaping, flipping, and just giving-it-a-go for decades. The upcoming DS title could supplant them all – not by being a greatest hits of past Mario gameplay, but instead by playing like an ultimate remix album. Familiar features, stages, enemies, and moves are mashed up in this entry like a genius DJ's greatest mix tape.

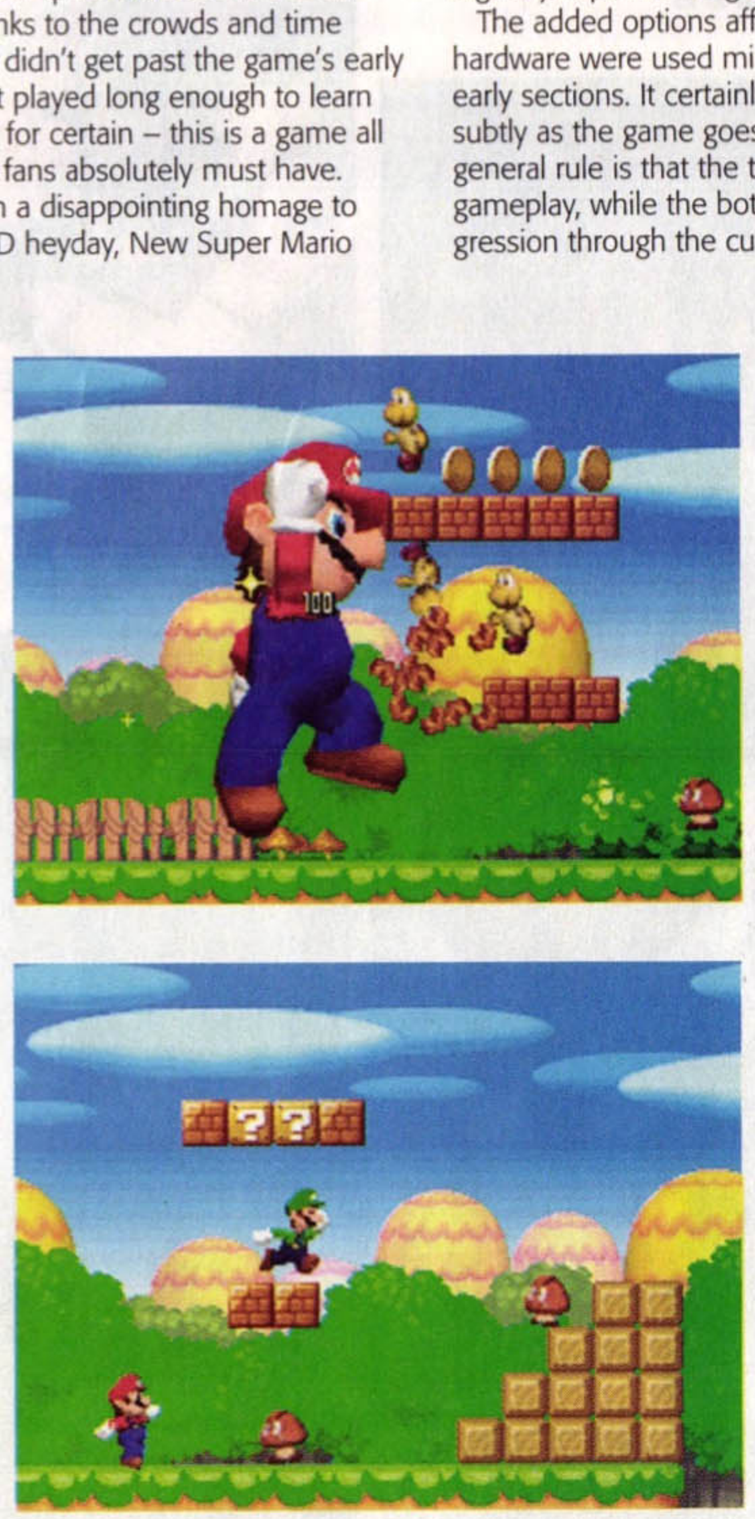
We got some hands-on playtime with New Super Mario Bros. at the recent Game Developers Conference in San Jose. Thanks to the crowds and time limits, we didn't get past the game's early levels, but played long enough to learn one thing for certain – this is a game all Nintendo fans absolutely must have.

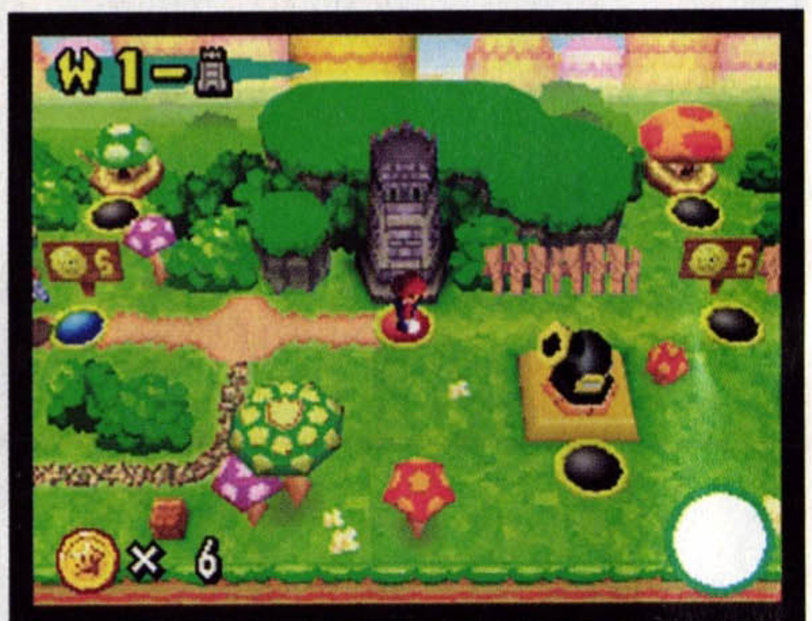
Far from a disappointing homage to Mario's 2D heyday, New Super Mario Bros. takes liberally from all of the series' entries. The overworld looks like Mario World or Super Mario 3, the butt stomp and triple jumps come from Mario 64, and the first level is almost straight from the original. While we still haven't seen if Mario can fly (neither confirmation nor a denial has been pried from Nintendo's silent development team), there is a generous distribution of mushrooms. Some, predictably, make Mario a little bit bigger while others modify him to *Alice in Wonderland* proportions – gigantic, screen consuming sizes let players plow through everything on the stage; while miniature 'shrooms give a shruken Mario higher jumps and longer glides.

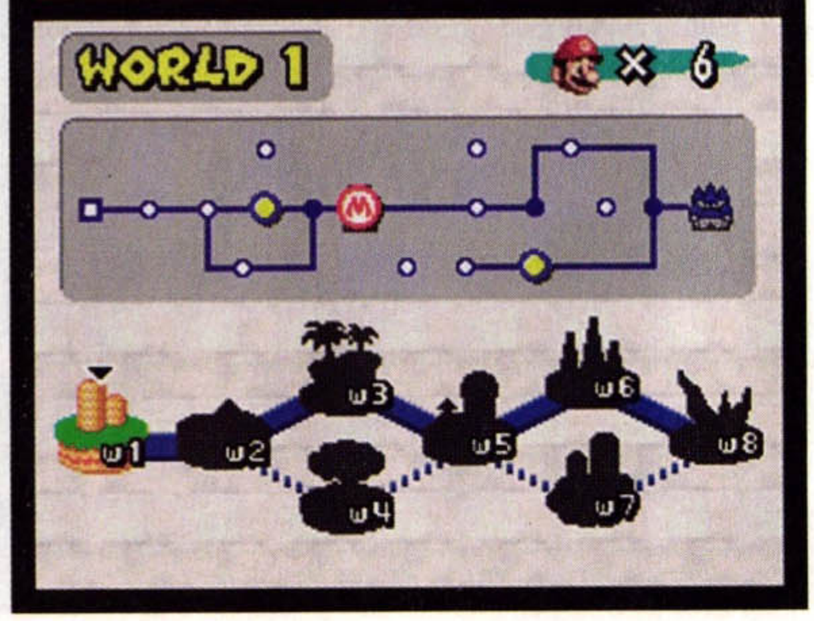
The added options afforded by DS hardware were used minimally in the early sections. It certainly could change subtly as the game goes on, but the general rule is that the top screen shows gameplay, while the bottom displays progression through the current stage, a slot for an extra power-up (think Super Mario World for a good example of this feature), and icons to show how many of the stage's hidden stars you've located.

This screen layout holds true for the multiplayer battles. Since all of the multiplayer is done over local wireless connections (and offers downloadable play for those without a cartridge), the host has sole discretion to set up the match parameters before a session starts. By default, players will be racing to find five stars – attacking an opponent makes them drop their stars, and finding eight coins will yield a random power-up.

With around 80 levels to play and replay, Nintendo's New Super Mario Bros. is primed to be nothing short of a full-fledged addiction. It's been too long since gaming had a new 2D side-scroller with our heroic plumber, and our brief playtime has given our thumbs a taste of exploration. Now we just want more. ■■■







PSP

Valkyrie Profile: Lenneth

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION/RPG **> PUBLISHER** SQUARE ENIX **> DEVELOPER** TRI-ACE **> RELEASE** TBA

CLASSIC ACCESSIBILITY

If only Square Enix weren't so poky with the North American releases. The PSP re-release of 2000's unique RPG Valkyrie Profile (now with the subhead Lenneth) came out in Japan this March, but a Stateside release date hasn't been set yet. Luckily, we do know what to expect, and it's tempting enough that a pre-order might be a good idea.

For those who missed the game the first time and don't want to shell out over $150 on eBay, there's a Norse-flavored treat in store. Throughout the game you'll collect the spirits of dead warriors, have them fight with you, and then send them to Valhalla to battle alongside Odin in an epic battle. The game has three very different endings and offers players a lot of choice in how much or how little they want to complete.

A series of cinematic sequences have been entirely recreated and now feature top-of-the-line animation. If you're one of the lucky few who got to play Valkyrie Profile on PSone, these new cutscenes are a great addition to the already-compelling package. Though there are few other major changes in this re-release, the 2D side-scrolling dungeons and richly animated sprites look even better on the PSP screen.

Some regard this as Tri-Ace's greatest RPG, and the limited run of the PSone version meant that lots of potential players were left out in the cold. The game's control scheme transfers perfectly, with face buttons still assigned to your party member's individual attacks. Building a party's combo strings is instantly rewarding, offering a lot of replay as your group changes members. This release is a great way to get a new generation into the fold, and we're more than happy to save some dough and also have a reason to charge up the PSP for some RPG goodness. ■■■

■ Dungeons are all 2D side-scrolling affairs, while the overworld has a freeform 3D layout

PLAYSTATION 2

Okami

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION **> PUBLISHER** CAPCOM **> DEVELOPER** CLOVER STUDIO **> RELEASE** SEPTEMBER

ACTION PAINTING

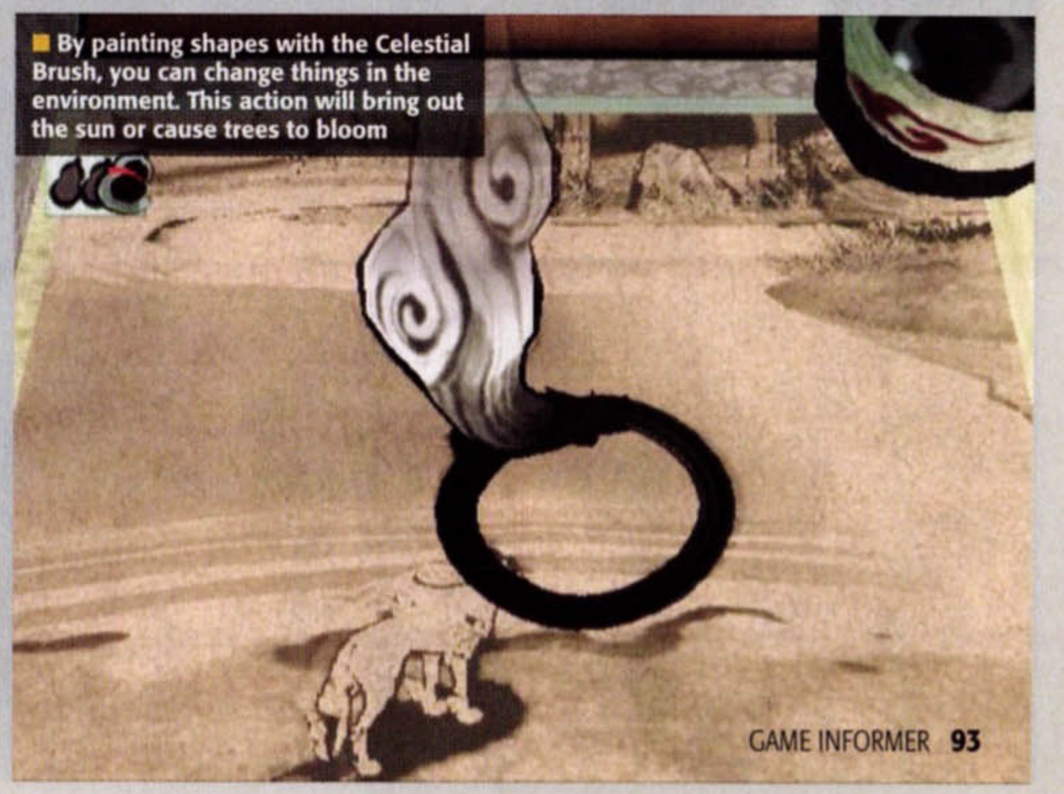
■ The game's visuals are some of the more gorgeous and unique we've ever seen

We've already told you about the graphics in Clover Studio's gorgeous new game Okami, and now a new Japanese demo of the game allowed us to put the gameplay through its paces.

You play as Amaterasu the sun goddess, who has incarnated herself on Earth as a wolf. Delving deep into the themes of nature and harmony that pervade Japanese folklore, Amaterasu seeks to restore nature to a land that's been laid barren by an evil force. To do this, she wields a powerful implement called the Celestial Brush, which will be central to your experience in Okami.

As we began, it quickly became apparent how the brush changes the conventional rules of gameplay. Early on, we had to ford a river that had run dry. By painting in the missing part of the river, nature restored the water and we were able to pass. We also freed a giant dragon by using the brush to complete a constellation in the night sky. Trapped by a gate? All you have to do is press R1 to bring up the brush, then press square and perform a slashing movement to slice it in half. Other uses we found were painting a circle in the sky to bring out the sun, then repeating the action to make trees bloom.

The brush gameplay is certainly intriguing, but we were a bit disappointed to note that – at least in the brief levels we experienced – you only seem to be able to use it at very set, predetermined instances. It does come in somewhat useful during combat, but we found using Amaterasu's more conventional fighting moves to be easier. Still, the potential inherent in this gameplay is immense, and could well make us look at games in a whole different way. This is most definitely a title that anyone who cares about video games as art owes it to him or herself to play. ■■■



■ By painting shapes with the Celestial Brush, you can change things in the environment. This action will bring out the sun or cause trees to bloom

PC

Dark Messiah of Might & Magic

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 32-PLAYER VIA INTERNET OR LAN) **> PUBLISHER** UBISOFT **> DEVELOPER** ARKANE STUDIOS/KUJU ENTERTAINMENT **> RELEASE** 2007

A SERIES REBORN

The Might & Magic brand has fallen from grace in the last few years, but new franchise owner Ubisoft is doing everything it can to breathe new life into this venerable series. Dark Messiah, the second M&M title from the French publisher, is taking form as a first-person action/RPG with a definite focus on the action side. While a strong framework of statistics and dice rolls will be operating behind the scenes, the goal is for players to immerse themselves in a somewhat non-linear fantasy adventure. With Valve's powerful Source engine taking care of the technology under the hood, developer Arkane Studios is focusing its efforts on crafting interesting, non-scripted scenarios for players to explore – and from what we've seen, Dark Messiah is well on the way to delivering just that.

The single-player campaign will take players through an epic storyline that takes place 20 years after the events of the soon-to-be released Heroes of Might & Magic V. And while players will by and large experience the tale in linear fashion, the developers are making it a point to set up obstacles and situations that allow the player to utilize their character's skills however he or she sees fit to solve the dilemma. This means that, much like in Deus Ex, there will be many paths to victory – except with the added benefits of environmental interaction (thank you, Source engine!) and vastly more complex enemy AI. Often times, there will be more factions interacting in a given battle than just you and the bad guys. This can lead to some intriguing decisions: Should you stay back and let the other two sides duke it out, wade in and crush some skulls of your own, or simply use the fight as a distraction and sneak on through?

■ Impalement is definitely a viable solution to this problem

Likewise, the astute player will be able to use the world to their advantage. Bunch of guards hanging out in a barn? Chuck a torch into a haystack and set them on fire. Fighting on a treacherous mountain pass? Use some ice magic to mess up your opponents' footing and send them plummeting to their doom. These are just a few examples of the new avenues of gameplay that the marriage of physics modeling and fantasy role-playing will open up to players.

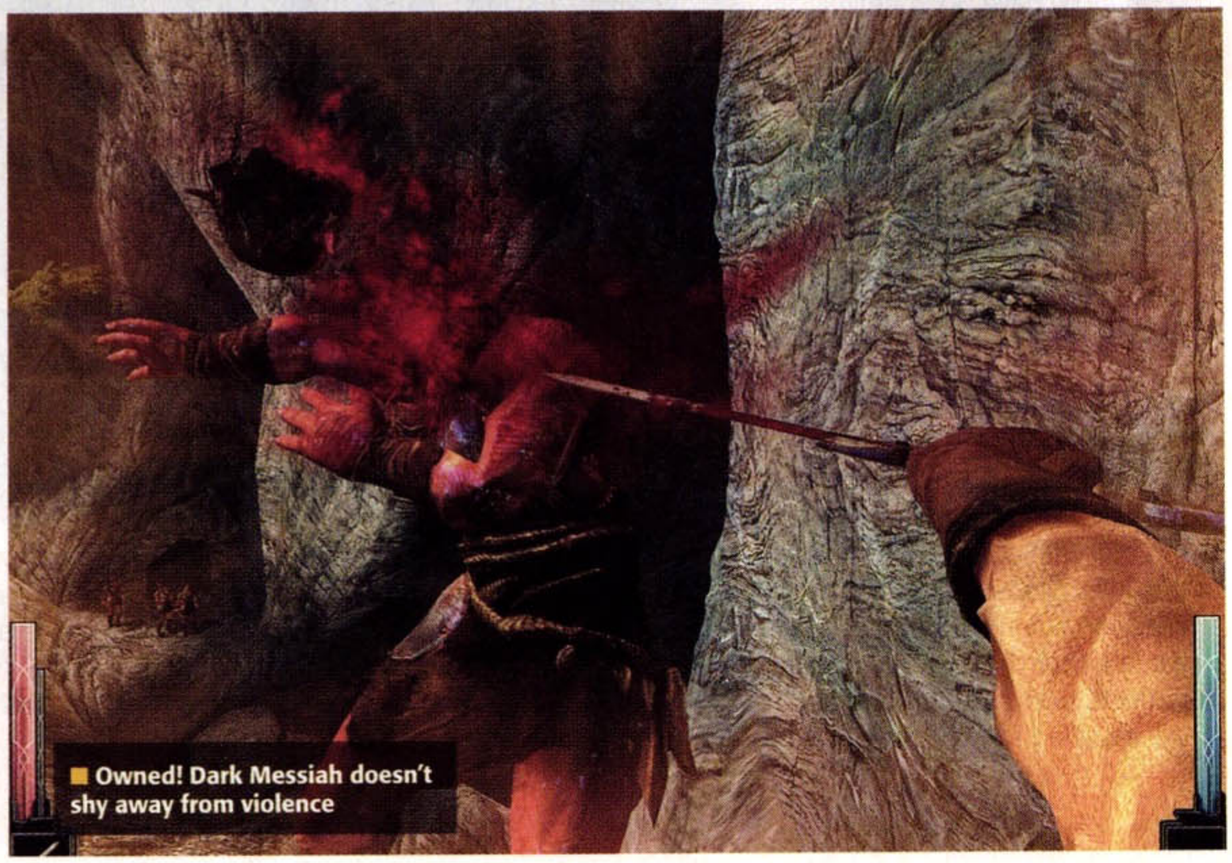
The multiplayer aspect, which is being handled seperately by Kuju Entertainment, is just as ambitious as the solo adventure. Dark Messiah's Crusade mode combines Battlefield-style territory control with all of the aforementioned open-ended combat, which has to be one of the coolest concepts we've ever heard. Players will choose from five different hero classes, all with unique skills, and gain experience as the battle rages on. That's not all, though – you'll carry a persistent avatar through a round of five huge maps, so that towards the end of a round your character should be a serious wrecking machine.

Putting a fantasy role-playing skin on the Source engine's outstanding visuals and physics simulation would be enough to get us on board, and Dark Messiah aims to go way beyond that. Based on everything we've seen and heard, it's hard to imagine that this title will end up as anything but a fantasy gamer's dream come true. Stranger things have happened, of course, but we've got a good feeling about this one. ■■■

■ A stealthy approach will open new paths through the game

■ Magic doesn't necessarily take a back seat to might

■ Inevitable comparisons to Oblivion aside, this title features females that are thankfully man-face free



■ Owned! Dark Messiah doesn't shy away from violence

UNLIMITED ENABLED

PC

World In Conflict

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER STRATEGY (UP TO 16-PLAYER VIA INTERNET OR LAN)
> **PUBLISHER** VIVENDI > **DEVELOPER** MASSIVE ENTERTAINMENT > **RELEASE** SPRING 2007

NO TIME TO MESS AROUND

Developer Massive Entertainment's previous work, the Ground Control series, may not have had the exposure of some more high-profile RTS titles. However, that doesn't mean that Ground Control didn't deserve to be top-shelf; the outstanding graphics and unique approach to combat were easily worthy of triple-A status. The studio's next project, World In Conflict, is ratcheting up the Ground Control design philosophy to the next level. Besides moving the setting to a full-scale Cold War scenario and evolving the overall design and technology of the game, Massive is putting serious work into the multiplayer aspect – arguably the most important part of any RTS.

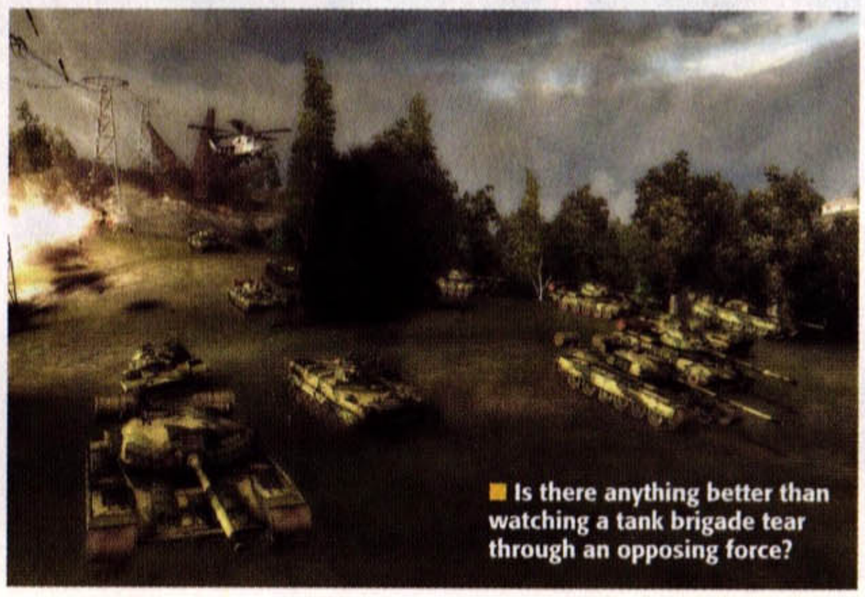
If you've ever had the pleasure of playing Ground Control, you'll instantly be familiar with the basic premise of WIC. There is no resource-gathering. There is no base-building. There is only fighting (see sidebar for details). However, the low-level tactical fighting that makes up the vast majority of WIC's gameplay is much deeper than the typical "grab a bunch of troops and attack-move" RTS formula. You'll have to take into account the landscape and available cover as well as effectively manage artillery, tanks, footsoldiers, and support powers like airstrikes. Not to mention that the very surroundings can drastically change over the course of a battle – WIC boasts an incredibly robust environmental destruction system and the map design to make it a real gameplay factor.

The final pieces of the WIC puzzle are the four specialist roles that players will be able to choose from at the beginning of a match. These will affect what support powers you'll be able to call on during a game, but more importantly, how much your units cost you to deploy. An air-focused commander will still be able to call in tanks, but they'll take up a much larger chunk of his available resources than they would for an armor specialist. As you would expect, this will be a central factor in online play – a team that can play to each others' strengths and cover their weaknesses will easily steamroll a bunch of newbs who think that an old-fashioned C&C tank rush will get the job done.

Speaking of online, WIC sounds like it'll be ready to hang with the big kids on the block in that arena as well. Massive's proprietary Massgate online portal will make finding matches and creating clans easy, as well as track various stats for both solo and team play. A ladder system will let you compete for the bragging rights that come along with ranking, and Massive is planning on running tournaments to boot. And, of course, the online community will be able to take advantage of fully-featured map editors and mod tools as well. All in all, there's not a whole lot more that we could wish for out of World In Conflict. It's just too bad that we still have to wait a whole year to play it. ■■■

■ This game has an absolutely crazy amount of graphical detail, given that it's an RTS

■ Artillery will play a huge part in the game. Good thing it looks totally awesome



■ Is there anything better than watching a tank brigade tear through an opposing force?

ECONOMICS 101

World In Conflict doesn't use anything resembling a traditional RTS economy model. Instead, each player has access to the exact same number of credits throughout a mission. These credits are assigned either as units you have in play, upgrades to your forces, or "in transit" back to your reserve after one of your units dies. Thus, everything remains more or less balanced until the very end of the game – making your tactics and teamwork the only thing that can save you from the ignominy of defeat.

PLAYSTATION 2 | GAMECUBE | PSP

Super Monkey Ball Adventure

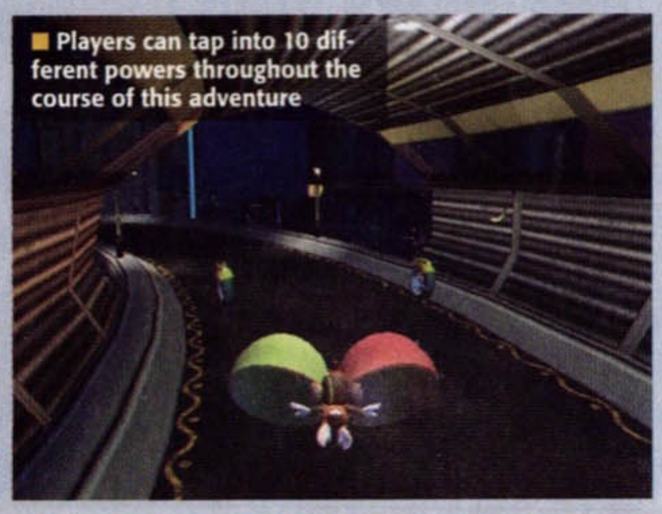
> STYLE 1 TO 4-PLAYER ADVENTURE (UP TO 4-PLAYER VIA PSP AD HOC) **> PUBLISHER** SEGA
> DEVELOPER TRAVELLER'S TALES **> RELEASE** JULY

THE MONKEY IN THE RYE

Generally known for its skill-based puzzles, Monkey Ball is breaking free from its roots to unleash its Shakespearean-like lore. Feuding monkey kingdoms, joy-sucking creatures known as The Naysayers, the sights of Monkitropolis…C.S. Lewis pwned!

When not marveling at a cutscene, you'll be asked to complete over 60 missions. Every action in the game still revolves around the whole monkey in a ball gimmick, but now you'll find yourself exploring vast environments and tapping into different powers to navigate them. Developer Traveller's Tales has implemented new abilities like sticking to surfaces, turning invisible, hovering for a brief amount of time, and our favorite, turning into wood. As you quest, you'll run into over 50 different monkeys, of which 20 can be used within the bonus party games.

All of the classic party games make a return, and are joined by three additions: Monkey Bounce, Monkey Tag, and Castle, a four-player game of tactical destruction. The PSP version of the game will also allow for wireless multiplayer through Ad Hoc, plus an exclusive trading card game that reveals the backstory to this adventure. ■■■



■ Players can tap into 10 different powers throughout the course of this adventure

■ Don't worry, Sega has confirmed with us that AiAi doesn't die in this scene

NINTENDO REVOLUTION

Super Monkey Ball: Banana Blitz

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (MULTIPLAYER TBA) **> PUBLISHER** SEGA **> DEVELOPER** SEGA STUDIOS JAPAN **> RELEASE** TBA

TILT IT, FLICK IT, ROLL IT

■ Flick the analog stick upward to leap and snatch out of reach bananas

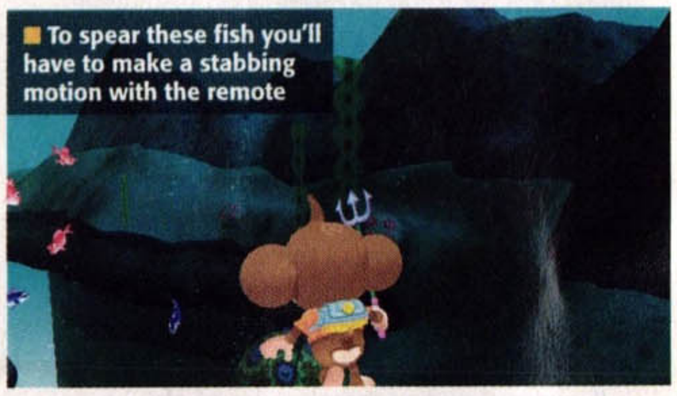
It was only a matter of time before this high concept series landed on Nintendo's high concept console. In many ways, it would seem that the Revolution's controller was built specifically with a game like Super Monkey Ball in mind.

In Super Monkey Ball: Banana Blitz, if you tilt the remote forward ever so slowly, your ball will creep forward. Tilt it forward further and it will pick up speed. Twisting your wrists to the side will turn the ball. Adding further depth to this series' play, if you flick the remote quickly, your monkey will perform a jump move, which in turn launches the ball into the air. That's right, platforming-based challenges are now factored into the 100-plus new maps.

The Revolution is also opening the doors for an astounding number of new party games. Sega is shooting to match the number of single-player maps with 100 unique party games. The entire single-player campaign can be played with just the remote (which will be great if Nintendo doesn't pack in the nunchuck peripheral with the unit), but many of the minigames will require that players use the nunchuck.

Sega hasn't set a release date just yet, but has expressed the sentiment that this game would be a great addition for the machine's launch. ■■■

■ Flick the remote upward rhythmically to jump this rope



■ To spear these fish you'll have to make a stabbing motion with the remote

■ This minigame features a tank-like control scheme that utilizes the nunchuck style

HIS BAZOOKA IS WORSE THAN HIS BITE.

"...dogs with rocket launchers sounds like a recipe for success."
- VGO Network

"...deep and totally likeable..."
- Newtype USA

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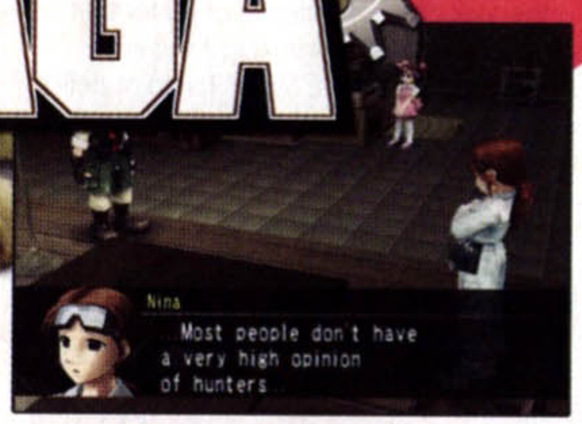

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XBOX 360 | PLAYSTATION 2 | XBOX | PSP

NCAA Football 07

> STYLE 1 TO 4-PLAYER SPORTS (2-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE, PS2 ONLINE OR PSP AD HOC) **> PUBLISHER** EA SPORTS
> DEVELOPER EA TIBURON **> RELEASE** JULY 3

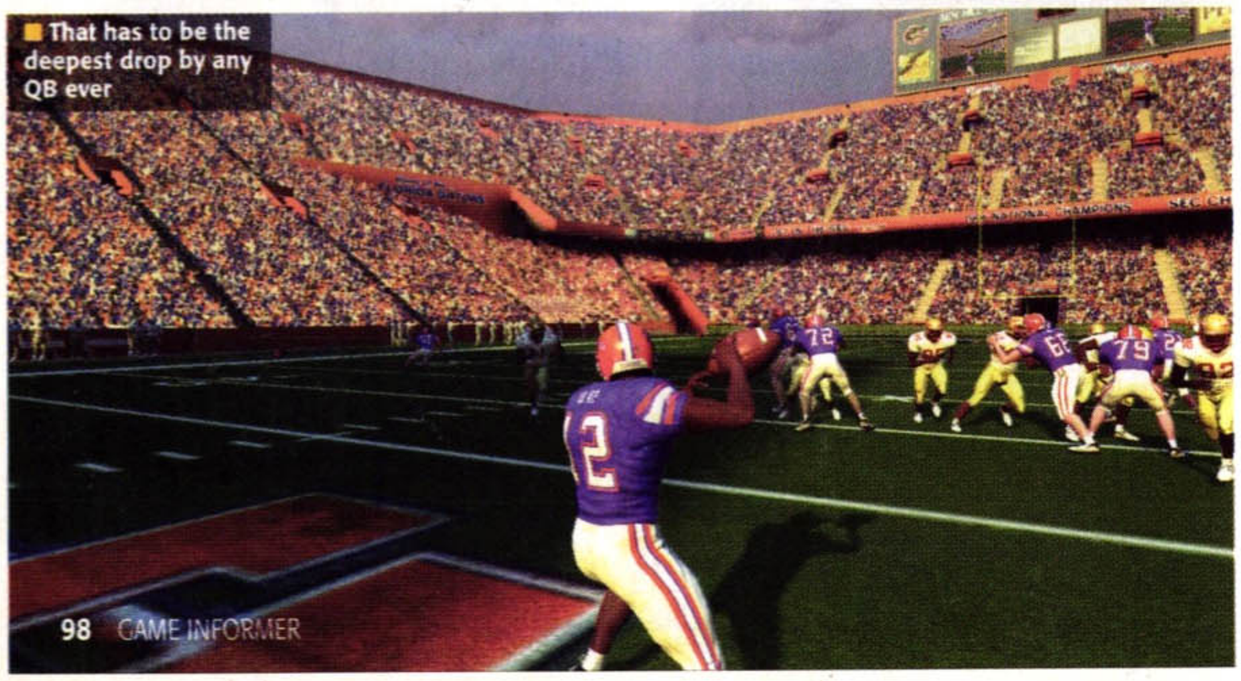
ELIGIBILITY QUESTIONS

Apart from getting excited about bowl games and Saturday afternoons packed with stadiums of raucous crowds, one reason that football fans look forward to the release of EA Sports' NCAA Football series is that it sometimes gives gamers a glimpse at what may be in store for them when the Madden NFL franchise releases its annual game in August. A sort of glimpse of the future if you will. If early indications hold, however, it doesn't look like that will be the case this year, as the Xbox 360's inaugural college football title is more like last year's 360 Madden with its pared-back feature set. It's like the franchise red-shirted itself!

The main component of the Xbox 360 version is a system that tracks the highs and lows of the game as the momentum shifts from team to team. This is quantifiably shown via a meter. A couple of years ago, the NCAA franchise involved crowds as an important aspect of playing against certain teams, and this Momentum Meter appears to be a logical extension of that. Do you bust out the trick plays on offense or go for that risky all-out blitz on defense just to swing things in your direction? Will a 10-point deficit sap the drive out of your players? Hopefully the results of this emphasis on momentum won't skew the balance of the title, as video game football fans have long been concerned about the CPU artificially turning the tables via catch-up AI.

Although there will not be a version of the game for PlayStation 3, PS2 (and Xbox) owners can take comfort in the fact that it seems that the current-gen NCAA will contain a fuller feature set anyway. These versions of the series will feature an emphasis on off-the-field activities for your Dynasty players (see sidebar for more), as well as the Momentum Meter. On the field, you can use the new spring game option to gauge your depth charts, as well as participate in 11 off-season minigames designed to improve your players. Finally, Madden commands such as slide protection, smart routes, and precision passing are available. NCAA 07 is also hitting the PSP, including a 10-year Dynasty mode, game momentum, and Wi-Fi multiplayer.

The next-gen version of NCAA does have some cool things going for it, such as graphic details (which extend to the fans in the stands), a full Dynasty mode, stand-alone minigames, and a photo album you can build and trade. But with a fuller feature set, it looks like the current-gen game has been hitting the books and is playing to impress. ■ ■ ■



That has to be the deepest drop by any QB ever

DOUBLE SECRET PROBATION

"Student athletes" is a true misnomer, but EA is entrusting you'll do the right thing. In a wrinkle included within the game's Dynasty mode entitled Campus Legend (only for the current gen), you'll have to balance your on and off-the-field personas as you juggle practices with your studies and social life. Campus Legend uses a dorm room HUD similar to last year's Race for the Heisman mode, which unfortunately has been dropped. We wonder if you'll be tempted by options such as "Press A to accept new Escalade from school booster." Do it! We won't tell anybody!

■ The crossing guards of the future are awesome!

PC

Battlefield 2142

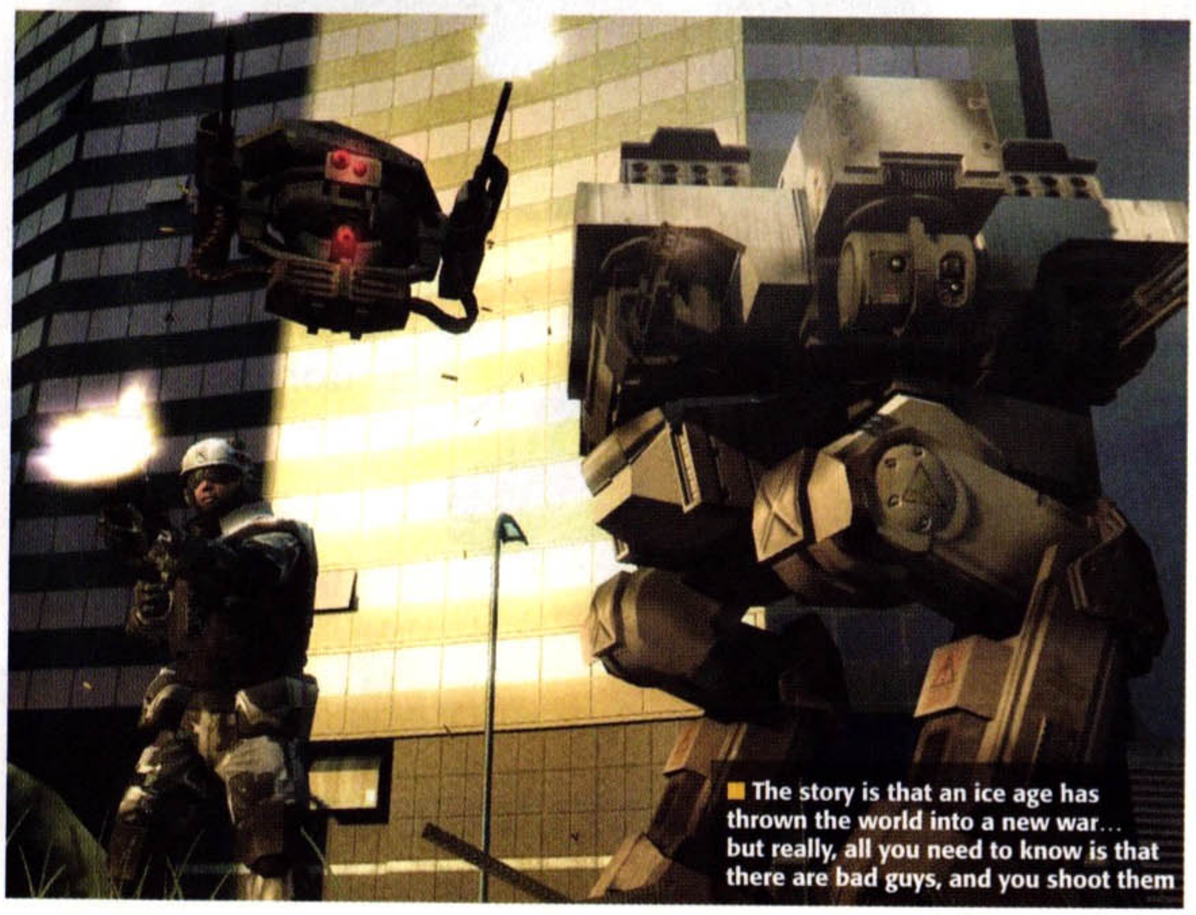
> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (MULTIPLAYER TBD) **> PUBLISHER** ELECTRONIC ARTS
> DEVELOPER DIGITAL ILLUSIONS CE **> RELEASE** FALL

THE FUTURE NEEDS YOUR HELP

As we surmised a couple of months ago, EA's top-selling Battlefield franchise is headed into the future with its next installment. While it's still a bit early for EA to spill all the beans on Battlefield 2142, there are some points worth noting.

What we've seen of 2142 so far has made it look very similar to the admittedly excellent Battlefield 2 – the game has all of the squads, voicechat, and big levels that we expect from the franchise. The twist, of course, is that the near-future setting comes with all kinds of fancy new ways to make war. Mechs, hover-drones, and enticingly advanced weaponry will all change the game from Battlefield 2's established pattern. And, honestly, if Battlefield 2142 were nothing more than a whole new theater in which to wage delicious Battlefield 2-style war, we wouldn't have much of a problem with that.

Of course, there's more to this title than just that. We don't know exactly what, but EA has teased us with the name of the new mode that Battlefield 2142 will introduce: Titan mode. The only word that we could squeeze out of the publisher with regard to this new mode was "huge," so we'll just have to wait and see what it is – but, given developer DICE's track record, our money's on Titan mode being pretty awesome. Whether or not it is good enough to dethrone the traditional Conquest mode as being the de facto way to play the game remains to be seen. EA assures us that the horrific front-end that has plagued the Battlefield series is being worked on as well, so we're pretty happy about the direction that this title is headed in, despite the lack of information at the moment. ■■■



■ The story is that an ice age has thrown the world into a new war... but really, all you need to know is that there are bad guys, and you shoot them

PLAYSTATION 2

Rule of Rose

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION **> PUBLISHER** ATLUS **> DEVELOPER** SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT JAPAN
> RELEASE FALL

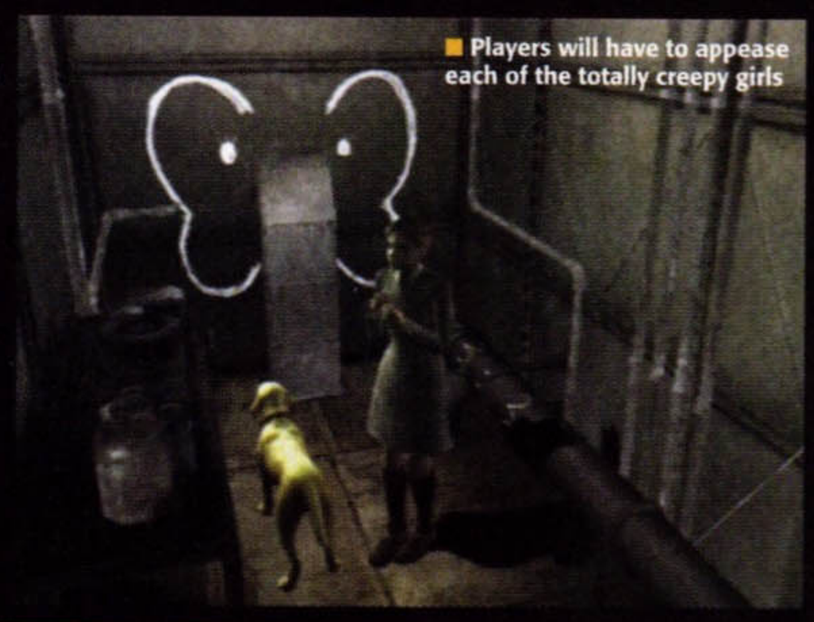
RAINDROPS ON ROSES AND WHISKERS ON KITTENS

The social structures built by packs of little girls are elaborate, and the punishments for not conforming are often harsh. But the little debutantes of Rule of Rose, a promising Japanese survival horror adventure that just recently got a U.S. publishing deal, are taking it a step into the macabre.

Set in the mid-1930s, Rule of Rose sounds much more like a survival adventure than traditional survival horror title. Jennifer, the main playable character, follows a young boy off the bus she is traveling on after he suddenly runs away from her. The stop seems to be in the middle of nowhere, with only a strange manor house nearby. As she approaches, Jennifer is swept into the mystery of the house, the downright creepy little girls outside, and what early reviews of the Japanese version describe as a flying whale. Um, okay...

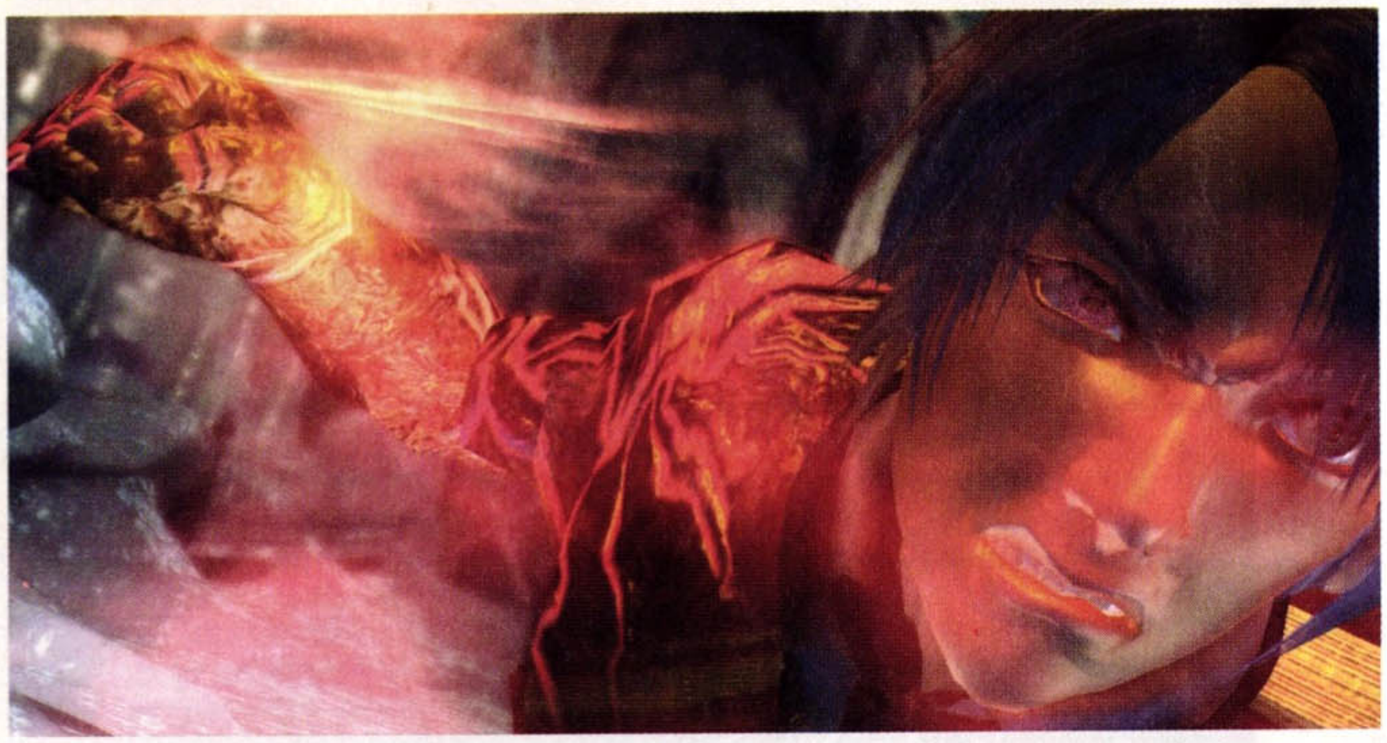
Puzzle solving and appeasing the little devil girls is the main order of business, but fighting bad guys doesn't appear to be part of the deal. Combat isn't a focus of the horror title's gameplay, but a stray dog will assist Jennifer by distracting enemies and pointing out hidden items. Unlike Haunting Ground, which also featured a somewhat helpless girl and her pet, players have no interaction or training options with the dog. It appears that the pooch is there simply as a passive aid.

The idea of a new creepy franchise based on wits and not weaponry is a promising one. Rule of Rose has the distinctive style and quirky premise to make it a standout in the survival horror arena. Luckily, the only stop between evil and our waiting PS2s is a round of localization, so the game could be out sooner than we think. ■■■



■ Players will have to appease each of the totally creepy girls

■ "Keep your eyes closed, baby, while I kiss you. I promise I am human. And totally hot."



UNLIMITED ENABLED

XBOX 360

Enchanted Arms

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ROLE-PLAYING GAME (2-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE)
> **PUBLISHER** UBISOFT > **DEVELOPER** FROM SOFTWARE > **RELEASE** SUMMER

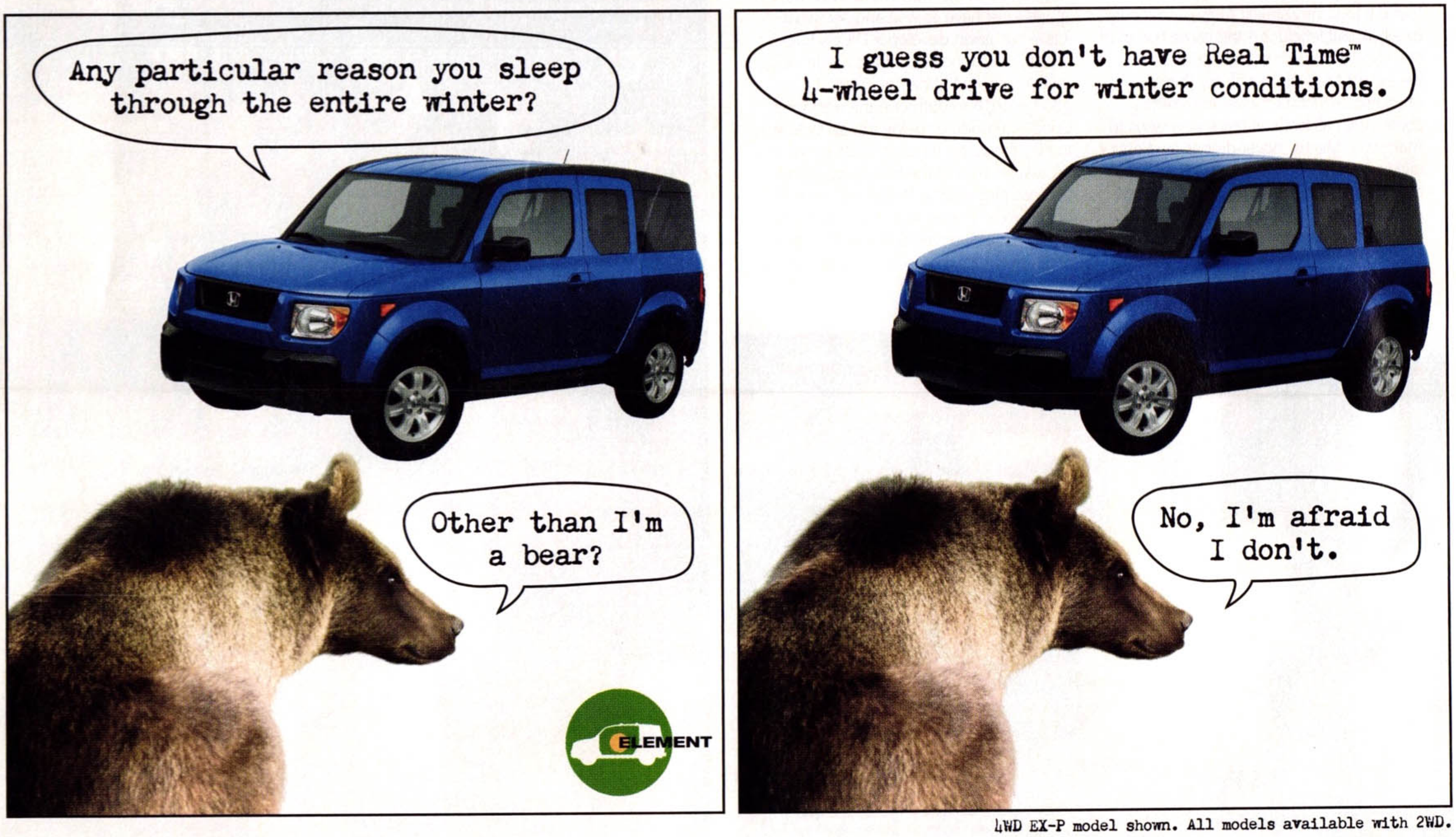
STORY FIRST, RPG SECOND

As advanced next-generation hardware lets developers play around with the conventions of gaming's oldest genres, one stalwart is getting an entry that sticks to the rules, but with beautiful results. From Software's Enchanted Arms is being imported to the States by mega-publisher Ubisoft for release this summer, and the story-heavy saga promises to be a taste of classic RPG delight gussied up with new looks and a quick battle system.

Released in Japan this January, this traditional RPG has a broad story arc familiar to us all – small town hero fulfils his destiny to save the world. We're putting money on a plucky sidekick and a mysterious prophecy, but without a proper English translation to play through, that's all speculation.

What's a certainty, though, is that the frequent in-game cutscenes feature over 100 characters and a storyline promising to last over 50 hours. There are 75 special creatures to recruit, level up, and customize along the way, as well as head-to-head battles over Xbox Live with an online ranking system. Hopefully the game's hybrid of action and magic in a distance-dependant battlefield will be the same method used in these player-versus-player matches, as early looks at the strategy-infused placement system promise great things.

Enchanted Arms is packed full of content and the only question left is if the story, a crucial part of its appeal, holds up on this side of the ocean. With so much emphasis on character development and an epic tale, Enchanted Arms wants to be a thinking man's fast-paced RPG. ■■■



4WD EX-P model shown. All models available with 2WD.

UNLIMITED ENABLED

PSP

Dungeons & Dragons: Tactics

> STYLE 1-PLAYER STRATEGY/RPG (MULTIPLAYER TBD) **> PUBLISHER** ATARI **> DEVELOPER** KUJU ENTERTAINMENT **> RELEASE** NOVEMBER

DIGGING UP YOUR ROOTS

Nevermind all this real-time, action-packed, new-fangled garbage. Dungeons & Dragons has many facets, but hardcore turn-based strategizing is where it all came from – D&D's predecessor, Chainmail, was a fantasy adaptation of then-modern strategy wargames. Dungeons & Dragons: Tactics is, as you might guess from the title, harkening back to this concept while staying as true as possible to the current 3.5 Edition ruleset as possible.

In addition to featuring all nine of the core classes, D&D Tactics will offer two psionic archetypes for players to choose from. The Psion and Psionic Warrior may almost be overkill in terms of the options that you'll have at your disposal when customizing your heroes, but then again, character development is one area that it's almost impossible for a strategy game to be too deep in.

Atari is also promising an epic storyline that will adapt to your party's moral alignment, be it good or evil. The plot will even allow the heroes to shift their alignments based on their actions. Finally, wireless multiplayer (though sadly not online) will let you play with or against your buddies. For our money, this is a perfect venue for the better aspects of the D&D ruleset to shine through in video game form – let's just hope that Atari and developer Kuju can pull it all together. ■■■

■ If you know what a green dragon's breath weapon is, this game is for you

■ What are wolves doing in the house? Giving you XP, that's what

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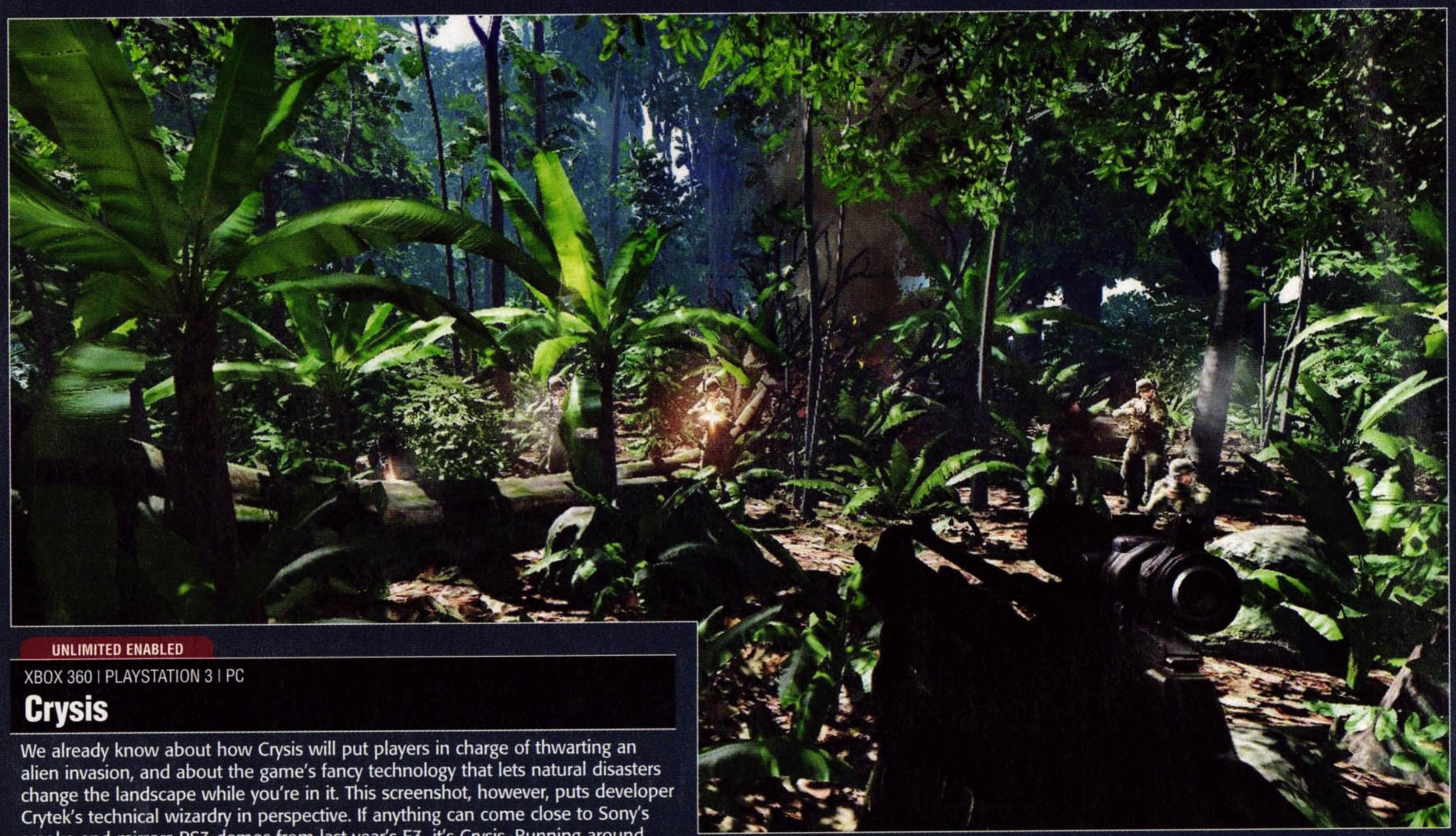
PHOTOPHILE

Mini Previews With Big Pictures



UNLIMITED ENABLED

XBOX 360 | PLAYSTATION 3 | PC

Crysis

We already know about how Crysis will put players in charge of thwarting an alien invasion, and about the game's fancy technology that lets natural disasters change the landscape while you're in it. This screenshot, however, puts developer Crytek's technical wizardry in perspective. If anything can come close to Sony's smoke-and-mirrors PS3 demos from last year's E3, it's Crysis. Running around this jungle would be fun enough to start with – but as we illuminated in a previous issue, there's much more to the game than that. It's honestly tough to think of much of anything that would make this environment look any better. We're almost looking forward to winter just so that we can take a vacation in Crysis' fantastic world.

PSP

Capcom Puzzle World

Capcom may be known largely for genre-defining fighting games and titles swimming with zombies, but the publisher also has a long history of puzzle games. Coming to PSP in a few short months, Capcom Puzzle World collects many of these puzzlers for the first time, including some (such as the Arkanoid-esque Block Block) that have never been available in the U.S. before. Puzzle World also features three entries of both the Buster Brothers and Super Puzzle Fighter series, as well as some slick new features. You'll actually be able to import JPEG files into the games and set them as the backgrounds of the games! Any title that actually lets you customize it is swell in our book, especially when it's packed with addictive puzzle gameplay.

PLAYSTATION 2 | PSP | GAME BOY ADVANCE | PC

Arthur and the Minimoys

Based on filmmaker Luc Besson's (*The Professional*, *The Fifth Element*) kid-friendly Minimoy universe, this early 2007 release from Atari and developer Etranges Libellules is looking like a fun family adventure. Details are still sketchy, but the game will have a heavy emphasis on teamwork between the story's three main characters – Arthur, Selenia, and Bétamèche. Madonna, David Bowie, and Snoop Dogg are doing voice work in the film version, but whether or not we'll get their spoken-word styling in the game is still unannounced.

PSP

Hotpxl

A wicked cool art style can't be all that makes a game stand out, but the additional hook of retro-themed Wario Ware-esque minigames does certainly get one's motor running. Atari is planning a fall release for the promising Hotpxl, which mixes graffiti tinged pop art with classic arcade gameplay in bite-sized portions. Future downloadable content is planned and a couple of multiplayer options called mega party mode (for a bunch of people) and versus (which sounds like a turn-based battle royal) round out the offering.

XBOX 360 | PLAYSTATION 3

Sonic the Hedgehog

To celebrate his 15th anniversary, Sega is bringing the world's fastest spiny rodent to next-gen consoles. Simply entitled Sonic the Hedgehog, this new title will focus on what Sonic does best: poorly-executed platforming! No, just kidding – Sega plans on using the power of next-gen hardware to create a sensation of speed that's more intense than anything in the series yet. And judging by some of the screens we've seen, it doesn't look like Sonic has lost any of the "extreme" attitude that made him really cool back in the mid-nineties. Grinding rails is edgy, dude! Have another Mountain Dew! Speaking of things that leave a foul taste in your mouth, we're hoping Sonic the Hedgehog can erase the bitter tang of Matt's twin archenemies, Sonic Riders and Shadow the Hedgehog.

PLAYSTATION 2 | XBOX | GAMECUBE | DS | GBA

The Legend of Spyro: A New Beginning

Tarzan was raised in a jungle by gorillas. Spyro was raised in a swamp by dragonflies. Really? This explains a lot, actually. We always knew there was something wrong with this purple little freak, but we could never put our finger on it. Not only will Spyro be coping with the shocking news of his origin, he'll also have to save the world again. On the plus side, all of this bad news finally unleashes the little guy's true potential. Ground-to-aerial melee attacks, long-range fury assaults, and elemental-based breath blasts are just a few of the new powers that Spyro will be pulling out of his tormented head. Look for this Sierra-published title on all current-gen platforms this October.

PLAYSTATION 2

Ar tonelico

Nippon Ichi, the company behind games like Disgaea and the Atelier Iris series, has yet another PS2 title that should continue the publisher's tradition of unique RPGs with old school charm and interesting game mechanics. Ar tonelico features a world in which people live in floating cities above the ocean, and are being attacked by mysterious creatures called Viruses. The fate of the world of Ar tonelico lays in the hands of a young knight named Lyner Barset, and some friends who have the ability to change songs into magic. Gameplay details are vague, but potentially very interesting. The field map looks like it includes some platforming elements, and the Encounter Bar indicates how many random encounters can happen in an area. The song-based magic can be used in combat, as can something called the Dive system, which allows you to power up a character by delving into his or her subconscious. It definitely sounds like there are some interesting ideas at play in this game, so expect to hear more about it before its release late this year.

PC

Call of Juarez

Come September, Ubisoft will invite gamers back into the Wild West with this first-person shooter. Call of Juarez puts you in two sets of shoes. Billy Candle, on the run for murder, has to use his archery skills and wits to stay one step ahead of the other playable character, Rev. Ray McCall. The good reverend is out to take down Billy, and uses both silver-tongued preaching and shootin' irons to blaze his trail. The gameplay promises to be much more diverse than a standard FPS, with multiple Old West-style scenarios like saloon brawls and train robberies to play through. Call of Juarez is currently slated for the PC only, but we all know how that goes.

PSP

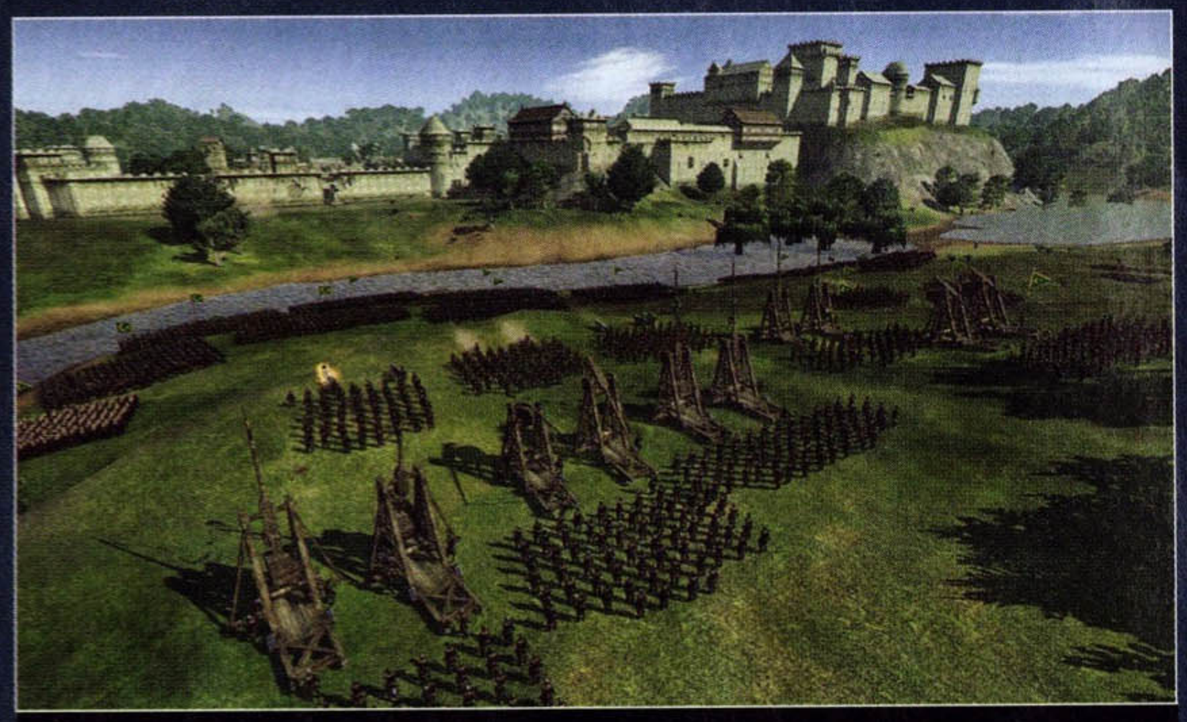
Ultimate Ghosts 'n Goblins

Fans of the ultra-challenging old school action franchise Ghosts 'n Goblins have much reason to rejoice. We recently got a chance to play the latest entry in the series, Ultimate Ghosts 'n Goblins, and it is one sweet little game. Arthur's new adventure recreates the feel of the classic series with everything you remember about the older games: side-scrolling action, blistering difficulty, and knights in boxer shorts. However, many new features bring Ultimate Ghosts 'n Goblins into the present, like 3D characters and environments, new moves and weapons, a save feature, and more. During our playtest, we marveled at the smoothness of the animation, thrilled to the brilliantly recreated music, and were amazed by some of the huge creatures we confronted. If you're a fan of the series, you simply need to play Ultimate Ghosts 'n Goblins. And if you're not, you're likely to become one once you see this game in action.

PSP | DS | PC

Marvel Trading Card Game

Picture Magic the Gathering with form-fitting tights and you are well on your way to understanding this superhero-based trading card game. Based on Upper Deck's long running line of Vs. cards, players will get the chance to command a team comprised of Marvel's greatest heroes and villains (and Thor). All three versions of the game will feature online support, and the PSP and PC versions will even feature cross-platform play. Konami is currently eyeing a fall release for this exciting title, and has plans to support the game with tournaments featuring cash and card prizes.



PC

Medieval 2: Total War

The popular Total War strategy franchise is headed back to the Dark Ages…in a good way. Medieval 2: Total War will stick fairly close to the historical timeline of the Crusades, and is comprised of the two hallmarks of the series: massive RTS battles and turn-based empire building. Look for Sega to publish it this November.

PC

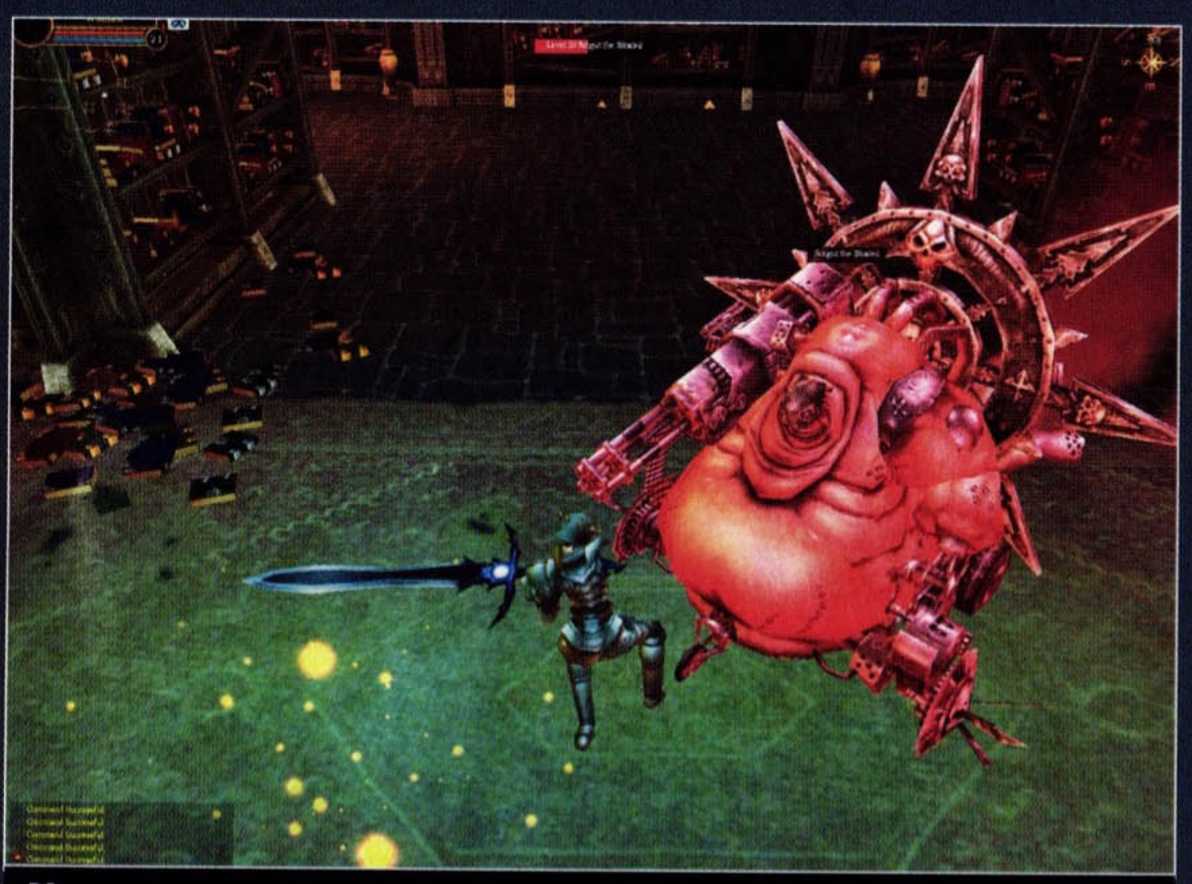
Darwinia

After being buzzed about on the Internet for months, honored at the Independent Games Festival, and getting onto Valve's digital download service Steam, Darwinia is finally getting an honest-to-goodness retail release – new publisher in town Cinemaware Marquee is putting Darwinia on shelves for PCs. The game is a strange offshoot of the real-time strategy genre, where you try to save the helpless Darwinians from the evil Red Virus in a minimalistic, Tron-like virtual world. Frequent puzzle-like elements and a unique control scheme make this a different, yet strangely compelling, kind of game.

PLAYSTATION 3

Fatal Inertia

Sometimes there just isn't much to say about another futuristic racer, but Koei's next-gen Fatal Inertia has a few tricks up its sleeves. Even though the game hasn't been concept approved by Sony Computer Entertainment America, it would seem second nature to give the title a green light. Promising a mix of street and rally racing with some demolition derby action tossed in, the game's strongest feature so far is the weaponry – many of the armaments will let players mess with physics.



PC

Dungeon Runners

With a title like Dungeon Runners, you pretty much know what you're getting into. NCsoft hasn't so much as announced a release date for this title yet, but one piece of information about this Diablo II-esque action/RPG piqued our interest. Dungeon Runners will work much like Runescape in that you'll be able to download the game for free and play it online without paying a cent. If you like it, you'll be able to buy a premium subscription of some kind, which will give you upgraded access to the game. NCsoft will debut more free-to-play titles, including Exteel and Soccer Fury, alongside Dungeon Runners when the new PlayNC service goes online.

PLAYSTATION 2

God Hand

From Atasushi Inaba and Clover Studios (the brilliant minds behind Viewtiful Joe) comes a new tongue-in-cheek brawler. God Hand, due out sometime in 2007, makes no bones about the fact that it's a game about beating the crap out of some bad guys. The action is way over the top, with dudes getting kicked over buildings, big metal things dropping onto heads from the sky, and the main character's God Hand (apparently it's literally one of God's arms grafted onto his body) pounding the bejeezus out of anything in its path. With Clover's action pedigree and trademark humor on tap, this is yet another title that proves that the PS2 has plenty of gas left in the tank.

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360 | PLAYSTATION 2 | XBOX

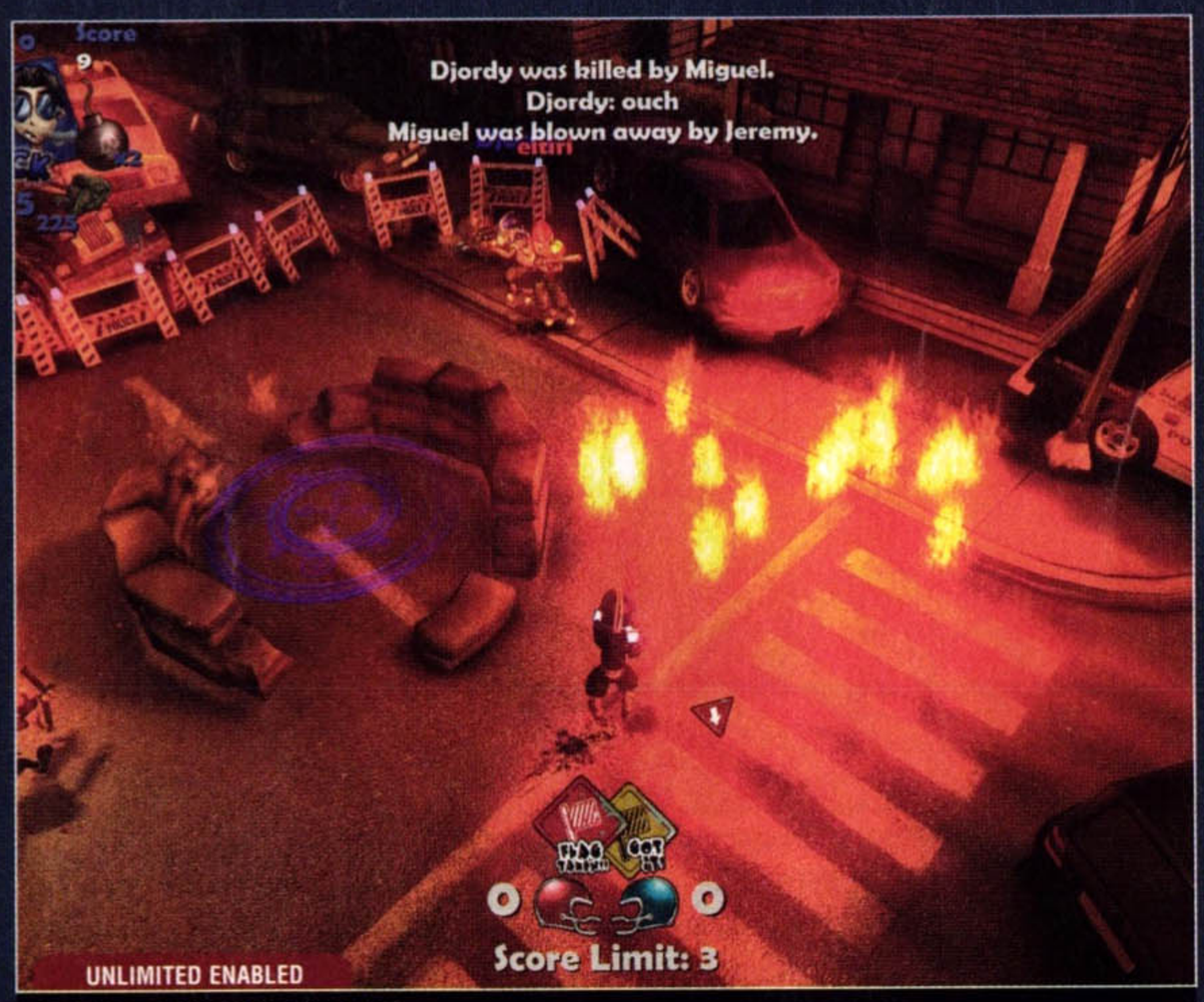
NHL 2K7

Your prayers have finally been answered, hockey fans! Shaved ice will now collect along the boards! While this seems like a completely worthless new feature, it is just one aspect of the overhauled visuals, which include new shooting, passing, and checking animations. As much as we loved the player movement last year, developer Kush Games is once again implementing a new skating engine. The game will also feature a snazzy Iso-Camera perspective, although we've never found a view that works better than the standard "from the rafters" perspective. NHL 2K6 will lead on the next-gen consoles, and will be ported down to the current-gen machines. All four versions are due this fall.

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360

Virtua Tennis 3

Sega's amazing tennis series is making the leap to the next generation with a strong focus on realism. Thanks to significant advancements to shot AI and player movement, pro players like Nadal, Roddick, Hewitt, and Federer will paint the lines, charge the net, and show you just how durable your ankles are. When you don't want to be on the receiving side of a 100 mph serve, you can put your skills to the test in a number of new minigames. Virtua Tennis 3 is currently slated as a fall release. When you see this game in action, we think you'll agree that this is the most exciting thing to happen to tennis since Andre Agassi had a mullet.



PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360 | PC

Monster Madness

Zombies driving go-karts! Mummies piloting mech-walkers! Did we just die and go to heaven, or does this sound like the coolest game ever? Powered by Unreal Engine 3, Monster Madness is poised to make its mark on the next-generation with stark-raving mad four-player co-op. Customizable weapons grant players the ability to slay monsters in style, and the inclusion of vehicles will serve as a nice diversion to the button-mashing mayhem. A release date has yet to be determined, but Artificial Studios hopes to have it ready for consumption next spring.

XBOX 360 | PLAYSTATION 2 | XBOX | GAMECUBE

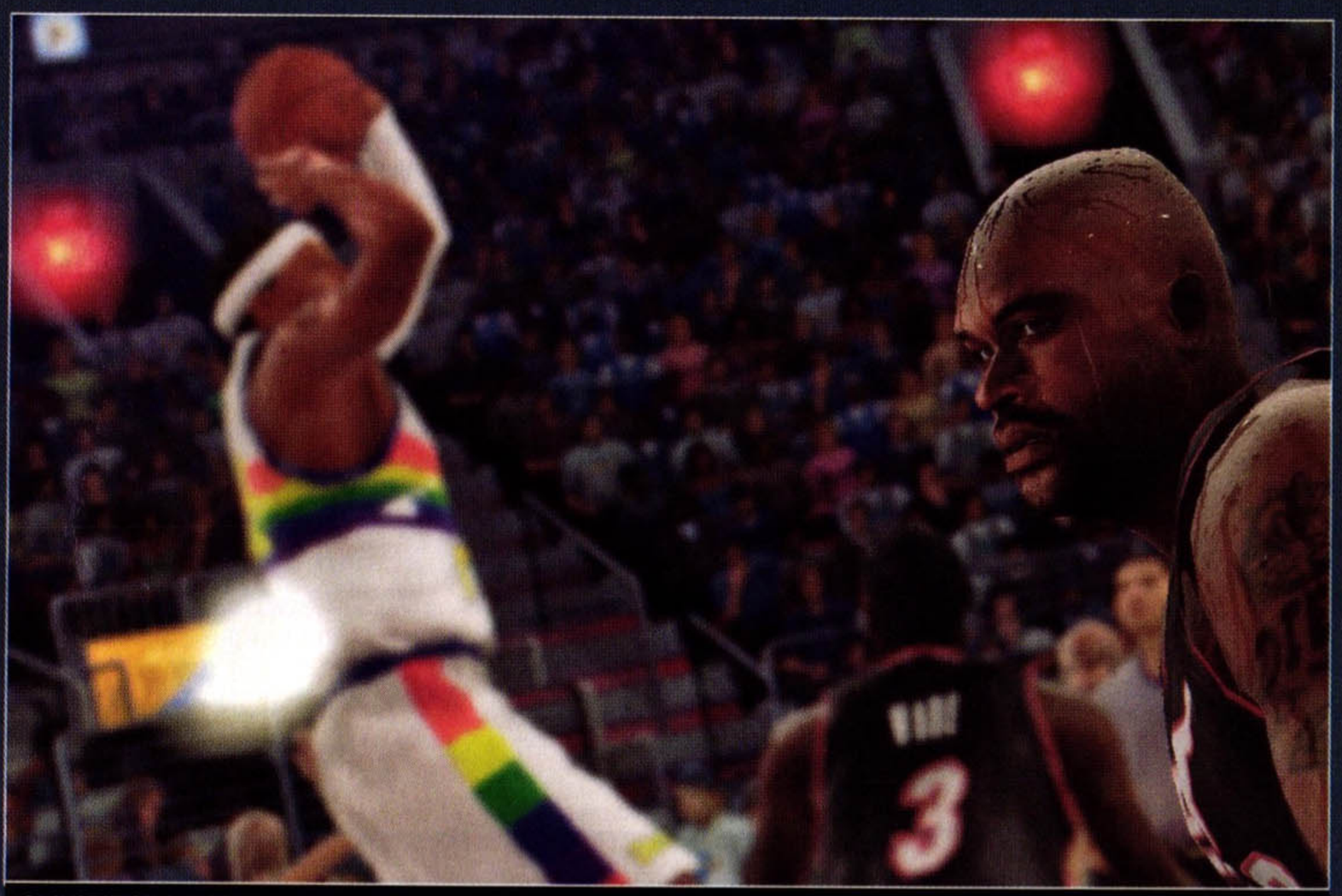
Open Season

Since every CG animated film released seems to gross around six bajillion dollars, every movie studio out there wants to get in on the act. Sony Pictures' contribution to the genre is *Open Season*, which stars Martin Lawrence and Ashton Kutcher (a match made in Hades if there ever was one). Mr. "You So Crazy" stars as Boog, a domesticated bear that finds his way into the wild right before hunting season, while Demi's husband voices the wise-cracking deer Elliot. In the game, which Ubisoft is shipping for all consoles to coincide with the film's September release, players can reenact Boog and Elliot's epic struggle against the hunters. Your weapons include skunk bombs, acorn-shooting squirrels, and other "outrageous woodland pranks." While there's certainly no lack of animal-themed CG movies these days, there aren't a ton of family-friendly games on the 360 yet, and Open Season sports some four-player co-op modes, so we have a feeling this might be a big hit with the kids.

XBOX 360 | PLAYSTATION 3

The Darkness

One move that Majesco made to avoid imploding completely was to sell off some of its more interesting projects. The Darkness, developed by Chronicles of Riddick creators Starbreeze, landed at 2K Games and seems to be coming along nicely. Scheduled for late this year, The Darkness places you in the role of Jackie Estacado, a mafia hitman with the powers of The Darkness, which allow him to summon creatures and grants him other abilities when in shadows. Based on the Riddick engine, you will be able to destroy light sources to create darkness and spawn two living tentacle creatures from your body that have a bevy of interesting powers. A first-person adventure with bizarre living shadow demons (voiced by Faith No More's Mike Patton!) created by Starbreeze is definitely enough to get us excited. One last thing: Jackie dies if he impregnates a woman, passing The Darkness power onto the next generation. Drag.



PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360 | PLAYSTATION 2 | XBOX

NBA 2K7

Although gracing the current-gen platforms, NBA 2K7 is first and foremost being designed for the next-generation machines. To much dismay, players still don't have the ability to leap into the stands and flail blindly at fans. They will however be much more physical on the floor, thanks to a new defensive mechanic that offers the ability to bump offensive players. Developer 2K Sports is also implementing a new alley-oop system, a fully-featured street ball mode, and the most important element of all, flowing hair. NBA 2K7 will once again be ready for the beginning of the basketball season.

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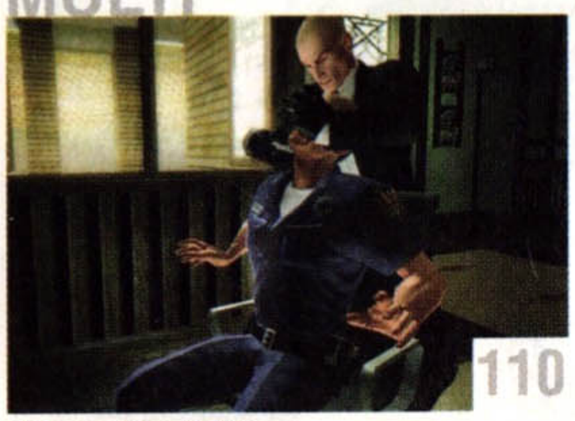
4WD EX-P model shown.
All models available with 2WD.

REVIEWS

We Play The Crap So You Don't Have To

MULTI



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Hitman: Blood Money

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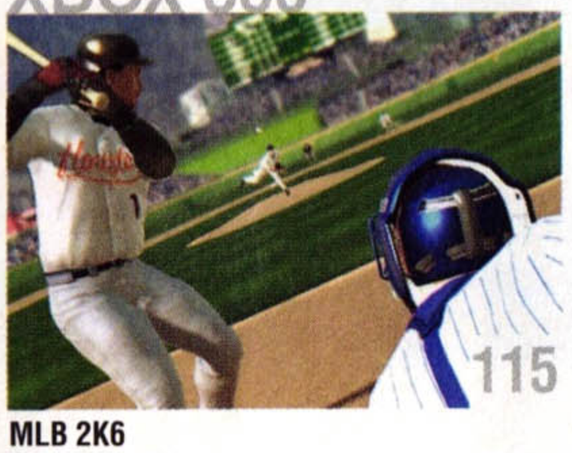

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GAME INFORMER GAME OF THE MONTH

Far Cry Instincts: Predator

Much more than a simple port of the Xbox version, Far Cry Instincts: Predator is two complete games, and each one is awesome. Both campaigns, Instincts and Evolution, offer tons of ways to battle through some of the best-looking environments around, including guns, traps, and animalistic powers. On top of two great storylines, Predator features a wide selection of multiplayer game types, as well as the ability to upload player-created maps. With so much crammed onto one disc, Predator is the game that keeps on giving.

THE SCORING SYSTEM

Our crack (or crackhead, we can never decide which) review team rates games in a number of categories to help you sort out the great from the stuff you'll hate. Most games are reviewed by two staff members, and you will find both their opinions on each review. To make things a little easier we have put together some definitions of what the numbers mean, what we look for in a game, and also a cheat sheet so the newbies can understand our advanced video game jargon. It is important to note that the Game of the Month is determined only by the main review score, not an average of the two opinions.

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.
9	Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.
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.
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.
6	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.
5	Passable. 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.
4	Bad. While some things may work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions to varying degrees or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
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.
2	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
1	Tori Spelling: Reiner hates her!!!

> Concept: What new ideas the game brings to the table and how well old ideas are presented.

> Graphics: How good a game looks, taking into account any flaws such as bad collision or pop-up.

> Sound: Does the game's music and sound effects get you involved or do they make you resolve to always play with the volume down?

> Playability: Basically, the controller to human interface. The less you think about the hunk of plastic in your hands, the better the playability.

> Entertainment: Flat out, just how fun the game is to play. The most important factor in rating a game.

> Replay Value

- **High** – You'll still be popping this game in five years from now.
- **Moderately High** – Good for a long while, but the thrills won't last forever.
- **Moderate** – Good for a few months or a few times through.
- **Moderately Low** – After finishing it, there's not much reason to give it a second go.
- **Low** – You'll quit playing before you complete the game.

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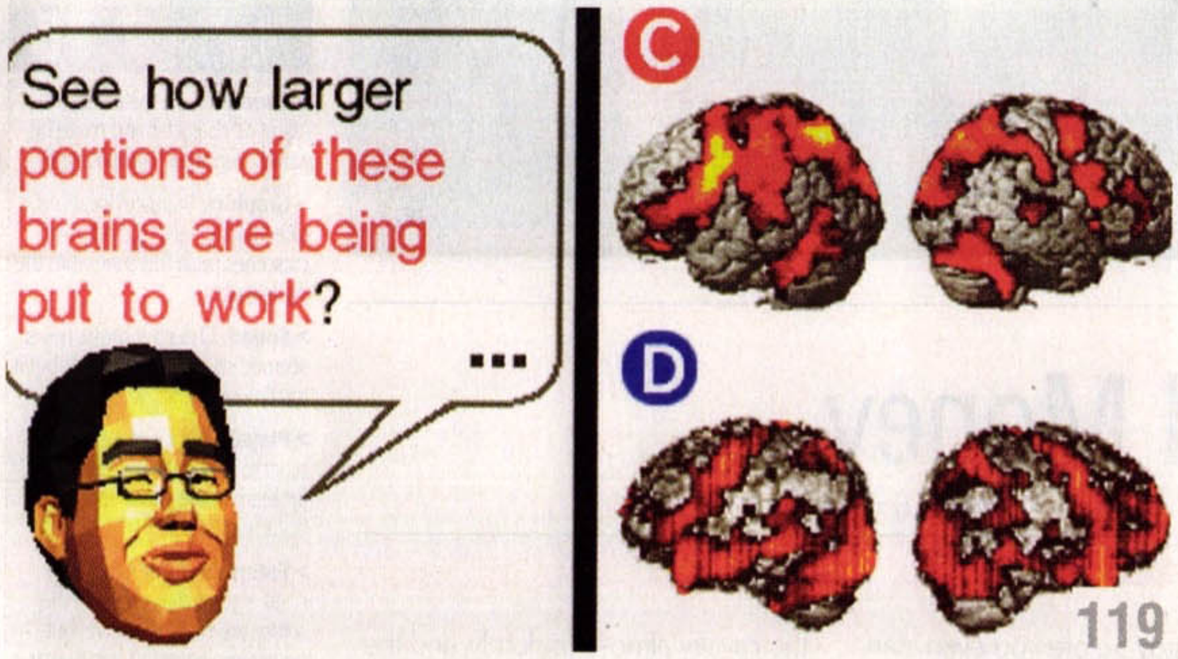
PSP

Ultimate Block Party



GAME INFORMER HANDHELD GAME OF THE MONTH

Brain Age

Nintendo has always been a company willing to push the boundaries of what's considered "fun," and Brain Age might represent its most daring gamble to date. The innovative DS series is already a huge phenomenon in Japan, and now it's coming to the U.S. to see just how dumb we really are. The game is basically an interactive, timed IQ test that measures your math skills, memory, and reading speed, as well as other more intricate tasks. After completion, you receive a mental "age" – younger ages representing a more spry and finely tuned mind. While this might sound about as fun as high school algebra, trust us when we tell you that you'll soon be hopelessly addicted to bettering your mental health.

theedge

When All Games Aren't Created Equal

This is where GI breaks down multi-platform games. So whenever you see this logo, there is important multi-system information regarding that product.

EARLY CHILDHOOD eC	Content suitable for persons ages 3 and older.	MATURE M	Content suitable for persons 17 ages and older.
EVERYONE E	Content suitable for persons ages 6 and older.	ADULTS ONLY AO	Content suitable only for adults.
EVERYONE 10+ E10+	Content suitable for persons ages 10 and older.	RATING PENDING RP	Product is awaiting final rating.
TEEN T	Content suitable for persons ages 13 and older.		

For our newer readers, here is a glossary of terms and acronyms that commonly appear in the magazine. Video game veterans should move along (these aren't the droids you are looking for).

1080i – A resolution specification used for HDTV. 1080i stands for resolution of 1920x1080 pixels. The "i" means that the video is being interlaced

480p – Progressive scanning, this option ("p"= progressive), creates a picture signal with double the scan lines of a conventional interlaced picture, 480i (i = interlaced), to create a noticeably sharper image. The 480p image offers higher picture resolution and eliminates virtually all motion artifacts in a 640x480 pixel resolution setting

720p – A resolution specification used for HDTV. 720p stands for resolution of 1280x720 pixels. The "p" means that the video is in progressive format

action – A term we use for games like Devil May Cry and Viewtiful Joe

ad hoc – A type of wireless connection that connects you with other players in your immediate vicinity

adventure – A term we use for games like Myst and Escape From Monkey Island

AI – Artificial Intelligence. Usually used to refer to how well the computer reacts to a human opponent

bloom – An effect that simulates the soft, blurred glow of bright light reflecting off of surfaces

board – A term we use for games like Jeopardy! and Mario Party

cel shading – A technique used to create 3D rendered objects that resemble hand-drawn animation cels

E3 – Electronic Entertainment Expo. The world's largest convention for video games

fighting – A term we use for games like Mortal Kombat and Dead or Alive

first-party – A game made by a console manufacturer's internal development teams exclusively for its own system

FMV – Full Motion Video. Usually refers to an animated CG cutscene

FPS – Frames Per Second. How many animation frames happen in one second. Also used to denote First-Person Shooters like Halo, Doom, and Call of Duty

framerate – The frames of animation used to create the illusion of movement

frontend – A game's menus and options

GBA – Game Boy Advance

GC – GameCube

Guitar Zero – Someone who thinks that being good at Guitar Hero means they are really a musician. We're talking to you, losers!

HDTV – High Definition Television

infrastructure – A type of wireless connection that uses the Internet to connect with other players over long distances

isometric – Three-quarters top down view, like StarCraft or Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance

ISP – Internet Service Provider. The company that provides you with access to the Internet

jaggies – Graphical lines that are jagged when they should be straight

LAN – Local Area Network. Connecting computers or consoles together within a small space to allow communication between them. Provides fast, simultaneous gameplay

MMO – Massively Multiplayer Online. Usually applied to role-playing titles, we use this term for games with persistent, multi-user online worlds like EverQuest and World of Warcraft

motion blur – Phantom frames follow an object to give the impression of realistic speed

normal mapping – A graphical technique in which a hi-res skin containing 3D information, revealed by light reflecting off the surface, is wrapped around a low-res model

NPC – Non-Player Character. Those people and creatures you see wandering around in games that are not being controlled by actual humans

particle effects – Things like smoke or sparks created in real-time

platform – A term we use for games like Super Mario and Crash Bandicoot

pop-up – When objects onscreen suddenly appear, typically due to poor draw distance

PS2 – Sony PlayStation 2

puzzle – A term we use for games like Tetris and Puyo Pop

racing – A term we use for games like Gran Turismo and Mario Kart

RPG – Role-Playing Game. A game that involves character improvement through collecting and spending points. A term we use for games like Final Fantasy and Xenosaga

shooter – A term we use for games like Ikaruga and Gradius

sports – A term we use for games like Madden NFL

strategy – A term we use for games like La Pucelle and Front Mission

third-party – Something made for a console by a company other than the console manufacturer

MULTI QUICKIES

XBOX 360 | PLAYSTATION 2 | XBOX | GAMECUBE

2006 FIFA World Cup

> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER SPORTS (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA PS2 ONLINE OR XBOX LIVE)
> **PUBLISHER** ELECTRONIC ARTS
> **DEVELOPER** EA VANCOUVER
> **RELEASE** APRIL 24 > **ESRB** E

BOTTOM LINE 8.5

I wasn't nearly so disappointed with the first Xbox 360 FIFA game that came out at launch as some people, despite its lack of game modes. With that said, this newer game is by far the more impressive choice, with fully fleshed out features, excellent animation, solid soccer gameplay, and an exciting presentation, replete with another batch of great music from around the world. The control scheme continues to be extremely simple, perhaps catering to a more casual sports game player than the Winning Eleven series. For my part, whatever FIFA lacks in precision it makes up for in fun and fast paced on-pitch action. For that relatively sparse American demographic that is actually excited about the whole World Cup thing, this title should be a sure thing.—**MILLER**

PLAYSTATION 2 | XBOX | PSP

Outrun 2006: Coast 2 Coast

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER RACING (UP TO 6-PLAYER VIA PS2 ONLINE, SYSTEM LINK, XBOX LIVE, AD HOC OR INFRASTRUCTURE)
> **PUBLISHER** SEGA
> **DEVELOPER** SUMO DIGITAL
> **RELEASE** APRIL 25 > **ESRB** E

BOTTOM LINE 7.5

There's a lot of content in the new Outrun 2006, but for good or bad, much of it will be very familiar to players of the earlier entries. Strike that, it's actually really, really familiar. Highlights are the multiplayer races, a full version of OutRun SP from arcades, new cars and new locations. While some of the content is new, the game plays exactly the same – fast, thick with the flavor of classic arcades, and kind of simplistic. The PSP version, surprisingly, was my favorite, and it might be because it just feels right to do some quick cruising on a portable.—**LISA**

PLAYSTATION 2 | XBOX | PC

Hitman: Blood Money

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** EIDOS > **DEVELOPER** IO INTERACTIVE > **RELEASE** MAY 31 > **ESRB** M

SLOPPILY EXECUTED

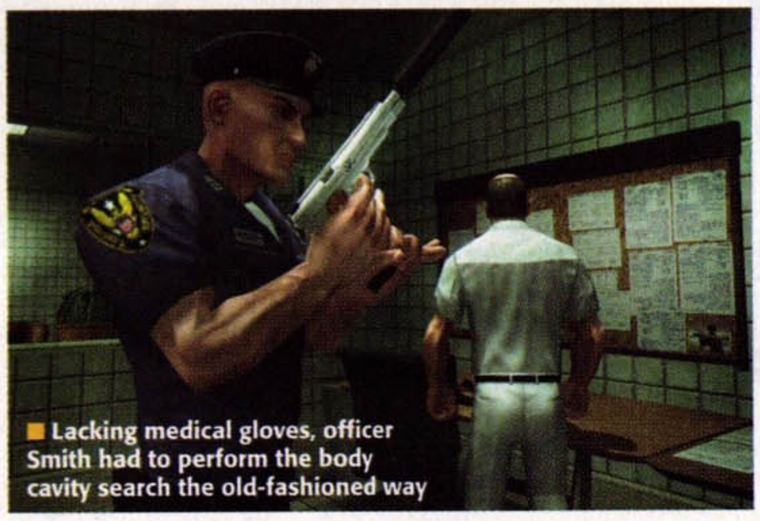
I'm no assassin, but it seems to me that the biggest skill of a gun for hire is crowd management. Get in, cover your tracks, get out, and stay unnoticed among the game's throngs of NPCs. While there's a lot to love about this series, and this entry in particular, Agent 47's world still doesn't offer the subtlety necessary for this great premise to really be satisfying.

The character and the universe aren't to be blamed at all. The tortured and soft-spoken Agent 47 has a great backstory and operates in a world of high-society intrigue. His clients have their own motives, but our flawed hero is focused on professional efficiency and in Blood Money, that includes a new Notoriety system, which has some really fun and rewarding features. A dynamically generated newspaper clipping lets players check the relative amount of information that cops, reporters, and marks might have on them. If you become too recognizable, future jobs are in jeopardy before you even start. Since 47 actually gets to manage his finances this time around, you can choose to upgrade weapons or, sometimes more usefully, pay off the cops to wipe your trail clean.

The setups and locations are also really well established and interesting. A killing during an opera is elaborate and devilishly clever. Consistently, the game shows ingenuity with 47's means and methods, and the environments (along with great cheesy-dramatic soundtrack choices) make the entire game's mood that of privilege, danger, and high drama.

Blood Money's good looks aren't enough, though. For every ounce of effort put into the grand locations, I wish that double that had been invested in AI. The crutch of this title's gameplay isn't mood or appearances, but in trusting that the rules of the universe will stay consistent and predictable. Threat levels rise without much obvious reason, enemies will call in the cavalry almost randomly, and the real-time map is more of a hindrance than a help. A stealth game is successful when it lets players think that they're being smart and that they're managing the situation in a clever way. This is only possible, and therefore success is only possible, when the universe behaves in an understandable and predictable way. Blood Money's citizens do not, and in that way the game fundamentally fails.

But even with this big problem, I still really love elements of the Hitman series and Blood Money in particular. The care in mission design, the new options to choose your equipment (and how it's upgraded), and the main character himself all make this a bitter experience for me. Hitman – the franchise and the character – deserve better than this sometimes buggy entry, and I hope that future releases really let me live the life of a paid killer. Vicariously, of course, that could be great fun.—**LISA**



■ Lacking medical gloves, officer Smith had to perform the body cavity search the old-fashioned way

BOTTOM LINE 7.75

> **Concept:** Take the awesome Agent 47 character and make his world even more complicated

> **Graphics:** Beautiful locations, nice lighting designs, and great cutscenes push this series into the big leagues

> **Sound:** Chamber music never seemed so tongue-in-cheek, but it totally works

> **Playability:** Clunky control schemes are the second biggest problem in the game and a total bummer

> **Entertainment:** Agent 47 is still a great character and the setups are really inventive, but poorly implemented details mar the whole experience

> **Replay Value:** Low

Second Opinion 7.75

Hitman: Blood Money is like trying to eat a delicious chocolate cake with no fork while wearing mittens. There are some tasty morsels to be had, but getting to them is a mess. I love so many things about this series – Agent 47 is a great character, the devious scenarios are packed with intrigue and tension, and your host of deadly gadgets and abilities give you a number of cool ways to approach every mission. However, there are still too many serious flaws with this game for me to give it a glowing endorsement. For a title that requires precise stealth, pulling off basic actions is way too tricky (He's right in front of you! Just strangle him, dammit!). Also, the laws of AI that govern the NPCs are extremely suspect. Sometimes, you can walk circles around your target without raising their curiosity, other times, you will walk into a room and be instantly targeted by the guards. Also, like all the other titles in the series, you spend far too much time looking at the real-time map, waiting for the right moment. A great game marred by sloppy execution.—**MATT**

IT AINT WHERE YOU FROM

WHERE YOU AT

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"Where You At?"

PLAYSTATION 2 | XBOX

Winback 2: Project Poseidon

> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** KOEI > **DEVELOPER** CAVIA
> **RELEASE** APRIL 25 > **ESRB** T

POSEIDON DISASTER

BOTTOM LINE 4

It's true, there are fans of the original N64 shooter Winback and its cover-based gameplay out there. Well, I was a fan of many things back in the day – Hypercolor clothes, A-ha, Koosh Balls – but it doesn't mean I want them to come back. With its antiquated gameplay, all Winback 2 successfully manages to do is look like that creepy middle-aged dude shopping at Hot Topic desperately trying to stay current.

Winback 2 puts you in control of a team of covert ops rejects who are on a mission to...defeat some bad guys. The gameplay revolves solely on popping out of cover and blasting anything that moves. An arcade-style feel is definitely intended here, and the action is as simple as can be, but Winback 2 doesn't even execute its no-brain formula well. The camera is so loose and out of control you feel like you're on a sinking ship, and its core mechanic, taking cover, is frustratingly sloppy. Everything about Winback 2 is reminiscent of the early days of 3D action, and that's definitely not a compliment. If the gameplay weren't bad enough, the graphics are so dull you'll be tempted to shove an icepick in your eye just so you have something to look at, and the cutscenes will have you begging for the quality writing of *Full House*. Winback 2 is an abysmal relic of gamings that sets a low bar for itself and fails miserably to even hit that.—**JEREMY**

> **Concept:** This sequel to an N64 game based around taking cover proves that some franchises simply should not be revived

> **Graphics:** Hey Koei, games have textures now – just thought you'd like to know

> **Sound:** Bad voice work, bad sound effects, bad music...it's just bad

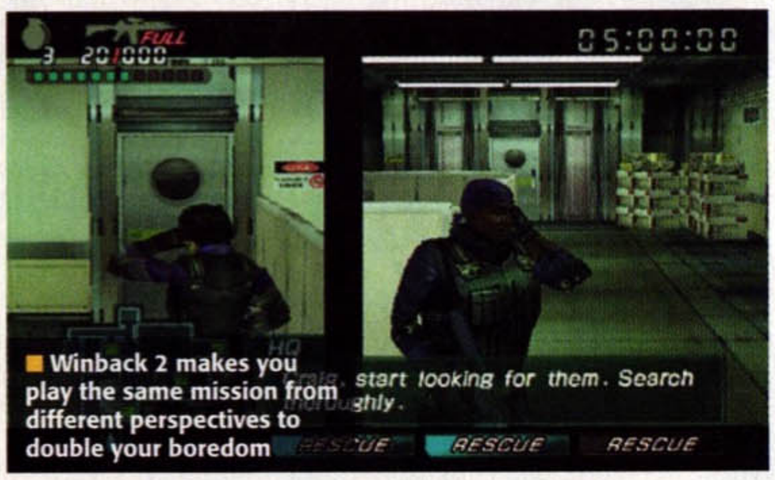
> **Playability:** This shooter moves about as gracefully as a drunken paintball game

> **Entertainment:** Cheap, one-note gameplay may work in arcades, but fails miserably on home consoles

> **Replay Value:** Low

Second Opinion 5

Defiant against graphical evolution, unwilling to grasp the idea that gamers are well versed in seeking cover, poised to bring 1999 back into the spotlight of gaming, behold Winback 2, the game that time forgot! Even if you were frozen in ice for the entire current generation, I think you'll have some qualms with the sticky controls, barren environments, and fact that nearly every enemy you encounter looks the same. This series started off with a unique gimmick, but now this gimmick is an ordinary gameplay mechanic that you see in every other game out there. Without anything else to back it up, Winback really has nothing that will win gamers back.—**REINER**



■ Winback 2 makes you play the same mission from different perspectives to double your boredom

MULTI QUICKIES

PLAYSTATION 2 | XBOX

Rogue Trooper

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION
> **PUBLISHER** EIDOS
> **DEVELOPER** REBELLION
> **RELEASE** MAY 23 > **ESRB** T

BOTTOM LINE 7.25

A solid, if by-the-numbers action title, Rogue Trooper's biggest downfall is its license, which is based on a comic book from the U.K. that few have heard of and fewer have read. Anyone who isn't a fan of the series will instantly be struck by how silly and familiar this sci-fi tale seems, but have to admit that the action is pretty passable. While there are no huge innovations in this game, Rogue Trooper's third-person shooter action works smoothly, has a decent cover mechanic, and contains a large arsenal of interesting weapons. The co-op gameplay is a nice touch, but not enough to overcome the bland graphics and familiarity that permeates every second of gameplay. In short, there are far better action titles than Rogue Trooper out there, but there are far worse, too.—**JEREMY**

PLAYSTATION 2 | XBOX | PC

Commandos: Strike Force

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 16-PLAYER VIA PS2 ONLINE, XBOX LIVE, OR INTERNET)
> **PUBLISHER** EIDOS
> **DEVELOPER** PYRO STUDIOS
> **RELEASE** APRIL 4 > **ESRB** T

BOTTOM LINE 5.5

Commandos built up a cult following as an isometric, small-scale strategy series, so I find it curious that it's abandoned its roots in favor of a full-3D experience. That said, there has been some attempt to preserve some of the franchise's hallmarks, like the ability to switch between characters with different abilities to accomplish level goals. However, in practice, this has resulted in nothing more than a poorly done tactical shooter that can't seem to decide if it wants to be a bad version of Hitman or a bad version of Medal of Honor. If I had more space, I could detail the game's numerous flaws in control, design, and AI, but I don't. Thank God.—**MATT**

XBOX | PC

Dreamfall: The Longest Journey

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ADVENTURE > **PUBLISHER** ASPYR MEDIA > **DEVELOPER** FUNCOM
> **RELEASE** APRIL 18 > **ESRB** M

USING ILLUSION

BOTTOM LINE 8

Adventure games are all about story. But there are crap parts of the genre that Dreamfall (and its obvious inspiration, Indigo Prophecy) have ditched for this new flavor of adventure games, and I say praise the heavens for that. This sequel has a great story and good pacing to back it up.

Abandoning the point and click interface of old adventure titles, Zoe and the other playable characters move freely through locations with an easy third-person perspective, quickly manage a minimal inventory system, and pick from amusing (and gameplay-crucial) conversation options. Besides making moving around just plain more enjoyable, the team at Funcom has also done an able job with the more nebulous areas of design. Locations feel full, big, and really lived in, but you'll never get lost – the size is a skillfully-executed illusion. Dreamfall's cast of characters is handled just as well through great animation and voice acting, making even the most casual encounter memorable.

In *The Princess Bride*, offenders are threatened not with death, but with "the pain." I fear a similar fate if too much of the story is revealed. Let's leave it at a confirmation that the earlier game's events and characters are involved, but playing through the first game is certainly not required to understand this entry. Through the lengthy narrative, much of the storytelling is quick, to the point, and well written. This is, I think, the game's strongest asset by far.

Still, Dreamfall occasionally asks players to do mindless fetch quests or puts them into puzzles that aren't terribly well designed. If the story hits home for a player, though, they'll get through, and I think that these characters will be enough for many.—**LISA**

> **Concept:** Find April Ryan, save April Ryan...at least, that's what the creepy girl in the TV will tell you to do

> **Graphics:** Character animation in particular is great and evocative

> **Sound:** An ambient score shifts with the many environments and is subtle, but a nice touch. The voice acting is top notch

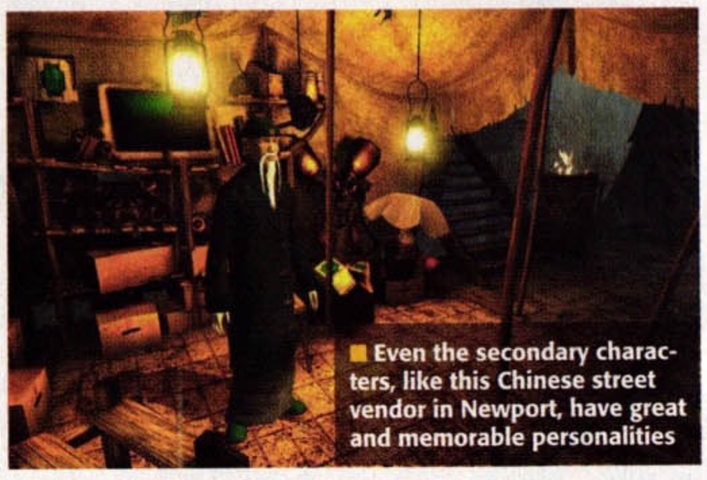
> **Playability:** A simple interface is made more complicated by d-pad/analog stick confusion

> **Entertainment:** Even if your feelings about the first game fall into the "hated" or "oblivious" camps, this is still a good, well-written ride

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion 7.5

For a game with little actual gameplay apart from a combat system that would have even been embarrassing 10 years ago, Dreamfall is a remarkably compelling experience. It casts off excess adventure game baggage like counter-intuitive inventory puzzles and spends a lot of time establishing a convincing backdrop for the story's surreal events. It sometimes falls back on clichés (cryptic little ghost girls are creepy. We get it), but generally keeps everything together with decent pacing and a cool cast of characters. It may not be a herald of the adventure game renaissance, but it's a step in the right direction...yet still a few steps behind Indigo Prophecy.—**JOE**



■ Even the secondary characters, like this Chinese street vendor in Newport, have great and memorable personalities

PLAYSTATION 2

Atelier Iris 2: The Azoth of Destiny

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ROLE-PLAYING GAME **> PUBLISHER** NIS AMERICA **> DEVELOPER** GUST **> RELEASE** APRIL 25 **> ESRB** E10+

TRANSMUTING SILVER INTO BRONZE

BOTTOM LINE 7.5

Beneath a skin of idealism and 2D graphics, last year's Atelier Iris was a distinctive yet traditional RPG that emerged as one of my favorite surprises of 2005. As a prequel to the first game's story, Atelier Iris 2 does a commendable job of tightening familiar systems and gameplay from its quirky predecessor. Even though these elements coalesce into another charming adventure, the end result feels more like a Saturday morning cartoon – a cheery jaunt with minimal depth.

As a young swordsman named Felt, you explore a terrestrial Kingdom in conflict while your impending girlfriend Viese handles things on a floating continent. Though you can switch between characters, it would be a stretch to say that these are are two separate storylines; the real action is on the ground, with Viese occasionally synthesizing and doing fetch quests in the sky. The tale unfolds without any real fireworks, and you basically encounter every archetypal character in the book. Does the video game world really need another spunky girl who thinks she can cook?

Thankfully, the technical side of the game is much more sound. Practically every aspect has been simplified; there's no more tedious overworld exploration, and you won't be doing nearly as much backtracking though environments. You still collect various elements from your surroundings as you advance, but the whole process of synthesizing through alchemy is less daunting since the disposition of your Mana no longer affects your alchemy. If you've got the materials, you've got the item – no babysitting required.

Even though Atelier Iris 2 has undergone enhancements, it's the ultimate loss of complexity in the story and gameplay departments that make it fall short of greatness. Sure, it may be more accessible, but Atelier Iris never exactly fit the profile of a mainstream series, and now everything just feels a bit shallow. Still, if you liked the first title and just can't get enough of that alchemy, it's worth playing as you wait for the next obsolete pseudo-science to sweep the nation. Personally, I've got my money on Orgonomy.—**JOE**

> Concept: People still like alchemy, right? Sequel time!

> Graphics: The colorful, hi-res sprites are practically begging for some extra frames of animation

> Sound: Plenty of voiced cutscenes that didn't make me claw at my ears

> Playability: A new FF IX-esque skill system is easy to understand and use, though item synthesis still takes some getting used to

> Entertainment: A solid title, but it just isn't particularly compelling

> Replay Value: Moderate

Second Opinion 6.5

This is one of the most disappointing sequels I've ever played. Though it streamlines the already-great item creation and combat systems, the charm and humor that pulled me into the first game's story are utterly lost. Likewise, Atelier Iris 2's pacing leaves much to be desired. When the dialogue and characters are boring and bland, there's no reason to make players wade through huge chunks of it just to get to the good parts. Lacking the unique emphasis on exploration and the clever localization that made the first game a surprisingly good time, Atelier Iris 2 is just another mediocre eastern RPG that only the truly devoted will love.—**ADAM**

PLAYSTATION 2 QUICKIES

PLAYSTATION 2

Monster Rancher EVO

BOTTOM LINE 8

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION/RPG **> PUBLISHER** TECMO **> DEVELOPER** TECMO **> RELEASE** APRIL 11 **> ESRB** E10+

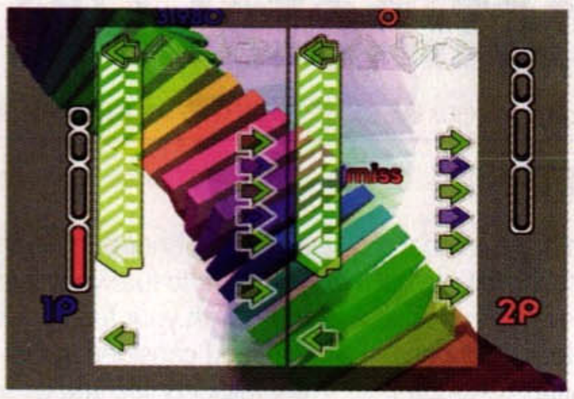
How strange…. This fifth entry in the Monster Rancher franchise puts forward the best visuals in the series, takes great advantage of the circus setting, and adds tons of traditional RPG depth, but manages to be a bit of a letdown in the details. The game's explanation of battle and training systems makes each important area way more confusing than it needs to be, and the disc-based monster creation produced more duplicates than I've encountered in earlier entries. It might be confusing as hell in the beginning, but trial and error will let gamers with perseverance reap some fun rewards.—**LISA**

PLAYSTATION 2

Dance Factory

BOTTOM LINE 8

> STYLE 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION **> PUBLISHER** CODEMASTERS **> DEVELOPER** BROADSWORD INTERACTIVE **> RELEASE** MAY 8 **> ESRB** E



I'm going to go out on a limb here and offend a lot of DDR purists and tell you that this is the dance/rhythm game you should play this year. It's certainly not the production values, which consist of functional but non-descript menus and spinning color backgrounds during songs. And the paltry on-disc song list definitely won't inspire anyone. Even the included minigame is relatively uninspired. So what's the deal? Dance Factory can take any CD you put in the PS2 and transfer any or all the songs to danceable tracks – and I'm not talking cheap, non-rhythmic versions. The newly created dance tracks firmly match up with the song rhythms, especially if you find music that you'd actually dance to in real life. The feature works great, and often creates some stellar fun from music that (gasp!) you actually want to listen to! The game's not perfect by any means, but this is an idea that is long overdue, and I, for one, think it deserves some props.—**MILLER**

PLAYSTATION 2

Real World Golf

BOTTOM LINE 7

> STYLE 1 TO 4-PLAYER SPORTS **> PUBLISHER** MAD CATZ **> DEVELOPER** AQUA PACIFIC/VALCON GAMES **> RELEASE** APRIL 4 **> ESRB** E

Real Golf aims to provide a cheaper home alternative to those large "virtual golf" simulators. However, since it uses gloves attached by strings to the base floor unit instead of motion-sensing technology, the sensation feels more like being a marionette than Vijay Singh. Running on Renderware, the game actually looks better than you might expect, and the control scheme works decently (although it doesn't really detect the subtleties of your swing). It's a decent time, but the base game here is light years behind series like Tiger Woods and Hot Shots in terms of depth and refinement. I could see this reaching a more casual audience of duffers, but hardcore fans of golf video games probably won't be satisfied.—**MATT**

XBOX 360

Far Cry Instincts: Predator

> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 16-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE OR SYSTEM LINK) > **PUBLISHER** UBISOFT > **DEVELOPER** UBISOFT MONTREAL > **RELEASE** MARCH 28 > **ESRB** M

GAME INFORMER GAME OF THE MONTH

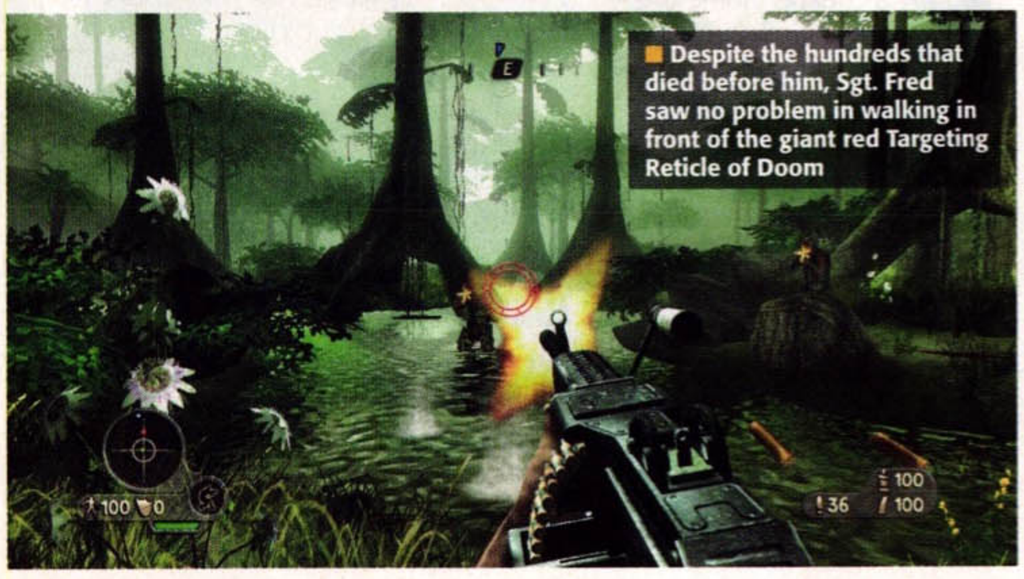
SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST

Although the game places a huge arsenal at your fingertips, including stealth kills, lethal branch traps, animalistic powers, explosives, and (of course) a huge selection of guns, your greatest weapon in Far Cry Instincts: Predator is your mind. With so many ways to approach any given combat situation, Predator is more cerebral than other shooters, and allows you to play the way you want to. Do you like sneaking up on enemies like Sam Fisher or charging at them head on? Do you want to lure your foes into traps or actively stalk them with your feral powers? It's completely up to you, and considering that it features both the first Far Cry Instincts title and its sequel Evolution, Predator is about as action-packed as games get.

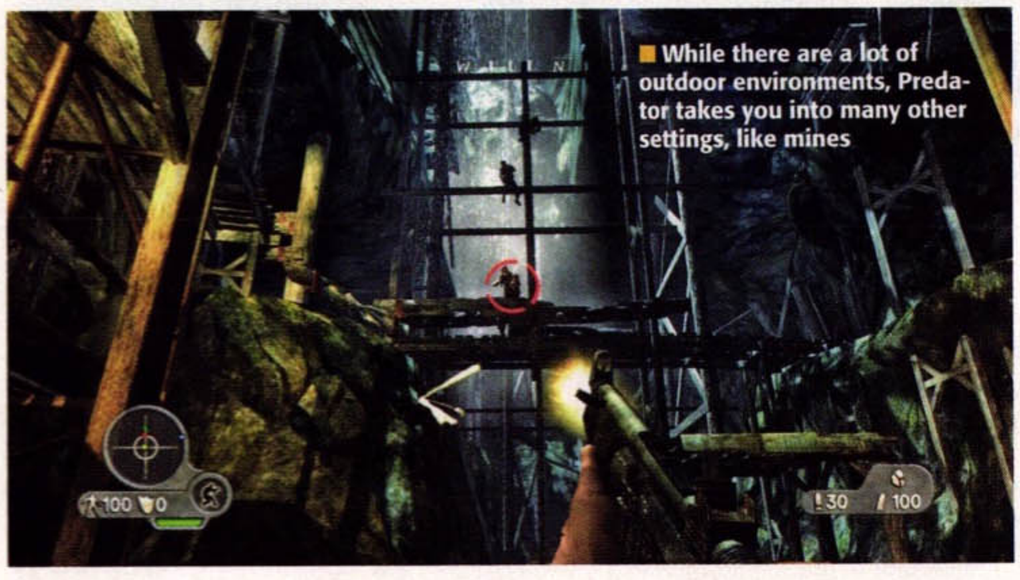
Both campaigns put you in the shoes of Jack Carver, a smuggler endowed with feral powers (which gradually evolve over the course of the first game). You have to play through Instincts to play the Evolution campaign (although there is a cheat code to unlock it), and the second game features even more freedom than the first. All of Jack's weapons and abilities from Instincts return, along with pipe bombs, molotov cocktails, and a new Feral Climb ability. Several sections also feature multiple objectives that you can tackle in the order you want, making Evolution even more freeform than Instincts. The second campaign, however, feels easier than the first, as the AI in Instincts has been made deadlier to give those who played the Xbox version a reason to revisit it. Although there are some moments when your enemies make stupid, glitchy mistakes, on the whole they are a deadly bunch, and Instincts is a long, difficult challenge. Evolution, on the other hand, felt a bit breezier to me, although it is definitely not without its tough spots.

Aside from the two campaigns, Predator also features a healthy mix of online game types, as well as a map editor. Multiplayer is a lot of fun, although I did experience some lag online that aggravated Predator's already-chunky aiming a bit (your reticle moves less fluidly than in other shooters, but isn't hard to adapt to), and most match types are pretty familiar. Since you can bring your created stages online, there is a huge variety of online maps, some of which are great, others...less so. Still, despite some technical glitches that prevent it from evolving into the next big thing in shooters, Predator is a lot of game for your money and packs a ton of thrills. I definitely can't wait to see where this series goes next.—**JEREMY**

■ The water is this game is easily some of the best around



■ Despite the hundreds that died before him, Sgt. Fred saw no problem in walking in front of the giant red Targeting Reticle of Doom



■ While there are a lot of outdoor environments, Predator takes you into many other settings, like mines

BOTTOM LINE 8.75

> **Concept:** Far Cry Instincts and its sequel are ported to the 360 in one fully-loaded package

> **Graphics:** Impressive, but inconsistent. Interior environments look nowhere near as good as the lush jungles

> **Sound:** The main character's voicework and weapon effects are good, but enemy callouts are repetitive

> **Playability:** Aiming is a bit sluggish, but the control scheme otherwise smoothly delivers a huge amount of gameplay options

> **Entertainment:** With two complete games and a big multiplayer component, Predator is definitely a great addition to the 360 library

> **Replay Value:** High

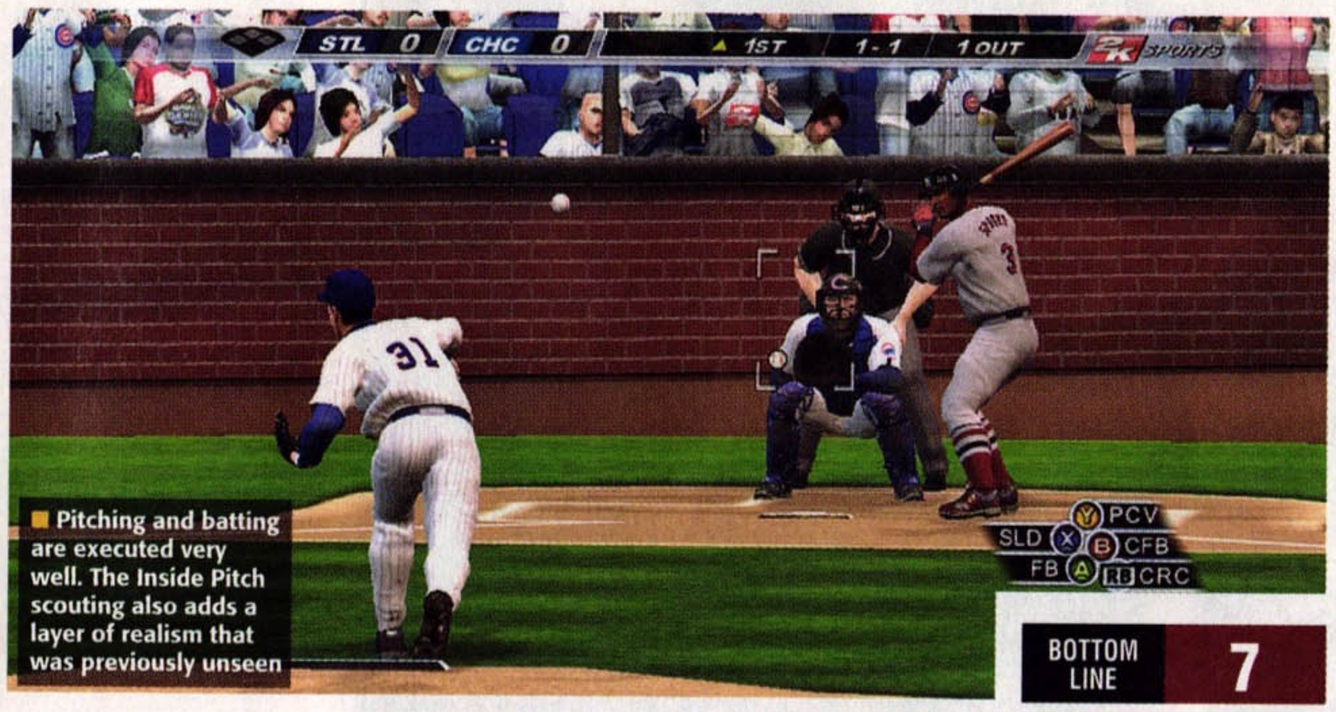
Second Opinion 8

I am a huge dork for the original Far Cry on PC. Its outstanding blend of stealth, action, and wide-open levels hooked me like few games ever have. On the other hand, the first console title left me wanting more. It's still a good game, but the stealth didn't work as well, vehicle controls were even worse than before, and the general imprecision of the aiming mechanics didn't thrill me. With this enhanced port to the 360, I was hoping that Ubisoft would clean up some of these issues. Well, they didn't. A bunch of new content has been appended to the single-player game, and everything works as well as it did on the regular old Xbox – which is, admittedly, better than many other console FPS titles manage. But while Predator is easily a competent and entertaining game, I just can't make myself love it.—**ADAM**

XBOX 360

Major League Baseball 2K6

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER SPORTS (2-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE) > **PUBLISHER** 2K SPORTS > **DEVELOPER** KUSH GAMES
> **RELEASE** APRIL 10 > **ESRB** E



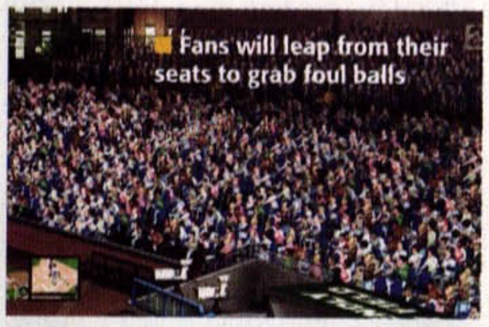
■ Pitching and batting are executed very well. The Inside Pitch scouting also adds a layer of realism that was previously unseen

BOTTOM LINE **7**

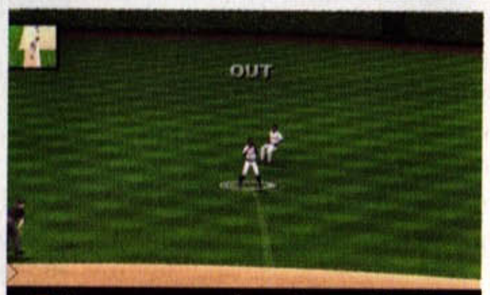
CURRENT-NEXT-GEN

The Xbox 360 has already amassed an enormous sports library. Although offering something for everyone, hardly any of the titles truly feel at home on this machine. Major League Baseball 2K6 is another release that showcases significant graphical embellishment, but ultimately cannot hide the fact that it was originally designed for the current generation.

The most noticeable alterations that have been applied to this version are purely of the cosmetic sort. At long last, it would appear that the days of pixelated paper-thin fans are finally behind us. The bleachers are crammed to capacity with over thirty thousand polygonal fans who can leap from their seats and clamor for a souvenir foul ball. The finest of detailing is also apparent within the player models, whose gloves are authentic to the very stitch. You'll also see that the jerseys ripple realistically when a player takes a big cut or sprints to wrap his mitt around a lazy fly ball.



■ Fans will leap from their seats to grab foul balls



■ As you can see from the positioning of the second baseman and right fielder, bloopers hardly ever drop

It's the content that the naked eye cannot detect that really makes this version quite different. Throws from the outfield have a little more zip on them, which in turn reduces the chance of a player scoring from second. Players showcase a higher level of intelligence while rounding bases and actually seem to be aware of where the ball is. Fielders charge grounders with newfound aggression, leading to more double play opportunities. Collision detection has also been enhanced. If a player is hit with a ball, they'll stand stunned for a few seconds before reacting. Even the velocity of pitching (for all difficulty levels) has increased to harness a higher level of realism.

Sadly, in going the extra mile to tighten up the gameplay, a number of new Bill Buckner-type errors have arisen. Several of my double play opportunities were muffed simply because the ball would fly right through the player who went to cover the bag. Given how quickly fielders can run, I rarely landed a blooper in the outfield. Because of this, most games were won based solely off of home runs. Also, hardly any of the players resemble their real-life counterparts. For instance, Ichiro looks Caucasian. Even though this game released after the season had already started, the rosters are not even close to accurate. To top it all off, create-a-player doesn't offer any form of facial customization.

This version is certainly a little easier on the eyes, but it never really gets the bat squarely on the ball with the gameplay that is delivered. As Cubs fans say, maybe next year.—**REINER**

> **Concept:** This port features minor tweaks to the graphics and AI, but its excellent moments are matched with some downright unforgivable flaws

> **Graphics:** Some player models look like plastic mannequins, but the new crowd details and lighting are quite impressive

> **Sound:** The commentary team reacts accordingly to situations in the game, but many phrases are often repeated throughout the course of a game

> **Playability:** Inside Edge adds a great deal of authenticity to the mix, but problems in the fielding truly hold this title back from being a respectable sim

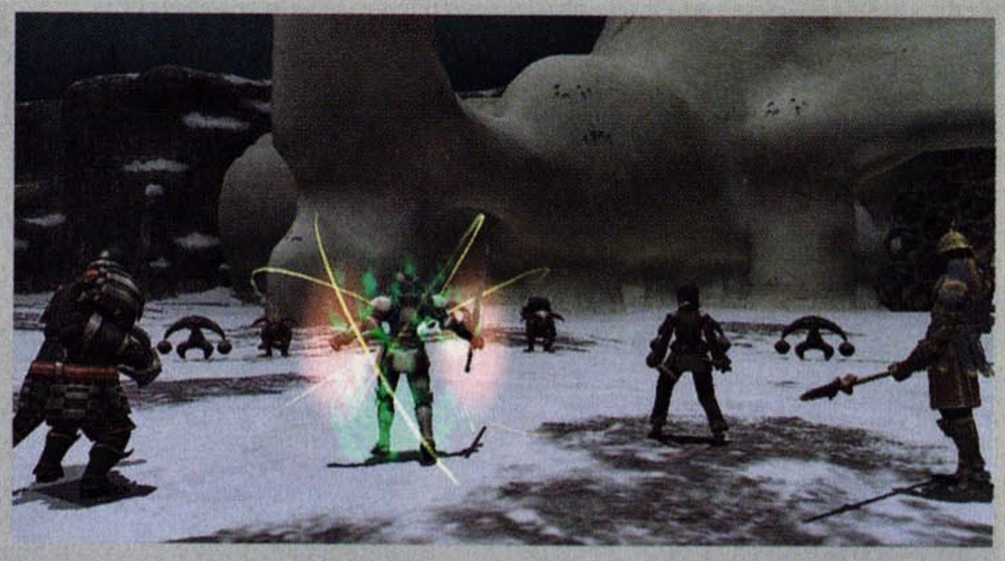
> **Entertainment:** Needs to be sent back to the minors to iron out the fundamentals

> **Replay Value:** High

■ Ichiro looks nothing like his real life counterpart

Second Opinion 7.5

Major League Baseball 2K6 steps up to the plate looking like a million dollars and confidently pointing to cheap seats. But all it takes is one error to darken that outlook. The game's defense needs some work, and it's not something that is solved by simply moving a gameplay slider. The problem with this game's defense are ones that are simply unforgivable. Sure, everyone lets a few by sometimes, but you just never know which way the ball is going to bounce. For those excitable manager types, I suggest you buy this game with some Tums.
—KATO



XBOX 360

Final Fantasy XI

> **STYLE** MASSIVELY MULTIPLAYER ONLINE ROLE-PLAYING GAME > **PUBLISHER** SQUARE ENIX
> **DEVELOPER** SQUARE ENIX > **RELEASE** APRIL 18 > **ESRB** T

SAME GAME, NEW ROBES

It's not World of Warcraft, but it's still a lot of fun. I originally began my travels in the world of Vana'diel three years ago. Even at that time, the level-grinding gameplay lagged behind the current MMORPG market. It was a slow play, but the allure of inhabiting the world of Final Fantasy kept me going. I played for 18 hours straight just to complete the quest that allowed me to ride a chocobo, and always found myself staring in disbelief when someone summoned Ifrit.

To much astonishment, the world of Final Fantasy XI is still going strong with over 500,000 subscribers spread across the globe. Xbox 360 owners now have the chance to join the PC and PlayStation 2 users through the game's amazing cross-platform support. The Xbox 360 version utilizes USB keyboard support, runs in a crisp 720p resolution for HDTV owners, and includes the Rise of the Zilart, Chains of Promathia, and new Treasures of Aht Urhgan expansion packs. Although consuming over five gigs of hard drive space and taking over two hours to install, this game feels right at home on the Xbox 360.

If you've already played it on another console, the new expansion fixes a number of problems, and at long last gives fans what they want – the chance to play as the blue mage. It is disappointing that you have to reach level 30 to don the blue robes, but the experience that Square has tailored around this job is the best that the game offers. The corsair and puppet master jobs are also quite interesting. Conversely, if you've never played Final Fantasy XI before, much of the experience demands the support of other players. If you can join a shell that is serious about the game, and have the tolerance for the down time (be it waiting for other players, or sitting around to heal), this is a game that you could enjoy for years to come.—**REINER**

■ Expect to see plenty of blue mages looking for parties

BOTTOM LINE **7.25**

> **Concept:** An old school MMORPG for the next generation

> **Graphics:** This game was always gorgeous. It doesn't look next-gen per se, but the boost in resolution really makes the finer details stand out. Unfortunately, menu text is still a bit difficult to read

> **Sound:** The incredible orchestrated score ties into and enhances the themes for each environment

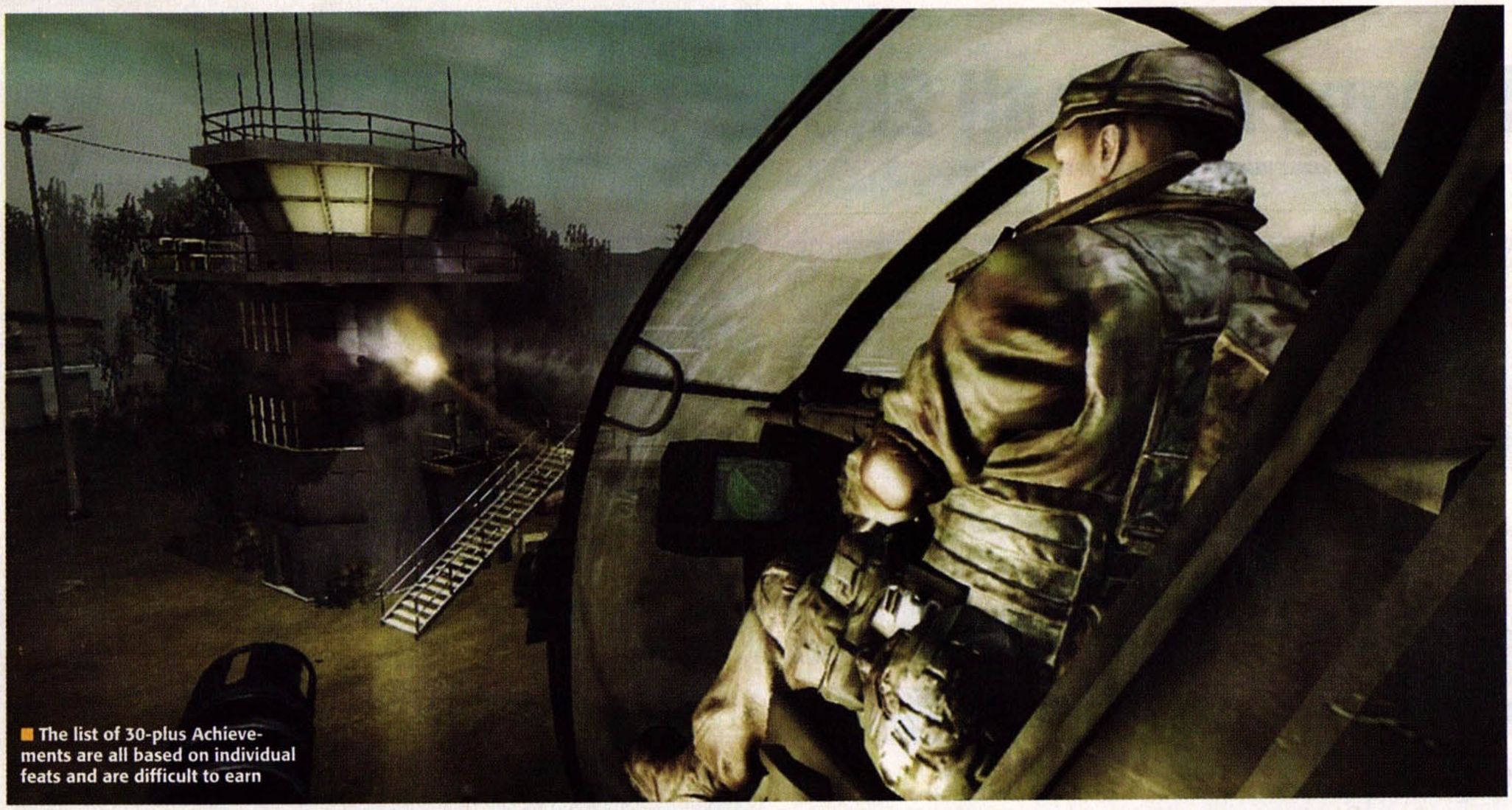
> **Playability:** Although a keyboard is a necessity, the interface is tailored well around the 360 controller

> **Entertainment:** A game of grinding for levels. However, this game's slow burn can be transformed into an amazing experience if you have the right people in a party

> **Replay Value:** High

Second Opinion 7.5

This is a game that is a few years old and getting a fresh coat of paint on the 360. It looks gorgeous. Characters, enemies (including the new monster types), and environments all have that delicious Final Fantasy vibe; and when I played a few years ago, that was almost enough to keep me hooked. But I couldn't get past a few things that are just unfriendly to players, and these features are almost too much to bear in the current climate of welcoming MMOs. Some of these issues are just minor usability bummers – text that's sometimes hard to read, map availability and usage, general interface flakiness, etc. But the new jobs are all pretty cool, the graphics are much improved, and the upcoming additions look promising. FF XI might be a hard road, but it certainly isn't without its rewards.
—LISA



The list of 30-plus Achievements are all based on individual feats and are difficult to earn

BOTTOM LINE 7.75

> **Concept:** The entire game has been pulled apart and reconstructed for the Xbox 360. This helps multiplayer, but damages the campaign

> **Graphics:** All of the new facial expressions on the soldiers, vibrant explosions, and detailed terrain are worth displaying proudly on an HDTV

> **Sound:** Follows the video game war formula of offering noisy weapons and an orchestrated score. In other words, it's not music to your ears

> **Playability:** Miserable vehicle controls, but the weapon play is excellent, and console games rarely offer such deep team tactics

> **Entertainment:** Single player is a roller coaster ride that ends terribly. Multiplayer couldn't be much better

> **Replay Value:** High

XBOX 360

Battlefield 2: Modern Combat

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 24-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE) > **PUBLISHER** ELECTRONIC ARTS > **DEVELOPER** DIGITAL ILLUSIONS CE > **RELEASE** APRIL 11 > **ESRB** T

TWO FACES OF WAR

You know you have a good game on your hands when it can make you grin with the dementia of a James Bond villain. Conversely, you know your 360 is choking on a hell-born creation when you have to restart a mission 20 times before you can complete it. Battlefield 2: Modern Combat dances wildly across the entire emotional spectrum. Just as you find physical exhaustion setting in from a monumental battle, the game punches you in the face with some of the worst balancing I've seen to date.

You can split a helicopter in two and watch a squadron of soldiers spill out of it with the ease of releasing yolk from an egg, but for some reason, you can't destroy an ordinary train with an entire army. The strange thing is, this wasn't necessarily a problem in the PlayStation 2 and Xbox versions that released last year. Rather than traveling down the road that most developers do for Xbox 360, which is usually limiting improvements to cosmetic enhancement, developer DICE has torn this entire game apart and rebuilt it with a slightly different vision in mind.

My biggest gripe with the current-gen game was how frustrating enemy spawning could be. A murderous spree could come to a screeching halt because a machine-gun toting squadron spawned directly behind you. This no longer happens. Rapid spawns are toned down significantly. While this would seem to lead to an easier experience, the game is much more challenging now thanks to a boost in the enemy intelligence. Your foes are no longer limited to their primary weapons, as they can now switch to different firearms and toss grenades your way. To help balance this aspect, DICE has implemented a new detection system, which allows players see where a shot came from.

All of these adjustments make for a more exciting play. It's the changes that have been made to the mission structuring that really throws this game's balance out of whack. For instance, the level Metal Island, which once assaulted gamers with six waves of enemies, has been stripped down to three more difficult waves. Most of the game poses a reasonable challenge, but there are some objectives that are way too taxing. We're talking controller-breaking difficult. Why won't my allies fire their weapons? And what is that train made of, anyway? Adamantium?!

Of course, for seasoned Battlefield fans, all of the work that DICE has applied to the single player campaign is irrelevant. This franchise's strength is online, and its presence on Xbox Live is right where it needs to be. The striking details that emerge from the new character models, architecture, and effects really pull players into the heart of the fray. The boost in resolution is also a great aid in detecting the enemy. As this series has illustrated so well on PC, finding a good clan remains one of the best experiences in gaming. Pushing yourself to climb the ranks (which are organized much like they are in Halo 2), will surely keep you glued to the game.

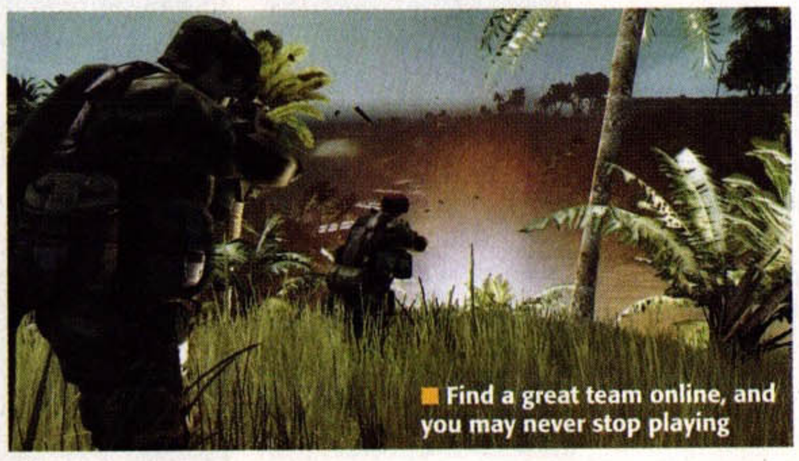
The control layout is a bit different than console gamers are probably used to, but the speed with which you can change weapons is astounding. Machine guns may feature ridiculously long clips, but you gotta love the feeling of mowing down three people crowded around a flag without changing a cartridge. Sniping is spot-on and rockets can rack up your kill count quickly. Most of the vehicles are a bit loose in control, but having multiple gunners makes them incredibly lethal, especially if you have a pilot who has mastered the terrible controls.

The single-player campaign definitely has some balancing issues that I pray DICE patches up in the future, but there are few games that can even be considered in this game's league when it comes to the wars that unfold online.—**REINER**

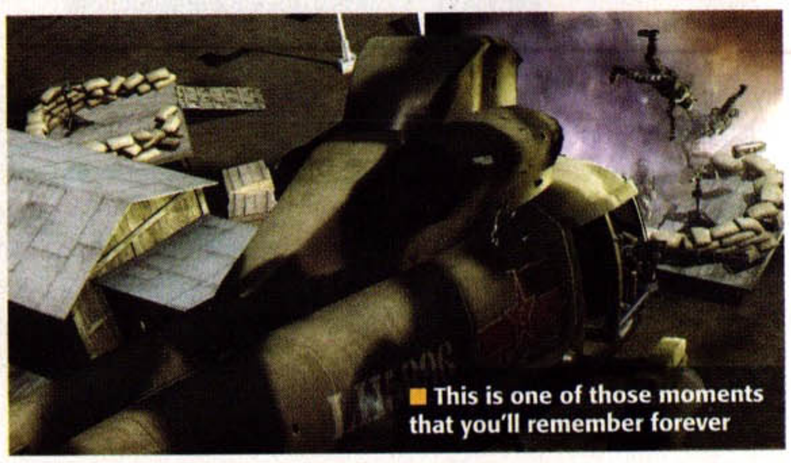
Second Opinion 7.5

There are a lot of things to complain about when you're playing an online game. People are idiots, games get dropped, and a hundred other annoyances pick on your patience. But they are forgivable when you consider how much fun it is to participate in the teamwork of online play where the spoils of war are truly earned. Subtract that camaraderie from the single player, however, and all you're left with is a headache the size of a humvee. At every turn, this game's solo campaign lets you down. Most noticeable is the AI, which does almost nothing to help you complete your objectives. Yes, being able to hot swap between guys is cool, but when you are doing it just to micromanage your soldiers, it gets maddening. Improvements have been made on the graphical front from the current-gen edition released in November, but there was so much more EA and developer Digital Illusions could have done to make this a good game.—**KATO**

The entire graphical package has been recreated to take advantage of the Xbox 360



Find a great team online, and you may never stop playing



This is one of those moments that you'll remember forever

Sometimes, just blowing the crap out of a bunch of stuff is what you need

If this game does one thing well, it's environmental destruction

PC

AutoAssault

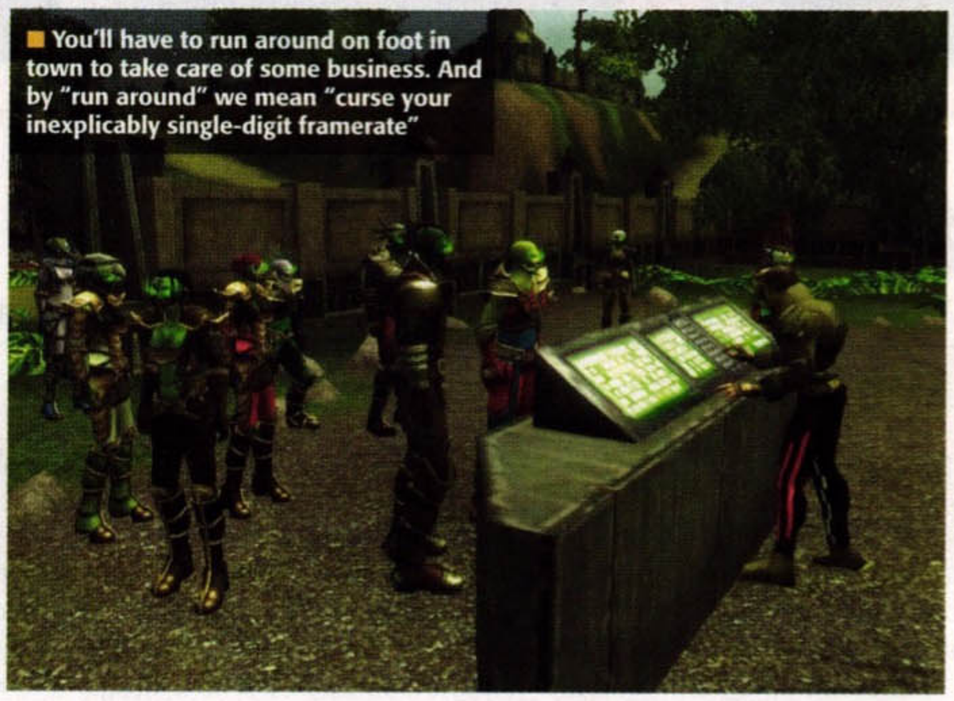
> STYLE MASSIVELY MULTIPLAYER ONLINE ROLE-PLAYING GAME **> PUBLISHER** NCSOFT
> DEVELOPER NETDEVIL **> RELEASE** APRIL 13 **> ESRB** T

MORE FESTIVA THAN FERRARI

I once had high hopes for AutoAssault. In the various early builds I've seen over the last two years, the game has always looked like it had a lot of potential to blossom into something special. Sadly, the majority of this potential has gone unrealized. Both the action-oriented combat and the traditional RPG elements manage to be strictly average, and there's just nothing particularly compelling about the game.

AutoAssault is structured almost exactly like a standard MMORPG. You'll take on missions from various NPCs, go hunt enemies for experience and loot in the wilds, and gain new powers and skills as you level up. The twist is that you'll do it all in a highly customized automotive wrecking machine. It sounds like a good idea on paper; who wouldn't play an MMO version of Twisted Metal? Unfortunately, the game does little to draw players into either aspect of the game, and ends up largely feeling like a regular old sci-fi MMORPG with wonky controls.

The issue with the action side of things is that most of the strategy involves targeting an enemy, holding down right-click to keep firing, and activating your skills whenever they're available. Some would argue that this isn't radically different than other MMORPGs, but the truth is that in AutoAssault it's pretty freakin' boring most of the time. Certain areas and encounters are really well-done, and give a great sense of satisfaction when you're standing in the middle of a square kilometer of wreckage after an intense battle, but those are the exception rather than the rule.



You'll have to run around on foot in town to take care of some business. And by "run around" we mean "curse your inexplicably single-digit framerate"

The RPG side of things is perfectly fine, with a fairly robust (if somewhat tedious) crafting system, extensive player-versus-player framework, and character classes that work well together. The problem is that the RPG elements don't measure up very favorably to the better MMOs on the market today, leaving AutoAssault with one fewer thing to entice gamers away from other titles. Also, due to the fact that you're always moving and doing stuff, there's much less time and attention to spare for chatting, finding other players to group with, and other social niceties.

Truckasaurus would be proud

On the plus side, nothing about AutoAssault is particularly broken (surprising for a just-launched MMO, I know), and there is certainly fun to be had. A certain population of gamers will no doubt find exactly what they're looking for here, especially as they get into the higher-level content and PvP areas of the game. However, when you log in on a Sunday afternoon and find three of the four servers at a "very low" population density, as I did, that doesn't bode well for the game's future.—**ADAM**

BOTTOM LINE 7

> Concept: Combine the joy of frenzied automotive destruction with the draw of RPG customization, to the detriment of both

> Graphics: If you have the rig to run it, it's fantastic. On an average system, the visuals are decidedly mediocre

> Sound: The sweet song of everything around you getting blown to hell is outstanding through a decent set of speakers

> Playability: The only hitch is in the occasional driving physics oddities

> Entertainment: Some folks will probably find enough worth here to pay $15 every month for it, but most will move on before the 30-day free trial ends

> Replay Value: Moderate

Second Opinion 7.5

Has anyone noticed how many gosh-darned MMOs seem to be out there these days? Well, there are a lot. To stand out from the pack takes some bold stripes, and nobody can fault Auto Assault for not having those. By placing the focus on car customization and action-oriented combat and racing, there's a decidedly different tone to the post-apocalyptic world of the game. That change of pace is the best reason to give AutoAssault a try, particularly if you're one of the many currently burnt out on the whole wizards and dragons scene. While the tone of the game is certainly unique, the level grind and quest structure are just as tedious as any other game of this ilk. The game could also be a good bit prettier and I wouldn't be upset about it. But it's hard to complain too loudly about a game that lets me jump cars off cliffs and blow up buildings with a turret-mounted machine gun.—**MILLER**

NINTENDO DS

Lost Magic

> STYLE 1-PLAYER STRATEGY/RPG (2-PLAYER VIA WIRELESS) **> PUBLISHER** UBISOFT **> DEVELOPER** TAITO **> RELEASE** APRIL 25 **> ESRB** E

CALL ME DOODLEMAGE

Just like anyone who has seen *Star Wars* has tried to use the Force, anyone who has played an RPG has tried to cast a spell. That's okay; it's nothing to be ashamed of. In fact, Lost Magic makes it easy to realize these magical ambitions through a simple and fun mechanic that allows you to draw runes on the screen, then watch the spells come to life. Even though the concept is interesting, it's not enough to drive an entire game, so like the sawdust used as filler in cat food, a bunch of terrible RTS elements are packed into Lost Magic to stretch out the experience.

At first, everything seems promising, as your young mage goes out into the world and learns the basics of spellcasting. However, after the tutorial battles, it quickly becomes apparent that the protagonist is far too squishy to handle things himself, which introduces Lost Magic's collection system. By weakening monsters and casting a trap spell, you add them to your personal army. You'd think that would make you more powerful, but you'd be wrong. It makes you a chaperone.

Instead of focusing on the enemies, your attention is constantly on your troops, helping them around whatever tree or cliff their laughable pathfinding is trying to make them walk through. You're in charge of healing them too, but the game doesn't make it easy on you, since everyone is basically hogpiling all over each other. You draw the healing rune, touch a unit, and expend mana to cast the spell – often only to find that you were one pixel off and healed someone who didn't need it. Amid all of this management, you need to clear out a level's enemies or bosses, and if you don't do it within an arbitrary time limit present in every level, you lose. For some reason.

The saddest thing is that Lost Magic frequently demonstrates the areas where it missed the opportunity to be fun. As you're frantically scribbling on the screen to drive back advancing foes, with fireballs and ice shards flying in all directions, you get a glimpse of how enjoyable the gameplay could have been if it were better focused. The real-time combat adds an element of urgency, but the repetitive battles and clumsy controls dull that edge early on. Experimenting by combining different spells can lead to unexpected results, but you just don't have the time to explore it fully because of the ticking clock. These all present some serious problems, but despite its flaws, I'm anxious to see if Lost Magic gets a sequel. This title might not be great, but there is a lot of potential here that would be a shame to waste.——**JOE**

■ The later runes are so complex that they are impossible to draw quickly in the heat of battle

■ Any time your doofus of a main character goes into battle alone, he's dead meat

BOTTOM LINE 6

> Concept: A stylus-controlled RTS on a tiny screen. What could go wrong?

> Graphics: The tiny sprites are hard to pinpoint, but the character portraits are strangely Miyazaki-like. If only I cared what they were saying

> Sound: "Off" is the correct position for your volume slider

> Playability: Real-time spell-casting is fast and fun, with far better symbol recognition than I was expecting

> Entertainment: There is a potential for fun, but no follow-through

> Replay Value: Moderately Low

Second Opinion 5.75

If spell casting were as frustrating and monotonous of a task as it is in Lost Magic, I would most certainly flunk out of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. As expected, using the stylus to mimic the movement of a wand works well. It's a neat little gimmick. Using it in an actual battle is a different story, however. Thanks to an unforgiving level timer, most of your time is spent drawing symbols as quickly as you can. When you have a free second, it's usually spent babysitting your companions – who love getting stuck on environmental objects and need constant healing. In the case of this game, divination should be pronounced more like damnation. It's a miserable stress maker of an experience. —REINER

HANDHELD QUICKIES

NINTENDO DS

Tao's Adventure: Curse of the Demon Seal

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ROLE-PLAYING GAME
> PUBLISHER KONAMI
> DEVELOPER KONAMI
> RELEASE MARCH 21 **> ESRB** E 10+

BOTTOM LINE 2

This title is exactly what all the haters were afraid of when the DS was originally announced: boring, tired game design with crappy touch screen control tacked on. Should you manage to get through the multi-hour, action-free intro sequence, you'll eventually make it to the meat of the game – only to find that scrolling through page after page of banal dialogue is arguably preferable to the abysmal combat. Drawing spells on the touch screen and recruiting monsters into your party are neat touches, but torpid battles and horrific control for nearly every aspect of play are just two of the dozens of reasons that you should never, ever bother with this game.——**ADAM**

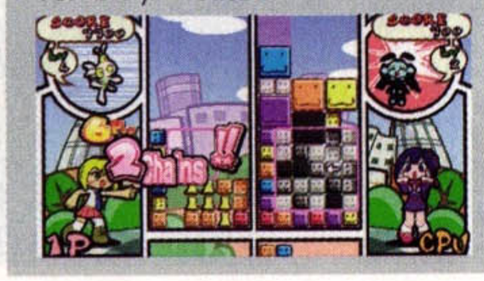
PSP

Ultimate Block Party

> STYLE 1-PLAYER PUZZLE (2-PLAYER VIA AD HOC)
> PUBLISHER CONSPIRACY GAMES
> DEVELOPER ARTDINK/CYBERFRONT
> RELEASE DECEMBER 8 **> ESRB** E

BOTTOM LINE 7.5

No, the release date is not a misprint. Ultimate Block Party came out in limited release last December and somehow we let it slip through the cracks, so this month we revisited it. In a nutshell, UBP is one part Japanese cute mixed with a slight deviation of the puzzle classic Tetris Attack. Instead of moving two blocks like Tetris Attack, you actually move a four-by-four block cursor around the screen that basically spins the blocks into position. While only a slight change, it does make for some rather challenging play. Spinning blocks like mad as the slow march works its way to the top (and your demise) is always a thrill. It's nothing fancy, but for puzzle freaks, this is a nice addition to the PSP library.——**ANDY**



HANDHELD QUICKIES

GAME BOY ADVANCE

The Tower SP

BOTTOM LINE 7

> STYLE 1-PLAYER SIMULATION **> PUBLISHER** SEGA **> DEVELOPER** VIVARIUM
> RELEASE MARCH 15 **> ESRB** E

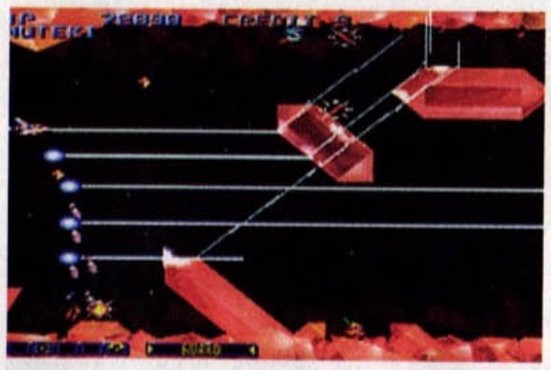
Essentially a re-release of SimTower (originally published in the mid-'90s for PC and Mac), this handheld edition is paced just right for portable gaming, although that leisure is probably the game's primary fault. You could, in theory, leave it running while you order a coffee, deposit a check, and get on the bus, and everything would still be fine when you check back in. While the strategy never plumbs deeper than your average kiddie pool, it's got the simplistic charm of Lemonade Tycoon and bright graphics of the first Sim City. Without getting too fuddy duddy, the low-stress charm of building your skyscraper is hard to really knock, especially for fans of casual simulations.—**LISA**

PSP

Gradius Collection

BOTTOM LINE 8.5

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION **> PUBLISHER** KONAMI **> DEVELOPER** KONAMI **> RELEASE** JUNE
> ESRB E



As the lint in my pockets can attest, Gradius is a supreme devourer of the silver coin. If your battle with this frantic shooting series has led to starvation and your son wearing unfashionable hand-me-downs from your daughter, I'm proud to say that this collection delivers a satisfying sensation of revenge. No longer will it drain your income one quarter at a time. This isn't just an assembly of fond arcade memories, however. In addition to the first four rock-solid installments, Konami has included the stellar Gradius Gaiden, a title that has previously only been available in Japan. Outside of artwork, little is offered in terms of bonus materials, but players do have the ability to tweak the options for each game – such as the number of lives, aspect ratio (original or stretched widescreen), and whether or not the slowdown from the original arcade versions is present. I've lost a good portion of my life to this series, and thanks to this collection, I'm losing more of it from anywhere I please.—**REINER**

PSP

Monster Hunter Freedom

BOTTOM LINE 4

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 4-PLAYER VIA AD HOC) **> PUBLISHER** CAPCOM
> DEVELOPER CAPCOM **> RELEASE** MAY 23 **> ESRB** 4

It's amazing how Capcom has taken a concept that I should be all over (hunting monsters? Sign me up! Eat lead, Frankenstein!) and turned it into one of the most boring, frustrating games I've ever played. While it looks great, Monster Hunter Freedom is a snore, with boring missions and even more boring things to do in between them. Combined with clunky controls and a bad camera, Monster Hunter Freedom winds up about as appealing as a pile of the Wolfman's droppings.—**JEREMY**

NINTENDO DS

Brain Age

GAME INFORMER HANDHELD GAME OF THE MONTH

> STYLE 1-PLAYER PUZZLE (UP TO 16-PLAYER VIA WIRELESS)
> PUBLISHER NINTENDO **> DEVELOPER** NINTENDO **> RELEASE** APRIL 18 **> ESRB** E

I GUESS I'M DUMB

BOTTOM LINE 8.25

I like to think that I'm a pretty smart guy. As you might imagine, I had high expectations as I popped Brain Age into my DS and began to test my mental acuity. Minutes later, my smug self-satisfaction was crushed by the stunning revelation that I, in fact, have the functioning brain of a 76-year-old man. Although this did explain my recent fondness for watching *Matlock* reruns, I found the news a bit disturbing. Has a steady diet of trash TV, video games, and junk food really withered my feeble mind to such a degree?

Not one to give up in the face of adversity, I plowed ahead with the game's brain training exercises. These brief sequences, according to Nintendo and neuroscientist Ryuta Kawashima (whose research inspired this title), stimulate activity in your brain's prefrontal cortex. The exercises, which are unlocked over time, include word memorization, quick flurries of simple math questions, and other intelligence tests. The most common are the Stroop tests, in which you must say the color of the text printed onscreen (this is made difficult because the words themselves are names of different colors i.e. the word "blue" written in yellow text means you must say "yellow"). Also included are the popular Sudoku puzzles, grid-based numerical "crosswords" of sorts, which I found the best of all the game's modes.

It might sound dry, and there are some issues with the voice and handwriting recognition (it frequently struggles to detect that you've said "blue"), but you'll be surprised how addicted you will become. Nintendo has a deep understanding of the basic human drives that make games compelling to people, and Brain Age appeals to the most basic of all: our vanity. I'm sorry, but there's just no way Reiner is smarter than me (or is that *smarter than I*? Whatever!), and I'm going to play this until that weird little computer man tells me I'm right.—**MATT**

> Concept: An interactive IQ test (It's more fun than it sounds)

> Graphics: Um...the fonts are amazing! Times New Roman pwns n00bs!

> Sound: Yourself, yelling "Blue! Yellow! Black!"

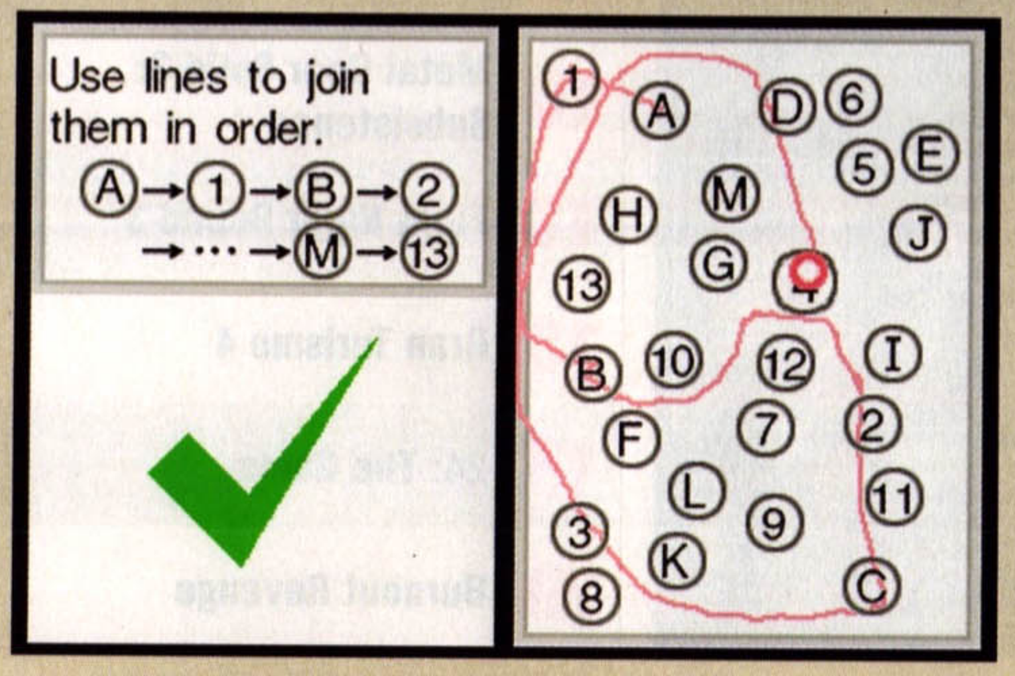
> Playability: Aside from slight voice recognition issues, the biggest hurdle will be your own poor handwriting

> Entertainment: It's actually addictive, and Sudoku puzzles are my newest obsession

> Replay Value: High

Second Opinion 8

I sometimes feel like Nintendo has turned me into a lab rat, and they run me through various game experiments just to test out what triggers the funinator in my brain (that's a technical term). The fact that this particular experiment in gaming manages to succeed both astounds and amuses me. Simple arithmetic and reading aloud from great works of literature are great reasons for teachers to start letting kids bring their DS back into elementary school, but the simplistic exercises are equally enjoyable for adults, particularly when you add in the bonus of a ton of Sudoku puzzles to mull over. While the validity or even relative value of this game's ability to judge anyone's "brain age" is highly suspect to me, it doesn't change how much I enjoyed this little cerebral voyage. It's fun, but you'll be at a loss to explain exactly why.—**MILLER**



CHARTS

An In-Depth Listing Of The Best Selling Games

TOP 20

Listings Based Upon NPD Data For March 2006 Based On Units Sold

Rank	Title	L. Mo.	System	Score	Release	Price
1	Kingdom Hearts II	N/A	PS2	9	03-06	$50
2	Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter	N/A	360	9.5	03-06	$60
3	The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion	N/A	360	9.5	03-06	$60
4	Black	N/A	PS2	8.5	03-06	$39
5	MLB 06: The Show	N/A	PS2	7.5	03-06	$39
6	Fight Night Round 3	6	PS2	9	02-06	$39
7	Black	N/A	XBOX	8.5	03-06	$39
8	The Godfather: The Game	N/A	PS2	7.5	03-06	$40
9	Fight Night Round 3	4	360	9	02-06	$60
10	God of War	N/A	PS2	10	03-06	$20
11	Metroid Prime: Hunters	N/A	DS	8.5	03-06	$35
12	Sonic Riders	N/A	GC	5	02-06	$39
13	Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas	1	PS2	10	01-06	$20
14	Super Princess Peach	N/A	DS	8.75	02-06	$35
15	The Godfather: The Game	N/A	XBOX	7.5	03-06	$40
16	Metal Gear Solid 3: Subsistence	N/A	PS2	9.5	03-06	$29
17	Fight Night Round 3	N/A	XBOX	9	02-06	$39
18	Gran Turismo 4	N/A	PS2	9.25	02-06	$20
19	24: The Game	N/A	PS2	7.5	03-06	$39
20	Burnout Revenge	N/A	360	9.5	03-06	$60

1 KINGDOM HEARTS II (PS2)

You know what would be cooler than mixing Disney and Final Fantasy? Combining *Police Academy* and Battletoads. It would be an epic game about giant bumbling humanoid frogs who sign up to become cops and fight crime with wacky antics, zany sound effects, and the ability to hop really far. Sounds like a lock for game of the year!

2 GHOST RECON ADVANCED WARFIGHTER (360)

GRAW! GRAW! GGGRRRAAAAWWWW! It's really fun to say, which may be why it sold so well. Try ordering it the next time you go to the store – any store. "I'll take a pound of salami, some cheddar cheese...and GGGRRRAAAWWW!"

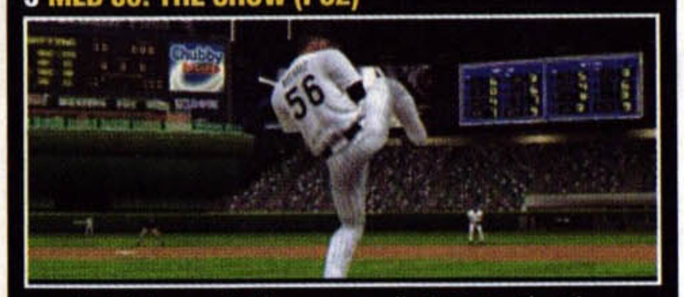
3 THE ELDER SCROLLS IV: OBLIVION (360)

We never thought that a game that lets us pick flowers, go for nature hikes, and steal bread from the poor could be as much fun as it is in real life. But it totally is. We know, we've tried them both.

4 BLACK (PS2)

Black is a fairly simple name for a somewhat simple game, but we have to admit that we like it better than this game's original title. "Shooty McShootsalot and his Billions of Bullet Buddies" is kind of a mouthful. Plus, we're pretty sure a children's show in Wyoming already took that name.

5 MLB 06: THE SHOW (PS2)



Wouldn't it be cool if this was actually MLB 06: The Big Show, and starred the seven foot, 500 pound wrestler from the WWE? A chokeslam is the perfect answer to all baseball problems. First baseman going to tag you out? Chokeslam! Runner about to score? Chokeslam! Ref kicking you out of the game for chokeslamming too many players? Chokeslam! Long line at the concession stand? Chokeslam!

TOP 10 JAPAN

Rank	Title	System
1	DS Training for Adults: Work Your Brain	DS
2	DS Training for Adults: Work Your Brain 2	DS
3	Animal Crossing: Wild World	DS
4	Densetsu no Stafi 4	DS
5	Guilty Gear XX Slash	PS2
6	Eigo Tsuke	DS
7	Pokémon Rangers: Diamond-Pearl eno Michi	DS
8	Final Fantasy XII	PS2
9	Pro Baseball Netsu Star 2006	PS2
10	Pro Baseball Spirits 3	PS2

4

7

TOP 10 GI

Rank	Title	L. Mo.	System
1	The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion	1	360
2	Far Cry Instincts: Predator	N/A	360
3	Brain Age	N/A	DS
4	Lara Croft Tomb Raider: Legend	4	Multi
5	Syphon Filter: Dark Mirror	3	PSP
6	Metroid Prime: Hunters	N/A	DS
7	Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter	2	360
8	2006 FIFA World Cup	N/A	Multi
9	Kingdom Hearts II	N/A	PS2
10	Fight Night Round 3	7	Multi

2

8

TOP 10 PC

Rank	Title	L. Mo.	Price
1	The Sims 2: Open for Business	N/A	$35
2	The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion	N/A	$50
3	Star Wars: Empire at War	1	$50
4	The Lord of the Rings: Battle for Middle-Earth II	N/A	$49
5	World of Warcraft	2	$31
6	Dungeons and Dragons Online: Stormreach	N/A	$50
7	The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion Collector's Edition	N/A	$59
8	The Lord of the Rings: Battle for Middle-Earth II Collector's Edition	N/A	$59
9	The Sims 2	4	$49
10	Age of Empires III	3	$49

3

10

Based On Monthly Units Sold

Source: The NPD Group/NPD Funworld®/TRSTS® • David Riley 516-625-2277

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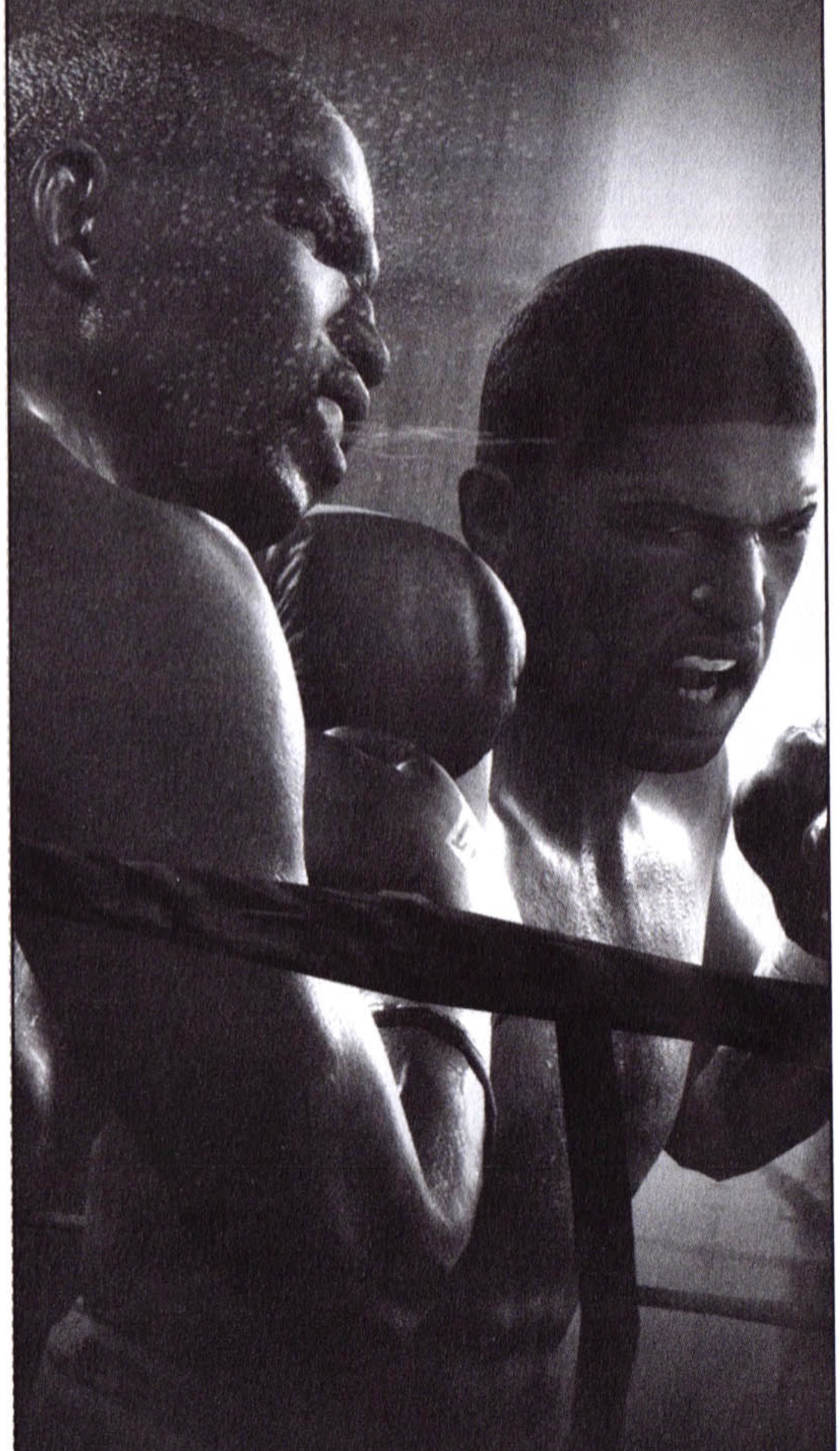

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REVIEWSARCHIVE

The Really Ugly Page Where You Can See Lots Of Old Review Scores

XBOX 360

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Amped 3	8.5	Dec-05
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PLAYSTATION 2

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X-Men Legends II: Rise of Apocalypse	9	Nov-05

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Blitz: The League	7.75	Nov-05
Brothers in Arms: Earned in Blood	8	Nov-05
Burnout Revenge	9.25	Oct-05
Call of Cthulu: Dark Corners of the Earth	6	Jan-06
Call of Duty 2: Big Red One	7.25	Jan-06
Capcom Classic Collection	8.5	Nov-05
Castlevania: Curse of Darkness	7.5	Nov-05
Chicken Little	7	Nov-05
Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe, The	6.5	Dec-05
Cold War	6	Dec-05
College Hoops 2K6	8	Jan-06
Conflict: Global Terror	6.75	Nov-05
Delta Force: Black Hawk Down	6.75	Oct-05
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Driver: Parallel Lines	6.75	May-06
Dynasty Warriors 5	6	Oct-05
Evil Dead: Regeneration	6	Oct-05
Fable: The Lost Chapters	8.75	Jan-06
Far Cry Instincts	8.75	Nov-05
FIFA Soccer 06	8	Oct-05
FIFA Street 2	6	Apr-06
Fight Night Round 3	9	Mar-06
Final Fight: Streetwise	4	Mar-06
From Russia With Love	7.75	Dec-05
Full Spectrum Warrior: Ten Hammers	7.25	Apr-06
Gauntlet: Seven Sorrows	6.25	Feb-06
Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter	7.5	May-06
Ghost Recon 2: Summit Strike	8	Oct-05
Godfather: The Game, The	7.5	May-06
Gun	8.75	Dec-05
Half-Life 2	7.25	Dec-05
Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire	6.5	Dec-05
Heroes of the Pacific	8.75	Oct-05
Indigo Prophecy	8.25	Oct-05
Karaoke Revolution Party	8.5	Dec-05
Kingdom Under Fire: Heroes	7.5	Oct-05
L.A. Rush	6.25	Dec-05
Major League Baseball 2K6	8.5	Apr-06
Marc Ecko's Getting Up: Contents Under Pressure	7.25	Apr-06
Marvel Nemesis: Rise of the Imperfects	7	Oct-05
Matrix: Path of Neo, The	7.25	Dec-05
Midnight Club 3: DUB Edition Remix	9.5	May-06
Midway Arcade Treasures 3	8.25	Oct-05
Mortal Kombat: Shaolin Monks	8.5	Oct-05
MVP 06 NCAA Baseball	7	Feb-06
Namco Museum: 50th Anniversary Arcade Collection	8	Oct-05
NASCAR 06: Total Team Control	8.25	Oct-05
NBA 2K6	8.5	Nov-05
NBA Ballers Phenom	7.75	Apr-06
NBA Live 06	7.5	Nov-05
NCAA March Madness 2006	7	Nov-05
Need for Speed: Most Wanted	8.5	Dec-05
Nightmare Before Christmas: Oogie's Revenge, The	5	Nov-05
Ninja Gaiden Black	9.5	Oct-05
Operation Flashpoint Elite	5	Feb-06
Pac-Man World 3	6.25	Jan-06
Peter Jackson's King Kong	8.5	Jan-06
Prince of Persia: The Two Thrones	9	Jan-06
Rainbow Six: Lockdown	8.5	Nov-05
Serious Sam II	7.75	Nov-05
Shadow the Hedgehog	4	Jan-06
Shattered Union	4	Jan-06
Sims 2, The	7.75	Nov-05
Sniper Elite	7.5	Nov-05
Sonic Riders	5	Apr-06
Spartan: Total Warrior	7.75	Oct-05
SSX On Tour	8	Nov-05
Star Wars: Battlefront II	8.5	Dec-05
Stubbs the Zombie in "Rebel Without A Pulse"	8	Dec-05
Suffering: Ties That Bind, The	8.5	Oct-05
Taito Legends	8.5	Jan-06
Tak: The Great Juju Challenge	7	Oct-05
Tecmo Classic Arcade	7	Oct-05
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 06	8.25	Nov-05
Tomb Raider: Legend	8.75	May-06
Tony Hawk's American Wasteland	8.25	Dec-05
Torino 2006	4.25	Apr-06
Total Overdose	6.25	Jan-06
True Crime: New York City	8.75	Jan-06
Ultimate Spider-Man	8	Nov-05
Wallace & Gromit: Curse of the Were-Rabbit	7	Nov-05
WarPath	7.25	May-06
Warriors, The	8.25	Nov-05
Winning Eleven 9	8.5	Feb-06
Without Warning	6.5	Nov-05
X-Men Legends II: Rise of Apocalypse	9	Nov-05

PC

Age of Empires III	8.25	Dec-05
Battlefield 2: Special Forces	9	Feb-06
Black & White 2	8.5	Nov-05
Call of Duty 2	9.75	Dec-05
City of Villains	8.75	Jan-06
Cold War	6	Dec-05
Dungeon Siege II	8	Oct-05
Dungeons & Dragons: Dragonshard	8	Nov-05
Dungeons & Dragons Online: Stormreach	8	May-06
Earth 2160	7	Feb-06
Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion, The	9.5	May-06
Fable: The Lost Chapters	9	Oct-05
F.E.A.R.	9	Nov-05

Serious Sam II – PC – Nov-05

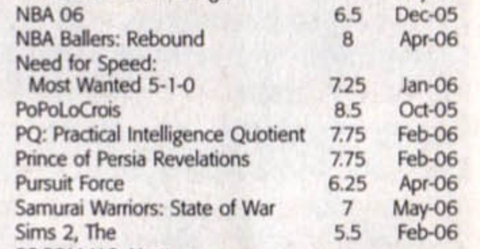
Full Spectrum Warrior: Ten Hammers	7.25	Apr-06
Galactic Civilizations II: Dread Lords	8	Apr-06
Indigo Prophecy	8.25	Oct-05
Lord of the Rings: The Battle for Middle-Earth II, The	8.5	Apr-06
Marc Ecko's Getting Up: Contents Under Pressure	7.25	Apr-06
Movies, The	8.75	Dec-05
Myst V: End of Ages	7.75	Oct-05
Quake IV	8.75	Nov-05
Serious Sam II	7.75	Nov-05
Shattered Union	4	Jan-06
Sid Meier's Civilization IV	9.5	Jan-06
Sims 2: Nightlife, The	7	Oct-05
Sims 2: Open for Business, The	7	Apr-06
Star Wars: Empire at War	8.25	Mar-06
Taito Legends	8.5	Jan-06
Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War - Winter Assault	8	Oct-05
WarPath	7.25	May-06

NINTENDO DS

Age of Empires: The Age of Kings	8	Mar-06
Animal Crossing: Wild World	8.75	Dec-05
Battles of Prince of Persia	8.5	Feb-06
Castlevania: Dawn of Sorrow	9.25	Nov-05
Dig Dug: Digging Strike	6.75	Dec-05
Electroplankton	7	Feb-06
Guilty Gear: Dust Strikers	6	May-06
Lost in Blue	7	Oct-05
Lunar: Dragon Song	4.75	Nov-05
Madden NFL 06	5	Nov-05
Mario & Luigi: Partners in Time	8.25	Dec-05
Mario Kart DS	8.5	Dec-05
Mega Man Battle Network 5: Double Team	7.75	Nov-05
Metroid Prime: Hunters	8.5	May-06
Metroid Prime Pinball	8	Nov-05
Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney	7.75	Oct-05
Pokémon Trozei	8.25	Mar-06
Resident Evil: Deadly Silence	7.75	Mar-06
Rub Rabbits!, The	7.5	Apr-06
Sims 2, The	6.75	Feb-06
Snowboard Kids DS	6	Jan-06
Sonic Rush	7	Jan-06
Super Monkey Ball: Touch & Roll	8	Apr-06
Super Princess Peach	8.75	Mar-06
Tamagotchi Connection: Corner Shop	6.5	Apr-06
Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles 3: Mutant Nightmare	4	Nov-05
Tetris DS	9.25	Apr-06
Tony Hawk's American Sk8Land	8.75	Feb-06
Trace Memory	7.5	Nov-05
Trauma Center: Under the Knife	8.25	Oct-05
True Swing Golf	7	Feb-06
Viewtiful Joe Double Trouble!	7.5	Dec-05
Worms: Open Warfare	7	May-06
Zoo Tycoon DS	6	Jan-06

PSP

Ape Escape Academy	7	Feb-06
Armored Core: Formula Front Special Edition	3.75	Nov-05



Syphon Filter: Dark Mirror – PSP – May-06

Capcom Classics Collection Remixed	8.5	May-06
Con, The	8	Nov-05
Daxter	8.75	Apr-06
Death Jr.	7	Sep-05
Exit	7.25	Mar-06
Field Commander	7.5	May-06
FIFA Soccer 06	7.5	Nov-05
Fight Night Round 3	7.75	Apr-06
Frantix	6.75	Oct-05
From Russia with Love	6.75	May-06
Generation of Chaos	5	May-06
Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex	5.5	Dec-05
Grand Theft Auto: Liberty City Stories	9.25	Dec-05
Gripshift	8.25	Oct-05
Infected	8.25	Jan-06
Kingdom of Paradise	6.75	Jan-06
Legend of Heroes, The	6	Jan-06
Lord of the Rings: Tactics, The	6.75	Jan-06
Madden NFL 06	8.5	Nov-05
Marvel Nemesis: Rise of the Imperfects	6.5	Nov-05
Me and My Katamari	8	May-06
MediEvil Resurrection	7.75	Oct-05
Mega Man: Maverick Hunter X	8	Mar-06
Mega Man: Powered Up	8.25	Apr-06
Metal Gear Acid 2	8	Apr-06
MLB '06 The Show	7	Apr-06
MX vs. ATV: On the Edge	8	May-06
NBA 06	6.5	Dec-05
NBA Ballers: Rebound	8	Apr-06
Need for Speed: Most Wanted 5-1-0	7.25	Jan-06
PoPoLoCrois	8.5	Oct-05
PQ: Practical Intelligence Quotient	7.75	Feb-06
Prince of Persia Revelations	7.75	Feb-06
Pursuit Force	6.25	Apr-06
Samurai Warriors: State of War	7	May-06
Sims 2, The	5.5	Feb-06
SOCOM U.S. Navy SEALs: Fireteam Bravo	7	Jan-06
Splinter Cell Essentials	8	May-06
SSX On Tour	7.75	Dec-05
Star Wars: Battlefront II	7	Jan-06
Street Fight Alpha 3 Max	7.75	Mar-06
Street Supremacy	6.75	Apr-06
Syphon Filter: Dark Mirror	8	May-06
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 06	7.5	Dec-05
Tokobot	8.25	Jan-06
Untold Legends: The Warrior's Code	8.25	Apr-06
Viewtiful Joe: Red Hot Rumble	7	May-06
Virtua Tennis: World Tour	8.5	Nov-05
Winning Eleven 9	7.5	Mar-06
Worms: Open Warfare	7	May-06
WRC: FIA World Rally Championships	8.75	Apr-06
WWE SmackDown Vs. Raw 2006	8	Feb-06
X-Men Legends II: Rise of Apocalypse	9	Dec-05
Ys: The Ark of Napishtim	6.75	Apr-06

GAME BOY ADVANCE

DK: King of Swing	7.75	Nov-05
Dogz	6.75	Feb-06
Donkey Kong Country 3	8.5	Nov-05
Drill Dozer	7.75	Feb-06
Dr. Mario Puzzle League	7.5	Jan-06
Dynasty Warriors Advance	7	Sep-05
Final Fantasy IV Advance	8.75	Jan-06
Gunstar Super Heroes	8.75	Dec-05
Mario Tennis: Power Tour	7.75	Dec-05
Mega Man Zero 4	8	Nov-05
Rebelstar Tactical Command	9	Oct-05
Tales of Phantasia	7.25	Mar-06
Zooo	7	Nov-05

UNLIMITED ENABLED

The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion

The Developers Give Us Their Best Tips For Exploring Tamriel

GENERAL POWER TIPS

If you feel like starting a new character, but you want to get him or her off the ground more quickly, head to the Arena after escaping the character generation sewer. The entire arena quest line will take you a few hours to beat if you've sharpened your fighting skills. In the process your character will probably gain several levels, and a good bit of gold to move around on some equipment upgrades before heading out to do some adventuring. Don't forget to check the Arena coffer on the way out. This is the best way to get a character into the mix quickly.

Buying a house is not just a good way to kill some time. It instantly gets rid of the need to part with those oh-so-valuable items to avoid being over-encumbered. Especially if you have finished a Daedric quest or two, and you don't want to have to carry around those rare artifacts, but you don't want to sell them either. Try to purchase one that can be easily accessible by fast travel. The one in the Imperial City waterfront is quite accessible, and fairly affordable (though it is not much to look at). You can purchase this house at the Office of Imperial Commerce, in the Market District, assuming Vinicia likes you enough.

Invest in your character early on. It may seem expensive to pay for training at low character levels, but later in the game when you have more money you will level up slower and won't be able to train as much. Pick a minor, non-specialty skill that would level slowly through use alone, and you can be a journeyman by level 10. In no time your pure mage can swing a mean sword.

Want to max out your level? Choose a race that doesn't give bonuses to your major skills and a specialization that doesn't include your major skills, and all of your major skills will start out at 25, allowing you to achieve the highest possible level. Of course, it will be slow going.

A tip for persuading that NPC a couple more points when their disposition is at its max: Take off that Arena garb (or anything that boosts your personality) and draw your weapon. Persuade them again, then put away your weapon and put on your personality enchanted accoutrement. You'll notice you'll have squeezed a little more disposition out of them.

Sigil stones are among the most useful items in the game. They can be used to enchant weapons, armor, and other items with special abilities, and they scale up in level as you do. Enchanting a sword with a transcendent stone makes Jimmy feel special...especially when he watches his foe's flaming carcass sent flying from a strike with his mighty blade of catastrophic flame damage. Just be aware that once you enchant an item, you can't repair it yourself without a high Armorer skill.

If you are specializing in the Marksman skill, don't bother taking Blade or Blunt skills, because you will be better off standing and shooting your bow than swinging weapons you aren't skilled with (of course, you should always be running away when not shooting).

Varla Stones that recharge all your enchanted weapons can be found in the depths of most Elven Ruins. Use them with care, however. There are only 50 in the entire game!

Advancing far enough into the Mages Guild to create enchantments can open the door to a super suit of armor by enchanting each piece with a 10 percent shield spell. Don't forget rings and amulets.

COMBAT

When you wait, your allies heal up at the same time you do. When you're fighting alongside allies, take every opportunity to wait to allow your allies to heal themselves.

Watch your fatigue when fighting, you do about 50 percent damage when your fatigue is low. In addition, check the condition of your weapon. You may lose many fights when you have a damaged weapon and low fatigue.

If your enchanted items keep running out too quickly, seek out the Shrine of Azura after you're level two or higher. Azura's Star can do wonders for keeping enchanted weapons effective.

Clannfear staggers can be lethal! No matter how much armor you've got, learn to circle them, and do as much damage as you can before they get close.

If you exit a city on foot or fast travel to a stable, keep your eyes open for a Khajiit in a dark grey robe. M'aiq the Liar has some of the most "interesting" rumors in the game. Talk fast! If he leaves, you can't catch up!

Be sure to use your shield often in melee combat. It's easy to forget to use it in the heat of battle, but it's not just for emergencies, and it makes a huge difference. Try alternating between attacking and defending, even against weak enemies. Shields are much better than weapons for blocking.

In combat with most melee opponents, a good thing to do is block the first attack then sidestep around the enemy while attacking them. They'll turn to face you, so you can keep sidestepping and hitting with the occasional block.

If you ever find yourself getting killed by something you can't beat, jump to a higher level just out of the opponent's reach and chip away their health with whatever is available, like spells or arrows.

Out of arrows? If you are facing off against an archer, dodge his arrows and then collect them later. You'll get more this way than killing him right away and looting his corpse.

(For the full list of tips, check out this month's Unlimited section)

Mod World

GROW
http://www.eyezmaze.com

We're well aware that Japanese things aren't all weird in that brain-cramping sort of Katamari way, but GROW and its flash game brethren certainly are. The point of GROW is to, well, grow things. This is accomplished by moving objects onto the playing field one at a time, where they interact with each other in pre-scripted ways. These games certainly aren't the pinnacle of game design (each of the versions has a "best" order to place the objects), but they're strangely charming and fun. In particular, GROW Cube is adorable as only little people making a paradise out of a plain brown cube can be.

3D BROWSER FPS
http://www.necromanthus.com

These browser-based adaptations of everything from Heretic to Warcraft and Deus Ex aren't exactly the best games out there, but the sheer fact that somebody got them (sort of) working in a web browser window is worth checking out. These renditions aren't picture-perfect ports by any means, but messing around with them is entertaining. We just wish that we could use the ever-amusing Chicken Mode cheat in the Heretic ripoff.

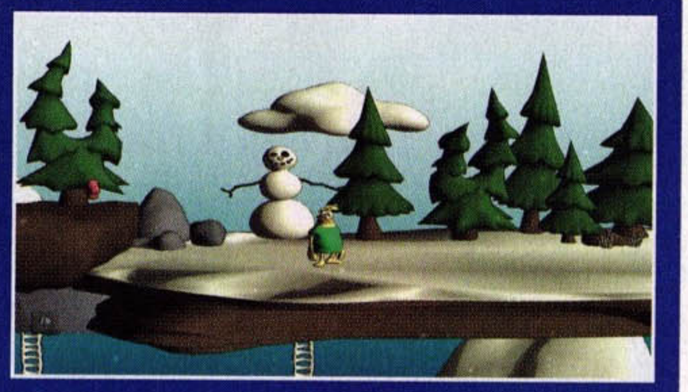
Attention All Cheaters!

Cheat codes, by their very nature, are in many cases buggier than Virginia in August. So, unless you don't mind re-doing those 70 hours you put into the latest game, do yourself a favor and back up your save before using any codes.

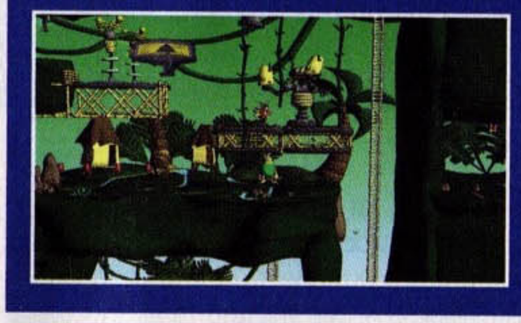
On a lighter note, you can send your codes to secretaccess@gameinformer.com for a chance to be featured here and win a very special prize!

Live Arcade Spotlight

Cloning Clyde



We love multi-directional shooters, and gem-based puzzle games certainly hold a fond place in our hearts. However, it certainly seems like variations on those two themes are starting to overwhelm the still-growing Xbox Live Arcade lineup. Enter Cloning Clyde, a full-on 3D side-scrolling adventure in the classic style. Clyde, as it turns out, has been cloned by an insidious corporation appropriately called Dupliclone. Now, not only does Clyde need to escape their clutches, but so do his numerous copies, several of which have adopted some rather strange characteristics. Bizarre variations include Frog-Clyde, Ape-Clyde, and the ever-popular Chicken-Clyde, among others. Each clone has his own special abilities to maneuver past traps and defeat enemies. On the gameplay side, we're most excited about the multiplayer possibilities. There's two-player co-op on one machine, as well as a four-player arena combat option over Xbox Live. A quirky art style and humorous concept are enough to pique our interest, and if nothing else, it's looking to stand apart from the rest of the XBLA options.



Code of the Month

Far Cry Instincts: Predator

Ah, island getaways. There's nothing quite like retreating to the quiet confines of a deserted island jungle where you can bask in the heat on the warm sunny beaches, walk through the leafy wooded wilderness, and blow the hell out of enemy helicopters with shoulder-mounted rocket launchers. You can enter the following cheats at the cheat menu, either from the main menu or from the pause screen. While most of the codes will turn off when you shut down, you should know that the map unlock cheat is permanent.

Enable Evolutions – FeralAttack
Infinite Adrenaline – Bloodlust
Infinite Ammo – UnleashHell
Unlock All Maps – GiveMeTheMaps
Unlock Evolution Campaign – GiveMeItAll

Nate Palmiotti
New York, NY

MULTI-SYSTEM

Driver: Parallel Lines

> **PLAYSTATION 2, XBOX**

Enter the following codes on the cheat menu.

Free Upgrades – TOOLEDUP
Indestructible Cars – ROLLBAR
Infinite Ammunition – GUNBELT
Infinite Nitro – ZOOMZOOM
Player Invulnerability – IRONMAN
Unlock All Vehicles – CARSHOW
Unlock All Weapons – GUNRANGE
Vulnerable Police Vehicles – KEYSTONE

XBOX 360

Blazing Angels: Squadrons of WWII

Enter the following at the main menu.

Unlock All Missions and Planes – Hold LT and RT and quickly press X, LB, RB, Y (x2), RB, LB, X

Enter the following at the pause screen.

God Mode – Hold LT and quickly press X, Y (x2), X, then hold RT and quickly press Y, X (x2), Y
Increased Damage – Hold LT and quickly press LB (x2), RB, then hold RT and quickly press RB (x2), LB

"GI Droid"
(location unknown – last seen standing outside E3, screaming insults about the world's greatest video games)

PLAYSTATION 2

The Godfather

Enter the following codes from the pause menu.

Full Ammo – ○, Left, ○, Right, □, R3
Full Health – Left, □, Right, ○, Right, L3
Get $5,000 – □, ○, □ (x2), ○, L3

XBOX

Blazing Angels: Squadrons of WWII

Enter the following at the main menu.

Unlock All Missions and Planes – Hold LT and RT and quickly press X, White, Black, Y (x2), Black, White, X

Enter the following at the pause screen.

God Mode – Hold LT and quickly press X, Y (x2), X, then hold RT and quickly press Y, X (x2), Y
Increased Damage – Hold LT and quickly press White (x2), Black, then hold RT and quickly press Black (x2), White

The Godfather

Enter the following codes from the pause menu.

Full Ammo – Y, Left, Y, Right, X, R3
Full Health – Left, X, Right, Y, Right, L3
Get $5000 – X, Y, X (x2), Y, L3

I'M A GEEK.

"I care more about the fight for first place between Core Microarchitecture vs. Radeon X800 than the World Series or the Stanley Cup."

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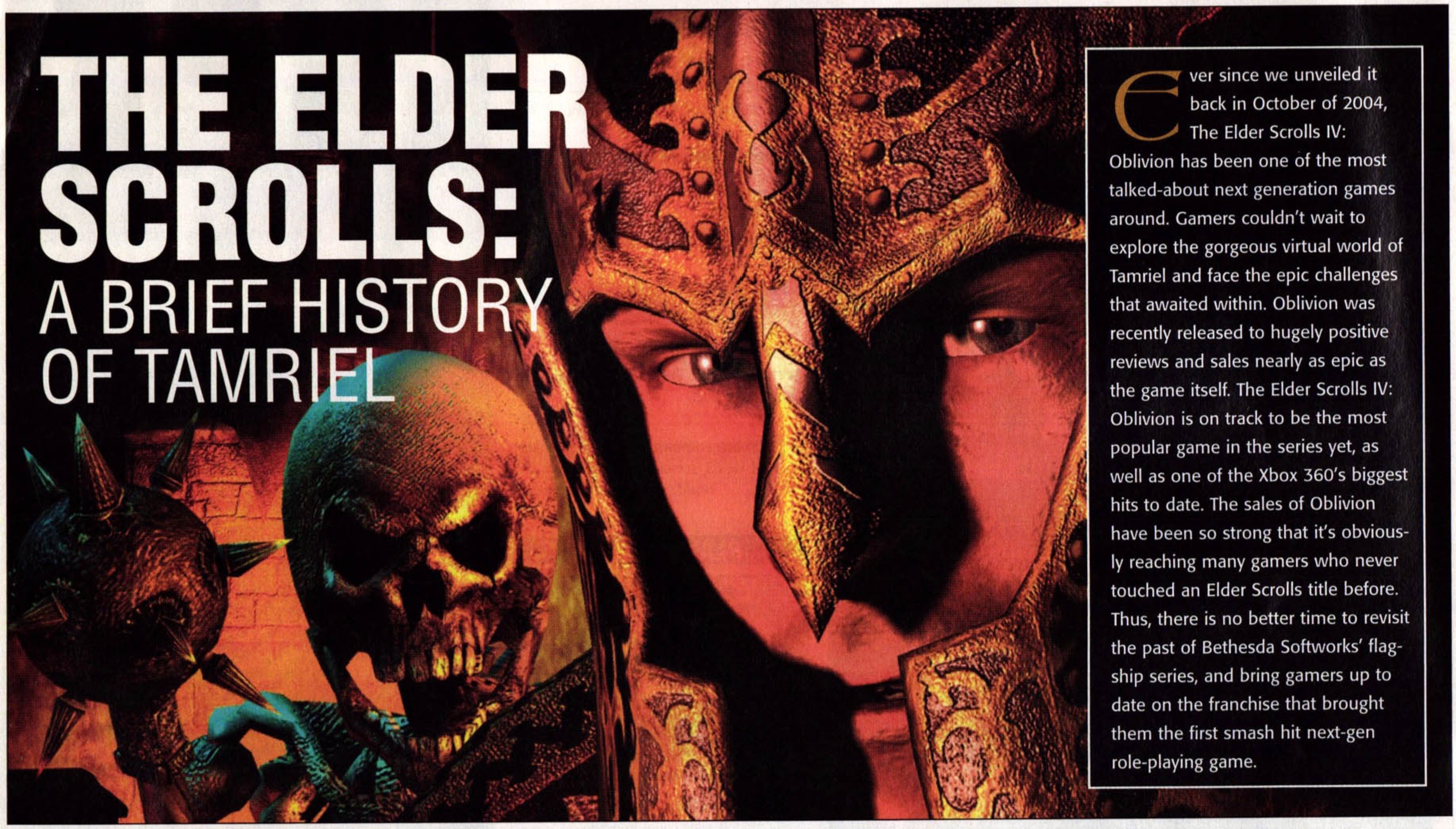
THE ELDER SCROLLS: A BRIEF HISTORY OF TAMRIEL



Ever since we unveiled it back in October of 2004, The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion has been one of the most talked-about next generation games around. Gamers couldn't wait to explore the gorgeous virtual world of Tamriel and face the epic challenges that awaited within. Oblivion was recently released to hugely positive reviews and sales nearly as epic as the game itself. The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion is on track to be the most popular game in the series yet, as well as one of the Xbox 360's biggest hits to date. The sales of Oblivion have been so strong that it's obviously reaching many gamers who never touched an Elder Scrolls title before. Thus, there is no better time to revisit the past of Bethesda Softworks' flagship series, and bring gamers up to date on the franchise that brought them the first smash hit next-gen role-playing game.

To unravel the story of the Elder Scrolls franchise, we spoke with Todd Howard, the executive producer of Oblivion. Howard joined Bethesda right as the first Elder Scrolls game (Arena) was shipping, and was happy to explain how that game evolved and how the world within it developed. "The nucleus of it was actually that a bunch of people here were playing a Dungeons and Dragons campaign in a universe that a couple of the guys had made that was Tamriel," explains Howard. "The first game, Arena, started as a gladiator game. At the time Bethesda was doing Terminator Rampage in 1993, and it was 'Hey this is another game that's going to be first-person 3D, kind of Wolfenstein/Doom era stuff.' It was going to be this big gladiator game, and you have a team of guys and go from city to city, and there are champions in these cities from different areas of this fantasy world, and you rise to the head of this arena circuit. Over time, very quickly, as more things got added to the game, we were like 'Oh, maybe you can leave the city, and you can wander out and explore and do things.' It just kind of steamrolled, and we said 'Hey, let's just make this a huge RPG.' Eventually, the party got dropped. There was a version of Arena where it was Wizardry-like, where there were four guys following behind you at all times. Eventually, it got to the point where we said 'Let's do Ultima Underworld on a grand scale.' There's another game that came out around the same time called Legends of Valor, which was very, very good, and if you look at that game, there are a lot of things that you can see in Arena that are very similar to that game."

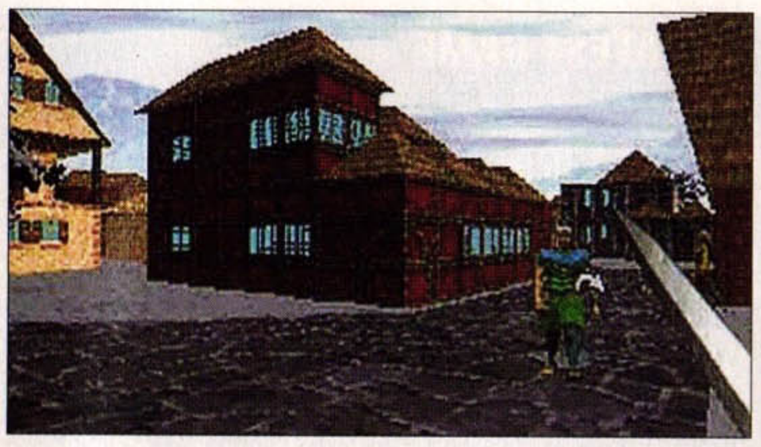
■ The Elder Scrolls: Arena (PC)

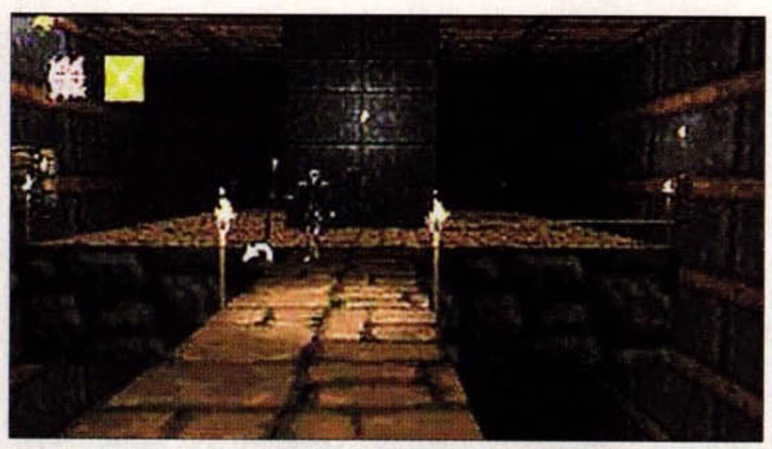
TAMRIEL LORE

Battlespire: An Elder Scrolls Legend was originally planned as an expansion pack for Daggerfall, but changed enough that it became its own game. The original title was Dungeons of Daggerfall: Battlespire.

Howard and the rest of Bethesda are still quite proud of Arena, and view it as quite a good game for its day. However, it wasn't until The Elder Scrolls Chapter II: Daggerfall that the world of Tamriel began to form into something distinct and identifiable. "The world itself started, if you play Arena, as a generic fantasy setting," admits Howard. "Then in Daggerfall, that's when the books showed up." As fans of the series know, The Elder Scrolls titles are filled with tomes that flesh out the games' world and history. While it's certainly not necessary to read them, doing so lets curious players learn details of Tamriel that they might not encounter otherwise. "We had a bunch of people do a lot of writing [for Daggerfall], and that's when the lore started getting fleshed out," continues Howard. "And Daggerfall to Morrowind, it really jumped again, as far as having a lot of background. Oblivion adds some, but not as much, because so much was built up in Daggerfall and Morrowind that we wanted to spend more time in Oblivion connecting the dots."

Not only does the history of the world become more and more fleshed out over the course of the series, the gameplay itself has grown and evolved. "With each game, we kind of pick a few things and push on them," explains Howard. "From the first game to the second, we wanted to push on the character system. In Arena, the character system is very, very strict, and there are experience points. In the other Elder Scrolls games, you just use your skills [to level up], but it's not like that in Arena. So in Daggerfall, we pushed on the character system. We added all these skills, and you level with the skills, and it was a much better role-playing experience for your character. From Daggerfall to Morrowind, what we really pushed was the world around you. In Daggerfall, it's very repetitive, you see the same things over and over again. It doesn't feel real. Your character feels real, but the world doesn't. So in Morrowind, we focused on the world around you. After Morrowind, we thought the world felt good, and your character felt good, but the other characters felt kind of





■ **The Elder Scrolls Chapter II: Daggerfall (PC)**

dead to us. So we said in Oblivion, 'We're going to push on the other characters now.' We fine-tuned all the other things, but our next focus is the other people in the world. They're moving around the world and talking and doing things. I honestly don't know what's next. We'll find something. But that's a good synopsis of how the games evolved."

Between Daggerfall and Morrowind, Bethesda released two spinoffs, Battlespire: An Elder Scrolls Legend, and The Elder Scrolls Adventures: Redguard. "Both were spinoffs, both were trying to do simpler, more action-focused genres," says Howard. "And both games have their merits, and their bad points as well. We just sort of realized making those games that what the audience wants from us are giant, big RPGs, so let's stick with that. Battlespire is closer to the traditional Elder Scrolls than Redguard; it's a first-person 'run around and kill things' game. It has a nice little story, but it's a very simple game. It came out after Daggerfall, so we went from something very complex to something very simple. And Redguard, which we were making at the same time, is kind of a mix of Tomb Raider, Prince of Persia, and King's Quest. It does a lot of things that we like the Elder Scrolls for, it's got a lot of lore stuff, and it plays differently than anything else – it's a third-person game. But, it didn't commercially do very well at all. It was right after Redguard shipped that the group that made it moved onto Morrowind, that was kind of the start of Morrowind."

TAMRIEL LORE

In Oblivion's arena, there is a quote inscribed on the water pool in which you wash you hands after a fight. This quote, attributed to the first Blades master, was the first thing players saw after initially installing the first Elder Scrolls game, Arena. What does it say? Visit the arena to find out.

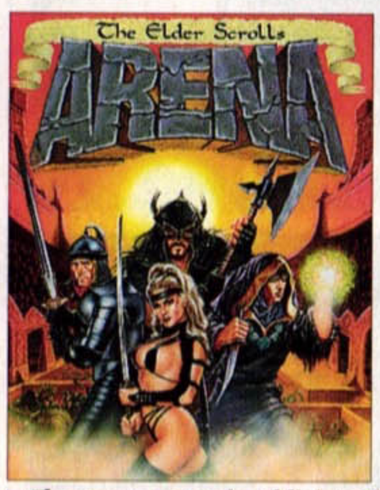
TAMRIEL LORE

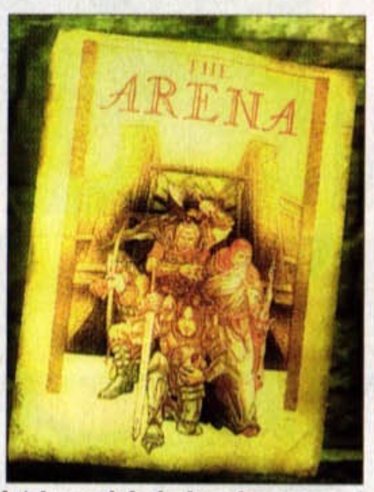
While there is a ton of information about Tamriel in the books and scrolls of each Elder Scrolls game, not all of it is right. Occasionally, mistakes are made. However, since all text in the games is credited to a citizen of the world, any inaccuracies in them are attributed to the in-game author of said text.

Morrowind, the third title in the main series, was the biggest hit in the franchise yet. For the first time, the series expanded to consoles, selling over a million copies on the Xbox. Both the original and Game of the Year editions of Morrowind became part of the console's Platinum Hits line, and yet Howard explains that Bethesda decided to veer away from referencing it too directly in Oblivion. "Originally, there were a lot more references to Morrowind in part IV, because it was so popular, and we were rolling right off of Morrowind into Oblivion," says Howard. "It's kind of natural in your designs to be adding things that reference it, and we started taking a lot of them out, because it felt too much like 'Hey, I didn't play that game, I don't understand that.' We didn't want that to be the case, we want each one to be its own thing. There are more references to Morrowind in this game than the other ones, but they're not that important, they're kind of set dressing. You'll hear people talk about Morrowind or read a book about the character you played in Morrowind. You'll hear references to what your character did if you played that game. But other than that, in the original story for Oblivion, we had characters that were from Morrowind and things like that, but we sort of thought it felt wrong and changed it."

As Oblivion is the latest chapter in this long-running series, it's obviously rife with references to the previous games. The fact that you can fight in the arena in Oblivion is a reference to the first game, but there are far more obvious connections between the two titles. For example, both games start not only in prison, but in the exact same cell. "The starting cell is actually the starting cell from Arena," reveals Howard. "The two chains are hanging there, and there's a gate. And the person who lets you out [in Arena] says 'Watch out, there are rats and goblins down there,' and that's exactly what you find in the beginning of Oblivion." There are several characters in Oblivion who appeared in the previous titles,

■ **The cells in Arena (top) and Oblivion (bottom) are actually the same room. Note the two hanging chains**





■ **The arena poster in Oblivion (right) is modeled after the cover of the first Elder Scrolls game, Arena**

TAMRIEL LORE

Bethesda actually created a PS2 port of Redguard, but decided not to release it, as the company wasn't happy with how it turned out. At one point, a sequel to Redguard was planned, entitled Eye of Argonia. Observant fans somehow discovered this title, and assumed it was the name of The Elder Scrolls V. The Fighter's Guild quest has a mission that is based on the plot of the scrapped game, but we won't say what it is here – no one likes spoilers!

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The Elder Scrolls Timeline

1994
THE ELDER SCROLLS: ARENA (PC)

1996
THE ELDER SCROLLS CHAPTER II: DAGGERFALL (PC)

1997
BATTLESPIRE: AN ELDER SCROLLS LEGEND (PC)

1998
THE ELDER SCROLLS ADVENTURES: REDGUARD (PC)

2002
THE ELDER SCROLLS III: MORROWIND (PC, XBOX)

2002
THE ELDER SCROLLS III: TRIBUNAL (PC)

2003
THE ELDER SCROLLS III: BLOODMOON (PC)

2003
THE ELDER SCROLLS TRAVELS: DAWNSTAR (CELL PHONE)

2003
THE ELDER SCROLLS III: MORROWIND GAME OF THE YEAR EDITION (PC, XBOX)

2004
THE ELDER SCROLLS TRAVELS: STORMHOLD (CELL PHONE)

2004
THE ELDER SCROLLS TRAVELS: SHADOWKEY (N-GAGE)

2006
THE ELDER SCROLLS IV: OBLIVION (PC, XBOX 360)

2006
THE ELDER SCROLLS TRAVELS: OBLIVION MOBILE (CELL PHONE)

■ The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind (PC, Xbox)

such as Emperor Uriel Septim, who has had some sort of presence in each of the Elder Scrolls games. "He does not appear visually in Morrowind, but he's referenced," says Howard. "He appears in Arena, Daggerfall, and Oblivion. And now he's dead. Fans didn't seem to care much. I think it's because they knew. Morrowind really bangs home this subtext of 'the Emperor's dying, the Emperor's dying.' The empire's on its last legs in Morrowind. I only had one or two people point out that this is a really bad thing. I think that you have to had played them all and rescued this Emperor in Arena and helped him in Daggerfall to really feel sad about it. I think a lot of people started Oblivion and were like 'Go ahead die, let's go. Get me outside, I want to see the forest.'"

Since Oblivion is such a gigantic game, some players will encounter other recurring characters like the King of Worms, who is a character in the Mages Guild quest and who was also an enemy in Daggerfall. But given the scope of Oblivion, there are many references to the series' past that some players catch and others miss entirely. That's fine with most fans, however – the hugeness of the Elder Scrolls games is part of what appeals to players the most. With each entry in the series, Bethesda has been working towards creating a virtual fantasy world, one that lets players live out a romantic notion of life in another time and place. Every release has found a wider audience than the last, and with Oblivion, it seems the series is finally on the track to blockbuster status. After years of devotion, growth, and intricately-crafted lore, Tamriel has become one of the most compelling destinations in the gaming world. ■■■

TAMRIEL LORE
While every employee at Bethesda is well-versed in the Elder Scrolls universe, a few are designated "Lore Masters," and are consulted when something from a previous game is referenced. The Lore Masters go back and research to find all references to the subject in previous games.

TAMRIEL LORE
The collector's edition of Oblivion comes with a Pocket Guide to the Empire, which contains a brief history of Tamriel. Battlespire also came with a pocket guide, although it has different content that Oblivion's guide – Battlespire takes place 400 years earlier in the Elder Scrolls timeline.

■ The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion (PC, Xbox 360)

GREATEST GAME OF ALL TIME
by Brendan Millings

KINGDOM HEARTS
> **FORMAT** PLAYSTATION 2
> **PUBLISHER** SQUARE ENIX

When Square Enix announced that they were partnering up with Disney to make a hack n' slash RPG entitled Kingdom Hearts, gamers were wondering what Square was thinking. Well, a lot of those gamers now know what Square saw in the premise of a Disney-based RPG.

You have to venture through different worlds and seal its keyhole, locking them from darkness. Every world you travel through should be a world that you're familiar with – most are Disney settings from movies. So, you can travel to places from movies like *Aladdin* and *Peter Pan*. Not only are there Disney cameos, but you'll also find some very memorable characters from Final Fantasy VII and Final Fantasy VIII. On top of that, the villain Ansem is probably one of the coolest video game villains you'll find.

The gameplay in Kingdom Hearts is really good. It's hack n' slash, but it runs fluidly and remains entertaining due to a pretty cool leveling up system. What's also fun about Kingdom Hearts is the Gummi Ship, which is a ship that you can build on your own and modify how you like. You can find parts as you blow up other ships, or you can buy parts from none other than Final Fantasy VII's version of Cid.

The controls in the game are easy to figure out. Tap the same button to keep hitting enemies. You can choose to just attack, do a magic spell, or summon someone from a Disney movie to help you during a fight (like Genie from *Aladdin*). The only flaw of this game is the camera. It always gets stuck on walls, and it's just really hard to maneuver.

The graphics for Kingdom Hearts are really good. The environments are nicely detailed, and so are the character models. Every one has a different look, and the animations are awesome as well. Every attack has some cool effect too, like the Sonic technique that you receive from Cloud from Final Fantasy VII.

When it comes to current generation console RPG's, voice acting is something to be expected, and in Kingdom Hearts Square Enix and Disney knew what they were doing. Haley Joel Osment was great as Sora. The Disney characters sound on par to how they were in their movie counterparts. This is by far some of the best voice work you'll find in any game.

THIS MONTH IN GAMING HISTORY

After months of competing with rival Commodore's price cuts, Texas Instruments announced the largest loss in its history on June 10, 1983. The company manufactured the TI 99/4A, which was initially a fairly successful home computer with distinctive speech synthesis capabilities. However, the price war with Commodore forced to eventually sell the TI 99/4A at a loss, which ultimately pushed Texas Instruments out of the home computer market.

SNES

THE LION KING

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** VIRGIN INTERACTIVE > **DEVELOPER** WESTWOOD STUDIOS > **RELEASE** 1994

RETRO RATING
NOW 8
THEN* 8.25

First of all, any game that has a level that begins with the phrase "roar at monkeys" is bound to be good. Fortunately, The Lion King also has some solid and entertaining gameplay that make it a stand-out among licensed platformers. With animation and sound clips taken straight from the golden age of Disney, the game does an excellent job of retaining the film's feel while still being fun to play. From crazy monkeys that fling you all over the place to jumping ambiguous pink animals while riding an ostrich, the action is fast and varied. The biggest drawback is some dodgy hit detection that has you taking damage and missing jumps in unpredictable ways. Otherwise, The Lion King is a rare example of a well-crafted, movie-based game from the 16-bit era. Unlike '90s game flops like Cliffhanger and Batman Forever (Oh, the days when the Pit Fighter-esque graphics were impressive), The Lion King illustrates that a license isn't necessarily a kiss of death.

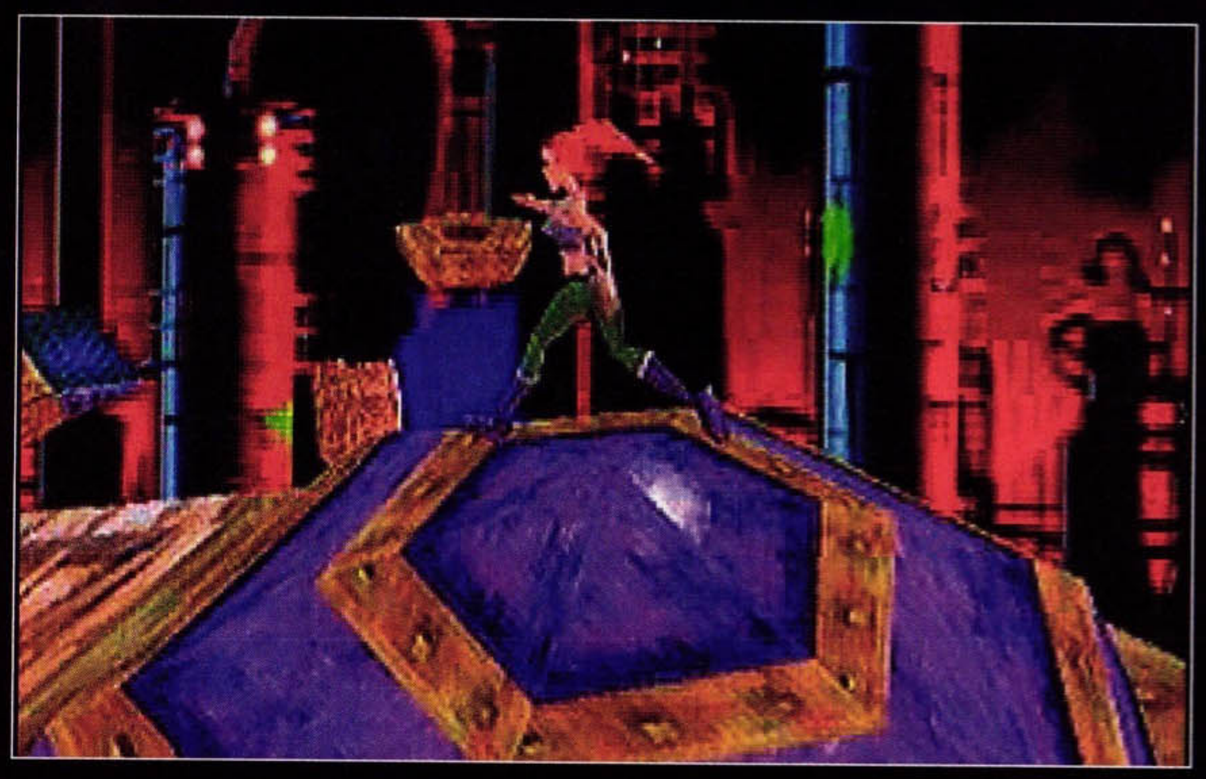
SNES

CHAVEZ

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER FIGHTING > **PUBLISHER** AMERICAN SOFTWORKS CORPORATION > **DEVELOPER** MALIBU INTERACTIVE > **RELEASE** 1994

RETRO RATING
NOW 8
THEN N/A

In the wake of the awesome Fight Night Round 3, fans of boxing video games may be tempted to go back and revisit some other digital pugilists from years past. Everyone knows about the popular Punch-Out series, but fewer are probably aware of the odd boxing game called Chavez. Despite its arcade-style looks, Chavez is actually a pretty deep little game, with a create-a-character mode and training between matches to boost your stats. Although early fighters are easy to overcome by simply throwing hooks, the career mode quickly gets tough, and forces you to use your full arsenal of jabs, hooks, and uppercuts. Your stamina will decrease from excessive punching, so you'll need to balance your offense with a good defense. So, with a surprisingly complex fighting engine and deep career mode, why haven't more people played this game? Well, it was only officially available in Mexico where its cover star Julia Caesar Chavez is a hero, and is actually a port of Riddick Bowe Boxing. But many copies actually made it into the U.S., and if you like boxing, you'd be well-advised to pick it up – even if you can't read the Spanish menus!



PSONE

PANDEMONIUM 2

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION/PLATFORM > **PUBLISHER** CRYSTAL DYNAMICS > **DEVELOPER** CRYSTAL DYNAMICS > **RELEASE** 1997

RETRO RATING
NOW 7.25
THEN* 6

Wildly imaginative level design and and fast-paced platforming aren't enough to save Pandemonium 2 from the curse of so many original Playstation games. It's been said before, and it will be said again – these games look terrible in hindsight. That the collective gamer population didn't all go blind during the PSone era is a miracle. Thankfully, solid platforming and entertaining environment concepts live on, and this sequel definitely had those. Living by the credo that collecting stuff is the best thing ever, the game doesn't stand up to the scrutiny of players who have had enough of picking up coins and health in their gaming career. Despite its flaws, a quirky humor shines through, both in the two certifiably insane characters and the equally psychotic worlds they run and jump through. Few will claim the game to be brilliant, but most will at least admit that it offers something a little different.

*Score given to the game when it first appeared in Game Informer. The Lion King (GI #20 12/94), Pandemonium 2 (GI #56 12/97)

GAMEOVER

"You Cannot Stop Me With Paramecium Alone!"

VIDEO GAME TRIVIA

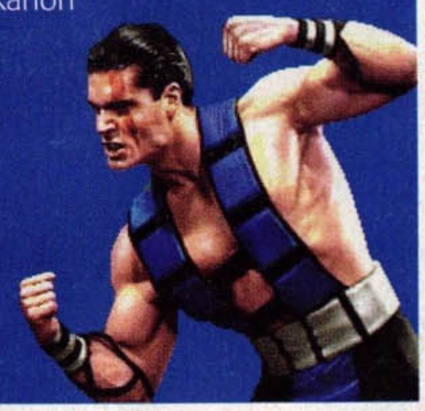
Every year, video games' best and brightest gather at the Los Angeles convention center for E3. Since the event is industry-only, many gamers may never see the twisted and bizarre things that happen on the glitzy show floor. Of course, there's only one way to break through the barriers and bouncers that prevent your access to the event: trivia. Answer these questions to discover just how deep down the E3 rabbit-hole you can go.

1 The original Donkey Kong is a classic, though its direct sequels never attained the same success. In the second Donkey Kong game, who is the character under the player's control?

A. Jumpman
B. Donkey Kong Jr.
C. Donkey Kong
D. Diddy Kong

2 This incarnation of Sub-Zero was used for which entry in the Mortal Kombat canon?

A. Mortal Kombat 3
B. Mortal Kombat: Deadly Alliance
C. Mortal Kombat: Shaolin Monks
D. You should have said "kanon"



3 It's commonly known that Battletoads for the NES was developed by Rare, but who originally published the amphibian-infused adventure?

A. Tradewest
B. Data East
C. Tecmo
D. Hudson Soft

4 Most of these titles are actual games for the N64. However, we totally made up one of them. Which is the imposter?

A. Panzer Panic
B. Armorines: Project S.W.A.R.M.
C. Glover
D. Rat Attack!

5 A serious contender for the best game intro of all time, this screen is taken from the NES version of which brawling classic?

A. Streets of Rage
B. Double Dragon
C. Final Fight
D. Eightman

6 At the brief height of his popularity, the Tazmanian Devil starred in this game on the Genesis. What was it called?

A. Taz's Adventure
B. Taz Attack
C. Taz-Mania
D. Taz Luhrmann

7 It's 2006, and hover racing still isn't the new national pastime? At least video games can give your anti-gravity speed fix. Which of these titles features boring, non-hovering cars?

A. F-Zero
B. Wipeout
C. Hi-Octane
D. Turbo

8 Life has consequences, folks. In which of the following tactical games do your units die permanently if they are killed on the field?

A. Final Fantasy Tactics
B. Gladius
C. Disgaea: Hour of Darkness
D. Tactics Ogre

9 Which of the following names are not assigned to one of Vergil's weapons in the special edition of Devil May Cry 3?

A. Yamato
B. Beowulf
C. Rudra
D. Force Edge

10 Which of these games provide a dubious biology lesson on the PSone by detailing the wrath of aggressive mutated mitochondria?

A. Silent Hill
B. Parasite Eve
C. Alone in the Dark
D. Golgi Body's Revenge

BREAKDOWN

8.7 % is the amount that Nintendo's net income increased during the last fiscal year, according to the company's preliminary earnings statement

34% of Take Two's total revenue is accounted for by the Grand Theft Auto franchise

100% of gamers who actually expected Starcraft: Ghost to not be delayed are suckers

0% of the GI staff plans on shelling out $2.50 for Oblivion's horse armor. We'd rather use the credits to buy Geometry Wars...again

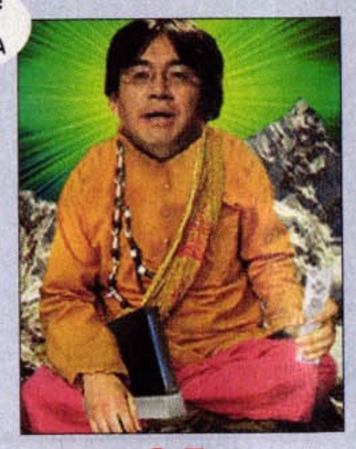
93% of our office has been "reader-proofed" in preparation for the inevitable riots after you read our Sacred Cow Barbecue article (see page 38)

★ Trivia Score & Rank ★

0-1:
The 3DO booth

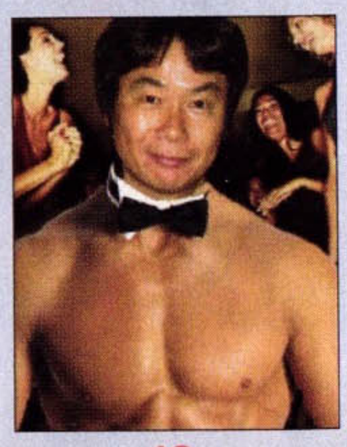
2-3:
Outside with bacon-wrapped hotdog vendors

4-5:
Bronze Membership at Microsoft's booth



6-7:
The Revolution's final mystery

8-9:
Five minutes alone with the PS3



10:
A private dance from Miyamoto

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Video Game Trivia Answers: 1. B 2. A 3. A 4. A 5. B 6. C 7. D 8. D 9. C 10. B

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