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THE WORLD'S #1 VIDEO GAME MAGAZINE



The Elder Scrolls V:  
**SKYRIM**

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2011  
THE ELDER SCROLLS V: SKYRIM



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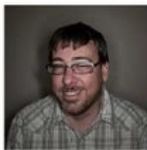


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## Why I Love the Top 50



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

Read my column or comment on this letter at [gameinformer.com/mag](http://gameinformer.com/mag) or follow @GI\_AndyMc

This year marks Game Informer's 20th anniversary, and even though I was there, I don't remember what month specifically it all started. Our first issue was simply labeled "Fall 1991."

We had a slow start back then, going from quarterly to bi-monthly issues before making the big jump to monthly, but as we grew we knew one thing was certain: We would do what is expected of all media outlets and give out annual awards. For the 11 years that followed we did just that. We picked the best, put them in an order, and proclaimed one game greater than the other.

The process, while important, has always bugged me. In 2003, I couldn't take it anymore. I hated picking one game as better than the other. On a cold winter day we decided to pick the 50 best games of the year and organize them by date rather than argue over ranking placement.

Our inspiration for the change came from music publications, as their lists often forgo rankings because, like games, they feature a wide variety of disparate genres. Is that jazz record really worse than that metal one? It all really depends on your point of view, and if you hate one style over another you will never truly agree.

This is why I love the Top 50. It manages to do what I want it to, which is celebrate the year and help gamers find golden gems that they may have missed. We didn't have to waste time arbitrarily ranking games that offer completely different experiences — it's just 50 kick-butt games.

Over the last couple of years we added back the classic genre and console awards, which handles the part of the award season decision-making I personally hate to make, but love to argue over. After all, arguing about which game is better with your friends, your magazine, and even your enemies is ultimately what makes these lists fun.

While we could agree on that, we almost never agree on which games make the cut for the Top 50, or for that matter, which game should win our Game of the Year award. Personally, this year was tough. I could easily give GOTY to God of War III, Red Dead Redemption, or Mass Effect 2 and feel great. In fact, I could give it to all three and feel even better, but that doesn't follow the spirit of awards organizing our pop culture into neat stacks of good, better, best.

Enjoy the Top 50, the awards, and an issue packed with some of the amazing games we will be arguing about in next year's Top 50.

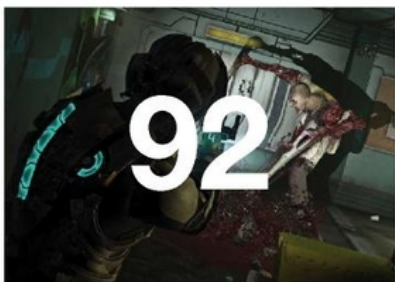
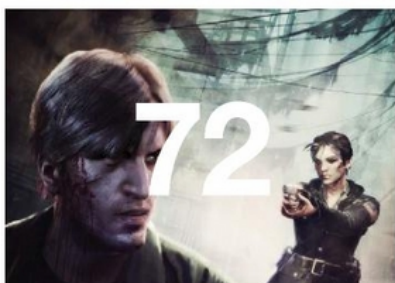


» 46

### The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim

A lot has changed in the 200 years since the Septim line was severed in closing the Oblivion gates. The dragons have returned to Tamriel, and you must take on a brand new adventure as one of the dragonborn in the next RPG from Bethesda Softworks.

by **Matt Miller**



## regulars

### » 6 Feedback

We discuss readers' complaints about our obviously flawless 30 Characters Who Defined A Decade list, address the supposed misogyny of The Last Guardian's Fumito Ueda, and more.

### » 10 Connect

Our picks for the top 50 games of 2010 span 16 pages. Alternatively, see what film director Guillermo del Toro has to say about his foray into gaming.

### » 78 Previews

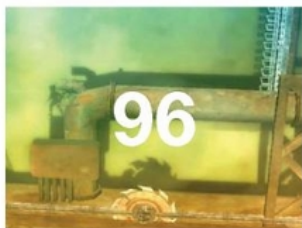
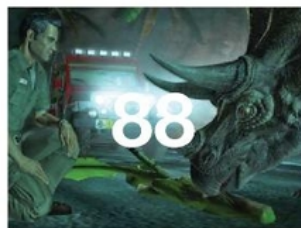
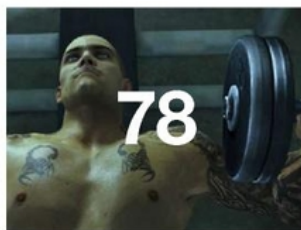
You probably want to know about Prototype 2 and Jurassic Park. If not, you can console yourself with the brutal realism of Fight Night Champion.

### » 90 Reviews

What better way to celebrate the holidays than by reading our gigantic two-page review of Dead Space 2? It's tradition, after all.  
**by Andrew Reiner**

### » 100 Game Over

Our holiday-themed trivia quiz will test your knowledge of the most obscure video game facts.



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**This month in Feedback we field praise and criticism for our Top 30 Characters list, discuss how much female representation in video games has (or hasn't) improved, and explain how each issue of GI travels through time.**



### Covers For Everyone

Upon browsing "30 Characters Who Defined a Decade," I initially found my own opinions to be in stark contrast to yours. That feeling quickly changed after reading the article and putting a face to the reasoning behind your decisions. Now I am hard-pressed to say that I disagree with your opinion on even one of those characters. That evolution of my own opinion has left me with one inevitable and undeniable conclusion: Your editors are of a superior alien species who are in control of a human-thought altering device, since it is statistically improbable that my own opinions would so closely mirror those of your editors. I also realize the futility of formulating this idea since, as I read your response to this email, my views pertaining to my realization will change. Keep up the good work Game Informer: You have effectively persuaded (or controlled) me into being a life-long subscriber.

**Matthew**  
Coal Township, PA

I was very impressed by the cover art for the December issue, and even more so when I saw the complete panorama on pages 46 and 47. I would be very interested in purchasing a large poster version. Is there any way this would be possible?

**Nathan Lehman**  
Via email

**Due to overwhelming interest from our readers, we will indeed be selling 12 x 48 inch prints of issue 212's full cover image. Details on how to order your print will soon be available at [gameinformer.com/posters](http://gameinformer.com/posters). As for Matthew's humorous theory: Don't worry, we're totally not a superior alien species. We repeat: We are not a superior alien species.**

### Back To The Future

I've been receiving GI for quite a while now, and one thing has bugged me the whole time. In the Feedback section of the magazine, the subjects discussed by staffers and readers are all from two issues ago. For example, when I received the December 2010 issue (with the top 30 characters on the front) the Feedback section was

on the topic of things discussed in October's BioShock Infinite issue, when the actual previous issue was November's Resistance 3 issue. Why is this?

**Parker Sams**  
Via email

**Because of the time it takes to print and ship the magazine to our readers, we usually end up finishing our current issue around the time the previous month's issue starts showing up in mailboxes, which means few people have had a chance to even read it, much less write us venom-spewing hate mail over its contents. If the delay still bothers you, just do what we do and pretend that you're so cool you're living in the future.**



**Question Of The Month:**  
What improvement/addition do you most want to see in Elder Scrolls V?

### Contact Us

[feedback@gameinformer.com](mailto:feedback@gameinformer.com)





## Short Answers to Readers' Burning Questions

• "how do I start receiving every game/informer magazines every month because I really want to get them do I have to pay?"

**Typically you have to – wait, how are you reading this?**

• "I've been wondering, is the Ben on your staff mentally ok?"

**The picture of Ben below should answer your question.**

• "Greetings. Than you are engaged?"

**This relationship thing is easier than we thought...**

## Worst News Tip Of The Month:

"I dont know what this is!!!!"

## Worst Write-In Votes For The Top 30 Characters Reader Poll:

- The Guy (GTA III)
- Yankees Suck
- zub-zero (Mortal Kombat)
- You're Mom
- Coelana
- Morgan Freeman (Half-Life)



### Searching For Sam Fisher

For the most part, I enjoy the list articles that you guys write. I usually find them fun and thought-provoking. However, as I read through the article about the "30 Characters Who Defined A Decade," I got so upset that I almost fell off the crapper. How could you guys leave Sam Fisher off this list?! He's one of the great characters who have made the stealth genre what it is today, not to mention racking up, like, a bajillion dollars in sales over six titles on multiple platforms! Besides, you guys gave Splinter Cell Conviction a 9, so what gives?

M.J.  
Omaha, NE

**Out of all the characters that readers felt were snubbed by our list, Sam Fisher was the most cited. But you shouldn't confuse great gameplay with a great character. Fisher's personality has been far too inconsistent over the years. Starting off as a loyal government man, Sam Fisher has been re-imagined as a rogue agent, a floppy-haired hobo, and a Jack Bauer-like brute. A character who goes through that many reboots in such a short time just isn't hitting the mark.**

gi spy



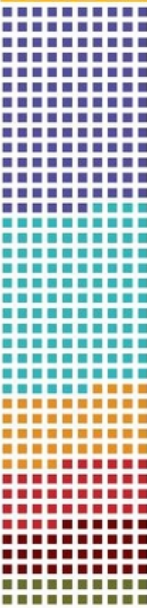
(Left) This is why we can't take Ben anywhere nice  
(Right) One PR's Juan Castro and Square Enix's Elizabeth Stewart and Stanley Phan enjoy a romantic dinner with Ben

CANDID PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY



GI SPY  
continued on page 8

## On Your Mind



- 'Why Wasn't I Inset Character From The Wrong Decade?' On The List? **35%**
- Fallout: New Vegas Bug Grips **23%**
- Our Black Ops Review Was Too High **20%**
- Our Black Ops Review Was Too Low **12%**
- Letters With The Subject Line: "Seriously?!" **6%**
- Letters Containing Call Out "Doo-Doo?/Doodle" Jokes **4%**



### Man Hands

I am very excited for *The Last Guardian* and read your preview as soon as I received your magazine. But I was surprised and offended by some of the comments Team Ico made when they mentioned that they changed the protagonist's gender because a girl's hands would be too small and weak, and her skirt would get in the way when she was climbing. First of all, are females only ever allowed to wear skirts? What is this, the 1800s? On top of that, the idea of her hands being too weak to hold onto Trico is just wacky. Isn't this a fantasy game? I don't expect a young girl to throw kegs over her head or wrestle wild alligators, but I don't expect that from a young boy, either. I will still play *Last Guardian*, but I question the attitudes of the game designers. There are lots of interesting and dynamic stories to be told with male and female protagonists. Did *Princess Zelda* let a skirt get in her way? Were *Samus'* hands too weak to hold up a gun? Men and women and even animals can do anything in video games. Limiting your imagination limits your reality.

**Catherine**  
Via email

Let me get this straight: Team Ico has no problem designing a giant cat/bird hybrid creature, but a pants-wearing female protagonist with large hands and a strong grip is too far-fetched?

**Brian Howe**  
Via Internet

Team Ico might be taking a decidedly traditional stance in designing its lead character, but if recent games like *Mass Effect 2*, *Red Dead Redemption*, and the upcoming *Tombs Raider* reboot are anything to go by, the industry is favoring strong, independent female characters over helpless princesses and glorified sex objects more than ever before.

### Boys. Boys Never Change

How come they don't make more games with nudity? Like in the *Sims* games, they are almost there but then they blur it out. I mean seriously, if you want to make more money off the game keep it in there. I really want to see more games with naked girls.

**Sam Fetherston**  
Via Email

**Yep, the future is looking bright for female characters indeed.**

### Game Date Disconnect

My girlfriend and I have been going out for a while now, and we are both gamers. We have little game dates where we visit each others' houses and play together. A problem has arisen through these gaming get-togethers. I am an avid RPG fan, while she is strictly interested in shooters. We had a vicious debate over *Final Fantasy* the other day; she insists every game is the same and the graphics just get fancier with each release. I attempted to explain to her the impact it has had on the genre, to which she replied that all RPGs are the same. Then I moved onto the fact that the games feature very different plots, mechanics, and worlds. Denial was her response. Got any advice on what a predominantly RPG-player such as myself can say to the shooter purist she loves?

**Madeleine Stephens**  
Via Email

**An important part of any relationship is respecting your partner's right to disagree with your opinion – that goes for gaming couples, too. Instead of spending time arguing your case for RPGs, pick a game you can both enjoy. Maybe try a shooter/RPG hybrid like *Mass Effect* or *Fallout 3*. If that doesn't solve your relationship problem, write to Ann Landers.**

## Reader Picks

In *Issue 212* we asked readers to pick their own favorite characters from the past decade. Here are some of the less popular but well-argued responses we received.

My favorite video game character from the past decade is Ratchet from the *Ratchet & Clank* series. I've devoted many hours to these games over the years due to their compelling stories and immersive gameplay. Ratchet is such a unique character and makes you wonder: Why did *Insomniac* make him a 3-1/2 foot tall cat with big ears? His cute, fuzzy appearance is in such stark contrast with his personality; he's cocky, has an attitude, and isn't afraid to blow apart anyone or anything that gets in his way. Even more unforgettable is his metamorphosis into a loyal, compassionate hero in *Ratchet & Clank*.

**Philip Ehke**

My favorite character from the last decade is one that not many will suggest: *Godot* from *Phoenix Wright: Trials and Tribulations*. Despite the fact that he was on your *Best Villain 2007* list, he always struck me as a tragic figure occupying the gray area of morality. He played a role similar to *The Boss* in the *Metal Gear Solid* franchise: the mentor whose ideals influenced the hero, but who turned into a tragic villain. His final confrontation with Phoenix helped transform Wright into the confident veteran found in *Apollo Justice*. The phenomenal character design, theme song, and writing helped establish a character who I will not soon forget.

**Robert H.**

My pick is CJ from *GTA: San Andreas*. Though the game showcased many stereotypes, I think that CJ's actions paved the way for a complex character like *Niko Bellic*. Faced with the challenge of trying to avoid a gang life, CJ went through great lengths to leave his past behind, only to see how his previous actions continued to cause stress and grief for him and his family. Constant dealings with rival gangs, crooked officers, and family members made CJ a cruder gangster than *Tommy Vercetti*, and a more haunted vigilante than *Niko Bellic*.

**Terry Marshal**

## GI SPY

**(Left)** This month the GI staff was held captive by *GWAR's* Oduus Urungus and Beefcake the Mighty – check out the video of their shenanigans at [gameinformer.com](http://gameinformer.com) **(Inset)** Jeff Cook really enjoyed the *GWAR* concert later that night **(Right)** Meagan took time out from her trip to Japan to pose with *Square Visual Works'* Takeshi Nozue (left), *Crystal Dynamics'* Kazuyuki Ikumori, and Karl Stewart





**WINNER 1 Richard Bednar** You may think the Covenant destroyed Reach, but it was actually their strategic deployment of Navi **2 Christopher de Leon** If Sagat had a special move in which he shot Adon out of his chest scar, that's the only one we'd ever use **3 George Vega** Come on, Chris...if you're gonna fight The Hulk, at least learn proper kneepad placement **4 Nino Valencia** Samus will have to do a lot more than kill Ridley to repair her image after Other M

Enter the Game Informer Reader Art Contest. All you need to do is draw, paint, scratch, spit, or carve the best damn art you can think of and send it to us. Please include your name, phone number, and return address. If you're the monthly winner, we'll feature your work in G and you'll receive a video game prize from the Game Informer vault. All entries become the property of Game Informer and can't be returned.

Send to:  
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Mpls, MN 55401

#### CORRECTIONS:

The picture of Keiji Inatune in the Top 10 Outspoken Developers story in Issue #213 should have been credited to Thomas Heger from Games.rr.



**(Left)** Tim doesn't look too sure about the mo-cap suit he tried on while seeing Silent Hill: Downpour at Vatra Games **(Center)** The tension between Obsidian's Greg Lutton and Adam is palpable **(Right)** Dan, Ben, and Ava Schrenk hang out with cult film director Tommy Wiseau before a midnight screening of *The Room*

feature

# Widening



## NOTABLES

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# The Scope

A look at racial diversity in video games

by Matthew Kato

The topic of race can be an explosive one, and like in other media forms, who we are is not always reflected in what we see in the games we play. Our favorite hobby has a well-documented history of under-representing racial minorities in its characters. One study of the top 150 video games conducted in 2009 by Dmitri Williams, a social psychologist and assistant professor at the USC Annenberg School for Communication, revealed an over-sampling of white male characters and an under-representation of minority populations such as Latinos in games.

This isn't just a problem on your TV screen; the absence of diversity can be a problem behind the scenes at your favorite developer as well. IGDA's Game Developer Demographics Report in 2005 noted that of the almost 6,500 developers surveyed, the white and Asian demographics were overrepresented. A lack of diversity isn't just a philosophical argument, but a situation that could affect what you play. Developers have a hard enough time creating compelling, successful content, so how do they untangle the intersecting lines of social justice, consumer desires, and developer responsibility and still come out with a game that's a fun, inviting experience for everyone? We talked to some developers about racial diversity in video games and why this is an important topic for all gamers.

"If it ain't fun, nothing else really matters," says Morgan Gray, development director at 2K Marin. Gray's comment is in regards to whether developers have a responsibility to make characters in games more racially diverse, but his answer is the same one developers everywhere evoke in any situation. If creating great games is the main duty of any developer, why does race come into the equation?

Video games' status as an interactive medium gives it the capacity to tell a unique truth to its audience. Part of that truth is strained when all the player sees are straight, white, male protagonists, just as it does with bad AI or poor graphics. A lack of racial diversity in characters also limits the palette of stories for the player by restricting the kinds of experiences protagonists of different backgrounds can bring to the table—whether that's race, gender, sexual orientation, or religious beliefs.

Building an avatar in games like *Mass Effect* is a natural tool to allow the player to create whatever diversity they want, including the chance to see themselves reflected in the game they are playing. Although this isn't an option for every game, and it would be obnoxious and conspicuous to force minority characters everywhere just for the sake of it, it's a step in the right direction even if there is still much work to be done to bring new stories and backgrounds to light.



**"If Master Chief took off his helmet for the first time and was a Chinese American, would the world turn away from Halo, leaving nothing but empty servers and the sound of lonely wart-hog's engine idling? I doubt it."**

*Morgan Gray, development director, 2K Marin*

## Developing diversity

One path towards getting more racial diversity in our video game characters is on the ground floor with the developers themselves. Similar to the question of whether some games can be realistic if everyone is white comes the problem of whether a predominately white game studio can create stories of different backgrounds without verging into the dangerous territory of stereotyping. Gray doesn't believe this is an insurmountable problem. "If we look out to the broad entertainment world we can have hundreds of examples of people creating characters very much different than themselves. In fact, the ability to create a broad range of characters is something all talented creators do all the time, be it creating a character of different race, or gender, or social stature, etc. The issue of whether or not the characters created in this way end up being a stereotype or caricature is chiefly related to the creator's skill level or intent."

Hiring a diverse group of developers also has its benefits. Jason Della Rocca, former executive director of the International Game Developers Association (IGDA) and senior consultant at industry group Perimeter Partners, says that homogeneity of your staff can lead to a cycle of similar games being made. "The stereotypical teenage boys who grow up playing Halo and Call of Duty that then get a job in the industry and then try and make the next Halo and Call of Duty. How do you insert something else in there?"

In his experience, Della Rocca still sees a lack of diversity in studios, but the developers we talked to believed that an individual's skill was the golden key into the industry. "From a designer's perspective, I want a focused, intelligent, and hardcore gamer," says David Robinson, producer on Namco Bandai's Afro Samurai. "They could have purple stripes for all I care. Just please don't suck. Be hard working and have a great attitude, because the job is tough enough already."

A meritocratic environment is the ideal situation for any workplace, but as is often the case, finding that talent in the first place may require help. Morgan Gray believes people interested in becoming game developers often simply don't know how. "Companies are looking for talent. I think when it comes to getting diversity – and let's face it, racial diversity is less of an issue than gender diversity in this industry – it's about letting people know about the opportunities. For the most part, ask anyone under the age of 25 how to get in the game industry and most respondents will say, 'I don't know.'"

## Giving gamers what they want

At the end of the day, hiring practices and the work developers are doing to diversify video game characters will be wasted if gamers aren't interested. There is no definitive answer on this point, but it's likely that all anyone wants is a great experience, period. Although some think that games have to stick to what they do best – "leave the social studies to parents and public broadcasting," says Robinson – others think that video games, like other mediums, can't help but address it.

"Games are artistic expression," believes Gordon Bellamy, chairman of the IGDA. "Some of it is super fun, some of it is serious. As leaders in entertainment, I think we're also leaders in culture. There's certainly a responsibility that game developers share. They are helping shape our culture. It's not pure folly, this is art, this is how people are learning about a lot of topics...and they are super fun."

Sean Ramjingsingh, producer of EA Sports' NHL series, thinks that regardless of publisher or even public trepidation, if we want to see more racial diversity in video games and the topic of race handled effectively through our unique medium, it's up to developers. At the end of the day consumers want a great experience, and he believes that this is something characters with different backgrounds can bring. "I think it's on the developers," he says. "If developers feel that they want to have racial diversity in their games, and they can provide a compelling experience around that and tell compelling stories based on those characters they've created, no matter what race they are, that's what consumers want."

No one solution to bring more racial diversity to video game characters makes sense for every game. Character creators are a great option, but even they aren't without their problems. While they allow a cosmetic expression of race, a person's background – and how race influences that – can't be told by textures alone. If the industry is truly going to offer different experiences to players, developers must take chances and be creative and skillful enough to craft a game that has a story and characters that can confer understanding of different races, genders, sexual orientations, religions, etc. to all players, no matter who they are. This needs to be done in a way that is as true to the people it is representing as it is simply a great game that is so good people can't ignore it.

Gamers and sales numbers will ultimately judge whatever ideas developers put forth, but first publishers have to green light projects. Della Rocca believes that the riskier the game, the harder time it might have getting made in the first place. "I can only speculate, but a lot of corporate decisions are made based on historical sales data. If I've got this great idea for Cows in Space, and then they look at the data and say, 'Jeez, there's no other Cows in Space games. There's no history, there's no competition, there's no past examples, there's just no data to support us giving you \$20 million to make your crazy Cows in Space idea.' And so the same sort of applies to the diversity question. It's very much a chicken and egg problem."

The path towards a more diverse industry is not clear, but if we do not make an attempt, we'll get the same game experiences over and over again and not even understand what we're missing. Video games thrive on new ideas, and this is exactly what's at stake. "I think it's great that our industry finds ways to celebrate diversity, the same way we continue to celebrate new ideas," Bellamy says. "Because that's what propels gaming forward. Therein lies some of the power of diversity. Its ability – just as it does in all areas of culture – to bring in new ideas, but also combine influences. It's like Dead Rising 2 – the joy of combination is what it's all about!" ♦

## Making Memories

We asked developers if there were any moments in their past that first made them aware of characters' race in video games.

### Gordon Bellamy (IGDA chairman)

"Black Guile [Super Street Fighter II: The New Challengers gave you the option to play Guile with an African-American skin – ed.]. Black Guile was the most incredible moment, and here's why.



There was Balrog, but Black Guile – in a game that we all loved – really spoke to, racially, ethnically, we can all be Guile. There's a sonic boom in all of us! It was really empowering in having that choice."

### David Robinson (producer, Afro Samurai)

"Growing up black in the '70-'80s, there wasn't a lot that the media gave us (minorities) something to be proud of or to feel as if we belonged and were loved in this society. But seeing Magnum P.I.'s best friend, a black helicopter pilot, changed my life completely. I still remember the day my friend Joe Silva told me on the playground in 6th grade about this 'cool show where there was a black guy who was a helicopter pilot.' Back then if you saw something on TV as a kid, that meant it was achievable, real, something that had to be possible. That spring board of 'you can do that too' got me into college and flight school. My desk is covered in helicopters as I speak to you now because of T.C. from Magnum P.I."

## The Tale of Afro Samurai

2009's Afro Samurai (based on the manga by Takashi Okazaki) featured a black samurai named Afro seeking revenge for the death of his father. David Robinson, who produced the game, feels that Afro's race was handled perfectly. "In developing his character, Afro was an homage to all the blaxploitation characters we grew up with. And in my asking Namco Bandai to take in the franchise, I thought it was a bold move. Few studios would have risked it. The Grand Theft Auto series has plenty of black characters, and all seem to fall into the same traps. From a studio perspective, Afro represented Namco Bandai showing the world it understood and appreciated art for art's sake. And the combining of Japanese culture and something uniquely American was a huge bonus."



# The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

NEWS WITH A SARCASTIC SPIN



the good

**(RIGHT)** We have nothing against Mark Wahlberg per se, but we kind of had our hearts set on Nathan Fillion (shown) as Nathan Drake in David O. Russell's upcoming *Uncharted* movie – especially given he's the fans' choice for the role and Fillion even lobbied for it himself. Oh, and some other guys named Robert DeNiro and Joe Pesci are going to be in the film as Nathan's father and uncle. Russell's film sounds like it's going to be a departure from the games, so there's already plenty of fodder for fans to cry foul over.



the bad



**(LEFT)** Square Enix has pushed back the release of *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*. The game was originally supposed to come out in the spring, but now the Eidos Montreal-developed title won't come out until sometime before spring 2012.



**(ABOVE)** A little over a year ago, gamers bailed on the board-peripheral driven *Tony Hawk's Ride*. With only 3,000 units sold in its first week, the follow-up *Tony Hawk's Shred* isn't likely to resurrect the peripheral. You know things are bad when publisher Activision takes developer Robomodo off the project in the middle of development.



the ugly

**(ABOVE)** MMO *Final Fantasy XIV* is a disaster, but Square Enix is at least trying to make things right. President and CEO Yoichi Wada apologized to everyone, the producer/director stepped down, a new leadership team has been announced, and the PS3 version has been indefinitely delayed. If you want, you can see the ugliness for yourself, as Square Enix has extended the game's free period to attract more players.

While more free time with the MMO is great for players, it's not so great for Square Enix. The company has recently downgraded its profit forecast for 2010 by 92 percent, and Square has admitted that it was banking on *FF XIV* doing much better than it has.



**(ABOVE)** Kinect comes out of the gate flying, with Microsoft reporting the peripheral sold 2.5 million units worldwide in its first 25 days. Microsoft appears well on its way toward its goal of selling five million Kinect peripherals by the end of 2010.

If reviewers want to give us a hard time about it because they're misunderstanding the game we made, it's not for me to tell them that they're wrong, absolutely not. But I wish people would get it out of their head that we made a Mario competitor, because we didn't.

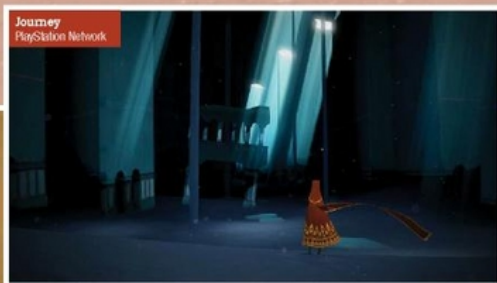


Epic Mickey's Warren Spector defends the game's poor camera and tries to insulate the title from gamers' expectations



# We take a **Journey** with thatgamecompany into its highly anticipated next game

by Matt Miller



Want more on downloadable and independent games? Head over to [gameinformer.com/impulse](http://gameinformer.com/impulse) for regular updates on the best titles for PlayStation Network, Xbox Live Arcade, and WiiWare. For more in this issue, read our full review of *Dead Rising: Case West* on p. 95, and learn our scores for *Echochrome II*, *Hard Corps Uprising*, *Kung-Fu Live*, and *Fairy Legends of Avalon* on p. 99-99.



**A**t the tail end of last year's E3, Sony quietly announced the latest project from thatgamecompany. Before a small gathering of journalists, the development team showed off **Journey**, the unusual and exciting new project from the minds that brought us *Flow* and *Flower*. Afterwards, the team hunkered down and went back to work, and there's been little word on the project since. So what have they been up to?

"Since E3 we have been working hard to flesh out the later levels of the experience," lead designer Nick Clark tells us. "The later portions of the game introduce environments and interactions that are significantly different from the desert levels we have revealed thus far. We're excited about the scope and breadth of the areas you'll travel through in *Journey*."

*Journey* casts players in the role of a haunting human-like figure that wanders a vast land of dunes and sand. A distant mountain always beckons in the distance, and strange ruins and obelisks dot the world. "The world is covered in sand, but the open desert is only one stop in the whole journey," creative director Jenova Chen says. "There are various terrain types and environments in this game. However, *Journey* is not an open world game where you can walk towards any direction infinitely. It's more of a path where you are heading to an end point, where the mountain is."

*Journey* is something of a departure for thatgamecompany, moving away from the abstract directions apparent in their earlier games in favor of a more cohesive narrative. "Flower's narrative is very loose, but the theme is very strong between each level," Chen explains. "It's tough to call *Flower* a story because it's so abstract. That's why we think a poem is the more proper description. *Journey's* narrative element is tighter, and the character is more like a human. Therefore, the game progression can be considered as a story, a parable."

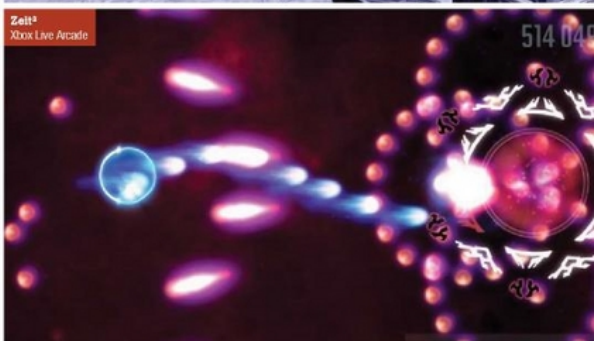
The world's vast sense of scale communicates feelings of isolation and loneliness. "We wanted to evoke a sense of 'small' in comparison to the rest of the world around you, as well as a sense of awe, in addition to the classic concept of a hero's journey," Chen says. The twist is that you're not alone on this trek. As you move through this strange and mysterious landscape, you'll occasionally encounter another player who is also wandering through the desert. "We hope the character's smallness will bring players together and help foster interesting relationships between them as they make their way through the world of *Journey*," adds lead artist Matt Nava. "The grand scale of the environments is something we wanted to use to place emphasis on this idea, and help communicate it to the audience."

A lot of mystery still surrounds *Journey*, but I'm content with that. This game will be best understood with a controller in your hands. Thatgamecompany's previous efforts leave me confident that *Journey* will be one of the hallmark downloadable games to watch in 2011. The game is far larger in scope than the developer's other titles, and the intriguing integration of a second, unknown player is fascinating. "I really hope that we can continue to surprise our players with what we have in store for them," Chen says. No matter how it turns out, I'm betting *Journey* will succeed in that goal at the very least.

This month I played the early levels of a great new PSN and XBLA title. **Swarm** plays like a strange crossbreed between *Pikmin*, *World of Goo*, and *Lemmings*. Players control a teeming little horde of alien swarminglings. The little creatures and their "mother" crash onto a hostile alien planet, and the gathered herd must move across the planet to grow and evolve. The hook lies in the capability to control your entire swarm at once – the swarminglings shuffle about together, but each individual scrambles about independently. Absurd levels of danger await the swarm, assuring that many of your group won't make the passage. As long as one survives, you can keep going. Controls are simple, with one button huddling your swarm together into a tight ball and another spreading them apart. They can scramble wildly atop each other in a cheerleader-style pyramid to reach high places, or pull together to gather energy for a short burst of speed. Lots of collectibles, clever level design, and even the occasional massive boss creature add up into a unique game I'm excited to play more of when it releases.

The sequel to 2009's original **Section 8** wouldn't have registered on my radar if it weren't for the number of ways that developer TimeGate is aiming to improve the experience. **Section 8: Prejudice** features a full five-hour campaign, 32-player online multiplayer, and four-player co-op all wrapped into a first-person sci-fi package. Throw in a \$15 price tag, and you've got my attention. *Prejudice* has some cool in-game tricks to boast. The *Battlefield*-like multiplayer matches equip players with powerful mechanized combat suits that enable everything from super-speed sprint capability to jet packs. Customizable load-outs let players shape the style of character they want to play, and dynamic combat moments introduce random objectives during the middle of a big match, like protecting a VIP for big point bonuses. Conquest mode plays for control of territory, while *Swarm* mode plays similarly to *Gears of War's* Horde; four players group together to hold off increasingly dangerous attack waves. I'm not sure if *Prejudice* has the chops to compete with the big boys, but the lower price tag and extensive gameplay options have me excited. *Prejudice* is slated to release in the first part of this year.

An IGF award-nominated indie game by Brightside Games is making its way to Xbox Live Arcade thanks to a publishing deal with Ubisoft. **Zeit** presents several twists on the horizontal shooter genre. The coolest of these additions is a time travel mechanic that lets players complete short bursts of action while cooperating with their own ship from several seconds earlier. The game features six unique game modes, including a basic Arcade playthrough, a Score Attack mode, and Survival. Weapon upgrades beef up your ship's attack capabilities, which comes in handy when taking on the eight boss fights. I love the fluorescent presentation of ships and weapon effects, and the time travel elements really challenged me to approach levels in a new way. *Zeit* should be out on Xbox Live Arcade by the time you read this. ♦



# Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood

Game Informer scours the leaderboards in search of the best of the best to uncover the person behind the handle and learn his or her strategies. If you get a pesky message over Xbox Live or PlayStation Network, please don't delete it. You could be our next featured gamer.



**Jesse \***

**Handle**

This\_Is\_Jesse

**Age**

21

**Hometown**

Houston, Texas

**Favorite Map**

Siena

**Favorite Persona**

The Thief

## Accomplishments

As of press time, Jesse is number one on the all-time kills leaderboard on PlayStation 3. He's in second place for all-time score, has the third best session score ever, and is second in all-time stuns. His total score of 5,368,855 is enough to hit the level 50 cap eight times over.

## Origin of Skills

He's never played the first Assassin's Creed, but got hooked on AC II and

Brotherhood. "[Brotherhood] is just fun and addicting," Jesse says. "Besides that, the only multiplayer game I played was Demon's Souls."

## Time Investment

So far, Jesse has invested over six days into Brotherhood's multiplayer mode. He says he's been playing a few hours every day since the game came out.

## The Key To Victory

"For Wanted [mode] what I

do is usually just use poison and charge. That way you can rack up points really fast. Charge is a skill where you can charge directly into the enemy and just kill him right there. Or you can charge into the person that's chasing you to stun them. Smoke bombs are the best at lower levels. You get smoke bombs pretty much at level six and they're the best thing to use. As soon as you drop one you can probably stun or kill someone."

## Defense

"I try to see if anyone is following me. You can't just always look forward because there are always people behind you."

## Major Points

"Try to hide, poison, and focus at the same time. That'll give you big points... around 1,000. Just follow your target. They're usually hidden in a crowd so you blend in and that's how you get a hidden bonus. You have to wait three seconds for the focus and then you poison them."

## Life Outside of Assassin's Creed

Jesse is majoring in accounting at the University of Houston.

## Other Favorite Games

Demon's Souls, Final Fantasy XIII, God of War III, Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots.

## What Should Be Improved?

Jesse wants online lobbies while players wait for matches to start. Other than that, he's generally pleased with Brotherhood's multiplayer. ♦

\*last name withheld upon request.





interview by *Annette Gonzalez*

# Guillermo del Toro Dives Into Game Development

interview

Film director turns video game developer for Insane trilogy

**A**claimed director, producer, screenwriter, novelist, and designer Guillermo del Toro can now add "video game creator" to his already impressive resume. Del Toro and THQ recently announced a partnership to create the Lovecraftian horror title *Insane*, an idea he's been kicking around for four years. Illinois-based Volition will join creative forces with the *Pan's Labyrinth* director for the trilogy, with the first installment dropping in 2013. We spoke with del Toro about his lifelong relationship to video games and his plans for *Insane*.

## On getting into game development:

I've been trying to develop games for the last four or five years, but the schedule and geographical location were never conducive to it. I've been a gamer all my life; I'm 46, I've been playing video games since they were essentially made available to the public. I've seen the form evolve from total reflex coordination gaming into a true narrative powerhouse. It's a truly strong narrative form. I believe video games are going to be the cornerstone of narrative in the next decade. As a storyteller it is my duty to get going on learning the language not as a gamer, but as a storyteller.

I really have to admit that the life and career I dreamt of as a young filmmaker in Mexico was a very different path. I'm extremely happy with the path I've been taking. I think that game storytelling is teaching me a lot, and I must say I'm proving to be a very fruitful experiment, but I never planned it.

## On his gaming roots:

I played everything from *Galaga*, *Pac-Man*, the early stuff like *Asteroid*, everything that was motor, hand-eye coordination... What really captured my imagination as a storyteller were the CD-ROM games like *Bungle's Marathon* and *Myth*. I love the way the form has evolved.

## On what he's playing now:

The one that really has my attention right now is *Red Dead Redemption*. I wrote a Western about 13 years ago, and in the movie business all you hear is nobody wants to see a Western. I love the fact that they were able to bring a really hardcore modern sensibility to it, but still feels very classically rooted.

## On choosing THQ:

I have met everyone in the past. I have met Ubisoft, EA, Rockstar, but for this game we were going to go out in the world and talk to different people. The first stop was THQ. I hit it off so fantastically with Danny [Blison, EVP Core Games] and Paul [DeMeo, director of fiction development]; we were all on the same page from the moment we

started talking that I decided not to seek any further. I thought, "This is it. This is where I pitch my tent."

## On teaming up with Volition:

Their games are popular and really well constructed, and I admire all of that. What I was really impressed with was where they wanted to go. There was a huge drive, creativity, and ambition in the conversation we were having that really won me over.

## On participating in the process:

What I want to do is get involved in it. I want to get immersed in it. I don't want to be just casually involved because otherwise I wouldn't be doing it. The time it takes and the effort it takes is only worth it if I'm learning the narrative and if I'm learning this form of storytelling. That's the purpose for me. I'm not interested in it if I'm not immersed.

The intent for the game is made very clear by the fact that we are not investing a few months and slapping my name on it. We are taking years. If Danny Blison tells me "We need you for two weeks now, for three weeks more in a month," in any threshold that Danny demands on me, I will comply.

I will do writing, but I don't think I will be writing the technical screenplay because I've never written it. It's a different form than screenplay writing, but I will be involved in every single creative decision of this game. By this I mean every turn the screenplay takes, every piece of dialogue, every prompt, rendering, every decision will go through me.

## On the VGA debut:

We had not done enough to show gameplay and we didn't feel we wanted to generate artificially a teaser that we would contradict four months from now, so we decided upon creating a mood piece, a teaser, to show how creepy and unsettling it can be, the type of atmosphere.

## On the Insane concept:

I liked the idea of a game where you start playing in a head space and you end up almost finding yourself reinterpreting the whole game towards the end, where things are revealed to you. The title is *Insane* for a reason. Let me put it that way. I was very attracted to the idea of insanity in-game. That's the origin.

We're going to try some new stuff that has never been done before, and we are trying to give you a very intense and very narrative experience. We don't want to do survival horror, we want to do horror that has a scope and a story that is very strong and within the limits of what we need. We want to keep it as much driven by gameplay as possible. It falls squarely into the H.P. Lovecraft horror universe. We are talking about very nasty tentacle things. I want to make it emotionally very strong, and play with morally difficult choices for the player.

What I really hope and long for and strive for in this game is to create a mythology that people are interested in, that the story of the central character is compelling.

## On more del Toro games in the future:

This is not a once-in-a-lifetime thing. For me, this is the beginning of a new path. Beyond that, it's not that I'm going to just dabble in video games. I think video games are going to completely take over storytelling in our society, and I firmly believe, if I'm lucky and blessed enough, and if I prove adept at this, I'll be evolving with the form into storytelling of this kind. Video games are not a fad. They are absolutely a narrative form and a medium that is already evolving and recognized as a narrative form, so the answer is a resounding "Oh, yes!"

For the full interview with Guillermo del Toro, check out [gameinformer.com/mag](http://gameinformer.com/mag)



# massive

## The Cataclysm strikes World of Warcraft

Blizzard plays to its strengths in WoW's third expansion with outstanding questing and dungeons

by Adam Biessener

I can't imagine an expansion design more suited to the casual types who make up a large portion of World of Warcraft's audience. Leveling is revamped again, and exploring the old world by questing through it on a fresh character or blazing around on your high-level epic flying mount is amazing. Archaeology, the new profession available to every character, is an enjoyable treadmill that pays off with bits of lore and plenty of vanity rewards like pets, titles, and achievements. Rolling through the new zones from levels 80 to 85 is a delightful roller-coaster ride through both dramatic storylines, like the Earthmother's reclamation of her realm, and tongue-in-cheek pop culture odes to *Hogan's Heroes* and *Indiana Jones*.



Not a minute of it has any challenge to speak of, but Blizzard has only gotten better at crafting a journey that impresses with everything from epic lore-driven battles to amusing one-offs. Nearly every rough spot has been ground away; quest hubs fall into place one after another, flight paths connect points of any note whatsoever, and backtracking is kept to a minimum. Above all, the inescapable sense of progress keeps driving you forward. For a good long time, discovering what's around the next corner is more than enough.

Once you reach the level cap, though, players tend to fall into one or more of a few categories. First, you've got your players who hit the cap, pat themselves on the back, and roll a new character to do it all over again. These folks are set with Cataclysm. With how much refurbished content there is now, you could raise at least four characters to level 80 without repeating much. Going from 60 to 85 will get old faster since those zones are unchanged, but it's tough to ask for much more than you got with Cataclysm.

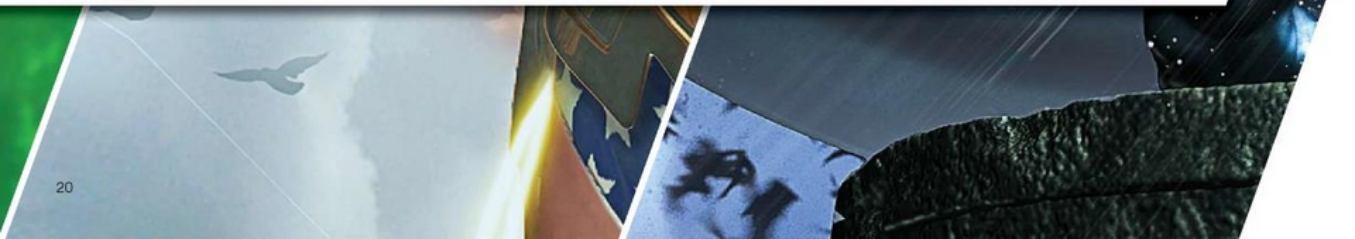
Another group wants to get in and start pounding on the hardest content in the game, whether for the challenge, sense of accomplishment, or the draw of shiny purples. Indications so far are extremely positive for these players. Don't let the super-hardcore guilds' early conquests faze you. Heroic five-mans and raids are as difficult and rewarding as any content Blizzard has ever done, with the exception of super-bosses like Algalon. Many of the mechanics are fresh, learning the fights is a fun challenge, and the game balance feels as good as it ever has at the start of a tier of raiding. Some healers disagree with me, but I love the new interplay between tanking, crowd control, damage avoidance, and healing. The WoW design team spoke publicly at length about how they intended to bring challenge back to every role in dungeons, and they succeeded.

Shockingly, Blizzard finally got the PvE gear progression right as well. Picking up a set of heroic-level gear is relatively simple between building reputation (accomplished in normal and heroic level 85 dungeons), trading in Justice Points (acquired in heroic five-mans), and the dungeon drops themselves. Moving beyond that into epic gear requires conquering epic content, as only a slow daily trickle of Valor Points can be obtained via heroic dungeons. The consequence of all this is that you have no reason to grind heroics over and over after you've soundly beaten them, so you can bend your efforts to overcoming greater challenges rather than wallowing in trivial content for so-called welfare epics.

A third set of players turn to PvP for their elder game thrills. Unfortunately, these folks have gotten the short end of the stick this time around. The new battleground-esque zone, Tol Barad, is an odd mix of asymmetrical objectives that seem to heavily favor the defenders. It's obviously supposed to be a more casual-friendly PvP environment than arenas or battlegrounds, but you'll get your teeth kicked in just as badly by a gear differential there as in any other PvP situation. That said, if Arena and Battleground balance comes out ahead of the questionable situation that existed during Wrath of the Lich King, PvPers might not be too upset after all.

I don't know yet if Cataclysm is going to be my favorite of the four WoW iterations we've played so far. Some things persistently annoy me, like server identities being badly fractured by the dungeon finder. Other frustrations are transient, like the god-awful outscene bloat in Uldum and buggy quest scripting in Twilight Highlands. Much of Cataclysm's lasting appeal, however, is dependant on Blizzard's release schedule moving forward. The developers need to avoid the glacial pacing of Wrath of the Lich King's second year, no matter how much I like the first round of content. ♦

massive





# Who Should Care About DC Universe Online

MMO players are a diverse lot, but it's not that difficult to sort

them into several broad categories. You probably already know where you fit along the exploration, social interaction, and challenge axes. Given that, is Sony Online's upcoming DC Universe Online worth your time? Our time with the beta reveals some of the answers.

by Adam Biessener

## Hardcores

**Who are you?** If you're not in a top-three guild on your server, you're probably applying to them. For that matter, you've probably already transferred servers chasing the most-progressed group that will have you. Crushing every challenge the designers throw at you, no matter the time investment, is your *raison d'être*.

### What do you think about DCU?

Deep skill trees are worth exploring, and thorough study should yield the right combinations to handle the most overpowered villains (or heroes) of the DC Universe. The queue system looks promising, as it gives you an easy in to the content you need to upgrade your gear and skills at all hours of the day. It's like WoW's dungeon finder, but for everything from co-op instances to more traditional dungeons to PvP battlegrounds and raids. The lack of hard info on endgame raiding is troubling. On the other hand, Sony Online has stated that it wants to ship the game with approximately a 40-hour time to level cap and fully half of the content intended for endgame characters. The biggest question, though, is whether the underlying tech can handle all of the crazy physics-enabled powers in eight-player raids without breaking down.

**The verdict: Maybe.** The chances of endgame being as deep as a game like WoW look slim, but this might be worth a look as a lighter, less serious alternative.

## Explorers

**Who are you?** You know that half-finished zone that you can only access by standing on top of this one mailbox in the light of the full moon and turning widdershins thrice before strafing left and jumping north while holding your breath? It's only the coolest place in the entire game. If you didn't put up the original YouTube video, you subscribe to the author's stream. No game world's secrets are safe from you.

### What do you think about DCU?

Some games are nice enough to give you your first mount at the early level of 20. DCU has you choose whether to navigate the world via flight, acrobatics, or super-speed at character creation. There are achievements for everything from visiting the Wayne family memorial in Gotham to viewing Metropolis' skyline from the tallest skyscrapers in town. Some special secrets are only accessible during boss fights by poking around every corner of the abandoned hospital or underground science lab that serves as your battlefield.

**The verdict: Yes!** If you're a DC Comics fan and an explorer, good luck fighting this compulsion. Even someone like myself, whose MMO tastes tend to run elsewhere and is only peripherally aware of DC lore, can get lost for hours digging around the world.

## Questers

**Who are you?** Your guidies ask you where obscure objectives are rather than alt-tabbing to a guide site. You've been through every zone at least once on one or another of your army of alts. If there's a deeper secret hinted at in various unconnected bits of lore, you collected it into a wiki.

### What do you think about DCU?

Solo story-based instances are just about the best idea ever. Having iconic characters like Batman, Joker, or Wonder Woman walking you through your questlines via voice communicator isn't far behind. It would be nice if the bulk of the quests had a bit more variety to them; so far in beta you're either hunting for hard-to-find targets or fighting an endless wave of instantly respawning enemies. At least the bad guys are doing things and engaging in combat when you're not there instead of standing around waiting to be killed.

**The verdict: Probably.** Polish is an issue, but even a moderate improvement over beta will make this one of the better solo, alt-friendly games around. Breadth of content may not be there either, with the 40-hour leveling curve, but what does exist is entertaining.

## PvPers

**Who are you?** Leveling, crafting, and dungeons are nothing more than means to an end. Usually the other guy's end, since you're running the new hybrid build that the latest patch buffed to obscurity. The only thing you despise more than so-called carebears is the inevitable nerfs that stop you from two-shotting anything but a tank.

### What do you think about DCU?

Queues for PvP instances, and missions that lead players there, are great. Legends PvP, where you take on the role of iconic heroes and villains, is awesome – when you're in the mood for a fair fight, since your gear and skills are pre-selected. Being on the wrong side of this month's balance is going to be rough, though, with so much of the game's PvE balance built around incapacitating moves, from stuns to juggles to knockdowns and mind control. You're going to have to upgrade your connection now, because the action-packed combat heavily penalizes any latency whatsoever, especially in PvP.

**The verdict: Doubtful.** Wrecking news is going to be awesome with DCU's explosive combat, but Sony Online has a lot to prove when it comes to balancing game mechanics, technology, and PvP progression. ♦

For more DCU coverage, including more detailed beta hands-on reports, hit up [gameinformer.com](http://gameinformer.com)

# Toshiba Qosmio X505

A laptop with liftoff

Anyone who has dreams of carting Toshiba's new Qosmio X505 around town in a messenger bag is fooling themselves. This fancy piece of hardware may be labeled a laptop, but it's clearly intended to push your old desktop to the side and set up shop in your gaming den. Fortunately, the X505 has more than enough brawn to bully a few desktops around.

The X505 isn't the fastest hot rod on the lot, but it's close. With NVIDIA's GeForce GTX 460M graphics card and an Intel Core i7 CPU, the X505 ran

both *Crysis: Warhead* and *Call of Duty: Black Ops* at high settings without any hiccups. It also won't take long for you to hop into the action. Thanks to its second solid-state hard drive, the X505 took less than a minute to boot and a mere eight seconds to come out of sleep.

While the Qosmio was designed primarily for games, its Blu-ray drive, 18-inch 1080p display, and HDMI output make it a solid media system as well. Those who like to crank up the tunes will appreciate the built-in Harman Kardon speakers and Dolby Home Theater technology.

Considering this is such a massive desktop replacement, we were surprised the X505's keyboard feels a little choked, and the keys themselves are so glossy that your fingers always feel ready to slide off. The touchpad also has the occasional spasm, but you'll want a mouse for gaming sessions anyway. Running at top speed, you can squeeze a little less than three hours out of the batteries, so you'll want to keep this behemoth close to an outlet.

The X505 is a nice piece of hardware, but it's more expensive than some desktops, and not as easy to upgrade. Still, if you find yourself in need of a hefty portable machine that can handle high-end PC gaming, the X505 might be right for you.

VIEWER GOOD 

**\$1,999.99**

[us.toshiba.com](http://us.toshiba.com)

by Ben Reeves & Matt Bertz



## THE X505 AT A GLANCE

Operating System Windows 7 Home Premium (64-bit) | Processor 1.73GHz Intel Core i7 7400M | Graphics NVIDIA GeForce GTX 460M with 1.5GB GDDR5 Memory 6GB, 1066MHz DDR3 | Hard drive 320GB 7,200rpm and 64GB SSD | Dimensions 17.4 x 11.5 x 1.8 inches | Screen size 18.4 inches | Weight 10.4 pounds





9

editor's  
choice



#### 1 | Nikon D7000

The Nikon D7000 is a great option for enthusiast photographers looking for a more powerful camera to grow into. This durable, lightweight SLR features lightning fast six frames-per-second continuous shooting, a high-resolution three-inch LCD panel, and a 39-point autofocus system that keeps your images razor sharp. The 16.2-megapixel shots produce vivid details even in low lighting conditions. A full complement of scene modes gives point and click fans options for any shooting scenario, and serious photographers will appreciate the two customizable save settings. The D7000 also gives you the ability to shoot 24 frames-per-second, 1080p HD video on the fly — not bad for a non-camcorder.

**\$1,499 (with lens bundle)**  
nikon.com

#### 2 | Sony PS3 Bluetooth Headset

This is how a Bluetooth headset should work. The

newest version of Sony's set immediately syncs to your PS3 upon plug in, is lightweight enough to leave your ears cramp-free after hours of use, and produces little to no echo. The microphone may be too strong since it captures a small amount of ambient household noise, but at least you don't have to scream so your teammates can hear you. You can expect about six hours of talk time, and the unit doubles as a PC microphone while charging. We just wish the ear hoop didn't feel so cheap, and that people would stop using these things in the grocery store checkout. Too bad Sony can't fix human nature.

**\$49.99**  
sonystyle.com

#### 3 | Silent Hill Statues

Even your bookshelf isn't safe from the horrors of Konami's twisted survival series. These Trims Japan statues may be unofficial, but they look like the real

deal to us, and they're finally getting imported to the U.S. this January. Both the Pyramid Head and Valtiel statues are made from high quality resin, measure at 1/6 scale, and weigh around 11 pounds, so they're about the same size as a demonic infant.

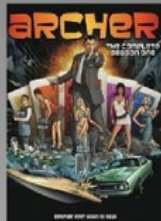
**\$579.99 (Pyramid Head), \$539.99 (Valtiel)**  
bigbadtoystore.com

#### 4 | Rock Band Ottomans

Does your apartment look like it got hit by a tornado of rock? Maybe it's time to get organized. Level Up's Rock Band branded ottomans provide plenty of room to hold an entire living room concert. Measuring 18 x 35 x 88 inches, this solidly constructed wood frame comes with Velcro guitar loops, fitted drum stick loops, side accessory pockets, game/controller trays, and a microphone pocket.

**\$199.99**  
levelupgear.com/rockband

### MEDIA SHELF



#### ARCHER SEASON ONE

Adam Reed's (*Fleishyango*, *Sealab 2021*) animated adult comedy about the secret life of an international spy is one of FX's funniest new shows.

**\$29.98**  
foxshop.com



#### AXE COP VOLUME 1

Created by a five-year-old and illustrated by his 26-year-old brother, *Axe Cop* captured the world's attention with its insanity. Now the web comic's entire original run is collected in trade format. We hope this kid never grows up.

**\$14.99**  
darkhorse.com



#### MACHETE

An illegal immigrant framed for murder, Machete, gets drawn into a conspiracy that sparks a revolution in Robert Rodriguez's *Grindhouse* spin-off and B movie exploitation project.

**\$29.98**  
foxshop.com



## Epic Mickey

Disney's *Epic Mickey* released on November 25 to mixed reviews. Some critics praised the rich Disney world and choice-driven gameplay, while others called out problems with the camera and mission structure. We spoke with Junction Point studio head Warren Spector for his take on the company's first Wii release.

**What aspect of *Epic Mickey* turned out just the way you had hoped or better than you hoped? Are there elements of the game you wish you could have made more changes to?**

Well, clearly the music turned out better than I imagined it would. I'm really happy about that. The story has the kind of emotional resonance I always hoped it would, and the game really doesn't feel – to me, at least – like any other game. Its tone and pacing and its feel isn't like other games. That's one of the reasons the direct comparisons with *Mario Galaxy* are so hard for me to hear. We weren't trying to make a *Mario* game, a *Zelda* game, or a *Deus Ex* – we were trying to make a game that borrowed some elements of all of them to achieve something new and I think we did that. Are there elements I wish we could have worked on more? Sure. I've never worked on a game I was completely satisfied with and hope I never do. I guess top of the list would be our use of the paint and thinner mechanic. We did some interesting stuff with it but it was the first time we, or anyone, had ever tried anything like that and I know we can do more in the future.

**What prompted the decision to not include spoken voice for most of the characters in the game?**

I thought it would be best to borrow an approach Walt used in the earliest *Mickey* cartoons where he didn't use actual words, but communicated mostly by making noises. I also had it in my head that Oswald, as a silent cartoon character, couldn't talk and as ruler of Wasteland laid down the law – "I'll can't speak, no one will." Then there were some localization and disk space issues. Put 'em all together and sticking with the

Japanese RPG and console standard of "bark plus text" just made sense.

**The camera system became a problem for some players. Are there changes that could have been made to make the camera more cooperative?**

I suppose so, but to be honest there was only one thing we might have done that we didn't and looking back on it, I wish we had done. There were situations in the game where we took control of the camera, which was necessary, but we decided not to let players override our decision. In other words, there are times when the manual camera controls simply don't work. Now, I think that may not have been our best decision. But other than that, people have to understand that all the games we're being compared to – and it's pretty amazing games, with *Mario* being the prime example. The fact is, a pure platform game has very different requirements than an action/adventure game, and we were trying to merge elements of both. That meant our camera had to be the best blend we could come up with of platform and action/adventure camera techniques. I still think we did well – given the challenge we faced in combining these two genres into one game and given that we threw in the ability to erase walls and floors and ceilings and parts of them...I mean, we really did take a very hard problem and make it much, much harder. Oh, and one more thing – we've been knocked by some folks for not including a lock-on camera mode, which would have made combat easier. Those folks are right – which is why we did include a lock-on camera mode. Try it, you might like it, folks!

**The paint and thinner mechanic seems like it must have made level design pretty challenging, since you can't ever count on a player having all the parts of the level visible or accessible. Was the paint and thinner concept more trouble than it was worth, or did it pay off in the end?**

I'd never say it was more trouble than it was worth – not I'll go to my grave believing you have to try something you've never done, something no one's ever done, in every game you work on. Even in this first iteration you can see the potential of it. There's something really special, magical even, about being able to remove and restore things in a game world. You never got anything exactly right the first time, and as I said earlier, there's no question we can make better use of this idea. I absolutely love the paint and thinner mechanic.

**Epic Mickey includes more choice-driven gameplay than most character-driven action/platformers. Why?**

I don't really have a good answer for that other than that I have negative interest in working on any game that doesn't offer players choices with consequences. If it ever comes to pass that I can't make games like that – no one will fund them, players vote with their dollars and tell me they don't want games like that, whatever – I'll stop making games. End of story. Games can do only two things that I can think of that no other medium can do; one is offer real-time, dynamic puzzles and the other is offer players the opportunity to tell their own story, or at least tell a story in collaboration with others. I think it's ridiculous not to take advantage of the things your medium does that others can't do.

But, at the end of the day, it's just a personal thing – a personal conviction, no more, no less.

**Epic Mickey returns players to the same locations several times for different missions. Is there more backtracking than there should have been, or are these familiar locations a part of how you wanted the game to be experienced?**

I wouldn't say there's more backtracking than there should have been, but there are a couple of things I'd do differently if I had it to do over again. First, I'd offer more variety in the 2D sections than we did. I thought 40-ish 2D maps would be enough, but I'd like more. Second, I'd have made the hubs persistent – if they preserved the state you left them in, I think returning to them, being able to make different choices about how to interact with the hubs each time, might have made for a richer experience.

**The game includes the return of several Disney characters that are virtually unknown to many in the modern gaming audience. Which characters were you most excited to reintroduce? Which one of these revived characters turned out the best?**

Without question I was thrilled that we got to reintroduce Oswald the Lucky Rabbit. And the Gremlins – those are some terrific characters. I'd love to see *Disney* go back to the storyboards we saw in the *Archives* and actually make the movie Walt Disney and Roald Dahl never got to make – how cool would that be? Heck, I've always wanted to produce a movie – maybe *Disney* will let me make it!

**Given the new motion control devices from Microsoft and Sony, is there any chance we'll see *Epic Mickey* on any other platforms?**

Man, I get asked this a lot and I always have to give the same answer. There's no reason why we couldn't put *Epic Mickey* on other platforms. However, we're not working on it at this time.

**Would Junction Point like to do more with classic Disney characters? What new ideas might you be interested in exploring in a second *Epic Mickey* game?**

I've actually always envisioned *Junction Point* – well, once we became a part of *Disney* – as the studio that draws inspiration from the *Archives*. I've been pretty up front about my love of the Ducks. I'd love to do a *Duck Tales* game, and a *Gremlins* game would be amazing. Oswald would make a great leading man...er...rabbit. As far as a second *Epic Mickey* game goes, there's no shortage of interesting challenges to tackle. I have some ideas about music gameplay that could be fun and there's a world of stuff we can do with paint and thinner that we couldn't even have thought of the first time around. Or we could do some stuff completely different and not do any of the stuff I've mentioned here. Who knows? There's no shortage of ideas! ♦

CONCERT & DANCE

# THE BIG SHOW



performing  
"PURPLE HAZE"



playing "LISBON"



THE WALKMEN



with



BAD BRAINS

playing  
"BANNED IN D.C."

plus



featuring  
"100 DAYS  
100 NIGHTS"

SHARON JONES &

THE DAP-KINGS

singing  
"LEGALIZE IT"



with  
THAO

performing  
"COOL YOURSELF"

and

PETER TOSH



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# TOP 50 GAMES OF 2010

Last year may go down as the most front-loaded in history, with critically acclaimed games *Mass Effect 2*, *Heavy Rain*, *God of War III*, and *Battlefield: Bad Company 2* all hitting shelves before the ground thawed. Then Rockstar Games defied the analysts by delivering the first blockbuster Western game in *Red Dead Redemption*. With big guns like *Halo: Reach* and *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood*, the fall and winter didn't disappoint either. In the following pages we celebrate 2010 by highlighting our favorite characters, chronicling the most memorable gaming moments, and crowning the Game Informer game of the year.



# Mass Effect 2

After an explosive opening sequence that tears Shepard and his team apart, the second installment of BioWare's epic space trilogy doesn't take its hand off the hyperdrive. With the shady Illusive Man behind the scenes, Shepard traverses the far reaches of the galaxy to recruit an elite team for a suicide mission. Using the choices you made in the first game, BioWare fulfills its promise of creating a consistent and immersive universe. With its re-engineered combat, the action in *Mass Effect 2* feels just as polished as the brilliant visuals and conversation system. Given the more responsive controls, don't think twice about putting your allies' lives on the line by jumping through the Omega 4 relay. It's worth the risk.



01.26 ■ XBOX 360

## Bayonetta

There has never been a character like Bayonetta. It's easy to brush off her outrageous proportions and absurd hair suit, but those who dive into the game will find some of the tightest and most entertaining combat in years. The best part of *Bayonetta* is its unpredictability. Whether you're platforming among chunks of falling rubble, decimating cosmic-sized angel bosses, or battling atop speeding cars on the highway, it's always an insane rush.



01.05 ■ PS3, XBOX 360

## Darksiders

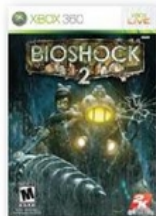
*Darksiders*' puzzle-solving may not be as consistently clever as a *Zelda* game, and the combat may not be as over-the-top and fun as *God of War*, but as a mash-up of these concepts, it emulates both well enough to stand out from the crowd. Top it off with complex dungeon design and a surprise appearance from a *Portal*-like gun, and this is an apocalyptic trip every gamer should take.



03.05 ■ PS3, XBOX 360, PC

## BioShock 2

The imposing *BioShock* characters who caused us to cower in fear became the centerpiece of 2K Marin's sequel. In this return to Rapture, the prototype Big Daddy, Subject Delta, dual-wields weapons and plasmids. Though he starts off rather weak, once you reach the peak performance levels through a series of upgrades no Big Sister or splicer is safe. Satisfying combat aside, the allure of exploring breathtaking underwater locales and uncovering the rest of Rapture's dark secrets make this a return trip worth taking.



02.09 ■ PS3, XBOX 360, PC

## Heavy Rain

*Heavy Rain* has been on our minds ever since we saw the jaw-dropping tech demo several years ago, and the creative minds at Quantic Dream didn't disappoint. Told through the eyes of four characters, this powerful interactive story chronicles one man's attempt to save his son from a serial killer. The haunting *Se7en*-like plot unravels differently for every player, making the post-game discussion with other players as engaging as the thrilling experience itself. Seriously, play this before the twist is spoiled for you.



02.23 ■ PS3

## Battlefield: Bad Company 2

Nobody creates a total war multiplayer experience better than DICE. Helicopters circle overhead, tanks blast through defensive fronts, and snipers call in mortar strikes from afar as teams coordinate to take out their objective. *Bad Company 2* delivers some of the most memorable maps in the series yet. With a competent single-player campaign riding shotgun to the addictive multiplayer, this is DICE's most impressive title since *Battlefield 2*. Our only complaint? We want more maps.



02.02 ■ PS3, XBOX 360, PC

## MLB 10: The Show

When people see *MLB 10: The Show* for the first time, they often remark that it looks just like a television broadcast. If a player steps out of the batter's box to adjust his batting gloves in real life, his in-game counterpart will likely repeat the exact same motions. The realism transitions to the gameplay on the field, as players react to hard hit groundballs just as they should. If a pitcher is on his game, batters embarrassingly swing at his 0-2 slider in the dirt. *MLB 10: The Show* is the most impressive baseball game to date.



03.02 ■ PS3

## Final Fantasy XIII

Say what you will about the nonsensical story, Final Fantasy XIII looks great and arguably features the best combat system of any RPG to date. Square Enix cut out much of the fluff found in traditional JRPGs, leaving players more time to sink their teeth into the game's class-swapping Paradigm system that ably balances strategy with fast-paced action.



03.09 ■ PS3, XBOX 360

## God of War III

The finale to the God of War saga plays out like a bloody rollercoaster ride. Kratos' fury carries the player through a series of unforgettable moments, never relenting long enough to let the gods of Olympus catch their breath. God of War III is best described as a 12-hour highlight reel, as every act of revenge exacted by Kratos needs to be seen and played through again.

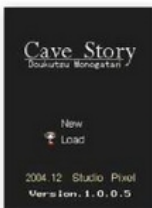


03.16 ■ PS3

Best PS3 Exclusive

## Cave Story

The developers behind Cave Story must have studied NES classics like Metroid and The Legend of Zelda, because this downloadable title is a masterful example of 8-bit gaming. Some of Cave Story's old-school sensibilities feel tired today, but the game's retro presentation, clever weapon system, and entertaining boss battles remind many of us why we got into gaming in the first place.



03.22 (W) ■ 1.29 (PS) ■ Wii, DS

## Just Cause 2

When water-cooler discussions about your game start with "So I tied a tank to my airplane and surfed it into a nuclear base," you know you're doing something right. Few have completed this huge sandbox game, yet many of us dedicated days of our lives to spontaneously skydiving between aircraft with gun and grappling hook in hand, maniacally blowing up everything in sight in this gorgeous tropical setting.



03.23 ■ PS3, XBOX 360, PC

## Splinter Cell: Conviction

After four grueling outings, Sam Fisher looked ready for a break. Instead, Ubisoft takes him off the grid, whispers in his ear that his daughter didn't die accidentally, and lets the fireworks ensue. Conviction's innovative mark-and-execute system encourages stealth without slowing down the action, and with other improvements like a great cover system and involving narrative, gamers happily welcomed Fisher back into service.



04.13 ■ XBOX 360, PC

## Picross 3D

The Picross series offers some of the best puzzle gameplay in all of video games. With Picross 3D, HAL brings the grid-based picture drawing system into an additional challenging dimension. Now players chip away at a solid brick to form a sculpted structure rather than pixel-style 2D art. Even if you manage to complete the seemingly endless mix of puzzles on the cart, Nintendo offers a steady stream of new ones via download.



05.03 ■ DS

TOP  
10

## HEROES

### 1 JOHN MARSTON – RED DEAD REDEMPTION

Marston's list of past transgressions is as long as any Rockstar protagonist's, but once he was responsible for a wife and child, this reformed outlaw did his best to become an honest farmer. Ultimately his past caught up with him, but even in the face of overwhelming odds, Marston defends his family with unwavering resolve.

### 2 EZIO AUDITORE – ASSASSIN'S CREED: BROTHERHOOD

Ezio's transformation from a hotheaded lothario to a master assassin was rooted in a thirst for revenge, but after unraveling the mysteries behind his personal loss, he devoted his life to the greater good. Granted, his method for fighting evil usually involves jabbing a metal blade into people's faces, but if you want to make an omelet...

### 3 ETHAN MARS – HEAVY RAIN

How far would you go to save someone you love? It's not an easy question to answer, but when Heavy Rain's nefarious mastermind puts Ethan Mars through a series of diabolical tests to save his son, this ordinary father displays uncommon determination.

### 4 COMMANDER SHEPARD – MASS EFFECT 2

Most heroes would be content with sacrificing their lives to save the galaxy, but in Mass Effect 2, Shepard comes back to life to save it a second time. While the Citadel's alien races are busy squabbling with each other over power and position, Shepard amasses a ragtag crew of suicidal allies to save the day.

### 5 JASON HUDSON – CALL OF DUTY: BLACK OPS

Hudson is more than just Alex Mason's handler; he's the guy that will do anything to keep the United States safe from the Soviet threat. Tasked with the kind of difficult decisions that would make Jack Bauer lose sleep at night, Hudson's unflappable demeanor earned him the nickname "Ice Cube."

### 6 NOBLE SIX – HALO: REACH

Garners knew from the beginning of Halo: Reach that the Spartans of Noble Team would not meet a happy ending. When it comes time for someone to stay behind and protect the ship carrying Master Chief, Noble Six doesn't hesitate to sacrifice himself for the mission, paving the way for all of Master Chief's future adventures.

### 7 MICHAEL JORDAN – NBA 2K11

Forget the eternal struggle between good versus evil. This year players stepped into the sneakers of a real hero – the greatest basketball player of all time. In an era where most of the current NBA greats are self-absorbed showboats, playing through Jordan's illustrious career reminds us why everyone in the '80s and '90s wanted to be like Mike.

### 8 LIGHTNING – FINAL FANTASY XIII

Amongst Final Fantasy XIII's cast of lackluster protagonists, Lightning is the only character who seems capable of taking on the corrupt government of Cocoon. Lightning's no-nonsense approach to her mission makes her the game's standout hero.

### 9 WAR – DARKSIDERS

Most people wouldn't consider one of the four horsemen of the apocalypse to be a hero, but ultimately good and evil are two sides of the same coin. Bound by his code of honor, War battles against both Heaven and Hell to restore order to the universe.

### 10 SUPER MEAT BOY – SUPER MEAT BOY

Over the course of his journey to save his girlfriend, Super Meat Boy will die literally thousands of times. As he trudges on toward his goal, not even Hell, the end of the world, or a fecal doppelganger can stand in his way.



feature 28

A large, detailed illustration of John Marston, the protagonist of Red Dead Redemption. He is shown from the chest up, wearing a yellow and black striped shirt and a wide-brimmed hat. He has long dark hair and a beard. He is holding a double-barreled shotgun, pointing it towards the viewer. The background is dark and filled with intricate mechanical details, possibly a car engine.

## Red Dead Redemption

Tasked with bringing the last living members of his former gang to justice, John Marston's mission is larger than the expansive world Rockstar has created. Six-shooter in hand, Marston sets out to explore Rockstar's beautifully realized version of the Wild West. With a world inhabited by some of the most memorable characters and dangerous animals we've seen this console generation, fine-tuned gameplay mechanics borrowed from the blockbuster Grand Theft Auto series, scores of Oblivion-like side quests, and a satisfying multiplayer experience, Rockstar succeeds in keeping us wrangled in from beginning to end and earns our Game of the Year award.

OF THE  
**GAME**  
YEAR

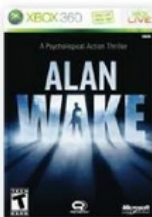


05.18.11 PS3, XBOX 360



## Alan Wake

Many know it as "the flashlight game," but the gimmick of light being your greatest weapon takes a backseat to the mystery surrounding protagonist Alan Wake's descent into madness. Is there really a dark presence chasing Alan, or is it just a construct of an unstable mind? Many who play through it have their own unique explanations as to what possibly happened.



01.18 • XBOX 360

## Super Mario Galaxy 2

Super Mario Galaxy 2 may dip into the same paint bucket as the last game, but it uses different brush strokes to paint a picture just as breathtaking. The game's hundreds of platforming challenges maintain a creative spark and rarely retread old concepts or mechanics. Whether you're hopping across the sky as Cloud Mario or steamrolling gombas as Rock Mario, Galaxy 2 never fails to deliver classic thrills.



01.23 • WII

## Blur

Given their unforgiving catch-up AI and unbalanced arsenals, many kart games feel like they're circling the junior circuit compared to Blur. Bizarre Creation's 21st century kart racer successfully avoids those pitfalls, creating a new experience that ditches cutesy four-wheelers and adorable power-ups for speeds normally found in other racing games and explosive trump cards. Blur's hyper-stylized action may look chaotic, but it rarely feels unfair.



01.25 • XBOX 360

## Joe Danger

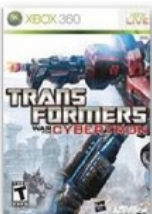
Hello Games' fresh PlayStation Network racing experience puts players in the role of a washed up stuntman looking to reclaim fame by working crowds with over-the-top acrobatics. With familiar elements from Excitebike and Trials HD, plus a dash of speedy platforming, performing death-defying feats has never been more addicting. Joe Danger's solid controls, wealth of racing goals, endless combo possibilities, multiplayer, and content creation tools make for a winning combination.



01.08 • PS3

## Transformers: War For Cybertron

It would have been easy for Activision to sit on the Transformers license until the next inevitable movie tie-in, but the company handed the reins to a development team that clearly loves the franchise. Co-op campaigns for both Autobots and Decepticons flesh out the series' origins through explosive levels and a world that feels alive. The act of transforming brings a sense of movement to combat against both AI and human opponents. With War For Cybertron, Transformers fans finally have a license-worthy video game.



01.27 • XBOX 360

## Singularity

The award for most under-marketed good game of the year goes to Singularity. Activision's best-kept secret borrows heavily from BioShock, but developer Raven delivers a gripping time-bending tale of experiments gone awry through excellent puzzles and an interesting mix of otherworldly powers that can be used in thrilling combat scenarios. Even if the mechanics are familiar, Singularity offers a unique experience that shouldn't be overlooked.



01.29 • XBOX 360

TOP 10

## DORKS

### 1 SAMUS ARAN – METROID: OTHER M

This is why Metroid games are usually about exploration instead of story. Other M flings this iconic bounty hunter to rock bottom, painting Samus as a petulant brat instead of an awesome warrior. The ham-fisted delivery of her lame backstory doesn't help matters. Thumbs down!



### 2 MICHAEL THORNTON – ALPHA PROTOCOL

Alpha Protocol was supposed to be an espionage RPG, but thanks to Michael Thorton, it is more of a d-bag simulator. Whether he's striking out in romantic dialogue or getting knifed by addicts, Thorton fails to fulfill the spy fantasy. If you dream of being a loser, though, he's your man.



### 3 HOPE – FINAL FANTASY XIII

A boomerang?! Of all the cool weapons in Final Fantasy XIII – guns, swords, gunwords – why does Hope choose a boomerang? Because he's an idiot, that's why. You can't expect much more from a twerp whose only forms of self-expression are whining and crying.



### 4 SALEM & RIOS – ARMY OF TWO: THE 40TH DAY

How to be like Salem and Rios: Bang your head repeatedly against any hard surface. When you regain consciousness, your pre-linguistic grunts will sound just like the "banter" between these meatheads. Congratulations, Army of Two fans: You're the lowest common denominator.



### 5 SUBJECT DELTA – BIOSHOCK 2

Big Daddies are awesome, right? Not if you're Subject Delta. Instead of effortlessly slaughtering hordes of splicers (like every other Big Daddy in Rapture), Delta is easily overcome by the most half-hearted assaults for most of the game. No wonder the Big Sisters want to kill him; Delta's a disgrace to the family.



### 6 STARKILLER – FORCE UNLEASHED II

The words "Jedi" and "dork" rarely go together, but Starkiller is the Chosen One to unite them. Is he a clone? Starkiller isn't smart enough to figure that out for himself, so he spends all of his time chasing after a woman he may have never met. Sneaking up on strangers is guaranteed romance!



### 7 JOE PESCI IMPERSONATORS – ALAN WAKE, BAYONETTA

The obnoxious loudmouth routine works for Joe Pesci for one reason: He's Joe Pesci. Coming from anyone else, that same bumbling sidekick schtick is a catastrophic failure – but that didn't stop Barry and Enzo from crapping all over their scenes in Alan Wake and Bayonetta.



### 8 SHEEP MAN – MEGA MAN 10

Okay, Capcom is officially not even trying. Sheep Man takes the prize for being the worst robot master ever (sorry, Clown Man). He obviously looks ridiculous, and his attacks involve turning into clouds of wool and firing static electricity. Also, his weakness is a baseball. Seriously.



### 9 REBECCA – ASSASSIN'S CREED: BROTHERHOOD

Yeah, we get it – Rebecca's totally L337 because she's a hacker or something. If only she'd keep her mind on her work instead of aggravating everyone with her insipid emails, mindless prattle, and phony personality. If joining the Templar order means no more Rebecca, then sign us up.



### 10 AGENT YORK – DEADLY PREMONITION

Unlike the other entries on this list, Agent York is the endearing type of dork. He talks to an imaginary friend, reminisces about old movies, and sees the future in his coffee. York is simultaneously odd and charming, like that friend you're happy to have but embarrassed to introduce to anyone.



TOP  
10

## VILLAINS

## 1 THE ILLUSIVE MAN — MASS EFFECT 2

Though he's technically one of Shepard's allies, only a fool would trust the Illusive Man. This puppet master claims to look after humanity's interests, but his devious methods and xenophobic agenda make him a dangerous man to be around—even if he says he's on your side.

## 2 EDGAR ROSS — RED DEAD REDEMPTION

Folks are constantly manipulating, betraying, and shooting John Marston, but no one does him wrong quite like Edgar Ross. Callously using Marston's family as leverage to further his own ambitions, Ross is a more devious man than the outlaws he forces Marston to hunt.

## 3 THE ORIGAMI KILLER — HEAVY RAIN

The Origami Killer's motivation, methods, and identity are best kept under wraps, since revealing them prematurely would spoil this groundbreaking game. Even without knowing the details, your hunt for this terrifying figure is what drives the intense narrative of *Heavy Rain*.

## 4 SARAH KERRIGAN — STARCRRAFT II

The memory of a non-infested Kerrigan haunts Jim Raynor as he laments his failure to protect her, but she isn't just a psychological threat. The Queen of Blades herself commands the relentless forces of the Zerg, and entire armies fall at her feet when she steps onto the battlefield.

## 5 ZEUS — GOD OF WAR III

Zeus may be the king of the gods, but he's not a benevolent ruler. From high atop Olympus, he battles Kratos and the Titans as the world is thrown into chaos around him. Zeus' power is only exceeded by his hubris, which makes it even sweeter when he finally gets his comeuppance.

## 6 THE SPIDER — LIMBO

This oversized arachnid doesn't have complex motives or a nefarious endgame—it's just hungry. The lumbering predator is terror incarnate; with its lightning-quick attacks and a fondness for impaling, the mere sound of the spider creeping up behind you is enough to inspire panic.

## 7 NIKITA DRAGOVICH — CALL OF DUTY: BLACK OPS

He's got a Russian accent and he hangs out with Fidel Castro, so there's no way Dragovich isn't evil to the core. As if more proof were necessary, Dragovich is responsible for Alex Mason's captivity in a Russian gulag. He also has an unhealthy interest in American politics.

## 8 JEANNE — BAYONETTA

As an Umbra Witch, Jeanne is capable of the same outlandish feats as Bayonetta, but without all of the emotional baggage. While Bayonetta tries to unravel her own past, Jeanne uses the full extent of her supernatural talents, which makes their confrontations lopsided and awesome.

## 9 DEATHWING — WORLD OF WARCRAFT: CATAclysm

Azeroth as you knew it is gone. Floods, earthquakes, and lava have changed the face of the land. All of the chaos and destruction is the work of Deathwing, a once-noble black dragon who soars through the world and periodically shows up to obliterate seasoned veterans and noobs alike.

## 10 GIDEON GRAVES — SCOTT PILGRIM VS. THE WORLD

Gideon Graves is everything the final boss of a brawler should be. He has unfair advantages in the form of weapons, cheap attacks, and three forms that pay homage to classic games. Even if you aren't a Scott Pilgrim fan, you'll hate Gideon for all the right reasons.

## Limbo

Limbo's brilliant black-and-white silhouette art style immediately grabs your attention, but the clever environmental puzzles and haunting sound effects steal the show. As the young boy wakes up and progresses through the dangerous dreamscape, the only sounds you hear are amplified environmental effects. Combined with hard-to-spot booby traps, terrifying creatures, and shocking death animations, Limbo channels the macabre in a very memorable way.



07.21 • XBOX 360

## StarCraft II: Wings of Liberty

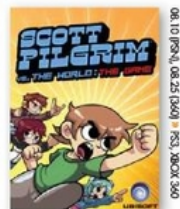
Over 10 years have passed since the original, but Blizzard returns to its sci-fi real-time strategy classic in a huge way. *Wings of Liberty* provides everything we want from the long-awaited sequel: an accessible campaign full of unique missions, gorgeous cutscenes, polished multiplayer, and a revised Battle.net that makes finding friends and refining your strategy easier than ever. The only downside to this blissful experience is realizing that you have to wait for the two remaining campaigns.



07.27 • PC

## Scott Pilgrim vs. the World

Indie comic icon Scott Pilgrim had a big 2010 thanks to a critically acclaimed film adaptation starring Michael Cera and this excellent downloadable game. This retro-styled four-player brawler salutes fans of the series with loads of video game inside jokes. Constant level-ups and shopping open up new combat options. Ramona's seven evil exes form an ideal and charismatic boss structure, and Paul Robertson's inspired 2D art and animation is unmatched.



08.10 • PS3, 08.25 • XBOX 360 • PC

## Lara Croft and the Guardian of Light

Guardian of Light surprised both Tomb Raider fans and non-fans alike. The co-op experience starring Lara and ancient Mayan warrior Totec blends the raw fun of a twin stick shooter with environmental puzzles that require two brains and unique character abilities to solve. Throw in massive bosses, crazy chase scenes, and an addicting upgrade system, and you have a unique Tomb Raider game that stands taller than some recent games in the series.



08.18 • PS3, XBOX 360, PC

## Mafia II

Some people expected Mafia II to deliver an open-world sandbox similar to Grand Theft Auto, but 2K Czech chose to skip the meaningless sidequests in favor of honing a tightly crafted gangster tale that recalls classic films like *Goodfellas* and *A Bronx Tale*. Mafia II transports players to post-World War II America, an era seldom visited by video games. The relationship between protagonist Vito Scaletta and Joe Barbaro drives a compelling story that borrows many familiar scenarios, but by the end takes a tragic twist no one could see coming.



08.24 • PS3, XBOX 360, PC

## Valkyria Chronicles II

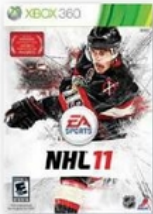
As a handheld sequel to the PS3's *Valkyria Chronicles*, some fans feared this follow-up wouldn't meet expectations. Those fears proved unnecessary; *Valkyria Chronicles II* packs a punch on PSP with a staggering number of missions, more character development, and branching progression trees for each class. Even on a smaller screen, the combat system retains the thrilling strategic warfare of the original, ensuring that you're always excited to run onto the battlefield.



08/31 • PSP

## NHL 11

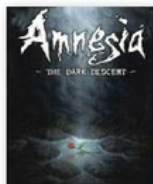
The follow-up to last year's sports game of the year didn't have any on-ice competition to skate against, but that didn't stop the puck-heads at EA Canada from honing their craft. With the addition of a new face-off system, broken sticks, and a real-time physics system that delivers unique bone-crunching hits, *NHL 11* remains an elite sports game. The EASHL online leagues are still best in class, and the new Hockey Ultimate Team mode gives gamers yet another avenue to satiate their puck lust in a game filled to the brim with solid modes.



09/07 • PS3, XBOX 360

## Amnesia: The Dark Descent

Not every game is about having fun. *Amnesia* is focused on scaring your pants off, and it performs splendidly, providing some of the most terrifying moments we've ever experienced in a video game. With no way to fight off the horrifying creatures lurking the halls of Brennenburg Castle, you must learn to run and hide, often while screaming like a baby. Any game that makes us jump out of our chairs from fright deserves a special nod.



09/08 • PC

## Civilization V

Firaxis' strategy title about conquering the world certainly conquered our desire to sleep. *Civ V* adds hex tiles and ditches unit stacking to give the battles more tactical variety. Improvements to the UI make navigating and building your *Civilization* easier than ever, yet the game's finer intricacies will take players hundreds of hours to master. It's hard to imagine being drawn to another strategy game the same year that *StarCraft II* hit, but *Civilization V* makes a convincing case.



09/21 • PC

## Dead Rising 2

Capcom took a risk by moving its zombie-filled sandbox away from the mall setting and introducing brand-new hero Chuck Greene. Fortunately, Blue Castle Games was up to the challenge. Its whacked-out version of a Nevada casino town provides a perfect backdrop for Chuck's story, and his improvised weapons are as bizarre – and effective – as we'd hoped. Adding co-op to the mix makes the package even more appealing and helped even the odds against the thousands of undead foes.



09/28 • PS3, XBOX 360, PC

# Halo: Reach

*Reach* may be a prequel, but it ties up the *Halo* series like a neat bow. This disc is engorged with content: a smartly crafted campaign boasting impressive AI and strong pacing, a multiplayer mode that will keep players engaged for years, an improved, fan-favorite Firefight mode, and a host of other extras like the Forge level editor. Bungie didn't just close the book on its legendary run with the series; it went out with a bang.



09/14 • XBOX 360

Best Xbox Exclusive

Best Shooter

Best Co-op



## MOMENTS

## 1 DIDN'T SEE THAT COMING –

CASTLEVANIA: LORDS OF SHADOW

One key component of the Castlevania formula is missing throughout much of Lords of Shadow, but it eventually appears with a bang. This double whammy wallops players with an exciting character twist for Belmont and follows up with the earth-shattering revelation of the rumored sequel's setting.

## 2 RED DEAD DENOUEMENT – RED DEAD REDEMPTION

As he heads home after doing the Bureau's bidding, John Marston feels like his life is finally back on track. But as he reconnects with his loved ones and retakes the reins of his ranch, a sense of doom hovers over the catharsis. The events that subsequently unfold create one of the most memorable finales in gaming history.

## 3 FIGHTING CRONOS – GOD OF WAR III

God of War III is a non-stop assault of jaw-dropping moments, but Kratos' battle against Cronos rises above. Traversing the titan's gargantuan body and carving him into pieces is simultaneously disturbing and thrilling. He may be one more corpse to Kratos, but we'll remember Cronos for ages.

## 4 THE TRIALS – HEAVY RAIN

When Ethan Mars is forced to go through several trials devised by a psychopath to retrieve his lost child, you know he isn't going to walk away without some kind of disfigurement.

## 5 A NEW PERSPECTIVE – BIOSHOCK 2

Hours of drilling through hopeless splicers as the first Big Daddy eventually leads to an experience unlike anything we've ever seen in the BioShock universe. This string of events provides a fresh look at the beloved world of Rapture through a familiar set of eyes.

## 6 THROUGH THE OMEGA RELAY – MASS EFFECT 2

You've gathered your crew. Your ship is armed to the teeth. Now it's time to pass through the relay and face the Collectors on their turf. The ensuing mission demands sacrifice and keen leadership, and it's likely that everyone isn't coming home. Maybe not even Shepard.

## 7 THE LAST STAND – HALO: REACH

We find out why Halo: Reach opens with a broken Spartan helmet when the game concludes and the Covenant overruns the planet. With no backup, limited supplies, and a never-ending stream of enemies, Noble Six does the only thing a Spartan can do: hold the line as long as possible.

## 8 DONNING THE RAINCOAT – DEADLY PREMONITION

The Raincoat Killer is a local legend in Greenvale; an axe-wielding maniac who rampaged through the town in the 1950s. This legend becomes a reality during an amazing flashback sequence.

## 9 THE PERFECT KILL – ASSASSIN'S CREED: BROTHERHOOD

Whether you're watching your underling assassins strike from the shadows or playing mind games with your opponents in multiplayer, the satisfaction of a well-executed kill never diminishes. Requiescat in pace.

## 10 MINECRAFT MADNESS – MINECRAFT

It's not even a finished game yet, but one-man indie project Minecraft tapped into a deep creative undercurrent in our collective subconscious. Its early alpha build sold over half a million copies this year on word of mouth alone. The planned 2011 release is going to wreck us if it adds actual gameplay and goals.

## Castlevania: Lords of Shadow

Previous 3D Castlevania games were notoriously bad, so to see the series finally find its footing is a cause for celebration. Gabriel Belmont battles werewolves, vampires, towering titans, castle-filling ogres, and every other Halloween monster you can imagine in this visually astounding action title. Using Belmont's handy combat cross to ascend medieval fortresses and destroy behemoths is a blast, but pales in comparison to the shocking finale.



10.05 • PS3, XBOX 360

## NBA 2K11

Visual Concepts always delivers a solid hardcourt experience, but with the help of Michael Jordan the game soars to new heights in 2010. The Jordan Challenge, which recreates the 10 career-defining moments in MJ's career with historical rosters, jerseys, and commentary, is the most ambitious and impressive new sports mode of the year. Combine it with the always impressive Association franchise mode and several small but necessary improvements to the gameplay, and you have the best basketball game of this console generation.



10.12 • PS3, XBOX 360

## Kirby's Epic Yarn

Kirby's Epic Yarn is one of the most adorable games of the year, but don't let that scare you off. The patchwork visuals are wedded to inspired level design, making for one of the most satisfying 2D platformers in years. From transforming into cute Kirby vehicles to literally pulling levels apart at the seams, Epic Yarn constantly introduces new and interesting threads. Sure, it may be a little easy, but few other games this year had us smiling quite as often.



10.17 • Wii

## DJ Hero 2

FreeStyle Games put its own spin on the music game genre with DJ Hero, a title that gave players control of a turntable peripheral as they scratched their way through mash-ups of the finest tracks hip hop and dance have to offer. In DJ Hero 2, the team improves the mechanics of its predecessor in every conceivable way. With new freestyle options, vocal duties, and a killer soundtrack that never lets up, you can keep the party bumping into the wee hours of the morning.



10.19 • PS3, XBOX 360, Wii

## Best Rhythm/Music

## Fallout: New Vegas

New Vegas may come off as "just more Fallout 3" to some gamers, but with the lengthy wait between new releases from Bethesda, we're happy to have the option. Using VATS to take down enemies in gruesome ways is as entertaining as ever, and new iron sights aiming leads to much better non-VATS combat. Tweaks to the companion system, opposing faction storylines that encourage multiple playthroughs, and a crazy new setting make this a trip to Vegas worth taking.



10.19 • PS3, XBOX 360, PC

## Super Meat Boy

When you die dozens of times on the same level, the grinding repetition is usually met with curses and broken controllers.

Team Meat manages to replace that frustration with charm by infusing its tough-as-nails platformer with quick reloads, infinite lives, buttery controls, and copious replayability. Also, it's hard not to like a game about a skinless boy rescuing his girlfriend made of band-aids from a fetus in a tuxedoed robot.



10.20 (XBOX 360), 11.20 (PC) • XBOX 360, PC

### Fable III

As Fable III kicks off, the townspeople are ready to revolt over the king's authoritarian bend. After the ruler extends his cruelty to his own flesh and blood, the prince joins the revolution. Lionhead's signature humor is apparent throughout the journey to capture the crown, as players get drunk at ghost parties and encounter a hilarious D&D group. Once you ascend the throne, Fable III comes into its own by making you balance your desire for being a popular ruler against tough decisions to keep the kingdom safe. It turns out ruling isn't so simple after all.



10.26 » Xbox 360

### Rock Band 3

Naysayers may believe music games are dead, but Harmonix's innovations with the latest Rock Band entry are a convincing counterpoint. Rock Band 3 sports an improved interface and comprehensive career structure for fans of the classic descending note formula, plus some excellent Pro Modes for players ready to learn the real thing. If that's not enough, the inclusion of the keyboard peripheral adds a new skill to your musical repertoire as you jam to the most eclectic Rock Band soundtrack yet.



10.26 » PS3, Xbox 360, Wii

### Pinball FX 2

The pinball craze died off long ago, but now it's back thanks to Zen Studios' amazing silver ball simulation. Through an array of inventive social options, you're constantly competing against other players' scores. If you come close to beating a friend's best mark, their Xbox Live Avatar will appear on your screen, taunting your efforts. Outside of the Addams Family machine, you won't find better tables to wage war on.



10.27 » Xbox 360

### Dance Central

With Dance Central, Harmonix creates the most authentic and entertaining virtual dance experience of our generation. Breakdown mode and the inability to fail ensures both pros and players with two left feet can have a great time and learn a few moves in the process. Local multiplayer dance-offs and instant freestyle playback are both entertaining and hilarious, making Dance Central the perfect example of how Kinect brings people together. Harmonix not only set the bar for dance games, but has also set the example of how Kinect can succeed.



11.04 » Xbox 360

### Call of Duty: Black Ops

Despite anger over the Infinity Ward drama, high expectations, and a step backward in the timeline, Treyarch came into its own with Black Ops. Even if you didn't enjoy the high-octane rollercoaster ride of a single-player campaign, the multiplayer is as good as it's ever been with the addition of a currency system that lets you unlock weapons and upgrades as you see fit. And fighting the undead as JFK in Zombies mode? Brilliant!



11.09 » PS3, Xbox 360, PC

### Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood

On paper, Brotherhood sounds like an expansion. But once you dive off a Borgia tower in Rome you realize the story furthers the larger narrative. Its new gameplay mechanics, like the ability to recruit a team of assassins and Ezio's new quick-strike attack options, change the single-player experience in fundamental ways. The addictive multiplayer mode is also worth checking out. Brotherhood's title may suggest otherwise, but it's a full-fledged sequel in our book – and a great one at that.



11.16 » PS3, Xbox 360, PC

## God of War: Ghost of Sparta

While God of War III concludes Kratos' story, Ghost of Sparta fills in the gaps between the first and second games in the series. Developer Ready at Dawn once again showcases its mastery of the PSP hardware, pushing the system to the limit. Whether Kratos is tromping through Atlantis or tying up loose familial ends, Ghost of Sparta consistently delivers outstanding combat and epic moments that stand side-by-side with the series' console iterations.



11.02 » PSP

Best Handheld

## PUBLISHERS DEVELOPERS

## 1 ELECTRONIC ARTS — LAST YEAR: 2

Mass Effect 2's unforgettable sci-fi storytelling and tightened gameplay is at the head of the pack for EA, but that's just the tip of the iceberg. Call of Duty got some stiff competition this year with Battlefield: Bad Company 2's entertaining multiplayer, Guitar Hero was left in the dust by Rock Band 3, and racing got a much needed boost with Need for Speed Hot Pursuit. The company also had several solid sports titles, the Sims 3 console adaptation, and downloadable hit DeathSpank.

## 2 ACTIVISION — LAST YEAR: 5

Though the messy divorce with the lead talent at Infinity Ward and CEO Bobby Kotick's flippant remarks painted Activision as an industry bully, the company's 2010 was successful nonetheless. The giant publisher wooed Halo developer Bungie, flexed its financial muscle with Call of Duty: Black Ops, and made a great licensed game with Transformers: War for Cybertron. Add the stellar work Blizzard did on World of Warcraft: Cataclysm and StarCraft II, and it's hard to deny Activision's publishing power.

## 3 NINTENDO — LAST YEAR: 6

While the DS didn't get as many memorable titles as we've seen in previous years, Nintendo gave Wii enthusiasts plenty of reasons to celebrate. With near perfect titles such as Super Mario Galaxy 2, Kirby's Epic Yarn, and Donkey Kong Country Returns, this is the most time we've spent with the Wii since the console first released.

## 4 TAKE TWO — LAST YEAR: 3

Take-Two's mantra is quality over quantity. The company delivered another acclaimed open world title with Rockstar's Red Dead Redemption, released its most successful sports entry yet with NBA 2K11, dropped highly rated sequels for Mafia and BioShock, and gave us the long-anticipated Civilization V.

## 5 SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT — LAST YEAR: 1

It's safe to say the PlayStation 3 has hit its stride. Sony delivered a varied and impressive roster of stellar exclusives like God of War III, Heavy Rain, MLB 10: The Show, and a few memorable PSN titles like Hello Games' Joe Danger. The company also introduced its answer to motion controls with Move, and Gran Turismo 5 finally hit retail.

## 6 MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS —

LAST YEAR: 7  
Though the relationship between Microsoft and Bungie has come to an end, their final collaboration, Halo: Reach, delivered on every front. So did Microsoft's gamble on controller-free gaming, Kinect, and a first-party lineup that included Fable III and Alan Wake. Though Xbox Live experienced a price hike, the arcade space was bustling with impressive exclusives including Limbo, Iomilo, and Super Meat Boy.

## 7 UBISOFT — LAST YEAR: 9

Ubisoft's diverse portfolio was hit or miss this year, with a mix of mediocre titles and stunning successes. Alongside lackluster titles such as Just Dance 2 and Shaun White Skateboarding, there are hits like Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood, Scott Pilgrim vs. the World, and Splinter Cell: Conviction.

## 8 CAPCOM — LAST YEAR: 10

The only real low point for Capcom this year was the departure of Keiji Inafune. The Japanese publisher released a stream of solid sequels with Dead Rising 2, Lost Planet 2, Mega Man 10, and Super Street Fighter IV. The company also produced excellent DLC in the form of Dead Rising: Case Zero and Case West.

## 9 SEGA — LAST YEAR: N/A

This year marks the return of good Sonic games with Sonic 4: Episode 1 and Sonic Colors (DS). PSP owners had a reason to return to their handhelds with Valkyria Chronicles II. Plus, with the help of Platinum Games, Sega introduced some impressive new IPs like Bayonetta.

## 10 SQUARE ENIX — LAST YEAR: N/A

Every year Square Enix releases a new numbered Final Fantasy title, it's undeniably a good year. Final Fantasy XIII went multiplatform, Lara Croft returned in Guardian of Light, and open world title Just Cause 2 showcased the growing potential of the publisher's acquisition of Eidos.

## 1 BLIZZARD — LAST YEAR: 4

Blizzard's mantra is "when it's done." This philosophy means gamers have to wait years, sometimes decades between sequels, but it pays off in a level of quality that few can match. StarCraft II would put Blizzard on this list by itself, but the studio also released World of Warcraft: Cataclysm and an ambitious revamp of its Battle.net service.

## 2 ROCKSTAR SAN DIEGO —

LAST YEAR: N/A  
Rockstar San Diego's Red Dead Redemption gave gamers something we'd wanted for a long time — an open-world Western epic. The game is built on the Grand Theft Auto template, but Rockstar used it to create an experience unlike any other. Filled with fascinating characters, grand vistas, and engaging action, it was the year's breakout hit.

## 3 SONY SANTA MONICA — LAST YEAR: N/A

Every God of War game raises the bar in terms of spectacle and brutal, finely tuned gameplay. Sony Santa Monica delivered the third chapter in the saga this year, and it managed to not only match, but exceed our expectations. The level of graphical firepower coupled with amazing gameplay made God of War III one of the year's best gaming experiences.

## 4 BIOWARE — LAST YEAR: N/A

BioWare took its considerable RPG chops to the next level with Mass Effect 2, which provided the year's most engrossing saga. Never before have we felt so connected to a game, as the decisions you make as Commander Shepard change the fate of the universe. The interactive dialogue system is the genre's most important gameplay innovation this generation, and this series shows no signs of slowing down.

## 5 QUANTIC DREAM — LAST YEAR: N/A

Many games made an impact on us this year, but none was more affecting than Quantic Dream's emotional thriller Heavy Rain. Smart, gripping, and often sad, the game made us feel a real emotional connection to protagonist Ethan Mars, something few games have ever accomplished to this degree.

## 6 BUNGIE — LAST YEAR: N/A

Now developing a new franchise for Activision, Bungie is leaving Halo behind. However, Halo: Reach was a fitting end to the saga it began on the original Xbox. Full of emotion and nearly perfect in design, Reach restored Halo to its position atop the shooter genre. Wherever the series goes from here, it won't be the same without the talents of one of the most consistent and talented studios in all of gaming.

## 7 HARMONIX — LAST YEAR: 2

While things haven't been great for Harmonix on the business side (owner Viacom is looking to unload the studio), its work this year couldn't have been better. It released Rock Band 3, its most comprehensive and deep music title to date, and gave us Dance Central, an addictive dance game that was the best Kinect launch title.

## 8 RETRO STUDIOS — LAST YEAR: N/A

Retro left the familiar confines of the Metroid series behind to bring back Nintendo's beloved Donkey Kong Country franchise. While the reappearance of DKC was surprising enough, it was even more surprising that Retro created a game that was even better than its old-school predecessors.

## 9 MOJANG SPECIFICATIONS

LAST YEAR: N/A  
Markus Persson, better known by his web handle "Notch," couldn't have known what he was unleashing on the world when he put out the alpha version of Minecraft this year. An open-ended, construction-themed sandbox title, Minecraft took the Internet by storm, as players used the game's creation tools to make an insane variety of constructs.

## 10 FRICTIONAL GAMES — LAST YEAR: N/A

This small independent developer from Sweden (the second on this list!) created one of the year's truly unique experiences, the groundbreaking survival horror title Amnesia: The Dark Descent. While it's not as polished as some big budget games, Amnesia is perhaps the most chilling game ever released.



## Need For Speed Hot Pursuit

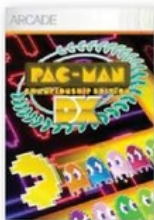
Criterion has always impressed us with the Burnout series, but it takes high-speed arcade racing shenanigans to a new level in the latest Need For Speed. Two separate but equally entertaining career modes force you to contend with crafty AI in white-knuckle competition. The innovative Autolog feature builds on Burnout Paradise's awesome brand of social updates, ensuring you always know when a friend has a new record you need to best.



11.16 • PS3, XBOX 360, PC

## Pac-Man Championship Edition DX

Not all Pac-Man games have to be boring collect-a-thons or silly party games. Back in 2007, Namco tinkered with Pac-Man's original '80s formula to produce an outstanding arcade game that had Pac-Man bouncing back and forth between sides of the maze. With Pac-Man Championship Edition DX, Namco improves on the magic. The addition of sleeping ghosts that chase after Pac-Man and the ability to prolong Pac-Man's powered-up state push DX's action to a frantic level. Few things are as satisfying as eating a row of 50 ghosts.



11.17 (ARC) • 11.23 (PS3) • PS3, XBOX 360

## Donkey Kong Country Returns

Retro takes the classic side-scrolling formula of the original Donkey Kong Country and turns it on its head with foreground and background play, new enemies, co-op, and even more secrets to explore. Though family friendly in presentation, DKC Returns doesn't skimp on difficulty; you'll let out a sigh of relief at the discovery of each red balloon and checkpoint, as challenging platforming sections keep you at the edge of your seat from start to finish. Donkey Kong's long-awaited return is one of the greatest platformers we've ever played, and a must-play for Wii owners.



11.21 • Wii

## Gran Turismo 5

We've been waiting so long for Gran Turismo 5 that it's still hard to believe it actually came out. Thankfully, our patience paid off with some of the most realistic graphics ever experienced in a racing game, especially in cockpit view for premium cars. The tweaked progression means you won't feel the same grind as previous GT games, and the social experience of sharing cars and courses guarantees we'll be spending plenty of time behind the wheel for the foreseeable future.



11.24 • PS3

Best Racing

## Ilomilo

Don't let this adorable indie puzzler fool you. Reuniting two cutesy creatures by manipulating a cube-filled world will break your brain in more ways than you can imagine – and that's why we love it. With a unique style, the perfect amount of complexity, and an excellence in design on par with Valve's Portal, this is the most fun we've had with a puzzle game this year.

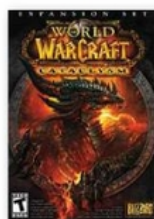


11.26 • XBOX 360

Best Puzzle

## World of Warcraft: Cataclysm

How does Blizzard keep millions of paying subscribers interested in a six-year-old game? Huge expansions like Cataclysm certainly don't hurt. Alongside the introduction of two new races and a ton of content for the raised level cap, Blizzard has completely redesigned the original 1-60 leveling experience. Story-driven quests push you through zones faster than ever before, and the new flexible raiding system invites more casual players to experience all of the content.



12.07 • PC

TOP 10

## DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

### 1 BORDERLANDS: THE SECRET ARMORY OF GENERAL KNOX

With regular releases of high quality DLC, Gearbox knows how to take care of its fan base. Both of the team's DLC releases this year made the list, but with General Knox DLC being its largest offering, it takes the top slot. An increased level cap, new weapons, and a confrontation with the most powerful creature in Pandora proves there thankfully ain't no rest for the wicked.

### 2 RED DEAD REDEMPTION: UNDEAD NIGHTMARE

With Undead Nightmare, Rockstar expands on our 2010 game of the year with hours of additional gameplay. This DLC shows that bears aren't the most terrifying creatures in the Old West as you complete a wealth of new missions and subquests while fending off hordes of zombies.

### 3 BATTLEFIELD: BAD COMPANY 2 – VIETNAM

It took way too long for DICE to deliver new maps for Bad Company 2, but we can't argue with the final product. Returning to the rice paddies and dense jungles of Vietnam is a blast, and the introduction of menacing new weapons like the flame thrower helps differentiate the action from the original game. This is one draft we don't recommend dodging.

### 4 BORDERLANDS: CLAPTRAP'S NEW ROBOT REVOLUTION

In the fourth DLC pack released by the talented folks at Gearbox, the beloved, chatty Claptrap finally gets some time in the spotlight. This pack offers up plenty of loot for the taking and a load of cute, but deadly Claptraps to take down.

### 5 BIOSHOCK 2: MINERVA'S DEN

As Subject Sigma, players can deliver a world of hurt to Splicers with improved gunplay as you unravel a gripping tale surrounding The Thinker that dishes out a shocking conclusion.

### 6 LEFT 4 DEAD 2: THE SACRIFICE

The Sacrifice gives fans of the Left 4 Dead franchise a chance to play as the original group of survivors in a new campaign that gets your heart pumping and ultimately delivers an emotional farewell to a member of the crew.

### 7 ALAN WAKE: THE WRITER

Alan Wake leaves a number of unanswered questions to the mysteries that unfold during the overall experience. Thankfully, The Writer helps clear up some of the fog. This additional content takes a few steps into surrealism and offers some gameplay twists to help put some of Alan Wake's plot pieces together.

### 8 MEGA MAN 10: BASS MODE AND SPECIAL STAGES

Mega Man 9 offered DLC in the form of a playable Proto Man, but Mega Man 10 already comes with the Blue Bomber's bro, so Capcom ups the ante by offering the oft-forgotten Bass as a downloadable character. The brooding robot can shoot bursts of rapid plasma fire diagonally and dash, making Mega Man look more like a chump. Even better, three DLC stages bring back the deadly Mega Man Killers from the Game Boy titles.

### 9 HALO: REACH: NOBLE MAP PACK

You can never have too many Halo multiplayer maps, so Bungie's addition of brand new gorgeous locations (Anchor 9, Tempest, and Breakpoint) is entirely welcome.

### 10 DRAGON AGE: ORIGINS: DARKSPAWN CHRONICLES

BioWare's additional combat-focused content for Dragon Age: Origins finally gives players the chance to control the Darkspawn. There is no shortage of entertainment when playing the bad guy role as you hack, slash, and ultimately terrorize the city of Denerim.



## DISAPPOINTMENTS

1 STUDIO CLOSURES,  
LAYOFFS, RESTRUCTURINGS

This year, the games industry felt the effects of the economic downturn in a big way. Only a few years ago, analysts and publishers laughed off the global financial crisis, declaring that video games were somehow recession proof. But studio bloodletting began in 2009, and continued at a furious pace in 2010 with a depressing number of studios suffering layoffs, closings, and publisher-mandated restructurings. Victims included Red Octane, Krome Studios, Visual Concepts, Neversoft, Raven Software, Realtime Worlds, Budcat, Luxoflux, Radical Entertainment, and Propaganda Games.

## 2 THE INFINITY WARD DEBACLE

After the record-breaking success of Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2, everything looked rosy for Activision and developer Infinity Ward. But behind the scenes the relationship between the two parties was eroding, eventually devolving into a public spat. Former IW studio heads Vince Zampella and Jason West were fired, and the pair subsequently sued Activision for withholding millions of dollars in unpaid royalties. Activision countered by saying that the two broke their contract by talking with rival publishers and plotting against Activision. West and Zampella formed Respawn Entertainment, and over 30 IW employees jumped ship to join the new company.

## 3 METROID: OTHER M

Team Ninja's take on the Metroid formula promised an incredible mix of the exploration the series is known for and brutal, Ninja Gaiden-style combat. Instead, we got a badly paced, poorly written, story-heavy game that turned Samus into an unlikable child. For ruining the reputation of a beloved and iconic character, we give Metroid: Other M a heartfelt thumbs down.

## 4 THE PATCH CRUTCH

Like it or not, the words "an update is available for this game" have become an integral part of the console gaming experience. Sometimes these patches come after a game's release, adding features such as online co-op. Other times, as in the case with Fallout: New Vegas, they address a variety of game-crippling bugs. It's great that developers can address problems after launch, but the first few weeks of a game's release are starting to feel more and more like a beta for which you have paid full price.

## 5 MEDAL OF HONOR TALIBAN FIASCO

EA's Medal of Honor took a lot of heat for the questionable decision to allow players to play as the Taliban in multiplayer. At first, the company defended their right as artists to create edgy content, before quickly reversing course and renaming the Taliban as the "opposing force" when faced with a ban of the game in stores on military bases. Embarrassing and gutless, this was one of the year's worst moments.

## 6 FLOUNDERING JAPANESE GAME DEVELOPMENT

In September, Capcom's head of R&D and global production Keiji Inafune told the *New York Times* that Japanese game development was at least five years behind the West. A month later, he left the company after a 23-year career. Japan, once known for its best-in-class game development, has lagged in recent years. Square Enix president Yoichi Wada cites Japan's closed society and reluctance to adapt to changing tastes as reasons behind its decline. Regardless of the whys, it's clear that developers need to step up their game.

## 7 NPD AND THE ABSENCE OF REAL SALES DATA

The gaming industry loves to invite comparisons between itself and Hollywood, but it falls short in one major way: transparency. You can go online and with a few clicks of your mouse read how much money a particular movie has grossed in 24 hours. With game hardware and software, that simply isn't possible. The NPD Group has compiled fragments of that data for years now, releasing small portions of information in monthly bursts. In October, the organization said it would no longer be releasing hardware sales figures and that its top 10 releases would no longer have accompanying sales numbers. In an industry filled with speculation and blind guesswork, not having access to information doesn't help anyone.

## 8 THE REALTIME CRACK UP

Crackdown was a surprise hit for developer Realtime Worlds – perhaps too surprising. By the time Microsoft decided it wanted a sequel to the sandbox game, the Scotland-based studio had already committed to development on its MMO shooter APB. The sequel was handed to new developer Ruffian Games, made up of many ex-Realtime World's Crackdown team members. Long story short, Crackdown 2 was a disappointing retreat and APB flopped, effectively putting Realtime Worlds out of business.

## 9 THE CURIOUS CASE OF LUCASARTS

LucasArts has two film franchises just screaming to be triple-A gaming blockbusters in Star Wars and Indiana Jones, but the Force is no longer strong with this publisher. The studio suffered layoffs in September and the departure of veteran project lead Haden Blackman. Later, it handed over Star Wars: The Old Republic to EA. Where's our Star Wars: Battlefront update? Why hasn't LucasArts delivered the Indiana Jones game we deserve? Most importantly, what's going on over at LucasArts?

## 10 THE UBISOFT MONTREAL TALENT EXODUS

First Clint Hocking, an instrumental Splinter Cell and Far Cry 2 designer, left the studio. Then news broke that Assassin's Creed creative director Patrice Desilets left Ubisoft Montreal as well, and a large group of the senior designers working on the blockbuster franchise also followed suit. Ubisoft Montreal has always had a deep roster of talent from which to pull, but with more and more studios opening up in Montreal the competition for top talent is fierce, and we can't help but feel wary about Desilets' vision for Assassin's Creed being lost in the shuffle.

## HONORABLE MENTION

## Deadly Premonition

No game generated more controversy in the Game Informer offices than this quirky title. Its opponents derided it for the outdated mechanics pulled unmercifully from last-gen survival horror games that had them tearing their hair out in frustration. The more masochistic (and possibly open-minded) editors looked past these early problems to find some original, ambitious ideas and a surprisingly charming (if weird) *Twin Peaks*-inspired story.

If you can finish *Deadly Premonition* without falling in love with Agent York and the quirky citizens of Greenvale, we envy your cold, unfeeling heart.



02.23 • XBOX 360

## TOP 50 BREAKDOWN

ESRB	2010		2009	
	2010	2009	2010	2009
E	11	9		
E10+	4	6		
T	14	19		
M	20	16		
Unrated	1	0		
<b>Genre</b>				
Action	17	12		
Action/RPG	3	0		
Adventure	2	0		
Compilation	0	1		
Fighting	0	4		
MMO	1	0		
Platforming	6	3		
Puzzle	2	2		
Racing	4	2		
Role-Playing	1	3		
Rhythm/Music	3	3		
Shooter	5	7		
Simulation	0	4		
Sports	3	4		
Strategy	3	5		
<b>Platform</b>				
PlayStation 3	29	27		
Wii	6	9		
Xbox 360	34	22		
PC	18	12		
Nintendo DS	2	4		
PSP	2	1		
<b>Exclusivity</b>				
PlayStation 3	5	6		
Wii	3	6		
Xbox 360	8	5		
PC	4	4		
Nintendo DS	1	4		
PSP	2	1		



## READER & STAFF PICKS

We made our picks for the best games of the year, so now it's time to see what the readers think. Users on [gameinformer.com](http://gameinformer.com) voted for the best games in a variety of categories. Some of the winners line up neatly with ours, but a few dark horses won the readers' acclaim. See how your favorites stack up with these complete results.

### BEST DOWNLOADABLE

READER & STAFF



LIMBO

### BEST CO-OP

READER & STAFF



HALO: REACH

### BEST RACING

READER & STAFF



GRAN TURISMO 5

### BEST FIGHTING

READER & STAFF



SUPER STREET FIGHTER IV

### BEST STRATEGY

READER & STAFF



STARCRRAFT II: WINGS OF LIBERTY

## READER PICK OF THE GAME YEAR

### Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood

SEE STAFF PICK  
ON PAGE 30





**READER  
BEST SHOOTER**  
**Call of Duty:  
Black Ops**

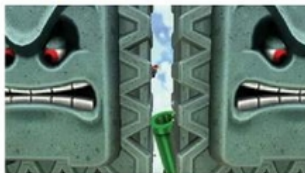


**STAFF  
HALO: REACH**

**BEST PLATFORMER**

READER

STAFF



SUPER MARIO GALAXY 2



DONKEY KONG COUNTRY RETURNS

**BEST ACTION**

READER

STAFF



ASSASSIN'S CREED: BROTHERHOOD



RED DEAD REDEMPTION

**BEST PUZZLE**

READER

STAFF



BEJEWELED 3



ILOMILO

**BEST RHYTHM/MUSIC**

READER

STAFF



ROCK BAND 3



DJ HERO 2

**BEST COMPETITIVE**

READER

STAFF



ASSASSIN'S CREED: BROTHERHOOD



STARCRIFT II: WINGS OF LIBERTY

**BEST SPORTS**

READER

STAFF



FIFA 11



MLB 10: THE SHOW

**BEST RPG**

READER & STAFF



MASS EFFECT 2

**BEST XBOX 360 EXCLUSIVE**

READER & STAFF



HALO: REACH

**BEST PS3 EXCLUSIVE**

READER & STAFF



GOD OF WAR III

**BEST PC EXCLUSIVE**

READER & STAFF



STARCRRAFT II: WINGS OF LIBERTY

**BEST HANDHELD EXCLUSIVE**

READER & STAFF



GOD OF WAR: GHOST OF SPARTA

**STAFF  
BEST Wii EXCLUSIVE**

# Donkey Kong Country Returns



**READER  
SUPER MARIO GALAXY 2**

## EDITOR PICKS

**Andy McNamara**

- 1 God of War III
- 2 Mass Effect 2
- 3 Red Dead Redemption
- 4 Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood
- 5 Darksiders
- 6 Halo: Reach
- 7 Heavy Rain
- 8 World of Warcraft: Cataclysm
- 9 Singularity
- 10 Picross 3D

**Andrew Reiner**

- 1 Red Dead Redemption
- 2 God of War III
- 3 Mass Effect 2
- 4 Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood
- 5 Castlevania: Lords of Shadow
- 6 Halo: Reach
- 7 Donkey Kong Country Returns
- 8 Call of Duty: Black Ops
- 9 Super Mario Galaxy 2
- 10 MLB 10: The Show

**Matt Helgeson**

- 1 Red Dead Redemption
- 2 DJ Hero 2
- 3 Heavy Rain
- 4 Super Mario Galaxy 2
- 5 Ilomilo
- 6 Picross 3D
- 7 Pinball FX 2
- 8 Darksiders
- 9 LittleBigPlanet PSP
- 10 Call of Duty: Black Ops

**Matthew Kato**

- 1 Heavy Rain
- 2 Red Dead Redemption
- 3 Gran Turismo 5
- 4 Mass Effect 2
- 5 Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood
- 6 Limbo
- 7 Blur
- 8 Pro Evolution Soccer 2011
- 9 NHL 11
- 10 Pinball FX 2

**Bryan Vore**

- 1 Mass Effect 2
- 2 Red Dead Redemption
- 3 Heavy Rain
- 4 God of War III
- 5 Scott Pilgrim vs. the World
- 6 Bayonetta
- 7 Fable III
- 8 Alan Wake
- 9 Kingdom Hearts: Birth by Sleep
- 10 Professor Layton and the Unwound Future

**Jeff Cork**

- 1 Red Dead Redemption
- 2 Dead Rising 2
- 3 Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood
- 4 Castlevania: Lords of Shadow
- 5 Deadly Premonition
- 6 Mass Effect 2
- 7 Heavy Rain
- 8 God of War III
- 9 Pinball FX 2
- 10 Fable III

**Meagan Marie**

- 1 Mass Effect 2
- 2 Split/Second
- 3 Dead Rising 2
- 4 Lara Croft and the Guardian of Light
- 5 Alan Wake
- 6 Need for Speed Hot Pursuit
- 7 Cave Story
- 8 Dance Central
- 9 Heavy Rain
- 10 Limbo

**Jeff Marchiatava**

- 1 Red Dead Redemption
- 2 Mass Effect 2
- 3 Battlefield: Bad Company 2
- 4 Pinball FX 2
- 5 Super Meat Boy
- 6 ModNation Racers
- 7 Just Cause 2
- 8 Heavy Rain
- 9 Darksiders
- 10 Halo: Reach



### Adam Biessener

- 1 StarCraft II: Wings of Liberty
- 2 World of Warcraft: Cataclysm
- 3 Civilization V
- 4 Amnesia: The Dark Descent
- 5 Mass Effect 2
- 6 The Settlers 7: Paths to a Kingdom
- 7 Picross 3D
- 8 Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War II - Chaos Rising
- 9 MLB 10: The Show
- 10 Rock Band 3



### Matt Bertz

- 1 Red Dead Redemption
- 2 Mass Effect 2
- 3 Battlefield: Bad Company 2
- 4 Heavy Rain
- 5 Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood
- 6 NHL 11
- 7 Limbo
- 8 NBA 2K11
- 9 Mafia II
- 10 Metro 2033



### Joe Juba

- 1 Heavy Rain
- 2 Mass Effect 2
- 3 God of War III
- 4 Bayonetta
- 5 Final Fantasy XIII
- 6 Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood
- 7 Ilomilo
- 8 Valkyria Chronicles II
- 9 Red Dead Redemption
- 10 Deadly Premonition



### Matt Miller

- 1 Heavy Rain
- 2 Mass Effect 2
- 3 Rock Band 3
- 4 Red Dead Redemption
- 5 Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood
- 6 Cave Story
- 7 Limbo
- 8 StarCraft II: Wings of Liberty
- 9 Joe Danger
- 10 Transformers: War for Cybertron



### Ben Reeves

- 1 StarCraft II: Wings of Liberty
- 2 Mass Effect 2
- 3 Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood
- 4 Limbo
- 5 Civilization V
- 6 Red Dead Redemption
- 7 Splinter Cell Conviction
- 8 Super Mario Galaxy 2
- 9 God of War III
- 10 Halo: Reach



### Tim Turi

- 1 Mass Effect 2
- 2 Castlevania: Lords of Shadow
- 3 Red Dead Redemption
- 4 Super Meat Boy
- 5 Dead Rising 2
- 6 Super Mario Galaxy 2
- 7 Heavy Rain
- 8 Scott Pilgrim vs. the World
- 9 Donkey Kong Country Returns
- 10 BioShock 2



### Annette Gonzalez

- 1 Mass Effect 2
- 2 Red Dead Redemption
- 3 DJ Hero 2
- 4 Donkey Kong Country Returns
- 5 Super Mario Galaxy 2
- 6 Dance Central
- 7 BioShock 2
- 8 Rock Band 3
- 9 Limbo
- 10 Angry Birds



### Dan Ryckert

- 1 Red Dead Redemption
- 2 Donkey Kong Country Returns
- 3 Super Mario Galaxy 2
- 4 Castlevania: Lords of Shadow
- 5 God of War III
- 6 Mass Effect 2
- 7 Pinball FX 2
- 8 Battlefield: Bad Company 2
- 9 StarCraft II: Wings of Liberty
- 10 Heavy Rain



### Phil Kollar

- 1 Mass Effect 2
- 2 StarCraft II: Wings of Liberty
- 3 Red Dead Redemption
- 4 Amnesia: The Dark Descent
- 5 Deadly Premonition
- 6 Beat Hazard
- 7 Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood
- 8 World of Warcraft: Cataclysm
- 9 Super Mario Galaxy 2
- 10 Castlevania: Lords of Shadow



### Ben Hanson

- 1 Mass Effect 2
- 2 Red Dead Redemption
- 3 StarCraft II
- 4 VVVVVV
- 5 Super Meat Boy
- 6 Battlefield: Bad Company 2
- 7 Donkey Kong Country Returns
- 8 Perfect Dark XBLA
- 9 Costume Quest
- 10 Infinity Blade

# The Big Tent: The Changing Culture Of Gaming

by Matt Helgeson  
senior editor,  
Game Informer



For much of the 30-odd years that they've been a hobby, video games have served as a way of connecting people, a secret handshake among those that often didn't quite fit in with the crowd.

Now, I'm not so sure. A 2008 Pew Research study found that 97 percent of children play video games. Last year, NPD Group found that 63 percent of all Americans had played a game in the last six months. In contrast, only 53 percent had been to a movie in the same time period. As the industry likes to trumpet, games have become a mainstream entertainment, perhaps even the dominant form of entertainment.

In many ways, this is great news, but it makes me question the idea that a monolithic

"gamer culture" still exists. As in every form of media today, the audience is increasingly fragmented. Does the person who plays *Persona 3* have anything in common with the guys who frag on *Modern Warfare 2* every night? Does the *Civilization* aficionado have a bond with someone who's hard at work on his *Madden* franchise? Probably no more than the person who went to see *Transformers II* does with the person who loves *Frost/Nixon*. Do you ever meet someone and say, "Hey, you watch mov-

ies? Cool, so do I! We have so much in common!?"

These divisions always existed to some extent, whether it was action games vs. RPGs or console players vs. PC players, but there was more of a common culture shared by gamers. For one, there were fewer outlets for games. As a kid, I remember sitting around with friends and playing RBI Baseball followed by the original *Metal Gear*. It wouldn't be uncommon to see someone play *Contra* then pop in *Dragon Warrior*. Even today, much of what passes for video game art, culture, and music is rooted in the pixelated graphics and primitive electronic tones of the 8- and 16-bit eras. Icons like *Pac-Man*, *Mario*, and *Link* still resonate strongly with gamers, even ones that were too young to have enjoyed them the first time around.

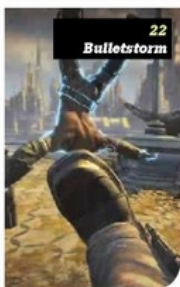
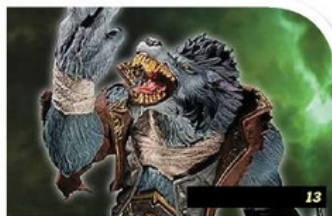
Part of their enduring appeal is nostalgia – and the fact that, in the cases of *Mario* and *Zelda*, the series have continued to spawn excellent sequels throughout the years. But I can't help but wonder if part of this phenomenon is a yearning for the days when video games were still something our parents didn't understand, when we all still had the same definition of what games were and what they represented. You see the same thing in music. While rock, hip-hop, and dance have cross-pollinated into a million subgenres, icons like the Beatles, Michael Jackson, and Led Zeppelin retain their power partially because they came

from a time when we all agreed on things.

When we're all gamers, being a gamer doesn't really mean anything. We're not a tribe; we're a huge market of millions of people from every race, creed, color, religion, and socio-economic group of which you could think. Increasingly, the games we play are as diverse and different as we are. Smaller groups will always band together based on mutual interests, but in many ways we're long past the time when you can assume much about someone because they play games. Perhaps that's progress, but part of me can't help but feel a little sad about it.

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

If you work in the industry and would like to share your opinion, contact senior editor Matt Helgeson at [matt@gamerformer.com](mailto:matt@gamerformer.com)



## February

### 01 New Releases

- Ace Combat: Assault Horizon (PS3, 360)
- Days of Thunder (PS3)
- Kevin Van Dam Fishing (PS3)
- Knights Contract (PS3, 360)
- Plants vs. Zombies (DS)
- Top Gun (PS3)
- Top Spin 4 (PS3, 360, Wii)

### 02 Iron Man 2.0

Col. James Rhodes wore the War Machine armor for decades. Today, he becomes the new Iron Man... Iron Man 2.0. This three-issue story arc is the prelude to a new ongoing series. Odds are Marvel never goes back on the decision to create Iron Man 2.0. You heard it here first: Iron Man 2.0 will be around forever just like Frankencastle and the Iron Spider.

### 04 Off the Deep End

Remember when people were ashamed to put James Cameron's name on anything? After the success of Avatar, his name is now being slapped onto projects as frequently as Tom Clancy's. Today's "James Cameron" film, Sanctum, is an underwater survival story starring nobody of note. Cameron probably just took his script for The Abyss crossed out the title, and scribbled in Sanctum. Spoiler: The aliens are T-1000s.

### 08 New Releases

- Ape Escape (PS3)
- Naruto Shippuden: Shinobi Rumble (DS)
- Test Drive Unlimited 2 (PS3, 360)

### 11 Welcome to Disasterpiece Theater

Every month we find ourselves making fun of new Nic Cage movies. We've exhausted our supply of Ghost Rider jokes, made fun of his deadpan delivery, and mocked his stupid long hair. At this point, he's just a walking punchline—a joke that constantly writes itself. His latest wreck, Drive Angry, opens today... and it looks like his worst movie ever. Think about that for a second.

### 13 Get Your Plastic Worgen!

The werewolf race in World of Warcraft is called worgen? Did Blizzard hire the person who names all of the Ikea furniture? If you want to place a worgen on your hordes (shelves) or micks (desk), DC Direct has just released a great new worgen action figure. This series also includes a human paladin and an orc rogue.

### 15 New Releases

- Combat Wings: The Great Battles WWII (Wii)
- Conduit 2 (Wii)

- Dungeon Raiders (DS)
- LEGO Star Wars III: The Clone Wars (PS3, 360, Wii, PC, DS)
- Marvel vs. Capcom 3: Fate of Two Worlds (PS3, 360)
- NASCAR 2011: The Game (PS3, 360, Wii)
- Photo Worlds DS (DS)
- Tactics Ogre: Let Us Cling Together (PS3)
- Warriors: Legends of Troy (PS3, 360)
- Ys I & II (PS3)
- Yu-Gi-Oh! World Championship 2011 (DS)

### 18 Post-Jedi Living

Have you seen *Avatar*? Did you enjoy Liam Neeson's shin kicks? If you enthusiastically said "yes" to both of these questions, go see *Unknown* today. It seems like the same basic movie, except with a new conspiracy and more bad guys to punch in the neck. All that Jedi training apparently paid off for Neeson. What's your excuse, Hayden Christensen?

### 22 New Releases

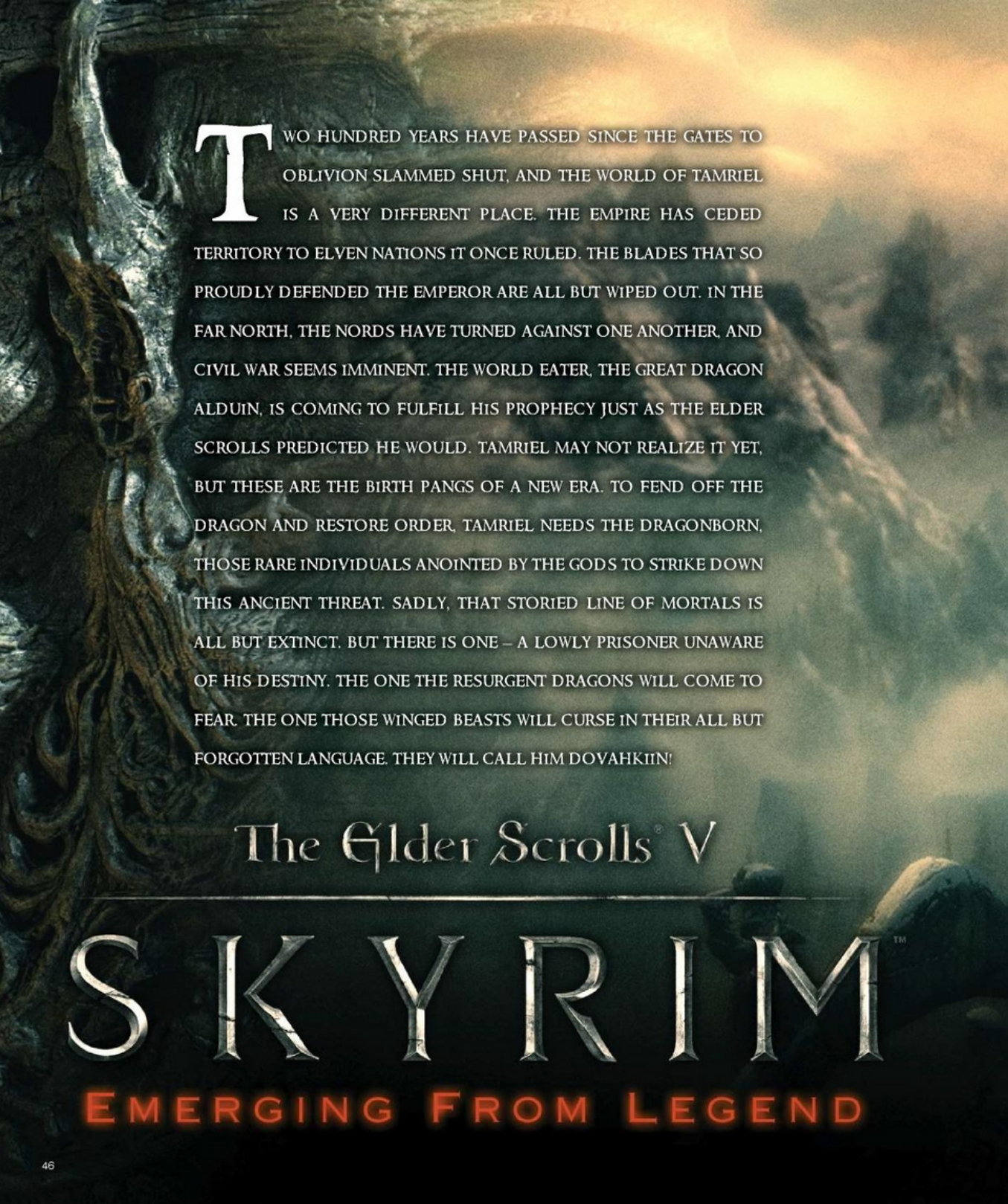
- Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood (PC)
- Bulletstorm (PS3, 360, PC)
- De Blob 2 (PS3, 360, Wii, DS)
- Killzone 3 (PS3)
- Pro Angler Movies (PS3)
- Reckless Historia (DS)

### 23 Year of the Cosmic Motorcycle!

The Flash may no longer hold the title "fastest man alive." A new speedster known as Hot Pursuit has emerged from the Speed Force to deliver a warning—no one can break the speed limit again. Will Flash and his feet-footed cohorts heed his advice, or will their actions trigger an event that forever changes the DC universe? Read Flash issue 1.0 to find out. This story serves as a prelude to this summer's Flashpoint event.

### 27 Celebrating the Best Batman Game Ever Made

DC Direct's second line of action figures based on Batman: Arkham Asylum hit shelves this month. This series consists of Bane, Poison Ivy, a second version of Batman, and Zsasz. We're counting the days until Batman: Arkham City hits PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360. If anything, these toys make the wait a little easier.



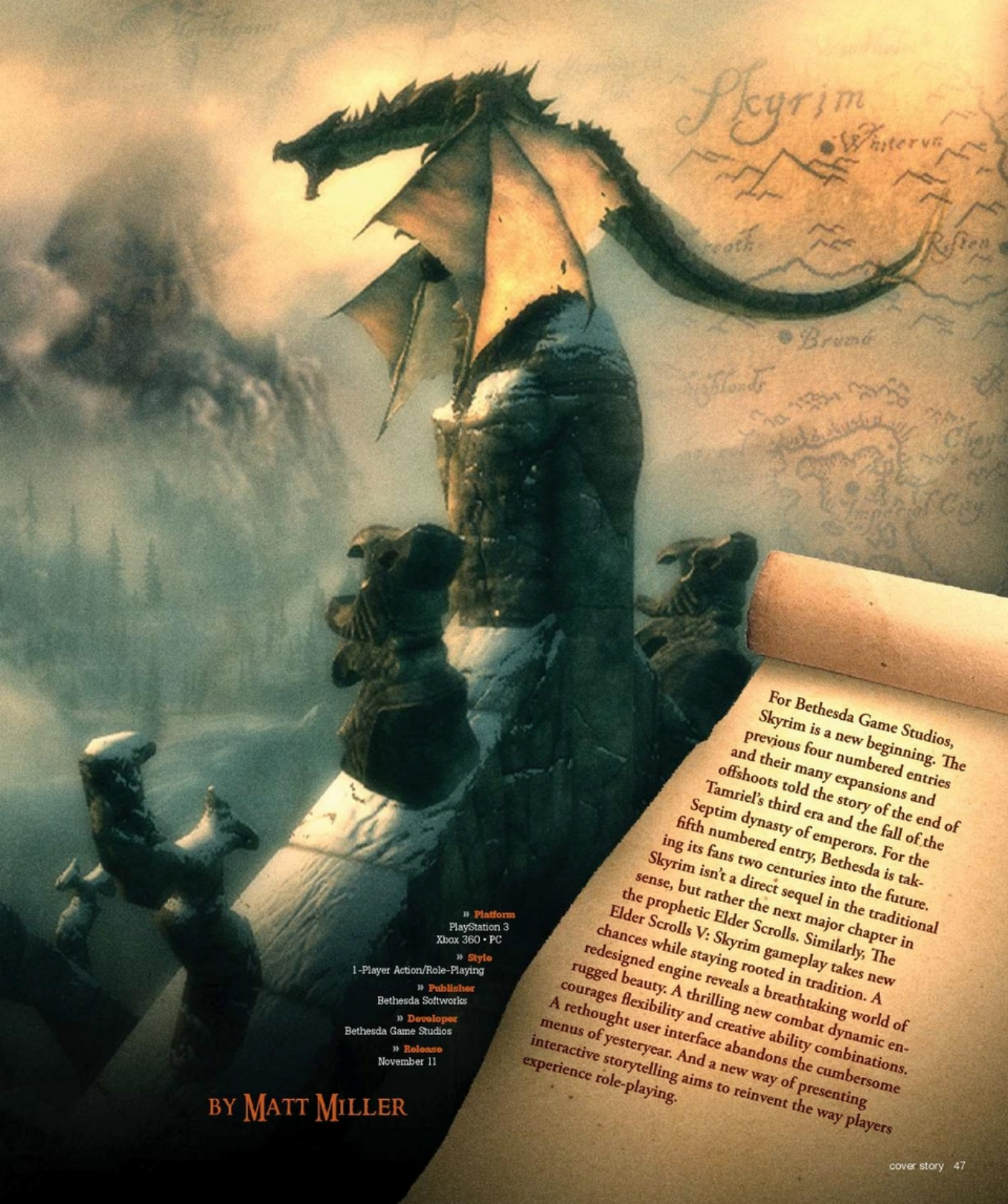
**T**WO HUNDRED YEARS HAVE PASSED SINCE THE GATES TO OBLIVION SLAMMED SHUT, AND THE WORLD OF TAMRIEL IS A VERY DIFFERENT PLACE. THE EMPIRE HAS CEDED TERRITORY TO ELVEN NATIONS IT ONCE RULED. THE BLADES THAT SO PROUDLY DEFENDED THE EMPEROR ARE ALL BUT WIPED OUT. IN THE FAR NORTH, THE NORDS HAVE TURNED AGAINST ONE ANOTHER, AND CIVIL WAR SEEMS IMMINENT. THE WORLD EATER, THE GREAT DRAGON ALDUIN, IS COMING TO FULFILL HIS PROPHECY JUST AS THE ELDER SCROLLS PREDICTED HE WOULD. TAMRIEL MAY NOT REALIZE IT YET, BUT THESE ARE THE BIRTH PANGS OF A NEW ERA. TO FEND OFF THE DRAGON AND RESTORE ORDER, TAMRIEL NEEDS THE DRAGONBORN, THOSE RARE INDIVIDUALS ANOINTED BY THE GODS TO STRIKE DOWN THIS ANCIENT THREAT. SADLY, THAT STORIED LINE OF MORTALS IS ALL BUT EXTINCT. BUT THERE IS ONE – A LOWLY PRISONER UNAWARE OF HIS DESTINY. THE ONE THE RESURGENT DRAGONS WILL COME TO FEAR. THE ONE THOSE WINGED BEASTS WILL CURSE IN THEIR ALL BUT FORGOTTEN LANGUAGE. THEY WILL CALL HIM DOVAHKIIN!

The Elder Scrolls® V

# SKYRIM™

EMERGING FROM LEGEND





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

» **Style**  
1-Player Action/Role-Playing

» **Publisher**  
Bethesda Softworks

» **Developer**  
Bethesda Game Studios

» **Release**  
November 11

BY MATT MILLER

For Bethesda Game Studios, Skyrim is a new beginning. The previous four numbered entries and their many expansions and offshoots told the story of the end of Tamriel's third era and the fall of the Septim dynasty of emperors. For the fifth numbered entry, Bethesda is taking its fans two centuries into the future, but rather the next major chapter in the prophetic Elder Scrolls. Similarly, The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim gameplay takes new chances while staying rooted in tradition. A redesigned engine reveals a breathtaking world of rugged beauty. A thrilling new combat dynamic encourages flexibility and creative ability combinations. A rethought user interface abandons the cumbersome menus of yesteryear. And a new way of presenting interactive storytelling aims to reinvent the way players experience role-playing.

# A NEW LAND

YOU MOVE OUT INTO THE CRISP MORNING AIR, AND LOOK OUT ACROSS THE WINDSWEPT MOUNTAINSIDE. SCATTERED COPSES OF PINE DOT THE SLOPE. THE FOLIAGE RUSTLES SOFTLY IN THE BRISK BREEZE. DISTANT PEAKS GLIMMER AMID THE CLOUDS IN THE PANORAMA SPREAD OUT IN FRONT OF YOU. IT'S BEEN A LONG TREK ACROSS THE RANGE, BUT NOW YOU NEAR YOUR DESTINATION. A LONE VILLAGE HIDDEN AMONG THE MOUNTAINS WILL OFFER REST. STRIDING DOWN THE CURVING PATH, YOU PAUSE BY AN ICY COLD RIVER WHERE IT RUSHES THROUGH THE GORGE TO WATCH FISH LEAP AMONG THE ROCKS WHILE HEADING UPSTREAM. A SHADOW FALLS ON THE PATH NEARBY, AND YOUR HAND MOVES TO YOUR BLADE. THE SLOVENLY, CHARGING FIGURE DOESN'T SEEM AS INTERESTED IN THE SCENERY AS YOU.

Only a few moments into observing *The Elder Scrolls V* in action, the game takes our breath away. Whether you're looking at the world from the HUD-free first-person view or the improved third-person perspective, the world of *Skryim* is meticulously detailed. The new rendering engine offers unparalleled fidelity for an open-world role-playing game. Every object in the world casts a perfectly formed shadow. Trees and branches move independently, and water flows in swift currents, imparting a sense of energy and life to the world even when no other creatures stand nearby. Incredible draw distances allow players to look out from a mountain peak across vast distances, and everything you can see – from the lowest valley to the highest distant snowcapped rocks – is traversable. Snow falls naturally onto the stones and branches, appearing not as a preset texture, but falling exactly as it would onto that object given its shape and size.

The titular setting of *Skryim* is a harsh wilderness that lies to the north of *Cyrodill*, the sprawling central nation through which players journeyed in *Oblivion*. Where *Oblivion* focused on idyllic sylvan glades and imperial cities, *Skryim* delivers precipitous mountains, majestic tundras, and crumbling ruins. "It's a really rugged environment," game director Todd Howard explains as he walks us through

the world. "For a fantasy world, it's lower tech. We want magic to stand out as something special. It's a bit more brutal. It's the original home of men in Tamriel. You see these cities that seem like they've really been lived in for a thousand years. It feels less Renaissance Faire. I'm a big Conan fan, so there's some of that."

The homeland of humanity, *Skryim* is a massive nation with many elevations for players to explore. "It's kind of nice for us, especially coming off of *Fallout*, to do something really beautiful, with vistas and plants," Howard says. "The northern coast is very icy, and you get these glaciers and snow. And then there's an area called the Reach, which is rocky and craggy, in the western end of *Skryim*. There's a tundra, this big wide open area in the middle, where you see the mountains at the far edge. Within this one place, there's maybe six or seven really different environment looks."

Saber-toothed cats, woolly mammoths, and elk wander freely through the same wilderness populated by towering giants, lumbering frost trolls, and terrifying snake-like ice wraiths that float along the frigid air currents. Five massive cities dot the landscape, offering refuge from the harsh landscape. Even underground areas are rich in variation, from icy caves to forgotten crypts. "There's a uniqueness to the terrain that makes it really good for the kind of games we like to do," Howard tells us.





Skyrim is filled with crumbling ruins and ancient cities



## NAMES TO REMEMBER

### Alduin

Also called the World Eater, this massive dragon's return was foretold by the prophetic Elder Scrolls. His triumph will mean Tamriel's destruction.

### Dragonborn

Called "dovahkiin" in the language of dragons, these rare individuals are true dragon hunters. As the game begins, your hero may be the last one left.

### Esbern

One of the few surviving Blades, Esbern is a sort of mentor to the game's hero. He's been following the prophecies, and knows that the world of Tamriel is in serious trouble. He is voiced by Max von Sydow (*Minority Report*, *Shutter Island*).

### Greybeards

These mysterious old men live atop a high retreat called High Hrothgar, at the top of a mountain called the Throat of the World. They are highly versed in the power of the dragons, and the dragonborn hero will need to climb the 7,000 steps it takes to reach them and be trained.

### Skyrim

A rugged northern nation in the larger continent of Tamriel. The king recently died, setting off a potential civil war between those who wish to secede from the Empire, and those who want to remain.

# WEAPONS OF CHOICE

THE BANDITS CLOSE IN FROM MULTIPLE DIRECTIONS, AND YOU DROP INTO A COMBAT STANCE. YOU DRAW A LONG STEEL BLADE INTO YOUR RIGHT HAND, AND PULL THE WELL-WORN SHIELD FROM YOUR BACK ONLY MOMENTS BEFORE THE HIGHWAYMAN'S HATCHET GLANCES OFF ITS SURFACE INSTEAD OF YOUR ARM. YOU MANAGE A DEFT SWING THAT CATCHES YOUR OPPONENT OFF-GUARD, AND BLOOD BLOSSOMS ACROSS HIS MIDSECTION. UNDAUNTED, HE REARS BACK FOR A POWERFUL SLAM, HOPING TO OVERPOWER YOUR GUARD. YOU TAKE THE MOMENT TO BASH FORWARD WITH YOUR SHIELD, SENDING HIM STAGGERING. BY NOW, HIS COMPANION IS ALMOST UPON YOU. ABANDONING YOUR SHIELD, YOU TURN TOWARDS THE NEW OPPONENT AS A WHIRLING CURRENT OF ICE IGNITES WITHIN YOUR PALM. YOU FLING THE SPELL INTO YOUR FOE'S PATH.



Bethesda is well aware that players are ready for something new out of the Elder Scrolls combat system. Skyrim's recalibrated approach to fighting remains true to the core action tenets of previous entries while streamlining weapon and ability usage and deepening the ways that opponents can affect each other in battle.

The core change is the addition of a two hands/two options approach to combat. Every weapon or spell in the game can be equipped to either hand at any time, leading to limitless combinations of attack options. Dual wield two of the same weapon, or place a dagger in one hand and a mace in the other. Fight defensively with a shield on your left arm and a crackling ball of electricity in your right. Set two completely different spells in either hand, or put the same spell in both hands, letting you combine the spell to extraordinary effect. The choice is yours.

If you want to change your tactics in mid-battle, you can trade out items and abilities with the touch of a button. Rather than offer you only eight choices on the directional pad, Bethesda implemented a handy customizable menu to quickly select your favorite weapons, spells, and items, so it's extremely easy to swap your loadout in a single battle with only a momentary pause in the action.

No matter your choice of gear, the way you fight opponents shapes your character in the world. "You are what you play," Howard reiterates several times during our visit. Gone is the restrictive class system of earlier games. In its place stands an elegant leveling system that rewards experience for everything you do in the game and has safeguards in place to limit exploits. Use one-handed weapons, and your skill with them will improve. Cast lots of illusions, and your abilities within that school of magic will be amplified. "The main thing is that you don't pick which skills are important to you in the beginning," Howard details. "In Oblivion, you would just play for awhile, and after awhile the game would ask you: What do you want your class to be? Which was really a way of saying, what skills are important to you? Then

past that point, those are the only skills that affect your leveling. There's no way to give you a good idea, in the first hour, what's important on a game of this scale. We've tried, I just don't think there's a way to do it."

As any given skill in Skyrim increases, it contributes to your overall level growth. The higher the skill, the more it contributes to leveling. "Raising one skill from 34 to 35 is going to level you faster than raising one from 11 to 12," Howard says. Thus, specialization in a few key skills is advisable, but not required. The more skills you choose to advance, the more you delay your progression to high levels.

Those ever-ascending levels will be highly desired. Each level comes with an automatic boost in health, and then a choice to further advance your health, or to improve either magicka or stamina, the other two primary in-game resources. In a nod to Bethesda's other role-playing universe, Fallout, each level also brings the choice of a perk, one of dozens of special power-ups tied to the 18 skills. These perks may increase the damage of your dagger during stealth attacks, or allow your mace to ignore enemy armor. Each choice further delineates your hero from every other player's choices.

Leveling is stretched across a wider field, affording more choices for players to shape their character over time. "Oblivion and Fallout were more like leveling from one to 25. This is one to 50," Howard shares. "But it's still a similar playtime. So you level up faster in the beginning. Part of the reason for that was, number one, it's more fun, and number two, with the way we're handling perks, there's a lot of them, and it's really the way to define your character. It's the way to get power. So you want more of them early on." Even after level 50, players will be able to continue gaining new levels, but the process will dramatically slow. "We want to support archetypes. There are the combat guys, the magic guys, the stealth guys. But most people play some mix of that. And we just want to make that organic," Howard concludes.





Players will still be able to craft their hero from 10 unique races as the game begins; facial and body features are entirely customizable

## THE FEEL OF COMBAT

"All the stuff we're doing, we want the game to feel more believable, not just on the screen, but in your hands," Howard says. Combat in Skyrim is still based on the familiar variations of melee throwdowns, careful ranged assaults, and a huge variety of spells, but much of the moment-to-moment action feels more involving and brutal.

Melee is built strongly around a give and take of offense and defense, where staggering the enemy and watching for openings is key to victory. "We wanted the pace of melee combat to be different," Howard says. "There has to be an energy and a joy to it. And we're also interested in how the weapons feel in your hand." There are also newly added finishing moves that are unique to both the weapon you're using and the target you're hitting, adding a satisfying flavor to the end of a hard fight.

Ranged combat is once again dominated by the bow and arrow. In general, bows take longer to draw back than before, but they are much more powerful, allowing stealthy players to take down targets with one hit from a great distance.

The magic system has dozens of spells, ideal for players who like a lot of variation to their combat encounters. "There are five schools of magic," Howard says. "There were six in Oblivion. We got rid of mysticism, and moved some of that stuff around. The magical school of mysticism. Isn't that redundant?"

No matter your style of combat, battles feel more mobile, but with fewer cheap tricks to cheat the system. For instance, the old backpedaling approach just won't cut it. "We've really slowed down how fast you move backwards," Howard says. "So a guy who is charging you, you can't just back up from him. In Oblivion, you ran backwards at the same speed you ran forwards. The biggest reason we changed that was a visual one; in third-person, it just looked ridiculous."

# RELATES WELL WITH OTHERS

AT LONG LAST, RIVERWOOD COMES INTO VIEW. THE SMALL LOGGING COMMUNITY LOOKS TO OFFER A WELL-DESERVED RESPITE AFTER THE LONG JOURNEY. LOOKS CAN BE DECEIVING. AS YOU MAKE YOUR WAY ALONG THE VILLAGE'S CENTRAL AVENUE, THE TOWNSPEOPLE ARE ABUZZ WITH THE WORST SORT OF NEWS. A DRAGON HAS PASSED THIS WAY ONLY RECENTLY. YOUR HOPES FOR SOME RELAXATION WILL HAVE TO WAIT. REALIZING YOU'D BETTER STOCK UP, YOU HEAD INTO THE BIGGEST STORE IN TOWN AND HAPPEN UPON THE SHOPKEEPER AND HIS SISTER IN A BITTER ARGUMENT. IT SEEMS THE SHOP HAS BEEN ROBBED OF A MYSTERIOUS ARTIFACT. THE INDIVIDUAL WHO MANAGES TO BRING IT BACK MIGHT FIND ANY NUMBER OF DISCOUNTS HEADED THEIR WAY...



Villages, towns, and cities are as important as they've always been to the Elder Scrolls world, but in *Skyrim* Bethesda alters the way that players will experience non-player character interaction and increases the number of activities that can be explored in these bastions of civilization.

For those that played *Oblivion* or *Fallout 3*, your most immediate concerns about NPC dialogue can be laid to rest. Conversations no longer occur in a zoomed-in view of the person you're speaking to, and Bethesda enlisted far more voice actors to keep the repartee fresh. Approach an NPC, and a converse option will pop up. As they speak to you, the AI-controlled character will move about, occasionally looking at you, or turn away to continue a task like woodcutting or

minding a counter. Secondary conversations you overhear also provide info without you ever needing to engage in dialogue. Townsfolk might mention a missing item, or comment on an unusual situation, and those details will automatically enter your log, offering new avenues of exploration should you choose to pursue them.

Your hero can also engage in more activities within the towns, which helps the world feel more genuine. Stand at the forge and carve new weapons from red hot metal. Mix strange alchemical substances to create poisons or potions. Enchant items with new magical effects. Explore the mundane through farming, mining, woodcutting, or even cooking. Towns are filled with activities when you're looking for a break from life-and-death adventuring.



Faces have been dramatically overhauled. Characters now exhibit more emotion, show off distinctions between different races, and just plain look better.



"Ice wraiths are these crystalline, serpentine beings that form out of the winds," Howard explains. "They're terrifying."



## THE RADIANT STORY

The Elder Scrolls V has a remarkable new approach to storytelling in a role-playing game. In Oblivion, Bethesda's Radiant AI technology empowered NPCs to enact their own daily schedules and needs. Radiant story applies the same principle to the much wider experience of moment-to-moment character interactions with the world.

Put simply, the Radiant story system is about reacting to player actions in everything from the tiniest detail to the broadest plot point. "We're still telling very specific storylines in our main quest and our factions, and all that stuff is done by hand," Howard reaffirms. "But Radiant story allows us to have quests that are flavored dynamically for who you are and where you are." The game itself watches everything you do. What skills have you improved? What places have you visited? Who have you killed? What weapons do you own? Which figures in the world are your friends, and who are your enemies?

The answers to these questions create the backbone of your story. If you murder the shopkeeper in Riverwood that might give you a quest, his sister will automatically inherit the shop, and might even offer you the same quest. However, knowing that you killed her brother, she might do so only in anger and frustration.

Out on the street, your magically empowered hero may be approached by another magic-user who wishes to duel. If you had only improved your weapon skills, that character might never appear.

Wandering through town, you could enter your inventory and decide to drop a heavy two-handed weapon rather than sell it at a nearby shop. In some instances, the weapon might lie forgotten in the mud. At another time, a young boy might grab it up and rush after you, asking if you had dropped it and might like it back. In a third instance, two burly men might reach the

weapon at the same time, and begin to fight over who will take it home.

The game eventually logs a huge storehouse of knowledge about how you've played, and subsequently tailors content to your capabilities and experiences. Entering a city, a young woman might approach you and beg you to save her daughter from kidnappers. The game will look at the nearby dungeons you've explored, automatically set the mission in a place you've never visited, and designate opponents that are appropriately matched to your strengths and weaknesses.

"To the players, they'll get a quest that we feel is appropriate for who they are and what they're doing at the time," Howard says. In essence, your version of Skyrim will be built to your specific playing style.

For more exhaustive details on Radiant story and all the technical features of Skyrim, visit [gameinformer.com/skyrim](http://gameinformer.com/skyrim).



# INSIDE THE INTERFACE

SIGNS OF WARMTH AND LIFE FADE INTO THE DISTANCE AS YOU HIKE UP AND AWAY FROM RIVERWOOD IN PURSUIT OF THE MISSING ARTIFACT – A GOLDEN CLAW OF ELDRITCH ORIGIN. YOU PAUSE OUTSIDE OF TOWN TO REARRANGE YOUR EQUIPMENT. YOU TAKE TO

TIME CHECK YOUR MAP, AND CONSIDER THE QUICKEST ROUTE UP THE MOUNTAIN. SATISFIED WITH YOUR PREPARATIONS, YOU HEAD INTO THE WILDERNESS. AS THE PATH WINDS INTO THE MOUNTAINS, HEAVY FOOTSTEPS ECHO OFF THE ROCKS, AND YOU STARE UP IN ALARM AT THE LUMBERING MASS OF FLESH AS IT APPROACHES. A MOUNTAIN GIANT STANDS TALL AND LANKY, TOWERING ABOVE YOU AS IT MAKES ITS WAY FORWARD. PREFERRING DISCRETION OVER VALOR, YOU STEP INTO THE SHADOW OF A NEARBY BOULDER AND WAIT FOR THE HULK TO PASS. YOU BREATHE A SIGH OF RELIEF AS THE FOOTSTEPS FADE. UNFORTUNATELY, THE FROST TROLL THAT WAS DOGGING THE GIANT'S TRAIL ISN'T SO WILLING TO OVERLOOK YOUR PRESENCE, AND YOU'RE SUDDENLY IN A FIGHT FOR YOUR LIFE.

Enemies now each have unique behavioral patterns. Not every monster you meet in the wilderness will immediately jump to the attack.

Menus are rarely fun, but they don't need to be cumbersome like they were in *Oblivion*. To answer the need for improvement, the team went back to the drawing board to craft a user interface governed by simplicity, usability, and integration into the fiction. If they do their job right, menu surfing will be easy to navigate while offering plenty to explore for those who wish to deepen their understanding of the world. "You know in iTunes, when you look at all your music? You flip through it, and see all the covers and information. It becomes tangible, even though it's this virtual thing. That's what I like about it," Howard explains. "One of our goals was, 'what if Apple made a fantasy game? How would that look?' It's very good at getting through lots of data quickly, which is always a struggle with our stuff."

Tap the menu button, and a four-point, compass-style overlay will appear before your eyes. Skills, Inventory, Map, and Magic are the four subsections presented. Push up to Skills, and your eyes will turn to the sky above, where constellations of stars glimmer above Skyrim. "The heavens are showing you what you're like," Howard says. "It becomes an entertaining way of looking at your skills." Each constellation is one of those skills, divided between areas of the sky that represent melee combat, magic, and stealth capabilities. Each perk you select lights another star in the constellation.

Push right from the compass menu, and you'll reach your inventory. Weapons and armor are well organized, and any one of them can

be tagged as a favorite for quick selection. Books appear as three-dimensional objects that you open to read. Other items, from flowers and herbs to magical relics, each appear in their own designated space. Every item in your inventory has a detailed, zoomable, rotating image to examine, which pops up as soon as you select the item, giving a tactile quality to the objects you carry with you.

Pushing left from the main menu calls up your selection of magic spells – 85 in all. If you're a dedicated collector, many offering variations on a theme. Within your fire spells, for instance, you might have a bursting fireball, a flamethrower spray, or a burning rune that activates when a creature crosses its threshold. Like with weapons, any spell can be equipped to either hand or set to your favorites for easy in-game access.

Finally, press down on the menu, and it's as if your character is looking down to the ground. As he looks earthward, the first-person view begins to pan far back. Skyrim's map appears as a huge topographical display viewed from an improbable height. You can explore the map at your leisure, passing the towering mountain peaks, forests, cities, and tundra. As you've come to expect, you can instantly travel to previously visited locations with the tap of the fast travel button.

The visual effect of the new menu system is subtle but important. The old menu paradigm pulled you entirely out of the game world into a collection of tables, text, and tedium. The new interface keeps players grounded in their location in the world while still delivering fast and detailed information.





NAME **Bendu Olo** LEVEL **9** RACE **Dark Elf**

ALCHEMY **30** ILLUSION **24** CONJURATION **26** **DESTRUCTION 56** RESTORATION **24** ALTERATION **21** ENCHANTING **27** SMITHING **18**

The School of Destruction covers the harnessing of elemental energies. This skill makes it easier to cast spells like Fireball, Ice Spike, and Lightning Bolt.

MAGICCKA **180/180** HEALTH **240/240** STAMINA **100/100**

"When you level up, you get a chance to pick a perk, something we did a lot of with Fallout 3." Howard says. "We actually did them in Oblivion, it's just the perks happen automatically as you raise those skills. And we feel it's really fun to pick them. It lets me define my character more."



# HERE THERE BE DRAGONS

THE DRAGON ROARS, AND DIVES IN TO ATTACK. FLAME POURS FROM ITS GAPING MAW. IT CRIES OUT A WORD OF POWER IN DRACONIC, STRENGTHENING IT FOR THE BATTLE TO COME IN YOUR SEARCH FOR THE MISSING GOLDEN CLAW. YOU'VE ASCENDED TO A TUMBLING RUIN OF NORD BUILDINGS. FOR A TIME, THE SCALED MYTHICAL BEAST SEEMED TO BLEND, STATUE-LIKE, INTO THE STONE, BEFORE SPREADING ITS WINGS AND CALLING OUT ITS ANGER. NOW, YOU'RE CORNERED AGAINST THE WALL WITH THE DRAGON READY TO DIVE BOMB. YOU SCRAMBLE BACK DEEPER INTO THE RUINS, AND BEYOND A FALLEN PILLAR YOU SPY YOUR BEST HOPE FOR ESCAPE. A TINY PASSAGE OPENS INTO THE HILLSIDE, DESCENDING INTO THE DUNGEON BELOW. EVEN AS THE DRAGON LANDS AND REARS BACK TO STRIKE, YOU DIVE FOR THE OPENING AND HURRY INTO THE DARKNESS BELOW. OUTSIDE, THE WYRM BELLOWS IN FURY AS ITS PREY SLIPS AWAY.





**A**midst any discussion of what sets *Skyrim* apart from its predecessors, dragons are at the very heart – as is how your character is tied to them. Though the *Elder Scrolls* video game franchise has been around since 1994, dragons have never been a part of gameplay. That's because the fiction has been clear on the point that dragons were banished from the world thousands of years ago. Until now.

The *Elder Scrolls* have prophesied the return of the dragons. In fact, the signs that the dragons would be returning were clearly laid out in the predictions: The shattering of the Staff of Chaos (The *Elder Scrolls: Arena*), the appearance of Numidium (Daggerfall), the volcanic Red Mountain (Morrowind), and the opening of the Oblivion gates (Oblivion) all heralded their arrival. The last sign is the citizens of *Skyrim* turning against each other in civil war, an event that is unfolding as *Skyrim* begins. Already, lesser dragons are flying free across the world. Eventually, the dreaded Alduin will return – a godlike dragon destined to devour the world if left unchecked.

Long ago, a force existed that expelled the dragons. Individuals called dragonborn wield the same mighty power as the dragons themselves. "The dragonborn can battle the dragons on another level," Howard describes. "They're anointed by the gods. That's why they can light the dragonfires to become an emperor. They kind of help make the world whole." These powerful figures were supported by the dragonguard, later called the Blades. After the dragons' retreat, the Blades eventually came to guard one ancestry of dragonborn individuals, the Septim emperors. Unfortunately for the world, that line of rulers has now been wiped out, and the dragonguard has been hunted down and nearly destroyed. No dragonborn has been seen in decades until you arrive – a dragonborn with the potential to stand against the tide.

"Part of the big mystery is, why are the dragons back?" Howard tells us. "How have they come back? How do we stop this? And what is the player's role in that as the dragonborn?" Dragons won't be some legendary concept left dangling before players until the end of the game. Dragons are real and regular threats in the game world. They fly into battle at unexpected times. They ravage towns. They wield awesome power. And you'll have to face them repeatedly in single combat.

# THE ONE THEY FEAR

PERHAPS YOU WOULD HAVE BEEN BETTER OFF FACING THE DRAGON. DEEP BENEATH THE NORD RUINS, YOU'VE FOUND CATACOMBS THAT STRETCH INTO THE FRIGID DARKNESS, FILLED WITH UNSPEAKABLE DANGERS. IN ONE ROOM COATED IN WEBBING, A BOULDER-SIZED SPIDER LOWERS ITSELF INTO THE CHAMBER, CHITTERING AND CLACKING ITS MANDIBLES. ELSEWHERE, AN ARMY OF DRAUGR UNDEAD, FALLEN NORD WARRIORS OF A FORGOTTEN TIME, CHOKES THE CORRIDORS AHEAD. THE DARK ELF THAT STOLE THE GOLDEN CLAW ARTIFACT FLEES INTO THE DEPTHS, A CHASE THAT RESULTS IN HIS DEATH. NOW YOU'RE FACED WITH A CHOICE. YOU'VE RECOVERED THE RELIC, AND YOU'LL HAVE A HAPPY SHOPKEEPER WAITING FOR YOU BACK IN RIVERWOOD. BUT THE DARK ELF SPOKE OF A SECRET BURIED DEEPER WITHIN THE DUNGEON, A MYSTERY TIED TO THE STOLEN CLAW. THE LURE IS IRRESISTIBLE. YOU PUSH AHEAD.

DEEP BELOW, THE MYSTERY REVEALS ITSELF. A FORGOTTEN HALL OF STORIES LEFT BEHIND BY THE ANCIENT NORDS SERVES AS A MAUSOLEUM FOR THEIR HONORED DEAD. THE GOLDEN CLAW UNLOCKS THE INNER SANCTUM. WITHIN, A SHIMMERING RUNIC WALL SITS, UNTOUCHED FOR CENTURIES. THE HIEROGLYPHS SEEM FAMILIAR. A WORD LEAPS OUT FROM THE DRACONIC TEXT. YOU ARE DRAGONBORN. YOU WERE BORN TO UNDERSTAND THESE RUNES. THE WORD SINKS INTO YOUR MEMORY, AS IF IT HAD ALWAYS BEEN THERE.

TURNING TO LEAVE, A SARCOPHAGUS BURSTS OPEN, AND A SHIMMERING SPECTER EMERGES, ANGERED BY YOUR DISRUPTION OF ITS ETERNAL SLEEP. IT'S A FOE BEYOND ANY YOU'VE FACED IN THIS DARK CRYPT. THE WORD OF POWER SPRINGS INTO YOUR MIND. "FUS," YOUR VOICE REVERBERATES LOUDLY. "RO," YOUR VOICE BUILDS IN INTENSITY. "DAH!" THE UNDEAD PRIEST GOES HURTLING BACKWARD AS A WALL OF SURGING FORCE WASHES OVER IT, AND THE VAULT ECHOES WITH YOUR SHOUT.



**T**he title of dragonborn has real meaning for gameplay. As perhaps the last surviving dragonborn, your character has a unique capability to learn and apply the power of the dragons through the mystical language they speak. Above and beyond magic and weapons, your character can acquire abilities called dragon shouts, as you journey through the world. By absorbing the souls of dragons you slay, your capability to learn new shouts grows.

"There are these words of power, and if you learn how to say them right, they have a powerful effect," Howard explains. "There are other people in the world who can use the dragon shouts, but it's very rare. It's like arcane knowledge. It used to be done more in the past. But your ability to absorb the dragon souls and do the shouts on the level that you can is beyond them." There are over 20 unique shouts in the game, and each one is formed from three words of power. These are acquired in various ways as you journey through the world. With each new word, the shout you expel grows in intensity and power. "They are all translatable [from draconic to English], like 'strong wind of the gods,'" Howard details.

Dragon shouts expand your abilities in many directions. One sends foes hurtling away from you, staggered by the force of your yell. Another slows down time around you. Some unique words of power are spoken as a whisper, to aid in a stealthy approach, like the one that sends you instantaneously from one place to another. One particularly potent shout speaks the true name of an actual dragon, and the beast is forced to come to your aid and fight beside you in battle.

## DRAGON LANGUAGE

Bethesda created a full draconic language for use in *Skyrim*. Complete with a 30 character written alphabet, a full grammar and syntax guide, and an extensive vocabulary of words, the draconic language and its words of power serves as the backbone to the dragon shout system. To learn details about Bethesda's fascinating endeavor to tackle this project and to translate the draconic text on the back of this magazine, visit [gameinformer.com/skyrim](http://gameinformer.com/skyrim).



Characters can now sprint by expending stamina, offering some new options for getting around a battlefield to an advantageous position.

# IT'S ALL COME TO THIS

YOU SCURRY THROUGH THE DIM PASSAGE TOWARD THE GLIMMER OF LIGHT AT THE END, AND EMERGE INTO THE COOL, SUNLIGHT NEAR THE MOUNTAIN'S PEAK. THERE IS NO TIME TO CATCH YOUR BREATH. YOUR PURSUER HAS NOT GIVEN UP. THE DRAGON HAS BEEN CIRCLING, AND NOW HE RENEWS HIS ASSAULT. A FURIOUS MELEE ENSUES. HIS CLAWS TEAR AT YOU, HIS FIERY BREATH SINGS. YOU SHOUT A WORD OF POWER, AND THE DRAGON SEEMS TO SLOW MOMENTARILY AS TIME SHIFTS AROUND YOU. YOU DIVE TO THE SIDE AND STAB YOUR BLADE UP INTO THE CREATURE'S NECK. IT FLAILS WILDLY, AND FINALLY COLLAPSES. INSTANTLY, ITS BODY BEGINS TO COMBUST, BURNING ITSELF OUT FROM THE INSIDE. YOUR BLOOD QUICKENS, AND A GLOW OF POWER SUFFUSES YOU. ANOTHER SOUL BRINGS YOU ONE STEP CLOSER TO ALDUIN.

Seeing *Skyrim* in action, it's hard not to see the *Elder Scrolls* games that came before as a preamble. From a story perspective, those earlier games predicted the threat that would fall during a new age of the world. In gameplay terms, *The Elder Scrolls V* leaves the same impression; everything that came before was just a preview of what's now to come. So much about the experience being crafted by Bethesda seems wholly new, even as the fundamental dynamics of combat, exploration, and character progression remain at the fore. If all goes well, players will pick up the controller on November 11 and encounter an experience that caters itself, from beginning to end, to the exact way they choose to play the game. ♦



# UNCHARTED DRAKE'S DECEPTION™ 3




» **Platform**  
PlayStation 3

» **Style**  
1-Player Action  
(Multiplayer TBA)

» **Publisher**  
Sony Computer  
Entertainment

» **Developer**  
Naughty Dog

» **Release**  
November 1



*It all started  
with the desert.*

After releasing *Uncharted 2: Among Thieves* to rave reviews and over 3.8 million units sold worldwide, the Naughty Dog team took a much-needed extended vacation. When they returned they sought a new technical challenge that would test them as much as the snow in *Uncharted 2* and the jungle in the first game, if not more. The multitude of properties present in desert sands (blowing, pouring, displacement under foot) fit the bill perfectly and offered an intriguing backdrop for chasing historical mysteries.

This time around, Nathan Drake returns to his primary obsession: unraveling the enigma of supposed ancestor Sir Francis Drake. According to the events of the first game, this 16th century privateer apparently died on an island in the Pacific Ocean protecting the cursed statue of El Dorado, but it turns out that this was only one of his many adventures. Somehow Nate discovers Francis' ties to a lost treasure hoard while following the trail of 20th century explorer T.E. Lawrence, better known as Lawrence of Arabia.

Before the British Army officer earned his reputation for his role in the Arab Revolt during World War I, Lawrence was an archaeologist who ventured throughout Europe and the Middle East fascinated with the Crusades and Arabian culture. He told friends before his tragic early death in a motorcycle crash that he would love to mount an expedition to find what he called the Atlantis of the Sands, a legendary lost city of untold wealth that God wiped out because of its people's wicked ways.

Known by many names throughout history – Ubar, Wabar, Iram of the Pillars – this place is said to be buried in the Rub' al-khali desert in the Arabian Peninsula. Also called the Empty Quarter, this 250,000 square mile wasteland is one of the last unexplored places on Earth. And it's exactly where Nathan Drake makes a doomed crash landing.

*by Bryan Vore*



Drake and Sully follow the trail of Laurence of Arabia

"It's a tall order," responds Naughty Dog co-president Evan Wells when asked how his team plans to top the previous games. "To get the reception that Uncharted 2 got was definitely a big surprise for us, and now we do feel a pretty big amount of pressure externally, but I don't think it yet exceeds the pressure we put on ourselves."

Drake and longtime pal Victor "Sully" Sullivan have been in this business for some time now, but players have only seen their most recent adventures. Naughty Dog promises to fully explore the nature of their friendship in Uncharted 3, making it the central plot point. "This is Nate's lifelong friend and partner and mentor,

and pretty much the closest thing to a father figure he's got," says creative director Amy Hennig. "And we realize that Sully is absolutely a fan favorite and people want to know more about their backstory and their history and how this unlikely duo came together. So for us their relationship is one of the main threadlines in our story, and the bonds of this partnership is explored and also tested in this story."

That doesn't necessarily mean the game is going to be one big boys' club. Naughty Dog promises an "expanded cast of new and returning characters" without confirming anyone specifically. Drake's old flames Elena Fisher and Chloe Frazer are nowhere

to be seen, but we'd be very surprised if they didn't show up in some respect.

"Okay, we gotta find a way out of here," Drake says as armed thugs stream into the dilapidated old chalet in the forests of France he's currently holed up in with Sully. Inside the structure exists a clue left by T.E. Lawrence, or so the longtime partners think. As it turns out, right when they make a key discovery, a band of mercs shows up to make things difficult. The entire demo that we recently saw takes place here rather than in the desert that Drake crashed a plane into in the debut trailer. Even though we didn't see the sand in action, another new elemental effect was front and center — fire.

"That's our way out. Down there," he says as he points to the ground floor door far below their current high perch.

They try to make their way to the stairs but the only way through is past a huge gap. Drake shimmies along a ledge while Sully waits for him to open up a path. Birds flutter away as Drake nears. He jumps on an ornate chandelier that wasn't meant to hold his weight even when it was new.

"Watch yourself," Sully shouts.

"I got it," Drake replies.

Suddenly, the structure jerks downward a few feet and comes to a violent halt.

"Thing's gonna go," Sully exclaims.

"I know! I know," Drake yells just before he leaps off and grabs an old wooden beam. The chandelier crashes to the ground below while Drake accidentally yanks down a chunk of the upper floor, creating a convenient ramp for Sully.

"Hey, that'll work," Sully says.

"Just like I planned," Drake teases.

They round the next corner and see a merc patrolling below. Drake jumps down on the guy and slams his face into the floor (one of his new stealth attacks).







He looks up to see other goons pouring out canisters of gasoline. One of them lights a match and drops it on the floor. A raging fire quickly springs to life.

"Crap, that's not good," Drake says as he pulls out his pistol.

Even though *Uncharted 3* is still approximately a year from release, this stage looks like it's ready to come out tomorrow. Graphical prowess notwithstanding, a lot of it has to do with the fact that the scene is fully orchestrated and voiced. Actors Nolan North (Drake) and Richard McGonagle (Sully) and the rest of the cast have already been in for mocap and voice acting at Naughty Dog's reserved set in Sony's movie studio. "They really are a part of the team. It's a really different relationship than most developers have with their casts because they do work with us for over a year on each of the projects," Hennig says. The actors do a mix of scripted dialogue and improv as they watch pre-recorded gameplay, much of which makes it into the final game.

Drake unloads his gun into the group of enemies before they can get a shot off. Sully splits off as Drake climbs up another tricky area. As he passes through a doorway, a merc grabs Drake from behind, pinning his arms. Another soldier approaches from the front. Drake takes the opportunity to show off his new barroom brawl skills in which he can fight off multiple enemies at the same time. He kicks the guy in front of him in the gut and elbows the one behind him several times. Once he's free, Drake uppercuts the goon to finish him off.

"One of the things we always felt was missing in the action/adventure genre is a brawl," says *Uncharted 3* director Justin Richmond. "You can engage multiple targets, which you couldn't do last game. They're trying to ring you — push you back in the middle. On top of that, Drake will use environmental things around him. So if there's a bottle on a bar he'll pick it up and smash it against their head or he'll smash them into the bar. We're more heavily using the counter button, so the counter can actually do multiple things at the same time. Sometimes he'll duck and you'll be able to

do a quick punch. It's all contextual based on what's happening in the game. It's still relatively simple, but it feels a bit deeper."

Sully appears across a gap. An old beam looks like it could offer a way across if it were positioned correctly.

"Hold on, Sully," Drake shouts as he yanks the beam into place. As soon as Sully starts teetering across, a squad of mercs appear behind him. Drake overturns a nearby table for cover and starts blasting.

"C'mon, hurry," Drake yells.

"Hang on. I'm coming," Sully replies.

"Is this an inner ear thing? Let's go!"

Sully finally makes it to the other side and the two move off to the next area. Sully boosts Drake up to a high ledge, but he's blasted with a backdraft in the face as soon as he gets up there.

"Dammit," Sully yells.

"It's not good," Drake coughs out as he reels on the floor.

"We're trapped."

"There's gotta be a way out of here."

## MULTIPLAYER LESSONS

While Naughty Dog declined to talk about *Uncharted 3*'s multiplayer component, members of the team were open about their thoughts on multiplayer the last time around. "I was the multiplayer designer on the last game and Christophe [Balestra — co-president of Naughty Dog — Ed.] wrote all of the network code, so it's very dear to both of our hearts," game director Justin Richmond says. "I think the thing we both felt after the last game was, 'Okay, that was the first step. Now let's just blow this out.' We want to be synonymous with PS3 multiplayer. We want *Uncharted* to be what people talk about when they talk about playing multiplayer on the PS3."



## BEHIND THE SUBTITLE

"Whenever we come up with a subtitle for a game we like to come up with something that's going to have multiple layers of meaning, something that's open to interpretation," creative director Amy Hennig says. "If you break down all the permutations, it could mean lots of things. It could be either Drake. It could be being deceived. It could be being deceitful. It could be an object that's used as a deception. There are multiple layers to the meaning even inside our story, which is why we like the abstractions of the subtitle. And I think once people get a chance to play it they'll realize what we mean by that." As far as the similarity to the fake logo that went around the Internet recently (*Uncharted 3: World of Deceit*) designed by a student for a project, Hennig says, "He's really talented, but it's totally a coincidence."

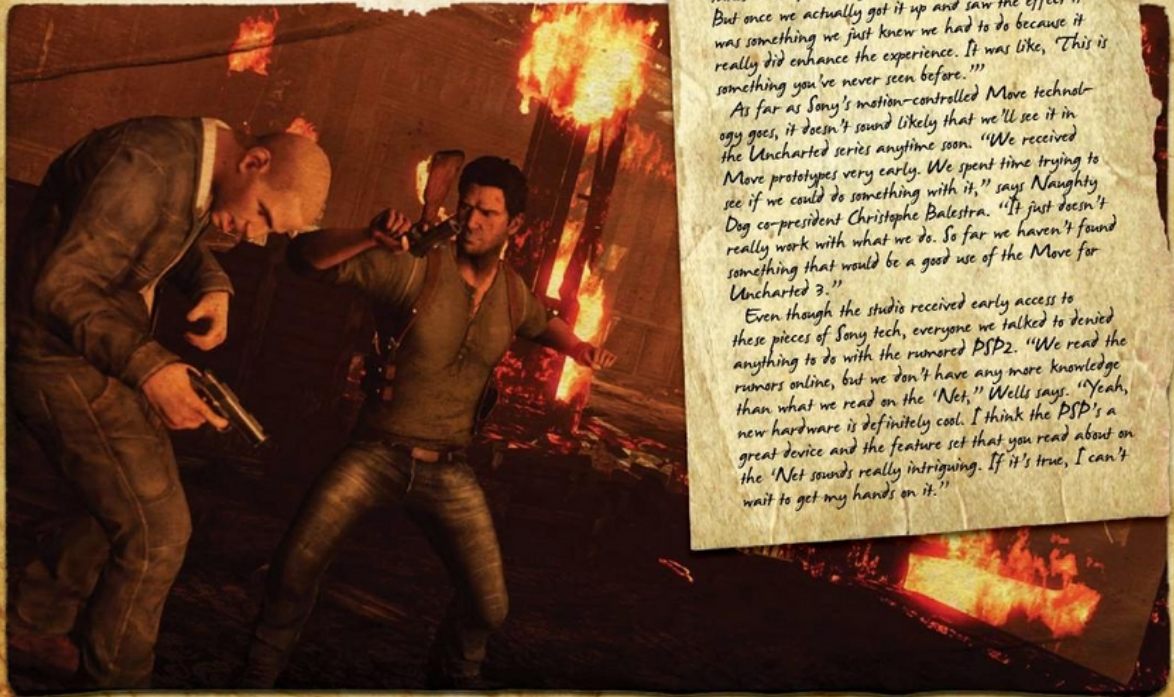


### 3D, MOVE, AND PSP2

Naughty Dog confirmed that *Uncharted 3* will indeed utilize stereoscopic 3D. The studio received early access to Sony's prototype 3D TVs to tinker around with. "First, we were skeptical because it was going to be a lot of work," Naughty Dog co-president Evan Wells says. "You've got to basically render two images in the time that you're ordinarily rendering one, so it takes a lot of trickery to pull it off in optimizations. But once we actually got it up and saw the effect it was something we just knew we had to do because it really did enhance the experience. It was like, 'This is something you've never seen before.'"

As far as Sony's motion-controlled Move technology goes, it doesn't sound likely that we'll see it in the *Uncharted* series anytime soon. "We received Move prototypes very early. We spent time trying to see if we could do something with it," says Naughty Dog co-president Christophe Balestra. "It just doesn't really work with what we do. So far we haven't found something that would be a good use of the Move for *Uncharted 3*."

Even though the studio received early access to these pieces of Sony tech, everyone we talked to denied anything to do with the rumored PSP2. "We read the rumors online, but we don't have any more knowledge than what we read on the 'Net," Wells says. "Yeah, new hardware is definitely cool. I think the PSP's a great device and the feature set that you read about on the 'Net sounds really intriguing. If it's true, I can't wait to get my hands on it."



## WELCOMING OTHER STUDIOS

Once Naughty Dog decided on a desert theme and did some pre-production work, the team chatted up another studio in the Sony fold, thatgamecompany, about its upcoming desert game, *Journey*. "We talked to them a few months ago. They're just down the street. What they're doing is completely different from what we do, but it was kind of inspiring just to talk to each other," says Naughty Dog co-president Christophe Balestra.

"It was like, 'So how are you doing this awesome sand?'" adds game director Justin Richmond. "They're like, 'We're spending five of the six SPUs on it.' We're like, 'Well, that's not an option.'"

But that's not the only dev house they've spoken with. "We're very open here with other studios. We have a lot of people right after we ship a game just visit us," Balestra says. "Even the *Respaïn* guys just came by here [the studio of ex-*Infinity Ward* head, Vince Zampella and Jason West — Ed.]."



Before the fire, Drake was running around loose and relaxed, but thanks to Naughty Dog's new streaming animation tech, now he's hunched and coughing. When he gets close to the flames he puts his hands up to protect himself. The studio claims this is only one example of how Drake will naturally react to the environmental stimulus around him. The end effect should provide a more realistic feel to the presentation.

Fight on cue, thugs bust down a wall and start shooting. Drake guns them down and presses onward. He and Sully team up to push aside some rubble and see an open door to the outside. Drake runs for it and a merc appears in the entrance. He lights a pile of rubble and slams the door shut. Their way out just went up in flames. Ever optimistic, the duo goes back upstairs to look for another way. As Drake explores the area, tons of rubble crashes down from the ceiling and a massive hole opens beneath his feet. The camera follows him as he plummets to an open stair landing below.

As usual, Drake gets right back up and presses on. Sully rejoins him and they push on up the winding stairway. As they're running along, Drake's foot bashes



through the landing, trapping him in place.

"Dammit, Sully! I'm stuck. Help me out," Drake shouts.

"Oh, s—," Sully exclaims as a squad of enemies starts streaming down the stairs toward them. He runs behind Drake and tries to free his trapped foot. Drake has to take out several waves of troops while completely immobile and without any cover.

Eventually the assault subsides and Sully is able to free Drake's foot. The pair continue on but it's not long before the section of stairs they're on gives out beneath them. Drake and Sully now dangle from the railings as this chunk of stairway seems to hang by a thread. Drake pulls himself up while working his way toward Sully.

"Sully, hang on," Drake shouts.


"I'm slipping," Sully warns.

"I got you," Drake says as he pulls up his old friend to safety. They take a brief moment to recover and observe the raging inferno closing in from all sides. Drake's last words of the demo spell out the grim reality.

"This whole place is coming down." ♦



Drake struggles to free his foot



Could that be old  
Shang Tsung we see  
in the background?

» **Platform**  
PlayStation 3  
Xbox 360

» **Style**  
1 to 4-Player  
Fighting (Online TBA)

» **Publisher**  
Warner Bros.  
Interactive

» **Developer**  
NetherRealm Studios

» **Release**  
April

# BACK TO THE BLOODBATH

Ed Boon and NetherRealm return the

# MORTAL KOMBAT

iconic fighter to its gory beginnings

Fans of the Mortal Kombat series are a bloodthirsty crowd. After playing through the notorious series' first seven entries, gamers were trained to expect nothing but the most grisly, creative, and oftentimes hilarious deaths you could imagine. That's why so many questions went through our minds as soon as the first teaser image for Mortal Kombat vs. DC Universe appeared online in 2008. We looked at Sub-Zero and Batman facing off, and first imagined how insane it would be to see the Lin Kuei ninja rip the Caped Crusader's head off. But wait... there's no way DC would allow that, right? Our concerns about a T-rated Mortal Kombat game were realized in the presentation of its trademark fatalities. Most were tame, while others panned away before the final blow was delivered. As we were shaking our heads at these castrated finishers, series co-creator Ed Boon already had a plan in mind to bring the series back to its roots in a big way.

Even during the production of MK vs. DC, Boon and his team knew their next step. "While we were making it, we knew we were gonna go back to an M-rated game. We were gonna go back to the 2D fighting plane and revisit the older story. That whole plan was already in place." Directly after the series' largest departure and tamest entry comes what will undoubtedly be the most violent in its long history.

by Dan Ryckert

# A Familiar Tale Reimagined

In returning to the 2D plane and filling the roster with MK veterans, the new *Mortal Kombat* has an undeniable nostalgia factor. It's refreshing to see gallons of blood spill all over the floor of Shao Kahn's coliseum again, and the goofier characters from later entries (Drahmin, Hsu Hao, etc.) are nowhere to be seen. All of the characters NetherRealm has revealed so far appeared in the first three games, and for good reason. While this isn't a straight remake of the original trilogy, this new game tells an altered version of the story.

As Raiden is about to be murdered by Shao Kahn, he sends a mental message back to an earlier version of himself. The game follows this enlightened Raiden through the events of the first three *Mortal Kombat* games. How this alters the original sequence of events is yet to be seen, but expect to see several familiar faces and environments that look far superior given the huge technology leap since the series' early arcade years.

The story mode features elaborate cutscenes and an ongoing narrative that puts you in the shoes of numerous characters, but Boon promises two more single-player options as well. One uses a traditional tournament ladder in which you climb through the ranks and take down a sub-boss and a boss, followed by an animated ending for your selected character. The other features little in the way of story, but tests your skill set and knowledge of play mechanics.



Many special moves will be familiar to fans of the series





## The Art Of Kombat

Mortal Kombat has always been known more for its special moves than its intricate combos, but stringing specials together has always been a primary strategy. Sub-Zero always had the go-to freeze/uppercut/slide sequence, and Kitana dispatched many opponents with her fan lift/kick/fan throw combo.

In Mortal Kombat 3, the series went in a different direction with rapid-fire combos that required intense memorization. Boon recognizes that this method made things difficult for the attacker and made the defender completely lose control of their character. The new title drops the rapid-fire system and harks back to the combo system from the first two games. "You're making your own combos. We aren't programming them in as much," Boon says.

Performing well during a match gradually fills up a special meter that can be utilized in several ways. Defensive-minded players can use a section of the meter to perform a breaker move, similar to the system from Mortal Kombat: Deception. Impatient attackers can spend individual segments of the meter on super-powered versions of special moves. If you're patient enough to let your entire meter fill up, however, you gain access to the most devastating attack available – an X-Ray move. Displayed prominently in the trailers released thus far, these Tao Feng style moves zoom the camera inside your opponent's body to show skulls cracking, vertebrae shattering, and bones breaking. These wince-inducing moments are shocking even for veterans of the ultra-violent series, and they're sure to be a popular addition.



The robotic assassins Sektor and Cyrax are back



### The Devil Is In The Details

While we don't expect friendships or babilities to appear in the game, it wouldn't be a Mortal Kombat title without a treasure trove of hidden goodies. The original entry in the series featured a secret fight with Reptile, a character that wasn't selectable or even referred to at any point in the standard game. Boon added more and more of these to each subsequent title. When Mortal Kombat: Deadly Alliance released in 2002, it contained a Krypt with 676 unlockables, including characters, arenas, and alternate costumes. The new Mortal Kombat probably won't feature as many secrets as Deadly Alliance did, but it is bringing back what Boon calls a "gigantic Krypt-like environment" complete with a new currency system.



## Finish Him!

Flying spears, fireballs, and uppercuts are fun to execute, but the series' trademark is undoubtedly its fatalities. Gamers were shocked to see Sub-Zero pull Johnny Cage's spine out of his body back in 1992, but as the years passed these finishing moves became more and more cartoonish. Just two entries later, each character had a goofy friendship move, a babality, an animality, and two fatalities (one of which involved blowing up the entire earth).

"They kinda got out of control," Boon admits. "It became this expectation of 'what kind of -alities are we gonna add to every single one?' That just became such a distraction from the normal fighting that we figured that we obviously can't add an -ality to every single fight."

Boon says the team made a conscious effort to be more serious with this installment, and the only -alities you'll be seeing are fatalities and stage fatalities.

Showing off your favorite fatalities to friends was a fun, if frustrating experience. Because of the precise position-

ing, timing, and memorization required, you often had to go through several fights just to see that sweet head rip or spiky death. Thankfully, the new Mortal Kombat features a full training arena that allows you to skip straight to the iconic "Finish Him!" moment any time you want. If your jaw dropped at the new Jax fatality, it's easy to load up this mode and rattle off the required input to get straight to the gore.

Though the focus is on putting fatalities front and center, that's not to say Boon, a notorious easter egg advocate, won't throw in some other moves on the sly in the future. "If we were gonna have friendships or babalities or something like that in the game, it would certainly be something that I'd prefer to not even talk about," he coyly remarked. "To me it would be cooler if it was an actual hidden feature as opposed to something where we just told everyone 'yeah, there are friendships in the game!' It would be something that people would discover."

### Returning Veterans

Besides the Kratos cameo, every character revealed thus far has been from the cast of the first three games. Here's the list of every confirmed (or unconfirmed?) character as of this writing:

- Sub-Zero
- Scorpion
- Raiden
- Johnny Cage
- Kung Lao
- Sonya Blade
- Jax Briggs
- Reptile
- Kitana
- Mileena
- Cyrax
- Sektor
- Nightwolf
- Goro
- Jade
- Shao Kahn
- Kratos (PS3 exclusive)



The Living Forest is just one of many classic environments you'll see, and they all look fantastic.





## Formidable Foes

Much of the Mortal Kombat roster has already been revealed, but when speaking to Boon he dropped two more names sure to excite the fanbase: Goro and Jade. The four-armed beast looks more menacing than ever, and his moveset is expanded now that they don't have to work within the confines of the original puppet model. We watched as he slammed Johnny Cage's face into the floor of the notorious Goro Pit and tossed him like a rag doll across the screen.

While the monster is most definitely in the game, Boon says he is not a selectable character. "We want to have some characters be bosses, be big obstacles that you have to get through." Boon explains. "They have a mystique to them, and I think Goro, Shang Tsung, and Shao Kahn have always been your obstacles that you've had to get across. We really want to have some of our characters represent that. Right now, he's a boss."

Whether or not the "right now" part of that statement means Boon is up to something isn't clear yet, but based on his fondness for secrets we doubt he would let the cat out of the bag if Goro is indeed playable.

Every character revealed thus far has been a returning face, with one recently revealed exception. The God of War himself will be playable in the PlayStation 3 version, and we couldn't imagine a more perfect fit for the MK universe.

"For us, Kratos was a no-brainer," Boon says. "It was such an obvious fit and we're already getting his special moves and fatalities into the game. He has an environment that has probably our most elaborate stage fatality we've ever had in any Mortal Kombat game. It's really gonna be something special."

Boon didn't elaborate on what this stage fatality entails, but it already has our imaginations picturing titans ripping kombatants limb from limb or a Colossus crushing them under its fist.

Obviously, only PS3 owners get to wield the Blades of Chaos. Though an Xbox 360-exclusive character isn't out of the question, Boon says that none are in the works as of this writing.

"With downloadable content, who knows what's gonna be down the line in terms of which characters or how many characters we do," he says. "That's something that we're trying to be very aggressive on with this game series, downloading new characters. That means the cast is really never fully fleshed-out, so I can never really say the 360 won't have a character. Right now, we don't have a guy that we're working on that's in the game in the same way that we're doing Kratos."

Rumors of a Gears of War character have surfaced, helped in no small part by tweets from Epic's Cliff Bleszinski and Boon himself. Despite the rumors, we've seen no solid evidence that Marcus, Dom, or anyone else from the Gears universe is currently scheduled to appear alongside Sub-Zero, Scorpion, and the rest of the MK gang.

Many fighting game series are content to rehash the same basic formula time and time again, but Boon and his team at NetherRealm have proven with each entry that they want each one to be an experience unto itself. The early games added more fatality types, the jump to 3D introduced mid-round deaths and weapons. Armageddon featured every MK character ever, and Mortal Kombat vs. DC Universe had Liu Kang and company taking on the most unlikely of opponents.

After eight entries of mixing up numerous aspects of the legendary fighting series, Boon is ready to return to the core elements that made the franchise a phenomenon. Based on the excitement the game has drummed up thus far, it seems that the fans are more than willing to take that step back with him. ♦





# DEAD RISING

- » **Platform**  
PlayStation 3  
Xbox 360
- » **Style**  
1-Player Action
- » **Publisher**  
Konami
- » **Developer**  
Vatra Games
- » **Release**  
2011



# SILENT HILL: DOWNPOUR



by TIM GRITSIS

## Silent Hill is more than a town.

It is a macabre mirror of one's self. Where some see a pleasant resort community, others experience the living, breathing embodiment of malicious judgment. It splits open the minds of troubled visitors and splatters their emotional trauma across its foggy asphalt. In the intervening years since the town's PlayStation origins, that reputation for terror has been tarnished by mediocrity. Konami's flagship horror franchise mutated from the harbinger of sleepless nights to a cookie-cutter haunted house fraught with cheap scares. *Silent Hill: Downpour* is being developed by Czech-based studio Vatra Games, and it has heard the cries of dissatisfaction. "Vatra" is Czech for "large flame," and much like one of the series' trademark flashlights, this team is leading fans through the darkness of *Silent Hill*'s shady past into a hopeful future.





As in *Silent Hill: Homecoming*, you sometimes need a specific weapon to open passage to a new area, like a crowbar or a padlock.



## Unexpected Visitation

Murphy has done questionable things. His tainted past landed him in prison, and ultimately on an inmate transport bus heading God knows where. His troubled history hangs over his head, like the thick fog hovering above the forest zipping by the bus window. Icy tendrils of anxiety ensnare his chest as the collection of social misfits hurtles towards an unknown fate. His anxiety proves to be justified as the bus careens out of control, sailing off the side of the road and straight into the foreboding woods.

Murphy comes to beside the mangled remains of the bus. He calls out but is answered with silence. Deciding to look for help, Murphy enters the misty forest. Tree canopies and dense fog blot out the sun, but Murphy can see a group of crows pecking the corpse of a dead animal. They take flight as he passes them on his way toward a break in the trees, which opens to reveal the shore of a vast lake, home to a lone boat. A scrap of paper catches Murphy's eye. A freak storm, the newspaper clipping calls it. A town has recently been hit by rough weather. Presumably, it's the town Murphy is heading towards for help.

"If you look at the whole series, and the way that we

chose to look at the series – *Silent Hill* as an entity, a genius loci – is the character," says Brian Gomez, design director for *Silent Hill: Downpour*. "*Silent Hill* the town is the star of the show. In the way that Jigsaw is in *Saw*, he's the inciting force and events transpire around him. That's what *Silent Hill* is like. So we see *Silent Hill* as the only consistent character across the whole series.

It's really about who you plug into it. You get a different result whenever you plug in a different person with a different psychology, a different load of guilt or remorse that they're carrying around with them."

Murphy is one such conduit for *Silent Hill*'s evils. Very little is known about this man outside of his trouble with the law, and Gomez is happy with that lack of connection to previous games. "You're never going to dig up Murphy's past and discover he's the great, great, great grandson of the grandmaster of *The Order* [*Silent Hill*'s enigmatic cult] or something like that," he promises. "You'll find some nice little tie-ins for the fans, but Murphy's story is Murphy's story. It has nothing to do with Alessa, or James, or anybody."

Further along his trek across the forest,

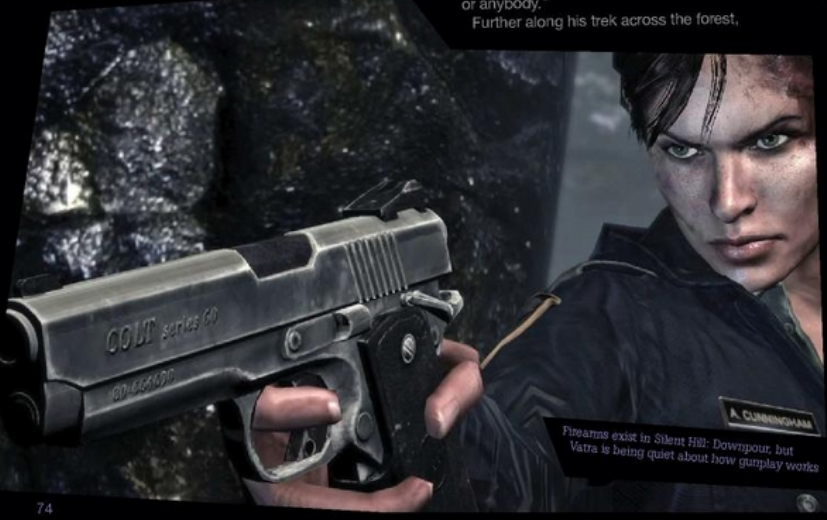


a startling complication rears its ugly head. A female police officer tells him to freeze and raises her gun. The officer, Anne Cunningham, accuses him of playing a part in the bus crash. She makes her way across a narrow ledge on a nearby cliff face, attempting to keep the convict in her sights. In an instant, she loses her footing and dangles from the ledge closest to Murphy. Choosing life over firepower, she lets the gun fall. Her demand for compliance turn into a pleas for help. Murphy lowers his hands, suddenly forced to choose between an easy escape and saving Anne's life.

Players' actions have affected the finales of every *Silent Hill* game since the first title. However, the criteria were usually cryptic, ranging from enemies killed to whether or not you examined a specific item. These hidden prerequisites are still in place, but players also make more obvious, game-defining decisions. Choices, down to what outfit he's wearing, will affect more than the game's conclusion. Vatra says characters will treat Murphy differently depending on your selections. In some cases characters' fates are set, but his actions still carry repercussions.

Choosing to help Anne, Murphy rushes toward her with his hand outstretched. It's too late. She screams as she loses her grip on the slick stone. Murphy curses to himself as he watches her disappear into the fog. At least he tried. He'll have to find help elsewhere.

Eventually, Murphy's path leads him to a huge cable car system that stretches far across the nearby canyon. A boarded-up souvenir shop



Firearms exist in *Silent Hill: Downpour*, but Vatra is being quiet about how gameplay works.



Screamers can stun Murphy with a shriek



stands in his way. Inside the building he spots a sign advertising free cable car tickets to the winner of an arcade game. He pilfers some coins near a register and heads for another door.

On his way out, the camera switches from a third-person, over-the-shoulder perspective to a shot facing Murphy and the shop. A shadowy figure floats by a boarded window.

"We wanted to go back to the classic style of Silent Hill, with fixed camera as well as the player-controlled camera," says producer Devin Shatsky. "There are a lot of things that you can do as a designer to set up scare moments. When [the player] can control the camera, it's hard to set up certain things. That's not to say that every time it goes into fixed camera you can expect a scary moment. We like to introduce the fixed camera quite often in the game so that you never really know what to expect."

Unaware of the odd onlooker, Murphy happens across a vintage pickup truck that's seen better days. "Flathead V8,

no doubt about it," he mutters to himself in quiet appreciation.

"Wicked old beast, ain't she?" says a voice from behind Murphy. An aging mallman appears from the fog. "Me, I'm partial to something with a little less rust, but to each his own."

"Look, I don't want any trouble," Murphy replies. "Just point the way out of town, and I'll keep right on going."

"Now who said anything about trouble? I'm just trying to be helpful, son," says the mallman in a too-soft tone. "Name's Howard, by the way."

Murphy offers his own name. Howard gives his inmate coveralls a once over.

"Heading to prison, are ya Murphy?" he asks. The mood becomes tense.

"Just looking for a way out of town, is all," Murphy says, reminded of his incriminating outfit.

"That so? Afraid all the roads are out – every last one of them. Strangest thing..." Howard replies.

"What the...?" Murphy's attention diverts to a disturbing sight in the souvenir shop behind Howard. It's the mysterious shape from before – a small, brown, withered, fetus figure that stares at Murphy through the two-by-fours.

"Something wrong, son?" Howard calmly asks. "Did you see it, up there in the window?" Murphy asks as he turns to Howard in bewilderment. Looking back at the window, the thing has disappeared. Howard looks confused. "Nevermind..."

"I suppose if you're really desperate, you could use the old sky tram. Of course, it hasn't really been kept up since the accident," Howard says, gesturing towards the old, neglected cable car rig with a sign that reads "Devil's Pit Aerial Tram."

"I think I'll take my chances," Murphy replies. "That's the spirit," Howard encourages. "Well, this mail isn't going to deliver itself. Good luck, Murphy. Hope you find whatever it is you're looking for."

Murphy finishes examining the huge pulley system, turning back to Howard to ask the name of the place they're in. But he's gone, disappeared into the mist.





## Spontaneous Hydrophobia

Further along in his quest, Murphy finds himself in a decrepit diner. The place is battered and looks ready to collapse. His search for clues brings him to the kitchen, where he smells the earthy scent of sulfur.

"Is that gas?" Murphy asks himself as he locates the safety valve. He gives the wheel a crank and steps back, expecting the gentle hiss of natural gas to cease. Instead, flames erupt over the huge flattop grills, triggering emergency sprinklers. Streams of water douse the imposing flames. But something is wrong. Reality goes rogue and the ceiling and walls of the diner tear away, flying miles above into oblivion. Stretches of rusted grating, pipeworks, and catwalks splattered with black replace the interior. Massive fan blades rotate with a deafening, rhythmic hum.

Rain pours down, raising the water level to Murphy's waist. He frantically wades through the worsening flash flood, searching for another shut-off valve. Finding it, he cranks it and the torrent ceases. A grated stairway is revealed. Murphy runs toward it, past walls that stand with the odd angles of an M.C. Escher piece.

Things go from bad to worse at the top of the stairs. A black fog seeps through the walls — a floating mass of malice that pursues Murphy down seemingly endless hallways. Electricity crackles within the amorphous stalker. Murphy yanks down shelves and anything not nailed down to slow the pursuer. Water floats on the ceiling overhead like an upside-down river. What is happening here?

"Thematically, psychologically, story-wise, obviously water is playing a big part in it," says Gomez. Vatra wants to break the predictable mold of the nightmarish parallel world presented in earlier Silent

Hill games. "Ours isn't nearly as uniform as some of the more recent games were," he says. "With Silent Hill: Shattered Memories there was always a chase every time the otherworld happened."

Other Silent Hills made the nightmare world feel like backtracking. In Silent Hill: Downpour, they will play out like terrifying, standalone levels rather than evil remixes of familiar territory.

Back in the game, the world literally turns on its side. Suddenly, Murphy's feet are off the ground and he's sliding. The floor takes on the angle of a chute, sending him downwards at an alarming pace. Murphy tilts his body to dodge the objects he was using as barricades.

His plummet ends abruptly, landing him on a plush red carpet in front of a rocking chair and gramophone. With the black fog creature nowhere in sight, Murphy explores his otherworldly confines. Sections of a house are raised by huge rusty chains, and Murphy pulls levers to raise and lower the rooms to create a path. He's greeted with a stalwell. Lights flicker and sway overhead. He sprints up the flight of stairs, but it extends infinitely with each new step. After too long he turns around, defeated. A new door



waits at the bottom. Opening it, he finds himself back in the diner, with no signs of fire or water.

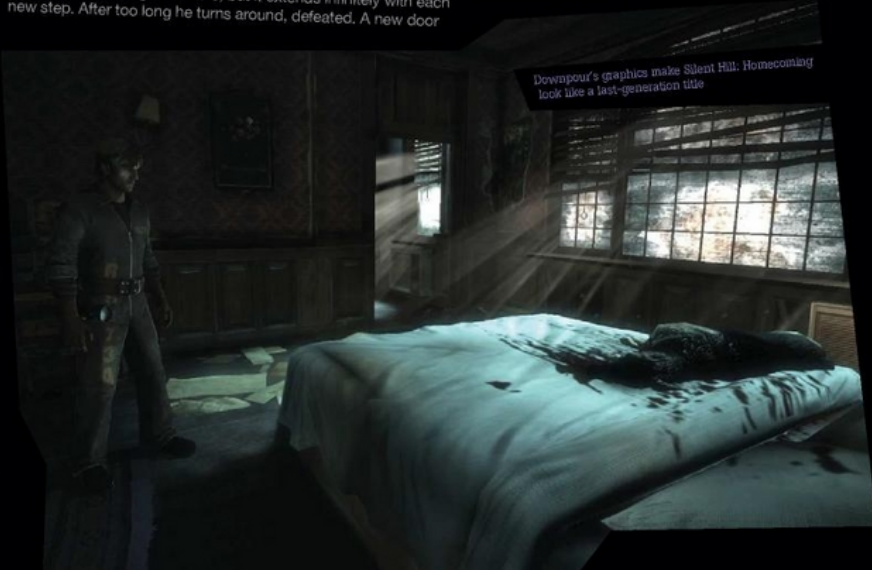
Puzzles have always played a large part in Silent Hill games, and the developers want to play that up. In Silent Hill: Downpour, they will be offering easy, medium, and hard difficulty levels for the various head-scratchers. "They did it in the early Silent Hills as well, and I think it kind of got lost along the way," says Shatsky. "I think the fans were very disappointed in that, so we wanted to bring that back."

## Disturbing Denizens

A door in the diner leads to an attached residence. Inside he finds crimson carpet and furnishings matching the segmented rooms from the nightmare world. He comes across another note, which details a reclusive woman who won't leave her bedroom. He adds the scrap to his journal, next to the newspaper clipping.

In Silent Hill: Downpour, notes, hints, maps, and other useful information are stored in Murphy's journal. "You'll find things on the map like little old school notations from Murphy as he notices things," says Gomez. "So even if you know where you're going it's good to check things back on the map and see what you've seen." Maps and other intel are key not only for progressing the story, but also discovering and completing sidequests.

"You can get clues which relate to the main story progress, but at certain points it can be hard to decipher if it's related to the sidequest or main story," says lead designer Marek Berka. "It will be up to you to choose which clues are worth following."



Downpour's graphics make Silent Hill: Homecoming look like a last-generation title

## HOMEWARD BOUND

The majority of the demo we were shown takes place on the outskirts of Silent Hill, but the town is still the focal point of the game. Vatra gave us a sneak peek at the infamous streets, and this iteration of the creepy community is larger, more detailed, and features more variety than any other. It is so big, in fact, that the developers must insert huge markers for themselves so they don't get lost while making the game. Conversely, players can gain access to Silent Hill's subway system to make transportation to the game's plethora of locations easier. With one exception; Vatra says there aren't any reused settings from past games (e.g. hospital, school). If you decide to diligently explore all these locations and other sidequests that Silent Hill: Downpour has to offer, you'll be in for an adventure clocking in at over 10 hours.

"If you look at the previous games, we took the southeast corner of the map that was never explored," says producer Devin Shatsky. "The lore behind Silent Hill is that it's a living, breathing resort town that has a normal, day-to-day life. It's not this town that should have been quarantined by the government 20 years ago, or whatever. It's actually a parallel-type universe, so what Murphy is seeing in Silent Hill may not necessarily be the actual town itself."



Eventually, Murphy discovers the bedroom mentioned in the note. Within, he finds a dog lying on a bed in a pool of blood, its insides turned out. A coffee maker sits on a windowsill. Turning it on causes steam to pour against the window, and finger-scrawled numbers appear on the glass.

Back on the main floor, Murphy hears the abrasive buzz of static. Following the noise into the basement, he discovers the source is a lone TV. He cuts the harsh fuzz and moves on to another room. Murphy enters to find a fellow inmate savagely beating an immobile woman. Alarmed, Murphy pulls the rabid, cursing attacker off the victim. When the raging convict turns to tell Murphy he doesn't understand what's happening, the distorted female shell rises behind the man and slits his throat with razor-sharp claws.

Murphy flees through the musty basement, leaving the psychotic creature behind. He spots a lift on the opposite end. Somewhere, the beast bellows. The scream forces Murphy to cover his ears, giving it just enough time to catch up. He barely manages to shut the abomination out of the elevator, affording him an unfortunate glance at the creature's slit mouth and filth-matted hair.

He surfaces in a village of dilapidated shacks. Inside one, he finds some fresh clothes to hide his prison garb. Outside, something moves in the trees behind the buildings. Claws and screams rip through the air. Another one of the creatures rends his flesh, leaving a pool of blood on the back of his new shirt. He scrambles for a chair sitting outside a nearby house and smashes it across his foe's face. Legs fly off the furniture in a shower of splinters. Murphy chucks the remains as he frantically searches for a new weapon.

The combat in Silent Hill: Downpour looks very similar to the way battles played out in the classic games. Murphy is no warrior, and his swings are inaccurate. Unlike previous games, Murphy doesn't have a weapon inventory. He'll find random objects like crowbars, fire extinguishers, and axes in the environment and carry them one at a time. Weapons also have limited durability, so don't expect to rely on a rusty pipe from beginning to end like in previous games. "It's about dsempowerment,"

says Gomez. "Horror is about making the player feel vulnerable. You can't feel vulnerable if you've got a giant gun or the unbreakable fire axe."

Fights are to be avoided if possible, so it's better to deliver incapacitating blows and run. The "Screamer" enemy Vatra implemented is tough, and trying to kill one will bring you within inches of death. The growing blood pool on Murphy's back indicates damage, and thankfully he's only a button press away from popping some meds. Vatra also confirms that boss battles will return with quicktime events in place to showcase the action.

Murphy smashes a cinderblock into the ghoul's twitching body, which dissolves into a puddle of black tar. He has to get out of here. He has to get on that tram. He finds an arcade game, Jail Break, in one of the shanties. Playing this is the only way to win the cable car ticket. He inserts the coins he found back in the souvenir shop. Murphy plays a type of reverse pachinko, guiding a ball into holes as water rises. The wet distraction is reminiscent of his brush with death in the diner. After scoring well enough, the machine coughs up a ticket. Seizing it, he begins his trek back towards the aerial tram.

A familiar scream pierces the silence. An ambush! Murphy breaks into a sprint. Looking over his shoulder he spots three of the creepers lurking after him, their limbs moving with a preternatural quickness. He swings open the door of the souvenir shop and throws the lever to activate the tram. The entire building reluctantly shudders to life. He feeds



the ticket into the turnstile and rushes into the open door of the cable car. Relief washes over him as the screams fade to nothing.

The sun begins to set as Murphy descends into the Devil's Pit gorge tourist attraction. The massive rock formations and tremendous waterfalls backlit by the amber dusk would be beautiful if it weren't for that sinking feeling in his gut. His world is coming more and more undone as he nears Silent Hill. ♦

For a screenshot gallery and feature about Vatra's Czech Republic inspirations, head on over to [gameinformer.com/inag](http://gameinformer.com/inag)



Vatra promises that you can say goodbye to the flesh-toned, plastic-wrapped meat mannequins of previous games

# Fight Night Champion

Float like Rocky, sting like Ali in the new story mode

In 2003, ESPN debuted *Playmakers*, a gridiron soap opera about a fictitious professional football team that dealt with many of the dirty off-the-field issues commonly seen in the world of sports. Critics and viewers alike gravitated to the show, making it the third-most popular program on ESPN. Not everyone was happy with the success. The NFL disliked the show due to its portrayal of professional players as drug addicts, wife beaters, and closeted homosexuals. With the renewal of the *Sunday Night*

*Football* contract on the horizon, ESPN caved to pressure from the overbearing league and cancelled the show.

Sports game developers are all too familiar with this kind of league pressure. Many leagues review the content that goes into each game, which might keep, for example, EA Tiburon from adding random events like substance abuse suspensions or off-field controversies to Madden's popular franchise mode. With no league body to appease, the *Fight Night* development team at

EA is free from these types of shackles and plans to make use of its liberties in the new *Champion* mode. As the first mature-rated title in EA Sports history, *Fight Night Champion's* story mode examines the seedy underbelly of boxing. To make sure the story meets the team's high standards, EA hired Academy Award winning writer Will Rokos (*Monster's Ball*). Here are short bios of the characters players encounter as the drama unfolds. • Matt Bertz



## Andre Bishop

The central figure of the story mode, Andre is a talented boxing prodigy who many project to be the next Sugar Ray Leonard. Blessed with superior athletic abilities and demonstrating a maturity beyond his years, players will guide Bishop through the trials and tribulations he must overcome to realize his goal of being the best boxer in the world.



## D.L. McQueen

The Don King of the story, McQueen is a cutthroat boxing promoter who will do anything to keep his empire at the top of the sport. McQueen has his eyes set on signing Andre, and he doesn't plan on taking no for an answer.



A photograph of Gus Carisi, an older man with white hair, wearing a light-colored short-sleeved button-down shirt. He is standing in a boxing ring with his hands clasped in front of him. The background shows the ropes of the ring and a red corner pad with a white logo.

### Gus Carisi

Gus is a foul-mouthed, crotchety trainer who mentored Andre Bishop Sr. during his boxing career. After the elder Bishop died in a car accident, Carisi took it upon himself to raise the orphaned boys. An old-school aficionado who fiercely guards the integrity of the sweet science, Carisi laments how promoters like D.L. McQueen have transformed the sport.


» **Platform**  
PlayStation 3  
Xbox 360

» **Style**  
1-Player Sports  
(2-Player Online)

» **Publisher**  
EA Sports


» **Developer**  
EA Canada

» **Release**  
March 1

A photograph of Meagan McQueen, a woman with dark hair, wearing a blue long-sleeved top. She is standing in what appears to be a gym or office setting.

### Meagan McQueen

The daughter of the most notorious boxing promoter on the planet, Megan is a lifelong boxing fan who wants to get into managing on her own merits.

A photograph of Raymond Bishop, a man with short dark hair, wearing a red and white jacket. He is holding a black telephone receiver to his ear.

### Raymond Bishop

Raymond is also a formidable boxer, but he doesn't have the hype surrounding his career like his older brother Andre. Ray makes up for his lack of buzz with a boisterous, narcissistic personality not unlike a diva wide receiver in the NFL.

A photograph of Isaac Frost, a muscular man with tattoos on his chest and arms. He is looking upwards with a determined expression. The background shows a gym setting with a barbell.

### Isaac Frost

The reigning heavy-weight champion of the world, Frost is an intimidating force who beats his foes into submission and revels in injuring opponents with his devastating blows. His dominance is so complete that experts see him holding the title for years to come.



# Prototype 2

Murdering your maker all over again

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

» **Style**  
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**  
Activision

» **Developer**  
Radical Entertainment

» **Release**  
2012

When we first saw *Prototype*, we were impressed enough by its potential that we featured it on our cover.

Unfortunately, the game's release in 2009 didn't live up to our expectations. Radical Entertainment is getting a second shot at making *Prototype* work, but is it worth getting our hopes up again? Following *Prototype 2*'s announcement earlier this month, Activision is remaining tight-lipped on details about the game, but we know a few things.

Players return to an infection-ridden New York City, where they'll step into the shoes of Sgt. James Heller, an Army operative who has returned from war overseas to discover his home in ruins. Filled with rage, Heller ventures into the virus-plagued mess that has become known as the Red Zone with a death wish. In a twist of fate, he gets infected with the same virus as Alex Mercer, the dark anti-hero of the first game, and sets out to kill him. It's currently unclear exactly

why Heller wants Mercer dead, but the plot is sure to be packed with twists and turns that slowly unravel the mystery.

In the brief glimpses of gameplay we've seen thus far, Heller's powers look similar to Mercer's from the first game, but he has a few new tricks. In one segment, he uses a giant gatling gun to fight off a helicopter. In another, he uses his tendrils to throw a tank.

The deadly tentacles that Heller controls seem to have more use in *Prototype 2*, acting in a way reminiscent of *Venom* or *Carnage* from Spider-Man comics. In one clip, black tendrils shoot out from Heller in multiple directions, grabbing nearby vehicles and enemies and pulling them together in a brutal, blood-filled cyclone. When he transforms to use claws, his new form is larger and more monstrous than anything Mercer became. He'll likely need this advantage to help fight off equally gargantuan new opponents that were shown briefly in the announcement trailer.

With a 2012 release date, Radical still has plenty of time to work on the problems we had with *Prototype* and win us over with the sequel. » **Phil Kollar**

Heller's powers seem even more destructive than Mercer's. Hopefully that bodes well for the sequel being more fun.



## Second Draft

If Radical wants to live up to the potential we saw in the first game, here are some of the biggest changes I'd like to see them implement:

**Smarter Story** – *Prototype*'s revenge fantasy wasn't reaching for the level of *Hamlet*, and that's fine, but is a little bit more intelligence in the plot too much to ask for? *The Assassin's Creed* games have proven that unraveling a conspiracy theory can make for a gripping game narrative. *Prototype 2* should focus more on a clean, tightly-written web of intrigue and less on a confusing mix of paramilitary organizations, virus types, and under-developed characters who double-and triple-cross each other.

**Less Annoying Stealth** – Intelligence was also a problem when it came to how enemies reacted to Mercer. I love the idea of taking on a different form to infiltrate a military base, but these sequences were executed clumsily. Calmly walking around often sent enemies scrambling for an alarm, but bouncing away over a building and changing form caused pursuers to give up the chase instantly. *Prototype 2* may be better if they cut this mechanic altogether and focus on the action.

**Brutal Combat** – The first game allowed you to transform your arm into a huge blade, a sharp set of claws, or even a whip, yet enemies constantly got the upper hand by breaking your combos. Alex was made out to be an unstoppable beast in the story, but in practice it was all too easy to get overwhelmed by a constant flood of enemies. Boss fights were an even greater struggle and a drain on my will to keep playing. It's okay for the main character to feel overpowered in some games; *Prototype 2* should be one of those games.

**Mission Variety** – Protect a target. Chase after a vehicle. Destroy these towers. I've played these missions over and over in many open world games, including *Prototype*. Side missions fared no better, with such mindless inclusions as checkpoint-based races and killing sprees. *Prototype 2* desperately needs to feature missions that play on the strengths of the game and help set it apart from other open world titles. Using your gliding power to land at a specific location felt unique to *Prototype*. Radical should build on that.

**A Better Hero For A Better City** – Alex Mercer is an anti-hero. Grim and gritty sells. I get it. But at some point, I want to be able to connect with the person I'm playing as and feel like I understand him in some way. Mercer's attitude was so bathed in darkness and his disregard for innocent civilians so all-encompassing that I never once liked him. A new protagonist means another chance for Radical to create someone I actually want to play as. While they're at it, Radical could overhaul the boring, unmemorable New York City from the first game.

**Co-Op Play?** – You know what always makes huge, destruction-filled open worlds better? Messing them up with a friend. Co-op was originally planned for inclusion in *Prototype*, and when it was cut, Radical promised to explore the idea in the future if they were able to do a sequel. Here's hoping the studio hasn't forgotten that promise.



# WWE All-Stars

THQ San Diego attempts to make pro wrestling even more ridiculous

When Vince McMahon purchased WCW and ECW in 2001, the television product wasn't the only thing he limited for wrestling fans. His massive takeover also drastically changed the video game landscape for the "sports entertainment" faithful. In the late '90s, fans could choose between THQ's excellent WWF titles, EA's WCW games, and Acclaim's ECW attempts. For the last several years, however, Smackdown vs. Raw has been the only game in town (outside of mediocre TNA titles and the supremely disappointing Lucha Libre game from Konami). While it still operates under the banner of Vince McMahon's juggernaut promotion, THQ is finally giving gamers a brand-new option with the promising WWE All Stars.

If we were to compare WWE games to sports titles, Smackdown vs. Raw would be NBA 2K11 and All Stars would be NBA Jam. That's no accident, as Jam (and NFL Blitz) veteran Sal Divita is onboard as executive producer. As he did with the hardwood and the gridiron, Divita is bringing over-the-top moves, a ridiculous visual style, and a simplified but rewarding control scheme to the squared circle. It's not just the SVR roster with new gameplay and a different look, however, as the roster features just as many legendary grapplers as current superstars.

Available WWE stars consist of both legends and members of the current roster, but THQ is only revealing six so far: Andre the Giant, Rey Mysterio, Bret Hart, Triple H, and the previously announced John Cena and The Rock. While the final roster is still a work in progress, THQ is planning on a "dream roster" consisting of superstars from your childhood and the top talent of today—including some faces that you wouldn't expect to see.

Each superstar fits into one of four categories: Acrobat, Big Man, Brawler, or Grappler. Acrobats can perform high-flying springboard attacks and cover almost the entire ring with a top rope attack. Even better, they can access the top turnbuckle by propelling themselves off of an opponent. Playing as Rey Mysterio, I sprinted up the body of Andre the Giant, backflipped onto the turnbuckle, and proceeded to level the big man with a missile dropkick.

If you fall into the big man category, your character can charge up massive strikes that can send your opponent flying. When I played as Andre, I sent Mysterio rocketing into the ropes with a massive punch. Once he ricocheted off the ropes, I landed another blow that sent him

cartoonishly flying outside of the ring.

Brawlers like Cena and The Rock are equipped with unblockable charged attacks, and grapplers like Bret Hart can string numerous grapple moves together into a combo. These two classes may not be flying around the ring like the acrobats or sending foes outside of it like the big men, but their moves are by no means subtle. Cena's Attitude Adjustment isn't just a modified fireman's carry like it is on WWE programming; it's now a superhero-like leaping slam that causes a shock-wave in the mat when it connects.

Whereas the majority of wrestling games feature a momentum system for building up finishers, All Stars doesn't rely on a rising-and-falling meter. As you perform big attacks, your finisher meter will rise without fear of it dropping back down. If your meter is half-full and you suddenly find yourself on the tail end of a severe beating, you don't have to worry about restarting from square one.

Once you find yourself with a full finisher meter, you can activate a finisher state by pressing LB and RB together. In many wrestling games, this would be the point where your opponent would cowardly run around the ring until your finisher expired. This won't be a worry with All-Stars, as (like NBA Jam's "fire") it requires your opponent to confront and "put out" your finisher state if they hope to avoid it.

Putting out a finisher state is accomplished with extreme signature moves. On top of the finisher meter, each player also has an energy meter. This fills up as you mix up your strikes and moves, and each filled segment allows you to perform an extreme signature. These trademark attacks, such as Cena's Five-Knuckle Shuffle or The Rock's swinging DDT, are rarely used to finish off an opponent. If you connect with one of these while an opponent is in a finisher state, it reverts them back to their default status and gives you a chance to continue the match.

Health meters have rarely been seen in wrestling games ever since Acclaim's titles in the late '90s, as most modern titles rely on stamina, body damage, and other vague indicators. Divita and the team at THQ San Diego are actively going for a fighting game feel for All Stars, so they're bringing back health meters. Smackdown vs. Raw matches can go on for extended periods of time, but All Stars differentiates itself again by featuring matches that frequently end within five minutes or so.

It isn't too dissimilar from Mortal Kombat's fight-

ing system. That fighter features standard attacks (punches, kicks, sweeps), special attacks (spear, freeze, bicycle kick), and fatalities. All Stars features standard strikes, extreme signature attacks, and finishers. In tandem with the health meter, All-Stars really does resemble a fighting game instead of the sim-like Smackdown vs. Raw.

From the looks of it, WWE All Stars should do a great job of reaching its demographic. Professional wrestling fans whole-heartedly embrace over-the-top, unrealistic action, and this game delivers it in spades. Ideally, the title will even strike a chord with gamers that don't know "Stone Cold" Steve Austin from Duke "The Dumpster" Droese. NBA Jam and NFL Blitz managed to resonate with gamers that never watched sports, and Divita and THQ San Diego plan to walk that same path with All-Stars.

» Dan Ryckert

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

» **Style**  
1-4 Player Fighting  
(4-Player Online)

» **Publisher**  
THQ

» **Developer**  
THQ San Diego

» **Release**  
March 2011

Old-school WWE fans will love the idea of Cena tapping out to the Sharpshooter





# Mario Sports Mix

The Mushroom Kingdom plays host to even more whimsical athletics

- » **Platform**  
Wii
- » **Style**  
1 to 4-Player Sports  
(4-Player Online)
- » **Publisher**  
Nintendo
- » **Developer**  
Square Enix
- » **Release**  
February 7

Back in the late 1990s, Mario proved himself to be quite the Renaissance man. We already knew he was fond of turtle stomping and go-karting, but during the Nintendo 64 days he started trying his hand at the sporting world. He tried golf and tennis first, and then moved onto baseball, soccer, and basketball in later years. Not satisfied with one sport per game anymore, the plumber and company compete in four separate events in the upcoming Mario Sports Mix.

When an asteroid lands in the Mushroom Kingdom near Peach's castle, Toads assemble to investigate the crater. Finding crystals that contain various sports equipment, they decide to hold tournaments involving the kingdom's most recognizable faces.

This characteristically ludicrous setup is as good an excuse as any to get Mario and friends to compete in the four sports available—basketball, dodgeball, volleyball, and hockey. Each of these can be played 2-on-2 or 3-on-3, in a variety of courts and environments. Luigi's Mansion features ghosts that can assist you, the waves of Koopa Troopa Beach wash items and coins

onto the shore, and the dusty Western Junction features a train that rockets straight down the middle of the playing area. Why the citizens of the Mushroom Kingdom built a basketball court over a set of active train tracks is anyone's guess, but I stopped questioning the logic once a bunch of Shy Guys started throwing coins at me from the top of a boxcar.

Each of the four sporting events is structured similarly. Item boxes give you a variety of power-ups that you can attach to your shot by holding the B button. A green shell adds some power to your shots or throws if used offensively, or you can use them to trip up opponents on defense.

As you play, a meter fills up that allows you to unleash a ridiculous special attack. They're not unblockable, but defenders will have to be on their toes to survive them without giving up any points. If you're playing basketball as Waluigi, he'll sprout four robot arms that rapidly hurl balls at the basket. Daisy can confuse opponents in volleyball by causing a giant field of flowers to show up on their side, obscuring the shadow that indicates where the ball is headed.

None of the sports are particularly complex,

with three or four buttons (or a remote shake) handling most of your actions. Basketball seems even simpler than an arcade experience like NBA Jam, and the action moves along at a slower pace. None of these games take much strategy—most boil down to “block opponent's shot, then try to take your shot.” However, items and stage-specific events help keep the action from becoming too repetitive.

What Mario Sports Mix lacks in gameplay depth, it makes up for with a healthy serving of trademark elements from the Mario franchise. Instead of a traditional puck, you'll be sliding a gold coin around the rink. If a volleyball shot is just outside of Yoshi's reach, he'll stick out his tongue to make the save. The typical Mushroom Kingdom cast is all on hand for Sports Mix, and you'll even see some surprise Square Enix characters get in on the action.

While these aren't the most complex sports games, it's reassuring to see them offer more than the minigames that are so prevalent on the console. With four separate sports and online support, it definitely offers gamers more mileage than its peers. » **Dan Ryckert**





You'll need to mount up if you hope to take on the fearsome acklay

# LEGO Star Wars III: The Clone Wars

This hunk of bricks has a few tricks up its sleeve

I had been a while since I'd last seen LEGO Star Wars III: The Clone Wars in action, which is why I was surprised that a recent demo of the game started with the arena battle of Geonosis. We'd played that part of Episode II before in LucasArts' first LEGO Star Wars game, after all. Why bother revisiting that sequence?

After watching a LucasArts representative play through the encounter, it's abundantly clear that developer Traveller's Tales has learned a lot about making LEGO games over the years — thanks in no small part to its work with the Indiana Jones, Batman, and Harry Potter franchises. That experience pays off in ways that even players who aren't into the Clone Wars' timeline can appreciate.

The Clone Wars' graphical improvements over its predecessors are immediately noticeable. There's far more action onscreen, and background details are rendered with the attention they deserve. In the film, the arena battle was dense with activity as Jedi fought geonosian

fighters, battle droids, and assorted space monsters. The LEGO Star Wars rendition was significantly toned down, transforming the chaotic engagement into a tame series of finding and destroying droids before fighting Jango Fett. LEGO Star Wars III: The Clone Wars' version is far more faithful to the movie, resulting in a superior gaming experience.

The level starts off with Obi-Wan Kenobi, Padme Amidala, and Anakin Skywalker tethered to posts, where they're set to be gnawed on by three terrifying creatures. Obi Wan breaks free of his chains and rescues his friends. Well, at least he removes their chains. There are a few things in the way of a complete rescue, including hundreds of droids and other enemies. And three of the enemies — the acklay, nexu, and reek — are slobbering beasts ready for a Jedi entrée.

Those three enemies show off the Clone Wars' blend of realism and LEGO whimsy. For example, the spider-like acklay sports one LEGO leg. It can be broken off, giving Padme a grappling

point she can use to climb atop the beast and kill it. Obi Wan can hop onto the massive horned reek (sitting on a block) and use the beast to kill the feline nexu.

When Jango Fett enters the arena, now positively brimming with background characters, it's a great time for Obi Wan to use a new lightsaber throw attack. Similar to how batarangs functioned in LEGO Batman, players paint their targets by pressing and holding a button, then release it to attack. Jango is eventually beaten, his helmet kicked into the bustling stands like a soccer ball. Since this is a LEGO game, humor trumps all else, and young Boba Fett looks quizzically at the empty helmet.

The sequence is a great representation of how the game is coming along. Visually, it's a stunner, with little details like Kit Fisto's swaying tail whips and larger strokes such as the incredible amount of potential characters shown onscreen.

The LEGO games have always been a go-to series for family gaming, and this one seems to be no different. Having the kid-friendly Clone Wars license attached to it makes the game even more appealing to families with younger players — or anyone else who's looking for a solid co-op session. We're definitely excited to see what LucasArts manages to do with the Clone Wars story, particularly since it's still being told.

» Jeff Cork

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

» **Style**  
1 or 2-Player Action

» **Publisher**  
LucasArts

» **Developer**  
Traveller's Tales

» **Release**  
February 15



There's far more action in the battle sequences now, and the graphics blend realistic characters with familiar LEGO elements



The scene swap feature lets players see what's going on elsewhere



# MotorStorm Apocalypse

It's not the end of the world; it's just the beginning

» **Platform**  
PlayStation 3

» **Style**  
1 to 4-Player Racing  
(16-Player Online)

» **Publisher**  
Sony Computer  
Entertainment

» **Developer**  
Studios Evolution

» **Release**  
Spring

**M**otorStorm has never been about telling a story – it's been too busy focusing on its Burning-Man-meets-Mad-Max-boost-racing, and it's gotten pretty far on the formula. MotorStorm Apocalypse isn't a story-based racer by any means, but it does use a thin plot veneer to provide a little more context to what you're doing. It's just one of the new additions to the game that endeavors to build upon the franchise's potent racing.

Players experience the light motion comic backstories of three characters – Mash, Tyler, and Big Dog – as they progress through the game. "We've been continuing to look at the relationship between story and game in the racing genre ever since we announced MotorStorm Apocalypse," explains Matt Southern, the game's director. "The story ele-

ment is very minimal, which we think is right for the title."

If story isn't the core of the game, then what use is it? As minimal as it may sound, it helps introduce some new features to the series. The Festival and its crazy participants are again the focus of the game, only this time they're joined by a private military company and an opposing faction that have infested the locales where the Festival races take place. While racing, you'll face threats such as people firing at you, looters, and even runaway fuel trucks barreling the wrong way down the track.

Regardless of these man-made nuisances, nature is still the backbone of your racing experience, and Apocalypse showcases it in turmoil for your racing delight. The game contains 40 races, with persistent damage from lap to lap

and race to race. "When you revisit a track," says Southern, "the differences are often profound, and there are some that change radically over the virtual 48 hours of our 'Party at the End of the World.' This is something we've spent a long time making the right decisions on. The apocalypse is Mother Nature's doing – you are there to race. We're striking a balance between epic-scale destruction that is fairly repeatable, like a series of skyscraper collapses, and more emergent, physics-driven elements such as the unpredictable contents spilling from those skyscrapers."

As the track changes all around you, racers must hastily pick the most efficient route for your vehicle. Apocalypse introduces five new classes: superminis, muscle cars, supercars, superbikes, and choppers. Players can customize their rides more than ever with decals and parts, and share your designs with others. Your Boost ability and the consequential engine overheating are also tweaked. Driving too close to heat sources like burning buildings adds more heat to your engine, while it cools down when you soar through the air.

Some of these additions to the series' blueprint aren't major in and of themselves, but Apocalypse promises to add important features that will challenge and excite players without turning the franchise into something it's not. » **Matthew Kato**



## Online Options

Although we've previously reported that you can make your own tracks in the game, Apocalypse's options are more akin to a mode creator. You can tweak race parameters for multiplayer, from something as simple as having a bikes-only race to changing how far monster trucks can fly through the air or how explosive cars are on contact.

You'll also be unlocking parts to improve your vehicles (like better acceleration, faster cooling, etc.) as well as chaps which can be wagered during online races. Furthermore, the game gives you the chance to race in various combinations of splitscreen and online play.

Cars aren't your only competition on the track. Missile-shooting helicopters and gun-toting pedestrians will also make things interesting





Shift 2 adopts the Autolog community system from Need for Speed: Pursuit to encourage competition between friends



# Shift 2: Unleashed

The race for greater realism

When you're racing against seasoned pros like Forza Motorsport and Gran Turismo, you can't afford to take your foot off the pedal. Though critics hailed Need for Speed Shift as a solid racing sim, developer Slightly Mad Studios knows it needs to improve on the little things if it wants to find itself in pole position in the subgenre. For Shift 2, the team is opening the hood and making some tweaks to the game's already competent racing engine.

First and foremost, Slightly Mad Studios wants to better capture the visceral nature of racing. A driver isn't just taking on other racers; he or she must also battle the track and the car to come out on top. The new helmet cam tries to capture

the intensity of the cockpit experience by adding movement to the normally fixed camera perspective. This subtle change gives you the feeling of speeding along at hundreds of miles per hour. The driver's head jerks forward when you slam on the breaks, bobs backward as you kick the car into a higher gear, and looks into turns to help you spot the appropriate line.

In further service to the cause of realistic racing, Slightly Mad is revamping the AI. In the last game, drivers were sometimes overly aggressive, as if they were more concerned with dueling you than they were with placing. This year their attention is focused on coming out on top, and the dev team is giving them more varied

brake points on turns to make them seem more human. If they brake too early or late, that can be the opportunity you need to make a pass. With the FIA GT1 World Championship license in their back pocket, EA also plans to use the Need for Speed-sponsored racers as boss battles.

Though EA didn't go into details, the company claims Shift fans can also look forward to a revamped career mode, a deeper car tuning system that lets you more accurately achieve the kind of performance you want from your vehicle, and more realistic car damage. We'll find out if these changes can earn Shift 2 a place on the podium next spring. » **Matt Bertz**

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

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

» **Publisher**  
Electronic Arts

» **Developer**  
Slightly Mad Studios

» **Release**  
Spring



A new tuning system gives you more control than ever over your car's performance

# Binary Domain

Humans vs. Robots from the creator of Yakuza



Sega's recent announcement trailer for Binary Domain is more like an invitation to ask questions than the company is not going to answer than an intriguing teaser. When is it going to release? Don't know. Who are the characters? Eh, they don't have names yet. What's going on? These people are fighting robots. Duh!

The game takes place in Tokyo in the year 2080, with a three-person "international peace-keeping squad" battling an army of robots. Taking a page from 1997's *The Fifth Element*, the fighting takes place in the scummy lower city while a fancy, futuristic upper class exists peacefully above. The squad includes a stern pistol-wielding pony-tailed lady, a big dude with a temper, and a medium-sized guy who says things like, "Let the good times roll!" without a trace of irony.

The concept comes from Sega's Toshihiro Nagoshi, who is known for Super Monkey Ball and Yakuza. "What I wanted to create this time was a dramatic and energetic sci-fi shooter," he said in a statement. "When you hear sci-fi you may think of cold, clinical environments but with Binary Domain I wanted to combine this with a deep human drama. The keyword we have in mind for this project is 'Life.' I wanted to make something that will be accepted by both the Japanese and Western markets and this fundamental theme is something everyone knows, but which the full extent of can be difficult to grasp."

Translation: the game will explore the question of organic versus synthetic life. Is one more valid than the other? After the humans tear through legions of mechanized foes, the trailer shows a robot with sad eyes looking over the battlefield of fallen brethren. Then we see a woman in a white lab coat up in a techno skyscraper taking care of a tiny baby while watching news of the fighting on TV. The camera pans down her body to reveal that she has robotic Terminator legs! Oh man, what if one of the squad members turns out to be a robot but doesn't know it? It certainly would force the humans to rethink all of that robot killing they've been doing. I'm definitely looking forward to any explanations Sega may have in the coming year. » **Bryan Vore**

» **Platform**  
PlayStation 3  
Xbox 360

» **Style**  
1-Player Shooter  
(Multiplayer TBA)

» **Publisher**  
Sega

» **Developer**  
Sega

» **Release**  
TBA



## Radiant Historia

You can't change the past, unless you can

If you think the Japanese RPG market is dwindling, you haven't been playing your DS enough. Thanks to publishers like Atlus, you can still find plenty of handheld role-playing fun, and you're about to get even more when Radiant Historia hits. With a development team including talent from Persona 3 and Radiata Stories (plus the Kingdom Hearts composer), RPG fans should have this one on their radar.

The story involves a steampunk/fantasy world where the two major countries are locked in a long war while a strange disease is turning people into sand. After a bizarre mission, an intelligence agent named Stocke finds himself with access to the White Chronicle, which allows him to travel through time.

Along with his compatriots, Stocke visits different points in time and space to create alternate futures and jump between parallel timelines to save the world. The choices you make in each era will have effects across the whole timeline, and you can go back to previous choices to see how different outcomes lead to changes elsewhere in time.

The plot appears to share some similarities to the classic Chrono Trigger, but the battle system has an unfamiliar twist. The turn-based combat takes place on a 3x3 grid, and some of your abilities move enemies to different positions. The main benefit to these maneuvers is that your attacks hit all enemies in a square, so you can herd them together to dish out the pain. For additional damage, party members can team up and combine their attacks in a single assault.

From Radiant Historia's development pedigree to its unique mechanics, Atlus has a good shot at roping in the hardcore RPG crowd once again. Check out our review in next month's issue to see how everything comes together. » **Joe Juba**

» **Platform**  
Nintendo DS

» **Style**  
1-Player Role-Playing

» **Publisher**  
Atlus

» **Developer**  
Atlus

» **Release**  
February 22



# Dungeon Siege III

Hands-on with this hack n' slasher

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

» **Style**  
1 or 2-Player Action/  
RPG (PS3, 360),  
1-Player Action/RPG  
(PC) [2-Player Online]

» **Publisher**  
Square Enix

» **Developer**  
Obsidian Entertainment

» **Release**  
Summer

This might be the most misleading game title of 2011. *Dungeon Siege III* is being developed by a different studio, marketed by a new publisher, and draws little from the first two games except for backstory. Don't let that discourage your interest, though. Our hands-on time with the first two hours of the game revealed an action/RPG that plays like *Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance* with a splash of *Mass Effect*.

Whichever class you choose, you'll meet up with the others in the game's first hours. We only had the opportunity to check out the Guardian class, embodied by fantasy hero archetype Lucas. Our enemies are rent asunder by giant sweeps of Lucas' massive two-handed sword or dissected by the focused strikes of his sword-and-board style, depending on the encounter—each setup shines in certain situations, and switching between the two is a shoulder button away. Each slash fills our power bar, which can be drained to effect radical change on the battlefield via impressive powers like path-clearing sword dashes that one-shot most rank-and-file enemies. All the while, loot and experience rain down upon us like champagne in a playoff clubhouse.

Filling the power bar (by rocking face in the normal way) and emptying it (by wrecking half



Rank-and-file enemies are more opportunity than threat

the bad guys on screen with one attack), and flipping effortlessly between combat styles keeps battle fresh. Any time there were bad guys on the screen, I was happily engaged in ruining their day. Unlocking new powers as you level and equipping ever more powerful bits of loot isn't any less fun here as it has been in the dozens of action/RPGs you've no doubt played over the years. Obsidian has a lot of polish work to do—and it's not a studio known for smooth, bug-free games—but this solid hack n' slash core is promising.

To Obsidian's credit, *Dungeon Siege III*'s world is laid out more like a quest hub-focused MMO than a traditional linear dungeon crawl. The one hub I had the opportunity to visit had quests for various townsfolk sending me off in several directions. Each mission was a variation on "go here, kill this," but they worked well as excuses to poke around the many nooks and crannies of the expansive map. There will be fast travel between quest hubs via a kind of astral causeway, but it wasn't enabled in the preview build I played.

It may seem like I'm skipping the story, but you can fill in the blanks of this fantasy adventure *Mad Lib* yourself. You've got your evil sorceresses, corrupt chancellors, wise sages, and conniving mercenaries. Lucas' childhood home is shockingly burnt to the ground in the opening cutscene. The simple townsfolk cry out for

a savior to deliver them from evil that threatens to engulf the very world itself. Obsidian has told interesting tales in the past (*Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic II*, *Fallout: New Vegas*), though, and the *Mass Effect*-like conversation wheel could enable interesting dialogues. The storytelling I saw during this preview left little impression on me, good or bad.

No action/RPG is complete without co-op, and this is where *Dungeon Siege III* has a chance to shine. Drop-in, drop-out cooperative play is available from the beginning, online or off. The main thrust of the plot will follow whomever the lead character is, with the second player taking on the role of a generic member of one of the other classes who just so happens to have the exact same skills and equipment as the story character of the same class, who replaces the unnamed fill-in when the main character meets up with them in the storyline. Whenever a second player isn't present, the AI takes over for the companion. Unfortunately, you can't switch between your protagonist and his or her buddies in single-player.

*Dungeon Siege III* has a great underlying design, so a future in which Obsidian gets its technical ducks in a row and takes the plot somewhere interesting after the intro is quite possible—and quite desirable for gamers. » **Adam Biessener**



Filling the four orbs lets you unleash super-powered versions of your abilities



Switching combat styles for different situations is critical



# Jurassic Park

An unlikely developer steps into the maw of a troubled license



» **Platform**  
PC • Mac  
Console TBA

» **Style**  
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**  
Telltale Games

» **Developer**  
Telltale Games

» **Release**  
Spring

Pitting players against the deadliest beasts to ever walk the planet seems like the perfect blueprint for a video game, but since 1993 developers have struggled to capture the magic of *Jurassic Park*. Though a dozen plus games have carried the series' iconic logo, their uninspired designs fall in line with a prehistoric Rambo fantasy more than the source material found in the *Jurassic Park* novels and films.

Dinosaurs are the attraction, but the heart of *Jurassic Park* is humankind. Our emotions and tendencies shape these stories. The best and worst of humankind are almost always on display, whether that's someone being brave enough to put their life on the line or ravenous enough to sacrifice others for their own personal gain. These stories are built on deep character development and the hope that viewers and readers are emotionally invested with the human

element long before a dinosaur emerges from the brush.

No *Jurassic Park* video game has explored this element. Perhaps this is why Universal Pictures, the *Jurassic Park* license holder, hasn't unleashed its dinosaurs in the video game space since 2003's *Operation Genesis*. Enter Telltale Games, a development studio with a reputation of making character driven adventure games. "Universal didn't want another dinosaur shooting game," says Joel Dreskin, Telltale's director of

marketing. "That's something from their side that interested them in Telltale Games as a partner for the property."

Telltale plans to create an experience identical in tone to the films. To do this, the human element must come through loud and clear. The team has studied the films and hopes to take pages from the Steven Spielberg playbook for both pacing and presentation.

Executive director Kevin Boyle understands the challenge the team has ahead. "As far as pacing goes, there are some things that are useful from the heritage of Telltale, but creating a new experience that pays off on both the slower-paced character building moments and high tension you expect from *Jurassic Park* is a new direction for Telltale," he admits. "Story and character are a really important part of it. You are going to feel drama. You are going to feel tension. You'll feel different kinds of emotions. There's humor. Light moments. Downtime to get to like the characters. Certainly the wonder and awe of the island, and then everything breaks down to those moments of terror."

Telltale isn't just trying to channel the true essence of the license, it is also responsible for adding to the lore. This game is designed as a direct sequel to the first movie, addressing the plot points that weren't followed through in the first film and never surfaced again in the sequels. For instance, what ever happened to that Barbasol can filled with embryos that Dennis Nedry lost in the jungle?

Some of the game takes place at the same time as the film, but Boyle says you'll experience these moments through the eyes of new characters. "We'll see our characters kind of cobbling together and asking 'What the hell went down here?'" Boyle says. "We're going to pursue this MacGuffin to a new conclusion."

Which begs the question, who are the main characters? You won't get the chance to wear sunglasses at night with Jeff Goldblum's character Dr. Ian Malcolm, or have an unintentionally flirtatious conversation between Dr. Alan Grant

Getting to Nedry's jeep looks to be difficult



Telltale's signature puzzles will be a big part of *Jurassic Park*

and Ellie Sattler – although most of these characters are referenced. One character you may recognize is a bit player from the first film named Gerry Harding, the chief veterinarian at Jurassic Park. You'll also meet his daughter, as well as various people interested in that can of dinosaur embryos. The inhabitants left on Jurassic Park's Isla Nublar will make themselves known, and odds are some of these people are smugglers and mercenaries.

Applying the Jurassic Park license to the storytelling systems Telltale has created in past games makes sense to a degree, but in our conversations with the team they kept coming back to Quantic Dreams' *Heavy Rain*. "While our story is more linear than *Heavy Rain*, actions the player takes are reflected in the way the story is told," Boyle says. "The choices the players make result in changes to the details of the story. Players will know we are paying attention to the decisions they make."

Telltale is also heavily inspired by *Heavy Rain*'s gameplay mechanics. The team is still figuring out how actions are presented to the player, but Boyle says Telltale is approaching the task with "more focus on cinematic presentation of your interactions." Expect plenty of investigating and looking around in the slower-paced gameplay sections, but when the tension escalates to life and death scrambling, the gameplay shifts from selecting destinations to immediate response.

It wouldn't be Jurassic Park without velociraptors, and Telltale says they are huge nuisances. The big bad tyrannosaurus rex is also on the hunting trail. Lead designer Joe Pinney also teases another foe. "There's a dinosaur beyond the movies – a new threat," he says with a smile. "You'll recognize it from its glowing eyes in the brush. It's a nocturnal dinosaur."

Like most of Telltale's recent games, Jurassic Park is designed as a five-part downloadable series. The team plans to release it on PCs, Macs, and consoles.

Telltale hopes that the direction it is taking with this beloved license keeps players engaged with the characters as they are dangling from the maws of dinosaurs. The fourth Jurassic Park film has been spinning its wheels in development hell and if the game hits on all the right notes, it could be the continuation fans have been waiting for. — Andrew Reiner



The new ensemble of characters will run into specific moments shared from the characters in the movie



Here's your first look at Jurassic Park's new threat. Can you figure out what dino lurks in the brush?





**gameinformer**  
**GAME OF THE MONTH**

## 94 LittleBigPlanet 2

Media Molecule's ambitious sequel combines fantastic platforming with a virtual toolbox that will keep you playing and creating levels for hours. The expanded toolset gives users even more options when building levels, branching out into entirely new gameplay genres. Whether you want to craft your own worlds or just enjoy the fruits of others' labor, LittleBigPlanet 2 provides a massive amount of quality content that will only grow as the community adds their contributions.

### THE SCORING SYSTEM

<b>10</b>	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.	<b>5</b>	Flawed. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.
<b>9</b>	Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.	<b>4</b>	Bad. While some things work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
<b>8</b>	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.	<b>3</b>	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.
<b>7</b>	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.	<b>2</b>	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
<b>6</b>	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.	<b>1</b>	Website spammers – the lowest of the low.

### AWARDS

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

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# Dead Space 2

A heart-pounding journey into the mouth of madness

9

PS3 • 360 • PC

## » Concept

Isaac Clark is infected, and his sanity is slowly trickling away. His mental state becomes the backbone of Dead Space 2's plot and action. Can Isaac save mankind from the spreading necromorph virus, or is he a new threat?

## » Graphics

An astounding level of detail accompanies every object. The level designs also give no hint of where enemies may be lying in wait

## » Sound

If you turn off the volume, it isn't the same game. Much of the tension is brought to life by excellent sound design and music that flows with the on-screen horror

## » Playability

The gunplay mechanics and payoff for most of the shots you fire couldn't be better. The escalating difficulty brings unwanted tension as the game nears its conclusion

## » Entertainment

A dread-drenched experience that finds new ways to scare and reward Dead Space fans

## » Replay Value

High



GameZone  
GOLD

Style 1-Player Action (8-Player Online) Publisher: Electronic Arts Developer: Visceral Games Release: January 25

When Isaac Clark boarded the derelict mining vessel *USG Ishimura*, his actions were fueled by hope. His girlfriend Nicole was stranded on this ship. He did everything in his power to reach her. His search only led to death. The *Ishimura* was contaminated by a biological threat. Everyone aboard it, including his love, was lost to the disease. Although Isaac survived, he couldn't outrun the contagion. He was infected.

In Dead Space 2, Isaac isn't a stalwart hero spitting out one-liners. He's a flawed character. His deteriorating state of mind adds tension

to an already unnerving atmosphere. He sees ghosts, and his consciousness periodically shifts from reality to a horrifying memory.

Not being able to trust a game's protagonist puts the player in a precarious position. I found myself second-guessing Isaac's actions. Is he battling the people infected with the virus? Is his mind creating these apparitions? Or, worse yet, is it tricking him into harming uninfected people? The race to find a cure becomes Isaac's priority.

The feeling of helplessness is established early on, and the sequences that follow are drenched in suspense and ambiguity. Compared to Isaac's

time aboard the *Ishimura*, Dead Space 2's scares are bigger, the tension is greater, and the threat created by the virus makes every shot you fire count. This is one of the most emotionally and physically draining games I've played.

Dead Space 2's new setting, the Sprawl, a heavily populated space station built on one of Saturn's moons, contributes greatly to the heightened unease. The *Ishimura* housed only its workforce, whereas the Sprawl is a home for families. This means that the infection strikes children and even newborns. Battling a seven-foot beast that vomits acidic bile and tries to impale Isaac with razor-sharp appendages is one thing, but watching a mother cradle a necromorph baby will haunt my nightmares until I die.

The Sprawl's architecture is quite different than the *Ishimura*'s. Well-lit shopping districts, personalized housing, and a rainbow-filled nursery all provide a false sense of security and normalcy to scenarios that are anything but. A room void of danger is often accompanied by a claw scratching a door, rattling footsteps overhead, or muffled screams coming from a distant area. The sound design is pitch-perfect, and the accompanying score makes the scares seem bigger than they really are.

Although Isaac still uses many of the same tools from his previous entanglement, the setting – and new threats that lurk within it – give Dead Space 2 a decidedly different feel.

The team at Visceral Games has gone out of its way to ensure that the player never feels comfortable during the game. Not only does Isaac hallucinate, but creatures burst through walls when you least expect them to.

At no point in this game did I feel that Isaac



The necromorph attacks can be relentless



The threat in front of you is often the least of your worries



Zero gravity sequences put your flight skills to the test



had the upper hand. Enemies are not only greater in number this time around, they are stronger and better protected. De-limbing specific necromorph types takes an entire clip of ammo. I often found myself using kinesis to hurl every object in a room at a monster, praying that one shot impales the beast or at least knocks it back long enough for me to reload.

While I appreciate the challenge the team has created, I have to call them out on the design of many of the combat scenarios. As Isaac is engaging a threat directly in front of him, foes will drop from vents behind him. If Isaac had a rearview mirror on his helmet, I wouldn't have a problem with this, but too many of my deaths came from an unregistered foe attacking me from behind.

Tack these unfair spawns onto a game that is brutally difficult to begin with, and many of your screams will come not from horror, but frustration. The balance is perfect through the first half of the game, allowing for fluid progression while still making you thankful for every ammo clip an enemy drops. As the plot unravels, the difficulty increases with each new encounter. Unbeatable foes are thrown into both puzzle

and standard combat operations, and elevator rides are packed with necromorphs. I found that the normal difficulty setting felt more like hard or expert in similar games.

As drained of energy as I was at the end of battle, *Dead Space 2* often rewarded my effort with action-packed cinematics. Some of these moments blend seamlessly with unique gameplay sequences, much like *Uncharted 2* does. I won't spoil anything for you, but I will say that a sequence taking place aboard a train and another involving a needle are front-runners for *Game Informer's Moments of the Year* for 2011.

Disorienting zero-gravity sequences (of which there are many), and a handful of clever "how do I open that door?" puzzles are peppered into the action at just the right times.

The excitement also stretches to *Dead Space 2's* multiplayer component, where players get the chance to hunt mankind as the necromorph legion.

In a similar vein to Valve's *Left 4 Dead*, all of the matches pit a human team against necromorphs. As the human team feverishly attempts to complete objectives, the necromorphs are tasked with slowing their progress, usually by ripping off

their heads or chopping off their legs. I enjoyed my time playing as both sides. Controlling the necromorphs leads to cringe-worthy highlight reels, but these murderous thrills are matched by the feeling of accomplishment that comes with a well-oiled human team that coordinates tactics.

The matches are quickly paced thanks to spawn points that allow necromorphs to crawl out of a vent just feet away from a human opponent. The action is relentless, and post-match kill counts are usually through the roof. Each kill earns you experience points that unlock higher ranks (60 in total) and new armor as well as weapon upgrades. In two hours of match time, I reached level four. Another two hours got me to six. It will take days to reach the cap.

*Dead Space 2* is a monster of a sequel, offering bigger scares and more excitement than I expected. I enjoyed Isaac as a silent protagonist in the original game, and I find I like him even more now that he's found his voice. I'm still confused by the scientific explanations for the contagion and how it is linked to the obelisk-like Marker, but I like where Isaac's story is going. The tease for *Dead Space 3* has my head spinning with questions. • **Andrew Reiner**

# LittleBigPlanet 2

Media Molecule puts the power of creation at your fingertips

## 9.5

PS3

### » Concept

Play, create, and share all over again, with emphasis on the "create"

### Graphics

The crafty, do-it-yourself vibe looks as fantastic as ever

### Sound

Peppy tunes make great background noise, and the addition of voice acting helps the cutscenes

### Playability

Platforming is improved, but not perfect. Creation tools are easy to learn, but difficult to master

### Entertainment

I doubt anyone is cold-hearted or jaded enough to dislike this adorable title

### Replay

High



gamerformer  
GAME OF THE MONTH

gamerformer  
GOLD

Style 1 to 4-Player Action/Platforming (4-Player Online) Publisher Sony Computer Entertainment  
Developer Media Molecule Release January 18 ESRE E

## An Easy Transition

Players who really dug into the first LittleBigPlanet will be happy to learn that all of their work hasn't gone to waste. Most levels made in the original are available for play and editing in LBP 2, and all of the costumes you bought for Sackboy will transfer over. In other words, the first game's audience can expect a smooth transition when picking up the sequel.

I can't stop thinking about LittleBigPlanet 2. Even after putting down the controller, I continue playing with the creation tools in my head. Everyday objects send me off into daydreams about new vehicles, and ideas for bizarre puzzles spring to mind in mid-conversation. With this sequel, Media Molecule gives players a bottomless toolbox, and I can't remember the last time a game had such a relentless grip on my imagination.

Calling LBP 2 ambitious is an understatement. Like the original, the experience is split into two parts: playing the story mode, and creating your own levels. This time, however, the creation mode towers over the campaign with an array

of options to help make your gaming dreams a reality.

You've probably heard that you can make games in multiple genres now, and that isn't just an empty promise. I dabbled in 2D shooters, demolition derbies, and unclassifiable mayhem. The options can be overwhelming at first, but once you get a handle of a few of the new tools, things start clicking into place. You'll definitely want to figure out the Controllinator as soon as possible, since it allows you to control things remotely. Object modifiers are also incredibly useful; some let you tweak specific traits (like anti-gravity or friction), while others set contraptions rotating or moving without the need for complicated pulleys and levers.

Even with so much potential in other areas, playing around within the game's native platforming framework was the most fun for me. I loved creating fleets of death-dealing vehicles, twisted puzzles, and leaps of faith. Sackbots (NPCs you can program with different behaviors) add more depth to the levels, like when you have to rescue them or outfit them with lasers. Throwing in other styles of gameplay is still fun, but they work best when used to augment platforming rather than replace it.

Figuring out how best to use these new toys isn't quick or easy, but it pays off big.

Even so, the chasm between basic understanding and fluency is extremely wide. Despite the inclusion of numerous tutorials, more advanced in-game instruction would ease the learning curve. Placing a few cameras isn't the same as orchestrating an entire cutscene, but the tutorials don't help you synthesize the simple pieces into a more complex whole. I'm sure plenty of level-building savants will fall right into step, but a little more guidance for the rest of us could result in even an even wider pool of awesome community-created levels.

By focusing so much on the creation tools, I don't mean to sell the story mode short. It features brilliantly designed levels, four-player co-op, and the same sense of style that made the original so charming. The pacing is better, with more unique segments (like 2D shooting or top-down racing) breaking up the action. Platforming mechanics have also been refined since last time, but a continued reliance on physics makes for a handful of sloppy segments. Thankfully, the frustrating parts are infrequent, and the space between them is filled with sights that are guaranteed to inspire you when you try your hand at making your own levels.

The original LittleBigPlanet was impressive, but LittleBigPlanet 2 cements Media Molecule's position as masters of facilitating user-created content. By providing an abundance of tools and inspiration, along with the platform to share your creations, you could play LittleBigPlanet 2 every day and experience something different and amazing every time. » Joe Juba







# Gran Turismo 5

Polyphony realizes its racing dream

**Style** 1 or 2-Player Racing (16-Player Online)  
**Publisher** Sony Computer Entertainment  
**Developer** Polyphony Digital  
**Release** November 24 **ESRB** E

**P**olyphony Digital's singular vision and commitment to delivering a great race experience pays off in Gran Turismo 5. It's not the most complete racing game since it doesn't deliver on every front, but when you get behind the wheel of GT 5 it is a racing experience like no other.

A great racing title isn't just about going fast or having a big selection of cars, and GT 5 succeeds in capturing that elusive adrenaline rush. The graphics are undoubtedly a big factor in this simply because of their high level of detail and evocation of realism. Racing is all about living in the moment, and nothing conveys that more than combining the game's great sense of speed with impressive graphics. I highly suggest you get into a premium car and race from the cockpit view, where you'll feel the sensation of every bump on the street and get a better idea of the rigors of racing. Add in snow, rain, and night environment variables, and you've got a game that visually lives up to the hype.

One of my continuing criticisms of the series has been the cut-and-dry, sterile feeling of its career mode. Although GT 5 doesn't abandon its traditional racing events format, I appreciate how relatively easy it is to earn money and XP to move up the ranks. You no longer have to grind the same race track to progress thanks to additions like the kart racing and rally special events. The game also aids its progression with seemingly disparate rewards like paint chips (which you use to color your cars), free cars, photo travel locations, and more.

Even with a relatively generous progression curve, I don't mind working my way up the car ladder. Having to race all kinds of vehicles gives me an appreciation of what different cars are good and bad at, and it helps me as a racer in general. In some ways, this is the heart and soul of what Gran Turismo is all about.

As much as this game nails its overall vision, the franchise could stand to stretch its horizons. Gran Turismo 5 tries to do this by adding car damage, but it strangely unlocks only later in the game. By the time Polyphony unlocked the feature, I was past worrying about when it would show up.

The online component, with its smooth racing experience, standard community features, and pre-race practice options is satisfying, but disappointingly lacks overall rankings or leaderboards. I also think Polyphony passed up a larger chance to integrate the online portion back into your main career. I wish they'd done this with online instead of the underwhelming B-Spec mode, which has you directing other racecar drivers while they race for you. Why would you want to surrender the wheel to someone else?

Gran Turismo 5 is worth the wait. Every aspect of the game didn't blow me away, but the sheer amount of effort and craftsmanship that went into the game is impressive. This is an experience that racing fans should not miss. » **Matthew Kato**

9

PS3

» **Concept**  
Capture the essence of racing and go beyond just collecting cars and tracks

» **Graphics**  
Horizon objects occasionally pop in, but otherwise the game looks awesome

» **Sound**  
A scant number of rock songs from the likes of Them Crooked Vultures are drowned out by a sea of crappy smooth jazz. I paid more attention to the cars' varied engine sounds.

» **Playability**  
For those playing with controllers, I suggest mapping the gas/brake to the right analog

» **Entertainment**  
GT 5 is a finely tuned racing experience with a few flaws that don't spoil the overall picture



# Dead Rising 2: Case West

Chuck and Frank deliver a healthy dose of fan service

**Style** 1-Player Action (2-Player Online)  
**Publisher** Capcom **Developer** Blue Castle Games  
**Release** December 27 **ESRB** M

8

360

**D**ead Rising 2: Case West picks up seconds after Dead Rising 2's credits finish rolling. Chuck Greene is about to get his face bitten off when Dead Rising's Frank West saves the day. The two men have their own agendas, but they align nicely. For Chuck, a nearby Phenotrans facility offers an opportunity to clear his name after the outbreaks in Las Vegas and Fortune City. Exposing the pharmaceutical giant's lies would be a huge break for photojournalist Frank, who has an unexpectedly personal stake in the story as well.

Unlike Case Zero, the previous standalone downloadable adventure, Case West is a cooperative experience. Chuck and Frank are together the whole time, whether Frank is controlled by the game's AI or an online friend. There are a few notable differences between how Frank works in the single-player experience versus previous NPCs. As the introduction points out, these aren't the first zombies that Frank's fought. It stands to reason that players don't have to waste much time babysitting the character—he's a solid fighter, and (more importantly) won't die. Players can hand the character weapons, which he'll use until they either break or run out of ammo.

Case West reintroduces Frank's camera into the game, which isn't as big a deal as it might sound. While players are free to snap pictures of zombies or anything else that strikes their fancy, experience is only earned when shooting photos of designated targets. It's probably asking too much for Blue Castle to shoehorn a fully realized photo mode into a downloadable sidestory, but its current implementation is disappointingly limited.

Players who revel in the series' arsenal of weapons may feel equally let down. Since the storyline takes place in a pharmaceutical company facility, there just aren't as many available weapons. It clearly wouldn't make sense to have a sporting-goods store on a factory floor, for example. That said, plenty of bizarre and obscure items are available to harass the undead with, including chemicals, Segway knockoffs, and bonesaws. Also, some new items can be combined into inventive combo weapons.

Phenotrans has its share of secrets, and players uncover a few of them during the course of this brief adventure. You'll see a familiar face or two, and get a better sense of how the two main games are connected. If you're growing weary of the series' "take the survivors back to the safehouse" formula, cheer up. The folks Chuck and Frank meet up with know the facility well enough to escape on their own, once they've been helped out a bit.

Case West is a tricky proposition. Where Case Zero was a nice appetizer for players who were looking forward to Dead Rising 2, I'd guess that most of Case West's players have played through the sequel by now. It's hard to go back to a smaller venue, even in spite of the universe-expanding storyline. For diehard fans of the series, this one's a must-play. For everyone else, Case West is fun, but hardly essential. » **Jeff Cork**

» **Concept**  
Bring hero Frank West into the world of Dead Rising 2, complete with his camera

» **Graphics**  
The pharmaceutical factory setting is a nice change of pace from shopping centers and casinos

» **Sound**  
Zombies sound as pitiful as ever, and the new weapons have a nice aural oomph to them

» **Playability**  
The camera functionality doesn't add much to the game, but there's still enough zombie slicing to keep players occupied

» **Entertainment**  
Case West does a solid job of tying up the loose ends of the story while leaving things open for the inevitable sequel

» **Replay Value**  
Moderately high

# Lost In Shadow

Clever puzzles are undermined by poor controls

7.5

Wii

» **Concept**

Make a platformer/puzzle game in the vein of Ico and Limbo

**Graphics**

The visual filters make it look better than most Wii titles, but they're sometimes overdone

**Sound**

Ambient noise and a few enemy squeaks are about all you'll hear

**Playability**

The sluggish controls and frustrating combat are the game's biggest drawback

**Entertainment**

Lost In Shadow can be tedious, but those who stick with it will be rewarded

**Replay**

Moderately Low

Thanks to Nintendo's stable of time-tested mascots, there is no shortage of excellent platformers on the Wii. With *Lost In Shadow*, Hudson Entertainment aims to deliver a more mature adventure to gamers, trading in kid-friendly humor for an introspective storyline and action-heavy platforming for challenging puzzles. *Lost In Shadow* delivers on the latter, but even with some clever, continually-evolving game mechanics, the entertainment is dragged down by painfully unresponsive controls.

Like the main protagonist, *Lost In Shadow*'s storyline doesn't have a lot of weight. You play as the shadow of a boy that has been separated from his body and cast off of a giant tower. In order to reunite with your body, you must make your way back up the structure one level at a time, solving puzzles and collecting gems to unlock each new floor. The only other story elements are delivered in the form of signposts that contain short musings on your predicament, but they don't really go anywhere. Instead, the game focuses on your long climb back to the top.

*Lost In Shadow* starts out slow, and the lethargic gameplay will likely scare off many players before the game gets good. Your character controls similarly to the prince from the old 2D Prince of Persia titles, with a hefty delay every time you change directions, jump, or climb ladders. The combat is more affected by these poor controls than the platforming is, as you move too slowly to effectively dodge the attacks of your enemies. This becomes less of a problem as your health bar increases (via reading the aforementioned messages), but only in the sense that it allows you to absorb more cheap shots. The biggest issue, however, is the lack of save points. Dying on a floor requires you to completely restart it, which can easily negate 15-30 minutes of gameplay. You can force a save by returning down a level, but the amount of backtracking required makes it more trouble than it's worth.

Luckily, *Lost In Shadow*'s puzzles largely overcome these considerable flaws. The game throws a number of mechanics at you, such as shifting light sources, rotating viewpoints, and moving foreground objects, all of which transform the shadow landscape you traverse. A new mechanic is introduced halfway through the game that introduces some light



Your shadow doesn't walk on objects in the environment, but the shadows in the background



three-dimensional gameplay and creates more compelling puzzles. As I closed in on the final floors of the tower, I had a hard time putting down the controller. A late twist introduces a bit of unnecessary backtracking, and some floors feel excessively labyrinthine, but neither of these issues drag the overall gameplay too far down. Ultimately I can't recommend *Lost In Shadow*

to everyone. The puzzles and combat are too difficult for children (even on easy mode), and platforming fans will be put off by the unresponsive controls. *Lost In Shadow* can't compete with Nintendo's first-party offerings, but if you can accept its flaws, the mind-bending puzzles will keep you entertained to the end. » **Jeff Marchiafava**

Some puzzles involve the player manipulating light sources



Clunky controls make avoiding deadly objects harder than it should be



# Ghost Trick: Phantom Detective

Life after death isn't all it's cracked up to be

Style 1-Player Adventure Publisher Capcom Developer Capcom Release January 11 ESRB T

6

Because they're light on traditional gameplay, interactive adventure games need compelling stories, characters, and puzzles in order to work. Getting this formula right is what made the *Ace Attorney* series successful, and getting it wrong is what makes *Ghost Trick* a failure.

Considering that *Ghost Trick* is the latest project from *Ace Attorney* creator Shu Takumi, the game's bizarre premise shouldn't come as a surprise. You play as Sissel, a recently deceased spirit who can manipulate inanimate objects and travel four minutes into the past. Combining these two abilities allows you to participate in Rube Goldberg-style setups where Sissel flips, opens, and rotates various objects in order to



save people from their imminent deaths.

The concept is cool, but I was disappointed to discover that *Ghost Trick* doesn't have nearly the same charm as the *Ace Attorney* series. Sissel falls flat as a hero, the story uses convenient amnesia as a constant crutch, and a series of predictable twists deflate the overall mystery. In a game that depends on a strong narrative to keep players engaged, these shortcomings are difficult to forgive.

To make matters worse, *Ghost Trick* also stumbles in its puzzle design. Instead of allowing for the trial-and-error that leads to "ah-ha" moments of discovery, many situations have rigid solutions that you must execute with precise

timing. If you miss your one chance to possess a man riding by on a bicycle, or hit a tennis ball prematurely, you'll have to go back to a checkpoint. The checkpoints aren't well placed, either; expect to re-watch scenes (though you can skip through dialogue) and repeat actions just to get another shot at the problem areas.

Though the game misses some important marks, it isn't a completely lost cause. The character animations are incredibly fluid and impressive, and several of their conversations are good for a chuckle. Unfortunately, these scattered bits of life aren't enough to bring Sissel's adventure back from the dead. » **Joe Juba**



DS

» **Concept**

Solve a mystery and save people's lives by possessing random stuff

» **Graphics**

The animation is phenomenal, and the stylized art suits the tone well

» **Sound**

A few cool background tunes, but nothing that held my interest

» **Playability**

Crummy checkpoints discourage you from experimenting with the puzzles

» **Entertainment**

A few bright spots aren't enough to make *Ghost Trick* worthwhile

» **Play**

Moderate

# Kingdom Hearts Re:coded

The most skip-worthy entry in the series

Style 1-Player Action/RPG Publisher Square Enix Developer Square Enix/n.a.n.d. Release January 11 ESRB E10+

6.75

DS

» **Concept**

Transform a mobile phone game into a full-fledged handheld experience

» **Graphics**

A collection of reused and low-resolution assets from previous games

» **Sound**

Get ready to hear the same old Disney songs yet again

» **Playability**

A focus on precise platforming doesn't mix well with Re:coded's pesky camera

» **Entertainment**

New minigame types help resuscitate all too familiar levels and gameplay

» **Play Value**

Moderate

A confusing number of *Kingdom Hearts* games have released over the last few years, and by jumping all around the timeline, series mastermind Tetsuya Nomura hasn't made it easy to keep track of the events. *Re:coded* is the first title to pick up after the end of *Kingdom Hearts II* and puts you in control of franchise hero Sora — well, a digital replica of him at least. The game originally released episodically on mobile phones in Japan, but Square tweaked and beefed up the title for its DS release.

*Re:coded* takes its cues from *Tron*, as Disney's Mickey, Donald, and Goofy get sucked into a computer copy of overused worlds like Aladdin's Agrabah and Alice's Wonderland. They originally summoned Data Sora to deal with the bugs in the system to help decode a mysterious message, but eventually get trapped inside and need his help to escape. Aside from the reshaped areas, Sora ventures into new areas called system sectors, techno neon code rooms, to quash bugs plaguing the worlds. These futuristic dungeons are essentially the only new areas in the game, but it's not long before layouts repeat and become as stale as the rest.

The devs thankfully spruced up these maps with new-gameplay modes taken from other

genres. For example, rather than serving as a battle arena, Olympus Coliseum is a refreshing turn-based RPG in the vein of the *Mario & Luigi* series. Other variants include a side-scrolling platformer, a Space Harrier-style shooter, and a battlefield command stage where Sora has to boss AI allies around rather than attack himself. The RPG segment is easily the best, teasing what a less action-focused *Kingdom Hearts* experience could be. The platformer plays like the auto-scrolling running games that are all the rage on smart phones. The only problem is that it relies on the standard movement set of the main game, which is way too imprecise to meet the needs of the genre.

Though *Re:coded* suffers from heavily recycled levels and enemies, at least Square Enix innovated on the character growth. The new leveling system replicates a computer motherboard where players place microchips to boost stats and unlock new abilities. It's annoying that you don't know what some abilities will do until you unlock them, but they all are useful in the end. I especially liked the "cheat" switches that allow you to tweak various elements of the game for a price. You can trade off your health for more loot, or increase enemy strength for more prizes. It's unwise to slide things too far out of the ordinary,



but it's nice to have the option if you're shooting for something specific like more money or faster leveling.

*Re:coded* allows players to revisit previously completed worlds for additional fetch quests and more system sectors, but only completionists should bother. Near the end of the game you're going to have to run through all of these maps again anyway in a lazy move by Square to pad out the quest.

Despite the new gameplay types, *Re:coded*'s mostly recycled content feels too stale to recommend to anyone outside of the most die-hard fans. » **Bryan Vore**

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the score

## 9 | Hard Corps: Uprising

Platform PS3 • 360 Release February ESRB T

When you're scrolling through the DLG shop, it's easy to zip right past *Hard Corps: Uprising*. Do not make that mistake. This is a brand-new official HD entry in Konami's *Contra* series. Sure, the main characters wear shirts and have an anime look to them, but the moment you pick up the controller it feels like the pure run and gun bliss that only *Contra* can deliver. — Bryan Vore

## 8.25 | Plants vs. Zombies

Platform DS Release January 18 ESRB E10+

There just isn't that much different to say about *Plants vs. Zombies* on DS. It works, but the music, graphics, and framerate have taken a hit in the process. — Adam Biessener

## 6.5 | Kung-Fu Live

Platform PS3 Release December 7 ESRB T

Scanning players into this PSN brawler via PlayStation Eye is a neat gimmick, but strict space and lighting requirements lead to inconsistent rendering and move execution in combat. On the plus side, KFL's chopsocky, B-movie storytelling is entertaining, and striking poses for your in-game appearances in comic book panels is downright hilarious. — Annette Gonzalez

## 5 | Splatterhouse

Platform PS3 • 360 Release November 23 ESRB M

If you're looking for a mindless brawler that drenches the screen in blood, *Splatterhouse* delivers. If you're looking for a game that is fun to play and doesn't stagnate in its combat design in the first few minutes of play, you'll want to look elsewhere. — Andrew Reiner

## 9.5 | Mass Effect 2

Platform PS3 Release January 18 ESRB M

Reliving the choices of the first *Mass Effect* as an interactive comic book pales in comparison to importing your own Commander Shepard. However, aside from losing that consistency in the universe, *Mass Effect 2* is just as good on PS3 as it is on 360. — Joe Juba

## 6 | Faery: Legends of Avalon

Platform 360 Release November 11 ESRB E10+

*Faery* is an ambitious RPG offering a conversation system similar to *Mass Effect*, overworld flight reminiscent of *Drakan*, and combat that harks back to the heyday of *Final Fantasy*. With little in terms of polish and depth, not too mention a painfully dull story, *Faery's* promise quickly transforms into boredom. — Andrew Reiner

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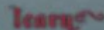


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## 6.75 | Marvel Super Hero Squad: The Infinity Gauntlet

Platform PS3 • 360 • Wii Release November 16 ESRB E10+

Despite its shortcomings, *Marvel Super Hero Squad: The Infinity Gauntlet* is a charming game. Even during the Galactus battle, it was hard not to smile while fighting the planet-hungry giant by firing tacos into his mouth from a flying truck. It's just a shame that *Infinity Gauntlet's* gameplay doesn't quite measure up to its abundant humor. — Jeff Cork

## 8 | You Don't Know Jack

Platform PS3 • 360 • Wii Release January 25 ESRB T

It's been a while since we last heard from the snarky pop-culture quiz series, and I didn't realize just how much I missed it. Host Cookie Masterson and his crew are back with loads of hilarious and bizarre trivia, with the franchise's trademark blend of high and low culture. If you have fond memories of the series or are in the market for an uproarious multiplayer game, it's time for a *Jack Attack*. — Jeff Cork

## 7.25 | Echochrome II

Platform PS3 Release December 21 ESRB E

The shadows cast by your *Move* controller's imitation of a flashlight are the landscape your tiny avatar must traverse, and getting him to the goal requires contorting his environment in seemingly impossible ways to create a path. It's a clever gimmick, but the fun is too often buried under layers of frustration created by overly complicated levels that demand a precision of control of which the game is simply not capable. — Adam Blesener

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# All is Fair in Love and War

Love is in the air, and even video game characters can feel its choking presence. While most people are lucky to meet some-

one at a party or club, video game characters always seem to find love on the battlefield. You might think this means we have nothing to learn from them, but video game romances seem to last longer than any of Hollywood's affairs. Add up your score to see which video game coupling you're destined to emulate.

**1. Aphrodite is the beautiful Greek goddess of love, but what is her fate in the God of War series?**

- a. Kratos runs her through with his blades before smashing her head against a stone pillar several times
- b. Kratos uses her to solve an elaborate environmental puzzle then abandons her before she meets an untimely demise
- c. Kratos finds Aphrodite in her chamber with her handmaidens and unleashes his inner monster upon her
- d. In order to protect Eve, the first Empress of Rome, Aphrodite helps Xena: Warrior Princess sneak into Olympus

**2. Cupid is often portrayed as a baby cherub who looks strikingly similar to Pit from Nintendo's Kid Icarus series. The original Kid Icarus received a sequel on Game Boy in 1991. What was this title called?**

- a. Kid Icarus: The Sacred Eggplant
- b. Kid Icarus: Pit's Adventure
- c. Kid Icarus: It's The Pits
- d. Kid Icarus: Of Myths and Monsters

**3. Speaking of cherubs, in 2000 Shiny Entertainment released Messiah, a game about a cherub sent to clean up the Earth by possessing rats, cyborgs and aliens. What was this cherub's name?**

- a. Bob
- b. Gabriel
- c. Dusty
- d. Pery

**4. The Prince of Persia titles almost always feature a prince seeking the hand of a princess, but it hasn't always been the same princess...or the same prince. Which one of these was not a love interest for one of the prince's incarnations?**

- a. Aesna
- b. Elika
- c. Tamina
- d. Farah

**5. There is an urban legend that says if you wish on a green M&M your true love will come to you. Sounds great - maybe you could wish on one of these M&M branded games instead. Which one of these games only delivers empty promises because it's a bogus title?**

- a. M&M's: Candy Coating
- b. M&M's: The Lost Formulas
- c. M&M's: Shell Shocked
- d. M&M's Beach Party

**6. In Gears of War 2, Dom spent a good portion of the game searching for his wife. What was her name?**

- a. Bernie
- b. Maria
- c. Helen
- d. Mrs. Dom

**7. Nathan Drake and Chloe Frazer heated up PS3s in Uncharted 2: Among Thieves. Actors Nolan North and Claudia Black voiced the couple, but that game wasn't the first time those two had worked on the same game. What game haven't these two prolific vocal talents worked on together?**

- a. Final Fantasy XIV
- b. God of War
- c. Mass Effect 2
- d. Dragon Age: Origins

**8. It turns out that Sonic is a bit of a ladies' man. No one can keep this hedgehog tied down. Which character has never had a romantic interest in Sonic?**

- a. Princess Elise
- b. Princess Sally
- c. Tails
- d. Amy Rose

**9. In Final Fantasy VII things got a little hot and heavy between Cloud and Aeris, which was a little skeezy since Aeris had once dated Cloud's best friend. What was the name of Aeris' first boyfriend?**

- a. Zack Fair
- b. Zack Morris
- c. Zack Highwind
- d. Zac Efron

**10. What is love?**

- a. Oh baby, don't hurt me. Don't hurt me no more
- b. A battlefield
- c. All you need
- d. I don't care, I have an Internet connection

## Answers

1-c, 2-d, 3-a, 4-a, 5-a, 6-b, 7-d, 8-c, 9-a, 10-ask your mom

## Score and Rank

### 0-1 correct:

#### Otacon and Sniper Wolf

Either you'll get in a fight over the check, or your best friend is going to kill your lover before she is devoured by wolves. One way or another this is going to end badly.

### 2-3 correct:

#### Meat Boy and Bandage Girl

It feels like you two were made for each other, but you're going to have to go through hell to make it work.

### 4-5 correct:

#### Tidus and Yuna

You feel like this is destiny, but your father might try to keep you apart, and it won't end well unless you start a New Game +.

### 6-7 correct:

#### Link and Zelda

Things will be a little awkward at first because one of you doesn't know how to talk to girls and the other doesn't like to be kissed, but if you work through it, this could be a relationship that withstands the test of time.

### 8-9 correct:

#### Nathan Drake and Elena Fisher

You have your ups and downs - you fight, you laugh, you bicker. But that's what real relationships are made of.

### 10 correct:

#### Mario and Luigi

Sometimes it turns out that the one you're supposed to be with is the one who's been there all along.

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