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

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Is It Out Of Control?

There is a video game circle of life, and that circle begins with developers and publishers making money. Sure, there are starving developers and failing publishers driven by their love of games, but ultimately video games is a business, and businesses need to make money.

I would never argue against their right to make money. I enjoy playing games, and I don't mind paying for the privilege of playing fantastic games (that's the consumer's role in the circle of life, by the way).

But there is a beast on the prowl, and that beast is the rapidly developing "free-to-play" space.

The free-to-play model is conceptually great, as it allows consumers to experience a game before they decide to throw down their hard earned cash. But at this point in their evolution it feels like publishers are going to great lengths to "trick" people into spending significantly more money than anyone with a conscience should condone. I find this fleeing to be scary.

The Smurfs' Village, which has been in the top grossing iPad apps list for weeks at the time of this writing, offers a pay option for just about every action you can make in the game. The core mechanics are well designed and entertaining, but the game constantly bombards you with opportunities to pay cash to advance and severely limits the gameplay options unless you're willing to open your wallet. So is the game really "free-to-play"?

Given its continual ranking as one of the highest grossing iPad apps, it's obvious the game is successful and people are willing to throw down cash to perform all kinds of actions in games. Ultimately, I can't blame the companies for in essence "giving the consumer what they want."

But I foresee a nightmare scenario where I'm playing Street Fighter online, and every match requires a quarter. Even worse, imagine that in order to advance to the next section of Dead Space 3, you have to either wait for 108 hours for your "Action Points" to reset, or you can pay \$5 for the next unseen portion of the game, which leaves you wondering how much you're really getting for your five bucks and asking how much further down the rabbit hole you have to go (or rather, how deep the publisher will reach into your pocket) before you reach the game's climax.

I understand that the people who have invested and created these products deserve an opportunity to make money, be it through advertising or selling items in game. I support that, but at what point does the obvious extortion pass the point of acceptability?

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Mass Effect 3

The Reapers have arrived on Earth, and now you will see the results of your decisions throughout the entire Mass Effect series. Find out more about Commander Shepard's last stand in our exclusive look at the final chapter in BioWare's sci-fi trilogy.

by Joe Juba



72 **Batman: Arkham City**



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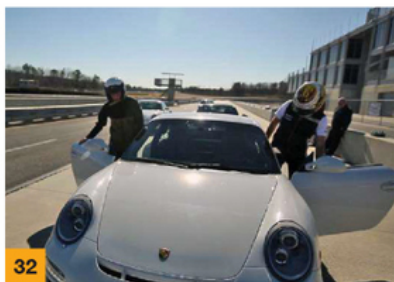
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Crysis 2 may finally put to bed all the questions about developer Crytek creating games that are more tech demos than entertainment. **by Matt Bertz**

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What is the name of Sephiroth's sword? Who is Diddy Kong's female counterpart? Test your gaming knowledge in this quiz/word puzzle.

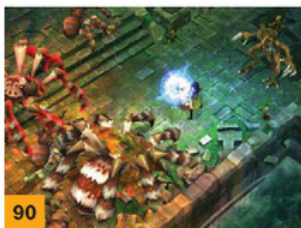


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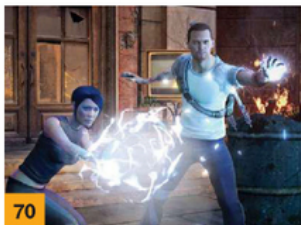


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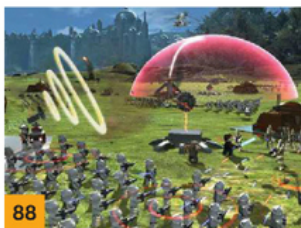
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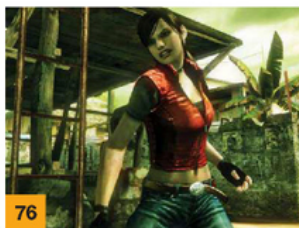
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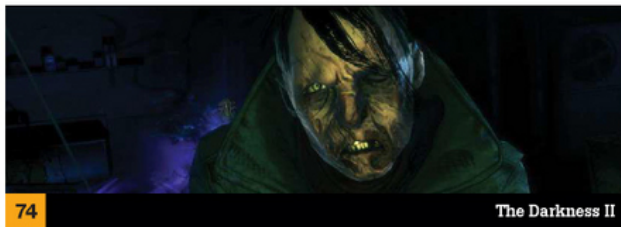
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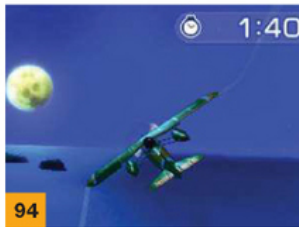
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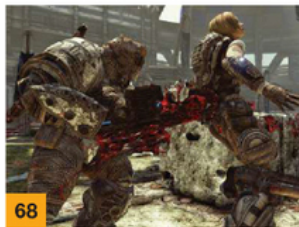


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This month in Feedback, readers rebut criticisms of Lara Croft's new look, scold an immature Black Ops player, recast the upcoming Uncharted movie, and lament bad video game purchases.

Double D'ohs

In regards to Valerie's Feedback comment in issue 215 about her displeasure with Lara Croft's new look, please let it be known that most of us female gamers are very happy with her new look, as it is more realistic and definitely more respectful. Valerie obviously doesn't see the bigger picture or understand how important a statement the redesign makes to the industry and to gamers. It took courage to break Lara's iconic mold and make her compatible with the gaming community as it stands today.

Erika C.
Chicago, IL

Did I really just read a letter in GI about a 22 year-old, very well-endowed female complaining about how she may not be able to win free martinis for a year because Crystal Dynamics re-crafted Croft? Seriously; Shut up. The redesign doesn't limit your ability to dress as the previous incarnations of the character at all, and there are still a plethora of heroines (and villains) who have retained their hourglass figures if you desire a "current" costume. I think that the redesign will be an interesting step for the franchise. I agree that it is strange to see Lara get a total makeover, but I'm confident in CD's ability to make the gameplay worthwhile enough to lessen the blow of the revamp. I'm sorry; I get that everyone is entitled to their own opinions, but no one feels bad for your enormous gazongas.

Brytni Donnelly
via email

The number of letters we received criticizing Valerie's stance on Lara's makeover barely outnumbered the letters requesting her picture and/or phone number, so we're going to go ahead and chalk this up as a win for feminism.

Contact Us

feedback@gameinformer.com



Rated M For Mature

I just read the letter in Feedback from Steve from East Lansing [Play Nice, issue 215] complaining about how his player card was under investigation in Black Ops. His opinion seemed to be that some mom reported him. Ignoring the fact that I don't know many moms who would sit down and play Black Ops, I'd just like to say that I'm 27 years old and I report every racist/sexual/offensive emblem I see. When I come home from a bad day at work, I want to sit down with a beer and unwind by having some fun with a game. I don't need to look at crudely drawn clip art depicting sex acts. If I wanted to see boobs I'd buy my wife some flowers. Grow up, Steve.

Andy Tschida
Minneapolis, MN

Regarding the "Play Nice" Feedback letter in issue 215. As an almost-40 year old woman with no children who loves to play Black Ops on my PS3, I am probably the one who reported your player card. You see, having the freedom to design your own explicit and disgusting image doesn't mean that I, or any other woman, should have to look at it when we beat you. If you feel that the gaming industry should support more mature gamers, then the best sign of maturity is a non-harassing gamer card that doesn't degrade some culture or gender.

Rachel
Columbus, OH

While we received a few letters defending Steve's constitutional right to be obnoxious, most of our readers agreed with Andy and Rachel: Using adult language doesn't make you a mature gamer - respecting your fellow players does.

The Squeaky Wheel

As a fan of the Battlefield series and a veteran since BF2, I'm a bit disappointed with Patrick Bach's reasoning behind the console versions not getting 64-player matches, based on the lack of requests from players [Battlefield 3 cover story, issue 215]. I was unaware that if I wanted new features in a game I had to take to the Internet and complain until I got my way. Just because console gamers didn't voice their complaints about a lack of 64-player matches doesn't mean that we don't want them. If there are hardware constraints or if Xbox Live can't

handle 64-player matches, then that's fine and I understand. But if the sole reason they are leaving a feature out of the game is because of the lack of complaints then that seems like a step in the wrong direction.

Dylan
West Lafayette, Indiana

We were also surprised when Battlefield 3's executive producer Patrick Bach told us that the reason PC gamers are getting 64-player battles is because they were the ones complaining about not having it. But don't bug us about the decision - let DICE know how you feel about it.

Casting Couch

In your "The Good, The Bad, And The Ugly" column in issue 214, I read that Mark Wahlberg is being considered for the role of Nate Drake in the Uncharted movie. Wahlberg is good, but he's no Drake. I'm with you guys on Nathan Fillion as a good choice for Nate Drake. Does Naughty Dog have any say in who gets cast as Nate Drake? Because after Wahlberg's "captivating" performance as Max Payne, I'd think Naughty Dog would keep Marky Mark as far away as possible from the project.

Paul Disscher
Emmetsburg, IA

I just read that Mark Wahlberg will be playing Nathan Drake in the Uncharted film, and although I do love Mark Wahlberg and I'm familiar with the gaming community's preference for Nathan Fillion, I still don't feel either one of them would make a good Nate Drake. This may sound crazy, but when I think of Nathan Drake, I think of Bradley Cooper. I truly feel he's got that everyman appeal that Naughty Dog was looking for in its creation of Drake. I'm curious if anyone at Game Informer's staff agrees.

Mike Leja
Williamstown, MA

You mean the guy who had diarrhea in Wedding Crashers? Yeah, we could see him as Nathan Drake - but only if Nathan Drake has diarrhea through the entire movie.

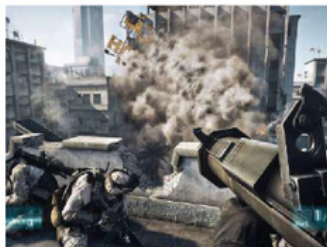
Subliminal Messages

I was reading Adam Blessener's article on Tera [Massive, issue 215] and I noticed that the

caption over the picture had some boldface randomly scattered through it. Is it some secret conspiracy? Are you trying to communicate with your robot/cyborg/alien/gamer brethren? Are you taking over the Earth?! What will you do with us once the takeover is complete?! Please let me die painlessly!

Craig Redden
via email

No need to freak out, Craig. The bold lettering was unintentional. Trust us: When our robot, cyborg, and alien brethren begin taking over the world, you'll know it.



Love Is A Battlefield 3

I wanted to let you all know that I absolutely loved your Battlefield 3 cover story. I can't remember a game that I have anticipated more. The info I was able to find via other sources was pretty scarce. The game looks amazing, and the article went into more depth about the game than I thought would even be available at this time. Kudos! I'm really glad I found your magazine.

Jared Gulick
Allentown, PA

Just want to say thanks for the very informative mag you all put out. The cover story on Battlefield 3 was great, along with the article with Mr. Bushnell showing how his life has come full circle. On a separate note, thanks for shipping to overseas locations for those of us in the U.S. Army. We move around a lot and it's nice to know that no matter where we go we will have some consistency in our lives.

SSG Barrera
Ansbach, Germany

Short Answers to Readers' Burning Questions

"Is anyone going to actually read this question?"

Unfortunately,

"I love you. Can I have a hug?"

For the last time, Mom, NO.

"Dear, Game Informer staff. If you could have any super power, what would it be?"

The magic ring that the Green Hornet has is pretty cool...

Quantified!

We have received over 50 letters informing us that Seth Rogan wasn't in *Paul Blart: Mall Cop*. Roughly half of them excused the "mistake" on the grounds that both movies equally sucked.

Worst News Tip Of The Month:

"A man tried to buy an Xbox 360 with weed and war arrested."



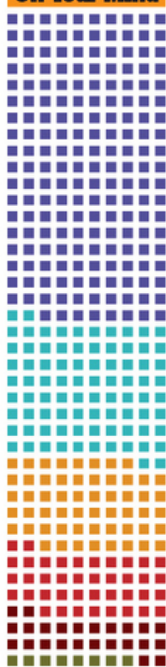
(Left) Wizard World's Chloe Dykstra and Meagan demonstrate the proper way to pose for a picture on a WMD at a recent Homefront party. **(Center)** Bender Helper's Nick Parker and Ben clearly weren't paying attention. **(Right)** Meagan chowed down on some brains with PopCap's infamous zombies.

CANDID PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY



GI SPY
continued on page 8

On Your Mind



- Gaming Disappointments **47%**
- Battlefield 3 Excitement **21%**
- Reboots Readers Want to See **14%**
- Props For Issue 215's Ice-T Interview **10%**
- Complaints About The Ice-T Interview (Haters Gonna Hate) **6%**
- Hype Over 3DS/N3P **2%**

Question Of The Month:

What's your favorite military FPS franchise, and why?

Gaming's Biggest Let-downs

In Issue 214, we asked readers about their most disappointing video game purchases. *Sonic ended up being the biggest culprit for buyer's remorse, although no one could agree on which of his titles was the worst. Here are some other answers we received.*

I was very much anticipating the release of Haze. It was being developed by the geniuses at Free Radical. I mean, these guys hit three consecutive homeruns with the TimeSplitters series, and some of them even worked on the legendary GoldenEye. But when I bought it and started it up, I only played 30 minutes before I removed that huge disappointment from my PS3 and returned it to the store.

Dustin Palmer

Dinowarz for the NES. All I can say is robotic dinosaur battles – how cool is that? After begging my parents for a month and a half, they finally bought it for me as a Christmas present. Thrilled, I ran upstairs and slammed it into my machine and readied myself for some epic carnage. After a half hour of cheap levels, cheesy enemies, crappy graphics, and laughably easy bosses, I was finished. I remember being terribly confused that there wasn't anything more to the game and pissed off at being so let down. I mean, seriously, it takes a pretty weak effort to disappoint an eight-year-old.

Dave Brouillette

Metrod: Other M is unquestionably the most disappointing game I have ever purchased. This game single-handedly changed one of the most expertly crafted and understated female characters in video games into whiny, archetypal, pre-teen garbage.

Charlie Dearing

By far the worst game I ever bought was Shenmue 2. The first Shenmue was an interesting dock worker sim with light forklift racing elements that was ruined by the addition of some sort of story. After playing about half an hour of Shenmue 2, I hadn't done any dock work at all. What gives?

Josh Pruitt



Missing Mass Effect

I recently tried the demo for Mass Effect 2, and as a fan of shooters, RPGs, and sci-fi, I would really like to play this game. However, I feel that I'd be missing out on a lot since I didn't play the first game. Should I jump into the Mass Effect series without playing the first game and hope for the best, or bypass the series entirely?

Jeremy Jones
via email

One of the coolest features of Mass Effect is the fact that your decisions carry over from one game to the next, and missing out on that is disappointing. However, you would be doing yourself a bigger disservice if you skipped Mass Effect 2 just because you didn't play the first game. When it comes to a great video game series, it's always better to be late to the party than to never experience it at all.



(Left) Andy and Annette created their own Ocean's 11 crew with fellow industry veterans under the faux clouds of the Paris hotel in Las Vegas. (Right) Nothing ruins a karaoke party faster than a bunch of Game Informer editors. Apologies to 2K Games' Jennifer-Lee Heinsler and Sega's Thu Nguyen

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skin to reduce irritation.

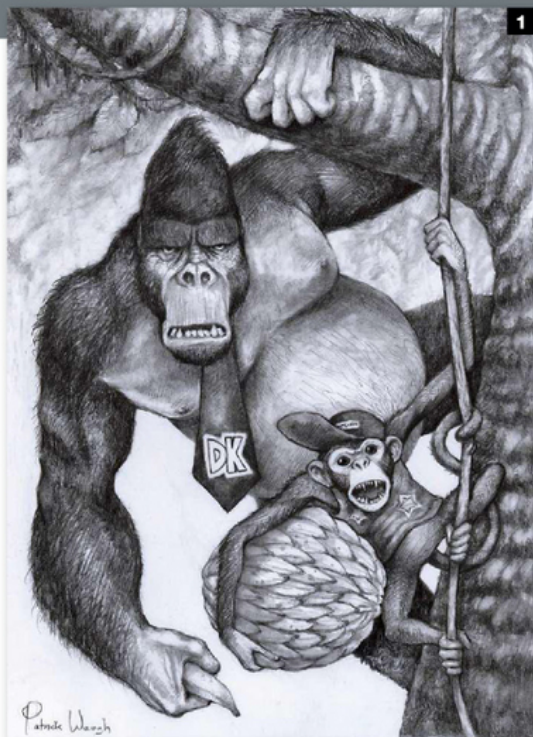


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Send to:

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Reader Art Contest
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3rd Floor
Mpls, MN 55401



WINNER 1 Patrick Waugh The first image from Donkey Kong: Act Zero **2 Dorian Harry** After murdering virtually every Greek god, Kratos destroys the moon in a brutal quicktime event **3 Katrina Bazan** This Sub-Zero model isn't accurate unless it features a fully-modeled clay skeleton and organs inside **4 Jason Smejkal** I don't think I saw this many colors throughout the entire duration of Dead Space 2 **5 Aaron Jones** Duke's looking a little strung out here. He'll probably chalk it up to "tiger blood" or some crap if you ask him about it.



GI SPY

continued from page 8

(Left) Writers Dooma Wendschuh and Corey May hang out with Jade Raymond and her fellow Ubisoft peeps at this year's DICE conference. **(Middle)** Also in attendance were Harmonix's John Drake, GDC director Meggan Scavo, and Insomniac's James Stevenson. **(Right)** It wouldn't be a party without GI's former media editor Nick Ahrens and Giant Bomb's Jeff Gerstmann.



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The 3DS Is Here

Nintendo Takes Handheld Gaming to a New Dimension

by Matt Helgeson

Announced last March, Nintendo's 3DS has been highly anticipated by gamers the world over. Any new Nintendo handheld is big news; the company has dominated the category since the release of the original Game Boy in 1989. While competitors from Sega to Sony have tried to make a dent in Nintendo's market share, all have failed. The 3DS, which is the successor to the most lucrative game system in history in the DS, is Nintendo's hope for staying on top of the handheld mountain. The 3DS released in America on March 27, and while this issue went to print before we learned how many units were purchased at launch, the Japanese launch – in which the unit was virtually sold out across the country – points to a strong first day in America. Nintendo sent final 3DS hardware to the press a few weeks in advance of its release, and we wasted no time tearing our box open and putting it through its paces. Here are our impressions.

The Features



StreetPass and SpotPass

Nintendo is placing a big emphasis on the 3DS' Wi-Fi functions. Two of the ways the system will use Wi-Fi are the StreetPass and SpotPass modes. Both work in similar ways: you turn the modes on, then walk around with your 3DS. In StreetPass, you can exchange Miis with fellow users you pass (you choose the Mii and greeting you'd like to share) or other game-related data, songs from your SD card, or in-game items. SpotPass will find local Wi-Fi hotspots and automatically download games, system updates, and other data from Nintendo. Nintendo also plans to set up its own hotspots in major cities to service 3DS owners. Of course, both of these functions can be accessed by developers for use in their games.

The 3DS interface is nicely designed. Games and apps are organized in a scrolling, horizontal bar similar to Sony's cross media bar. While Pictochat is gone, there's a lot to dig into.

Online Play/Friend Codes: While the 3DS still uses Friend Codes, Nintendo has made the system much more useable and now comparable to Xbox Live and PSN. Instead of a jumble of Friend Codes for each game, each DS owner only has one Friend Code attached to the 3DS itself. Once you've added a friend, you can access their profile, which provides information such as their online status and what game they are playing. In game, you can scroll through a friends list instead of re-inputting a code. If you're near a friend, you can bypass the Friend Code altogether via the local friends search option. Online play is accessed through in-game menus.

Nintendo 3DS Sound: This mode allows you to play music saved to your SD card and record brief sound bites that can be edited (slowed down, speed up, pitched higher or lower) with a

simple XY axis onscreen slider. You can also add songs to a StreetPass playlist and share them with other 3DS units.

Mii Maker: This Mii editor is similar to the Wii version. All the basic functionality is there. The camera mode automatically creates a Mii for you based on a photo you take with the system's forward- or rear-facing camera. Mine turned out pretty ugly, but perhaps the 3DS was trying to tell me something. You can send Miis to other 3DS units via StreetPass and use the Mii Channel to receive new Miis, but you can not upload Miis to the Mii Channel from the 3DS. There is also a QR reader (square, more complex UPC codes that are common in Japan and gaining popularity in the U.S.) that uses the camera to scan a code and award you with a new Mii. We received Nintendo's Reggie Fils-Aime from a promotional QR code Nintendo gave us.

Mii Plaza: This mode is for the Miis you collect with the StreetPass function. Basically, you leave your 3DS in sleep mode while you walk around, and you'll automatically receive notifications when

you've passed a fellow 3DS owner who has Mii StreetPass enabled. Just hit approve, and his or her Mii will then populate your Mii Plaza. You can then use that character in the game Find Mii, a light turn-based RPG that's included. Jeff Cork and I used this feature to trade Miis, and it worked well.

Download Play: Allows you to connect with nearby 3DSs to play single-cart multiplayer. We experienced problems with this feature, including numerous game crashes on multiple titles.

Activity Log: Keeps a record of the games you play, including the total playtime logged in each title. The 3DS also has a pedometer that records the number of steps you take while carrying the unit in sleep mode. The pedometer can also be used with certain titles, like *Nintendogs*, which allows you to "walk" your dog while you walk in the real world.

Play Coins: Play Coins are a 3DS currency that you can earn by walking around with the unit in Sleep Mode. The unit's pedometer keeps track of

your steps, and you earn one Play Coin for each 100 steps taken (up to 10 coins per day, and a limit of 300 coins total). These coins can later be spent in the Mii Plaza on a puzzle minigame or on buying party members in the Find Mii turn-based RPG. Being able to buy new puzzle pieces and Find Mii combatants are valuable options for those who live in less populous areas and are unable to exchange pieces or Miis with passersby.

You can also use Play Coins to buy new levels in some of the AR Games, including archery and fishing. Some 3DS titles let you spend Play Coins for in-game items as well. For example, *Super Street Fighter IV: 3D Edition* lets you exchange Play Coins for "Figure Points," which unlock statues of Ryu, Chun-Li, and other characters.

Note: While Nintendo has promised features like Netflix streaming movies, 3D movie trailers, and an Internet browser, those functions were not implemented at press time.

The Hardware

Priced at \$249.99, the 3DS costs 100 dollars more than the DS did at its launch in 2004. With such a hefty price tag, you'd expect a unit with a more premium look and feel than the ugly, cheap looking original DS hardware. For the most part, we were impressed with the unit. It's comparable to the build quality of the DS Lite, the much-improved second iteration of the original DS. It's approximately the same size as the DS Lite as well.

The unit comes in two colors: Aqua Blue and Cosmo Black. Both colors are attractive, but we preferred Cosmo Black. The finish is high quality, similar to that of the DS Lite or the original PS3, and features a gradient effect, gradually shifting from a dark black or blue to a lighter tone on the back of the unit. Overall, it feels well made and durable, a hallmark of past Nintendo devices.

The unit has a physical power button along with the traditional d-pad, face buttons, and left and right shoulders. The select, start, and home buttons are placed under the bottom screen. It also adds an analog pad, similar to that of the PSP's. However, it feels much better; it's got a rubberized finish and is concave, making it more comfortable than the PSP's analog nub. Volume, wireless, and 3D functions are assigned to sliders on the side of the unit. The cartridge slot is located in the same location as it was on the DS Lite. It accommodates both 3DS and DS cartridges.

The top screen, which is used for 3D display, is a wider aspect ratio than that of the DS, measuring at 3.53 inches wide by 1.81 inches high and featuring a resolution of 800 x 240 pixels. The lower touchscreen sports a much lower 320 x 240 resolution at the same dimensions as the DS's screen (though the resolution is slightly higher than the older system's 256 x 192 frame). As before, the touch functionality is accurate and responsive.

The unit also comes with a charging cradle, which lets you set it on your desktop to charge through a plastic wedge base. This also comes in handy if you want to play at a table or desk, allowing you to keep a steady viewing angle.

*Like the DS, the unit has stereo speakers and a headphone jack. The audio quality is surprisingly clear; these tiny speakers perform admirably for their size. We wish the volume went a bit higher; you'll need headphones in a noisy environment. The microphone, which I used for both recording my voice and for commands in *Nintendogs*, worked well, though the recordings had the tinny, thin sound I associate with early USB computer microphones.*

The 3DS includes back- and forward-facing cameras. The back-facing array is actually two stereoscopic cameras, which allow you to take 3D pictures as well, and save them to the included 2GB Toshiba SD memory card (which fits into a slot on the side of the unit). With a resolution of 640 x 480 pixels and no flash, the 2D images aren't on par with most cell phone cameras, let alone dedicated digital cameras. By comparison, the iPhone 4's highest resolution photos are 2048 x 1536.

The included stylus now fits into a slot on the top of the unit, under the hinge. It has a metallic finish, and now telescopes out to make it a bit longer than the stylus on the DS Lite; it's a small, but nice improvement for those of us with bigger hands.

continued on page 18



Augmented Reality

One of the coolest features of the 3DS is its ability to use its 3D cameras for augmented reality games. The unit comes with a pack of six AR Cards. Five are pictures of familiar Nintendo characters (Mario, Link, Kirby, Samus, and three Pikmin), while the sixth has a question mark on it. The character cards work simply: set them on the table, focus the 3D camera on them, and a 3D model of the character will be displayed on the surface of your table or desk, allowing you to take a photo. The question mark card is more interesting, as it opens up some minigames to play in three-dimensional space.

The best was a target-shooting mode, which opens up from the card after you lay it on the table and point the camera at it. You aim by physically moving your camera view around, shooting targets until you open up a boss battle with a dragon. Seeing computer graphics overlaid on a real world environment is a very cool trick that Nintendo will hopefully expand on in the future. Some other games are also included: a fishing contest, a graffiti drawing mode, and AR Shot, a fun contest where you aim a pool ball toward a goal over morphing, changing 3D topography.

Face Raiders is another game that uses AR functions. You start by taking a photo of your face, which is then transposed onto a ball with a propeller on top. These face balls then start hilariously flying around the room you're in (displayed through the 3D camera) and attacking you. You must then destroy your flying doppelgangers by shooting balls at them. It's a fairly limited experience, but it's fun and will be useful in showing off the 3DS' unique functionality to your friends.



The Bottom Line

As a policy, we don't assign a grade to a system at launch, as too much can change over time in terms of both system updates and software. Ultimately, the games will define a system; you can read our thoughts on the launch lineup in our Reviews section. However, outside of *Super Street Fighter IV: 3D Edition*, nothing in the launch lineup seems like a defining or system-selling title. Let's hope Nintendo has some surprises in store for us.

The 3DS itself is a well designed, solidly made piece of hardware. Though more expensive than past Nintendo handhelds, its build quality and finish look and feel very high quality. The controllers, buttons, and ports are all comfortable, durable, and well placed. While it's not a graphical powerhouse, even the initial launch games impressed us; it's definitely a big step up from the DS.

Of course, the real hook is the 3D display, which is quite impressive. The glasses-free experience delivers a great sense of depth without sacrificing clarity or resolution. To deliver something that's never been done before – and on a relatively affordable

The Tech

The 3DS experience is something very special – the first time you see 3D effects in real time without glasses is memorable. It's an amazing bit of technology. In my play sessions, I didn't encounter any issues with eyestrain, which some doctors in Japan had worried about prior to the 3DS' launch. For those with more sensitive vision, you can turn down – or totally disable – the 3D display at any time with the slider control.

Every game we played was fully functional in 2D. However, I have some reservations about the 3D viewing angle, which must be very precise. Tipping the unit in any direction, even slightly, will result in an annoying "double vision" effect.

Usually, the initial batch of titles reveal a system that falls somewhere between the DS and the PSP in terms of graphical power. It's not a huge step forward, but the screen displays are bright and clear, and we noticed plenty of details – like lush fur textures in *Nintendogs*, and nicely rendered 3D environments in *Pilotwings* – that aren't possible on the DS. Add in the wow factor provided by the 3D effects, and it's a handheld that impresses. With a relatively weak launch lineup, we'll have to wait to see what the 3DS can do when more elaborate games like the *Ocarina of Time* remake, *Kid Icarus: Uprising*, and *Resident Evil: The Mercenaries* are released.

Battery Concerns

Our major complaint thus far is the 3DS' battery life. Nintendo estimates that the system can go three to five hours between charges, depending on what functions you are using. This revelation drew criticism prior to launch, and it appears to be a very real problem. In my time with the system, I'd estimate that the 3 to 5 hour window is sadly accurate – don't expect this to last you through a trans-Atlantic flight like the DS did. At least the PSP had the excuse of a physical disc drive to explain its short battery life. Given that this is another cartridge-based handheld, it seems like a blunder on Nintendo's part. Thankfully, third-party manufacturers like Nyko are already stepping to the fore with longer-life replacement batteries for the 3DS. They might be the first mandatory accessory purchases we've seen in the industry since the lighting attachments we all suffered through with the original, non-backlit Game Boy Advance.

handheld – is a major accomplishment. The big question is whether developers will make games that utilize the effect in interesting ways, something they have largely failed to do with the Wii's motion controls. Still, our initial impressions of the 3DS are positive, and it appears to be yet another triumph for Nintendo in the handheld market. ♦



The original River City Ransom

River City Ransom is back, and RCR 2 (for consoles and PC) is even being made by some of the original creators. The game is coming out this summer (winter on PC), and we expect it to be a downloadable title. Thirty years later, are Alex and Ryan still enrolled at River City High?

Good

A recent motion capture casting call from studio Telsey & Company leaked info about a future Rockstar Games project codenamed Rush. Superannuation uncovered casting details, which point toward a Rockstar game set in California starring characters such as a weed evangelist, FBI agent, cult leader, mellow swinger, and more. With the FBI involved, could this be announced-but-gone-dark game Agent? Or is it Grand Theft Auto V?



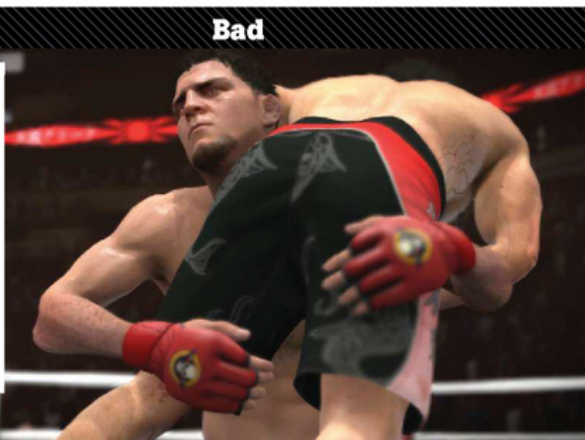
the Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

news
with a
sarcastic
spin

Bad



Square Enix has canceled Gun Loco, a title about a prison planet where the inmates run the asylum. Sounds like it would have been an awesome game, actually.



EA Sports' MMA franchise found itself in a weird spot after Strikeforce was absorbed by UFC. The Strikeforce-allied game featured one of its fighters, Fedor Emelianenko, on its cover. EA says it hasn't yet committed to a sequel to the game, but this sure doesn't help matters. UFC says that it's not going to interfere with Strikeforce, but the conventional wisdom is that UFC is simply waiting out Strikeforce's two-year contract with Showtime before absorbing its fighters. UFC currently has a deal with EA rival THQ that goes through 2017.



What do you call an encore that nobody asked for? Ubisoft is crafting what it claims is an original title that is nothing like other games that may be out there. You be the judge: Rocksmith (out in September) lets you play along to 45 songs from bands like the Rolling Stones and David Bowie as you strum in time to stuff onscreen with a real guitar. Oh, and the game can also be bought in a \$200 PS3 or Xbox 360 bundle that comes with the game and a real guitar.

Ugly



Industry analyst Michael Pachter revealed an aspect of the February NPD numbers that the sales organization wasn't making public — Xbox 360 Kinect bundles outsold the PS3 Move bundles five-to-one that month. Surprise. One company aggressively marketed its product, and the other let its launch leak out like a fart in the wind. Guess which one is which.

Quotable

“Of course I want to make it... Sega I think is going to let me make it, I think it is just up to the budget.”

— Yu Suzuki on

the ever-tantalizing

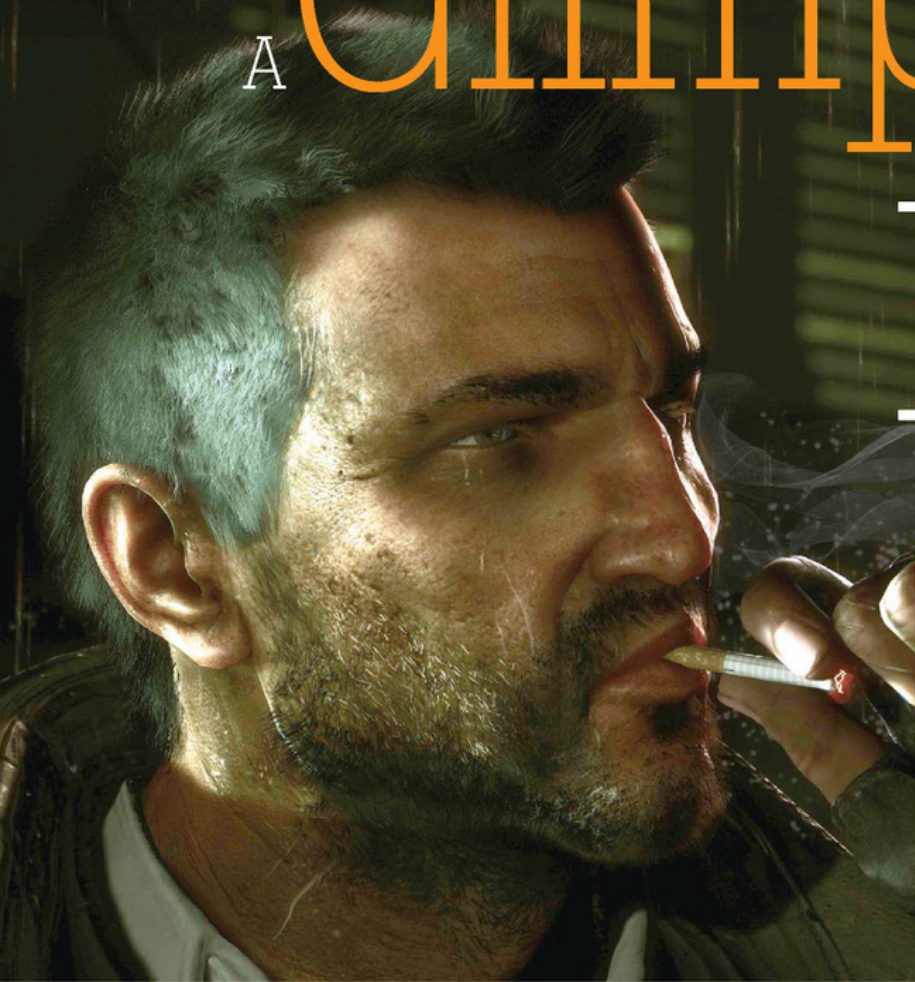
possibility of Shenmue 3



A Glimpse

Into the

Fut



Over the past few years, the dominance of Epic's Unreal Engine 3 has been striking. Filling the void left by id Software's ill-received Doom 3 engine, Unreal 3 has become ubiquitous, powering everything from shooters like BioShock to Epic subsidiary Chair Entertainment's 2D action/adventure Shadow Complex. With the release of Infinity Blade, Epic proved that the flexible development platform could even deliver awe-inspiring graphics on iPhone.

Epic shows no signs of giving up its iron grip on the engine licensing market. At this year's Game Developer's Conference, the developer showed a new tech demo designed to showcase new top-end features being added to the engine, including improved shadowing, depth of field, lighting, and reflective effects. Some of these features will be put to use on current high-end DirectX 11 PC graphics cards. It's important to note that the demo was run on a PC outfitted with three top-of-the-line Nvidia GeForce GTX 580 cards – the most expensive graphics configuration on the market today. However, Epic's Mark Rein feels that this is an indication of where mainstream PC and console hardware might go in the next few years.

"Maybe the next Nvidia graphics card bump means we can use two, we don't need three," Rein said, "and maybe the next bump means we can use just one. And the next bump after that means that we can use the mid-range card."

Unreal

Epic shows off its latest Unreal engine technology at GDC

by Matt Helgeson

The Samaritan demo

Epic's always had a knack for drama, and the clip shown at GDC was far from a clinical tech demo. Entitled "The Samaritan," it would have made an amazing introduction to a new Epic IP (which led to some heated speculation, but more on that later).

It starts with a panning shot of a city street at night, which nicely shows off multiple ambient lighting sources from a variety of neon signs reflected on the rain-slick pavement. Add in the flashing lights from a police car and a roving spotlight, and it's a tour de force in real-time light and shadowing. The camera pans up to the clip's titular protagonist, who's attempting to cut the chain on a padlocked door with a blowtorch. He briefly pauses to light a cigarette with the torch, allowing us to see the ultra-realistic skin textures and wispy trails of smoke curl around his face. He pauses and walks to the edge of the roof of the building he's attempting to enter. Down below a group of armed thugs are beating on a pedestrian.

From here, all hell breaks loose. Suddenly, his body covers itself with thick, metallic looking plating – a morphing effect similar to that of Mystique in the X-Men movies. He leaps down, lands with a thud, and begins to dispatch the heavily armored men. Throughout the battle, we see a variety of eye-popping effects, from slow-motion blur to the realistic shatter of plate glass. The Samaritan quickly morphs between his human form and his armored, alien-looking form, which he uses to repel bullets from the last thug's machine gun. After dispatching the last adversary with a grisly headshot, he pauses to light another smoke. In the background, we see a giant robotic walker approach. He turns to face the insect-like mech, smiling as it issues a warning. Here again, we see the amazing new lighting effects, as the Samaritan appears washed out in the harsh halo of the walker's spotlight. The Samaritan smiles, throws his cigarette in the mech's unblinking eye, and charges towards it...at which point the action stops, revealing the familiar "Powered by Unreal Technology" logo we've seen in so many games.





DYNAMIC REFLECTION SHADOWS ON



DYNAMIC REFLECTION SHADOWS OFF



SUBSURFACE SCATTERING

A look at things to come?

The Samaritan demo gave us a new cache of technology buzzwords: DirectX 11 dynamic tessellation and displacement, subsurface scattering, and shadowing point light reflection, among others. But the real excitement of the dip comes from seeing what gaming might look like a few years from now, whether on next-generation PC graphics cards or consoles.

Many have speculated that it also might have been a sneak peek at a future Epic game franchise. In an interview with EGM in December of last year, Epic's Cliff Bleszinski told the publication that the company was working on a new IP being headed up by former Prototype designer Eric Holmes. He also told gamers to keep their eyes peeled at GDC.

Epic's Mark Rein denied that the Samaritan demo was intended to reveal a new IP in an interview with IGN, saying that a team of about a dozen tasked with "push[ing] technology" created the demo. However, it's worth noting that early showings of the Unreal 3 engine at industry trade shows were made up of environments and characters that were later used in Gears of War. Neither Rein nor Epic technical director Tim Sweeney (see sidebar) ruled out the possibility that this demo might later become a game project. While this most recent Unreal 3 demo definitely shows us what games will look like in the future, it's also very possible that we've seen our first footage of what could be the next big Epic franchise.

The Mind Behind The Engine

In this exclusive interview, we ask Epic's technical director and CEO Tim Sweeney about the company's new Unreal 3 engine demo, and whether this could be a first look at a new epic IP.

What are some of the most notable new Unreal Engine 3 features that you showed at GDC?

Unreal Engine 3's DirectX 11 support is the basis for most of the new features we're showing. We're utilizing tessellation and displacement, subsurface mapping to amplify geometry, increasing the detail of characters dramatically as they approach the player. Besides improving the visuals, tessellation enables artists to create these highly detailed, realistic characters more efficiently than traditional modeling techniques.

Unreal Engine 3 now supports image-based reflections, enabling surfaces of any shape to reflect an approximate version of scenes with varying glossiness and blurriness. In Samaritan, you can see this in the reflections of neon lights on wet walls and the "long" headlight reflections on slick streets that move as cars drive by.

This is complemented by high-quality dynamic shadows from many environment lights, including point lights and other light sources. When the robot in Samaritan hovers under the street light its shadow is reflected dynamically beneath it onto the pavement.

Subsurface scattering simulates the light that scatters inside semi-transparent materials. It's the key to lifelike skin, exposing illuminated flesh layers where you expect to see ruddiness and veins. Some light is absorbed and some is reflected, so non-opaque surfaces appear to be more luminous. Our characters have more natural-looking hair thanks to improved anti-aliasing support, naturally softening the edges of the hair.

Bokeh depth of field (DOF) provides a filmic quality to games. Bokeh refers to the blur of an image's out-of-focus areas and lights, which often cast small circles or hexagonal accents in the camera lens as you pass by a light source.

How are these new features going to impact the games we play in the next few years?

I'm most excited about the ability for more realistic characters and movie-quality environments to enhance the player's emotional attachment to the game world. In the beginning, games only delivered fun, engaging challenges — Donkey Kong's graphics were sufficient for that. Doom was, to me, the first game with sufficient realism to deliver a genuinely scary experience. Game developers have much further to go in delivering truly dramatic interpersonal experiences. Alyx in Half Life 2 offered a glimpse into this possibility; I think increasingly lifelike characters are the key to further progress.

The demo ran on a PC with three new Nvidia GeForce graphics cards. Obviously that's well above the consumer standard now, even for gaming rigs. How long will it be

before we see PCs on the market capable of running this demo with all the effects turned on?

We're doing trailblazing work here, so our early technology is way more brute force than a final product. With significant further optimization work, I expect we could deliver this quality of experience on a single high-end graphics card. Go out two or three years, and thanks to Moore's Law [referring to the theory that computing power doubles approximately every two years - Ed.] that's going to be mass-market hardware.

What are some of your favorite parts of the demo that some fans might miss?

To me, it's the little details that stand out. The splashes of rain on the ground, causing ripples in puddles to be highlighted by the reflections of a street sign. The shadows on the character's face underlaid by light reflected through his skin. The subtle turbulent ripples in the smoke from his cigarette. The little hexagonal blur patterns on distant objects, simulating the appearance of light masked by a camera's iris.

Is this demo partially aimed at the console makers? Do you expect the next generation of consoles to be able to run this demo?

This demo is aimed at everyone who is forward thinking in the game industry: developers, hardware makers, hardcore gamers and, of course, hardware makers of all sorts. Of next-generation consoles the Samaritan demo only requires what Moore's law will readily provide.

Many have speculated that Samaritan might be a new Epic IP. Was this it? If you're not confirming that it is a new IP, is it at least something that will possibly be developed further?

A small team of extremely talented designers, artists, and programmers spent a lot of time fleshing out the world you saw in the Samaritan demo. Where we go from here is a question that can only be answered with time.

Are any of the features and enhancements to the Unreal Engine that we saw in the video able to be used on Xbox 360 or PS3 right now?

The features and enhancements we showed in the Samaritan demo are intended to showcase both next-generation hardware possibilities and DirectX 11 on today's high-end PCs. While parts of it, such as cloth and some post-processing effects, is technologically compatible with Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3, the sheer magnitude of the features' usage in Samaritan goes far beyond what current-gen consoles can run. All of these techniques are available to Unreal Engine 3 licensees and can be readily adopted in PC games today.



Rumor Watch:

Is Activision Planning To Buy Take-Two?

Recently, talk has circulated in the industry regarding an Activision plan to purchase publisher Take-Two and its stable of Rockstar and 2K Games development studios and properties. We spoke to some of the leading analysts in the industry to find out just how likely this blockbuster acquisition is.

by Matt Helgeson

Rumors and Speculation

The speculation regarding Activision's interest in buying Take-Two began in February, largely due to an article on the website IndustryGamers. In the article, game industry analyst Arvind Bhatia of Sterne Agee made an argument that the move would make good sense for Activision, which had recently put many of its long-running IPs like Guitar Hero and Tony Hawk on indefinite hiatus and closed internal studios Bizarre Creations, Luxoflux, Budcat Creations, 7 Studios, Shaba, and RedOctane. Activision conducted large-scale layoffs at other studios, including Neversoft and Raven Software. While these moves were done in response to sluggish sales, it also drastically diminished Activision's internal development capacity.

"We think such a combination would be positive for both companies," he said. "Activision will benefit from taking control of several proven intellectual properties at Take-Two such as GTA, Red Dead, Max Payne, BioShock, Mafia, Civilization, Midnight Club and new, upcoming properties such as L.A. Noire and Agent. It would help Activision diversify its portfolio, which has recently become too concentrated following the cancellation of titles such as Guitar Hero, Tony Hawk, [and] True Crime.... Take-Two will benefit from being part of a large entity with deep pockets – a must in the next generation cycle when rising development costs will make it more difficult for smaller players to thrive."

The rumors grew stronger on the heels of an MCV report that quoted an unnamed "senior executive" in the industry who said, "There are very strong rumors amongst people at a very senior level within the global business."

How Likely Is The Deal?

The analysts we spoke to are divided on how likely this merger of two game giants is. EEDAR's Jesse Divnich agrees with Arvind Bhatia on the logic behind the move for both Activision and Take-Two.

"Outside of Call of Duty and Guitar Hero, Activision has achieved minimal success within the traditional console market," Divnich commented. "With the shutdown of the

Tony Hawk, Guitar Hero, and Blur studios, one has to be concerned with Activision's position in the market. Despite some recent declines, the traditional console market still delivers revenues in excess of \$20 billion a year, worldwide. Just seems like a lot of money Activision is leaving on the table. Throw in the fact that they have nearly \$2.8 billion in cash sitting around, and it would seem entirely plausible they begin to make additional acquisitions in the market. Who better than Take-Two, which is the only company that has consistently delivered high-quality and high-selling games?"

Divnich also feels the move would be smart for both companies. "If such an acquisition would occur, both companies would benefit," he speculated. "First and foremost, Activision would be the proud owners of the Red Dead, Grand Theft Auto, and L.A. Noire brands. For Take-Two and its employees, an acquisition would put their brands in the hands of a company that has one of the largest global reaches in the industry." Still, he stops short of predicting that the move will happen, saying only that it "makes good business sense."

Wedbush Securities' Michael Pachter is more skeptical, saying, "The reason [it won't happen] is there are a lot of headaches at Take-Two. Activision, for better or worse, has a style of annualizing every game – and if it's not annual, it's every two years. It just doesn't fit with what Take-Two does, which is every five or six years. Culturally, that's not a good fit."

He expresses particular doubts about Activision's ability to retain top Take-Two development talent. "The Housers [Rockstar heads Sam and Dan Houser – Ed.] don't have to stay. You can buy the IPs but not the people. If Activision were to purchase Take-Two and go to Sam Houser and try to tell him the way it was going to be, he's got enough money in the bank to say 'screw you' and go do whatever he wants. What he wants might be to hire every single one of the Rockstar people, which is what Respawn did. If Bungie can get a deal with Activision where they are independent and Respawn can get a deal with EA, I'm pretty sure Houser and company could get any deal they want with anybody. That makes Take-Two difficult to buy."

Still, he feels the current Take-Two management – which considered and turned down an offer of \$25 a share from EA in 2008 – is open and even interested in selling for the right price. But considering that few outside of EA and Activision have the financial resources to do so, it seems unlikely in his opinion.

Whoever is right, we've likely not heard the last of this story. Take-Two's roster of talent, which includes Rockstar, BioShock's Ken Levine, and Sid Meier, makes the company an attractive prospect. We contacted both Activision and Take-Two about this story. Both declined to comment.

iTunes

Ap



Phone

The Big





Questions

feature

With the rise of mobile gaming, gesture-based controls, browser-based games, and an elongated console cycle, the interactive entertainment industry landscape looks drastically different than it did a decade ago. Once-formidable regions like Japan have failed to keep up with development trends, while Korea and China are challenging the conventional perception on how players consume games. Are these innovations here to stay, or are some of them destined to be short-lived fads? We asked industry luminaries to shed light on the big issues that could change the way you play your games.

by Matt Bertz

Once the shining beacon of innovation and creativity, the Japanese game development community has fallen on hard times. Obviously, in the aftermath of the tragic natural disaster the country is dealing with much larger concerns, but the Japanese game market has shown signs of weakness for years now. With three straight years of revenue decline and a global market share that has shrunk from roughly 50 percent in 2002 to a number hovering around 10 percent in 2009 according to *The New York Times*, the country's publishers are facing an identity crisis.

In Their Own Words

Several Japanese industry insiders have spoken out about the country's current creative crisis. Here are a few select quotes about the gravity of the situation.



"If it's right for Japan, it's probably not right for the rest of the world."

— Sony deputy executive president **Kaz Hirai**



"Japan is at least five years behind."

— Mega Man designer **Keiji Inafune**



"The designers and to-be-designers in the West have the focus, ambition, and ability to make their dream become true. So it is not the Japanese technology or culture that is losing, we are lacking the motivation."

— Metal Gear Solid creator **Hideo Kojima**

So how did Japan lose its edge? Some point to the rigid Japanese business culture, which tends to alienate creativity. Japanese developers were also slow to embrace new console trends like online multiplayer and failed to innovate in genres they traditionally dominated like role-playing games. Japanese role-playing games, outside of a numbered Final Fantasy title, are almost non-existent on sales charts, while Western RPG franchises like *The Elder Scrolls*, *Fallout*, *Mass Effect*, and *Dragon Age* have taken the lead.

While Japan struggles to gain its footing, competition keeps getting steeper. European and American developers currently dominate the console space, and South Korea and China are now the global leaders in the emerging free-to-play models and in-browser games. Digi-Capital estimates that China's online and mobile market could reach \$18 billion by 2014.

In a time where Japan needs to diversify and embrace the growing international market, some companies are instead turning inward. Rather than investing the capital necessary to compete on a creative and marketing level with Western juggernauts like *Call of Duty* and *Assassin's Creed*, some Japanese companies are instead pumping out cheaper handheld titles like *Monster Hunter* that have wide appeal in Japan, but never rise above niche status overseas. Capcom has released 10 *Monster Hunter* games since 2005, yet it's only released four games over the same time period in the franchise with the most global appeal, *Resident Evil*. Two of those were light gun spinoffs for the Wii, and the fourth was a quick and dirty Nintendo DS port of the original.

To former Electronic Arts executive Bing Gordon, this is the wrong approach. "I think there's a lesson in America of Manifest Destiny," he said. "America had excess resources for 200 years... is American success due to democracy or due to excess resources? I'm betting on excess resources."

"Japan had excess resources in the '70s and '80s. They had the newest manufacturing plant

in the world, they had to import materials but the materials were all importable, and they had a little Westernization of the culture. They had this blossoming generation that grew up with education and materials, so Japan had 20 years of slack capacity if you will. What every parent of means knows about their kids is they hope the kids work as hard as they did. I think in Japan, they get in this generation gap where the old people try to cling to the old ways and the new people want to create new ways and at the same time there are no excess resources in the system, so all hell breaks loose.

"Japan has no excess resources in the system, and they've got a younger generation that wants out due to their parents. They're going to have to be more global, they're going to have to be less insular. They can no longer depend on success in the Japanese market being exportable."

Though many Japanese publishers have had a hard time adopting overseas, its creative leaders haven't. The exodus of big name talent to new Western partners is astounding. In the past five years, Resident Evil's Shinji Mikami, Ninja Gaiden's Tomonobu Itagaki, and Killer 7 creator Goichi Suda have all signed deals with North American partners while their former Japanese employers scramble to fill the creative void. For many of the defectors, it boils down to business. Who can provide the most financial support to their creative vision?

"The business side is not keeping up with investment," the outspoken Keiji Inafune told *The New York Times* a month before leaving Capcom last October. The decorated developer has an informed perspective, having served the company since the early Mega Man days.

"You need to be prepared to invest four billion yen or more on a game and then spend two

billion yen more to promote it. But Japanese companies can't do that. So we're losing out to the West in terms of investment in games. It's a vicious cycle, a deflationary spiral. Because you don't invest, you can't sell games, and because you don't sell games, you can't invest."

Japanese companies don't necessarily need to look outside the island to find successful examples of growth. Sony and Nintendo have both developed into powerful multinational companies with strong footholds in Japan, Europe, and North America. Each has embraced an international approach to game development, with studios located around the world. Sony's Santa Monica studio is a leader in the action category with *God of War*, and Texas-based Retro Studios has successfully revitalized two classic brands for Nintendo: *Metroid* and *Donkey Kong*.

Many companies realize the widening creative and competitive gap, and are making moves to better position themselves as global companies. In 2009 Final Fantasy publisher Square Enix acquired European publisher Eidos, which strengthened its Western presence with valuable franchises like *Tomb Raider*, *Deus Ex*, and *Thief*. At the same time, companies like Konami and Capcom are forging Western partnerships and handing the creative control of valuable franchises like *Devil May Cry*, *Silent Hill*, and *Castlevania* to developers overseas. It's a step in the right direction, but if the companies don't learn from these partnerships and adapt to the new business realities, the struggle may continue.

"The Japanese game creators have to admit we're behind the Western games at this moment and try to be humble and learn why," Inafune told *4Gamer*. "Otherwise, we're not going to be able to start all over again."

How
can JAPAN
REGAIN its
relevancy?

When Nintendo revealed the Wii at the 2005 E3, many jaded journalists laughed it off as a miscalculated gamble

and decried its unresponsive controls. After selling over 85 million consoles and seeing Sony and Microsoft subsequently scramble to play catch up with the Move and Kinect, respectively, Nintendo had the last laugh. The Wii is the unquestioned king of the console wars, with the second-place Xbox 360 trailing by over 30 million unit sales.

Though worldwide Wii sales have slowed in the past year, gesture-based gaming is still going strong. Microsoft launched the Kinect this past November and has sold 10 million units thus far. Though the Move hasn't generated the same hype as Kinect, Sony has shipped 4.1 million motion controller bundles to retailers and could see a sales spike as more games like Killzone 3 and SOCOM 4 take advantage of the technology.

The hardcore may scoff at the simplistic controls and game libraries dominated by party-oriented titles, but motion-based controls attract new consumers who are intimidated by contemporary game controllers. With two analog sticks, a d-pad, two triggers, and eight buttons on most gamepads, developing the coordination and muscle memory necessary to master a first-person shooter can be as challenging as learning a musical instrument. With the Move, Wii, and Kinect's straightforward interfaces, anyone can step in and immediately start enjoying the interactive experience. But do these types of interfaces have the staying power to carry over into future consoles, or are they destined for the closet?

Many gamers who prefer gamepads to wands and nunchuks often express worry that gesture-based interfaces will drive game developers to gradually move away from the traditional controller in hopes of appealing to a wider audience. When polling insiders at DICE, a yearly game development summit, none of the developers or analysts we spoke with believed that motion controls represent a serious threat to traditional interfaces.

"Motion-based gaming will always have a spot in our industry, but we still have a long ways to go before it becomes a standard," proclaims EEDAR analyst Jesse Divnich. "At the end of the day, a control stick can do things that are not technically possible with motion games."

Will *the* MOTION CONTROL gaming craze LAST?

Developer Mark Cerny also shared this sentiment, pointing out that for longer games like Final Fantasy, where you are investing upwards of 60 hours, an interface that involves arm waving isn't ideal.

"I think one of the keys is playtime," Cerny says. "The shorter you have the playtime, then the more interesting you can get with it. But if you're sitting on the couch all day playing I really don't think you want to be moving even your forearms."

Though gesture-based controls may never become the predominant interface for hardcore games, that's not to say the standard controller couldn't stand to learn a thing or two from the Wii, Move, and Kinect.

"I think the more intuitive we can make our controls in games, the better off we are," says former Assassin's Creed producer and current Ubisoft Toronto studio head Jade Raymond. "I definitely think there is a lot of interesting stuff for gesture controls, and I think the next step will be figuring out how to get that finer tracking of gesture controls."

"I think it will be pretty pervasive eventually," believes 5th Cell creative director Jeremiah Slaczk. "It will get more refined, and that's a better thing. The more options you have as a gamer and a game designer, the better, right?"

What's Next For Kinect?

Microsoft's controller free peripheral flew off store shelves to the tune of 10 million bundles sold, but in the following months new releases have been scarce. Turn to page 40 to learn about the handful of Kinect games that are scheduled to debut this year.



Since the NES debuted in 1985, Nintendo's had a notorious relationship — or lack thereof — with third-party publishers. With each subsequent console, Nintendo-published games have thrived while publishers have struggled to reach the success they find on other consoles no matter how well the Nintendo hardware sells.

Former EA executive and current Kleiner Perkins Caufield & Byers partner Bing Gordon chalks this up to the company's fierce sense of independence. "My sense is that companies have cultures, and Nintendo's culture has always proudly been 'we'll do it ourselves and if everybody else wants to jump on them can,'" he says. "Nintendo's been about margin and control rather than market share."

No decision has reflected this go-it-alone philosophy more than the debut of the Wii MotionPlus in 2008. When the company announced the controller enhancement at E3, several third-party developers were as surprised as the press — Nintendo never bothered to notify them of the new technology. As a result, the MotionPlus received almost no software support at retail, making it less attractive to consumers.

Dealing with the company's erratic support has tested the patience of some partners. Speaking to IndustryGamers, Electronic Arts CEO John Riccitiello admitted, "It's a frustration for all third-party publishers when a platform holder does less to promote third-party content." He also pointed to the company's less than convincing track record, saying Nintendo has never made a console that's been "a heavy third-party supporting system. It's not lack of trying; they start the morning thinking what's best for their own intellectual property."

The Third-Party Gap

In looking at the number of third-party games that rank among the top 20 game sales for each platform as provided by the NPD Group, the Nintendo dilemma for those publishers is evident.



Nintendo's got Miyamoto, and he could do a game that could single-handedly drive 10 percent market share, so they got in the habit of retaining control. They never had that awkward feeling of having to depend on other people for their success."

As long as Miyamoto is making games for Nintendo it doesn't have to rely on third-party publishers to find success, but the company is leaving low-hanging fruit on the revenue tree. Good third-party games can increase consumer interest in the hardware, which in turn sells more software. Console manufacturers also receive licensing fees for every third-party game sold. "It really is pure profit," Reggie Fils-Aime admitted to

Fortune in 2007. "Third-party games can really determine who wins." So what's taking so long for Nintendo to develop a cohesive third-party support system?

Recently Nintendo president Satoru Iwata acknowledged the problem during a press conference and pledged to do a better job of supporting its partners going forward. "It is true that the third-party software sales ratio on Nintendo platforms are comparatively smaller," he said. "Wii's third-party software ratio is especially low."

"We need to decrease the concern that only Nintendo software can sell well on Nintendo platforms and third-party software cannot sell in the same volume. We will not make a trend similar to the one found for Wii in Japan now," he promised. "We feel a need to have closer ties with our third-party developers from the beginning."

The company is trying to mend these relationships starting with the 3DS launch. According to Nintendo of Europe's Laurent Fischer, there are currently around 70 first- and third-party games in development for the emerging handheld.

Nintendo's lack of third-party support hasn't helped, but in the eyes of 5th Cell executive director Joseph Tringali, it's not the only reason publishers rarely find success on its platforms.

Break The Mold

We know everyone loves Mario, Zelda, and Metroid. If you're looking to branch out, try these non-Nintendo created Wii and DS games you can't get on any other platform.

- ▶ Little King's Story
- ▶ Super Scribblenauts
- ▶ Radiant Historia
- ▶ House of the Dead: Overkill



"They set themselves up to fail because there's this juggernaut Nintendo and a lot of the publishers say, 'We'll never compete with Nintendo, we can't do it,'" he says. "It's like they're talking defeat into their strategy before they even start, instead of asking 'What is Nintendo doing and why are they successful?' Rather than their marketing advantages and point of sale advantages, they make games for their platform and for their audience. A lot of times they have a unique element to it."

When Tringali speaks, publishers and developers should

listen. The 5th Cell is one of the few third-party developers that has found repeated success on the Nintendo DS, with Drawn to Life selling 3.5 million units and the Scribblenauts series reaching 2.5 million.

Wedbush Morgan analyst Michael Pachter agrees with Tringali. "The Wii has been a tough platform because most publishers have failed to understand the audience," he says. "Nintendo has had great success, as it clearly knows its customer. Other games (let's call them 'mass market'), like Guitar Hero, dance, and fitness games have thrived. I think that we'll see more games like these in the future."

Why can't
THIRD-PARTIES
make MONEY on
NINTENDO
platforms?

Five years ago, few consumers took mobile gaming seriously. With drastically varied operating systems, technologically limited handsets, and slow network speeds, not many were willing to navigate the sluggish, unintuitive menus to download a title that looked like a stillborn NES game and used the cramped keypad for its interface.

After Apple rewrote the mobile phone playbook with the iPhone, mobile gaming isn't as intimidating or shallow anymore. Most phones now operate on standardized operating systems like iOS, Android, and the emerging Windows Phone 7 platform that boasts Xbox Live integration. Cell phone technology is starting to rival that of the traditional gaming handhelds. As a result, mobile gaming has exploded.

The Call of Duty of mobile games, Angry Birds, boasts over 40 million players a month, and the success has allowed developer Rovio to collect \$42 million from investors and expand further into pop culture. It has sold over two million Angry Birds plush dolls and recently signed a deal with 20th Century Fox to promote the upcoming animated movie *Rio* with an Angry Birds tie-in game.

"Games dominate mobile apps — games only account for 17 percent of all apps available, but account for more than 50 percent of all revenue generated," said Elizabeth Harz, senior vice president of global sales at Electronic Arts, at the Mobile Marketing Forum. "If you look at Apple's apps revenue, 75 percent of it is from games."

That number will keep skyrocketing according to Juniper Research. The firm estimates that mobile games revenues will be worth \$11 billion annually worldwide by 2015, nearly double the \$6 billion recorded in 2009.

With so many people gaming on their phones, is the need for a dedicated gaming handheld waning? After all, why would you carry a PSP or 3DS when you can play entertaining versions of known gaming franchises like Dead Space on your phone?

"The formidable lead enjoyed by cell phones capable of gaming will continue in the years to come with no hint of decline, and their near-universal presence gives them the potential to become a viable competitive threat to dedicated gaming platforms, primarily handheld devices," said iSuppli analyst Pamela Tufegdzic in an August report.

Many publishers like Electronic Arts are making aggressive moves in the mobile space, but not everyone is interested in jumping on the bandwagon. "We don't view the App Store as a really big opportunity for dedicated games," Activision CEO Bobby Kotick said at Reuters' Global Media Summit.

Nintendo president Reggie Fils-Aime agrees. "I actually think that one of the biggest risks today in our industry are these inexpensive games that are candidly disposable from a consumer standpoint," he told GameTrailers. "I actually think some of those games are overpriced at one or two dollars, but that's a whole different story. Angry Birds is a great experience, but that is one compared to thousands of other pieces of content that for one or two dollars I think actually create

a mentality for the consumer that a piece of gaming content should only be two dollars."

He could be right. While Wedbush Morgan analyst Michael Pachter doesn't see handhelds going away, he thinks the best days could be



Will mobile GAMING KILL the HANDHELD market?

behind them thanks to the cost differential between the mobile and handheld experiences.

"I think that the ubiquity of gaming apps and the low price points will be an attractive alternative to far more expensive handheld games, and as more handheld devices like the iPod Touch or Android phones are purchased, many owners will see no real reason to buy a dedicated handheld for gaming," he said. "I don't think that the NGP or 3DS will approach the installed base of their predecessors unless pricing comes down dramatically."

Though the mobile games are undoubtedly cannibalizing the handheld market, you don't have to prematurely cancel your 3DS or NGP orders. With Nintendo's first-party pedigree and Sony's extensive publishing partners, good handheld games will still come.

"There will always be room for traditional video games, and if anything the mobile and tablet markets are expanding our industry," says EEDAR analyst Jesse Divnich. "YouTube didn't hurt theater sales, and I fail to see how these emerging mobile and social markets will hinder traditional video game sales. Social and mobile games are just bite-sized snacks of entertainment. Any true gamer realizes that."



Talking Angry

Tired of hearing companies like Nintendo belittle mobile gaming, Rovio

executive Peter Vesterbacka went on the offensive during a panel at the South by Southwest Interactive conference, saying "consoles are really a dying breed" as consumers flock to cheaper mobile experiences like Angry Birds. While Angry Birds is an undeniable blockbuster hit, Vesterbacka's hyperbolic statement is unfounded considering Call of Duty: Black Ops just became the best-selling game of all time and many mobile games still struggle with visibility. He later made a more sensible argument when he decried people calling experiences like Angry Birds "casual games." He remarked that film reviewers don't talk about "casual movies," and said that Angry Birds players can become just as involved as players do with more traditional "hardcore" games.

If the console cycle followed its traditional trend, we'd already have some juicy details about the next Sony, Microsoft, and Nintendo consoles. But with the benefit of online updates, the hardware isn't as etched in stone as it was in the past and the manufacturers can evolve the console experience without waiting for a new billion-dollar project. That said, it's never too early to look ahead in anticipation for the next big thing. So when can we expect to see new consoles, anyway?

"I don't think many publishers would support a new console transition, as none are making much money this cycle, and a transition to a new console has the potential to severely cut into those profits," says Wedbush Morgan analyst Michael Pachter. "Thus, I don't see a new console for at least three more years."

Though we may have to wait a while before we get any solid details about the next next-generation consoles, our sources tell

When are the NEXT CONSOLES coming?

us that both Microsoft and Sony have started the conceptualization processes. Microsoft recently posted three job openings for the company's Xbox Console Architecture group, which is "responsible for defining and delivering next-generation console architectures from conception through implementation."

When polling analysts on what company

will come out of the gate first, a consensus pick emerged.

"Nintendo," says Jesse Divnich, EEDAR vice president of capital research. "But one has to ask, was the Wii truly part of the seventh or 'next-generation'? Nintendo has always gone against the grain, and I expect them to be the first to launch a new home console before Sony or Microsoft. Between Microsoft and Sony, I'd expect Microsoft, as the Xbox 360 hardware is beginning to show its age. But I don't expect to hear anything on new home consoles from Microsoft or Sony until 2013."

With Wii sales slipping precipitously as more consumers look for consoles that take advantage of their HDTVs, Sterne Agee analyst Arvind Bhatia believes that a Wii refresh featuring HD support or a new console could be coming soon.

"We would not be surprised if Nintendo unveiled the specifications of its next console at E3 in June this year, followed by product introduction early next year," Bhatia said.

Last generation, the PlayStation 2 library couldn't be beat thanks to a wealth of games that you couldn't get on the Xbox 360 or GameCube. But with more and more third-party games being produced for multiple consoles this generation, it would make sense that first-party exclusive games become a bigger differentiator when a consumer is looking to purchase a console.

With legendary franchises like Super Mario Bros., the Legend of Zelda, and Metroid, Nintendo has always depended on its first-party titles to make its consoles more attractive to consumers. When the PlayStation 3 released, Sony redoubled its efforts to create compelling first-party games, adding Resistance, Infamous, LittleBigPlanet, and Heavy Rain to an already deep lineup featuring blockbusters like God of War, Ratchet & Clank, and Gran Turismo.

But as this generation of consoles has moved forward, Microsoft has veered from the path and adopted an alternative approach. Nintendo and Sony continue to push impressive first-party lineups, but Redmond's library is shrinking before our

eyes. With Mass Effect going multiplatform this year and several first-party titles failing to produce enough sales or critical acclaim to warrant a sequel, the Xbox 360 is down to a handful of exclusive franchises to draw in consumers - Fable, Halo, Forza, Gears of War, and potentially Alan Wake.

Despite Microsoft's slimming exclusive lineup, it is still hanging onto second place in the console wars thanks to many exclusive windows that give Xbox 360 users first shot to purchase enhancements to third-party games like Call of Duty map packs and the Grand Theft Auto IV expansions. Can this approach continue to yield results, or does Microsoft need to expand its portfolio?

"I don't see Microsoft adding first party capability, but I do see them continuing to invest in third-party exclusive windows," predicts Wedbush Morgan analyst Michael Pachter. "They have enjoyed tremendous success by gaining a three-to-six month advantage, particularly with DLC related on online multiplayer games like Call of Duty, and I expect them to continue to exploit that advantage."

The exclusive DLC windows are profitable because of the rise of importance in online networks as a deciding factor for consumers when making purchases. If your friends are all playing Call of Duty on Xbox 360 because they want access to the newest map packs first, chances are you're going to choose an Xbox 360 over the PlayStation 3 as well.

"Ten years ago the argument was that the

How Exclusive

Despite beating the PlayStation 3 and Wii to the market by a year, the Xbox 360 lags behind in first-party retail games.



first-party titles defined a console. In 2011, it is all about the differentiating services, such as Xbox Live," says EEDAR analyst Jesse Divnich. "Microsoft will likely continue to secure additional media

partnerships to enhance its online services before it invests additional resources to first party titles."

Sony has noticed the effectiveness of these third-party exclusives, and this past year started to cultivate its own partnerships. At the 2010 E3, it announced PS3-exclusive collectors editions for both Medal of Honor and Dead Space 2 that featured content consumers couldn't get anywhere else. Sony also signed a deal with Valve that allows the developer to use its Steam service to push new content to the PlayStation 3. When announcing the deal, Gabe Newell proclaimed the PS3 version would be "the best version on any console."

With the competition getting tougher for creating exclusive content for third-party multiplatform games, consumers face even more perplexing questions when deciding which console to buy. How much they care about exclusive content windows for their favorite games, where their friends are playing, and first-party titles they can't play anywhere else will all play a role in the decision-making process.

Are FIRST-PARTY GAMES still important?

3D is the Jason Voorhees of entertainment technology. Though it originally debuted and faded away in the '50s, like the masked killer it keeps coming back from the dead every few decades. Not even *Jaws*, the first blockbuster summer movie, or Michael Jackson's *Captain EO*, the Disney World film that came out during the peak of the pop star's celebrity, could solidify its footing as a must-see technology. Whenever someone revived the surprisingly resilient tech, it unfailingly receded into obscurity once again.

Then came *Avatar*. Hailed as a revolution in the technology, John Cameron's 2009 sci-fi epic shattered expectations, becoming the first film to gross more than \$2 billion. Suddenly 3D was hot again, and almost every tech company began fighting to get in front of the line. "3D will sweep the world," Sony CEO Sir Howard Stringer told *Wired* in an interview last year. "There is no reason we shouldn't be enormously successful."

We've heard that before, but this time data backs the proclamation. From HDTVs and Blu-ray players to handhelds and game consoles, 3D is stretching its reach beyond the silver screen and into our homes. Consultancy Suppli estimates that shipments of 3D-enabled HDTVs will rise to 78 million in 2015, or around 40 percent of the global flatscreen TV market.

"I think it is a technology that's coming," Ubisoft's UK marketing director Murray Pannell told *Eurogamer*. "We can't ignore it. It'll start slowly this year. But, like HDTV, I wouldn't rule out the fact that this will be installed in everyone's living room in three years time, and for us to be in a position to have content that could really look absolutely amazing in 3D."

But as the technology currently exists, 3D may not be as attractive to consumers as the manufacturers hope. A recent Nielsen Survey found that while many potential TV buyers are impressed by the 3D technology, they are still turned off by the price, lack of content, and being forced to wear glasses to enjoy the experience. Half of the survey participants said the glasses were uncomfortable, and a mind-boggling 89 percent of respondents were turned off by the glasses because they restrict them from performing any other tasks. It's an annoyance to remove your glasses every time you want to make eye contact with someone in the room or check your phone for sports scores.

As the technology becomes ubiquitous, the hope is that many of the exorbitant costs associated with a full 3D experience (the television, Blu-

ray player, console, and glasses) will likely fall, and the technology could evolve past glasses.

"I think we're in early days here," says Mark Cerny, the legendary game developer who has worked on everything from *Marble Madness* to *Uncharted: Drake's Fortune*. "If 10 billion dollars of 3D televisions are going to be sold, do you think you'll still have to wear glasses to see a 3D image? I don't think so. They will find a way."

Even if they appreciate the concept, some people can't enjoy 3D due to eye strain or medical issues. ABC News reports that up to 12 percent of Americans may have some degree of stereo blindness, which is the inability to track depth properly. That's a large part of the population to leave on the sidelines.

Then there's the issue of value. Is 3D as transformative an experience as the marketing would have you believe? While some developers like Guerrilla Games and Crytek think it can be, not everyone agrees.

"I don't personally think 3D is always a better experience," says BioWare co-founder Greg Zeschuk. "It's very different than when you're looking at standard definition versus HDTV. I watch a lot of soccer, or football. When you have to watch a game in standard definition you go, 'Oh, my God. This is horrid.' It sticks with you and it's painful. I go, 'Well, do I really care if the guys pop out of the screen a little bit or it seems like there's depth?' Not really."

Zeschuk is not alone. While Nintendo, Sony, and Ubisoft are positioning themselves as leaders in 3D gaming, both Microsoft and Electronic Arts are taking a more conservative approach. Of the several industry insiders we spoke to, most had mixed feelings about 3D becoming a game changer.

"It's an enhancement; it's not a solution,"

echoes fellow BioWare co-founder Ray Muzyka. "Can it affect gameplay? That's actually, I think, the crux."

EEDAR analyst Jesse Divnich believes that 3D will eventually be everywhere, but he also doubts it will have an impactful role in the future of video games. "3D penetration will be no different than say the penetration of the picture-in-picture feature," he says. "Eventually costs of production will be so minimal that it becomes a standard in all televisions. However, much like picture-in-picture, its frequency of use may be minimal."

In the interim, you may want to avoid spending thousands of dollars on 3D-enabled technology for your home entertainment center. Unless you're an early adopter who craves new technology, it's wise to wait until prices drop, a universal standard develops, or a few *Avatar*-sized hits prove 3D won't lose its pulse again. ♦

IS it TIME to JUMP 3D on the bandwagon?

A Brief History of 3D Gaming



1982
Arcade game *Subroc* 3D debuts, which uses a special eyepiece to create 3D effects



1982
Western Technologies releases the Vectrex, the short-lived console that features 3D support



1987
Square creates 3D *WorldRunner* and *Rad Racer* for the NES, which both include a pair of anaglyphic glasses



1988
Sega releases the *SegaScope* 3D add-on for the Master System. Only eight games support it



1995
Nintendo introduces the disastrous *Virtual Boy* console, which is discontinued in less than a year



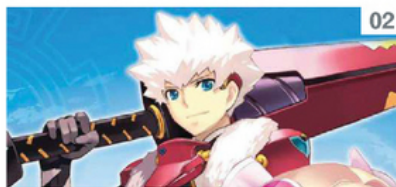
2010
Sony goes big, offering 3D support in over 10 PlayStation 3 games



2011
Nintendo releases the 3DS handheld

.hack//G.U. Vol.1//Rebirth

No game titles have produced more head scratching than those in the .hack// series. Here we have a period – at the beginning of the title, mind you – the word “hack” in all lowercase letters, and two forward slashes. Fans of these games simply refer to the series as “dot hack,” pretending the nonsense at the end doesn’t exist. That’s no excuse for Cyberconnect2’s bad behavior. Out of all the stupidly named games in this franchise, .hack//G.U. Vol.1//Rebirth gets our vote as the worst: You’re naming a video game, not a URL.



Ar Tonelico Ooga: Knell of Ar Ciel

Sometimes our language lacks the vocabulary to describe the more fantastic elements in video games. Coming up with a few new terms for your game is fine, but when it comes to the title, there has to be a limit. You know you’re over that limit if pronouncing the game’s title makes it sound like you’re having a stroke.



Infinite Undiscovery

What is the phrase Infinite Undiscovery even supposed to mean? Undiscovery isn’t a word, and doesn’t make sense as a concept. If your life is full of infinite incidents of your “undiscovering” things, I’m pretty sure that just means you’re dumb. The same holds true for game titles.

Dissidia 012 [Duodecim]: Final Fantasy

Square Enix is the master at coming up with confusing titles. As the first sequel to the original Dissidia, this follow-up is naturally titled Dissidia 012 – a numbering system that makes about as much sense as scoring in tennis. Duodecim isn’t actually part of the title, but rather the Latin pronunciation of 12. It was nice of Square to include it so you that know how to make an ass of yourself when saying the name out loud.



Kingdom Hearts 358/2 Days

The third Square Enix game to make the list, Kingdom Hearts 358/2 Days takes bizarre JRP naming conventions to new heights. Series designer Tetsuya Nomura stated in an interview that the title would make sense to the player at the very end of the game. He was wrong. It does, however, make you sound like a robot when you start talking to your friends about “Three five eight days over two.”



Mobile Suit Gundam: Gundam vs. Zeta Gundam

Hey Capcom: Your game title has too many friggin’ Gundams in it.



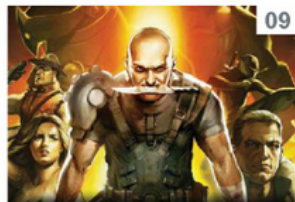
S.C.A.T.: Special Cybernetic Attack Team

If you absolutely need to have an acronym in your title, don’t make it spell out a term for feces. I don’t care how awesome your special cybernetic attack team is, no one is going to take it seriously if you have a synonym for poop scrawled across your uniform.



F.3.A.R.

Sometimes an unconvincing acronym isn’t enough. F.E.A.R. stands for First Encounter Assault Recon, despite assault and recon being two very different things. For the third game, some marketing genius decided that resurrecing leetspeak would best convey how cool it is, so they turned the ‘E’ into a ‘3.’ This further proves that no one in the industry really understands how acronyms work.



Matt Hazard: Blood Bath and Beyond

The Matt Hazard series is meant to be tongue in cheek, so we won’t complain too much about the stupid title. We’re just surprised they went with a reference to a health and beauty store. Also, we preferred the joke the first time we heard it – in a 1997 episode of *The Simpsons*.



John Daly’s Prostroke Golf

Forgive us for mixing sports metaphors, but having John Daly as your golf celebrity is strike one. Having the word “Prostroke” in your title is strike two and three. If you hear someone say “I’m playing John Daly’s Prostroke Golf,” a video game probably isn’t the first thing that comes to mind – especially if they finish the thought with “...if you know what I mean.”

Game Informer Editors Smash Their Way Into the Record Books

by Dan Ryckert



Earlier this year, a copy of Guinness World Records 2011: Gamer's Edition showed up at our office. I spent some time flipping through its pages, amused at records for high scores in Donkey Konga and minigames from Zelda.

As I continued reading it, I started thinking about getting in the book myself. Considering I had no record-setting collections, hadn't developed any mega-selling games, and don't possess the insane old-school arcade ability required to become the new King of Kong, my options were limited. Remembering that I once played *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* for 22 hours straight, I decided on a gaming marathon. Guinness World Records has entries for several types of these; among them are Dance Dance Revolution marathons, first-person shooter marathons, racing marathons, and LAN party marathons. After scanning the options, I landed on a fighting game marathon. Despite fully expecting it to be a solo effort, I went around the office asking if anyone would be interested in joining me in this record-setting attempt. To my surprise, fellow editors Tim Turi, Jeff Cork, and Ben Reeves immediately agreed to participate. With four players ready for the long haul, the natural choice was Super Smash Bros. Specifically, we landed on Brawl thanks to its numerous unlocks and match options. On the weekend of March 19–20, we set a new Guinness World Record by playing it for exactly 30 straight hours. To the right, you'll see what it was like for each of us.

DAN RYCKERT

My early hours during the record attempt were very rocky. I had planned to get no less than eight hours of sleep prior to the attempt, so I headed to bed at 10 p.m. on Friday (the attempt started at 9 a.m. Saturday). Sleep comes difficult for me even on a normal night, so a looming world record attempt kept me up until the morning hours no matter how hard I tried to rest. Coming in to the office on three hours of sleep, I was groggy and sleep-deprived before we even started. Dr. Pepper and Mountain Dew were my diet for several hours, and they helped keep my head up and eyes open until my second wind came. A revolving door of guests at the office, a lively chat room in our online stream, and the high frequency of jokes and hilarious moments kept me going after that. The most tedious moment was when I realized we had played for fifteen hours and we still had at least a dozen to go. I knew I was getting really tired when I saw the name bars over our character's heads and thought, "Why do we all have hammers?" Things picked up again once the sun started to rise and the finish line was within sight. Officially becoming the new world record holders was fantastic, but the best moment was when we were able to finally put our controllers down at the 30 hour mark.

TIM TURI

Failure never crossed my mind when we held early discussions regarding our Guinness World Record attempt. Being the incredible physical specimen that I am, I've easily played games for long stretches without moving a muscle. Hours 18 to 24 were incredibly sleepy ones, but I pulled through with caffeine, mac 'n' cheese pizza, ludicrous jokes, and the amazing Game Informer community. Although I was thrilled when we beat the record, my joy was tempered knowing we had to raise the bar further. I know I could have played longer, but I wasn't complaining when I felt sleep's sweet, chocolatey embrace. I became very bored with the Super Smash Bros. Brawl formula after 30 straight hours, but I somehow felt the urge to once again blast dudes in the face with Samus the very next day. Super Smash Bros. Brawl is the perfect game to play for an absurd amount of time, but I wouldn't mind trying something else if we go for another record.

JEFF CORK

I've had a great life so far. Even with all the amazing moments I've experienced – marrying my wonderful wife, witnessing the births of my sons, getting this job – few hold up to hearing "Congratulations, you can now put down your controllers." I went into our record attempt thinking that the most difficult part would be staying awake. As one of Game Informer's old men, I'm typically in bed by nine and have eaten breakfast by the time some of the other editors are drifting off to sleep. As it turns out, staying awake wasn't a problem. Ben's nonstop commentary would have made falling asleep impossible, and after hearing some of the things that came out of his mouth I wouldn't have felt comfortable putting myself in that position. I've always been good at sloto, which was the secret behind essentially staying rock-still for the first 18 hours. The strangest part of an already strange experience was feeling that I could have kept going for a few more hours. If someone ever breaks our record, know this: I've done it once before, and I can do it again.

BEN REEVES

Two days before the attempt I came back from a work trip to Canada, so the Friday before our attempt I stayed late at the office catching up on emails and working on our Spider-Man: Edge of Time feature. By 1:30 in the morning, I decided that I should just sleep at the office. So in addition to jet lag, I was battling the 6.5 hours of terrible office couch sleep the whole time we were playing. The marathon itself is a blur now, but I'm pretty sure I had fun. I think our skills peaked at hour five, and by the end most of us were just hitting buffers. I remember panicking when I heard we'd run out of Mountain Dew only 10 hours in, and halfway through the night I got so loopy that I almost fell out of my chair laughing at one of Tim's expressions. In fact, I actually did fall on my face during three separate runs to the bathroom. Incredibly, the next day I felt fine. Super Smash Bros. Brawl is an absurd game to play for such a length of time – it's completely imbalanced and victory often feels arbitrary, yet somehow the Nintendo magic shines through. I still love that game. We all joked about how sick of it we'd feel by the end, but I can imagine playing Super Smash Bros. again in a few weeks. I might even feel like breaking another Guinness record...someday. ♦

A Record By the Numbers

Total time played:
30 hours
(Previous record: 26 hours, 27 minutes)

Number of matches: 474

KO to Deaths

Jeff: 1,058-812
Ben: 837-821
Tim: 828-868
Dan: 631-845

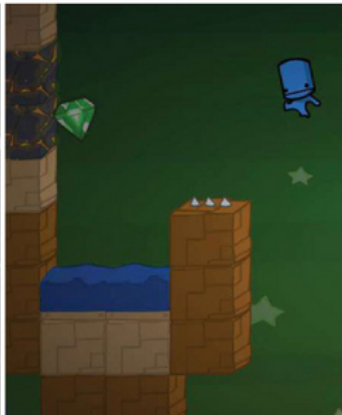
KO total: 3,354

Most-picked character: Link
Time spent as Link: 10 hours, 40 minutes



Art by Mike News





The 2D Revival continues

Fallen Frontier is a long way off, but I got some details about the new project straight from the developers. Moonshot Games is a team formed by Bungie expatriates that is bringing its Halo expertise to bear on the 2D action scene. Fallen Frontier follows a jaded lawman named Ed who travels from Earth to Alpha Centauri to carry out an act of vengeance. The story unfolds in the style of a classic film noir mystery, as Ed hunts down a suspect who hasn't been seen in almost 30 years. Though the game is a side-scrolling shooter, it mixes in some significant platforming and exploration elements. Creative director Rob Stokes credits games like Metroid, Shadow Complex, Abuse, Out of This World, and Flashback as major inspirations, but action is at the core of the experience. "In many ways, the game represents our attempt to translate the gameplay of a 3D FPS like Halo into 2D," Stokes says. The grappling hook tool lets you

pull enemies in close for a devastating close-range gunshot, and players earn other special abilities that can disrupt enemy AI or open new navigation paths. The game also features two-player co-op throughout the campaign. Look for Fallen Frontier sometime next year.

Castle Crashers developers The Behemoth has an eye for smart design, catchy art, and amusing concepts that nearly assures its new game will be worth a look. Its latest online/offline co-op game, **BattleBlock Theater**, is built around the ridiculous concept of conniving felines using you for their perverse amusement. Up to four players must navigate hundreds of short stages filled with platforming, combat, puzzle solving, and exploration. The levels are different based upon how many players are in the mix, as they are designed to encourage teamwork. Each stage is filled with pick-ups, like rocket packs and wings, and the Theater gift shop offers all sorts of weapons and tools, known as props, that can further flesh out your customizable character. Experimentation and silliness is encouraged as you explore with friends; characters have unlimited lives, so

there's no reason not to push your buddy into the nearby spike pit. The objective in each level is the same: find three gems and escape. If story mode isn't your thing, eight-player arena modes offer unusual objectives, from chasing a golden whale to coloring in the world with your team's color. The Behemoth hasn't announced a release date yet.

2D fighting games have always attracted a mixed crowd. On one side you have the hardcore players who learn every move, watch tournament fights on the Internet, and research infinite combos. At the other end of the spectrum are laid back enthusiasts who enjoy banging on buttons and watching the hits fly. **Skullgirls** aims to satisfy both groups. The stylish new online fighter pits bouncy anime girls against each other in single or tag team matches. The game looks to classics like Marvel vs. Capcom 2, Guilty Gear, and Darkstalkers for inspiration, offering the creative freedom those games embraced while addressing the exploits that caused problems at high-level play. I played it for a couple hours, and was impressed with the tight controls, gorgeous animation, and



BattleBlock Theater
Xbox Live Arcade



Skullgirls
PlayStation Network, Xbox Live Arcade



Ms. Splosion Man
Xbox Live Arcade



Moon Diver
PlayStation Network, Xbox Live Arcade

with six remarkable games by Matt Miller

over-the-top combos. Custom tag-team assists, the ability to break out of looping assaults, and a wealth of combos for each character aim to make the game an equal to other tournament-level fighters. While the game plays in 2D, it runs in a 3D engine, so the detailed character sprites are dynamically lit based on the environment. It's a stunning effect. Reverge Labs is releasing *Skullgirls* on XBLA and PSN later this year.

A while back I got my first glimpse of **Outland**, a stunning new Ubisoft title being developed by Housemarque. This month, I played the first several hours of the game, and my enthusiasm has only grown. The game mixes fascinating mechanics – light and dark power-ups deliver the rapid-fire color changing of *Ikaruga*, the visuals evoke the shadow relief style of *Limbo*, and the exploration elements echo *Metrodroid* and *Castlevania*, where new abilities open up new paths. To keep up with the platforming and combat challenges that lie ahead, you must flip back and forth from red to blue. While blue, similarly colored projectiles can't hurt you, you can leap onto blue platforms, and you can damage red enemies.

Flip colors and the opposite is true. Add a fun melee swordfighting element and online co-op and *Outland* achieves the rare feat of successfully combining several great features from other games so a wholly new experience emerges. Look for it in the next few weeks.

The sequel to Twisted Pixel's popular *Splosion Man* introduces a new character and fleshes out every aspect of the original title's gameplay. **Ms. Splosion Man** still has you blowing up to reach high places in fast paced and humorous co-op enabled platforming sequences. However, the new game sends its feminine exploding protagonist out of Big Science Labs and into the futuristic world where she encounters new features like zip lines, trampolines, body-launching cannons, flying cars, and massive boss encounters modeled after classic SNES end-of-level fights. Twisted Pixel is also broadening the reach of the game by adding a *Super Mario World* style world map with branching level paths. For those who found the difficulty curve of the original *Splosion Man* daunting, some levels along these paths are easier. At the same time, hardcore fans still have numerous challenging levels to explore.

Everything surrounding that experience should be more polished, funny, and filled with variety. We're still waiting to hear about a release date.

Kouichi Yotsui, the mind behind the classic 2D game *Strider*, is leading the team designing **Moon Diver**, a new cooperative action game being published by Square Enix. Up to four players join up either off or online to fight through waves of enemy attackers while leaping and flipping through challenging platforming levels. Like *Strider*, the game embraces freedom of movement, allowing characters to hang from ceilings, climb walls, and double jump to their hearts' content. As you play, you'll level up your chosen character by customizing his or her health, magic, and power. Pick-up combo moves are scattered across the levels that increase the array of special moves available to each character. After playing for a couple of hours, I can say that the game is built for co-op; many moves let characters work in tandem to take down huge numbers of foes. A classic 2D action arcade game if I ever saw one, *Moon Diver* should be out by the time you read this on both PSN and XBLA. ♦

*Want more about independent and downloadable games? Explore gameinformer.com/impulse, where you'll find daily updates, new game trailers, downloadable reviews, and more. This month, you can find our interviews with the teams behind both *Fallen Frontier* and *BattleBlock Theater*. For more in this issue, check out our scores for *The Dishwasher*, *Vampire Strika*, *Chime Super Deluxe*, *Bit Trip Flux*, and *Slam Bot Scrappers* on pp. 96-97.*



feature

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TEST

**GI'S MATTHEW KATO PUTS
HIS VIDEO GAME RACING
KNOWLEDGE TO THE
ULTIMATE TEST**

"The EMT is here,"

casually announces the Porsche PR woman to everyone in the room during a break in the session. Porsche factory driver Patrick Long and I have been playing Forza 3 and discussing video game and real-life racing all morning, and her comment brings home how real things are going to get. For a day at the Porsche Driving School in Leeds, Alabama, I tested what I picked up about racing from video games through the years out on a real-life track with a Porsche 911 Carrera 2S. Thankfully, the EMT was unnecessary.

Like most kids growing up with video games, racing games were a staple of my diet. It started with arcade cabinets like Pole Position and segued into home consoles, whether that was Excitebike on the NES or Gran Turismo on the PlayStation. I've always considered myself an average to slightly above-average racer - nothing special. I use the AI cars as speed breaks when I have to, and I know that it's easiest to pass the AI by braking late going into the corners. Despite a lead foot and a tendency toward inconsistency, I've also learned a few things from racing video games through the years.

by Matthew Kato

All photography by Jon Gordon. Thanks to Patrick Long, Dave Engleman, and Robin Baker at Porsche, Jared Holland and Bonnie Berkes from the Brandware Group, Jeremy Lawley and Jeff Pumer at Porsche Driving School, photographer Jon Gordon, and everyone at Barber Motorsports Park.



THE STARTING LINE

How much? I was about to find out. But before we take it to the track, I am put at ease by familiar surroundings – a pair of Xbox 360 consoles with Forza 3 running on them. Porsche has set up a virtual showdown between Patrick and I at a reception at the track, presumably so I can strut my stuff and stake my claim as a master of the video game discipline. Patrick is cordial and humble about his gaming abilities, but I'm not supremely confident that I will beat him. Patrick has

played video games throughout the years, and knowing what I know about how I like to race – often faster than I should – I have a feeling that a guy who's driven in 24-hour endurance races won't crack under the pressure and blow the first hairpin turn like somebody on Xbox Live.

We start with some hot laps, both of us in a Porsche Cayman S at Laguna Seca in California. I have actually driven a 35mph go-kart at the track once, and I've certainly raced the track enough times in video games to

feel comfortable. Patrick and driving partner Jörg Bergmeister have won GT races at the track in the American Le Mans series, so he surely already knows every turn like the back of his hand.

Patrick starts out on the right foot, producing a mistake-free run and leaving me in the dust after I blow the exit of turn three...and again in turn six. I eventually redeem myself and post the best single lap time at 1:47.361, but that's not a victory. Being a good racer requires consistently good lap times and sustained concentration, not a single bright spot in a sea of mediocrity.

Thankfully, a change of scenery over to the Nürburgring in Germany produces better results for me. I regain my composure, putting down some good laps at the Stage B section of the mammoth course. Patrick's hot lap times are within a relatively tight grouping, but I get in the fastest time (2:14.060) and despite a couple mistakes, set a decent pace.

FEEDBACK

We're using the official Xbox racing wheel set within a racing seat, but I never feel comfortable. Even after messing with the seat, the wheel feels too far away and I have to take my shoes off just to feel comfortable with the pedals. These may sound like excuses ("The key to being a professional race driver is being good with excuses," quips Patrick), but you have to be able to precisely control your steering, gas, and brake inputs for success. This is no different whether it's a video game or real life.

Patrick tells me that you don't want to use aggressive hand motions when you're steering, and the lack of road feedback through the pedals (which most racing wheels don't offer) gives the triggers of a controller an upper hand in this department. "That's one of the misconceptions, that you get into a race car and you're either full on the brake or full on the throttle," he explains. "Everything about how the car moves is how you lean into the throttle or lean into the brake, or the relation-



ship of using each one of them and the timing. I think that's one of the things on the controllers that has really progressed."

Plenty of serious racing gamers use various wheels, but Patrick believes that even though video games and more sophisticated racing cockpit simulators can have their uses – such as getting used to tracks' layouts – there is no substitute for the real thing. Still, he thinks that video games can help with the mental aspect. "I do see a translation or crossover on the mental side. If you can get on a video game and maintain perfect execution for hours on end – that is something that definitely applies. But there's no real risk or danger factor, and that's the difference."

ON THE TRACK

During lunch I have a little time to think about the morning's session and what, if anything, it means for actually getting in a car and applying what I know to the track. Overshooting the corners and sliding into the grass like I often do in a game isn't going to be acceptable in an expensive Porsche that doesn't have a restart button. But if anyone at Porsche or the track has any reservations about what they'd seen that morning they



aren't saying anything. I have signed the track waivers (but not read them) and there is an EMT on site, so all the necessary preparations are in place.

It's a cold day at the track, just over 40 degrees, and Alabama has just been hit

with about four inches of snow the previous couple of days. This is a good thing, however, because a cold track offers more grip. Patrick and I get in the 911 Turbo and he takes me around the track, pointing out the brake points, best lines (both of which are highlighted at times with cones), and a lot of great info about how to race the track. Barber Motorsports Park – which is used in a variety of pro race events including the IndyCar and Superbike series – has a mix of everything from elevation changes to blind corners.

It is now my time behind the wheel in a 911 Carrera 2S, with Patrick riding along to continue his instruction. I start out relatively cautious, mainly trying to remember all the turns and not be surprised by anything since, frankly, there's no minimap in the corner to rely on. It is not long before I start to layer on more speed as I became familiar with the car and the track. Soon I'm feeling the flow as I move from corner to corner. The C2S feels great and easily handles the relatively modest paces I put it through. The principles are much the same as in a video game, but it's instantly clear why video game racing will not match the real thing any time soon.



MEET PATRICK LONG

Patrick's love of racing goes back as far as he can remember, and that includes having his dad putting him up on a bar stool to play Pole Position at the arcade. His ascension through the racing world included a stint in Europe at age 17 climbing the ladder to Formula One with wins in the British Formula Ford and Formula Renault series. His participation in a Red Bull Racing search for a top American F1 driver (he finished sixth) drew the attention of Porsche, who hired him in 2003 as a factory driver to represent the company in various racing disciplines.

Patrick says he loves the versatility that working with Porsche brings. "I've never wondered what it would have been like. If you asked me if I would trade my role right now in racing for a role in Formula One, my answer would be no – and I can tell you that over and over straight faced. The balance and diversity I have right now, I'm pretty thankful for that." This diversity has included opportunities on NASCAR road courses like Infineon and Watkins Glen.

In 2011 he'll try to continue his success in international endurance races and the American Le Mans series, where he's a three-time GT2 champion and a 20-time race winner.

He considers the arcade racer *Hard Drivin'* as "still one of the best video games ever produced," and although he enjoys playing video games, he's wary of them too. "I find it hard to balance my competitive urges and my OCD. I would sit on these things all night if I really got into it."



DRIVING LESSONS

The g-forces that bear down on you when you're driving can be tremendous, and they are an unreplicated thrill of racing. At the risk of sounding pretentious, it's part of what fuses man with machine and allows both to work together as one. A good driver can feel exactly how the car is responding to the track and how it's being driven at any given second, reacting accordingly. Video games try to do this with force feedback rumble and visual cues when driving in the third-person camera, but it's not even close to being the same.

As I continue around the track, I adhere to the simple driving instructions that I have learned through the years and which Patrick's has told me: Finish all your braking before you enter the corner. Take an efficient line through the corner with an appropriate amount of throttle. Accelerate out. Luckily, I don't spin out or enter the corners too hot and skip off the track like I did in Forza 3 earlier – I actually feel like I have a good command of all the principles involved. Patrick also adds a great tip that doesn't translate to most corners in racing games: visualize your exit.

While you're in the middle of a corner you want to add what Patrick calls "maintenance throttle." This is a variable amount of speed that stabilizes the car by keeping some weight on the back tires. Simultaneously, you're turning your head to look ahead to your exit and the next turn. This is when you can mash the



fact that the feeling and information from the g-forces isn't there.

Further obscuring the topic of realism versus perception in racing games is that to most gamers a racing title is more realistic when there are no racing assists used. But Patrick says that this isn't necessarily the case. "A lot of these cars are ABS- and traction control-designed, so when you turn all of that off, you're kind of leaving it in the hands of the game designers to simulate what the car would be like."

perfectly, I'm keeping up with Patrick (who no doubt isn't driving as fast as he can) and feeling what I imagine is how you want to feel if you are actually racing: in control, alive, and approaching the edge of your abilities. This evaporates in an instant when Patrick leaves me in the dust in the elevation of turns nine and 10 (see track map). I am once again too cautious coming out of the chicane in turn eight, and he dusts me on the exit. I turned my head to the right to find the exit cone and he was already out of sight.

If I need any further proof that what I've done in a video game or out on the track hasn't approached real racing, I get it as I ride with Patrick in a Porsche GT3 in the day's final track session. He calls the GT3 a "race car with a license plate," and as far as I can tell, that's true.

Earlier I asked Patrick how to identify the edge of that envelope – that fine line where you're getting the most out of the car while still being in control. He replied that you should hear the tires squealing. He says that's the car "communicating with the Gs." Well, out on the track in the GT3, Patrick makes those tires sing on every corner and brings the full effect of the g-forces and every law of physics in the universe to bear on that car and us in it. The GT3 is more than up to the task, and although Porsche is respected for making sexy, fast cars, let me just add something I learned in riding with Patrick in the GT3: Porsche also makes a very good seat belt.

While he is driving I notice that he is doing more than 80mph through some corners – a full 20mph faster than me. I have no idea if Patrick is driving to his full extent that day or if he is playing it safe, but it's clear that his mind and body are moving on a whole different plane of performance from the rest of us. Taking every corner at high speeds, he still executes perfect entrances and exits while manually shifting and conducting precise movements on the steering wheel. It's quite an experience to live through firsthand. Even when he whips a few drifts through some corners for fun and his hands are locked in extremes on the wheel, I never for a second feel we are out of control.

THE FINISH LINE?

"How's your stomach?" I'm asked a few times from different people after my ride-along in the GT3 with Patrick – a common question, I'm told. The innocuous sandwich lunch from



gas and surge out of the corner. It's based on a simple principle: look where you want to go.

In video games, the opposite is true. Since you usually don't move the camera while you're in the middle of a corner, it's easy to get target fixation, which is where you look where you definitely don't want to go. This amounts to staring straight ahead at an oncoming obstacle instead of concentrating and focusing on where you'd rather be going. Ironically, this can especially be a problem if you're in a game's first-person, cockpit view. It's not easy or intuitive to move the camera with the right analog stick (if that's even allowed in the game) while you're steering with the left (especially if the right analog camera naturally snaps back to center, as is often the case). In this respect, racing in the third-person offers a better view. In his opinion, Patrick thinks that the out-of-car third-person view adds an extra dimension of visual feedback that is a small attempt to correct the



"A RACE CAR WITH A LICENSE PLATE"

Back on the track after my driving tutorial with Patrick, we go head-to-head (sort of) against each other in the safest manner possible. Driving by myself I follow him at a distance of about two car lengths trying to mirror his pro lines through the course.

Having clocked a handful of laps, I feel that I know the course enough to start adding more speed to my route. At first this works

A TOUGH TO TAME TRACK

The front straightaway of Barber Motorsports Track is just over 530 yards, and I reached almost 130 mph before the drop off into the blind left-hand corner into turn one. Turn two keeps the rollercoaster feeling with a steep embankment that dips and rises again as it approaches what was probably my most successful corner — turn five.

That one was fun because it's preceded by a straightaway and it forced me to slam on the brakes before I started turning. But I was soon on the throttle again and turned my head to get a good early look at the exit cone. Accelerating out of turn six felt nice and satisfying.

Turns seven and eight are a mini-chicane that didn't require a big dropoff in speed, but I never felt super comfortable here. Patrick kept telling me to increase my speed through these areas and to hug the curbs on either side. Instead I would just coast through. I always felt like I would bottom out at the apex of corner seven if I carried too much speed, so I kept backing off.

I gathered a lot of speed up to the crest of turn 11, but like the course's first turn, it gives way to a dangerous blind corner. Turn 14 creates a symmetrical embankment with turn two on the other side of the front straightaway. Unlike that turn, however, 14 was the most difficult section of the course for me. Its deceptively shallow entrance kept lulling me into thinking I had more time to get to the left side of the track in anticipation of the turn itself. The result was that I would start braking in the middle of the track, which left me very unprepared.

I made matters worse here by committing a major faux pas: braking and turning at the same time. Patrick previously explained to me that you don't do this because it exerts both linear and lateral force on the car, creating a situation where the rear is loose since all the force is at the front of the car.

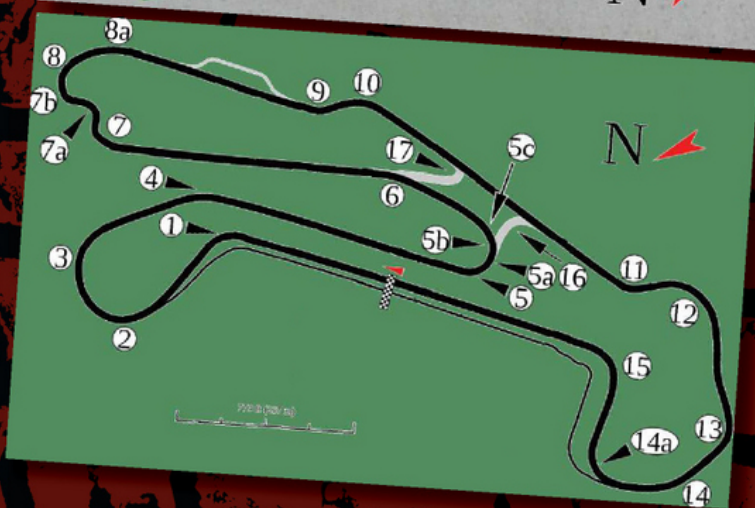
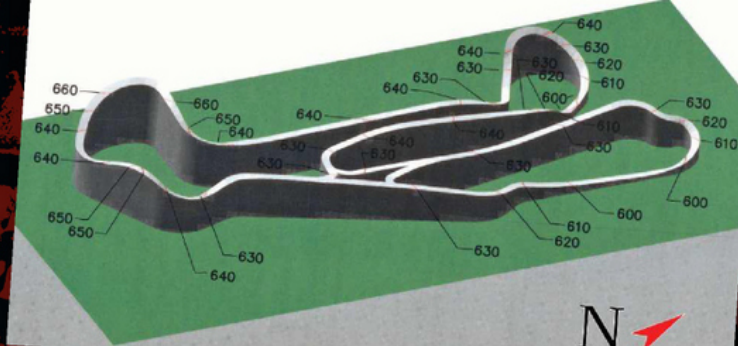
A couple times it got bad to the point where I could feel the car's ABS kick in, and a slight rumbling sensation would come through the brake pedal. That's the technical description, but the reality was far scarier. My heart stopped and I held my breath in anticipation of the worst. I'll probably never know exactly what the outer limits of a Carrera S2 are, but I was clearly given a warning.



definitely do just that. Patrick ends up winning easily as the Circuit's sharp turns are too much for me, and it doesn't help that I spend critical seconds trying to get back on the track after a spin out.

Racing in video games is everything and nothing like it is in real life. The inputs are there, but the output is different. What I knew about racing from video games was applicable on the track, but it only led to different conclusions and questions about the validity of any comparison between video games and the real thing. Could this experience lead to me being a better racer in video games? Certainly. Can I transfer that back onto the track again? The only way to find out is to get back out there as soon as possible. ♦

Be sure to check out a video of the day's events at gameinformer.com/mag



a few hours ago is still moving at near-racing speeds even after I have gotten out of the car, but I lie and say I'm fine as I concentrate on the cool, fresh air.

Coming back for the final video game session of the day is a return to Earth. I'm not knocking Forza 3, but after being subjected to the ride that I just had, racing against Patrick head-to-head back in the game feels like controlling air, as if there's nothing on the other end of the controller. It's unfair to compare this to any game to the real thing, but perhaps it's too easy to fool ourselves into thinking what

we're racing is real because of the graphics, the sensation of speed, and the fact that controlling a car onscreen seems so analogous to what we'd be doing with a real steering wheel. I guess you could say that about any video game.

Funnily enough, it was easy to revert back to my old ways of not braking enough into corners and misjudging my speed. Perhaps because there is no physical threat of bodily harm or even death, my mind happily pushes its luck. In a three-lap stint at Le Mans' Circuit de la Sarthe in Forza 3 for all the marbles I



Rift's Compelling Case For Your MMO Allegiance

Why I'm happily grinding away in Telara while an army of Azerothian alts lays dormant

by Adam Biessener

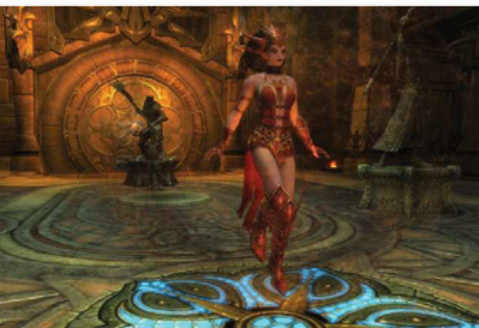
As much fun as I had with Cataclysm in the months I spent with it, I've officially jumped ship for Rift. Part of the reason is undoubtedly Rift's shiny newness, but after a bit of soul searching, I've found deeper underpinnings for my decision.

I'm done with "massively singleplayer."

The obnoxious overuse of phasing in Cataclysm's 80-85 zones, along with a content development philosophy that seems to hold that no non-instanced content should require grouping, pushes World of Warcraft players into their own virtual spaces rather than encouraging them to work together. Seeing another character in the world is annoying more often than not, since the grand total of the impact you have on each other is almost always simply one of you having to wait for a quest objective to respawn. Want to pop over and help a buddy find a named monster? You very likely can't see each other if you're in a Cataclysm zone, since you have to be in questing lockstep to not get out of phase with one another. You can forget about duo leveling with a friend unless you maintain rigid discipline about only playing together.

Rift, on the other hand, does everything in its power to push players together into ad hoc groups. Everyone's group is "public" by default, which means that anyone can join you with one click of a button on your portrait. Whatever I'm doing in Rift's public zones – whether it's questing or world PvP or fighting planar invasions – I'm as likely to end up in a group with any other Defiant players in the area as to fly solo. The system sounds vulnerable to griefing on paper, but I haven't kicked a player out of a group in all my hundreds of hours with the game. I've got a friends list a mile long above and beyond my guild just from the natural interactions with other players in the world.

If I want to level up a character on my own, I'll play a single-player game and chat with my friends over Steam. I play MMOs to save huge worlds from Internet dragons with players from all over the globe.



Rifts and Invasions are infinitely more compelling than instanced dungeons.

Let's be real for a minute. WoW's endgame consists of three things: instances (dungeons, battlegrounds, arenas), daily quests, and leveling ails. That's fine until you get a taste of dynamic content. When was the last time you banded together with a bunch of players to stop a wave of enemies coming in to kill your questgivers and torch your towns? Hillsbrad in 2006 maybe, or in the wave of capital city sieges shortly after achievements were introduced in 2008. Rift delivers those experiences daily, and I don't think I can ever go back.

Other MMOs have dynamic or player-driven content to various degrees, like *Eve Online's* corporation wars or several other titles' variations of open-world PvP design. Rift lets players have that experience when they want alongside all the conveniences of modern, post-WoW MMORPG design. You won't be stuck under a grieler's thumb like you are all too likely to in many hardcore-focused PvP games, and Rift's level of polish rivals Blizzard's legendary attention to detail.

The incentives in Rift are sufficient to drive players toward participation for now, but keeping healthy populations around its dynamic events as the player base matures is one of the main challenges Rift faces. I'm loving it now, but if the level-cap invasion scene is dead by the time ArenaNet gets around to shipping *Guild Wars 2*, I may be writing another article like this sooner than later.

Rift lets me build a better hero.

If I want to tank Cataclysm dungeons or raids with my Death Knight, I have maybe three or four talent points I can move around without hurting my performance. I can pick entire new talent trees to complement my main soul with Rift's innovative specialization system. So far, at least, I've been able to make interesting decisions about how I want to do my job (tanking, debuffing, ranged damage, melee damage, raid healing, tank healing, not getting crushed in PvP, etc.) without preventing me from being effective or viable.

For example, I can pair a healing soul with my damage-oriented spellcasting soul to create a self-shielding, life-draining multi-target grinding specialist. Alternatively, I can choose a soul that gives a no-cooldown instant attack spell to reduce my reliance on timed casts for increased PvP mobility. A third build – still with the same primary soul – could supplement the spellcasting focus with a splash of tanking talents that provide trickle healing to the entire raid as I nuke the enemy. Because I'm still spending the majority of my points in the spellcasting tree, I'm able to handle basic damage-dealing duties without a problem in any of these builds. And this is all based only on the Cleric's Inquisitor soul. I haven't touched on more balanced builds that spread significant investment over multiple trees, or the other three archetypes and dozens of different souls that offer radically different capabilities.

You can counter with the argument that competent players can crush WoW's leveling dungeons without spending talent points anywhere, much less with optimized builds.



So what? Rift gives players real choices about how they want their character to develop and play. I used to be jealous of the ability of a WoW druid to change her role from spell damage to healing to tanking or melee damage with a simple respec. After playing Rift, the WoW druid looks like an unfinished, crippled class.

Moving from Cataclysm to Rift isn't like going back in time.

Every time I've dived into a different game after a stint with *World of Warcraft*, the experience has been gutted by a constant litany of the little annoyances that WoW's years of polish have ground away. From trivial things like a counter-intuitive mechanism for splitting stacks of items in your inventory to weird presentation issues like animations not syncing properly with abilities, I could never shake the feeling that I was playing an inferior, B-quality game. This kind of problem never matters much over the course of at most a few dozen hours with a single-player game, and is only mildly irritating in the hundreds of hours that I tend to pour

into a strategy title I take a shine to. In an MMO, where you're spending weeks of real time in-game, these rough edges add up – especially for a game constantly being compared to a Blizzard title.

Rift doesn't have this problem. For the first time, another developer has matched (if not beaten quite yet) Blizzard in that company's area of strength.

The fact that Rift's launch made *World of Warcraft's* look like *Anarchy Online* from a technical perspective by comparison doesn't hurt, either.

For now, Rift has my attention.

I don't mean this article to be an attack on Blizzard or *World of Warcraft*, as negative as I've been about Cataclysm at points. My time with Cataclysm was wonderful, but it's over. I'm hopeful that Rift will deliver above and beyond the excellent leveling experience. If not, though, there are several projects on the horizon – including Blizzard's own mysterious Titan – waiting to seduce me away should Trion falter. ♦



What's Next For Kinect

Even though Microsoft's Kinect is the fastest-selling consumer electronics device of all time, software releases for the peripheral have slowed to a crawl since the launch's 17-game lineup. Where are the Kinect games? What lies in the hardware's future? We caught up with Microsoft's Kudo Tsunoda and a few Kinect developers to find out.



by Annette Gonzalez

Microsoft's answer to motion controls was a runaway hit when it launched worldwide in November. Kinect sold more than 2.5 million units within a month of release, putting the sensor closer to Microsoft's pre-launch projections of a lofty five million sales through the holiday season. To everyone's surprise, Kinect went on to sell eight million units in its first 60 days at retail, earning Microsoft's latest piece of hardware the Guinness World Record for fastest-selling consumer electronics device of all time. During that stretch it sold an average of 133,333 units per day.

Even with record-breaking hardware sales, Kinect's post-launch software support has been less than impressive. The sensor boasted 17 games at launch with wildly varying review scores, the most critically acclaimed of the bunch being Harmonix's *Dance Central*. Since the strong November debut, Xbox 360 titles in purple packaging have been sparse. However, according to Kinect creative director and general manager of Microsoft Game Studios Kudo Tsunoda, the device is gaining traction as publishers who weren't originally part of launch are now getting involved.

"Many of the publishers who did not build Kinect products for the launch have seen the amazing sales of Kinect, and they are jumping on board," Tsunoda says. "It's amazing what being the best-selling consumer electronic product of all time will do." Even though Activision and EA (which published EA Sports Active 2 for Kinect at launch) are notably absent from the upcoming games list so far, companies such as Ubisoft and THQ, which have been strong supporters since launch, are still on board with several Kinect games coming in 2011 (see sidebar). Sega is publishing an M-rated first-person horror title, *Rise of Nightmares*, and companies like 2K Play, Capcom, and Warner Bros. (partnering with developer Double Fine), are jumping on the Kinect bandwagon with *Carnival Games*, *Steel Battalion*, and *Sesame Street* titles, respectively.

Several of these titles, plus the much anticipated *Star Wars* Kinect game and compatibility with the likes of *Forza Motorsport 4*, might give hardcore gamers a reason to use their Kinects in 2011. However, by the looks of the largely kid-friendly 2011 lineup thus far, we may not see more Kinect games with major mass appeal until 2012.

From casual to hardcore

Kinect's launch games let users bust a move with friends, interact with exotic jungle cats, and get in shape with fitness selections. Though the lineup offered some solid casual choices designed with the tech in mind, critics noted that the library lacked titles appealing to hardcore Xbox 360 owners. On the flip side, even though games designed specifically for Sony's PlayStation Move fall into a similar trap, the motion controller has been successfully implemented in high-profile games such as *Heavy Rain* and *Killzone 3* as an alternate control setup. Could we someday play *Gears of War* using Kinect?

"Historically, Xbox has been predominantly a



Child of Eden



UFC Personal Trainer

hardcore game console. We have found with Kinect, like most new technologies, that if you build games from the ground up to take advantage of the features of Kinect, the games rock," Tsunoda explains. "While many of the existing Kinect games are not hardcore games, they are built from the ground up to take advantage of all the features Kinect offers. More hardcore games are coming, but I think developers are really smart not to take Kinect and force it into games built for controllers."

THQ production director William Schmitt, whose team is currently working on a UFC title for Kinect, agrees. "The Kinect offers numerous control options through total body tracking

in three dimensions and voice recognition, all without the need for a controller. Given this, use of a standard controller would likely be more limiting, because it would occupy both of the player's hands, and therefore detract from the entertainment value that the system is designed to offer," Schmitt explains. "If a one-handed gun peripheral were introduced to work in conjunction with the system, however, that may offer a significantly different experience in the case of first-person shooters."

Tsunoda says most developers up to this point have built games that focus on the player being the controller. He notes, however, that mixing Kinect games with a standard controller is entirely possible. Ubisoft's *Child of Eden*, for example, is fully playable with either Kinect or a standard gamepad and offers a noticeably different experience depending on the input method.

What's next?

Though Tsunoda didn't provide any explicit details on what we can expect from Kinect in the coming year, he says Microsoft has merely scratched the surface with the platform's capabilities. Judging by the Kinect hacks we've seen across the web that have pushed the boundaries of what we thought the sensor was capable of, we're hoping for even more innovative gaming experiences down the line as developers become more proficient with the tech. "You'll see new features that will really alter what people think they can do with their Kinect sensor. Stay tuned for some big surprises at this year's E3."

For more information on upcoming Kinect games, check out gameinformer.com

Third-parties sound off on Kinect

"Ubisoft is very much behind Kinect, and the company is actively developing Kinect-exclusive and Kinect-enabled titles. We recently announced *PowerUp Heroes*, a superhero-themed full-body combat game exclusive to Kinect, and we will have more information about other upcoming Kinect-enabled titles this summer."
— Adam Novickas, Director of Marketing, Ubisoft

"We are pushing the boundaries of gaming in some titles and our early adoption of the Kinect is paying off with the team exploring non-trivial ways of using the device. This does not mean that we are not paying attention to what has worked well on Kinect either — I am excited by the breadth of titles coming out this holiday and beyond."
— Mary Beth Haggerty, VP of Product Development, THQ Kids, Family, and Casual Division

"Kinect is a lot of undiscovered country and we're thrilled that we're one of the early adopters of that technology, which is a great opportunity for us. As long as we have ideas that we believe are strong and work well on that platform, and as long as we can find financial and creative partners that want to go along with us, I think you'll absolutely see stuff in the future."
— Nathan Martz, Lead Programmer, Double Fine

Upcoming Games

April
Carnival Games: Monkey See, Monkey Do (2K Play)
Michael Jackson The Experience (Ubisoft)

May
Virtua Tennis 4 (Sega)
Kung Fu Panda 2 (THQ)

June
Child of Eden (Ubisoft)

TBA 2011
Steel Battalion: Heavy Armor (Capcom)

Kinect Star Wars (official title TBA) (LucasArts)
Forza Motorsport 4 (Microsoft Game Studios)
Rise of Nightmares (Sega)
UFC Personal Trainer (THQ)
PowerUp Heroes (Ubisoft)
Sesame Street: Once Upon a Monster (Warner Bros.)
The Gunstringer (Microsoft Game Studios)

Sesame Street: Once Upon a Monster





Dragon Age II

Dragon Age: Origins was one of the biggest role-playing games of 2009, and BioWare tried to build on that success with the highly anticipated sequel. However, departures from the original formula left many fans divided on *Dragon Age II*. We talked with lead designer **Mike Laidlaw** about the reasoning behind some of the prominent changes.

Was there ever a point in development when you considered additional narrators besides Varric to provide another perspective on the events?

We certainly did, but realized the danger of doing so was that the story would become muddled. We didn't want to layer confusion by making the players constantly ask whether anything they were doing was real.

How did you determine which characters from *Origins* and *Awakening* to include in the sequel?

As a general rule, it was a matter of asking which characters seemed to offer information about the world's evolution (such as Alistair the King's appearance) or who logically made sense to appear in the course of the game due to political or geographic locations.

When creating interesting companion characters, what considerations come first?

We try to make all of our companions interesting, real people, rather than getting over-focused on their "role" up front. There's certainly some lean to make sure that there's some exposure to, say, elves, but we wouldn't ever stop at just defining a character as "elf warrior." So our approach has been to make sure we do have enough combat coverage, which usually means developing more characters than we need. The ones who don't fit the current story or the combat and

race balance? Well, we tuck them away for later.

Many of the caves and building interiors are repeated, even though the locations are supposed to be different. What kind of limitations necessitated this decision?

In the balance of production, we realized that we had capacity to create and maintain more stories, content, and encounters than we could necessarily create unique levels for, so we made the call to re-use some of the caves and other levels in the interest of providing more sidequests and encounters.

The fast-paced combat system of the console version is a large improvement over *Origins'* console entry. How did you zero in on the parts of that system that needed the most attention?

Lots of both formal and informal usability testing. The real key, we discovered, was that of expectation space. Controllers carry with them the feel that "these buttons are designed to do things." Whether jump or attack or grapple, controllers feel at their best when they trigger a response. The question then became whether we could look at our combat system as a whole and get that level of responsiveness while still using our RPG rules, stats, inventory, and so on as the determining factor in the effect of that action. Another key consideration was ensuring that the changes didn't make the game impossible to play on the PC, which

is why we kept to an attack/ability paradigm rather than combos or other action game mechanics.

Do you see *Dragon Age* ever revisiting the traditional tactical gameplay found in *Origins*?

It really depends on the definition of tactical. For some, it simply means "slower." For others it means more complicated combat scenarios and more engaging/challenging foes. To the former, I would say no. I personally find the responsiveness and personality of the new combat system to be much better for *Dragon Age* as a whole. My experience with the game feels more like I'm in control, rather than issuing orders, and that direct correlation to my actions is something I really enjoy. This is speaking as a habitual PC pause-and-player.

As to the idea that tactical requires more thought, and more engagement in terms of ability use, I would argue that we haven't moved away from that (enemy commanders and assassins present a type of situational challenge that simply wasn't there in *Origins*), but that we certainly can go further. We're already looking at the types of foes and encounters we have in our portfolio with an eye toward expanding the breadth of combat challenges.

The rogue occupies a clearer role in combat now, but why did you decide to downplay the importance of positioning (like with the backstab skill)?

Positioning still plays a pretty significant role in the rogue abilities, for two reasons. First, many enemies have what we call a "frontward bias," which means that they are more damaging and more effective when fighting to the front. As less durable characters, rogues are far more survivable when fighting from behind. Secondly, all characters receive a silent boost to their critical chance when "flanking" a foe, or fighting from behind, which in turn plays into the many "does extra X when landing a crit" abilities that rogues can acquire. And don't get me started on Shadows.

Ultimately, the backstab skill is designed to address a personal peeve with melee rogues from *Origins*: There was no way to quickly move into a flanking position, and doing so often caused myriad path-finding issues. We experimented with a repositioning skill to get behind foes with a sick roll, but that felt lackluster compared to the rogue's other abilities so we added an attack to it. Backstab was born.

Meredith plays a significant role late in the story, but is largely absent for the rest of the game. Why keep a prominent antagonist in the background for so long?

The "prominent antagonist" is a staple of fantasy. It's a story of how heroes are made, not born, and I think that by the same token, it's a story of how the antagonist need not always be the villain. To me, that's a very human tale. I believe the early game likely could have used some additional appearances by Meredith, but we were likely being over-cautious of her being perceived as a source of confusion or frustration for players: "I think she's important, but she feels disconnected from my current goals!"

What would you say to a PC gamer who feels like *Dragon Age II* was "dumbed down" compared to *Origins*?

I would suggest that they play on Hard, frankly. *Origins* on normal delivered a pretty painful experience on the PC if you were new to RPGs, and I firmly believe that it turned people off. There's a very clear "skill gap" between someone new to *Dragon Age II* and a returning *Origins* player, and I think it's very easy to forget how steep that learning curve could be once you've overcome it.

As such, we've made the early-game quests and encounters more forgiving, especially on normal, to help someone just getting their feet under them acclimate. Hard, however, presents a solid, and consistent challenge to veterans, and one where I think teamwork, pause-and-play, and smart thinking are all quite important. ♦

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TAKE A LOOK INSIDE

Use parental controls to restrict 3D mode for children 6 and under. Nintendo 3DS is a trademark of Nintendo. © 2011 Nintendo.

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gamestop.com/nintendo3DS

DSWare downloadable content and point balances are not currently transferable to Nintendo 3DS. Full trade value amount must be applied toward the purchase of a new Nintendo 3DS. Net retail is after trade. 3DS regular retail price is \$249.99. Offer not good on cash trades. Trades must be in full working condition to receive full value. Hardware must have all necessary components for trade. Cannot be combined with any other offer. Trade-ins subject to manager approval. While supplies last. May not be valid in combination with other offers. GameStop, Inc. reserves the right to cancel, terminate, modify, or suspend the offer for any reason without notice. See store associate for details. No dealers. Offer valid in the United States, Puerto Rico, and Guam only. Void where prohibited. Offer expires 5/6/11. © GameStop, Inc. GameStop is a registered trademark of GameStop, Inc. All other trademarks and trade names are the properties of their respective owners. All rights reserved.

interview



Edward Carrón

PSP Powerhouse Ready at Dawn Eyes the Future

Ready at Dawn is one of the few developers in the industry that specialized in PSP development. Its mastery of the system was evident in amazing games like *Daxter*, *God of War: Chains of Olympus* and *God of War: Ghost of Sparta*. We recently spoke with **Ru Weerasuriya**, Ready at Dawn co-founder about the company's past, present, and future, including his views on Sony's NGP handheld.

interview by Matt Helgeson

What are some of the things you learned while working at Blizzard?

Everything I learned on both the business and development sides was from Alan Adham. He founded Blizzard in 1991 with a couple of his friends. One thing I learned from him was that, until you quit the game industry, you don't have a life. Every single ounce of who we are – our lives, our social lives – everything blends into our work. The second thing I learned was dedication and passion. It didn't matter what time of day it was or how long you had worked. If it could be done better, we just did it.

Talk about the development process of *Daxter*. It was Ready at Dawn's first game, and for a brand new system.

It became something we didn't expect, and I don't think Sony expected it either. The PSP wasn't out yet when we pitched the game and we were trying to figure if it was even possible to replicate a PSone experience on a portable platform, because no benchmark existed. As the months went by, we realized that we were doing a lot more than a PSone; it was more equivalent to PS2.... It was a pleasant surprise to find that we could do a lot more than we expected. It went from a small experience to a full-blown, story-driven platformer.

How did you become involved with the *God of War* franchise?

That was also a pitch we brought to Sony. The natural thing would have been to move on to *Daxter 2*. We still talk internally about how awesome it would be to work on a second *Daxter*. At the time we were working on *Daxter*, the first *God of War* came out. We were all playing it at work. We had a conversation about what we should do next, and we thought of bringing up the idea of doing a *God of War*. We pitched it to Sony Santa Monica and they thought it would be a great fit. We weren't sure we could replicate it on PSP. We talked about doing a 2D game, a very different *God of War*. But we decided that if we did it, it had to be as good as the console *God of War*. That was what convinced Sony.

Do you think Ready at Dawn is the greatest PSP developer?

[Laughs] That's a question someone else should answer. One thing we hoped we proved is that we tried to be the biggest supporters of the platform. Sony and us proved that the PSP was capable of things no one thought it could do. As far as being the best developer on that

system, I've enjoyed games from *LocoRoco* to *Lumines* to *Grand Theft Auto*. It's hard to say what's better. But we're very happy with our success. We did everything possible to make that hardware shine.

Was PSP difficult to develop for?

It's hard to say, because a lot of other developers are going to hate me for saying this, but I actually think it was harder to develop for PSP than another console. There was such an expectation for what it could be; it wasn't just a Game Boy experience. Because so much was expected, we always felt we'd be compared to the "big brother" games...every single review that came out, we got docked because it wasn't as good as *God of War* in graphics or [other areas]. Actually, as much as it hurts to hear that, it's the greatest compliment we could have ever gotten. The expectations were much greater than even the platform could provide.

After the first *God of War* game came out, you announced that you were giving up PSP development. You showed a picture of your boxed up PSP dev kits. Later, obviously, you reversed that decision and made *God of War: Ghost of Sparta*. What caused that decision?

We've always wanted to do the things that the guys here were passionate about. At the time, we really thought we had pushed the PSP hardware as hard as we could. I remember that we packed up the PSPs. FedEx was supposed to come pick them up, and we decided to take a picture and post it. We never thought twice about what it would mean, but it became much bigger than we intended. It took us about three months after the game shipped to start having questions about the things we didn't do on *Chains of Olympus*. There were things we couldn't do in the time allowed. Those questions lingered, and the guys here started saying, "If we did another one we could make it so much better." Because the drive had returned here, it was a really easy conversation with Sony. So I guess we shouldn't have sent those PSP units back, but it took a while for us to think through it.

When you were thinking that you were moving on from PSP, were you thinking about making a home console game? Do you still have those ambitions?

There's always a lot of ambitions to do a lot of things here. From day one, we've always worked on our own IPs, just because we had ideas that we wanted to put on paper. After *Chains of Olympus*, we needed to know if we were disciplined enough to do something on our own. So we self-funded a small prototype internally.... We'll probably come back to it one day. But it's not something we're doing right now.

You had made some comments to Edge that the PSP was "doomed from the get-go." What were the flaws of the PSP?

Well, as you know, things get taken out of context. The context of that actual line was talking about iPad and current mobile platforms. We were talking about connectivity and the fact that you have the ability to be connected to the game at all times. In that sense, the PSP doesn't have that backbone – the 3G network. If we look back now, that's what was making or breaking mobile gaming. The iPhone is popular because of that – you're directly connected and you can download a game wherever you are. I can be at the airport, download a game, and be at it straightaway. That's what the PSP lacked. That's why we're looking forward to the NGP. As I said, it was taken out of context, because a lot of the conversation was taken out of the article. Sensationalism takes over. Next time, I'll figure out a way to not say that or to speak to the right people.

You've made some favorable comments about Sony's NGP. It would seem like a logical step for Ready at Dawn. Is your next project on NGP?

That question comes up all the time. Right now, we can't talk about our plans as far as NGP is concerned. As far as the platform is concerned, I know what most people know and have seen. As far as working on it, we've never said no to any platform.

Have you seen the NGP? What are your impressions of the hardware? It has the connectivity and other unique things like the touch pads.

It has a lot of potential on all fronts. The touch pads are great, but they aren't going to make or break a game. What does excite me about the NGP is it's the first time we're going to see what it feels like to play across platforms. Every time we picked up a console today, we play a different version of the game. It's never the same game. The NGP could allow us to see a seamless game experience from one to the other. The power that it provides would allow us to have a game on PS3 that you could put down and pick up on NGP. I'm speculating, but that's the beauty of a system that is so powerful and connected.

So you feel that the horsepower is there to do that with NGP?

Yes, from what I've seen and what I've heard. The demos that were shown of *Uncharted*, I was really surprised, especially considering that is the first generation of games for the system. I can't imagine what it will be like when we're in the middle of the cycle. People could do amazing things on that platform. ♦

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

1984 BASIC TRAINING
Weerasuriya begins experimenting with BASIC language computer programming on his Commodore 64.

1994 AUTOMOTIVE DESIGNS
Weerasuriya enters the Art Center College of Design in Switzerland, the country he grew up in. He majored in car design. In 1996, the Swiss campus closed and he transferred to the school's Pasadena, CA campus.

1996 CHANGING COURSE
After graduating, Weerasuriya realizes that the automotive industry is not where his interests lie. He begins investigating a career in the game industry.

1997 SIGNING ON
Weerasuriya gets a job at Blizzard as a concept artist. While at Blizzard he works on games like *Warcraft III*, *StarCraft*, *Blood War*, and *World of Warcraft*.

2003 LEAVING THE NEST
After a distinguished career at Blizzard, Weerasuriya sets out on his own.

2004 A NEW VENTURE
Weerasuriya forms Ready at Dawn Studios with former Blizzard colleague Adrea Peestno and former Naughty Dog programmer Didier Malenfant, who he met while snowboarding.

2006 THE FIRST HIT
Ready at Dawn releases its first game, published by Sony, the acclaimed PSP game *Daxter*.

2008 GODLIKE
Ready at Dawn releases another classic in partnership with Sony, *God of War: Chains of Olympus*. It's acclaimed as one of the best PSP games to date.

2010 NEW HEIGHTS
Ready at Dawn crafts another instant hit, *God of War: Ghost of Sparta*, which will likely be its last PSP game. *Ghost of Sparta* currently has an 86 rating on Metacritic.

dear



Cans On A String

Game Informer Headset Roundup

by Ben Reeves

1 Turtle Beach Ear Force PX5

Pros: Like an insecure overachiever, Turtle Beach's new wireless headset acts like it has something to prove – and prove it does.

Not only is the PX5 compatible with Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, PC, and Mac, but its dual Bluetooth functionality means you can use it to answer your cell phone or stream music off your iPhone while playing games. Thanks to Dolby Digital technology, this set cranks out flawless 7.1 audio and has pitch-perfect mic pickup. However, the PX5's coolest feature might be the fact that it talks back, letting you know which one of the 18 different presets you've picked, or informing you when you pair with a Bluetooth device.

Cons: The PX5's price might be the only thing holding audiophiles back from purchasing one of the slickest gaming headsets on the market, but those who can afford this high tech piece of hardware won't be disappointed.

OUTSTANDING

\$249.99
turtlebeach.com



2



3



4





5

PC

2 Astro Gaming A40

Pros: Astro's offering competes with the PX5 for the best sound quality. The A40's microphone produces crystal clear voice chat, and can be positioned on either the right or left ear cup. We love the unit's super lightweight design, which makes this one of the most comfortable headsets to wear for extended periods.

Cons: Astro's Mixamp 5.8 is useful for converting this headset into a wireless device, and the mixamp also handles the system's game/voice balance controls. Unfortunately, the device will set you back another \$140 bucks. The bigger problem is the plastic bridge that connects the A40's ear cups; the cheap plastic feels like it could break within a year.

\$199.99 (Standalone Headset) \$139.99 (Mixamp)
astrogaming.com

3 Creative Sound Blaster Tactic 3D Sigma

Pros: Creative wins the happy ear award for most comfortable headset. Thankfully, all that padding doesn't interfere with the unit's sound output. The Sigma has great surround sound emulation, and its noise-cancellation microphone offers clear sound without excess background interference.

Cons: Console gamers are left in the cold since the Sigma features no 360 or PS3 support. Creative's PC-based sound control and equalizer software didn't make a noticeable difference in audio performance; none of our adjustments could correct the Sigma's bass-heavy sound output.

\$89.99
creative.com

4 Logitech Wireless G930

Pros: Given the spot on 7.1 surround sound delivery and light design, you might forget that the G930 is a wireless set. In addition to excellent directional audio, the G930's noise canceling microphone and noise-isolating ear pads will make you feel like you're in your own little world. The system's best feature is the three programmable G-keys that give you instant access to your music, chat clients, and voice-morphing software.

Cons: Lacks Xbox 360 support. The G930 also seems to have been made for smaller heads, so those of us with large skulls will feel a bit crushed between these cans. Bass levels also feel a little flat at times.

\$159.99
logitech.com

5 Razer Chimaera

Pros: Razer always produces sick-looking hardware, and the Chimaera is no exception. The Chimaera's display stand even doubles as a charging station. We love the rich soundscape these speakers produce, and appreciate that the unidirectional microphone manages to pick up only our voice.

Cons: The Chimaera was built specifically for the Xbox 360, and it works perfectly for that console. If you want to use it with your PC you'll need a 3.5mm to RCA cable, which is sold separately. This headset also never molded to our head, producing some discomfort in the long term.

\$129.99
razerzone.com

6 Sharkoon X-Tatic SX

Pros: The Sharkoon sacrifices performance for price, but its sound output is solid enough for those working on a limited budget. The X-Tatic won't wear on your wallet or your ears, and the cheapest headset is also one of the most comfortable.

Cons: Audio extremes sound a little flat through the Sharkoon's tin can speakers, and the unit's bendy microphone creates feedback when you reposition it. We were also annoyed that the 360 adapter plugged directly into the inline volume control box, leaving nine feet of unused USB cord to flop around at our feet.

\$59.99
sharkoon.com

7 Tritton AX Pro

Pros: Tritton's oversized ear cups should fit any head and won't put unneeded pressure on your ears. We liked the audio controller box, which helped boost this set's performance to true 5.1 surround sound. We had no problem getting this headset to work on our PC, Xbox 360, and PS3.

Cons: The removable microphone isn't as adjustable as we'd like, and it comes packaged with enough cords to make NASA jealous (the audio controller alone requires a separate AC adapter). The unit feels sturdy, but its outer plastic shell makes the unit look cheap.

\$169.99
trittontechologies.com



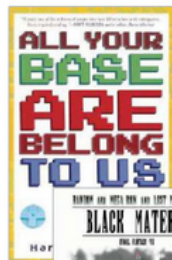
6

PC



7

PC



ALL YOUR BASE ARE BELONG TO US BY HAROLD GOLDBERG

Spanning 50 years of video game history, Goldberg explains how electronic entertainment has come to dominate popular culture.

\$15.00
randonhouse.com

BLACK MATERIA: FINAL FANTASY VII

Rap artists Random and Lost Perception remix Final Fantasy VII's soundtrack, creating some catchy and surprising beats in this ode to one of history's most beloved RPGs.

\$7.99
random.bandcamp.com

HUMAN PLANET

From the makers of *Planet Earth* and *Life*, this eight-part series showcases humanity's courage and ingenuity as our race has struggled to survive the extreme adversities on planet Earth.

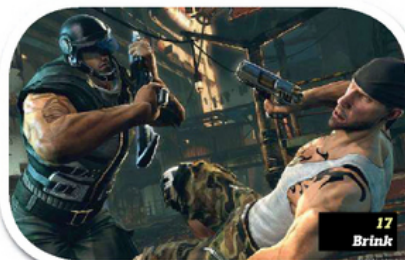
\$49.99
bbcamericashop.com

THE COLONY: A STRUCTURE CELEBRATING THE TRIUMPHS OF TECHNOLOGY BY VIKTOR ANTONOV

The concept artist for *Half-Life 2* has created a stunning illustrated novel about a 19th-century adventurer who seeks to uncover the truth about a lost city in spite of his government's opposition.

\$24.95
designstudiopress.com

Media Shelf



17
Brink



04



05



06



12



11



10
MX vs ATV



13



17
L.A. Noire



20



24
F.E.A.R. 3



31

Red Faction: Armageddon

May

2011

03 New Releases

- *Borg: The New Generation* (PS3, 360, Wii)
- *Dual Pan Sports* (3DS)
- *Pintball: Hall of Fame* (Wii)
- *Thor: God of Thunder* (PS3, 360, Wii)

04 Captain America Graduates to Second Series

In Marvel Comics' new *Astonishing* Captain America series, Steve Rogers' past comes back to haunt him. A World War II nemesis he thought long dead is threatening the 21st century's way of life. This new ongoing series runs concurrently with the long-running *Captain America* book, and is written by the amazing Andy Diggle (*Daredevil*, *Shadowland*).

05 Sonic Toys at an Affordable Price

Stash 'n' Collectibles and First 4 Toys' six-figure Sonic the Hedgehog set is now available for the low price of \$27.99. This line includes Sonic, Super Sonic, Tails, Knuckles, Metal Sonic, and that annoying female character.

06 Drop the Hamlet Hammer

Today's big theatrical release stars Natalie Portman and Anthony Hopkins, and features the directing talents of Kenneth Branagh. Surprisingly, the film isn't some boring period drama begging for an Oscar — it's *Thor*. Just when you thought you had stopped caring about superhero movies, this Norse juggernaut comes along and... doesn't change anything. At least it will keep you busy until they release the inevitable MODOK movie.

10 New Releases

- *MX vs ATV: Alive* (PS3, 360)
- *SpongeBob SquarePants* (3DS)
- *Thor: Tales of Asgard* (Blu-Ray, DVD)
- *Yu-Gi-Oh! 5D's World Championship 2011* (DS)

11 A Story to Read Before Playing Batman: Arkham City

Today DC Comics welcomes the first issue of its five-issue *Batman: Arkham City* comic book. This series bridges the story between the *Batman: Arkham Asylum* and *Arkham City* games. One year has passed since the Joker held *Arkham Asylum* hostage. Gotham City now faces a new threat, not by a familiar rogue, but a pair of mys-

terious twins. How will the city's new mayor react to this attack? What role will Batman play?

12 Let the Mega Man Celebration Begin

This glossy blue and cyan Mega Man X figure commemorates the legacy of Capcom's blue bomber, and is the first of many planned. Mega Man X comes complete with alternative X-buster parts and other interchangeable bits. You don't even have to hunt through discarded robot factories for Dr. Light's hologram upgrade capsules to get them, they just come in the same package.

13 Vampire Wars

If you're a fan of such movies as *Lemony Snicket's A Series of Unfortunate Events*, *Constantine*, *The Prophecy*, and *End of Days*, you may want to go see *Priest*, today's pseudo-religious supernatural thriller. This film features magical monks, speaker bikes, vest deserts, and ninja throwing stars. You may think that sounds like *Star Wars*, but this movie has vampires... so it's totally different.

17 New Releases

- *Brink* (PS3, 360, PC)
- *Days of Thunder* (PS3)

- *Dead or Alive Dimensions* (3DS)
- *Deep Black* (PS3, 360)
- *L.A. Noire* (PS3, 360)
- *LEGO Pirates of the Caribbean* (PS3, 360, Wii, PC, PSP, 3DS, DS)
- *The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings* (PC)

20 Another Day, Another Pirates Movie

The original *Pirates of the Caribbean* is enough, so *Pirates of the Caribbean: On Stranger Tides* is a bit of a stretch. Of all the rich and compelling tales in cinematic history, we're glad that the exploits of Captain Jack Sparrow are getting such a thorough treatment. Everyone knows that a story based on an amusement park ride can't be told in just three measly blockbuster.

24 New Releases

- *Dirt 3* (PS3, 360)
- *F.E.A.R. 3* (PS3, 360, PC)
- *Operation Flashpoint: Red River* (PS3, 360)
- *Transformers: The Complete Series* (DVD)

31 New Releases

- *Dungeon Siege II* (PS3, 360, PC)
- *Red Faction: Armageddon* (PS3, 360)

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» **Platform**

PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • PC

» **Style**

1-Player Action/RPG

» **Publisher**

Electronic Arts

» **Developer**

BioWare

» **Release**

Holiday

MASS EFFECT™





You spared the Rachni Queen. You saved Ashley. You handed the Collector base over to the Illusive Man. Or maybe you didn't do any of those things. BioWare directs

the general narrative arc of the Mass Effect series, but players craft the nuances of the story through their choices. The result is a legion of fans with personal connections to their own visions of Commander Shepard, and unique perspectives on the events in the Mass Effect universe. Male or female, paragon or renegade, soldier or adept – Shepard is shaped by numerous decisions spread throughout Mass Effect 1 and 2. While these choices often ripple out to affect the whole galaxy, nothing you've done so far can change the grim scenario Shepard faces at the beginning of Mass Effect 3: The Reapers have arrived. The full-scale war against these sentient machines forces Shepard to answer for his or her actions and allows players to witness repercussions that have been churning beneath the surface of the story since the trilogy began.

Mass Effect revolves around galactic conflict; entire worlds and civilizations are at risk, and their fates lie in Shepard's hands. This grand scope is comically at odds with the humble location where the exploits of the Normandy and its crew are determined. The Mass Effect series is developed at BioWare's studio in Edmonton, Alberta. The building is connected to an average three-star hotel – the window in the shared office of BioWare co-founders Ray Muzyka and Greg Zeschuk only overlooks a restaurant and a fountain in the hotel lobby. However, these inconspicuous surroundings gave rise to one of the most ambitious and revered franchises in gaming. This is where the Mass Effect trilogy started, and it is where the battle to save the galaxy in Mass Effect 3 is currently underway.

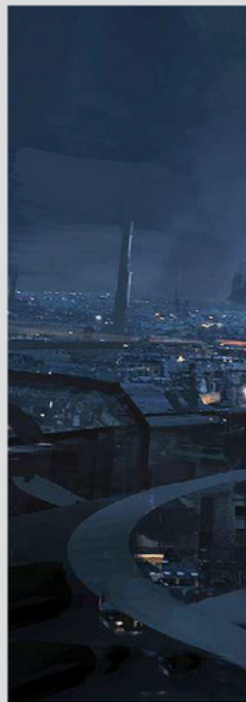
When BioWare first announced Mass Effect, the developer's goals for the project seemed unattainably high. Not only was it positioned as a three-game story before the first entry had even released, but the concept of decisions carrying over from one game to the next had never been attempted on such a scale. Once Mass Effect came out, however, BioWare's ability to deliver on its promises became apparent. The game was hailed as a cinematic sci-fi masterpiece, and the even greater success of Mass Effect 2 served to cement the series' reputation and win more fans. Now, with the epic conclusion on the horizon, all of the build-up in the first two titles is about to pay off. "This is what we've been looking forward to the whole trilogy," says executive producer Casey Hudson. "If you think about the IP that we've built, really every one of the arcs that we've got going are leading towards this long list of incredible moments, and that's really what Mass Effect 3 is made out of."

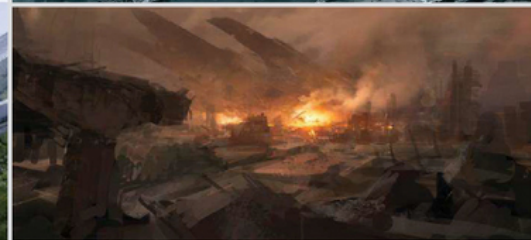
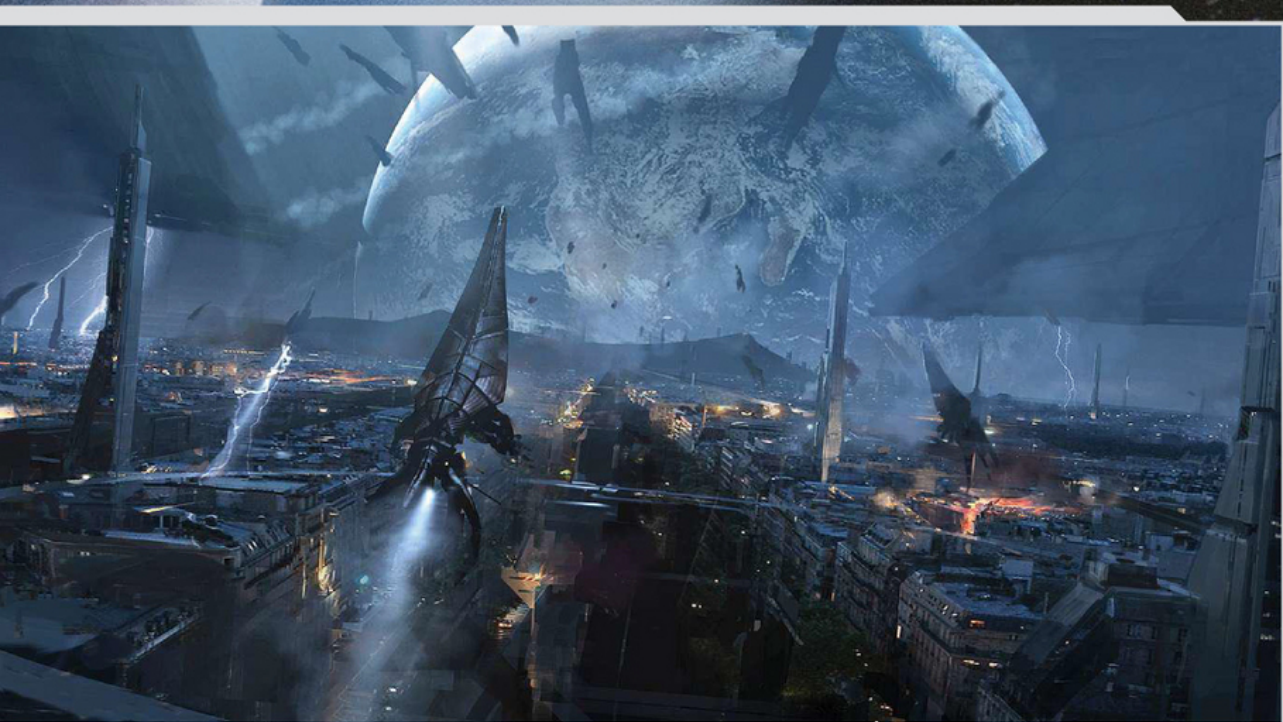
A HERO'S WELCOME

The story begins with Commander Shepard on Earth facing scrutiny related to the events of the recently released Mass Effect 2 DLC, Arrival. Only a few months have passed since the suicide mission to take out the Collector base, but members of the Alliance are still hesitant to believe Shepard's tale of an imminent attack from the Reapers. Even though players have experienced the wrath of these ancient foes first-hand, most inhabitants of the Mass Effect universe see the Reapers as an old legend that pose no real threat. That changes as soon as the massive sentient warships appear over Earth and systematically conquer its key locations with ease.

"The opening starts by showing things from around the world – New York, London, Japan. You're seeing what's happening in all these other places first, seeing these reports from major cities," Hudson says. "Then you look out your window, and it arrives."

Shepard may have known this was coming, but there's no time to say "I told you so" to the Council. The brutality and efficiency of the Reaper assault is overwhelming. This isn't the kind of battle the forces of Earth are accustomed to fighting – it took a whole fleet and a coordinated assault to take down Sovereign at the end of the first Mass Effect, and that was just one Reaper. Now, hundreds of them are descending on Earth and the surrounding systems. "This is the all-out invasion that you've been trying to stop the whole time," Hudson says. "They've taken the Earth, and they're starting to take other parts of the galaxy. It is about a full-blown galactic war in Mass Effect 3."





PROFILE: THE NORMANDY

Second only to Commander Shepard, the Normandy is one of the most recognizable elements of the Mass Effect series. The iconic ship is still under Shepard's control in Mass Effect 3, but it has been reclaimed by the Alliance and is in the process of being taken apart, studied, and rebuilt. "The Alliance feels like it's basically theirs," says executive producer Casey Hudson. "You're a Spectre, but you're also an Alliance marine. It's like if someone commandeered an aircraft carrier in World War II, they're not going to say 'Lucky for you! You have your own aircraft carrier!' They want to take it and analyze it. ... It's still the Normandy, but it's different again and it's got some different parts and rooms to explore."

THE PLAN

As the invading force overcomes humanity's home, Shepard quickly realizes that the battle for Earth is lost. The only hope is to flee, gather support, and mount a counter-attack to reclaim the planet. "That's kind of the sad part; you have to give up and escape somewhere. That's what the opening level is about: How can a hero run away to fight another day, and what plausible solution is there?" Hudson reveals. "Answering that is the core of what you're trying to do as a player. How do you stop something that is unstoppable?"

In the first two games, your goals were apparent early in the story. Find and stop Saren. Recruit a team to help eliminate the Collectors. In *Mass Effect 3*, you know you need to take back Earth, but the path to victory is less clear at the outset. You won't just find some long-lost Reaper "off" button; you need to pursue a way to gain the upper hand while surviving against the Reapers' continuous attacks across the galaxy.

"There's an evolution of what you think needs to be done to stop the Reapers," says Hudson. "Starting with one idea that changes – and there are red herrings – you're trying to shape what this plan should look like." Shepard adapts the plan to accommodate information you uncover along the way, but one aspect remains unchanged: You're going to need help.



During our demo, we saw a few hints that Captain Anderson could be a party member. However, BioWare says that his presence was just "placeholder."

Mass Effect 3 will be more difficult than the second game, but the team wants the challenge to be entertaining instead of frustrating





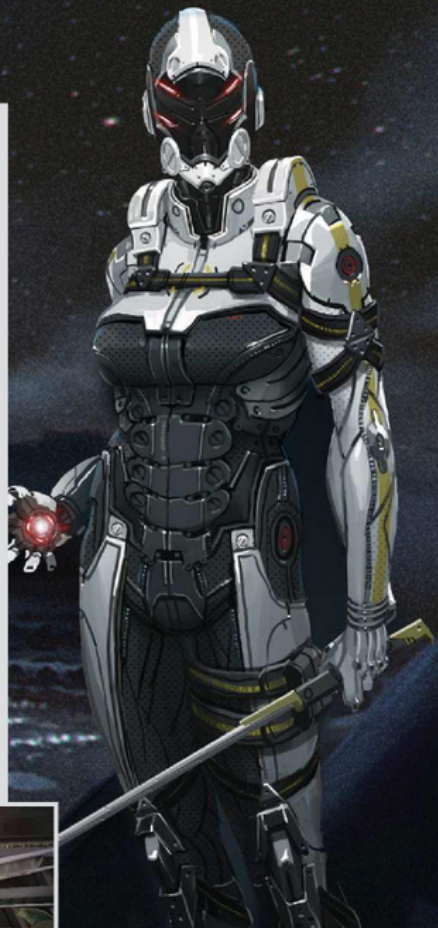
OLD CONFLICTS, NEW ALLIES

In *Mass Effect 2*, Shepard traveled across the galaxy recruiting specific individuals. In *Mass Effect 3*, that won't be enough. Given the scale of the threat, you need to unite entire civilizations and rally behind a plan to stop the Reaper incursion.

While no one wants to see the Reapers take over, gaining the support of a whole race isn't an easy task. For many species, dropping everything to aid Shepard against the Reapers would only assure their destruction at the hands of another threat. For example, Shepard visits the Salarian homeworld in search of allies, finding it consumed in a conflict relating to the Krogan genophage (a concept introduced back in the first game and revisited in the second). Similarly, the exiled Quarians are attempting to reclaim their home planet, which was overrun by the Geth hundreds of years ago. In both cases, one side relenting results in victory for the opposing force, so Shepard is tasked with resolving these conflicts in hopes of freeing up resources and gaining support.

Don't expect to win the loyalty of the galaxy by simply completing a series of fetch quests, though. These scenarios have been slowly built up since the series began, and the issues involved are complicated. "We've established all of these different things that are going on," Hudson says. "By going through and working through these larger plots, what if you could get them all unified and get them all behind you? Maybe, in some cases, that's not possible. Maybe you're not able to figure out what the solution is."

The bottom line is that Shepard needs help from anyone who will offer. Some of this aid will come from old friends, and some will come from surprising new sources. However, each group that backs Shepard raises the stakes even higher; instead of just gambling with the lives of the *Normandy's* crew, Shepard may have to sacrifice civilizations to put an end to this war.



Melee attacks play a larger role now, and each class has a unique close-quarters attack

NEW GAME +

Handling replayability in a story-driven title is a challenge. The first *Mass Effect* made extensive use of new game+ features, allowing players to start new characters with significant bonuses. The second entry had a similar feature, but focused more on letting players continue doing missions as the same character. Where will *Mass Effect 3* fall in this spectrum? "It's probably going to be a combination of both," says executive producer Casey Hudson. "We're going to have a version of the post-game state that you can go back to and finish more stuff, but then we'll have stuff you can loop back around and do in new game+. It's a hybrid of the two."

ON THE BATTLEFIELD

The narrative in Mass Effect 3 flows naturally from Mass Effect 2, and the same can be said of the gameplay. Though combat was redesigned significantly between Mass Effect 1 and 2, players can expect a more familiar experience this time around. "If you look at the way Mass Effect 2 was received by fans and critics – given the huge, sweeping changes we made – I think there's reason to believe that the formula we arrived at was right," Hudson says. "Now, I think there are tweaks we can make to that."

Many of the improvements are subtle, and will only be immediately apparent to players who remember Mass Effect 2's combat well. Enhanced cover mechanics allow Shepard to maneuver easily while remaining protected from enemy fire, and peeking around cover has been optimized. Shepard's new roll move adds agility to firefights, along with the ability to leap over gaps and low objects (without having to duck behind them first). Also, the addition of ladders creates multi-level areas without the need for giant ramps, adding more dimension to the spaces where you'll be fighting so they don't all feel like square arenas with cover scattered around. Best of all, weapons are no longer restricted based on class, so any character has the ability to use any weapon.

The enhancements also extend to enemy AI. In previous games, your foes' behavior didn't vary wildly. They would take cover and pop out occasionally to fire off a few shots. In Mass Effect 3, enemies can perform coordinated assaults. "They're conscious of each other, they flank, they're much more aggressive," Hudson says. "They have very specific roles on the battlefield, and those roles – like chess pieces – work together a lot better because they have unique tactics."

If you're thinking that these features sound standard for most third-person shooters, you're right. However, remember that the original Mass Effect's gunplay was more about the numbers under the hood than player skill – an element of its RPG roots. "We realized that because we have shooter combat, we inevitably will be compared with the best shooters in the world. So we have to get to that level," Hudson admits. "Now, with Mass Effect 3, we're able to complete that evolution with improvements across the board."



MASS EFFECT MEETS MULTIPLAYER?

When the teaser for Mass Effect 3 first released, rumors were swirling that the project was actually a multiplayer title set in the Mass Effect universe. Those rumors turned out to be false, but it got many gamers thinking about how a multiplayer component would fit into the Mass Effect trilogy. Rest assured, the team has thought about this, too. "As a single-player experience, and just as a world that people want to immerse themselves in and share, we've been trying to think of a way that makes sense for people to experience Mass Effect with their friends," says executive producer Casey Hudson. "We haven't yet come up with a way to do that, so we don't have anything to announce at this time. But, obviously, multiplayer is something we want to do more of in the future as a company."





RETURN OF THE RPG

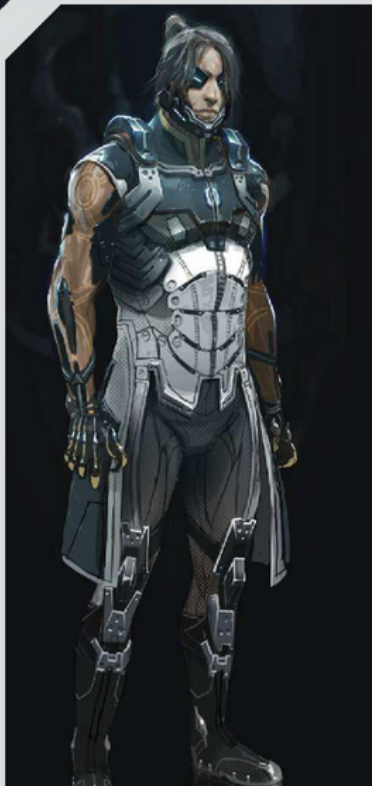
Some fans of the original *Mass Effect* complained that the second entry strayed from its RPG roots, focusing too much on the action. While *Mass Effect 3* is embracing the action-oriented approach to combat from *Mass Effect 2*, the team acknowledges that work needs to be done to recapture the series' role-playing spark. To accomplish this, BioWare isn't reverting to old iterations of *Mass Effect's* design; instead, the studio is adding greater depth and customization to the current model.

In *Mass Effect 2*, Shepard was reconstructed from scratch, giving BioWare a story-based excuse to reconfigure and reset the skill system. That's not happening again. In *Mass Effect 3*, you will start out more in line with where you left off in the previous game. "You start out with some of these basic powers you would have had in *Mass Effect 2*, but quickly they start becoming evolved powers," Hudson explains. "That's where we've added more and different options for you. We know that people wanted to have not only the ability to allocate skill points, but to have a little more choice in that." This means that a biotic power like Singularity will evolve into several forms as it develops, not just one of two options at the end of a linear progression.

The emphasis on choice also applies to weapons, which now have multiple forms of customization. You can obtain different barrels, scopes, and materials to outfit your arsenal as you see fit. Not only will these weapon mods have tangible combat benefits, but they'll also change the physical appearance of your guns, so you can tailor your favorite weapon to be just the way you like it. "People are right when they say that it needs more in the activity chain, from what you can buy in stores and what you can customize and the way that translates to different weapons and your attachment to them," Hudson says. This mechanic allows *Mass Effect 3* to regain some of the personalization of the first game without requiring players to sort through a cumbersome inventory or carry around dozens of possible upgrades.



Why is the Illusive Man using Cerberus to hunt down Shepard? You won't know until you play the game for yourself



KNOW YOUR ENEMY

The Reapers are no longer some mysterious threat lurking in the far reaches of space. They have started a war, and Shepard is in direct combat with them throughout the course of Mass Effect 3. That isn't to say that every enemy you face is a massive starship (Shepard will probably still neutralize the occasional band of mercenaries), but the Reapers and their armies are your primary foes.

"You've only been able to see a few Reapers before, but now you're actually seeing them in person," Hudson says. "You're in the same space with these guys, fighting these mile-high starships." Obviously, Shepard can't take down hundreds of Reapers in single combat, but that doesn't mean players won't be doing some of the dirty work themselves. Exactly how you take down these unstoppable foes will remain a mystery until you witness the battles for yourself.

As daunting as the opposition is, Shepard may get some help from unexpected places. In one story-boarded sequence we saw, Shepard is in a column of Krogan vehicles as an advancing Reaper devastates the surroundings. A damaged Turian fighter crashes into the column, destroying Shepard's vehicle as the hulking foe moves forward. On foot and faced with a hopeless battle, all seems lost until a Thresher Maw bursts from ground and begins grappling with the Reaper. Shepard runs underfoot as the two titanic creatures dash overhead, and the Thresher Maw gains the upper hand by constricting itself around the Reaper and pulling the machine under the sand. The struggle appears to be won, but then lasers begin bursting through the ground, indicating that Shepard should probably get out of there as fast as possible.

"This is the type of scale we want to work at for Mass Effect 3," says cinematic animation lead Parrish Ley. "We've built up all these characters—we've got all this history and lore—and it feels like, if we don't go this big, it's just a waste."

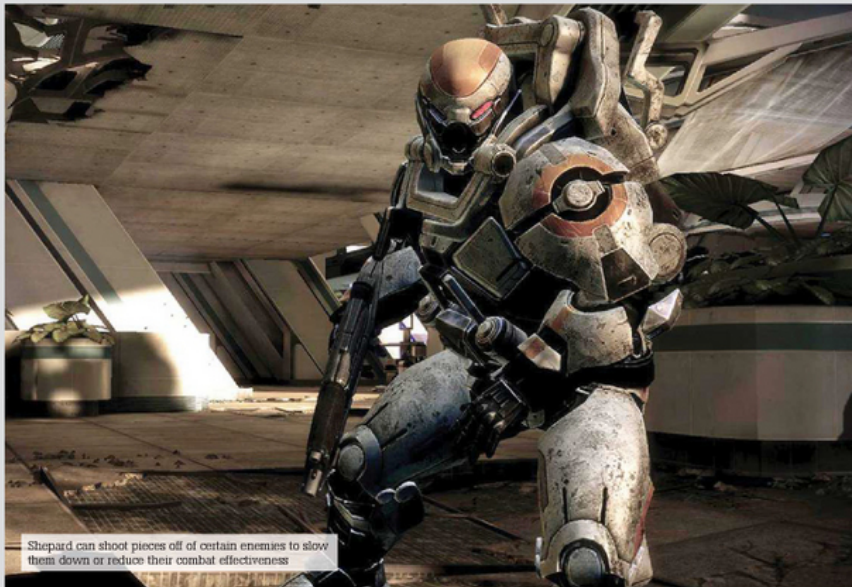


As if fighting the Reapers themselves isn't bad enough, you'll also have to contend with their thralls. In Mass Effect 1 and 2, players faced enemies called Husks. These cybernetic abominations are the result of humans being implanted with Reaper technology and repurposed. Unfortunately for Shepard, the Reapers can do this with practically any species in the galaxy. From bipedal races like Turians and Batarians to more beastly variations like Rachni and Harvesters, these twisted versions of familiar creatures comprise the bulk of the Reapers' ground forces.

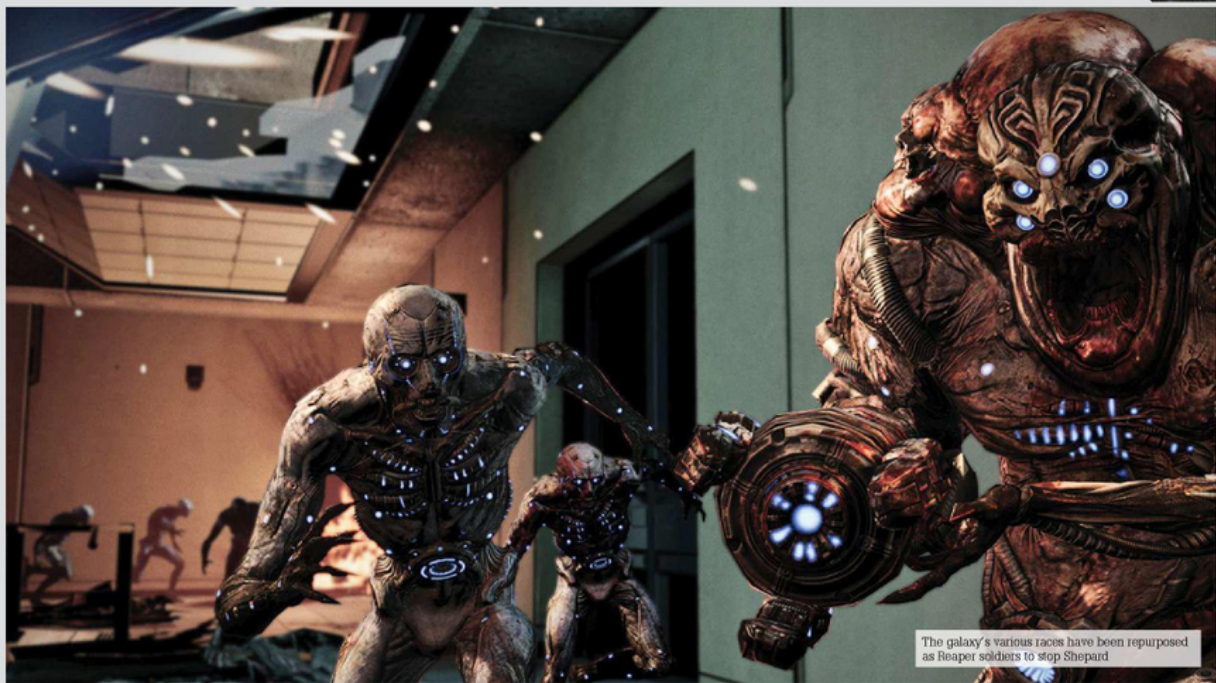
In addition to fighting the terrifying Reaper army, Shepard is being hunted by a former employer. "Cerberus is also a factor," Hudson teases. "Whereas in the previous game, you were begrudgingly working with them from the inside, now they're part of this force that's out to stop you." The organization's motives for trying to stop Shepard are a closely guarded secret at BioWare, and gamers won't know the truth until they play Mass Effect 3 for themselves.

PROFILE: JAMES SANDERS

Amid all of the old friends that are rejoining (or at least talking to) Shepard, players will also meet a few new faces. Alliance soldier James Sanders joins Shepard early in the story, possibly even before the initial Reaper attack on Earth. While Sanders is a seasoned soldier, the political workings of the galaxy and its seedy underbelly are still unfamiliar to him. "He's kind of the entry point for when something bizarre happens," says executive producer Casey Hudson. "The new player is probably thinking the same thing that Sanders is. But it's not that Sanders is the dumb guy who is amazed by everything—he's a soldier. He's done his tour of duty." Despite some similarities, Sanders is not the character we saw in the initial reveal trailer for Mass Effect 3. BioWare couldn't confirm whether Sanders bears any relation to Kahlee Sanders from the Mass Effect novels, but that would certainly be an interesting tie-in for fans who have followed the franchise to other media.



Shepard can shoot pieces off of certain enemies to slow them down or reduce their combat effectiveness



The galaxy's various races have been repurposed as Reaper soldiers to stop Shepard

GETTING THE TEAM BACK TOGETHER

Of all the questions fans have about Mass Effect 3, the loudest and most frequently asked is probably "Who do I get back in my party?" Over the course of the series, gamers have developed an attachment to Shepard's squadmates – a fact that BioWare does not treat lightly.

If everyone from the previous games returned as a permanent party member, introducing new characters would be difficult... and the character selection screen would be a mess. The trick is giving gamers a satisfying payoff to the relationships they've built while managing the roles that each character can play, from cameo to major player.

"It's the whole range, and it's different per character," Hudson says. "Some characters are going to be absolutely core to the story. They're squad members. The whole structure of the story kind of pivots around them. Others will be conventional squad members that you can choose to have with you or not... Some characters might be there for just a mission, but they're a squad member in that mission. And some characters might just have cameo appearances."

Don't worry that BioWare has forgotten about Legion, your romance with Ashley, or the fact that you didn't lose any allies during the attack on the Collector base. While the exact role these characters play may be unknown, they weren't introduced into the Mass Effect universe only to be swept under the rug. You can safely assume that you'll see all of the major characters return in some capacity (see sidebar for more).



Ashley in Mass Effect 3

WHO'S BACK?

Over two games, Shepard has racked up a lot of friends and enemies. Though all main characters will likely return in Mass Effect 3 (if they've survived this long), here is a list of who is confirmed to make appearances.

Characters that BioWare says will be playable to some extent:

LIARA
GARRUS (if he survived ME 2)
ASHLEY or KAIKAN
JAMES SANDERS

Characters we saw or heard during our demo (possibly playable):

WREX
MORDIN
LEGION
ANDERSON

Other Appearances:

UDINA
THE ILLUSIVE MAN

CHOICE AND CONSEQUENCE

Mass Effect made a name for itself by pioneering in the field of player choice. Instead of just making decisions that affect a single game, BioWare promised that your actions would be reflected in later installments. But with so many variations, how can those choices be represented in a way that is satisfying for the player?

"We have a system that can now read plot states much quicker and branch off, running various different branches in parallel," Ley says. "Let's say that in one large cinematic, you saved this person, but lost this person, and romanced this person – it can read all of those and then goes through this sequence out to the end so all of your shots and notes are custom-built based on those decisions."

The assault on the Collector base at the end of Mass Effect 2 used a similar technique, but that was just for one sequence. Since your personal version of the galaxy will be such a pervasive part of Mass Effect 3, the technology has been refined and runs much smoother – no more conspicuous loads as the game tries to read what choices you've made.

You'll also notice the consequences of your decisions outside of cutscenes. For example, if Garrus died during the course of Mass Effect 2, he hasn't made a miraculous recovery. He's gone. If Garrus survived, he can join Shepard, and may even have a personal mission that you can complete. However, players shouldn't feel cheated if they've lost a few allies during the course of the series; the goal is to reward gamers for playing how they want to, not to penalize them by withholding content. "It'll be different, but not worse," Hudson says. "That's part of the fun of being able to do different playthroughs. It's not that something's there, and then it's missing. You get to see what's different, and what is there, and what changes."

BEYOND THE TRILOGY

After Mass Effect 3 is finished and the trilogy is complete, is that the end of the Mass Effect universe? Not if BioWare has anything to say about it. After building such an intricate setting, the developer would like to see it branch out into other genres and even other media. "Within video games, a lot of people say that they want to see an MMO," says executive producer Casey Hudson. "I think that kind of makes sense for this universe... part of what you're trying to do is save that universe so you can live in it. That's part of the promise, I think, for any great IP. It has to be a world worth saving... I think Mass Effect has that quality to it. If you get rid of the Reapers and win that, wouldn't it be amazing to just live on the Citadel or just take a ship to Omega? That makes sense."



Will the action get off the ground in Mass Effect 3? Executive producer Casey Hudson says: "We are treating space cinematics and space combat differently and on a bigger scale than ever before."



INTERVIEW WITH CASEY HUDSON

We chat with the executive producer of Mass Effect 3 and the mind behind the franchise.

Mass Effect 2 took the series in a darker direction. Considering that the galaxy is at war, is it safe to assume this tone continues in the third game?

Yeah. I don't want to say it's hopelessness, but it's that sense of, given the scale of what you're fighting, how can you possibly win? It's going to take so much coordination and so much force. Whereas Mass Effect 2 was sort of stylishly dark – cool and slick, this is much more of a full-scale war feel. You don't really have the luxuries, and you don't have the sense that you can for sure win. Deep down, you know that it's going to get ugly and there are things that are going to be lost, even if you win.

Can you say anything about how Shepard thinks that beating the Reapers is an attainable goal?

Part of the trick is that the nature of that kind of story is that, initially, it has to be kind of hopeless. Then, you start finding a reason to believe. But if I tell you that reason to believe right now, then the story up front doesn't make sense when you play, because you're waiting for X to happen. That's the thing we don't want to reveal.

But there's an element to this plan that BioWare is still keeping under wraps?

That's right.

The Illusive Man was a central figure in Mass Effect 2... what can you say about his role in the new game?

He's in Mass Effect 3. He's one of our major characters in the IP, and that's part of what we're doing

in Mass Effect 3. In general, all big characters are there – given they're alive.

If all characters can use all weapons, how does a class like the soldier distinguish itself?

There's still a balance in terms of the skills. Even if you make weapons universal in terms of class, you still have all the different class-based powers, like biotics or tech. However, there is still a difference in that the soldier is the only one that can carry all of the different classes of weapons at once. The other classes can choose to carry whatever weapon they want, but they may only have two or three they can carry, whereas a soldier can have them all at the same time.

Does Shepard's skill point distribution import from ME 2?

We always have to find a balance, because we don't want to punish players who haven't played before. But on the other hand, there should be an advantage to having done certain things previously. In general, the intent is to bring forward the character exactly the way you left off, but for new players, basically giving you what you probably would have had – but there are benefits to having played it before.

After the Mako in Mass Effect and the hovercraft in Mass Effect 2, what is your philosophy on including vehicles in Mass Effect 3?

I think it's going to be more like Mass Effect 2, where it's not built into the critical path. We have opportunities for other kind of fun bits – not



BioWare wants to diversify the battlefields, moving away from large arenas filled with obvious cover

necessarily like anything we've done before, but with some stuff that's a little bit different.

What about mineral scanning?

Well, we're changing that part of the game. We haven't locked down exactly what we're doing with it, but it won't be at all like what you saw in Mass Effect 2. We've had the uncharted worlds and Mako stuff, planet scanning, and N7 missions; that part of the experience is always important — that nonlinear going out in the galaxy and doing stuff. But we'll change it for Mass Effect 3.

How will you familiarize new players with the events of the previous games?

We're going to do something similar to what we did with the PS3 version of Mass Effect 2. We basically have a "story so far" thing, which, even if you import a game, you'll see. It's just that it plays out and recaps what you did. But if you haven't, you'll see the same thing, and it stops to ask you what you would have done... it's essentially a saved game creator that leads you into the main game and tells you what's going on.

Some choices in the first Mass Effect, like the Rachni Queen's fate, didn't have a significant

impact on ME 2. Will we see the repercussions of those actions in 3?

There are some decisions you could have made in Mass Effect 1 — and the comic in the PS3 version — that, in Mass Effect 3, make a really big difference. Different things happen, and you have access to different things, and they will affect the endings that you have access to. That's part of what we wanted to do from the start; from the first game, making choices that can affect everything, all the way up to the final resolution.

The ending in Mass Effect 2 where Shepard dies basically had to be deliberately obtained. Given the stakes in Mass Effect 3, are players going to have to work harder to get the "good" endings?

We are developing a way that the granularity of your success is there in a similar way. We do have more of an analog set of endings, similar to how it worked in Mass Effect 2, but it will probably be a lot more so. Because this is our big ending, it's pretty analog, and then there are lots of consequences within that. It's not quite the kind of thing where it's difficult to get the worst-case scenario. It's kind of distributed a bit differently.

THE END

Amid all of Mass Effect 3's features, one is sure to simultaneously excite and disappoint fans of the series: This is the end. The war that was set in motion back when you first played Mass Effect in 2007 is reaching its climax, and you'll see how the galaxy is shaped by your actions.

"The thing about Mass Effect 3 is that it's going to be a lot more complex to build in the repercussions from your previous games, but ultimately that's what it's all about," Hudson says. Integrating choices from the first two Mass Effect titles is part of the payoff fans are expecting, but another facet of Mass Effect 3 is that your actions will have finality. The end of the trilogy means that the narrative arc is done throwing passes for the next entry to catch; BioWare doesn't need to consider how Shepard's choices will affect future installments. Players will feel the weight of how much is at stake, because they could lose it all. The result is an explosive finale with plenty of stunning moments and unexpected twists that are sure to illustrate why Commander Shepard is one of the defining heroes of this console generation. ♦





The developer behind Shattered Dimensions refines its gameplay and crafts a high-concept science fiction story that takes Spider-Man to places he's never been

SPIDER-MAN

EDGE OF TIME

► **Platform**
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360

► **Style**
1-Player Action

► **Publisher**
Activision

► **Developer**
Beenox

► **Release**
Fall

Spider-Man is dead. After years of battling super villains and saving New York from bi-weekly disasters, the wall crawler meets a gruesome end. The superhero's death sends New York into a spiral. Crime reaches new heights as poverty and homelessness spread like viruses. By the year 2099, New York's citizens live in fear of a near-totalitarian regime. Above it all sits Alchemax, a mega corporation that has its talons in everything from the commercial sciences and politics to organized crime. However, this is not how history was supposed to transpire. The universe is off balance, and only one person is aware of the time paradox. That man is Miguel O'Hara, a brilliant geneticist who moonlights as the Spider-Man of the future. In order to save his own time, this Spider-Man will need to completely rewrite history. *by Ben Reeves*

A redemption story

Spider-Man's video game career has more ups and downs than the New York skyline. Titles such as Neversoft's PSone Spider-Man and Treyarch's open-world movie tie-in Spider-Man 2 were heralded as some of the best superhero games of their time, but yearly releases have damaged Spider-Man's reputation as much as one of J. Jonah Jameson's venomous editorials. When a virtually unknown developer from Quebec, best known for its work on movie licenses such as *Monsters vs. Aliens* and *The Bee Movie*, started working on a Spider-Man game, fans were reasonably skeptical.

However, *Spider-Man: Shattered Dimensions* became one of the highest-reviewed Spider-Man titles in years. Activision was so pleased with the game's success that earlier this year the publisher announced that Beenox would be the exclusive developer for the next several Spider-Man games. Spider-Man's video game career was beginning to look a little brighter.

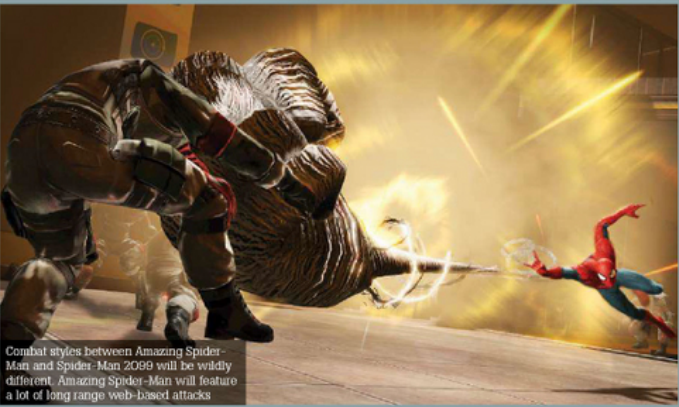
Not everyone was happy with *Shattered Dimensions*, however. The team at Beenox knew there was one area of the game where it could make big improvements. "In order to deliver the kind of experience we were going for, we knew that we would need a deeper story," says Beenox's creative director Gerard Lehiany.

Beenox already had an idea for a time traveling narrative that involved both *The Amazing Spider-Man* and *Spider-Man 2099*, but the team knew it needed help fleshing out the larger story moments and dialogue. Beenox needed a comic book veteran — a Spider-Man expert who was already familiar with the video game industry. So the studio turned to one of the comic industry's legendary writers.

Amazing Spider-Man's evade move lets him dodge any attack. It's also represented by multiple shadowy figures in classic comic book fashion.



Combat styles between *Amazing Spider-Man* and *Spider-Man 2099* will be wildly different. *Amazing Spider-Man* will feature a lot of long range web-based attacks.



The Spider-Man of the future

In 1992, Marvel Comics dreamed up a line of comics set nearly a hundred years in the future. Comic veteran Peter David pitched Marvel on his ideas for a futuristic Spider-Man — a grittier take on Stan Lee's original concept that imagined a more serious Spider-Man fighting crime across a towering cyberpunk city. *Spider-Man 2099* ended up being the most consistently successful comic in the 2099 line, selling over 100,000 copies almost every month (a number most comic creators would kill their protagonist for today).

Despite *Spider-Man 2099*'s popularity, by the middle of the '90s the comic industry had imploded and Marvel was facing Chapter 11 bankruptcy. Internal corporate bureaucracy led to the cancellation of every comic within the 2099 line. But *Spider-Man 2099* wouldn't die. The character Miguel O'Hara kept popping up in cameos in several of Marvel's other books and in reprints. After Beenox announced that *Spider-Man 2099* would be one of the main protagonists in *Spider-Man: Shattered Dimensions*, the futuristic hero seemed more popular than he'd been in over a decade.

As the father of *Spider-Man 2099*, Peter David was the natural choice to write Beenox's sequel. But there were other reasons that Beenox felt David was the perfect fit for its game. In the '80s David had a run on *Amazing Spider-Man* that is still talked about to this day. His "The Death of Jean DeWolff" arc is often ranked as one of the best Spider-Man stories of all time. David is also no stranger to the video game industry; the prolific writer wrote the script for Chair Entertainment's popular XBLA title *Shadow Complex* and has produced comic book adaptations for Halo and Disney's *Epic Mickey*.

"It didn't take much to convince David to join the team. I was thrilled when it was first announced that *Spider-Man 2099* would be a part of *Shattered Dimensions* a while back. I honestly had no idea the character had that many fans," David says. "Apparently his presence in the game was popular enough to generate this game where he has a greater focus. I think it's great. I'm just pleased that the team thought of me this time." With David on board, the team exploded with creative new ideas for *Spider-Man: Edge of Time*.

Talking through time

Spider-Man: Edge of Time begins in the world of 2099. A mysterious villain (Beenox wouldn't reveal who, but we suspect that it could be either Jordan Boone, a.k.a. Halloween Jack, or Gabriel Stone, a.k.a. Goblin 2099) figures out how to open a portal to the past so he can alter history for his benefit. Miguel O'Hara witnesses the villain's plot and jumps forward to stop him, but he is a fraction of a second too slow and gets caught in the middle of the time portal. Stuck between times, Miguel watches as history is rewritten with the death of the original Spider-Man, the rise of Alchemax as a corporate superpower, and the ultimate decay of New York City. "The future becomes darker. You can feel it," says Beenox producer Mathieu Tremblay. "Alchemax is in control of everything, almost like it's not a free world anymore." Unable to travel back in time, Miguel uses the technology at his disposal to send a message through time to correct the one event that he believes triggered this catastrophic series of events: the death of the Amazing Spider-Man.

A major complication with Miguel's plan arises, however. Peter Parker, the Amazing Spider-Man, isn't interested in changing reality. Thanks to the alterations in the time stream, Peter is no longer the troubled everyman who can't make ends meet. Instead, he's recently acquired a high paying job working for Alchemax, which he believes is a reputable company.

Peter's new job places him in the Alchemax building, a symbol of American modernity. Practically a city in itself, the building is outfitted with science labs, hydroponic jungles, living quarters, and all manner of facilities that people might need to survive. The Alchemax building is so large, in fact, that the entire game takes place within its walls.

Peter is crawling his way up the Alchemax building when Miguel contacts him through time. Peter is headed to the 66th floor to rescue coworkers who are in danger, but Miguel informs him that he is destined to die on the 66th floor.

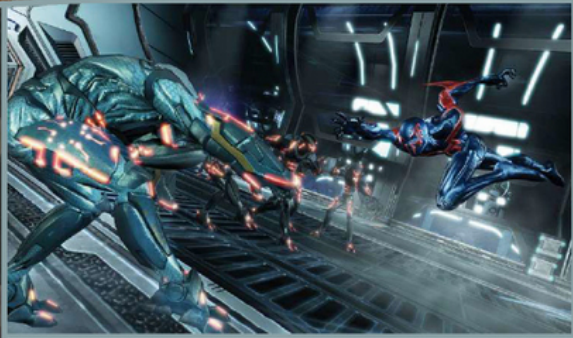
"Peter ultimately knows that he's walking into danger, but other people are in danger as well, so he has to be the hero and go save them," says associate producer Kevin Umbricht. "While he is making his way up to the 66th floor, in the future, Miguel O'Hara is working his way down the Alchemax building to get to his own 66th floor." According to Beenox, some big revelations await players once they get there. That won't be the end of the game, but it's a major turning point for the story.



Spider-Man 2099 will still feature a lot of vertical gameplay



A picture-in-picture system will keep players informed about what is happening in both timelines



Robotic killer kittens

As both heroes make their way through the Alchemax building, players are constantly shuffled between their points of view. "Things that the player does in the modern day wind up – thanks to the dynamics of the game – impacting the world of 2099," explains David. "It's a sort of a one-in-a-million set of circumstances, which we call quantum causality, but it has some wonderfully demented results."

At one point in the game, Peter is sneaking his way through the halls of Alchemax when he receives a message from Miguel. A towering security mech has overcome the future hero, but if Peter makes his way to the lab and destroys the blueprints for this security bot, the robot will cease to exist in the future and he'll save his counterpart.

During sequences in which these two allies communicate, Beenox felt it was important for players to understand exactly what is happening in each timeline. To accomplish this, it developed a unique picture-in-picture system to display the events of both characters at the same time. While Peter races through a corridor towards the security lab, a small window pops up in the bottom right-hand corner of the screen that shows Spider-Man 2099 getting thrown across the room by the two-story mech.

Peter rushes into the engineering lab to find a giant exoskeleton prototype hanging from the ceiling, wires and cables streaming out from it like a New Year's Eve float. In the picture-in-picture view, Miguel is now being crushed by the mech, but as Peter tears the

prototype room apart on the main screen, the machine begins to fade out of existence like Marty McFly in *Back to the Future*.

Almost instantly a handful of smaller robots take its place. "If you mess with time, you won't always get what you expect," says Leahy with a smile. Sometimes Peter's tinkering in the past will create a butterfly effect that adds new problems for Miguel. Peter asks Miguel for an update: "Did it turn into something else? Like – I don't know – kittens?"

"Yeah," Miguel grumbles. "small...metal...robotic...killer kittens."

During this exchange the picture-in-picture box featuring Spider-Man 2099 expands to fill the whole screen, and players take control of Miguel as he fights off several of the human-sized robots. There will be no loading screen as players jump between the two different time periods. "The whole game is one seamless, story-driven experience," Umbricht says.

When players take control of Spider-Man 2099 they're forced to deal with the repercussions of this quantum causality phenomenon. "Sometimes a wall might disappear right in front of you while you're playing because of something that has changed in the past," Leahy says. "While you're playing, things are constantly evolving around you, so you'll have to always be reactive."

Since Miguel is from the future, he has knowledge of past events that still haven't happened to Peter. Miguel will constantly tip Peter off to some of the dangers ahead. Even though the two characters are never in a room together, they need to rely on each other if they want to survive the dangers of Alchemax.





Josh Keaton, the voice talent from *The Spectacular Spider-Man* cartoon show, played Ultimate Spider-Man in last year's *Shattered Dimensions*. Keaton will be returning for *Edge of Time*, but this time he'll be voicing *Amazing's* version of Spider-Man.

Hero doesn't play well with others

Peter and Miguel may share a superhero identity, but each version of Spider-Man is as different as their time period. "Where they differ the most to me is their attitude toward the challenges that are facing them," David explains. "Miguel O'Hara didn't have an origin steeped in a transformative 'with great power' moment, and so his priorities are somewhat different from Peter Parker's."

Each hero reacts to the world around them in different ways, and they don't always get along. Miguel is older and has more life experience, but Peter has more experience being Spider-Man. Where Miguel is utterly focused on the grand scheme of things, Peter is obsessed about the human cost of his actions. "There's almost a Spock/McCoy dynamic to their relationship," David says.

A good example of this dynamic is an early exchange between the two. After trying to convince Peter that he's going to die on the 86th floor, Miguel becomes frustrated that Peter is unwilling to do things his way. It seems that nothing will deter Peter — not even the greater good — from helping his fellow man.

"If you were smart, you'd clear out," Miguel says. "But no, you have to go on proving your bravery."

"Bravery?" Peter exclaims. "Dude, there is nothing I would like better than to just high tail it out of here."

"Then why don't you?"

"Because what I do here matters. Beyond changing hallways and elevators, it matters," Peter yells. "And that's just something I have to live with, even if it means I die with it. You get it, O'Hara?"

"Whatever," Miguel shrugs, clearly not in tune with Peter's philosophy on responsibility.

The difference between these two heroes also plays out in combat. In *Shattered Dimensions*, Beenox developed a combat system where each character had his own set of attacks and combos. In *Edge of Time*, this system has expanded. *Amazing Spider-Man's* combat still centers on long-range, web-based attacks, while *Spider-Man 2099* exhibits faster, more up-close and personal combos. Each hero also has a few new powers at his disposal.

Amazing Spider-Man is an agile gymnast, and one way that the team at Beenox is displaying *Spider-Man's* dexterity is with a new move that allows him to dodge any oncoming attack, projectile, or other environmental trap. Players can activate this evade skill at any time, but it needs to be recharged before you can use it again. While evade is active, *Spider-Man* is essentially invulnerable.

We witness this ability first hand when *Spider-Man* approaches a defensive laser grid. With evade active, *Spider-Man* jumps through the laser grid, dodging beams in a shadowy flash. The whole process becomes automatic as soon as evade is activated. "This is tied to the core abilities of Peter Parker and his spider sense. He can react faster than the human eye

can see," Umbricht explains.

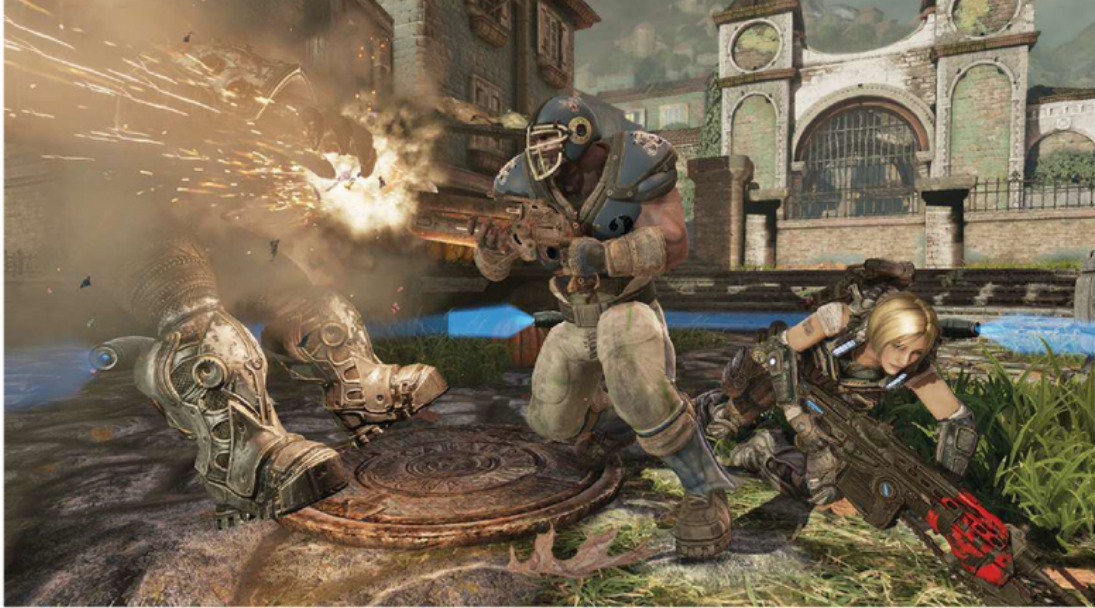
Evade is exclusive to the *Amazing Spider-Man*, but Miguel O'Hara has his own unique mechanic. At any time, Miguel can create a temporary holographic decoy to attract the attention of enemies and other security systems. This allows him to catch a momentary respite during heated exchanges. He can also use it to sneak behind his foes and pounce on them while they're distracted.

These skills are just a taste of the things these heroes will be doing throughout the game. Beenox is still fleshing out the design, but as the game progresses, the two heroes' fighting styles will continue to diverge as they learn different but complementary moves and level up existing powers.

Spider-Man has been around for more than half a century, and during that time he's battled ordinary street gangs, infamous serial killers, and inter-dimensional demons. The character is hard to pin down, but Beenox is focused on delivering a game that stays true to the hero's nature.

"The one rule we have written everywhere is, 'are you sure only Spider-Man can do this?'" Lehtani says. "Because if any other character from comics or movies or games can do what we're making *Spider-Man* do, then maybe we need to rethink our design."

The studio is pushing its title in directions that *Spider-Man* games have never gone before, and if all these concepts come together Beenox could be creating the best *Spider-Man* title to date. ♦



Gears of War 3

Testing the waters of the beta bloodbath

Last time we checked in with Gears of War 3 we learned about the game's streamlined multiplayer modes and beefy new weaponry. Enlisting COG soldiers can look forward to toting around an instant kill capable sawed-off shotgun, a lancer with an impaling bayonet, and a launcher that fires subterranean torpedo mines. Modes like Team Deathmatch and Capture the Leader combine familiar game modes (Submission, Annex, etc.) under more recognizable labels, but still pack the same gritty Gears action.

Epic made several minor but important tweaks to Gears of War 3's core gameplay. Characters move slightly faster than they did in the previous two games, creating a more frenetic battlefield. The boost to speed doesn't disrupt the visceral, heavy feel of Gears. Instead it fosters a more fluid experience, eliminating the feeling that you're wrestling with the crosshairs. Nimbly rolling in and out of a cover and delivering a devastating sawed-off blast to a pack of fools is performed more gracefully than in past games. New bloody executions are now unlocked after

you become proficient with specific weapons, allowing you to customize the mayhem and bash in an enemy's skull with the butt of your Hammerburst for extra experience.

All the cathartic curb stomps in the world would be nothing without a good arena to perform them in. We gunned and chainsawed our way through six of the game's multiplayer maps, and can now give you the low down on what to expect when you jump online in Gears of War 3 later this year. » **Tim Turi**





Checkout

A decrepit, bombed-out supermarket is the setting for this miniature multi-player map. Overturned shelves create an obstacle in the center, and scattered boxes and displays create unique lines of sight. Some long distance firing is possible if given a good angle, but you'll want to go with up-close-and-personal weapons like the sawed-off or retro lancer. A handful of tiny offshoot rooms make the action even more claustrophobic and present good opportunities for executions.



Seeing Cole's Thrashball outfit in action on this map is a hilarious treat

Thrashball

Fight for your life on Cole's old stomping grounds: a derelict Thrashball court that resembles the gridiron. Tons of waist-high cover is littered throughout this athletic field, mirroring the "battle of inches" feel of football. Smart players will duck into the hallways leading along the sides of the map and attempt to flank their foes. Given the map's large amount of choke-points, a few incendiary grenades can be deadly. Remember to aim for the huge, dangling scoreboard in the middle (which also tracks kills) to squash your enemies into paste.



Overpass

This map is a gigantic, symmetrical arena with a stretch of collapsed highway across the middle. Burnt out school buses and road signs litter the roads, and the area floods late in the match for a dramatic effect. You'll want to bust out the Longshot sniper rifle or Hammerburst for this big battlefield, the latter of which now sports iron sights for precision aiming. A deadly Mulcher turret is perched at the top of the map, and if you allow the enemy to dig their heels in, you'll be in for an uneven fight.



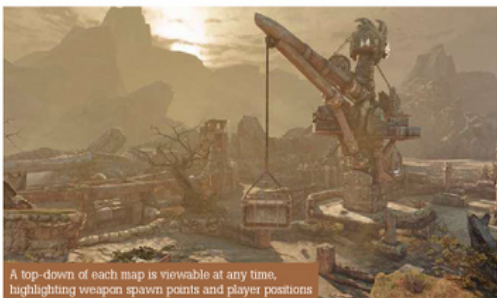
Old Town

This setting is reminiscent of an old Spanish village that hasn't been completely ravaged by the war, and it shows off Gears 3's brighter, more colorful art style. Many long stretches of cobblestone road twist and turn towards the center of the map. The middle area is a close-quarters affair perfect for shotgun showdowns. There aren't many leverage points, so expect to grenade and pick away at your enemies while they dig in behind cover.



Mercy

Reminiscent of a Spanish church's courtyard, this beautiful map is one of the largest in the bunch. A huge open area in the center is accented with a fountain, creating a great focal point. Ruins are scattered along the sides of the map, forming broken hallways where you can expect a few point-blank gnasher duels. Several blind corners populate the map, which are perfect for well-timed sawed-off shots or a retro lancer impalement charge of doom.



A top-down of each map is viewable at any time, highlighting weapon spawn points and player positions

Trenches

This map looks like ground zero of the Locust invasion. Unlike the other vibrant maps, it's dirty, brown, and oversaturated, giving it a classic Gears of War feel. Several narrow pathways are broken up by a few tight corners, so using cover is a constant necessity. A retro lancer or gnasher is ideal for this mid-sized map, and incendiary grenades are a great way to keep your foes at bay with area of denial tactics. However, if you become an expert with the Digger launcher, this map's tight passages are the perfect killing grounds.

- » **Platform**
Xbox 360
- » **Style**
1 or 2-Player Shooter
(10-Player Online)
- » **Publisher**
Microsoft Game Studios
- » **Developer**
Epic Games
- » **Release**
September 20



The narrative isn't a constraint for Cole or mission designers. If the pieces are present, you can arrange them how you like.

Infamous 2

User-generated missions infiltrate New Marais

- » **Platform**
PlayStation 3
- » **Style**
1-Player Action
- » **Publisher**
Sony Computer Entertainment
- » **Developer**
Sucker Punch Productions
- » **Release**
June 7

While open world experiences are often what you make of them, players are rarely provided the chance to literally shape the world around them. Sucker Punch recently announced a surprising new addition to Infamous 2 that is intended to combat what it says was the biggest flaw of the original game – its finite nature. Cole's adventure in New Marais offers players a chance to step into the shoes of mission designers.

"Sandbox games like Infamous 2 are a ton of fun," explains Sucker Punch development director Chris Zimmerman. "There's a whole city to explore, and we provide lots of stuff to do in the city...but no matter how many missions and mini-missions and systemic opportunities and branching story lines we add to the game, eventually the story ends. We thought Infamous 2 would be better if it didn't end, so we spent the last two years adding a user-generated content feature to the game."

Taking a page from its PS3 LittleBigBrethren, the feature allows users to design missions that draw from a broad range of genres including defense, escort, search and destroy, survival, platforming, puzzles, and more.

The city of New Marais will be seamlessly populated with official and user-developed missions, providing the player with fresh content even after completing the primary campaign. Color will differentiate official and unofficial content, and players can tailor their experience by filtering selections by genre, quality, and more.

Those interested in developing missions will have access to the same pool of assets – characters, creatures, props, and behaviors – used by Sucker Punch. Aspiring designers can create missions from scratch, or remix an existing level



by dragging, dropping, and determining the actions of NPCs. The game's narrative isn't a limitation, either, as you can pit Cole and Zeke against Nix and Kuo in a battle for the ages if so inclined.

Creating missions provides players a chance to become notorious in their own right. Quality – determined by a mission's ranking – dictates visibility. The higher the ranking, the better chance it will be showcased and disseminated to other *Inferno 2* players. The "Famous" tier is where the bulk of successful missions will fall, with the elite being cherry-picked for the highest honor – Sucker Punch Featured Content. These missions default to everyone as must-play experiences.

Sucker Punch showcased four short missions designed with diversity in mind. The first mission, titled *Save the Cathedral*, tasked Cole with escorting a group of allies through hostile-infested territory to disarm a bomb. The second mission mimicked a lower defense game; Cole began perched atop a bridge between two generators as waves of enemies approached from below, attempting to break through the line. The next mission took the form of a shooting gallery, with Cole tossing explosive barrels at foes positioned throughout the environment. The last of the demonstrations featured a straightforward race against time through a series of rings positioned alongside power lines.

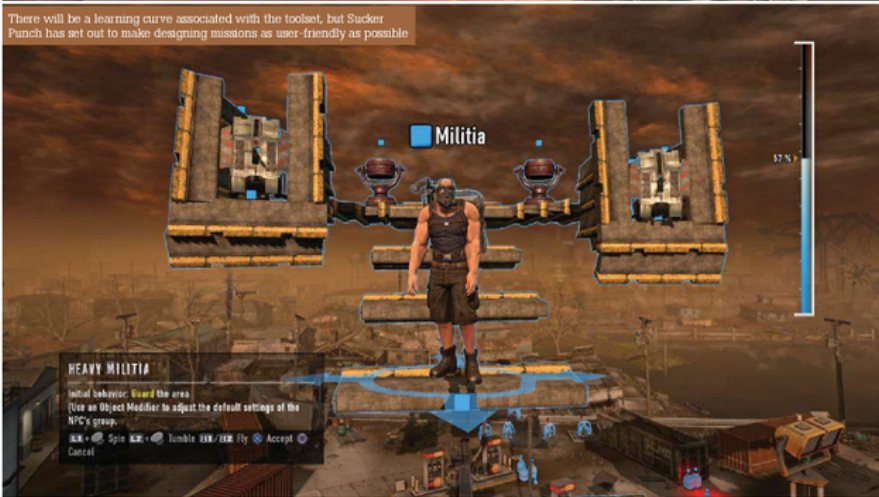
All four missions were designed for the tight time constraints of the event, so none of them clocked in at more than two minutes. That being said, Sucker Punch states missions can be as long as desired, but striking a sweet spot between brevity and a fulfilling objective will help in obtaining a high mission ranking. An experience system is integrated into user-generated play as well, but Sucker Punch wouldn't speak

to how it will feed back into the core game just yet.

A public beta is slated for early April, and during this time the first round of featured content will be developed and selected to launch alongside *Inferno 2* this June. » **Meagan Marie**



There will be a learning curve associated with the toolset, but Sucker Punch has set out to make designing missions as user-friendly as possible





Joker's massive lieutenant still seems to have an advantage

Batman: Arkham City

More villains emerge from the shadows

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

» **Style**
1-Player Action
» **Publisher**
Warner Bros.
Interactive
Entertainment

» **Developer**
Rocksteady Studios

» **Release**
October 18

Constantly one-upping the smarmy Riddler in *Batman: Arkham Asylum* was an excellent motivation for tracking down and solving all of his puzzles. The thing is, this battle was only against a disembodied radio voice. That's all going to change in the sequel, as developer Rocksteady has revealed the in-game character model of the Riddler. Keeping in line with the gritty, realistic design of the *Arkham*-verse, Edward Nigma sports a classier suit and bad-boy fingerless gloves rather than revealing spandex onesie.

As revealed in *Game Informer's* cover story (issue 209), the Riddler has a new bag of tricks

within *Arkham* city. Now Batman can scan groups of thugs with his visor to spot Riddler informants and swoop down to extract information out of them about clue locations. The Dark Knight will have to utilize nearly all the gadgets in his arsenal to solve the increasingly tricky conundrums. An early example features a trophy hovering over what looks like a bear trap. Batman has to retrieve the item with his grapple gun, as it snaps shut when he walks too close.

The green-loving villain has raised the stakes this time around, taking several hostages to lure Batman into completing his riddles. Of course, Rocksteady won't spoil what the big payoff will

be for players who jump through all of his hoops, but we're confident it'll be more interesting than *Arkham Asylum's* antidimactic Riddler wrap-up.

Speaking of villains, you'll notice the first in-game image of Joker in *Arkham City*. The pre-rendered debut trailer showed him hooked up to a bunch of medical equipment, but a clip at the end of a recent trailer indicates that he might not be as ill as previously thought. The killer clown is shown walking around just fine, though his complexion has been better.

More clues in the same trailer point to the presence of some other unannounced foes. A building that appears to be the Penguin's hide-



The Riddler's command center allows him to keep an eye on Batman and his many trapped victims.



Stonis Industries point to Black Mask's presence in Arkham.



out flashes by in the background at one point. Whether this indicates that he appears in the game or is simply referenced is still unclear.

Treacherous gang lord Black Mask has all but been officially announced. Stonis Industries has appeared in screens and a trailer. Comic fans will recognize this business's connection to Roman Stonis, Black Mask's real identity. Roman inherited the company and ran it into the ground, with a last minute buyout from Bruce Wayne saving it from bankruptcy. Fueled by resentment and anger, Roman carved a wooden black skull mask out of his father's coffin and went into a life of crime. When he came face to face with

Batman, the fight ended with the mask being accidentally burned to his face permanently. The Stonis connection isn't the only clue. A figure that looks almost exactly like Black Mask is shown from behind for a split second in a recent trailer.

It's a long way to go before players will be able to swoop around Arkham City, so expect plenty more villain reveals in the months leading up to October. We're just hoping Rocksteady and Warner Bros. keep some of them secret before the game hits. » **Bryan Vore**

Visit gameinformer.com for the latest *Batman: Arkham City* trailer, information, and screens





The Darkness II

Jackie Estacado's bloody return



"Which limb can I take?"

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

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

» **Publisher**
2K Games

» **Developer**
Digital Extremes

» **Release**
Fall

When Starbreeze's *The Darkness* released in 2007, it showcased inventive dark powers and clever water cooler moments, but lacked in a few areas. Many years later, the comic book based franchise is getting another shot in the hands of Digital Extremes (*BioShock 2* multiplayer, *Dark Sector*). We spoke with Digital Extremes project director Shelton Carter to find out what important changes are in store for the sequel. » **Bryan Vore**

What are your thoughts on the first *Darkness* game?

The narrative was the thing that we loved the most. The moments for us that were great were [things like] sitting on the couch with Jenny. In terms of what did we look at to change, everything else we ran through the ringer. There were pros and cons to just about every bit other than that.

In the first game it was easy to over rely on firearms over the darkness powers. Any changes there?

We're trying to draw you into the combat so you're unleashing your powers and your demon arms. The core shooting still has to be great. We know we're a shooter at the heart, so shooting always has to be satisfying and fun, but if we can get you to close in and use the powers – that's what we try to do all the time.

Enemy hearts seem to glow in the demo. How are they important?

The hearts tie into a lot of things. You can't one shot kill all the time [with the slashing arm]. When you eat a heart it makes the slash demon arm able to cut up enemies. It's tied into a progression system how long you can do that. Hearts also give you health. It's like, "Okay I'm in trouble. Eat a heart. Close the distance." We really want people to get close in the combat.

There was a whole lot of light bulb smashing in the last game. Any streamlining on that front?

We love the first game, but there were situations where it felt like you'd go into a room and pop out one, two, three, four, five lights – you're just popping everything. I think the subway area was a good example of how we've done it. You see the splashes of the three big light cones and you're like, "Okay, I could still fight around that." If I want to go in there I might want to shoot it out before, but I don't have to take out every light before I get into a fight with guys.

Why is there only one darkling character this time around?

The darklings were great as comic relief. They made us laugh and we wanted to keep that part of it because it's kind of grim sometimes what you're doing. But I didn't care if one of them died. They were throw-


away. There was no attachment to it, and we felt like what we could have is someone who's your sidekick or your friend. I haven't played enough Fable to say what the dog is, but people have been drawing parallels to me at work saying "You know, it kind of starts feeling like that." You have an attachment to him. You don't want him to die. You have a little bit of influence over his actions and our progression system ties into him as well. He has his own AI, so every playthrough is a little bit different. If he sees the player getting low on health, he'll go and headbutt an enemy or try to distract him a little bit. He has this save-your-ass suite of moves. We don't want him kill stealing, but at the same time, if he's around he should be able to help you out.

What's up with new villain "The Crippled Man"?

He knows what the darkness is and he has a way of taking it from Jackie. So that makes him a pretty big threat.

Go to gameinformer.com for a full rundown of the *Darkness II*'s early gameplay demo.





Prototype 2

Radical Entertainment breeds a better beast of destruction

The first *Prototype* tried to make players feel like the ultimate Swiss Army knife of destruction. Players could morph into an enemy soldier, sneak into a military base, and lay waste to any entire battalion of armored vehicles before tearing off up the side of a nearby building. Unfortunately, technical issues and a chaotic combat system soured the experience. Radical Entertainment made a lot of gameplay promises that weren't perfectly delivered in the first *Prototype*, but the team is working to improve on all of the first title's weaknesses without sacrificing the power fantasy in this sequel.

After Alex Mercer saves Manhattan from nuclear obliteration at the end of the first *Prototype*, he disappears from public view. However, by the beginning of the sequel, the media is still demonizing Mercer because they think he is the monster responsible for releasing the virulent Blacklight plague that destroyed their city. The public is also ignorant of the fact that the Blackwatch Corporation was behind the whole affair. Players assume the role of James Heller, a former U.S. Marine Sergeant who lost his family during the events of the first game. At the start of the game, Heller hunts down Mercer, but instead of finding answers, Heller becomes infected with the same strand of bioweaponry that gave Mercer his organic superpowers. Caught in the middle of the battle between Mercer and Blackwatch, Heller goes rogue and tries to get to the bottom of the disastrous conspiracy for himself.

Heller enters a world that has changed dramatically from the Manhattan of the first *Prototype*. The first *Prototype* offered up a large playground to explore, but very little set one district apart from another. Heller, on the other hand, will encounter three vastly different zones as he explores the battered city. The first area is a heavily militarized zone where Heller contends with the army's most advanced hardware. Within the city's quarantine zones, Heller encounters survivors of the Blacklight plague who have turned several Manhattan blocks into a hopelessly overcrowded shantytown. The final zone is called the red zone. This section of the city was ground zero for the Blacklight plague, so the virus has had the most time to grow and evolve. Now the organic infection has completely overrun parts of the city, turning whole city blocks into a jumble of organic tendrils.

Each part of the city offers its own challenges and obstacles, and Heller will learn moves that Mercer never did in order to conquer them. One of Heller's new power types allows him to produce organic tendrils that can be used in a variety of deadly ways. If Heller fires a ball of tendrils at an enemy, these tendrils will expand and affix themselves to different objects in the environment before tearing Heller's opponent limb from limb. Another move lets Heller shoot a ball of biological matter into the middle of the street. Organic vines then whip out from the center and grab onto cars, people, and other loose debris before yanking it all together into one implosive crunch of metal and flesh.

Radical Entertainment has also improved its environmental destruction engine. In the first game, vehicle damage was represented by the addition of burn marks that compounded until an object exploded. In *Prototype 2*, metal warps and bends as Heller pounds it. Different objects and enemies will also be more vulnerable to certain types of attacks. For example, a large tank-like creature might shrug off blows from Heller's hammer fists, but Heller could hack off his legs with a single swipe by morphing his arm into a large blade.

Along with environmental damage, Heller can also weaponize many objects within the city. This was present in the first game, but the mechanic has been expanded for the sequel. We watched Heller rip off a tank's turret before jumping into the air and throwing it down on the base of the tank. Heller then dashed to a second tank and ripped off its gun turret before turning this makeshift rifle on a rushing mob of mutants. In a variety of ways, Heller will be able to convert any number of objects within his environment into instant artillery.

With branching story missions, an expanded and more diverse cityscape, and a more refined combat system, *Prototype 2* looks like it could deliver the experience many of us were hoping for the first time around. Unfortunately, we'll have to wait until 2012 before we find out how the final product shapes up. » **Ben Reeves**

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

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Activision

» **Developer**
Radical Entertainment

» **Release**
2012



Heller will be able to dismember his enemies, but he might be surprised to find many foes crawling after him even after they lose a leg or two





You may want to turn off 3D for competitive play, as some feel it interferes with accuracy

Resident Evil: The Mercenaries 3D

Mercenary mayhem on the go

» **Platform**
Nintendo 3DS

» **Style**
1 to 2-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Capcom

» **Developer**
Capcom

» **Release**
July 6

Forgoing a narrative for an action focus, *Resident Evil: The Mercenaries 3D* distills the concept introduced in *Resident Evil 3* to a portable, 3D presentation. Comprising over 30 missions with varying modes and goals, puzzles and plot yield to unending combat.

The revealed roster of playable characters includes siblings Chris and Claire Redfield, codename Hunk, and the morally questionable Jack Krauser. Capcom promises to announce additional characters drawn from the seasoned franchise as it moves closer to the ship date. Each character has a unique loadout that can be customized as the player progresses through the *Mercenaries* campaign. Chris' arsenal includes a standard pistol, shotgun, and sniper rifle. Krauser has a knife, bow and arrow with unlimited ammo, and rocket-propelled grenades at his disposal. While the feature wasn't available in our demo, *Mercenaries* also sports a talent tree/perk system that allows players to unlock new weapons and skills. We don't expect it to vary much from the

system used in the console games.

The levels we played during the demo featured traditional killstreak objectives, and hosted an amalgamation of enemies and locales from *Resident Evil 4* & 5. As with the characters, expect more variety in the final game. Capcom says it has "more surprises" up its sleeves in terms of legacy content.

The key to *Mercenaries 3D* is moving around constantly, not only to crack crystals and increase the length of the round but also to avoid being caught off guard by a foe or the occasional boss. *Mercenaries 3D* did well in capturing the feeling of pressure inherent to the mode, making the seconds spent reloading a terrifying trip to limbo. Contextual melee attacks – initiated when near an injured enemy rather than mapped to a button – are particularly enjoyable and appropriately over-the-top.

The dual-screen interface works well to facilitate speed, with the top screen keeping tabs on the action and the bottom acting as the

player's inventory. A quick tap will change a weapon or first-aid spray, although the actions can be assigned to face buttons if you prefer tactile feedback.

The *Mercenaries 3D* allows you to run and gun for the first time ever in a *Resident Evil* game. Surprisingly, we didn't use the feature more than the initial time needed to confirm its inclusion. Only imprecise shots from the hip are available during movement, and as such we found it significantly more accurate (and familiar) to stop and carefully position ourselves for each kill. Wildly spraying ammo isn't an intelligent tactic when it's already a limited resource.

While the demo was short and featured little diversity in terms of cast and environments, the experience was surprisingly engaging and intense once the learning curve of the handheld was surpassed. We're looking forward to trying out the title with the full roster of characters, and to giving the two-player online co-op a go. — **Meagan Marie**



Character taunts are amusing if completely useless



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Uncharted 3: Drake's Deception

Naughty Dog introduces Drake's latest adversary

» **Platform**
PlayStation 3

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

» **Publisher**
Sony Computer
Entertainment

» **Developer**
Naughty Dog

» **Release**
November 1



Katherine Marlowe commands a group of highly dangerous agents that will pose a huge threat to our heroes

The women in Nathan Drake's life are never afraid to take the wheel in a high-speed chase or provide additional gunfire in a major shootout when his life is on the line. Thanks to the efforts of Elena and Chloe during several life-threatening scenarios across his last

two Uncharted adventures, the daring journeyman is ready to embark on a third. However, during Nathan Drake's upcoming undertaking, he and partner-in-crime Victor Sullivan confront one malicious woman more likely to cut off her own hand than lend one to the duo.

In a cinematic revealed by Naughty Dog at the Game Developers Conference, Drake and Sully rush out of the back door of an establishment only to find the alleyway blocked off by thugs. A brawl ensues that does not go in their favor and they find themselves lying in piles of garbage, tarnishing their once pristine suits. A black vehicle rolls in from around the corner and an older woman steps out, masked by an umbrella. She immediately gives Sully a not-so-gracious greeting. "Still wallowing in the gutter with your protégé, I see. Not very dignified for a man of your age," she says.

As the mystery woman closes her umbrella, Drake dishes out a snide comment: "Careful now, wouldn't want you to melt." In a rage, she pulls out a dagger, points the blade between Drake's eyes, and says to him "I wonder what you're really afraid of. Not bullets or blood or broken bones. No, you get off on all this, don't you? Cheating death...or not."

The woman uses the blade to break the chain around his neck holding the ring inherited from Sir Francis Drake, ending the cinematic by saying "Mr. Sullivan, I won't harm your precious boy. I merely want what's mine."

Katherine Marlowe certainly knows how to make an impression. The villainess of Drake's Deception is the leader of a secret society that dates back more than 400 years to Queen Elizabeth's court. One of Queen Elizabeth's main agents was Sir Francis Drake, and this common interest in the ring pits Drake and Sully against the nefarious Marlowe in a long-contested fight

over the possession of the artifact. The ring propels the duo on a journey around the world, which will eventually lead them on a path to the Arabian Desert.

The cinematic leaves many questions unanswered regarding Marlowe's intentions and the events leading up to the plane crash seen in previous reveals. We can't wait to see how the narrative in Drake's Deception unravels when Uncharted 3 releases on November 1.

» **Annette Gonzalez**

Check out Marlowe in action in the cinematic trailer revealed at GDC on gameinformer.com



One of Marlowe's lackeys



The Gunstringer

Become a pistol-wielding puppet master

I never desired to play a video game starring an undead cowboy marionette with a thirst for revenge before my time with Twisted Pixel's *The Gunstringer*. I also never thought I'd love using the Kinect's motion control to simultaneously gun down enemies and manipulate the aforementioned puppet. After firing off a few rounds with the upcoming Xbox 360 downloadable, however, I'm a gung-ho believer.

The game starts off with players resurrecting the Gunstringer from a shallow grave by miming a string-tugging motion. His old posse is responsible for putting him in the dirt, and the dusty road to revenge begins with you manipulating our hero's movements by mimicking puppeteer motions. Lifting your hand up makes the Gunstringer jump, and side-to-side motions cause him to weave around obstacles as he automatically runs down an enemy-filled road. Gunplay is performed by pointing at the screen with your other hand, painting targets, then flicking your wrist up to unleash a "dead eye"-style bullet barrage. If brute force is more your style, you can eventually break the fourth wall by slamming your

list down, which causes a realistic-looking hand to squash all onscreen opposition. Running and gunning down linear paths may not sound enthralling, but the clever control mechanics make every bad guy a joy to dismantle.

Cover-based shoot-outs are also a part of *The Gunstringer's* formula. At one point a gigantic, waving, inflatable advertisement balloon blocks your path and players must use their movement hand to carefully peek around cover while targeting its weak spots. The Gunstringer automatically moves to new cover as the fight progresses, allowing you to focus on dodging and attacking. Side-scrolling 2D segments will also be tossed into the mix later on, though we haven't gotten our mitts on them yet.

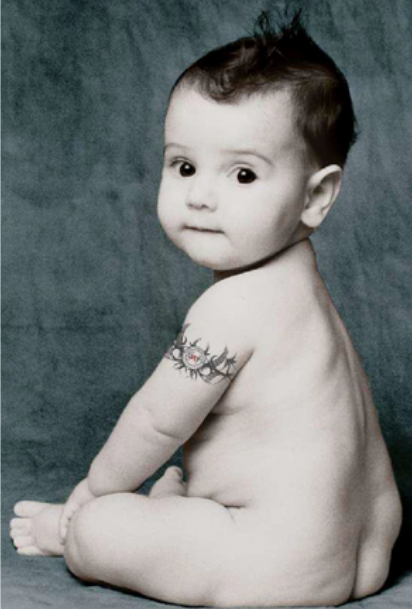
So far Kinect gaming experiences have been limited to dance marathons and sports competitions. While those are great demonstrations of the sensor's entertaining technology, *The Gunstringer* is poised to be deeper and more rewarding. If you're a core gamer with an appreciation for innovative gameplay and a goofy story, don't let *The Gunstringer* mosey on by. » **Tim Turi**

- » **Platform**
Xbox 360
- » **Style**
1 or 2-Player Action
- » **Publisher**
Microsoft Game Studios
- » **Developer**
Twisted Pixel
- » **Release**
2011



Lazy do-nothings rejoice - *The Gunstringer* can be played sitting down!

geeked at birth

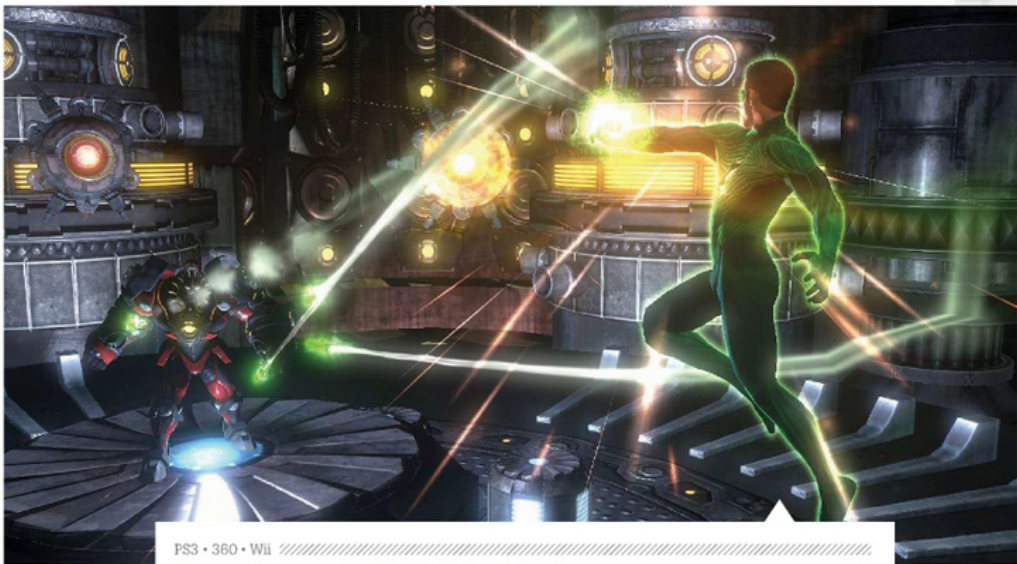


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PS3 • 360 • Wii

Green Lantern: Rise of the Manhunters

Using his Green Lantern ring, Hal Jordan can create gattling guns, giant fists, and other spectacular hard-light constructs, which can be linked together to form a variety of combos. Xbox 360 or PlayStation 3 owners get to play as Jordan or Sinestro in the game's drop in/drop out co-op. Get ready to save the universe in this Warner Bros.-published action title just before its movie counterpart comes out this June.



PS3 • 360 • Wii • PC • DS • PSP • 3DS

LEGO Pirates of the Caribbean

LEGO Star Wars developer Traveller's Tales is telling the story of all four Pirates films, including the upcoming *On Stranger Tides*, in this kid-friendly adventure that's being published by Disney Interactive Studios. The game offers 20 story levels across familiar locations where players will come across more than 70 characters in minifig form. LEGO Pirates will allow players to join the fray at any time for two-player drop-in/drop-out co-op when the game releases in May.

PS3 • 360

NCAA Football 12

There isn't a lot of new info on EA's latest NCAA title yet, but it's immediately evident that the game is undergoing a visual overhaul – again. Jokes aside, the new HDR lighting makes a big difference, using multiple rendering passes and exposure tricks to make the players pop. Fully modeled grass, different tackles, and updated uniforms are also discernable in the limited footage that EA Sports has released for the game. Last year's title took a big step forward, and we hope NCAA 12 can keep up when it comes out July 12 for PS3 and Xbox 360.



360 • PC

The First Templar

Developer Haemimont Games and publisher Kalypso Media are teaming up to tell a story of the knights templar, a real-world order that many gamers know from its fictional form in the Assassin's Creed series. The hack n' slash action/RPG features drop-in/drop-out co-op as a French Templar Celiau and his rogue-ish partner Marie seek out the holy grail. Look for it May 10.

3DS

Dream Trigger 3D

D3 Publisher's bullet hell shooter offers more than 50 levels and 100 challenges to complete across 10 unique environments. Visuals are set to a multi-track musical score that remixes classical music compositions with layers added as players attack enemies, dodge, and move the reticle around gorgeous environments. The 3DS shoot-em-up is set to launch this spring.



PC

Dear Esther

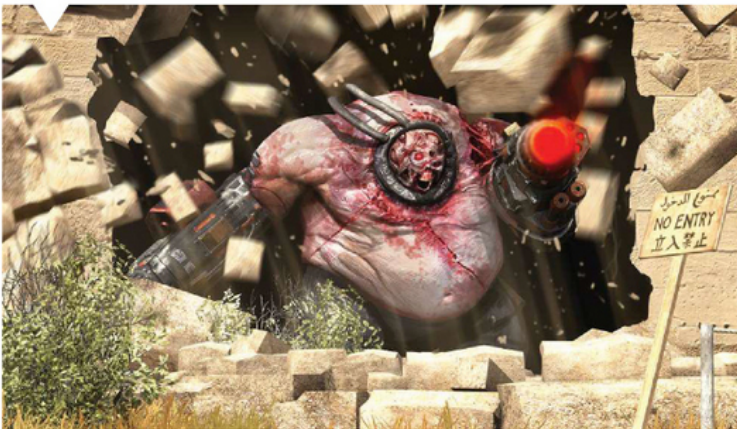
"Dear Esther is a ghost story told using FPS technology," explains creator Dan Pinchbeck. The game is unlike anything you've seen before; there is no progression or conflict. An ambiguous story is slowly revealed as you explore a misty island, but what you learn and in what order is based on how you move through the world. For more on The Chinese Room's intriguing project, read our extensive interview with Pinchbeck at gameinformer.com.



PC • Console TBA

Serious Sam 3: BFE

Serious Sam is back and looking better than ever, thanks to Croteam's impressive new engine. Gamers with a fondness for twitch-based action shooters will be happy to know that the developer isn't changing its focus from blasting unending hordes of ugly-looking aliens. Fan favorites like an optional third-person view, mod support, and a massive 16-player co-op mode are set to return this summer. Serious Sam 3: BFE is being published by Devolver Digital.



Reviews



GAME OF THE MONTH

84 **Crysis 2**

With gorgeous visuals, a more cohesive story, and developer Crytek's signature sandbox shooter gameplay, *Crysis 2* explodes onto consoles in spectacular fashion.

Even if you haven't played a game from the series before, it's worth picking up *Crysis 2* for its lengthy single-player campaign and fleshed-out multiplayer.

THE SCORING SYSTEM

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

AWARDS

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

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Old Spice



Crysis 2

Crytek delivers a welcome antithesis to the cavalcade of copycat shooters

9

gameformer
GAME OF THE MONTH

gameformer
GOLD

Style 1-Player Shooter (12-Player Online) Publisher Electronic Arts Developer Crytek Release March 22 ESRB M

PS3 • 360 • PC

» Concept

Bring Crytek's signature sandbox shooter to consoles with a new engine and a more cohesive story

» Graphics

With the CryEngine 3 at its disposal, Crytek created a beautiful game filled with jaw dropping destruction and scenic backdrops. Only occasional pop-up and texture loading issues detract from an otherwise gorgeous title

» Sound

Hans Zimmer lends his talents to the soundtrack, but his contributions fail to give the score the evocative impact of his film work

» Playability

Crytek did a great job of transposing the nanosuit control onto the gamepad.

The satisfying gameplay is silky smooth and navigating the environment as a super soldier is a blast

» Entertainment

A must play for jaded gamers sick of corridor-based shooters. Crysis 2 offers a sense of freedom seldom found in the genre

» Replay Value

Moderately High

With a core of dedicated PC fans that demand technical excellence and a curious console community that wonders what all the fuss is about, the expectations for Crysis 2 are quite high. For the franchise's introduction to those who didn't own a NASA super computer capable of running the original game in all its glory, Crytek wisely sticks to the traits that made the first game successful while simultaneously pushing the boundaries of graphical fidelity.

Though the story touches briefly on the events of the first game, the Crysis 2 plot is self-contained enough that you won't be missing much if this is your first experience. Players take the role of a Marine named Alcatraz who, due to a series

of circumstances beyond his control, ends up donning a nanosuit that gives him super speed, strength, armor, and stealth capabilities. With an airborne disease plaguing New York City and an alien uprising destroying the capital of the world, Alcatraz must track down a researcher who may have knowledge of how to squelch the invasion.

In the face of this grave threat, you would think our business, military, and scientific communities would come together to put forward a united front. Instead, disagreements fracture the armed forces, researchers, and a private military contractor hired to aid the city. With all the sides at odds, Alcatraz is humanity's best bet.

Armed with the nanosuit, that load is much easier to carry. Crytek deftly mapped the suit's abilities onto the gamepad without sacrificing traditional shooter controls, giving you cloaking, armor, and tactical assessment skills at the touch of a button. The gameplay handles as smoothly as the best shooters in the business, and the frequent weapon drops allow you to experiment with new toys without worrying about losing your preferred gun for good. The team also implemented a useful first-person cover and lean system.

In terms of level design, the game takes its cues from the streamlined approach Crytek adopted for Crysis Warhead. The decimated



buildings and barricaded streets give the action a more enclosed feeling than the expansive open worlds of Far Cry and the original Crysis, but the environments are still large and varied enough to give players the freedom to wage war against the above average enemy AI with a tactic of their choosing.

Rather than force players into a series of predictable fights with predetermined weapons, Crytek creates sandbox battle scenarios and allows each player to adopt his or her own preferred approach. Like Batman: Arkham Asylum, you often enter the battle arena at a vantage point just out of sight. This gives strategic players the option of marking all the targets in the area so they don't encounter many surprises once they open fire. From here, how you confront the overwhelming odds is up to you. You can stay in stealth mode to silently pick off enemies one by one, adopt a hit and run strategy by jumping in and out of stealth to recalibrate your approach after each kill, activate power armor for a frontal assault, or snipe enemies from the high perches present in most scenarios.

The battles and set piece moments intensify as the game progresses. I wish I could say the same for the narrative. The pawn in the middle of the human factions tasked with saving the city, Alcatraz may as well be a robot. Unquestionably following orders from no fewer than five people during the 10 to 12 hour campaign - who are oftentimes at odds with one another - the protagonist has no agency even though he controls the most powerful weapon at humanity's disposal. Other than the CEO of the biomedical company that designed the nanosuit, whom you meet in a memorable scene, all the characters you encounter similarly lack depth. This is a shame; the theme of the lengths that the frail human race must go to defend itself from an overwhelming alien threat and how the suit changes its users is an intriguing jumping-off point.

Though its single-player campaigns are lauded, Crytek's multiplayer has always lacked allure. At

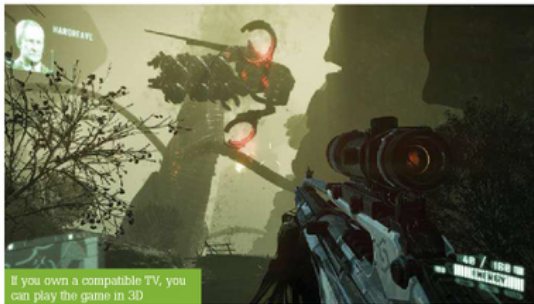
face value Crysis 2 shamelessly borrows elements of the two most popular online shooters, Call of Duty and Halo, but once you dig into the experience you begin to respect its subtle differences. For instance, instead of giving you game-changing bonuses for killstreaks, you need to collect the dog tags from your fallen victims to access radar, airstrikes, or a gunship. This forces campers out of their comfort zones or keeps their influence in check if they prefer to stay and snipe.

As with the campaign, the nanosuit is the great differentiator. Crytek UK balanced the suit's abilities well and created a smart system of persistent enhancements that players earn by using the suit's power, armor, and stealth abilities during battle. There are enough upgrades to give players the flexibility to build a unique suit tailored to enhance their strengths or shore up their weaknesses.

With 12 maps ripped from the campaign, 50 rankings, medals, and customizable kits, Crysis 2 makes a strong case for becoming a destination multiplayer mode. The one major criticism I can levy is that Crytek locks the more creative game modes. You won't have all the modes unlocked until level 39, which seems needlessly buried in a game that doesn't have a large community behind it that is guaranteed to keep playing for the 15-plus hours necessary to access all the options.

Crysis 2 largely avoids the problems that surfaced during the beta. With no dedicated servers, a few matches were interrupted by the annoying server migration. In my seven hours on the battlefield I occasionally suffered from game-crippling lag, but these instances were rare.

If you're tired of fighting corridor-based wars against an endless flow of brainless meatbags, Crysis 2 is worth a look. The unique sandbox approach to gunfights and game-changing nanosuit lend the title a flavor of its own, and Crytek smartly leverages these strengths in both the single- and multiplayer modes. » **Matt Bertz**



If you own a compatible TV, you can play the game in 3D

Shift 2 Unleashed

Redefining for the better



8.5

PS3 • 360 • PC

» Concept

Slightly Mad Studios throws a little grit and style in the otherwise staid world of sim racing

» Graphics

I love the nighttime racing in this game. Overall, the graphics perfectly ride the line between being stylistic without abandoning realism

» Sound

The miscellaneous car sounds of marbles, turbo, and other touches are great. However, I got tired of Vaughn Gittin Jr.'s pre-race pep talks

» Playability

The helmet FPS cam is definitely worth checking out for the subtle head bobbing. The cars feel like they pivot on swivels, unfortunately

» Entertainment

Shift 2 injects some adrenaline in the sim genre, but this boost does not stay long enough to change the sub-genre

» Replay Value

Moderately High



Style 1-Player Racing (12-Player Online) Publisher: Electronic Arts Developer: Slightly Mad Studios Release: March 29 ESRB: E10+

Barely two years ago Electronic Arts entered the sim-racing business with Shift. It wasn't the greatest racer, and at the time it made me wonder what EA and developer Slightly Mad Studios were trying to achieve by entering the sub-genre. If that title was the foot in the door, then Shift 2 serves as more of a true introduction for the franchise because it has enough style to set itself apart.

The series' overhaul starts with the great graphics, which don't just catch your eye, but are positively arresting. The lighting from car headlights and the environments in the night races are awesome, and the sense of speed helps sell the experience. I liked the helmet cam, which bobs around as you attack the corners and decelerate, but even though it's another aid that gives you the sensation that your car is going fast enough to break free and slide out, I got used to it quickly and started not to notice it. Overall, the graphics give the game an atmosphere and identity that is stylized enough to stand out and offer more than just realism. This is no small matter in a field crowded with games

trying to look like the real thing.

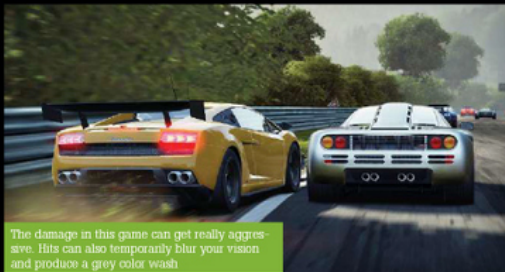
Shift 2 also betters itself by using a basic XP leveling system in lieu of the old Driver Profile that offers rewards in five set categories (cash, vinyls, cars, rims, and paint) up to level 20. Still, I'm glad the concept of corner mastering has been retained, and I like how it's unobtrusively integrated into the HUD map. I liked seeing how I was doing on each corner from lap to lap, and it gave me something to shoot for at every interval on the track.

While getting more XP for mastering all the corners of a track is a cool bonus, Shift 2 doesn't solve the larger problem in racing games of how to lead the player through a large amount of races and still have them feel interested at the end of it all. It has race variants like Time Attack, Duel, and Elimination, but the tenth race feels the same as the twentieth. Shift 2 tries to inject some excitement by having real-life racing stars like Vaughn Gittin Jr. comment on your progress in live video, but it didn't work for me. At least the game paces its money and gift cars easily enough so you're not left grinding or stuck in a

dead end. A lot of races give you loaner cars, so you don't have to waste money on some specialty car only to use it once.

The Autolog borrowed from Need for Speed: Hot Pursuit is about as close as the game comes to making its mark on racing as a whole, as it posts your best speeds at a track on the Speed Wall for all your friends to admire. You can also jump right into the races they've finished to try to show them up or take back your crown. I think it would be cool if the next game took the Autolog a step further and integrated your friends' times into appropriate finish times for Career races not dependant upon AI racers, like the Hot Lap and Time Attack race types.

Shift 2 defines the franchise in a way that the first one didn't. Although the cars can feel like they swivel on a center axis, the racing is pretty good, and the overall experience gets a boost from the graphics and the erratic nature of the AI racers. It doesn't blow by the competition, but by improving its lap times, Shift 2 is on its way. — **Matthew Kato**



The damage in this game can get really aggressive. Hits can also temporarily blur your vision and produce a gray color wash



The helmet cam gives you a sense of your car swinging around the corners

Tiger Woods PGA Tour 12: The Masters

Tiger gets himself out of a tricky trap

9

PS3 • 360 • Wii

» **Concept**
Subtle additions like caddies and a new career structure make a big difference this year

» **Graphics**
Everything from the grass to the gawkers looks crisp

» **Sound**
Jim Nantz's rich vocal tones add warmth, character, and weight to the proceedings

» **Playability**
Like Madden's GameFlow feature, Tiger 12's caddie feature and various assists can be stripped away to your liking, but it's also hard to fathom playing without it from now on

» **Entertainment**
This is the best Tiger since 2008, and possibly paves the way for more improvements in the future

» **Replay Value**
High



Style 1 to 4-Player Sports (4-Player Online) Publisher EA Sports Developer EA Tiburon Release March 29 ESRB E

Fight Night Champion's story mode is garnering buzz for bringing a dose of drama to the normal sports gaming grind. Tiger Woods is also doing its part. No, the game doesn't have a story mode, and you're not smashing the back window out of your fender-bent Escalade with your golf club. However, centering the rebuilt career mode on The Masters tournament is a great decision that finally binds a lot of the game's loose ends under a cohesive structure to chronicle your rise from amateur to PGA Tour champion. It helps turn leisurely afternoons on the greens into competitive fights that bring out the best in the series, making Tiger 12 one of the high notes of the franchise.

The previously separate Tiger Challenges are now integrated into a single career path, and instead

of feeling like a club hack wandering around looking for a round of golf in earlier Tiger games, I now feel like a golfer on the rise in charge of his career. From the jump you're playing in tournaments, working on sponsorship objectives, and setting your sights on the Masters and the PGA Tour. It sounds like a surface alteration to the classic Tiger career structure, but apart from making things more exciting, this has a positive effect on the balance of the game. Playing well in these early tournaments gives you the opportunity to get a big XP bump and therefore the chance to raise your attributes without having to grind as much early on like in previous games.

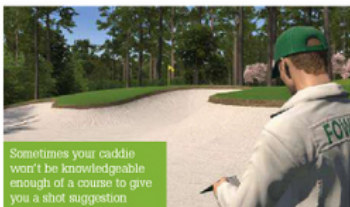
It didn't take me too long to work my way through the amateur ranks, earn a birth to Q school, and even get past the Nationwide tour to get to the PGA tour. I was also making a dent on my worldwide ranking and the year's FedEx board. But this seemingly meteoric rise doesn't mean the game lacks meat on the bones. Optional events like Tiger Challenges are built into tournaments on the schedule, and now that getting equipment isn't tied to money but is unlocked by completing sponsorship challenges (like completing a full round at a course without getting a bogey), there are plenty of content carrots to chase.

This more focused approach to the career mode is mirrored in the gameplay with the introduction of a caddie. Your caddie gives you shot options that take into account factors such as the lie of the ball, weather, course elevation, draw/fade, etc. This is not only useful in speeding up play and making things easier, but the caddie often smartly led me to safer areas of the green with certain approach shots. While the caddie simplifies matters, playing Tiger isn't

easy. Even though your caddie tells you which percentage to hit, actually producing a smooth swing that hits that number is often difficult. I've used the practice swing feature more than I ever have in the past. Moreover, your caddie's info isn't always rock solid, but improves the more times you visit the course and meet certain objectives. That said, there were many times when I followed my gut instincts and used a custom shot (which is basically like golfing the old way) for better results. I got a better feel for my clubs' swings and differences in the process. Similar to mid-air spin and other assists, if you don't like the caddie feature, you can always toggle it off.

Unfortunately, PlayStation 3 owners with a Move controller are hamstrung by the visual disconnect between the controller's accurate movements and your onscreen avatar. Your backswing often appears choppy, and this gets in the way of judging which percentage you're swinging at.

Through the years the Tiger franchise has layered on more realistic tour touches like the FedEx championship, the Masters, or the U.S. Open. This year EA's lined things up and knocked the ball down the fairway straight and true. I think the next step for the franchise is to infuse more of the hole-to-hole drama as players chase each other up and down the leaderboard instead of each hole feeling the same, but this is a great start that makes your Tiger experience feel cohesive. Instead of chasing Tiger as the game's ultimate end goal, now I feel like I'm building up my own career and writing my own story to the top. That's a great feeling. — **Matthew Kato**



Sometimes your caddie won't be knowledgeable enough of a course to give you a shot suggestion



Homefront

The fight for a worthy cause undermined by technological missteps



Style 1-Player Shooter (32-Player Online) **Publisher** THQ **Developer** Kaos Studios **Release** March 15 **ESRB** M

Burdened by a record deficit, shrinking middle class, aging infrastructure, overstretched military, and an increasingly hostile political climate, some might say the United States of America has seen better days. Extrapolating these events alongside a highly implausible reunion between North and South Korea, THQ and Hollywood screenwriter John Millus have concocted an alternate universe *Red Dawn* that replaces the Soviets with the Korean People's Army.

Homefront joins our imperiled nation in 2027, two years after a Korean EMP blast renders America helpless and opens the borders to invasion. The battle scars stretch across the nation. As protagonist Richard Jacobs is detained by KPA troops and forced onto a bus in Montrose, Colorado, you watch helplessly as the bus rolls past internment camps, impromptu executions, and ditches filled with everyday Americans. When a truck smashes into the bus and resistance fighters free Jacobs, I gladly joined the fight to liberate our sacred White Castles and Hooters restaurants (both of which are littered across the Midwest town).

The setup immediately sucks you in, but once you join the ranks of the resistance, the emotional scenes that raise Homefront above your typical point-and-shoot affair become increasingly scarce. Kaos Studios smartly implements Half-Life 2 style calm-before-the-storm moments by giving you downtime in the resistance camp to get to know the ragtag group of patriots, but your options here are limited and I never developed an attachment to my comrades. It's tough to warm up to people when they constantly get in your way on the battlefield and bicker nonstop about the feasibility of the plan in action.

Once the bullets start flying, Homefront fails

to distinguish itself from the myriad shooters making camp in Call of Duty's wake. Everything on the standard FPS checklist is here—sniper battles, turret set pieces, a chopper sequence, and even the 2027 equivalent to the AC-130 mission in Call of Duty 4. While placing these segments in a shooter isn't a bad decision, Homefront brings nothing new to the table outside of a remote-controlled drone. Rather than give you the keys to this destructive trump card, you're limited to selecting its next targets and watching the fireworks from afar.

The controls are competent enough to get you through the battles, but the lack of polish and craftsmanship is evident throughout the five-hour campaign. It's easy to get hung up on objects in the environment, the "follow-me" NPCs guiding you from objective to objective move at a snail's pace, and the graphics are hardly cutting edge. From low-resolution textures to the static, pixelated skies, Homefront looks like it was built during the transition to the current generation of consoles. Despite its underperforming graphics, the game still suffers from framerate dips and animation hitches.

Thanks to some well-crafted maps and a unique in-game economy, the multiplayer fares better than the campaign. Rather than give each team a set number of vehicles at the start of the match, Homefront rewards you with Battle Points for each kill, assist, or flag capture. Players can then use these points in-match to purchase cheap perks like flak jackets at any time during the match, or save them to unlock the more expensive, tide-turning toys like armored vehicles, drones, and air strikes.

The multiplayer is also easier to approach for less-skilled players thanks to the clever Battle Commander mode. This twist on traditional team

deathmatch and conquest modes evens the battlefield by placing beacons on skilled players riding long killstreaks. The more kills you rack up, the more opposing players are notified of your position. Doing so discourages exploitative camping and gives good players a run for their money by putting the X on their backs.

The Ground Control conquest mode features 32-player battles, but during our play sessions lag became an issue whenever large clusters of players and vehicles were grouped together. Homefront also features a progression system with 75 levels, weapon unlockables, and perks. Though I would have liked to see more weapons included, there is enough here to keep you busy for a tour of duty.

With its interesting premise, evocative opening sequence, and clever variation on multiplayer, Homefront has a strong foundation. It's a shame that technical limitations and a derivative single-player campaign keep the game from realizing its potential. **— Matt Bertz**



7

PS3 • 360 • PC

» **Concept**

After an economic and military collapse, America is invaded by a unified Korea

» **Graphics**

Ugly low-res textures, wooden characters, and stagnant lighting all contribute to the noticeably dated graphics

» **Sound**

Get ready for a lot of second-guessing from your fellow resistance fighters

» **Playability**

Competent shooting controls, but getting caught up on environmental objects is easy, so watch your step

» **Entertainment**

THQ and Kaos developed an interesting concept, but fail to deliver memorable gameplay to go along with it

» **Replay Value**

Moderate

LEGO Star Wars III: The Clone Wars

The best LEGO Star Wars game yet

8.5

gameformer
SILVER

Style 1 or 2-Player Action Publisher LucasArts Developer Traveller's Tales Release March 22 ESRB E10+

PS3 • 360

» Concept

Add massive battles to the classic LEGO formula

» Graphics

With hundreds of characters on screen at once, this is the first LEGO game that feels like it was built exclusively for this generation

» Sound

Best elevator music ever. You know what to expect from the sound effects and score

» Playability

Vehicles control exceptionally well. Cooperative play works better than in previous iterations. The thrill of going back to collect all of the minikits is once again a great reason to revisit levels

» Entertainment

Easily the most entertaining LEGO Star Wars game yet. Whether you're playing by yourself or with a friend at your side, you can sink dozens of hours into exploring this massive game

» Replay Value

High

If you've played any of Traveller's Tales' licensed LEGO games, whether it's Star Wars, Batman, Harry Potter, or Indiana Jones, you know what to expect from LEGO Star Wars III: The Clone Wars' basic gameplay. Any pre-assembled LEGO object you come across can be smacked until it crumbles into basic building blocks, raining multicolored collectible studs onto the floor. Most unassembled LEGO blocks found in a level can be pieced together to create an object or vehicle that will likely grant access to a new area. Foes that are shot or whacked explode into a mess of body parts, and may drop a red heart that will replenish your health. At any point, a second player can jump in or drop out of play. After completing the game, you can re-enter levels with all of the different character classes to hunt down 10 well-hidden minikits. And of course, at one point your character will be asked to ride a lawnmower, an elephant, or some kind of hilarious vehicle that never should exist in the Star Wars universe.

Even with this familiar framework in place, Traveller's Tales has added to the formula to such a degree that it feels like a completely new experience. This is the first LEGO game that doesn't feel like a holdover from the previous console generation. New technology allows for hundreds of characters to occupy the screen at once. Rather than just destroying two or three battle droids at a time with a saber throw or perfectly placed rocket, you'll now have the chance to obliterate dozens at a stroke by running them over with a speeder bike or an unruly Geonosis coliseum beast. The true scale of a Star Wars battle is captured in this game, and the power Traveller's Tales places into your hand is electrifying.



The new technology also allows levels to seamlessly expand from tight corridor-based gunfights to outer space ship-against-ship warfare. The scale is impressive and true to the source material. Cooperative players also don't have to worry about being tethered onto one screen. If one player wants to explore more of a ship while the other player takes flight to wage war against a capital ship, he or she can do so. The new split-screen system allows players to do what they want, and recognizes when they are in the same frame by converting to a singular view. As is the case with all LEGO games, this one is best played with a friend at your side.

Cooperative tactics are especially useful for the game's new RTS battles. Base building, resource management, and carefully plotted strategies are all a part of the mix, but in execution, the RTS elements are light, and so easy to comprehend that even non-gamers should figure them out in a few minutes. Outside of crushing the opposing forces (which could be the Republic or Separatists, depending on who you choose) the goal of the RTS levels is to secure territories. With each occupied territory, new building options become available. You can build a wide variety of vehicles (all of which can be controlled, as well as troops (which you can order to attack specific targets), shield generators, torpedo stations, and should the victory conditions call for it, an escape pod. All of the vehicles control exceptionally well and offer varying tactical strengths. The one problem that these levels run into is the AI almost comes across as pacifistic. They'll destroy approaching vehicles and throw up a shield, but they never push back or rally to protect their bases. The true nemesis ends up being the clock. Early in the game, before the stud multiplier and invincibility red bricks can be purchased, completing a stage in a set amount of time can be difficult. The RTS levels are abundant, and a great addition to Traveller's Tales' well-worn LEGO gameplay.

Although the game begins with *Attack of the Clones'* Battle of Geonosis, which was likely used to show off the ability to throw hundreds of battle droids on screen at once, all of the other levels are based on the first two seasons of *The Clone Wars* television series. With such a large selection of stories to choose from, the game offers a high level of variety in its levels and conflicts within them. The one constant overlapping in most levels is the boss. Count Dooku, General Grievous, and Asajj Ventress are confronted multiple times, and serve as the cornerstones of big Jedi versus Sith throwdowns. Like all LEGO games, the boss fights boil down to figuring out what technique works and repeating it until the foe falls, but at least this time around the battles unfold through multiple phases and stages.

If you are a completionist who wants to unlock every character, complete every bounty hunter mission, and secure every gold brick, be prepared to invest at least 40 hours of your life into this game. It's a long ride, but not all of those hours will go directly into gameplay. Figuring out what you should do next or how to unlock a new challenge often boils down to searching every nook and cranny in the hub world, which is not unlike trying to find a needle in a haystack. I was still making game-changing revelations in my 23rd hour. Never once, however, was I bored. Almost every accomplishment rewards you with a new playable character, of which there are 115 in total. Most of these characters are yanked from the Clone Wars, but you'll also unlock familiar faces from the prequel and classic trilogies.

Even with so much of the gameplay clinging to the formula Traveller's Tales created for its first LEGO game, *The Clone Wars* offers a vastly different experience that captures the best of both of the LEGO and Star Wars licenses. It's easily the best LEGO game to date. » **Andrew Reiner**

Second Opinion 8.5

Traveller's Tales has settled into a groove with its LEGO games, but it's far from a rut. The latest installment to the series is my favorite one yet, even though I couldn't care less about the Clone Wars. The game still is built off the basic structure that was outlined in the first LEGO Star Wars, though it's been significantly expanded and refined. Levels are not only huge, but they're a joy to explore with a friend, thanks in large part to the dynamic split screen. A few missions really show off the improved scale, where each player is free to zip around in space or dock on a ship and explore the interior at will. The game's light RTS elements are a surprising addition, and they're a fun departure from the rest of the game. My only real beef with the game is that it's possible to miss out on significant chunks of it if you don't scour every inch of the hub world. That lack of direction sometimes extends to level design as well; the few times I got stuck had nothing to do with puzzles, and everything to do with poorly explained mission objectives. That said, even if you don't know who (or what) a Cad Bane is, this is the LEGO game to buy — Star Wars or otherwise. » **Jeff Cork**

WWE All Stars

A dream roster clashes with a lack of gameplay variety

Style 1 to 4-Player Fighting (4-Player Online) **Publisher** THQ **Developer** THQ San Diego **Release** March 29 **ESRB** T



Since McMahon's WWE is the only big-name game in town when it comes to pro wrestling options, and the Smackdown vs. Raw series has been the only real choice for gamers in recent years. Thanks to THQ San Diego, wrestling fans that want a little more silliness and a lot less realism now have another option. WWE All Stars takes the biggest names of the '80s and '90s and pits them against the superstars of today, allowing sports entertainment fans to create numerous dream matches.

The roster is a who's-who of the last three decades of wrestling. Hall of Famers like Bret Hart and Roddy Piper populate the Legends side of the character select screen, while today's best like CM Punk and The Miz round out the other half. Outside of some notable exclusions like Ric Flair and Chris Jericho, not many fan favorites are missing. All of these superstars come equipped with their signature moves, and they're pulled off with even more fanfare than in real life. Undertaker's Tombstone Piledriver is a devastating finisher on Raw, but he performs it with an insane 20-foot leap in All Stars.

Building up to finishers requires you to beat

your opponent down in a variety of ways, and your moveset changes drastically based on which class you're playing as. Acrobats can springboard off of the ropes, Big Men can charge massive strikes, Brawlers are the most well-rounded, and Grapplers can chain holds together. Once you do enough damage to your opponent to fill your meter, you can pull off that Stunner you've been building towards.

Gameplay relies heavily on reversals, meaning you spend a good deal of your time staring at the HUD waiting for prompts to appear. It can be frustrating taking on the AI, as something as simple as an Irish whip can take numerous tries thanks to the frequency of reversals. Timing these correctly is crucial, and it takes time to become familiar with the proper window for the button tap.

While the gameplay is fun despite its simplicity, All Stars disappointingly offers only a few modes. Both Path of Champions and Fantasy Warfare are essentially glorified exhibition matches. The former consists of 10-match gauntlets with brief (and generic) promos sprinkled throughout, and matches in this mode are never really tied to your final opponent. Even something as simple as

fighting through Undertaker's past Wrestlemania victims before taking him on would be better than this. The D-Generation X arc exclusively consists of tag matches, but it's inexplicably limited to single-player.

Fantasy Warfare pits a legend against a current superstar, and they all have a specific theme (for example, Steve Austin and CM Punk battle to see who the better role model is). The only thing separating these from standard exhibition matches are the hype videos that play before the bout. These resemble the promo videos that WWE airs before a pay-per-view, and should appeal to big wrestling fans.

WWE All Stars' striking visual style and focus on over-the-top action are a perfect fit for the wrestling world, but the lack of variety brings down the overall experience. With no mode feeling like more than a series of exhibition matches, it seems like less than a full game. I hope THQ gives this formula another shot, because it could be a great companion to Smackdown vs. Raw if it comes back with a more substantial experience. » **Dan Ryckert**

7.5

PS3 • 360

» **Concept**
Bring together two generations of WWE superstars in an action-packed battle

» **Graphics**
The colorful world of pro wrestling is even more exaggerated, with superstars resembling action figures more than human beings

» **Sound**
Jim Ross and Jerry Lawler are recruited for commentary, and the in-ring effects are predictable

» **Playability**
Each of the four classes handles distinctly, and there are many opportunities for reversals and combos

» **Entertainment**
Most of the gameplay is solid, but the lack of modes and variety brings down the experience

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

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Top Spin 4

Top Spin 4 perfects the fundamentals and delivers a compelling career mode

8.5

generatormer
SILVER
Style 1 to 4-Player Sports (4-Player Online)
Publisher 2K Sports Developer
2K Czech Release April 15 ESRB E

PSS

» **Concept**
Simplify Top Spin 3's convoluted controls while adding depth to career mode and online

» **Graphics**
The pros look lifelike, and the animations are very fluid. The arenas and crowds are much more detailed, which is highlighted by the new TV-style presentation

» **Sound**
The crowd noise seems to ebb and flow with the match. Hope you like the song "North American Scum" by LCD Soundsystem. You'll be hearing it a lot

» **Playability**
The gameplay is centered around correctly timing simple button presses. Still, it will take you a while to master.

» **Entertainment**
From the gameplay to the career mode, Top Spin 4 does it right

» **Replay Value**
High

Calling a game "solid" can sometimes be taken as faint praise, but I can't think of a better word to describe 2K's Top Spin 4. The long-running series has always specialized in a more serious-minded approach to the game than Sega's Virtua Tennis (you won't be dodging giant falling fruit) and a comprehensive career mode that emulates real world pro tennis.

In contrast to Top Spin 3's convoluted mechanics, Top Spin 4 is focused on a more streamlined approach. The basic shots are assigned to the four buttons. However, the duration and timing of your presses can make your shot either a control shot or a more risky power shot. It's nothing you haven't seen before, but it feels right – and that's everything in tennis. The analog functions have been scaled back, but you still have an analog serve. I quickly mastered this and found it more effective than the standard serve. Other than a few shoulder modifiers for charging the net and drop shots, the controls are simple and light. The PlayStation Move controls on PS3 were functional but hardly revelatory.

The career mode is as comprehensive and well organized as I've seen. After using the deep player creation mode (I always seem to come up with the ugliest players possible), you'll begin to climb the ranks, eventually earning super star status. The career mode works off a calendar system. Each month you can compete in one training exhibition or special event and one tournament. The events range from practice matches to dance club appearances and motion-capture sessions. You can improve your stats by hiring coaches; each comes with passive stat bonuses and in-game challenges (like "hit 50 slice shots") that lead to more stat bumps. XP can be assigned based on three playstyles: offensive baseline, defensive baseline, and serve and volley.

Though there's only so much you can do to make a tennis career mode compelling, Top Spin 4 does it better than any game to date. This depth carries over to the World Tour multiplayer mode. In this mode, you'll take your created player online to compete for the number one world ranking each week. Even better, you'll continue to earn XP in all online and offline modes, which can be applied to your single-player career. While I played this game pre-release, the test matches I played were silky smooth. I only remember two instances of lag, neither of which changed the outcome of the point.

While it's not a revolution in video game tennis, Top Spin 4 provides both a mastery of the basics and the most comprehensive career mode to date. Throw in perhaps the best roster of real-life professionals ever assembled, a great and relevant online component, and Move functionality for the PS3, and you have a title that's more than ready for center court. » **Matt Helgeson**



Torchlight

Another great way to crawl through random dungeons

8.5

generatormer
SILVER
Publisher Microsoft Game Studios
Developer Runic Games
Release March 9 ESRB T

360

» **Concept**
Bring last year's lauded dungeon crawler from PC to the controller crowd

» **Graphics**
This won't be winning many technical awards, but the cartoony art style is pleasant and inviting. The explosive effects give the action a satisfying pop

» **Sound**
I'll never stop being amused at how explicitly the town music apes Diablo's. That's about the only notable thing among the otherwise vanilla audio

» **Playability**
Some fine control is lost relative to the original mouse/keyboard scheme, but this was never a game about precision

» **Entertainment**
Random levels, loot, and monsters. Sure, this is a Diablo clone, but it's a good one

» **Replay Value**
Moderately High

I've never been much of a believer in isometric Diablo-style action/RPGs on console. Sometimes it's good to be wrong. Torchlight makes the transition to Xbox Live Arcade almost entirely intact. I'll still be playing on PC, but I wouldn't point anyone away from this edition.

Torchlight is an unapologetic rehash of Diablo's mechanics. The view, the control, the skill tree, the inventory system, the dungeon's structure, and even the random item generation are cribbed from that classic. I don't say this as a bad thing; Torchlight's brand of explosive dungeon crawling is a different vibe that scratches a slightly different itch. This cuddler nature is the very thing that allows Torchlight to thrive on consoles.

Even on hard difficulty, diving through the monster-infested mine below the town of Torchlight isn't exactly a tactical affair. Combat is more akin to driving a tank through a platoon of orcs than desperately defending a hill with bow and sword against scores of Uruk-hai. Chilling on your couch, firing abilities in the general direction of monsters, and watching your minions clean house as you mady hack away is a perfectly reasonable way to play the game.

Don't let this easy-breezy description sell the action short. Pygmies explode into clouds of blood on a good critical strike. The ground avatars and flings spiders everywhere when your avtar unleashes a mighty stomp. Skeletons shatter under elemental onslaughts. Unleashing hilarious carnage is Torchlight's primary goal, and it performs its mission well.

This casual approach to gameplay soothes my minor irritation at the loss of the control that comes with the switch to gamepad. The rare occasions where I can't pull off an advanced tactic – like dropping a slowing trap next to a red barrel, luring monsters into the draining field, then setting off the explosive container – just aren't as big of a deal as they would be in a harder game.

Torchlight is a celebration of the silly fun of building an overpowered hero and tearing through hordes of monsters. We'd all love co-op (which is coming in the sequel, announced last year), but my advice is to appreciate Torchlight for what it is rather than complaining that it's not what you want your perfect dungeon crawler to be. You won't be disappointed. » **Adam Biessener**

Second Opinion 8.75

Pumping up an unstoppable hero is one of my favorite hooks in gaming, and Torchlight hits the sweet spot by maintaining a constant flow of cool powers and randomized loot. Even without much variety in classes and builds, experimenting with skills and tactics provides hours of fun as you delve into the monster-infested mines. The swarms of bad guys offer meager resistance, serving more as opportunities to showcase your dominance (I can't recommend Ember Lance highly enough). In a different game, this lack of proper balance might be a problem, but the ease of combat fits well with Torchlight's cartoony vibe. Sure, I'd like to see deeper characters, more options, and better bosses, but those aren't exactly complaints; I enjoy Torchlight so much that I just want more reasons to keep playing. » **Joe Juba**



PlayStation Move Heroes

Even Sony's dream team can't overcome Heroes' lack of substance

Style 1 or 2-Player Action **Publisher** Sony Computer Entertainment
Developer Nihilistic Software **Release** March 22 **ESRB** E10+

6.5

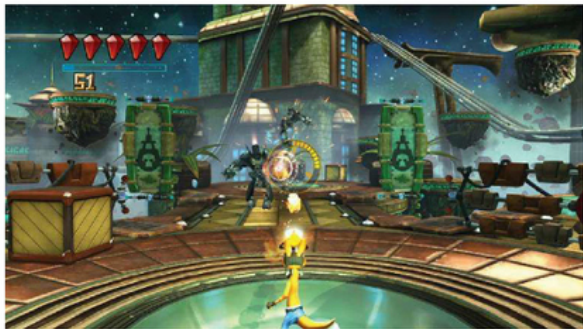
When Sony first announced that it was combining three iconic franchises—Jak and Daxter, Ratchet and Clank, and Sly Cooper—into a single game, fans got understandably excited. Seeing beloved video game heroes interact with one another in a mash-up is inherently entertaining, and extending characters beyond their traditional settings offers boundless creative options for the storytellers. But instead of capitalizing on these classic characters in a story-based mega-adventure, Heroes gives players a collection of repetitive, motion-based gaming events stitched together with the weakest of plots.

PlayStation Move Heroes begins with each of the series' duos (Sly Cooper has been paired with his hacker turtle friend, Bentley) being teleported out of their home worlds by a dubious-looking alien to play in the Inter-Universal Hero Games. After a little boasting and one-upmanship, the heroes agree to take part in the extraterrestrial competition, mainly out of apathy. I'm not in love with any of the three franchises, but even I couldn't resist the charm of seeing these mascots mingling. Unfortunately, there are only a few brief cutscenes like this during the game. Once the gameplay starts, Heroes is strictly a solitary affair.

Before each event you'll pick a single character to play as, based on whether the mission is designed for a hero or sidekick. In co-op, the second player is reduced to a floating crosshair that provides support via shooting enemies or dropping power-ups. Each character has a unique special ability, which gives him a little individuality, but I was still left wondering what the point of a team-up is if the characters don't work together.

Events are broken down into five basic categories: melee- and whip-based fighting, shooting sequences, and disc and bowling challenges. Each event is more robust than your typical motion controller-based minigame, and features a healthy variety of objectives including third-person segments that use the Navigation controller. The shooting stages are the main attraction, with some of the more chaotic shootouts briefly capturing the excitement of a Ratchet and Clank title, minus the creative arsenal. All of the events controlled well save for the occasional camera glitch, but repetition set in after the first 20 challenges or so and even the gunplay became dull. Heroes will only take an afternoon to complete, but from where I was sitting (or standing, as the game requires), that's not a bad thing.

Heroes is better than the typical Move cash-in, and every now and then the action is reminiscent of what makes these three franchises popular. However, with more characters than gameplay events, and no interaction between the protagonists outside of a few cut-scenes, it's hard to imagine a fan that wouldn't feel disappointed by this (non)mashup. **Jeff Machiavava**



PS3

» **Concept**
 Combine three of Sony's classic duos into a collection of Move-fueled minigames

» **Graphics**
 The protagonists and environments look good, but most of the enemies are simplistic in design

» **Sound**
 Aside from the inclusion of the original voice actors for the characters, nothing stands out

» **Playability**
 Move controls perform admirably, though there are occasional aiming and camera issues with some events

» **Entertainment**
 Most players will tire of Heroes' repetitive formula before its underwhelming conclusion

» **Replay Value**
 Moderate

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BLACK LION VIVA MEDIA THE WAY TO NVIDIA

MATURE 17+

M Blood Violence Sexual Themes Strong Language

ESRB CONTENT RATING www.esrb.org

Online Interactions Not Rated by the ESRB

Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War II – Retribution

Squad-based RTS increases unit count with mixed results

7.75

Style 1-Player Strategy (4-player online) Publisher THQ Developer Relic Entertainment Release March 1 ESRB M

PC

» Concept

Enlarge the Dawn of War II toolbox by allowing multiplayer-style squads and upgrades – and non-Space Marine factions, finally – in the single-player campaign

» Graphics

The engine is starting to show its age if you zoom in, but from a normal camera angle it still looks great

» Sound

Consistently excellent voice work sells the 40K universe in all of its hilarious over-the-top glory

» Playability

Being able to set your HQ to automatically replace fallen squads is great, but having more dudes in your army does not serve the tight focus on small-scale tactical combat well

» Entertainment

There's no reason DoW II players won't love Retribution, especially in multiplayer, but the campaign left me cold after Chaos Rising's excellence

» Replay Value

Moderately High

The second expansion for Relic's hero-focused science fiction RTS broadens the scope to include more factions and units, but it comes at a price. Shaking up a formula that has been running unchanged through the base game and first add-on isn't a bad idea, but the original design's elegance was a big part of its draw. Adding a bunch of complications and caveats, while undeniably increasing the size of the toolbox at the player's disposal, doesn't make the gameplay any better.

I should be clear that this discussion of changing designs and unnecessary complexity is in regard to the single-player campaign. Multiplayer in Retribution is a marginal upgrade that retains the basic structure of its predecessors while thankfully ditching Games for Windows Live and adding new maps and heroes. I can't see anything that would alienate fans, and having another Last Stand map is great. If you're an established Dawn of War II online player, go ahead and skip the incoming complaints about Retribution's lackluster campaign and go buy the game already. Multiplayer-curious newbies beware: Jumping into competitive play at this point is going to match you up against players who have two years of experience with the game if not the few new units in Retribution. Be prepared to swim with the sharks.

The Retribution campaign's narrative suffers by being told from six different perspectives. You can play any of the six races, but the overall story doesn't change (though your character's motives for pursuing it do). Dawn of War II, and particularly the Chaos Rising expansion, did an excellent job of staying tightly tied to a tiny cast of characters and using limited storytelling resources to flesh them out. Retribution's larger



ensemble spreads the story too thin. There are some great moments, mostly around the Imperial Guard's Inquisitor and Ork pirate Cap'n Blutflagg, but the overall tale falls flat.

Previous Dawn of War II campaigns put you exclusively in control of four heroes at a time. Retribution allows you to replace your auxiliary heroes (not your commander) with elite infantry squads, and to summon reinforcing infantry squads from on-map bases. This is great in theory – more options, huzzah! – but in practice having more units to control dilutes the awesomeness among your forces instead of concentrating it on your heroes. The result is a small-scale RTS that loses the unique flavor that Dawn of War II worked so hard to create. Using more units isn't a total disaster, but it is decidedly uninspiring compared to customizing heroes into well-honed killing machines.

The good news is that you can ignore most of this fluff and reinvest your resources back into

your heroes, playing the campaign much like the older ones. Unfortunately, Retribution's level design is a step back. Dawn of War II maps have always been relatively linear, but these railroad you to an unprecedented degree. I felt like I was trying to figure out what the next step the level designer wanted me to take was, rather than coming up with a winning strategy based on my troop of elite heroes.

All that said, the new factions are interesting to play and feel reasonably well balanced. From the Chaos Marines' Warp energies and Nurgle's plagues to the Orks' ever-growing Waaagh!, the six sides present unique mechanics and solid, powerful tactical possibilities. Unless you're going to dive into multiplayer, though, Retribution is a mediocre expansion pack even though the base gameplay is still quite good. Pick up Chaos Rising instead, which you should have done anyway because it is fantastic. » Adam Biessener





Final Fantasy IV: The Complete Collection

Take one last ride with the Red Wings



Style 1-Player Role-Playing Publisher Square Enix Developer Square Enix Release April 19 ESRB E10+

Since its initial SNES release as Final Fantasy II, this RPG has seen re-releases on PlayStation, Game Boy Advance, and Wii's Virtual Console – plus a full 3D remake on DS. Even though I've played Final Fantasy IV more than any other game in the series, I never get tired of it. Whether you're a longtime fan like me or a newcomer who can't tell Kain from Cecil, you can't go wrong with Final Fantasy IV: The Complete Collection.

As the name implies, this compilation gathers everything related to FF IV in a single package: the original game, the sequel (called The After Years), and a brief interlude bridging the gap between the two. Thankfully, you can access all three installments from the main menu right

away, so you don't need to start at the beginning if you're already familiar with the base game.

Final Fantasy IV is great by itself, so the addition of the extra content just seals the deal. The After Years wasn't received well as a downloadable episodic game on Wii, since doling out the story piecemeal over several months and charging gamers for each chapter isn't a good way to keep them interested. This collected format suits the plot much better; when played as an uninterrupted adventure, After Years held my attention like it couldn't before. The graphical upgrades (which the base FF IV shares) also make the experience better, forming a consistent visual style across the entire saga.

Since FF IV and After Years are already avail-

able in other forms, Interlude is the only new piece of the puzzle. Unfortunately, it's the biggest disappointment on the disc. Calling it a full game is a stretch; the story took me less than four hours to complete, and most of that time was spent in three dungeons repeated from FF IV – identical layouts and everything! Even so, I'm glad I played it, since the tale ties neatly into the events of After Years.

If you've somehow managed to overlook Final Fantasy IV over its numerous incarnations, this is the best way to get the whole experience. Though not every facet is airtight, The Complete Collection is an addictive mix of traditional RPG mechanics, character-focused narrative, and pure nostalgia. **» Joe Juba**

8.5

PSP

» Concept
The entire Final Fantasy IV saga in one place

» Graphics
Visuals fall in line with the PSP releases of Final Fantasy I and II. I'm glad the changes are consistent across all three parts

» Sound
I love the option to use the original tracks over the new arranged ones, but both versions sound good

» Playability
Do you want to attack, cast a spell, or use an item? The familiar interface works perfectly and doesn't hold any surprises

» Entertainment
If you haven't played Final Fantasy IV yet, now is the time

» Replay
Moderate

The 3rd Birthday

A twisted tale afflicted by faulty gameplay execution

Style 1-Player Action/RPG Publisher Square Enix Developer Square Enix Release March 29 ESRB M

After a string of tragic events on Christmas Eve 2012, New York City finds itself enveloped by the Babel's massive tentacles in an incident known as the Sacrifice. This sets the stage for CTI agent Aya Brea's return to the Big Apple, as her altered genetics make her the only one resilient enough to rid the city of the macabre Twisted and ultimately bring down the Babel.

One year after the Sacrifice, Brea uses the CTI's Overdrive machine to deliver her mind to the past and hijack the bodies of soldiers. This will not only help her complete her world-saving mission, but also uncover the secrets of her own blurry history. This backdrop makes for compelling plot points, and use of Overdrive creates opportunities for unique gameplay, whether the shooting gallery feel and repetitive mission structure makes this action-oriented approach fall flat rather quickly.

During the tutorial stage the player is introduced to a variety of Overdrive abilities. These techniques allow Brea to quickly hop between the bodies of soldiers on the battlefield, assuming their position and weapons. Jump inside weakened enemies for an Overdrive Kill that

causes them to implode, turn the aim of all allies toward a common enemy for a critical Crossfire attack, or go into a berserk state called Liberation that gives Brea incredible firepower and agility. Brea's impressive party tricks are all available from the beginning and would have been better served if they were unlocked over the course of the game. Though satisfying at the outset, the novelty quickly wears thin after executing these stagnant moves ad nauseum.

Whether you're battling through the streets of New York or a dilapidated concert hall, you're typically trapped in an enclosed section that requires you to Overdrive and safely position your allies, then blast the constantly respawning foes with firearms and Overdrive abilities, all the while destroying surrounding red orbs to open up exits. You're then free to begrudgingly move on to the next section, rinse, and repeat. To add insult to injury, gameplay imbalances make some combat sections a breeze and others downright frustrating even on normal difficulty. There are weapon upgrades and options to manipulate Brea's DNA with Over Energy chips



collected from enemies for support abilities that help improve your capabilities, however this light RPG element doesn't reveal its full potential until you've maxed out your upgrades toward the end of the game.

Once you near the cusp of the roughly 15-hour experience, Brea will not only have fully powered weapons and an arsenal of helpful support abilities, but she'll also have access to tanks and helicopters once the game breaks out of dull corridor shooting sequences, adding a much needed dose of variety. Battling through the lulls early on will reward your patience with spectacular boss fights and cinematics leading up to the grand finale.

Parasite Eve fans may find themselves turned off by the frenzied action-oriented approach of The 3rd Birthday, and the execution certainly has its ups and downs. Even though The 3rd Birthday may not be one worth celebrating, we're hoping Square Enix can get it right if it decides to someday bring the franchise back to its console roots. **» Annette Gonzalez**

6.75

PSP

» Concept
This PSP spinoff of the classic Parasite Eve franchise marks Aya Brea's return to New York

» Graphics
Gorgeous cutscenes unfold as the twisted tale unravels. Environments set the moody tone and range from detailed to drab

» Sound
Voice acting is average at best. With the constant flurry of bullets you'll spend most of your time listening to gunshots

» Playability
The tank controls of yesteryear were ditched for a fluid setup. Control configurations complement the PSP layout well despite camera control and auto-aim issues

» Entertainment
The 3rd Birthday offers an intriguing storyline with plenty of plot twists that are buried under repetitive (and occasionally frustrating) third-person shooting sequences

» Replay Value
Moderate



Pilotwings Resort

Flying the friendly, dull skies

7.25

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Nintendo
Developer Monster Games/Nintendo
Release March 27 **ESRB** E

3DS

» **Concept**

Take to the skies in a return visit to Wii Sports Resort's Wuhu Island

» **Graphics**

Not a ton of detail and a little pop-in, but the clean, crisp visuals help show off the 3DS's power

» **Sound**

The upbeat music sounds fine, but I lowered the volume before long

» **Playability**

Challenges quickly ramp up in difficulty, but each vehicle is fun to master

» **Entertainment**

Pilotwings is a totally suitable launch title, but don't expect it to hold your attention for long

» **Replay Value**

Moderate

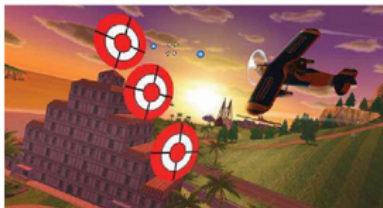
If you've played either of the previous Pilotwings games, you've probably got a pretty good idea of what to expect from Pilotwings Resort. It continues the series' simple formula of flying around in various aircrafts while showing off the 3DS' improved graphical capabilities as well as the 3D functionality itself. Sadly, though, Pilotwings Resort is held back from any lasting impact because of a handful of shortsighted design choices.

The majority of your time with the game will be spent in mission mode, where you take on various challenges that are ranked by difficulty—bronze, silver, gold, and platinum. Though you'll definitely need to replay some missions in order to earn enough stars to unlock the higher difficulties, it's worth the effort. The later challenges provide some of the most interesting scenarios, such as one mission where you use your rocket belt to hunt down stray UFCs and return them to the mothership.

Pilotwings really shines during that handful of slightly weirder missions, but the vast majority of the game's levels stick to the same few mundane goals: fly through rings, pop some balloons, avoid mines, and try to land safely on floating platforms. Even these objectives could be a little more interesting if the game featured more varied settings, but none of the missions stray from Wuhu Island, the tiny locale that Nintendo introduced in Wii Sports Resort. Though Wuhu Island is full of memorable landmarks, there's only so many times I can fly into the volcano in the middle of the island or maneuver in-between the windmills and still think it's exciting.

Beyond the missions, there's also a free flight mode that allows you to explore the island in a vehicle of your choosing while picking up collectibles and performing stunts. While this can be enjoyable, you're trapped with a tiny time limit that grows in small bits as you pick up more items. Since you're already going up against the clock for missions, I wish that free flight mode had dropped the time limit altogether.

As a means of showing off the new portable hardware, Pilotwings Resort works well enough. As a game, though, it only has brief gusts of brilliance amidst a wide-open sky of rings to fly through. » **Phil Kollar**



3/3



Ridge Racer 3D

A new perspective meets a generations-old formula

7.25

Style 1-Player Racing (4-Player Local)
Publisher Namco Bandai **Developer** Namco Bandai
Release March 22 **ESRB** E

3DS

» **Concept**

Give 3DS owners their first notable racing title

» **Graphics**

3D can play tricks on your eyes when viewing the car, but switching to first-person makes a significant difference

» **Sound**

Generic hyperactive techno plays throughout your laps

» **Playability**

The circle pad performs admirably, and the drift-based gameplay is still fun

» **Entertainment**

A tournament ladder Grand Prix mode seems a bit too bare-boned, but the racing action is solid

» **Replay Value**

Moderate

A Ridge Racer title in a console launch lineup is nothing new, so it should come as no surprise to see the series debut alongside Nintendo's newest portable. Considering the only racing alternative on the system is the lackluster Asphalt 3D, Namco's long-running series doesn't have much competition in the genre at this early point in the 3DS lifecycle. Ridge Racer 3D doesn't do anything to revolutionize the series, but its fundamentals are solid enough to satisfy genre fans until something a little fresher comes out.

Grand Prix is the primary single-player mode, and has you competing in a series of tournaments to earn points. These points can be used to purchase new vehicles as they become available or upgrade your current rides with nitrous kits. Progressing through this mode doesn't feel like anything new, as we've seen this numerous times in the series' past.

If you want to get a bite-sized version of the Grand Prix experience, you can select Quick Tour mode. After entering your desired length of time, course type, and car category, the game generates a series of races. This mode works well for a portable, especially if you have limited time on a plane or bus ride.

Steering feels great on the circle pad, and the series' signature drift-based gameplay makes its unsurprising return. A new option allows for one-button drifting, which lets you control the turns with a dedicated button rather than feathering the accelerator. Having several options never hurts, but I found myself strongly preferring the classic method.

Friends with the game can take you on via local multiplayer, and you can put your points on the line during Risk Races. Even if you're not actively playing the game, your 3DS can swap ghost information with your friend's system thanks to the StreetPass functionality. Without even turning the system on, you can have access to your buddy's best times and ghost data so you know what you're up against even when they're not around.

Since the gameplay doesn't differentiate itself much from previous installments, the 3D effect is the big selling point for this entry. When the effect is turned up significantly, I found that my eyes oftentimes shifted out of focus when glancing back and forth from my car to the road ahead. I typically don't like to play racing games in first-person, but I switched to see if it lessened this annoyance. Sure enough, the 3D effect looked better and upset my eyes less once placing the camera in the driver's seat. If you want to crank up the 3D on that fancy new system of yours, I'd suggest you do the same.

Ridge Racer 3DS is a perfectly competent racer, it's just one that doesn't do anything new. If you prefer an old-school arcade racing experience (like Daytona 500 or Sega Rally) over more realistic alternatives (Forza, GT), then this should satisfy early 3DS adopters. » **Dan Ryckert**



Nintendogs + Cats

You really can't teach an old dog new tricks

Style 1-Player Simulation **Publisher** Nintendo
Developer Nintendo **Release** March 27 **ESRB** E

6.5

3DS

» **Concept**

Nintendogs returns, adding cats and little else to the gameplay of the first game

» **Graphics**

The game shines visually; the dogs and cats are beautifully animated and show off realistic fur textures. The 3D effects are appealing, but don't have much impact

» **Sound**

The soundtrack is minimal and forgettable. However, the improved voice recognition makes teaching tricks to your dog a much better experience

» **Playability**

The touch screen controls function admirably, though the menus and user interface can be too clunky at times

» **Entertainment**

If you're looking for cute, you're in the right place. If you were hoping this series was actually going to evolve on 3DS, you'll be sorely disappointed.

» **Replay Value**

Moderate

My first few hours of playing Nintendogs + Cats was so dominated by a feeling of déjà vu that I went in the Game Informer vault and pulled out the original. It turns out my gut was right – there are precious few differences between the two. You get a dog at the kennel and start training it, with breaks for feeding, baths, and going on walks. As before, you can enter competitions; the only new one is a simplistic lure competition where you turn a crank to move a fuzzy lure down a series of ropes to guide your dog through a roped off race course. Once again, you are very limited in what you can do each day – a couple of competitions and a handful of new tricks are all your dog has the energy for. That's true-to-life, but aggravating from a player's perspective.

Of course, there are lots of little touches like new side areas to explore while on walks, the ability to rotate the camera around your puppy while petting or bathing it, new design motifs and furniture to buy for your house, and being able to trade items with other owners via the 3DS StreetPass. Welcome additions all, but so minor in impact that the game feels like little more than a graphically enhanced version of the first. I did appreciate the improved voice recognition, which made teaching tricks less frustrating.

The addition of cats to the franchise also falls flat. Cats aren't very malleable; you can't teach them tricks or take them for a walk. Mostly, they do their own thing, purring when you pet them, eating when they are hungry, and playing with various toys like a feather lure or a bubble ring. However, watching them hiss and bat at your puppy is amusing.

By far the biggest improvement over the original Nintendogs is the presentation. The dogs and cats are animated beautifully, and show nice subtleties like realistic fur texturing and responsive eye tracking. The most fun I had with the game came at times when I was just watching my cat and dog play and fight. However, I'm not sure that's a good thing for a video game, which should be interactive above all else.

The 3D effects aren't terribly impressive, but that's more down to the very simple and static environments in the game. The trick competitions are done with AR Cards, so you must set one down on a table and view a 3D image of your dog through the unit's camera. It's a nice visual effect, but also means you have to have an AR Card with you if you want to participate in them.

Nintendogs + Cats definitely retains the inescapable charm of its predecessor, and I expect that will be enough for many of the younger and casual fans who loved the first. For me, I expect more than marginal improvements after a six-year layoff. » **Matt Helgeson**



Ghost Recon: Shadow Wars

A pleasant turn-based surprise

Style 1-Player Strategy (1 or 2-Player Local)
Publisher Ubisoft **Developer** Ubisoft Sofia
Release March 27 **ESRB** T

8.25

3DS

» **Concept**

Adapt the near-future special ops franchise to a turn-based tactical strategy formula

» **Graphics**

You can clearly see everything you need to, but this is not a good-looking game

» **Sound**

Mute this now, thank me later

» **Playability**

The interface is smartly designed to keep the various bits of information you need handy

» **Entertainment**

The story and presentation are crap, but the gameplay is as good as anything in the genre

» **Replay Value**

Moderate

I have to give Ubisoft credit for letting one of its established franchises break out of its comfort zone. Ghost Recon has always been about pulling off ridiculous stunts with super-elite troops and their near-future technology, and this turn-based strategy title captures that fantasy as well as any of the series' first-person shooters.

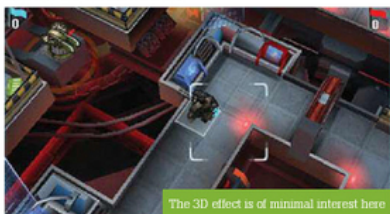
Ghost Recon: Shadow Wars plays more like Front Mission than Advanced Warfighter. Your squad of up to six Ghosts takes turns moving and attacking with their foes (ultranationalist Russians [again], if you must know). And let that be the last we speak of the utterly throwaway plot). The rules for cover, supporting fire, lines of sight, and movement are simple but smart. You don't have to memorize a set of arcane formulas and exceptions to understand how things work. At the same time, the rules promote realistic tactics like overlapping fields of fire and bounding from cover to cover.

Your squad consists of just six Ghosts, but they have radically different capabilities. Using their unique talents is crucial, from the engineer's deployable turret to the scout's optical camouflage. The game's 37 levels throw enough settings and challenges at you to keep things fresh throughout the campaign's 20-plus hours. I was still coming up with new plays a dozen hours in; Shadow Wars' ability to keep the player from recycling the same strategies is a great accomplishment.

The developers obviously made the choice to favor fun over gritty realism. The Ghosts are bullet sponges, and your medic can patch the most grievous

wounds with a quick zap from her magical first aid kit. Controlling flags on the map accrues command points, which can be spent to call in airstrikes, give your units extra turns, and more. I laud this decision; the Ghosts' amazing capabilities shine through despite the fact that it takes dozens of rounds to kill anyone.

I don't have a lot of complaints about the game. The presentation is distinctly second-rate, but since when is that a problem for a turn-based game? Hotseat multiplayer is a tacked-on set of one-on-one duel maps that is a minor distraction at best, but I wouldn't have cared if it were entirely absent. The franchise may seem like an odd fit for the genre, but this is a wonderful implementation that evokes the spirit of the Ghost Recon franchise while presenting a delightful strategic challenge. » **Adam Biessener**



The 3D effect is of minimal interest here

Read the extended review at gameinformer.com

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Create	5	Jan-11
de Blob 2	8	Apr-11
DJ Hero 2	9.25	Dec-10
Donkey Kong Country Returns	9.5	Dec-10
Epic Mickey	7.75	Jan-11
Fip's Twisted World	3.5	Jan-11
Ghost Recon	4.5	Jan-11
Kirby's Epic Yarn	9.5	Dec-10
Lost In Shadow	7.5	Feb-11
Mario Sports Mix	4.5	Mar-11
Marvel Super Hero Squad: The Infinity Gauntlet	6.75	Feb-11
Michael Jackson: The Experience	6.5	Jan-11
Sonic Colors	7	Jan-11
Trom: Evolution Battle Grids	6	Jan-11
You Don't Know Jack	8	Feb-11

PC

Bejeweled 3	9	Jan-11
Bulletstorm	9.25	Apr-11
Call of Duty: Black Ops	9	Dec-10

Create	5	Jan-11
Dead Space 2	9	Feb-11
Divinity II: Flames of Vengeance	7.75	Jan-11
Dragon Age II	7.75	Apr-11
Dungeons	7	Apr-11
Fallout: New Vegas	8.5	Dec-10
James Bond 007: Blood Stone	7.5	Dec-10
Magicka	7.5	Apr-11
Total War: Shogun 2	9.5	Apr-11
Two Worlds II	7.75	Mar-11
Yar's Revenge	7.5	Apr-11

NINTENDO DS

Dragon Quest VI: Realms of Revelation	8.5	Mar-11
Ghost Trick: Phantom Detective	6	Feb-11
Kingdom Hearts Re: coded	6.75	Feb-11
Mario vs. Donkey Kong: Mini-Land Mayhem	8.25	Dec-10
Monster Tale	8	Apr-11
Okami	8.75	Mar-11
Plants vs. Zombies	8.25	Feb-11
Pokémon Black/White	8.75	Mar-11
Raiden Historia	8.75	Mar-11
Sonic Colors	8.5	Jan-11

PS3

Disidia 012 Final Fantasy	7	Apr-11
God of War: Ghost of Sparta	9.5	Dec-10
Inimals	7	Dec-10
Lord of Arcana	7	Mar-11
Tactics Ogre: Let Us Cling Together	9	Mar-11
Ys: The Oath in Feighna	8.5	Jan-11

the score

6 | Madden NFL 3DS

Platform 3DS Release March 27 ESRB E

In an era where millions of football fans obsess over stats, build fantasy teams, and even tune in to watch NFL combine drills, I'm not sure what audience EA is targeting by stripping Madden of its core multiplayer and franchise mode features. Nintendo handhelds may not always attract hardcore gamers, but that doesn't mean football fans who own the devices don't want a fully featured game. — Matt Bertz

4 | Steel Diver

Platform 3DS Release March 27 ESRB E10+

Maybe some gamers will be pulled into the aquatic world of Steel Diver despite the limited content, tech demo quality, and seemingly broken multiplayer. For the majority of Nintendo fans, though, it's destined to become a strange and forgotten footnote in the publisher's history. — Phil Kollar

8.5 | The Dishwasher: Vampire Smile

Platform 360 Release April 6 ESRB M

The first Dishwasher game was one of the most action-packed and fast-paced games available on Xbox Live. Its sequel ups the ante with bigger, better bosses, tight controls, more interesting upgrades, and an evocative art style. It's a bloody good time. — Matt Miller

8 | Chime Super Deluxe

Platform PS3 Release March 29 ESRB E

Zoë Mode brings back tracks from the original Chime and pads the set list with five more mesmerizing tunes and grids. The additional songs and the inclusion of four-player co-op and versus multiplayer makes Super Deluxe on PSN the ultimate version of the addictive block-building puzzler. — Annette Gonzalez

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6.5 | Lego Star Wars III: The Clone Wars

Platform DS • PSP • 3DS Release March 22 ESRB E

The portable versions of the LEGO games have been disappointing, and the trend continues. Ultimately, LEGO Star Wars III: The Clone Wars on handheld is like the Mega Bloks version of an excellent game. It's similar enough if you're desperate, but your money is better spent on the genuine article. — Jeff Cork

8.25 | Bit.Trip Flux

Platform Wii Release February 28 ESRB E

Flux and its five predecessors offer something totally unique within the video game world — a breath of fresh air that is especially welcome on a service like WiiWare. If you're ready for a challenge, give the game a try. Come to think of it, try the whole series. — Matt Miller

6 | Major League Baseball 2K11

Platform PS3 • 360 Release March 8 ESRB E

Major League Baseball 2K11 plays like a blooper reel from This Week in Baseball. Every game plays out like a year in Milton Bradley's life — you know something horrible is going to happen, you just don't know when it will be. — Andrew Reiner

7 | Slam Bolt Scrapers

Platform PS3 Release March 15 ESRB E

Slam Bolt Scrapper's ambition is also its greatest pitfall. In blending Tetris-like block building, tower defense time management, and traditional brawler mechanics, it sacrifices expertise for breadth. But despite the occasional frustration, the game is entertaining and engaging. — Meagan Marie

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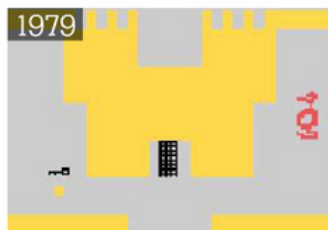
Early Inno

Hack and Slash. Platformer. FPS. All players are familiar with these standard genres, but where did they originate? We take a look back at 12 early titles responsible for some of the



1962 First Shoot 'Em Up Spacewar!

Developed by Steve Russell and a small group of programmers at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Spacewar was a two-player shoot 'em up that had players dodging a central gravity well, in addition to their opponent's missiles. In 1971, an updated version of Spacewar called Galaxy Game was installed at Stanford University and required 10 cents to play, making it the first video arcade game.



1979 First Action-Adventure Game Adventure

Based on the 1976 text adventure game Colossal Cave Adventure, the Atari 2600's Adventure added action and puzzle elements that included multi-colored keys and three dragons with different AI characteristics. In 1986, the action-adventure genre would get a major overhaul with the release of Nintendo's The Legend of Zelda.



1980 First Graphic Adventure Game Mystery House

Developed by husband and wife duo Ken and Roberta Williams, Mystery House was the first adventure game to feature monochromatic graphics to accompany its text-based gameplay. The game was an instant hit for their newly found company, On-Line Systems. A few years later the couple renamed their company Sierra On-Line and began working on their next graphic adventure game, 1984's King's Quest.



1984 First 2D Fighting Game Karate Champ

Although it was preceded by two boxing arcade games created by Sony (Heavyweight Champ in 1976 and Champion Boxing in 1983), Karate Champ provided the foundation for 2D fighting genre. The game didn't feature health bars, but its round-based matches paved the way for more complex series like Yie Ar Kung-Fu (1985) and Street Fighter (1987).



1984 First 2D Platformer Donkey Kong

Although some gamers consider 1980's Space Panic to be the original platformer, Donkey Kong was the first game to feature a jump button, an integral component to the genre. Donkey Kong spawned two characters that would become long-term innovators of the platformer genre: The titular ape, and Jumpman, who was renamed Mario in the 1982 sequel, Donkey Kong Junior.



1985 First Life Sim Little Computer People

Fifteen years before The Sims took the video game industry by storm, Activision released a quirky sim called Little Computer People, which tasked the player with serving as landlord to a character living inside of a three-story home. Although interaction with your character was severely limited, Little Computer People captured the addictive nature of snooping on the daily routine of a virtual human.

vators

which games invented these common classifica-

genres we know and love. by Jeff Marchiafava



1981 First Stealth Game Castle Wolfenstein

Although the Wolfenstein series is best known for the FPS titles created by id Software, the franchise started as a top down 2D stealth game developed for the Apple II. Muse Software incorporated a number of stealth-based gameplay mechanics into Castle Wolfenstein, all of which have become synonymous with the genre. Sneaking past guards, donning disguises, picking locks, and searching fallen enemies for items were all present in this 1981 classic.



1982 First Survival Horror Game Haunted House

It may be a far cry from survival horror staples like Resident Evil and Silent Hill, but the Atari 2600's Haunted House contained many of the same elements. In addition to primitive inventory management and puzzle solving, Haunted House featured an innovative lighting mechanic that required the player to use matches to illuminate nearby objects while avoiding a cast of ghoulish enemies.



1984 First Beat 'Em Up Kung-Fu Master

Known simply as Kung-Fu in America, this early brawler was based on the Jackie Chan action film *Wheels on Meals*. Kung-Fu Master's side-scrolling beat 'em up action inspired more popular successors like Double Dragon, Final Fight, and Streets of Rage.



1989 First Hack and Slash Game Golden Axe

The term "hack and slash" originated with pen and paper RPGs, but was easily adapted to fast-paced, melee-based action games. Some point to 1985's Gauntlet as the originator of the genre, and although its fantasy setting and class system undoubtedly influenced games like Golden Axe, its projectile-based combat disqualifies it in our eyes. Over the past decade, the hack and slash genre has been redefined by games like Diablo, God of War, and Bayonetta.



1991 First First-Person Shooter Catacomb 3-D

Video games have been using a first-person perspective since the 1970s, but it wasn't until Catacomb 3-D that we saw the elements that would come to define the FPS genre. Unsurprisingly, this little-known FPS came from id Software, and would serve as the foundation for the following year's release – Wolfenstein 3D.



1991 First Graphical MMORPG Neverwinter Nights

Years before MMORPGs were labeled as such, AOL partnered with Stormfront Studios to release Neverwinter Nights, a game that fit the future definition. Neverwinter Nights' initial capacity was 50 players per server, which expanded to 500 by 1995. The game was expensive to play, as AOL was still charging gamers by the hour for internet usage. However, there was no shortage of users willing to pay: Over 100,000 players had created accounts by the time AOL shut off the servers in 1997.

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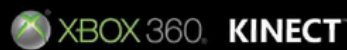
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