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top
50
games
of 2012





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A Top 50 in the Making



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

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

I know conspiracy theorists love to believe we are on the take, or have some ulterior motives to induct certain titles into our Top 50 games of the year. That is not the case; while shady back-room deals make for interesting fiction, our selection process is surprisingly straightforward.

Let me paint a picture: Imagine 18 editors in a conference room, each on edge even before the discussion begins. Some because they have seen the carnage before, others because they don't know what they are in for yet.

Everyone in the room looks a little ragged, as the team has been putting in late hours at home trying to play the games they know will be contested and battled over. Trying to convince other editors that your choice for Game of the Year is better than another without having played both to completion is a one-way ticket to humiliation.

There are pieces of paper everywhere. A list with all the games of 2012 that scored a 7.5 or higher. Editor notes and personal favorites. Possible dorks and heroes. We assemble a list of about 75 games, whittled down after numerous conversations and email exchanges.

The list starts with about 15 "slam dunks" that we all agree on. Then people start demanding additions and subtractions. One game is hailed as genius, while another is declared the most insipid game ever created. And thus begins the blood bath.

This continues for the next five hours. There are lots of passive aggressive sighs and defeated looks. Choices are made. Dreams are crushed. And that is just for the Top 50. At this point it isn't even a Top 50 – it's a Top 54. Everyone is given homework: Play the games at the bottom of the list (if they haven't already) so we can make those final painful cuts.

Into the wee hours of the evening we argue over the individual "Best of" honors and the Top 10s. We eventually dismiss and pick up again the next day, because everyone loses their will to argue (which doesn't happen often with our group).

Making the Top 50 every year is both heaven and hell, as great games – like any other art – are in the eye of the beholder. Your favorite game didn't win our Game of the Year honor? Well, neither did mine, and I'm the editor-in-chief (sorry, Dishonored). There were some amazing games in 2012. Enjoy the list.

Cheers,



Cover Artist

If you remember our cover art for *The 30 Characters That Defined A Decade* (Dec 2010), then this month's amazing cover by Sam Spratt will look familiar, as we brought him back for an encore performance. Check out his work and order prints at his site: samspratt.com

0113

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Top 50 Games of 2012

At the end of every year, we gather in our conference room and have a huge argument about which 50 games are our favorite of the previous 12 months. Every GI editor walks out with a bruised ego and hurt feelings, and it's all for you.



16

Something in the Water



70



24

The Flood of Free to Play



26

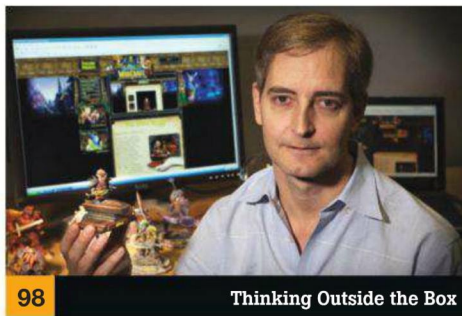
Creating Clementine



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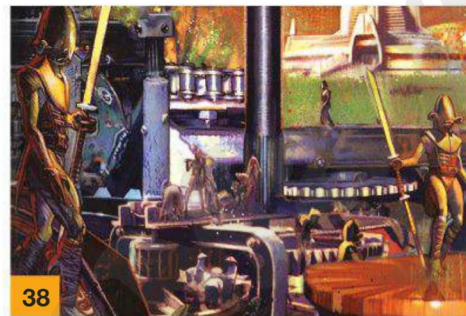


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» 6 Feedback

This month readers thank us for highlighting some lesser-known games, ask us what happened to Watch Dogs, complain about unreliable co-op partners, praise some of our reviews, and complain about others.

» 10 Connect

Disney bought Lucasfilm, and we try to figure out what that means for its gaming future. We also look at the history of Crystal Dynamics, round up a bunch of free-to-play games, and try to figure out why we are so compelled to protect Clementine in Telltale's *The Walking Dead*.

» 66 Previews

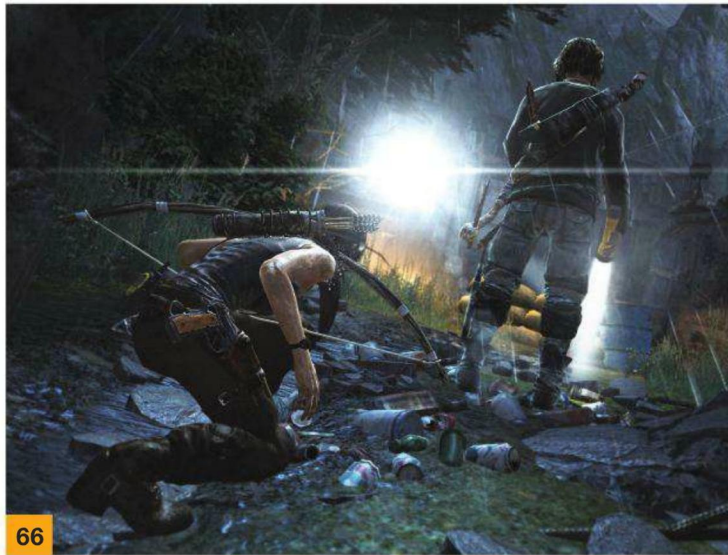
This month we got our hands on *Tomb Raider*, *Aliens: Colonial Marines*, *Devil May Cry*, and *Sly Cooper: Thieves in Time*. We also spoke with *God of War: Ascension*'s director Todd Papy about multiplayer and how it fits into a historically single-player franchise.

» 80 Reviews

The Wii U is upon us, and we let you know which games are worth picking up and which to avoid. We also get lost in the jungle in *Far Cry 3* and return to *Wasteland* with *Epic Mickey 2: The Power of Two*.

» 100 Game Over

Some people like to read words, others like their information in number form. For the latter crowd, we've put together a statistical analysis of all the games in our top 50 list and jammed them into an assortment of charts and graphs.



66

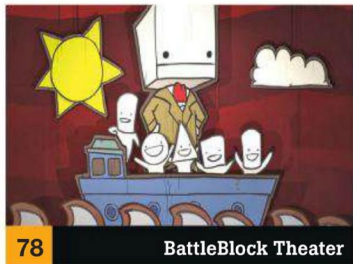


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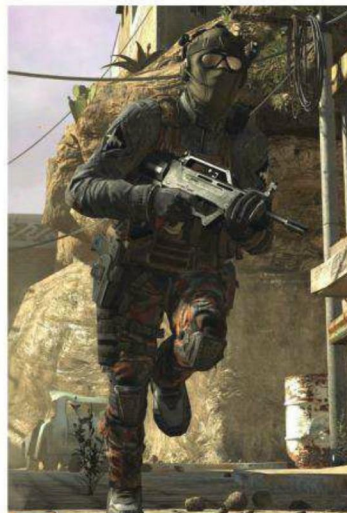
BattleBlock Theater



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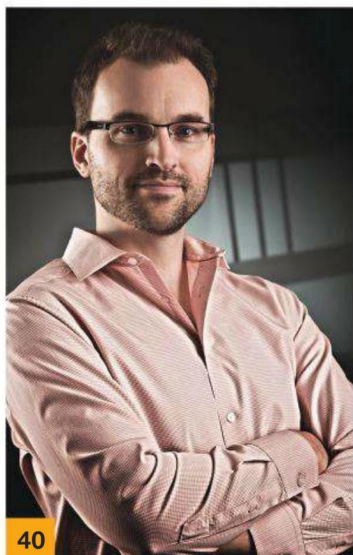


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¹3D viewing requires NVIDIA graphics card, plus NVIDIA 3DTV Play software, a NVIDIA compliant 3D TV with 3D glasses, compatible media and HDMI cable, all sold separately.





This month in Feedback, readers solicit advice on how to deal with a bad co-op buddy, resist change at all costs, misunderstand the fundamental nature of reviews, and question whether some beloved, family-friendly characters are really agents of Satan.

Blip on the Radar

When issue 235 came in the mail, I went straight to the article on the five under-the-radar games. Those games look amazing! If it wasn't for your cover story, I never would have known about these awesome games like *Metro: Last Light* and *Fuse*. Also, I'm not normally someone who plays zombie games, but when I read the *Dead Island: Riptide* preview, I immediately showed it to my buddy and started planning a zombie all-nighter for when the game comes out. Thank you for showing me some great games that I might have missed otherwise.

Rush Engle
via email

While we enjoy revealing huge blockbusters from triple-A studios on our covers, it's equally satisfying to expose gamers to lesser-known titles worthy of the same love. Hopefully all five of the titles highlighted in issue 235 are no longer under the radar for gamers.

Satan, I Choose You!

At school, my friend Blake used to like Pokémon, but now he does not. I asked him why he doesn't like it anymore, and he said his dad said they are demons! The next time you visit Japan's Pokémon company, please ask them if that is true.

Truman Farnsworth
via email

Don't worry, Truman. We're pretty sure Nintendo's pocket monsters aren't demons. However, that would explain our sudden urge to drink blood every time we listen to the Pokémon theme song backwards...



Who Watches the Watch Dogs?

What is going on with Watch Dogs? It had a very strong E3 showing, but since then we haven't heard anything about it. Not even a release date. Like many, I am very interested in this game and just want a bit of news.

Travis Peterson
via email

You and us both. Unfortunately, development is starting to transition to next-gen hardware right now, and while publishers and developers happily used E3 to give the public a glimpse at some promising new games, no one is ready to talk about future consoles yet – or the games that might appear on them. We'll just have to remain patient, but when we do have new information, our readers will be the first to know about it.



A Friend Indeed

A college friend and I both have 360s, so I try to play with him as often as I can. The problem is that he's always telling me what games we should both buy, and gets really excited about playing them. I have bought Dead Island, Torchlight II, Resident Evil 6, and Borderlands 2 just this year, but when I try to play with him, he's always playing stupid FIFA with his other friends. It's gotten pretty obvious that he doesn't really mean any of the crap he says, and I'm wondering if I should even try to play with him anymore or just freaking delete him from my friends list. It sure would be cheaper to not have him as a "friend."

Nick Keeler
via email

It sounds like your pal is a real jerk, Nick. Luckily, you shouldn't have trouble finding enthusiastic communities devoted to those games. Our advice: Jump into some matchmaking, and have fun!

The Devil is in the Details

Why, after so many years of game development, billions of dollars spent, and thousands employed in the process of manufacturing games, does it take a simple magazine article to lay down 10 of the most important features in any game (Attention To Detail, issue 235)? Is it really that difficult for programmers and project managers to miss rules such as these? It's like an auto manufacturer neglecting to put in seat belts, windshield wipers, and headlights. Thank you for bringing simplicity and clarity to this topic.

Dan Harrell
West Sacramento, CA

I whole-heartedly agree with #7 (decent captions) in your Attention To Detail article. I'm of the belief there's an industry standard when it comes to in-game text: Make it white, as small as possible, and use the worst font you can find. I've played on several different televisions and it's all the same: unreadable and blurry. Just once, I'd like to load a game and be able to read the text.

John Ziegler
Kenner, LA

Short Answers to Readers' Burning Questions:

"Am I the only one who knows that Paper Mario: Sticker Star is going to be released on Origami Day?"

Yes.

"What if Sega got rid of every single Sonic character except for Sonic, Tails, Knuckles, Blaze, Metal Sonic, the little animals, and Dr. Robotnik? How would you react?"

Probably the same way we do now.

"I don't know who that sexy chick is at the top of my screen in Borderlands 2, but can you give her my number? She's a smokeshow."

What the hell is a smokeshow?

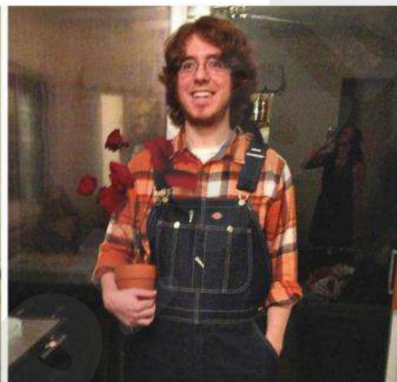
Worst News Tip of the Month:

"Dan cannot be trusted! So you should appoint Ben instead!"

Question of the Month:

If you had to work for a video game villain, who would you choose, and why?

gi spy



(Left) Tim's John McClane Halloween costume was pretty good, but some improvised help from RPGFan.com's John McCarroll made it great.

(Right) Nobody told Kyle it was a costume party, so he showed up in his regular weekend attire.

CANDID PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

GI SPY
continued on page 8

feedback 7

On Your Mind



Stealth vs. Guns Blazing Discussion **33%**

Under-The-Radar Games Excitement **27%**

"Why Wasn't [Insert Title] on Your Lost RPGs List?" **18%**

Why We Play Article Love **10%**

"Your RE 6 Score Was Too High, Stupid!" **8%**

"Your RE 6 Score Was Too Low, Stupid!" **4%**

Six Appeal



I have been a fan of the Resident Evil series from the days of the PS1. Obviously, I picked up RE 6 on release day, and you guys are spot-on with your review; the game rocks. My question is why other review sites gave it such a poor rating. What am I missing?

Anthony Muto
via email

I just wanted to thank you for giving Resident Evil 6 a decent review, because I noticed it's not faring too well with other critics. Normally I don't pay attention to what kind of reviews a game receives, but I get uneasy when I hear comments like, "Don't bother, I heard that game sucks." I admit that RE 6 isn't perfect, but it's much better than what the reviews say. I understand that I won't always agree with critics, but I'd hate to see a good game get passed by because of what somebody else said.

Tye De Yoe
via email

While we're glad you found our review informative, it's not more "correct" than anyone else's critique of the game. Even if you agree with our opinions, you shouldn't mistake them as universal truths – a mistake other readers made while berating our RE 6 review for being both too high and too low. Ultimately, everyone needs to accept the fact that opinions differ – until the day we craft a retort capable of setting trolls on fire just by reading it, that is. Speaking of...

Another Man's Treasure

I just wanted to say that your review of Medal of Honor: Warfighter was expected to be bad, based on the way your team raves over crappy Call of Duty – I wouldn't be surprised if you give Black Ops II a 10. Warfighter's beta was better than MW 3, let alone the full version of

Warfighter. I know, I know; in business, it's all about money and who pays you the most to promote their games. Thank God your little review of Warfighter isn't going to sway the diehard players of Warfighter, 'cos you know what? They already know how good it is and we love it!

Anthony DiBella
via email

Actually, we gave Black Ops II an 8.5. You see, when you're not a self-professed diehard fan of a series, you're capable of acknowledging a game's flaws – like Warfighter's abysmal AI and the laundry list of bugs the game shipped with. If you feel Warfighter's myriad other problems don't ruin the game, though, then we're happy for you.

Get Off My Lawn



You know, the gaming industry has gone downhill these past few years. The only games anyone cares about now are M-rated gore fests with big muscled army dudes and assassins. What happened to games that were unique and fun? Not gross with blood flying everywhere. And what's wrong with the pricing structure of games now? 60 dollars? Really? It wouldn't be a problem under normal circumstances, but most of the games aren't even complete! DLC, on-disc DLC, online passes, season passes, and all kinds of other crap mean you aren't getting a complete game. Why doesn't anyone do anything about it? And why does everyone only play the latest Assassin's Creed and Call of Duty? Is there nothing else on the market?

Brian Matei
via email

Kudos, Brian: You've expertly channeled every grumpy old man who's ever complained about change, while simultaneously ignoring all of the counterexamples that don't support your opinion. But remember, change is a good thing; if the world stopped turning, we'd all melt into big puddles of goo.

Quiet, Please!



In issue 235, we asked readers whether they prefer a stealthy approach to action games, or to go in guns blazing. By a margin of almost three-to-one, readers prefer stealth – at least until they get caught. Here are some responses.

Ten or fifteen years ago, I was firmly a member of the "guns blazing" team. But, as I've gotten older, I've slowly switched to stealth. I think my level of patience has increased with time. I also now see completing a level in stealth mode as more of a challenge.

Corey King

"Leeroy Jenkins!" Otherwise, why play video games? You can be cautious in real life. It's fun to be Leeroy sometimes!

Carlo Orozco

Given the choice between using stealth or being a berserker, I typically start with stealth. Then when my abysmal attempt fails, I just kill everyone. Or I die; that happens a lot, too.

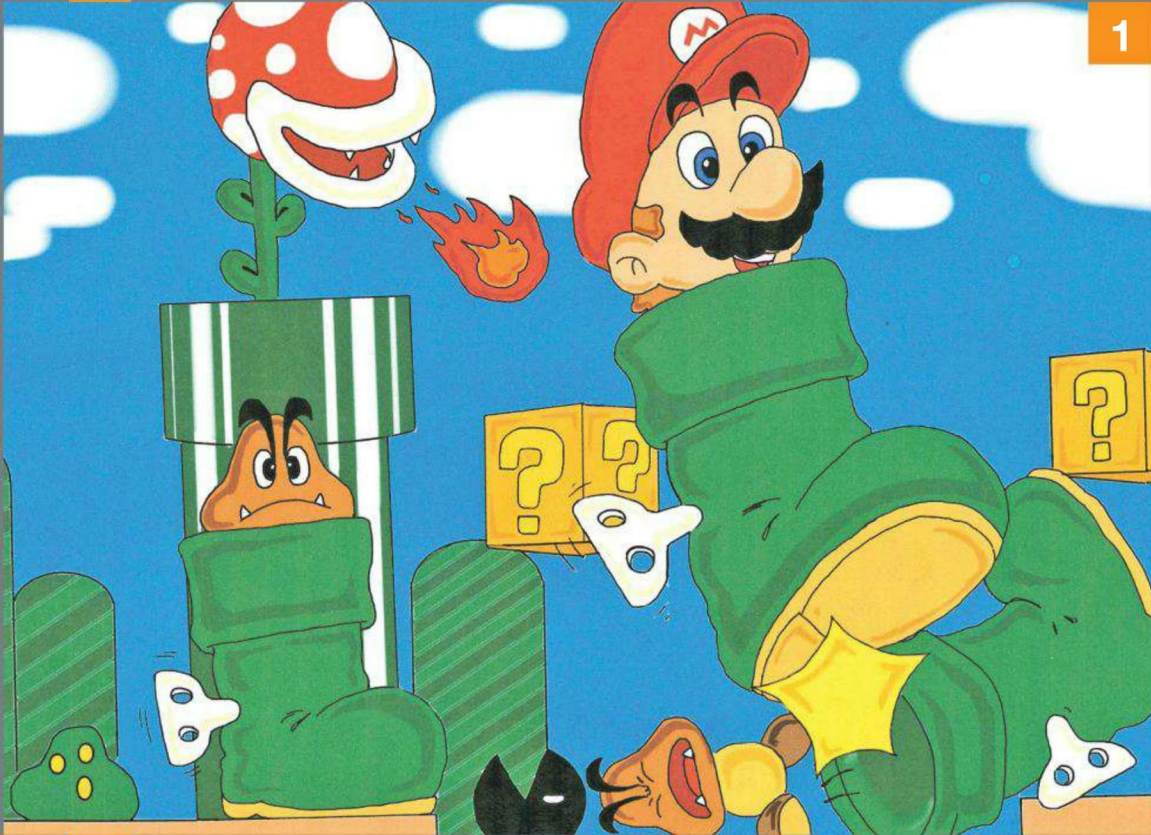
Brady Hollis

(Left) Jim "Snazzy Suit" Reilly caught up with Nintendo's Reggie Fils-Aime at the ESA's Nite to Unite fundraiser in San Francisco. **(Inset)** Jim also plied Valve's Gabe Newell for Half-Life 3 information. Tell us what he said, Jim!

(Right) Meanwhile, Andy partied all night with Apple's Greg Essig, IGN's Tal Blevins, Chillingo's Kaiser Hwang, Apple's Cory Lewis, and Gamefly's Ryh-Ming Poon.



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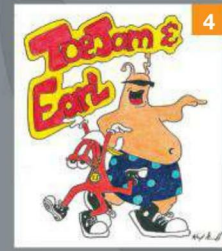
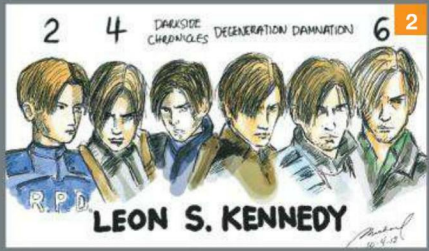


WINNER
1 David Metzger
We still don't understand why this power-up hasn't ever returned

2 Michael Perez
Leon isn't exactly the master of reinvention

3 Fernando Williams
Sony Santa Monica is really running low on gods for Kratos to murder

4 Alex Benarroche
At least Earl has the decency to wear some boxers



Corrections:
 In this year's Holiday Buying Guide, we listed Thinkgeek's Technomancer Electronic Wizard Hoodie as a great present for your geeky friends. It turns out it was all an elaborate prank. Thanks for ruining our Christmas, Thinkgeek!

» Submit your art for a chance to win our monthly prize. Please include your name and return address. Entries become the property of Game Informer and cannot be returned. Send to: Game Informer Reader Art Contest | 724 First Street North, 3rd Floor | Mpls, MN 55401



(Left) Andy and Jim ran into game industry stalwart Wim Stocks on the streets of San Francisco. Looking fit, Wim! **(Right)** Behold, Game Informer's talented new interns: O'Dell Harmon, Jordan LaPorte, and Mike Mahardy.

connect



NOTABLES

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The Empire

Disney Acquires Lucasfilm

by Matthew Kato

Star Wars: Episode VII Film Targeted for 2015

In a seismic move, the Walt Disney Company acquired Lucasfilm from founder George Lucas for \$4.05 billion in cash and stock. It now owns everything Star Wars – most importantly the films, merchandise, and licensing. This deal also includes video game division LucasArts, as well as other entities like Industrial Light & Magic and Skywalker Sound.

Concurrent with the sale, George Lucas is retiring, with current co-chairwoman Kathleen Kennedy assuming the role of Lucasfilm president. Despite Lucas' retirement, more Star Wars feature films are coming. Disney announced that Episode VII is being targeted for a 2015 release, and the company says it expects to put out a feature film for the series every two to three years. As for other Lucasfilm properties like Indiana Jones, Disney says it has no current plans.

While some Star Wars fans may rejoice

that Lucas is no longer directing the films and the franchise, he is maintaining a role as a creative consultant. In a video released on the official Star Wars YouTube channel discussing the announcement, Lucas revealed he has story treatments for Episodes VII, VIII, and IX. "I sort of moved that treasure trove of stories and various things to Kathy, and I have complete confidence that she's going to take them and make great movies," he said.

Kennedy says writers have assembled to discuss the stories, and calls Lucas her "Yoda" in the process. "The main thing is to protect these characters – make sure that they still continue to live in the way that [George Lucas] created them so that the universe of Star Wars continues to grow," she said.

As for video games division LucasArts, Walt Disney chairman and CEO Bob Iger laid out a new direction. "[We're] likely to focus more on social and mobile than we are on console," he said on a conference call. "We'll look opportunistically at consoles – most likely at licensing rather than publishing." Judging by these remarks, we don't expect a dramatic resurrection for LucasArts – a video game company that has seen turmoil in recent years. Two presidents have signed with and left the company since 2008, and the creative voices of Hayden Blackman (*The Force Unleashed*) and Clint Hocking (previously at Ubisoft) have also left.

Despite Iger's stated focus on non-console experiences, third parties will still be contracted to make games for the company. The internal LucasArts studio behind *Star Wars 1313*, a third-person title for current and possibly next-generation consoles that casts the player as a bounty hunter on Coruscant, said in a statement it was "business as usual" at the developer. A tech demo of the game was shown at E3 2012 to positive results.



The End of Indiana Jones?

The Star Wars franchise dominated the headlines of Disney's Lucasfilm acquisition, but what about Indiana Jones? The series does not appear to be a big part of the company's plans. Disney didn't mention Indiana Jones other than to note that financially it didn't assign any value to the franchise in the transaction due to some financial "encumbrances" inherent to Paramount's owning of the distribution rights to the past films.

As a video game property, Indiana Jones has only appeared in Lego games and the poorly reviewed *Indiana Jones and the Staff of Kings* for Wii this generation. Given that the franchise's future largely depends on star Harrison Ford and new movies – neither of which appear viable right now – it's hard to blame Disney for not putting a lot of stock in the brand.

Disney's other existing video game entity, Disney Interactive Media (formerly Disney Interactive Studios), is a shell of its former self, which used to boast internal studios such as Propaganda Games (*Turok*, *Pirates of the Caribbean: Armada of the Damned*) and Black Rock Studio (*Pure*, *Split Second*). The publisher continues to license its Marvel properties to other publishers like Activision, and still owns Junction Point Studios (*Epic Mickey*) and social games company Playdom.

We have to wait and see how Disney handles the Star Wars property, but if the company's stewardship of Marvel since its acquisition in 2009 is any indication, it should be in good

hands. The Marvel brand is strong, thanks particularly to the recent string of films leading up to and including this past summer's blockbuster *The Avengers*. Overall, Disney says it wants to expand the presence of the Star Wars brand internationally, and into areas beyond just toys. Star Wars integration into Disney theme parks was specifically mentioned at the time of the acquisition.

Disney's plans to grow the Star Wars franchise even further is exactly what George Lucas wants to happen. "I'm doing this so that the films will have a longer life," he said. "More fans and people can enjoy them in the future. It's a very big universe I've created, and there's a lot of stories sitting in there." ♦

LucasArts at a Crossroads

Disney has not outlined how Disney Interactive Media and LucasArts may combine or work together in the future, apart from a general stated desire to focus on mobile and social gaming. While this may sound like the death knell for core-focused console games from LucasArts in particular, Baird Equity Research senior research analyst Colin Sebastian thinks that the stronger retail and distribution ties of Disney, as well as the upcoming consoles, could provide a good opportunity for LucasArts. "A new console cycle gives another opportunity for game developers – especially with a game like *Star Wars*," he said. "Despite the mixed success that EA had on the MMO side, with new movies coming, with legitimately a lot of core gamers interested in that brand, I think it would not make sense for them to abandon the consoles."

LucasArts and Disney currently have these projects under way:



LucasArts

- *Star Wars 1313* [shown]
- Open-World RPG (In the fall of 2011, the company posted a jobs listing for this unnamed project. Could it be the return of *Knights of the Old Republic* or something else entirely?)
- Action-Adventure Game (via jobs listing)
- First-Person Shooter (via jobs listing)
- Aerial Combat Game (The jobs listing asks candidates for experience especially in "space-based shooters.")
- Online game – (Jobs listing wants experience with first-party Sony and Microsoft certification. Company also brags about a "new way of connected online gaming that is going to revolutionize the industry.")

Disney Interactive

- Assorted kid-centric Disney games

The Good

PS4 DEVELOPMENT GAINING STEAM

Citing multiple sources, VG24/7 says that developers have been receiving PlayStation 4 dev kits, with the final version expected some time next summer. Furthermore, U.S. developers have met with Sony, which is briefing them about the system, codenamed Orbis. The machine is said to have, among other features, a Blu-ray drive and a new user interface that lets you use the system's menus (like the PSN store) without having to quit out of your game. The system is expected to be announced right before E3, which is in mid-June.



The Bad

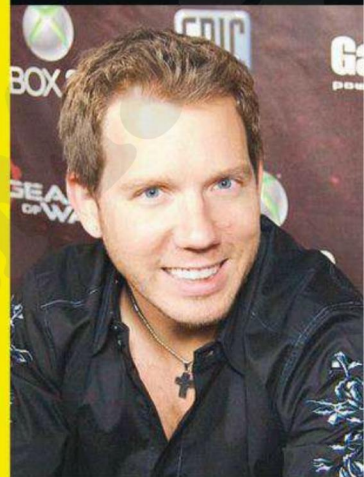
THQ'S RECENT FINANCIAL

earnings call is a parade of bad news. The company has delayed South Park: The Stick of Truth (now coming out in May), Metro: Last Light (shown), and Company of Heroes 2 (both to March). But that's just the tip of the iceberg. By the company's own account, Darksiders II didn't perform to expectations, and because of the delays, THQ says that it may need to cancel current projects, sell assets, and possibly pursue additional funding which "may or may not be available on financially attractive terms."



Quotable

"Hey, Capcom. Call me. We can fix Resident Evil. Together."



— Ex-Epic designer **Cliff Bleszinski** begins his search for a new job

The Ugly

SILICON KNIGHTS

has been ordered by a court to recall and destroy all unsold copies of its games using Epic's Unreal Engine 3, like Too Human (shown) and X-Men: Destiny, as well as remove and destroy Epic's technology from its game engines. But that's not all: Silicon Knights has also been ordered to pay an additional \$4.5 million to Epic in damages. Previously Silicon Knights lost its legal battle with Epic Games over the use of the engine. Feel free to send your own copies of Silicon's games back if you'd like to send them on to a better place. ♦





Wii U

Review

After over a year of anticipation, Nintendo launched the Wii U on November 18. We played a bunch of games and dug into all of the features to help you make the decision whether or not to put the new console on your holiday shopping list.

— *by Bryan Vore* —

The System

The Wii U has a low-key, minimalistic look reminiscent of the previous Wii system. The edges are rounded and the back end extends a little longer than its older brother, but it's very similar. It has two USB 2.0 slots in the front and two in the back to connect USB sticks or external hard drives for bonus storage. Using a USB LAN adapter (sold separately) is the only way to get a wired Internet connection, as the system doesn't have an Ethernet port. Wi-Fi comes standard.

The front-loading disc drive has a small, white LED that lights up when a disc is inside. It's frivolous, but I'm one of those people who always hits the eject button before I'm about to put a disc in just to be sure. This puts that neurotic impulse to rest once and for all.

Extra Storage

Nintendo doesn't recommend USB sticks for storing games and data, and decided that SD cards can't be used at all outside of Mii storage and original Wii data. External hard drives are supported up to 2TB, and Nintendo suggests devices with a separate charging cable. The entire drive must be formatted to work on the Wii U exclusively.

Audio/Video

The most drastic leap forward from the Wii to the Wii U is the high-definition graphics. The HDMI port supports up to 1080p resolution and surround sound. With no optical port, users have to run an HDMI cable from the Wii U to a compatible receiver and from there to the TV if they want full high definition and surround sound. Otherwise, you can run analog stereo sound out of the standard A/V multi out. Just because the system supports surround sound doesn't mean developers have to fully use it, however. Nintendo only pumps stereo sound out of the two front speakers in *New Super Mario Bros. U* instead of going full surround. Even in games that support 5.1, like *Ninja Gaiden 3: Razor's Edge*, you may have to go into the settings to turn it on. Don't count on surround being fully implemented in Wii U games, and always double check the settings before jumping into them for the first time.

If you're replacing an old Wii, most of the old equipment and cords are compatible. The sensor bar, AV cables (component and composite), Wii LAN adapter, and nearly all the controllers work just fine (syncing Wii remotes is easier than ever). All you have to swap out is the power cable and the HDMI cable (included in the box) if your TV supports it. Kudos to Nintendo for not making us buy all new remotes and accessories.

The GamePad

The real razzle-dazzle of the Wii U comes from the new GamePad. This device comes with all of the standard buttons you'd see on a 360 or PS3 controller, but its stand-out feature is the 6.2-inch screen. The resolution is nice, though no one will confuse it for a retina display iPad. This touchscreen works just like the 3DS, which means it can't sense more than one finger at a time, but you can touch it with anything as opposed to typical phone and tablet capacitive screens that need a signal from your body.

A front-facing camera and microphone facilitate video chat, and you can take pictures of your face to display on your TV. The photo/video image quality isn't going to win any awards, but it does the job. The accelerometer and gyroscope handle motion control, which performs smoothly in launch titles like Nintendo Land. Near Field Communication functionality is built in, but implementation in games is limited at this point.

Despite its relatively large size, the GamePad still feels light at 1.1 lbs. The rechargeable battery is only good for a few hours, but you can maximize that time by going into the controller settings and dimming the screen brightness. Charging via a cable to the main console is a no-go. You have to run a separate power cord from the GamePad to a wall outlet or use the charging dock included with the deluxe console. I'd gladly take a heavier controller for more battery life.

The GamePad screen functions in a variety of ways. Sometimes it offers a look at your inventory or a map, or provides touch control of the action occurring on the TV screen. Other times it simply duplicates the on-screen action, allowing you to ignore the TV altogether. Some games, like New Super Mario Bros. U, can be played entirely on the small screen without having to turn on the TV at all. You can play these titles on the GamePad while a friend or family member watches TV programming if you like (be sure to plug in some headphones to the GamePad). Taking advantage of the controller's 20-25 foot range, I was able to take it around the house. The signal gets choppy once you're pushing the range, and it displays an error message once you've moved past it. I'd love a guaranteed signal throughout the whole house, but having a semi-portable home console is amazing enough for now.

Developers have to choose between making innovative use of the second screen during gameplay or scaling back so the game can operate via remote play on the small screen. Nintendo Land is a great example of the all the crazy things the new GamePad can do, but most of the content doesn't work without the TV and small screen working in tandem.

The Big Update

To experience all the Wii U has to offer, you have to download a day-one update. This beast can take over an hour to download and install on a broadband connection. After the initial batch of systems, Nintendo will probably include the update on future Wii U shipments, so this issue will hopefully disappear in the post-holiday timeframe.



FINAL GRADE:
B-

We love the Wii U's HD visuals and surround sound, and the GamePad opens up new possibilities with the extra screen. Nintendo launched with two solid first-party games and finally gave fans a wide array of third-party titles that were never coming to the old Wii. The bothersome update installation, short GamePad battery life, and long loads bring things down, but the not-quite-there online structure is the biggest letdown. Graphically, we won't know what the Wii U is capable of until developers have had more time with the system. As of now, Nintendo has caught up visually to 360 and PS3, but has yet to prove it can surpass them.

Main Menu

The Mii Plaza serves as the main hub. A crowd of user Mii's streams down from the top of the screen and clusters around various apps to offer commentary. The second screen displays a grid of boxes similar to the menus of the 3DS and Wii.

As of press time, launching games and apps results in lengthy load times. If you're trying to do several tasks in quick succession it gets annoying. At least you can run some apps during a paused game by hitting the home button. Nintendo is aware of the issue and claims it is "exploring ways to enhance features for consumers' overall experience."

Online

The Miiverse is the central area for all communication between players. Message boards exist for each game, where players can comment on each other's posts and "yeah" them (similar to Facebook "likes"). In the activity feed you can view all posts from people on your friends list and people you "follow" similarly to Twitter.

The days of entering a string of impossible-to-remember numbers to lock in Wii friends are over. To add a person to your friends list, simply enter in their Nintendo Network ID (which is basically their screen name). Then other person has to enter yours and, bam, you are now friends! It's not as elegant as simply saying yes to a friend request on Xbox Live or PSN, but

it's better than friend codes. Unfortunately, your ID is tied to a single console, so if it's stolen or breaks you lose all of your digitally purchased content and saves.

We messed around with FIFA 13's online multiplayer, and both players have to be in the game itself and logged into EA's Origin servers to receive game invites. Voice chat is supported on a game-by-game basis, and you can't use the GamePad mic and speakers. You have to buy a headset like the officially licensed model from Turtle Beach. The lack of universal chat and game invites is a major bummer, and without a packed-in headset there are going to be a lot of silent multiplayer matches.

Nintendo eShop

The new eShop looks sleek and clean, but if a game doesn't appear on the front page it's hard to find by just browsing. The store also lacks WiiWare and Virtual Console games. It contains full retail game downloads, download-only games (think Xbox Live Arcade), and preview looks at retail-only titles and 3DS games. Watching

trailers for games and browsing screenshots is much more functional and streamlined than on the Wii. Nintendo foolishly failed to incorporate the Wii Shop into the eShop. You can still get there using the separate Wii app, though it's a pain.

Playing Old Wii Games

Almost all of the games from the Wii are promised to work on the new Wii U. Instead of firing up a Wii game from in the normal Wii U menu, players have to head into an emulation of the original Wii menu. If you've transferred content from your old system, it appears here. Gamers expecting mega uprezzed versions of Wii classics will be disappointed, but the visuals are slightly cleaner than before when the signal is run through a digital HDMI connection instead of analog component cables. The GamePad is not compatible with original Wii content. This is understandable since the GamePad would be an awkward substitute for the Wii remote, but it sucks that you can't play Virtual Console or WiiWare games on the small GamePad screen. Nintendo claims it's working on getting Virtual Console titles playable on the small screen, but it's unclear how or when this will happen. ♦

To learn more about other Wii U features like parental controls, the delayed TVii app, the web browser, and more, head to gameinformer.com/mag



What's in the Box?

Basic - \$299.99

- 8 GB internal memory for storage (3 GB usable)
- Wii U console (white)
- Wii U GamePad (white)
- Wii U AC adapter
- Wii U GamePad AC adapter
- HDMI cable
- Sensor bar

Deluxe - \$349.99

- Nintendo Land game
- 32 GB internal memory for storage (25 GB usable)
- Wii U console (black)
- Wii U GamePad (black)
- Wii U AC adapter
- Wii U GamePad AC adapter
- HDMI cable
- Sensor bar
- Wii U GamePad cradle
- Wii U GamePad stand
- Wii U console stand
- 2-year digital promotion



Something

in the Water

How Crystal Dynamics gave many of today's top game creators their start

by Matt Helgeson

Today, many gamers think of Crystal Dynamics as the studio that pulled Tomb Raider back from the brink of irrelevance. Its upcoming reboot of the series is one of 2013's most anticipated titles. Those with a few more years under their belts recall the company's glory days in the '90s, when it was known for the then-edgy platform star Gex and as the publisher of Silicon Knights' early Legacy of Kain games.

Many people may not know it, but Crystal Dynamics was one of the greatest incubators of talent in the history of video games. Since its inception, several ex-Crystal employees have risen to positions of influence throughout the industry, helping craft multimillion selling and critically acclaimed franchises along the way. Dead Space, Uncharted, World of Warcraft, and Grand Theft Auto all had influential designers and producers on their credits list with Crystal Dynamics backgrounds.

Whether by chance or design, Crystal Dynamics brought together an incredibly talented group of game developers, many of whom formed friendships and working relationships that endure to this day.

A NEW BREED

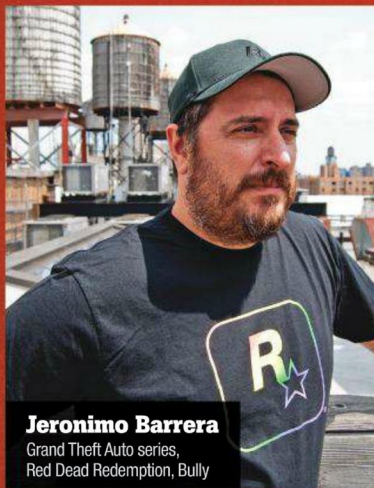
“It’s bizarre...there was something in the water, I guess,” **Amy Hennig** says while recounting a list of the people she worked with during her stint at Crystal Dynamics. Hennig, now creative director at Naughty Dog, is revered as one of the industry’s best writers for her work on the Uncharted series. However, she’s worn nearly every hat imaginable in the game industry, including artist, animator, producer, and designer.

Hennig was a relative industry veteran when she arrived at Crystal Dynamics in 1995, already having worked at Electronic Arts on games like Michael Jordan’s Chaos in the Windy City as an artist and designer. Positive reports by some ex-workmates eventually lured her to Crystal, which had been founded by Judy Lang, Madaline Canepa, and Dave Morse (who’d previously helped create Amiga).

She wasn’t alone. Crystal was quickly developing a reputation as a place where young talent could go to work on new IP – in an environment that was a precursor to the freewheeling culture of the upcoming dot-com boom. Less corporate than more established Bay Area companies like Sega and Electronic Arts, the company provided less-than-seasoned development talent a way in to the industry.



Amy Hennig
Legacy of Kain series,
Uncharted Series



Jeronimo Barrera
Grand Theft Auto series,
Red Dead Redemption, Bully

Jeronimo Barrera who has overseen blockbuster games like Grand Theft Auto IV and Red Dead Redemption as Rockstar’s VP of product development, was one of the young developers who got a chance to shine at Crystal. “They took a lot of chances on people,” Barrera says. “There wasn’t necessarily the strongest game development community in those days. Now, there’s a whole industry of kids coming out of schools with degrees and things for games. This was a bit more ad-hoc. They took a chance on me and I was in my early 20s. I think my hair was dyed green at the time – it was a real mess. But I was passionate about what I did. I remember before there was a word called ‘crunch.’ I looked forward to working overnight and being surrounded by these really passionate people. Crystal, as a company, really supported that kind of environment.”

Evan Wells, now co-president of Naughty Dog, had been introduced to some Crystal employees through a temporary job at ToeJam & Earl developer JVP. He joined the company for a summer job working on the original Gex. “They were trying to ship it in time for me to get to school in September,” Wells remembers. “It was supposed to be a summer gig, but summer was ending and the game was not ready and it was going to slip. It did, and they wanted me to stay on because I was working on so many levels. Well, I said, ‘I’m a year from graduating; I have to go back to school.’ I was also on the gymnastics team at the same time. We had a shot at winning the championship; I couldn’t just drop out on them. So I continued to work through my senior year.”

Others came from a variety of backgrounds. **Glen Schofield**, now head of Sledgehammer Games at Activision and the creator of the Dead Space franchise, was more experienced. “I left Capcom because we had spent two years trying to make an engine,” he says. “We had all the art built and everyone was learning 3D. I was getting frustrated that we just couldn’t build an engine. I was only a senior art director at Capcom and went on to try to be a producer, but I was running into technical difficulties. I go up to Crystal for an interview, and I see the exact opposite. They [had] the art but they couldn’t get it together. But I saw

Crystal Dynamics Gameography



1993

Crash n’ Burn (3DO)
GI Score: N/A

Cyber Clash (3DO)
GI Score: N/A



1994

Gex (3DO, Saturn, PSone, PC)
GI Score: 9.25

Off-World Interceptor (3DO)
GI Score: N/A

The Horde (3DO, Saturn, SNES, PC)
GI Score: N/A

Total Eclipse (3DO)
GI Score: 7



1995

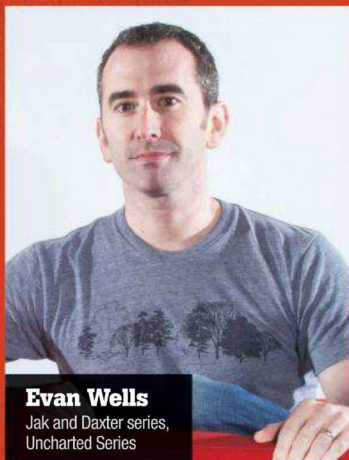
Solar Eclipse (Saturn)
GI Score: 8.5

this beautiful engine, and I said, 'Damn.' The art and the design, that's my forte, so I was like, "This is it."

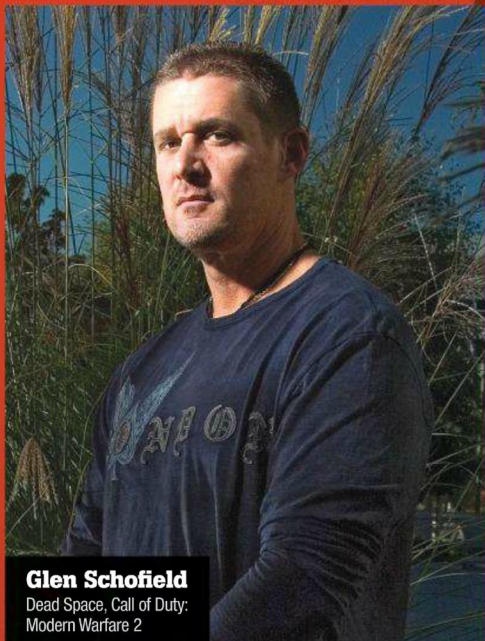
Noah Hughes, who still works at Crystal, is a testament to how the company's open structure made it easy for talent to rise through the ranks. Today, Hughes is the creative director overseeing the high-stakes Tomb Raider reboot. In 1993, he was just a kid in the test department.

"It started as a summer job for me," Hughes says. "I started as a film student at San Francisco State. My brother worked at Crystal; he was a programmer. He got me a job. I got in the door as a tester, but I don't think I tested much more than a day or two before I was taking over a lot of the video production, since I had the passion and experience from the film background. So I came in through the classic entry point, but I instantly started weaseling my way into any production role that I could get into."

Crystal quickly became a hotbed of game talent. Other notables include Sledgehammer creative director Bret Robbins, Naughty Dog's The Last of Us lead Bruce Straley, and World of Warcraft's lead content designer Cory Stockton.



Evan Wells
Jak and Daxter series,
Uncharted Series



Glen Schofield
Dead Space, Call of Duty:
Modern Warfare 2



Noah Hughes
Tomb Raider series

1996

3D Baseball (Saturn, PSone)
GI Score: N/A

Blazing Dragons (Saturn, PSone)
GI Score: N/A

Blood Omen: Legacy of Kain
(PSone, PC)
GI Score: 8.75



Pandemonium (Saturn, PSone)
GI Score: 6

**Slam 'N Jam '96 featuring Magic
and Kareem** (Saturn, PSone)
GI Score: N/A



1997

Pandemonium 2 (PSone, PC)
GI Score: N/A



1998

Gex: Enter the Gecko (PSone, N64)
GI Score: 9

The Unholy War (PSone)
GI Score: N/A

SWEET FREEDOM

Developers found that Crystal allowed for the free exchange of ideas and was structured to encourage collaboration. This started with the building itself.

"It was just a huge, open-plan atrium with open cubicles that were all built in," Hennig says. "It was really neat; it was not the typical type of office. You could stand up and see everybody. There were some offices around the outside, but even those were glass-walled. It was very open and collaborative – everybody could see and hear what everybody else was doing.

Unlike their more established competition, Crystal operated with a relatively blank slate. With few commercially established franchises to lean on, the company (which was operating as both a publisher and developer at the time) had to seek out new IP.

"It felt like a studio that wanted to make really good games but wasn't corporate yet," Schofield says. "There was this free and easy spirit. Any idea could get into the game. If you think about the games we were making, they were all pretty new IPs. Being not corporate, I can remember doing really unorthodox things like, if we needed another level done, asking somebody if they would put in some overtime and saying, 'I'll give you \$5,000 extra.' One guy really kicked ass and, at the end of the game, we bought him an electric guitar and lessons. Another woman – she was just this lead engineer on our team who was really fantastic – we got her a trip to Japan."

This approach paid off, as Crystal accrued one of the era's most diverse game catalogs. From the vehicular combat of *Off-Road Interceptor* to the comedic pop culture-spoofing hijinks of *Gex*, no genre was off limits at Crystal. It also helped craft externally developed projects from Silicon Knights and Toys for Bob. Amy Hennig, in particular, worked extensively on the *Legacy of Kain* games.

Not all the partnerships would end well; Silicon Knights eventually sued Crystal Dynamics over the rights to the *Legacy of Kain* franchise, a legal battle that Crystal won. Jeronimo Barrera recalls a moment that may have foretold things to come: "You know who made a big impression on me

at the time? [Silicon Knights founder] Denis Dyack. I remember, one time, something was going on and Denis was unhappy. There was screaming, the cops showed up, and it was all over the place. [Laughs] But, then, I thought, 'That's cool, that's rock 'n' roll, and that's why I'm in this industry.' I never looked at it as unprofessional, I always looked at like, 'Yeah, someone's got some strong opinions about how things should be done and that's that.'"

Within Crystal, teamwork was encouraged with a structure that gave smaller groups of people greater control over their part of a game.

"We started putting levels together by 'pods,'" Schofield says. "We get a group of people that work together – designers, artists, animators – they build the level. They are empowered to make a lot of the level themselves. We still do things in pods [at Sledgehammer] – of course, they are a hell of a lot bigger."

With an open office design and an atmosphere of creativity, the designers would riff with each other, brainstorming ideas that were unique but not necessarily commercial. Evan Wells recalls being impressed by Barrera's outside-the-box ideas, including a never-made valet parking attendant puzzle game. Barrera, for his part, remembers a then-rejected idea that may have been more viable than he thought at the time. "There was an idea we had where you played a cat burglar," he says. "It was a 3D, platforming, run-and-hide game. It didn't go anywhere. It was like, 'Well, who'd want to play a burglar?'" Then Sly Cooper eventually came out and was along those lines."

The other secret to Crystal's success? Lunch. Many former Crystal staffers recall the free, catered lunches the company brought in for its employees, an extravagance that wouldn't be common practice until the tech industry boom later in the decade. The company's approach came at a price, which meant that Crystal Dynamics was frequently strapped for cash. "There were times when they would post how much money we had left on the door, like 'A couple million left!'" Schofield recalls. "But we always managed to get the game out on time."



1999

Akuji the Heartless (PSone)

GI Score: 7

Legacy of Kain: Soul Reaver

(PSone, PC, DC)

GI Score: 8.75



2000

102 Dalmations: Puppies to the Rescue (PSone, PC, DC)

GI Score: 6.75

Walt Disney World: Magical

Racing Tour (DC)

GI Score: N/A



2001

Legacy of Kain: Soul Reaver 2

(PS2, PC)

GI Score: 8.75

Mad Dash Racing (Xbox)

GI Score: 6



2002

Blood Omen 2 (PS2, Xbox, PC, GC)

GI Score: 8

THE CUTTING EDGE

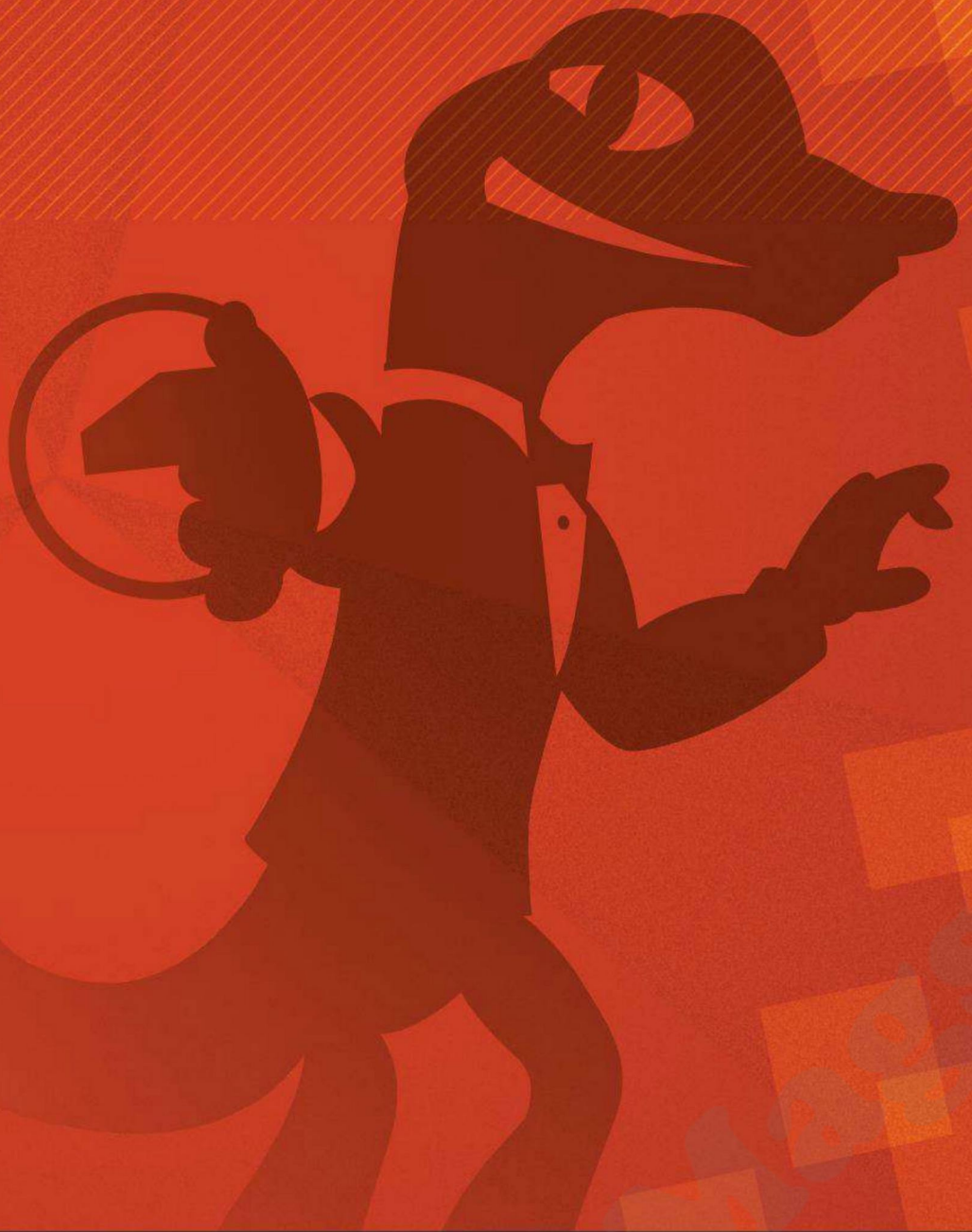
Free lunches are a nice perk, but developers don't put in 80-hour weeks for months on end for sandwiches. Crystal Dynamics was formed during a period of disruption in the game industry. For the talent that became the backbone of the studio, working at Crystal offered a chance to work on the latest and greatest technology.

"I think an important backdrop to it is the feeling in the industry at the time that frontiers were pretty ripe," Hughes says. "3D gaming as a concept was really just emerging. In that first year, it was about full-motion video. But most of the important technology was just taking games from 2D to 3D. That was an exciting time. You had this nexus of small developer excitement around, 'What can we do with these new frontiers?' I think Crystal Dynamics was one of those focal points."

The company was an early adopter of the 3DO, an expensive system that featured an optical disc drive. Crystal jumped into 3DO development with both feet, creating *Gex*, *The Horde*, *Total Eclipse*, and *Off-World Interceptor* for the system. However, the 3DO's extravagant \$599 price tag (which would be nearly \$1,000 today when adjusted for inflation) meant that it quickly sank in the marketplace.

When the 3DO tanked, Crystal became an early Western developer for Sony's PlayStation thanks to Mark Cerny, the most well-known of the early Crystal gang at the time. Cerny, who created the classic arcade game *Marble Madness* for Atari while still a teen, had strong ties to Japan after moving there to work for Sega on *Sonic the Hedgehog 2*. Cerny's connections gave Crystal a leg up on its fellow American developers.

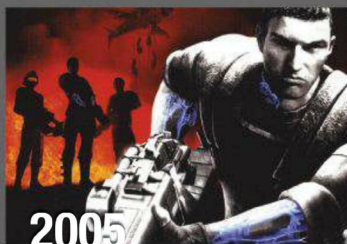
"[Mark] got Crystal the very first PlayStation development kit," Wells remembers. "We were able to port *Total Eclipse* to the PSone. It was the very first approved game that Sony Computer Entertainment America ever gold mastered. It was an honor that Crystal held due to Mark Cerny's relationship with Sony in Japan."



2003

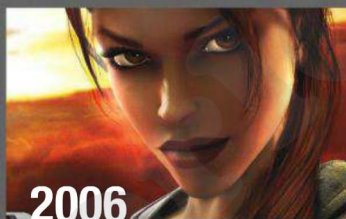
Legacy of Kain: Defiance
(PS2, Xbox, PC)
GI Score: 7.75

Whiplash (Xbox, PS2)
GI Score: N/A



2005

Project: Snowblind (PS2, Xbox, PC)
GI Score: 8



2006

Tomb Raider: Legend
(PS2, Xbox, 360, GC)
GI Score: 8.75



2007

Tomb Raider: Anniversary
(PS2, 360, Wii)
GI Score: 8.5

LASTING LESSONS

In many ways, Crystal was a product of the times. With a young staff eager to explore new technology and management that allowed them the freedom to do so, it's not surprising that many of the people who cut their teeth at the company have gone on to become some of the most respected and successful creators in the industry. Everyone we interviewed expressed affection for their days at Crystal Dynamics, and in the years since, most have continued to work with alumni.

"Crystal was sort of ahead of their time in a lot of ways – similar to the mentality at Rockstar," says Barrera, who's been a core member of the Rockstar team since its early days. "They were looking at the medium as something serious; something that could compete against television, movies, and books.... It's a lot of the foundations of how I do things today. Even as simple as floor plans, having the open space and having everybody mixed together in little groups. [I learned] the process of really thinking through your ideas and presenting those ideas."

Glen Schofield built his career off the relationships he formed at Crystal Dynamics. Many of the key members of his teams at Visceral Games and Sledgehammer Games are colleagues he met there. When he initially left Crystal, then at a low ebb before it was handed the reins to Tomb Raider by parent company Eidos, he took 20 people with him. Many of them also made the jump to Sledgehammer, including Jason Bell and Bret Robbins.

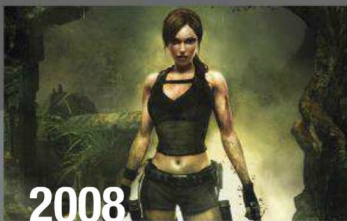
Amy Hennig stayed on until 2003. Like many alumni, the next chapter in her career was opened up through an old Crystal connection.

"Evan [Wells] called me in 2003," she says. "We'd run into each other at trade shows and stuff like that. He called out of the blue in the

spring of 2003 and said, 'Do you want to join us?' I was right in the middle of working on Legacy of Kane: Defiance. I said, 'Well I have a game to finish first, you know, it'd be lousy of me [to leave].' But he just said, 'Well, next time you're in L.A., come see the company and meet the team.' He knew at that point that [Naughty Dog founders] Jason Rubin and Andy Gavin were phasing themselves out and handing the reins over. He was looking for people that he could trust. It was really flattering that he thought of me to come in and be the game director on Jak 3."

For Noah Hughes, Crystal Dynamics is still home. As one of the few employees who has been there for most of the company's history (he left for three years in the late '90s before returning), he has seen the studio's ups and downs. Despite the drastic changes in management, ownership, and technology that occurred through the years, the spirit of those early days remains for Hughes.

"If I look at it from a personal perspective, I loved being here, and I came back after I left," Hughes says. "What it really comes down to is this: I don't make games for a paycheck. I need to get a paycheck while I make games, because I have to pay the bills, but I love making games. It's my life's ambition to create entertainment, and video games are my favorite form of entertainment. For me, to work with enough people that feel that way about it is really the key. You get big enough, diluted enough, jaded enough, and it becomes about other things. What Crystal tends to hold on to is this sense that it's this group of people that need each other to make awesome games and want to do so more than anything else.... Somehow, with Crystal, and it fluctuates – we've gone through tough periods – but it manages to have that feeling for me." ♦



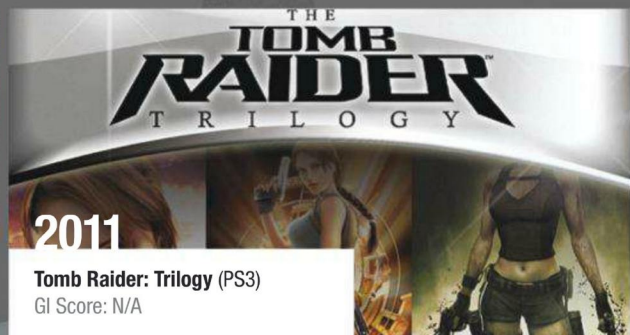
2008

Tomb Raider: Underworld
(PS3, 360, Wii)
GI Score: 8.75



2010

Lara Croft and the Guardian of Light (PS3, 360, Wii)
GI Score: 9



2011

Tomb Raider: Trilogy (PS3)
GI Score: N/A

The Crystal Gang

Crystal Dynamics alumni have risen to great heights in video games, and are now responsible for guiding some of the biggest companies and franchises in the industry. This is a partial list of the notable talent that has passed through its doors.

SLEDGEHAMMER GAMES

Glen Schofield

GM/CEO of Sledgehammer Games – Produced Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3. Former general manager of Visceral Games and executive producer of Dead Space

Bret Robbins

Creative director, Sledgehammer Games – Worked as creative director on Dead Space at Visceral Games

Chris Stone

Animation director, Sledgehammer Games – Worked at EA as animation lead on Dead Space, The Godfather, and the Lord of the Rings games

Marc David

Currently in **tool and programming at Sledgehammer** – Programmer on Legacy of Kain: Soul Reaver and many EA titles, like From Russia With Love and Dead Space

Jason Bell

Project lead engineer, Sledgehammer Games – Bell worked on the Soul Reaver and Tomb Raider franchises at Crystal Dynamics

NAUGHTY DOG

Amy Hennig

Creative director, Naughty Dog – Lead writer for Uncharted series

Bruce Straley

Game director, Naughty Dog – Currently working on The Last of Us

Richard Lemarchand

Former lead designer, Naughty Dog – Recently left the company for a teaching position at USC's prestigious game program

Stephen White

Co-lead tools and engine programmer, Sucker Punch – Former co-president, Naughty Dog

OTHER STUDIOS

Caroline Esmurdoc

Vice president at online animation school Animation Mentor – Former executive producer, general manager, and COO of Double Fine Productions

Steve Papoutsis

VP/GM and executive producer at Visceral Games and Electronic Arts – working on Dead Space franchise. Former audio/visual lead and producer at Crystal Dynamics

Jerónimo Barrera

Vice president of product development, Rockstar Games – Has played major roles in all of Rockstar's games

Mark Cerny

CEO of Cerny Games – Cerny is one of the most respected consultants in the industry, and has contributed design work to series like Uncharted, Infamous, Resistance, and Ratchet & Clank. Rumored to be assisting Sony with PlayStation 4 development

Lyle Hall

General manager, Heavy Iron Studios

Eric Lindstrom

Longtime creative director at Crystal Dynamics. Now working in the **social and mobile space with LudusLabs**

Strauss Zelnick

Chairman and CEO, Take Two Interactive – Former president and CEO of Crystal Dynamics

Cory Stockton

Lead content designer for World of Warcraft, Activision Blizzard – Stockton is one of the guiding forces and most public faces of the popular MMO

Sam Player

Executive producer, Electronic Arts – Player works largely in developer relations. Recent credits include Mass Effect 3 and FIFA 12

Steve Groll

Worked in marketing and publicity at Crystal Dynamics, now works in **product evaluation and submission at Sony Computer Entertainment**

Rob Dyer

Head of partner publishing, Zynga – Dyer was president of Crystal and took over as president of Eidos when it acquired the studio. Dyer has also served as SCEA's senior vice president of publisher relations

John Kavanagh

President, Paramount Digital Entertainment – The former Eidos/Ion Storm vet served as president of Crystal Dynamics

Scott Krotz

A Crystal veteran that's stayed with the company, Krotz is currently the **lead programmer** on Tomb Raider



The Flood of Free to Play

Video games are expensive. They always have been, but if the future of online gaming is any indication, they may not always be. Free to play is not a new theory, but it is one that has begun to rapidly gain popularity. Success stories like League of Legends and Wargaming.net are causing developers to take notice and ask themselves how much they should be charging for their games, if anything at all. Even games that were formerly full retail releases, like Team Fortress 2 and Star Wars: The Old Republic, are moving over to the free-to-play model.

It's a simple idea: let everyone play your game free of charge to build a playerbase, and then let the players who want to spend money on the game spend it. These games all offer paid options to either customize your character or speed up the leveling process.

Just because a game is free, however, doesn't mean it is automatically worthy of your most valuable asset: time. These are some of the games that we believe are worth your while, or will be when they launch in the near future.

by Kyle Hilliard

STRATEGY

The lineages of strategy games like **Command & Conquer**, **DOTA**, and **Starcraft** are thriving in the world of free to play. If you want to use your brain more than your twitch skills to destroy the competition, these are the games worth looking at.

Command & Conquer

commandandconquer.com/free

- Built using the Battlefield 3 engine for impressive destruction physics
- Developed by an offshoot studio of BioWare, creators of Mass Effect and Star Wars: The Old Republic
- Will include single-player options for the player that prefers not to mingle



League of Legends

leagueoflegends.com

- Huge, passionate community with lots of help for newbies
- Unbelievably large roster of characters to master
- Community tools keep jerks under control

End of Nations

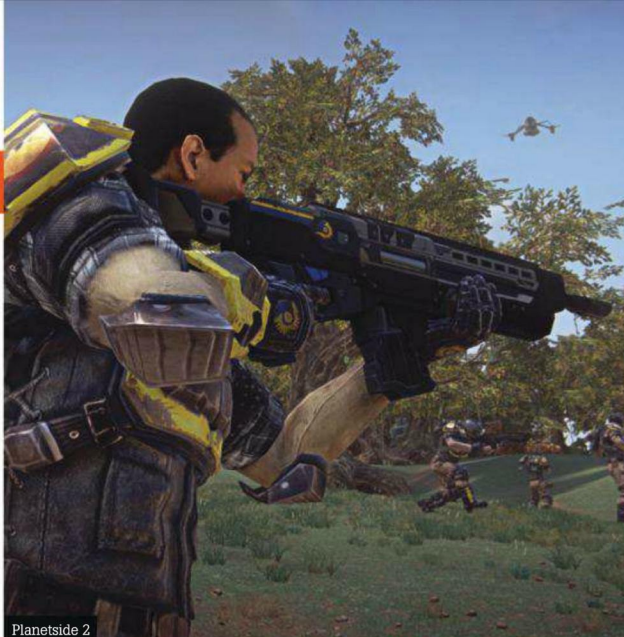
endofnations.com

- Biggest RTS-style battles to date
- Co-op and team PvP support, not 1v1 focus of other RTSes
- Customizable army lets you take on any role

Smite

smitegame.com

- Third-person perspective brings visceral action to MOBA genre
- Play as different gods from real-world religions
- Designed to appeal to both MOBA veterans and newcomers



Planetside 2



Tribes: Ascend

KEY: * Massively Multiplayer Online, 🎮 Available on console, ✔ Available to play now

SHOOTER

Shooters are as popular in the world of online free-to-play games as they are in the world of retail. If you pick up games like **Halo**, **Call of Duty**, **Gears of War**, and **Battlefield** every year, you might want to look at these shooters.

Firefall *

firefallthegame.com

- Dynamic co-op MMO content with live alien invasion
- Deep character progression and customization
- E-sports style PvP (see *Massive*, p.35)

Battlefield Heroes ✔

battlefieldheroes.com

- Huge open battlefields
- Wide array of vehicles
- Classic maps vetted by years of playtesting

Tribes: Ascend ✔

tribesascend.com

- Open levels and vehicles encourage diverse tactics
- Unparalleled speed and mobility
- Jetpacks

Planetside 2 *

planetside2.com

- Persistent world means every battle counts
- Class-based combat allows tactical diversity
- Sci-fi vehicles bring explosive power

Team Fortress 2 ✔

teamfortress.com

- Nine distinct player classes
- Excellent balance encourages teamwork
- Hats

Warface

warface.com

- Crysis tech and studio have impressive credibility
- Master a new arcade-like co-op level every day
- In-mission seamless weapon customization

Hawken ✔

playhawken.com

- Brings back explosive mech combat
- Highly customizable mechs, from the weapons and defensive items they carry to their hardware make-up
- Detailed cockpits, excellent presentation drives immersion (read our full preview on p.74)

Dust 514 * 🎮

dust514.com

- Takes place alongside Eve Online in rich player-driven universe
- PlayStation 3 exclusive
- Massive battlefields incorporate everything up to and including orbital bombardment

World of Tanks ✔

wargaming.net

- E-sports style of balanced PvP matches, but with tanks
- Immense roster of real-world tanks
- Future integration with World of Warplanes and Battleships

RPG

World of Warcraft still commands a huge audience, but the competition is creeping in. Even if you prefer your RPGs to be of the single-player variety like **The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim**, **Diablo III**, or **Kingdoms of Amalur: Reckoning**, you may want to give some of these a shot.

DC Universe Online * 🎮 ✔

dcuniverseonline.com

- Interact with iconic DC characters and locations
- Action-packed combat uses physics to empower superheroes
- Full MMORPG on PlayStation 3 and PC

Marvel Heroes *

marvelheroes.com

- Designed by one of the lead designers of Diablo and Diablo II
- Play as your favorite Marvel heroes in this hack-and-slash action RPG
- Story by the famed Marvel author Brian Michael Bendis (read our full preview on p. 68)

Happy Wars 🎮 ✔

happywars.net

- Third-person beat 'em up for the Xbox 360 with lots of player customization
- Diverse battle arenas send you to places like the ocean floor
- Large scale battles, 15-on-15 player matches

Lord of the Rings Online *

lotro.com

- Jump into the world of The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings trilogy, interacting with notable characters
- Purchase and decorate your own property in Middle-earth
- Choose among nine different classes, seven vocations, and 10 jobs

Star Wars: The Old Republic ✔

swtor.com

- BioWare-quality personal storylines
- Interesting, well-written NPC companion characters
- Taps into the rich fictional back-drop of the Star Wars universe

Neverwinter *

playneverwinter.com

- Adapts Dungeons & Dragons tabletop rules into a strong action-focused experience
- Craft your own content for others to play in The Foundry
- Quick cooldowns on magic attacks mean fast combat and explosive encounters

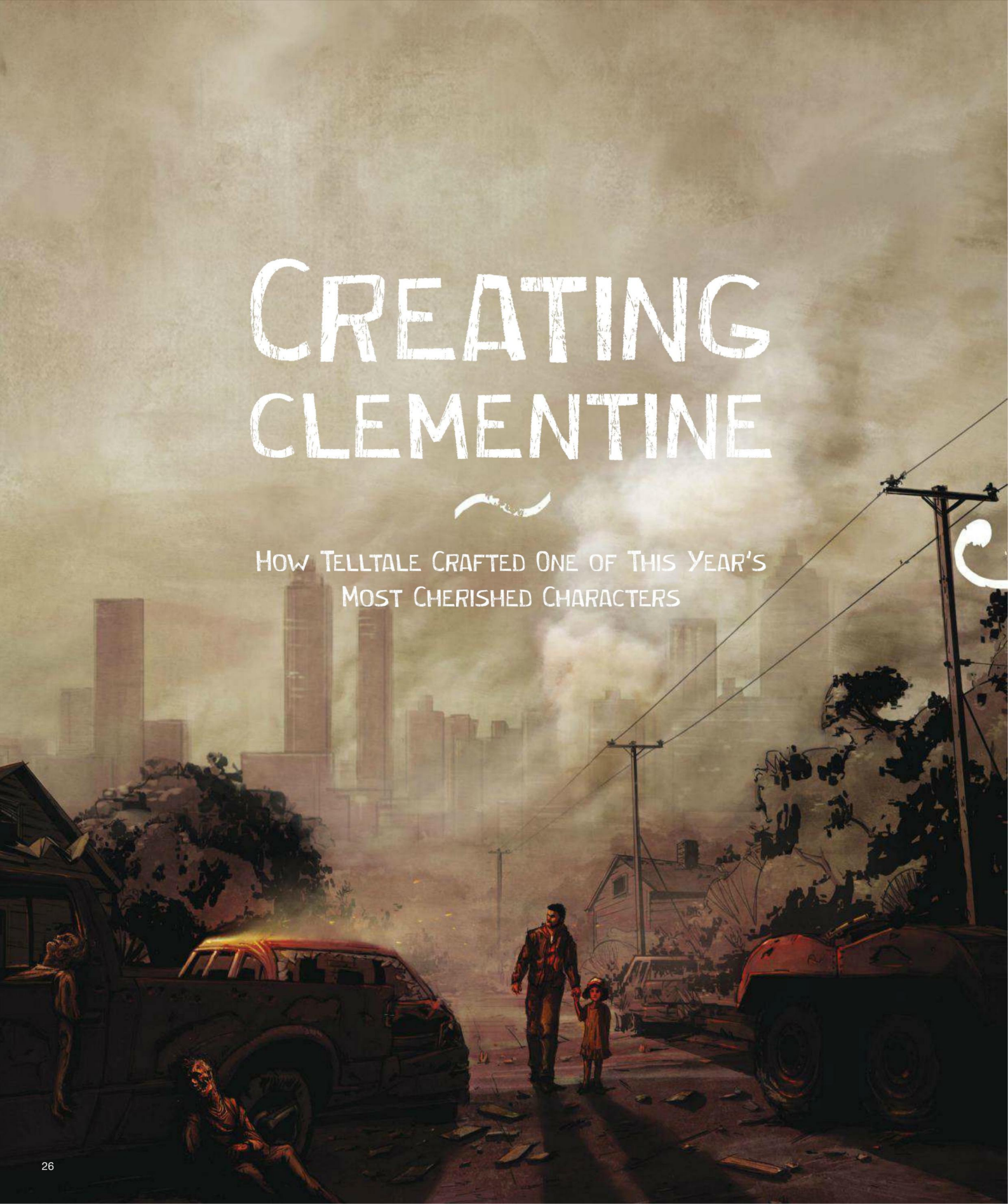



Neverwinter

CREATING CLEMENTINE

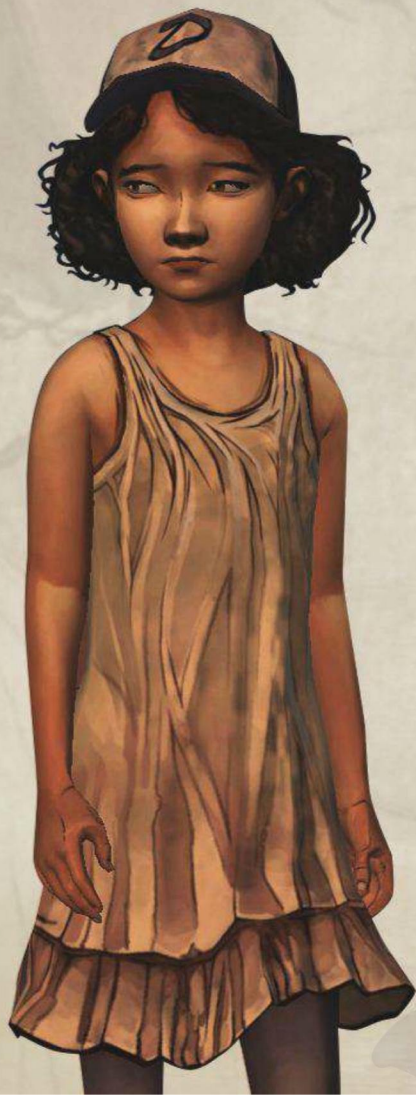


HOW TELLTALE CRAFTED ONE OF THIS YEAR'S
MOST CHERISHED CHARACTERS





This year's most beloved protagonist isn't a war hero, assassin, or space marine; she's an eight-year-old girl.



Yes, there's something about Clementine, and when she stepped onto the screen in Telltale's *The Walking Dead* with her oversized blue-and-white baseball cap, messy hair, wide eyes, and angelic voice, everything changed. This zombie apocalypse is different; it isn't about mindlessly killing zombies, escaping from Boomers, or hiding out in a mall. The experience centers on keeping one little girl safe, and we do things we never imagined we'd do just to hear her speak another line of dialogue.

Clementine isn't just a collection of polygons on a television screen. She's broken through the barrier, securing a place in the hearts of many – a feat most video game characters never accomplish. How did Telltale create one of the most magnetic characters to grace our TV screens? We sat down with some of the masterminds behind Clementine at Telltale – writer and creative lead Sean Vanaman, art director Derek Sakai, and voice actress Melissa Hutchison – to discover how one little girl came to life and became a beacon of light in a hopeless journey.

by Kimberley Wallace



THE BEGINNING

Though Lee Everett is the character you control in *The Walking Dead*, he wasn't the character that the game is built around. "Clementine was literally the first idea," says Vanaman, who planned Episode 5's outcome before writing a single line of dialogue. Vanaman had plenty of reasons to focus on a child, since Robert Kirkman, writer of the original comic series, never shied away from involving kids in his dark tale. However, convincing his Telltale cohorts to use a young girl in such an intense setting wasn't an easy sell. Vanaman says, "Getting people internally excited about it was really challenging.... There's no kid I can point to in a video game and say, 'It's going to be just like that person, don't worry about it.'" Soon enough, the reservations lifted, surprising even Vanaman. "People recognized the hurdle set forth by deciding there's going to be this little girl that's going to be a key feature of the game, but people kept saying yes anyway."

The next step was shaping Clementine's

personality. "From the beginning, the designers knew they wanted a character that would act as a moral compass for the main character as he progressed through the game," says art director David Sakai. "The designers envisioned a smart, honest, and capable girl around eight years old."

Clementine also had to be imaginative and precocious, which led to giving her a hideout: the treehouse. "She's already strong enough to isolate herself from her parents, knowing that her relationship with her parents is so strong that she can always come back inside," Vanaman says. Since most of what's been revealed about Clementine's parents is from a phone message, it's surprising to discover just how much influence they had in Vanaman's creation of Clementine. "I wanted her parents to be the sort of parents I aspire to be one day. That informed who she was to me," Vanaman says. "I really designed her parents before designing who she was. We did that before she was the Clementine in the game."

Her parents also factored into creating her iconic blue-and-white baseball hat with the

letter "D." Vanaman wanted Clementine to have something she held onto as a constant reminder of her parents and their impact on her. After talking to Sakai, the idea for the hat was born. Sakai drew inspiration for much of Clementine's design from his young daughter, who wears a similar cap. "She's got a crazy sense of fashion that oddly translates well into the world of *The Walking Dead*. My daughter won't accept advice from anyone when it comes to her outfits. For example, she'll combine her favorite dress with her older brother's baseball cap and then refuse any shoes at all," Sakai says. "Clementine doesn't have parents to tell her what to wear, so her outfits needed to reflect a child's idea of appropriate clothing."

During the process Vanaman turned to Sakai's experience with fatherhood for advice. Sakai gave him some sage words that shaped Clementine's dialogue: "The less my kids talk, the smarter I think they are." Vanaman took the advice to heart. "I strike through a lot of Clementine lines with a red pen before they get into the game," he says. That wasn't the



Changing Clementine

Lee Everett wasn't Telltale's first idea for a main character. Originally, Vanaman planned for Clementine to come from a single-parent household where Clementine's brother took care of her due to her mother not being up for the task. With this idea, Clementine's brother became the lead, but Vanaman decided a pre-existing relationship would be too much to ask a player to take on in *The Walking Dead* world. The decision led to them changing Clementine's race because they wanted her to look like she could potentially be Lee's daughter.



limit of Sakai's wisdom about children, as he also imparted his thoughts about a child's honesty. "My daughter was a major inspiration for me because she is always telling me my business," Sakai says. "She is only five, but if I step out of line she is always the first to call me on it."

FINDING A VOICE

With the concept and design in place, the last piece of the puzzle was finding the perfect voice actress, a task that was more difficult than anticipated. Children auditioned, but they couldn't grasp the emotional complexity of the part. Adults didn't sound like what Vanaman and his team envisioned for Clementine. The auditions took so much of a toll that Telltale wondered if the character they spent so much time crafting would even work. "We thought we were going to have to take Clementine out of the game," Vanaman says.

Thankfully, fate intervened in the form of Melissa Hutchison, a veteran voice actress who had worked on past Telltale games like

Sam & Max and Back to the Future, as well as the cult hit *Deadly Premonition*. Once Hutchison came into audition, everything clicked on both ends. "We got the auditions for Episode 1, and when I read Clementine's character description, it struck this chord in me," Hutchison says. "I really related to Clementine. Her personality description kind of matched that of my own when I was a child, sans the zombie apocalypse thing." Acting like a child came naturally for Hutchison, but she still prepped for her role. "I study people. I mimic people – personalities, movements, facial expressions. I keep them inside of this library in my head. Clementine is a result of that," she says. Every detail she observed in children she put into Clementine, right down to how kids pause, stutter, and add breaths between words.

"[Once] Derek [Sakai] draws an incredibly captivating little girl and you get Melissa Hutchison to do just this perfect voice, it does so much of the work for you," Vanaman says. "And now, it's like, 'Okay, we just write the game and try not to screw it up so bad.'"



CEMENTING THE BOND

Now that the foundations for Clementine's character were set, the next challenge was forging a bond between two strangers that would become one of the most treasured relationships in *The Walking Dead*. "Lee and [Clementine] are the main characters, so I wanted to get them together as fast as possible," Vanaman says. "The first character you meet is the one you're going to care about, the first thing on your brain."

Clementine's first scene and interaction with Lee were instinctual for Vanaman. He walked the player into a story that's been going on for three days: Clementine having a territorial battle with her zombie babysitter. This introduction imbued Clementine with some specific traits: "We needed you to instantly like her, so she saves your life," Vanaman says, "We needed her to be resourceful, so she brings you something very specific to save your life. We needed her to be vulnerable, so she's afraid while you're killing her babysitter."

This sequence perfectly set up Clementine's role in the story, but did Vanaman have any reservations pairing her with Lee, a convict? "No,

I knew Lee just had to feel in his soul like a good man, and I feel like we do that," he says. A safe haven existed because the player was controlling and shaping Lee throughout the process while a bond with Clementine deepened. "The whole backbone of the story is the relationship between Lee and Clementine, and the choices Lee makes in order to protect Clementine," Hutchison says. "If Clementine came off annoying, people would be trying to find the button that sends her straight into a herd of walkers."

Having Lee and Clementine's instantaneous connection build even deeper throughout the episodes has been a high point of the game, but it also serves as part of the conflict. "We knew who they are as they grew together was going to cause problems," Vanaman says. "It's a tragic relationship." The doubt surrounding her parents' survival preys on you. A best-case scenario doesn't really exist — if her parents are dead, that's tragic for Clementine. And if they're alive? What does that mean for Lee? You're growing the whole time with Clementine, but the context of the relationship pulls them apart, as we saw in Episode 4 when Clementine grows frustrated with Lee not looking for her parents in Savannah.



The Infamous Haircut

Episode 3 was by far the most shocking in the death department, but one other big event happened: Clementine's precious hair got chopped. Vanaman knew it was a big move and was doubtful if people would get behind it, but he knew it fit well in the storyline. Lee had just seen a child die and Vanaman wanted the realization to sting that it could have been Clementine. He made a list of everything about Clementine he thought was a liability — like the fact that she couldn't shoot a gun — but then realized another big one existed: zombies grabbed her hair in the past. Once he approached Sakai about it, Vanaman was surprised by just how much he liked her new look, "I liked her silhouette more — you saw her face; it wasn't just this mop anymore," he says.



THE EMOTIONAL PULL

How can one character grip such a wide range of people? What is it about Clementine that keeps us trudging through such a tragic tale? Perhaps we just want to believe that good prevails. "Clementine is meant to represent innocence and purity," Sakai says. "She embodies the main character's desire to protect and preserve what is good about humanity."

But it goes deeper than that. We're watching an eight-year-old girl lose her innocence and experience the darker side of the world through gruesome deaths. The fantasy of happy endings is destroyed for her as she realizes in Episode 4 she may never return to school. Her wardrobe also changes to further enforce her vanishing naivety, "At the beginning she is wearing a sweet clean summer dress, but as the game progresses, her dress becomes dirty and bloody, and reflects her loss of innocence and Lee's inability to shelter her from their grim reality," Sakai says.

This humanization of the story draws people in. "So much of the greater story is about families, parents, and kids. That stuff is really powerful," Vanaman says. "If we execute on that honestly then you're going to hopefully connect." Clementine's desire to see her parents and faith that they're alive even while people around her are dying showcases this childhood optimism. "Even if the players don't have a daughter of their own," Sakai says, "they can identify with Clementine's fear of never seeing her parents again."

From the beginning no character's fate has been guaranteed, which is part of what Vanaman admires about the unsettling tale. "That's what the story does in *The Walking Dead*, you have to be afraid of it," he says. Keeping players invested in Clementine has always centered on her safety, but because of the precedents Kirkman set in *The Walking Dead* comics, the door is open to torture players with Clementine's life. "Kids are treated just like adults in the narrative. Kirkman...he will kill a kid in an instant [without hesitation]," Vanaman says.

The emotional toll of the unpredictable narrative has certainly tested Hutchison. "I can actually say that this is the first job in my voice-over career that has actually brought me to actual, physical tears," she says.



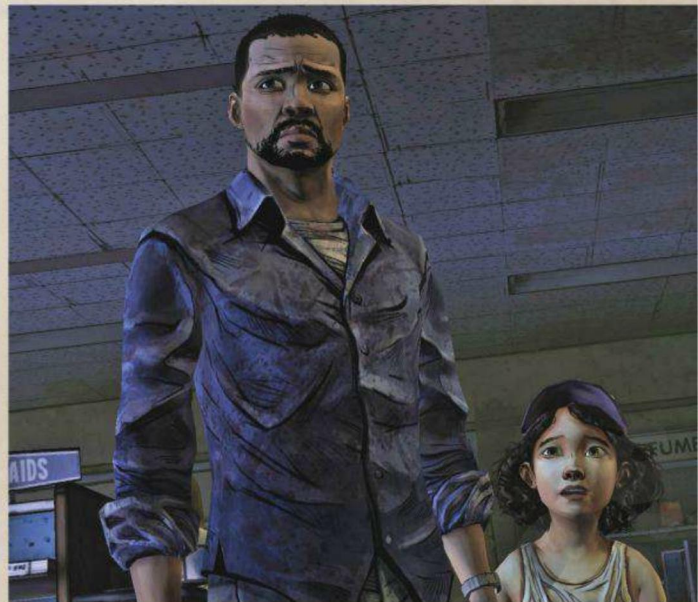
ATTACHED FANS

Clementine quickly became the star of *The Walking Dead*, and ever since she's been showered with fanfare. Right now, Telltale has a #ForClementine hashtag on Twitter where fans express just how far they'd go for her. Telltale has seen it all, from Clementine cosplayers to beautiful fan art all in the name of one little girl. The reaction is something Vanaman wasn't quite prepared for, but he's happy with the result. "The fact that people care about Clementine is invaluable." Fans are so passionate and emotionally-invested that they often react to her like she's a real person. Hutchison says, "I have seen people get downright pissed at other characters in the game if they try to put Clementine in dangerous situations. It is awesome to see how protective people have become of her."

The response has forced Telltale to consider the question: Does having someone that people have taken such a liking to change the vision for the character? "No. It can't. It's a dark path.... It's so tough," Vanaman says. "You have to dance with the date that brought you. The game is doing well, so I don't want to muck with the plan. I'm afraid to do that." While Vanaman hasn't changed any of his plans for Clementine, he did realize he had to make decisions about her with more care. He says, "You have to be a little bit more careful because people care so much."

The team at Telltale is also very aware of how much Clementine dictates players' choice. Vanaman spoke of data that confirms player's decisions often change depending whether or not Clementine is in the scene. "That's a pretty big power. You have to be judicious, and with great power comes great responsibility," Vanaman says. Clementine only enters the mix for weighty decisions, but it's never done to try and force the player's hand. He says, "You can't be cavalier about it, otherwise you guys will totally stop trusting us and see right through us."

The fans aren't the only ones getting attached to Clementine. Hutchison even confesses to having a strong connection with her, especially since this is longer than she usually gets to spend voicing a character. "She has become my own, my love, my precious," she says. "I too have become very protective of her."



A RAY OF LIGHT IN VIDEO GAME WRITING

From the moment Clementine stepped on the screen, she pulled us into her world. We've watched her grow, cheering her on as she finds herself, fearing we won't always be a part of her life. Few characters provoke such an investment, but Clementine broke through the slew of generic characters on our screens, providing something deeper for players. Like a voice of morality, Clementine has been with us all along, trying to prove good can overcome even the most vicious circumstances.

"She is like this little light of innocence and hope in a world of doom and despair," Hutchison says. Not many characters have ignited the type of emotions that Clementine has for many, and that's a testament to everything that went into her creation. As Sakai says, "I strongly believe it is the amalgamation of writing, voice acting, acting/animation, and the art working together that brings out her appeal. If any one of those areas fell short she would be off-putting to the player." ♦

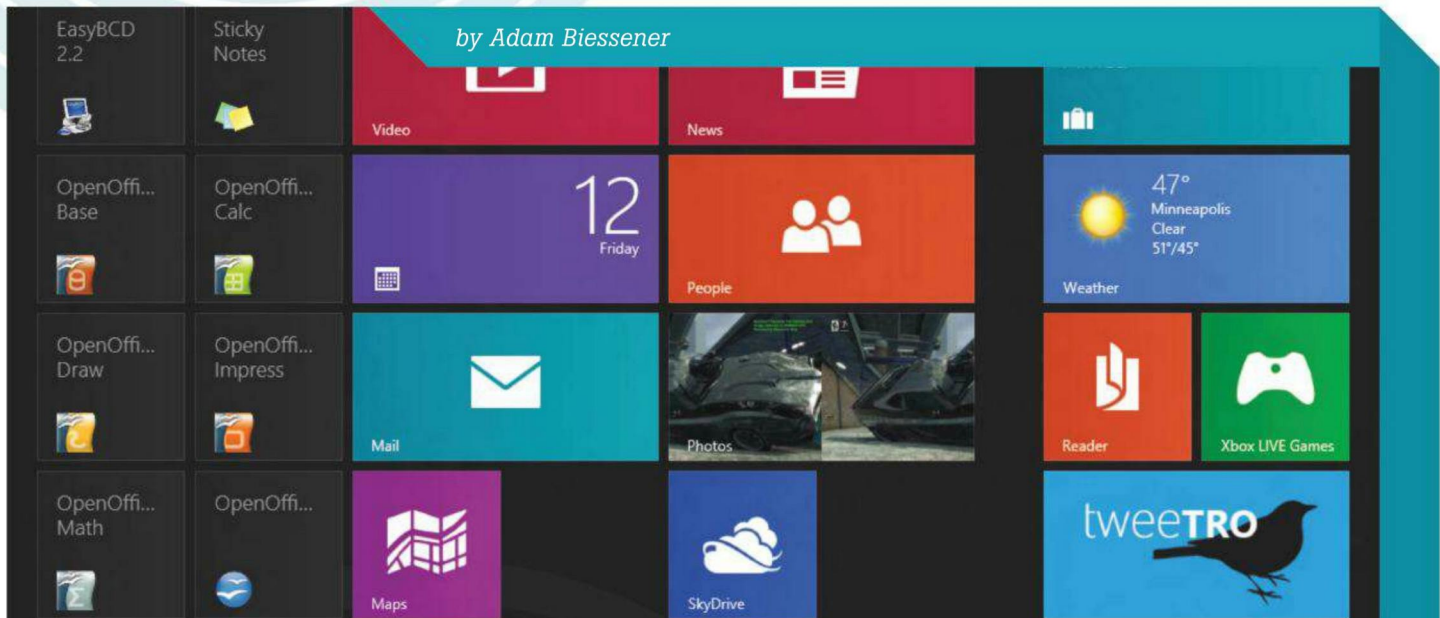


The Gamer's Guide to Windows

8

Everything you need to know about Microsoft's new OS

by Adam Biessener



The next major version of Windows is upon us. Microsoft's push to marry the slick, modern phone/tablet interface of Windows Mobile with the power of a desktop Windows machine falls flat, but other areas of the new operating system – particularly its unification of all your Microsoft services and your PC under a single login – are promising. Though the overall package has little to offer PC gamers over Windows 7 or even XP, the potential of both SmartGlass and directly tying your Xbox Live account to your PC could be the foundation for a powerful endgame for Xbox users.

STARTING ANEW

Replacing the Start menu that has existed in Windows since time immemorial with the tablet-like Start screen is Windows 8's most obvious and dramatic change. It is also the worst feature in this release. By itself, the Start screen nearly destroys everything that is good about Windows 8. Its one-app-at-a-time paradigm works great on a tablet or phone, but on a full desktop or laptop PC without a touchscreen it is a perfect nexus of anti-usability and infuriating restrictions. How often do you copy-paste between apps, or save a file to your desktop to load into another app, or access network storage? Dozens of common activities like these are far more cumbersome and inefficient with the Start screen and the Modern UI.

Apps made for use with the Modern UI work fine, though their obviously mobile-centric interfaces with their huge buttons

are ludicrously oversized on a modern widescreen PC display. Switching between Modern apps is markedly slower than clicking through windows on the desktop.

Shortcuts to non-Modern UI apps can also be placed on the Start screen. Clicking them sends you to the traditional desktop, where you can use them like you've been using home PC programs for the last 20 years.

You can attach your games to the Start screen, but it's just like putting a shortcut on the desktop – and in fact you're taken to the desktop for any game you care to name, since the grand total of 15 games available through Xbox Games for Windows currently are the only ones that support Modern UI. Attaching games to the Start screen doesn't add any functionality in any way, so the fundamental limitations of the Start screen make using the desktop as your launching pad for

gaming as well as the rest of your PC use the better solution.

GAMING PERFORMANCE

When it comes to the games themselves, Windows 8 makes very little difference. Both digital platforms like Steam and media-installed games work exactly as they always have, and our tests revealed no noticeable differences in performance or capabilities in any of several games tested under Windows 7 and 8.

As with any new operating system, peripheral support is a little spotty for Windows 8 at the moment. We haven't had any trouble with our devices, but reports have surfaced of gamers having issues with elaborate setups. The smart thing, for now, is to double-check on Windows 8 support for any esoteric peripherals you have plugged into your box. This minor issue should work itself out quickly as



SmartGlass Support

The lone third party to promise SmartGlass support has already backed out, as EA canceled its planned inclusion in this year's Madden title. The remaining games that we know to have current or future SmartGlass support – Ascend: New Gods, Dance Central 3, Forza Horizon, Halo 4, Home Run Stars, and Kinect Sesame Street TV – are all published by Microsoft.

Windows 8 becomes more widespread.

Finally, don't forget to update your video card drivers. We shouldn't have to say it, but everyone forgets once in a while and both Nvidia and AMD have new drivers built for Windows 8.

THE XBOX EXPERIENCE

Microsoft's big push is the new Xbox Games for Windows initiative (not to be confused with Games for Windows Marketplace, which is the same mess as ever). Windows 8 users primarily interface with the service through the Games app, which signs directly into your Xbox Live account. Unfortunately, its slick Modern UI style doesn't make up for its lack of core functionality. While you can set beacons and see what your friends are up to cross-platform between PC and Xbox 360, expected capabilities like messaging are bafflingly absent. Without messaging, party chat, and the like, Xbox Games for Windows is a far cry from the seamless integration we hoped for. As great as achievements for Minesweeper are, the inability to send and receive messages is far more notable.

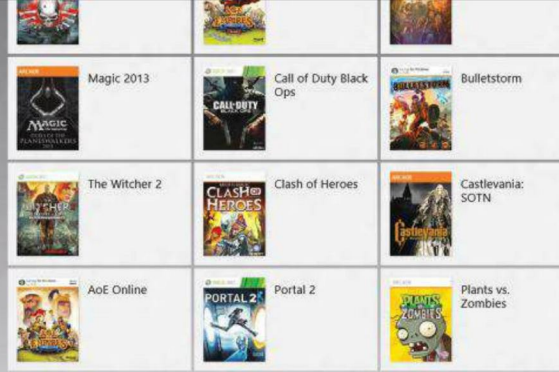
VISITING THE MICROSOFT STORE

The upside to the Xbox invasion of Windows 8 is a tablet-like ability to quickly and easily download, install, and play titles like Angry Birds and Cut the Rope, except through a Microsoft-curated digital store instead of one from Apple or Google. The experience works fine, but the content is currently extremely limited. Microsoft's nebulous promises of future support are light on specifics, and much of the fate of the service is in the hands of the third parties who make the games we want to play – especially since Microsoft has stepped away from first-party development in recent years.

Buying Xbox 360 games is a less pleasant experience. You can purchase anything in Microsoft's Games on Demand store, but we had to manually initiate the download from the console itself in our test. Add-ons and DLC are not available for purchase in Windows 8; you have to buy them the traditional way on your Xbox despite SmartGlass and the unified login.

SMARTGLASS

Rather than Xbox Games for Windows, SmartGlass is the most useful link between a Windows 8 PC/tablet and an Xbox 360. The framework of a real-time link between two devices sharing media and apps across your



home network has incredible potential.

What capabilities it currently has work well, but SmartGlass is still quite limited. The ability to remotely launch a game installed on your Xbox is trivial, but potential for gaming applications is evident in the SmartGlass integration already appearing games like Forza Horizon. As is the theme with SmartGlass, it works well but within a limited scope – and how much do you really want to put your controller down to pick up your tablet and mess with the Forza map instead of pausing and doing the same with your gamepad?

As a media control, SmartGlass is slick. If you're signed up for Xbox Music or don't mind buying your media through Microsoft-approved channels, streaming media through your 360 is a breeze. SmartGlass sadly won't serve your existing media to your Xbox; only media purchased through Windows 8 can be accessed through the app. Nonetheless, within those restrictions it's a powerful entertainment tool.

The greatest feature SmartGlass currently offers is a better way to search through your Xbox and navigate through complicated store menus, messaging, and media apps like ESPN and Netflix. Like many of Windows 8's innovations, though, this aspect of SmartGlass is much better enjoyed with a couch-friendly tablet or

smartphone than a laptop.

It's not quite there yet, but it's possible to see a roadmap to where combining the many facets of your digital life, from phone to tablet to gaming and media consumption all under the Microsoft umbrella, could be an attractive choice. If and when Microsoft improves the existing rough-around-the-edges implementation of its digital storefront, gets better third-party app and media support, releases competitive mobile hardware, and expands the capabilities of its first-party app offerings, that possibility may become a reality. At the moment, however, both Apple and Google have clear leads in this arena.

THE FINAL WORD

Unless you're itching to connect your Windows phone or tablet with your PC, there's little reason to recommend Windows 8 at this stage – and the start-screen debacle is enough to actively avoid upgrading non-touchscreen systems. Heavy Xbox users will see some value from SmartGlass today and the potential for much more in the future, but PC gamers reap no benefits from the upgrade. Taken overall, most users are looking at awfully thin reasons to go through the cost and trouble of an OS upgrade. ♦

Fixing the Obvious Problem

Microsoft has made the mind-bogglingly stupid decision to force users into booting into the Start screen, not the desktop, and includes no option to bring back the Start button that is a thousand times more useful for accessing the dozens of programs, files, and folders a modern PC user wants available at a moment's notice. The good news is that there's a fix; the bad news is that it costs five bucks. The Start8 app from Galactic Civilizations developer Stardock neatly solves both these problems, and is highly recommended for any primarily mouse-and-keyboard Windows 8 user.





XCOM: Enemy Unknown

Firaxis lead designer Jake Solomon is unusually forthcoming about his recently shipped alien invasion strategy game. As well-received as XCOM has been, we still had some questions. Solomon defends his minimalist interface, cops to the final mission's issues, and goes deep on the franchise's complicated relationship with farms below.

Did the combat math all work out the way you wanted?

Oh yes, I'm really happy with the numbers. Randomness is what makes XCOM tense and replayable. Missing that 95-percent shot with your sniper, as unfair as it feels, is what reassures you that the game is actually fair. And playing for keeps – against odds like that, success feels all the sweeter.

The last mission hasn't been well received. Where do you think that went wrong?

Yeah, that's totally fair. I whiffed a little on the design, to be honest with you. I think the level design is great, the art is wonderful, but for some people the combat just fell a little flat. I wanted the final mission to be a victory lap, where the player plows through all of the aliens that had been terrorizing Earth. Turns out some people wanted a final challenge worthy of the XCOM experience, and the resultant sense of accomplishment that brings. A totally fair point, as I see it. Also, we probably should have celebrated the individual soldiers a little more than we did, but I honestly didn't realize how attached players were going to become to their squads. That's on me.

Are you happy with how the priority objective system worked out at the end of the day?

I'm really happy with how the objectives worked out. Players are still able to make their own way through the game, and at

the same time they still feel the pressure of a race against the alien invaders. To be honest, if I did everything over, I'd probably make the objectives more open-ended or even somewhat random, but all in all I think the system worked out pretty well.

Did you ever consider adding in more camera angles (or a free camera) or an interface element to address the occasional difficulty in determining a soldier's line of sight?

Yeah, there's no getting around the disconnect between what the player sees and what the soldier sees, not from our chosen camera angle, but there are certainly things we could have done to help that. I will say that we used to show the player exactly what their soldiers would see whenever they moved. I know that sounds wonderful, but in reality it was awful. *Awful*. You were no longer looking down on a war-torn city street and ordering your beloved soldiers into precarious tactical positions. Rather, you were surfing the UI, dragging your cursor all over the screen until you saw the alien heads pop up. Trust me, taking that system out was the single biggest improvement made to the combat in XCOM.

The early build order feels like it doesn't leave much room for choice because of the overriding importance of engineers and satellites. Do you have any ideas for addressing that?

I agree, to some extent. Without

multiple victory conditions, players will eventually optimize against a system. That is not necessarily a bad thing. There is enough randomness in the country panic and mission progression that games aren't going to play out the exact same way every time, no matter how rigid your build order is. That being said, the strategy does reach a level of stasis far sooner than I would like, where the panic levels off and the player feels secure. It's something we're looking at, because the last thing you should ever feel in XCOM is secure.

The SHIV feels ancillary to the core game. Are you comfortable with where that balance landed?

Absolutely. I only wish I had more systems like that. SHIVs are completely optional, which adds replayability and opportunities for player strategies outside of the norm. I personally think XCOM needs more of that.

Players never get their hands on any super high-tech toys that break the rules – we're stuck with improvements on the basic weapon classes for the whole game. What led to that decision?

I completely agree with that criticism. I think I first saw that in the Game Informer review, and the minute I read that, I thought, "Huh. Good point." There is a lot of variation that comes through late-game elements like psionics and the blaster launcher, but

suffice it to say, I've been playing a lot of Borderlands and I am inspired.

Were there any classes or abilities that you liked which ended up on the cutting room floor during development for one reason or another?

Oh lord. Yes. The ability to destroy cover with laser weapons, the ability to paint a target and call in heavy artillery, the ability to calm panicking soldiers with a commanding officer – I could go on for days. Game development is like that, though. Some ideas were unbalanced, some sounded good but played awful, and on some we just ran out of time. That's the business.

Cattle mutilation is endemic to the modern alien abduction mythos. Why did you decide to leave it out of XCOM?

Good question. But it's hard to have cattle mutilation without farms.

Why aren't there any farms? Is it really XCOM without farms?

Oh, I walked into that one. We have about 20 farm levels prototyped somewhere. No joke. But farms have two big problems: they tend to be made up of wide-open spaces, which don't work well when your soldiers rely on cover to survive. And farms regionalize really, really, poorly. A bridge in Indiana can pass for a bridge in Kenya. A farm, on the other hand, is very distinct in its appearance based on the part of the world you're in. But if I'm being honest, I still dream of farm levels. The whole team does. So never say never, my friends. Never say never.

We've got Test Chamber videos, more in-depth interviews with Solomon and his team, podcasts, and everything else you could want for XCOM content at gameinformer.com

Firefall Proves Its MMOFPS Concepts

Red 5, a new game studio filled with veteran developers, is closing in on its debut release.

The free-to-play PC MMO shooter Firefall is nearing the end of its beta period. Red 5 expects to be feature-complete by the end of the year, and the pie-in-the-sky dreams the studio has been selling for years now will soon have to be proven in the wild. A spin around Firefall's closed beta reveals a game with exceptional nuts-and-bolts gameplay that cries out for more content while tantalizing players with the promise of what it could be.

by Adam Biessener



Like Guild Wars 2, Firefall consists of two games that intersect but never interact. The open-world, player vs. environment half is a constantly shifting web of drop pods, incursions, and larger events as the remnants of humanity wage a desperate war against the invading alien Chosen. Firefall's player vs. player, on the other hand, consists of e-sports style instanced matches between set teams. Participating in either contributes to your slow climb up the lengthy progress ladder.

Running from one hotspot of invasion activity to another, working together with your fellow players to push back the inexorable alien assaults or retake territory the Chosen have overrun, is the best Firefall currently has to offer. From simple point-capture battles to longer multistage events, the cooperative battles are wonderful chaos. The wide variety of twisted wildlife and many different classes of chosen soldiers provide diverse opposition. Complementing your allies' skills and tactics with your own comes naturally thanks to the

well-designed player classes and the ability to customize your own loadout to suit your play style.

If the Chosen warfront is quiet or you don't feel like dealing with the infuriating lack of quick transit to get to the next battle, "thumping" for resources in the wilderness can be profitable and amusing. Once you find a deposit (by smashing around with the Scan Hammer, which never fails to get a smile from me), calling in a Thumper starts a timed defense mission as it provokes hostile creatures while extracting resources. Thumpers come in multiple flavors intended for different group sizes and, while soloing can be tough if you aren't equipped for it, thumping is a great way to make some money, XP, and resources with a small group of friends. I'd love for the crafting system to be less complicated, but at least it has depth and value for those who put the time and effort in.

The often-terrible travel times and current dearth of content are the biggest problems facing Firefall's PvE. Most towns and outposts have glider pads that launch you high into the sky for a quick boost, but the finicky controls make it too easy to stall out into a vertical dive. As cool as they are, I've mostly given up on gliders as a time-saving device – hoofing it on foot ends up being faster most of the time. No shuttle service or taxis exist yet, though they're hinted at with certain inactive objects in the world. The running joke among Firefall players is that finding a body of water or group

of monsters to suicide into and spawn back in town is the preferred method of fast travel.

I am less enthusiastic about the current state of Firefall's PvP. Matchmaking is a disaster – quite possibly due to low beta populations. But still, getting rolled over and over by players who not only have more experience but also can do significantly more damage because of their better gear.

I've also encountered noticeable latency issues, which is unacceptable for an eight-player match on a high-end gaming PC with a solid Internet connection in 2012 (which again may be due to playing against international opponents, but why am I getting matched against them in the first place?). The potential is there; each class has amazing but mostly balanced abilities that work well together, the well-designed maps are rich, and the outstanding spectator mode has profound implications for broadcasting and community creation. In a game like this with large power differences based on how long you've been playing, though, the matchmaking must be addressed before launch.

Firefall isn't quite there yet, but that's why they call it a beta. I'm encouraged by the successful recent overhaul of progression and by the moment-to-moment gameplay. As long as Red 5 can get more content and better travel options on the PvE side and fix the matchmaking in PvP in the next few months, I see great things in Firefall's future. ♦

The only bike currently available in the beta is for a single mission phase, sadly



FREE MEANS FREE

Firefall is free to download and play, and has no subscription fee. The cash shop offers respectful microtransactions for the usual cosmetic items, boosts to XP gain, and the like. Pay-to-win and other microtransaction follies can completely ruin a game for me, but I have no problem with Firefall's model.

Ron Gilbert and Double Fine
rediscover adventure in

THE CAVE

by Matt Miller

For months I've wanted to learn more about Ron Gilbert's upcoming collaboration with Double Fine, but I missed several opportunities to see early demos. That meant I came to the game totally fresh for my first hands-on experience. I found a game deeply rooted in the classic adventure game aesthetic and humor that made Tim Schafer and Ron Gilbert into gaming icons during their days at LucasArts. However, the 2D platforming, cooperative play, and stellar production values of *The Cave* speak to a genre moving forward, not back.

The *Cave* follows the story of seven unusual individuals who have each come to a mystical cave in search of something they've lost. The hillbilly is seeking the love of a good woman he lost. The creepy brother and sister twins (who play as one character) are looking for the love of their parents. The knight, time traveler, adventurer, scientist, and monk also each have unique objectives. For any given playthrough, you only take three along for the ride. The others remain behind for future playthroughs.

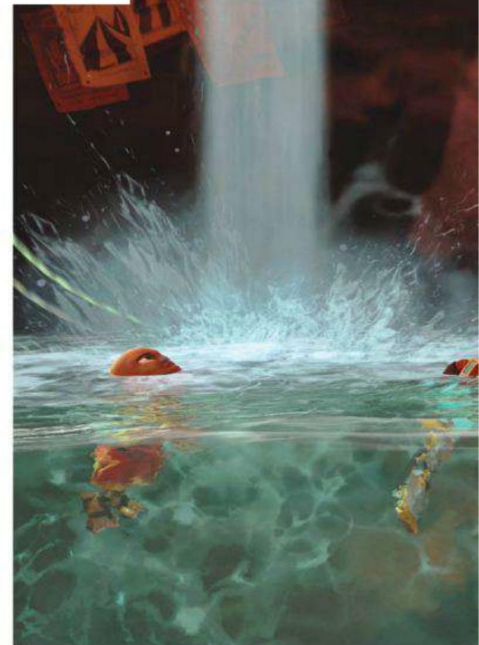
Your character choice gives you a special trait, like the knight's guardian angel that protects him from fire and fall damage, or the time traveler's ability to teleport short distances. However, your choice of characters has a more fundamental effect on the game. As you explore the *Cave*, you'll only be able to access the areas of the cave that correspond to your three party members, along with all the connecting corridors between them. A second playthrough could have an entirely new set of puzzles and levels to solve, ensuring that enthusiastic players will play through at least one or two more times.

The *Cave* is more than just a location – it's an actual presence and personality, and it narrates the story, contributing both humor

and a distinct sense of menace. I love the mystery of who or what the *Cave* is, and why it drew these disparate individuals together. The environment feeds into this mystery, opening up into strange locations that seem to echo events in the main character's lives, like the knight's castle, populated by a bored princess, hungry dragon, and anachronistic king.

Even in locations dedicated to one character, the rest of the party's special abilities sometimes allow for quick solutions to otherwise tricky puzzles. Perhaps more importantly, other players can control these characters. *The Cave* includes three-player cooperative couch play, encouraging the sort of communal puzzle solving that used to drive titles like *Maniac Mansion* and *Monkey Island*, but now everybody gets their own character. If you're playing by yourself, tapping the d-pad allows you to switch characters at any time.

The game avoids inventories or having to figure out how to interact with objects. Instead, you can always carry around one object and interact with any number of places in the world using a context-sensitive button press. Controls are simple, but everything feels faster and more action-oriented than many adventure games, in large part because you're playing through 2D platforming-style levels.





I saw several areas in the game, but my play-time was dominated by the hillbilly's deranged carnival level. The old-school adventure game concepts are readily apparent. Levels are built to be explored first and solved afterwards; there are lots of strange characters and funny sequences to witness before you begin putting the pieces together about how to progress. In this case, I need to acquire six carnival tickets to purchase a big pink teddy bear for the amazing two-legged woman – the hillbilly's secret crush. Wherever I go, I'm greeted by demented takes on familiar carnival attractions, like the exotic clothed dancers, where immaculately covered-up ladies cavort before lusty viewers.

Different carnival games award you with tickets, but I can't get any of them through conventional means since each game is rigged. Instead, I need to figure out work-arounds. I consult the animatronic fortune teller to learn the next color that will show up in the spinning color Wheel of Misfortune. Elsewhere, I ask the magician to turn a heavy barbell invisible so I can fool the weight

guesser. The puzzles are clever without being obtuse, and the solutions always deliver a twist on your expectations. In traditional Double Fine fashion, the game also has regular injections of funny dialogue. When I finally acquire the teddy bear, the hillbilly's naïve expectations for love don't exactly come to fruition, resulting in a heated exchange.

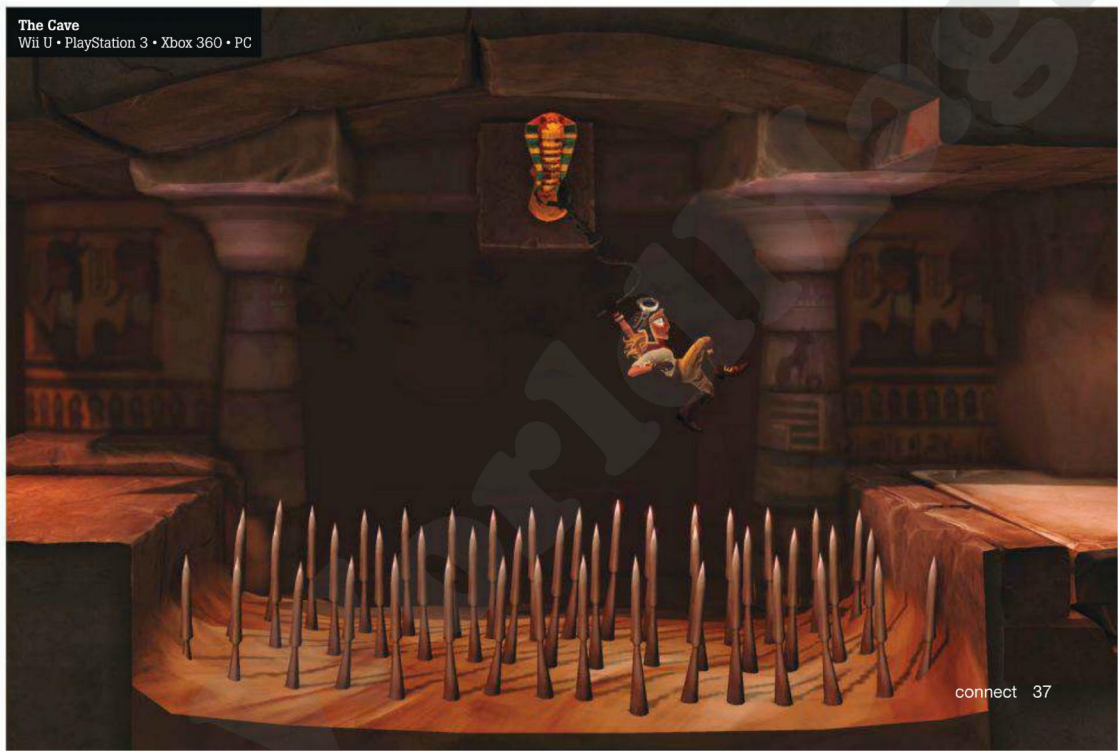
The quirky sense of humor carries over into some fantastic animation work that brings the characters and the cave they're exploring to life. The hillbilly has big, floppy feet that slap against the ground as he runs. The twins pull and push each other along as they run, always holding each other's hands, and staring mournfully out at the player when they stop moving. I also got a kick out of the narration, which makes it feel like everything onscreen is part of a demented bedtime story.

Sega and Double Fine plan to release *The Cave* early next year. The slower pace and focus on careful thinking over constant action may be off-putting for newer gamers, but I suspect a lot of players may be won over by the twisted humor and smart puzzle design. ♦

Looking for more on downloadable and independent games? Explore gameinformer.com/impulse for the best in PlayStation Network, Xbox Live Arcade, Nintendo eShop, PC, and mobile games. For more on downloadable games in this issue, don't miss our look at creating *Clementine* from *The Walking Dead* (p. 26), our previews of *CastleStorm* (p. 72) and *BattleBlock Theater* (p. 78), and our review of *The Walking Dead Episode Five: No Time Left* (p. 86).



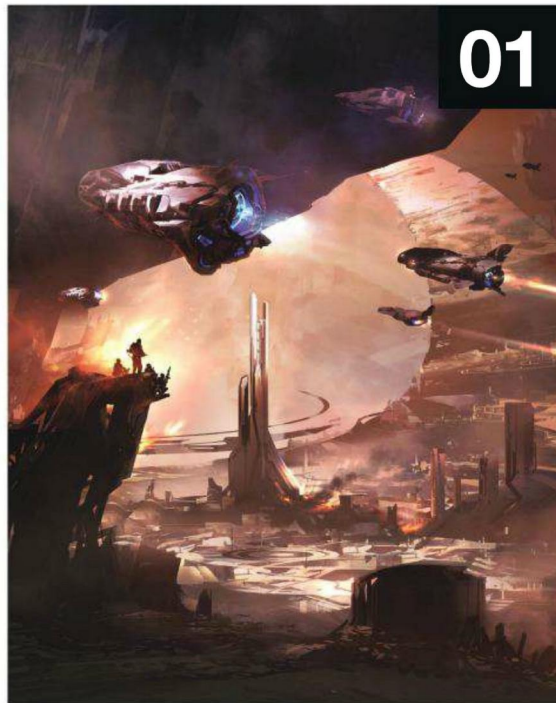
The Cave
Wii U • PlayStation 3 • Xbox 360 • PC



top ten

PRECURSOR CIVILIZATIONS
by Matt Miller

Ever notice how some of your favorite games include an ancient, forgotten civilization that once ruled the world, or even the galaxy, but has since faded into obscurity? It seems like such a strange and specific story trope, but it shows up all over the place. Here is our list of the very best of the wildly powerful societies that once reigned over our game worlds, but who have subsequently disappeared into the mists of history. We've also done you a little favor by classifying where they fall on the scale between sinister and benevolent in their dealings. Those sensitive to spoilers may want to skip over choice entries.



01

Forerunners

Halo series

A hundred thousand years before Master Chief picked up his first assault rifle, the mysterious Forerunners were the dominant race in the galaxy. They were a force to be reckoned with, capable of building advanced artificial intelligences, massive structures up to the size of artificial worlds, and shepherding the evolution of entire alien species. They met their match when facing the parasitic Flood, which was overrunning the galaxy at an alarming pace. The Forerunners halted that advance with the most powerful weapons in the galaxy; the Halo rings wiped out most of the Flood, but took out most other sentient life in the process. Good or evil? The verdict's still out.



BENEVOLENT

SINISTER



02

The First Civilization

Assassin's Creed series

You probably don't realize it, but humanity once existed as a slave race created by powerful ancient beings that once inhabited Earth. Those Who Came Before crafted humanity in their image, but left them bereft of some of the powers and technology that assured superiority. Nonetheless, humanity eventually rebelled and gained control of some of that technology — the Pieces of Eden. The full story of the First Civilization remains to be written, but without spoiling anything from the recent franchise entry, it's safe to say that we haven't heard the last from these ancient beings.



BENEVOLENT

SINISTER



03

Rakata

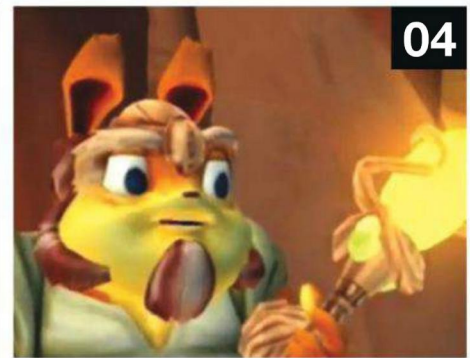
Star Wars: The Old Republic series

Thousands of years before the Jedi and Sith started swinging lightsabers at each other, the Rakatan Infinite Empire stretched across the galaxy far, far away, spreading terror, conquest, and slavery in its wake. The Rakata (also called the Builders) mastered the use of the Force early on, and they had no qualms about using the dark side to further their expansionist goals. Their greatest tool of war would be the automated ship-building super-weapon station called the Star Forge, which would be used by Darth Malak centuries later in his bid to destroy the Republic.



BENEVOLENT

SINISTER



04

Precursors

Jak & Daxter series

What do you do if your ultrapowerful, technologically superior species is small, cute, and furry? If you're the Precursors, you concoct an elaborate myth of an imposing powerhouse species, and proceed to craft the world with no one the wiser. In a fun twist, Jak & Daxter's Precursors turn out to be the same species as the wise-cracking Daxter. The Ottsets were behind the crafting of the world and the wider universe seen in the games, and they were capable of manipulating the mystical Eco substance on a profound scale. In order to hide the truth about their identity, these furry creatures created towering monuments across the world that made everyone believe they were far more threatening than they actually were.



BENEVOLENT

SINISTER



05

Protheans

Mass Effect series

As the asari, turians, humans, and other advanced races spread out into the galaxy, they began to encounter strange relics of a long-lost people. From the remarkable travel enabled by the mass effect relays to the mystery of the Citadel, the known races credited a previous civilization called the Protheans with these remarkable discoveries. In actuality, the Protheans were a powerful race that reached its height 50,000 years ago, by which point they had brought most other galactic species under one government, whether those races liked it or not. The Reapers shattered all that, systematically bringing down the Prothean empire in a long and bloody war – an object lesson for later races about the dangers of a stratified society ruled by a monolithic empire.



BENEVOLENT

SINISTER



06

Xel'naga

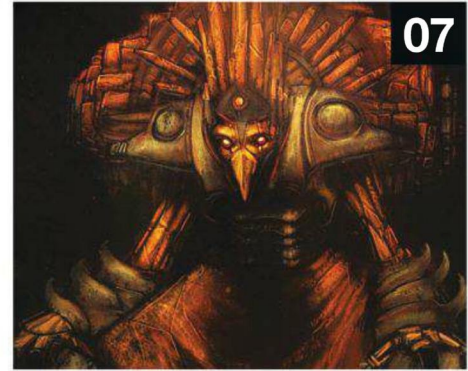
StarCraft series

The progenitor race known as the Xel'naga came to the Milky Way millions of years ago, seeding planets with new species as they went. The long-lived Xel'naga viewed history through the prism of millennia, and saw that their species would one day come to an end. To ensure the continuity of their people, they created the protoss and the zerg as two races that could one day merge into a reborn version of the Xel'naga. It's likely the Xel'naga did not predict the dreadful conflict that would result as the two races encountered each other, leading to the overwhelming war that would also draw humanity into its destruction.



BENEVOLENT

SINISTER



07

Chozo

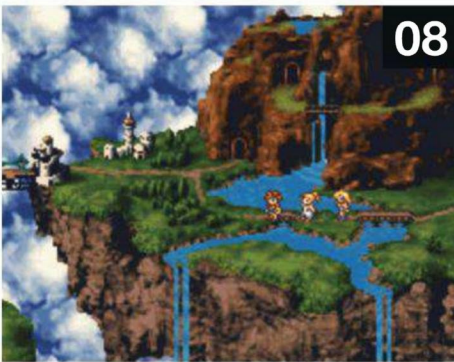
Metroid series

The birdlike Chozo once populated multiple worlds, leaving their iconic stone statues everywhere they went. The powerful but peaceful species melded extreme technological and scientific superiority with a deep spiritualism. The strange creatures have mostly disappeared from the galaxy under mysterious circumstances, but not before rescuing a young human named Samus Aran from the remains of a space pirate attack and teaching her their ways. As an adult, Samus is a renowned bounty hunter, but she owes much of her wisdom and power to the insight of her adoptive and now-absent alien parents.



BENEVOLENT

SINISTER

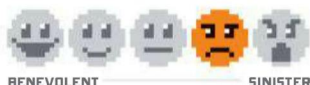


08

Kingdom of Zeal

Chrono Trigger

In the distant past, a segment of humanity discovered they could manipulate natural forces in surprising ways. They could use magic. With this newfound power, they abandoned the non-magic using humans to a harsh upcoming ice age, and lifted four islands high into the sky on which to live undisturbed. The people of Zeal were technologically advanced and considered themselves highly enlightened, but they were brought to ruin by their own pride. They attempted to summon and harness the power of Lavos, and that malevolent being shattered their kingdom and sent it tumbling into the sea.



BENEVOLENT

SINISTER



09

Valkyrie

Valkyria Chronicles series

Worshipped as gods by many, the Valkyrie were an incredibly powerful race who came to Europa from the distant north. They came as invaders, using their durable bodies and devastating weapons to subjugate those they encountered. Over time, the Valkyrie diminished as they presumably interbred with those they had conquered, but the bloodline remains strong in certain individuals into the present day – a power that could turn the tide of entire wars.



BENEVOLENT

SINISTER



10

Humanity

Fallout series

Wandering across the wasteland, witnessing the towering monuments and ruined skyscrapers left behind from before the war, it's easy for an inhabitant of the Fallout universe to attribute unbelievable power and prosperity to the lost civilization that once lived on those lands. Decades ago, humanity thrived in grand cities, had their fill of food and medicine, and traveled great distances in cars, trains, and planes. But something awful happened, and war never changes, leaving the land burnt, most of the populace dead, and the mutated survivors to pick up the pieces. Today, the humans who lived before the war are nearly mythical, both for their remarkable technology and their unbelievable hubris.



BENEVOLENT

SINISTER

interview



photo: Don Hammond

A New Era Begins at BioWare

With the recent departure of founders Ray Muzyka and Greg Zeschuk, fans wonder what the future holds for fabled RPG developer BioWare. We spoke with BioWare Edmonton general manager **Aaryn Flynn** about the future of the studio and its Mass Effect and Dragon Age franchises.

interview by *Matt Helgeson*

Did you know that the doctors were leaving for a while or did it take you by surprise?

We knew about it for a while before they announced. In Ray's blog post, he references that he decided to do it in April. He told a few of us right around then. We had a lot of time to prepare for the actual transition. I guess if you're asking the more philosophical question of did we ever imagine that there would be a time where Ray and Greg would retire in an abstract sense – I guess we did in the sense that they are such intelligent guys and they had made their career in games having come from being medical doctors. You always wondered if they were ever going to do that again. They certainly managed the company in a way that made that possible for themselves. They always wanted to make sure that they were teaching everybody things during the course of growing the company.

As you look to the future of Mass Effect, what's the philosophy for the series moving forward? Is it going to be an outgrowth of what came before or is it taking a radical new direction?

I wouldn't say that it's a radical new direction. I think we know what we want to give the fans and we know what they want. When you switch engines and go to Frostbite, it opens up some opportunities for things. The team in Montreal is taking a fresh take on things. So, yeah I wouldn't say it's radical, but certainly we want to try new things and shift perspectives a little bit and give players a chance to see different aspects of the Mass Effect universe. We always used to say that Mass Effect was a universe with millions and millions of stories in it, and we were only telling a few with the trilogy. So, I think that's the spirit we're going into this with, the idea of what kind of stories can we tell and how can we tell them in a way that fans will love?

Will all upcoming BioWare projects be using the Frostbite 2 engine?

I think so. When we look at Frostbite and the success we're having with it with Dragon Age 3 and the support we're getting from teams around EA, it's fun being a part of an organization and community that's doing good work with that technology.

Talk a little bit about Dragon Age 3. It's fair to say that Dragon Age 2 was not received as well as the first one.

I think that's fair to say. [Laughs]

What do you think that Dragon Age 3 needs to do differently?

Well, we definitely take the criticisms of Dragon Age 2 very seriously and into great consideration. We spent weeks and weeks poring over it and figuring out not only the mistakes we made but also what we had to do to really show fans that we'd heard it and were going to do better with Dragon Age 3.

The philosophy we're going into Dragon Age 3 is more like Origins than it is like Dragon Age 2. In [DA 2], we tried to tell a very intimate story. We did some good things but made some mistakes as well. With three, we're going back to a very grand and world-beating kind of story that has broad scope and epic things in it. Philosophically, once you do that, it helps define and dictate the decisions you make after that.

While BioWare was pushing interactive storytelling and choice in Mass Effect, Bethesda pushed open-world exploration to new heights with Oblivion and Skyrim. Where do you see the genre moving; are you influenced by what Bethesda has done?

I definitely think we're influenced by it. You can't look at a game like Skyrim and not think about how impressive what they've accomplished is – or [think] that's an interesting new direction or that there was something that didn't work well for them that we could take in a new direction. So, we're always influenced by these games, especially in a relatively tight-knit genre like RPGs.

In terms of where I think RPGs are going, I think we have to get back to more exploration in our games. I think that's not just because of some of the shortcomings in Dragon Age 2, but because there's a heritage there, something we used to do a lot of in games like Baldur's Gate and Neverwinter Nights, where exploration was one of the key themes. We've gotten away from that with Dragon Age and Mass Effect. We want to get back to those themes. Not only because they seem powerful, but they are things that fans want. They want to know more about these worlds we are crafting, and they want to chart their own course through it.

Mass Effect was a trilogy, and your choices carried through throughout the entire series. Is that something that's a part of the DNA of Mass Effect – the games being interconnected – or will future games be more standalone?

I don't think we've made any decisions on that

yet. I think you're right, one of the hallmarks and successes of Mass Effect was that it was committed to be a trilogy right from the beginning. As such, it was built into the design that we'd have these choices carry over through the games. We haven't made any decisions about that with the upcoming Mass Effect game yet. We want to make sure we have the technology before we make big decisions.

So, you don't feel that the games necessarily have to be connected in that way?

No, I don't think so. It will depend on the choices we make about the setting for Mass Effect. Do we want to give the fans a story that they are going to relate to? Absolutely. It wouldn't be a Mass Effect game if we didn't do that. We want this to be very identifiable as a Mass Effect game. But how we'll connect the choices and all that is to be determined.

In retrospect, how satisfied are you with how BioWare handled the fan outcry and controversy surrounding the Mass Effect 3 ending?

The ending stuff was tough to take. We all played it and went through it and none of us really got the magnitude that people were going to be upset about it. I understand it a lot better now that I've spent time reviewing it with other team members. I like that we did the extended cut ending. We had a lot of support in doing that both from Ray and Greg and the rest of EA, because we really felt that this wasn't the note we wanted to end the Mass Effect experience on. I'm happy with how the extended cut turned out. I think we did a good job of trying to wrap those choices back up and reflect that back to the players in a fair and reasonable way. It's a good learning experience for us in the future, in that you can underestimate how much people love their characters. So, we'll be watching that much more carefully next time.

You guys came into the last generation of consoles very strong with two new IPs – Dragon Age and Mass Effect. As we move into a new generation, how will you strike a balance between new IP and managing existing brands?

We definitely want to do new IP. In terms of the balance, it is a good chance to look at what we could do with new IP even as we're supporting those brands and evolving them in new directions. It's nice that, if we do a new IP – which we do want to do – three brands is a nice number to manage. We can experiment and try lots of new things. Three is a nice number, and we're working hard to start a new IP. ♦

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

2000 SUPER COMPUTING
Flynn graduates from the University of Alberta with a degree in computing science

2000 TOOL BOX
Flynn gets a job at BioWare, where he works on programming development tools for Baldur's Gate 2

2002 NIGHT SHIFT
Flynn helps create the toolset for BioWare's epic RPG Neverwinter Nights

2005 A NEW EMPIRE
Flynn plays a major role in programming Jade Empire for the original Xbox

2006 TAKING THE LEAD
Flynn is promoted to lead programmer at BioWare Edmonton

2007 MASS SUCCESS
Flynn becomes the assistant director of programming on Mass Effect, a game that redefines the boundaries of RPG storytelling

2008 DIRECTING DEBUT
In a new role as director of programming, Flynn guides BioWare's tech across all its franchises

2009 MANAGEMENT
At BioWare Edmonton, Flynn becomes the studio general manager, overseeing all game development

2012 BIG DEPARTURES
BioWare founders Ray Muzyka and Greg Zeschuk retire from the game industry. Flynn steps up to lead the studio through the transition



Play MG Android Gaming

by Ben Reeves, Jason Oestreicher, and Jeff Cork

Modern cell phones are so multifaceted that we regularly use them more like microcomputers than we use them to call people. That being the case, maybe there is a corner of the market for a smartphone-like device that isn't actually a phone. Play MG is banking on it with the first dedicated mobile gaming device for the Android operating system.

The Play MG is powered by a 1-GHz processor and 1GB RAM, and features 4GB of internal memory, which can be expanded to 10GB via microSD cards. The system also boasts a four-inch 480x800 capacitive touch display and runs Google's Android 4.0 Ice Cream Sandwich, so it has all the features of last year's smartphones. Thankfully, it's priced relatively low, and this Wi-Fi only system won't force you to sign up for a data plan.

The unit's curved design is comfortable. We played games like Temple Run, Angry Birds Star Wars, and Need for Speed, experiencing largely the same audio and video fidelity we've received from many modern Android phones.

This unique device won't appeal to everyone, but it could be an intriguing gaming option for kids or anyone who doesn't feel the need for a mobile phone. The MG Play has

some nifty built-in security tools that allow parents to see what their kids are installing on the device, block certain apps or activities, or track how much game time has been logged. A digital wallet also helps you to set up an allowance for other users to purchase games without accessing a credit card.

It's hard to recommend this system over Google's Nexus 7 tablet, but if you want something that's a little more portable or would prefer an iPod Touch alternative for watching movies, listening to music, or surfing the web, the MG Play gets the job done.

AVERAGE 

\$149.99 | playmg.com

1 Roxio Game Capture HD Pro

Interested in capturing your gameplay footage? Maybe you want to share it on YouTube or stream it live on Twitch.tv? Roxio has you covered with this all-in-one video capture solution. With the Game Capture HD Pro, you can record, edit, or upload live gameplay with commentary directly to YouTube or Twitch.tv. The packaged software provides a robust editing suite where you can add titles, transitions, and voice-overs. The capture quality is on par with similar devices on the market, but the buggy editing software is prone to freezing and might leave you grumbling. Still, this is a great point-of-entry for those who want to get their feet wet.

AVERAGE

\$149 | roxio.com



2 Sifteo Cubes

Bridging the gap between toys and video games, Sifteo Cubes are an interesting way to play. Sifteo's newest version of its cubes, each of which is equipped with a touchscreen and tilt sensor, can communicate with one another, which the little system uses to various effects. An RPG has players arranging the tiny boxes to allow a character to navigate along a multiscreen path, while a word game challenges players to combine letters by moving cubes around. The games are simple, and they feel like proof-of-concept demos rather than anything you'd want to spend any real time with. More games are on the way; here's hoping they make better use of this relatively expensive novelty.

LIMITED APPEAL

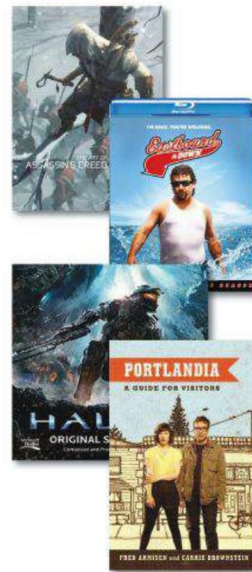
\$130, \$30 for additional cubes | sifteo.com



3 DC Comics Deck-Building Game

Similar to popular deck-building games like Dominion and Ascension, Cryptozoic's newest card game lets you play as popular DC heroes like Batman, Superman, Wonder Woman, and Aquaman — adding new, more powerful cards to your deck as you play. Each hero has a unique special ability that requires different strategies to master, and the whole set is compatible with other Cerberus Engine: Heroes games. Next time Joker holds Gotham hostage, have the Caped Crusader give him a paper cut.

\$40 | cryptozoic.com



THE ART OF ASSASSIN'S CREED III

Assassin's Creed III takes the franchise into a brand new era as it explores the New World. This perfect coffee table book collects Ubisoft's historical reimaginings and evocative landscape paintings of colonial America.

\$29.95
titanbooks.com

EASTBOUND AND DOWN: THE COMPLETE THIRD SEASON

Deluded burnout Kenny Powers resurrects his baseball career as the closer for a South Carolina minor-league team called the Myrtle Beach Mermen in this third season of HBO's side-splitting comedy.

\$39.98
store.hbo.com

HALO 4: ORIGINAL SOUNDTRACK

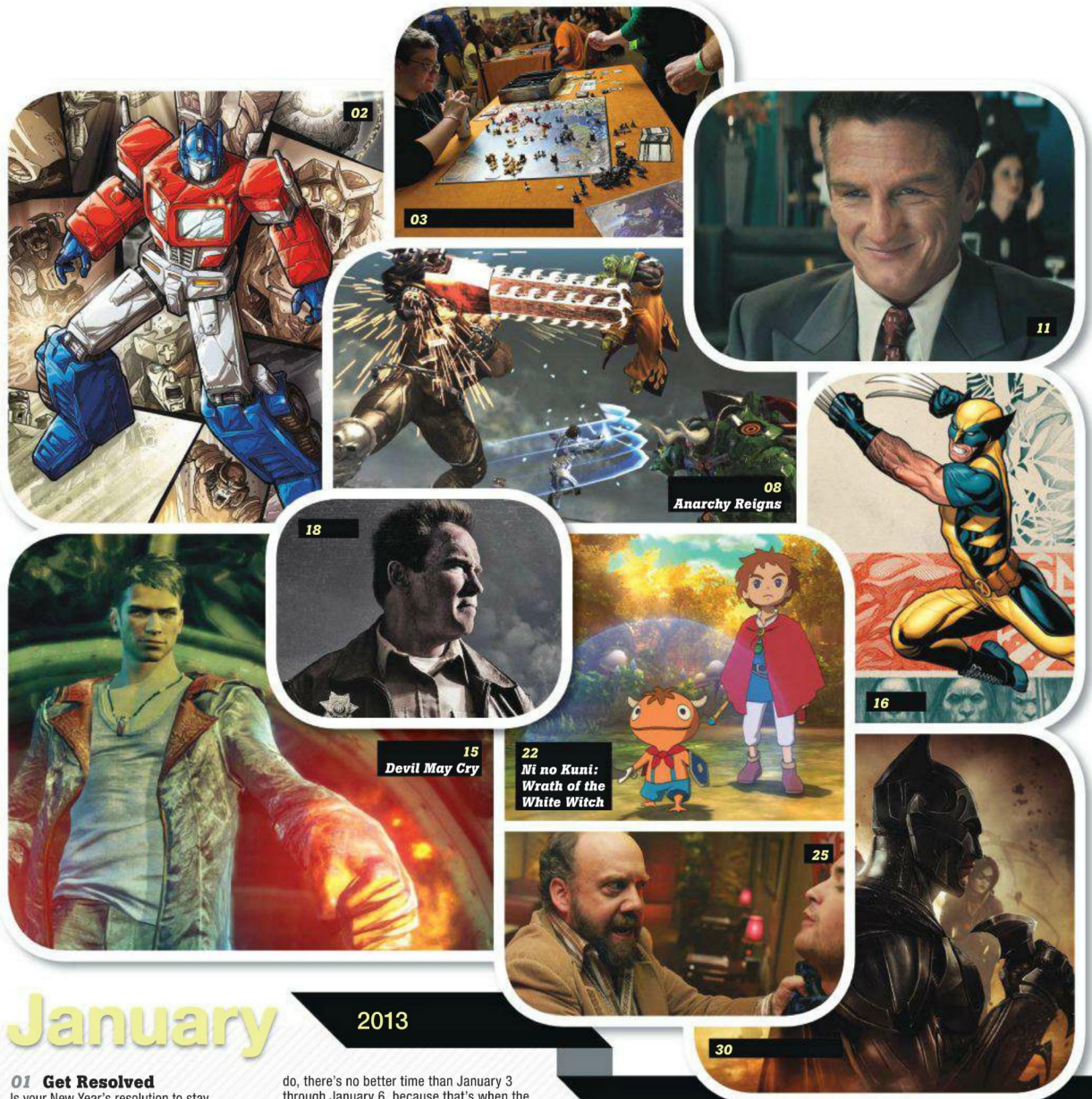
Composer/producer Neil Davidge of Massive Attack is joined by 16 of the world's most renowned electronica artists, including Skrillex, Sander Van Doorn, and Apocalyptica, to create a soundtrack that lives up to the Halo legacy.

\$13.99
halo4soundtrack.com

PORTLANDIA: A GUIDE FOR VISITORS

If you're visiting Portlandia, don't forget this humorous guide to all the best wheelchair-accessible, skateboard-accessible, and segway-accessible shops, schools, restaurants, and food carts the beautiful city has to offer.

\$16.99
hachettebookgroup.com



January

2013

01 Get Resolved

Is your New Year's resolution to stay informed on all of the latest games? Then you should be making regular trips to gameinformer.com to watch episodes of Test Chamber. We play a little of everything, from low-budget niche titles to top-tier releases, so you can see which games are worth your time and attention. As a bonus, you also can see us make fools of ourselves.

02 Bumblebee Doesn't Pull Punches

Do you miss those old-fashioned Transformers comics, with all the brutal deaths, gritty action, and insane plots? IDW has you covered with the collected first volume of *Regeneration One*, on sale this month. Simon Furman, the writer of the original comic series, returns to continue the story begun all those years ago. The metal parts fly as the robots get back to doing what they do best: blowing each other up!

03 It's Magfest Time Again

You probably don't make your way to National Harbor, Maryland very often. Maybe it's time to change that! If you

do, there's no better time than January 3 through January 6, because that's when the annual Magfest show is happening. Magfest involves four days of gaming-related bliss, including guests like the Angry Video Game Nerd and the Mega Man-inspired band The Protomen. It's time for a new state slogan: "Maryland: It's For Gamers."

08 New Releases

› Anarchy Reigns (PS3,360)

11 Getting Uglier

If you've ever looked at Sean Penn and thought, "Hey, his face isn't craggy and leathery enough," then *Gangster Squad* is for you. Releasing in theaters today, the movie features the respected actor playing the part of a 1940s gangster. To look the part, Penn wears a bunch of facial prosthetics. Nick Nolte is also in the film (along with Ryan Gosling, Emma Stone, and Josh Brolin), but unlike Penn, Nolte's oversized chin and defeated brow are 100 percent natural.

15 New Releases

› Sniper: Ghost Warrior 2 (PS3,360)
› Devil May Cry (PS3,360)

16 Wolverine vs. Dinosaurs

Fan-favorite comic creator Frank Cho takes on both writing and art duties in the debut of *Savage Wolverine #1*, on sale this month. The clawed mutant mysteriously appears in the dinosaur-filled Savage Land, and scantily clad Shanna the She-Devil is the only one willing to aid him against everyone else there, who are naturally out to kill him.

18 The Last Stand

Arnold Schwarzenegger is known for his action movies, but *The Last Stand* (in theaters today) has to be a comedy. Even though Arnold is playing a small-town sheriff fighting against a cartel, there's no way the film's producers can expect audiences to take Arnold seriously as an action hero again. That's the joke, right? Because if so, we're laughing already.

22 New Releases

› Ni no Kuni: Wrath of the White Witch (PS3)

25 Spoiler Alert!

People don't like the endings of movies ruined for them, but today's theatrical release, *John Dies At The End*, takes care of that right away. The supernatural horror/comedy is written and directed by the same guy behind *Phantasm* and *Bubba Ho-Tep*, so it's bound to have some bizarre and amusing twists. We just hope the title isn't some sort of elaborate fake-out built to surprise us if/when John doesn't actually die. Uh-oh...we just blew our own minds.

30 Finally, Some Backstory

If there's one thing you need with super-heroes, it's involved backstories explaining how they got where they are. If you're interested in Injustice: Gods Among Us (the fighting game from Mortal Kombat developer NetherRealm), then you should keep your eyes open for this month's comic book spin-off that explains what the roster of DC heroes were up to prior to the events of the game.



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top 50 games of 2012



With the unveiling of Unreal Engine 4 and the release of Nintendo Wii U, we expected 2012 to be a year remembered for promise and hype. Instead, Microsoft and Sony abstained from making their announcements. Rather than drool in anticipation over the next-gen games on the horizon, our focus turned to the stellar titles at hand. From consoles and handhelds to tablets and phones, gamers had more options on more platforms than before. In the face of this overwhelming flood, we locked ourselves in a room to curate a list of the best games, moments, publishers, developers, and characters of 2012. Enjoy.



final fantasy XIII-2

The battle system is the real star in Final Fantasy XIII-2, allowing players to manage the flow of combat without getting bogged down in micromanagement. With more customization, generous post-game content, and a new monster-collecting element, this direct sequel improves on the mechanics of its predecessor in every way. The time-travel story doesn't make much sense, but the combat is so fun that you don't care why you're fighting.



JAN 31 | PS3, 360



JAN 11 | PC, IOS

HERO ACADEMY

Hero Academy's turn-based gameplay entrances, infuriates, and tests friendships. The concept is simple: pit teams of elves, dwarves, humans, and more in one-on-one strategy battles, with victory coming by either clearing out enemy rosters or smashing their crystals. The game's depth comes with each race's special abilities and the variety of the different boards. Every turn notification signals that you're inching closer to victory or defeat.



FEB 07 | 3DS

RESIDENT EVIL: REVELATIONS

This handheld entry in the long-running horror series delivers undiluted Resident Evil 4- and 5-caliber action on the go. The story puts those previously mentioned games to shame with interwoven storylines featuring multiple characters and flashbacks. A fulfilling weapon-customization system, clever boss fights, and support of the circle-pad attachment make this a must-play for Resident Evil fans and a reason to own the 3DS.



FEB 21 | PS3, 360

ASURA'S WRATH

CyberConnect2 previously demonstrated its anime appreciation with numerous Naruto games, but Asura's Wrath proves the developer has some insane ideas of its own. The action game has a solid combat system, but the bombastic setpiece moments steal the spotlight. Whether you're punching spaceships while soaring through the stars or battling a galaxy-sized foe, Asura's Wrath is a nonstop demonstration of absurd fun.



FEB 21 | VITA, PC

TALES FROM SPACE: MUTANT BLOBS ATTACK

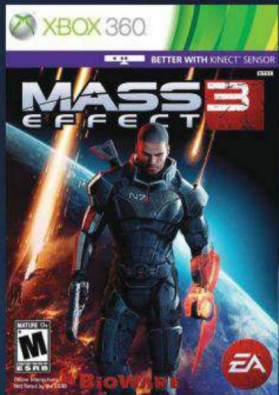
Mutant Blobs Attack was the shining star of a Vita launch lineup crammed with bland ports. DrinkBox Studios' sequel to the 2011 PS3 game About a Blob retains the stylish visuals and unique soundtrack and replaces the things that didn't work with ones that do. Manipulating platforms and other objects in the environment via the touchscreen cleverly shows off the Vita's capabilities, and the game rightly focuses on entertaining puzzles and platforming rather than boss battles.

BEST

ROLE-PLAYING,
DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

mass effect 3

All of your choices in the Mass Effect series over the last five years led to this thrilling culmination of Commander Shepard's actions. In addition to presenting the consequences of your previous decisions, the final chapter sports numerous gameplay improvements. Refined gunplay, a renewed focus on RPG elements, and improved encounter design put Shepard in top form for the war against the Reapers. BioWare also added a fantastic multiplayer mode that it supported with free updates all year. Mass Effect 3 is the complete package – an ambitious, genre-crossing adventure that demonstrates the best of what games can offer.

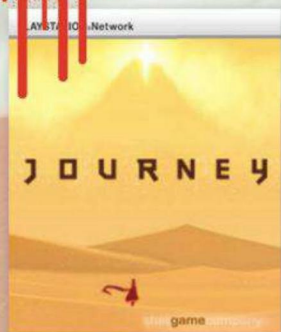


MAR 06 | Wii U, PS3, 360, PC

EDITOR'S PICK 2012

GAME
OF THE YEAR

BEST
PS3 EXCLUSIVE



journey

Journey is not defined by characters or even gameplay, but instead its exploration of mortality is powerfully conveyed by stripping away video game conventions. Whether you play solo or with others via multiplayer, the game stands as a beautifully constructed allegory complete with stirring visuals and music. Journey is not a traditional game, but developer thatgamecompany crafted yet another thought-provoking title that pushes the boundaries of what interactive entertainment can achieve.

MAR 13 | PS3

top 10 villains

RAUL MENENDEZ

Call of Duty: Black Ops II

A pitiable antagonist, Raul Mendez's harsh upbringing laid the foundation for an evil mastermind. An early foray into madness began when he took a machete to the invaders of his Nicaraguan village. Since then, he has focused on turning America's military technology against itself.

VAAZ MONTENEGRO

Far Cry 3

He may not be the leader of the bandits in *Far Cry 3*, but Vaaz is the one in your face taunting and threatening death. What he lacks in imposing stature he more than makes up for with his unhinged, unpredictable sociopathic tendencies.

HANDSOME JACK

Borderlands 2

Surviving Pandora's hordes of psychopathic bad guys and deadly fauna is tough enough, but Handsome Jack is constantly taunting you over radio communications. His twisted humor and deluded sense of valor makes him a particular nuisance.

THE BLACK WIDOW

DayZ

This insidious zombie apocalypse bandit capitalizes on the kindness of strangers by playing the damsel in distress role. After hearing her cries for help over *DayZ*'s global chat, good-hearted players coming to her rescue are greeted with murder and theft.

SECTOPODS

XCOM: Enemy Unknown

Just when you think you've figured out the rules of *XCOM*, this mechanical behemoth emerges and devastates your team by making two actions in one turn. Many commanders have lost their best soldiers to the Sceptopods' deadly laser beam and rocket barrages.



THE GRAND MASTER TEMPLAR

Assassin's Creed III

The entire *Assassin's Creed* series has built up the Templars as everything that's wrong with the world. *Assassin's Creed III* humanizes the leader of the Templars in a way only video games can, making Connor's inevitable hunt after him even more impactful.

SLENDER MAN

Slender

He has no eyes or ears, but the Slender Man knows where you are. Look closely past those trees in the darkness and you may imagine his tall, gangly form. In reality, he's probably right behind you, but you're too busy running from fear to check over your shoulder.

SKULLMAGEDDON

Double Dragon Neon

Part G.I. Joe's Cobra Commander, part *He-man* and the *Masters of the Universe*'s Skeletor, Skullmageddon is the embodiment of an '80s cartoon villain. His raspy voice, shrill cackle, and the inevitable foiling of his evil plans make him a lovable throwback to simpler times.

KAIUS

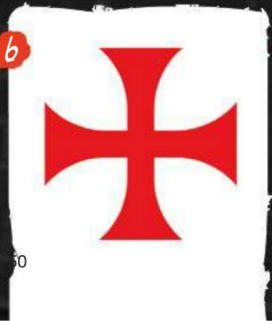
Final Fantasy XIII-2

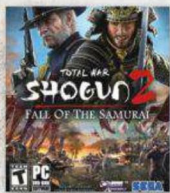
Players spend *Final Fantasy XIII-2* fixing time paradoxes caused by an enigmatic man manipulating the fabric of the universe. Your party's hunt to track down Kaius and put an end to the chaos is a valiant one, but appears futile when this villain finally reveals his hand.

DR. TAN

Dance Central 3

This mad scientist touts mad dance skills. He has all the best dance moves across time down pat, and going toe-to-toe with him proves a stiff challenge. His regimented style doesn't leave much room for improvisation, however, which proves to be his downfall.





MAR 23 | PC

TOTAL WAR: SHOGUN 2 — FALL OF THE SAMURAI

This expansion is a must-have for any aspiring Shogun not only for the massively improved naval game and first-person Gatling mode, but for how it expands on the parts that make Shogun 2 special in the first place. Rallying the clans behind the Imperial or Shogunate banner amps up the already-exceptional diplomatic maneuvering, and the endgame Realm Divide event is far more epic as the endcap to an entire grand campaign's worth of politicking.



APR 06 | WII

XENOBLADE CHRONICLES

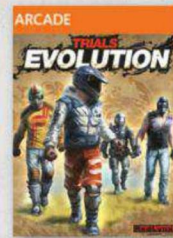
Passionate fans campaigned hard to get the chance to experience this new game from the creator of Xenogears and Xenosaga. Xenoblade Chronicles follows Shulk and his mysterious sword, the Monado, as they journey across the bodies of warring titans Bionis and Mechonis. The complex social and battle systems let Wii owners experience one last gigantic hurrah before putting the console to rest.



APR 13 | 360

FEZ

Curious gamers spent years waiting to try out Polytron's enigmatic game about a cute little guy named Gomez and his perception-altering fez. Those fans weren't disappointed. Fez is all about expanding your horizons and thinking in new ways, and few games offer more novel puzzles. From scanning in-game QR codes to paying attention to how your controller vibrates, Fez broadens your mind while delivering memorable fun.



APR 18 | 360

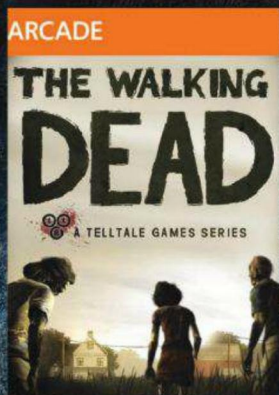
TRIALS EVOLUTION

The sequel to one of the first Xbox Live Arcade blockbusters, Trials Evolution takes its predecessor's simple formula of using an off-road motorbike to conquer increasingly difficult sidescrolling obstacle courses to new heights. The challenging, physics-based gameplay remains the same, but the Excitebike-style multiplayer, new outdoor environments, and better-balanced single-player campaign add depth and variety while decreasing frustration. Plus, excellent creation tools for the community deliver a near-endless supply of amazing new levels.

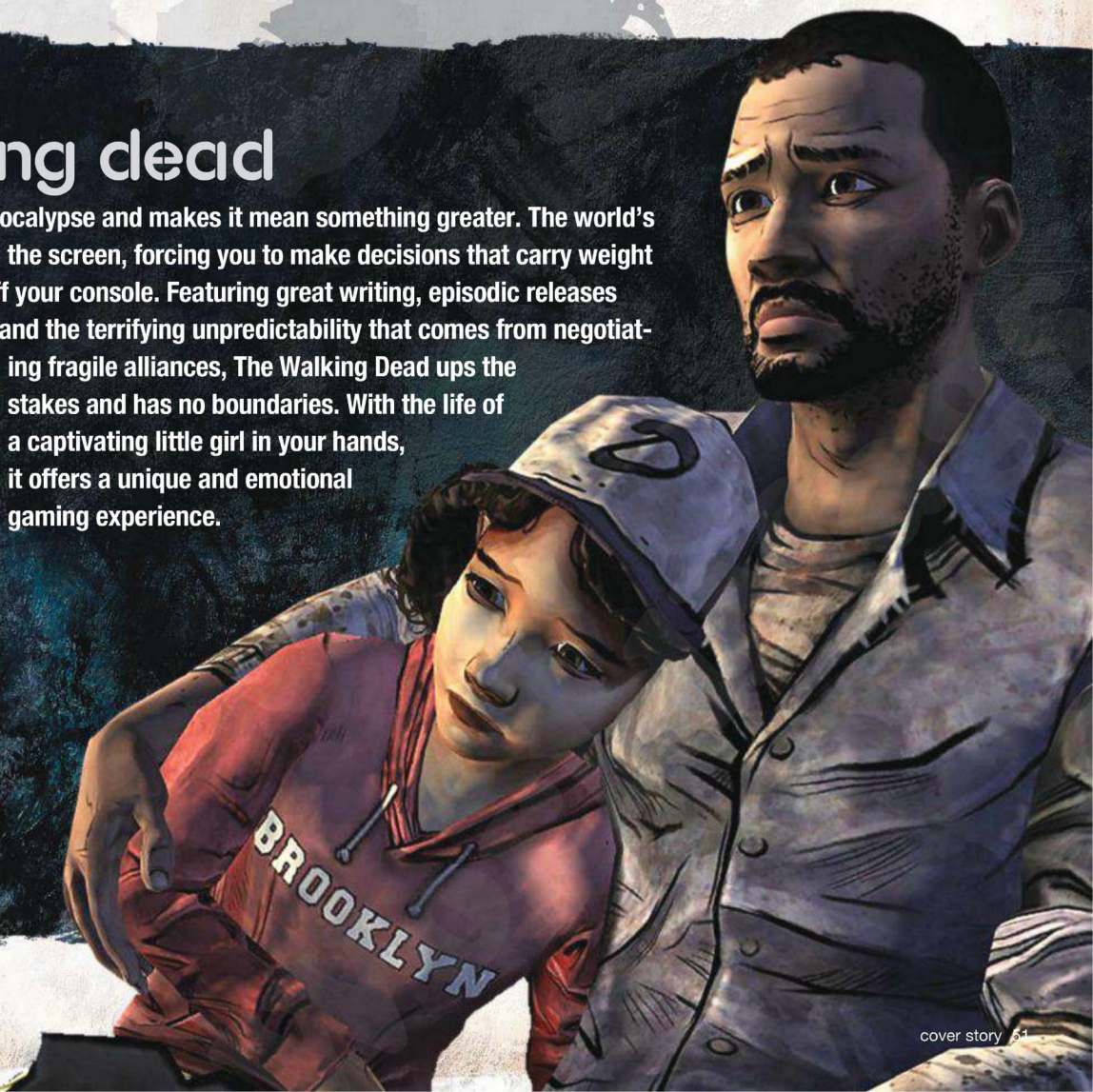
the walking dead

Telltale takes a zombie apocalypse and makes it mean something greater. The world's emotional trials transcend the screen, forcing you to make decisions that carry weight well after you've turned off your console. Featuring great writing, episodic releases with intense cliffhangers, and the terrifying unpredictability that comes from negotiat-

ing fragile alliances, The Walking Dead ups the stakes and has no boundaries. With the life of a captivating little girl in your hands, it offers a unique and emotional gaming experience.



APR 24 | PS3, 360, PC, iOS



PROTOTYPE 2

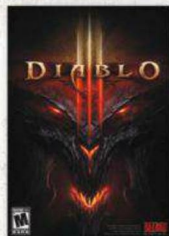
Prototype 2 overcomes the issues of the first entry to earn a place alongside other memorable open-world entries. Protagonist James Heller starts with an arsenal of awesome powers that exponentially expand, making you feel like the ultimate slaying machine. The story isn't Shakespeare, but tracking down previous hero Alex Mercer is a fun concept. It's a shame the game didn't sell well, leaving developer Radical Entertainment devastated by layoffs and killing the chances of Prototype 3.



APR 24 | PS3, 360, PC

DIABLO III

You know you've left a lasting mark on a genre when other games of its ilk are described as clones. Expectations were high for Diablo III, but Blizzard rises to the challenge. In spite of the rough launch and DRM issues, Diablo remains one of the premier hack-and-slash franchises on the market. The five unique classes, customizable skill system that encourages tinkering, and unending trail of loot make it one of the best co-op experiences of the year.



MAY 15 | PC

MAX PAYNE 3

At long last, Rockstar's doomed hero Max Payne returns, once again embroiled in a world of pain and deceit. The game traces Max's descent into drugs and alcohol via his escape from New Jersey into the glamorous world of Brazilian high society. The action keeps the focus on the traditional Bullet Time gun acrobatics, but the lush setting and engrossing storytelling make it feel new.



MAY 15 | PS3, 360, PC

top 10 heroes

LEE EVERETT

The Walking Dead

In a world overwhelmed by a zombie plague, Lee's the convicted felon you want at your side to make the hard calls. No matter what choices he makes, and who he sacrifices along the way, everyone who plays The Walking Dead knows what defines Lee — an unwavering commitment to protecting a little girl named Clementine.



MASTER CHIEF

Halo 4

After three games starring Spartan-117, Halo 4 finally gives us a glimpse behind the helmet of the conflicted hero inside. Driven by duty, and unwavering against the tallest odds, John must still deal with the emotions that make him human and find a way to protect the one person who's actually important to him.



CORVO ATTANO

Dishonored

Corvo is already legendary in Dunwall for his combat prowess when he serves as Lord Protector to the beautiful Empress Jessamine. This legend takes a dark turn after he's wrongly framed for the Empress' murder and he vengefully vows to track down the conspirators.



COMMANDER SHEPARD

Mass Effect 3

Over the course of the trilogy, Shepard transformed from a soldier into the savior of the galaxy. Shepard is the only thing standing between the Reapers and the end of the universe. After hundreds of smaller choices, one final decision sets the stage for the future of the Mass Effect universe.



CONNOR

Assassin's Creed III

Rarely do we see a video game character grow from a naive child to a seasoned hero. Connor is more thoughtful and idealistic than previous Assassin's Creed heroes, but he proves he's a worthy branch on that deadly family tree through his conflicted but riveting character arc.



DEATH

Darksiders II

Sometimes heroes pop off the screen because they're just so incredibly awesome to play. Death leaps and slashes his way into this list by sheer force of coolness. Few video game heroes offer the same sense of power as when the eldest Horsemen of the Apocalypse rides down his foes on a spectral steed, giant scythe in hand.



MAX PAYNE

Max Payne 3

He's miserable. He's flawed. But he won't let injustice stand. Max Payne has lost everything in life, and he's drowned his sorrows in the bottom of a whiskey bottle to forget the worst of it. However, when he sees powerful men taking advantage of the weakest and poorest among us, he slow-motion leaps into action, guns ablaze.



ASURA

Asura's Wrath

When you've been screwed over as badly as Asura, it's easy to understand how you might be defined by unquenchable rage. Asura traces a path of destruction and vengeance everywhere he goes, leaving dead mortals and gods alike in his wake. But he's still a hero to his daughter, Mithra, and that's all that matters in the end.



QUICO

Papo & Yo

Quico cowers in the closet, hiding from the unstoppable anger of an alcoholic father. In the darkness, he steps into an imaginary world of his own creation and comes to terms with his own identity in the face of his father's illness and violence. In a year dominated by killers and revenge, Quico holds his own with wisdom and heart.



THE NINJA

Mark of the Ninja

The unnamed lead in Mark of the Ninja agrees to bear the tattoo that will give him the supernatural power to defend his clan, but at a terrible cost — death or madness. His path takes more than a few turns, and this ninja is faced with a stark and surprising choice to determine who he really is.



DRAGON'S DOGMA

Capcom's East-meets-West take on action-RPGs is a crazy hybrid all its own. Cool story? Check. Massive fantasy monsters that you can climb upon? Check. Scads of loot? Check. What sets it further apart is its unique pawn system. Your AI companions can be recruited by other players, gaining XP and knowledge about Gransys, Dragon's Dogma's massive world. Think Skyrim by way of Dark Souls, and you're on the right track.



MAY 22 | PS3, 360

CIVILIZATION V: GODS & KINGS

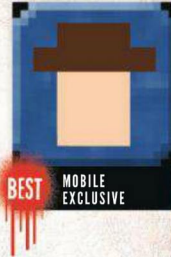
Taking a game with the complexity of Civilization V to the next level without adding even more minutiae that places too many demands on players' attentions is a tall order, but the Gods & Kings expansion walks that tightrope with skill and grace. Espionage adds flavor and intrigue with little overhead, religion makes the early game more interesting only to step back in the later and more complicated stages of history, and the across-the-board rebalancing is a huge positive for an already amazing game.



JUN 19 | PC

10000000

Pitching EightyEightGames' 10000000 to friends isn't an easy task. Once you get past the name (it's 10 million), there's the game itself. This match-three-style puzzle game has role-playing elements, and a retro look and soundtrack. Your best bet? Just hand them your iPad and let them figure out why 10000000 is greater than the sum of its already excellent parts. If you haven't played it yet, download the game and prepare to be sucked into its time-stalling vortex.



JUL 25 | iOS

ORCS MUST DIE 2

Robot Entertainment once again delivers a satisfying hybrid of tower defense and third-person action. With a cartoony aesthetic and plenty of one-liners, Orcs Must Die 2 doesn't apologize for being fun. The tense action of mowing down endless waves of orcs is nicely complemented by strategic timeouts for placing traps and reassessing loadouts. Add in the excellent new co-op, and Orcs Must Die 2 easily slaughters its way onto our list.



JUL 30 | PC

SOUND SHAPES

Nothing is complex about jumping around levels as a little dot, sticking to surfaces, and avoiding dangers, but the payoff in Sound Shapes is enormous. Each of the levels is a song that musically builds up as you progress, and each level contributes to an album composed by artists like Deadmau5. You can also create your own tunes/levels in the game, but even if you don't you'll still make beautiful music.



AUG 7 | PS3, VITA

clarksiders II

After controlling War in the last game, players assume the role of Death in Darksiders II. The new Horseman is more agile than his brother, allowing players to explore the vast world, solve puzzles, and kill horrific abominations like never before. Chaining together your supernatural abilities keeps combat fun, but the deep loot system is the most addictive feature. Finding chests and beating tough foes yield more powerful equipment, ensuring that Death is always well-prepared.



AUG 14 | PS3, 360, PC



SLEEPING DOGS

Numerous delays and a switch in publishers couldn't stop United Front Games from finishing *Sleeping Dogs*. Although its release didn't break any records, the game offers open-world fans plenty to get excited about. The Hong Kong setting and characters stand in stark contrast to most western-focused games, and the gameplay deftly mixes third-person shootouts, driving, and kung fu-infused brawling with an undercover-cop story reminiscent of *Infernal Affairs*.



AUG 14 | PS3, 360, PC

DUST: AN ELYSIAN TAIL

The highlight of 2012's Summer of Arcade promotion, *Dust* provides gamers with a unique blend of action and exploration. An emphasis on fluid combat, an array of RPG-lite features, and the joy of uncovering secrets are the three pillars that hold up the gameplay, while a distinct artistic style creates mesmerizing visuals. Old-school charm and airtight controls make *Dust* a pleasure to play, and the many hidden corridors and treasures keep you going after the credits roll.



AUG 15 | 360

TRANSFORMERS: FALL OF CYBERTRON

Whether you're a fan of the robots in disguise or you just like a great action game, *Fall of Cybertron* ratchets up the intensity with a cavalcade of playable characters, big setpiece moments, and tight gameplay. From prowling through stealth sequences to rampaging as a robotic dinosaur, the game tracks the Autobots and Decepticons as they brawl through the final days on their home planet.



AUG 21 | PS3, 360, PC

GUILD WARS 2

Many players' hopes for the next generation of MMOs were riding on *Guild Wars 2*'s August launch, and ArenaNet's fantastic MMORPG delivers on almost all fronts. Dynamic events are an immeasurable improvement on genre-standard static quests, the action-oriented combat allows far more skill and strategy to every battle, and public world vs. world PvP is the kind of player-driven endgame many have dreamed of since *Dark Age of Camelot*. The small matter of not charging a subscription fee doesn't hurt *Guild Wars 2*'s legacy one bit, either.



AUG 28 | PC

MARK OF THE NINJA

Klei Entertainment snuck out of the shadows to craft one of the best stealth games in years. Players control a supernatural assassin as he sneaks and kills his way through an array of enemy mercenaries, devious traps, and the most dangerous enemies of all – light and sound. With a clever upgrade system, phenomenal replay value, and a killer story, Klei proves 2D stealth can be a recipe for fun.



SEP 01 | 360, PC

top 10 moments

THE VERY MODEL

Mass Effect 3

Mass Effect's universe has been torn by the salarians' decision to sterilize the krogans with the genophage virus. *Mass Effect 3* introduces a genophage cure that gives Mordin a chance for redemption, but the grim consequences extend well beyond the threat to Shepard's fragile political alliance.

ROAD TRIP FROM HELL

The Walking Dead Episode 3: The Long Road Ahead

Telltale's *The Walking Dead* series is full of bad situations that require hard decisions, but in the span of a few minutes, an RV ride from hell hits you with several unexpected twists that derail your adventure and remind you that no one is safe in a zombie apocalypse.

DEATH OF A HERO

XCOM: Enemy Unknown

XCOM's permadeath forces players to own their mistakes. That lesson is driven home when your favorite soldier – the one you built your entire squad around and who saved the day countless times – gets unceremoniously slaughtered at the hands of the enemy. Remember: Real commanders don't reload!

WHAT'S BEHIND THE DOOR?

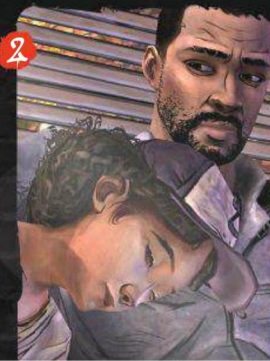
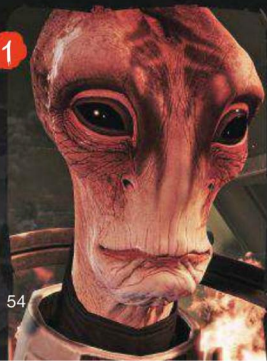
Assassin's Creed III

Assassin's Creed's centuries-spanning mystery all comes down to what's behind an ancient, glowing door. We won't spoil what it is, but the revelation brings long-sought answers and raises new questions that leave players pondering the myriad directions the series could go next.

ATOP THE MOUNTAIN

Journey

Players face a hard voyage in *Journey*, which is underscored by the conclusion's long, cold trek up a frozen mountain. What players discover after that is a liberating experience that drives home *Journey*'s emotional allegory.



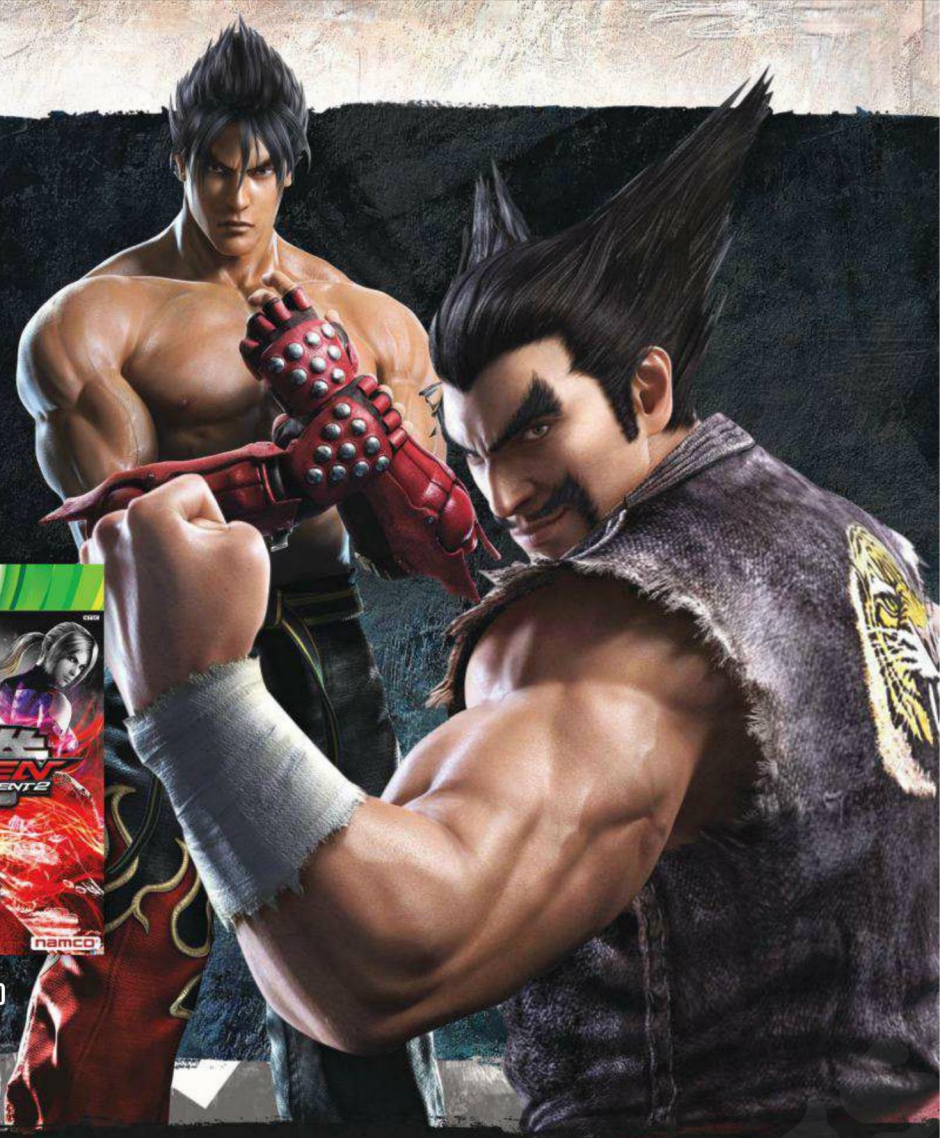
BEST
FIGHTING

tekken tag tournament 2

Namco's latest in the celebrated fighting series doesn't reinvent the wheel. Rather, it tunes up the formula with a staggering 59 playable characters, tons of free downloadable content, and one of the smoothest online experiences in the genre. Namco has been busy polishing the game since it arrived in arcades a year ago, and the developer's hard work shines through.



SEP 11 | PS3, 360



HILT DEEP

Asura's Wrath

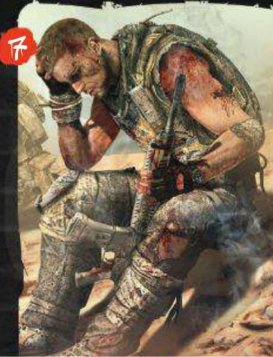
Asura and Augus' epic battle on the moon stands out in a game composed of outrageous moments. As the duo hurtles towards Earth, Augus impales Asura with his sword, pinning him to the planet. Then the blade continues growing until it bursts out the other side of the globe. Who says Japanese gaming has grown stale?



WHITE PHOSPHORUS

Spec Ops: The Line

Rarely do shooters make gamers think twice about pulling the trigger. Spec Op: The Line does just that when a by-the-numbers mortar mission takes an unexpected turn, blindsiding the player with tough morality questions most military shooters go out of their way to avoid.



THE END

Halo 4

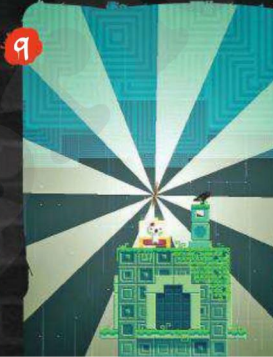
Halo 4's ending doesn't just provide the epic, action-packed conclusion we expect from a triple-A blockbuster. It also personalizes Master Chief in a way no Halo game has done before, making us care about the man behind the armor as he struggles to set aside his own desires for the greater good.



THE EUREKA! MOMENT

Fez

Whether you scanned a QR code, paused for some seemingly innocuous controller vibrations, or deciphered Gomez's mysterious mathematics, everyone experiences a "Eureka!" moment in Fez. Few experiences are as satisfying as ending 20 minutes of head scratching with another anti-cube under your belt.



CLAPTRAP'S BIRTHDAY BASH

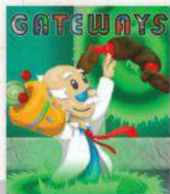
Borderlands 2

In one of Borderlands 2's many amusing missions, the player is tasked with inviting Pandora's most memorable characters to Claptrap's birthday party. After everyone politely declines, you're left alone with the series' sad little robot and a stack of pizza waiting for the hilariously awkward engagement to end.



GATEWAYS

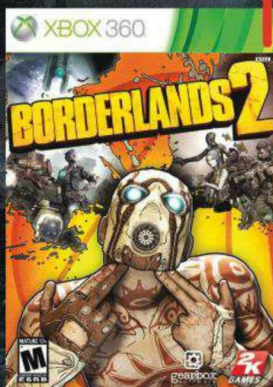
This indie puzzle game from Smudged Cat Games evolves the Portal formula by giving you four powerful guns that let you bend time, space, gravity, and your own size to your will. The 2D perspective makes the early puzzles a cinch. Once you start exploring the sprawling, Metroid-style laboratory, however, the puzzles begin mixing your unique abilities in mind-bending ways that not even Portal 2 can compete with.



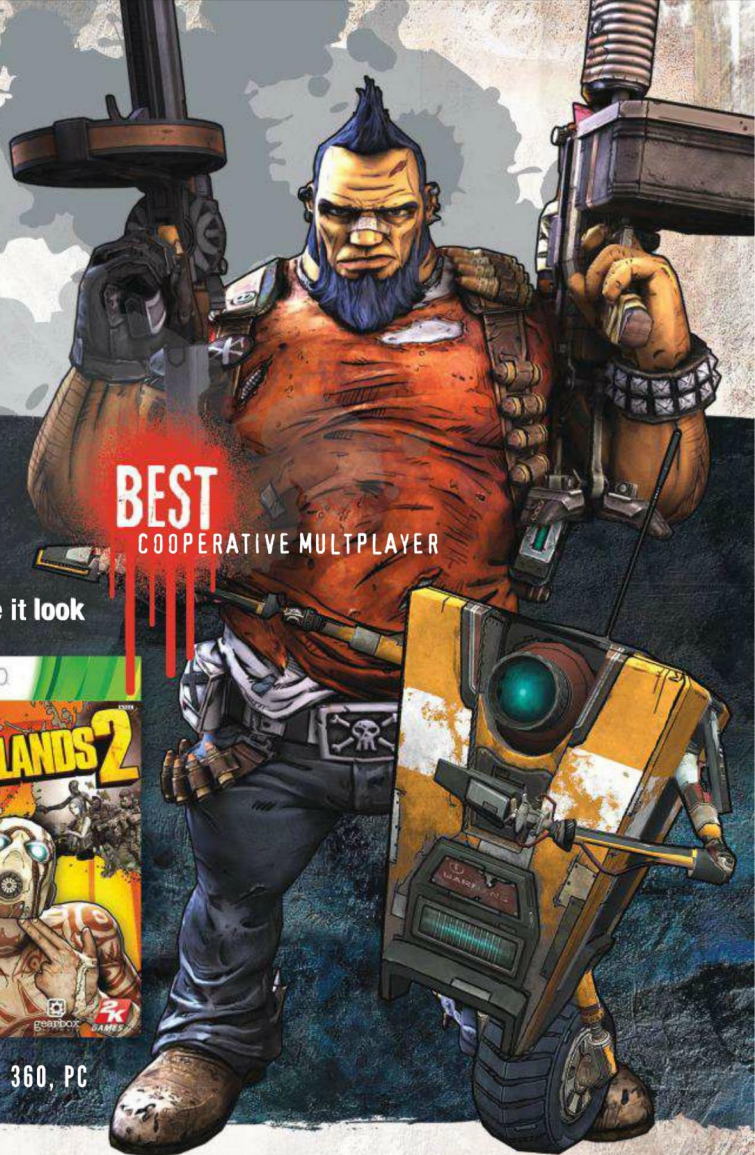
SEP 13 | 360, PC

borderlands 2

The innovations of the original Borderlands set a high bar for a sequel. Gearbox didn't just surpass fan expectations – it made it look easy. Borderlands 2 is one of the rare sequels that doesn't make players choose between “more” and “better.” The world is bigger and offers more variety. Guns are more plentiful and distinct at the same time. The story strikes a balance between gonzo humor and serious moments. The improved gameplay and complementary classes easily snag our co-op game of the year award; the myriad other enhancements make Borderlands 2 a blueprint for how to make a sequel.



SEP 18 | PS3, 360, PC



BEST
COOPERATIVE MULTPLAYER

top 10 dorks

MOG

Final Fantasy XIII-2

Any good will moogles might have had from previous Final Fantasy games is torpedoed as soon as Mog's stupid mouth opens. Saying “kupo” at the end of every sentence is a one-way ticket to Dorktown, especially when everything you're saying is either obvious or annoying.

SUPERMAN

Lego Batman 2

Superman is bland and wholesome, but he makes up for it with superpowers, right? Not for the majority of this game, and Superman minus the “super” is just “man.” The only person who seems to like him is Robin – a fact that should be a big red flag for any comic book hero.

BRYCE BOLTSMAN

NeverDead

Remember all of those times in NeverDead when Bryce Boltzman was completely generic, unlikable, and boring? Of course you don't. No one does, because no one played NeverDead. You'll just have to believe us when we tell you that you made the right choice.

FIDGET

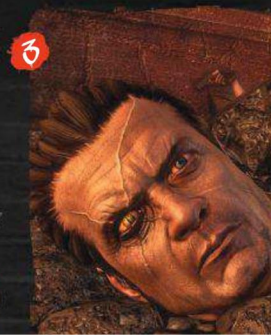
Dust: An Elysian Tale

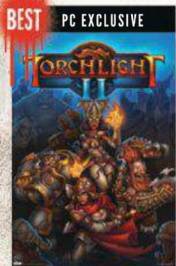
Some people might argue that Fidget is adorable. Those people deserve the hell they have made for themselves. Every conversation with this flying, furry companion is a vision of the apocalypse – witnessing the plagues, torment, and desolation that accompany the end of all things.

DANCIN' HAN SOLO

Kinect Star Wars

Though we're all familiar with the desecration of our favorite Star Wars characters by now, this one still stings. Setting a new low bar, our favorite smuggler dances to retooled popular music in the iconic carbon freezing chamber. Leia: “Han, this is terrible!” Han: “I know.”





SEP 20 | PC

TORCHLIGHT II

Nobody used to beat Blizzard at its own game, but Torchlight II marks the end of that era. Outstanding skill, class, item, and enemy design make replaying Torchlight II's random maps an eternity of amazing gameplay. Welcome to the future, where the best PC game of the year is downloadable, has no online requirement, and costs a mere \$20. Come to think of it, the future rules.

LITTLEBIGPLANET VITA

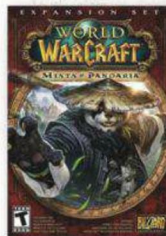
Tarsier Studios and Double Eleven created a game that lives up to the standards of Sackboy's PS3 adventures. The game features the same fun and inventive sidescrolling platforming, and makes good use of the Vita's touch panels with clever minigames and gameplay mechanics. The deep creation tools fans expect return and are made even better by "pinch and rotate" touchscreen controls that evoke the iPad.



SEP 25 | VITA

WORLD OF WARCRAFT: MISTS OF PANDARIA

The fourth expansion to Blizzard's juggernaut MMORPG has players returning in droves for its Pokémon-like pet battle system and another huge dose of the best dungeon and raid content in the business. The fact that Blizzard is still bringing new ideas that millions approve of heartily enough to spend money every month on a seven-year-old game is incredible.



SEP 25 | PC

NBA 2K13

The challenger NBA Live series dropped off the face of the planet yet again, but that hasn't stopped Visual Concepts from improving its perennial All-Star hoops simulation. Building off the series' legacy of deep and varied gameplay, NBA 2K13 features the best single-player mode in sports games to date, an improved online experience, and the most polished broadcast style presentation in the genre.



OCT 02 | Wii U, PS3, 360

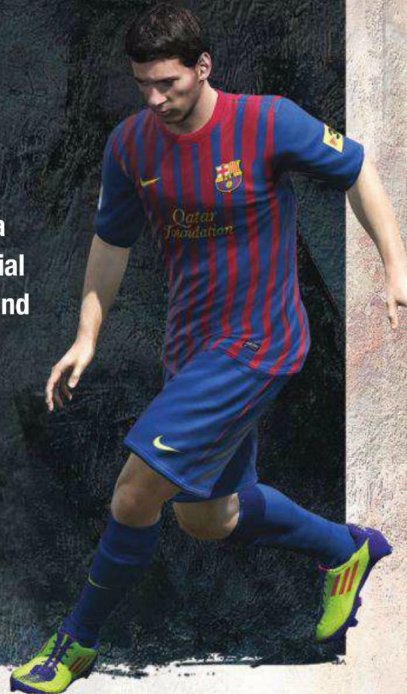
BEST SPORTS

fifa 13

The FIFA franchise keeps building on its successes. This year's entry boasts an alluring expansion of offensive options, a career mode with international managerial assignments, dynamic player behavior, and the spread of the promotion/relegation Seasons concept into other multiplayer modes. The game improves on multiple fronts, and while not perfect by any means, it captures a lot of the beauty of soccer and earns our sports game of the year nod.



SEP 25 | Wii U, PS3, 360, PC



PAUL REVERE

Assassin's Creed III

Paul Revere's midnight ride is one of the great American legends. According to Assassin's Creed III, it's all a lie; Revere's main contributions were riding pillion on a horse, whining at Connor to hurry up, and shouting wildly inconsistent directions. Some hero.

BEN

The Walking Dead

The only thing this guy can do right is earn a place on our Top 10 Dorks list. Whether he's "protecting" the survivors or "watching" Clementine, everything Ben touches goes south. If this franchise were all about him, it would have to be retitled The Walking Liability.

JAKE MULLER

Resident Evil 6

Jake Muller is either an elaborate parody of stupid Resident Evil characters or the product of a hopelessly clueless company trying to make an edgy protagonist. His awful dialogue and impotent attempts at being cool fail at every turn — but they sure succeed at sucking!

THE LEE BROTHERS

Double Dragon Neon

With their air guitars, high fives, and barrage of one-liners, Billy and Jimmy Lee are the epitome of '80s cool. Here's the problem with that: It isn't cool anywhere but the '80s. This duo might be a big hit as a Bon Jovi cover band, but otherwise they just look like losers.

NICK

Lollipop Chainsaw

Nick is a severed head that is kept alive through an arcane ritual, so he gets points for perseverance. Unfortunately, he's also a constant wet blanket. Who wants a sarcastic, torsoless wiener raining on your parade when you're trying to chainsaw through a horde of zombies?

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OCT 09 | PS3, 360, PC

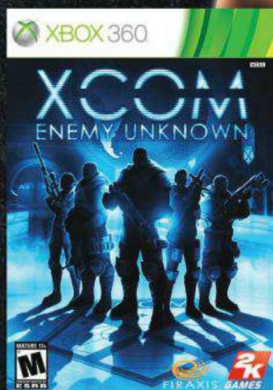
DISHONORED

In a year where new concepts in retail games were as scarce as good NPD numbers (maybe there is a correlation there?), Dishonored defiantly slices against the grain. Successfully melding otherworldly powers of BioShock and stealth-based gameplay of Thief, Arkane Studio's riveting revenge tale steals the show as the best action game of the year. Whether you stick to the shadows or wield your powers like a bloodthirsty agent of death, Dishonored offers thrills. We hope we get to visit the Steampunk/Victorian world of Dunwall again in the near future.

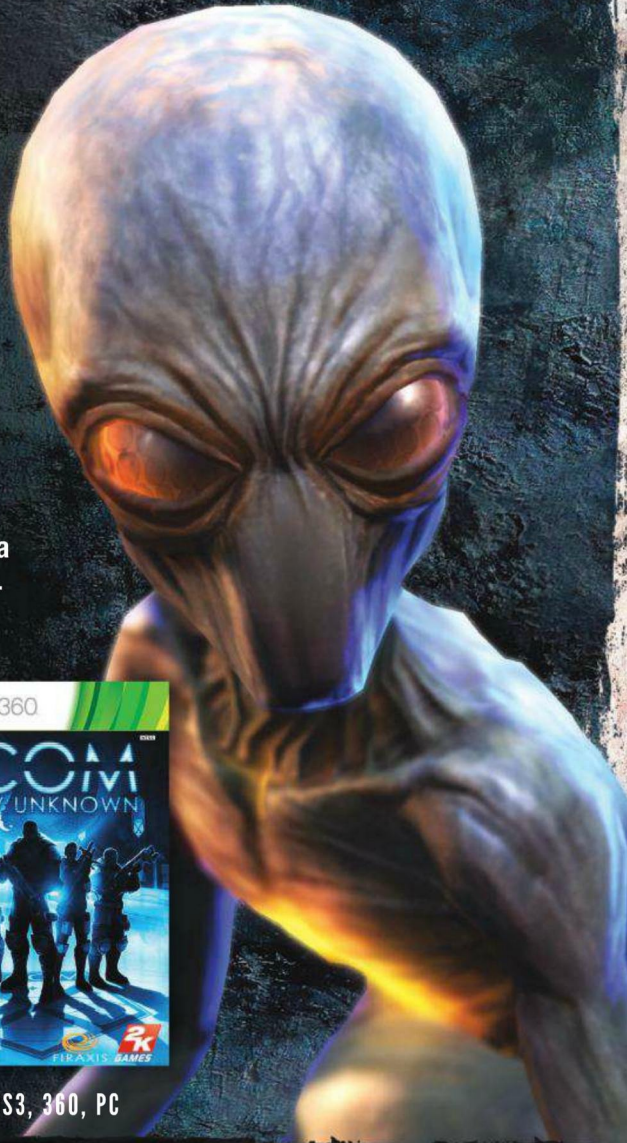
BEST STRATEGY

xcom: enemy unknown

Pleasing hardcore PC fans of the much-beloved 1990s franchise and expanding to a broader console audience sound like mutually exclusive goals, but Firaxis bull's-eyes both targets with a single shot. XCOM's nail-biting tension, tough strategic decisions, and incredible turn-based tactical combat make up a wonderful love letter to a bygone era and an amazing introduction to strategy gaming for a new generation.



OCT 09 | PS3, 360, PC



top 10 headlines

MARQUEE DEVELOPERS MOVE ON

The industry got a shakeup with the retirement of BioWare doctors Ray Muzyka and Greg Zeschuk and the exit of Cliff Bleszinski at Epic Games. The BioWare co-founders are pursuing interests outside of the gaming industry, while Bleszinski's future plans are unknown. Unfortunately, as time goes on we may see more and more of our favorite luminaries move on.

CONGRESS DEFEATS SOPA

Amid concerns about Internet freedom, the SOPA and PIPA anti-piracy bills were killed before they went up for a vote. The Entertainment Software Association (ESA) backed the bills before ultimately dropping support in the face of consumer ire. Even members like Epic Games disliked the bill, showing that although it aimed to protect intellectual property, there must be a better way to do it.

FREE-TO-PLAY GOES MAINSTREAM

Once the free-to-play model was considered only for subpar titles, but this year saw more triple-A MMOs embrace it. Guild Wars 2 uses the model to great success – and didn't have to use an obnoxious pay-to-progress microtransaction scheme in the process. BioWare's Star Wars: The Old Republic just went free-to-play as well, perhaps providing more traction for the model in the U.S.

ACTIVISION SETTLES WITH WEST & ZAMPELLA

The legal saga between Activision and former Infinity Ward heads Jason West and Vince Zampella came to an end with a settlement out of court. No details are known, but perhaps Activision will think twice about engineering the firing of its creative talent and driving them into the arms of a competitor.

NEW HARDWARE

Nintendo and Sony already kicked off the next generation with the release of the Wii U and Vita, respectively. Although their final verdicts won't be written for some time, both came out of the gate with some impressive tech and features that excited gamers and have us hoping for a prosperous future.

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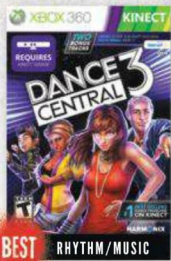


5



DANCE CENTRAL 3

Harmonix continues to be the only company helping justify your Kinect purchase. The newest entry in the Dance Central series adds more than a bunch of new songs and dances moves. The hilarious time-traveling dance-crime-fighting story mode, decade-spanning song set, and improved party modes make Dance Central 3 one of the most entertaining workouts you'll have all year.

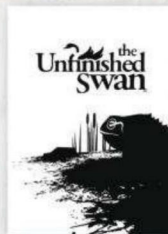


BEST RHYTHM/MUSIC

OCT 16 | 360

THE UNFINISHED SWAN

Kudos to Sony for publishing Giant Sparrow's *The Unfinished Swan*, an artful game that translates heavy themes like memory and loss into a beguiling experience. Using gobs of paint, a young child named Monroe reveals a stark black and white world he must explore to find the titular painting created by his late mother. The game is unlike any other, and stands with *Journey* as one of the year's most inventive titles.



OCT 16 | PS3

ZERO ESCAPE: VIRTUE'S LAST REWARD

As the sequel to the underground hit *9 Hours, 9 Persons, 9 Doors*, *Zero Escape: Virtue's Last Reward* had a lot to live up to. Thankfully, it carries the legacy to even greater heights. Constantly questioning potential allies and enemies' motivations while piecing together clues is one thing, but doing it across different timelines where betrayal may mean death is beyond addictive. Add intense, fun-to-solve puzzles to the mix, and *Zero Escape* grips you in more ways than one.

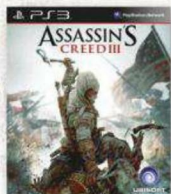


BEST HANDHELD EXCLUSIVE

OCT 24 | 3DS, VITA

ASSASSIN'S CREED III

After four previous games, *Assassin's Creed III* launches its fans into another new era in history. Connor's riveting journey through the American Revolution is filled with opportunities for frontier exploration and dramatic naval combat. Moreover, we finally get the payoff we've been waiting for since the first game, with a surprising wrap-up to the present-day storyline, and a teasing glimpse of what's to come in future installments.



OCT 30 | Wii U, PS3, 360

NEED FOR SPEED: MOST WANTED

Saying this game is a combination of *Burnout Paradise* and *Most Wanted* isn't a slight on developer Criterion. Combining the car-based upgrade system and open world with cop chases and boss-like cars on the *Most Wanted* list provides a structure that keeps the racing action and spectacular crashes flowing. Add in the constant racing suggestions from the online Autolog feature and multi-player options, and racers have many avenues to see Criterion's finest work.

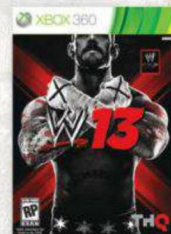


BEST RACING

OCT 30 | PS3, 360, PC

WWE '13

With few challengers, it's easy for this wrestler to be king of the ring, but a lack of competition hasn't stopped THQ from delivering power-bombs. *WWE '13's* Attitude Era mode perfectly captures the thrills and antics of WWE heyday from the '90s. The wild in-ring action and a robust character creator that allows fans to create favorite wrestlers not on the roster also help make this the perfect tribute to the male soap opera.



OCT 30 | PS3, 360, Wii

DISNEY BUYS LUCASFILM

Disney's acquiring of Lucasfilm carries the brand's torch forward with the retirement of George Lucas. Episodes VII-IX are on the way at shorter intervals than the previous films, and they may even rescue the movie series' battered reputation. On the video game front, no changes have occurred yet for LucasArts or Disney Interactive — two companies in dire need of direction.

THQ'S MELTDOWN & THE MIDDLE CLASS

The year 2012 was rough for THQ. A plummeting stock price, studio closures, poor *Darksiders II* sales, the loss of the UFC license, and game delays have left the company with few options. Once a solid middle-tier publisher/developer, the decline of THQ may leave little room for companies who are neither indie game makers nor big fish like EA.

38 STUDIOS V. RHODE ISLAND

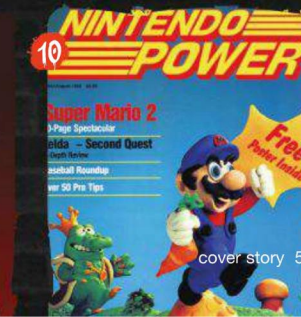
After accepting \$75 million in loans from the state of Rhode Island, Kingdoms of Amalur developer 38 Studios (founded by former MLB pitcher Curt Schilling) went belly up after missing payments to the state. Schilling and some associates are currently embroiled in a lawsuit from the state alleging fraud, financial misconduct, and other charges.

ZYNGA GETS TAKEN DOWN A PEG

The social games publisher's post-IPO decline continues. With its stock price languishing around \$2 a share, several executives are being investigated for insider trading. Meanwhile, Zynga canceled 13 games (including the Sims-like *The Ville*), closed studios, and cut jobs. Is this the future of social games?

MAJOR MEDIA CLOSE THEIR DOORS

Many remember the excitement of reading every new issue of *Nintendo Power* magazine. Unfortunately, future generations won't be able to say the same now that the magazine is gone. Other Future publications folded, and G4 network canceled *Attack of the Show* and *X-Play*.

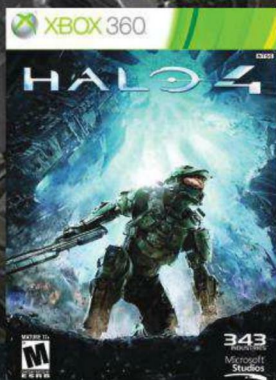


BEST

XBOX 360 EXCLUSIVE,
COMPETITIVE MULTIPLAYER,
SHOOTER

halo 4

Silencing the naysayers who believed no one besides Bungie could make a great Halo game, 343 Industries knocked its debut out of the park. The stunning visuals and sound are the best seen and heard on consoles this year. Master Chief and Cortana's story on planet Requiem is the most compelling and clear of the series. Multiplayer's new modes, weapons, and maps, points-based scoring, and rewarding progression system put it at the top of the competitive heap this year. The new weekly episodic series Spartan Ops will keep the co-op and story rolling onward nearly through the end of 2013.



NOV 06 | 360



NOV 13 | Wii U, PS3, 360, PC

CALL OF DUTY: BLACK OPS II

Call of Duty is the en vogue game to hate on, but the series does over-the-top setpieces better than Michael Bay and still offers a competitive multiplayer experience alongside the best of them. With Black Ops II, developer Treyarch successfully experiments with the blockbuster campaign formula by allowing player decisions to shape the narrative. The multiplayer isn't drastically improved, but noob-friendly loadouts and new e-sports features help broaden its appeal on both ends of the ability spectrum.

top 10 successes

THE ALTERNATIVE FUNDING REVOLUTION

A broader range of games than ever are getting made today, and publishers have nothing to do with it. Thanks to Kickstarter, Indiegogo, and other alternative funding mechanisms, developers from Obsidian to one-man garage teams are bringing their dream projects (and ours) to life.

THE DAWN OF DAYZ

One man and a mod can change the world when the fantasy he's selling is as compelling as Dean "Rocket" Hall's DayZ conversion of Arma 2. Flesh-devouring undead are the backdrop, but thirst, cold, and your fellow survivors are the real dangers of this zombie apocalypse.

THE HALO HANDOVER

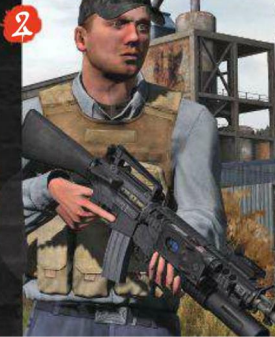
Pessimists began writing Halo off as one of video games' premier franchises as soon as Bungie won its independence from Microsoft in 2007. Instead, the passion of the new caretakers at 343 Industries, Microsoft's deft handling of the transition, and Bungie's graceful exit have made Master Chief a stronger icon than ever.

THE SMITHSONIAN CELEBRATES VIDEO GAMES

If anything can put this timeless "are games art?" debate to rest, it's the Smithsonian American Art Museum debuting an amazing exhibit, The Art of Video Games. We already knew how powerful our favorite medium can be, but a little extra legitimacy from a respected institution never hurt anyone.

MINECRAFT CONQUERS ALL

Mojang's indie exploration/survival/crafting game already owned a raptr worldwide audience coming into 2012, but this year saw the game become a Call of Duty-like force on Xbox 360 as well as a power player in the mobile arena as well.





NOV 13 | PS3, XBOX 360, WII, 3DS, VITA

LEGO THE LORD OF THE RINGS

The team at Traveller's Tales continues to refine its classic formula with Lego The Lord of the Rings, creating the best game in the series so far. Middle-earth is gorgeously realized, and the gradually unfolding world is vast and full of things to explore. Frodo, Gandalf, and the rest of the fellowship fit naturally in the Lego universe, whether you're reliving scenes from the fantasy epic, hunting down collectibles, or simply enjoying the goofy humor that makes Lego games so endearing.



NOV 18 | WII U

NEW SUPER MARIO BROS. U

Just when it looked like the New Super Mario Bros. franchise was getting stale, Nintendo does something like this and totally redeems itself. The new Boost Mode adds another layer on top of the already super fun multiplayer, giving one player the power to assist or destroy his or her friends by adding platforms with the GamePad touchscreen. Even without this great feature, the game is loaded with brand-new enemies, level concepts, and plenty of old-school references for fans of the classics. On top of all this, players finally get a new Mario launch title for the first time on a Nintendo console since the N64 in 1996.



NOV 20 | PS3, 360, PC

HITMAN: ABSOLUTION

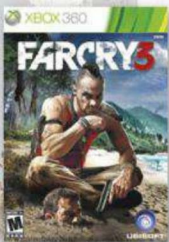
After a long hiatus, Agent 47 recaptures his mantle as gaming's premier hitman. A promise to a longtime friend pits 47 against his former agency in a story that's more personal than previous games, yet delivers all of the creative kills and memorable locations fans expect. Streamlined controls and an expanded move set minimize frustration, while a variety of challenges and the new Contracts mode boost replay value to new heights for the franchise.



NOV 20 | PC

PLANETSIDE 2

Sony Online's massively multiplayer, sci-fi game is a top-tier shooter on gameplay alone, but the persistent world and enormous MMO battles elevate PlanetSide 2 into the stratosphere. The speed and lethality of the infantry combat is reminiscent of Unreal Tournament's glory days, and monstrous vehicles play a crucial role in most battles. Best of all, every shot matters because you're fighting over actual territory and not just a scoreboard.



DEC 04 | PS3, 360, PC

FAR CRY 3

When a group of trust-fund kids accidentally skydive onto a pirate-controlled island, their sunny vacation turns into a bloody nightmare filled with surprises. This third numbered entry in the open-world shooter series is the most complete of the bunch, offering fluid controls, tons of side missions, a crafting system, and the most exotic and dangerous explorable open world this side of Red Dead Redemption. If the roving pirates don't get you, the Komodo dragons or tigers surely will.



DEC 11 | 3DS

PAPER MARIO: STICKER STAR

The Paper Mario series has never been one to coast along on sheer charm. If that was the case, it has enough fuel to circle the solar system a few times. Sticker Star builds on past games, adding an unusual item-based combat system to Mario's flattened world. Nintendo's game is anything but flat, however. Whether you're talking about its surprisingly deep combat or the smart use of 3D, this is easily one of the best implementations of the 3DS' hardware around.

To dive deeper into our game of the year picks and participate in the reader's poll, visit gameinformer.com/2012GOTY

LEAGUE OF LEGENDS EXPLODES

Quick – name the most-played PC game outside of Asia. No, it's not World of Warcraft, Guild Wars 2, or Minecraft. League of Legends exploded in popularity in 2012 to capture that title, promoting tournaments with seven-figure prize pools, and legitimizing free-to-play gaming for millions of players.

CROSS PLAY ARRIVES

Sony has talked a big game about cross-device functionality for years, but this year saw real progress. Cross play between PS3 and Vita is a delightful reality for several games, and we salute Sony for its consumer-friendly stance on paying once for access to a game on both platforms.

EPISODIC GAMING RISES FROM THE DEAD

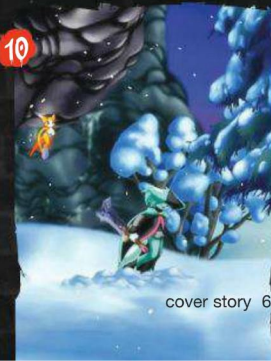
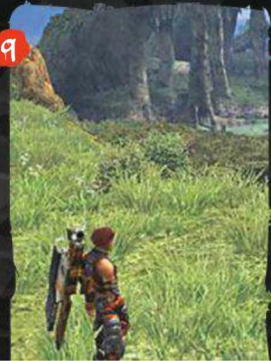
When Valve went dark and seemingly abandoned its episodic plans for Half-Life after Episode 2, the once-bright future of episodic gaming looked grim. Telltale Games never lost faith, and its excellent Walking Dead titles rewarded that persistence.

BELOVED RPGS CROSS THE PACIFIC

The inexplicable failure of fan-favorite Japanese Wii RPGs Xenoblade Chronicles and The Last Story to come to North America infuriated fans, who took to the Internet to let Nintendo know how they felt. Chalk one up for gamers, because we finally saw them come stateside after prospects looked all but dead.

HUMBLE HEARTS WIN MINDS

Making video games is a career for some, a dream for others, and a lifestyle for a select few. Dean Dodrill is in a category of his own, designing and programming Xbox Live Arcade hit Dust: An Elysian Tail by himself. A solo accomplishment like that was impressive in the Atari 2600 era; today it's unheard of.



top 10 disappointments

1 THE CREATIVITY GAP

With this current console cycle dragging on, publishers played it safe, hedging their bets with fewer games, fewer risks, and fewer new IPs. While high-profile (and well done) sequels are always welcome, we wanted more new things. Outside of a few highlights like Dishonored, it was hard to find quality retail games that both sold well and didn't contain a "2" or "3" in the title.



2 VITA'S SLUGGISH START

Sony released – in terms of functionality and graphical power – the greatest handheld ever made this February. So why doesn't anyone care? The Vita has struggled to sell despite a solid lineup of games like Zero Escape, LittleBigPlanet PS Vita, Sound Shapes, and Need for Speed: Most Wanted, and new cross-play functionality for games like MLB 12: The Show.



3 WII U BOTCHES ONLINE

While Nintendo did some things right with Wii U online – like implementing Miiverse forum-style communities and killing friend codes – it still got some important things wrong. If it wanted to bring back hardcore gamers, tying accounts to one system, not allowing users to invite friends across games, and ignoring party chat were bad choices.



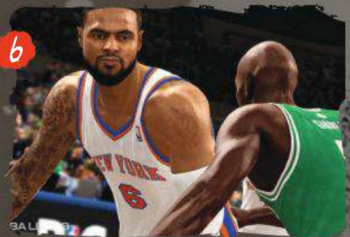
4 SKYRIM'S PS3 CATASTROPHE

While 360 owners received game-fixing patches and expansions, PS3 owners are sitting out in the cold. At the of time this writing, Bethesda said that PS3 DLC is coming "soon," but it's already been too long a wait. A game this great shouldn't have such unreliable support.



5 THE MASS EFFECT 3 ENDING CONTROVERSY

Some fans loved the ending of Mass Effect 3. Others hated it. At first BioWare staunchly defended its right to make creative decisions, whether popular or not. Then, it changed course and released DLC that expanded (but didn't drastically alter) the ending – leaving both those its defenders and detractors unsatisfied. Worst of all, the studio never tried to make the case for its original ending.



6 NBA LIVE CANCELED...AGAIN

EA tried to rebrand the sagging NBA Live franchise as NBA Elite in 2010, but that game was never released due to quality issues. After being given to a new studio, two years later NBA Live 13 was supposed to release this fall before being unceremoniously canceled. This is the biggest botching of a high-profile (and expensive) sports license in history.



7 RESIDENT EVIL'S TARNISHED REPUTATION

Resident Evil, once one of the industry's most revered franchises, took a major hit to its reputation this year. Things started off fine with the excellent Resident Evil: Revelations for the 3DS, but quickly soured with Slant Six's terrible Resident Evil: Raccoon City. The real trouble came when Resident Evil 6's gonzo action-movie approach made it the most divisive main entry in series history.



8 ASSASSIN'S CREED III BUGS

Assassin's Creed III represents a new chapter for the series, and is one of the year's most varied and expansive game experiences. Sadly – even after a large day-one patch – it's also one of the year's buggiest. YouTube is filled with evidence of everything from bugged missions to a man on a horse falling through the world into a "limbo" zone of nothingness.



9 BLIZZARD BUNGLES DIABLO III ONLINE

Blizzard made the controversial call to require an "always on" Internet connection for Diablo III. This turned into a disaster when the servers crumbled on launch, making it impossible for many owners to play the game at all. Blizzard also delayed the launch of the game's in-house auction house and still has not implemented the post-launch PvP features it promised.



10 THE PUZZLING OBSESSION WITH PERIPHERALS

Despite a bad year of sales, the console makers pushed forward defiantly with Kinect and PlayStation Move. Sony also wasted precious E3 stage time on Wonderbook, an odd interactive product that requires both the Move and PlayStation Eye. Wii U pushes things farther still, with games that use the GamePad, Wii remotes, and pro controller in different combinations. All we want to do is play the games, not mess with frustrating set-ups.



top 10 publishers

1 TAKE-TWO (Last Year: 9)

It may not have a huge 2012 catalog, but Take-Two's publishing labels released several highly praised games. XCOM: Enemy Unknown revitalized turn-based strategy, Max Payne 3 signaled the return of a beloved character, Borderlands 2 delivered unparalleled cooperative play, and NBA 2K13 cleaned up the boards with another solid year.

2 ELECTRONIC ARTS (Last Year: 1)

EA maintains a lofty spot on our publisher list thanks to its diverse approach to the game industry. Turning Star Wars: The Old Republic into a free-to-play game, expanding its mobile reach, and excelling in the console space with Mass Effect 3 and its considerable sports lineup easily offset disappointments like Medal of Honor: Warfighter.

3 ACTIVISION BLIZZARD (Last Year: 7)

With a deep stable of moneymaking franchises that includes Call of Duty, Skylanders, World of Warcraft, and Diablo, Activision Blizzard may as well change its name to Activision Banking. Though the company's play-it-safe approach in 2012 doesn't win the love of gamers pining for new experiences, you can't argue with the quality or polish of its many sequels.

4 NINTENDO (Last Year: 6)

By stabilizing the 3DS platform and striking first in the next-gen console battle, Nintendo had a productive 2012. It won approval from JRPG fans by porting Xenoblade Chronicles, several titles gave the 3DS library a much needed shot of quality, and the Wii U launch line-up struck a nice balance of high-quality Nintendo titles and third-party offerings.

5 SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT (Last Year: 2)

Sony's hardware division didn't have a banner year, but its curation of meaningful indie games cannot be overlooked. From creative experiments Sound Shapes and The Unfinished Swan to the emotional experiences of Journey and Papo & Yo, Sony proved it's unafraid to venture into uncharted territory. The game industry is better because of it.

6 MICROSOFT (Last Year: 8)

Its overzealous peddling of Kinect functionality withstanding, Microsoft kept Xbox Live Arcade relevant throughout the year with standout titles like Fez, Trials Evolution, Minecraft, Mark of the Ninja, and Deadlight. It would have placed much higher on this list if it offered more blockbuster titles to stand alongside its retail offerings Halo 4, Dance Central 3, and Forza Horizon.

7 UBISOFT (Last Year: 4)

Ubisoft makes the list primarily thanks to its flagship Canadian studio in Montreal. With help from its sister studios around the globe, Montreal released both Assassin's Creed III and Far Cry 3. You also can't forget the juggernaut Just Dance 4, which again enticed tweens into flailing their arms and legs to the beats of era-spanning pop songs.

8 SQUARE ENIX (Last Year: N/A)

We thought Square had a relatively quiet year, until we looked back on its lineup. Final Fantasy XIII-2, Hitman: Absolution, Kingdom Hearts 3D: Dream Drop Distance, Sleeping Dogs, and Quantum Conundrum all indicate that this legendary Japanese publisher may be getting its groove back.

9 ROVIO (Last Year: N/A)

The Angry Birds publisher continued to dominate the mobile phone and tablet market in 2012 with a bevy of addictive titles. Angry Birds Star Wars and Space kept kids coming back to their tablets, while Bad Piggies and Amazing Alex found success as well. Moving Angry Birds to the 3DS and consoles also proved a shrewd move.

10 CAPCOM (Last Year: N/A)

Though a couple of polarizing Resident Evil games damaged the reputation's franchise, Capcom took some chances with new IP while everyone else stayed the course with sequels. Dragon's Dogma and Asura's Wrath didn't dominate sales charts, but they provided a much-needed breath of fresh air to console gamers.

Falling off the list: Warner Bros. Interactive (3), Bethesda (5), THQ (10)



top 10 developers

1 FIRAXIS GAMES

If anyone could resurrect the classic X-COM franchise, it was Civilization developer Firaxis. Sid Meier's studio created a game that both appeals to fans of the 1994 classic and draws in a legion of new fans through its easy-to-grasp yet amazingly deep turn-based combat.

2 ARKANE STUDIOS

Dishonored shows passion and risk can get you far. While many developers fear releasing a new IP near the end of a console generation, Arkane Studios' ambition paid off with its acclaimed world. Creativity exists around every bend with the execution of enemies and missions.

3 TELLTALE GAMES

In an industry where top-notch writing is hard to come by, Telltale surprised many and created an emotionally gripping tale with The Walking Dead. The episodic releases flow into the intense cliffhangers, and thanks to Telltale, we have one of the best-written child characters to date.

4 ROBOT ENTERTAINMENT

Robot proves you don't need to have big money to succeed – just big ideas. Formed by ex-Ensemble developers, Robot improved on its flagship Orcs Must Die 2 title and took the mobile crowd by storm with Hero Academy.

5 343 INDUSTRIES

Whenever a beloved franchise switches hands, worry surfaces over the preservation of its legacy. However, fans hardly felt the lack of Bungie in Halo 4. The game received plenty of praise and, more importantly, 343 Industries proved that Microsoft's franchise is still in good hands.

6 GEARBOX SOFTWARE

A year after its only major release was the preservation project Duke Nukem Forever, Gearbox Software blasted back onto the scene with guns aplenty in Borderlands 2. While retaining everything you loved about the first game, Gearbox fixed just about every flaw – and even gave us a minimap.

7 UBISOFT MONTREAL

Ubisoft Montreal had a lot on its hands with the release of both Assassin's Creed III and Far Cry 3 this year, but both games stand as strong offerings. Crafting two open-world games with vastly disparate designs shows Ubisoft Montreal isn't just a one-trick pony.

8 RIOT GAMES

Not many developers can keep dedicated players around three years later, but Riot Games convinced players to stay put with lots of brand-new content. This year's addition, Dominion, changes the MOBA genre drastically with its capture-and-hold style gameplay.

9 BLIZZARD

This year Blizzard proved once again why it's a force to be reckoned with. Not only did it release the addictive and sleep-depriving Diablo III, but it showed that World of Warcraft is still the king of the mountain with a new feature-packed expansion, Mists of Pandaria.

10 BIOWARE

Losing the Doctors and closing a few studios stings, but BioWare still earned its keep on this list with Mass Effect 3. Closing out a powerful trilogy is a huge undertaking, but BioWare said goodbye to Commander Shepard in a finale that fans are still talking about.

top 10 editor picks

ANDY MCNAMARA

1. Dishonored
2. Mass Effect 3
3. Borderlands 2
4. XCOM: Enemy Unknown
5. Darksiders II
6. Need for Speed: Most Wanted
7. Mark of the Ninja
8. 10000000
9. Journey
10. The Walking Dead

ANDREW REINER

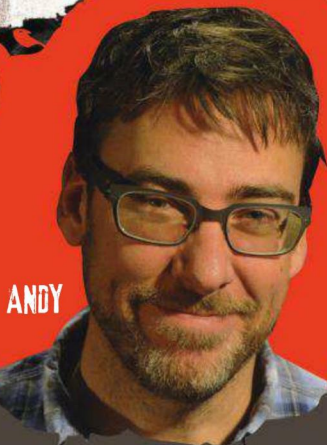
1. Mass Effect 3
2. The Walking Dead
3. Borderlands 2
4. XCOM: Enemy Unknown
5. Call of Duty: Black Ops II
6. Halo 4
7. Dishonored
8. Dragon's Dogma
9. Lego The Lord of the Rings
10. Max Payne 3

MATT BERTZ

1. Dishonored
2. Journey
3. XCOM: Enemy Unknown
4. Far Cry 3
5. The Walking Dead
6. Borderlands 2
7. FIFA 13
8. Halo 4
9. Mass Effect 3
10. NBA 2K13

MATT HELGESON

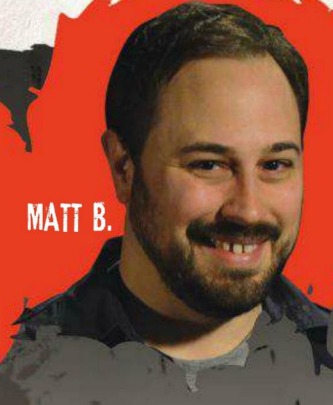
1. The Walking Dead
2. Dishonored
3. XCOM: Enemy Unknwn
4. LittleBigPlanet Vita
5. Jak & Daxter Collection
6. Assassin's Creed III
7. Borderlands 2
8. Max Payne 3
9. Dungeon Raid
10. Transformers: Fall of Cybertron



ANDY



REINER



MATT B.



MATT H.



MATT



BEN R.



JEFF C.



JEFF M.



TIM

MATTHEW ATO

1. Journey
2. Dishonored
3. XCOM: Enemy Unknown
4. The Walking Dead
5. Mass Effect 3
6. Need For Speed: Most Wanted
7. FIFA 13/ Pro Evolution Soccer 2013
8. Assassin's Creed III
9. Trials Evolution
10. Madden NFL 13

JEFF COR

1. Journey
2. Far Cry 3
3. The Walking Dead
4. Call of Duty: Black Ops II
5. Zookeeper Battle
6. Hitman: Absolution
7. Dishonored
8. XCOM: Enemy Unknown
9. Dragon's Dogma
10. Lego The Lord of the Rings

BEN REEVES

1. XCOM: Enemy Unknown
2. Halo 4
3. Assassin's Creed III
4. Mass Effect 3
5. Diablo III
6. Borderlands 2
7. Dishonored
8. Mark of the Ninja
9. Max Payne 3
10. Transformers: Fall of Cybertron

JEFF MARCHIAFAVA

1. Mass Effect 3
2. XCOM: Enemy Unknown
3. The Walking Dead
4. Borderlands 2
5. Far Cry 3
6. Hitman: Absolution
7. Journey
8. Assassin's Creed III
9. Halo 4
10. Gateways

TIM TURI

1. XCOM: Enemy Unknown
2. Far Cry 3
3. Resident Evil 6
4. The Walking Dead
5. Mass Effect 3
6. Resident Evil: Revelations
7. Diablo III
8. Max Payne 3
9. Call of Duty: Black Ops II
10. Super Hexagon

BRYAN VORE

1. Mass Effect 3
2. Borderlands 2
3. New Super Mario Bros. U
4. Halo 4
5. Assassin's Creed III
6. Journey
7. Fez
8. La-Mulana
9. Double Dragon Neon
10. Kingdom Rush HD

JOE JUBA

1. Mass Effect 3
2. Borderlands 2
3. Journey
4. Assassin's Creed III
5. The Walking Dead
6. Dishonored
7. Asura's Wrath
8. Lego Lord of the Rings
9. Final Fantasy XIII-2
10. Fez

MATT MILLER

1. Mass Effect 3
2. Assassin's Creed III
3. Halo 4
4. Fez
5. Transformers: Fall of Cybertron
6. Journey
7. Mark of the Ninja
8. Guild Wars 2
9. XCOM: Enemy Unknown
10. Far Cry 3

JIM REILLY

1. The Walking Dead
2. Dark Souls: Artorias of the Abyss DLC
3. Max Payne 3
4. Spec Ops: The Line
5. Transformers: Fall of Cybertron
6. Binary Domain
7. Journey
8. XCOM: Enemy Unknown
9. Mass Effect 3
10. Resident Evil 6

ADAM BIESENER

1. XCOM: Enemy Unknown
2. Torchlight II
3. Guild Wars 2
4. Dishonored
5. Total War: Shogun 2 – Fall of the Samurai
6. PlanetSide 2
7. Orcs Must Die 2
8. Diablo III
9. Civilization V: Gods & Kings
10. FTL

JOE

MATT M.

ADAM

BRYAN

JIM

BEN H.

JASON

IMBERLEY

DAN

YLE

DAN RYC ERT

1. Borderlands 2
2. XCOM: Enemy Unknown
3. New Super Mario Bros. U
4. Fez
5. WWE '13
6. Mass Effect 3
7. Hero Academy
8. Dishonored
9. Trials Evolution
10. Soulcalibur V

BEN HANSON

1. XCOM: Enemy Unknown
2. Mass Effect 3
3. The Walking Dead
4. Journey
5. Xenoblade Chronicles
6. Hero Academy
7. Sound Shapes
8. Mark of the Ninja
9. Triple Town
10. Need For Speed: Most Wanted

YLE HILLIARD

1. Fez
2. Halo 4
3. Journey
4. Dishonored
5. Sound Shapes
6. Mass Effect 3
7. Darksiders II
8. Assassin's Creed III
9. 1000000
10. Gravity Rush

JASON OESTREICHER

1. Borderlands 2
2. XCOM: Enemy Unknown
3. Street Fighter X Tekken
4. The Walking Dead
5. Mark of the Ninja
6. Far Cry 3
7. Torchlight II
8. Mass Effect 3
9. Darksiders II
10. Deadlight

IMBERLEY WALLACE

1. Mass Effect 3
2. The Walking Dead
3. Zero Escape: Virtue's Last Reward
4. Persona 4 Golden
5. Sleeping Dogs
6. Borderlands 2
7. Final Fantasy XIII-2
8. Persona 4 Arena
9. Tales of Graces f
10. Dust: An Elysian Tail



Tomb Raider

We play the first three hours

For months now, Crystal Dynamics has been showing off the impressive opening minutes of Lara Croft's new adventure, in which the heroine escapes from an underground cave, explores the nearby forest, and is eventually captured by menacing scavengers. At long last, I got to put my hands on the controller and play that same intro, and then surge past into the following hours of the game. I found a game full of opportunities for exploration, tense combat, and a number of new surprises – all of which help to cement Tomb Raider as one of my early top picks for 2013.

Crystal Dynamics has a remarkably solid and technically impressive game on its hands, especially considering the months of polish yet ahead before the March release. In particular, animation on Lara Croft, her enemies, and the world around her are all top notch. A huge variety of movements and actions bring the main character to life, as she slides her hand against nearby rock faces for balance, turns her head to look where you rotate the camera, and dips and leaps over a wide array of obstacles in the world.

I'm immediately struck by the opportunities for exploration and upgrades in even the

earliest section of the game. Crystal Dynamics dangles two big reward mechanisms in front of you throughout the game. You earn XP by finding hidden treasures, hunting and skinning animals, killing enemy soldiers, and completing challenges in the world. You can scour the scattered detritus around the island and find salvage in boxes, on bodies, and in hidden caches. XP contributes to character growth, giving players a wide selection of abilities and improvements to Lara's survivalist tendencies, from increased perception of hidden objects in the game world, to the ability to throw dirt in a melee opponent's eyes. Salvage feeds into gear improvements, like adding damage to your gun or making your bow more accurate. Since both systems contribute to character improvement, it's easy to get caught up in searching an area for extra XP and salvage. Moreover, the developers have crafted environments with plenty of secret locations to discover, so it never feels like a chore.

The coolest of those discoveries answers a question that many Tomb Raider fans have had since the game was revealed: Where are the tombs? As Lara continues her narrative, numerous locations include optional

Tomb Raider is packed with story sequences that help to sell Lara as a vulnerable but strong character





hidden delves – ancient burial places filled with dangerous traps and puzzles. By making many of these intriguing areas optional, the game ensures that story pacing won't take a hit if you're not interested in a distraction. However, you can revisit areas through fast travel options available at every campsite, and many environments include additional secrets and tombs for those willing to go back after new improvements become available. During my playtime, I explore the dark recesses of the Tomb of the Unworthy. After a physics puzzle that involves reducing the weight on an elevated platform, I'm able to reach an impressive treasure chest, and an equally impressive XP reward.

The biggest surprise I encountered is the increased focus on dynamic, tactical combat scenarios – an arena Tomb Raider has struggled with in the past. Approaching a cadre of scavengers ensconced in some old buildings, I have a number of options to bring them down. I start by firing my bow at a wall near one of the distant guards. He turns to investigate, giving me the chance to fire a second silent shot to bring down his companion. While the first foe is still distracted, I sneak up and strangle a third enemy from behind. By now, the bad guys are on to my presence, and the bullets start flying. A dedicated dodge move sends Lara weaving back and forth into nearby cover, as a machine-gun turret peppers bullets

from above. I shoot an explosive barrel to take out the emplacement, and then gun down a soldier as he attempts to zip line down to my location; he falls and slides to a stop nearby. I dodge to a new cover point as a bad guy flings a Molotov cocktail, and I thank him for his trouble with a bullet. A last soldier breaks out of the nearby building with a riot shield, but I roll behind him, giving me a clear shot, and finish the battle with a blast from my machine gun. I love the vertical playfields available in the battle, which encourage mobility and situational awareness. Enemy AI is also impressive, responding to my maneuvers with actions and spoken dialogue that recognize my tactics.

As I'm climbing and fighting my way through the island, it's clear that narrative depth and clarity is a big priority. Frequent cutscenes flesh out Lara's growth from a frightened young woman to a cunning survivalist, and the team's done a great job of building empathy for their heroine. My favorite story sequences pop up at some of the early camp sites, where Lara crouches, shivering by a small fire. She watches snippets recorded on a camcorder from before the ship crash, helping to take her mind off the danger and reminding her of happier times. For players, these sequences help set up many of the other survivor characters and their personalities, but without the need to bog down the game opening with boring exposition.



Underground locations are appropriately dark and threatening

It's been a long time since a Tomb Raider title felt like it was in competition to be one of the defining games in a year, but my time with the game makes me a believer; Lara's new adventure deserves acclaim. If the game that follows matches the drama and tight gameplay exhibited in the beginning, Crystal Dynamics may have a hit on its hands. » **Matt Miller**

Visit gameinformer.com to learn more about Tomb Raider through our exclusive interview with the developers

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

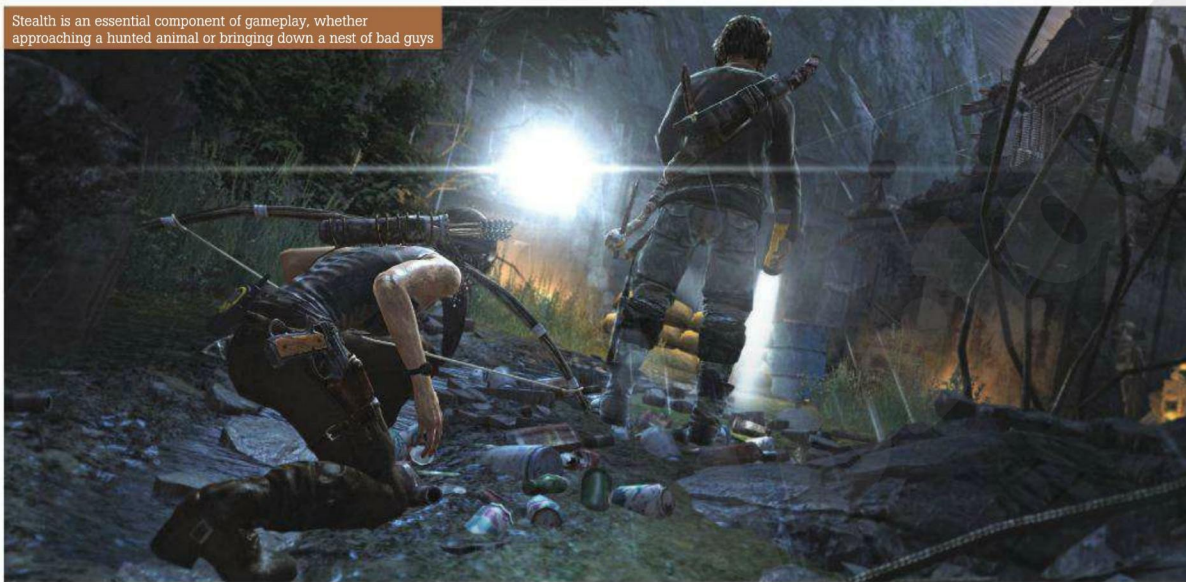
» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Square Enix

» **Developer**
Crystal Dynamics

» **Release**
March 5

Stealth is an essential component of gameplay, whether approaching a hunted animal or bringing down a nest of bad guys





Marvel Heroes

Gazillion allies with Marvel for the ultimate team-up

» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
Massive Multiplayer
Action/RPG

» **Publisher**
Gazillion
Entertainment

» **Developer**
Gazillion
Entertainment

» **Release**
2013

Raven's *Marvel: Ultimate Alliance* is still widely beloved by comic fans as one of the best action/RPGs on modern consoles. We haven't seen a new entry in Raven's superhero-based hack 'n' slash since 2009, but Marvel fans might soon find a way to scratch that itch when Gazillion Entertainment's *Marvel*-themed MMO releases later this year.

"In a lot of ways, this is massive multiplayer *Ultimate Alliance*," Gazillion Entertainment's president and COO David Brevik tells us when we sit down to play the game with him. "It's a little bit deeper, a little bit more of an RPG, but in a lot of ways *Marvel Heroes* is very much in

tune with that look and that feel."

As one of the co-founders of Blizzard North, Brevik served as a lead designer for the first two *Diablo* games. Now Brevik hopes to take his experience working on the Ferrari of action/RPGs to make a *Marvel Comics* game full of side quests, randomly generated dungeons, and loot. Also, it's free to play.

"From a design perspective, making a free-to-play game means we can break all the rules," Brevik says. "Since we don't have people locked into a subscription, we can create a different type of MMO, and give people something they're not used to."

Just because the game is free doesn't mean Gazillion is skimping on production values. The game uses the Unreal 3 engine to produce massive environments where hundreds of players fight hordes of thugs online together. *Marvel* story architect Brian Michael Bendis is writing the plot, which is told through more than 100 minutes of animated comics produced by popular *Marvel* artists and voiced by many of the actors from *Marvel's* animated films.

The story follows the events that take place after Dr. Doom acquires the cosmic cube, which is basically a high-tech Tupperware



Roster of Announced Characters

- Black Panther
- Black Widow
- Cable
- Captain America
- Colossus
- Cyclops
- Daredevil
- Deadpool
- Emma Frost
- Hawkeye
- Hulk
- Human Torch
- Iron Man
- Jean Grey
- Luke Cage
- Ms. Marvel
- Nova
- The Punisher
- Rocket Raccoon
- Scarlet Witch
- Spider-Man
- Squirrel Girl
- Storm
- Thing
- Thor
- Wolverine

container full of primordial energy that gives its owner the power to reshape reality. In Dr. Doom's hands this is bad news, so the heroes of the Marvel universe unite to take him down. In his mad quest for power, Doom is traveling the world to acquire any mystical or supernatural artifact that could challenge his power. First on the list is the Tablet of Life and Time, a life-giving relic currently under the possession of Wilson Fisk, a.k.a. the Kingpin. The game starts as Marvel's heroes converge on Manhattan to acquire the tablet before Doom gets his hands on it.

A premise like this isn't nearly as exciting if you can't play as Marvel's A-List superheroes yourself, and Gazillion is working to add to an already long list of heroes (see sidebar), which currently sits at 26 playable characters. One of the odd story conceits is that anyone can play any character at any time. While you'll likely see a lot of Wolverines and Spider-Mans running around on your server, Gazillion isn't too worried about it.

"If you wanted to create a guild called 'The Bubs' and run around as a pack of Wolverines, go for it," Brevik says. "At any time, you can bring up your roster of heroes and switch out to someone else. So if there are too many Hulks running around, switch over to the Punisher."

Thankfully, every individual Wolverine could look and play differently based on how players outfit skills, equipment, and alternate costumes. For example, a player who chooses to play as Hulk can run around as the classic purple-wearing angry monster, his pinstriped Vegas alias, Joe Fixit, the armor-clad gladiatorial version of Hulk from Marvel's *Planet Hulk* story line, or any number of other alternate costumes.

Costumes don't affect a player's abilities, but their skillsets are just as diverse. I took the Punisher up to level 14 and unlocked a variety of his long-range abilities. The action is fast and explosive. Characters' various powers seem to work well together, and experimenting with how different characters can play off each other is fun. The Punisher's rapid-fire skill allows him to wield two automatic rifles and mow down foes, while armor-piercing rounds let him charge up a devastating long-range sniper shot. Each character has three different skill trees. I explored many of the Punisher's

long-range weapons, but he also has a guerrilla skill tree that focuses on close quarters combat and martial arts, and an explosives tree that focuses on setting everything on fire.

While most RPGs center on a holy trinity of character classes, Gazillion is working to make each of the characters unique. The Punisher is a great long-range combatant, but stronger characters like the Hulk or Thing can pick up and throw cars. Characters like Storm and Iron

Man can fly, and Wolverine's healing powers make him a great close-quarters tank.

At its core, *Marvel Heroes* is an action-driven MMO. Its simplicity of play, addictive loot trail, variety of character classes, and low barrier to entry should make it immediately appealing to thousands of comic fans. The game doesn't completely fill the hole left by *Ultimate Alliance*, but it could be the best alternative to an official sequel. » **Ben Reeves**



Closed Beta

Interested in playing *Marvel Heroes* before it officially launches sometime next year? Sign up for the closed beta (going on now) at marvelheroes.com.



Devil May Cry

Three reasons to believe in Dante

» **Platform**
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Capcom

» **Developer**
Ninja Theory

» **Release**
January 15

A publisher doesn't reboot a franchise if everything is going in the right direction. Two years ago, Capcom announced that it was resetting the Devil May Cry universe and reaching out to developer Ninja Theory for a new installment. Fans initially bristled at the idea, but the change in direction is shaping up to be a great move for a series that seemed to be losing its way. I played the first four missions and, if you're still skeptical about this reimagining of Dante's adventures, here is what you need to know to set your mind at ease.

1. Combat is Complex

Dante shifts between stances that emphasize weapons with different attack speeds, a mechanic similar to the one Ninja Theory used in Heavenly Sword – but the similarities end there. DMC does not play like Heavenly Sword; Dante puts his weight behind his attacks in a way that Nariko never did, filling every combo with satisfying slashes. The controls also demand precision, since each of the weapons has a long list of unique moves that you purchase with upgrade points. My favorite techniques from previous games – like the stinger, prop shredder, and high time – are all present. Plus, if you don't like your current loadout, you can sell moves back for a full refund, allowing you to easily try out different skill combinations to find a style that suits you.

2. The Tone is Right

Dante may be sporting a new visual style, but his attitude is right in line with expectations. He's sarcastic, unflappable, and prone to performing hilariously improbable feats during cutscenes. The dialogue is reminiscent of Devil May Cry 1 and 3; Dante nonchalantly spouts one-liners while standing face-to-face with

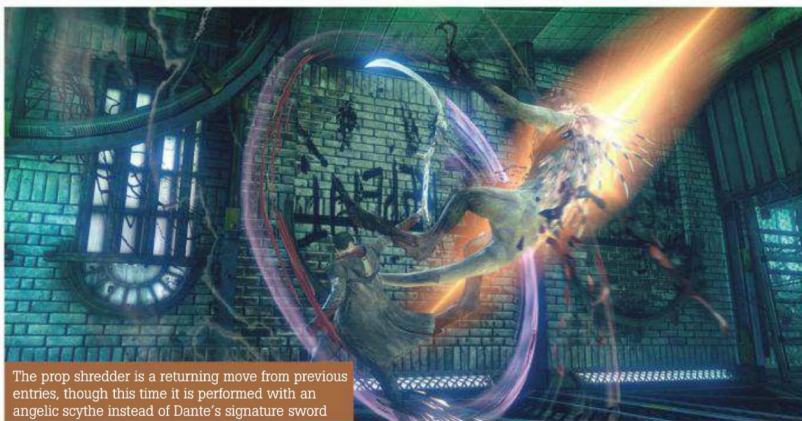
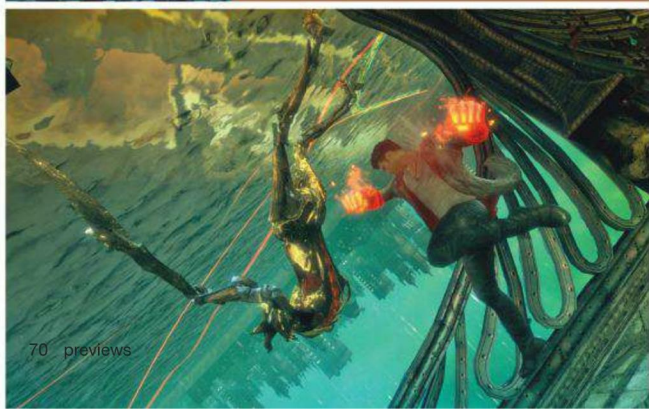
horrifying abominations. This entry embraces its roots in another interesting way: Many of the achievement/trophy names are homages to cheesy lines from the series, like "Fill your dark soul with light" and "Come on, Puppy. Let's go!"

3. Limbo is Cool

Most of your demon killing in the first four missions is done in Limbo, an alternate dimension that overlaps with reality. Fans of Bayonetta will feel right at home with the otherworldly vibe. Your surroundings are familiar – city streets, dockside carnivals, ruined mansions – but have the potential to change in unexpected ways. Limbo distorts and breaks apart to stop you; the ground crumbles under your feet, buildings topple on top of you, and the laws of physics generally don't apply. These events aren't limited to a handful of setpiece sequences; they occur almost constantly as you progress through a mission. When you aren't engaged in combat (and sometimes when you are), you get the feeling that the world is possessed and has a grudge against Dante – a theme that fits very well into Devil May Cry's gonzo, anarchistic style. » **Joe Juba**



Limbo overlaps with reality, but since it's overrun with demons, it doesn't have the same rules. Like gravity, for example



The prop shredder is a returning move from previous entries, though this time it is performed with an angelic scythe instead of Dante's signature sword

Aliens: Colonial Marines

Not your average bug hunt

The *Aliens* films have cast an undeniably large shadow across the games industry. Elements from the influential series have been cribbed throughout the years. Halo's Sgt. Major Avery Johnson is essentially Gunnery Sergeant Al Apone with a different voice actor, and *Aliens*' USMC squad has provided archetypes for nearly every space and military shooter since its 1986 release. The fact that the series has provided so much inspiration makes it all the more difficult to reconcile the lack of a truly great *Aliens* game. I can't say whether Gearbox's *Aliens: Colonial Marines* is that game, but after spending a few hours playing it, I'm certainly leaning in that direction. Here are a few reasons why.

It's as tense as I'd hoped

Aliens was more of a straight-up action movie than its predecessor, but that doesn't mean that those slow-burn horror moments are gone. If you thought being stalked by a single xenomorph was tense, Ellen Ripley and a squad of Colonial Marines had to deal with hundreds of the creatures.

Gearbox does a great job of doling out moments of intense action with long sections where seemingly nothing happens. As any horror fan can attest, the scariest moments are also often in those quiet stretches. Walking in the tight corridors of the abandoned ship *Sulaco* is undeniably creepy, especially once I start noticing strange touches such as video cameras pointed at cocooned humans. Those xenomorph eggs placed at their feet couldn't have been mere coincidence. Something terribly wrong happened here, which adds an additional layer of tension and urgency to my actions. I cautiously sweep rooms with my pulse rifle ready, lighting up corners with my flashlight and agonizing over every ping of the motion tracker.

Those environments

Based on some of the demos I'd seen of the



game, I was concerned that *Colonial Marines* was going to feature too-long corridor sections with a sparse selection of larger areas. I was happy to see that the *Sulaco* itself is huge, and filled with plenty of visual and geometric variation. One of the coolest sections takes place in the ship's gravity well, a towering cylindrical room with a huge spinning centrifuge. It's hard not to be distracted by the device's constant motion, which adds an additional layer of paranoia when waves of xenos start popping out of vents and scampering down its sides.

I also explored Hadley's Hope, the colonist outpost from *Aliens*. There are tons of subtle references to the film, such as a corridor with

two nearly depleted sentry guns. That sense of familiarity made me geek out in moments like wielding the all-powerful smartgun. Casual fans might miss out on some of those references ("Hey! That's the facehugger that Burke unleashed on Newt and Ripley!"), which is another incentive to rewatch the movies.

Xenomorphs are awesome

In multiplayer, players don't face off in teams of marines vs. marines. Instead, groups are divided between marines and xenomorphs. Players who take control of the xenos get a different experience, including a change in their vantage point. Instead of the first-person view that the rest of the game is built on, the camera pulls back and shows the aliens in all their chitinous glory. Gearbox's design director John Mulkey says the decision came in part because the creatures can scurry up and around walls and ceilings, which can get confusing without a reference point. Also, the xenos look sweet, and the team wanted players to appreciate every tail-lashing, acid spit, and claw strike. » **Jeff Cork**

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

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

» **Publisher**
Sega

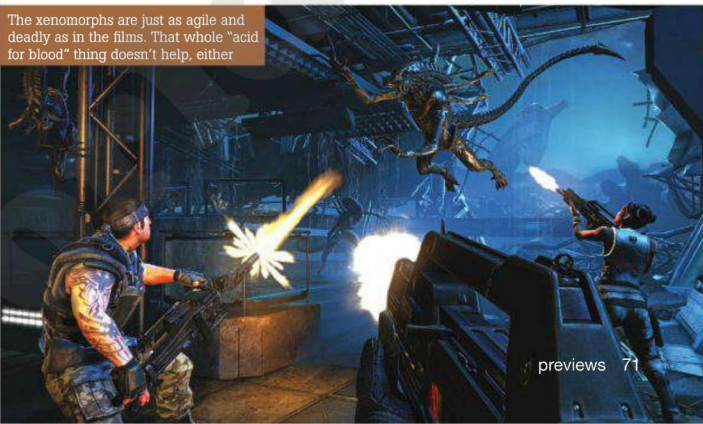
» **Developer**
Gearbox Software

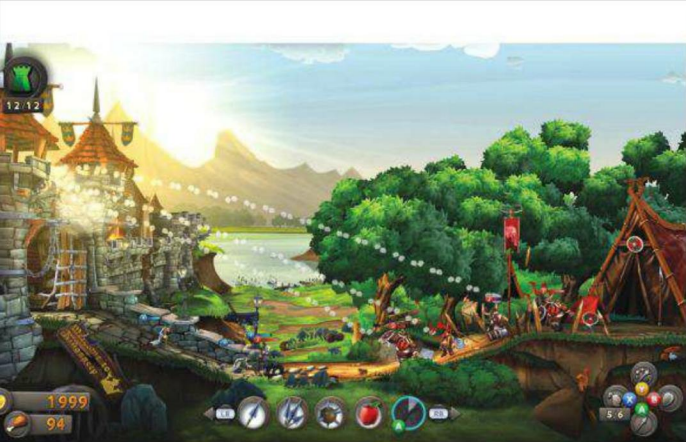
» **Release**
February 12, 2013

Xenomorphs are adept at hiding in their environments. Nothing gets past the handy motion tracker, however



The xenomorphs are just as agile and deadly as in the films. That whole "acid for blood" thing doesn't help, either





CastleStorm

Zen Studios injects strategy into the casual market

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

» **Style**
1 or 2-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Zen Studios

» **Developer**
Zen Studios

» **Release**
Spring
(Xbox 360)

The developers at Zen Studios have said they're flattered to be known as "the pinball guys" thanks to their successful Pinball FX and Zen Pinball franchises. However, if our recent hands-on time with CastleStorm is any indication, players may have to come up with a new nickname for the studio. The physics-based action title pits knights against Vikings with addictive gameplay reminiscent of Angry Birds – if Angry Birds also featured a light RPG leveling system, tower defense elements, and emphasized strategy over trial and error.

Whether you're playing the single-player campaign or multiplayer (the game supports both local and online play), CastleStorm tasks you with protecting your 2D castle from invading soldiers and ballista attacks, while simultaneously assaulting your enemy's castle. To accomplish these and other goals (such as capturing your enemy's flag or the various other

objectives the campaign missions offer) you have three types of abilities at your disposal.

Your first and main line of attack is your ballista, which can fire a variety of arcing attacks at your enemies, including javelins, morning-stars, and exploding apples, each of which runs on its own cooldown timer. The aiming in the preview build we played is a little finicky – especially when attacking targets clear across the map – but bringing down the last tower on your opponent's castle is as satisfying as the destructive action in Angry Birds ever was, and landing a headshot on a fast-approaching soldier is equally pleasing.

Bombarding your enemy's castle is all well and good, but you also want to deploy soldiers to help hold the front line. You have a variety of troops you can spawn to occupy the battlefield between your castles. Swordsman march towards the enemy's gates and their own certain doom, soaking up the attacks of their Viking counterparts while archers hang back and shower encroaching foes with arrows. Unlike projectiles, spawning soldiers consumes food, so you can spam the battlefield with as many troops as your reserves allow without any wait.

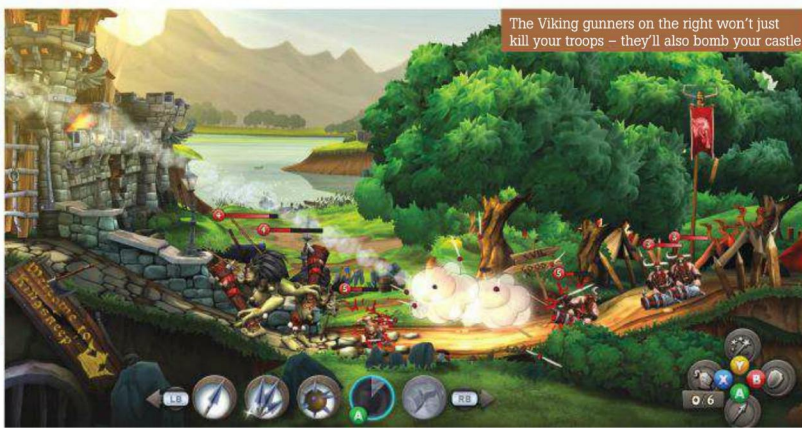
You also have spells at your disposal, and each provides a grab bag of different effects. Bless regenerates health for any troops on the battlefield, while Heavenly Swords creates a powerful area-of-effect attack – perfect for quickly taking down a dangerous troll or a bear-riding huntress. The most powerful spell gives you direct control of Sir Gareth, the chivalrous hero of the CastleStorm's light-hearted narrative, allowing you to slice down your foes in simple beat-'em-up fashion.

Everything in CastleStorm happens in real-time, but a smart interface prevents the action from becoming overwhelming. Each category of ability has its own dedicated face button, making it easy to spawn a bunch of soldiers, send out a shower of different projectile attacks, and cast a quick health boost to the frontline soldiers within a matter of seconds. You can slot up to five abilities in each of the three attack categories, and each ability can be leveled up with gold earned from defeated enemies.

CastleStorm also features a castle editor, which lets you piece your own fortress together from a variety of different rooms. As you pass levels, you unlock new rooms that you can add to your castle, each of which serves a specific purpose. You must build a barracks for each soldier type you want to spawn, including a shooting range for archers and horse stables for mounted knights. Other rooms provide passive bonuses; kitchens replenish your food supply more quickly, while recruiting offices increase your maximum army size. Just be sure to add in some thick walls and towers for protection. If (or should I say when) one of your rooms is destroyed by the enemy, you lose its power for the rest of the battle.

After a few hours of play, it's clear that building a smartly designed castle is just as important as your strategy for destroying your opponent's castle. Thankfully, you can save dozens of blueprints to accommodate different tactics. Zen Studios still has work to do before CastleStorm's spring release, but unlike my hastily designed fortresses, its newest downloadable title is built on a strong foundation.

» **Jeff Marchiafava**



The War Z

DayZ gets some deadly competition

Last year, a PC mod called DayZ was released for the realistic military shooter Arma 2. DayZ focuses on scavenging for survival, knowing who to trust, and avoiding zombies in a grim post-apocalyptic world. DayZ shows promise on a conceptual level, but suffers from bugs, cumbersome controls, and an unintuitive interface. While developer Bohemia Interactive readies a standalone release of DayZ, Hammerpoint Interactive is swooping in with a more polished, approachable open-world zombie game to fill the gap.

The War Z builds upon the same premise as DayZ: Scavenge for food and supplies in third- or first-person, ally with friendly human players, try not to get killed by thieving bandits, and avoid zombies. Unlike DayZ, players can customize multiple characters and adjust their loadouts with a shared stockpile before venturing forth into a vast Colorado wilderness (just one of many game worlds promised). You forage for canned goods, bottled water, and weapons in-game, but you can also purchase certain items in The War Z's marketplace. Food, armor, bigger backpacks, and melee weapons can be bought using currency earned in-game or via microtransactions. Hammerpoint doesn't want players to "pay to win," so don't expect to buy a suit of

armor and a Gatling gun and walk through the game. Hammerpoint plans to integrate an experience-based skill system to unlock perks like decreased weapon recoil or faster running speed.

Along with the increased personalization, The War Z alpha build is simply more fun to play than DayZ at this point. Zombies look and sound more authentic, gunplay is more visceral and responsive, and interacting with the world is more intuitive. Collectible items glow with a faint aura similar to Left 4 Dead, making them easy to spot. The HUD, which contains vital information regarding hunger, thirst, and stamina levels, is also easy to digest. Weapons, rations, and other items can be hotkeyed to number keys for quick access.

The War Z's solid interface allows players to quickly immerse themselves into the dreary world. With no overarching narrative or mission structure, emergent stories are what make the game so addictive.

At one point I attract a group of undead while reclaiming a shotgun from a fallen survivor's corpse. I sprint out of town towards a farm in the distance, trying to lose the train of zombies following me. By dumb luck, I find a cache of food and shotgun shells in a dilapidated barn. Suddenly, a fellow survivor walks in. I fear I



have unwittingly pilfered this man's hideout. Having been murdered for less in past sessions, I bolt out a window. I run out of stamina with just enough time to hide in some brush. The man follows me, but keeps his distance. Can he see me? I load the shells into my new shotgun and train it on his head. That's when I notice he has been trying to write to me in the in-game chat. Claiming to be friendly, he tosses down a granola bar as an olive branch. In exchange, I throw a baseball bat between our feet, as eager to reciprocate as I am to see if he's foolish enough to use it against me. After a shaky standoff, my new friend and I team up to go search for supplies in a nearby gas station.

The War Z still has time in development, but already moments like this have me itching to see what else may happen. If you're intrigued by post-apocalyptic stories that focus on the human element rather than the disasters themselves (i.e. *The Walking Dead*, *The Road*), try forging your own experiences in The War Z. You can pay to access the alpha now.

» **Tim Turi**

» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
Massively Multiplayer
Online Shooter

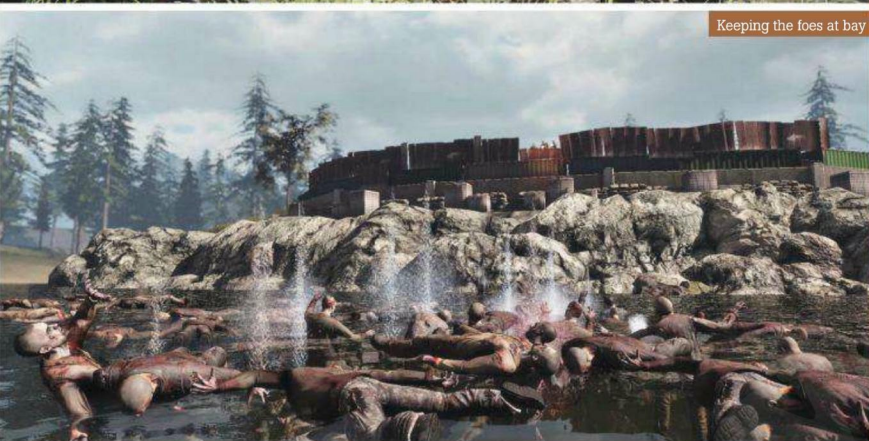
» **Publisher**
Arktos Interactive

» **Developer**
Hammerpoint
Interactive

» **Release**
Fall 2012



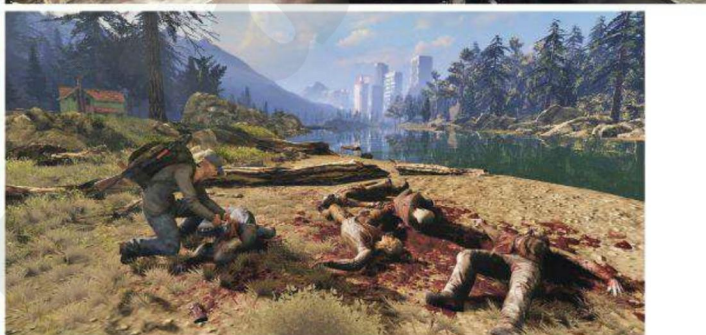
The zombies look and sound authentic

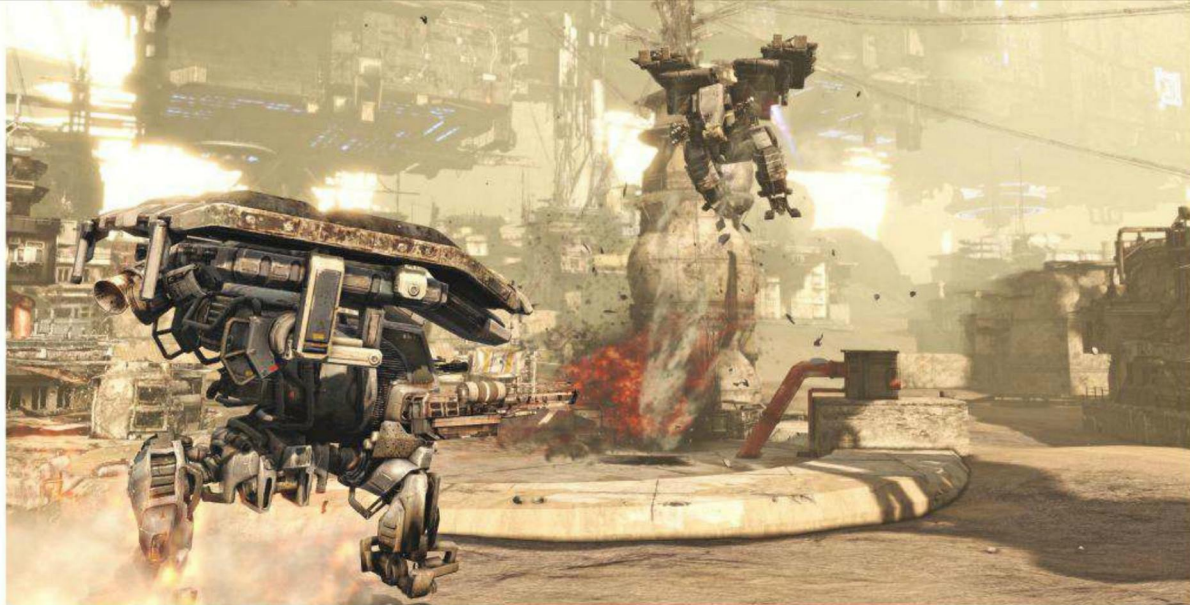


Keeping the foes at bay



These guys should probably cut their losses and run





In Siege mode, if your team collects enough energy, you can launch an attack from a battleship

Hawken

Building a better robot

» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
12-Player Online
Shooter

» **Publisher**
Meteor Entertainment

» **Developer**
Adhesive Games

» **Release**
December 12

Traditional mech-based FPS games are generally steeped in simulation. Clomping around in a 30-ton robot feels as one would expect: slow and clunky. Adhesive Games hopes to change that by bringing Hawken's gameplay up to speed with modern, fast-paced shooter action.

Ultimately, Hawken sits comfortably between traditional mech games and first-person shooters. Its mechs are agile, using jump jets to reach higher ground or dash out of enemy fire. However, the added mobility doesn't cement

Hawken as a twitchy, run-and-gun shooter. The gunplay emphasizes strategy, and you're frequently scrambling to find a safe place to repair your mech.

Mechs are divided into one of three main categories: light, medium, and heavy. Where the classes really distinguish themselves, though, are in specializations and abilities. For example, I chose a heavy mech called the Brawler, which is a flak-cannon-wielding beast that can transform into a defensive turret. If you don't want to sacrifice that much mobility, you can choose the Rocketeer. This is another heavy mech capable of soaking up a fair amount of damage, but its strength lies in its explosive ranged combat rather than getting up close and personal.

Currently, Hawken has a sparse selection of game types. Staples such as deathmatch and team deathmatch are present, but with a twist. Winning is determined by the number of points scored via kills, assists, and how much damage you inflict rather than just how many kills you rack up. Siege and Missile Assault provide objective-based team experiences and are often lengthy, strategic battles.

Based on your performance, you are awarded both XP for acquiring stat-boosting skills and points to purchase additional mechs, weapons, items, and internal upgrades. This

is all done in the Garage, which serves as your loadout screen prior to launching a game. Inside, you can customize your mech with different cosmetic parts and color schemes. Adhesive Games is adamant that Hawken's free-to-play model won't end up being pay-to-win, and anything available for purchase can also be earned in-game.

In the visual department, Hawken is remarkable, and can stand toe-to-toe with many triple-A games on the market. Adhesive Games has crafted stunning settings for the Hawken universe. While there are only a handful of different areas, each locale is varied and highly detailed. Cityscapes in particular have depth and verticality, with plenty of nooks and crannies for your mech to find cover in. The well-animated mechs convey a sense of weight, and the sound effects light up the battlefield in astonishing fashion.

I had fun in my time with Hawken's beta. Not surprisingly, blowing stuff up with big-ass robots is a satisfying experience. I didn't feel at all claustrophobic in the cockpit; in fact, I was immersed. Eye candy never hurts, and the visuals are a sight to behold. Beauty, however, is only skin deep. Under the hood, the lack of game modes and maps might cause this machine to stall out of the gate.

» Jason Oestreicher



This nimble mech boosts into position

Prison Architect

Exploring the darker side



One of the latest fascinating indie projects to be funded through alternative crowd-based means, *Prison Architect*, puts players in control of a for-profit prison. As the principal designer, you try to make a buck while keeping the prisoners occupied and distracted enough that even if they're not singing your praises from the rooftops, they're at least not rioting in the canteen and stabbing guards with improvised shivs. A tour through the early alpha build currently available to backers is promising.

The introduction – the only pre-designed scenario built so far – is a grim mission that walks you through building an execution chamber for a convicted murderer. Players don't control workers directly, instead painting (and paying for) build orders across the flat 2D world using simple tools. Once you issue instructions, your order is fulfilled as trucks automatically bring in the raw materials to be put together by autonomous workers. Laying foundations, placing objects like beds and doors, and running electrical and water infrastructure are quick tasks even with the rough-cut interface currently in place.

Brief vignettes mix narration, hand-drawn "photographs," and in-engine scenes to tell the condemned man's story between construction tasks. Once a suburban teacher, he killed his wife and her lover in cold blood when he walked in on them in his own bed. The player is reminded that he has been found guilty and sentenced to death under the law, and that the prison's job is not to judge but to carry out society's directives. The prisoner whispers, "I'm sorry," just before the executioner throws the switch. The screen whites out as the scenario ends in a victory that feels like anything but.

"The darker tone you see in the introduction is indicative of where we want to be in our storytelling," says designer Chris Delay. "There is no enemy army to be destroyed at the end of the level. Your prisoners are a cross between your enemy and your army, and they can't be defeated no matter how big your base is. Most games have quite a clear morality in that you are usually the good guys, attacking and destroying the clear and obvious enemy,

without any moral ambiguity. None of that is true in *Prison Architect*."

The amorality of the situation isn't rammed down the player's throat, but presented as sequences of events that feel like they should have some moral value attached but which you're explicitly told to not think of in that way. The dichotomy is mildly uncomfortable, but remarkable in how it encourages the player to think about the relationships between society, justice, criminals, punishment, and the for-profit prison system. *Prison Architect* is a game first and foremost, though, as put front-and-center with the free-form sandbox mode.

Like *SimCity*, *Tropico*, or *The Sims*, the player takes on the role of an invisible force of will that sets up parameters that the simulation in *Prison Architect* takes place in. Prisoners fulfill their needs – exercising, showering, eating, sleeping, watching TV – according to their own desires and the schedule that you set up. Keeping them relatively happy is paramount. An angry prisoner is much more likely to start fights, cook up and sell drugs, and otherwise cause trouble.

The depth comes from how you lay out structures and objects. Setting up central locations for common activities like eating is

efficient, but congregating prisoners into larger groups is more dangerous since fights quickly spread to nearby inmates until a full-scale riot erupts. Constructing distributed facilities for showers, recreation, and mealtimes is safer, but more expensive – and you won't always have the money or space to design the perfect solution.

Prison Architect is early in development and has a long way to go. Goals are notably absent from the sandbox mode, and only a single scenario is built so far. The simulation works as-is, but is relatively shallow as of yet. Nonetheless, Delay has big plans. "One of my high-level aims is to have a scenario where your guards are dealing with a prisoner and end up beating him quite a bit more seriously than you requested or was required," he says. "They won't respond to your requests to stop because they're in such a rage and they just want to take it out on the prisoner. You then have to deal with the prisoners' injuries and your guard's over-use of force. You potentially have legal issues to resolve as a result."

None of that exists in the game yet, but if *Introversion* succeeds, *Prison Architect* will be as exceptional as it is unique.

» **Adam Biessener**

» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
1-Player Simulation

» **Publisher**
Introversion Software

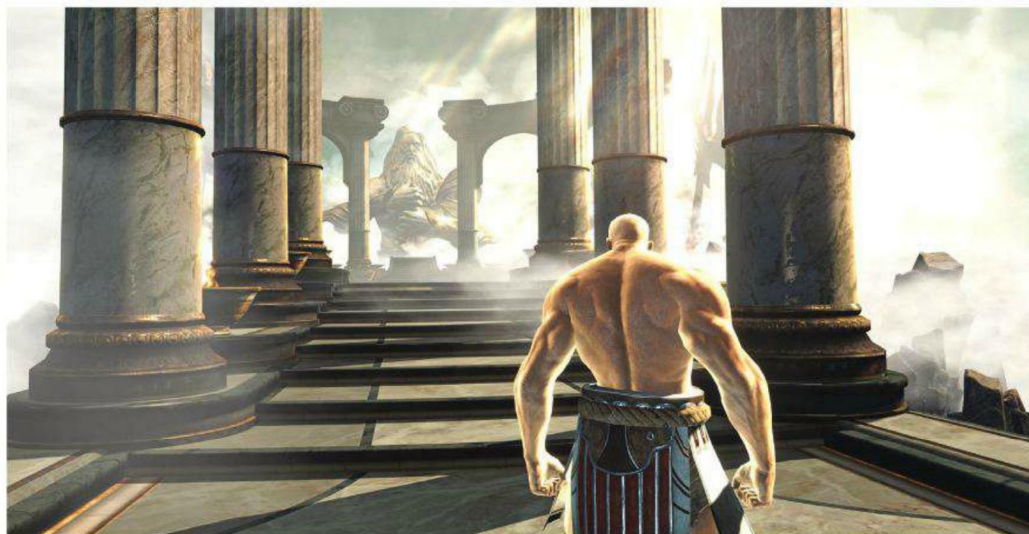
» **Developer**
Introversion Software

» **Release**
TBA



God of War: Ascension

Sony explains the risky move for its blockbuster series



» **Platform**
PlayStation 3

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

» **Publisher**
Sony Computer
Entertainment

» **Developer**
SCE Santa Monica
Studio

» **Release**
March 12

God of War: Ascension surprised many gamers when it debuted with a multi-player reveal. Sony Santa Monica is dead set on introducing online play to one of its biggest series, and we spoke to game director Todd Papy about the studio's multiplayer philosophy. » **Dan Ryckert**

God of War has always been a single-player experience. With Ascension, why did you decide to come out of the gate with a multiplayer reveal rather than a traditional debut?

I think people knew what to expect from our single-player experience based off of the three previous games, plus the two that Ready at Dawn did. Since we were focusing on the multiplayer, we wanted to make sure that we squashed any questions of what the multiplayer is going to be. It's a philosophy of mine — I prefer to hide as much gameplay as possible. I want the players to experience it versus seeing it, and I want to show less single-player early on because there's such a long lead time for releasing a game. I want to make sure that when we release single-player, it's close to the launch and also hits home.

Is multiplayer a common request your team has received from the community in past years?

I wouldn't say that it's been a request by any means, but at the same time I don't know if anybody expected us to do it. It's one of those things where we felt like we could do it, and players would be more than surprised with how it feels. We felt like we could do something special and new to the franchise as well as to the multiplayer genre that's different than an FPS or some of the other melee games we've seen.

Shooters dominate the online space right now. As a third-person action game are there any other titles that you can take cues from in terms of online play, or are you forced to offer something completely new?

I would go back to some of the old school games like Power Stone. We look at Power Stone and how that stuff worked. A lot of what we're doing right now is, "Okay, what do we feel makes a sticky multiplayer?" Part of that is looking at other multiplayer games that are out there right now and also saying, "Okay, what feels right for our game?" That took a long time to come up with and find the formula.

Will we be seeing any shifting environments on the scale of Power Stone 2, or will it be subtler?

It'll be subtler. With our camera system, it's a little bit trickier than Power Stone even though it has a similar fixed camera system. The way that we shoot, we think of it almost like a movie set. We design on three walls, and we try not to design on four walls at all. That fourth wall is always where the camera lives, it can back up and everything is laid out in front of you. Having these transitioning levels has been a difficult process, but it comes to a point where you don't want to interrupt gameplay and switch to a camera and then say, "Okay, game on." For us, we've been trying to figure out how we can tell the player, "Hey, this is about to happen," and after you've played it once you know when it's transitioning on to its next state.

You've mostly been showing off team-based

modes. Are there going to be any free-for-all modes for lone-wolf gamers?

Yeah, we do have free-for-all modes. Basically, we've taken the Hercules map from God of War III and now you can actually play in there. We have Hercules in there and he messes around with you guys a little bit. He's not a boss, but he'll come down and break apart the back of the arena, and then you can knock people out. It's a two-to-four player map so the fighting is a lot more intense, you can't run away really. It caters towards our hardcore fans that are purely into combat and want to dominate that side of the gameplay, versus our bigger arenas that allow players that aren't as skilled to still be part of a team and contribute to the match. In our smaller, tighter arenas, you're going to get your ass kicked if you don't know how to fight.

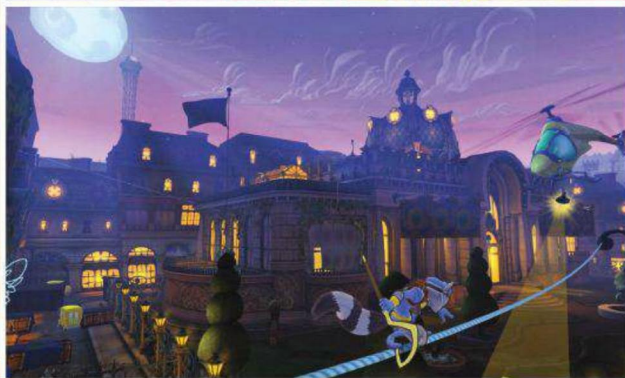
How will players defend against attacks? Will there be a counter and parry system?

We have parries, and we have counters. We have what we call an item button, which is more of a defensive thing, so it will actually get you out of a combo and then possibly it could give you magic depending on whom you're aligned to. It could give you health, it could give you what we call shouts, or what is basically a curse, or something like that. It sounds very MMO, but basically you can turn off their block, so it's a way for you to counter and set them up so that you can retaliate and go on the offensive. We're not like Bushido Blade, where you get that one hit and you're dead. Certain things are one-hit kills, like you can get rung out, and there are sequences that if somebody gets a good combo on you and you're at half health you can be dead, but it would be the same thing in a first-person shooter or even Street Fighter.

How substantial is the story component of multiplayer? Is there an overarching narrative throughout?

No, it's very light. We want to make sure players can switch allegiances when they want to, so it's pretty hard to tell a story dealing with Ares and then all of a sudden you can switch to Hades. We didn't want to deal with that just yet, and if we ever do another one of these, maybe that's something we can focus on. Right now, we really want to focus on the gameplay and figure that out just because it's such a beast to take on. To me, it's been bigger than our titans in the last game.





Sly Cooper: Thieves in Time

Getting back to Sly's roots

At the end of *Sly Cooper 3*, a lot of loose ends were left untied. Sly was suffering from possibly faked amnesia in order to leave his thieving life behind and start a romantic relationship with his long-time rival police officer Carmelita Fox. Bentley the turtle and his new girlfriend Penelope worked together to create a vault to store Sly's inherited wealth and work on a time machine. Murray the hippo returned to his life of training under the Koala Guru and became a professional race car driver. It seemed the gang was finished, but it only takes a few minutes of *Sly Cooper: Thieves in Time's* opening level to realize that Sly and the gang will always have a job in their thieving sights.

Bentley is the first to notice that something is askew. Entries in the Thievius Racoonus are inexplicably disappearing, because someone is traveling through time and mucking with the space-time continuum. Bentley seeks out Sly and discovers that his amnesia has been a ruse to trick Carmelita, and he's been itching to get back to his thieving ways. Murray is an easy sell, and leaves his racing days behind to get back to what he does best: support Sly

and his dangerously addictive and highly illegal thieving habits.

After a quick training job in Paris and a run-in with Carmelita, who learns the hard way that men never change, the gang is off to feudal Japan to meet up with and save Rioichi, the master ninja Cooper.

We've seen Japan in previous *Sly Cooper* previews, but this is the first time developer Sanzaru let us have full reign over the level. I quickly found myself jumping on spires, climbing poles, bouncing off handy trampolines, collecting bottles, and pickpocketing enemies who forgot to watch their back. *Thieves in Time* feels like a *Sly Cooper* game in the best way.

The first job is freeing Rioichi from wrongful imprisonment. This requires a hacking job from Bentley. Even though we are in the past, whoever made their way there first was able to implement all kinds of technology.

Sly sneaks his way into the prison using his platforming skills and a soldier costume he had procured earlier. The platforming is fantastic and makes me disappointed that I don't get to play more games like this. Jumping from

platform to platform and dodging the fireball security measures feels like *Sly Cooper's* first adventure.

Once Rioichi is free he becomes part of the team and it's time to set our sights on El Jefe, the displaced Tiger commander from the future. After some reconnaissance, it turns out El Jefe is after Rioichi Cooper's cane. In order to break into his stronghold, the team concocts a plan that involves, among many other tasks, stealing a geisha outfit for Murray so he can charm his way into guarded strongholds.

After a series of picked locks, thrown switches, beaten up soldiers, and an unfortunate mistake that places Rioichi's cane in El Jefe's paws, Sly takes him on in a boss battle. The fight with El Jefe shows off *Thieves in Time's* excellent animation. Watching El Jefe move and interact with Sly as he throws out electricity and fire attacks is impressive. Clear attention to detail shines through in everything from El Jefe's facial expressions to the movement of his tail.

After the battle, a gigantic zeppelin appears and grabs Ricoichi's cane before Sly has a chance to return it to its rightful owner. Far away in the zeppelin you can see the silhouette of whoever is behind these time-traveling shenanigans. It's unclear if it's somebody new or somebody we should recognize, but they have a large bushy tail and mouse-like ears.

If this early look is any indication, Sanzaru has captured the essence of the *Sly Cooper* series. The team knows what makes the raccoon and his pals tick. *Thieves in Time* feels like a *Sly Cooper* game, and I found myself making excuses to continue to play the demo even after ending El Jefe's reign in feudal Japan. » **Kyle Hilliard**

» **Platform**
PlayStation 3 • Vita

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Sony Computer Entertainment

» **Developer**
Sanzaru Games

» **Release**

February 5

Sixaxis Surprise

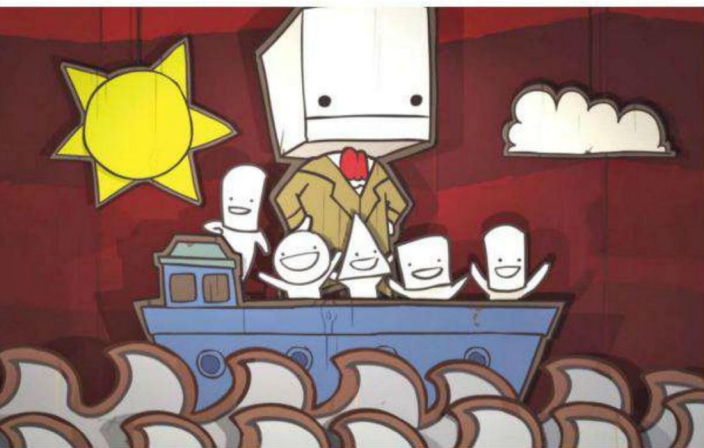
During the feudal Japan job, I played three different hacking minigames as Bentley. Two of them play like a twin-stick shooter, tasking a Bentley avatar to break his way through virtual defenses. The other is a Sixaxis-controlled game where you must move an electric ball to a goal in a certain amount of time. I thought most PlayStation developers had left Sixaxis controllers behind, but Sly has at least two games that take advantage of it: the aforementioned hacking game and a fishing minigame where you create poisoned sushi to knock out a pair of guards.

Sucker Punch Kung-Fu

Sly Cooper 4 Thieves in Time has been in development since 2008. Developer Sanzaru Games pitched the idea of a new *Sly Cooper* by creating a sample playable level. Sony was impressed and Sanzaru went to work on the *Sly Cooper HD Collection* with the help of Sly's original developer Sucker Punch studios. "Sucker Punch's kung-fu is very strong. We learned a lot about how to make a *Sly Cooper* game by doing that process," said Mat Kraemer, *Thieves in Time's* lead designer. "We love this franchise, we love this game. We wouldn't pitch a game that we wanted to build as a studio if we weren't that vested in it." Sanzaru clearly has a passion for *Sly Cooper*, and that is evident in the high standard of quality displayed in the game's first full level.

BattleBlock Theater

A buffet of platforming goodness



» **Platform**
Xbox 360

» **Style**
1 to 4-Player Action
(4-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Microsoft Studios

» **Developer**
The Behemoth

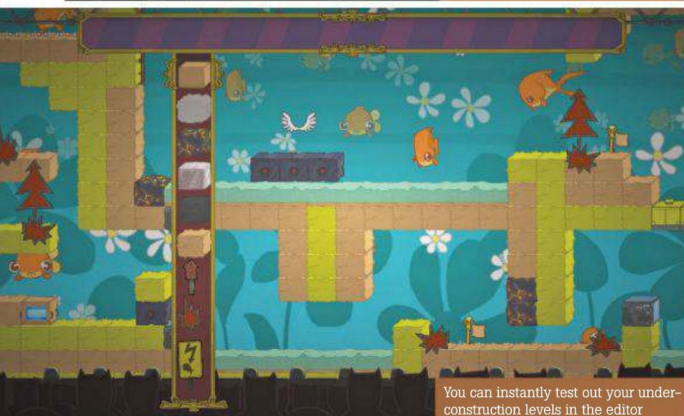
» **Release**
2013

The Behemoth's latest title has been in and out of the public eye since its first reveal in 2009. Fans have been hungry for more from the developer since its smash XBLA hit *Castle Crashers* wowed 360 owners in 2008. We recently played through a few hours of the quirky 2D platformer, and like its predecessor, *BattleBlock Theater* is poised to deliver quality multiplayer action.

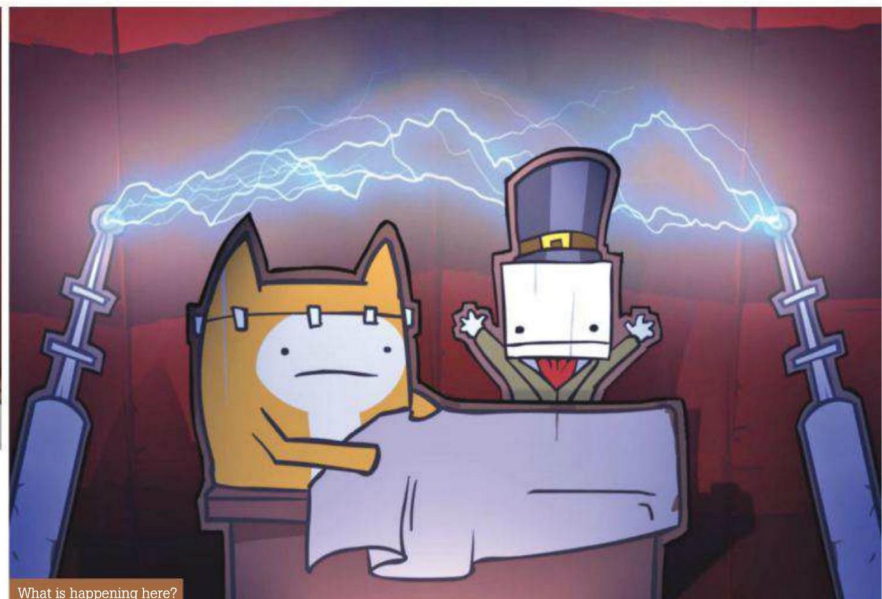
The story kicks off with The Behemoth's sense of humor front and center. A chatty, neurotic narrator tells the tale of the *U.S.S. Boatship*, a nasty storm, and the inevitable shipwreck on a prison island run by dead-eyed feline guards. The absurd premise is



Charcoal blocks make your character bounce all over the place



You can instantly test out your under-construction levels in the editor



What is happening here?

guaranteed to keep players chuckling, and the goofy narrator keeps the act up throughout the game.

The evil cats have rigged the prison into a gladiatorial arena, which sets the stage for the insane story mode. Playable either solo or with a friend (locally or online), the game offers more than 200 different levels. Players work their way through the colorful, deadly environments, hunting down a predetermined number of green gems before finding the exit. Stages are composed of blocks with varying characteristics. Water blocks drown you, sticky blocks slow you down, timed blocks detonate after touching them, and launcher blocks send you sailing through the sky. Some blocks fire lasers at you or extend energy bridges, forcing you to use teamwork to solve situational puzzles. You can also help each other out by tossing your buddy across a gap or pulling them over a ledge. You can use creative weapons like explosive frisbees and acid bubbles to take on pesky cats, but you can also turn on your friends for some hilarious grieving.

If pounding on your friends is more your style, *BattleBlock Theater's* arena lets up to four players duke it out in a variety of wacky modes. One game type has players scrambling around the map collecting gold dropped by a flying whale, which must then be deposited into a flying safe. Another game is a simplified version of soccer, which involves frenzied sprints for the goal and tossing weapons like grenades to block shots. I had the most fun with king of the hill. Tossing opponents off the point-generating king blocks and knocking them back with the fan weapon kept me cackling. I never knew I had an itch for competitive platforming, but *BattleBlock Theater* scratches it.

The frantic action might be a frustrating mess in a less polished game, but infinite respawns (except on Insane mode) and



responsive controls make this a riot. The intuitive control scheme extends to the level editor, which lets one or two players simultaneously construct any sadistic rat maze they desire. All the tools and block varieties used by the developers are available to creative players ready to contribute to *BattleBlock Theater's* user-generated content.

BattleBlock Theater's inconsistent exposure may have made some fans nervous that the game would never see the light of day, but rest assured. The puzzling story mode, addictive arena games, and accessible level editor are coming together into one content-packed downloadable. I walked away from my time with the kooky platformer with renewed confidence in The Behemoth and more excited than ever to play the final product. » **Tim Turi**

Monster Hunter 3 Ultimate

Capcom crafts the ultimate Monster Hunter package



Capcom's Monster Hunter games are packed with hundreds of hours of monster hunting-quests. Some find these titles difficult to break into, but series fans adore the deep crafting and hunting systems. If you missed monster-hunting season when Monster Hunter Tri released on the Wii in 2010, Capcom is packing nearly an entire game's worth of new quests, enemies, and weapons into the re-release.

One of Ultimate's biggest additions is a monstrous new enemy called the Brachydios. This lumbering wyvern coats its horns and arms in explosive plasma. Hunters should stay clear of

its powerful paw swipes and horn thrusts, but the Brachydios also leaves deposits of plasma scattered around the battlefield. Players need to dodge these organic landmines while felling the beast.

"The Brachydios is the first monster in the series to be of the slime element, which has drops that allow players to create special weapons and armor that have the element imbued in them," says assistant producer Natsuki Shiozawa. "There are a ton of other cool new monsters as well, such as the Zinogre that attacks with fierce electric attacks, and the Lagombi, which glides along the floor

while assaulting the player."

Monster Hunter Tri featured a support character named Cha-Cha, whose skills and personality change depending on the mask he's wearing. In Ultimate, a second support character joins Cha-Cha on the support team. This little creature is called Kayumba, and both characters can use items to heal players or learn new elemental attacks that help capture monsters. Cha-Cha and Kayumba can also dance together, which grants players a variety of power and stat bonuses.

"We felt that by adding a rival character for Cha-Cha, who was so well loved by fans before, it would really help bring out their personalities and make them even more appealing to fans," Shiozawa says. "Cha-Cha and Kayumba are rivals who are there to support the player in their own ways, and thus have different masks and skills."

Another cool addition to this re-release is cross play. If you play at home on the Wii U, you can resume your game on the go if you also have the 3DS version.

Monster Hunter 3 Ultimate adds a significant amount of content to what is already a massive game. Capcom hopes this makes the game much more enticing for those of us who still haven't caught the monster-hunting bug and to those looking to return to the hunting grounds. » **Ben Reeves**

» **Platform**
Wii U • 3DS

» **Style**
1-Player Action/
Role-Playing
(4-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Capcom

» **Developer**
Capcom

» **Release**
March



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gameinformer
GAME OF THE MONTH

88 New Super Mario Bros. U

Nintendo's iconic plumber teams up with Luigi and those two Toads once again to rescue Princess Peach. This time around he's got another helper: someone's finger. The new Boost Mode adds an exciting new dimension to co-op play in some of the best levels the New Super Mario Bros. series has yet seen.

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	Elevator farts.

AWARDS

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

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Far Cry 3

You know where you are? You're in the jungle, baby

9

PS3 • 360 • PC

» **Concept**

Return this open-world shooter to a lush jungle setting and fill it with activities

» **Graphics**

The gorgeous and varied terrain invites you to explore every nook and cranny

» **Sound**

When you hear a hissing sound, brace yourself. Those Komodo dragons aren't friendly

» **Playability**

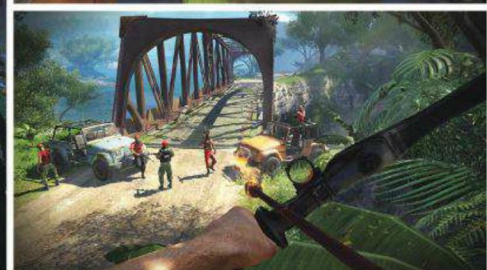
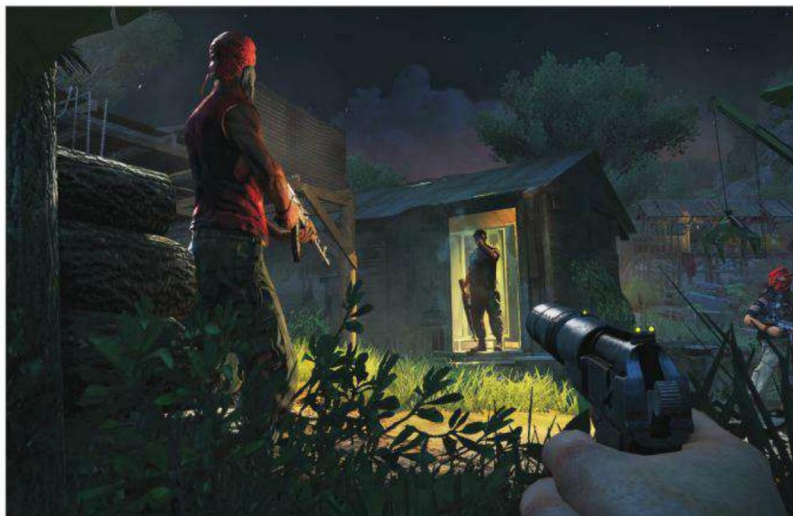
The refined gunplay (now without firearms malfunctions), more forgiving checkpoints, and wealth of side activities make this a much more enjoyable experience than Far Cry 2

» **Entertainment**

This is one island adventure you won't want to miss

» **Replay Value**

Moderate



Style 1-Player Shooter (12-Player Online) **Publisher** Ubisoft **Developer** Ubisoft Montreal **Release** December 4 **ESRB** M

The idyllic beaches, lush jungles, and warm weather make the South Pacific islands intriguing vacation destinations, but the region also has a darker side. From blackbirding in the 19th century to seedy drug and human trafficking operations in modern times, visits to these remote locations aren't always memorable for the right reasons. When a group of trust-fund kids unknowingly parachute onto an island inhabited by pirates, their sheltered, picture-perfect life is given a cruel dose of reality.

After escaping pirate captivity, Jason Brody vows to drop his silver spoon and pick up an AK-47. With the help of the island natives, he starts down the path of the warrior, taking over enemy encampments, learning to live off the land, and trying to find his friends before they are sold into slavery. This sudden transformation from harmless party boy to savage killer feels implausible, but Far Cry 3 introduces so many other compelling characters (especially the tribal leader Citra and the madman Vaas) and throws so many activities at players that you find yourself invested in the world nonetheless.

When you're not searching for your fellow one-percenters, you can participate in races, compete in shooting challenges, hunt down wanted islanders, climb towers to reveal more of the map, or capture pirate camps to free the surrounding territory of their influence. This ability to reclaim areas of the map is a welcome addition to the series, since the infinite enemy respawns of Far Cry 2 and unforgiving checkpoint system derailed the experience. The island also has several types of collectibles to search for, some of which make sense (relics) and others that seem baffling (drug recipes).

The pirates represent the gravest threat on the island, but they aren't the only danger Brody faces. The wild is filled with deadly

predators like tigers, Komodo dragons, and sharks. If you don't pay close attention to your surroundings, you may meet your untimely demise like a foolish Steve Irwin wannabe. Killing them and gathering their hides allows you to construct new pouches for carrying more weapons, ammunition, syringes, and money. It doesn't make sense to force a player to find a rare animal just to craft a new wallet that can hold more cash, but it encourages you to explore the rich and varied island terrain, which includes ancient ruins, huge waterfalls, and wrecked ships.

Like the best open-world shooters, Far Cry 3 excels because it lets you approach objectives in any way you see fit. For some missions I would sneak in to the base, turn off the alarms, and stealth kill as many people as possible. In others I would use an overlook to snipe unsuspecting pirates with a suppressed long-range rifle. My favorite approach is introducing the chaos of the wildlife into the encampment. Driving Komodo dragons into the bases or letting caged tigers loose helps you even the odds. While the pirates desperately try to subdue the animals, you can open fire with their backs turned.

This kind of freedom is exhilarating; I only wish the AI posed more of a challenge. They too frequently pour into the same positions where their friends just died, and can't discern elevation changes. Rather than work their way up a cliff to attack after spotting me, for instance, they just stood at the base of the incline, making it extremely easy to take them all out with one well-placed grenade.

As you hone your killing skills, Jason Brody's growth as a warrior is chronicled by a tribal tattoo on his arm. By completing missions and side activities, you earn XP that can unlock new special abilities like more health, improved shooting accuracy, or cinematic

takedown moves. Far Cry 3 offers a wealth of options, but you don't need to be picky. If you tackle a fair amount of side activities you will unlock most of them before you reach the end of the story.

In addition to the impressive single-player campaign, which features one of my favorite narrative conclusions this year, Far Cry 3 also offers a standalone co-op mode complete with its own story. As four players work together to hunt down a cruise-ship captain who sold out his crew and passengers to pirates, you encounter scripted sequences that require you to work together to take out bridges or compete against one another in shooting challenges. The co-op largely abandons the open-world format that makes the single-player experience, but it's a fun diversion nonetheless.

Far Cry 3 also features a full-fledged multi-player mode complete with player progression, unlockable weapons/attachments, and four game modes. The sluggish movement and questionable hit detection keep this game from competing against the top online shooters, but if the community embraces the map editor, it could still find a niche in the overcrowded space. The modes don't offer much you can't get elsewhere, but the island setting, "survival instinct" effect that highlights enemies for poorly performing players, and amusing match endgame that allows the best player on the winning team to either humiliate or show mercy to the best player of the losing team give the game its own feel.

After two remarkable but uneven offerings, Far Cry finally pulls everything together in the third installment. The diverse open-world action, compelling story, and an alluring environment that begs exploration are all high water marks for the series. This is an island adventure all shooter fans should experience. » **Matt Bertz**

Epic Mickey 2: The Power of Two

The Mouse falls flat

Style 1 or 2-Player Action Publisher Disney Interactive Developer Junction Point, Blitz Game Studios, Heavy Iron Release November 18 ESRB E

5.75

Wii U, PS3, 360, Wii

» Concept

Return to Wasteland for another adventure with forgotten Disney toons

» Graphics

Beautiful character animations and colorful backgrounds are a highlight of the game

» Sound

The whimsical voice acting is strong, but the sung musical numbers are flops

» Playability

The paint/electricity aiming mechanic works well

» Entertainment

Frustrating level, quest, and boss design all pull the game down

» Replay Value

Low

Junction Point clearly knows its Disney, from the way Mickey Mouse's ears turn and bob in Epic Mickey 2 to the constant nods about visiting the classic theme park. That love shines through with beautiful animation and art, silly cartoon voices, and constant opportunities to delve into the history of Disney fiction. Unfortunately, Junction Point's obvious affection is the most redeeming element of this sequel; from the structure of puzzles to the implementation of the cooperative experience, nothing ever coalesces into consistent entertainment.

Epic Mickey 2 moves in a number of new directions, but usually away from what I liked in its predecessor. Tedious puzzle rooms have replaced longer platforming levels. While Mickey and Oswald still jump from place to place, the focus is almost always on fetching some hidden object or opening a door. Solutions are rarely intuitive, and wandering from place to place before stumbling upon the answer is common. Regular vocal cues do little to alleviate the problem, like telling me to "go over there" without specifying where, or look "by the entrance" in a room with multiple doors.

The story is a flimsy excuse to send Mickey and Oswald from one place to the next, many of which are recycled (but modified) locations from the first game. The middling plot is punctuated by painful interludes of the Mad Doctor's singing, which fails to elicit any of the intended magic of a classic Disney musical. Appropriately silly voice acting now helps to

enrich the storytelling, and frequent cutscenes help move events forward. Unfortunately, rather than focus on a few characters that could be fully realized, the game throws dozens of characters into the mix, and few are around long enough to be memorable.

Mickey's familiar paint and thinner mechanic returns as the central tool for affecting the world, and it's entertaining to shape the world by filling in objects or making them disappear. Unlike in the first game, I was occasionally unsure which objects could be thinned. Meanwhile, Oswald's ability to create electricity with his remote is less interesting than the paintbrush, mostly acting as a tool to flip switches by giving them power. Nonetheless, the ability to aim and shoot objects consistently works well for both characters, and Epic Mickey remains one of the stronger implementations of motion controls in the systems that support it.

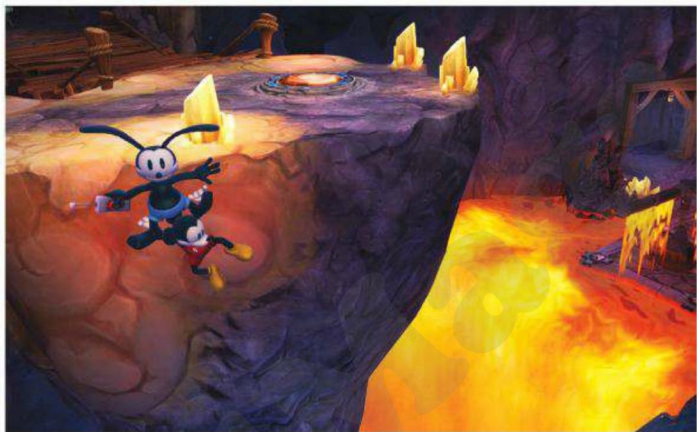
Playing alone, the ally AI is profoundly unhelpful, getting left behind on the most basic platforming sequences and failing to revive me when required. Playing with a cooperative partner makes the frustrations mount, largely because of each character's inability to stun most enemies, Mickey can't jump long distances, and relying on each other for these gameplay fundamentals isn't fun. Split-screen play complicates the already confusing level design, but that's the only option; no online cooperative play is supported.

Whether alone or with a friend, there's

plenty to do as you wander. Side quests, collectibles, and hidden locations abound in Wasteland, but I commonly found myself wondering what they are all for. From shiny pins to any number of pictures to take with the camera, I got lost in the sea of objectives. Plus, it's usually inconvenient to return to the quest giver once a job is complete.

Even if I wasn't enjoying the activities on offer, I rarely had complaints about what I was looking at. The game deserves a nod for its beautiful visual presentation, filled with vibrant colors and imaginative twists on familiar Disney iconography. In particular, I applaud the return of dedicated 2D platforming levels based on old cartoons. The 3D levels look equally pretty, but level design and shape is often confusing and haphazard.

Attractive visuals only carry the game so far. Just when I finished one infuriating, monotonous boss fight I'd get thrown into another directionless, obtuse puzzle room. The discrete sections connect into an unbroken string of frustrating gameplay. I'm genuinely sad that a game rooted in the joy of Disney failed to evoke any in me, but Epic Mickey 2 is so disjointed and rambling, I was ready to escape Wasteland when the time came. » **Matt Miller**



The Edge

While the Wii version is a noticeable visual step down from 360, the dedicated motion controller is a plus. Balance your preference for visual fidelity against control to choose a system, or play on PS3 to get the best of both worlds while using a Move controller. The Wii U version also offers excellent graphics and motion controls, but exhibits some noticeable slowdown at times.

Call of Duty: Black Ops II

Treyarch offers FPS fans a mixed bag

8.5

PS3 • 360

» Concept

Finally introduce some significant changes to Call of Duty's single-player formula

» Graphics

As always, everything looks great and moves along at a steady 60 frames per second

» Sound

The campaign features some Hollywood-caliber voice acting, and the shootout sound appropriately chaotic

» Playability

It's Call of Duty. You won't find any real control hiccups anywhere

» Entertainment

Strike Force missions aside, fans of the franchise should find plenty to like

» Replay Value

Moderately High



Style 1 to 4-Player Shooter (16-Player Online) Publisher Activision Developer Treyarch Release November 13 ESRB M

Call of Duty 2 kicked off this console generation when it released alongside the Xbox 360, and the series has been an annual juggernaut ever since. This sustained popularity has put the series in a tough spot creatively, as drastic changes to the formula might turn off longtime fans. With the first Black Ops, Treyarch demonstrated it was willing to take risks by shaking up numerous multiplayer conventions. Fans loved the new features, and the developer has shifted its focus to campaign changes for Black Ops II. Some of these risks pay off, and others are faulty despite their ambition.

One of the most frequent critiques of the series' campaigns revolves around their restricting linearity. Treyarch has countered this in two ways with Black Ops II: presenting the player with narrative-changing decisions (both obvious and subtle), and adding the new sandbox Strike Force missions.

During my six hours with the campaign, I sometimes didn't even realize how my actions had shaped the situations. You are occasionally presented with immediate choices like, "Do you want to kill this guy or not?" but others aren't as overt. As you enter one area near the middle of the campaign, your enemies are desperately attempting to burn evidence of some sort. Depending on how quickly you kill them, you might gain some information that will assist the overall war effort. These decisions don't affect the grand scheme of things, but many cutscenes and in-game scenarios can be altered based on your actions. The weight of your decisions isn't on the level of a game like Heavy Rain, but the system had me talking to others about their experiences in a way I had never done before with this series.

Interspersed between the story's chapters are the new Strike Force missions. These are undoubtedly the weakest part of the single-

player component. The idea of integrating sandbox stages with light RTS elements could have been a great way to shake up the standard gameplay. Instead, these stages are full of frustration as you attempt to control your AI teammates. Ordering my squads around via the overhead tactical view proved to be a fruitless effort, as they rarely reacted to my commands. At one point late in the game, I even had to restart an entire Strike Force mission because of a glitch that wouldn't allow me to perform the final required action.

Strike Force missions are a pain, and though they are not required for progression, they have a major impact on your ending. If you take them out of the equation, the Black Ops II campaign is on par with previous entries. Hopping between the 1980s and 2025, it tells the story of the original game's Alex Mason and his son David. The plot quickly gets convoluted, but the main threads are easy to follow and are ultimately rewarding. Everything moves along at a breakneck pace, big set piece moments punctuate the action, and Raul Menendez proves to be one of the best antagonists in the series.

With such a focus on introducing new elements to the campaign, it seems that multiplayer was approached with more of an "if it ain't broke..." mentality. Treyarch made one big tweak when it comes to loadouts: the new Pick 10 system, which allows for increased customization options. Players are allowed to hit the battlefield with 10 points in their loadout. Gun attachments, perks, grenade types, secondary weapons, and new wild card bonuses each take up a point. If you want to take the fight to your enemy with a decked-out LMG, you can equip up to three attachments with the use of a wild-card bonus. If you'd rather create an ultra-speedy class for capture the flag matches, you can activate wild cards that allow for two perks in each

slot. With those active, you're free to head into battle with six speed-oriented perks. The system is interesting, but I ultimately found it less exciting than the currency system and contracts introduced in the original Black Ops, which are scrapped for this sequel.

Ever since World at War, Treyarch's zombie modes have enjoyed a devoted following. Black Ops II offers plenty to keep those fans coming back in, with a massive (and secret-filled) Transit mode that shuttles players across a zombie-infested town on a bus. It appears to be another horde mode clone on the surface, but fans of the previous offerings know that the bevy of Easter eggs in zombie mode offers a surprising amount of replayability.

Black Ops II gives multiplayer fans countless tweaks and changes to the formula to keep them occupied until next year's inevitable installment. New league matches are tailored to the e-sports community, and these open up every unlockable from the start in the interest of fairness. They also eliminate random elements from maps, such as moving environmental objects. The stat-tracking elements of Call of Duty Elite are now free, so everyone who owns the game has access to heat maps and extensive records.

For shooter fans that don't require as deep of a dive, Black Ops II's multiplayer may feel like more of the same. No significant new match types are present, and the Pick 10 system doesn't drastically change the gameplay experience. Most of the changes to the Call of Duty formula come in campaign mode, and they are executed with mixed results. Despite some frustrations, Black Ops II is yet another massive, polished, finely tuned entry in a series that shows no signs of slowing down. Even if Treyarch misses the mark on occasion, I respect the developer for taking chances with a series that would sell just fine if it stuck with the status quo. » Dan Ryckert

Medal of Honor: Warfighter

A Medal of Awful

Style 1-Player Shooter (20-Player Online) Publisher Electronic Arts Developer Danger Close Release October 23 ESRB M

5

PS3 • 360 • PC

» **Concept**

Kill time between Battlefield releases by deploying this over-the-hill soldier

» **Graphics**

The powerful Frostbite 2 engine creates some great lighting effects, but oftentimes Danger Close oversaturates it

» **Sound**

Competent voice acting, but expect a few audio glitches

» **Playability**

Danger Close nails the controls, though the hit detection seems slightly off

» **Entertainment**

With a huge arsenal of impressive military games to choose from, leave this malfunctioning shooter on the shelf

» **Replay Value**

Low



In a bid to keep pace with Activision's front-running Call of Duty, competitor EA devised a two-tiered approach: Give its star first-person shooter franchise, Battlefield, the stage every other year, and alternate it with Medal of Honor, a once-glorious series that has struggled to match the quality and excitement of its early World War II games. The studio tasked with this revival, Danger Close, was given many of the necessary tools to compete on this hyper-competitive genre: two years of development, a decent marketing budget to drive awareness, and the keys to the powerful Frostbite 2 engine. Even with all of these advantages, Medal of Honor: Warfighter more resembles an untrained insurgent trying to figure out a state-of-the-art rocket launcher than a Tier 1 soldier.

Given the relatively short campaigns of modern shooters (this one clocks in at around six hours), multiplayer often makes or breaks these games. Warfighter tries to carve a niche in the overcrowded market by hedging its bet between the fast-paced, lone-wolf action of Call of Duty and the team-oriented approach of Battlefield. With a healthy assortment of unlockable weapon attachments, comprehensive stat tracking, player progression, and five game modes, Warfighter checks off all the multiplayer boxes. Danger Close just forgot to bring the gameplay.

The setup is promising. Players choose between six classes – sniper, spec ops, point man, heavy gunner, demolitions, and assaulter. Classes are distinguished by their class abilities and support actions (kill streaks). Once you choose your class, you are paired up with another person to form a two-man Fireteam. The ability to resupply and heal your teammate encourages pairs to work closely together, and when your partner is gunned down, his killer appears with a red halo around him so you can exact revenge.

The Fireteam construct is a great building block, but with inconsistent hit detection,

sluggish movement, and a confusing user interface that obfuscates what new weapons or attachments you've unlocked, the multiplayer has its share of problems. Danger Close even bungles the basics, like respawn locations and terrain navigation. The game allows you to spawn next to your fellow fireteam member when he or she isn't engaged in direct combat, but when playing modes like Hotspot (which charges you with attacking or defending various locations), choosing the "fall back" option occasionally respawns you directly into the line of mortar fire or right next to an enemy.

Outside of the occasional chopper appearances that become available as high-tier support actions, the concentrated maps keep the focus on infantry battles. Some maps give the appearance of being open, but thanks to invisible barriers that prevent you from leaping over certain fences or taking cover in patch of grass on the other side of a short embankment, they largely play as a network of corridors.

Most of the objective-based game modes stress strategy and cooperation, and Danger Close includes a hardcore modifier called Real Ops that allows you to experience two of the modes with the HUD elements pared down and friendly fire turned on. I thought my favorite mode was going to be Combat Mission, which operates like a streamlined rush mode with only three M-com stations to destroy, but the boundaries that prevent the defending team from venturing too close to the attacking team's respawn camp are ill-defined and located way too close to the control point. My preferred mode is the sport-like Home Run, a 10-round competition where teams alternate defending two flags. Each player is only given one life per round, so the stakes are high.

Like the multiplayer, the single-player mode botches most of its mission objectives. Danger Close includes all the ingredients of

the blockbuster shooter recipe – explosive set pieces, cinematic cutscenes, and a replayable tutorial mission ripped straight out of Call of Duty 4 – but the lack of creativity, sloppy execution, and a jingoistic narrative derail the experience. The only redeeming feature Warfighter brings is the slick secondary scope mechanic that allows you to switch between two different magnified scopes on the same rifle, which is great for alternating between close and ranged combat.

The globetrotting campaign tours terrorist hot spots like Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, and the Philippines, but the weak narrative thread barely holds these disparate missions together. To help deliver authenticity to the experience, Danger Close enlisted real Tier 1 soldiers to write the story, but rather than give us insight into moral, emotional, and physical tolls combat takes on soldiers and their families, the game falls back on heavy-handed tropes that paint war in the most simplistic hues.

Outside of a few thrilling (but out-of-place) car chase sequences that would feel more at home in a James Bond or Jason Bourne game, Warfighter brings nothing new to the table. The level design is painfully linear, and Danger Close puts a strange over-emphasis on breaching techniques. The laughable enemy AI is prone to taking cover from grenades in the middle of the street, and your oblivious squad members set up shop in your line of sight or even push you out of cover because they are scripted to position themselves in that spot. The occasional audio glitches, ugly building textures, and awkward lighting choices prove Danger Close isn't comfortable controlling the powerful Frostbite 2 engine, as well. I even experienced a checkpoint bug that forced me to restart an entire level.

The uninspired single-player campaign, uneven multiplayer execution, and rampant presence of glitches undermine Medal of Honor: Warfighter's efforts to join the Tier 1 of military shooters. If Danger Close keeps executing this poorly, this once-loved series may be dangerously close to being put in a casket. » **Matt Bertz**



The Walking Dead Episode Five: No Time Left

Telltale says farewell to fast friends

8.5

PS3 • 360 • PC

» Concept

A bare-bones adventure game that tells a compelling story set in the universe of Image's *The Walking Dead* comic

» Graphics

This series' graphics are far from highly detailed, but they evoke the look and feel of a comic

» Sound

Much of the voice cast has improved since the early episodes, and this episode even uses music to full effect a few times

» Playability

No Time Left features little to no puzzle gameplay. It's a straightforward, choice-heavy narrative

» Entertainment

The game feels like one long cutscene, but a few interactive moments prevent you from dropping your controller

» Replay Value

Moderate



Style 1-Player Adventure Publisher Telltale Games Developer Telltale Games Release November 20 ESRB M

Endings are notoriously hard to write. People want stories with closure – they want a satisfying ending that feels logical and meaningful. Unfortunately, life isn't full of logical conclusions. How do you remain true to life while trying to tie everything up in a neat bow? Impressively, Telltale Games has managed to wrap *The Walking Dead* up like a Christmas present while retaining its authenticity. The *Walking Dead*'s shades of realism make the experience all the more eerie.

In previous episodes of the series we watched Lee, Clementine, and their band of fellow adventures survive the initial onslaught of the zombie apocalypse, hunt for shelter and food, and ultimately head for the coast in search of a boat that would let them float across the safety of an open ocean. Along the way, players were forced into several morally compromising choices. At the end of Episode Four, Clementine disappears and Lee is left to hunt her down. An ominous air hangs over the party, and it's clear that this group will never be the same again.

I felt like Episode Four was a weak point for the series, adding a few characters who didn't contribute much to the overall story. Thankfully, *No Time Left* comes back strong as one of the best. The characters feel more authentic

than ever, and they have several genuine moments of reflection where they fight and bond with one another. Lee's actions throughout the episode also solidify him as one of the strongest heroes of the year. If you've been following this series from the beginning, this entry is almost guaranteed to pull at your heartstrings, and its ending will hang with you for weeks.

The series has never had particularly strong puzzles – a fact Telltale must have realized, because puzzle mechanics have been largely abandoned here. *No Time Left* is more like an experiment in interactive fiction; you have a few conversations, use a ladder to climb up to the top of a bell tower, smash open a window with a bat, and lop off a bunch of zombies' heads before watching the credits roll. It's the shortest entry of the series. However, I'm glad that Telltale trimmed out the elements that weren't working so it could focus on telling a compelling story.



Telltale's episodic love letter to zombies remains one of the most memorable gaming experiences of the year. Telltale has already announced it is working on Season Two, and *No Time Left* beautifully wraps up the story of these last several episodes while teasing things to come. *No Time Left* isn't a "happily ever after" affair, but it feels like a dark and stormy introduction to another exciting chapter. » Ben Reeves

Lego The Lord of the Rings

Walking into Mordor with a smile

8.5

PS3 • 360

» Concept

Apply the Lego formula to the film adaptations of J.R.R. Tolkien's fantasy epic

» Graphics

The non-Lego environments have a cool diorama feel, and the Lego blocks and characters look the same as ever

» Sound

Voices pulled directly from the film audio often have abrupt or tinny implementation

» Playability

Floaty jumps require practice to master, but otherwise the controls are simple and straightforward

» Entertainment

The humor and gameplay mix well with the setting, making the most impressive Lego game to date

» Replay Value

High



Style 1 or 2-Player Action/Platforming Publisher Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment Developer Traveller's Tales Release November 14 ESRB E10+

If you've played one Lego game, you haven't played them all. That may seem obvious, but I've encountered too many people who dismiss new Lego titles based on the faulty assumption that they are all the same. *Lego Lord of the Rings* is the perfect opportunity to see how far this series has come since its inception. *Traveller's Tales* has crafted a wonderful platformer that stands on its own – though the Lego charm and a great license make it even better.

Lego Lord of the Rings is a broad fusion of many elements – exploration, collection, combat, puzzle-solving – and Middle-earth is the ideal environment for these things to come together. The mix of faithfulness and playfulness with the source material makes *Lego Lord of the Rings* the best video game adaptation of Tolkien's universe, hands-down.

You don't need to be a diehard fan to have a good time here. The gameplay supporting the story (which follows the three movies) is fun regardless of your level of Middle-earth expertise. Whether you're playing in single-player or with a local co-op buddy, the variety is astounding. You still beat up bad guys and collect studs, but that kind of activity occupies a much smaller percentage of the

experience. Most of your time is spent exploring the iconic environments, hunting down collectibles, and searching for solutions to puzzles. Combat is still important, but it tends to happen in more impressive ways than enemies mindlessly pouring out of doors. Stomping around as Treebeard, riding into battle as King Théoden, and taking down Oliphaunts are just a few examples of how *Traveller's Tales* keeps the action fresh.

Once the War of the Ring is won, your time with *Lego Lord of the Rings* is just beginning. The (fairly linear) core campaign is an easily digestible eight hours, but the wealth of open-world, post-game content is staggering. With all of Middle-earth available to explore, the most powerful items, best puzzles, and coolest characters are yours to find – including a bonus level where you control two powerful villains. Obsessive players can expect to spend 30 hours or more to hit 100 percent.

As fun as this game can be, some technical issues get in the way. Character selection bugs, chugging framerates, and screen tearing provide occasional annoyances.

The irregular audio quality (the voices are all sampled directly from the films) sometimes makes it seem like the main characters' dialogue is provided by an Internet soundboard, which deflates some otherwise cool moments.

A handful of technical stumbles can't keep *Lego The Lord of the Rings* from being the best Lego game so far. Finding a great compromise between the linear installments and the sprawling open world of *Lego Batman 2*, *Traveller's Tales* hits sweet spots in the structure and gameplay, constantly giving players new goals and new places to explore. The steady stream of goofball humor keeps the mood light, but almost every part of the game is entertaining in its own way. » Joe Juba



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New Super Mario Bros. U

Nintendo's hero returns with the best New Super Mario Bros. game yet

9.25

Wii U

» Concept

Add a fun new element to already great couch co-op and more bite-sized challenges

» Graphics

HD visuals at last! Everything looks gorgeous

» Sound

Even though the Wii U supports 5.1 surround sound, Nintendo purposely chose to only offer two-channel stereo sound

» Playability

Sideways Wii remotes are as tight as always and the GamePad is solid. Beware: Pro controllers are not supported

» Entertainment

Some of the most creative NSMB levels Nintendo has created, incorporating new and classic elements alike and rarely repeating standout enemies and themes

» Replay Value

Moderately High

After playing through New Super Mario Bros. 2 on 3DS a few months ago, I was concerned that the "New" series had run its course. The levels didn't feel as fresh and the coin collection gimmick didn't make much of an impact. I feared this dip in quality signaled stormy skies for New Super Mario Bros. U on Nintendo's next home console, but I couldn't have been more wrong.

Right out of the gate you can't help but notice the new high-definition visuals. Everything is so clean and bright now. Nintendo didn't just settle for up-rezzing old assets (though plenty of that still happened); the artists went wild with imaginative background imagery and the koopalings' airships are loaded with little details. A particularly gorgeous stage was clearly inspired by Vincent van Gogh's painting "The Starry Night."

New enemies and themes are constantly popping up, and each only appears once or twice. A massive sea snake chases you all throughout a water level and never shows up again. The same goes for rare classic enemies like the stomping Sumo Bros, who haven't surfaced since Super Mario World. All of these factors keep things fresh as you progress through the main game.

Boss battles are all familiar faces from the Koopaling crew, but their new powers allow for fresh and clever battles. A special clash at the halfway point stands out from the rest, and the thrilling final boss is one of the best in the entire Mario series.

The now-standard lineup of Mario, Luigi, and two generic Toads offer the same undeniable raw multiplayer fun. At any given moment, your friends and family seesaw from greatest ally to worst enemy. Playing this game in silence is impossible; constant cries of pain and glory mean that you probably don't want to pop this in if someone in the house/apartment/dorm has to get up early in the morning.

The new twist this time around adds in a fifth player for boost mode. This person watches everything play out on the GamePad screen and can tap to add platforms, stun enemies, and destroy projectiles. It strikes a great balance of luring in players who aren't confident in their platforming skills while still giving them a satisfying job to do.

After some practice, a skilled boost player can rescue the bros from certain doom and help them get hidden star coins. If characters jump on the boost platforms a certain number of times in a row, the boost player can earn a purple star that grants the ability to kill onscreen enemies with a tap. It feels even more

empowering than the traditional invincibility speed run. Boost players also have the power to be just as evil as the rest of the

gamerformer
GAME OF THE MONTH

gamerformer
GOLD

Style 1 to 5-Player Platforming Publisher Nintendo Developer Nintendo Release November 18 ESRB E



onscreen characters (if not more) by blocking jumps with platforms, so they really are included in every way.

Standard power-ups return, like the fire flowers, ice flowers, and mini mushrooms. The new super acorns stuff Mario into a flying squirrel costume that allows him to glide, cling to walls briefly, and perform a slight jump boost in mid-air. Players accustomed to the raccoon tail or cape from previous games will need to practice to make the most of the suit, but it becomes a handy tool in the arsenal. I only wish that it featured some kind of attack like the raccoon tail whip.

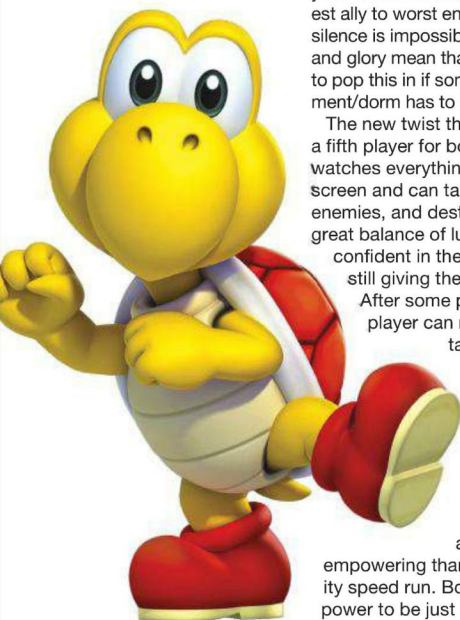
Some rare power-ups appear, and they add a unique flavor to the stages they're used in. A special version of the acorn grants infinite fly time and can only be obtained by catching Nabbit. Players must chase this new rabbit thief who occasionally appears in completed levels. Upon catching him, they are rewarded with the special P-Acorn that only lasts a single level. This mechanic works similarly to the treasure chest chases in Rayman Origins, but you can easily bypass any challenge by equipping star power before starting the stage.

Yoshis appear for a handful of levels and work the same as they did in the Wii prequel.

Baby Yoshis return from a lengthy hiatus, and add interesting twists to a few stages. One inflates to enhance your jump, another shoots bubbles from its mouth to trap foes, and a third lights up dark cave stages and stuns enemies. They never grow to full size no matter how much you feed them, but they give you a 1-up if you keep them alive until the end of the stage.

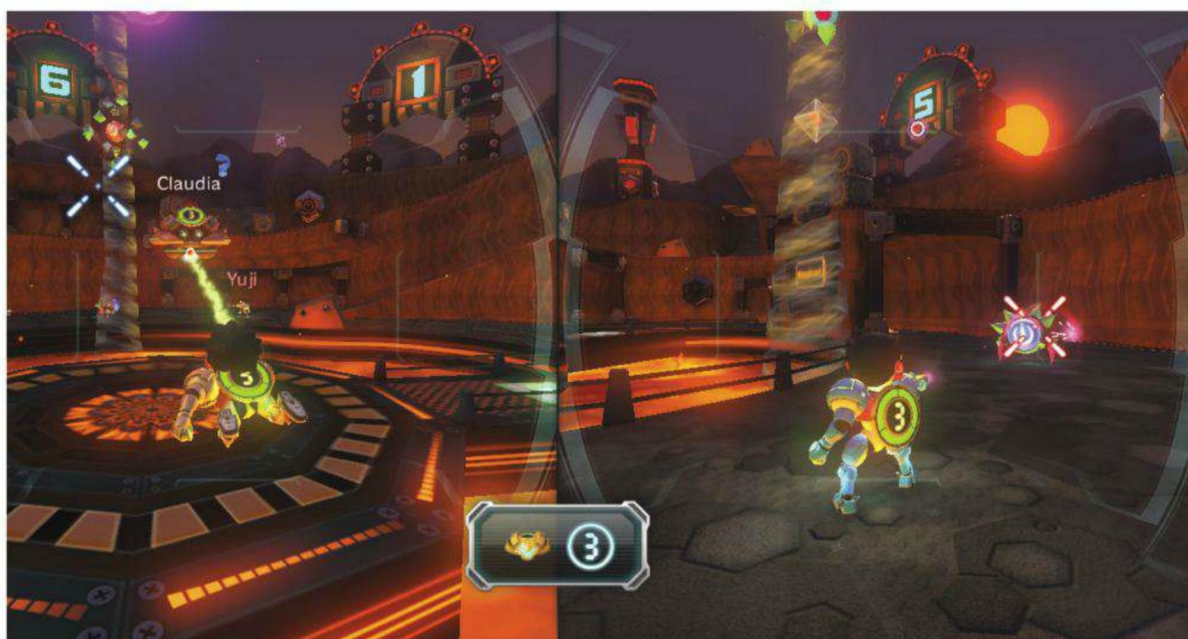
Outside of the main quest, you can tinker with a few alternate modes. Coin rush returns from the previous Wii game in which players compete to collect the most. Challenges put your skill to the test with speed runs, coin collection, boost mode team up tests, and more. Trying to perfect these is tempting, but without any in-game rewards or an online leaderboard to gauge your skills against others, it's just not worth it. The same issue exists with the Boost Rush Mode that tasks you with beating levels that auto-scroll at different speeds based on how many coins you have.

I'd much rather spend time searching out hidden stages and collecting star coins in order to unlock the special content that appears after beating the game. I won't spoil what it is, but it will keep old-school Mario fans playing long after Princess Peach is safe and sound. » **Bryan Vore**



Nintendo Land

An adequate introduction to the Wii U



Style 1 to 5-Player Party Publisher Nintendo Developer Nintendo Release November 18 ESRB E 10+

When Nintendo first introduced the Wii, the company put its best foot forward in choosing *Wii Sports* as its flagship title. Six years later, Nintendo Land is tasked with familiarizing consumers with the Wii U. Though Nintendo Land won't be played for years to come, it does a good job showing off what the Wii U can do.

Nintendo Land contains a total of 12 minigames – three competitive, three cooperative, and six solo. The collection has plenty of variety in both game design and complexity. Some games are simple, like Captain Falcon's Twister Race, where you move your racer by tilting the GamePad. Others, like the shooter-esque *Metroid Blast*, are more complex, having you turn the GamePad every which way to aim while also using the dual analog sticks to maneuver.

Competitiveness breeds the most fun in Nintendo Land through its uses of asymmetric gameplay and simple control schemes. The three competitive games are variations on hunting the other players. In *Mario Chase*, players with Wii remotes use their limited vision on the TV screens to pursue Mario in a maze, while the touchscreen displays the entire map for Mario. With a two-minute time limit, gameplay is frantic, especially if you have four people chasing you. *Mario Chase* is the best of the three competitive games. *Luigi's Ghost Mansion* and *Animal Crossing: Sweet Day* provide fun twists, although it would have helped for even one game to go outside the chase formula.

The cooperative attractions don't fare as well, mostly due to awkward control

schemes. The *Legend of Zelda Battle Quest* is great fun for those who are swinging the Wii Remotes like swords, but the GamePad players must move the bulky tablet around to aim their bows. Anyone who's played *Face Raiders* on the 3DS knows this is a recipe for disaster. *Metroid Blast* suffers from this same issue, in addition to having both the right and left analog sticks control the momentum of your ship. Fortunately, *Pikmin's* isometric gameplay lends itself better to the GamePad, though tapping rapidly to attack tires out your wrists. However, these modes do offer more than just one-off experiences, which is refreshing for a minigame compilation. With a wide variety of levels and boss battles, including appearances from franchise baddies, the cooperative mode is definitely designed for those who want to master a specific game and see how far they go with their skills.

While the games have more depth than the minigames we saw on the Wii, these controls also put up a barrier with the learning curve, particularly in regards to the GamePad's inability to offer the accuracy required for *Zelda's* archery or *Metroid's* shooting. You can't just put on the co-op modes at a party and expect that everyone can enjoy – or even grasp – the games. That isn't necessarily a bad thing, but the imprecise controls are just as frustrating for seasoned gamers.

Those looking for alone time can indulge in single-player versions of the team attractions or partake in solo events. These are much simpler than their multiplayer counterparts, and are reminiscent of mobile games: easy to play and great for short sessions. *Balloon*

Trip Breeze and *Donkey Kong's Crash Course* whet your whistle for high-score hunting, whereas *Octopus Dance* is unoriginal and Takamaru's *Ninja Castle* doesn't control well.

Playing all these minigames gets you coins, which you can use in your Nintendo-themed park. Here you can explore the Mii-filled plaza and use your coins to play a *Peggle*-like game to get treasures and enhance your park's appearance. It's simple, but luckily that's not where the meat of the game lies.

The question for Nintendo Land really comes down to longevity. Although I had a blast playing *Mario Chase* for a few rounds, I'm already bored with it. With only a few similar standout games, the collection doesn't captivate as much as it could. Still, despite some control foibles and a few uninteresting minigames, Nintendo Land gives players a proper introduction to the capabilities of the Wii U and its GamePad. » **Kimberley Wallace**



7

Wii U

» Concept

Jump into a Nintendo-inspired theme park complete with minigames themed after its classic franchises

» Graphics

Graphics don't wow compared to the Wii, but they're definitely crisper and clearer

» Sound

Hearing tunes from your favorite Nintendo games drives the experience and puts you into the setting, especially the classic *Zelda* music

» Playability

Nintendo Land has pick-up-and-play games, as well as those with more complex controls and a learning curve

» Entertainment

This collection has its fun moments, but the depth and lasting power of the games are lacking

» Replay Value

Moderate

ZombiU

A bad start for new IP on the Wii U

5

Wii U

» **Concept**

Shove all the Wii U's features into a crummy zombie game and expect people to play it

» **Graphics**

Muddy textures and ugly character models make this a poor demonstration of Nintendo's first high-definition console

» **Sound**

The incessant pinging of your radar is going to drive you insane

» **Playability**

Clunky combat, tedious inventory management, and forced GamePad features drain this game of fun

» **Entertainment**

The biggest threat in a survival horror game should be the enemies, not the gameplay itself

» **Replay Value**

Low



Style 1 or 2-Player Shooter **Publisher** Ubisoft **Developer** Ubisoft Montpellier **Release** November 18 **ESRB** M

When the Wii released back in 2006, Ubisoft delivered a new IP called *Red Steel* on launch day. The game aimed to highlight the console's motion controls with first-person shooting and gunplay. Unfortunately, the sloppy aiming and slashing instead foreshadowed how much the FPS genre would struggle on the console. Ubisoft is back again with a new game that shoehorns in all the bells and whistles of Nintendo's latest console. Instead of an exciting showcase of the Wii U's interesting new technology, *ZombiU* demonstrates just how bad survival horror can get.

The goal of the game is to navigate London's underground subway system to access various parts of the city, forage for supplies, and survive the walking dead. You scan the environment for ammo, health, and other goodies by holding the GamePad in

front of the screen and moving it around. This gimmick is cute for the first hour or so, but holding up your arms after entering every new room quickly becomes a nuisance. You manage your inventory using the GamePad's touchscreen in real time. The idea of forcing players to quickly juggle supplies while zombies close in is novel, but the increased tension only highlights the clunkiness involved with sliding around tiny icons.

Because *ZombiU* takes place in the U.K. and *Shaun of the Dead* exists, your fallback melee weapon is a cricket bat. Where other first-person zombie games like *Dead Island* and *Left 4 Dead 2* have proven that weighty, satisfying close-quarters combat is possible, *ZombiU* is the exception. Ammo is scarce, so I hope you like the idea of batting idiot zombies in the head almost a dozen times before they drop. Combat requires players to ready their weapon by holding one shoulder button then pressing the other. This makes sense for shouldering firearms, but the agonizingly slow bat swings give combat an awkward, unsatisfying rhythm. I know conserving ammo is important during a zombie apocalypse, but after hours of mind-numbing melee combat I was burning through precious rounds just to avoid using my bat.

Zombies don't care if you're struggling with awful controls, so expect to get eaten many times early on. The penalty for death is to spawn as a new survivor in your safe house and track down your previous, freshly zombified character to reclaim your gear. The concept is interesting, but results in a lack of commitment to any single character and an abundance of tedious backtracking.

Retreading familiar territory wouldn't be so painful if *ZombiU*'s presentation wasn't such an assault on the senses. You spend most of your time squinting through the darkness with a glorified penlight, a problem exacerbated by a lackluster lighting system that makes everything look blurry. A dirty camera-lens effect makes your TV screen appear filthy and frequently obscures your view. The repetitive sewer environments make it too easy to get lost. The useless quest tracker and confusing map system make navigating the boring environments even worse. All these things culminate to make one of the worst-looking launch games for the Wii U.

ZombiU doesn't feature online multiplayer, but two players can engage in competitive local play. The asymmetrical gameplay involves one player, the King of Zombies, placing undead around a map with the GamePad while another battles them using a Pro Controller or Wii remote/nunchuck combo. Dropping zombies into the map using the GamePad's touchscreen is easy, and watching your horde swarm your enemy is sadistically satisfying. Being on the receiving end of a zombie barrage is unbearable with the Wii remote/nunchuck, so only bother if you're picking up a Pro Controller.

Gamers eager for a new experience tailored to the Wii U likely have their eyes on *ZombiU*. It shows off nearly every feature of Nintendo's new hardware, but the sum of these parts is a horrifying Frankenstein's Monster. Good zombie games are a dime a dozen these days, and I can't recommend *ZombiU* above them despite being the only undead shooter on the Wii U. » **Tim Turi**





Scribblenauts Unlimited

Engage your imagination

Style 1-Player Puzzle **Publisher** Warner Bros. Interactive
Developer 5th Cell **Release** November 18 **ESRB** E 10+

8.25

Wii U

» **Concept**

Stuff even more words and items into the Scribblenauts Universe, throw in some new creation options, and add just a pinch of story

» **Graphics**

The high-definition colors look great, and the art style is as charming as ever

» **Sound**

The music rests pleasantly in the background and the sound effects are often hilarious accompaniments to your summoned objects

» **Playability**

You can use the buttons and look at the television, but often you're better off sticking to the touchscreen exclusively

» **Entertainment**

Maxwell's Universe breeds creativity and unexpected situations, but it doesn't always feel like a game

» **Replay Value**

High

The Handheld Difference

Many of the features of Scribblenauts Unlimited make it over to the 3DS version, with only a few exceptions. The camera controls are more restrictive, which hinders with navigation and tracking down puzzles. The creation tools are also entirely absent from the 3DS version, which outweighs the minor addition of Street-Pass features. Everything else – story, puzzles, and charming visuals – is almost identical to the Wii U version.

Score: 8

Rabbids Land

Ubisoft's Rabbids are party poopers

Style 1 to 4-Player Party **Publisher** Ubisoft
Developer Ubisoft Paris **Release** November 18 **ESRB** E 10+

4

Wii U

» **Concept**

Take Mario Party's tired minigame-infused board game concept, add Rabbids, walk away

» **Graphics**

The animation work is good, but there is nothing great about the graphics; this could have been a Wii game

» **Sound**

Ubisoft's Rabbids make a lot of funny and odd sounds, but you've probably heard them before and nothing else this game does is worth listening to

» **Playability**

Rabbid Land's controls are simple and its minigames are easy to learn, but they aren't very balanced or fair

» **Entertainment**

A few of the minigames are worth revisiting, but you'll probably have to play them again even during just one play session

» **Replay Value**

Low

Since the zany but lovable Rabbids first appeared in the Rayman Raving Rabbids, I've felt that these oddball creatures deserved a series of their own. Ubisoft's bunnies whack each other with baseball bats, flatten one another with steamrollers, and flush themselves down toilets. These bug-eyed creatures take an impressive beating and keep coming back for more, but their slapstick antics are what make them so captivating. Unfortunately, watching Rabbids zap each other with lasers or get squashed by giant dice is about the only entertainment Rabbids Land provides.

The theme is simple: The Rabbids enter a Disney Land-like theme park full of crazy rides and attractions, and frivolity ensues. Except frivolity doesn't ensue. You and up to three friends take turns rolling the dice and working your way around a simple circular board. Landing on different squares thrusts you into a variety of challenges, but none of them make you want to roll the die a second time.

Minigames are Rabbids Land's primary activity. These offer a wide range of tasks, and try to make inventive use of the Wii U's controller, but few are implemented well. One game lets a player control a ship as it circles a giant squid, while the competitor blows on the Wii U gamepad in order to make the octopus launch penguins at the ship. Other games have you tilting the gamepad to roll a boulder around a maze, buckling Rabbids into a carousel before the ride starts and flings them off, and helping a Rabbid surf through space as he dodges a barrage of fireballs.

The minigames are creative, but not entertaining. They are so universally boring that I had trouble getting friends and co-workers to stick around to finish a single playthrough. Some games are also conceptually flawed – I could never win a game that had me tracing pictures on the ground, because 80 percent of the time my handiwork wouldn't register on the Wii U GamePad. While the game is technically four-player, the minigames are only one-on-one affairs, which means that two random players have to sit out each minigame. They are the lucky ones.

The Rabbids franchise has a lot of potential. I like party games, and titles like Rabbids Go Home are a good excuse to collect a few friends for a couple hours of laughter. Unfortunately, Rabbids Land's dull and repetitive minigames ruin a party already soured by slow pacing and tedious dice rolling. » **Ben Reeves**

PlayStation All-Stars Battle Royale

Sony's heavy hitters square off

7.5

PS3 • Vita

» Concept

Pit Sony's first-party stars (and some guests) against each other

» Graphics

Backgrounds are active and detailed, and all of the characters look right

» Sound

Some catchy tunes, both original and re-used

» Playability

No control hiccups to speak of

» Entertainment

Plenty of fun with friends, but not exactly exciting by yourself

» Replay Value

Moderate



Style 1 to 4-Player Fighter (4 Player Online) **Publisher** Sony Computer Entertainment **Developer** SuperBot Entertainment **Release** November 20 **ESRB** T

By the time SuperBot officially unveiled PlayStation All-Stars Battle Royale, rumors had been flying for a while about a Sony-branded Smash Bros. clone. Reducing this new fighter to “clone” status is unfair to the final product, but the argument has a base. At first glance, it looks like a shameless rip-off. But upon playing it further, tweaks of varying significance become apparent.

Most importantly, the method of winning these chaotic bouts is completely different than Nintendo's franchise. Beating down on your opponents with the three face-button attacks doesn't weaken them directly. Instead, it builds up a three-tiered super meter that unleashes progressively more devastating attacks. Sweet Tooth may strap a bomb to his opponents with a level one super,

but he can turn into a massive mech form if you're patient enough to save up all the way. Discovering what crazy attacks these characters have up their sleeves is one of the most entertaining elements of the game.

No matter what level the super is at, these attacks are the only way to kill opponents and gain points. You won't have to worry about falling off platforms or being knocked into the horizon like you would in Smash Bros. This system changes up the experience significantly, but it can also be a hindrance. Considering these supers are the only way to earn points, it is frustrating to save up and miss several times in a row. It also makes stock battles annoyingly lengthy. These usually come down to two characters darting at each other, attempting to hit a super, and missing. In general, timed battles are the way to go with Battle Royale.

By no fault of Sony, the roster pales in comparison to Nintendo's fighter. PlayStation has become a massive brand over the last 17 years, but the company doesn't have the pedigree of its competitor. Pitting Kratos and Nathan Drake against each other is a nice novelty, but it doesn't have the same feeling as industry icons Mario and Link facing off. Battle Royale's roster has a few heavy hitters, but it also includes some low-profile competitors like Fat Princess and Colonel Radek (almost certainly to be referred to as “The Killzone Guy” by most).

Each stage is initially based on one particular franchise, but elements from a second franchise invade the area near the halfway mark. It's a fun little surprise the first couple of times, but I grew tired of the repeating format. Playing on a God of War-inspired stage with Hades thrashing about in the

background is awesome, but then it gets invaded by Patapon and changes the entire feel of the stage. A Loco Roco stage features the PSP game's charming art style until Metal Gear Ray decides to show up and wreak havoc. I like all of these ideas for stages individually, but it seems unnecessary to mash them together.

One feature that sets Battle Royale apart from Smash Bros. is its ranking system. Individual characters level up and unlock new customization parts as you use them. Some of these unlocks come in the form of icons and title cards (similar to Street Fighter), while others tweak your character itself. If you tend to play as one character a lot, you can eventually unlock alternate costumes and new victory poses, taunts, and music for them.

Taking the fight online doesn't offer anything that isn't already available in local play. Basic leaderboards and stats are available, but nothing shakes up the gameplay. It may not be a revolutionary online fighting experience, but it ran without a hint of lag for me.

Sony has been pushing PS3/Vita cross play lately, and Battle Royale is one of its most high-profile experiments with the technology. In a success for the feature, the game plays and looks great regardless of which system you play it on. Playing on Vita feels like the exact same experience as the console, and it's great to be able to play online against those that are playing in their living rooms.

All-Stars is clearly similar to Smash Bros., especially because it's far more fun to play with friends. Solo, it quickly becomes repetitive and doesn't give you much reason to continue. If you have company over, however, PlayStation All-Stars Battle Royale can be a lot of chaotic fun. » **Dan Ryckert**



Assassin's Creed III: Liberation

The Brotherhood finds a home on handheld

Style 1-Player Action/Adventure (Asynchronous Multiplayer) **Publisher** Ubisoft **Developer** Ubisoft Sofia/Ubisoft Montreal **Release** October 30 **ESRB** M

7.75



The Assassin's Creed series is one of the biggest success stories of this hardware generation. The historical open worlds, stunning visuals, and cinematic moments showcase the best of what console gaming can provide. While it offers an outstanding experience on the big screen, that ambition has not translated well to handhelds. Assassin's Creed III: Liberation is the first portable entry to feel like a real Assassin's Creed game – even if it isn't among the best of them.

Most of the series' hallmarks are present in some form. You run around a bustling city, assassinate slavers and business rivals, and search for an artifact from the First Civilization. At the heart of the action is Aveline, a heroine with plenty of personality and a cool arc – especially once the story starts exploring the gray area between Assassin and Templar. The experience doesn't feel like a low-budget imitation of the real thing, though it admittedly isn't as polished or extensive as Assassin's Creed II or III.

Aveline's main mission takes her between New Orleans, the bayou, and other locations, but she encounters a handful of diversions along the way. The main money-making loop involves her father's shipping business. You load up ships with cargo, and then sell that cargo at a different port after the ship's abbreviated real-time voyage. This addictive mechanic replaces the money you automatically get at intervals in other games, but I like how it requires more participation than simply sitting back and watching the money roll in. I only wish the shipping empire was accessible from more locations; it is inconvenient to hoof it across town to administer your fleet.

Other side missions involve enhancing your shipping, curing poisoned villagers, buying out rival shops, and finding collectibles. Without the constant and automatic influx of

money, the value of these tasks is questionable, but they contribute to the sense of activity in the world and keep you occupied when you aren't slicing through your enemies.

Liberation features a combat system similar to the one found in Assassin's Creed III, reducing complexity while still making you feel like a capable killer. I miss the ease of Ezio mowing through a group of guards in seconds, but Aveline's chain-kill ability is a good compromise. Instead of being a natural part of your moveset, it is a special ability that you activate in order to clear out a bunch of attackers in one satisfying swoop. The renewed focus on countering keeps you on your toes, but aggression remains an option. New tools like the whip and the blowgun are great additions to the arsenal, and Aveline shares Connor's affinity for hatchets.

When Liberation follows the lead of other Assassin's Creed titles, it excels. When it tries to carve out its own identity, it stumbles.

Aveline's unique hook is her three personas: the assassin, the lady, and the slave. In theory, the abilities of each encourage you to swap them frequently. In practice, the interplay between three personas' characteristics is poorly thought-out. For example, the lady can charm guards, but can't climb anything – no scaling buildings, leaping fences, or clambering onto the dock if you fall in the water. Every persona has some sort of handicap like that,

making them each seem like one-third of a true assassin instead of giving Aveline access to her full range of abilities.

Apart from the single-player campaign (which takes about 10 to 12 hours to complete), you can participate in an asynchronous multiplayer mode – but the less said about it, the better. It's shallow and boring and should be avoided. Another low point is the Vita-specific features; they occasionally feel gimmicky, but more often they are just plain broken. The camera doesn't detect a bright light even when held directly up to a bulb, the tilt function turns a simple ball-rolling maze into a disaster, and pickpocketing with the rear touchpad rarely works. Liberation serves as a case study in tragic implementation of the Vita's unique capabilities – probably not what Sony and Ubisoft were hoping for from a system exclusive.

Despite the issues, fans of the series should still seriously consider playing Liberation. None of the worst problems are embedded into the core gameplay. Combat is fun, climbing and navigation works well, and the story feels like a natural part of the AC universe. The tie-ins to Assassin's Creed III are minimal (mainly one mission near the end), but Liberation hints at what areas the series is exploring next. It isn't a required piece of the puzzle, but I had fun with Aveline and enjoyed seeing her part in history unfold. » **Joe Juba**



Vita

» **Concept**

A full-fledged Assassin's Creed title on a handheld system

» **Graphics**

Apart from a few visual glitches and pop-in, this is a consistently great-looking game

» **Sound**

The music doesn't dazzle, but it feels appropriate. The voice performances are well done, with the exception of a few bad accents

» **Playability**

The basics all work well, but some camera and targeting issues pop up occasionally. The Vita-specific gimmicks are terrible

» **Entertainment**

Despite the inconveniences, Assassin's Creed fans should appreciate the combat, story, and characters

» **Replay Value**

Moderate

8.5

Vita

» **Concept**

Dungeon crawl inside a TV to save people before their hidden selves devour them

» **Graphics**

This Vita version is sharper, cleaner, and more colorful than its PS2 predecessor

» **Sound**

New and old songs fuel the atmosphere, creating a memorable soundtrack that keeps the J-pop spirit of the franchise alive

» **Playability**

Prepare to fight the camera in dungeons, but the extra variety of difficulty levels means nobody is left out

» **Entertainment**

Even four years later, Persona 4 is still fun, inviting, and shows the power of solid character development

» **Replay Value**

Moderate



Persona 4 Golden

In Teddie we trust



Style 1-Player Role-Playing **Publisher** Atlus **Developer** Atlus **Release** November 20 **ESRB** M

With an anthropomorphic bear, dungeons inside a television, and a look at characters' psychological issues, Persona 4 is unlike any other RPG – which is probably why it holds up so well. Four years have passed since Persona 4's PS2 release, and with its transition to Vita, the ride is still addictive and thought-provoking.

The writing stands strong as the mature tale tackles the psyche. Characters' fears and secrets are confronted via dungeons inside a television. Persona 4 is bold, never shying away from heavy material; one character questions his sexuality, while another struggles with vanity. The realistic and honest portrayal of these difficult struggles is Persona 4's

greatest strength, forging a connection between the player and the characters. Those elements remain unchanged from the original release, but Golden adds two extra social links to chat up: new character Marie and the police detective Adachi. Both are intriguing, though Marie falls victim to the amnesia trope.

The randomly generated dungeons return and, yes, they still have an awkward camera that is problematic when trying to set up preemptive strikes. Grinding is still a staple, along with the turn-based structure and focus on exploiting enemy weaknesses. If you get tired of fighting your way through corridors, you can always take a break with the still-addictive persona creation system, forging

new monstrous allies to assist you. You need all the help you can get when you get to the long, difficult boss battles.

One welcome change to the dungeon crawling is rescue requests, which allow a signal to be sent out over PSN asking for help. If other users accept it, characters gain some HP and SP to begin the next battle. While useful for a dungeon crawler with limited save points, only time will tell if the game has enough networked users to make rescue requests relevant.

With the battle and social aspects connected, Persona 4 Golden fits together seamlessly. Newcomers are sure to find plenty to love, while series veterans can revisit fond memories and new content. » **Kimberly Wallace**



Call of Duty: Black Ops: Declassified

A complete embarrassment for gaming's biggest franchise

3

Vita

» **Concept**

Try to sell a game based on name alone

» **Graphics**

Generic environments play host to a wide assortment of glitches

» **Sound**

An awful lot of unnecessary f-bombs are thrown around

» **Playability**

Outside of the goofy touchscreen controls and a poorly implemented sprint function, it mostly handles fine

» **Entertainment**

Do not play this game

» **Replay Value**

Moderately Low

Nine months after the Vita launched in North America, it still doesn't have a standout title for mainstream audiences. Portable versions of the Uncharted, Resistance, and Assassin's Creed franchises proved to be lackluster, but Sony has one last big name to draw on in 2012. If Call of Duty can't move units, what can? Unfortunately, Declassified is an absolute mess.

Releasing on the same day as the solid Black Ops II, Declassified in no way resembles that game's level of quality. Instead of an ambitious single-player campaign, this version offers gamers 10 standalone missions with no noteworthy story outside of the inclusion of a few Black Ops characters. Imagine the mediocre Unit 13, then subtract most of the missions, throw in some broken geometry, and make the enemy A.I. literally suicidal. At one point, I saw a soldier throw a grenade directly at a wall, which then bounced back and killed him. In the same mission, an enemy was shooting at a nearby car that he was using for cover. He continued to do this until he died in a fiery explosion. Those are the more dramatic examples. Most enemy soldiers are content to hide behind a wall and fruitlessly shoot into it until they're killed.

These 10 missions can be completed in

about four minutes each. All told, I beat the primary single-player mode in 42 minutes. A time-trial mode gives you a handful of obstacle courses (which I typically beat in under a minute), and the final mode is an uninspired horde clone. If you're looking for a fun single-player shooter experience, you'd be hard pressed to find an experience less complete than Declassified.

It's a shame, as the core mechanics tend to work more often than not. Aiming and shooting may not feel as tight as the console installments, but I rarely struggled to find my target. Outside of some goofy touch controls for throwing grenades and steadying my aim while sniping, these controls would have been acceptable if the rest of the game was anywhere close to decent.

Declassified's online play is far from a saving grace for this awful title. When I was actually able to connect to matches, I was frequently kicked out to a background screen that I couldn't exit out of (forcing me to restart the system). Multiplayer does feature many of the series' trademarks, including created classes, customizable killstreaks, weapon unlocks, and perks. All of this is on a much



smaller scale than its console brothers, however. Customization isn't the only thing that's been whittled down, as the maps are claustrophobic and uninspired.

Call of Duty: Black Ops: Declassified is appalling. In dramatic fashion, it fails to live up to the high bar of quality gamers expect from the Call of Duty name. It's also a discouraging sign for gamers who shelled out \$250 for a Vita in the hopes of console-quality experiences on handheld. I can't recommend Declassified to anyone; casual FPS players and Call of Duty fans alike will recognize the train wreck Nihilistic Software has developed. » **Dan Ryckert**



Epic Mickey: Power Of Illusion

Tracing and erasing trips up Mickey's platforming rhythm

Style 1-Player Platforming **Publisher** Disney Interactive
Developer DreamRift/Junction Point
Release November 18 **ESRB** E

Epic Mickey: Power Of Illusion has all the right ingredients on paper. It's a spiritual sequel to the beloved Castle of Illusion starring Mickey Mouse for Sega Genesis. It's developed by DreamRift, the creators of the innovative yet flawed Henry Hatsworth in the Puzzling Adventure and Monster Tale, one of my favorite Metroid and Castlevania-inspired games from the last few years. Despite its pedigree, Power of Illusion went seriously wrong somewhere along the way.

The main offender is the forced painting and thinning mechanic. You trace a drawing on the touch-screen to make platforms and other objects appear in the top screen. This is frustrating when you have to stop what you're doing every 10 steps to doodle, then wait around while Mickey shoots paint or thinner to make the object appear/disappear. You can't even choose where you place platforms or decide what shape they take. The painting's implied pretense of creativity never rings true.

The frustration with drawing extends to boss battles as well. Instead of focusing in on an enemy's pattern, you have to stop what you're doing and trace/erase constantly. This kills any rhythm you try to build. This is especially true for the final boss, Mizrabel (who for some reason is now Maleficent from *Sleeping Beauty* instead of the Evil Queen from *Snow White*). The earlier bosses are ridiculously easy, but the game goes from cakewalk to infuriating deathtrap about halfway through. When you die, the worst part isn't even restarting at the inconvenient checkpoints; you lose all of the money and collectibles you've nabbed along the way, so you need to do all the work over again.

I don't know whom this game is for. Casual players will probably never make it to the end due to spike-covered later levels and cheap enemies. Hardcore players will be surprised how fast they'll finish if they can power through (my game clock read about 90 minutes after the credits rolled).

You could always go back to collect missed Disney characters and items, but what's the point? Every conversation with these chumps goes the same way. "I was walking through the forest/castle/etc. and I somehow ended up here," the character says. "Well, golly," Mickey replies. "We've got a fort you can stay safe in." "Sounds good," the character says before dematerializing, which seems like they could have done it at any time. I wish I could warp back to the time when Power of Illusion was full of mysterious promise. » **Bryan Vore**

5

3DS

» **Concept**

Try to mix the worlds of Epic Mickey and the classic Castle of Illusion

» **Graphics**

DreamRift's trademark quality animation and visuals shine

» **Sound**

The music is fine, but not very memorable

» **Playability**

The terrible painting and thinning mechanics ruin everything

» **Entertainment**

Fans of all stripes will be sorely disappointed

» **Replay Value**

Moderately Low

Liberation Maiden

It's up to you to save New Japan, Ms. President

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Level-5 **Developer** Grasshopper Manufacture **Release** October 25 **ESRB** T

7

3DS

» **Concept**

As the president of New Japan, you must defeat the evil Dominion with your powerful mech armor

» **Graphics**

The few animated cutscenes look great, but the actual game is held back by oppressive fog and last-generation visuals

» **Sound**

The music rocks your face off and serenades you with emotional Japanese pop music, all while explosions rack your eardrums

» **Playability**

One hand holds the stylus to aim on screen, and the other gets cramped as you hold the 3DS steady

» **Entertainment**

The ridiculous story blasts the game off, setting it into full speed and never lets up. It's chaotic and hectic, but fun

» **Replay Value**

Moderate

In a vote of 200 opposed to 273 in favor, the teenage daughter of the recently deceased president of New Japan gets elected to power. As soon as the votes are cast, new president Shoko Ozora jumps into a mech and exits the floating city in a show of speed and power to fight the nation's enemies single-handedly.

Liberation Maiden comes from the mind of Suda 51, a game designer best known for oddball titles like Killer 7, Shadows of the Damned, and the recent Lollipop Chainsaw. Liberation Maiden lives up to the bizarre tones established in his previous games, but on a smaller scale.

You have full, 360-control of your mech as it flies over the battlefield. On the normal difficulty, combat is fast and fluid, and firing off a collection of lasers at both ground troops and incoming missiles is empowering. The carnage is overwhelming at times, making it difficult to sort out the chaos and see what's happening. This is especially true on the higher difficulties, where I often found myself dying without knowing what had killed me or how.

Liberation Maiden plays like the recent Kid Icarus for 3DS. You hold the stylus in your right hand and aim using the touch screen. With your left hand, you control the movement of your mech with the circle pad. As you move your cursor over the enemies, you are able to lock on to them, and when you lift the stylus from the screen, you fire off a barrage of lasers.

This control scheme was awkward on Kid Icarus, and it's no different here. I tracked down one of the stands included with Kid Icarus that helps you hold up the system for ease of play after the second level. Adding the stand was helpful, but I still felt my hand cramping up.

Thankfully, from the perspective of your hand and wrist, Liberation Maiden is incredibly short. I was able to get through the game's five levels in less than three hours. You earn unlockables for tackling the higher difficulties and playing Stage Attack (which lets you jump to any stage you've already beaten), but overall there isn't a lot of game here – even considering its \$7.99 price on the eShop.

In an already short experience, I was amused by how much time is eaten up by tapping through dialogue. The action is constantly interrupted by an older man in a suit named Kira. He's an advisor to the teenage president that won't stop advising. He rarely repeats word for word the same statements, but he loves to tell you the same ideas over and over.

Liberation Maiden, for better or worse, is a brief, fast-paced experience. I found myself laughing at the game's opening, and even though I never became genuinely engaged in the plight of Shoko and New Japan, I enjoyed taking it all in. » **Kyle Hilliard**

reviews archive

PLAYSTATION 3			XBOX 360			Wii			PC					
Amazing Spider-Man, The	6.75	Sep-12	NBA 2K13	8.75	Dec-12	Walking Dead Episode 4: Around Every Corner, The	8.25	Dec-12	Hitman: Absolution	8.75	Dec-12	Spaltters, The	8	Jul-12
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Inversion	6	Aug-12	Starhawk	7.5	Jul-12				Quarrel	8.5	Apr-12			
Jet Set Radio	6.5	Nov-12	Street Fighter X Tekken	8.75	May-12				Realms of Ancient War	4	Dec-12			
Journey	9	Apr-12	Tekken Tag Tournament 2	8.5	Nov-12				Resident Evil 6	8.75	Nov-12			
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MLB 12: The Show	8.75	May-12	Walking Dead Episode 2: Starved For Help, The	8	Jul-12				Sniper Elite V2	8.25	Jul-12			
Mugen Souls	5	Dec-12	Walking Dead Episode 3: Long Road Ahead, The	8.5	Nov-12				Spec Ops: The Line	7.75	Aug-12			
NASCAR The Game: Inside Line	7.25	Dec-12							Spelunky	8	Sep-12			

the score

7.75 | King's Bounty: Warriors of the North

Platform PC Release October 26 Rating N/A

Legacy issues like boss fights and recruitment tedium get less acceptable every year, but I still had a blast with this strategy/RPG. Whether you're new to the series or a 300-hour veteran, there's much to recommend here. I just hope I'm not writing these same things next year. - Adam Biessener

8.25 | Elemental: Fallen Enchantress

Platform PC Release October 23 ESRB N/A

Stardock's fantasy empire-builder checks off all the features that gamers like me have been longing after for nearly two decades, includes a few intriguing new ideas of its own, and ultimately delivers on most fronts despite lacking the soul that defines true greatness. - Adam Biessener

7.75 | Hotline Miami

Platform PC Release October 23 Rating N/A

I loved the intensity of the basic design and the challenge of trying to think on my feet, but the clunky controls and repetitive action inhibit what is otherwise one of the most creative indie titles of the year. Despite all of my frustrations, after extended breaks, I found myself coming back for more. Hotline Miami's uneasy ambiance and frenetic action have an odd allure. - Ben Reeves

8 | Sonic and All-Stars Racing Transformed

Platform PS3 • 360 Release November 20 ESRB E10+

Sonic and All-Stars Racing Transformed improves nearly every aspect of its predecessor. Even if some of the Sega references go over your head, you still have one of the best kart-racing games around. I particularly enjoyed the way the missions have been incorporated in the overall career mode - now there's no excuse not to tear through these challenging and rewarding race variations. - Jeff Cork

Thinking Outside

How Microsoft Broke Into the Video Game Market

More than a decade ago, America's largest software developer entered the video game hardware market and carved out a segment of the industry for itself. It was no easy feat, but the Xbox's innovations have pushed the industry forward in every area from controller design to online gameplay. To get a better insight into how the Xbox helped shape the industry, we recently spoke with ex-vice president of Microsoft's games division Ed Fries.

interview by Ben Reeves



How did you end up at Microsoft working on games?

I started programming the Atari 800 when I was in high school, but by the time I was in college in 1984, the whole game industry melted down. So, I finished my computer science degree and got a job working at Microsoft. I worked on Office for 10 years. I was

one of seven programmers who did the first version of Excel for Windows. After that, it was time for me to run a business in the company, and I looked around and said, "Well, the business I really want to run is the games business." The vice presidents of the company hauled me into their office and told me I was committing career suicide. "Why would you leave Office, one of the most important parts of the company, to work on something nobody cares about?" I ignored them. So I took over the games crew. There was Flight Simulator and not really too much else at that time. The next year we started working with a little company called Ensemble Studios, and the next year we came out with a game called Age of Empires. Between Flight Simulator and Age of Empires we had enough profit coming in that I could start to reinvest and grow the PC gaming business.

It sounds like you had a lot of freedom to do whatever you wanted.



the Box

Yeah, I had a lot of freedom. I didn't know when that VP told me that nobody cared about the game business that that would be a good thing, but it was a really good thing. As long as I wasn't losing money, nobody really cared about what I was doing.

So when did you guys first decide to do a console?

There had been several ideas to do it. If you remember, Microsoft did Windows CE for the Dreamcast. So Microsoft had sort of dabbled in some console-y things. I never got my group – the games group – involved in those. I didn't believe in them. But one day, these guys from the DirectX team walked into my office – guys like Otto Berkes and Seamus Blackley. They had this crazy idea to do something they called the DirectX Box. DirectX is the name of the Windows APIs (application programming interfaces) for gaming. Their idea was, basically, to put a Windows PC in a console box, and try to convince

people that it's not a Windows machine, but really a game console. That was the initial idea. To me, that idea had a lot of appeal because I had grown our PC business quite a bit by then and I was starting to look at the console business. It's not a business I understood very well, but we had the idea that we could get into the console business and still be PC-like. I thought, "Oh this would be easier for us, to make the transition." So that was the initial naïve idea.

It seems like Xbox evolved quite a bit after that.

There were actually two groups pitching a console at the same time. The other group was a bunch of guys who had done Windows CE for the Dreamcast, and they were a bunch of ex-3DO guys. They wanted to make a very traditional game console, a very PS2-like console. Our proposal was the complete other end of the spectrum. The first version of it was literally a Windows PC that basically

had a little front end that made it look like a console. So we pitched our two competing ideas at the Bill and Steve level, and they picked us. I think they picked it because it was more familiar to them. I mean, it ran Windows. Then we spent a year actually learning about the console business and what we wanted to build. The more we learned, the more our plan slowly inched towards that other group's plan. Windows went away and the architecture changed to some degree. The hard disks stayed, which the other group didn't have, but by the end we were somewhere between the two plans. And you might argue that the 360 is even closer to what they traditionally pitched, even closer to a traditional console than Xbox was. In a way, those guys were probably right, but we won.

What was it that excited you about the idea of having a more PC-style console? Why was that the project you wanted to back instead of the more traditional approach?

You've got to understand; I'm a programmer at heart, so I'm a technical guy, and I look at stuff from that point of view. This machine looked like a PC from the inside. It was a very comfortable architecture for a PC game developer to move into. Initially I thought we could probably pretty easily run games that were both on PC and on Xbox. So even if Xbox didn't really succeed for my business, for our game business, I'd have a PC version of the game too and I'd be okay. The more we got into it, the more they sort of separated and the more I realized the markets were different and the controllers were different; there are a lot of differences. In the early naïve days there was this idea, in my mind at least, that we could somehow benefit more from our experience doing PC games. Then there's also the idea of Xbox Live and having a connected multiplayer experience, which was very comfortable at that time to a PC gamer. There were early multiplayer console kinds of experiments, but none of them were really integrated into the gameplay the way they were in the PC world. We thought that was something we could bring to the console world and add benefit, and I think that proved to be true.

You talk about the hard drive and you guys kept the hard drive throughout the cycle. How important do you feel that was to the Xbox's success?

It's a very difficult question. You could talk to some people on the team today and they would say it is the biggest mistake we made. When you're talking to me I think I'm probably the biggest advocate of it, even though I think it didn't achieve its full potential. If we had just launched into this crowded space with two or three really entrenched competitors and we didn't have a differentiated product, I think it would have been very difficult for us. So, the fact that it had the hard disk was something that no one else had ever done in console, and I think it was important because of that.

We've heard rumors that the original controller was modeled after the Dreamcast controller. Is there any truth behind that?

No, that's not true at all. The "duke" controller came out of the Microsoft gaming hardware group. They had done a series of controllers called the Sidewinder controllers, and you can go back and look at sidewinder and see almost exactly where the duke came from. It was derivative of what they were already doing on their line of PC controllers.

Looking back, do you think you would do anything differently when you were making the system?

That's a hard question because, looking back, if I knew then what I know now, I would do a million things different because I know which games were going to succeed and which ones were going to fail. When you're going into it, you're just guessing. There were a lot of people asking us, "Where's your big fuzzy character? Every console has a mascot. Where's yours? It can't be Master Chief; Halo doesn't even look like a console game." So there was a lot of criticism early on about our content and about how appropriate it was and whether we were going to alienate the console gamers. We had Lorne Lanning working on Oddworld, and he had been successful on PlayStation, so we had a big name console developer and we thought, "Oh, well that's going to be a big thing." Halo was much more of a wild card. It definitely was something that came from the PC mentality or, in this case, Macintosh mentality. Would that fly with console gamers? At the time, we just didn't know.

You had Microsoft at your back, which is a huge corporation, but you had never done a console before. Did you guys ever feel out of your depth? Were you worried about succeeding?

No. Maybe we were cocky from our experience on Office. When I started on Excel, Lotus 1-2-3 was bigger than all of Microsoft. There were seven of us, and our job was to make a better spreadsheet and try to beat them, so we battled Lotus with Excel. We battled WordPerfect with Word. So I guess I was reasonably confident we could do this, but you never know until you try. We were certainly naïve about things; we were certainly wrong about things, but I think we got enough things right.

Looking at the whole picture, where Microsoft has run with the Xbox brand, what do think of where they are now and where they have taken the 360?

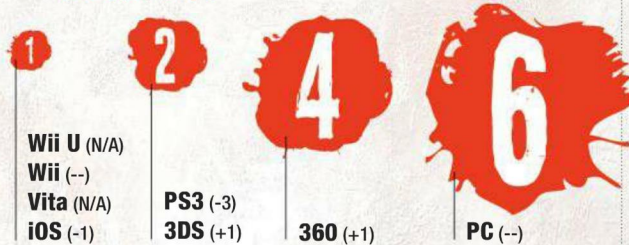
I think they have done a fantastic job. One thing that has happened in the console world is [that] it's slowly become more about software and less about hardware. Microsoft's in a great position because it's a software company, so things like Xbox Live are just ahead of anything else that's out there. That's really their software nerd niche that allows them to be able to do systems like that and do them well. I'm proud of where the 360's gotten. ♦

top 50 games

BY THE NUMBERS

How do the Top 50 Games of 2012 break down in terms of genres, platforms, and publishers? We crunched the numbers to find out, and see how the trends changed from last year.

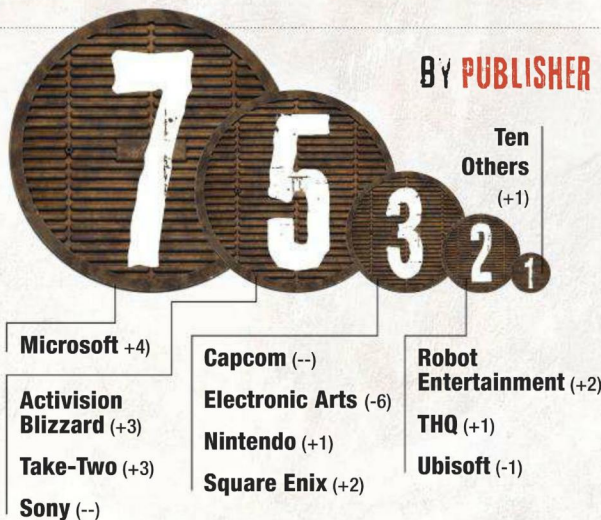
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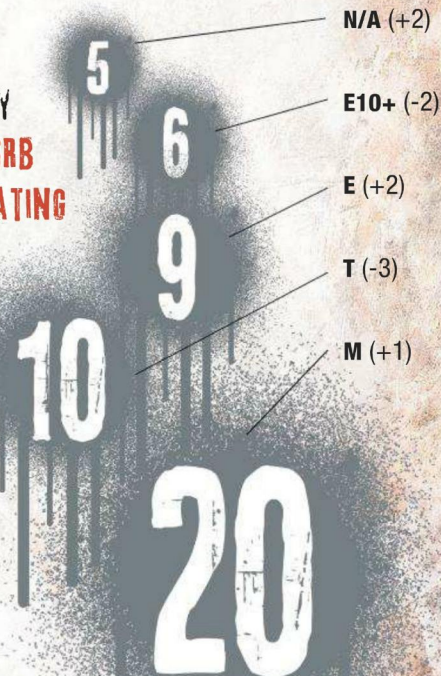
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Issue 237 • January 2013

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