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THE WORLD'S #1 VIDEO GAME MAGAZINE



The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt
A Must See Next Generation RPG



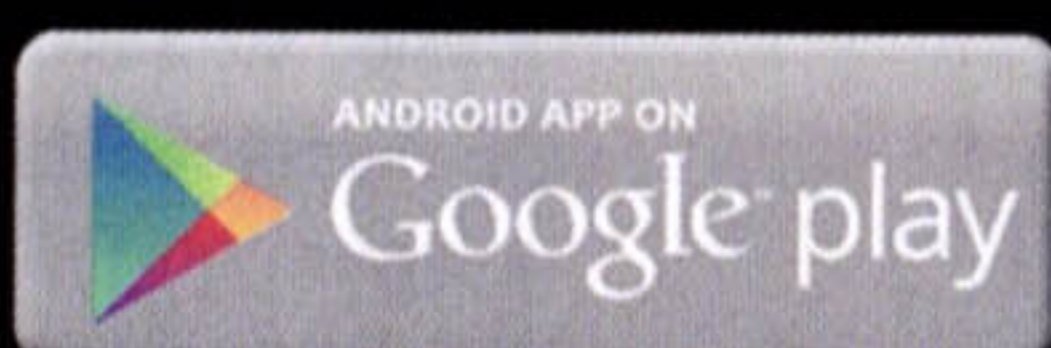
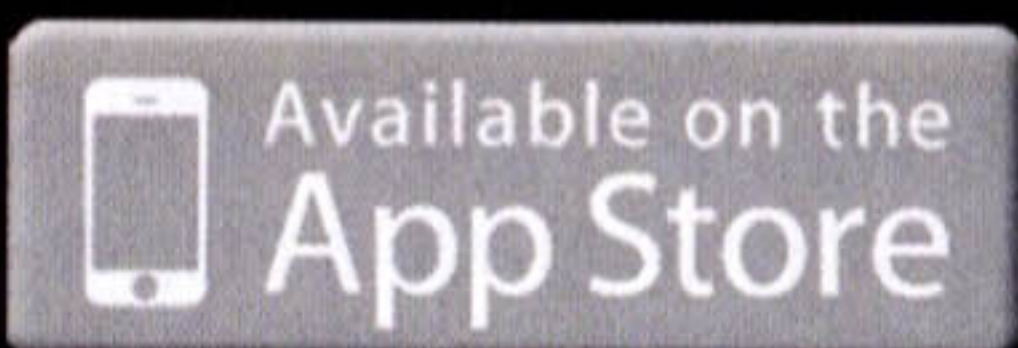
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EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
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Free to Pay

I'm not exactly sure when the phrase "free-to-play" became ingrained in our lexicon, but it's a business model that has its roots in the PC freeware business of the 1980s. Of course, back then the ways to extract money from customers were far less developed. What started as games supported by an advertising or demo model has moved into the "freemium" generation, where in-game items or member services are the primary source of income.

I am not here to say I hate free-to-play games, or capitalism for that matter. I thoroughly enjoy playing free-to-play games, and who doesn't like making money? The business model does not define its entertainment value. Nor does paying for the entertainment make it a rip-off. Games are expensive, and the hard-working men and women of game development deserve compensation for their amazing products.

I am, however, slowly but surely becoming annoyed at the straight-faced lies that game publishers and developers deliver in the free-mium space while they inform me how lucky I am to be playing their product for "free."

I have lost count of how often I have been told by developers and publishers that people who spend money in a freemium game don't get an advantage over people who don't pay. This is true in some cases, but I am seeing an alarming trend where opening up the wallet not only leads to advantages in-game, but in essence is making games more expensive than they would have been at that old industry standard of 60 American dollars.

Players are able to unlock weapons faster in first-person shooters, ensuring that the army with the biggest pocketbook has an advantage over pure skill. Leaderboards will always be questioned on whether the player was good or just had the cash to keep purchasing "gems" or whatever other made-up monetary device the game employs. Or what about RPGs, where you can refill meters that let you kill monsters that would normally be beyond your power, or level and gain attributes at a faster pace?

Do you have to buy your way to victory? Certainly not, but these developers are preying on our competitive instincts to line their pocketbooks. Is it a fair exchange? It really depends on the game and how each person feels about parting with their hard-earned dollars. It does concern me, however, that the hardcore fans tend to be the ones covering the bill for those who are unwilling to pay. The playing field suffers when the rules can be bent for just a few dollars more.

Cheers,



The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt

CD Project RED's The Witcher 3 takes the series' dark fantasy universe and non-linear storytelling into a truly open world for the first time. Even if you haven't been following Geralt's exploits so far, The Witcher 3 offers a perfect entry point.

by **Adam Biessener**



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» 6 Feedback

We're still getting both positive and negative feedback on our top 50 issue from January, as well as thank you notes for previous features, sarcastic thank-you notes for our reviews, and math lessons.

» 12 Connect

We take a look at the process of writing games, with interviews from the authors of games like Uncharted, Assassin's Creed, and Borderlands. We also examine live-action advertisements for video games on TV, and talk to Double Fine about its Kickstarter success.

» 70 Previews

We've decided to take a final look at BioShock Infinite before reviewing it, and see what Disney Infinity is all about. We also checked out the new Splinter Cell, the new Pokémon, the new Final Fantasy, and The Witness, the new game from the creator of Braid.

» 86 Reviews

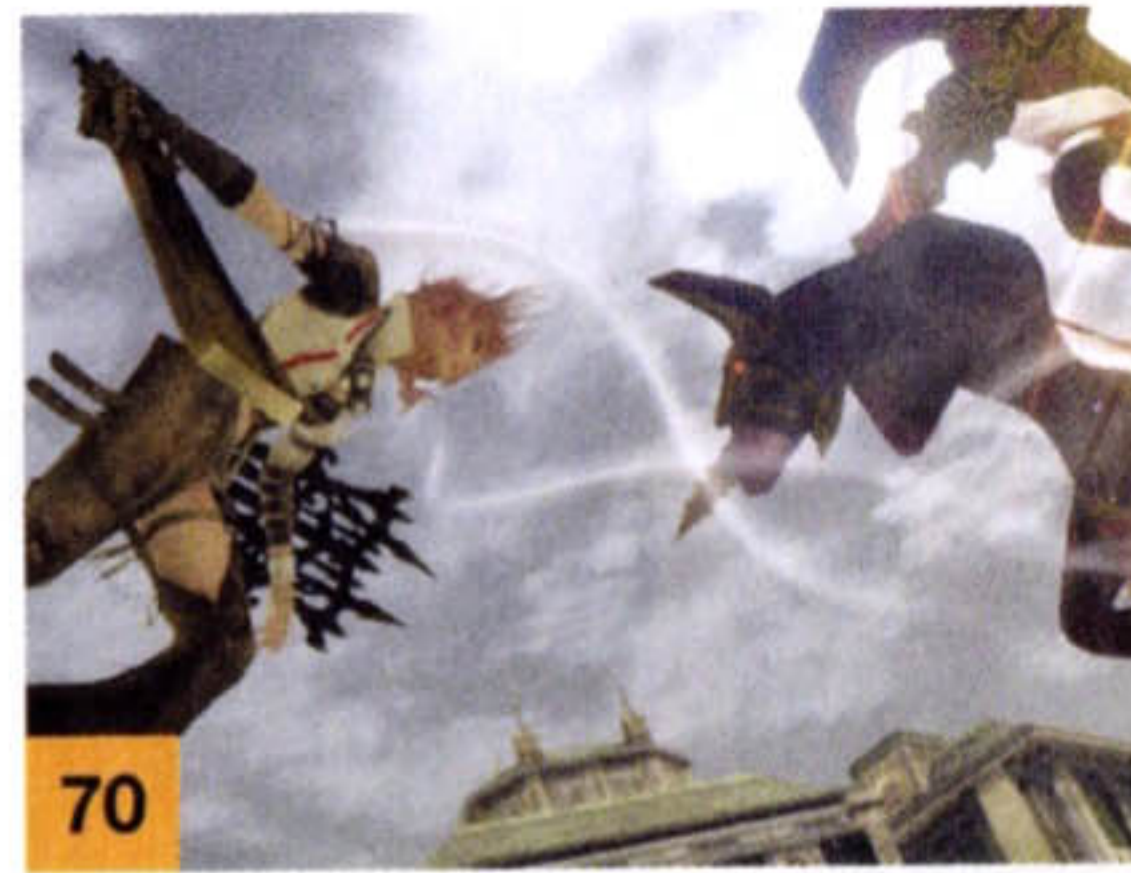
This month we jump back into Isaac Clarke's universe for Dead Space 3, see what Sly Cooper and the gang are up to these days, and check out Nintendo's latest entry in the Fire Emblem series.

» 100 Game Over

RPGs sometimes have some strange story elements pulling your character to the end goal. The state of Florida has some very strange headlines adorning its newspapers. Let's see if you can tell the difference.



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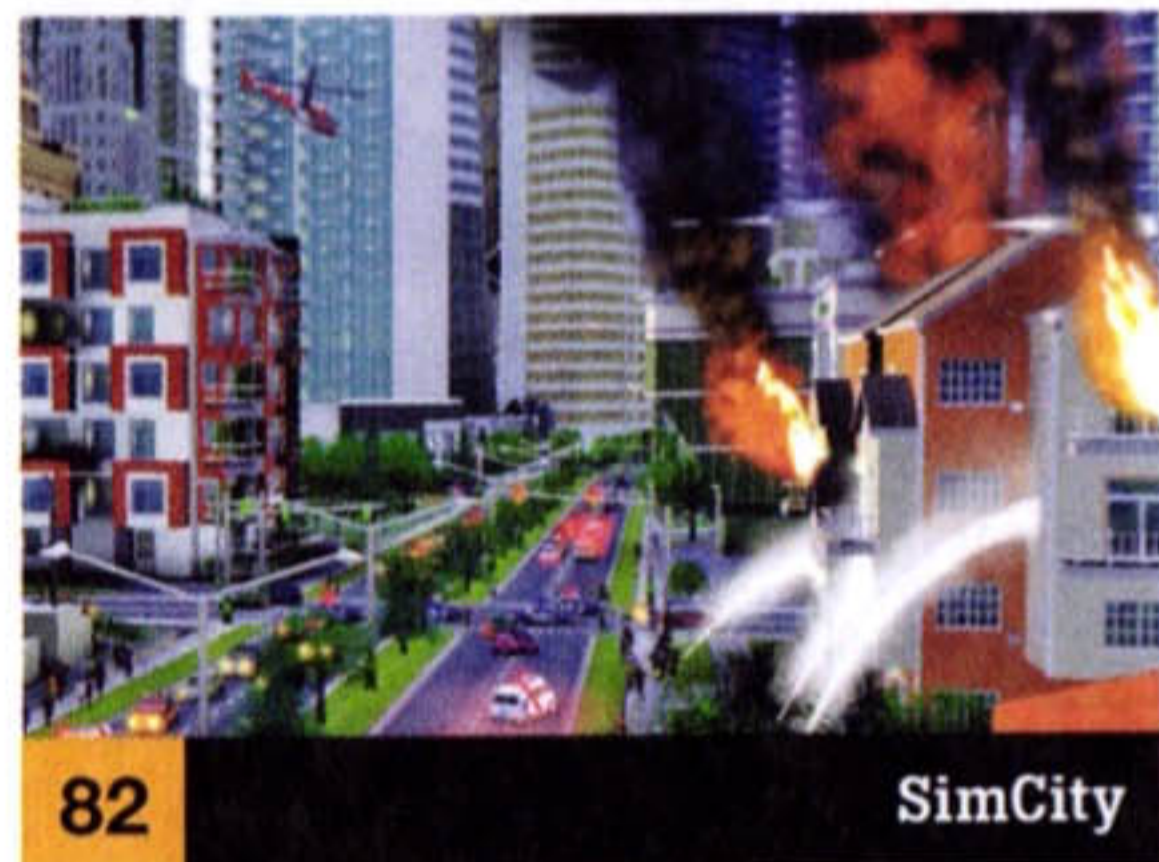
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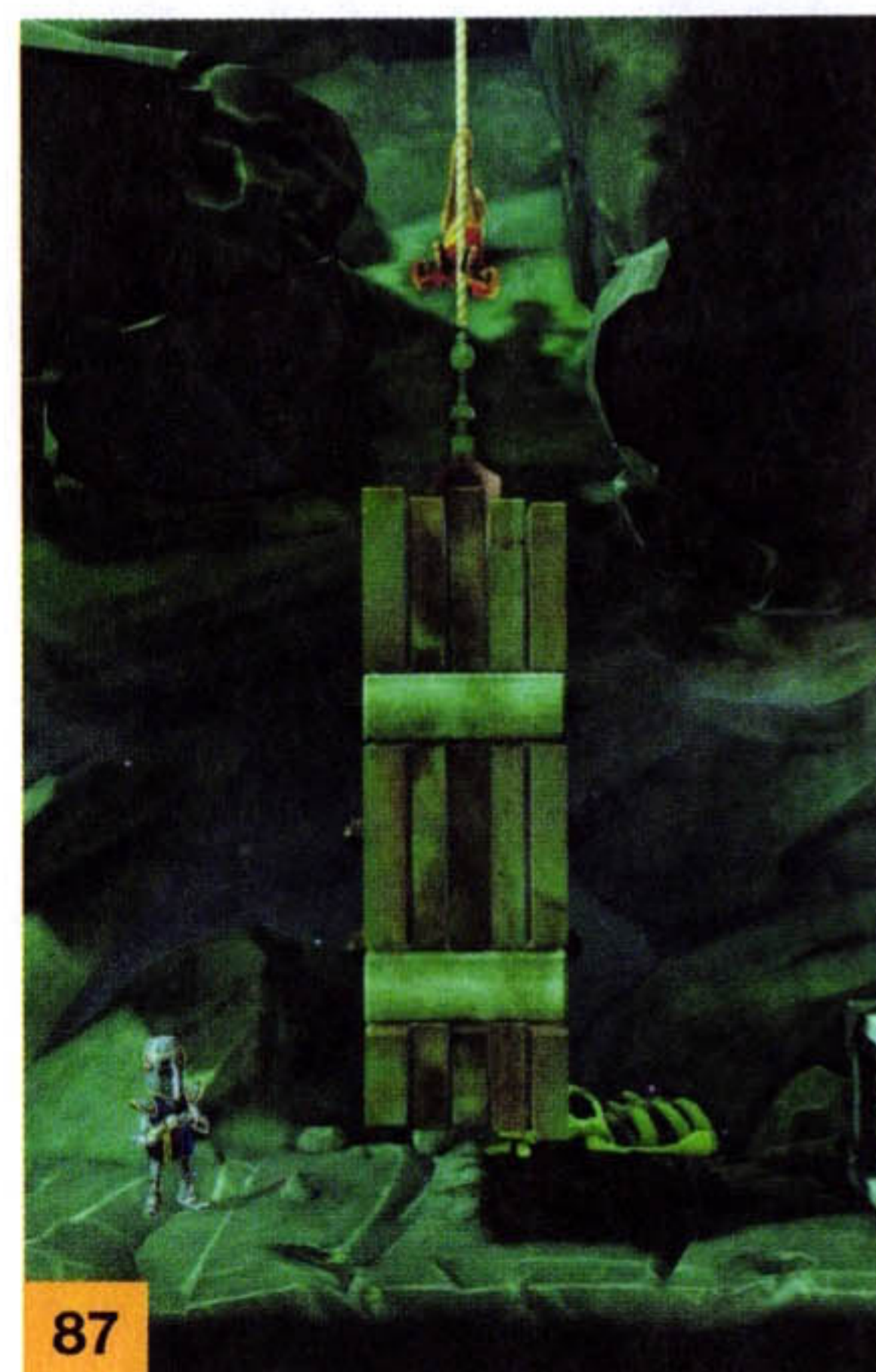


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Anarchy Reigns



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Rewriting the Rules



★ WOLFTHORN ★

A NEW SCENT FROM

Old Spice

ANSWER THE SMELL OF THE WILD



This month in Feedback, readers respond to our Top 50 Games of 2012 with pro-FemShep praise, mathematics, and confusion over what year it is. Readers also discuss the waning of a beloved video game genre, share what video game villains they'd work for, and have the audacity to question our pun-making skills.

Top 50 Cover Love

I was pleasantly surprised to see Mr. Spratt's artwork featured again on the cover of issue 237. I loved his artwork from the Top 30 Characters that Defined a Decade issue back in 2010, and this issue's artwork is just as awesome, if not better. But even more surprising was the inclusion of female Shepard on the cover and not her male counterpart. Whoever made that decision should get a hardy pat on the back. Like a few select others, I made my way through the Mass Effect Universe as FemShep and cannot see the tale BioWare so masterfully created told any other way. Thank you for giving the lady her due time in the spotlight.

Anthony Cucchetti
Warren, MI

I just wanted to let you all know how exciting it was to read this year's "Top 50 Games of 2012" issue. Coming home from a long work day and seeing a new Game Informer in the mail is always a plus, but when I saw the ever-amazing and beautiful FemShep and the Editor's Game of the Year emblem on Mass Effect 3, it made it even better! Despite any controversy about the endings, ME will always be my favorite game series, hands down. It's awesome to see you guys recognize the game, and I look forward to seeing a future cover with the next Mass Effect game on it!

Josh Thompson
via email

We could think of no better way to celebrate the magnificent games of 2012 than to commission another piece of cover art by the talented Sam Spratt. Check out more of Spratt's artwork at samspratt.com. As for choosing FemShep over her stubby headed counterpart, we wouldn't have it any other way.

Crunching the Numbers

The Top 50 Games of the Year issue is always my favorite issue, and this year's was one of the best. As a lifelong XCOM fan, I have been happy with all of the GI love for the new game this year. When I saw that you picked Mass Effect 3 as game of the year, I was a bit sad. Eyeballing the Top 10 editor rankings, it looked as if XCOM should have won, so I did a little digging. I inverted the rankings to give the games a proper score: First place gets ten points, second place gets nine, etc. Lo and behold, XCOM received 113 points...but Mass Effect 3 got 114. Ouch! Okay, what about the total average score among all of the editors? XCOM got 5.94...ME 3 got 6.0. Ouch! How about the average scores among editors that had both games on their list? XCOM 7.53...ME 3 7.13. Victory! So either way it was close, but let's call it a tie!

Darryl Christensen
St. Louis, MO

While we appreciate your attempt at using science to justify our selection (or invalidate it, as the case may be), our choice for game of the year is not a strictly mathematical one. It's based on a lot of debating, voting, and eventually Thunderdome-style battles to the death as the rest of the office shouts "two editors enter, one editor leaves!" At the end of the day, Mass Effect 3 came out on top, but your instinct was correct; it was an incredibly close call this year.

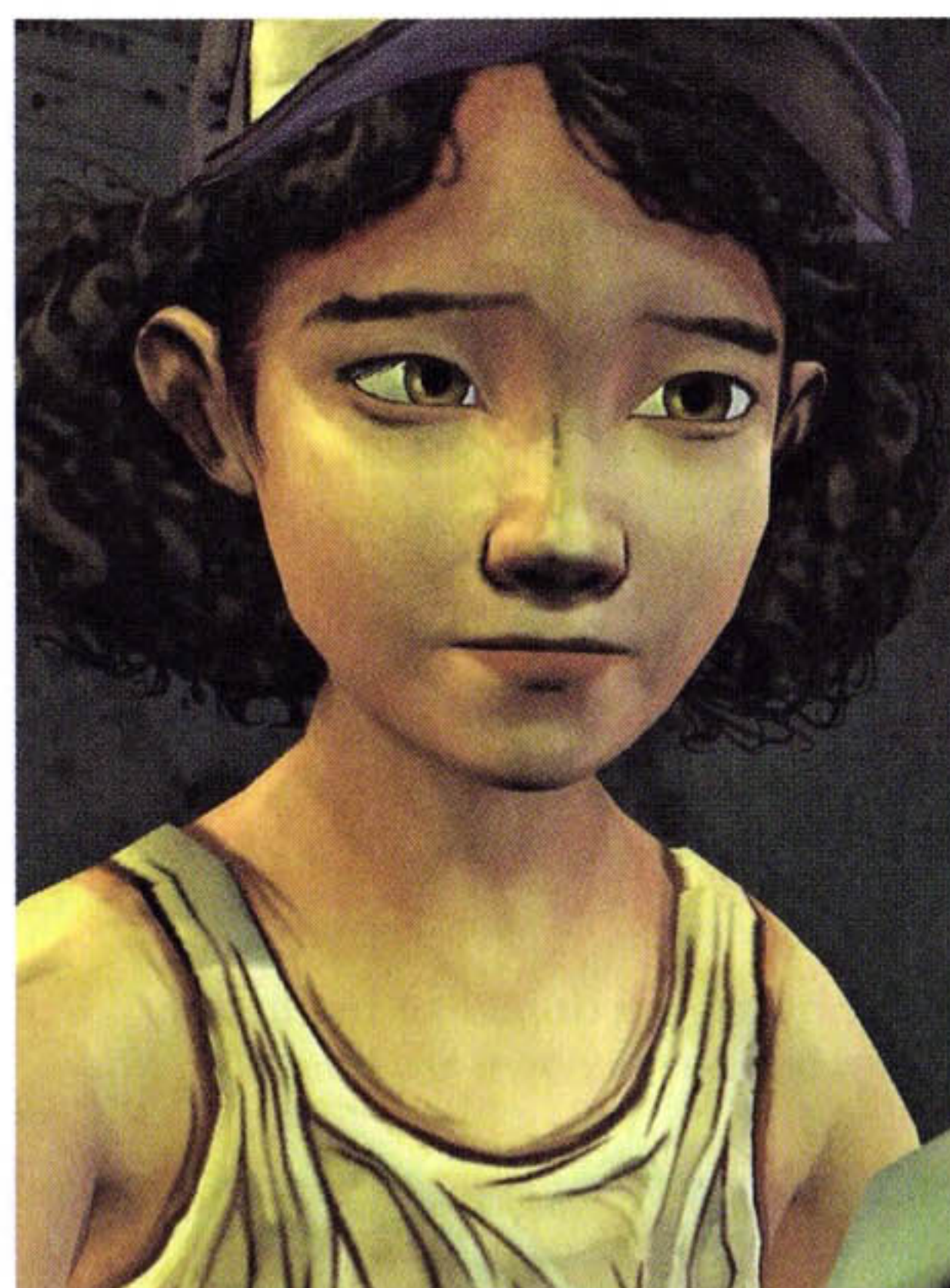


Gears of What?

I truly can't believe that Gears of War 3 did not make it in your Top 50 Games of 2012 list. As a matter of fact, I can't remember the last time I saw even one of the writers acknowledge Gears of War as a favorite. Every time you guys ever have a list of the top games, Gears of War is never mentioned; it seems like you have a beef with Epic and Gears of War in general. In a time where original ideas in video games are few and far between, it would make sense that Gears of War would get some credit for being one of the most original games of all time. But then again, seeing your guys' pictures/comments, you look like a bunch of spineless idiots anyway. Gears of War is much too fast-paced and kickass for a bunch of nerds like you!

Paul Craft
via email

Gears of War 3 came out in 2011. It was included in our Top 50 list, and won our Best Xbox 360 Exclusive award in the year it was actually released.



Clambering for More Clementine

I just wanted to thank the GI staff for the article "Creating Clementine" in issue 237. I read and re-read it, wondering how I let such an inspiring title slip through my fingers. Luckily, it was on sale during the holidays, so I snatched the opportunity to get all the episodes. I've been playing the game nonstop, and I am now on my second playthrough. I love the game and am thankful that Kimberley Wallace brought it to my attention.

Vinnie Rivera
via email

In your Creating Clementine article, you had a section entitled "Cementing the Bond." Why didn't you put "Clementing the Bond" as the sub-header? Unsubscribed!

Sean Milligan
via email

We received a number of letters from readers expressing their gratitude for the in-depth look at the creation of the precious star of The Walking Dead. Nevertheless, we're sending Kim to pun school immediately to ensure she never misses such a golden opportunity again.

Short Answers to Readers' Burning Questions:

"Would you guys want a prequel video game or movie to Resistance: Fall of Man?"

Not really.

"Why does it seem like PS3 has way more exclusive games than Xbox 360?"

Because it does.

"Why is it that every magazine says 'preview' when they are playing the game? Would that not be a 'playview?'"

What?!

Worst News Tip of the Month:

"Ben Reeves is secretly Keanu Reeves' evil brother."

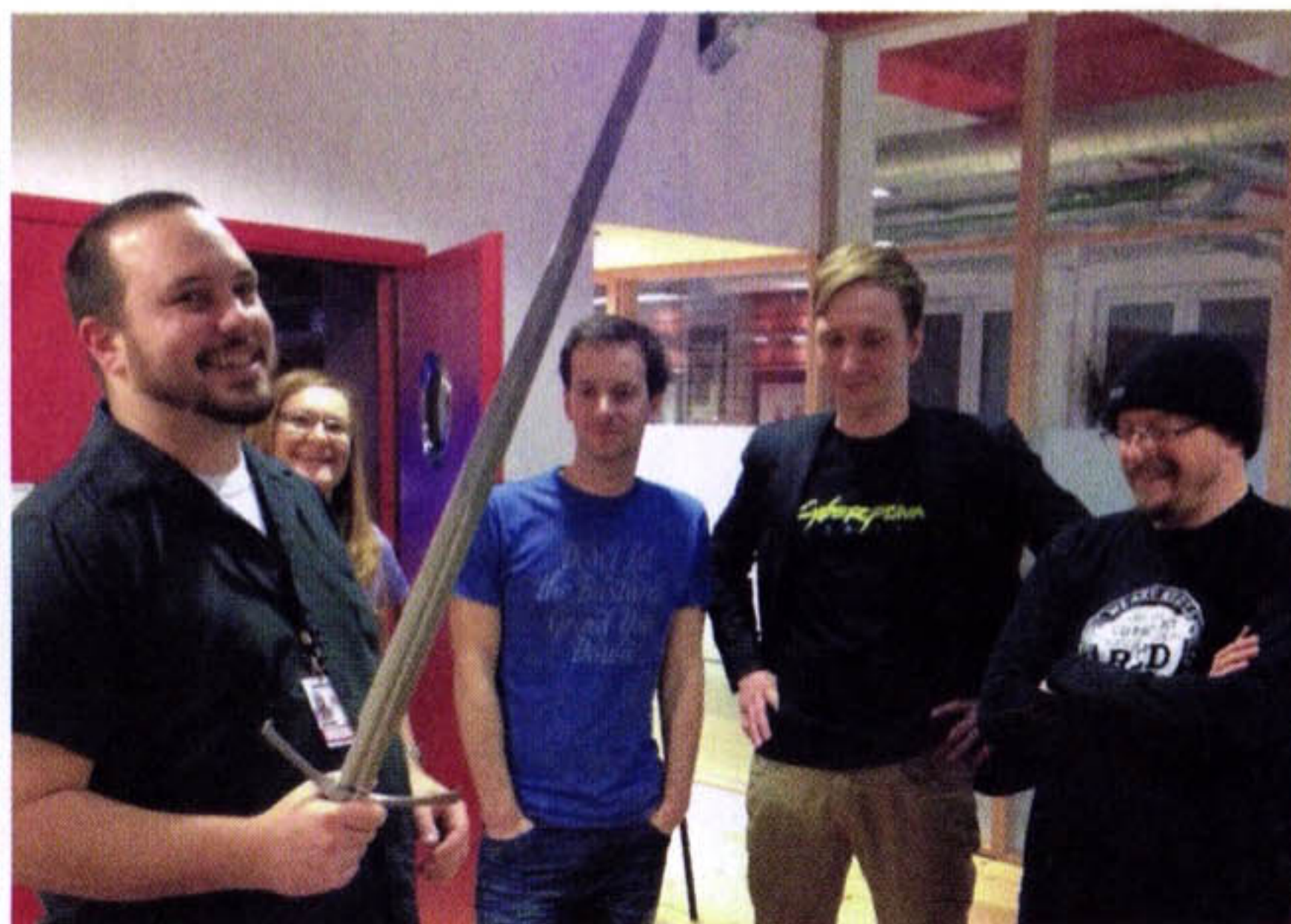
Reader Gibberish:

"I realize that you all are a total numskulls! How could I described you as "gameinformer"? more like "dumbinformer"!!"

Question of the Month:

What game would make you buy a next-gen console?

gi spy



(Left) During their trip to Warsaw, Poland, tour guide Dorota Bartnikowska brought Adam, Ben Hanson, and CD Projekt RED's Maciek Sosnowski to the Copernicus Science Center. She couldn't convince Hanson that this sculpture wasn't a functioning robot, however. (Right) The first mistake CD Projekt RED's Agnieszka Szóstak, Michał Płatkow-Gilewski, Adam Badowski, and Borys Pugacz-Muraszkiewicz made was giving Adam a sword. The second was not wearing armor.

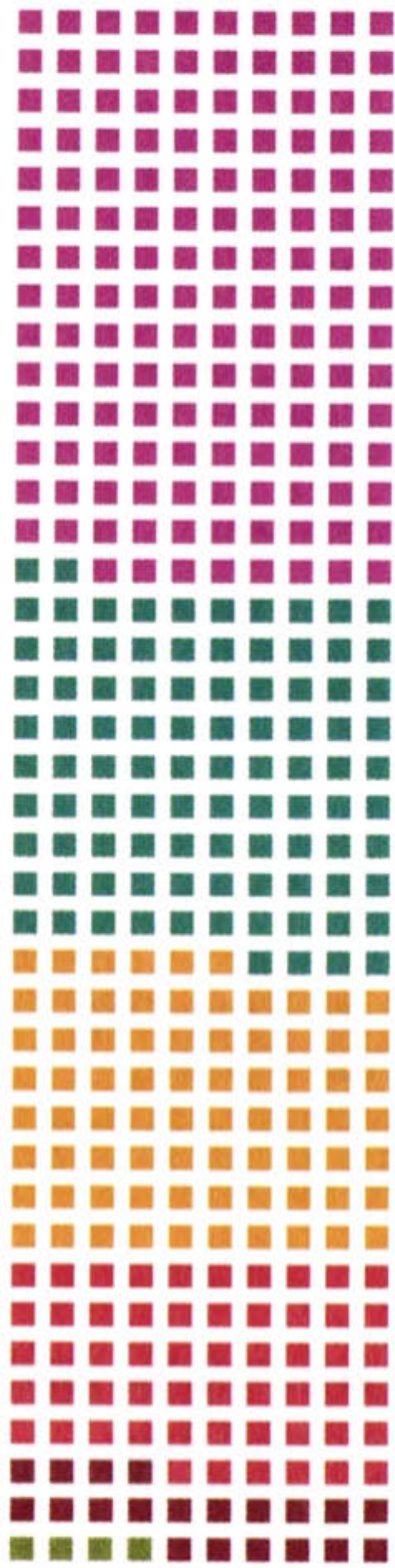
CANDID PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

GI SPY

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feedback 7

On Your Mind



■ Top 50 Games of 2012 **37%**

■ Clementine Love **24%**

■ The Best Villains to Work For **19%**

■ Windows 8 Gripes **14%**

■ Game of the Year Controversy **5%**

■ Paul Revere History Lessons **1%**

The Need to Read

Thank you so much for recommending the new *Need For Speed: Most Wanted*, a game that is nothing like any NFS I've ever played – and that's not a good thing. All it has in common with the original *Most Wanted* is the name. Therein lies the problem: Had it been called "Burnout Crashfest," your review would've been justified. As I am not a fan of the Burnout games, and I feel utterly deceived. I am not happy about this. I've been ripped off by the game maker, the game store I bought it from, and you. Thanks a million.

Ryan Balogh
Austin, TX

We're sorry you don't like the game, Ryan, but our reviews are based on how

fun a game is, not if it's similar or dissimilar to other games in the series. For that information, you actually have to read the review; if you're not a fan of Burnout-style racing games, why did you buy a title that our review said was full of "spectacular Burnout-style crashes," and is all about "developer Criterion's ruthless pursuit of its racing vision" in the opening paragraph?

Sneak King

In the late '90s I got hooked on stealth games and the act of sneaking up behind enemies and silently taking them out. Franchises like *Metal Gear Solid* and *Tenchu* really hit the spot, but now it seems series that were centered on 100-percent stealth are either gone or evolving too far from the

formula. Are there games out there to fill the void, or is stealth a trend that developers aren't interested in anymore?

Jack Mohan
via email

While a lot of classic stealth franchises have adopted action elements in an attempt to broaden their appeal, that design shift has been a two-way street. Many developers are looking for ways to accommodate fans of different play styles, and last year *Dishonored* and *Far Cry 3* provided some of the best stealth gameplay of this generation. If you're still looking for a pure stealth experience, check out our preview of *Dark* on page 80, or try Klei Entertainment's *Mark of the Ninja*, which we named the best downloadable game of 2012.

Question of the Month:

In issue 235, we asked readers what video game villain they would work for and why. The responses were all over the place, and exhibited some questionable logic for choosing a potential employer. Here are some of the responses:

Hands down, the best video game villain to work for has to be Wario. Think about it: How awesome would it be to work on crazy game ideas with the WarioWare crew?

Esteban Hinojosa

I would want to work for the King of the Galaxy, because I'd get to sleep in a hammock in space on my downtime and help with punishing Prince whenever he does something unsatisfactory.

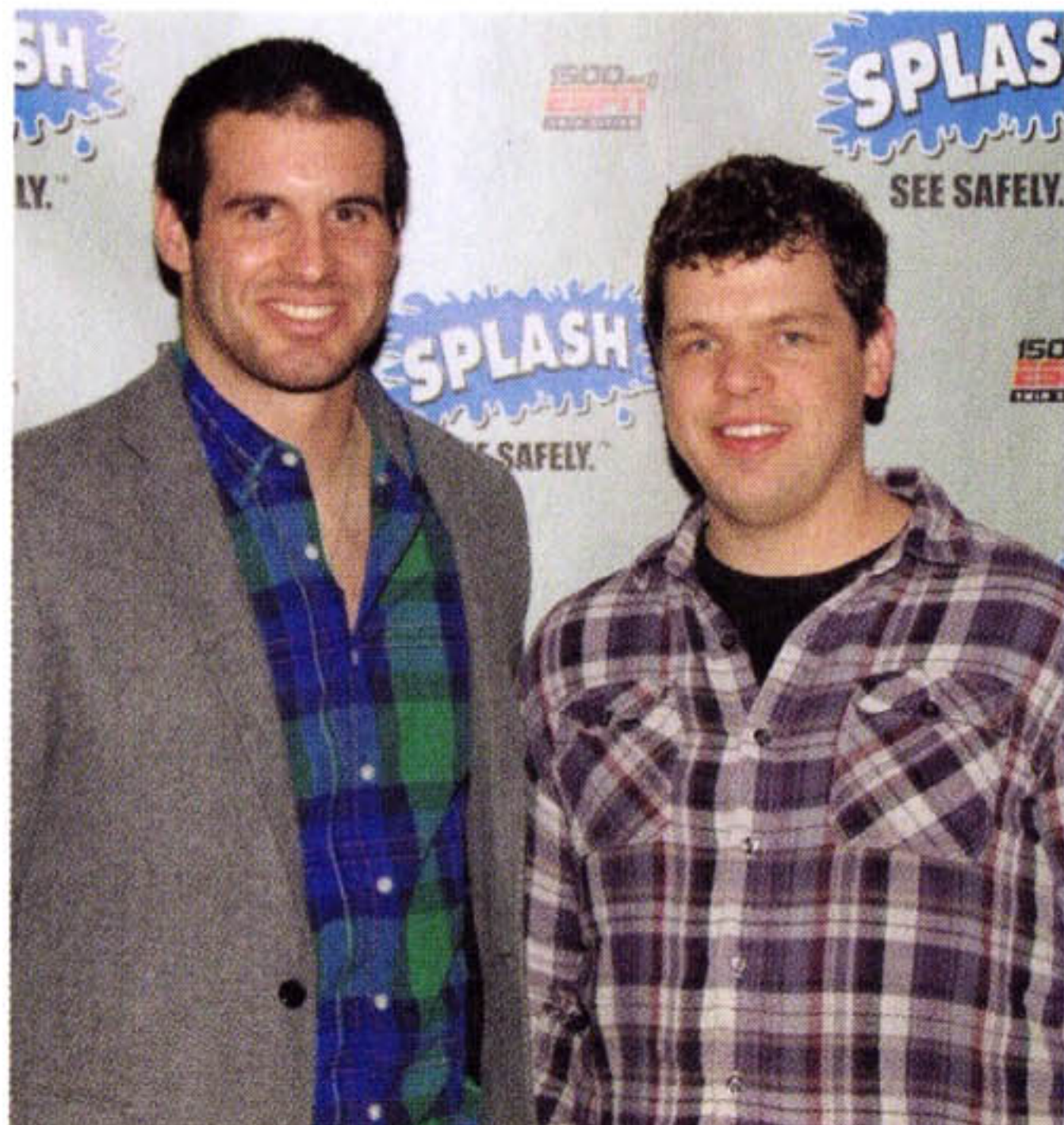
Kira Walter

I'd work for Bowser. I mean, what other job has you traveling across the world, through space, and everywhere in-between, all while kidnapping a beautiful princess, laying waste to the land, and attempting to rule over the universe with no real consequences once you're defeated? Plus, there's always work; you never see the Goombas filing for unemployment benefits.

Nick Tarry



(Left) Recently, Ben Reeves and Vikings QB Christian Ponder bonded over their love of windshield wiper fluid at The Pourhouse in Minneapolis. **(Right)** Comedian James Adomian checked out the GI vault after joining the Replay crew for a little *Darkwing Duck*. Check it out at gameinformer.com.



GI SPY

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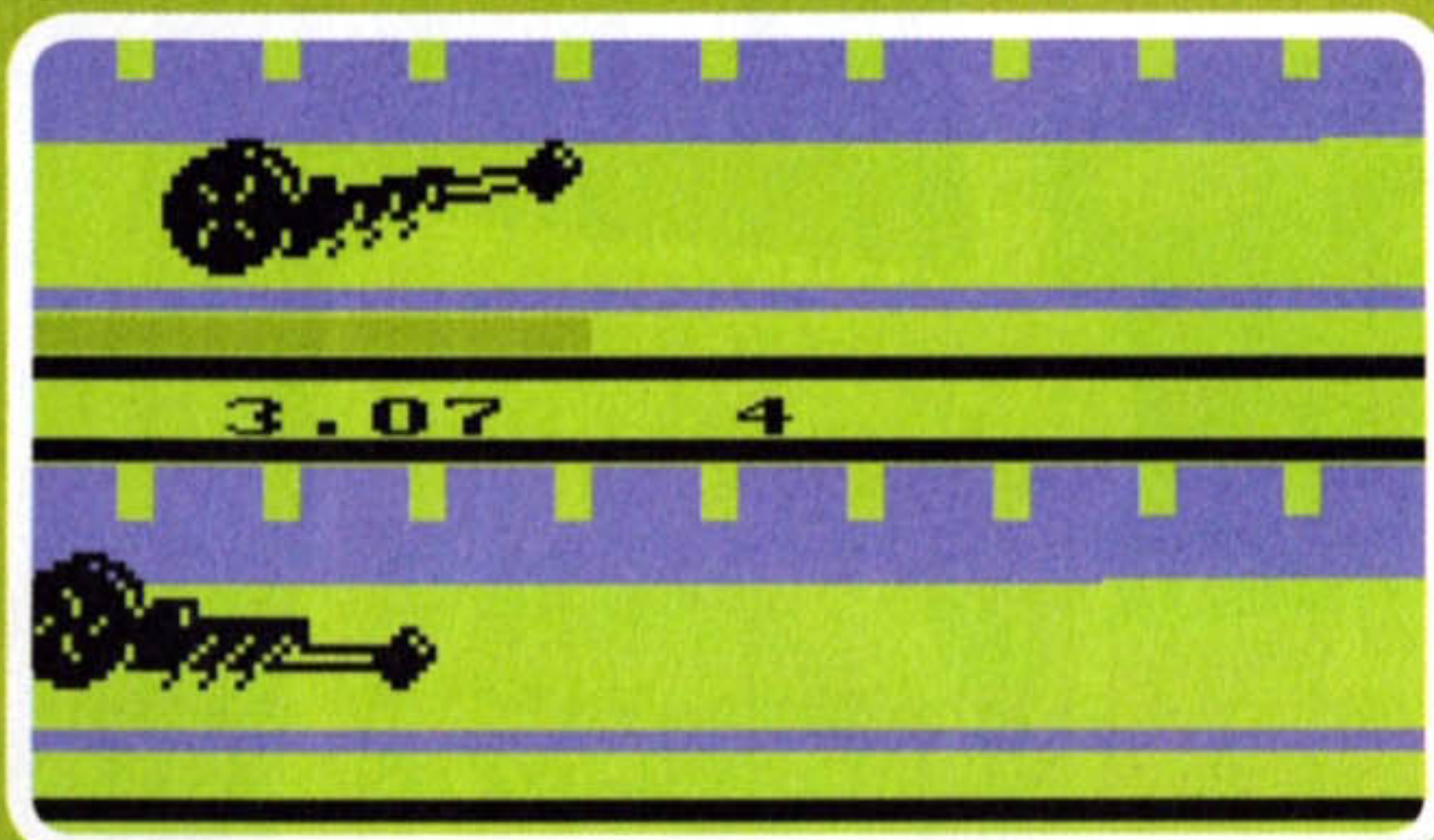
DAVID CRANE

ON HIS
FIRST
ACTIVISION
GAME

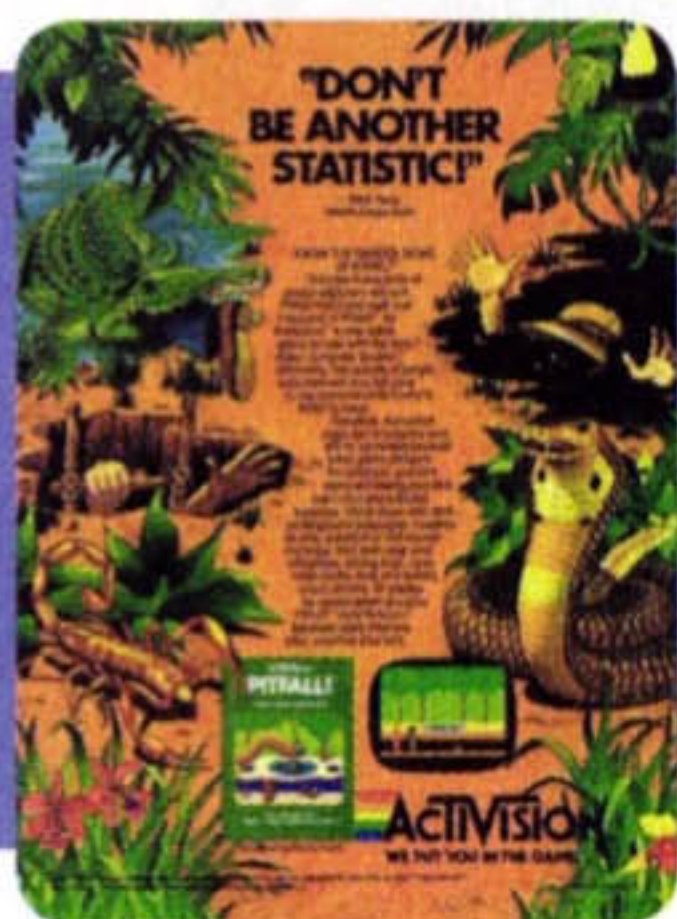


"My first game was Dragster, which was someone else's arcade game that I really ported over. It was a simple game about two drag racers on a split screen. You only raced a quarter mile and it only took about six seconds to play. But the day after we gave our trade-show samples to the sales people, the adult son of one of our Chicago sales reps came up to me. It was a little scary, because he looked mafia. This Chicago sales guy, he looked connected and his son looked the same way. So he comes up, grabs

me around the throat, and he said, "I could kill you for this." It turns out he had played Dragster for 35 hours straight. He couldn't put it down. So here's a guy playing 35 hours straight of a game that lasts six seconds a run, just trying to improve his score. I was blown away; that's when I knew there was something special about the games we were making."



Activision didn't like marketing campaigns based entirely on art, so the company usually incorporated photos or video of its games in its advertising. The game creator was also almost always mentioned in the ad.



A New Kind of Company

In the '70s, when a company wanted to get into the video game business, it created a video game console and then started making games that would play on that console. Atari made game cartridges for the Atari 2600, Magnavox made games for its Odyssey system, and Mattel made games for its Intellivision. Making games for other consoles didn't make practical business sense at the time. If you wanted to make video games, you had to make a console first.

And then four dissatisfied programmers from Atari formed Activision.

"Before we started the company, we checked with lawyers to make sure that it was legal to do what we were talking about," Crane says. "We actually budgeted for a lawsuit when we went to a venture capitalist and got backing. Sure enough, they tried to sue the pants off us."

Getting funding was a challenge in and of itself. At the time, venture capital firms didn't invest in software companies. Software didn't seem like a real product because there was nothing tangible to hold onto. The four programmers secured backing for their company only on the basis that they would be producing physical cartridges, which would

be marketed as games. Even then, the private equity firm Sutter Hill Ventures invested less than \$1 million into the company. Within three years, Activision would be worth more than \$300 million.

From the beginning, Activision looked like a different kind of video game company. Crane, Kaplan, Miller, and Whitehead teamed up with a businessman named Jim Levy, and the five founded their company on the idea that a game was a piece of art created by an author. As they envisioned it, Activision would give every programmer credit on the games they made, and would even promote authors by devoting a full page to them in the instruction manual. The founders decided to package their games in bright, colorful boxes with their Activision label clearly displayed across the top so the company's games would clearly stand out on store shelves. Most importantly, the four programmers knew the Atari 2600 inside and out, so their games used every ounce of the system's graphical capabilities. Black borders were even employed to keep color bleeding down. Many would later say that Activision's games looked better than many of Atari's own titles.

ACTIVISION Timeline

1979

(MAY) Atari programmers David Crane, Larry Kaplan, Alan Miller, and Bob Whitehead meet with Atari CEO Ray Kassar to demand that the company reward its developers more fairly

(OCT) Crane, Kaplan, Miller, and Whitehead file papers to found their own company, Activision, the first independent developer and distributor of video game software



1981

(JUL) Activision releases Kaboom!, which has players using the paddle controller to capture explosives dropped by a mad bomber at the top of the screen. The game goes on to become one of the company's early million-sellers

1982

(APR) Activision releases Pitfall! The game becomes one of Activision's most iconic titles, and is often credited as the first platformer. It goes on to sell over four million copies – a dizzying feat for the Atari 2600. Later in the year, co-founder Larry Kaplan leaves for Amiga.

1983

(MAR) The company ends its fiscal year by reaching more than \$157 million in sales and by June completes its initial public offering

1984

Bob Whitehead and Alan Miller leave Activision to form Accolade



Battling a Giant

By the fall of 1979, the four programmers had set up inside Crane's garage and started working on their initial launch lineup: Dragster, Fishing Derby, Checkers, and Boxing. The games wouldn't release until the following summer, but to help build sales momentum for its new products, and in order to establish its brand name, Activision took its games to the summer Consumer Electronic Show in Chicago.

"Our first CES was quite a splash," Crane says. "We were in the third sub-basement at McCormick Place. Fortunately, we were in the corner and we had our banner at an angle, so we had good visibility even though we were the last booth in the last place anyone went. Even so, people saw our booth and immediately started to get excited."

The young developer started generating so much press that Atari felt it had to go on the offensive. On the second day of the show, Atari bought a full page ad in the CES trade show daily aimed directly at Activision.

"It said, 'Atari believes that anyone who would steal trade secrets from another company and try to profit on them are evil, terrible people,'" Crane recalls. "They didn't mention Activision by name, but it was pretty clear they were talking about us. It was funny, because they made that statement, but we all agreed with it because we weren't stealing anything. They tried to paint us as being really bad."

Atari continued its attack, trying to bully the fledgling publisher out of the retail market by telling retailers that they wouldn't be able to carry Atari products if they distributed for Activision. Atari then accused Activision of stealing various proprietary information, including a programming trick known as the "venetian blinds" technique.

The venetian blinds technique had been invented by Bob Whitehead while he was working on Video Chess for Atari. The technique allowed sprites to change positions every scan line, meaning a programmer could get eight or more sprites to line up onscreen. Previously, programmers had only been able to get the Atari 2600 to produce six sprites on a single line, so this was a nifty trick. The problem for Atari was Activision hadn't used the venetian blinds technique in any of its games.

Atari continued to threaten to sue Activision

for stealing company secrets, so David Crane worked up a demo of a digital window overlooking a sunset. A player could use a joystick to raise or lower a set of venetian-style blinds attached to the window. When Atari's lawyers came over to question the Activision crew about the venetian blinds programming technique, Crane showed them the demo of the digital venetian blinds, asking, "Is this what you're talking about?" Everyone thought it was hilarious. Everyone except Atari's lawyers; Atari filed a lawsuit alleging that Activision's members had violated a non-disclosure agreement.

"They tried all these monopolistic practices, and it was stupid because we helped make their console the de facto standard for a decade because we were supporting it and the next group supported it," Crane says. "They were selling more consoles because of our support, but they couldn't see it that way. We were the best thing that could have happened to Atari, but they didn't think so at the time."

Activision continued to churn out a string of hits that included Kaboom!, Chopper Command, Skiing, and Pitfall! Then in 1982, Atari decided that it was losing the lawsuit and opted to settle out of court. Activision could continue to develop third-party video games for Atari's systems in return for royalties – an arrangement that functions much like modern first-party/third-party licensing agreements. The Atari 2600 was officially an open platform. Activision had swung the doors wide open for a slew of long-forgotten

third party companies like Imagic, Tigervision, and Froggo Games to flood the market.

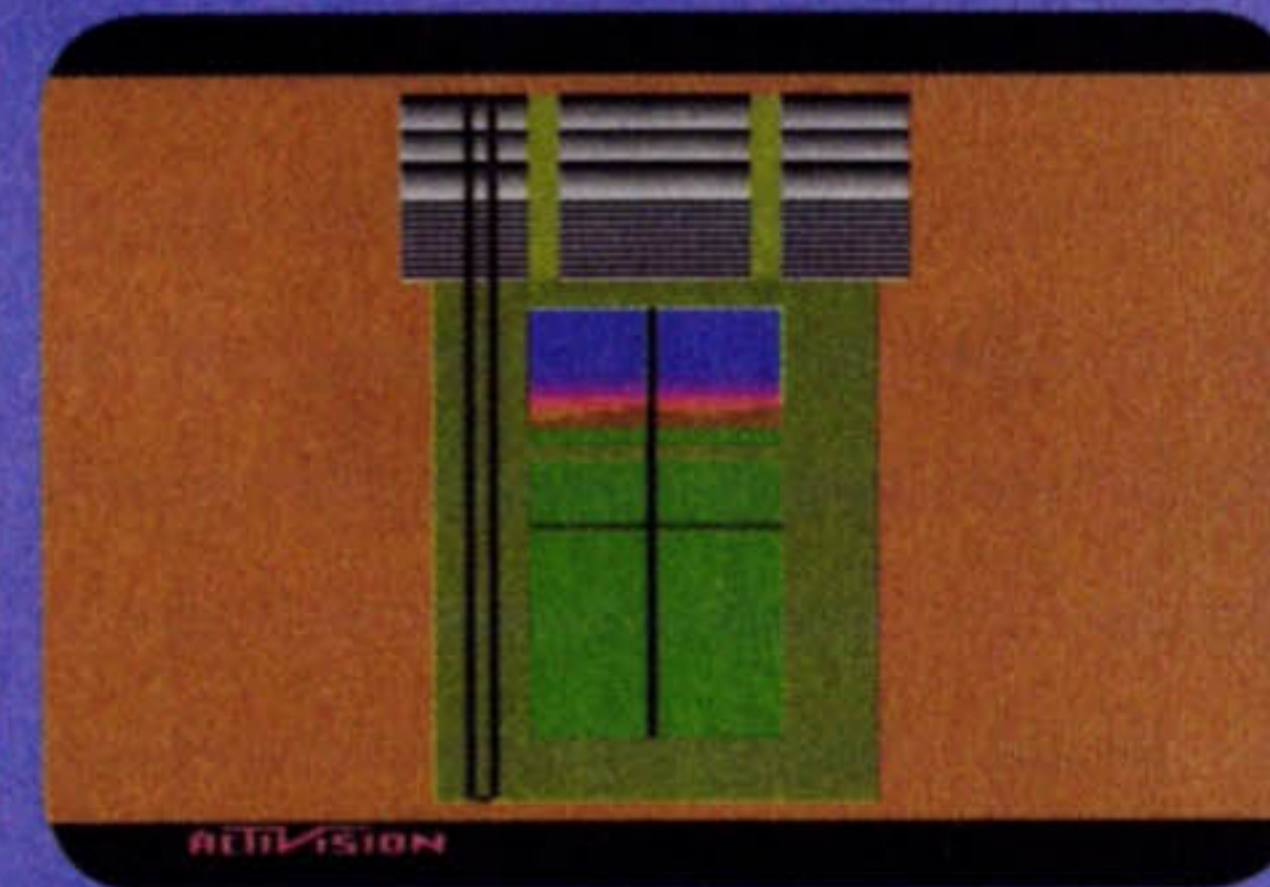
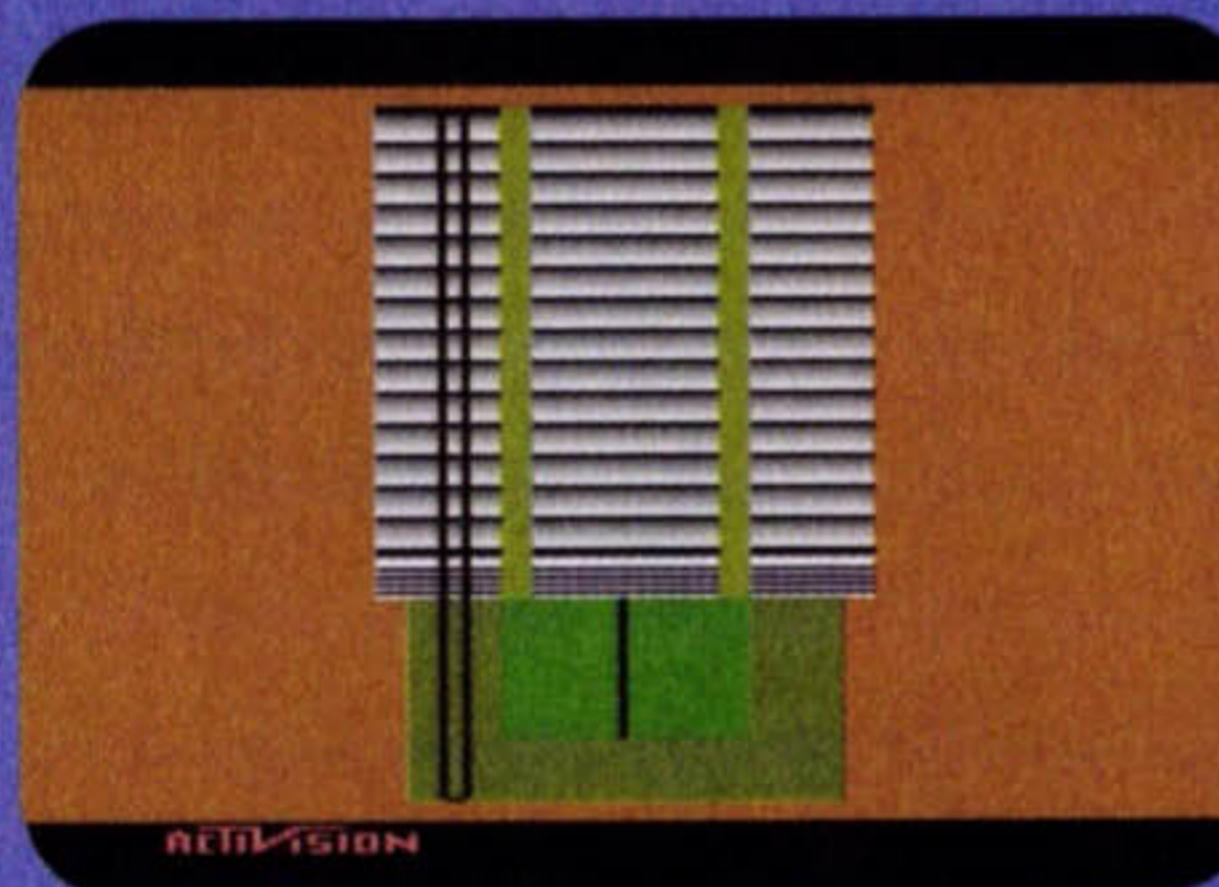
The Activision that exists today is a vastly different company than the one formed in David Crane's garage back in 1979. The company has weathered a series of financial losses, a name change, and a multi-million dollar patent infringement lawsuit over the years. The company's founders had all left by the mid-'80s and by the time that current CEO Bobby Kotick acquired the company, Activision was such a financial disaster that it was forced to file for Chapter 11 bankruptcy. Despite its dire straits, Activision was worth saving.

"What Bobby Kotick realized was that the Activision brand name was worth \$50 million when he bought the company for less than \$1 million," Crane says. "It was estimated at that point that it would cost \$50 million in marketing to make another company be as recognizable as Activision already was, so he had that going for him and he knew it."

Much of Activision's success today is built on that brand name, but its legacy is larger than a single company. Crane, Kaplan, Miller, and Whitehead envisioned an industry where game makers were credited as artistic visionaries who shared in the profits of a game's financial success. They envisioned an industry where games were not just seen as toys, but as entertainment products comparable to movies, music, and books. It was a vision of today's industry, a reality they helped shape. ♦

Check back next month when we take a closer look at David Crane's most popular Activision title, Pitfall!

A look at the venetian blinds tech demo that David Crane worked up as a joke to show Atari's lawyers. Activision later used the sunset art as the background in Barnstorming



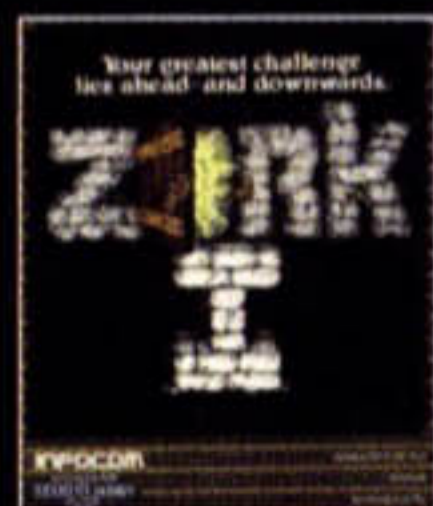
1986

The last remaining founder at Activision, David Crane, leaves the company to co-found Absolute Entertainment with Garry Kitchen



1987

Activision purchases Infocom, the leading adventure game developer and publisher of Zork

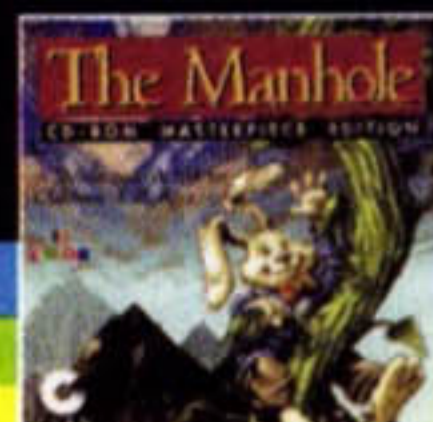


1988

Activision changes its corporate name to Mediagenic and broadens its focus to include business software

1989

Activision, under Mediagenic, publishes the first interactive entertainment product on CD-ROM, an adventure game for kids called The Manhole



1990

BHK Corporation, headed by Bobby Kotick, purchases a controlling interest in Mediagenic



1992

(DEC) Mediagenic emerges from chapter 11 bankruptcy and changes its name back to Activision



2007

(DEC) Activision and Vivendi announce that they have signed a merger agreement, effectively making them the world's largest video game publisher. The company renames itself Activision Blizzard





RPG OR FLORIDA

If you want the craziest news headlines in North America, it's no secret that Florida is a goldmine. Role-playing games play a similar role in the gaming industry, providing more ridiculous scenarios and plot devices than any other genre. In a testament to how bonkers these two sources can be, sometimes it can be difficult to tell them apart. Read the headlines and determine which ones originate from actual news reports in Florida, and which ones are drawn from RPGs. **by Joe Juba**

- 01** RPG | FL Man steals sweet roll, hides it in pants
- 02** RPG | FL Man and his dog find bronze gorilla statue in woods
- 03** RPG | FL Teen and his dog uncover abandoned laboratory
- 04** RPG | FL Teacher attacked by airborne fish
- 05** RPG | FL Love triangle between two sisters and adopted brother leaves one dead
- 06** RPG | FL Woman refuses to leave launch pad, delays space shuttle launch
- 07** RPG | FL Alleged stabber claims he was possessed by cat spirit
- 08** RPG | FL Woman attacks lover after disappointing sexual performance
- 09** RPG | FL Late-night television blamed for increase in teen murders
- 10** RPG | FL Woman driving vehicle 100mph claims divine forces made her do it
- 11** RPG | FL "I am a reincarnated space traveler," says robot enthusiast
- 12** RPG | FL Adult woman adopted by wealthy boyfriend
- 13** RPG | FL Large beehive, thousands of bees threaten residential area
- 14** RPG | FL Man offers to shoot children out of cannon
- 15** RPG | FL Sexual assault at wrestling tournament under investigation
- 16** RPG | FL Father assaults son's romantic rival
- 17** RPG | FL Man uses samurai sword, mop as weapons during altercation ♦

Score & Rank

- 17 CORRECT:** Nice work, cheater
- 14-16 CORRECT:** You either play a lot of RPGs, or read a lot of Florida news reports
- 11-13 CORRECT:** You were overthinking it! You talked yourself out of a few right answers
- 8-10 CORRECT:** Most people get this score. Congratulations, you're boring!
- 5-7 CORRECT:** You could have just picked either "FL" or "RPG," answered every question the same way, and still scored better than this
- 0-4 CORRECT:** You are a primitive AI still struggling to understand human behavior

1. FL 2. FL 3. RPG (Secret of Evermore) 4. FL 5. RPG (Tales of Legendia) 6. RPG (Final Fantasy VIII) 7. RPG (Chrono Cross) 8. FL 9. RPG (Persona 4) 10. FL 11. RPG (Xenogears) 12. FL 13. FL 14. RPG (Secret of Mana) 15. RPG (Shadow Hearts: Covenant) 16. FL 17. FL and RPG (Chrono Trigger)

Game Informer Magazine® (ISSN 1067-6392) is published monthly at a subscription price of \$19.98 for 1 year or \$24.98 for 2 years by Sunrise Publications®, 724 North First Street, 3rd Floor, Minneapolis, MN 55401. (612) 486-6100 or FAX (612) 486-6101. Canada & Mexico orders must add \$25/yr additional postage; all other international orders add \$35/yr. All orders must be prepaid in U.S. dollars by check, money order or credit card. PowerUp Rewards™ Pro Card may be purchased for \$12.00 (includes \$7.00 S&H). For subscriptions, back issues, or customer service inquiries call toll free at (866) 844-4263 or mail publisher at above address. Periodicals postage paid at Minneapolis, MN, and additional mailing offices. Subscribers/Postmaster: Send address changes to Game Informer Magazine®, 724 North First Street, 3rd Floor, Minneapolis, MN 55401. Canadian subscribers send address changes: Express Messenger International, P.O. Box 25058 London BRC, Ontario, Canada N6C 6A8.



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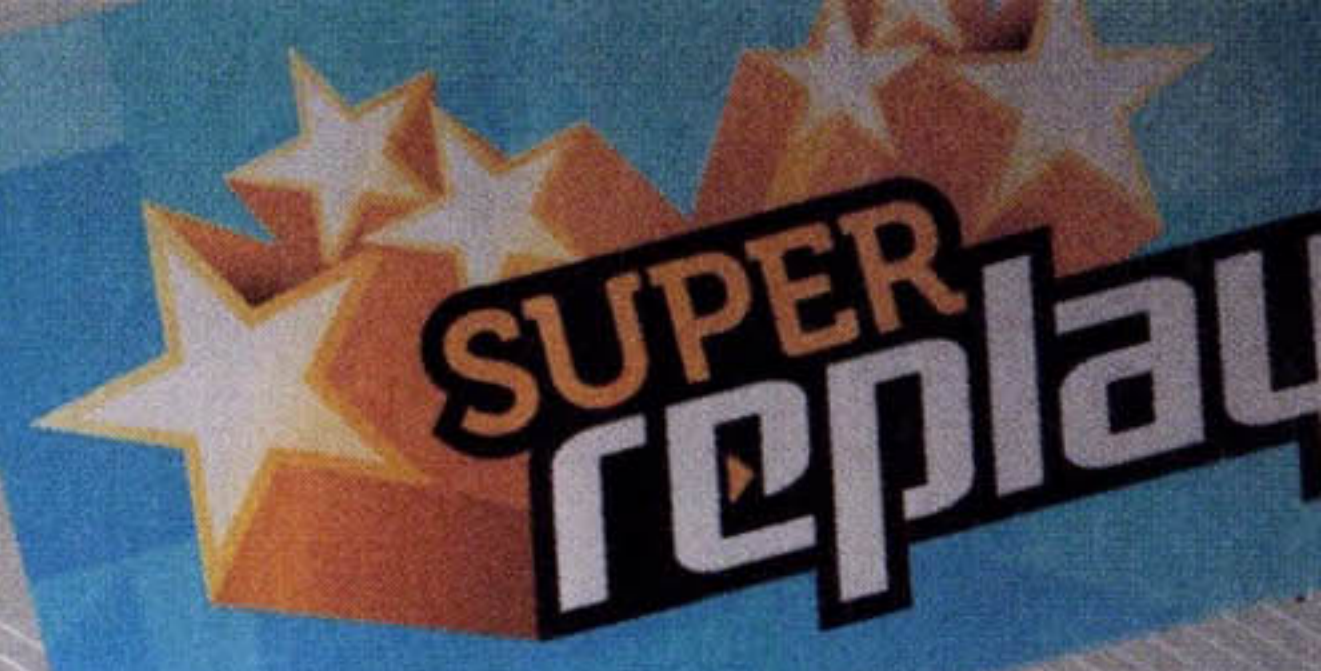
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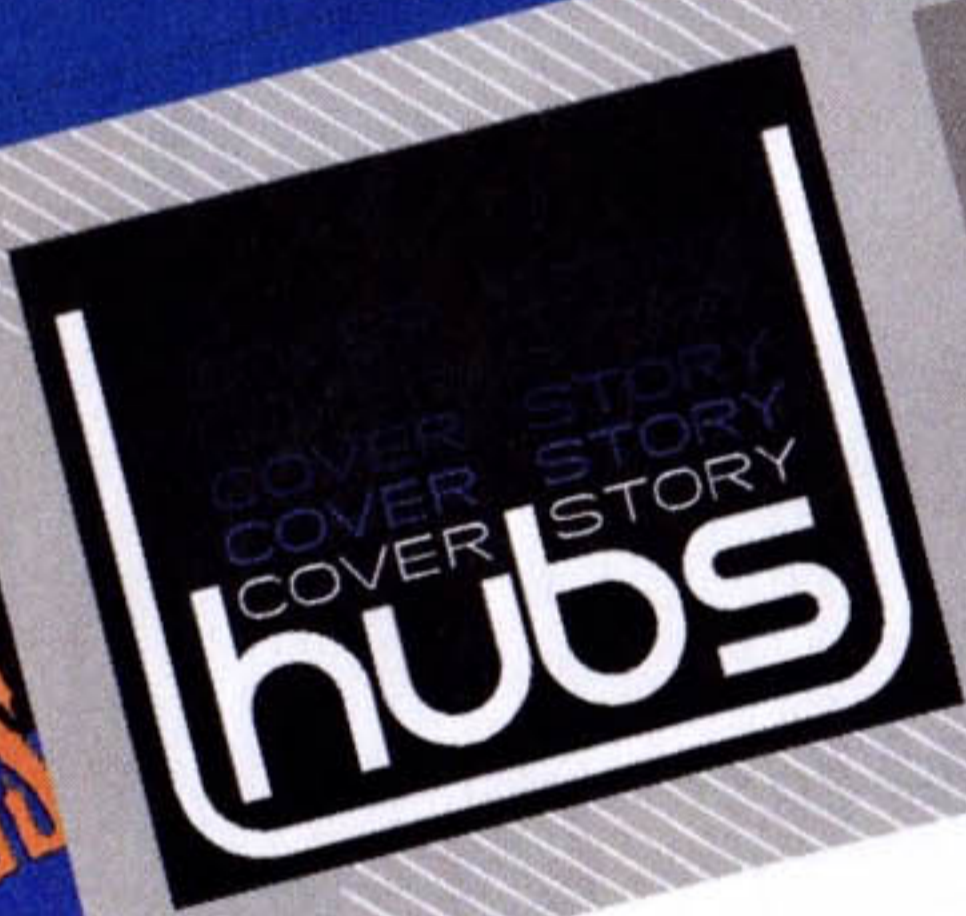


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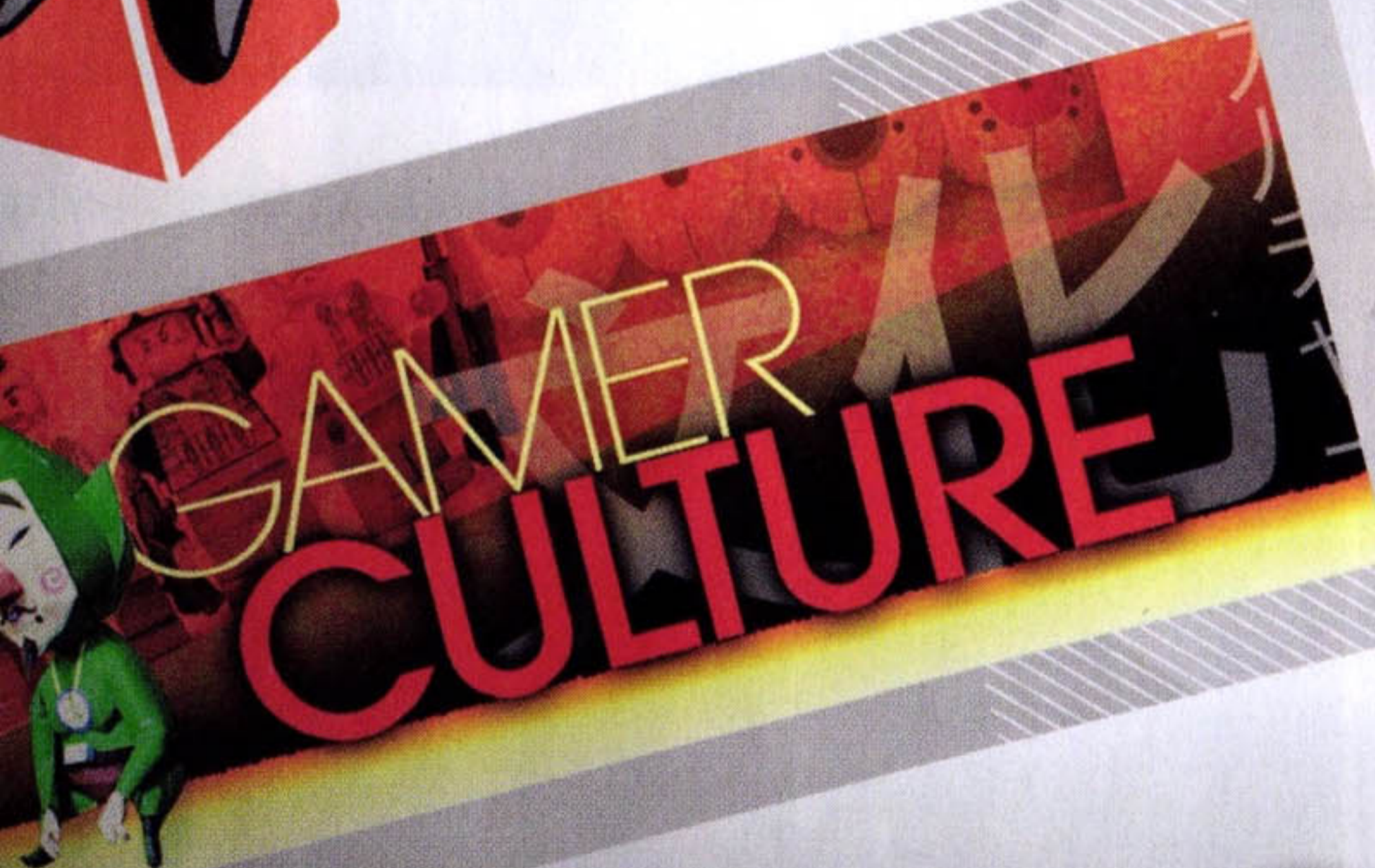


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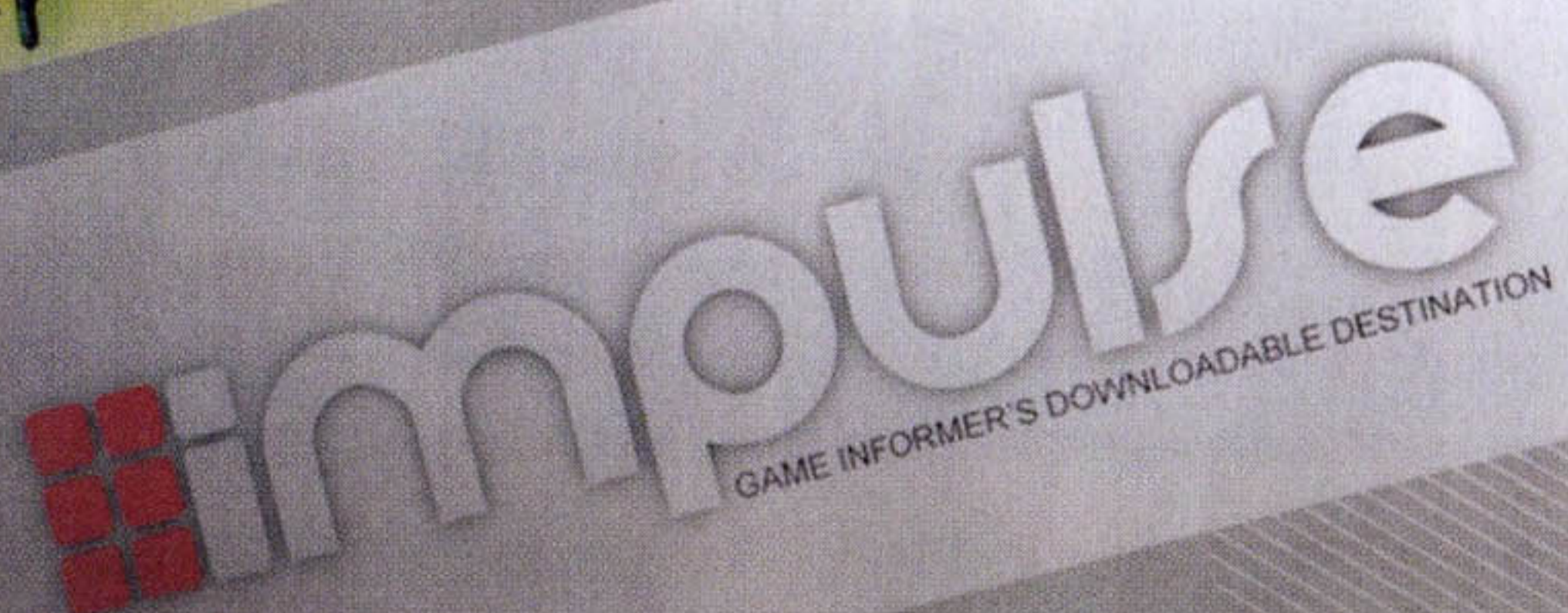
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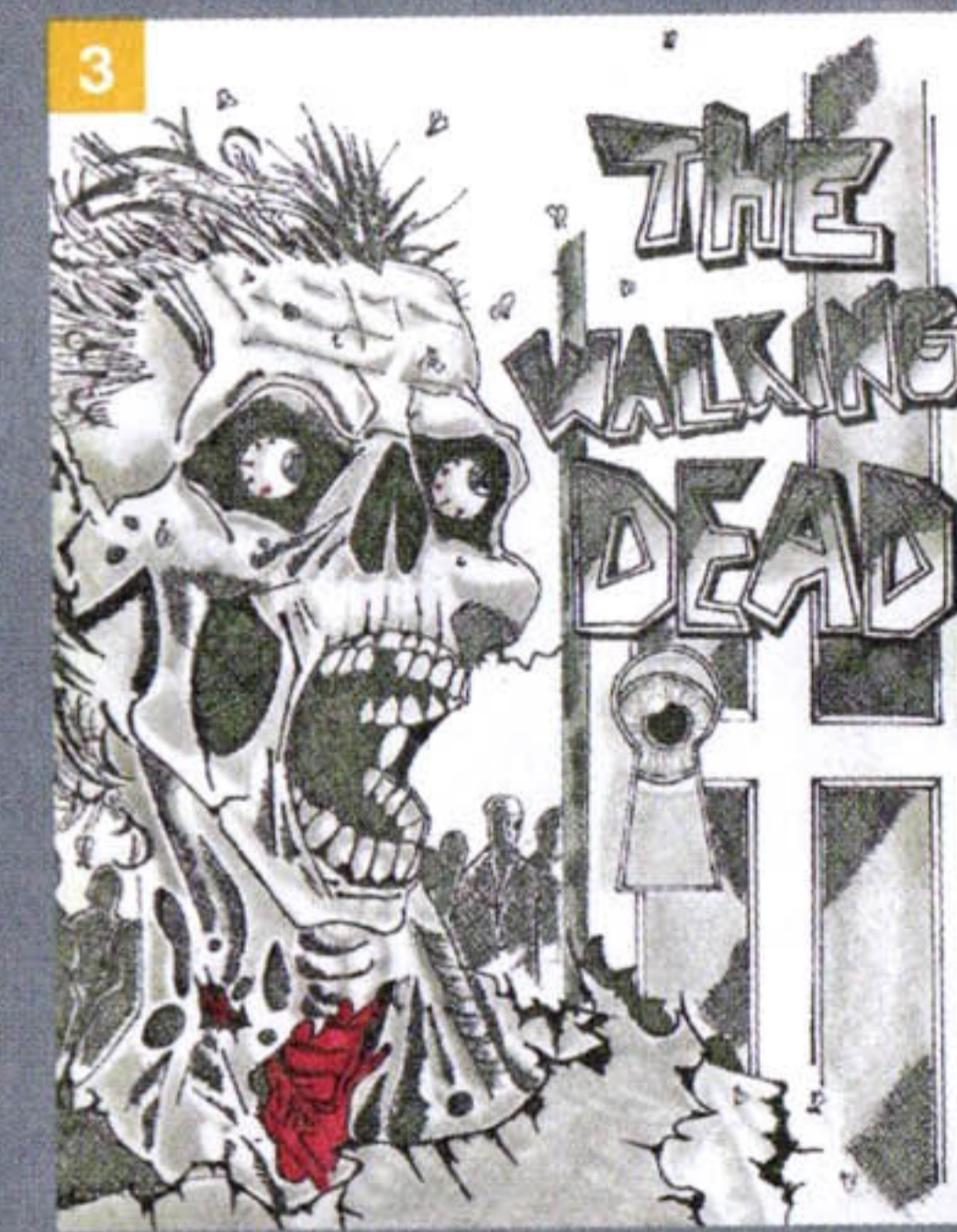


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- 2 Kevin Gray**
We suspended our disbelief for Da Vinci's flying machine in *AC II*, but an actual eagle attachment is going too far
- 3 Nicholas Weir**
Note to door manufacturer: keyholes aren't as effective when they're almost big enough to walk through
- 4 Axel Stallman**
Bowser finally forgoes theatrics for practicality

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GI SPY
continued from page 8

(Left) This month Bryan started a crossed-arm club with Ubisoft's Maxime Béland, Arne Pedroso, and Patrick Redding. Standing by elevators with your arms crossed has never been more fun! **(Right)** Avalanche Software's John Blackburn and Disney's John Vignocchi became BFFs with Reiner and Jeff Cork after showing them *Disney Infinity*.



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HOME VALVE ALWAYS EXPANSION

Valve Spearheads Expansions to Home Console Gaming

by Matthew Kato

The next-gen consoles are coming, but the battle for your living room

encompasses more than just the home consoles made by Sony, Microsoft, and Nintendo. This year's Consumer Electronics Show (CES) highlighted some upcoming platforms that aim to expand the variety of game systems available to you. With a low barrier to entry, relatively attractive price tags, and the possibility of plenty of games, these boxes aim to change the console landscape. Could this be the beginning of a new era in home console gaming?



Ouya

he traditional console setup is a closed experience closely controlled by the system's manufacturer. The advantages of this approach are that the console manufacturer acts as a gatekeeper, making sure that not only does software conform to set specifications aimed at ensuring a minimum level of quality, but that the platform itself can be a part of an overall brand strategy, like focused initiatives such as Kinect or Xbox Live.

This manufacturer-controlled approach does have costs, however. MMOs have famously been excluded from Xbox Live, for example, due to Microsoft's interest in keeping a tight rein on everything from the patches available to the payment methods. There are also the fixed hardware specs, lack of development tools available to the consumer, and other proprietary constraints.

Recently, some attractive alternatives to the traditional console model have garnered attention. In particular, the news at this year's CES was the influx of systems designed to make games more accessible via download or stream, as well as bring mobile Android titles and apps to your TV. Nvidia's Shield, PlayJam's GameStick, and Ouya are all targeting your living room, and Valve's Steam Box is planning its own revolution.

Valve Waits in the Wings

Valve has not-so-secretly been developing its own home console, colloquially dubbed the Steam Box. This system would deliver games digitally via Valve's own Steam service, which would be playable on your TV screen with a controller via the company's currently available Big Picture mode. Although the Steam Box would be closed in the sense that the box itself would be configured to Valve's specifications, it will run Linux with the option to install Windows. It will also run apps like Netflix and have a web browser.

At CES, Valve co-founder Gabe Newell talked in more depth about the company's thoughts on the Steam Box in an interview with *The Verge*, providing new details about the officially unannounced endeavor. While Valve plans on producing its own Steam Box, the company is licensing out Steam to other companies so they can make their own boxes. Newell said that he envisions "Good, Better, Best" grades of boxes that range from those that are solely focused around streaming games to those with whatever extras the manufacturer wants to put in,

such as a disc drive. Valve's own controlled offering will be in the middle of the pack. "[Valve's position is]: let's build a thing that's quiet and focuses on high performance and appropriate form factors."

Newell also talked about the desire for user-created store fronts, biometric controllers, and the next generation of Steam Boxes capable of acting like a server that can run games out to multiple monitors for simultaneous gaming sessions. Biometrics utilizes information from your body such as heart rate, retina tracking, or other biological characteristics, and Valve has been hiring engineers to explore its possibilities. "Maybe [motion control] is just failure of imagination on our part," Newell told *The Verge*, "but we're a lot more excited about biometrics as an input method."

Although Valve only showed off prototypes of its own Steam box at CES and talked about it in the abstract, Xi3 debuted its box code-name Piston that supports Steam and its Big Picture mode. It wasn't Valve's Steam Box, but it was funded in part by the company. As much as Piston grabbed some headlines at CES, these kinds of small form-factor specialized PCs are nothing new, and their availability will only increase as Steam continues to be licensed. It will be interesting to see how Valve differentiates itself from the competition – whether that's with exclusive games, biometrics, or Steam services. By spreading Steam as well as spearheading its own console, Valve's power could spread quickly.

Android – The Other OS

This year's CES also featured a number of Android-based devices that will try to expand home gaming, each with their own particular hook. Nvidia's Shield wirelessly streams Google Play titles as well as those from your PC (as long as they use a high-end Kepler-based GeForce GPU) onto its Xbox 360-style controller that has a built-in 5-inch, 1280x720 HD multitouch display. The Kickstarter-funded GameStick has a dongle that hooks into your TV's HDMI port and lets you play Android games on your TV for \$79. Last year, fellow Kickstarter project Ouya turned heads with its streaming console, access to OnLive's streaming catalog, and requirement for every game to have some sort of free-to-play aspect. Also noteworthy is that Ouya is completely hackable without voiding the warranty, which not only opens the system to homebrew games, but also piracy.

As attractive as each of these options may sound, relying on Android can be risky. While it provides a familiar, open operating system and potentially a deep roster of already-released games, the Android ecosystem has its problems.

In the mobile and tablet market, Android games face the challenge of trying to conform to myriad different hardware configurations, versions of the operating system, and mobile carriers that utilize Android (as opposed to the unified Apple products). Games that currently exist could also face a difficult conversion process as existing mobile/tablet titles that use touchscreens have to adapt to the controllers of these home consoles.

Furthermore, Android's open structure – where anyone can develop a game for the OS without having to pay for a developer's license or jump through various approval hoops – is cluttered, plagued by piracy (which can scare away potential publishers/developers), and simply isn't as popular with companies and the general public as Apple's App Store and its products. There is also the threat that Apple could make its own foray into the living room through an iOS gaming console or expansion of Apple TV functionality.

"All that stuff really scared us," says Nathan Vella, co-founder and president of iOS/mobile/downloadable developer Cappybara (Critic Crunch), who elected to utilize the expertise of tools developer Apportable for the Android version of *Superbrothers: Sword & Sworcery EP*. "I still think that's one of the really tough parts of Android development is that there's so much fragmentation."

Despite some of the difficulties with Android, it's the gaming itself which is exciting users for these devices and which will likely make them succeed or fail. Since it's not hard to hook your PC up to your TV and enjoy games today, these devices will have to differentiate themselves by their ease of use, low price tag, and exclusive software in order to stay relevant.

Ouya boasts exclusive episodic content from Robotoki's zombie franchise *Human Element* (slated to hit in 2015), and apart from a large Android-based library that many other devices also tap into, it will host *Final Fantasy III* and possibly other ports of established titles. Software could be a crucial differentiator for Valve and its Steam Box, which could



make waves if the company were to make its games exclusive to the console.

Regardless of exclusives, Vella thinks exposing more gamers to Android titles could introduce them to a broader variety of good games. "One of the things that's really amazing about Android that doesn't get talked about is the sheer volume of content. If you're interested in really hardcore board games, you can find a significant number of really hardcore board games on iOS or Android...and it's a lot harder on traditional consoles."

Colin Sebastian, senior equity research analyst for Baird Research, thinks that some of these Android consoles could have a tough time in the market. "I liked some of the Android game platforms, although my best guess is they will get stuck in a 'niche-y' muck in between high-end gaming PCs and traditional living-room consoles. Over time, I also expect that both Apple and Google will make a bigger splash in games, bringing app stores to living rooms via smart TVs or boxes, and in my view these platforms have a better shot at shaking up the console market."

"I think it's going to come down a lot to making sure that those experiences are tailored for where or what they are being played on," says Vella. "When you talk about what's the value to a consumer to play a phone game on a giant screen, if the processors aren't good enough to make the graphics look better, or if the interface isn't better, and so on, it's not going to be a great experience. But I do think there's something really interesting about being able to access a wider amount of content instantly."

Some of these systems may not see the light of day or be able to fulfill all their potential, but the prospect of being able to access more games and expanded experiences will always excite gamers, no matter who is making the console. ❖

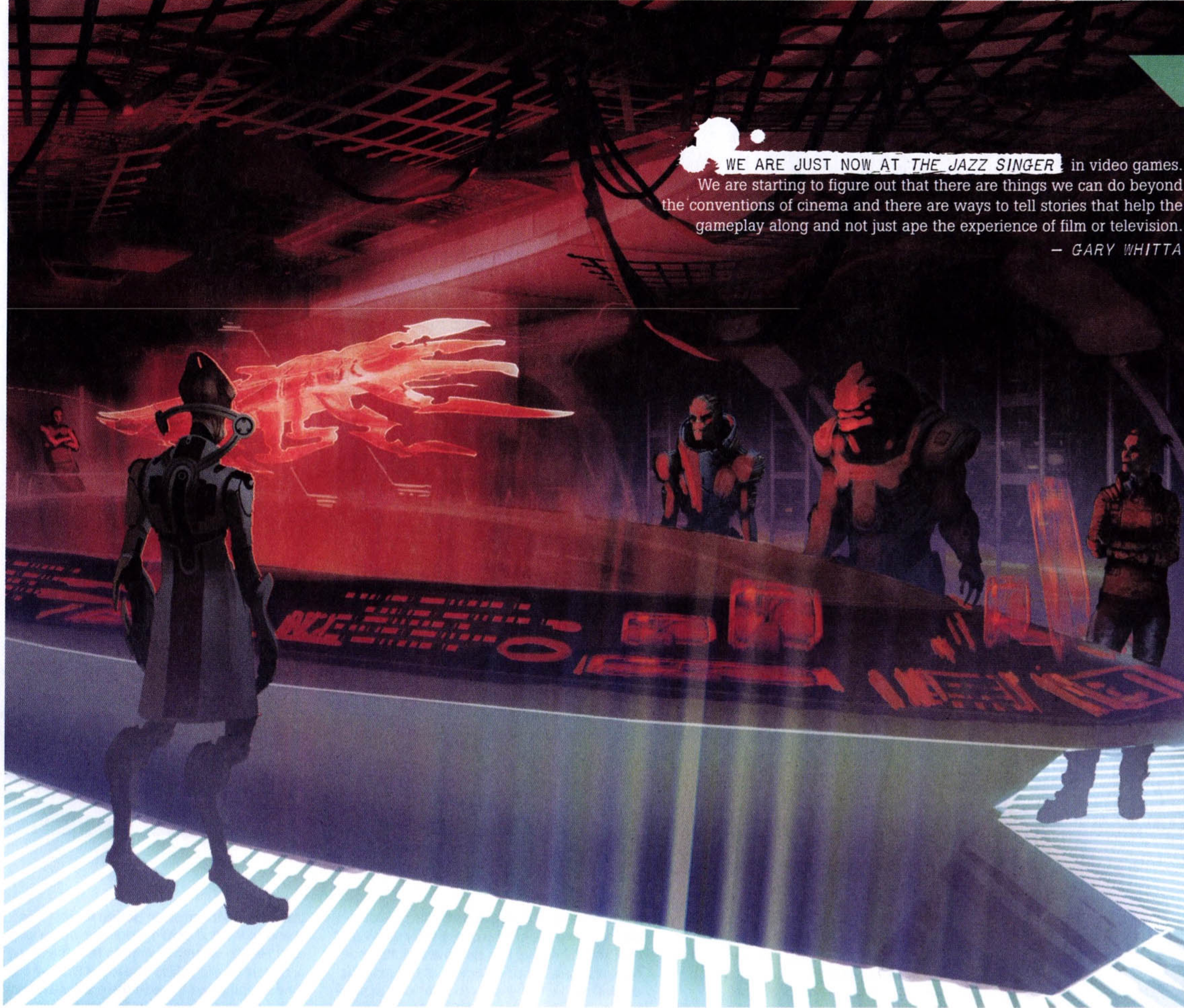




THE WRITERS' ROOM

Revealing the Art and Science of Game Writing

by ANDREW REINER



WE ARE JUST NOW AT *THE JAZZ SINGER* in video games. We are starting to figure out that there are things we can do beyond the conventions of cinema and there are ways to tell stories that help the gameplay along and not just ape the experience of film or television.

— GARY WHITTA

WHETHER WE'RE FOLLOWING MARIO AS HE LEAPS THROUGH PIPES TO RESCUE AN ABDUCTED PRINCESS OR SCULPTING THE SAGA OF COMMANDER SHEPARD IN THE MIDST OF A UNIVERSE-SPANNING WAR, MOST VIDEO GAMES HAVE STORIES TO TELL.

Even Ms. Pac-Man – a game about a hockey puck that eats pellets – provides fiction for its characters, showing us how Ms. Pac-Man and Pac-Man fall in love.

Some video game stories are expressed through simple pantomimed animations. Some are told entirely through text. Others unfold like motion pictures with voice actors, orchestrated scores, and dramatic cinematography. We're even seeing games that invite players to create the narrative through the choices they make.

Although video games have been around for over 50 years, the medium is young when compared to other entertainment avenues. Writer Gary Whitta – who recently collaborated with Telltale Games for *The Walking Dead*'s first season, and is also credited for writing the film *The Book of Eli* – compares

the current state of video game storytelling to the era when silent movies turned into talkies.

"We are just now at *The Jazz Singer* in video games," he says. "We are starting to figure out that there are things we can do beyond the conventions of cinema and there are ways to tell stories that help the gameplay along and not just ape the experience of film or television."

Telltale's *Walking Dead* is the perfect example of a game that experiments with interactive storytelling. Although the threat of a zombie attack looms large, the game focuses on a group of survivors and the conflicts between them. A gun is rarely fired. Most of the player's time is spent conversing with the characters, getting to know them, learning who to trust and who to keep an eye

on. The undead threat serves as the backdrop for the human drama. Telltale sacrifices action sequences, effectively reimagining the adventure genre as an interactive drama. You don't need to be holding the controller to appreciate this emotional story.

To better understand how game writers practice their craft and break down the boundaries of this nascent entertainment form, we spoke with some of the most prominent writers in the industry. In doing so, we found that the ways in which game writers approach their job are as diverse as the games themselves. There's no one "right" way to craft a game story, and every studio finds its own methods for balancing the needs of story, technology, level design, and gameplay.



STORY INCEPTION

As a writer for *Borderlands 1* and *2*, the *Brothers in Arms* series, and the forthcoming *Aliens: Colonial Marines*, Gearbox's Mikey Neumann has used a variety of scriptwriting and creative processes. For him, the game dictates what approach is used. "It's not like someone comes in and is like, 'This is the game and here is the script,'" he says. "It is actually really drawn out and collaborative, but probably one of the most fun processes in the game industry and game production."

Game scripts change over the course of a development cycle, and numerous challenges arise for the development team. Budgets, time constraints, and unforeseen curveballs like a designer introducing a new gameplay concept or an artist adding a new defect to the character's features complicate the writing process – which can, in some cases, last for the majority of a lengthy development cycle.

"We have a motto at Gearbox that good ideas can come from anyone," Neumann says. "We stick to that." For some studios, a script fuels the gameplay. For others, it's the other way around.

Borderlands was born when game designer Matt Armstrong submitted an idea for a mix between *Diablo* and *Halo*. The wasteland

theme was established early in this project's life, but the general tone of the story didn't gel until several writers and designers plotted specific missions. "The first time that *Borderlands* crystallized in my head as to what kind of story it was came from Scooter's line, 'He messed up my mama's girly parts,'" Neumann remembers. "So many people were involved with the plot and what we were doing with the game; I sort of gave it context and humor and silliness."

Other writers, like Ubisoft's Corey May, lead writer of *Assassin's Creed I*, *II*, and *III*, advocate a process where story and design are integrated from the project's inception. For each of the *Assassin's Creed* games, May involved himself with the projects from "day zero," making sure he and the creative director worked together on high-level ideas for the stories.

"We come up with something that we pass back and forth," he says. "It can be anywhere from one to three pages and it's just a very general overview of what the story is going to be about, where we are going to go, what some of the major plot points are, and a lot of the big moments."

Once Ubisoft has the overall narrative arc and the characters outlined, they pitch the

treatment to the mission design team. "This is sort of the first coming together where we say, 'Here is where we want to take the story, and start thinking about the ideas that we have for gameplay and to see if there are ways that these things can come together,'" May says.

When the team agrees on direction, May begins his historical research for the story and the mission designers work on a game prototype while conducting design research. After that, the creative director oversees a "blueprint meeting" with the writers, game designers, and level designers in attendance. This high-level meeting walks through the game and breaks it into different arcs.

May compares the *Assassin's Creed* series' design to television shows, but where these shows have multiple episodes, *Assassin's Creed* has sequences. "Our games are always divided up into sequences, so we'll generally have the concept of arcs, but not necessarily acts, because I don't know if all games necessarily fit into an act one, act two, act three structure," he says. "We will sit there and we'll map out the sequences each with a discrete beginning, middle, and end – an end that concludes in such a way that it pulls you into the next sequence."



ON THE BEST DAYS, YOUR INSTINCT as a game designer and your instinct as a game writer should be one and the same, which is it should be audience-facing — what is best for the audience.
— KEN LEVINE



THE ART OF COLLABORATION

Balancing story and gameplay is one of the most difficult challenges for writers. Hideo Kojima obviously makes few concessions with the amount of storytelling in the Metal Gear games, but some development studios don't want to leave the player hanging for too long without any interaction with the game. A fair number of games blend storytelling seamlessly with gameplay.

Half-Life 2 allows Gordon Freeman to move around the environment as characters converse with him and the plot is introduced. BioShock delivers backstory through recording devices that play messages as the player explores and engages in combat.

Although The Walking Dead finds success in its slower moments, Whitta recognizes the importance of player interaction. "When I am enjoying my writing, I have to stop myself because I realize I haven't actually given the player anything to do for the last five minutes," he says. "Sometimes [writers] have to go back and realize that they are kind of serving multiple masters at once. They are serving a narrative master who wants to tell a good story, but they are also serving a gameplay master. The game is a storytelling experience, it's a gameplay experience, and it's interactive in some forms and linear in others. The storyline pacing and gameplay pacing have to exist in harmony."

Irrational Games' Ken Levine wears two hats as the creative director and head writer for BioShock Infinite — a hybrid role many writers envy as it reduces the disconnect between the narrative and design pathways. "On the best days, your instinct as a game designer and your instinct as a game writer should be one and the same, which is it should be audience-facing — what is best for the audience," Levine says. "That's the whole philosophy of Irrational — the philosophy of not taking control away from the player and showing them 10-minute cutscenes. You're giving the story to them without asking them to be non-interactive. Trust me, there are times when you write a scene and you're really happy with it and you put it up and it's like three minutes long and you're like, 'there is no way this is going to work.'"

Striking that perfect balance often comes late in a game's development cycle. Naughty Dog's Amy Hennig, a veteran scribe who has worked on the Uncharted and Legacy of Kain series, says the story has to be the most flexible part of game creation.

"You have to try to make some best-guess assumptions about your story and kind of figure out what the arc of it is, and then pin some things to the wall and say, 'Well we're going to do this,' and then that sets people off with tasks," Hennig says. "Maybe you don't know exactly where you're headed with that idea, but then you, as the writer, again having to be the most flexible discipline on the team, say, 'Well, I'm committing to this and this is a part of our story and our game flow.'"

For Uncharted 2, Naughty Dog wanted to do something radically different from a tropical jungle. The team settled on a snowy setting early in development. "We didn't know where in the snow we were going, or why, or what sort of myth or historical mystery we could tie around that, but we put that pin on the board and said, 'Okay we're committing to snow,'" Hennig remembers. "Then my job is to then go

and start doing a whole bunch of research and say, 'Well, now I've got to find some historical mystery or some little hook from real history that sets us off and running.'"

Naughty Dog also wanted to recreate the big moments seen in adventure cinema. The Uncharted series is often recognized for these sequences, such as the train in Uncharted 2 or the capsizing ship in Uncharted 3. The storytelling blends seamlessly with these big events, sometimes fooling the player into thinking they should still be watching the action, but actually have to control it.

"From a creative standpoint, especially for an action-adventure cinema narrative, a lot of times you do start from this idea of, 'What are our big set pieces, what are some of the things that we really want to hang our hat on?'" Hennig says. "It's not unusual as a writer to say, 'This would be awesome, right?' Actually if you go back and look at the *Raiders of the Lost Ark* story transcripts you'll see Lucas and Spielberg doing the same thing. For us, the ante is upped one more time because not only do we go through that process of saying, 'Wouldn't it be cool if?' But then also, because we have the team all sitting there ready to work, have to say, 'Yeah it would be cool and let's commit to it, because these things are also going to be the hardest things we do.'" Uncharted 2's train level was the first one the team worked on and the last one they finished. The narrative had to adapt to the ebb and flow of that lengthy development process.

Writers also have to think about how small details could have a huge effect on the game creation process. If a character puts on a jacket and lights a cigarette, that small moment could become a huge time commitment for animators and artists. Neumann says that dialogue with the art team is an important part of the writing process. "Sometimes I'll write something that in my head seems very simple, but then I talk to an artist about the art and animation and find out that it is incredibly difficult. Ultimately we only have so much time, so much budget, and we're going to spend all our time and effort on the places that deserve it the most."

May says there is a lot of back and forth between the writers and other teams. "It may not be readily apparent where you can put X type of gameplay into the main path, so we'll sit and brainstorm a little bit and find a way to make sense of it. It's a super collaborative process and it usually takes a couple of weeks to go through the entire thing, move missions around, move plot points around, and go back and forth, bargaining and compromising. I am really lucky in the sense that I've been working with most of these guys for a really, really long time now, so we know each other pretty well, we have a shorthand. It sounds like it should be chaotic, but it's not. It actually works out really well and it's really fun."

A game writer's role usually diminishes toward the tail end of a project, but their work isn't necessarily done. Focus shifts to enhancing communication and readability to the player. "At this point, we should be done with the big, emotional narrative stuff," May says. "It's more logistical housekeeping, polishing, small things like that. We need to make it very clear what the mission objective is, or, a mission objective has changed slightly and the dialogue refers to the old one, so this is what we have to change."

THE COMPLICATIONS OF BRANCHING NARRATIVE

When a game gives the player the choice of determining who joins them on missions, who their love interest will be, and who will live and die, the writer needs to keep track of all of the different threads that stem from these decisions. The *Mass Effect* series expands its narrative web by allowing players to select whether they are male or female. Entirely different interactions and stories are tied to both choices.

"With *The Walking Dead*, I'll finish a scene and then go back and write it seven other times, taking into account every possible

permutation of the scene that can happen," Whitta says. "I remember when [Telltale] handed me the script for episode one of *The Walking Dead*. It was like 600 pages. I nearly had a heart attack because there was so much stuff!"

Maintaining consistent tones through a conversation thread can be problematic, especially if emotion is expressed by the player character or the NPC. In games like *Skyrim*, the narrative flow can be jarring when an NPC who is angered by one question the player character asks suddenly reverts back to a calm state to field the next question.

Whitta says that this type of writing isn't easy. "I wrote a scene in *Walking Dead*'s fourth episode that had so many different permutations and could play out so many different ways that I had to go lay down for five minutes in a dark room because it gave me a migraine just figuring out how it would all work," he remembers. "You have to read every different version of it and make sure that when the player plays through their version of that reality that the characters all make sense and that the character doesn't then say something that contradicts something they said right before."



BLENDING INTO A BIGGER UNIVERSE

It isn't just in-game scripts that writers have to keep straight. Licensed products pose just as much challenge. The game's lore needs to sync up with the motion picture, comic book, or novel. The tone has to match, and parameters are often in place to prevent writers from exploring specific ideas.

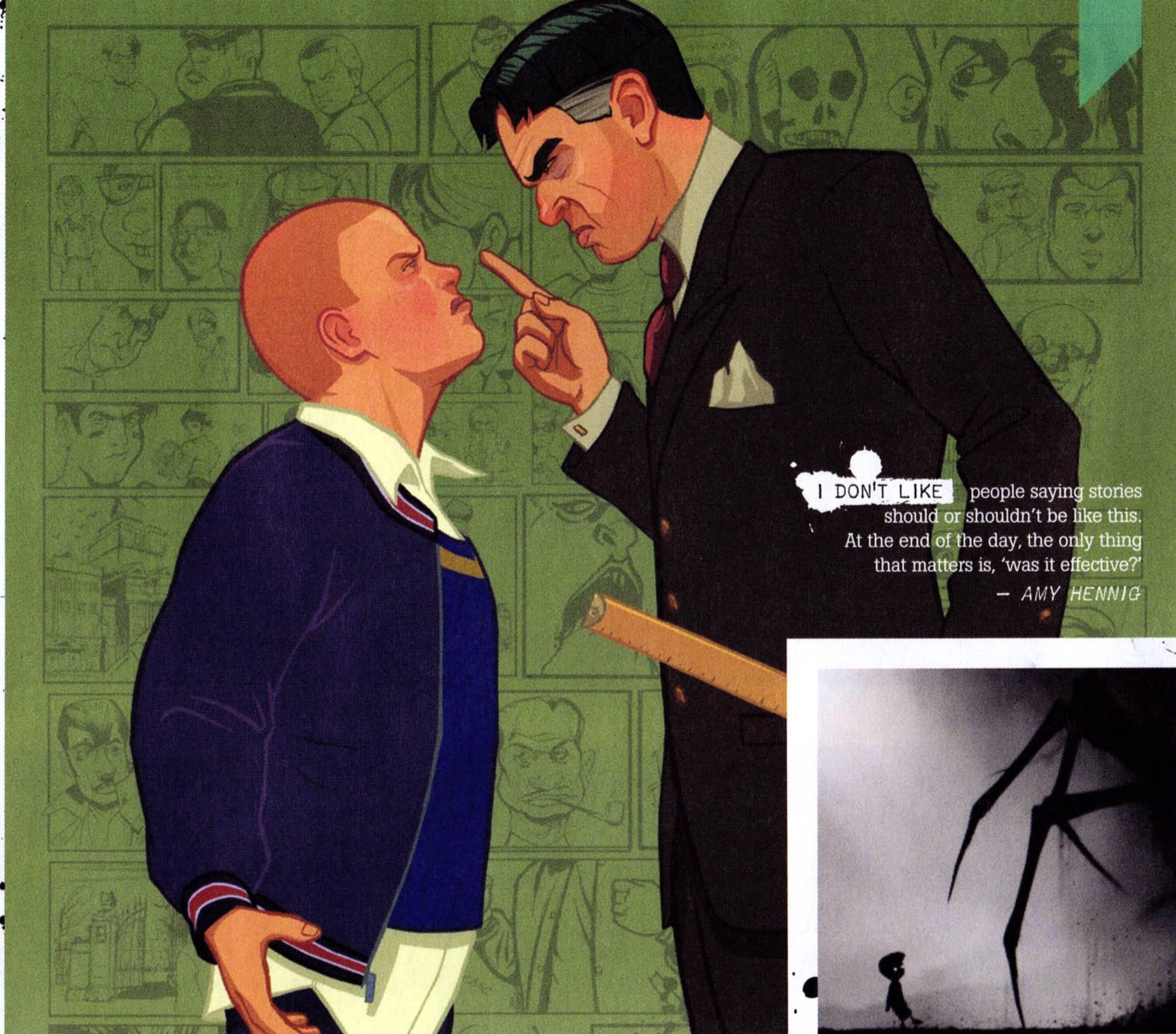
When High Moon Studios approached Hasbro with ideas for its *Fall of Cybertron* game, it learned that Hasbro wanted to reboot all of *Transformers*' fiction. Nearly 28 years of lore was about to change. Rather than keeping High Moon at bay, Hasbro saw video games as a delivery system for this new initiative.

With the assistance of Hasbro, High Moon was given the freedom to create a new beginning for this universe.

For *Aliens: Colonial Marines*, a game 20th Century Fox decided to be a canonical sequel to the *Aliens* films, Neumann says scriptwriting was a different process from day one because they had to factor in where characters were in the universe, and what characters could or couldn't be used.

"It is the game I've worked on where the story matters the most by a staggering margin," he says. "We had to have such a well hammered out plan in place before we started writing."

Some companies seek consistency by having the same writer from a comic book, movie, or television show work on the game script. *South Park* creators Trey Parker and Matt Stone are the head writers for Obsidian's upcoming RPG, *South Park: The Stick of Truth*. The benefit of this approach is that the writing should be indistinguishable between the game and the television show. But given Parker and Stone's hectic schedules when the show is in season, their time for working on the game is limited so the development team may not have the flexibility to alter the narrative in service to the gameplay as frequently as studios with full-time writers on staff do.



I DON'T LIKE people saying stories should or shouldn't be like this. At the end of the day, the only thing that matters is, 'was it effective?'
— AMY HENNIG



STILL AN EVOLVING ART

While all of the writers we talked to take different approaches to their craft, when we asked them how game writing could improve, their responses were remarkably similar – all pointing to being given the freedom to experiment and for teams to find their own right way to do things.

“In general, we’re getting better at it. I think we’re getting better talent in the industry and I think we’re individually getting better at what we do, we’re becoming better writers,” Hennig says. “The thing I try to avoid is this idea that there is one goal, one mountaintop that we’re all trying to shoot for and I hate the idea of there being some homogenous answer to this. I don’t like dogma. I don’t like people saying stories should or shouldn’t be like this. At the end of the day, the only thing that matters is, ‘was it effective?’”

May is wary of publishers trying to implement a structured system across all of its titles. “I am very against the idea that there is a magic formula or a single right way to do it,” he says. “If that were true, there would be a developer or a publisher out there that was worth tens of billions of dollars because they were knocking it out of the park every single time. My hope is that what you discover is that everyone does it differently and yet all of these different methods and approaches

can still lead to interesting narrative and successful games.”

Experimentation has led to unique experiences, like *Journey* telling a story without any words or dialogue and *Heavy Rain* imitating the everyday occurrences of life to strengthen the bond between the player character and his family. Writers like Jonathan Blow are turning game storytelling into an art with world reflections hidden in a tale that initially comes across as a playful spin on Mario chasing a princess. From *Bully* to *Grand Theft Auto*, Rockstar Games’ Dan Houser invites players to enter worlds brimming with intelligently written characters, savvy political parody, and hilarious pop culture callouts.

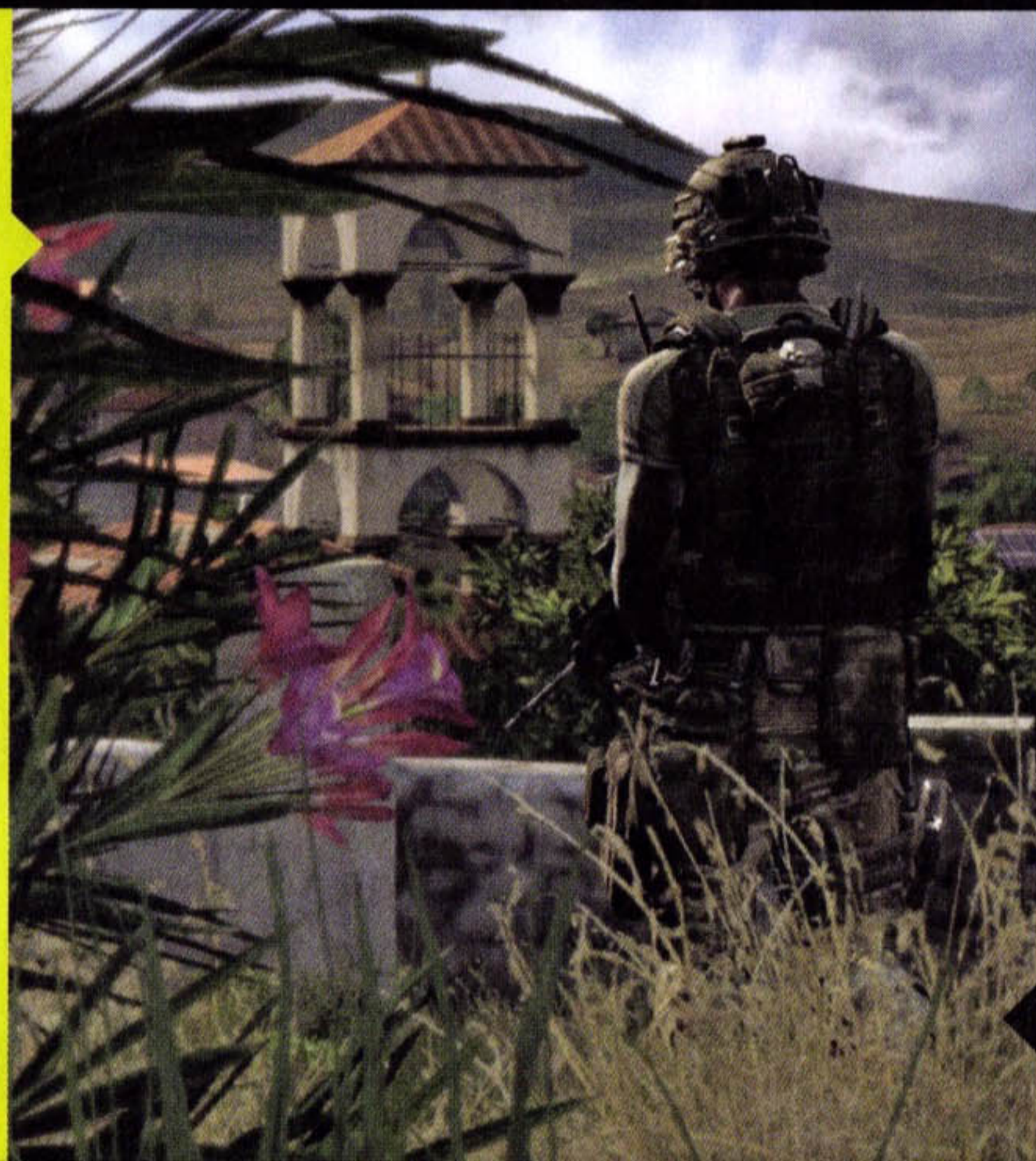
“I think you see every now and then a game like *Limbo* that expresses a story without feeling the need to hold you by the hand,” Levine says. “I think we’re still learning to trust gamers with our story rather than sitting them down on our knees and ‘All right gamer, this is what’s happening now.’ That’s a very positive thing. I still think anyone can sit back and write a 2,000 page document that explains everything about your universe...but it’s not important. The only thing that is important is what is on the retinas and the eardrums of the gamer and how it hits those things, because that is how they respond to it emotionally.

Like the spider scene in *Limbo*. You could write that on paper, but who cares? It’s not an interesting scene on paper. It’s how it’s presented visually. How little that game explains is a strength of that game. You can imprint so much upon it. It kind of looks like a Rorschach and it kind of is a Rorschach. Emotionally, it’s a very primal quest. It’s a very simple quest, and then it becomes about the experience of each room. It tells a very effective story.”

Other franchises have stuck to their guns for decades. The *Legend of Zelda* series shuns the modern-day enhancements of voiceovers, making Link an eternally silent protagonist, and *Final Fantasy* wouldn’t be *Final Fantasy* if the antagonist didn’t transform into some kind of multi-storied beast.

There was a time when a game’s story could only be found on the pages of a manual tucked inside of its box. We also lived through an era when developers and publishers wouldn’t fix translation errors from games ported from Japan. Today, a story is just as important as gameplay. The writer plays just as vital a role in a game’s creation as a programmer or designer. Video games have enjoyed a creative renaissance since their inception, and if a writer like Whitta truly believes game writing is turning a new leaf like film did in the ‘20s, we have much to look forward to. ♦

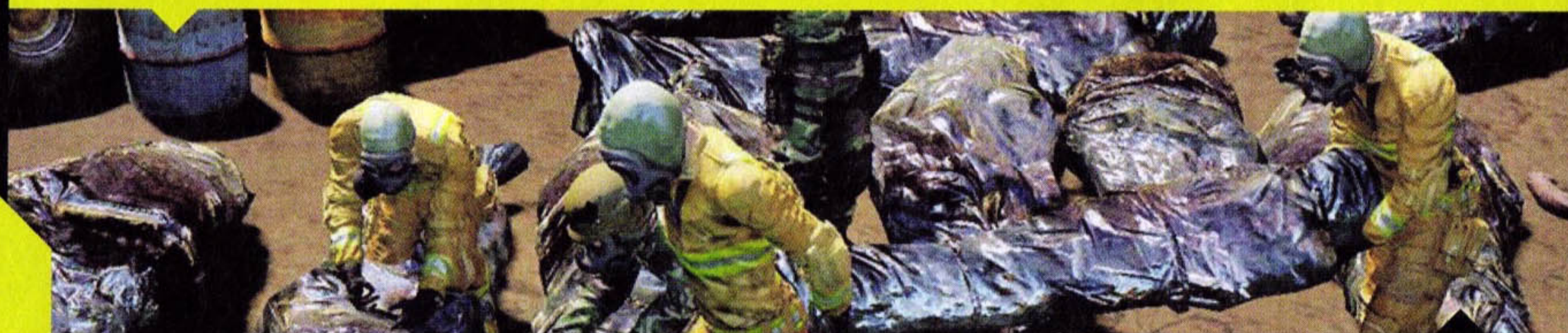
The Good



IMPRISONED DEVELOPERS

Ivan Buchta and Martin Pezlar from Arma studio Bohemia Interactive have been freed on bail after spending 128 days in a Greek jail on suspicion of spying on a military complex on the island of Lemnos. Bohemia Interactive says they were simply on vacation as tourists. Buchta and Pezlar get to go home to the Czech Republic, but their trouble with the Greek authorities is far from over. In other Arma news, Arma III has been delayed until an unspecified date later this year.

The Bad



WAR Z DEVELOPER

Hammerpoint Interactive ignited controversy when it was charged with fraud because players felt its description on Steam was not accurate. This includes talking about the game as an open world that features large groups of zombies, the existence of a skill system, servers that accommodate 100 players, and other aspects of the game that aren't currently included. War Z was taken off Steam temporarily for these factors, as well as user complaints of forum abuse from Hammerpoint. Executive producer Sergey Titov apologized to fans and accepted responsibility for his role in the mess.

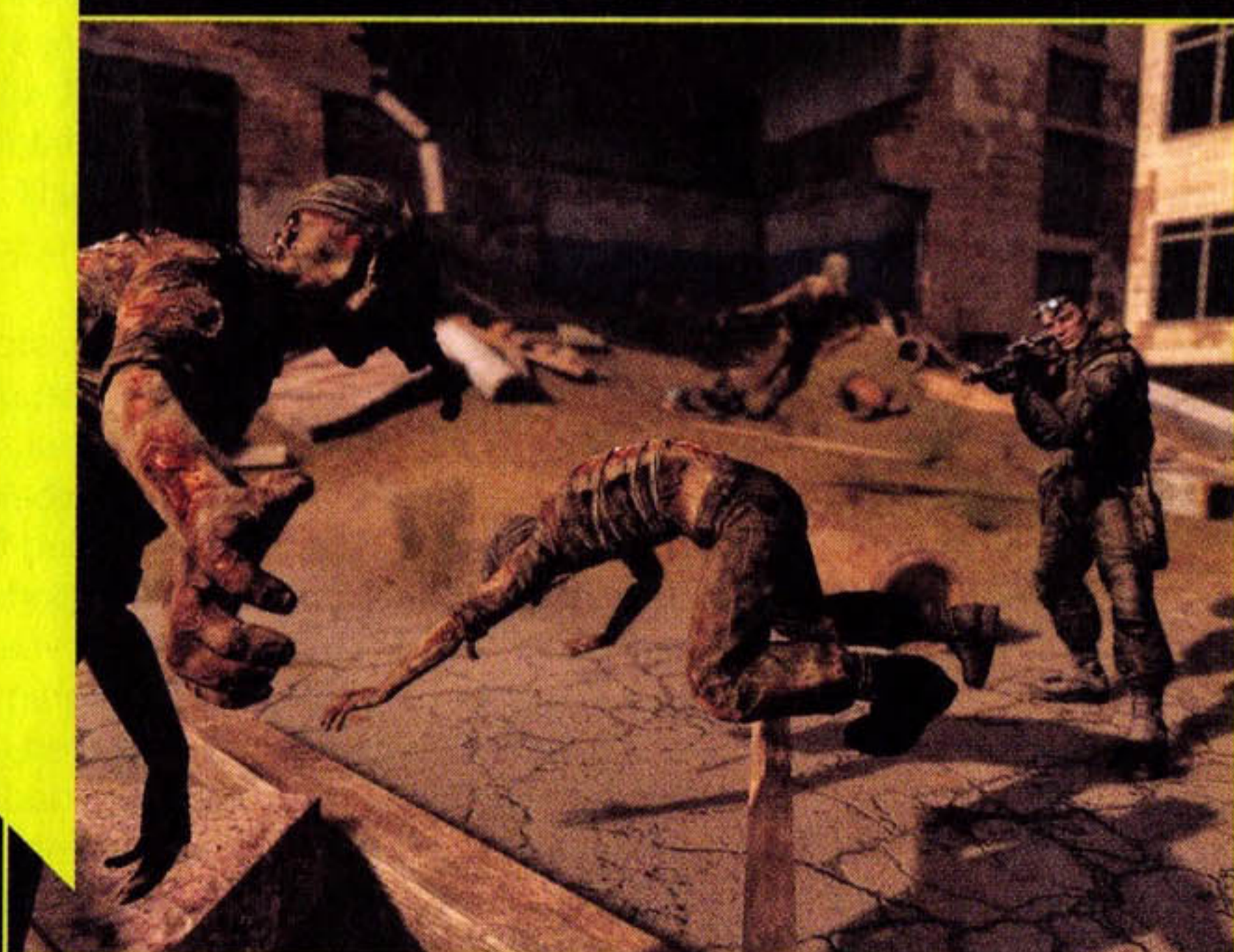
Quotable

"We know there's no single answer and, quite frankly, we don't even know whether some of the things people think impact on this actually impact on it or not."



— Vice President **Joe Biden** meets with video game executives and researchers while canvassing opinion with his gun violence task force

The Ugly



THE RIGHTS OF

the S.T.A.L.K.E.R. franchise are in dispute. BitComposer Entertainment, U.S. publisher of Call of Pripjat (shown), released a statement that it had acquired the rights to the franchise, but this was quickly refuted by series developer GSC Game World, which claimed to still have the rights. As of the time of this writing, the matter has not been clarified. ❖



01

Plants vs. Zombies

(360, PS3, PC, Vita, iOS, Android)

PopCap's adorable presentation is a delightful wrapper around the arguably broadest set of challenges in the genre. The variety lets players get endlessly creative in keeping zombies off their lawns, which is the toughest achievement for any TD designer.



02

Desktop Tower Defense (Flash)

Now in its third major incarnation, Desktop TD has the best "mazing" – where players determine the creeps' path by blocking them with towers – in the business.



03

Orcs Must Die 2 (PC)

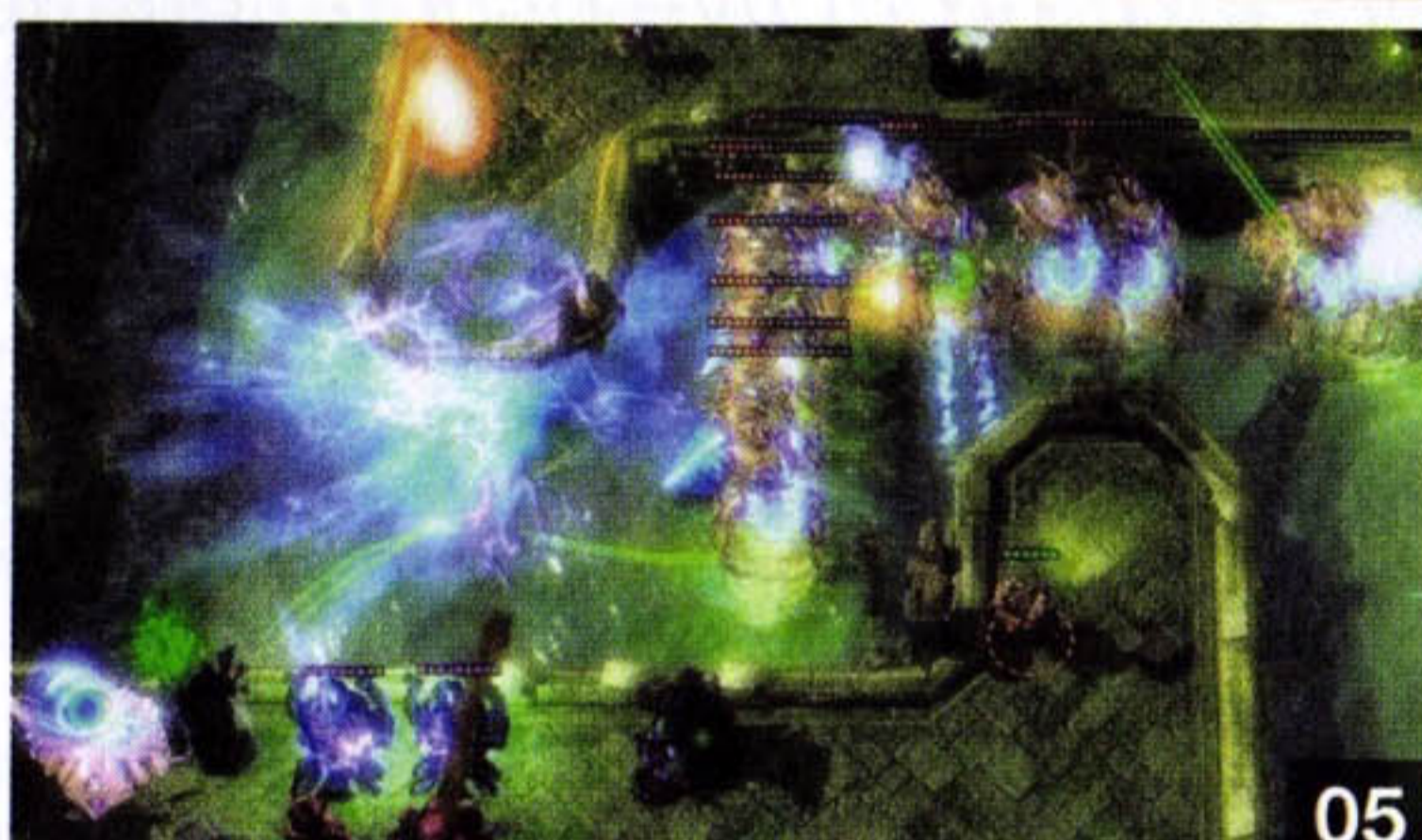
The explosive third-person action, broad customization, and exceptional co-op play elevate this to its status as the best hybrid TD to date.



04

Kingdom Rush (Flash, iOS)

The brutal challenge in Kingdom Rush's later levels is only possible thanks to the brilliant innovation of warriors clogging up the enemies' path.



05

Element TD (PC, Flash)

This Warcraft 3 mod still has active development on its StarCraft II incarnation and inspired the original Flash implementation of the genre, both thanks to the huge popularity that stems from its deep gameplay.



06

Defense Grid: The Awakening (360, PC, Mac)

The first high-definition game built from the ground up as a dedicated tower defense title, Defense Grid's graphics, gameplay, and story still hold up.



07

Fieldrunners 2 (iOS)

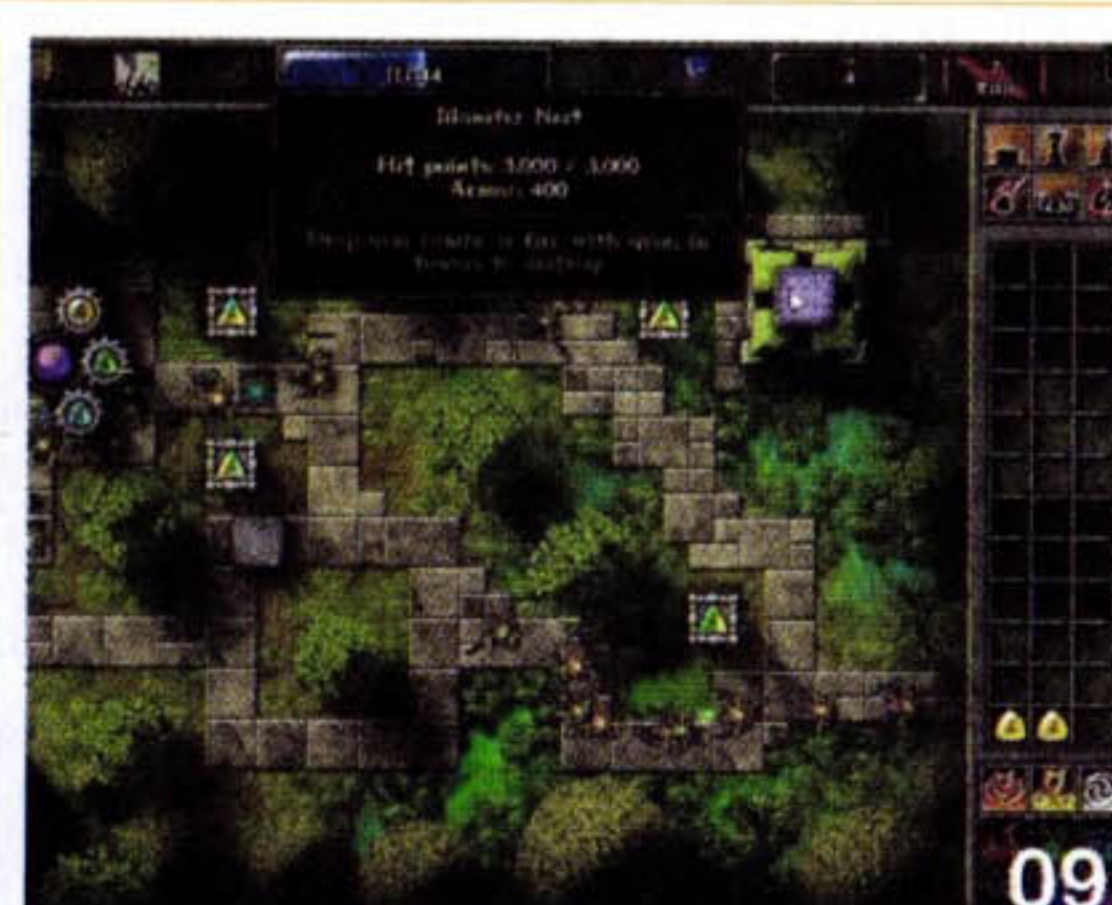
This follow-up to the first majorly successful mobile TD leveraged that success into something truly special.



08

Toy Soldiers (360, PC)

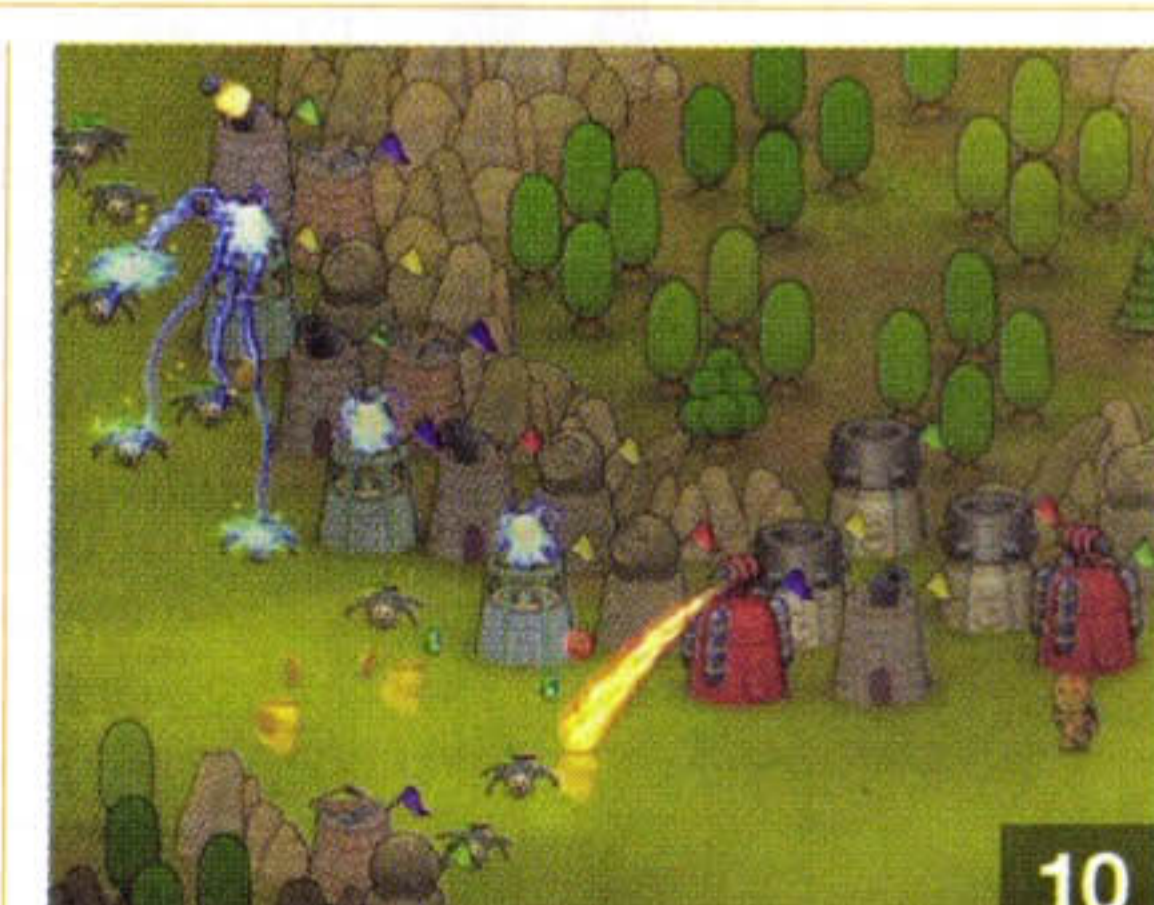
This hybrid action/TD game offers a great spectacle to go along with its wide variety of tactical options and outstanding aesthetic.



09

GemCraft (PC, Mac, Flash, iOS)

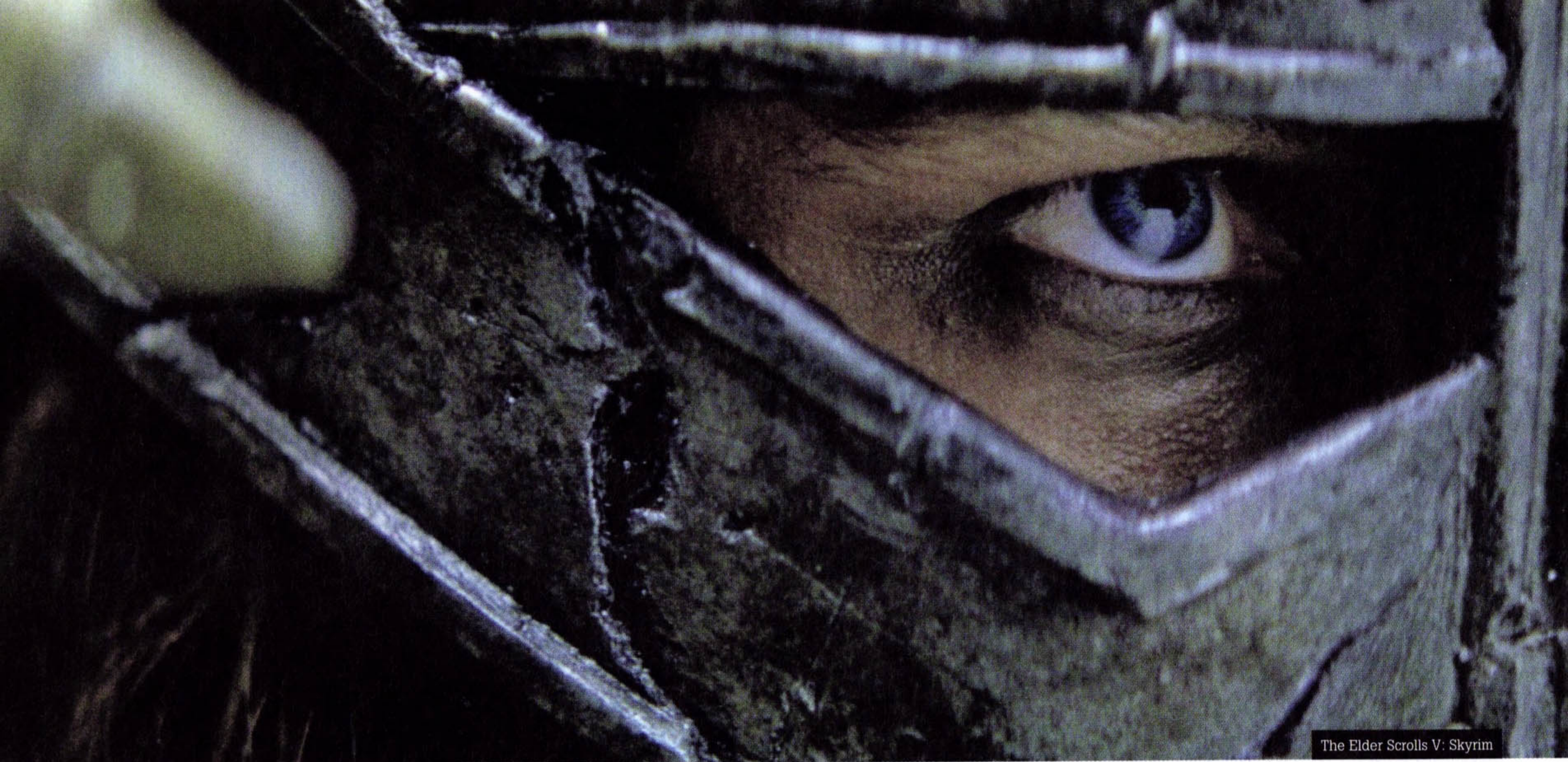
Massive amounts of customization, broad selections of powers that interact with each other, and hundreds of levels to experiment on make it easy to see why this has millions upon millions of plays online.



10

PixelJunk Monsters (PS3)

The unique gameplay in this artistic Sony exclusive offers something a bit off the beaten path, which is just what the genre needs on console.



The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim

Bright Lights, Dim Pixels

Why are publishers turning to live action commercials to advertise video games?

by Kyle Hilliard

Over the past few years, publishers have changed the way they advertise video games on television. Where we used to see high-quality animated CGI, gameplay footage, or children rapping about the enemies of the Zelda universe, video game publishers today are creating elaborate live-action short films that look more like movie trailers than video games.

Game franchises like *Borderlands*, *The Elder Scrolls*, *Darksiders*, *Halo*, and *Call of Duty* have all opted to advertise their latest iterations with the use of live-action commercial TV spots. So much time and effort is spent on crafting memorable, visually stunning in-game moments in these titles, it's curious that publishers don't leverage them in their advertisements. Instead, the product is hidden behind a Hollywood-style 30-second advertising spot. According to the publishers we spoke to, they choose this approach for a very specific reason.

If you're reading this magazine, you are not the target market for these advertisements. You know what games are coming in the near future, and in all likelihood you have already made your purchasing decisions based on sources outside of direct television advertising. Ultimately, companies choose live-action commercials because they are trying to reach a wider, more mainstream audience that doesn't necessarily keep up with video games, but may be persuaded to take part if something

looks interesting enough.

"All the gamers will get their information through trailers and the web," says Matt McCloskey, the director of business management for *Halo* at 343 Industries. McCloskey worked extensively on the *Halo 4* live-action web series, *Forward Unto Dawn*, as well as the live-action television commercials that were used to promote Master Chief's latest adventure. "You don't need a TV commercial to reach people who would be swayed by gameplay and trailers. They will find it all on the web. If you're going to go to TV, you're trying to broadcast out to people who otherwise wouldn't watch the trailers for the game."

Live-action commercials are also popular because they offer an emotional connection

that marketers don't believe can be achieved with gameplay footage or animated characters. Video games sometimes take hours to slowly develop a bond between the player and the character. The nature of the medium allows for such an elongated process. Live-action film, on the other hand, allows viewers to invest in characters at a much faster pace. For this reason, filmmakers are better suited to create media where viewers can quickly connect to a character.

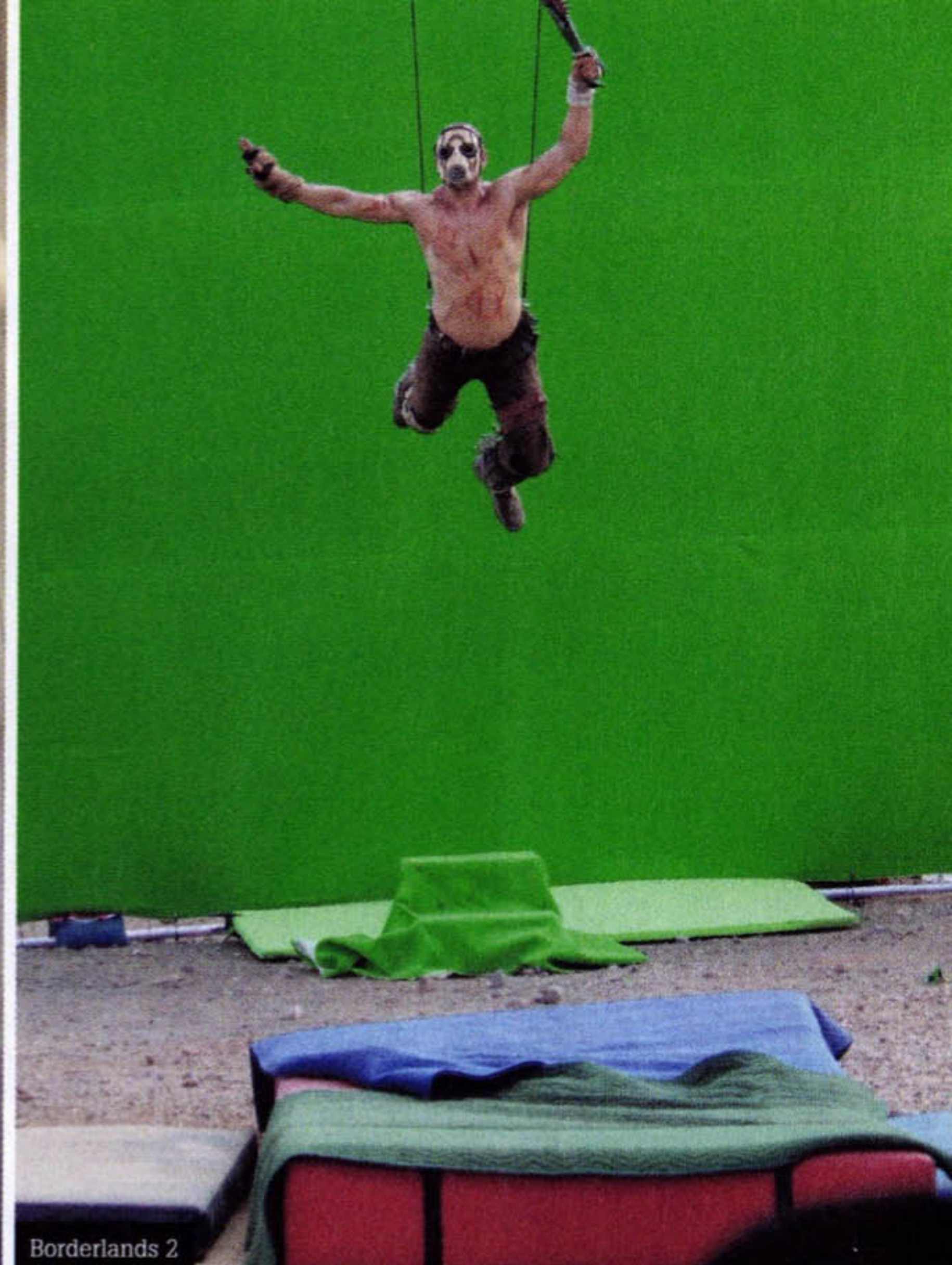
"Games do something great, right? They offer an interactive opportunity to be proactive with characters and storylines where you get to actively make choices," says Josh Feldman, the executive producer for *Forward Unto Dawn*. "When you experience a great movie or



Fallout 3



Darksiders 2



Borderlands 2

a great television show, you have a more passive experience. I think game companies look to live-action incarnations to capture a bit of what film and TV does so well, and that is allow for an emotional resonance with a character."

Frank O'Connor has been with the Halo series since its inception, and has seen the advantage of using live-action footage to promote a game ever since Halo 3's impressive marketing run. That campaign featured live-action sequences and a montage of a large diorama featuring a Halo battle created entirely with figurines frozen in battle. "If it's a cartoon, if it's a videogame, if it's any kind of art that doesn't normally exist as a photographic or real-life medium, there's something really attractive about seeing it in the real world," O'Connor says. "We have to get people's attention and one way to do it is with real people and real stuff."

As alluring as this approach is, risks are always present when creating a live-action translation of a video game. Done incorrectly, you could end up with a cringe-worthy short. That was a fear for Pete Hines, vice president of marketing at Bethesda, when the idea came

along to make Skyrim's television advertising campaign live-action. "I think when it works, it works. And when it doesn't, you see it right away and it makes you wince," Hines says.

Bethesda started entertaining the idea of shooting live-action promotional material with Fallout 3. You can see its inception in the beginning of Fallout 3's E3 2008 trailer, but it wasn't until Skyrim that Bethesda decided to

“ We have to get people’s attention and one way to do it is with real people and real stuff. ”

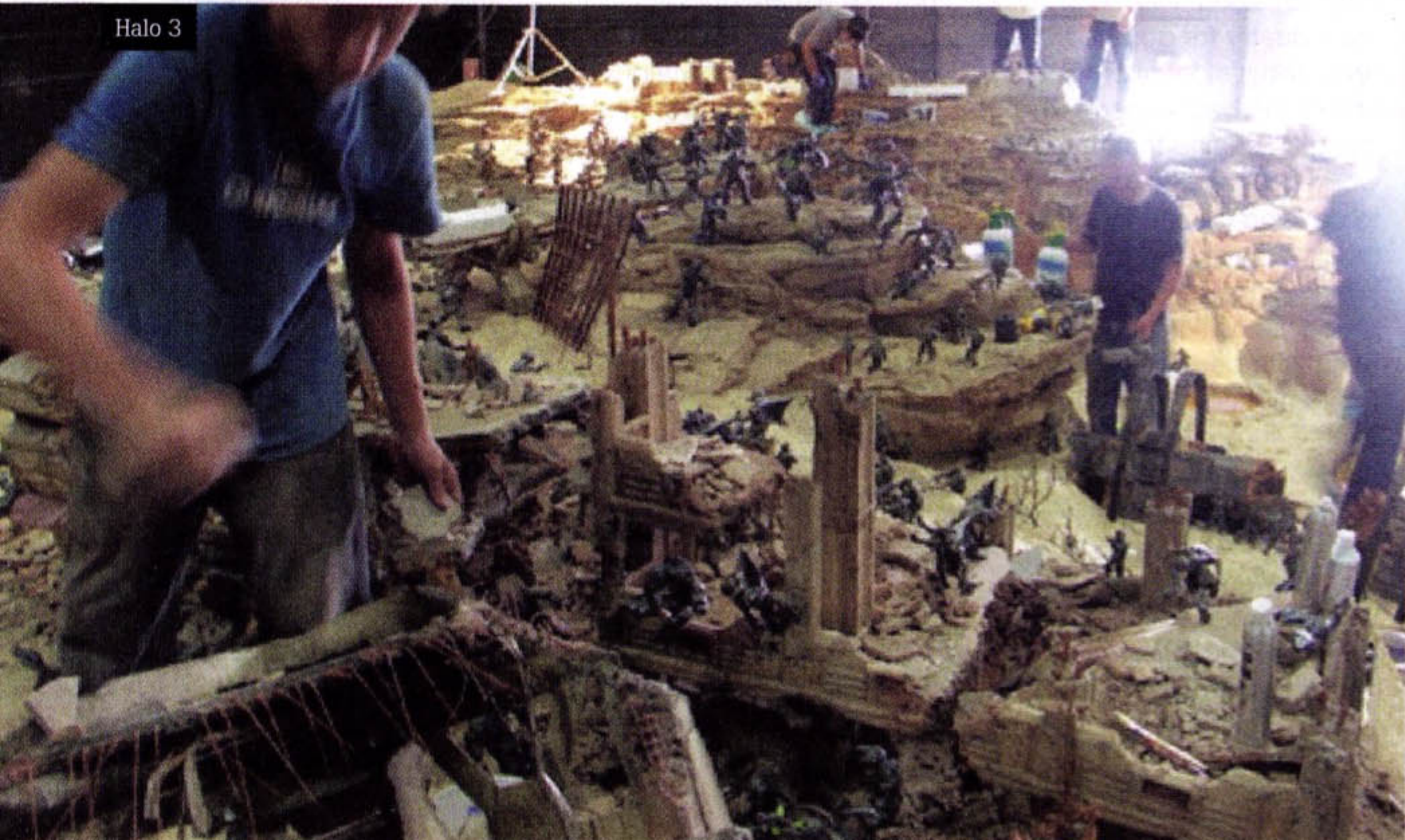
— O'Connor

truly go for it. "I'm a believer in 'less is more' when it comes to live-action," Hines says. "Just something that showed people freaking out and running one way, and one guy, unafraid, walking right towards the trouble. That's the guy I want to be in a game." Selling the idea of the game rather than the content was the goal for Skyrim's commercial.

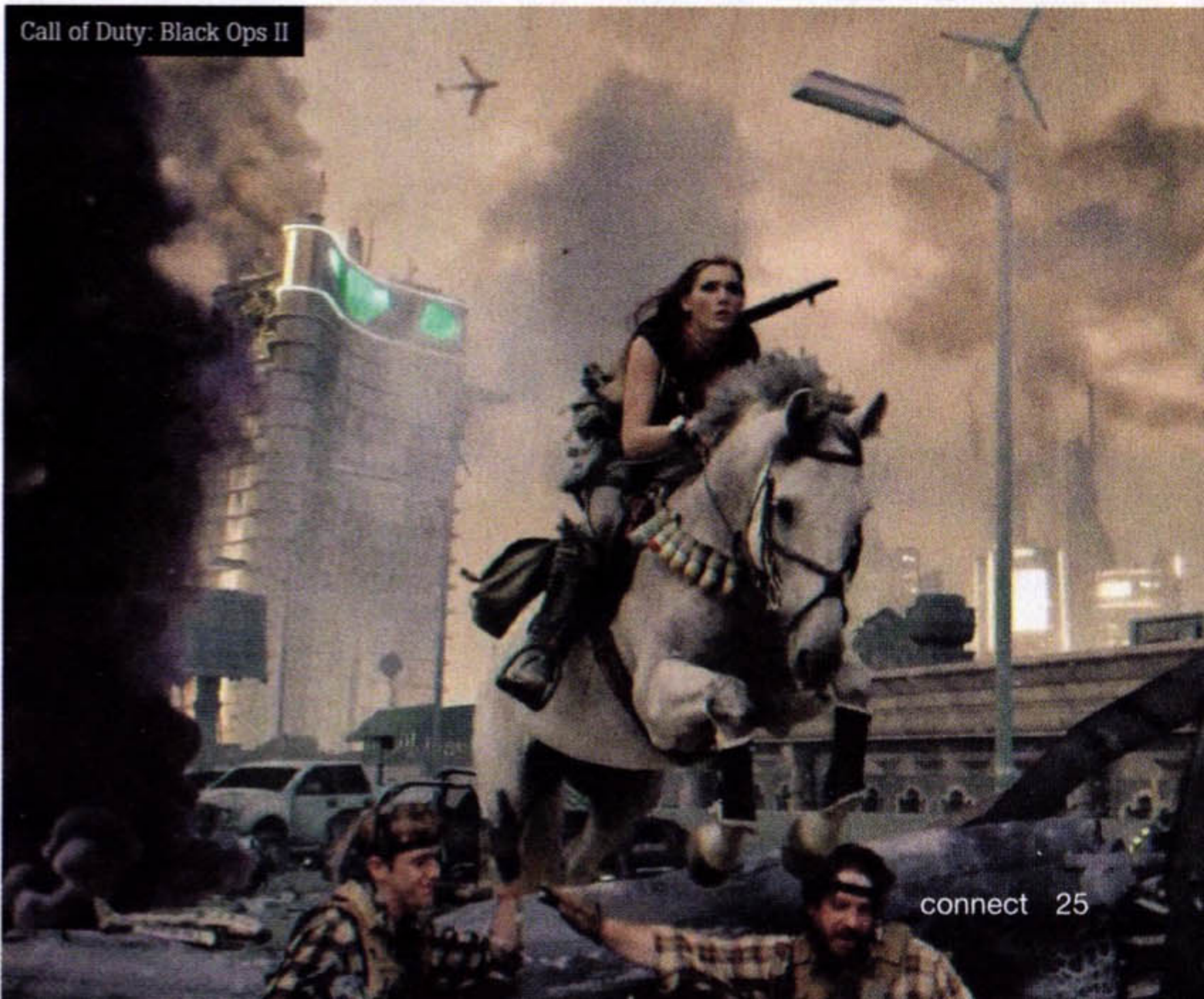
Publishers also run a risk of misleading viewers if the commercial doesn't accurately

portray what a game has to offer. Halo 3's impressive diorama commercials showed Master Chief in the middle of a war with hundreds of soldiers and Covenant embroiled in combat. Ultimately, the game featured familiar Halo battles with small but imposing groups of enemies. Halo fans knew what to expect, but for someone who started with Halo 3, that commercial did not represent Halo accurately. The misrepresentation didn't keep the popular game from selling, but not every game may be this fortunate.

Despite those concerns, the positive results of marketing campaigns for games like Halo, The Elder Scrolls, and Call of Duty have encouraged more publishers to ditch CGI for live action. "I don't know if this is now going to be the new thing in the industry or not," Hines says. "From our perspective, we continue to look for what's the best fit for what we're trying to say, and how we're trying to say it. And, of course, it's important to note that for gamers — it's always about the game." ♦



Halo 3



Call of Duty: Black Ops II



Introducing Obsidian's PROJECT ETERNITY

by Adam Biessener

The code-named Project Eternity is the highest-funded video game to date on Kickstarter, so the team members at Obsidian aren't the only gamers out there yearning for the golden age of isometric Western role-playing games. Executive producer and lead programmer **Adam Brennecke** talks about the independent studio's crowd-funded attempt to revisit the glory days of **Icwind Dale**, **Planescape: Torment**, and **Baldur's Gate**, due out on PC in April of 2014.

Can you tell me what makes your world different than a typical high-fantasy setting?

It is a high-fantasy world, so it's not completely different than high fantasy, but we wanted to strike a good balance between introducing some new concepts. One of the new concepts is how people get magic or the way magic works in the world. We had this idea of soul power. Your soul after you die is kind of spread out to magic soul users. Your powers can get reincarnated into new people. That's where your magic energy comes from. The heroes of the stories are people that have strong soul energy. They are strong souls. Maybe they reincarnated from a hero from the past or something like that.

Is working with your own tech going to make it easier to ship a more technically solid game?

We are using Unity 3, which is kind of nice. We're not building the engine from the ground up. Unity so far has been amazing. I've been in the industry for quite a while now, and it's definitely been one of the best experiences using an engine that I've worked with. It's allowing us to develop gameplay very quickly. It's stable. It's solid. We haven't run into any big problems with it yet. Another thing with developing a solid foundation, our team is fairly simple compared to modern games. With our pre-rendered backgrounds, it's something we have a lot of experience doing. We're also trying to focus on making the game bug-free. That's my job. That's something we tried to

work really hard on with *Dungeon Siege III*; ship a bug-free game. I think that game on the tech side was fairly solid.

Is the framework that you are using to build Project Eternity something that can be adapted to other projects in the future?

Oh yeah. That's our goal. We have a couple of programmers on the team right now, and we really want to build a good framework for not just Project Eternity, but what the next project is. We have to make sure that the stuff is flexible enough to be able to be used in another project. The goal is to hopefully have the first game be really successful so we can continue on and make the sequel or another game like Project Eternity but in a different world.

The "mature theme" is one of the big things from the Kickstarter pitch.

What do you mean by mature themes?

I've been asked that a lot. It's not like we are going out of our way to put boobs in our game or super-gory violence. We want to treat the player like an adult. It's like other things you've seen from Obsidian games. *Alpha Protocol* is a good example. *Fallout: New Vegas* is a good example. Even our past games from Black Isle like *Planescape: Torment*. Adults are playing our games. Let's not dumb it down. We can introduce some themes and stuff that other games don't really have.

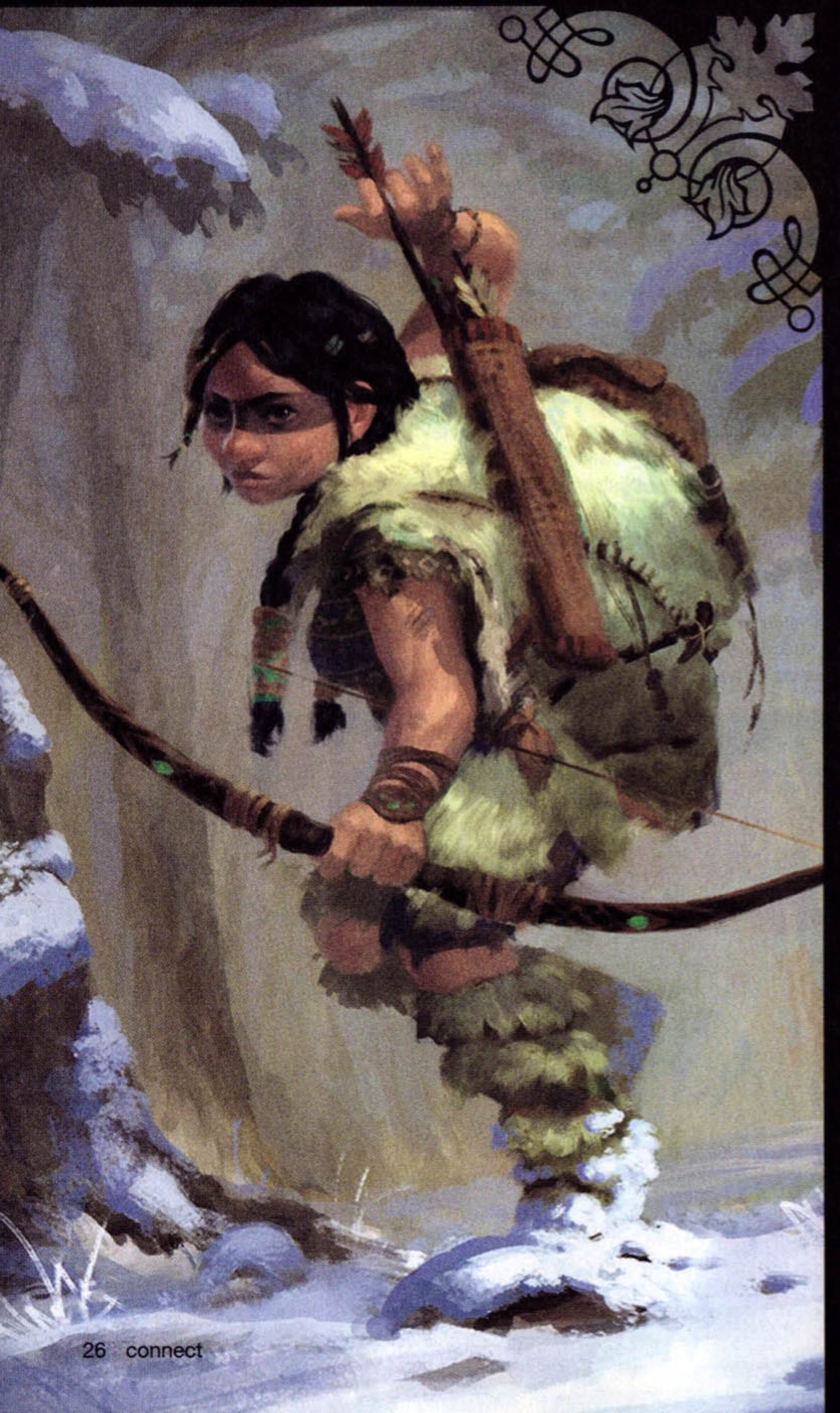
Like what?

I'm thinking about the story right now and I don't want to

spoil anything. I would say that you can touch upon a lot of things like drug abuse, alcoholism, characters with those problems. The way Obsidian deals with these issues, they are not over-the-top, they are very rooted in the real world. I guess real-world issues. We're also looking at racism and more hardcore things like slavery and genocide. Stuff like that that games don't really touch upon. I think we're going to do it tastefully and really make you think about what these things mean. How do you deal with these characters that have these problems?

With your producer hat on, do you worry at all about the dangers of promising a huge mega-dungeon through stretch goals?

It always worries me. Yeah. I'm worried about it, but that's understandable because that's a lot of stuff and we don't have a lot of budget. That's our job. We have to get it done. In any project, we just have to make sure that we scope it properly and we don't introduce a lot of feature creep in the project and we stay true to our vision and we just execute once we get into production. I don't really see a big problem with it. It's going to be a lot of work, but I think we can hopefully get everything done. If we don't hit our date, we're not pressured with a publisher to release it exactly on that date. That's something we will look at and evaluate as time goes on. Right now, we're making great progress and I'm not worried about that part of it. ♦



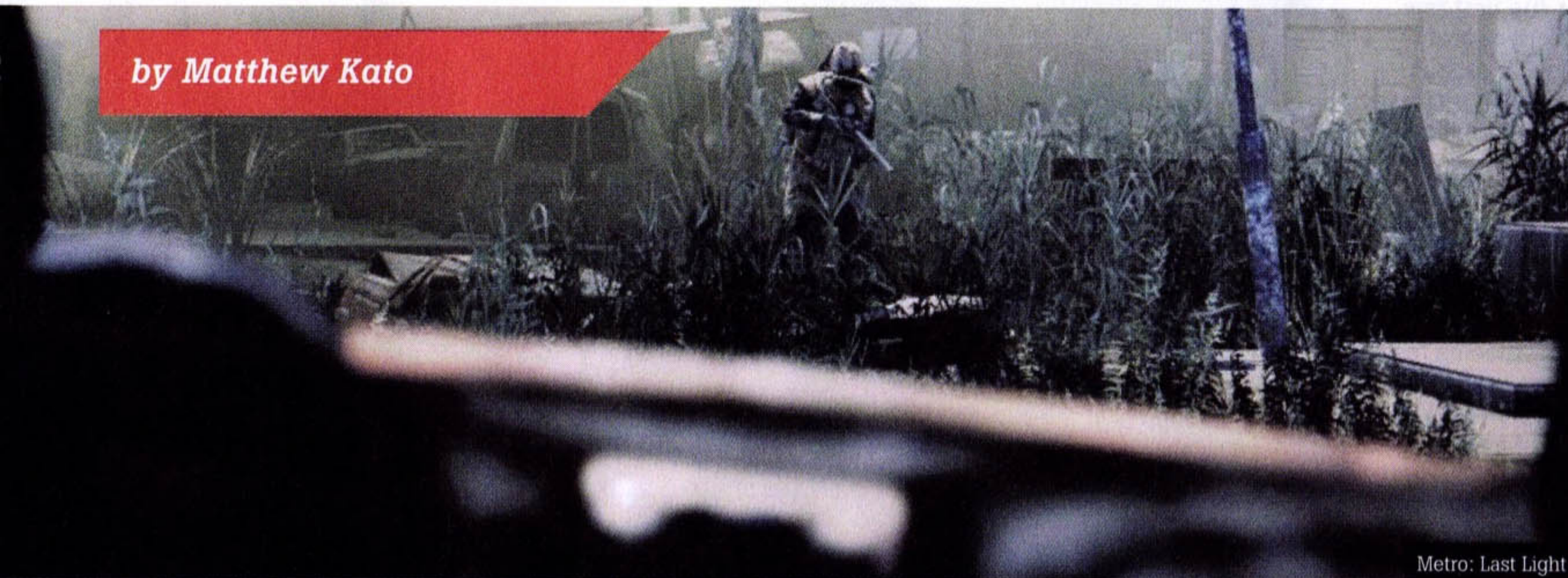
THQ

Closes Shop

Studios & Properties Sold Off



by Matthew Kato



In the end, THQ could not be saved. Despite a roster filled with current franchises such as WWE, Darksiders, and Saints Row, and promising future projects from Assassin's Creed creator Patrice Désilets and Turtle Rock Studios, the company closed its doors after 23 years in the business. The company, whose name derived from the initials of Toy Headquarters, was forced to sell off its properties and admit defeat after several attempts to resuscitate the business.

Late last year, THQ filed for bankruptcy, and the initial hope was to sell the company, its four domestic studios and their properties to the Clearlake Capital Group for at least \$60 million. At the time, THQ president Jason Rubin said that the company's filing for Chapter 11 bankruptcy was not the end of THQ ("Quite the opposite is true, actually," he said in a statement). Rubin also said that the publishers' upcoming games (South Park: The Stick of Truth, Metro: Last Light, and Company of Heroes 2) were undisturbed and on track to release. Nevertheless, creditors and trustees objected to the move, and in the end the company could not be kept together as a whole, but had to auction off the company piece-by-piece for approximately \$72 million.

THQ's demise lies partly in the fact that it never was able to execute a successful strategy that defined the company as a whole. It tried kids' games, but the license fees involved were too heavy. It tried multiple times to create an internal studio structure to deliver homegrown, triple-A franchises, but this too was costly. Toward the end it tried its hand at mobile gaming and microtransactions, but failed to gain

enough traction. A successful publisher needs a variety of strategies, but in the case of THQ, it was never the big fish in any particular pond.

The company started in 1990 and built a strong foundation with games based on kids' licenses and its popular wrestling games. In the 2000s, it started to expand into other genres with success via the Red Faction, MX, and Destroy All Humans! franchises, as well as the acquisition and creation of a worldwide studio system. Unfortunately, the company struggled to take the next step that would have put it on equal footing with companies like Electronic Arts and Activision. In 2011, THQ announced it was moving away from the licensed kids' software that had helped it become successful, and the following year its uDraw tablet accounted for \$100 million in lost revenue, franchises like Red Faction were canceled, and the company went through a restructuring period that resulted in layoffs and the closure of studios.

"I think, quite honestly," Colin Sebastian, senior research analyst at Baird Research, told us in the spring of 2012, "the best-case scenario for THQ at this point is to get acquired. Get acquired by a company with a lot more financial and development resources that can layer on with what they have in the studios." He continued, "...for THQ it would be an exit strategy that avoids that worst-case scenario." Unfortunately, THQ tried this strategy too, but without success.

In an interview with Game Informer, THQ president Jason Rubin told us that when he joined THQ in May to help right the ship, it only took a couple of weeks for him to realize that from a financial

perspective, things were actually worse than he initially thought. "However," he said, "the team at THQ are fighters, and through fixing product, turning to fixing finances, raising money, finding a partner in Clearlake, and filing for Chapter 11, I always believed that THQ would survive." But after the courts delayed the initial sale to Clearlake on January 4, Rubin said he began to worry that the company might not make it.

"I cannot think of anything that I could have done to change the outcome," he told us. "But I can tell you that I will spend a lot of sleepless nights thinking about what I could have changed. Even if I can't figure out what I could have changed, I accept those results as failure. I am not dodging that responsibility."

While many of THQ's games and talent have found new homes, developers like Vigil, its Darksiders property and unannounced game codenamed Crawler (which Rubin calls "fantastic"), and the WWE license remain unsold as of the time of this writing. Rubin says that these will be sold off separately – including back-catalog assets like Red Faction. As we were going to press, there was talk that Take-Two Interactive was interested in picking up WWE, but that has not come to fruition.

"All of the titles in the portfolio now have the potential to be the great games they should have been," says Rubin. "And now that the THQ auction is over, I can also say that the majority of them have found homes and will ultimately reach their intended audience, the core gamer."

Unfortunately for THQ it will be too little, too late, but for the games the best days may still lie ahead. ♦

The Great THQ Fire Sale

Here's where THQ's games and studios went and for how much:

Studio/Property: **Volition & the Saints Row IP**
Buyer: **Koch Media (\$22.3M)**

Koch Media owns Dead Island publisher Deep Silver, and this is a big win for the company given Saints Row's success.

Studio/Property: **Relic & Company of Heroes 2**
Buyer: **Sega (\$26.6M)**

Company of Heroes 2 was slated to come out this year – which shouldn't change. The acquisition of the property, as well as Canadian studio Relic, should instantly boost Sega's international studio structure.

Studio/Property: **THQ Montreal**
Buyer: **Ubisoft (\$2.5M)**

The studio – headed by former Ubisoft creative force Patrice Désilets (Assassin's Creed) – was going to be the prime driver behind THQ's resurgence. It will be interesting to see how the return of Désilets to his former employer plays out, as well as his projects 1666 and Underdog.

Studio/Property: **South Park: The Stick of Truth**
Buyer: **Ubisoft (\$3.3M)**

The only question here is whether any possible French jokes in the game will be edited out by its new masters.

Studio/Property: **Metro: Last Light**
Buyer: **Koch Media (\$5.9M)**

The dark, post-apocalyptic FPS vibe of the Metro franchise will round out Deep Silver's stable opposite Saints Row.

Studio/Property: **Homefront 2**
Buyer: **Crytek (\$500K)**

Crytek gets Homefront 2 for a steal. The studio's technical expertise should bring the franchise's occupied-America setting to life.

Studio/Property: **Evolve (by Turtle Rock Studios)**
Buyer: **Take-Two (\$10.9M)**

This game by the developers of Left 4 Dead is tabbed by some as one of the more attractive THQ pieces for sale, and its price seems to indicate as much.

Assassin's Creed III

Focusing on a new protagonist and a new historical era, Assassin's Creed III left many familiar things behind. Going in a new direction is risky for any series – even one as successful as Assassin's Creed – and the latest installment left many fans with divided opinions. We talked to **creative director Alex Hutchinson** about the challenges of surprising players, integrating history, and polishing a massive game.

The fact that players don't control Connor for the first few hours was a well-kept secret prior to release. How was that decision made?

We wanted to surprise people, basically. We do so much press before the release of a game that I sometimes feel there isn't that joy of discovery anymore. When I was younger buying new games, there was no Internet, the magazines took a few months to reach Australia, and so often all you knew was a little prerelease gossip, the thoughts of friends, and the back of the box. Finding a great game with limited knowledge was a huge joy – it feels more personal.

The intro sequences are divisive; some players love the set-up, while others want to get to the meat of the game sooner. Did the team anticipate this reaction?

We knew that there was a risk in delaying the "box moment," where you get to play the guy you see on the front cover, but I firmly believe that it leads to a better story. Why should you care about your targets or the plans of the Templars if you know nothing about them? We wanted you to play as and empathize with the Templars, so that you knew who you were targeting, to try and give it more impact than previous games. We also wanted to humanize the Templars, to make them less stereotypical villains.

Some players have complained that the frontier is too large to navigate. In retrospect, would you have put more viewpoints or fast travel locations into that space?

We didn't explain that you can fast travel via the map to portal gates or a few other areas on the frontier very clearly, which I regret. And yeah, we probably should have put a few more fast travel points in the frontier as well. It's a tricky balance as navigation is one of the core features and joys of the game, but you don't want to force people to do it over and over again.

This question highlights one of the core challenges of game



development: often once everything is in place, the solutions to certain issues are obvious, and often not even that hard to implement. But the road to get there, building the world, arranging the first pass locations, hooking it up to the interface, testing it in a real gameplay environment and not a test environment, all while working on hundreds of other features which are often more pressing or more important, means time becomes very scarce.

More than previous AC protagonists, Connor seems to play a significant role in every major historical event of his era. Does this "Forrest Gump Effect" affect players' ability to connect with the story?

With AC III, we had more historical information than ever before, and we knew our audience would also know much more when they began the game than they did about the Crusades or Constantinople. We wanted to give them a chance to experience as many of those key moments that they might have heard about as possible. It's also hard to tell a story about the Revolution without explaining a lot of these events, so you end up sending Connor to them a lot, just so the player can witness them. As one

of the few games that uses history so extensively, more history can't be a bad thing. We love it, we think a lot of our players love it, and it's part of the unique flavor of the franchise.

An explanation of how Connor and Achilles learn about Connor's father seems conspicuously absent. Why is that?

That's an interesting one. Early on we realized we didn't want the "who is my father" story to be part of the narrative, as it's such a common story and not really that interesting. We didn't want the, "Connor, I am your father" moment in the narrative at all. We didn't want it to be a secret, and if it's not a secret, then people shouldn't make a big deal out of it. But in a clean playthrough, I agree it would have been nice to sneak in one more scene where Connor and his mother talk about it directly.

During our trip to the studio for the cover story, you made a comment about having six months left to polish – yet the game released with a fair share of bugs. What happened between then and release?

That's the difference between being in early production and being up against the wire. It was

our goal all along, but the challenge was we were making the biggest game in the franchise – and I believe one of the biggest games ever – and it was also massively codependent, which makes it hard to cut scope. What I mean is, we bonded tutorials to story, and we bonded story to missions and various other factors which meant it was hard to radically reduce scope without making it incoherent. As you start to run out of time you just need to work harder and longer, which reduces your iteration time and polish time.

Both Assassin's Creed III and Far Cry 3 were developed at Ubisoft Montreal, and both use the same Alice in Wonderland quote ("In another moment, down went Alice after it, never once considering how in the world she was to get out again"). Did the teams know they were doubling up?

No, we actually didn't know at all, which is funny. We both play each other's games, but often there are cutscenes missing so I didn't see it in Far Cry 3 until they shipped, which was hilarious. The writers of both games have worked together on AC games in the past, so I guess it's just something in the air up here. ♦

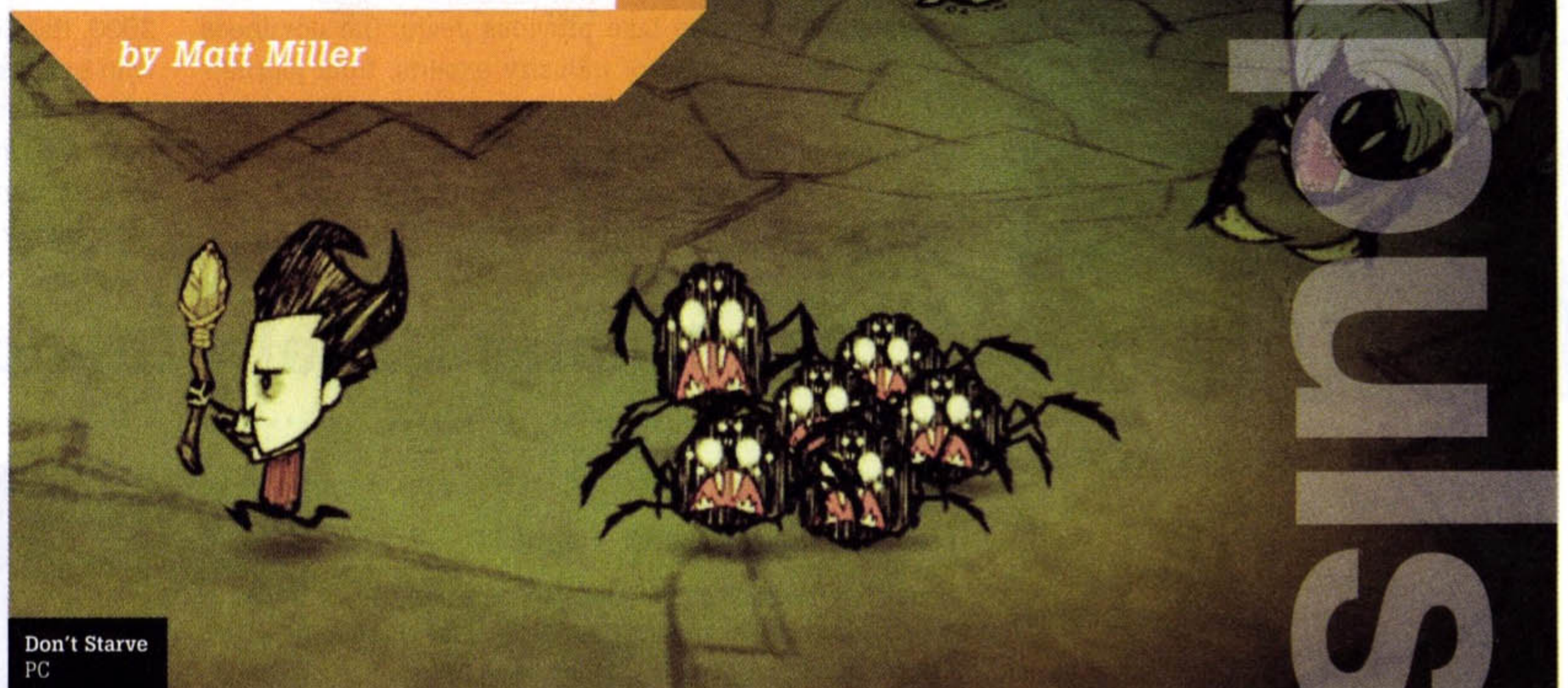
TWO HIGH-QUALITY BROWSER GAMES SEEK BETA PLAYERS

As the independent game scene continues to evolve, developers are taking any advantage they can find to gain input from potential consumers and draw more attention for their projects. Opening up beta builds to the public can draw in the crowds, and also help shape the final phases of development. I played two awesome new games this month that are using that exact strategy, and came away ready to recommend more people try them out. Moreover, both games have options to play directly in your browser – an indicator of the increasing sophistication of the browser-based game scene.

Klei Entertainment is best known for games like *Mark of the Ninja* and *Shank*, but its newest release is decidedly different. **Don't Starve** puts players in the shoes of Wilson, a "gentleman scientist" who has been marooned in the middle of nowhere by a fearsome demon. The survival-oriented gameplay seems overly simplistic at first glance – little more than gathering sticks and berries as you wander a nondescript wilderness. The tension and fun arrives as you begin to realize how dangerous the wilds can be, and how fragile Wilson is. Fail to light a fire by nighttime, and nocturnal creatures appear in the darkness to tear you apart. Fail to acquire enough food, and slowly starve. Venture into a giant spider nest, and you'd best be ready to run.

Don't Starve is a more structured variation of the *Minecraft* formula. You need certain raw materials to build a pickaxe or shovel, but more complex tools lie just out of reach as you expand your campsite and improve your survivability. Find rare bits of salvage, and you can feed them into your "science machine" for points to unlock more complicated machinery. As you explore, you encounter simple puzzles that test your ability to survive a little longer. Want to catch a rabbit? You need a snare and some carrots with which to bait the trap. Later on, you must deal with the strange pig people and their bulging king. The game revels in the sense of discovery and experimentation, and when I finally stepped away, I was surprised at how many hours I had invested in the seemingly simple concept.

I admit to a giddy nostalgia as I dug into this month's other featured game. **Card Hunter** is an homage to classic tabletop *Dungeons & Dragons* games from the '80s. Each adventure module is narrated by a game master, who leads you down into the dungeons and explains the scenarios before setting your characters down onto a grid map to do battle. Most grid-based video games try to hide the appearance



by Matt Miller

Don't Starve
PC



Card Hunter
PC

of figures on squares, but *Card Hunter* goes the opposite direction. Each figure is a tiny cardboard standee, and beyond the edge of the map, you see scattered polyhedral dice.

Unlike the classic RPG, actions are dictated by a selection of cards that your characters draw on each turn. Your card selection is based on your equipped weapons and character abilities, so your dwarven fighter might acquire a bash card, while your elven mage gains a fireball. You play the cards to move around the grid and engage enemies, and the game master will play cards to control the monsters' actions.

Careful hero placement and ability usage is central to a successful battle in *Card Hunter*, and concealing characters behind pillars and walls is a necessary tactic. As I navigated my characters through the demo, I loved the way each turn presents a new randomized

selection of cards for me to use. Special abilities mess with the standard rules, letting characters draw extra cards or automatically block incoming attacks. After the fights, players are rewarded with treasure like new magic weapons and armor that introduce new cards into their character decks. The final battle scenario against an acid-spewing green dragon tested my ability to survive, and I came away eager to dive into the full game.

Card Hunter is taking beta applications as we speak, with an aim to get public players into the mix in the next month or two. Meanwhile, *Don't Starve* is available for early access beta purchase now, getting you in on the ground floor as the developers continue to hone the final game. Both games surprised me with their depth and fun, and give me hope that browser-based gaming options are increasingly worth some focused attention. ♦

Looking for more on downloadable and independent games? Check out gameinformer.com/impulse for reviews, previews, and news on the best in Nintendo eShop, PSN, XBLA, PC, and mobile games. For more in this issue, flip the page to read about this year's IGF nominees, and don't miss our feature on *Star Wars Pinball* on page 66, our preview of *The Witness* on page 74, our reviews of *The Cave* (p. 85), and *Joe Danger Touch* (p. 92), and our scores for *Crimson Shroud*, *Aero Porter*, *Hundreds*, and *Middle Manager of Justice* (p. 94).

Pushing Boundaries

The Independent Games Festival Celebrates Another Year of Innovative Games

Fifteen years on, and the IGF shows no signs of slowing down. The annual celebration of indie games has another crop of great looking titles in nomination this year. Like previous years, the nominees are selected by a jury of industry experts, from journalists to fellow developers. This year, more than 580 games were part of the the main competition, and the final nominees represent some of the best work being done by independent developers in the last year.

We're highlighting the five nominees for the Seumas McNally Grand Prize. Named after a previous IGF grand prize winner who tragically died of Hodgkin's lymphoma in 2000, the Seumas McNally Grand Prize has recently been won by titles like Fez, Minecraft, and Monaco.

In addition, we've included a complete list of IGF nominees (see sidebar) so you can investigate these great games on your own. Final IGF award winners in each category will be announced on March 27th.

by Matt Miller

IGF Category Nominees

Excellence in Visual Art:

- Guacamelee!
- Incredipede
- Kentucky Route Zero
- Lovers in a Dangerous Spacetime
- Year Walk

Technical Excellence:

- Intrusion 2
- LiquidSketch
- Little Inferno
- Perspective
- StarForge

Excellence in Design:

- FTL: Faster than Light
- Samurai Gunn
- Starseed Pilgrim
- Super Hexagon
- Super Space _____

Excellence in Audio:

- 140
- Bad Hotel
- Hotline Miami
- Kentucky Route Zero
- PixelJunk 4am

Excellence in Narrative:

- Cart Life
- dys4ia
- Gone Home
- Kentucky Route Zero
- Thirty Flights of Loving

Nuovo:

(honoring abstract and unconventional game development)

- 7 Grand Steps
- Bientot l'Ete
- Cart Life
- dys4ia
- Little Inferno
- MirrorMoon
- Spaceteam
- VESPER.5

2013 Seumas McNally Grand Prize Nominees

Cart Life

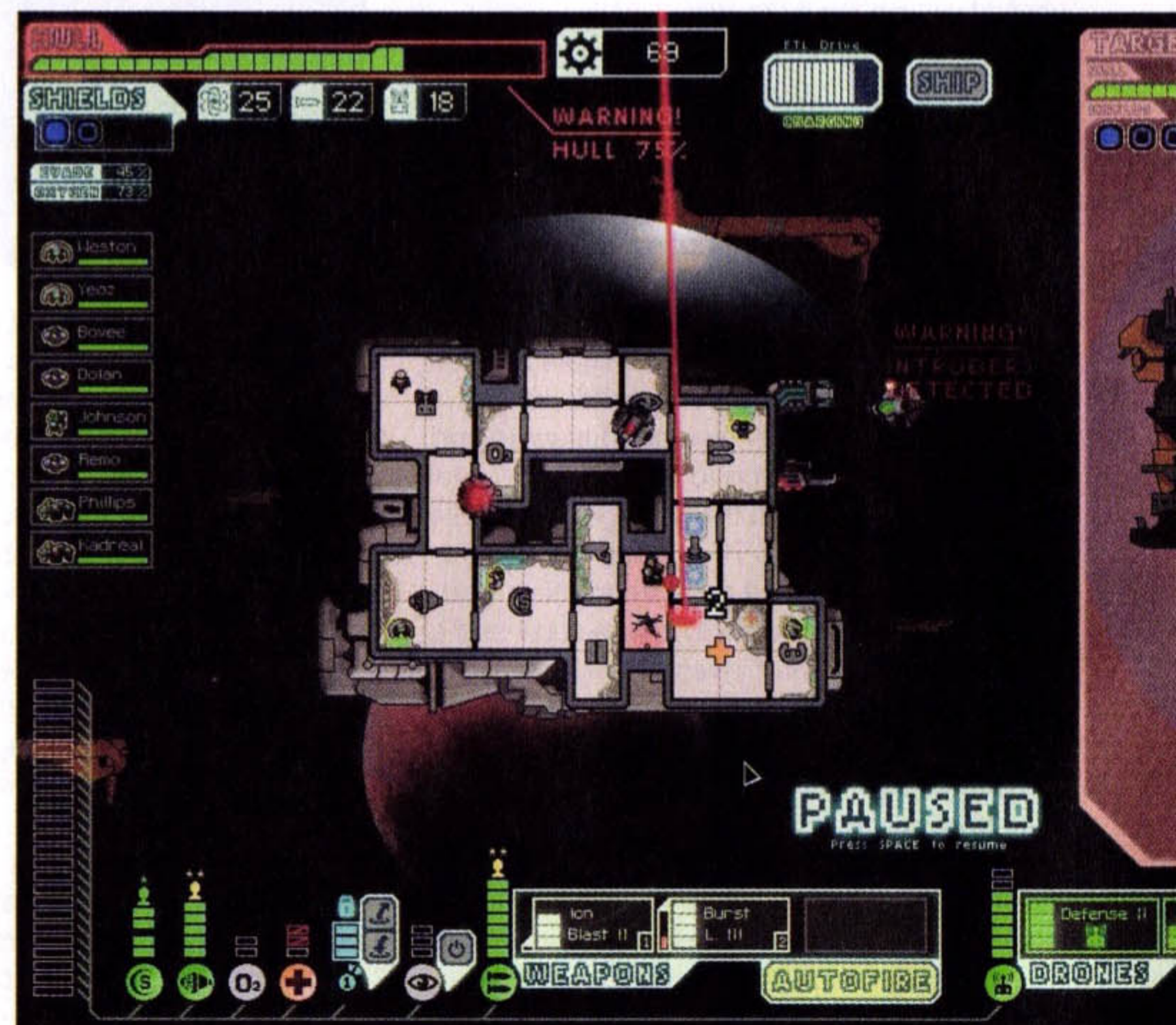
Developer: Richard Hofmeier Format: PC

Hofmeier's fascinating retail simulator puts players in charge of a street vending business in a small city. Players choose between characters like a newsstand owner or coffee cart proprietor, with the aim to serve customers and drive sales. Each street cart has its own simple mechanics to master, and it's easy to drop into a routine as you repeat the tasks required to succeed. What sets Cart Life apart are the elements that take us into each character's life outside of their retail venture, fleshing out their loves, secret desires, and life problems, from caring for a cat to dealing with cigarette addiction. Backing up the unique game mechanics is an attractive pixelated black and white art style that calls to mind newspaper print. The game comes together in a way that humanizes these individuals who most of us only interact with in a cursory way during our day-to-day lives.

FTL: Faster than Light

Developer: Subset Games Format: PC, Mac

Described by its developer as a "spaceship simulation real-time roguelike-like," FTL garnered lots of attention with its release last year as it answered the childhood fantasies of thousands of folks who grew up dreaming of running their own interstellar space vessel. The game lets you build and customize your own ship and head off on a galaxy-saving mission, and delivers all the requisite tasks you'd expect from such a journey. Each playthrough includes tense space battles, salvage operations, contact with alien species, and hard decisions about how to proceed, as depicted through RPG-style text sequences. The battles are particularly thrilling, as defeat means you start over from scratch. The high difficulty encourages players to try out different ship layouts and battle strategies, and each playthrough includes a random galaxy layout, profoundly increasing replay value. Balancing shield levels, sending out boarding parties, and venting oxygen offers the sort of geeky thrills sci-fi fans cherish, and FTL delivers those familiar events in every game.



Hotline Miami

Developer: Dennaton Games **Format:** PC

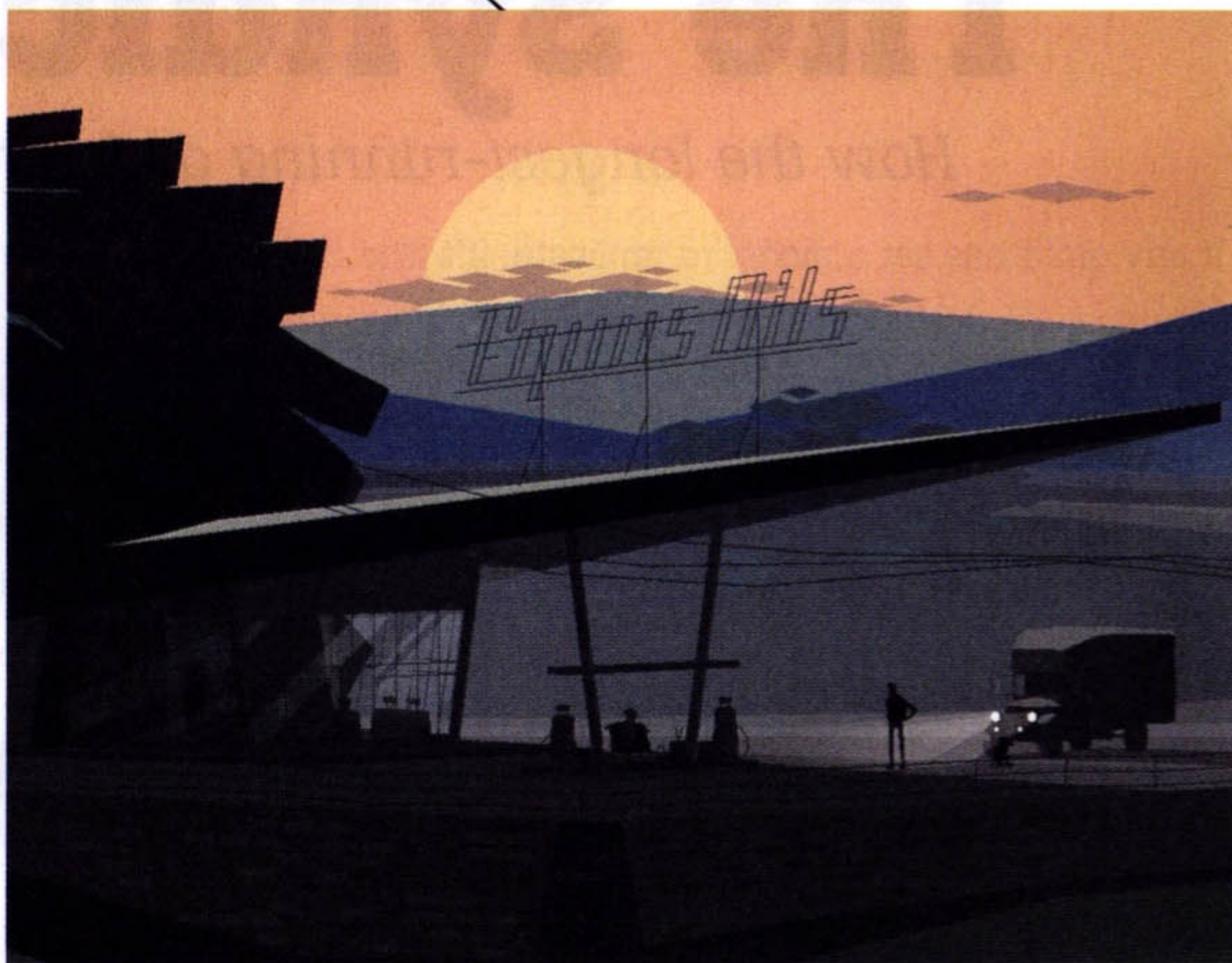
The drug-addled violence of 1980s Miami is in full effect in Dennaton's brutally fun action game. Not for the squeamish, *Hotline Miami* sets you loose as a homicidal maniac with unclear motivations as he mows his way through waves of enemies. Played from a top-down perspective, the action rewards quick thinking and quicker reflexes. Each level demands you to don a crazy animal mask that changes out your abilities in minor ways, like making unarmed attacks lethal or increasing your speed. Players infiltrate buildings and take down its equally remorseless defenders, tricking them into bottlenecks or taking them by surprise from behind with shotguns, katanas, power drills, and other ruthless weaponry. The game's primitive art style depicts the bloody violence in vivid colors, and the continuous electronic soundtrack keeps pumping even when you die and restart the levels, maintaining the illusion of one continuous fight. Through it all, the question of why this violence is happening nags at you, and makes you question your own actions, particularly as you peruse the ruinous aftermath of your rampages.



Kentucky Route Zero

Developer: Cardboard Computer **Format:** PC, Mac

Following on the heels of great episodic storytelling adventure games like *The Walking Dead*, *Kentucky Route Zero* should be on the radar of anyone interested in the expanding boundaries of interactive narrative. The game tells the story of a strange secret highway in the cave system underneath Kentucky, and the equally strange people who move along the mystical roadway. Focused more on character development and story than puzzles and brainteasers, the point-and-click adventure game embraces an ethereal dreamlike quality in its presentation. The first episode (available now) introduces Conway, an antiques deliveryman seeking an address that may or may not exist, and his journey rapidly veers into existential territory. The subtle musical score weaves in elements of old bluegrass standards, and the vector style graphics paint a world of stark shadows and glimmering pools of light. In short, *Kentucky Route Zero* should appeal to players looking for a more thoughtful and philosophical game, so long as they don't mind making their way through some extensive text dialogue and purposefully deliberate pacing.



Little Inferno

Developer: Tomorrow Corporation **Format:** Wii U, PC

The creators of *World of Goo* released *Little Inferno* late last year to widespread critical acclaim. The game has an incredibly simple premise that makes it something of a hard sell; the main focus of *Little Inferno* is on throwing items into a fireplace and watching them burn up. Some complexity is introduced through the need to find combos of different items that need to be burned together, which manifests like a simple puzzle mechanic. However, the majority of praise for the game has come through its poignant and sad thematic storytelling, which unfolds organically over the course of the game, leading to a moving conclusion that feels contrary to the seemingly random focus of the gameplay. Numerous reviewers have noted the importance of experiencing *Little Inferno* for oneself, so we won't ruin its depth and emotional core here, but its unusual structure promises a gameplay experience apart from anything else you've played.



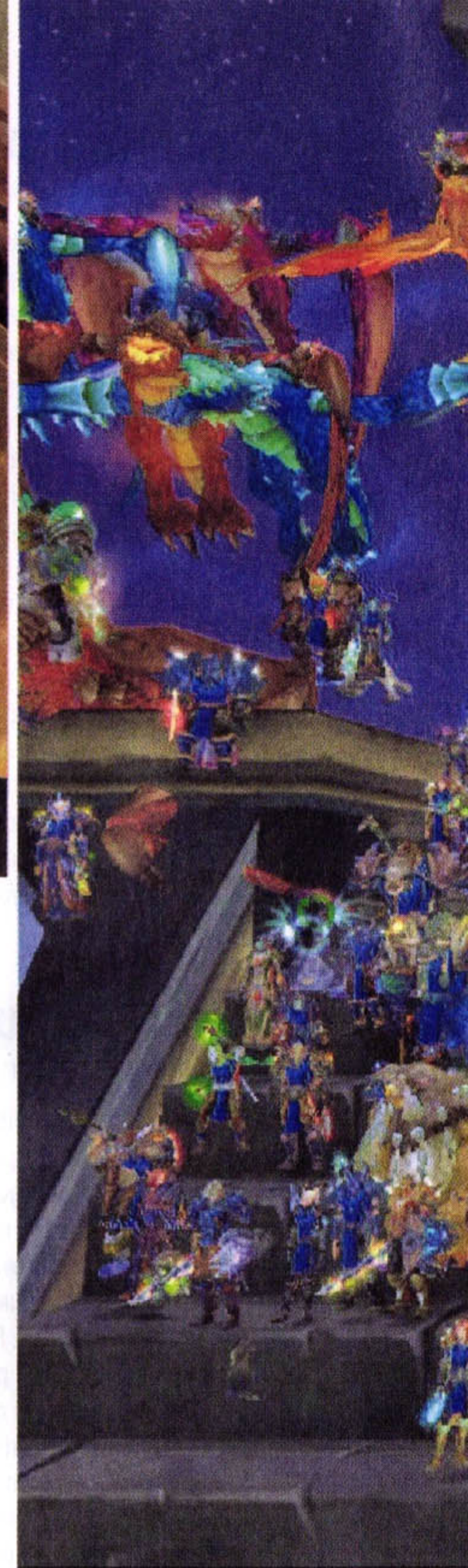
Read our reviews for *FTL: Faster Than Light*, *Hotline Miami*, and *Little Inferno* at gameinformer.com



The Syndicate

How the longest-running guild stays on top

If any guild has set a model to replicate, it's The Syndicate. Not only does it hold the Guinness World Record for being the longest-running guild at 17 years, but it's risen to such popularity that its name is trademarked. The secret? This isn't your everyday guild. The Syndicate is focused on nurturing a mature and intelligent community with barely any turnover, drama, or recruitment problems. We spoke to leader and founder Sean Stalzer, known in the online world as "Dragons," and other Syndicate members to understand how the guild has continued to stay on top.



by Kimberley Wallace

Forming a Guild from the Beginning

Sean Stalzer formed The Syndicate in 1996 when he was fresh out of college, fueled by his frustration over other guilds that split apart over drama. "I felt there had to be a way to overcome those challenges and make a community that actually worked together and cared about the overall community and didn't fracture and implode when issues arose," he says. But just because Stalzer had a clear vision didn't mean his initial efforts were error free. At the time, massively multiplayer online games were a new breed, but this worked to Stalzer's advantage. Expectations were low, allowing room for mistakes. "By today's

standards, if we tried to form a guild the same way we founded The Syndicate, we would surely implode," Stalzer says.

Stalzer's early recruiting policy was to let almost anyone in and actively seek other guilds to merge with The Syndicate. Though this is the same strategy that has resulted in many guilds tearing themselves apart, Stalzer sees the silver lining to his early errors. "I am not saying if I had to do it all over that I would do it the same way again," he says. "But in a day and age where people didn't know what to expect, we were able to weather that storm of bad recruiting decisions and emerge out the other side with a really strong, very unified, and very large core group of

like-minded people."

Stalzer and company started turning heads with Ultima Online's launch in 1997. Most UO guilds were short lived, but The Syndicate showed from the start it would buck the trend. Since then, the guild has had a presence in games such as World of Warcraft, Star Wars: The Old Republic, and EverQuest, and members have beta tested for over 70 MMOs, including Guild Wars 2, Rift, and Tera.

A True Community

What provides The Syndicate with staying power? The answer is obvious, but challenging: developing a true community. Their membership doesn't exist for any particular game. Instead, it's built around the people first. "By recruiting great people and

by focusing entirely on them as our reason for existing, we have built incredible loyalty," Stalzer says.

The Syndicate has a strict policy to ensure only the best candidates get in. Applications aren't considered unless a member can vouch that an applicant's personality, play style, and values mesh with The Syndicate. Even if a candidate has a strong recommendation, they're not a shoe-in. If the guild has even a little doubt, membership won't be offered: "My rule is that being 99.99 percent sure of someone is a rejection. We need to be 100 percent confident," Stalzer says.

The lofty standards are key to sustaining membership, which currently stands near 1,200 members.



Approximately two people leave per year, a phenomenally low turnover rate. Karen M, a member who prefers to go by her online name "Surrina," says the low turnover all comes down to "the friends-first approach." Placing emphasis on the individual behind the avatar is so important that the guild holds its own yearly event called "SyndCon" for members to bond. "Once you connect the toon to a person, gaming takes on a whole different meaning," Stalzer says.

As for people expecting the guild to play the superiority card and shun the virtual community, that couldn't be further from the truth. Free crafting services are offered to players, alongside in-game contests and events. The Syndicate isn't shy about

directly sharing the secret of their success with other guilds. As Surrina says, "We have helped many guilds establish themselves and work out systems that provide them more stability."

The Business Side

Although the guild still participates in plenty of raids, it's also moved over to the business realm. A partnership with Prima gives its members the chance to help write strategy guides and consult on numerous games. According to Stalzer, it was intentional. "Most gamers, at one time or another, make the statement that 'If only the developer listened to me, I could change the game for the better!'" he says. "We believed that very strongly and sought about creating

a model by which we could provide that service."

By the time most MMO's launch, The Syndicate has been playing them for months to give developers feedback. In fact, for *Kingdoms of Amalur: Reckoning* and the ill-fated MMO, *Copernicus*, guild members spent a few days at 38 Studios providing pointers. "It is both a great memory and a sad memory because *Copernicus* would have been a stellar game had things not gone as they did," Surrina says. Most recently, The Syndicate wrapped up the official wiki for *PlanetSide 2*.

The Future

Today, The Syndicate's future seems limitless. Right now, more than 100 members are forming a core feedback team

for a major MMO developer's early alpha build. The guild also has plans for venturing into others areas, like card games, first-person shooters, and mobile games.

Success is a word synonymous with The Syndicate, and it's clear that the guild has something special. As Stalzer says, "True success in the online world is not about collecting pixels. Even getting those pixels sooner than someone else is really not a measure of long-term success. Kudos to every world-first person and group out there, but a huge percentage of [them] from two years ago no longer exist. Why? Because they didn't exist for their people. Our people are why we exist, and they in turn ensure our continued success." ♦

interview



Rewriting the Rules

Double Fine's **Greg Rice** didn't take a traditional route into the game industry. His background includes a degree in vocal performance and a stint in medical school. At Double Fine, Rice is helping to shape the company's future, guiding the production of the studio's Kickstarter-funded adventure project, and ensuring the community of backers stays engaged with the project.

interview by Matt Helgeson

You have a very nontraditional educational background. How does that inform what you do as a producer and how you approach your job?

With the brand-management stuff I do, I think I always try to approach it by thinking like a fan. That usually serves me well. If I was a fan of Double Fine, which I am, how would I want our products to be presented to me, and what would I want the company to be doing? I think that alone is a good way to look at things. When I was in high school and wanted to figure out what to do with my life, games were an option but something that I knew very little about. I think that one of the big things for me was trying to help demystify the game industry for people. Things that we've been doing – like the Kickstarter trying to show a really transparent and honest view of what the game studio does – comes from me wishing I had more information like that when I was a kid. I know Tim [Schafer] feels the same way.

How did the idea of the Kickstarter adventure evolve?

We started talking about it about a year before we launched, so about 2011. At the time, Kickstarter was seeing a lot smaller budgets for video games, things like 10 or 20 thousand dollars. We've made a lot of those kinds of games – big consoles games that were tens of millions of dollars like *Brütal Legend* to downloadable, smaller games that were a couple million – but even that was way out of the realm of possibility when we started talking about it. But there were some things we liked about Kickstarter. It was a direct line to your fans and being able to be more in control of your project. So we kind of kept it on the back burner. Ultimately, the Two-Player Productions guys came to us and asked us about doing a Double Fine documentary next. We were excited about that, for all those reasons I talked about – trying to demystify the video game industry. We knew if we were going to go ahead with it would have to be a project that would be willing to be very open and transparent so it would make a good documentary. That's very hard to do with a publisher-funded project, because their PR and marketing schedules are very strict. It would be hard to show stuff that was very early and be open with what's happening. So we quickly decided that the Kickstarter would need to fund both the game and the documentary.

The original goal was for \$400,000, which isn't a huge amount of money in game

development. Was that intended to fund the whole game or just act as seed money and you would fund the rest with other money?

It was actually going to be a totally different project than what it is now. That was the minimum amount of money that we thought we needed to make something – an attempt to have a low enough budget to be reachable on Kickstarter. So when the budget ballooned the way it did, we had to step back and decide what game we could make now, with \$3 million. We just amped up the production size of the game. It let us add new platforms and voice support for the characters and stuff like that. It's now more in line with the game we really would have wanted to make.

Is the core idea the same, but you're adding more production values and feature sets that wouldn't have been possible?

Well, one of the interesting things is we didn't have an idea when we started. The idea was just that it was going to be a point-and-click adventure game from Tim and a documentary based on that. There was no story or anything in place. It was more changing the scope and scale of the game, essentially.

It's risky to ask for that much money – and get even more money than that – and not have an idea to start with. Were you worried about that?

We were sort of worried about it. I feel like it actually sort of benefitted us, because it allowed fans' imaginations to fill in what they thought the game would be, instead of us presenting something and they potentially not liking it. But the big thing for us is that we wanted the documentary to be there from day one, just so everything could be captured on camera.

For those of us that didn't back the project and aren't getting access to the documentary, what's the idea for the game as it stands now?

We haven't talked much about the idea for the game because we had a lot of backers reach out to us and say that they want to follow the progress of development but they don't want the game to be spoiled when it comes out. So the documentary is more about the day-to-day workings of a game studio; what the roles are and problems we face with development. It's more about the operations of the team. There are some glimpses of art and things like that, but we keep story and puzzles and things like that out of it.

You also said in the Kickstarter that you would be soliciting fan feedback in creating the game. How can you do that when they don't know the story and details?

How are you managing that?

Yeah, it's been interesting. We've been doing things on our internal forums, which is a hidden forum for Double Fine Adventure backers. We had concept artists fly in for a week to Double Fine to do a concept art jam. This was when the idea was still really new in Tim's head. He had a vague idea of the main story beats, but there were a lot of directions the world could go in. So we brought those guys in to paint for a week in the back together, and jam with our artists here to come up with these crazy ideas. Tim posted in the public forums, which he posts in about once a week with other updates of sorts, he posted asking for ideas of locations that you've never seen before in a game and would want to explore and we got something like 40 or 50 pages worth of ideas. It looks like some of those are actually going to make their way into the game. So, while we definitely don't get into the specifics of puzzles, we definitely have been reaching out to people or ideas on things and feedback.

People say they want an old-school experience, but they don't want all the wonkiness and archaic design. They want the feeling, not necessarily the reality of what those old-school games were.

That's exactly what we've been doing. We've evaluated every aspect of those games, tried to figure out what the core is that really resonates with people. I think that we've determined that it's the narrative, how much of a focus there is on narrative, how beautiful the art is and how fun it is to explore these odd and eccentric worlds. But, like any time we are approaching implementing interaction systems and dialogue systems, we've been good about evaluating what parts of those we still like and what parts can potentially be modernized. What we're trying to do is make a game that really embodies the spirit of Tim's old games but still has a modern twist.

There was such a controversy about *Mass Effect 3's* ending. It wasn't what many fans expected or wanted. With a Kickstarter, that sense of ownership of the game is even greater because the fans actually gave you the money to do this. Are you worried about managing expectations and any possible backlash?

I think, like I said, a lot of people have been very upfront about the fact that, ultimately, they backed this project because they love Double Fine's games and they love Tim, and that they have enough trust in us that we're going to make a game they like. I think that the writing and design and the game is one of the things I'm least worried about. I know Tim is going to write a funny game and people are going to think it's funny. So that's definitely not something I'm super worried about. ♦

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

1998
ADVENTURE BEGINS
Rice falls in love with Tim Schafer's stylish adventure game *Grim Fandango*

2001
SING OUT
Rice attends college at the University of Iowa, studying vocal performance. He appears in many musical productions and performs with various bands

2004
CHARITABLE ENDEAVORS
As part of the University of Iowa Dance Marathon, Rice helps raise over \$3 million for the Children's Miracle Network, benefitting kids with cancer

2005
MED SCHOOL
Inspired by his charitable work, Rice enters medical school at the University of Iowa

2008
HEADING WEST
Deciding that video games are his true calling, Rice quits med school and moves to California

2009
GUITAR HEROICS
Rice gets his first job in the game industry as a tester on Activision's *Guitar Hero: World Tour* and *Guitar Hero: Metallica*

2009
THE AGENCY
Moving to the powerhouse talent house Creative Artists Agency, Rice becomes assistant to former Microsoft exec Seamus Blackley, whose clients included Tim Schafer

2010
DOUBLE UP
Schafer gives Rice his break at Double Fine, where he produces games like *Costume Quest* and *Stacking*

2012
KICKING OFF
Double Fine sends shockwaves through the game industry by funding a new Tim Schafer adventure game through the crowdfunding site Kickstarter

gear



Razer Sabertooth

by Ben Reeves, Jason Oestreicher, and Matt Miller

Razer wants to turn serious gamers into serious multitaskers. Thanks to the Sabertooth's six additional remappable inputs, you can fluidly jump, reload, and change weapons without taking your thumbs off the analog sticks. It takes a while to get used to the two rocking, bidirectional multi-functional triggers housed under this Xbox controller, but they allow you to input face button commands with your index fingers. If they ever get in your way, both triggers are fully detachable.

We love the Sabertooth's relaxed weight, non-slip rubber casing, and the satisfying click produced by every button. If you feel the need to use the backlit face buttons, they can also be reprogrammed through the unit's tiny OLED display. Casual gamers may prefer a wireless controller, but this system's detachable 10-foot braided fiber cable

cuts down on performance latency. The Sabertooth has enough nitro under the hood to get it banned from Major League Gaming, much like Razer's 2010 entry the Onza, but it will still sharpen the competitive edge of most casual players. Still, its high price point might be the biggest challenge for some consumers.

VERY GOOD

\$79.99 | razerzone.com

1 Seagate Wireless Plus

Running low on storage space for all that media on your tablet? Seagate's new wireless hard drive could be your iPad's new travel companion. This 1TB external hard drive is capable of storing hundreds of movies or thousands of songs and photos that you can browse via a dedicated app on your iOS, Android, or Kindle device. You can stream media to up to three smartphones, tablets, and laptops simultaneously using the drive's ad-hoc wireless signal. Thanks to this system's battery you shouldn't have to talk with your travel companions for up to 10 hours.

\$199 | seagate.com



2 Blaze NeoGeo X Gold

In the '90s, SNK's Neo Geo was a dream machine for many gamers, but game cartridges cost \$300 and the console was more than double that price. This made the NeoGeo an unattainable pie in the sky for many. The NeoGeo X Gold recreates the look and feel of a Neo Geo AES console at a much more digestible price point. Unfortunately, the emulation quality isn't up to NeoGeo standards. Colors are overly saturated, and the sound is not as rich as the original. The handheld's chassis is sturdy, but the 4.3-inch screen is blurry in direct light and has a narrow viewing angle. Battery life only affords three to four hours of playtime with no stand-by mode, which limits its portability. Fortunately, you can recharge via a micro USB cable (not included).

Connecting to the NeoGeo X's docking station allows you to use up to two arcade sticks and output video via HDMI or composite connections to a TV or monitor. Tommo has talked about rereleasing the NeoGeo library on SD cards, but as of press time, the company hasn't released any, so you're stuck with the 20 classic games built into the system itself. Having classic NeoGeo titles on demand is nice, but this is not a faithful recreation of the original console.

LIMITED APPEAL

\$199 | neogeox.com



3 Legendary: A Marvel Deck-Building Game

Deck-building card games are all the rage in tabletop circles thanks to their fast and strategic style in which gamers continually acquire ever more powerful cards into a growing personal deck that expands your options each turn. The stellar new Marvel Comics deck builder has players cooperating to bring down evil masterminds like Doctor Doom, Loki, and Magneto. Gorgeous comic-style art graces the cards, the rules are straightforward and smart, and the comic-book action vibe pervades every part of the game. One to five players can play through a game in about an hour.

\$59.99 | store.upperdeck.com

ATARI Inc.
Business Is Fun



ATARI INC.: BUSINESS IS FUN
BY CURT VENDEL AND
MARTY GOLDBERG

Nearly eight years in the making, this 800-page tome chronicles the rise of Atari through thousands of researched documents, hundreds of interviews, and several previously unpublished photos.

\$39.99
atarimuseum.com/book

GAME OF THRONES: THE
COMPLETE SECOND SEASON

HBO's award-winning series based on George R. R. Martin's bestselling books returns for a second season of duplicity and treachery as the most powerful families in the Seven Kingdoms battle for the Iron Throne.

\$79.98
store.hbo.com

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA:
HYRULE HISTORIA
HARDCOVER

Dark Horse teamed up with Nintendo to produce this classy hardcover, which contains never-before-seen concept art, the full history of Hyrule, the official chronology of the games, and much more.

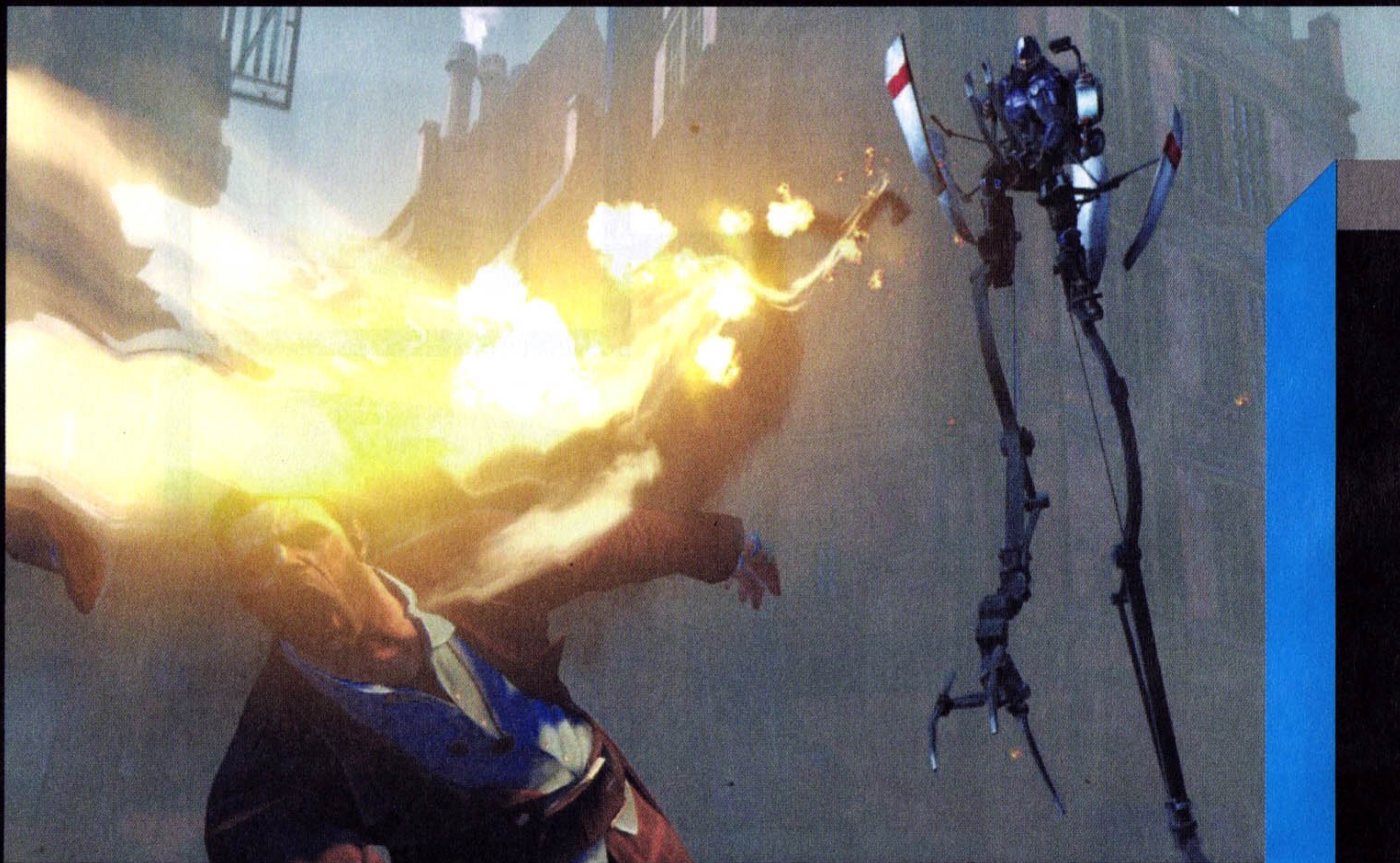
\$34.99
darkhorse.com

LIFE'S TOO SHORT:
SEASON 1

In the spirit of *Extras*, Warwick Davis stars in this sidesplitting comedy produced by Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant about a self-aggrandizing actor desperately trying to remain in the public eye as the UK's biggest little person.

\$29.98
store.hbo.com

This is My Story



by Matthew Kato, senior associate editor, Game Informer

More and more video games are giving players choices to shape the narrative of their character and the story as a whole. What could be more natural in an interactive medium? Gamers have eagerly embraced the chance to make decisions and craft their own tale in games like *Mass Effect 3*, *Dishonored*, *The Walking Dead*, and many others.

The sheer amount of time we spend playing these titles – and given the weight as well as volume of some of the decisions to make for our characters – naturally endears us to them and gives a sense of ownership over the narrative outcomes. With all this time and emotion invested in an experience I shaped myself, replaying the game or going back to see how things might have turned out differently feels unnatural. I’ve already made those choices, and I’m going to stand by them because that’s the story I’ve made for myself.

I understand the temptation to see what could have happened in a game had you made different choices or wanting to explore all the content a developer has created. I wouldn’t mind revisiting some of my decisions when a game handles my choice in a manner I wasn’t expecting. But when I reflect on everything that has happened to my character at the end of the game, changing that by going back and sampling different paths fundamentally alters the game experience itself.

Some people start from scratch with a new character to make new decisions and craft an alternative narrative (like in *Mass Effect*, for instance). When I try to do this I find that I can’t forget what I’ve already experienced the first time around. Since many of the decisions and outcomes would

be the same anyway, I feel I’m just treading familiar ground.

Like life itself, a single playthrough represents both the good and bad. You may regret something you’ve done in the game, but every life has moments of regret. In a much bigger sense, striving for perfection is a flaw in and of itself, and in terms of a game, there is something to be cherished in a story that reflects who you are – warts and all. The luxury of choice that modern games afford us in relation to their compelling characters and stories is perhaps the biggest achievement of our interactive medium. Ironically, exercising the power of choice by replaying a section can erode the significance of that choice.

Games also expand their stories with DLC that adds on to it after the fact. I’ve bought story-based DLC in the past, but I usually like stories that are finite in scope. I don’t feel the

need to consume a property’s content just because it represents more of something I already like. I’d rather have one good story run its course than oversaturate the experience with small side stories that come out after you have already experienced a resolution.

We can craft our own experiences in video games, which is an extraordinary power for a medium. But repeating playthroughs and sampling of different outcomes, in my opinion, can defuse that power and ultimately rob me of what I’ve worked so hard to earn. ♦

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

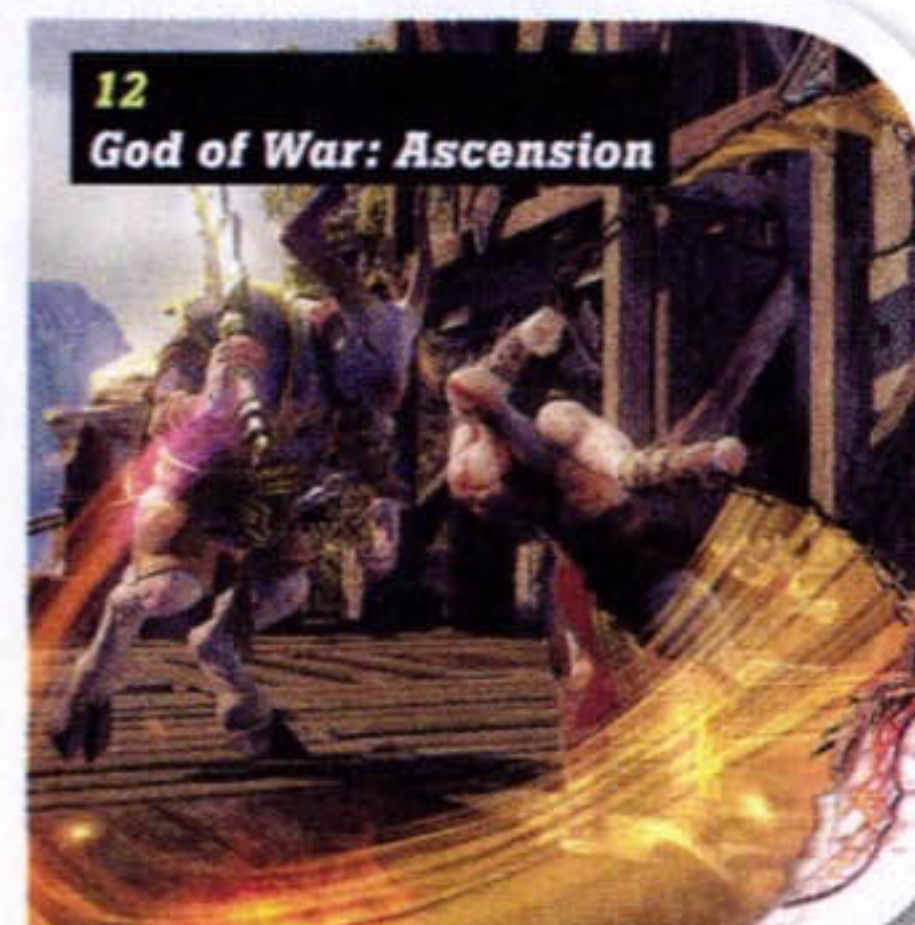
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If you work in the industry and would like to share your opinion, contact senior features editor Matt Helgeson at matt@gameinformer.com



05
Tomb Raider



08



12
God of War: Ascension



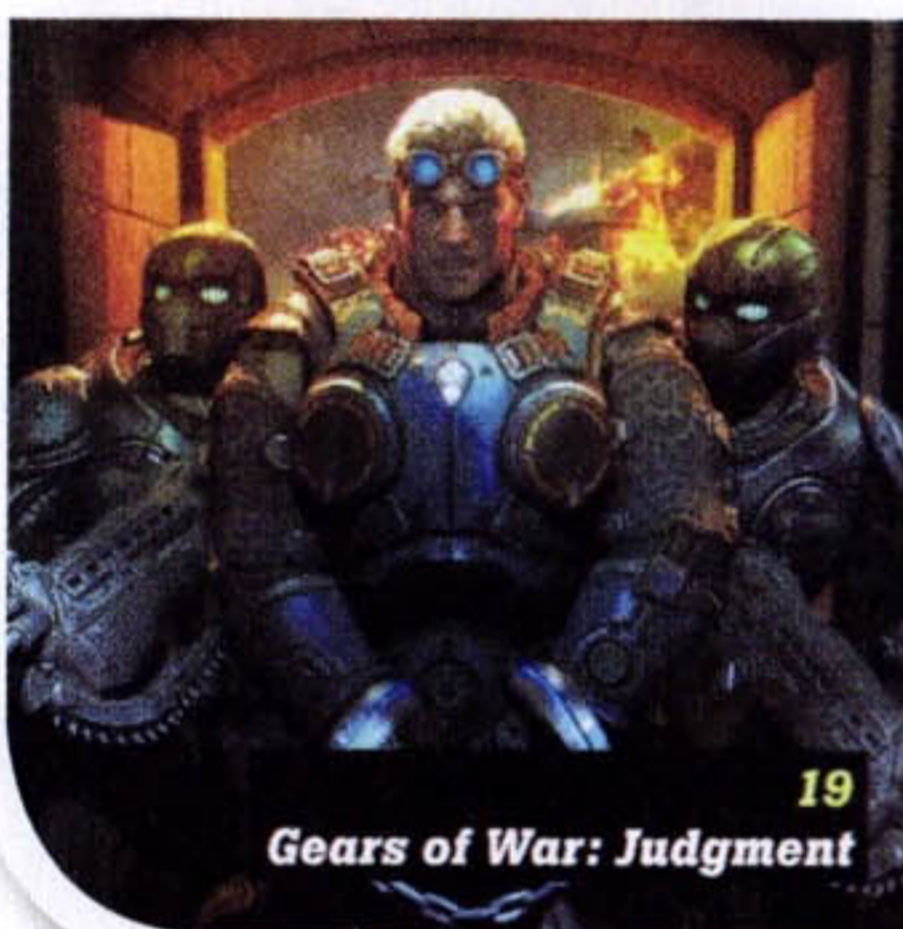
15



26
BioShock Infinite



27



19
Gears of War: Judgment



29

March

01 New Releases

› Warrior's Lair (Vita)

05 New Releases

- › The Amazing Spider-Man (Wii U)
- › Castlevania: Lords of Shadow – Mirror of Fate (3DS)
- › MLB 13: The Show (PS3, Vita)
- › MLB 2K13 (PS3, 360)
- › SimCity (PC)
- › Sniper Elite 2: Silver Star Edition (PS3, 360)
- › Tomb Raider (PS3, 360)
- › Wreck-It Ralph (Blu-Ray, DVD)

08 Return to Oz

Today's big theatrical release, *Oz: The Great and Powerful*, must have started as a game of Hollywood chicken that no one backed down from. "Let's make a prequel to *The Wizard of Oz*!" "Let's cast James Franco as a character that doesn't smoke weed!" "Let's include as many CG characters as possible!" Any one of these things is a sign to slam on the brakes. But no one did. A ray of hope lays with director Sam Raimi, the man who made Peter Parker dance in *Spider-Man 3*.

12 New Releases

- › God of War: Ascension (PS3)
- › Sniper: Ghost Warrior 2 (PS3, 360, PC)
- › Starcraft II: Heart of the Swarm (PC)

13 Constantine Goes Solo

Justice League Dark, a comic book series that focuses on magical events in DC Comics' universe, has become one of the publisher's most talked-about books. The leader of Dark's team is occult detective John Constantine. This chain-smoker now has his own ongoing series set in the New 52 universe. The first issue ships today.

15 Feel the Magic

Steve Carrell and Jim Carrey are rival magicians in *The Incredible Burt Wonderstone*, in theaters today. With those two stars, you're probably expecting the film to be an intense drama like *The Prestige* or *The Illusionist*, but lo and behold, this movie is a comedy. And it looks hilarious! You can't go wrong with bird jokes.

18 New Releases

- › Lego City: Undercover (Wii U)

19 New Releases

- › The Croods: Prehistoric Party! (Wii U, 3DS)
- › Gears of War: Judgment (360)
- › Monster Hunter 3 Ultimate (Wii U, 3DS)
- › Need for Speed: Most Wanted (Wii U)

23 LARPer's Find Their Padded Room

Dubbed "The Asylum," Ark-Con is a two-day convention held in Springdale, Arkansas, that offers all-night gaming in the "Dream Therapy" room and LARPing in "The Padded Room." If you've always wanted to live out your fantasy of being a crewmember aboard the U.S.S. Enterprise, you can take a turn manning a station in the Artemis Spaceship Bridge simulation.

25 Game Developer's Conference

The best and the brightest in the video game industry come together

in San Francisco today to learn, exchange ideas, and cultivate the community of game development. This five-day conference boasts over 400 lectures, panels, and roundtable discussions, and some 22,000 attendees leave with new knowledge of their craft. GDC also hosts the Independent Games Festival, which is a great place to learn about the hot up-and-comers in the field.

26 New Releases

- › Army of Two: The Devil's Cartel (PS3, 360)
- › BioShock Infinite (PS3, 360, PC)
- › Veep: Season 1 (Blu-Ray, DVD)
- › The Walking Dead: Survival Instinct (PS3, 360, Wii U)

27 The Sleeping Age

Dark Horse Comics calls *Until We Sleep* "the perfect entry point" into the Dragon Age series and an "essential addition to its canon." This story hits comic stores today

and is written by David Gaider, lead writer of BioWare's Dragon Age games.

29 G.I. Joe for Real This Time!

After nearly a yearlong delay, *G.I. Joe: Retaliation* opens in theaters. With the extra time to improve the film, we hope they added more Snake Eyes being awesome, vehicles with preposterous missile payloads, and people yelling "Cobra!" Of course, the delay probably means more 3D sequences and a few extra scenes with Channing Tatum.

31 Game of Thrones Returns

The third season of HBO's brilliant *Game of Thrones* television series kicks off today, putting further pressure on writer George R. R. Martin to finish writing the sixth book. This season is based on the first half of the third entry, *A Storm of Swords*.

» PLATFORM
TBA • PC

» STYLE
1-Player Action/
Role-Playing

» PUBLISHER
TBA

» DEVELOPER
CD Projekt RED

» RELEASE
2014

THE NEXT GENERATION OF ROLE-PLAYING


— • • • —
THE WITCHER 3: WILD HUNT

Everyone wants something different out of a role-playing game. Some yearn to explore their own path through a beautiful open world. Others want to struggle with meaningful decisions that determine the outcome of dramatic plotlines. Another set of players looks for characters with depth to become invested in. Still others need weighty combat and power development to test their skills against.

The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt is for those wild dreamers who want it all.



BY ADAM BIESSENER



Geralt of Rivia isn't an old man, but he's tired. Tired of hunting monsters for fearful people who think his mutation-born powers make him a fiend himself. Tired of being ensnared in the politics of kings only to see his friends killed and their kingdoms shattered, left unable to resist the imperial ambitions of foreign conquerors. Tired of being alone in a world that has taken everything from him – his love, his home, his companions – and the conscience that won't let him ignore the further sacrifices demanded of him.

Tired he may be, but the White Wolf has his memory back and a sword arm that can still swing faster than any in the North. Not even the mighty wraith commanders of the Wild Hunt that has stalked humanity from the shadows throughout the centuries, the armed might of an aggressive empire, or the long list of personal enemies Geralt has made in his years of adventure will stand between him and his long-lost sorceress love.

Though you don't need to play the first two games to get the full experience out of this third entry in the franchise (turn to page 45 for more), the strong foundation laid by CD Projekt RED's first two games inspires confidence in *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*. *The Witcher* (PC, 2007) introduced Geralt and his dark fantasy world to American audiences, and won more than a hundred awards despite its odd timing-based combat system thanks to the exceptional storytelling. *The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings* (PC/Xbox 360, Mac; 2011/2012) won nearly a hundred critical awards as well on the strength of its non-linear storytelling, excellent characters, and rich world while ditching the unusual gameplay for more traditional third-person action. The second game also marked the debut of CD Projekt RED's internal engine technology, which proved capable of delivering lush environments and gorgeously smooth animations on par with the best RPGs on the

market. Together, the games have sold more than five million copies worldwide.

As ambitious and successful as *The Witcher 2* was, its sequel is an order of magnitude larger of an undertaking, and not just because it's coming out on "all available" top-of-the-line consoles (the company is being vague, but reading between the lines isn't difficult) on the same day it hits PC next year. "We decided that we were ready for the next step," says studio head Adam Badowski. "We decided to combine two types of games. We mastered storytelling in RPG games – that's our strongest side. On the other hand, we feel that we missed something. We missed the huge freedom of open-world games like *Skyrim*."



Proper mounted combat is still being tested and therefore isn't a definite part of the game, but horses are such a critical part of navigation that some kind of interaction between the beasts and combat is necessary



Ships float on the water in true physics interactions, so choppy seas are almost nausea-inducing



The studio has already demonstrated its ability to competently execute the mechanical trappings of a modern RPG, from tactically rich action combat to deep crafting, inventory, and progression systems. Now CD Projekt RED is challenging itself with the task of creating an open world the team has measured at 20 percent larger than Skyrim's. To handle such a tall demand, the development team has doubled in size. The Witcher 3 doesn't have chapters, acts, or other artificial break-points. For the first time, Geralt's story truly is what you make of it.

The new streaming technology in REDengine 3 allows Geralt to seamlessly cross from one end of the world to the other – a trip estimated at 30 to 40 minutes on

horseback – without seeing a loading screen. From solving mysteries in the dense urban environment of Novigrad to tracking monsters to their stinking lairs in the blasted forests and swamps of No Man's Land, Geralt's path is wide open. The massive landscape is your sandbox to be explored on foot, by horseback, and via boat as you pursue your long-lost love, play the game of empires on behalf of the northern kingdoms that still claim independence, and thwart the nefarious Wild Hunt. Fast travel allows players to instantly revisit any location they've discovered.

Filling a game world this large with content is a daunting task, and the team is taking several approaches to ensure that players aren't just wandering empty landscapes searching for the next pin in their map. "A huge goal is to keep the high quality of our quests, with all the cinematics and impressive events and moments," says game director Konrad Tomaszkiewicz. A point of interest will always be in sight, beckoning players to explore dank caves, embattled villages, decaying ruins,

and more. More than a hundred hours of hand-scripted quests fill the world, running the gamut from helping villagers to engineering the succession of the Skellige kings. Monster hunting (see sidebar on page 49) is a constant source of adventure, income, and unique rewards. Minigames based on the area of the world, like knife-throwing in Skellige, offer distraction and unique rewards, though players who don't care for those activities will never be required to complete them in order to progress the main storyline this time. A rudimentary in-game economy is full of profits to be made, especially if you resolve quests in such a way that they affect prices in your favor. Monsters, bandits, traders, animals, and more walk the wilderness alongside Geralt, and attack anyone they deem hostile. This can be a problem, opportunity, or both for a clever witcher.

Taking advantage of opportunities like luring a monster into a bandit camp is one of the ways The Witcher 3 rewards being smart rather than just good with a sword. The world is a dark and dangerous place, especially since enemies don't scale to the player's level. Being prepared is the best way to stay alive. Thanks to the seamless, open, dynamic world in The Witcher 3, finding a group of friendly sword arms to retreat to is as legitimate of a tactic as drinking the right potion or wearing the appropriate armor.

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THE CONSUMER-FRIENDLIEST DLC

CD Projekt RED has enjoyed a lot of goodwill from its fans thanks to free content patches with new quests, reams of bug fixes across many post-launch patches, and even releasing The Witcher 2 with no DRM through GOG.com. Studio head Adam Badowski believes that the pros of this approach still outweigh the cons:

"We believe that DRM can cause more problems to customers who actually have gone out and bought the game, than become a successful tool to fight the pirates. That's why we think it's possible to introduce a DRM-free business model, but it's too early to get into details. Another element we value and cherish is post-launch support. We look at it as a form of reward for our fans. With The Witcher 3 we would like to handle things in a similar way as we did with The Witcher 2, meaning you can expect free expansion packs after the release of the game. Speaking of updates, we will do our best to make sure that our next game is as polished as it can be on the day of its release. However, we will keep implementing patches and fixes accordingly. We want to assure you that we will support our game way past its release date."



A screenshot from the video game The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt. Geralt of Rivia is sitting on a wooden ledge in a dimly lit tavern. He is wearing his signature blue and brown outfit. In the background, several other characters are visible, and the atmosphere is warm and rustic, with wooden beams and hanging lanterns.

NO EXPERIENCE NECESSARY

You don't need to play the previous Witcher games to enjoy the third one, though the second one in particular comes highly recommended on its own merits. CD Projekt RED assures us that *The Witcher 3's* plot is fully standalone and that all of the introduction necessary to get up to speed on the world and Geralt himself is included in the early stages of the game. Even so, here's a quick primer for the uninitiated (spoilers present for the first two games, obviously):

GERALT OF RIVIA

The titular witcher, Geralt is a sterile mutant bred for swordsmanship and to survive the toxic effects of the powerful potions that give him the edge he needs to survive his monster-hunting profession. The silver sword on his back has taken the life of many fiends over the years, and its twin in steel serves Geralt equally well in his many confrontations with humans and demihumans. His mastery over several magical signs gives him access to powerful personal magic, though nothing on the level of the mystical forces that a full sorceress or wizard commands.

Plagued by amnesia throughout the first two games, Geralt has recovered the bulk of his memory as *Wild Hunt* starts. He is on a mission to reunite with his long-lost love, the raven-haired sorceress Yennefer. His complicated on-again, off-again romantic relationship with Triss Merigold still exists, but cannot compare – Yennefer is the love of his life whom he once traded his own life for in a previous confrontation with the *Wild Hunt*.

Geralt has shaped the fates of kings and kingdoms and no doubt will again (or not, if the player decides to avoid those plotlines). That being said, the main storyline of *The Witcher 3* is more personal than the political machinations of the previous game.

THE WILD HUNT

These spectral riders come from another dimension, stealing human children for their unknown but surely malevolent purposes. Their terrible ride has crossed Geralt's path in the past, notably when they attacked him on the island of Avallach as he and Yennefer recovered from their death to an angry peasant mob and subsequent resurrection by Geralt's adopted daughter, Ciri. The Hunt captured Yennefer and was tracked down by Geralt, who offered himself up to take her place. The Hunt therefore released an amnesiac Yennefer, whereabouts currently unknown. Directly before the events of the first game, Geralt escaped from the Hunt but lost his memory thanks to his time as a captive. The story of *The Witcher 3* should put a close to Geralt's dealings with the evil riders once and for all.

TRISS MERIGOLD

This redheaded sorceress of no small power has wandered the world at Geralt's side, served as royal advisor to sitting monarchs, and had many adventures besides. The role she plays in *The Witcher 3* is as yet unknown, but the events of the last game resulted in a precarious position for magic users in the North (specifics of which are dependent on choices made in the final act of the second game). Triss figures to have less impact on the world and the narrative this time than when she was part of the late King Foltest's court and entangled in vast magical conspiracies that brought entire nations to war.

As far as Triss and Geralt's sporadic romantic entanglement, the situation is

complicated. "At the end of *The Witcher 2*, Geralt and Triss went their separate ways without breaking it off or telling each other, 'This is it,'" says senior writer Borys Pugacz-Muraszkiewicz. "At the beginning of *The Witcher 3*, they haven't seen each other for a while – they're focused on other things – but inevitably there's interest. There's a bond there that is very difficult to pretend doesn't exist."

ZOLTAN CHIVAY

The mercenary dwarf has a checkered past, sometimes fighting alongside demihuman resistance to human hegemony and other times helping Geralt set things right even though it harms his own kin in the short term. Foul-mouthed and borderline alcoholic as he may be, few beings of any species can be counted on to help their friends in a pinch like Zoltan. The empire of Nilfgaard has no love for dwarves, especially mercenaries who have taken up arms against its aggression in the past, so Zoltan finds himself on the fringes of society once again as the empire pushes farther into the North in *The Witcher 3*.

DANDELION

The loquacious bard known as Dandelion counts Geralt as a friend, though his unquenchable tastes for wine, women, and song have led him to need rescuing at least as often as he has aided Geralt with his silver tongue and network of connections. Though Dandelion is under little personal threat from the Nilfgaardian invasion, he detests the centralized empire and its regimented society. Like Zoltan, he is doing his best to avoid the advancing armies in the third game.

THE NORTH

The setting of *The Witcher 3* is made up of independent kingdoms that war with each other as frequently as they trade, now fractured and disorganized thanks to the events of the second game. Assassins killed the kings Foltest of Temeria and Demavend of Aedirn, sorceresses tried to unite a disputed area under a figurehead mind-controlled dragon of a monarch, and demihuman persecution and the violent resistance it spawned blossomed into all-out civil war.

The metropolis of Novigrad still stands free, and the hardy warriors of the Skellige archipelago are independent but currently embroiled in the chaos of a succession dispute following the death of old King Bran. However, the lightning-quick advance of the invading Nilfgaardian armies has left vast reaches of land between Novigrad in the north and the riverlands of the south in turmoil, a so-called No Man's Land of burning villages and free-roaming bandits who prey on anyone they like in the absence of a central authority to impose order.



WHAT YOU SEE ISN'T ALL YOU'LL GET

CD Projekt RED has provided the screenshots you see here from its current in-game assets running on its internal PC development hardware. However, the renderer – the part of the engine that translates the game files into what you ultimately see on screen – is still in development and will boast significant improvements by the time *The Witcher 3* ships. “Right now you see the game in the old renderer, but it’s going to be taken to a truly next level,” says gameplay producer Marek Ziemak. In particular, the developers tell us that skin shaders and the dynamic lighting model will be markedly more advanced in the final version.





« CONTINUED FROM 44

REAL CHOICES, REAL CONSEQUENCES

Slaying monsters, fighting hostile humans in all of the many forms they come in, collecting items, leveling up, and exploring the world are all important parts of *The Witcher 3*. The element that elevates this franchise beyond the rank and file of any other competently crafted RPG, however, is the impressive amount of choice available to players within the narrative. This third entry applies the same concepts that propelled the last game to fame and success across a world 40 times larger, and brings clever solutions to the challenge open-world freedom poses to the narrative. "It was a really complex task to combine an open world with a story-driven game," says lead quest designer Mateusz Tomaszkiwicz. "To do that, we had to make some changes in the philosophy of making the game structure."

Narrative comes in three forms in *The Witcher 3*. On the lowest level, you have free-form activities like monster hunting, crafting, and individual standalone quests. One step above that, the political situation and

Nilfgaardian invasion is resolved through the core plotline of each major area (Skellige, Novigrad, No Man's Land). "Each of these lands has its own storyline," Tomaszkiwicz says. "If you're not interested in it, you can abandon the plotline, but it will have repercussions in the future. This is a new kind of non-linearity in our game. Not doing this plotline will be a choice that you have." Finally, the main narrative thread of Geralt's search for his loved ones and conflict with the Wild Hunt naturally runs throughout the entire game.

These narrative units have multiple branches that feed into themselves and each other. Nothing outside of the main storyline itself is required to beat the game, but you could have help in a main-line encounter from an ally you gained in the Skellige archipelago if you've completed certain quests in certain ways.

Major events in the main storyline act as "gates" for the state of the world. For example, a village threatened by bandits might be abandoned after certain events if the player doesn't help them with their troubles.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 50 »

Weather effects like this storm are dynamically generated and fully modeled as real volumetric clouds rather than being simply painted on the skybox



This scene will get rather less peaceful if any wolves happen by



HUNTING MONSTERS FOR FUN AND PROFIT

The previous Witcher games often approach Geralt's profession as a collection of abilities rather than the way of life that it is presented as in the novels they're based on. The monster-hunting mechanic, combined with the in-game representation of Geralt's heightened mutant senses, ties the witcher lifestyle into *The Witcher 3* on a deeper level.

Instead of the "kill 30 nekkers" style of contracts from the previous game, Geralt now encounters communities and individuals with monster-related problems that need solving. A press of the left trigger activates Geralt's witcher senses, which allows players to glean information from a crime scene upon discovering it. Within range of a scene of interest, the mechanic conveys clues to the player through the witcher muttering to himself and/or visual depictions of past events that represent Geralt's reasoning.

For example, a pattern of scuff marks on the ground and the disposition of a corpse might lead Geralt to say something about a powerful, sudden attack and the player to see a phantom-like figure being jerked off its feet and its neck yanked to an odd angle. Examining the body's waxy skin, Geralt might say something about how it has been drained of blood — a clue that narrows down the list of possible assailants. Finding sufficient clues through examining physical evidence, talking to people, and even researching monster behavior in books eventually leads Geralt to the culprit. In the case of this example, a vampire is the only monster that fits the bill.

The knowledge players acquire about the enemy is valuable for more than tracking. Preparing yourself with the right potions and armor beforehand makes a huge difference in any fight, and the more you know about a foe's capabilities the better off you are. Time of day and other conditions affect where monsters appear and their abilities, so don't plan your werewolf hunt for a full moon. Most importantly, you can strike critical areas in combat depending on how much you learn about monster anatomy and tactics: disabling a vampire's poisoning attack by hitting its venom gland, stopping its regeneration by hitting the specialized organ responsible, or even pulling off an instant kill by skewering both of its hearts with precise thrusts. CD Projekt RED is still deciding between using a handful of in-combat special moves for these attacks and a slow-motion quick-time event style of executing the strikes.

The aftermath of a successful hunt is the best part. Defeated monsters leave otherwise unobtainable alchemical and crafting ingredients necessary for the creation of unique potions, items, and mutagens that allow Geralt to obtain special powers and upgrades in the new mutation development tree. These kills also serve as the witcher's primary method of income.



« CONTINUED FROM 48

The developers were understandably reticent to share detailed examples for fear of spoilers, but the general idea seems like a sound response to the challenges of player choice and non-linear storylines in an open-world game.

Romance and sex have always been part of Geralt's world, and the third game continues the franchise's slow move toward more romance and fewer shallow sexual encounters. "We want to treat it maturely like we did in *The Witcher 2*," Tomaszewicz says. "We are not bringing sex cards back." With the story's emphasis on Geralt's search for his lost love, we can hope for a somewhat more mature handling of the subject. "When we talk about maturity, we talk also about things that happen to a common guy who is looking for loved ones," says lead writer Marcin Blacha. "He's not a kid, he's not a young boy who's looking for adventure. He wants to be left alone."

Though *The Witcher 3* doesn't have entirely different environments based on singular choices like the previous game – a structure that would be impractical in an open-world setting – players face similarly impactful decisions.

Players engage with mutually exclusive storylines and situations based on certain momentous choices, though not quite on the level of *The Witcher 2*.

DIGGING DEEPER

While *The Witcher 3*'s game mechanics are based heavily on the systems in the previous game, the developers are revisiting many details. Common concerns, like the backward difficulty curve, are being addressed, and reworking the flow of combat is aimed at bringing the gameplay more in line with mainstream action games without compromising the second game's tactical variety or high skill ceiling.

The presentation is getting an expected facelift, with 96 animations for Geralt's combat moves as opposed to the last game's 20. An innovative "weighting" system for the camera helps to keep the biggest threats in frame at all times, which will hopefully mitigate some of the previous title's problems with enemies slipping behind Geralt unseen.

The *Witcher 3*'s combat system makes three significant changes that combine to solve the problem of



The toolset the studio is releasing with the game is powerful enough to create anything the engine can handle, up to and including a town like this, the surrounding countryside, and hand-scripted quests that take place there

being locked into long animations. Every button press is now mapped to a single strike, each move takes a roughly equivalent time to execute, and you can always interrupt your current action to immediately dodge or block. You can even dodge or block when out of stamina, though you'll be staggered in that case. This marks a repudiation of the initial design concept of the second game, which demanded weightier decisions in moment-to-moment combat but alienated some players with its harsh punishment of poor choices or targeting miscues.

"Our goal is to make the combat more intimate," says lead gameplay designer Maciej Szcześniak. "You don't run – in the Witcher 2 you were running constantly. You walk, but your attacks are very fast. Your opponents also walk but they have charges and things like that." Geralt's explosive dodge roll is also replaced by a pivot move that retains its defensive utility without the game-breaking mobility. Attacks, however, are faster than they were in the last game. The team hopes these changes to the philosophy of moment-to-moment combat create a more naturalistic but still deadly experience.



A YOUNG MAN'S QUEST

The story of Geralt's search for a would-be king in the Skellige islands is an example of how CD Projekt RED pulls all of the elements of *The Witcher 3* together into a cohesive whole. The following is an early, unfinished version of a piece of the overarching Skellige storyline.

Geralt's horseback ride through a forest whipped by a gathering storm into a bustling port town seamlessly blends into a long climb up to the castle that commands the seaside cliffs. The camera cuts to a directed cinematic view as Geralt walks onto the balcony to speak with the local lord, whose son Hjalmar has gone to a legendarily dangerous island in search of a relic that will proclaim him a hero ready to lead the fractious islanders as a high king. The only interface element onscreen throughout the entire conversation is the occasional set of dialogue options, shadowed white text superimposed on the naked scene.

Witcher and noble stroll across the balcony as they chat, Geralt's world-weary manner evident as he leans up against the parapet to study his friend's anxious face. After the conversation concludes with the witcher promising to investigate the young man's disappearance, the view snaps back to the standard third-person cam and Geralt heads off in search of the drunken navigator who pointed Hjalmar on his way.

After locating the man and plying him with a malted beverage, Geralt is told that he must find a special horn to keep bloodthirsty sirens from attacking him en route to the island Hjalmar sought. What would be a sub-quest on its own in another game is a footnote in *The Witcher 3*, as Geralt bullies the pilot into giving up his personal horn. Being a famous monster hunter with a reputation for a short temper (one of Geralt's nicknames is "the Butcher of Blaviken," a moniker based on a misunderstanding the witcher has made no effort to correct) serves him well.

Geralt makes his way to a boat moored on the pier, hops in, and sets sail into the storm. A few uneventful minutes later, he lands on the coast of the cursed island he seeks. Mangled bodies on the shore tell a grim tale,

and he mutters under his breath as he passes by them. A swarm of crab-like scavengers attacks his ankles, but a quick application of the flamethrowing Igni magical sign fries most and sends the rest scurrying away from an area still smoldering with flames.

The witcher is greeted by an even more gruesome sight upon ascending through a narrow gorge onto a windy plateau. Translucent representations of past events animate onscreen as he activates his mutant witcher senses to read the clues left by a body impaled on a tree, bloodstains on the ground, and scattered arms and armor. "Lifted and dropped," Geralt says to himself.

Eventually the trail leads Geralt to a dimly lit cave filled with fragments of broken ships and mismatched odds and ends that once belonged to them and their crew. An urgent whisper beckons him to a makeshift prison holding Hjalmar, who points out the ice giant sleeping nearby. Geralt is faced with a choice: Free the man and help him defeat the giant, which would allow Hjalmar to claim the kingship of Skellige by virtue of such a heroic deed, or assassinate the sleeping giant safely and risk Hjalmar's wrath.

The developer controlling the demo chooses to do things Hjalmar's way, and a desperate battle ensues as the would-be hero runs over and smacks the giant awake as soon as he's released. The giant stomps anyone nearby, bashes the floor to knock deadly stalactites loose from the ceiling, and whips a huge anchor by its chain into its foes. Eventually Geralt and Hjalmar are victorious, and the demo ends.

In the full game, outcomes would be different based on both the ultimate decision with Hjalmar and the giant, as well as how much of Hjalmar's crew the player saved (an aspect that was inactive for demo purposes).

Enemy AI has been completely rebuilt, and scripted boss encounters are out as well. The team grimaced and laughed when asked about the heavy quick-time event usage of the second game's Kayran fight. One boss-type encounter we saw, with Geralt locked in deadly combat with an ice giant at the end of a quest segment (see sidebar on page 51), could repeat out in the wilderness if the witcher comes across another of the creatures. The difference would be that a giant on a mountaintop would lack the contextual stalactite-dropping move of the giant in the cave.

Environmental contributions to combat don't stop there. Around a dozen types of interactive objects exist in *The Witcher 3*. The developers gave one example of a wasp hive Geralt can irritate with the telekinetic Aard sign to create a damaging distraction for his foes, and disperse the swarm with the fiery Igni sign once the wasp swarm becomes more problematic than helpful.

These magical signs have been retooled as well. Each of the five signs has its basic form, like Igni's new flamethrower effect. If the player advances down the magic tree as Geralt levels up, they can unlock a second form of the sign – in Igni's case, a 360-degree blast that immolates anything nearby. Yrden's small trap can be modified into a larger field that slows any enemies within, as another example. The player retains the use of the basic form as well.

The other two trees, based on swordsmanship and alchemy, are also returning in slightly different forms. Players who specialize in swordfighting can unlock new strikes now, as well as boosts like improved stamina and parrying. CD Projekt RED didn't offer much information on the alchemy tree, other than that the mutation mechanic has been moved off of to a separate development path (unlocked via monster hunting, see sidebar on page 49) independent of the level-up process, and so the alchemy specialization is based more on potions now.

Some forms of improvement are available for the player's horse and boat as well, though those are still



in development. The most exciting idea the developers have for those is the possibility that players could access their long-term storage stash from their horse as well as from inns. In any case, the team is well aware of how frustrating inventory management was in *The Witcher 2* (especially at release, with substantial improvements coming in post-release patches). CD Projekt RED is committed to a less tedious process for this entry.

Powerful weapons and armor can be found in many ways, but crafting remains critical to players seeking to maximize Geralt's capabilities. Players can customize their crafted items now, with some components able to be substituted for similar things – monster scales instead of leather in a piece of armor, for example.

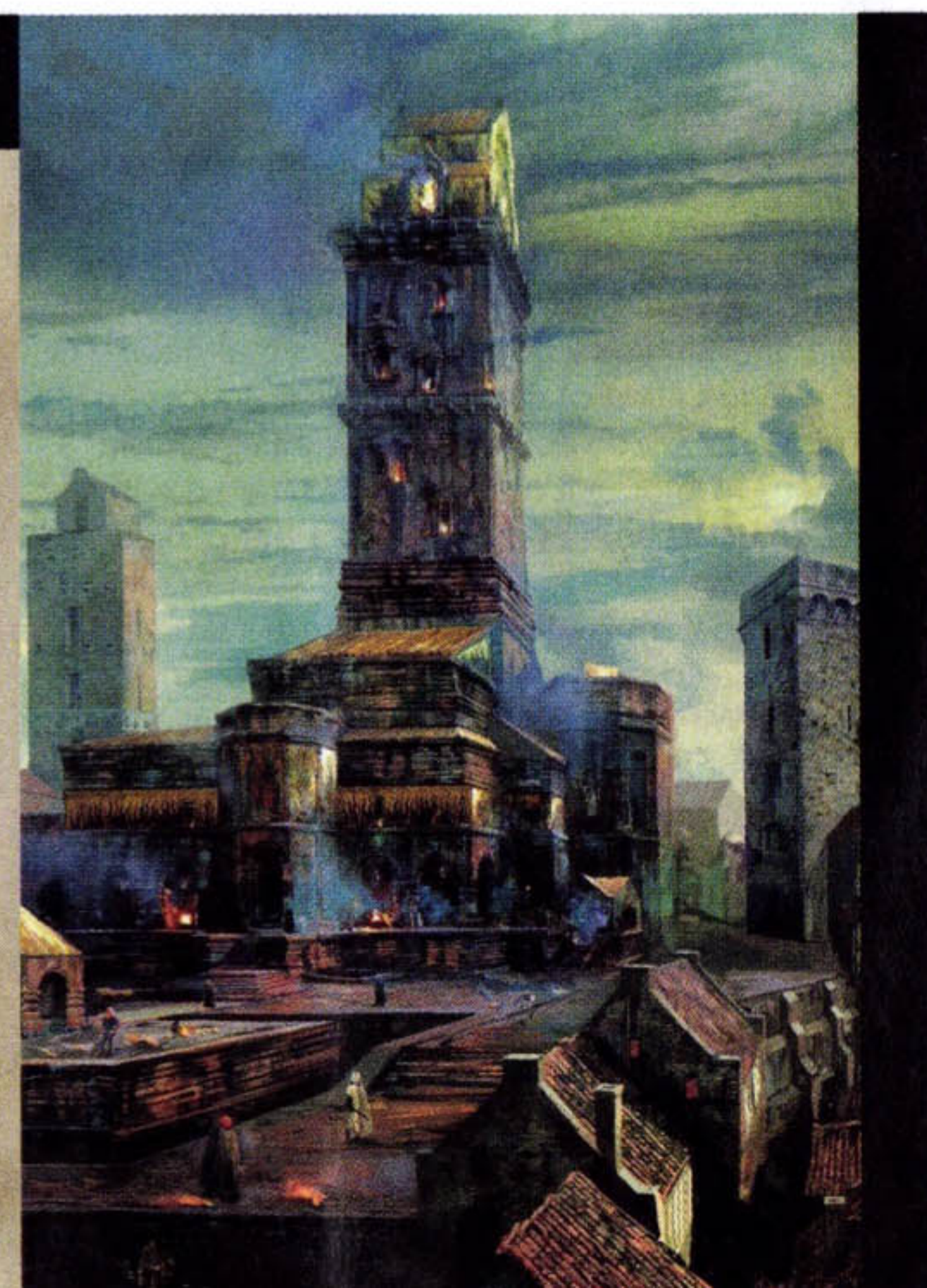
This obviously affects the properties of the final item. Unique components can be found as part of monster hunts or questlines, which can be combined with special recipes to create artifacts of immense power. Don't expect the village blacksmith to be able to craft the legendary sword you're lusting after, though; finding the crafter with the skill to execute a high-end recipe is part of the effort required to obtain such an item.

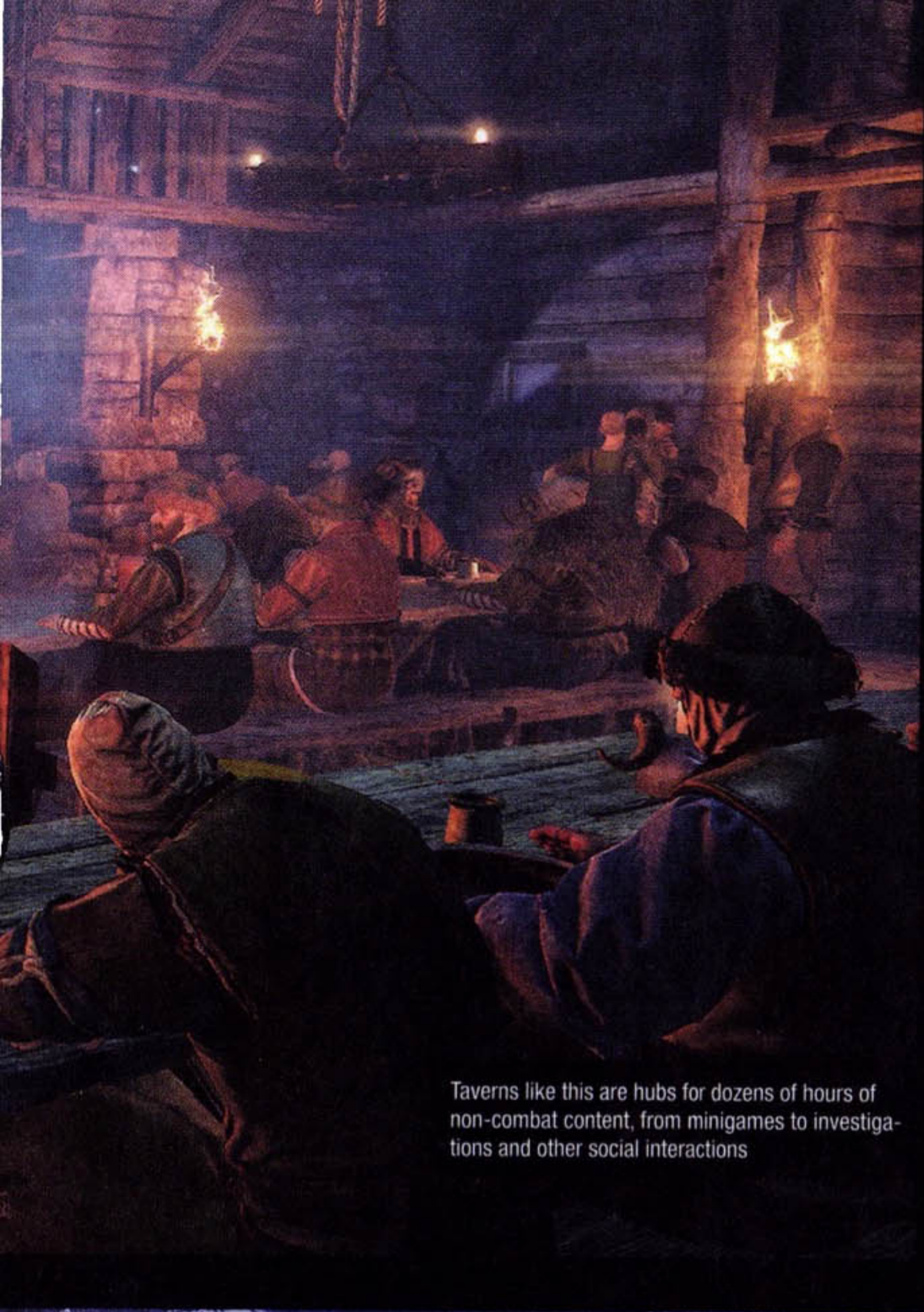
Each piece of armor has its own unique appearance just as in the previous game, though they benefit from the improved presentation and the new cloth simulation. Players can also visit a barber to change up Geralt's hairstyle, though dyeing it is out of the question – he's called the White Wolf, after all.

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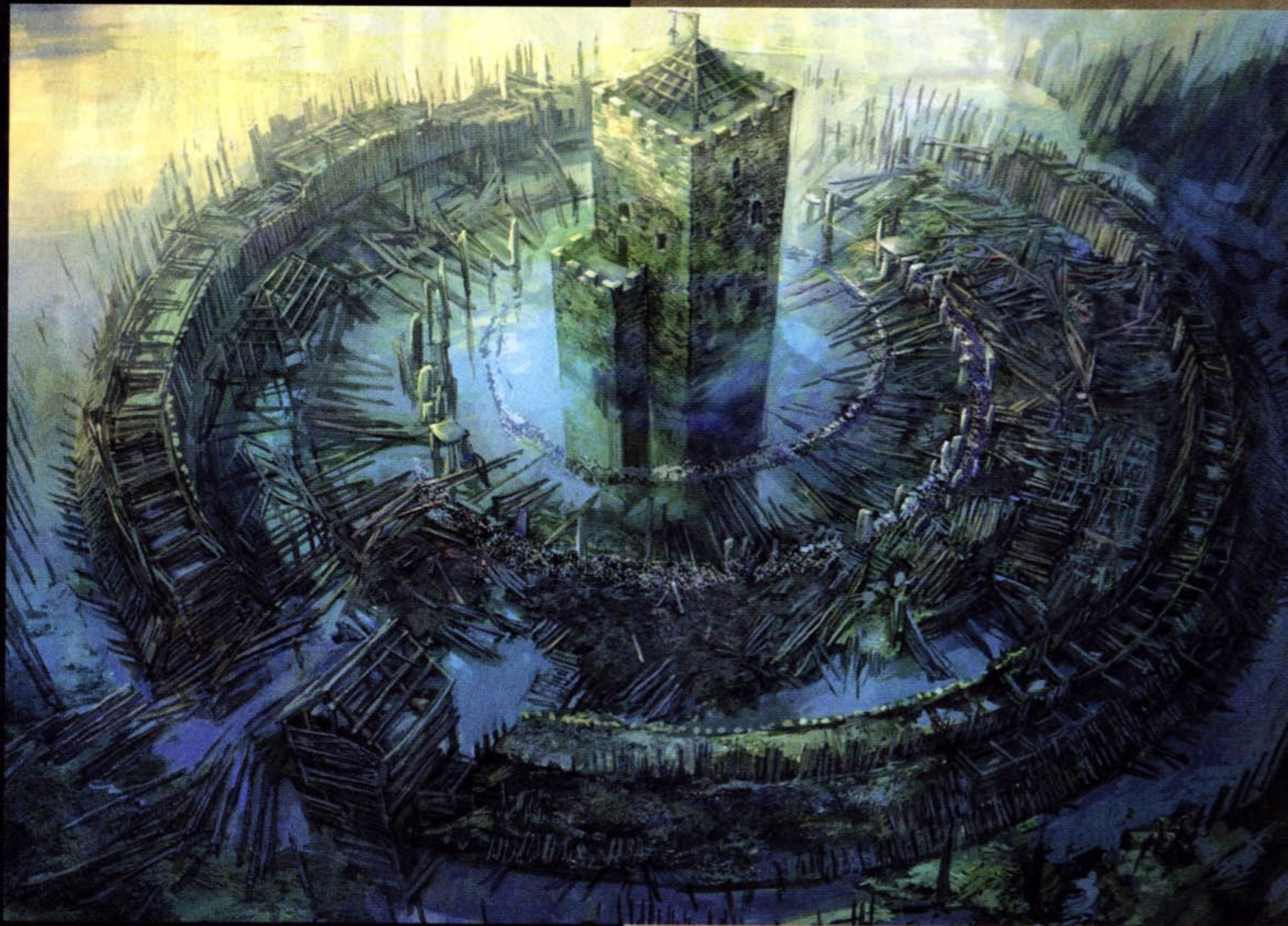
ПЕХТ-ГЕП HARDWARE

CD Projekt RED is keeping mum about any platforms *The Witcher 3* is in development for besides PC, but the company has confirmed that it will launch on whatever console platforms are most powerful when it comes out next year.





Taverns like this are hubs for dozens of hours of non-combat content, from minigames to investigations and other social interactions



Skelligan longships are impressive crafts, but Geralt's boat is a one-man affair



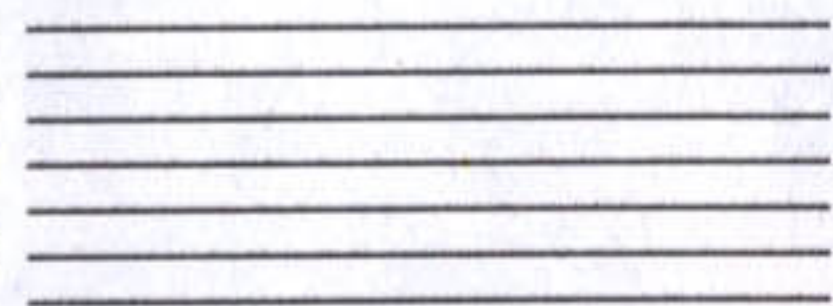
Telling another chapter of Geralt's story with a few tweaks and new visual effects would have been a perfectly acceptable direction for CD Projekt RED to take the franchise, but *The Witcher 3* is much more. This third title is the culmination of Geralt's long-running conflict with the Wild Hunt, but it's also the result of a talented studio learning innumerable lessons from its impressive success to date and challenging itself to go above and beyond expectations. Delivering an open world without compromising on the non-linear storytelling and strong characterizations that got the studio to where it is today is an ambitious goal, especially considering the challenges of appearing on new hardware platforms, but the team is committed to doing just that.

It's difficult to imagine a more fitting way to kick off the next generation of single-player RPGs. ♦

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Dive deeper into *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* at gameinformer.com/witcher3, with video interviews filmed at the CD Projekt RED studio in Warsaw, Poland about everything from monster hunting to the company's struggles as an independent developer, a chance to get your questions about the game answered, and the 360-degree rotating model of the Ice Giant that digital subscribers are already enjoying



BIOSHOCK INFINITE



» **PLATFORM:** PlayStation 3 • Xbox 360 • PC » **STYLE:** 1-Player Shooter » **PUBLISHER:** 2K Games » **DEVELOPER:** Irrational Games » **RELEASE:** March 26

The BioShock Infinite Primer

★ BY MATT BERTZ ★

In a few short weeks, gamers will board a rocket bound for Columbia. This wondrous city in the sky was created to showcase American exceptionalism around the globe, but disappeared years ago after attacking the Chinese during the Boxer Rebellion. Now a man with a mysterious past must venture into the lost city to find a woman at the center of the civil war that has erupted in the aftermath of Columbia's disgrace.

Developer Irrational Games is still holding its cards close to the vest regarding the game's narrative, but a hands-on demo of the opening chapters and a roundtable discussion with the studio leads has given us a clearer picture of what sorts of things gamers should pay attention to when they step into this fantastic alternate reality.



Amazing New Setting, Same Great Gameplay


★ ★ ★

When Irrational Games unveiled *BioShock Infinite*, the initial reactions generally fell into two camps. Some gamers flippantly thought of it as “Rapture in the sky,” while others believed it promised an experience unlike anything they’d ever seen. After spending four hours with the game, I can report that *BioShock Infinite* falls somewhere in between those two preconceptions.

The beginning has several parallels to the opening sequence of the original *BioShock*. *Infinite* kicks off in the year 1912, with protagonist Booker DeWitt being rowed out to a lighthouse off the coast of Maine – not unlike the one that served as an entrance to Rapture. Instead of descending into the underground city via a bathysphere, Booker climbs to the top of the tower to find a solitary red chair. When he sits down, the room around him transforms into the cockpit of a rocket. Blasting into the sky, the player is introduced to the majestic scope of the flying city.

Though Rapture and Columbia are both idealistic utopias run by demagogues, this city in the sky looks and feels markedly different. The sunshine-lavished world stands in stark contrast to the dark and foreboding interiors of Rapture. Where the underwater city was largely vacant outside of the deranged splicers and dangerous Big Daddies, Columbia is a vibrant city with bustling boardwalks filled with regular citizens going about their daily business.

The setting is distinct, but *BioShock* fans will be happy to hear that much of the gameplay is couched in the series’ exceptional tradition. As you explore this inviting new world, you can scrounge for items and unravel the story of the city through audio logs and kinoscope videos. You can also buy new equipment and supplies from vending machines located throughout the town.

A large background image showing Booker DeWitt, a bald man with a beard and a dark coat, looking towards the right. In the foreground, Elizabeth, a woman with dark hair wearing a black dress and a choker, looks upwards with a concerned expression. The setting is a dark, industrial interior with greenish lighting.

Building a Better Companion

Elizabeth is more than just the woman DeWitt is sent to rescue from Columbia. She's also one of the most engaging AI companions I've met since rubbing shoulders with Alyx Vance in *Half-Life 2*.

Making Elizabeth such a welcome companion wasn't an easy feat for Irrational Games. Throughout the development process, the team struggled with finding ways to make her relevant to gameplay, helping the player forge emotional bonds with her, and making sure she didn't impede exploration or combat.

Some early focus testers even claimed they hated Elizabeth. Figuring out why she rubbed them the wrong way proved difficult.

"It's not focus testing in the way that people understand it where they give specific instructions – it's a lot closer to being a physician trying to diagnose someone," says writer Joe Fielder. "Someone comes to you with a set of symptoms and they're trying to figure it out themselves so there can be a lot of noise there. Your job is to try and figure out what the real symptom is. It might have some correlation to what they say or it might be entirely unrelated."


In scrutinizing the many complaints, brainstorming ways to refine her behavior to be non-intrusive but helpful, and injecting small emotional flourishes like Elizabeth holding your hand as you awake from getting knocked unconscious, Irrational transformed her from an annoying Disney princess into a helpful and engaging partner in crime.

Spending her formative years in captivity, Elizabeth has developed a wide-eyed curiosity about the world. While you explore the city, she soaks everything in, interacting with the citizens and pointing you toward things she finds interesting.

Despite being locked away from society for several years, she also proves to be surprisingly useful. She tosses you any coins she finds, picks locks, and even offers to resupply your health or ammo in the middle of an intense battle. Her most useful trait, obviously, is her supernatural ability to tear the fabric of reality to create environmental advantages for you in combat.

Like many alluring characters, Elizabeth also has an air of mystery surrounding her. When Booker infiltrates the tower where she is being held against her will, it's clear her father's minions have been observing her for scientific purposes. Moving toward the chamber holding Elizabeth, Booker walks past a warning sign that reads "Do not approach siphon while the specimen is awake."

Elizabeth also has a strong fascination with the City of Light, painting pictures of the Eiffel Tower, and even tearing open a portal to 1980s Paris to reveal a marquee displaying showtimes for "La Revanche Du Jedi." When Booker frees her from captivity, she suggests they should head to France. Is she simply a Francophile, or is there something more driving her desire to visit Paris?

A smaller image on the right side of the page showing a statue of John Wilkes Booth, the assassin of Abraham Lincoln. The statue is a dark, weathered figure standing on a pedestal. The background is a bright, hazy outdoor setting.

The Dividing Line

Though Columbia looks picturesque with its gorgeous neoclassical buildings, its political atmosphere is anything but. In the wake of the international incident, a civil war has erupted between the devout followers of Father Comstock and the disenfranchised citizens who don't meet the criteria for their Aryan society.

Institutionalized racism is apparent throughout the wealthy districts of Columbia. Much like America before the civil rights movement, the city has separate bathrooms and drinking fountains for the "lesser races." Signs hang within these quarters with slogans like "mind your manners amongst your betters."

Hostile attitudes aren't just passively ingrained in this society; antagonistic behavior is openly encouraged. When exploring the fairgrounds, Booker DeWitt wins a raffle and is given a baseball. Attention turns to the stage, where a mixed race couple is bound to a display featuring cutouts of monkeys. Booker can choose to either throw the baseball at the couple or chuck it toward the racist ringleader of this abominable activity.

While making his way toward the large statue where Elizabeth is being held captive, Booker comes across the Fraternal Order of the Raven, which may as well be the Columbia chapter of the Ku Klux Klan. The lobby of their building prominently features a statue of John Wilkes Booth, the man who assassinated Abraham Lincoln.

With this introduction to the Columbian way of life, it's hard not to feel sympathetic toward the Vox Populi before coming into contact with them. But based on previous conversations with Irrational, we know that this group, which started with pure intentions, has grown increasingly violent as well.

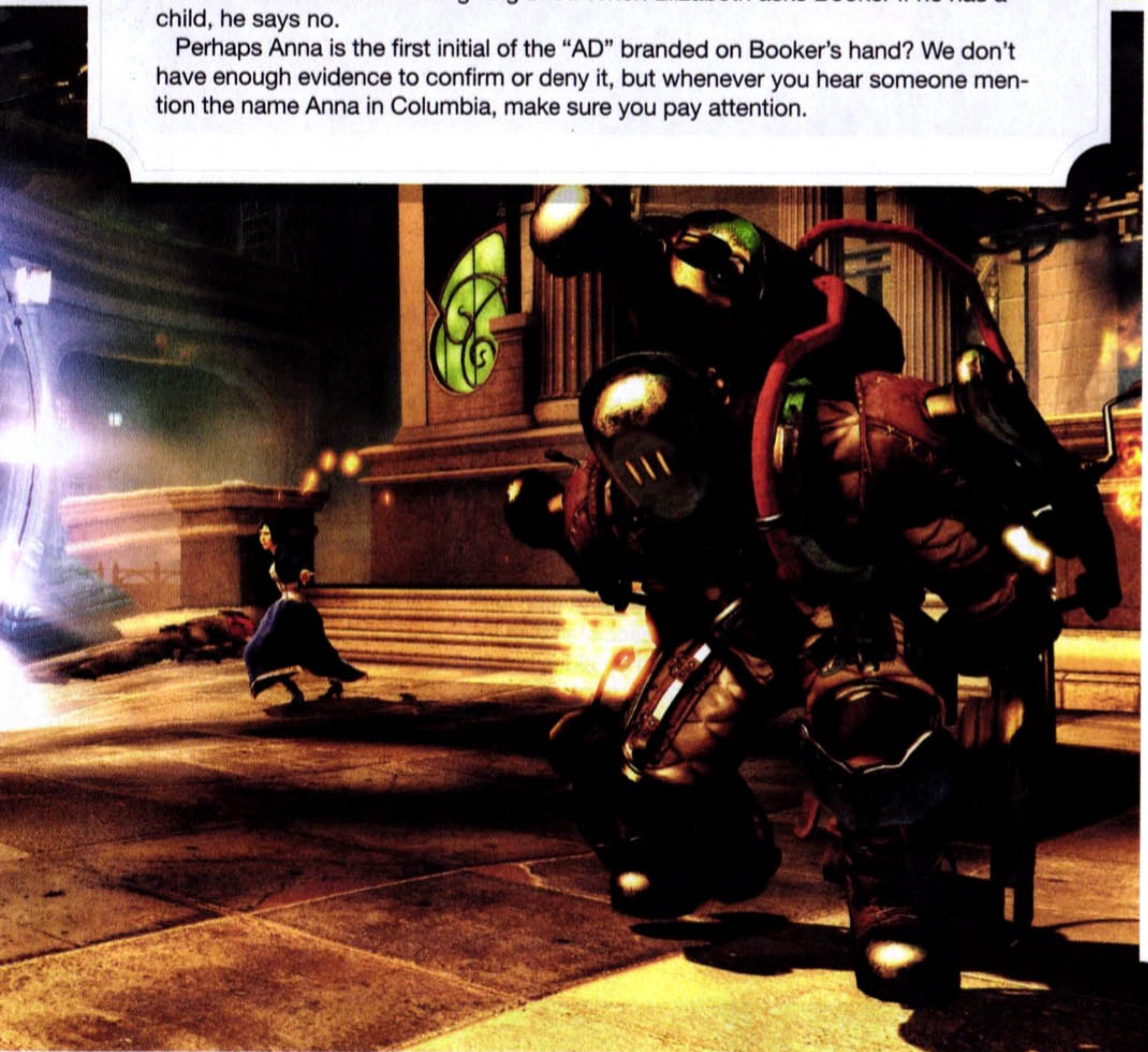


Who's Anna?

During a harrowing escape from Songbird and the Monument Island where Elizabeth was being held captive, Booker is knocked unconscious when he plummets from the sky into a body of water. With the help of Elizabeth, he washes up on the shore of Battleship Bay, a luxury beachfront where Columbia citizens go to unwind. When he awakens in a haze, he calls for a woman named Anna.

Later in the game when he and Elizabeth are exploring the sights of the Battleship Bay arcade, a woman mistakes Elizabeth for an Annabelle. Knowing Irrational, this probably isn't a coincidence. Booker later reveals that someone close to him named Anna had died while giving birth. When Elizabeth asks Booker if he has a child, he says no.

Perhaps Anna is the first initial of the "AD" branded on Booker's hand? We don't have enough evidence to confirm or deny it, but whenever you hear someone mention the name Anna in Columbia, make sure you pay attention.



Weird Science

BioShock Infinite opens with a quote: "The mind of the subject will desperately struggle to create memories where none exist." This passage is pulled from Rosalind Lutece's *Barriers to Trans-Dimensional Travel*. Lutece isn't just a fictitious scientist studying quantum mechanics; she appears to be a person who has a greater understanding of what is going on in Columbia. You first meet her on the boat DeWitt takes to the lighthouse. While bickering with the man in the yellow raincoat rowing the boat, she retorts, "Coming here was your idea," and explains that she "doesn't believe in the exercise." What exercise? "The entire thought experiment."

What exactly is going on? I raise the subject with creative director Ken Levine, who dances around narrative spoilers but sheds some light on the allusions to a quantum mechanics experiment. "I've always loved areas of science that seem counterintuitive," he says.

When I mention the dizzying complexity of quantum mechanics (even the Wikipedia entry is peppered with incomprehensible jargon), he distills its essence by explaining the "many worlds" interpretation of the Schrödinger's Cat thought experiment.

This exercise was born out of the revelation that a piece of light can mathematically be interpreted as both a particle and a wave, which scientists previously understood as mutually exclusive properties. To explain this paradox, physicist Erwin Schrödinger came up with a thought experiment.

Imagine you place a cat in a sealed box containing a device that activates a deadly poison exactly 50 percent of the time you perform the exercise. Is the cat alive or dead? Schrödinger suggests that it exists in a state of all things – it's both alive and dead – because, in the universe you inhabit, it doesn't have any existence until it's observed.

"If you think about that, what it means is that effectively there are infinite states the universe could exist in, and by observing it they will actually get resolved," Levine says. "It's so counterintuitive to how we think and it sounds like science fiction, but if you accept that fact that light can be observed as a particle and a wave, then it's actually not science fiction. It's actually science... Every time there is a decision point, it opens up into another infinite set of variations. You can imagine all the permutations that would form around just the smallest microcosm of existence."

This could explain the strange occurrences Booker encounters throughout his journey in Columbia. Every once in a while you may spot a shimmer, or an emblem or item may transform right in front of your eyes. The citizens of Columbia play songs that aren't written until decades later, like The Beach Boys song "God Only Knows" and Cyndi Lauper's "Girls Just Wanna Have Fun." How have these future occurrences made their way to the year 1912? Maybe through tears in the fabric of reality that Elizabeth – and perhaps other people in Columbia – are capable of creating.

Lutece and her partner have a keen interest in observing how all of this plays out, revisiting Booker and Elizabeth repeatedly during their attempted escape. At one such encounter early in the game, the duo asks you to choose between two necklace charms for Elizabeth. One has the image of a cage, and the other an image of a soaring bird. Upon making your choice, Lutece and her unidentified partner vaguely analyze the significance of your choice. Are Booker and Elizabeth the centerpieces of some strange scientific experiment? Considering Elizabeth is openly referred to as a specimen in the tower where she's been held captive since a young age, it seems plausible.



Booker DeWitt's Baggage

Playing through the first four hours of the game revealed several new details about BioShock Infinite protagonist Booker DeWitt that left me asking more questions regarding who he is and why he's been chosen to recover Elizabeth from Columbia.

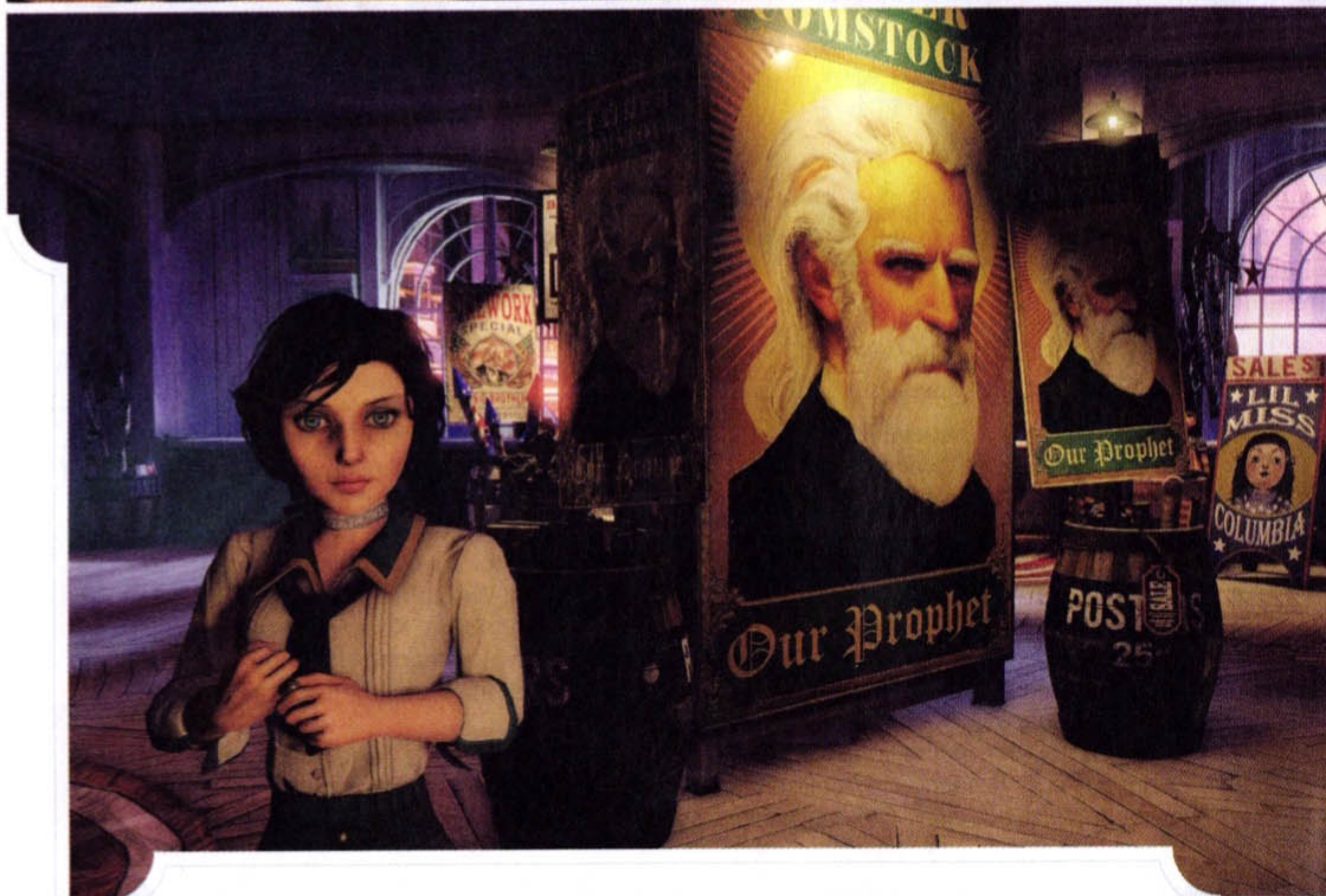
Based on previous discussions with Irrational, we already knew that DeWitt is a former employee of the Pinkerton Agency, an organization that was the largest private law enforcement organization on the planet at its peak. Pinkerton agents were hired muscle renowned for crushing union uprisings and tracking down wanted outlaws, so we know Booker is accustomed to violence.

When DeWitt is being transported to the lighthouse on a rowboat at the beginning of the game, he is handed a wooden box with a plaque that identifies him as a former soldier from the seventh cavalry regiment during the Wounded Knee Massacre. During this tragic event, the American army opened fire on a Lakota encampment after a deaf man's firearm discharged, killing more than 150 Lakota men, women, and children. Was DeWitt a participant in this atrocity or merely a witness?

After arriving at the lighthouse, a note made out to Booker is posted on the door that reads, "Bring us the girl and wipe away the debt." The player is reminded of the urgency of this task during a flashback later in the game where Booker finds himself back in his office. The year is 1893 (the same year as the World's Fair: Columbian Exposition in Chicago), and men are pounding on his front door demanding that Booker get the girl. What debt does Booker owe these men, and why do they covet Elizabeth so badly?

Booker finds himself back in this familiar location every time you die in the game. Instead of being reborn in a Vita-Chamber, you rejoin the fight by walking out of the office and back into Columbia.

Though Booker would be content to carry out his duty with minimal interference from the Columbians, he is drawn into the brewing civil war between The Founders and the Vox Populi when a citizen spots the letters "AD" branded on the back of his right hand. According to the prophecy of Columbia leader Zachary Hale Comstock, this is the mark of the False Shepherd, the one who will lead the lamb of Columbia (Comstock's daughter Elizabeth) out of the city. This revelation ignites the violent impulses of the citizens, making DeWitt's snatch-and-grab job much more difficult.



The Power of Prophecy

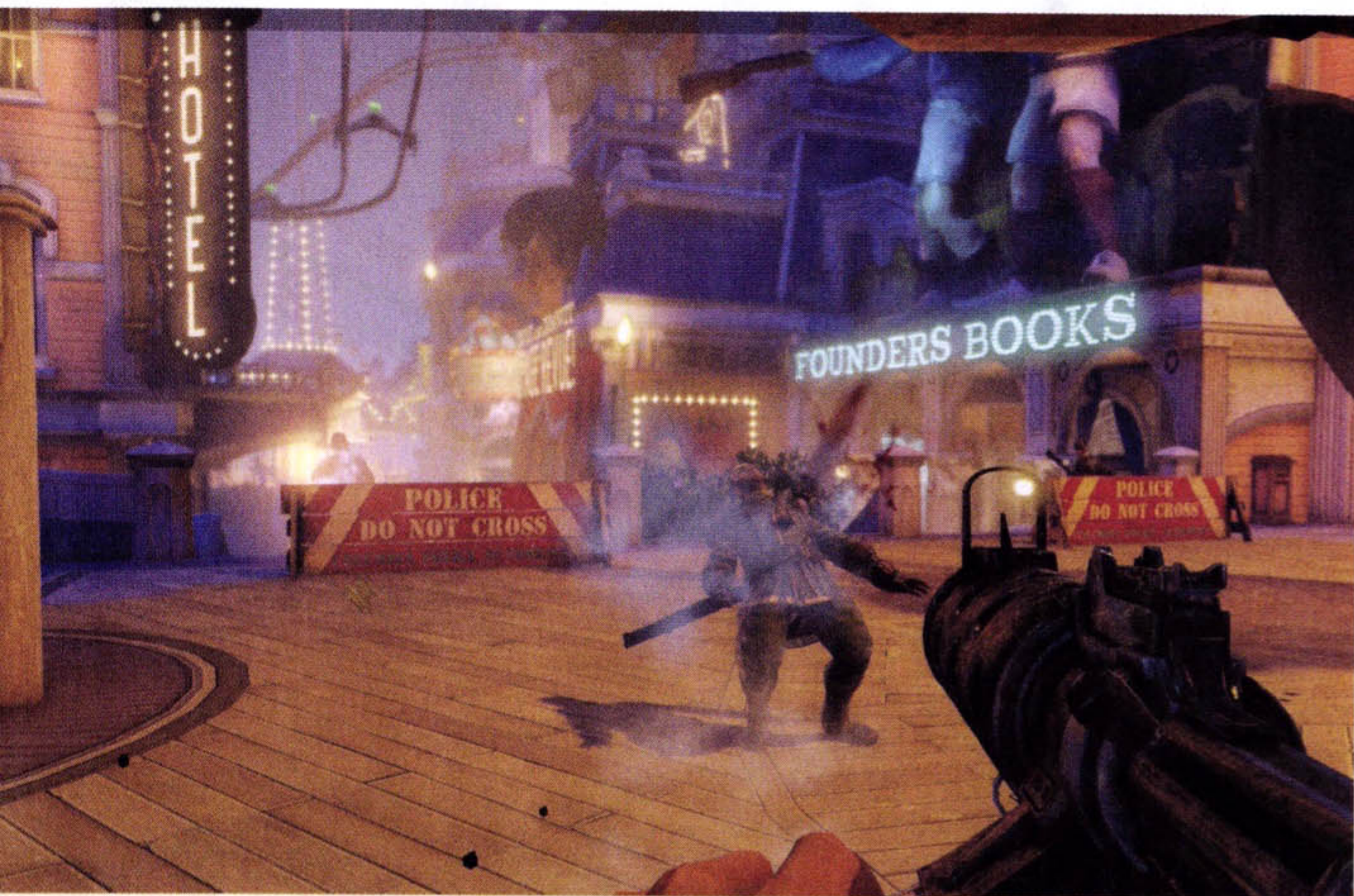
The U.S. Constitution isn't the only thing the ultranationalist Founders party worships. Its constituents pray to statues of the founding fathers, but they direct most of their zealotry toward their magnetic leader, Zachary Hale Comstock, who claims to be a prophet.

The religious overtones resonate throughout Columbia. The city's welcome center is a cathedral-like building bathed in light from candles and sunbeams shining through stained glass representations of Comstock. To gain entrance to the city proper, you must submit to a baptism by Columbian citizens wearing white robes.

Comstock knows how to amplify this religious fervor. Propaganda is plastered throughout the city referring to him as "Father Comstock" and warning the populace about his vision that a False Shepherd (Booker) intends to lead The Seed of the Prophet (Elizabeth) out of the city. Elizabeth is also referred to as the Lamb in some posters, a religious symbol typically associated with innocence and ritual sacrifice.

These prophecies sound crazy to an outsider, but Booker DeWitt realizes he plays an integral role in Comstock's liturgical drama. How did Comstock know Booker intends to liberate Elizabeth? Even weirder, how did he know that Booker has the initials "AD" branded on his hand?

In the Hall of Heroes, Comstock has installed exhibits that paint him as the hero of The Battle at Wounded Knee and the Boxer Rebellion – nothing like revisionist history to paint you in a good light. Another exhibit claims that Daisy Fitzroy, the figurehead of the rival Vox Populi political faction, killed Comstock's wife. Given the factual inaccuracy of the other two exhibits, this could also be a strategic mischaracterization of events.



Tailor the Way You Play

As in the past two BioShock games, BioShock Infinite's array of weapons and gear affords players the ability to confront enemies with various play styles. Each weapon in the game features four upgrade slots that grant perks like improved accuracy, more damage, bigger magazine clips, or quicker reloads.

The Vigors, the supernatural abilities players acquire by drinking a potion, also have two upgrade slots to make your preferred powers more effective. The demo didn't showcase all of the Vigors, but the ones we used felt very similar to plasmids from previous games. Devil's Kiss is basically an incendiary grenade, similar to Incinerate. Bucking Bronco suspends enemies in the air, just like Cyclone Trap. Possession allows you to take control of inanimate objects like turrets. Once upgraded it can also be used on humans. Murder of Crows is essentially the avian version of Insect Swarm, sending a hostile group of birds to attack the target. Shock Jockey stuns enemies temporarily.

BioShock Infinite replaces Gene Tonics with Gear, passive abilities that grant players specific performance bonuses. Players can equip up to four pieces of gear, one each on the head, torso, arms, and legs. Finding the right gear to augment your preferred play style can turn you into a formidable foe. For instance, if you love fighting from the skylines (in-game ziplines that you use with your Skyhook) you could equip DeWitt with Throttle Control for enhanced speeds and faster stopping abilities, the Newton's Law gear that knocks back enemies when you dismount the skylines, and the Skyline Reloader gear that automatically reloads your weapon when you jump on or off the rails.

Elizabeth's ability to open tears in the fabric of reality also helps players dictate how battles play out. If you like vertical combat, you can have her reveal some elevated positions. If you prefer to bury your enemies in a hail of bullets, sometimes she may provide the option of a stationary turret.

Taking to the Skyrails

When Irrational first showcased the skylines during our cover visit in 2010, we left wondering how the development team could pull off the combat. Cruising down curving rails at 60 miles per hour like a rollercoaster in first-person perspective is disorienting enough. How do you add melee and ranged combat and still have the player feel in control?

After experiencing these combat sequences myself, I'm surprised how comfortable the combat is. The left analog stick serves as a throttle that allows you to speed up or slow down at will. A simple click of the B button allows you to reverse your direction on the rail, and swinging the camera around with the right analog stick reveals new landing positions on other rails or the ground. Thanks to smooth camera transitions, jumping between new positions is hardly disorienting. Within 10 minutes of playing around on the rails, I felt comfortable enough to attempt some acrobatic leaps that preserved my momentum and allowed me to reverse my direction at high speeds.

If you spend a lot of time on the rails in combat sequences, some enemies will also jump on the rails for high-speed engagements. You can shoot at them from afar, but I had the most fun timing melee strikes when enemies flew past me. Minibosses like the Handyman will shock the rails to kill your strategic advantage, so during those battles it's key to continually move from the ground to the rails and keep him off guard. ♦

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

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

» **Publisher**
Disney Interactive

» **Developer**
Avalanche Software

» **Release**
June

Disney Infinity

Mr. Incredible bounds through the bustling streets of Metroville, punching and smashing Syndrome's robotic minions and turning them into sparking scrap. Meanwhile, Mrs. Incredible flails her taffy-like limbs at the tentacled enemies, whipping at them from a distance. In another world, Jack Sparrow rows into the pirate island Tortuga, doing his best to avoid detection as the town crumbles and burns. Moments later, he's sailing the high seas in his customizable galleon, taking on Davy Jones and his scurvy dogs. Over in Radiator Springs, Lightning McQueen tears around dusty roads and through canyons, taking on race missions and performing crazy stunts.

Aside from their Disney licenses, these scenarios seem to have little in common. In fact, they're all just a small part of Disney Infinity, an ambitious new gaming initiative from Avalanche Software that could redefine the way the Mouse House views video games.

by Jeff Cork

TO INFINITY,

YONDER





A DELUGE OF IDEAS

players could run through the storyline from Pixar's 2010 film in a fairly straightforward fashion. The second component was where things got interesting. The game included a Toy Box mode, which presented players with an open world and a virtual chest of toys and props, and then let players run loose.

They could not only interact with friends from the world of Toy Story, but the mode also pulled in elements from *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, *Cars*, and *Monsters, Inc.* in the form of costumes for the little Blockhead non-player characters. The central conceit behind it all was that these were toys inside of the game, which allowed for those kinds of jumbled crossovers.

After Toy Story 3, Disney asked what the studio would like to work on next. At the time, Avalanche had two teams, with one working on the then-unreleased *Cars 2*. The Toy Story 3 team was working on another Pixar game that was eventually shelved. Its answer to Disney's question was a follow-up to Toy Story 3, but with a focus on the Toy Box mode and a shift toward Buzz Lightyear. Pixar

CEO John Lasseter was enthusiastic about the project, and development proceeded as usual.

Then the new co-president of Disney Interactive, John Pleasants, posed a challenge to Avalanche. "He looked at the game and was like, 'This is cool, but can you think even bigger?'" recalls Avalanche CEO John Blackburn. "Let's think about how we can do

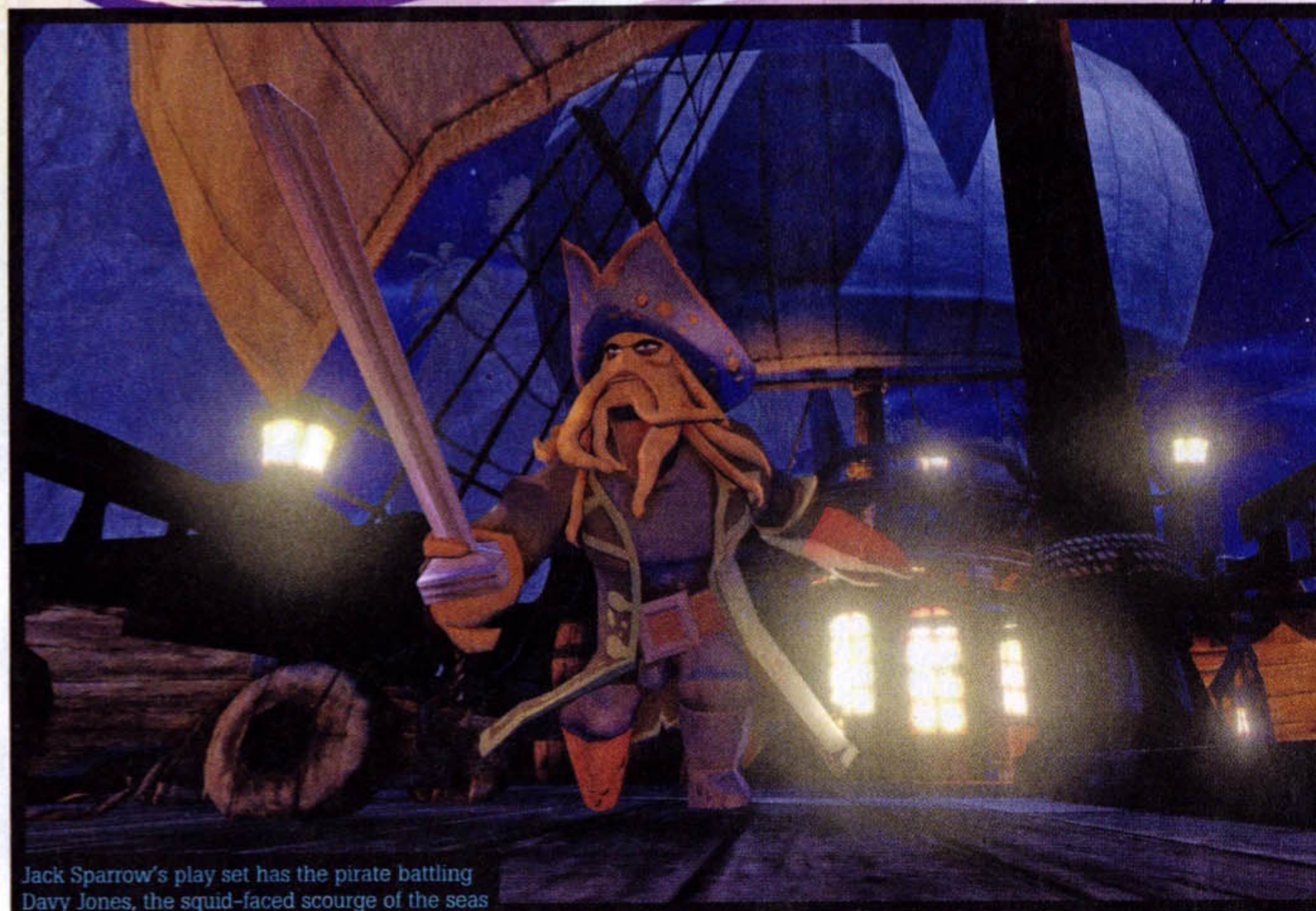
Avalanche's Toy Story 3 took an unusual approach, in that it was essentially two games in one. First,

players could run through the storyline from Pixar's 2010 film in a fairly straightforward fashion. The second component was where things got interesting. The game included a Toy Box mode, which presented players with an open world and a virtual chest of toys and props, and then let players run loose. They could not only interact with friends from the world of Toy Story, but the mode also pulled in elements from *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, *Cars*, and *Monsters, Inc.* in the form of costumes for the little Blockhead non-player characters. The central conceit behind it all was that these were toys inside of the game, which allowed for those kinds of jumbled crossovers.

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Jack Sparrow's play set has the pirate battling Davy Jones, the squid-faced scourge of the seas

this as a platform for all Disney properties and all the films that we will be working on, and how can we make those fit together so they support each other better."

"We came back and said, 'You want big?'" says Disney Interactive development director John Vignocchi, laughing. The plan was unexpectedly ambitious in scope: Deliver the story-based experiences that players have grown to expect from licensed titles, but also have characters, items, and other elements from those games funnel into a second mode – an even bigger Toy Box. To add another complication to

the pitch, what if there were physical toys that interacted with the games?

"You challenged us to think big; you didn't challenge us to come up with something that we knew was doable," Blackburn remembers saying to Pleasants.

The Play Sets

Disney Infinity includes three play sets with the game's starter pack, each with their own unique gameplay aspects. All of the sets include customizable elements, as well as quests and optional objectives. Additional play sets will roll out over time to add new characters and other interactive elements to the game and Toy Box. We've got details on the pack-in sets, as well as exclusive information on the upcoming *Cars* set.

Who's In?

Disney is more than Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck. The company owns other well-known IP, including Marvel Comics, the Muppets, and the newly acquired Star Wars. Here are just a few of the cameos and references you can expect to see in the game. You can start speculating as to what we'll be seeing in the future.

- Mickey Mouse's jalopy
- Captain Hook's ship
- The Electric Mayhem's bus
- The Recognizers from *Tron*
- Phineas and Ferb
- Jack Skellington
- The Headless Horseman



The Pieces

Disney Infinity has several physical components, which may seem confusing at first glance. Here's how it all fits together.

The Disney Infinity Base is the piece of hardware that connects the game's pieces to the system playing the game. It has recessed slots for the figures and the power discs. This is packed in with the \$74.99 starter pack.

Figures are the molded characters that fit onto the base. Like the other components, they contain an RFID chip to allow the base to recognize them. They also store character progression. Upgrades don't provide discrete stat bonuses to individual characters, but they allow players to unlock additional props and items to bring into the Toy Box. Figures will be \$12.99 individually, or \$29.99 for a three-pack. Disney says 17 figures will be available for purchase in the game's first incarnation.

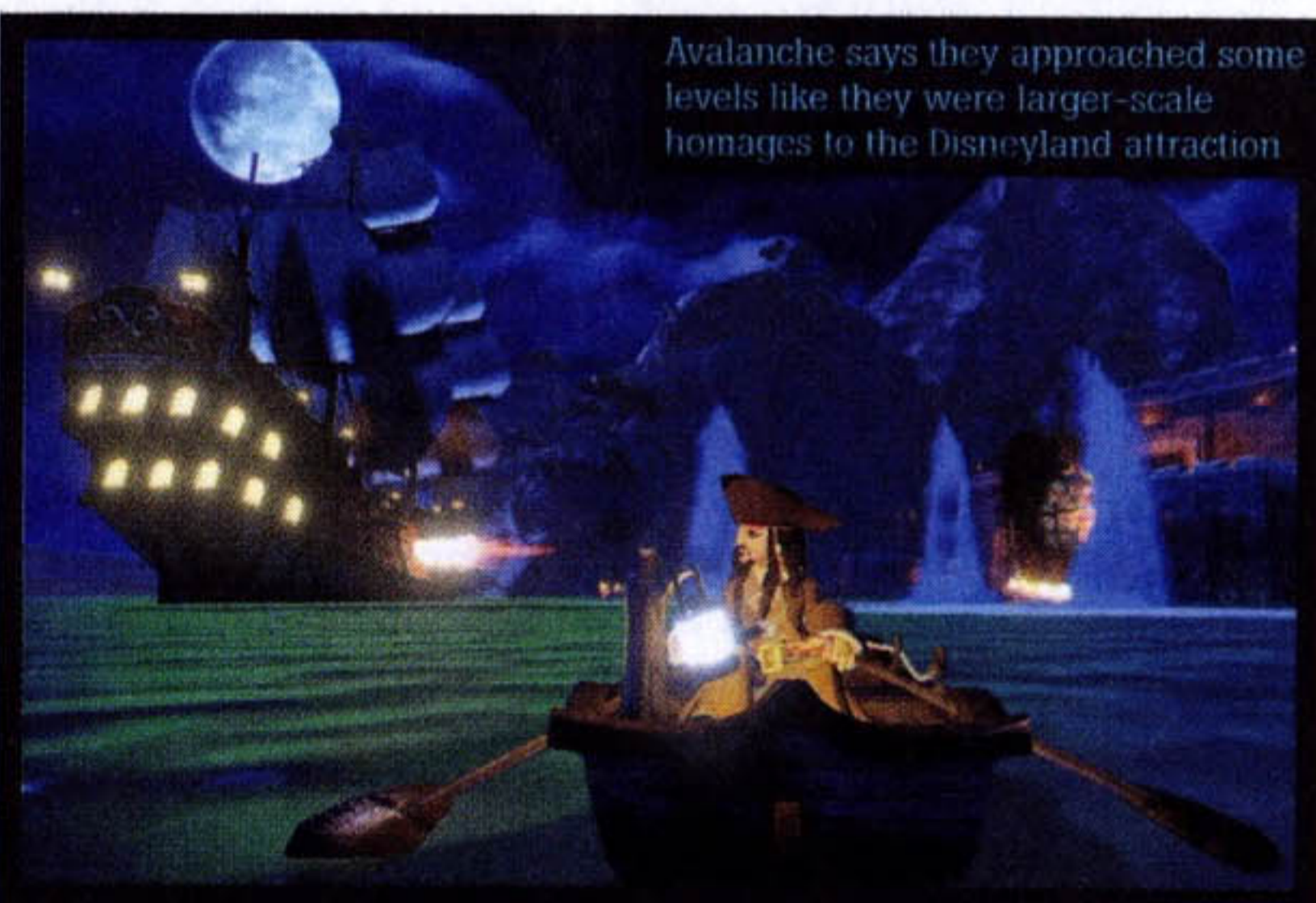
Play set pieces are placed on the base, and as you might imagine they open up play set worlds. These are true-to-property games within the game, which focus on the story and settings as opposed to the Toy Box's mashup style. Play sets will cost \$34.99. Disney has six play sets planned, including the three in the starter pack.

Power Discs come in two shapes. The circular ones give players buffs or inventory items, and they work in all play sets and the Toy Box. The hexagonal discs provide Toy Box customization options, such as new toys or inventory items. Multiple discs can be stacked upon one another, either two under a character or three on the hex portion. These discs will be sold in blind bags for \$4.99. If you get a duplicate buff disc, such as one that provides a loot bonus, stacking them amplifies the effect. Twenty different Power Discs will be available at launch.

These accessories also come with Web codes, which can be entered into the online versions of the game to unlock additional content.



Disney says Infinity will give players a chance to pit characters such as Dash and Lightning McQueen against one another in races



Avalanche says they approached some levels like they were larger-scale homages to the Disneyland attraction



REIMAGINING THE TOY BOX

Once the Disney execs wrapped their collective minds around the proposition – and were convinced, for example, that having missile launchers mounted onto Cinderella's carriage made sense within the game's logic – it was go time. Avalanche faced the daunting challenge of assuring license holders that their IPs were going to be respected, even as players would be given the opportunity to tweak things and mix and match parts. They could do so with one

guiding principle: "We don't want players to create something that looks like the baby from Toy Story 3, where someone has mashed on these parts and it looks like an abomination of what the character is," Blackburn says.

Those kinds of considerations may seem silly, but given the amount of customization at hand, it makes sense. Players can draw from a wide array of Disney characters and licenses in a gaming mash-up. Mr. Incredible can ride atop Aladdin's Abu (in elephant form), while wearing a jetpack and wielding the blaster from Lilo & Stitch. Meanwhile, those characters could be roaming around a town including elements

such as Scrooge McDuck's massive vault, Epcot's sphere, and Cinderella's castle – while the Wreck-It Ralph game screen looms high overhead in the sky.

Players add characters into their worlds in several different ways. First, they can purchase and place figures onto the Disney Infinity Base (see sidebar). The starter set includes Mr. Incredible, Sulley, and Jack Sparrow. There are also loads of other playable characters that are unlocked as players progress through the game. Additional elements can also be added by either purchasing them or unlocking them in the game's virtual store through coins you earn while playing.

The Toy Box mode is a wonderfully chaotic jumble designed to let kids play with virtual toys the way they do in real life. Spend time with a young person (or think back to your own childhood), and you'll realize that kids don't stick to one brand or franchise when they're goofing around. Pixar captured the essence of

The Look

One of the most striking things about Disney Universe is how each of the characters seems to fit within the same stylized world. It wasn't always that way. "When we first started, some characters were almost like Playmobil people, other characters were like stuffed animals, other characters were like action figures," recalls Avalanche's John Blackburn. "We kind of took that same idea from Toy Story, where it was all over the map." Pixar's CEO John Lasseter wasn't a fan of the visual hodge-podge. An avid toy collector, Lasseter said the characters should look as though they belonged in the same world and that they were designed to sit together on a shelf.



Pirates of the Caribbean

Pirates of the Caribbean combines the action of the first three films, as Captain Jack Sparrow and his crew face off against ol' tentacle-face himself, Davy Jones. Sparrow and his band of mates fight their opponents with swords and flintlock pistols, but players shouldn't abandon their sea legs. Avalanche's John Blackburn says about half of the game takes place on the high seas in customizable ships. "As a pirate, you wouldn't want to build a town, you go ransack towns," he says. "But you do care about your ship, so you're able to customize your [ship and] crew in a bunch of ways." That includes cannons (which can be fired like turrets), sails, figureheads, your crow's nest, decking, and even the form of the ship itself. In the story, you're following a treasure map that could lead to a way to defeat Jones once and for all. Players can pull their ships, cannons, and other elements into the Toy Box.



The Incredibles

The Incredibles set is, as Blackburn puts it, all about combat. It tells an alternative version of *The Incredibles*, where Syndrome isn't killed at the end. Instead, the villain unleashes a group of his fellow villains on the streets of Metroville. They include prototype robotic minions and villains such as the monologue-prone Baron von Ruthless, which were only mentioned in passing during the film. Avalanche has been working closely with Pixar and other Disney license holders to ensure they're remaining faithful to each brand, even gaining access to previously unseen characters and locations.

Each of the four Incredibles brings unique abilities to battle. Mr. Incredible is a melee powerhouse, but he isn't great at crowd control. In multiplayer, he can team up with Mrs. Incredible, who can juggle and help manage multiple enemies. Dash is expectedly quick, both in how he moves and how quickly he can attack his foes through combos. Violet uses her invisibility and force fields to create havoc. Blackburn says that Pixar didn't show much of the characters' offensive capabilities, and that it was fun collaborating with the studio to explore how they deal with enemies.

play quite well in its *Toy Story 3* film, showing Andy acting out imaginative scenarios with Hamm the Pig, Mr. Potato Head, and, of course, Buzz Lightyear and Woody.

In Toy Box mode, players can roam around the world freely or take on story missions designed to ease them into using the level-design and creation tools. They can also team up with a friend in split screen or up to three others online to build cooperatively or cause a little mischief.

"One of the coolest things that I've seen recently was one of the guys had a helicopter, and it has a hook that comes down and you can pick up other things," Blackburn recounts. "He was picking up this other player, and the other player was getting angry because he didn't want to be moved around like that anymore, so he just took out the editor tool and deleted the guy's helicopter. I was expecting him to do something like pull out a weapon or something, but he was like, 'I'm just going to take that thing out of the world.'"

The editor tools provide a degree of depth not unlike *LittleBigPlanet*. Players can add buildings and props to the world or even terraform the ground itself. The sophisticated set

of logic tools allow players to move objects around, spawn enemies and other objects, and even move the camera's position. These allow creative types to design their own unique missions and even recreate familiar games such as *Donkey Kong* and the *Bowser's Castle* track from *Super Mario Kart*.

THE FUTURE

According to Vignocchi, Disney Infinity marks a change in how the company is approaching video games. In part, he says it's due to how licensed games face dwindling respect from consumers. That's not the company's only motivation, however. In the past, people would buy a licensed game, finish it, and then move on. With Disney Infinity, the company is hoping to retain customers over the long term by giving them something larger to hold on to.

Blackburn says parents can buy their kids a play set or other add-on and build upon the framework that they've already invested in. Each play set offers between 3 to 10 hours of gameplay, depending on whether players are going for speed runs or taking a more completionist route.

Comparisons between Disney Infinity and Activision's *Skylanders* games are difficult to avoid, but each is taking their own approach. Disney sees Infinity as part of a longer-term strategy (we've heard estimates of anywhere from 5 to 10 years), in which characters and elements from each play set and game are compatible with future versions. The goal is to ensure that these toys retain their gameplay value over the years.

Disney isn't ruling out that some future movies might lend themselves to standalone games, but that Infinity is going to be a

linchpin of the interactive space. The game engine and development tools were designed with multiple game genres in mind, which means games that would otherwise have taken a considerable amount of time to be developed as standalone projects can come out on Infinity much faster. Disney says that one of the goals for the platform is to have interactive content available in Infinity day and date with movie launches, DVD releases, and other important dates.

Vignocchi says that one of the design mantras with Infinity is "Can I? Yes I can." Judging from the scale of gameplay that Avalanche has already delivered with *Toy Story 3*'s sandbox and from the demos we've seen, Disney Infinity has the potential of earning that lofty name. ♦





Francesco brought some missiles along for the ride, in the unlikely event someone's able to pass him.



Monsters University

With the Monsters University play set, Avalanche took a different approach from the previous combat-heavy scenarios. In Pixar's upcoming film, we learn how Mike and Sulley met in college. The world of *Monsters Inc.* isn't filled with marauding enemies, which would have made a brawler-type play style a bit of a mismatch. Instead, the Monsters University game enrolls players in Scare School, in a prank battle against rival Fear Tech. Think Harvard versus MIT, and you're on the right track.

"Fear Tech is referenced in the film, but is not necessarily a location that is visited in the film," Blackburn says. "It is visited in the Infinity play set for Monsters U, which is again how we're collaborating with the actual filmmakers to expand the fiction of the property." Players use props like toilet-paper launchers and spring-loaded traps to prank students from the opposing school. There's a day/night cycle in the game, and players will have to be stealthy if they want to pull off their pranks. That includes all the trappings from a traditional stealth-based game, including enemy vision cones and guards that are drawn to sound. Along the way, players can lay out and build their own fraternity row.



Characters can grab powerups and items from other franchises while in the game's Toy Box.



Interested in seeing some of the crazy things you can do in Toy Box mode. Look at this screen.



Cars

The events in the Cars play set takes place after *Cars 2*'s storyline. "Lightning McQueen is trying to get all of the international racers to come to Radiator Springs for an international grand prix," Blackburn says. As you build tracks and expand the town as you see fit, other racers will join you to compete, including Chick Hicks and Formula One racer Francesco Bernoulli. Players can pull track elements from the set into the Toy Box to construct their own courses and stunt parks. The buildings play a dual role in this set, too. They have fold-out elements, which allow characters to interact and race through them. When they're inevitably blown up, the destroyed pieces essentially become stunt-park pieces, which players can trick off of.



STAR WARS PINBALL

ZEN STUDIOS TACKLES A GALAXY FAR, FAR AWAY

BY JEFF MARCHIAFAVA



» **PLATFORM**
Wii U • PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • PC • Mac
Vita • iOS • Android

» **STYLE**
1 to 4-Player Arcade

» **PUBLISHER**
Zen Studios

» **DEVELOPER**
Zen Studios

» **RELEASE**
February

Over the past few years Zen Studios has slowly expanded its digital pinball empire. The unquestioned leader in a niche genre many gamers overlook, the developer offers dozens of original tables in multiple game titles across an ever-growing list of supported platforms. Zen has achieved its success by making mostly small, calculated decisions. Its newest undertaking represents the company's biggest and riskiest deal yet, and attempts to combine Star Wars and pinball in a way that fans of both worlds will enjoy.

DO OR DO NOT

Zen Studios is no stranger to massive licenses. In 2012, the Hungarian studio released Zen Pinball 2 and Pinball FX 2 tables based on PopCap's tower defense juggernaut, *Plants vs. Zombies*, and teamed up with Marvel for an extensive string of superhero-themed tables. The success of those partnerships and the studio's other offerings have allowed Zen to increase its staff by roughly 25 percent, but it's still a small developer in many ways.

"We moved into a new office this year, which is pretty cool," says Mel Kirk, Zen's vice president of marketing and PR. "We used to be in a very unassuming residential building, and now we're in an actual office." Many of their ideas for potential tables and partnerships still come from being fans first and foremost.

"We have this list on a whiteboard, of tables that we'd like to do one day and properties that we'd like to work with," Kirk says. "Star Wars is on the very top of that list."

Zen contacted LucasArts a number of times over the years to gauge the company's interest in a potential partnership, but the publisher was hesitant. "They already have their own product timeline," says Zen creative director Neil Sorens. "So they were always like, 'Maybe. Come talk to us in 2014 or something.'"

"To them we were probably just some small outfit out in eastern Europe," Kirk adds. "Like 'Oh, you want to work with Star Wars? Okay, sure.'"

"But then they started this casual division," Sorens says. "They were looking for good partners to work with." As it just so happened, Zen's handling of the Marvel license perfectly demonstrated the studio's ability to work with big-name companies and franchises.

LucasArts was suddenly on board. "We were not expecting Star Wars to be this soon," Kirk says. "We were expecting it a year or two down the road." Despite the initial surprise, Zen pounced at the opportunity, striking a deal to create a series of 10 Star Wars-themed tables. The contract gives the developer the right to use official movie assets, music, sound effects, the likeness of actors, and pretty much anything else the studio requests relating to Star Wars. "They're very helpful getting us assets," Kirk says. "If we need a sound for this or that, they've got these enormous libraries they can search through real quickly and find the right sound." If appropriate dialogue doesn't already exist, LucasArts even facilitates the recording of new lines. "Any comments about balls have all been new recordings," Kirk jokes.

A POWERFUL ALLY

Signing the deal was just the first step in the partnership between Zen Studios and LucasArts, as the contract doesn't actually outline the table themes. Those are decided by a series of back-and-forth conversations between the two companies. Kirk recalls one of their first meetings when they began discussing table ideas.

"It's kind of scary when you go in to present something," Kirk says. "You just don't know what the expectation is, so you kind of go with what you think they want to hear."

Zen's first pitch was to create each table based on one of the films. "Originally the team said, 'Okay, we're going to do a table based on Episode I, Episode II, etc.'" Sorens says. "And LucasArts said, 'Don't just do movies. That's not interesting.' We were like, 'Yeah, you're right. It's not.'"

Zen then pitched the project the way they wanted to make it, which ironically was more to LucasArts' liking. "We said, 'Okay then, we can do one or two tables based on movies, we can do ones based on characters we think are interesting or cool, we can do them based on planets, events – all sorts of different aspects of the Star Wars universe.'"

The team was relieved by LucasArts' flexibility. "Luckily, they were with it," Kirk says. "They knew exactly what we should be doing."

"We were like, 'Yes! We don't have to do Jar

Jar or whiny Anakin,'" Sorens adds.

The first pack of tables, due out in February, demonstrates the variety Zen Studios is aiming for with Star Wars Pinball. The triple pack includes a table covering the events of *The Empire Strikes Back*, one based on the animated *Clone Wars* series, and a final table dedicated to everyone's favorite intergalactic bounty hunter: Boba Fett. The final seven tables promise even more variety, and Zen hopes to devote at least one table to some obscure character or aspect of the Star Wars universe.

"That's part of keeping it interesting," Kirk says. "When we announced the Marvel Vendgeance and Virtue pack, the most talked-about table was Moon Knight. Everyone was like, 'What the hell are you guys doing? Why Moon Knight?' You really get people to pay attention when you do something weird."

"You also generally have more freedom to make up your own stuff when you're working with the extended universe," Sorens adds. "You don't have to worry as much about the canon or following what's already been written."

Kirk says they're open to including details from the upcoming Star Wars movies if it makes sense, but so far nothing is set in stone. The first batch of tables is nearly complete, however, and our hands-on time convinced us that Star Wars fans won't be disappointed.

THE STANDALONE EXPERIENCE

While the Star Wars tables will be integrated into the main libraries of Pinball FX 2 on XBLA and Zen Pinball 2 on PS3 and Vita, Zen will also be releasing a standalone Star Wars Pinball game for Sony's platforms shortly after launch. The standalone version will allow the community to apply their high scores to either the Light or Dark side, and the UI will change to reflect which side is winning the overall fight. Additionally, players can earn ranks (Jedi Knight, Sith Master, etc.) based on their cumulative scores. The top 12 Jedi and 10 Sith players will make up the respective councils of each order, earning the ultimate bragging rights to shame their friends with.



HANDS-ON WITH STAR WARS PINBALL

While each of the launch tables has its own distinct style and game flow, all three are loaded with details that are sure to make Star Wars fans smile. Here are some elements that stood out to us during our hands-on time with the game.

STAR WARS EPISODE V: THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK

The most traditional table of the launch pack, The Empire Strikes Back retells the events of Episode V via the table's five main missions. Each mission has multiple stages based on scenes from the movie, but checkpoints save your progress should you fail out. During our time with the table, we hopped over asteroids and a floating TIE fighter via a temporary jump, used alternating loop shots to blindside an attacking stormtrooper, and took on Darth Vader – only to have him catch our ball in mid-air and crush it with his Force powers. Other missions include helping Luke's snowspeeder trip up an AT-AT, and an off-table training droid minigame that has you deflecting incoming laser blasts with your lightsaber from a first-person perspective. Star Wars details are everywhere, with multicolored R2-D2s filling in as bumpers, the Force providing ball-saving "pushbacks" on the outlanes, and John Williams' iconic soundtrack punctuating all of the on-table action.



ANY CHANCE FOR INDY?

We asked creative director Neil Sorens whether Zen has any plans to produce tables based on other LucasArts IPs. He said that while the current deal is only for Star Wars, Indiana Jones is an obvious choice of an IP they'd be interested in doing. For now, however, the companies are taking things one step at a time.

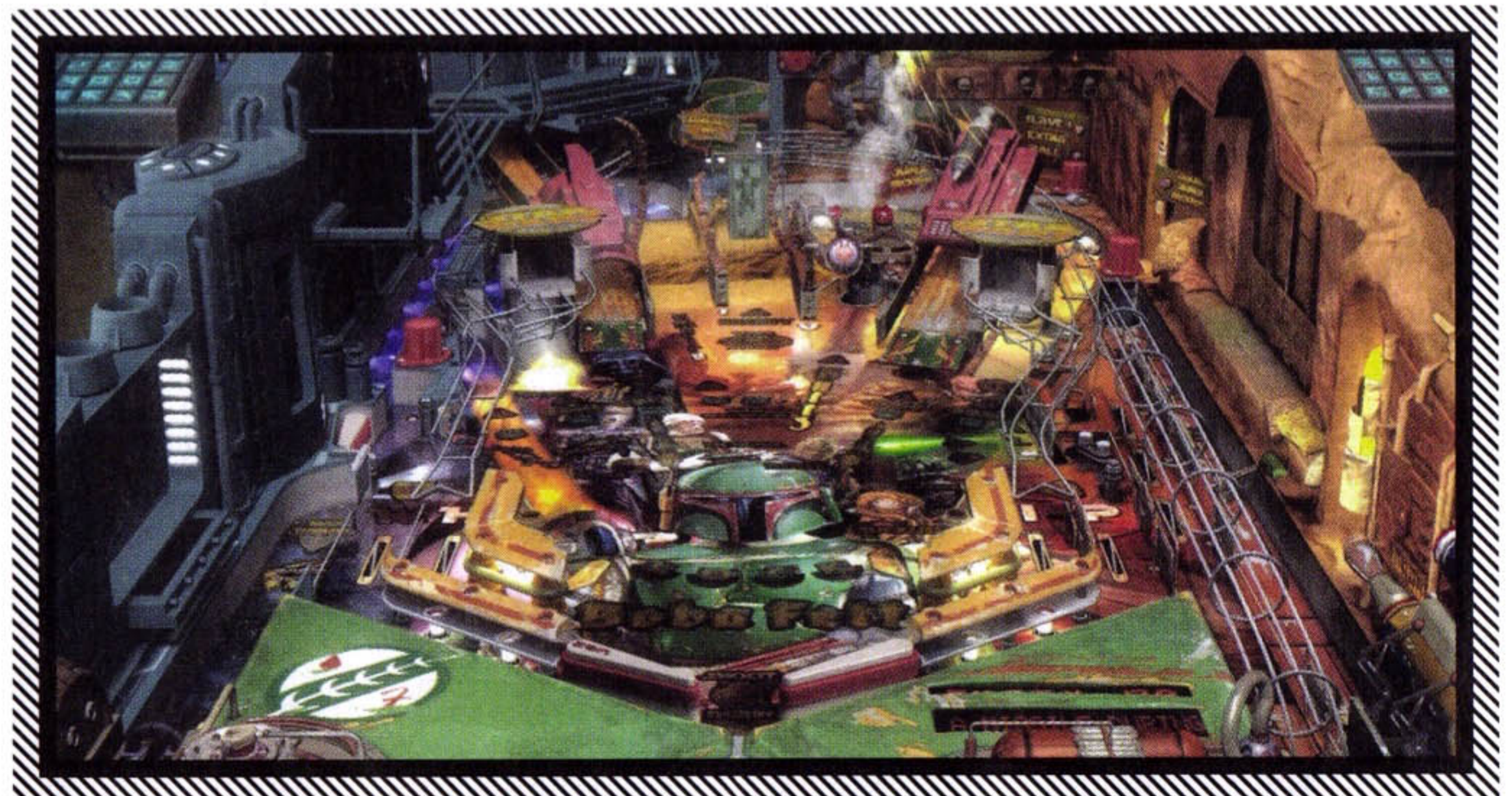


CLONE WARS

Based on the popular animated series, the Clone Wars recounts Anakin and Ahsoka Tano's fight against Count Dooku and his Dark Jedi apprentice Asaji Ventress, and opens with a classic Star Wars text crawl read by the show's narrator. The table is a tangle of ramps that somehow flow smoothly between upper- and lower-flipper shots, and several Hurry Up modes take advantage of the combo-heavy design. The most entertaining Hurry Up mode is Point Rain, which requires you to transport Clone troopers to Geonosis by locking a ball into a gunship that floats onto the center of the table, and then dodging anti-air missiles with timed ramp shots. Another mode tasks you with training clones by completing shots on two consecutive mini-playing fields; completing them assigns you new military ranks, which increases your score in the final wizard mode.

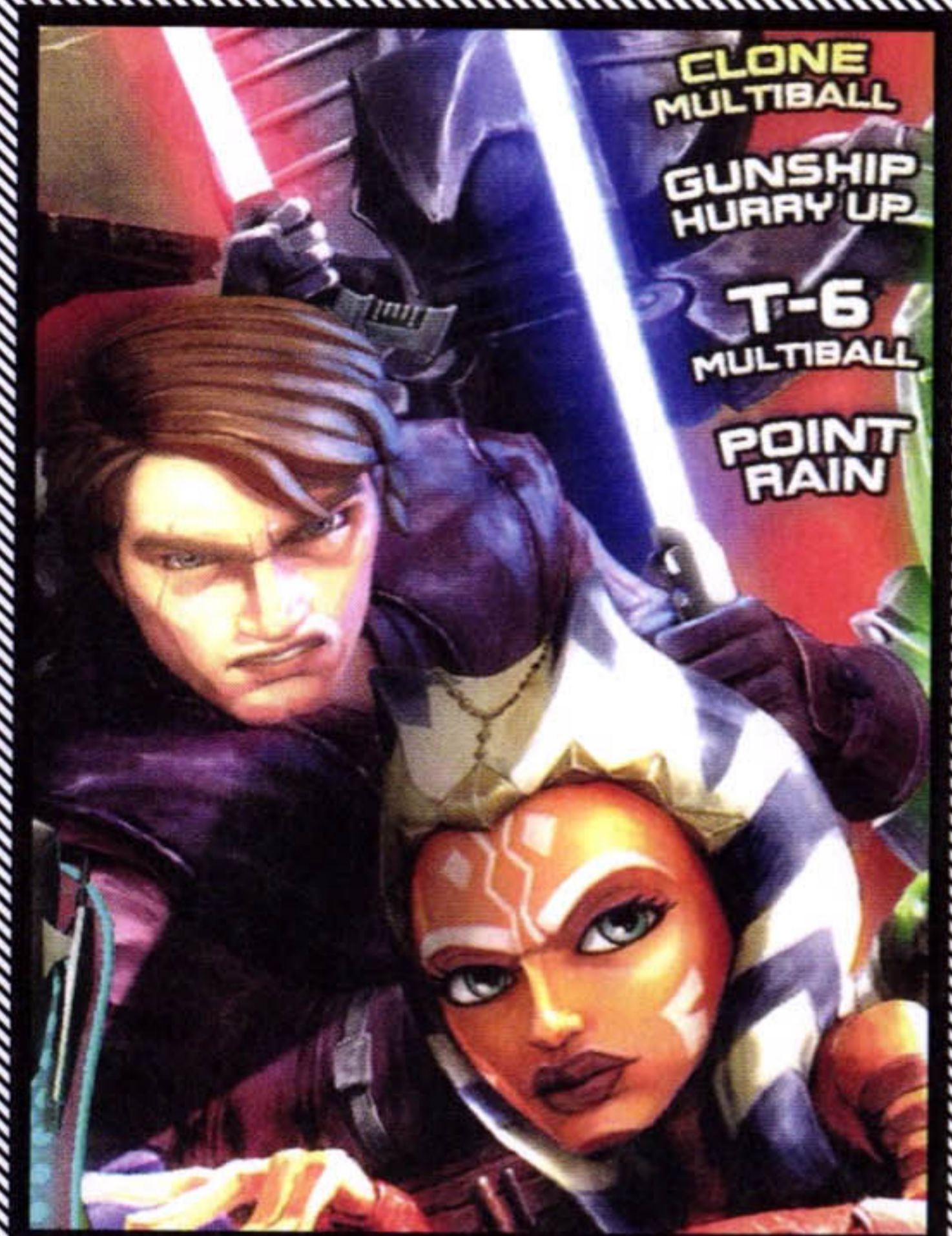
BOBA FETT

If anyone in the Star Wars universe is worthy of his own table, it's Boba Fett. Players can earn major points by helping the infamous bounty hunter complete jobs for either the Galactic Empire or the Hutts. Between bounties, players can increase their end-of-ball bonus by pulling off consecutive ramp combos, or earn homing missiles used to auto-complete some shots during missions. Amusingly, the table's spinner is Han Solo sealed in carbonite. Spinning the frozen smuggler increases the Highest Bidder award and gets you that much closer to nabbing him – just make sure you have enough speed when jumping the Sarlaac pit, as falling inside it resets the mode and gives you a measly 10 pity points.





Like Zen Studios' previous games, Star Wars Pinball supports two-player splitscreen play, and up to four players in its hotseat multiplayer mode



ALWAYS IN MOTION

Zen Studios continues to be an anomaly in the video game industry, navigating the tricky waters of licensed games and multiplatform digital distribution with relative ease. With the launch of Zen Pinball 2 on the Wii U this January, Zen Studios now offers tables on virtually every platform, including the Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, PlayStation Vita, Nintendo 3DS, Windows 8, Mac, and iOS and Android devices. How does Zen succeed where so many others have failed? "We've taken baby steps," Kirk says. "We've learned how to work with all these companies, and how they like to receive information. Communication is the biggest key."

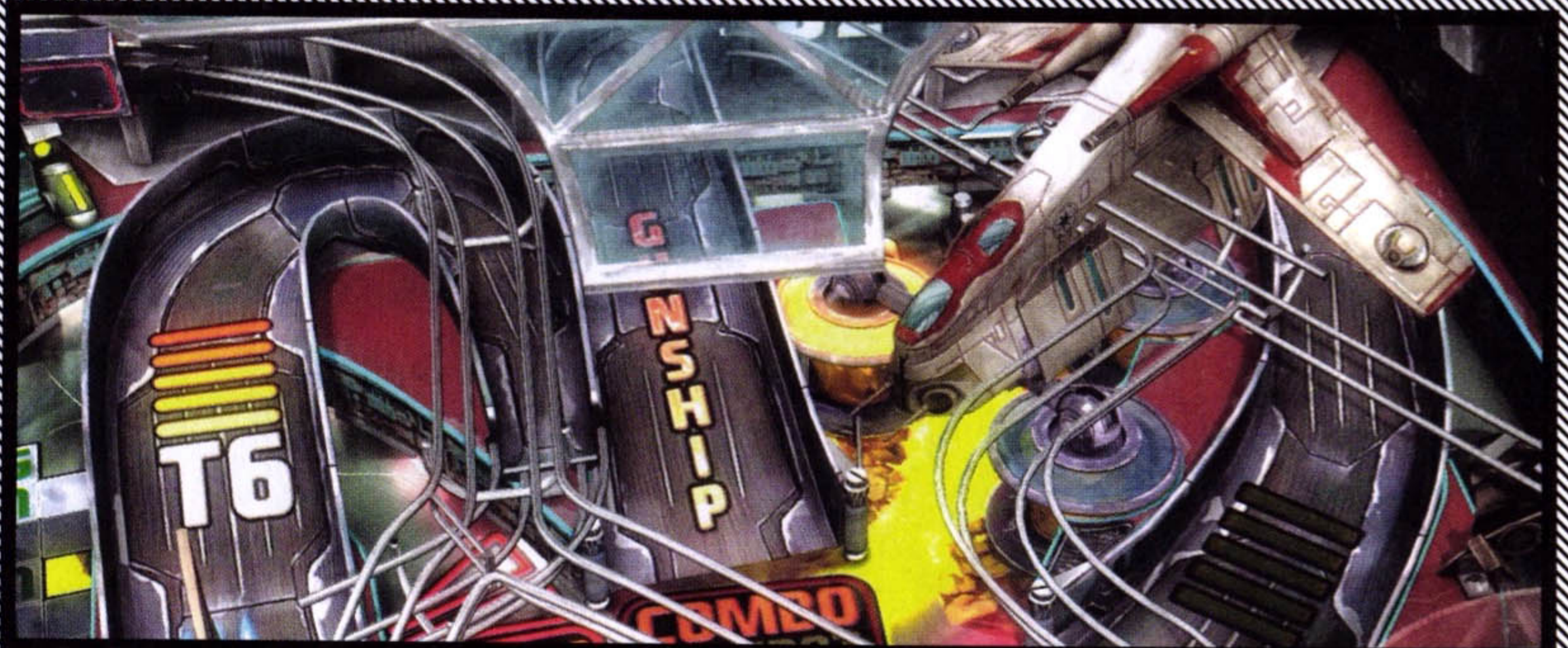
"The other thing is we didn't come online on all these platforms at once," Sorens says. "A couple years ago we were on consoles, and we said, 'Okay, in order to have a successful pinball game in the long term, we're going to have to find pinball fans wherever they are.' So 'pinball everywhere' was our big initiative that we had. It's a good thing too, now that we see sales slowing down big time on consoles at the end of their cycle and people moving to mobile as their platform of choice."

The growing pains of building such a diverse pipeline to deliver new content to fans is now paying off, placing the studio on good footing for the future and providing added incentive for potential new partners. While the team is still working on some new original tables, Star Wars is the clear priority for Zen's pinball division in 2013.

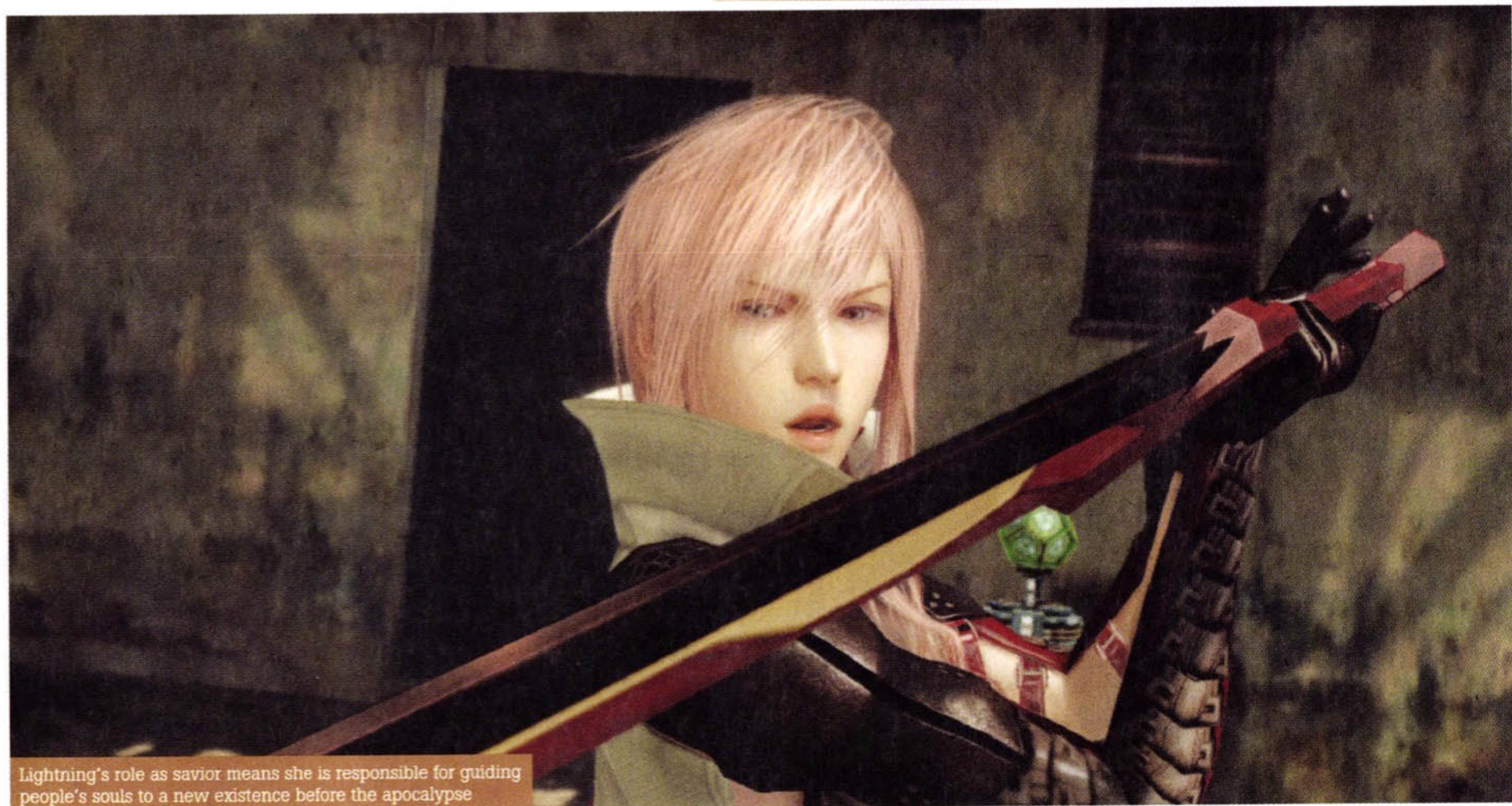
"The people who want our original tables are probably the most vocal ones in our community, so we hear from them on a daily basis – sometimes hourly basis," Kirk says. "We love to work on our own stuff and we have [original] tables coming. But when opportunities like [LucasArts] present themselves, you've got to just take them." It's a philosophy that hasn't steered Zen Studios wrong yet. ♦



Hitting the carbonite Han Solo spinner can help you net major points. Just make sure you have enough speed to clear the Sarlacc pit



spoiler



Lightning's role as savior means she is responsible for guiding people's souls to a new existence before the apocalypse

Lightning Returns: Final Fantasy XIII

Lightning strikes thrice

If you finished Final Fantasy XIII-2, the fact that Square Enix is making a third chapter to conclude Lightning's story shouldn't be a surprise. Final Fantasy XIII-2 ended with a cliffhanger that left many characters' fates in question and the future of the world uncertain. Lightning Returns aims to answer your lingering questions and wrap up the story that began with the original Final Fantasy XIII – and bring Lightning back into the leading role.

Several centuries after the events of the previous game, Lightning wakes up from a long sleep to find her surroundings changed. Instead of Cocoon, Pulse, and Valhalla, everything has been merged into one reality called Nova Chrysalia. This world is comprised of four separate continents (connected by a monorail system), each one populated by citizens who cannot age or die naturally. That means that the people who were alive at the end of Final Fantasy XIII-2 are still alive, despite the passage of time. Lightning is the savior appointed to save these souls in the face of an impending apocalypse.

The end of the world in Lightning Returns is different from the regular RPG variety. It isn't a vague threat that only occurs if the villain's plan succeeds; Lightning wakes up with 13 days remaining before the apocalypse, and an accelerated in-game clock counts down the minutes as you explore the world and complete quests. This means that players need to manage their time to accomplish as much as possible before the countdown reaches zero. The pressure adds a sense of urgency, but it also forces players to decide which tasks take priority. If you're worried about missing out on content, you can always pursue different avenues on a second playthrough on new game+, which allows you to carry over certain parameters from your original run.

Not only is Lightning once again in the

lead role, but she's not sharing the spotlight with anyone. In battle, she fights enemies by herself, requiring a shift in how this title approaches combat. Considering that the previous two games rely on party cooperation via the paradigm system, the development team needed to create a new mechanic allowing Lightning to be powerful and versatile on the battlefield. The result is the schema system, which lets players create and assign customizable classes. A schema is the combination of an outfit Lightning wears (some have innate bonuses to different attributes), the weapon she wields, and the abilities players assign.

For example, one schema might be a dress with a bonus to magic (you can customize the colors on most of Lightning's clothes), a sword with a high magic stat, and spells like Thunder and Fire mapped to the attacks. Others might focus on support magic or physical attacks. Lightning can have three schema equipped at once, and players switch from one to the other to take advantage of the different roles she can play.

It seems similar to paradigms at first, but the schema system points to another important shift in combat design: Fights require active participation from the player. Unlike the two previous entries, you can't just set paradigms and watch battles play out. Each schema's abilities are mapped to face buttons, and must be activated individually. If you want to cast Thunder, block, or attack, you need to press the assigned buttons. Varying your strategy is also part of the equation; each schema has its own ATB gauge, and it depletes with each action performed, meaning that you need to swap them frequently to stay effective.

This action-oriented combat system is a big departure from other entries, but the

development team believes that it is the best way to put Lightning's power in players' hands. Instead of dictating the general flow of battle, you are able to chain together individual moves in order to hit different enemy weak points – a new goal that replaces the stagger concept.

Lightning Returns isn't called Final Fantasy XIII-3 for good reason. Even though it picks up the narrative from earlier games, it features substantial changes that make it feel like less of a straight continuation on the gameplay front. It hasn't been transformed into a full-fledged action game, but Lightning Returns experiments with some intriguing ideas uncommon in RPGs. Whether or not the risk pays off remains to be seen, but the new direction may give hope to those who felt jilted by Final Fantasy XIII-2. » **Joe Juba**

» **Platform**
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360

» **Style**
1-Player Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
Square Enix

» **Developer**
Square Enix

» **Release**
Fall

Those clothes aren't just decorative. Lightning's outfits have latent bonuses that help players decide which abilities to assign to each ensemble



Attacking, guarding, and dodging are commands that players handle manually. You won't just set up Lightning's abilities and watch her go



MLB 13: The Show

Trouble with the curve

» **Platform**
PlayStation 3, Vita

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

» **Publisher**
Sony Computer
Entertainment

» **Developer**
Sony Computer
Entertainment
San Diego

» **Release**
March 5

Most Major League all-stars fail at the plate seven out of ten times. Detroit Tigers slugger Miguel Cabrera won the American League MVP, but also led the league in grounding into double plays. White Sox designated hitter Adam Dunn showed he could take a pitch last season with a league-leading 105 walks. He also walked back to the dugout with his bat on his shoulder more than anyone with an embarrassing 222 strikeouts recorded.

The developers at Sony Computer Entertainment San Diego don't feel like they've attained this level of realism in its MLB: The Show series. Though the team has successfully emulated the statistical frequencies of strikeouts and double play balls, offensive outbursts were few and far between. "Last year, you rarely had games where you had over 10 or 15 hits, or scored 9 or 13 runs," says Ramone Russell, The Show's community strategist and game designer. "This year you're going to see those games."

This new attempt at realism doesn't just come from Sony crunching numbers behind the curtain. Sony is opening up the timing window for making contact across all of its control options and difficulty levels. "You won't be scoring a thousand runs, or be batting .899, but you will see your offense jump,"

Russell says. "It won't be a home run-fest or arcadey, but if you square up on a ball, you're going to hit it hard now. We don't feel people will be nearly as frustrated with the hitting aspect of the game as they were in the past." This doesn't mean your offense will rack up more runs every game. If a pitcher is on top of his game, he can still put zeroes on the board.

If you really struggle at the plate, Sony is implementing a new beginner mode, which sounds a bit like batting practice. In the first inning, the pitcher throws fastballs across the heart of the plate. The computer opponent will continue to throw this pitch until you consistently make good contact and have great timing. This doesn't necessarily mean you'll get a lot of hits; you're just making good contact. Once you get into a rhythm, the AI will adapt and throw a second pitch type into the mix and perhaps start moving the ball around the plate.

Experienced players who can already put good wood on the ball can now tap into a new push/pull hitting engine to add a new dynamic to their game. "We have every MLB players' spray charts in the game," Russell says. "Prince Fielder, for example, is an extreme pull hitter. He hits 60 percent of his balls to right field. In the game, when you press the select button to see that pitcher/batter

match-up, you'll see that he's an extreme pull hitter. When he swings and makes contact, those balls are going to go where it says they are going to go most of the time. He's still going to hit opposite field balls, but 60 percent of the time he's pulling the ball." To combat this, the AI will shift its defensive positioning based on the hitter. Russell says that players can tweak defensive shifts on their own or can rely on the computer to do it for them, which is the default setting.

Hitting also incorporates Sony's new True Ball Physics 2.0, which delivers more hit types, and balls losing energy at a faster rate. This means you won't see nearly as many ground rule doubles. High, inside fastballs can also be roped down foul lines without traveling into the stands.

A First-Person Show

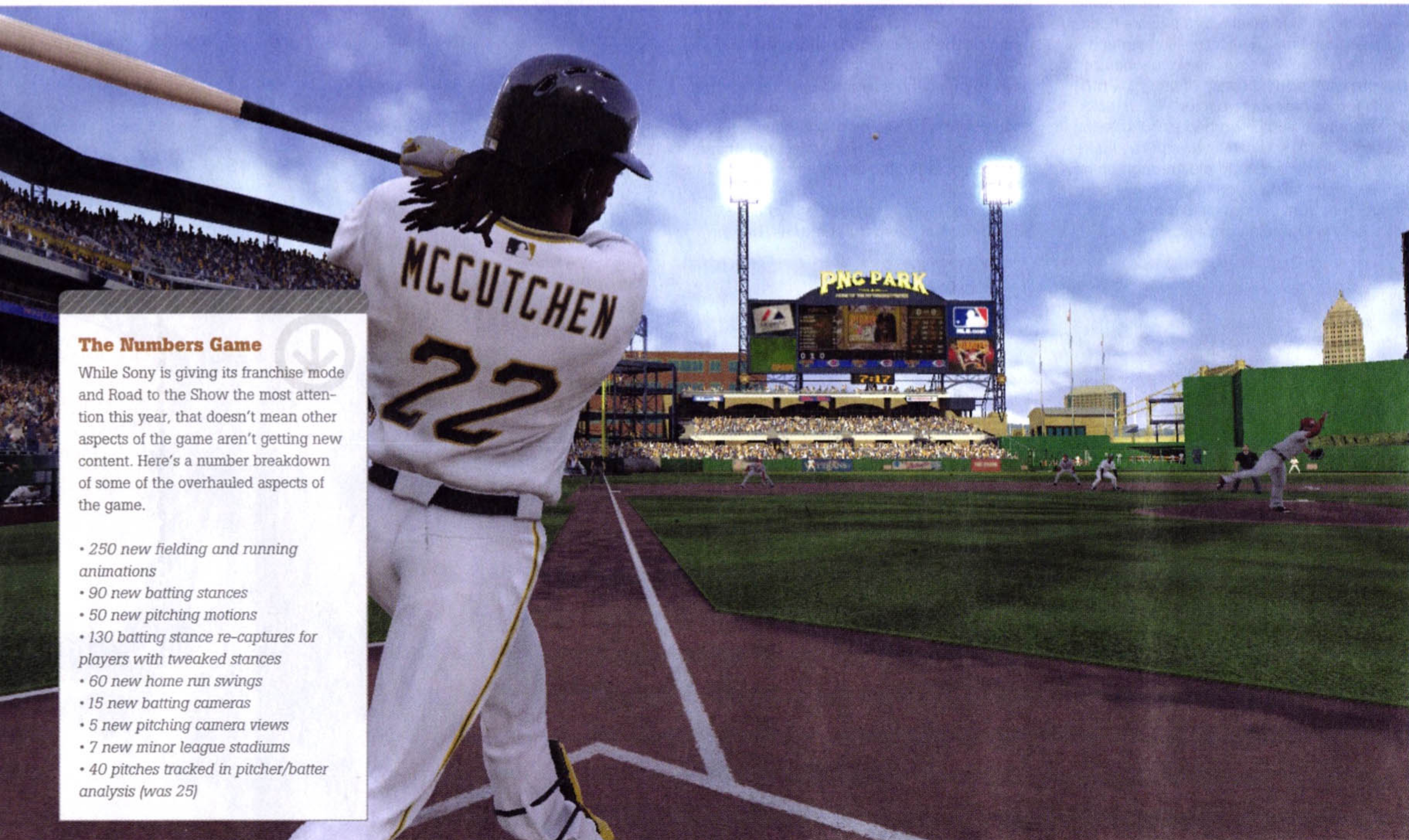
When it comes to game modes, Russell says that Road to the Show and franchise received the most tweaks this year. "With Road to the Show, we want to give the player a first-person experience," he says. "This doesn't mean that you're playing the game from the first-person perspective, but we want to make you feel like you are in the game."

No longer is commentator audio a part of the Road to the Show experience. If you're a

The Numbers Game

While Sony is giving its franchise mode and Road to the Show the most attention this year, that doesn't mean other aspects of the game aren't getting new content. Here's a number breakdown of some of the overhauled aspects of the game.

- 250 new fielding and running animations
- 90 new batting stances
- 50 new pitching motions
- 130 batting stance re-captures for players with tweaked stances
- 60 new home run swings
- 15 new batting cameras
- 5 new pitching camera views
- 7 new minor league stadiums
- 40 pitches tracked in pitcher/batter analysis (was 25)



SCHEDULE

SIM SEASON

VIEW STAFF

TRAINING ASSIGNMENTS

SCOUTING

NEW

NEXT GAME


CHC 63-82 **VS** **PIT** 66-79 

JACKSON [11-13, 4.08] **LIRIANO** [7-5, 3.33]

L1

FRANCHISE INFO

R1

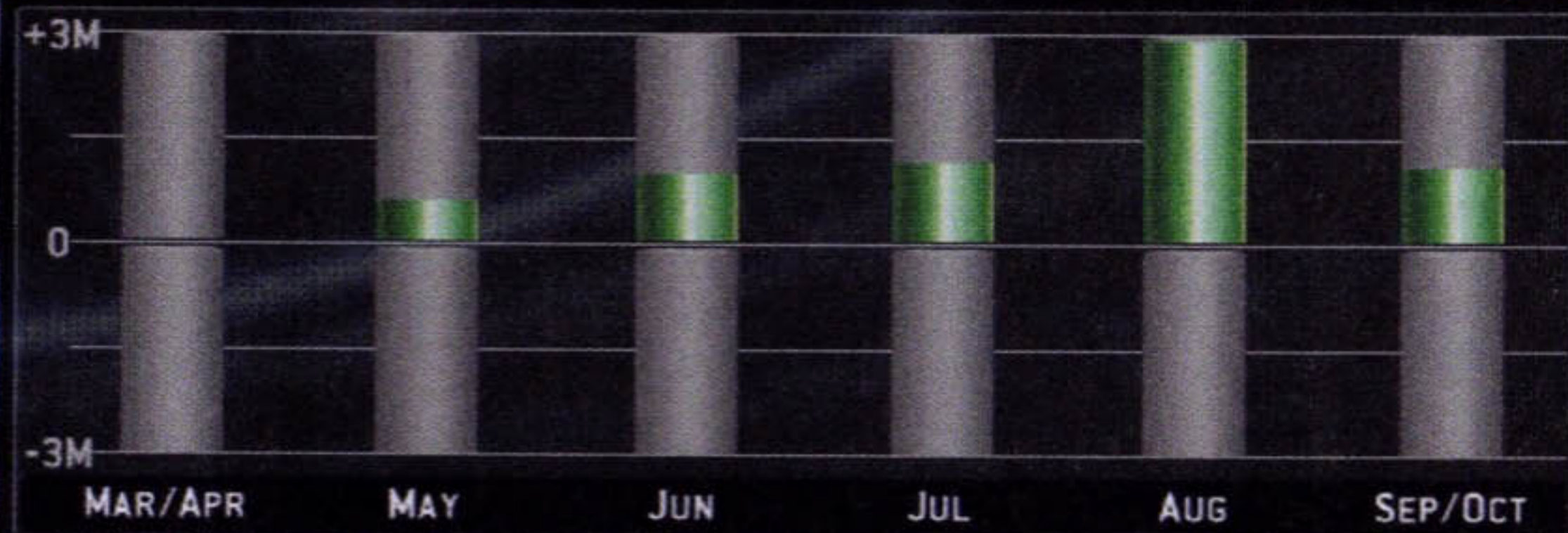
2013 TOTAL BUDGET = 60.50M

PLAYER SALARY 34.39M

BUDGET ROOM 14.56M

STAFF SALARY 11.55M

2014 PROJECTED BUDGET 60.77M



GRAPH REPRESENTS MONTHLY PROFIT / LOSS
PROFIT / LOSS IS DETERMINED BY ON-FIELD PERFORMANCE

centerfielder, you'll now hear the left and right fielders talking to you about the tendencies of the batter. If you're running the bases, your base coaches will communicate with you – yelling at you to stop or keep running. The crowd is factored in as well, although Russell wouldn't go into the specifics of how they interact with your player.

Camera placement is another big change for this mode. Road to the Show boasts hundreds of new presentations that capture your player's career. For fielding, the camera now focuses on both the ball and your player, which Russell says makes fly ball tracking much easier. When you're hitting, the camera follows the ball more than staying stationary on your player in the box.

For those of you who said that fielding is too easy, Sony has added a manual catch option that can lead to bobbles and embarrassing missed grabs. It's defaulted to off, but if you want more of a challenge, you can turn it on.

Road to the Show is still solely about your player, but if you want to see how your team scores runs or who is coming in to pitch in a tight ballgame, you can view a new fast-forward simulation that shows you exactly what happens during the game in sprite form. You'll see batters come through in the clutch or let your pitcher down by striking out.

The player creation process offers new options as well, including Bryce Harper's eye black. Players can also choose a one- or two-handed swing. Have you ever wondered how your Road to the Show player stacks up against others? You can now track your offline Road to the Show player through a

new online leaderboard that compares player stats across AA, AAA, and MLB levels.

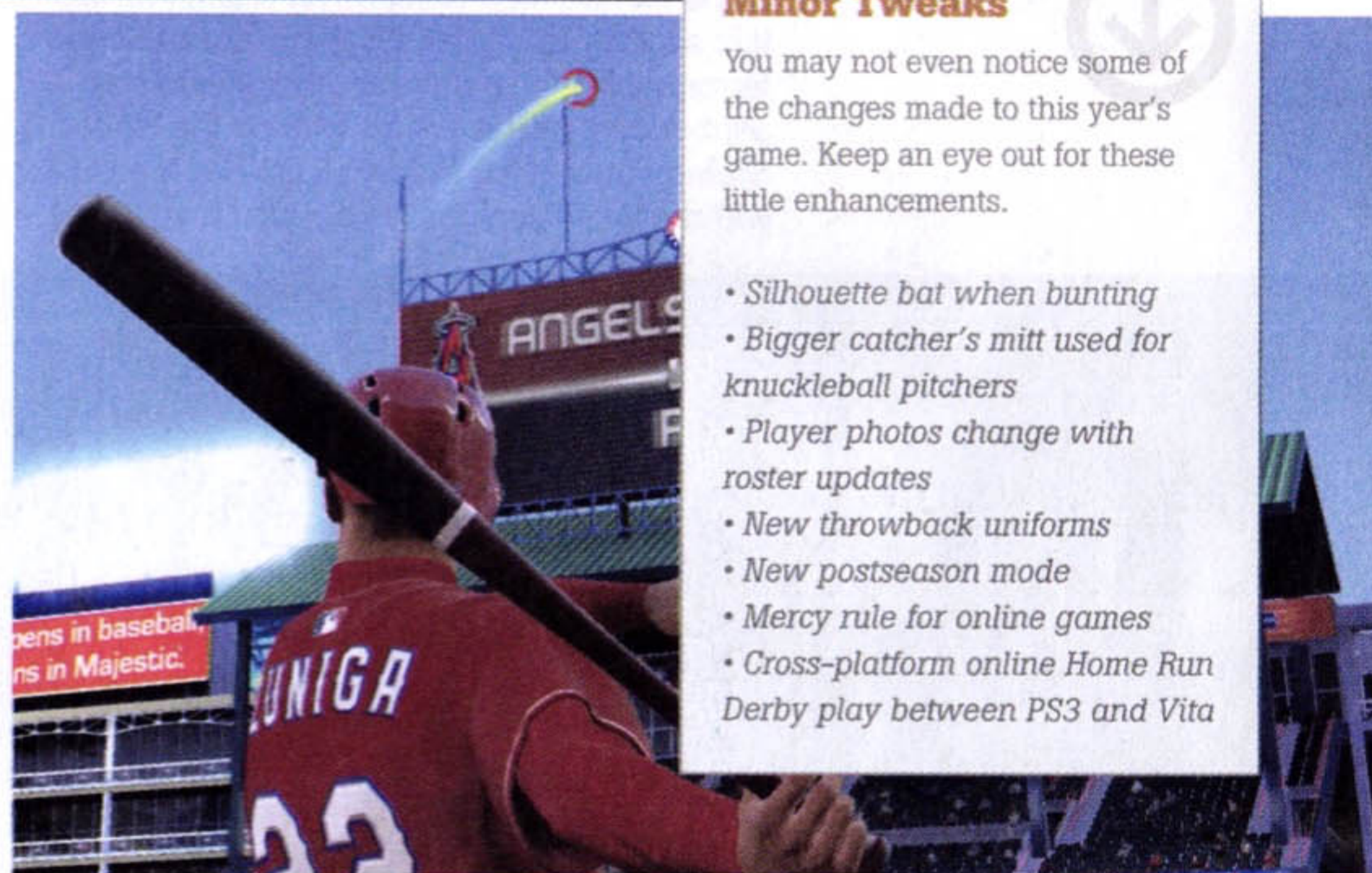
Crunching Franchise Modes Numbers

Your team's bank account plays a large role in this year's franchise mode. Sony looked at over 50 years of historical data to correlate attendance with how much a team grosses.

"We found that the Yankees, Phillies, and Giants sell out every single game. They make a ton of money because they are always making the playoffs," Russell says. "That's why they have \$130 million to \$200 million dollar budgets. Unfortunately, in our game in the past, you've never been able to take a small market team and turn them into the Giants or Rangers or Washington Nationals for that matter. The Nationals didn't have the budget they have now six years ago. What happened for the smaller market teams in our game, the budgets would increase, but the increment they were increasing was smaller than the player salaries' incremental increase. So, it didn't matter how much you won or how many times you got to the playoffs. The system wouldn't allow you to make that kind of money."

Sony ripped out all of that old logic and rewrote it from scratch for MLB 13: The Show. If you finish the season over .500, you'll have more money to spend in the following season. If you make it to the playoffs, you'll have even more money to play with. The deeper you go in the playoffs, the greater the sum. This data stacks year-to-year, and you can track your budget impact month-to-month.

When the offseason rolls around, a great season could lead to the signing of that

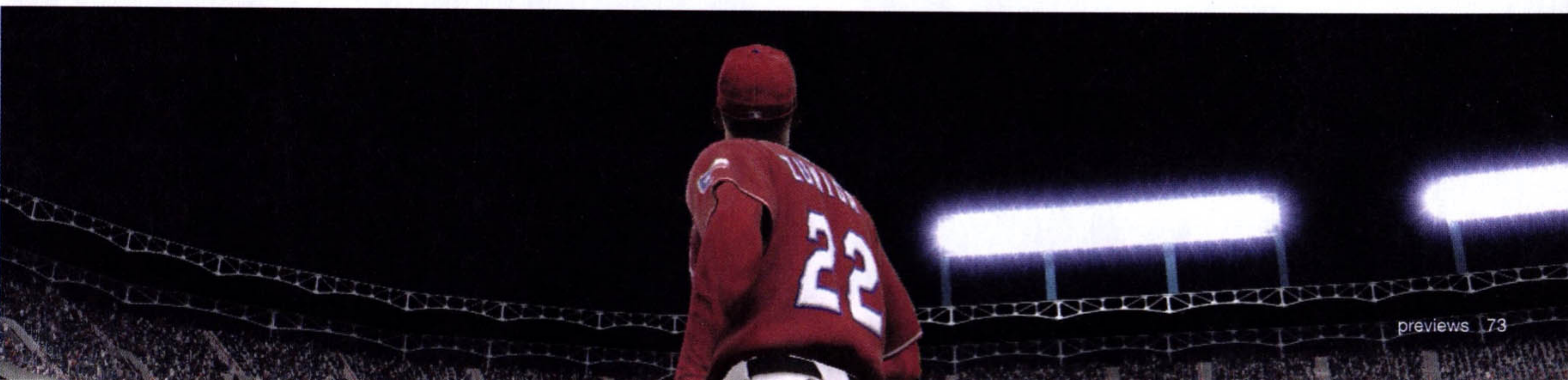


Minor Tweaks

You may not even notice some of the changes made to this year's game. Keep an eye out for these little enhancements.

- Silhouette bat when bunting
- Bigger catcher's mitt used for knuckleball pitchers
- Player photos change with roster updates
- New throwback uniforms
- New postseason mode
- Mercy rule for online games
- Cross-platform online Home Run Derby play between PS3 and Vita

one-big free agent. "Now you can use the Padres, Pirates, or Twins to make big player acquisitions," Russell says. Payroll extends to the four scouts you hire for drafting young talent. Certain scouts are better at analyzing pitchers or position players. If a scout has a 99 rating in pitching, his results will be dead-on accurate. If he only has a 50 rating, buyer beware. Scouts also have ratings for discovery and efficiency. The discovery rating determines how fast a scout can locate talent. The draft hits in June, so time is of the essence. Scouts with high discovery ratings lead to a larger pool of prospects. The efficiency rating determines how fast a scout can rate a player's skills. All of the scouting can be switched to auto if you don't want to handle it. » **Andrew Reiner**



Splinter Cell Blacklist

Sam Fisher takes command in the war on terror

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

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

» **Publisher**
Ubisoft

» **Developer**
Ubisoft Toronto

» **Release**
August 20

Ever since an impressive debut last E3, details on Splinter Cell Blacklist have been strictly classified. A new year means new intel, as we witnessed live gameplay of two new levels and learned more about the universal upgrade system.

For the uninitiated, Sam is pulled back into service personally by U.S. President Patricia Caldwell. She's shuttered Third Echelon due to the corruption that came to light in the events of Splinter Cell: Conviction and devoted funding to a new off-the-books team with Sam at the helm (named Fourth Echelon, naturally). His close circle includes series mainstay Anna "Grim" Grimsdottir, hacker Charlie Cole, and CIA operative Isaac Briggs. Rather than holing up in a building, the team crisscrosses the globe in a mobile base/plane named the *Paladin*. The reason for all this secrecy and spending? An international terrorist alliance named the Engineers has announced a series of attacks on the United States dubbed the Blacklist. Unless the U.S. withdraws military forces out of a long list of

countries, the Engineers will continue to execute terrorist strikes throughout the world.

Every time players fire up the game, they go directly to the *Paladin*, where Sam can walk around, chat with his team, and interact with the Strategic Mission Interface (SMI) supercomputer. People on the aircraft can offer insight, upgrades, and new missions. The SMI is an interactive screen on top of a large table that the whole team can crowd around. Sam can look at a map of the world to see all of the single player, co-op, and competitive multiplayer missions in one place. Filters can assist if you're looking for a specific type of mission, but it seems pretty clear overall.

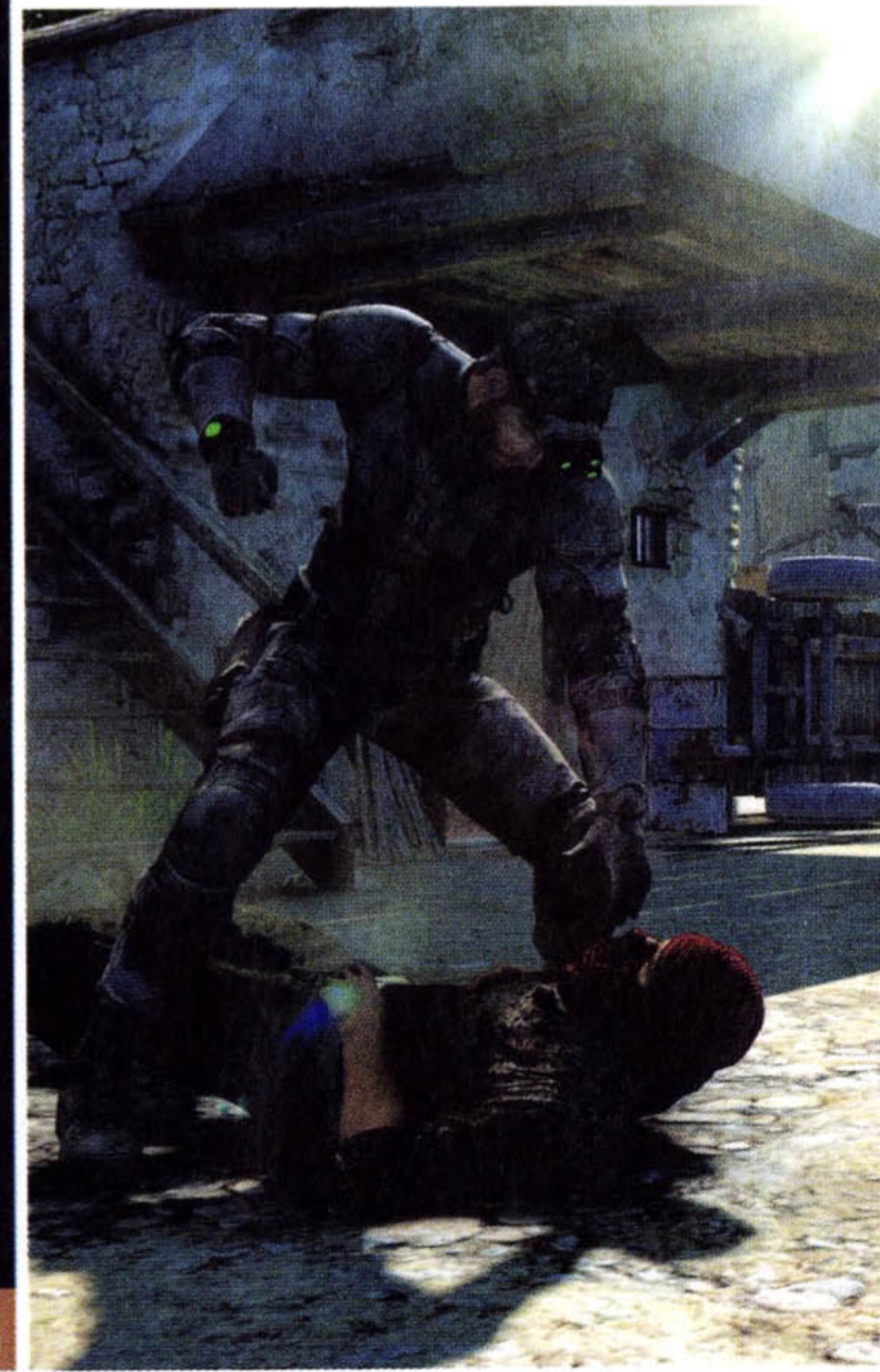
The first mission we saw takes place after the Blacklist attacks are set in motion. Sam needs to get to a CIA safehouse in Benghazi, Libya to find and extract a contact. The twist? It's Andriy Kobin, a sleazy black-market dealer whom Sam has plenty of reason to hate from the events of Conviction. He tells Briggs to bring his sniper gear while Grim

strongly reminds everyone that this is an extraction, not an assassination.

We skip the first part of the mission where Sam is disguised as a civilian and sneaks to the safehouse. Once there, it's clear that the terrorist forces beat Fisher to Kobin. When Sam establishes contact with the *Paladin* to figure out a new plan of attack, the whole room fills with projected data and imagery, a subtle, yet more evolved take on the projected mission objectives of Conviction. They exchange intel and Sam heads toward Kobin's suspected location.

As he ziplines over and prowls through the dangerous streets crawling with enemy forces, we get to see the scoring system in action. Whenever Sam slides past troops unseen or takes them down non-lethally and hides the bodies, he gets experience points in the Ghost category. These points pay more into the progression system than aggressive run-and-gun Assault maneuvers. Somewhere between complete stealth and crazy commando is Panther. Here you kill people without raising a ruckus with neck snaps or the stylish mark-and-execute mechanic first seen in Conviction. With every action, points pop up at the bottom of the screen with one of these three icons next to it. At the end of a mission, you can see which categories you focused on the most, though they all pour into one big currency pot. If you're not satisfied with your performance you can always replay missions for a better score and tweak the difficulty.

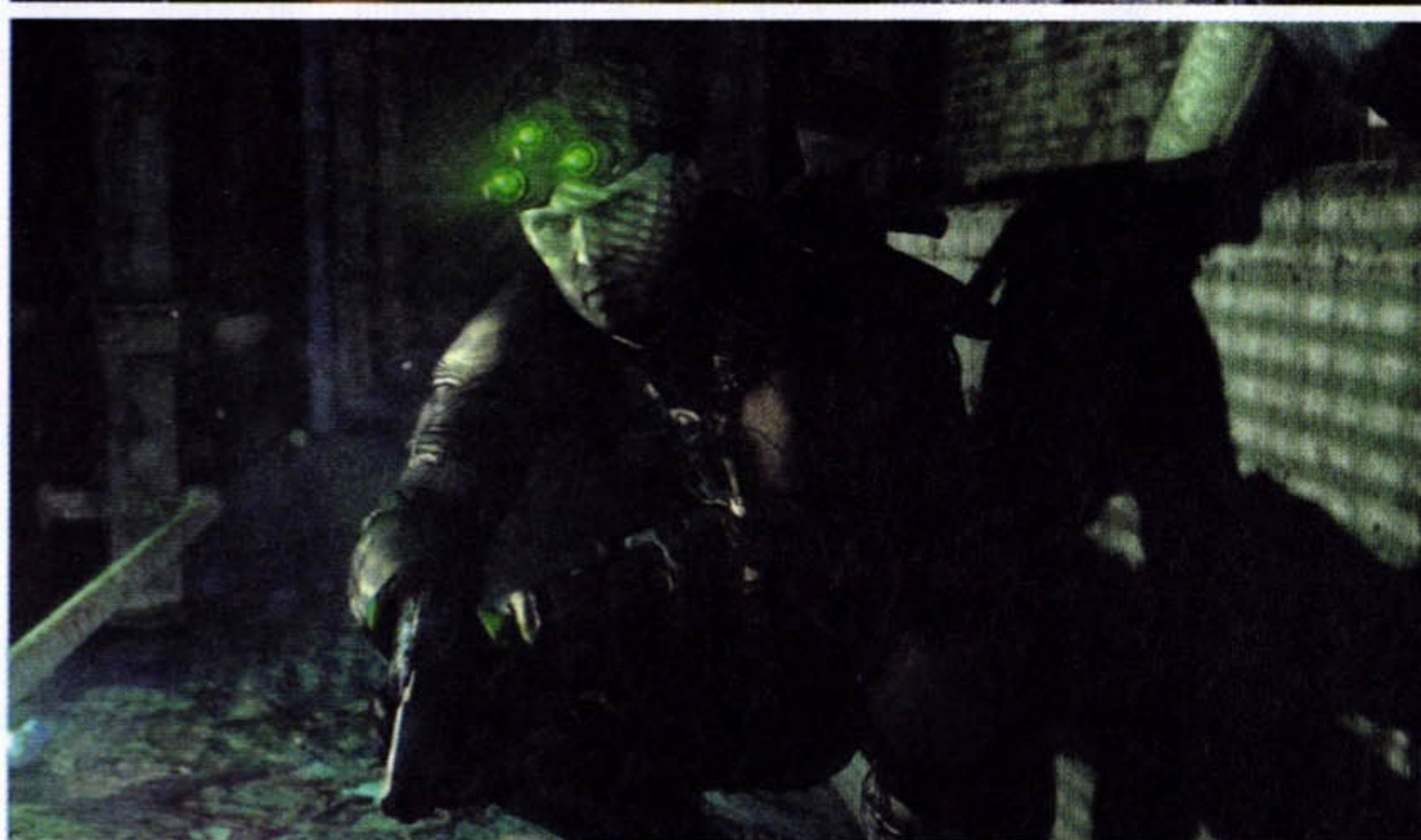
Sam reaches what looks to be a former police station. Kobin is tied to a chair,



Non-lethal takedowns take longer, yet earn more points



Sam's iconic suit and goggles return



receiving electric shocks from a group of three terrorists for his lack of cooperation. Sam can see it all through the cracked one-way glass commonly used in interrogation rooms. He marks all three, causing red arrows to appear above their heads, and then executes his plan. Sam smashes the window, grabs a guy and pulls him through, then pops up and shoots the other two before they realize what's going on. Kobin, facing away from his rescuer, wonders aloud, "So what are you? CIA? Special forces?" His facial expression drops from smarmy to terrified once he sees Sam's face. Trying to hop away in his chair, Kobin tips over and smashes to the floor. Sam tells him to relax, cuts him free, and gets him to his feet. Players then must escort him unharmed to an escape point and dig into cover to dismantle the enemy forces. Once the coast is clear they zipline out of the building and head back to the *Paladin*.

Kobin's immediately shuffled into one of the onboard holding cells. Sam can venture back there and get intel on a new possible mission from him. Kobin says he has information on an attack on a Vienna embassy. Sam can accept the mission immediately or put it off until later. It'll then show up in the SMI as a co-op mission. Ubisoft says most of the co-op missions can also be tackled solo, so you don't have to wait for a buddy to come online to experience the story and score some cash for upgrades.

Once you've loaded up on money, you can buy new weapons, suits, gadgets, and upgrades for your plane. Stealth-focused players can invest in quieter equipment and sneaky gadgets, while assaulters can buy body armor and bigger guns. Players can save multiple loadouts for use in different mission types. All cash, gear, and loadouts are universal through single player, co-op, and competitive multiplayer. Ubisoft estimates players can unlock 30 to 40 percent of the

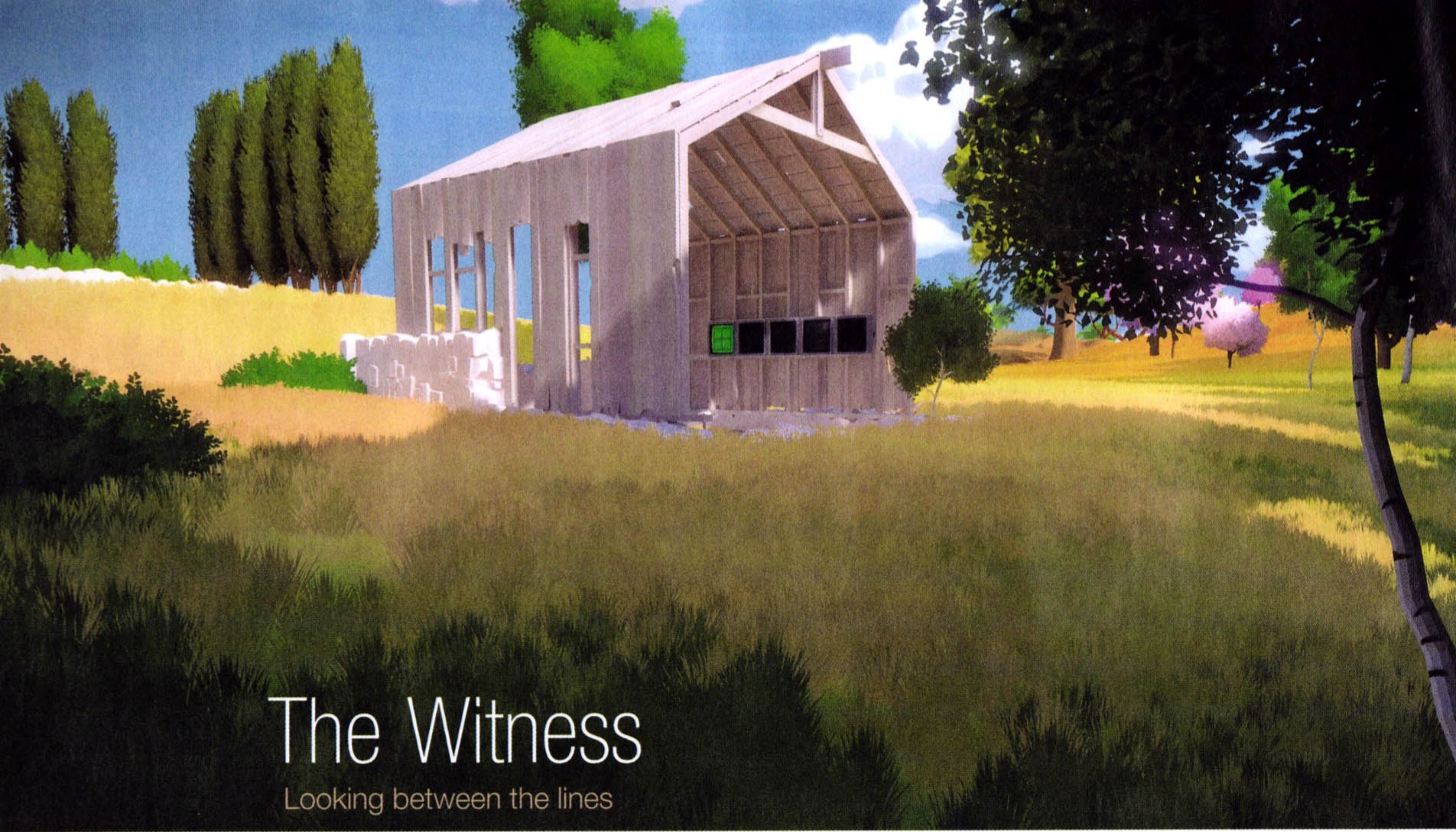
upgrades upon a first playthrough of the single player and co-op, but it's also possible for multiplayer fans to get everything through hours of competitive matches and start the campaign fully upgraded.

The next mission takes place several hours later in the campaign in a London chemical lab. Sam creeps past several guards on rainy nighttime rooftops. He comes upon an open elevator shaft and uses a rope to slide down to the bottom. The new area is crawling with enemies, including a tech soldier who can jam your radar and enemy-detecting goggles. He sends out small drones that can zip along the floor and ceiling and explode if they sense a threat. Fortunately, Sam's always a step ahead in the technology department. He sends out his own remote hovering drone to track down the tech. Using the drone's first-person camera view, Sam locates the offending enemy and takes him out with one clean shot.

With his full abilities restored, Sam makes his way to an office full of documents. They indicate an important shipment scheduled to leave the lab soon. Further on, he finds several guys in hazmat suits loading cargo. He must get to the shipment completely undetected to plant a tracker (one of the few sections in the game that requires stealth). Sam slips inside the shipping container and opens a high tech case. Over the radio, Grim explains that it's some kind of nerve gas derivative. Sam places the tracker inside, unconcerned with the dangerous substance. He closes everything back up as an enemy approaches.

And so the promising demo ends. Blacklist has made a lot of progress since E3, but Ubisoft Toronto has pushed the release back from the initial spring release window to late August to clear it from a surprisingly competitive March and allow for more polish. Hopefully, it'll be worth the wait. » **Bryan Vore**





The Witness

Looking between the lines

- » **Platform**
PC • iOS
- » **Style**
1-Player Puzzle
- » **Publisher**
TBA
- » **Developer**
Thekla, Inc.
- » **Release**
2013

When I first sit down to play *The Witness*, it appears to be a puzzle game about drawing lines. The first obstacle involves tracing a simple horizontal line across a computer monitor. In the minutes that follow, all of the puzzles follow a similar theme. Given an origin point and an end point on various grids, I must deduce the correct path for a line while adhering to simple rules. Initially, the concept doesn't seem far removed from puzzle books one might find in an airport bookstore, but that impression quickly fades. *The Witness* isn't about drawing lines. As the game unfolds, solving the grids becomes a fascinating test of your ability to observe, reason, and interpret.

Presenting complex ideas through simple mechanics was a hallmark of Jonathan Blow's 2008 title *Braid*. Blow and the rest of the team at Thekla, Inc. have some similar goals with *The Witness*. Despite the straightforward interface, the puzzles are clever, imaginative, and draw players deeper into the story.

"I've tried to make it so that not all of the puzzles are hard, but they are all interesting,"

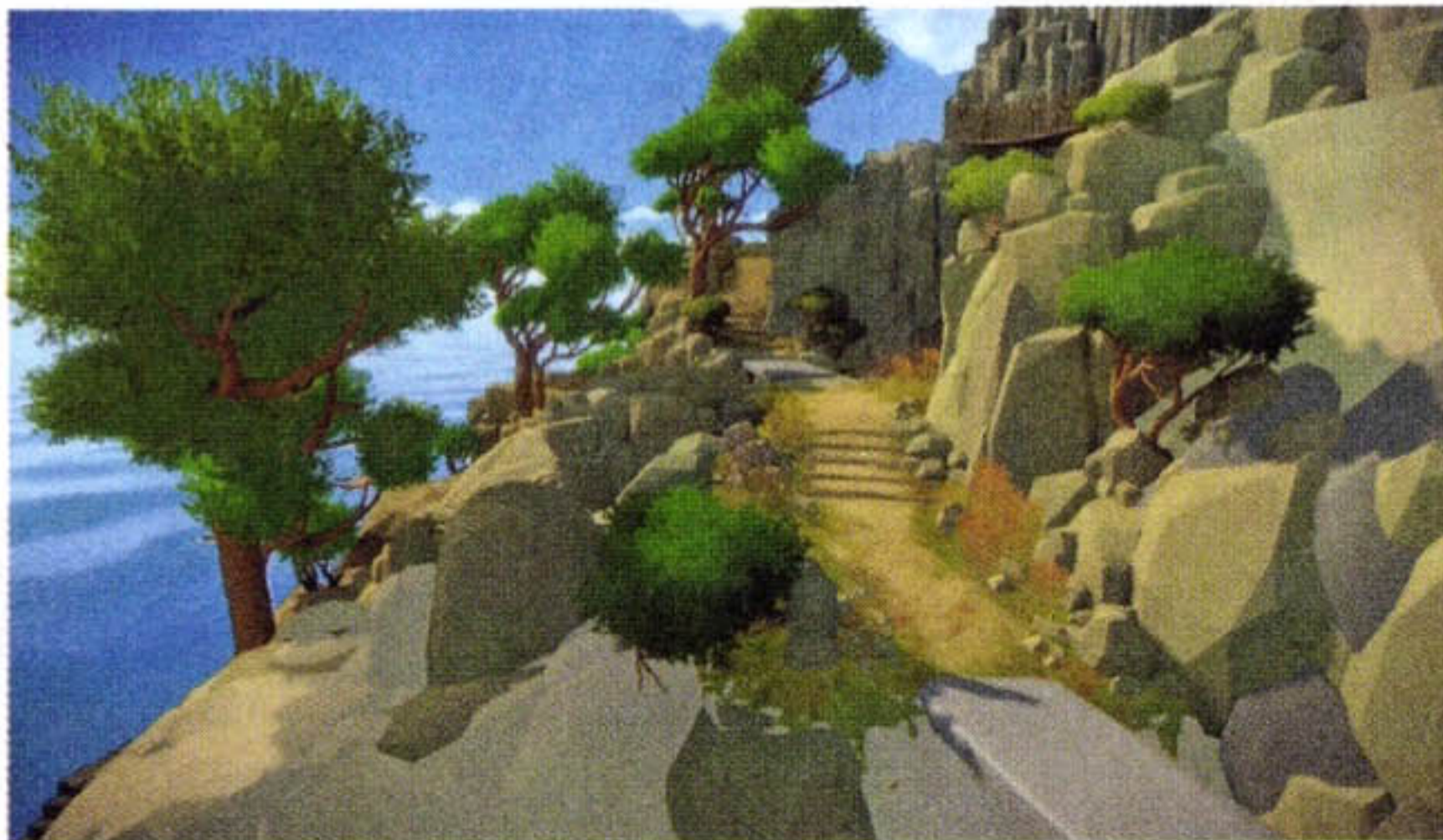
says Blow. "There's actually a good quantity of easy puzzles that will take 30 seconds. But it's 30 seconds where, in doing it, you see a new idea. It's not just there to be a puzzle. It's there to say something – maybe just a tiny little thing – but after you do a bunch of them, all these ideas stream together into a nonverbal narrative."

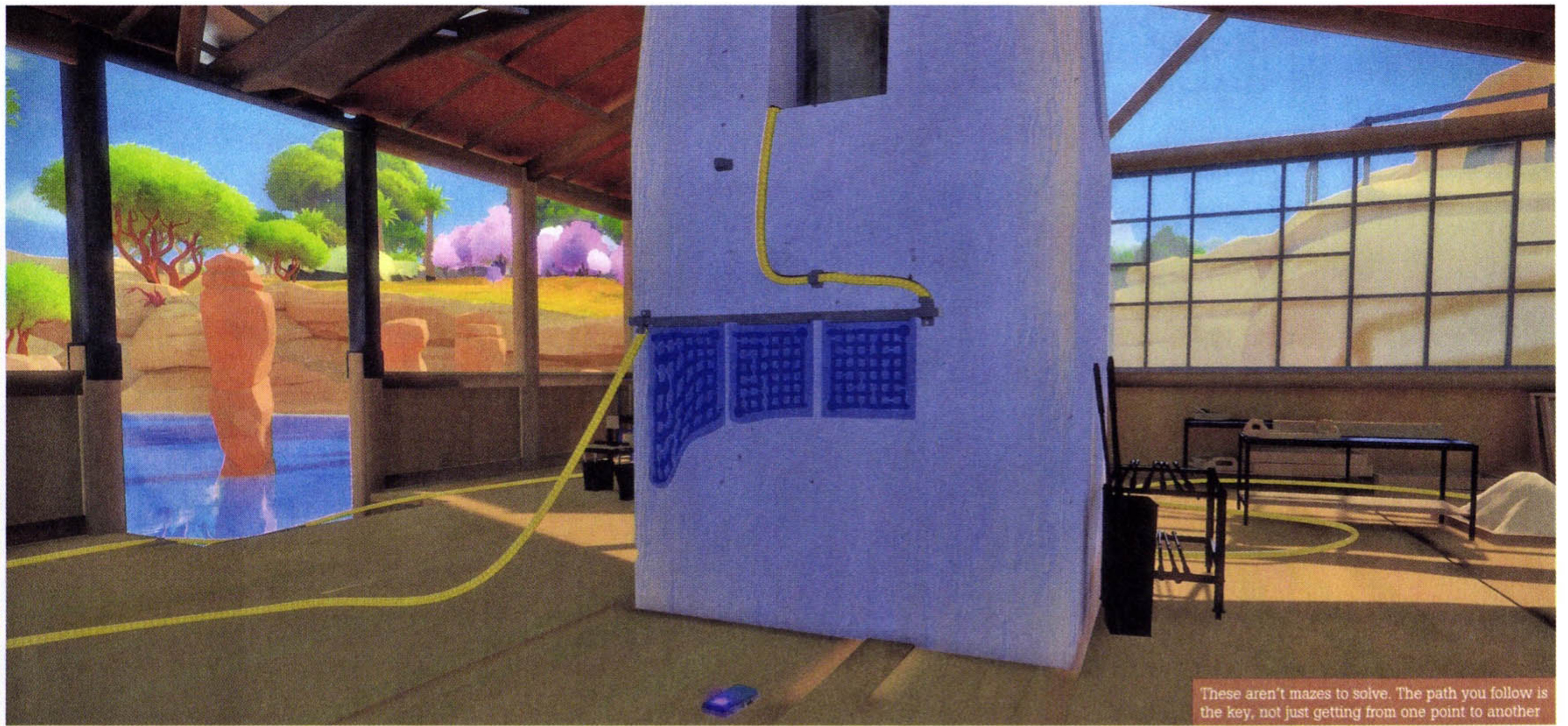
Finding out your purpose on the mysterious island, discovering its function, and learning about your predecessors are just a few of the unfolding story elements. These are largely uncovered through exploration and inference, similar to the way *Myst* titles tell their tales – and that isn't the only way *The Witness* draws comparisons to *Myst*. The puzzles also demand that players turn to the environment for clues, along with a dose of trial-and-error.

Drawing a line between two points is just the foundation. The complexity comes from rules that dictate certain parameters about the line you are drawing. For example, if the squares of a grid have black or white on them, you need to trace a line that splits the colored blocks into separate compartments.

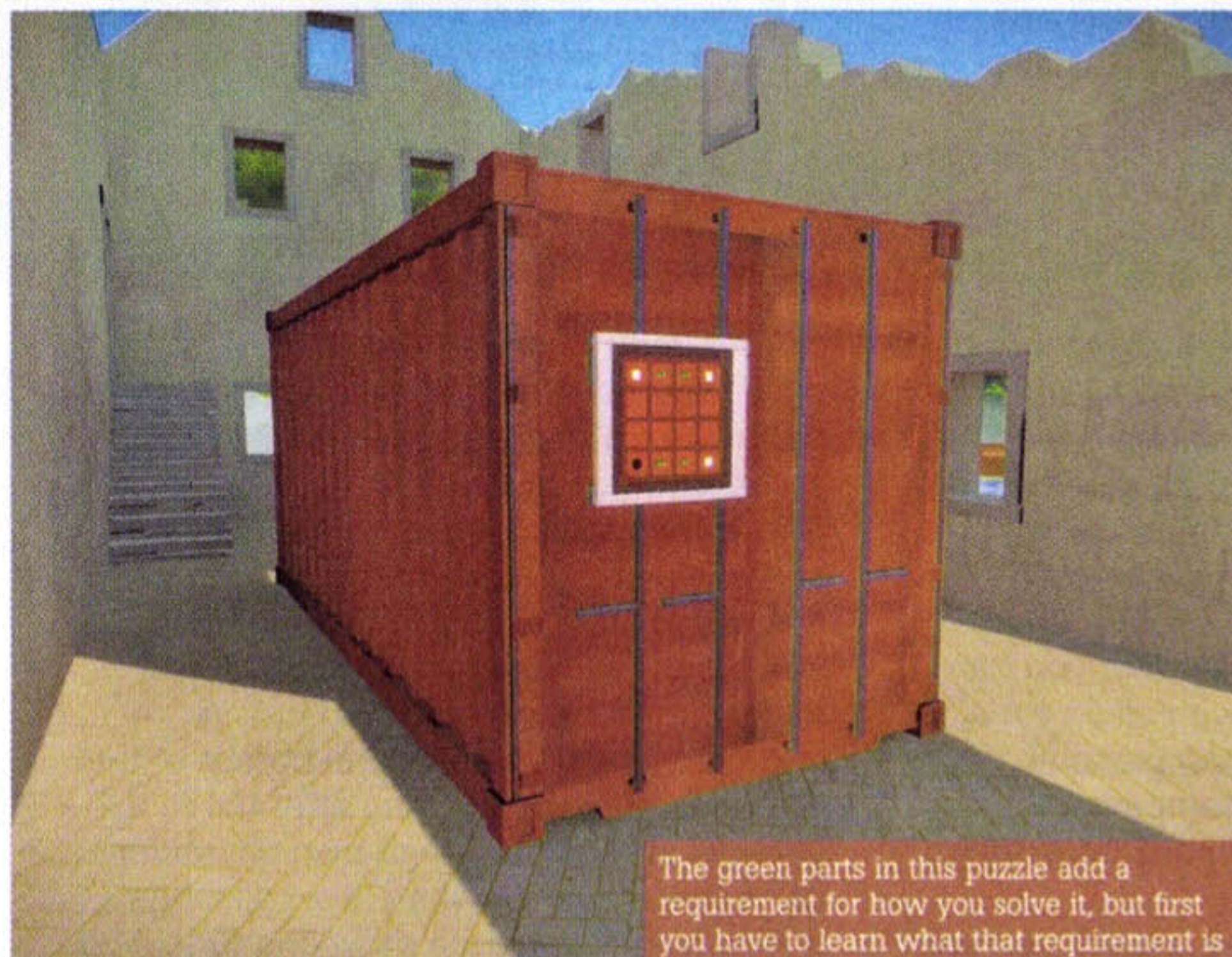
If you see black spots along the vertices, it means your line must pass through all of them. These parameters are never explicitly taught or explained; they are usually introduced and communicated when you encounter a series of puzzles that start easy and escalate to ensure you understand the concept.

As I play, I discover puzzles that seem to be unsolvable. One grid requires the impossible: separating a pattern of colored squares in a way that cannot be done. Another appears to have no rules to follow, but none of the lines I draw are correct. I won't spoil exactly what you need to do in these situations, but the surroundings play a pivotal role. Every time I feel stuck, a hint isn't far away. The hints aren't always explicit – don't expect to find the required path etched into a nearby table by a mysterious benefactor. Instead, I find that a slight change of perspective is enough. I look under, above, and through objects in the environment, and these new angles usually point me in the right direction thanks to a variety of visual

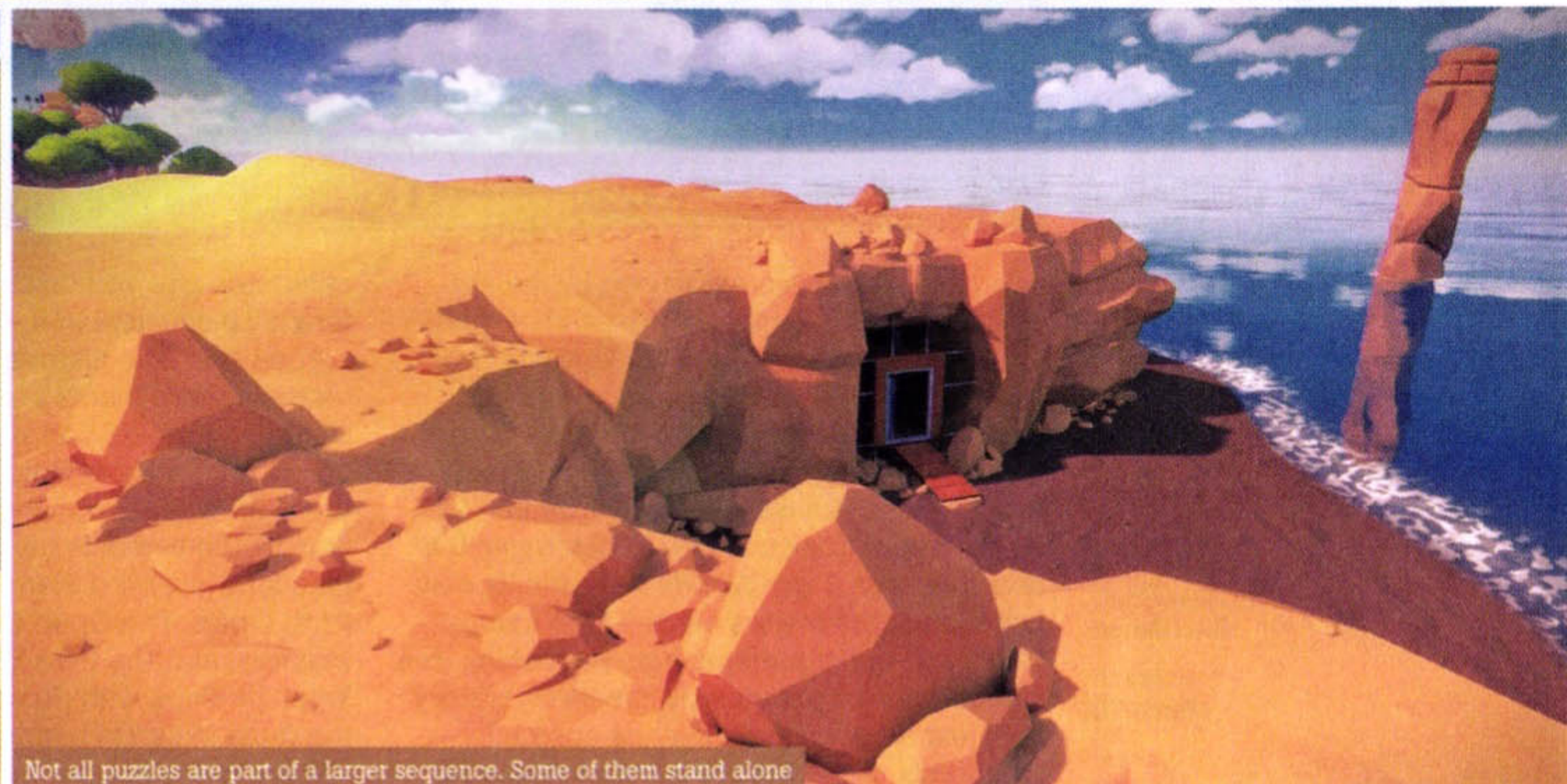




These aren't mazes to solve. The path you follow is the key, not just getting from one point to another



The green parts in this puzzle add a requirement for how you solve it, but first you have to learn what that requirement is



Not all puzzles are part of a larger sequence. Some of them stand alone

and audio clues. Does the puzzle look any different from a distance? From the other side of a structure? Do you hear anything new? Changes like these could be your stepping stones on the way to a solution.

Of course, some puzzles are just difficult. Not every one has a "magic key" hidden nearby. Right after the introductory area, I stumble upon a monitor situated on a vault door. The grid is adorned with unfamiliar symbols, and since I haven't learned what those symbols require, my chances of solving the puzzle are low. About 30 minutes later, I've been introduced to the symbols in other areas of the island, so I return to the vault. What used to be an impossible puzzle is downgraded to hard. However, even knowing what I'm supposed to, the puzzle proves too complex for me to solve at the moment.

"I like puzzles that are hard, but the game should only ask you to put in an amount of effort that is proportional to what the game is willing to give you for that effort," says Blow. In other words, the puzzles in *The Witness* are not difficult just for the sake of being

difficult. Blow wants to ensure that challenging puzzles like the vault door give an appropriate reward, not just open the door to another puzzle.

On the other hand, some puzzles do open the door to another puzzle. Many of the monitors on the island are linked; when one is solved, it may activate a new tier of monitors in an area. This cascade doesn't continue indefinitely, though. The island is broken up into several distinct areas, and players progress through a series of puzzles in each one until it is cleared. You know you're done with an area when you turn on a golden box and send a laser beam heading toward a mountain peak in the distance – at which point you continue exploring the island and start at square one in another area.

"What we're aiming for is building this tightly meshed world where everything has a reason for being there," says Blow. "Maybe you don't understand at the beginning, but as you go through the game you piece things together in your mind."

My time with *The Witness* felt short. After

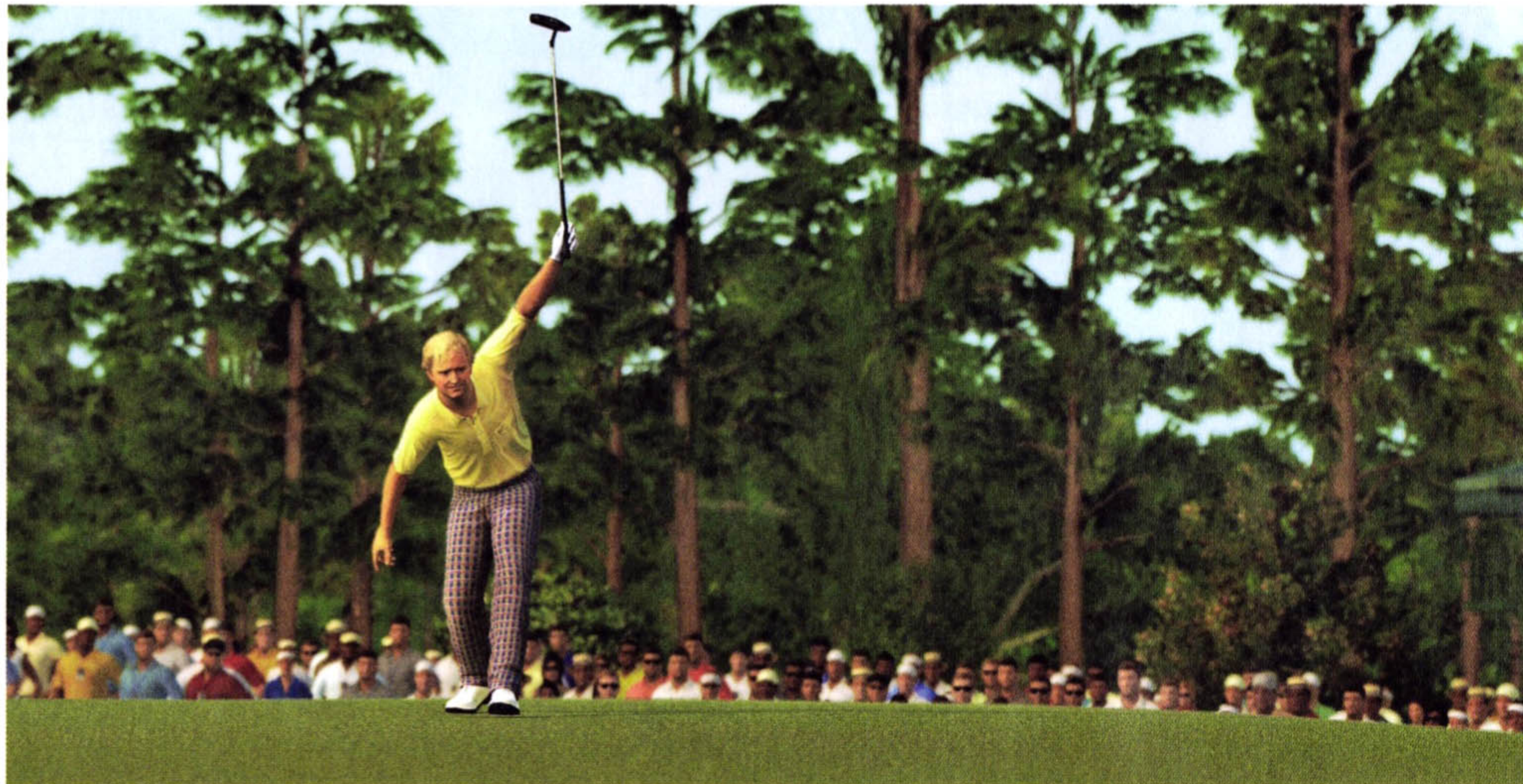
playing for about an hour, I felt like I was just scratching the surface and getting familiar with its puzzle-solving vocabulary. On the other hand, I probably wasn't as close to proficiency as I thought. As with *Braid*, *The Witness* establishes rules to acclimate players with its mechanics, but it also doesn't shy away from breaking those rules on occasion.

"You don't sit down in the morning and say, 'I'm gonna really break some rules and think outside the box today!'" says Blow. "It's more like, I have things that I get excited about, design-wise. When a game sets up some rules and starts going according to them, that's often very interesting in the beginning. At some point in most games, that gets boring to me. From a design standpoint, I always try to look at how I can change it up and make it interesting."

The grid-and-line puzzle format may seem simple at first glance, but don't be fooled: *The Witness* is shaping up to be a compelling and unpredictable adventure with the potential to surprise even the most seasoned puzzle-solvers. » **Joe Juba**

Tiger Woods PGA Tour 14

History in the making



» **Platform**
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360

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

» **Publisher**
EA Sports

» **Developer**
EA Tiburon

» **Release**
March 26

All sports have eras defined by the athletes who dominated the game. Some of them fade into the background over time, while others endure as legends. Naturally, sports fans like to compare legends from one era against another. Playing the what-if game is always fun as we search for some kind of objective way to determine the absolute best. Tiger Woods 14 – with its new Legends of the Majors mode – won't stop those age-old arguments from happening, but it's more fun to put your own mark on history than just arguing about it in the abstract.

Legends of the Majors is your chance to square off against some of golf's greatest legends like Ben Hogan, Jack Nicklaus, Arnold Palmer, and Tiger himself. The mode sports six eras of golf history (spanning from 1873 to the present) and more than 60 challenges, complete with era-specific visuals, equipment, and even physics. Beat the pro associated with that era with your created

character, and you unlock that golfer and era for play elsewhere in the game.

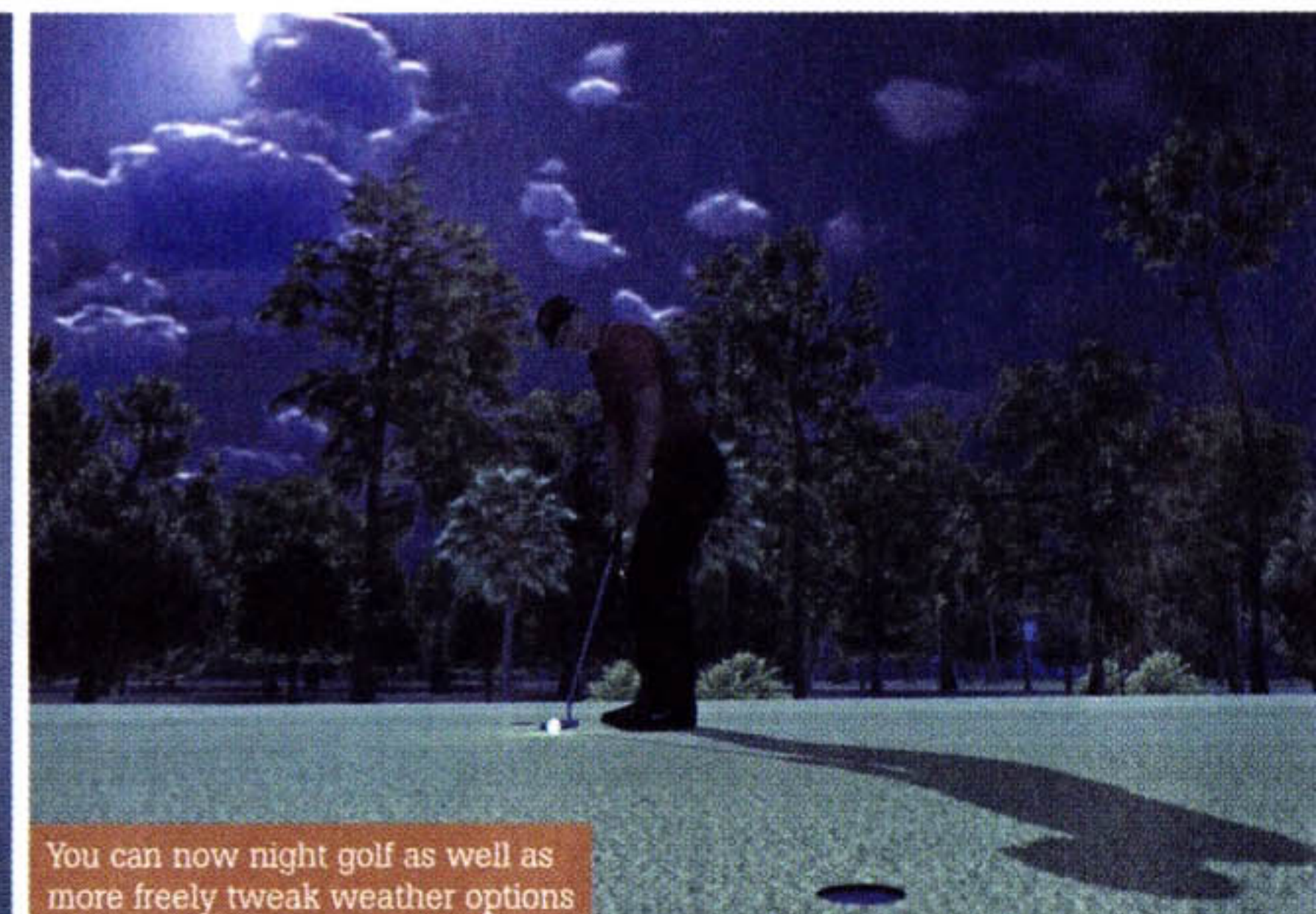
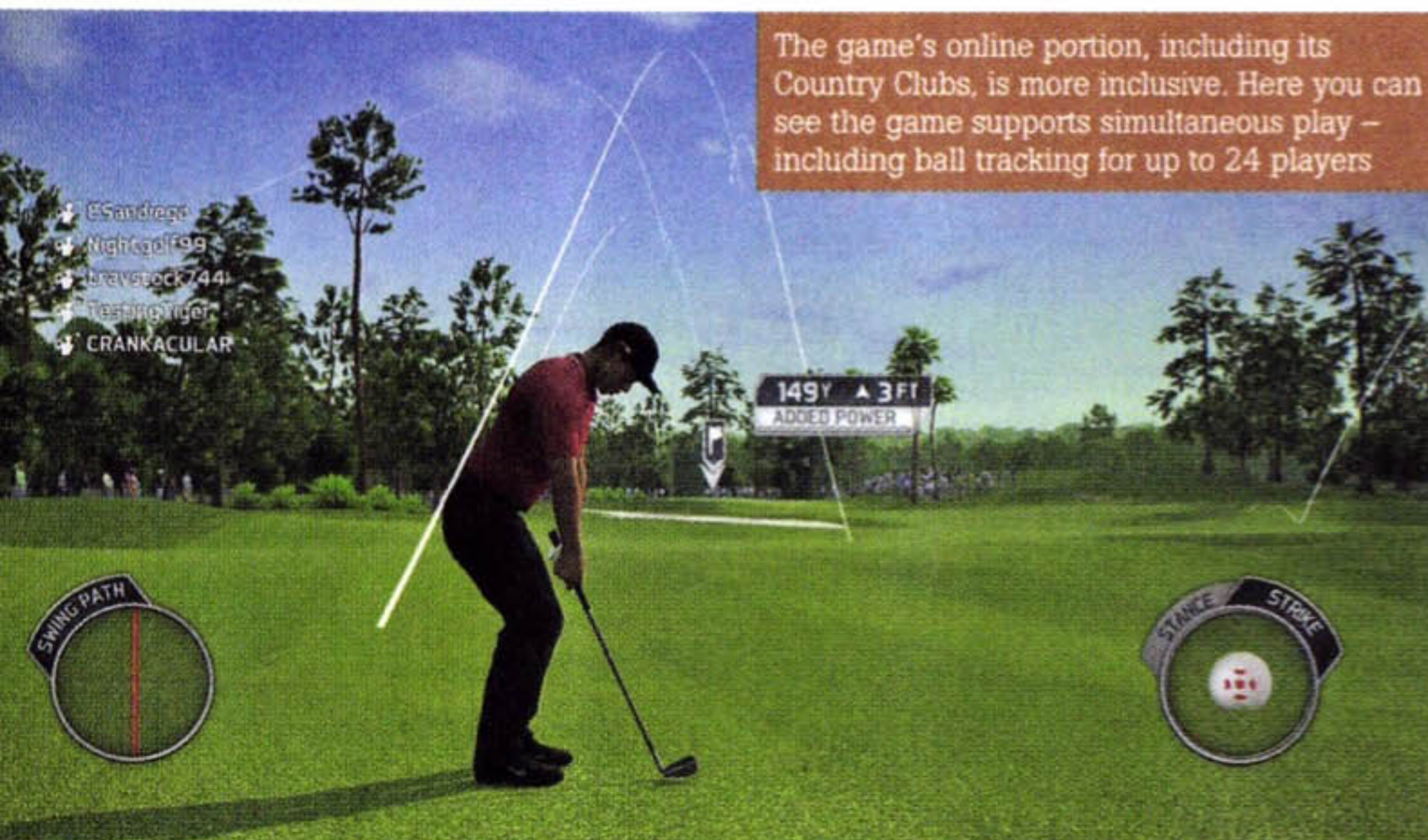
Apart from the historic golfers, Tiger 14 features more than 35 real-life golfers, including the addition of the LPGA, where you can create a female pro and try to win the Kraft Nabisco Championship. Another first for the series is the fact that you can play for the Grand Slam with all four majors (U.S. Open, The Open Championship, The Masters, and the PGA Championship). Tiger 14 ships with 20 courses on its disc, the most in series history.

If you're looking for more action, you can always find a game via your online Country Club, which is more inclusive this year. The maximum membership number has gone from 25 to 100 per club. The more club members who play daily, the bigger the benefits, and there is now a leaderboard that compares the average tournament scores of your members versus those from other

clubs. Unfortunately, there still isn't a way to set up tournaments between specific clubs.

Last year, Tiger totally overhauled its swing mechanics, and this year it returns with some modifications. Different swing styles (including those of the historic golfers) necessitate swinging the left analog at different angles. Appropriately, a swing meter similar to the one used in Tiger 09 returns in the lower left-hand corner of the screen to show your swing after the fact. Golfers' swings have their own characteristics that influence where the ball lands and how they generate draw and fade. You can also design your own, including picking your trajectory.

With Tiger 14, EA Sports is opting for some stability with its gameplay while adding a more attractive historical aspect than the boring Tiger Legacy mode. Will making history be enough for this installment to make its mark? » **Matthew Kato**



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Dark

A new stealth title emerges from the shadows

» **Platform**
Xbox 360 • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Kalypso Media

» **Developer**
RealmForge Studios

» **Release**
April

The beginning of the next console generation is nearly upon us, and that usually means new franchises are few and far between. RealmForge, the German developer behind Dungeons (a Dungeon Keeper-like strategy game), is giving it a go with a new vampire-themed stealth game.

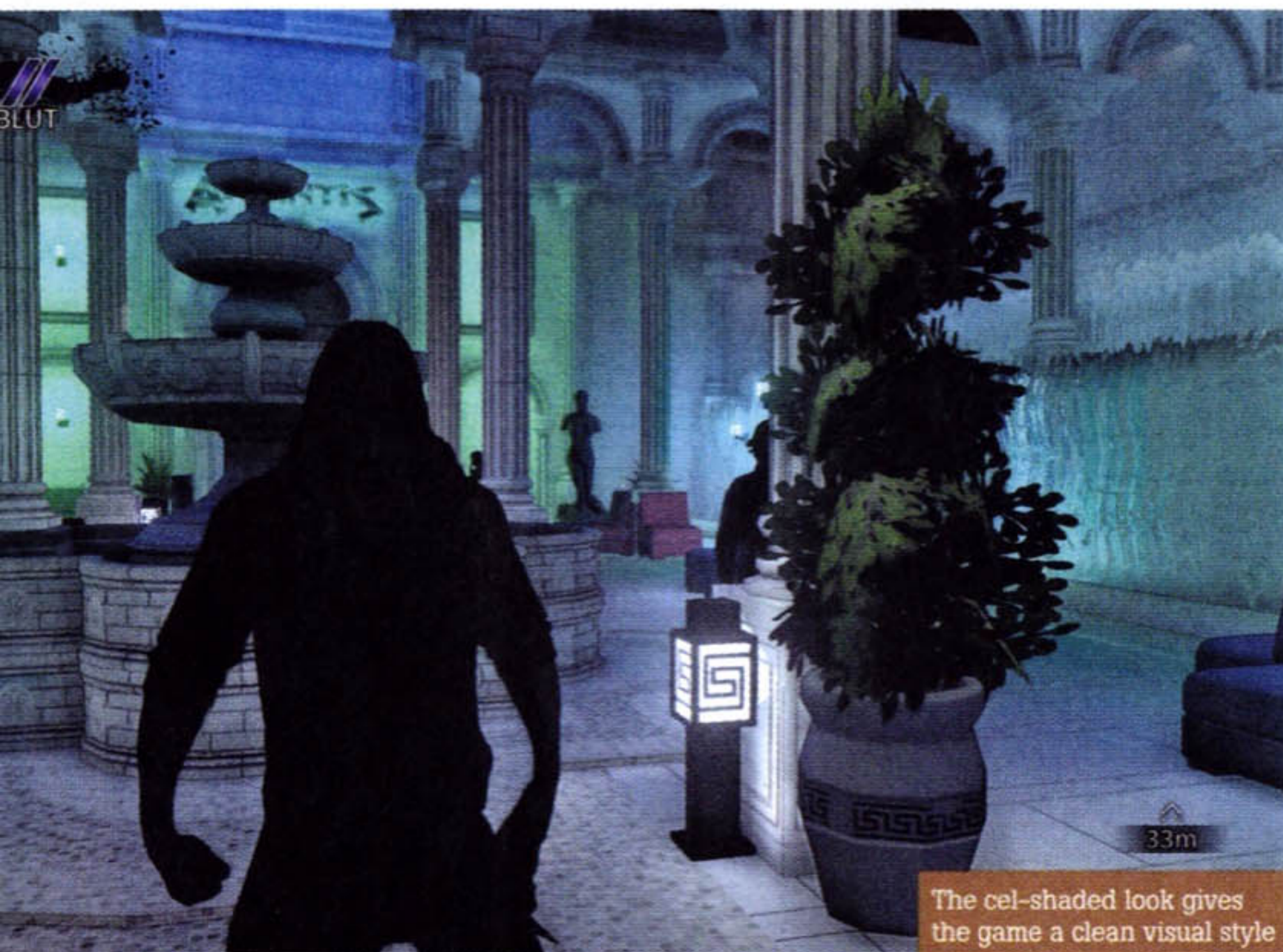
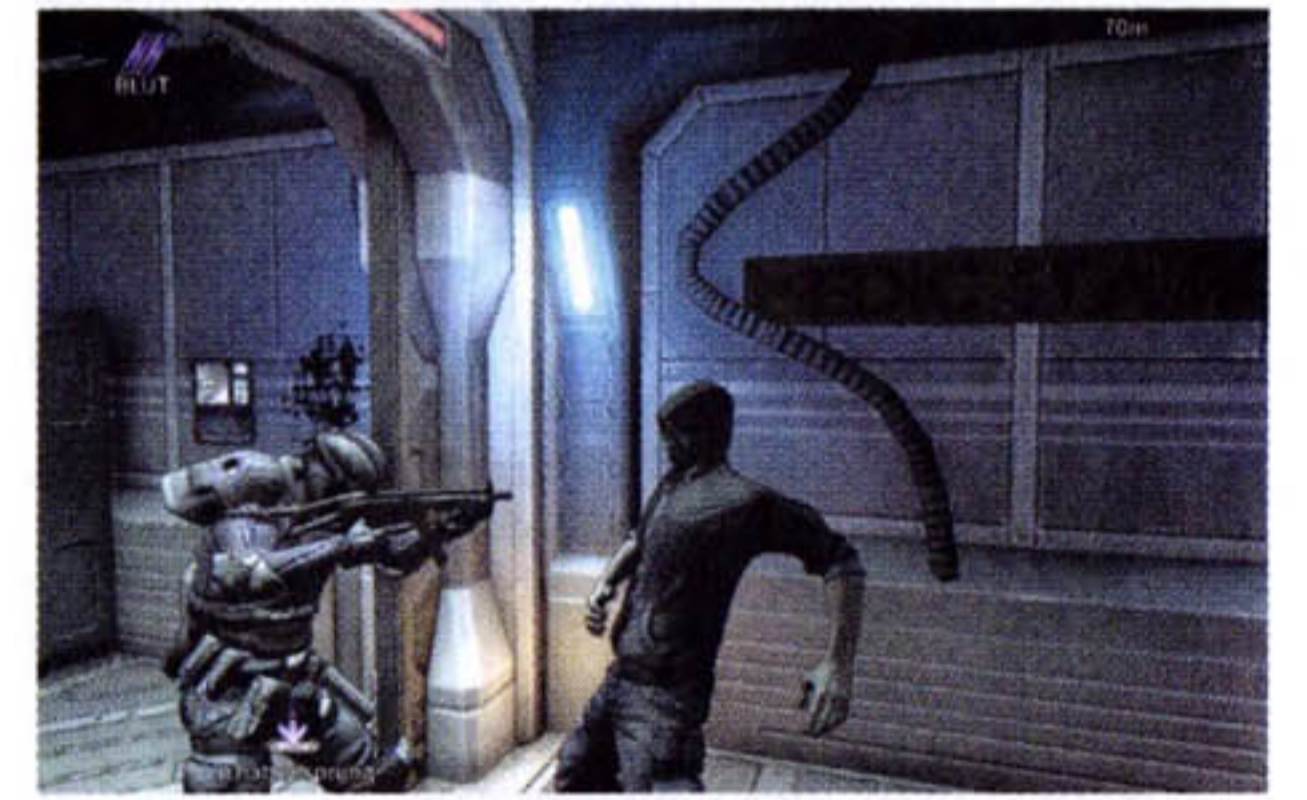
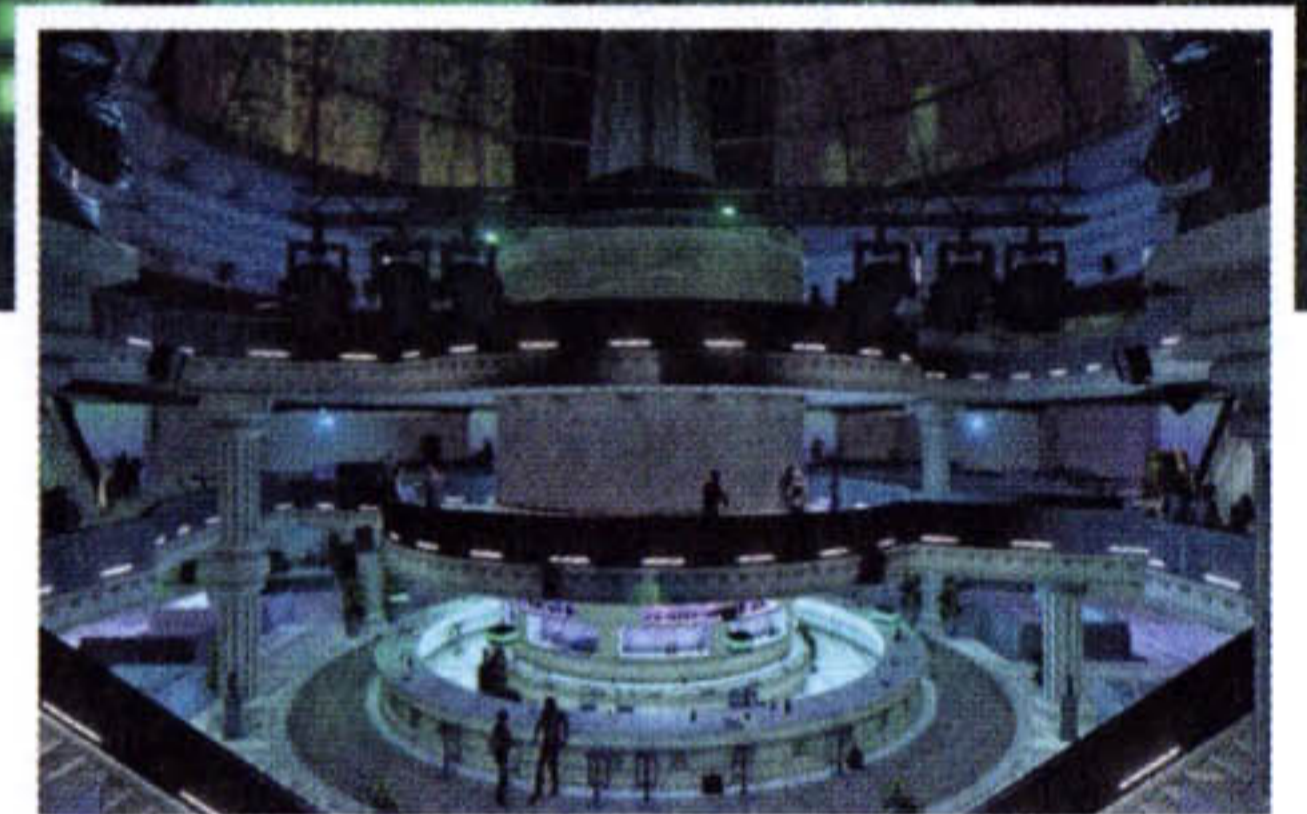
Players control Eric Bane, a recently turned vampire. Eric wakes up in a gothic nightclub, Sanctuary, with no recollection of how he became a bloodsucker. Rose, the owner of the club, is willing to help Eric figure out what happened, but her goal isn't entirely altruistic. In Dark's universe, freshly bitten vampires only become whole when they drink their master's blood. Otherwise they become ghoulish abominations. Rose doesn't like these vampire lords, and helps Eric by pointing him their way.

Eric assassinates these elder vampires for Rose while also acquiring their blood to hopefully make himself whole. Once Eric avoids the curse of becoming a ghoul, he ultimately wishes to become human. Players can learn more about his world and story by interacting with NPCs, and RealmForge promises two different endings.

Some of these ancient vampires stick to the shadows, while others are more public. One vampire lord, Vlad, masquerades as the mastermind behind a supposedly eco-friendly corporation named GeoForge. Eric infiltrates his massive skyscraper, which includes a huge indoor park. The colorful greens of the gardens pop thanks to Dark's cel-shaded look. Eric also infiltrates locations like a museum and a cryogenics laboratory.

Dark is inspired by traditional stealth games like the Splinter Cell and Thief series. Eric must avoid security guards and monsters while sneaking through levels. Humans react when they see or hear Eric, but the less intelligent ghouls only start spitting acid on him if they hear him. Piles of broken glass or motion-activated museum audio tours will alert them to the player's location if they're not careful.

Like the protagonist of the old-school stealth games mentioned before, Eric is at his deadliest when he's hidden. The young vampire crumples easily when outnumbered by slashing claws or firepower. Being undead gives Eric powers like limited teleportation, increased speed, confusing enemies, and even sensing his foes' circulatory systems through walls. Like any stealthy antihero, he can grab unaware enemies and either kill them or drink their blood. Eric's vampiric powers require the life force of others, and drinking is the only way to keep using them. Players can upgrade their powers and unlock new ones by completing mission objectives or sneaking by



The cel-shaded look gives the game a clean visual style

a high number of enemies unseen.

Dark is RealmForge's first foray into making console games, but the new stealth game shows promise. Splinter Cell and other traditional stealth games have shifted towards high action in recent years, and Dark may satisfy fans of the genre hungry for a stiffer challenge. » **Tim Turi**



Deadly Premonition: The Director's Cut

The raincoat killer returns

To say that *Deadly Premonition* summons up extreme opinions is an understatement. The Xbox 360 game's across-the-charts review scores earned it a Guinness World Record for Most Critically Polarizing Survival Horror Game – a distinction that new publisher Rising Star Games is only too proud to bring up. PlayStation 3 owners have either had to import the game or satisfy their curiosity by pulling up YouTube clips of some of the game's most bizarre moments ("Sinner's sandwich" is a great start), but soon they can see what all the fuss is about thanks to an enhanced director's cut.

The game now runs at 1080p, which is either a blessing or a hilarious curse. Even ardent fans admit the game isn't exactly the best-looking one out there, and the enhanced resolution is a solid underline to that fact. Of course, those fans may counter by saying that graphics whores are missing the point. *Deadly Premonition* is all about the town of Greenvale, its people, and its dark past. Agent Francis York Morgan is as endearing a character as his textures are muddy.

Many critics couldn't get past the tedious combat, which is amplified by poor controls. For the director's cut, developer Access Games is revisiting the game's inputs, saying that they're now in line with what players might expect from other games in the survival-horror genre. While the studio wouldn't elaborate, they said that some of the new story content addresses the original game's slow start and

adds multiple endings. Players also get to hear more of Agent Morgan's oftentimes-bizarre monologues, where he riffs on topics ranging from movies and music to past cases.

Over the course of his investigation, Agent Morgan felt right at home in Greenvale. Players can make it official in the director's cut, with the ability to purchase a home in the town. Game director Suehiro "Swery 65" Hidetaka

told us that Morgan won't be able to peep into his own windows, however.

Deadly Premonition: The Director's Cut is bound to remain as polarizing as ever, though Rising Star Games is attempting to fix some of the issues that plagued its original release. This April, new players can check it out for themselves. It's almost a certainty that they'll leave Greenvale with strong opinions. » **Jeff Cork**

» **Platform**
PlayStation 3

» **Style**
1-Player Adventure

» **Publisher**
Rising Star Games

» **Developer**
Access Games

» **Release**
April



If you think he looks great here, wait until you see him in 3D

Swery 65 is the place to go if you want to play a game of darts. Don't bother asking why you play with a dart gun. It's a regional thing

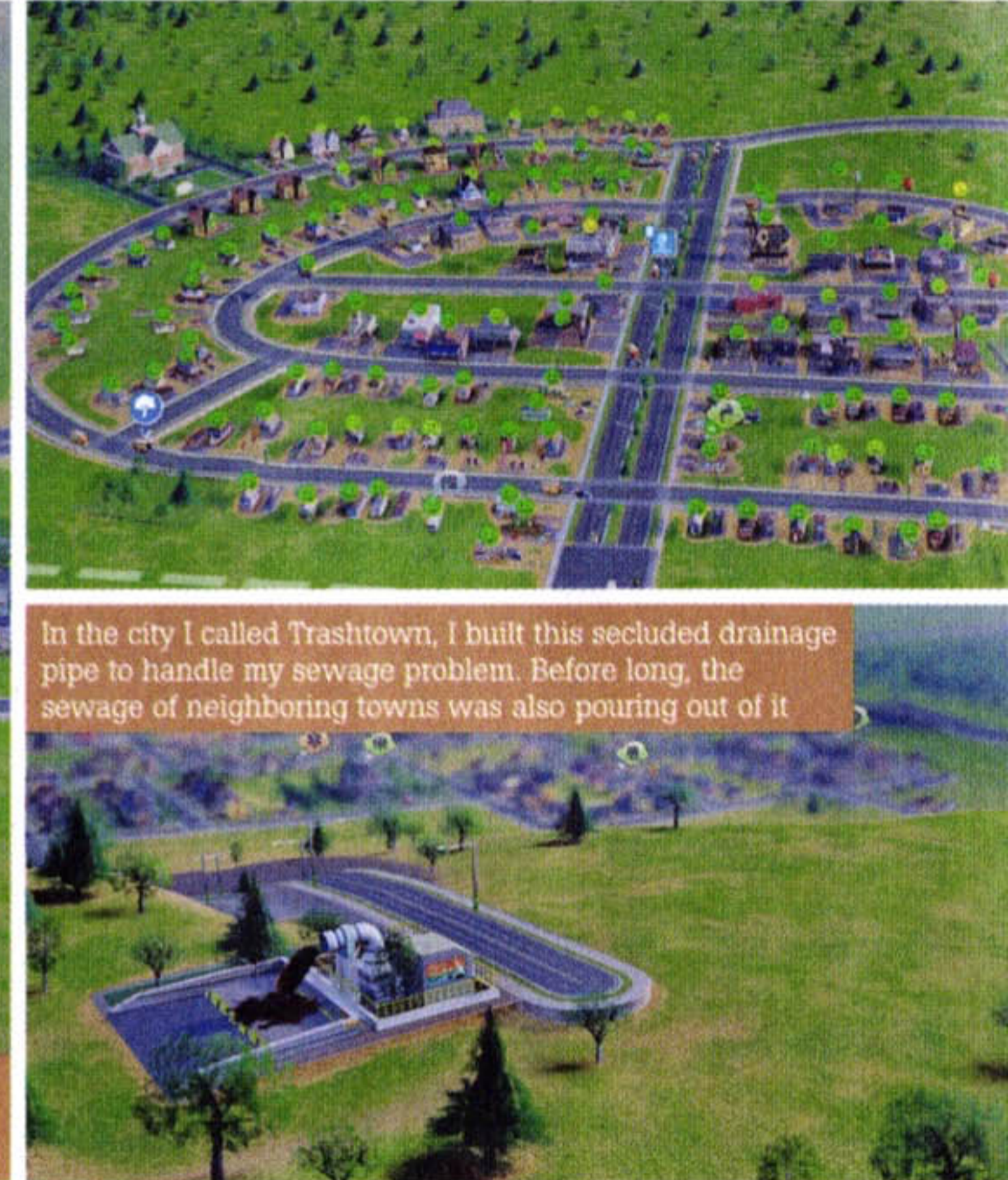


SimCity

The joy of dividing your efforts



The Expo Center is a hefty financial investment, but it can pay off big in terms of attracting visitors to your city



In the city I called Trashtown, I built this secluded drainage pipe to handle my sewage problem. Before long, the sewage of neighboring towns was also pouring out of it

- » **Platform**
PC • Mac
- » **Style**
1-Player Simulation
(14-Player Online)
- » **Publisher**
Electronic Arts
- » **Developer**
Maxis
- » **Release**
March 5 (PC)
TBA (Mac)

Veterans of the SimCity series are accustomed to providing their citizens with everything. A single city was expected to provide all utilities, law enforcement, and health care to its residents. That isn't the case in the newest installment. Basic services can be imported from nearby towns, saving you from the necessity of building pollution-heavy structures or expensive infrastructure. Previous hands-on time left me apprehensive about this shift in design, but that was before a six-hour session where I discovered the benefits of being the mayor of Trashtown.

I start playing with every intention of creating a thriving cultural hub that can be everything to every person, but that attempt goes downhill quickly. Industrial pollution clouds the air, sewage backs up under the streets, and my citizens are sick. I use the city treasury to address these problems, but buying sewage-output dumps and clinics leaves little money for more enticing structures like schools and casinos. More problems – crime, fires, water shortages – surface, sponging up even more money. Given the sorry state of affairs, I name

my city Trashtown and bail out, hoping for a fresh start in a new location.

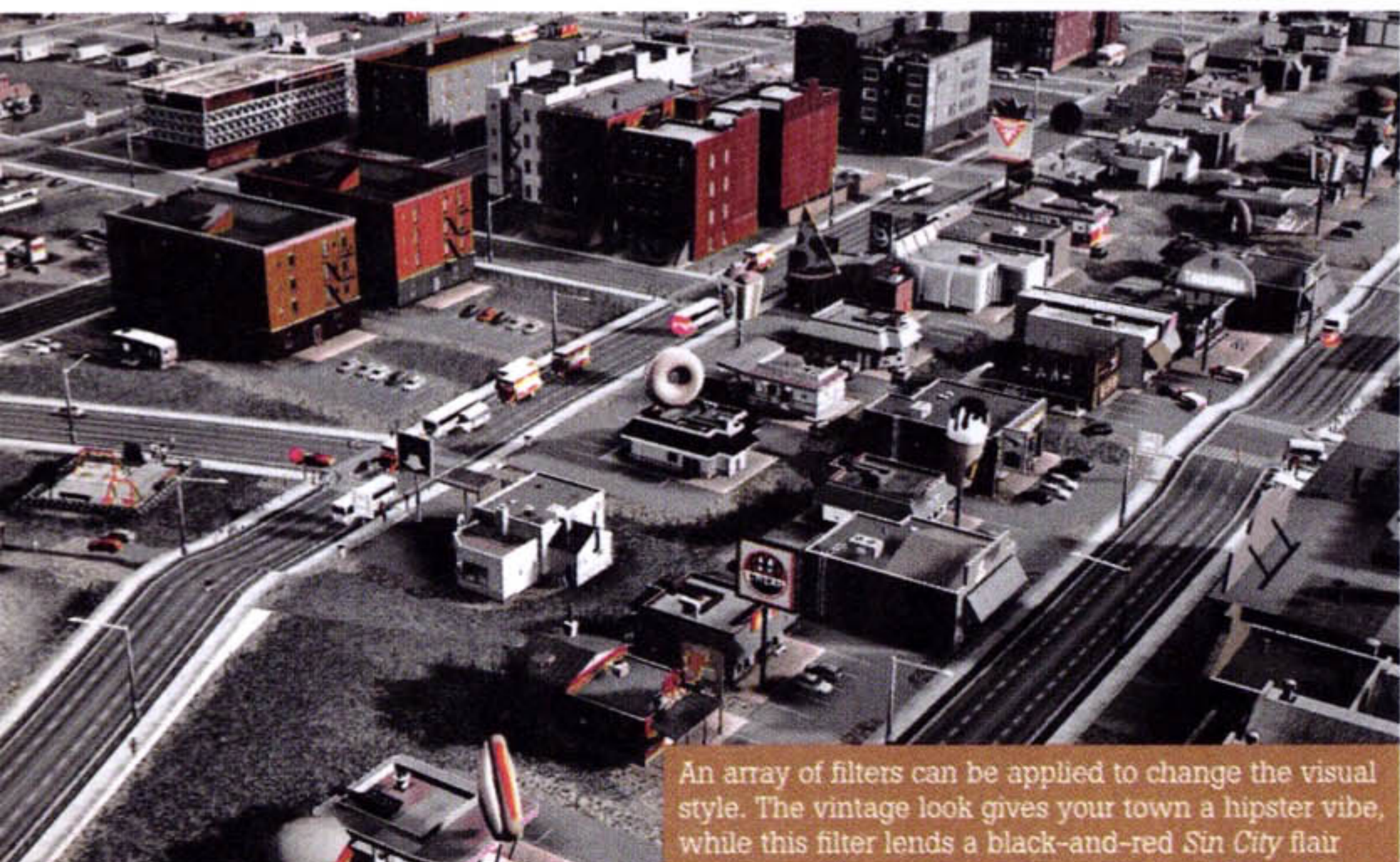
My second city is located in the same region, meaning that it can share services with Trashtown. I realize the benefit of this almost immediately; the two smog-belching coal power plants of Trashtown are producing an energy surplus, and my new city buys the excess rather than spending money on a polluting eyesore. As I build upscale housing and shopping, I realize that many of my citizens are commuting to Trashtown due to its abundant industrial jobs, saving me from having to make space for unsavory factories. My garbage is sent to Trashtown's dump, and when the sewers back up, guess who gladly accepts the waste of my favored population? I am relieved of the need to do any of the dirty jobs, leaving my new citizens free to enjoy the benefits of a charmed, cultured life.

Offloading these undesirable duties costs money, but so does building the infrastructure separately. I also enjoy the benefit of not having an open-air sewage pile anywhere within the city limits. Despite the way games have conditioned players to believe that a hefty upfront investment eventually pays off, it may not be the right choice. If you plan on building a sprawling megalopolis in the spirit of previous SimCity titles, the scale of the task will likely force you to seek outside help. Providing fire, police, and hospital coverage for that many citizens has a hefty price tag; outsourcing some of those services to other cities might be more economical. You may not have the gratification of doing everything by yourself, but this SimCity is different from previous entries. It's less about the success of a single city and more about the collaborative success of multiple cities with different goals.

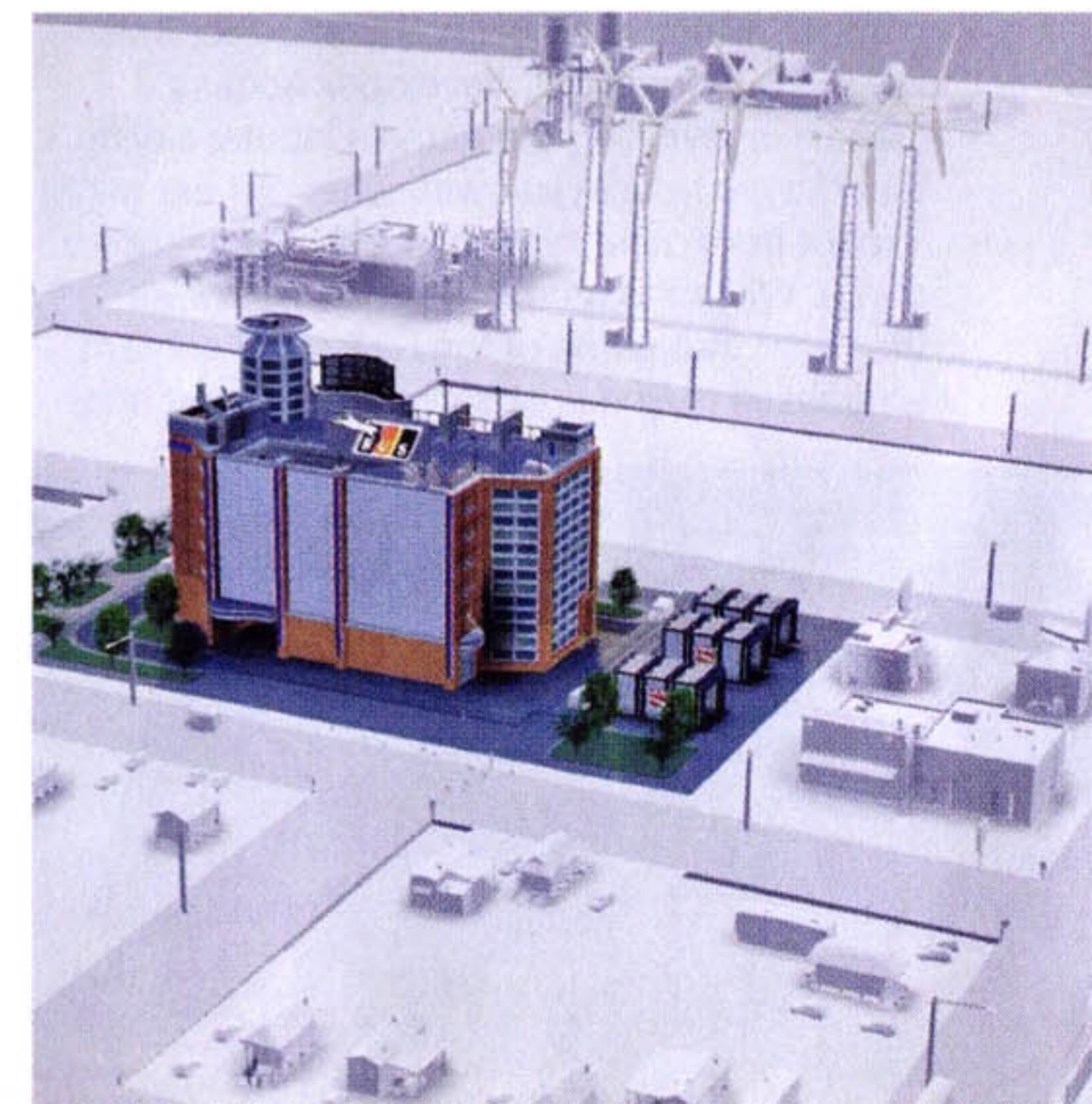
In its own way, Trashtown was a huge success. I jumped between my two towns, tweaking one to the benefit of the other. Though I did this in solo mode, the same concept applies to multiplayer strategies. No one wants to

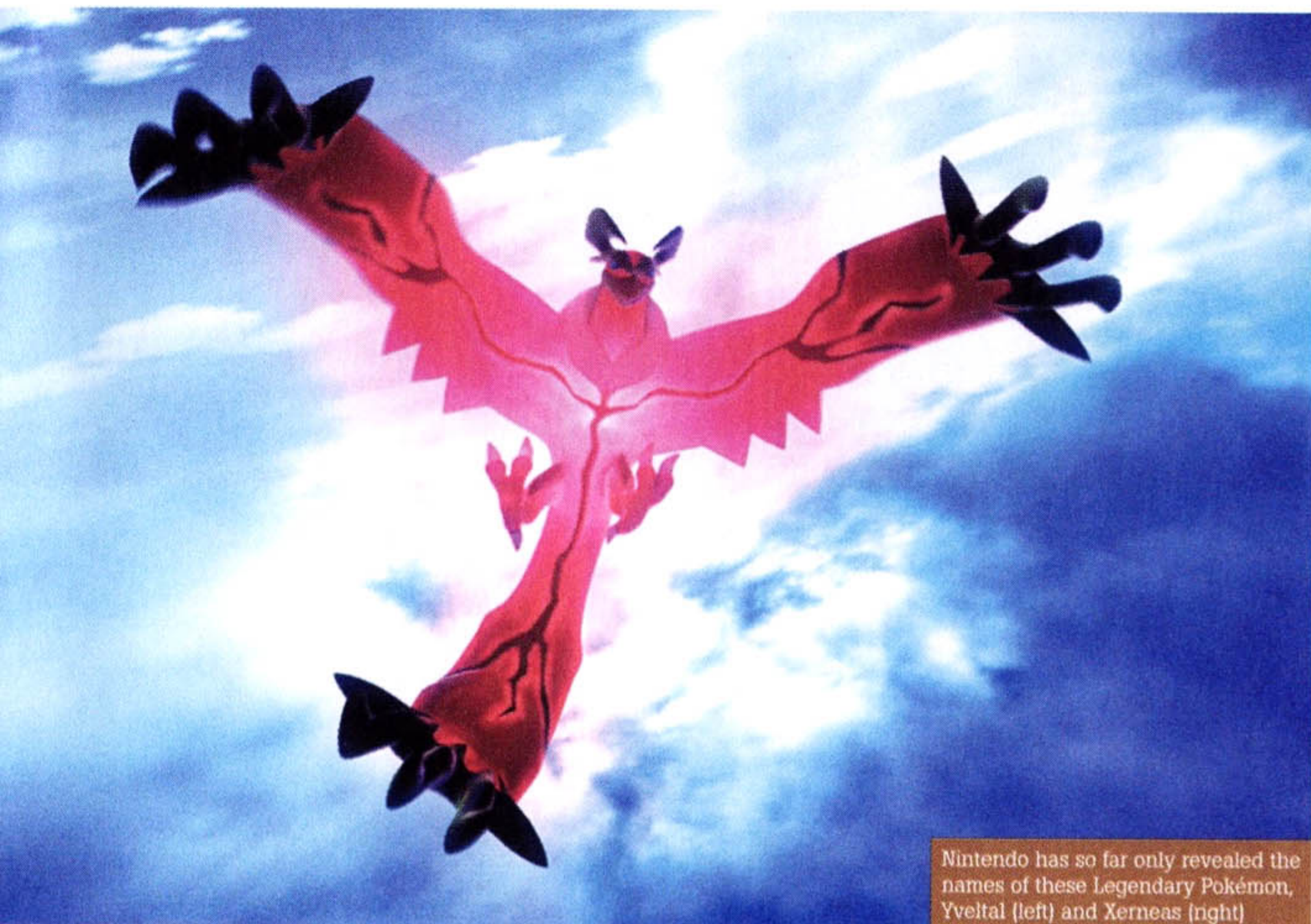
play a polluted, garbage-filled cesspool, but the division of labor is the important element. You may be in charge of building up a fleet of police cars to help your neighbors, while another player builds a hospital to benefit the whole region. Players could start their own Trashtowns with enough sewage and garbage solutions for everyone, subsidized by the donations of all benefitting players.

This is where the controversial always-online feature comes into play; sharing these resources isn't just one way to play SimCity. It's the optimal way. The game is designed around cooperative effort, which involves real-time coordination. This SimCity is different, and that may be hard for some old-school fans to accept – but it doesn't mean the game is any less entertaining, humorous, or detailed. The move away from a one-city-fits-all approach leads to more variation and specialization, making it easier to focus on the aspects of the simulation that interest you the most. Thanks to Trashtown and other creations like it, no one city needs to bear the burden of every negative consequence. Sure, no one wants to live in Trashtown – but everyone is glad it's there. » **Joe Juba**



An array of filters can be applied to change the visual style. The vintage look gives your town a hipster vibe, while this filter lends a black-and-red Sin City flair





Nintendo has so far only revealed the names of these Legendary Pokémon, Yveltal (left) and Xerneas (right)



Meet the new starters from left to right: Froakie, Chespin, and Fennekin

Pokémon X and Y

Pokémon fully embraces the third dimension

When Nintendo announced Pokémon Black and White 2 last year, the first question everyone asked was, “Why not release it for the 3DS?” Nintendo’s newest handheld system was well into its second year by the time Black and White 2 released, and fans were clamoring for a core Pokémon title that would take advantage of its new functionality. Pokémon X and Y serve to satisfy those cravings.

The Pokémon Black and White series dipped its toes in the polygonal 3D waters, but X/Y is the first core Pokémon entry to fully dive into the third dimension. All of the characters are full models instead of 2D sprites. The colors of the new cel-shaded look aren’t as vibrant as games like *The Legend of Zelda: Wind Waker*, but they still look great.

Nintendo and developer Game Freak have not divulged many details of the game, but we gleaned a few pieces of information from the announcement trailer. Both male and female trainers were shown exploring the world, and one clip even showed a trainer on roller skates moving through a town. This could be a hint that you can ride more than just the standard bicycle in X/Y. Trainers can expand their maneuverability in the world with the addition of some light platforming. The

trailer showed players jumping or using ropes to cross gaps.

The combat animations look drastically expanded. With the full 3D models, pitting your Pokémon against one another looks closer to the Pokémon Stadium games than to the limited animation afforded by 2D sprites butting heads. Pokémon animate and move to both take and absorb hits. Based on the trailer, it looks like every Pokémon may have its own set of animations, as opposed to reusing the same animation for different Pokémon that use similar attacks.

The trailer also revealed the three brand new starters, and the two legendary Pokémon that will come to define the concurrent releases. For the starters you can choose between Froakie, the frog-like water Pokémon; Chespin, the otter-like grass Pokémon; and Fennekin, the fox-like fire Pokémon.

Shortly after revealing the game, Nintendo offered the names of the Legendary Pokémon. Yveltal (pronounced ee-VELL-tall) and Xerneas (pronounced ZURR-nee-us) each correspond to the letter that begins their name. Even their design shapes are similar to the letters X and Y. We asked director of consumer marketing for The Pokémon Company International, J.C. Smith, if the naming

convention has a greater meaning.

“It makes localization very easy for this international title because all the titles worldwide, except for Japan, are Pokémon X and Pokémon Y,” he said. “It adds to the international feel of the game, giving it the same title. It’s another way to unify the experience for people.” That explains the marketing reason for the change from colors to letters, but we will have to wait to play the game to see if the story ties in to the X/Y name.

Pokémon X and Y are set for release in October this year, and for the first time, everyone in the world will be playing on the same day. » **Kyle Hilliard**

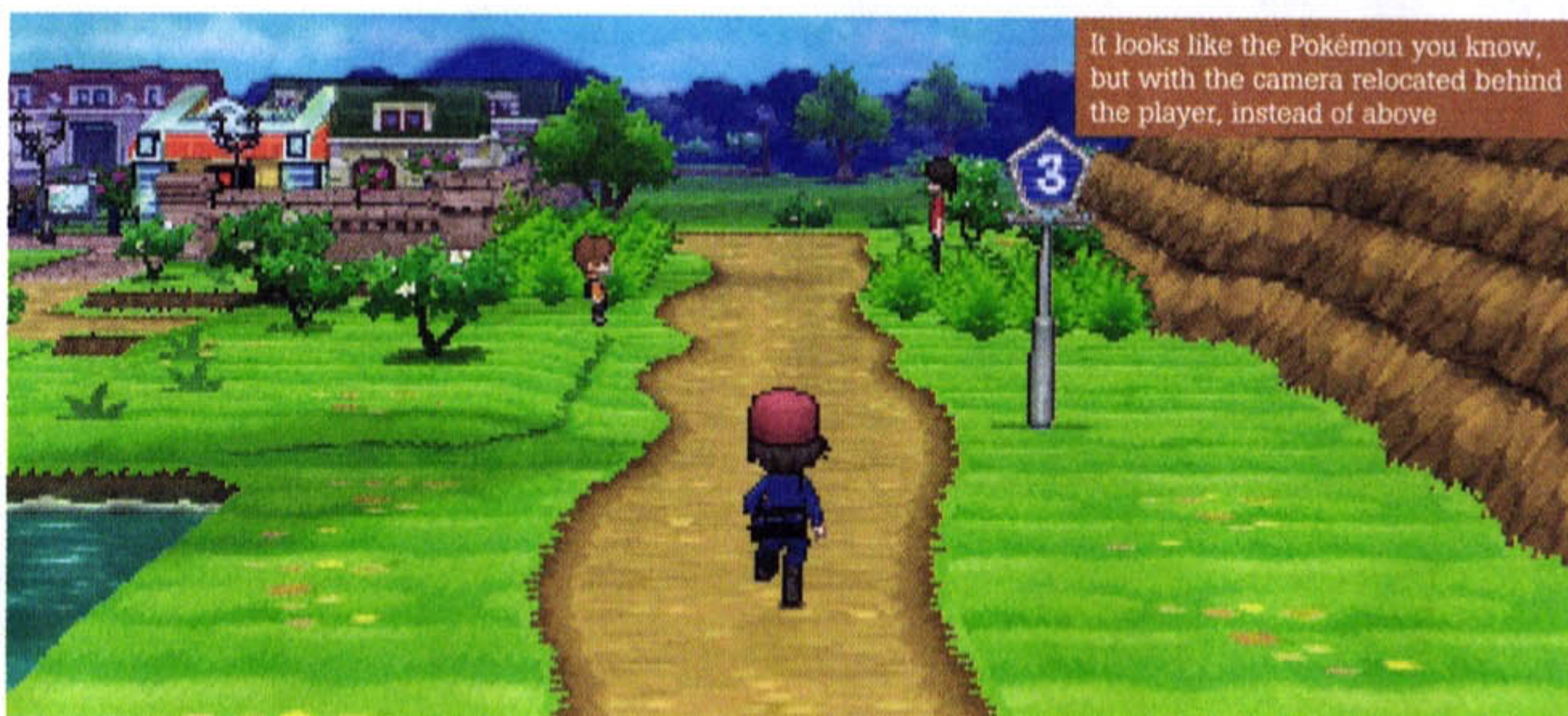
» **Platform**
3DS

» **Style**
1-Player Role-Playing
(Multiplayer TBA)

» **Publisher**
Nintendo

» **Developer**
Game Freak

» **Release**
October



It looks like the Pokémon you know, but with the camera relocated behind the player, instead of above

The structure in the background is leading Pokémon fans to theorize that the game takes place in a world based on France. Previous Pokémon games have looked to Japan and New York for design influence





Castlevania: Lords of Shadow — Mirror of Fate

MercurySteam's portable entry impresses upon further inspection

- » **Platform**
3DS
- » **Style**
1-Player Action
- » **Publisher**
Konami
- » **Developer**
MercurySteam
- » **Release**
March 5

At last year's E3 I briefly played MercurySteam's first entry in the portable Castlevania series. My initial impressions weren't glowing, but my thoughts have changed after playing the first five hours of the game. *Mirror of Fate* still isn't anything like previous portable Castlevania games, but its robust combat and intriguing castle design could make up for the departure from tradition.

Mirror of Fate kicks off with a prologue segment that sheds light on Gabriel Belmont's time with his wife, Marie, before *Lords of Shadow*. Short, cel-shaded vignettes hint at the conception of their son, Trevor, and show Gabriel riding off to fight evil. Players control Gabriel during a short tutorial fight through a dark castle. Afterwards, we see a freshly born Trevor handed off to a holy brotherhood for safekeeping. The story fast-forwards (post-*Lords of Shadow*) to show Trevor's son, Simon Belmont, as a grown man. Simon is a

hardy warrior who has been surviving off the land with the help of a tribe that took him in.

Players control Simon during the first act as he treks toward a dark, evil castle wielding a whip he crafted himself. The early section of the game boasts great environmental variety, with Simon slaying zombies in an abandoned village outside the castle gates. Out-of-reach ledges are scattered around the castle, and Simon learns he needs a special grappling-equipped combat cross to reach them. During this sequence players learn how to swim, use sub-weapons like the throwing axe, and are introduced to finer details of combat.

During my previous hands-on session, the fighting in *Mirror of Fate* felt clunky. This time it became very satisfying once I approached it as a side-scrolling *Lords of Shadow* rather than a successor to the Symphony of the Night-style portable games. Players gain experience as they kill enemies and discover secrets, and leveling up unlocks new moves.

Simon can eventually learn a shield-shattering punch or enhanced combo. After an hour with the game I found joy through dodging, parrying, and air-juggling packs of werewolves and mermen.

The castle is filled with secrets and unique locations, and progressing requires platforming and puzzle solving. Simon eventually collects a duo of protective ghosts to aid him. One defends him from enemies and environmental hazards, and the other attacks nearby foes. Simon uses the defensive spirit as a sort of spectral umbrella when passing under poison waterfalls. The offensive phantom wards off zombies while our hero works a crank to raise a gate.

Simon also rides a macabre merry-go-round in the Toy Maker's Funfair and climbs a complicated network of scaffolding on the castle's exterior. A convenient network of portals takes the pain out of backtracking, which makes exploring previously unreachable locations convenient after finding the combat cross. A mysterious dark-clothed figure with pale skin and white hair periodically helps Simon during his quest, but flees before he can be identified.

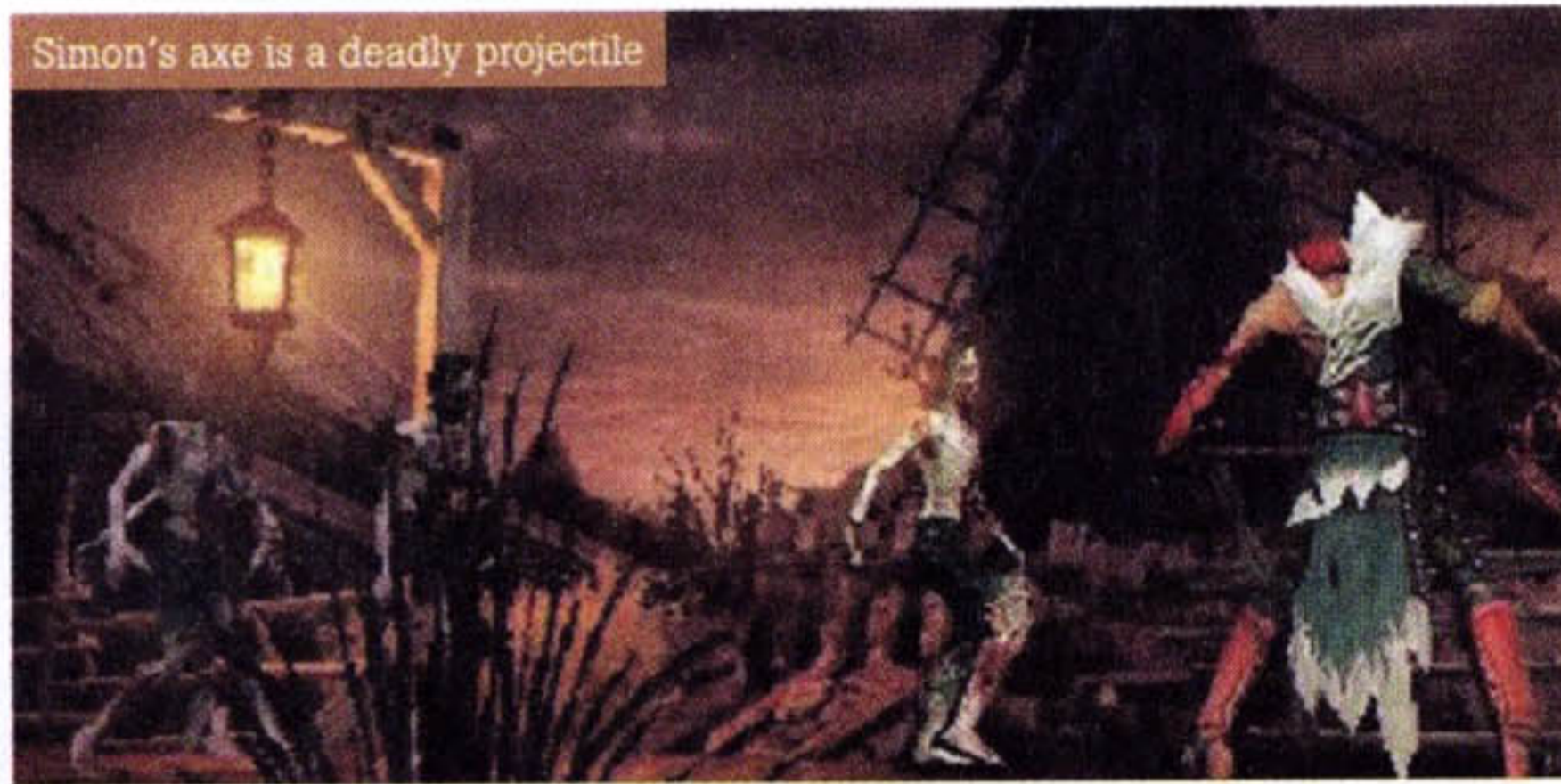
After climbing the previously mentioned scaffolding, Simon crashes through a stained glass window near the top of the castle. He's greeted by a beautiful garden populated by scantily clad women. They beckon him, but he resists and the lead temptress reveals her true succubus form. The boss battle involves dodging energy blasts, wiggling out of life-draining embraces, and seeing past her illusory clones.

The garden façade dissolves after Simon kills the succubus. Gabriel Belmont sits on a throne in the distance, appraising Simon not as his grandfather but as Lord Dracula. I won't spoil what happens next, but it involves the mysterious, pale figure entering the room and some revelations compliments of Dracula.

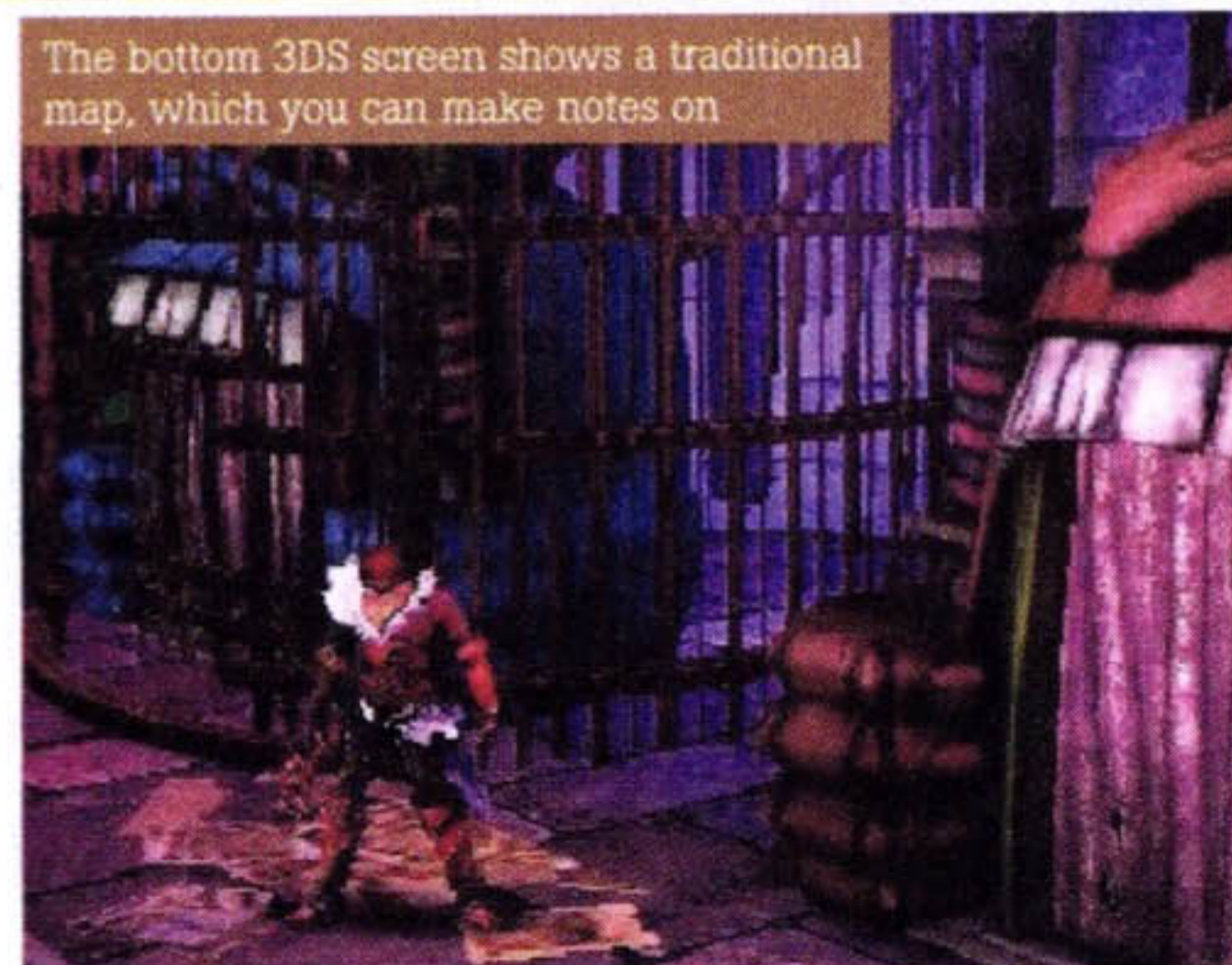
My extensive hands-on time with the game concluded following the meeting with Dracula, and I was dying to continue. *Mirror of Fate*'s visceral combat, extensive exploration, and intriguing story have me eager to continue the quest on the 3DS. » **Tim Turi**



The 3DS visuals look fantastic



Simon's axe is a deadly projectile



The bottom 3DS screen shows a traditional map, which you can make notes on



Bravely Default: Flying Fairy

Flying with promise

Square Enix's *Bravely Default: Flying Fairy* has caught the eye of many RPG enthusiasts, raising demand for a North American release. The yearning is no surprise due to the intriguing names behind it. Developer Silicon Studio's previous project was *3D Dot Game Heroes*, but even more exciting is the collaboration between producer Tomoya Asano, who worked on *Final Fantasy III*, *IV*, and *The 4 Heroes of Light* for the Nintendo DS, and scenario writer Naotaka Hayashi, who earned acclaim for his visual novels such as *Steins;Gate*.

Together Asano and Hayashi worked to create something fresh yet classic for RPG fans. They reminisced about early *Final*

Fantasy and *Dragon Quest* games, and realized they missed the simpler times when you could jump right into any game. This inspired *Bravely Default's* turn-based battle system, which is fast, deep, and easy to learn. What stands out is that you input all your commands at the start of your turn. Each character begins the battle with one BP (brave point), used for a single action. Among the standard variety of commands are the *Brave* and *Default* options. Selecting *Default* skips a character's turn and stockpiles an extra BP, while *Brave* allows up to four commands to be linked, each expending a BP. Strategy becomes involved when characters can spend more BP than they have, sending them into the negative. Is it worth it to

spend a few turns idle regenerating points in exchange for a massive burst of attacks?

Bravely Default also has plenty of options to customize your experience, with over 20 jobs and 300 abilities. The various jobs range from the basics like white and black mages to unique classes such as pirates, chemists, and superstars. Another development goal was creating a community experience that would take advantage of the 3DS' wireless capabilities. You can summon a friend into battle, borrow a job level from your friends list, and rebuild a town through *StreetPass*. *Bravely Default* holds plenty of promise, so we're hopeful that a U.S. release is in the cards. » **Kimberley Wallace**

» **Platform**
3DS

» **Style**
1-Player Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
Square Enix

» **Developer**
Silicon Studio

» **Release**
TBA



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gameinformer
GAME OF THE MONTH

88 Dead Space 3

Isaac Clarke's harrowing battle against the necromorphs continues with the strongest entry in the fantastic horror series. Visceral Games maintains the series' signature tone on a new frozen planet. Isaac can now craft his own weapons from scratch, allowing players to take ownership over the weaponry safeguarding their fragile lives. Players can also team up with a friend for the two-player co-op campaign. What Dead Space 3 may lack in scares, it makes up for with pure entertainment.

THE **SCORING** SYSTEM

10	Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.	5	Flawed. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.
9	Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.	4	Bad. While some things work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
8	Very Good. Innovative, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.	3	Painful. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
7	Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.	2	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
6	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.	1	The GI fridge. Orange juice from 2010 and a green thing we think may have once been a sandwich.

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

The Cave

Ingenious puzzles, tedious runaround



7.75

Wii U • PS3 • 360 • PC

» **Concept**

Explore a mystical cave with a motley crew of adventurers, solving puzzles as you go

» **Graphics**

Beautiful animation helps distinguish each character

» **Sound**

A subdued musical score supports the amusing narration

» **Playability**

Simple platforming controls allow easy navigation, but sometimes button presses don't do what you want them to

» **Entertainment**

Patient explorers will enjoy the smart puzzle design, but pacing is slow

» **Replay Value**

High

Style 1 to 3-Player Adventure **Publisher** Sega **Developer** Double Fine Productions **Release** January 22 (Wii U, PS3), January 23 (360, PC) **ESRB** T

On Gilbert's return to adventure games has been widely anticipated, and as his first co-venture with Double Fine, *The Cave* represents an amalgam of new and old. The twisted humor and inventive puzzles that define classic Gilbert-authored adventure games like *The Secret of Monkey Island* and *Maniac Mansion* are in full effect. However, the new 2D presentation streamlines play, and the absence of an inventory demands logical choices in your approach to solutions. The creepy characters and varied locales hidden away inside the cave make for a fun adventure, but the whole affair is hampered by confusing level layouts and the need for backtracking, making this a game squarely targeted at the more patient among us.

The Cave's greatest strength is its characters, and the way those individuals inform the game. Any single playthrough involves only three of the seven available protagonists. Each character has a unique special ability, but the more significant effect of your choice is the paths it opens. Half of each playthrough is set in character-specific locations that can only be breached by the connected adventurer. If you want to visit all of the cave's locations, you will need to play through a few times.

The voice of the cave itself narrates your journey – a not-so-subtle malevolent presence that draws unfortunate souls into its depths. The hidden nooks and crannies contain all sorts of surprises, from a lost Egyptian pyramid to an attraction-filled carnival. Each environment introduces a new linked set of puzzles, all of which lead to a subversive and twisted story payoff – often to further our understanding of

the adventurers.

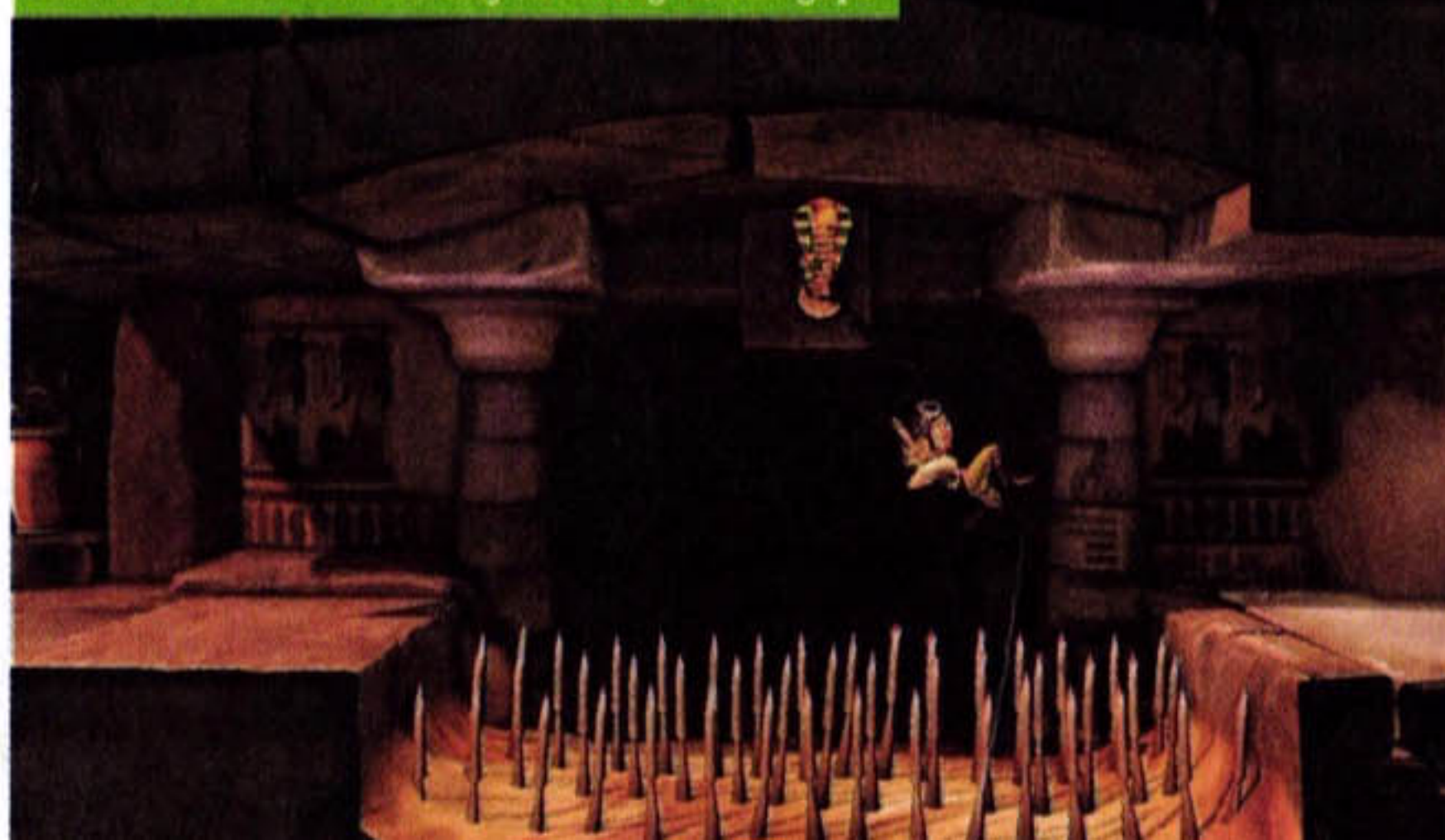
Puzzle design is varied and often fascinating, demanding careful observation of the environment for clues on how to proceed. The Monk's meditative trials task players to think like a Zen master. The Time Traveler's challenging scenario forces players to alter small details in an environment millions of years ago to get a different result in the far future. When the solutions to these puzzles click, the game nails the thrill of old-school adventure gaming.

Even so, frustrations abound as you explore the twisting corridors. It's easy to get lost in any given section, as similar-looking chambers and branching turns meld together in the mind. Items you need for a puzzle are often several minutes away, and that presumes you wrap your head around the solution the first time you pass the requisite bucket, barbell, or bone. Backtracking is tiresome, and the absence of any quick travel system further slows things down. That's especially true as you navigate each of your three characters into the spots they need to

stand to solve a particular challenge, often running each down the same paths to reach something like a weight-sensitive pressure plate. The lack of an inventory forces you to think critically about which single item to carry, but it also means if you pick up the wrong item you're running back to get the right one. Fans of old-school adventure games won't balk at the irksome runaround, but *The Cave* misses its mark in eliminating the pacing problems that characterize those earlier classics.

At least you don't have to solve solo; *The Cave* supports up to three players working together on a single TV, but falls short of letting players split up, so you still have to switch back and forth as puzzles demand characters in different locations. Still, that cooperative vibe echoes the way many players first encountered the genre – a group of friends gathered around a screen, laughing at the crazy solutions required to slip past a perplexing blocked path. In replicating that novel experience, *The Cave* succeeds. » **Matt Miller**

Each of the seven characters has a special ability, like the Adventurer's ability to swing across gaps



While the entire game is set within a cave, an enormous variety of environments and situations awaits inside



Dead Space 3

Chewed up, spit out, and back for more

9.75

PS3 • 360

» Concept

The most polished, well-paced entry in the excellent sci-fi horror series yet. Bringing a friend along for two-player co-op is a blast

» Graphics

Snow crumbles beneath Isaac's boots, necromorphs are disgustingly detailed, and the backdrops are stunning

» Sound

Solid voice acting sells the drama, and the cries of enemies are appropriately unsettling

» Playability

The new weapon-crafting system and roll dodge make it easy to play the way you want to play

» Entertainment

The environments are moody and the gameplay is without a hitch. This is one of the best horror games I've ever played

» Replay Value

High



gameinformer
GAME OF THE MONTH

gameinformer
PLATINUM

Style 1-Player Action (2-Player Online) Publisher Electronic Arts
Developer Visceral Games Release February 5 ESRB M

As long as mankind has existed, our base instincts have included survival and tool creation. Visceral Games' latest entry in its acclaimed horror franchise expertly taps into these core desires. Players still creep through dim corridors while blasting limbs off alien zombies, but the scope of survival has expanded. What you bring to battle is completely up to you thanks to the deep weapon-crafting system. Protagonist Isaac Clarke can also suit up with a buddy this time in two-player co-op. These features culminate into one of the most rewarding video games I've ever played.

Most of Dead Space 3's preview coverage has highlighted hero Isaac Clarke's harrowing quest on the inhospitable ice planet, Tau Volantis. I was surprised and pleased to play several exciting acts that take place before his trip to the Hoth-like snowball. One section made me feel like an astronaut more than any other game has, and I loved it. Floating

around the debris of destroyed space ships is surreal yet calming. This zero-gravity, focused part of the game is more open than previous Dead Space entries, allowing you to shuttle between sites and accept optional missions. Tau Volantis has a similar structure, sans the zero gravity. Straying off the critical path and accepting side quests regularly rewards players with goodies like ammo, health, and precious resources.

Unlike the first two games, players gather resources like tungsten and scrap metal instead of money. These materials are used to make extra ammo, upgrade your suit, craft weapons, and more. Scavenging much-needed resources is just as satisfying as finding that critical health pack when things get rough. Even better, you acquire little robots that troll areas for goodies and automatically return to your workbench, so every trip to a bench is like Christmas. Sorting through all your items to see what new weapons you can

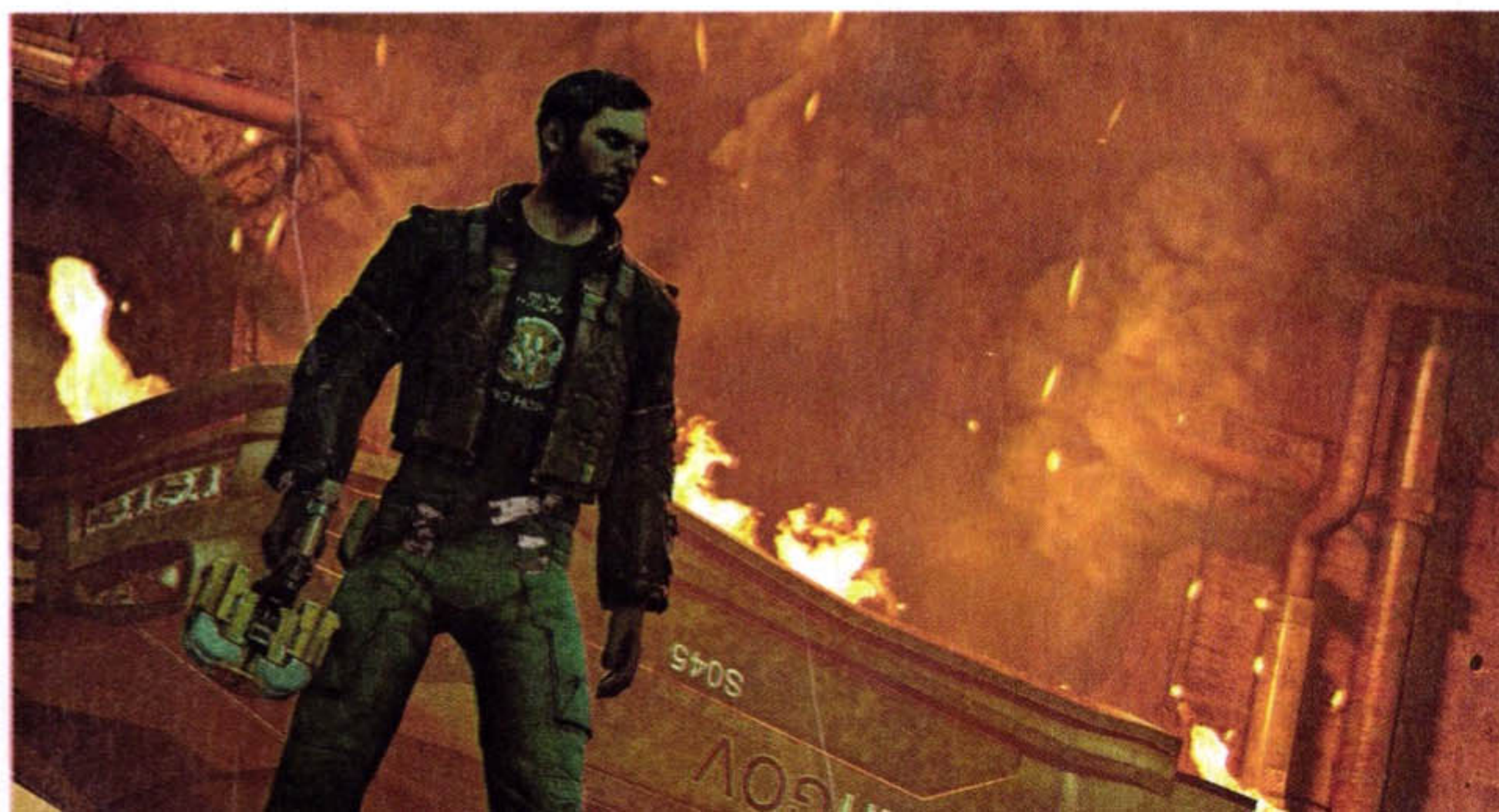
craft or tweak is a worthwhile endeavor that gives you a greater sense of ownership over your equipment.

Previous Dead Space games had players purchase new weapons, but Dead Space 3 gives you one gun to start with and sets you loose with the best weapon-crafting system I've ever encountered. Weapon components like gun frames, plasma cores, and ammo modifiers can combine into countless configurations. I thought I had optimized my resources by cobbling together a decent line cutter that I used for half the game. Then I spent 15 minutes reconstructing my main firearm from the ground up, and boy was I wrong. Your upgrade circuits and components are salvaged when you dismantle weapons, encouraging experimentation. I started mopping up necromorphs with my devastating custom plasma cutter/flamethrower hybrid, complete with stasis-enhanced rounds.

Dead Space 3 is still creepy, but this entry is more action-packed than previous games. That's a good thing. Isaac's intuitive new dodge roll makes avoiding the larger necromorph attacks more manageable. His enhanced mobility is extra helpful during gigantic, tense boss battles that force players to think strategically about their stasis and telekinetic powers. Battles may be frequent and frenzied, but the game does a great job of building suspense. Battling necromorphs along Tau Volantis' frozen surface while your body temperature plummets is thrilling. The game also boasts one of the most intense, *Lost*-style crash sequences in gaming. The only notable speed bump occurs in the final act of the game, which has tedious

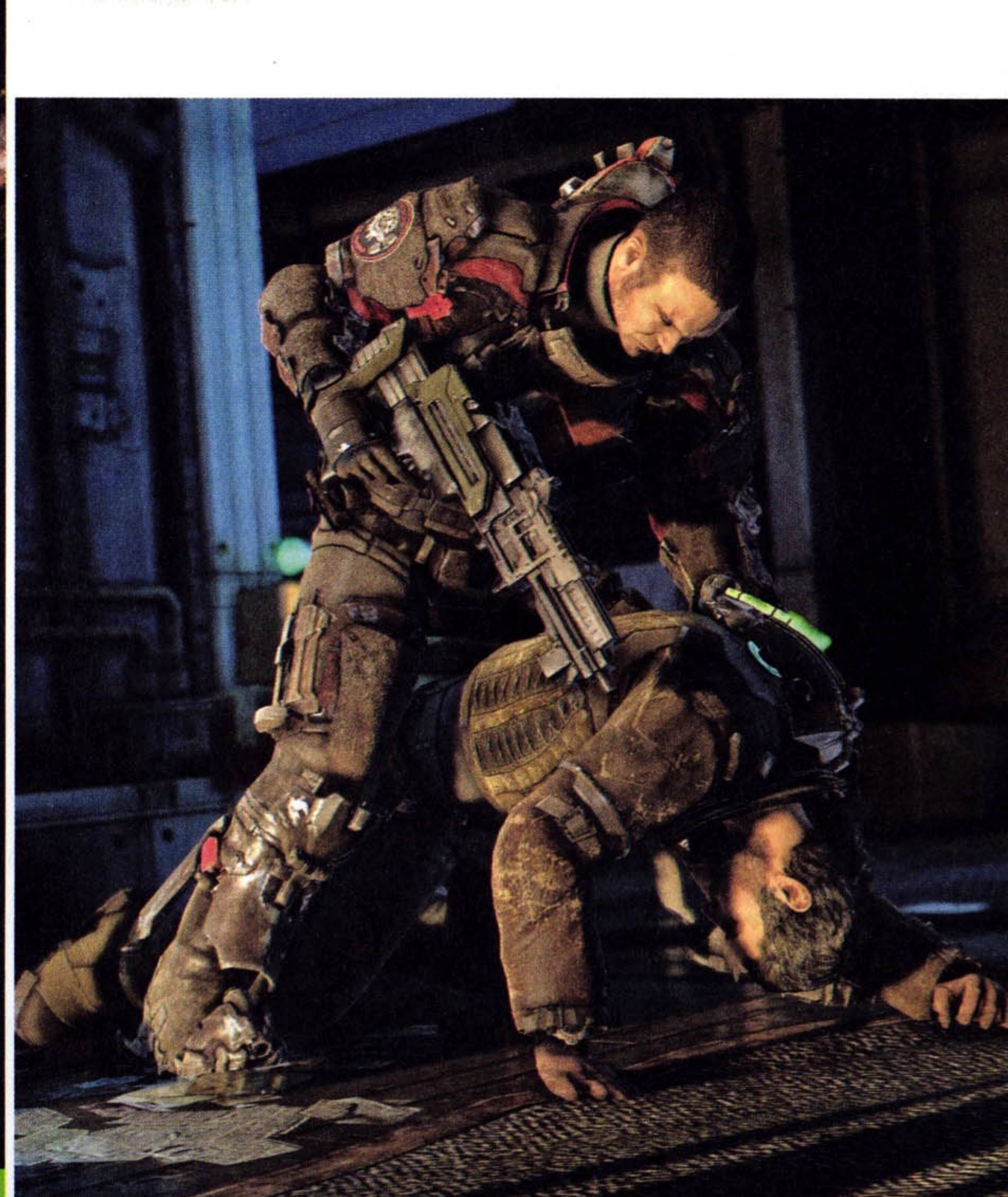
Better with Kinect?

The 360 version of Dead Space 3 is compatible with Kinect. Players with busy hands can shout commands like "reload" or "quick heal" to have their character perform actions on the fly. In my experience, voice recognition was spotty and there was a brief (but critical) lag when it did work. I don't recommend using Kinect.





If you're low on health, close encounters like these will end you



backtracking and difficult battles that feel forced. Otherwise, the pacing is masterful.

Every event in the game, including the aforementioned crash sequence, is playable with a friend via online-only co-op. One player is Isaac, the other is Carver, a no-BS military man. The game tosses more enemies at players in co-op mode, but having an extra gun makes the deadly mission more fun and decidedly easier (we recommend playing co-op on hard). A handful of missions require you to play cooperatively, and are gated off in single-player. These missions reward co-op partners with worthwhile bonus story details and loot, but solo players aren't being denied anything critical. Players controlling Carver see unique, twisted hallucinations that players controlling Isaac will not. The bizarre, asymmetrical experience makes co-op feel true to the series and helps flesh out Carver's background. Also, players gather independent loot but can still share items (including weapon blueprints), which streamlines the whole experience. The main hitch in co-op lies in the cutscenes, which awkwardly pan away from Carver to focus on Isaac. In one such moment Carver miraculously teleports from Isaac's side to the ship they were both trying to board.

Visceral laid the foundation for a terrific horror series with the first *Dead Space*. The clean, HUD-less presentation, dismemberment-focused gunplay, and expertly crafted derelicts have made each successive entry feel ahead of its time. *Dead Space 3* evolves the winning formula into a title not only befitting of the fantastic series, but also one of the best games of this generation. » **Tim Turi**



Captain Norton doesn't give Isaac much say in accepting his new mission

Anarchy Reigns

An action-packed online brawler with some rough edges

7.5

PS3 • 360

» **Concept**

Gonzo characters duke it out in this action/fighting game hybrid. Multiplayer is the main attraction, but a sizeable campaign awaits solo players

» **Graphics**

Character models and their animations look great, but the environments and NPCs are boring and repetitive

» **Sound**

The hip-hop soundtrack has some satisfying beats, but the obnoxious lyrics are grating

» **Playability**

More accessible than most fighting games, but less complex than top-tier action games. The camera is a nuisance

» **Entertainment**

Beating up other players online is fun, but the action sometimes feels too chaotic given the shoddy camera. The campaign is a mindless grind with some silly story segments

» **Replay Value**

Moderate



Online gaming experiences are dominated by shooters and sports games, while action games tend to be single-player affairs. But what would happen if 16-player deathmatches were populated with chainsaw-wielding maniacs and cybernetic ninjas instead of gun-toting army dudes? Platinum Games' *Anarchy Reigns* answers this question. The 3D, arena-based brawler hosts chaotic battle royales where anything goes, along with a lengthy single-player campaign.

Anarchy Reigns feels like a hybrid of a fighting game and an action game. Blocking attacks and pulling off flashy throws is as satisfying as it is in *Street Fighter*. Unleashing a flurry of light and heavy attacks against opponents is similar to action games like *Asura's Wrath* (complete with ridiculous and powerful special moves). Combining familiar genres makes the game immediately accessible, with a gradual learning curve for those eager to learn the finer nuances of combat. Mastering techniques that let you bounce back from a rough landing or break a combo feels great and pays dividends. However, babysitting the clunky camera and selecting targets with the finicky lock-on system can spoil the fun. Juggling your enemy in the corner is a cathartic treat, unless you can't see the flaming semi-truck beelining toward you.

The core of *Anarchy Reigns* lies in the competitive multiplayer mode. Match types range from tense one-on-one cage fights to a frantic 16-player battle royale with random environmental hazards, and everything in between. Taking on 15 other players is overwhelming enough, but it becomes even nuttier when the arena's geography morphs – or when a gigantic death-laser robot enters the battle. Sometimes these spectacular events amplify the fun, other times they result in frustrating deaths. Regardless, the fact that the tide of battle can turn on a whim keeps things exciting.

Unfortunately, the 17 fighters (18 including *Bayonetta*, if you preordered) all play too similarly to make experimentation worthwhile.

My favorite modes are those that dramatically mix up the formula. Capture the flag is a blast, especially when you smuggle the enemies' flag down a back route and beat down a foe with it before scoring. Deathball plays like an even more violent version of rugby, with two teams passing and running a ball toward opposing goals. My team was endlessly slaughtered playing Deathball, but I still had a good time.

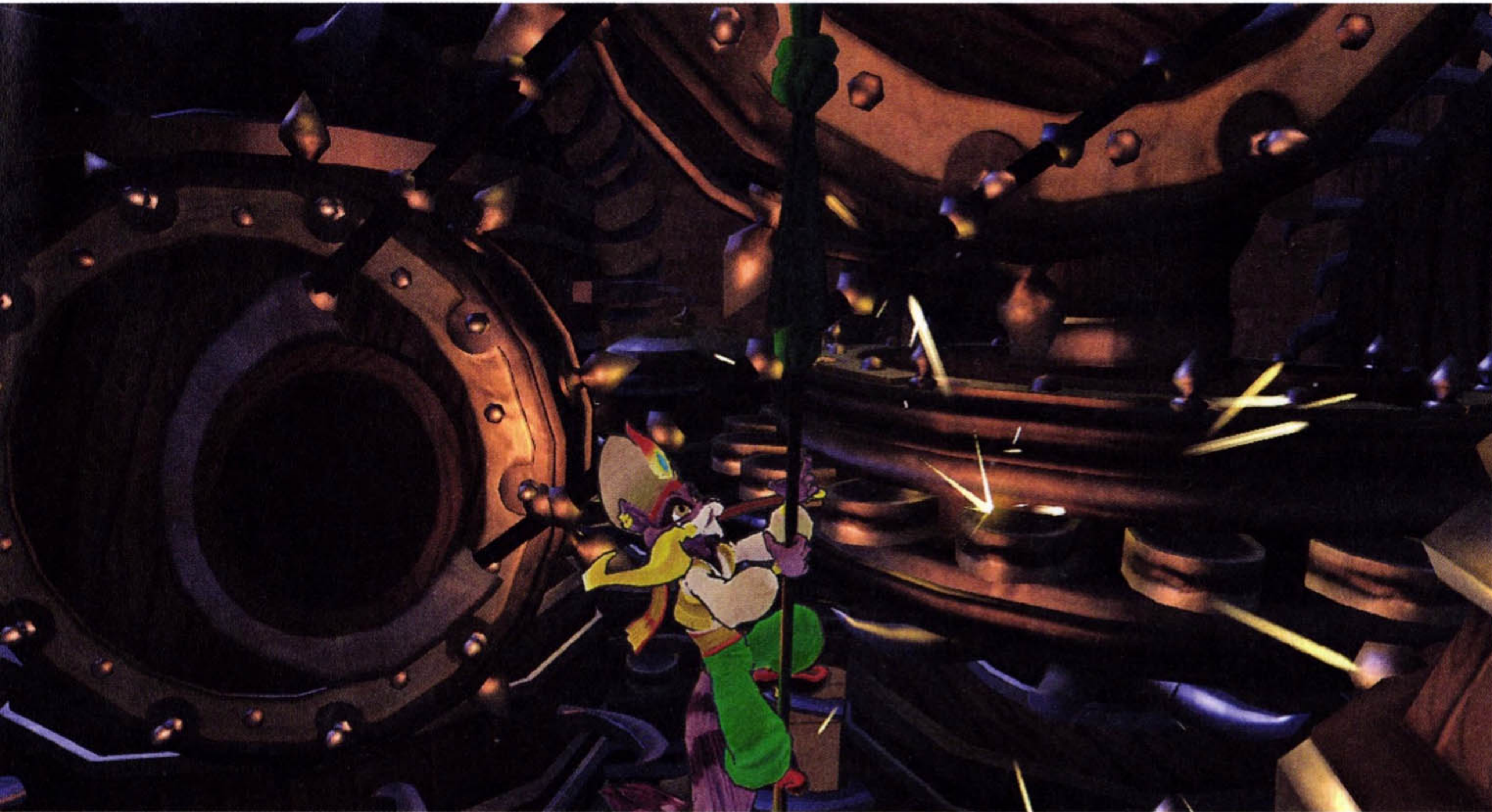
The single-player campaign initially feels barebones and tacked-on, but it gets better the deeper you dive. You play as either Jack or Leo, returning characters from Platinum Games' grisly Wii title, *MadWorld*. The supporting cast is composed of other returning *MadWorld* characters and some new faces, all of which are playable in multiplayer after unlocking them via the campaign. This single-player mode plops players in a series of open

environments where they must earn points to unlock new objectives. The majority of missions, whether timed or not, involve slaughtering waves of mundane mutant enemies. Racking up enough points unlocks the more exciting story missions, which pit you against other fighters and usually treat you to a goofy cinematic. The campaign starts out slow, but I grew to enjoy mindlessly bashing enemies with occasional tastes of Platinum's trademark innuendos, corny humor, and gritty action.

Anarchy Reigns' multiplayer scratches an itch I didn't know I had, but its camera faults and near-identical character move sets hold it back from scratching hard enough. However, online matchmaking is quick and easy, and the network fidelity held strong through every round I played. The campaign is rough at times but overall entertaining, though I wouldn't recommend it to anyone looking for a high-caliber action experience. » **Tim Turi**

Sly Cooper: Thieves in Time

The old is new again



Style 1-Player Action/Platform **Publisher** Sony Computer Entertainment **Developer** Sanzaru Games **Release** February 5 **ESRB** E

The team at Sanzaru Games were huge fans of the Sly Cooper series. The problem? The heyday of the action/platformer was long past and Sucker Punch Productions, which created the series, had moved on to the darker Infamous franchise. So, Sanzaru worked up a demo level of what they envisioned as a modern-day Sly Cooper game and showed it to Sucker Punch and Sony. Surprisingly, the gambit worked, and Sanzaru was given the task of updating the original games for last year's Sly Cooper Collection. Impressed, Sony and Sucker Punch gave Sanzaru the go ahead to create an all-new Sly Cooper adventure.

Sly Cooper: Thieves in Time is the fruit of their labor, serving as both an excellent introduction to Sly Cooper for newcomers and an expertly done statement of the platformer genre's enduring appeal.

I've always felt that Sly Cooper's building-scaling, tightrope-walking platforming was an unacknowledged precursor to Ubisoft's Assassin's Creed series. Appropriately, Sanzaru takes AC's main conceit as the driving force to a well-done story in which Sly and the gang travels to different historical periods and encounter his ancestors in the Cooper clan.

A mysterious villain is stealing pages from the ancient Thievius Raccoonus book, erasing the Cooper family history. This won't stand, of course. Sly, Murray, and Bentley turn the gang's van into a time machine and head back to set things right. While it's not as serious in tone as games that frequently get hailed as examples of "great game writing," the tale is well told, fleshed out by funny dialogue, and a

plot that actually makes sense in its own outlandish way. Though I'm a bit conflicted about the ending, it ranks as one of the better stories I've seen in a platformer.

Time travel serves as a device to deliver variety in both setting and gameplay. Through the adventure, you explore eras ranging from the Wild West to the ancient Middle East, each packed with unique gameplay, filled with secrets to uncover, and rendered in vivid detail. In each, you encounter one of Sly's ancestors, who, after the gang frees them, becomes a playable character. From Tennessee Kid Cooper's six-gun heroics to the brute force of Sly's prehistoric ancestor "Bob," each puts an interesting spin on the basic gameplay. Throw in levels where you play as the wheelchair-bound Bentley, brawling Murray, and gunslinging Carmelita, and you've got a remarkable amount of diversity. Hacking minigames featuring Bentley (and resembling top-down or side-scrolling twin-stick shooters) are done well, but become repetitive. The boss battles are a bit of a letdown at first, but they increase in both creativity and grandeur as you progress. While not every mission hits the mark, the action is very consistent given how much is being attempted.

While the variety ensures that the game never grows stale, the real draw is the expertly crafted platforming. As Sly, you effortlessly glide over rooftops and tiptoe across tightropes, thanks to responsive controls. You also unlock costumes that grant Sly new powers, like shooting arrows that create tightropes or the ability to slow time. However, for all the depth of movement available to the player,

every action you take feels completely natural and fluid – the hallmark of good control design. The stealth elements are as you remember, along with enemy AI that feels somewhat archaic when you sneak by enemies that are just a few inches away from you just because you're outside of their small circle of awareness.

The game also revives the cel-shaded graphical style that was the hallmark of the original Sly trilogy. Thieves in Time's gorgeous visuals will have you wondering why the technique ever fell out of fashion. Each era has a distinct and vibrant color palette, and is brimming with detail.

After playing so many shooters in recent years, Thieves in Time's old-school platforming is a breath of fresh air. While it doesn't innovate, its subtle craftsmanship and varied gameplay reasserts what we've always known: This genre still has something important to add to the game industry. I hope this game meets with the success it deserves. » **Matt Helgeson**



9

PS3 • Vita

» Concept

The team at Sanzaru are longtime fans of the franchise, and this love shows through in a game that captures the spirit of the past while bringing it up to present-day standards

» Graphics

The cel-shaded, beautifully animated characters pop off the screen against richly detailed and colorful worlds

» Sound

Incorporating influences from Henry Mancini's jazzy '50s movies soundtracks to a variety of period-specific genres, this is the most diverse and best game soundtrack I've heard in ages

» Playability

Platforming is fluid and effortless, enhanced by the unique abilities of the 10 playable characters and broken up by some unique gameplay set pieces

» Entertainment

While it's hardly innovative, Thieves in Time serves as a reminder of how much variety and fun the action/platformer genre can offer

» Replay Value

Moderately High





Knytt Underground

A long, fun grind without a point

7.5

PS3 • Vita

» **Concept**

Give players a huge, puzzle-filled world with strange characters and intriguing lore

» **Graphics**

Slapdash character art stands in stark contrast to the beautiful environments

» **Sound**

The music is great and helps define each area

» **Playability**

Aside from occasionally getting hung up on world geometry, the controls are tight and responsive. The game is also cross-buy compatible, and allows you to transfer saves between your PS3 and Vita

» **Entertainment**

The gameplay moves at its own pace and requires patience, and the lousy ending requires forgiveness

» **Replay Value**

Moderate

Style 1-Player Platforming **Publisher** Ripstone
Developer Niffilas' Games, Green Hill Studios
Release December 18 **ESRB** M

Indie developer Nicklas Nygren is known for creating unique and imaginative platformers, and his latest release is no exception. Knytt Underground mixes artsy visuals with novel gameplay mechanics and lets players loose to explore the largest Metroid-style world map I've ever seen. While the characters and puzzles held my attention for the long haul, the directionless narrative fumbles its way to a profoundly disappointing ending.

At the heart of the tale is a mute sprite named Mi Sprocket who is chosen to undergo an ancient quest to ring six bells in order to save her subterranean world, which is full of interesting lore and atypical characters. However, Knytt Underground's real draw is exploring the world. Mi's small but unique skill set, including the ability to morph into a ball and bounce off of surfaces, aids you in solving countless environmental puzzles. Most involve reaching a seemingly unattainable ledge or avoiding deadly enemies, and solutions rarely feel repetitive. One area involves using the momentum from a large fall to bounce your way to safety. Another requires chaining together a series of one-time use power-ups – like floating sideways until you hit an obstacle – to navigate multiple screens. Some areas are mazes filled with moving blocks and hidden paths. None of the solutions are mind-blowing, but they do make you feel clever from time to time.

Slowly but surely, the sprawling branches on your map fill out into a solid rectangle of more than a thousand rooms. Exploring every map cell becomes a grind and requires a lot of backtracking, but I was compelled to see what happened when I rung the final bell.

Unfortunately, the ending is an utter letdown. Nygren – who appears as an in-game character during the wrap-up – states outright that the adventure is more about the journey than the ending; I might have accepted that explanation if the game had at least tried to offer a meaningful conclusion, but the tongue-in-cheek ramblings the game offers instead are a miserable substitute.

Exploring Knytt Underground's vast world and learning about the eccentric cast of characters and surprisingly deep lore can be fun – just don't expect any kind of rewarding conclusion to be awaiting you at the end of your adventure. » **Jeff Marchiafava**



Joe Danger Touch

Joe Danger takes his stunt show on the road

8.25

iOS

» **Concept**

Jump, duck, and wheelie your way through 50 stunt-filled obstacle courses by jabbing and swiping at the screen

» **Graphics**

This mobile title looks just as bright and detailed as its older console brothers

» **Sound**

Joe Danger's chipper elevator tunes won't have you unmuting your iPhone in public. In fact, you might as well cue up an iTunes playlist

» **Playability**

Hello Games has deftly translated Joe Danger's mechanics into a simple touch interface

» **Entertainment**

Joe Danger adapts to the auto-run genre fairly well. Each level is scattered with enough collectables to motivate you to run through them a couple times

» **Replay Value**

High

Style 1-Player Platforming
Publisher Hello Games **Developer** Hello Games
Release January 10 **ESRB** N/A

Joe Danger Touch reminds me why being a stuntman seemed so cool as a kid. Joe flips over tanks full of sharks, races into loop-de-loops with a smile on his face, and rides the gust of industrial fans dressed like a giant chicken. Through it all, he remains so chipper that even when he fails to ace a stunt he still does a little jig. Who am I kidding? Joe Danger Touch makes me realize that I still want to be a stuntman.

Joe Danger first wheeled his way onto consoles back in 2010. Both games offered an interesting mix of racing, platforming, and tricking, and each level was filled with enough collectibles to warrant a second run-through – though beating your friend's high score would likely keep you coming back after you'd collected every last coin. Amazingly, Hello Games has taken most of the mechanics from the console entries and folded them into a hearty auto-run game for mobile platforms.

As Joe barrels through each level, you ensure his safety by navigating the obstacles through a simple one-touch system. Press down on the screen and Joe ducks; let go and he pops into the air. Some courses also allow you to switch tracks at certain marker points. Each level has its own list of secondary objectives to complete, such as collecting all the coins, perfectly timing all the jumps, or collecting a series of letters that spell "Danger." The controls may be simple, but Joe's stuck throttle ensures you have to master the timing of every jump and trick in order to keep your score up and avoid eating gravel.

The levels are short and digestible, which is good because you have to replay them several times. The deeper you move into the game's campaign, the more coins you need to unlock new levels and new costumes that are required for certain levels. The various costumes give you different score bonuses, but the best ones require a lot of coins to unlock, meaning you have to perfect every level to unlock the really good stuff. But unless your GameCenter friends list is massive, you might not find that high score carrot very tempting.

Just because it's on a smaller screen doesn't mean that Joe Danger Touch is a lesser game. Hello Games has successfully boiled down all the major elements that made the series fun on consoles, making this handheld version just as entertaining as its console brethren. » **Ben Reeves**

Fire Emblem: Awakening

Lighting your brain with brilliance



gameinformer
GOLD

Style 1-Player Strategy Publisher Nintendo Developer Intelligent Systems Release February 4 ESRB T

Loss, uncertainty, and the fear of making a mistake with your next move fill Fire Emblem: Awakening with undeniable intensity. Awakening makes you think long and hard about every move, but its standout achievement is enhancing the classic formula to create one of the best strategy/RPG experiences I've had in a long time.

Combat is the shining star of Awakening. Systems work so well that it feels like battles have infinite, unpredictable paths to success or failure. For instance, placing units next to each other gives bonuses, such as increased odds to dodge. Characters also build relationships over time, occasionally providing additional attacks or blocking incoming strikes. However, assistance is never a given; all you can do is deepen relationships and increase your odds. You can also combine two characters to create one super-unit. This comes in handy when a unit is low on health. Instead of leaving one character vulnerable on the

battlefield, pairing keeps them safe, acquiring the other character's HP.

Maps also come with a variety of advantages and disadvantages. Different terrains impact movement, while forts refill health each turn and decrease enemies' hit chance. Other squares, such as staircases, spawn enemies unless blocked by a friendly character. All of these elements provide a spontaneous, challenging puzzle to overcome against-all-odds battles.

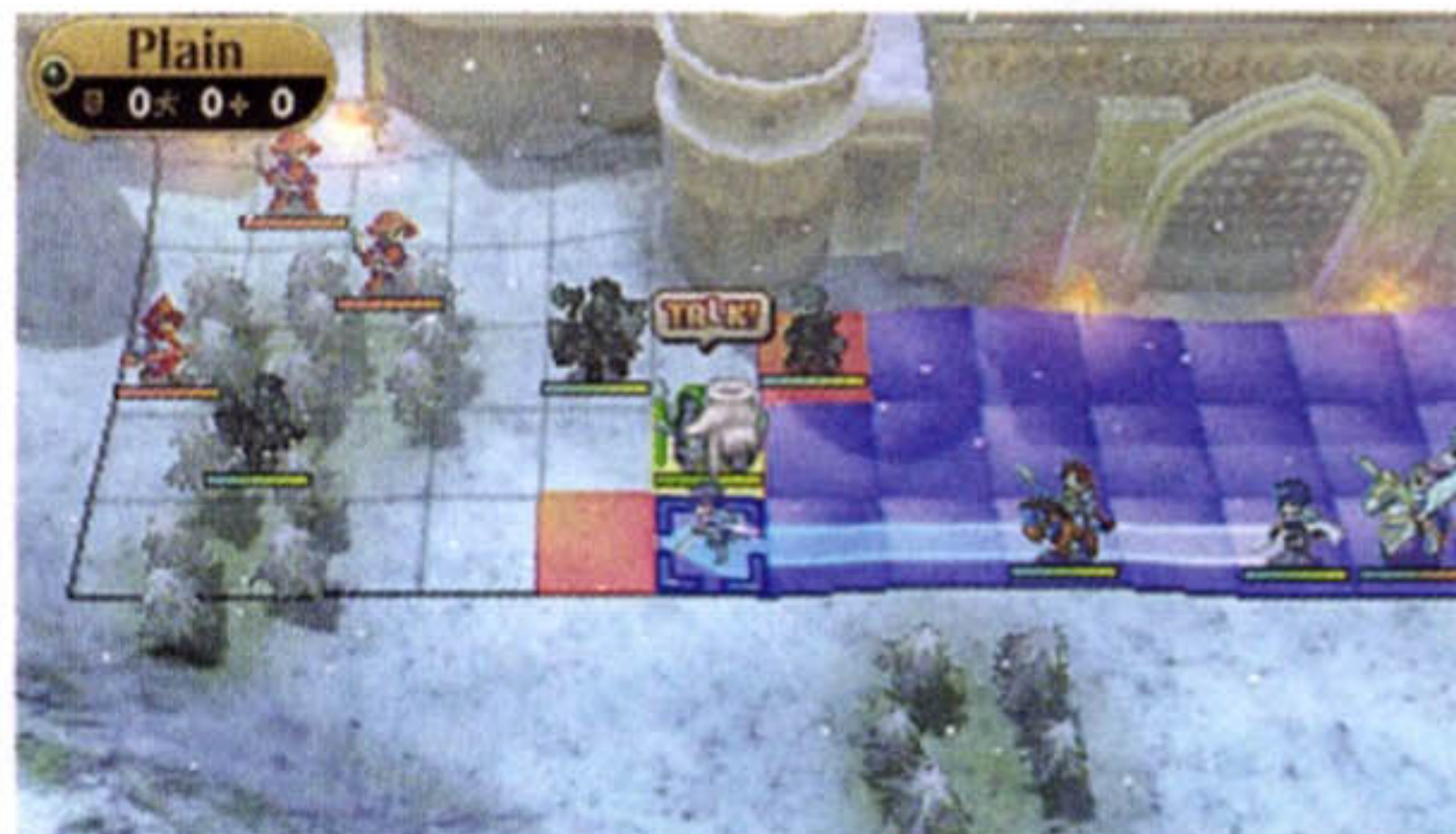
Fire Emblem games have never handed out victories easily, and Awakening is no exception. The margin for error is slim and the AI is sharp. If you leave a combatant vulnerable, expect swift vengeance. Intelligent Systems has offered the option to disable permadeath, but I recommend you keep it on. Permadeath added intensity to my choices, kept me on the edge of my seat, and created an unmatched sense of accomplishment. It made me feel like I was a commander who could potentially

send soldiers to their death. But that doesn't mean Awakening is perfect; some battles feel more about luck than strategy, no matter how stacked the odds are in your favor.

Unfortunately, the story doesn't carry the same allure as the combat. In the midst of a war over the sacred Fire Emblem, your customized character initially battles amnesia. It's not until the second half that the story heats up, focusing instead on changing fate. The concept is clichéd, but becomes more interesting as plot twists hit later. Revelations come at the right moments, with just enough detail to avoid predictability.

Fire Emblem impresses with its large, colorful cast. For me to care about individuals in such an expansive roster is a huge feat. Between battles, characters that were placed next to each other may interact in skits called support conversations. The banter gives an interesting look at each character's personality, revealing unexpected foibles. Get two characters' support level high enough and they marry, but even more thrilling is that later in the game, you'll find their children in side quests that you can recruit into your party. This creative feature is just the quirk Fire Emblem needs to stand out.

During my time with Awakening, I always had a reaction to what was going on around me. My heart raced as I watched enemies close in on an injured character, and I found myself devastated if I executed an action that cost me the match. Awakening made me scratch and claw for victory, and I savored every moment. » **Kimberley Wallace**



9

3DS

» **Concept**

Fight fierce strategic battles to try to alter the past and avoid a grim fate

» **Graphics**

Great-looking 3D-enhanced cutscenes, with maps and sprites retaining that loveable, old-school feel

» **Sound**

Music gets overused, but individual tracks capture the heart and soul of the series wonderfully

» **Playability**

Strategy is deep, but the mechanics are never difficult to grasp and the tutorial walks you through gradually for easy comprehension

» **Entertainment**

Intense and never dull, Awakening forces you to think critically and discover true strategy in a refreshing way

» **Replay Value**

High



PLAYSTATION 3

Amazing Spider-Man, The	6.75	Sep-12
Angry Birds Trilogy	7	Dec-12
Assassin's Creed III	9.5	Dec-12
Awesomenauts	8.5	Jul-12
Binary Domain	7.5	May-12
Birds of Steel	7	Jun-12
Borderlands 2	9.75	Oct-12
Call of Duty: Black Ops II	8.5	Jan-13
Counter-Strike: Global Offensive	8	Nov-12
Darksiders II	9	Oct-12
Dead or Alive 5	6	Nov-12
Devil May Cry	9	Feb-13
Devil May Cry HD Collection	8	May-12
Dirt Showdown	7.5	Jul-12
Dishonored	8.75	Dec-12
Double Dragon Neon	8.25	Nov-12
Dragon's Dogma	8.5	Jun-12
Dyad	8.25	Sep-12
Epic Mickey 2: The Power of Two	5.75	Jan-13
F1 2012	7.75	Nov-12
Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse	4.5	Feb-13
Far Cry 3	9	Jan-13
FIFA 13	8.75	Nov-12
FIFA Street	7.25	May-12
Game of Thrones	6	Jul-12
Ghost Recon: Future Soldier	7.5	Jul-12
Guardians of Middle-earth	7.5	Feb-13
Hell Yeah! Wrath of the Dead Rabbit	8.5	Dec-12
Hitman: Absolution	8.75	Dec-12
Inversion	6	Aug-12
Jet Set Radio	6.5	Nov-12
Karateka	8	Dec-12
Lego Batman 2: DC Super Heroes	8.25	Aug-12
Lego the Lord of the Rings	8.5	Jan-13
LittleBigPlanet Karting	8	Dec-12
Lollipop Chainsaw	7.5	Aug-12
Madden NFL 13	8.25	Oct-12
Mass Effect 3	10	May-12
Max Payne 3	9.25	Jul-12
Medal of Honor: Warfighter	5	Jan-13

MLB 12: The Show	8.75	May-12
Mugen Souls	5	Dec-12
NASCAR The Game: Inside Line	7.25	Dec-12
NBA 2K13	8.75	Dec-12
NCAA Football 13	8.75	Aug-12
Need For Speed: Most Wanted	9	Dec-12
NHL 13	8	Nov-12
Ni No Kuni: Wrath of the White Witch	7	Feb-13
Papo & Yo	8	Oct-12
Persona 4 Arena	8.5	Oct-12
Planets Under Attack	7.25	Feb-13
PlayStation All-Stars Battle Royale	7.5	Jan-13
Pro Evolution Soccer 2013	8.75	Nov-12
Prototype 2	8.5	Jun-12
Quantum Conundrum	8.5	Aug-12
Rainbow Moon	7.75	Oct-12
Ratchet & Clank Collection	9.25	Oct-12
Ratchet & Clank: Full Frontal Assault	7.5	Feb-13
Realms of Ancient War	4	Dec-12
Resident Evil 6	8.75	Nov-12
Retro City Rampage	7	Dec-12
Retro/Grade	8	Nov-12
Ridge Racer Unbounded	6.75	Jul-12
Rise of the Guardians	6.5	Feb-13
Risen 2: Dark Waters	5.5	Oct-12
Rock Band Blitz	8	Oct-12
Skullgirls	8	Jun-12
Skylanders Giants	8	Dec-12
Sleeping Dogs	7.75	Sep-12
Sniper Elite V2	8.25	Jul-12
Sonic and All-Stars Racing Transformed	8	Jan-13
Sorcery	6.75	Jul-12
Spec Ops: The Line	7.75	Aug-12
Starhawk	7.5	Jul-12
Street Fighter X Tekken	8.75	May-12
Tekken Tag Tournament 2	8.5	Nov-12
Test Drive: Ferrari Racing Legends	6.5	Aug-12
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 13	8	May-12
Tokyo Jungle	7	Nov-12

Transformers: Fall of Cybertron	9	Oct-12
UEFA Euro 2012	6.75	Jun-12
Unfinished Swan, The	8	Dec-12
Walking Dead Episode 1: A New Day, The	8.25	Jul-12
Walking Dead Episode 2: Starved For Help, The	8	Jul-12
Walking Dead Episode 3: Long Road Ahead, The	8.5	Nov-12
Walking Dead Episode 4: Around Every Corner, The	8.25	Dec-12
Walking Dead Episode 5: No Time Left, The	8.5	Jan-13
Way of the Samurai 4	6	Oct-12
World Gone Sour	6.75	Jun-12
WWE '13	9	Dec-12
XCOM: Enemy Unknown	9.5	Nov-12
Yakuza: Dead Souls	7.75	May-12

XBOX 360

Amazing Spider-Man, The	6.75	Sep-12
Angry Birds Trilogy	7	Dec-12
Assassin's Creed III	9.5	Dec-12
Awesomenauts	8.5	Jul-12
Binary Domain	7.5	May-12
Borderlands 2	9.75	Oct-12
Call of Duty: Black Ops II	8.5	Jan-13
Counter-Strike: Global Offensive	8	Nov-12
Dance Central 3	8.75	Nov-12
Darksiders II	9	Oct-12
Dead or Alive 5	6	Nov-12
Deadlight	8	Oct-12
Devil May Cry	9	Feb-13
Devil May Cry HD Collection	8	May-12
Dirt Showdown	7.5	Jul-12
Dishonored	8.75	Dec-12
Double Dragon Neon	8.25	Nov-12
Dragon's Dogma	8.5	Jun-12
Dust: An Elysian Tail	8.75	Oct-12
Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim - Dragonborn, The	8.5	Feb-13
Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim - Dawnguard, The	8	Sep-12
Epic Mickey 2: The Power of Two	5.75	Jan-13

F1 2012	7.75	Nov-12
Fable Heroes	4	Jul-12
Fable: The Journey	5	Dec-12
Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse	4.5	Feb-13
Far Cry 3	9	Jan-13
Fez	9.25	Jun-12
FIFA 13	8.75	Nov-12
FIFA Street	7.25	May-12
Forza Horizon	8.5	Dec-12
Game of Thrones	6	Jul-12
Gateways	9	Dec-12
Ghost Recon: Future Soldier	7.5	Jul-12
Guardians of Middle-earth	7.5	Feb-13
Halo 4	9.25	Dec-12
Hell Yeah! Wrath of the Dead Rabbit	8.5	Dec-12
Hitman: Absolution	8.75	Dec-12
Hybrid	6	Oct-12
Inversion	6	Aug-12
Jet Set Radio	6.5	Nov-12
Joe Danger 2: The Movie	8.25	Nov-12
Karateka	8	Dec-12
Kinect Star Wars	5.5	Jun-12
Lego Batman 2: DC Super Heroes	8.25	Aug-12
Lego the Lord of the Rings	8.5	Jan-13
Lollipop Chainsaw	7.5	Aug-12
Madden NFL 13	8.25	Oct-12
Mark of the Ninja	9	Nov-12
Mass Effect 3	10	May-12
Max Payne 3	9.25	Jul-12
Medal of Honor: Warfighter	5	Jan-13
Minecraft Xbox 360 Edition	8.75	Jul-12
NASCAR The Game: Inside Line	7.25	Dec-12
NBA 2K13	8.75	Dec-12
NCAA Football 13	8.75	Aug-12
Need For Speed: Most Wanted	9	Dec-12
NHL 13	8	Nov-12
Ninja Gaiden 3	6	May-12
Penny Arcade's On The Rain-Slick Precipice of Darkness 3	8	Sep-12
Persona 4 Arena	8.5	Oct-12
Pid	6.5	Dec-12

Planets Under Attack	7.25	Feb-13
Pro Evolution Soccer 2013	8.75	Nov-12
Prototype 2	8.5	Jun-12
Quantum Conundrum	8.5	Aug-12
Realms of Ancient War	4	Dec-12
Resident Evil 6	8.75	Nov-12
Resident Evil: Operation Raccoon City	6	May-12
Ridge Racer Unbounded	6.75	Jul-12
Rise of the Guardians	6.5	Feb-13
Risen 2: Dark Waters	5.5	Oct-12
Rock Band Blitz	8	Oct-12
Sine Mora	8	Jun-12
Skulls of the Shogun	8.5	Feb-13
Skylanders Giants	8	Dec-12
Sleeping Dogs	7.75	Sep-12
Sniper Elite V2	8.25	Jul-12
Sonic and All-Stars Racing Transformed	8	Jan-13
Spec Ops: The Line	7.75	Aug-12
Spelunky	8	Sep-12
Splatters, The	8	Jul-12
Steel Battalion: Heavy Armor	3	Aug-12
Street Fighter X Tekken	8.75	May-12
Tekken Tag Tournament 2	8.5	Nov-12
Test Drive: Ferrari Racing Legends	6.5	Aug-12
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 13	8	May-12
Tony Hawk's Pro Skater HD	7.5	Sep-12
Transformers: Fall of Cybertron	9	Oct-12
Trials Evolution	9	Jun-12
UEFA Euro 2012	6.75	Jun-12
Walking Dead Episode 1: A New Day, The	8.25	Jul-12
Walking Dead Episode 2: Starved For Help, The	8	Jul-12
Walking Dead Episode 3: Long Road Ahead, The	8.5	Nov-12
Walking Dead Episode 4: Around Every Corner, The	8.25	Dec-12
Walking Dead Episode 5: No Time Left, The	8.5	Jan-13
Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings - Enhanced Edition, The	9.5	May-12
World Gone Sour	6.75	Jun-12

the score

7.5 | Crimson Shroud

Platform 3DS Release December 13 ESRB T

Crimson Shroud takes the RPG formula and boils it down to its essence. The story reads like a novel, the characters are tabletop miniatures, and instead of exploring dungeons, you select areas from a map to enter and roll dice during combat. It's a blessing for old-school RPG fans who love managing statistics, but it also showcases why some old RPG mechanics have been abandoned. - Kyle Hilliard

5 | Aero Porter

Platform 3DS Release November 29 ESRB E

Video games have a way of making tedious tasks entertaining. Despite my preconception that handling baggage at an airport is not enjoyable, I wanted Aero Porter to surprise me. Unfortunately, it didn't. - Kyle Hilliard

8 | Hundreds

Platform iOS Release January 7 ESRB E

Hundreds is one of the stronger examples of a mobile title making great use of a touchscreen device. It isn't perfect, but it's packed with tons of clever levels and puzzles. Many will require 10, 20, or more attempts, but it's always a great feeling when your patience and wits move you one more step ahead. - Dan Ryckert

6 | Middle Manager of Justice

Platform iOS Release December 13 ESRB N/A

The big problem with Middle Manager is that it feels hands-off, but still demands your attention. You are strictly a spectator and the fighting just happens on its own. You are constantly rewarded, but nothing you get ever feels like a worthwhile achievement. - Kyle Hilliard



Wreckateer, The	7.5	Oct-12
WWE '13	9	Dec-12
XCOM: Enemy Unknown	9.5	Nov-12
Zuma's Revenge	8	Sep-12

Wii U

Chasing Aurora	6.5	Feb-13
Epic Mickey 2: The Power of Two	5.75	Jan-13
Little Inferno	8.5	Feb-13
New Super Mario Bros. U	9.25	Jan-13
Nintendo Land	7	Jan-13
Rabbids Land	4	Jan-13
Rise of the Guardians	6.5	Feb-13
Scribblenauts Unlimited	8.25	Jan-13
Transformers: Prime	6.5	Feb-13
ZombiU	5	Jan-13

Wii

Epic Mickey 2: The Power of Two	5.75	Jan-13
La-Mulana	8.5	Dec-12
Last Story, The	6	Sep-12
Mario Party 9	5.75	May-12
Skylanders Giants	8	Dec-12
Xenoblade Chronicles	9.5	May-12

PC

Botanica	8.25	Jul-12
Call of Duty: Black Ops II	8.5	Jan-13
Civilization V: Gods & Kings	8.5	Aug-12
Diablo III	9	Aug-12
Dishonored	8.75	Dec-12
Elemental: Fallen Enchantress	8.25	Jan-13
Endless Space	7.25	Sep-12
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gameinformer

Volume XXIII • Number 3 • Issue 239

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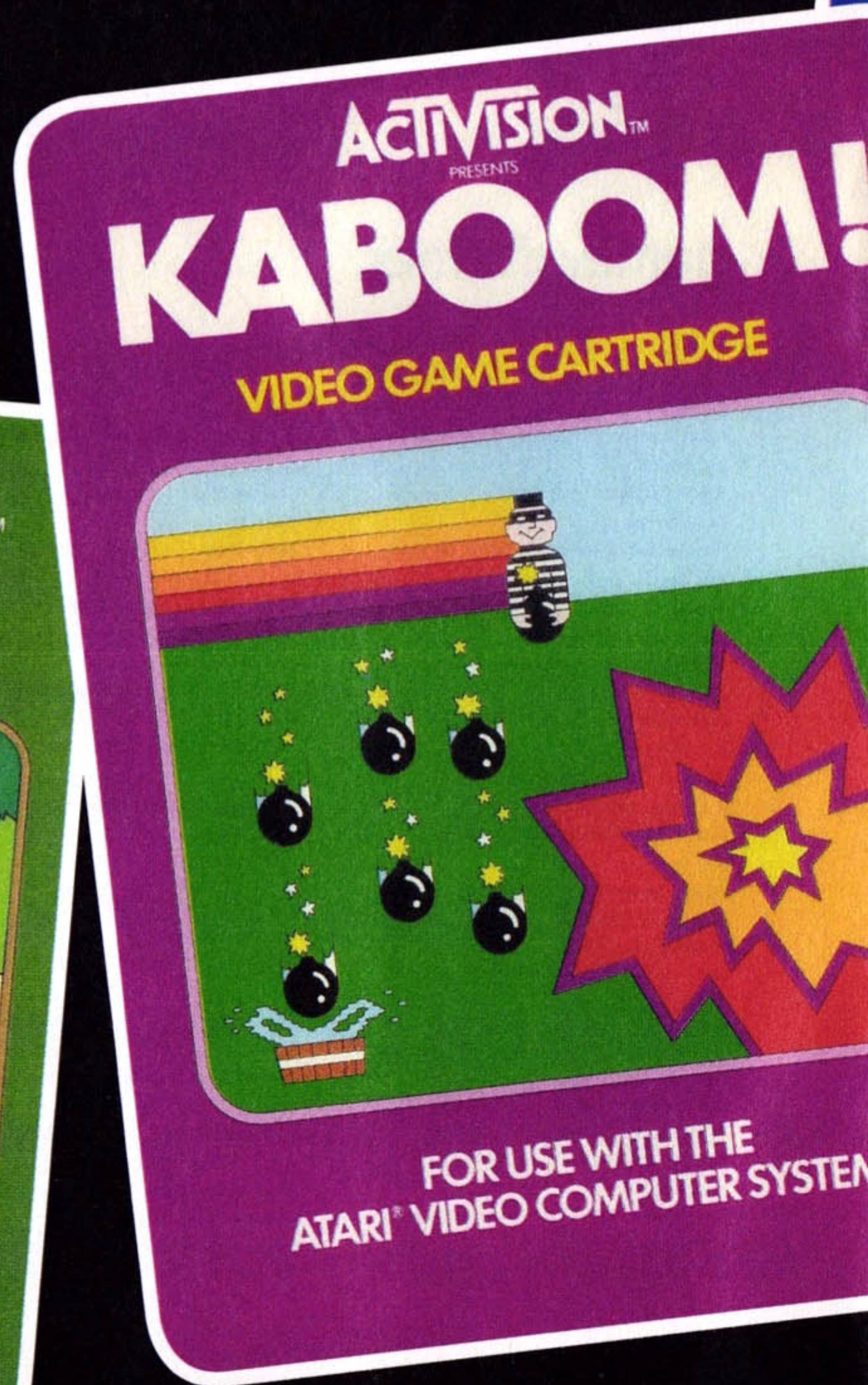
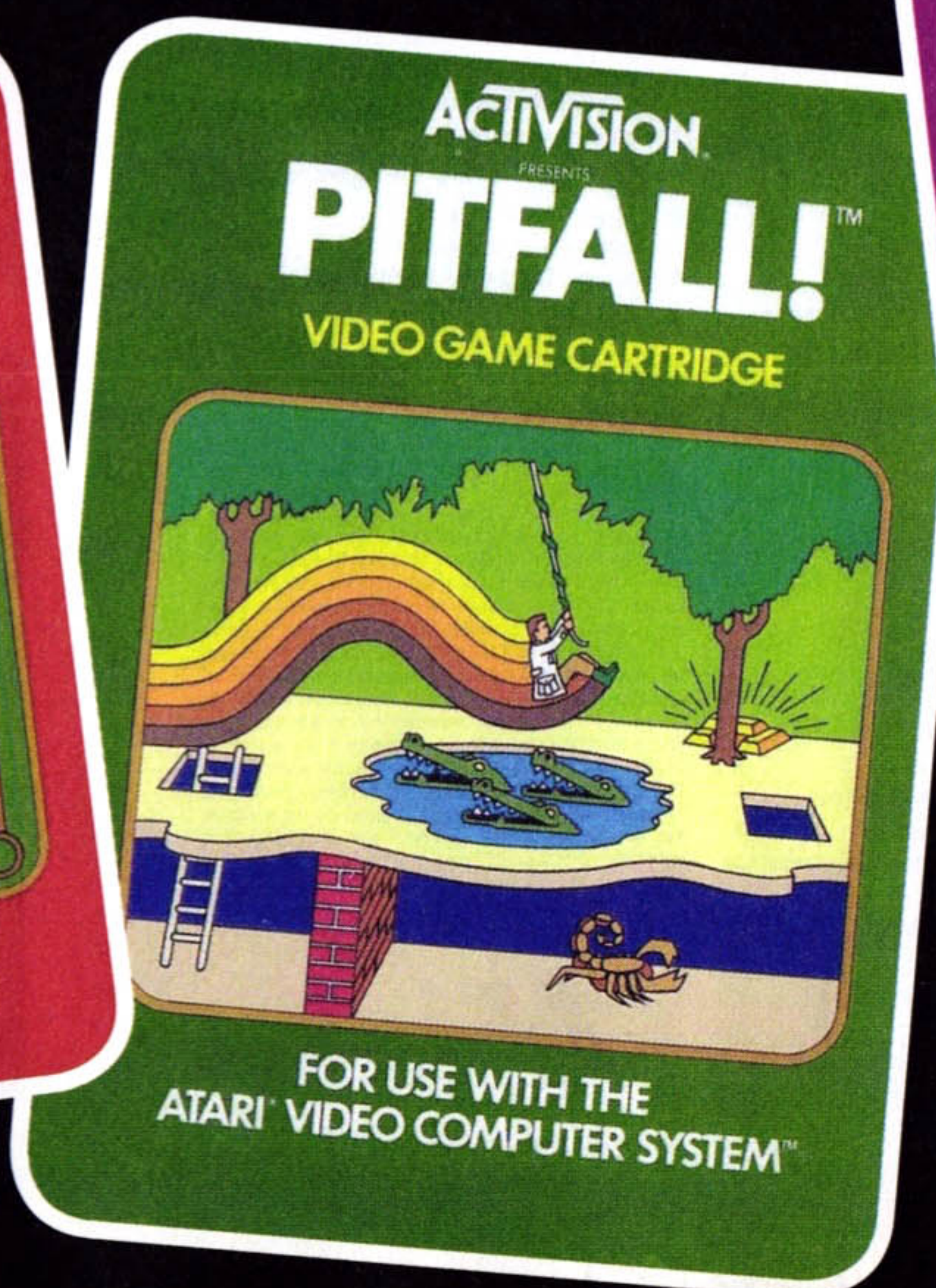
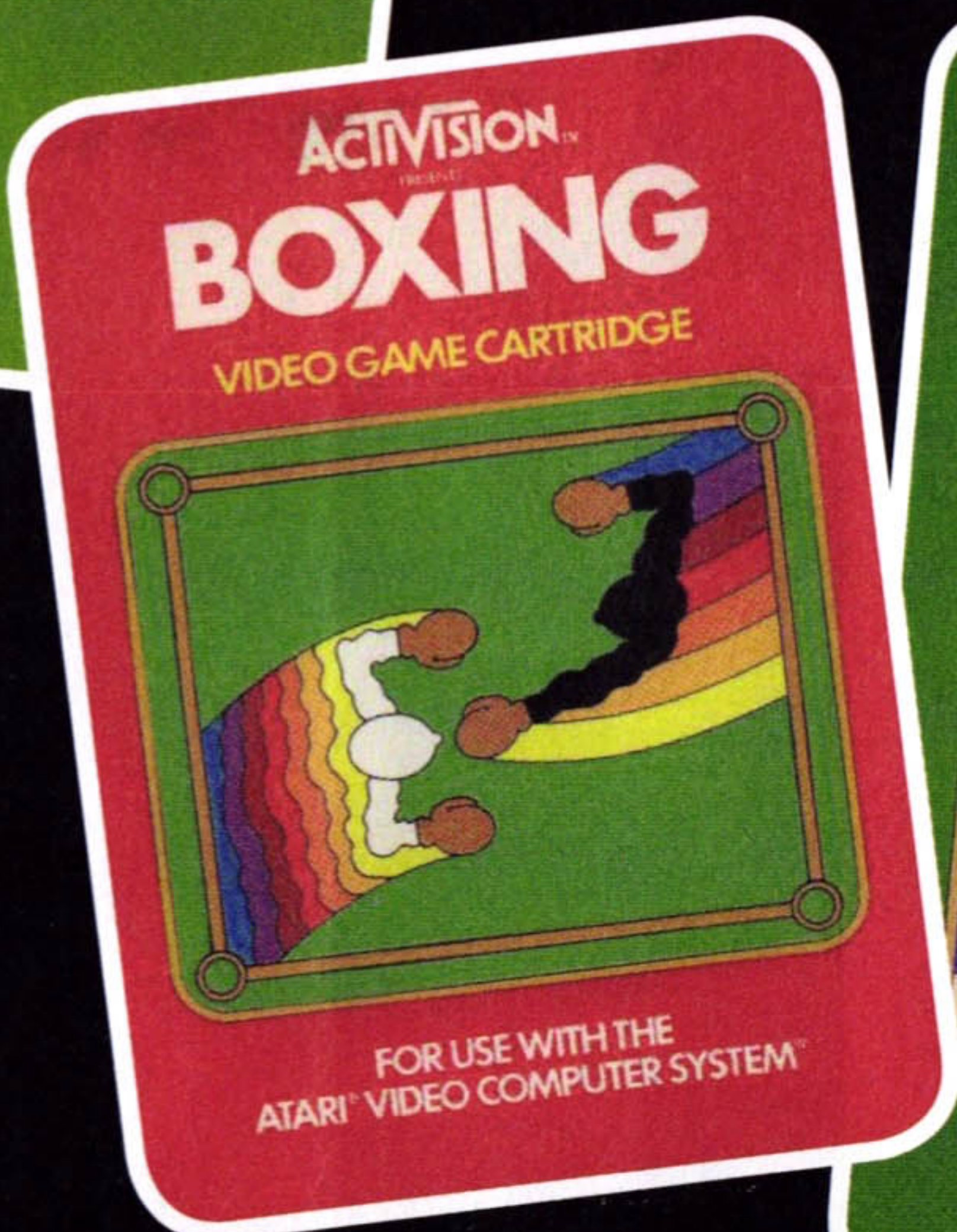
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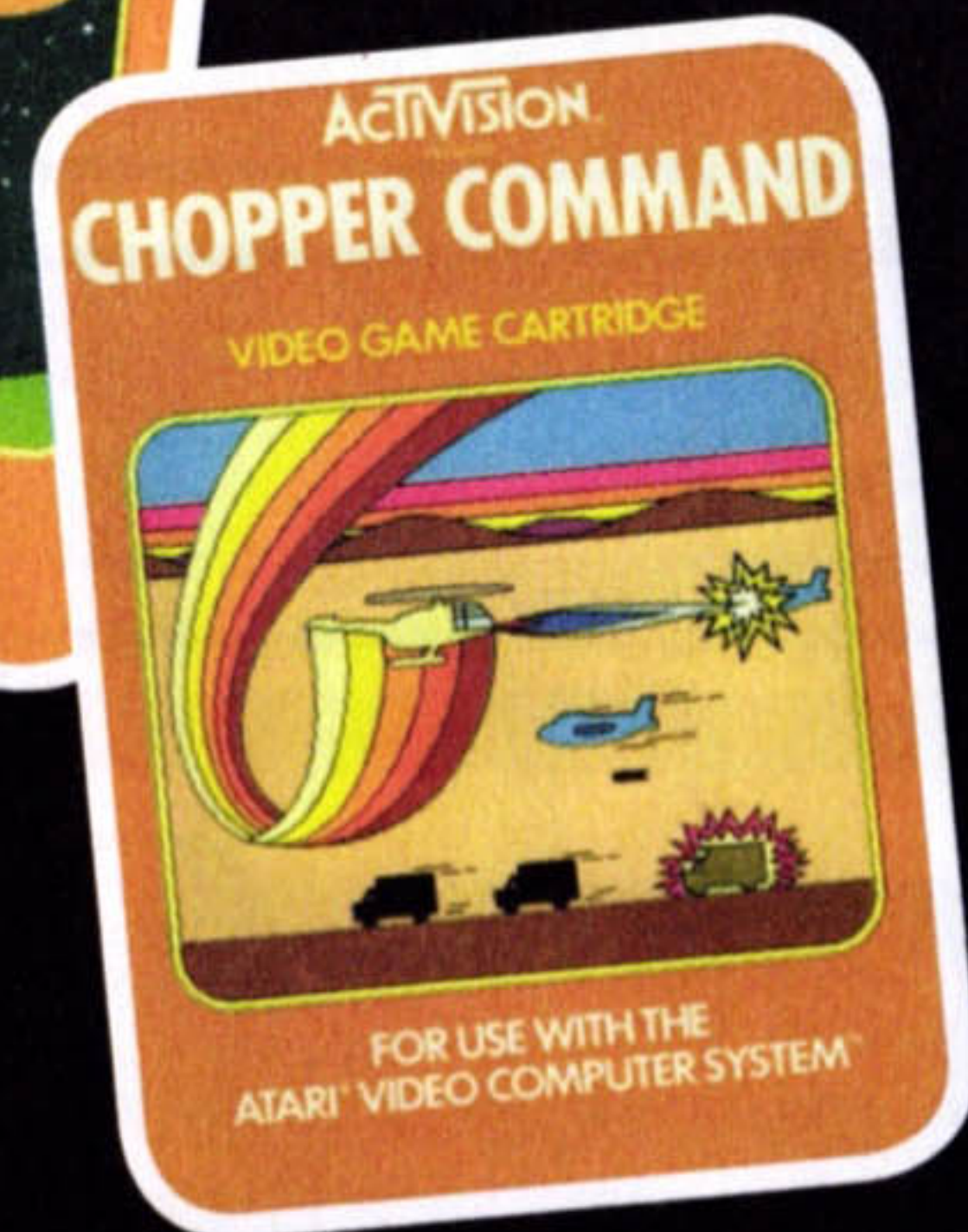
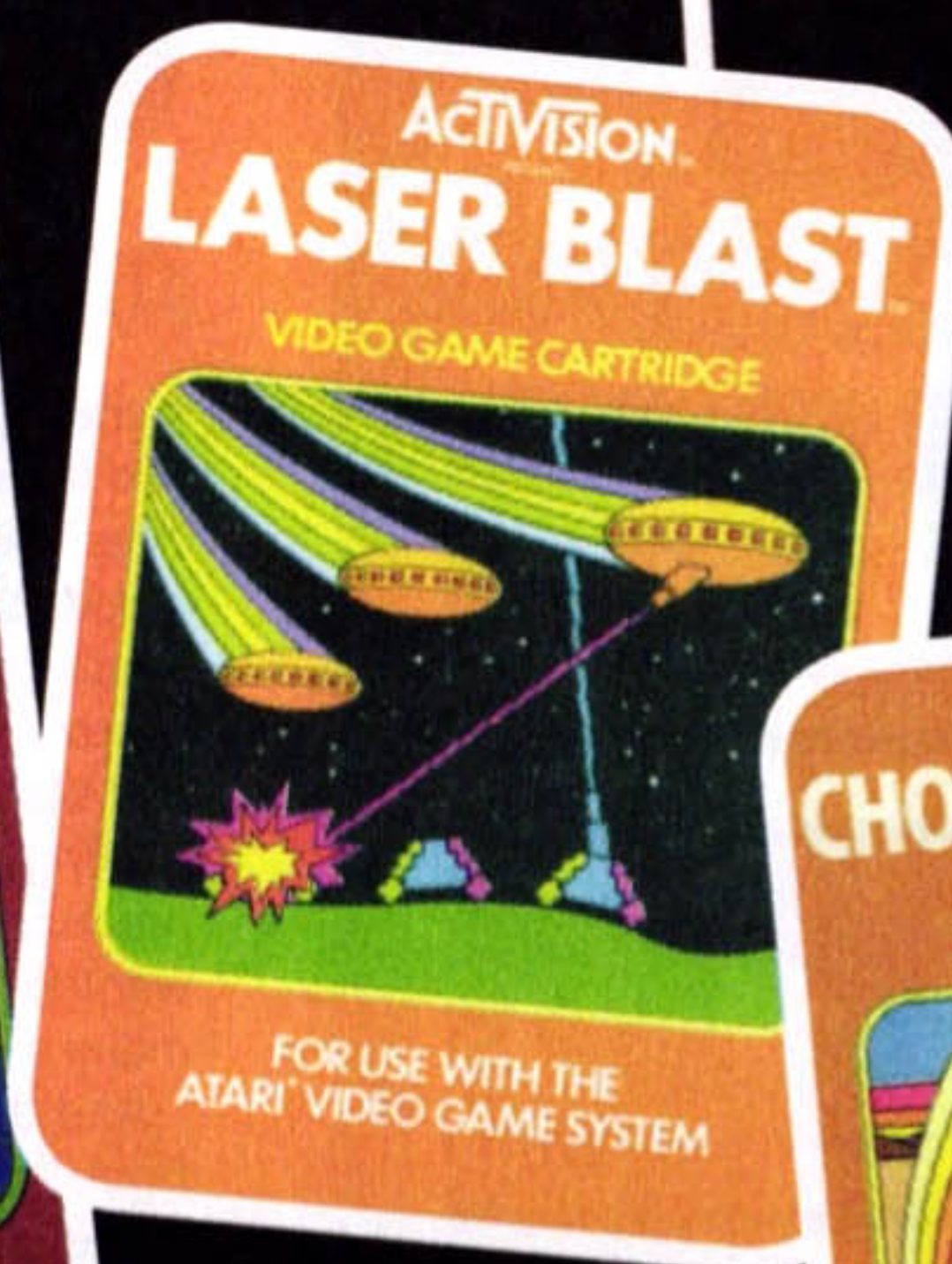
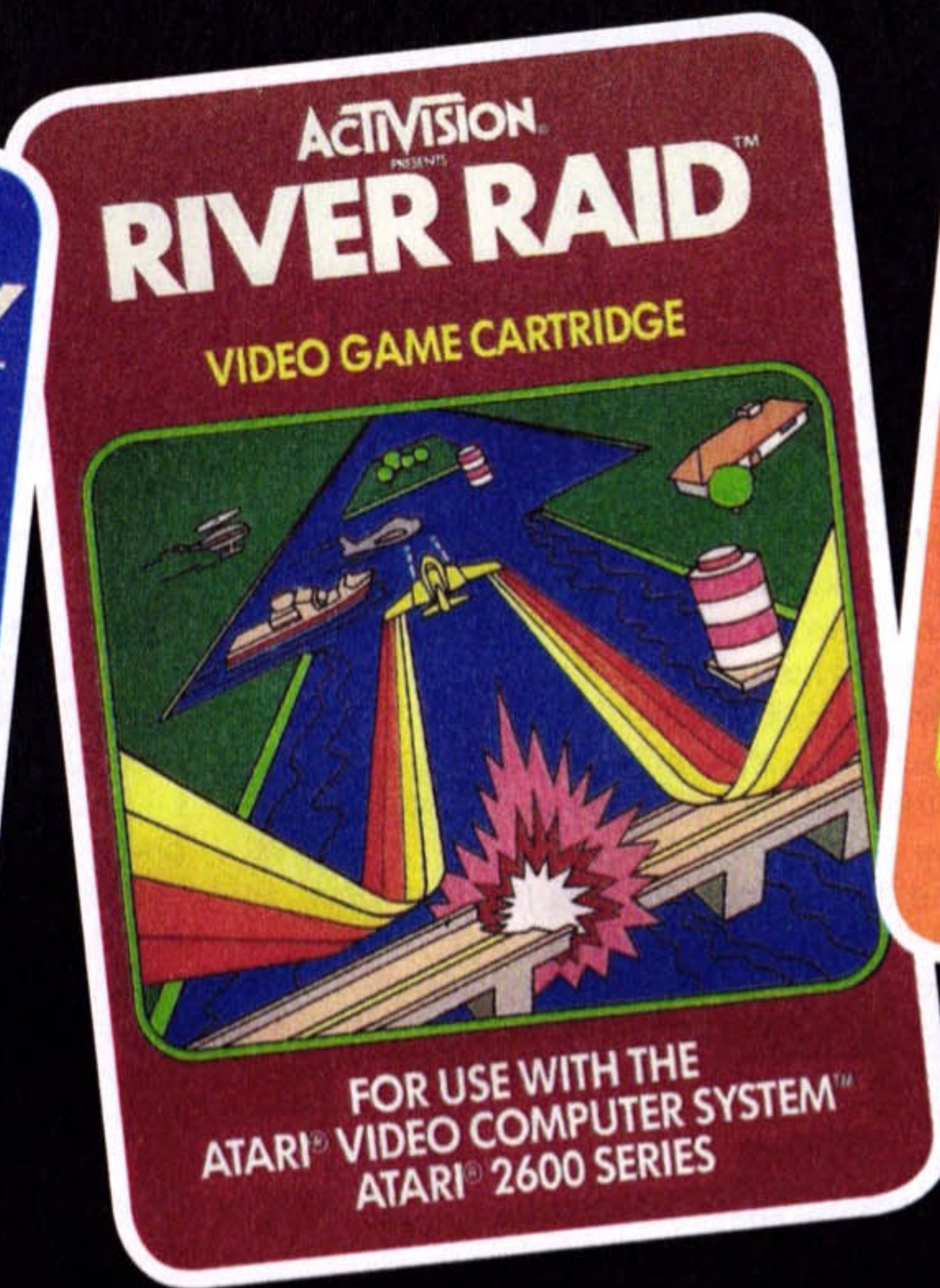
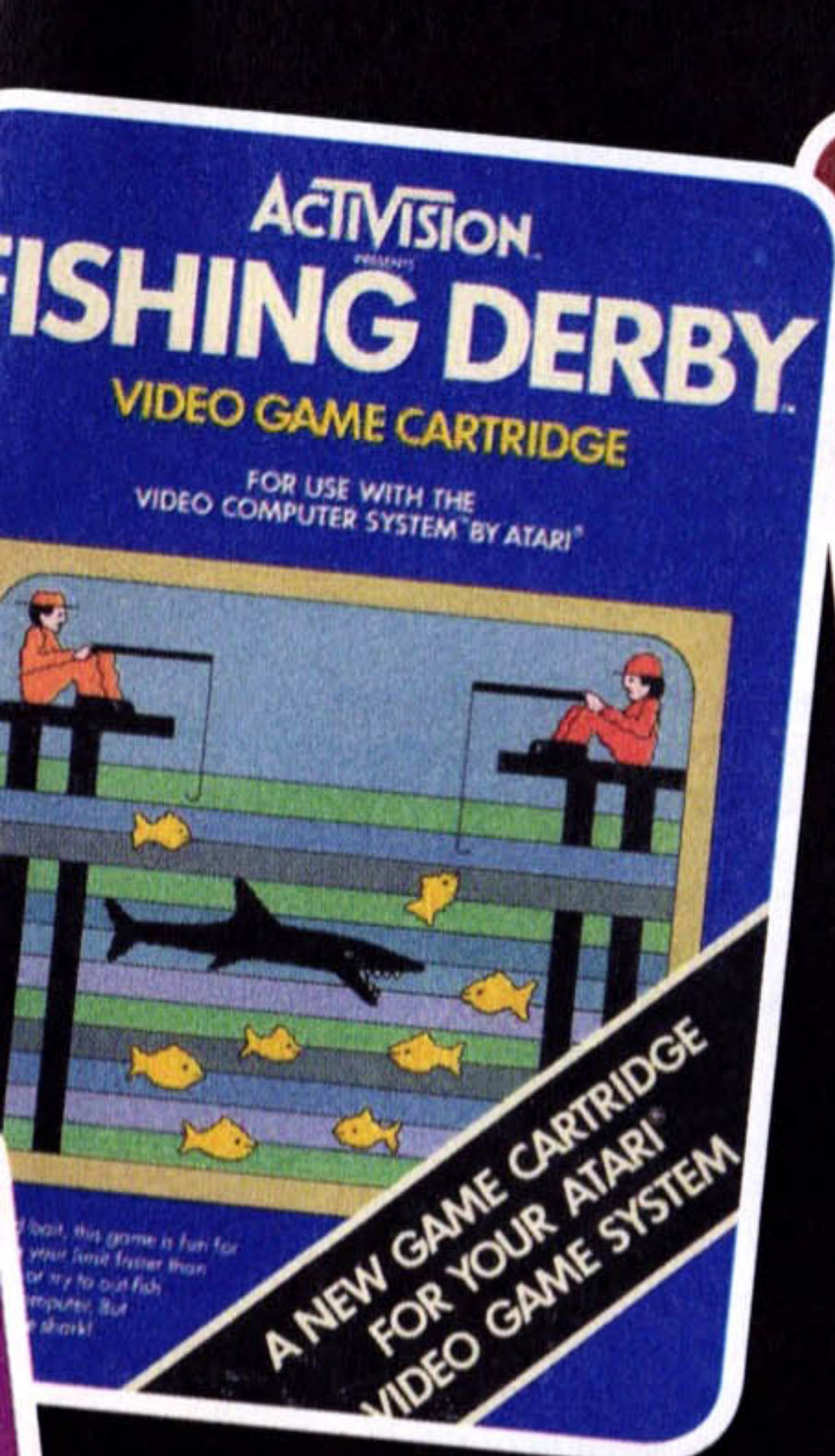
How four men re-wrote the rules and changed
by Ben Reeves

In the late '70s and early '80s, Atari was a giant in the entertainment world. It helped kickstart the video game industry with a combination of high-profile games and inventive hardware that invaded local bars as well as the living room. Atari became a cultural icon and one of America's rising industrial stars. But it didn't get there alone. As the first third-party developer, Activision was one of Atari's biggest supporters, producing some of the most successful and best-loved games for the Atari 2600. Many credit Activision with bolstering Atari hardware sales and helping sustain the console maker's branding. Atari didn't see it that way. To Atari, Activision was the worst kind of enemy: an enemy that had come from within.



Natives

the video game industry forever



The Memo that Sparked a Fire

In early 1979, Atari's marketing department issued a memo to its programming staff that listed all the games Atari had sold the previous year. The list detailed the percentage of sales each game had contributed to the company's overall profits. The purpose of the memo was to show the design team what kinds of games were selling and to inspire them to create more titles of a similar breed. Unfortunately, a few of Atari's designers were less than inspired.

David Crane, Larry Kaplan, Alan Miller, and Bob Whitehead were four of Atari's superstar programmers. Collectively, the group had been responsible for producing many of Atari's most critical hits. Titles like Canyon Bomber and Surround don't sound like much today, but over 30 years ago they were hot properties. The four programmers also respected each other's work, and had formed a clique within the company.

"I remember looking at that memo with those other guys," recalls Crane, "and we realized that we had been responsible for 60 percent of Atari's sales in the previous year – the four of us. There were 35 people in the department, but the four of us were responsible for 60 percent of the sales. Then

we found another announcement that [Atari] had done \$100 million in cartridge sales the previous year, so that 60 percent translated into \$60 million."

These four men may have produced \$60 million in profit, but they were only making about \$22,000 a year. To them, the numbers seemed astronomically disproportionate. Part of the problem was that when the video game industry was founded, it had molded itself after the toy industry, where a designer was paid a fixed salary and everything that designer produced was wholly owned by the company. Crane, Kaplan, Miller, and Whitehead thought the video game industry should function more like the book, music, or film industries, where the creative talent behind a project got a larger share of the profits based on its success.

The four walked into the office of Atari CEO Ray Kassar and laid out their argument for programmer royalties. Atari was making a lot of money, but those without a corner office weren't getting to share the wealth. Kassar – who had been installed as Atari's CEO by parent company Warner Communications – felt obligated to keep production costs as low as possible. Warner was a massive

corporation and everyone helped contribute to the company's success.

"He told us, 'You're no more important to those projects than the person on the assembly line who put them together. Without them, your games wouldn't have sold anything,'" Crane remembers. "He was trying to create this corporate line that it was all of us working together that make games happen. But these were creative works, these were authorships, and he didn't get it."

"Kassar called us towel designers," Kaplan told *InfoWorld* magazine back in 1983, "He said, 'I've dealt with your kind before. You're a dime a dozen. You're not unique. Anybody can do a cartridge.'"

The four programmers left Kassar's office dejected. Warner was willing to give its recording artists royalties for the music they made, but their most productive programmers couldn't even get a bonus after making the company millions. Crane, Kaplan, Miller, and Whitehead were good at making games – that in-house memo proved people wanted to play what they programmed. The four decided that they were done working for Atari. But they weren't done making games for the Atari.