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THE WORLD'S #1 VIDEO GAME MAGAZINE





The Elder Scrolls® V

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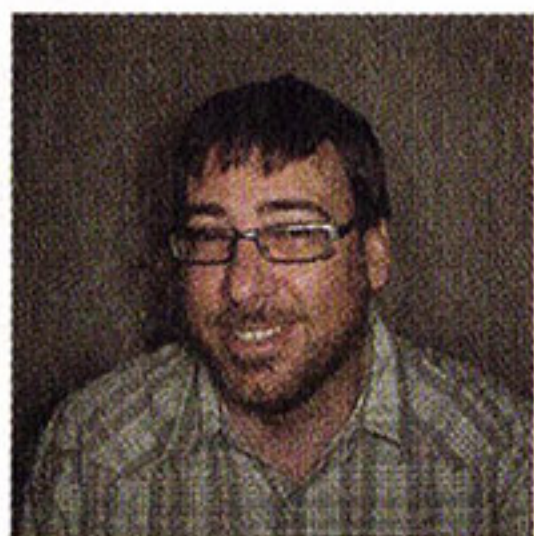


Bethesda



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RATING PENDING RP CONTENT RATED BY ESRB	May contain content inappropriate for children. Visit www.esrb.org for rating information.
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ANDY McNAMARA
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
andy@gameinformer.com

Read my column or
comment on this letter at
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@GI_AndyMc

The Golden Cartridge Heard Around the World

I know some Game Informer readers were not playing games (or perhaps even born) yet when The Legend of Zelda was released on the Nintendo Entertainment System, but you can take it from someone who was there in 1987 when it hit North America: It's hard to believe it has been 25 years since the groundbreaking title debuted in Japan back in 1986.

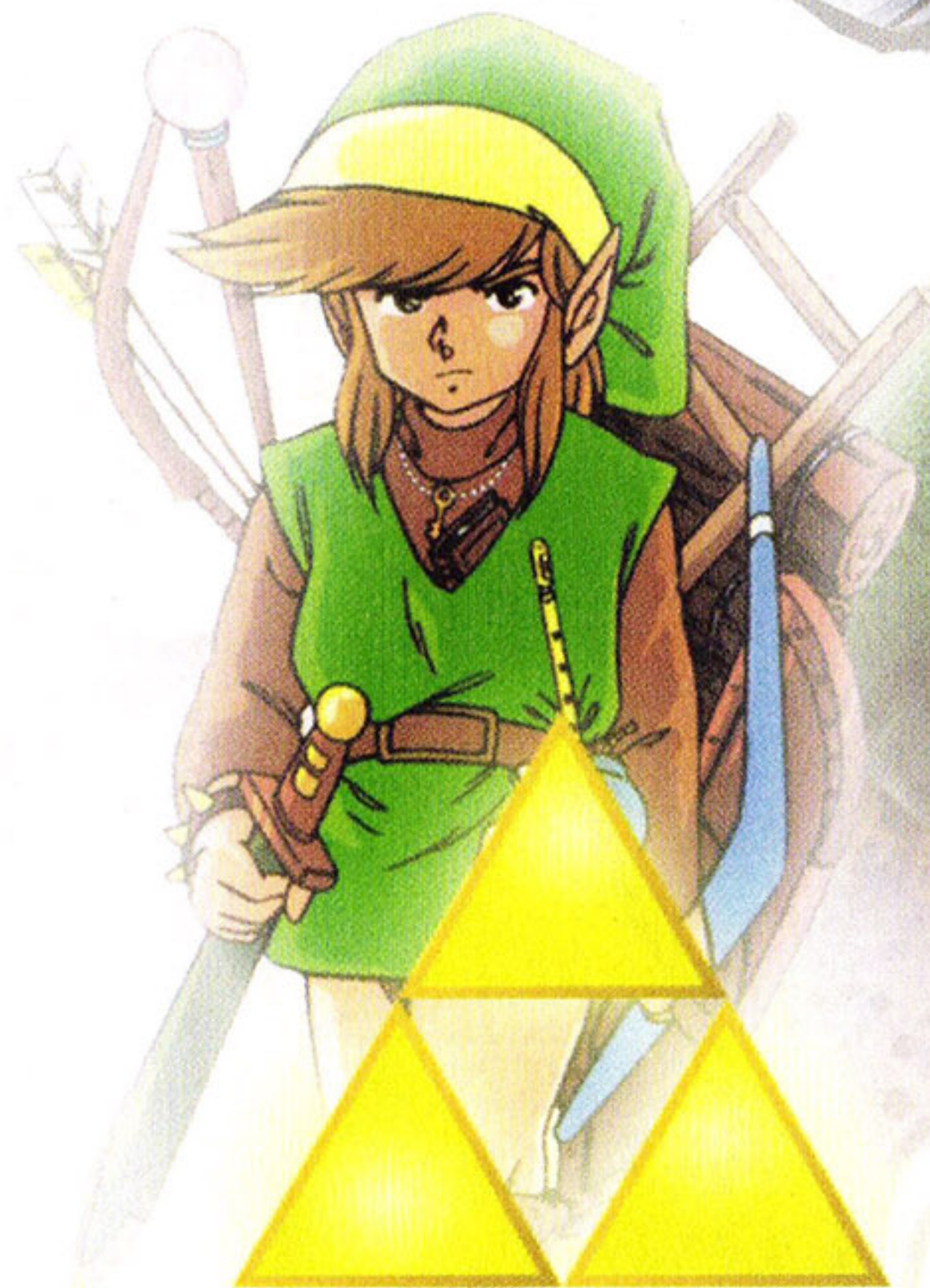
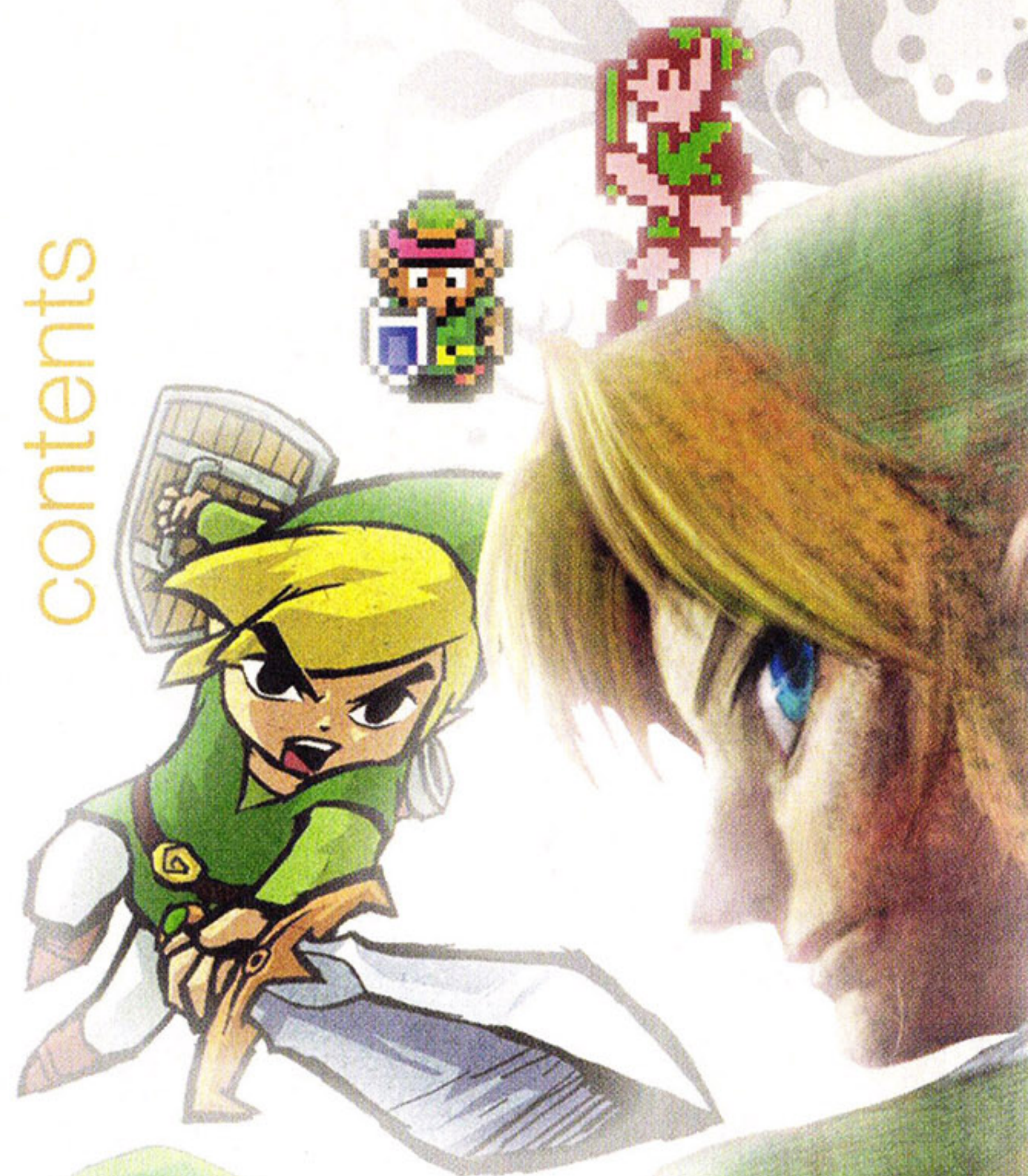
The odd part is not that the release feels recent; it is that it seems so much longer ago. We have seen so many innovations and changes in the industry over the last two and a half decades. The graphics, the design, and the technology behind every aspect of gaming has taken massive leaps forward in such a small span of time. Yet The Legend of Zelda still stands as one of the greatest of all time.

Imagine if you saw a game of the same graphical style being sold for your phone today. Most people would say that it looks like garbage based solely on the visuals. Zelda, of course, is about the furthest you can get from garbage. This game – this entire series – has defined gaming for years. The classic tale about a hero saving the world and the struggle between good versus evil is timeless; don't be surprised if gamers continue to celebrate Zelda's anniversary (and new installments) for many more decades to come.

Game Informer has let too much time pass since our last celebration of the world's favorite little hero in a green hat, and this month we fix that with an amazing cover story that both commemorates the series' anniversary and explores its future with a 10-page cover story on Skyward Sword.

Enjoy the issue.
Cheers

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The Legend of Zelda: 25 Years of Magic and Master Swords

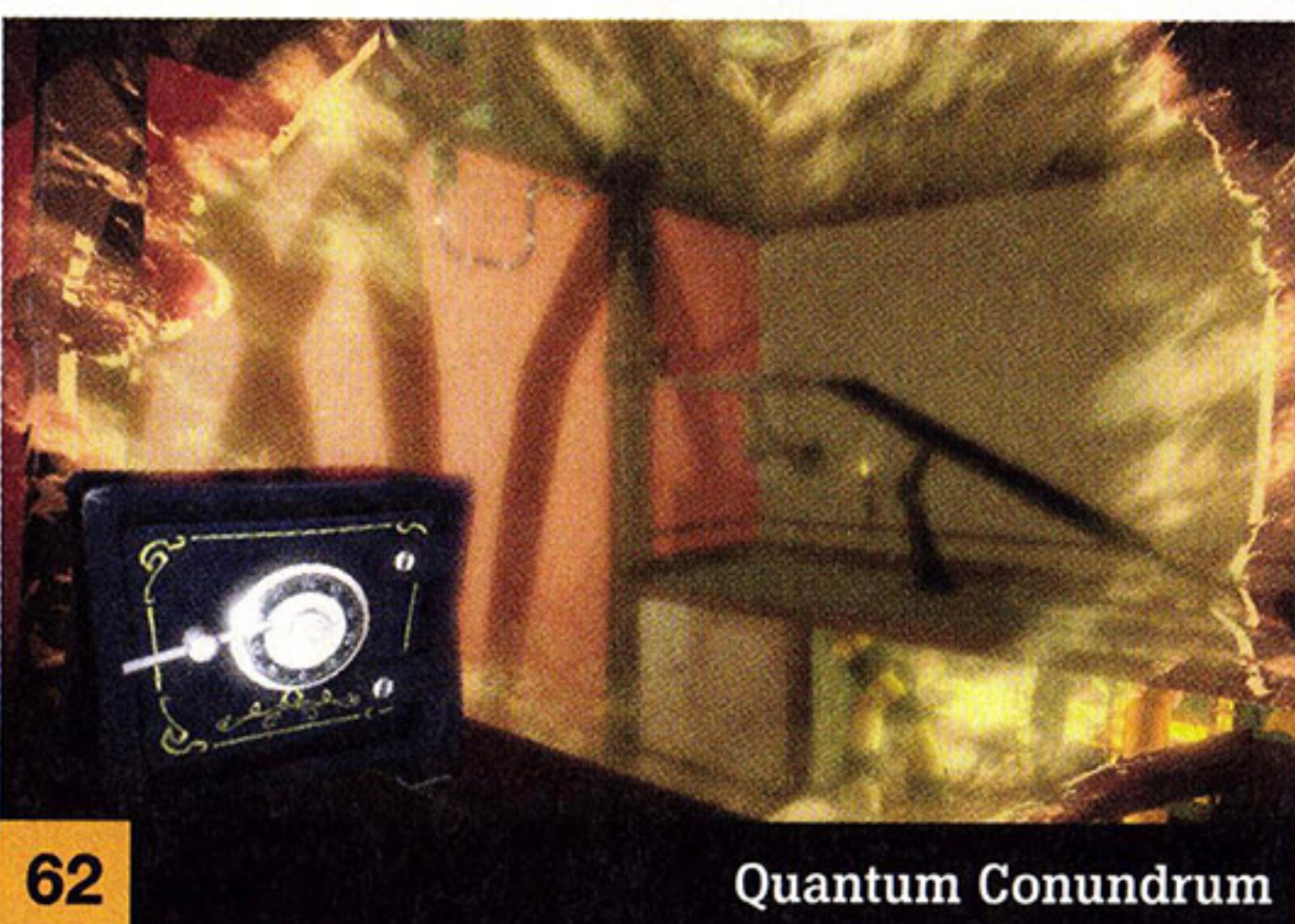
Link has secured a special place in the hearts of the Game Informer staff through the decades. To celebrate, GI editors share their personal experiences with the legendary series and Phil explores new areas, gameplay mechanics, and design philosophies that will carry the franchise into the future in our 10-page story on Skyward Sword.



Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3



Saints Row: The Third



Quantum Conundrum



regulars

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This month readers complain about impolite gamers, get burned out on Call of Duty, and discuss their favorite E3 announcements.

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Find out what happened at this year's Gamescom convention in Germany, which games are the cream of the bountiful co-op crop, and exactly how much money free-to-play king Zynga is making.

» 68 Previews

Learn all about Reiner's stay in the vast fantasy world of Skyrim, check out Dante's new tricks in Devil May Cry, and find out what happens when a scantily clad, chain-saw-wielding cheerleader encounters zombies.

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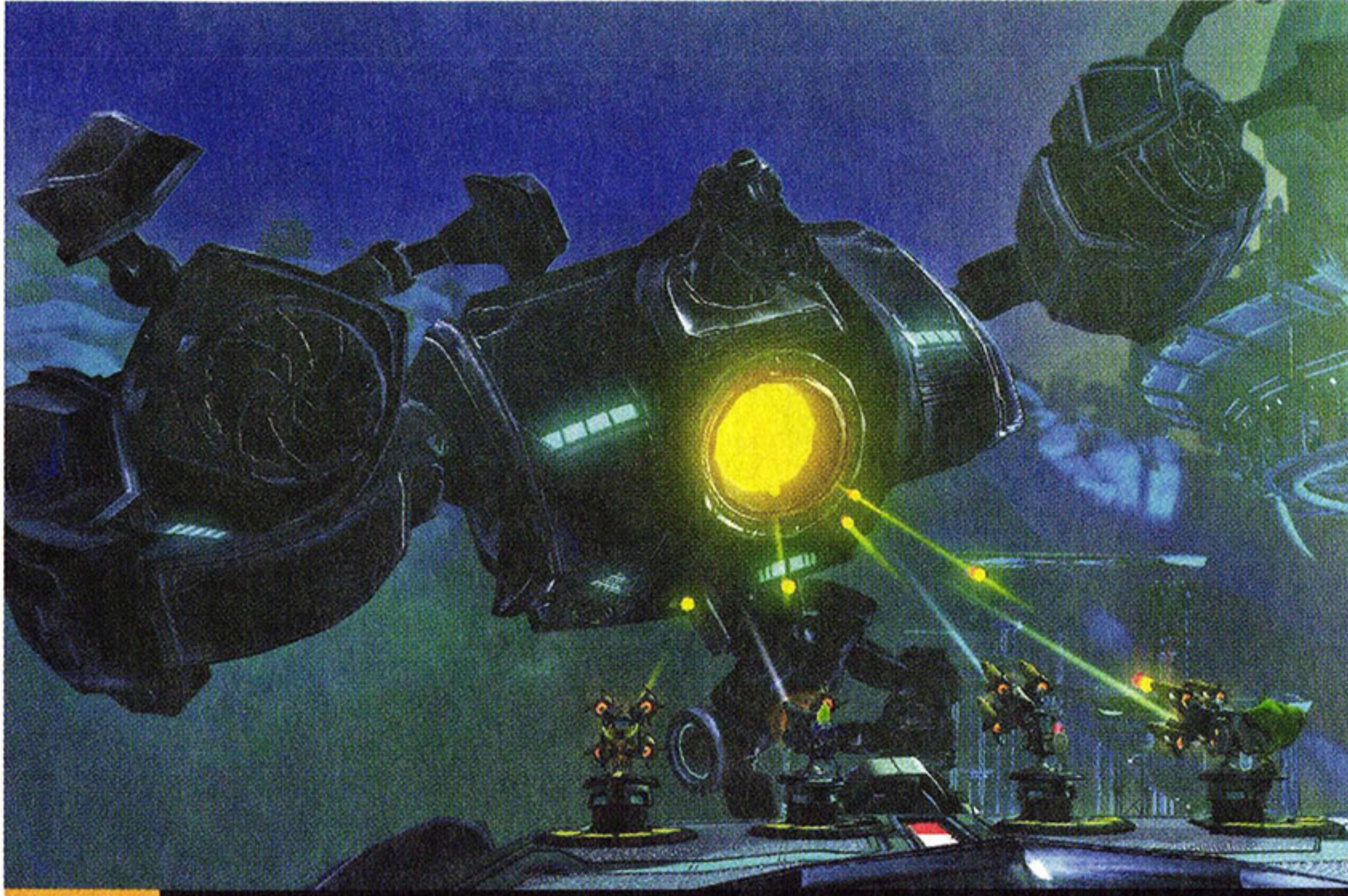
Tired of the same old zombie game? Dead Island injects the walking dead into a huge open world with tons of deadly weapons, quests, and loot to busy you and your friends.

by **Tim Turi**

» 100 Game Over

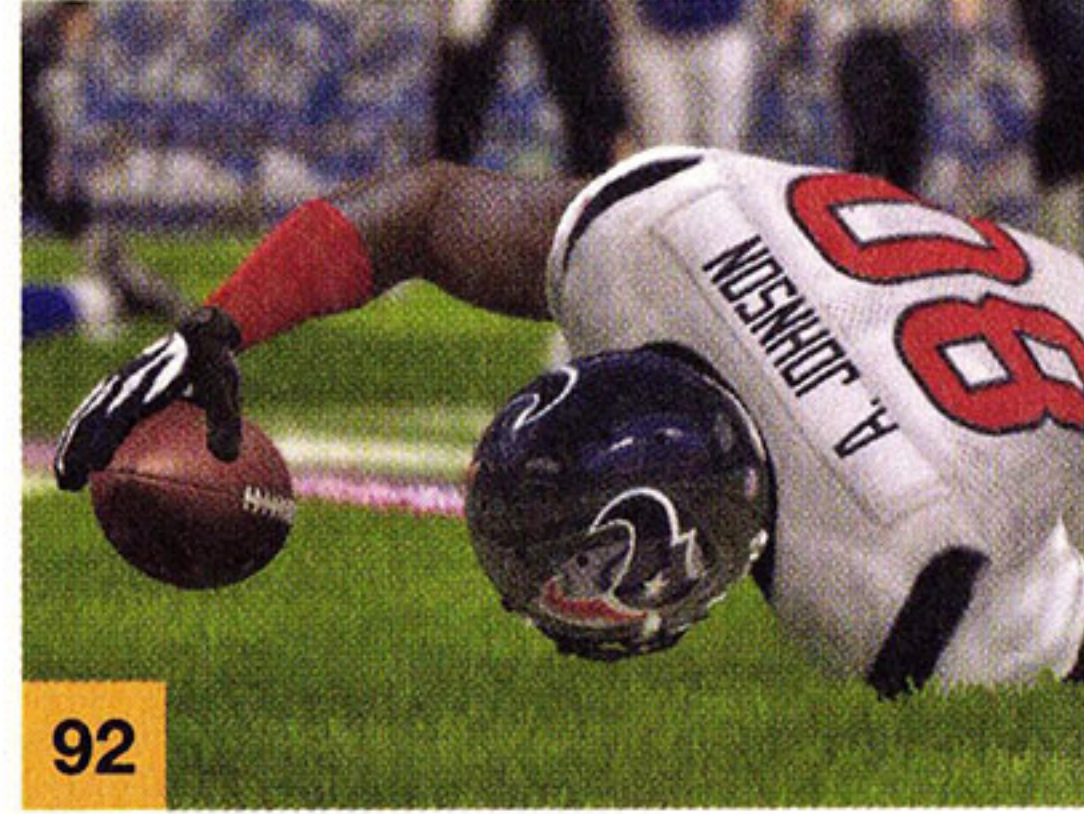
Have you ever wondered how much your hard-earned in-game currency would be worth in the real world?

by **Ben Reeves**



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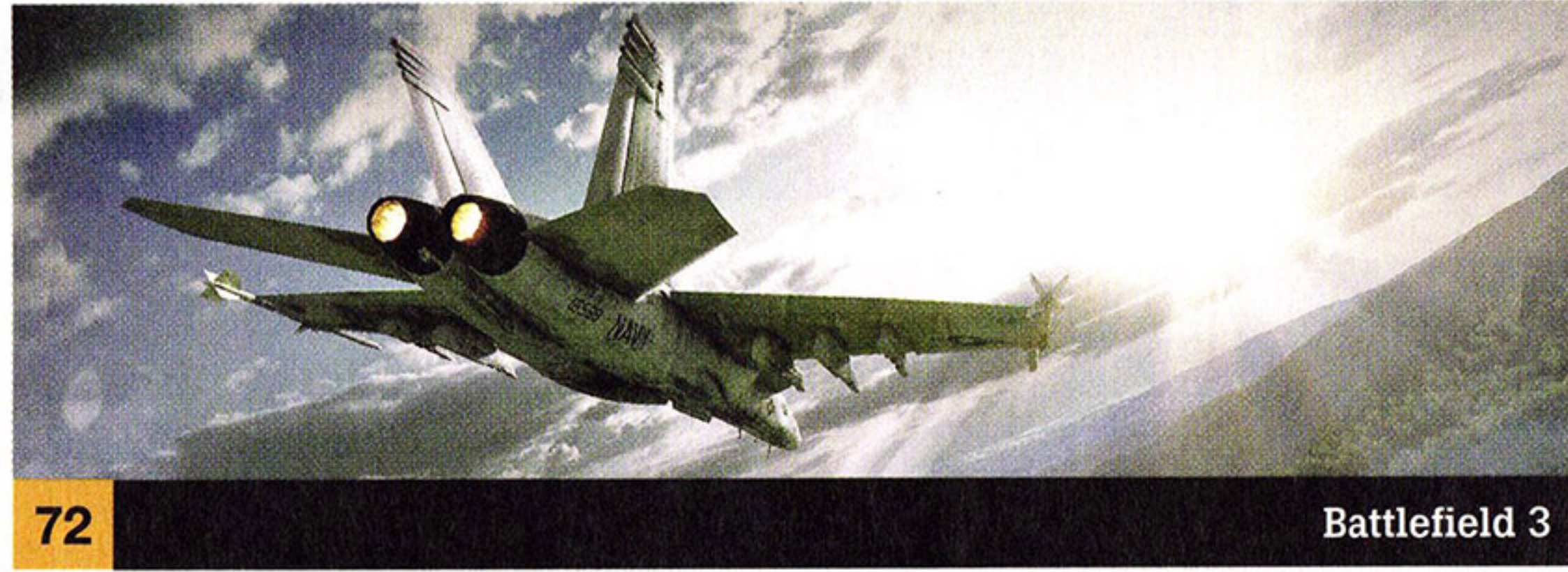
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Battlefield 3



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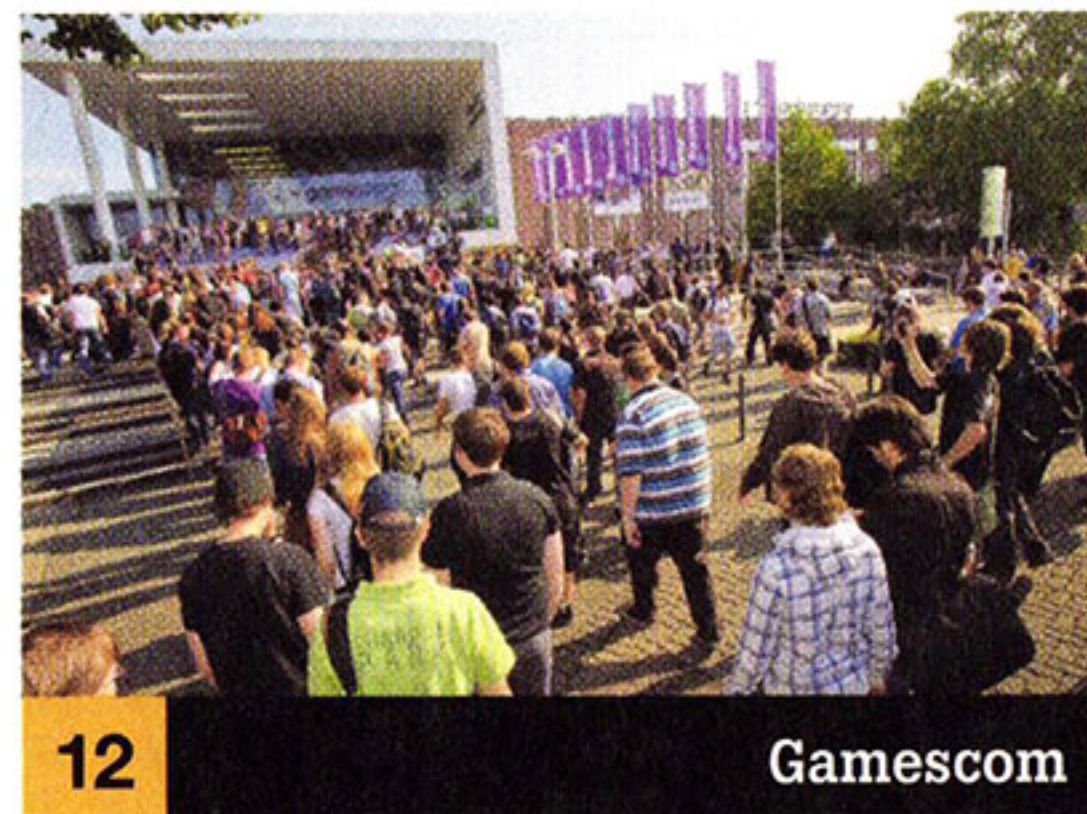
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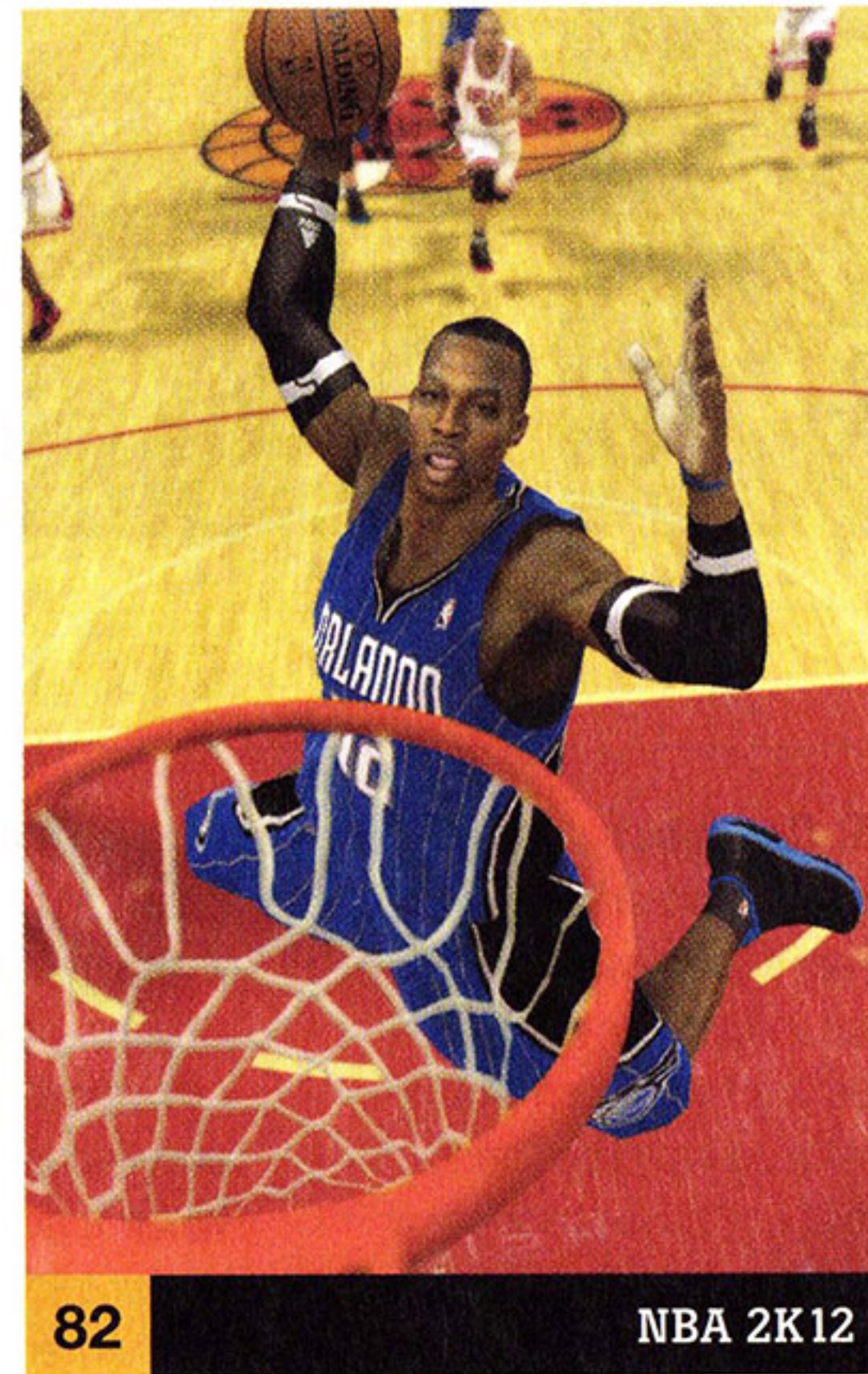


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SOMEWHERE IN THERE
**THERE'S A
 MAN IN THERE**

★ *Old Spice* ★

SMELL BETTER THAN
 YOURSELF



This month in Feedback, readers take a stand against online loudmouths, sympathize with a burned-out Call of Duty player, discuss their favorite E3 announcements, and uncover a Halo/Demolition Man conspiracy that may shake the gaming industry to its core. Or not.

Dishonorable Mention

I am incredibly excited for Dishonored! I have been yearning for a good stealth game forever. Everything about it looks amazing, especially the fact that there will be nonlethal ways to take out guards. I also like the world that it is set in. It seems like it might be a refreshing change of pace from the standard monotony of first-person shooters.

Danny Austin
Novato, CA

Bethesda will be the death of me. I just read your cover story on Dishonored, and seriously that's one of the best-looking games I've ever seen. Between Fallout: New Vegas, The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim, and now Dishonored, there just won't be enough time. If they release a Fallout 4, then I may as well break up with my fiancée and quit my job to give these games the time and attention they deserve.

Dane Bankston
Willis, TX

Don't worry too much, Dane. Not only will it be a while before Dishonored comes out – not to mention a potential Fallout 4 – but when your fiancée hears you joking about dumping her for a video game, we're guessing you'll have a lot more free time on your hands.

A Higher Bar

I simply want to thank Andy McNamara for calling out the crude gamers who verbally abuse others for their voice or cultural background (The Highest Court, issue 220). I am a southern man, and I have a southern drawl. Far too often I'll be playing a game, say one word, and then be harassed. Just because I'm from the south doesn't make me a racist or a farm boy. Thank you for addressing this issue. Maybe I will plug in my microphone next time I play online.

Samuel T. Blackwood
via email

I agree completely with Andy's views on the online gaming community. I often turn my 360 on and just enter party chat by myself so I don't have to worry about the slander that happens online. I mainly play Halo: Reach, and I've heard thousands of comments making fun of everything you outlined: race, gender, language, etc. It's sad that the online community is such a nasty place that I can no longer play games with my little brother without muting everyone in our

lobby. If only one person reads what you wrote and changes their online behavior, you've done us all a giant favor.

Jesse McDonald
via email

We received a considerable amount of letters from gamers agreeing with Andy's call for a little more civility from online gamers. They may not outnumber the number of slander-spewing jerks you'll run into during an average night of online gaming, but at least it's a start.



Contact Us

feedback@gameinformer.com



Kicking The Habit

In issue 220, a reader named Matt Bernsdorf poured his soul out concerning his relationship with Black Ops. After reading his opinion on CoD taking over his life, I thought to myself, "Wow, another gamer feels the same way as me," and I expected a decent response from the writers. It concerned me that you guys didn't feel any sympathy for Matt or feel even a little connected with his situation. I know I do. 10 days, 4 hours, and 21 minutes.

Christian Hensley
via email

I just would like to say that Matt Bernsdorf's letter is completely right. Why get frustrated over a game that truthfully doesn't matter? As soon as the next Call of Duty game comes out no one will care about what you did in the last game. One should play the game for fun, not to be tenth prestige. Video games were and are made for fun, not for people to get angry over them. I am with you Matt; after playing the Call of Duty series religiously for many years, I quit.

Ben Klick
via email

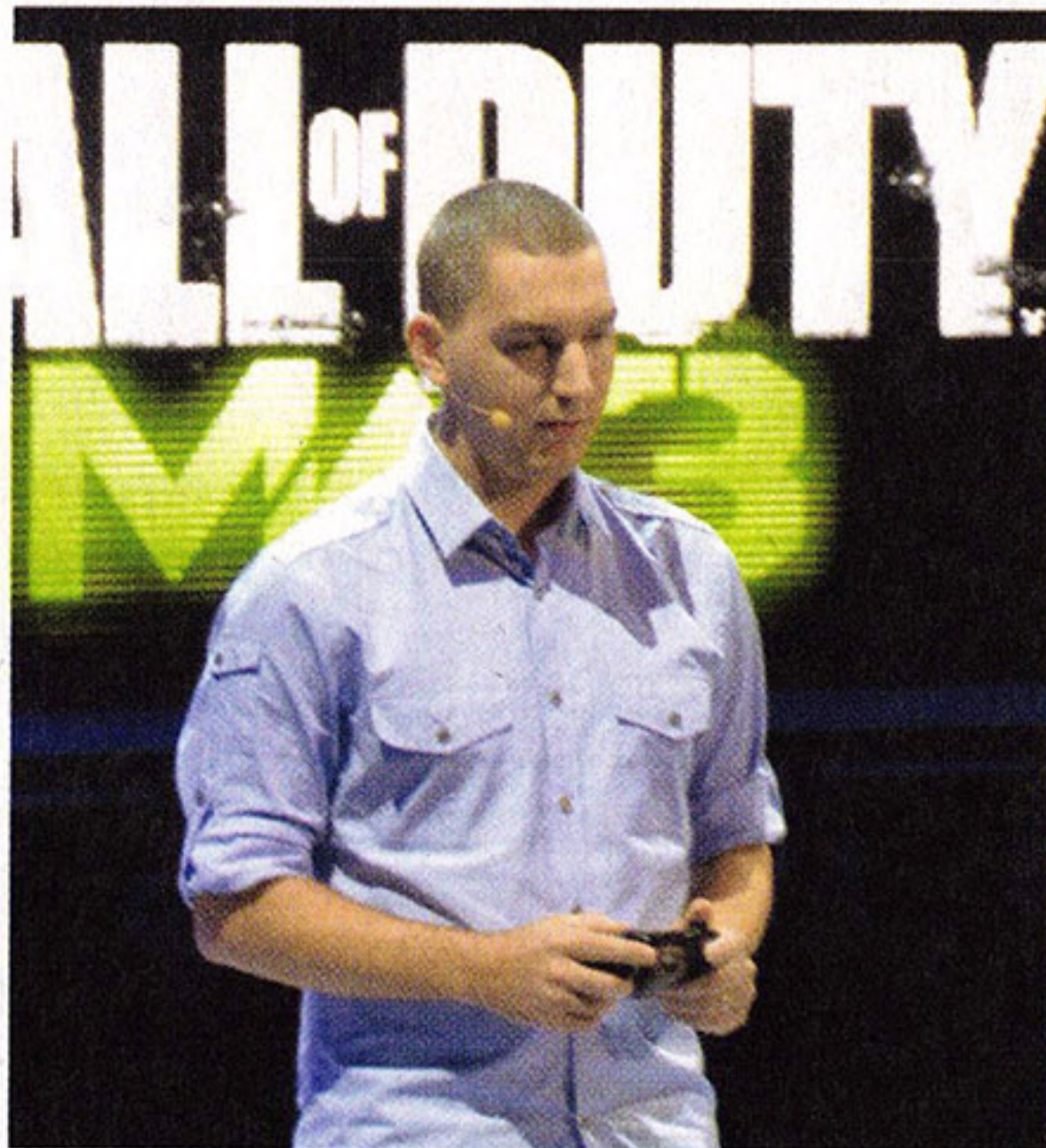
Based on the responses we received, Matt's letter seems to have tapped a group of gamers who are tired of the Call of Duty grind. We didn't intend to sound emotionally disconnected from his plight – in fact, we've all been burnt out on a series at one time or another. The best advice we can offer is that once a game stops being fun, it's time to play something else.

Growing Pains

I am 23 years old and living with my parents. I am desperately trying to get a job to move out. My question is, how do I get my parents to play more video games? They treat me like I'm mentally deficient just because I like to play a lot of video games. The only game they play is that stupid frog collecting one on the iPhone. They blame my inability to find work on video games and have stated multiple times that if I were to quit gaming I'd be able to easily get a job. I think that if I could just get them playing some games that they would see that gaming isn't all bad. Any and all advice would be appreciated.

Christian
Stockton, CA

While your love of digital entertainment is admirable, Christian, don't forget that you're a gamer, not a missionary. Your parents don't sound interested in playing games, and that's okay. Instead of trying to convince them that they're wrong, focus on the job search instead. That way your parents won't feel like games are holding you back, and you'll have the added bonus of actually being able to buy things with your own money when you're employed.



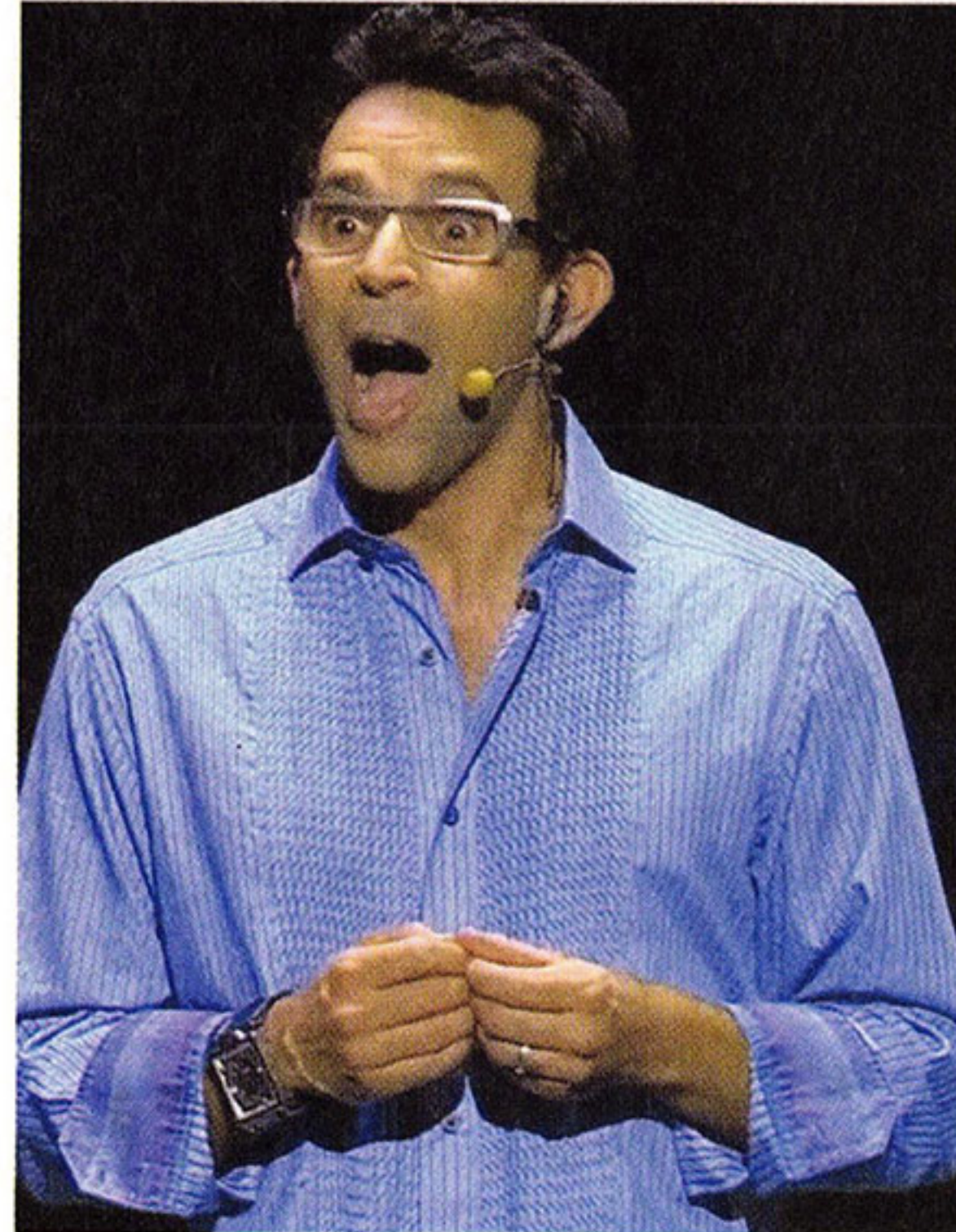
Name Calling

In your August issue you said that Ryan Bowling from Infinity Ward debuted Modern Warfare 3 (Microsoft Pushes Kinect, Teases New Halo, issue 220). In actuality, my brother's name is

Robert, not Ryan. I was very amused by this misprint. Thanks for the laugh. I shall call him Ryan from now on.

Topher Bowling
Ft. Knox, KY

Our sincere apologies to Robert – both for accidentally misprinting his name, and for supplying the fuel for some sibling-on-sibling grieving.



Don Draper He Ain't

Thank you, thank you, thank you for highlighting Mr. Caffeine in The Good, The Bad, And The Ugly (issue 220). As a big fan of various Ubisoft series through the years, I was sorely disappointed with someone who has clearly never picked up a controller and was so full of generic salesman bull that it oozed out of my video feed during their press conference. Ugh. That guy made my ears bleed.

Liz
via email

Mr. Caffeine's performance was so bad, we thought Ubisoft was trying to be ironic in a hipster performance art kind of way. Here's hoping that next year the company cuts out the hammy attempts at humor and focuses on the games that E3-goers are there to see in the first place.

Short Answers to Readers' Burning Questions

"Could I get a real explanation of what the bill from California was going to do? Because it seems like the ESRB was already doing it."

Actually, it seems like you have a good grasp of the situation.

"when will they make a new black ops is there a bully 2 and is there a new fallout in the making?"

Punctuation.

"Where can I get more 3D glasses for my Nintendo 3DS?"

You're doing it wrong.

Worst News Tip of the Month:

"all these games that are coming out for either systems couldn't be some of the best ones ever made."

Welcome to the World, Ganondorf Ortiz

Dear Game Informer, if this letter appears in print, my wife has agreed to call our baby Ganondorf.

Miko Ortiz



(Left) Conan O'Brien still looks surprisingly peaceful, considering he has Dan Ryckert hanging on his shoulder **(Center)** Bryan, Jeff, Ben, Tim, Dan, and Phil responded to the loss of GI's Longest Fighting Game marathon record by breaking/setting six individual records in a variety of game series and genres. Way to go, guys! **(Right)** THQ's Neal Pabon is such a dedicated gamer that even his dog Zoey gets in on the action

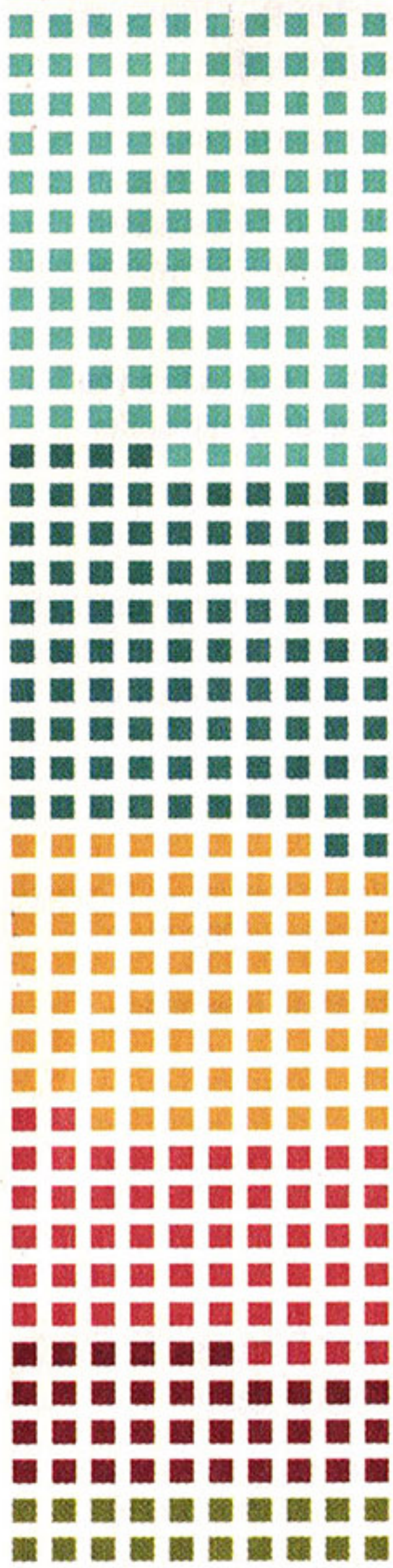
CANDID PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY



GI SPY
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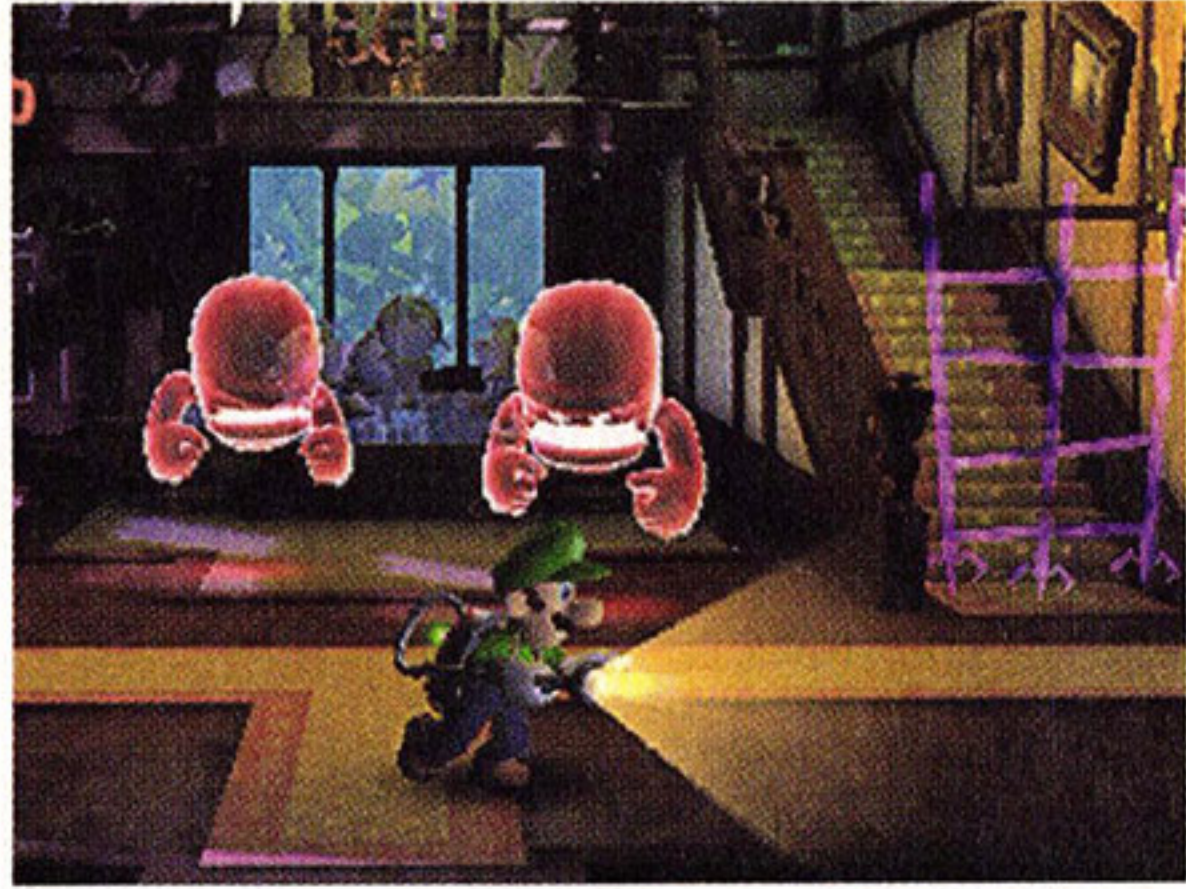
On Your Mind



- E3 Cheers And Jeers **29%**
- Dishonored Excitement **24%**
- Online Etiquette (Or Lack Thereof) **19%**
- "Why Wasn't [insert game] In Your E3 Hot 50?!" **14%**
- "Why Weren't [insert characters] In Your Top Ten Rivalries?!" **9%**
- Capcom Cancelling Mega Man Legends **5%**

Question Of The Month:

What video game character are you going to dress as for Halloween?



Favorite E3 Announcements

In issue 219, we asked readers what their favorite announcement was at this year's E3. Halo 4 was the easy winner, but gamers were also excited for other projects in the works.

My favorite announcement from E3 was when 343 Industries revealed Halo 4. When I heard that Bungie would no longer be producing the series, I was heartbroken. They did such a good job, I wasn't ready to give it up. But when I saw the announcement for Halo 4, my heart leapt with joy. I can't wait for the game.

Brandon Bohn

For me, it was Darksiders 2, hands down. Watching the trailer gave me chills down my spine, and seeing your cover of issue 219 made me scream like a little girl in front of all my friends. Hearing about all the upgrades that they're making to the gameplay is making me count down the days.

Timothy Hubata

The moment Nintendo announced Luigi's Mansion 2, I jumped up and down in my chair and screamed from excitement. It was my favorite GameCube game because I have always favored Luigi over Mario. I have not owned a handheld since Game Boy Color, but I will be hugging my husband with one hand and stealing his cash with the other just to get a 3DS to play this game.

Marie Ellison

My favorite announcement from E3 would have to be Minecraft Mobile. I can't wait to play Minecraft on my phone!

Randy Sautel



The Real John Spartan

Is Halo a rip-off of *Demolition Man*? In *Demolition Man*, the protagonist is a man named John Spartan, who gets cryogenically frozen and then is later thawed out when a threat arises that only he can pacify. In Halo, a man named John, who is a Spartan, gets thawed out from his cryogenic sleep in order to stop an alien menace that only he can quell. Both feature a female sidekick who annoys the protagonist at every turn, and has the ability to get inside the protagonist's head. I could go on, but why bother? I've clearly made my point.

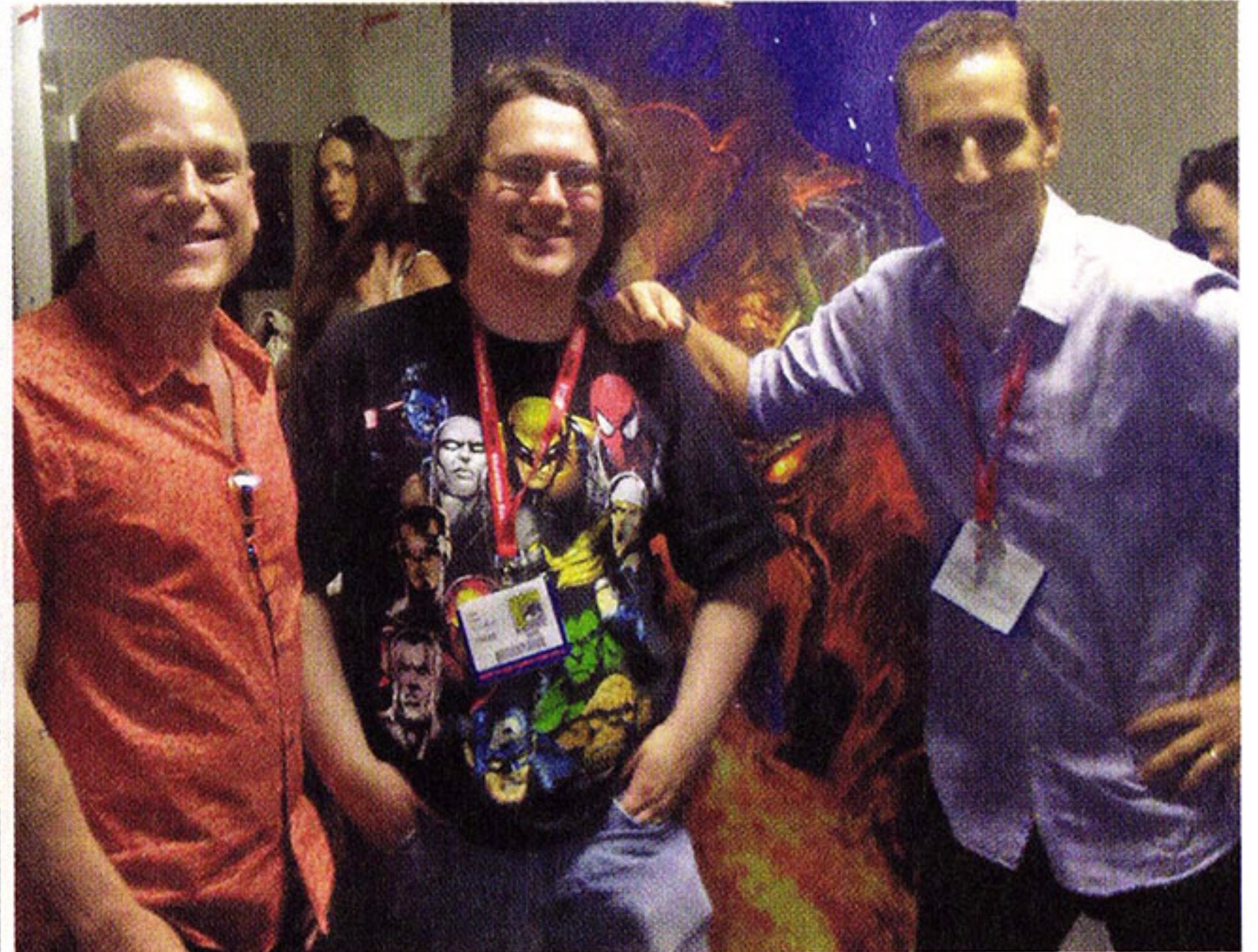
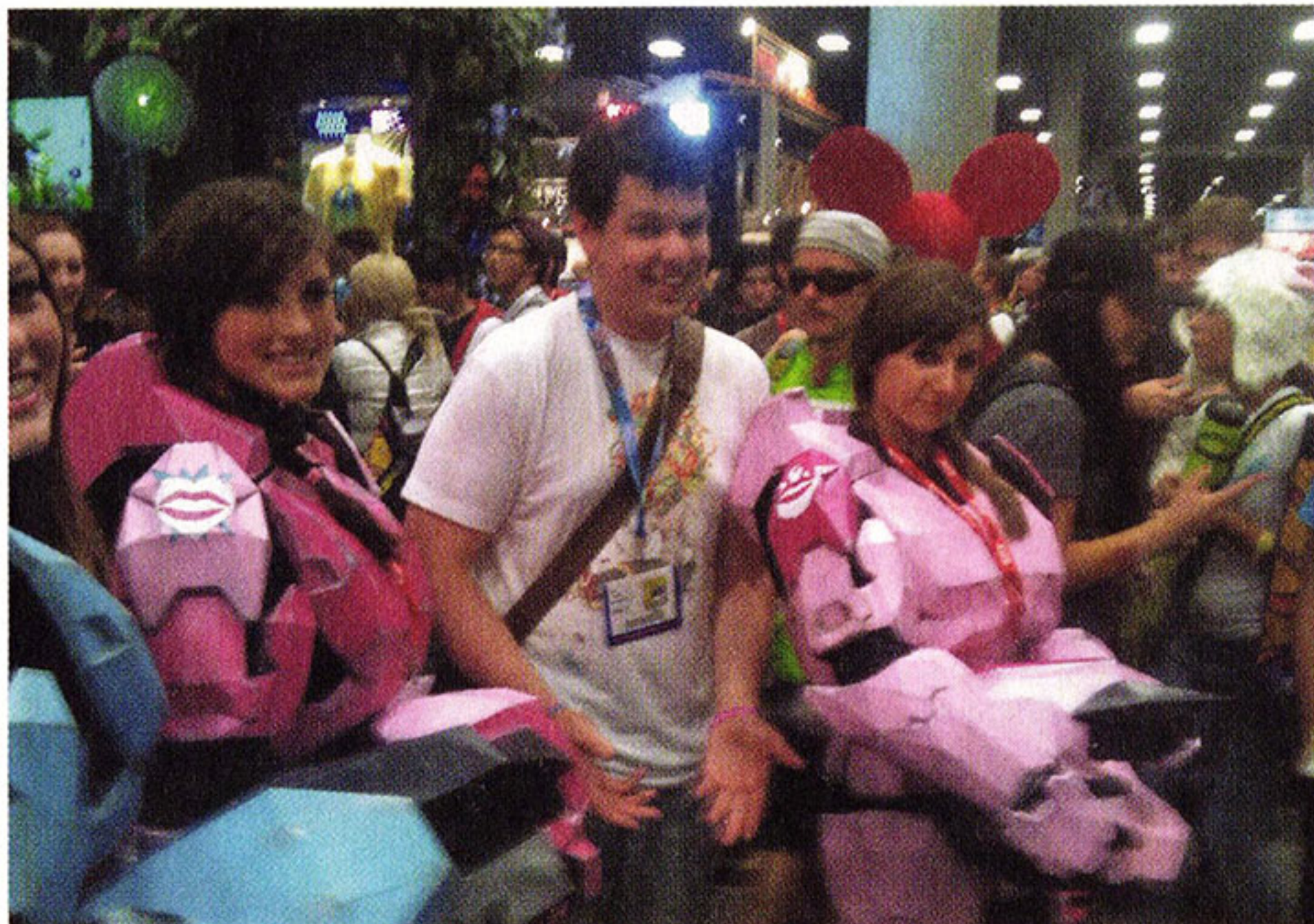
Walter Wolford
via email

You have outlined an interesting theory, but you're forgetting one key difference. When Master Chief speaks, people can actually understand what the hell he's saying.

GI SPY

continued from page 7

(Left) Ben plays the fool with a couple of female Halo cosplayers at this year's Comic-Con. At least we think he was playing **(Right)** Also at Comic-Con, Phil ran into G4's Adam Sessler and comic book guru Todd McFarlane



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Get The Ultimate Audio Advantage

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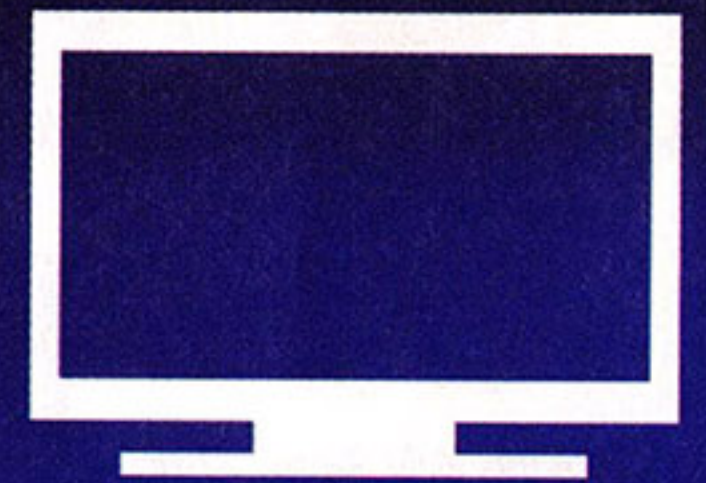
Hi-fidelity 7.1 virtual surround sound*



Crystal clear voice chat



Play in comfort for hours



Stay informed with on-screen headset status updates**



PS3
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PlayStation Network

*Virtual surround sound on the PS3™ system requires system software version 3.70 or later. Virtual surround is not available for some PS3™ system audio formats. For details, visit us.playstation.com/support. **On-screen headset status updates available on the PS3™ system only.

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

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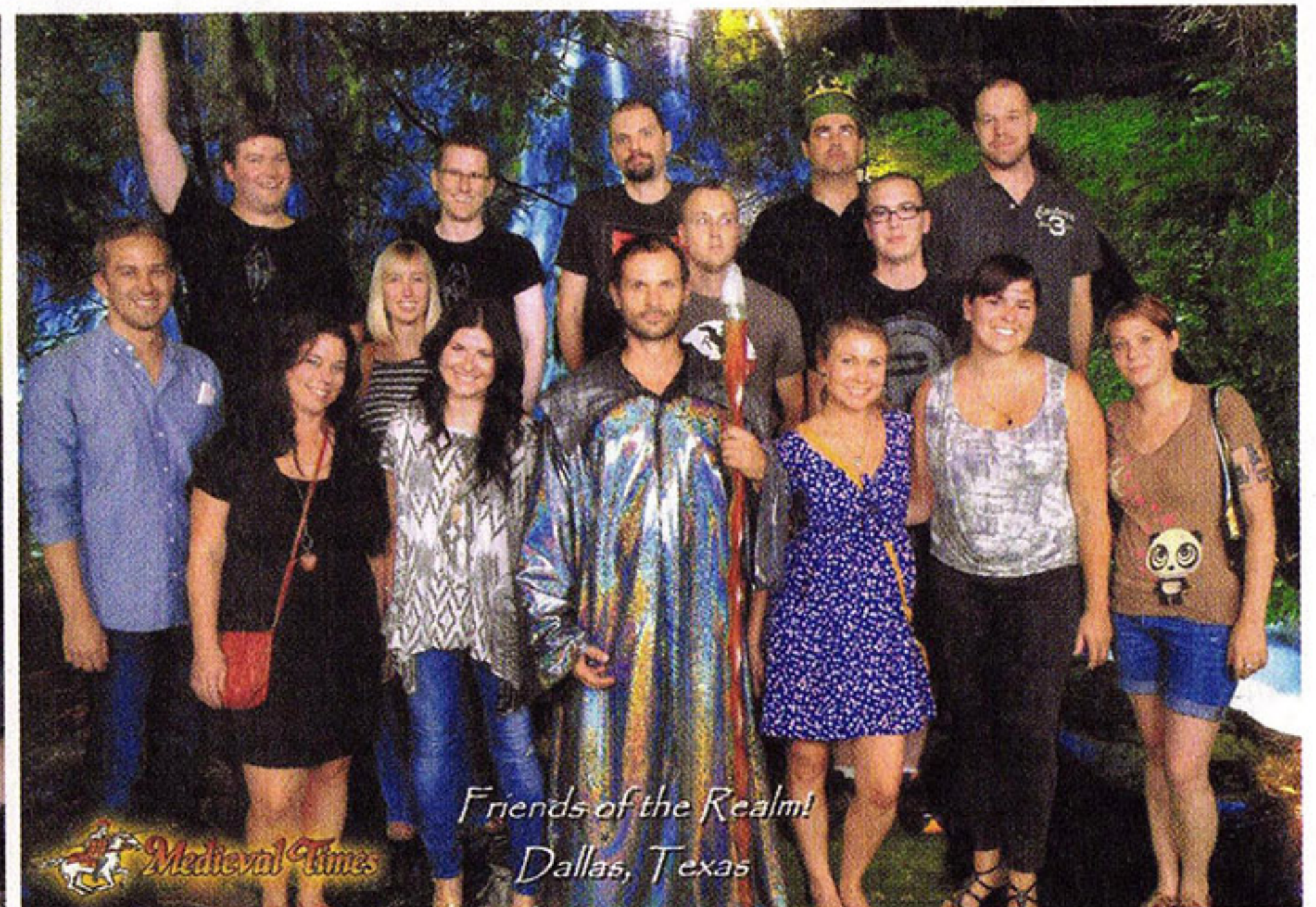
WINNER 1 Aaron Damico This Nathan Drake action figure may have the trademark half-tuck, but we were hoping for a drawstring that triggers a Nolan North quip. **2 Destinie Corbane** Considering both the Star Wars and Star Fox franchises started strong and then lost their way, this comparison isn't much of a stretch. **3 Rienzi Gokea** We're not sure what the hell Peach did to that turnip, but we wouldn't advise eating it at this point. **4 Lyndsey Schoonmaker** Amaterasu patiently sits and waits to hear news of an HD re-release of Okami.

CORRECTION:

In issue 221 we ran a retrospective on the 1993 Super Mario Bros. film. However, we failed to cite the Super Mario Bros. The Movie Archive (smbmovie.com), which proved to be a valuable resource, providing us with some behind-the-scenes information, images, and concept art.

GI SPY
 continued from page 8

(Left) Playing MW 3 can work up an appetite. From left to right: Activision's Robert Taylor, Beachhead Studios' Chacko Sonny, Dan "I only own one shirt" Ryckert, freelancer Taylor Cocks, Activision's Joshua Selinger, Infinity Ward's Ryan Robert Bowling, EGM's Ray Carsillo, and Sledgehammer Games' Guy Beahm **(Right)** After playing a bit of Skyrim at this year's QuakeCon, Reiner and his fellow industry friends had a real life high fantasy adventure at Medieval Times.





-PEOPLE

"...FULL-THROTTLE SUSPENSE AND TERROR..."

-TVGUIDE

THE WALKING DEAD



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Gamesc

The Video Game World Turns To Europe

GAMESCOM, in Cologne, Germany, maintains an interesting position on the industry calendar. E3, where most of the big announcements are made, sets the tone for the coming year in June, while Gamescom is the last major convention stop before companies' best-laid plans come to life in the fall and holiday season (with all due respect to the waning Tokyo Game Show in September). You may be tempted to see Gamescom as just another convention, but it's not. Its influence extends beyond Europe, and this year it not only set the stage for the holiday season, but also for 2012.

NOTABLES

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2011

SONY'S PS3 PRICE CUT & NEW PSP

At its Gamescom press conference, Sony announced that the worldwide price of the PS3 was lowered. The 160GB and 320GB systems in North America are now \$249 and \$299, respectively, and a limited edition *Infamous 2* bundle (320GB PS3, a copy of the game, and a 30-day PlayStation Plus membership) is also available for \$299. Industry analysts foretold the move for quite a while now. The price drop won't dramatically alter the console landscape, but it will undoubtedly help maintain the system's momentum.

Specifically for Europe, Sony also introduced a new version of the PSP for 99 euros that will come out this fall. No word on if or when it will be released in other territories. The unit sports a matte black finish, and what it loses in its price it also loses in a few features. The unit doesn't have Wi-Fi, but it will still play any PSP games you have either on UMD or from download (via the Media Go software and a PC).

It may seem odd that Sony would be trumpeting a PSP when the Vita is on the horizon, but given the big price difference between the two, they certainly aren't competitors. Furthermore, Sony's traditional strategy is to create and maintain fans on the backend of a console's cycle so they eventually become fans of the new system in the future.

In related handheld news, Nintendo cut the price of the 3DS weeks before Gamescom from \$249.99 to \$169.99, but Sony said it didn't feel pressure to respond in kind with the Vita, which will come out at \$249.99 (Wi-Fi model) sometime early next year.

This Euro-only PSP sells for €99, and Sony is supporting it with a new value-line of titles including *FIFA 12*, *Invizimals: The Lost Tribe*, and *EyePet Adventures*



Unlike E3, Gamescom wasn't inundated by press conferences, which allowed Sony and Electronic Arts to grab some headlines with their respective press events. As far as new initiatives go, Electronic Arts' BioWare announced that it was coming out with free-to-play title *Warhammer Online: Wrath of Heroes*, and the company's sports label also debuted a 2012 FIFA Street title to the soccer-loving masses.

Later that day, Sony let loose a barrage of announcements, from a new model of the PSP to new Vita titles like *Resistance: Burning Skies* (see page 86), *Escape Plan* (page 87), as well as an *Assassin's Creed* title from Ubisoft, which was announced but not detailed. The company also debuted *Infamous 2*'s first non-user-created DLC, entitled *Festival of Blood*, and showed its continued support for the *Move* with *Move Fitness* and *DanceStar Party* (and EA promised support for the peripheral in next year's FIFA 13). Still, it doesn't look like the *Move* has achieved the escape velocity necessary to turn it from curiosity into phenomenon.

Microsoft had an event, but it was nothing more than a chance to play Xbox 360 games. Nothing new was shown or announced. Similarly, Nintendo ignored the chance to grab some Gamescom headlines for itself outside of a press release for the *Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword* release date (November 20) and a new Wii bundle exclusive to Europe.

It's not surprising that Sony tried to please the continental crowd – the PlayStation 3 is stronger in Europe than it is in the States. But the company's prominence at Gamescom 2011 (its booth was larger than its already formidable one at E3) also potentially points to some weaknesses in its competitors' armor. Microsoft doesn't have a marquee first-party lineup to shout about in 2012, and

Nintendo is on hold at the moment due to the 3DS's current lack of success. Moreover, the Wii is living on borrowed time since the Wii U has already been announced for next year.

Not everything was new at Gamescom; plenty of games just showed off slight updates to their E3 demos. That said, some titles made good impressions and bettered their reputations. Big titles like *Batman: Arkham City* continued to impress, and smaller titles like Sega's *Binary Domain* – whose squad play was much more impressive than at E3 – improved their stock.

PC gaming in Europe is a bigger part of the market relative to console gaming than here in the States, and Gamescom's lineup reflected this. Titles like *Guild Wars 2*, *Dragon Commander*, *Diablo III*, *Firefall*, *Dota 2* (see page 16 for more), and *Star Wars: The Old Republic* commanded a big presence at the convention, and there was a smattering of other intriguing prospects that otherwise might have been ignored at E3 such as *King Arthur II* and *Salem*. The masses themselves seemed to enjoy all the titles on hand, and the convention set a new attendance record: 275,000 visitors from 70 countries. During the first public day, the crowd was so large that the flow of people into the halls was controlled because the convention was already at capacity. Inside the public halls, the situation wasn't much better as some people waited all day in front of the *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3* booth only to find out that the game's theater was only showing off a trailer for the title with no gameplay.

Some fans' disappointment aside, Gamescom 2011 was a success. When Sony decides to use Gamescom as the platform to announce a PlayStation 3 price drop, the company isn't just talking to Europe, but the world. Moves like this are relevant to the coming holiday season as well as the future as companies try and set the stage for early 2012 releases and beyond. Looking at Sony's handheld business in particular, with the announcement of new Vita titles and a Europe-only budget PSP, the company isn't just showcasing content that caters to this region's tastes, but executing a global strategy that further points to the continuing influence of the West and away from Japan. With more and more influential European developers like *Battlefield 3*'s DICE in Sweden, Gamescom will continue to cater to the growing power of Europe and the industry as a whole. ♦

GAMESCOM RISERS & FALLERS

Here's a quick look at some of the games whose stock rose or fell during the convention.

RISERS

Battlefield 3

Gamescom's official Game of the Show (and we agree), *Battlefield 3* not only wowed people with another great trailer at EA's press conference, but the PC version's 64-player multiplayer and co-op were playable as well.

Batman: Arkham City

It's hard to believe that the excitement for this game could get any bigger, but the playable Catwoman demo at the show impressed by exhibiting how her gameplay experience differs from *Batman's*.

Devil May Cry

New developer Ninja Theory showed how it's not all about looks. At Gamescom this title had a coming-out party by showcasing its limbo world and mind-bending environments.

Dragon Commander

This game comes from *Divinity* series developers Larian Studios, and it ambitiously mixes real-time strategy with more hands-on combat featuring a dragon with a jetpack.

FALLERS

Forza Motorsport 4

At E3 people were impressed with the game's Kinect functionality, but even in racing-mad Germany, all the game could muster up was a new track.

Star Wars: The Old Republic

EA is limiting the game's initial availability, and other MMOs like *Tera* and *Guild Wars 2* are offering more interesting features. The more time goes on for this game, the more excitement for it is fading.

Kinect Star Wars

The game's buggy and unintentionally hilarious integration with Kinect hasn't gotten any better since a similarly bad showing at E3. Even news at Gamescom that you could play as a Rancor didn't help. Shortly after the convention, the game was delayed until sometime in 2012.

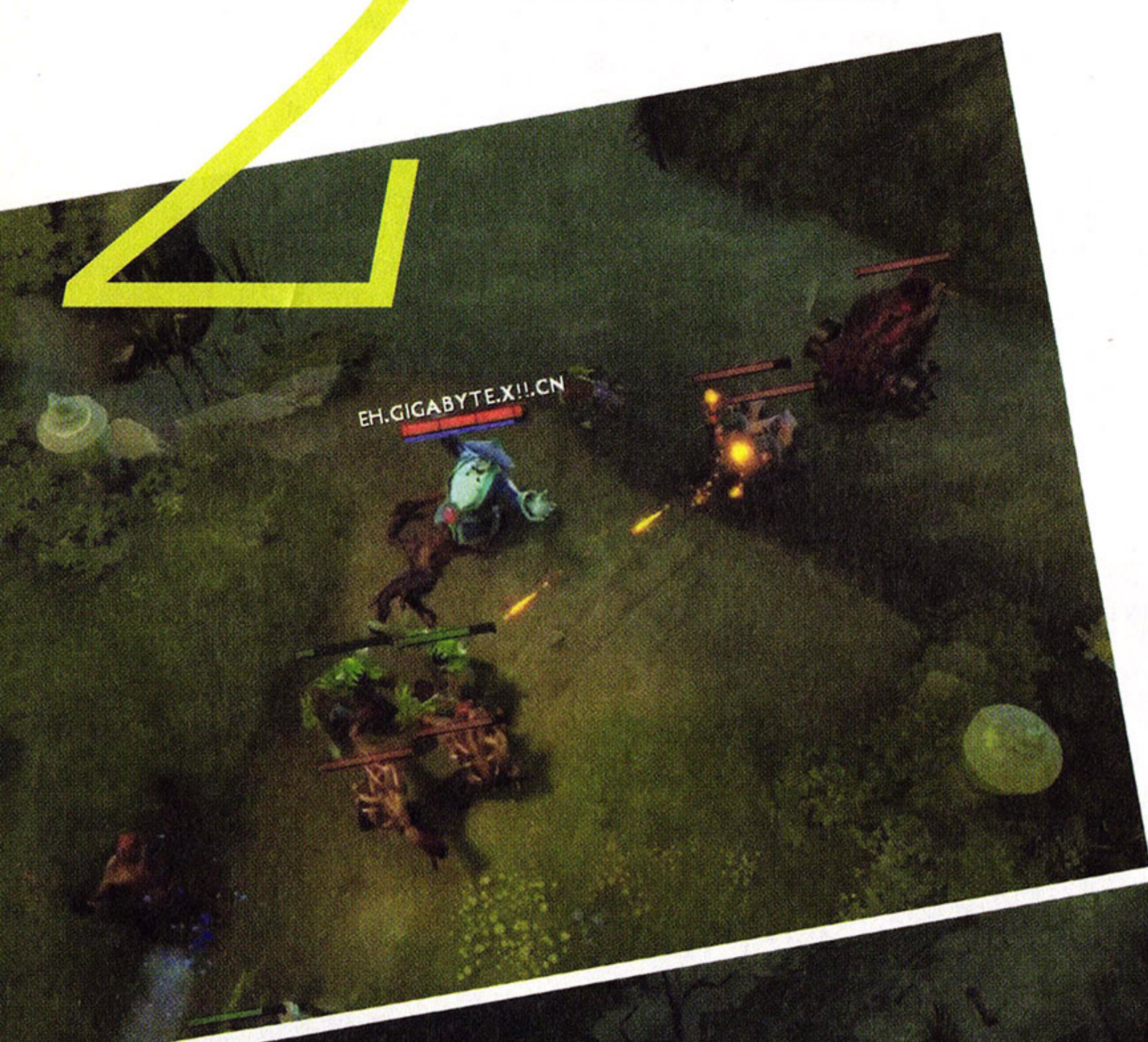
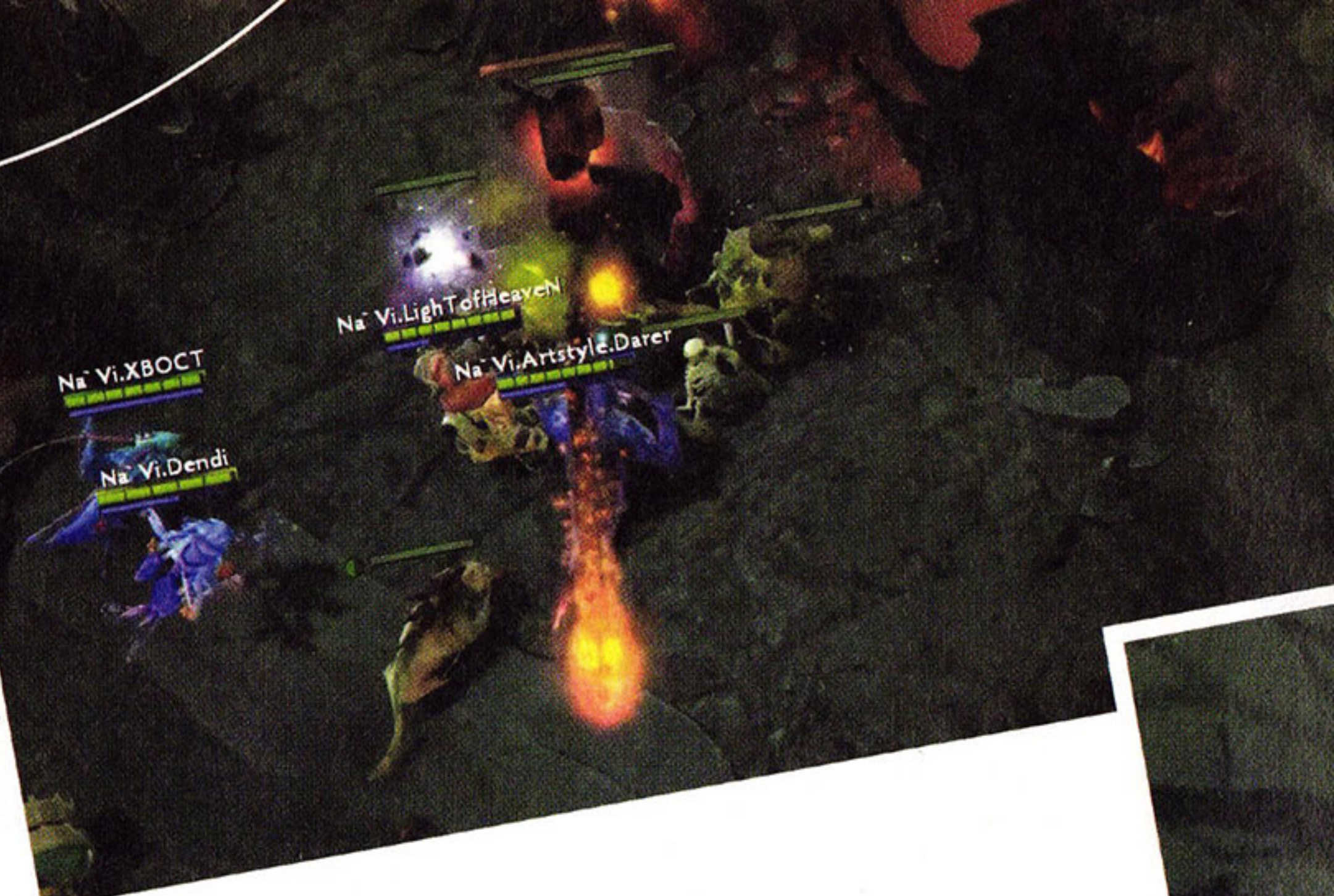
Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3

Apart from disappointing fans who waited in line for hours only to see a non-gameplay trailer of the game (the only playable action was of *Spec Ops* and *Survival* modes, behind closed doors), *MW 3*'s multiplayer didn't blow minds (see page 64 for more). Maybe Activision was saving all of the good stuff for its own *Call of Duty XP* fan fest, held September 2 in Los Angeles.

Dota

Gameplay Finally Shown at Gamescom Tournament

VICTORIOUS UKRAINIAN TEAM NA'VI
TAKES HOME \$1 MILLION



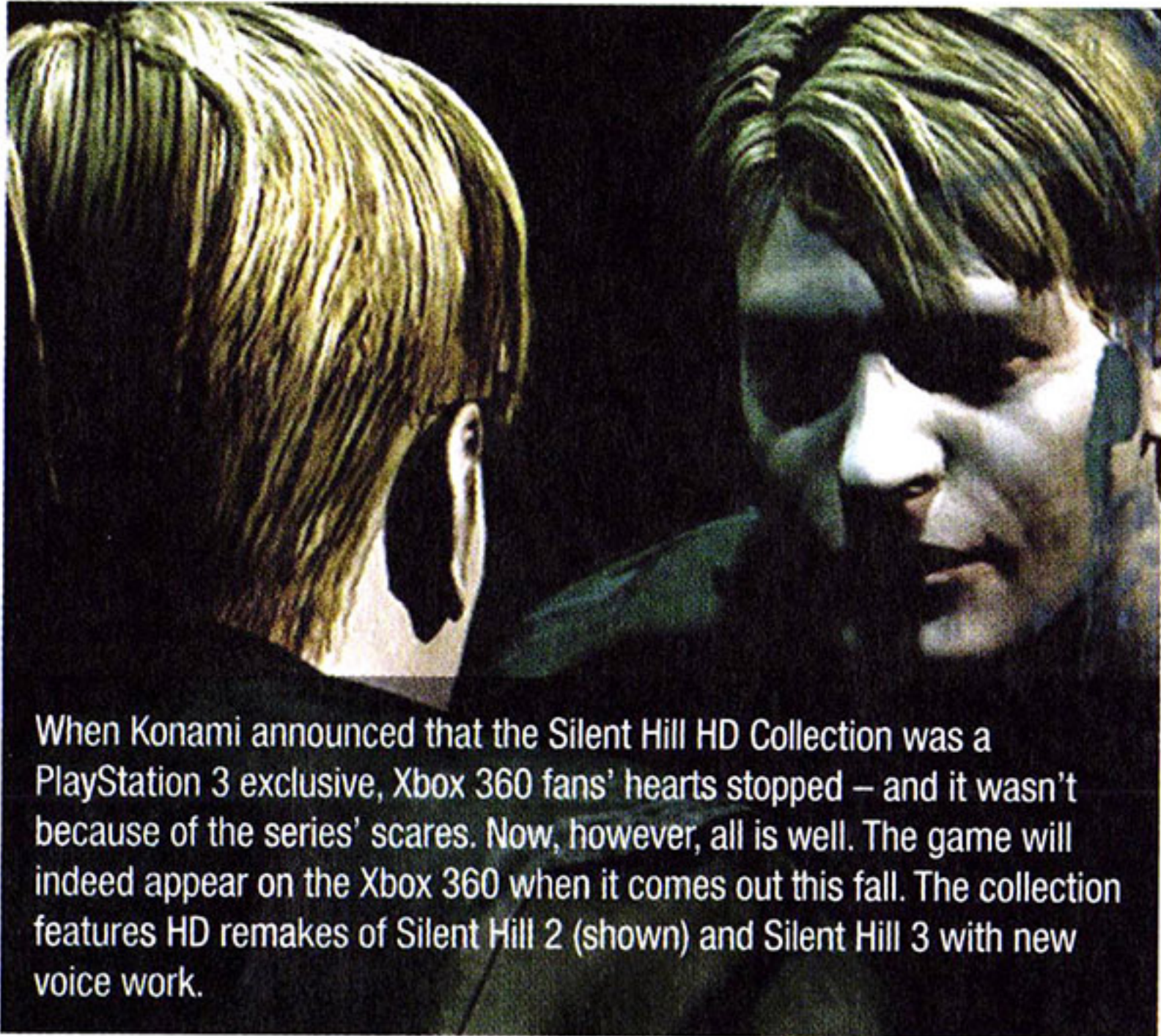
The International tournament was a heck of a coming-out party for Valve's next game. Despite a few technical hiccups with the streaming service, Dota 2 came off looking exactly like what the millions-strong Defense of the Ancients community is waiting for: a shiny update to the massively popular game that doesn't screw up its delicate balance.

Valve had a few issues at the beginning of the tournament, interrupting the broadcast for extended periods for the millions of viewers and eventually leading to the company cutting the German and Russian language streams in the rearview, though, fans were treated to hours of straight-up live gameplay featuring the best gamers in the world. What more could you ask for? A vocal portion of the online Dota community made it quite clear that they would have preferred different commentators. Many gamers from outside the U.K. had difficulty understanding the shoutcasters' thick British accents, and the commentators had a tendency to quickly devolve into mic-distorting shouting whenever the action picked up. The fact that the in-game voice support recorded the commentary for easy uploading with the replays bodes well for the long-term competitive scene, though.

Pro Dota team Na'Vi from Ukraine beat out China's EHOME in the final, taking in \$1.6 million for their efforts. EHOME came away with \$250,000. A total of \$1.6 million was given out to the top eight finishers.

As for the game itself, it looked like Dota. It's just as hardcore, just as unforgiving, and just as skill-centric as ever. Dota 2 apparently has limitless room for skilled players to distinguish themselves from merely decent players, to say nothing of the long trek from newbie to average. The International made a powerful case for Dota 2's future as an e-sport. If the mentoring, coaching, and community involvement Valve is planning for the game work out – we obviously didn't see any of it watching the pros at Gamescom – Dota 2's reach could extend far beyond the tournament scene.

Good



When Konami announced that the Silent Hill HD Collection was a PlayStation 3 exclusive, Xbox 360 fans' hearts stopped – and it wasn't because of the series' scares. Now, however, all is well. The game will indeed appear on the Xbox 360 when it comes out this fall. The collection features HD remakes of Silent Hill 2 (shown) and Silent Hill 3 with new voice work.



Minecraft's Markus Persson (known as Notch) challenged Bethesda to a Quake 3 duel as a way to settle the two's recent legal battle. Bethesda is suing Notch's Mojang to change the name of its upcoming game called Scrolls because the company says it sounds too close to Elder Scrolls. If only more disputes were solved this way.

the Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

news with a sarcastic spin

Bad

ATARI

Atari has sent its lawyers to shut down some long-running, non-commercial Atari fansites dedicated to nefarious, corporation-crumbing activity such as 2600 homebrew community building and programming tutorials. Atari may have taken over the domain names of those sites, but the hearts and minds of 2600 fans remain elusive.



THQ is halting its MX vs. ATV franchise, and has indefinitely stopped the Red Faction series. THQ charged that both games weren't selling well enough, and CEO Brian Farrell characterized sales of the last two Red Faction games as "niche." Speaking of niche games, it'll be interesting to see what THQ does to the Saints Row series when its sales numbers come out.

Quotable

"Welcome to the big leagues Eric – I know you're new in the job, but someone should have told you this is a competitive industry. You've got every reason to be nervous... you'll be out of the category in 2-3 years. If you don't believe me, go to the store and try to buy a copy of Guitar Hero or Tony Hawk."

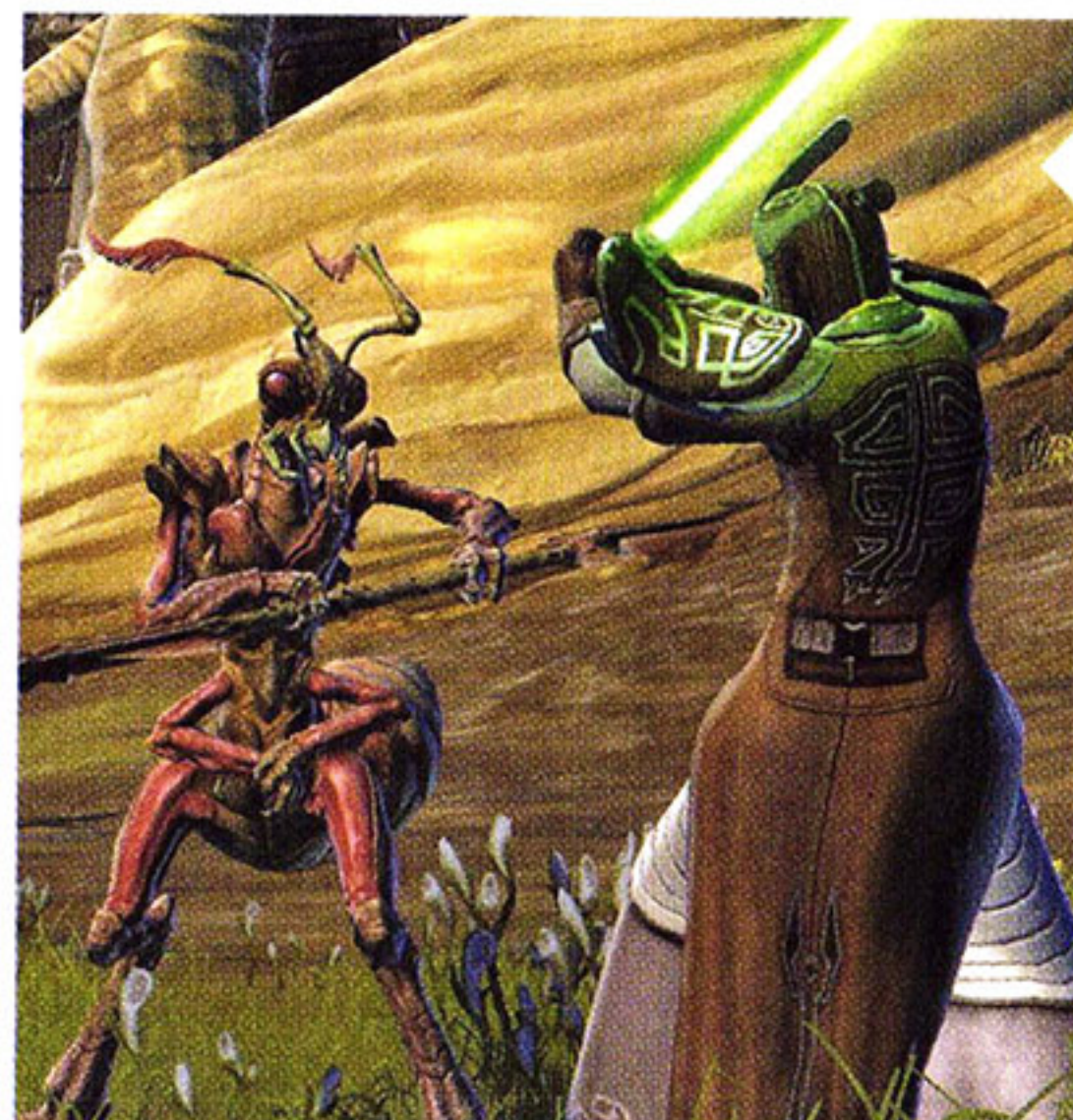


Jeff Brown, EA corporate communications vice president, responds to Activision publishing CEO Eric Hirshberg's request for a verbal cease fire between Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3 and EA's Battlefield 3.

Ugly

French website 01Net (which nailed some Wii U specs before the system was released) has a rumor that Nintendo is planning a \$10 3DS peripheral that would add a second analog stick to the handheld in another attempt to bolster sales. Furthermore, this would be a stopgap solution to the additional stick being added permanently in a newly designed 3DS that would also scale back the 3DS effect and possibly have a new name.

If these rumors are true, it proves that Nintendo is truly desperate for the handheld to succeed. The company has already dropped its price to \$169.99.



Gamers are brandishing pitchforks over Electronic Arts' Origin download service. Whether it's making games like Crysis 2 unavailable on Valve's Steam service, Star Wars: The Old Republic's exclusive Origin limited edition, or requiring Battlefield 3 players to install the client on their PCs (even if they bought the game at retail), people aren't happy.

Ironically, many of the practices are not exclusive to Origin – Valve also has a Steam requirement for its retail games – but people never pass up a chance to hate EA.

Co-Oped

by Jeff Cork



Save The Planet...

Guess what? The world is in trouble, and only you and your partner can save the day! It's a good thing your team is equipped with heroic powers and loads of loot.

Gamers have been cooperatively exploring dungeons in real time since the days of Gauntlet. Fortunately for all of us, things have gotten a bit more sophisticated since the glory days of arcades. At the very least, our health isn't constantly draining in an obvious quarter-gobbling ploy. **Dungeon Siege III** is a solid action RPG with plenty of gear and weapons to collect, as well as a robust character customization system. The solo game is passable, but it doesn't spring to life until you add a second player. The Xbox Live Arcade exclusive **Crimson Alliance** is a more action-oriented approach to dungeon crawling – think more along the lines of Gauntlet: Dark Legacy than a Diablo – and it's a blast in multiplayer. Its bold, colorful presentation is easy on the eyes, too, which is definitely a plus for those marathon adventuring sessions. Don't think that dudes with swords and armor are the only ones who can break crates and scoop up loot, however. **Marvel: Ultimate Alliance** is an older game, but it still holds up well in the multiplayer arena. This who's who of classic (and not so classic) Marvel characters lets players assemble their own teams of heroes and villains. The sequel is a relative disappointment, so stick with the original.



Dungeon Siege III



Crimson Alliance



Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2



Up!

If you want to play with a friend, you have plenty of options. Here are our recommendations based on who you're playing with and what you're in the mood for.

It's a great time to be a co-op gamer. But just because you have a lot to choose from, it doesn't mean that every cooperative experience is the same. Just like with movies and music, some games fit particular moods better. With that in mind, we've broken down a variety of current-gen games into several handy categories. Read on, and you'll be set whether you're entertaining kids or looking for an epic adventure.



Gears of War



...Or Blow It Up Real Good

Sometimes the price of victory can be calculated in lead. The enemy forces are a diverse lot, but none of them stand a chance when they're in your team's crosshairs.

Even though the following games are based on firearms, headshots, and swarms of bad guys, they couldn't be more different. The Call of Duty series has dominated online multiplayer since its release, giving players plenty of reasons to band together and take on opposing teams. **Modern Warfare 2's** Spec Ops mode is a great option for fans of couch co-op, letting players take on high-stakes missions across the globe together. Epic's **Gears of War** series puts an emphasis on co-op multiplayer, and it's more interesting than just plopping two players into the world. Players are routinely split along branching paths, often with different types of gameplay. **Left 4 Dead** forces players to work together, too. If you stray too far away from your group, it's more than likely that you'll be serving up dinner for a few lucky zombies. If you enjoy horror movies and teamwork, you can't go wrong with this one. And it wouldn't be a co-op list without at least mentioning **Borderlands**. If you like to balance your time between single player and co-op, it's a must-play. Players have the flexibility to level up in one mode and easily transfer their progress to the other. Once you play it cooperatively, going back to the wastelands alone is tough. For a mix of these last two games, check out **Dead Island**, which we reviewed on page 90.



Marvel: Ultimate Alliance

Left 4 Dead



Borderlands





LEGO Star Wars

The Kids Are Here!

Whether you're babysitting, playing host to young relatives, or hanging out with your own kids, these games show that "family friendly" doesn't have to be synonymous with suffering.

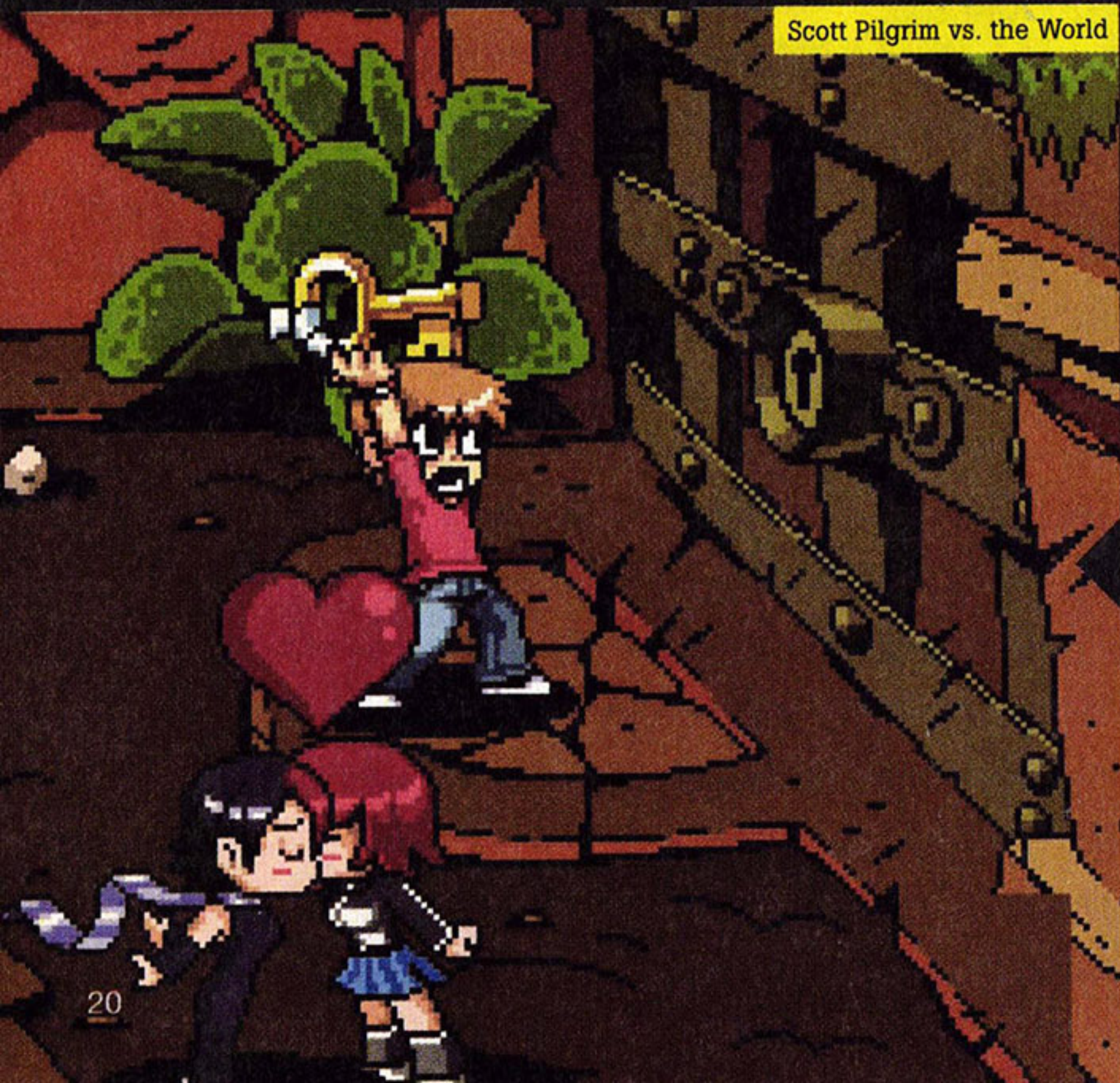
A million kid-friendly activities exist that don't involve parking down in front of a television, but sometimes it's rainy outside. Or you're lazy. That's when it's great to have a few co-op games on hand. The **LEGO** games are uniformly good choices, with the exception being the pair based on Indiana Jones. Later installments allow players to explore levels independently, which can be a godsend when your young partner insists on hanging back for no good reason. Older kids will get a kick out of **LittleBigPlanet**. Its content is appropriate for all ages, but some of the platforming sections are tricky and the grab mechanics can be tough for people with little hands. **New Super Mario Bros. Wii** also gets difficult later on, but it's an all-around good pick for family co-op. It's a great place for fledgling gamers to start, since much of its gameplay could be seen as a crash course in Video Games 101. Just try to resist the temptation of throwing your teammates into the abyss.



New Super Mario Bros. Wii



Army of Two



Scott Pilgrim vs. the World

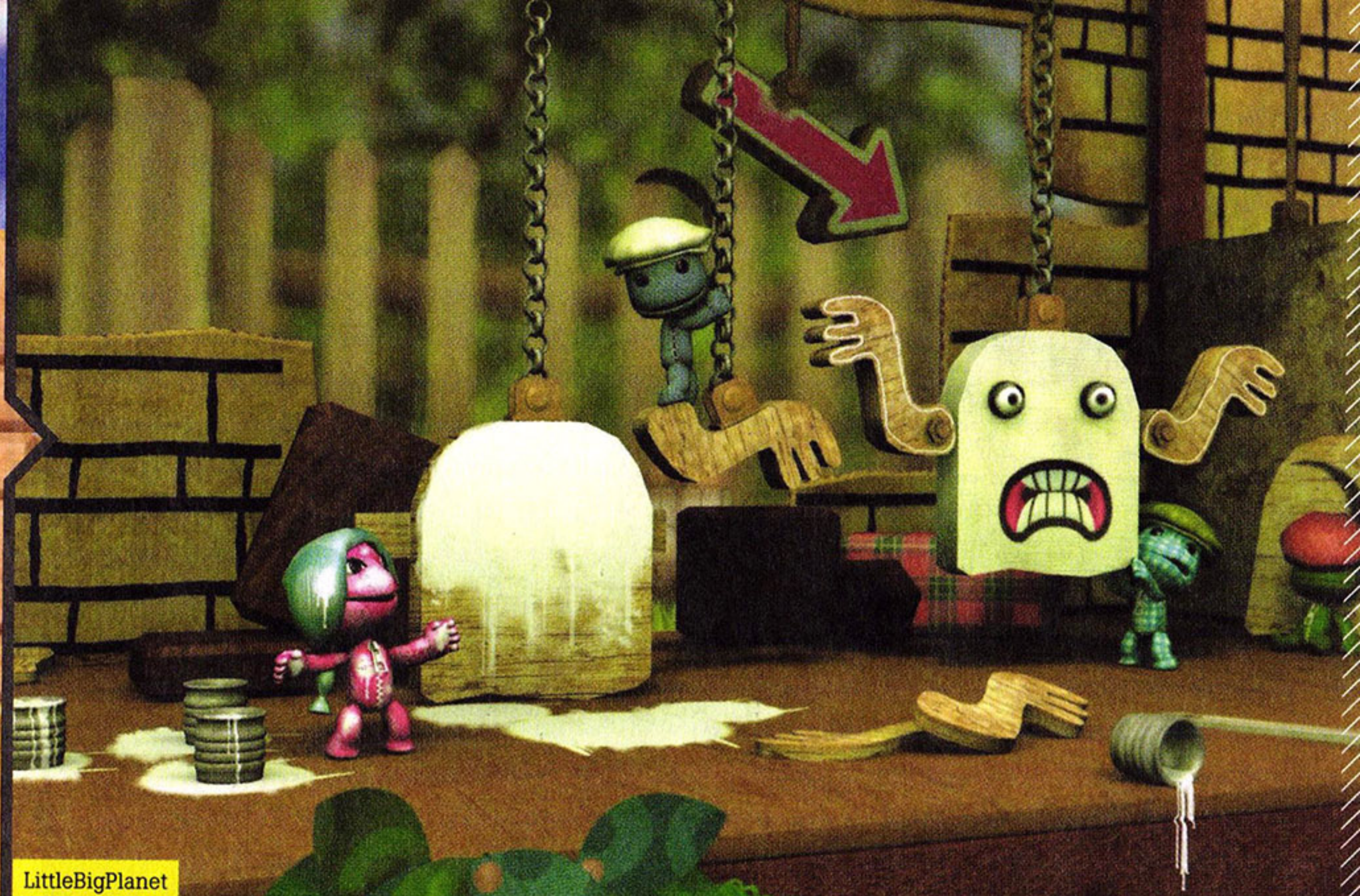
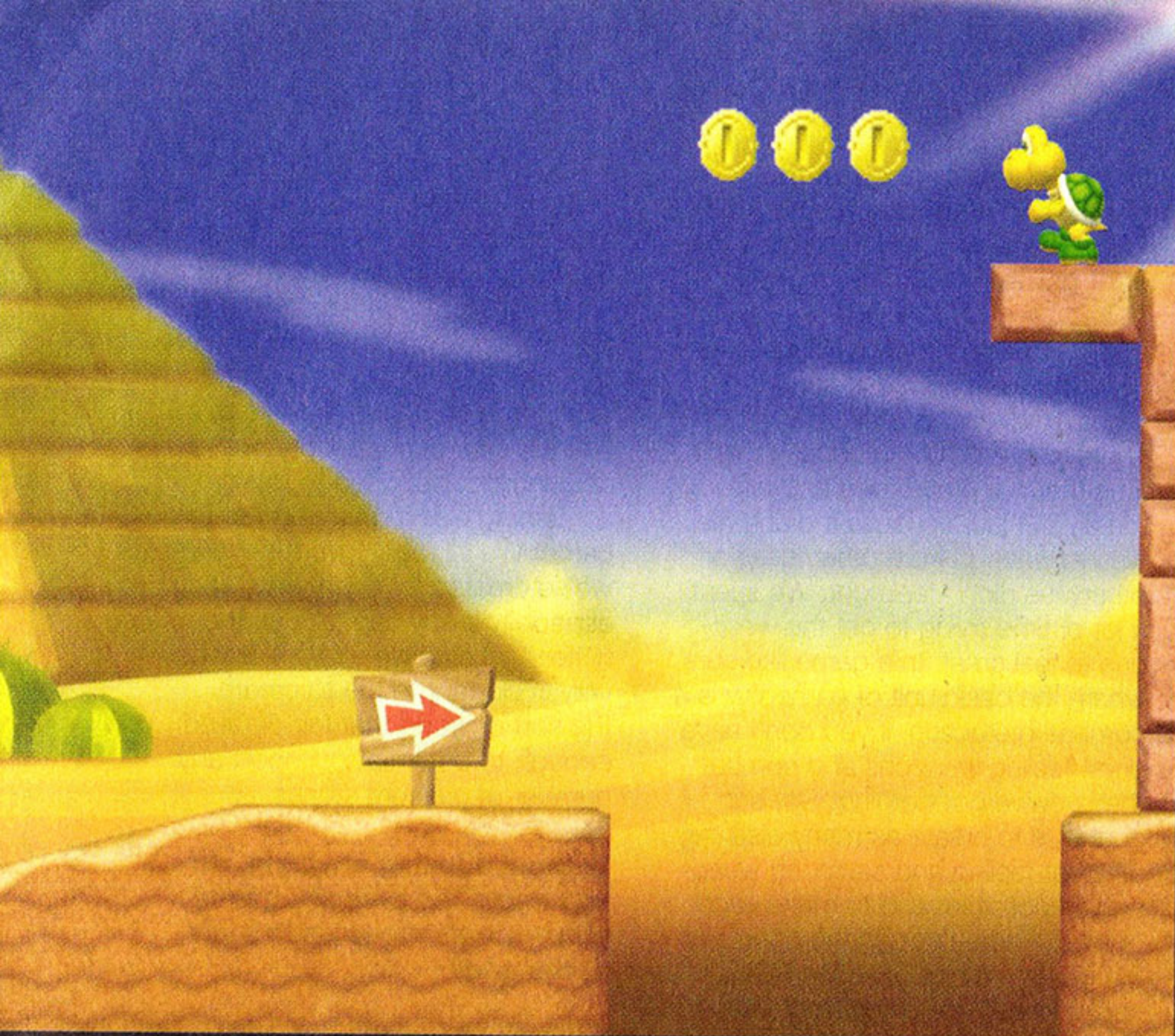
Rock It Old School

The more things change, the more they stay the same. These co-op games combine the best of retro gaming with modern game design.

The downloadable game **Castlevania: Harmony of Despair** takes the series' familiar 2D exploration and adds a thrilling element of multiplayer. Up to six players can explore the game's massive levels, each with its own unique boss battles. If you can't round up a party, however, give this one a pass; the solo experience isn't worth the effort. **Scott Pilgrim vs. the World** and **Castle Crashers** are both heavily inspired by the heyday of arcade brawlers, but they introduce plenty of contemporary elements as well. In particular, they allow players to level up their characters, adding a welcome element of replayability to the mix. The crudely hilarious and deceptively cute **Castle Crashers** also boasts a massive roster of characters, each with their own special attacks and powers. **Scott Pilgrim vs. the World** is a treat for retro enthusiasts, featuring great 16-bit inspired art and a catchy chiptune soundtrack. Even if you aren't a fan of the comics or the film adaptation, it's worth your time.

Castle Crashers





LittleBigPlanet



Kane and Lynch

Kick Back, Riff, And Relax

These may not be the cream of the gaming crop, but they're perfect if you and your buddies enjoy creating running commentaries over B movies.

Life's too short to take everything seriously. Some cynical types will tell you that it's also too short to play anything other than the best games out there – they're wrong. Fans of *Mystery Science Theater 3000* or *RiffTrax* can try their hands at creating their own irreverent on-screen commentaries to the in-game action. **Army of Two** and **Kane and Lynch** are forgettable shooters when played solo, though it's clear that they were designed to be played with a buddy. Kane and Lynch in particular has a few cool multiplayer tricks, including a playable character who hallucinates during key events – misleading the player in the process. **EDF: Insect Armageddon** is a great game for those times when you and your friends want to disengage your brains, drink a few beverages, and just have fun. All you need to know is that a bunch of giant bugs have invaded Earth, and it's up to you and your squad to blow 'em back into space. Another great option is **50 Cent: Blood in the Sand**. It's completely ludicrous and over the top, and you'll want to share the whole bizarre experience with someone else. From blowing up helicopters with pistols to the game's entire premise (50's priceless diamond skull was ripped off by a concert promoter; now it's personal), it's a game that has to be played to be believed. 💎



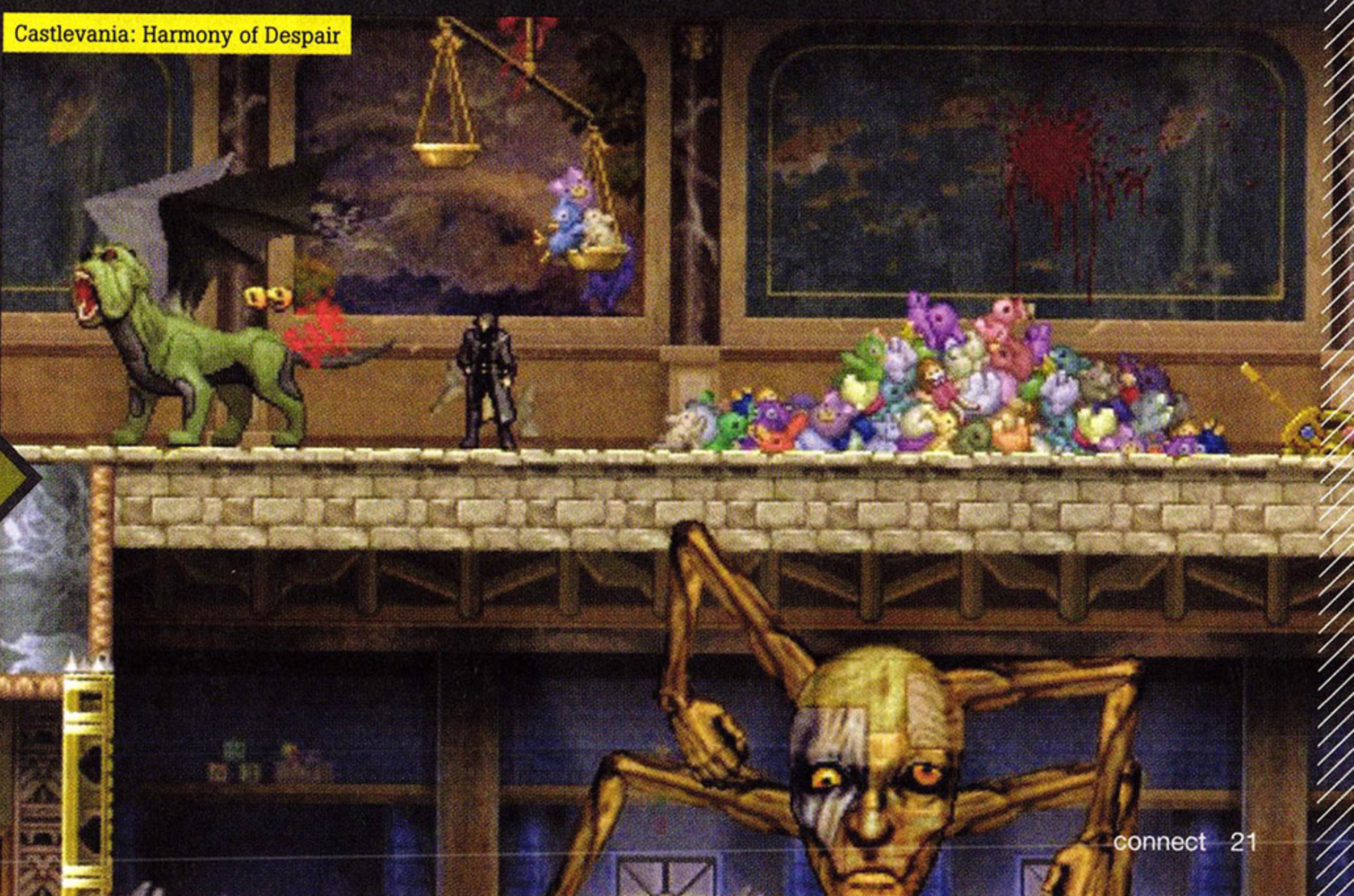
Earth Defense Force: Insect Armageddon



50 Cent: Blood in the Sand



Castlevania: Harmony of Despair





Bastion

Supergiant Games' debut release came out of left field to become one of the most highly praised games of 2011. We quizzed creative director Greg Kasavin on the origins of the game, ideas that hit the cutting room floor, and how different players chose to conclude the game.

How did the idea of Bastion's narrator emerge?

Like most of the ideas in Bastion, the idea for the narration was born in the living room of a house in San Jose where the studio is located. It wasn't something that was contemplated from the beginning of the project, but then, the project didn't start with some grand design document or detailed feature set. The narration came up as an idea during the course of the nine months the game spent in a prototyping phase, during which time it was mostly just Amir Rao and Gavin Simon, the studio co-founders, rapidly trying different things.

From the beginning of the project we felt we wanted to make a game that could have some emotional weight to it, but we also knew we didn't want to interrupt the play experience for any reason. At first these goals seemed contradictory, but as it turned out, using narration allowed us to deliver story and context and narrative depth at the player's pace. It was the perfect solution to what we wanted, plus it gave me some really interesting constraints to work with from a writing perspective: We would have a story filtered entirely through a single voice, who would be there to deepen the player's interactions onscreen by giving context to those actions.

What sources did you look or listen to for inspiration for the world of Bastion?

We knew we wanted Bastion to be an atmospheric game because we feel that one of the most important aspects of games is their transportive quality, their ability to make you feel like you're in some completely different place. From the earliest days on the project we were talking about the tone we wanted to strike, and how we would express that through the game. One of the influences I brought up early on is the American author Cormac McCarthy, who's written novels like *Blood Meridian*, *No Country for Old Men*, and *The Road*. He's got this amazing lyrical writing style, minimal dialogue rich with subtext crossed with these beautiful natural scenes. His writing has an Old West flavor even if it's not set in that kind of environment. We wondered what that type of style would sound like in a game.

One important difference, though, was that we wanted to extract the sense of evil from out of his work. Plenty of games deal with evil. We wanted to have a more positive and hopeful tone, ultimately. We wanted the game to be suitable for players of all ages, and I was very interested in writing a story from that perspective – like a modern version of a traditional fairy tale.

How did you determine the number of weapons to include? Were there any you cut from the final game?

During Bastion's prototyping phase, all of the weapon ideas came together at least in a first-pass form. There was a lot of stuff during that time that got prototyped and ultimately cut just because it didn't feel distinct enough from other ideas or otherwise didn't feel right. We spent a lot of time trying to get the weapons to feel great. In a game like ours, where the basic unit of gameplay is a combat interaction, if you don't have great-feeling weapons and combat then you've got nothing. So, our goal was to create as many distinctly different-feeling and satisfying weapons as possible, and to make each of them viable through the course of the game. In a lot of action/RPGs, you're constantly discarding weapons in favor of bigger or better ones, whereas we wanted players to get attached to their different weapons in this game. We ended up creating some of our game levels expressly to showcase some of the weapons we had, which might sound a bit backwards, but tells you just how important this aspect was to us from a gameplay standpoint.

As an example of something we cut, we had a bullwhip weapon that got pretty far along before we realized it just wasn't working out well and didn't meet our criteria. It fit the theme of the game just fine, but it was shaping up to be sort of a medium-range, crowd-control type of weapon. We already had the Scrap Musket, essentially a shotgun, which was filling the same role and doing it better. So the only rightful place for the whip turned out to be the cutting room floor. We even prototyped stuff like jetpacks, which neither fit the theme or the level design. We had remote-detonated mines, which were pretty cool but unnecessarily complicated. Some of our design philosophy around the weapons must come from us having worked on real-time strategy games, where there's a natural tendency to want to design units that neatly fill specific roles. Having the maximum number of discrete units can make for an elegant game.

Would Supergiant Games ever be interested in creating a sequel to Bastion?

One of our design mantras on Bastion was to make a complete game. No half-baked features, no fat. We held back nothing for this game, and approached it knowing it may well be the one and only game we'd ever get to make as a studio, so we had to give it our all. It was very important for us to have the game finish strong, to leave players feeling fulfilled and satisfied at the end. So in that respect, we never really imagined it as the beginning of a franchise or anything like that.

It would be a self-contained story and world. We just wanted to make a great, stand-alone game, and we figured we could do it again and again with future projects if we had the chance – we have a lot of ideas.

That being said, and I realize this sounds a bit contradictory, we're certainly not opposed to doing something else in the world of this game. We all really love the world we've created for this game, and especially in my capacity as the writer and creative director, it was very important to me to create the sort of world that felt detailed enough to potentially support any number of different stories.

Without spoiling anything, do you know the percentages of players that chose each path at the end?

As of right now, we don't have exact data yet about how the endgame panned out for different players. Anecdotally, we have a strong impression that players liked going through the game more than once both for gameplay and story reasons. [That's] great, because we really wanted to include that new game plus mode in there. We've been getting really great feedback about the game ending, including some players telling us that they've sat there paralyzed by it for like 10 minutes or even 30 minutes...that's been really great to hear. We didn't know exactly how people would take the ending of the game, but it's the ending we had intended from relatively early on. We also knew we were going to set aside an ample amount of time during development in order to execute on it as well as possible.

The choices around the ending are meant to be expressive. Many games offer moral choices, but I don't think we go through life making moral choices, or at least that's not how they feel. People make choices based on logic and faith... we don't weigh the good or the evil of our decisions, we just do what seems appropriate and will bring about the outcome we want. So it was important to me to have an ending in which every outcome was fully justified, and that put the essential question of "how will you leave the world?" in the player's hands. In any story, for the story to be meaningful, there has to be a dramatic change that occurs. It was very important to me that players feel like they could have a hand in that change, rather than for the change to be strictly dictated to them by the story. ♦



For our complete interview with Greg Kasavin, visit gameinformer.com/mag

01

R.O.B.

Nintendo's Robotic Operating Buddy enticed gamers with the dream of having their own mechanical servant, but just like the promise of flying cars and jetpacks, this oddball NES accessory left players disappointed. Only two games were made for use with R.O.B., both of which centered on using the robot to place items on buttons using its mechanical arms. The only problem? R.O.B.'s snooze-inducing pace made playing with him an exercise in frustration.

Steel Battalion Controller

No one ever said piloting a vertical tank would be easy – or cheap. Capcom took the mech sim genre to absurd new levels with its \$200 super controller that featured two joysticks, a gear stick, three foot pedals, and forty buttons, making it more complicated to operate than most cars. We don't know what's more ridiculous, trying to figure out this complex controller, or Capcom trying to figure out how to make a Kinect version of the game.



02

DJ Hero Turntable

Proof that not all one-use peripherals are a bad idea, DJ Hero's turntable accessory provided a fresh gameplay experience the stagnant rhythm genre desperately needed. Minor complaints about the crossfader and DJ Hero's presentation didn't stop critics from pointing to the series as a promising avenue for the future of music games – until Activision killed it, anyway.



03

Samba de Amigo Maracas

The bundled accessory for Samba de Amigo made it right at home in the Dreamcast's library of quirky titles. You control the Latin music-obsessed monkey Amigo by standing on a plastic mat attached to a sensor bar and shaking a pair of connected maracas. Samba de Amigo's humorous style and lively soundtrack garnered solid reviews, but you'd be hard-pressed to find a more embarrassing music peripheral to have gathering dust in your closet than these bright red rattles.



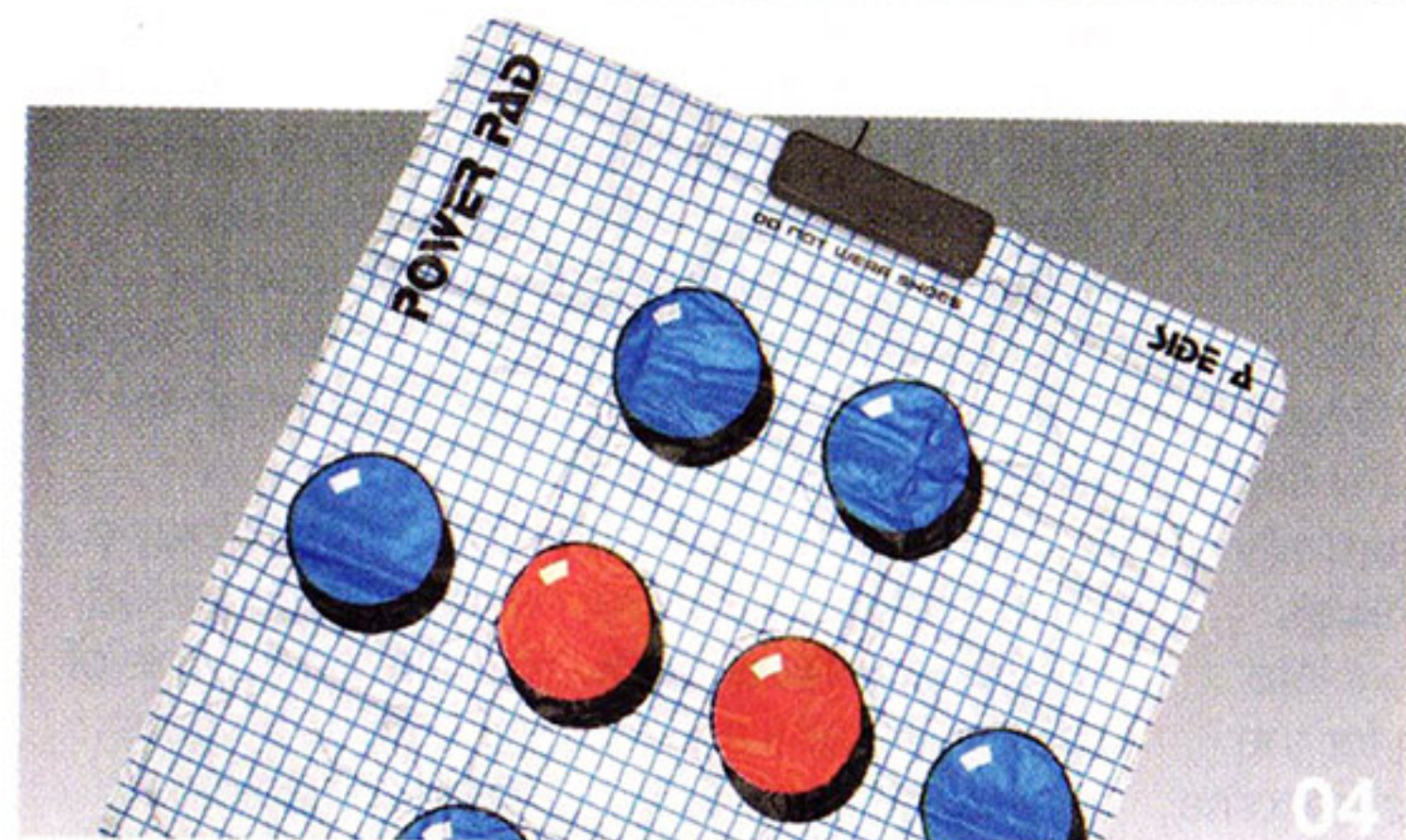
05



06

Sega Activator

Long before Microsoft launched its body-tracking Kinect peripheral, Sega attempted controller-free gameplay with an octagonal floor unit called the Activator. The Activator contained a series of infrared sensors that players triggered by kicking their arms and legs in the space above them. Horrible motion detection quickly doomed the accessory, but not before Sega coined the "You are the controller" slogan, which Microsoft later repurposed for its new-fangled camera.



04

Power Pad

Originally sold by Bandai as the Family Fun Fitness pad, Nintendo saw promise in the floor mat game controller and bought the rights to it. Only a handful of games were ever made for it, most notably the pack-in title World Class Track Meet, but that doesn't diminish the Power Pad's street cred as an early forefather to the dance pad craze.



07

Super Scope

When Nintendo bundled the NES Zapper and a copy of Duck Hunt with its first home console, it cemented the light gun as an iconic peripheral. The SNES follow-up didn't fare as well. Nintendo managed to top the stupidity of hunting ducks with a bazooka. Not even the pack-in game, Super Scope 6, justified gaming with this unruly peripheral sitting on your shoulder.



08

Tony Hawk Board

When the Tony Hawk series began losing customers to EA's Skate franchise, Activision devised a bold new approach to win back its audience. The result was the notorious Tony Hawk: Ride skateboard peripheral. The Ride board has been mercilessly lambasted by critics and gamers alike, but our office copy still gets regular use. Not with the game, mind you – it makes a comfy footrest.



09

Let's Tap Tap Box

Let's Tap beckons gamers to place a Wii remote face down on a flat surface and tap alongside it to compete in a variety of minigames. In order to make Let's Tap more convenient for players who... lack flat surfaces in their homes... the game came with the cheapest pack-in known to man: a cardboard box. After folding together their "Tap Box," players were ready to be disappointed. A limited edition pack in Europe came with two Tap Boxes – and that's not even counting the box it came in!



10

Kinect Game Boat

Atomic Accessories' Game Boat is a life-size replica of the inflatable raft found in that Kinect Adventures minigame you played once for 10 minutes. Instead of adding anything to the gameplay, you blow up the raft with the included pump, place it in the middle of your living room, and stand in it like an idiot. On the plus side, the Game Boat can also be used in real water – though if you were stupid enough to buy this accessory there's a good chance you'll still drown, so we'd advise against taking it outdoors.

Joe Danger returns and Payday has us robbing banks Left 4 Dead-style

Previously, Joe was confined to his stunt bike. The range of vehicles is now dramatically expanded. Each level has its own unique ride and concept. You ride a rickety mine cart like a rollercoaster while ducking and leaping over gaps. Later, you ski down a snow-blanketed peak, shutting down missile silos and dodging grenades before hopping aboard a snowmobile. Another level has Joe on a police motorcycle, dodging traffic and punching out the bad guys as he passes them. We've even been promised some jetpack levels later in the game. Stages vary in length from 30 seconds to 10 minutes, and you'll get to see the results of your hard work in trailers for the movie you're making. Add in the polish and fun bonus features (including a new and improved level editor) that fleshed out the first game, and Joe Danger: The Movie may emerge as another of my favorites when it releases in 2012. Unlike its PS3-exclusive predecessor, the team hopes to make this game available on multiple platforms, so I'd put odds that we'll eventually see a XBLA and PC release.

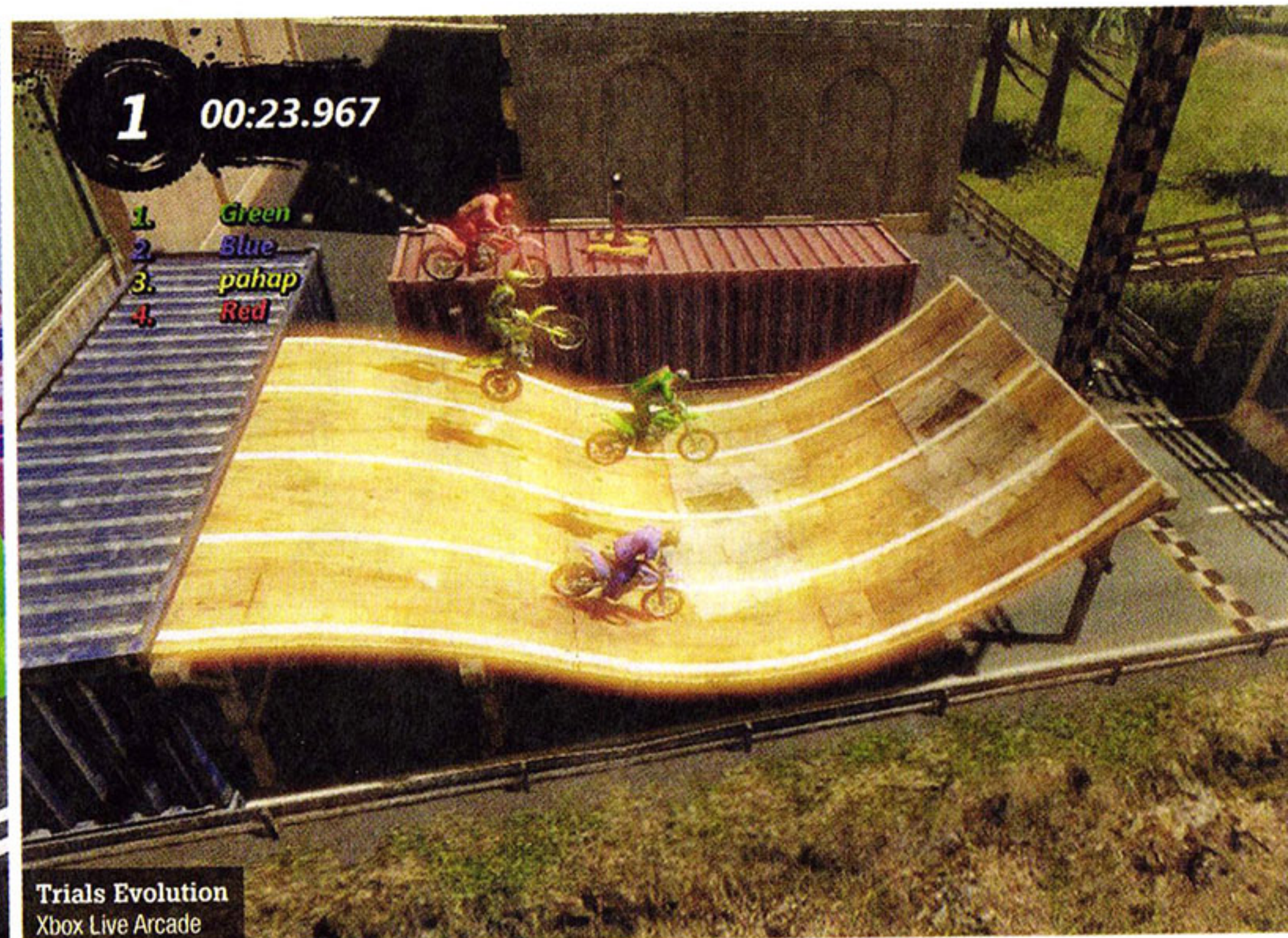
While we're on the subject of crazy stunts, I have some high hopes for the upcoming release of **Trials Evolution**. RedLynx met tremendous success with the release of Trials

HD, and the team is returning to XBLA for the ambitious sequel. The bikes have busted out of the dingy warehouses that dominated the last game, and players can now enjoy all sorts of wide-open outdoor environments. Recognizing that some players hit a figurative brick wall of difficulty last time around, the team has added a series of license tests to help train more difficult skills, and the four-player trick racing mode lets you enjoy the game with friends. Perhaps the most exciting announcement is the full-featured track editor and the ability to share your levels with the world. RedLynx claims that the development team used the editor to craft all the official levels, which bodes well for ambitious designers ready to put in some work. Trials Evolution is targeting a release before the end of the year.

Remember how much fun you had with your first session of cooperative Left 4 Dead? That's the exact enthusiasm I felt after my first match of **Payday: The Heist**. The criminally fun new game borrows liberally from Valve's zombie title, but transforms the survivors into an organized crew of criminals looking for the next big score, and the undead hordes become trained bank guards and SWAT members who will do anything to stop you. Each heist has a

unique setup, and the details are slightly different each time even though the goal remains the same. In my first mission, we held up a bank and I had to track down the bank manager and one of his key cards. Upon a mission restart, the bank manager was in a different part of the bank. Each heist is resolved in a series of steps – my second job had our team infiltrating a drug cartel and stealing their cash. We cut out the floor and ceiling around the panic room that held all the money, then waved down our helicopter to pick the whole thing up. After that, we all made a break for the basement to escape. At each step, teammate communication was essential, as we juggled holding off the police, managing hostages, and completing designated tasks. Developer OverKill has an interesting variation on the cooperative formula – I'm eager to see the way each scenario holds up to repeated playthroughs when the final version releases.

This month, I also had the chance to play a good chunk of a clever new platformer called **Sideway: New York**. You take on the role of a young graffiti artist named Nox as he gets hauled into an alternate dimension painted along the walls and rooftops of New York City. The game's art style is instantly engaging; the

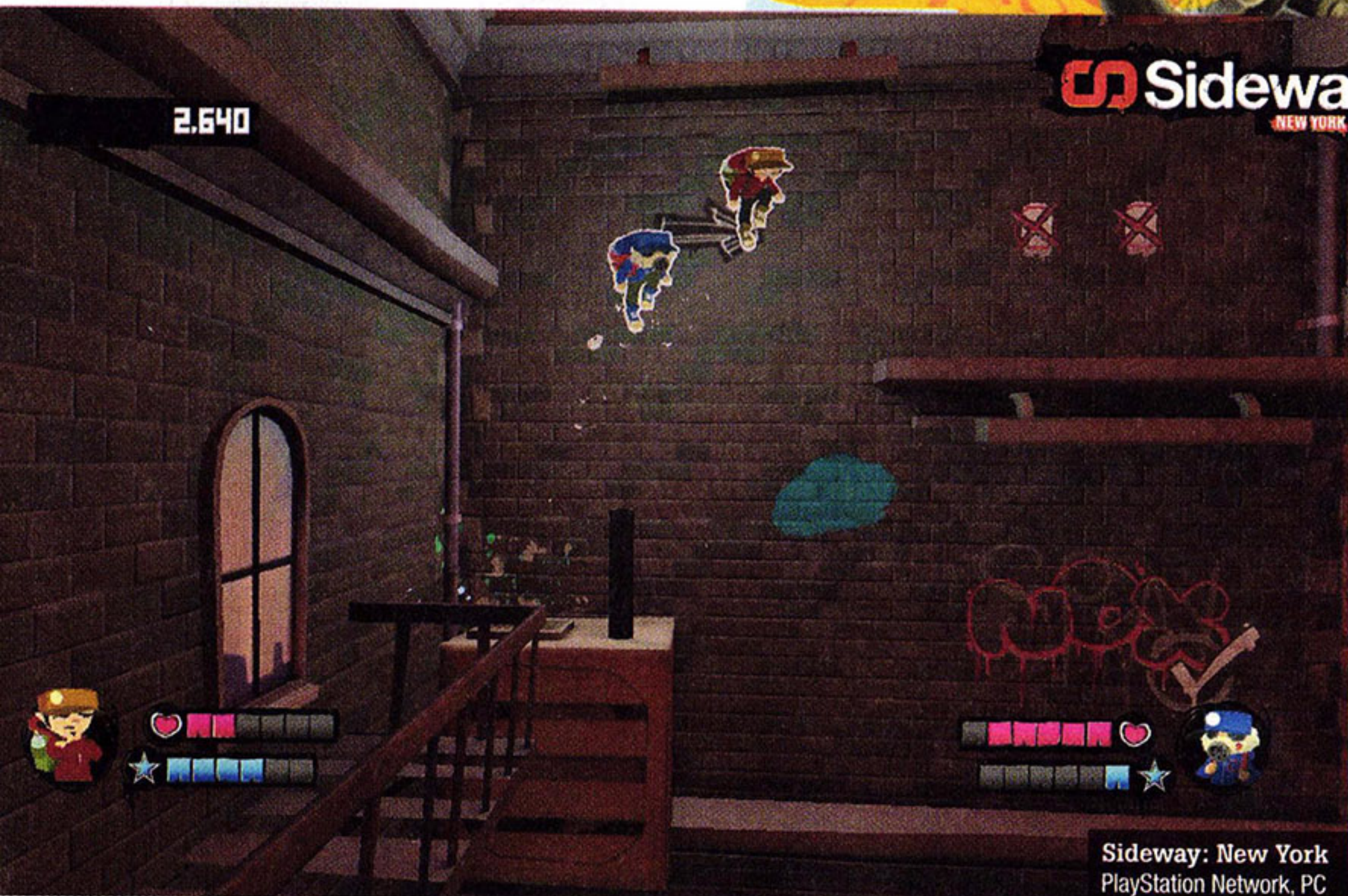


Joe Danger was one of my favorite downloadable games of 2010. Hello Games combined obstacle running, racing, action, and platforming into one satisfying story about a washed up stuntman and his death-defying return to fame. It turns out that the team wasn't quite done with Mr. Danger. *Joe Danger: The Movie* is a sequel that aims to maintain the pacing and action of its predecessor while blowing out the gameplay variety. *by Matt Miller*

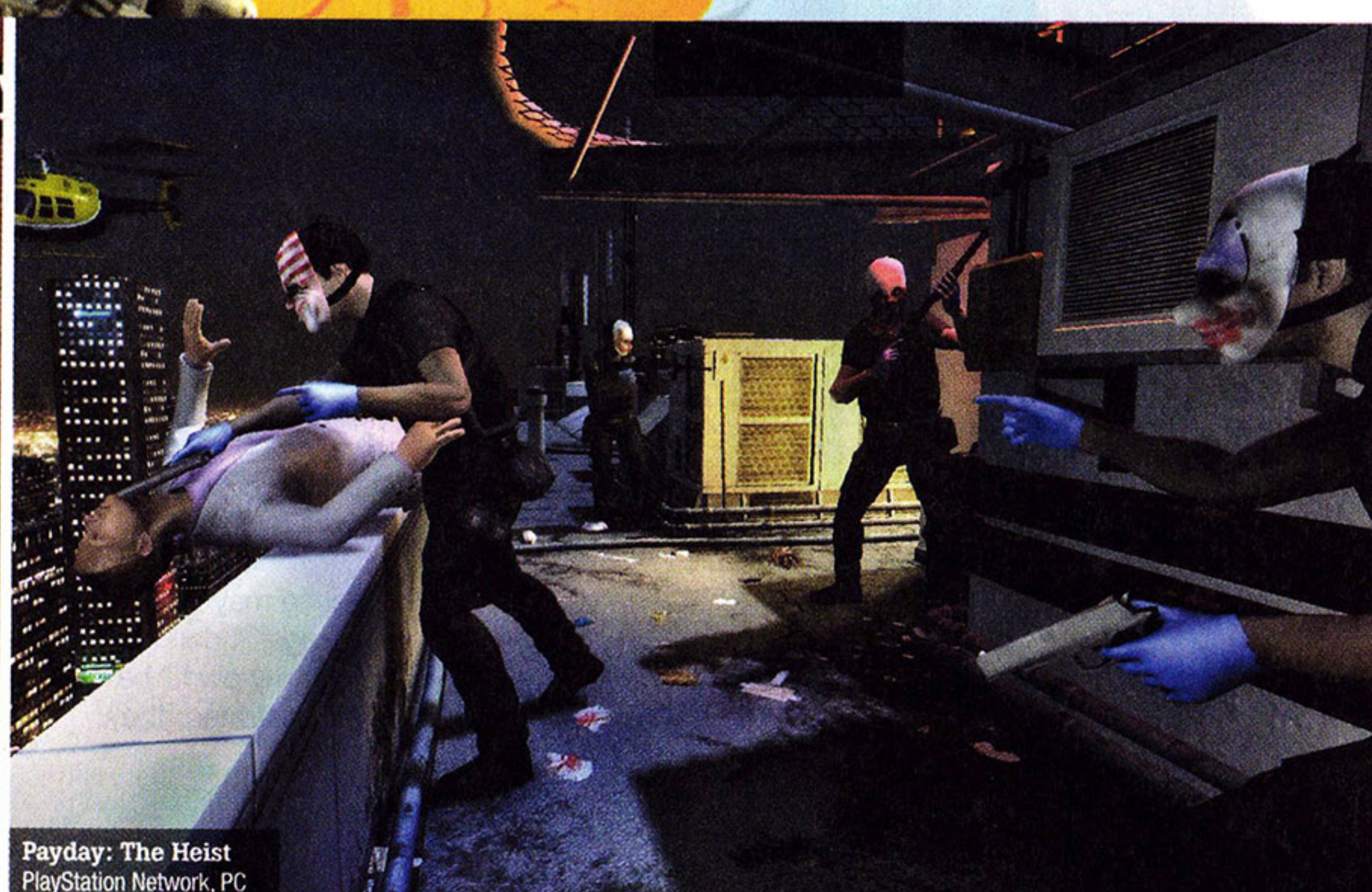
Looking for more info on downloadable and independent games? Check out gameinformer.com/impulse for regular updates including reviews, previews, videos, screenshots and interviews about some of the best new and upcoming games for Xbox Live Arcade, PlayStation Network, WiiWare, and PC. For more downloadable games coverage in this issue, don't miss our detailed first look feature on Quantum Conundrum on p. 60. You can also read our review for Crimson Alliance on p. 96, and our score for Fruit Ninja Kinect on p. 98.

world is three-dimensional, but you run and jump along the two-dimensional flat plane of the walls while using the window ledges and drain pipes as platforms. As you slip around corners or over roof ledges, the entire scene shifts as well, keeping your painted body pressed to the surface as the camera angle rotates. The concept might not be enough to support a full game if it wasn't for the clever level design. Plenty of hidden locations and secrets populate each level, and new abilities are introduced over time, like the power to paint in personal graffiti tags to create new platforms, or send a grapple up to a special tag that lets you swing across the screen. The game also includes a cooperative option where a second character tags along for the fun. I was surprised how much I enjoyed my time with the early levels of Sideway. Controls felt good, each stage had a hip-hop infused vibe, and moving through levels was fast and rewarding.

Both Payday: The Heist and Sideway: New York are on the way courtesy of publisher Sony Online Entertainment, and you don't have long to wait to check either of them out. They release on PSN and PC within a matter of weeks. ♦



Sideway: New York
PlayStation Network, PC



Payday: The Heist
PlayStation Network, PC



Marvel vs. Capcom 3

by Phil Kollar



Noah

Age 8

Hometown

Lompoc, California

Handle

The Prodigy

Favorite Team

Hulk, Sentinel, Wesker

Every year, thousands of fighting game faithful gather in Las Vegas, Nevada, for the Evolution Championship Series (a.k.a. Evo), a huge set of tournaments where devoted players of fighting games such as Street Fighter IV and Mortal Kombat show off their skills. This year, one performance stood out from the crowd and built a ton of buzz from players at the event and those watching via livestreams: eight-year-old Noah's domination at Marvel vs. Capcom 3.

This young competitor took down plenty of much older opponents and climbed to the top 48 in the Marvel vs. Capcom 3 tournament before being knocked out. We tracked down Noah to discuss how he made it to Evo and where he'll go from here.

The Beginning

Noah didn't begin playing the Marvel vs. Capcom games until this most recent iteration. He got a hold of the game immediately upon its release in February and quickly developed an affinity for it. As for going to Evo, Noah chalks it up to a family decision. "My family believed in me," he says. "We all decided to put my skills to the test against the best in the world."

The Competition

Some of the opponents Noah went up against were surprised to find themselves facing off against such a young fighter. Noah wasn't fazed at all, though. "All my competitors are older than me," he says. "I'm used to it."

In fact, the age difference may have worked to Noah's advantage. "I don't think they expected me to hold my own," he admits. "They didn't get frustrated; they just looked confused."

Other Games

Beyond Marvel vs. Capcom 3, Noah plays a wide variety of other fighting games. Currently he's enjoying Super Street Fighter IV: Arcade

Edition, Darkstalkers, Street Fighter: Third Strike, and the new Mortal Kombat. Noah didn't hint at whether he's interested in going competitive with any of these games at next year's Evo.

The Future


As if there was any doubt, Noah is preparing for a future as a competitive gamer. He's already received a sponsorship from The Traveling Circus (www.thetravelingcircus.net), a clothing site where fans will be able to purchase a special line of clothing featuring designs by Noah. The fame isn't getting in the way of other parts of Noah's life, though. "School and homework are most important," he tells me. "I can only play on my consoles once I've completed homework and only for an hour at a time so I have time for other activities."

Advice

When I ask Noah to pass on any sage wisdom he might have for gamers looking to up their Marvel vs. Capcom skills, he lays it out in the simplest way possible: "Just be patient and keep practicing, and you'll find you will win." Leave it to an eight-year-old prodigy to be so succinct. ♦

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





Free to Pay

by Matthew Kato

How Zynga's Empire Influences Everybody

You may not play social or casual games, but that doesn't mean they don't affect you. Zynga, the maker of Facebook games FarmVille and Mafia Wars, took in \$850 million in revenue in 2010 – almost as much as Electronic Arts and Activision combined, according to *The Wall Street Journal*. Now the fast-rising company founded in 2007 is in the process of an IPO that the financial paper says could garner it as much as \$2 billion. This has not gone unnoticed, and the “core” publishers are trying to figure out the ramifications and intentions of this very large elephant in the room.

Some people say Zynga isn't a game maker. The company has been accused of re-skinning existing game ideas, concerning itself more with microtransactions than games, and being an invasive marketing machine that gets Facebook users to endlessly bother their friends for help. One anonymous employee famously told *SF Weekly* that Zynga founder and CEO Mark Pincus told them, “I don't f---ing want innovation. You're not smarter than your competitor. Just copy what they do and do it until you get their numbers.”

Regardless of what gamers may think of FarmVille (and judging by the reaction to our FarmVille article in issue 205 – it's not much), Zynga is making waves in the industry. The money it's making off of microtransactions has the rest of the industry envious, and many big industry names are jumping aboard. Electronic Arts in particular can't keep its executives from joining the company – EA COO John Schappert, EA Play executive vice president Jeff Karp, and EA Tiburon co-founder Steve Chiang have all joined Zynga in the past year.

Looking at the numbers, you can't blame them for joining a winning team. Inside Network's App Data website says that Zynga has over 260,000 monthly active users, making it the number one app developer with over eight times the users as sixth-place Electronic Arts. Considering that market research firm Parks Associates estimates that virtual goods will be a

\$6 billion industry by 2015, there's a lot of money to be made in the increasingly popular freemium model, where money is made off of microtransactions. Michael Pachter, industry analyst and managing director of equity research at Wedbush Morgan, told us that Zynga's own conversion rate of users who spend money in its games is four percent, while other companies are at one to two. “Everybody looks at that and realizes, ‘Wow, there's really a lot of money out there...why can't we do that?’” he says.

Companies like Electronic Arts, which bought Bejeweled developer PopCap Games this year, are asking themselves the same thing. But even though Pachter doesn't believe that EA is trying to go toe-to-toe with Zynga (“I don't know that [EA] wants to knock Zynga off, as much as they want to get their billion.”), the concept of microtransactions has been integrated into most publishers' bottom lines. Games like *City of Heroes* have gone free-to-play with microtransactions after trying to survive with a monthly subscription model, and EA itself is trying to make money off of everything from *Battlefield Play4Free* to à la carte features like its online pass and *Ultimate Team* card packs for its sports games.

Not everyone spends money on these free-to-play titles or other forms of microtransactions, but not everyone has to.

A 2010 Inside Network report showed that 10 percent of social game players spent money on Facebook games, including Zynga's freemium titles, with two percent willing to spend \$25 per month. These so-called “whales” are counted on to generate the bulk of the revenue for these otherwise free games.

While this may sound like a Hail Mary strategy, it's clearly working for companies like Zynga. Pachter believes that although it may not have perfected the product or price point, “they're ahead of all the other guys right now.” As other companies try to catch up, the microtransaction movement is only starting to hit its stride as companies of all different stripes experiment with different models to find out what works best for them and their titles. Don't like Zynga games? Well, as I'm sure Zynga would be the first to tell you: It's not about games – it's about money. ♦



AN MMO FOR THE SILENT HILL CROWD

The Secret World

I love MMOs, but if there's one thing that frustrates me about this genre, it's the lack of variety. Sure, plenty of different gameplay styles exist, especially now that so many MMOs are moving away from the strict EverQuest/World of Warcraft formula, but the vast majority of massively multiplayer games share a fantasy or science fiction setting.

Later in the mission, she trades her flashlight for a bundle of road flares. The player must carefully choose when and where to use these tools. Not only is the number limited, but the flares draw enemies to her location. The mission ends with a boss fight against a giant zombie creature called the Devourer that crawls along the ceiling, looking similar to the licker from the Resident Evil games.

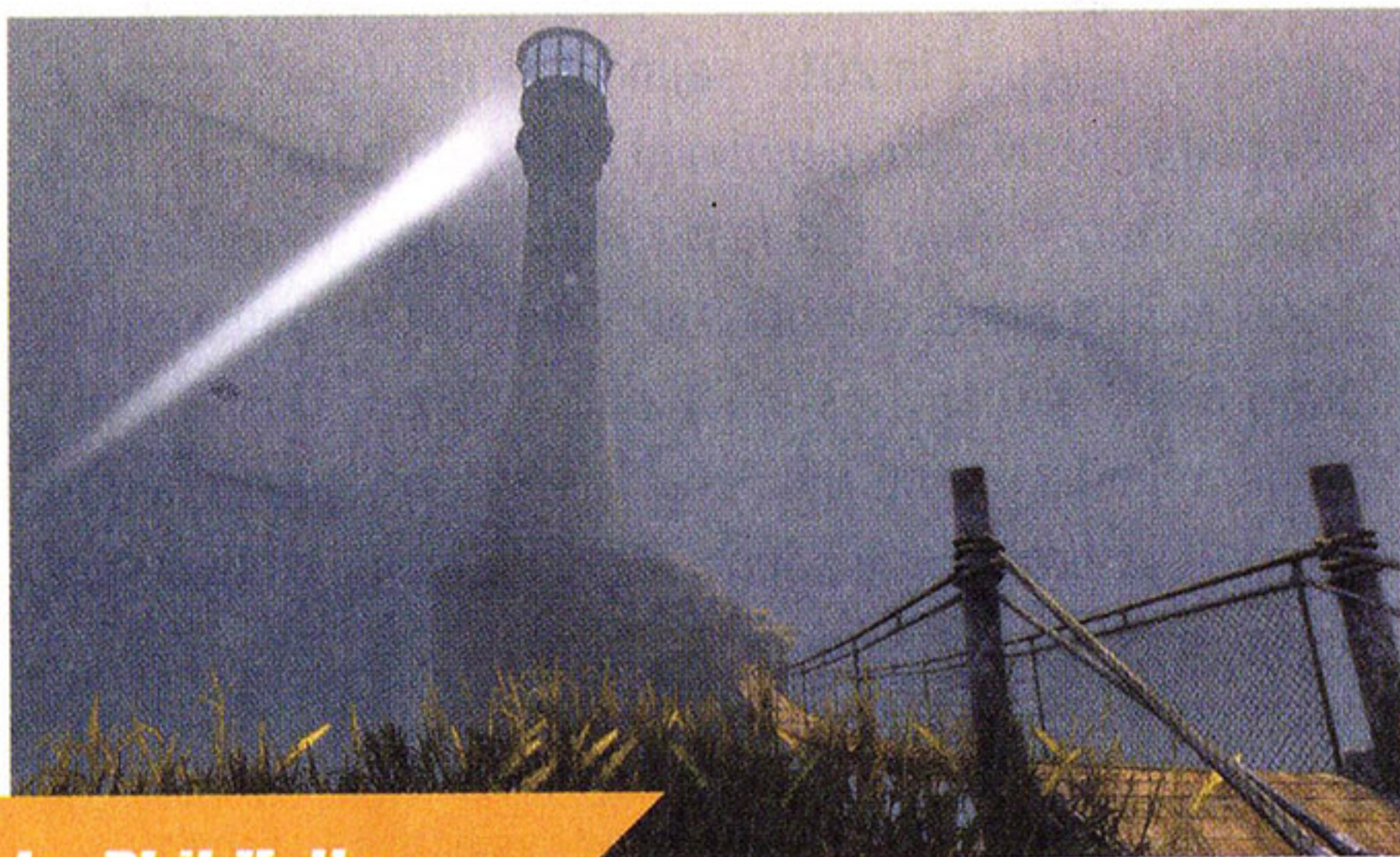
Funcom wasn't able to show me the same mission as the Templar or Dragon, but I was given some examples of how it might play out differently. Playing as a Templar, players might witness how the electricity goes out in the first place. Dragon players may get an explanation for where the undead creatures came from and why they've infested this parking garage. Director Ragnar Tørnquist says Funcom approaches story in *The Secret World* as "a huge jigsaw puzzle." Each side gets a couple pieces, and it's up to the community at large to put it together.

Tørnquist doesn't hide his influences. "Survival horror games are one of my favorite genres," he tells me. "I love *Silent Hill* and the original *Resident Evil* games and that feeling you get from them."

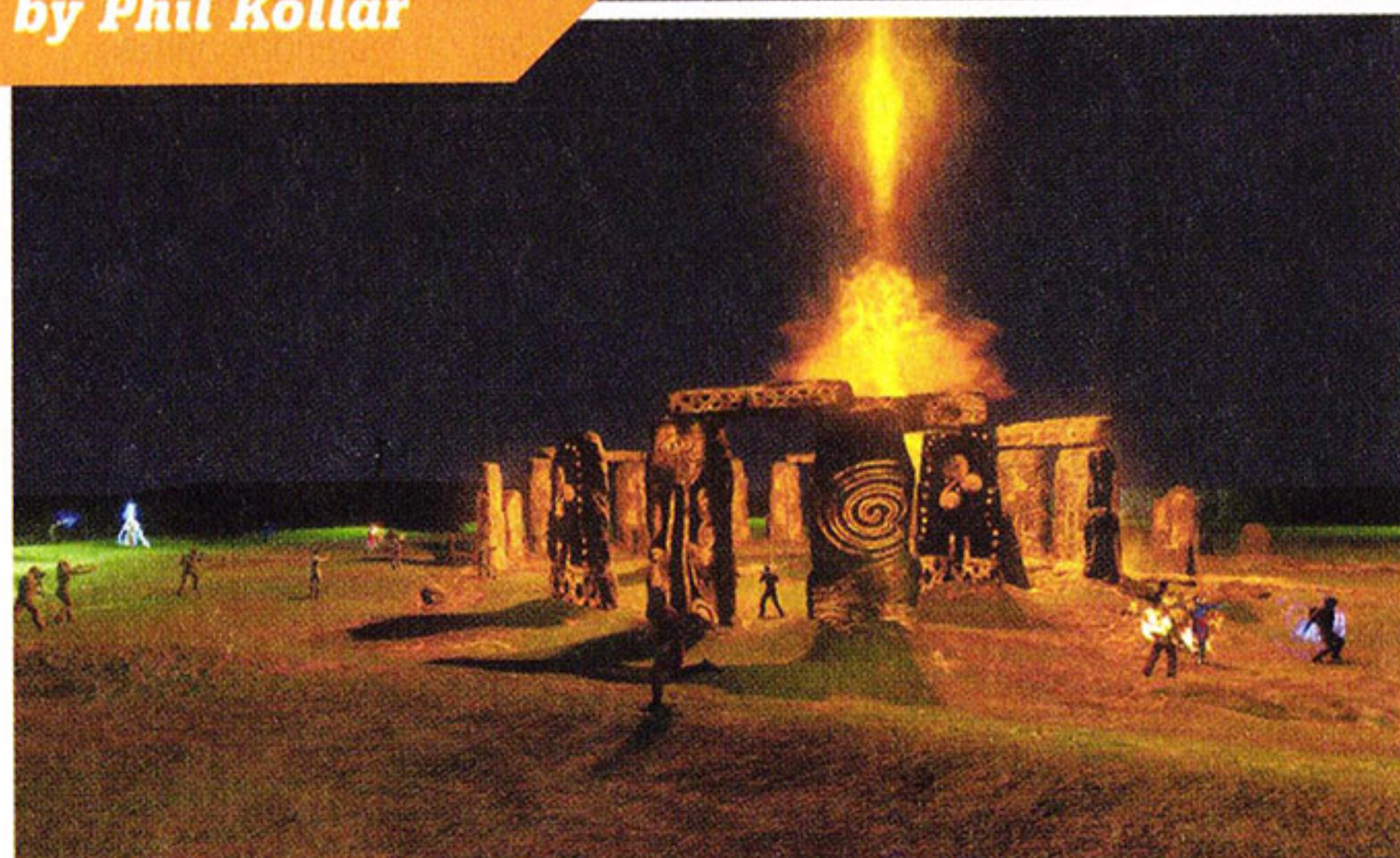
Tørnquist also admits that this is a challenge in a massively multiplayer game. He's adamant that his game has some of the best and freakiest monster design in the genre, but admits that "when you have a bunch of them standing in a playfield and lots of people running around, you're not going to get very scared by it unless you're running low on health." Thus the horror elements will mostly be relegated to instanced missions.

My biggest question, then, is how many of these instanced missions there are in *The Secret World*. "Into the Darkness" was definitely a solo-friendly task, but Tørnquist says that "95 to 98 percent" of the game is multiplayer content. Obviously I want to interact with friends in an MMO, but I'm wondering how quickly the terror will drain away when I have a group of four friends along and we're arguing over who's going to tank and who's going to heal.

I still have plenty to be unsure about with *The Secret World*, not least of which being that I still haven't had any hands-on time. With the game scheduled for an early 2012 release and a beta planned before the end of the year, I should be able to remedy that soon. I hope it lives up to its potential, if only so that we can get more MMOs that break the fantasy/sci-fi mold.



by Phil Kollar



The primary source of my interest in *The Secret World* since its announcement years ago is that it breaks that trend. This MMO is set in modern times, albeit a contemporary setting where all of the urban legends and conspiracy theories in the world are true. I saw the game in action for the first time at Gamescom, and while I'm not completely sold on it yet, I'm more ready than ever to try out an MMO that doesn't have my character wielding battle axes or laser guns.

Players in *The Secret World* are split into three different factions: the New York-based Illuminati, the London-dwelling Templar, and Shanghai's Dragon. In addition to guiding your character's personality, the faction choice determines what side of various missions you see. Many of the game's missions are playable by all three groups, but they will unfold differently for each.

I watched a mission called "Into the Darkness," where an Illuminati character had to investigate a parking garage in New York City where a fellow agent had gone missing. Shortly upon entering, the character discovers a rival Templar lurking in the facility, and the electricity goes out.

The gameplay that made up the majority of this mission was more like something I'd expect from a survival horror game than an MMO. Since the area is pitch black, the Illuminati character has to use a flashlight to navigate the darkness. Strange zombie creatures begin attacking, and she must take them down as they lunge at her from the shadows.

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FORZA MOTORSPORT | **4**
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FORZA.XBOX.COM
AVAILABLE OCTOBER 11TH

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 XBOX 360.

Jump in.

interview



photo: Ness Sherry

Rocksteady On Reinventing Batman

Sefton Hill, game director and co-founder at Rocksteady Studios, helped guide the company from its humble beginnings through the superheroic triumph of Batman: Arkham Asylum. Now, as Batman: Arkham City nears, Hill spoke with Game Informer about how the studio has helped take a once-troubled license to the promised land.

interview by Matt Helgeson

Batman had a terrible track record in video games. It was a running joke in the industry about how there couldn't be a good Batman game. Were you intimidated by those past failures?

We saw it as an opportunity, because it was a character we really loved and we thought the world deserved a good Batman game. We had two years to develop it and we weren't tied into a specific license so we had time to do the game justice. It was a great combination. We had a lot of factors that came together to make a great game. We had a hungry team and a great license that we were really passionate about. We weren't intimidated; we were excited by the opportunity. When we had the team meeting and said we were working on Batman, we were all cheering.

Every project has an initial pitch or idea. What was your initial idea for what would make Arkham Asylum the Batman game we'd been waiting for?

One of the main things was this idea of really letting the player feel what it was like to be Batman in terms of appearing out of nowhere and taking enemies down. Reading a lot of the comics and watching the films, a lot of those were about the enemies' experience of Batman and the fear he generates. We wanted to translate that. A lot of our early prototypes were about watching the enemies and how terrified they got, then striking out of the shadows. We wanted to let the player see how Batman experiences that, how he watches the enemies and picks them off one by one. We wanted to give you the power of Batman. We always said right from the start that we wanted it to be something where there weren't artificial limitations placed on Batman. This was a celebration of who Batman is, and if that meant he was too powerful, he's too powerful. If he's too powerful, the enemies would have to find better ways to overcome him rather than us sapping his powers.

A big decision for any project is what technology you're going to use. You went with Unreal 3. Why did you decide to license that instead of create your own engine?

From our point of view, it was a relatively fateful decision. We've never seen ourselves as a technology-driven studio; we're a gameplay-driven studio. We want our time and energy spent on making the best game we can possibly make. We always see technology as a means to an end. Our attitude is "How can we make the

best games we can possibly make and what is the best route to get to that place?" Middleware solves a lot of those problems. We evaluated the various middleware and we really liked Epic and their attitude as well. We met with the guys from Epic, and the way that they work is similar to the way that we work. They are all about empowering the content creators.

Licensed games often get a bad rap in the press and from fans. Did you ever strain against the limitations of the license or was DC pretty open with you?

For me, working on Batman was my first experience with working on such a high-profile brand. Like you, I'd heard the horror stories of working on particular licenses. But for us it was fantastic. I really only have positive things to say about DC and working with the guys there. They contribute great ideas. Fairly early on in the process they realized that we were fans. We weren't trying to turn Batman into something he's not; we're trying to make a celebration of Batman. Once that level of confidence was there, it made things a lot easier. We don't want to give Batman a gun, that doesn't make sense. I don't think of those rules as restrictions. If Batman had a gun, I don't think Arkham Asylum would be as good a game. It's because we couldn't fall back on those generic gameplay crutches, we had to come up with new ideas.

Was there a moment during development when you thought, "We really nailed this. This is the Batman game people have been wanting."

It's hard when you're working closely on a game, you feel like you're in that bunker for two years. You don't really get much perspective on it. It wasn't until people were doing the very first reviews that I thought we'd made something that really resonated with people. I was proud of what we'd done, but I'm so close to it and I see it every minute of every day – even when I'm asleep. It's hard to say. The true judge is when it goes out and people get to play it.

Prior to Arkham Asylum, you were fairly unknown as a studio, working on a license that many had given up on in terms of video games. Suddenly, it was a huge hit, and now you've got expectations for the follow-up. Was that hard?

The way that I personally chose to deal with it was ignore it. [Laughs] If you worry too much about that it can become creatively suffocating. You can be so concerned with what people are going to think that you become paralyzed and unable to make creative decisions. Really we just said, "Let's go for it and keep the

attitude that made the first one a success." That's partially responsible for the decision to go for a much more ambitious game. We wanted to push and do something new; that's why we went with a much bigger scale and scope. We didn't worry too much about the expectations. I felt like, at the end of Arkham Asylum, the team was getting better and better. The next one is going to be better than the last game.

Arkham City's environment is much larger and more open. Was that an idea you'd had at the end of the Arkham Asylum project?

That would be fair to say. We'd had this idea of "What Batman game do we want to play? Where do I want to go next?" The obvious thing was wanting to experience what it's like to be Batman in Gotham City. That's where I wanted to go. We had no idea how we were going to do it, or if we could do it, but it got us excited. Our engine team and technical team gave everyone the confidence. We told them what we wanted to do in terms of scale and they said they'd make it happen.

It seems like a risk to add a new playable character in Catwoman. You've had a whole game to nail down Batman as a character.

That's a fair comment, especially because our biggest amount of time we spend on anything in the game is Batman – giving the player different options and abilities and gadgets. Adding a new player character isn't a simple thing to do, especially when you have a character that has unique powers. You can't just re-skin Batman. Catwoman is nothing like Batman. We need a whole new traversal system. It was a big decision and it wasn't made lightly. It was a massive amount of work. [She] had to feel different, but still as high-quality as Batman. We felt that what was interesting about Catwoman is that she provides a nice contrast to Batman. He has a strong moral compass that he's always following, whereas Catwoman is much more ambiguous in her objectives. It allows the player to walk on the dark side a little bit.

Batman has such a long history and a huge rogues gallery. How do you go about choosing which villains to work with?

We start off with the story. We bounce around ideas – we had Paul Dini and people from DC involved in that process. We want to write a classic Batman story. Because you have such a fantastic rogues gallery, we're looking for the characters that best fit that story. We don't pick characters and then build the story around them, because then the story won't work. We want to start with a great Batman story. ♦

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

1992 PHILOSOPHICALLY SPEAKING

Hill graduates from the University of East Anglia with a degree in philosophy. With philosopher jobs in short supply, he pursues his other passion: video games

1993 TESTING 1, 2, 3

Hill takes a position as a tester at Perfect Entertainment, working on projects like Discworld II and its eventual Saturn port

1996 DEVELOPING

After leaving Perfect, Hill takes a job at the UK developer Argonaut. At Argonaut, he gets his break as a game designer

2000 DESIGN MATTERS

Argonaut's Dreamcast title Red Dog: Superior Firepower is released. Hill serves as lead designer on the project

2000 MOVING UP

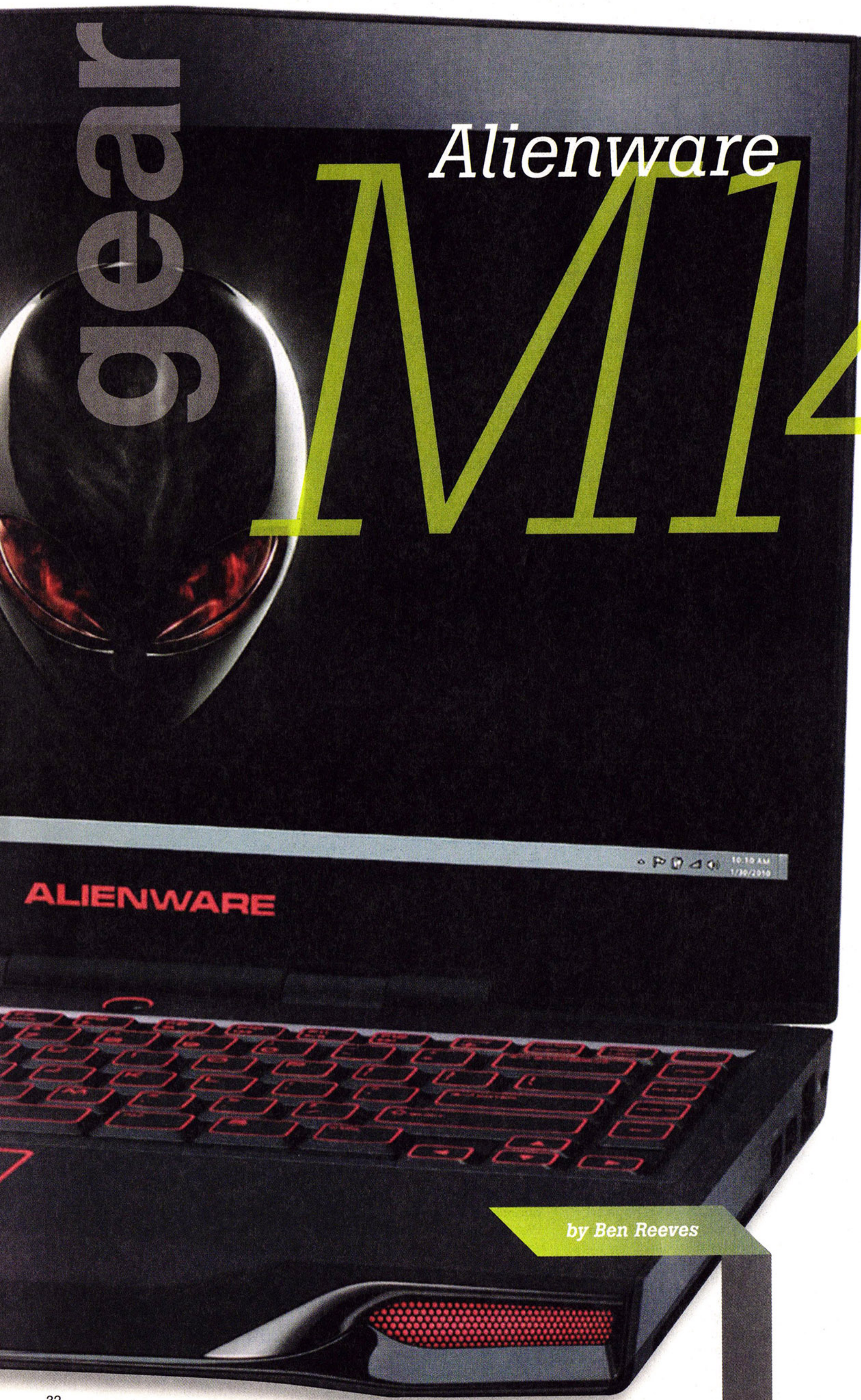
While working on some of the design groundwork for the upcoming game SWAT: Global Strike Team, Hill begins overseeing larger parts of Argonaut's business, including next-gen (PS2) technology

2004 NEW VENTURES

When Argonaut folds, Hill and others form Rocksteady and complete the last Argonaut project, Urban Chaos: Riot Response

2007 A CLASSIC

Rocksteady accomplishes what was previously thought impossible: deliver an amazing Batman game. Batman: Arkham Asylum sells well and is hailed as a classic



by Ben Reeves



editor's
choice

Alienware M14x

High-end gaming machines that you can throw in your messenger bag are convenient, but who are laptop companies trying to kid? We don't want to carry most 18-inch beasts past our front porch. Alienware tries to solve this problem with its 14-inch M14x – the first of its size from the Mx line. Weighing in at less than seven pounds, it won't break your back as you cart it around town. The M14x may be slightly underpowered compared to some of Alienware's heftier offerings, but NVIDIA's Optimus technology and the latest Intel Core i processor still allow it to power through games like Crysis 2 and Bulletstorm without a hiccup. If you get tired of the small screen, the M14x also lets you beam 3D or HD content to any WirelessHD-equipped display in your house. You can squeeze about six hours out of the battery without gaming, but expect about half that during frag sessions.

SUPERB

Starting at \$1,099
alienware.com



1 GAEMS G155 Portable Gaming System

The Nintendo 3DS and iPhone are handy for short trips, but during extended sabbaticals you start to miss your home consoles. Thanks to GAEMS (Gaming and Entertainment Mobile Systems), you don't have to leave your main gaming machine behind every time you hit the road. The G155 is outfitted with a clamshell design and padded interior for keeping your PlayStation 3 or Xbox 360 safe, an integrated 15.5-inch LED display, and an HDMI port for connecting to your console, making it a great travel companion. Even though the display is limited to 720p, you won't miss the higher resolution too much given the screen size; it still has a crisp picture and rich color palette. The speakers are loud enough to compete with nearly any ambient noise, but explosions and gunfire sometimes come out flat and tinny, so we suggest audiophiles take advantage of the unit's two headphone jacks. The G155 is designed for Xbox 360s and PS3 slims, but we were able to cram a full sized PS3 into the case. Side pockets provide plenty of room to store cables and controllers, but we would have liked to see a slot or two for game storage, and the unit's lack of an internal battery means that you can't take this anywhere that doesn't have an outlet.

VERY GOOD

\$299
projectgaems.com

2 StarCraft Premium Series 01

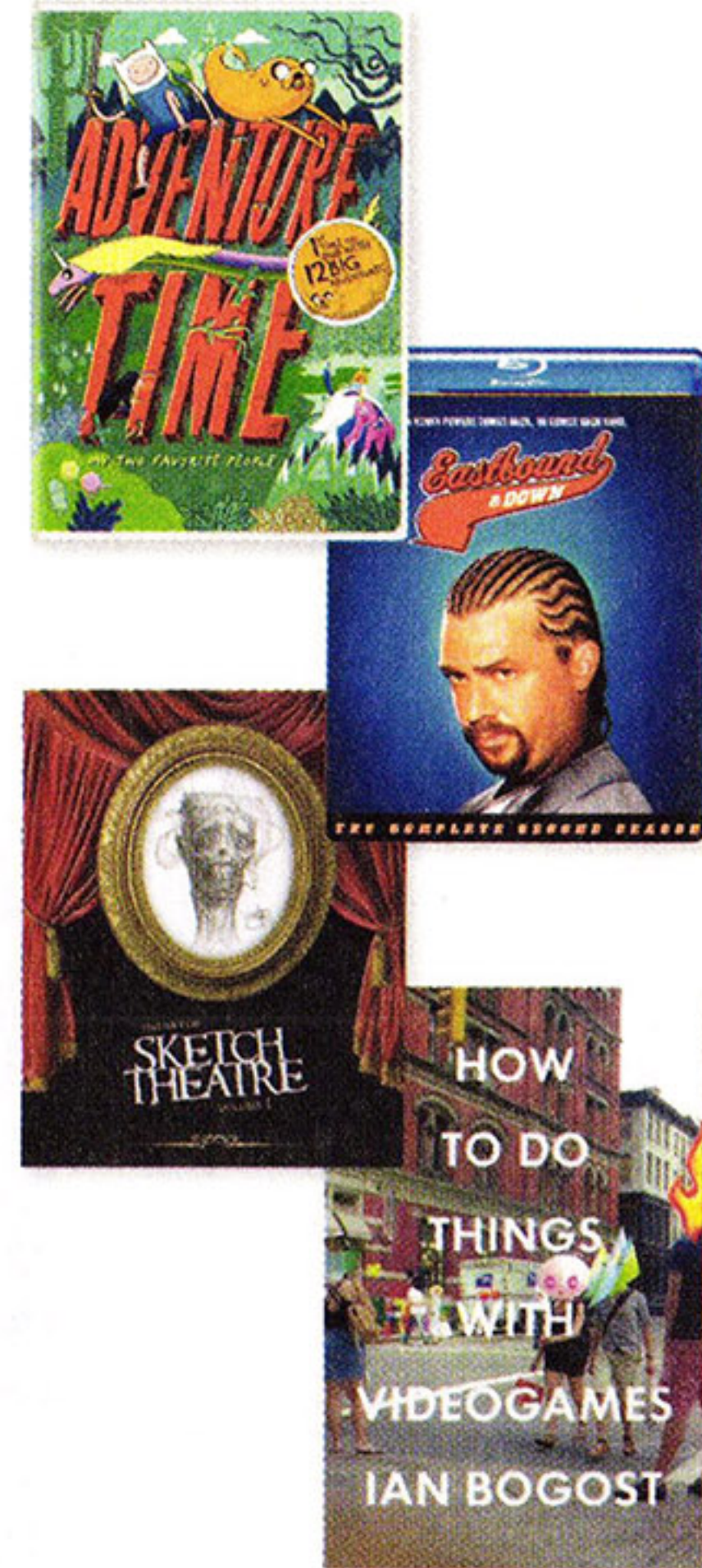
DC Direct's new line of StarCraft II action figures features Terran commander Jim Raynor (standing 7.5 inches tall) and Protoss prelate Zeratul (standing 10 inches tall). If you want to display your crazy devotion to StarCraft, put these detailed figures up all over your house. But if you whisper StarCraft love poems into their ears as you cuddle up with them in bed at night you may want to seek counseling.

\$29.99 (each)
dccomics.com/direct

3 Calibur 11 Console Vaults

Want to customize your PlayStation 3 or Xbox 360, but don't want to drill holes in the system or perform a warranty-breaking modification? Calibur 11's Vault series of accessories might be your solution. Trick out your console with molded designs, customizable LEDs, and a variety of chassis colors. These console cases help stabilize vertical-standing systems, claim to improve your console's airflow, and provide a handy place to store controllers and headphones. Calibur 11 has already developed Gears of War 3 and Major League Gaming Vaults, and will soon bring other properties — such as Uncharted and Battlefield — to market as well.

\$59.99-89.99
calibur11.com/shop



ADVENTURE TIME: MY TWO FAVORITE PEOPLE

Inspired by video games, Cartoon Network's Emmy-nominated cartoon follows the wacky adventures of two friends who create candy zombies, converse with magical books, and thaw businessmen from icebergs.

\$14.98
cartoonnetworkshop.com

EASTBOUND & DOWN: THE COMPLETE SECOND SEASON

Danny McBride's failed baseball star Kenny Powers is ill-tempered, selfish, and hilariously inappropriate. When this ex-big leaguer moves to Mexico, his life continues to spiral out of control, much to our amusement.

\$39.98
store.hbo.com

THE ART OF SKETCH THEATRE: VOLUME 1

Sketch Theatre is a popular online showcase for time-lapse sketches from a variety of professional artists. This hardcover edition features profiles and artwork from 58 of the site's best contributors.

\$40.00
sketchtheatre.com

HOW TO DO THINGS WITH VIDEOGAMES BY IAN BOGOST

From their use in art, exercise, and advertisement, video games have influenced the world. Writer Ian Bogost takes a wide-ranging, philosophical look at how games have assimilated into our popular culture.

\$29.95
us.penguin.com



04
Dark Souls



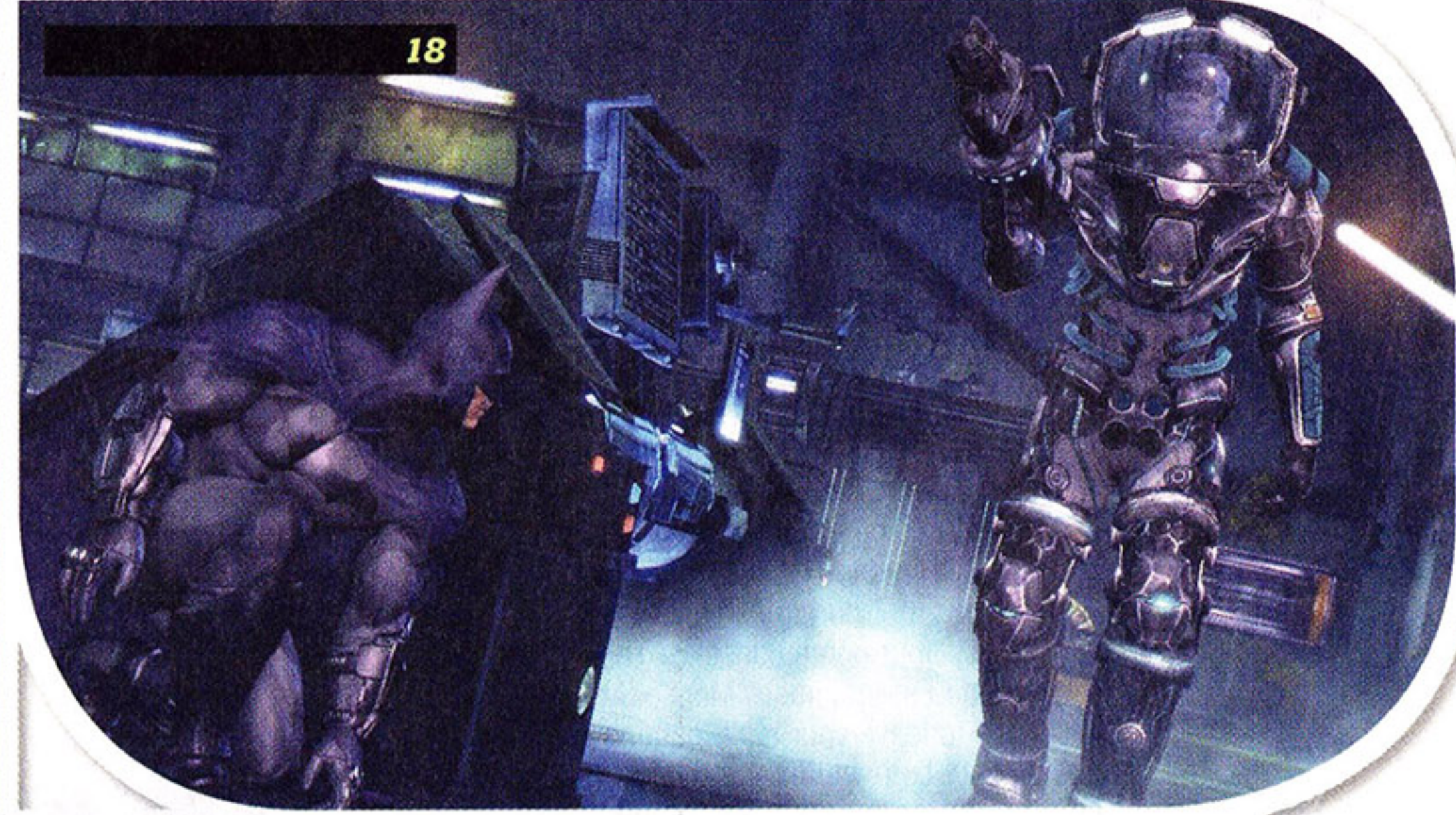
11
Forza 4 Motorsport



12



25
Disney Universe



18



21



14



18

October

04 New Releases

- › Dark Souls (PS3, 360)
- › Happy Feet Two (PS3, 360, Wii, 3DS, DS)
- › Kore Gang (Wii)
- › NBA 2K12 (PS3, 360, Wii, PS2, PC)
- › Pac-Man Party (3DS)
- › Rage (PS3, 360, PC)
- › Spider-Man: Edge of Time (PS3, 360, Wii, 3DS, DS)
- › Stronghold 3 (PC)

11 New Releases

- › Ace Combat: Assault Horizon (PS3, 360)
- › Ben 10: Galactic Racing (PS3, 360, Wii, DS)
- › Combat Wings: The Great Battles of WWII (Wii)
- › The Cursed Crusade (PS3, 360)
- › Dance Dance Revolution 2 (Wii)
- › Dead Rising 2: Off the Record (PS3, 360)
- › Forza 4 Motorsport (360)
- › Go Vacation (Wii)
- › The Hidden (3DS)
- › Hulk Hogan's Main Event (360)
- › Imagine: Fashion Designer (3DS)
- › Just Dance 3 (PS3, 360, Wii)
- › Kinectimals with Bears (360)
- › Marvel Super Hero Squad: The Infinity Gauntlet (3DS)
- › Max and the Magic Marker (DS)
- › Michael Phelps: Push the Limit (360)
- › Monster High: Ghoul Spirit (Wii, DS)
- › Naruto Shippuden: Ultimate Ninja Impact (PSP)
- › Rocksmith (PS3, 360)
- › Sesame Street: Once Upon a Monster (360)

12 Batman Catch Up

Sometimes good things come to those who wait. If you missed out on DC Comics' exceptional Batman: Arkham City prequel comic, you can now pick up the entire series in one hardcover 168-page book. DC is also throwing in all five digital chapters.

14 Musketeer Things

Today marks the release of two high-profile films with familiar titles. *The Thing* is a prequel to John Carpenter's classic 1982 film of the same name. The other film, *The Three Musketeers*, is based on the candy bar of the same name.

18 Reiner, Phil & The Bat

On most Tuesdays, Game Informer's dynamic duo of Reiner and Phil play through the new releases for the week in lengthy uncut videos on gameinformer.com. This week, they're providing critical analysis for Batman: Arkham City, Ratchet & Clank: All 4 One, and Skylanders: Spyro's Adventure.

18 New Releases

- › Batman: Arkham City (PS3, 360, PC)
- › Carnival Island (PS3)
- › Cooking Mama 4 (3DS)
- › Dr. Lautrec & the Forgotten Knights (3DS)
- › Everybody Dance (PS3)
- › Jimmie Johnson's Anything with an Engine (PS3, 360, Wii)

Medieval Moves:

- › Deadmund's Quest (PS3)
- › PetZombies (3DS)
- › PowerUp Heroes (360)
- › Ratchet & Clank: All 4 One (PS3)
- › Rune Factory: Tides of Destiny (PS3, Wii)
- › The Sims 3: Pets (PS3, 360, PC, 3DS)
- › Skylanders: Spyro's Adventure (PS3, 360, Wii, 3DS)

21 Another Handicam Horror

All of the people that went to see *The Blair Witch Project* in 1999 are to blame for Hollywood's obsession with handicap films. Today, you can either pay a bunch of cash to go see handicap film *Paranormal Activity 3*, or you can film spooky shadows with your own camera and sell the footage to Paramount Pictures.

21 Wolverine and the X-Anime

A brand-new X-Men anime series by author Warren Ellis and animation studio Madhouse kicks off on G4 today at 11 p.m. ET. In the first episode, the X-Men reunite after one of their ranks turns up dead. Their investigation leads them to the U-Men, an anti-mutant organization determined to purify the world of the children of the atom.

25 New Releases

- › Back to the Future (Wii, PC)
- › Battlefield 3 (PS3, 360, PC)
- › Captain America: Super Soldier (3DS)
- › Disney Universe (PS3, 360, Wii)
- › Family Game Night 4: The Game Show Edition (Wii)
- › Generator Rex (PS3, 360, Wii, 3DS, DS)
- › The House of the Dead: Overkill (PS3)

28 Justin Time-berlake

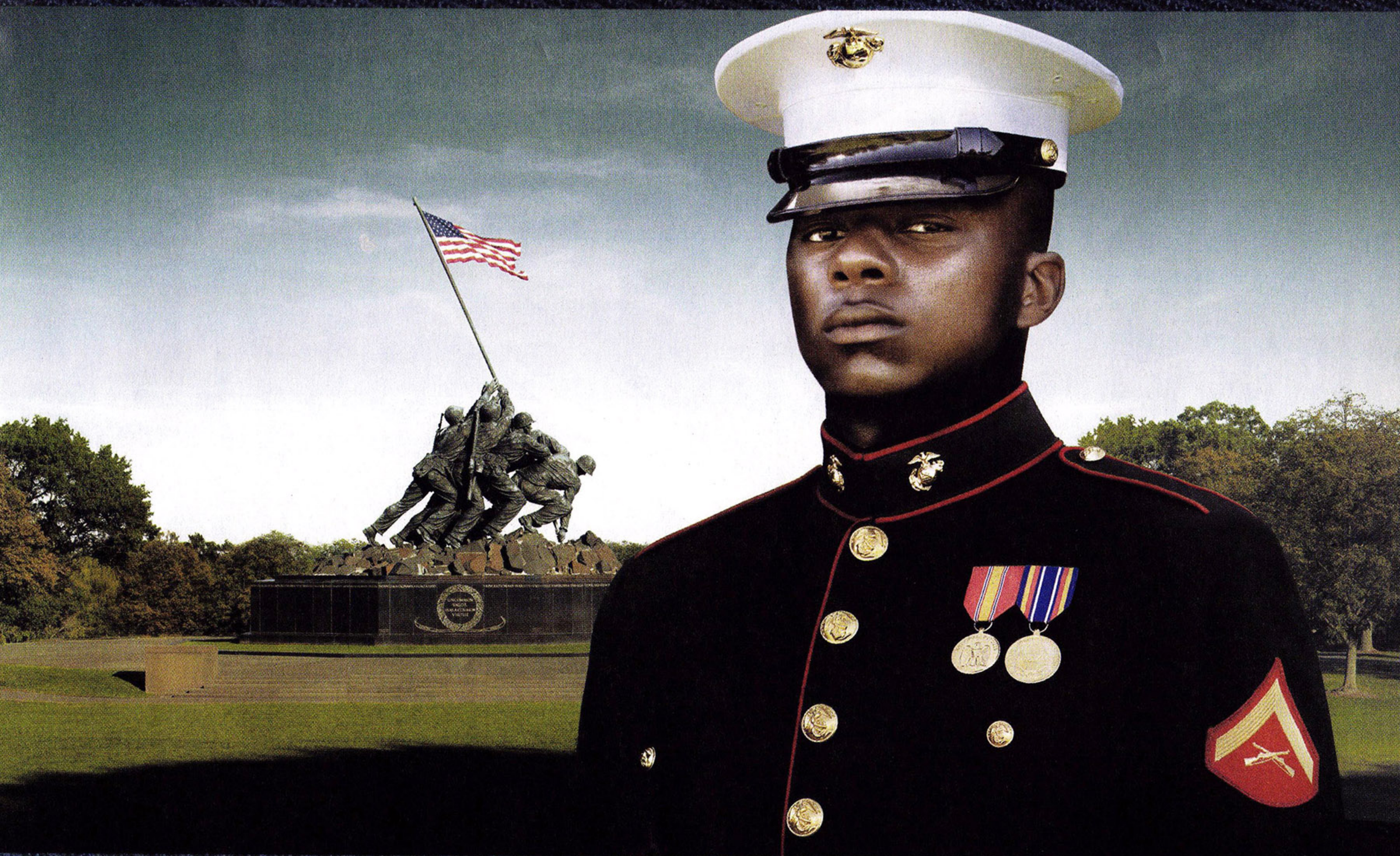
In today's theatrical release, *In Time*, people stop aging at 25, but can live forever if they have the money to buy more time. It's a lot like the Game Informer office, except we stopped aging at 12. Instead of buying time, we bought Bad Dudes, Rock & Roll Racing, and Earthbound. Money well spent. Anyway, this film stars Justin Timberlake, and it actually looks good.

31 Trick or Treat or Drake

If you're planning to attend a Halloween party this year (hopefully dressed as a video game character) you may want to leave early, as *Uncharted 3: Drake's Deception* will go on sale at midnight. The question is: Would you rather hang out with costumed friends or play one of this year's most anticipated games? The answer: Your friends aren't going anywhere, and thanks to the rise of cosplay, Halloween can happen whenever you want it to. *Uncharted 3*, on the other hand, only launches once.

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The Legend of Zelda



25 years of magic and Master Swords

With as many generations of console hardware and legions of failed mascots as we've gone through, one can easily forget that the video game industry is still relatively young. We have plenty of franchises with a huge number of releases, but very few veterans of the digital age have remained active since the early days of NES. The Legend of Zelda was first released in Japan in 1986, making 2011 the 25th anniversary of Link's adventures.

The impressively long-lasting Zelda franchise is one of the few series where you could believably make an argument that not a single truly bad title has been released. Okay, yeah, we know about the horrible CD-i games, and we'll get to them. But to show our love and appreciation for Nintendo's legendary games, we decided to take individual looks at each of Zelda's 13 core releases.

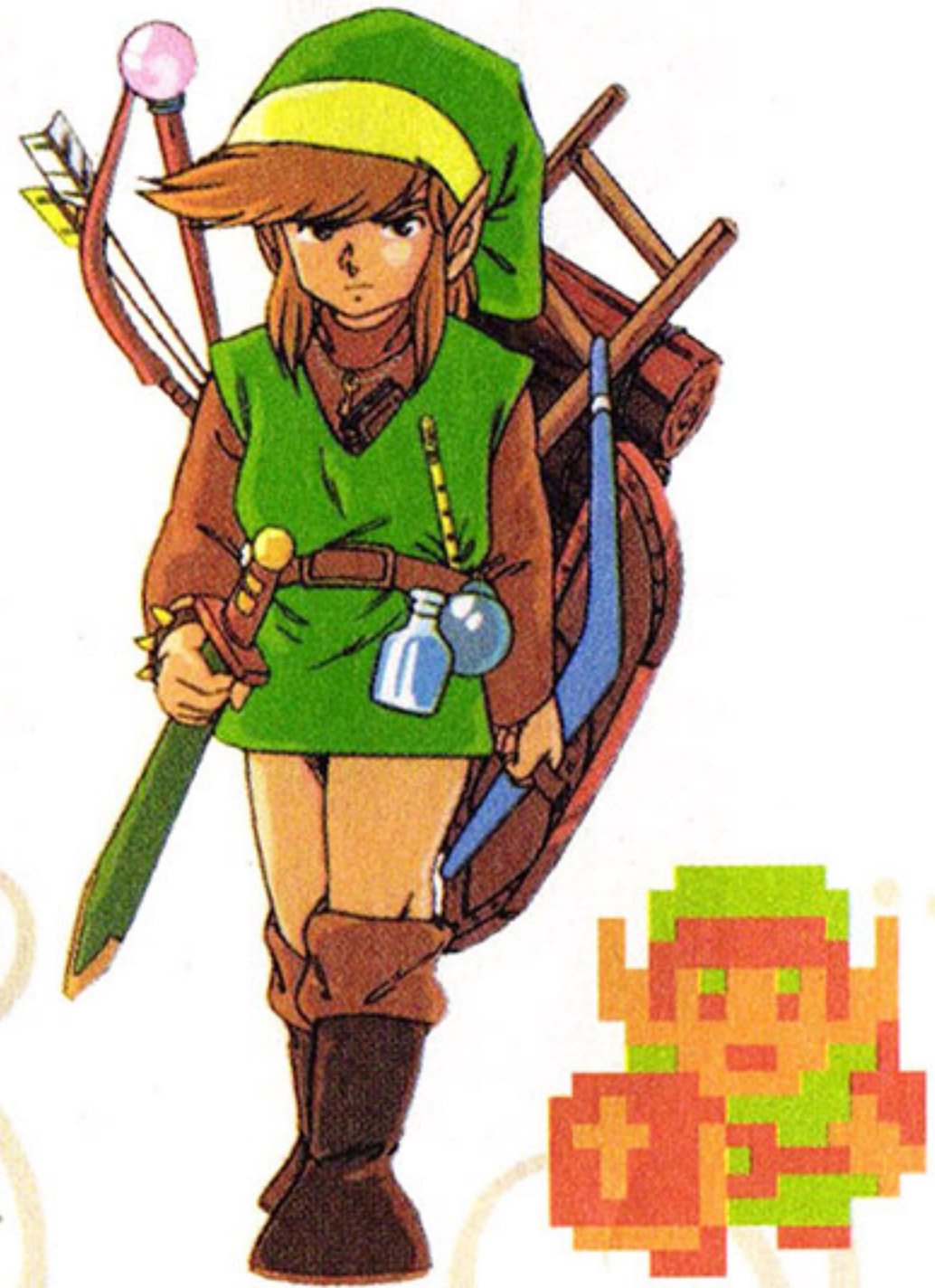
Rather than waste time describing the gameplay or structure that you probably already know about, these are more personal reflections from our editors discussing why each of these excellent games matters to us. We also gathered some memories from long-time series creator Eiji Aonuma. Turn the page to kick things off with an evolution of Link, showing how the protagonist has changed from game to game. Enjoy our stories, then share and discuss your own Zelda experiences at gameinformer.com/zelda.

Once you're done reminiscing, take a look at Zelda's future with a 10-page feature on the newest installment, Skyward Sword.



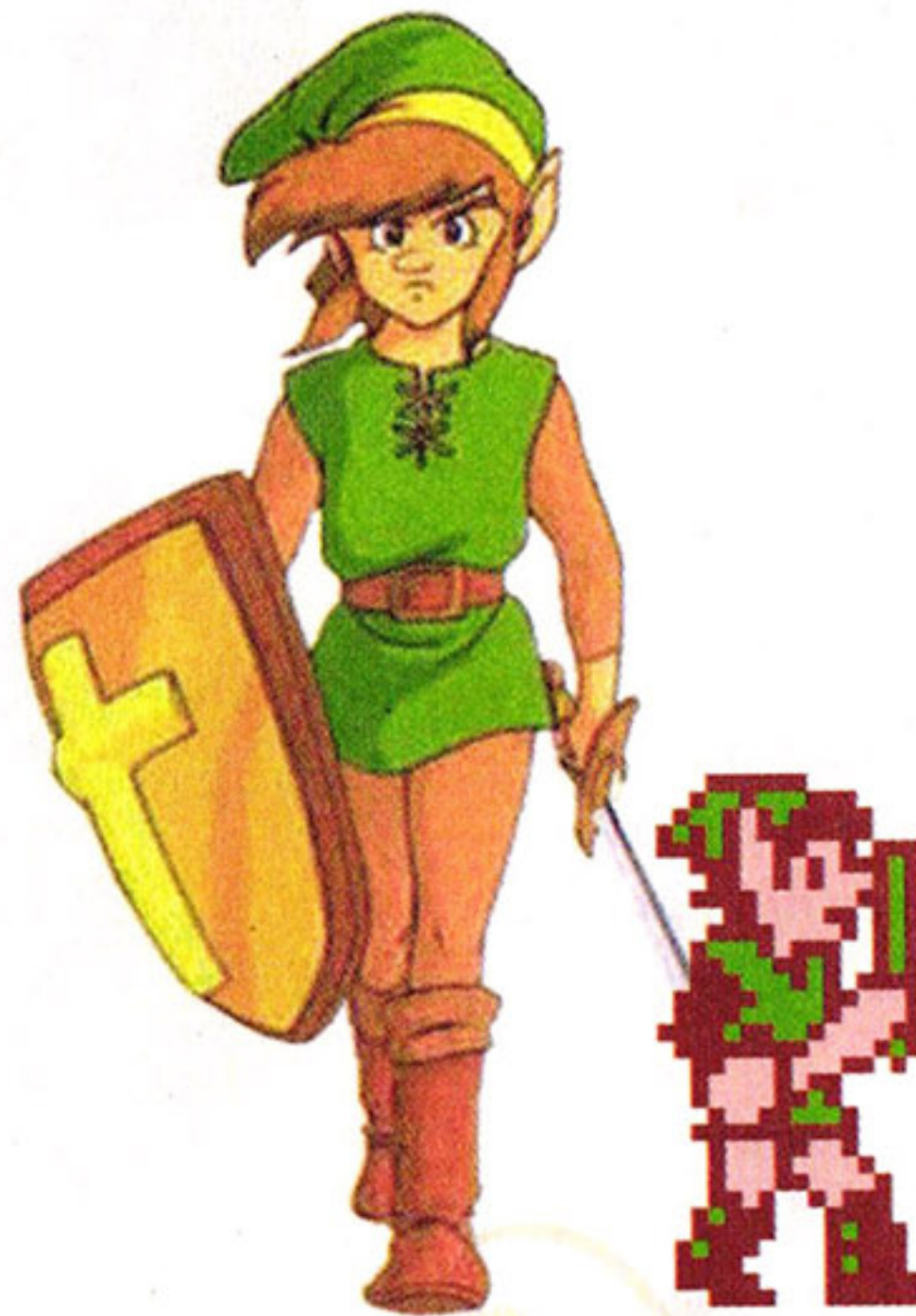
The Legend of Zelda (1987)

Link's debut introduced many of his trademarks – a green tunic, his silent manner, and iconic items like the boomerang, bombs, and bow. When gamers saw him in-game, many wondered what the odd green pixels above his eyes were. We still don't know for sure.



Zelda II: The Adventure of Link (1988)

Zelda II: The Adventure of Link shifted our view of the hero thanks to its sidescrolling nature. We saw him from the top-down on the over-world map, but most of our time with him was running from left to right in XP grinding runs.



A Link to the Past (1992)

With Link to the Past, the Christian cross imagery was replaced with the iconic Triforce and other designs. While the character's art has almost always portrayed him with blond/brown hair, his in-game sprite appeared to have pink hair.



The Evolut



Majora's Mask (2000)

Other masks in the game granted him new abilities, but the Deku, Goron, and Zora masks turned Link into new creatures entirely. These allowed him to navigate around Termina differently, and even changed the instrument he played.



Majora's Mask (2000)

Once all the other masks were collected, Link could turn into his most intimidating form ever – Fierce Deity Link. This form was only available during boss fights, and allowed Link to shoot beams out of his curving sword.



Wind Waker (2003)

With his GameCube debut, Link was reintroduced in his most controversial form yet. Thanks to the cel-shaded style of Wind Waker, Link appeared more child-like and cartoonish than ever. While some gamers cried foul over this new direction, the game and art design are generally looked back upon fondly.

Link's Awakening (1993) • *Oracle of Ages / Oracle of Seasons* (2001)

Link's three installments on the Game Boy didn't take the look of the character in any unexpected directions. With the system's limited screen resolution, Nintendo developers didn't have much room to work with when it came to the character's in-game model.



Ocarina of Time (1998)

In previous titles, Link's age was never clearly defined. With his 3D debut, we got to see two distinct versions of the hero – Young Link and Adult Link. The latter is the model that became most recognizable, serving as the basis for his appearances in *Soul Calibur II* and *Super Smash Bros.*



Majora's Mask (2000)

Majora's Mask may have featured gameplay mechanics based on time, but Link remained young throughout. This disappointed some who enjoyed the more mature Link from *Ocarina of Time*, but the 24 masks in the game guaranteed he'd have more abilities than ever before.



ion of Link

by Dan Ryckert



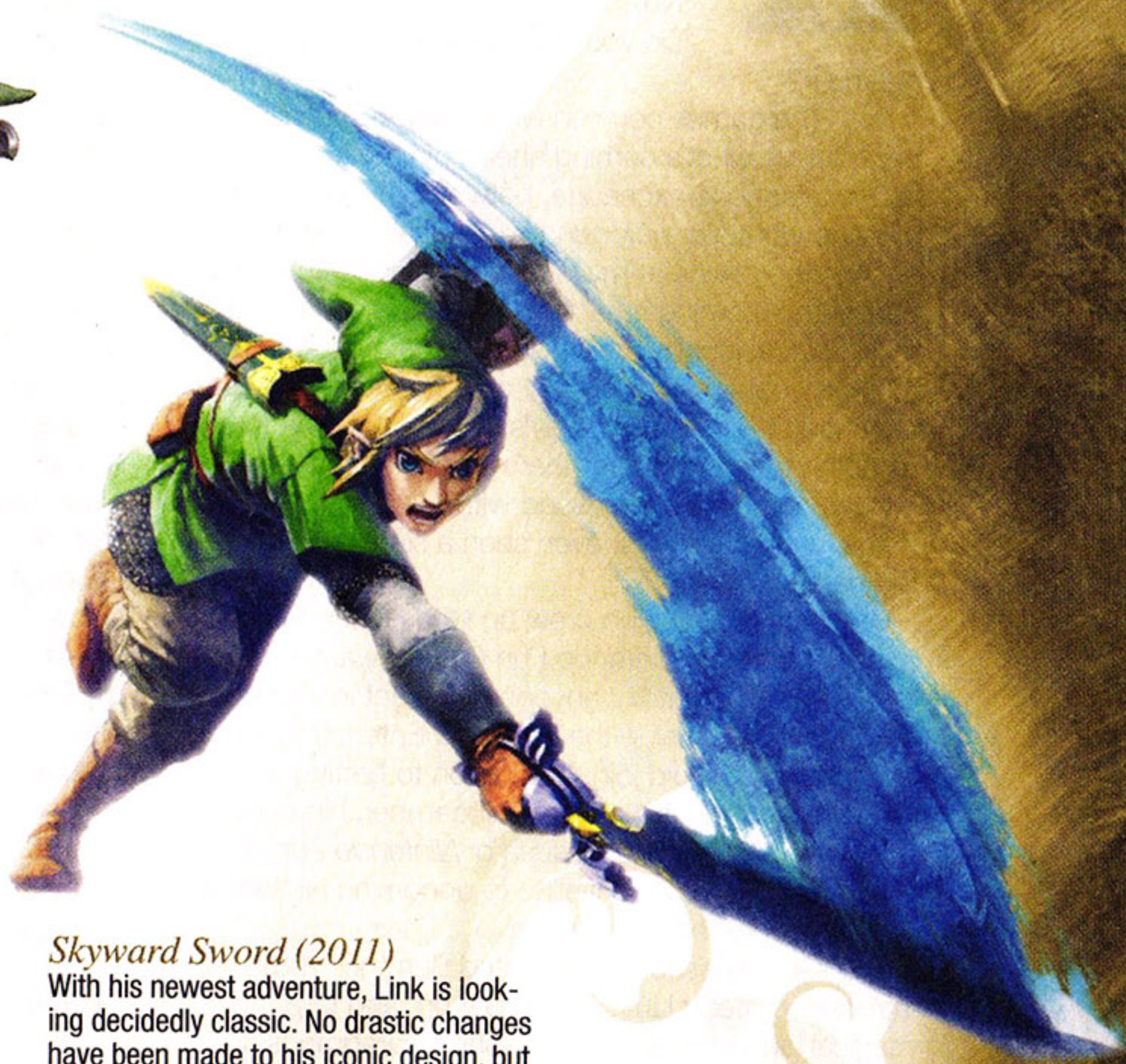
Four Swords Adventure (2004)
Minish Cap (2005) • *Phantom Hourglass* (2007) • *Spirit Tracks* (2009)

After *Wind Waker*, Link's portable adventures stuck with the Toon Link design. From the size-changing *Minish Cap* on GBA to his two DS titles, the expressive and simple design worked well on the small screen.



Twilight Princess (2006)

Link's return to form was so well-received that longtime *Zelda* fans openly wept in the audience when he was shown off at E3 2004. His final GameCube game (and Wii debut) featured the most adult-looking Link to date, as well as an alternate wolf form.

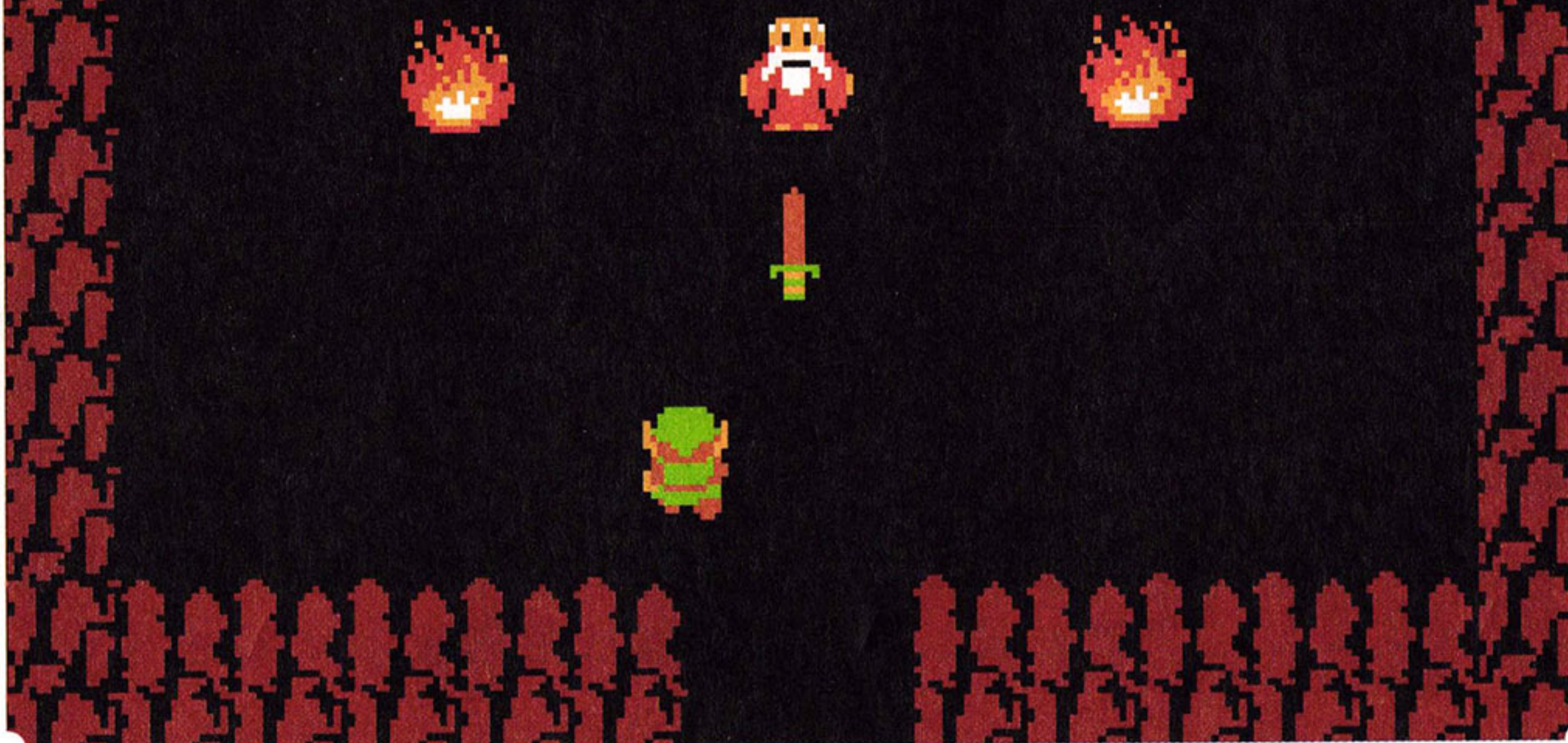


Skyward Sword (2011)

With his newest adventure, Link is looking decidedly classic. No drastic changes have been made to his iconic design, but Hyrule looks different thanks to the game's watercolor-like visuals.



IT'S DANGEROUS TO GO ALONE! TAKE THIS.



The Legend of Zelda

Release **August 22, 1987** • Format **Nintendo Entertainment System**



"Good morning. I'm wondering if you have the Legend of Zelda for Nintendo in stock."

"No."

"Do you know when you might be getting it?"

"No. The games come in when they come in. They don't tell us what's coming ahead of time."

This telephone exchange, between my 13-year-old self and whatever unfortunate clerk happened to answer the phone at my local department store, was part of my morning ritual for most of the summer of 1987. Occasionally, the person on the other end of the line would make a critical mistake and tell me that they hadn't received the day's shipment. I took that as an invitation to bother them again in the afternoon.

I was completely obsessed with the Legend of Zelda, and I hadn't yet even seen a single pixel from the game.

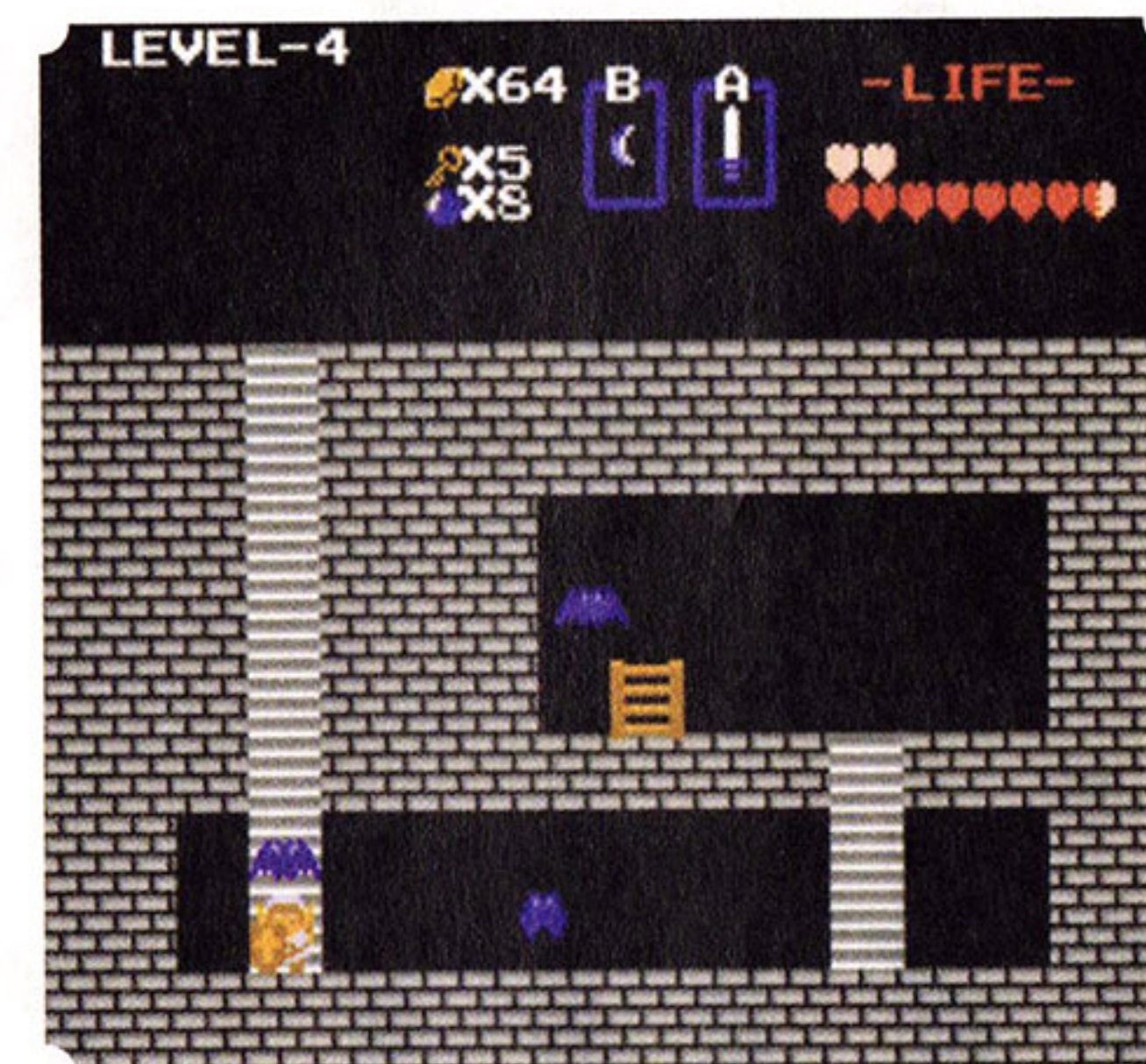
Like a lot of kids who grew up with Nintendo, I was a member of the Nintendo Fun Club. It wasn't an exclusive organization; anyone who sent in a postcard that came inside the Nintendo Entertainment System's box could join. In addition to getting a completely useless wallet-sized membership card, members also received issues of *Nintendo Fun Club News*, a valuable lifeline to upcoming Nintendo games before the Internet era.

The second issue, simply dated Summer 1987, introduced me to Link, Zelda, Ganon, and the magical land of Hyrule. In nine short paragraphs, I was hopelessly sold. I'd long envied the kids who played games like *Gemstone Warrior* and *Ultima*

III in the school's computer lab. These adventures took hours upon hours to absorb, and I didn't have a PC at home – and not for lack of trying. The idea that I could play something that rich and exciting on my NES was completely mind-blowing. Even some of the minor details in that story were too much for me to fully comprehend. Secret passages? A battery backed-up memory? It was even so special that Nintendo packed it in gold, whatever that meant. And so the calls began.

If you look online, you'll read that the Legend of Zelda was released in North America on August 22, 1987. That's a half truth, at best. Sure, that could very well be the day that the boxes were shipped across the country, ripped open by indifferent retail workers, and flung onto shelves, but it wasn't much of an event. Maybe the clerks put it on the shelf that day. Maybe they didn't. Game releases weren't anticipated in the same way, at least not in any official capacity.

It must have been near the end of August when my family went on a trip to Anchorage. It was the big city to us, so it seemed only fitting that Zelda would be there. When I spied it behind the counter at a



Kay Bee Toys store, I was stunned. It was strange to finally hold the box in my hand and stare at the shiny gold Game Pak visible through a slit in the cardboard box. After paying the then-outrageous price of \$53, that part of my quest had ended. I spent the rest of that trip poring over the fold-out map, hoping to glean some secrets from a game that I still hadn't played.

That summer and fall were devoted to exploring every inch of Hyrule and rescuing fair Zelda. When I wasn't in school or doing homework, it was almost a guarantee that I'd be parked on the floor in front of our television gazing up at the screen, lost in another world.

As other kids in my school got their own copies, we hoarded and exchanged tips and secrets. "Did you know that you could push that tombstone?" "If you have a candle, try burning some trees." "When that guy says 'Grumble grumble,' he's actually asking for something." There was a collaborative spirit surrounding the game and its mysteries that's impossible to recapture.

I really wish I could go back and play it again for the first time. Happy birthday, Zelda. *by Jeff Cork*

"I almost feel like there's no game more difficult than [the original Legend of Zelda]. Every time I try to play it I end up getting 'Game Over' a few too many times and giving up partway through.... I didn't ever think that I wanted to make a game like that."

~ Eiji Aonuma

Zelda II: The Adventure of Link

Release **December 1, 1988** • Format **Nintendo Entertainment System**



Classic Nintendo games became a huge priority when I was a teenager. Being raised on Sega systems, I never had the chance to dig into the massive library of phenomenal NES games.

As a little kid I spent a few fleeting moments with Mega Man, Castlevania, and Zelda at my cousin's house, but I never had enough time or skill to get lost in those challenging 8-bit dreamlands. Years later, I religiously played through all those missing memories after finally tracking down and purchasing a functioning NES at a local used game shop. Along with it, I secured a mint condition copy of *Zelda II: The Adventure of Link*.

Thankfully, I was shopping with my best friend. I had heard that *Zelda II* was by far the weakest entry in the core series and was ready to skip the title, but he argued otherwise. He recalled his childhood quests through Hyrule with such nostalgic loyalty that I felt I'd be letting him down if I didn't give Link's sophomore outing a try.

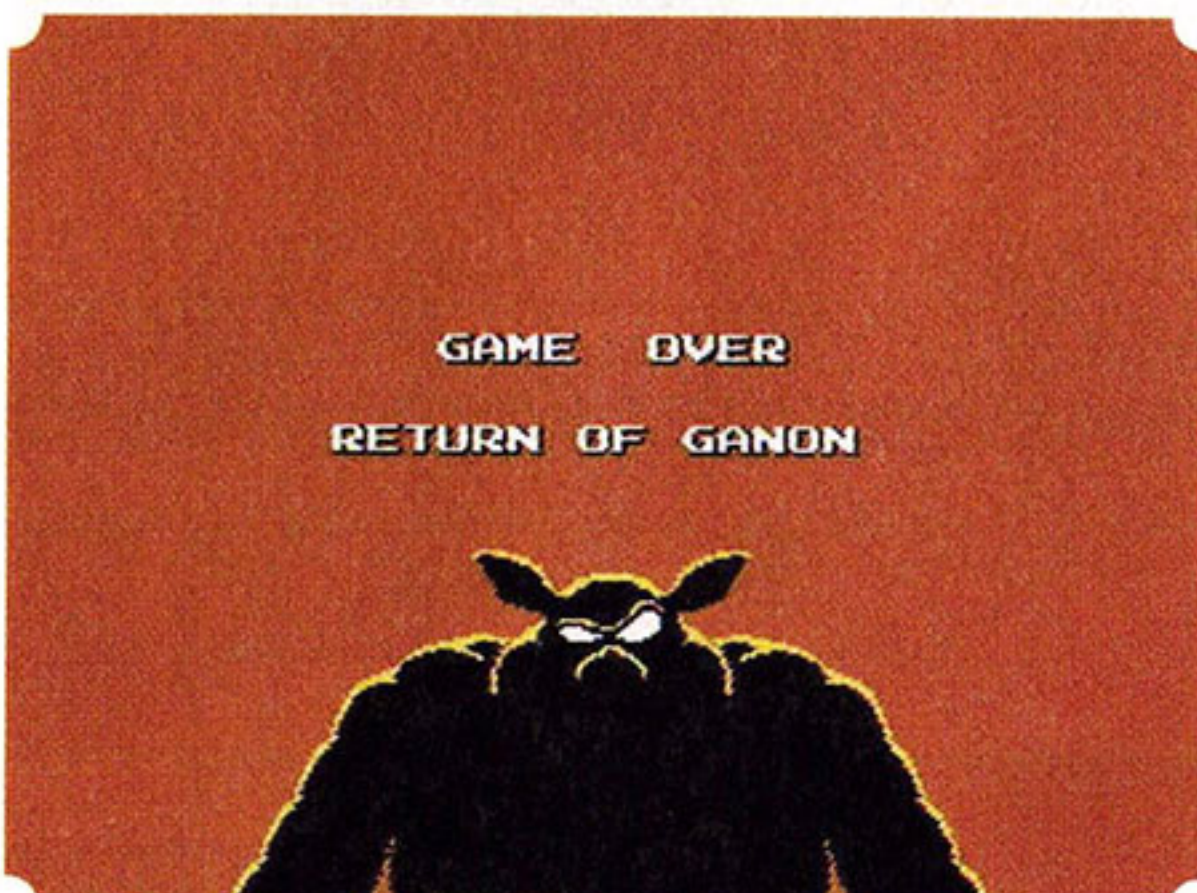
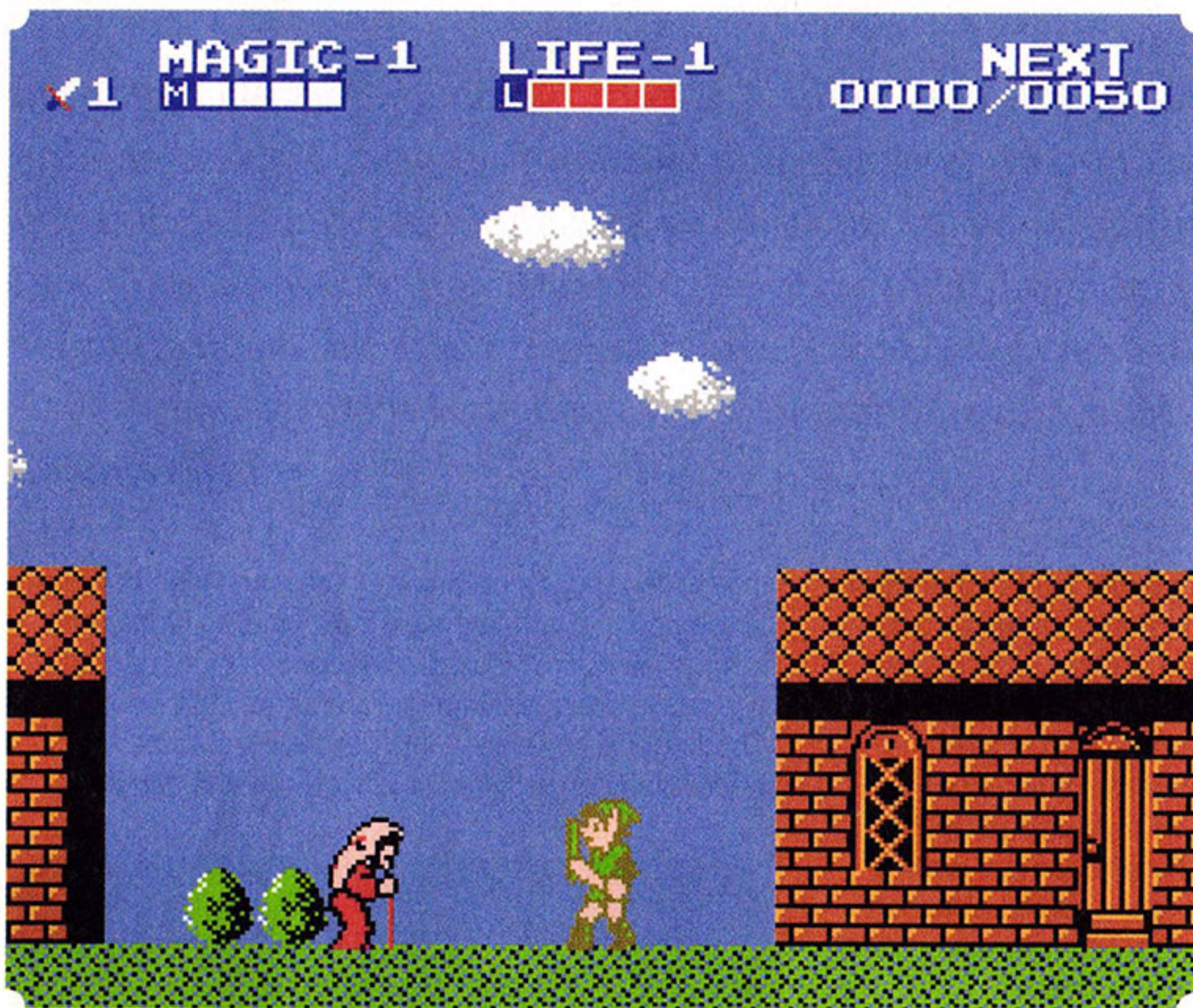
I still remember plugging that shining cartridge into my grubby NES. It worked without any finagling, and soon enough I was staring at Link's profile. *Zelda II*'s side-scrolling gameplay caught me off guard, but years of platforming experience helped me acclimate quickly. Link doesn't usually bring his aerobic abilities into battle, and that's why jumping in *Zelda II* intrigued me. Leaping to slash at enemies' weak points added a new wrinkle of complexity to fights. Combat became less about blindly slashing and more about strategy when I first encountered the shielded Ironknuckles. I loved predicting and deflecting their attacks. These encounters reminded me of Stalfos battles in *Ocarina of Time*, and discovering the seed that would later evolve into grand 3D swordfights felt great.

The next thing that threw me for a loop was the music. Upon entering the top-down overworld, the familiar melody of the original *Zelda*'s theme begins, but it is quickly replaced with a more flourishing, triumphant tune. I've always adored video game music, and *Zelda II*'s soundtrack immediately nestled into my ears. Despite the game's age, the score sucked me into Link's grand adventure, and I still catch myself humming it today.

Good music has helped smooth over *Zelda II*'s rough edges in my fuzzy memories, but the game's punishing difficulty isn't easily forgotten. By the time I decided to tackle the game, I had already conquered several *Final Fantasy* titles. I was no stranger to grinding. *Zelda II* is the only time I've had to grind out levels as Link, and I loved it. Beefing up Link's magic, health, and attack power after endlessly murdering enemies with a high P-bag drop rate (*Zelda II*'s confusing XP pickup) was as rewarding a venture as in any RPG.

Maxing out Link's abilities wasn't just satisfying, it was downright necessary. Facing off with the first incarnation of the now-infamous Dark Link was a grueling slugfest. I died many, many times. I probably should have taken a break, but I remember fighting that bastard for hours straight. I could have trekked through that temple in my sleep by the time I finally vanquished my doppelganger and won the Triforce of Courage. Princess Zelda had been saved again.

I recall visiting a local pool hall with friends shortly after the ending credits rolled. I awkwardly leaned over the table in the smoky room and lined up my shots with fingers still aching from the NES controller's rigid architecture. I whiffed several shots and probably sunk the eight ball. I was never good at pool, but it didn't really bother me that night — I had just beat *Zelda II*. *by Tim Turi*



A Link to the Past

Release **April 13, 1992** • Format **Super Nintendo**

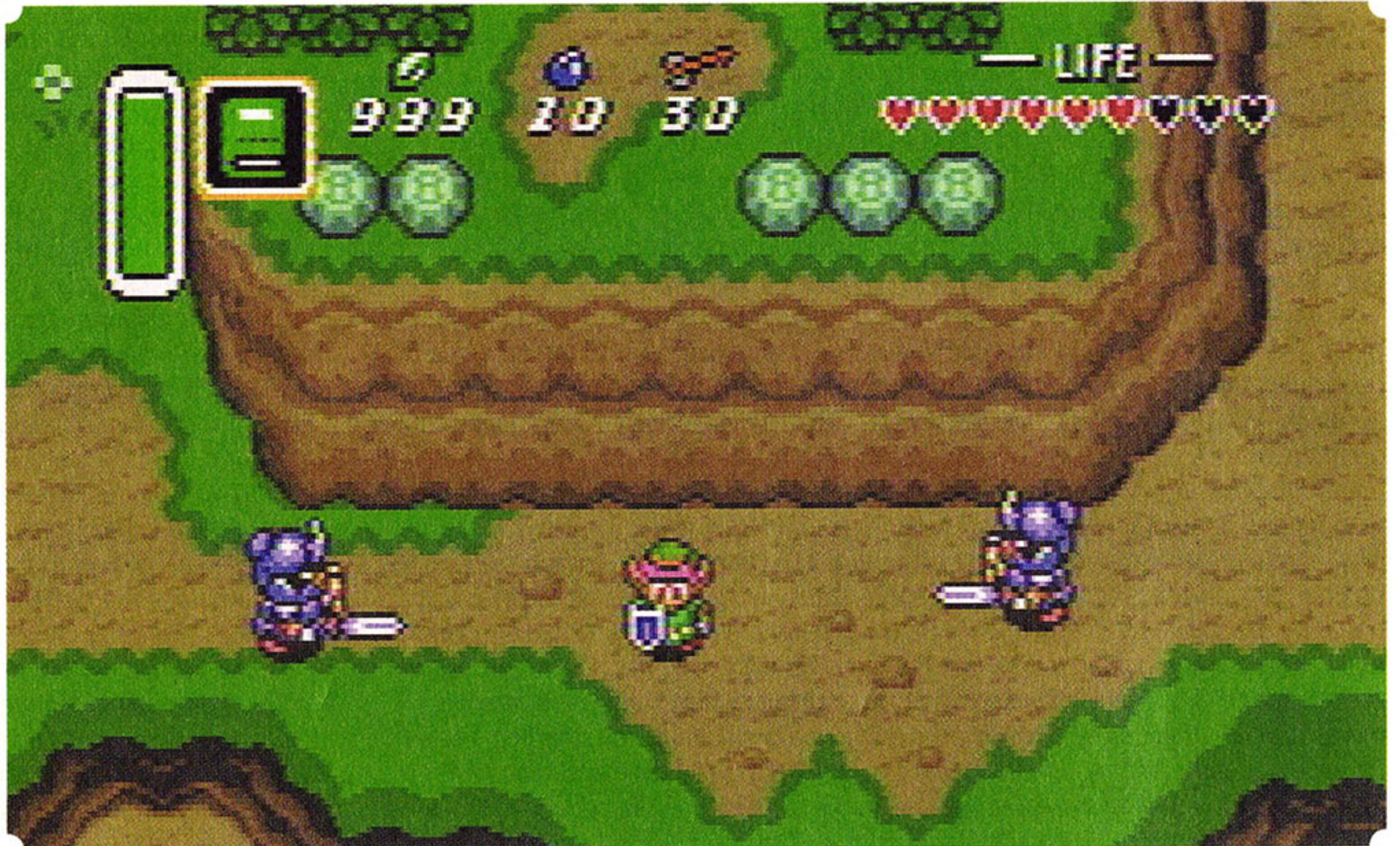


While I appreciate the original Legend of Zelda and enjoyed playing through it years after its release, I was a toddler when it originally hit store shelves in 1987. I obviously wasn't cognizant enough at the time to recognize its impact on the industry, but I do have faint memories of watching my father and step-father play through it as a child. I grew older and became enamored with the Mario series, Mega Man, and Mike Tyson's Punch-Out, but Zelda mostly escaped me until my eighth birthday. However daunting the game seemed to me when I was younger, I felt ready when I opened my birthday present to find A Link to the Past.

It was the same day I received my Super Nintendo, along with the included Super Mario World. I wanted both games more than anything in the world, but I decided to pop Zelda in first. After waking up in his house, I assumed control of 16-bit Link for the first time. I picked up a couple of pots, grabbed the lantern, and then walked outside. That's when I heard the ominous music and saw the rain for the first time. Looking at it now, the rain seems utterly unremarkable. It's a standard weather effect, and didn't try anything artistically dangerous. Despite this, it was something I had never seen before.

It wasn't so much the graphical element of the scene that fascinated me, but the overall mood. The lighting outside was dim, rain pounded down, thunder sound effects played, and armed soldiers stood guard down almost every path. I tried talking to them, but they all assured me that I was just a little kid and should go back to bed. Throughout this, Zelda spoke to me about her dire situation in the castle. This combination of elements painted the scene perfectly – bad things are happening, and no one could possibly believe this kid could do anything of real significance. It took all of five minutes for me to be absolutely sold on this game. I had waited what seemed like eons to my young mind for Super Mario World, but it could wait for now.

As I progressed in the game, I couldn't believe how vast it seemed. Defeating the wizard Agahnim in the Light World seemed as climactic as anything I had ever seen in my history of gaming, and I fully expected credits to roll after dealing the final blow. To my surprise, I was transported to a sinister parallel dimension that featured seven new dungeons to explore. I had never seen a game this big before, and



“What I found with A Link to the Past was the fun and joy you get from the simple things in that game when exploring the world. Even something as simple as cutting the grass and having something pop out of it that you weren't expecting to be there. That sense of exploration of the world itself was really where I latched on to the series, and that was where the inspiration for Marvelous [Aonuma's first game as director] came from.”

~ Eiji Aonuma

I was obsessed with scouring every inch of its maps.

Collecting items in all of my previous games was a simple procedure – I'd see the power-up or mushroom that I wanted to reach, and I'd get to it using my platforming skills. As anyone who's played the series can tell you, Zelda was different. I'd spot a piece of heart on a cliff, only to be stopped by a seemingly uncrossable set of spikes on the path to the prize. Having to return to areas once I obtained specific items was a new concept to me, being used to the instant gratification of platformers.

I wouldn't rest until I knew every secret and Easter egg in the game. I spent money on hint lines trying to figure out how to fill that one last spot on my inventory (the Cane of Byrna). I panicked when the purple bat in Kakariko Village attempted to halve my magic meter's capacity, only to be relieved when I realized he had accidentally doubled it. Upon introducing my friends to the game, I felt like the coolest kid in third grade when I showed them how to defeat Agahnim with the bug-catching net.

While I could easily narrate my entire experience with A Link to the Past beat-by-beat, I don't have enough room on this page to fully capture what this game meant to me. I had enjoyed and obsessed

over video games before A Link to the Past, but this is the one that made it clear that gaming would be a huge part of my life from that point on. Almost 20 years after I played it for the first time, I still consider The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past to be the best video game I've ever played. *by Dan Ryckert*



Link's Awakening

Release **August 2, 1993** • Format **Game Boy**



When the Legend of Zelda: Link's Awakening came out, I was doubtful. The Game Boy was a cool system, but my favorite games had a habit of losing something in the portable transition. Mega Man lost entire stages. Mortal Kombat was an indecipherable mess. Even Mario wasn't immune. Through the Game Boy's monochromatic lens, the mascot was transformed into a submarine-driving munchkin who threw rubber balls at giant insects. I had a hard time believing that the little plastic rectangle could be a suitable home for my beloved Zelda. I used my skepticism as a shield, hoping to protect myself from being disappointed in the game the same way Zelda II let me down.

Oh boy, was I ever wrong.

Link's Awakening is one of my favorite games of all time, portable or otherwise. It magnificently captured what I loved about the series, while simultaneously playing with its still-evolving formula. The dungeon designs are still some of the best to date, with puzzles that are as elegant as they are difficult. Best of all, it's really weird.

The game opens with Link washing ashore on a beach after his ship is ruined in a storm. He's nursed back to health by a girl named Marin, one of the many residents of Koholint Island. It's immediately clear that this isn't your typical Zelda game. One of the first things you do is walk past a Chain Chomp in the village. At the time, seeing a Mario character so clearly out of its element was stunning. That wasn't the only unusual cameo. SimCity's Dr. Wright makes an appearance, as does Yoshi and the Goombas. The whole experience feels like playing through a fever dream – with good reason, as it turns out.

I spent the better part of the summer of 1993 with my face pressed against a tiny screen. If there was a light source nearby, I was aiming my Game Boy at it like a solar collector. When it was all over, I was more than a little sad. Link's Awakening made me laugh, with silly characters and situations. Its puzzles – particularly the Eagle's Tower level, with its collapsing pillars – made me want to tear my hair out. But still, more than anything else, I was just bummed out that I finished one of the best games I'd ever played. I think even then I knew just how special it was. *by Jeff Cork*



Oracle of Ages / Oracle of Seasons

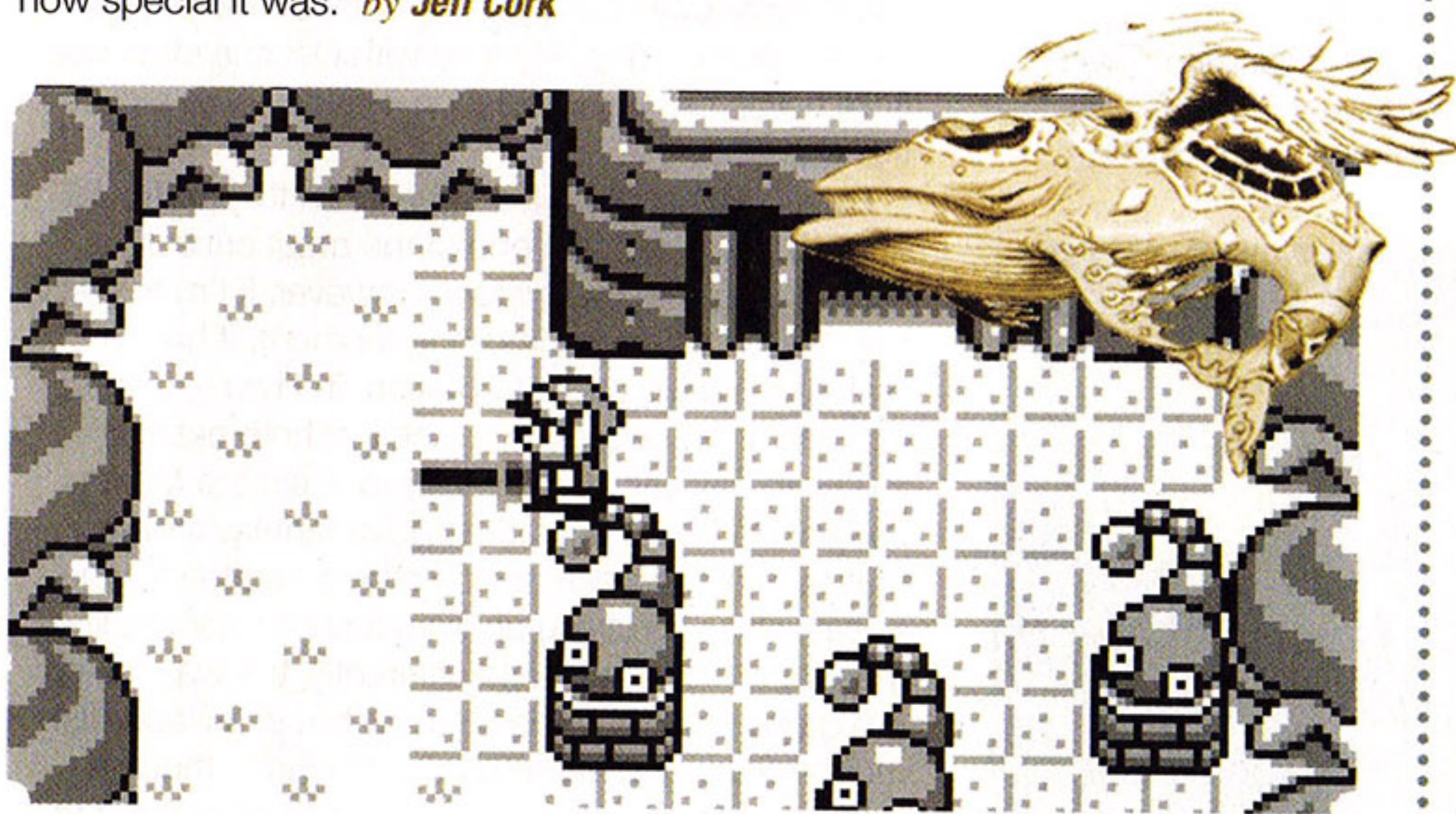
Release **May 13, 2001** • Format **Game Boy Color**



I was still in high school when Capcom hatched its plot to create a trilogy of linked Zelda games for the Game Boy Color, but I was already savvy enough (or at least cynical enough) to be deeply concerned at the prospect of Nintendo handing one of my favorite series over to another publisher. As it turns out, I had nothing to worry about.

This trimmed-down duo broke down the Zelda formula into its two core elements – Ages focused on the puzzle-solving that I'm so fond of, and Seasons was more about action and combat. I'll always be curious what Capcom intended to do with the canceled third title. Because they deal with shifts between four seasons and two different time periods, the overworlds of the Oracle games are surprisingly massive and full of secrets for gamers willing to experiment.

Most gamers willingly acknowledge Capcom's skill at working with the Zelda formula as proven by the Oracle games and Minish Cap, but I think it deserves even greater recognition. On the same day, Capcom released two fully fleshed out Zelda titles of such quality that most fans would have no trouble believing they came from Nintendo itself. It was an incredible, expectation-defying feat by any measurement. *by Phil Kollar*



Darker relics of Nintendo's past



We're obviously smitten with this lengthy list of core Zelda releases, but there exists a long-lost trilogy of games technically tied to the series that Nintendo and its fans have made a silent agreement to pretend didn't happen. In 1993 and 1994, three Zelda games developed outside of Nintendo were released for the obscure Phillips CD-i. Here's a quick overview of the three Zelda games you should never play.

Link: Faces of Evil – This side-scrolling travesty featured such bonuses as stiff controls, enemies that can

stun-lock you in combat as they drain your health slash by slash, and Link doing the infamously stupid "duck walk" by crouching and walking at the same time. Worst of all, it broke a cardinal Nintendo rule for the series: Link was given an awful, grating voice in animated cutscenes that were worse than the short-lived Zelda cartoon series.

Zelda: Wand of Gamelon – While borrowing the same terrible side-scrolling style of Faces of Evil, Wand of Gamelon has the unfortunate distinction of being the first Zelda game that allows players to step into the role of

Princess Zelda. It came with its own set of problems as well, particularly sketchy platforming and an overabundance of dark rooms that require constant use of lantern oil just to view your surroundings.

Zelda's Adventure – A new developer and a perspective shift weren't enough to save the final Zelda CD-i game from being just as terrible as the others. The overhead view initially lends it a classic Zelda feeling, but a rough art style, lengthy loading between screens, and a broken map system quickly revealed it for the sham it is. The animated sequences from the other two games are gone, but they're replaced by live action video cut scenes that are just as painful to watch.



Ocarina of Time

Release **November 23, 1998** • Format **Nintendo 64**



I was not sold on the idea of a 3D Zelda. By 1998, both Sony and Nintendo had some strong 3D offerings out on the market, but Zelda? That was sacred and not to be messed with. The earlier games in the series were almost a genre in and of themselves – nothing else matched the thrill of exploration and magic that characterized The Legend of Zelda. It's fair to say I was wary of the big changes on the horizon.

Cut to a few months later, and I was happily touting Ocarina as one of my favorite video games ever, even

daring to declare that maybe, just maybe, I liked it more than its predecessors.

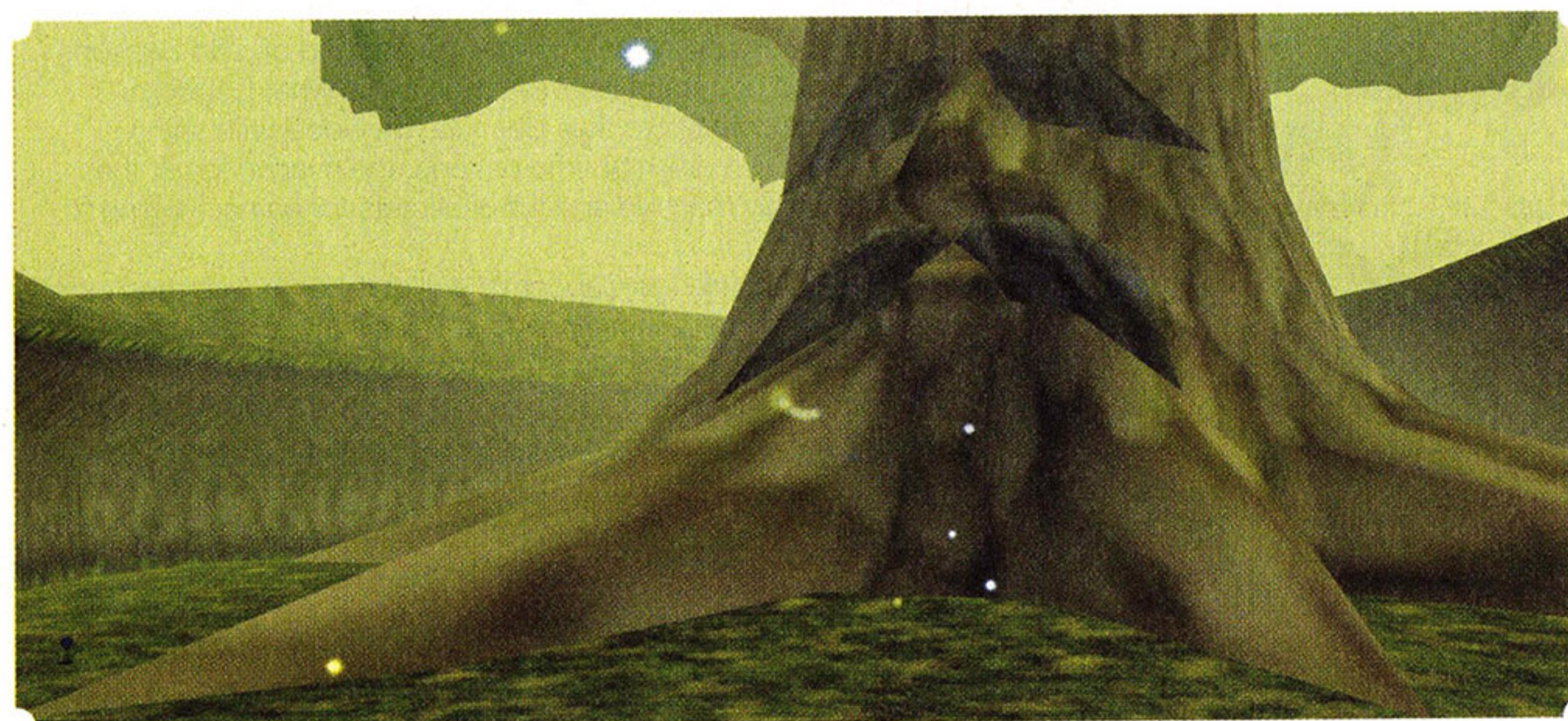
Nintendo nailed the 3D experience. It was, in every way I could have imagined and several that I hadn't, better than I expected it to be. The context sensitive actions, the auto-jump, the lock-on combat system – Ocarina was years ahead in quality with the way it presented what would become the dominant camera view in the coming decade.

However, the things that made Ocarina of Time really work were extensions of what I had always loved in the series. From the first time I broke out

onto Hyrule Field and heard the music swell, to the excitement of saddling up on Epona, and on through the wonder of entering the Temple of Time and uncovering the magic of the Ocarina's music, Zelda's first N64 outing was a grand journey of discovery. Hyrule felt like a true fantasy world, filled with a deep and storied history, charming characters, and strange creatures; the power of that world was all the more remarkable because the wonder and excitement lasted so long. My time with Ocarina stretched from hours into days and then weeks – how big was this game?

There's plenty of praise to heap on this particular Zelda entry. It remains one of the most critically lauded game titles in history. However, if I'm to distill my love for the game into one moment, it has to be Link's startling transformation. In Hyrule, it takes just one short sequence to see our hero enter as a boy and exit as a man ready to wield the Master Sword. But like many of the great fantasy stories, that moment represents something greater. It's the experience of growing up from a child to an adult – the way we see the world differently, the way things get darker and more dangerous, but simultaneously more thrilling and rewarding. Just when I thought I'd seen everything this Hyrule had to offer, it all felt new again as I rediscovered it seven years into its own future.

Video games get a lot of flak for being all about escapism, as if all anyone gets out of them is a break from the real world into some implausible illusion. Undoubtedly, games do give us that thrill. What's lost in that equation is another aspect of why we love games. Amid these fantastic backdrops and unusual characters, the best games touch on the realities we all understand. Ocarina certainly deserves credit for its technical mastery and its trailblazing approaches to everything from combat to puzzles. However, it also holds a place as one of the great coming-of-age stories, and proof that the interactive medium has its own ways to represent and talk about that universal experience. *by Matt Miller*



“The first way that we approached it was what can be done in 3D when looking at the template of a 2D Zelda? ...That was a tremendous amount of fun. There weren't really any templates or rules for us to work from in creating that game. We were really pioneering and doing it on our own at the time. That's where a lot of the joy came from.”

~ Eiji Aonuma

Majora's Mask

Release **October 25, 2000** • Format **Nintendo 64**



Considering I had to wait six years between *A Link to the Past* and *Ocarina of Time*, the last thing I expected after the series' 3D debut was a new console title within two years. I started hearing rumblings about a new *Zelda* in 1999, with the rumored titles *Ura Zelda* and *Zelda: Gaiden*. Screenshots depicted the young version of Link exploring a town with a large clock tower in the center, although further details were slow to release. More information leaked out during development, and I started to worry that the new game would be exclusive to the 64 DD (the failed N64 add-on that was never released outside of Japan). Being a 15-year-old who worked part-time at a movie theater, I definitely didn't have the cash to spend on a bulky disc drive add-on, even if it was required to play *Zelda*. To my relief, Nintendo eventually announced that it would be coming to the Nintendo 64 proper, with the only additional purchase required being the relatively inexpensive Expansion Pak. When it finally released in late 2000, I expected a quickly made sequel to one of the best games of all time. What I got was a fantastic yet odd experience that stands as a unique departure in the *Zelda* franchise.

The most defining characteristic of *Majora's Mask* is the way the story and time-bending gameplay mechanics work together. An ominous, gigantic moon (complete with demonic face) is looming over the land of Termina, and it threatens to take out the bustling Clock Town in three days. Link is tasked with enlisting the help of four giants to repel the moon, using the powers of the Ocarina to juggle time as needed.



Using familiar tunes like the "Song of Time" as well as a handful of new ones, Link could slow down or speed up time, as well as return to the first of the three days. With only a handful of major dungeons, most of *Majora's* puzzles revolved around the residents of Termina. With his notebook, Link could track the needs and schedules of numerous characters, and significant rewards were in place for completing these sidequests.

These rewards usually came in the form of one of 24 magic masks. These ranged from bunny ears that made you run faster, to a *Clockwork Orange*-esque contraption that kept Link's eyes open while an old woman told him boring stories. They weren't all trivial, however. The Blast Mask let you create as many explosions as you wanted without having to waste a single bomb. The form-changing Zora, Goron, and Deku masks may



have had a bigger impact on the overall gameplay, but discovering the uses of the more minor masks was just as much fun. While getting 100% in most modern games might snag you a hefty achievement, collecting all of the masks rewarded you with something that offered major in-game benefits. Taking bosses down as Link's Fierce Deity form was a great way to feel powerful after all your hard work, and it's one of the most impressive versions of Link we've seen in the series' history.

When I think back to *Majora's Mask*, my most immediate memory is that of the moon. It wasn't just some timer on the HUD or a repeated reminder from your fairy; it was an omnipresent menace that would become immediately apparent by simply looking at the sky. This constant race against time was a novel gameplay mechanic, but it also served as one of the most stressful features in any game I've ever played. I spent hours exploring Hyrule Field at my leisure in *Ocarina of Time*. In *Majora's Mask*, I felt like I was constantly running for my life.

As a follow-up to the iconic *Ocarina of Time*, *Majora's Mask* took some huge risks with its dramatic gameplay shifts. Some gamers found the time mechanic too confusing or stressful, while others were fascinated with the new experiences it created (I consider myself in the latter camp). While it departed from the norm by featuring a tale that didn't focus on Hyrule or Ganon, it still managed to include many familiar elements like Epona, a fairy companion, and the legendary overworld theme. These reminded you that you were certainly playing *Zelda*, but the rest of the game ensured it was unlike anything you had seen before. *by Dan Ryckert*



The Wind Waker

Release **March 24, 2003** • Format **GameCube**



Field was large, but Epona's speedy gallop shrunk it down to a less impressive scale. In contrast, the Great Sea spread out as far as the eye could see (or the GameCube could render), and I felt encouraged to explore at my own leisure. I loved seeing a speck in the horizon and sailing my ship over to see what it was. Admittedly, I loved having to constantly babysit the wind's direction slightly less, but the rewards offset the inconvenience.

The game's cel-shaded world masks a story of loss and regret, hope and redemption. Games routinely stir up my emotions. I laugh at well-written jokes, freak myself out in survival-horror games, and I'm not above moments of controller-throwing rage. Few games, however, make me sad. I was overcome with a feeling of melancholy when my journey eventually took me to Hyrule Castle. The once-majestic place I'd visited times before was now flooded and in stasis. That moment, along with the rest of the game, is elevated by one of my all-time favorite game soundtracks.

I'm not really a proponent of gamer culture. When I see someone baking a game-related cake or stenciling a Space Invader on the side of their house, I shudder a little bit. And don't get me started on video game-themed weddings. I realize that I should be embracing this kind of nerdy stuff because, well, I'm kind of a nerd, but I can't abide by this kind of behavior. Games are fun, but there's more to life than jabbing away at a controller all the time. That said, I'm also a hypocrite of the highest order.

When my wife and I were planning our wedding, we ran into a problem. We couldn't walk down the aisle accompanied by the soothing sounds of crickets chirping, so we had to come up with a song. Something simple. Something pleasant. Something fun. I ran dozens of candidates by her, and each was summarily rejected. Then I found the perfect song.

Weeks later, my soon-to-be bride and I walked past our loved ones and important friends as the theme from *The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker* played. It's a great song, and only one of my alpha-nerd friends recognized it. To this day, my parents refer to it as "that nice Irish song."

Whew. My cover remains intact. *by Jeff Cork*



Sometimes it seems as though Nintendo is damned if it does, and damned if it doesn't. Stay faithful to a game's roots, and people blast the sequel for being derivative. Take a risk by trying something new, and others cry foul at those changes. With *The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker*, Nintendo pushed the series in a stunning new direction, creating one of the most polarizing entries in the series.

For people anticipating the realistic-looking Link from a GameCube sizzle reel a few years earlier, the wide-eyed, cartoony interpretation of the hero that Nintendo revealed at its 2002 E3 presentation was a shock. GameCube defenders had been fighting off charges that the system was "kiddie" since its

launch, and Toon Link was a colorfully wrapped artillery shell for the other factions of console warriors.

Personally, I was thrilled to see that the series was getting overhauled. The so-called Realistic Link was a safe direction to explore, but that's exactly what it was: safe. I know some people never made it past *Wind Waker's* distinctive art direction, and I honestly feel sorry for them. The game did more than reskin Hyrule and its inhabitants. As much as I love other games in the series, *Wind Waker* is the one that most made me feel like I was actually exploring an amazing new world.

From the cinematic opening, which told Link's story through tapestries, to the moment I set foot on Outset Island, I was sold. Everything about the game felt vast and epic. *Ocarina of Time's* Hyrule



Four Swords Adventures

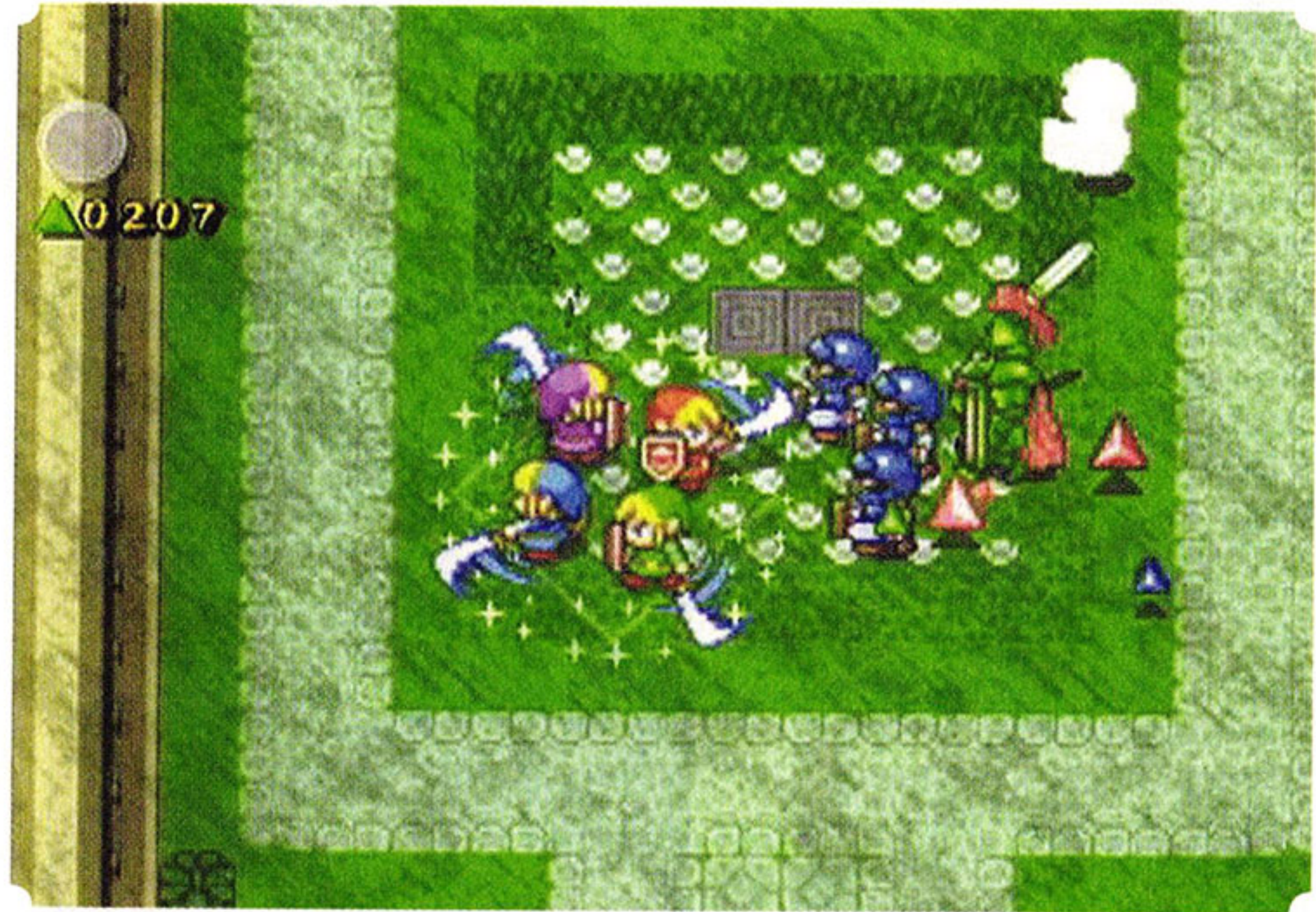
Release **June 7, 2004** • Format **GameCube**



On paper, Four Swords Adventures sounded like a dream come true for me. It was a top-down Zelda title that featured an art style similar to A Link to the Past, and it allowed for four-player cooperative play. I knew it wouldn't feature a full-length quest like the SNES classic, but the idea of taking on bosses and enemies with three friends still sounded incredible. However, I quickly realized in the weeks leading up to its release that this was a game that would be very difficult to experience to its full potential.

To play four-player, each player had to have a Game Boy Advance as well as the cable that allowed it to connect to the GameCube. I was in my junior year of college when Four Swords Adventures released, and most of my gamer friends were more interested in finishing their degree than keeping up to date with portable gaming consoles and their peripherals (what the hell was the matter with them?). I knew one friend with the required components, so I had him come over the night the game came out. We played for a couple of hours and had a blast fighting over rupees and throwing each other into pits of lava. We had so much fun that we decided to halt our playthrough so we could experience the rest with the full four-player line-up. We tried to wrangle up friends with GBAs for a few weeks, but things never panned out. Our two-player game was never finished, and I found single-player to be a shadow of what the game was supposed to be.

I assumed my history with the game was over at that point, but getting hired at Game Informer meant four-player was finally a possibility. Several months ago, I grabbed four GBAs from the office and bought four used link cables. Tim Turi, Ben Reeves, and Ben Hanson were on board as we went to my apartment and finally booted up four-player Four Swords Adventures. We enjoyed it for a few



hours, but eventually agreed that the puzzles weren't quite up to Zelda's high level of quality, and the game as a whole wasn't worth the seven-year wait to play. Four Swords Adventures isn't a bad game by any means, it just requires an awkwardly complicated setup that doesn't feel quite worth it in the end. *by Dan Ryckert*

The Minish Cap

Release **January 10, 2005** • Format **Game Boy Advance**



The Game Boy Advance was a renaissance of the glory days of 16-bit gaming in a lot of ways, but few of the system's games approached the brilliance of Minish Cap. This wasn't a simple port or reworking of a classic game or formula. Capcom's last Zelda game was a joyous exploration of why we loved the Super Nintendo era in the first place.

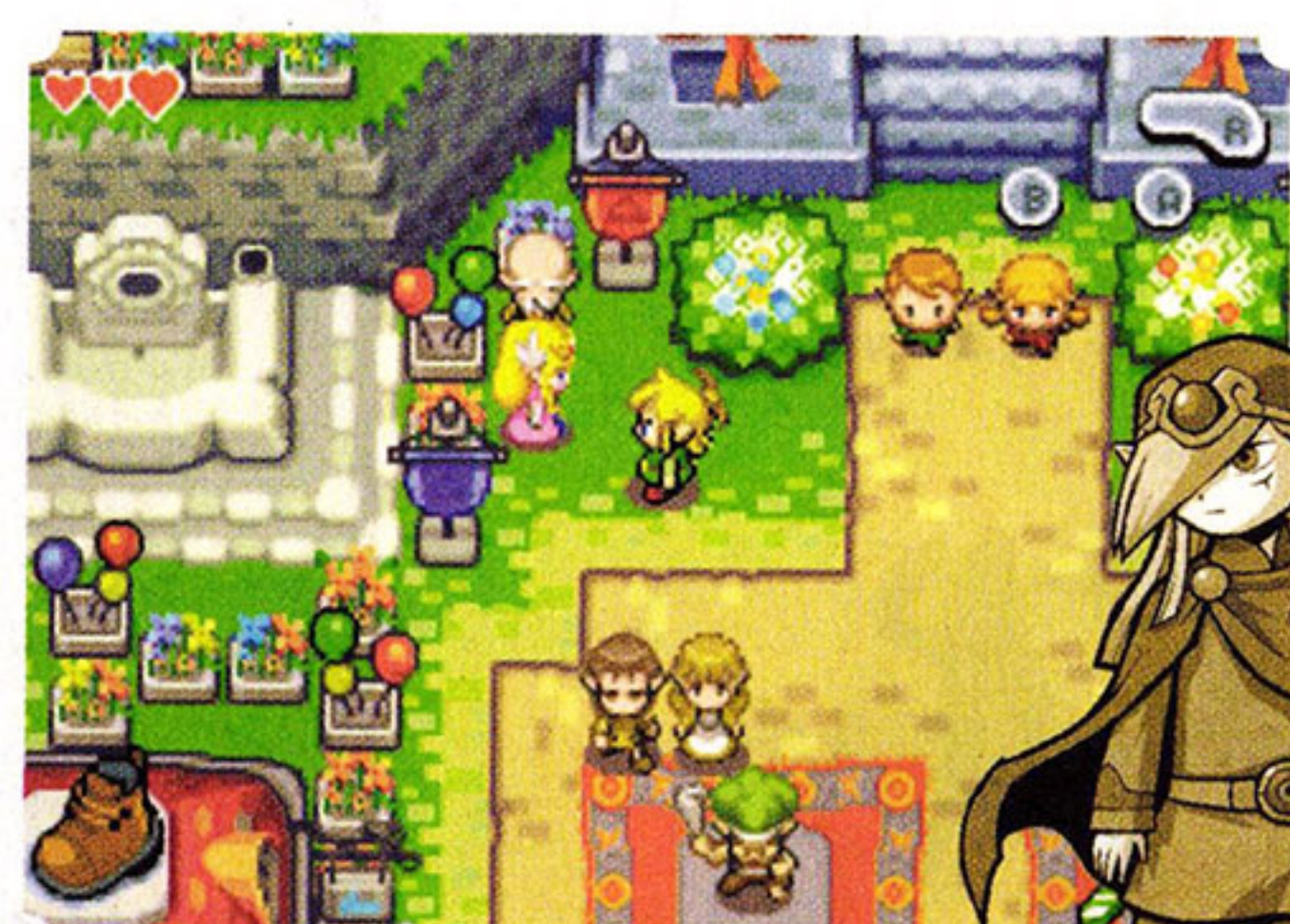
You'll never hear me say a bad word about A Link To The Past, and I would have gobbled up a translation of those mechanics to a new version of Hyrule with gusto. Capcom went well beyond that with

Minish Cap, though, bringing a whole new set of fantastically creative ideas to the traditional top-down sword-swinging gameplay.

Just as the Dark World or the adult/child worlds in other Zelda titles played with the idea of two planes of gameplay intersecting at odd and wonderful angles, Minish Cap's concept of shrinking down to insect size and exploring the alien world of mushrooms and treelike blades of grass is cleverly integrated into the puzzle design. The unfettered joy of digging through your toolbox to come up with a jury-rigged solution to the problem at hand, whether it's an epic boss battle or a flooded hallway,

is captured here as well as in any of Nintendo's own classics.

I thought that I was going to have to grow up with Link after his move to polygonal 3D, but Minish Cap reminded me what it was like to be discovering the brilliance of SNES gaming when that was the big thing and Ninja Turtles were the height of popular culture. It's a Saturday morning cartoon come to life in all the best ways, its timeless gameplay, story, and puzzles respecting the intelligence of an adult while bringing back one of the finest points in gaming history. *by Adam Biessener*



Phantom Hourglass

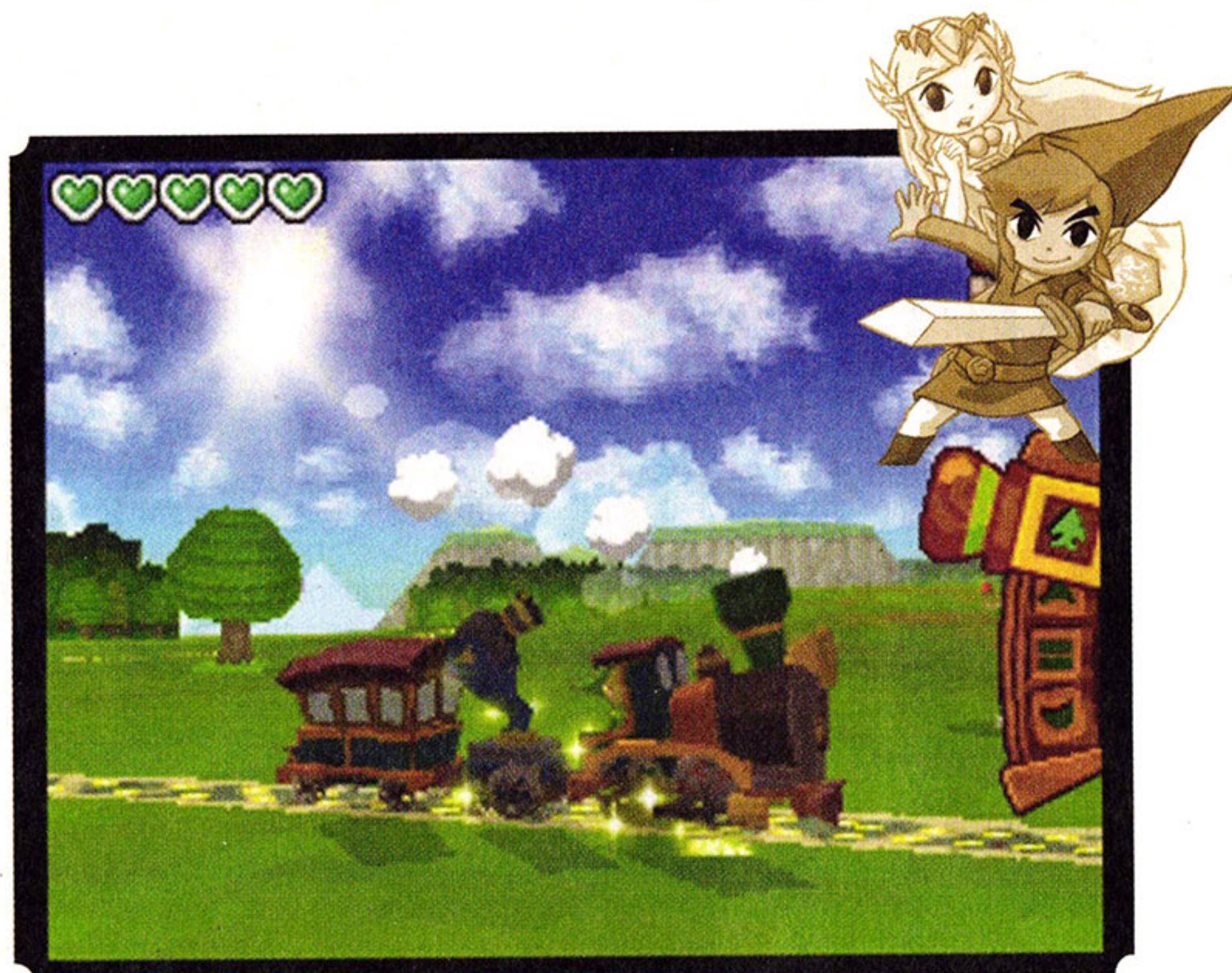
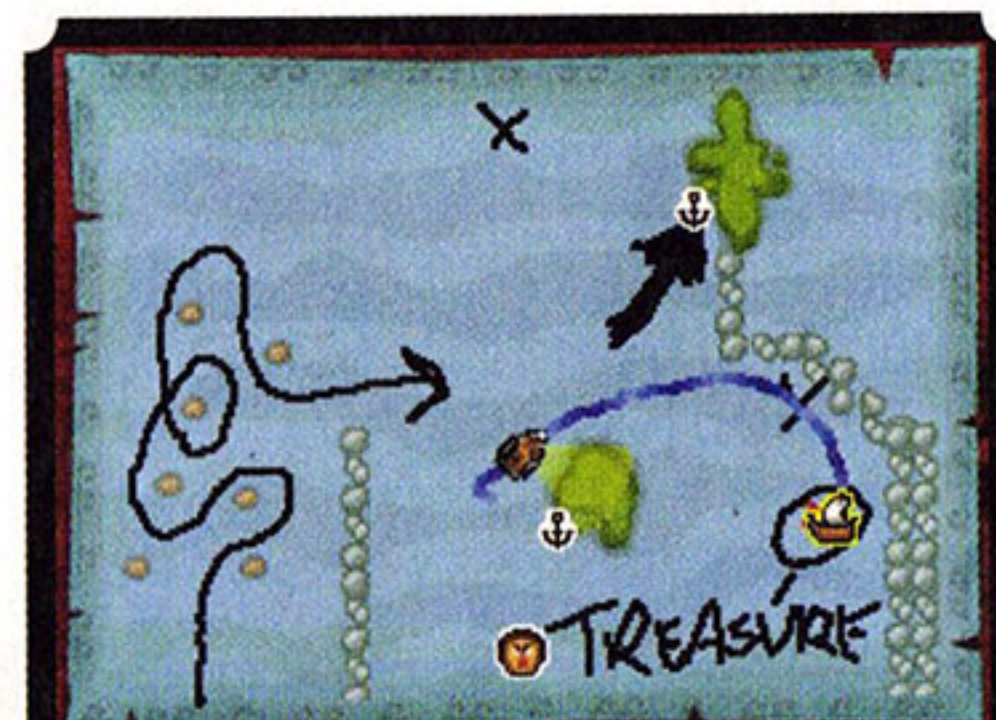
Release **October 1, 2007** • Format **Nintendo DS**



I remember the moment *The Legend of Zelda: Phantom Hourglass* was announced at Game Developers Conference in 2006. Nintendo showed the debut trailer during its keynote address, and everyone in the room flipped out as is customary when a brand new Zelda is shown. The excitement had many different reasons behind it. *Wind Waker* fans were thrilled that Toon Link was finally making a comeback. DS owners had their first Zelda game to look forward to. I was pumped to get another classic top-down view experience in the vein of the original.

Phantom Hourglass was anything but traditional, however. The innovative controls showed that a touch screen on the DS could handle just about everything for a full action adventure game. Making movement and attacking feel natural was an achievement in itself, but so many other creative uses were the icing on the cake. Remember how boring sailing was in *Wind Waker*? Here it was completely remedied on the S.S. Linebeck by being able to draw out your course and shoot the cannon at seafaring enemies while you cruised automatically across the sea. And who could forget how awesome it was to be able to trace out the path of your boomerang before you threw it? The puzzle possibilities opened up by this alone were amazing.

The simplest and most useful touch screen tool by far, however, was the note system. After decades of finding some scrap paper to write down puzzle clues and special locations in *Zelda* games, it was finally packaged in the game itself. Simply being able to mark bomb locations on an in-game map would have blown my younger self's mind, and it still kind of does. Nintendo has gone on to implement note-taking into the 3DS itself so that all games can take advantage of this popular feature without extra hassle on the development side. It gets me wondering what innovations are around the corner when Nintendo gets around to an inevitable all-new *Zelda* on 3DS. All I ask is that Nintendo keeps that top-down view. *by Bryan Vore*



Spirit Tracks

Release **December 7, 2009** • Format **Nintendo DS**



I don't believe in bad *Zelda* games. Sure, there are games in the franchise that have disappointed dedicated fans, but that doesn't make them awful in general. I missed out on *Spirit Tracks* when it initially released, and the negative buzz towards the game didn't encourage me to make it a priority. Eventually I picked up the game during a sale and tossed it on my pile of backlogged games. A few months back I retrieved it, popped it into my DS to accompany me on a long airplane trip, and had a good time.

Exploring the *Zelda* series' vast overworlds has always been a passion of mine, but I adore the dungeons just as much. *Spirit Tracks* felt like a series of dungeons strung together by streamlined locomotive-based exploration. For some, that takes all the fun out of the *Zelda* formula. For my bite-sized stints with the game during travel, it was perfect. The linear nature of train tracks made it so I always knew where I was going. That made for a rewarding experience each time I cracked open my DS. I've trekked through my fair share of

expansive Hyrule overworlds in my day. Not every *Zelda* game needs to have a cookie cutter clone of the same map.

Though I'll defend *Spirit Tracks'* means of transport and the core dungeon design, a few facets made me regret passing on *Okami* in favor of this cart. The Phantom Armor carryover from *Phantom Hourglass* almost derailed the entire experience. Babysitting

suits of armor possessed by Princess *Zelda* became tedious. It reminded me too much of *Phantom Hourglass's* déjà vu-inducing Temple of the Ocean King. Making matters worse, the last boss battle in *Spirit Tracks* was easily the worst in the entire series. As if having to control both Link and *Zelda* atop a demonic train wasn't bad enough, later you've got to deflect dozens of huge fireballs in succession using the touchscreen's dodgy combat controls.

My complaints may seem severe, but you've got to keep things in perspective. This is a *Zelda* game. Nobody should ignore *Spirit Tracks* simply because a handful of diehard fans whined about it not having *Epona*. *Spirit Tracks* is still a wonderful game, and I'm happy I took a chance bringing it on a long trip. I've definitely traveled with less charming companions. *by Tim Turi*



Twilight Princess

Release **November 19, 2006** • Format **GameCube / Wii**



Early in the evening on Saturday, November 18, 2006, I joined a line of teenagers, 20-somethings, and scruffy adults at a Wal-Mart in the middle of Minnesota – the nearest location to my tiny college that sold video games. I had never been to a midnight launch before, but years of Nintendo fandom and a build-up of hype for the new Wii console had forced me out of my comfort zone.

What new experiences could this system offer that would be worth standing in Wal-Mart's frigid entryway for six hours (and longer for those who had already been there when I arrived)? Walking down the line and polling people on which launch games they were purchasing, there was a universal refrain: *Twilight Princess*.

Upon getting home from the store with my copy in hand, I greedily unwrapped it, tore open the Wii, and popped the game in, ignoring my friends' pleas to try *Wii Sports* first. As it turned out, this was a mistake. *Twilight Princess* has a notoriously slow first few hours, and I gave up when I got stuck trying to figure out the correct way to catch a fish.

Ignoring these early frustrations the next day, I pressed on and spent the next week plowing through *Twilight Princess* with as few breaks as I could handle. Sleep? Didn't need it. College classes? Unless my professors decided to teach the history of

Hyrule or the correct procedure for defeating a Deku Toad, they were useless.

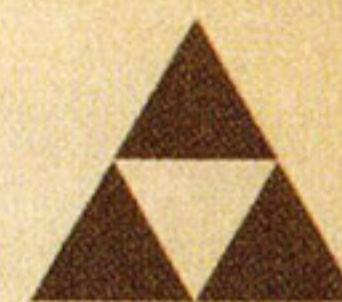
Even more so than the near-perfect *Ocarina of Time*, *Twilight Princess* pulled me into the realm of Hyrule and made it feel like a real place. Maybe it was the more realistic style or the darker tone, or maybe it was how Hyrule Castle loomed in the distance from almost any point in the game's overworld, constantly reminding me of my inevitable goal. It also boasted a greater size than the rest of the series, with my first playthrough easily lasting more than 40 hours – plenty of time to build up the world and characters such as the Link-idolizing Colin, the mysterious Twilight being Midna, and a shockingly melancholy Princess Zelda.

Another change to the *Zelda* formula that I don't think *Twilight Princess* gets enough credit for is its inventive dungeons that fit into the world more naturally. While the majority of dungeons in *Zelda* games past took place in out-of-context temples or castles, *Twilight Princess* maintained the traditional structure in unique, world-building settings. Before my adventure was done, I had explored a Yeti-inhabited mansion on top of a snowy mountain, a gilded city in the sky, and a desert prison. *Ocarina of Time* and *A Link to the Past* had toyed with strange dungeon settings a bit, but *Twilight Princess* did it more frequently and better than any other game in the series.

Perhaps my appreciation for *Twilight Princess* over *Ocarina of Time* relates to buying a Wii at launch and not having an N64 available until years after *Ocarina of Time* had come out. Whatever the reason, as far as I'm concerned, *Twilight Princess* is hands-down the best game in the series. To this day, it's one of the only games I will ever consider worth standing in line with a bunch of teenagers for an evening. *by Phil Kollar*







“Some of the fun we had back then was lost in the creation of later games.” These are the words of long-time Zelda director and producer Eiji Aonuma. He is speaking to me on a television screen via satellite. The first time I met Aonuma was at E3 2010, shortly after Nintendo debuted *The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword*. Over a year later, the game is now only a few months from release. I just asked Aonuma about the first Zelda title he worked on, the beloved *Ocarina of Time*, and he is reminiscing about how different it was working on this series at the dawn of the 3D era.

“The problem is that when you do something once in a game like *Ocarina of Time*, when you make the next game it becomes expected that all of that is there,” Aonuma laments. “You end up spending a lot of time creating all these elements of the game just to meet expectations.”

Aonuma says one of his goals with *Skyward Sword* is to “take the franchise into new places.” I’ve just spent six hours playing a near-finished version of the game and discovering exactly what new places he means.

» **Platform**

Wii

» **Style**

1-Player Action/Adventure

» **Publisher**

Nintendo

» **Developer**

Nintendo

» **Release**

November 20

A Link to the Past, a Step to the Future

by Phil Kollar



These slime creatures must be cut down quickly or they will continue growing



Zelda franchise. These muscular creatures sport fashionable haircuts and only pop their upper bodies above ground while talking to Link. The Mogma warn of a bunch of shady “guys in red” headed deeper into the volcano.

Before I can venture past my new friends, I hear a familiar noise, the loud beep that I associate with my fairy ally trying to tell me something. In the case of Skyward Sword, a new character named Fi fills the role previously held by Navi in Ocarina of Time and Midna in Twilight Princess. Fi is a female spirit who inhabits the Skyward Sword, and she’s reminding me of a new power the blade has: dowsing.

To use dowsing, Link holds the sword straight out, taking the game into a first-person view. The sword emits a loud noise when Link is pointing in the direction he needs to go. Dowsing can be used to find many different things, from keys and hearts to Zelda herself. In this case, the sword informs us that Zelda is currently in the next temple – right where those mysterious red guys went.

In addition to providing direction on the main quest, dowsing partially exists as a replacement for the compass, a long-time Zelda dungeon item that has been removed from this entry. This time around, finding a dungeon’s map will automatically fill in treasure and boss locations without the need to find another secondary item.

“A number of people working on Zelda now are people that grew up playing Zelda,” Aonuma explains. “From their perspective, they’re looking at it as, ‘What are some of the things that failed to be helpful in getting through the game?’ They’re stripping that out and streamlining.”

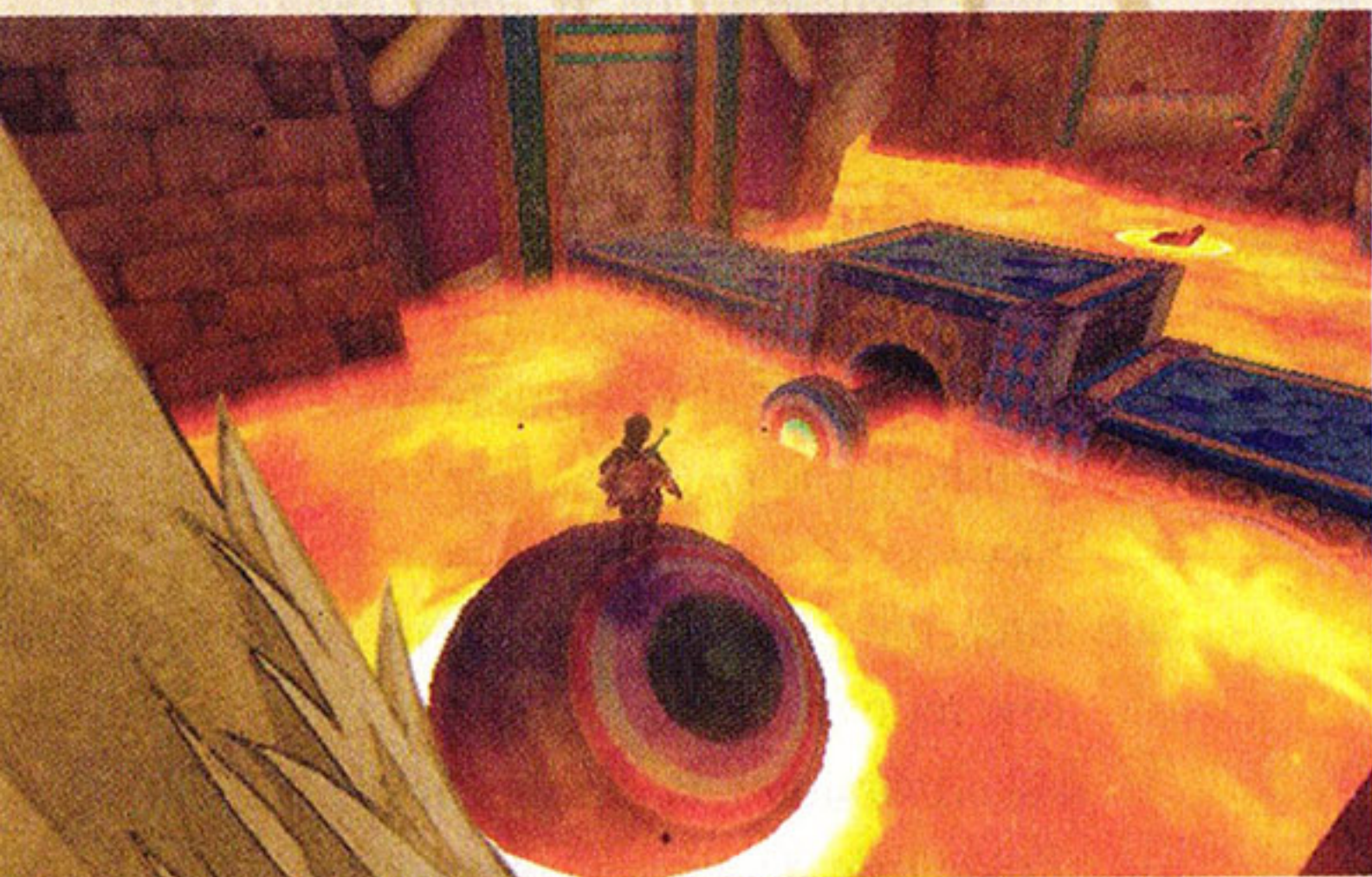
The compass also proves less necessary thanks to an important change in Skyward Sword’s structure compared to previous Zelda games. While the overworld technically still exists for players to explore between dungeons, now the developers are treating it more like a dungeon itself. Rather than exploring giant, open areas

ADVENTURES AND ORIGINS

Link begins this adventure as a citizen of Skyloft, a group of floating islands blissfully unaware of the dangerous world that exists below the clouds. The people of Skyloft travel between islands using giant birds, a rare breed of which Link befriends in a ceremony near the beginning of the game. When he’s out flying his bird with Zelda – this time an old friend rather than a princess – the two encounter a terrifying tornado that sucks her in. The rest of the game’s journey is devoted to tracking down Zelda with the aid of a powerful weapon that will eventually become the Master Sword – a plot point that neatly ties Skyward Sword to the N64 classic Ocarina of Time.

At E3, Nintendo showed off the Forest Temple, which is Skyward Sword’s first dungeon. In true Zelda fashion, the Fire Temple is next in line, and I begin in the overworld sections leading up to it.

As I enter the region known as Eldin Volcano, I’m introduced to the Mogma, a race of mole people new to the



like Hyrule Field, between-dungeon segments feature the same balanced mix of combat and puzzle-solving that makes Zelda dungeons so compelling.

My puzzle-solving skills are immediately put to the test with the introduction of a tiny seal-like enemy – named a pyrup – that hides beneath rocks and inside walls. After climbing into the cracks of a nearby wall, it begins shooting fire out of it, blocking my path. Nearby, some bomb flowers are growing, and when I pick one up I discover one of the many new combat options provided by the Wii Motion Plus controls.

Depending on how I angle the controller, I can perform a traditional overhead bomb throw or roll the bomb underhand, similar to tossing a bowling ball in *Wii Sports*. I can even put spin on the explosive package with a twist of my wrist. I throw out a few clunkers that explode ineffectually against the wall. Finally, I sink one into the hole and blow up the annoying creature. I take the time to crawl in afterward and collect a single rupee as my prize.

As I progress down the path to the volcano, I fight a few more of these fire-breathing baddies – some of which require overhead bomb throws – as well as orange slime monsters that multiply into smaller foes when I slice them and continue growing unless I destroy them quickly. On occasion the blobs drop a piece of loot that grabs my attention: a clump of goo. Along with eldin ore dropped by the pyrups, these are the first pieces I've seen of *Skyward Sword*'s upgrade system, a promising addition to the franchise.

Upgrades provide this *Zelda* game with two important elements missing from previous titles in the series: First, items grow more powerful and presumably more useful so you won't stop using them. Second, it's a money sink. In most *Zelda* games, by the time you hit the second half, you have the largest wallet in the game, and it's constantly overflowing with rupees. Now you have something to spend all that wealth on.

The upgrade system isn't fully developed yet, so Nintendo didn't include it in the demo, but director of product marketing Bill Trinen provided an example of how it might work. Using a mix of materials collected from enemies and rupees, I could upgrade my slingshot – a basic early game item – to a spread shot, providing greater firepower against larger groups of enemies. Each item has multiple levels of upgrades, though it's unclear if players

will need to choose upgrade paths or if they will eventually be able to buy every upgrade if they're rich enough.

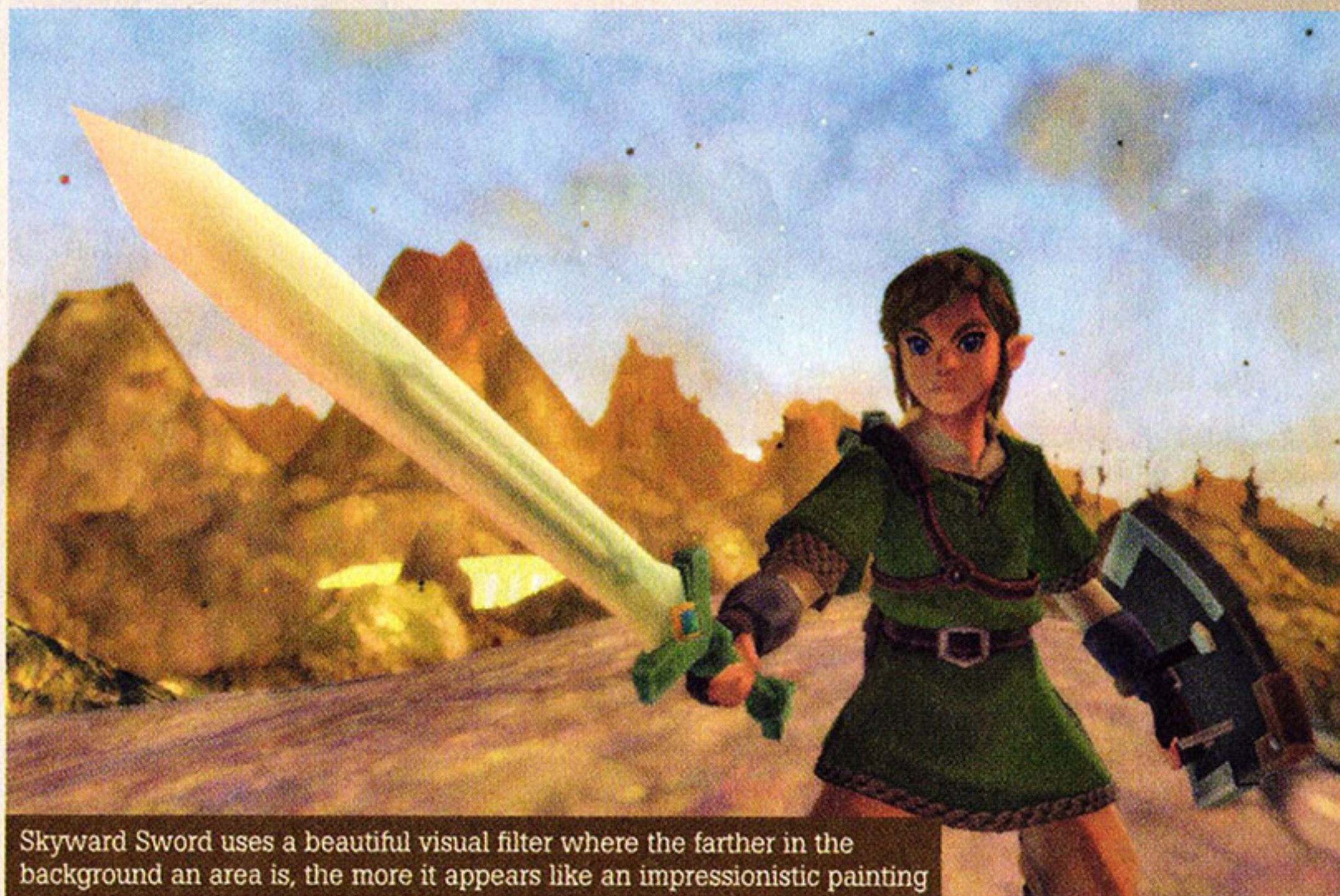
After solving some simple puzzles using bombs, I make my way into a cave. I've been playing for over an hour at this point. "Is this the dungeon finally?" I ask Trinen.

"Not yet," he says, smiling.

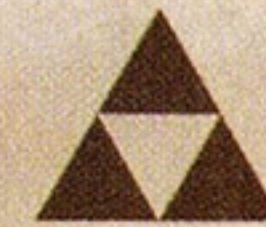
TAKE TO THE SKIES

At the mouth of the cave, I see a statue – one of many scattered throughout the overworld and dungeons. The statues serve two purposes: save points and portals to the world above the clouds. Trinen decides that now is a good time to pause my underground adventure and show me what it's like to fly in a *Zelda* game.

Link calls his bird with a sky-piercing whistle and jumps on the strange-looking beast's back. Up in the air I bring up my map and see a surprisingly familiar sight. The layout of Skyloft's many tiny islands is heavily reminiscent of the rolling seas of *The Wind Waker*. Gamers who were turned off by the hours spent sailing in that GameCube release shouldn't fret, though. Link's avian companion moves much faster than the boat ever did, and though enemies and tornados provide obstacles, you won't need to worry



Skyward Sword uses a beautiful visual filter where the farther in the background an area is, the more it appears like an impressionistic painting



AN EXPANDING BAG OF TRICKS



Every *Zelda* game is partially defined by the inventory of tools Link builds up throughout his adventure. Here are the items we know about so far in *Skyward Sword*:

Slingshot: An early ranged weapon. The slingshot can be upgraded for increased combat capability to remain useful in the late game.

Bomb Bag: Once Link has collected this convenient sack, he can store bomb flowers and use them at any time.

Bow and Arrow: A more powerful ranged weapon than the slingshot.

Digging Mitts: Link can use these gloves to unearth rupees, hearts, and other secrets hidden in the ground.

Beetle: Players let loose this flying companion but maintain control by moving the Wii remote around. The beetle can collect out-of-reach items and cut through ropes or webs to help solve puzzles.

Whip: The whip can grab onto certain things in the environment, suggesting Link might be able to swing to ledges Indiana Jones-style. It can also stun enemies in combat.

Mystery Musical Item: Nintendo wouldn't tell us what instrument Link will master this time around, but he will gain a new musical item in *Skyward Sword*. The only hint we have is that this time players use Wii Motion Plus to control the music.





about controlling the direction of the wind anymore.

I see multiple beams of light shooting up from the clouds. A green beam is situated above the forest, while a red one ascends from the volcano area I was just in. On the map screen, I can set my own blue beacon to help guide me to specific islands I want to visit.

Beyond mapping out the sky islands and exploring on your own, Skyward Sword has a treasure-hunting system somewhat like Wind Waker. While on the ground, Link can discover hidden, rune-encrusted boxes. By raising his sword to the sky to build power and then slashing, the boxes are teleported to the clouds, unlocking treasure chests up above. These chests appear as glowing points on your sky map, making it easy to toss down a beacon and locate them on your bird. It's another fun time sink adding to what Trinen implies could be the largest Zelda game yet.

The only real concern that I have about flying is how



The Mogma are allies to Link, but they tend to disappear underground once they're finished talking

DID YOU KNOW...?

Aonuma may have his early aspirations of being a puppeteer to thank for his storied career with Nintendo. "I went to university at essentially an art school, but I wasn't studying art per se," Aonuma tells me when I ask him how he got hired at Nintendo. "I was really doing more sort of craftwork, particularly creating wooden puppets. As I was wrapping up school, I realized that really wasn't something that would be easy to get a job with."

Despite his job concerns, Aonuma applied at Nintendo and was surprised at how well it worked out: "Mr. Miyamoto was in on my interview session, and he saw the puppets that I made, and he thought they were pretty interesting. I think I won him over with my puppets."



Link gets to the ground: sky-diving. Link can jump off his bird above any island or beacon, at which point he hurtles toward the ground. Players control his fall by angling the Wii controller and must press B shortly before hitting the ground to whip out a parachute and avoid a concussion. Perhaps it just takes some getting used to, but I frequently find myself overshooting my target and falling into the clouds. Luckily, Link's bird appears to rescue him before he is flattened.

While Link can return to Skyloft at most points during the game to explore and talk to townspeople, he's only required to come back between dungeons and at certain plot points. Right now, there's nothing else I can do here, so Trinen shows me how to return to Eldin Volcano to continue my march toward the next dungeon.

OUT OF THE FRYING PAN

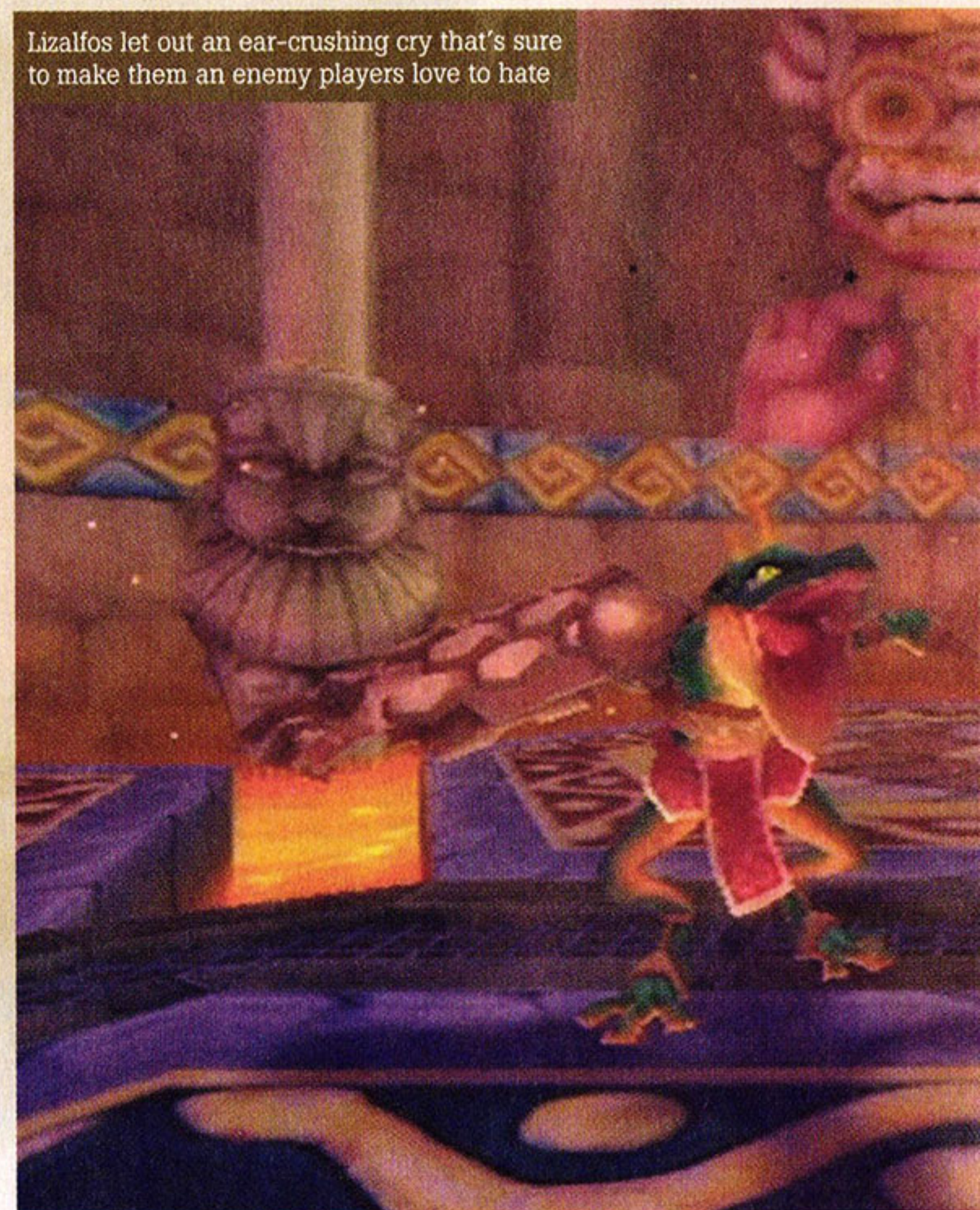
After winding my way through the mountains, I come across a locked door to the Fire Temple. The path outside the dungeon splits off in multiple directions, and Fi informs me that I can now use the dowsing mechanic to search for pieces of the key that I'll need to proceed. I'm impressed by how much activity Nintendo has crammed into this space before I enter a dungeon and by how much it feels like a natural extension of the Zelda formula rather than a bunch of time-wasting fetch quests.

As I search for the key, I encounter several environmental challenges that force me to smartly use the stamina meter, a new element that dictates how often Link can use special attacks and allows him to dash and climb quickly. While dashing or climbing, the circular meter slowly drains, and if it empties entirely before you stop to let it refill or grab a refreshing fruit, Link is immobilized for a few seconds.

At first I'm certain that this system will annoy me, but I grow to enjoy it. Dashing allows Link to navigate up steep hills that he would slide down normally. He can also dash into a wall to climb a short way up it and grab a slightly out-of-reach ledge. Longer hills and climbing segments turn into a brainier Prince of Persia, with players figuring out the ideal path to find a ledge to rest on or a fruit to eat before Link is out of stamina.

I'm also continuously surprised by the dynamic combat situations I find myself in. This is partially due to the Wii Motion Plus controls, which provide more ways to fight with the sword and other items – such as the previously mentioned bowling bombs. It also seems like Nintendo

Lizalfos let out an ear-crushing cry that's sure to make them an enemy players love to hate





worked to create unique interactions with the enemies and world and incredible animation to match.

In one situation, I'm tasked with running up a steep hill while goblin-like creatures called bokoblins toss boulders at me from above. I bolt up to a ledge and take out my sword to fight the bokoblin there. He blocks high with his mace, so I slice low. Two more cuts, and he's down. He falls onto the hill below, but instead of disappearing into smoke like an enemy normally does upon defeat, I watch the bokoblin roll down the hill realistically, hitting the bottom with a satisfying thud before he vanishes.

Running further up the hill, I use Link's light parkour abilities to grip the ledge where a couple bokoblins are leering down at me. Before I can pull myself up, one of the bokoblins wanders over and stomps on Link's hand, sending him flying back down the hill. It's a tiny addition, but this is the kind of nuanced gameplay situation I don't normally associate with Zelda.

I also encounter large groups of bokoblins led by one who carries a horn. I cut down enemies for a while before realizing that I'm hearing the horn blare every few seconds, at which point more bokoblins drop into the fray. The horn-carrying enemies essentially act as an endless respawn until they're taken out. Some of them take shelter in wooden towers that require me to set up a bomb to bring the whole structure tumbling down.



Aonuma says new director Hidemaro Fujibayashi is to thank for these surprising flourishes. Fujibayashi previously worked on Spirit Tracks and the Oracle of Ages and Seasons, but Skyward Sword is his first time directing a Zelda game.

"He has a fairly young team that hasn't been involved in a lot of Zelda games before," Aonuma says. "One of their objectives from the beginning was that they wanted to do things in Zelda that haven't been done before. They spent a lot of time coming up with ideas for new interactions in the Zelda series."

As I finally enter the dungeon after three hours of conquering the overworld surrounding it, I run into another one of those new interactions. Early into the Fire Temple,



THE CHRONOLOGY OF ZELDA

Each Zelda game stands on its own fairly well, but hardcore Zelda fans have spent ages concocting complex theories about how the whole series could connect into a complicated history of Hyrule. With Nintendo being so forthcoming about Skyward Sword being a prequel to Ocarina of Time and telling the origin story of the Master Sword, I can't help but ask Aonuma if the developers behind the games spend much time thinking about how they relate to each other.

"Obviously we've made so many games now that we can't help but think about how those games connect to one another," Aonuma says. "However, that consideration comes late in the development process. When we create a new game, we don't start with a preset notion of what the story is going to be or how it's going to flow. We start by focusing in on what the core gameplay element is going to be and then develop from that."

With Skyward Sword, the team went into the game knowing that the core gameplay element would be Wii Motion Plus. With the focus on more fully realized controls, it made sense for the sword itself to play an important part in the plot. So when does it get put into the overall timeline?

"There is a document on my computer that has a stamp on it that says 'Top Secret,'" Aonuma tells me with a laugh. "I actually haven't even shown it to many of the staff members. One of the special privileges of being the producer of the series is that I have the right as we're finalizing the game's story to then decide where it fits in."

Aonuma says he is afraid that revealing the official Nintendo timeline would lead future Zelda teams to focus on the story more than the gameplay. "People start to focus in on the storyline and gaps in the timeline," he explains. According to Aonuma's design philosophy this is "a backward way of creating a game." Wish as they might for an official word from on high, fans are probably going to have to keep guessing on the true nature of Zelda's history.

DID YOU KNOW...?

Both producer Eiji Aonuma and sound director Hajime Wakai are members of a 60-person orchestra called The Wind Wakers, composed entirely of Nintendo employees. Aonuma tells me about the group's most recent performance: "Yesterday we played a medley from Star Fox 64 3D...and then we went out drinking afterward."



Like the islands in Wind Waker, exploring Skyloft can lead Link to some pretty strange places

one of the Mogma asks me to retrieve his bomb bag. I wipe out a room full of bokoblins and collect the prize, which the Mogma kindly allows me to keep. I happily discover that rather than buying bombs, Link can now pick up bomb flowers anywhere in the world and refill his bomb bag with them.

The smile is quickly wiped from my face as I realize how careful you must be with these explosives. One of the enemies in the temple is a fish creature that pops out of the lava to shoot fireballs at Link. The only way to defeat

this opponent is to toss a bomb in its mouth.

Excited from gaining my new tool, I rush to the lava's edge to taunt the fish into revealing itself. It appears and spits a fireball at me. I'm slow to dodge and get hit, which sets Link on fire for a few seconds. I pull out a bomb to get my revenge...and it immediately explodes. Trinen laughs nearby and lectures me: "You can't pull out a bomb if you're on fire. That's not safe."

It's another small touch that adds to this growing sense of wonder that Skyward Sword is filling me with. Despite outwardly sticking fairly close to the Zelda formula, I'm never sure what to expect from my actions. This is a feeling I haven't associated with the series since Ocarina of Time, like Aonuma said.

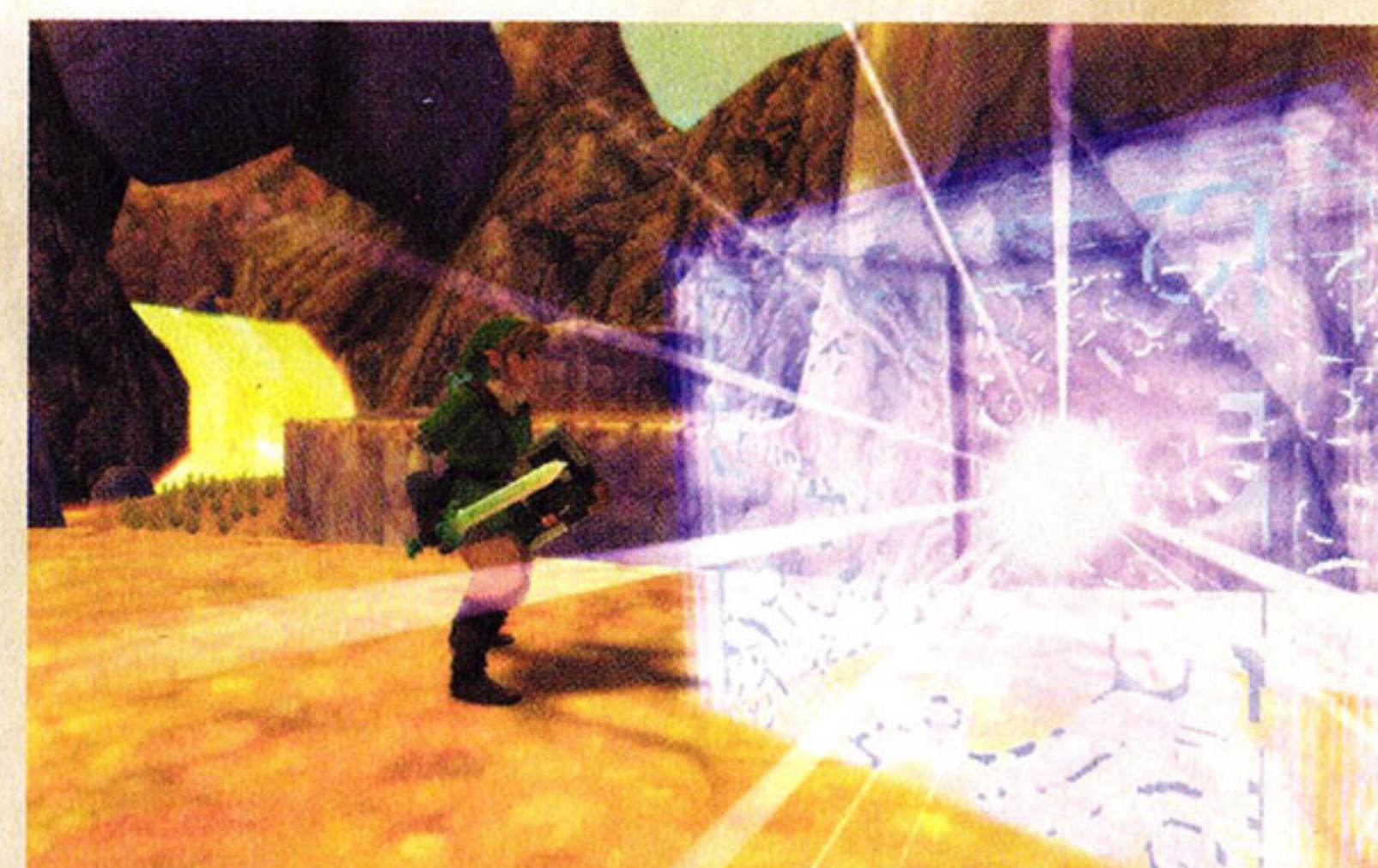
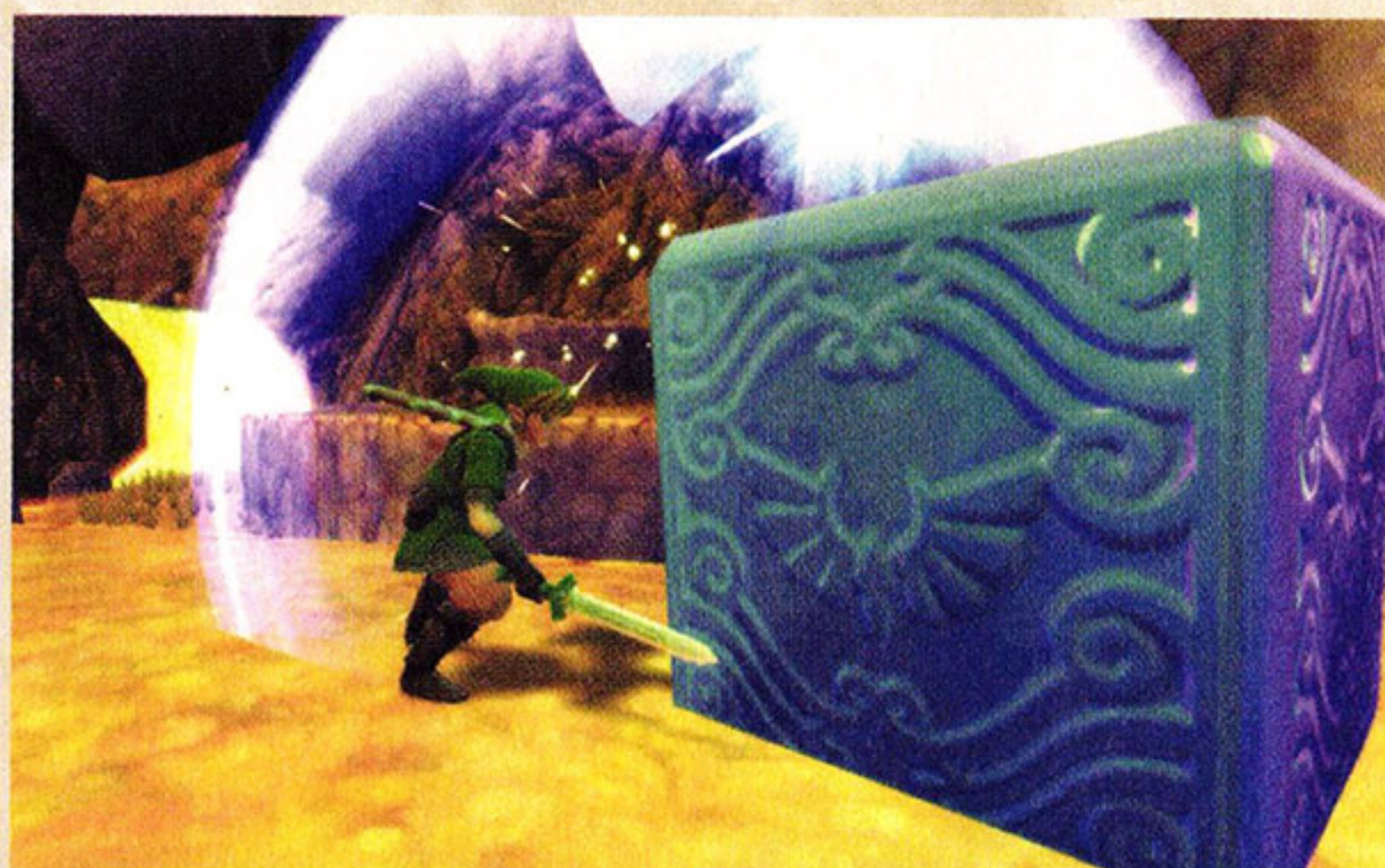
Surprising interactions aside, the layout of the Fire Temple remains true to what I expect from a Zelda dungeon. I go from room to room solving puzzles, finding keys, and hitting switches to unlock the path forward. I'm introduced to the most difficult enemy so far, a lizard man known as a lizalfos that can block all of my sword slashes. If I successfully dodge its attack, the creature takes time to taunt me by sticking its tongue out and emitting a truly cringe-worthy noise. I have to ignore the annoyance, though, as this is the only opportunity to attack and defeat the opponent.

As I make my way to the boss room – the point on my map where Zelda is supposed to be located – I have to contend with challenges such as balancing on a stone ball to navigate through lava and a Crash Bandicoot-esque sequence that has me running toward the camera to escape a boulder bouncing toward me.

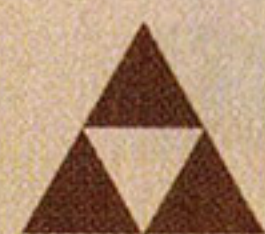
Upon entering the boss room, I'm greeted by Ghirahim, the self-proclaimed Demon Lord and Link's main antagonist in Skyward Sword. This foe also showed up as a boss encounter in the Forest Temple, but now he's just here to taunt Link. He refers to Zelda as a "precious oracle" and a "female servant of the Goddess" before assuring me that I'll never find her. Ghirahim summons the true boss of this area and then takes off.

continued on page 58





The Scaldera boss fight takes place in a narrow arena that is quite different from the series' norm



COMPOSING A LULLABY

The gameplay of *Skyward Sword* isn't the only area where Nintendo is trying new things. In my time with the game, several music tracks stood out to me as wildly uncharacteristic of the franchise (and, as such, interesting and ear-catching).

Whenever Link meets up with one of the Mogma, an upbeat, jazzy track complete with snapping fingers runs in the background. On the other end of the spectrum, when Guardians are activated in the Silent Realm, frightening industrial music starts playing. This track sounds more like something I'd expect to hear in *Silent Hill* or *A Nightmare on Elm Street*.

According to sound director Hajime Wakai,

part of the reason for the exploration of new musical styles is thanks to *Skyward Sword* being the first *Zelda* game to feature a fully orchestrated soundtrack. But Wakai says it's also an extension of Aonuma's goal to "break down some of the typical patterns you see in *Zelda* games."

Earlier this year, some fans realized that the main theme for *Skyward Sword* is actually "Zelda's Lullaby" from *Ocarina of Time* played backward. "Wakai actually created that," Aonuma reveals. "He did it secretly and didn't let me know. It wasn't just a matter of them being silly or playing around but really looking at what they can do with the music that would draw on the rich musical history

of the series but still offer something new."

Aonuma says that in addition to being a callback for fans of the series, the connection to "Zelda's Lullaby" is important to the plot. "The main theme is called 'The Goddess' Song,'" he explains. "There is an intentional connection between the Goddess and *Zelda*, so we wanted those two songs to relate to one another." Aonuma and Wakai promise similar musical cues elsewhere in *Skyward Sword* for long-time *Zelda* lovers, including a surprising use of the original overworld theme from *Legend of Zelda* on NES.

The game also features an original composition by legendary video game composer Koji Kondo, who created the soundtrack for

the first *Zelda*. "It'll be the song you hear before actually starting the game," Wakai says. "Mr. Kondo did something interesting with the arrangement. He requested that when we record it with the orchestra, there must be a bugle that sounds as if it's coming from off in the distance. When you hear that sound in the prologue, what sounds almost like a military bugle, it adds this great feeling to it."

Fans of *Zelda*'s music will receive a special bonus when they pick up *Skyward Sword*. Both the special and regular editions of the game will come with a 25th anniversary music disc packed in featuring tunes from across the series' history performed by the *Zelda* orchestra.

The Sky

1



Players will be able to place beacons to help navigate the massive realm of floating islands in the sky



Unlike the traditional Zelda arena battle, this boss fight takes place on a narrow ramp. At the bottom is a pit of lava, and at the top are a bunch of bomb and heart flowers for refilling mid-battle. The boss, Scaldera, looks like a giant boulder with legs, and it slowly makes its way up the ramp, stopping to shoot fireballs at Link.

After shooting at Link for a while, the boss tries to suck him into its mouth. I've seen this before; I toss a bomb directly into its mouth and it explodes, sending the enemy rolling to the bottom of the slope. Each successful attack chips away at the enemy's rocky outer layer, revealing molten skin below. It also uncovers a single eye on a stalk

that I must slash at to truly damage Scaldera. The eye can dodge and position itself in different locations, requiring me to slash in specific directions with Wii Motion Plus.

It isn't long before I've defeated Scaldera. As triumphant music plays, I collect my victory heart container and head to the next door to see if Zelda will appear. But before I have a chance to encounter the reason for Link's journey, Trinen loads up a different area.

THE BLOOD-CURDLING SOUND OF SILENCE
The final stop on my tour of Skyward Sword is an area that doesn't appear until much later in the game. Known

as the Silent Realm, Trinen describes these treasure hunts as “spiritual tests that Link must go through in an alternate world.” Players will return to twisted versions of areas they’ve already explored – in this case, the overworld area surrounding the Forest Temple.

Silent Realms play out as a strange mix of the tear-collecting portions in Twilight Princess and the stealth parts of Phantom Hourglass. Link shoves his sword into the ground to access the new areas, so he has no weapons there. He carries a spiritual vessel that must be filled with tears, but giant Guardians seek to block his progress and can knock him out with a single blow.

When I’m first transported to the Silent Realm, I’m in a shining circle of safety, but the second I step out of it, the Guardians activate. A quick cut shows the statuesque figures raising their heads and swords, and terrifying music begins booming. I grab the first tear, which is directly in front of me, and breathe a sigh of relief as the Guardians deactivate.

Each time Link grabs a tear, he is given 90 seconds to find another one before the Guardians spring to life. I bound around the wooded area, which is bathed in an unsettling purple glow. Tiny lantern-wielding ghosts float past on patrol. If I am exposed to their light, the Guardians will activate regardless of how much time I have.

I’m definitely stressed while playing through the Silent Realm, but this section avoids the annoyance that can come from single-hit kill traps. In addition to tears, I

stumble upon a number of light seeds that cause all the remaining tears on the map to shoot beacons into the sky for 30 seconds, revealing their locations. Using these helpful plants, I successfully collect all of the tears on my first attempt.

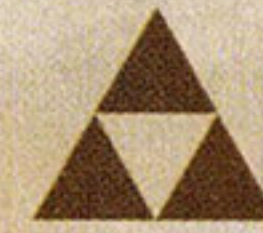
Like much of Skyward Sword, the Silent Realm has that unusual quality of feeling familiar yet fresh. It draws on elements that I recognize from older Zelda games, but it does something new with them.

The way Aonuma sees it, Ocarina of Time set various standards for how a 3D Zelda game works that subsequent games such as Wind Waker and Twilight Princess have stuck to – sometimes too closely. He wants Skyward Sword to similarly set the stage for the next batch of Zelda releases by “illustrating for people how the Zelda series can change and evolve.”

I certainly see those changes in the handful of hours I’ve spent with Skyward Sword. Nobody will be fooled into thinking this isn’t a Zelda game, but Nintendo has taken some important steps toward a future where the series could be different.

But maybe not too different. “We’ve been talking a lot about how we’re trying to make this Zelda game feel new and different,” Aonuma cautions, “but there will come a point in the game where you’ll still get that final feeling that this is still a Zelda game.”

Visit gameinformer.com/zelda for a month full of exclusive Skyward Sword videos, features celebrating the series’ 25th anniversary, and more.



WHAT’S NEXT?

We may still be several months from playing the final version of Skyward Sword, but with a future HD Zelda project teased on the Wii U, I can’t resist asking Aonuma if his team has started planning ahead.

“It’s not something they’re working on daily right now, but we are taking time periodically to sit down and think about some of the things we might be able to do with that system,” Aonuma admits. “The demo that we showed at E3 was really just more of a rough idea of if all we were to do was to take a Zelda game and put it in HD, this is what it might look like. We’re much more interested in looking at the power of the Wii U system and seeing how we can take advantage of that power to do things that we haven’t been able to do in a Zelda game before.”

I also ask Aonuma if they’ve considered an original Zelda title for the 3DS, beyond Ocarina of Time 3D and the rumored Majora’s Mask remake. “Of course we’ve thought about it,” he says. Then he reveals a tidbit that suggests they may be further along than just thinking: “I’ll give you one hint, but maybe you won’t understand it. It will be a game in which having 3D will mean something.”



When you see the Guardian’s eyes light up and hear the music shift, you’ll know it’s time to run



» Platform

PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • PC

» Style

1-Player Puzzle

» Publisher

Square Enix

» Developer

Airtight Games

» Release

2012

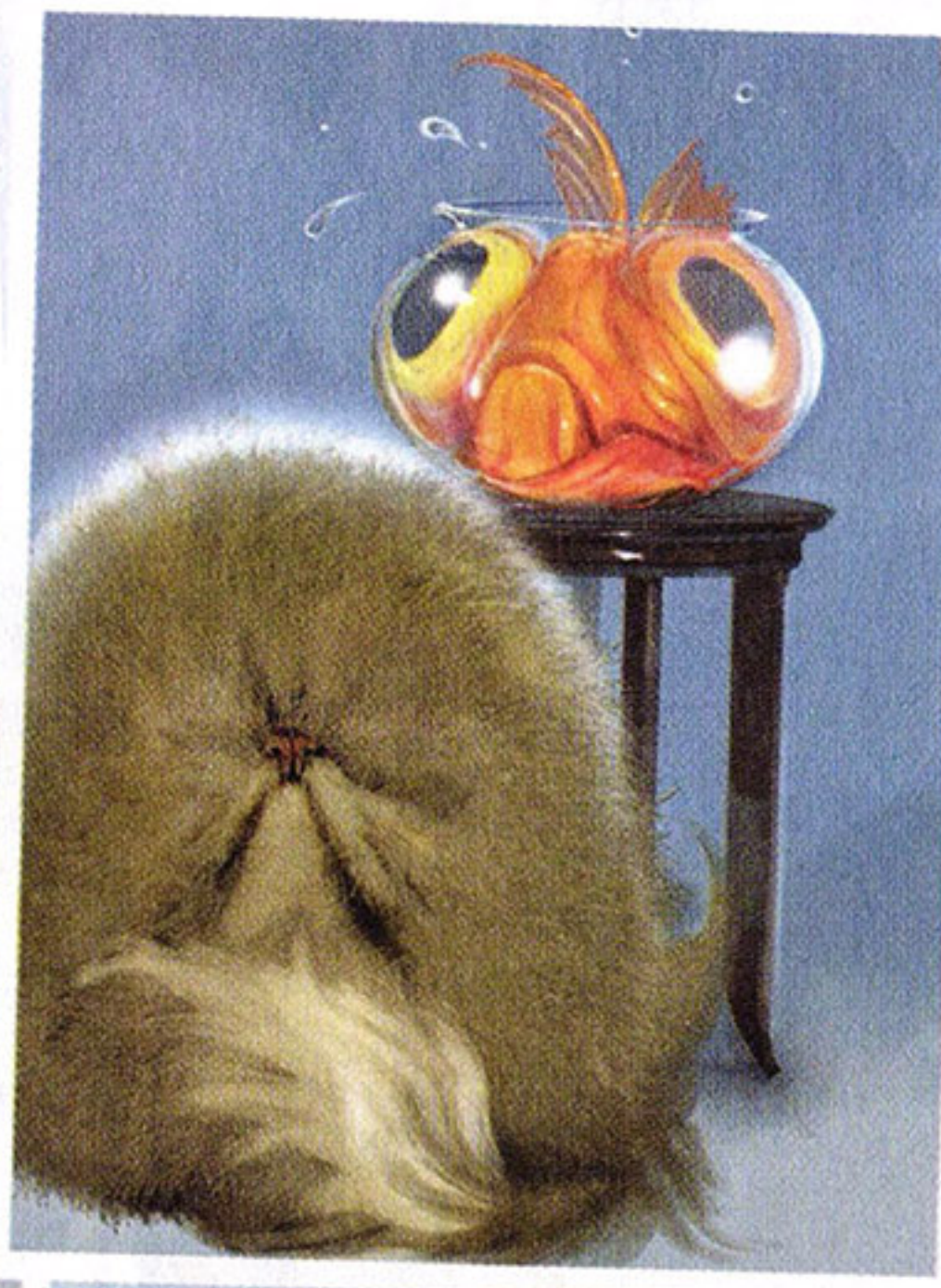
The cover art for the game Quantum Conundrum features a central character, a scientist with a white lab coat, a red turtleneck, and a mustache, wearing goggles. He is holding a glowing green cube. To his left, a young boy with blonde hair is crawling on the floor, looking up at the scientist. The background is a dark, industrial-looking environment with a large, glowing yellow sphere and a green, glowing cube. The floor is made of wooden planks, and there is a blue rug and a lamp in the background. The title "QUANTUM CONUNDRUM" is written in a stylized, blue and white font at the bottom, with a trademark symbol. The letter 'Q' is large and contains a white atomic symbol.

QUANTUM CONUNDRUM™

SHIFTING PERSPECTIVE

Two years ago, Kim Swift left her position at Valve, one of the world's most lauded video game companies, where she had played a central role in one of the developer's greatest successes: Portal. She departed for the little-known studio Airtight Games, and promptly settled out of the limelight to begin work with her dedicated team. That's the last we heard from Swift, until now. Enter Quantum Conundrum, a new first-person puzzle game that should undoubtedly please Portal fans, but also deliver something new.

by Matt Miller



Professor Fitz Quadwrangle has cloned his cat one – or two – too many times

"I was at Valve basically straight out of college. It was my only real experience with the game industry," Kim Swift tells us. "I had a lot of fun working on Portal. Later, it was really fun working on Left 4 Dead, but it cemented in my mind the type of game I'd like to make. I was given the opportunity to come over to Airtight. I'd get my own team, and the ability to make whatever game I want to. It sounded really great. So I jumped ship, and I haven't regretted it at all."

Swift's experience at Valve set the stage for the game she would make next. She loves puzzle games. She wants to find ways to appeal to everyone from hardcore shooter fans to young kids. She likes shorter games, experiences where she can play through to understand and appreciate the designer's intent after just a few hours. In short, she likes the kind of game she is now making.

Quantum Conundrum takes the familiar mechanics of environmental manipulation and turns them upside-down. Rather than simply manipulating objects that always obey the same rules, Airtight's new game challenges players to change those rules in order to make impossible actions possible. You change the very dimension in which you exist; each of four alternate dimensions has its own unusual visual aesthetic, and more importantly, a central feature that changes the nature of reality. Your body remains grounded in normal space, but everything around you changes, from the color of the walls to physical properties of the world. It

makes for a fascinating and potentially confusing idea, right up until it all clicks and you understand just how much power you have to affect your surroundings.

Who is the lucky hero with such a powerful ability? "The premise is that you're a kid who is dumped off on your uncle's doorstep for the weekend by your mom," Swift explains. "It just so happens that your uncle is an eccentric inventor named Professor Fitz Quadwrangle. The only problem is that he seems to have gone missing. Now you're going to have to go find him." Unfortunately for this young and unnamed 12-year old hero, Quadwrangle's daunting Victorian manor is filled with the detritus of his many experiments and inventions. It's a nearly unmanageable obstacle course of strange technology. The only thing that saves you is an object your uncle left behind: the Interdimensional Shift device (IDS).

The IDS lets you instantly shift dimensions and perceive the world from a new perspective. The first is the amusingly named fluffy dimension. "It's very scientific," Swift laughingly assures us. "Everything becomes very plush. Fall damage is lessened because everything is so soft and cushy. The walls, floors, and ceilings all become padded. Objects turn into the stuffed animal version of themselves. Things that are in the world become 10 times lighter." Flip over into the fluffy dimension, and you can haul up a heavy sofa and easily toss it across the room like a pillow.

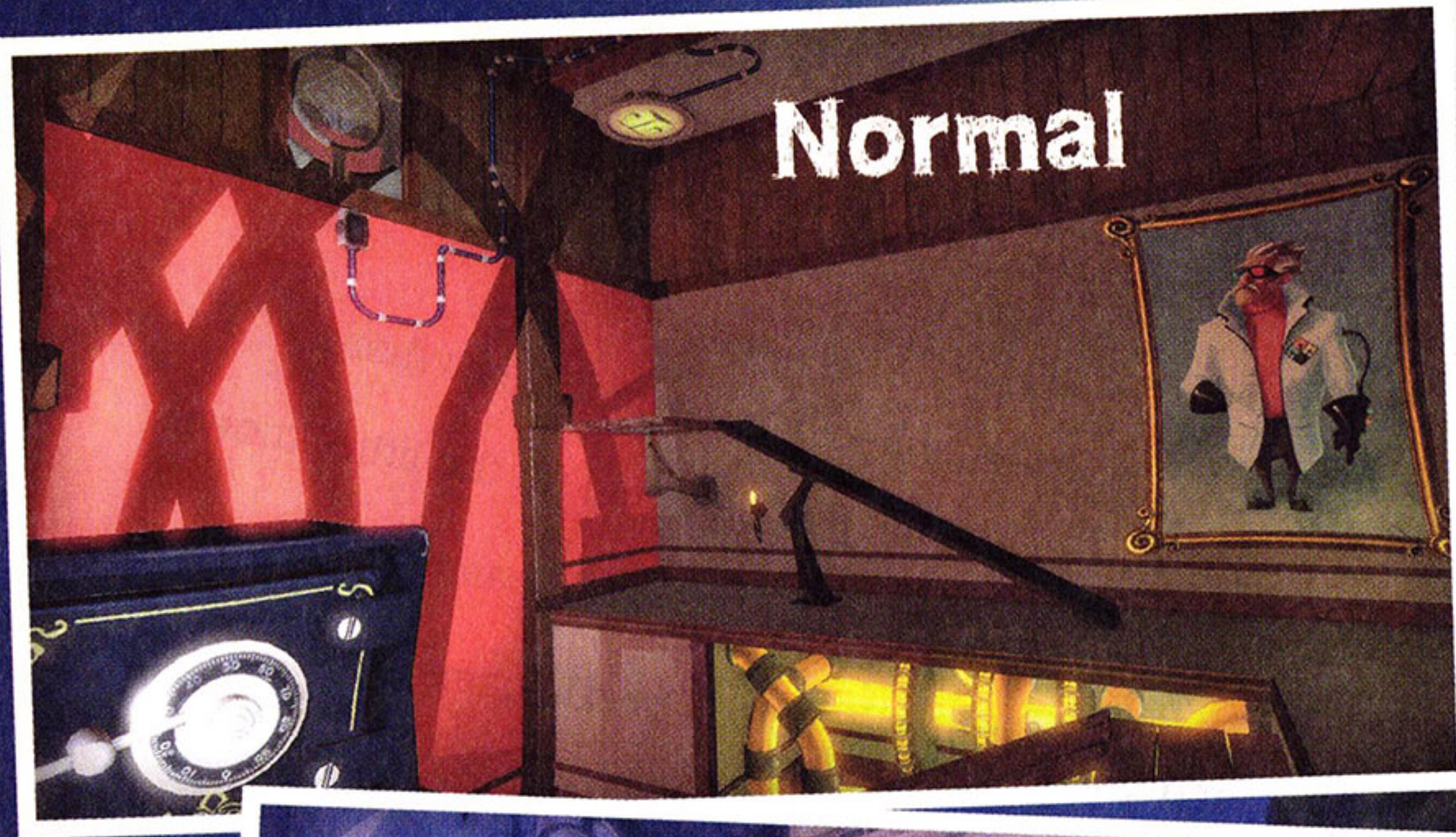
The slow-motion dimension has everything moving

20 times slower than the real world. "One of the fun things to do in the slow-motion dimension that I like to do is play catch with myself," Swift says. "I can just throw something across the room, switch to slow-motion, run across the room, go back to normal and then catch that object."

A third option has you tapping a button on the IDS to enter the reverse-gravity dimension. The ceiling becomes the floor, and previously stationary objects hurtle skyward. "One of the great things about this dimension is you can use it as a vertical elevator. Say there's something above me, like a ledge I need to get to. I can grab an object and put it down on the ground, jump on top, switch to reverse gravity, and it will shoot me up, and I can jump across to that ledge."

A fourth, as-yet-unrevealed dimension is also in the mix, but the three we know about so far create a potent and varied mix of available actions. In the demo we saw, the player tapped into the fluffy dimension and threw a normally heavy combination safe across a yawning chasm. Then the player slowed time. The projectile hung in the air, barely moving. The player hopped up onto the box and switched to the normal dimension, and then rapidly flipped over into reverse gravity. The box (and the hero standing on it) went flying across the gap under the momentum of the original throw, even while the constantly shifting gravity kept the flight at a consistent altitude. This kind of combination of

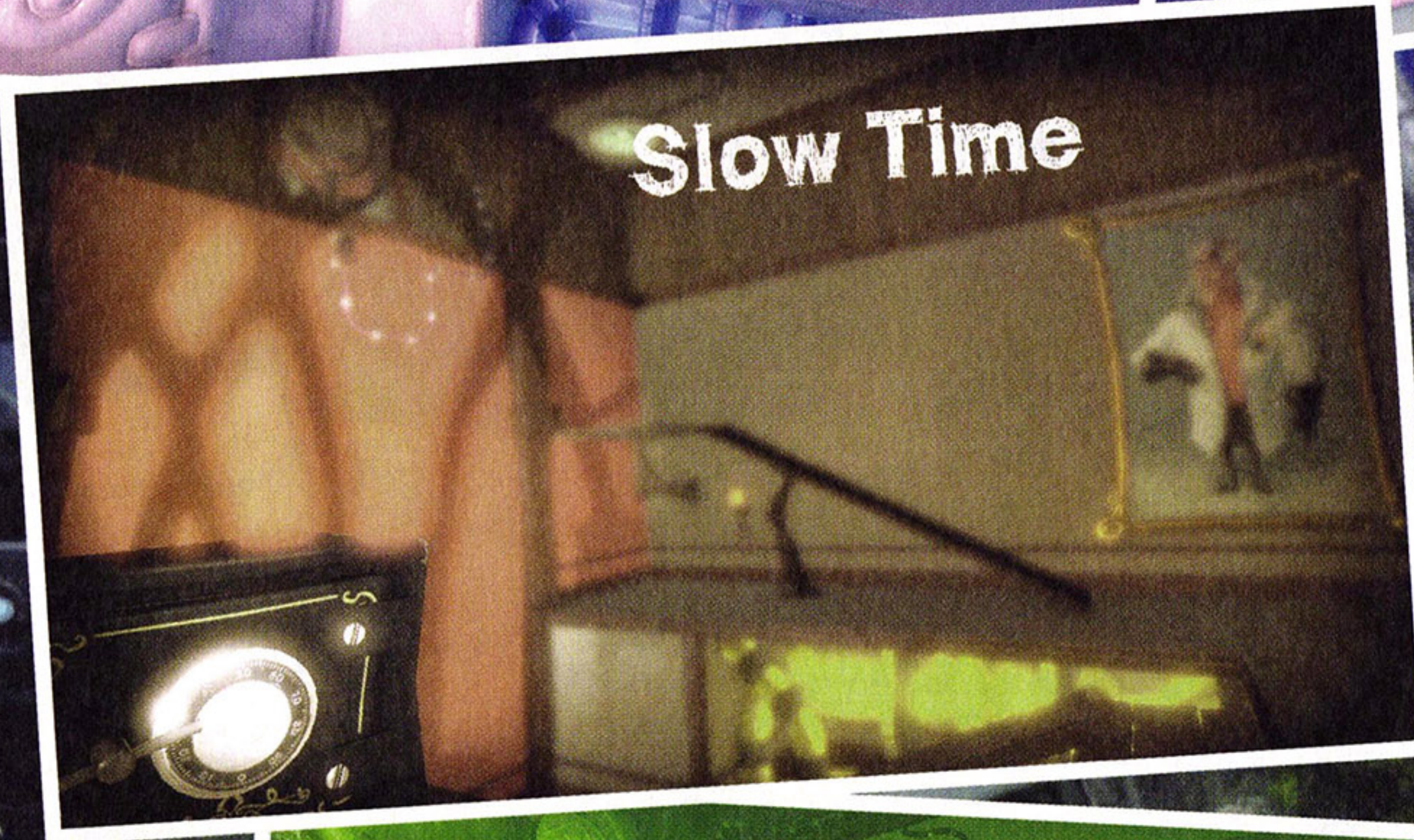
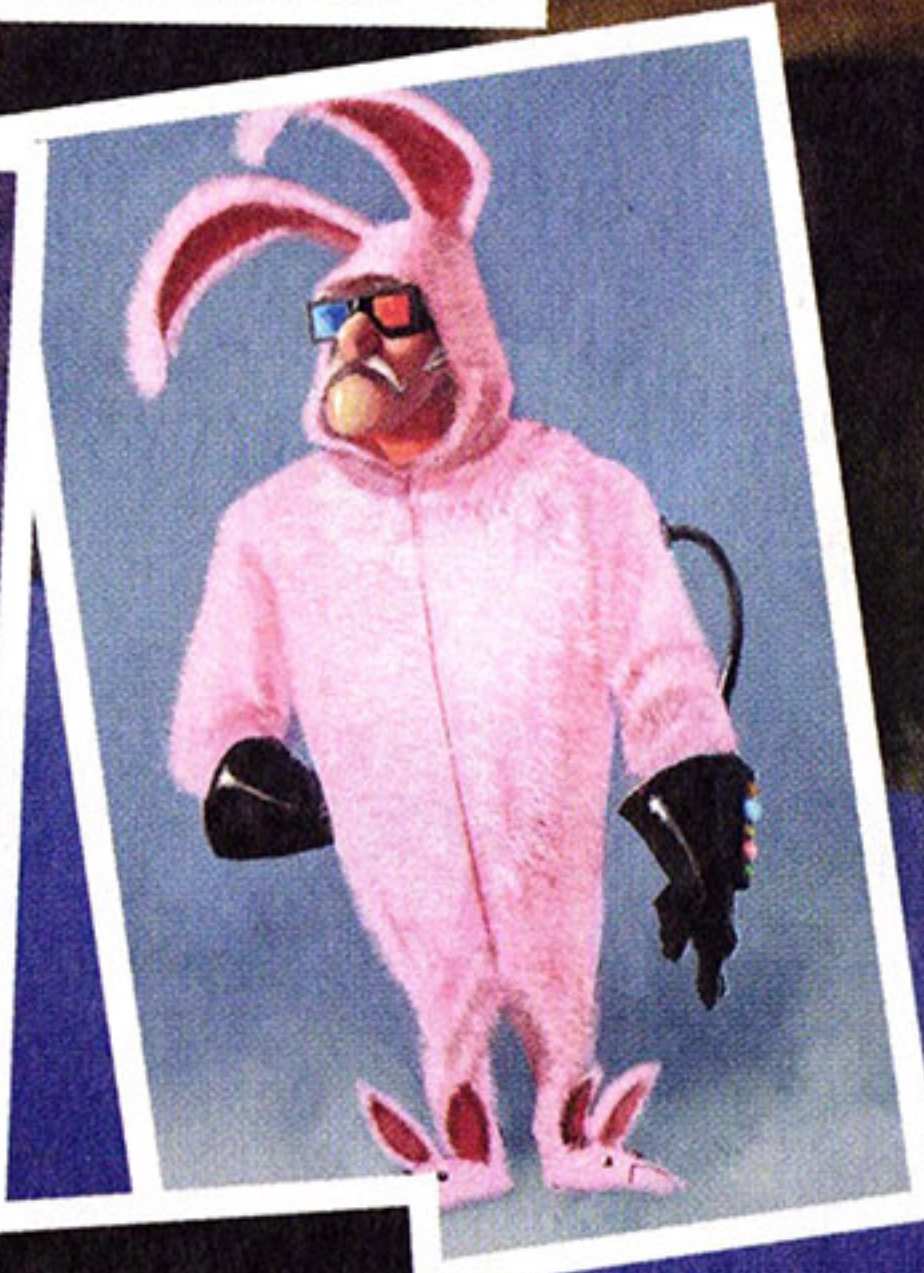
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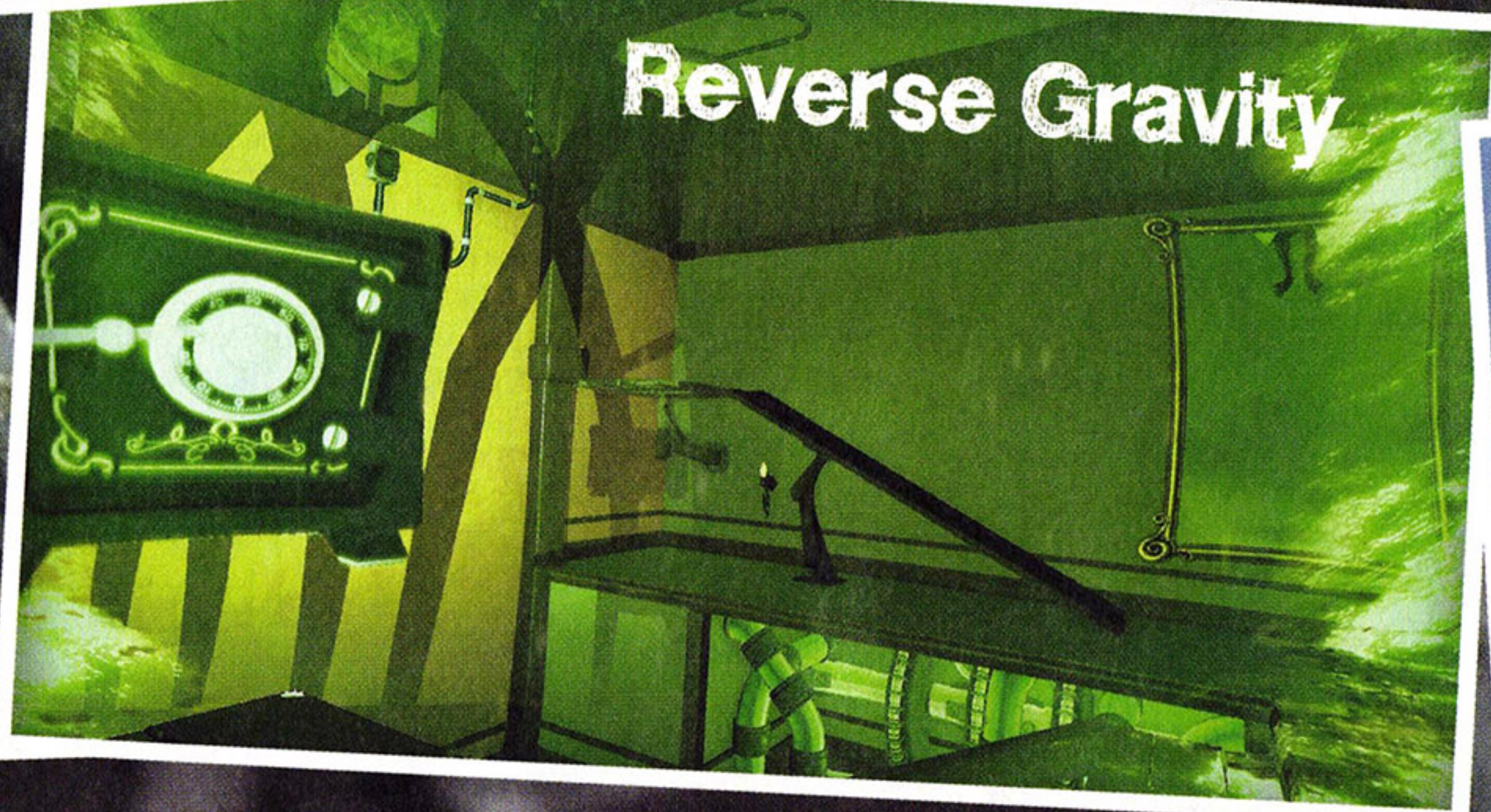
Normal



Fluffy



Slow Time



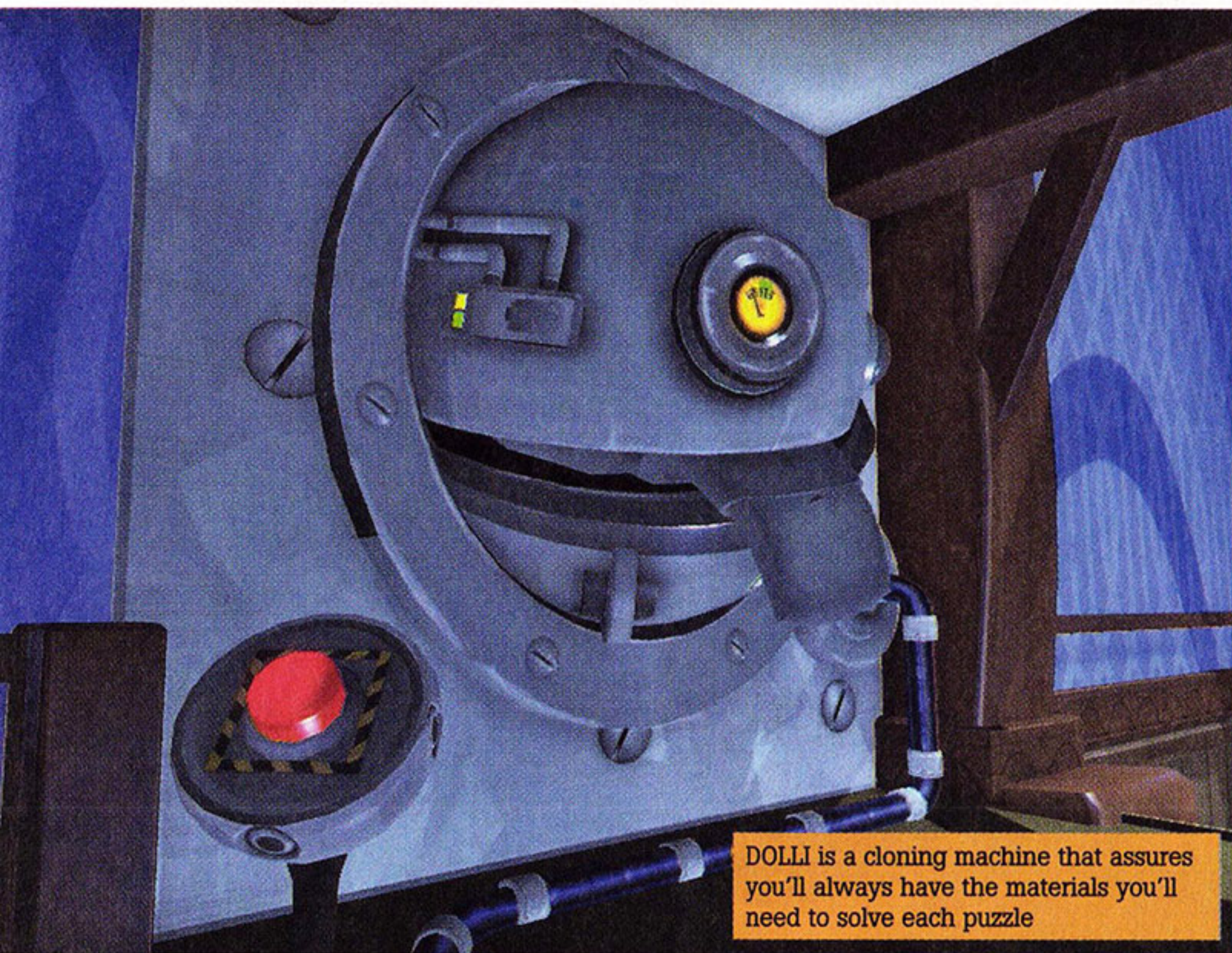
Reverse Gravity



???

Getting A Clear Picture

The portraits throughout the game world serve a double purpose. They add life and humor, but they also indicate which dimension you're standing in. Every wall painting has different versions that shift as you change dimensions



DOLLI is a cloning machine that assures you'll always have the materials you'll need to solve each puzzle



The Professor has adapted his manor to support his many interdimensional experiments

continued from page 61

powers is necessary to solve the game's puzzles, but don't expect to use the effects of multiple dimensions simultaneously. "We thought about having that for a bit. But we realized it would make our brains explode," Swift says.

Along the way through your uncle's puzzle-filled manor, you encounter other personalities that keep the world alive and amusing. Unsurprisingly, your inventive uncle Professor Fitz Quadwrangle will play a major role. "You come into the scene just as he's doing some experiment with the IDS. Something with that experiment goes horribly wrong, and that's when your uncle goes missing," Swift details. "You'll hear voiceovers from Professor Fitz. He's able to tap into the intercom system of the house. He'll kind of heckle you a little bit, and help you with a few puzzles." A similar concept added a lot of amusement in *Portal*, but it remains to be seen what parallels exist between the Professor and a certain maniacal artificial intelligence.

Professor Fitz isn't the only entity in the manor. You also encounter IKE, short for Interdimensional Kinetic Entity. The development team alternates between describing the creature as either a mutated wombat or a koala gone horribly wrong. "He's a little shy. He's actually Professor Quadwrangle's pet/lab assistant. Through the Professor's travels through different dimensions, he found this creature and he followed him home. Ever since then he's lived in the manor," Swift says. "His particular

quirk is that he can see in multiple dimensions at the same time. It's caused him to be a little unhinged. So every time you see an image of him his eyes are a little crazy. He also has this very extreme appetite, and he'll eat things throughout the manor, just for fun."

You'll also repeatedly run into DOLLI (Dynamic Object Linear Ligation Interface). DOLLI appears as a vaguely demented metallic head that regularly spouts out objects into the world. DOLLI is actually the Professor's cloning machine, and she's installed throughout the manor to keep everything in order. In particular, she is often forced to clone new versions of important lab equipment when IKE happens to eat something he shouldn't.

With these colorful personalities along for the ride, you make your way through the three wings of your uncle's sprawling estate. The challenges get more intense as you progress, and you continually gain access to new dimensions to help you along the way. The strange style of the world reflects the unique viewpoint of a youth for whom everything is just a little too big. "We were kind of trying to evoke a little bit of Dr. Seuss, a little Tim Burton. We wanted everything to have kooky angles, and a lot of thick to thin in terms of pillars and other things in the manor." Swift says. It's a balancing act, as the team aims to maintain the cartoony styling that excites kids while grounding the visuals enough to not scare away grown-up players. A big element of the charm comes from a

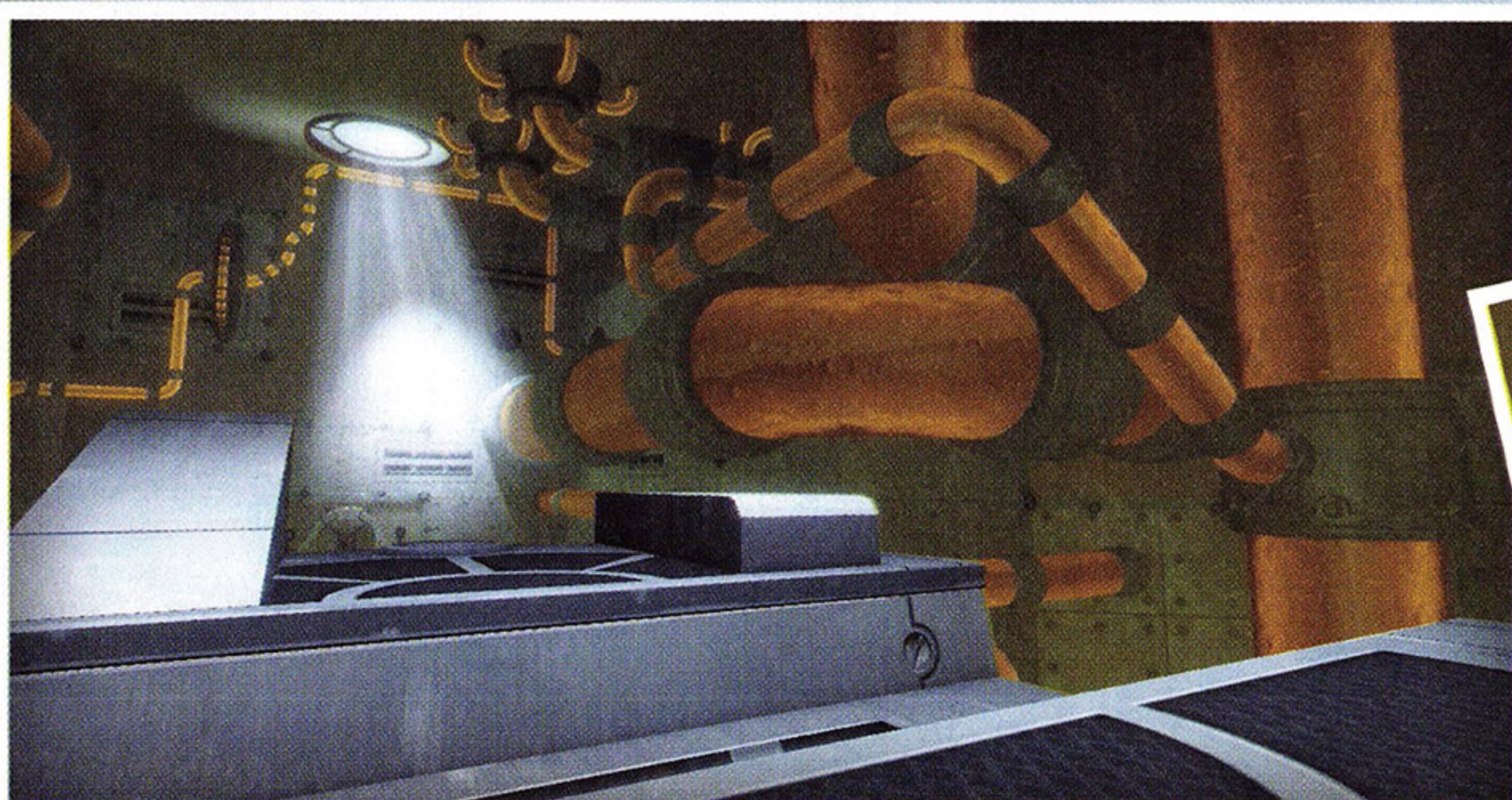
plethora of portraits scattered throughout the manor; every image looks different depending on the dimension in which it is viewed. "In one of them, Professor Quadwrangle in the normal dimension looks very regal, and in fluffy dimension he's wearing a bunny suit, and in reverse gravity he's flying up to the ceiling," Swift says.

We can't wait to explore the manor in *Quantum Conundrum* for ourselves. Swift and her new team at Airtight have crafted a world that should please fans of her previous work, while blazing some new trails for first-person puzzling. Even so, comparisons with *Portal* seem inevitable. What does Swift think is the difference? "Yeah, it's a first-person puzzle game where you're manipulating the environment, and there's action elements mixed with thinking elements," she says. "So, from a super high level, they share commonality. But if you look at the actual game mechanics it's very different. *Portal* is very focused on having these portals in the world, and everything you do has to do with those portals. In *Quantum Conundrum*, it's all about shifting the environment itself. You're not changing just one element of the space around you. You're changing all the space.

"We definitely feel it's a really fun idea – you're effectively changing the laws of physics on the fly with just the flip of a switch. We're really excited to see what people think." ♦

Going Digital

Quantum Conundrum has some big ambitions, but like many new franchises in today's game market, the team is targeting a digital release on Xbox Live Arcade, PlayStation Network, and PC. "For us, this is a really new concept, and we wanted to test the validity of the concept with our audience and see if this is something that appeals to them," says creative director Kim Swift.



CALL OF DUTY MODERN WARFARE 3

Infinity Ward and
Sledgehammer
tread familiar ground

by Dan Ryckert



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

» **Style**
1 or 2-Player Shooter
(16 Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Activision

» **Developer**
Infinity Ward,
Sledgehammer
Games/Beachhead
Studios

» **Release**
November 8

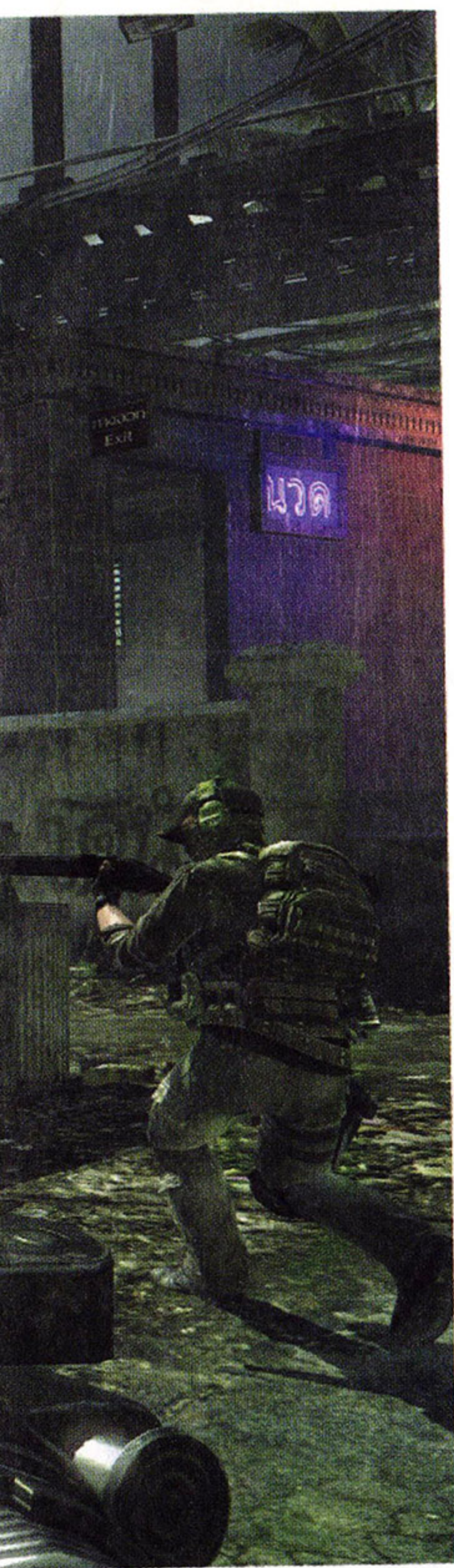


One year ago, I sat in Treyarch's studio as the Black Ops dev team explained the steps it was taking to move Call of Duty's multiplayer forward. They implemented a new currency system that allowed for more player choice in the leveling process. Players were given the ability to create unique decals that could be affixed to their weapons. Contracts allowed players to earn more XP by achieving specific goals before a time limit expired, and wager matches allowed for nontraditional game types, with pools of in-game cash going to the winner. Treyarch also added a dive move so you could get to a capture point or away from an explosion in dramatic fashion. None of these additions changed the fundamental nature of Call of Duty's multiplayer, but they were all beneficial to the experience.

One year after Treyarch revealed these changes, I sat at Activision's headquarters as members of Infinity Ward, Sledgehammer Games, and Beachhead Studios introduced me to Modern Warfare 3's multiplayer. As was the case when Jason West and Vince Zampella still ran Infinity Ward, the new creative leaders were adamant in saying this game is a direct sequel to Modern Warfare 2 and that it has nothing to do with the Treyarch titles. This means all of the fresh multiplayer ideas introduced in Black Ops are absent in Modern Warfare 3 – which may not be the smartest move for staving off franchise fatigue. I spent many hours playing three modes on five new maps, and outside of some minor tweaks to the killstreak system and an entertaining new twist on team deathmatch, I couldn't shake the feeling that this entry is treading water. When put up against Treyarch's additions last year, the multiplayer could even be taking a step back.

I may be disappointed by the lack of real changes, but Modern Warfare 3's multiplayer feels like more than a glorified map pack. Players now pick their killstreak rewards from one of three lists (see sidebar, page 65). If you find yourself





on the offense more often than not, select the assault package. This set of killstreaks is all about destroying the enemy, whether it be from a AC-130 or a laser-guided Reaper attack. After racking up 15 kills, players gain the ability to don the menacing Juggernaut armor. Movement becomes much slower, but you're automatically equipped with an LMG and the Scavenger perk. Stomping around the battleground with this heavy armor is a blast, and it should extend your life span dramatically.

Defensive-minded team players should choose the support package. This set of rewards is for those who give objectives priority over their kill/death ratio. Counter-UAVs, booby-trapped care packages, SAM turrets, and escort airdrops (a collection of care packages protected by a helicopter) are all included in this selection. One of the most useful comes after you get five kills; once you reach the kill count you can set down ballistic vests for your team to pick up.

We didn't get a chance to see the specialist package, as it unlocks at level 80 (I managed to get up to around 30 in my time with the game). This class is specifically for hardcore players who want additional control over their perks. It allows you to assign three additional perks to your class, which unlock sequentially after you rack up kills. For example, Scavenger doesn't really come into play early in a life span. After you've racked up a few kills, however, you could be low on ammo. If you set this as your fourth or fifth perk, it will unlock after a certain number of kills and give you the re-up you desperately need.

Killstreak rewards have been a big part of the last few Call of Duty games, but they tend to favor players with a kill/death ratio mindset. In a welcome move, completed

objectives like capturing a flag or defusing a bomb now also count toward killstreaks. Hopefully, tweaks like this and the team-based support package should encourage players to work as a unit rather than stat-hunting lone wolves.

Rewarding players for teamwork seems like a step in the right direction, but it obviously all comes down to how well the Call of Duty audience reacts to it. If people use it, great. If they opt for the assault package and continue playing like they've always played, then nothing changes. We won't know how much of an impact these changes will have until the game is out in the wild. But no matter how someone chooses to play, I'm confident that the new Kill Confirmed mode will be a popular twist on team deathmatch.

Kill Confirmed operates similarly to classic TDM – players are split into two teams and tasked with reaching a predetermined kill count before their opponent. However, your team won't receive the kill point when you put a bullet through your enemy's head. Killing an enemy nabs you the XP regardless, but your team doesn't get that score bump until someone grabs the dog tags your foe drops upon death. If your team manages to secure the tags, a "kill confirmed" message lets you know that you're one point closer to victory. Take too long, and an opponent can pick up his fellow soldier's tags to deny the point.

Focusing on the dog tags adds a new layer of strategy to TDM. After killing an opponent, your first instinct may be to rush toward the tags so you advance the score. It might not be the best move though, considering enemies might have their crosshairs trained on the tags in preparation. Arriving on the scene after a massive shootout is like stumbling into a treasure

Specialized Rewards

We weren't able to see the specialist killstreak package, but we saw what assault and support had to offer. Here's what you can expect from the two:

Assault:

- 3 Kills - UAV
- 4 Kills - Care Package
- 5 Kills - Intelligent Munitions System
- 5 Kills - Predator Missile
- 5 Kills - Sentry Gun
- 7 Kills - Attack Helicopter
- 9 Kills - Little Bird Guard (personal air drop guarded by helicopter)
- 9 Kills - Reaper (laser-guided missile attack from UAV)
- 12 Kills - AC-130
- 12 Kills - Pave Low
- 15 Kills - Juggernaut Armor
- 15 Kills - Osprey Gunner

Support:

- 4 Kills - UAV
- 5 Kills - Counter-UAV
- 5 Kills - Ballistic Vests
- 5 Kills - Airdrop Trap
- 8 Kills - SAM Turret
- 12 Kills - Advanced UAV (shows direction enemy is facing)
- 12 Kills - Remote Turret (can be fired manually from afar)
- 14 Kills - Stealth Bomber
- 18 Kills - EMP
- 18 Kills - Juggernaut Recon (comes with personal radar, riot shield, and pistol)
- 18 Kills - Escort Airdrop (numerous care packages, guarded by helicopter)

CONTINUED ON PAGE 67



Points aren't awarded in Kill Confirmed matches unless you snag your victim's dog tags

The Arenas Of World War III

From the beginning of Modern Warfare 3's advertising campaign, Activision made it clear that the single-player campaign would be a globetrotting ordeal. The multiplayer maps are no different.

Underground

This bombed-out train station should look familiar to anyone who's ridden the tube in London. Underground offers plenty of places to battle, including a two-story office building, a train station, a bridge that goes over the tracks, and even the tops of the train cars themselves.

Village

Set in the jungle, portions of this muddy area take place in a third-world market that somewhat resembles Modern Warfare 2's Favela. When you're not sprinting down the chicken-filled streets, you can post up on a large, elevated rock to pick off unsuspecting foes.

Paris

With the Eiffel Tower looming in the background, Paris is the most immediately recognizable locale I played. Shops and storefront cafes are in various stages of disrepair as you explore this war-torn city.

Dome

Set in a dusty radar facility, Dome is the smallest of the levels I played. Its lack of real estate makes it a particularly hectic experience if you're playing Domination, as close-quarters battles for control points is a regular occurrence.

Plaza2

With a mixture of interior shopping areas and outdoor courtyards, Plaza2 reminded me a bit of Terminal from Modern Warfare 2 without the planes. Escalators are your primary means of changing altitude, and store counters act as frequent cover sources.



Hardcore players will likely appreciate the specialist package, which lets players create their own killstreak sequences





For The Hardcore

Call of Duty Elite offers a wealth of data and tools for the hardcore community. Its integration with Modern Warfare 3 is extensive, and many elements of Elite will be present in-game. During multiplayer matches, notifications will let you know if you're playing with gamers that share certain affiliations with you. If you belong to an "Over-40 Dad Gamers" or "Minnesota Vikings Fans" group, you'll learn which players you have something in common with.

Affiliations are loose connections, but clan support is also available for the competitive types. These clans can be managed on the web or via your console, and both real-life and in-game rewards are given to those who perform well. One example is a double-XP weekend for your entire group if you reach the maximum clan level.

Functions of Elite can even be accessed via smartphones and tablets. If you're in line at the grocery store and want to swap perks on one of your classes, you can load up the Elite app and make the necessary changes. Bored at work and daydreaming about deathmatches? Go to the Elite website to change up the accessories on your SCAR, examine heat maps, and pinpoint what your loadouts are lacking.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 65

trove, with tons of opportunities to confirm and deny kills strewn about the battlefield. This mode should also cut down on campers, as sitting back and sniping enemies isn't going to be much help if you're not grabbing the dog tags (although a sniper/runner team could be a formidable combo if done correctly).

Kill Confirmed isn't the only slight tweak to the classic Call of Duty formula I appreciated. The progression and unlock systems have also changed. If you're partial to a certain type of weaponry, your proficiency for that type will level up to unlock abilities like less sway, less flinch upon damage, holding your breath in ADS, allowing for two attachments, and deeper bullet penetration. As you earn killstreak rewards, they can now be scrolled through and

selected with the d-pad. A new Intelligent Munitions System (IMS) killstreak operates like a 360-degree claymore, launching an explosive at enemies who enter its detection radius. Enemy projectiles like grenades and missiles can now be shot down with the Trophy System equipment. Infinity Ward and Treyarch are also introducing a weekly/daily challenge system that will likely function in the same manner as the one in Halo: Reach.

After spending several hours with the multiplayer, it feels like more than a map pack, but less than a full sequel. Adjusting the killstreak system, introducing a handful of new weapons and abilities, and tossing in a twist on team deathmatch may not be enough to assuage franchise fatigue. With serious competition looming in the form of Battlefield 3, I

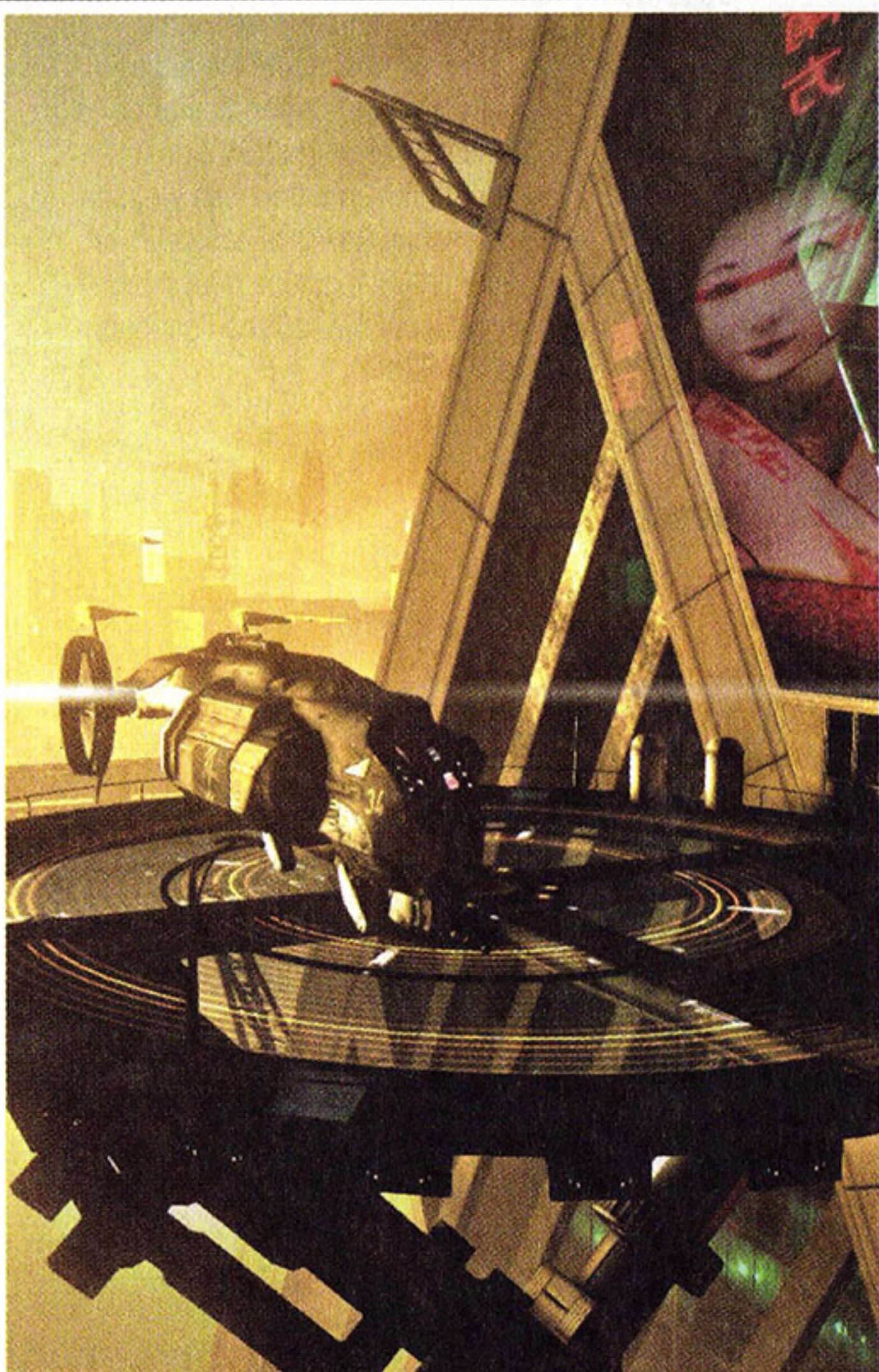
was hoping Modern Warfare 3 would be the installment that delivers major changes to the series. Instead, I saw nothing outside what is expected from a Call of Duty title. It has a solid engine, tight controls, and a deep and rewarding leveling system. However, at its core it's the same solid engine, tight controls, and leveling system we've seen for years.

Modern Warfare 3 will surely sell millions right out of the gate, but you have to wonder how long Activision can keep delivering similar experiences before Call of Duty begins losing steam like other over-milked franchises. This year sees the long-running series facing its stiffest competition to date, and Modern Warfare 3's reception will be crucial in determining whether or not the sales juggernaut has already peaked. ♦



Syndicate

Electronic Arts revives a PC classic



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

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

» **Publisher**
Electronic Arts

» **Developer**
Starbreeze Studios

» **Release**
2012

Finally, one of the worst-kept secrets in gaming receives its official debut. Back in 2008, EA announced a collaboration with Starbreeze Studios, the talented Swedish team that created *Chronicles of Riddick: Escape From Butcher Bay* and *The Darkness*, to resurrect one of the publisher's most acclaimed franchises. In the ensuing three years, rumors flew left and right that the top-secret game, codenamed "Project RedLime," was a remake of Peter Molyneux's 1993 PC cyberpunk tactical action/RPG *Syndicate*. Later, unconfirmed sources said the *Syndicate* reboot would feature *Grand Theft Auto*-style gameplay. A leaked script and a few trademark filings later, we now have real details about the oft-speculated project.


The original *Syndicate* took place in a near-future setting where corporations had usurped control of the world from governments. As they vie for power, each syndicate employs cybernetic shadow agents to infiltrate, sabotage, and assassinate their rivals. The isometric action gave players tactical control of four of these genetically enhanced agents and tasked them with making their syndicate the most powerful in the world. As they expanded their reach, players could raise money to research and develop new technology for their agents by taxing their territories.

When conceptualizing the reboot, EA and Starbreeze realized this top-down style of game wouldn't translate well to the modern era. Out went the isometric camera and relatively hands-off approach to combat in favor of a first-person shooter – so much for the open world rumors.

"We've been wanting to do something with *Syndicate* for so long, and the ideas and thinking have moved along with the rest of the industry," says EA executive producer Jeff Gamon. "Imagine if you took all those values of the original game – just take the fiction for starters, and then take the agent, the brutality, the weaponry, the technology, the research. If you take all those ideas and make them into a game for now – for modern gamers on modern platforms – this game is what you would come up with."

The new *Syndicate* takes place in the year 2069. Like the original, the power of corporations has grown to such an extent that they operate unchecked by democratically elected governments. The key to their rise to power is the broad adoption of chip augmentation technology, which allows the companies to interface directly with human brains. What could possibly go wrong?


With DART chips serving an integral role in many people's lives, three rival corporations (Eurocorp, Cayman Global, and Aspari) ostensibly control all facets of society. Each has its own



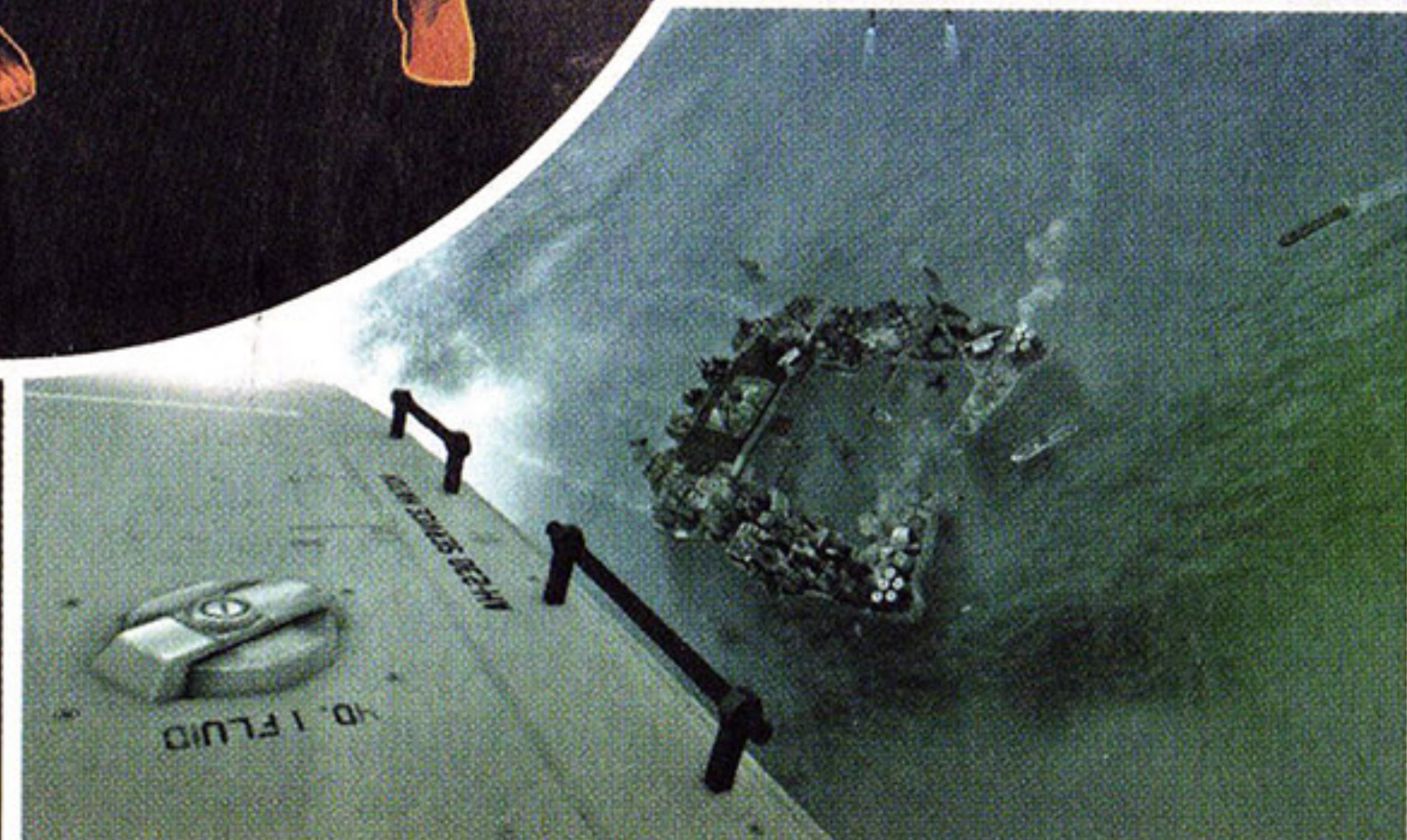
Dart vision gives you a very invasive view of your enemies

Channeling the Classic via Co-op

Given Syndicate's tactical action/RPG lineage, stuffing competitive multiplayer into the game didn't make much sense to Starbreeze. Instead, the studio is building a four-player cooperative campaign evocative of the original, which put players in control of four agents. Like the single-player campaign, players hack and blast their way through missions built specifically for co-op. Unlike the single-player campaign, players have a full progression system that allows them to customize their breaching technology. Around 20 offensive and team-based breaches are available for players to unlock.



These baddies aren't the same dolts you're used to fighting in other games – Starbreeze has created a procedural AI system that can react to your fighting style with the appropriate tactics. "We're pretty confident that the AI makes this game different to other first-person shooters," says executive producer Jeff Gamon. "We see it as a core strength."



territories that are only accessible if you have the company chip. These walled communities aren't the only organizations at play, however. Some dissidents known as downzoners reject this false utopian society and want to destroy society to reestablish an even playing field for all of the world's citizens.


The single-player campaign is a narrative-driven experience penned by *Crysis 2* scribe/famed sci-fi writer Richard Morgan. Players assume the role of Miles Kilo, a Eurocorp agent outfitted with a militarized version of the latest DART6 chip. Given his role in the company – to protect its key assets and work against the rival companies – Kilo has augmented abilities other citizens do not.

"Imagine being able to access all the digital systems that surround you," Gamon states. "Agents can essentially hack through the protection that surrounds these systems and override them." This gives Kilo the freedom to infiltrate enemy establishments, like a floating Cayman Global city located off the shores of New York City. In one of the missions we watched, Kilo stows away on a floating car to reach the city and infiltrates it in search of a kidnapped Eurocorp scientist.

Kilo's DART6 chip turns him into a formidable fighting machine. When engaged in battle, Kilo

has three powerful applications called breaches at his disposal. Like the old Persuadatron gun, the Allegiance breach hacks into an enemy's chip and reprograms them to join your cause. Backfire causes enemy weapons to fail and leaves the victim temporarily vulnerable. The third breach, Suicide, scrambles an enemy's mind to the point that he offs himself. Each of these abilities is on a cooldown timer, but you can't just take cover and expect them to refill. The DART6 chip runs off adrenaline, so if you want to regain your abilities you need to stay engaged in battle.

The supplemental chip functions may be less powerful, but prove equally useful. By turning on Dart vision, Kilo can slow down time, move faster (including reloads), deal more damage, take less damage, see electronic systems through obstructions, and even shoot through cover with specific weapons.



Kilo is also well versed in firearms. Like the original game, expect to see several cool near-future toys during combat, including the popular gauss rifle. To make the combat a central attraction of the reboot, Starbreeze is working hard to create a procedural AI that is smart enough to recognize your tactics and switch up its approach accordingly.

With rival tech corporations, augmented humans, first-person gameplay, and near-future



The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim

A hands-on journal from Riverwood to Whiterun

» **Platform**
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360

» **Style**
1-Player Action/RPG

» **Publisher**
Bethesda Softworks

» **Developer**
Bethesda Game Studios

» **Release**
November 11

At this year's QuakeCon, an event where thousands of gamers congregate in the searing heat of Dallas to play, compete, and party together, Bethesda Softworks offered journalists the first chance to play The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim. This hands-on demo lasted an hour, and each player was allowed to do whatever he or she wanted in that time. Rather than wander the wilds aimlessly like many people did, I decided to create my own quest. The text that follows is my harrowing journey from the small village of Riverwood to Whiterun, a bustling, walled city to the north.

Instead of just throwing me into the game with a pre-made character, the demo allowed me to create my own character. Since this process was counted in my hour with the game, I didn't spend much time with it. I checked out the reptilian Argonian race, which hails from the Black Marsh swamplands and looks much like it did in

Oblivion and Morrowind, with green-scaled skin highlighted with blue hues and yellow, cat-like eyes. In the end I decided to create a Khajiit. The level of customization with this race was impressive. I could alter the eyeliner, change the color of the speckles on the nose, add earrings, and even apply a hairdo on top of my character's furry dome. As in Oblivion, the Khajiit have long, humanoid-like legs and a tail.

My journey started with my character's hands bound in a dreary cave, which Skyrim director Todd Howard said is roughly 30 minutes after the start of the game. The button layout is similar to the previous Elder Scrolls games. On Xbox 360, the X button sheathes and unsheathes your weapon, the B button gives you access to the menu system, the Y button jumps, the A button interacts, and pressing L3 activates stealth mode.

While the general controls are familiar, the combat controls have evolved considerably.

If you have a shield equipped, you can bash enemies with it to cause them to stagger, opening them up for attack. If you hold down the attack button with a melee weapon, you trigger a powerful attack that is often accompanied by a cool animation. When I stabbed a wolf with this attack, my character drove the sword deep into the beast and then used the shield as leverage to pry the sword out of the dead animal. You also must actively block oncoming attacks.

Spells also have varying attacks. As I walked down a path toward the village of Riverwood, I spotted two wolves on a nearby hill. When they caught my scent they came charging down the hill and I met them with a powerful flamethrower attack by holding down the spell button. It didn't take long to burn these gorgeous animals, which look much more lifelike than the creatures in Oblivion.

Since Riverwood was in the previous Skyrim demos, I didn't spend much time in the village. Instead I headed north alongside a babbling stream that had salmon jumping out of the water and stumbled upon a small farm populated by a cow and hen. I watched the hen for a bit as it walked around aimlessly while clucking, and then stole the egg that was sitting in its nest.

I then made my way into the farmhouse, which only took a couple of seconds to load. Judging from the spread on his table – goat cheese and Nord mead – this farmer is living the good life. When I went back outside I met a woman named Sigrid, whose first words to me were "I'm spoken for, don't get any ideas." She kept on farming while telling me about herself and her daughter. After she shared five or so details, she started delivering the canned responses of "Yes?", "Good afternoon," and "What do you need?"

Leaving Sigrid and the farm behind, I made my way farther north to a large murky river. I could have crossed using a bridge, but

The Khajiit I created looks like a puma wearing goth lipstick



Is this a shot of Skyrim or Assassin's Creed: Reptile?



The non-human races look much better than they did in Oblivion



All weapons and items are accompanied by cosmetic changes

I decided to test out the swimming instead. The animations are a little rough, but as I swam across to the other bank I was able to grab a few salmon as they passed by. Who needs a fishing rod when you can just grab them? As I approached the bank I saw a large elk wade into the river. When I moved in too close for the beast's comfort, he made a run for it.

Continuing down the path on the other side of the river, I stumbled across a group of Stormcloak soldiers escorting a prisoner. When I approached the group a hostile soldier blurted out, "Citizen, I'm warning you." Then I was presented with three choices. I could do nothing, free the prisoner, or free the prisoner and give him an item, which I assumed in this case would be a weapon so he could defend himself against his captors. Considering that there were three guards with their swords drawn and I was a mere level one character, I opted to stay out of it. As soon as I moved away, the soldiers sheathed their weapons.

Heading north again, I ran into another farm. This was a much bigger plot of land, with several gardens. In the middle of this farm a group of three humans were battling a massive giant. Rather than joining the fray, I decided to just sit back and watch. The battle raged back and forth, but eventually the humans prevailed. Afterwards I met Alea the huntress and her sidekicks Farkas and Ria. My first interaction with her was a statement about the battle – I could say, "You don't look like you need any help," or "I tried to help." When I chose the flattering option, she thanked me and explained that her band was a part of the Shield-Brothers. I was then prompted to either inquire about joining the group or to wryly respond with "Sounds like a waste of time." Alea told me that if I wanted to join the group I would have to ask the leader of the Companions.

After going our separate ways, I ventured north again, picking items like lavender and tundra cotton on my way toward Whiterun, a large walled city on the hill. Before I walked up the hill, I stopped by a stable and talked to the stable-hand named Skulva. When I asked to buy a horse, he replied that his horse was seven years old and in fine health. His asking price? One thousand gold. Rather than pay the outrageous fee, I jumped on the horse and galloped up the hill to the city with Skulva cursing and running after me. Since there were no guards in the vicinity, I got off scot-free.

When I approached the gates of the city, the guard said, "The city is closed with the dragons about." From here I had a few options to try and

get into the city. I could offer him news about the dragon attack at Helgen, bribe him with 56 gold, or intimidate by asking him to stand aside. I chose to pay him off, and soon I was behind the comforts of the city wall.

Loading takes a bit longer when entering a big city like Whiterun, but as the screen loads you're given gameplay tips, bits of lore, and can even tinker with a three-dimensional object on the screen. Once the city loaded, I took a brief tour. Whiterun looks to be a wealthy city in good shape – the beautifully designed A-frame homes have nice brickwork and look pristine. A large courtyard I stumbled upon served as home to a giant tree and a gazebo. A large outdoor market offered several opportunities to buy or trade gear, and there was plenty of stuff laying around for those who prefer five-finger discounts. The city guards, who have black rams on their shields, would prefer you didn't.

I made my way into a beautiful manor, where all walks of life were sitting around eating and drinking. One guy was eating a large sweet-roll that looked like it could put a man into a food coma. I spoke to a musician named Mikael, who played a unique stringed instrument. After conversing, he switched to a wooden flute. In the back of the manor I came across a ledger. When opening it up I was busted by the citizens and apprehended by the city watch. To avoid imprisonment I paid a 44 gold fine.

With only a few minutes left before the demo concluded, I decided to leave the city to head toward a place called Dawnstar. Night had fallen, and the world took on another personality with new creatures like torchbugs and luna moths that I collected. Stumbling upon Lorieus Farm, I walked in the home to find two people sleeping. Before I could steal the couple's valuables, I was tapped on the shoulder and told my time was up. All of my pleading to play just a few minutes more was met with a shaking of the head.

Overall, Skyrim played great. The framerate was fluid, the combat satisfying, and the world begs for more exploration. After the demo concluded, Todd Howard confirmed that the Dark Brotherhood is returning in Skyrim. As if we needed another reason to be excited about this game. » **Andrew Reiner**





Battlefield 3

Hands-on with multiplayer and co-op

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

» **Style**
1-Player Shooter
(24-Player Online: PS3, 360)
(64-Player Online: PC)

» **Publisher**
Electronic Arts

» **Developer**
DICE

» **Release**
October 25

Battlefield 3 came to the Gamescom convention in Germany with both barrels blazing. First, DICE showcased the co-op campaign, which boasts its own unique levels and story that weaves into the single-player campaign. Then, behind the walls of an enormous booth on the show floor, 64 PCs ran full capacity multiplayer matches for five days straight.

The co-op mission I played took place in a seemingly quiet Middle Eastern city at night. The goal: rescue a recent defector from the People's Liberation and Resistance (PLR). I creep into the building stealthily with a fellow journalist co-op partner and we find two guards hanging out in the darkness. We try to coordinate our shots, but the other guy doesn't hold up his end of the bargain.

Soon the alarm is blaring and we have to pick up the pace. I grab a shotgun off the body of one of the soldiers we killed and head down the hallway. With all the power you'd expect from a Battlefield shotgun, enemies fly back as I blast them in the chest and a thundering boom rings out with each shot.

We hoof it up several flights of stairs and find the designated apartment where the VIP is being held. The door blows off its hinges as we approach. I peer inside and unload at the foes within. After scanning the room for threats, we find the target crouched in a corner. He gets up and follows us out, picking up a gun along the

way. We head toward a waiting envoy of military vehicles and he climbs inside one of them.

Now we need to escort the envoy to the green zone. I trade my shotgun for a long-range rifle with a thermal scope and begin the escort on foot. We don't even make it around the corner before PLR forces open fire from behind cover on the ground and from balconies above. I move to the opposite side of the street to gain a different sight line and then my partner and I start whittling down their numbers from afar. Spotting targets is nearly impossible with the naked eye, but using the scope highlights enemies in yellow on a green backdrop.

Perhaps splitting up isn't the best tactic on this mission. If one of us goes down, the other has to run through the open streets to revive the other. Fortunately, the downed player can shuffle behind cover so the rescuer can help out without getting shot to hell. We both end up dying eventually anyway, so I decide to jump over to the 64-player multiplayer.

I pick the assault class and get rolling on the Caspian Border map in the traditional conquest mode that has five flags available for capture. Vehicles are in high demand, and after failing to catch up to the envoy of tanks, jeeps,

buggies, and jets, I'm left sprinting across the expansive green fields toward the nearest flag. It takes awhile, but the excitement ratchets up when I get to the first contested base. I kill a couple enemies and we take the zone, but I die on the way to the next one.

The rest of the match I play around with tanks, helicopters, and fighter jets. Sometimes my PC freezes (this is alpha software after all), but while it reboots I look over to other players' screens to get a bigger picture of the battlefield. Tanks and ground vehicles are the most accessible to control. Like in previous Battlefield games, choppers and jets are way more complicated to grasp out of the gate, but they offer an incredible view of the map and all of the skirmishes taking place across it. Jets don't move at Mach 2, so infantry armed with anti-air weaponry still have a fighting chance when they swoop in for the kill.

Playing with 63 other people on the huge map is a complete rush, so it's too bad that console players won't get to enjoy this same sense of scale. Will the 24-player battles still deliver the same thrills? With Battlefield 3's release just around the corner, we'll know soon enough. » **Bryan Vore**

Battlefield 3 by the Numbers

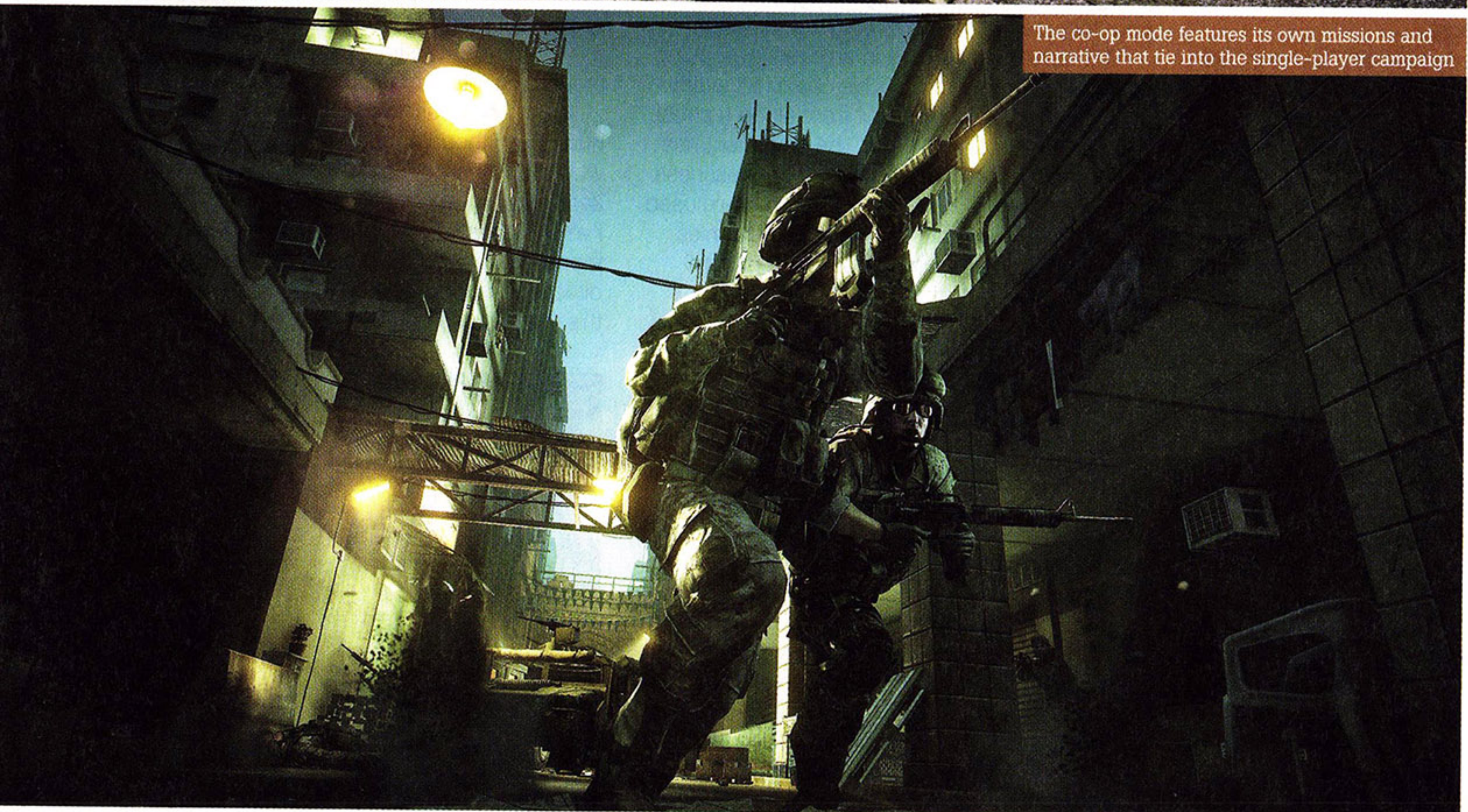
Maps: 9
Weapons: 55
Weapon Attachments: 27
Equipment: 16
Soldier Specializations: 14
Vehicles: 22
Vehicle Specializations: 28
Ribbons and Medals: Nearly 100
Dog Tag Customizations: 350+



With multiple jets per side, the aerial battles on the Caspian Border map are intense



The co-op mode features its own missions and narrative that tie into the single-player campaign



Battlefield 3 Multiplayer Burning Questions



DICE executive producer Patrick Bach clears up some outstanding questions we still had regarding the revamped multiplayer.

Q: Is each map playable for all the modes out of the box, or are you locking some of them for later use like you did with Bad Company 2?

A: Yes, all fire game modes in Battlefield 3 will be playable from day one on every map.

Q: Have you figured out a way to allow more than just the four-player squad chat together?

A: We have, and will allow you the ability to toggle and speak to your squad or the whole team.

Q: It took nearly six months before fans received a DLC pack with brand new maps in Bad Company 2. Can players expect a more frequent stream of new maps for the base game with Battlefield 3, or are you focused more on making expansions like Return To Karkand?

A: We have very ambitious plans for Battlefield 3 post launch. So far we've announced the Back To Karkand pack, which will include some of the best Battlefield 2 maps created, now revamped with the help of Frostbite 2. Launch date isn't official yet so stay tuned.

Q: The BFBlog mentioned that the ranks go up to Colonel, which is seven ranks shy of where the progression ended in Bad Company 2. Are there fewer ranks this time?

A: We made a conscious effort to include fewer ranks based on the real ranking system in the Marines. An example would be that generals are not usually on the battlefield. However, the addition system of Service stars will actually create a total of 145 levels to reach so this meant that once you have reached Colonel you will start to add Service stars (100) to this rank.

Q: If you buy BF 3 for both PC and a console, will you be able to accrue experience and stats under one Battlelog account or will you have separate progression tracks?

A: The persistence for each system will be separate. We do not want people to get a higher score just because they have more platforms. That said, you can use Battlelog to track any platforms' progress.



Devil May Cry

The city itself wants Dante dead

» **Platform**
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Capcom

» **Developer**
Ninja Theory/
Capcom

» **Release**
TBA

Capcom's live demo of Devil May Cry at Gamescom 2011 dispelled any doubts I had about the game's direction. You may have seen the trailer released to coincide with the show, but it doesn't showcase the most exciting part of Ninja Theory's re-envisioning of DMC: the way the city itself is trying to kill the insouciant hero.

I saw Dante following a slim girl through city streets, chatting about their plans to combat an unnamed force. Suddenly, a CCTV camera spots Dante. Capcom explains that the city itself has a sort of demonic consciousness that can't affect physical reality directly, but lives within the CCTV system and the rest of our electronically connected society. A distorted, guttural voice gurgles something unintelligible, and a demonic eye thrusts from the camera as the city shifts disturbingly.

"They're pulling me into Limbo!" Dante shouts as he draws his sword. The angles of the city change, becoming something out of M.C. Escher's nightmares. Buildings crowd oppressively over the street. Apartments that looked normal take on a grim hue as their stonework facades adopt a tinge of corruption. The people walking the streets fade away, replaced by translucent silhouettes that phase in and out of sight. Only the girl's voice remains. She alone can talk to Dante when he occupies this other world, but why? Capcom won't say just yet, but did admit that the unnamed young woman plays a pivotal role in Devil May Cry's story.

With his unstoppable sword, two iconic handguns, and the new axe and scythe weapons he has in his respective demon and angel personas, Dante obliterates the skeletons that spontaneously take shape on this monstrous plane. Dante's alternate weapons are accessed in a way that should feel familiar to fans of Ninja Theory's Heavenly Sword. Players simply hold down R2 or L2 to access his demon/angel sides, and his weapons and utility moves change accordingly – no need to swap weapon sets or enter a pause menu. In addition to changing his

weapon, Dante gains a stomp and a pull move in demon form or a lift and a glide in his angel persona. The upshot of it all is that switching weapons mid-combo is seamless, and Dante has improved mobility thanks to a chain that works much like Nero's Devil Bringer from DMC 4.

Dante's Devil Trigger is entirely different than previous incarnations. Instead of going into an unstoppable frenzy and/or changing forms, he launches all of his enemies into the air. They hang helpless and immobile as the music switches to a hauntingly unnatural ambient track rather than combat's typical pounding heavy metal soundtrack. Devil Trigger's duration is based on how long the player is able to remain airborne. Keep your combo going without touching the ground – the air dash and chain are key here – and you'll have quite a long time to slash away at your foes before the Devil Trigger state ends.

After spreading his foes in an even layer along a city block, our hero uses his chain to traverse the crumbling balconies that front along a street that no longer offers a path. The pavement has fallen away, leaving only a twisting formlessness calling Dante into the void. The same chain used for traversal (and, naturally, whipping enemies helplessly about during combat) spikes the demonic eyeball and rips it from the camera with a wet slurp. This section of the demo ends as the city reverts to its normal proportions and Dante returns to the mortal sphere.

Another scenario served as an even more impressive indication of the direction Ninja Theory and Capcom are taking DMC. Dante is once again pulled into Limbo as he enters a cathedral, but this time it's not the undead he has to fear – it's the city itself. The floor falls away, revealing a glimpse of rolling nether-space. The walls slam in, trying to crush Dante as he sprints toward a sliver of daylight in front of him. Prominently featuring the chain and his angelic-powered air dash, Dante's flight through the possessed cathedral (which keeps elongating in front of him, twisting Euclidean space beyond its natural limits) is almost parkour.

Finally, he reaches the stained glass window that offers escape only to have the wall tilt away from him as the cathedral extends its grasp as far as it can. Dante slides down the animated structure and shoots out the window, ending that section of the demo.

The element of the demo that makes me so enthusiastic for DMC is the hardest thing to put into words: the sheer sense of physical threat that the city projects. Walls don't just grind together in their quest to paste Dante; they slam toward one another in fits and starts. The cathedral toys with Dante, flinging the floor in front of him suddenly out of reach as he sprints away from the malevolent architecture and playing games with the player's perspective as an exit that seemed so close is yanked away at the last second. The techniques used in DMC are part of successful horror cinema canon for good reason; they evoke gut-twisting reactions by turning around our intuitive grasp of spatial reasoning.

I wasn't on board with this re-envisioned DMC until now; I thought that Dante looked like a whiny teenager and didn't care for the modern aesthetic in previous teaser trailers. Now that I've had a taste of what the final product will be, though, I wholeheartedly support the bold new direction Capcom and Ninja Theory are taking this much-loved franchise. » **Adam Biessener**



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PS3

PlayStation 3



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Games for Windows LIVE



XBOX 360

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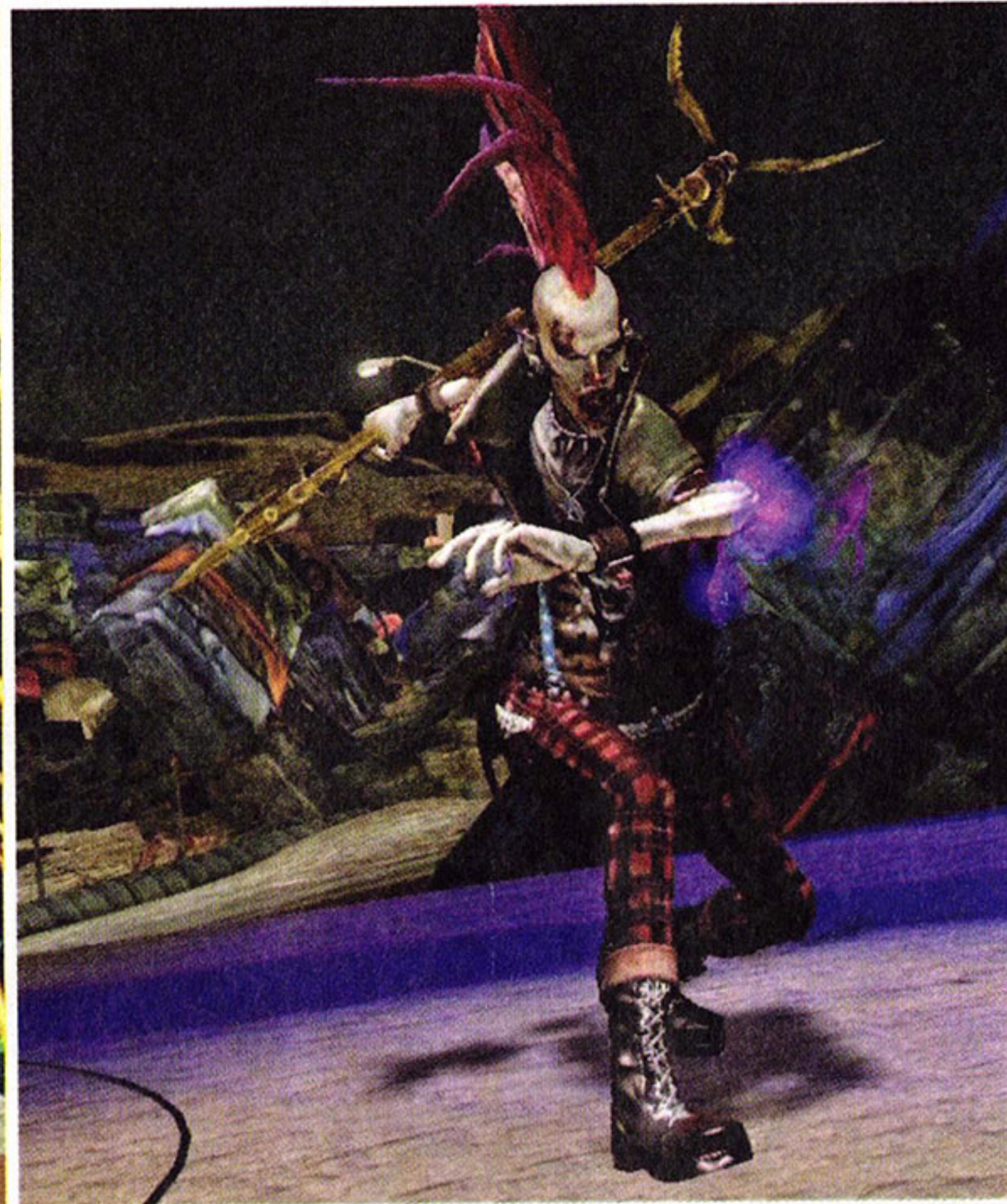
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Lollipop Chainsaw

This zombie-slaying cheerleader isn't just another pretty face



Juliet's cheerleading skills come in handy



- » **Platform**
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360
- » **Style**
1-Player Action
- » **Publisher**
Warner Bros.
Interactive
- » **Developer**
Grasshopper
Manufacture
- » **Release**
2012

Suda 51 isn't known for subtlety, but Lollipop Chainsaw is excessive even by his standards. The game stars Juliet Starling, an 18-year-old cheerleader and queen bee at San Romero High. When the school is attacked by zombies, she grabs her trusty chainsaw and fights back to save her classmates. Her boyfriend Nick accompanies her – sort of. He's a severed head who just happens to still be alive.

In our demo, Juliet starts out battling a group of zombies in a classroom. Her cheerleading skills are on display with every acrobatic jump, kick, and flip that she incorporates into her melee attacks. She accentuates those dazzling moves with her saw, which generates some grisly kills. It can be used in special finishing moves, which zoom in on the action to give players a nice look at what happens when a zombie is split vertically from crotch to skull.

The gruesome content is tempered by a happy, upbeat tone. Juliet wants to save the school, darn it, and she's going to try her hardest. That

optimism translates to the game visually in the way freshly killed zombies disappear in a sparkly flash, or how particularly awesome kills are rewarded with a rainbow and gold star.

Juliet fights her way through the halls and classrooms of the school, rescuing the occasional student. When she waits too long and a helpless classmate is overtaken by zombies, he's transformed into an especially nasty specimen. The grim prospect of fighting a super-zombie is a powerful incentive to try to save as many people as possible.

Eventually she comes upon the mid-level boss, math teacher Mr. Fitzgibbons. After yelling that there's a math test today, the zombified teacher opens the classroom door to let a swarm of the undead join the fight. After the crowd is torn apart, Fitzgibbons dives out of the window. He resurfaces a few minutes later, wielding a desk as a shield. His methodical bashing and wild swings are no match for Juliet's agile fighting style, and he's laid flat in no time.

Next, we saw a boss battle against a punk zombie named Zed. He's everything you'd expect to see in a stereotypical punk: red mohawk, leather jacket, plaid pants. Judging from the spiked microphone he bears, he's also an aspiring musician. Zed and Juliet meet up in a junkyard, where Zed says he loves dead cheerleaders.

The fight goes on in several stages, with Juliet slicing him in half at the end of each phase. Zed simply pushes his two halves back together and brags about how it doesn't hurt him. One of Zed's attacks is bound to ruffle a few feathers. He yells things into his microphone like "f---ing b----," and the letters of those words radiate away from him. Juliet has to bash them away or take damage. Eventually, Zed is killed in a spectacularly graphic fashion, and the demo is over.

Lollipop Chainsaw would seem like another game that's only out to shock people if not for

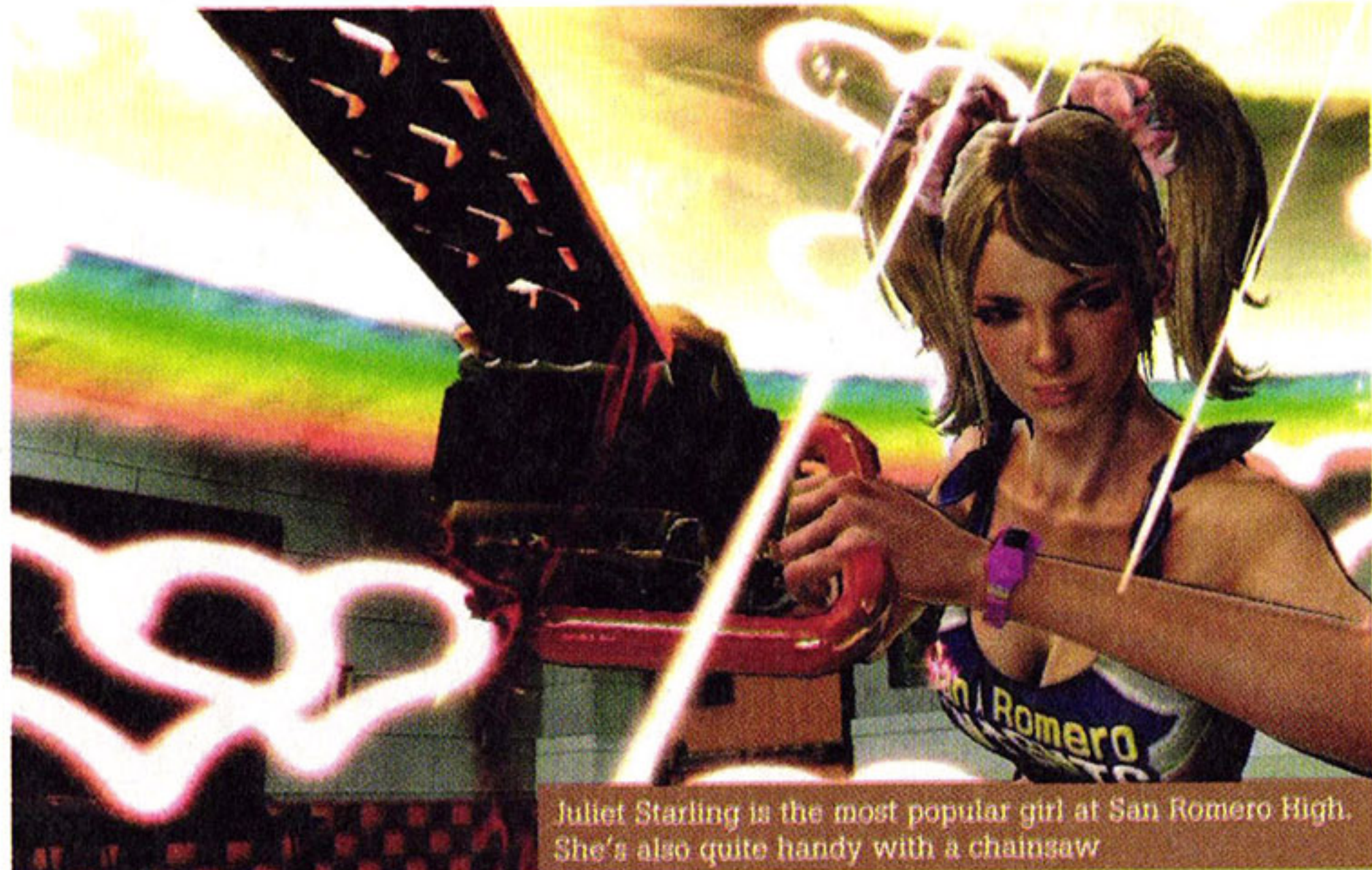


Homework stinks



the silly tone. It's like Peter Jackson's *Dead Alive* in that regard. Juliette is a likeable heroine, and it's nice to see that she's more interesting than just another hot chick in a skimpy outfit. She seems sassy and confident without falling into the easy "tough girl" trap. She kind of reminds me of Buffy.

There's still a lot to learn about the game, including what Nick's role is. On one screen we saw references to "Nick Roulette," but the devs wouldn't elaborate on what exactly that entails. Considering that he's just a head, I'm intrigued to learn how he can help in battle. Maybe he's a biter? » **Jeff Cork**



Juliet Starling is the most popular girl at San Romero High. She's also quite handy with a chainsaw

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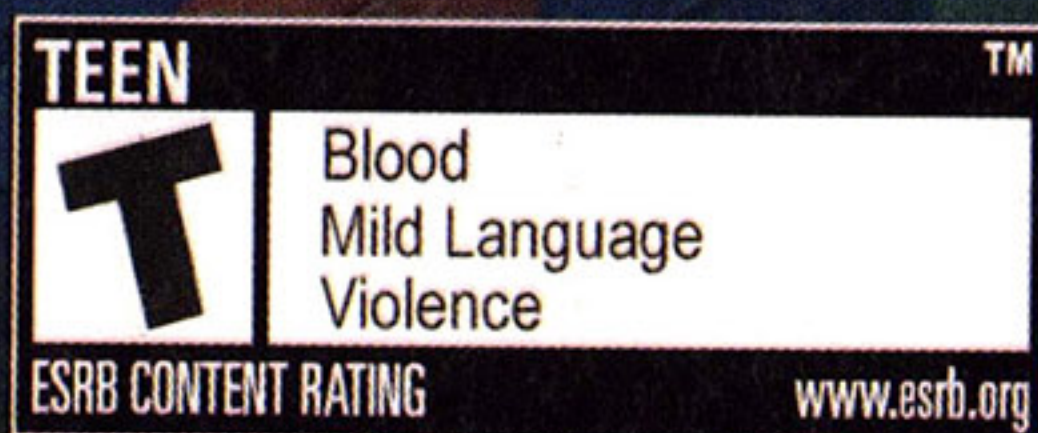
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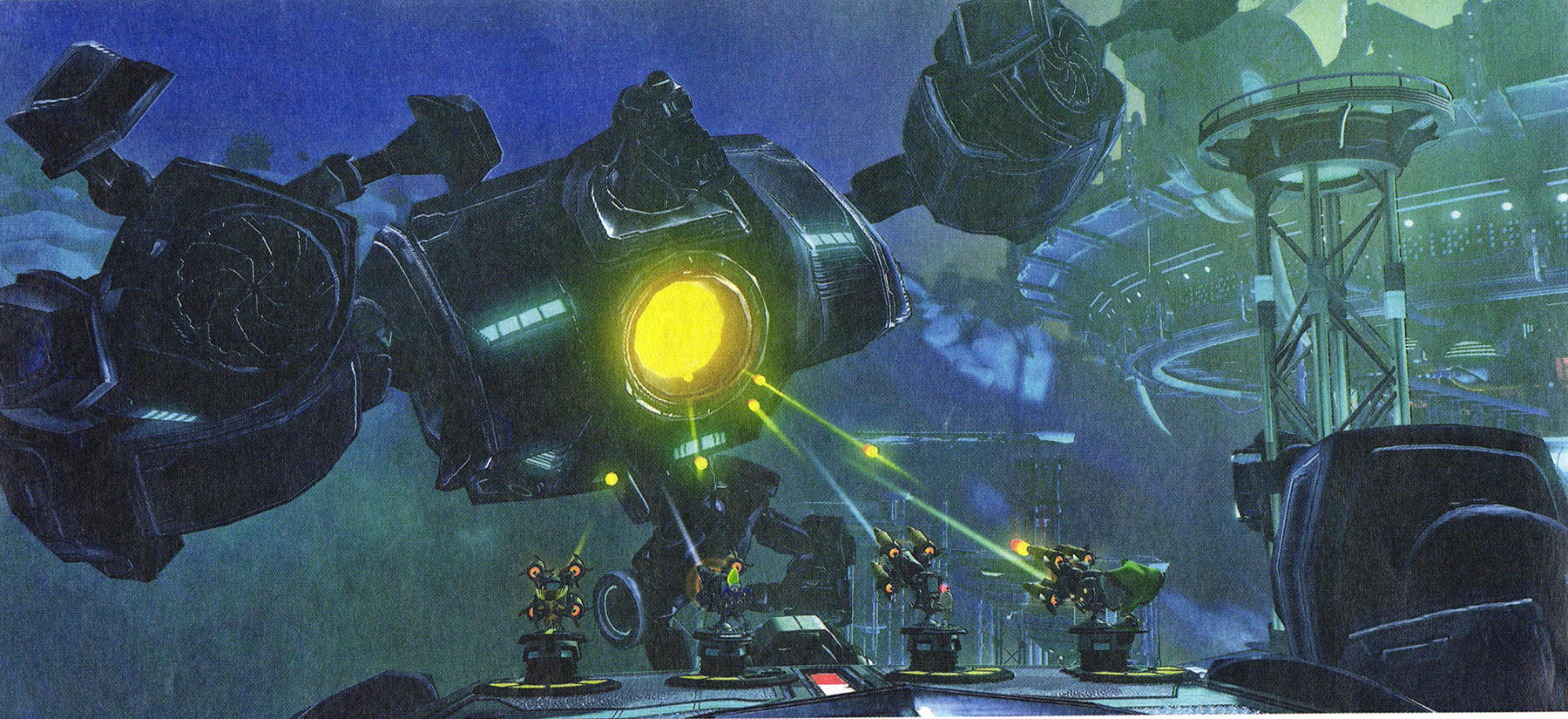
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Ratchet & Clank: All 4 One

Insomniac gives you alone time

» **Platform**
PlayStation 3

» **Style**
1 to 4-Player
Action/Platform
(4-Player online)

» **Publisher**
Sony Computer
Entertainment

» **Developer**
Insomniac Games

» **Release**
October 18

Ratchet & Clank are ready for retirement. Tired of saving the world year-in and year-out, the duo just wants to get back to the life of fixing ships and playing hologames until two in the morning. Unfortunately, the galaxy faces one of its greatest crises in memory: The lovable buffoon Captain Qwark has been elected president of the Galactic Federation. Now calling himself Galactic President Copernicus Qwark, the meathead has been awarded an Intergalactic Tool of Justice award. Unfazed by the idea of becoming an intergalactic tool, Qwark asks Ratchet and Clank to escort him to the city of Luminopolis to accept the award.

On Luminopolis, a new adventure begins. Series mainstay Dr. Nefarious unleashes a creature called the light-eating Z'grute, which begins trashing the city. This incident attracts the attention of a massive entity called the Creature Collector. This giant ship arrives on Luminopolis to take Nefarious' creature into custody, and the whole group – Ratchet, Clank, Qwark, and Nefarious – get swept off to a distant part of the galaxy in the process. The unlikely allies must work together to save their skins.

The set-up is built for co-op hijinks, but Insomniac still wants solo players to feel like they are working as part of a team. Since the Ratchet & Clank series has traditionally been

known for its single-player experience, I put the game through the friendless test to see what it offers loners.

One AI bot accompanies players through each level, and it never hurts players or steals their bolts. Unlike All 4 One's co-op experience where anything goes, I never felt like I was competing with my AI buddy. He remained on hand to help during combat and stayed out of the way during platforming sequences and puzzles. Unless you're playing as Clank, your companion is Clank. During lulls in the action, Clank rests on your back like he has in previous games. However, when you control Clank, his AI companion is Qwark. Somehow the galactic president also finds a way to fold himself up onto Clank's back, which looks both ridiculous and hilarious.

As I travel deeper into the heart of the planet Magnus, I experiment with the array of weaponry. Like any traditional Ratchet & Clank title, All 4 One features an impressive collection of weapons, such as a rocket launcher that fires cluster bombs, an electrified whip, and a plasma-spewing grenade launcher. The Critterstrike turns enemies into baby T-Rexes that attack your foes, and you can upgrade the weapon to give your minions fire breath.

Character-specific items give each hero a unique superpower. Clank's Zoni Ray slows time

for a limited period, while Qwark's Quantum Deflector shields provide the team with an extra layer of defense. Insomniac designed these tools to be powerful game-changers that alter the course of the battle, so don't be surprised by how quickly these specialty items burn through ammo.

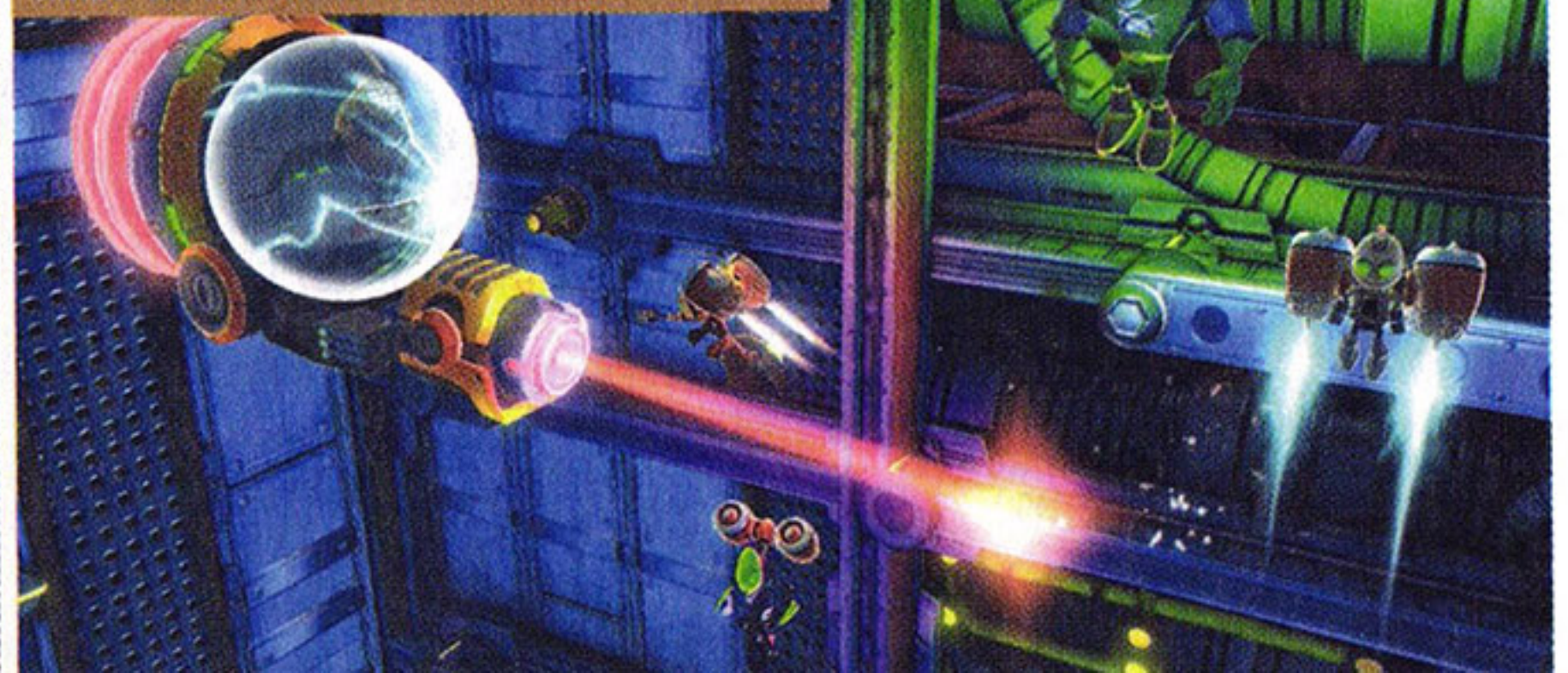
After trekking through the Terawatt Forest, I end up in front of the Hall of Paradoxology, which is protected by a series of large *Iron Giant*-like robots. After hacking into one of these robots, I mount a couple turrets on the guardian's back, initiating an on-rails sequence that has me fending off waves of enemies. The game is filled with alternate gameplay moments like this, where the team must perform a series of action-packed stunts. One forces you to navigate the dangers of a nearly bottomless pit with jetpacks, while another encourages cooperation to steer a vehicle through an aerial combat sequence.

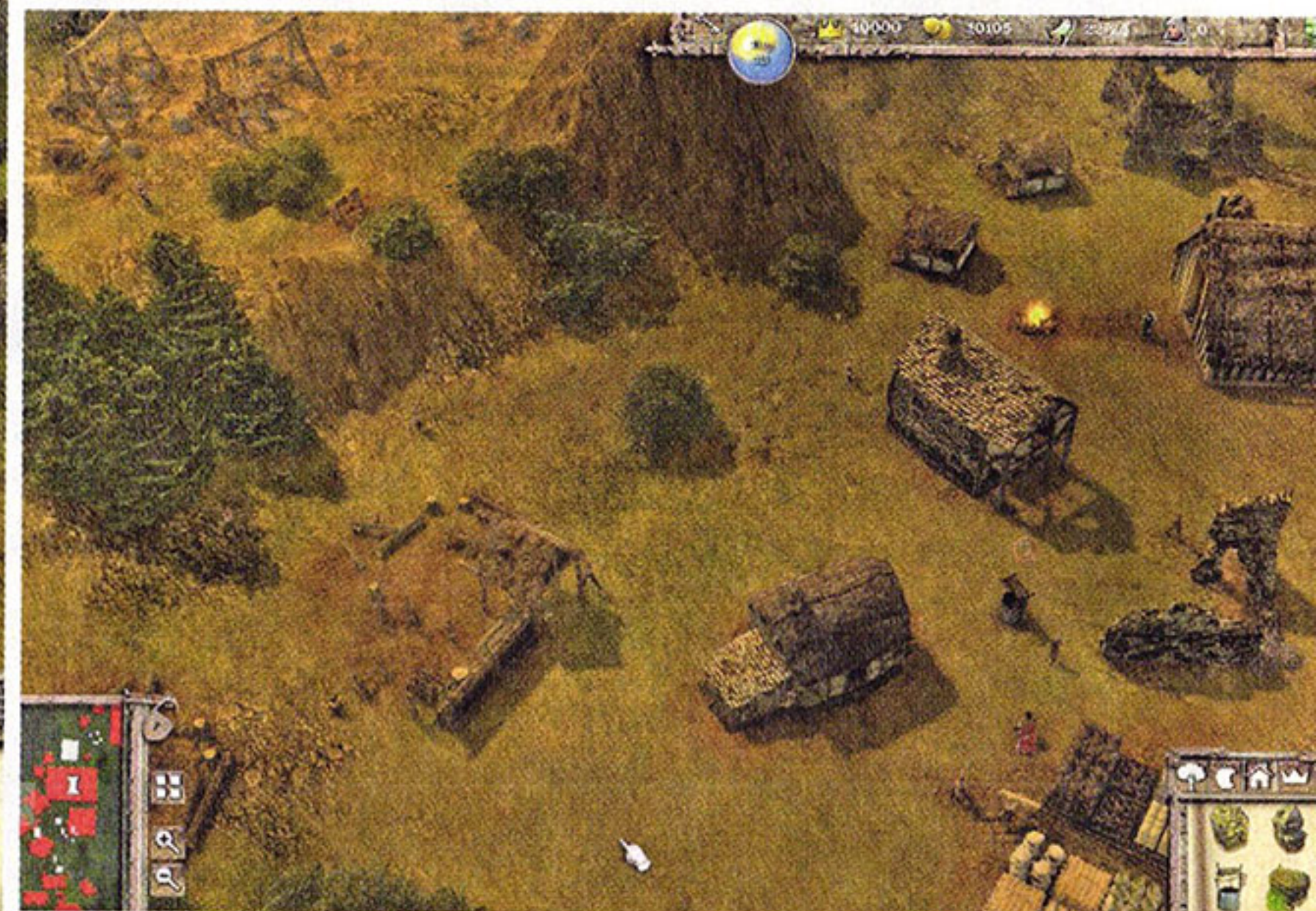
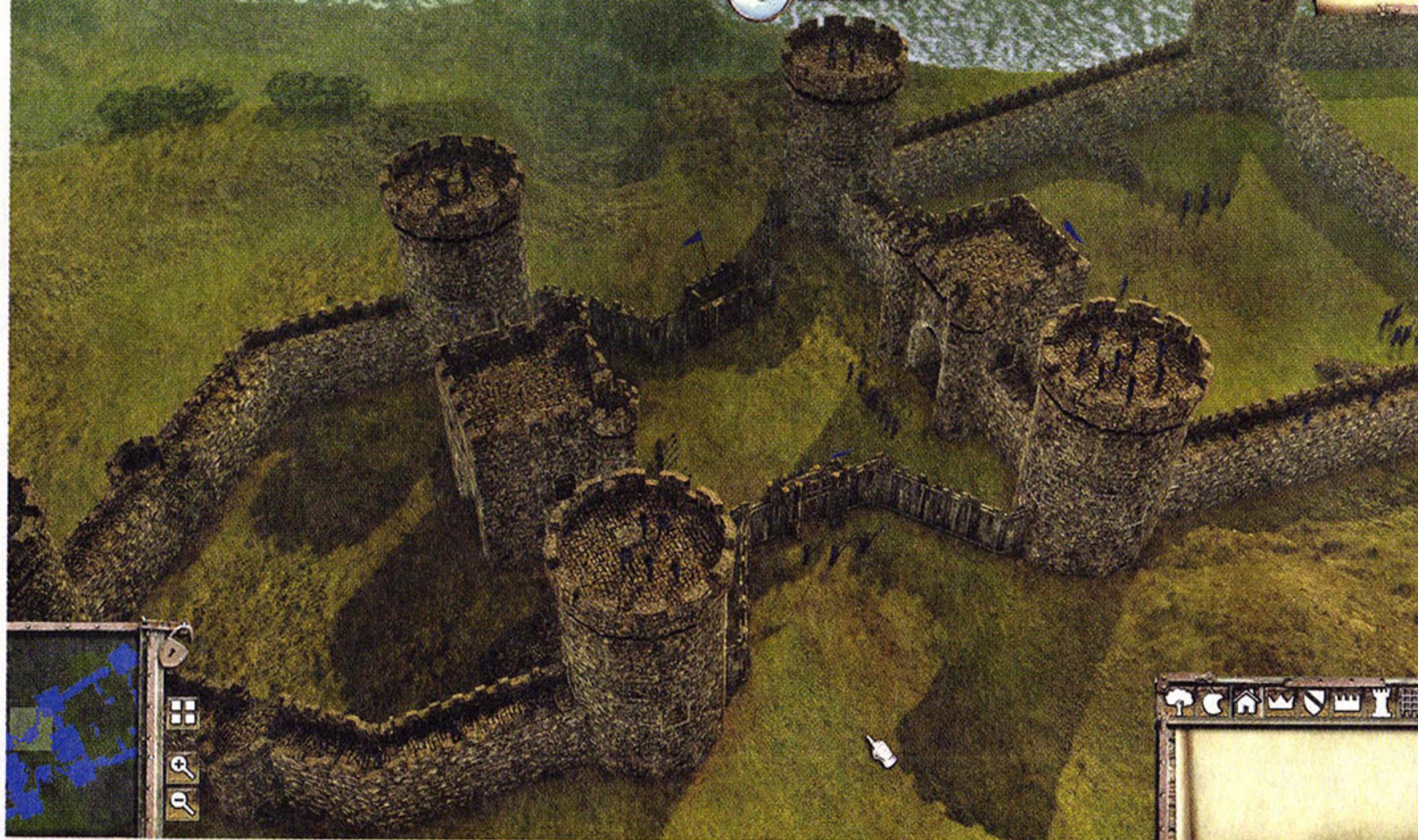
Insomniac has created a unique hybrid with All 4 One. Players who have always wanted to play Ratchet & Clank with a friend can experience the drop-in co-op. However, those who love Ratchet & Clank's traditional single-player experience should be pleased by the helpful but unobtrusive AI partner and its list of inventive weapons. » **Ben Reeves**

The All 4 One cast finds animated journals scattered throughout the game. These journals, narrated by a Dr. Croid, detail the game's backstory and tell the history of the Creature Collector



TJ Fixman has written Ratchet & Clank Future: A Crack in Time and the Ratchet & Clank comic. He returns to write All 4 One





Stronghold 3

Something to look forward to for simulation fans

European development is coming to the rescue of yet another beleaguered PC genre. Firefly Studios' Stronghold series has been a simulation stalwart for a decade, and Stronghold 3 looks to reclaim the franchise's throne after a six-year hiatus following the divisive Stronghold 2. The steps Stronghold 3 is taking to get back to the original game's roots while modernizing its technical side are enough to get me on board with this castle builder.

Most sim games ignore physical conflict (The Sims and its many offshoots) or abstract it to the point that players do little more than equip dudes and give generic "fight" or "flee" orders (The Settlers 7, Dawn of Discovery). Stronghold journeys halfway to Warcraft; you command your soldiers on the battlefield and in defense of the castle you've so painstakingly raised from a pile of stones into a towering edifice. The battles aren't the tightly designed tactical masterpieces of Company of Heroes, but the rudimentary RTS implementation is enough to get across the pleasure of flanking an enemy position or the shame of losing half your army to boiling oil or flaming logs dropped from castle walls.

To field a respectable force, you must first develop an economic infrastructure to support it. This is where the real meat of Stronghold 3 lies. From building houses to lure peasants to your town to managing the production chains necessary to keep your blacksmiths supplied with metal, players spend the bulk of their time laying out settlements and making sure their men have all the tools and shops they need to create a booming town. Just make sure to keep them happy (via food and reasonable taxes) or at least afraid enough of you to do their jobs anyway. Torturing dissenters in the town square goes a long way toward cowing a resentful populace.

Once your people are happily bustling away, it's time to allocate a certain amount of their production toward building the castle of your dreams. Stronghold 3 removes the construction grid rules of its predecessors, so you can use any angle you like in designing your fortress. Spicing up the walls with various types of gates, towers, traps, and other goodies will pay great dividends when the bad guys come. Firefly prides itself on

making the best castle-building games around, so you've got dozens of pieces to snap together to build the best castle you can. The other half of the fun is watching enemies try (and hopefully fail) to breach your stronghold.

Not every scenario follows this basic pattern. Sometimes you must build an army to attack an enemy castle. Other maps give you a working village with plenty of resources and ask you to quickly build and defend a castle. Some levels have little or no conflict at all, staying firmly on the building side of the game.

The improvements in Stronghold 3 are legion. The design largely goes back to and improves upon the original Stronghold's tenets, for instance by making housing a single building type that increases your population cap based on its distance from your keep. The technical features are a huge leap forward as well. A modern rendering engine makes it look respectable and inviting, and getting rid of the previously mentioned grid is a fantastic improvement that results in more organic-looking towns and castles. A day/night cycle allows for interesting mission objectives as well as different graphical looks. Instead of a strategy game-like fog of war, your vision is dependent on time of day and whatever light sources you have – so building beacon towers that you can light with an archer's flaming arrow can be a critical part of your defensive strategy.

I came to Stronghold late, so the marginal technical implementation and shoddy presentations of the older games in the series were significant barriers for me. As a fan of sims in general, though, I'm excited for Stronghold 3. It's impossible to judge deep games like this at a glance, but I've seen several encouraging things for every quibble I have with the game. » **Adam Biessener**

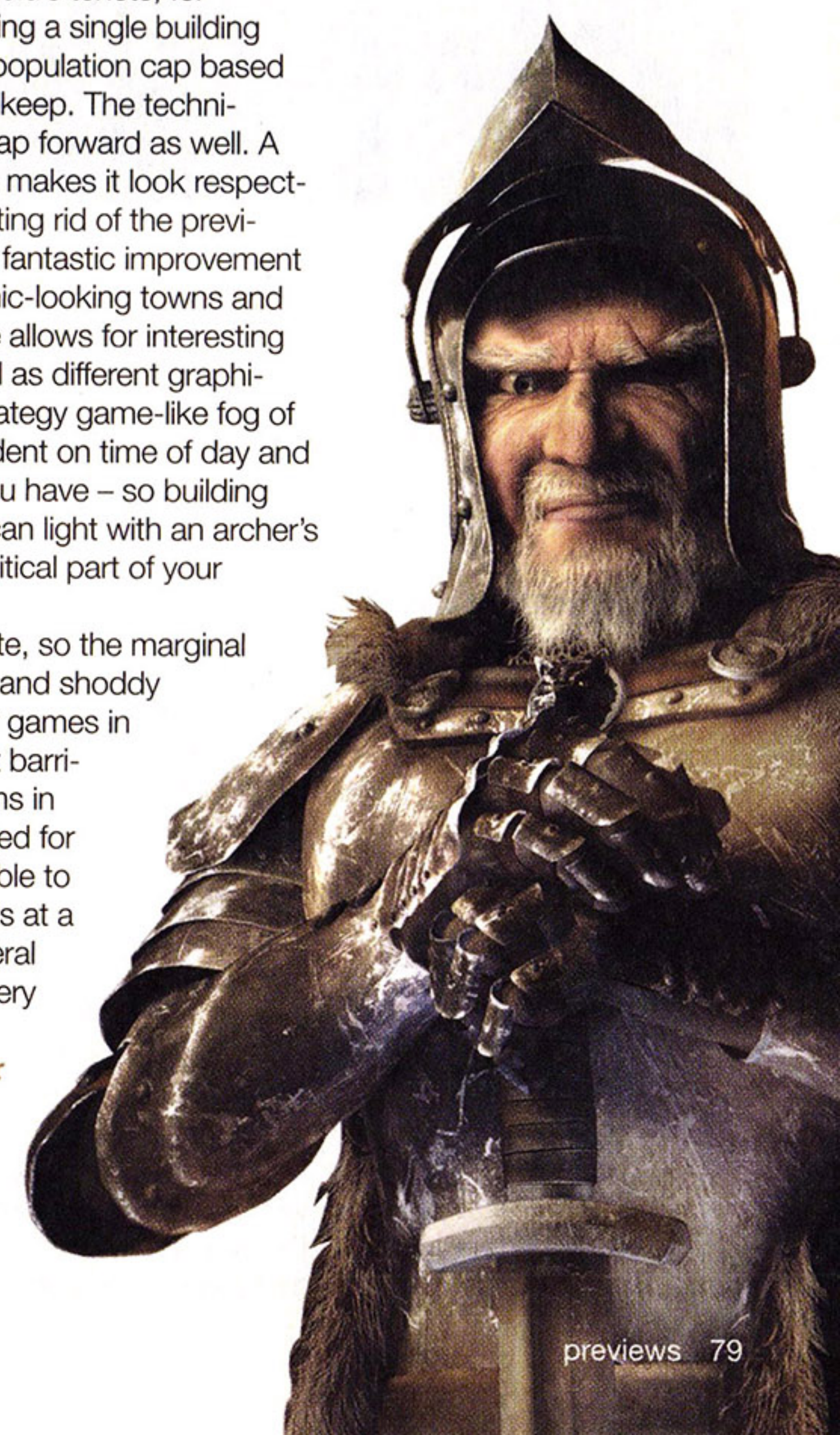
» **Platform**
PC

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

» **Publisher**
7sixty

» **Developer**
Firefly Studios

» **Release**
October 4





Diablo III

Hands-on impressions and two new controversies

» **Platform**
PC

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

» **Publisher**
Blizzard Entertainment

» **Developer**
Blizzard Entertainment

» **Release**
TBA

Diablo III is taking increasingly solid form, and Blizzard unveiled new details about the highly anticipated title at a recent press event at the company's California headquarters. I was surprised at some of what I saw, but I couldn't be happier with the way Diablo III plays.

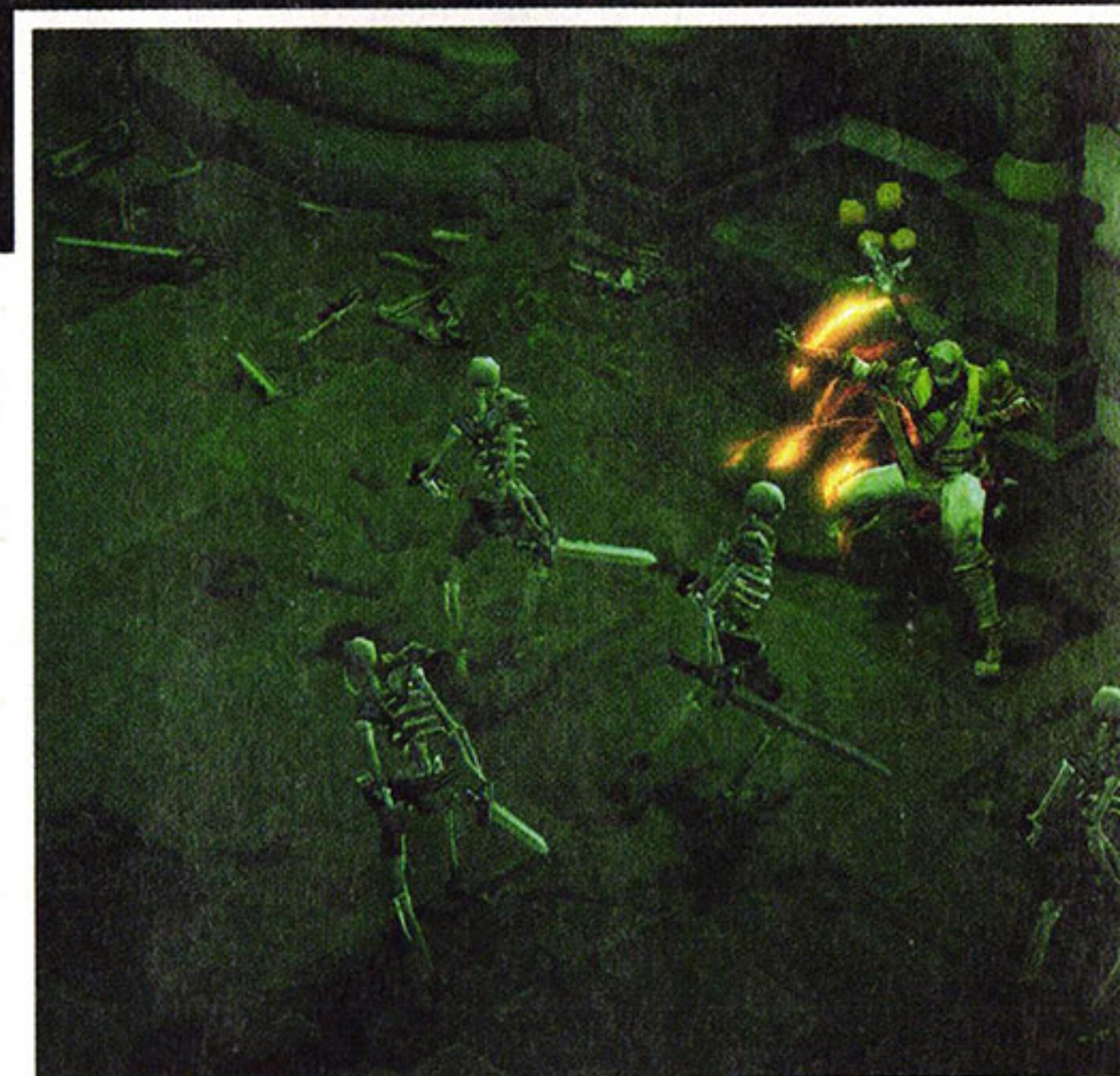
I ran through the first half of Act I solo and co-op, and it's a blast either way. All five classes offer something unique, and the randomization presents interesting one-off scenarios and unique challenges. The art is incredible, creating the brooding, gothic atmosphere that Diablo is known for without being dreary or boring.

The biggest change since last we've seen the game is in the skill system. Blizzard has ripped out skill points entirely, instead giving you access to new skills at set levels and having them automatically scale as you advance. The catch is that you can only equip a handful at a time (two to start, six eventually), though you can swap skills at any time. This may seem like a radical change, and in some respects it is, but I'm sold on it. Being able to freely experiment with new spells – one of the core draws of the Diablo experience – is such a massive benefit that it easily outweighs any downsides.

The story of New Tristram's attempts to survive the siege of undead monstrosities and the reanimation of mad King Leoric is delivered organically rather than through static dialogues. You can still skip through it if you're only here for the loot, but it's fed to you in small, easily digestible chunks. I'm happy to listen to a companion tell me about a town's fall to demons so long as she does it while I'm eviscerating said demons instead of making me stop to read a text box.

Dynamically generated one-off local events are great additions that keep things from feeling too similar. At one point in my adventures, I encounter an abandoned cellar being looted by pygmies. Fighting a swarm of bad guys in these tight quarters is an interesting battle for my fragile wizard, and it is made more tense by the race to kill the treasure-bearer before it opens a portal and escapes with the loot.

Dabbling with all five classes left me impressed with the variety, as well as the marked difference between playing separate builds of the same class. Using debuffs and pets to keep monsters away as the Witch Doctor is nothing like a Wizard blasting them into bits with raw elemental power, despite the fact that they're both spellcasting



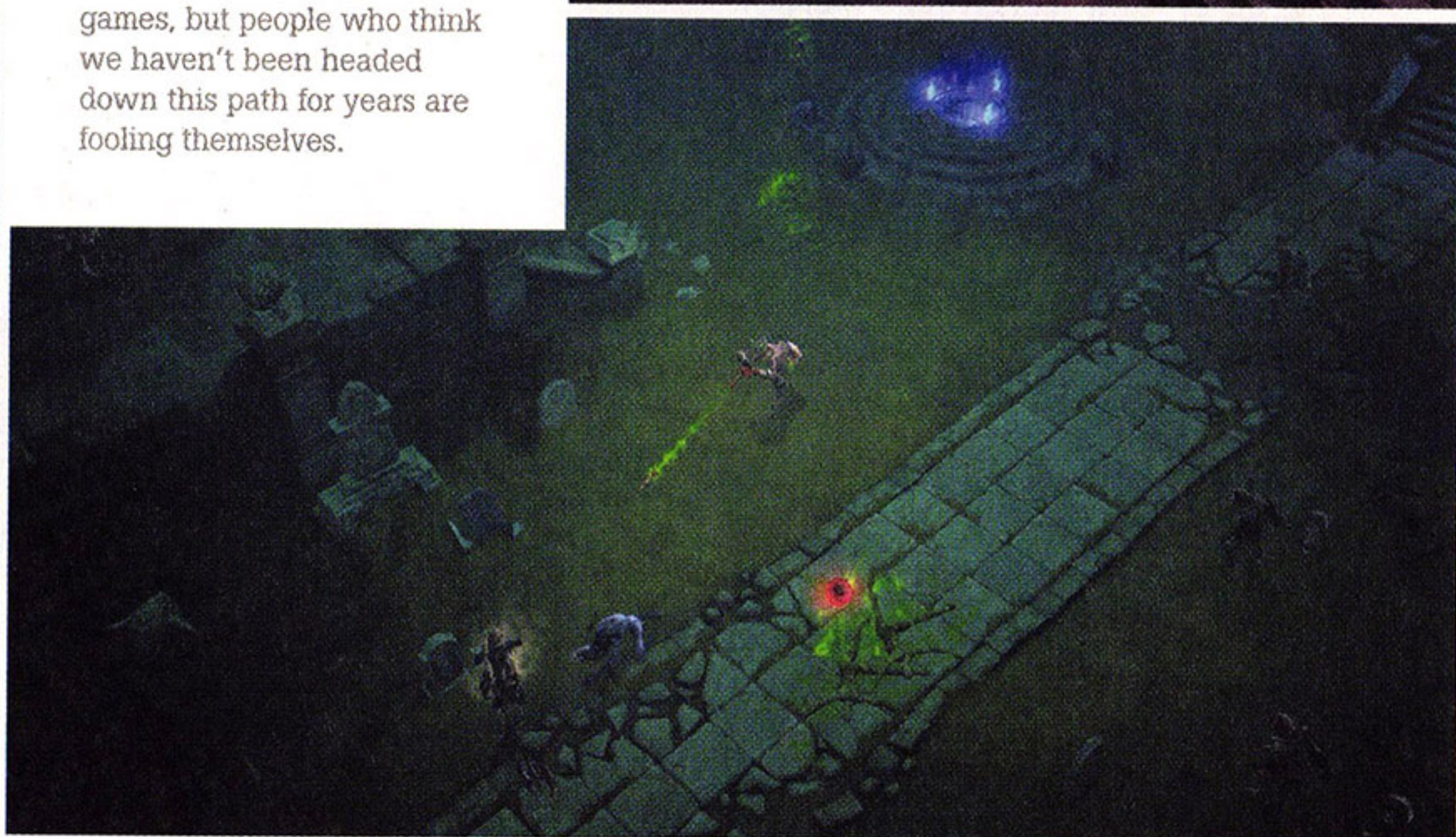
ranged classes. Likewise, the Barbarian's gonzo smash-oriented combat style is distinct from the Monk's stolid, defensive tactics. The Demon Hunter, as a physical ranged class, is unique among the five. I love what Blizzard has done with making positional tactics primary to that class, with powerful stationary traps and acrobatic escapes complementing bread-and-butter projectile attacks.

Whatever your take on the controversies around the real money auction house and always-online requirement that sparked a lot of

Real Money Auction House

Players can sell their gear (and eventually characters) to each other for real money through Blizzard's own Diablo III auction house. You'll likely get a number of free listings per week, after which you'll pay a listing fee to put items up. When an item sells, you get the cash minus a flat transaction fee. At that point, you can cash out the profit to a third-party payment provider for an additional percentage fee. Should you leave the sale price in your Blizzard account, it is locked there forever and can only be used for Blizzard digital services: Diablo auctions, digital copies of games, or World of Warcraft subscriptions and items.

After my initial shock, I found that I don't have strong feelings about the real money auction house. I don't plan on using it much, but I don't particularly care if anyone else does – just as I don't care that people buy Diablo II items from grey market vendors right now. It simply doesn't impact my play experience. Blizzard obviously hopes to create an ongoing revenue stream for itself via the listing and transaction fees to offset the costs of running Battle.net, just like you would expect a business to do. I do worry slightly about the long-term implications of sanctioning real money purchase of digital goods in games, but people who think we haven't been headed down this path for years are fooling themselves.

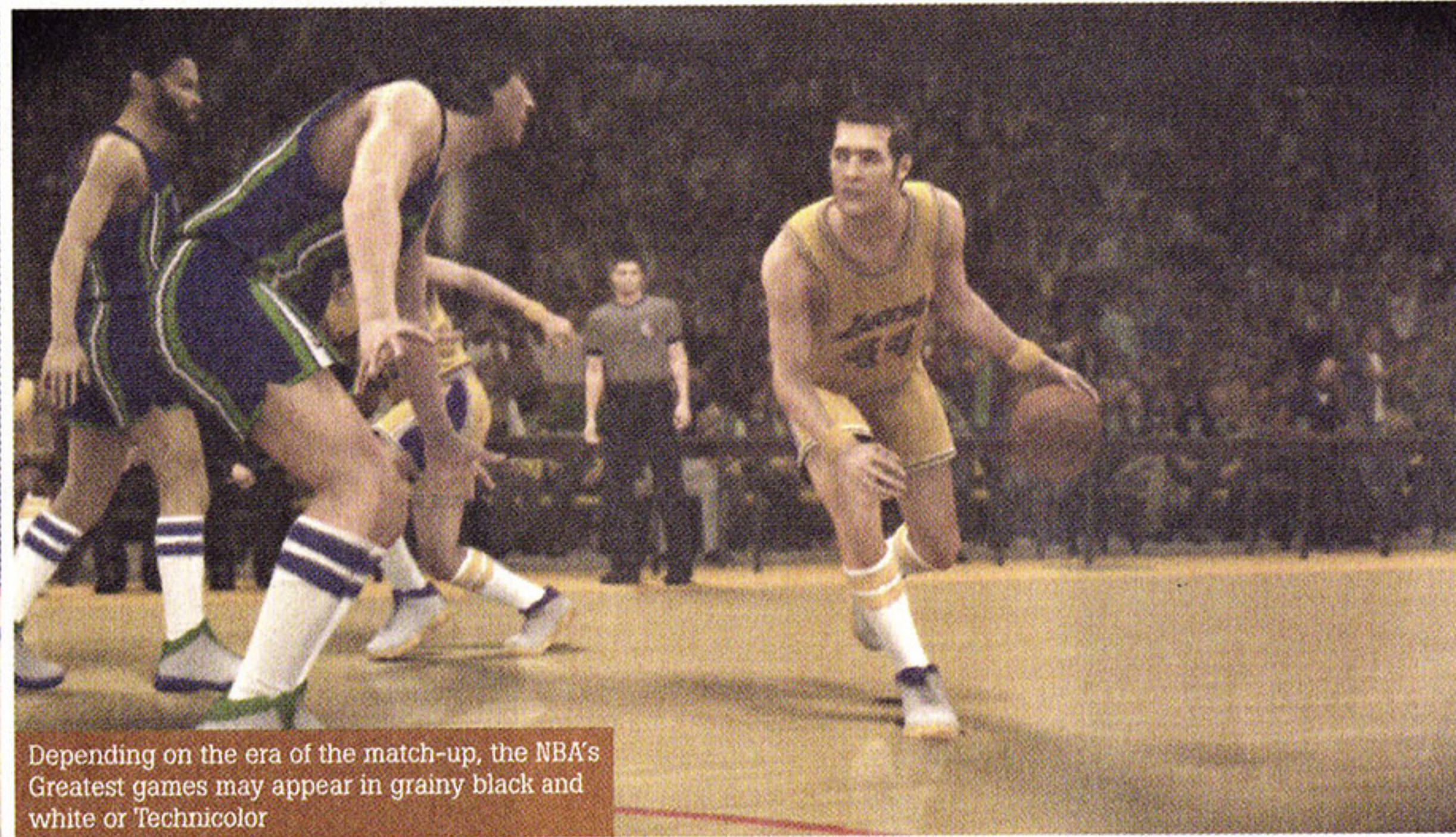
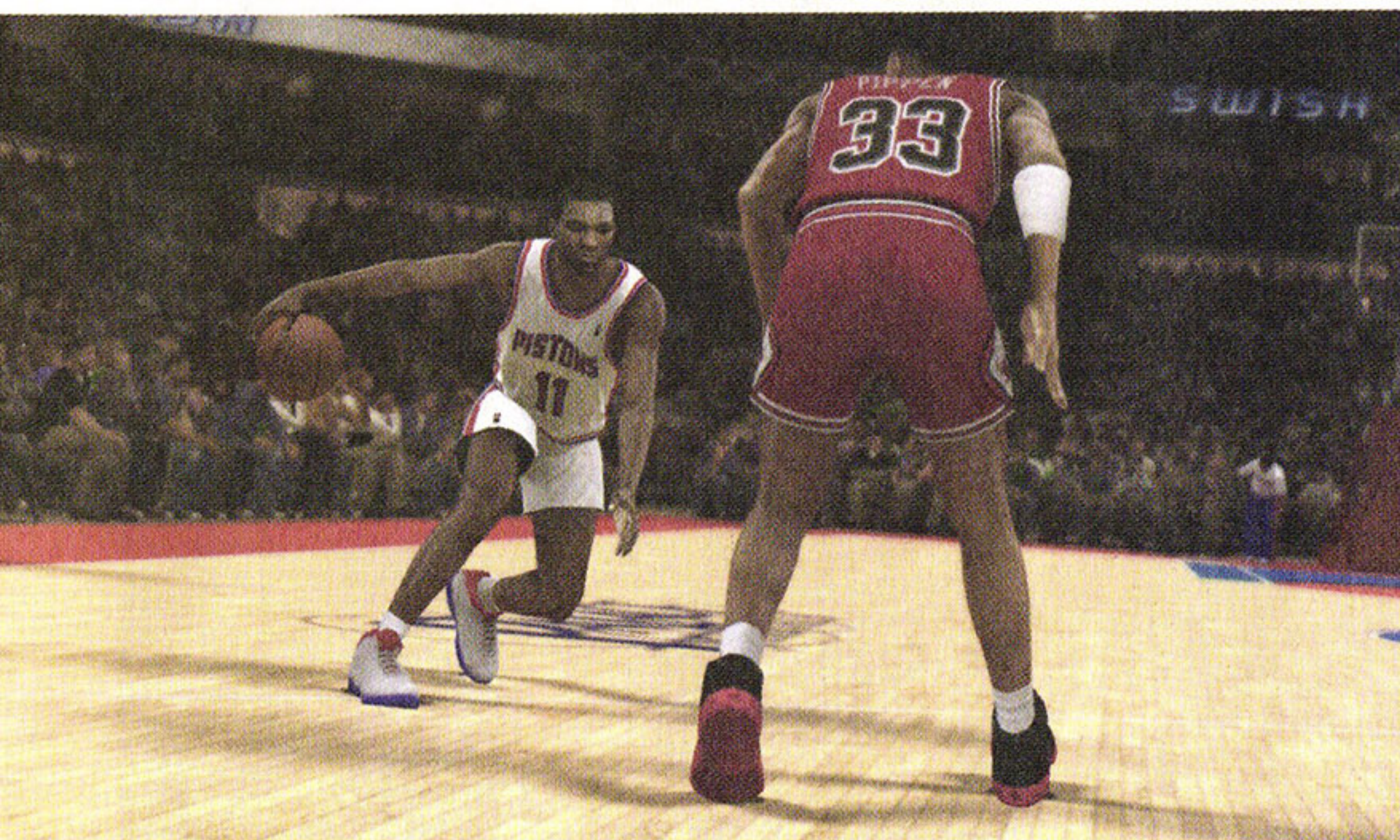


vocal online discussion (see sidebars), I have a hard time believing that any Diablo fan will be less than pleased with the gameplay. I have played more Diablo than any one person should in a lifetime, and I'm planning to do the same when Diablo III comes out – which Blizzard is hoping will be this year, but the company has yet to announce a solid date. » **Adam Biessener**

Go to gameinformer.com/mag for videos, interviews, and more hands-on impressions of Diablo III

Always Online

There is no such thing as offline play in Diablo III. Like an MMO (but without the subscription fee), you'll always play on games hosted by Blizzard servers and your characters will always be stored in the cloud. In Diablo II terms, the only game mode is Closed Battle.net. Blizzard insists that the decision was made to ensure that players don't have to start over when they move from single-player to co-op, as many Diablo players have historically made that transition well after getting invested in their characters. I can understand that reasoning from a design perspective, but I have a hard time believing that the company would make such a fundamental change solely to bridge the gap between single-player and co-op. Getting more customers connected to the Blizzard store with Blizzard accounts has obvious advantages from a business standpoint, as does the additional protection against piracy that this policy gives. I don't personally have a problem with the decision, as I was always going to play Diablo III exclusively online just like I played Diablo II, but I can understand the irritation that many players have been loudly vocalizing online. At the end of the day, though, I can't get too upset about this for two reasons: First, the game is good enough that I would put up with worse annoyances to play it. Second, I agree that playing Diablo online is an objectively better experience. So long as Blizzard doesn't screw up the support side of things where we have to deal with service outages or irritating lag, I won't be marching on Irvine with torch and pitchfork held high.



Depending on the era of the match-up, the NBA's Greatest games may appear in grainy black and white or Technicolor

NBA 2K12

With the lockout looming, NBA 2K12 calls on the ghost of basketball past

» **Platform**
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360

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

» **Publisher**
2K Sports

» **Developer**
Visual Concepts

» **Release**
October 4

Many wondered how the sales of Madden NFL 12 would be affected by a league lockout, but after months of public bickering, messy court proceedings, and behind-closed-doors negotiations, the NFL owners and NFLPA saved the season in the nick of time. Many don't predict the same rosy outcome for the NBA labor issues. Owners are digging in their feet, NBA players are signing contracts with teams overseas, and lawyers for both sides are locked in a tense stare-down over how best to split the league revenues. So what would a lockout do to the NBA 2K12 series, which is coming off its best year ever?

2K Sports has a contingency plan. Building off the success of last year's popular Jordan Challenge mode, the publisher is diving back into the league's rich history with the NBA's Greatest mode. Players can take part in 15 classic matchups showcasing some of the sport's most legendary names. In addition to the previously announced participants Jordan, Magic, Bird, Dr. J, and Kareem Abdul Jabbar, players can take the reins of classic teams headlined by Wilt Chamberlain, Jerry West, Bill Russell, Oscar Robinson, Patrick Ewing, Hakeem Olajuwon, Karl Malone, John Stockton, Scottie Pippen, and Isaiah Thomas.

Each game is presented as it looked in the era it happened, so Jerry West appears in grainy black and white, and Oscar Robinson's game features the signature oversaturation of Technicolor broadcasts. Rather than call the game as if it were unfolding before them, though, commentators Kevin Harlan and Steve Kerr deliver a history lesson that highlights how these stars left their marks on the league.

The best part? Many of these matchups bring even more fan favorites to the table, including

Walt Frazier, Pistol Pete Maravich, and David Robinson. Once you win one of the NBA's Greatest matchups, you unlock both legendary teams for use in quick play. This means you can finally pit unstoppable legends like Wilt Chamberlain against dominant modern-day players like Shaquille O'Neal to see who is the best center of all time.

Regardless of whether you're playing with legends or a collection of less-talented misfits on a contemporary team, fans should appreciate the changes I noticed during a hands-on session. On offense, you're even less beholden to pre-determined animations than last year – every

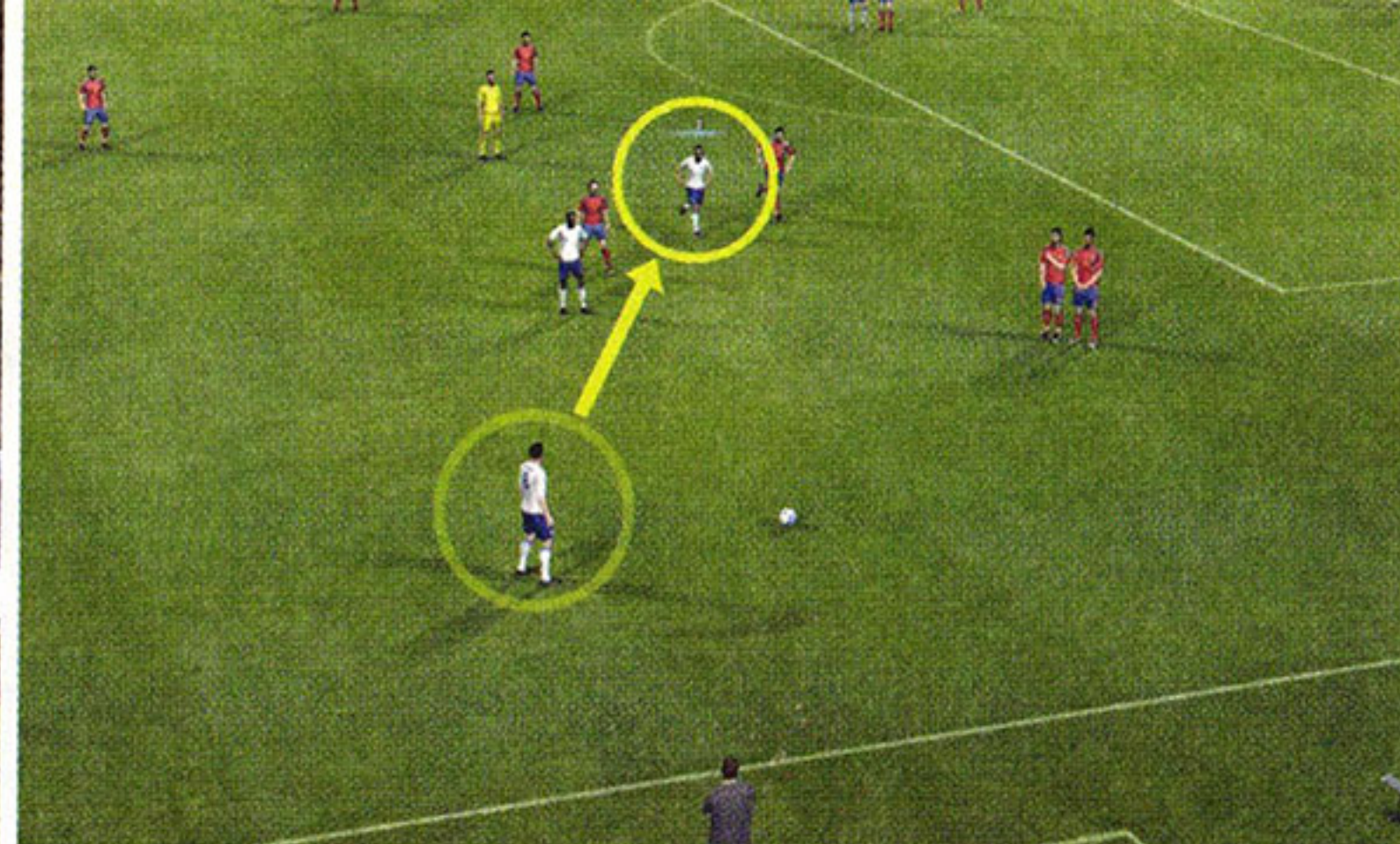
shot is interruptible and alterable with the shot stick. On defense, the magnetism that kept you glued to ball handlers is gone, but you have new tools at your disposal for shutting down guards. Holding LT makes your player take shorter steps and keep his shoulders square to the ball handler, allowing you to cut your mark off before he arrives at his favorite spots on the court. Holding in both triggers provides you a lateral burst for cutting off drives to the lane as well.

The revamped post game also gives you more versatility in the paint as well. Pressing the Y button turns your back to the basket or allows you to quickly face up your defender. This quicker transition between the two most common post positions allows 2K to work in more fluid animations that reflect the play style of agile and versatile wingmen like Richard Jefferson. Since you can turn your back to the basket in any area on the court, it also adds another move to the repertoire of bigger guards like Chauncey Billups.

In playing through a few games, I noticed that the teams make more use of the shot clock this year, which slows down the game to a more realistic tempo. Gameplay producer Rob Jones says if you played eight minute quarters last year, you'll probably need to bump it up to somewhere around 10 minutes to get the same results. We touched on the new play-calling system last issue, but I also noticed a new feature that lets you call custom inbound plays coming out of timeouts by choosing the passer, shooter, and area of the court you want them to break free.

League lockout or not, it appears NBA 2K12 is stepping up its game. Will basketball-starved fans find solace in this video game simulation, or could the ugly proceedings turn them off from the sport altogether? We'll find out when the game ships on October 4. » **Matt Bertz**





Pro Evolution Soccer 2012

Pro Evo goes on the attack

Publishers love to tack gimmicks onto their long-running sports franchises to help the current iteration stand out. After all, when one of the main thrusts of your new title is AI improvements, that's usually not the kind of thing that gets people salivating. But the additions to this year's Pro Evolution title are anything but subtle and under the radar. The experience is different from the moment you pick up the controller.

Whether I was on offense or defense, I noticed an improvement in the support offered by my AI teammates. When you're on the attack, teammates make diagonal and dummy runs at your opponent's defense to try and create passing opportunities and open up space on the field. It's a welcome change from past years, where teammates would run with you down the field like robots, and it sparks your own creativity when

you have the ball.

Going a step further, PES 2012 gives you unprecedented control over your off-the-ball teammates via the right analog stick. If you simultaneously click and move it you can manually control any player to make a run, get open for a pass, return to defense, or whatever. This also applies to set pieces, so you can improvise deadly corner and free kicks. In practice, it can be a handful to control two different players simultaneously with both analog sticks, which is why there is also an assisted version of this feature where selecting a player will cause him to automatically go on a run.

Thankfully, defenses have been given a boost to stay on pace with all these new offensive options. Relying on the AI for your defense is critical, and this year I noticed less of a gap between my midfield and defensive lines. This

gives attackers less chance to roam around. Your AI teammates also are more aggressive at attempting to snag balls in open space, which helps.

Off the pitch, PES 2012 has rebranded its Master League career mode as Football Life, but in the preview build we played, it wasn't available to us. Konami is also introducing a new Club Boss mode to go along with the usual UEFA Champions League and Copa Santander Libertadores options, but you have to unlock it first. We're not sure what Club Boss is, but it sounds like a manager-focused mode.

To some, Pro Evo's heyday was back on the PlayStation 2. But in the last two years, the franchise has made up a lot of ground. This year's changes could take it well into the future. » **Matthew Kato**

» **Platform**
PlayStation 3 • Xbox 360

» **Style**
1 to 7-Player Sports (PS3),
1 to 4-Player (Xbox 360)
(8-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Konami

» **Developer**
Konami

» **Release**
November 8

FIFA 12

Striking on target

After years of building its stock, FIFA has become one of the better EA Sports franchises. Like FIFA 11, this year's game bolsters itself through additions and improvements in a variety of areas ranging from modes to nuts-and-bolts gameplay.

After some hands-on time, my initial reaction is positive due to some of the more obvious changes installed. The new physics engine's influence can be felt when you're jostling with opponents and making tackles. It's nice to see instances where you can get tackled and yet still maintain possession (as well as witness some variety in the animations), which cuts down on the times in previous titles when it seems like the AI predetermined who would win the ball before the players physically interacted. Also helping with your possession of the ball is a new small area control button, which helps you maneuver better in tight quarters.

The AI exhibits new smarts in a variety of ways. Opponent defenses cut down the passing lanes and press effectively, plus they also show more creativity via some long balls along the flank



that can surprise you if your formation is out of shape. I'd still like to see more shots from the AI around the box, as well as a stronger desire to pull the trigger when necessary, but the changes thus far are welcome.

In Career mode, improvements in the AI are also noticeable in that you get more offers for players during the transfer window. EA Canada has upgraded the mode from last year's bare

bones approach, adding features like weekly form, player morale, youth scouting (similar to NHL's), and even press days where you can call out an individual player.

In a year featuring strong competition from Konami's Pro Evolution series, FIFA 12 is keeping up the pace and giving soccer gamers plenty of quality choices. » **Matthew Kato**

» **Platform**
PlayStation 3 • Xbox 360

» **Style**
1 to 7-Player Sports (PS3),
1 to 4-Player (Xbox 360)
(22-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
EA Sports

» **Developer**
EA Canada

» **Release**
September 27

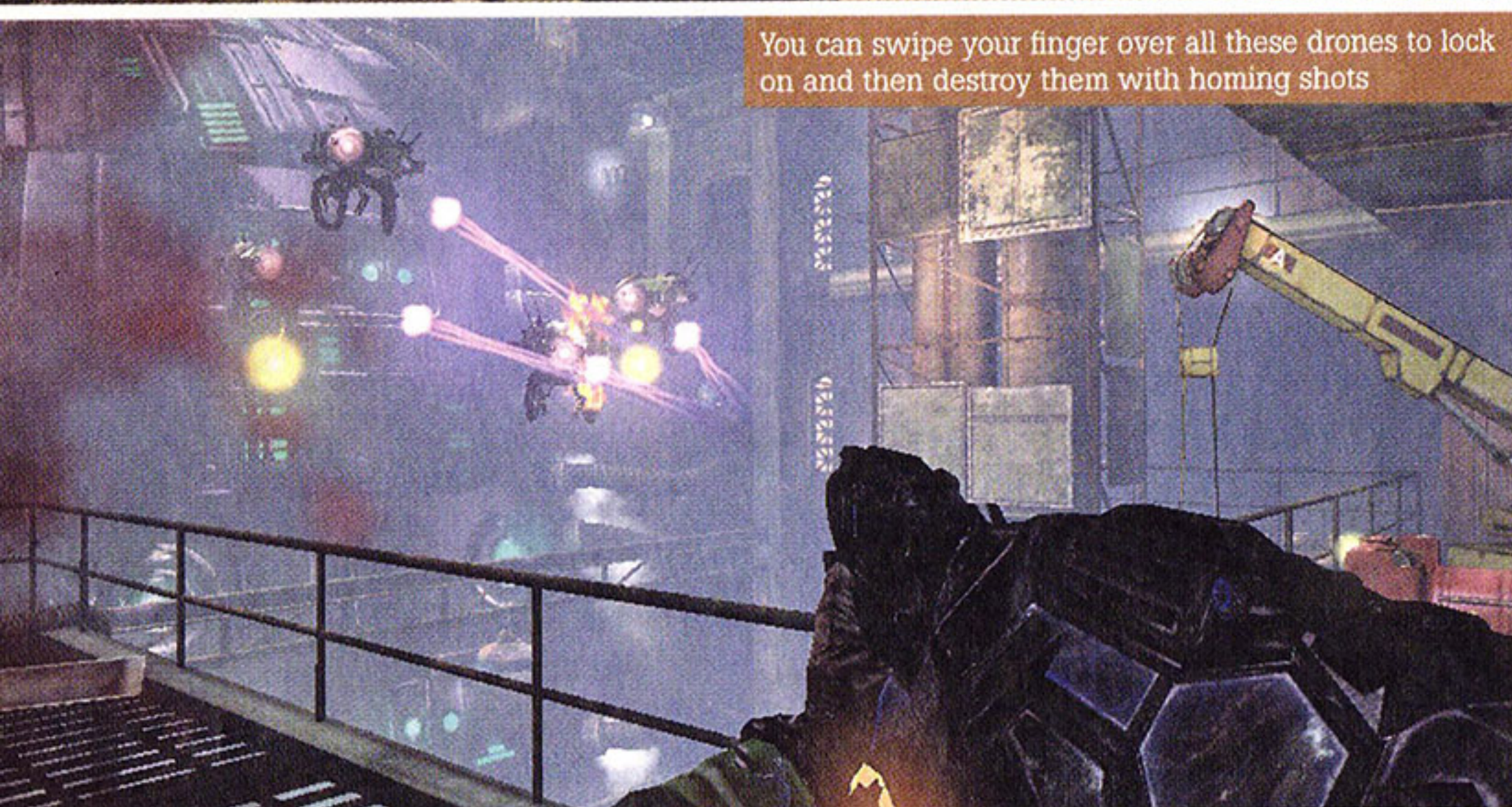


Wii version

The Wii version of FIFA 12 offers both the traditional manager/career structure as well as Wii-exclusive features such as FIFA City (a personalized area filled with unlocked buildings, fans, and star players), street soccer, and power ups.



The Vita can handle all kinds of crazy ships and explosions going on in the background



You can swipe your finger over all these drones to lock on and then destroy them with homing shots



Resistance: Burning Skies

The Chimera invade Sony's upcoming portable

» **Platform**
Vita

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

» **Publisher**
Sony Computer
Entertainment

» **Developer**
Nihilistic Software

» **Release**
2012

With the announcement of Resistance: Burning Skies, Sony has added yet another of its marquee franchises to the PlayStation Vita lineup along with Uncharted, Killzone, LittleBigPlanet, and ModNation Racers. Developer Nihilistic is handling the project, coming off its gig on PlayStation Move Heroes. Despite the kid-friendly, minigame-heavy nature of its last game, studio founders Ray Gresko and Robert Huebner are no strangers to shooters, having worked on the LucasArts classic Jedi Knight: Dark Forces II.

Thanks to the Vita's dual analog sticks, Burning Skies controls more like a first-person shooter than 2009's Resistance: Retribution for PSP, which used a third-person perspective. "You should be able to pick this up and play it like it was any game in the Resistance series," Sony senior producer Frank Simon says.

Rather than tell a prequel or sequel tale with Burning Skies, Sony and Nihilistic decided to fill in the two-year time gap between the intro of Resistance 2, which picks up directly after the first game when Nathan Hale is apprehended by the SRPA in 1951, and the rest of the game, which fast forwards to 1953 when the Chimera

launch a full-scale invasion of the U.S. "We wanted to find a time period and a location where you really see the tipping point from when life is normal and then, at the end of the game, life is forever changed," says Nihilistic president Robert Huebner. "That's why the game takes place in a really compressed time period – just like three or four days. It's not a globe trotting, big picture type of thing. You're just seeing the ground eye view of how one area of the United States changed completely."

The team wanted a civilian hero this time around instead of the military men of past installments, so players control Tom Riley, a firefighter everyman who gets caught up in the battle.

In my first hands-on gameplay session, the controls felt up to the task and the graphics didn't look that far off from Burning Skies' PS3 big brothers. I picked up the action about halfway through the game, with Riley waking up on a table with an I.V. in his arm. He's in a secret lab on Ellis Island, and pandemonium breaks out when the Chimera arrive. I immediately grab Riley's fire axe to do my part in stopping the Chimera invasion.

I lodge the axe into a Chimera's neck, grab a

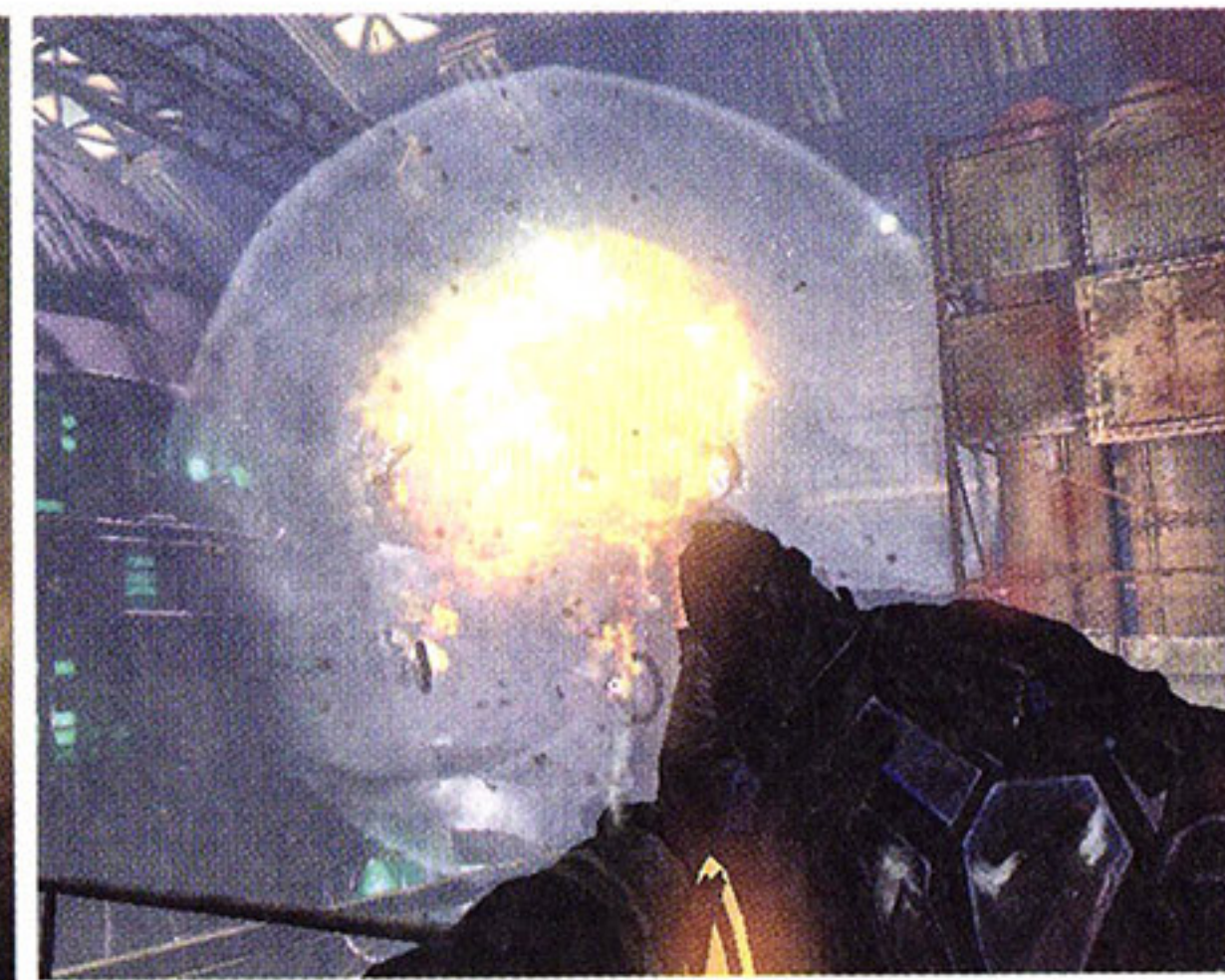
gun, and continue on. The Vita's touchscreen functionality comes into play immediately, as the axe and grenades become virtual buttons on the bottom right of the screen. This frees up the other buttons for different functions and prevents you from having to bring up the weapon wheel for a quick melee attack. Grenades can be dragged and dropped from this virtual button onto your intended target, as well. Many weapons use the touchscreen for alt-fire modes as well. For instance, with the Chimeran cluster fire gun (CFG) you can paint targets with your finger and then fire at all of them simultaneously with the right trigger.

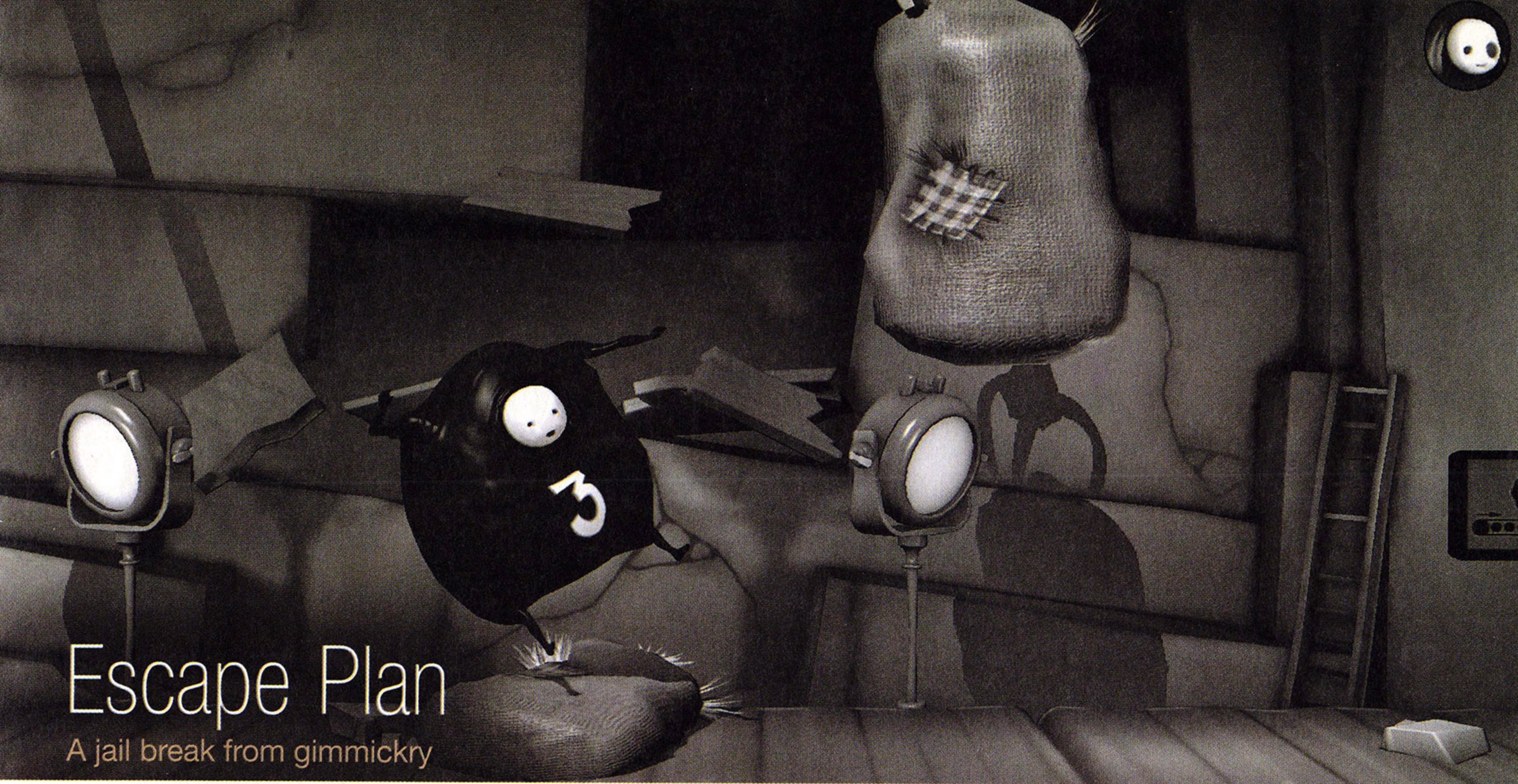
While it takes most of its cues from the console games, Burning Skies does preserve the cover system from Retribution. You can either press the left shoulder button to pop up and aim out of cover, or tilt the system slightly. The weapon wheel also plays it both ways, allowing you to select another weapon with the analog stick or simply by pressing it. The team says it wants as many functions as possible to work both with touchscreen/motion and traditional button presses so that players can play the game either way.

Sony wouldn't divulge any details regarding multiplayer at this point, and we received a similar amount of static when we asked if Burning Skies would feature any cross-platform compatibility with Resistance 3 like Retribution and Resistance 2 had with the Infection mechanic. "We're definitely not ruling anything out at this time," Simon says. "Both teams are exceptionally good at doing that type of thing but I don't know if there's anything we're talking about yet."

When Sony's ready to talk about these features and more, we'll provide updates on the way to Burning Skies' 2012 release. » **Bryan Vore**

Head to gameinformer.com for extended hands-on impressions.





Escape Plan

A jail break from gimmickry

When I first saw Sony's new PlayStation Vita hardware following its January reveal – back when it was still called NGP – I was pleased that games such as *Uncharted: Golden Abyss* allowed me to stick to traditional controls in addition to the gimmicky touchscreen and tilt functionality. I was certain that I would always prefer playing games with buttons, and it would take a very special game to convince me otherwise.

If my first hands-on time with *Escape Plan* is any indication, this could be that special game.

Created by new developer Fun Bits, *Escape Plan* recalls last year's indie sensation *Limbo*, both in its stark black-and-white visual style and the way its main characters die over and over in brutal traps. What sets it apart from *Limbo* is the use of two characters and the approachable, natural controls.

Protagonists Lil and Laarg are two prisoners who must escape from a mysterious facility. The game begins with Lil in bed. In order to wake him and get his attention, the player simply needs to tap him on the screen. Swiping left or right causes either character to begin walking in that direction. Swiping down prompts the character to jump.

These simple controls are all you need to lead the duo into increasingly deadly rooms. These torturous traps range from tiny – Lil can trip over a precariously placed box and knock his brains out on the floor – to humorously giant. In one room, an evil minion operates an oversized mallet that smashes Laarg into the wall.

The silly deaths are as much of a reward as getting through a room unscathed. This may remind some players of titles like *Oddworld* and the aforementioned *Limbo*, but the multi-character puzzle solving brought another game to my mind: Blizzard's *The Lost Vikings*. As it turns out, this similarity was not surprising to

Fun Bits CEO Chris Millar.

"*The Lost Vikings* was the first game I ever tested," Millar explains. "My brother was a designer on it, and I would go into Blizzard for free on the weekends and test." Eventually Millar got a job with Blizzard, and the last game he worked on before leaving the company was the Game Boy Advance port of *The Lost Vikings*.

"I loved having different characters with different abilities," Millar says. "Even back then, they wanted to reward players so that when they died it was funny. It's not just game over." To carry out this goal, the *Escape Plan* team has an animator devoted to creating new death animations.

In addition to using the touchscreen to move Lil and Laarg around, players also use other unique Vita controls to solve puzzles. In some rooms, the rear touchpad is used to push out timed platforms for the protagonists to walk across. Elsewhere, Lil can use an air canister to fill himself and float up to the ceiling, at which point players can tilt the Vita to guide him away from spinning blades.

Escape Plan's smart minimalism extends beyond the controls. Lil and Laarg are full of character despite the lack of voice acting or text. The way these two walk, interact with each other, and smile or grimace provides more likable characters than a sea of weak RPG dialogue. Fun Bits' approach to creating characters reminds me of Pixar; like the lovable but mostly mute robot *Wall-E*, Lil and Laarg put a grin on my face just from watching the trailer.

Escape Plan also functions without a traditional HUD. Most traps wipe out Lil and Laarg in a single blow, so the game doesn't need a life bar. A large number on each character's chest updates to let you know how many times each character has died, but beyond that there are no visual elements outside of the onscreen action. The early levels I played didn't even feature any

sort of tutorial text, a choice that I hope carries over to the final version.

During my hands-on with *Escape Plan*, the only use for traditional controls was the ability to use the analog sticks to zoom in and out and glide my view across each room. However, these same actions can be accomplished with multi-touch, and Millar was uncertain if the analog sticks would be usable in the final version. Personally, I hope they aren't. *Escape Plan* has done the unthinkable and made me a believer in Vita's alternate control methods. » **Phil Kollar**

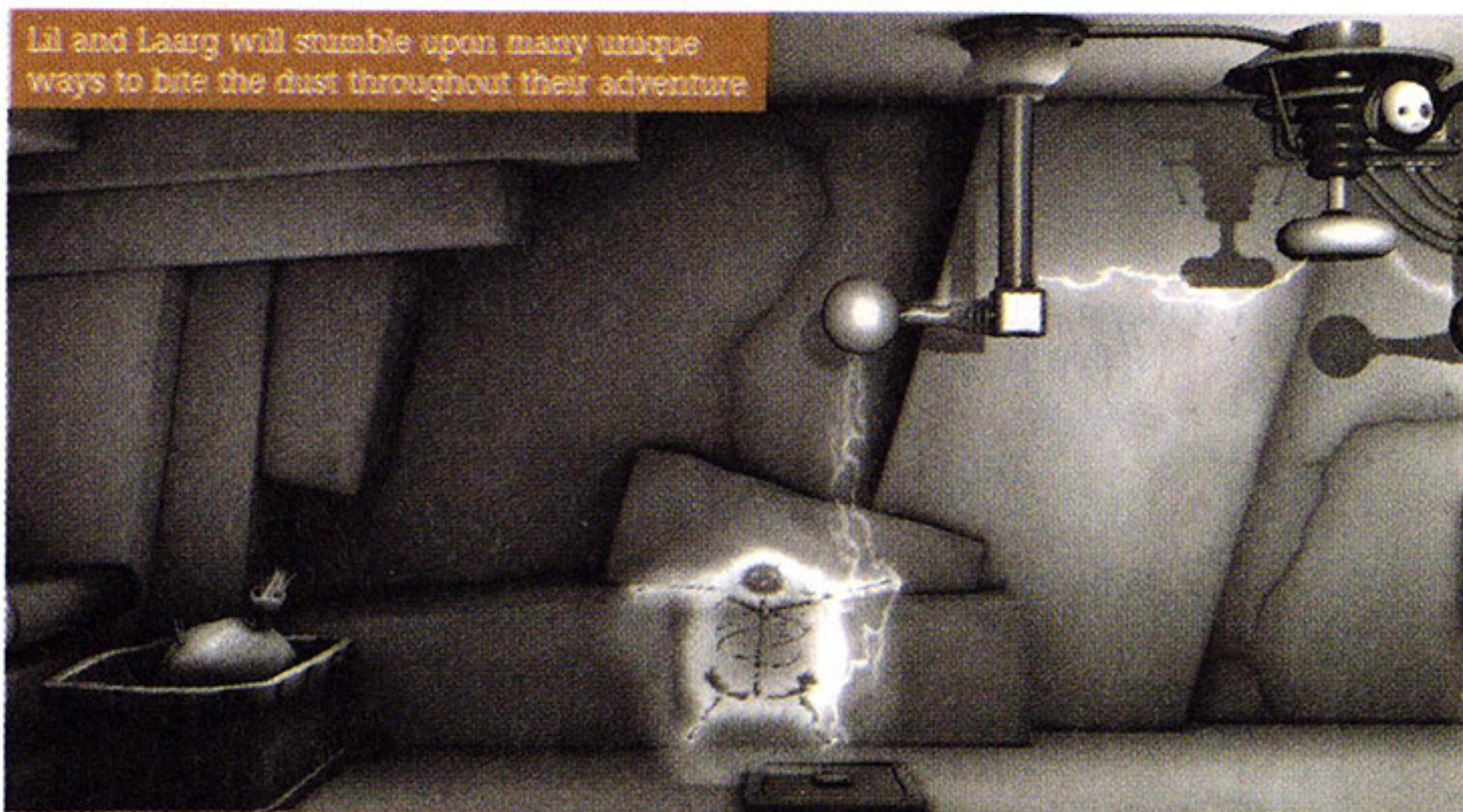
» **Platform**
Vita

» **Style**
1-Player
Adventure/Puzzle

» **Publisher**
Sony Computer
Entertainment

» **Developer**
Fun Bits

» **Release**
TBA





Saints Row: The Third

An invitation to mayhem

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

» **Style**
1-2 Player Action
(Online TBA)

» **Publisher**
THQ

» **Developer**
Volition Inc.

» **Release**
November 15

I've been itching to get my hands on Saints Row: The Third since our April cover story, so I was naturally excited when Volition told us they were going to swing by the Game Informer offices. Better still, I had the opportunity to play the game how I wanted. No missions. No structure. Just a guy, a city, and an insatiable appetite for destruction.

I entered the world as the default character who's been shown in the game's trailers and screenshots. This Javier Bardem lookalike was certainly adequate, but I wanted to take advantage of the game's staggering array of customization options. Volition's Eric Barker says there are about two googol's worth of possible body, clothing, and weapon combinations (that's a two followed by 100 zeroes, to put it into perspective).

After ganking a fast car from one of Steelport's civilians, I set my GPS to Image by Design. The plastic-surgery emporium transforms my somewhat generic leader of the 3rd Street Saints into someone truly remarkable. Luchadore gang members would learn to tremble at the sight of my emaciated, mole-riddled hero. With a purple bob. And a lady voice.

I exited the store, drop-kicking a pedestrian on my way out. Now that I had a chance to admire

myself in the sunlight, one thing was clear: I needed a wardrobe change. That conservative suit had to go. Rather than head back into my now-smoking car (I may have hit a few things on the drive over), I commandeer a moped and head to the Let's Pretend costume store.

The last thing a group of Luchadores see before getting obliterated by an unmanned drone's guided missile is my furry-suited hero running toward a garbage truck. As I make a quick escape from the carnage, I get to see the car deformation close up. My vehicle rolls over hoods and crumples trunks with ease. It's a small touch, but it speaks to the overall improvement in the game's presentation.

It's great that my current vehicle shrugs off impacts from other cars, because I'm making a beeline for the Professor Genki's Super Ethical Reality Climax diversion, traffic be damned. This new event has been described as *The Running Man* meets a crazy Japanese game show. It's just as accurate to call it a stripped-down version of Bizarre Creation's time-based shooter, *The Club*. I navigate a series of corridors, taking out costumed freaks and earning additional firepower for maintaining a killstreak. All the while, I'm soaking up play-by-play commentary that includes the voice talent of Hulk Hogan's

character, Angel De LaMuerte.

The Saints have gone commercial in Saints Row: The Third, as evidenced by a bustling retail store selling special Saints merchandise. I browse the racks for a while, but I don't find anything I need to have. I provide my customer comment on my way out in the form of a gut-shot to the clerk. Hey, Steelport's not a place for nice folks.

That's when I spy it: the Gattmobile. This custom ride has the enormous, scowling face of Saints favorite Johnny Gatt recreated on its front in fiberglass. I drive around the street, torching passersby with Gatt's cigarette flamethrower.

The police come in no time flat, surrounding my car and blasting at it with pistols and shotguns. Eventually, the Gattmobile's hairpiece flies off. In my haste to escape, I drive over it, stranding my vehicle on the plastic hair. I helplessly blast a few puffs of flame out before a cop yanks me out and throws me to the ground. Before he's able to cuff me, though, a squad car explodes, apparently the victim of an errant jet of fire. The police are knocked from their feet, and I stand up and start sprinting away toward the safety of the nearest alley. The day is young, and I'm just getting started. » **Jeff Cork**



Subtlety was never Volition's strong suit



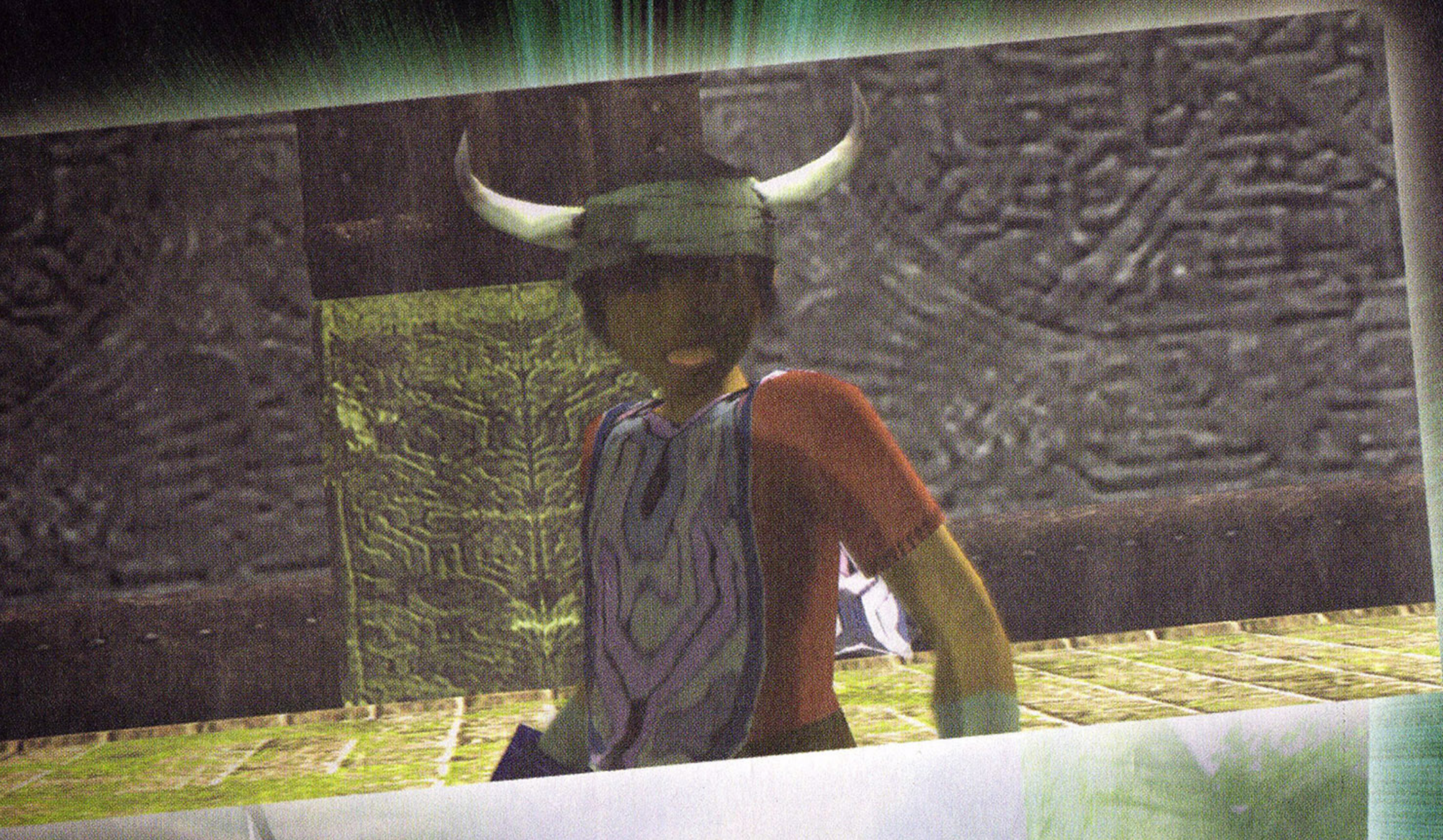
Furries versus cops. What could possibly go wrong?

Preorder Pandemonium

If you typically shy away from preordering, you may want to reconsider. Two of the most interesting things I played with during my hands-on time with *Saints Row: The Third* are being given away exclusively to folks who preorder the game from participating retailers. They include Professor Genki's "Octopuss" launcher, which shoots mind-controlling mollusks onto enemies' heads. Once they've been hit, victims will fight alongside the player – until the squids explode. Another bonus, Professor Genki's Super Ballistic Man-a-pult, sucks pedestrians up through the front, and they can then be launched into the air (or into buildings) via the truck's bed-mounted cannon. An Evel Knievel-inspired stunt suit and mascot head round out the preorder offerings. If you're serious about your *Saints Row*, these extras aren't to be missed.



reviews



gameinformer
GAME OF THE MONTH

95 The Ico & Shadow of the Colossus Collection

When they first released on PlayStation 2, Ico and Shadow of the Colossus amazed gamers with their artistic flair and thoughtful narratives. When remastered in HD and bundled together in a single package for PS3, both titles only get better. Years after their original debuts, these two classics from Team Ico deliver breathtaking adventures that remain high points in gaming history.

Note: Epic Games was not able to provide a copy of Gears of War 3 in time to include the review in this issue. Check back next month for our full impressions of this highly anticipated game.

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	Street comedy.

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

"BEST OF ITS KIND SINCE THE ORIGINAL SIMCITY."

- GAMESPY

"BEST STRATEGY GAME OF E3 2011"

- GAMING EXCELLENCE

TROPICO 4

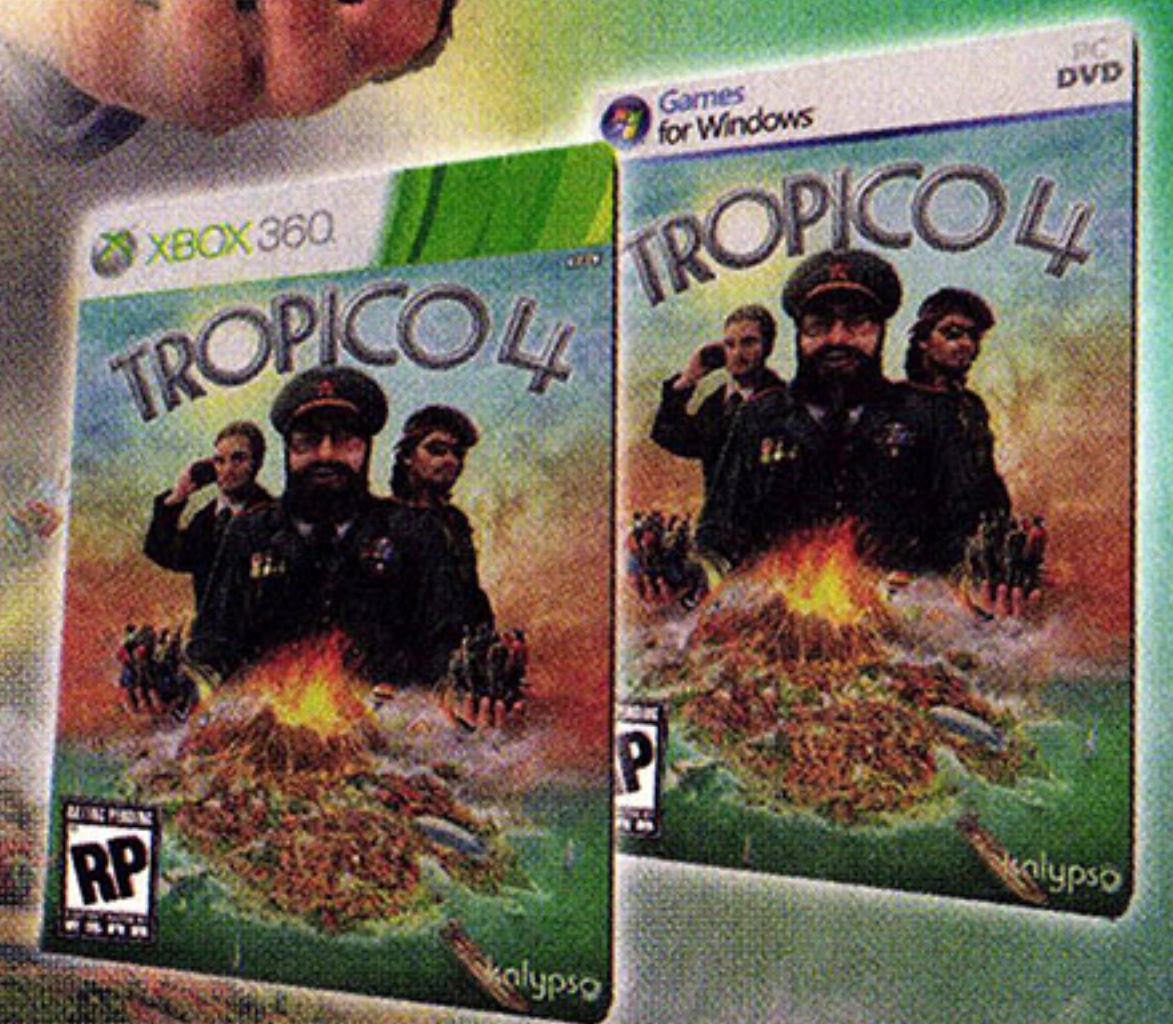
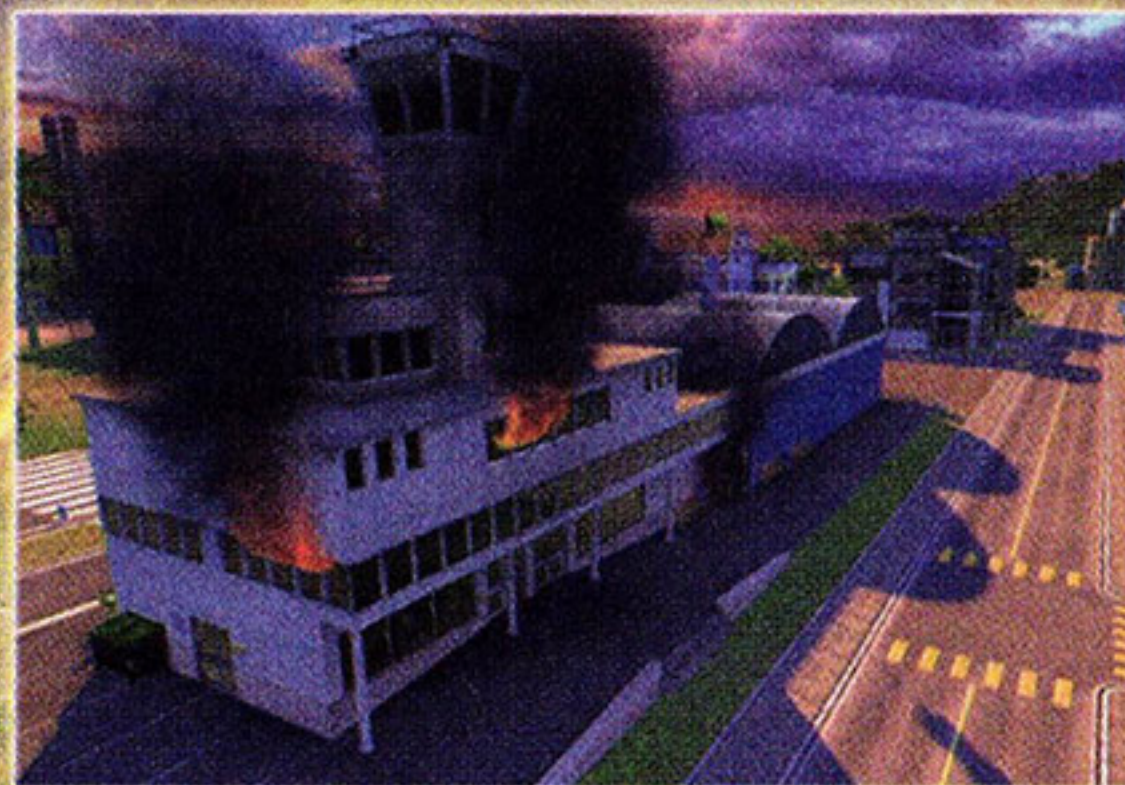


"READER'S CHOICE NOMINEE FOR
BEST STRATEGY GAME OF E3 2011"

- GAME SPOT



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RP
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Dead Island

A few missing limbs can't hold back this undead romp

8.5

gameinformer
SILVER

Style 1-Player Action/Role-Playing (4-Player Online) Publisher Deep Silver Developer Techland Release September 6 ESRB M

360

» Concept

Deliver something just shy of the open-world zombie apocalypse game you've always wanted

» Graphics

The variety of character models is staggering and environments look good

» Sound

An ominous soundtrack is accentuated by squishy dismemberment and unnerving zombie screams

» Playability

The controls and menu navigation take a lot of getting used to, but the game feels nice once it all clicks

» Entertainment

As with most RPGs, the real fun takes time to settle in. But when it does, Dead Island is hard to put down

» Replay Value

Moderately High

Like a garbage disposal with a severed arm shoved down it, the video game market is clogged with zombie games. New games featuring the walking dead have trouble standing out from the horde, but Techland's first-person, open-world, action/RPG entry Dead Island distinguishes itself. After kicking and slashing my way through the infected island of Banoi, I can say the game has tons to offer.

The long-term goal in Dead Island is to escape Banoi. On the way, you'll fight tooth and nail through legions of zombies as one of four characters. The survivors are all unique and loosely class-based, with specialists focusing on various types of melee weapons or firearms. While everyone starts on similar footing, the joy lies in chopping zombies to bits and completing quests to level up and customize your character. Though guns are introduced later on, the core gameplay is viscerally satisfying melee combat similar to *Condemned* or *Left 4 Dead 2*. Hit detection is reliable and consistent, allowing you to become a sadistic surgeon who decides which limbs to sever or fracture.

The quests involve many tired zombie movie clichés like undead-proofing a truck or making supply runs, but mowing through the walking dead is a blast. Depending on how you nurture your skill tree, the same character can either become a throwing master with boomeranging weapons that pack a chance to kill on contact, or a gunslinger with improved accuracy and a vicious instant-kill curb stomp.

Misery loves company, and Dead Island is best played with friends. Gearing up with three fellow zombie slayers reminded me of the blissful carnage of *Borderlands*. Power-leveling underdeveloped characters, swapping new loot, and cooperating to survive are all highlights of co-op. When you're standing on the roof of a car surrounded by craven cannibals, having a buddy with a fire axe is a great thing. The drop-in, drop-out co-op demands that all players be at exactly the same point in the main plot in order for quest progress to save, but experience and loot are always retained. It's in your best interest (and the most fun) to choose a group of friends and stick with them from the beginning, unless you don't mind burning through low-level quests to catch up. Fortunately, enemy levels scale with you, so backtracking isn't a complete waste of time.

My time on Banoi Island was filled with more memorable moments than I could've imagined. I raced down a city street and was intercepted



The game's second act is much more claustrophobic

by a pack of flaming zombies that instantly gave chase. I decided to turn tail and run, allowing the scathing flames to gradually destroy my pursuers. I hurled sickles, scythes, and knives into a hulking undead beast, retrieved them from its rotting frame, and threw them again. I sprinted at a zombie, jump-kicked it to the ground, and smashed its brain in with my foot. I severed a brute's flailing arms while my friends distracted him. These amazing moments were made possible by the freedom the game bestows upon creative players.

Speaking of creativity, you'll occasionally find blueprints that transform items in your arsenal into even more improbable weapons. Wrap barbed wire around a baton, or create an electric machete using scavenged items. Cracking zombies over the head with a flaming baseball bat and watching them set their friends ablaze is a riot. You can also spend money to repair degraded implements or upgrade their core stats. Dozens of nasty weapon types, when combined with the skills you've chosen to improve, give you plenty of opportunities to develop a unique play style. You can pack your weapon wheel with throwing knives, destroy foes with baited bombs, or arm yourself to the teeth with firearms. Gunplay is introduced late, and the delayed satisfaction of getting your first handgun makes you feel like a god. Aiming down the iron sights and popping enemies in the skull feels wonderful, especially when it's a psychopath survivor that crumples with one critical headshot. Gun nuts shouldn't expect a boatload of ammo, though. This is the apocalypse, after all.

Your quests will send you to multiple sections of Banoi Island, and each one has a distinct flavor of dread. An omnipresent sun bakes the walking corpses on the beach, exposing every oozing battle wound. The hotel's dark corridors

present an entirely different atmosphere where creatures lurk just outside your flashlight beam. While terror doesn't appear to be Dead Island's top priority, being stranded on a huge island packed with monsters is unsettling. I could spend dozens of hours within the gigantic decaying city alone.

While the captivating locations and engaging combat should entertain zombie fans, Dead Island is missing a layer of polish. Navigating the menus, getting accustomed to the controls, and generally learning the ropes is a clunky process with few tutorials. And don't get too attached to your favorite weapons if you plan on using them as projectiles, because downed zombies sometimes disappear along with your meticulously upgraded weapons still lodged inside them. I also had an entire quest grind to a halt because my AI-controlled guide would either get snagged on geometry or walk in circles. NPCs aren't the only directionally challenged denizens of Banoi Island either, as the minimap's finicky pathfinding can occasionally put you on a wild goose chase. Techland says a day one patch will fix some AI and quest tracking issues, but at the time of this review those changes are yet to be confirmed.

I've played a lot of zombie games in my time, and Dead Island scratched an itch I didn't even know I had. Cooperative undead survival is nothing new to gaming, but exploring a gigantic zombie-infested island with friends is. I easily poured over 40 hours into my playthrough, and a new game plus promises even more entertainment. Rewarding character progression and the vast variety of weapons should appeal to anyone looking for a good time. If you've spent your time planning for the zombie apocalypse, Dead Island is the best option so far to test how long you'd last. » **Tim Turi**

What about PC and PS3?

We were unable to review the PlayStation 3 and PC versions of the game in time for this issue. We will evaluate them separately and report on any substantial differences at gameinformer.com. Otherwise, consider this our definitive review.

Deus Ex: Human Revolution

A long-dormant series returns to mixed results



Style 1-Player Action/RPG Publisher Square Enix Developer Eidos Studios Montreal Release August 23 ESRB M

8.5

PS3 • 360 • PC

» Concept

A prequel story to the classic cyberpunk series that embraces player choice

» Graphics

The color yellow shows up everywhere, including outlines, menus, and the overall tint of the environments. Facial animations are robotic, but the world is gorgeous. Hardly any of the architecture is recycled

» Sound

Adam Jensen's voice makes him sound indifferent to his circumstance. The soundtrack fits the cyberpunk vibe, but is easily mistaken for Mass Effect

» Playability

A respectable stealth game is brought down by a restrictive energy system that kills the tension. The firefights don't fare much better thanks to brainless foes

» Entertainment

As a series fan, I enjoyed the experience, but large portions of the gameplay feature questionable design decisions

» Replay Value

High

With Ion Storm dead and celebrated Deus Ex creators Warren Spector and Harvey Smith each in new stages of their careers, developer Eidos Montreal faces the difficult task of bringing back one of gaming's most acclaimed series. Eidos sticks to original formula, offering a game that supports stealth, combat, exploration, and RPG-style upgrade and conversation systems. Unfortunately, not all of these mechanics work as well as others, and your enjoyment is tied to how heavily you lean on the more polished portions.

Human Revolution weaves an amazing story filled with heady techno-babble. In the year 2027 (25 years before the original Deus Ex), society struggles with the ethics of cybernetic augmentation. The debate is at a tipping point, but the biotechnology companies (and the corrupt governments behind them) will ultimately determine the outcome. Players take the role of Adam Jensen, a biotech company security specialist who gets wrapped up in the conspiracies.

Exploring the cities may not sound enthralling, but it is one of the most rewarding experiences in Human Revolution. The environments are reminiscent of *Blade Runner*, packed with high-tech architecture, multi-tiered rooftops, and a looming sense of despair. Jensen can talk to every character populating these areas, from alleyway bums to security guards protecting a helipad. Some only give canned responses, while others offer secondary missions. Most of these characters have interesting stories to tell, and many of the secrets uncover surprising facts about the world and its inhabitants. The conversation system driving these interactions is brilliant, and all of the writing is top notch. Jensen radiates about as much enthusiasm as *The Matrix's* Neo, but he's a skilled conversationalist capable of negotiating with terrorists and bending people to his will. Players control the tone of the dialogue, similar to *Mass Effect's* approach. After hearing a pitch from his boss, Jensen can respond with an intrigued, grudging, or callous remark. A hostage situation inspires humbled, reasoned, or empathetic approaches. These stances are not the only factors at play; characters often reveal their true intentions through body language, giving players more than tone to consider when choosing responses.

For my first playthrough, I relied on stealth to achieve my goals. Moving like a ghost gets the blood pumping, especially in heavily fortified areas loaded with patrols, turrets, and cameras. Learning guards' routes requires patience, but the thrill isn't just the satisfaction of remaining undetected; along the way, you loot offices, hack computers, and uncover additional weapons, items, and story content. I loved how often I



found myself debating if a new weapon upgrade was worth the risk. Certain areas are initially inaccessible, so you don't need to debate – you just come back later. I still have several locations scribbled in my notepad that I want to re-investigate.

Although Jensen is outfitted in the latest and greatest that biotechnology has to offer, his arms apparently run on cheap batteries. Whenever he performs a stealth takedown, he drains this battery. If he only has one active cell (which is usually the case) he can't perform another takedown until the battery charges. That's right: A character with state-of-the-art cybernetics can't perform a simple choke or punch until he waits about 30 seconds (upgrades reduce the time) for his battery to recharge. Having multiple charged cells breaks the stealth experience just as much as having only one, since a stealth takedown triggers a time-stopping animation sequence. This allows Jensen to execute a kill undetected and unattacked, then expend another charge to bounce to other clueless enemies.

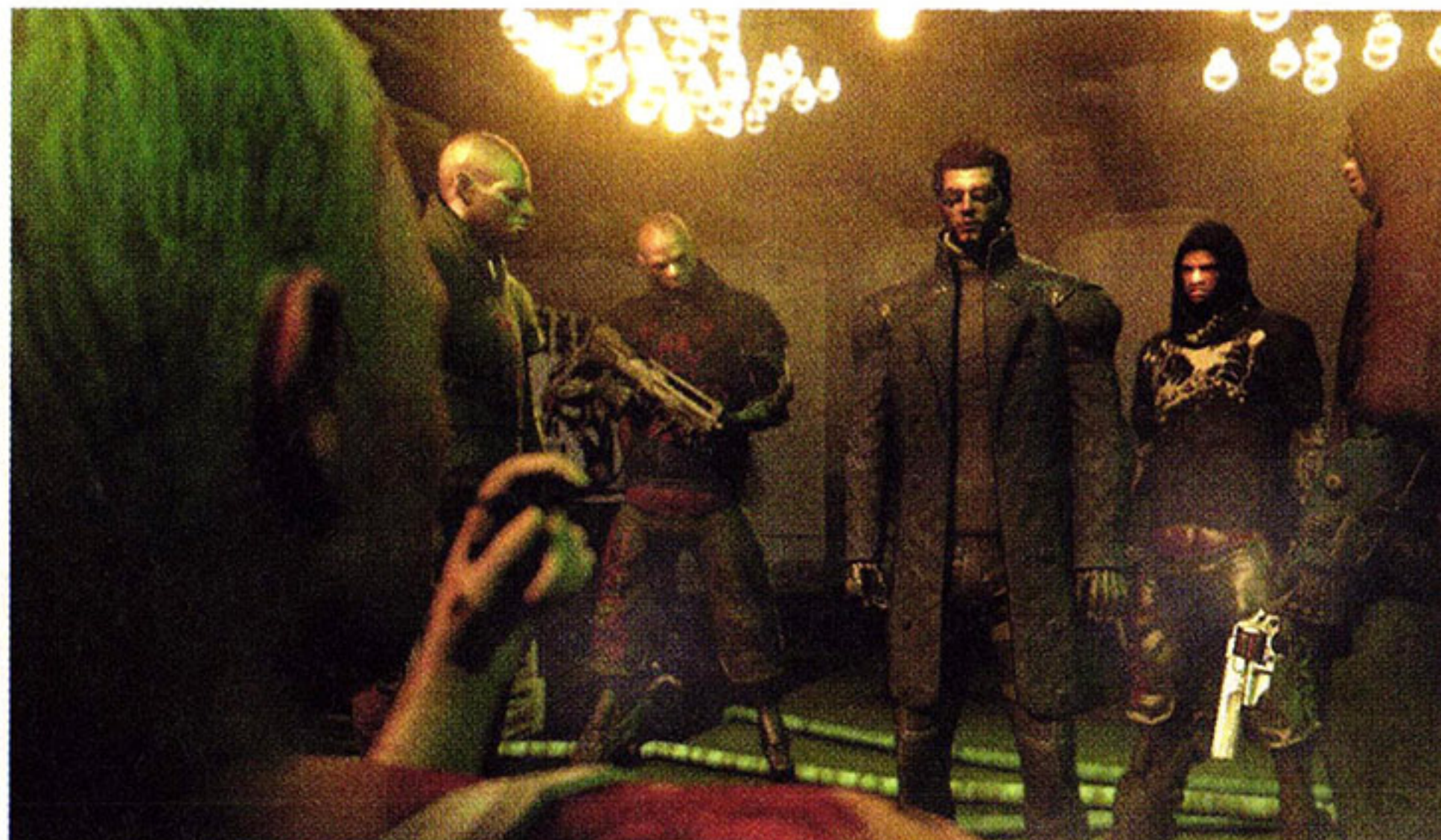
Upgrading Jensen's augmentations opens up new gameplay options and overly effective advantages. Some of the augmentations add new skills (like the ability to see through walls), while others (like computer hacking) add to Jensen's exploration opportunities. Choose your augmentations wisely, as the sheer number of options can shape Jensen in completely different ways and potentially keep large sections of the game blocked off. I finished every side mission I came across and spent hours exploring, and still had 30 upgrades left to activate at the game's conclusion.

Occasionally I would forgo stealth and engage in firefights. The responsive gunplay works well with the smart cover system, but when enemies are alerted their intelligence is often stripped away. Most of the time, they'll hunker into one cover location and bob up and down to take shots. They often throw themselves directly into harm's way, and their lack of aggression means

Jensen can often sit in one place to pick them all off. Don't assume that makes shooting easy; Jensen is fragile, and a few shots to the chest will put him down. Bullets are also hard to come by, but the limited health and ammo add to the intensity of battle.

The boss encounters are less enjoyable. These horribly repetitious arena fights are against super-powered foes that can usually drop Jensen before he even knows what hit him. My approach to these difficult conflicts was to get off to a good start, save my game, then repeat the process until they were defeated. In the last boss battle, I hid on a closet shelf until my foe was vulnerable – not exactly the epic showdown I was expecting.

Human Revolution's flaws don't hold it back from being an entertaining adventure through a riveting story and world. It rewards your perseverance with a fantastic plot payoff and a great sense of character progression. The annoying stealth takedown mechanics keep the game from greatness, but if played a certain way, Human Revolution captures the spirit of its predecessors. Even if it's not a masterpiece, this entry lays the groundwork for a promising future for the series. » **Andrew Reiner**



Madden NFL 12

Fumble!

7.5

PS3 • 360

» **Concept**

Piecemeal additions to many of the game modes don't add up to any significant progress. If anything, the franchise has taken a step back

» **Graphics**

Players' uniform details look nice and crisp. It's cool that you can often see chunks of grass and turf fly up

» **Sound**

The commentary is often behind the action, and it's the conspicuous weak link in a presentation package that has many improvements

» **Playability**

A number of issues, including super-jumping linebackers, poor ball awareness, and atrocious special teams mar the gameplay. It sounds insignificant, but I also hate the menu setup because it makes you do so much unnecessary work to get where you want to go

» **Entertainment**

Despite a number of promising features, Madden fails to deliver a compelling experience

» **Replay Value**

Moderately High



Style 1 to 6-Player Sports (PS3), 1 to 4-Player (Xbox 360) (6-Player Online) **Publisher** EA Sports **Developer** EA Tiburon **Release** August 30 **ESRB** E

The year-after-year sports game structure should be additive, with success achieved by building on previous efforts. Madden, however, seems to be in a cycle – and this year it's on a downturn. Not since the beginning of this console generation has the series been so out of sync. Like a desperate team that has stocked up on high-profile free agents thinking it's on the cusp of a championship, Madden NFL 12 looks good in practice, but where it counts it's a jumbled mess of frustration, unmet expectations, and sloppy play.

Madden NFL 12 doesn't fully execute on its ideas. The series neglected the franchise mode last year, and although developer EA Tiburon made big changes, this mode will have to be reworked again in order for it to be fun. The

goal of the new scouting system is to build info on players through multiple regular season and off-season scouting stages. You have to pinpoint your priorities and accept that you'll know more about some players than others by draft day. I love this concept, but you can't find out enough info on players even if you scout them multiple times. Worse yet, you don't even have the combine numbers for the players you don't scout. You can't tell me an NFL scouting staff wouldn't know a player's 40 time or other basics about even obscure players. As a fan I can get that stuff just by watching the NFL Network. Ultimately, on draft day you have to resort to taking shots in the dark or reaching for players; the best-player-available strategy is impossible to implement.

The other linchpin of franchise mode, free agency, also has good intentions but is unfulfilling. The new timer-based bidding system is cool, but it could help you out with more menu tools, and the period still has no restricted free agency or flexible contract options for players on your roster you resign before they enter free agency. Your roster is larger, but it still doesn't contain a practice squad and the CPU automatically signs undrafted free agents for you.

The franchise mode isn't the only area in need of reworking. Adding more options to last year's GameFlow playcalling system has made what was once a simple feature confusing. Why do plays disappear in the GameFlow menu when I cycle through them, and why can't I see the formations these plays are run from? Superstar mode's new experience system gives you points for activities you didn't do (tackling points for a QB?) and doesn't have nearly enough depth to make you feel like a superstar. The presentation, with its cool NFL Films-like shaky cams, can't

correctly name the Gatorade Impact Player of the Game. I once saw it call out a QB with a rating of 13.9! Finally, more legacy gameplay problems must be cleared up. Linebackers still jump obnoxiously high to block passes on the higher difficulties, players can be unaware of the ball, secondaries drop many gimme INTs, WRs lack any aggression going after the ball, true gang tackles are missing, and punt and kickoff blocking is still horrible.

It's disappointing that many of the new features fail to bring value to the table, but elements like last year's excellent motion system are at least in place to make the game exciting from moment to moment. Although I wasn't in awe of the new player hot/cold streaks, I liked the player roles and how they changed from year to year and gave your players a career progression arc. Other bright spots are the online communities that help weed out the riff-raff from your online multiplayer (thanks to stronger grieving rules), and the accompanying leaderboards also offer a larger structure to the experience. This is especially useful since the online franchise feature is still a bust.

Past Maddens either delivered new features or fixed old problems, but this year you get neither. In too many instances Madden 12 takes you down promising paths that only lead to dead ends. Commenting on the obvious disappointments that crop up in the experience, Bertz once asked me incredulously, "Didn't they play their own game?" I can't remember a time when the series was this lost. I'd say that it has nowhere to go but up, but as this year shows, progress can be elusive and nothing can be counted as certain. » **Matthew Kato**

Second Opinion • 7

Given EA Tiburon's renewed focus on franchise mode this year, I had high hopes for Madden 12. Some of the new features – like expanded rosters, customizable playbooks, and dynamic player traits – are long overdue additions. But many of the other "improvements" take the franchise out of contention. The new rookie scouting gives you little to no info on the vast majority of draft eligible players. The new timed free agency bidding works, but doesn't give you a chance to peruse the list and make targets before the frenzied countdown begins. On the field, the game fumbles thanks to poor adjustments to the passing game that resurrect old problems. Quarterbacks take sacks when they clearly have enough time to complete their throwing motions, linebackers knock down way too many balls intended for receivers 15 or more yards away, and the soothsaying safeties who can predict pass destinations despite having their backs to the play have returned. Add the woeful, delayed commentary of Gus Johnson, the throwaway superstar mode, and the stunning choice to neglect improving online franchise mode in favor of a new group-based multiplayer that segments the community, and you have an all-around disappointment. Instead of grasping for the Lombardi Trophy as it should be this late in the console cycle, Madden is headed for the showers before the playoffs even begin. » **Matt Bertz**

NHL 12

Fighting for position, seeing through the screen



gameformer
SILVER

Style 1 to 6-Player Sports (PS3), 1 to 4-Player (Xbox 360) (12-Player Online) Publisher EA Sports
Developer EA Canada Release September 13 ESRB E

8.75

PS3 • 360

» Concept

Round out the gameplay with net jostling and tweaked player physics

» Graphics

More diverse goalie animations help open up the net

» Sound

The Gary Thorne/Bill Clement commentary duo sounds largely the same, though they do call out player streaks and slumps now

» Playability

The addition of the net jostling makes this the most well-rounded NHL title yet

» Entertainment

NHL 12 skates like an all-star in the EASHL and Be A Pro modes, but its Be A GM mode is a mess

» Replay Value

High

The perfect combination of size, speed, and presence, a good power forward can change the complexion of a hockey franchise. Legends like Peter Forsberg and contemporary bigs like 2011 MVP Corey Perry smother defenders on the forecheck, don't shy away from contact in the corners, and are immovable enough to provide screens or position themselves for rebounds in front of the net. In previous NHL games, their general ineffectiveness made them the first guys I dumped in Be A GM mode – they weren't fast enough to escape contact, and smaller players could easily knock them off the puck. Thanks to the addition of net jostling and a tweaked physics engine that makes it tougher for squirts like Daniel Briere to upend guys who tower over them, the power forwards are once again relevant in NHL 12.

The refined physics and net battles are just two of the many great improvements to the gameplay this year. With under-the-hood signature traits determining how an AI-controlled player should react, your teammates become more involved in the attack. Offensive defensemen join the rush, pass-happy centers hole up in Gretzky's office behind the net, and snipers put themselves in position for one-timers. With goalies fighting to see through screens and pucks rebounding off their pads more naturally, NHL 12 has the most diverse goal scoring I've seen to date.

However, some goals aren't deserved. Refs blow calls regarding goaltender interference (leaving an open net), and defensemen are too lax in denying wraparounds or cuts toward the crease. Hopefully, developer EA Canada can address some of these problems with

the downloadable tuner updates.

Be A Pro mode benefits the most from the new gameplay improvements. Since the revamped player AI is much more engaged in the offensive zone, it's easier to trust your teammates and pass them the puck. The new in-game task system also helps the mode feel more dynamic. If your team is behind one goal in the third period, your coach may encourage you to even up the game and reward extra experience points for doing so. The only major gripe I had with the mode was how it determines playing time. My rookie center played on the first line and led the NHL in scoring, but the coaches still didn't trust him enough to skate a power play or penalty kill.

While moving up the ranks in Be A Pro, players unlock nine legendary NHL players like Wayne Gretzky, Ray Bourque, and Patrick Roy. Though it's fun taking these stars for a skate, Be A Legend misses the mark by placing them on contemporary teams instead of recreating the retro vibe like 2K Sports did with NBA 2K11's Jordan Challenge mode. I'd rather get a hockey history lesson from commentators as Gordie Howe takes the ice with Sid Abel and Ted Lindsay than watch him pass the puck to The Mule and Dan Cleary.

The franchise-style Be A GM mode also aims for the net but ends up shattering the Plexiglas. For the second year in a row, trades, free agency, and drafting all need major overhauls. AI-controlled GMs still propose boneheaded trades, above-average players in their prime still get stowed away on minor league rosters, restricted free agents (like 2011 number one overall draft pick Ryan Nugent-Hopkins) sit out entire seasons, and some teams even let their

highly rated prospects enter free agency rather than signing them.

The biggest problem with the mode may be the top-heavy player ratings. When even below average fourth-liners like James Sheppard are rated above 80, you have too large a grouping at the top of the skill spectrum. It gets even more overpopulated when young players improve as years go by and aging players don't receive a commensurate drop-off. By the fifth year of my career as GM, it wasn't uncommon to go against teams that had 100 ratings in offense, defense, or both. These mistakes take away from an experience I would otherwise enjoy thanks to its spot-on player development, farm system management, and interesting progression.

The two other NHL destination modes, the EASHL online hockey league and Hockey Ultimate Team collectible card mode, maintain their high quality by making a few small but welcome tweaks. It's now easier to match up against friends in HUT matches, and a position change card helps you improve your team chemistry without relying on lady luck to deliver that highly rated NHL right winger when you already have two left wingers you could put on the ice. The EASHL sharpens its skates with a more gradual progression system and the ability to reconfigure your skills based on the position you are playing in the game at hand.

Though the Be A GM mode needs a major overhaul and the new Legends feature falls flat, NHL 12 is still strongest where it counts – on the ice. Just like a well-rounded power forward who can dominate in all three zones, you can't deny the benefit this brings to the club. » **Matt Bertz**

Resistance 3

Insomniac's third installment continues the downward trend

7

PS3

» **Concept**

Take players on a lackluster cross-country war against the Chimera as new protagonist Joe Capelli

» **Graphics**

Bland environments that don't capture the atmosphere of the first game or the scale of Resistance 2's larger battles

» **Sound**

Guns don't feel like they have much weight, and the soundtrack is forgettable

» **Playability**

Controlling Joe is never much of an issue, but getting enemy AI to acknowledge your existence can be troublesome

» **Entertainment**

If this is the final Resistance game, the franchise is certainly going out with a whimper

» **Replay Value**

Moderate



Style 1 or 2-Player Shooter (16-Player Online) Publisher Sony Computer Entertainment Developer Insomniac Games Release September 6 ESRB M

Launching with the PlayStation 3 back in 2006, the original *Resistance: Fall of Man* signaled that Sony wanted a blockbuster FPS franchise to call its own. Insomniac's alternate history shooter deviated from clichés set by both WWII and sci-fi games with a story about an alien invasion in the 1940s. Its sequel made some odd decisions, such as limiting the single-player loadout to two weapons instead of the well-liked weapon wheel from the first. After fans gave the sequel negative feedback, Insomniac made some significant changes heading into *Resistance 3*. Unfortunately, they're not enough to keep the game from being a decidedly average shooter, and the most disappointing entry in the series.

After ending the misery of previous protagonist Nathan Hale during the dramatic climax of *Resistance 2*, Joseph Capelli takes over the marquee role despite the limitations of his bland personality. Overused plot devices, such as the mitten of Joe's sick child he carries during his journey, fail to endear the player to the new series star, and Capelli never develops interesting or likable traits. More importantly, I never felt he was capable of anything significant on the battlefield. As players, we're tasked with trekking across the United States and almost single-handedly taking out a massive alien force while utilizing a character with all the menace of a Walmart greeter.

Capelli ultimately needs to get to New York City, where a massive Chimeran tower serves as one of the primary structures of the enemy's war effort. The map of the U.S. shows you advancing through Oklahoma, St. Louis, Pennsylvania, and beyond, but none of the areas have a distinct visual quality outside of the occasional landmark like the Gateway Arch. It's disappointing to see such bland environments from the same developer that created the vibrant worlds of *Spyro*

the *Dragon*, the imaginative and varied planets of *Ratchet & Clank*, and the initially intriguing locales of *Resistance: Fall of Man*. Outside of an entertaining boat ride and a surprising turn of events about three-quarters of the way through the game, players spend most of their time traversing underground passages and cookie-cutter towns in various stages of disrepair.

As you progress through these areas, the combat situations feel anything but dynamic. Each one is scripted beat-by-beat, with waves of enemies appearing like clockwork whenever you cross an invisible line. The only element that shakes up these sequences is the omission of a regenerating health system. When you're desperately sprinting across the battlefield to collect a health pickup, it adds a sense of urgency to the proceedings knowing you can't just duck behind a rock for five seconds.

The predictable level designs do *Resistance 3* a disservice, but numerous glitches prove more damaging. I can live with the occasional floating body, but other bugs halt the flow of the game entirely. One area required me to wait for an NPC to open a door before I could proceed, and he simply stood in front of it and stared at the ceiling. I turned around to clear the previous area of enemies to see if that was what was stopping him, and two Chimera walked into the room. They stood directly in front of me, stopped, and stared at the ceiling. I walked around them and tried to get their attention, but they didn't pay me any mind. Once I killed both of them, the NPC snapped into place and proceeded. This wasn't an isolated incident – I couldn't proceed past several areas because one enemy would be caught in the environment or was otherwise out of the field of vision. Once I ascertained where their grunts were coming from, I'd chuck a couple grenades in the appropriate direction and the game would continue.

Insomniac has a long history of creating unique weaponry, and the entertaining guns at your disposal in *Resistance 3* are the game's strongest aspect. While most of the selections on the returning weapon wheel are old favorites (Bullseye, Auger, Carbine, etc.), the new additions fit right in. Whether you're freezing enemies with the Cryogun, electrifying them with the Atomizer, or mutating them with the (you guessed it) Mutator, it's nice to have variety when it comes to taking the Chimera down.

These weapons cross over into the multiplayer space well, but they're about the only thing that hasn't been lifted wholesale from *Call of Duty*, *Halo*, or *Battlefield*. Whether it's the hologram and bubble shield abilities from *Reach*, the killstreak reward system from *Call of Duty*, or the *Battlefield*-esque Chain Reaction mode, everything has a unshakable "been there, done that" feel. They didn't even bother to rename the identical Bandolier and Scavenger perks from *Call of Duty*. The multiplayer is unoriginal, but that doesn't mean it can't be fun to play. Considering how bland the campaign is, the average online play is the best part of the overall package.

Insomniac approached *Resistance 3* with no lack of ambition, expanding to a three-year development cycle in an effort to make this its biggest title yet. The team succeeds in some ways, as the various hand-written notes and journals you'll find on your trek to New York City help to flesh out the story. However, more effort seems to have been put into minutia than the gameplay itself. With no reason to connect with these characters and little in the way of action to separate itself from the packed FPS crowd, *Resistance 3* makes it clear that the series doesn't belong amongst the triple-A competition in the genre. » **Dan Ryckert**

The Ico & Shadow of the Colossus Collection

Time can't touch Team Ico's classics



Style 1 or 2-Player Action/Adventure (Ico), 1-Player Action/Adventure (Shadow of the Colossus) **Publisher** Sony Computer Entertainment **Developer** Team Ico/Bluepoint Games **Release** September 27 **ESRB** T

9.75

Video game elitists insist that people must earn the right to call themselves gamers. Enjoying playing games isn't enough; you need to prove your dedication by experiencing a shifting collection of definitive titles. The specific entries vary, but both Ico and Shadow of the Colossus are frequently mentioned on such lists. I don't advocate that exclusionary view of gaming, but I agree that these titles from Team Ico perfectly illuminate many facets of the medium's appeal.

Video games provide a broad spectrum of experiences. On one end, you have the adrenaline-fueled action embodied by Sony's other compilation this month, God of War: Origins Collection. On the other end of the spectrum are Ico and Shadow of the Colossus, titles that rely on understatement and ambiguity to convey their stories. You won't find any combo multipliers or headshots, but these adventures slowly and deliberately build an emotional connection in a way that few games have accomplished before or since.

Ico and Shadow of the Colossus seem simple on the surface. The former is about guiding a young woman through a castle, and the latter is about killing 16 monsters to bring a loved one back to life. Through subtle character interactions and vibrant visuals, these straightforward premises are transformed into engrossing tales. Both efforts from director Fumito Ueda and his team are often cited as examples of video games as an art form, and their remastered incarnations only add more weight to the argument.

The improved framerate and HD visuals benefit both titles significantly, which isn't a trivial statement considering how good these games looked when they first released. In terms of content, Shadow of the Colossus is essentially the same, but Ico is based on the original's European release so it has a few differences from the North American PS2 version. A few puzzles are slightly altered (including one timing-based piston jump that took me multiple attempts), but the most notable changes arise after you've beaten the



game. On subsequent playthroughs, Yorda's dialogue is accompanied by legible subtitles, so you can finally understand her. You can also activate a co-op mode in which a second player controls Yorda. The camera still focuses on Ico, and Yorda can't do anything she couldn't before, but having a human control her means she moves more intelligently and efficiently. Both of these extras are cool bonuses for hardcore fans, encouraging at least two playthroughs.

Though Ico has the most additional stuff, Shadow of the Colossus excels in its own new way. Both titles in the collection feature 3D support, but Shadow of the Colossus uses it the best. I usually think that 3D is a stupid gimmick, but this marks the only time it has enhanced my experience rather than feeling like a throwaway novelty. The scale of the colossi – and the sense of vertigo caused by dangling from them – is conveyed well through the 3D effect. The end result isn't cool enough to justify the purchase of a 3D TV, but it's a nice perk for those who already own one.

Games from previous generations face the danger of not resonating with modern audiences.

Gaming evolves rapidly, and what worked five years ago may not cut it today. This was not even a remote concern as I replayed both games in this collection. Yes, the controls in Ico and Shadow of the Colossus are rusty by current standards, but the basic mechanics aren't what made these games landmarks in the industry. These sad and compelling masterpieces create immersive worlds, interesting characters, and memorable journeys. That hasn't changed in the intervening years, and playing through them again in this unbeatable package only serves as a reminder that no other developer can imitate Team Ico's singular style. » **Joe Juba**

PS3

» Concept

Two unique and revered PlayStation 2 games receive the HD treatment

» Graphics

Both of these games are more gorgeous than ever

» Sound

The voice work and music are minimal, but suit the tone of the games

» Playability

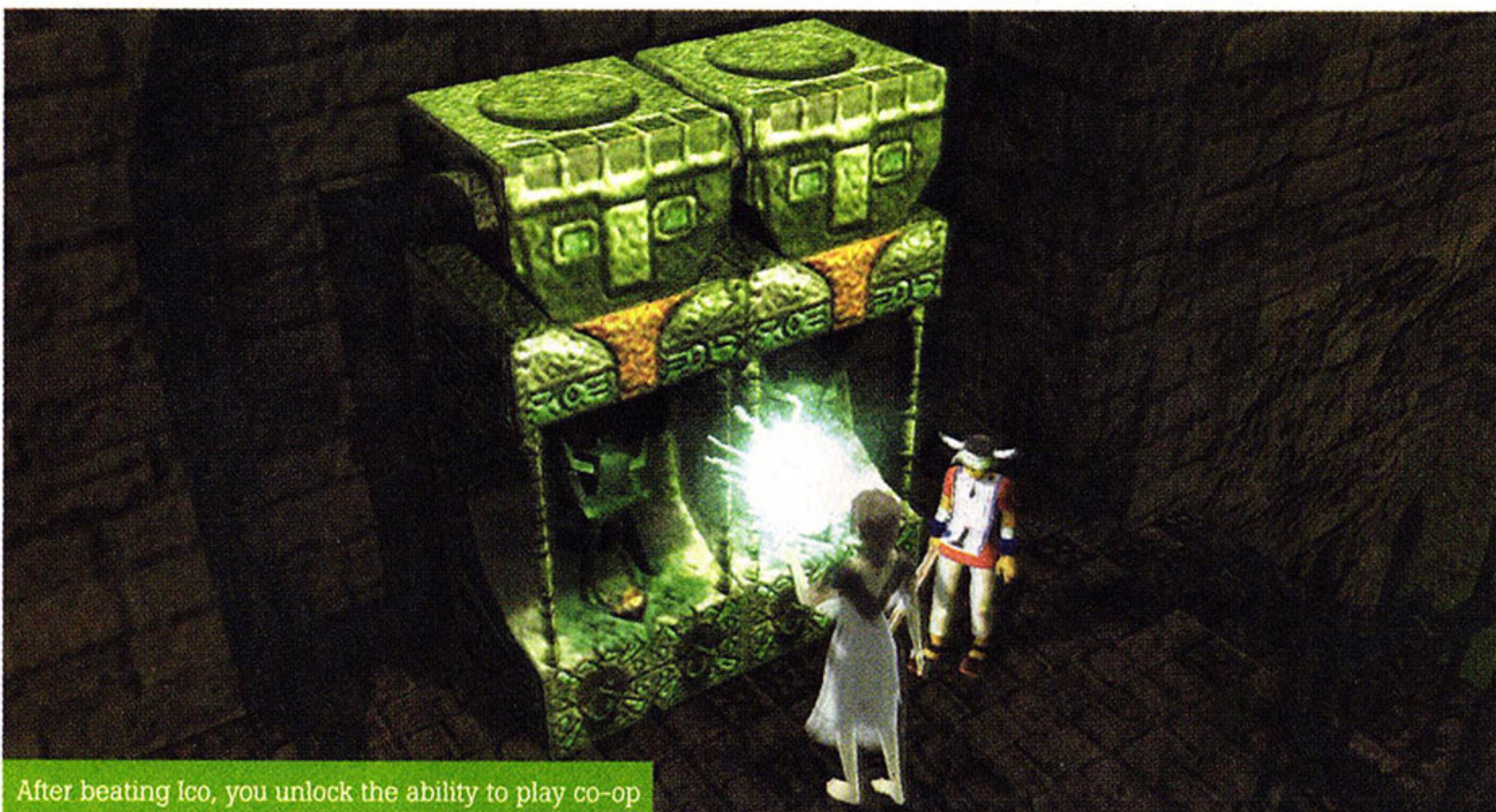
If pressing triangle to jump feels strange, you can easily remap the buttons

» Entertainment

Whether you're playing for the first time or just due for another run through, this collection is \$40 well spent

» Replay

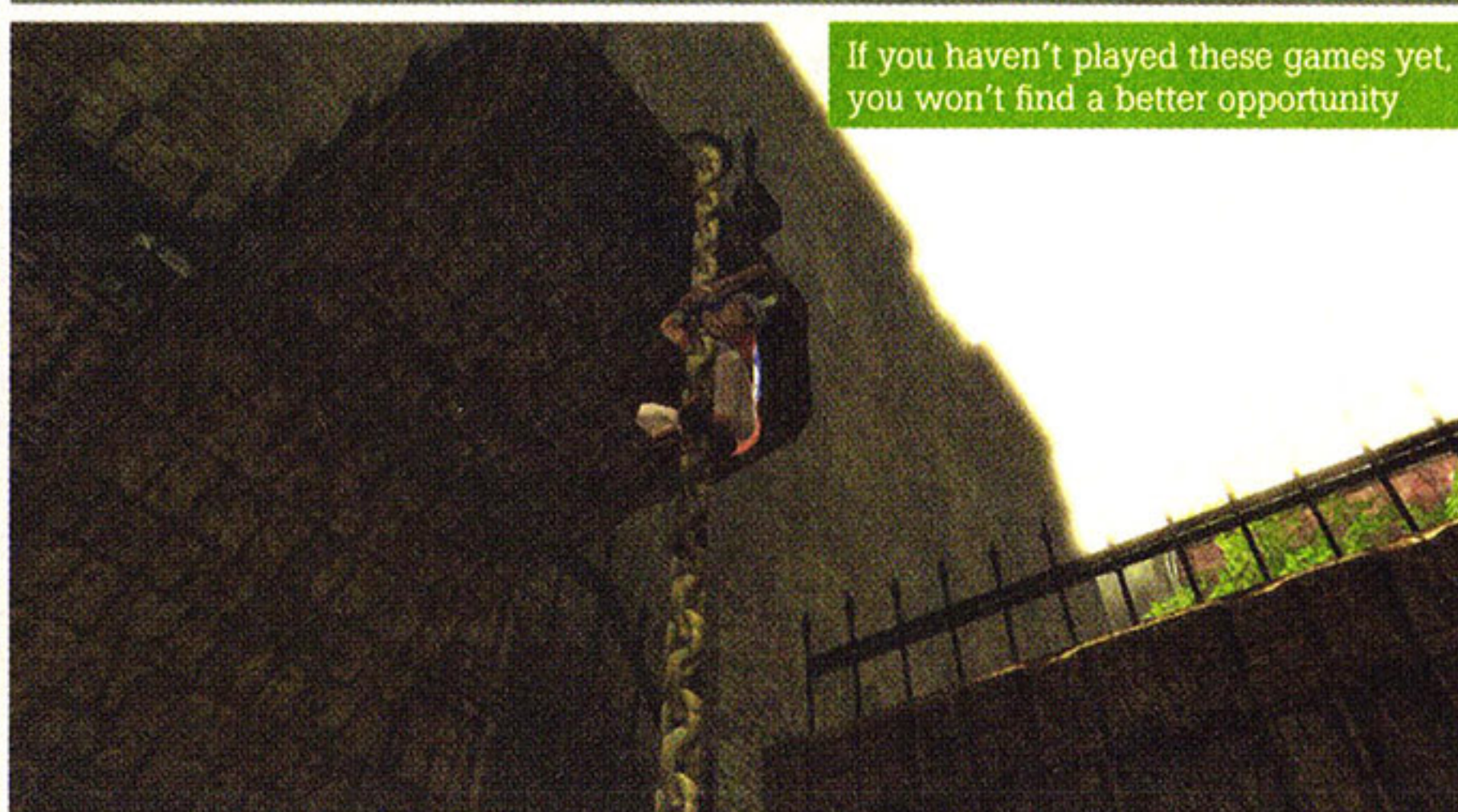
Moderately High



After beating Ico, you unlock the ability to play co-op



The colossi are even more intimidating in HD



If you haven't played these games yet, you won't find a better opportunity



God of War: Origins Collection

Kratos turns in another godly performance

9.5



Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Sony
Developer Ready At Dawn
Release September 13 **ESRB** M

PS3

» **Concept**

Play both handheld God of War installments remastered in HD

» **Graphics**

These were good-looking games before, but the move to PS3 has made them better

» **Sound**

Kratos does a lot of shouting, and the music does a lot of pumping-up

» **Playability**

With the evasive roll mapped to the analog stick, everything feels just like it should

» **Entertainment**

The full God of War experience, with fun combat and epic moments. Except this time, you get two games at once

» **Replay**

Moderately High

Since the original God of War released in 2005, Kratos' epic has expanded to five games and three systems, including PSP. Those handheld entries from Ready At Dawn accomplish a rare feat, providing portable God of War experiences that earn their place beside the console installments. Chains of Olympus and Ghost of Sparta are great games – without needing to apply the “for a handheld” qualifier. This fact is clearer than ever now that they are bundled together in God of War: Origins Collection.

Because of the quality of the originals, the transition to PS3 goes well for both titles. A new HD coat of paint results in impressive visuals for both gameplay and cinematics, and the action flows smoothly thanks to the improved framerate. The graphics aren't as jaw-dropping as God of War III, but I doubt any reasonable gamer was expecting such a drastic transformation.

Both games also support stereoscopic 3D, but I can't really tout that as a selling point. The feature doesn't make the games any better or more immersive; it's a neat trick, but you're not missing anything without it. The implementation of trophies is a far bigger deal, adding goals to shoot for and a few laughs, like the beam-walking trophy in Chains of Olympus. The games are worth replaying anyway, but trophies give hardcore fans an extra incentive to revisit these chapters in the tale.

Underneath the new layer of polish, Kratos still feels as powerful and brutal as ever. He takes down towering beasts and commits deicide with ease, and the gameplay feels right at home. I loved both Chains of Olympus and Ghost of Sparta when they first released, but I'm not going to re-hash my original reviews. The biggest difference is that my only mechanical complaint is fixed on the PS3 versions. I never warmed up to using the shoulder buttons to perform the evasive roll on PSP, but the second analog stick eliminates this problem and puts Kratos' full agility at your disposal.

The evasive roll was a small kink in the formula on handheld, but now that it's ironed out, you can enjoy the stylish combat and memorable story unimpeded. Without spoiling anything about the plot, I can say that Chains of Olympus and Ghost of Sparta possess a handful of the series' coolest moments, from familial encounters to ruthless kills. They also have the best secondary weapons in any of the games (the gauntlet in CoO and the spear/shield combo in GoS), which give you a reason to finally put down the iconic chain blades and try something new.

Independently, Chains of Olympus and Ghost of Sparta were standout efforts that helped make a name for Ready At Dawn. When you put them together in the Origins Collection, you get two amazing and upgraded adventures in one \$40 package that no fan of action games should miss. » **Joe Juba**



Crimson Alliance

Top notch co-op seals the deal

8.75



Style 1 to 4-Player Action/Role-Playing
Publisher Microsoft
Developer Certain Affinity
Release September 7 **ESRB** T

360

» **Concept**

Join up with friends and slash your way through some deadly dungeons

» **Graphics**

Detailed characters stand out well from the beautiful environments

» **Sound**

Strong voiceovers give the characters personality

» **Playability**

Excellent interface design and straightforward controls get you right into the action

» **Entertainment**

One of the best cooperative dungeon crawlers in years

» **Replay Value**

Moderate

Fantasy-themed action/RPGs trace a pretty standard formula. It involves monsters, loot, twisty corridors, and character upgrades. Even so, there's a big difference between a great dungeon crawler and a mediocre one. Small features like ease of interface, distinct character classes, and smart level design can make all the difference. Crimson Alliance is one of those rare games that gets it right. The result is a surefire formula for a fun weekend with a couple of friends.

Certain Affinity's new game can be played with any combination of one to four players, but I personally like it best with three. That's because the developers have crafted three well-balanced but distinct character classes in their mercenary, assassin, and wizard. As you play, you'll notice the familiar concept of character leveling has been abandoned in order to put a tighter focus on equipment upgrades, the primary way to improve over time. Cosmetic changes to armor and weapons turn your drab adventurer into a god-like killing machine, and you'll eagerly await each new opportunity to spend your hard-earned gold. A simple-to-use pop-up inventory system keeps the action going for other players as you equip new gear.

Crimson Alliance unfolds as you explore a mysterious ruined city and its monster-infested environs. A sparse but well-written story keeps things moving with occasional voiced story sequences. Most of your time is spent in the cleverly wrought ruined fortresses, grounded shipping ports, and necromantic castles that make up the game's diverse dungeons. Each level is filled with secret passages and hidden niches, and you'll get increased rewards for strong combat performance and speedy runs through each stage.

There's little choice in how you improve your character's powers, but your limited selection of attacks are all fun to utilize; they only get more exciting as they grow in strength. Battles grow extremely intense on the later levels, especially on the higher difficulties. If you've got buddies along for the ride, you should definitely try to tackle the more challenging settings and get the appropriately higher rewards that come along with them.

Every aspect of Crimson Alliance works together to engineer a fun cooperative hack n' slash. From the quick and easy inventory to the excellently designed levels and rewarding combat, this is the downloadable game to play with friends this season. » **Matt Miller**

Choose Your Class

Certain Affinity has opted for an unusual pricing structure for Crimson Alliance. You can pay full price for the whole package (\$15 at launch). Alternately, if you're playing with friends, you can decide the class you want to play and purchase the game for \$5 less with only one of the three classes fully playable.





Kirby Mass Attack

Kirby divides and conquers

Style 1-Player Platforming **Publisher** Nintendo **Developer** HAL Laboratory
Release September 19 **ESRB** E

With Nintendo's portable focus squarely set on 3DS recently, it's easy to forget that a new Kirby adventure is on its way to the good old DS. In his latest entry on the system, Kirby Mass Attack puts gamers in control of up to 10 versions of the adorable pink puffball. Featuring stylus-only controls and some gameplay elements reminiscent of Pikmin, it beats Squeak Squad, Super Star Ultra, and Canvas Curse as the best franchise entry on DS.

Outside of a brief exposition explaining how the evil Necrodeus splits our hero into 10 pieces, the game wastes little time dropping you into the action. Each hub world starts you with only one Kirby, and you're tasked with collecting fruit to add more to your count. Similar to the star doors in Mario 64, it takes a certain amount of Kirbys (up to 10) to enter each subsequent level.

Once inside a level, your crew is controlled by dragging a star to the group's destination. A double-tap makes them run, a single tap allows for more precise positioning, and tapping an enemy causes the whole group to hop aboard and pummel them into oblivion. Some enemies won't be vulnerable from the front, so you must flick Kirbys with the stylus for better positioning. Flinging your group onto the back of a baddie to take them down reminded me of Pikmin, and the flick mechanic offers a surprising amount of control.

Most stages simply require you to get to the exit with as many Kirbys

as possible, but the game occasionally throws in one-off mechanics that do a great job of mixing up the experience. One places the group in a tank that shoots Kirbys out one-by-one, while others have you influencing the direction of a hot air balloon or a teetering tree by positioning your group accordingly.

Each stage features several collectible medals, which serve to unlock an impressive amount of extras. First you unlock basic minigames like whack-a-mole, but you'll eventually open up more interesting diversions like a pinball game, a bare-bones RPG minigame, and a surprisingly complete shooter called Strato Patrol EOS.

Even if your attention is turned to the new generation of portable systems, it's worth taking a step back to play Kirby Mass Attack. With solid touch-based control mechanics, a wealth of unlockables, and the classic Kirby charm, it's another great first-party experience on a system full of them. » **Dan Ryckert**



8.5

DS

» Concept

A side-scrolling adventure that lets the player control up to 10 Kirbys with the DS stylus

» Graphics

Bright and cartoon-like, resembling old-school Kirby more than Wii's Epic Yarn

» Sound

Classic Kirby tunes are always welcome, and the new ones fit right in

» Playability

Stylus-only controls worked great for the series in Canvas Curse, and they work just as well here

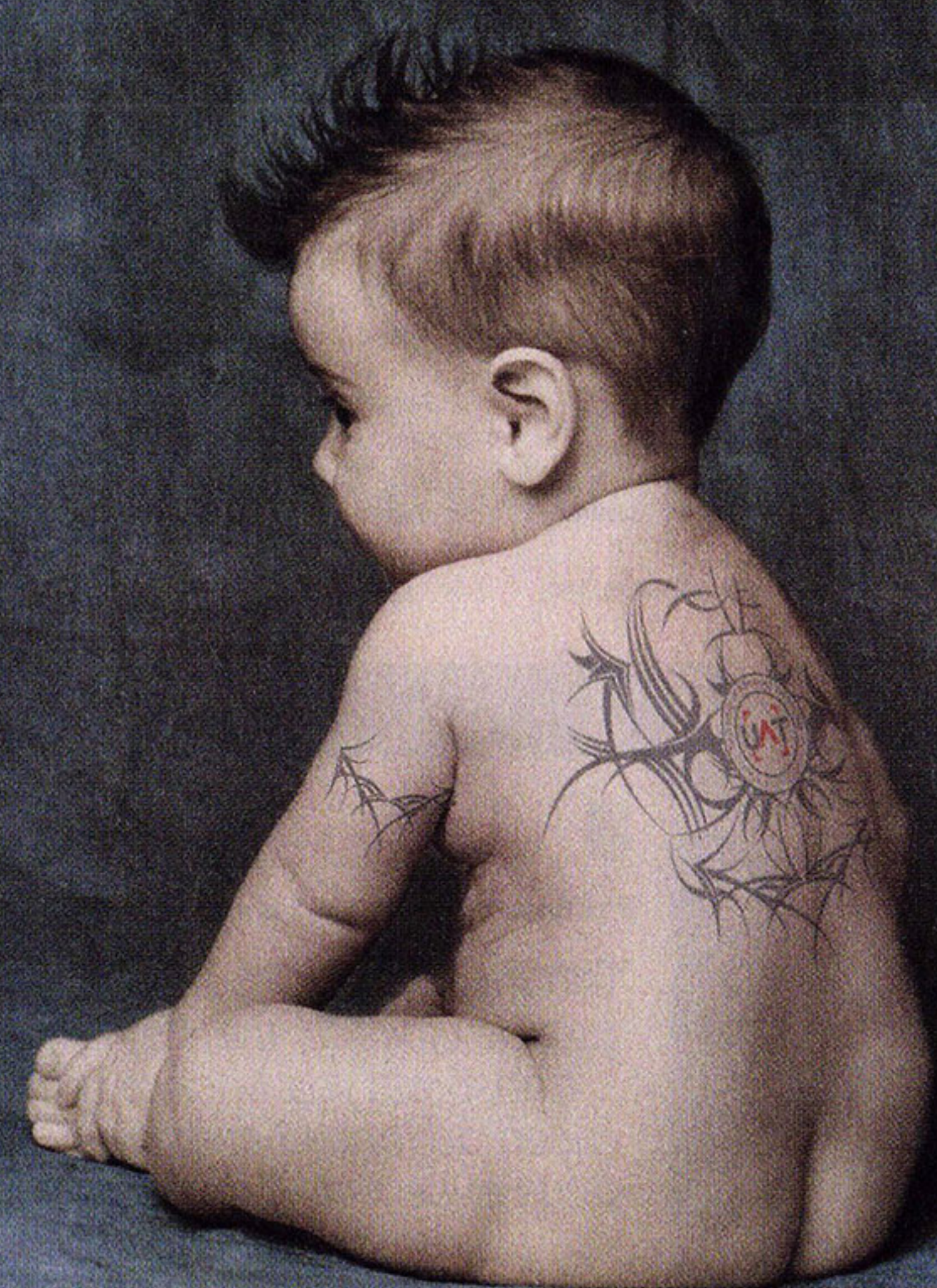
» Entertainment

The standard stages are great, and the wealth of unlockables will keep you coming back for more medals

» Replay Value

Moderately High

geeked at birth



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the score

8 | Bit.Trip Complete

Platform Wii Release September 13 ESRB E

The *Bit.Trip* games aren't just fun games in the style of arcade classics, they're tiny time machines. The series transports you back to a time when a game didn't need advanced enemy AI, weapons leveling, or skill trees to be fun. A designer could hang an entire game on one simple concept. – Ben Reeves

8.25 | Disgaea 4: A Promise Unforgotten

Platform PS3 Release September 6 ESRB T

The network is the only place *Disgaea 4* breaks much in the way of new ground, but it's a wonderful complement to yet another iteration of an already slick design. Absent a major rework of *Disgaea's* foundation, this is about the best that we could ask for – even if you have to remind yourself that you're not playing the same PlayStation 2 game from 2003 once in a while. – Adam Biessener

8 | The Gunstringer

Platform 360 Release September 13 ESRB T

Roughly three hours into this Kinect-only shooter, I told myself I was going to take a break... until *The Gunstringer* lowered his pistol to watch a lumberjack make passionate love to an alligator. From that point on, I would endure my arm pain to see this title through to the end. The hilarious story of a skeletal marionette's bid for revenge is backed by intense shooting gallery action, proving that Kinect can appeal to hardcore gamers. – Andrew Reiner

5 | Bodycount

Platform PS3 • 360 Release August 30 ESRB M

It's clear that the team didn't have the time and resources to do *Bodycount* right. What's left is a bland and essentially incomplete game. – Bryan Vore

8 | Fruit Ninja Kinect

Platform 360 Release August 10 ESRB E

The game offers both competitive and cooperative two-player modes, but it's often just as fun to switch off between rounds of the single-player modes. *Fruit Ninja* tugs at your competitive desire to constantly best yourself and your friends. – Ben Reeves

7.5 | Dragon Quest Monsters: Joker 2

Platform DS Release September 19 ESRB E

The underlying systems are solid, and the addition of online battles gives it more longevity than the previous title. You won't find many other new features if you played the original *Joker*, but the familiarity doesn't keep the formula from working on a basic level. – Joe Juba

8.25 | Star Fox 64 3D

Platform 3DS Release September 9 ESRB E10+

I enjoyed the updated visuals and 3D effects, but I wanted to turn off the gyro controls the second I used them. Once they were off, I found myself loving every second of the game like it was 1997 all over again. This remake might not be the triple-A first-party killer app the 3DS needs, but it's a solid piece of nostalgia for longtime fans and an exceptionally strong shooter for newcomers to the series. – Dan Ryckert

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Currency Converter

Calculating Video Game Exchange Rates

Sure our economy feels like a sinkhole that never hits bottom, but if you compare the U.S. dollar to many video game currencies you'll see that a lot of video game protagonists have it worse off than we do.

Banana Coins

(DONKEY KONG COUNTRY RETURNS)

BANANA JUICE = 20 BANANA COINS
 JAMBA JUICE BANANA BERRY SMOOTHIE = \$3.85
 MAGIC CONVERSION: **\$1 = 5.19 BANANA COINS**

It would cost you almost 41 banana coins every time you went to see a movie in the theater.



HOW ARE VIDEO GAME EXCHANGE RATES CONVERTED?

1 First, we take a look at an item from the in-game economy. For example, Banana Juice in Donkey Kong Country Returns. **2** Next, we find a comparable item in the real world, such as Jamba Juice's Banana Berry Smoothie with an energy booster. **3** Finally, we apply a mathematical formula so complex it might seem magical to our Mesopotamian ancestors.

Bottle Caps

(FALLOUT 3)

BOTTLE OF NUKA COLA = 20 CAPS
 BOTTLE OF COCA-COLA = \$1.39
 MAGIC CONVERSION: **\$1 = 14.39 CAPS**

The U.S. National debt would be over 210 Trillion caps. That's a lot of refreshment.



Rupees

(THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: OCARINA OF TIME)

LON LON MILK = 10 RUPEES
 REAL COW MILK = \$1.12
 MAGIC CONVERSION: **\$1 = 8.93 RUPEES**

A McDonald's Happy Meal would cost over 28 rupees.



Pokémon Dollars

(POKÉMON RED, BLUE, AND YELLOW)

POKÉMON CALCIUM = 9,800 PD
 BOTTLE OF TUMS = \$8.76
 MAGIC CONVERSION: **\$1 = 1,118.72 PD**

You would need almost 4,000 Pokémon dollars if you wanted to buy one Starbucks Frappuccino.

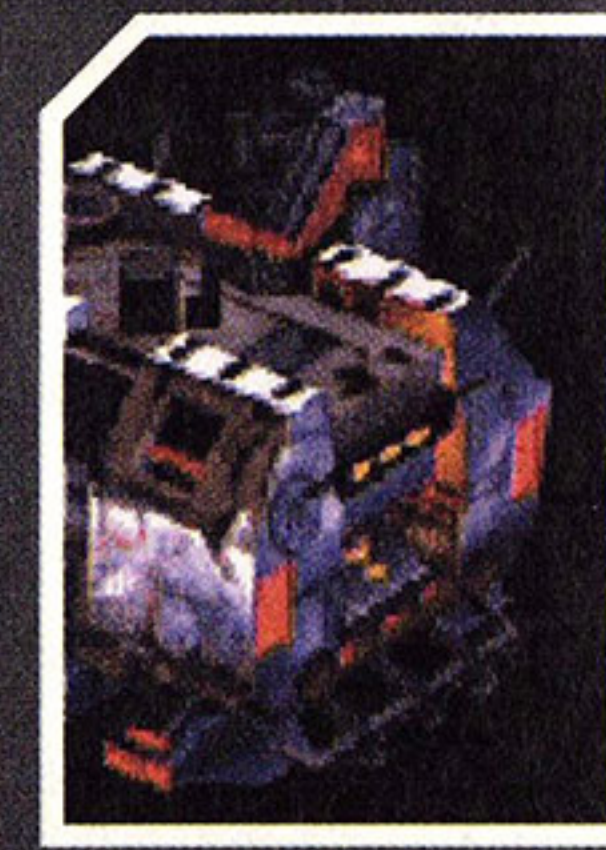


Minerals

(STARCRRAFT)

FACTORY = 200 MINERALS
 U.S. FACTORY (AVERAGE) = \$2 MILLION
 MAGIC CONVERSION: **\$1 = .0001 LBS. OF MINERALS**

You would only need one pound of minerals to buy an average-priced used car, and you'd probably have enough left over to spring for automatic locks and a remote start.



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