

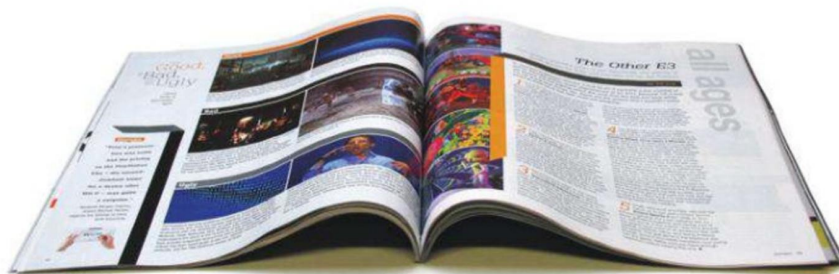
gameinformer®

THE WORLD'S #1 VIDEO GAME MAGAZINE

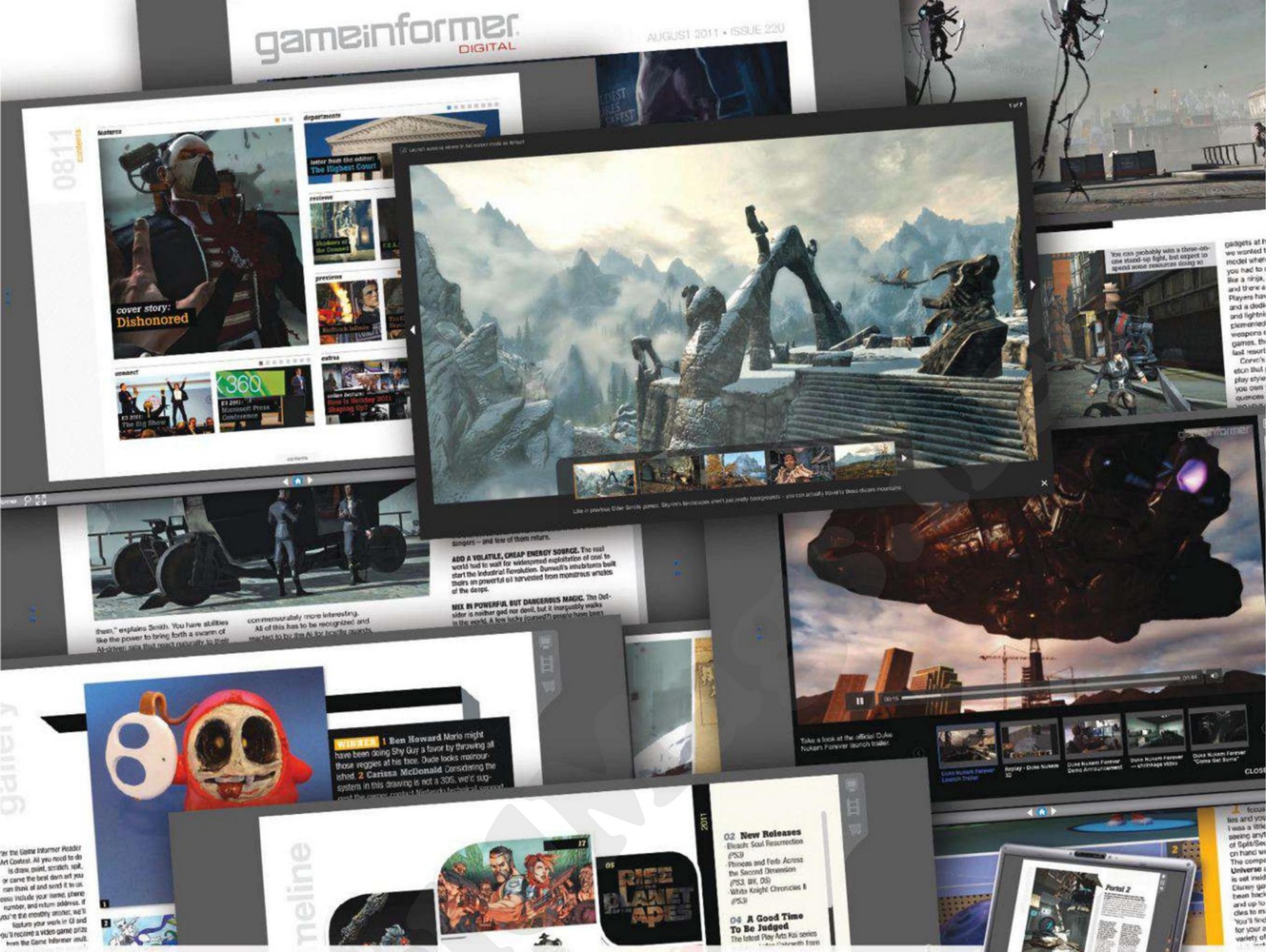
THE LAST OF US

A SAVAGE SURVIVAL
TALE FROM THE DEVELOPER
OF UNCHARTED








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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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The GI Community Rules

When we relaunched gameinformer.com back on October 1, 2009, it felt like I was staring into the abyss. Who or what would be there looking back at me after launch? I had 18-plus years of making magazines under my belt at the time, but this was the first time I had developed a website with real effort behind it (some longtime readers may remember Old Yellow, which was purely a labor of love we did while busting our butts to put out the magazine).

Just under two and a half years later, I could not be happier with the result. The site has been experiencing great growth, but the most impressive part is that even as we have grown our community it has continued to be one of the best on the Internet in my humble opinion (yes, in this case I am very biased). I was more than a little scared of the wrath of anonymous Internet users spamming us with hate like I see from online communities around the web, but the Game Informer community is an amazing bunch of people (thanks in no small part to our fantastic moderators).

If you don't already make it a daily destination (or even better – your browser home page), you are missing out on a lot of content that complements the magazine or can be enjoyed on its own.

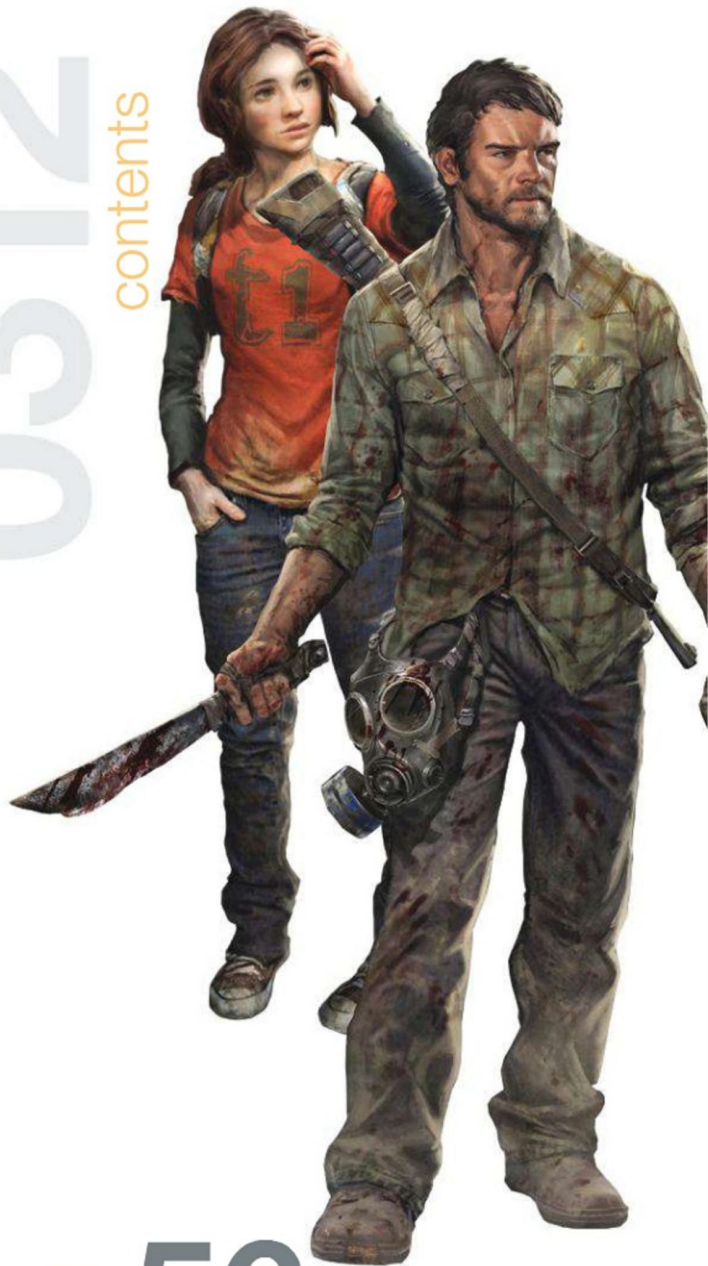
We have some amazing community bloggers who impress me each day with their interesting and thoughtful takes on the video game industry. We have a weekly podcast (and sometimes Respec Radio), numerous video shows (including Replay, The Quick 15, and The Misadventures of Reiner and Phil), and all the custom content created by our video team. This includes our fantastic videos that give readers a chance to hear about the games straight from game developers behind our exclusive cover stories.

But that's just the tip of the iceberg. We also deliver daily video game news, unique previews, DLC impressions, interviews with gaming's illuminati, the always exciting cover reveals, editor blogs, and quick access to Game Informer's digital edition. You can even interact with the staff in our comments section or by following us on Twitter, Facebook, Google+, or YouTube.

This is just the beginning, as we have even more plans for Game Informer online, Game Informer digital, and the magazine in the coming year. So consider this an invitation to come join us and the rest of the GI community on gameinformer.com. We'll do our best to make sure you don't regret it.

Cheers,

0312
contents



» 56

The Last of Us

Naughty Dog is taking cinematic action games in a bold new direction by asking players to survive a post-apocalyptic cross-country journey that will change this remarkable cast of characters forever.

by Bryan Vore



34



10

The Oscars of Video Games



30



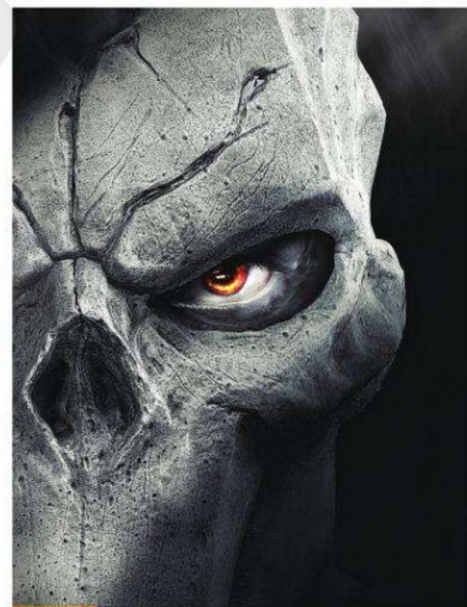
26

Jumping Off the Game Screen



74

Street Fighter X Tekken



68

Darksiders II

regulars

» 6 Feedback

Curious as to what our reaction to review score complaints is? We've got that and plenty more sass to serve alongside as a garnish this month. Also: screaming!

» 10 Connect

If the Spike TV Video Game Awards rub you the wrong way, learn about why you should care about the peer-awarded Interactive Achievement Awards instead.

» 74 Previews

Come for the Resident Evil 6, stay for the Street Fighter X Tekken. Along the way, why not check out PlanetSide 2, MLB 2K12, and Silent Hill: Downpour?

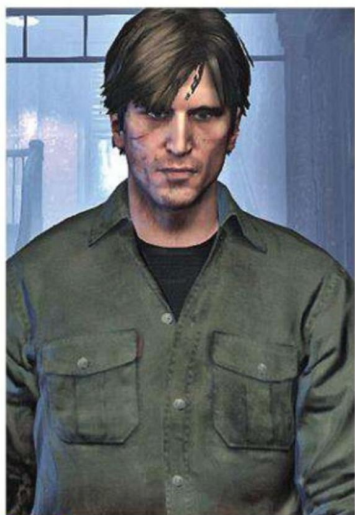
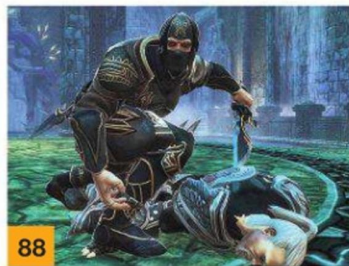
» 86 Reviews

38 Studios has talked a big game about Kingdoms of Amalur: Reckoning since its inception. Phil breaks down how well the company's debut matches up to the promises.

by Phil Kollar

» 100 Game Over

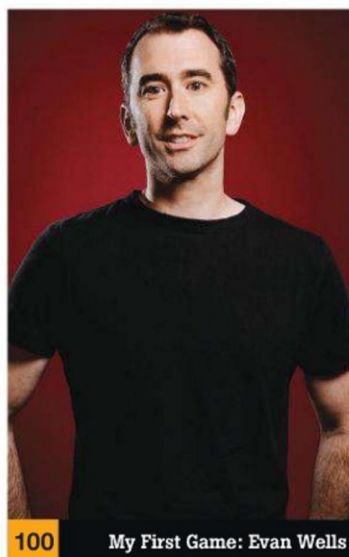
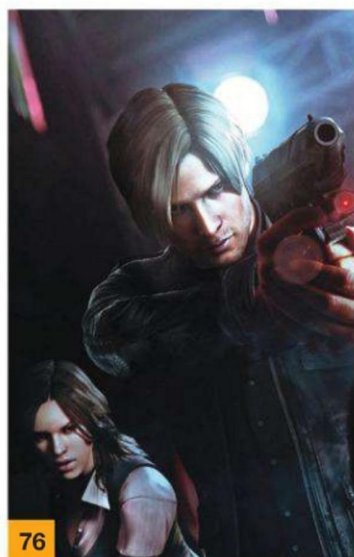
Naughty Dog's Evan Wells relates the story of how he started in the industry. It's probably not about the game you think it is.



Silent Hill: Downpour



Razer Star Wars: The Old Republic Gaming Keyboard



My First Game: Evan Wells

games index

All Zombies Must Die!	93
Amy	92
Army Corps of Hell	95
Darkness II, The	91
I Am Alive	81
Jak and Daxter Collection	94
Kid Icarus: Uprising	85
Kingdoms of Amalur: Reckoning	88
Major League Baseball 2K12	83
Mass Effect 3	80
NeverDead	92
NFL Blitz	96
PlanetSide 2	84
Postal III	96
Pushmo	96
Resident Evil 6	76
Silent Hill: Downpour	78
Soulcalibur V	90
Street Fighter X Tekken	74
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 13	82
Unit, The	85
WWW	96
Wipeout 2048	95
Zen Pinball 3D	96

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This month in Feedback, readers wax poetic on their mixed feelings for Skyrim, lament a friend's prejudice against Call of Duty, futilely defend Mega Man's honor, and finally learn why their complaints over review scores don't mean squat.



Going Down To South Park

How freaking excited am I about the South Park RPG? In short, really freaking excited. Trey Parker and Matt Stone have always impressed me with how topical and hilarious the series has continued to be even though it started out as cardboard cutouts and fart jokes. A real, full-budget game? Heck yes.

Terry Grubham
Moscow, ID

I just wanted to say I'm looking at the South Park cover, and it is possibly the best cover of all time. It looks really good. Good job guys. That being said, Skyrim should have gotten a 9.75. Good day, gentlemen.

Luis Ramos
Miami, FL

Guess you can't win them all, as this next pair of letters aptly demonstrates...

The Life Of A Reviewer

I was upset with the ratings of this year's biggest titles. This holiday season by far has had the best titles come out and many of these great games (Battlefield 3, Uncharted 3, Resistance 3, Assassin's Creed Revelations, and Skyrim) have all received poor ratings. The men and women who made these titles possible worked extremely hard on them with their best ideas and everything else. Shouldn't these titles deserve a much better score? At least better than 9.5, as well as the low blow of 8.75 for ACR?

Jaime
Fort Worth, TX

Hello. I would like to talk about Saints Row: The Third. Why did you give it a 9 when everybody is saying that it sucks? I mean really, if the game is that bad why write a review about it? For real, my friend Dewayne says it doesn't suck, but we don't listen to him. You guys should have reviews from real people. Change it!

Lyne
Southfield, MI

This month we received angry letters informing us that our reviews for Modern Warfare 3, Minecraft, and Skyrim were all too low and too high. We mock ornery readers for assuming that their opinions are closer to some imaginary objective standard of quality, but that doesn't stop more from writing in to tell us how our personal enjoyment (or lack thereof) of a game is somehow incorrect. Save your breath, folks, and be more like this young mother from Anaheim.

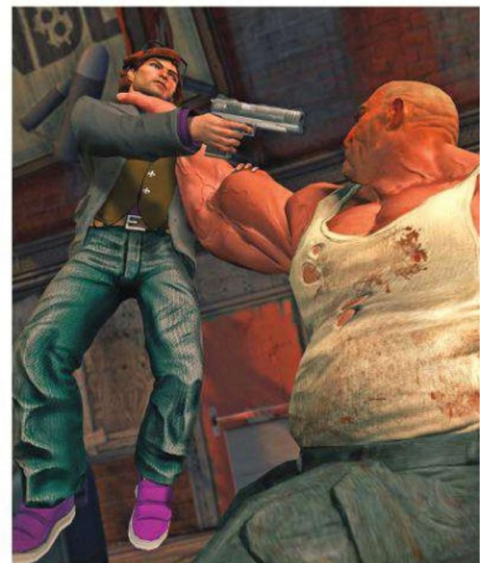
An Opinion Worth Sharing

Every time I see a letter complaining about your review scores I just shake my head. As a 28-year-old single mother, I don't have nearly as much time as I used to for playing video games. While I read reviews to gauge the general reaction to a game – basically to see if the response is mostly positive or mostly negative – I do not take reviews as anything other than another person's opinion. Because that's what they are. Quibbling over half a point before a game has even come out, like Karim's response to your Uncharted 3 review (A Fantastic Fanatic, issue

225), is just juvenile. The truth is, while I peruse your reviews of games that interest me, I read Game Informer for the plethora of other informative articles you guys publish.

Bethany
Anaheim, CA

Congratulations, Bethany. You are doing it right.





Poetry Break

This is how Skyrim on PS3 makes me feel. The flames lick the ground, scorching the fine brown glades of grass at my feet, but I am a statue, tall and picturesque in the fading sun. I hold my ground unflinchingly as the beast's wings spread open to wrap me in the fierce pangs of death. I steady myself and ready my blade. I lunge at the dragon with red hot glowing eyes. I shout. My voice lashes out at the dragon's very soul, forcing the beast down to the charred earth before me. The smoke rises as a smile creases my lips. I am Dragonborn. This is my des-. Sorry, the game just froze. I was attempting to say "destiny."

Glenn
Philippi, WV

Bravo, sir. You have undoubtedly summed up the feelings of many PS3 Skyrim fans, without resorting to vulgarities or empty threats against Bethesda. If there's a Nobel Peace Prize category for tongue-in-cheek poetry based on a video game...well, that would just be silly.

War Of The Mind

I just wanted to thank you guys for the Advanced Tactics article in issue 225. It's good to know that there are still military shooters that take skill and strategy to play. But what about Brothers in Arms: Hell's Highway? Personally, I thought that game really required strategy to get through the campaign, and above all, it was based on a true story. Not only did it have an amazing campaign, you also felt a strong connection to Staff Sergeant Baker and all of the conflicts he went through.

Tyler Wells
via email

I just wanted to say that I loved the Advanced Tactics article. The little piece about America's Army is definitely true. Long story short, my mom accidentally cut an artery in her arm, and thanks to America's Army, I put a tourniquet on, stopped the bleeding, and basically saved her hand and possibly life. The doctor said if I wasn't there and didn't do what I did, things would have gone a lot worse for her. I'm glad I sat through all the long boring lectures in America's Army now!

Sean McLaverty
via email

There you have it, kids. Playing video games saves lives.

Short Answers to Readers' Burning Questions

"people and their game systems. what is their prob."

Exactly!

"1-10: How bad does Ben smell?"

Depends on whether a 10 is really good or really bad.

"Where can I get a sense of humor like ya'll?"

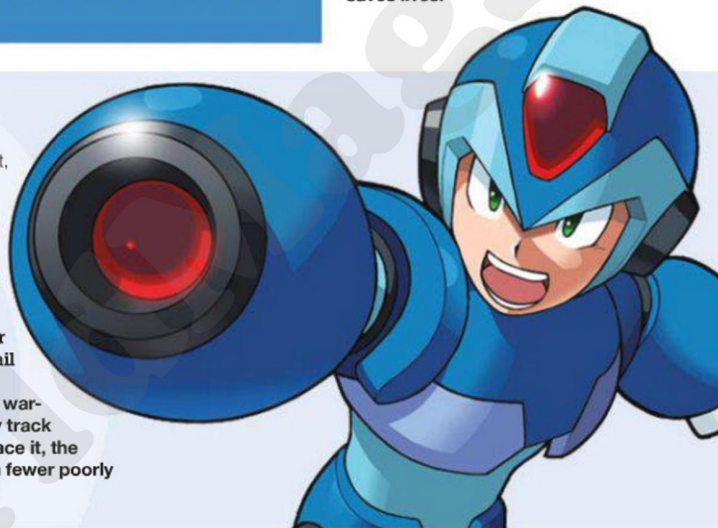
Check your local middle school.

Mega Maniac

I'm writing in regards to issue 225's Top Ten Assassins list, because it had Mega Man on it. While I realize this is a joke and that the entire description should not be taken seriously, I don't think you should joke around when you look like you have no idea what you're talking about. A lot of die hard Mega Man fans are going to complain, and a lot of new Mega Man players are going to get the game thinking he's an assassin. Just clearing things up.

Garrett Schneider
via email

Who was joking? What else would you call a skilled warrior whose sole reason for living is to systematically track down and murder unsuspecting sentient beings? Face it, the Blue Bomber is essentially the Terminator, only with fewer poorly enunciated one-liners and a bitchin' arm cannon.



Worst News Tip Of The Month:

"Your review for Sonic Generations sucks ass and I hope you all burn in hell."

Just Sayin'

Ending an argument with the term "just sayin'" is now officially passé. Just sayin'.



(Left) For some reason Ben's instinctual response to seeing a statue is to point at its crotch and laugh.

(Right) It took the entire Darksiders II team at Vigil Games to hold up Death's sword, but it was totally worth it.

On Your Mind



- Review Rants **69%**
- Readers Calling Out Other Readers For Complaining About Reviews **14%**
- Kids Complaining About Mature Content In Games They Want **11%**
- Pictures of Children Reading GI While Potty Training **4%**
- Letters Pointing Out The Creases In Matt Stone And Trey Parker's Shirts **2%**

Question Of The Month:

What's the best reward you've ever gotten in a video game, and why?



Pride And Prejudice

I recently borrowed Modern Warfare 3 from a friend. I suggested that another friend of mine buy it, because we always tell each other if a new game is good. He refused to even think about touching it, completely based on his prejudice that COD is riding its own wave of success at this point. I do agree that it is overhyped at times, and the series has had its ups and downs, but I really don't think it's fair to refuse to buy or even play a game based on a prejudice. There are very many closed-minded gamers out there, and sometimes it horrifies me to see the lengths they'll go to just to keep from saying one good thing about a single game, genre, or series.

Riley Simmons
Falls Village, CT

Sometimes your favorite game ends up being the one you decided to take a chance on. Rebelling against a game simply because it's popular is always a bad decision (they're often popular for a reason, after all). However, it's your friend's decision to make. You did your part by telling him about a game you're really enjoying; if he doesn't want to heed your advice, that's his loss.

Great Expectations

In issue 225, we asked readers whether their most anticipated holiday game lived up to their expectations, and the results were resoundingly positive. Here are some of the answers we received.

Having never enjoyed or purchased a military FPS in my life, I am quite surprised that Battlefield 3 has cast such a captivating spell over me. One release day purchase later, DICE has earned itself a fan for life. The multiplayer, the Frostbite 2 engine, the co-op, and even the much-criticized campaign earn BF 3 a near daily spot in my PS3 queue. Way to make this gamer feel like a soldier, you Swedish wizards!

Daniel Canal

Modern Warfare 3 absolutely lived up to my expectations. The gameplay is smooth and fast, the Survival mode is very enjoyable, and the gun customization is great.

Zachary Priesing

Did Skyrim live up to my expectations? Hell, no. It Karate-chopped their heads off with kick-ass ninja explosions. So much better than I thought. Although it does have its downs (like wonky animations and some weird voice transitions and mechanics), it totally makes up for that with extraordinary storytelling (Dark Brotherhood for example – holy crap, right?), great atmosphere, and just overall excitement.

Grif Williams



GI SPY

continued from page 7

(Left) Adam, Ben Reeves, and Ben Hanson were all smiles when meeting the XCOM team at Firaxis. Well, except for Reeves, who was more of a disturbing smirk.

(Right) The team also met with strategy designer extraordinaire Sid Meier.



I have no mouth, and I must scream.



I Scream, You Scream

I just wanted to tell you how much I enjoyed your story on I Have no Mouth, and I Must Scream (Classic GI, issue 225). Not to sound like an oblivious jerk, but I usually skim through the Classic section. Not this time. I pored over every single detail, and really enjoyed it. I adore short stories and it was really interesting to read about one being turned into a game, especially one I was too young to enjoy myself. I was absolutely intrigued by it.

Ivalon Wells
via email

I loved the I Have no Mouth, and I Must Scream article. I discovered the short story about a year ago and spent hours creepily stalking any information I could find on it, which led me to the video game. I just love the premise, which focuses on something deep and entirely different from anything else. The article reminded me of it, and now I just want to reread the story.

Elaria
Santa Ana, CA

I just read the I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream Classic story. I wanted to thank you guys for introducing me to a very fascinating story that I have never heard before until now. It piqued my curiosity and imagination as to the endless possibilities that can occur as a result of "controlled" warfare gone wrong.

Christian Hensley
via email



WINNER 1 Zach Raw Apparently we missed the super-sweet flaming blue sword upgrade in Skyward Sword.
2 Kevin Lingenfelter If this is to be believed, either a Big Daddy is in the sky or a crazy bird monster is in the sea. We don't like either scenario.
3 Charles Atkins Based on his facial expression, that chimp's life hasn't been quite as hard as Snake's.
4 Dominic Higginbottom Ezio had to take out the previous guest characters to earn his roster spot in Soulcalibur V.

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.

Send to:
 Game Informer
 Reader Art Contest
 724 1st St. N.,
 3rd Floor
 Mpls, MN 55401

CORRECTIONS:

In our Resident Evil: Revelations review, we accidentally stated the game takes place after Resident Evil 5. In actuality, it takes place between Resident Evil 4 and Resident Evil 5.

In our Classic GI feature on console launches (issue 226), we incorrectly stated info about the Atari 7800. Midwest Gaming Classic co-founder Martin Goldberg says that the system actually came out in January 1986 after Atari Corps.' Jack Tramiel negotiated with 7800 rights owners Warner Communications. The system came out with 11 titles: Centipede, Asteroids, Dig Dug, Food Fight, Galaga, Joust, Ms. Pac-Man, Pole Position II, Robotron: 2084, Xevious, and Desert Falcon. Accordingly, the 7800's letter grade is a C.



(Left) GI ran into plenty of friendly faces at this year's CES, including Airtight Games' Kim Swift and Mark Pottorf, and SweetLabs' Aaron VanWart. (Inset) Also in attendance were Fortyseven Communications' Sibel Sunar and Gamefly's Ryh-Ming Poon. (Center) Things got a little crazy when Yoshinori Ono, Tomoaki Ayano, and Dan Pantumsinchai stopped by to show Jason and Dan Street Fighter X Tekken. Watch the video at gameinformer.com. (Right) You thought we were kidding about Ben, didn't you? We weren't.

connect

The

NOTABLES

- 20 expiration date: will modern video games go bad?
- 24 the shooter simulator
- 26 jumping off the game screen: transformers: fall of cybertron toys premier
- 30 grading the playstation vita
- 35 the debate over sopa rages on
- 38 prognosticating 2012



Cars of Video Games

Did the Spike VGAs leave you yearning for a more serious approach to video game award shows? Check out the 15th annual Interactive Achievement Awards

by Kyle Hilliard

For the general public, the Spike Video Game Awards are the most prominent industry award show. This annual spectacle has the brightest lights, the loudest music, the biggest stars, and airtime on a major cable television network. But sometimes amongst the pomp and pageantry of celebrity skits, preview trailers for upcoming titles, and musical performances, the show creators seem to forget why the VGA's exists in the first place – to celebrate the best games of the year. This past year, many of the award presentations and acceptance speeches weren't even televised.

This irked some of the show goers who believed they were invited to the show to be involved in the proceedings. Actor Mark Hamill, who received a nod for his excellent voice work as the Joker in Batman: Arkham City, felt slighted by the way the awards were shoved to the side.

"Weird VGAs!," he tweeted. "Don't mind losing but I'd like to know when it happens. Did I miss something? Award given off-camera? Tara & I in lousy seats BOO!"

His Batman co-star Tara Strong, who voiced Harley Quinn, also shared her dismay, tweeting "Hey, @SPIKE_TV, if you weren't going to announce the nominees, why have us come to the show? VO may not matter to you, but it sure does to us. I mean, I got my make-up done; I at least wanted a close up of my face when I lost but pretended to be happy for someone else!"

Thankfully, alternatives exist for those interested in seeing serious recognition for video game accomplishments. Fifteen years ago, the Entertainment Software Association (ESA) sanctioned the Academy of Interactive Arts and Sciences (AIAS) to help recognize artistic achievement in the world of video games with the Interactive Achievement Awards (IAAs), which are celebrated quietly every year at the Design, Innovate, Communicate, Entertain (DICE) summit. Starting in 2009, cable channel IFC started broadcasting half-hour recaps of the awards show, and expanded the coverage into live streams of the full event. This year, the coverage is shifting to gamespot.com, which is airing a live stream of the show on February 9 hosted by comedian Jay Mohr.

Striving for Legitimacy

If the Spike VGAs are equivalent to the MTV Music Awards, then consider the IAAs the Oscars. Just like the film industry's Academy Awards, the IAA voting panel is composed entirely of peers who work in the gaming industry. This is a major distinguishing factor





From left to right, Mike Morhaime (Blizzard), Dr. Greg Zeschuk (BioWare), John Riccitiello (EA), Dr. Ray Muzyka (BioWare), and Mike Capps (Epic Games President) after the doctors received Hall of Fame accolades.

Building for the Future

With the rise of mobile and social gaming, the interactive entertainment landscape has shifted drastically over the past few years, and a new demographic has emerged. For AIAS board members like Rich Hilleman this is an exciting new development that requires their attention. "From my perspective, when nine out of ten of the players in your business are new in the last several years, there are some new obligations to helping your players understand what good and great looks like, and be empathetic and articulate about their needs not just the needs of the traditional core gamer," he said. To recognize these emerging markets, the board has expanded the IAAs over the past few years to include categories for casual games, social networking games, and mobile games.

that separates the IAAs from the Spike VGAs, which are decided upon by a select group of journalists and public voters. AIAS president Martin Rae considers the Oscars comparison reasonable, saying, "I think it's fair to say that absolutely our goal is to be the preeminent vehicle for individuals in our industry and for titles in our industry."

According to Rae, the similarities between the IAAs and the Oscars expand beyond the peer review process. "It's not a popularity contest or a consumer-driven contest," Rae says the award recipients are not necessarily the best-selling or most financially successful

games of the year, but rather the ones that the industry feels were the most innovative and moved the medium closer to being widely considered a form of artistic entertainment.

"I think it's very important from a historical and contemporary perspective to recognize talent and great achievement in an artistic industry, and it becomes historically relevant as your industry grows and matures," Rae says. "We're a pretty young industry from that perspective, but if you look back and you look at the history of the motion picture academy and who they recognize and why they've recognized them, and the historical archive they've

built, it's just important for the industry."

Insomniac Games CEO Ted Price, who serves on the academy's board of directors, believes the awards are critical to showing the rest of the world how far the interactive entertainment industry has come.

"Our goal is to demonstrate clearly why games hold their own against and surpass, in many cases, other forms of entertainment when it comes to an art form," he says. "The academy exists to recognize the amazing creativity that goes into games of all types and to help promote them to not only the industry, but to the rest of the world."



Meet the AIAS Board of Directors

01 SHUHEI YOSHIDA is the senior vice president of product development for Sony Computer Entertainment.

02 DENNY THORLEY is the president of development Day 1 Studios, the studio best known for the MechAssault games and most recently F.E.A.R. 3.

03 RICH HILLEMANN is the chief creative director at Electronic Arts. His department at EA is the primary corporate support mechanism for new hardware and software platforms. He is best known, however, for creating the Madden NFL series with Scott Orr.

04 JAY COHEN is the president of development for Jerry Bruckheimer Games and formerly of Ubisoft.

05 ZACK KARLSSON was a member of the board for three years while working with Namco Bandai and Double Fine. He now works with Capcom, and is no longer a member of the board.

06 MICHAEL GALLAGHER is the president of the Entertainment Software Association.

07 TED PRICE is the president and CEO of Insomniac Games. He's in charge of the studio's hits through every console generation, including Spyro the Dragon, Ratchet and Clank, and the Resistance series.

08 DON DAGLOW is no longer a member of the Board of Directors. Instead he is part of the AIAS Foundation board.

Daglow has a long history with video games being heavily involved with companies like EA, Broderbund, Intellivision, and later founded Stormfront Studios, creators of Neverwinter Nights and Stronghold.

09 MARTIN RAE is the president of the Academy and previously served as CEO of Boss Game Studios. This studio released many titles for the Nintendo 64.

10 TIM CAMPBELL of Gameforge, makers of many browser-based games.

11 KEN LOBB is the creative director for Microsoft Game Studios and helped to produce games like Fable and the original Crackdown

12 DON JAMES has been with Nintendo of America for over 20 years and had a hand in the creation of the ESRB rating system.

13 PATRICIA VANCE is the president of the ESRB, the entertainment software and ratings board.

14 MIKE CAPPS is the president of Epic Games, the developer behind Gears of War and Unreal Engine.

15 CHRISTIAN SVENSSON is the corporate officer and vice president of strategic planning & business development at Capcom, the publisher behind games like Mega Man and Street Fighter.

NOT PICTURED **SETH LADD** of Google and a member of the Google Chrome team. Ladd helped bring Angry Birds to the web.

FRANK PEARCE is the executive vice president of product development for Blizzard Entertainment, Inc., the developers of World of Warcraft, Starcraft, and Diablo.

TERRANCE MYERS isn't on the board of directors, but he is the executive producer of the Interactive Achievement Awards, and has a history of working in film production with the likes of Ben Stiller and other prominent producers.

Broadening Horizons

Electronic Arts chief creative officer Rich Hilleman, one of the men directly responsible for the creation of the Madden Football franchise, believes the impact of the AIAS goes beyond the award process. "I think that we were, and continue to be, one of the most articulate voices about the craft that is interactive entertainment creation," he says. "We've contributed a lot in ways that are non-tangible, things like the computer history museum, to forums on interactive entertainment in places like Germany and in Shinyang, China last year."

AIAS has also made tangible contributions to the industry by creating two different scholarships. The Randy Pausch Scholarship fund was created in honor of Dr. Pausch, who was a co-founder of the Entertainment Technology Center at Carnegie Mellon University. This scholarship is awarded to students interested in pursuing a degree in the development of interactive entertainment. AIAS also helped found the Mark Beaumont scholarship fund, which is awarded to students specializing in the business side of interactive entertainment. The Beaumont scholarship was created in memory of Mark Beaumont, a former COO of Capcom North America and Europe.

AIAS also worked with the ESA to create Into the Pixel, an annual art show that celebrates the art of computer and video games by giving awards to the best pieces of art produced by the video game industry.

The Peer Process

For board members like Price, this is a labor of love. The AIAS is a non-profit organization whose output is based purely on the volunteer efforts of its members. Members of the industry become involved because they want video games to be legitimized as an art form.

"Ours is a very peer-driven process, and it relates much more to and goes back to the people who make games, and when you have peers awarding peers in a process I don't think you can have a better award," Rae says.

Board member Denny Thorley agrees. "There is certainly a place for the other awards and they do a good job and it's great, and they help us all in the industry, but there is something to be said by being recognized by your peers in the industry," he said.

For a game to be eligible for an IAA, first a publisher must submit its games for consideration. For each award category, a group of volunteer peers is assembled to discuss the possible candidates. If it's a craft discipline award, like gameplay engineering, then the peers must have some level of expertise in that field. If it's a genre award, then the peers of that group must

have expertise in that genre. For example, all the members of the peer group selected to decide nominees for the action game category have either worked on, or are currently working on, action games.

A publisher or developer must be a member of the AIAS in order to submit a game. However, there is a write-in system that allows for games that were not initially submitted to be considered. In 2010, Take-Two Interactive was not a member of the academy, a little game it published called Red Dead Redemption ended up taking home five awards through the write-in process – more than any other game that year.

Once the list of games is finalized, the peer groups must play all of the games. Afterwards, they meet to discuss which games should be eligible for voting. When all the candidates have been decided, AIAS members vote through a secure online ballot. All the games considered for any award are also eligible to receive the Game of the Year award.

A Show for All Tastes

The video game industry has grown to a point where there are a number of different awards

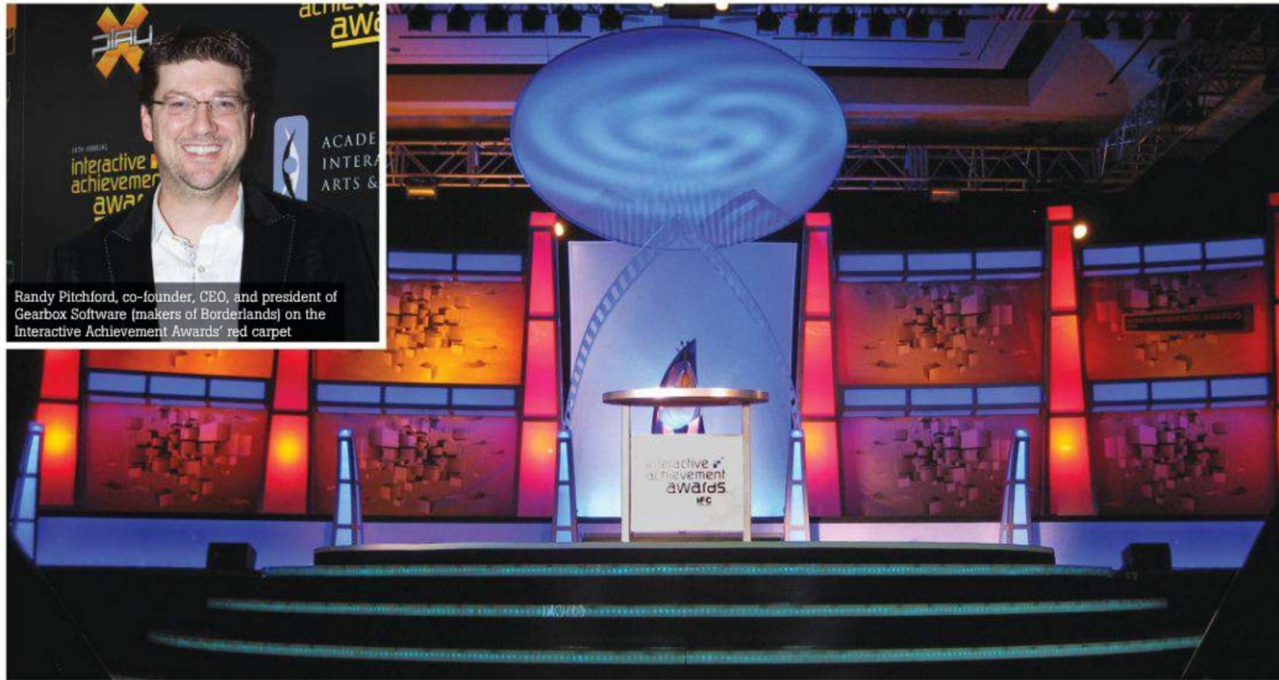
shows that can appeal to any kind of gamer. The VGAs lend a sense of Hollywood importance and excitement to video games by creating a show focused on entertainment and first-look trailers of upcoming games, while the IAAs approach the awards with a sense of gravitas and critical importance necessary to elevate the medium in discussions of artistic entertainment expression.

"Anything that increases the exposure and accomplishments of the industry is good for the business," says Terrance Myers, executive producer of the IAA award show.

Board member Rich Hilleman agrees. "The customer-oriented awards are an important expression that you really want to hear, and I know that when people win those they know it's the product of customers speaking their minds about what they think is great," he said. However, he still feels strongest about the clout behind the IAAs, saying, "We seem to be the one that people talk about the most when they win. At the end of the day, we represent the crafts people love, what our business believes are the best of the best, and that's usually a special responsibility that's a little different than those other guys." ♦



Randy Pitchford, co-founder, CEO, and president of Gearbox Software (makers of Borderlands) on the Interactive Achievement Awards' red carpet



Past IAA Game of the Year Winners

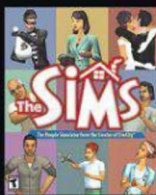
1998
GoldeneEye 007



1999
The Legend of Zelda:
Ocarina of Time



2000
The Sims



2001
Diablo II



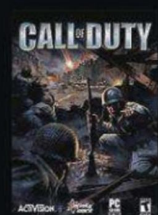
2002
Halo: Combat Evolved



2003
Battlefield 1942



2004
Call of Duty



Jay Mohr hosting the 13th annual 2010 Interactive Achievement Awards



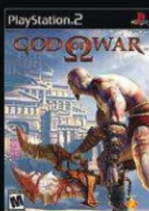
The Game Conference for Movers and Shakers

The Interactive Achievement Awards is the most high-profile event of the DICE summit, but many of the industry's best and brightest creators use the conference as an opportunity to mingle and talk shop with their fellow creators. "When I'm at DICE, I forget that I belong to Sony or work on PS3, or any of those things," said Shuhei Yoshida, senior vice president of product development for Sony Computer Entertainment. "There is much less business talk or PR talk or new product introduction. There are very few of these [discussions]; it's more focused on the forefront of creative thinking." The DICE summit also hosts impressive keynote speakers every year. This year, developers like David Jaffe (Twisted Metal, God of War), Tomonobu Itagaki (Dead or Alive, Ninja Gaiden), and Todd Howard (Fallout 3, Skyrim) will all speak at the event. The Academy also likes to bring in non-gaming speakers like film director Gore Verbinski (*Pirates of the Caribbean*, *Rango*) to give the attendees new perspective on the creative process. In the near future, the AIAS hopes to increase its prevalence globally by extending the DICE summit into areas like Asia and Europe.

2005
Half-Life 2



2006
God of War



2007
Gears of War



2008
Call of Duty 4:
Modern Warfare



2009
LittleBigPlanet



2010
Uncharted 2:
Among Thieves



2011
Mass Effect 2





BACK TO THE

Bethesda Wins Fallout



WASTELAND

MMO Rights From Interplay

The two companies have reached a settlement that cancels Interplay's previous licensing of a Fallout MMO (as well as no claim to the brand or any future games), with those rights reverting back to Bethesda. Interplay will be permitted, however, to sell the PC versions of Fallout, Fallout 2, and Fallout Tactics through December 2013 (after which time the rights become Bethesda's), as well as receive \$2 million from Bethesda's parent company ZeniMax Media. Each company is responsible for its own legal costs for this battle that has been ongoing even before Bethesda filed its initial complaint against Interplay in 2009.

Interplay published and developed the original Fallout title back in 1997, and multiple titles in the series appeared from various development houses through the years. But despite owning such beloved franchises as Fallout and Baldur's Gate, as well as in-house developer Black Isle Studios (Fallout 2, Planescape: Torment), the company was in such a perilous financial state that in 2002 NASDAQ delisted Interplay's shares. In 2003 Interplay closed Black Isle. The developer was working on Fallout 3, but the rights to that game (along with the permission to make sequels) were sold to Bethesda in 2004, which started over on the game from scratch.

In 2007 Bethesda signed a deal with Interplay to attain the rights to the Fallout IP itself for \$5.75 million, and in a role reversal, Interplay then turned around and licensed the rights from Bethesda to make a Fallout MMO. However, the deal contained provisions that would later become sticking points between the two companies: Interplay was required to begin "full-scale" development by April 2009, the MMO had to have at least \$30 million in secured financing, and the company had to deliver the game within four years of the start of development. If any of these conditions were not met the rights to the Fallout MMO would revert back to Bethesda.

In 2009 Bethesda filed a legal complaint stating that Interplay had not met the first two stipulations of the contract, and wanted the agreement for the MMO voided and work on the title stopped. Bethesda also sued Masthead Studios – the developer Interplay hired to work on the MMO – saying that under the terms of the agreement Bethesda had to approve any sublicensing agreements (in this case to Masthead), which it says it never did.

Furthermore, Bethesda's lawsuit wanted to block the sale of Interplay's Fallout Trilogy (Fallout, Fallout 2, and Fallout Tactics), stating that Bethesda never approved that packaging and other marketing materials related to the product. The company claimed that this caused confusion among consumers between the Fallout Trilogy and Bethesda's Fallout 3. Bethesda also objected to Interplay's licensing agreements with digital distribution sites such as Steam and GOG.com.

Although Interplay initially tabbed the Fallout MMO's budget at \$75 million, by 2009 the company was in a dire financial state. Regardless, it claimed it had not defaulted on the MMO's \$30 million funding stipulation. It had started work on the Fallout MMO, and although Interplay claimed it had hundreds of pages of design documents, a playable demo, and released assets from the game in 2010, Bethesda was steadfast in its belief that Interplay had breached its contract.

Interplay fired back with its own lawsuit against Bethesda arguing that Interplay had not defaulted on its obligations, and charging that Bethesda was conspiring to strip Interplay of its contractual right to make the Fallout MMO and give it to ZeniMax Online, which was formed in 2007 – months after Interplay and Bethesda's agreement.

Bethesda later amended its suit in 2010 to claim that Interplay had only licensed the name "Fallout" and not any assets, settings, storylines, etc. associated with the universe such as the Vault Boy icon or its characters, a move which Interplay called "absurd." In a court filing, Interplay claimed that in the years prior to amending the suit, Bethesda knew that the MMO used assets from the Fallout universe, but said nothing about it at the time "because it knew Interplay was doing exactly what the parties intended under their agreements."

Although the courts delivered some setbacks to Bethesda's efforts to stop Interplay and Masthead's work on the game last year, this settlement seems like a clear win for Bethesda. The company gets the rights to a Fallout MMO, Interplay can't sell older titles in the franchise after 2013, and Interplay has no claim to any part of the Fallout brand and its games. These are things that Bethesda has wanted all along.

As for Interplay, the right to sell its Fallout titles for the time being should be a key pillar in keeping the company afloat. It's currently re-releasing some of its legacy titles such as Descent on platforms like WiiWare, digitally distributing games from indie developers via its Interplay Discovery program, and plans to release Battle Chess later this year. The company has previously stated that it intended to make sequels to franchises such as MDK, Dark Alliance, and Descent, but that was at a time when it expected revenue from the Fallout MMO.

What Bethesda plans to do with its newly acquired rights to a Fallout MMO is unknown. An Elder Scrolls MMO has been rumored for years, but anything the company may be working on has been kept tightly under wraps. Then again, it seems unlikely that Bethesda's parent company would create a division called ZeniMax Online and obtain \$300 million in funding from Providence Equity Partners with one of the stated goals being to "finance massively multiplayer online games" and not make an MMO. Perhaps it's just a matter of which one comes first, Elder Scrolls or Fallout. ♦

Bethesda Softworks may have purchased the rights to the Fallout franchise from original creators Interplay in 2007, but it's been anything but a simple transaction. Both companies have been in a legal battle over a proposed Fallout MMO and the series' back catalog that started almost the moment the ink on the contract dried. Now the entire legal saga has been resolved, leaving Bethesda with sole possession of a Fallout MMO.

A Journey Into Thatgamecompany's Stunning Third Game

by Matt Miller

It's been a long wait, but I finally had the opportunity to dig deep this month into an extended hands-on session with *Journey*. The PSN exclusive has had plenty of buzz ever since its announcement at E3 a couple of years back, but an air of mystery has surrounded the title ever since. What is this unusual game about a red-cloaked figure in a vast desert? How much is the game a departure from the developer's previous work on *Flow* and *Flower*?

Tempting as it might be to gush about the strange plot told over the course of the game, I'm going to avoid spoilers as much as possible. The game's content has been kept quiet for a very good reason; a lot of the joy and wonder comes from the sense of discovery as you move forward. I'm not going to be the one to wreck it for you.

Without spoiling individual moments, I now have a far better sense of how the game works. Your unnamed character begins the game with a clear trajectory set before him: Reach the distant mountain peak glittering in the distance. There are only a few controls at your disposal as things get started. Either the right analog stick or a tilt of the controller rotates the camera, and the left stick controls movement. A circle button tap sends out a brief musical note and a little pulse of energy, but it's initially unclear what effect this has.

Soon afterward, things grow more interesting. Strange, glowing pick-ups within the worlds create and extend a scarf that trails



Journey
PlayStation Network

behind your character. Scattered bits of fabric float along the currents of the desert breeze, and react to your pulsing call; these items create runes upon your scarf as you brush up against them. The powered-up scarf, in turn, is like an internal power source, letting you rise like the fabric and float on the surrounding air currents, effectively flying for brief periods of time.

As the game continues, these wayward fabric squares increasingly feel like living things within the game world. In fact, the stark desert wasteland that the game presents on the surface is something of an illusion. In practice, these vast stretches of sand move and flow much more like some vast body of water. Wind rustles and creates waves on the surface. Strange creatures of cloth gather like schools of dolphins, floating jellyfish, and languorous whales. The game world feels alive and vibrant, thanks in no small part to the way *Journey's* excellent music and sound design weave seamlessly into the experience.

I've yet to partake in one well-publicized feature: the unusual approach to multiplayer. When the game releases, online players will encounter other random players around the world playing at the same time. Independent of identification or traditional communication, you can interact with or bypass these individuals as you see fit. I'm intrigued by the possibilities of how that experience will roll into the otherwise single-player tale.

Next month, one of the Game Informer editors has the unenviable task of applying a review score to this project. Like the titles that gamecompany has produced before, *Journey* defies easy classification and evaluation. Filled with distinct moments meant to elicit emotion and perception of beauty, *Journey* is a piece of interactive art as much as it is a traditional game. No matter how you describe it, it's a title that should absolutely be on your radar as we near its release in March. ♦

Looking for more information about downloadable and independent games? Visit gameinformer.com/impulse for regular updates on the best titles for PlayStation Network, Xbox Live Arcade, WiiWare, and PC download. This month, check out our video of Game Informer editors as they jump in front of the Kinect to try out Double Fine's zany new title, *Happy Action Theater*. For more on downloadable games in this issue, you can read our reviews of *Amy* on page 92, *All Zombies Must Die* on page 93, *Pushmo* on page 96, and *NFL Blitz* on page 96



Intensity Shuttle lets you record your live gameplay in full resolution 1080HD!

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\$199



Expiration Date

Will Modern Video Games Go Bad?



We often think of video games as a timeless medium. Players with a love for retro gaming can still dust off an NES, blow in the bottom of a Super Mario Bros. cartridge, and experience the game the way it was played 25 years ago. Over the past few years, the video game industry has undergone an online revolution, opening up exciting new avenues for interaction and distribution. At the same time, these changes have introduced some troubling restrictions that impact the longevity of the games you buy. The day you can't play your favorite modern game may be coming sooner than you think.

The Authentic(ated) Experience

Anyone who's played a game in the past two years is aware of a pack-in many games come equipped with nowadays: The online pass code. Whether you're unlocking a frivolous new costume, a handful of bonus maps, or the game's entire multiplayer component, some part of your new experience is likely tied to authenticating your copy via some online service. Gamers without Internet access have suffered without this bonus content for some time now, but even for online gamers these extras will be available only for as long as Microsoft and Sony provide service for their systems. Once that is gone, that content (if

it's not already loaded on your console) will be gone forever. We won't cry if that means losing access to our horse armor in Oblivion a few years from now, but some missing content will prove more detrimental to the overall experience. Late last year, Rocksteady was criticized for locking the Catwoman chapters of Batman: Arkham City, which intertwine with the Caped Crusader's own narrative, behind a hefty DLC download. Ultimately, players who buy the game new and have access to the Internet don't think much about the inconvenience of downloading the extra content. But once Xbox Live and PSN support are no longer offered for the 360 and PS3, a piece of Arkham City's adventure will be permanently lost.

by Jeff Marchiafava



When The Servers Are Severed

Gamers tend to think of multiplayer-oriented games as offering endless replayability, but due to the costs associated with maintaining servers for online play, multiplayer is oftentimes the first aspect of a game to get the axe. Late last year, BioWare launched its highly anticipated MMO *The Old Republic*, offering players the chance to explore a new take on the Star Wars universe. Five days earlier, however, another MMO based on the hit sci-fi IP, *Star Wars Galaxies*, shut off its servers. For eight years the game offered a home to a dedicated group of players, which may sound like a long time. But the ending of *Star Wars Galaxies* is absolute – players no longer have the ability to go back to the game for a stroll down memory lane or to catch up with friends. The doors are closed.

Social games aren't impervious to getting the axe, either. Late last year, EA PopCap announced its plans to shut down the Facebook game *Baking Life* at the end of January, despite an average daily player count of 100,000 users. Adding insult to injury, the game's developer announced that any outstanding virtual currency (*Zip Cash*) players have cannot be refunded or transferred to the company's other titles.

It's not just PC players who must worry about having the plug pulled on their favorite online game. Console games featuring dedicated server-based multiplayer are just as susceptible to being rendered unplayable by discontinued support, which sometimes comes sooner than you think. Last year, 2K Sports shut down *NBA 2K11*'s multiplayer servers in mid-November, after just 13 months of support. Players were encouraged to "upgrade" to *NBA 2K12*, but the newest iteration in the series doesn't have *My Crew* or the traditional Online Leagues, leaving fans of those modes high and dry.

The multiplayer servers for *Demon's Souls* have been on the chopping block several times as well. Originally Atlus planned to discontinue the multiplayer servers in March of 2011, but the shut-off date was then delayed until fall of the same year. Fans are now riding another stay of execution until an unnamed time in 2012, but sooner or later a facet of *Demon's Souls*' innovative blend of multiplayer and single-player will be gone for good.

Patch Now, Cry Later

The past few years have introduced console owners to a necessary evil long known by PC gamers: post-release patches. It's now commonplace for console games to require multiple updates after release, many of which are mandatory if you want to continue playing online. The practice of patching a game is usually a good thing; thanks to online updates, developers can fix pesky oversights, whether that be an annoying glitch, UI tweak, or a game-ending bug.

Modern games have no shortage of game-breaking bugs. Whether the ability to provide post-release support has made developers more willing to release games before they're fully tested is a question without an easy answer, but one thing is certain: Title updates, like all digital content, will only be around as long as the publisher or console manufacturer supports them. Not only will gamers without Internet access never be able to use post-release patches – which have become increasingly common in the past few years – those who haven't downloaded the updates will lose their ability to do so once those services are down. Those gamers will be playing the game in all of its original, buggy glory. One only has to look at the rocky launch of *Skyrim* to understand how unpleasant a prospect that may be.



For collectors, game of the year editions provide an offline option, as many feature DLC packs and the latest patches on the disc – but first a game must be popular enough to warrant a re-release in the first place.

Vanishing Act

Perhaps the most exciting aspect of the current generation of consoles has been the advent of downloadable content. Services like Xbox Live and PlayStation Network give developers a downloadable alternative to the rigid \$60 pricing structure of retail games, as well as the ability to extend game experiences via DLC packs. However, the convenience of trading in a physical medium for one that can be downloaded into your living room comes at the uncertainty of what will happen to your purchases in the future. What, for example, will happen to all of the downloadable games you've purchased on your current console? How long will you be able to re-download a game or DLC pack you've erased from your hard drive?

Any gamer who has had to replace an Xbox 360 has likely run into another stumbling block in the form of Microsoft's DRM protection, which requires an Internet connection to authenticate an XBLA game if it's not being played on the original system. If you're not online, those purchases will automatically revert to trial copies until they can connect to Microsoft's servers. Microsoft offers owners a tool to transfer the licenses of DLGs to a new system on its website, but if your 360 is connected to the Internet all the time, it's an easy problem to overlook – one that won't become evident until Microsoft has already ceased supporting the 360's Xbox Live services, at which point you may lose your ability to authenticate DLGs on your replacement 360.

However, not everyone is looking at the future of digital games with trepidation. 5th Cell's creative director Jeremiah Slaczka has been a fervent advocate of digital distribution, and

sees great possibilities in how the medium can help preserve games, making the need to keep around old consoles obsolete. "Do you watch your old VHS tapes on your old VCR, or do you simply stream those classics from Netflix?" he asks. "Sure, you could pull out and dust off your VCR from your closet, plug it in, and pop *Back to the Future* in, but why would you want to if you have a digital library of nearly infinite content?"

Slaczka believes we're already seeing the same transition for video games. "We're seeing most older games go digital, now. People want them on other platforms, the technology is readily available, a new market developed, and now you can play all the console classics right on your handheld device. I think this is great because, before digital distribution, it was very difficult to introduce these titles to the general public. This is going to happen to digital-only games as well. It's just that those games are so new right now, no one has had the need to port them anywhere."

An Unknown Future

Ultimately, gamers won't know what kind of continued support downloadable content will receive until the hardware manufacturers announce their plans for the next generation of systems. Although they may face public pressure, Sony and Microsoft are under no legal obligation to continue supporting this generation's vast array of servers, patches, and downloadable games and content, or to offer any kind of software compatibility on future systems. Considering that this is the first generation of hardware to offer many of these advances, we are in uncharted territory.

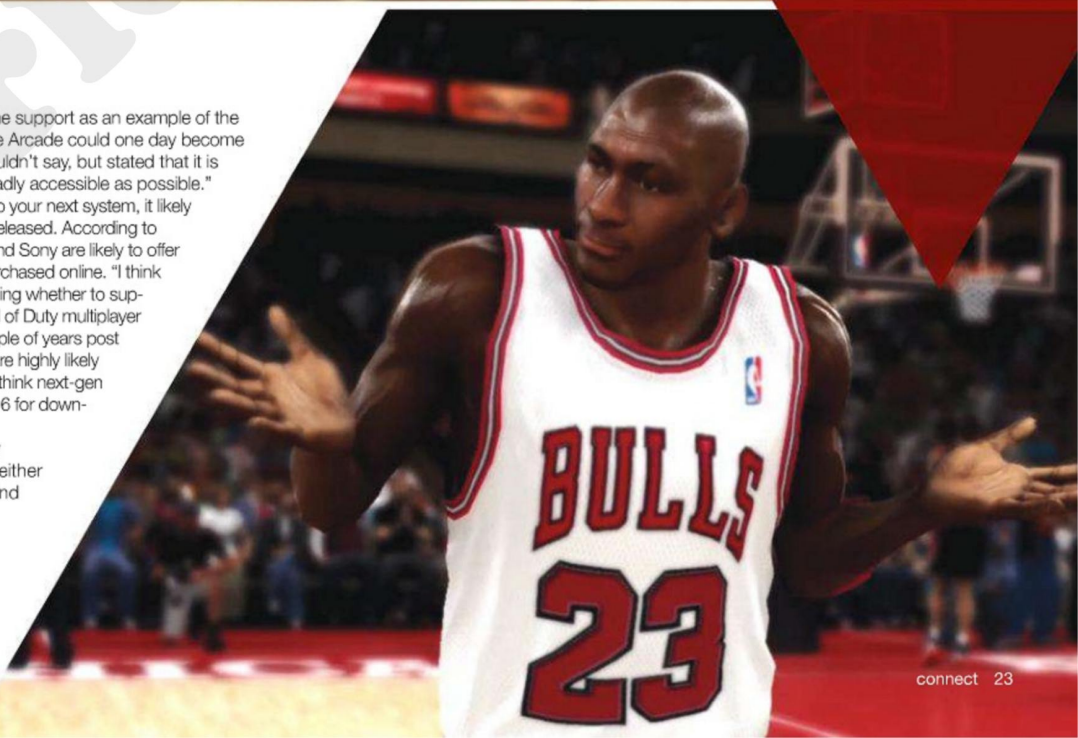
We talked to a Microsoft spokesman about the company's plans for future support of the Xbox 360's software library, and his answers were predictably vague. However, he did tell us that Microsoft views Xbox Live accounts, gamertags, and avatars as a digital identity that is



not dependent on hardware, citing Windows and iPhone support as an example of the company branching out. Does this mean that Xbox Live Arcade could one day become a multiplatform service, similar to Steam? Microsoft wouldn't say, but stated that it is "always looking at ways to make [XBLA] games as broadly accessible as possible."

Even if your downloadable content doesn't carry over to your next system, it likely won't disappear the day the next Xbox or PlayStation is released. According to Wedbush Securities analyst Michael Pachter, Microsoft and Sony are likely to offer gamers an extended grace period on content they've purchased online. "I think that downloadable games is the smallest part in determining whether to support online for legacy systems," Pachter told us. "The Call of Duty multiplayer community is likely to remain quite large for at least a couple of years post launch of the next-gen systems, so Microsoft and Sony are highly likely to continue legacy online support for at least two years. I think next-gen systems are coming out in 2014, so support through 2016 for downloadable games should be sufficient for most people."

Whether that will be a long enough window to satisfy gamers remains to be seen, but one thing is certain: Neither Microsoft nor Sony will maintain previous hardware and software indefinitely, and unlike the shoebox of old cartridges you may have sitting in your closet, much of the online content and support that modern games rely on can't be stored away forever. The best advice we can offer players is to enjoy your games while you still can. ♦



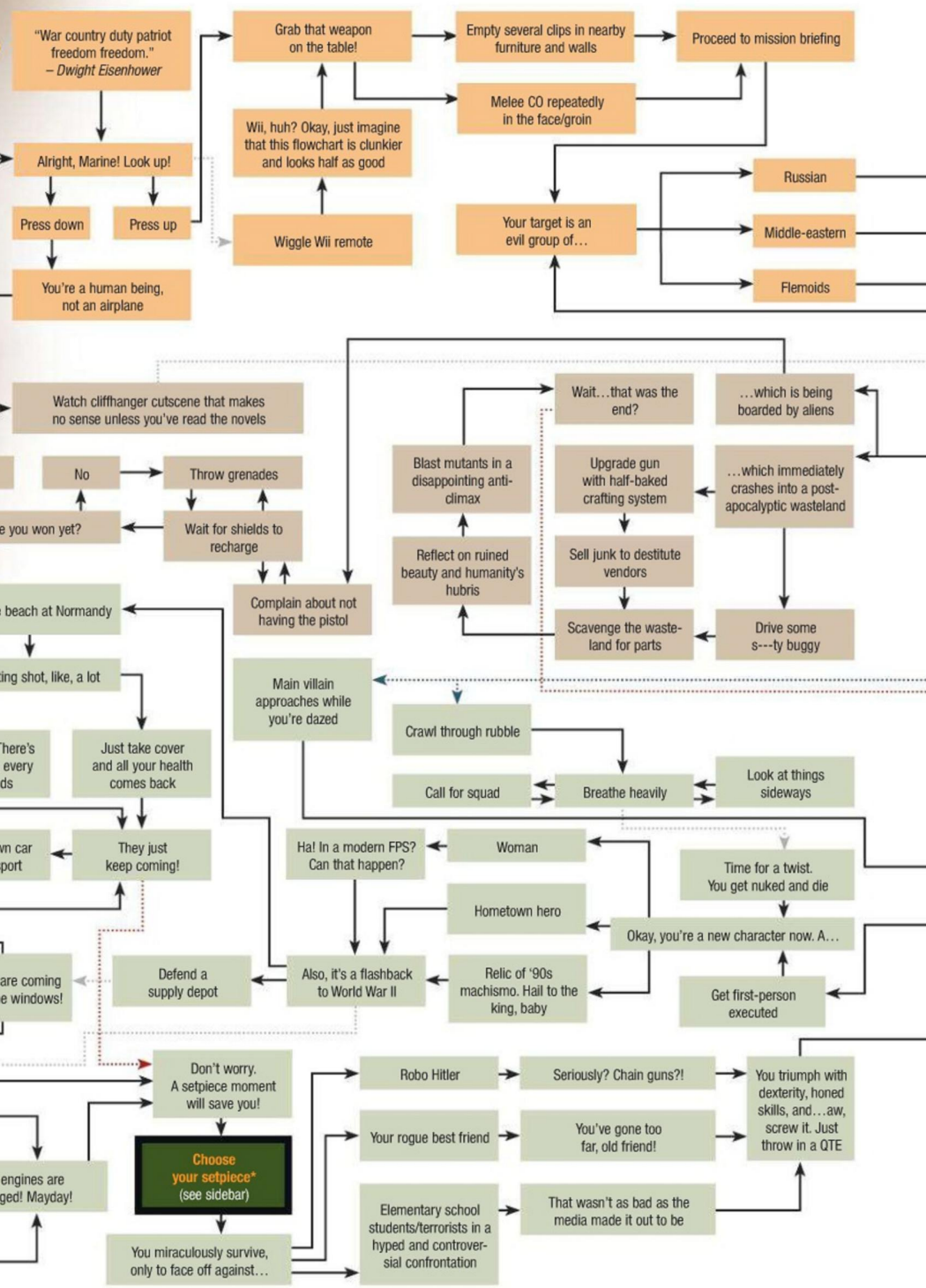


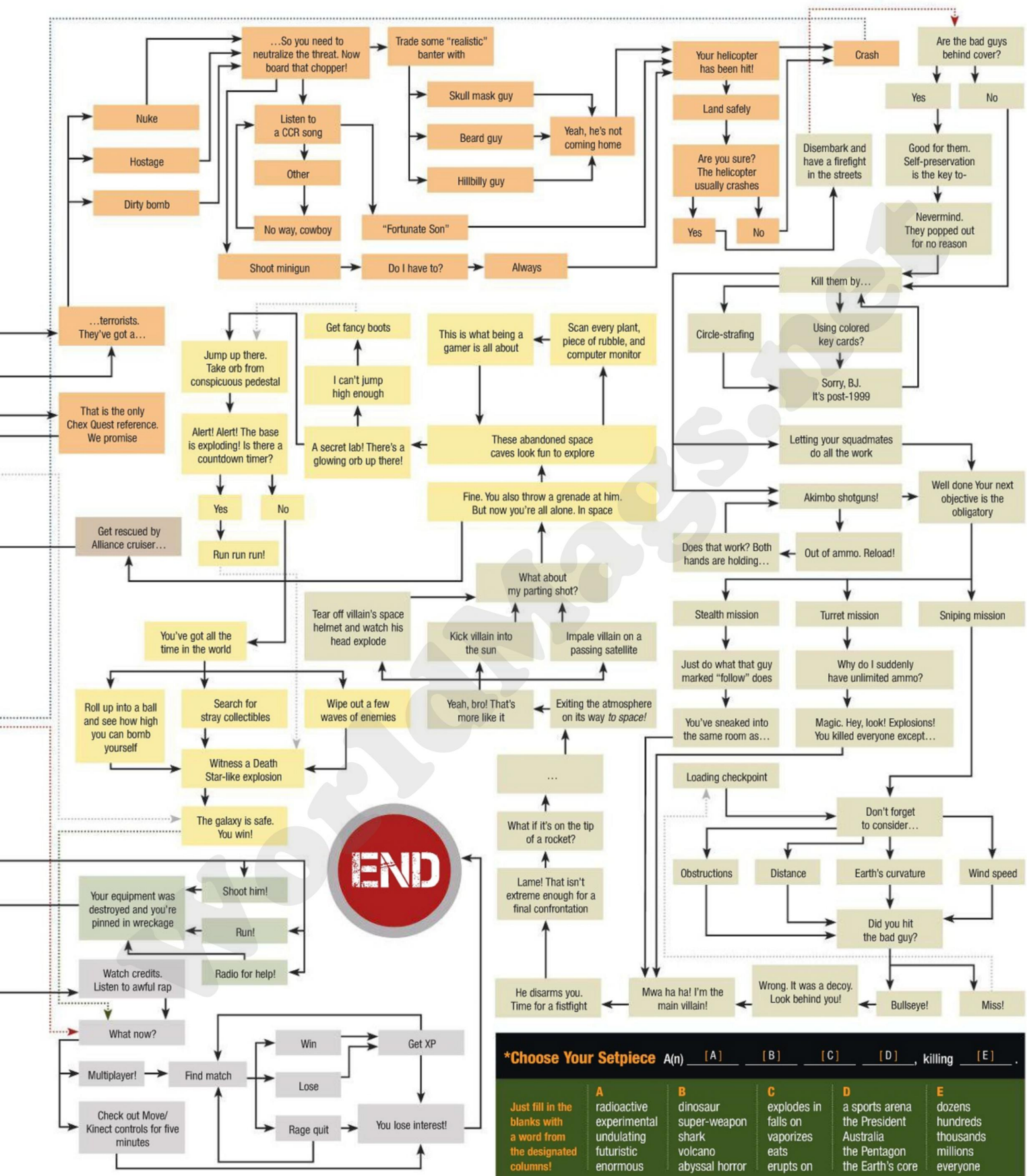
THE SHOOTER SIMULATOR

First-person shooters are a big business, but with each new big-budget release, gamers get more familiar with the genre's tricks.

The spectacle increases annually as developers strain to find new ways to shock players, but you can see pretty much everything an FPS has to offer thanks to this useful and informative flowchart. *by Joe Juba*

START





Jumping Off the

Transformers:

If you read our blowout cover story on the new Transformers game from High Moon Studios a few months back, you may have wondered if those cool robotic designs might make their way out of the game and into action figure form. This is a franchise rooted in toys, after all. Wonder no longer. Hasbro plans to release a whole collection of new toys directly inspired by the upcoming video game.

"We did a limited run of around four toys the first time for War for Cybertron," explains Jerry Jivoin, director of the Transformers brand at Hasbro. "Every convention we went to we always would get questions about whether we're going to do more. So when we saw the Fall of Cybertron game, it just blew us away. We saw how cool it was shaping up to be. We immediately said, 'We've got to do toys of these.'"

In news that should delight longtime Transformers fans, the first figures are the menacing Combaticons – five Decepticon-aligned robots that combine into the destructive Bruticus. "The characters are from the original classic storyline that came out in the '80s," Jivoin explains. "Originally, he was one of the first combiners, which is a technology in the Transformers universe where a group of robots transform on their own, individually,

Bruticus

Brawl

Toys (left)
Concept art (right)



Game Screen

Fall of Cybertron Toys Premiere *by Matt Müller*

but they also transform to combine into one gigantic character." Those same figures are brought to life once again in High Moon Studios' Fall of Cybertron. At least one of the characters, Vortex, is a confirmed playable character.

These new Fall of Cybertron figures will release as part of the Transformers Generations toy line. Fans will be thrilled that Hasbro is making them in the deluxe size that has become the standard for the collection. That larger scale of figures will make Bruticus one of the bigger combiner toys Hasbro has produced.

Jivoin confirms that the Combaticons are just the first announced figures connected to the game – more are on the way in future announcements. The ambition behind such a venture from a huge toy company like Hasbro is rooted in a deep faith in the game behind the toys. Over the years, the overwhelming majority of Transformers toys drew inspiration from the cartoons, and later, the live action

movies. In many ways, the decision to invest so heavily in toys from the games represents a sea change – an acknowledgement that Fall of Cybertron toys have the potential appeal to draw in both collectors and kids to a new visual styling for these classic characters.

"When we look at video games, they're great storytelling devices. The high quality of the game makes it another great way to tell another part of the Transformers story," Jivoin says. "We've got many fans of different expressions – whether it's the video game format, Prime, the movie, or classic G1. There's a lot of variation in Transformers fans around the world. And this is just a great way to tell another story along that timeline."

Behind the Scenes

How do the new Transformers toys leap from a video game into the toy world? We asked Joshua Lamb, director of design for the Transformers brand at Hasbro. "Overall, it's about a two-year process, from early concept to when the product hits the shelf," Lamb says. "So, in this case, we got it kicked off a while back, which is why we're so excited to finally

discuss it. It's been on our plates for the last year."

For the Fall of Cybertron toys, the early design process is completed in tandem with the developers at High Moon Studios. Normally, part of a designer's job is selling the project internally. This task is far easier with high-quality visuals on hand from a game developer. "I have this gorgeous art, and I can say, 'Look what we're going to do,' and everybody in the company just says, 'We've got to do that,'" Lamb says. "On the flip side, when you're trying to create a transformation that matches up to the designs, that is very challenging. It is more difficult than when we're coming up with it on our own, but that's part of the fun. The more challenging it is, the better off the product ends up."

The Transformers toy brand is a cooperative venture between Hasbro and Japanese toymaker Takara Tomy. The two companies are effectively one team when it comes to designing the new Transformers. "We are a complete partnership," Lamb explains. "What happens throughout the design process is finding a designer in our Rhode Island building here, and a designer at the Takara Tomy building. The

designers work really closely with one another. They really go from a sketch stage to an early quick model stage, then the next step is a fine-tuned model that is completely hand-built."

This prototype is built to the exact scale of the final figure, and it's rare that significant changes occur after that model is crafted. These fragile prototypes are fully articulated and transformable, and only a few exist in the world for each figure. These are used for everything from internal sales presentations to pictures on the back of the toy box.

The prototype then heads to the factory to be manufactured, where some minor changes are frequently made for quality assurance reasons. "When we come to the manufacturing process, there are changes with some articulations," Lamb said. "Not with how the character articulates overall, but some of the joints. Do we want to use a ball joint or a pin? Usually, once you built the model, you're 99 percent there."

After that, the toys head off to the stores. In the case of the individually packed Combaticons from Fall of Cybertron, fans can look forward to a retail release around August or September – just in time for the planned video game release. ♦

Head to gameinformer.com/mag for our full interview with Jerry Jivoin and Joshua Lamb, as well as an up-close look at all the newly announced toy figures and the art that inspired them



A Toys Story

How Activision leveraged the toy market and a creative video game idea to make a smash success

If depleted inventory and bare store shelves are any indication, *Skylanders: Spyro's Adventure* has been a tremendous success. Toys for Bob's creation merges highly detailed collectable figurines with a full-fledged video game, a combination that's seemingly irresistible to kids. The idea of merging video games and toys isn't new (Freaky Creatures, anyone?), but the road to *Skylanders* isn't exactly well trodden. Read on to learn how Toys for Bob pushed Activision into the toy biz.

By Jeff Cork



Toys for Bob was initially tasked with simply rebooting the Spyro franchise for parent company Activision. At the

time, the Wii was still extraordinarily popular, and Toys for Bob looked to Nintendo's console for design cues. Skylanders producers Alex Ness says his team soon realized that Nintendo's secret sauce wasn't in the obvious waggle controls, but in its ability to deliver whimsical, fun games that bordered on the magical.

"We thought a lot about toys," Ness recalls. "We've always liked toys – we're even named after toys. When you played with action figures, you always imagined them doing stuff, and we thought 'What if we could actually bring that toy into the game and do stuff with it?'"

Toys for Bob was fortunate enough to have a crew on hand that could deliver more than just ideas. "We had our main character guy, I-Wei Huang, who models and concepts our characters, makes them out of clay and paints them and everything." Ness says software engineer Robert Leyland, an electronics hobbyist, came up with a working version of the game's Portal of Power interface. With a working set of prototypes in hand, the team

The Star Control Connection?

Toys for Bob has been around for more than two decades, and older gamers may recognize a few notable titles on its resume. Before working on kid-friendly games such as *Madagascar* and *Skylanders*, the studio created the classic action-strategy games *Star Control* and *Star Control II*.

"In the mining levels that occur later in the game, there are these purple crystals that only Prism Break can destroy," Ness says. "They're called Tzo Crystals, which of course were the most valuable mined materials in *Star Control II*."

The second homage? "There are some lines that the upgrade fairy, Persephone, says that are straight out of *Orz*," Ness says, referencing one of *Star Control*'s alien races.

Ness says his team is thrilled to be working on *Skylanders*, but that "*Star Control* is something that will never go away in our minds, as something we want to do."

pitched their ambitious plan to Activision.

"At first there was a little bit of a pause, and we thought, 'Uh oh, are we about to be in trouble here?'" Ness recalls. "Then one of the higher ups started to talk it through and was like, 'Yeah, let's do that.' It wasn't this moment like 'Aha!', it was just like, 'Yeah, sure, we'll make millions of toys.'"

Activision's vice president of marketing, John Coyne, was brought in to help develop and market the fledgling project. With more than a decade of experience in the toy business, including the launch of the Bakugan toy line, Ness says Coyne's experience was tremendously helpful. Toys for Bob's raw enthusiasm was important, but they needed someone who dealt with issues unique to the toy market – choking hazards and all.

A longtime gamer himself, Coyne was impressed by how Toys for Bob was merging toys and video games in meaningful ways. "It's never been tried in the way that *Skylanders* did it," he says. "I think what really worked with *Skylanders* and what resonated so strongly with me is the magical and incredibly fluid way that the toy comes to life in the video game. I think that resonates with kids and adults. It's just pretty cool and

magical to see something go from physical to virtual and digital, and then you can play with it and quickly take the toy off and put one in."

Early on it became clear that Toys for Bob was onto something special. "We'd done a lot of licensed games before with Activision, and we'd usually work with the producers over there, the same with marketing and sales, but we'd never really had the full company Eye of Sauron on us," Ness says. "At some point with *Skylanders*, people really recognized that it could be really cool and fun and suddenly everyone from our CEO on down was involved."

Ness says his team's ignorance on the minutiae of the toy industry in some ways led to a better overall product, including the amount of painted details on each figurine. He freely admits that they didn't know about the toy industry's self-imposed limits. "Because we wanted it to be a good experience for people all around rather than to be a cheaper toy, we really wanted the toys to reflect the personalities of the characters themselves as well," Coyne adds. "That meant putting more detail on them than perhaps a traditional toy company would."

The Portal of Power peripheral that bridged the toys and games was further developed with help from RedOctane, the company that helped create the peripheral-based *Guitar Hero* series. The portal became critically important when it came time to pitch the game to retailers, Coyne says. It's one thing to hear how it works, and quite another to see it in action. Once buyers and other execs got to see the toys shift from an immobile object to a fully realized video game character in a flash, they were sold. "We found we really had momentum and support once we were able to physically demonstrate it to all our retail partners," Coyne says.

The same technology that makes the game work was also a boon in the retail space. Interactive kiosks in major retailers allow customers to see how the technology works, as well as allowing kids to see what the kinds of powers a character wields in the video games.

While it may be relatively uncharted territory, Toys for Bob and Activision have every intention of staying in the toy/game space for the foreseeable future. Coyne and Ness are coy on specifics, but they both seem eager to move to the next step for the *Skylanders* series. If those empty shelves mean anything, so are the fans. ♦

Gotta Catch 'Em All

Skylanders' toy roster will eventually include 32 figures, four location playsets, and eight magic items. The game's popularity has made it difficult to track down certain figures and set, something Activision is keenly aware of. "There is no conspiracy; we're definitely shipping as many *Skylanders* out as we can," says Activision vice president of marketing John Coyne.

This relative scarcity creates an interesting problem, considering how closely the toys and games are intertwined. If you're unable to track down a *Skylander* of the Undead element type, for example, a variety of areas are blocked off inside the game. *Skylanders* producer Alex Ness says Toys for Bob was sensitive to that balance during development. "We had to create a full game for people who might not ever buy any of the toys, and we had to create extra for people who actually want to buy all these toys and check out all these optional areas," he says. "I feel like the single-player experience, if you never buy another toy you're getting a full game. It's a long, rich experience."

For players ready to see more of the game, however, Coyne says that *Skylanders* reinforcements will be hitting stores in the coming months in a variety of different waves. If you missed an earlier toy release, you'll have more opportunities to snag them on shelves without having to meet up with a Craigslist poster or hit up eBay. This even includes figurines that are currently fetching big bucks on the secondary market. "Some of the ones that were exclusive to certain retailers early on will be part of the main waves later on," Coyne says.



The *Skylanders* crew underwent a series of changes as they went from prototypes to production-ready toys. For instance, Drill Sergeant went from this candy-colored version (right) to something a bit more metallic looking (far right)



Grading the PlayStation Vita

by Kyle Hilliard

DISPLAY

The screen is the first thing you will notice about the Vita, and understandably so. Though it doesn't have the resolution of the iPhone 4's Retina display, this five-inch, 960x544 resolution OLED screen still delivers bright, colorful, and stunning visuals. The graphical fidelity is markedly better than the PSP and PlayStation 2, but not quite on the same level as the PlayStation 3. The fact that the image quality is even in the neighborhood of the high-powered console is an incredible feat in and of itself. During my review I saw no hints of ghosting or tearing, frequent problems on the PSP. Video playback looked great on the screen as well.

DESIGN

The sleek and sturdy Vita feels great in your hands. It's larger than any of the other competing handheld devices (including mobile phones), but it's never unwieldy. It doesn't dig into your palms, and the chassis is rounded on the sides so there are no uncomfortable sharp edges.

Though it has a similar layout, the buttons feel different compared to the DualShock 3 controller. The face buttons click responsively but lack the soft, pressure-sensitive push of the PlayStation 3 buttons. The shoulder buttons feel more similar to the later PSP models, offering the slight illusion of a trigger without actually having it. The d-pad has the same satisfying click of the face buttons, but where the DualShock 3 breaks the d-pad into four separate buttons, the Vita has one solid piece of plastic with no separation. Thankfully, this design doesn't hinder the responsiveness.

The importance of the built-in dual control sticks cannot be understated; it's the primary element that sets the Vita apart from the PSP, the 3DS (which only offers a second analog stick via a peripheral), and game-friendly mobile phones. It also makes you forget you are playing a handheld. These sticks aren't replicas of those on the PlayStation 3 controller, but they're close. They lack the same range of movement and don't double as buttons when pressed, but they feel perfect for the handheld system. They sit close enough to the system's surface that they don't feel like they will catch on things when the device is hastily stuffed into a backpack or pocket. The one minor downside of the control sticks is their close proximity to the d-pad and the face buttons. Jumping between the X button and the right control stick may prove difficult to gamers with larger hands.

BATTERY LIFE

The Vita tucks out after about four to five hours of continuous play, which is on par with the PSP but far below the DS battery life. The Vita does beat the 3DS by the large margin, however, offering longer continuous play and a longer sleep time, even with a paused game in progress.

USER INTERFACE

The menus should look familiar to most smartphone users, as every available piece of software gets its own specific application. Visually, apps are displayed as circular discs that resemble bubbles. They can be moved around, but cannot be bundled or organized in any other fashion. When you open an application, a shortcut is created that can be reached by swiping the screen to the left. These shortcuts can be removed by simulating a peeling motion from the top of the screen to the bottom left. Removing the application shortcuts is instantly understandable and executable with no tutorial.

Some of the assorted applications can run simultaneously, such as games and the trophy viewer application. You can't do things like begin playing a game on a cartridge, and then open a game on the memory card, however, which is fine because I don't foresee a need to have multiple games

running at once. In regard to software that can be run simultaneously, there is no XMB like the PSP and the PlayStation 3. To multitask, you have to pause a game, close the software, and then open the other app. This means there is no quick way to check trophies, friends lists, or messages. Checking these things doesn't interrupt your game; it just slows you down, so it's a small complaint.

When you log into your PlayStation Network account on the Vita, your account is connected to that Vita. Short of factory resetting the system, there is no way to share multiple accounts on one Vita like you can on a PlayStation 3.

The Vita also includes a web browser. It's about as functional here as it was on the PSP – which is to say not very much at all. It's a useless addition because it's definitely inferior to browsing with your smartphone.



tion Vita

Is Sony's new handheld gaming platform worth the price of admission? We break down its performance and hand out a final grade in anticipation of the February 22 release.



MULTIMEDIA

In the off chance that you take photos with your Vita, getting them off the system is a process. Sony offers a free downloadable content manager (for PCs only) for the Vita that lets you move photos, video, and music on and off the system. It's not the most intuitive software, but I've seen worse.

The simply titled Content Manager Assistant can be downloaded by heading to <http://cma.dl.playstation.net/cma/>. Once the software is downloaded, the Vita looks at the video, picture, and music folders on your computer and you can copy items from those folders to the Vita, or the other way around. It's simpler than something like iTunes' complicated syncing mechanics, but still requires some strange folder navigation.

SUMMARY

Our technological complaints about the Vita are relatively minor, but this impressive device will cost you. At \$249 for the base, Wi-Fi-only model, the Vita is expensive. The need for purchasing a proprietary memory card further exacerbates the problem. It seems absurd that Sony didn't include a few gigabytes of internal storage, because players can't do much without a memory card. Even buying the non-3G model of the system with one game and the smallest memory card will set you back over \$300. If you lose the included proprietary cable used for charging and connecting the Vita to a computer for file transfers, your only replacement option is an overpriced wire from Sony. It's also worth noting that the battery cannot be replaced without replacing the entire system.

The Vita is not a flawless system, but when it comes to the important features that make a handheld gaming console worthwhile, it hits

most of the notes. Incredible graphics, responsive touchscreen and tilt mechanics, and the extra control stick make the Vita one of the most well-rounded handhelds we've ever seen. Given its myriad input options, the Vita can satisfy the casual gamer used to playing games with a touchscreen and the much harder to please hardcore gamer who wants full control and amazing graphics.

With impressive launch titles like *Uncharted: Golden Abyss*, the game library shouldn't be an issue for the Vita. The question is, are gamers still eager to purchase a \$250 system and \$40 games when they can easily find rewarding experiences for under \$10 on their smartphones and tablets? If they don't, it's a sign of the times, not a knock on the Vita's quality.

CAMERA

When it comes to mobile gaming devices, every manufacturer shoves in a camera, but does anyone really use them? Did you take any photos on your DSi or your 3DS other than on the first day of owning the system? In all likelihood, you have a better or comparable camera on the phone in your pocket. Photos taken on the Vita's 1.3-megapixel cameras look muddy and small. Outside of the cameras being used for augmented reality gameplay purposes, I doubt the forward and backward-facing cameras will get much use.

TOUCHSCREEN

When Sony first demonstrated the Vita, it seemed as though it had created a handheld video game console with touchscreen elements. But the more time I spend with the system, the more it feels like a touchscreen device with video game elements. Outside of playing games, everything is controlled by the touchscreen: menu navigation, setting changes, etc. Considering how much you touch the screen, it's a shame it is so susceptible to smudging. The back of the system also serves as a touchpad as well, but it cannot be used to navigate the menus. The face buttons don't work for menu navigation, either. This means there is no way to avoid touching the pristine screen and turning it into a giant smudge mark.

As you would expect from a device in the post-iPhone era, the touchscreen works flawlessly. It's a difficult theory to test, but the Vita touchscreen even seems more responsive than Apple's offerings, which is a testament to its quality. This multi-touch display is blazing fast. The touch abilities of the back of the handheld fare just as well as the front. The tilt and motion sensing seem more responsive than Apple's devices, as well.

WELCOME PARK

To show off new users what the Vita can do, Sony is including Welcome Park in every bundle. This series of minigames is designed to highlight every facet of the system. For instance, one game puts you in control of a skateboarder to learn how to use the tilt controls, while another tasks players to use the touchscreen to select numbers in a certain order. Other minigames showcase the microphone and camera capabilities as well. They're all simple, but they do a great job of familiarizing users with the system and you can earn trophies by playing the games.

APPS

If you're looking to expand the functionality of your Vita, you can download Facebook, Twitter, Skype, and FourSquare apps at launch. A Netflix app is coming to the Vita, and Sony hopes it will be available to download on the Vita's release day. The interface was created to support many apps, so we expect to see many more gaming and non-gaming add-ons as the Vita moves into the future.

BREAKING DOWN THE PRICE

PS Vita
\$249.99 (Wi-Fi-only),
\$299.99 (3G)

Memory Card
4GB – \$19.99
8GB – \$29.99
16GB – \$59.99
32GB – \$99.99

Games
\$29.99-\$49.99

Data Plan (3G Model Only)
250MB – \$14.99/mo.*
3GB – \$30.00/mo.*

*no contract

FINAL
GRADE
A-



Rayman Origins

Rayman is a character from a bygone gaming generation. In recent years, he's even been overshadowed by his own spinoff series, Raving Rabbids. Ubisoft hoped to revive the limbless hero with last year's platformer Rayman Origins, but consumers have been slow to embrace another Rayman title. We chatted with Ubisoft creative director Michel Ancel and lead designer Sebastien Morin about the game's development and what the title's reception could mean for the series' future.

Rayman Origins was originally announced as a downloadable game. How far into development did you get before you realized you should switch over to a full retail release?

Michel Ancel: The episodic format and digital distribution were well suited to the team size and ambition during the first year of development. But as we progressed, we outgrew what digital episodes could deliver because of the way that the Rayman franchise works. In a Rayman game, you get all your powers and go back and revisit worlds with new content. It is like *Zelda* in that regard. That format just isn't compatible with an episodic download model. We didn't want people to feel obliged to download each episode, so the structure of the game drove us to the boxed game. Fans had wanted a full retail release for Rayman anyway, and we didn't want the platform icon "wasted" digitally. After that, we started creating all kinds of new worlds, levels, and characters. Before we knew it, the game had grown to something with 60-plus levels and over 20 hours of gameplay.

During that original announcement, Ubisoft talked about the UbiArt Framework as something that other games could use. Is that still happening?

Ancel: That's still the intention with the engine. We are creating an engine that can be flexible for developers to create games of all kinds. We're excited to see what will be created with this engine in the future!

We've found that many of our friends and relatives who don't play video games enjoy playing Rayman Origins. Did you design the game specifically with non-gamers in mind?

Sebastien Morin: We've designed Rayman Origins with a very large spectrum of players in mind. There's a huge gap of skills between rookie players and veteran platform gamers. We build our levels so that the main path would let the beginners learn how to platform better, and also gave a lot of opportunities for the pros to show off their mad skills and challenge everybody to do the same. It's just like riding bikes when we were kids. The rookies stayed in the middle of the road still learning not to fall. The more daring kids were trying some silly tricks on the side of the road, often crashing their bike. It was a good laugh.

Was it a design challenge to create levels that were fun for both single-player and multiplayer?

Morin: We decided quite early that we would have the same exact levels for both single-player and multiplayer so that it would be possible to opt in or opt out anytime in the game. And we spent several months learning how to do that. The "aha" moment for us, was when we started to design our levels with specific dialogue between players in mind. To be more specific, the main ones were: "help me!", "wait for me!" and "thanks!" It was a very powerful and simple way of describing levels for the multiplayer without impeding the solo player.

Origin's music is great. How involved were you in the creation of the score? What was the thought process behind the singing fish?

Ancel: [Laughs] Well, the fish aren't actually singing, it's the lums. They sing throughout the game and this one was a special song to fit the environment. This song and all the music in the game was created here in Montpellier with our favourite composer, Christophe Heral, who I also worked with on *Beyond Good & Evil*. The approach with the soundtrack is the same kind of approach we use in visual design – real art, real instruments (even instruments Christophe has designed and built himself just for the game), real immersion!

Globox seems to be a favorite character to play in co-op. Like Nintendo did with Luigi, have you ever thought about giving him his own starring role in a game?

Ancel: Yes, that's a great idea! I think with his fat ass, we should really put him in a fitness game. If Globox can lose weight, anyone can!

One of the bosses resembles Angry Birds. Was this an intentional reference to the popular iPhone game?

Ancel: No, actually it was not intentional. The creation of that boss had more to do with constraints. We needed to create a boss that fit into a circular collision shape. Sometimes constraints push design, and if you have similar constraints you end up with similar designs. So, in the end, they may be from the same bird family of circularum occursum.

What's the story behind the dance sequence toward the end of the game? It's amusing, but seems somewhat out of place.

Ancel: It's our response to Just Dance. Everyone is playing Just Dance these days, so we were just trying to give the people what they wanted. Honestly, it's the kind of stupid jokes and surprises that we find entertaining and want to put in our games. It made us laugh. In the end games are supposed to be fun, so hopefully other people laughed, too.

Are you creatively interested in making more 2D platformers in the future? Would you like to see Rayman take another direction in a potential sequel?

Ancel: Yes, I really enjoyed working on Rayman Origins. It was the first game I can remember working where I still enjoyed playing it, even after playing it for two years. There are still a lot of crazy ideas that we have for Rayman and this engine...like triangle birds, square birds, the list goes on and on.

Origins was critically well received, but its sales have been somewhat disappointing. Do you feel it was fair to release this kind of game during the holiday rush and on the same day as Assassin's Creed Revelations? It seemed that Rayman may have suffered a similar fate as Beyond Good & Evil, which released on the same day as Prince of Persia.

Ancel: Rayman Origins is a very different game than BG&E, and a different game than many of the other games that launched this holiday. It's like as they say, "Time makes the goat cheese better!" We have seen more and more players over the past weeks playing the game and I think it will continue to be this way. We are very proud of Rayman Origins and very appreciative of the amazing scores and feedback we've received. People really appreciated the art, the music, the humor, and detail that went into this game. We need to keep doing games like this. ♦

by Joe Juba



01

The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess

The hero of Hyrule needs to have unwavering courage, peerless swordsmanship, and mad style on the slopes. Taking a break from saving princesses and collecting heart pieces, Link grabs his legendary Master Snowboard and bombs his way to victory in a race against a yeti. Sure, snowboarding in a Zelda game is dumb, but it's hard to argue with Link. The man's got steez.



02

Final Fantasy VII

Why does a game with steampunk design elements, giant swords, turn-based battles, and magical creatures also have a snowboarding minigame? It was the '90s, and these things happened. The same answer applies to the "Why is Cloud cross dressing?" question.



03

Cliffhanger

The side-scrolling levels of this movie tie-in give you exactly what you expect: Sly Stallone climbing cliffs and punching bad guys. In the Sega CD version, you also get frustrating and out-of-place snowboarding sections where the Italian Stallion dodges rocks and outruns avalanches.



04

Tales of Vesperia

This is a traditional Japanese RPG in most other areas, but Tales of Vesperia has a strange minigame featuring Repede racing down a snowy, obstacle-laden path in order to win prizes. A pipe-smoking, snowboarding dog sounds like a hilarious YouTube video come to life.



05

Crash Bandicoot: Wrath of Cortex

Many 3D platformers change up the action with different gameplay, but that doesn't mean that developers need to cram in every stupid idea they have. For example: Crash's sister Coco snowboards down a hill trying to collect apples in the middle of an avalanche. Was this level designed via mad-libs?



06

Sonic The Hedgehog 3

After jumping and loop-de-looping his way through a carnival, Sonic gets shot out of a cannon and lands on a snowboard. Sure, why not? This intro to the Ice Cap Zone is a departure, but no one should have been too surprised; Sonic is an expert at going downhill.



07

Kirby's Epic Yarn

Kirby has all kinds of cool transforming powers, but that isn't edgy enough for Nintendo's pink puffball. To add some truly extreme action to this lovable and crafty platformer, Kirby gets on a snowboard to slowly cruise around. Did he forget he has the power to turn into a UFO?



08

Rayman 3

The ice level is an age-old tradition in platforming titles. Adding new twists to snowy mountains must be challenging, but throwing a limbless taffy-man on a snowboard just doesn't make any sense. This whole section should have been replaced with the phrase "stage complete."



09

Mega Man 8

Over a decade passed between the releases of Mega Man 8 and 9, and stunts like this might have had something to do with it. The series is supposed to be about the Blue Bomber systematically murdering evil robots, so maybe fans were disappointed when he hopped on a snowboard and started shredding.



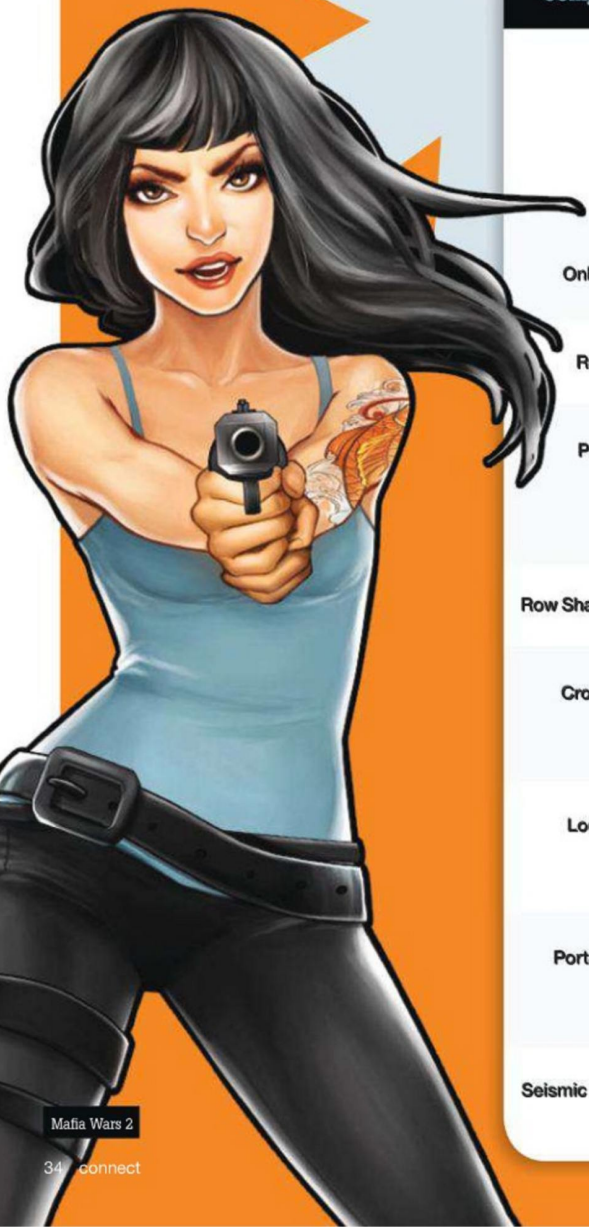
10

Mini Ninjas

Everyone knows that ninjas are masters of the shadowy arts. Apparently they are also pretty radical snowboarders, because Mini Ninjas sees them jumping into oversized hats and careening down snowy slopes. You can't fight evil samurai warlords when the powder beckons, bro!

Social Distortion

When you think about social games, you picture vibrant settings, cartoony characters, and simplistic game mechanics. However, the award-winning pedigree of the talent behind these games may surprise you.



Company	Popular Games	Notable Talent	Previous Work
Zynga	Farmville, FrontierVille, CityVille, Mafia Wars, Words With Friends, Hanging With Friends	Bob Bates, David Bettner, Paul Bettner, Steven Chiang, Phil Frazier, Soren Johnson, Brian Reynolds, Bruce Shelley, Mark Skaggs, Mark Turmell	Age of Empires, Age of Mythology, Alpha Centauri, Civilization II, Command & Conquer: Red Alert 2, Halo Wars, Madden NFL, NBA Jam, Rise of Nations, Spore, Timequest, Unreal II: The Awakening
Tetris Online Inc.	Tetris Battle	Minoru Arakawa	Earthbound, Mike Tyson's Punch-Out!!, Zoda's Revenge: Star Tropics II
RockYou	Zoo World	Greg Keamey	SimCity, The Sims, The Sims Online
Playdom	Gardens of Time	Raph Koster, Steve Meretzky, Michael Rubinelli	EverQuest II, The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy, Madden NFL, NBA Hang Time, NHL (EA), Planetfall, Star Wars Galaxies, Ultima Online
Row Sham Bow	Woodland Heroes	Ian Cummings, Philip Holt	Madden NFL
CrowdStar	Happy Aquarium, Happy Pets, Top Girl, Wasteland Empires	Jeffrey Tseng	Star Wars: Starfighter, Unreal Tournament (Dreamcast)
Loot Drop	Cloudforest Expedition (coming soon)	Brenda Brathwaite, Tom Hall, John Romero	Doom, Duke Nukem II, Jagged Alliance, Quake, Wizardry, Wolfenstein 3D
Portalarium	Port Casino Poker, Ultimate RPG (release TBA)	Richard Garriott, Dallas Snell	Tabula Rasa, Ultima, Wing Commander
Seismic Games	TBA (first game debuts in 2012)	Greg Borrud, Eric Gewirtz	Destroy All Humans, Mercenaries, Star Wars: Battlefront, The Saboteur

The Debate Over SOPA Rages On

Internet protest stalls the controversial legislation, but future action is still possible

by Matt Helgeson

On October 26th of 2011, Representative Lamar Smith (R-Texas) introduced the Stop Online Piracy Act (or SOPA) into the U.S. House of Representatives. In spite of how polarized current U.S. politics are, the bill enjoyed solid bipartisan support, with its sister bill in the Senate, the Protect IP Act (or PIPA) being introduced by Patrick Leahy (D-Vermont). Both bills had co-sponsors from both major parties.

This sudden outbreak of bipartisanship quickly led to controversy. As soon as SOPA and PIPA were introduced, many in the technology community – as well as free speech activists – decried the bills as draconian violations of First Amendment freedoms, dangers to the health of the Internet, and damaging to further innovation in the information technology industry.

ing wrong with this goal. Most people agree that copyrights should be protected and that content creators ought to be able to pursue digital pirates. However, SOPA's vague wording and the sweeping powers it gives copyright holders and the government to shut down access to websites they deem as traffickers of pirated content has shaken the Internet community, resulting in a firestorm of controversy.

The Controversy

While the bill aims to curtail obviously illegal activities, the wide-ranging and troublingly vague language of SOPA concerns many. SOPA places power in the hands of the plaintiff who wants copyrighted material taken down. In the original language of both bills (which are in the process of being changed), all a plaintiff has to do is go through a simple "notice-and-terminate" process, sending an Internet advertising service or network provider a claim of a site's alleged copyright violations. At that point, the service provider has only five days to act on the notice and block users from going to the site in question. The blocked site can then file a "counter-notice" that makes the case for the site being restored. The provider then judges the validity of the counter-notice, a tricky proposition since reinstating the site could open it up to a lawsuit from the plaintiff.

As you can see, there's little legal recourse or due process from a site accused of copyright infringement. This could place many cloud storage and file-transfer sites like MediaFire and YouSendIt under the gun – as well as sites like YouTube, where users upload footage of copyrighted movies, television shows, and video games.

Worse than the letter of the law is the possible chilling effect it could have on speech. Faced with a likely deluge of copyright complaints, many Internet service providers may find it easier to shut down access to any site it receives a complaint about rather than open itself up to future legal action from the copyright plaintiff. This could deal a serious blow to freedom of speech and information on the Internet.

What It Means for Gamers

Besides the obvious risk to the general freedom of information on the Internet, some of the activities gamers engage in on the Internet could be threatened if SOPA passes. Jennifer Mercurio, vice president of the Entertainment Consumers Association, details some of them. "[The] most obvious would be threatened fines and jail time for posting machinima, speed trials, streaming game play, 'braggart' gameplay videos, group or clan gameplay, as well as professional gaming," she says. "Moving forward, if I was a gamer who engaged in any of those activities, I'd be pretty freaked out by SOPA, as well as PIPA."

Of course, it would be up to the individual copyright holders to pursue each specific instance, but it's clear that they would be given

What is SOPA?

The basic intent of the law is to block sites that traffic in pirated or copyrighted material. Because of existing U.S. laws (like the Digital Millennium Copyright Act), many pirate sites are hosted overseas and thus not under the jurisdiction of U.S. law. Obviously, this makes it difficult for U.S. copyright holders or intellectual property creators to protect themselves from digital theft of their content.

On its face, there's nothing

wide-ranging legal rights to do so. Who knows? Theoretically, the makers of the film *Downfall* could have YouTube blocked from ISPs because of "Hitler reacts to..." videos.

A Firestorm Of Internet Protests Makes A Difference

As the vote on SOPA/PIPA neared, Internet users mobilized online to decry the legislation, which they felt would strike a serious blow to online freedom. Anti-SOPA sentiment spread like wildfire on message boards, blogs, and social networking sites like Twitter, Facebook, and Google+.

These voices were joined by a host of popular Internet sites, which coordinated a "blackout" on January 18. Google blacked out the logo on its homepage, while Wikipedia disabled its homepage and others like Reddit took their sites down for the day. This stark message seemed to strike a chord with lawmakers, as support for the legislation started losing momentum by the hour.

The game industry's reaction was mixed. Many companies, like Capcom and THQ, have refused to take a public position. Others, like Epic Games and 38 Studios, have explicitly stated their opposition. A few publishers owned by larger conglomerates, like Disney Interactive and 345 Games, haven't voiced support for SOPA but their parent companies have.

Crumbling to political pressure, the Entertainment Software Association, the game industry's chief lobbying and political organization, released a statement essentially pulling its support for SOPA after initially supporting and actively lobbying for its passage.

Roadblocks And Changes Ahead

For a moment, it appeared that the passage of SOPA and PIPA was inevitable. It had broad, bipartisan support and the White House had issued a comment suggesting that President Obama would sign the bill if passed.

Now, it appears that Internet protests – and pushback from potentially affected companies like Google, Facebook, and Twitter – had their desired affect. At present time, SOPA is caught in legislative limbo. The first blow came from the White House. In a response to an online petition, the Obama administration released this statement: "While we believe that online piracy by foreign websites is a serious problem that requires a serious legislative response, we will not support legislation that reduces freedom of expression, increases cybersecurity risk, or undermines the dynamic, innovative global Internet."

The bill has also lost steam in both houses of Congress. House majority leader Eric Cantor (R-Virginia) said SOPA would not be put to vote unless there was a "consensus" reached. In addition, key sponsors of SOPA (Lamar Smith, R-Texas) and PIPA (Patrick Leahy, D-Vermont) intend to pull the DNS (Domain Name System) provisions from the bills – controversial language that would have forced ISPs to block offending sites from the Internet. House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-California) also tweeted that she is against the passage of SOPA.

Though both SOPA and PIPA have stalled, highly modified versions of the bills could be reintroduced in the future. Just a few days after several legislators withdrew support for both bills, a new alternative emerged – the Online Protection and Enforcement of Digital Trade Act (OPEN). This bill, which was proposed in both the House and the Senate, has similar goals – to stop foreign sites that traffic in pirated content – but gives oversight to the International Trade Commission instead of the Justice Department. OPEN would apply only to sites that "primarily" and "willfully" specialize in piracy. Tellingly, companies like Google, Twitter, and Facebook that were staunchly opposed to SOPA and PIPA have signed on in support of this bill. Some primary supporters of the previous bills, like the Motion Picture Association of America, feel that OPEN doesn't come down hard enough on piracy. ♦

Look for more information on this quickly developing story on gameinformer.com

Holiday Spenders

The gaming industry continues to thrive off big holiday sales numbers

November saw the release of *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3*, *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, *Assassin's Creed Revelations*, and *Uncharted 3: Drake's Deception*, all critically acclaimed titles that sold millions of copies. This holiday, time was publishers' biggest threat, as gamers had to decide which blockbuster to play next.

According to NPD, a retail tracking firm that reports on monthly U.S. game sales, three of the top five best-selling games for 2011 were released in November. Pooling their sales together, the five top titles this past holiday sold a combined 26 million units in the U.S. Each sold more than two million units during those two months.

Despite impressive-sounding numbers, NPD says U.S. holiday software sales were down three percent year-over-year from \$3.8 billion to \$3.7 billion. Additionally, December sales were down 14 percent from the previous December. According to NPD, part of the decline is due to November game launch sales being down 19 percent in units in December 2011, compared to November launches in December 2010.

Even though December sales were down, NPD says overall sales revenue for the month still accounted for 23 percent of 2011's total sales, highlighting the fact that the holiday months are still important for the industry.

U.S. video game hardware sales also saw a steep decline this past holiday. Hardware sales were down 21 percent year-over-year from \$2.9 billion to \$2.3 billion. Sales of games for HD platforms were up eight percent in dollars in December, and nine percent for the total year, however.

"Correspondingly, the PS3 and the Xbox 360 enjoyed the highest tie ratios for the year in terms of software units sold divided by the platform install base through the end of 2011," said NPD senior category analyst Liam Callahan.

NPD says Xbox 360 was the best-selling console in the U.S. for 2011 and sold over 3.5 million units over the November and December months. If rumors of new consoles from Sony and Microsoft at this coming E3 prove to be true, consumers can expect to see more price drops on current hardware as companies gear up for the next generation.

EVERYBODY DANCE!

One of the gaming industry's biggest surprises over the past couple years has been the rise of dancing games. As the music titles like Guitar Hero and Rock Band fade away, dance titles are quickly taking their place as gamers' social activity of choice. This past holiday saw a big jump in dance game sales.

NPD says the dance genre grew 35 percent in units and 16 percent in dollars in this holiday season versus last holiday. "Part of this success was driven by new games like Just Dance 3, Dance Central 2, and The Black Eyed Peas Experience as well as solid performance from older dance games like Michael Jackson The Experience, and Dance Central 1," Callahan explained.

The most successful dance title released thus far is Just Dance 3 from Ubisoft. According to

NPD, Just Dance 3 sales in December 2011 marked the first time since at least 2004 that a non-Call of Duty title sold more than three million units in a December month.

Just Dance 3 was also the number one Kinect game and the number one PlayStation Move required game for the month of December.

"The Just Dance brand started as a novelty targeting mostly nontraditional gamers, but over time even core gamers are starting to see the value of having Just Dance in their game collection," said Tony Key, Ubisoft's senior vice president of sales & marketing. "What game are you going to choose at your next party? Do you take out Assassin's Creed or Just Dance?"

"There is a time and place in every gamer's social life where Just Dance is the most appropriate choice."

...MEANWHILE IN JAPAN



Gaming tastes are naturally different in Japan, and it looks like our gaming brothers and sisters across the Pacific couldn't even enjoy the quality software bounty that we in the West received this Christmas. Japanese retail tracker Enterbrain reports that hardware and software sales data in Japan shows a decline for the fourth straight year – this time down eight percent from 2010. The Enterbrain report says that the dip is a result of an "absence of big hit game titles." That's certainly something that U.S. gamers didn't have to suffer through this holiday season. Although hardware sales were up 2.4 percent in the country thanks to the Nintendo 3DS and PlayStation Vita, software was down a whopping 13.7 percent.

Looking at the top 10 games in sales for 2011 from Media Create, while the Japanese chart shows handheld games well represented in the first four slots and beyond, you'll also notice more duplication of games from series like Final Fantasy and Monster Hunter. No matter where you are, however, it seems like the holiday season is still where the money is made; all of the games listed in Japan's top five were released after October 27.

1. Mario Kart 7 (3DS)
2. Super Mario 3D Land (3DS)
3. Monster Hunter 3G (3DS)
4. Final Fantasy Type-0 (PSP)
5. Final Fantasy XIII-2 (PS3)
6. Monster Hunter Portable 3rd (PS3)
7. Rhythm Heaven (Wii)
8. Tales of Xillia (PS3)
9. Dragon Quest Monsters Joker 2 Professional (DS)
10. Wii Sports Resort Wiimote Plus Pack (Wii)

THE REST OF THE BEST

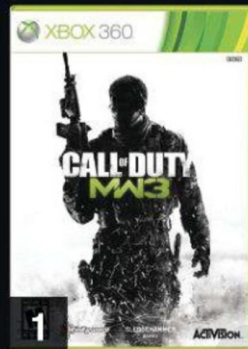


Naturally with all the high-powered games out this holiday season, there were bound to be some less fortunate titles. Some probably never stood a chance, like Ubisoft's Rayman Origins, which sold a paltry 50,000 units on multiple consoles in its first four weeks on sale. The game was not only released among all the holiday heavy hitters, but for some reason publisher Ubisoft also released Rayman the same day as its own Assassin's Creed Revelations. The company made a similar move when it released Beyond Good & Evil and Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time on the same day back in the holiday season of 2003, which ended poorly for Beyond Good & Evil.

For other games, however, it wasn't necessarily a lack of sales that prevented them from showing up on the holiday season top 10, but the strength of competition. Single-platform titles like Sony's Uncharted 3: Drake's Deception (which sold 700,000) and Halo: Combat Evolved Anniversary (almost a million in sales), as well as EA's Need for Speed: The Run (close to 700,000) probably would have made stronger chart showings if it wasn't the holiday season. Likewise, given the strength of the holiday lineup, titles that came out earlier in the year such as Portal 2, L.A. Noire, Mortal Kombat, LEGO Star Wars III: The Clone Wars, and Dead Space 2 didn't chart in the year-end sales top 10.

Not appearing on any sales list but doing just fine were Activision's video game/toy mash-up Skylanders: Spyro's Adventure and BioWare's Star Wars: The Old Republic. NPD says Spyro would have ranked 10th for the year if the software bundle sales were combined with the character packs from the accessory category. Similarly, The Old Republic (which managed to nab 14th place even though it came out late in the month on December 20) is more successful than it might appear since the NPD doesn't count digital sales. EA heavily pushed the game's sale on Origin, its digital download service, and even offered a deluxe edition of The Old Republic exclusively on Origin.

TOP 10 TITLES FOR HOLIDAY 2011 (NOV. AND DEC.)



Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3
Activision



Just Dance 3
Ubisoft



The Elder
Scrolls V: Skyrim
Bethesda Softworks



Battlefield 3
Electronic Arts



Assassin's Creed
Revelations
Ubisoft



Madden NFL 12
Electronic Arts



Saints Row:
The Third
THQ



Batman:
Arkham City
Warner Bros. Interactive



Super Mario
3D Land
Nintendo



The Legend of Zelda:
Skyward Sword
Nintendo



Prognno 2012

A man in a red and green outfit is hanging from a complex mechanical structure. He is holding a glowing green light. The background is a dark, industrial setting with a large yellow sphere on the right. A sign in the background reads "to the ramparts Patriots ALLI".

sticating

This year looks to be another great one for gamers. We assess the major publishers' current lineups, potential pitfalls, and general outlooks.

by Jeff Cork

The tail end of 2011 was jam-packed with big releases like *Batman: Arkham City*, *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, and *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3*. With so many great games on our plates, it's understandable if you've

forgotten about the amazing titles coming in 2012. We're here to refresh your memory, as well as provide analysis on what you can expect to see from the biggest game publishers in the upcoming year.



Aliens: Colonial Marines



Twisted Metal

Activision Blizzard

The second half of Activision Blizzard is pulling its weight this year, with both *Diablo III* and the latest *World of Warcraft* expansion expected to drop. The publisher still has the reliable blockbuster *Call of Duty* franchise on hand, the importance of which can't be overstated. If Treyarch didn't deliver a new entry in 2012, it would be breaking a profitable tradition. *Skylanders: Spyro's Adventures* has been a hit at retail this past holiday season, so don't be surprised when Activision rolls out new figurines and other goodies for the series in 2012. This is also a make-or-break time for its other projects, which includes

Prototype 2 and another *Transformers* game. If these games don't perform well in the market, it's likely that they'll be tossed on the pile with *Guitar Hero*. Neversoft has been quiet about what it's been working on post-*Guitar Hero*, aside from saying the team is heading in an exciting new direction. Vague? Yes. Overdue for an announcement? You bet. Activision is trying to reboot the *Tony Hawk* franchise by kicking it old school, via the downloadable *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater HD*. The company won't be able to make money off expensive peripherals this time around, but it didn't before, either.

Key Franchises: *Call of Duty*, *Diablo*, *James Bond*, *Marvel: Ultimate Alliance*, *Spider-Man*, *Spyro*, *StarCraft*, *Transformers*, *Warcraft*

Announced Games: *Battleship*, *Diablo III*, *Prototype 2*, *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater HD*, *Transformers: Fall of Cybertron*, *World of Warcraft: Mists of Pandaria*

Bethesda Softworks

With the late 2011 release of *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, don't bet on seeing much from Bethesda Game Studios this year aside from a steady batch of DLC. They make huge games, and these things take time. In 2012, the publishing arm of the business is going to get a workout, with games like *Dishonored*, *Prey 2*, and *Doom 4* in the works. We should also get more

details regarding the MMO that Bethesda's online division is making (could it be related to the *Elder Scrolls* universe?). This is also a great time for Zenimax to show what they got from purchasing Machinegames and Resident Evil creator Shinji Mikami's Tangoameworks.

Key Franchises: *The Elder Scrolls*, *Fallout*, *Rage*, *Quake*

Announced Games: *Dishonored*, *Doom 4*, *Prey 2*

Capcom

Capcom burned through a bit of fan goodwill last year with the cancellation of the community-driven *Mega Man Legends 3*. Credit should be given to the company, however, for continuing to be one of the few Japanese publishers that takes risks and consistently works with Western developers. Gamers may be feeling fatigued over the company's reliance on the *Resident Evil* license and incremental fighting game updates, but there's

more on the horizon. *Dragon's Dogma* and *Asura's Wrath* both look promising. Former Capcom executive Keiji Inafune made a point of emphasizing reboots of classic franchises, and we're curious to see if that strategy will continue. A new *Devil May Cry* is in the works, and the company has a vast library of games stretching back to the arcade days to draw from.

Key Franchises: *Ace Attorney*, *Bionic Commando*, *Dead Rising*, *Devil May Cry*, *Final Fight*, *Ghouls 'n Ghosts*, *Marvel vs. Capcom*, *Mega Man*, *Monster Hunter*, *Okami*, *Onimusha*, *Resident Evil*, *Street Fighter*, *Viewtiful Joe*

Announced Games: *Asura's Wrath*, *Devil May Cry*, *Dragon's Dogma*, *Resident Evil 6*, *Resident Evil: Operation Raccoon City*, *Resident Evil: Revelations*, *Steel Battalion: Heavy Armor*, *Street Fighter X Tekken*

Electronic Arts

When it comes to sheer volume of titles released, it's tough to beat EA. The mega-publisher has a solid lineup for 2012, including the new fantasy game *Kingdoms of Amalur: Reckoning*, the *Syndicate* FPS reboot, and the final entry in the *Mass Effect* trilogy – not to mention the critical first year for the MMO *Star Wars: The Old Republic*. It's all bolstered by a continuing investment in Facebook and casual games, a greater push toward micro transactions, and its new Origin download service. Sequels are a big part of the gaming industry today, and EA has demonstrated its enthusiasm toward

revisiting popular franchises over the years. At the same time, the company has steadily introduced new IP in addition to games that end in numbers. We expect that EA will surprise us in 2012 with a few new announcements, including whatever the former *Call of Duty* developers at Respawn Entertainment have cooking and its rebooted NBA franchise. EA announced back in 2009 that it would be publishing Red Eagle's game based on Robert Jordan's popular *Wheel of Time* novels, so expect to hear more on that this year, too – in the form of more game details or an official cancellation.

Key Franchises: *Battlefield*, *Burnout*, *Command & Conquer*, *Dead Space*, *Dragon Age*, *FIFA*, *Fight Night*, *Madden*, *Mass Effect*, *Medal of Honor*, *Mirror's Edge*, *Need For Speed*, *SimCity*, *The Sims*, *Skate*, *Ultima*, *Wing Commander*

Announced Games: *FIFA 13*, *Grand Slam Tennis 2*, *Kingdoms of Amalur: Reckoning*, *Madden NFL 13*, *Mass Effect 3*, *Medal of Honor II*, *Overstrike*, *The Secret World*, *Shank 2*, *SSX*, *Syndicate*, *Warp*

Konami

Konami continues to churn out sequels like it's going out of style. The *Silent Hill* series and *Dance Dance Revolution* have lost their luster over the years, in spite of continuous reboots and updates. The reemergence of *Metal Gear Rising* (now under development at Platinum Games and

subtitled *Revengeance*) has given some fans new hope for the title, while leaving others apprehensive. One bright spot in Konami's future is the *Castlevania* series, which returned triumphant in 2010's *Lords of Shadow*. Here's hoping we'll see more of it in the future.

Key Franchises: *Castlevania*, *Contra*, *Dance Dance Revolution*, *Gradius*, *Metal Gear*, *Pro Evolution Soccer*, *Silent Hill*, *Zone of the Enders*

Announced Games: *Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance*, *Silent Hill: Downpour*

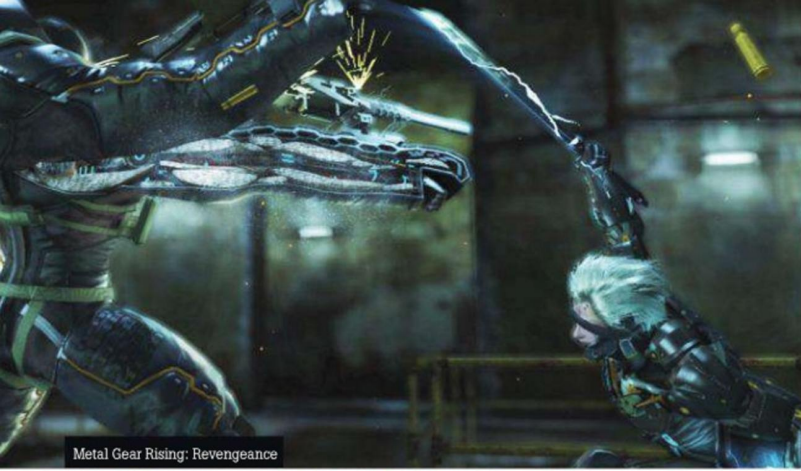
Microsoft

While it doesn't like to call too much attention to it right now, Microsoft is working on new hardware. Will we see it in 2012? Probably not in a physical form, though we'll know more about what next-gen will deliver. Meanwhile, Kinect hasn't been the panacea Microsoft predicted. The peripheral sold like gangbusters, but attempts to create games for the hardware have been lackluster at best. With the specter of that new hardware on the horizon, third-party developers are left in a bind. Should they spend development resources on the Xbox 360 or wait for the next batch of hardware?

That remains a critical question, and it's one we hope we get answered in 2012. Xbox Live Arcade will continue to be a large part of the 360's gaming ecosystem, with Remedy's recently announced *Alan Wake* game, *American Nightmare*, appearing exclusively on the service. As the big three slide into the next generation, these kinds of downloadable games will be a stopgap solution between full-retail, triple-A projects on aging hardware and the expensive first steps on unproven hardware.

Key Franchises: *Alan Wake*, *Crackdown*, *Halo*, *Fable*, *Forza Motorsport*, *Gears of War*

Announced Games: *Alan Wake's American Nightmare*, *Fable: The Journey*, *Halo 4*, *Kinect Star Wars*



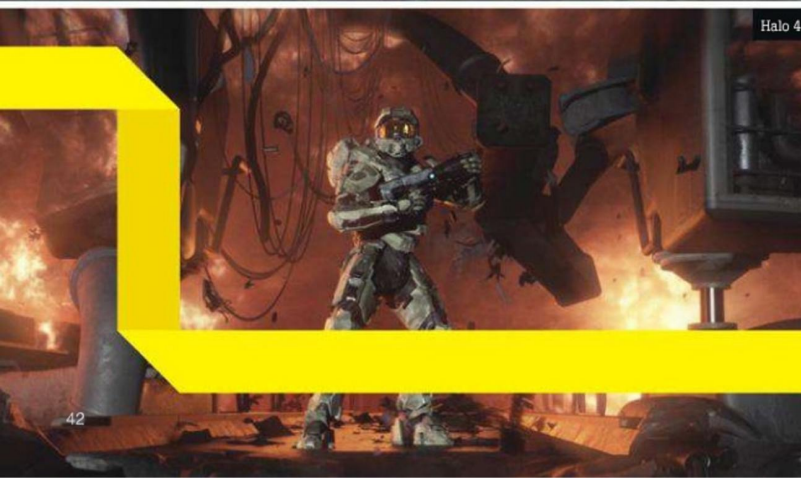
Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance



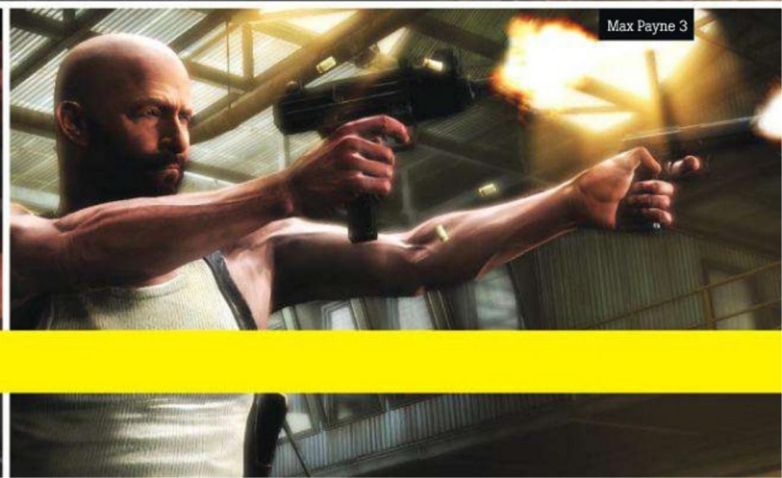
Borderlands 2



Tomb Raider



Halo 4



Max Payne 3

Namco Bandai

Despite its best efforts, Namco Bandai has had a rough couple of years. Risky moves such as a Splatterhouse revival and new IP like Enslaved: Journey to the West and Majin and the Forsaken Kingdom sounded like relative slam dunks, but they dribbled off the court. Expect to see a more conservative approach in the foreseeable future, with the company leaning

on reliable franchises such as Soulcalibur, Tekken, and the Katamari series. Even its unproven RPG, Ni no Kuni, has the established talent of Level-5 and Studio Ghibli behind it. If Namco isn't begging Dark Souls developer From Software to whip up another punishing hit, the publisher is doing something wrong.

Key Franchises: Ace Combat, Dark Souls, .hack, Ridge Racer, Soulcalibur, Tekken

Announced Games: Inversion, Ni no Kuni: Wrath of the White Witch, Soulcalibur V, Tekken Tag Tournament 2, Tekken X Street Fighter, Touch My Katamari

Nintendo

The Wii U is going to be the biggest thing on Nintendo's 2012 agenda. You always have to pay attention to new hardware, even if all signs point to the console being more of an incremental improvement over the current tech instead of a bold stride toward next-gen technology. A variety of studios declared their enthusiasm for the system's potential when it was announced at E3, and this year we'll see if they were excited enough to actually develop games for it. Nintendo has said that it purposefully

held back a number of finished 3DS titles to avoid saturating the market, so we'll see if that move pays off. This year's performance will determine where the handheld goes from here. We haven't seen a new Metroid for a while, and the Wii U's built-in screen and accelerometer seem like a great fit for Samus' scanning tech. It's also the time for players who have cried out for a new Kid Icarus release to put their money where their mouths are when Kid Icarus: Uprising hits.

Key Franchises: Donkey Kong, Kirby, Metroid, Pikmin, Super Mario Bros., Super Smash Bros., The Legend of Zelda

Announced Games: Kid Icarus, LEGO City Stories, Mario Party 9, Rhythm Heaven Fever, Xenoblade Chronicles

Sega

Sega gets a bum rap for flogging Sonic to the point of exhaustion, but the publisher is taking a lot of risks in 2012. Its lineup runs the gamut from kid-friendly releases like Super Monkey Ball to gritty content like Aliens: Colonial Marines and the Yakuza series. Binary Domain isn't likely to make much of a

splash in the crowded third-person-shooter space, but keep an eye out for Anarchy Reigns. If enough gamers latch onto Platinum Games' four-player fighter – the closest we're likely to get to a contemporary Power Stone game – Sega could have a sleeper hit on its hands.

Key Franchises: Alex Kidd, Columns, Condemned, Golden Axe, MadWorld, Shenmue, Sonic the Hedgehog, Total War, Valkyria Chronicles

Announced Games: Aliens: Colonial Marines, Anarchy Reigns, Binary Domain, Sonic the Hedgehog 4: Episode 2, Super Monkey Ball, Virtua Fighter 5: Final Showdown, Virtua Tennis 4 (Vita), Yakuza: Dead Souls, Yakuza 5

Sony

Sony is in a similar position to Microsoft, though it can distract consumers with its Vita handheld. The newness of the gadget, accompanied by interoperability with the PS3 hardware, is likely to buy Sony some time as it figures out the best possible strategy for its next move. Meanwhile, Sony will continue to deliver a varied first-party lineup and mine past franchises in clever HD bundles. Perhaps this is the year The Last Guardian finally

comes out of hiding as well. Sony's been cagey about God of War's future, saying that while God of War III marked the end of the trilogy, the series isn't necessarily done. Maybe Sony Santa Monica will let us know what's ahead for the franchise this year. Naughty Dog's new project, The Last of Us, is also looking promising.

Key Franchises: Gran Turismo, God of War, Heavy Rain, Infamous, Jak and Daxter, Killzone, LittleBigPlanet, MotorStorm, Ratchet & Clank, Resistance, SingStar, SOCOM, Sly Cooper, Syphon Filter, Twisted Metal, Uncharted

Announced Games: Jak and Daxter Collection, Journey, The Last Guardian, The Last of Us, LittleBigPlanet, Resistance: Burning Skies, Sound Shapes, Starhawk, Sly Cooper: Thieves in Time, Twisted Metal, Uncharted: Golden Abyss

Square Enix

Picking up Eidos was one of the smartest things Square Enix has ever done. That acquisition gave the company access to licenses such as Deus Ex, Hitman, and the reimagined Tomb Raider. Considering that its Final Fantasy games take such an agonizingly long amount of time to

ripen, the comparatively short development time buys Square some time as it tries to sort out what's next for the creaky RPG series. Since Eidos Montreal is finished working on Deus Ex, Thief 4 could come out of hiding this year as well.

Key Franchises: Carmageddon, Deus Ex, Dragon Quest, Final Fantasy, Front Mission, Hitman, Just Cause, Kane & Lynch, Kingdom Hearts, The Legacy of Kain, Thief, Tomb Raider

Announced Games: Dragon Quest X, Final Fantasy Versus XIII, Final Fantasy XIII-2, Hitman: Absolution, Kingdom Hearts 3D: Dream Drop Distance, Tomb Raider, Thief 4, Quantum Conundrum, Wakfu

Take-Two

This is going to be one hell of a year for Take-Two. In addition to the possible release for the recently announced Grand Theft Auto V, stores will be slammed with Max Payne 3, BioShock Infinite, and Borderlands II, to name

a few. The publisher's 2012 lineup is about as good as it gets, making 2K Games the publisher to beat in the months to come.

Key Franchises: BioShock, Borderlands, Duke Nukem, Grand Theft Auto, Mafia, Max Payne, Midnight Club, NBA2K, Red Dead, Sid Meier's Civilization, XCOM

Announced Games: BioShock Infinite, Borderlands 2, Grand Theft Auto V, Max Payne 3, Spec Ops: The Line, The Darkness II, XCOM: Enemy Unknown



Mass Effect 3

Darksiders II



Mass Effect 3



Diablo III

Telltale Games

Telltale has carved out a market in the adventure game space, a genre largely considered barren only a few years ago. The company has dabbled in console releases for its largely PC-based titles, and we can expect to see that expand in 2012 with *Fables* and *The Walking Dead*. It's easy to focus on

zombies, particularly when they're tied to a hit show and comic series, but don't rule out the reception that *King's Quest* is likely to get from old-school gamers. It was a pioneering series, and it'll be interesting to see how King Graham fares in the current climate.

Key Franchises: *Back to the Future*, *Jurassic Park*, *Monkey Island*, *Sam & Max*, *Wallace & Gromit*

Announced Games: *Fables*, *King's Quest*, *The Walking Dead*

THQ

THQ is going through a transitional stage, to put it kindly. The publisher killed off the *Red Faction* franchise after the disappointing *Red Faction: Armageddon* was released. THQ has a number of licenses (such as *SpongeBob* and *Scooby-Doo!*) and several sequels announced for 2012. Things look quiet on the new IP front for this year, however. Guillermo del Toro's horror game *Insane* isn't due out until 2013, and sequels are the only other thing you'll find on their list of upcoming releases. We don't

expect to hear many concrete details from THQ about what its Montreal branch is cooking up, but it's likely that trickles of information may begin to flow before the year's up. THQ Montreal was built around former Ubisoft employee Patrice Desilets, the man behind *Assassin's Creed* and *Prince of Persia: Sands of Time*, so whatever the studio is working on, it's bound to be interesting. However, there is a rumor that THQ's lineup beyond 2012 is being reassessed.

Key Franchises: *Company of Heroes*, *Darksiders*, *Homefront*, *Insane*, *Red Faction*, *Saints Row*, *SpongeBob SquarePants*, *UFC*, *Warhammer 40,000*, *WWE*

Announced Games: *Darksiders II*, *Metro: Last Light*, *South Park: The Game*, *UFC Undisputed 3*, *WWE Brawl*

Ubisoft

Ubisoft is another major publisher with a strong list of titles for the year. The company has a number of gritty action games on the docket, including *I Am Alive*, *Far Cry 3*, and *Ghost Recon: Future Soldier*. That's offset by a continuing emphasis on family games. Ubisoft has been one of the few big

names that has consistently pumped out Kinect games, which we expect to continue in 2012. Considering it has the *Just Dance* and *YourShape* fitness games in its back pocket, that's a solid formula for success. And who knows? Perhaps its Uplay achievement system will finally move out of beta.

Key Franchises: *Assassin's Creed*, *Avatar*, *Beyond Good & Evil*, *Brothers In Arms*, *Call of Juarez*, *Driver*, *Far Cry*, *Ghost Recon*, *Just Dance*, *Myst*, *Prince of Persia*, *Rayman*, *Splinter Cell*, *The Settlers*, *YourShape*

Announced Games: *Assassin's Creed 3*, *Brothers in Arms: Furious 4*, *Far Cry 3*, *Ghost Recon: Future Soldier*, *Ghost Recon Online*, *I Am Alive*

Valve

At this point, Valve could probably drop out of game development and comfortably sustain itself off the revenue from Steam. Fortunately for those of us who play games, that scenario isn't likely to play out. The company has its hands relatively full with the release of a new *Counter-Strike* game and *Dota 2*. Both of these games are updates to popular hardest-of-the-

hardcore releases, which begs the question: Will these games pull in new audiences, or will they continue to cultivate a small but loyal following? Meanwhile, the question on everyone's lips is, "Where is *Half-Life 3*?" Here's hoping we'll find out in 2012.

Key Franchises: *Counter-Strike*, *Half-Life*, *Left 4 Dead*, *Portal*, *Team Fortress*

Announced Games: *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive*, *Dota 2*

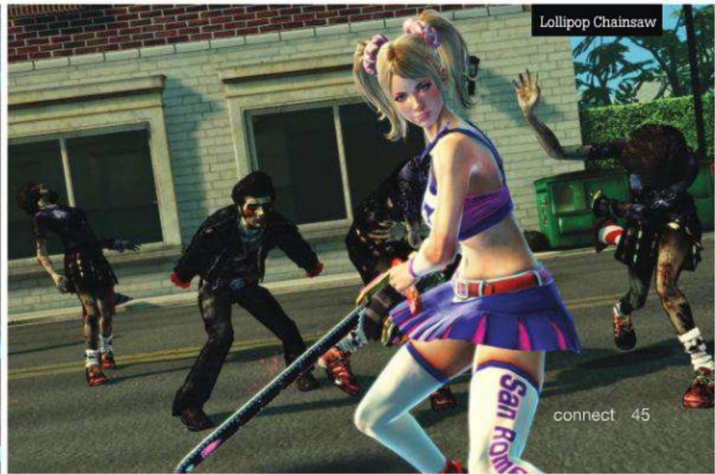
Warner Bros. Interactive

Warner ended 2011 with the release of the critically acclaimed *Batman: Arkham City*, and it's digging into the batcave again with the DLC shooter *Gotham City Impostors*. The publisher is also releasing Suda51's latest game, *Lollipop Chainsaw*. American publishers didn't seem to know how to

market his previous games, so we're curious to see how Warner handles the challenge. Developer *Traveller's Tales* is crafting the Wii U exclusive *LEGO City Stories*, and the studio is bound to have another LEGO game or two up its sleeves. ♦

Key Franchises: *Bastion*, *Batman*, *F.E.A.R.*, *LEGO*, *Mortal Kombat*, *Scribblenauts*, *Sesame Street*, *Spy Hunter*, *The Lord of the Rings*

Announced Games: *Gotham City Impostors*, *Lollipop Chainsaw*, *The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings* (Xbox 360)





The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim Speed Run Challenge

interview by Andrew Reiner

When Bethesda Game Studios wraps development on a title, tradition dictates that someone from the development team must battle someone from the QA team in a speed run competition to finish the main quest as quickly as possible.

For Skyrim's speed run, the development team selected Jeff Brown as its hopeful. The QA team picked Sam Bernstein. The competition was heated, and ended up closer than anyone could have imagined. Jeff finished the game in 2 hours, 16 minutes, and 30 seconds. Sam edged him out slightly with a time of 2 hours, 16 minutes, and 10 seconds – a mere 20-second difference.

I spoke with Sam about the strategies he used in this impressive run, testing a game of this size, and if he thought Jeff even stood a chance.



Sam Bernstein
QA lead, Bethesda
Game Studios

Is this the first time you've been in a speed run competition?

I was in, and won, the speed run competition for Fallout 3 as well.

How many times would you say you completed Skyrim from start to finish?

If I had to make a rough estimate, I guess I've completed it somewhere around 60 or so times.

At what point did you think you had a chance at becoming a speed run champion?

In the weeks leading up to the competition I knew I had a pretty decent lead on Jeff. However, a few days before the showdown I had heard he was getting closer to my time. After learning this news, I decided to sit down after work each day leading up to the competition and re-evaluate the path I had been taking to see where I could cut corners. Over the next couple days I tried a few different techniques to speed things up, but I wasn't finding anything useful.

The day before we ran the competition I found a maneuver that would allow me to save some time, but pulling it off was tricky. If I didn't land it just right it could end up costing me more time. That night I spent about half an hour perfecting my technique of getting through this trouble spot before I was comfortable. *[Bethesda wouldn't tell us the maneuver – Ed.]*

Does the speed run timer start at character creation or when your character reaches the over world?

The timer we used was the time baked into the actual save file. That time starts when the game is turned on, so once "Press Start" came up in the main menu, the timer was already running. We made a save as the achievement for Dragonslayer came up at the end of the main quest; the time-stamp on that save is what we used for our final time.

What character race did you select?

I chose to play as a High Elf as they're the tallest race in Skyrim at 1.08 times normal scale. This makes them faster than any other race. It's not a huge difference, but over a long period of time, it can shave off precious minutes.

What approach did you take to combat?

My approach to combat was to avoid it at all costs and run as fast as I could to my next objective. Over the entire game, there are only eight times when I'm actively engaging in combat rather than running to my next objective.

Did you even bother assigning new perks?

Nope, I never even went to the level up screen. The time I save by skipping the perk screen outweighs the benefit of any of the perks I was able to get.

Is part of the strategy clicking through text as quickly as you can? Obviously, if you're not careful you can have an NPC go through an entire dialogue string again.

That's definitely part of the strategy. Learning the dialogue trees so you know when you have to navigate to other dialogue options and click through them as fast as possible is key. Another part is knowing when you're able to back out of dialogue and have the quest continue. There are times when NPCs will continue what they're saying after you exit dialogue with them, allowing you time to start getting to your next destination as they finish up whatever they're saying.

Was there a particular weapon or armor set that you went out of your way to get?

There's a great katana, Dragonbane, that you can pick up in Sky Haven Temple that does extra damage to dragons, something that's pretty useful for getting through a fight quickly and without needing to open your inventory to use a health potion. I make it a point to not wear any armor; you run faster that way.

What parts of the game were the most difficult to shave time from?

The hardest part to shave time off of was the Peace Council scene in the quest 'Season Unending.' The majority of that quest is

done by listening to other people indirectly, so there's no way to skip through dialogue. There is, however, a way to get the NPCs themselves to skip their own dialogue due to how the scripting handles when quest updates occur. Other notably difficult places to shave off time were: training with the Greybeards in "The Way of the Voice," finding faster ways of getting to the Elder Scroll in "Elder Knowledge," and getting through Skuldafn quickly in "The World-Eater's Eyrie."

If you die and reload, does the clock stop or is the competition in real time, meaning the time for restarting is factored in?

Since we were going by the time listed on the save, if you died during the course of the run, the game would load back from your last autosave and go from there.

How many times did you die?

Neither of us died.

After recording this impressive run, do you see any areas where you could improve on your time?

Absolutely. Jeff did a few things that I didn't do, giving me some great ideas of how to shave off some time. I've also gotten ideas from other members of our QA team on shortcuts to speed things up. All that being said, I haven't actually timed a run since the competition; I'm happy with the results of it.

Where do you think Jeff went wrong? Obviously, you beat him by only 20 seconds.

I can't really say he did anything wrong, we each had our own strategies and went about parts of the game completely differently. It was honestly really exciting through the end. ♡

The Good

DESPITE A CHANGE

in Shigeru Miyamoto's role at Nintendo, the legendary developer still has the creative juices flowing. Miyamoto says that apart from Pikmin 3 for Wii U, he's working on another title for an unknown system. Previously Miyamoto stated that he wanted to work with the younger developers at Nintendo on smaller projects. We don't know if this new title comes from that new focus, but as long as it's not related to Wii Music or the Vitality Sensor, it should probably be good.



THE GOOD, THE BAD & THE UGLY

Quotable

"...We are not making any announcements at E3."

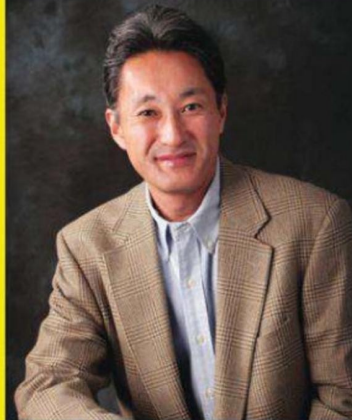
The Bad



AFTER A STRONG FIRST WEEK

on sale in Japan, sales for Sony's PlayStation Vita handheld dropped. The Vita went from 321,407 units in its first week to just 42,648 in its third – even the PSP beat those numbers that week, with 62,746 units sold.

Sony's director of hardware marketing, John Koller, was nothing if not optimistic. "We're going to give it some time, but overall those numbers have been to forecast," he said. Well, if anyone knows how to nurse along a limping handheld to millions of units – like the PSP – it's Sony.



– Kaz Hirai, president and group CEO of Sony Computer Entertainment, knocks down rumors that the PlayStation 4 will debut at the E3 convention in June.

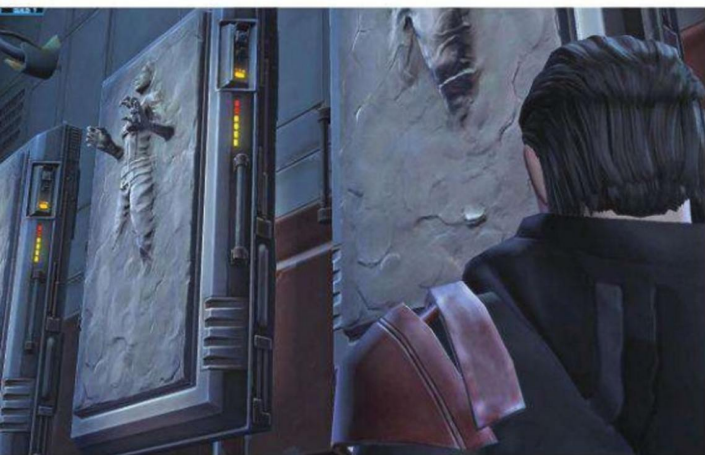
IF WE ASKED YOU

to guess any two games that are delayed, which would you pick? Chances are they were Max Payne 3 and Ghost Recon: Future Soldier. Guess what? They've been pushed back once again. Max Payne 3 now comes out on May 15 for PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360 and May 29 for PC. Similarly, Future Soldier comes out on May 22 for PS3 and Xbox 360, with a PC version shipping at a later, unspecified date.

The Ugly



massive



Star Wars: The Old Republic

The Best Single-Player MMO I've Ever Played

Developer BioWare accomplished everything it set out to do with its enormous, fully voice-acted MMORPG. Star Wars: The Old Republic isn't just the best new entry in Star Wars fiction in years; BioWare's successful inclusion of the kind of RPG storytelling gamers expect out of a single-player game into the MMO genre is a stunning achievement. I have a long list of things I wish the team had focused on more, but as a big fan of both BioWare and Star Wars, I don't regret a second of my journey to the level cap and final achievement – the Darth title in front of my powerful Sith Juggernaut's name.

by Adam Biessener

interview



photo: Steve Skoll

Guiding The Game Developers Conference

Each year game professionals gather for the Game Developers Conference, a show focused on the craft of making games. Here, GDC general manager **Meggan Scavio** talks about the evolution and growth of GDC.

interview by *Matt Helgeson*

You've been involved in GDC since 2000. What are some of the ways the show has changed over the years?

The biggest change, and really the only change, is in size. We've always followed the basic tenets of how we're going to produce the event. It's always developer-driven and developer-focused. We always look to our audience. We've maintained this path. We don't want to be a big, flashy event. We want to focus on our developers. That's all we've ever done.

You mentioned wanting to maintain a developer focus. It's an industry event, but outlets like Game Informer go every year and some publishers and developers use it as a platform to unveil new games and products. How do you balance those concerns without having it turn into a "mini-E3"?

For me, there's "inside GDC" and "outside GDC." "Inside GDC" is the things that happen in the building and the things that I have control over. Mostly that is the conference sessions. But there are a lot of things happening outside of GDC. I'm sure Game Informer spends a lot of time going to hotel rooms and seeing demos. I have no control over that. We don't stop people from doing that. Also, it helps bring everyone to San Francisco at the same time. What I have control over are the things happening inside GDC, where we discourage speakers from announcing games or having content that is solely an announcement.

In creating the show, you must have to have a lot of contact with the development community. Right now, what do you think the biggest concerns are in the development community?

We're seeing a lot of people trying to figure out how to sustain their business. That's from all different levels, from a triple-A studio to a small, independent start-up. You see people like Valve taking Team Fortress 2 and turning that business model around to free-to-play. You're seeing people leaving the bigger studios and starting up on their own. They are trying to figure out how to market, distribute, and fund their games.

Talk about the process about how you recruit people to speak at the show and how you program the sessions.

The advisory board is made up of super-qualified developers working in the industry today. It's around 20 people now. They are across all disciplines; we've got social guys, triple-A guys, producers, designers, programmers. We've got Rob Pardo from Blizzard, Mark Cerny, Chris Hecker – a lot of great people

covering the spectrum. We get together at E3. We sit around and talk about what they saw at the show, what they thought was missing from the show, and what they would like to see at the next GDC. They come up with a bullet point list of things they want to see at GDC.

A couple of months later, we post that online and send out a call. We usually get about 1,000 submissions in a month. The advisory board members read and grade and comment on every single one of those. The advisors are assigned as mentors to talks that they would like to see move forward.

Any sessions or speakers that you're excited about this year?

We do the Game Design Challenge every year. I think this year's is perfect for what's going on in the industry today, with the rise of the smartphone. The challenge this year will be to design a game that can be played in 10 seconds. [Laughs] It's trying to find a way to create a meaningful play experience in short bursts of time. We are bringing back the classic game postmortems. This year we are doing three. I have one confirmation: Tim Cain, the designer of the original Fallout. I'm very excited about that.

Another thing that I think is great are the Experimental Gameplay Sessions. People submit prototypes and they are displayed during these two-hour gameplay sessions. It's amazing what's come out of those. In the past, people saw for the first time Katamari Damacy, Flow, Braid, Portal, and World of Goo.

You just announced that Cliff Bleszinski was going to be hosting the GDC awards. How did that happen?

Being the Game Developer's Conference, we are firm believers in celebrating the developers. So we will only put developers onstage as hosts. We've had Tim Schafer as a host of the GDC Awards, but he'll only do it every other year. [Cliff] is a smart, awesome guy and I can't wait to see him onstage. He's earned so much respect in the game development community; I want to give that respect back to him by having him onstage for the awards.

You have the Game Developer Choice Awards. The Interactive Achievement Awards happen at DICE. We have the Spike TV awards that get a lot of exposure on television. Could you combine what GDC and the AIAS awards do with the exposure of the Spike awards – something that is a major televised event, but still has the respectability?

We have spoken with the AIAS Awards for many years about trying to find a way to cooperate, but they are an association. We are not. They have their way of doing things. I just don't think those two events will ever combine. They serve their purpose and have a lot more

categories than we do. I wish we could work together easier, but it's probably not going to happen.

As for Spike, I've spent years trying to get on TV. Years! [Laughs] I get very close and there are a lot of people who are interested. However, television requires entertainment. It requires advertisers. We would basically have to change the Game Developers Awards and make it like the Spike awards in order to get on television. I have a lot of respect for Geoff Keighley and his team and what they do. I know that Geoff is fighting the good fight, but he is limited in what he can do. I've been told again and again that we have to have celebrity hosts and [things like that] in order to be broadcast.

Basically do what Geoff and Spike are doing.

Yes. And I do think Geoff has made it better than it used to be. It's not something that everyone is excited about, but it's what it has to be.

Talk about the Independent Games Festival. It has proven to be a springboard for a lot of independent games that eventually end up being published and finding big audiences.

We have tried to create a home for the independent game community. In the early days, it was slim pickings. There weren't a lot of submissions and there weren't a lot of indie game developers. But we stuck with it and the festival has grown along with the community. They're really testing the limits of what the creative part of our industry is capable of.

You opened GDC China as well. What's the development industry like over there and how does the show differ in China?

Consoles are still illegal in China, so everything is played online. It's a way for the government to control the content and the time that people are allowed to play. The development community over there has been limited to what they are able to do. There's a lot of copying that goes on over there; there's not a lot of creativity going on right now. But we've been in China for four years with the GDC and we actually launched the Independent Games Festival over there. In our first year, most of the IGF China submissions came from the Asian Pacific regions. But this year we're seeing more submissions and indie development coming from mainland China, which has been hard for them in the past. They are just now starting to catch up with the West in terms of being able to develop more on their own, rather than in giant machines, which is what it's been.

What are GDC's goals moving forward?

Our goals moving forward are the goals we've always had – follow our core values and serve the development community as best we can. 💎

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

**1986
A GREAT ADVENTURE**
Like many gamers, Scavio began a lifelong love affair with video games through the Nintendo classic *The Legend of Zelda*

**1989
MOVING ON**
Scavio attends college at the University of Nebraska at Omaha

**1995
ANTIQUING**
After leaving school, Scavio is involved in the music and arts scene, eventually landing in San Francisco, where she works in an antiques store

**1996
BIG EVENTS**
Scavio gets a temp job at the media company Miller Freeman, working in event planning. The position eventually becomes permanent

**2000
ACQUISITIONS**
Miller Freeman purchases the Game Developers Conference and Scavio begins working on the show, coordinating volunteer workers. Around this same time Miller Freeman was merged into CMP Media and later United Business Media

**2005
GAME ON**
Scavio becomes a part of the game group at Miller Freeman/UBM

**2008
DIRECTING**
Moving up, Scavio is appointed the director of the main Game Developers Conference in San Francisco

**2011
TAKING OVER**
Scavio becomes the general manager of the Game Developers Conference, overseeing the San Francisco GDC, plus branch shows in Austin, China, and Europe

gear

RAZER STAR WARS: THE OLD REPUBLIC GAMING KEYBOARD



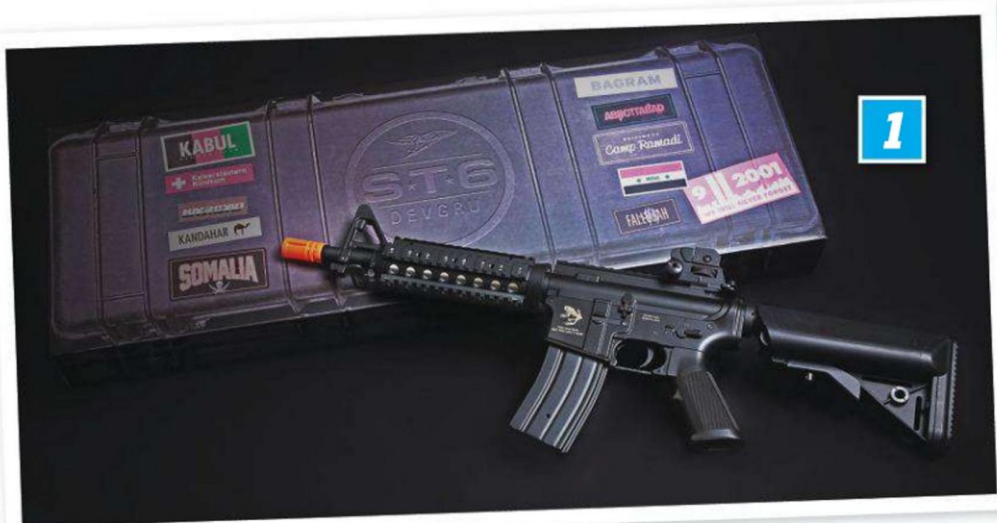
"Razer's new Old Republic-branded keyboard is so cutting edge it could slice a Tauntaun open like a lightsaber."

Any young warrior bold enough to jump into the massive online war raging between the Galactic Republic and the Sith Empire needs powerful tools to survive the conflict. Razer's new Old Republic-branded keyboard is so cutting edge it could slice a Tauntaun open like a lightsaber. One of the keyboard's biggest selling points is its dynamic, adaptive tactile keys. These ten tiny OLEDs change their functionality depending upon which keyboard app you have running at any given time. The system's multi-touch LCD

track-panel can be used to stream videos off the Internet or as a trackpad, allowing you to navigate the game world more efficiently. Razer's highly responsive anti-ghosting keys can respond to up to 10 key presses at any given moment, so you shouldn't have to worry about any of your battle commands getting spirited away in the middle of combat. Razer's new keyboard is a great choice for Sith and Jedi alike. Given the more than 100 fully programmable keys, brilliant gold backlighting, elegant metallic finish, and access to Razer's Synapse 2.0 cloud-based profile storing, we imagine that a lot of non-MMO players will embrace this board.

\$249.99 | razerzone.com/swtor

by Ben Reeves and Tim Turi



1 Echo 1 ST6 DEVGRU

Inspired by Call of Duty, Echo 1 modeled its newest airsoft gun after the M4 CQB, which is the preferred configuration for SEAL teams and other Special Forces units. The full ST6 package includes a 300 round magazine, a vertical grip, backup iron sights, crane stock, battery, and charger. The ST6 fires bb rounds at a velocity of nearly 400 feet per second, making this is the perfect weapon to cut down any army of soda cans that might amass at your fence.

\$195 | echo1usa.com

2 Razer Star Wars: The Old Republic Gaming Mouse

Like the Old Republic keyboard, Razer's Star Wars-themed mouse is in a star cluster all its own. This version of the Razer Naga features 17 fully programmable keys. The configuration is hard to get used to and isn't great for non-MMO games, but once you acclimate to having so many inputs on the tip of your thumb, it's hard to go back to the normal two-button fare. This mouse also features wireless/wired dual mode capability, interchangeable Sith/Republic faction emblems, cloud-based profile storage, and comes with a code to unlock a rare green color crystal that changes the color of your lightsaber or blaster bolts.

\$139.99 | razerzone.com/swtor



3 Sifteo Cubes

We love playing games on a huge screen with a controller in our hands, but Sifteo cubes offer a great alternative. Sifteo cubes must be rearranged, tilted, and fiddled with to solve puzzles or guide digital characters through a maze. It's a great way to clear the cobwebs from your FPS-added mind. You have to remain wirelessly "tethered" to your computer to play, which is a hindrance, but once you get in the zone with one of the many downloadable games, you'll appreciate the unique gameplay offerings.

VERY GOOD ■■■■■■■■■■

\$149 (Comes with three cubes, each additional \$45) | sifteo.com



50/50

Seth Rogan and Joseph Gordon-Levitt's bald head find out if having cancer is a good way to pick up girls in this amusing – and surprisingly heartfelt – dramedy.

\$30.49
50-50themovie.com

ART OF THE MASS EFFECT UNIVERSE

Get a glimpse of how BioWare first envisioned Mass Effect by digging into the concept art and developer commentary on the characters, locations, vehicles, and weapons from all three titles.

\$39.99
darkhorse.com

DELOCATED: THE COMPLETE SEASONS ONE & TWO

Jon seems like your average New Yorker seeking fame with his own reality TV show, but the twist is that his family is in the Witness Protection Program and forced to wear balaclavas to protect its identity. This quirky comedy is one of Adult Swim's most offbeat shows.

\$29.98
adultswim.com

THE ROOK: A NOVEL BY DANIEL O'MALLEY

When Myfanwy awakes in a London park with no memory of her past, she discovers that she is a member of a secret British organization formed to combat supernatural threats. She also discovers that she has a supernatural secret of her own.

\$25.99
hachettebookgroup.com



05



06
Mass Effect 3



09



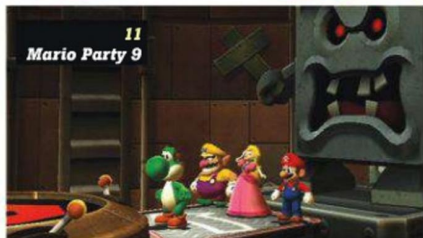
20
Kid Icarus: Uprising



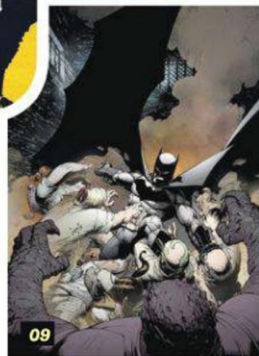
07



16



11
Mario Party 9



09



27
Dragon's Dogma



13
Resident Evil: Operation Raccoon City



14

05 Game Developers Conference Kicks Off

The video game industry gathers in San Francisco for this annual conference that explores the art and business of game development. If you plan on attending, make sure you catch Rocksteady's "Journey from the Asylum to the City" panel and Blizzard's "Diablo III: Giant Toads and Zombie Bears" session. This is a great show for aspiring game creators to attend.

06 New Releases

- › Crush 3D (3DS)
- › Horsez (3DS)
- › Jungle Speed (Wii)
- › Major League Baseball 2K12 (PS3, 360, Wii)
- › Mass Effect 3 (PS3, 360, PC)
- › MLB 12: The Show (PS3, Vita)
- › NCIS (3DS)
- › Ridge Racer Unbounded (PS3, 360)
- › Silent Hill HD Collection (PS3, 360)
- › The Sims 3: Showdown (PC)
- › Street Fighter X Tekken (PS3, 360)

07 An Atomic Front

Jonathan Hickman's new ongoing comic series *The Manhattan Projects* invites readers to experience the history of science through the eyes of madmen. What if the atomic bomb was created as a front for a more sinister project? This series kicks off today and features the art of Nick Pitarra.

09 Owls in Gotham

One of the biggest changes in DC Comics' New 52 universe is Batman's origin story. His parents still tragically die outside of a theater, but we're now learning that a clandestine organization called the Court of Owls has guarded Gotham since its inception. They view Batman as a threat to their city. This story is now collected into one hardcover volume for \$24.99.

09 Civil War Vet in Space!

Today marks the opening of one of the weirdest science fiction concepts to date: A civil war veteran named John Carter is warped to Mars where he becomes a superhero who must save the planet and score with the princess. The movie is just called *John Carter*, but should really be named *Superman Gets Laid on Mars*.

11 Nintendo's Board Game Party Continues

Mario Party 9 hits Wii today, and offers the new gameplay wrinkle of boss battles. Players must work together to defeat Bowser and King Boo, yet must still be competitive in hopes of walking away with the highest score. This entry offers 80 different minigames and a new vehicle-based approach to moving across the game board.

13 New Releases

- › FIFA Street (PS3, 360)
- › Naruto Shippuden: Ultimate Ninja Storm Generations (PS3, 360)

- › Resident Evil: Operation Raccoon City (PS3, 360)
- › Silent Hill Downpour (PS3, 360)
- › Sniper: Ghost Warrior 2 (PS3, 360)
- › Tales of Graces f (PS3)

14 South Park Turns 16

Are you excited for the upcoming South Park RPG? Bone up on your knowledge with South Park's 16th season, starting today on Comedy Central. If we know Trey Parker and Matt Stone as well as we think we do, there's a good chance their game writing may bleed into this season.

16 Hablas Español?

Will Ferrell, the actor who has a cameo role in almost every comedy, is once again taking a starring role in today's release, *Casa de Mi Padre*. According to the trailer, the main selling points of this film are Ferrell, guns, cigarettes, and special effects. The entire movie is spoken in Spanish with English subtitles. On a scale of *Anchorman* to *Semi-Pro*, this film looks to lean toward the former.

20 New Releases

- › Kid Icarus: Uprising (3DS)
- › Kinect Rush: A Disney-Pixar Adventure (360)
- › Top Gun: Hard Lock (PS3, 360)

23 The New Twilight

Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* book jumps to the big screen today, and is just a sparkling vampire shy of looking like a *Twilight* sequel. Producers cast a bunch of tween magnets in the leading roles, so all fans need to do is replace the name "Edward" with "Peeta" and "Jacob" with "Gale." To prepare, you could read *The Hunger Games* (which is excellent) or watch *Battle Royale* (which is basically the same thing).

27 New Releases

- › Capcom Digital Collection (360)
- › Dragon's Dogma (PS3, 360)
- › Rhythm Thief & the Emperor's Treasure (3DS)
- › Tiger Woods PGA Tour 13 (PS3, 360)
- › Yakuza: Dead Souls (PS3)

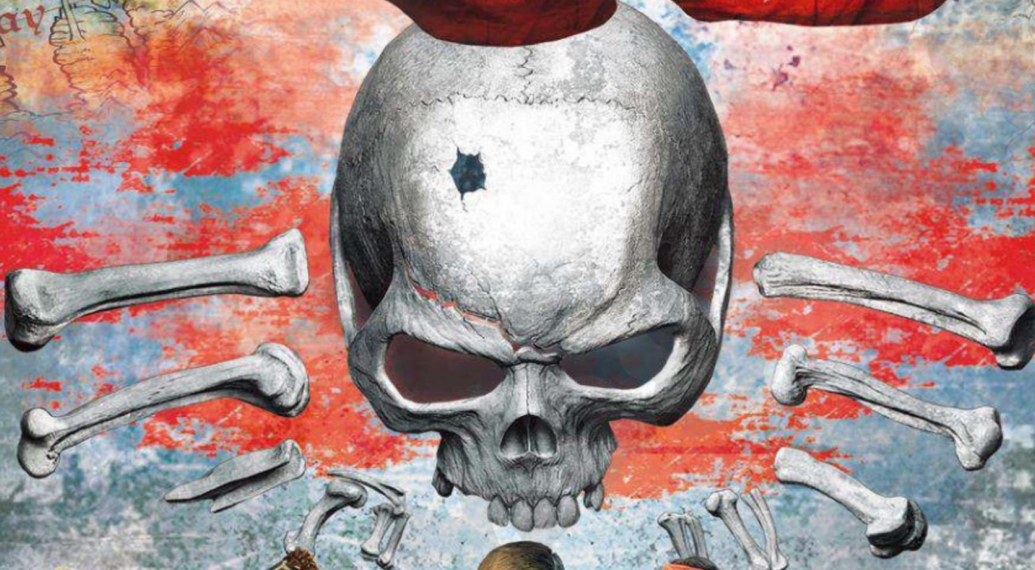
30 God of War Ripped Off Again

When is Sony going to sue the makers of the *Clash of the Titans* and today's sequel *Wrath of the Titans*? Seriously, it looks just like God of War. It has fire giants, a guy named Zeus, and is set in ancient Greece. Those were all great ideas when humans saw them for the first time ever in God of War. We said the same thing the last time and you sent us angry emails. Think, really think, before sending another.

04.24.2012

RISEN 2

Dark Waters



MATURE	17+™
M	Blood Strong Language Use of Alcohol Violence
ESRB CONTENT RATING	www.esrb.org

WWW.RISEN2.COM







THE LAST OF US

A LONG ROAD AHEAD

» **Platform**
PlayStation 3

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

» **Publisher**
Sony Computer Entertainment

» **Developer**
Naughty Dog

» **Release**
Late 2012

Back in early December of last year, a teaser for a mysterious new PlayStation 3 exclusive appeared on the Internet. A cryptic trailer showed live action shaky cam footage of flaming cars, quarantine zones, displaced families wearing surgical masks, and riots. The narrator laments the past in a future without simple things like Sunday football and the sound of an airplane. We found out the name of the game, *The Last of Us*, but no one knew who was making it. At the same time, another connected video showed an ant moving erratically until something started growing out of its head. Fans quickly connected the video to BBC program *Planet Earth*, specifically a segment on the Cordyceps fungus. This parasite forces an ant to climb to a certain height, kills it, and then grows out of its dead carcass in a macabre display, eventually releasing spores to infect other ants. Many varieties of insect-focused Cordyceps exist, and each one targets a specific species of bug. But what did this have to do with *The Last of Us*? We all found out

a few days later when the first trailer debuted at the Spike TV Video Game Awards.

The Cordyceps fungus jumped to humans and caused the end of the world as we know it. Infected humans' only function is to infect others, as our protagonist Joel and his teenage companion, Ellie, know all too well. While survivors scavenge for supplies, a pack of infected appear and it takes both of them shooting and stabbing to stop just one long enough to allow them to sprint toward the exit.

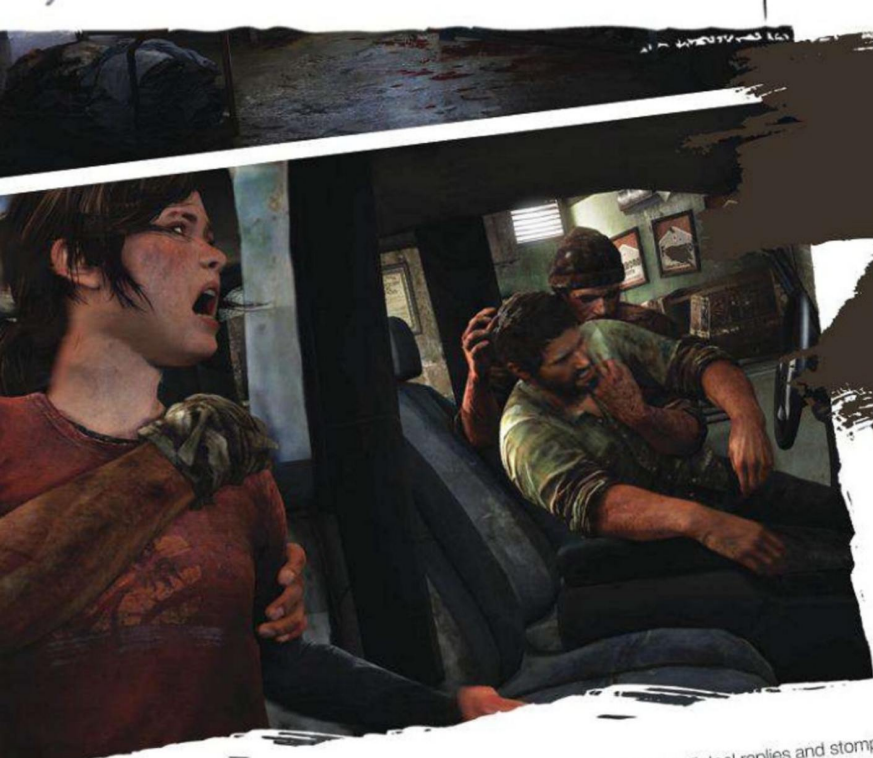
The trailer looked great, and the iconic Naughty Dog logo that appeared before it whipped fans into a frenzy. The creators of *Uncharted*, *Jak and Daxter*, and *Crash Bandicoot* have a pedigree few developers can match. This is why we jumped at the chance to visit the Santa Monica studio to see the first live gameplay of *The Last of Us*, dive into the backstory of the world and protagonists, and hear how close Naughty Dog was to making an all-new *Jak and Daxter* game for PlayStation 3.

BY BRYAN VORE



JOEL STRUGGLES TO SURVIVE





AN AFTERNOON DRIVE

An old, beat up pickup truck rumbles into an eerily quiet city on a sunny afternoon. A country and western classic blares out of the speakers, but it's certainly not playing over the radio waves. Clear streets eventually become choked with rusted out, abandoned vehicles. Only one narrow path exists.

"Well, perfect," Joel complains as he brings the truck to a halt.

"Now what?" asks his teenage companion, Ellie.

Joel twists around and briefly considers going back the way they came. "Screw it," he says and puts it in drive.

A moment later, a man staggers out in front of them clutching his gut and calling for help. Joel slams the breaks.

"Easy! Holy s---. Are we going to help him?" Ellis asks.

"Put your seatbelt on, Ellie."
"What about the guy?"

"He ain't even hurt," Joel replies and stomps on the gas.

The man in the street suddenly straightens up and pulls out a gun. He manages to fire a single shot through the windshield before the truck slams into him head-on. His friends quickly materialize. A man on the passenger side smashes in Ellie's window as they drive by, sending shards all over the interior. The truck fishtails, but doesn't lose speed.

It looks like they might escape until a city bus careens into the truck and sends it crashing into an abandoned storefront. The pickup smashes into the back wall, leaving Joel and Ellie dazed.

"I'm okay. I'm okay," Ellie says between breaths.

"Then get out. Quick," Joel replies.

Suddenly, scavengers rip the doors open and start pulling them out. Joel watches Ellie get taken away kicking and screaming before his face is smashed down into the center console. He's yanked violently out of the pickup and pulled over to the side of the store. He gains his wits just as the attacker pushes him toward an eight-inch shard of glass jutting up from an old window frame. Joel resists as his neck edges closer to the glinting shard. Ellie's screams echo in the background.

THE ONLINE QUESTION

With all of these human factions scavenging through the cities, it's not that hard to imagine what online multiplayer could look like in *The Last of Us*. Though Naughty Dog isn't prepared to discuss specifics, game director Bruce Straley at least admits it exists. "We're going to have some sort of online component," he says. "We're working on a bunch of ideas, but we haven't nailed anything down. We definitely know it's going to be awesome."

GROUND ZERO

As they wrapped up *Uncharted 2: Among Thieves* in the fall of 2009, major changes were underway at Naughty Dog. The developer was receiving constant requests to license the *Uncharted* engine from internal and external studios alike. Fans may have noticed that none of these requests have come to fruition. "[The engine] just isn't set up to be able to be worked on outside of our office," explains Naughty Dog co-president Evan Wells. "So really the only way to leverage that would be to get a second team going."

Wells says another more important reason for the unprecedented expansion was that the studio has an abundance of talent and he didn't want to lose anyone to headhunters or career ceilings. "So many people here at Naughty Dog who are environment modelers or designers or animators could be leads or directors at any other company," Wells says. "They're just really masters of their craft and doing a great job here, so we wanted to give them an opportunity to grow."

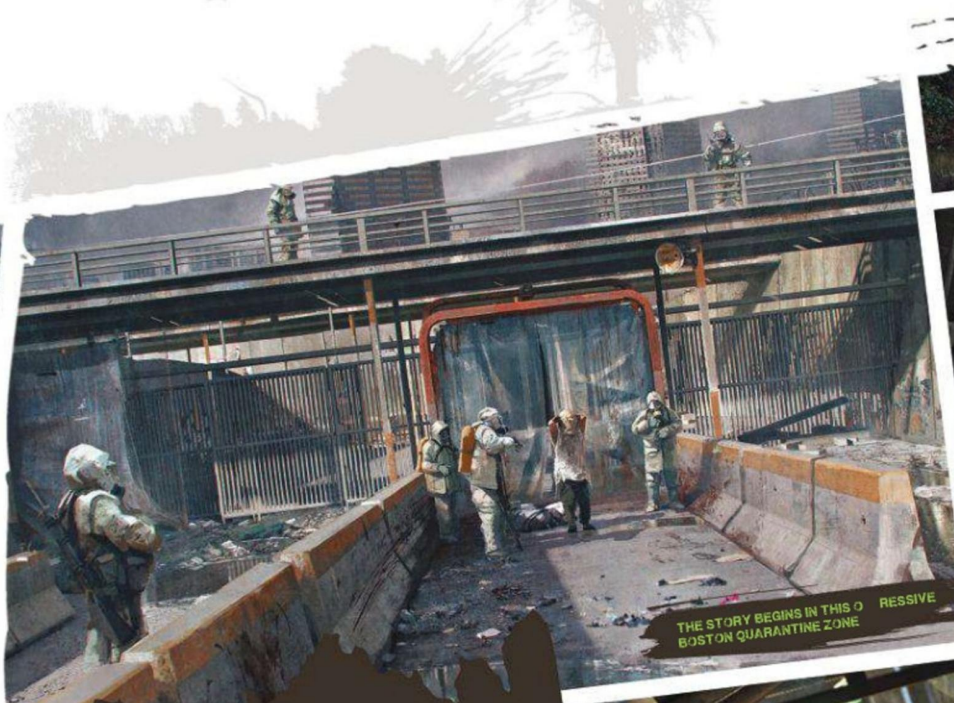
Wells and co-president Christophe Balestra decided to create two completely separate teams so the creators could focus entirely on one project instead of bouncing back and forth. They installed Bruce Straley as the new game's director, whose past Naughty Dog credits stretch from directing *Uncharted 2* all the way back to *Crash Team Racing*. The newly named creative director, Neil Druckmann, got his start designing menus in *Jak X: Combat Racing*, and most recently was a lead designer on *Uncharted 2*.

A DIFFERENT KIND OF POST-APOCALYPSE

The *Last of Us* team is well aware of the many tropes that come along with making post-apocalyptic and zombie games. "It's been done before. We've seen the typical zombie shooter, the typical desaturated gray worlds," says game director Bruce Straley. "That's not Naughty Dog. That's not our style. It has to be beautiful. It has to give you that sense of mystery and entice you to want to see more." Visually, the team is inspired by the popular "ruin porn" branch of photography in which decrepit structures are taken over by nature in some way. This allows them to create ruined relics of human civilization while juxtaposing them against lush greenery, creating intriguing yet disturbing environments.

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THE STORY BEGINS IN THIS ORESSIVE BOSTON QUARANTINE ZONE



AN OSCAR-WINNING COMPOSER

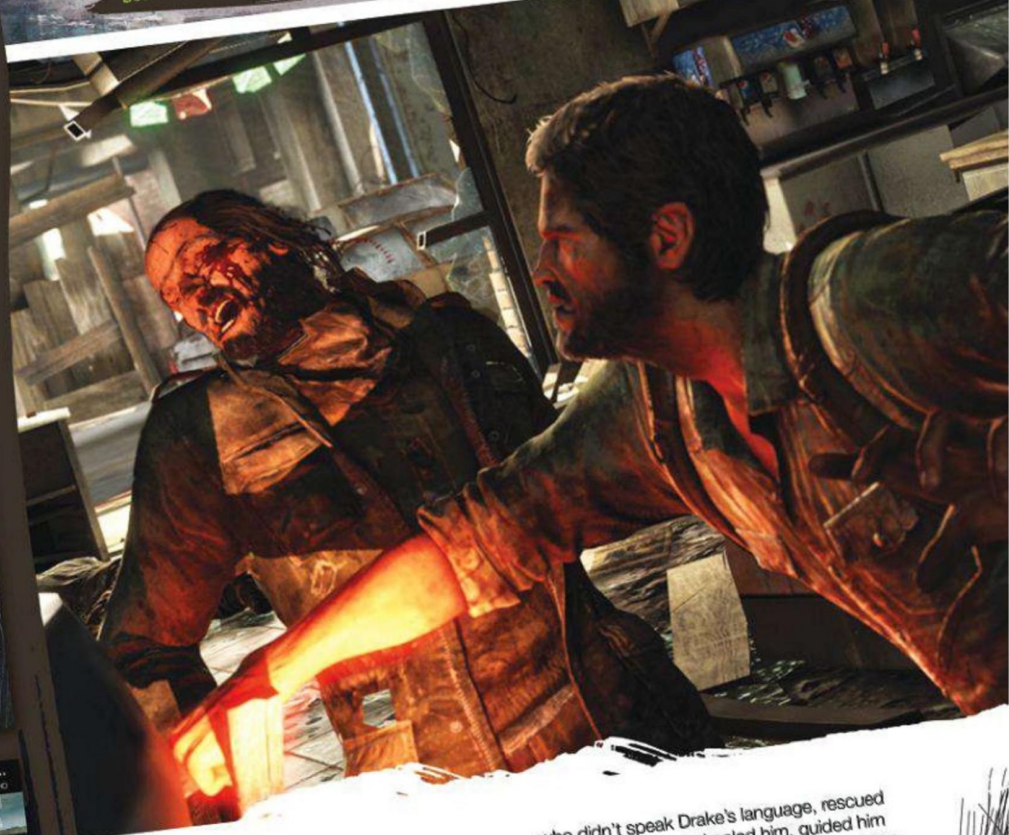
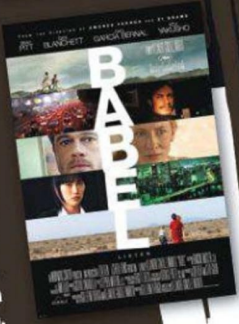
When Naughty Dog was kicking around possible composers to hire with Sony Music, someone mentioned that a lot of people there listen to the *Motorcycle Diaries* soundtrack by Gustavo Santaolalla. When they investigated his background, they discovered that he won back-to-back



Academy Awards for *Brokeback Mountain* in 2006 and *Babel* in 2007. Before long, Santaolalla was at the studio watching an early version of the first trailer and getting a full description of the plot. "His first words were, 'I want to be a part of this. Whatever it takes, I want to write for this,'" creative director Neil Druckmann recalls.



Santaolalla has already written over a dozen tracks, one of which can be heard in the first trailer. As part of the overall minimalist sound design, the music will be subtle, but the composer has long proven that he can make a lot from sparse instrumentation.



As Naughty Dog built up the team with internal and external recruits, a big question loomed: What game would they make? While many different concepts floated around, including an all-new entry in the Jak and Daxter series (see sidebar on page 64), the team ultimately decided to go with a new IP that allowed them to make whatever they wanted.

Straley and Druckmann looked back through their repertoire and settled on the *Uncharted 2* sequence where Nathan Drake teams up with a man named Tenzin in the Himalayas. This man,

who didn't speak Drake's language, rescued him in a snowstorm, healed him, guided him through dangerous caves, helped him escape from snow creatures, and fought alongside him to save his village from enemy forces. The two built up this deep trust through working together for only a short time.

"We gave ourselves this challenge - what if you took an entire game to build a relationship with someone instead of just one level?" Druckmann says. "That became one of the inspirations for *The Last of Us*."



NAUGHTY DOG NEITHER WANTS TO SHY AWAY FROM GORE NOR EX-LOIT IT IN THE LAST OF US

When choosing the characters, they looked to some of their favorite films like *Road to Perdition* and the Coen brothers' recent take on *True Grit*. "You have these male, violent characters that have gone someplace dark, that are essentially dead inside," Druckmann says. "They get a chance at redemption when they are introduced to this kid, this person who still has some innocence left. And for the kid it's this coming of age story. This adult that they're hanging out with is in some ways corrupting them, but in some ways giving them the tools to become independent. These two characters complete each other in a way."

The relationship between Joel and Ellie is the core of *The Last of Us*, but it starts off

understandably rough when they meet in Boston 20 years after the fungal outbreak that took down most of the world. As a 14-year-old orphan, Ellie has never seen the old world or anything outside the towering concrete walls of the oppressive military quarantine zone she grew up in. She's obsessed with relics from our culture like music and books, and constantly gets in trouble at her boarding house. Joel is in his late forties and has been through a lot of heavy stuff to survive. Now he runs drugs and weapons through the quarantine zone's black market.

This bleak locale is littered with checkpoints and constant body scans for traces of the infection. If you come up positive, you're executed

immediately. The spores can be transmitted through the air, but it needs to be a concentrated and confined space to really spread. At least these people can enjoy sunlight and fresh air without having to wear gasmasks all the time.

As the man who can get you things, Joel is recruited to sneak Ellie out of the quarantine zone for an unknown reason. He agrees to leave this delightful place, but things go horribly wrong and they end up being pursued by the military. Joel's instinct is to leave the girl behind and move on, but he promised a dying friend that he would escort her to safety. When a nearby safe haven doesn't work out, the two venture west on a post-apocalyptic journey across the United States.

THE KILLING

Joel and Ellie have made it as far as Pittsburgh, but this could be the end of their journey if they don't fight back against the scavengers. Joel elbows his attacker and turns the tables. He slams the man down on the glass shard and he comes up sputtering with blood pouring out of this throat.

Elsewhere, Ellie bites her captor's arm and gets slapped to the ground. She struggles to get up, trying to escape, and Joel dashes over to kick the scavenger in the face. The man staggers to his feet and Joel beats him down.

"Motherf---er! What's wrong with these guys?" Ellie shouts.

"Catch your breath. We're leaving," Joel says.

"Watch out!"

When more scavengers enter the store, Joel and Ellie split up to find cover. "He's behind the counter," one calls out.

Joel pulls out a handgun in the darkness. The only light sources are the sunbeams pouring in from outside. The enemies are dark silhouettes creeping toward them. He pops up and shoots one down. He crouch-walks to a new spot and tries to fire at another scavenger, but he's out of bullets and the clicks of the empty chamber echo through the room.

The man hears this and closes in on Joel's position, taunting him along the way. Joel's got no bullets and no weapons. This is going to go badly.

"Hey, f---face!" shouts Ellie before she hurls a brick into the man's head. Stunned and cursing, he's distracted just long enough for Joel to vault over the counter and punch him out.

"Behind you!" she warns. But it's too late. A scavenger has already bashed a 2x4 into Joel's back. He dodges the second swipe and prries the weapon out of the man's grip. Joel knocks him to the ground and raises the 2x4 above his head. The man pleads for mercy, but Joel smashes down on the scavenger's skull without hesitation.

"Over the bus," Ellie says. More men are climbing over rubble to get to them.

"Godd---it. Move," Joel commands. They both sneak out the side of the store. Joel takes a look back to see a scavenger surveying the bloody scene.

"Sweet Jesus," the man mutters. "Watch yourselves. This tourist's got some scrap in

him." The men fan out and Joel targets one in an alcove. He sneaks up behind and chokes him out.

"Hey, you found anything?" shouts an enemy off in the distance. Joel and Ellie sneak away as the man nears. He sees the dead body.

"Oh, no. Hey, they're here. They're still here!" the man shouts. Joel picks up a nearby brick and throws it at him. He charges while the man's stunned and kills him with the 2x4. Upon searching the body, Joel finds a few bullets. He loads them into this gun and looks up, spotting a scavenger carrying only a pipe.

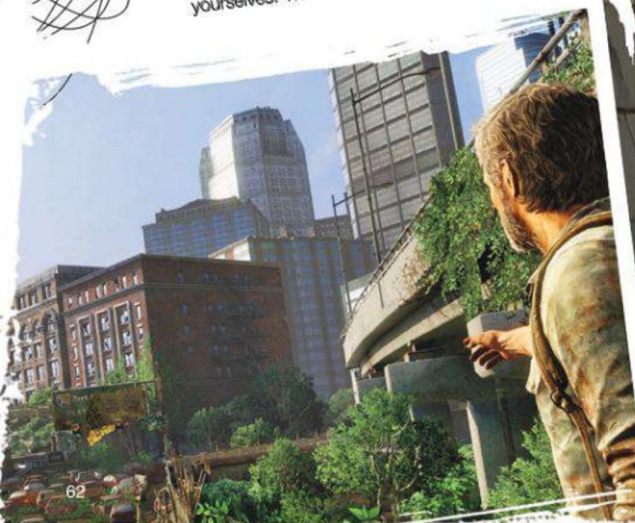
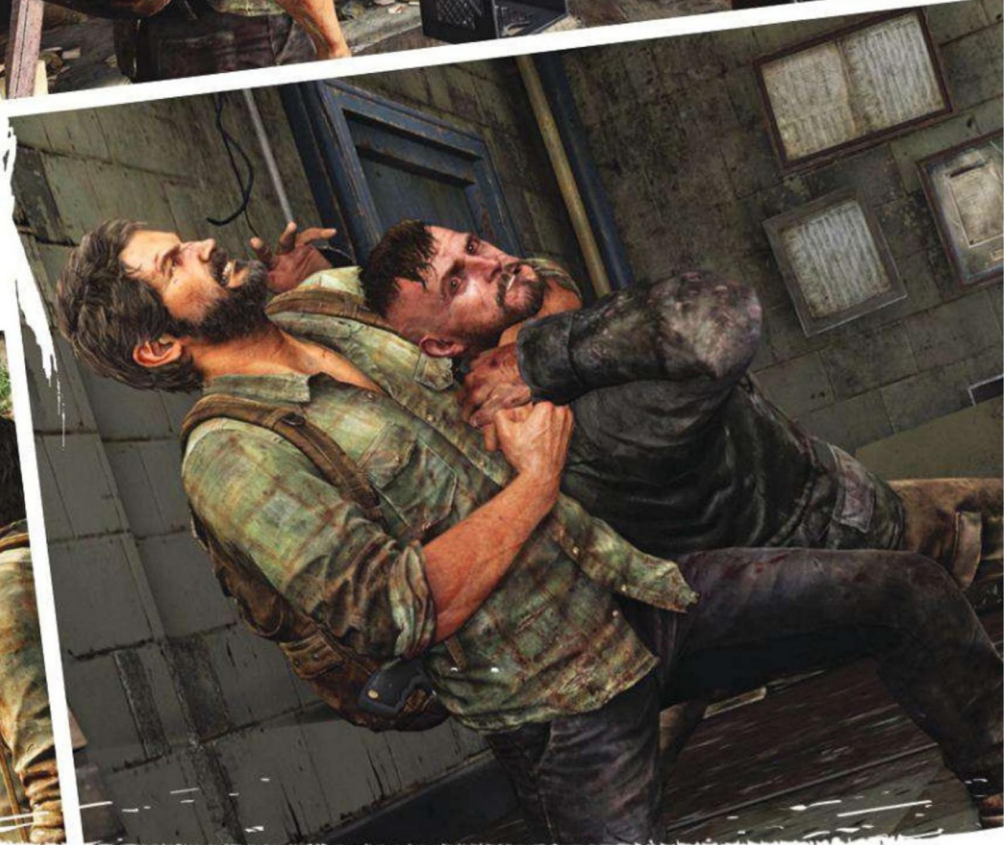
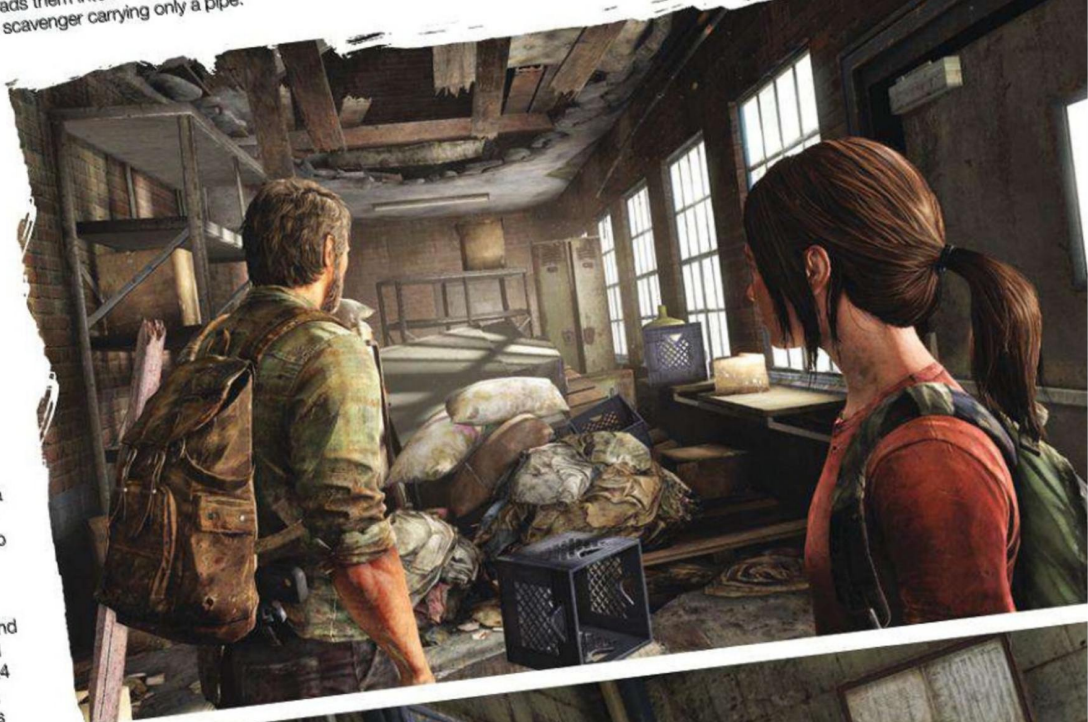
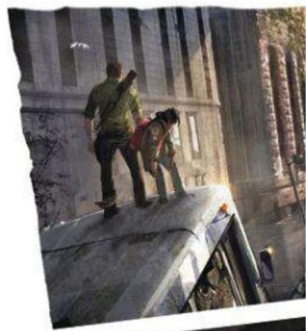
"Oh, f--- me," the man says and dashes back into the dark store.

Joel runs after him and carefully creeps around the aisles, his gun raised. There's no trace of the enemy. The only sound is Joel's footsteps and tense breathing. The man screams and charges him from behind, but Joel turns and shoots him down in time.

"All right, I think that's the last of them. You okay?" Joel asks.

"Yeah, I guess so," Ellie replies.

"Good, because we need to get the hell out of here."





WHILE ELLIE STAYS OUT OF TROUBLE FOR THE MOST PART, JOEL CAN'T PROTECT HER ALL THE TIME

SEQUEL POTENTIAL

When you look at Naughty Dog's track record, the studio doesn't usually kick off a new franchise unless it's fertile ground for additional entries. That said, it's difficult to imagine sequels to some of the films that directly inspired the creation of *The Last of Us*, like *The Road* and *No Country for Old Men*. "We only think about one game at a time," clarifies game director Bruce Straley. "The story is self-contained," adds creative director Neil Druckmann. "The story stands on its own. We don't end on a cliffhanger. The characters and the journey they go through ends with this story."



NAUGHTY DOG RETURNS TO JAK AND DAXTER?

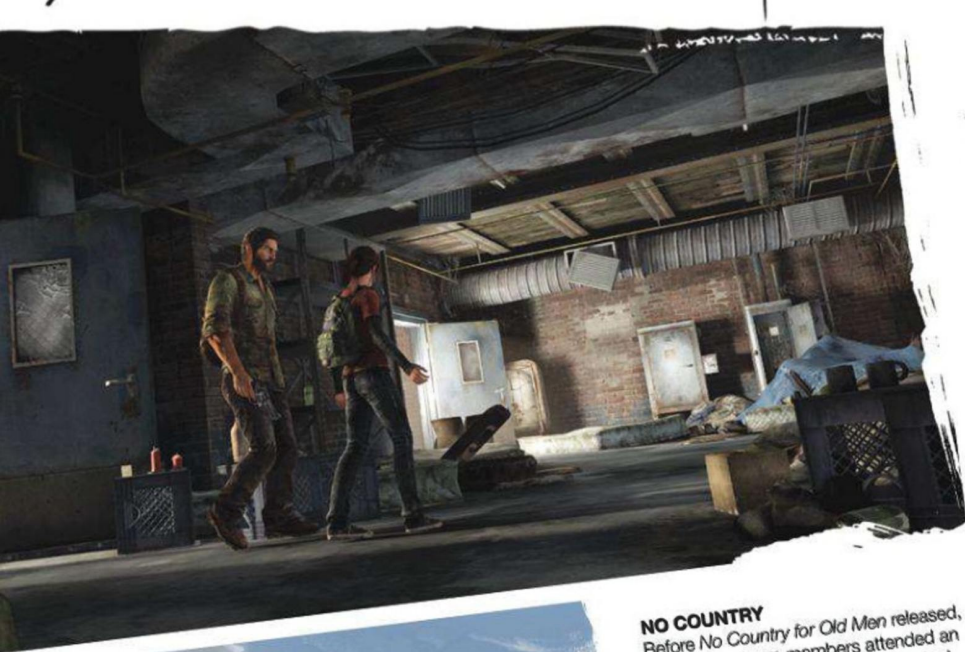
When Naughty Dog decided to create a second development team in the studio, it needed a new game idea. One of the earliest possibilities was a reboot of the Jak and Daxter franchise on PlayStation 3. Co-president Evan Wells explains what happened.

"We'd all talked about it in interviews with fans asking, 'When's the next Jak and Daxter?' I don't know if this is going to make them happy or sad, but we did explore the idea fairly extensively. Something that we talked about early on was, 'Let's go back and apply what we've learned on the Uncharted games to Jak and Daxter.' It's one of the franchises that's near and dear to us, and, in all honesty, we'd like to somehow honor.

"But as we started exploring this and looking at ways we could evolve the game and apply the same narrative techniques that we had leveraged to good effect in the Uncharted series and bring the technology forward and allow us to render in a more realistic style like we were able to do in Uncharted, all the ideas just started to feel like they were going so far away from what made Jak and Daxter Jak and Daxter. Even if we felt like we're going to give the fans another Jak and Daxter, we felt we weren't going to give them the game that they wanted. We would end up limiting the direction that the company had this passion for while simultaneously not creating the game that fans wanted. We just realized we were going to just do everybody a disservice. So at that point the conversations started to move in new directions.

"Now is not the time. Never say never. It could happen. Naughty Dog's got a long history and I think it's got a long future, so to say we'll never go back is kind of crazy. But right now we've got this new IP that we're definitely going to be supporting. I guess there's a possibility that the Uncharted team could move on to Jak and Daxter. It's still up in the air, but I wouldn't think that's going to happen because I think we'd run into all of the same problems with that team that we did with this team."





"Balance of Power," which constantly and dynamically adapts as enemies and Joel trade off the upper hand.

"We're not sure why it works this way, the psychology behind it, but the more we humanize them the scarier they become," Druckmann says. The team hopes to accomplish this by adding emotion and personality to the enemies alongside the advanced AI. They get angry when a friend dies, they warn each other of danger, and they're frightened when they've lost the upper hand.

It's best to avoid direct confrontation, as the added lethality is a two-way street. Making matters more difficult, you can't just hide and wait for your health to recharge. Persistent health means you'll have to use a health pack to repair damage and budget enough time to apply it.

Players take control of Joel while Ellie is an AI-driven non-player character. Naughty Dog decided against integrating cooperative gameplay, though it promises that Ellie will prove very capable and not get in your way. "We know very capable and not get in your way. 'We know if the entire thing is an escort mission you're gonna hate it,'" Druckmann says. "The easy thing for us to do is every time there is combat she just hides somewhere and then she comes out at the end. We gave ourselves the insane challenge of, 'How do we make her a part of this combat space?'"

In the demo, she does a great job of tagging along, staying out of sight, warning Joel of danger, and getting him out of jams. Ellie's skillset expands over time in some unexplained ways (note that she is holding a gun on our cover). As long as players don't purposely lure enemies to her position or completely ignore when she's obviously in trouble, they shouldn't have to worry much about blaming a game over on her.

"The train in Uncharted 2 was one of those things that once we said we're going to do it, it took the entire course of two years of development," Straley says. "That's how we're treating our AI in this. It's so important to ground these characters, to make them intelligent, to try to get the interactions with the players right."

NO COUNTRY

Before *No Country for Old Men* released, a few of the team members attended an advance screening. "The psychological impact that this movie had was completely inspiring," Straley remembers. They couldn't stop thinking about how much tension the Coen brothers achieved through subtlety. The movie had very little music and sometimes no dialogue for long stretches of time. Instead, the Coen brothers relied on ambient noise, exhausted breathing, and booming guns. Combat in *The Last of Us* is heavily inspired by Anton Chigurh's intense gun battle with Llewelyn Moss, going for as much tension as possible in place of a non-stop action thrill ride.

Alongside sparse sound design, realism is key. Limited resources mean Joel isn't going to be running around blasting a machine gun. In this world, a single pistol bullet can kill. This added lethality affects enemy decisions as well. When Joel pulls out a gun and kills an enemy, the others are going to hide or try to flank his position. If they can see Joel only has a melee weapon, they'll come right after him. Naughty Dog calls this AI system



THIS CONCEPT ART OFFERS A GLIMMER AT WHAT LIFE IS LIKE OUTSIDE OF THE CITY





ELLIE WILL FOLLOW JOEL'S LEAD WHEN MANEUVERING THROUGH COVER

ESCAPE

Joel eyes up the bus that now blocks the way they came into the city. "We sure as hell ain't going back this way. You find anything?" he asks.

"Not yet," Ellie replies. They stroll through the streets looking for a possible way out. A closed garage looks promising. "Hey, maybe we can go through here."

"Alright, let me see if I can get it," Joel says. He lifts the heavy door up a few feet. "Go. See if you can get it propped open with something."

Ellie scampers quickly under. Only her legs are visible as she searches the space. She stops looking. "Um, there's some pretty gnarly stuff in here," she warns.

"Ellie!"

"Right," Ellie says as she snaps out of it and finds the door's chain to yank on. "Ok, go."

Joel dashes through, turns around to grab the door, and slowly lowers it so as not to alert anyone. When he finally gets a look at the room, he sees a few bodies and some large piles of clothes, shoes, and some large piles of food. It's clear that this faction funnels all the highway traffic into a single ambush point, kills anyone who drives in, and takes all of their things.

"F---ing hunters. See, this could have been us," Joel cautions.

"Man, that is a lot of people that didn't make

it," Ellie contemplates.

"I knew I should have turned the damn truck around."

"We lived."

"Barely. C'mon, let's get out of here."

The pair ascends some nearby stairs.

"How did you know?" Ellie asks.

"About what?"

"About the ambush."

"I've been on both sides."

"Oh."

They get up to the hunters' living area. It's got beat up lockers, piles of supplies, and soiled mattresses everywhere.

"So, uh, kill a lot of innocent people?"

Ellie digs.

"Just search the place."

"I'll take that as a 'yes.'"

"Take it however you want."

They both spend some time searching through the place.

"Dirty clothes, dirty clothes. Ah, here you go. More bullets," Ellie announces.

"Good. Thank you," Joel says and they move outdoors where a pile of burnt bodies awaits them.

"Oh, man," Ellie says.

"C'mon, you don't need to be looking at that."

"I've seen worse."

"All right then."



TRIPLE-A ACTING

For *The Last of Us*, Naughty Dog is using the same process it uses for capturing to performances in the *Uncharted* franchise. Actors Troy Baker (Joel) and Ashley Johnson (Ellie) play out the scenes in the developer's dedicated space on the Sony Pictures lot. Voice and motion capture are both done at the same time in order to get naturalistic performances and leave room for improvisation. Like always, all of the facial animations will be done by hand. Baker has appeared in countless games, playing Snow in both *Final Fantasy* and *XIII* games, one of the player voices in *Saints Row: The Third*, and *Two-Face* and *Robin* in *Batman: Arkham City*. In 2012, he will also appear as Booker DeWitt in *BioShock Infinite*. Johnson has more of a Hollywood and TV background, appearing recently in *The Help* and the AMC show *The Killing*, while classic sitcom fans will recognize her as Chrissy Seaver in the latter seasons of *Growing Pains*.



with unique Ellie and Joel abilities is a key pillar," Druckmann explains. Each can do things the other can't, and they must work together to move forward. One thing's for sure, neither one of them will be performing the wild action star climbs and jumps that *Uncharted's* Nathan Drake can. All actions have to fit within the game's grounded, realistic tone.

Keeping in the realm of realism, we didn't see any spore-infected humans like those shown in the first trailer. "The reason we want to focus on the human antagonists right now is that is the focus of the game," Wells says. "You will be facing humans more frequently than infected."

Different human factions all have different goals. Not all of them are hunters. Some will even help you along the way if it benefits them somehow. Just like an *Uncharted* game, Joel and Ellie are part of a larger cast of characters and enemies that will come in and out of their adventure as they pass through not just cities, but suburbs and rural areas as well.

"You can kind of see what we're willing to talk about and what we're not," Druckmann explains. "It's almost like what people don't want to talk about is what's really important to them. We wanted to right away in the first trailer show the infected so there's no mystery behind it. It's like, let's get this thing out of the way because it's not about this. [It's about] the mystery of who these characters are, what their backstory is, why are they together, and why are they leaving the quarantine zone. That to us is more interesting than how did this thing spread [or] who spread it. I've seen that before, but I haven't seen this kind of relationship in games." ◆

Check out gameinformer.com/lastofus for a month of expanded content. Watch video interviews with Bruce Straley and Neil Druckmann, read more on the lost *Jak* and *Daxter* game, see *Game Informer* editor-in-chief Andy McNamara discuss all things Naughty Dog with co-presidents Evan Wells and Christophe Balestra, and more

Joel scans the horizon. Brilliant green plants blanket the urban landscape. Trees sprout out from cracks in the pavement and bushes peek out between a sea of abandoned cars. He spots what he's looking for.

"All right, there's the bridge. That's our way out of here," he says, but Ellie is already climbing down. "Ellie, slow down. Wait for me."

"What? I'm right here."

"How 'bout you let me go first? And keep your voice down."

"Okay," she says in a mocking tough guy voice.

They slowly make their way through the cars and begin to notice bullet holes in all of them with long-dead bodies inside. They're all pointed toward the torn-down gate of a ruined quarantine zone. Imposing concrete walls loom up ahead.

"What happened here? Your fellow hunters do this?" Ellie asks.

"Cute. And no, my money's on the military."

"Why would they mow down all of these people?"

"Can't let everyone in."

"So they kill them?"

"Dead people don't get infected. Sacrifice the few to save the many."

"That's kind of s---ty."

"Yeah."

As the cars get closer together, Joel and Ellie start walking on the roofs and hoods.

"You know, besides all of that horrible stuff, this place is actually kind of pretty."

"Well, I'll stop to smell the roses once we're out of this city."

A murder of crows suddenly takes to the sky near the gate ahead.

"Get down," Joel whispers. They both crouch behind the trunk of a car.

"What? What is it?"

"Shut up."

A brief whistle sounds from up ahead. Two shadowy figures climb up on some cars and the demo fades to black.

BEHIND THE CURTAIN

While we saw many interesting elements in *The Last of Us* demo, some key parts of the final game were absent. Platforming and puzzle solving, for instance, were minimally present. "Figuring out how to navigate spatial problems

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

» **Style**
1-Player
Action/RPG

» **Publisher**
THQ

» **Developer**
Vigil Games

» **Release**
Summer





A RENDEZVOUS WITH DEATH

VIGIL SHOWS OFF THE NEW MOVES THAT MAKE DEATH A VERY DIFFERENT PROTAGONIST FROM HIS BROTHER, WAR

by *phil hollar*

As the sequel to THQ's surprisingly awesome 2010 action game, *Darksiders II* has a lot in common with the original. You'll still be slicing up demonic enemies, solving *Zelda*-style puzzles in post-apocalyptic dungeons, and piecing together a conspiracy of biblical proportions. One area in which the sequel is decidedly different is the main character. In my most recent lengthy look at *Darksiders II*, it became abundantly clear that Death is much more than a palette swap for his big brother.

on borrowed time



In the first area of the new demo, Death enters a cave full of freely flowing lava. As he walks in, a stone golem named Ghorn threatens him and smashes the ground, destroying the bridge Death is standing on and sending the hero plummeting below.

On this lower level, I'm quickly introduced to one of Death's significant improvements over War: his ability to quickly and gracefully navigate the environment. In the first game War could climb across ledges, but his bulky frame made him slow, so these sections were generally straightforward and didn't require much timing. In this dungeon of *Darksiders II*, Ghorn's ground-smashing causes lava to rise, forcing Death to be swift as he clamors up a vertical passage.

The first *Darksiders* was often referred to as a blend of *God of War* and *Zelda*, but this traversal challenge reminds me of another popular franchise: *Prince of Persia*. Death employs a wall run to begin his trek upward, then runs along the wall's limited handholds, inching higher up where possible. At key points he can launch himself using the ghost hand, a hook-shot-like tool that pulls Death up to attachments sticking out of the wall and – with a well-placed button press – sends him sailing even higher.



"In the first game, all of the traversal was non-committal traversal, just point-to-point," says lead designer Haydn Dalton. "Now at some point you're going to fail while doing a wall run or using your ghost hand. That adds an element of tension. It adds a lot of commitment and engagement for the player to getting around the environment."

Another early navigational puzzle sees Death standing on platforms that slowly sink into the lava like something out of a Mario game. He quickly scans his environment to get a bearing on each platform and then must jump to the next before he's fried.

Once back on solid ground, Death whips the ghost hand at an enemy across the room. It grabs the demonic creature and sends it flying toward Death's waiting flurry of scythes slashes. At one point in the brutal combo, Death's two scythes are combined into a single large blade for a downward smash.

Death switches over to some of the secondary weapons, which can be accessed on the fly. As might be expected, the hammer is slow

and bulky but powerful, producing attacks that damage the enemies for over 1,000 hit points. I couldn't tell what percentage of the enemy's life bar that represents, but it seems impressive compared to the 300 or 400 points the scythes dole out. As a sucker for instant feedback, I'm also happy to see the addition of damage-indicating numbers floating above enemies as Death attacks.

After fighting through a few waves of relatively easy opponents, Death encounters his first simple puzzle in the form of a lava river with no apparent way across. Nearby sits a giant, unmoving golem that appears to be made of stone and metal. This is a rideable construct, a key puzzle-solving element for several of the dungeons in *Darksiders II*.

Death can hop onto the golem's shoulders and move through the lava with ease. In the next area, I witness its basic attacks – large ground pounds that deal area damage but are very slow in comparison to Death's regular barrage of abilities. After cleaning another room of demonic scum, Death parks the construct in a





groove in the ground that opens a nearby door.

At the end of this area, Death faces off against Ghorn, the troublesome rock creature that sent him on a detour at the beginning. This opponent is much larger than Death and has a huge drill in one hand and a giant stoney sword in the other. Despite his imposing size, Ghorn is only a miniboss; Dalton promises that actual bosses in *Darksiders II* are much bigger.

The encounter with Ghorn has a rhythm that

feels familiar. After an initial round of hacking and slashing, the boss begins shaking and glowing red. This is Death's cue that he's about to perform an explosion, giving the agile hero time to run out of the area of effect. Later in the battle, Ghorn pounds the ground, causing bursts of lava to shoot up in tiny, narrow streams that Death must dodge. Around the midway point of the fight, the boss summons smaller rock-based minions to pester Death.

I've seen these boss fight elements in plenty of action and RPG titles, but *Darksiders II* presents them elegantly, and the fight looks like a blast.

Ghorn is defeated with a brutal finishing move where a large, spectral version of Death – his Reaper form – hacks at the creature with a giant scythe. Dalton casually notes that this whole lengthy dungeon – one that easily lasted as long as the shortest dungeon in the first *Darksiders* – is an optional side area.

"The publisher will ask, 'How many players are actually going to see this stuff?'" Dalton admits with a laugh. "Well, a lot, we hope. There's always going to be a certain number of bonus things for the player to do instead of focusing on the main quest. It's a risk, but we think it makes for a better game."



Skills



power over death: a look at darksiders II's skill trees

Though War gained new powers throughout the original Darksiders, Death's progress feels much more like a traditional RPG. Each time he levels up he gains an ability point. Players can apply these to two main skill trees: the melee-focused Harbinger tree and the Necromancer tree, which grants Death new spells and greater proficiency with using them.

I wasn't able to explore the full list of potential options in Death's skill trees, but here's an early look at some of the abilities:



Harvest: This ability increases Death's range by sending his Reaper form leaping forward with scythes firing out from it. Each additional skill point devoted to Harvest will cause more scythes to be unleashed.



Death Grip: This crowd control ability summons a giant skeletal hand from the ground to hold an enemy in place while simultaneously providing a small amount of damage.



Exhume: Coffins rise from the ground and burst open, producing small zombie minions who will fight for Death. Additional skill points allow more minions to be summoned at one time.



Murder: Death sends a large group of crows at an enemy. Like Death Grip, this causes some damage but is primarily a form of crowd control, keeping bigger groups of enemies distracted so Death can focus elsewhere.



Unending Hunger: This passive improvement to Murder allows each bit of damage done by crows a small chance of producing another Murder.



Weapon Master: This Harbinger skill causes Death's melee attacks to be critical strikes much more frequently and also makes critical strikes refill some of his Wrath bar, allowing for more abilities to be used.

dressed to kill



The next phase of the demo jumps ahead to a different point in the game — one of the main quest dungeons in the area known as the Maker's Realm. The huge difference in the locales is impressive. This dungeon looks like an ancient ruin, overrun with vegetation and crumbling to pieces. Patches of the roof have broken away, and I can see areas off in the distance that Death will visit at other points in the game.

Before venturing inside, Dalton opens the menu to show off another of Darksider II's new features: the loot system. New armor pieces and weapons drop from enemies like candy from an exploding piñata. Though there's a huge variety of visual and statistical differences between the armor sets, Vigil has split the armor into three basic groups to help players easily

identify which items they want. Necromancer pieces enhance spellcasting, Slayer armor is more focused on allowing a player to take damage, and Wanderer armor plays up Death's speed and rogue abilities.

With a cloth-heavy Necromancer set, Death is ready to show off his abilities. In the next room, he encounters a shielded, floating robot known as the sentinel construct. This enemy raises tinier constructs to life and is invulnerable until it drops its shield to do so. As the sentinel creates the first batch of smaller bad guys, Death uses the exhume ability to summon a few undead minions of his own. The next time the shield drops, he attacks the sentinel with a group of crows using the Murder ability (see sidebar).

After this combat scenario, Death moves on to a puzzle-heavy portion of the dungeon once





again involving the rideable construct. He arrives in an area with a locked gate and no immediately obvious way to open it. In one corner of the room, shadowy black crystals protrude from the wall. These crystals are a concentrated form of corruption that Death will discover and work to destroy throughout the game. His regular weapons are useless against the corruption, but the rideable construct has the power to clear it.

Upon smashing this corruption with the construct, Death discovers a lever that opens the nearby gate. The next area contains a physics-based puzzle. Two gates stand between Death and the other side of the room. In front of the gates lies a circular groove in the floor. The two gates open and close depending on whether the groove is filled.

To progress through this tricky room, Death

rolls a stone ball into the groove, opening the first gate but sending the second back up. He runs into the narrow space between the two and tosses a bomb onto the ball. Blowing up the bomb with a shot from his pistol causes the ball to roll back just enough that the gates switch off once more, allowing Death to keep moving through the dungeon.

Progressing through the dungeon, the puzzle challenge ramps up in a smooth manner. Dalton says the team is working hard to make sure that the game's difficulty – both in puzzles and combat – rises at a steadier pace this time around, rather than the peaks and valleys of the first game. In the case of this dungeon, that means slowly mixing the previous elements. One room makes Death deal with a rideable construct and a stone ball at the same time.

Another brings a second rideable construct into the mix. Death jumps back and forth between the two, opening up gates that allow each one to pass until he gets to a room where both must be placed in waiting slots to unlock the next door.

Finally Death reaches a huge set of double doors that open into a stunning outdoor area. Waterfalls and forests spot the background, and a stairway leads up to a circular arena. It looks like the ideal setting for a boss battle.

Death enters the arena and watches the gigantic construct hulk smash down near him. This enemy looks similar to the rideable constructs Death has been using except with more robot-like gears as part of his body. The middle portion of the hulk is a pulsating web of oozing black corruption. Despite the hulk's increased size compared to Ghorn, this is merely another miniboss.

Death's regular attacks are largely useless against the construct hulk. Instead, he waits for its various heavy smashes to knock loose bombs that are helpfully hanging above the arena. Once those are free, Death can grab one, throw it at the hulk, and blow it up to knock the behemoth down. When he falls to the ground, the hulk's corruption spills all over, becoming temporarily weak to Death's onslaught. After repeating this pattern a few times, Death once again summons his Reaper form for a final attack where he slices the construct into neat pieces.

As the demo ends, I mention how surprised I am by just how many new elements are at play in *Darksiders II* compared to the average sequel. "It's a fine line between giving players more of what they want and adding so much stuff that it isn't really the game it used to be," Dalton says.

He believes *Vigil* is on the right side of that line. If what I've seen is any indication, *Darksiders II* builds on the foundation of the original without emulating it outright, taking more steps toward originality than many sequels in this industry. Referencing our *Darksiders II* cover story, Dalton puts it simply: "I think we're delivering on what we promised."



Tekken characters retain a number of their signature attacks



Street Fighter X Tekken

Two fighting legends enter the ring

If you had asked me 10 years ago if we would ever see a crossover game featuring Street Fighter and Tekken characters, I'd have laughed off the suggestion. The differences between the franchises seemed too vast. Luckily, we have two people crazy enough to try: Street Fighter IV producer Yoshinori Ono and Tekken producer Katsuhiro Harada. The 2D gold-standard Street Fighter and 3D trail-blazer Tekken are arguably the kings of their respective subgenres, so how do you combine two fundamentally different fighting games into one? You start from the ground up.

Not content with simply importing Tekken characters into an existing Street Fighter engine, Capcom is bringing together bits and pieces from each series in an attempt to make fans of each game feel welcome. Capcom harmonizes the difference in perspective by placing 3D characters on a 2D plane. The engine has a decidedly Capcom feel, but it makes Tekken players feel right at home by integrating gameplay systems like the juggle-heavy combos and charge counters from the 3D series. To give Street Fighter X Tekken an identity of its own, Capcom also introduces a slew of new features, modes, and systems. This is the company's most ambitious fighter to date.

The most prominent addition is the gem system, which adds several layers of customization and makes the game more accessible to new or casual players. Gems break down into two types: boosts and assists. Boost gems increase the attack, defense, speed, cross gauge, and vitality stats of your character. Certain conditions must be met before they are activated for a short duration. For example, one gem grants a 10 percent increase to your defense, but it activates only after you've been hit by two special moves. Assist gems

accommodate newcomers by giving players easy inputs for special moves or auto-escaping throws. Unlike boost gems, there is a drawback to activating them, such as draining a significant amount of your meter. If micro-managing your fighter sounds confusing and you just want to get to the action, Capcom also provides pre-constructed gem sets that you can quickly select after choosing your fighter.

Another of the game's innovations, the Cross Rush system, allows you to initiate a combo by simply pressing a light, medium, and hard attack in sequence. If you add another hard attack, this will launch your opponent into the air and automatically tag in your partner to further extend the beatdown. If the Cross Rush is blocked, however, you will overextend yourself and will be wide open to punishment from your opponent. This forces players to keep their mashing in check. In my hands-on time, this fluid mechanic was easy to grasp and execute.

Cross Arts and Cross Assaults are similar to mechanics in other Capcom fighters, but in SFXT they are integrated much more effectively. Landing a Cross Art is an extremely satisfying experience, with your character performing his or her Super Art and volleying the opponent to your partner for them to execute theirs. Cross Assault is a chaotic spectacle where both you and your partner attack at the same time.

Possibly the most interesting (and confounding) new mechanic is Pandora. In exchange for sacrificing one of your teammates who is low on health, your remaining character will enter the match in a powerful state, demonic in appearance, with a regenerating super meter and greatly increased attack power. Pandora is only active for a short amount of time, and your round is over unless you defeat your opponent before it runs out. It's a risky, last-ditch comeback mechanic that should only be used in dire situations. Luckily, there are ways to open up your opponent and combo into Pandora. This can be made especially damaging if you apply gems that use it as criteria for activation.

All of the game modes from Street Fighter IV return for SFXT, but Capcom also has plans for enhanced online offerings. The new Briefing

Room operates as an online training room for both you and your partner. This is a great way to kill time while waiting for a fight request or to work on strategies and combos. Capcom also wrote brand new netcode to accommodate four-player battles. This enhanced system was built off the base code used in Ultimate Marvel vs Capcom 3.

In the dedicated Scramble Battle mode, four players are active for the entire battle and each team shares one life bar. It's madness to maneuver around the screen, but downright fun to play with a group of people.

Not surprisingly, Street Fighter X Tekken's roster is an all-star affair featuring favorites from each series. Capcom has announced over 30 combatants and a few guest characters thus far. The Street Fighter camp includes staples such as Ryu, Ken, and Chun-Li. Interestingly, the Mad Gear Gang from Capcom's venerable brawler Final Fight is getting a significant spotlight in the form of Hugo, Rolento, and Poison. Other Final Fight alumni, such as Cody and Guy, have been hinted at in cinematic teaser trailers released by Capcom. The Tekken side includes Mishimas Heihachi and Kazuya, veterans King and Nina, and more recent fighters such as Lili and Bob. Yoshinori Ono says to expect a handful of further announcements as we near release.

Guest characters Toro, Kuno, and Infamous' Cole are appearing in both the PS3 and Vita versions. Additionally, Capcom has teased Vita-only characters that bear a striking resemblance to familiar mascots from each company. Unfortunately for Xbox 360 owners, no exclusives are planned for the system.

Capcom hopes Street Fighter X Tekken is accessible enough for newcomers, deep enough for hardcore players, and flexible enough for those wanting a customized experience. It's a delicate balancing act, and we're eager to see the final release in early March to measure how it holds up. In either case, the prospect of witnessing once impossible dream matchups featuring (bear-wrestler) Zangief vs. (actual bear) Kuma or the two agile butterballs Rufus vs. Bob has me excited. » **Jason Oestreich**

» **Platform**
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360

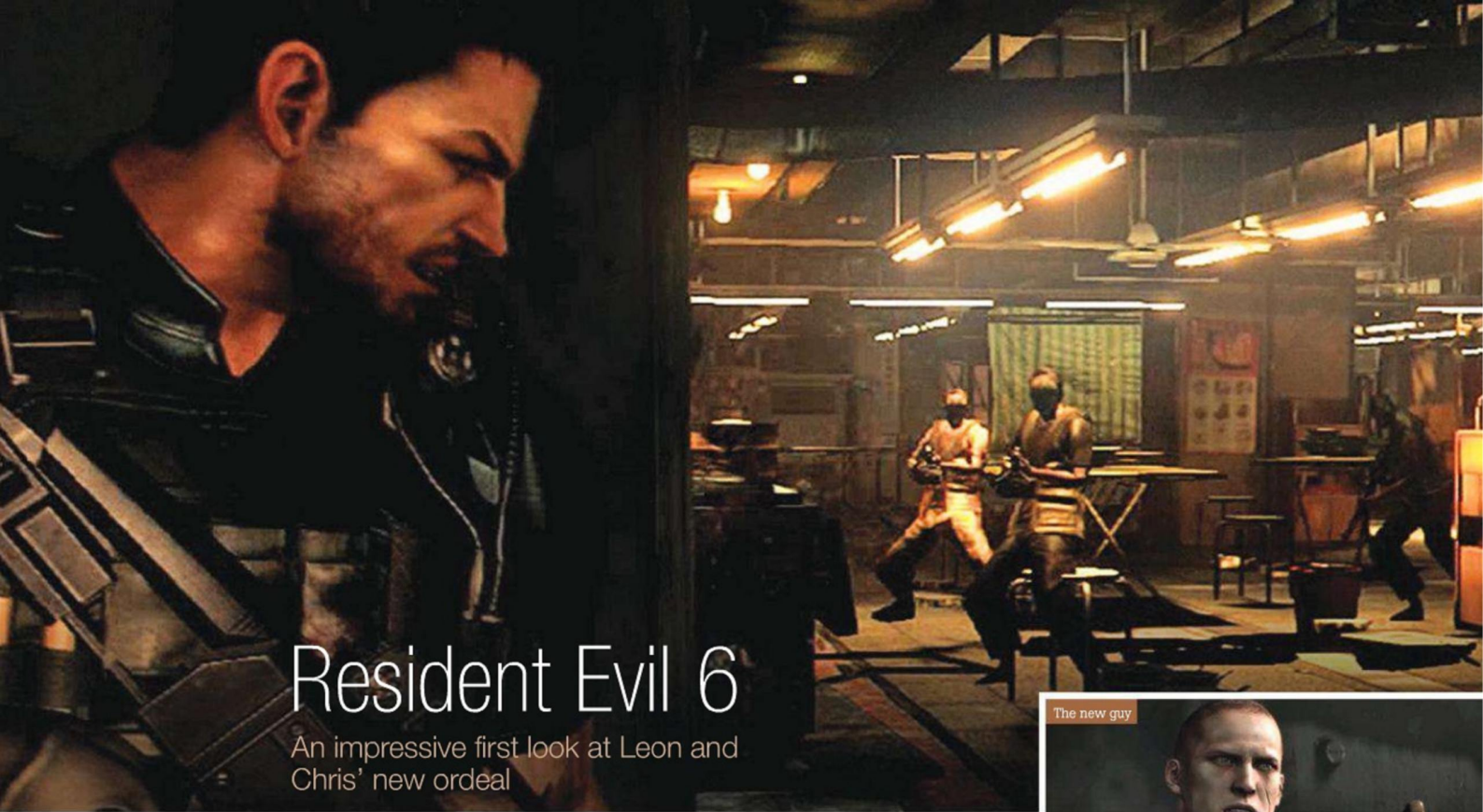
» **Style**
1 to 4-Player Fighting
(4-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Capcom

» **Developer**
Capcom

» **Release**
March 6





Resident Evil 6

An impressive first look at Leon and Chris' new ordeal

» **Platform**
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360

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

» **Publisher**
Capcom

» **Developer**
Capcom

» **Release**
November 20

This is a great year to be a Resident Evil fan. The fantastic Resident Evil: Revelations is out on 3DS, the action-packed Resident Evil: Operation Raccoon City is on the horizon, and after all that we can still look forward to Resident Evil 6 at the end of the year. Capcom's juicy reveal trailer offers lots of information about the game's characters, settings, gameplay, and enemies. As with any new Resident Evil, however, we're left with just as many questions.

For the first time ever, series mainstays Leon S. Kennedy and Chris Redfield are starring in the same game. Their new adventure takes place after the events of RE 5. Leon's ordeal begins by terminating the recently zombified president prior to a tell-all address he was set to give regarding the infamous Raccoon City incident. A new mysterious female, Helena Harper, joins Leon on a harrowing trek into Tall Oaks, a town reminiscent of Raccoon City that's crawling with undead. Tall Oaks marks the return of classic, brainless zombies, suggesting that the ruinous town may offer Leon a horrific, tense experience similar to his time in Resident Evil 2.

Capcom says the game's wide scope reflects the global scale of bioterrorism. Chris Redfield's journey into an infected city in China is the first proof that the epidemic has spread massively. The B.S.A.A. agent appears to be on a personal vendetta, though Wesker's defeat in RE 5 makes Chris' new goal enigmatic. He can be seen shoving citizens out of his way as he sprints through the crowded, neon-lit streets. Where Leon's adventure seems to be closer to the classic games, Chris' Chinese expedition looks like it packs all the high-octane action of Resident Evil 5. Exploding cars, attack helicopters, speeding motorcycles, giant infected beasts, and all other manner of crazy set pieces obliterate the scenery. He can also be seen engaging in

firefights with armed, uninfected enemies.

A new, yet-unnamed playable character also joins the cast. This money-hungry mercenary has a priceless possession flowing through his veins – blood that's suggested to be valuable to the entire world. Could this new mystery character have the cure to the virus plaguing humanity? A young blonde woman joins his side, who looks and sounds remarkably similar to Ashley from Resident Evil 4. Perhaps the President's daughter is looking to exact some revenge on the bioterrorists that infected her father? The two are seen fleeing from a hulking, Nemesis-like mutant that seems hell bent on their destruction.

Capcom has gone on the record stating that Resident Evil 6 will have co-op, but the trailer reveals more surprising gameplay hints via gorgeous in-game footage. Both Leon and Chris dodge zombies, slide on the ground, and shoot from a prone position. While we don't have confirmation that players can finally move and shoot simultaneously, the characters' enhanced mobility is a hopeful sign. Chris also takes cover several times throughout the trailer. We don't know whether taking refuge is contextual as in RE 5, or if the game incorporates a true cover system. At one point Leon is seen lodging an axe into a zombie's face, suggesting a stronger focus on melee weapon combat.

Resident Evil 5 was a gorgeous game, and this sequel features even more stunning environments, character designs, and animations. Resident Evil: Revelations impressed us by juggling parallel stories, settings, and characters to deliver a rich experience, and RE 6 is shaping up to do the same on a much grander scale. If this trailer is any indication, Capcom is taking the best elements of the franchise and stitching them together to deliver the beautiful Frankenstein monster fans deserve. » **Tim Turi**



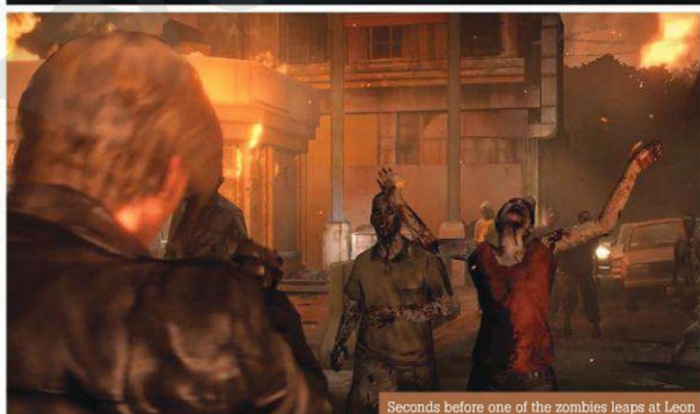
The new guy



This girl is probably Ashley Graham



A new Nemesis?



Seconds before one of the zombies leaps at Leon



Chris is kind of a jerk now

Silent Hill: Downpour

Surviving on the streets of Silent Hill



» **Platform**
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Konami

» **Developer**
Vatra Games

» **Release**
March 6

The Silent Hill series has a past nearly as sordid as the titular town. The first few games won widespread acclaim among horror and gaming enthusiasts. The foggy streets, deeply disturbed characters, and surreal enemies were unlike anything at the time. The horror darling gradually became corrupt in the eyes of gamers as each sequel marked a steady decline in quality, both in terms of storytelling and gameplay. While a 2006 film based on the games saw moderate success, it did little to help the struggling series regain

relevancy. My hands-on time with the new Silent Hill: Downpour has given me a good feel for Vatra Games' take on the iconic horror series, and this new ordeal may have what it takes to shake the rust off the classic survival horror series.

I begin my journey into madness as Murphy, an escaped convict with a murky history, travels into a dank underground tourist attraction. Named the Devil's Pit, this abandoned mining facility is home to foreboding stalactites, flooded passages, and threatening shadows. Unfortunately

for Murphy, it's his best shot at getting to Silent Hill and finding some help for his crashed prison transport.

Fumbling through the darkened mines without a light source keeps me on edge. A healthy chunk of time has passed since my last encounter with an enemy, so I'm bracing for a surprise. After aimlessly creeping through the blackness for a few minutes, I remember a lighter I acquired earlier. Flicking the flint reveals a stairway that was obscured by the darkness. I probably passed the same stairway in my search for the correct route half a dozen times, and while I'm relieved to discover it, it creeps me out to think that other things could be lurking in the dark.

The stairway leads to a series of cranks used to route the mine's hydro-powered machinery. Arranging the flumes one way drains a flooded passage and grants Murphy access to a medkit, while organizing the waterway in the opposite direction powers an old elevator. I like the idea of puzzles opening up branching paths, and hope it's a gameplay feature explored more deeply in the final game.

After hiking back to the elevator, I spot something moving. A gangly, pinkish creature crouches over a corpse, loudly taking his fill of flesh. This subtle introduction of a new enemy chills me. I appreciate that the new threat is revealed organically rather than forced down my throat in a rigid cutscene. The creature skitters away as I descend the stairs, clearing the way to the elevator. The rickety lift's slow descent is interrupted by snarling and a loud slam. The creature from above appears to have taken an interest in me. The beast cuts the

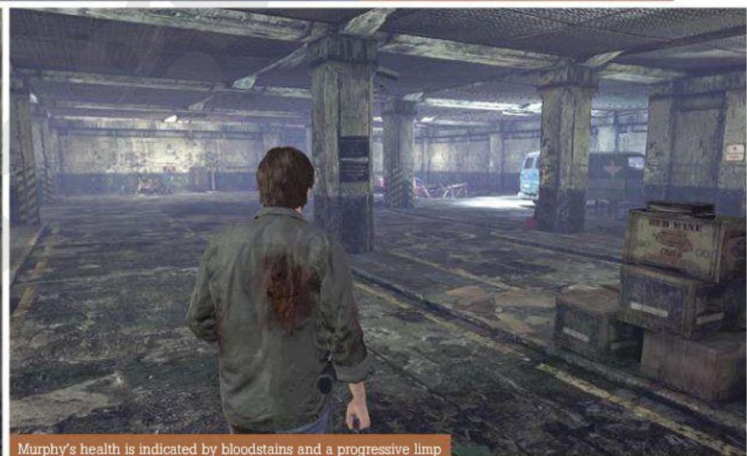




A foe is usually hot on your heels on the streets



The tram from the Devil's Pit mine leads right to Silent Hill proper



Murphy's health is indicated by bloodstains and a progressive limp

elevator cable, sending me plummeting down the shaft. The remainder of my time in the Devil's Pit is filled with several creepy surprises that I won't spoil. What I will say is that Vatra is continuing Silent Hill's long history of disturbing mannequin moments.

With the Devil's Pit behind me, I finally take to the streets of Silent Hill. For the most part, these winding, ruinous streets are just like I remember them from past games in the series. I spend most of my time trekking down a road only to find a gaping chasm. Piles of garbage and items clutter lawns and stoops, adding a touch of grimy detail unlike previous entries. Each disheveled yard, street corner, and building seems to have its own unique story to tell. While the visual variety is much appreciated, you'll still find yourself running around in circles quite a bit – something fans of the series are likely expecting.

With new territory come new enemies. The trend of anticlimactically introducing new foes continues; this time it's a shirtless beast man with claws and a demented face. Think of a botched Weapon X experiment with homicidal tendencies. At one point, I was being chased by two of these freaks along with a couple of the shrieking banshee ladies I'd been introduced to

previously. Outmaneuvering and ditching Silent Hill's unsavory population is nerve-racking in a way horror fans will appreciate.

While dodging and running helps preserve medkits and bullets, sometimes a scrap is unavoidable. Thankfully, Downpour features one of the most reliable combat systems in the series so far without removing the element of fear and surprise. I switch between using pick axes, rebar, baseball bats, and crowbars against my foes. The rhythm of combat usually involves taking a few swings, blocking the enemy's attack, and then going in for a few more swings. Given that Murphy's adversaries are haunted creeps, their movements are erratic and difficult to predict. Combat is consistently challenging without being too frustrating, unlike the clunky encounters of the original game. Weapons also have durability, so that attempted kill shot with the baseball bat may leave you with a splintered mess and a pissed-off monster.

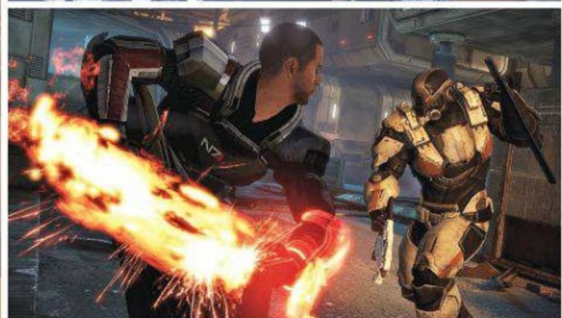
Like the older Silent Hill games, roaming the streets in Silent Hill: Downpour presents plenty of subtle, unsettling moments. One misadventure that stuck with me involves exploring the basement of a random house. Entering via a window, I'm greeted only by the noise of soft

sobs. Examining a nearby milk carton reveals an ad for a missing child, hinting at the origin of the haunting wails. After finding the rest of the basement locked off, I follow the sound of TV static upstairs. Flipping the switch causes the TV set to short circuit and explode. The crying stops immediately. Traveling back downstairs, I find the once locked door is now open. Without giving too much away, I'll say that Vatra is not afraid to put you in dangerous, surreal situations that will leave you with sweaty palms.

More puzzling and haunting incidents happened to me during my time with Silent Hill: Downpour, but I'm hesitant to share – but not because recalling the events is too taxing on my fragile heart. Rather, I don't want to rob the impact from eager horror fans who deserve a good fright. During the rest of my playthrough I encountered an enigmatic mailman, soothed the unsettled souls of apartment tenants, and traveled to the gigantic clock tower in the middle of the city. A memento from Murphy's past greets him at the clock tower, revealing more about his mysterious stint in prison. I can't wait to learn more about Murphy's checkered past and what other scares Vatra has in store » **Tim Turi**



Players can switch ammunition types on the fly by calling out the new type to Kinect.



Mass Effect 3

Not bad with Kinect

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

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

» **Publisher**
Electronic Arts

» **Developer**
BioWare

» **Release**
March 6

Microsoft has teased 360 owners with Kinect applications for hardcore games like *Forza Motorsport* and *Ghost Recon Future Soldier*, but up to this point the voice- and gesture-controlled peripheral hasn't impacted core gamers in a meaningful way outside of giving them new ways to navigate their Netflix queues. Changing your view of a car's interior is a nice touch, but what about gameplay? BioWare takes up this challenge in *Mass Effect 3*.

For BioWare, the solution was leaving the gesture recognition behind in favor of a robust suite of voice commands. The *Mass Effect 3* demo used to showcase the Kinect functionality is the same level we saw at E3, Gamescom, and PAX Prime. In this mission, Shepard and his crew are fighting to extract a Krogan female

from the Salarian homeworld of Sur'Kesh before the Cerberus agents snatch her.

The voice controls integrate into the action seamlessly. Instead of accessing the power wheel to issue commands to your squadmates or using waypoints to guide them into cover, all you need to do is point your reticle at a target, say the name of the teammate you want to act, and issue a command. Anything you can do on the controller is available as a voice command. When you verbalize your instructions, a small microphone icon in the upper left-hand corner of the screen indicates whether Kinect heard you properly. Outside a few instances where room chatter drowned out my voice, the Kinect understood my commands and processed the information quickly.

Moving to engage the Cerberus agents, I had no problems directing Liara and new squad member James Vega to cover and commanding them to use their special abilities on the fly. It's a very satisfying feeling to say "James, carnage" and watch an enemy explode into several bits of flesh seconds later. Even better, if your squad members have different specializations, you don't even need to say their name during the order. My group was smart enough to know that when I said, "warp," the order was intended for Liara.

Voice commands also work for managing Shepard's inventory and interacting with the environment. By saying a few simple words, I had the commander chucking grenades, switching weapons, changing ammo types, opening doors, and interacting with consoles. Best of all, if the going gets rough, you can save your progress without drilling into the menus by saying, "quick save."

I came into the demo skeptical of the Kinect voice controls, but after churning through baddies by issuing battlefield commands, I'm pleasantly surprised how well it integrates into the basic action. Not having to open the power wheel to order your squadmates around allows you to keep firing downrange, improving your overall battle effectiveness. As EA demonstrated during E3, the voice controls extend to dialogue situations as well.

The *Mass Effect 3* voice commands aren't a standalone reason to pick up Kinect, but if you already own it, give them a shot when this demo hits Xbox Live on February 14. You may finally have a Kinect experience worth talking about. » **Matt Bertz**



I Am Alive

Survival of the fittest is the name of this game

When gamers explore post-apocalyptic settings, we're normally armed to the teeth with assault rifles, grenades, and stimpaks. Rarely do games throw you into the chaotic aftermath of a worldwide catastrophe with no viable resources. Ubisoft's downloadable title *I Am Alive* feeds off these kinds of harrowing experiences, embracing the dreary realism of a fractured civilization and leaving you with only your wits and a few depleting supplies to help you survive.

Much like Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road* or Gary Whitta's film *The Book of Eli*, the world of *I Am Alive* is desolate and barren, with few survivors inhabiting the devastated cities. Water and canned food are prized possessions, and weapons are few and far between. Developer Ubisoft Shanghai further drives home the bleakness of this setting with a muted color palette and a tense soundtrack.

My hands-on demo begins with the main character returning to the outskirts of his hometown city of Haventon. He flew out east right before the catastrophe hit, and it has taken him a year to trek home. Though encounters with fellow survivors are rare, he holds out hope that his wife and young daughter are still alive. All he's managed to retain during his journey is a camcorder, a few batteries, a rope, and a handgun with an empty clip.

The once-bustling city is in shambles, with the one bridge into town evidently torn and mangled by an earthquake. Getting to the other side won't be easy. I begin navigating the street full of abandoned cars and finally spot a ladder up the side of one of the bridge supports. It looks like I have to take the acrobat's way across the bridge.

This everyman character doesn't have any Nathan Drake or Ezio Auditore genes in his makeup. He's a sure climber, but as I ascend each rung of the ladder, his stamina bar drops down slightly. If I drain the stamina bar completely, his health will start to diminish as well, and he may plummet violently back down to earth. Charting a proper course before moving is key because you need to take any opportunity available to catch your breath and restore your stamina.

Halfway through climbing, jumping, and swinging through the mangled metal beams, I realize the next climbing segment isn't going to allow



me to take it slow. My stamina drains completely before I have a chance to reach safety, and I'm forced to repeatedly pull the right trigger to make the character climb more quickly before his health meter drains completely. When I finally reach the ledge, I'm forced to use my last bottle of water and can of food to replenish my health. So much for rationing.

Once I safely reach the other side and head into the sewers, I finally run into a fellow survivor. This edgy character doesn't take kindly to my presence, drawing a gun and instructing me not to come any closer. I oblige, scooting quickly past him and continuing my journey.

I emerge from the sewers a few blocks from the apartment. Another mentally disturbed survivor approaches me with a machete drawn. I instinctively raise my firearm to stop him in his tracks. He has no idea the gun isn't loaded, so while he stands with his hands raised I clock him with the butt of the gun. As restitution for his act of aggression, I steal his weapon and find a bullet in his pockets. This commodity will come in handy in this dangerous city.

Further ahead I encounter my first gang. This duo moves toward me with intent to injure, but stops in their tracks when I raise my firearm. I try to pistol whip one of them, but before I land the blow the other moves in and stabs me with his weapon. With the situation spiraling out of control I decide now is a good time to use the bullet to even the odds. After the first guy hits the pavement I disarm the second guy easily.

With my health bar dangerously low, I thankfully come across a medkit. I don't hesitate to

patch my wound, but I should have exercised restraint because right before I reach the apartment I walk past a mother pleading for help for her dying son. Had I not used the medkit, the Ubisoft Shanghai rep says I could have saved the boy. In doing so, the mother would have shared vital information about the cataclysmic event and given me another replay token. These allow players to restart at a checkpoint if they succumb to the dangers of the city.

I finally reach my destination, but unfortunately there are no signs of life within the apartment. I find a note on the mantle from the character's significant other. The letter says the wife and child were ushered off to the emergency shelter, but it's dated a year ago. It looks like the journey to find his loved ones is only beginning.

Ubisoft Shanghai says *I Am Alive* provides roughly six to eight hours of gameplay. Along the way players will encounter more dangerous platforming sequences, hostile survivors, and clues to what happened to the world and his family. My short demo of the game left me eager to jump back into the quest. Though the atmosphere is slightly reminiscent of survival horror games like *Silent Hill*, Ubisoft's steadfast commitment to presenting the aftermath realistically is something I haven't experienced in a video game before.

As one of the flagship titles of the Xbox Live Arcade House Party, *I Am Alive* is scheduled to release somewhere between February 14 and March 15. Look for the PSN version shortly thereafter. » **Matt Bertz**

» **Platform**
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360

» **Style**
1-Player Action

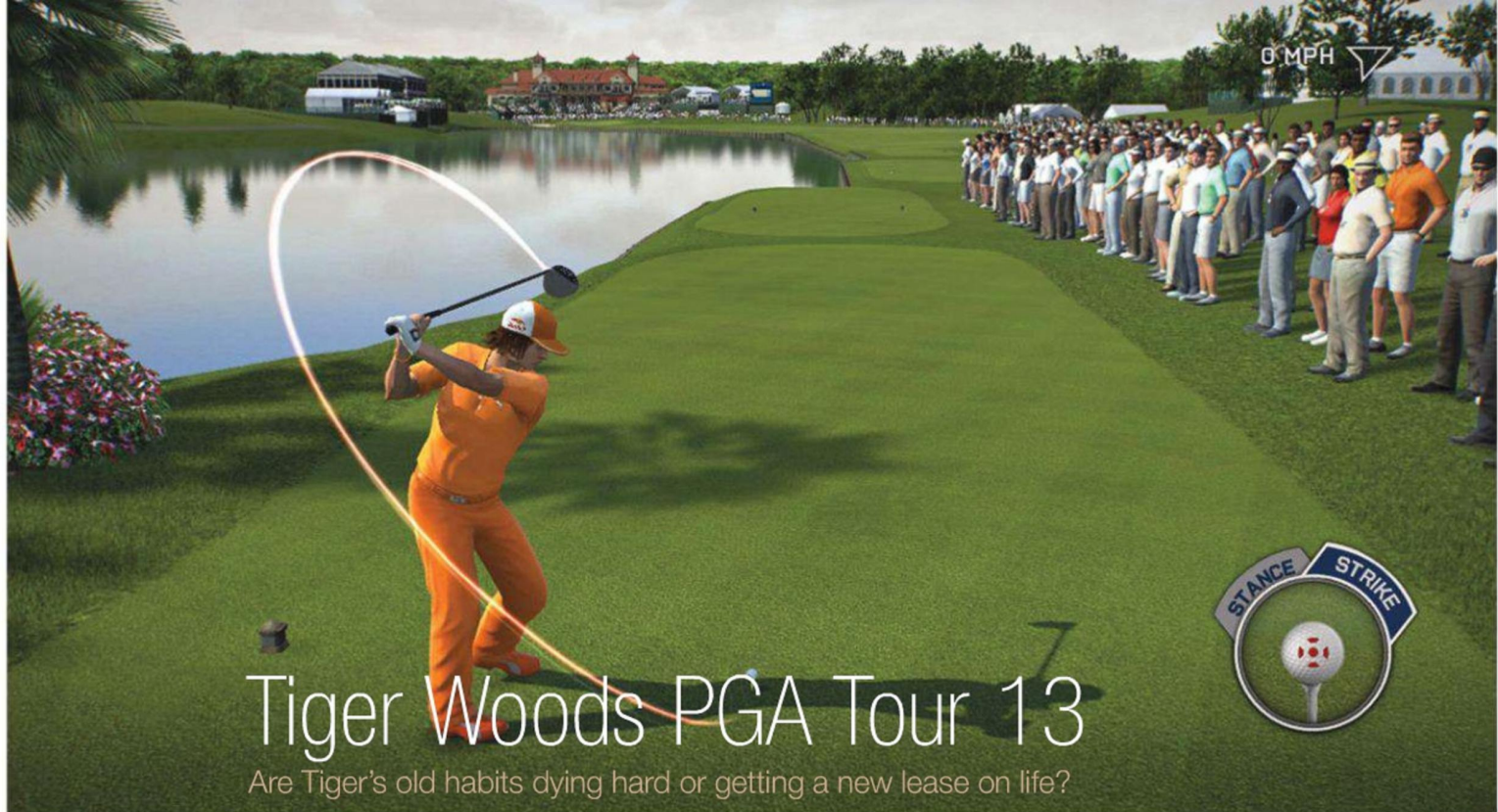
» **Publisher**
Ubisoft

» **Developer**
Ubisoft Shanghai

» **Release**
March



Players must watch a stamina meter when climbing or risk plummeting to their deaths



Tiger Woods PGA Tour 13

Are Tiger's old habits dying hard or getting a new lease on life?

» **Platform**
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360

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

» **Publisher**
EA Sports

» **Developer**
EA Tiburon

» **Release**
March 27

In an attempt to rediscover his golfing mojo, last year Tiger Woods famously altered his swing—the one that helped him get within striking distance of Jack Nicklaus' fabled record of 18 major championships. Now EA Tiburon's Tiger franchise is also altering the analog swing mechanic that has made it successful after coming off one of its best years ever. Of course, in the video game world, there is a fine line between consistency and stagnation, so the developer is going to have to be careful that this year's changes don't add a wicked slice to its swing.

Tiger 13 is changing its swing by tweaking every aspect rather than undergoing wholesale revolution. Every second of your backswing and downswing are now tracked with a real-time trajectory HUD that follows your club. This gives you more noticeable feedback than in previous Tigers as you try to achieve maximum efficiency and avoid hook or slice. Perhaps more impactful, however, is that power is added or decreased based on the velocity of your downswing. While this offers you more options, it also demands a consistent swing to get the results you're after.

You can also open or close your stance to apply draw or fade on the ball (respectively), and

shift where the ball is in relation to your stance for more or less loft. For getting out of bunkers or punching it out of the rough, you can also change where you strike the ball to top or get under it. All of this stuff can also be done with either a Move or Kinect, although the latter has the advantage of voice recognition to do everything but swing the club for you.

Tiger vets know that many of these features are not new to the series—they simply went under older marketing names like the Shape Stick or Loft Stick. So, are these additions actually new or is it all a bunch of rehashed gimmicks? Until we get our hands on the game, we can't say. Although executive producer Brent Nielsen admits that some of these features have been used before, their sum effect in Tiger 13 "[adds] a sense of feel to the game." He points out the added animations and new ball physics influence how the game has changed.

Nielsen says that the goal is to let players create their own kinds of shots with these new tools instead of having to push buttons to call up a punch shot or draw, for instance. These results can be achieved more organically through your swing or body positioning. Similarly, the team wants to move away from the kind of

golf-by-numbers that some Tiger players have mastered where they can hit specific swing power percentages in order to get consistent results. Accordingly, this year you can no longer simply stop your club at the desired swing power percentage and swing from there. If you stop at the top of your backswing your avatar will automatically revert to its idle stance.

Tinkering with its swing isn't the only addition to Tiger 13; work has also been done on the online side with the creation of Online Country Clubs. These can house 25 members, and you'll vie for weekly championship status within your club, challenge other clubs, and earn upgrades for your club as a whole.

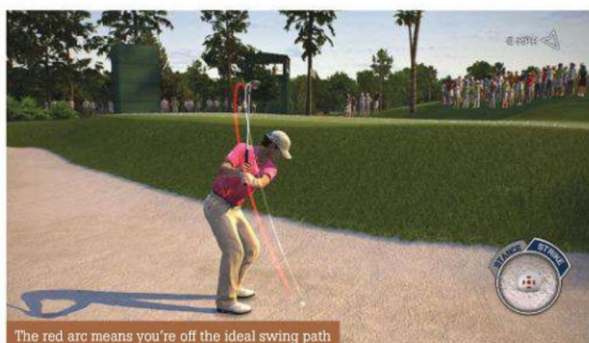
In a similar spirit of community, the game keeps persistent track of all your golfing accomplishments across participating EA golf games (like EA's Facebook title) so you can defeat overarching challenges such as downing a certain amount of birdies, for instance.

Is this all just feature inflation, or signs of a development team refusing to stand idle even when it's at the top of its game? It might just be all a matter of feel. » **Matthew Kato**

The Life of Tiger

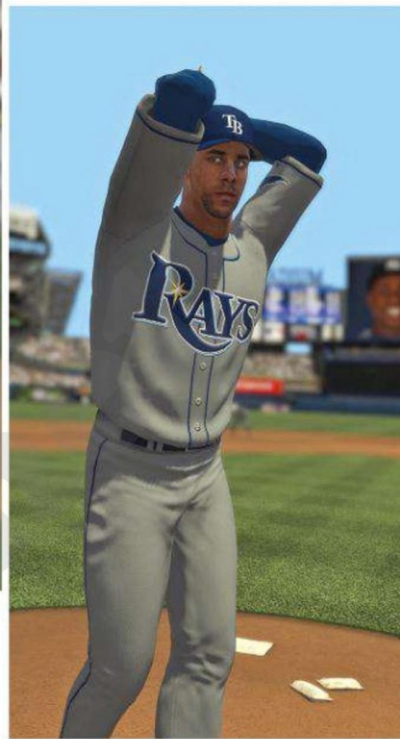


If you thought that EA was trying to distance itself from Tiger Woods, guess again. Tiger 13 features a scenario mode that is quite different from anything previous in the franchise. Tiger's Legacy Challenge walks players through Tiger's life by letting you play as different Tigers in different phases of his life to try and complete both past and future accomplishments. This includes hitting shots as a two-year-old Tiger Woods on *The Mike Douglas Show*. Yes, that really happened.



The red arc means you're off the ideal swing path





Major League Baseball 2K12

After a disastrous season, the 2K series enters rehab

Last year, 2K Sports developed a case of "the yips," a term coined from a baseball player's sudden inability to perform routine on field actions. Like Chuck Knoblauch's struggles to throw to first base (once resulting in a ball drilling announcer Keith Olbermann's mother in the face), Major League Baseball 2K11's yips are both amusing and tragic.

Catchers injured themselves by slamming into walls as they sprinted after foul balls hit deep into the stands. AI managers pulled pitchers who were throwing gems after only 50-plus pitches and would not pinch-hit for their hurlers in the later innings of close games, leading many to believe Pete Rose programmed the manager logic. After an injured player was removed from the game, he would stay on the field, standing near the batter's box. A ball clearly hit out of a player's reach would sometimes magically teleport into his glove. I even saw a base coach duck in fear of a lazy pop fly (hit 20 feet away from him) and Twins' outfielder Denard Span scale a 30-foot wall to rob a home run.

From inexcusable bugs to unrealistic player logic, Major League Baseball 2K11 played baseball worse than the Chicago Cubs circa 1909-2011. Knowing full well that last year's game didn't deliver the intended experience, 2K Sports is taking an iterative approach to this year's game, rather than introducing new ways to play.

In my hands-on time with the MLB 2K12, Visual Concepts continually pointed out subtle tweaks, sweeping changes, and often reinforced how it is better than last season's effort. For instance, when a ball is hit into play, the framerate no longer jitters when the camera switches positions. The batter runs smoothly out of the batter's box, sprinting to the bag on a ground ball and properly rounding the bags for extra bases or outfield hits. Catcher animations, a point of mockery in previous series entries, have been completely re-shot and now embody a

high level of realism with smooth transitional animations. The team also claims that online matches' swing, pitching and throw meters will not be affected by lag.

In terms of gameplay balancing, pitching is receiving the most attention. The development team felt that last year players abused pitches that worked (as they should). This year, pitchers lose their effectiveness if they are abused by the pitcher or the batter gets good wood on specific pitch. If Ryan Howard knocks a Gio Gonzalez fastball out of the park, he won't trust that pitch and its rating will go down for the game. It will drop even further in later at-bats against Howard. New pitch tracking data also shows where each pitch type lands in the strike zone and if they led to an out or hit. If a pitcher only uses his curveball seven percent of the time in real life, when a player finds success with it and continues to use it, it will lose effectiveness the more it is used outside of that seven percent.

Fielding also poses a new challenge depending whether you decide to make a throw on the run or take the time to set your feet. A new meter with a "sweet spot" grows or contracts depending on what position the fielder is in.

Batting is mostly the same, but the timing for pull and opposite field attempts have been tweaked, greatly reducing the potential for a home run. You'll also see a different animation for a power swing.

One lucky gamer will once again walk away with a million dollars in this year's Perfect Game Challenge. This year, the challenge is charted through a new universal leaderboard that tracks the top eight perfect games thrown (based on pitcher used and matchups), and will pit those eight players in a tournament. The winner walks away rich.

Drawing inspiration from 2K's NBA Today mode, Visual Concepts is adding MLB Today Season, a mode that allows players to play at

the same pace as the Major League season with the same line-ups that the team uses in real life. Only one game can be played per day, and if a day is missed, it will be simulated using the same results and stats as the real team.

My Player is largely the same as last season, but it will now be much harder to create a player that excels in every area. If you create your player as a speedster, speed points are cheaper and power points are more expensive. I'm a little wary of this direction, as I've always enjoyed making a five-tool player.

While the game certainly looks better than last season, my hands-on time still brought many concerns over bugs (an AI base runner retreating to first on a ground ball) and the quality of the presentation (twitchy transitional animations still exist). Over 40 hours of new commentary have been added to the mix to strengthen the broadcast, and 2K says that the development time left between now and launch is dedicated solely to polish.

With 2K's exclusive rights to the MLB license ending at the end of this year, I have to wonder how dedicated the company is to this series. Are they building a foundation for the future, or giving a minimal effort in hopes of getting out under the contract's weight? » **Andrew Reiner**



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

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

» **Publisher**
2K Sports

» **Developer**
Visual Concepts

» **Release**
March 6



PlanetSide 2

Creative director Matt Higby answers our questions

» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
Massively Multiplayer
Online Shooter

» **Publisher**
Sony Online
Entertainment

» **Developer**
Sony Online
Entertainment

» **Release**
2012

With Sony Online Entertainment bringing back its massively multiplayer first-person shooter franchise later this year, we flagged down PlanetSide 2 creative director Matt Higby to pick his brain on why he thinks his game is relevant, how players interact with each other aside from with guns, and what role smaller groups will play in the massive wars he hopes to kindle. » **Adam Biessener**



Camelot immediately spring to mind)? Have you done anything with PlanetSide 2 to avoid some of the pitfalls and rough spots that players of those games have encountered?

From the game development perspective, our game is about player combat, not player

politics. We're offering lots of outfit functionality and coordination tools to support combat and coordination, but when it comes to trying to sort out alliance disputes, outfit disbands, etc. players can handle those disputes on the battlefield. Of course, our community management and customer service teams are always on deck to help manage situations that arise.

The metagame dynamic in a three-faction game is much different than a two-faction (or faction-less) MMO. Even so, we've seen the result of a winning team attracting more players and eventually dominating its server through sheer numbers many times over. How will you deal with that problem in your game?

In PlanetSide 2, we've established a number of features in order to encourage even population, from sorting servers at character create based on your chosen empire, to giving bonuses to under-populated empires, and even potentially

locking creation of new characters for over-populated empires on servers if we have to, although that would be a last resort that we wouldn't want to have to take. Ultimately, we think that the empire balance will be reflected proportionally from server to server.

What role will a smaller friends-and-family outfit be able to play in the larger war?

If there is an enormous battle taking place at a facility it won't matter if your outfit is 20 people or 200 – you'll be able to take part and make an impact. However, if you prefer to stick to smaller battles there are lots of objectives scattered in multiple capture regions of various shapes and sizes all over the continent that you can capture with smaller groups.

The worst thing that can happen to a dynamic PvP game is for players to decide that win trading (or node trading, or base trading, etc.) is the best way to achieve their goals. How do you intend to deal with that?

This comes down to balancing rewards for fighting, capturing, defending, etc. It's a tough act to balance with a lot of different vectors, but, at the end of the day, as long as actually competing with enemies provides a rewarding experience (both in terms of gameplay and tangible rewards) then this type of exploitation won't become a major problem.

Several developers have taken a crack at MMOFPS in recent years, but none have really caught on. What makes you think PlanetSide 2 could be the game to break through in this nascent genre?

A lot of games have been marketed as MMOFPS in recent years, but I don't think any of them were truly what we talk about as an MMOFPS. Most of these are actually instanced games with character persistence. When we talk about MMOFPS we are talking about thousands of players competing simultaneously in battles across enormous maps. PlanetSide 2 will deliver massive scale battles in a way that no game since the original PlanetSide has come close to.

What lessons have you learned from previous games that prominently feature player politics (Eve Online and Dark Age of



Unit 13

With the Vita's dual analog sticks, shooters may finally get their due on handhelds



Shooter fans sick of lackluster options on handheld devices heaved a huge sigh of relief when Sony announced that the Vita would ship with two analog sticks. For far too long, developers were forced to come up with clever workarounds for importing shooters to mobile platforms. Some titles (like Syphon Filter: Dark Mirror and SOCOM: Fireteam Bravo) found a way to impersonate shooter controls, but achieving functionality is a far cry from the smooth controls proper analog sticks offer. Unit 13 is one of the first Vita titles to take advantage of the long-awaited functionality.

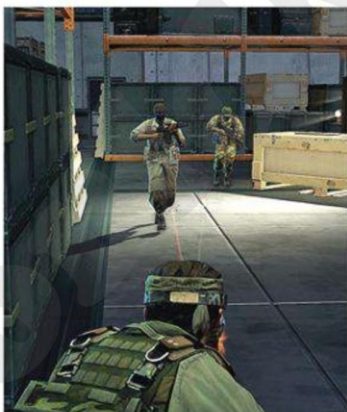
This third-person shooter made by Zipper Interactive (SOCOM, MAG) stresses tactics over running and gunning. The collection of 36 standalone missions centers on a conflict with African warlords, but Zipper chose not to invest much time in the narrative because when you're playing on the go, getting in and out of your experience is sometimes more important than spending your limited time watching cutscenes.

Anyone who has played a SOCOM game will be right at home in Unit 13. Players move and shoot much like you would expect them to for a modern shooter, but Zipper is also leveraging the unique Vita features to give you even more options on the battlefield. While zooming in on enemies, you can tap the touchscreen to switch between a zoom and a scope view or swipe the back panel to adjust which shoulder you are looking over. Players can also reload weapons, toss grenades, and complete objectives gathering intelligence by hitting the appropriate button on the touchscreen.

Much like the underrated Bizarre Creations shooter The Club, you earn points for each action you complete during the mission, and your final score is compared against your friends and other players via online leaderboards. Taking a cue from the popular Autolog feature found in Need For Speed, Unit 13 promotes competition between friends by broadcasting notifications when someone beats your high score or unlocks a new weapon. The game also has a progression/unlock system for the six playable operatives, a boss battle-style High Value Target mode, and a daily challenge mission custom made by Zipper.

Unit 13 has no competitive multiplayer, but those who prefer to play with friends can play all 36 missions cooperatively via a Wi-Fi connection. » **Matt Bertz**

- » **Platform**
PS Vita
- » **Style**
1-Player Shooter
(2-Player Online)
- » **Publisher**
Sony Computer
Entertainment
- » **Developer**
Zipper Interactive
- » **Release**
March 6



Kid Icarus: Uprising

Nintendo aims for the stars with long-requested revival

Since Nintendo announced it a couple of years ago, I've seen bits and pieces of upcoming cult hit revival Kid Icarus: Uprising. Only recently did I have a chance to dig in for an extended hands-on session to discover what this game is really all about.

I played four levels from various points across the story mode, ranging from traditional Greek ruins to a mountaintop fight against a space pirate ship. Regardless of setting, every area featured the same structure, beginning with an on-rails flying segment where main character Pit shoots enemies out of the sky. After that, you switch to a ground-based section where you're given free control of Pit's movement, allowing for more exploration. Each level wraps up with a boss battle, often against a foe much larger than the diminutive Pit.

You can switch weapons between levels or when you die, and the weapon you use can greatly impact your experience. A slow weapon like the staff requires Pit to stay back and attack enemies from a distance as much as possible. A bigger weapon like the club allows Pit to knock projectiles back at enemies, but requires being in melee distance to be effective. In addition to these general types, I picked up tons of variations with differing stat boosts. Some weapons provided speed or armor bumps for Pit, while others gave a chance at poisoning enemies.

The many weapon options feed back in to the game's difficulty challenge. Each time you begin a level, you set the difficulty on a scale ranging from 0.0 to 10.0. The default difficulty rests on the low end at 2.0. To go above or below that you need to spend some of the in-game currency (which in this case is hearts). Taking on higher difficulty settings will reward you more hearts if you succeed and you have a better chance of receiving rare weapons.

This challenge loop adds incentive for replaying levels, as does the amusingly self-aware dialogue between Pit and Palutena, the goddess he serves. These two bicker, comment on the game's graphics, and make references to the NES original constantly, and the chatter seemed to switch up a bit on subsequent playthroughs.

I still want to know more about Kid Icarus: Uprising's multiplayer, and I'm curious how long the single-player game is, but I'm certainly looking forward to this 3DS release much more after my hands-on time. » **Phil Kollar**

- » **Platform**
3DS
- » **Style**
1-Player Action
(Multiplayer TBA)
- » **Publisher**
Nintendo
- » **Developer**
Project Sora
- » **Release**
March 23



reviews



gameinformer
GAME OF THE MONTH

90 Soulcalibur V

Project Soul has done just about everything fans could ask for to bring its revered fighting franchise back to its former glory. Soulcalibur V is the best entry in the series to date.

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	SOPA/PIPA.

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

EXTRAORDINARY
Misadventures
OF
**REINER
AND
PHIL**

GAME INFORMER
SPOILED!
APPROVED



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FEATURES

Replay



- The Extraordinary Misadventures of Reiner and Phil** GI's dynamic duo jumps into the newest games to show off every bit of gameplay with goofy video commentary. Check back for new episodes every week.
- The Game Informer Show** The GI staff discusses the biggest news and hottest releases in this weekly podcast. New episodes every Thursday.
- Replay** Relive fond (and not so fond) moments from the past as the GI staff replays classic games in this weekly video series.
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Kingdoms of Amalur: Reckoning

Revolt against fate, remain bound by convention

8

PS3 • 360

» **Concept**

A beloved writer, artist, and designer team up to create a huge action/RPG

» **Graphics**

Borrows heavily from the stylized look of World of Warcraft, but the level of detail and amount of color set it apart from similar fantasy RPGs

» **Sound**

A memorable score and solid voice acting take a hit from some annoying sound bugs that occasionally cause syncing issues

» **Playability**

The mix of Elder Scrolls questing and God of War combat makes for one of the most approachable, easy-to-enjoy RPGs ever

» **Entertainment**

There's practically too much content here, and though some of it feels derivative and uninspired, fun core mechanics kept me engaged

» **Replay**
High



Style 1-Player Action/Role-Playing **Publisher** Electronic Arts **Developer** 38 Studios/Big Huge Games **Release** February 7 **ESRB** M

As the brainchild of artist Todd McFarlane, writer R.A. Salvatore, and Elder Scrolls III and IV lead designer Ken Rolston, Kingdoms of Amalur: Reckoning has an impressive pedigree that sets high expectations. Reckoning is meant to be the launching point for a vast new fantasy universe, and though it doesn't serve that purpose as well as 38 Studios wants, it provides a lengthy and entertaining – if sometimes flawed – experience.

Reckoning takes place in a section of the world of Amalur known as The Faelands. Though it follows the Elder Scrolls formula of dumping tons of side quests and faction quests onto the player,

it's not an open world in the way of Bethesda's RPGs. Instead, the game is structured like an MMO, funneling you from zone to zone by way of various quest lines. Environments lean heavily toward cheery, oversaturated forests at first, but eventually open up into a variety of canyons, swamps, and mountains.

Areas tend to be fairly self-contained because of this layout, which allows the story threads for each quest hub to grow and climax in an entertaining (if predictable) way. Each area is huge and full of secrets, and there's fairly strong motivation to return after you've already solved the local population's problems.

In addition to hidden treasures and bonus dungeons unconnected to sidequests, each area features a number of lorestones – objects that provide a bit of backstory on Amalur. While the history lessons aren't necessarily enthralling, if you find every lorestone in an area you will get a powerful permanent boost to your stats. Certain quest lines provide similar permanent stat boosts, ensuring that thorough gamers will become increasingly godlike as the game progresses.

Reckoning's plot exists to mostly explain why your character – who is dead at the outset, then resurrected –

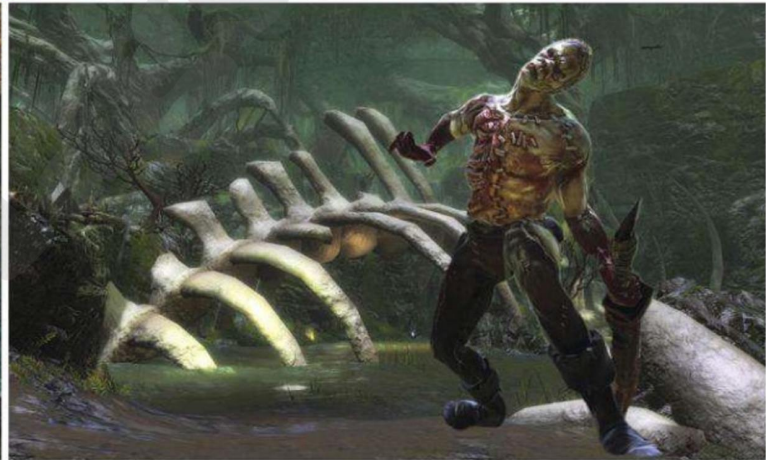
can defy fate in a world where everyone else is imprisoned by it. It's a cool concept that provides some helpful context for why your character is powerful enough to fix things for virtually every citizen, but the developers fail to make it seem as though your actions are having much of a visible impact on the world. The Faelands are distressingly static, rarely changing to reflect the good or evil you have done. That may work in an MMO, but it feels out of place in a single-player adventure.

The hundreds of quests are full of minor twists and turns, but they never quite go anywhere interesting. Both the main storyline and most of the lengthy faction quests end without any significant surprises to the degree that even now, a mere week after finishing the game, I can only vaguely recall any of the characters or plotlines I encountered. Nothing about the world of Amalur feels original enough to get me excited for the potential future products in this universe. Big Huge Games and 38 Studios have unique takes on traditional elves, fairies, and gnomes, but they've failed to create a compelling hook in the lore that differentiates it from everything else in the fantasy genre.

For all my issues with the storytelling, Reckoning more than makes up for it in battle and character growth. The real-time action feels similar to God of War's combo-chaining combat. Some action fans may bemoan the lack of depth with the one-button approach to melee, but the ability to switch to different weapons mid-combo and whip out spells and special abilities on the fly feels fantastic.

The rhythm of combat is broken up with a fun





mechanic called fateshifting. Each time you kill an enemy, you fill up a portion of your fate meter, gaining more fate based on how skillfully you mix up your abilities and how long you can keep your combo count rising. When the fate meter is full, you can fateshift to enter a slow-motion massacre where your attack power is greatly increased. At the end of a fateshift, the game asks for some good old-fashioned button-mashing to determine the experience bonus you'll receive as your character does a brutal, stylish kill. Fateshifting made me feel powerful and greatly increased the speed at which I gained levels thanks to the experience bump.

Each time you level up, you choose whether to devote skill points to mage, warrior, or rogue abilities. These choices unlock lightly defined class roles in the form of stat boosts called destinies that can be swapped at any time, freeing you to make any character you want. In a rarity for RPGs, mixing and matching abilities from multiple trees has just as much potential for creating a devastatingly powerful character as focusing on one skill type. You unlock specific destinies by mixing two of the three trees or even spreading points evenly across all three. Reckoning even provides a quick, easy, and

relatively cheap way to completely refund your talent points and start building your character all over again, encouraging fun experimentation.

I was also pleasantly surprised to discover how enjoyable stealth gameplay is in Reckoning. I generally expect stealth options in RPGs to be underdeveloped and frustrating, so I cringed a little as I joined the Travelers, this game's version of the Thieves Guild. Fortunately, Reckoning's stealth is just forgiving enough – particularly after you've put a handful of skill points into it – that I had a blast. When in stealth mode, clear markers indicate how aware of you your enemies are, making it easy to learn and toy with the AI patterns. Awareness also drops quickly, taking care of some of the usual pacing problems with this kind of gameplay.

While Reckoning succeeds with its combat and stealth, it falls short in its Diablo-esque loot system. I picked up hundreds of thousands of pieces of armor throughout my time in Amalur, but actual upgrades became increasingly rare after the 30-hour mark. To add to the frustrating lack of desirable loot, the majority of upgrades I received in the final half of the game were the same armor models. When I did get a model switch, the new piece would often clash garishly

with whatever else I was wearing.

Reckoning also struggles with its technical performance. Numerous out-of-sync sound cues, framerate hitches, and slow-loading textures plagued my playthrough. I even encountered a few battles where enemies were completely invisible for a few moments while their models loaded. The PS3's mandatory install makes these issues slightly less common, but if you're playing on Xbox 360, strongly consider installing the game to the hard drive to help alleviate the frequent, lengthy load times.

Despite its problems, Reckoning is a good game with a lot of stuff worth checking out. But even with all of the talent backing it, it's just on the edge of being something much greater than it is. For a game that's all about breaking out of the confines of fate, it's a shame that so much of the content feels stuck within such narrow conventions. » **Phil Kollar**

This review is based off time spent with the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 versions of Kingdoms of Amalur: Reckoning. We were not able to play the PC version, but if there are any major changes in that version, we will provide an update to the review on gameinformer.com

Soulcalibur V

Round and round we go

8.5

PS3 • 360

» Concept

Add new fighters and better online support to the Soulcalibur we've been playing for over a decade now

» Graphics

Each character is more outlandish than the last. As always, the presentation is gorgeous and without any rough edges or framerate hiccups

» Sound

The terrible one-liners aren't any better than they were in 1998. There are just more of them

» Playability

This is as responsive and fluid as anything out there. Soulcalibur plays well on a gamepad, if you're looking for something that doesn't require an arcade stick

» Entertainment

This is the best Soulcalibur out there if you can ignore the nostalgia factor, but at the same time it's the same Soulcalibur as all the others

» **Replay Value**
Moderately High



Several characters have been replaced with fighters sporting identical move sets, like Leixia here taking over for Xianghua

gameformer
GAME OF THE MONTH

gameformer
SILVER

Style 1 or 2-Player Fighting (2-Player Online) Publisher Namco Bandai
Developer Project Soul Release January 31 ESRB T

This is the best Soulcalibur ever. The fifth (sixth, really) entry in the main franchise avoids the missteps of the previous two while retaining their good parts and adding a few new features of its own. Even so, "best Soulcalibur ever" doesn't mean what it used to. We've been doing this for over a decade at this point. No matter how smooth and vibrant the new coat of paint is, we've all been here before.

The roster is as huge and varied as ever. The proper online play added in this edition is long overdue. Soulcalibur V hits all the right bullet points that a fighting game sequel has to have, but more importantly, it doesn't screw anything up. Nothing has moved backwards, unless you count a few of my staple moves being changed or removed. That is all but inevitable when we're

talking about a series I've dumped several hundred hours into.

Most of the changes are ancillary to the actual fighting, but there are some notable tweaks. Many more moves that incorporate guard impact windows have been added, which integrate the guard impact concept more smoothly into intermediate-level play. A super bar similar to Street Fighter's is now part of the game, though super moves aren't as devastating. Even a perfect Brave Edge executed in a counter state usually does less than half a health bar of damage. Finally, the flow of any given round feels even more focused on initiative and the ground game than in previous Soulcaliburs.

The new fighters won't convince me to move away from my traditional mains (Mitsurugi,

Xianghua, and Siegfried, for the record), but they're interesting additions. Fiona has powerful long-range attacks with her orb, and she strikes as fast as anyone in close, but her mid-range game seems weak. Z.W.E.I. is harder to get a handle on; his toolset focuses on summoning a spirit wolf and is unusual to the point that I had a heck of a time coming up with any decent tactics. Ezio seems less overpowered than

previous guest characters, lacking an easy-to-execute close range get-away move to get back to his stronger mid-range distance. Patroklos is very reminiscent of Cassandra, with explosive mid-range moves and easy launchers that reward a poking playstyle. Nightmare and Kilik are, of course, still complete cheese.

Online play is much better supported in Soulcalibur V than in previous installments. Ranked matches work like StarCraft II, with the network handling matchmaking within a simple set of player-defined criteria. Setting up a room to play casual games according to your preferred ruleset is easy as can be. As with all pre-release review code, I was unable to test the final network infrastructure or get as much online play in as I'd like, but barring some unforeseen failure on Namco Bandai's part it should be a destination mode.

The persistent stat tracking and progression is wonderful, and ties in beautifully to the enhanced character creator. As you level up and unlock new cosmetic items, you can outfit your own created character (who uses an existing fighter's style) or any of the default characters with whatever you like. Want to put a big purple afro on Ivy? Go nuts. If you're really dedicated, you may even unlock something for a lady fighter to wear that you wouldn't be embarrassed to have on the TV when your mother walks into the room.

Soulcalibur V is the next-gen Soulcalibur that I've been wanting as a fan for years. At the same time, it's nothing if not more Soulcalibur. Now if Namco Bandai would release a DLC pack with the full Soul Calibur II roster, I could finally retire that disc. » **Adam Biessener**



The Darkness II

A lovesick killer loses his soul



Style 1-Player Action (4-Player Online) **Publisher** 2K Games **Developer** Digital Extremes **Release** February 7 **ESRB** M

In the comic book business, it's common for high-profile writers and artists to leave a series before completing a story arc. The change in talent often produces a jarring shift for readers. The plot can head in a direction the previous creative team may not have intended. Alterations to character appearances and dialogue can give them entirely new personalities. Even if this comic is technically picking up where it left off, its tonal and cosmetic changes can make it feel like an alternate reality continuation.

The Darkness, a video game series based on the Top Cow comic, is afflicted by a similar creative malady. Developer Starbreeze tapped this license to create a powerful shooter that played out like a slow-moving stealth game with protagonist Jackie Estacado lurking in the shadows, summoning his darkling minions to systematically take down his foes. For the sequel, newly appointed developer Digital Extremes keeps Jackie's story alive, but the framework for the experience is aimed more toward the fast-paced shooter crowd than people looking for a creepy supernatural thriller. That's not to say Digital Extremes didn't create a decent game full of mindless action, but the soul that Starbreeze nurtured and made Jackie's driving force is nowhere to be found.

This time around Jackie comes across as a lovesick broken record, going on and on about his dead girlfriend Jenny. Two years have passed since her tragic death, and he hasn't found peace. He's obsessed with her memory to the unhealthy degree that he sees hallucinations of her and is continually reminded of the great moments they had together. One of the best moments from the original was Jackie's quiet

night on the couch with Jenny. Digital Extremes tries to evoke this same feeling from players on numerous occasions, but they all feel forced and disingenuous. No offense, Jenny, but I feel like Digital Extremes is beating a dead horse.

A new antagonist and reason for Jackie to seek vengeance are introduced early on in this tale, but as you've probably gathered by now, loverboy's head isn't exactly where it should be. As he becomes unhinged, Jackie's mind lapses into a reality without the Darkness where Jenny still lives. These sequences have Jackie talking to his mob buddies and Jenny, adding humor to the grim tale, but the gimmick is revisited too often. The resolution to the entire plot hangs on Jenny, and sadly doesn't reach closure until after the credits, where another ridiculous Jenny revelation awaits.

The gameplay struggles to find its pulse just as much. Combat relies on reflexes more than strategy this time around; Jackie can rarely get the jump on an enemy, and the Darkness is just a weapon rather than a tool. Most encounters begin when Jackie passes an invisible trigger point in the environment. Foes crawl out of the woodwork, descend from rooftops, and almost always rush his location, resulting in more close-range encounters and challenging battles.

Jackie can quad-wield weapons (two guns and two Darkness serpents), allowing for a variety of grisly kills. Placing two bullets into an opponent's leg makes him reel, giving Jackie enough time to lift him off of the ground with a serpent. As the foe dangles in agony, the second serpent can rip off his head or puncture his chest. The gunplay and serpent mechanics are beautifully implemented, and once mastered, empower the player with the sensation of superiority

on the battlefield.

Feeling powerful is fun, but combat encounters lack the necessary variety in design and enemy types to remain fresh. Even with an extensive upgrade system in place, the action doesn't evolve from its initial form. I must have summoned my serpents to perform the grotesque wishbone kill (ripping a foe in two from the crotch to the face) at least 100 times in the seven or eight hours it took to complete the game.

The only diversion from the repetition is the rare instance where control switches to a darkling. This foul critter occasionally sticks his fingernails into human eye sockets, but mostly performs boring actions like scurrying through vents and disabling fuse boxes. His most memorable accomplishment is peeing on dead enemies, which isn't a good sign. I should also point out that this darkling is always onscreen playing the "follow" role seen in the Call of Duty games, motioning you in the right direction. The odd thing about this handholding technique is that the game already offers a light-up breadcrumb trail waypoint system. If you use it when he's on screen, the trail goes right below his feet. I have to ask: At what point did we become so bad at navigating linear environments that we need two redundant "Help me! I'm stuck!" systems?

The Darkness II is more of a rebirth for the series than the sequel it's trying to be. The action is mindless and fevered, and Jackie has transformed from a vengeful protagonist into someone who probably listens to "Dream Weaver" as he cries himself to sleep. I found it to be an interesting journey, mostly just to see how different it is from the original, and also to see how a demonic superhero can be whipped by a dead woman. » **Andrew Reiner**

7.5

PS3 • 360

» Concept

A new developer and gameplay direction join Jackie Estacado as he continues to mope about his lost love

» Graphics

The original game's realistic dark tones have been replaced with vibrant cel-shading. This new look doesn't evoke the same creepy feeling, but it effectively paints comic book-like worlds and character designs

» Sound

Jackie's mob friends are written exceptionally well, and the actors that bring them to life are perfectly cast. Licensed music is used at the right times to bring about a chuckle or heighten the atmosphere of a scene

» Playability

Without much in terms of enemy or weapon variety, the new fast-paced approach to combat falls flat despite excellent execution

» Entertainment

This follow-up lacks the spark and creativity of its predecessor, and proves to be more entertaining in its limited multiplayer content

» Replay Value

Moderate

Cooperative Vendettas

The Darkness II features a second side story that can be played by yourself or with up to three other people. This three-hour experience offers up more combat variety, as each of the four playable characters have their own upgradable powers. Most of the challenges boil down to players mowing down enemies, but proves to be an exhilarating and easily digestible experience with a friend at your side.

NeverDead

A bloody mess

4

Style 1-Player Action (4-Player Online) **Publisher** Konami
Developer Rebellion Studios **Release** January 31 **ESRB** M



PS3 • 360

» Concept

You're an undead badass who can rip off his own head and limbs. You must shoot and chop your way out of a demon apocalypse

» Graphics

It's a good-looking game marred by a poor camera and technical issues

» Sound

Terrible voice acting, forgettable score, lots of explosions

» Playability

The game's hook – the fact that your body flies apart after any heavy attack – makes combat frustrating and messy. The online co-op is decent, but limited to small set-up levels

» Entertainment

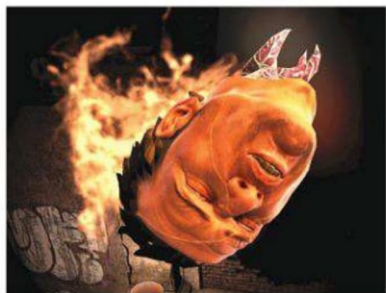
The main character is aggravating, the story clichéd, and the gameplay poorly designed and beset by technical issues

» Replay Value

Low

Designing games is hard work. NeverDead is a great example of just how hard it is.

The main gameplay hook – your character being able to detach his own limbs and roll himself back together again – sounds novel on paper (and was tailor-made to sound awesome in preview coverage). However, if you're going to use a unique mechanic, you have to design a game around making that concept fun (Portal is a great example). Rebellion may have come up with a new idea, but these days that's simply not enough. By shoehorning this oddball idea into a terrible, unoriginal third-person action game, it created an experience that is too



clichéd to feel fresh but also fails at delivering on the basics of the genre.

The plot, which I won't waste too much time on, is pure drivel. You're Bryce Boltzmann, an undead employee of a government agency that is tasked with killing off the various demons that threaten our world. Without spoiling too much (though I guessed the big plot "twist" after about 15 minutes), a parallel story told in cutscenes eventually sheds light on Bryce's origins. Frankly, the writing is so bad I couldn't care less about the story, and Bryce is armed with some of the worst one-liners in recent memory.

With your fellow agent Arcadia, you proceed to the end of this stolid adventure by shooting and hacking through endless waves of demonic creatures and increasingly frustrating boss battles. The basic combat is divided between standard third-person shooting and analog sword action. The levels are dull (you generally have to kill every enemy in an area to open the next door), with the exception of some amusing platforming you do as a disembodied head.

While there's nothing wrong with the basic combat design, myriad technical issues mar this experience to the point where, at times, the onscreen action is incomprehensible. The camera is erratic, the targeting suspect, and

your body flies apart nearly every time you take significant damage (forcing you to roll your head back to your body before your head is inhaled by enemies). Sometimes, you'll get caught in a loop of getting hit, rolling your head back on your body, and being hit and flying apart again.

This is even more difficult when the camera wigs out and you can't tell where you are. The boss battles, which are long, multi-stage wars of attrition, rarely offer anything more creative than "shoot him in the glowing part" and feature such annoying tropes as regenerating health bars. Even worse, a few times I encountered bugs like my severed head rolling through the floor into a weird, blank dimension with only a city skyline and another, more serious bug that left me cut off from the last enemy I needed to kill to advance through the next door.

This lack of polish wouldn't be nearly as frustrating if not for the fact that the game's primary feature – the dismemberment of the main characters – makes the game less fun than it would have been as just a plain old third-person action game. Sure, it's a unique idea – but not every idea is worth pursuing. In the case of NeverDead, this concept should have been left on the cutting room floor. You could say the same about the game itself. » **Matt Helgeson**

Amy

Survival horrible

3

Style 1-Player Survival Horror
Publisher Lexis Numérique **Developer**
VectorCell **Release** January 11 (Xbox 360),
January 17 (PS3) **ESRB** M

PS3 • 360

» Concept

Save humanity by keeping a special little girl alive in an extended survival-horror escort quest

» Graphics

The infected aren't the only dead-eyed residents of Silver City; Amy is one creepy little kid

» Sound

Fans of Geiger counters and hissing steam valves are in for a real treat

» Playability

Awful combat, checkpoints, and AI keep Amy from attaining mediocrity

» Entertainment

You have better things to do with your life (and \$10) than play this broken mess

» Replay Value

Low

Amy is the story of a woman named Lana, the little girl she rescues from a mysterious research facility, and the fallout from a horrific outbreak. It's also a cautionary tale of how poor game design can murder fun, and how easily the desperate can be separated from \$10.

Expect a typical survival-horror scenario with spooky tunnels, moaning creeps, and easily broken melee items. The twist comes with Amy. When broken down to her key functionality, Amy is a pretty handy item to have around. She fetches stuff, casts a variety of psychic spells, and flips a mean switch. Unfortunately, Amy is also a tremendous annoyance.

Amy follows simple commands such as "come," "stay," and, "pick up those syringes." She also has an immunity to the outbreak that's plaguing Silver City, which comes in handy. Stray too far from Amy, and Lana will rapidly become infected. When she does have to leave the little girl behind (crates don't push themselves, after all), Lana can mitigate the effects by jamming a needle into her neck. As her condition worsens, her gait changes to a limp, her vision takes on a red tinge, and she hears creepy whispers. In the



final stages of the infection, Lana can amble past the hostiles without fear of being attacked – a boon considering how awful she is at staying alive. Without any accurate way for players to gauge her condition, however, the bigger danger is that she'll simply fall down without warning and die.

When this happens – and it will – you'll have to start over at the last checkpoint. This usually means that about 10 minutes of preparation is instantly gone and will have to be repeated. There's not much tension to be had in the game to begin with, and it's completely drained when you're forced to do the same menial tasks over and over again to try to determine where exactly a plan went wrong.

This is exacerbated in later levels, when simply being spotted by an enemy automatically means failure. Here's a sample sequence: Push a crate. Hit a guy in the back of the head with a crowbar,

breaking the weapon in the process. Leave Amy. Wait 40 seconds to get contaminated enough to walk past a pair of infected. Push two more crates. Get Amy. Walk past infected. Shove Amy into a concrete pipe. Wait 40 seconds to get contaminated. Push a car. Rejoin Amy. Watch as Amy decides to walk over broken glass, alerting everyone in Silver City. Restart. Even when Amy doesn't act like an idiot, the game becomes a tedious series of trial and error sequences, with little feedback as to what went wrong.

As a downloadable title, I wasn't expecting Amy to measure up against the triple-A juggernauts of the survival horror genre. However, I was expecting a game that was at least playable and contained some kind of entertainment. Make no mistake: Whether Amy is delivered to you via download, retail SKU, direct brain wave, or retinal implant, it is terrible and should be avoided. » **Jeff Cork**

All Zombies Must Die

Yet another twin-stick zombie shooter rises

Style 1 to 4-Player Shooter **Publisher** Square Enix **Developer** Doublesix **Release** December 27 **ESRB** T

Doublesix, developer of *Burn, Zombie, Burn*, has unleashed another downloadable twin-stick zombie shooter upon the unsuspecting masses. Some new weapons, a barebones crafting/leveling system, and groan-inducing story are incorporated in an attempt to breathe new life into the rotting formula. Like any assault rifle, the action is effective in short bursts, but prolonged repetition leads to a jam in your enjoyment.

Most of the game is predictably spent killing

zombies while reading inane banter between Ben and his icy ex Rachel. Manipulating both analog sticks to move and shoot is as reliable as it ever was. Using the torch to set a single zombie on fire, herding the flock together, and watching the flame spread among the undead is sadistically satisfying and easy to pull off.

Weapons can be easily modified to gain properties like a sonic blast to stop enemies in their tracks, which provides a useful respite in hairy situations. Unfortunately, few weapons outside the shotgun and chainsaw are any good. You'll curse to yourself when you accidentally collect a wimpy cricket bat or impotent submachine gun. To make matters worse, fully customizing your loadout is a restricting mess. Not being able

to swap out both weapons at the base when you please is a huge pain.

Satisfying the game's mindless goals (variations on zombie-killing) gets a little livelier with friends. Local drop-in, drop-out co-op is available at any point, allowing you and three friends to play as a faceless soldier or unlocked supporting character. Sorry, no online play here; you or your friends will have to brave the real world to play together. Be sure to turn off the irritating friendly fire, unless you want your friends to cooperate their fists into your shoulder.

I don't regret the time I spent with *All Zombies Must Die*, but there isn't enough about the game that sets it apart from the myriad other titles like it on the digital marketplace. If you're looking for some decent *Zombies Ate My Neighbors*-style couch co-op action, you can do a lot worse for your \$10. If you want a game that innovates on the twin-stick shooter genre in a meaningful way, however, I wouldn't look here. » **Tim Turi**



7.5

PS3 • 360

» **Concept**
Integrate some passable progression and crafting into the tried-and-true twin-stick zombie shooter

» **Graphics**
Hope you like characters with exaggerated craniums

» **Sound**
You're going to hear a lot of gunshots and a song that rips off John Carpenter's *Halloween*

» **Playability**
While the lack of online co-op sucks, being able to drop in and out locally at any time is great

» **Entertainment**
There's some fun to be had in frenzied spurts

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

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Jak and Daxter Collection

Jak and Daxter make a comeback

9.25

PS3 • 360

» **Concept**

Collect three great PS2-era platformers with updated HD graphics, 3D, and trophies

» **Graphics**

While the technology is dated, the fresh HD coat of paint helps. The great character and art designs remain timeless

» **Sound**

Great voice acting and subtle and intelligent scores courtesy of DEVO's Mark Mothersbaugh

» **Playability**

Each successive game adds new depth and variety to the core platforming mechanics

» **Entertainment**

While the Jak series shows its age in some respects, it remains one of the most ambitious and well-executed platforming franchises ever made

» **Replay Value**

Moderate



Style 1-Player Action/Platforming **Publisher** Sony Computer Entertainment
Developer Naughty Dog/Mass Media **Release** February 7 **ESRB** E-T

Stuck between Naughty Dog's early icon Crash Bandicoot and the large-scale spectacle of the Uncharted series, the Jak and Daxter games are transitional works for the developer in many ways. While still falling squarely in the action/platforming genre, the series was driven by a restless sense of innovation, evolving from the standard '90s collection-driven design to Jak 3's apocalyptic open-world that suggested what *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome* might have looked like if conceived by Pixar.

I played all three Jak games when they were released, but it was instructive to play all three again in quick succession. The first thing I noticed was how different in both tone and

design Jak 2 and 3 are from the original, which seems to be cut from a different cloth. While pushing the boundaries of the genre in terms of scale, graphics (for its day), and technology, Jak and Daxter doesn't stray that far from the template of '90s Rare games like Banjo-Kazooie and Donkey Kong 64. You wander around talking to villagers, getting tasks ranging from simple fetch quests to longer-form platforming episodes, earning power cells and precursor orbs along the way. It doesn't feel as innovative as I remember, but it's still a tour de force of craftsmanship packed with engaging platforming levels, boss battles, and some (occasionally problematic) vehicle segments that deliver variety.

With Jak 2, Naughty Dog blew up its formula with an epic adventure that took obvious inspiration from Rockstar's Grand Theft Auto III. Now, the open city of Haven serves as the hub world, with Jak and Daxter riding hoverbikes from location to location to engage in platforming levels that take place just outside the city walls.

The series also went through a dramatic shift in tone in Jak 2. The previously voiceless main character was transformed into an angry young man, complete with a new soulpatch look that made him look like a refugee from a turn of the century metal band. Jak had been the subject of experiments that injected

him with volatile Dark Eco, transforming him into a hulking, gray "Dark Jak." The story and tone of Jak 2 is continued in Jak 3, making the original now feel more like a lighthearted prologue to the action series. Jak's more serious persona seems a bit silly in retrospect; thankfully, the wisecracking Daxter is always around to lighten the mood with a well-placed comedic remark.

Jak 3 is basically a restatement and expansion of the strengths of Jak 2. Now banished to the wastelands outside Haven City, Jak eventually makes his way back to set things right, but not before experiencing a varied and grand adventure. Minor improvements to control and gameplay (like expanded weapons functions) abound, and the dune buggy vehicles you pilot in the deserts are much more satisfying than any of the hoverbikes in Haven.

It's an attractive update of a trilogy that, in many ways, marked the end of the action/platformer era. Nintendo carries on, but the genre is now a niche market. The Jak series (along with its spiritual sister series Ratchet & Clank) is also the last time that the platformer seemed to really be engaged in the larger conversation of game development. These games were intended to be blockbusters, to compete with the Grand Theft Autos of the world. While there's been a platformer in recent years, most of those games are looking back to the simpler 8- and 16-bit eras.

Naughty Dog's work in this franchise endures thanks to great characters, finely tuned gameplay, and a unceasing inventiveness. Though some aspects of the games are dated now, the Jak games stand up as epic adventures. » **Matt Helgeson**



Army Corps of Hell

Underutilized mechanics meet an underwhelming launch title

Style 1-Player Action (4-Player Online) **Publisher** Square Enix
Developer Square Enix **Release** February 22 **ESRB** M



We constantly hear about Mario, Zelda, and Donkey Kong when Shigeru Miyamoto's career is discussed, but rarely do we hear about the underrated Pikmin games. Those charming titles featured a unique gameplay mechanic that has rarely been duplicated. While the idea of tossing hordes of minions at your foes hasn't been used much since Pikmin, it has reappeared in an unlikely Vita launch title. Army Corps of Hell takes the basic idea of those GameCube titles, subtracts the puzzle elements, and adds a healthy dose of metal-themed imagery and music. The end result is initially amusing, but it wears out its welcome quickly thanks to a lack of variety.

Playing as a demonic warlord, the core concept of the game involves directing various small goblins at your enemies. You have access to soldiers that can be thrown onto foes' backs, spearmen that dash forward to attack distant enemies, and mages that can shoot projectiles at elemental foes. Each stage consists of battling from small island to small island, taking out waves of demons and monsters. Unfortunately, that's about all there is to the game. Some clever boss fights pop up from time to time, but these

encounters are often repeated. New enemies occasionally appear, but they aren't enough to keep the stages from resembling a Dynasty Warriors-esque grind after a while.

Despite being a launch title for a system with many unique hardware elements, Army Corps of Hell takes advantage of almost none of them. It seems like it could have been a PSP game, from the visuals to the simplistic controls (the right analog stick is used, but turning could have been performed via the PSP shoulder buttons).



An odd drumming item has you tapping the rear touchpad to regain health, but it feels shoehorned in.

Other than some seconds-long repeated cutscenes between stages, there is almost no story. The only thing that keeps you going after getting the initial upgrades (more goblins, new types of goblins) is the alchemy system. By harvesting the bodies of fallen enemies, you can build new armor and weapons for your goblins. It's nice to power up your minions, but

these stat upgrades do little to break up the monotony of the core gameplay.

I enjoyed Army Corps of Hell quite a bit during the initial stages, but it didn't take long to realize how little there was to the overall experience. You can bring three friends along via ad-hoc play, but it won't change the fact that the gameplay revolves around a repetitive grind through similar levels. » **Dan Ryckert**

4.5

Vita

» Concept

Take the mechanics of Pikmin and bring them to hell

» Graphics

Characters and enemies lack detail, and the stages lack distinctive qualities

» Sound

Lots and lots of wailing metal

» Playability

Vita's hardware is barely utilized. This feels like it could have been a PSP game

» Entertainment

The initial stages hold some value, until you realize that you're essentially going to be repeating them for the entire game

» Replay Value

Low

Wipeout 2048

A solid, yet predictable experience for Vita's launch

Style 1-Player Racing (8-Player Online) **Publisher** Sony Computer Entertainment America **Developer** SCEE Liverpool Studios **Release** February 15 **ESRB** E10+



The Wipeout series and Sony consoles have a long history together, dating back to the PSone's launch window in 1995.

When Sony released its first portable 10 years later, the anti-gravity racer was sitting on store shelves right alongside it. History repeats itself this year, as Wipeout 2048 greets new Vita owners on day one. It's a gorgeous and fast-paced racer as always, but a strong sense of familiarity and some questionable hardware utilization bring the experience down a bit.

If you've played any recent game in the series, you have a good idea of what to expect from 2048. Bells and whistles like photo mode, pilot assist, and motion controls have been seen before, and the core gameplay still revolves

around hitting speed pads and collecting (or absorbing) weapons and power-ups.

Campaign mode is the meat of the game, featuring several seasons with optional paths. You participate in required races, combat events, time trials, and zone races, but secondary events branch off the main path for those looking for more XP. These become more necessary as you reach the tougher races, as they often reward you with new vehicles. Leveling up is crucial, as it's another method to unlock the more advanced crafts. The XP system is handled well, as you pocket your acquired experience at the end of each race regardless of where you landed on the leaderboard. It makes even your losing efforts worthwhile, which significantly decreases the

frustration of a poor performance.

Your campaign can also be brought online, with leaderboards and secondary objectives mixing up the standard single-player experience. These secondary objectives are in place to give new players an incentive to participate against veterans, as it gives them a chance to earn XP even if they can't compete for the fastest times. Ad-hoc play for up to eight players is supported, as is cross-platform play with owners of Wipeout HD on PlayStation 3.

Launch games are frequently engineered to showcase the new console's hardware, and Wipeout 2048 is no different. One control option allows you to steer by tilting the Vita, thrust with the rear touchpad, and absorb pick-ups with the front touchpad. By no means does this improve the experience in any way, and I promptly reverted to standard controls.

It's a competent racer, but Wipeout 2048 feels too familiar for its own good. Long loads and underwhelming touch controls don't help the matter, and may dissuade anyone who isn't a longtime fan of the series. If you need a solid racer right away when you get your Vita, Wipeout 2048 will suffice. However, others may want to wait until something fresher comes along. » **Dan Ryckert**



7.75

Vita

» Concept

Pilot anti-gravity hovercrafts through futuristic cities

» Graphics

The fast-paced races do a great job of showing off the graphical capabilities of the Vita

» Sound

Wipeout once again looks to current electronic acts to provide the soundtrack

» Playability

Vita's analog stick does a good job of controlling the action, but the crafts still possess a noticeable lack of traction

» Entertainment

As long as you don't expect a reinvention of the series, Wipeout will suffice as a solid racer for Vita's launch

» Replay Value

Moderate

PLAYSTATION 3

Ace Combat: Assault Horizon	8.25	Dec-11
Adventures of Tintin, The	7.75	Feb-12
Alice: Madness Returns	6.75	Jul-11
Assassin's Creed Revelations	8.75	Jan-12
Bangai-O HD: Missile Fury	7.75	Jul-11
Batman: Arkham City	10	Nov-11
Battlefield 3	9.25	Dec-11
BloodRayne: Betrayal	7	Sep-11
Bodycount	5	Oct-11
Brink	6.75	Jul-11
Burnout Crash	7.5	Nov-11
Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3	9	Jan-12
Call of Juarez: The Cartel	4.5	Sep-11
Captain America: Super Soldier	7.5	Sep-11
Cars 2	7.75	Aug-11
Catherine	7	Aug-11
Crysis	8.25	Dec-11
Dark Souls	8.75	Nov-11
Dead Island	8.5	Oct-11
Dead Rising 2: Off the Record	9.5	Nov-11
Deus Ex: Human Revolution	8.5	Oct-11
Dirt 3	8.75	Jul-11
Disgaea 4: A Promise Unforgotten	8.25	Oct-11
Disney Universe	6.5	Dec-11
Driver: San Francisco	8	Nov-11
Duke Nukem Forever	6.75	Aug-11
Dungeon Defenders	7.75	Jul-11
Dungeon Siege III	8	Jul-11
Dungeons & Dragons: Daggerdale	6	Jul-11
Earth Defense Force: Insect Armageddon	8	Aug-11
El Shaddai: Ascension of the Metatron	9	Sep-11
Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim, The	9.5	Jan-12
F.E.A.R. 3	7.75	Aug-11
Fancy Pants Adventure, The	7.5	Jul-11
FIFA 12	9	Nov-11
Final Fantasy XIII-2	8	Feb-12
God of War: Origins Collection	9.5	Oct-11
GoldenEye 007: Reloaded	7	Jan-12

Green Lantern: Rise of the Manhunters	6.5	Aug-11
Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, Part 2	6.5	Sep-11
House of the Dead: Overkill Extended Cut	8	Dec-11
Ico & Shadow of the Colossus Collection, The	9.75	Oct-11
Infamous 2	8.75	Jul-11
Jurassic Park: The Game	5.5	Jan-12
King of Fighters XIII	7.75	Feb-12
Kung-Fu High Impact	6	Feb-12
L.A. Noire	8.75	Jul-11
LEGO Harry Potter Years 5-7	7.5	Jan-12
LEGO Pirates of the Caribbean	7	Jul-11
Lord of the Rings: War in the North	5.5	Dec-11
Madden NFL 12	7.5	Oct-11
Magi: The Gathering - Duels of the Planeswalkers 2012	8	Aug-11
Metal Gear Solid HD Collection	9	Jan-12
MX vs. ATV Alive	7	Jul-11
NASCAR Unleashed	7	Dec-11
NBA 2K12	9.5	Nov-11
NCAA Football 12	9	Aug-11
Need for Speed: The Run	7.75	Dec-11
NHL 12	8.75	Oct-11
No More Heroes: Heroes' Paradise	7.75	Sep-11
Okabu	8	Dec-11
Payday: The Heist	6.5	Dec-11
Pro Evolution Soccer 2012	9	Nov-11
Rage	9	Nov-11
Ratchet & Clank: All 4 One	8.75	Dec-11
Rayman Origins	8.5	Dec-11
Red Faction: Armageddon	7.25	Jul-11
Renegade Ops	8.25	Nov-11
Resident Evil 4	9.5	Nov-11
Resident Evil Code: Veronica X	8.5	Nov-11
Resistance 3	7	Oct-11
Rochard	8.25	Feb-12
Rock of Ages	7	Nov-11
Rocksmith	8.25	Dec-11
Saints Row: The Third	9	Dec-11
Shadows of the Damned	9.25	Aug-11

8 | Final Fantasy XIII-2

Platform PS3 • 360 Release January 31 ESRB T Issue February '12

Progression is player-driven, combat is even more entertaining, and an array of other adjustments makes it one of my favorite RPGs from a mechanical perspective. I just want all of that integrated with a story that isn't laughable and borderline insulting. – Joe Juba



Sims 3: Pets, The	7.5	Dec-11
Skylanders: Spyro's Adventure	8	Dec-11
Sonic Generations	6.75	Dec-11
Spider-Man: Edge of Time	6.5	Dec-11
Super Street Fighter IV: Arcade Edition	7.75	Aug-11
Thor: God of Thunder	4.5	Jul-11
Transformers: Dark of the Moon	7.5	Aug-11
Trine 2	8.75	Feb-12
Ultimate Marvel vs. Capcom 3	8	Jan-12
Uncharted 3: Drake's Deception	9.5	Dec-11
Warhammer 40,000: Space Marine	8	Nov-11
WWE '12	5.5	Jan-12
X-Men Destiny	7	Nov-11

Brink	6.75	Jul-11
Burnout Crash	7.5	Nov-11
Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3	9	Jan-12
Call of Juarez: The Cartel	4.5	Sep-11
Captain America: Super Soldier	7.5	Sep-11
Cars 2	7.75	Aug-11
Catherine	7	Aug-11
Child of Eden	8	Jul-11
Crimson Alliance	8.75	Oct-11
Dance Central 2	8.25	Nov-11
Dark Souls	8.75	Nov-11
Dead Island	8.5	Oct-11
Dead Rising 2: Off the Record	9.5	Nov-11
Deus Ex: Human Revolution	8.5	Oct-11
Dirt 3	8.75	Jul-11
Disney Universe	6.5	Dec-11
Driver: San Francisco	8	Nov-11
Duke Nukem Forever	6.75	Jul-11
Dungeon Defenders	7.75	Jul-11
Dungeon Siege III	8	Jul-11
Dungeons & Dragons: Daggerdale	6	Jul-11
Earth Defense Force: Insect Armageddon	8	Aug-11
El Shaddai: Ascension of the Metatron	9	Sep-11
Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim, The	9.5	Jan-12
F.E.A.R. 3	7.75	Aug-11

Fancy Pants Adventure, The	7.5	Jul-11
FIFA 12	9	Nov-11
Final Fantasy XIII-2	8	Feb-12
Forza Motorsport 4	9.25	Dec-11
From Dust	8.75	Sep-11
Fruit Ninja Kinect	8	Oct-11
Gatling Gears	8	Jul-11
Gears of War 3	9.5	Nov-11
GoldenEye 007: Reloaded	7	Jan-12
Green Lantern: Rise of the Manhunters	6.5	Aug-11
Guardian Heroes	8.25	Dec-11
Gunstringer, The	8	Oct-11
Half-Minute Hero: Super Mega Neo Climax	8.25	Sep-11
Halo: Combat Evolved Anniversary	8.5	Jan-12
Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, Part 2	6.5	Sep-11
Hulk Hogan's Main Event	1	Dec-11
Insanely Twisted Shadow Planet	8	Sep-11
Joe Danger: Special Edition	8.5	Feb-12
Jurassic Park: The Game	5.5	Jan-12
Just Dance 3	6	Dec-11
Kinect Disneyland Adventures	7.5	Jan-12
King of Fighters XIII	7.75	Feb-12
Kung Fu Panda 2	5	Jul-11
Kung-Fu High Impact	6	Feb-12

XBOX 360

Ace Combat: Assault Horizon	8.25	Dec-11
Adventures of Shuggy, The	8.25	Aug-11
Adventures of Tintin, The	7.75	Feb-12
Alice: Madness Returns	6.75	Jul-11
Assassin's Creed Revelations	8.75	Jan-12
Bangai-O HD: Missile Fury	7.75	Jul-11
Bastion	9.25	Sep-11
Batman: Arkham City	10	Nov-11
Battlefield 3	9.25	Dec-11
BloodRayne: Betrayal	7	Sep-11
Bodycount	5	Oct-11

1 | Postal III

Platform PC Release December 21 ESRB M

Even moving beyond the immature, purposefully offensive sense of humor, there's nothing redeeming about Postal III's frustrating, buggy gameplay. At one point Postal III tasks you with collecting HIV-infected cats; I'd rather do that in real life than play this awful game again. – Phil Kollar

7.75 | Zen Pinball 3D

Platform 3DS Release January 13 ESRB E10+

I didn't think pinball would work on such a small screen, but I was pleasantly proven wrong. The biggest drawback is the age of the tables, but the core mechanics provide fun and addictive pinball on the go. – Jeff Marchiafava

8.25 | Pushmo

Platform 3DS Release December 8 ESRB E

Intelligent Systems' latest puzzle creation is easily the best new, exclusive game to the 3DS eShop. The block pushing and pulling concept is simple enough at first, but quickly becomes devilishly mindteasing. – Bryan Vore

8 | NFL Blitz

Platform XBLA • PSN Release January 3 ESRB E10+

Even with the omission of late hits, NFL Blitz is an old-school arcade experience that hasn't lost the fun factor it had a decade-and-a-half ago. Its gameplay will seem unmistakably familiar to fans of the original, but it's still a great title to have in your library to pull out for the occasional game. – Dan Ryckert

7.75 | WWW

Platform 3DS Release December 29 ESRB E10+

Making your way through hours of punishing 2D gauntlets with Captain Viridian's singular ability to invert gravity is a natural fit for Nintendo's portable, and the experience is alternately rewarding and frustrating just as it is in WWW's original PC release. – Adam Biessener

geeked at birth



L.A. Noire	8.75	Jul-11
LEGO Harry Potter Years 5-7	7.5	Jan-12
LEGO Pirates of the Caribbean	7	Jul-11
Lord of the Rings: War in the North	5.5	Dec-11
Madden NFL 12	7.5	Oct-11
Magic: The Gathering - Duels of the Planeswalkers 2012	8	Aug-11
Ms. Splosion Man	8.75	Aug-11
MX vs. ATV Alive	7	Jul-11
NASCAR Unleashed	7	Dec-11
NBA 2K12	9.5	Nov-11
NCAA Football 12	9	Aug-11
Need for Speed: The Run	7.75	Dec-11
NHL 12	8.75	Oct-11
Otomodius Excellent	3.75	Jan-12
Pro Evolution Soccer 2012	9	Nov-11
Rage	9	Nov-11
Raving Rabbids Alive & Kicking	5	Jan-12
Rayman Origins	8.5	Dec-11
Red Faction: Armageddon	7.25	Jul-11
Renegade Ops	8.25	Nov-11
Resident Evil 4	9.5	Nov-11
Resident Evil Code: Veronica X	8.5	Nov-11
Rise of Nightmares	5	Nov-11
Rock of Ages	7	Nov-11
Rocksmith	8.25	Dec-11
Saints Row: The Third	9	Dec-11
Sesame Street: Once Upon A Monster	8.5	Nov-11
Shadows of the Damned	9.25	Aug-11
Sims 3: Pets, The	7.5	Dec-11
Skylanders: Spyro's Adventure	8	Dec-11
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Transformers: Dark of the Moon	7.5	Aug-11
Trenched	7.5	Aug-11
Trine 2	8.75	Feb-12
Tropico 4	7.75	Nov-11
UFC Personal Trainer: The Ultimate Fitness System	5	Sep-11
Ultimate Marvel vs. Capcom 3	8	Jan-12

Warhammer 40,000: Space Marine	8	Nov-11
WWE '12	5.5	Jan-12
X-Men Destiny	7	Nov-11

Wii		
Bit.Trip Complete	8	Oct-11
Dianey Universe	6.5	Dec-11
Fortune Street	8.5	Jan-12
Kirby's Return to Dream Land	8.5	Dec-11
Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword, The	10	Dec-11
LEGO Pirates of the Caribbean	7	Jul-11
Mario & Sonic at the London 2012 Olympic Games	5.75	Feb-12
Spider-Man: Edge of Time	6.5	Dec-11

PC		
A Game of Thrones: Genesis	6.75	Dec-11
Alice: Madness Returns	6.75	Jul-11
Batman: Arkham City	10	Nov-11
Battlefield 3	9.5	Dec-11
Brink	6.75	Jul-11
Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3	9	Jan-12
Call of Juarez: The Cartel	4.5	Sep-11
Dead Rising 2: Off the Record	9.5	Nov-11
Deus Ex: Human Revolution	8.5	Oct-11
Duke Nukem Forever	6.75	Aug-11
Dungeon Siege III	8	Jul-11
Dungeons of Dredmor	8	Sep-11
Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim, The	9.5	Jan-12
F.E.A.R. 3	7.75	Aug-11
Jurassic Park: The Game	5.5	Jan-12
Magic: The Gathering - Duels of the Planeswalkers 2012	8	Aug-11
Might & Magic Heroes VI	8.25	Dec-11
Minecraft	9.25	Jan-12
Payday: The Heist	8	Dec-11
Rage	9	Nov-11
Renegade Ops	8.25	Nov-11
Rochard	8.25	Feb-12
Rock of Ages	7	Nov-11
Saints Row: The Third	9	Dec-11
Serious Sam 3: BFE	7.75	Feb-12
Skylanders: Spyro's Adventure	8	Dec-11

Stronghold	4	Jan-12
Swords of the Stars II: Lords of Winter	3	Jan-12
Trine 2	8.75	Feb-12
Warhammer 40,000: Space Marine	8	Nov-11
Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings, The	9.25	Jul-11

NINTENDO DS		
Aliens: Infestation	8.25	Nov-11
Cars 2	7.75	Aug-11
Dragon Quest Monsters: Joker 2	7.5	Oct-11
Kirby Mass Attack	8.5	Oct-11
Professor Layton and the Last Specter	8.5	Dec-11
Solatorobo: Red the Hunter	7.5	Dec-11

PSP		
Corpse Party	8	Feb-12
Final Fantasy IV: The Complete Collection	8.5	May-11
LEGO Star Wars III: The Clone Wars	6.5	May-11
Patapon 3	6.75	Jun-11

3DS		
Cartoon Network Punch Time Explosion	4.75	Jul-11
Corpse Party	8	Feb-12
Final Fantasy IV: The Complete Collection	8.5	May-11
Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time 3D, The	9.25	Jul-11
LEGO Star Wars III: The Clone Wars	6.5	May-11
Patapon 3	6.75	Jun-11
Resident Evil: The Mercenaries 3D	8	Aug-11
Resident Evil: Revelations	9	Feb-11
Shinobi	6.5	Feb-11
Star Fox 64 3D	8.25	Oct-11
Tetris Axis	8	Nov-11

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Classic

Alex Kidd

Sega's forgotten mascot



by Bryan Vore

Everyone knows Sonic is the face of Sega. But he didn't show up until 1991. So who carried the mantle before the first appearance of the blue hedgehog? Sega's first console, the SG-1000, released in Japan in 1983 and failed in the face of Nintendo's popular Famicom (NES). But when Sega answered with the Master System in 1986, it had a new hero to go along with it: The prince of Radaxian, Alex Kidd. This young man – known for his red jumpsuit, giant ears, and penchant for rice cakes – enjoyed a five-year gaming hot streak before dropping off the map. After revisiting his inconsistent record, it's easy to see why he was set aside when Sonic came to town.

Available on Wii Virtual Console



Alex Kidd in Miracle World

1986 Master System

Alex Kidd's first adventure was a direct answer to Nintendo's hit from the year before, Super Mario Bros. However, it didn't share many similarities outside of being a 2D platformer. The levels transitioned from platforming to swimming to vehicle driving without batting an eye. Alex tooted around on a motorbike, a pedal-powered copter, and a tiny speedboat. If you crashed into something, you had to go the rest of the way on foot or take a swim in an alternate path. The strangest, yet most memorable element of Miracle World is the Janken Matches (read: rock, paper, scissors) against bosses with hands for heads. If you lost at this game of chance you would lose a life, which was unimaginably frustrating. Still, Sega saw enough promise in the game to pre-load it on later versions of the Master System.



Alex Kidd: The Lost Stars

1986 Arcade, 1988 Master System

The Lost Stars came out two years earlier in the arcades and featured two-player simultaneous platforming with Alex's girlfriend Stella. The game had almost nothing in common with Miracle World, ditching the free-flowing level system for a more structured platforming approach like Super Mario Bros. The console edition scrapped the multiplayer, brightened up the colors, and incorporated a clever combined health bar/timer that slowly drained over time. Taking damage would knock down your health and cause Alex to emit a revolting high-pitched scream. A disembodied voice tasked Alex to "Find the Miracle Ball," but neglected to mention that he'd have to play all six levels twice. The most memorable part of the game is a naked mohawked enemy who shakes skulls out of his butt in the spooky Halloween level.



Alex Kidd: High-Tech World

1987 Master System

Nintendo may have famously transformed Yume Kōjō: Doki Doki Panic into Super Mario Bros. 2 for North American audiences, but Sega implemented the tactic first by turning a Japanese princess adventure game (Anmitsu Hime) into an Alex Kidd joint. Completely changing the tone of the game yet again, Alex had to scamper all around his palace to gather pieces of a map that leads to an arcade, completing zany tasks along the way. He even had to take a test covering math, Mozart, and Sega trivia. Brief, lame platforming sections where players encountered tons of ninjas broke up the aimless wandering. In the end, High-Tech World ends up as one huge advertisement, as Alex's final goal is to have a great time playing Sega's awesome arcade lineup.



Alex Kidd in Shinobi World

1990 Master System

It's unclear why Sega didn't just put Joe Musashi in this game and call it Shinobi. I guess having Alex in the lead lightened the tone. Some evil being that's been banished for 10,000 years returns, and what's his first order of business? To steal your girlfriend, of course. Fortunately, some other friendly ghost bestowed Alex with mystical ninja powers so he could slice up bad guys with his sword and cast tornado magic. The first boss shoots fireballs like Mario and shrinks down after you beat him up enough. Too bad Alex didn't beat Mario in the way that could have changed fate: sales numbers.



Alex Kidd BMX Trial

1987 Master System

This top-down bike racer that only released in Japan was quickly slapped together to utilize Sega's paddle controller. Any random character could have appeared in this thing.



Alex Kidd in the Enchanted Castle

1989 Genesis

Enchanted Castle was Alex's only release on the Genesis. In hindsight, it was his last real chance to prove himself. Here Alex finally went back to his original, winning formula. Janken matches and vehicles return in addition to his constant desire to eat rice cakes. Janken matches rarely cost you a life, but you annoyingly had to play it every time you wanted to buy vehicles, pogo sticks, and powerups in the store. The last boss is the ultimate rock-paper-scissors opponent due to the fact that he had tons of arms. In the end it turned out that your father wasn't really kidnapped at all. He was actually vacationing in this treacherous land you were busting your hump to get through.

Cameos

Alex hasn't starred in a game since his heyday, but he has shown up every once in awhile as a playable character in Sega Superstars Tennis (2008) and Sonic & Sega All-Stars Racing (2010). His most significant latter day role, however, was in the Japan-only title Segagaga for Dreamcast (2001). Here players took control of Sega and were tasked with saving it from going out of business at the hands of its chief rival (a fake Nintendo). In it, you meet Alex Kidd, who at that point is drearily living out his days working in game retail.

Watch Alex's full dialogue from Segagaga in an English subtitled video at gameinformer.com/mag

Here's a choice excerpt translated by Sega for Game Informer:

*I debuted as Sega's mascot, and went head-to-head against N*ntendo's Mar*o [words bleeped in game]. But, it didn't work out in the end. For the longest time after that, I beat myself up about it, thinking about why it turned out the way it did. I spent a lot of time on this riverbank, staring at the sunset.*

– Alex Kidd, Segagaga



My First Game

Evan Wells

Toejam & Earl in Panic on Funkotron

Long before Naughty Dog co-president Evan Wells worked on *Jak & Dexter*, the talented game designer was earning his chops with another famous video game duo. The man who would go on to mold the award-winning *Uncharted* series got his start designing levels for a sequel starring intergalactic hip-hoppers Toejam & Earl. Working on the jammin' Genesis title not only taught Wells the fundamentals of game making, it was the first step on his path to Crystal Dynamics and eventually Naughty Dog.

Blast Off

"It was the summer of my freshman year, so I guess that would've been the summer of 1992. I'm renting a new game like practically every day, just going through the library and playing games all summer long, and my roommate and I rented *Toejam & Earl*. We played it, and our goal was always to finish it before the rental period was up and go onto the next one. We managed to get to the end and were super excited. We built that spaceship and took off. The credits rolled. Back then, credits weren't a wall of names like they are now. You could actually read these names and appreciate them. One of the first names that came up was a programmer named Mark Voorsanger. Voorsanger is a very unique name. You don't run across that many Voorsangers. There was a rather famous national gymnast champion at Stanford, Conrad Voorsanger, though I was never teammates alongside him. He still came around the gym from time to time, so the next time I asked him, 'Do you have a brother named Mark?' He was like, 'Yeah I do, how'd you know?' I said, 'I just finished his video game.' And he's like, 'Yeah he made this game called *Toejam & Earl*.' I said, 'I know, it's awesome!'... I said I'd like to talk to Mark to see if he had work the next summer.

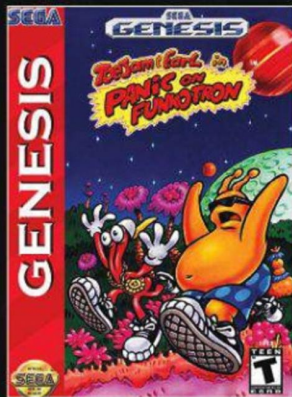
"I went to Mark Voorsanger's office and met with him and his partner, Greg Johnson. I just geeked out because I was in their office seeing all the posters of the games they worked on. Greg Johnson worked on *Starflight*, which was the PC game I played growing up that just blew my mind. There were literally a thousand stars in the solar system and you could go all over the place searching each planet's environment. *Caveman Games* was another one I had played. I was like, 'You worked on *Caveman Games*!' I don't know if it was my enthusiasm or what, but I got the gig. They were working on the sequel to *Toejam & Earl* and needed some help on the level layout. I had never done this, but I played lots of games and had a computer science degree, so I guess all that led up to getting the job."

A Sadistic Start

"I made all kinds of rookie mistakes. Now there's more documentation, you can read books about it, and obviously go to school, but back then it was the Wild West and trial by fire. All the first instincts you have are to catch the player or trick them into killing themselves. That's the worst game design. You don't want to trick the player into killing themselves. As a 20-year-old game designer I guess that was my first instinct. Greg showed me the ropes and showed me that wasn't how to do it."

Funky Game Design

"There were an enormous amount of secrets in the game. One of the power-ups you had let you teleport five tiles forward or something, so we had all these secrets where if you bumped up against a wall and teleported five tiles in you'd find secret alcoves or hidden presents. Some of the things I thought were the most amazing about that game going back to the brilliance of Greg Johnson was before *PaRappa the Rapper* he had a music beat game in there. You'd come across these boom boxes and in order to beat these minigames you had to hit out the beat. It was pretty rad."



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