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How You Can Make Gaming Better



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

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

Everyone has had a bad experience with gaming, whether it's playing an online match, discussing games in a forum, or getting dragged into a dreaded Twitter show-down. In an effort to make the world a better place for gamers, I offer you three things you can do in 2013 to strengthen the community.

Don't be a dirtbag online

The amazing thing about being a profanity-spewing racist or homophobe online is that you aren't really being the enlightened individual you believe you are. You are just one of the many clichés of stupidity that have ruined online games for years. I'd pay any company an exorbitant fee to play on an age-gated service that actively and aggressively removes dirtbags, and I have a feeling I'm not alone. Try being nice and hanging out. It's a novel approach and far more entertaining for everyone.

Respect people's opinions

Stop telling people they are wrong when they share their favorite game or praise a recent game that they enjoyed. One of the great things about gaming right now is there is a mind-blowing number of options. From simple mobile games to Call of Duty and everything in between, there is something for everyone. Just because I like Journey and you don't doesn't make one of us better than the other. Appreciate gamers for being just that – gamers.

Sit back and enjoy the ride

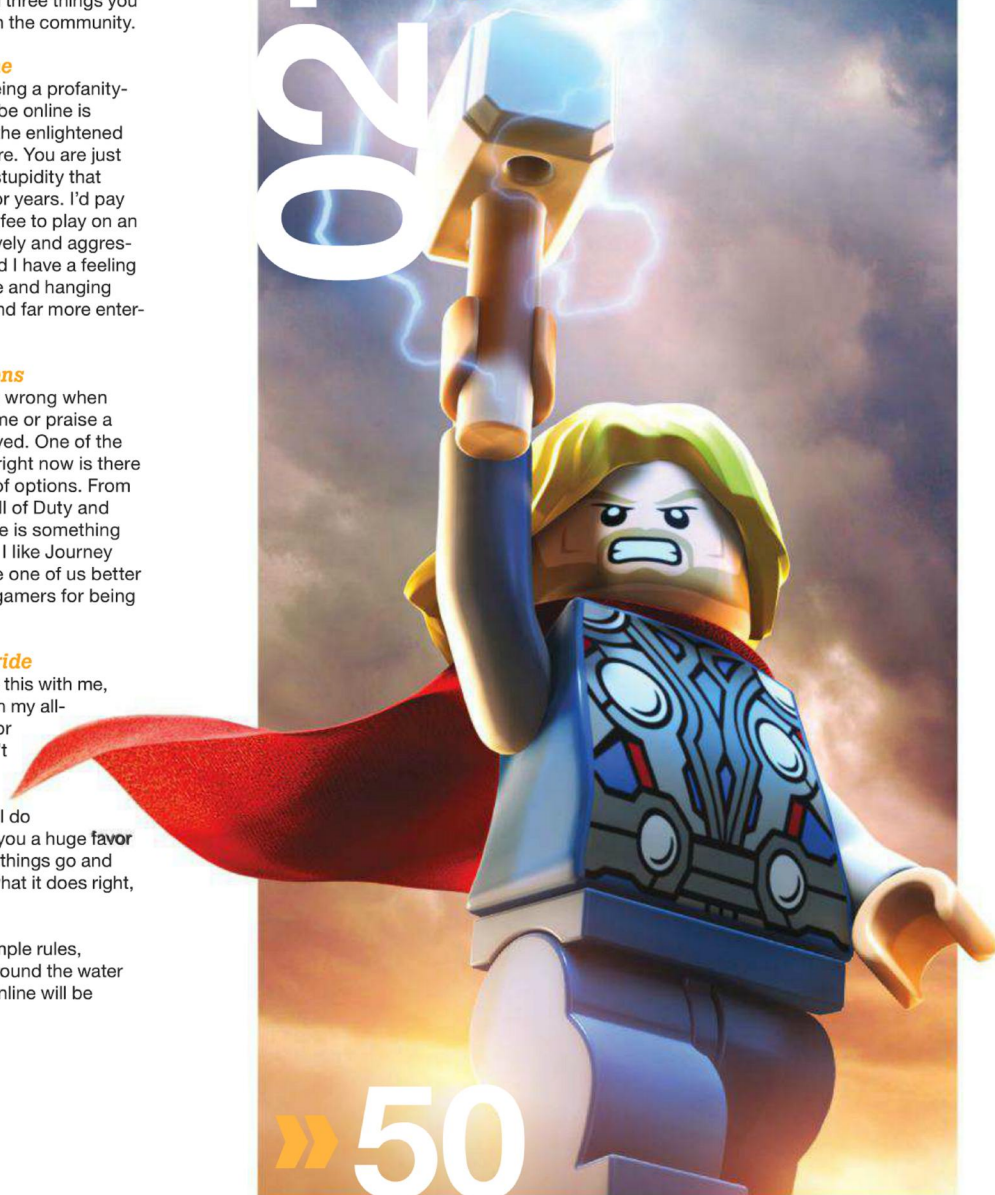
I'm sure someone will argue this with me, but no game is perfect. Even my all-time favorites have had minor glitches or scenes that didn't quite work out. And that's okay. The total experience is what it's all about. You will do yourself and others around you a huge favor by letting some of the small things go and just enjoying the game for what it does right, not what it does wrong.

If everyone follows these simple rules, then talking about games around the water cooler and playing games online will be even more enjoyable.

Cheers,

2013

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Lego Marvel Super Heroes

Traveller's Tales has tackled Star Wars, Batman and other DC heroes, Pirates of the Caribbean, Rock Band, Lord of the Rings, and Indiana Jones. It hasn't steered us wrong yet, and the next franchise it has in its sights is the Marvel Universe.



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This month, readers say goodbye to playing games to full completion, talk about how much they love the dreary and hopeless world of *The Walking Dead*, and question the merits of a gaming icon.

» 10 Connect

Last month we shared our list of the best games of 2012. Now we share your picks for who deserved the spotlight. We also look at the future games slate of the Wii U and discuss when we can expect news of next-gen consoles.

» 74 Previews

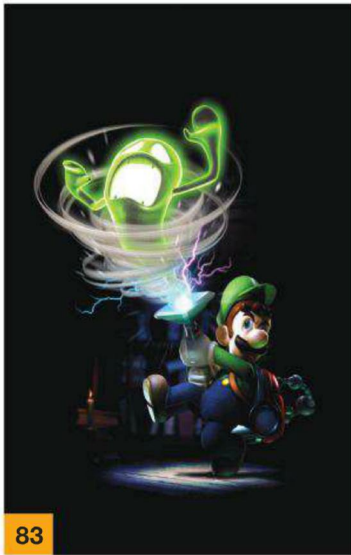
This month we have two-page previews of *Gears of War: Judgment*, and *Metro: Last Light*. We also got some hands-on time with Nintendo's upcoming 3DS titles *Luigi's Mansion: Dark Moon* and *Fire Emblem*.

» 86 Reviews

Check out our reviews of *Skyrim's Dragonborn DLC*, the Studio Ghibli/Level-5 collaboration *Ni No Kuni*, and the new *Devil May Cry* reboot.

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See how much you know about *Traveller's Tales' Lego* video games, and test your knowledge of the *Lego* toys themselves in this month's trivia.



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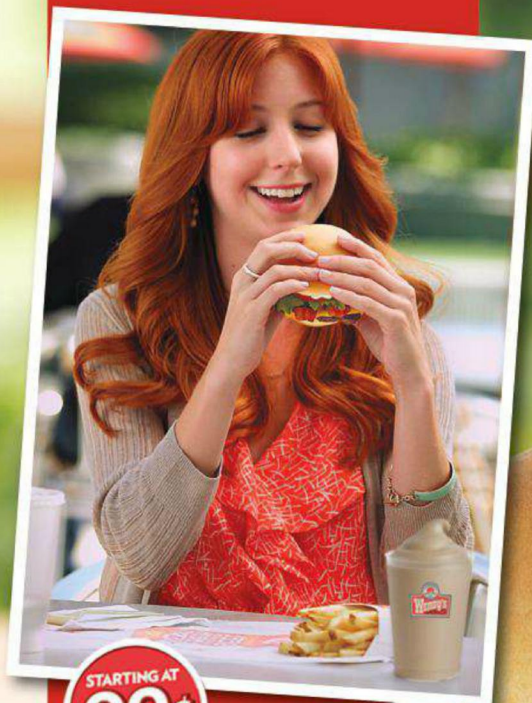
Fire Emblem: Awakening

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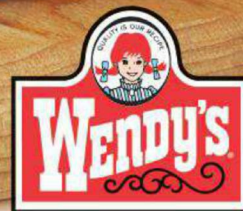
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Everyone has a value menu these days. But at Wendy's®, value is more than just a low price. That's why our new Right Price Right Size lineup is loaded with over a dozen choices all made with the same quality ingredients as the rest of our menu. Because we want you to like what you spend AND love what you eat.

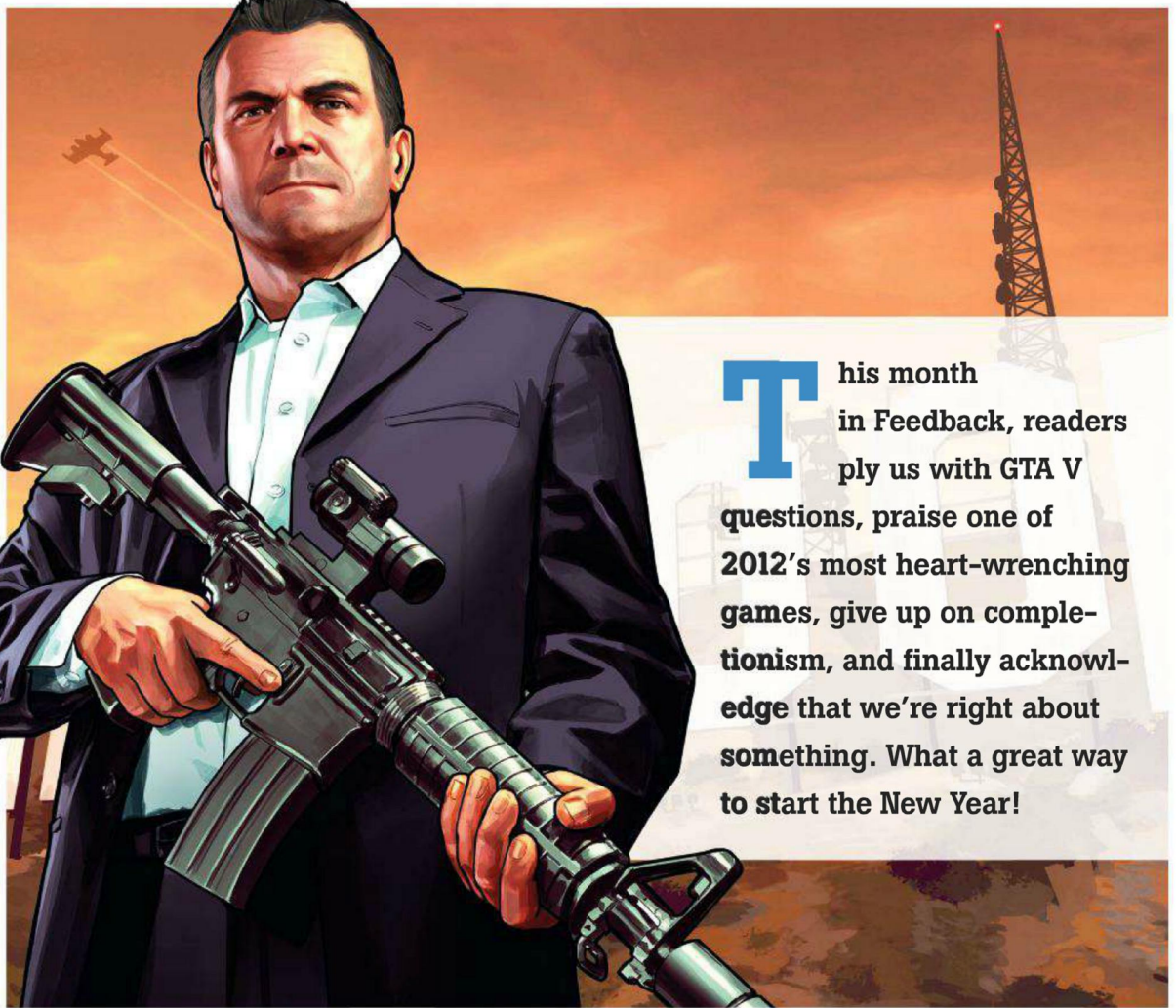


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This month in Feedback, readers ply us with GTA V questions, praise one of 2012's most heart-wrenching games, give up on completionism, and finally acknowledge that we're right about something. What a great way to start the New Year!

Grand Theft Euphoria

I just read your cover story for Grand Theft Auto V and cannot wait until this game comes out. I'm particularly hyped for the idea of three playable protagonists and being able to switch between them on the fly during certain missions. However, I have a question. If I decide to only play as Michael, will I be missing out on story missions specific to Trevor or Franklin? After reading the story I feel like I may need to play the game three times to see the story from all angles. Either way, I'm looking forward to playing the crap out of this game.

Lance Howard
via email

After reading this month's GTA V cover story, I have a question that I think a lot of other people have as well: Will the missions be less linear? I would like to see more paths available during missions. I'm a player who likes to sneak around in games; I'm not asking for GTA V to be a stealth game, but some variety other than blasting away everything in sight would be nice. Did Rockstar make any comment about that?

Kevin
via email

This month we were inundated with letters from GTA V fans craving more information. Fans can learn more in our extensive Q&A online, but to answer Lance and Kevin's questions, you won't have to play the game three times to see the whole story, and there will be more gameplay variety during missions. Now go read our online coverage at gameinformer.com/gtav/

Enemy Mine

I love Minecraft, but sadly my brother does too. Every day when I come home from school, he is on my Minecraft account. It's like he's on it more than me, and it's my account. I used to have my password saved on my computer, but even when I turned that setting off he still finds a way to get onto my account. What should I do to keep my brother off of my account?

Tristan Titus
via email

The simple solution would be to tell your parents – but that would be missing the bigger picture. Instead, put him to work for you; threaten to rat him out to your parents unless he slave mines precious ores for you. What else are brothers for?

A Fallen Hero

Last year I wrote to you guys regarding who I thought should play the role of Nathan Drake in the *Uncharted* film. I stated that I thought Bradley Cooper should play the role, and you published my feedback in one of your issues, essentially mocking my choice. I just wanted to let you know that Mr. Cooper stayed in our small town in the Berkshires this past summer during our annual theater festival. I had the opportunity of serving him at an after-play party, and Cooper pretty much ignored me. I admit that as a fan, I felt a little hurt. Although I still enjoy Cooper's acting, he's no "every-man" like Nate Drake! I also finally got to see Nathan Fillion in action, and am now in agreement with you guys. He should play the role. Thanks for showing me the right way.

Mike Leja
Williamstown, MA

We've never felt this vindicated before. Still, we're sorry Cooper didn't live up to the Nathan Drake standard when you met him. To us he'll always be the guy who had diarrhea in *Wedding Crashers*.

Contact Us

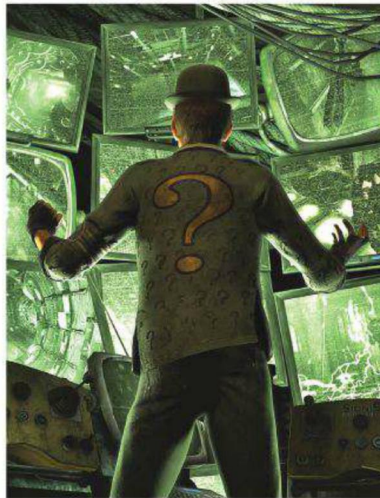
feedback@gameinformer.com

Tears and Joy

I am 31 years old, and I have collected comic books and played video games for the majority of my life. I have thousands of issues from hundreds of different books, and I have played countless games across every generation of console and computer. Never in my life have I been moved to tears by a video game. That is until 30 minutes ago. This letter is a thank you to Telltale Games for their wonderful, episodic version of *The Walking Dead*. I own every issue of the comic book, and as wonderful and creative as Kirkman is, he's never made me feel as in touch with a character as Telltale did at the end of Episode Five. What a game! I hope you guys enjoyed it as much as I did, because it's one for the ages.

Nate Nease
Las Vegas, NV

We certainly did, Nate. *The Walking Dead* is a great example of how emotionally impactful interactive storytelling can be, and we're excited (and terrified) to see where Telltale takes the story next. All we know is we plan on playing Season 2 in the rain so no one can tell if we're crying.



You Don't Complete Me

Adam Biessener's editorial on giving up completionism (*Letting Go*, issue 236) hit the nail on the head; if the average gamer age is now 31, we former "completionists" must shift gears to accommodate, you know, life. This epiphany has allowed me to revisit games like *Arkham City*, which I had played an hour before shelving in hopeless dismay of ever finishing the game and finding all the Riddler Puzzles. Now games like *Uncharted* provide a new joy; before I was so busy trying to find collectibles that I literally couldn't see the beautifully rendered forest for the trees. It's liberating, and frankly good therapy for what might be considered borderline compulsive behavior. Kudos to Adam for verbalizing what I think many gamers need to hear.

Andrew
via email

Whether it's attaining 1,000 achievement points or seeing a completion stat hit 100 percent, many gamers have a tendency to try to finish everything a game has to offer—often to the detriment of the overall experience. The joy you get from simply having fun with a game will always trump performing frustrating or monotonous tasks for the sake of being complete. We always knew Jerry Maguire was full of crap.

Short Answers to Readers' Burning Questions:

"Will there be a *Star Wars* level in *Kingdom Hearts 3*?"

They put everything else in those games, so why not?

"My mom grounded me for a month from 'everything fun,' so all I have left is old GI magazines. Isn't this beyond cruel punishment?"

Sounds like a sweet deal to us.

"Am I the only person that would play a *Grand Theft Pirates* game?"

Definitely not.

Worst News Tip of the Month:

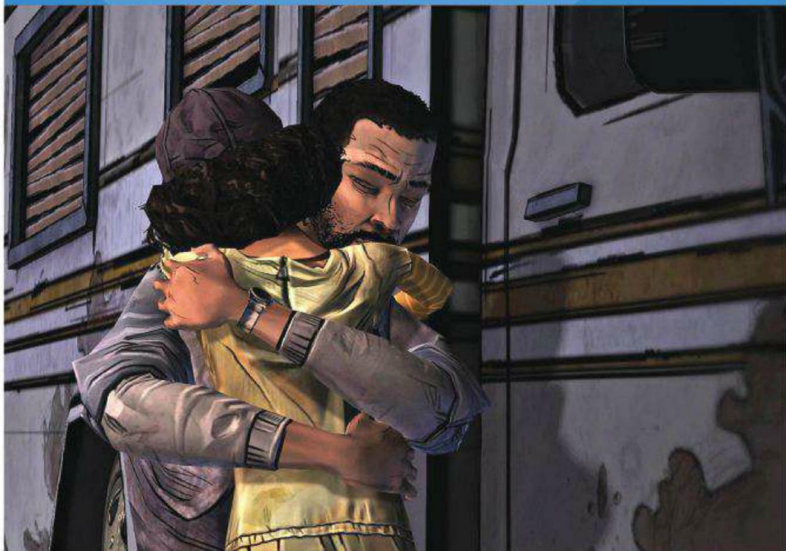
"I'm emailing you by text, from my bathroom, to inform you that issue 234 does not include even one image of a cat."

Worst Opening Line to a Feedback Letter

"I just want to complain on your review for *Pokémon Black and White Version 2*."

Quantified!

On average, one reader per month accidentally sends us a school paper on a topic that has nothing to do with video games. We know we often school our readers, but we draw the line at grading their papers.



gi spy



[Left] Jim talked about industry predictions and fancy suits with Wedbush Securities analyst Michael Pachter at the ESA's Nite to Unite **[Right]** Jim also started a purple tie club with SCEA's Shane Bettenhausen

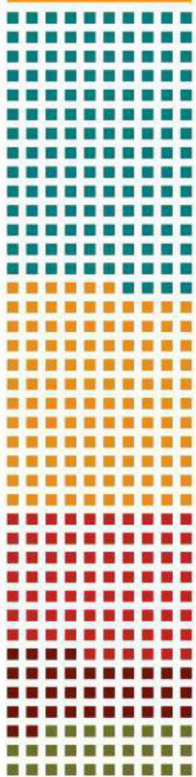
CANDID PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

GI SPY

continued on page 8

feedback 7

On Your Mind



- GTA V Excitement **36%**
- Genre Revival Picks **29%**
- Technomancer Hoodie Despair **19%**
- Nerdy Burning Pokémon Question Rebuttals **9%**
- Assassin's Creed III Bug Complaints **7%**

Question of the Month:

Which next-gen console do you plan on buying, and why?

Gaming With Wolves



I own Red Dead Redemption, Fable III, Skyrim, and Assassins Creed III. These are all excellent games, and I have no complaints with them, save for one: they all feature wolves as an aggressive animal that attacks you on sight. Why do developers do this? I don't mind them being in the game or being able to hunt them in games. What I object to is their portrayal as man-eaters. Granted, there have been cases where humans have been attacked by sick or starving wolves, but those instances are rare. I still enjoy these games, and will continue to do so – I just wish they could portray wolves in a more positive and truthful light.

Jason Mimiaga
via email

You bring up a fair point, Jason, but if you think wolves get a bad rap, consider the plight of zombies. At least Okami and Wolf Link offer some positive takes on the ancestors of man's best friend. All the undead have is that jerk Stubbs the Zombie.

Reach for the Stars



I just finished reading issue 236 and you have honestly given me the best holiday present ever! I have been searching for a game similar

to Freelancer for over a decade. There has been no other game that captured space simulation and combat physics better while also giving players limitless customization. After I read your preview on Star Citizen, I literally jumped out of my chair in excitement (which for some reason my wife can't comprehend). Thank you for highlighting a project that I and many others have been searching for to fill the void Freelancer left.

Joseph Drew
via email

You may be the most excited Star Citizen fan we've heard from, but you're not the only one. Roberts Space Industries raised a total of \$6.8 million for its ambitious MMO, including \$2.1 million from Kickstarter, which covered all of the developer's stretch goals. All that's left now is the wait.

Not So Super Mario?



I was wondering: If Mario had not been created way-back-when, would his games be as popular as they are now? I've come to the conclusion that they would not. They frankly aren't very imaginative or fun, but are accepted because of nostalgia. Teenagers who played Mario when it first came out grew up, had kids, and passed it on to them. Those kids like them because their parents like them, but if their parents hadn't introduced them to the games, they wouldn't play them at all. Just putting it out there; I'm prepared to take the hate.

Mark Watkins
via email

Mario's storied history has certainly put him on a pedestal. That said, your nostalgia argument is overly simple. Older generations played a lot of games that didn't stand the test of time; you don't see kids playing Pong nowadays just because their parents loved it. While some Mario entries have been more innovative than others, the series remains popular because it continues to provide fun experiences for kids and adults alike.

It's Alive!



In issue 236, we asked readers what classic video game genre they would revive and why. The most popular answer was a surprising one: the text-based adventure. Here are some responses:

If there was one genre I could bring back, it would easily be the text-based adventure genre. It is like reading a book. I love Black Ops II and Halo 4, but Zork has a certain charm no other genre can deliver.

Jack Little

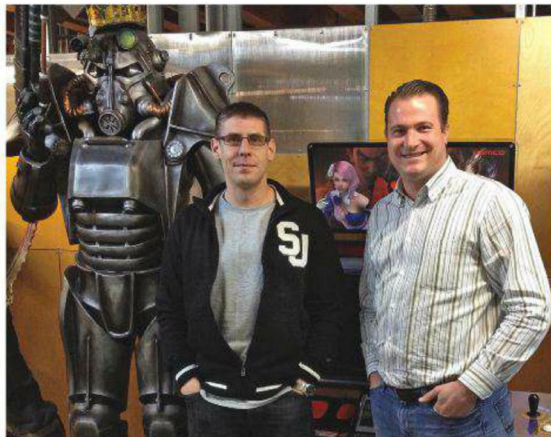
Easy: shmups. The last good shmups were Gadius V and Ikaruga. I think current-gen reincarnations of this classic genre would be amazing. In a game world where player-friendly games reign supreme, a dose of hardcore shmup action would be a great breath of fresh air.

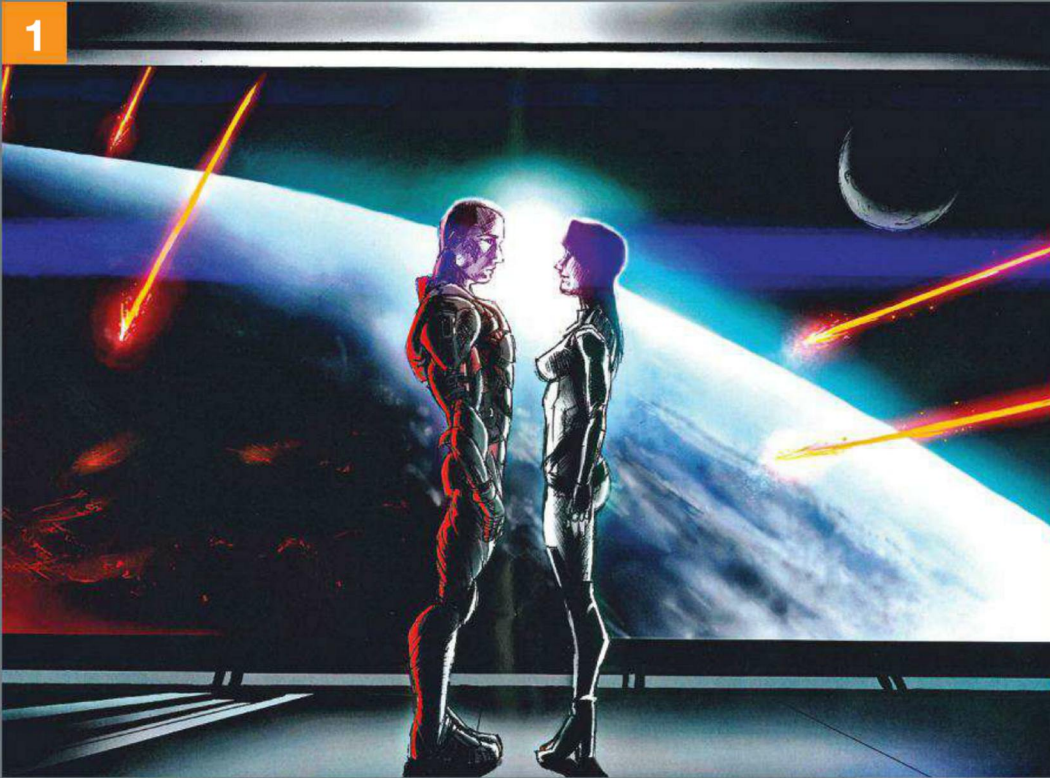
Scott Hewson

I would revive the classic RPG genre. There's nothing like getting lost in a world of Final Fantasy, Legend of Dragoon, or Xenogears!

Drew Croff

(Left) City Interactive's Michael Sroczynski and Highwater Group's Lance Seymour stopped by the office to improve our aim with Sniper: Ghost Warrior 2. Read our preview on page 81 (Right) Not even a surprise Wampa attack could stop Ubisoft's Sarah Irvin from showing us Rayman Legends. Now that's what we call professional!





WINNER

1 Zach Raw

Nothing says "romantic moment" like a terrifying invasion of Earth.

2 Kevin Engberg

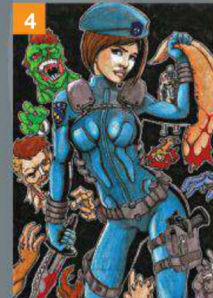
We're not validating the rumors of Nintendo buying Sega, but that sure looks like a Dreamcast logo on Mario's sole.

3 Jake Potts

Adult themes worked for Conker, so why wouldn't Rare be able to do it with Banjo?

4 Alejandro Alvarado

Jill gathers the first required ingredient for her patented Licker Jerky.



Corrections:

In our article on the history of Crystal Dynamics (Something in the Water, issue 237), we stated that Sledgehammer Games' Glen Schofield worked on Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2. In actuality, Schofield worked on Modern Warfare 3.

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



(Left) Gazillion Entertainment's Leo Olebe and David Brevik, and Fortyseven Communications' Chase Colasanno braved the harsh Minnesota weather to show us Marvel Heroes. In our book, you guys are the real heroes. **(Center)** We're not sure why Deadpool showed up at GI and started hurling burritos at editors, but we were hungry so we didn't ask questions **(Right)** Deadpool is like that annoying roommate who's always touching your stuff – only with more guns and swords

THE 2012 READER GAMES OF THE YEAR

Last issue (#237) we told you our picks for the games of the year, and now you've told us yours. In an online reader poll with 56,415 respondents*, our community picked out its favorite titles in a number of categories. See how they stack up against our choices:

* Respondents could vote multiple times, but not every person had to vote on every question.



READER



EDITOR

**GAME
OF THE
YEAR**



Assassin's Creed III
(10.1%)

RUNNERS-UP

Mass Effect 3
(8.5%)

E

Guild Wars 2
(6.9%)

Borderlands 2
(6.9%)

Halo 4
(39.2%)

BEST
**COMPETITIVE
MULTIPLAYER**



BEST
**XBOX 360
EXCLUSIVE**

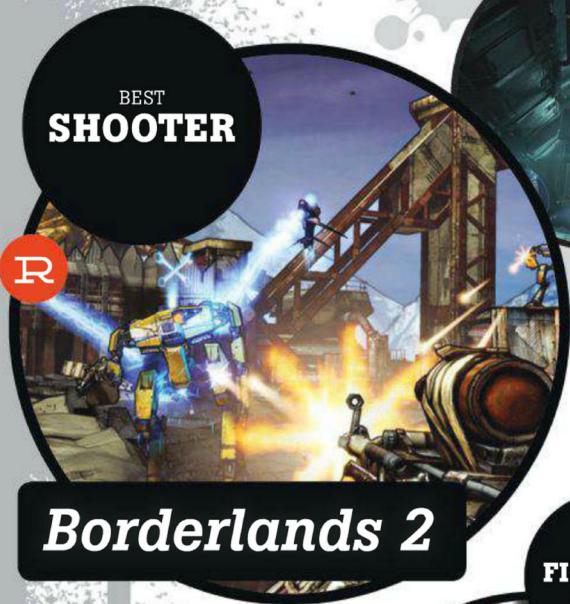


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BEST SHOOTER

R



Borderlands 2

Halo 4

E



FIFA 13

R

E



BEST SPORTS GAME

BEST FIGHTING GAME



Tekken Tag Tournament 2

E

R



Soulcalibur V

BEST RPG

Mass Effect 3



R

E

E

BEST STRATEGY GAME



XCOM: Enemy Unknown

R

E

FUN FACT:

No game in any category received 0 votes

BEST PUZZLE GAME

Quantum Conundrum

Fez

R





Assassin's Creed III

R

BEST ACTION GAME



E

Dishonored



New Super Mario Bros. U

E



Rayman Origins

R

BEST PLATFORMER



BEST CO-OP MULTIPLAYER

R

E

Borderlands 2



R

Guild Wars 2

BEST PC EXCLUSIVE



E

Torchlight II

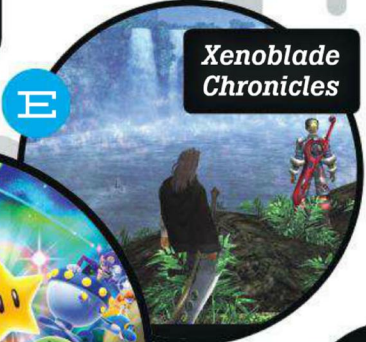


BEST RACING GAME

R

E

Need for Speed: Most Wanted



Xenoblade Chronicles

E



BEST Wii EXCLUSIVE

R

Mario Party 9



BEST PS3 EXCLUSIVE

R

E

Journey



The most competitive category was for fighting games, while the least competitive was for Xbox 360 game of the year



BEST
MMO

Guild Wars 2

R
E



BEST
HANDHELD EXCLUSIVE

Assassin's Creed III: Liberation

R



58.3 percent of respondents voted in all the categories

BEST
DOWNLOADABLE EXCLUSIVE



BEST
Wii U EXCLUSIVE*

R

New Super Mario Bros. U



Zero Escape: Virtue's Last Reward

E



Mark of the Ninja

E

The Walking Dead

R



The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim - Dragonborn

R



1000000

E

Angry Birds Star Wars

BEST
MOBILE EXCLUSIVE

R



BEST
DLC

Mass Effect 3: Leviathan

E



Call of Duty: Black Ops II only received 1.6 percent of the Game of the Year vote

*category not voted on by editors



THE COMING

The entire industry has been talking about the next generation for some time now, but this year we should see both Microsoft and Sony join Nintendo in the next-generation console fraternity. Software development is currently under way for both Sony and Microsoft's new systems (codenamed Orbis and Durango, respectively), and we already know details on games being created right now – some of which you will play this year. **by Matthew Kato**

SOFTWARE OF THE FUTURE

Even before development kits for the two new systems were handed out to studios, work had already begun on next-gen titles using rough target specifications and pre-production elements such as game concepts, art, and stories were worked on in anticipation. We've also learned that developers have already received the development units of Microsoft's new console, which means next-gen development is moving full

steam ahead. The games listed here are in various stages of development, and although some studios are still tight-lipped regarding their plans (Microsoft in particular is making their partner companies toe the line), that doesn't mean that their ideas aren't taking concrete shape as we speak.

We hear that both Sony and Microsoft are targeting special Apple-style press conferences to unveil their platforms near the Game Developers Conference in late March. E3 in June may be the industry's biggest event, but both companies want to give their systems their own limelight. That doesn't mean E3 won't be without its

surprises. Next-gen games will be announced at the convention in preparation for the systems' release at the end of the year. We hear that Sony in particular is determined not to come out last this time like the PlayStation 3 did this generation, so we'll have to see how soon it can get the PlayStation 4 out the door, and whether Microsoft is motivated to prevent this from happening.



STORM

DESTINY

According to a leaked document obtained by IGN and confirmed by Bungie, *Destiny* is set 700 years into Earth's future, where humans have flourished in the solar system but since fallen into decline. The aptly named Last City on the planet is protected by a massive, mysterious moon-sized spaceship known as The Traveler. The game casts you as "knights" who must protect the Earth from an emerging alien threat.

Bungie has released art for the four-game series with Activision, and the developer says it plans to share more on the game soon.



WATCH DOGS

Ubisoft announced Watch Dogs for PS3, Xbox 360, and PC this past E3, but it also said that the release is far out enough that it could support more systems. Watch Dogs is set in an open-world, near-future Chicago. The city and its citizens are monitored and connected to a central operating system called the CTOS. As Aiden Pearce, players use this network to their advantage to manipulate the city's infrastructure and use people's personal information hacked from the CTOS for their own ends. We don't know what Pearce's motivation is just yet, but it appears the multiplayer component is an integral part of the experience as well.



RESPAWN ENTERTAINMENT'S TITLE

Now that they've found a home with EA, former Infinity Ward heads Jason West and Vince Zampella are rumored to be working on a sci-fi shooter. We expect an official announcement sometime this year. No information about the game has come out yet, but the studio has released a pair of blurry screenshots that we can all speculate on.

BATTLEFIELD 4

EA hasn't announced the consoles for Battlefield 4, but the company has said that its beta starts in the fall. A new Battlefield would be a great opening salvo for any system, and given the scalability of the Frostbite engine, we fully expect it to come to the current consoles as well.

CALL OF DUTY: MODERN WARFARE 4

Activision has developers Infinity Ward/Sledgehammer and Treyarch alternating releases with the Modern Warfare and Black Ops series respectively, and 2013 represents Modern Warfare's turn at bat. Infinity Ward hasn't said anything about the project, but given that Call of Duty 2 helped establish the Xbox 360 launch, it's a good bet it will be present for a console debut once again.

STAR WARS 1313

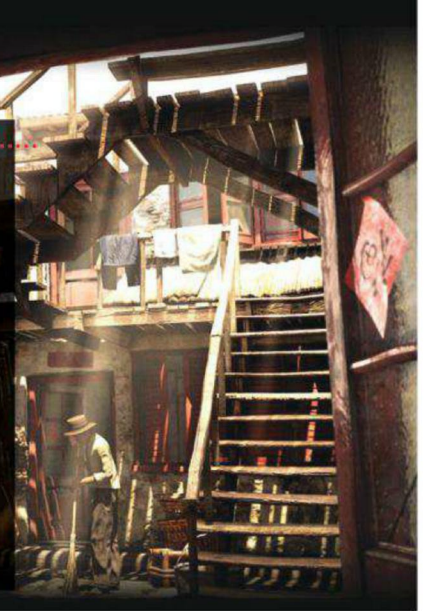
The not-so-secret secret regarding this title's E3 2012 showing was that the game is also a next-gen title. The demo showed at the convention specifically did not reveal the game's bounty hunter protagonist – who is believed to be Boba Fett. The game takes place on Coruscant, and LucasArts says that given the fact that it's centered on a bounty hunter, Star Wars 1313 won't feature The Force and the title will have a gritty, mature tone.





WHORE OF THE ORIENT

Brandon McNamara – formerly of L.A. Noire's Team Bondi studio – has a new game for the next-generation consoles that's set in 1936 Shanghai, which he describes as “the most corrupt and decadent city on the planet, where anything can be had or done for the right price.” Sounds like a great place for an open-world game that could explore themes of colonialism, the drug trade, political intrigue, and organized crime. Given L.A. Noire's detailed facial-capture system, we expect Whore of the Orient to usher in the new systems beautifully.



ASSASSIN'S CREED

Releasing another Assassin's Creed title a year after AC III may seem ambitious, but given the four-year run of annual releases – as well as the company's clamoring for new systems – we expect another title in the series in 2013. Recently, an online survey was sent out gauging players' interest in things like co-op play, different protagonists than AC III's Connor in different time periods, and more. Relying once again on Ubisoft's history, it would make sense that the next AC would be an offshoot akin to AC II: Brotherhood and Revelations.

EA SPORTS' LINEUP & NBA 2K14

Sports games' yearly schedule makes them a good candidate to appear simultaneously for both generations, since systems usually cover their genre bases with a sports game or two. Plus, skipping a year (or three if you're NBA Live) simply isn't a good idea. Since Madden, FIFA, NHL, and 2K Sports' NBA 2K14 ritually appear in the fall – the soonest we would see either Sony or Microsoft's next systems – they would be in a good position to bolster any launch.



CYBERPUNK 2077 & THE WITCHER 3 (CD Projekt RED)

In a recent interview, CD Projekt CEO Adam Kicinski stated that both of these games are next-gen titles. Cyberpunk 2077 is based off of Mike Pondsmith's seminal Cyberpunk pen-and-paper RPG, and the developer is working with Pondsmith on a mature game that contains a non-linear plot, plenty of character customizations options via weapons and gadgets, and extensive RPG gameplay systems.



Tomorrow & Today

Even though the next-gen consoles are coming out and software development is well under way, that doesn't mean the transition between the present and the future is black and white. Making next-gen games costs a lot of money, time, and resources. When you consider that the initial install bases for these platforms will be much smaller than the current ones, it will be hard for most of these initial titles to make their money back on next-gen versions alone.

To alleviate this inevitability and try and make as much money as possible on their creations, publishers – as they have done in past launches – will release some of these games for both current- and next-gen consoles. These will be of different quality as developers try to either scale up games created primarily for current consoles by putting some extra shine and features on them to make them appear next-gen, or pare back features or graphical fidelity for the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3.

DRAGON AGE III: INQUISITION (BioWare)

Inquisition is set in a larger map of the series' world of Thedas than the previous two titles, with an all-consuming war between mages and templars raging. EA has hinted that the game introduces a new hero, although any save info you have from the previous two titles will be taken into account. In general, BioWare says it is listening to the criticism of the franchise to date, and plans to include more customization options, strategic combat, and better environments, among other things. A level designer for the game at EA Shanghai recently tweeted that the game is targeting the next systems and a release date of 2014.



HUMAN ELEMENT (Robotki)

The game is the first project from ex-Infinity Ward community manager Robert Bowling's Robotki. A prequel for the game will be exclusive to downloadable games system Ouya, but the main game will hit in 2015. Human Element takes place 35 years after a zombie apocalypse, and surviving is about dealing with your fellow humans as much as it is about the undead. Players choose identities like being a solo adult or one partnered with a child, for example, and this template influences your story as you progress.



In the Works

As much as we know about many of the next-gen titles currently in development, there is a lot going on behind the scenes. First-party Sony developers **Naughty Dog** (Uncharted series) are hard at work on a PlayStation 4 title, and given the studio's pedigree, it's a good bet that the project will use the system to the fullest. We also expect big things from **THQ Montreal**, which is headed by Patrice Désilets, former creative lead of Ubisoft's Assassin's Creed and Prince of Persia series. He signed with THQ to much fanfare in the summer of 2011, and the studio has been busy executing his unknown vision. THQ is also publishing the next title by **Turtle Rock Studios** – the developers of Left 4 Dead and a former Valve subsidiary – as well. The game is a first-person shooter powered by Crytek's CryEngine 3, and although we don't know a lot of specifics at the moment, we've heard some developers not affiliated with the project rave about the title.

Other big-name studios we know currently working on next-gen software include Just Cause developer **Avalanche Studios**, which is working with **Square Enix** on a "groundbreaking" open-world title. Meanwhile, the Japanese publisher/developer is working on its new Luminous engine, which was showed off at this last E3 in the company's Agni's Philosophy: Final Fantasy Real-Time Tech Demo. While it's probably a bad idea to place too much stock into the demo turning into an actual product (see the teased "remake" of Final Fantasy VII for proof), the engine will obviously power the company's titles – including Final Fantasy – on the upcoming systems.

Elsewhere, Shinji Mikami's **Tango Gameworks** is working with **Bethesda** on a survival horror title called Project Zwei, **Neversoft** might be working on a Call of Duty title or perhaps something completely different, Dark Souls' developer From Software formerly announced a sequel that could be cross-generation, and LittleBigPlanet creator **Media Molecule** has moved out of the R&D phase for its next-gen project.

MIRROR'S EDGE 2 (EA/DICE)

According to Ngmoco's Ben Cousins, it's well known around Stockholm, Sweden that DICE has started on a follow-up to the cult classic. Given the timing, we expect it will come to next-gen systems.

KILLZONE 4 & UNNAMED NEW IP (Guerrilla Games)

Guerrilla has confirmed it's begun work on the two projects, and it only makes sense Sony would leverage their talent for high-fidelity graphics to show off the power of the upcoming PlayStation.

DOOM 4 & RAGE 2 (id Software)

Id Software's John Carmack said that development on the Rage sequel will occur after Doom 4. That game's release is currently nowhere in sight, but we hope to hear something soon. ♦

this is life





01

Deathwing

World of Warcraft

By simply showing up, Deathwing created a widespread cataclysm that changed the landscape of arguably the most popular virtual world on the planet. The warring factions of Azeroth put aside their differences to fight the gigantic dragon, who never got over his banishment to the elemental plane of Deepholm 20 years prior.



02

Bahamut - Final Fantasy

Bahamut may be a product of Arabic myth, but he made his fortune as a frequent guest star in the Final Fantasy series. He has appeared in nearly every Final Fantasy game as a summon, and even had his own Japan-only release in the form of Bahamut Lagoon.



03

Paarthurnax - The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim

In the world of Elder Scrolls, dragons are often malevolent, but Paarthurnax is in some ways the exception. He is the leader of the Greybeards, and has seen great wars in his lifetime. He spends his time meditating at the peak of the Throat of the World, which sounds boring until you understand that he is doing it to keep himself from engulfing Skyrim in flames.



04

Spyro - Spyro the Dragon

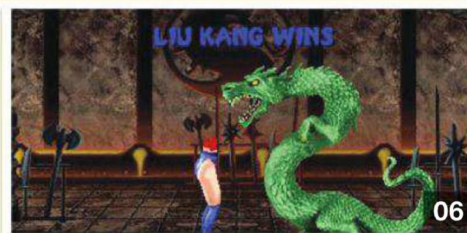
Despite the popularity of dragons in video games, successfully playing as them is a rare occurrence. Spyro stands strong as the exception, with all the powers of the typical dragon in a much smaller package. He has also successfully reinvented himself on more than one occasion to be a staple in the world video game mascots.



05

Charizard - Pokémon

After Pikachu, Charizard may be the most recognizable Pokémon in the franchise. He starts out small, struggling to keep his tail on fire, but it doesn't take him long to become one of your most powerful allies in the fight against gym leaders.



06

Liu Kang - Mortal Kombat

Mortal Kombat's protagonist may not look like a dragon, but when those iconic words echo through the battlegrounds demanding that Liu Kang "finish him!" you can see why he makes this list. One of Mortal Kombat's most memorable fatalities turns the fighter into a dragon so that he can chop off the upper torsos of his opponents.



07

Orochi - Okami

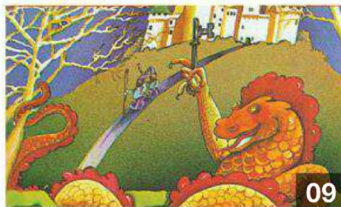
Orochi has eight heads, each one with its own separate demonic power. He is one of the largest bosses in a game that has a lot of huge boss fights. You take him on early in the game, but it's all an elaborate ruse to bring demons into the mortal world.



08

Hellkite Dragon - Dark Souls

The Hellkite Dragon, like just about every enemy in Dark Souls, loves to kill wandering heroes. He protects the bridge in the Undead Burg with a body covered in red spikes and fatal breath. Few heroes can get past the Hellkite Dragon without at least a few deaths slowing them down.



09

Rhindle - Adventure

Adventure's dragons may not be impressive by today's standards, but back in 1979 when you saw Rhindle, the red dragon, you ran. He was the most aggressive dragon roaming around the castle walls of Adventure and he had no qualms with ripping your dot out of existence with his open mouth and stealing your key.



10

Komodo Dragon - Far Cry 3

A lot of things on Far Cry 3's islands can kill you, but nothing consistently kills you as expertly as the Komodo dragon. When you see a pack of these giant lizards in the grass, you better get ready for a fight. Or you can just give up and save yourself some time.

this is death





Halo 4

When it comes to dissecting Halo 4, there's a lot of ground to cover. We spoke with creative director **Josh Holmes** about the campaign, multiplayer, Bungie, and more.

In Halo 4, Master Chief had more of a stake in the narrative. Not only was he dealing with these big cosmic battles, he was trying to save Cortana as well. Was this a concerted effort?

Absolutely. When we started approaching the story of Halo 4 and the return of the Master Chief, we wanted to develop him more as a character and have him come through as a human being a little bit more in the game. The way that we chose to do that was to explore that relationship between Chief and Cortana, and especially deal with this personal problem where he has his closest friend and AI who's dealing with her impending rampancy and mortality. Part of the balance of telling the story was how to tell that larger galactic-scale threat with Chief and the Didact and the threat that he represented to humanity, but then also have this smaller, more personal tale. Can Chief not only save the galaxy, but also save his friend? What impact will that journey have on him as a character? That was something that was really interesting to us.

Neil Davidge's score is a great complement to the game. It seems like the classic themes were used sparingly.

With the introduction of Requiem, a new enemy, a new threat, and

a very personal story that we're telling with Chief and Cortana, it required a whole new approach in terms of the music. Neil was able to bring a really amazing combination of organic and cinematic score mixed with digital, which plays to a lot of the elements of the game with the Prometheans being these tortured AI-like beings that are mechanical in form. It was very deliberate, but at the same time we wanted to bring back some of those familiar themes at the right moment so that players would have that sense of nostalgia.

What maps and modes are rising to the top as far as popularity?

If you look at past Halo games obviously Slayer and Team Slayer are always very popular. Big Team Battle with larger player counts and vehicles, and larger maps, has usually been not quite as popular. We made a decision that we wanted to focus on really elevating that experience and playing to what we believe are some of the big strengths of Halo multiplayer. We've seen a lot of people playing Big Team Infinity Slayer, about even with Infinity Slayer. SWAT has been an incredibly popular playlist. That's something that we continue to monitor each week. Depending on where the population is flowing, that's what leads to how we program the following week's playlist.

The community has spent a lot of time discussing the difficulty. What is your basic philosophy on tuning this?

It's always a fine line. We didn't set forth with the intention to make Halo 4 more or less difficult than past games. We strove for a roughly equivalent balance. One of the things that really impact the perception of difficulty for players is the fact that you have this entire new enemy class that you have to deal with, this threat that has new behaviors and responds to you in unpredictable ways. If all of your experience is based on fighting the Covenant, those new behaviors are something that you need to learn and develop tactics in response to them. That's where if you have players who are used to playing on Heroic or Legendary and they just jump into Halo 4 and suddenly they're feeling like, "Wow, this is much more difficult."

The Flood appears in the game, but only in a multiplayer sense. Were they ever considered for the main campaign?

No, not really, because they're not part of the story that we're telling with the campaign. When we first started on the project way back when, there were a lot of discussions around what story we wanted to tell. Back at that beginning point, I'm sure we had conversations around the Flood. As the story evolved and we

understood the narrative that we wanted to tell and the experience that we wanted to present, that helped shape who the opposing forces would be that you would come up against.

When can we expect season two of Spartan Ops?

Honestly, we haven't made any decisions in terms of where we want to go next with the Spartan Ops story. We have ideas as far as where the story is evolving, but that's not something we're focused on right now. It's turned out to be more work than we had originally anticipated, but we're really excited by the response. All of our focus right now is just on completing the first season and then we'll take it from there.

The transition of Halo from Bungie to 343 seemed extremely smooth from the outside. Would you agree?

I hope from an outside perspective it went smoothly because that was obviously our intention and I'm sure the intention of Bungie. It was a lot of work on both studios' parts to try and manage that transition to make it as smooth as possible. We want the experience that fans have to be a great one, and I think that's something that both 343 and Bungie care a great deal about. Many at Bungie remain Halo fans to this day and have given us some really kind words about the experience and shared words of support. We really appreciate that. Of course, we are all eagerly awaiting their new baby when that comes to market in Destiny. 💎

this is fire emblem awakening
here, the choices you make last forever



ZombiU

Ubisoft's ZombiU stands out as one of the most high-profile new IPs for Nintendo's Wii U console. The game combines permadeath, first-person action, and zombies into a punishing survival horror experience. The game earned polarized reviews, but got gamers talking. We spoke with **Gabrielle Shrager**, story design director and lead writer on ZombiU. Despite the aforementioned mixed reviews, Shrager vehemently defends ZombiU when questioned on the game's evolution, goals, and criticism.



ZombiU started life as Killer Freaks From Outer Space. What caused the change, and do you think it helped or hurt the game in the end?

Killer Freaks was designed to be a co-op arcade shooter with “pulp era” science fiction inspirations; fast, fun, and funny. The asymmetric multiplayer mode we showcased at Nintendo’s E3 2011 conference was a breakthrough from the point of view of uniting players of all skill levels to compete together in really fun, yet formerly impossible ways. As we continued to develop and test the game over the next few months, we realized that the GamePad, with its touchscreen, was also an ideal fit for a survival horror game.

It’s a tension-making machine that materializes a world outside the TV screen, offering an inimitable experience that takes players back to the roots of the types of intensely scary and compelling experiences offered by the best survival horror games. Zombies made the ideal enemy. They are slow and disgusting and allowed us time to exploit the second screen on the GamePad. But most people have forgotten

how to play these as developers have moved away from that slow-paced experience in the hopes of hitting a commercial home run with a highly scripted, cinematic, FPS-type experience. So with ZombiU it feels like we had to educate players all over again, and not just about survival horror, but about a brand-new way of playing with a brand-new controller.

From a narrative point of view, zombies are more familiar territory for players than Killer Freaks From Outer Space. But the popular genre comes with a lot of baggage, so we had to be especially creative there too. The “one bite kills” rule has rocked the establishment.

It is strong design choices that make a game stand out. Ours work well for players who relish the idea of a credible survival experience in zombie territory. ZombiU is not for players who want the power trip of running and gunning through reams of enemies.

Did the craze over Demon’s Souls’ unrelenting difficulty influence ZombiU’s game

design? Where do you see this love affair with very difficult games going?

Thinking about risk/reward is a significant part of designing a game. It has been our experience, and Demon’s Souls made this obvious, that one of the strongest ways to create a compelling gaming experience is to give the player something significant (within a game’s DNA) to lose and be fair about it. Games can be boring when they offer little or no challenge, but that doesn’t mean the challenge must be as radical as Demon’s or ZombiU’s. But with survival at the heart of our game and zombies as our genre, killing off survivors like flies is exactly what you’d expect from a zombie game.

Based on feedback and reviews, what is the biggest thing that you would change about the game?

More melee weapons would be one of the first things on our list. Give me a halberd to keep those zombies back! The pickings in the Tower of London’s armory would feel like Christmas!

The cricket bat was designed to be used almost as a last resort,

significant because it’s such a violent assault on your senses. Players quickly learn that it won’t save their bacon against more than one zombie at a time (either the hard way, or by listening to the Prepper). Some players depend on it entirely instead of scavenging for ammo and new gear, and these players deserve a richer melee experience.

ZombiU’s melee combat is sluggish and repetitive. Why did you make it take so long to bludgeon enemies?

Once you’re down to just your cricket bat, it often means you could have prepared better, and you’re going to feel the pain of this poor planning. When you go head-to-head with the undead, the sensation of gambling with your life is underscored by the stressful character voices that enact the human limits of physical and psychological endurance. Can the undead die? It’s a battle of wills, and a matter of opinion as to when too much is too much.

Some of the GamePad interaction (inventory management/scanning/etc.) feels distracting. Do you think there are areas where you tried too hard to implement the Wii U’s unique hardware features? Did you feel pressure to use them all?

Everywhere you look today, people are using multiple screens. At work we have two and even three screens to multitask; we watch TV while texting and Googling on our smartphones and tablets, and often with multiple applets or windows open simultaneously. Using the new GamePad becomes natural after a couple of hours. In fact, ZombiU’s use of the GamePad has been heralded as the most innovative and successful uses at launch by a majority of media and players. With any new system, you want to experiment with as many features as you can that excite you, and bring something to the experience that no other system can. When you try anything innovative for the very first time, you’re not going to get everything just right. ♦



command your army



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plan your attack



The lives of your army hinge on your choices. Choose your allies and the weapons they carry, survey the field, and lead your army in ferocious battles. Lead them well, and your allies will grow stronger fighting by your side.

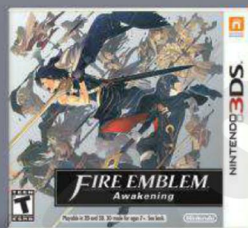
extend the action



Win the battle but know the war rages on. You can purchase and download additional maps with new stories, challenges and rewards. The first DLC map—free for a limited time—featuring a legendary Fire Emblem hero is available starting February 4th.

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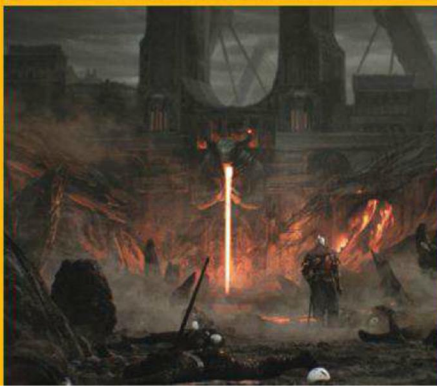
Games Discovered Questions Answered

Recapping Spike's 10th Anniversary Video Game Awards

Recent iterations of Spike's Video Game Awards have been filled with sophomoric humor and gamer clichés, but this year organizers took heed of the prevailing sentiment and created a less embarrassing spectacle.

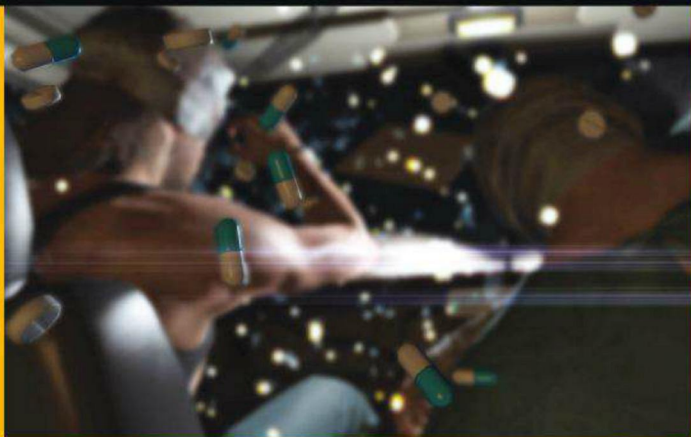
Gamers tuned in to see the end-of-year awards as well as the show's trademark reveals of new games and content via a series of trailers. While *The Phantom Pain* and *Dark Souls II* were the only big debuts this year (and that's debatable in the case of the former), footage was also shown of *BioShock Infinite*, *Castlevania: Lords of Shadow 2* (set in modern times), *Gears of War: Judgment*, *The Last of Us*, *Tomb Raider*, *South Park: The Stick of Truth*, and more.

by Matthew Kato



Dark Souls II

Developer From Software promises that gluttons for punishment are getting what they deserve with *Dark Souls II*, which will release for Xbox 360 and PS3 at an undisclosed time. The game's hero, world, and story are all new, but fans of the RPG can count on the series' trademark level of difficulty to continue. *Dark Souls II* also promises a revamped server-based multiplayer mode, a larger world, and an even darker tone.



The Phantom Pain

The big buzz around this game wasn't its reveal at the VGAs, but rather what happened afterward. Speculation quickly spread that *The Phantom Pain* wasn't a new IP, but rather a thinly veiled look at Kojima Productions' *Metal Gear Solid: Ground Zeroes*.

The trailer for *The Phantom Pain* centers on a soldier who has just awoken from a coma in an English medical facility under attack from a military force. The

character sneaks around the hospital with an ally while those around are being gunned down in cold blood. The trailer ends with a unicorn sporting a flaming horn and a giant whale-like creature wreathed in flame chomping a fleeing helicopter. Hallucinations, or pure chaos?

The theories suggesting this game is *Ground Zeroes*, or some other *Metal Gear* title, are numerous. A new Swedish studio called Moby Dick Studios is supposedly developing the game. Its CEO, Joakim

THE PHANTOM PAIN



2012 VGA Award Winners

Game of the Year
The Walking Dead

Studio of the Year
Telltale Games

Best Xbox 360 Game
Halo 4

Best PS3 Game
Journey

Best Wii / Wii U Game
New Super Mario Bros. U

Best PC Game
XCOM: Enemy Unknown

Best Handheld / Mobile Game
Sound Shapes

Best Shooter
Borderlands 2

Best Action Adventure Game
Dishonored

Best RPG
Mass Effect 3

Best Multiplayer Game
Borderlands 2

Best Individual Sports Game
SSX

Best Team Sports Game
NBA 2K13

Best Driving Game
Need For Speed: Most Wanted

Best Fighting Game
Persona 4 Arena

Best Adapted Video Game
The Walking Dead

Best Independent Game
Journey

Best Graphics
Halo 4

Best Song in a Game
"Cities" by Beck

Best Original Score
Journey

Best Performance by a Human Male
Dameon Clarke as Handsome Jack (Borderlands 2)

Best Performance by a Human Female
Melissa Hutchison as Clementine (The Walking Dead)

Best Downloadable Game
The Walking Dead

Best Social Game
You Don't Know Jack

Best DLC
The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim – Dawnguard

Most Anticipated Game
Grand Theft Auto V

Character of the Year
Claptrap (Borderlands 2)

Best Game of the Decade
Half-Life 2

Mogren, claims to have worked at a major American developer for years, but there is no record of any of his accomplishments. The name Joakim itself is an anagram for Kojima, and in the past Kojima has mentioned working on a Project Ogre. "Ogre" can be found in the surname Mogren. Developers wearing Moby Dick Studios shirts were openly seen at Konami's VIP area at the VGAs.

The trailer holds many clues as well. At the end the main character's face is finally shown. While bandaged (or is that a head-band?), it looks a lot like Big Boss' face from the *Ground Zeroes* promo shots – scar, mullet, and all. One of those promo images included the slogan, "From 'Fox,' two phantoms were born." Let's not forget that Big Boss himself was in a coma when *Solid* and *Liquid Snake* were created.

Gamers also noticed what appeared to be cameos by series' characters like Volgin, The Sorrow, and possibly The Boss, as well as the fact that the trailer's protagonist has an amputated arm just like *Liquid Snake*. Finally, the bottom of the words *Metal Gear Solid V* (which *Ground Zeroes* serves as a prequel to) can be overlaid, off-center on the top of *The Phantom Pain*'s stylized logo.

At the time of this writing, Konami was mum on any connections between *The Phantom Pain* and the *Metal Gear* series. ♦



PLANETSIDE 2

A Triumphant Achievement

by Adam Biessener

Going back to the tiny, limited world of a 64-player Battlefield match is tough after living through one of PlanetSide 2's hour-plus base assaults. The latest free-to-play massively multiplayer offering from Sony Online Entertainment is a pure shooter, with no NPCs and few emplaced defenses to get in the way of player-versus-player action. PlanetSide 2 doesn't pretend to do anything else, but this is a triumph of online first-person shooter combat once you get over the significant learning curve.

Don't be scared off by the "massively multiplayer" label. PlanetSide 2 is just as polished and battle-ready as any triple-A shooter. Network issues – like lag and players warping around – are almost entirely absent, even with hundreds of players fighting over the same objectives. Draw distance goes out to the horizon, though you generally don't have much luck shooting that far thanks to projectile velocity and drop. In all respects, PlanetSide 2 is a modern sci-fi competitive shooter, only bigger – much bigger.

Individual battles are fast and vicious. Despite their futuristic armor and shields, players are anything but bullet sponges. Even a heavy assault trooper with their class-specific super-shield drops with a single accurately fired clip, and melts as quickly as anyone else if they

stick their neck out in front of a massed enemy force. Accuracy is everything and mobility is limited, and so players' individual aiming skills determine the outcomes of small firefights more than any other factor except the element of surprise.

PlanetSide 2's shocking lethality makes being in the right place at the right time the most important skill you can develop. Flanking an entrenched enemy position without being seen can bag you a raft of easy kills. Waiting for enemies to come through a likely teleporter or up through a levitation pad is extremely rewarding. And, of course, finding a good sniping perch and picking off infantry is a timeless classic.

Learning how battles tend to flow in any

given base layout or overland topography involves a lot of dying and all the frustration that comes along with it. The dense sea of icons that clogs your minimap takes hours to understand, much less read at a glance in mid-battle. Groping your way around weapon types and the progression system is a moderate hassle, but gaining true understanding of the salient points of each facility type is a hell of a task. Large bases in particular are so vertically complex that the flat map system borders on useless, especially with teleporters and impassable energy shields in the mix.

Because death comes so quickly, the most contested spots are tied to the respawn system. The Sunderer personnel transport can





deploy into a forward spawn point, allowing downed soldiers to get back to the fighting much faster. Ensuring that your team has appropriate Sunderer placement (and denying it to your opponents) is the rock on which nearly all other strategies are built. Capturing control points isn't what really flips control of PlanetSide's massive facilities – destroying the central spawning unit takes the fight right out of an enemy army.

Frontlines develop naturally over the excellent maps. A simple ridge can provide enough cover to make it easy to defend, and over-running an enemy position like that carries a thrill almost equal to capturing an actual node. Doorways within an enemy force's field of fire are deathtraps, and breaking out of a well-defended one after minutes of being shelled with a nonstop barrage of heavy ordnance is a momentous occasion. Every single battle features dozens of these moments among the larger swell and fade of the overall engagement.

A skilled group of 10-20 players can quickly turn the tide of a battle between hundreds by influencing those moments – disabling a generator to drop a base's defensive shields, taking out a crucial Sunderer, or just wiping out an entrenched enemy position to allow the frontline to move forward. The capability for a smaller force to accomplish remarkable feats is a necessity for any large-scale shooter, and it's definitely present here.

Each class has a distinct role. The interplay between frontline heavy assaults, skirmishing light assaults, versatile infiltrators, resupplying and repairing engineers, and the always-crucial medics has a noticeable impact on the flow of battle, even though every player has the basic capability to gun down enemies with powerful firearms. Some class-based

shooters relegate their classes' unique abilities to minor roles, but in PlanetSide 2 they're all critical in every phase of battle. Good luck harassing an armored column without an engineer to resupply your rockets, or sustaining any deep strike without medics to resurrect the fallen, for example.

Vehicles fill similarly important niches. Main battle tanks are armored engines of destruction that demand an answer from the enemy before they tear entire armies to bits. The Galaxy dropship enables all kinds of advanced tactics for coordinated squads, and can be outfitted as a decently capable AC-130 analogue as well. A variety of smaller war machines fit into smaller roles, like swift individual transport and nimble harassment. While ground vehicles control naturally, piloting aircraft with a mouse and keyboard is unbearable – plug in an Xbox 360 controller for a superior experience.

Though stand-up fights place a premium on player skill, it's possible to have a good time in a supporting role. Experience points rain down on engineers who repair vehicles and hand out ammo, medics who heal and resurrect the wounded, Sunderer drivers who deploy an active forward spawn, and anyone who spots enemy positions to their team. You don't have to be anything approaching a tourney champion to contribute to and enjoy PlanetSide 2.

I've found equal parts fun and frustration on both sides of the infantry/vehicle equation, which usually indicates a good balance. The lengthy beta ironed out most of the borderline exploits that inevitably arise from players combining such a wide variety of capabilities in unexpected ways. Tanks happily one-shot soldiers with their main cannons, but being a big slow target when there are hundreds of

enemies in firing range is a hell of a disadvantage. Skilled pilots can pull off amazing feats of carnage in their aircraft, but a few dedicated anti-aircraft soldiers can limit the damage quite effectively.

PlanetSide 2's progression system is almost entirely based around certifications, which come with kills and assists, completing objectives, performing support actions, and with a baseline bonus trickle over time. The power they grant is significant. The ability to deploy a Sunderer as a forward spawn point, for example, must be unlocked by spending 50 certs. Want a scope for your gun? 30 certs (each, sold separately per weapon). Forward grips and laser sights are 100 certs apiece. Extra grenade capacity: 50 certs. Flat health and armor increases for each class, as well as ability boosts like more jetpack time for a light assault trooper, are hugely important and come with a serious investment of certs for each – 500 for the max level. Vehicles follow a similar pattern. Don't feel bad when you get pasted over and over by players with far more playtime than you; they're not just more experienced, but noticeably more powerful than you are.

To Sony Online's credit, the items for sale in the cash shop largely steer clear of the kind of power increases certs grant. The primary draw for spending real money in PlanetSide 2 is to unlock additional weapons. Almost all weapons are sidegrades, like a rifle with a slower reload but a larger clip. Unlocking each varies between \$2.50 and \$7, or you could grind out between 200 and 1,000 cert points to do the same. Cash can also buy temporary XP or resource rate gain boosts and cosmetic items. Anyone who gets into the game will likely want to drop a few bucks here and there, but that seems like a reasonable price for the quality and quantity of entertainment PlanetSide 2 offers.

PlanetSide 2 is an excellent game that happens to be free to play, not a free-to-play game worth maybe taking a look at. As painful as the learning curve can be, and as frustrating as it is to die over and over to players you never even saw, the experience is incredible and unique once the structure of the game clicks into place. Like any multiplayer game, it's better with friends. The built-in social features leave much to be desired, but that's true of every online shooter today. I heartily recommend PlanetSide 2 to anyone, even players who don't usually spend a lot of time in online shooters. You might be surprised just how compelling an eternal, player-driven war over a persistent world can be. ♦

Better with Friends

PlanetSide 2 is fun when you're playing with random strangers; the progression system mostly encourages players to contribute to the overall team effort. The game doesn't fulfill its potential until you're playing with a group of friends, though, coordinating your loadouts and taking on whatever missions you assign yourselves. The in-game voice chat is sadly inadequate, so make sure the clan you sign on with runs their own voice server. Similarly, the built-in social tools are so bare-bones as to be nonexistent. Players looking for a group to join will have much better luck surfing fan forums to find an outfit that matches their playstyle than trying to blindly make friends in-game.



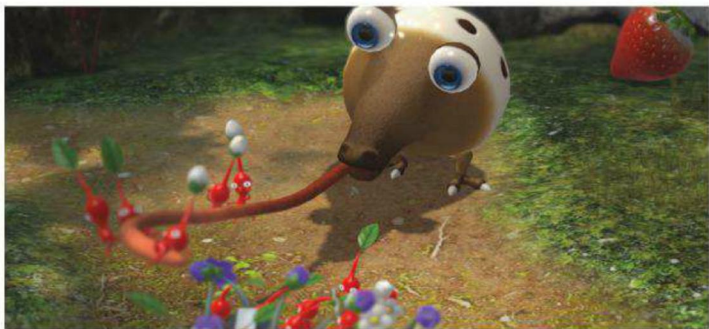
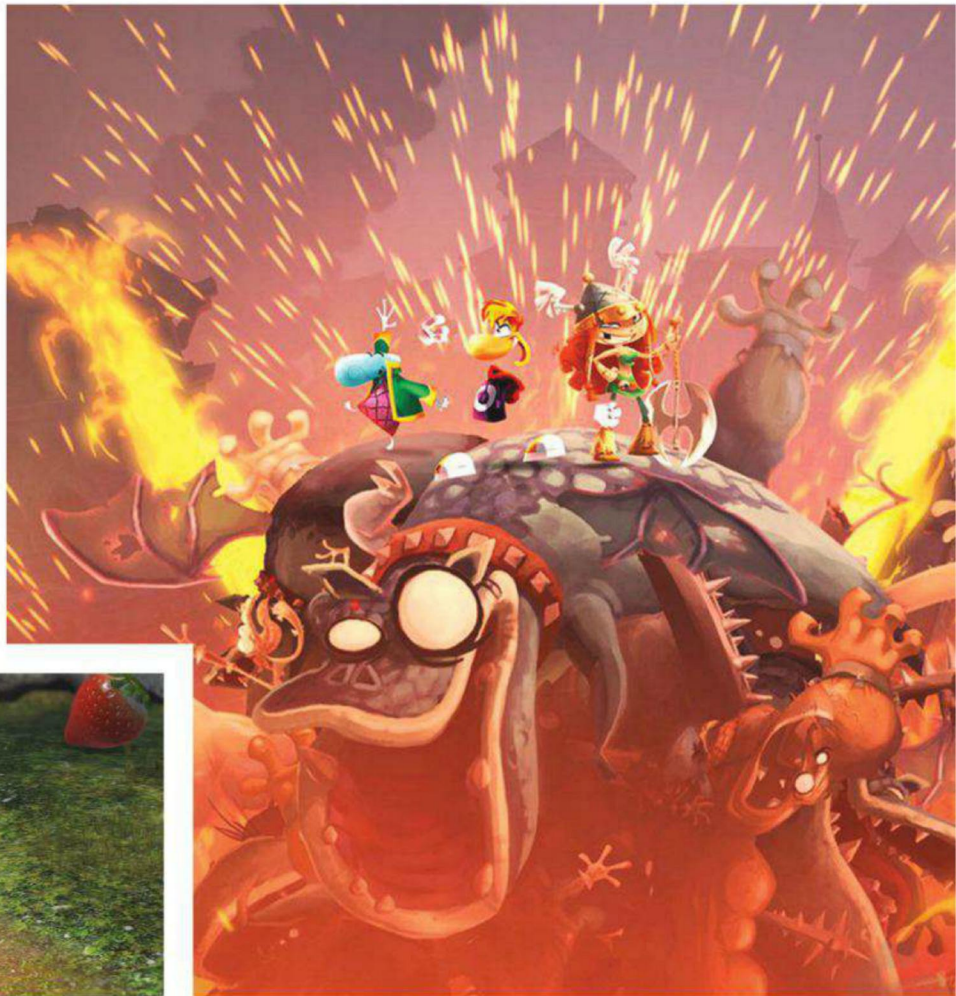


What's Next for Wii U

by Jeff Marchiafava

Like most of Nintendo's recent hardware launches, the Wii U released with a software line-up designed to showcase the system's abilities. Some titles, such as *New Super Mario Bros. U*, *Scribblenauts Unlimited*, and *Nintendo Land* put the Wii U's GamePad features to good use and have been well-received by gamers. Others such as *Epic Mickey 2: The Power of Two*, *ZombiU*, and *Rabbids Land* were disappointing, and raise concerns of whether developers can find innovative uses for the hardware's unique features, or continually recycle the same gimmicks.

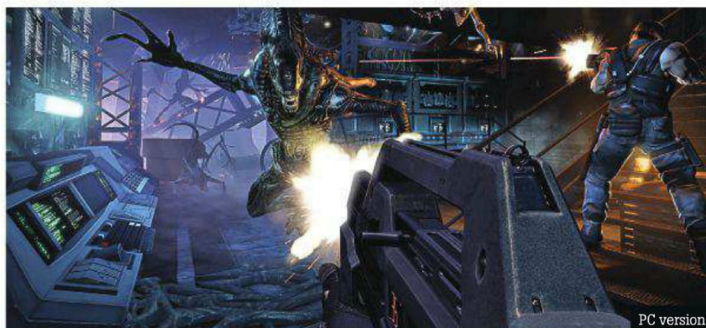
As the Wii U heads towards its second wave of software, those questions will be answered one way or the other. Here are the games slated for a 2013 release so far.



Pikmin 3

SUMMER

Pikmin 3 was one of the most celebrated showings at Nintendo's E3 2012 press conference. As in previous installments, players command groups of the adorable creatures to solve puzzles, traverse the environment, and defeat bosses. Curiously, Nintendo recommends playing *Pikmin 3* with a Wii remote and nunchuk, but confirmed it can also be played exclusively with the GamePad.



Aliens: Colonial Marines

FEBRUARY 12

Gearbox Software has been vocal in its enthusiasm for Wii U, and *Aliens: Colonial Marines* makes it easy to see why. The GamePad's touchscreen is perfect for the franchise, functioning as an in-game map and replicating the series' iconic motion tracker.

Rayman Legends

FEBRUARY 26

Announced as a Wii U exclusive, *Rayman Legends* is the direct sequel to 2011's acclaimed *Rayman Origins*. Similar to *New Super Mario Bros. U*, *Rayman Legends* allows a fifth player to aid friends by triggering interactive objects, nabbing collectibles, and tripping up enemies via the GamePad's touchscreen. For more on *Rayman Legends*, check out our preview on page 80.



Wii Fit U

EARLY 2013

One of the first games demoed by Nintendo for its new system, *Wii Fit U* allows players to use the GamePad in conjunction with the Wii Balance Board to perform a variety of exercise-focused minigames. Nintendo announced *Wii Fit U* as a "launch window" title, which means players should have it by March at the latest.



Lego City Undercover

EARLY 2013

The latest Lego game from Traveller's Tales breaks with tradition by giving players an open-world city to explore. As Officer Chase McCain, players bust criminals and Lego blocks alike, while donning a variety of costumes that unlock unique abilities. You can learn more about Lego City Undercover on page 64.



The Wonderful 101

EARLY 2013

Formerly known as Project P-100, Platinum Games' The Wonderful 101 tasks players with repelling alien invaders via a swarm of superheroes. The cartoony brawler allows you to recruit new citizens to strengthen your mob and perform united super attacks by swiping gestures on the GamePad's touchscreen.



Art from Bayonetta

Bayonetta 2

2013

Platinum Games surprised everyone when it announced in September that Bayonetta 2 is a Wii U exclusive. So far the developer has only released a teaser trailer, but with Nintendo stepping in as publisher for the game, it is a major score for the new system.



Game & Wario

2013

Game & Wario ditches the seconds-long microgames of the WarioWare series for slightly more complex activities. The game offers both single-player and multiplayer minigames, which combine the GamePad's unique abilities with the irreverent quirkiness Mario's nemesis is known for.



PC version

Project Cars

2013

The development of Slightly Mad Studios' crowd-funded racing simulator has focused on the requests of the game's backers, which includes some Wii U-specific features. The developer plans to include a tilt-steering option for the GamePad, using the touchscreen to display the buttons and switches of real, pro steering wheels.



Art from Super Smash Bros. Brawl

Super Smash Bros. Wii U [Working Title]

TBA

A new Super Smash Bros. was announced for the Wii U and 3DS by Nintendo's Satoru Iwata at E3 2012. Nintendo still hasn't given players a look at the game, but we do know it features interconnectivity between the Wii U and 3DS versions and is being developed by Namco Bandai.



PC version

Ghost Recon Online

TBA

Ubisoft demoed the Wii U version of its free-to-play third-person shooter back at E3 2011, using the GamePad's touchscreen to place beacons, order missile strikes, and fly drones. Unfortunately, this September Ubisoft stated the Wii U version of Ghost Recon Online is on hold as the team focuses solely on the PC version, stopping just short of announcing its cancellation.

What's Next for Wii U Services

Given the massive head start the PlayStation Network and Xbox Live have over the Nintendo Network, the Wii U is still playing catch-up when it comes to its online service. Here is a look at some of the new apps coming in early 2013, as well as some feedback gamers have given about how its online offerings could improve moving forward.

Nintendo TVii: One of Nintendo Network's biggest and most unique selling points is Nintendo TVii, a free service that integrates Netflix, Hulu Plus, Amazon Instant Video, TiVo, and cable network programs under one roof. In addition to letting viewers stream shows to either their television or the GamePad, the service can provide ancillary program details such as reviews, cast information, and real-time sports stats. As of this writing, Netflix and TiVo support is still forthcoming, and Nintendo plans to include other video and DVR services to Nintendo TVii in the future.

Google Maps: Adding a map app to a console tethered to a living room may not make sense on the surface, but using the GamePad allows users to explore the world via Google Street images. If you can't hop on a plane and visit the Taj Mahal, you can at least tour the grounds via the map app.

Panorama View: Nintendo showed off this tech demo at E3, and it's headed to the eShop this spring. Panorama View allows users to view a 360-degree video by rotating the GamePad as it plays. Nintendo has shown off examples of a Rio parade, London bus tour, and a hang-glider ride.

Other Notable Games Coming to Wii U

Monster Hunter 3 Ultimate – March
 Injustice: Gods Among Us – April
 Sniper Elite V2 – Early 2013
 The Amazing Spider-Man – Early 2013
 The Cave – Early 2013
 Formula 1 All Stars – 2013
 Biker Bash – 2013
 Jeopardy – 2013
 Wheel of Fortune – 2013
 Medium – TBA
 Project Nova – TBA
 Homefront 2 – TBA



Monster Hunter 3 Ultimate



Injustice: Gods Among Us

What Online Gamers Want Next From Wii U: Shortly after launch, we asked gameinformer.com members what they think of the Wii U's online functionality. The reactions of early adopters have been largely positive, with owners praising Miiverse as a fun way to trade messages and pictures with other gamers. Here are some issues our readers stated they would like to see Nintendo address.

- **Improve friend requests**

While a definite step up from friend codes, finding and adding buddies to your Wii U still has its problems. Our readers expressed hope that Nintendo would streamline the friend request process, and notify them when someone tries to add their account through the friends list.

- **Standardize invites and voice chat**

Another common request from our readers was for Nintendo to devise a universal system for handling game invites and voice chat similar to Xbox Live, instead of leaving it up to developers to implement.

- **Unite downloadable content**

While users are happy that Nintendo honored the downloadable games and virtual console titles they purchased on the Wii, many complained about having to enter a separate Wii Channel to access them. Uniting all downloadable content under the eShop would be a great improvement. ♡

by Matt Miller

From Small Beginnings

How the dream of a new 16-bit RPG came to life in Pier Solar

Many gamers have sat around with friends and talked about the game they'd make if they were developers. But what if someone really did it? The dream of Pier Solar began in 2004 on an Internet forum called The Tavern, part of a larger Sega fan website called Eidolon's Inn. Several members began chatting about making their own game. The big difference? These fans actually followed through.

Tulio Adriano took the initial steps to make that dream into a reality, forming a development studio called WaterMelon and ramping up development on Pier Solar and the Great Architects. "At the beginning and up to one year before Pier Solar released, we were working in our free time," Adriano says. "Basically all of the weekends, all of the possible nights, all of the time we had was put into it so we could get the game released."

Over the course of development, team members joined from all around the world, united around the goal of creating a new game in the style of Chrono Trigger, Phantasy Star, and Lunar. Challenges abounded, from a lack of funding to departing team members. At one point, a chief artist left the project and took all of his designs with him, necessitating starting over major elements of the game. Team leaders began to draw money from their own personal accounts to fund the project.

The game that emerged out of these trials surprised everyone. Pier Solar looks and feels virtually indistinguishable from the games it seeks to emulate. A rich fantasy setting, a complex battle system, and a vibrant cast of clichéd but amusing characters all recall the glory days of SNES and Genesis RPGs. "The first thing that we wanted to keep is the same spirit of the RPGs we played back in the '90s," Adriano says. "A lot of people may say this game has a lot of RPG clichés. Well, it does, because it was a game that was supposed to be a tribute to all of those awesome games that we played in the past. You go to town, you explore, you can go to shops, you buy your weapons, you upgrade characters, and as you add members to your team you start walking with a snake line. We have the turn-based battles in the game, and they are randomly encounter triggered. It's a very old-school type of classic JRPG, but we also tried to add some elements to the gameplay – especially the fights."

The homage passes beyond gameplay and visuals. WaterMelon brought Pier Solar to the systems that originally inspired its creation. When the game released in December 2010, it came out on the original Sega Mega Drive and Genesis, complete with classic packaging and an enhanced optional CD soundtrack for use with the Mega-CD expansion. The intricate



package is identical to the old game boxes for each system, and includes everything from a full-color art and instruction book to a set of stickers. In short, it is a dream come true for devoted collectors. Accordingly, it sold out after reprint after reprint, totaling over 6,000 sales – an impressive feat for a title built for systems that have been largely out of use for over a decade.

Cut to today, and that limited audience is the dilemma WaterMelon hopes to address. Thousands more potential players would love to experience the game, but don't have the hardware required. Kickstarter offered the ideal solution. By dipping into the crowdfunding well, WaterMelon is now pursuing the next evolution of its RPG. Pier Solar HD successfully completed its funding drive, and the HD expansion is now coming to download on Wii U, Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, Ouya, Android, PC, Mac, and Linux, along with a retail option on Sega Dreamcast.

The new version offers the same storyline and gameplay of the original, but dramatically reimagined visuals make it a more appropriate match to current-generation systems. "We could have gone with the cheaper option of doing a straight port, but then there's no value added," Adriano says.

Pier Solar HD is targeting a release in late 2013. Whether it's the initial cartridge release for classic home consoles or the upcoming remake, the project is a testament to the devotion and enthusiasm of the gaming community. For those fans who've longed for another entry in their favorite genre, it's an opportunity to explore a new fiction that should be both nostalgic and novel at the same time.

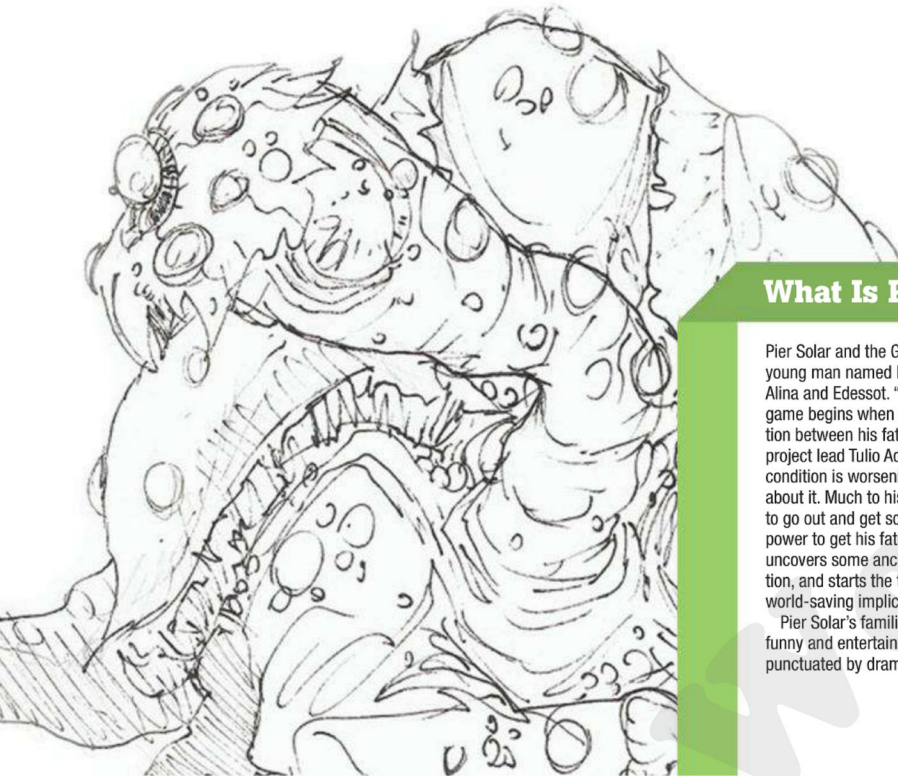
For more on Pier Solar HD, read our complete interview with Tulio Adriano at gameinformer.com/mag



16-Bit



HD



What Is Pier Solar?

Pier Solar and the Great Architects tells the story of a young man named Hoston and his two close friends, Alina and Edessot. "Hoston is a botanist and the game begins when he is overhearing the conversation between his father and his mother," explains project lead Tulio Adriano. "His father is ill and his condition is worsening. He wants to do something about it. Much to his mother's protest, he decides to go out and get some herbs that have the healing power to get his father back on his feet." This quest uncovers some ancient ruins of a forgotten civilization, and starts the trio on a wider adventure with world-saving implications.

Pier Solar's familiar story hides a surprisingly funny and entertaining flow of dialogue and events, punctuated by dramatic deaths and an ever-widening

array of side characters. Towns offer plenty of shops and conversations, and many of the townspeople have multiple strings of conversation to uncover. Dungeons are filled with hidden treasure chests and branching paths.

Random encounters reward you with XP and treasure, but are thankfully less frequent than many games within this style. The battles you do confront are more meaningful and challenging. The turn-based battle system follows genre conventions, but introduces complexity through a "gather" system that lets individual characters spend rounds building up power for special attacks or spells, which can then be spent or sent along to a different character. The mechanic leads to a fun exploration of strategy and character roles, especially in boss fights.

Two Incoming Mobile Games for the Dedicated Gamer

The emerging mobile game market is a maze of choices, especially for longtime gamers looking for an experience comparable to home console and PC games. While those titles remain few and far between, plenty of developers are beginning to see the potential in higher-end games on mobile platforms, and I suspect we'll see an increasing spread of impressive games on iOS and Android in the next couple of years; our two highlighted games this month are among the most promising.



THE DROWNING

by Matt Miller

Shooters have struggled to find an identity in the mobile space, as developers have tried numerous approaches to control and gameplay to make the experience palatable for shorter game sessions and limited control options. **The Drowning** aims in a new direction. Led by veteran Battlefield producer Ben Cousins, Scattered Entertainment is crafting its new horror/FPS from the ground up with mobile play in mind.

The Drowning offers a new take on the familiar zombie conceit. After an uncanny string of mass bird deaths, a strange black oil has been seeping up from the ocean floor, and mysteriously converging on populated cities. Individuals touched and consumed by the oil disappear, and then reappear a week later as mindless creatures intent on pulling down more victims.

You are a survivor, cut off from help on an island near the northwest coast of the United States. The game is about scavenging items to craft new vehicles and weapons, which in turn expand your capabilities in a fight and your range of exploration to new battlefields. To do so, you engage in first-person shooter battles

on discrete stages around the island, often as short as two minutes. Your score from bringing down the zombie-like enemies determines how long you have to scavenge the location for new materials. After the fight, you can use your rewards to improve existing weaponry or craft new armaments. Or, if you're ready to explore a new location, you can save up to craft a new vehicle, which serves as the gateway to other locations.

Anyone who has played a shooter on their phone or tablet doesn't need to be told about the limitations of the traditional dual-stick control approach. Instead, Scattered Entertainment is taking a chance on a brand new control paradigm that embraces the strengths of a touch-screen device. Tap a location on the screen to move there, and your character automatically heads to that location, moving around, over, and under obstacles in the way. Swipe the screen while you're moving or when stationary to control camera view, and then tap an enemy to target and shoot. I witnessed the new mechanic in action, and came away impressed with its flexibility and ease of use.

Beyond the innovative controls, **The Drowning** hopes to distinguish itself with production values that rival what you'd see on a home console. Following in the wake of games like *Infinity Blade*, **The Drowning** features visuals

you don't normally encounter on iOS, and it's clear that Scattered Entertainment is looking to attract the crowd of gamers who will recognize the difference.

I'm also heartened by the team's post-release plans, which will offer regular events to keep players coming back. **Boss Hunt** is one of several contests that will be weeklong events every month or so. While playing normal levels, **Boss Hunt** mode intersperses battles against extremely powerful enemies. You can opt in or out of these fights, but they're especially hard to tackle alone. Instead, once you discover one of these bosses, you can hop in the menu and request help from the wider community of players. They gain access to the same fight, and together you work to bring down the same boss in your individual games. You won't fight side-by-side in the same game, but the damage each player does is cumulative. It sounds like a cool way to bring the community together, and I'm eager to see what other event modes the developer introduces in the future.

The Drowning is releasing as a free-to-play title in early 2013, and is one of the more ambitious mobile titles we've seen. I'm excited to see if the team can match its impressive visuals and narrative depth with equally enthralling gameplay. ♦

Looking for more info on downloadable and independent games? Check out gameinformer.com/impulse for the latest on PSN, XBLA, Nintendo eShop, PC download, and mobile titles. For more in this issue, read our details on *Pier Solar HD* (p. 34), our first look feature at *Shadowrun Returns* (p. 68), and our reviews of *Skulls of the Shogun* (p. 92), *Ratchet & Clank: Full Frontal Assault* on (p. 92), *Little Inferno* (p. 93), and our score for *Planets Under Attack* (p. 94).



ANOMALY: KOREA

by Adam Biessener

The ex-CD Projekt RED (The Witcher) developers at 11bit Studios won me over with their debut project, *Anomaly: Warzone Earth* in 2011. That title – initially for Windows and iOS before making its way to Android, XBLA, and PSN in 2012 – flipped the tower defense genre on its head by putting players in command of an armored column making its way through a predefined maze filled with enemy defenses. Off the heels of *Anomaly*'s success, 11bit is investing even more into the follow-up, *Anomaly: Korea*.

Any discussion of *Anomaly* has to start with the presentation. Though the graphics scale downward for older devices, it still looks good even on the low-end iPhone 3GS and similar Android phones. On a modern device, it's jaw-dropping. High-end phones like the Galaxy S3, iPhone 5, and newer tablets like the latest iPad and Google's Nexus series run *Anomaly: Korea* with no compromises, and it honest-to-goodness looks like a current-gen console game. 11bit uses more verticality in *Korea*'s art design in an effort to make the top-down warzones pop, and the results are impressive. Seoul's skyscrapers jump off the gorgeous displays of a top-end device, while painstakingly rendered smoke and sparks blow across the alien-infested battlefield. The explosive effects that punctuate the constant action are a dramatic step up from the first game, with lasers melting thick armor and shockwaves rumbling across the screen.

The powerful impression created by the graphics only lasts for so long, but solid gameplay extends *Anomaly*'s beauty well beyond skin deep. The formula makes no attempt to fix what wasn't broken in the original. Your small force of near-future vehicles must navigate a series of terrible mazes filled with a variety of alien defenses by using smart paths, special commander powers, and brute force to overcome the impossible odds that stand between them and their goal.

A handful of unit types like damage-soaking APCs, fragile but powerful crawlers, versatile

tanks, and unarmed shield generators make up your column. Additional units and upgrades can be purchased after collecting the money scattered about each level. Smokescreens, repair fields, and other powers are deployed with a touch, providing crucial moment-to-moment interactivity in a game structured around watching your units trudge along a predetermined path and choosing their own targets to fire on.

One new item expands each category. The boost power is my new instant favorite with its huge increases to units' range, damage, and rate of fire. Flame-spewing towers light unshielded units on fire, which can only be extinguished with a repair field. Horangi (Korean for tiger) tanks are powerful to begin with, and charge a tap-activated special attack as they use their primary cannon. 11bit's level designers have also gotten more skillful in their approach to the puzzle-like maps, if my brief playtime with a near-final iPad version of the game is any indication.

Some of the game's 12 stages incorporate twists beyond the basic "get to the end" formula, including securing objectives, clearing areas within time limits, and disallowing special powers. A third difficulty level and an additional half-dozen challenge maps await those who are still looking for more after completing the main story.

The PC, XBLA, and PSN versions of the original feature a commander unit that players control directly, drawing fire and picking up care packages dropped by friendly air units. That mechanic doesn't play well on a touch-screen, so the commander is absent and you collect power-ups by tapping on them as in *Warzone Earth*'s mobile versions.

The original is an exceptionally polished, creative title that I like enough to have played it through several times on multiple devices. This sequel, which should be available on both iOS and Android by the time you have this magazine in your hands, is more of the same but with some new mechanics – which is exactly what I hoped 11bit had been working on. As of press time the company didn't have a final price, but expects *Anomaly: Korea* to retail for around the original's \$3.99 price tag. ♦



Familiar Territory

How do the Wii U's ports compare?

The launch of any console is built around the promise of new experiences. In addition to unique games like *New Super Mario Bros. U*, *Nintendo Land*, and *ZombiU*, Nintendo has used the Wii U as a platform to deliver ports of already-popular releases that were too powerful or complicated to ever come to the Wii. These titles were all previously available on competing systems, but they have new, Wii U-specific features to sweeten the deal. The question is: Do these additions make better games? Read our impressions of the Wii U ports to see how they stack up to their predecessors. ♦



Mass Effect 3

Original Score: 10

Mass Effect 3 is a fantastic game, and every story twist and gunfight makes the transition to the Wii U version. The graphics look good, the map on the GamePad (along with enemy positions) is a handy addition, and the other touchscreen features work fine. However, directing squad mates and using powers via the GamePad feel like clunky alternative options rather than improvements. The comic book (i.e. story recap) at the beginning gives comically little context for the few decisions it allows, which is a problem since Commander Shepard's previous choices are so important. As faithful as this port may be, you can't play Mass Effect 1 or 2 on the Wii U, so you're better off going with a version that allows for the universe continuity at the core of the series. » [Joe Juba](#)

Assassin's Creed III

Original Score: 9.5

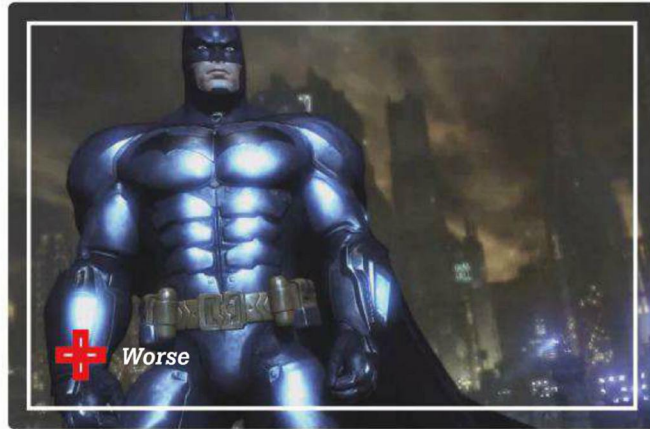
Connor's journey through the American Revolution is essentially unchanged. The Wii U gives players a map on the GamePad, along with the ability to use touchscreen buttons to swap weapons and call Connor's horse, but the additions are underwhelming. Thankfully, everything good about the game is preserved, including the massive scope, wealth of activities, and the great setting. Some of the game's disappointing aspects also made it over to Wii U; the framerate issues and abundant glitches are still present. Calling your horse may be slightly more convenient, but Wii U players are otherwise on the same playing field, for good and bad. » [Joe Juba](#)



Batman: Arkham City: Armored Edition

Original Score: 10

The Armored Edition wins its subtitle with the addition of a new suit that allows Batman to charge up his fists to unleash a fury of powerful punches. Other bonuses include a handy overworld map on the GamePad, a new hacking minigame, and motion-controlled batarangs and weapons (which can be turned off). Thanks to the GamePad, you don't need to pause the game when you want to upgrade your abilities or mark your map. All these additions are worthwhile, but the game's performance takes a hit on the Wii U. Arkham City stutters where it once soared on competing consoles. The effect is never game-breaking, but the visual instability is enough to hold Armored Edition back from being the best version of the game. » [Kyle Hilliard](#)



Tekken Tag Tournament 2

Original Score: 8.5

This edition of TTT 2 holds some novel features over the competition. Most welcome are the Nintendo-themed cross-over costumes and the return of Tekken Ball – an offline volleyball-style game unseen since Tekken 3. Mushroom Battle is a fun diversion with players growing and shrinking to comical proportions, and touchscreen controls should be enough to entice casual players. The smaller pool of available matches may disappoint online players, but the game performs excellently. With TTT 2's finely tuned graphical and gameplay engine remaining intact, players face a tough choice, but the Wii U version comes out on top thanks to the new content. » [Jason Oestreich](#)

Call of Duty: Black Ops II

Original Score: 8.5

Now that Nintendo is on an even playing field, it can finally play host to a faithful version of gaming's most successful shooter. Black Ops II is mostly unchanged on Wii U, but the GamePad comes into play in a few ways. Mission objectives are displayed on the smaller screen during the campaign, and you can see an overhead view of the map during multiplayer. Playing online with a second player can be done without splitting the screen, with one person on the GamePad and another using the television. Unfortunately, a lack of online activity severely affects the multiplayer side of the equation – the major selling point for fans of the series. » [Dan Ryckert](#)



Darksiders II

Original Score: 9

The GamePad controller gives the Wii U version a leg up on its Xbox and PS3 brothers. The loot system in Darksiders II used to require frequent trips to the sluggish menus. Thanks to the GamePad, equipping and inspecting your new gear can be done without stopping the action on the main screen. If you prefer a single-screen experience, playing exclusively on the GamePad looks great. Playing Darksiders II on the Wii U doesn't dramatically change the overall experience, but the little conveniences it offers make it the best version of Death's quest. The fact that DLC is included on the disc is a nice bonus. » [Dan Ryckert](#)



NBA 2K13

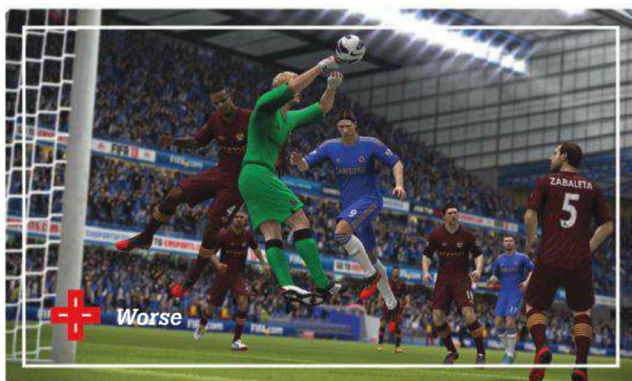
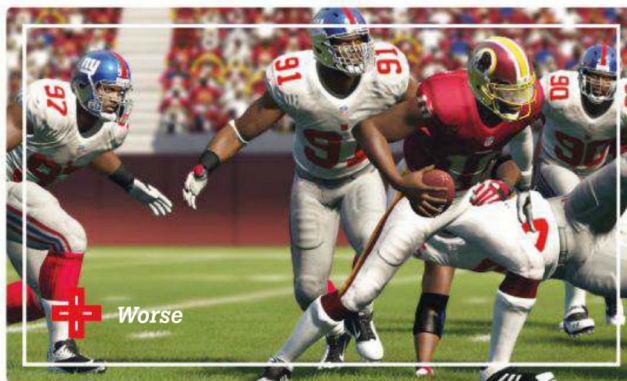
Original Score: 8.75

Unlike the EA Sports games, Visual Concepts and 2K Sports spared no expense for the Wii U version of their hoops simulation. NBA 2K13 has feature parity with the PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360 versions, providing all of the innovations made in this year's game. All the modes are present, including best-in-class MyCareer. Thanks to the GamePad screen, you can play on the controller while watching an NBA game on your television, which is the preferred way to play since the framerate is choppy on the big screen and you won't notice the graphical fidelity gap between the better older versions and the lesser Wii U port as much. The only other distinguishing feature the Wii U version adds is a Gatorade Biometric Scan. When you hold the GamePad up to the players on your television, tapping one of them displays his fatigue level and presents a brief statistical summary. The GamePad touchscreen also allows you to alter your offensive and defensive strategies on the fly or queue up substitutions. » [Matt Bertz](#)

Madden NFL 13

Original Score: 8.25

Madden 13 for the Wii U tries to be like the versions already released, and it even has a commendable GamePad feature, but it falls short. The hot routes you draw for your receivers at the line of scrimmage are faithfully executed, but the Wii U fails in some of the most basic aspects of the game. The framerate is bad, calling plays on the GamePad doesn't add to the experience, and the title lacks Madden 13's Ultimate Team, Online Team Play, and Infinity physics engine. The game suffers with these absences, but at least it includes the RPG-like Connected Careers mode – including the option to start a 32-team franchise league with your friends. » [Matthew Kato](#)



FIFA 13

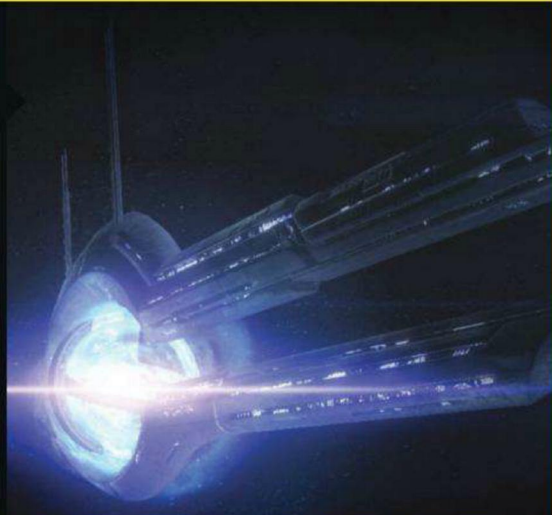
Original Score: 8.75

This game is basically FIFA 12 with some largely forgettable Wii U options poured on top. Using the GamePad for tactics, free kicks, and to motivate players during halftime (called Team Talks) is useful. But using the touchscreen to take a shot, send players on runs, or play man-marking defense during a live match is troublesome because it takes your attention away from the action on the big screen. The Wii U version also doesn't have Ultimate Team, Match Day Live, international duties, EA Sports Football Club, or any of the notable gameplay improvements in the FIFA 13 version for the other consoles. FIFA 12 was fun, but this title doesn't even stand up to the Xbox 360 or PS3 versions of that game, much less this year's entry. » [Matthew Kato](#)

The Good

A NEW MASS EFFECT

is under way at BioWare Montreal. The company's Edmonton studio created the first three games in the series, but Montreal helped engineer ME 3's multiplayer component. The studio is using the Frostbite 2 engine that powers Battlefield 3, and series' executive producer Casey Hudson recently asked fans if they'd rather the next title be a prequel or sequel to the events of the original trilogy.



The Bad



A COUPLE OF DELAYS

get 2013 off on the wrong start. Take Two pushed back BioShock Infinite a month from February 26 to March 26, and Nintendo delayed Pikmin 3 from the Wii U launch window ending in March into sometime in the summer.

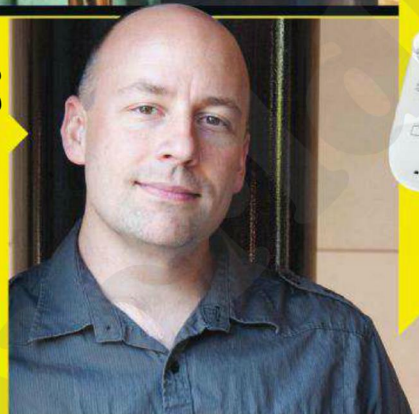
Quotable

"Reviews of a system or reviews of a game really come down to the quality and capability of the reviewer."

SOMETHING WEIRD IS GOING ON

over at Epic. First, star game designer Cliff Bleszinski left, and now president Mike Capps announced his retirement after 10 years with the company. Producer Rod Fergusson and Adrian Chmielarz from Epic subsidiary People Can Fly also recently left Epic. Capps will continue to work with the company in an advisory role and remain on the board of directors. ♦

The Ugly



— After some bad feedback about the Wii U, Nintendo's **Reggie Fils-Aime** points the finger squarely in our direction.

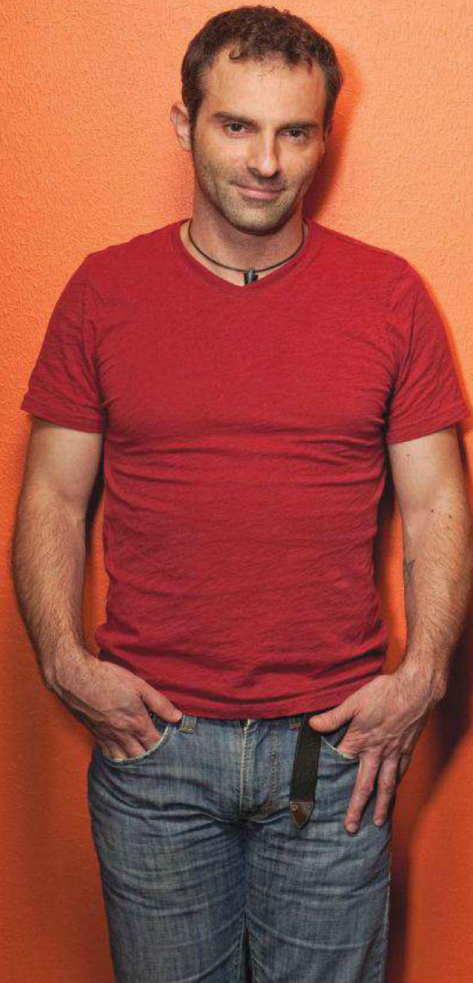
interview



AUSTIN



LYON



Raphael Colantonio (left) and Harvey Smith (right)

Arkane Goes Its Own Way

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

Arkane Studios' *Dishonored* was one of 2012's most original and critically acclaimed games. Building on the legacy of its leaders **Raphael Colantonio** (*Arx Fatalis*, *Dark Messiah of Might and Magic*) and **Harvey Smith** (*Deus Ex*), Arkane is staking out new territory in game design, with an emphasis on player choice. We spoke to Colantonio and Smith about the company's past, present, and future.

interview by Matt Helgeson

Harvey, when you came on board at Arkane, was it specifically to work on the project that would be *Dishonored* or did you guys go through a few ideas?

Harvey Smith: It's an interesting process we went through. Initially we were both going to creatively direct our own games. We were trying to get funding for two projects, basically. That proved really, really difficult, of course, because even one is really hard. Then there was a moment when we had a little light bulb that came on, where we realized we should just work together, try to have one project, with both of our strengths, covering for each of our weaknesses. [With] both [of us] pitching the idea, it was very powerful. It doesn't happen that often in the industry. People like Raph – who was the leader of *Arx Fatalis*, *Dark Messiah* – and me, I worked on the *Deus Ex* game; at this point we had both been in games like 18 years.

Early, talking to Bethesda, there were two different projects we were thinking of working on. But in the end, both of those opportunities went away. We were thinking, "Wow, this might tank our deal with Bethesda." Instead, they said, "No, we want to work with Arkane because of your passion for this particular kind of game. So even though both properties we were talking about went away, what do you think about this ninja pitch?" Ninjas are cool, but it's not our passion to make a ninja game, a traditional ninja game. So we basically began converting it piece by piece into something that looked good to us, which is one part *Thief*, one part *Deus Ex*, and a little bit of *Arx Fatalis* role-playing all rolled together. That's how [*Dishonored*] happened.

The idea of a ninja game evolved into *Dishonored*. Was that your idea, or was that an idea Bethesda had originally?

HS: They said, "We just want to work with you guys on the type of game that blends first-person and RPGs that you love so much. We do have this ninja [idea], what do you think about it?" We took a gamble, came back, and said, "We don't really want to work on feudal Japanese ninjas, but what if this is set in London in 1666 during the year of the Great Fire and the last year of the plague?" We started going in a different direction. At that point, you couldn't call it steampunk, and there were no supernatural [elements] in it. Slowly over time, we added the supernatural – witch hunters, heretics, and things like that. It takes a long time for ideas to bake. Often, you step back, look at what you've got on the screen, and it changes what's

in your head; then you start moving in that direction. It's a very organic process.

Once you settled on what *Dishonored* would become as an idea, how much did it evolve over time into the finished project?

Raphael Colantonio: From a high-level perspective it's very close. I think both Harvey and I had a very clear idea of the kind of experience we wanted. The game was very true to that vision. At more of a micro-level, there have been things that have changed drastically along the line. Some of them are story-oriented; we did some weird back-and-forth twists that we did not know we would do. [Other changes] were purely mechanical. For example, it was very late in the development process when we gave *Blink* for free in the inventory at the beginning of the game – inserting the tutorial, the Outsider forcing you to have *Blink*. The game took an entirely new identity in a way, because you are the assassin that blinks around. We could rely on, as game designers, [knowing that] every player had blink. If we had chosen to make it optional, maybe you would take it, maybe not. That is an example of something that was a drastic change that came pretty late. Even the definition of the Outsider, we were kind of struggling for a long time over his true nature, his personality, if he's good or bad. We had to try different flavors. In the end we're really happy with what we have. But it was a lot of back-and-forth on that.

As a player, including *Blink* from the beginning was a momentous decision. That decision made the game, in certain respects.

RC: The game certainly took a big boost in fun. The funny thing is that we came to that decision [in order] to fix another problem. Players were not using powers. They were never thinking of it, believe it or not. We thought, "How do we force – or at least encourage – players to use powers?" Then we identified that maybe they're afraid to spend their mana. So we put *Blink* in immediately, and we gave you a regenerating portion of the mana. So, at the very minimum, if you don't have any potions, you can still *Blink* around. It relieved people of the tension of expending mana for nothing. So those were mini-decisions that turned into something pretty major.

How would you characterize your relationship with Bethesda? How does that relationship differ from some of your past experiences?

HS: We are super happy. They are a small group of people instead of a giant organization with thousands of associate producers. It's a tight group of guys that have worked together for over a decade. It's privately held,

not publicly traded, so that changes things. They have made their success on trusting creative people like us. Their entire success with the *Elder Scrolls* games and the *Fallout* games have been because some developers were very passionate about taking first-person RPGs and making this big world steeped in all this lore, where the player's actions matter more than anything else. That's how you create your own fun. They're almost perfect for us.

***Dishonored* is a lot of things that aren't trendy in games now. It's a big, expensive game with no multiplayer. It's a new IP that doesn't seem particularly marketable. It's aimed at hardcore gamers. Yet, it's been successful. How did it feel to make a game that flew in the faces of the industry's conventional wisdom?**

RC: It feels great. I think it proves a point that we've wanted somebody to prove. I think, to some degree, *BioShock* proved it before us. *Fallout 3* proved it, too. We believe that the rule is that there is no rule. If something is good and the timing is right and if everybody is behind it, there is no reason why it can't [succeed]. We were lucky to work with probably the only publisher who really gets that. If you look at the [big] Bethesda games, they're all totally single player. Look at *Fallout 3*, which was incredibly successful. If you think before it shipped, it was an old franchise that was not that successful and it's going to be a single-player game that's post-apocalyptic and nobody really gets it. It's not like *Modern Warfare* and stuff like that. Why would people want to buy that? And yet people want to buy it because it's very well done, well marketed, and a very fun game.

Even the setting [of *Dishonored*] is weird and, to some degree, it was exactly the same thing with *BioShock*. *BioShock* took a lot of risks and they mixed RPG and first-person. The risk that you have when you do that is nobody likes you. The FPS people think your game is too slow; the RPG people think your game is not deep enough. It worked out because I think we believe in that kind of game. However, were we worried? Did we have doubts? Of course, but our passion is for this kind of game and all we knew is that we would give all our energy to make it work.

As opposed to the *Call of Duty* formula, where the player is shuttled between scripted moments, Arkane places an emphasis on creating an environment, giving the players a set of tools, and letting them find their own solutions and routes. Talk about player agency in game design.

HS: The strongest thing about the medium is that it's interactive. You can have a great dramatic experience watching a movie or reading

1994
QUALITY CONTROL
Colantonio and Smith meet as aspiring young game designers while working in quality assurance on Origin's legendary *System Shock*

1995
CYBERWORLD
Smith nabs an associate producer credit for his work on *CyberMage: Darklight Awakening*

1997
COUNTRY BUMPKIN
Colantonio contributes design work to the EA fantasy title *Beasts & Bumpkins*

1999
ARKANE BEGINNINGS
Colantonio founds Arkane Studios in Lyon, France

2000
A CLASSIC
Deus Ex is released. Harvey Smith's work on the acclaimed cyberpunk epic makes him one of the industry's most respected game designers

2002
FATAL BEAUTY
Arkane releases the open-ended RPG *Arx Fatalis*, which becomes a beloved cult hit

2005
A NEW PLACE
Smith leaves Eidos and gets a job at Midway to working on *Blacksite: Area 51*

2006
MAGICAL MOVES
Arkane releases *Dark Messiah of Might and Magic*

2007
IN TEXAS
Smith and Colantonio reunite at Arkane in Texas, and begin working on the game that would become *Dishonored* for Bethesda

2010
ACQUISITIONS
Bethesda buys Arkane, bringing it into its family of in-house studios

2012
BIG SUCCESS
Dishonored is released to glowing reviews. Bethesda announces that the game is now a franchise for the future

a book, but there's this set of emotions that come [from games]. You can find them playing capture the flag with your friends at night on your block when you're 12 years old. Or you can find them in a chess match where you look down at the board and you realize that if you move your rook over, you put the other player in a difficult check situation. It is a particular kind of drama that comes from interacting with the system, but we don't do that in the abstract. We do it with the story. The response to Dishonored and the chaos system is because we don't have a black-and-white morality and we don't punish you if you go one way – but we do have an outcome to your actions. We do things that other games don't do. You can totally ignore these incredible powers that we put in the game. You would not believe how much of our time and energy [went into the powers], and you can play the game without ever checking it. You can buy this game, play it, and sell it to a friend and never ever see the possession power. You can go left instead of right. You could ignore all the non-lethal outcomes for the assassinations.

It's a big part of our creative goal to not only provide a bunch of elective content and then let the player decide which content to pursue, and also to use whole base story telling so you can get as much or as little story as you

way. However, I think we always hoped that people will play the game at least twice. The two extremes – one is the violent playthrough and the other one is an avoiding [violence] playthrough. Peoples' choices are [about] how they feel about the tools. We cannot plan for everything, but we hope that game offered enough variety and possibility that most people would find their fun.

Bethesda's vice president of public relations and marketing, Pete Hines, has said that Dishonored has exceeded sales expectations and that they now see it as a new franchise for the company. I assume that's exciting news for Arkane. Are there now plans in place to make more games in this franchise?

HS: Well, we've announced three different DLC [packs] so far and we're thinking about what we would do in the future. We haven't announced anything yet. The game sold really well and the critical response has been very good. I think we're sitting at a 90 percent average right now. You can criticize one point or another, like you can with all games. But I think most games don't even try to do as much as we try to do, so I think we're getting positive press for that. It's also a breath of fresh air. The fact that we don't hold your hand...it feels like you could go in any direction or meet any of these characters and go

Everything is explained in the books [you find], like politics, the religions, the structures, the way the world of industry functions and all that – including the geography and what other islands are around, the size of the world, and some other stuff. That way, every time we design a location we try to tie things together so it makes a very cohesive world which people feel very immersed in. To answer your question, yes, because of that, there is more to potentially explore, whether it's in DLC or other stuff.

One of the excellent aspects of the game was the look and feel of Dunwall itself. I liked the visual aesthetics of the game. Can you talk about working with Victor Antonov and what he brought to the project?

HS: That's another one of those things that nine out of 10 people get and one out of 10 doesn't. One out of 10 people doesn't understand that this is deliberately a graphic style made to look painterly; it's not made to look photorealistic. We worked with Victor, who gets a lot of credit as he's due, but he worked side-by-side with Sebastian Mitton, who is our art director. Sebastian is also one of the guys who came up with a lot of stuff about the palette, and the texturing style, the character proportions, and things like that. Those guys worked with a large team of people and a lot of talent goes into that. Victor is an industrial designer who also has opinions about lighting, the architecture, and the history of the architecture. So, it's impossible to separate out who did what; they're both really talented. And 9 out of 10 people think the game is stylish or beautiful and it's been very gratifying.

It's a blend of styles and it's a blend of time periods but we were very happy with how unusual it is compared to most games, which as I've said before are either wizards and dragons, modern crime in L.A., soldiers, or space soldiers. It's very cool to be able to work in a [unique] world.

Will you work with Victor on future games?

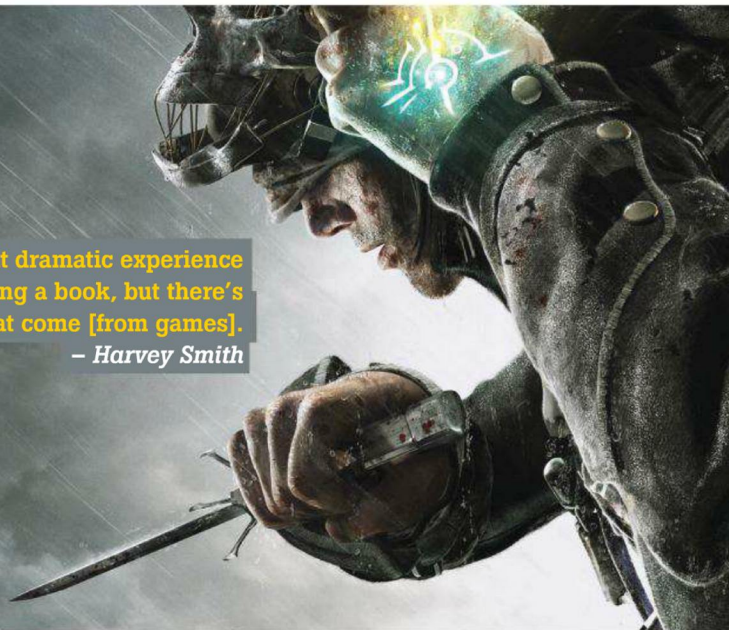
RC: Probably. Victor was initially working with Arkane, and he [has a role] at Bethesda/Zenimax now. We are very close to the games that we like to work on.

What are some of the things that excite you guys as game designers about the potential new generation of consoles and their power?

RC: Well, there are probably a ton of answers to that, but hopefully this time we won't have as much memory stress as we've had in the past. Memory has always been a problem on consoles, specifically for the kind of game that we like to make. We like depth, density, physics, dynamic lighting – everything that's got memory. That's one thing. The other thing for me is the fact that I believe, this time, all platforms are going to have some form of motion sensor. Meaning that, if everybody has it, as opposed to only some people who bought it and only on [certain] platforms, we might explore that and see what we can come up with. The dynamic between the console manufacturers and the developers is funny. Most of the developers want to make a game that works on as many platforms as it can, and the manufacturers want to do something specific that only their console has. ♦

You can have a great dramatic experience watching a movie or reading a book, but there's this set of emotions that come [from games].

– Harvey Smith



want. But also, when possible, to run things according to a simulation. We try to do that on every level – not just the guard AI.

You mentioned the chaos system and the idea that your actions impacted the ending that you received. Joe Juba, who reviewed the game for Game Informer, was dissatisfied with the fact that the game tells you at the beginning that you want to avoid killing people or you will get the darker ending, which some people perceived as not as good. That had the effect of discouraging you from using a lot of amazing tools to kill people that the game gives you.

RC: It is possible that some people feel this

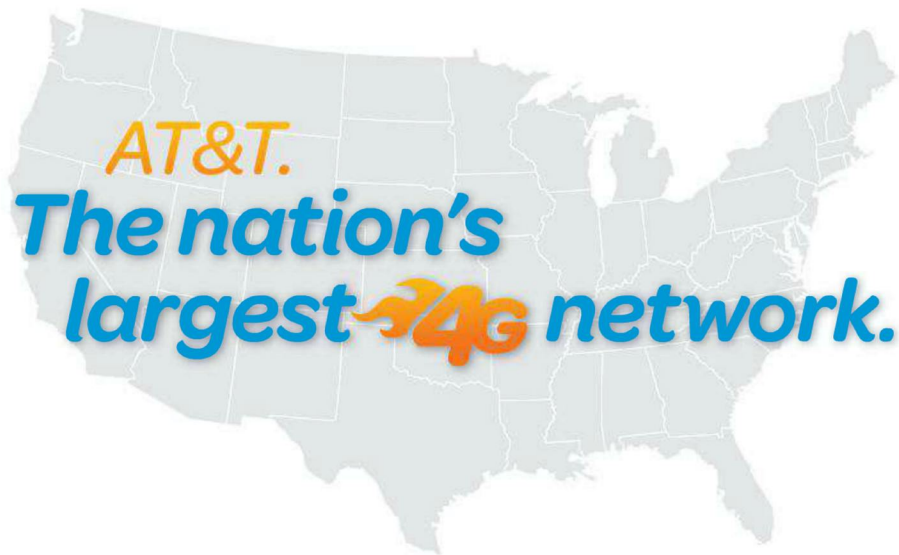
deeper with them. I think that's what Pete is talking about is that you know it's done really well, and you know there is a lot of potential here for ideas to explore.

The people that traveled to Arkane for our cover story on Dishonored saw that you guys had conceived this larger map the size of Western Europe, with Dunwall being one location. How much of that larger world have you guys conceived? Is it possible that you might explore that in the future, either in DLC or a sequel?


RC: We deliberately designed a world that is bigger than the game; so that the game itself and the areas you visit feel rich and deep.

What's more?

More Less



————— It's not complicated. —————
More is better.

Rethink Possible® 

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dear

by Ben Reeves



TABOVER

GAME INFORMER TABLET ROUNDUP

1 iPad Mini

PROS: The best way to sell Apple's new iPad Mini is to put the system into someone's hands. Weighing only 0.68 pounds, Apple still packed a 7.9-inch screen, a more than capable dual-core A5 chipset, and an impressive 10-hour battery into this miniature device. Apple's tiny tablet also gives you access to one of the best app stores on the planet, with over 270,000 iPad apps that scale perfectly to the smaller device. The iPad Mini is also one of the best ways to read the digital edition of Game Informer.

CONS: Apple's small system comes with a big price. Also, the Mini's screen displays 163 pixels per inch, which is actually better than most of the tablets on this list, but it still lacks some of the awe of Apple's Retina display featured on larger iPads.

BOTTOM LINE: Apple's 7.9-inch tablet has a 10-inch price, but this is the best tiny tablet on the market if you can afford it.

SUPERB

Starting at \$329 | apple.com/ipad-mini

2 Nexus 7

PROS: The Nexus 7 outclasses Apple's Mini in at least one category: This Google-designed machine crams 216 pixels per inch onto a vibrant display. The no-slip texture backing and light weight also make it easy to hang onto. You'll want to keep a tight grip on this machine, since it's your gateway to a wide range of Android apps that run on Google's Jelly Bean OS.

CONS: Despite its crystal clear display, the seven-inch screen isn't ideal for movies. We also noticed a few framerate hiccups while playing games like *Need For Speed: Most Wanted*.

BOTTOM LINE: The system's cheap price and versatility should make this the go-to tablet for Android fans.

VERY GOOD

Starting at \$199 | google.com/nexus

3 Galaxy Note 10.1

PROS: Samsung's responsive S Pen stylus comes in handy for jotting down quick notes while using any app. This 10-inch tablet is also blazing fast, housing a 1.4 GHz quad-core processor that allows for stutter-free gameplay while running multiple apps. A Micro SD card slot and a pair of quality side speakers help round out this tablet's feature set.

CONS: Samsung's plastic casing keeps down the system's weight, but it also feels cheap. The pen functionality and handwriting recognition aren't widely supported across all Android apps, and while the screen looks good, it isn't as crisp as the iPad or the Nexus.

BOTTOM LINE: Samsung's Galaxy Note 10.1 won't live up to everyone's high standards, but its unique features make it a great tablet for some.

AVERAGE

Starting at \$499 | samsung.com



2



3



4

4 Microsoft Surface

PROS: Microsoft's foray into the tablet space isn't light, but it is sturdy. In addition to the durable industrial design, the kickstand and 10.6-inch display that features a 16.9 aspect ratio are great for watching movies. The Windows RT OS is nice for running two apps at once, and it also runs traditional software like Office 2013. The Micro SD slot and the USB input are also appreciated.

CONS: The Surface needs to run a few laps around the block, because it's a little chunky. Programs take a while to load, and the screen only displays 148 pixels per inch. The

RT OS also only runs Microsoft-approved apps, which is a problem given that Microsoft's app store feels like a high school party that none of the cool kids want to attend.

BOTTOM LINE: The Surface's heft and limited app support make it a poor tablet, but the built-in kickstand and nifty keyboard cover make it an intriguing laptop alternative.

LIMITED APPEAL

Starting at \$499 | microsoft.com/surface



FEAR AGENT LIBRARY VOLUME 1

Rick Remender, the writer of *Uncanny X-Force* and *Bulletstorm*, tells a classic sci-fi story about a down-and-out alien exterminator who stumbles into an extraterrestrial plot to annihilate Earth.

\$49.99
darkhorse.com

GIRLS: THE COMPLETE FIRST SEASON

HBO's hit dramedy follows the lives of four twenty-something women trying to survive their post-college, New York lifestyle. The show is filled with plenty of awkward humor...and girls.

\$49.99
store.hbo.com

LOOPER

In the future, time travel is only available on the black market. The mafia takes advantage of this by sending its victims 30 years into the past to be assassinated. But what happens when the mob's hired gun is sent a future version of himself?

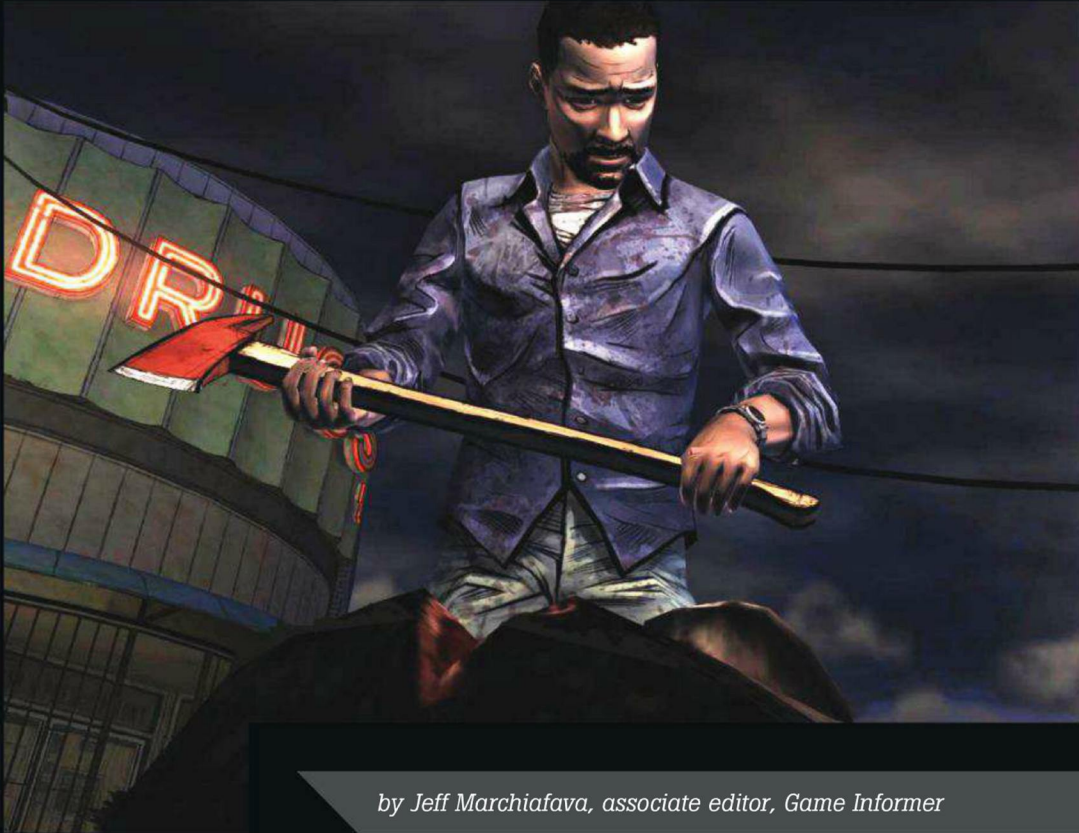
\$35.99
loopermovie.com

TIMELINE EONS

Put the history of the universe in your pocket. This inventive iOS app graphically represents the entirety of natural history on a scalable timeline that covers everything from the Big Bang to future apocalyptic predictions.

\$8.99
maani.us

To the Best of Bad Options



by Jeff Marchiafava, associate editor, Game Informer

When I look back at 2012, one aspect defined my favorite games of the year: The lose/lose scenario. This revelation came as a surprise to me; as a gamer, my primary objective has always been to win, which is usually preceded by a long string of smaller successes. In contrast, constantly being stuck between the proverbial rock and a hard place sounds horrible, right? Yet somehow the most fun and memorable gaming experiences I had last year were spent making the best of bad options.

Sometimes the decisions I faced were moral ones. The Walking Dead is rife with hard choices. After meeting the precocious and charming Clementine, Telltale's episodic hit ushers you through a gauntlet of hopeless scenarios. Along the way, you ruin alliances, lose survivors, and make endless sacrifices in hopes of protecting an innocent child as best you can.

In most games morality is black and white, boiling down to two options. Do I do the noble thing that makes my life a little harder, or do I revel in the ease and selfishness of taking the low road? The decisions you make in The Walking Dead defy such simple role-playing. Whether I was choosing who to save at the expense of another person's life or rationing out a meager supply of food to a starving camp, the choices stuck with me because there were no "right" decisions – only the ones I made and the ones I didn't.

Other times I faced tactical decisions. In XCOM: Enemy Unknown, the decision-making process is free of the veil of morality; all options are on the table when an alien invasion threatens humanity. That ethical freedom doesn't make your choices any easier, as you weigh bad options at every turn. Each abduction you respond to plunges two other countries into chaos. Terror missions become grim lessons in how low the world's expectations are for your organization, as civilians are mercilessly slaughtered by

enemy forces. Your soldiers are equally expendable, and once they're dead, they're gone for good.

These types of hard choices defy a modern trend in game design that has developers striving to include more players and keep them happy with a steady stream of rewards. But they also stick with you longer than most choices. Decisions become tougher to rationalize when there are no easy answers. You think about them more – obsess over some – and even after you make the call, it's hard not to wonder if things would have turned out better if you went with plan B.

The ending of Mass Effect 3 was marred by controversy. I won't blame fans for decrying the similarities of the final cutscenes, but I loved the no-win scenario laid out before me in the ending moments of the game. Each option was flawed, and my choice was mired in the uncertainty of its consequences and the knowledge of Shepard's impending doom. I stood at the crossroads obsessively weighing each option, and when I finally made my decision I felt a sense of ownership over it that few games evoke.

Not all decisions have to be as hopeless as the ones these games present. Developers have transcended simple morality choices and presented players with situations that can't be optimized in other ways as well. Sometimes it's just about nuance. The key is realizing that a choice doesn't need a carrot to entice the player into making a decision, and a consequence doesn't need a pat on the head in order to be rewarding. In my favorite games of 2012, however, a lot of those choices happened to come courtesy of the school of hard knocks, and I give props to the designers who didn't pull their punches or give players an easy way out. By making our choices hard, they also made them meaningful. ♦

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

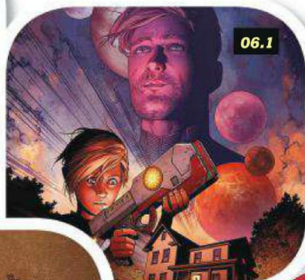
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If you work in the industry and would like to share your opinion, contact senior features editor Matt Helgeson at matt@gameinformer.com



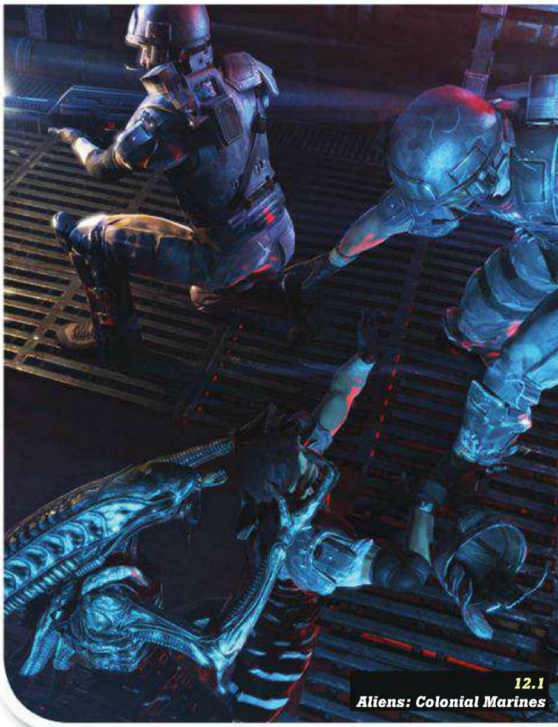
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Sly Cooper: Thieves in Time



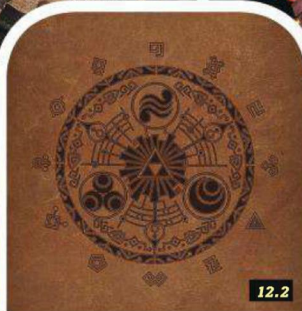
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Dead Space 3



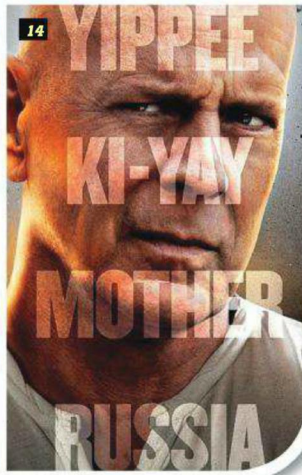
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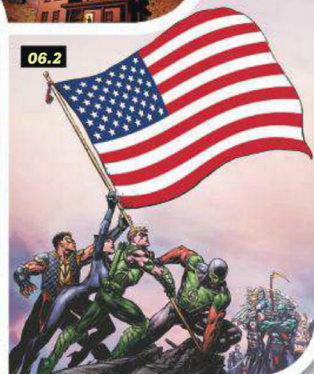
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Aliens: Colonial Marines



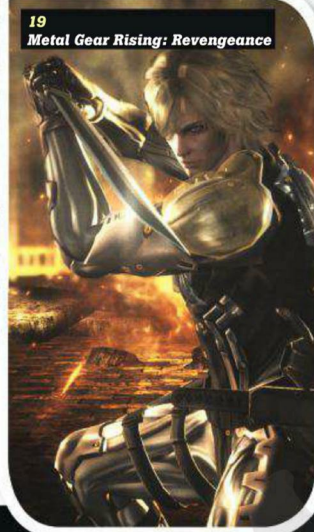
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14



06.2



19

Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance

February

02 Tournaments Galore at Carolina Games Summit

Tournaments for Halo 4, Call of Duty: Black Ops II, Super Smash Bros. Brawl, StarCraft II, and more than a dozen other games are the driving force behind the one-day Carolina Games Summit, held at Wayne Community College in Goldsboro, North Carolina. Speakers, exhibits, and card game tournaments are also planned.

05.1 New Releases

- › Dead Space 3 (PS3, 360, PC)
- › Sly Cooper: Thieves in Time (PS3, Vita)

05.2 D.I.C.E. 2013 is Underway!

The Academy of Interactive Arts and Sciences' 12th Annual D.I.C.E. Summit kicks off today at the Hard Rock Hotel in Las Vegas and runs through February 8. This intimate gathering of the video game

industry is jam-packed with panels, events, and an award show where Valve's Gabe Newell will be inducted into the AIAS Hall of Fame. Speakers include Gearbox's Randy Pitchford, Thatgamecompany's Jenova Chen, and Schell Games' Jesse Shell.

06.1 Another Go for Marvel's Gonzo Guardians

Since Marvel announced that its next big movie franchise is Guardians of the Galaxy, it should come as no surprise the comic series is being relaunched as well. Filled with pulp sci-fi action, ridiculous characters, and a talking tree, the new Guardians of the Galaxy is penned by Marvel superstar Brian Michael Bendis, and promises to be the craziest comic this side of the Horsehead Nebula.

06.2 DC Comics Celebrates America

Superman is often off-world. Batman has Gotham City to worry about. Aquaman has the sea. Who is keeping an eye on America? A new Justice League, that's who. Introduced in the first issue of *Justice League of America*, this team consists of Catwoman, Green Arrow, Vibe, Katana, Hawkman, Stargirl, and Green Lantern Simon Baz. This issue is shipping with 52 variant covers, each with a different U.S. flag.

07 16th Annual D.I.C.E. Awards

Formerly known as the Interactive Achievement Awards, many consider the D.I.C.E. Awards to be the Oscars of the video game industry. These awards hold extra weight for developers because their fellow developers determine who wins the trophies for the best console, PC, and mobile games.

12.1 New Releases

- › Aliens: Colonial Marines (PS3, 360, PC)

12.2 The History of Hyrule on Your Coffee Table

The Legend of Zelda video game series is chronicled in *Hyrule Historia*, a new book by Dark Horse and Nintendo. Shigeru Miyamoto provides an introduction to this illustrative look at Link's journeys, which includes never-before-seen concept art and a new comic book story by Akira Himekawa.

14 John McClane vs. Russia

Remember back in the '80s when the Russians were the go-to

enemies in every action movie? *A Good Day to Die Hard*, in theaters today, proves that the series still lives in the Cold War era. John McClane joins forces with his estranged son, Jack, to fight Russians, rattle off a bunch of dumb one-liners, and ultimately prevent nuclear armageddon. How is it that *Die Hard* has four sequels, but they only made one *Moonlighting*?

19 New Releases

- › Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance (PS3, 360)

26 New Releases

- › Etrian Odyssey IV: Legends of the Titan (3DS)



**LEGO MARVEL
SUPER HEROES**

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

» **STYLE**
1 or 2-Player Action

» **PUBLISHER**
Warner Bros. Interactive
Entertainment

» **DEVELOPER**
TT Games

» **RELEASE**
Fall

VEL HEROES, ASSEMBLE!

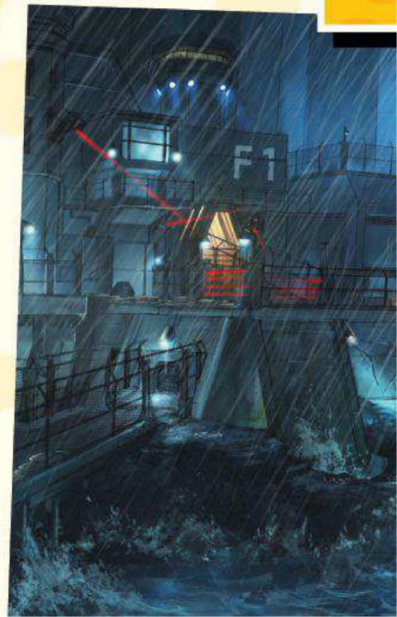
TRAVELLER'S TALES TAKES ON THE GAME SOME SAID COULDN'T BE MADE



Comics are filled with unlikely pairings. Over the years, readers have seen Archie pal around with the Punisher, Batman solve mysteries alongside Sherlock Holmes, and Superman and the Predator swap stories about being extraterrestrials. Next fall, gamers will experience the fruits of another team-up, one that seemed as though it could be stuck in "What If...?" limbo forever.

In early 2012, Lego launched an expanded series of construction sets based on heroes from DC comics. The Super Heroes line grew in the spring of that year to include a cast of characters from Marvel's roster. Finally, people could determine their own answer to one of geekdom's nagging questions: Who would win in a fight – Superman or the Incredible Hulk?

BY JEFF CORK





Loki's ultimate goal is to claim Asgard's throne. The concept artists are trying to remain faithful to the movie version of Thor's home base

T

Traveller's Tales delivered its own take on the DC mythos in the sequel to its 2008 release, *Lego Batman: The Video Game*. In *Lego Batman 2: DC Super Heroes*, players got to see what happened when Supes and the Caped Crusader worked together to battle Lex Luthor and the Joker. The cast of heroes was impressive, but Marvel die-hards were relegated to the sidelines. Any hopes of a *Lego Marvel* game were seemingly dashed

when fans looked at the relationship between DC and Traveller's Tales. The studio was purchased by Warner Bros. in 2007. Warner Bros. also owns DC. Why on earth would Warner allow its game studio to develop a title based on a competitor's license?

"We see the same things ourselves," says producer Phill Ring. "People kept saying, 'Oh, they're never doing a Marvel game.' Now we get to say that we are."

"The experience we've had with massive media organizations is that they're not entirely stocked by bad people," says TT Games head of production Jonathan Smith, tongue firmly in cheek. "This may come as a shock to people on the Internet, but it turns out that big media organizations are capable of making really good decisions with players' best interests at heart."

Lego Marvel Super Heroes is the result of a partner-

ship between Warner, TT Games, Lego, and Marvel. As complicated as those relationships may seem from the outside, they weren't insurmountable.

"It was one of those things where we had always thought about it, but we were like, 'Uh, maybe that's not going to happen because of DC, Marvel, what have you,'" says TQ Jefferson, vice president of production at Marvel Entertainment's games division. "But we started talking and [TT Games] was going to become available. We had no conflicts in our schedule or with any of our pre-existing agreements. Basically, the stars aligned and it was full steam ahead."



GOING FROM SUPERSTRENGTH TO SUPERSTRENGTH

When the deal was greenlit, TT Games had to assemble a story and cast of characters. From the start, the studio knew that the Avengers would be an important part of the game. "They're cool and current, and they're going to be cool and current for at least the next couple of years," says game director Arthur Parsons. "But let's not exclude the rest of those really great characters. Let's make a game where we can integrate all of these different factions and groups, and see what we end up with."

The result is a game that builds on many of the themes and heroes featured in the Avengers, while significantly expanding the roster with a new story. *The Avengers* is the third highest-grossing film of all time, so it stands to reason that more than a few players are going to be familiar with Iron Man, Captain America, Thor, and the rest of the super supergroup. Parsons says one of his favorite things about the Marvel universe is its massive roster, and *Lego Marvel Super Heroes* is designed to illustrate that.

"It's not Batman and Superman as two iconic figures – it's just iconic figures wherever you go, both on hero and villains," Parsons says. "On DC you have the Joker, you've got the Penguin, but when you go over to Marvel, it's just a richer pool."

The story is being written by Mark Hoffmeier, whose

credits include *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers*, *Spider-Man: The Animated Series*, and *Marvel Super Hero Squad*. While he's working with characters that he's written for in the past, fans of the latter show shouldn't expect a rehash of that slapstick material. "I think we hit a formula that keeps that *Lego Marvel* stuff but also makes it unique, so it's not *Super Hero Squad*," he says. "You may look at it and think there are some passing similarities, but it really has its own unique voice." For instance, one character from that animated series (who we've sworn not to reveal) plays a prominent role in *Lego Marvel*. While he's portrayed as a bumbling fool on the show, Hoffmeier says that villain's role in the game is far more serious.

Lego Marvel Super Heroes' setup shows off Marvel's impressive roster. Thor's kid brother, Loki, is imprisoned following his most recent misadventures. While he's still a god, Loki is powerless to act out his ultimate goal of returning to Asgard and taking what he considers his rightful throne. In the meantime, the trickster god reaches out to an as-yet-unnamed Marvel villain, creating a bad-guy alliance to defeat the heroes who stand in their way. Galactus is also heading toward Earth, and he's bringing his appetite.

The villains have an exiled god and a planet-munching alien, but just like in the movies, the good guys have a secret weapon of their own: the Hulk.

HULK SMASH

The creation of each *Lego* game follows a tried-and-true process. First, TT Games takes a look at what worked in previous games. Then they build off those ingredients and add something new to the mix. "Every *Lego* game we make we have to take 10 or 11 steps forward for people to see or perceive that we've taken one or two steps forward," Parsons says. For *Lego Marvel*, one of the first things the team added was the Hulk.

The redesigned *Lego* version of the Hulk towers over the rest of the heroes in the toy line, which are commonly called minifigs. He's appropriately muscular and threatening (while remaining *Lego* cute), and he's cast in the familiar shade of Hulk green.

Lego games also allowed players to temporarily take control of larger characters, such as the cave troll in *Lego Harry Potter* or the Ents in *Lego Lord of the Rings*. But when the team integrated the Hulk figure (appropriately dubbed a bigfig), they knew that Bruce Banner's alter ego was going to significantly change the way they designed the game.

The Hulk springs to life on a computer screen, a tightly coiled manifestation of pure rage. With a few clicks of a mouse, head of character animation Paul Munro puts the hero through his paces. Everything about him – his two-fisted ground smash, his simian gait, the way his

CONTINUED ON PAGE 57 »



Lego Marvel Super Heroes' artists often have to adapt and expand on set designs. Asgard's interiors were mostly empty halls in the films, which don't lend themselves to imaginative gameplay

WHO ELSE IS COMING?

TT Games is only confirming nine characters right now – Iron Man, Wolverine, Hulk, Spider-Man, Captain America, Black Widow, Loki, Deadpool, and Thor – but plenty more are going to be joining in, both in the campaign and as additional unlockables. Here are a few likely candidates:

- » Considering the amount of effort TT Games is putting into the so-called bigfigs, Hulk probably won't be the only character of that size. The Thing and Juggernaut sound like plausible additions, and their abilities would closely align with those of the green guy's.
- » While we were looking at concept art of a ruined Grand Central Station level (see page 57), head of production Jonathan Smith pointed out a tan, granular substance leaking through the walls. The appearance of Spider-Man in the corner all but confirms that players will be facing off against the wallcrawler's frequent foe, the Sandman.
- » Another level is set in the OsCorp Tower. If the Green Goblin didn't make an appearance, we'd be stunned.
- » While the Hulk was busy flexing his muscles in a test area, we spied a metallic wall with a dotted-line M on it. Unless Mysterio received a whole new skillset, be on the lookout for Magneto.



Marvel's most dangerous villains are housed in the Raft prison. Think Arkham Asylum, surrounded by water



A NEW NEW YORK

New York City becomes a character in any game it's featured in, and Lego Marvel Super Heroes follows suit in a slightly blockier way. When it came time to come up with a hub world for Lego Marvel Super Heroes, the city that never sleeps was the obvious choice.

"There are so many superheroes and villains based in New York, particularly in Manhattan Island," says Steve Sharples, Lego Marvel's assistant game director. "As soon as we decided that we wanted to take what was good about [Gotham City] in Batman 2 and create a new city for Marvel, it just came naturally that we could take New York, Lego-fy it, and make it ace."

"It is a Marvel version of New York City, so you're going to have things like Stark Tower," says producer Phill Ring. "So [you'll have] elements that are in the Marvel world, but also key landmarks, for example, like Times Square and the Statue of Liberty. They're all what makes New York feel like New York, so that as a starting point is great for us."

"We're working to give the essence of almost a caricature of scale to get the feel of the place, but within the scale that's manageable for a child playing it," says lead technical artist, Deborah Crook. "You wouldn't let a child loose around Manhattan, but you do want the space to be navigable by the players, including the younger players."

The team is also working to provide more activities and variety to the hub world, so players get the sense that it's more than merely a 3D map between missions. TT Games isn't elaborating, but says New York will get "dusted" over the course of the game, and that players can help reconstruct the city during their adventures.

Lego Batman 2's version of Superman provided inspiration for Lego Marvel's approach to flying, a critical means of transportation for many of the game's heroes. As with many of the other aspects of the design, balancing the needs of the player against hardware limitations is a tricky endeavor. "That is part of the challenge — being able to fit the sheer variety that we want to put in and the amount of gameplay, and the amount of Lego that we like to put into the hub," Crook says. "But it's like, 'Can that fit in memory if you're flying incredibly fast in it?' There are quite a bit of challenges in that, but we always rise to it."



« CONTINUED FROM PAGE 54

shoulders heave with each angry breath – is exactly what you'd hope for. It's remarkable to see how well his team has captured the essence of the character. We see him wreak his own brand of havoc in a test room, impatiently yanking a door open, ground-pounding a floor-mounted panel, and bashing a variety of Lego objects.

Putting him in the game is considerably more complicated than doing a great job of animating him, however. The Hulk is known for his wall-smashing ways, and TT Games knows the importance of making sure that element translates to the game. That creates the technical challenge of balancing the level design to accommodate Hulk's hyper strength. One of the cornerstones of TT Games' Lego titles is its free play mode, which allows players to revisit levels using any of the characters. That means a level that's built for Spider-Man, Wolverine, and Iron Man, for example, also has to take Hulk into consideration. He doesn't exactly fit into a standard door

frame, so levels are being built with him in mind, too. TT Games says players can expect an unprecedented amount of destruction in this entry, including the New York City hub (see sidebar).

HERO UP

The Hulk is clearly a focus for the team – none of my conversations with them over our two-day visit went without at least one Hulk reference – but he's not the only hero in town. There are more than 100 playable characters in the game, and TT Games is making sure they're all desirable. "We don't want people to go 'I'm going to play as Hulk, and that's it,'" Parsons says.

One of the calling cards of past Lego games is the way characters fall into several archetypes, ever since the first minifig Jedi used the Force to fling an enemy. Gimli can smash through cracked walls in Lego The Lord of the Rings. Robin's magnet suit allows Batman's little buddy to walk upright onto specific surfaces.

Indiana Jones can use his whip to swing over gaps. These character-class specific abilities serve as a basis for puzzles and an incentive for players to change roles often. Marvel's roster poses an interesting puzzle itself: How the heck can you sort characters who have so many different skills?

"Lego Marvel is a challenge from a design standpoint," Parsons admits. "You've got flying characters [such as] Iron Man and Thor. You've got characters like Spider-Man, who can swing around everywhere. You've got characters like Wolverine, who for all intents and purposes is invulnerable, as is the Hulk. So when you look at these things, every level of design has to factor those things in. But we also want to keep it true to the Lego game roots of making sure that you're having to switch characters, and every character has a reason to play them."

Someone like Captain America is relatively easy to figure out. He has his iconic shield, which he can use

Sandman hasn't been confirmed for the game, but it's hard to imagine who else would have filled Grand Central Station with a gritty mess



to target multiple objects and launch in a manner that's functionally identical to Batman's Batarangs or Legolas' arrows. But what about someone like Black Widow? Parsons says that at face value, there's not much to her, at least compared to gods and overwhelmingly powerful mutants. She's a spy. Fortunately, her employer, S.H.I.E.L.D., happens to have access to some of the best gizmos out there, and they're willing to share the wealth. TT Games wouldn't elaborate beyond mentioning her propensity for firearms, but it wouldn't be unreasonable to assume that there's a hackable node or two in her future.

Black Widow's skillset could complement someone like Thor, the same way Iron Man's will. "Even though he's a god, [Thor's] not really technologically savvy," Parsons says. "He's sort of a penthouse god, having feasts and doing almost medieval kind of stuff. He's not going to know how to hack into a computer, whereas Tony Stark can do it no problem."

And then there's Spider-Man. Everyone's favorite wall-crawler doesn't share many – if any – abilities with the rest of the Lego Marvel crew. If you think TT Games was going to take the easy way out with the hero and isolate his webslinging abilities to a few contextual areas, like Lego Batman's grappling hook, think again. The studio is taking the ambitious approach of allowing players to use his webs to stick to any surface and swing wherever

he wants. That kind of design specialization is expensive from a development standpoint, but TT Games wouldn't have it any other way.

In addition to using webs for traversal, he can use them to tie up the bad guys and to grab and pull objects. He also has his trademark spider sense. "Spider-Man is quite possibly the most difficult of the characters we've worked on, but he's becoming the most satisfying from a design perspective," Parsons says.

We get a chance to see how it all comes together in a rough version of a level set within Stark Tower. In the demo, Captain America and Tony Stark are working through a series of deadly traps that stand in the way of an Iron Man suit upgrade (have the bad guys taken over Iron Man HQ?). Here, we see Cap is more than just a shield bearer. He flings it at baddies, but he can also toss it into special wall indentations that give him a stepping-stone of sorts to higher levels, or use it to complete electronic circuits. As the duo passes a series of lasers, Captain America redirects a beam back into its wall-mounted blaster, destroying it in the process. Meanwhile, Stark hangs back. Even though he doesn't have his powerful suit, Stark isn't completely helpless. He can hack computers and use electronic devices, such as a radio-controlled helicopter.

One of the coolest parts of the demo comes when

we see the nine revealed characters all clustered together in one big room. Each of them has their own way of standing and unique idle animation. Iron Man stands wide, hands on his hips, a fun nod to Tony Stark's charming arrogance. Captain America is grim and stoic. Loki looks like he's about to do something sneaky, and Thor glances around warily. Even without any voice acting in place, TT Games has done a great job of conveying each character's personality in the animations alone.

Superheroes have been in video games for decades now, but the results have generally been less than heroic. TT Games has consistently delivered some of the best video game adaptations of licenses including Harry Potter, Lord of the Rings, and Star Wars. It seems as funny as it is plausible that one of the most exciting, well-rounded gaming overviews of the Marvel Universe could come by way of Lego. But fans of the bricks – both physical and virtual – aren't the only people who TT Games is targeting.

"We want [Marvel fans] to come in and go, 'Yeah, this is great. I can do cool things because I'm an Iron Man fan,'" Ring says. "That's what we're trying to create with these things."

Visit gameinformer.com/lego for expanded information on Lego Marvel and much more





One of the Raft's inmates seems to be harboring a grudge toward the Hulk. Who could it be?





BRICK BY BRICK

THE TRAVELLER'S TALES STORY

HOW A FEW SELF-DESCRIBED HACKERS WORKING OUT OF A BARN
CONSTRUCTED ONE OF THE MOST SUCCESSFUL GAME STUDIOS AROUND

BY JEFF CORK



W

hen you walk into TT Games' Knutsford studio in England, it's easy to forget that you're in the midst of a sales juggernaut. Other developers are great at getting on stages and boasting about how they're pushing the act of shooting people in the face to the next level. That's not what this studio is about. This unremarkable office building houses hundreds of developers who quietly and passionately create some of the highest-regarded family games in the industry. While we wait to get inside, the receptionist is busy moving large mounds of boxes. What's inside? "The Lego holiday orders," she replies. Those building blocks are more than just gifts. They're a critical part of TT Games' story.

Jon Burton founded Traveller's Tales in 1989. In addition to developing its own IP such as *Leander* and *Puggsy*, some of its earliest titles were based on *Dracula*, *Mickey Mouse*, and *Toy Story*. It was an eclectic mix with one arching theme: The studio proved adept at working with license holders and bringing their characters to life in video games, even if working conditions were a bit lacking.

"There were 20, 25 of us, and the company has steadily grown over time," says Traveller's Tales veteran Arthur Parsons. "We used to be in a barn. It was cold. It

was great fun." The barn's still there, though the studio has long since moved into cornier digs down the road. For that, the company can thank a couple of big names: Lego and Star Wars.

THE LEGO CONNECTION

Lego was formed in Billund, Denmark, in 1932, though Ole Christiansen's earliest creations would be unrecognizable to contemporary fans of the company. In the late '40s, the company's original line of wooden cars and whimsical toy houses were scrapped in favor of

EARLY EXPERIMENTS

If you've played through several Lego games, you've probably picked up on a few common threads. For instance, carrots, pigs, dancing skeletons, and disco rooms pop up with charming regularity. Puzzles require players to swap between various characters, and elements such as the stud meter, minikits, and red-brick extras have been there since day one. That doesn't mean there weren't a few dead ends and other development oddities since the series was first conceived. Here are a few of them:

RIGID PERFORMANCES

TT Games experimented with faithful representations of Lego minifigs when the studio first began work on *Lego Star Wars: The Video Game*. In early tests, characters were built and animated as though they were formed from the same plastic as their real-world counterparts. John Hodekinson, one of TT Games' game directors, says while the results were charming, they didn't provide animators with the full range of motion they required. Can you imagine what it would have looked like if Obi Wan was limited to

a spinning-wrist twirl attack?

BLOCKY BACKGROUNDS

In a similar vein, the idea of constructing everything in the games out of Lego elements was initially tossed around. The idea was scrapped for several reasons. First, Hodekinson says it's hard to see anything in a Lego when everything's covered in studs. Head of production Jonathan Smith says that their current blend of realistic backgrounds and Lego components not only lets players see what's going on, but it also provides a visual shorthand for what is and isn't interactive. If you see something made from Lego blocks in a TT Games title, odds are you can smash it, build it, or drive it. That hybrid approach isn't a new idea in the Lego world, either. Lead tech artist Dave Burton says fans have been seeing Lego toys set against realistically rendered backdrops on boxes for years.

INSERT COIN?

You wouldn't be that far off if you described the Lego games as having an arcade-like feel. This is

closer to TT Games' original vision than you may have guessed. "One of the original mandates was to make it like an arcade game," Hodekinson recalls. "In fact, originally we tried to put 'insert coin' where it now says press start. We really wanted that vibe of an old arcade machine. Of course, technical requirements kept us from going on screen, and it had to conform to the platform-holder requirements." Even though players won't have to reach for their pocket change when they join a co-op game, Hodekinson says they can see elements of that initial goal in the way broken pieces flicker before disappearing.

STUD MAGNATES

Ever wonder why Lego studs are such valuable in-game commodities? The obvious explanation is that they share the same coinlike silhouette that players have become familiar with over years of gaming. Smith also says that he likes to think of the tiny round elements as the atomic particles of the Lego universe. Pieces don't come any smaller, but they're still an important part of the building process.

acetate bricks, a precursor to today's ABS counterparts. The toys, dubbed Lego after the Danish phrase meaning "play well," were a smash hit. Kids loved building models based on the included instructions, and then taking them apart and coming up with their own designs.

Lego's popularity steadily increased over the decades, as new themes like space, castle, and towns were introduced, along with the now-iconic minifig characters. By the '90s, however, consumer interest declined as Lego faced aggressive competition from rival brick manufacturers and a younger audience that seemed to be more entranced with video games.

As part of a response, Lego commissioned a variety of video games to reflect the toy line in an interactive form. The first, *Lego Island*, let players explore a sprawling open-world sandbox. The 1997 PC game beat *Grand Theft Auto III* to market by four years. Another change came when Lego obtained the license from Lucasfilm to create a line based on the Star Wars universe. The line was a massive success, drawing in fans who had long abandoned the toys as they grew older.

Rather than grow complacent, Lego decided to invest further in video games. As fate would have it, they looked to a tiny studio in Knutsford.

A NEW HOPE

Jonathan Smith was an internal Lego staffer tasked with finding ways to further expand the company's gaming presence. It was 2001, and the company

wanted to bring in new people to see what kind of new experiences Lego games could bring. "That was an opportunity too good to ignore," he says. Smith and his team were sorting out the best possible way to bring Lego's sense of mischief and discovery to video games when they came upon what now seems like an obvious move. Why not make a game based on Lego's Star Wars license?

Smith approached Traveller's Tales with the project and commissioned a demo. "They had the individuals with the talent and skill to produce what was initially a very, very, very tiny but utterly perfect sliver of what would then go on to become *Lego Star Wars*,"

Smith recalls. "Just a room and a corridor with shiny floors and exactly the right lightsaber sound effects, and three or four characters with only a few animations. But everything that was present was perfect. You could put that demo room up right next to *Lego Star Wars III* or *Lego Lord of the Rings* and see how the character animation systems, the charm and the animation, the level of attention to detail in the environment, the reassuring, robust quality of the experience, [drew] a straight line to where we are now."

Many of the staff at Traveller's Tales were skeptical about the project at first. "Initially when they said we're going to do *Lego Star Wars*, it was just like, 'What? That's crazy,'" says tech artist Dave Burton. "At the time, it was quite a risk. Initially, people just didn't get the concept. But very quickly we started to realize that it worked."

Smith and his colleagues presented that early demo to Lucasfilm in San Francisco, and it was given the go-ahead. That approval was by no means a sure thing, considering some of the plans that Traveller's Tales had for the project. For one, the studio wanted to incorporate something called free play into the game, which was a mode that allowed players to take any of the game's unlocked characters into levels, regardless of whether it made sense or not, such as having Darth Maul team up with Obi Wan in the battle for Naboo. Lucasfilm was surprisingly on board with the concept. "You can have that," Smith remembers them saying. "Okay, off you go."

Traveller's Tales released *Lego Star Wars: The Video Game* in 2002, after two full years of development. Audiences embraced the mixture of whimsy and action, latching on to its family-friendly interpretation of the still-fresh new *Star Wars* Trilogy. *Lego Star Wars* has been, and continues to be, a massive success for the studio. Lego says the series, which grew to add the original *Star Wars* trilogy and a game based on the Clone Wars, has sold more than 30 million copies worldwide.

After *Lego Star Wars* and its adaptation of the original trilogy, Traveller's Tales (now dubbed TT Games following the acquisition of several other studios) moved to Lucasfilm's Indiana Jones series.

Warner Bros. purchased the studio in 2007, before the release of *Lego Batman*. The game marked the first time TT Games developed a game based on an original storyline. As evidenced by *Lego Marvel Super Heroes*,

CONSTRUCTION CREW



This is just a small portion of the Lego elements that TT Games' model builders use to do their jobs. Fishing parts out of a massive pile would probably take too much time

Carl Greatrix has what many people would consider a dream job: He builds Lego models for video games. Greatrix started with *Lego Indiana Jones 2*, with his first model being an old-school forklift. Since then, his models have become more complex, including the Joker robot from *Lego Batman 2* that took around 80,000 parts and the Barad-dûr tower from *Lego The Lord of the Rings*. "If it had been built physically, it would have been 2.5 meters tall," he says.

Greatrix and his team have two missions: First, they adapt official sets to the video games whenever possible. If the official sets don't work for whatever reason, the team constructs new models from scratch. "That's the bit that we like to do," Greatrix says.

You might think in-game modelers come up with vaguely Lego-shaped objects, toss a few studs on top, and call it a day. Nope. TT Games' modeling team meticulously crafts every Lego object and item you see on the screen, piece by piece, doing their best to ensure that the onscreen versions are actually buildable models. Sometimes Greatrix works with physical Lego blocks, pulling elements from a massive cabinet of parts organized by type. Other builds are easier to pull together using the software tool Maya, which authentically models



Marvel characters have a tendency toward wearing headgear, which challenges model builders to add extra headroom in vehicles

every available part in the Lego library.

Greatrix knows how rabid Lego fans can be about their hobby, and he takes his responsibility seriously. While the team is given occasional permission from Lego to create special Lego elements, it's something that Greatrix hates doing as a matter of pride. "If they see a part that doesn't exist, as far as I'm concerned, we've blown it," he says. "I've not done my job properly. I should be able to do it without creating a new element for it. I try to stay away from it as much as possible."

As with real Lego creations, Greatrix says the trickiest builds are those that incorporate organic shapes and curves. For instance, *Lego Harry Potter's* Whomping Willow boss creature was especially challenging. The malevolent tree not only needed to look like a tree, but it also had to accommodate a variety of fairly complex animations. Greatrix says that while it was difficult to create, he was happy with the way the model turned out.

That sort of challenge is a natural fit for someone like Greatrix, who says he's constantly trying to figure out how he'd build real-world objects out of the tiny plastic bits. "It's the best job in the world, without a doubt."

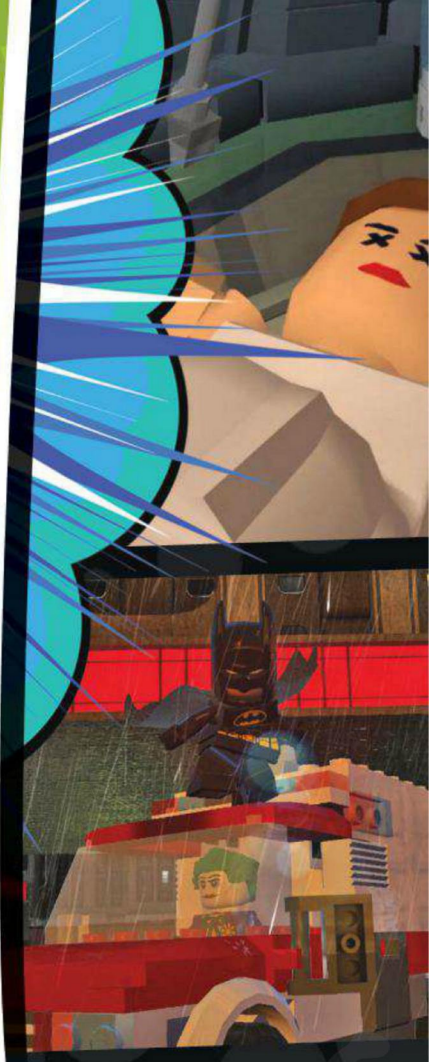
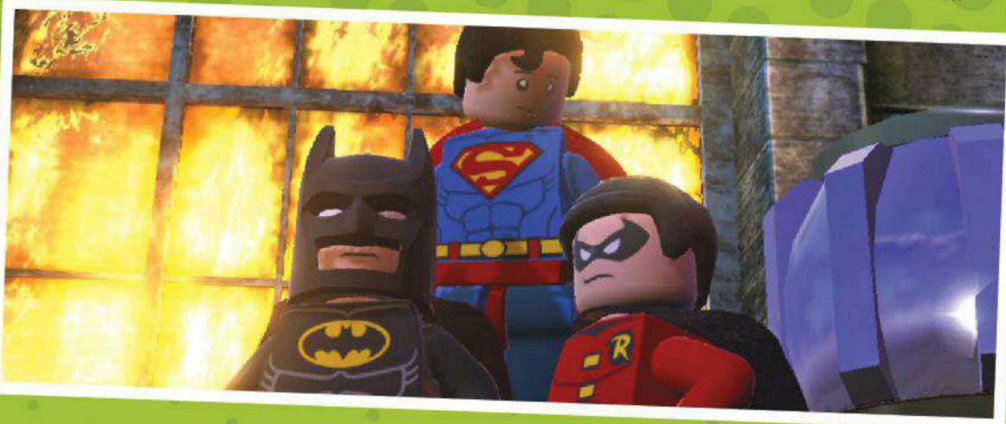
OUT OF THE SILENT ERA

It's nearly impossible to talk about the Lego games without using the word "charming." Since *Lego Star Wars: The Video* game first introduced players to a tiny rendition of Qui Gon and his bumbling sidekick, Obi Wan, fans have embraced the way TT Games retells familiar stories through pantomime and broad physical humor. The company stuck with this form of silent storytelling through more than 10 games, until *Lego Batman 2: DC Super Heroes* added voice acting in 2012.

The reasons for adopting the silent approach were numerous and varied. Some members of the dev team simply didn't like talking in video games. Head of production Jonathan Smith points to a more pragmatic reason, too: no voice acting means less effort needs to be spent localizing games. Regardless of the reasoning, cutscene director Duncan Kinnaird says TT Games embraced that initial voiceless challenge and eventually got quite good at it. When they began crafting their own stories, however, things changed. Much of the games' humor draws from the familiarity players have with the license that's being adapted. Telling a new tale from scratch is considerably

more difficult when you rely on what amounts to miming. "When we first jumped into the idea of [adding voice-work] both internally and externally, when we put it out to the public, we had people go, 'Great, we can actually do something different,'" recalls producer Phill Ring. "Then the other half of people go, 'Whoa, you can't do that. It's not a Lego game anymore. You can't make that change.'"

Ring says that most people were converted after seeing how *Lego Batman 2* incorporated voice acting. The tone was faithful to past games, while the added dialogue propelled the story along. The studio's next game, *Lego The Lord of the Rings*, added a twist on their fledgling use of voice acting. The game almost exclusively uses the spoken dialogue from Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, with the exception of a few quest-giving characters. Head of production Jonathan Smith says TT Games embraced that additional challenge, and they're exceptionally happy with how it turned out. With *Lego Marvel Super Heroes*, the team is working to maintain the same epic scope and scale of those other voice-acted titles, while ensuring that the series' traditional tone (and charm) remains intact.



Warner has taken a fairly hands-off approach with the titles and licenses TT Games has worked with. The developer released games based on Disney's *Pirates of the Caribbean* brand, Harmonix's *Rock Band*, and two more titles based on Lucasfilm's *Star Wars* and *Indiana Jones* brands. Of course, Warner's rich film library has been tapped, too, with the release of adaptations of *Harry Potter* and *Lord of the Rings*.

"We're also so blessed to have new worlds to play in," Smith says. "We go from *Star Wars*, to *Batman*, to *Indiana Jones*, to *Harry Potter*, to *Lord of the Rings*. We are so lucky to have all that variety, and that always stimulates new ideas. At the same time just as a matter of principle, we have to move on with each game."

People who don't follow every Lego release can't help but notice the superficial similarities between each entry. They all follow the same basic visual style (it is Lego, after all), and bashing bricks, collecting studs, and solving rudimentary puzzles remain part of their DNA. However, TT Games bristles at the suggestion that its games are relying on what amounts to a formula.

Lego Marvel Super Heroes' game director Arthur Parsons says he finds it strange that those criticisms are leveled at the Lego games, while other games in other genres follow the same annual release schedule and share similar amounts of common elements. Over the course of more than a dozen game releases, TT Games has introduced significant gameplay additions, including a level-design editor with *Lego Indiana Jones 2*, the advent of large hub worlds and brick-by-brick building with *Lego Harry Potter Years 1-4*, and a character cre-

ator in *Lego Star Wars II: The Original Trilogy*.

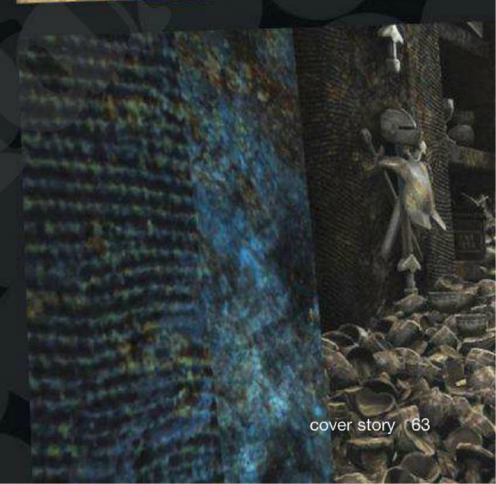
More often than not, the individual IP drives TT Games' innovation. "I think a lot of the times when branded games aren't great, something somewhere has gone in that element where people haven't really connected with the brand," Parsons says. "That's something we always do. From the top down at TT, it's kind of built into us. Make sure that you respect the license holder and respect the brand. And who wouldn't want to?"

Sometimes that means a strong character such as *Indiana Jones* gets additional in-game skills to reflect his prominence in the film series. Other times it can inspire something as ambitious as *Lego The Lord of the Rings*' huge rendition of Middle-earth. Regardless of where it comes from, TT Games does its best to follow the license down the most logical path, while also respecting their main audience: younger players.

"[We] keep things fresh each time, because if we're not doing that then we're wasting not only our time but the player's time and not only that, but even worse, children's time, which is absolutely unforgivable," Smith says.

Whether you say they follow a basic formula or not, TT Games' Lego titles are indisputably successful. All told, the series has racked up sales of more than 80 million copies worldwide and counting. Not bad for a bunch of hackers who used to work in a barn.

Visit gameinformer.com/lego for expanded information on *Lego Marvel* and much more



LEGO CITY UNDERCOVER

» PLATFORM

Wii U

» STYLE

1-Player Action

» PUBLISHER

Nintendo

» DEVELOPER

Traveller's Tales/TT Fusion

» RELEASE

Early 2013



THE TOY BOX DEEPENS

BY JOE JUBA

17,823

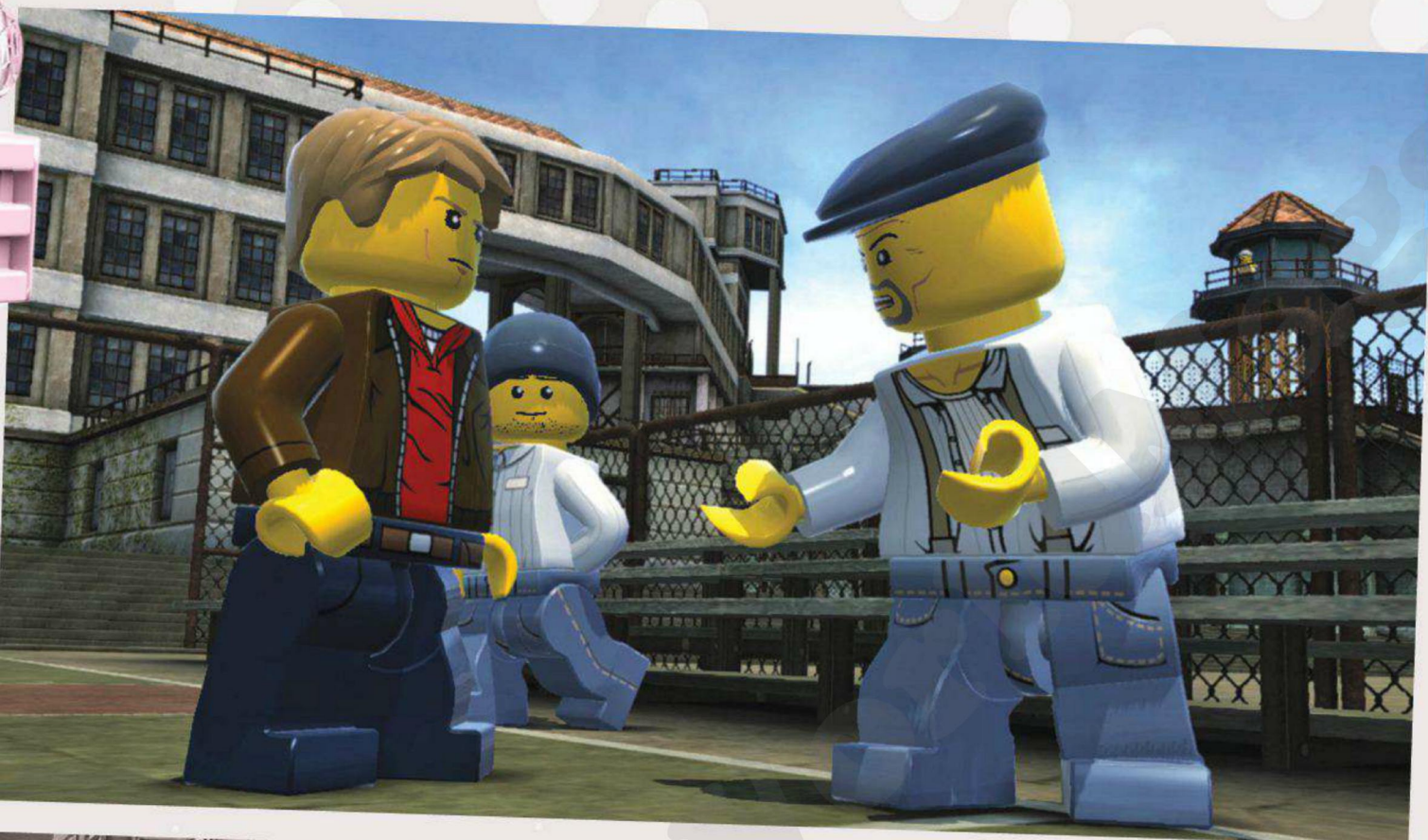
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45,560



art of the charm in Traveller's Tales' Lego games is seeing well-known franchises reinterpreted with minifigs, colored bricks, and quirky humor. Fans will be happy to find most of those hallmarks in place with Lego City Undercover, with one notable omission: the license. Familiar movie characters do not occupy the starring roles, and the plot is not constrained by the events of a particular film. Based instead on the popular City line of playsets and accessories, Lego breaks out on its own with this entry to tell the story of Chase McCain, a cop on a mission to

take down Lego City's notorious crime boss, Rex Fury. Is the content good enough to stand by itself? Early signs point to "yes." I played the game for two hours to get a handle on how Lego City Undercover works and what it adds to Traveller's Tales' winning formula.

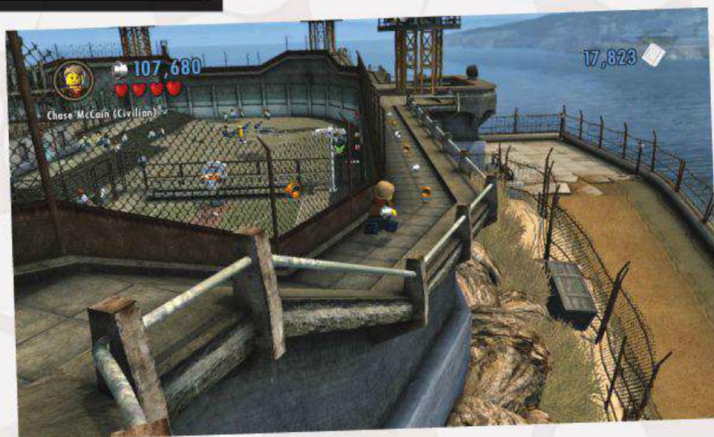




While driving, Chase can hop from one vehicle to another without going on foot first



This boat is a Super Build, which means you need to track down a lot of bricks before you can assemble it



Chase's abilities depend on which identity he assumes



THE OPEN WORLD

LEGO City is a big place, and players have free rein to drive around and explore it at their leisure. LEGO Batman 2 used a similar open-world structure, and LEGO City Undercover continues the evolution by filling the world with more visual variety. The surroundings are interesting, and even though this is the biggest LEGO game yet, the world didn't feel bloated as I drove down the streets. Like LEGO The Lord of the Rings, the overworld is persistent, but some missions take place in instanced areas set apart from the main map. That means you are free to cruise around, explore, and hunt down collectibles for as long as you want before deciding to advance the main story.

PLENTY TO COLLECT

Open-world titles often have multiple quest lines active at once, but LEGO City Undercover keeps its story more focused. You won't be taking requests from multiple characters at once, or trying to balance your allegiances like in a GTA game. In the section I played, the only

official missions were story-based, and the side content takes the form of the collectibles. Between missions, Chase fills his time by tracking down tons of different doo-dads and knick-knacks. Many of these items are unavailable at first, requiring players to obtain a special ability before cashing in. Like other LEGO titles, you can expect to fill plenty of time after completing the main story by hunting down studs, bricks, and cheats. Replaying levels to unearth all of their hidden secrets is undoubtedly on the docket, as well.

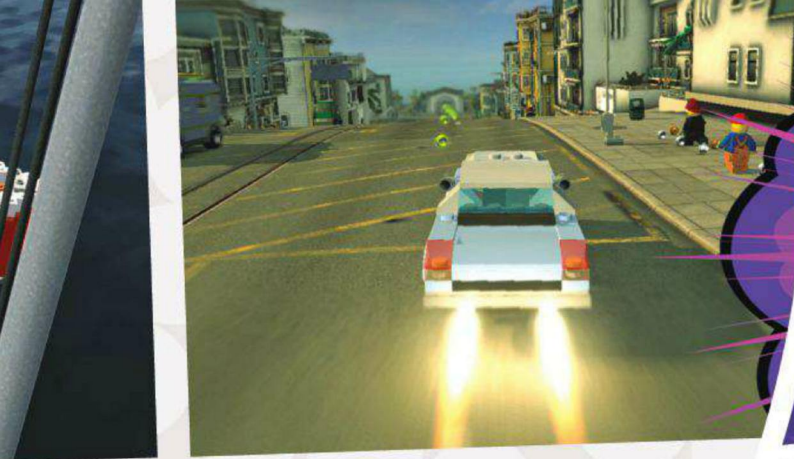
COSTUME PARTY

This is where the "undercover" in the title comes from. Previous games allowed players to purchase and switch between multiple characters, but in LEGO City Undercover, you mainly control Chase McCain. Instead of relying on allies with varying skillsets, Chase has different identities with unique abilities. Conceptually, this lets him work alone, though it is functionally the same as swapping out characters in previous LEGO games. If Chase needs to access a high location, you can swap

to his police officer outfit, which comes equipped with a grapple gun. Switching to the robber get-up grants access to a crowbar, while the miner's gear lets you blow up rocks that obstruct your path. Gathering and using these new costumes is the key to progressing through the story and gaining access to those hard-to-reach items and areas.

CHOOSE YOUR RIDE

Transportation is an important part of any open-world game, and Chase McCain has a lot of options for traveling in style. The easiest way to get a vehicle is to just hop in one that happens to be driving by. The streets of LEGO City are bustling, so you shouldn't have a problem commandeering a civilian's car. If you drive by another car you like better, just perform a vehicle-to-vehicle hop to switch – no need to go on foot to snag the superior option. Alternatively, Chase has the ability to order specific cars from call-in stations. I only unlocked the initial police car during my time with the game, but it appears that you get many more options as you progress.



WHAT ABOUT CO-OP?

From Star Wars to Lord of the Rings, cooperative play has always been a pillar of the Lego video game experience. That might be changing this time around. Despite previously listing the game as one or two players, when asked about the possibility of co-op in Lego City Undercover, Nintendo and Traveller's Tales would only say, "Nothing has been announced." While that response doesn't eliminate the possibility, one would think that the co-op feature – if it exists – would be a central selling point at this phase of development.



Despite some context-sensitive commands, combat is still extremely simple



You can set a destination using the map on the GamePad, then follow the green stud trail on the main screen to get there

Driving around the city is fun, but in my time behind the wheel, I didn't sense much difference between how the vehicles handle. However, I was just commandeering cars from the street, so perhaps the vehicles that unlock later have clearer advantages.

SUPER BUILDING

Studs aren't the only form of currency to collect in Lego City. When you break items like park benches, trees, and cars, you earn Lego bricks. These bricks are resources used in what Traveller's Tales is calling "super builds." Chase occasionally encounters Lego base plates in the world, and each one requires a large number of bricks to create the intended structure. Sometimes these super builds are functional, and other times they are just a cool cosmetic addition to the city. I completed two super builds in my session; one was a vehicle call-in station, and the other was a ferry that allows Chase to access Lego City's island prison. Don't be alarmed by the exorbitant numbers of bricks the super builds require; super bricks are one of the main

collectibles you hunt down, and each one of those gives a huge boost to your total, which beats spending hours smashing cars and benches.

USING THE GAMEPAD

Lego City Undercover isn't coming to PS3 or Xbox 360, which means it is able to use the Wii U's GamePad as a central component. The most useful feature is the map on the bottom screen, which means that you don't need to rely on a small minimap crammed into the corner of the screen. The other implementations I experienced felt more gimmicky. Video messages from Chase's allies come through on the GamePad, but the audio is really the important part – and it's inconvenient to look away from the main action just to watch a talking head. The GamePad also mirrors a device that Chase uses to scan nearby areas for suspects and collectibles, a process that has players standing up and rotating around to zero in. It's a minor inconvenience at worst, but I hope that the later hours of the game have more inventive uses for the device.

KEEPING IT FUNNY

Before I started playing, I was worried that humor from previous games might not work without familiar characters and scenarios to use as fuel. I was wrong. The whole introductory sequence is full of gems, including the LCPD slogan ("Building model citizens"), jokes that lampoon old-school police shows (including some great cameos), and the persistent mispronunciation of "computer" as "compuper." Granted, it's not as funny when you're just reading about it, but the humor kept me smiling consistently. A large part of that is thanks to Chase McCain's sidekick, Frank Honey, who is so hopelessly dopey that everything he says is amusing. It isn't just Frank, though; the general tone of the game strikes a balance between comedy, drama, and parody. Successfully juggling these components is a major factor in the success of the Lego series as a whole, and it looks like Lego City Undercover is keeping the magic alive.

For more on Traveller's Tales and its Lego titles, go to gameinformer.com/lego



Ten Questions Answered Before
Shadowrun Returns

by Matt Miller



» **Platform**
PC · Mac · iOS · Android

» **Style**
1-Player Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
Harebrained Schemes

» **Developer**
Harebrained Schemes

» **Release**
May/June

What is Shadowrun?

Shadowrun began as a tabletop role-playing game in the late '80s. Since then, it has evolved through multiple editions and is still played today. In addition, the franchise spawned several video games, including separate

role-playing games on Sega Genesis and Super Nintendo, and a controversial multiplayer shooter on Xbox 360.

The fiction combines elements of science fiction and fantasy in a way no other setting matches. Shadowrun taps the familiar dystopian cyberpunk vibe and injects it with the magic and optimism of classic high fantasy, from elves and trolls to dragons and spirits. "You have these two forces at war with one another. It's the dehumanizing future of cyberpunk and the very natural essence of magic," explains head of production Mitch Gitelman. Throw in a dose of noir detective atmosphere, and Shadowrun feels creative and surprising at every turn.

The Shadowrun fiction assumes that most modern life occurred roughly parallel to the real world up until 2011, after which strange events began to reshape the world. Human parents gave birth to elven infants, tribal nations gained powers to summon spirits, and technological advances led to a neural interface network called the Matrix (an idea that predates the Wachowski films). In Shadowrun, global megacorporations employ mages to do their dirty work, ork hackers infiltrate computer systems, and a dragon becomes the president of the country.

Where does Shadowrun Returns fit in?

Shadowrun Returns is a new game set within this unusual universe. Coming to PC, Mac, and tablets, this new strategic role-playing title garnered massive crowdfunding support on Kickstarter, giving hope to a dedicated legion of fans who've longed for a new entry in their favorite franchise.

The team at Harebrained Schemes is populated by longtime Shadowrun contributors, and led by two individuals with foundational ties to the franchise. Creative director Jordan Weisman is one of the original designers of the Shadowrun universe. Head of production Mitch Gitelman has had a long connection to the interactive rights to Shadowrun. "What we're really trying to do is bring Shadowrun back, and make a game that is true to the game world," says Gitelman. "It's a really story-based, deep experience where you get to see different aspects of Shadowrun."

What are some of the game's inspirations?

"The game we've created is like a halfway point between the old X-COM and the new XCOM," Weisman says. "That's our major inspiration from a mechanics point of view, although our interface is quite different," Gitelman adds. Gameplay combines the strategic battles of the XCOM series with deep role-playing

customization and a bit of detective-style investigation.

Beyond mechanics, the team cites film noir as the central atmospheric inspiration. "Shadowrun is based on film noir in the first place," Gitelman says. "Some of the storylines are straight out of old [Humphrey Bogart] movies. That's what's great about Shadowrun. Besides the cybertech and the magic, it's also that old gumshoe thing of hitting the streets and doing detective work."

Rather than look to recent role-playing games like Mass Effect or Skyrim, Harebrained Schemes is going back to the roots of tabletop gaming for its approach to conversations, character growth, and choices.





The screens in this article utilize actual game assets and in-game character models, but are shown in arranged poses rather than in-engine, as the Shadowrun Returns game engine is still being built and implemented

What is the game's audiovisual style?

Shadowrun Returns plays from an isometric view, but offers an unusual hybrid of visual presentations. "We've evolved into this 2D/3D hybrid rendering style," Weisman says. "It looks so rich, and unlike anything else in the genre." Painterly 2D environments offer a rich backdrop for the game world, but without the expense or time investment required for rotating polygonal stages. Meanwhile, characters are created in 3D, allowing for all the extensive weapon animations and magic effects the team is crafting.

Visually, Shadowrun Returns delivers the dark and murky underworld vibe of its noir inspiration, but injects the hyper-neon colors inherent to the cyberpunk milieu. Think *Blade Runner*, and add magic.

The team has also contracted the original musicians who composed for the Super Nintendo and Genesis games. The new tunes meld electronica with a more traditional orchestral style. Finally, to offer the team (and subsequent homebrew editors) the most flexibility, and keep the game budget under control, the game is being built to deliver story through text dialogue without voiceover.

What is the story about?

Shadowrun is set in a version of the real world in 2054. The story opens as a woman named Jessica Watts approaches your newly created protagonist for help. Her brother Sam, your old friend, has been murdered.

You're the only one she can trust, and she begs you to come to Seattle to figure out what happened.

"We thought the only appropriate place to start a Shadowrun video game was in the morgue, so the first scene is there," explains Weisman. "Your dead friend Sam is there, and like any film noir tale, the first character you meet is the lone star detective, Mitch Macklusky, who is immediately antagonistic. From there you find out that there's been a series of murders; these people have all been found with organs cut out. You're charged with solving Sam's murder, but as you dig into that, more and more unravels, and the mystery expands from the lowest echelons of society, like the biker gangs, all the way up to the dynastic control of one of the largest megacorps."

The Shadowrun fiction details events all the way up into the 2070s. Weisman targeted the early 2054 time period with hopes of moving forward into subsequent years in later games.

What kind of character can I play?

Any kind you want. Shadowrun Returns opens with an extensive character creator. Your runner can be a dwarf, elf, human, ork, or troll, and either gender is available for each race. After you select a race, you choose an archetype. The decker, mage, physical adept,

rigger, shaman, and street samurai are all options. It's not a class-based system; instead, these opening archetypes come with a suite of skill and abilities that set you on solid ground as the game begins. But even in the opening character creation, you have karma (i.e. XP) to spend on customizing your skills. "You earn both karma and nuyen in the game, and you spend the karma on attributes, skills, and abilities, and you spend the nuyen on gear," Weisman says.

Beyond shaping the abilities of your hero, Weisman also promises "elaborate visual customization" at the offset. Players conclude character creation by answering a short set of questions that determine your character's background, including what city he or she operated in before coming to Seattle.

While this main character drives the story, you still have access to a full party of other characters – many are mercenary shadowrunners you hire to broaden your options. "You directly control all the members of your party," Weisman says. "It's not like you're driving your protagonist and the AI guides all the rest, because that always pisses the s--- out of me, because the AI characters never do exactly what you want them to do."

Build Your Character

Shadowrun Returns allows players to choose between five character races and six different starting skill sets called archetypes, but you can mix and meld your character's abilities in any way you see fit, as well as customize your character's appearance.



The isometric view of the game world can't be rotated, but the single view exhibits incredible details everywhere you look

What do the different archetypes do?


For instance, the mages would see ley lines, but the street samurai won't. A decker will see where jack points are. The shaman is going to see the raw materials from which they can summon spirits."

Deckers can jack into the Matrix to confront security systems or battle other hackers. Resulting effects might include lifting the fog of war in an area of the map, taking over a turret, or sending out an EMP blast. Mages can perceive auras, offering hints about NPC intentions, and they'll notice ley lines where their magic will be easier and better to cast, almost like elevation in a traditional shooter. Shamans can summon spirits within the world, and then control those spirits as separate characters, but they have to beware overtaxing their abilities or the vengeful spirits will turn on them. Riggers control drones that can be used for everything from covert observation to combat. Street samurai are the martial experts on the field, wielding sword and gun in tandem through cool gear abilities like suppression fire. Finally, physical adepts offer a hybrid mage/martial arts class for players wanting some variety. You can also diverge from any archetype to build up abilities as you see fit, shaping a character that matches your preferred playstyle.

Each archetype brings its own array of powers into the game, and as you switch between characters in your party, you get different perspectives on the world. "Different characters see different information in the world," Weisman says. "For

Macklusky is the lone star ark detective assigned to the murder case, and he's got no patience for you or anybody else






This screen shows the game panned out wider than a normal single screen would show, while this rectangle approximates the iOS version's zoom level



Search the area!



How does the combat work?

The battle system draws extensively from the model established by the original X-COM. Careful party movement, extensive availability of special abilities and gear, and wise use of cover are all keys to victory as you move your party around the map.

Mechanically, the turn-based combat has players move and act with their entire team before the enemy turn comes up. Movement and actions are handled through expenditure of AP (action points), and each activity has its own cost. In addition, many game abilities alter available AP. "We simulate stun damage by taking away your action points," Gitelman says. "If you get punched it may do some physical damage, but it will also do a bunch of AP damage. You'll see that reflected in our spells as well, like Sleep."

The game also offers clear numerical information to guide your tactical choices in a fight. Select a certain spell or attack, and you'll see your percentage chance to hit and how much damage you can do for all the targets on the board simultaneously.

Shadowrun Returns handles cover in two distinct ways. "Direct cover is the action of taking your character into cover," Weisman says. "My character will automatically take cover anytime he's next to a cover object, similar to the new XCOM. In addition, we have incidental cover. That's like when there's five things between me and the guy that's shooting, and they're all light cover, and they build up. If they're in the line of sight, they're cumulative."

Can I make my own adventures?

Absolutely. In fact, it's one of the big features that Harebrained Schemes hopes distinguishes its game, and also pays homage to its heritage as a tabletop role-playing game. A full-blown game editor will ship with the PC and Mac versions of the game, with tablet functionality still to be

determined. "The editor is a separate program from the game, and with it you can construct environments using all the pieces we've got in the game," Weisman says. "It's exactly the same level editor we're using to make the game. You can use those Lego blocks to make a huge variety of things. That goes for interiors and exteriors."

Once you've made your map, you can populate it with content. Whether just making environments or taking the next step to build out scenes complete with characters, dialogue, ad-libbed keyword conversations, battles, and other adventure elements, the system aims for ease of use – no programming experience is required. Drag-and-drop environment pieces, pull down menus, and easy type-in-text should be a cinch if the team's plan comes to fruition. One of the advantages of a 2D background is that homebrew adventure creators should have an easy time placing objects without collision problems.

After you complete your perfect scene, you can upload and share it with the wider community. In turn, those players can evaluate your scene on two scales. Overall quality dictates how good everyone thinks your content piece is, and helps it rise to the top when people are searching for new content. In addition, graders evaluate each user-created content piece on how "Shadowrun" it is – how much does it fit within the fiction, style, and tone of the Shadowrun setting. The team's already been approached by eager modders from other game communities, so it will be exciting to see how the game expands with its user base. "People are going to make some amazing stuff," Weisman says.

In addition to relying on user-created content, Harebrained Schemes has high hopes for carrying on past launch in May or June of 2013. The game includes the full campaign scenario in Seattle, but shortly after launch the developers hope to release a second scenario set in Berlin. Like everything else connected to the game, it will be free for its Kickstarter backers.

The team also hopes to release smaller DLC environment packs regularly. These sets provide new locations, like the Ork Underground, and offer a new array of tiles, buildings, and other pieces for homebrew creators to expand their toolset. It's an ambitious goal, but if Harebrained Schemes succeeds, the support could make Shadowrun Returns a popular destination for creative amateur scenario creators, and in turn keep players coming back to play more for months or years to come. ♦

Jake Armitage was the main character of the SNES Shadowrun game, and he'll return as a major NPC in the new game



"You can construct environments using all the pieces we've got in the game. It's exactly the same level editor we're using to make the game." – Jordan Weisman

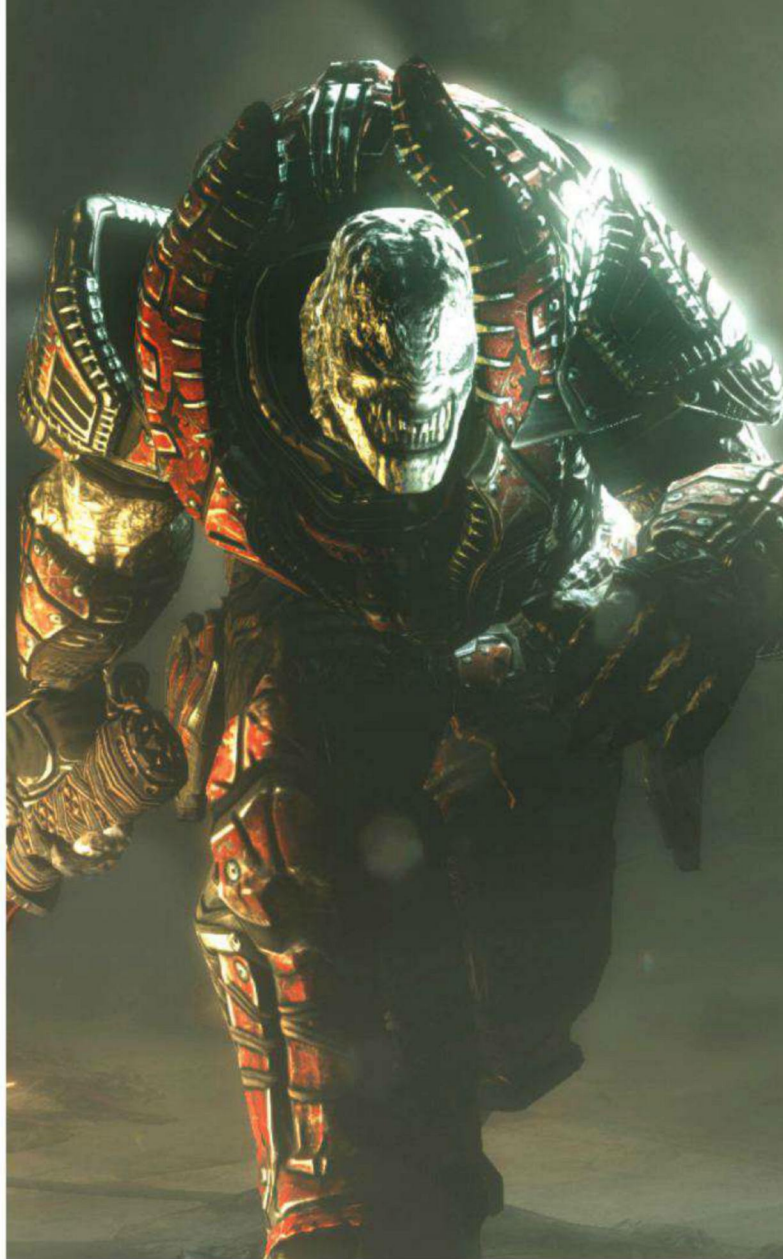
Since it's a role-playing game, how are conversations handled?

Harebrained Schemes is exploring an innovative hybrid of traditional dialogue trees with an injection of old school keyword conversations; if the idea works, it will add a true layer of investigation gameplay into the mix.

In addition to choosing basic responses and questions with non-player characters, the NPCs sometimes ask you questions.

"There's a short ad-lib sentence constructor," Weisman says. "Instead of asking questions using keywords [like in the old SNES game], you use keywords in the answering of questions that NPCs give you. We use this as a way to solve things, like a detective, and you need to be able to construct a motivation or draw a line of causation." These keywords are gathered during your investigations, and deliver that gumshoe thrill without overwhelming the player in a complicated system of disconnected clues. "We believe that it allows the player to make that intuitive leap," Weisman says.





Gears of War: Judgment

The Locust's new big bad guy gets a name

» **Platform**
Xbox 360

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

» **Publisher**
Microsoft

» **Developer**
Epic Games

» **Release**
March 19

Epic has revealed more on the Gears of War prequel since our July 2012 cover story. The developer shared details on new story developments, weapons, the main antagonist, and more. We also asked how the departure of key Epic Games employees over the last few months has affected the game's development. » **Tim Turi**

PADUK'S TESTIMONEY

In Judgment's campaign each character takes turns testifying before Colonel Loomis, who's charging Kilo Squad for desertion, defying orders, and so on. In a recent preview event, Epic showed former Union of Independent Republics (UIR) soldier Garron Paduk take his turn. Paduk wants revenge on Karn for wiping out his people. He knows who the antagonist is, and taking him out is his sole purpose for joining the COG forces.

Kilo Squad travels to a huge mansion on a

hunt for codes that can be used to activate a weapon powerful enough to destroy Karn. Along the way they use the estate's automated defenses to fend off waves of Locust. These defense scenarios play out like brief Horde matches, allowing players to place turrets that can fire bullets, shotgun shells, and flames. The mission concludes with a tense battle against a rampaging Berserker. With no Hammer of Dawn available, Kilo Squad must wear down the juggernaut with the mansion's available fortifications.

MORE ON MULTIPLAYER

Epic announced two new maps and confirmed Domination mode for Judgment.

Domination

Domination is a five-on-five mode where two teams struggle to control three rings. Judgment's increased focus on verticality in maps, the ability to walk off ledges, and increased game speed change the pace of this classic multiplayer mode. Expect Domination and the rest of Judgment's multiplayer to feel snappier and more exciting than past iterations.

Streets



This new Team Deathmatch and Domination map is set in Halvo Bay, where parts of the single-player story take place. Nighttime has fallen in the back alleys of this industrial area, creating an ominous atmosphere perfect for frenzied fights. Players weave through a butcher's shop, auto-repair garage, and hidden shortcuts in this close-quarters map.

Junkyard



This new map is for OverRun mode, Judgment's five-on-five fusion of Horde and Beast mode. Windows can be shot out and leapt through as COG soldiers fight to protect three objectives. A trash compactor can be activated to close off a hidden passageway, stemming the Locust's push to open sealed E-Holes.

KINK IN THE COGS?

We asked producer Chris Wynn how the departure of series creator Cliff Bleszinski, producer Rod Fergusson, and People Can Fly founder Adrian Chmielarz has affected Gears of War: Judgment.

"Losing good people is always felt," he says. "Luckily, there's so much experience at Epic and there's such a big team behind it that there are people all around that can step up and fill in. That's happened both here and at People Can Fly. Also the stage of project, all the heavy lifting and design and all that stuff was pretty well defined and wrapped up by the time those guys left. It was more about using our experience, knowledge, and talent to take it that final mile. We have all the best people that we can assemble on both sides focusing one-hundred percent to make sure the game is great."

WAR RELICS

MARKZA



Meet the workhorse of the UIR (the forces battling the COGs before the Locust attack). The MARKZA is a semi-automatic rifle with a 10-round magazine and scope. The gun is most effective for mid-range encounters.

Breechshot



The Breechshot is a MARKZA that's been repurposed by the Locust into a precise bolt-action rifle. What the Breechshot lacks in fire rate it makes up for with power. The scope is replaced with a bottom-mounted blade.

Booshka

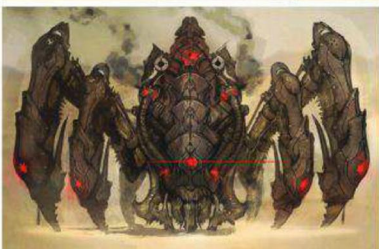


Another UIR weapon that the Locust made their own. The Booshka is an incredibly powerful grenade launcher with a three-round magazine. Once shot, grenades bounce around the vicinity and explode on contact.



Meet Karn

With RAAM not yet in the picture, Karn is your primary target in Judgment. This ugly Locust is the reason Baird and his crew are standing trial to begin with. Karn initially ravaged Garron Paduk and the rest of the UIR before he joined the COG army, fueling his rage against the monster. Baird also becomes filled with bloodlust, directly defying superiors' orders to track down and kill Karn.



Introducing the Rager

The Rager is a Locust type never before seen. Hear us out before you start blathering about the paradoxical issues of having a new enemy type in a prequel. The Rager blasts away at players using the Breechshot just outside melee range. Dealing enough damage to him forces him into a bloodthirsty rage. Berserk Ragers mindlessly charge into the fray, swinging away with the Breechshot's stock-mounted blade. Ragers died out early on in the Locust war thanks to their reckless battle strategies.



◀ Rager before transition...

...and after ▶

Crysis 3

Dressed to kill, Prophet returns to New York City



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

» **Style**
1-Player Shooter
(PS3, Xbox 360:
12-Player Online)
(PC: 16-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Electronic Arts

» **Developer**
Crytek

» **Release**
February 19

When you're wearing a nanosuit that grants superhuman strength, increased speed, enhanced armor, and momentary cloaking, stumbling upon a legion of armed infantry doesn't get your heart racing as much as it would in a typical shooter. The Crysis series needs to endow its enemies with the savvy to coordinate attacks, or players would just steamroll these punks like a Jedi toying with stormtroopers. The C.E.L.L. enemies in Crysis 2 didn't always pass the intelligence test, so in my first in-depth hands-on session with Crysis 3 I wanted to see if these soldiers offered any additional resistance.

The demo drops me into an abandoned MTA service station. Prophet is on the way to rendezvous with Warhead protagonist Psycho and a patrol of C.E.L.L. operatives stands between us. Before opening fire, I activate the tactical visor to mark the troops. This micro-sandbox features elevated catwalks, several train cars to take cover in, and a few water-filled passageways underneath the tracks – plenty of

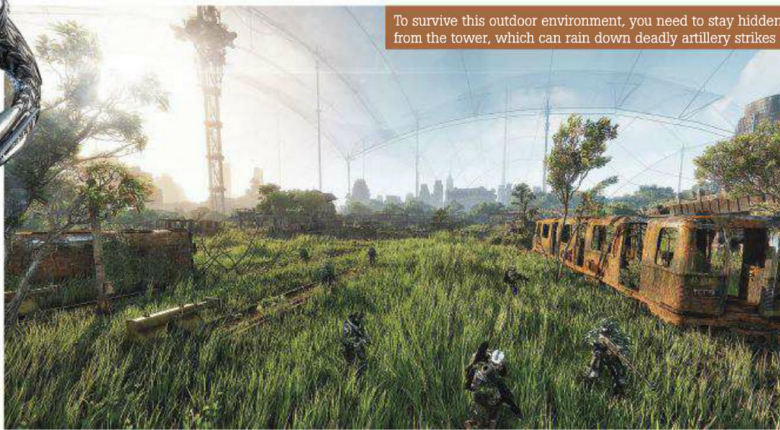
variety to support several different approaches. I typically adopt a Predator tactic – staying cloaked and picking off enemies one by one – but this time I toss a grenade between two soldiers to see how they respond. They scramble to get out of the way, but not before the shards incapacitate them.

The other soldiers in the area go into high alert, with several of the ground forces moving carefully toward my perceived location as those in elevated positions scan the environment. Not everyone rushes in at once; many take cover right outside the room I'm in, while others position themselves around the flanks. A few brave souls enter the building and walk into the crosshairs of my shotgun. I take them out and move back upstairs, turning on enhanced armor and dropping in behind the enemies positioned outside the lower level. These soldiers don't last long, but the concentrated fire from two turrets positioned on the walkway and several C.E.L.L. soldiers stationed strategically behind cover make quick work of me. Clearly, I need a better plan.

For my second attempt I take the opposite approach, using the nanosuit's cloaking to move undetected into better positions. I take down a few isolated soldiers with the compound bow and flank behind the two turrets. Using the new hacking functionality, I recruit the first turret to my cause. It opens fire on the unsuspecting C.E.L.L. soldiers, and while they try to subdue it I carefully pick off peripheral baddies with the bow. One enemy spots me and attempts to throw a grenade my direction, but it ricochets off the door of the subway car he's hiding in and lands at his feet – I'm guessing he didn't graduate at the head of the class. Before too long, all the threats are pacified. They never knew what hit them.

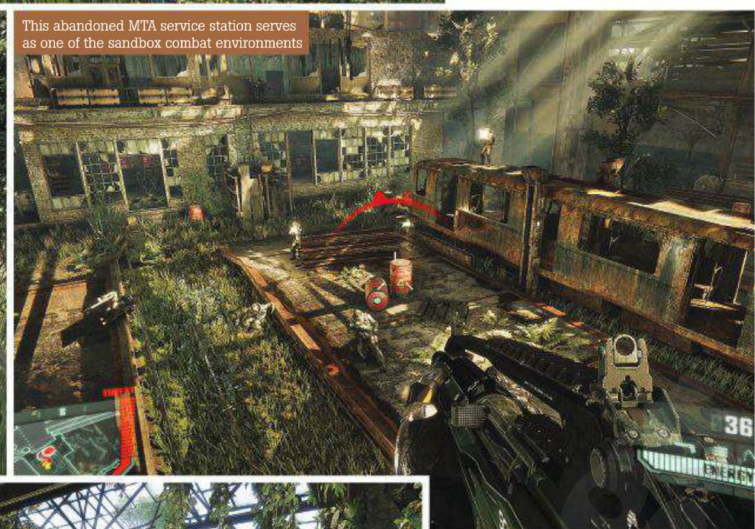
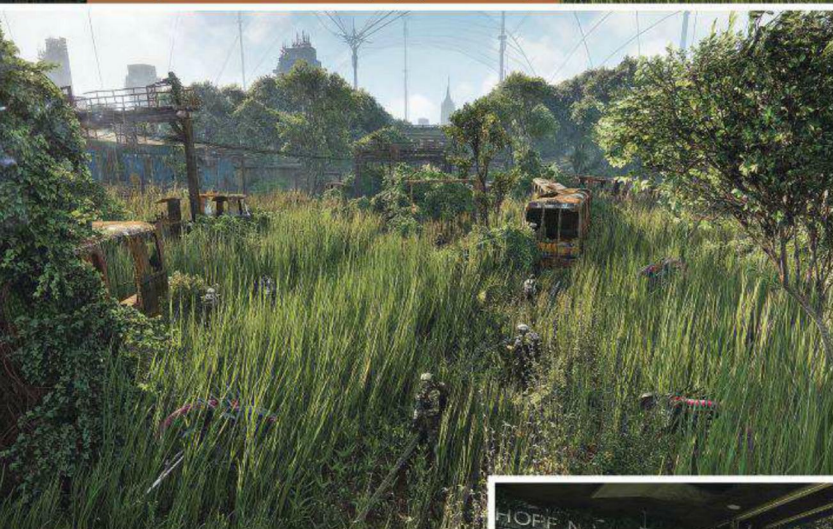
Taking a zipline out of the warehouse, I emerge into an open train yard of overgrown grass to face a new kind of threat. This grassy plain shows off the considerable power of CryEngine 3 – I've never seen foliage this dense or accurately rendered. Before venturing into the grass I see a Ceph Stalker speed past a rusting train car. Activating tactical vision gives me an idea of where the enemy is, but unlike C.E.L.L. soldiers, the Ceph don't stay marked. I silently take out a couple Stalkers with the compound bow, and then journey into the thicket.

The grass is so high you can't see Ceph coming at you until it's too late, so I activate the armor and make a run for high ground. Hearing these fast-paced aliens bustling through the grass nearby makes my pulse quicken. Sprinting no longer drains your suit's power in Crysis 3, and I need that energy to absorb the surprise melee attack from a Ceph Stalker. After frantically dispatching a few swarming Stalkers with up-close headshots, I reach the elevated





Something tells me there aren't a lot of outgoing flights from this airport

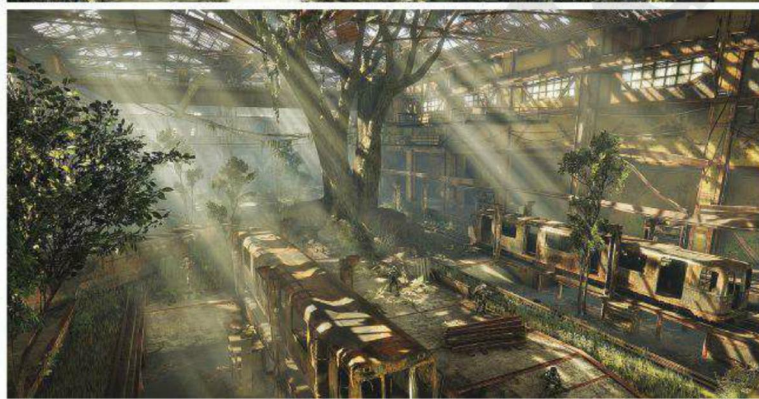
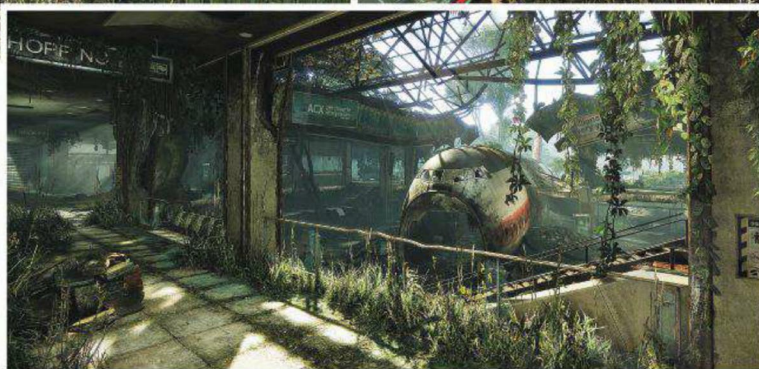


This abandoned MTA service station serves as one of the sandbox combat environments

position where Psycho is waiting.

Psycho looks different than the last time we saw him. For starters, he doesn't have a nanosuit. Wearing a faded jean jacket decorated with a Union Jack, he's dressed more like a punk rocker than an elite Special Forces soldier. With no time to ponder his new look, I take a defensive position on a nearby turret and pick off the Ceph as they dart quickly toward us. The C.E.L.L. eventually spots the Ceph threat as well, calling in air support to take them down. While the Ceph scramble, Psycho and I jump on a train and crash through the wall blocking our path to the rebel position.

The demo comes to a close with an explosive cutscene involving a train crash and an armored vehicle, and I'm left with conflicting impressions on the AI. Though the C.E.L.L. soldiers seem prepared for head-to-head firefights, they still need some training on how to properly throw a grenade or track a cloaked enemy. On the other hand, I fear and respect the deadly Ceph Stalkers. I look forward to facing off against them once again when the game releases on February 19. » **Matt Bertz**

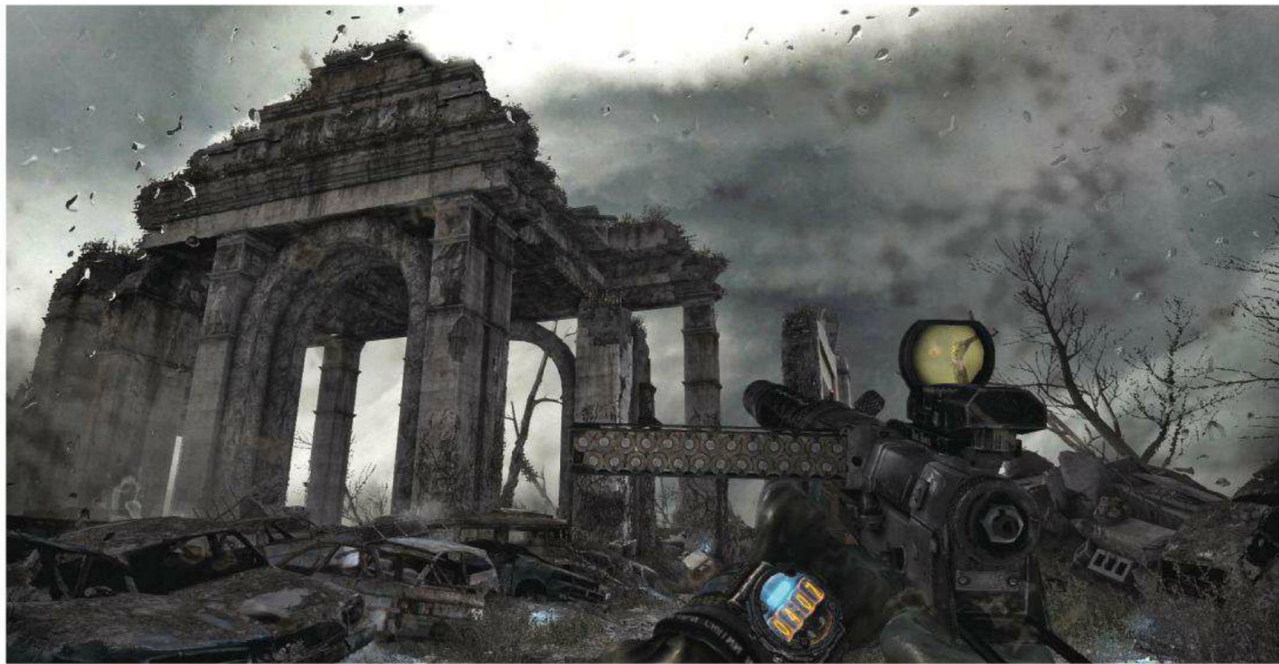


The Story So Far

Our hands-on demo takes place in the second level of the game, right after a group of rebels free Prophet from captivity. While imprisoned for the last 20 years, Prophet kept seeing visions of an apocalypse brought on by the Ceph. The rebels busted him out of prison because they believe he is the key to defeating the C.E.L.L., which they view as a totalitarian mega-corporation hell bent on world domination. To accomplish both goals, Prophet enters the Liberty Dome, the vast structure covering New York City built to quarantine the Ceph. Along the way, Prophet receives help from rebel operative named Claire Fontanelli and his former squad mate Psycho.

Metro: Last Light

The Dark Ones return



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

» **Style**
1-Player Shooter

» **Publisher**
THQ

» **Developer**
4A Games

» **Release**
March

At the canonical end of Metro 2033, the hesitant hero Artyom ends the threat posed by the mutant Dark Ones with a devastating missile strike. But rather than revel in his accomplishment, he contemplates whether eradicating the mysterious race was the right decision. In the opening moments of Metro: Last Light, the wandering philosopher Khan fuels this skepticism when he informs Artyom that he's seen a living Dark One in the same garden where they made their last stand.

Miller, the leader of the Spartan Order to which Artyom belongs, isn't interested in opening diplomatic talks with the sentient being. He orders Artyom to return to the garden and eradicate it. Knowing Khan is urging Artyom to establish communication with the being, Miller sends along his best sniper to make sure the

job gets done.

After outfitting their gas masks to prepare for the unwelcoming atmosphere above ground, the sniper and I start casing the environment. A few mutated beasts, known as watchers, attack on site, but the sniper and I take them out with ease. Journeying into a small ravine, I spot the Dark One. A chase ensues, and I eventually wrestle it to the ground. Upon touching the Dark One, Artyom experiences a vision of the mutants gathered around a pillar with Artyom standing above them all.

He awakens from this dream state to find himself in Nazi captivity alongside three other men who wandered into a bad situation. As one of the men pleads to be let free, the commanding officer orders a soldier to measure his head to determine whether or not he's a mutant. When the man fails the ethnic purity test, the

Nazi nonchalantly puts a bullet in his head.

The second prisoner, a Red Line communist, is executed as well. Before the Nazi can turn the gun on Artyom, the other Red Line captive boldly triggers a series of events that ends with he and Artyom out of shackles and two dead Nazis on the ground.

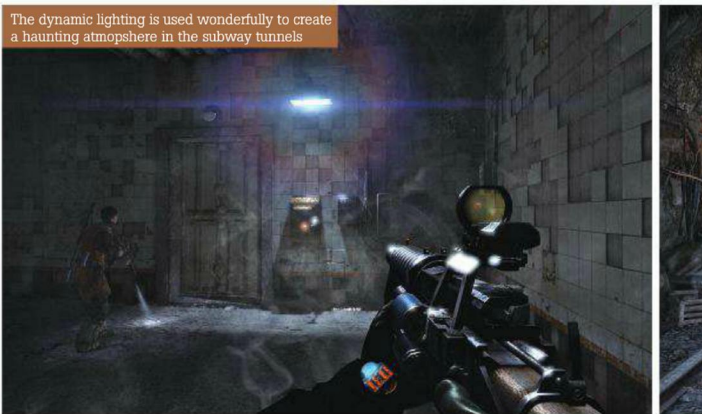
The survivors introduce themselves – the Red Liner is named Pavel – and they vow to work together to escape the concentration camp. The getaway involves staying in the shadows while climbing up a cylindrical tower, walking straight through a crowd of Nazis feverishly rooting for a vitriolic speaker, and dashing frantically out the front door when their cover is blown. When they approach another Nazi outpost in the subway tunnels, they are briefly separated and Pavel is captured. Rather than leaving him to rot, Artyom vows to return the favor and free him.

"A" for Atmosphere

Having worked on both S.T.A.L.K.E.R. and Metro, the development team at 4A Games knows how to cultivate a striking atmosphere. Using an enhanced lighting engine, the studio has expertly crafted foreboding environments in Last Light. With underground refuges filled with resilient survivors, a barren post-apocalyptic countryside, and haunting, darkened subway lines filled with unknown dangers, the world of Metro: Last Light begs to be explored.



The dynamic lighting is used wonderfully to create a haunting atmosphere in the subway tunnels



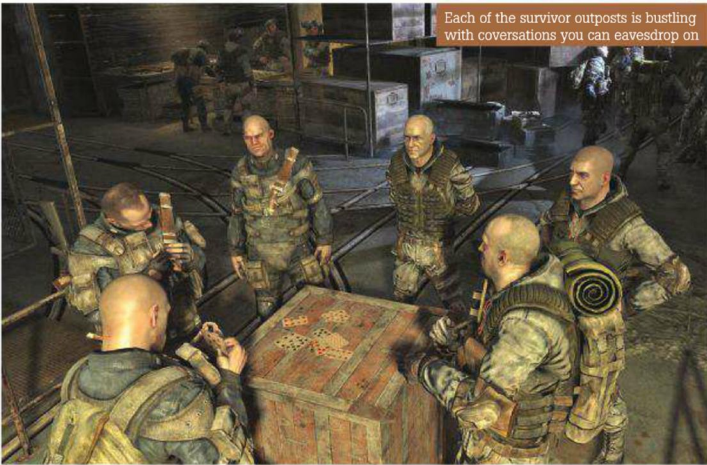


The only way to kill these spiders is by shooting their underbellies

Staring Down the Sights

Metro 2033 won praise for its story and sense of atmosphere, but the gunplay was rough around the edges. To bring the combat to the next level, 4A Games has streamlined the controls to feel more in line with contemporary shooters without abandoning the elements that made the game unique. Enemies are still extremely dangerous and ammo is scarce, but the improved shooting mechanics and health system give you a better chance of surviving firefights. Headshots are appropriately lethal, and the new reticle informs you of how much damage your bullets are doing if you shoot an enemy's flesh or armor.

Though the shooting feels more intuitive and accessible, it doesn't come at the cost of depth. Artyom still has to recharge his flashlights by hand, pump his pneumatic weapons, and monitor the filter level on his gas mask. All of these functions are housed in the two radial menus tied to the left and right bumpers.



Each of the survivor outposts is bustling with conversations you can eavesdrop on



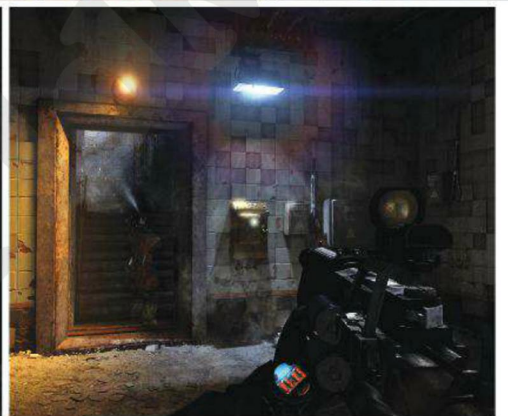
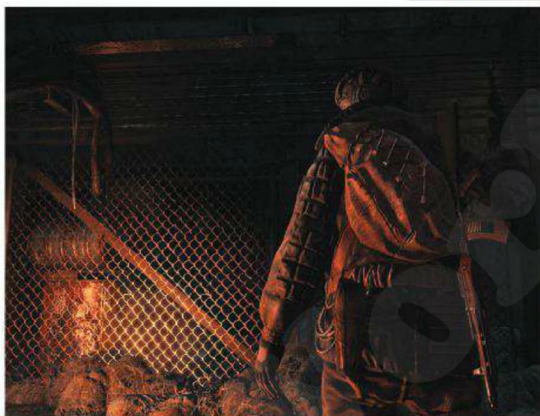
The rescue sequence plays out much like the micro-sandboxes found in Metro 2033. The Nazi outpost is built to give you several combat options. You can stealthily sneak up to guards and take them down silently with melee attacks, or run through the outpost with your finger on the trigger. Artyom reaches Pavel just before he is about to meet his demise.

Pavel offers his undying gratitude for the rescue, and agrees to lead Artyom to Theatr, a Red Line outpost near the Spartan headquarters. Along the way the duo enters a seldom-used catacomb filled with deadly mutant spiders with armored exoskeletons. To subdue these arachnids, Artyom must use a flashlight to drive them away and then shoot them in their exposed torsos. Arriving back on the surface, the duo walks through the remnants of a jumbo jet. This triggers a visceral flashback of the

passenger plane going down in the midst of the nuclear explosion that wiped out Russia. Both Pavel and Artyom are shaken by the vision, but with the Theatr only a couple minutes away they forge ahead.

Pavel vouches for Artyom at the gates, and finally they have a chance to decompress after the tense escape sequence. Artyom catches a show of dancing girls, eavesdrops on conversations between the Red Line survivors, and sits down for a drink with Pavel before we go our separate ways. This is only a short respite. Soon, Artyom must head back to Spartan headquarters to face the repercussions of failing his mission and report that the Nazis have the Dark One in captivity and plan to invade the well-stocked D-6 military base the Spartans uncovered in 2033. His journey of atonement is just beginning. » **Matt Bertz**

While trying to track down the Dark One, Artyom is captured by the Nazi faction





Rayman Legends

Moving with the rhythm

» **Platform**
Wii U

» **Style**
1 to 5-Player
Platforming

» **Publisher**
Ubisoft

» **Developer**
Ubisoft
Montpellier

» **Release**
February 26

Rayman Legends stands out among the Wii U's early releases. Super Mario Bros. U gave us classic Nintendo platforming, but Legends looks like it could offer us an experience that truly cannot be created on competing systems.

Ubisoft took us through a handful of levels, and along the way I performed traditional platforming, used the GamePad to perform some touch and motion-controlled feats, and jumped and punched to the rhythm. The rhythm-based levels are the early highlight of the game, and the part I am most excited to experience in the finished product.

I played two of the rhythm levels, one with original orchestrated music, and another with a Rayman-themed cover of the Ram Jam song "Black Betty." Ubisoft promises at least four more licensed songs, but isn't ready to reveal them. These play more like the high-speed levels from Rayman Origins where you chase the chests, but the difficulty is scaled back and every attack and jump corresponds with the music playing behind the action. You are at a full sprint throughout the level, and it is fantastic.

Ubisoft typically ports Rayman games to other platforms, but not Legends. The reason is Murphy, a character controlled by the GamePad. He is always available to help out in cooperative play, but roughly 10 percent of these levels require his presence. If you are playing with a partner, the second player performs the normal platforming antics while

the first player takes on the role of Murphy, distracting enemies, cutting hanging objects to create platforms using the touchscreen, and sometimes physically rotating the GamePad to create paths. If you are playing by yourself and you run into a Murphy-required sequence, AI takes control of the platforming character while you tackle the GamePad tasks. In my experience, the AI character didn't give me any problems. He even went into secret areas that I may have missed otherwise.

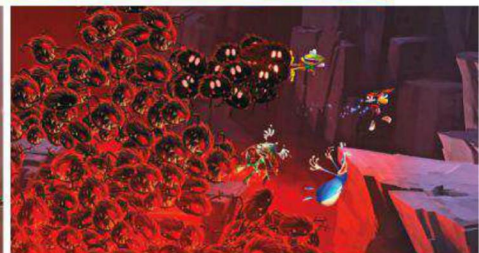
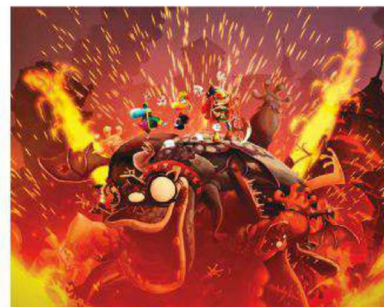
In a Greek-themed level littered with pillars and statues, the hand of Zeus reaches down from the top of the screen and begins shooting lightning bolts downward. Murphy must grab a shield and provide overhead coverage for the platforming character below. When I arrive at a gap that was too wide to jump, the platformer jumps on the shield Murphy is holding to cross the gap.

Rayman Origins focused on collecting Lums, the yellow smiling collectibles with wings and arms, but no feet. Lums still play a major role as part of your completionist goals in Legends, but the main objective is to save the Teensies, the species that made up the rest of your four-player party in Rayman Origins. Each level has 10 Teensies. Some are out in the open, others are hidden, and you want to collect as many as you can. You can still finish a level without collecting them all, but you need them to unlock new levels.

The small side quests hidden in each level are much more diverse this time around. In one

level, I try to kick a soccer ball at a cage with a Teensie inside. In another, Murphy rotates a maze to help Rayman get to the middle. Separate, challenge-focused levels change the format dramatically. In the one I experienced, I had two minutes to collect 200 Lums in a stage that was constantly changing its layout and obstacles.

Every time I spend time with Rayman Legends, it pains me to put the controller down. The game looks and plays spectacularly, and the GamePad implementation seems practical rather than gimmicky. It affords players a more diverse gameplay experience than something like the Boost Mode featured in New Super Mario Bros. U, without interrupting the high-speed platforming that Rayman does so well. I can't wait to see more of the rhythm levels, and find out what other licensed music Ubisoft is procuring. » **Kyle Hilliard**





Sniper: Ghost Warrior 2

Snipers don't inhale

When I saw Sniper: Ghost Warrior 2 at the last E3, it was in rough shape. Environmental structures disappeared before my eyes, and it had a last-generation look. Everything pointed to a repeat of the first game, which received abysmally low review scores thanks to its repetitive missions, all-seeing enemy AI, and technical issues. City Interactive has a lot to prove with this follow-up, and thankfully its second showing was much better.

Ghost Warrior 2 puts you in the shoes of Anderson, a soldier tasked with single-handedly preventing a bioterrorist attack. It's a cliché in the world of military shooters, but it allows for varied environments as you chase your enemy across the globe. In my demo I saw jungle environments from the first act of the game and urban environments from second act.

Sniper: Ghost Warrior 2 is built with CryEngine 3, the same toolset used on the gorgeous Crysis 2 and 3. Ghost Warrior 2 doesn't look as sharp as the Crytek games, but City Interactive is using the engine's considerable might to bring the world to life.

As I crawl through the thick foliage making my way up to a worthwhile sniping position, the first thing I notice is how realistically it moves and shuffles. Video games often repeat one plant animation to simulate the movement of brush, but here large leaves fold and react as I move through them.

As I make it up to the perch, creative

producer Michael Sroczynski walks me through a number of important details. The onscreen heart and lung capacity monitors affect my ability to make precise shots. I need to hold my breath to take a shot, and if I have been sprinting my heart rate rises and my lung capacity lowers, making it harder to pull off clean kills. If I pull the trigger too hard and fast, my shot could also go off mark. To get the best shot I need to take my time, stop breathing heavily, and gently pull the trigger. After a successful shot, I watch the enemy smoking a cigarette at the end of the dock collapse into the water.

Sroczynski and his team worked with professional snipers to avoid incorrect portrayals of the skill. In the world of video games, aiming for the head is the only sure way to pull off a fatal shot, but real snipers aim for the torso. It's a larger target with less room for error, and just as fatal. In Sniper: Ghost Warrior 2, torso shots are just as good as head shots. Holding your breath to fire a shot is nothing new in video games, but Sroczynski's snipers scoff at other video games where your character inhales before holding their breath. Real snipers don't inhale, they just stop breathing. Little details like these are littered throughout the game.

Regardless of which difficulty setting you choose, the enemy AI is the same. Instead of making the targets less intelligent, the casual difficulty automatically factors in bullet drop over long distances and wind direction,

and clearly marks enemies and stealth approaches on your map. On the higher difficulties, the game stops holding your hand and makes you take the bullet drop and wind into account. You also have to be much more aware of your surroundings, as the map does not offer much help.

When I wasn't looking down the barrel of a scope high above a group of enemies, Sniper: Ghost Warrior 2 plays like a stealth game. In one scenario, I crawl through a parking garage, sneaking up behind enemies to perform stealth kills with my knife. After killing my targets I disable an electrical fuse to turn off the lights, which allows me to sprint away under the cover of darkness. Before taking this approach I tried to engage in a Call of Duty-style open firefight with the soldiers in the garage, but they killed me immediately. If you don't create a healthy distance between yourself and enemies in these circumstances, there is a high probability you will die.

Sniper: Ghost Warrior 2 is not meant to be a sandbox game. The focus is sniping, so levels are designed to place you in the best sniping scenarios. Even in the more action-oriented sequences where situations quickly escalate and your heart rate jumps, the game puts you in a position where your best chance at survival is from behind the scope. We'll see if this approach redeems the series when the game comes out this spring. » **Kyle Hilliard**

- » **Platform**
Wii U • Xbox 360
PlayStation 3 • PC
- » **Style**
1-Player Shooter
(Online TBA)
- » **Publisher**
City Interactive
- » **Developer**
City Interactive
- » **Release**
Spring

Ghost Warrior 2 has competitive online multiplayer, but when I pressed producer Sroczynski for more details, he stayed silent





Fire Emblem: Awakening

Firing back strong

» **Platform**
Nintendo 3DS

» **Style**
1-Player Strategy

» **Publisher**
Nintendo

» **Developer**
Intelligent Systems

» **Release**
February 4

The last time we received a Fire Emblem title in the U.S. was the Shadow Dragon remake in 2008. In the past, new entries spun out every year or two, making this wait tougher to take, especially considering how the series has defined strategy/RPGs with its depth and the consequence of permadeath. After spending over two hours with the latest entry, *Awakening*, I'm impressed. One minute you're strategizing to get the best item and experience boosts; the next, sweat forms across your forehead while a squadmate's health dwindles – will this battle be their last? *Fire Emblem: Awakening* sticks to its roots, but then ups the ante with new features and endless content.

Awakening begins with a gorgeous cutscene – think *Valkyria Chronicles*' art style with a 3D enhancement. But this scene isn't just a striking visual; it takes a dark turn as you murder your companion while the villainous Validar taunts that you can't change fate. The moment is jarring, but then comes a curveball. Your customized protagonist awakens in a field and meets the man he just murdered – Chrom. How you got here isn't the only mystery. You have amnesia, and what's going on in the present isn't pretty. Mysterious creatures called Risen are literally falling out of the sky as armies are invading Chrom's land. You don't need visions to

foresee a lot of battles in the future.

Combat is similar to most tactical RPGs – grid and turn-based combat with unique character classes. *Fire Emblem* provides many more elements to consider, though. It still follows the series rock-paper-scissors model for weapons, where swords are advantageous against axes, lances best swords, and axes defeat lances. Placement matters, as units next to one another give bonuses, such as increasing evasion or hit chance. Two characters can also stack atop one another, increasing a couple of their stats, like strength and defense. The only drawback is that although you create one super-powered combatant, the other doesn't get the experience perks. The battlefield also features glowing squares. Place units there, and extra experience, weapon proficiency, or new items await.

Relationship building remains a large part of *Fire Emblem*. After missions, you can pair two allies together for "support conversations." These scenes offer insight and backstory on each character, and also affect their battle chemistry, making certain perks more likely. The vast amount of people I encountered all had intriguing personalities; none felt generic or throwaway. I began to look forward to support conversations because I never knew what was coming. In one scenario, a character creates racy posters of Chrom to inspire others to

join the army. If you sufficiently build your relationship with a paramour, it opens up an option to marry them. Eventually you can even have a child that will one day fight beside you.

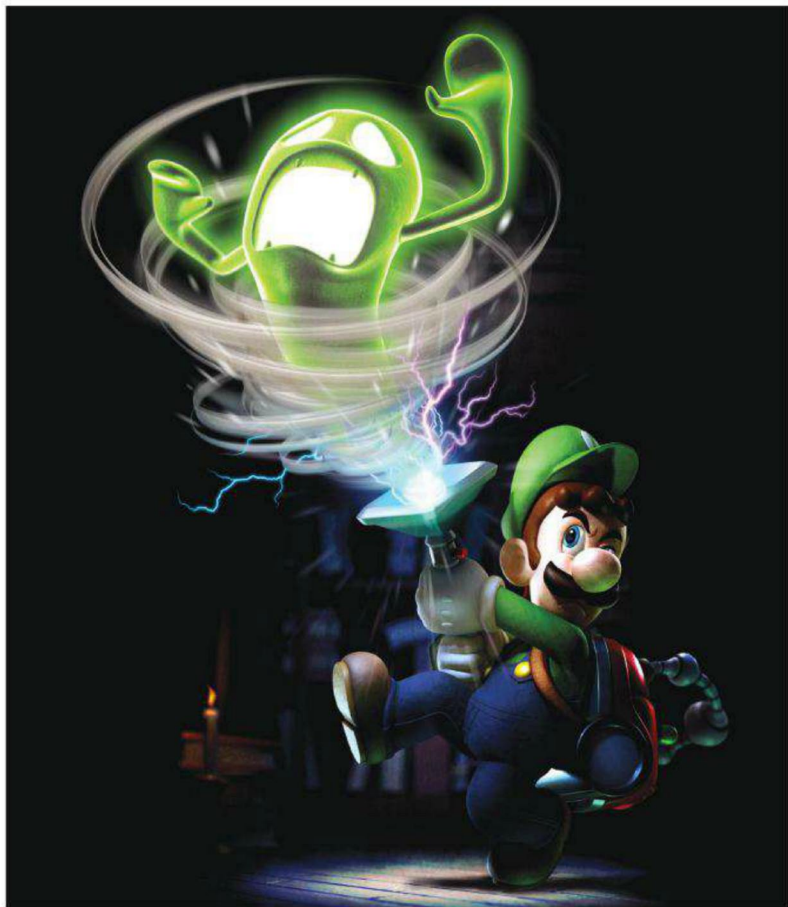
Awakening also has side missions, optional random battles on the world map for leveling up, and fun *StreetPass* features. If you *StreetPass* with someone, you have the option to buy an item they own or purchase their character to put in your party. This is great if you're looking for a stronger ally or just want to see your friends' customized avatar battle beside you. Nintendo also promises future *Awakening* downloadable content for U.S. audiences. The Japan release had plenty, including fan-favorite characters usable as party members.

Seeing *Fire Emblem* return is amazing, but I wasn't expecting to love the game from the start as much as I did. *Awakening* is one game strategy/RPG fans should not overlook. If you're afraid of permadeath, it can be disabled, but I advise you don't. Growing attached to your units while you worry about their lives makes every decision matter that much more. » **Kimberly Wallace**



Luigi's Mansion: Dark Moon

This bad omen is good news for the 3DS



Mario's little brother, Luigi, has bad luck with shadows. When he's not standing in his older brother's, he's jumping at the sight of his own in haunted houses. Luigi's Mansion: Dark Moon continues the green ghostbuster's GameCube quest on the 3DS. Over a decade has passed since the first paranormal incident, and the sequel features even more environmental variety, ghost types, and gizmos to keep gamers' favorite underdog busy.

The core of Luigi's Mansion remains intact. Players explore haunted mansions while inspecting items in the environment to scare up money, keys, and ghosts. Once a specter appears, the player stuns it with his or her flashlight and wrangles it with Luigi's fancy vacuum. Sucking up ghosts and unlocking doors lets you explore more of the spooky mansion.

Dark Moon deviates from its GameCube predecessor on multiple fronts. Instead of exploring one vast mansion, Luigi and Professor E. Gadd manage things from the safety of their bunker. Gameplay is segmented into a series of missions, making the portable title better suited for shorter play sessions. E. Gadd can even warp Luigi to a mansion remotely. I saw five spots on the world map, though the final number is unconfirmed.

The first mansion I visit is Gloomy Manor. After acquainting myself with the basics, I tackle a number of quests, oftentimes being introduced a new gameplay mechanic along the way. Luigi can now charge his flashlight to unleash a wide beam burst, stunning more ghosts at once. He can also unlock special passages by acquiring specific light bulbs and scan for hidden doors and other anomalies with another.

My favorite new ghost-busting mechanic involves the cleansing power of fire. Several missions task Luigi with clearing the mansion of pesky spiders and their unsightly cobwebs. Smaller webs can be sucked up with the vacuum, but larger ones must be burned. Luigi can suck up large spider eggs, light them on fire with candles in the environment, and then set doorway-blocking webs ablaze. Gloomy Manor concludes with a clever, multi-stage boss battle against a huge, possessed spider. This satisfying fight forces players to put all their new skills to the test in classic Nintendo fashion.

I also got a glimpse of the second mansion, Haunted Towers. This second phantom-infested estate is overgrown with carnivorous plants and greedy flowers that drop their goodies after a full flashlight charge. A group of ghosts carrying shovels attack Luigi in a greenhouse, blocking their eyes from his flashlight with the gardening tool. Two hungry flytrap-like plants require the timid hero to clear the way with only his vacuum and some prickly fruit. The first mission concludes with Luigi putting his plumbing skills to work by reactivating a hydroelectric generator, but an obese ghost creeps its way down the pipes before Luigi can reunite with E. Gadd.

The ghost-capturing gameplay works well on the hardware and the colorful graphics look sharp on the 3DS' screen. Luigi's Mansion: Dark Moon is shaping up to be a charming reason to own a 3DS. » **Tim Turi**

» **Platform**
3DS
» **Style**
1-Player Action
» **Publisher**
Nintendo
» **Developer**
Next Level Games
» **Release**
Spring





Company of Heroes 2

Charting a strategy through Relic's war

» **Platform**
PC

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

» **Publisher**
THQ

» **Developer**
Relic Entertainment

» **Release**
2013

The Eastern Front was the most gruesome theater of World War II. From the summer of 1941 through August of 1945, Nazi Germany pushed up against the Soviet Union in one of the largest military confrontations in history, resulting in over 14 million military casualties. The sequel to Relic Entertainment's exceptional WWII strategy game shines a spotlight on the wholesale destruction that took place along these frozen borders. Surviving this chaos is no easy task, but we held the line through several online multiplayer matches and walked away with a few tips to help you outwit the enemy. » **Ben Reeves**

Choose Your Sides Wisely

Company of Heroes 2 lets you play as either the Soviet Red Army or the German Ostheer. Each side has its strengths, but mastering battle tactics requires that you understand the weaknesses of each side. Generally speaking, the Russians have more numerous infantry and plenty of firepower. The Katyusha rocket artillery, for example, is capable of dishing out several football fields' worth of destruction. The Germans don't have the masses of expendable soldiers, but they do have highly trained infantry and a strong anti-tank force that makes them more versatile and cunning on the battlefield.

Stay Warm

Relic's new weather system significantly

impacted my winter strategy. Infantry doesn't last long in the cold before their health declines, and deep snow greatly slows their movement. The cold is almost a greater threat to vehicles, however, since it prevents aircraft from engaging their targets. Tanks resting atop frozen lakes are a tempting target, since the ice beneath them can be attacked, sending millions of dollars worth of military might to a frozen grave. Learn to use the weather to your advantage by luring your enemies out on the ice, and following tracks in the snow to discern their placement.

Keep An Eye In The Sky

Scouting is extremely important in Company Of Heroes 2. Relic's new Truesight technology mimics a more realistic view of the battlefield. Unlike the original Company of Heroes, you won't always have a 360-degree view of your troops surroundings. This realistic line of sight means that a brick wall obscures a few troops', while a forest might obscure an entire squadron. Send your fastest vehicles on scouting missions, be careful not to blindly march your army into unmapped sections of the battlefield, and learn to lay ambushes for your opponents by taking advantage of cover-dense areas.

Be Resourceful

In the first Company of Heroes, you captured points that were associated with specific resources – ammo and fuel. In Company

of Heroes 2, you can choose the kind of resource a point provides after you capture it. Instead of battling tooth and claw over a few key resource points, I had more freedom to strategically battle over different sections of the map. Your opponent might have the southern end of the Pripyat River on lockdown, but chances are that some point of the frontline is weak. Seek out that resource point and make it yours.

Prep Reinforcements

Even if your foe takes out your machine gunner, your equipment isn't lost. Missing or abandoned tanks and heavy artillery can be reclaimed if they aren't destroyed. This is cheaper than building new war machines from scratch. Inversely, you may want to use downed enemy tanks as bait for your opponent, laying mines and ambushing his troops when he comes to reclaim old equipment.

Keep Progressing

Regardless of whether you win or lose, you earn experience throughout single-player, competitive multiplayer, and co-op. This experience is applied to your profile, and as you level up you earn Battle Honors that reward you with various upgrades. Relic isn't ready to go in depth about this system, but it works similarly to Call of Duty's prestige system. This means you can unlock new perks for your units, as well as earn medals that are displayed on your multiplayer profile.

Europa Universalis IV

Write your own history book

The age of sail in Europe is one of history's most fascinating eras. Great colonial powers were born as ancient dynasties fell and nation-states arose from the chaos. These newly minted superpowers projected their influence half a world away as innovative navigational techniques and logistical methods opened ocean trade routes around the southern tip of Africa. Back home, land wars raged as old tensions and new disagreements

erupted into open conflict. This is the sandbox Europa Universalis IV presents to players. Take the reins of any political unit, from the Aragon insurgents in Spain to the Holy Roman Empire, and claw your way to a shining destiny through your own personal combination of force of arms, political manipulation, and economic might.

As in all of Paradox's internally developed strategy games, players have no goals other than what they set themselves. The game world is detailed down to individual royalty, and models a dizzying amount of systems: religious unrest, ethnic identities, tax rates, technological advancement, interpersonal feuds, and more. What you achieve is up to you, whether that's unifying Spain, expanding England's holdings in France, or turning Vienna into the dominant Mediterranean power.

While much of Europa's improvements over its predecessor are iterative, the remodeling of trade promises to reshape every aspect of strategy. Trade routes are built into the map, and consist of networks of linked nodes over land and sea. Each region in the game generates a certain amount of wealth, which flows along active trade networks and generates revenue for factions that have power over each node involved. Controlling an influential port now creates wealth for your

nation based on its trade value, rather than abstracting that concept to a flat income over time.

The trade network dynamically responds to the state of the world. Trade that previously flowed through the Middle East and Egypt before floating along the Mediterranean on European ships automatically diverts to the sea lanes once an intrepid power develops a functioning string of bases along the coast of Africa, for instance. In this way, the game loosely follows history (Portugal became an international power through shipping Indian trade around Africa) without direct objectives or set scenarios.

Europa Universalis IV is a massively complex game. Its unrivaled simulation aspects have the potential to create gaming experiences far more detailed and immersive than Civilization or Total War, even though it lacks those franchises' powerful presentations and exciting battles. The studio's last game, Crusader Kings II, single-handedly turned around the company's reputation for unfinished, buggy games and made the meticulously detailed sandboxes Paradox is known for accessible to a much wider audience. I haven't seen anything to imply that Europa Universalis IV isn't going to continue that trend. » **Adam Biessenner**

» **Platform**
PC

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

» **Publisher**
Paradox Interactive

» **Developer**
Paradox Development Studio

» **Release**
Fall



An advertisement for Full Sail University. On the left, a young woman with glasses and a ponytail is sitting at a desk, looking at a computer monitor. The background is a vibrant, stylized illustration of a futuristic or sci-fi world with various mechanical and organic forms. The text 'FULL SAIL UNIVERSITY' is at the top left. In the center, the phrase 'THE POWER TO CREATE' is written in large, bold, red, 3D block letters. Below this, there are three orange boxes with white text: 'DEGREE PROGRAMS IN:', 'Game Art', 'Game Development', and 'Game Design'. At the bottom right, there is a QR code and the phone number '800.226.7625' and the website 'fullsail.edu'. The bottom left corner contains contact information and a disclaimer.

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gameinformer
GAME OF THE MONTH

88 Devil May Cry

Dante returns in this compelling new vision for the Devil May Cry universe. Developer Ninja Theory uses this reboot to start at square one with the story, but the combat still steals the show. Amazing combos, stunning visuals, and smooth controls help restore this series as one of the best in the stylish action genre. This isn't exactly the Devil May Cry you may remember, but it makes an impression you won't forget.

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	Konami's professed non-relationship with Moby Dick Studio.

AWARDS

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



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Devil May Cry

This party's getting crazy! Again!

9

gameinformer
GAME OF THE MONTH

gameinformer
GOLD

Style 1-Player Action Publisher Capcom Developer Ninja Theory Release January 15 ESRB M

PS3 • 360

» Concept

Press reset on the series that kicked off a subgenre of stylish action

» Graphics

The artistic direction is great, presenting a creepy and surreal alternate universe

» Sound

The profanity-heavy dialogue tries too hard to be shocking, but the voice performances are especially good

» Playability

Everything flows together smoothly except for occasional targeting issues

» Entertainment

Fun, accessible combat hides enough depth to keep you coming back for more

» Replay Value

Moderately High

I've been a fan of the Devil May Cry series since its inception, and I don't care that Dante doesn't have white hair, or that his origin story has been retooled for this entry. I don't even care that he's fighting the demon king Mundus again; altering and revisiting key elements are expected in any reboot. Regardless of how characters and events change, Ninja Theory stays faithful to the heart and soul of the series with this reimagining – and that's what matters.

Stylish combat is the pillar supporting every other aspect in this incarnation of DMC. Wherever Dante goes or whatever new powers he gets, everything is focused on letting players tear through hordes of demons in entertaining ways. You start with Dante's signature sword and handguns, but your arsenal soon grows to rival previous titles in variety and complexity. By the end, you rapidly switch among weapons like a shotgun, axe, and scythe in order to keep the advancing enemies in check. The responsive, fast-paced battles require timing and precision, but cultivating those skills pays off. Stringing together elaborate multi-weapon combos to hit an SSS rank is extremely gratifying.

I'm impressed by the sheer variety of Dante's moveset. Three guns, two angelic weapons, two demonic weapons, and one sword have unique abilities that you purchase. Because some moves are more useful than others (I still love the Stinger/Trillion Stabs combo), you can refund any spent points at no cost, encouraging you to experiment with the possibilities. Thankfully, you get the grappling powers for free, and they add mobility to the battlefield in ways that combine the concepts behind Nero's Devil Bringer and Vergil's teleportation from previous installments.

As complicated as combat seems, it is surprisingly easy to control. Taking a page from its previous title, Heavenly Sword, Ninja Theory uses the shoulder buttons to shift between angelic and demonic weapons. I rarely found myself staying in one mode too long, opting instead to fire off a couple moves with one weapon before switching. One basic combo involves launching an enemy in the air from a distance (demon mode), then grappling and zooming toward it (angel mode), juggling it in the air with some scythe swings (angel), then slamming it to the ground to create an impact radius (demon). In practice, each move in that sequence only involves one trigger and one face button, resulting in rewarding (and visually stunning) displays of violence that you can direct with ease.

When Dante isn't fighting, he's traversing a bizarre and breathtaking world. Despite the modern-day setting, most of DMC's action takes place in Limbo, a dimension that exists parallel to reality. It sounds ridiculous, but this set-up serves as an excuse to put players in a surreal dreamscape where anything can happen. Streets break apart and crumble.



Where to Start?

Players can choose from three difficulty levels when starting Devil May Cry: human, devil hunter, and nephilim. If you've played through any previous game in the series, the first two options are too easy. Nephilim offers a reasonable challenge without constantly pushing your skills to the limit. If you change your mind, you can always switch difficulty for any mission you've unlocked. Your first playthrough should be fun; plenty of post-game difficulty modes open up if you're looking for a more brutal experience.

Gravity inverts. Buildings constrict. These visually amazing events aren't relegated to cutscenes; the ground can change beneath your feet at any moment, which is a fantastic way to keep things interesting as players move from one fight to the next. Fortunately, the hints of platforming here are much better than previous entries in the series, so you can appreciate the curveballs the world throws at you without getting too frustrated.

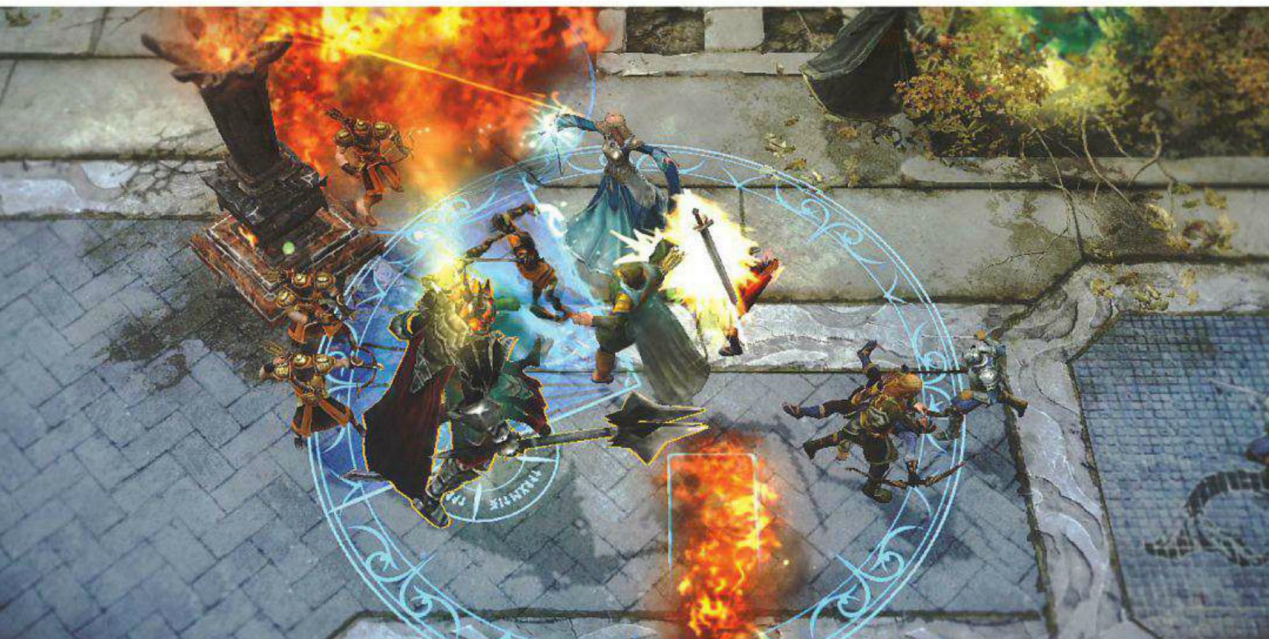
I have a lot of praise to heap on DMC, but it doesn't do everything right. With the exception of the final fight, the boss battles feel outdated. Instead of using the combat skills you've been honing, they mainly involve a brand of pattern recognition and dodging that would feel more at home in a 3D platformer. I was also disappointed by the implementation of the devil trigger ability. It's useful, but it charges slowly and depletes quickly, giving it too small of a role in the combat experience.

Lastly, the final levels don't clear the high bar set by the early part of the game. Limbo becomes more predictable, and thanks to aggravating enemy combinations, combat involves far less imagination. It's a shame, because these final missions should have been an opportunity to go all-out with combat and visuals. Instead, the game feels like it is running on fumes. Activate four generators and then align the symbols? Whatever you say, Vergil.

The last few missions aside, the mechanics, gameplay, and environments in Devil May Cry are exactly what I wanted. A reboot is a chance to revitalize a flagging series, and Ninja Theory has done that with a striking vision for the DMC universe and top-notch combat. Maybe this version of Devil May Cry will need rebooting in another 12 years, but for now, I can't wait to see what's next for Dante. » **Joe Juba**

Guardians of Middle-earth

League of Legends for dummies



Style 1-Player Action (10-Player Online) **Publisher** Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment
Developer Monolith Productions **Release** December 4 (360), December 5 (PS3) **ESRB** T

Every aspect of this Lord of the Rings-flavored MOBA is clearly modeled on Riot's juggernaut League of Legends, but sometimes I'm in the mood for Guardians' simpler and more streamlined experience. Frequent network problems are a tragedy for this exclusively multiplayer game, though, and often obviate the many smart and successful things that Monolith Productions has accomplished in the design.

Guardians of Middle-earth follows the established MOBA paradigm: Waves of creatures spawn at two opposing bases and smash into each other along three lanes, while five players on each side use a single hero unit apiece to turn the tide of battle. The single-lane variant is a faster, more intense experience that lacks the strategic depth of the traditional three-lane map, and quickly grows stale in comparison. Players grow exponentially in power as they level up, making the lost time waiting to respawn after a death a massive penalty. Eventually, one side overpowers the other enough to march into the enemy base and destroy the citadel, winning the game.

A handful of differences keep this from being a total League of Legends clone, like the removal of gold (and the associated item shopping), and the inclusion of out-of-lane shrines that grant buffs to the teams that control them. They all add up to a streamlined experience that works on a basic level and removes some of the more esoteric aspects of traditional MOBA play at the cost of making comebacks massively more difficult to achieve.

I appreciate how easy it is to pick up the strategy, since you don't have to worry about

gimping your team by not knowing the hundreds of items and how their various stats and specials interact with your chosen champion's power set like you would in LoL or Dota 2. The learning curve still exists, but we're talking about a dozen hours of gameplay instead of a dozen days to get your feet under you. The early- and mid-game jousting for control over lanes and neutral monster camps is my favorite phase of any MOBA, and that's the aspect that Guardians executes best of all.

The downside is that reversing the trend of a match going in the other team's favor is extremely difficult. Carries (hero builds that combine stats and powers in such a way that they explode in power to "carry" a team in the late game at the cost of relative early ineffectiveness) are a huge part of MOBAs, yet the concept is almost entirely absent in Guardians. You can't hope for a dramatic turnaround when your archer teammate goes from mediocre to awesome by completing a crucial item, for example. The position of the shrines and buff-granting neutral monsters in the middle of the map means that once a team has enough of a lead to start pushing beyond the halfway point they basically have permanent control of those helpful buffs. In my experience, the team ahead at the five-minute mark goes on to win the match the vast majority of the time – it just takes another 10 to 20 minutes to slowly grind down the opposition.

I like the rest of the game enough that the difficulty of reversing a match's flow isn't a huge problem, though. Pulling off awesome tricks like blinking behind enemies and using a knockback skill to launch them under your

tower to die horribly is just as gratifying in Guardians as in LoL or Dota. Personal skill, teamwork, and communication are all equally important, and the side that combines those aspects best is always the team that wins. Map awareness is crucial, as it should be; I've lost count of the kills I've scored thanks to sneaking through the jungle to pop up behind enemies that have pushed another lane too far. The moment-to-moment gameplay is truly excellent – until you start lagging or get dropped out of the match.

Evaluating network performance is always difficult thanks to the dozens of variables in play, but Guardians of Middle-earth is consistently poor enough in this regard that it must be noted. Ability timing gets seriously weird as matches progress, to the point that landing a melee-range root ability ends up with an enemy taking three steps away before their movement is arrested. Input lag results in too many deaths that occur seconds after hitting the button for a healing ability only to have it never trigger. Worst of all, I've disconnected from one out of every 15 matches or so – and with no way to rejoin after a network burp drops me out, you can lose 20 minutes of progress or more. Getting booted in the middle of an epic killstreak is one of the most frustrating things I've experienced in years.

Guardians of Middle-earth is an excellent game hobbled by bad network performance. I am continually drawn back to the exceptional gameplay, only to be repulsed by a disconnection or unbearably long matchmaking queue. I can see myself playing this for months on end if and when Monolith solves the lag and connectivity problems. » **Adam Biessener**

7.5

PS3 • 360

» Concept

Bring the broad strokes of the wildly popular multiplayer online battle arena (or Dota-alike, if you prefer that term) PC genre to consoles

» Graphics

The top-down view limits detail, but the look and feel of the excellent Peter Jackson films shine through

» Sound

The sound-alikes for film characters are outstanding, and contextual unit barks draw out the drama inherent in every match

» Playability

The developers did a great job of designing around the gamepad's strengths and weaknesses, but network lag regularly produces questionable results

» Entertainment

Network problems, from lag to far-too-frequent disconnections (with no way to rejoin the match, thereby losing all your rewards from it), almost entirely sink this otherwise good game

» Replay Value

High

The Edge

Whether it's because of poor matchmaking or a small player base, finding matches is consistently harder on PlayStation 3. The gameplay is identical, but you can expect to sit in the queue for a lot longer between games on PS3 than on 360. Even if buying the Xbox version means paying for an Xbox Live subscription you otherwise wouldn't, I'd still suggest going that route.

Ni No Kuni: Wrath of the White Witch

Where wonderment and old-school mechanics collide

7

PS3

» **Concept**

Journey to Studio Ghibli-inspired lands in the name of saving a young boy's mother

» **Graphics**

Vibrant and detailed graphics make a beautiful experience

» **Sound**

Music drives certain scenes, adding intensity to the journey. The voice acting is impressive

» **Playability**

Ni No Kuni isn't easy to grasp, but once you pass the learning curve, it gets better

» **Entertainment**

The world keeps you entranced. Unfortunately, the characters and old-school RPG mechanics don't have the same charm

» **Replay Value**

Moderate



Style 1-Player Role-Playing Publisher Namco Bandai Developer Level-5 Release January 22 ESRB E 10+

When Ni No Kuni: Wrath of the White Witch was announced as a collaboration between the famed Studio Ghibli and respected developer Level-5, my eyes lit up. Level-5's hits take classic gameplay systems and turn them inside out, while Studio Ghibli's films journey through fantastical lands with breathtaking visuals and deep life lessons. For months now, my imagination has been overflowing with Ni No Kuni's possibilities – but the reality doesn't match up to its potential. Ni No Kuni: Wrath of the White Witch is a respectable experience, but it's far

from a Ghibli or Level-5 masterpiece.

Ni No Kuni transports you between a real world and a fantastical one, the heart and soul of the game. It has childlike wonder around every bend – mushrooms grow as staircases, animals rule kingdoms, and Ghibli-inspired monsters meld creativity into every encounter. The vast environments have stunning visuals, and you're rewarded with a ship for sea exploration and eventually your very own dragon to control.

Sadly, the story and characters don't have the same allure as the world. Because Studio Ghibli's name is attached to it, I was expecting strong characterization and narrative. Unfortunately, characters have a dearth of personality and exist only to help the main character, Oliver. The one stand-out is Mr. Drippy, Oliver's stuffed-toy-turned-sidekick, who has a quip for every occasion. Even he starts to feel like a one-trick pony, though. Oliver's journey to give his mother life again should be an emotional one, yet it doesn't tackle the complexity of the situation in any profound way. Instead, the dialogue is as cheesy and predictable as an after school special.

Ni No Kuni features many battles, but most trying is the player's struggle against old-school mechanics. First off, every area contains an absurd amount of random encounters, and while enemies are visible on the field, they charge instantly once spotting you. Avoiding them is next to impossible, even after upgrading Oliver's speed.

This problem is exacerbated by limited save points in dungeons (although the world map allows saving at any time). If you die before reaching a save point, you're transported

back to the dungeon's entrance, grinding through the same enemies again. When you perish, Ni No Kuni also fines you 10 percent of your money to keep earned XP. Death is a possibility in every battle, keeping you constantly alert and forcing you to learn the battle system. Initially, that's what I liked the most, but the aforementioned issues made this process almost unbearable.

Most actions by characters or recruited familiars execute on a cooldown. The traditional battles aren't purely spamming "attack," because you need to strike at the right time to cancel enemy actions or counter attacks. These tactics, along with defending, are vital in every encounter. Use the battle system correctly and you're more likely to see "glims" on the battlefield, which restore health and magic power and occasionally unleash special attacks.

Despite the adrenaline-pumping intensity, the battle system has its frustrations. Sometimes the window to defend passes far too quickly. Not only must you select defend for your character, you must also order the sub-par AI companions to protect themselves as well. Other times, aggressive tactics are required to cancel a special attack, but the consequences for missing are too dire, forcing you to turtle.

Ni No Kuni is a mercurial experience. One minute I was exploring the world with adoration, and the next I was cursing a cheap boss battle. The journey can be fun; I liked collecting and growing familiars and watching the breathtaking world before me, but Ni No Kuni doesn't come without frustration. Enter for the beauty, but know it comes with a price. » **Kimberley Wallace**



The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim – Dragonborn

Lovecraftian excellence infiltrates Tamriel

8.5

360

» Concept

Skyrim's third expansion pack takes players to the coast of Morrowind, where the first Dragonborn resides

» Graphics

The creative environment designs for Apocrypha are a breath of fresh air. Dragon-riding animations skip and look unfinished. The Dragon Aspect armor effects look fantastic

» Sound

Hermaeus Mora's voice is brilliant, and the action is accompanied by a typical Skyrim score

» Playability

New shouts add depth to the combat mechanic, and Dragon Aspect enhances melee

» Entertainment

The critical path offers five to six hours of great questing that fizzles out in the final act

» Replay Value

Moderately High



gameformer
SILVER

Style 1-Player Role-Playing Game **Publisher** Bethesda Softworks **Developer** Bethesda Game Studios **Release** December 4 **ESRB** M

On paper, Dragonborn sounds like an extraordinary addition to the Skyrim experience. It boasts dragon riding, a trip to Morrowind's coastal island of Solstheim, new armor, weapons, and adversaries – a showdown between two all-powerful Dragonborn characters. As impressive as these talking points are, they are all eclipsed by the surprising inclusion of the Oblivion plane of Apocrypha.

Clearly a love letter to the work of H.P. Lovecraft, Apocrypha is infested with slimy tentacles and creatures with as many eyes as they have mouths. The hallways sway with life, sometimes collapsing or expanding as you walk down them. The architecture teems with shelves filled with lost tomes and scrolls. Dare to look upon one and the lettering comes to life for a brief moment before teleporting you deeper within this eerie, labyrinthine realm.

After you see Apocrypha, the giant mushrooms littered across Solstheim's terrain look unremarkable, yet are still a nice change of pace from Skyrim's snow-covered terrain. Apocrypha is a welcome show-stealer. The big bad that lurks inside of it, Hermaeus Mora, is equally as gawk-worthy and cool. Hermaeus Mora is the Daedric prince of knowledge and power, who chooses to appear as a mess of tentacles when dealing with mortals. Conversing with this intelligent abomination is as fascinating as it is dangerous.

Hermaeus Mora shares the spotlight with another great character: Miraak, the first of the Dragonborn. These finely penned characters are tied to all of the great plot points for the central story. Hermaeus Mora adds

intrigue with his propositions and view of the world. Miraak makes your blood boil; he steals dragon souls from you, and is driven by an insatiable thirst for power. The battle between Miraak and your Dovahkiin is grandiose, but unfortunately proves to be far too repetitive. Miraak doesn't have a great defense for close range attacks – especially if you're using the Dragon Aspect shout, which is unlocked within this quest line.

When you use Dragon Aspect, your character is adorned with magical armor that increases damage bonuses for weapons and shouts. This shout can only be used once per day, but stays active for a significant amount of time. If you lean on melee for most encounters, this shout is invaluable. I used it throughout most of Dragonborn's campaign, and wished I had it in my arsenal when I first journeyed through Skyrim.

Battlefield dominance also stems from the Bend Will shout. When the first word is unlocked, you gain control of animals. The second word turns mortals into slaves. The third word allows dragons to be tamed. Although your character can jump up on the neck of one of these gigantic beasts, don't think for a second that you get full control over it. All you can do is tell it who to target, when to attack, and where to land. These beasts stutter and stop as they fly, and often look like they are going to glitch out of existence. They lack aggression, too, attacking at a snail's pace and delivering little in terms of damage. Long story short, the dragon-riding mechanic is a disaster. I'd rather see backward-flying dragons return than use this power again.

Thankfully, for campaign purposes, you only have to tolerate it once, and for no longer than five minutes. After that, its usage is entirely in your hands.

Dragonborn delivers a great adventure that rarely apes content from the core game. The dungeon designs are inventive – especially the water temple – and flow nicely from quest to quest. Solstheim is a fun island to explore, offering a wealth of side content and locales to uncover. The dragon-riding and battle against Miraak in the final act are rough, but the story stays strong and ends up being one of the better quest lines Bethesda Game Studios has created. » **Andrew Reiner**



Skulls of the Shogun

Dead but not dull

8.5

360

» Concept

A well-executed turn-based strategy offering exclusively for XBLA

» Graphics

The take on the classic Japanese woodblock look is fun, colorful, and makes units distinct from each other. Each level is also based on a season

» Sound

Low-key music is in the background, and the characters speak in fake Japanese

» Playability

I would have liked the ability to rotate the map, but the game is solid enough that you won't feel cheated

» Entertainment

Expect enough options to keep things interesting without being bloated and confusing

» Replay Value

Moderately High



Style 1 to 4-Player Strategy (4-Player Online) Publisher Microsoft Studios Developer 17-Bit Release January 9 ESRB T

Turn-based tactical games aren't plentiful on Xbox 360, but *Skulls of the Shogun* helps fill the void adeptly. It's the kind of strategy game that I love; it lets you visualize and execute your best-laid plans, even if they can go down in flames.

Skulls is a grid-based tactics game without the grid. Regular units can move and attack in any order, and you're free to use up all or none of your units' allotted movement – which is always shown via a real-time circle interface. In general, the game accurately shows you

the outcomes of your actions, whether that's where you can move or how much damage you'll inflict if you attack.

That said, *Skulls of the Shogun* isn't simple. The boards contain environmental concerns such as cover, deadly cliffs, and the occasional intervening events/units, and they are thoughtfully laid out (each of the four seasonal levels contains five individual boards). Resource-generating rice paddies and monk-summoning shrines are strategically placed, and their production has a relatively small cap,

which thankfully keeps battles from taking forever. Commandeering an enemy shrine destroys the corresponding monk, and the rice paddies and shrines emphasize the importance of controlling resources for your army – which include the skulls dropped by fallen units that can be eaten for upgrades.

As easy as it is to look at a board and start to piece together your attack strategy, the AI does a good job flanking, prioritizing its actions, and keeping you guessing. Enemies did something I wasn't expecting more than a few times, and on several occasions I thought I had the match in the bag only to have the battle continue for a dozen or more turns.

Naturally, *Skulls* works great as a multiplayer title, and it not only gives you the option of four-player offline and online play, but also asynchronous, turn-by-turn multiplayer that can span the 360, Windows phones, and Windows 8 PCs. The mode is further differentiated by the ability to make or break alliances with others during the free-for-all battles.

Skulls of the Shogun could have more action and upgrade options for your units (like making unit facing more important), but it's a fun, well-executed title with a great sense of humor. Plan on playing it, even if not all your plans will come to fruition. » **Matthew Kato**



Ratchet & Clank: Full Frontal Assault

An interesting and flawed side-mission for QForce

7.5

PS3

» Concept

Combine the action-oriented gameplay of *Deadlocked* with tower defense elements

» Graphics

The graphics are as bright and crisp as ever, but the framerate takes a noticeable hit in co-op

» Sound

The voiceovers (especially Quark's) are humorous. The music is serviceable but unmemorable

» Playability

Tower defense elements are easy to grasp, and the basic controls are familiar for fans

» Entertainment

It's an interesting direction for this series, but this mix of gameplay styles feels like less than the sum of its parts

» Replay Value

Moderately High

Style 1 or 2-Player Action (4-Player Online) Publisher Sony Computer Entertainment Developer Insomniac Games Release November 27 ESRB E10+

was pretty taken with *Full Frontal Assault* at first, and it's clear this is a different type of *Ratchet & Clank* game. You have a base, and it has generators that you defend from harm. In your base – and the choke-point entry corridors – you can use bolts to buy turrets, mines, and other defenses to help protect your (rather fragile) generators. You also go out into the levels to collect bolts and unlock weapon pods to gain new implements of destruction, as well as activate key nodes that will ultimately help power up your

planetary defenses and end the round.

The formula is a unique way to combine third-person action, light platforming, exploration, and tower defense. However, these disparate gameplay elements are frequently at odds. Your turrets, mines, and barriers are so easily destroyed by enemy forces that you can't depend on them to hold down the fort, no matter how many bolts you spend on defenses. This means that you have to stop collecting bolts or finding power nodes to truck all the way back to your base every time

a new wave of enemies attacks. It's frustrating – especially because both parts of the games work well in isolation. The tower defense aspect ends up feeling like a chore.

As flawed as the single-player campaign is, the co-op and multiplayer aspects of the game are much better. Cooperative play with a friend minimizes many of the issues that hamper the single-player experience. Being able to split up allows one

player to hold down the fort and plan out the tower defense layout while the other explores the environment for nodes and bolts.

Competitive multiplayer is another bright spot. You can compete in one-on-one or two-on-two matches. Each match consists of three phases – recon (where you collect bolts and unlock nodes that grant you weapons on the battlefield), squad (where you use your bolts to purchase units that will be sent out to attack your opponent's base), and assault (where you can either lead an attack or defend your base and pray your units are successful). Exploring the environments to unlock nodes definitely has depth – and is all-important to victory, since nodes grant both weapons and recurring bolts throughout the match

In the final assessment, *Full Frontal Assault* feels like an experiment that produced mixed results. It attempted to complete two different objectives, and failed to fully carry out either one. » **Matt Helgeson**

Cross Play? Not Yet

Full Frontal Assault is part of Sony's Cross Buy program. However, the Vita version won't be released until sometime in January, so this review is strictly for the PS3 version.



Transformers: Prime

Another drop in the bucket for mediocre licensed games

6.5

Wii U

» Concept

A simple, underwhelming game set in the universe of the Transformers Prime cartoon

» Graphics

Character models and transformations look good. The environments and particle effects are dry and boring

» Sound

Peter Cullen voices Optimus Prime, and that's all that really matters in the audio department

» Playability

The combat is serviceable but boring. Using the GamePad to steer during driving sections isn't as awful as you might think

» Entertainment

Die hard fans of the TV show may something to enjoy here, but the whole thing feels like a by-the-numbers licensed game

» Replay Value

Moderately Low

High Moon Studios proved that video game greatness was possible with a decades-old cartoon license.

Developer Now Production offers a less-inspiring vision for Transformers with a Wii U game based off the excellent CG cartoon. The result is a faithful representation of the show that suffers from unremarkable gameplay.

Most of your time in Transformers: Prime's campaign is spent beating down Decepticons until an invisible wall drops. You play Optimus Prime, Bumblebee, and few other Autobots throughout the story, but they all play the same, save for speed. The shallow combat consists of mixing light and heavy attacks, with an occasional defense-shattering attack. You can pepper your foes with long-range blaster attacks using the lock-on system, but the inability to lead shots results in too many annoying misses. Despite a lack of imagination, barreling towards your foe as a semi truck and morphing into a giant robot to deliver a mid-air punch is always fun.

A few driving segments have been tossed in for variety's sake. You're forced to steer your vehicular form with the GamePad's

motion control capabilities during these parts. Motion steering isn't enthralling, but at least it isn't broken. These driving segments are the only moments that use the new controller in interesting ways. You can also use the Pro Controller or remote-and-nunchuk combo, though the latter is so awkward that you're better off skipping it altogether.

Fuzzy textures and boring level design doesn't do the mediocre gameplay any favors. On the other hand, character models and the transformation animations look great.

A bare bones offline-only multiplayer mode lets you and another friend battle one-on-one or against bots. Deathmatch is the only mode worth a glance. Decepticons and other unlockable Autobots are playable in multiplayer, but the flying Transformers handle like misassembled kites.

I consider myself a Transformers fan, but no amount of appreciation for the series makes me comfortable recommending Transformers: Prime. The benign gameplay may be a good option for fans too young for the gritty action of High Moon's excellent series, but that's about it. » **Tim Turi**



Little Inferno

The emotional flame

8.5

gamenformer
SILVER

Style 1-Player Puzzle Publisher Tomorrow Corporation Developer Tomorrow Corporation Release November 18 ESRB T

Wii U

» Concept

An interactive fireplace backed by a surprisingly great story

» Graphics

Realistic physics accompany each object. The flames look fantastic. The story sequence at the end of the game is beautifully shot

» Sound

The score fits the game perfectly. Crescendos are used to amplify the emotional response to specific moments

» Playability

Simple and stress-free, but a lot of fun. Challenge comes from figuring out what objects create combos

» Entertainment

Four to five hours of pyromaniac fun. The story sticks with you

» Replay Value

Moderate

Little Inferno has a soul that burns bright, igniting emotions as a sad story is told in the cinders of a fireplace designed to spark the imagination of children.

In-game advertising for the Little Inferno Entertainment Fireplace asks kids a disturbing question: "Do you know what's more fun than playing with toys? Setting them on fire!" The ad goes on to show happy, singing children tossing their most beloved toys and possessions into the Little Inferno. They look on in awe as these objects are engulfed in flames.

You play the role of one of these children. He burns television sets, Kitty Poo Poo Plushies, building blocks, toy zombies, handheld gaming systems, and the most dangerous toys of all:



mini nukes and dwarf suns. When it comes to gameplay, that's all that Little Inferno offers. You use the stylus on the GamePad to put an object in a fireplace, light it on fire, and move it around as it burns.

Some may say that Little Inferno isn't a game at all, but more of an interactive fireplace. Since it never penalizes the player, it's certainly one of the most relaxing gaming experiences I've encountered. But it is still a game – a puzzle game, to be precise. And it's a damn good one to boot.

Challenge comes in creating combos consisting of two or more objects at once. The player is asked to complete 99 unique combinations based on cryptic clues. For instance, to complete the Cold War challenge, a Russian nesting doll must be incinerated with an Uncle Sam Blam Blam action figure. It's a fun game of match two (or three) with a dark sense of humor.

Most of the items burn in different ways, making the act of starting something on fire fun. If a miniature moon is thrown into the fire, it generates its own gravity, pulling other items into its orbit. I was impressed by this attention to detail, not to mention the great physics that accompany all of the items and flames.

The one major drawback to this simple

experience is the arbitrary countdowns tied to items being delivered to your fireplace. You end up sitting around for no real reason as you wait for your objects to be available. You can cash in stamps to make items appear instantly, but you have a limited number of them (which replenishes slowly), and have to pick and choose which item deliveries are expedited.

Your character isn't alone in this world. He's exchanging letters with mysterious people. Their messages range from heartfelt to crazy, each increasing your desire to meet the person behind the words. You wouldn't think that a game like this would lead up to an emotional conclusion, but for reasons I can't even hint at, the narrative leads to final moments that are as intense as they are sad. In these sequences, the score hits all of the right notes, the imagery matches the mood, and the story succeeds.

Little Inferno is unlike any game I've played. It has a big heart that blends perfectly with its dark tones and simple gameplay scope. Days removed from playing it, I'm still thinking about it. I'm recommending it to my friends who love Braid, Unfinished Swan, and Journey. It's one of the nicest surprises of the year, and breaks from standard video game conventions. Play it, discuss it, and enjoy it. I sure did. » **Andrew Reiner**

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the score

6.5 | Chasing Aurora

Platform Wii U Release November 18 ESRB E

Flying feels fluid, and the art style and character design of the birds are very enticing, but Chasing Aurora needs to be more than an incredibly shallow single-player experience and half-baked multiplayer modes. – Kyle Hilliard

7.25 | Planets Under Attack

Platform PS3 • 360 Release November 14 ESRB E

Good content and some intense stages can be found in Planets Under Attack, but you have to become accustomed to the quirks in order to get to them. – Dan Ryckert

8.5 | Crashmo

Platform 3DS Release November 22 ESRB E

Crashmo improves on Pushmo's formula in every way, but I have a nebulous complaint. For some reason Crashmo doesn't inspire that "just one more" desire in me that I expect in puzzle games. – Bryan Vore

6.5 | Rise of the Guardians

Platform PS3 • 360 • Wii U Release November 20 (PS3, 360) December 4 (Wii U) ESRB E10+

While Rise of the Guardians is built on a solid foundation of hack-and-slash action and co-op multiplayer, the simplicity and monotony of the gameplay quickly becomes obvious. – Jeff Marchiafava

4.5 | Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse

Platform PS3 • 360 Release November 20 ESRB M

For every Batman: Arkham Asylum that shows us popular entertainment properties can be adapted into successful interactive experiences, there are several games like Family Guy of such poor quality that you wonder how they were greenlit in the first place. – Andrew Reiner

4.5 | Tank Tank Tank

Platform Wii U Release November 18 (Wii U) ESRB E10+

Finding entertainment in Tank Tank Tank is like panning for gold in the bathtub – you're not going to find anything. Like a culturally sensitive foreign joke, Tank Tank Tank fails to translate. – Ben Reeves

geeked at birth



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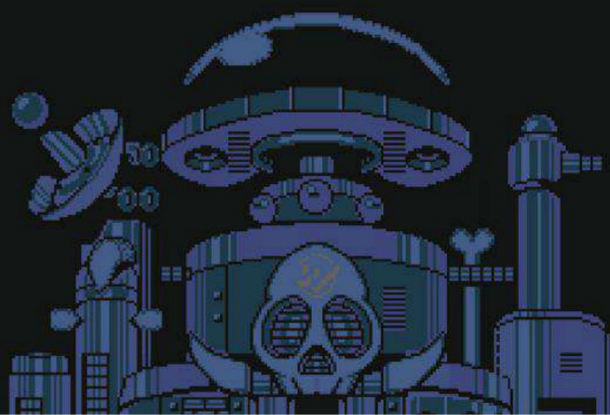


IN THE YEAR 2011

Celebrating Mega Man's 25th Anniversary

Fresh-faced Capcom employee Keiji Inafune was just finishing up his work on character art for the company's fledgling fighter, *Street Fighter*, when he was asked to help create something new. The game would combine a radical weapon-stealing system, rock-paper-scissors strategy, and challenging-yet-rewarding platforming. It just needed a hero to bring the whole thing to life. Inafune and the rest of his team at Capcom didn't know it at the time, but their hard work on the 1987 Nintendo title, *Mega Man*, would begin one of gaming's most beloved franchises.

BY TIM TURI



BORN TO ROCK

Originally released as Rock Man in Japan, Mega Man is about a little blue robot's quest to stop the evil doings of a mad scientist named Dr. Wily. Saving mankind involves destroying six Robot Masters that possess powers varying from fireballs to metal-sheering scissors. In a clever twist, Mega Man could steal his fallen foes' powers to turn the tables. Fighting Fire Man armed with only your Mega Buster is a difficult task, which makes figuring out that he's weak against Ice Man's ability all the more satisfying. Cracking the ideal boss battle order is a unique experience to the Mega Man series, and something Capcom nailed right out of the gate.

Despite its progressive game design, the first Mega Man was met with lukewarm sales. Keiji Inafune attributes the poor reception to the game's notoriously awful box art. The game did earn enough money for Capcom to release Mega Man 2. The sequel released one year later, and improved the winning formula on multiple fronts. Stage tunes are catchier, enemies are larger and more colorful, and the levels are even more varied. In one stage

Mega Man plummets through a sci-fi fortress while dodging instant-death lasers, and in another he battles robotic apes in forest treetops. Mega Man 2 establishes the classic series' charming Saturday morning cartoon vibe, something that entranced gamers of the time.

Mega Man 2's success paved the way for four more NES sequels, three of which released after the Super Nintendo's 1991 launch. The Mega Man series was still profitable enough for Capcom to keep making new adventures for the Blue Bomber on a last-gen console. While the core formula and visuals remained largely the same, the successive titles introduced game-changing features like a charged Mega Buster shot, slide ability, and a transforming robo-pooch named Rush. Five more classic-style Mega Man games hit the original Game Boy. These portable entries nearly matched the quality of their NES brethren, despite the monochromatic color scheme and zoomed-in camera.

Like any '80s video game worth its salt, the demand for more Mega Man prompted brand expansion. Mega Man joined the ranks of Simon Belmont and Pit on *Captain N the*

Game Master, and eventually earned his own cartoon series. Fearing the heroic robot's Japanese anime-style design would be too cutesy to gain traction in America, *Mega Man* made the characters taller, meaner, and pumped them up with muscles. Bandai also released a line of action figures for kids to dream up their own battles between Mega and Wily.

While the official war against Dr. Wily raged on via the NES and Game Boy in the early '90s, one of Dr. Light's other creations was fighting a new battle. Mega Man X released on the SNES in 1993 and became a hit. The series reboot set a high water mark for 8-bit franchises making the move onto 16-bit consoles. The game evolved the series' power-stealing gameplay with upgradeable armor, a slick wall jump, and a darker story. Years after the collapse of civilization due to an uprising of renegade robots called Mavericks, Mega Man X is activated to clean up the mess. A mysterious red robot with long blonde hair and an energy sword eventually teams up with X. Zero became an instant fan-favorite, and eventually becomes playable in later SNES and PlayStation sequels.

THE LEGEND CONTINUES

The PlayStation became Mega Man's home during the fifth console generation. Three deep, fast-paced Mega Man X sequels arrived on the PSone, complete with gorgeous Japanese anime cutscenes and the ability to save your game to a memory card. The titles sold well, but were met with mixed reviews. The new console also ushered in an eighth entry in the traditional Mega Man series, but the cutesy visuals and childish voice acting clashed with the established X series and didn't scratch fans' nostalgic itch.

Like the SNES before it, the PlayStation also fostered a new direction for the franchise. Like many other established series, Capcom's mascot made the leap into 3D with 1998's Mega Man Legends. New protagonist Mega Man Volnutt, his best friend Roll, and her grandpa Barrell are a group of treasure hunters eager to dig into mysterious ruins infested with evil robots. The game was filled with RPG elements like talkative NPCs, upgradeable weapon stats, and plenty of side quests. Some gamers struggled with Legends' clunky

control scheme while gunning down Reaverbots – an issue mostly rectified by the solid sequel. Despite the critical praise and a rabid fan following, the game suffered poor sales.

Capcom's intrepid robot practically disappeared from consoles at the turn of the century with the release of the PlayStation 2, GameCube, and Xbox. Aside from two mediocre sequels in the X franchise, fans had to turn to handhelds for their fix. A flood of Pokémon-inspired, collection-driven games released on the Game Boy Advance in the form of the Mega Man Battle Network series. Mega Man X fans who loved slashing apart Mavericks as Zero had the Mega Man Zero series for some of the hardest side-scrolling games around. Like Castlevania and other time-tested series that planted their roots in 2D, Mega Man Zero's handheld adventures were some of the series' best.

Unfortunately, the following Nintendo DS and PSP generation of Mega Man titles didn't share the same level of quality. The Mega Man Star Force series shifted the Battle Network's grid-based combat into the third-dimension,

but the series didn't gain the same praise or momentum as its predecessor. Mega Man ZX and its sequel ZX Advent tried to inject an open world into the Mega Man Zero formula, but the games didn't match the same level of excellence as the GBA's line of side-scrollers. PSP owners received two solid remakes with improved visuals and other enhanced features, but neither provided a true new experience.

The Blue Bomber's abrupt departure from console games and unexciting portable entries marked the first low point in the series' largely consistent track record. Despite this, his status as a game icon remained intact. Like Sonic the Hedgehog and Contra, Mega Man's golden 8- and 16-bit years cemented his legacy despite recent missteps. Gamers still salivated over the thought of Capcom's fighting robot guest starring in a Super Smash Bros. game, wore his t-shirts, and repurchased collections of classic titles. The following console generation would jostle fans with more ups and downs than anything the series had seen up to that point.



Keiji Inafune

co-creator of Mega Man, former Capcom employee, and current CEO of Concept



Hayato Tsuru

director of Mega Man 9 & 10



Hironobu Takeshita

producer of Mega Man 9 & 10

WHY DOES MEGA MAN EXPLODE?

Keiji Inafune: The inspiration or the theme for the effect was "resonance" or "afterglow." When you challenge a hardship, and when you end up facing death, you are given this resonance or afterglow moment to look back on what you had done wrong, or what you need to fix in your next run. And in doing so, you are more motivated to keep going and take on the challenge again.

BRINGING MEGA MAN TO LIFE

Keiji Inafune: We tried hard to make Mega Man come to life. We wanted to make him look alive, so that the users could really feel attached to the character and see Mega Man as a friend. Back in the day, there was limited game capacity, and we had to really be creative to squeeze everything into the cartridge.

So we fought to be creative and made it to show the bullets shoot from the arm, the eyes blinking, and the body ducking before each run.



Favorite Robot Master:

Inafune: Zero (Mega Man X Series)

Tsuru: Toad Man (Mega Man 4)

Takeshita: Star Man (Mega Man 5)

Favorite Mega Man game:

Inafune: Mega Man 2

Tsuru: Mega Man & Bass

Takeshita: Mega Man 5

Easiest Mega Man:

Inafune: Mega Man

Tsuru: Mega Man 5

Takeshita: Mega Man 5 or 6

Hardest Mega Man:

Inafune: Mega Man 8

Tsuru: Mega Man

Takeshita: Mega Man

What's in an E-Tank?

Inafune: You can say that the E-Tank is the heart of Mega Man.

Tsuru: It's a drink that gives one hope. I like beer better, though.

Takeshita: Is it a drink? Is it a battery? I'll leave it up to your imagination!

How do you enter boss doorways?

Inafune: Oh, I just run away

Tsuru: It might be an occupational syndrome of mine, but it varies. Because I was always checking for bugs at the same time, I'd go through doors in various different ways.

Takeshita: I'm the kind of player who just has to keep running forward! Although that has led me into my fair share of game-over screens (laughs).

What is your fondest Mega Man memory?

Inafune: It is really difficult to come up with one simple answer to this question. Even after leaving Capcom, so many people from all around the world ask me about Mega Man and tell me how much they adore the game. They all tell me that they want me to create a new Mega Man. But I would say that the fact that I still get these comments from the fans around the world is probably the fondest memory. I am truly lucky, and I am proud and grateful that I got to create Mega Man.

Tsuru: A while back we asked the fans to send in their own original boss designs, and seeing the post-cards pour in is my most fond memory. Bosses that looked cool, ones that made you laugh; there was a mountain of wonderful ideas and it was very fun to go through them all. At that time I realized again how popular the Mega Man series really was, and I felt a great deal of responsibility in working on the series.

Takeshita: That would be when I first joined Capcom and was able to play an unfinished version of Mega Man X on the SNES. I was still in awe of being able to play unreleased games. The new wall jump move was so cool, and there was a great battle with a huge enemy in the first stage. I remember thinking how much players were going to enjoy it when they saw it.



GI'S TOP 10 MEGA MAN GAMES

1. Mega Man 2
2. Mega Man X
3. Mega Man 9
4. Mega Man X4
5. Mega Man
6. Mega Man Zero
7. Mega Man Legends 2
8. Mega Man & Bass
9. Mega Man 3
10. Mega Man: Dr. Wily's Revenge

PIXELS, PROMISES, AND THE UNKNOWN

Before the downloadable boom of the current console generation, publishers rarely released true 2D games on consoles. Asking gamers to dish out \$60 for a retro-looking game isn't viable in today's market. XBLA, PSN, and WiiWare allowed companies like Capcom to experiment. Mega Man 9 released in 2008, and is a love letter to the classic-era games. The game pretends development never stopped for the NES, plopping gamers into a genuine 8-bit Mega Man. The retro sequel could've passed as a forgotten gem salvaged from Capcom's cutting room floor, but it was built from the ground up. A new generation was introduced to the unrelenting difficulty of the classic series. Mega Man 10, a downloadable sequel in the same vein as Mega Man 9, offered overwhelmed gamers an easy mode to grind down the sharp edges.

These old-school tributes were great trips down nostalgia lane, but in 2010, two Mega Man announcements got fans excited for something new. Mega Man Universe was a 2.5D downloadable title with an emphasis on user-created content. Players would be able to control their Capcom heroes like Street Fighter's Ryu and Ghosts 'n' Goblins' Arthur. Another game, Mega Man Legends 3, was announced shortly after for the 3DS. Keiji Inafune

revealed that fans had been clamoring for a Mega Man Legends sequel for years, and that Capcom would be allowing the community to get involved in the game's development. Fans contributed NPC character designs, item ideas, and even helped decide the look of a new female protagonist via Internet forums.

However, before the end of the year, Inafune announced that he would be ending his 23-year span at Capcom to take on new challenges. Despite the positive buzz for the games and the fans' dedicated involvement with Mega Man Legends 3, the projects were canceled after Inafune's departure. The games' cancellation stung fans enough, but the discontinuation of Mega Man Legends 3 rubbed salt in the wounds of contributors. Capcom had managed to alienate its most loyal followers. They expressed their dissatisfaction with angry Internet posts and an online petition for the game's release that garnered over 100,000 signatures.

Capcom is aware that Mega Man's missing-in-action status upsets fans, and the company has continued to make vague hints towards something new coming down the pipe.

"Right now Mega Man fans might be unhappy, but I still appreciate the continued support and am also looking forward to seeing more Mega Man in the future," says Mega Man 9 and 10 director Hayato Tsuru.

Hironobu Takeshita, producer of Mega Man 9 and 10, echoes those thoughts. "I'm sorry that there hasn't been any Mega Man news for quite some time, but rest assured that we're very grateful for the support of all you Mega-fans out there."

Capcom did recently announce one exciting bit of Mega Man news with Street Fighter X Mega Man. The game features the same retro style as Mega Man 9 and 10, but instead of Robot Masters Mega Man battles and acquires the powers of legendary Street Fighter characters like Ryu and Dhalsim. As if the downloadable PC game isn't already enough of a love letter to Capcom fans, it's also free. Whether this quirky crossover is enough to calm fans' disquiet about the series is yet to be seen.

With nearly 100 unique Mega Man games under its belt, Capcom has released a lifetime's worth in just 25 years. Despite the series' recent struggles, few gaming icons outside Nintendo's walls have enjoyed the same level of immortality as the Blue Bomber. Capcom has proven it can focus on supporting successful franchises like Resident Evil and Street Fighter while taking chances on new IPs like Dragon's Dogma and Asura's Wrath. Given the series' long history, fans' hunger for more, and a new game, we're confident Capcom will never abandon its little blue robot. ♦

THE MASTER LIST

From Cut Man to Splash Woman, Mega Man fans have dismantled dozens of evil robots over the last 25 years. Sometimes sensible (Bomb Man, demolitions robot), sometimes goofy (Clown Man, children's birthday robot?) but always adorable, this is a complete list of the classic Mega Man Robot Masters.



MEGA MAN 1

MEGA MAN 2



MEGA MAN 3

MEGA MAN 4

MEGA MAN 5



MEGA MAN 6

MEGA MAN 7

MEGA MAN 8



MEGA MAN & BASS

MEGA MAN 9

MEGA MAN 10



Answers: 1-b, 2-c, 3-a, 4-a, 5-c, 6-a, 7-b or d, 8-a, 9-d, 10-a

Know Your Bricks: Lego Trivia

You think you're a brick master? Test your knowledge about one of the world's most popular toys with our Lego trivia quiz.

by Ben Reeves



1. Founded by a carpenter from Billund, Denmark, the Lego company first started production of its famous plastic building block in what year?
 a) 1934
 b) 1949
 c) 1954
 d) 2014 (Idiot, that's next year)

2. Before it was called Lego, the colorful plastic blocks were sold under what name?
 a) Self-Locking Bricks
 b) Building Brixs
 c) Automatic Binding Bricks
 d) Mega Bloks

3. In 1997, Mindscape released the first Lego video game. What was the name of this title?
 a) Lego Island
 b) Lego Rock Raiders
 c) Lego Loco
 d) Lego Creator

4. The animated sequences in the Traveller's Tales Lego games have traditionally been mute. What was the first Lego game of theirs to feature talking characters?
 a) Lego Batman 2: DC Super Heroes
 b) Lego Indiana Jones: The Original Adventures
 c) Lego Pirates of the Caribbean: The Video Game
 d) Lego My Eggo

5. Which of these is not a playable character from Lego Batman 2: DC Super Heroes?
 a) Alfred
 b) Clark Kent
 c) Red Robin
 d) General Zod

6. What is the name of the kingdom in Lego's Knights' Kingdom line of toys and the 2004 GBA game Lego Knights' Kingdom?
 a) Morcia
 b) Vladek
 c) Mathias
 d) Hyrule

7. Which Lego game features an unlockable level based on a Disney attraction?
 a) Lego Indiana Jones 2: The Adventure Continues
 b) Lego Pirates of the Caribbean: The Video Game
 c) Lego Star Wars III: The Clone Wars
 d) This question is way too easy

8. In the cantina scene in Lego Star Wars II: The Original Trilogy, does Han shoot first?
 a) Yes
 b) No
 c) What the hell are you talking about?

9. In Lego The Lord of the Rings: The Video Game, how does Boromir die?
 a) Shot by an arrow
 b) Shot by a broom
 c) Shot by a Lego Block
 d) Shot with a banana

10. Two of the voice actors from Lego Batman: The Video Game reprise their roles for Batman: Arkham Asylum. Which characters do they play?
 a) Bane and Killer Croc
 b) Batman and Mr. Zsasz
 c) Harley Quinn and James Gordon
 d) This question is too hard

Score & Rank

0-2 Correct: Blockhead
You're falling apart!

3-5 Correct: Brick Layer
You know you can connect Lego bricks together, right?

6-8 Correct: Block Buster
You're creative, but people probably still ask what you built.

9-10 Correct: Lego Master
Go kick over someone's castle; you've earned it.



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