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RETURN AND THE FUTURE OF
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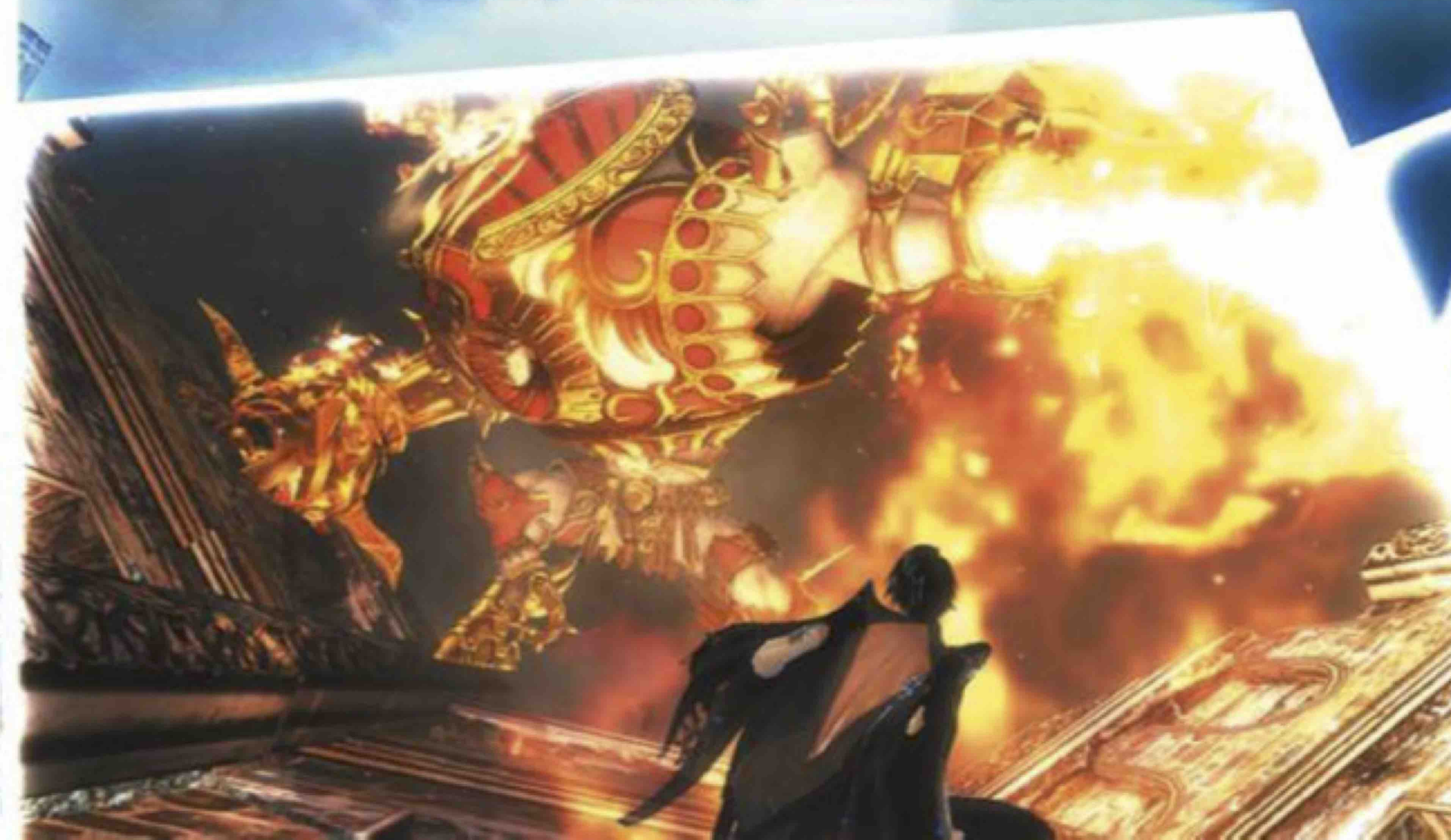
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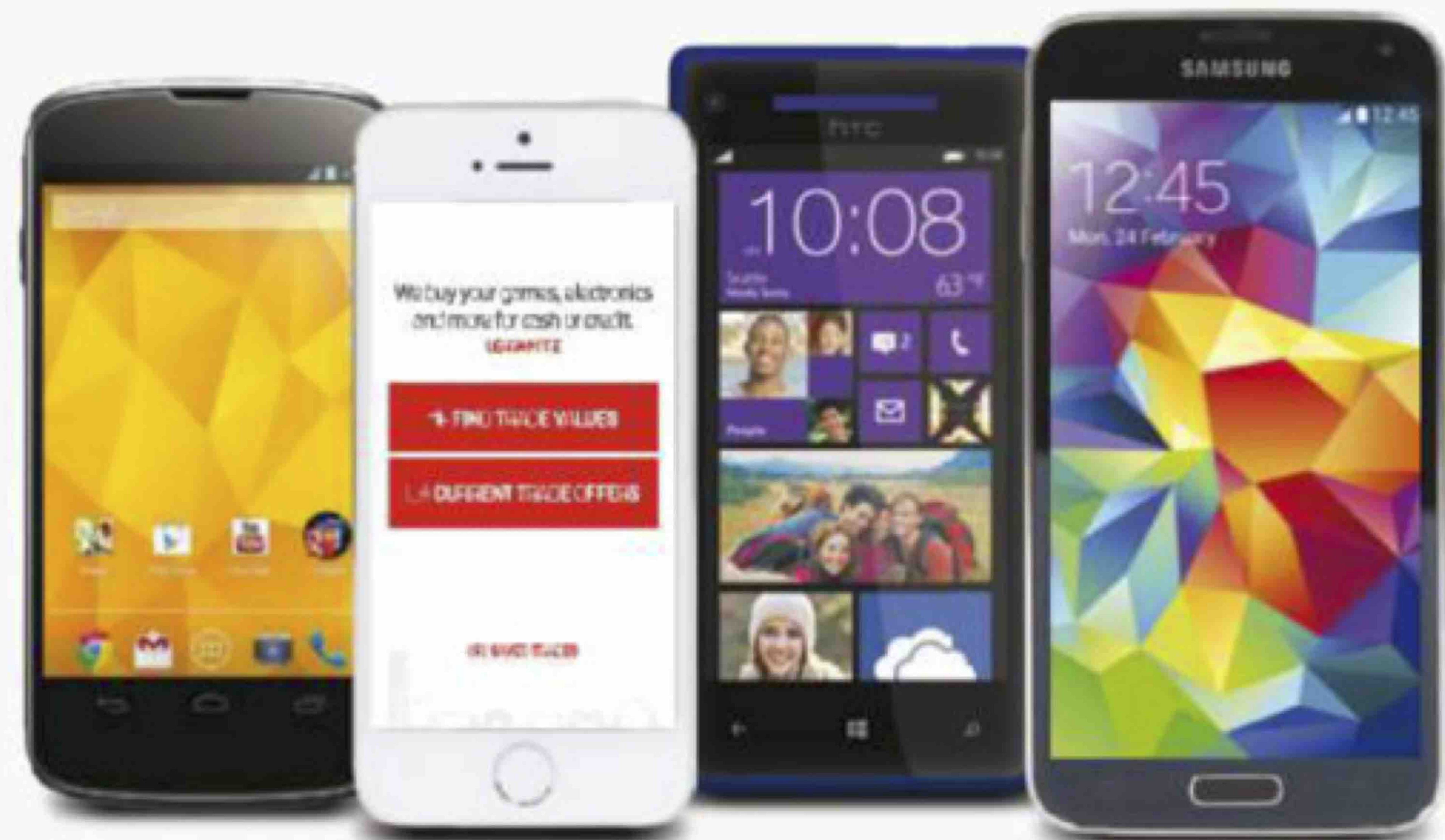
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Kickstart My Heart

I have a love-hate relationship with crowdfunding services like Kickstarter, Indiegogo, and Patreon. I love that projects that would otherwise never see the light of day all across the arts and technology spectrum have a venue to get funded. This is the consumer fueling the creative process in its purest form.

When given the opportunity to help one of my favorite bands that had split up long ago put together a documentary about a reunion tour, I jumped at the chance. Herein lies crowdfunding's biggest issue – nothing you fund is a promise; it's a wish. I wanted that band to succeed, and I was more than willing to throw money at the chance, but nothing is for sure in the crowd-sourced world.

To me, the good far outweighs the bad. Some projects never see the light of day, and the pledges are never returned. At the same time, crowdfunding has brought numerous games to life that simply wouldn't have otherwise had a chance. It's a risk we as supporters need to be willing to take, and a promise the creators need to have the desire and skill to deliver. It's a buyer beware market if there ever was one, as there are more than a few cautionary tales out there.

Which brings us to this issue you hold in your hands and the ethics question crowdfunding brings to Game Informer. For me personally, I refuse to help fund any game, as I feel it taints my judgment in regards to what I want to put in the magazine.

In a moment of weakness, much like the one I described above about my favorite band, I donated to *Shadowrun Returns* when it hit Kickstarter because I feared the game wouldn't be made. I figured that I'd donate just so I could sleep at night and tell myself that I had at least tried. I never imagined it would make its goal.

I couldn't have been more wrong, and it blasted through its goal. When the opportunity came up for Game Informer to discuss covering the game for a feature, I immediately felt dread in the pit of my stomach and knew that I simply couldn't take part in the decision-making process.

I was an "investor." Even though I owned nothing, I had put money in place that made me feel like part of the process. After this experience I decided to never donate to a game again. But to others, donating to a campaign is no different than preordering a game. It's a complicated issue, and every individual has to decide where they stand for themselves.

We have covered many crowdfunded games in the past, and will always do our part as a media source. While I can't give these projects money, I can use Game Informer to focus on games we believe in.

This month, we were lucky enough to work with a team as they brought their game idea to the public. I had never met any of the team members of *Molasses Flood* before they stopped by the office to show us what they had in the works. I found the story so compelling that I knew it was something we needed to share, as it explores the life-changing power of crowdfunding for both good and ill.

Enjoy the issue.

Cheers,

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Resident Evil Revelations 2

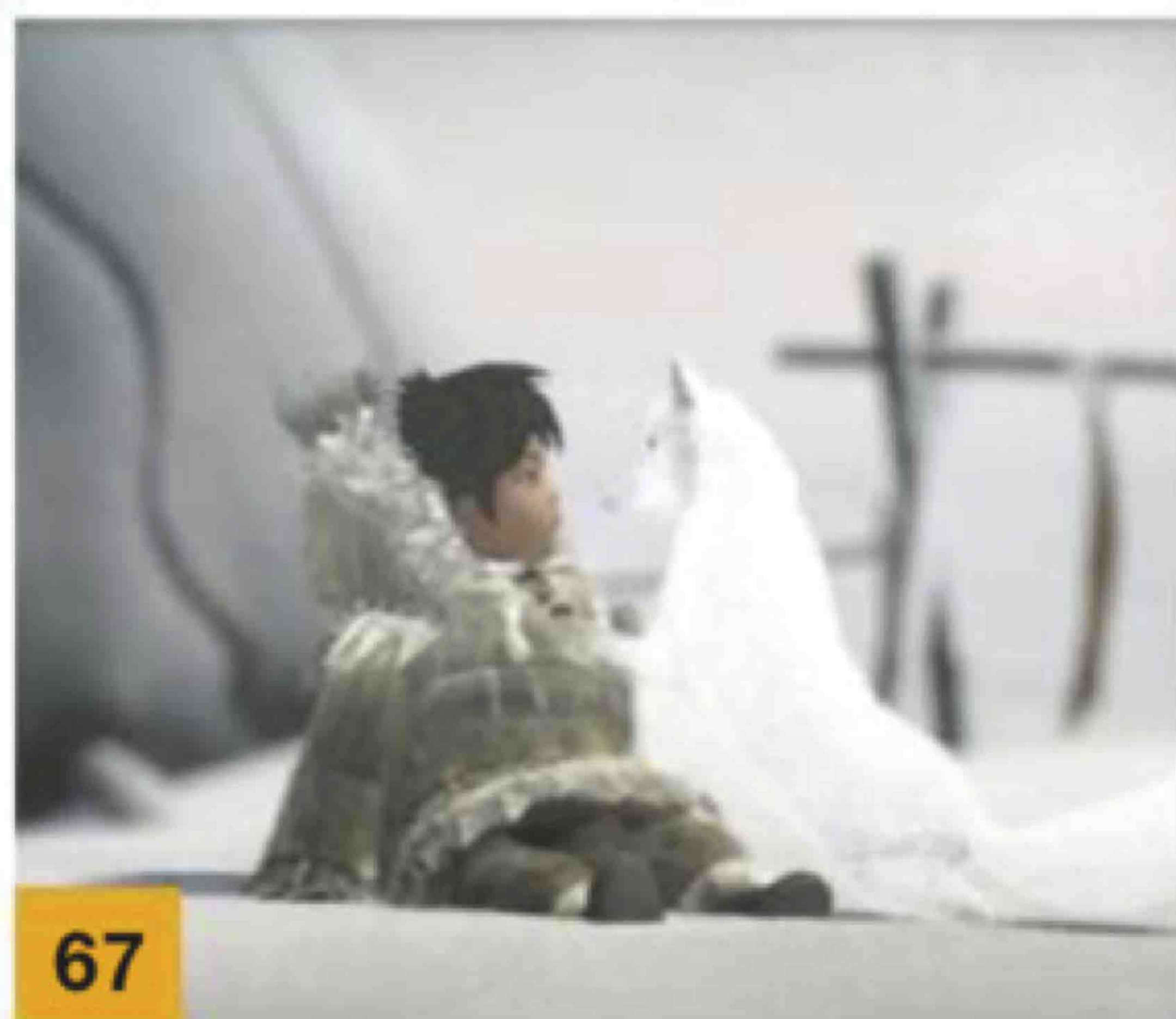
Claire Redfield returns to Resident Evil with the daughter of legendary S.T.A.R.S. member Barry Burton to fight through a demented torture island. Read about our exclusive hands-on with the first chapter in this episodic mystery. **by Tim Turi**



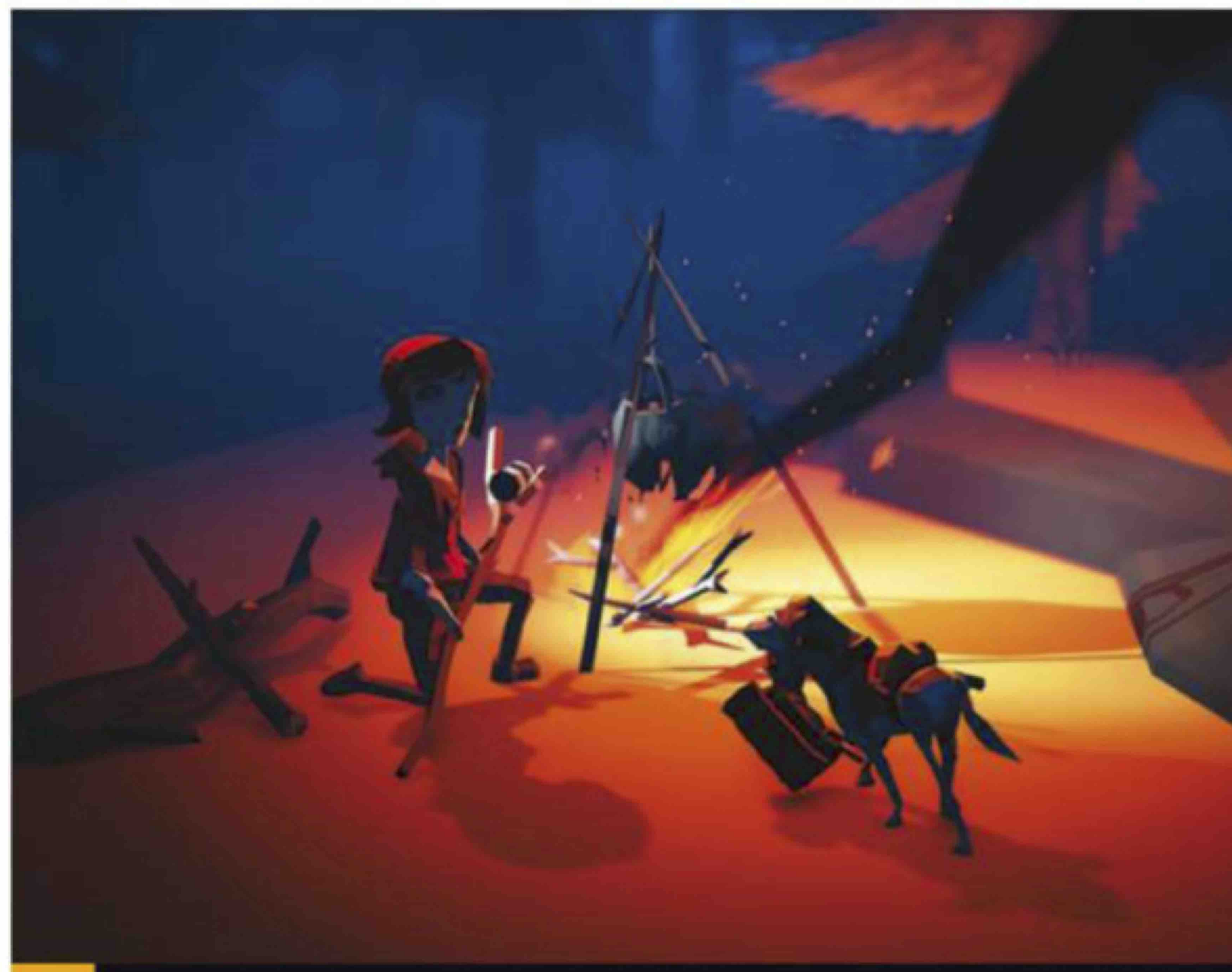
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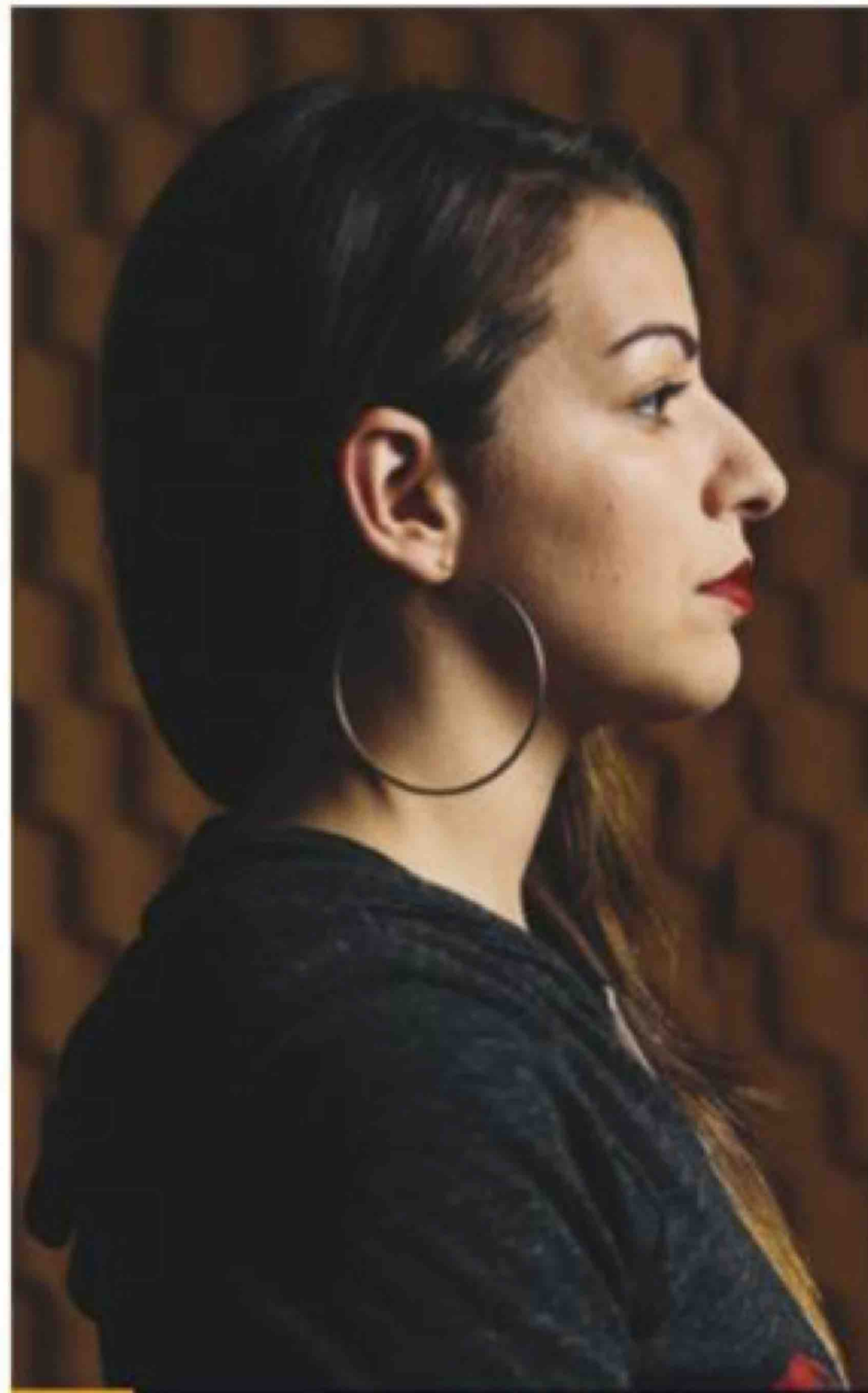
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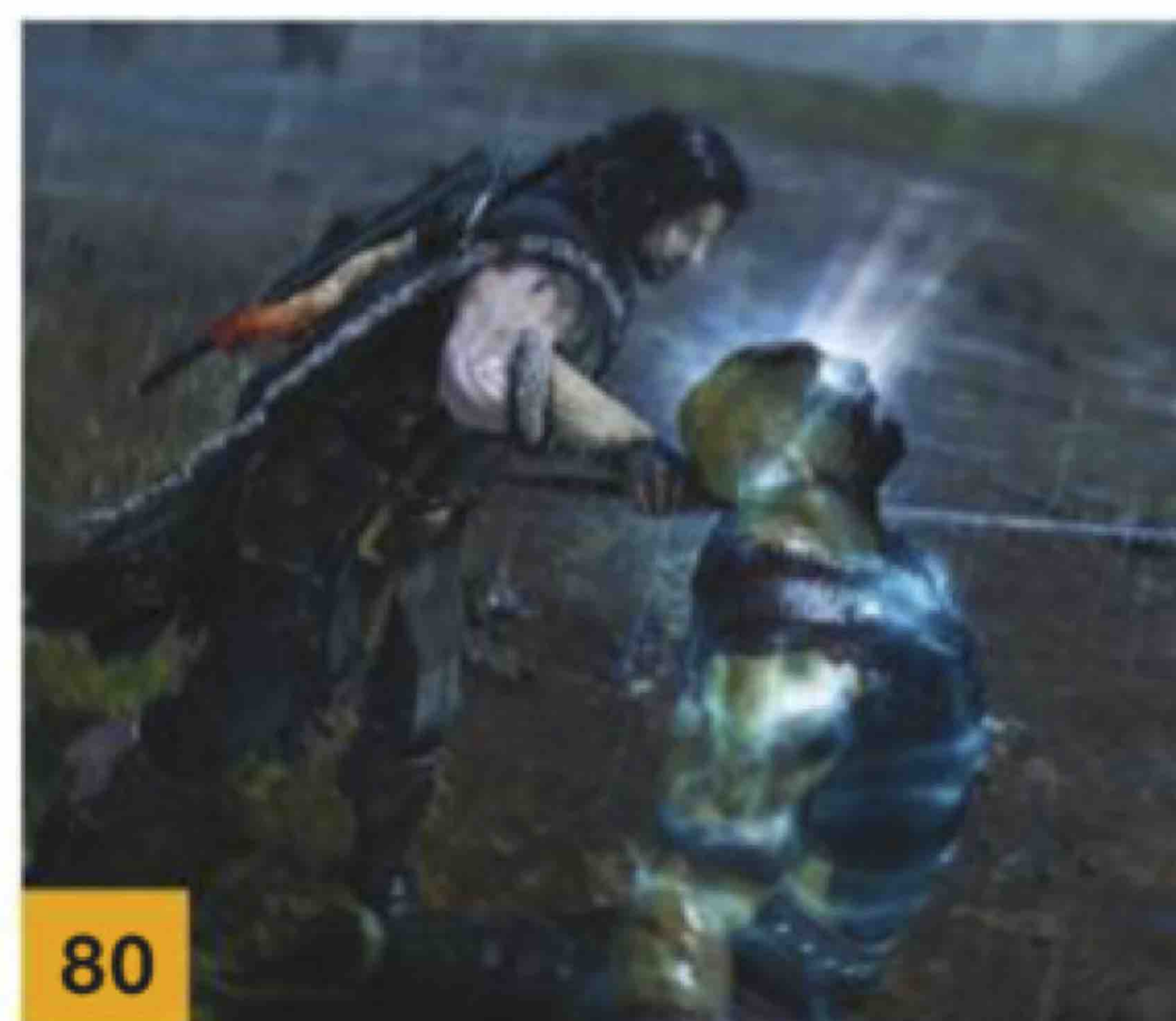
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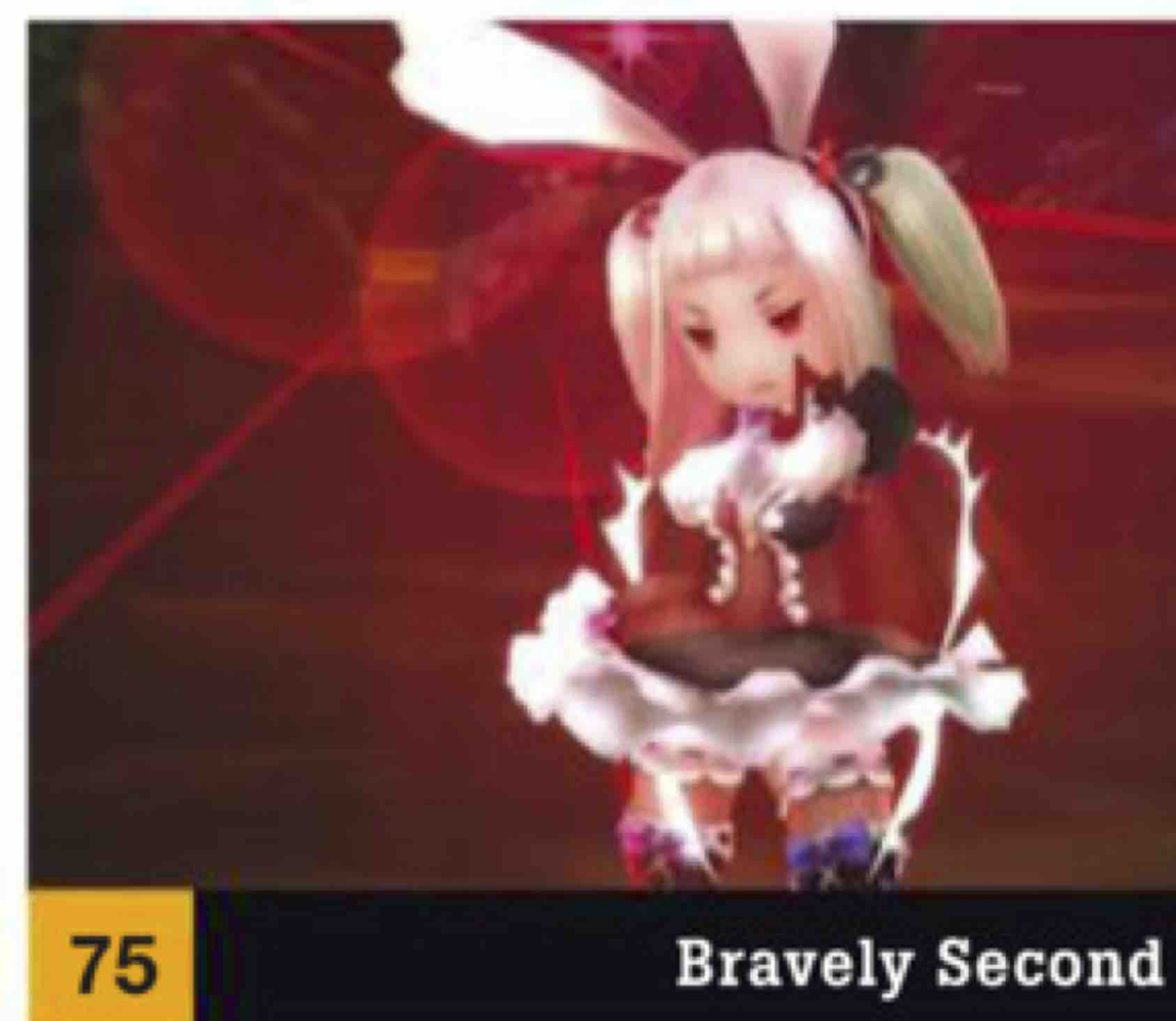
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regulars

» 6 Feedback

Readers assure us they are not tired of Assassin's Creed and don't mind seeing multiple entries in the franchise each year, tell us how they feel about console exclusive games, and nominate cities they would like an open world game to take place in.

» 10 Connect

We have reports from Tokyo Game Show, discuss what's next for Oculus Rift, and look at the current and upcoming offerings of MOBAs. We also chat with Tom "Syndicate" Cassell about reaching one million followers on Twitch.

» 62 Previews

Tearaway crosses over to PlayStation 4, Final Fantasy XV finally comes out of hiding, and we play some more Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain. We also check in on Dying Light and The Crew.

» 78 Reviews

The holiday video game release season is starting, and we have reviews for some of the biggest games of the year including Middle-earth: Shadow of Mordor, Alien: Isolation, Bayonetta 2, Destiny, Super Smash Bros., and Hyrule Warriors.



Neversoft gets some much-deserved love this month, as other readers weigh in on the effect streaming has on single-player game sales, champion their hometowns for potential open-world games, and more.

Two For One

I don't think one of your articles has ever satisfied me as much as your Assassin's Creed Rogue cover story. During all of the other Assassin's Creed games I've played, I've always felt a bit guilty taking down all of the "bad guys." I for one never saw the Templars as really evil. They promoted keeping the general populace safe and pacified under their rule – not what I would call evil. More often than not, I felt the Assassins were the bad guys, spreading anarchy and violence in the streets. I'm glad Rogue finally offers a more in-depth look at being a Templar.

Liam Farrell
via email

I love Assassin's Creed, so I was pretty excited to see a new Assassin on the cover and even more excited to learn that Ubisoft is coming out with two new Assassin's Creed games this year. However, I'm torn over which one I should get. Which Assassin's Creed game are you guys more excited for? Or do you find it a little ridiculous that they're releasing two games for the same series in one year?

Eli Avila
via email

While releasing two Assassin's Creed games on the same day does sound a bit ridiculous, we're glad that Ubisoft didn't compromise its vision for Unity in order to accommodate older hardware, or forsake fans who have yet to take the new-gen plunge. Whether the double dose of Assassin's Creed will cause franchise fatigue remains to be seen, but so far both games are looking great. For more on Unity and Rogue, check out our month of bonus coverage at gameinformer.com/ac.



Must Play?

In Andy's Letter from the Editor (Streaming Killed The Single-Player Star, issue 257), he questioned whether someone would play a linear, single-player game if they already watched someone else play it. I watched Let's Plays of the entire Silent Hill and Resident Evil series, and liked what I saw so much that I bought the games and played them myself. I think good gameplay will cause some players to buy a game they've already watched, and it can even lead to sales that would have been lost otherwise (in my case, I was convinced I'd hate survival horror until I watched those Let's Plays). While the availability of gameplay videos could damage the market for single-player games, I think the opposite is also possible.

Samantha Lienhard
via email

We heard from a number of readers who said they've purchased games after evaluating them via livestreams, and others who say they watch online playthroughs more for the personalities of the hosts than the games being played. While we'll always prefer playing a game for ourselves, the growing popularity of streaming continues to draw new crowds into gaming.

A Poor Substitute

I'm worried Sony is investing too much in online gaming services like Share Play. While playing a game with an online friend even if you don't both own it sounds like fantastic tech, I'd much rather have Sony invest its resources into building real couch co-op experiences, rather than a virtual couch that further separates me from my real friends. Is there any chance that this new generation will bring us together physically rather than virtually?

Anthony Paluso
via email

Sony has indeed spent a lot of money upgrading its online capabilities, but those investments aren't stopping developers from including couch co-op – if anything, the extra horsepower of new-gen systems makes local multiplayer more viable. Even if triple-A games continue to move online, expect to see plenty of developers embrace local multiplayer this generation.

A Tall Tale

I was surprised by your Tales from the Borderlands preview last issue (A Case of He Said, She Said, issue 257). In most previews from media outlets, you hear nothing but optimism. Yet your Tales preview had a very cautious, disappointed tone. I understand why you usually shy away from that tone, as developers can try to take you to task for any lost sales/pre-orders; you seem to save more negative comments only for reviews because of that. Thanks for the preview, though, and we shall see how the game develops!

Phillip Smith
via email

While previews and reviews typically differ in tone, it has nothing to do with potential sales or the hopes of the developer. A review is an evaluation of a final product, and as such is more critical by nature – all compliments and complaints are fair game. Previews, on the other hand, are a look at unfinished experiences; many things are still being tuned and fixed during development, so singling out specific bugs or gameplay issues isn't fair. However, we don't hesitate to share our concerns with underlying conceptual problems, as in the case of our Tales from the Borderlands preview.



Switch Hitter

I know a lot of people complain about console-exclusive games and features, but I am a big supporter of this business model. I think exclusives are one of the biggest ways the three major companies compete with each other, and this competition drives innovation. I also think exclusive games influence people's purchasing decisions. I know I buy every generation of the PlayStation for Sony's excellent first-party games. Despite my support for exclusives, I am very annoyed and somewhat jealous that Sunset Overdrive, an Xbox One exclusive, is being developed by Insomniac. Along with Sucker Punch and Naughty Dog, Insomniac has made some of the best Sony-exclusive games. What gives? How could they have switched to the other side?

E.J. Micielica
via email

Sounds like you just got bit by your own love of exclusives, E.J. While Insomniac has made several series for Sony over the years, including Ratchet & Clank and Resistance, the developer is still independently owned and free to create games for whichever console(s) it pleases. You can't blame Microsoft for pursuing its own exclusives, or Insomniac for taking a good deal – but at least you can find comfort in your own logic that Sunset Overdrive may spur Sony to come up with more innovative titles of its own.

Short Answers To Readers' Burning Questions:

"Why was Classic GI discontinued? Is there any possibility it could come back?"

It was never discontinued, and it is in this very issue, so the odds of it coming back are very good.

"Do you ever envision a day when the whole community can just have conversations without all the shouting matches and labeling?"

That sure would be nice. But no. No, we don't.

"Did you know about the game you suck?"

You really need to work on your insults.

Worst News Tip Of The Month:

"You should post the answer to the question of the month in the magazine."

Question Of The Month:

What's the game you've put the most hours into and why?

gi spy



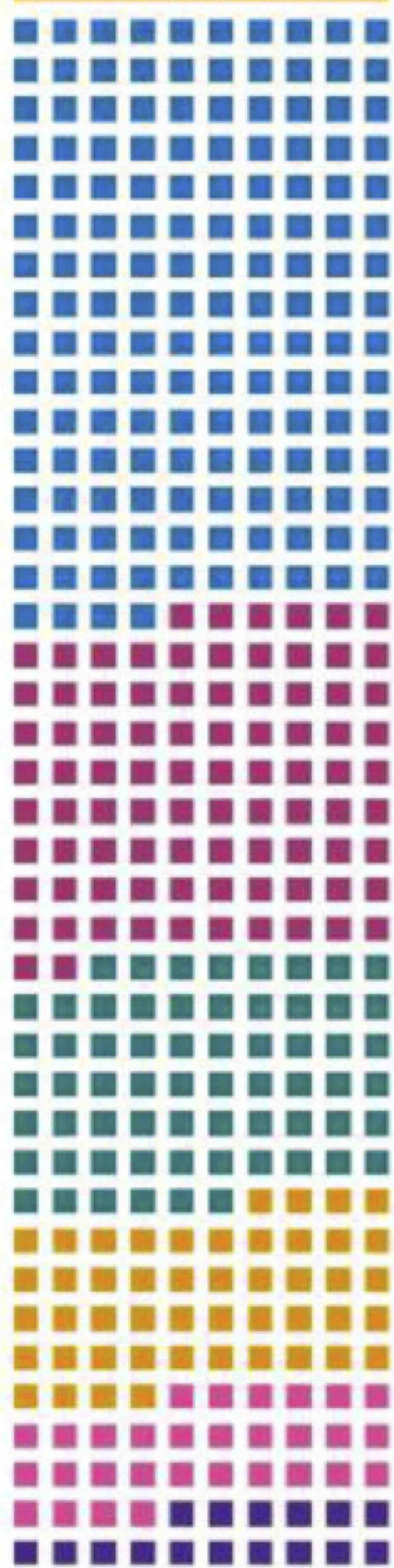
(Left) We're not sure why Mike wanted to make the "cowabunga" hand sign with famed designer and Final Fantasy creator Hironobu Sakaguchi, but Sakaguchi was polite enough to oblige

(Right) The random hand gestures continue with Nintendo's Hisashi Nogami, Tsubasa Sakaguchi, and translator Robert Tunstall. We really have no idea what they're doing

PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

GI SPY
continued on page 8

On Your Mind



- **36%** Open-World Tourists
- **22%** Assassin's Creed Adoration
- **16%** Fall Release Schedule Excitement
- **12%** R.I.P. Neversoft
- **10%** Livestream Fans
- **04%** Fans Of Assassin's Creed "Rouge"



Oh, The Places You'll Go

In issue 257, we asked readers what city they'd like to see featured in an open-world series. Unsurprisingly, most respondents selfishly picked their own cities, while the best replies correctly chose Minneapolis. Here are some responses.

I would want Minneapolis and St. Paul in a Grand Theft Auto game, because I think it would be interesting to have two different cities in the game. Basically, I just want them to be in it because I live there. I'm sure I am not the only one who wants to cause chaos in my own city.

Zachary Marien

I believe that Tokyo would be the best city due to its sheer size and the rich culture and lore that surrounds the city. It is the perfect blend of old and new, with towering buildings and ancient structures sharing space. Tokyo would be a great place to do a game that requires a current-day protagonist to find ancient artifacts underneath or around the city.

Brenden Pannell

Washington, D.C., has always seemed like the perfect fit for a Grand Theft Auto game to me. Doing missions for the government, sleazy politicians, agents of foreign governments, union bosses, greedy corporate lobbyists or other special interests – there are so many great story possibilities that would be available by placing the game in the nation's capital.

Tim Malone

I would love to see a post-apocalyptic Fallout-type game featuring the Tampa Bay area in Florida. I could totally see the bay area as a main hub for the survivors of the area using Interstate 4 to access Orlando for various missions. Just imagine running around a desolated Disney World or Universal Studios!

Jason Hetterich

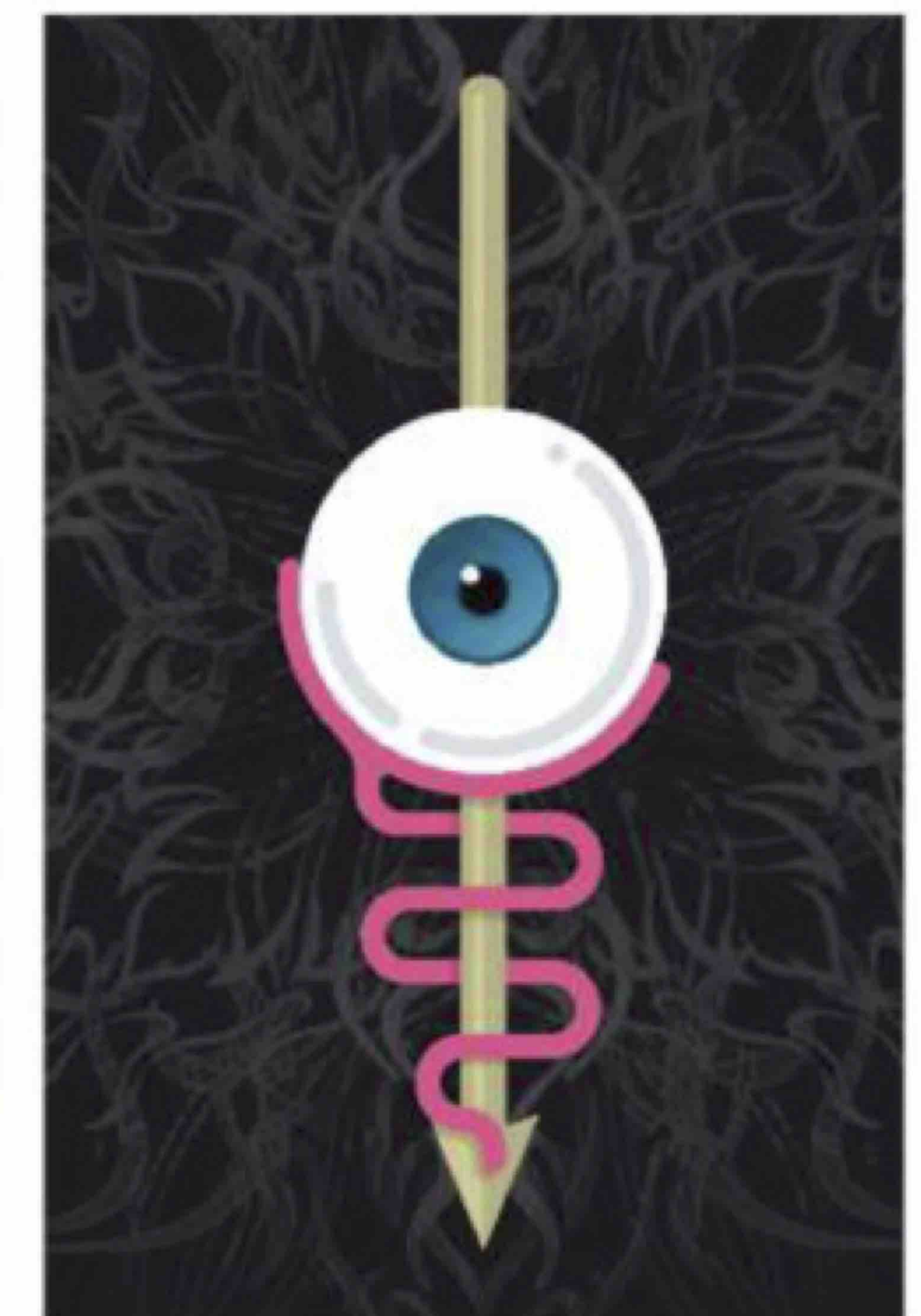
Never Say Die

I loved your interview with Joel Jewett and Scott Pease (20 Years of Neversoft, issue 257). It was awesome hearing about the history of the developer, from the struggles to the highlights. It's great seeing how passionate they were for their games, and their careers showed it; not many studios get one game out, and Neversoft was able to be ahead of the curve for 20 years. Kudos, Joel and Scott, and best of luck on your future endeavors.

Brad Cahill
via email

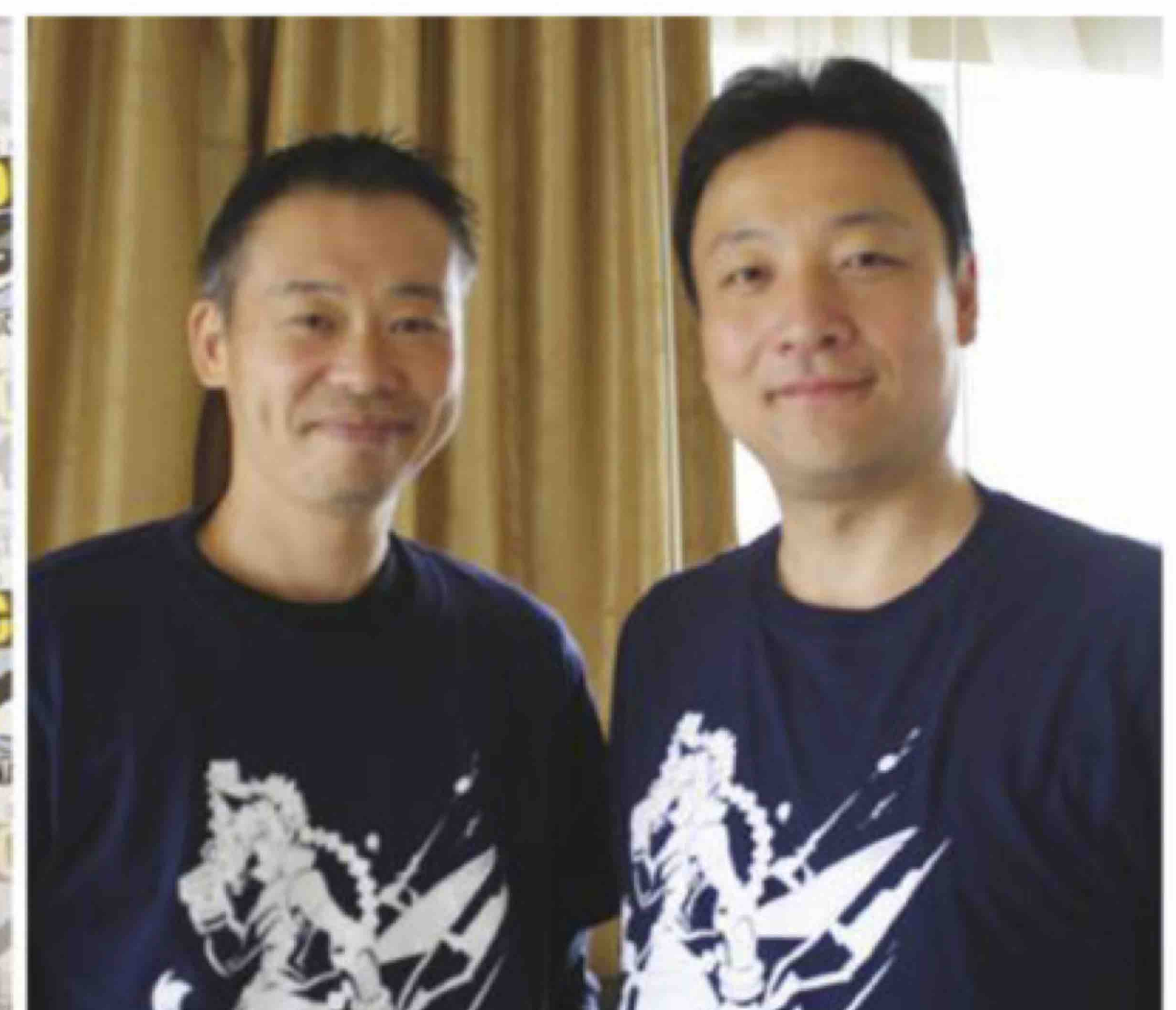
I just finished reading 20 Years of Neversoft. I'm sad to see such a great company disbanding. I need to thank Joel and Scott for making the Tony Hawk's Pro Skater franchise. Without it, I never would have met my significant other 11 years ago while playing THPS 4 online. We fell in love while playing Tony Hawk's Underground. We are still together today and are raising one heck of a gamer daughter. Thank you, Joel and Scott; the magic you created will be missed!

Molly F.
via email



(Left) Sega's former director of marketing Al Nilsen and CEO Tom Kalinske were on hand at this year's San Diego Comic-Con to discuss the glory days of the Sega Genesis and Sonic the Hedgehog

(Right) Concept CEO Keiji Inafune and Inti Creates CEO Takuya Aizu are so excited about Azure Striker Gunvolt that they weren't even embarrassed that they showed up to PAX wearing the same shirt



1



WINNER

1 Jimmy

Link only plays the lamest instruments

2 Dylan Peter Villegas

We don't care how deadly Poison Ivy is, plants aren't scary

3 Evan Kowalski

It takes Commander Shepherd 45 minutes to de-suit for a bathroom break

4 Lulu Curiel

Behold, the Q-tip tentacle beast!

5 Adriel Oviedo

Here's a deep cut: This art is inspired by the Sonic game on Game Gear

gallery



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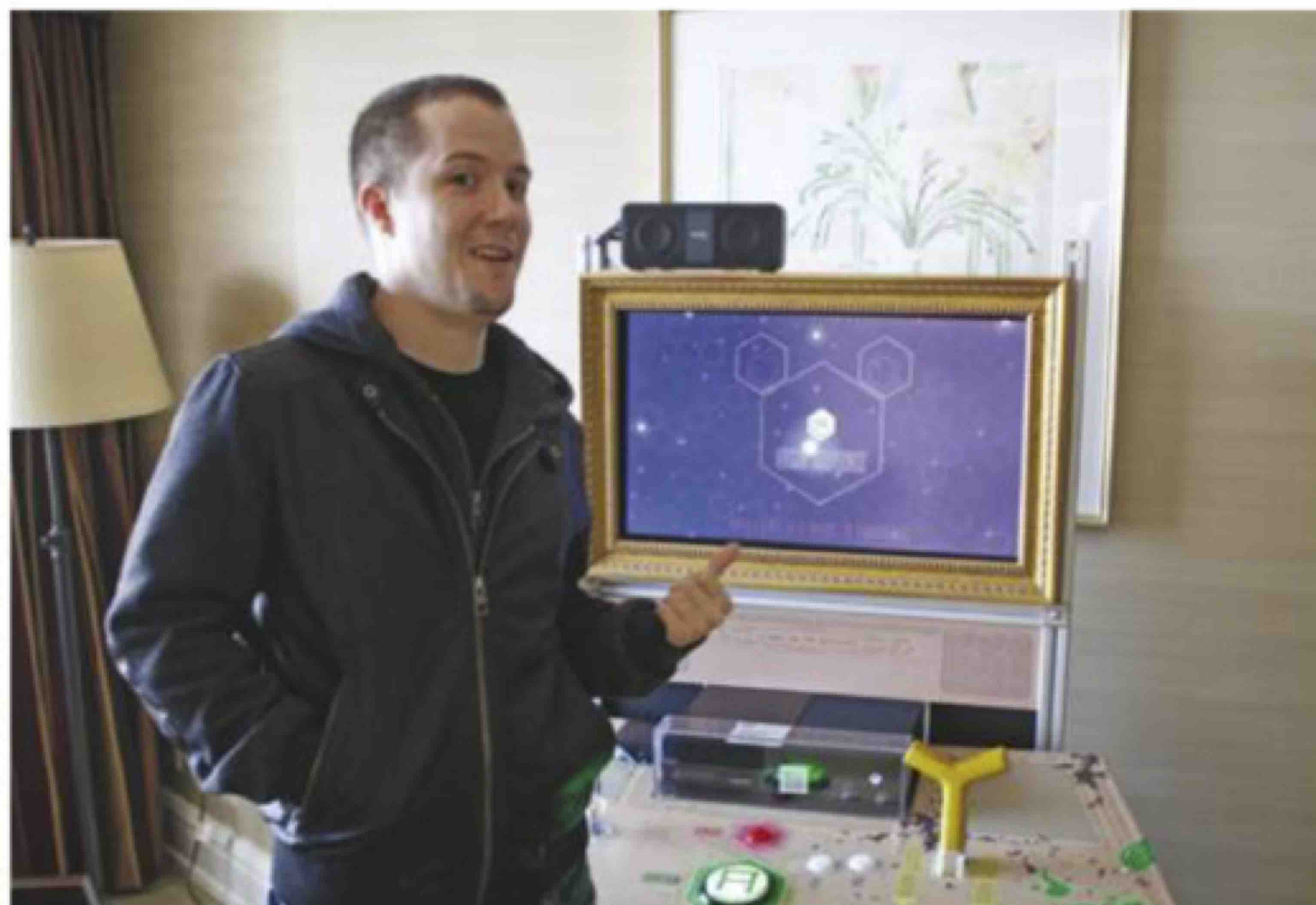
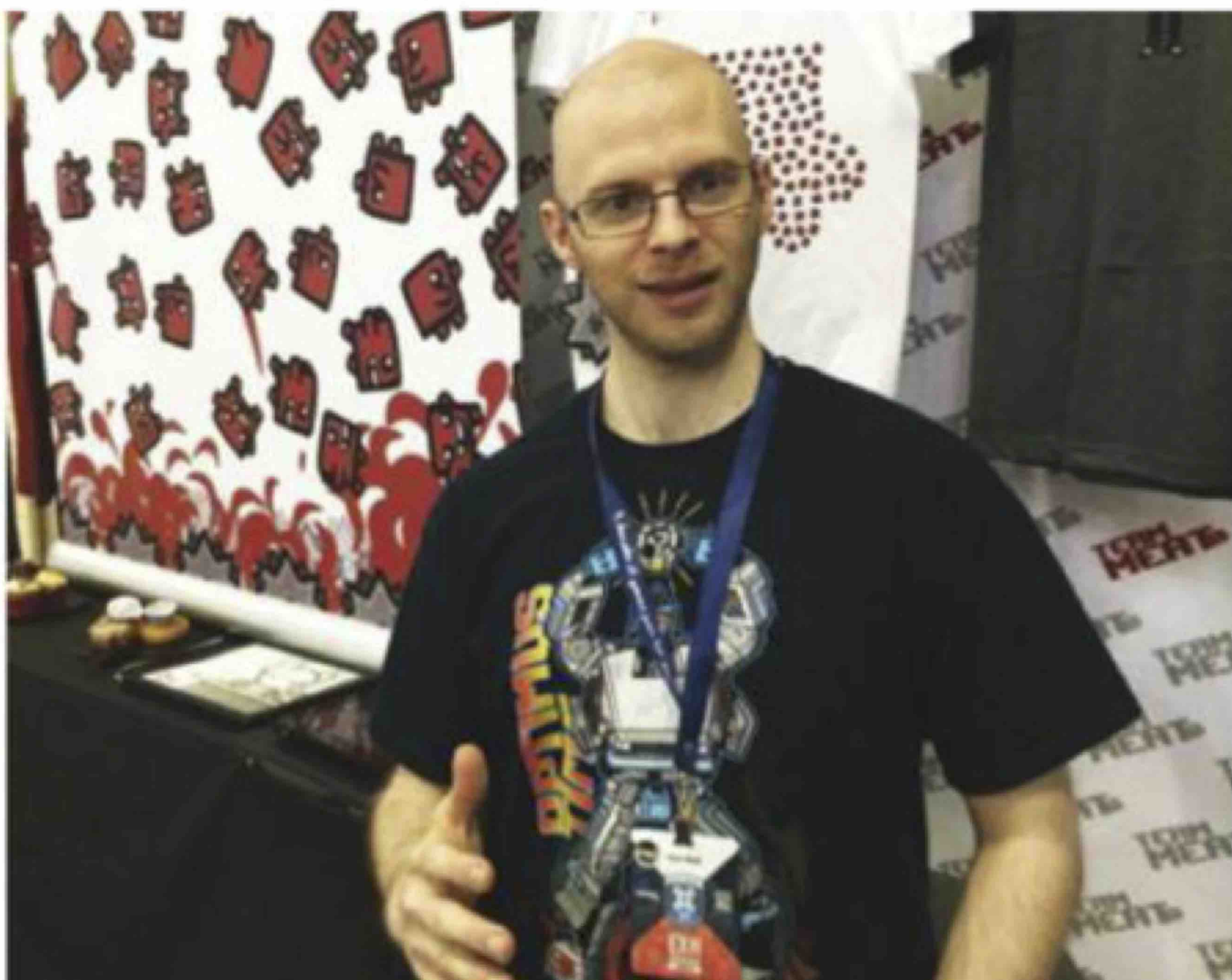


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(Left) If Team Meat's Tommy Refenes looks a little surprised, that's because we jumped out of the crowd and took this picture without warning. We call it guerilla photography **(Right)** The Behemoth's "Game 4" doesn't have an official title yet, but it does have an awesome arcade cabinet, which director Dan Paladin showed us at PAX



NOTABLES

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Tokyo Game Show 2014

The Other Convention Still Shines

The Tokyo Game Show may look like E3, but it sure doesn't feel like it anymore. Before the rise of other conventions like PAX and Gamescom, TGS and E3 were two sides of the same coin – analogous video game events tailored to their specific regions. Today, despite the elaborate booths, bustling crowds, and hands-on demos, the tone in Tokyo is vastly different from what we experience in Los Angeles every summer.

A cloud of expectations surrounds E3 every year. We look forward to new announcements and major reveals to map out the direction gaming will take for the coming year. For TGS, the sense of anticipation and importance just cannot compare; with other conventions stealing the spotlight, it no longer has the same reach. Nintendo usually skips the show entirely, and this year saw Sony and Microsoft remain quiet on any major news regarding their games or hardware.

by Joe Juba



Tokyo Game No-Shows

The Tokyo Game Show brought us news on many games, but several high-profile titles from Japanese developers were conspicuously absent from the event. We didn't hear a peep about **The Last Guardian**, which is sad but unsurprising at this point. Atlus put out a new trailer (and announced a PS4 release) for **Persona 5** the week before TGS, but didn't have anything new beyond that on the show floor. Square Enix only mentioned **Kingdom Hearts III** as it relates to Tetsuya Nomura leaving the Final Fantasy XV project. Suda 51's **Let It Die** was also nowhere to be seen. Thanks to Nintendo's traditional absence, we also didn't learn anything new about upcoming Wii U titles like **Super Smash Bros.** and **Xenoblade Chronicles X**.

Some people might say publishers' restraint during this show is confirmation of the decline of the Japanese gaming market, but you only need to see the thousands of people lined up outside of the Makuhari Messe to realize TGS is still important. As a consumer-facing event, the show floor is open to the public for half of its four-day run. With less PR and posturing, the crowd's excitement and unbridled enthusiasm takes precedence over the desire to appeal to the press. It puts games from genres that are considered niche on a global scale – like romance and JRPG – front and center. People wait in line for hours. Security guards constantly remind attendees not to run in the hall. A special courtyard is set aside for cosplayers. The 3DS Street Passes max out in minutes.

That is the audience for TGS. The hands-on gameplay on the show floor isn't always brand new, and the surprises are few, but developers seem to enjoy the opportunity to share their games with a grateful and eager public.

Big Events

Despite a lack of jaw-dropping announcements, TGS 2014 was far from a barren wasteland when it comes to gaming news. Using press releases, trailers, and stage demos, we saw and learned more about some of the most anticipated games on the horizon.

At this point, most fans just assume major gaming events will come and go with no official mention of Final Fantasy XV, but Square Enix surprised us with two interesting pieces of news. First, the title has undergone a change in leadership, and is

now being directed by Hajime Tabata (Crisis Core: Final Fantasy VII, Final Fantasy Type-0) instead of Tetsuya Nomura. Square Enix says the move allows Nomura to focus on Kingdom Hearts III, but the change appears more aimed at finishing Final Fantasy XV – a game in development over eight years under Nomura's supervision.

Tabata seems to be making progress already; the second piece of news regarding the title is Square Enix will release a demo of Final Fantasy XV in 2015 called Episode Duscae. A free voucher for the demo will be included with Final Fantasy Type-0 HD, though Episode Duscae's release date and price (for those who don't buy Type-0) were not specified. For more details and thoughts from Tabata himself, read our Final Fantasy XV preview on page 72.

Konami used TGS as a chance to show off more of Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain, with a new trailer and a stage demo highlighting the new buddy system in action (page 62). Bandai Namco offered some hands-on time with Tales of Zestiria (page 71), and NIS released the first substantial details about the upcoming Disgaea 5. The show also brought with it the surprise release of D4: Dark Dreams Don't Die, the episodic Xbox One-exclusive title from Hidetaka "Swery" Suehiro of Deadly Premonition fame (page 92).

Some titles were only present as trailers, but that didn't make them any less exciting. We got new looks at Sony's Bloodborne, Capcom's Deep Down, and Bethesda's The Evil Within. Even though we didn't get to play new content for these titles, the videos succeeded in drumming up plenty of enthusiasm.

Language Barrier

For North American gamers, one of the pitfalls of TGS is getting your hopes too high. Amid the big-name franchises bound for worldwide releases are smaller and more specialized games that may never reach our shores. These aren't always one-off games in unknown series; sometimes titles with popular pedigrees don't get localized outside of Japan.

Square Enix has yet to announce any English language plans for Final Fantasy Explorers and Bravely Second, despite the cachet those names currently carry in North America. The Great Ace Attorney from Capcom is also in limbo, especially considering the last game in the series skipped retail shelves in favor of a download-only release. Sega's cooperative action/RPG Phantasy Star Nova (from veteran developer Tri-Ace) also had a good showing, but the Phantasy Star name doesn't mean what it once did.

Learning more about these titles is one of the unique benefits of TGS. It can also be bittersweet – seeing something you want, but may never get. Ultimately, all you can do is wait, show your support and enthusiasm, and hope that publishers get the message.

The Tokyo Game Show is a strange confluence of well-known games, niche titles on the fringes, and zany things that would never have a shot at success anywhere but Japan. TGS may not be the spectacle it once was, but with so many cool games on display in one form or another, it continues to be an entertaining showcase for industry professionals and fans alike. ✦



TGS By The Numbers

Total attendees in 2014: 251,832
Total attendees in 2013: 270,197

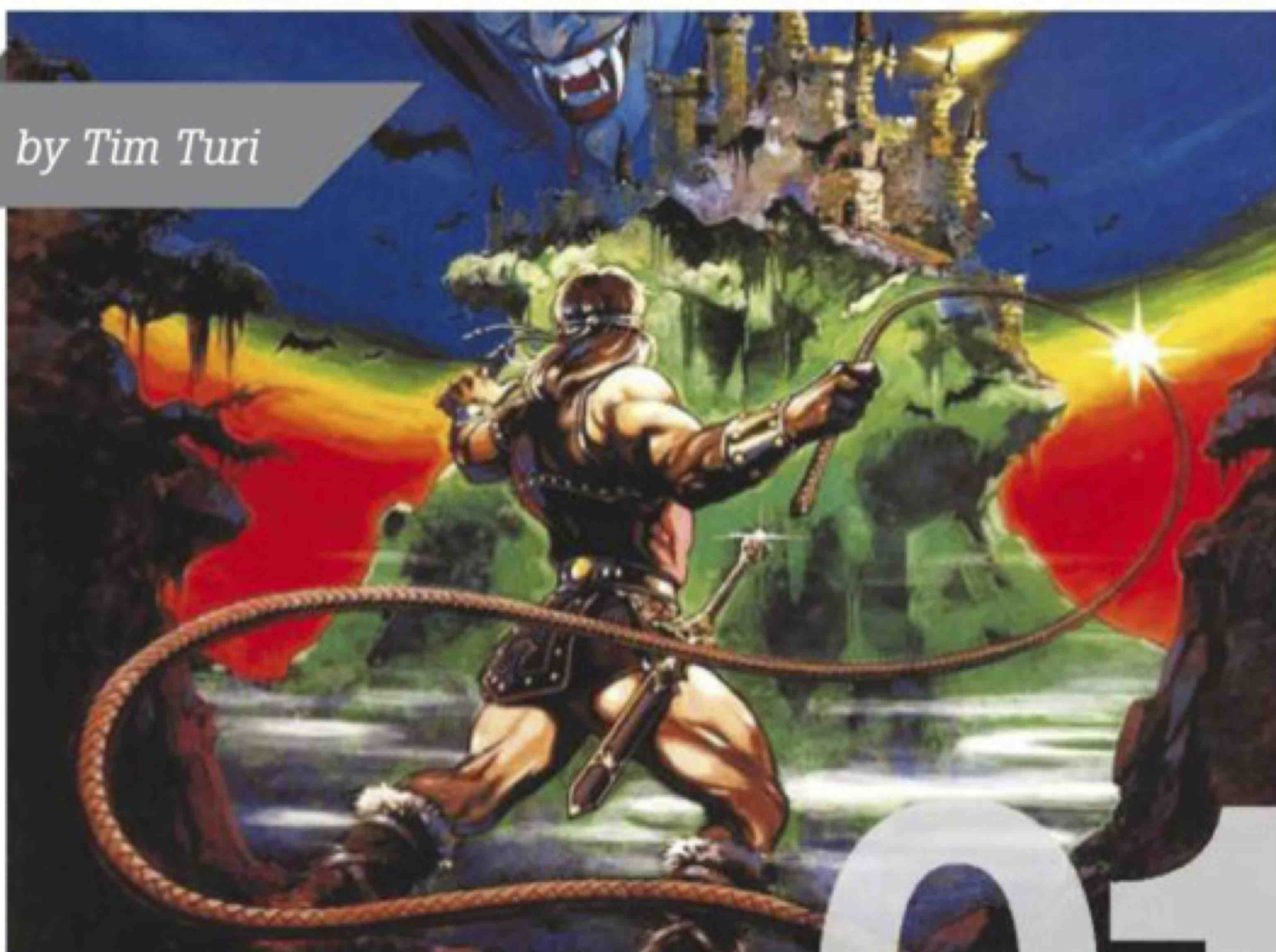
Number of exhibitors: 421
Total games shown: 1,364
Number of role-playing games: 138
Number of racing games: 7

Number of PlayStation 4 games: 42
Number of Xbox One games: 24
Number of Wii U games: 13
Number of iOS games: 259



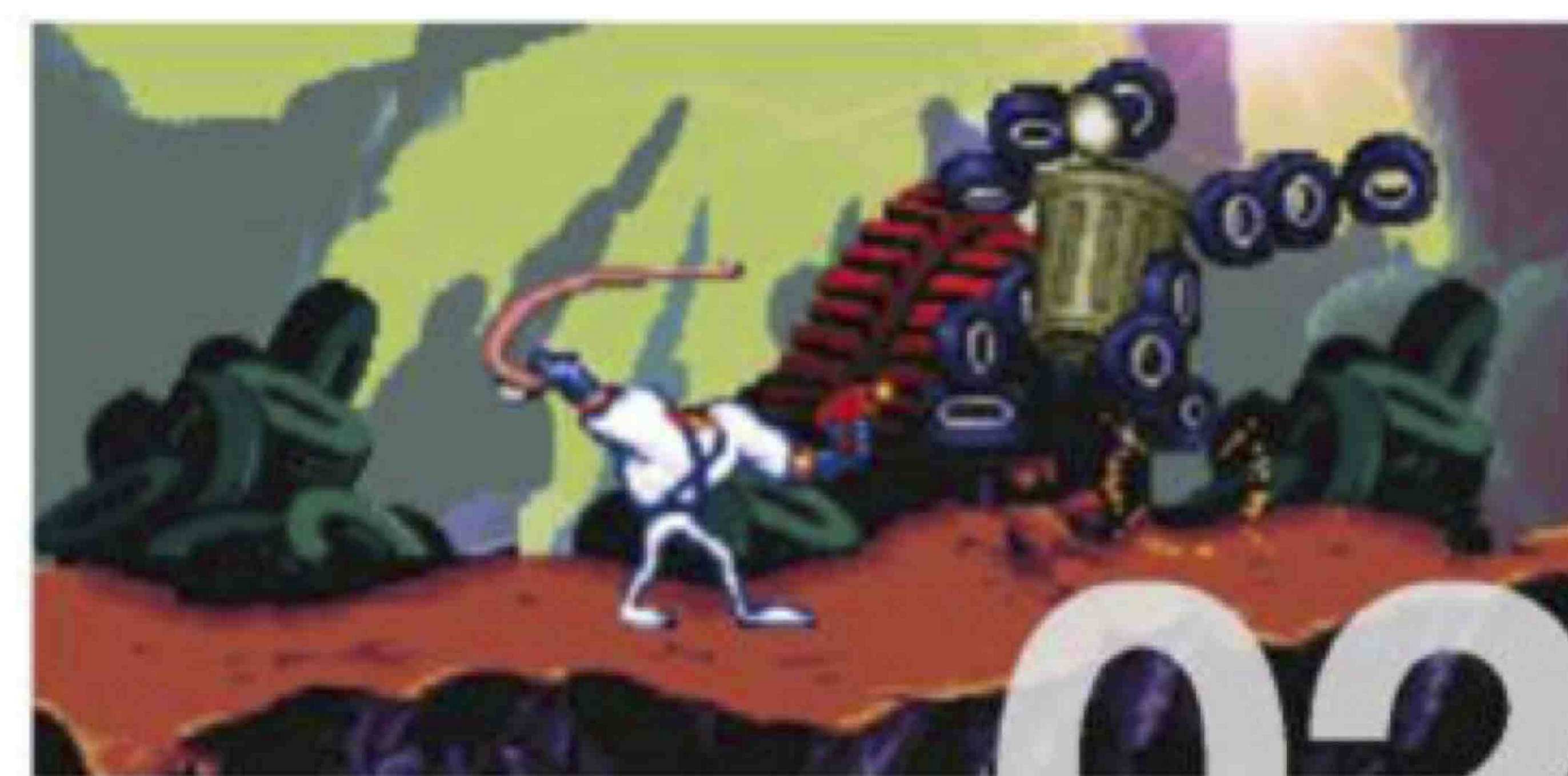
Whips

by Tim Turi



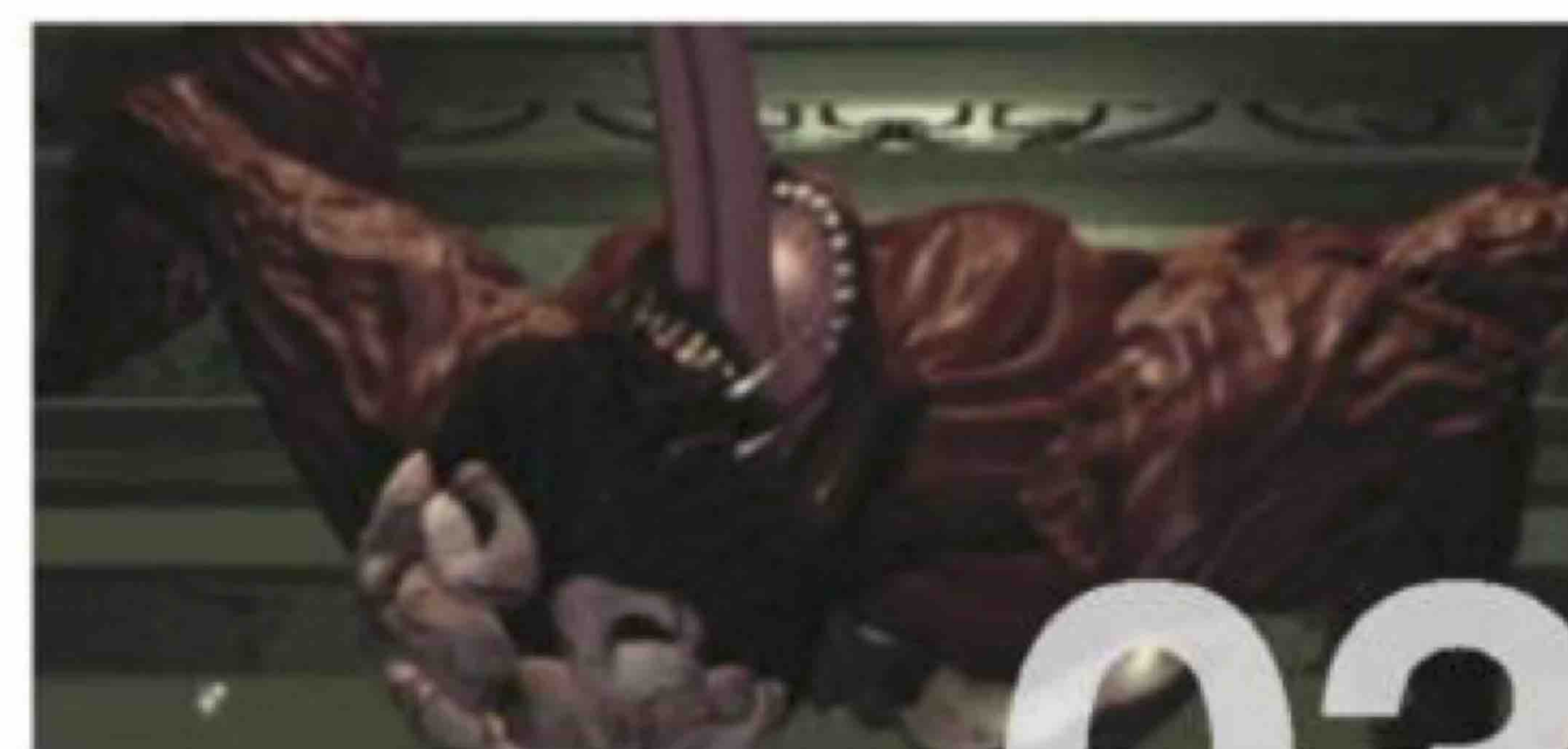
Vampire Killer - Castlevania

When slaying vampires, most people think of stakes and crosses. The Belmont clan flies in the face of these conventions by battling with this snappy heirloom. The Vampire Killer can be upgraded from a standard leather whip to a brutal spiked chain. It's not the most obvious bet, but it's been enough to defeat Dracula several dozen times.



Earthworm Jim - Earthworm Jim

Normally, brandishing an overgrown night crawler would more likely get you laughed off the battlefield than featured on a prestigious Top 10 list. Earthworm Jim not only gets a pass, but high honors for being able to use himself as a slimy whip.



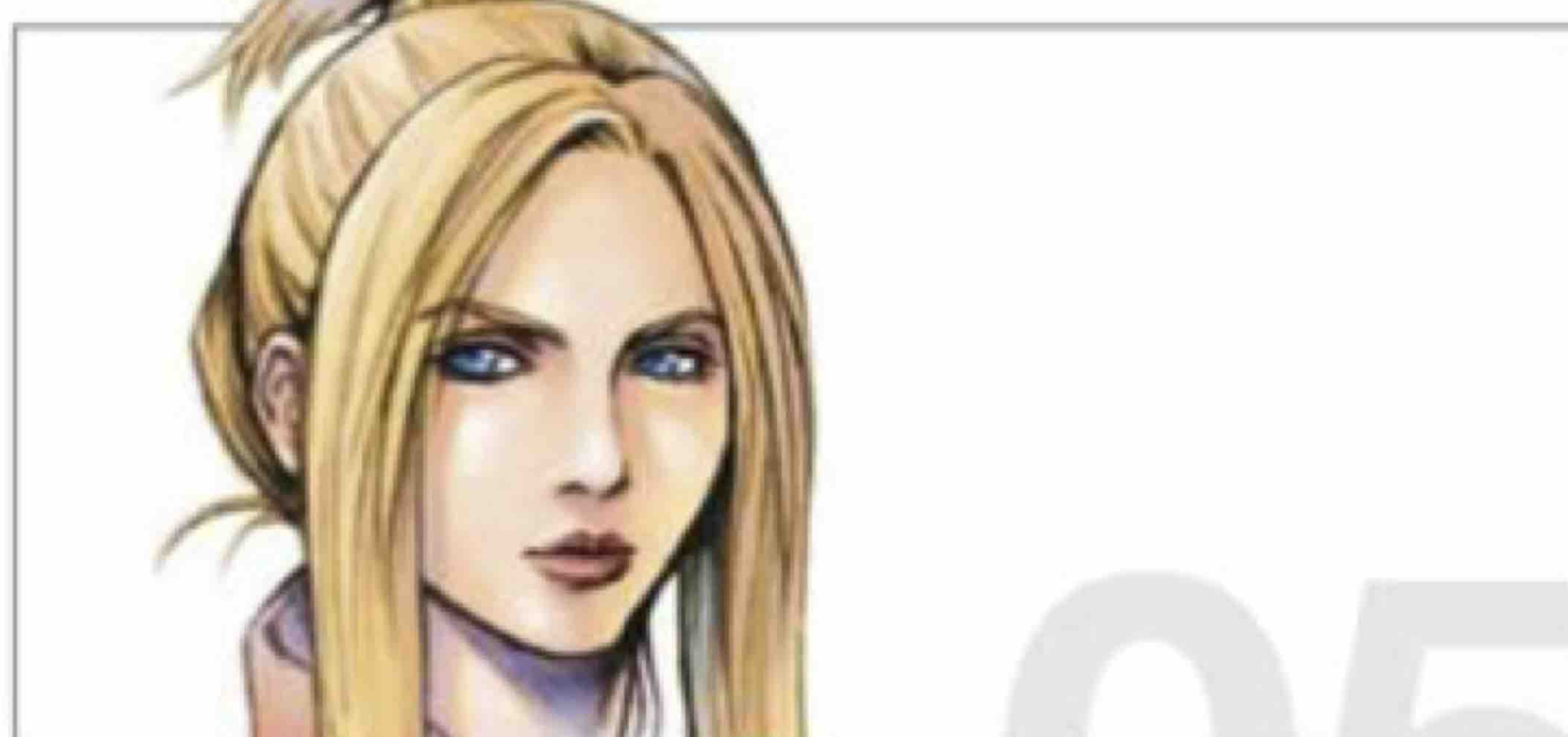
Licker Tongue - Resident Evil 2

Leon and Claire first encounter these super-mutated zombies in the bloody halls of the Raccoon City Police Department. These skinless freaks get their namesake by violently "licking" their prey with a six-foot long tongue. These slobbery attacks are enough to stun their victims and set them up for a swift beheading.



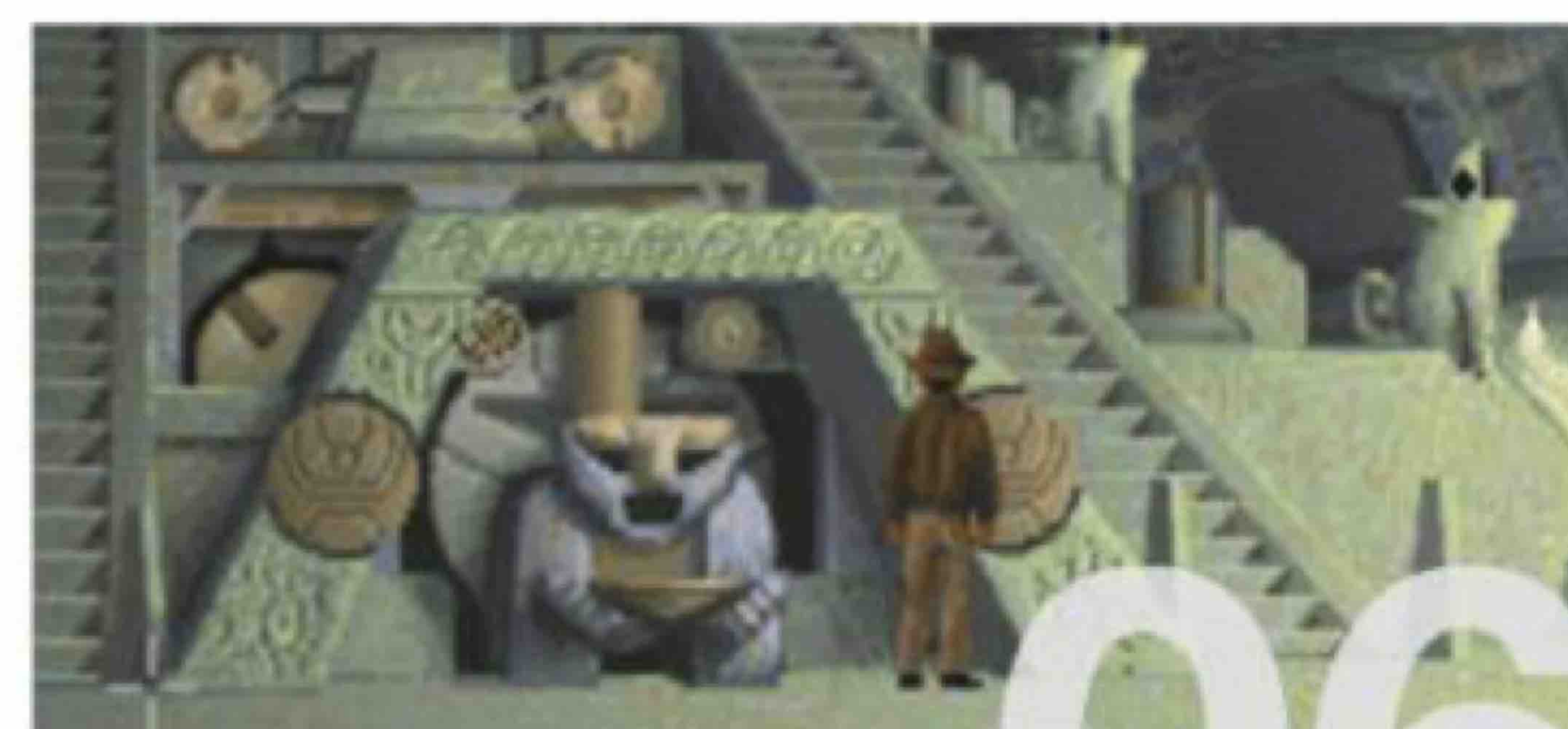
Energy Leash - Bulletstorm

Grayson Hunt is a smart-mouthed ass-kicker that loves blasting his foes to bits with style. His energy leash helps him keep the kills coming with signature flair. This handy tool can lasso enemies from across the battlefield, sending them into the air for an impromptu trap-shooting session.



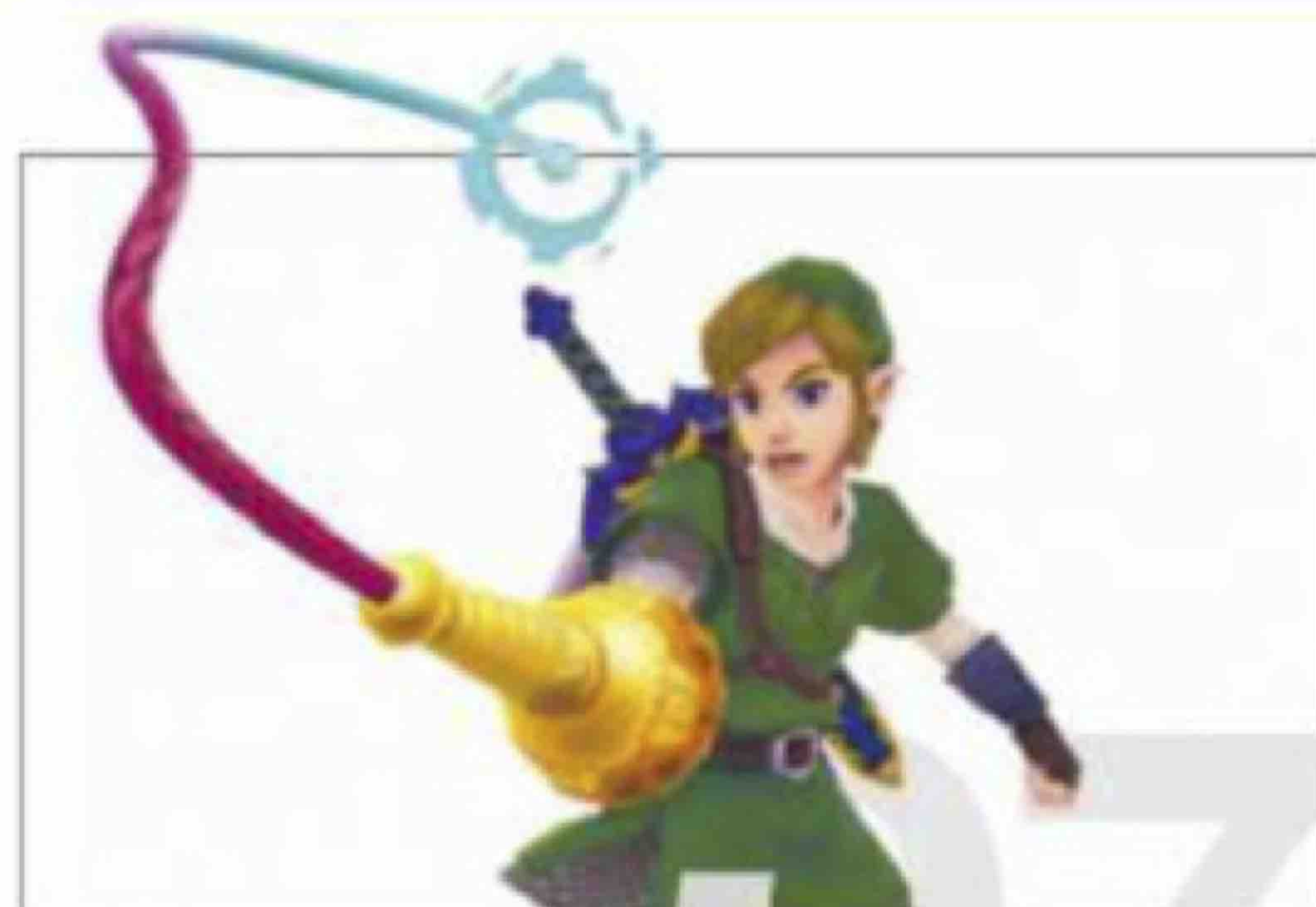
Save the Queen - Final Fantasy VIII

At a glance, Quistis is an unassuming teacher in FF VIII's Balamb Garden. But on the battlefield, she wields a compact metal whip that unfolds to deliver justice on the monsters of the world. The deadly Save the Queen is crafted with energy crystals, spikes, and most importantly the tentacles of noxious malboros.



Bullwhip - Indiana Jones and the Fate of Atlantis

Indy and his infamous whip didn't get their start in video games, but the well-worn bullwhip plays a key role in this LucasArts adventure game. Always at Indy's side, the bullwhip is perfect for everything from stunning Nazis to swinging across chasms.



Whip

The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword
Link acquires this shiny whip after a battle with a multi-limbed skeletal warrior in the Ancient Cistern. The whip lets Link grab items and switches from far away, and the glowing light orb on the tip can even damage certain enemies.



Plasma Whip

Super Smash Bros. Brawl
Samus Aran likes to collect a variety of weapons throughout her intergalactic missions, from powerful missiles to energy beams that grapple onto enemies. The minimalist Zero Suit Samus may have fewer toys at her disposal, but her plasma whip helps make up for the lighter arsenal.



Hair

Kabuki Quantum Fighter
Like a Slayer fan with a long mane rocking out on the outskirts of a mosh pit, this shaggy warrior uses his ginger locks as a whip to destroy evil dogs and giant fire-breathing skulls.



Linda's Whip - Double Dragon

A bunch of thugs punched your girlfriend in the gut and promptly kidnapped her, so you're willing to use whatever tools you can to get her back. The deceptively deadly Linda carries one of the most useful weapons – a chain whip.

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VIRTUAL PROGRESS



Oculus Rift takes another step closer to reality

As developers, investors, and press gathered in Los Angeles recently for the first Oculus Connect event, it was clear something had changed for Palmer Luckey's little Kickstarter project. Looking at a gathering of 1,000 people, with even more watching livestreams of CEO Brendan Iribe, chief scientist Michael Abrash, and chief technology officer John Carmack, it's easy to land on the obvious answer: Facebook's \$2 billion bet on virtual reality.

by Mike Futter



It wasn't that simple, though. Confidence was in the air. When we last met with Iribe, Luckey, and vice president of product Nate Mitchell at GDC this year (right before the Facebook acquisition), there was still an atmosphere of uncertainty. The team was proud of the newly announced second developer kit (DK2), but there was talk about survival and inching toward a consumer product.

Now, the senior team (which has swelled with the hiring of technology titans since Facebook purchased the company) has put doubt out of their minds. Virtual reality is going to happen, and the company is one step closer.

Oculus unveiled its next "feature prototype" at the event called "Crescent Bay," which is a leap forward from even the recently shipped DK2 units. The new head-mounted displays, which Oculus has made lighter than the current developer kits, are covered in LEDs for positional tracking.

If you have been keeping up with virtual reality progress, this will sound very similar to the "Crystal Cove" demo displayed at CES in January 2014. This time though, the sensors are also located on the back of the head, similar to what is offered by Sony's Project Morpheus prototypes.

Oculus wasn't terribly forthcoming with the technical specs. The resolution? Improved from the 1080p of the DK2. The field of view? Also increased beyond the 100 degrees in the current devkit. Weight? Noticeably lighter than what's currently available.

The 20 or so headsets available for demonstrations at Oculus Connect were handmade at the company's headquarters just



days before the event. The Crescent Bay demo was also the first time Oculus encouraged us to stand while using one of its products. The company has been emphatic that the Rift is designed as a seated experience, which made us take note.

"To give the strongest sense of presence, standing up helps," Iribe says. "Sitting down, it's still incredibly impactful, and I did the room many times sitting down. Standing up, it is a little more awesome. Just the way the brain works, I'm a little more convinced. Sitting down, you're feeling [the chair]. When you're standing up, and all there is are your clothes on your body, you're less reminded that you're not really there. We wanted to give the strongest sense of presence for everybody."

The Crescent Bay demo consisted of a number of scenes that showed off the positional tracking, positional audio, and improved clarity. The scene opens in a submarine, with a periscope immediately in front and the claustrophobic electronics and machinery whirring and thumping around.

I tried to reach out and grab the handles of the cylinder, but the company still isn't ready to reveal its input device. The scene faded and was replaced with a toothy dinosaur in a black room.

The creature sniffed the air and roared in my direction. Turning my head made clear that the built-in headphones (which weren't high quality) were delivering directionally based sound. The software for positional audio is as important as the quality of the hardware.

The demo progressed through a number of scenes, including a small town with a circling airplane overhead, bustling traffic, and people milling about. The paper aesthetic was adorable, and I was astounded as I leaned to examine the finer details.

One of the houses was in flames, as firefighters attempted to put it out. I could look inside the windows and see one of the residents pacing and crying. The detail was extraordinary.

The 10-minute demo closed with a brief clip developed by Epic Games in Unreal Engine 4. "Showdown" walks players down a city street as police take aim at a rampaging mech.

As the camera moves us closer to the hulking beast, bullets fly in slow motion, their contrails rippling the air. I move out of their way, because it just feels like the right thing to do.

As the carnage ramps up, concrete starts flying, glass shatters, and explosions boom. A car flips overhead, and looking up reveals terrified passengers, most likely in their final moments. Reaching the metallic beast elicits one last roar, signaling the end of my time with Crescent Bay and another step closer to bringing a consumer model into our homes.

Oculus still isn't committing to a timeline, but in conversation with Iribe, it's clear that visuals and audio are the two main components that need to be in place before launch. It's unlikely that a custom input device will be ready in time though, which means a consumer model isn't the end of the road. It's just the beginning. ♦



Samsung Gear VR

Oculus has split its development efforts into two branches. Not only is it working on a PC-based consumer headset, but the company has teamed up with Samsung to make mobile virtual reality possible.

The Samsung Gear VR will be released in an "innovator edition" this fall as a companion device for the Note 4 Android phone. All you need do is plug the phone in and place the cover on the head-mounted display.

Using the device is simple, with a touch-sensitive pad on the right temple with a back button above it. Targeting in the Oculus Home menu is handled with head positioning, and a tap of the touchpad moves forward.

A number of video, media, and game applications are available for the Gear VR. Video options are offered in either virtual cinema or 360-degree offerings (like the *Pacific Rim Jaeger Pilot* demo). Music options include Harmonix VR, an interactive visualizer that offers scene-based options activated by focusing on objects in the environment. Games run the gamut from third-person action to atmospheric puzzle to the (slightly nauseating) first-person version of Temple Run.

Because Gear VR doesn't yet offer six degrees of freedom (you can't lean into a scene), it's currently best for media consumption. It does have a visual passthrough (activated by holding the back button) so you can check in on the world around you. Gear VR also offers direct sound from the Note 4.

Mobile VR is going to be a reality soon. Expect to start seeing them in the next few months.



Twitch's Most Popular Streamer Shares His Journey

Watching video game-oriented streams has become a popular pastime for many gamers to the point where many teens prefer PewDiePie or Smosh over traditional Hollywood entertainers. Tom Cassell, who goes by the name Syndicate, recently became the first person (or company for that matter) to reach one million followers on the increasingly popular Twitch streaming service.

Tom
"Syndicate"
Cassell

Occupation

Professional streamer,
game developer

Twitter

www.twitch.tv/syndicate

Location

Manchester, U.K.

by Kyle Hilliard

How did this Manchester, U.K. native turn his love for games into a career as an Internet phenomenon? It all started with his love of games at a young age. "My super, super earliest memories would be my uncle actually playing Sega Mega Drive," Cassell says.

He played variety of games growing up, despite his parents' reticence, but his obsession truly started when a friend introduced him to Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare. "I wanted to be a pro at it," Cassell says. "I wanted to do MLG, but then I kind of got bored of the competitive side of it. As time progressed and new games came out, I moved on to Call of Duty Zombies." With this offshoot mode, Cassell found his niche that would later bloom into a much larger presence in the world of Let's Plays. He made video tutorials for the popular Call of Duty mode, and slowly began to foster his audience.

As Cassell gained momentum online, he realized he wanted to

not only talk about games, but make them as well. He enrolled in Hyde Clarendon Sixth Form College to learn how to do so, but didn't stay. One of Cassell's tutors saw his potential in the world of online video, and encouraged him to drop out, with the caveat that he could return if it didn't work out.

Cassell made a name for himself on YouTube, and currently has more than eight million subscribers, but over time gravitated toward streaming. "I remember doing super small streams on Justin.tv, like way back in the day when it wasn't even known as a gaming site – it was just a place where you could live stream," Cassell says, recalling only having a handful of viewers. He tried out Twitch early on after receiving requests from his audience, gaining 30,000 subscribers in a short amount of time. Once YouTube implemented streaming, however, he moved his streaming efforts there.

After streaming on YouTube

for two years, Minecraft (a game Cassell still streams often) convinced him to jump back over to Twitch thanks to its integrated streaming feature. "I got a really good response with my audience and new people on there," Cassell says. "I decided, screw it – let's try to set a goal of hitting a million before Riot Games and be the first person to do it."

Since then, Cassell has put his video efforts toward Twitch almost entirely. He thinks it has been worth it, even if it hasn't technically paid off. "You don't make more money off of Twitch, that's a fact. You just don't," Cassell says. "On the financial side of things, you are better off if you do it on YouTube. But...I love having a live audience and to be able to react and respond with them at any given moment on the spot... That's why I do it."

Cassell set his goal at hitting a million followers, but even Twitch's overseers weren't sure he could beat an established

company like Riot. When he saw himself getting close, Cassell decided to marathon Call of Duty Zombies. He even abandoned a fully paid trip from Microsoft to attend Gamescom so he could stay competitive with Riot. "I was ecstatic – my face was like purely pumped," Cassell says about crossing the one million mark, which happened midstream. "My audience is an absolute tank, and I cannot thank them enough for helping me achieve it. I couldn't be more proud of my audience."

Today, Cassell is still streaming on Twitch and filling out his YouTube channel, and he hopes to keep doing so for the foreseeable future. He doesn't think Twitch is a fad, especially considering the eSports implications of the website.

Cassell's popularity has allowed him to pursue his goal of getting into game development. He recently founded a company called 3BlackDot, which has grand plans for bringing new games to the world. ♦

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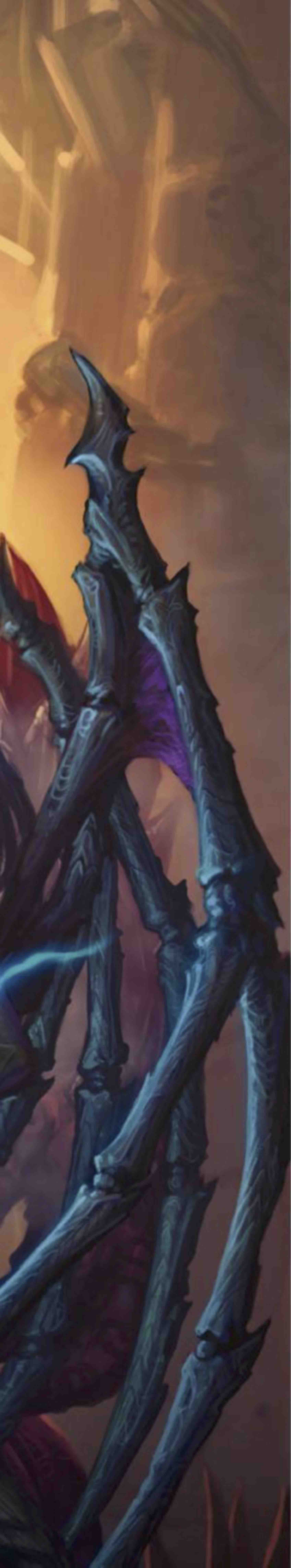
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MOBA EVOLVED

Following in the massive footsteps of League of Legends and Dota 2, several developers are wading into the MOBA scene with big ambitions and new ideas



As the multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) genre has risen to prominence on the PC and in the eSports scene, imitation has become the sincerest form of flattery. While a number of games are simply looking to claim a profitable slice of the genre that Heroes of Newerth, Dota 2, and League of Legends have defined after its mod-map beginnings in Warcraft III, many upcoming titles are moving away – some slightly, some heavily – from the tried and true three lane, two base formula that has changed the PC gaming landscape forever. After resounding success in the PC space, the genre is looking toward other platforms as the next frontier, with Hi-Rez Studios' Smite scheduled to debut on Xbox One and Battleborn launching on both current-gen consoles as well as PC.

Incorporating elements from different genres, changing the focus of the five-on-five battles, and cutting down the game length are all factors being experimented with in the next batch of titles entering the MOBA space. Accessibility and shorter match length appear to be popular broad based shifts, moving away from the significant burden of knowledge and time requirements that the foundation titles can be associated with. These new MOBAs add their own flavor to the proven formula, and sometimes change the recipe completely.

Free-to-play models mesh well with the MOBA package, allowing players to purchase or earn heroes and cosmetics through gameplay, and as such all of these titles with the notable exception of Battleborn are expected to be free-to-play on release, even if they currently have a buy-in early access option.

by Daniel Tack

HEROES OF THE STORM

Platform: PC
Publisher: Blizzard
Developer: Blizzard
Release: TBA

Blizzard's take on the MOBA is fast and friendly. Wielding the company's substantial stable of iconic and lovable characters ranging from the tanky Diablo to StarCraft's Siege Tank, Heroes of the Storm may be the most accessible of any entrant to the genre thus far. With shared team experience, no items to micromanage or purchase, and maps that offer clear objectives that bring a team together, the focus here is on ensuring that everyone can jump in and play without learning hundreds of items and abilities.

Unlike many other games in the genre, Heroes of the Storm has a variety of different maps that all play quite differently, using side objectives and minigames to promote team battles. Towers have a set amount of ammunition, promoting push-centric heroes and making the lane control aspects that can slow down other titles obsolete. It's in your best interests to keep your creep waves pressing up against enemy defenses.

Games take 10 to 20 minutes instead of around 40, leaving players free to grab a match in a more forgiving time block. More advanced players may gravitate toward heroes like the Zerg Abathur, who can essentially be anywhere on the map at any given time and break out of traditional MOBA character ability space. Players can currently opt-in to participate in the alpha and beta phase at Battle.net.



GIGANTIC

Platform: PC
Publisher: Motiga
Developer: Motiga
Release: 2015

Gigantic takes the core MOBA concepts – a five-on-five brawl with levels, upgrades, and respawn times – and mixes things up by working within a third-person shooter framework. Players must still destroy base objectives, but in Gigantic, the base is an enormous mobile creature that unleashes devastating attacks and has a huge pool of health.

Players battle to control the board by setting down creature summons (there are no creep waves) at various capture points and guard them to accumulate power for their huge monster. In close games, the battle often ends with both teams forced to fight under the huge presence of their respective beasts, creating a situation where both sides are spurred into team fights by necessity, while the earlier game allows for more lone wolfing and small-scale encounters.

The third-person shooter aspects that this title brings to the table make it feel a lot like a more refined deathmatch style game with overarching objectives, making it a fast-paced alternative for those who may be burnt out on isometric RTS-style options. Players can sign up for alpha now via the official website.

BATTLEBORN

Platform: PlayStation 4, Xbox One, PC

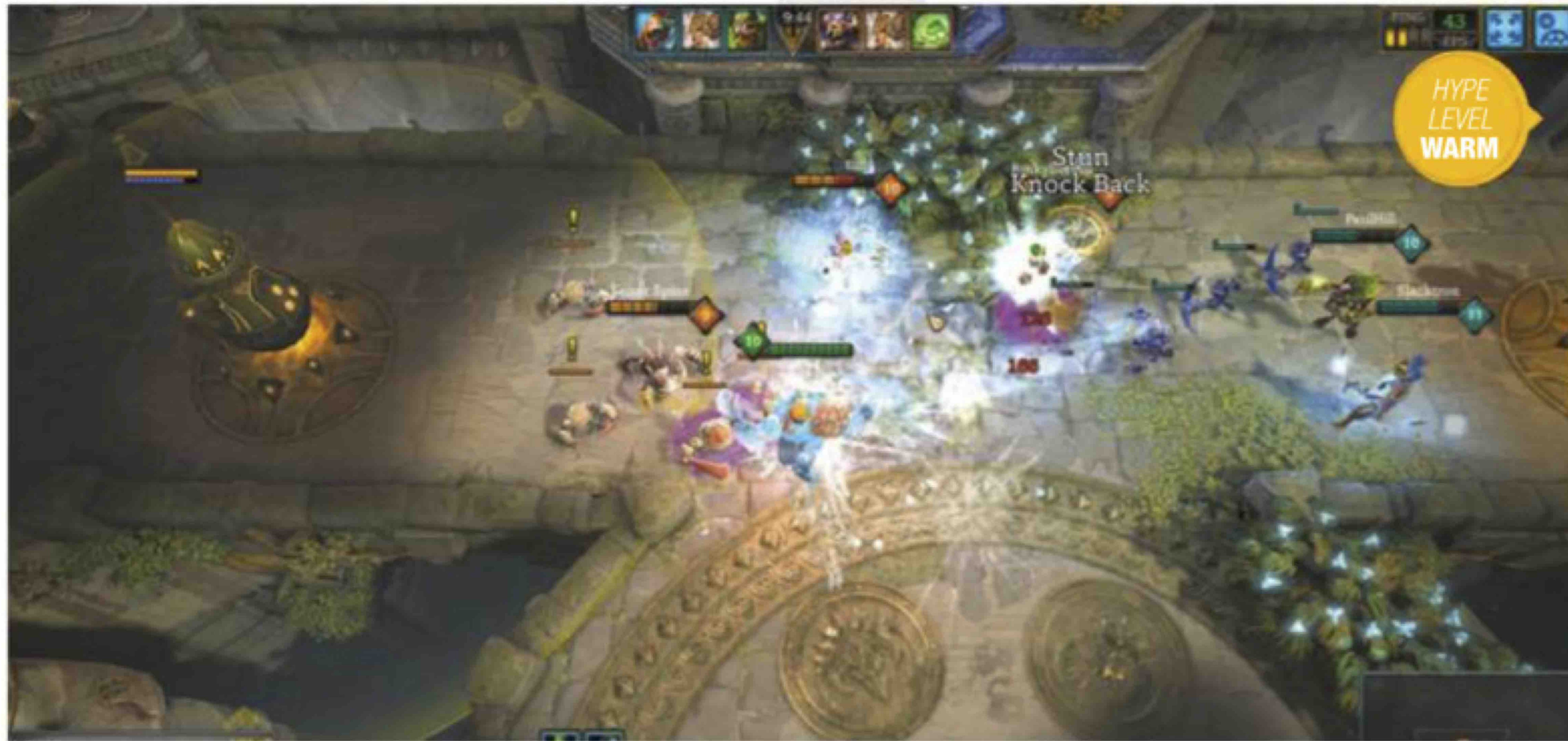
Publisher: 2K Games

Developer: Gearbox Software

Release: 2015

While many of Battleborn's features separate it from traditional MOBAs, (see page 64) it's hard to ignore that the competitive multiplayer aspects of the game draw upon many elements that make up the groundwork of the genre. Moving MOBA genre conventions into the first-person shooter sphere is going to be interesting. Combining brutal melee attacks and bristling gun-play should lend itself to console controls as well as PC.

While many current genre titles rely on controls lifted from the once-proud real-time strategy genre, those reams of hotkeys and map movement designations are difficult to translate to the joystick world, so first-person shooter may be the perfect fit to take all the best pieces of the MOBA puzzle and fit them together into something that could strike hot across platforms. Battleborn also has the distinction of being built to fit the standard retail box model, eschewing the free-to-play pay model that is now almost universally accepted for MOBA titles.



TOME: IMMORTAL ARENA

Platform: PC

Publisher: Kixeye

Developer: Kixeye

Release: TBA

Tome trims down the MOBA experience by offering quick three-on-three matches that take around 10 minutes, no last hitting, and towers that run out of ammo to ensure lanes fall. Being able to buy and heal right in lane make Tome an extremely fast-paced alternative to some of the other titles out here. Colorful characters with faction affiliations that you can work on at the account level provide special abilities, currency, and custom skin unlocks. Probably the biggest factor that separates Tome from the rest of the herd is you can play it right in your browser, making it an attractive lunchtime option or on-the-go choice. Tome: Immortal Arena is currently available for play in a beta phase.

DAWNGATE

Platform: PC

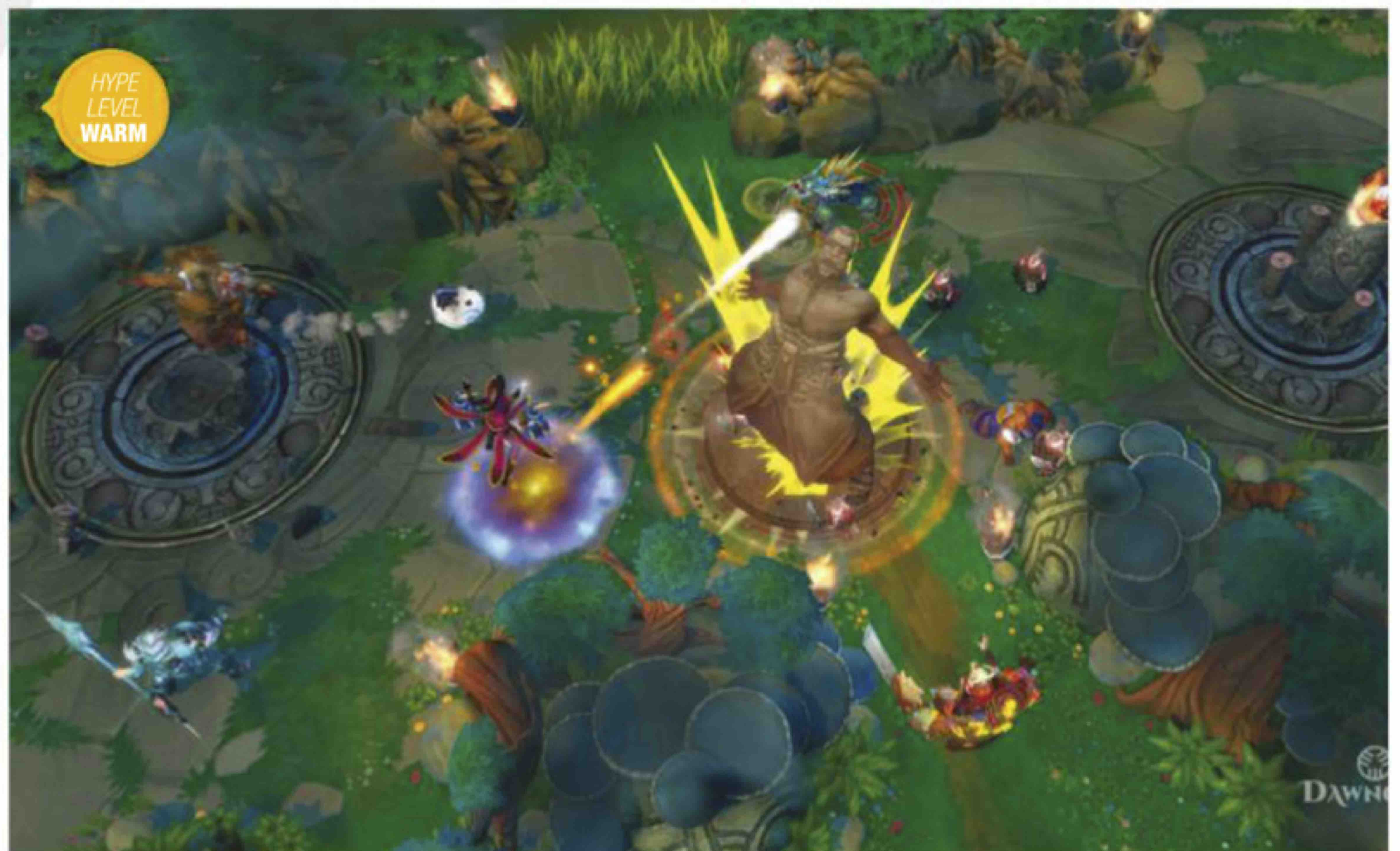
Publisher: Electronic Arts

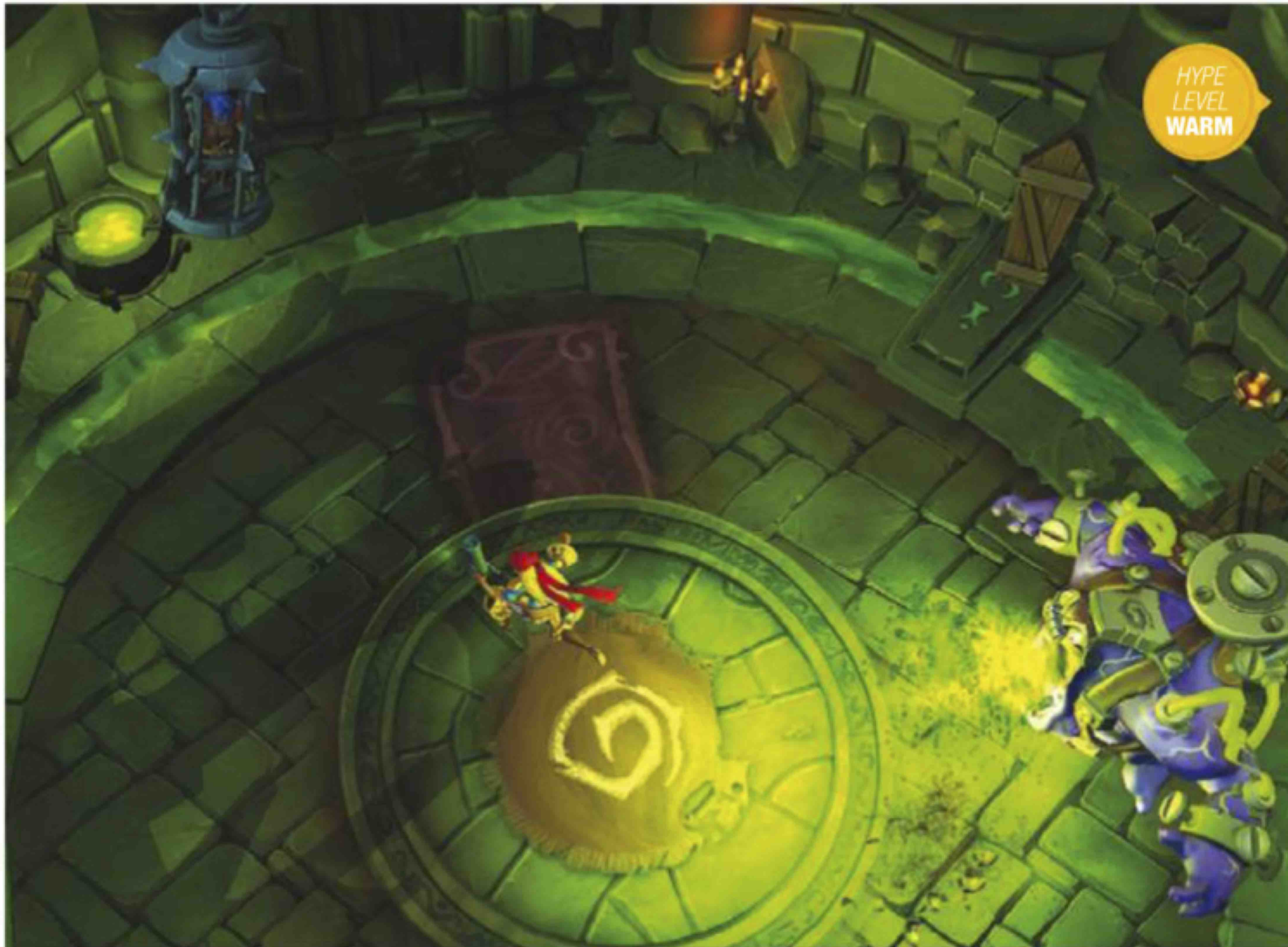
Developer: Waystone Games

Release: TBA

Electronic Arts and Waystone Games have their own entrant in the coming MOBA clash, and it's the mostly traditional Dawngate. Featuring two lanes instead of three and side objectives that give resources to the controlling team, Dawngate allows players a good break from standard five-on-five lane composition if they want to try things like dedicated roamers in addition to classic junglers and in-lane support/carry combos.

In addition to the new lane makeup, players also pick roles before the game that offer rewards for "correct" play – the carry gets additional resource bonuses from getting last hits, while the support may get extra resources from harassing the enemy heroes instead. Gankers and junglers have their own roles to select too, and while it's perfectly fine to play outside of the role you select, such as a support starting to pile on last hits, there are significant incentives toward playing your archetype well. Dawngate is currently in a community beta state, where players can sign up and play now if they wish.





STRIFE

Platform: PC
Publisher: S2 Games
Developer: S2 Games
Release: TBA

S2 Games is back for another round after being one of the genre frontrunners with Heroes of Newerth. While Strife is quite rooted in the five-on-five, three-lane design, last hitting (earning gold by getting the last attack on a monster before it dies) is such that players share earned gold, so your supports will have no problem gaining resources. Players can also augment their hero with companion pets that provide functional benefits. These pets allow you to accent your heroes to suit your gameplay, from the defense boosts of a turtle or some gold gain or mana regeneration.

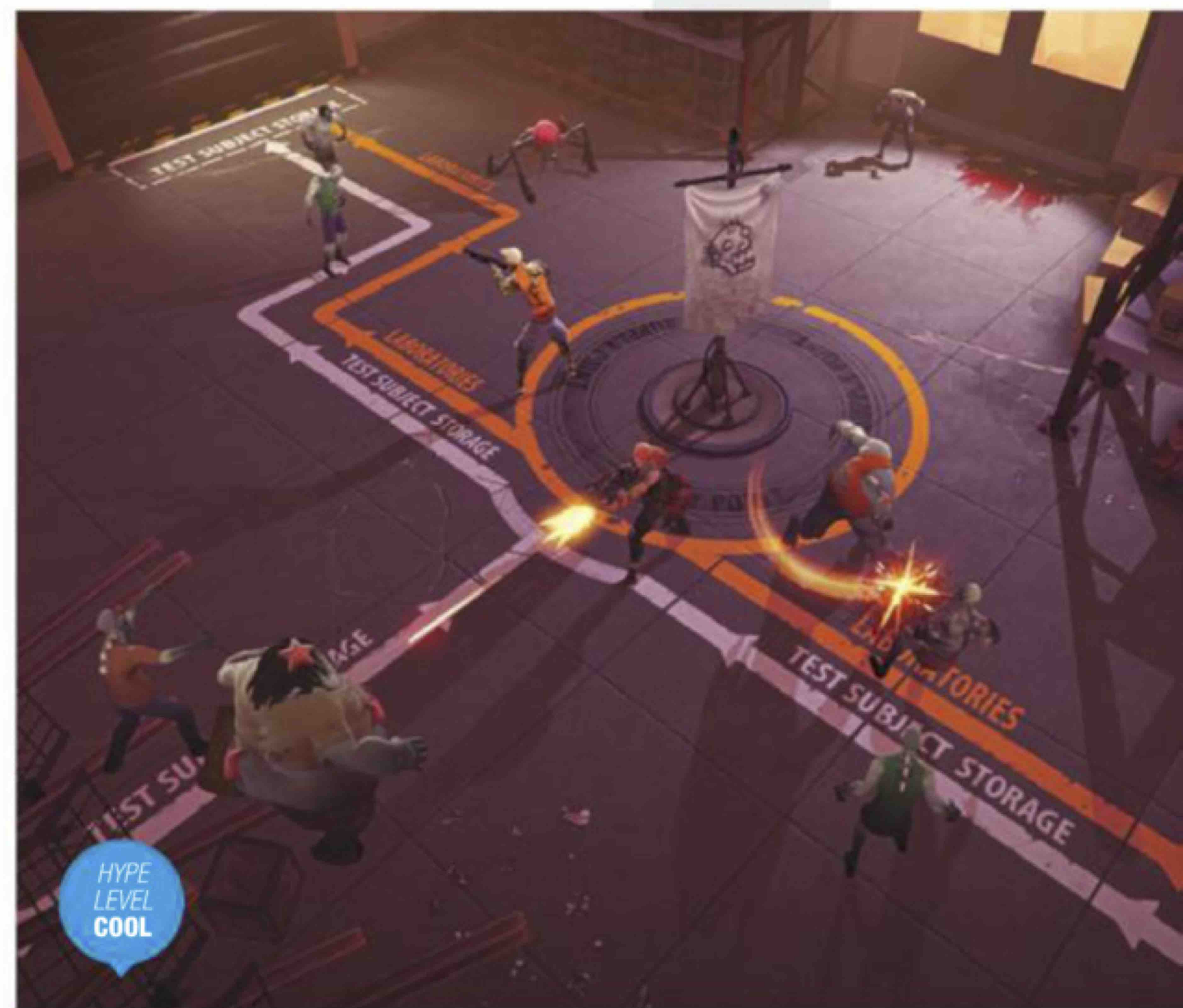
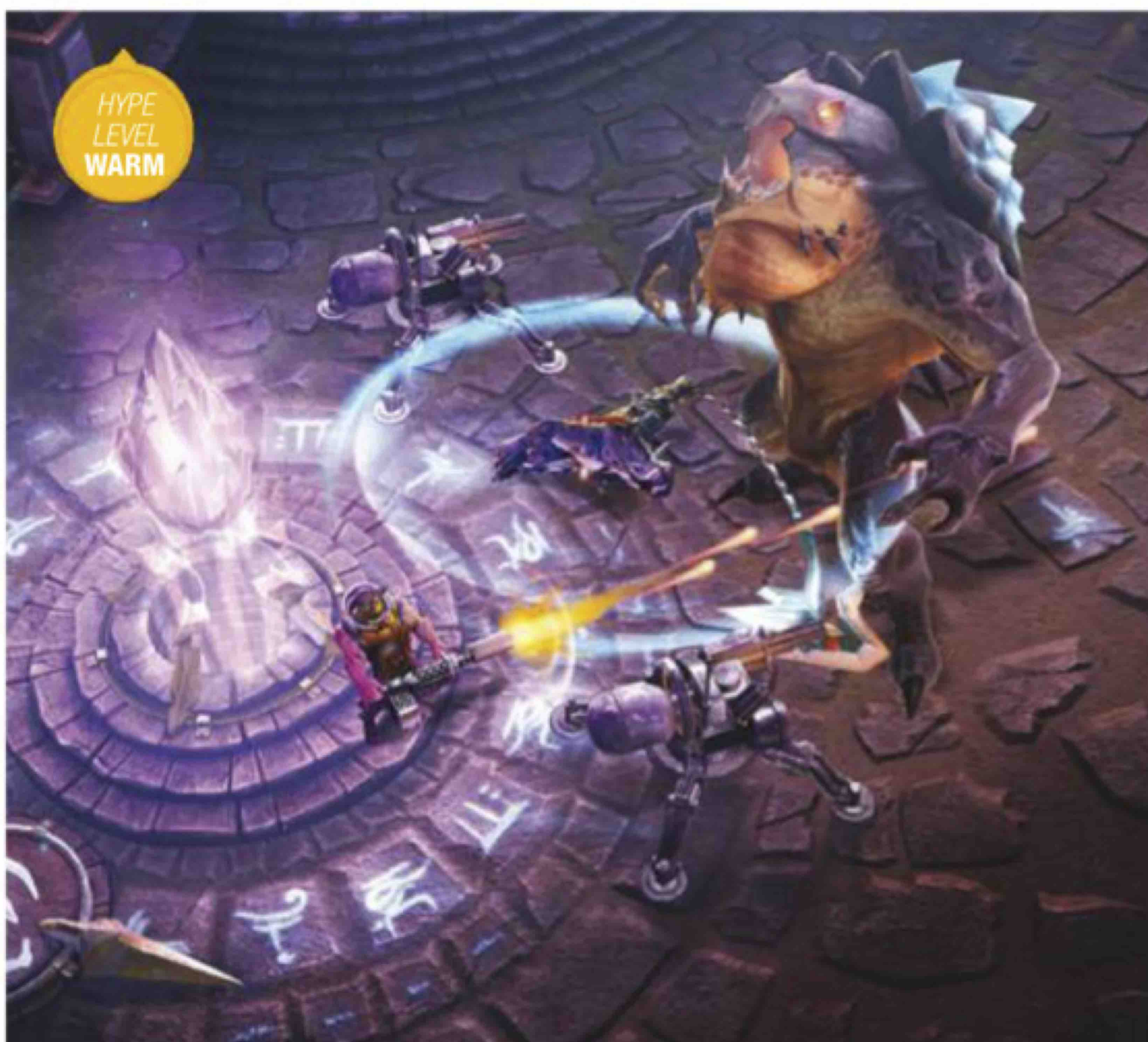
Another major change is that players can craft their own items. Don't like how the magic wand in the store gives health and damage, and find yourself simply needing more health? Using crafting materials gained after each match, you can alter existing items to fit your needs, like turning that magic wand into a healthstick. While these modifiable item recipes present a balancing challenge, it gives players complete control of how they want to play various heroes.

While S2 is also making an attempt to reduce elements that contribute to MOBA community toxicity, Strife's focus is on allowing players to play the hero roster in a number of different ways based on player preference and customization. Players can sign up and play Strife, now in open beta.

VAINGLORY

Platform: iOS
Publisher: Super Evil Megacorp
Developer: Super Evil Megacorp
Release: October

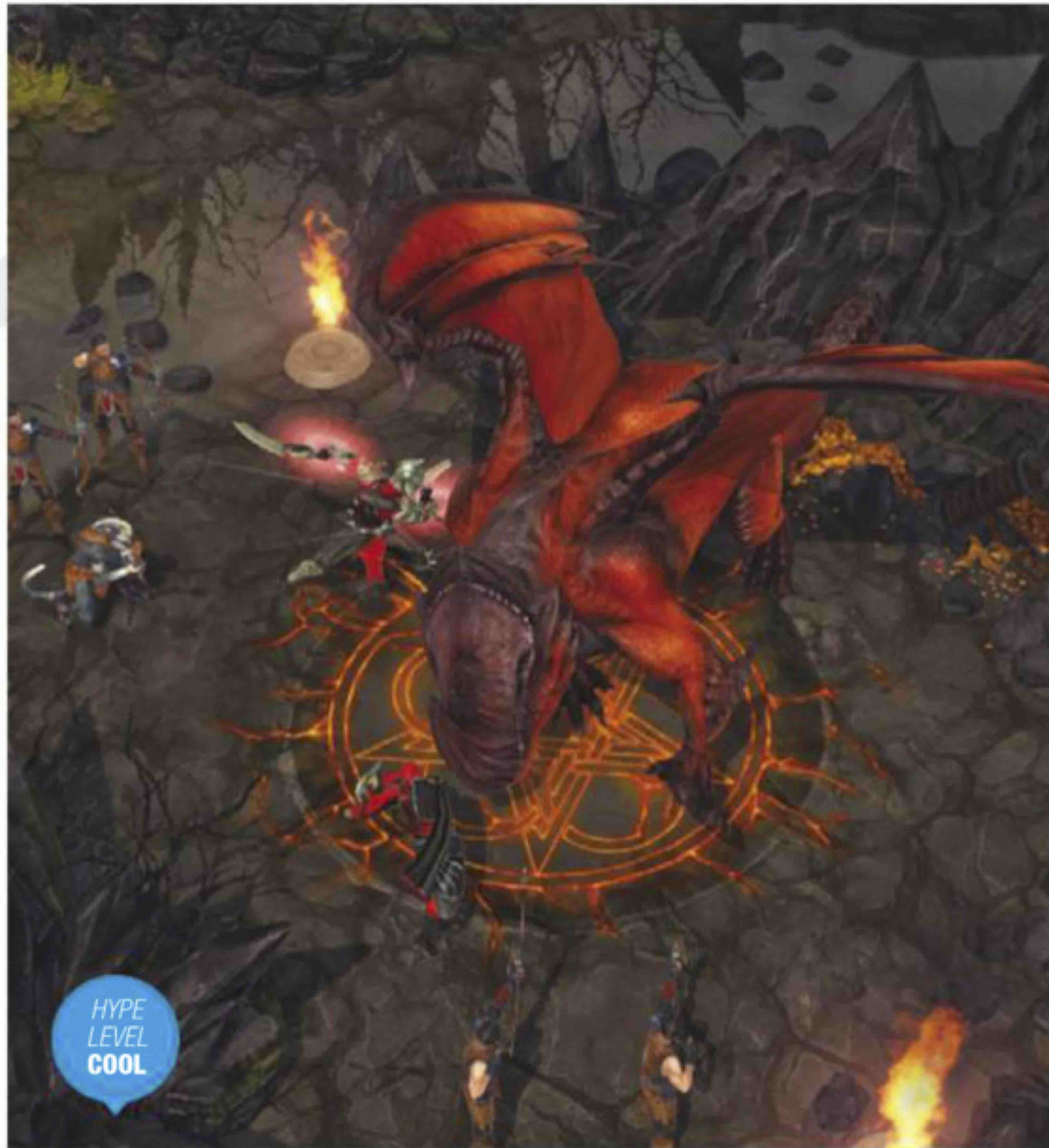
While the primary platform for the MOBA has been PC, some developers have offered quality tablet variants such as Zynga's Solstice Arena and Hammer and Chisel's Fates Forever. Vainglory is looking to captivate tablet users by providing all the best elements of the MOBA without making any sacrifices in the transition to the mobile platform. With a large roster of heroes, games that last around 20 minutes, and the same core gameplay elements a user would find on a PC title, Vainglory is attempting to take tap gameplay to the next level and target core users with the same associated challenges and skill requirements.



DEAD ISLAND EPIDEMIC

Platform: PC
Publisher: Deep Silver
Developer: Stunlock Studios
Release: TBA

Dead Island Epidemic features all those lovable zombies and some interesting diversions from the standard formula. Players can band together and play cooperatively in a horde mode, or, in a new take on MOBA design, battle in a massive 12-person brawl where three teams battle for victory as they attempt to control points on the map while fighting other teams and the zombie menace. Dead Island Epidemic is currently available via early access on Steam.



SINS OF A DARK AGE

Platform: PC
Publisher: Ironclad Games
Developer: Ironclad Games
Release: TBA

The MOBA space is new territory for Sins of a Solar Empire developer Ironclad Games. A far departure from its critically acclaimed 4X strategy title, the game incorporates many of the traditional MOBA features and brings quests into the mix. In Sins of a Dark Age's dark fantasy environment, quests serve as a primary motivation to coax players out of the lanes and act as an incentive for big team fights, long before the later stages of the game where they would normally occur. Sins of a Dark Age is currently available via early access on Steam.

ARENA OF FATE

Platform: PC
Publisher: Crytek
Developer: Crytek
Release: TBA

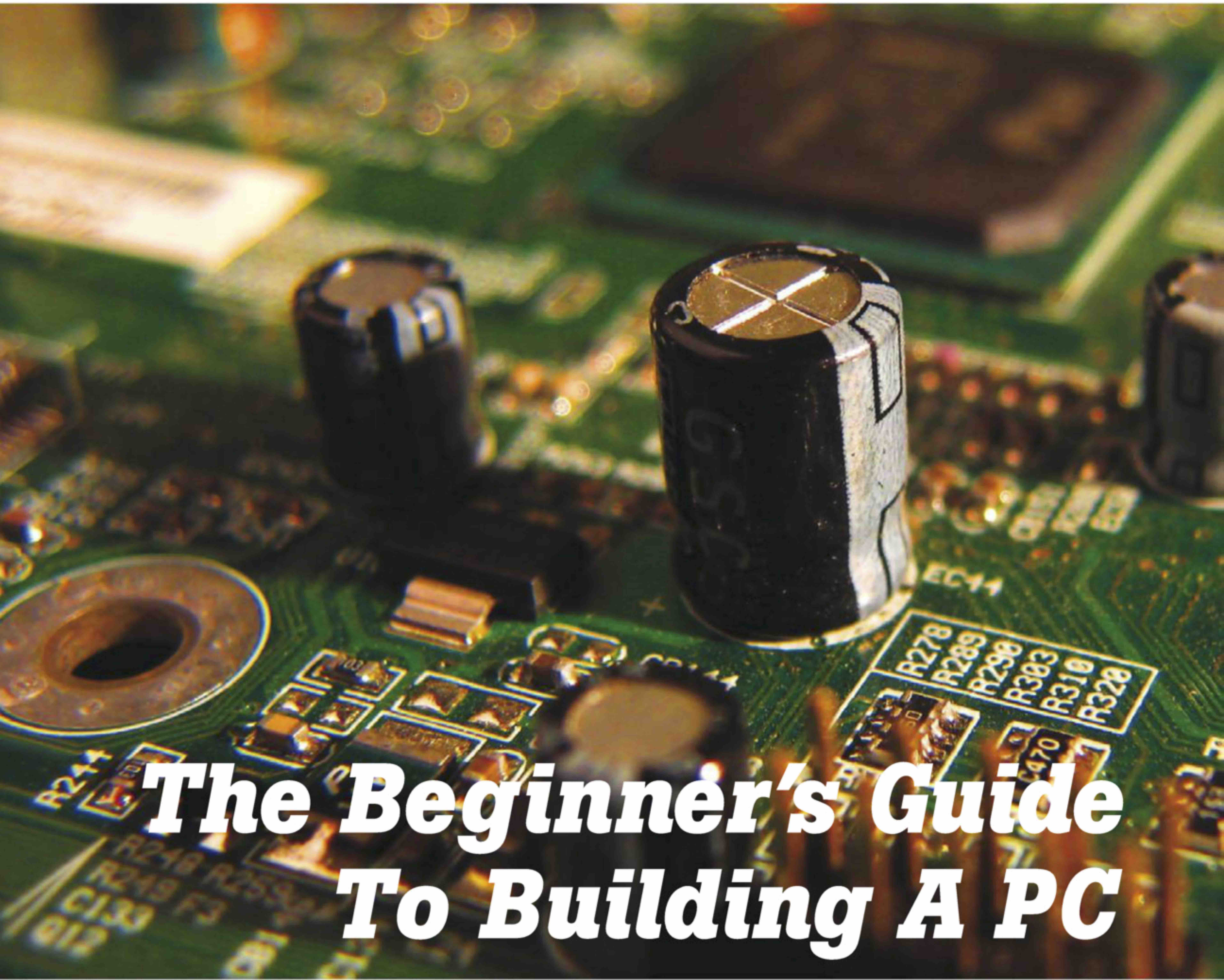
With games like Smite tapping into myth and legend for character inspiration, Arena of Fate looks to history and story for its heroes. In a traditional five-on-five format, players can play as Robin Hood, Joan of Arc, Little Red Riding Hood, Tesla and others. Arena of Fate continues the trend toward shorter game length, with matches running around 20 minutes. Interested players can sign up for beta now.



DEADBREED

Platform: PC
Publisher: Deadbreed AB
Developer: Deadbreed AB
Release: TBA

Deadbreed is a horror take on the MOBA. Many various player vs. environment elements are incorporated into this game, including quests, dungeons, monsters, mini-bosses and loot. Heroes level up outside of the matches themselves, allowing players to specialize in their favorite play styles, such as tanky bruisers or damage cannons. These account-level unlocks give players incentive to work on long term goals and progression that stays with them outside of the temporary advancement in match-to-match battles, and outfit their characters with artifacts and gems to enhance abilities and powers. Deadbreed is currently available via early access on Steam.



The Beginner's Guide To Building A PC

by Joe Juba

These days, owning a gaming PC is required to maintain a complete view of the video game landscape. With an expanding array of indie treasures, early access titles, mods, and triple-A blockbusters, even people who have traditionally been console gamers are supplementing – or replacing – their consoles with custom-made machines.

For first-timers, buying and assembling the components can be daunting, but the process shouldn't scare you away. With so many different options and varying budgets, creating a one-size-fits-all gaming PC isn't possible, but you can follow a handful of general tips to steer you in the right direction. We spoke with Jeremy Vaughan, editor at Overclockers.com, for some simple advice on how to build a powerful PC in your price range.

The Basics

Building a functional gaming computer requires surprisingly few components. You only need to purchase eight things to get started – though you will probably want to get multiple hard drives and add in an optical drive for DVDs and Blu-rays. More advanced builds might require multiple graphics cards and increased cooling options. Those additions aside, the basic checklist is as follows:

1. CPU
2. CPU Cooler
3. Motherboard
4. RAM
5. Hard Drive
6. Graphics Card
7. Case
8. Power Supply

you have enough RAM; 16 GB is a good place to start. After that, a solid-state drive (SSD) is your next priority. These drives are capable of booting quickly to get you into games much faster than traditional drives. “If you already have an SSD and have some leftover budget, get a bigger SSD,” Vaughan says. “Even on older computers, given a decent amount of RAM, an SSD is the number one biggest, most noticeable upgrade a person can get.”

Avoid Cheap Power Supplies

Saving money is good, but your power supply is one place to pay a little more to ensure that you’re getting a quality part. “A cheap power supply can not only fail, but it can take everything it’s connected to down with it,” Vaughan says. “Figure out the wattage you need and buy a solid, reputable power supply.” A bargain doesn’t mean much if it costs you more money in the long run.

The Motherboard In The Middle

Your motherboard is important, and it’s important to not go too cheap on it. However, don’t be fooled into spending too much, either. Motherboard prices range from cheap to ridiculously expensive, and the advantages of one model over another may not be immediately apparent. However, even if you’re building a good gaming PC, you likely don’t need one of the high-end options. “There are cheaper motherboards that aren’t necessarily worth their weight in plastic,” Vaughan says. “Once you’re above the low end, what really separates motherboards from each other are features. Pick a board in the mid-to-high end that has the features you want and get it.” If the motherboard you’re looking at has four graphics card slots and monitors processor heat down to sub-zero temperatures, it’s more than you’re going to need for your first home-built PC.

Don’t Get Lost In The Details

Poring over minor differences between similar products from various manufacturers isn’t going to yield some game-changing revelation. “Feature-for-feature and capacity-for-capacity, most graphics cards, RAM, and SSDs/HDDs are going to be at least in the general ballpark as all of the others,” Vaughan says. “There are only so many ‘features’ you can add to that kind of thing.” If two components appear to have similar features and are about the same price, don’t worry too much about making a wrong choice.

Overclocking Not Required

Most gamers have probably heard the term “overclocking” in relation to PCs. It refers to running your CPU at a higher speed than it has been specified for, which can increase performance – but it also generates more heat, which necessitates additional cooling. While this is certainly an option for first-time builders, don’t think that you need to overclock your system in order to have a great gaming experience. “The kind of user that should overclock is one that enjoys getting the most out of the computer they put together,” Vaughan says. “Or one that just likes tinkering, or even one that enjoys seeing what sort of benchmark scores they can get.” If that seems like more trouble than you’re interested in for your first build, you can trust that most modern systems are powerful enough to play the best games currently on the market.

Upgrade Gradually

Assuming your first build is a success, you will eventually want to get some components down the line. Unlike consoles, you don’t need to replace your whole system any time something goes wrong or needs improvement. “These days, keeping the majority of your system but upgrading just the graphics card every other year or so will keep you playing the most demanding titles without any problems,” Vaughan says. Because building your own PC makes you familiar with your components, you’ll be more comfortable and better equipped to install these upgrades yourself when the time comes. 💎

Visit Overclockers.com for more PC-building coverage, guides, and reviews of individual components from Vaughan and his colleagues.

Brand Loyalty

Some manufacturers have a history of quality products that you can’t see when looking at a component’s specs. While everyone has different experiences with different companies, Vaughan shares some of his personal brand preferences for various parts.

“I have always been a fan of Asus for motherboards. Gigabyte, MSI, and ASRock also make plenty of solid products, but Asus usually edges them out.

“For Nvidia graphics cards I lean toward EVGA. For AMD cards, Asus. EVGA has a reputation for solid cards that carry a superb warranty – not just for the terms, but for their service as well. Asus’ non-reference graphics cards, like their motherboards, are built like tanks. Gigabyte, MSI, and HIS make good graphics cards too.

“When it comes to RAM I am G.Skill loyal all the way. They don’t just make good RAM; they continuously test the limits of what can be done with it. Kingston is also a very good company that stands behind their solid products. Corsair is good but usually pricey. ADATA is no slouch either. There really aren’t any bad RAM manufacturers, just good and better.

“Power supplies are the easiest in my book: Corsair, period.”

Don’t Worry

A computer is a complex machine, and this leads to the assumption that building a PC is a hopelessly complicated ordeal. “The first thing to realize: It’s not as hard as it looks,” Vaughan says. “Yes, there are a lot of wires and plenty of intimidating looking connections. However, in today’s computing environment, it is essentially hard to mess up assembling a PC. If you try something one way and it doesn’t fit, don’t force it, because it probably isn’t supposed to go there... Aside from making sure you discharge yourself by touching something metal (so you don’t have built-up static electricity in your body), it’s actually pretty hard to hurt anything.”

Invest In Solid State

Let’s say you have all of your components chosen, but you have a little bit of your budget left to spend. Where would that extra money make the most difference? The first step is to make sure

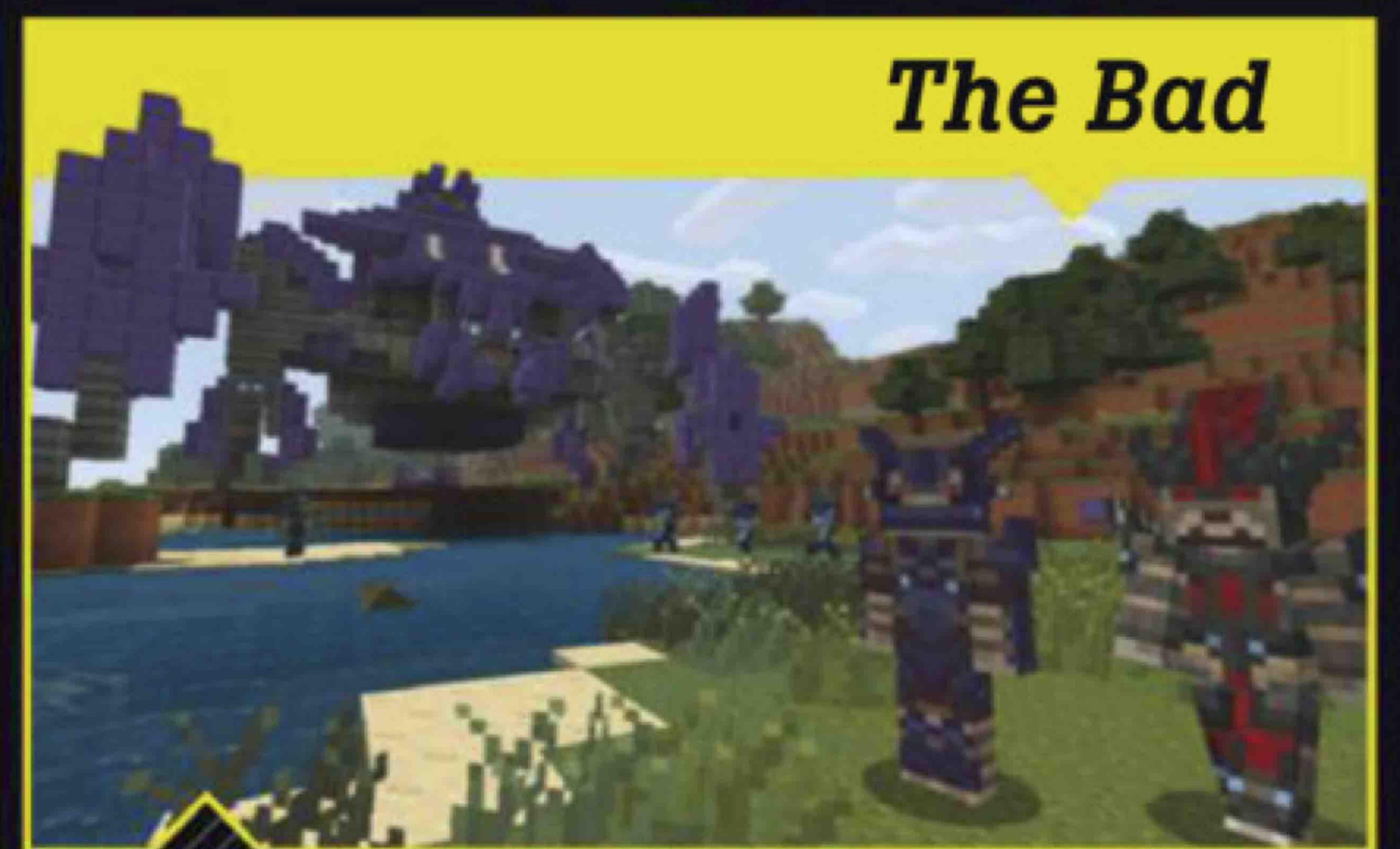
The Good



GRAND THEFT AUTO V

comes to the PlayStation 4 and Xbox One on November 18, and the PC gets its due on January 27. Apart from looking better, these new versions feature new weapons, vehicles, and activities, as well as increased 30-person multiplayer (on PS4 and Xbox One), 100 new songs, and more.

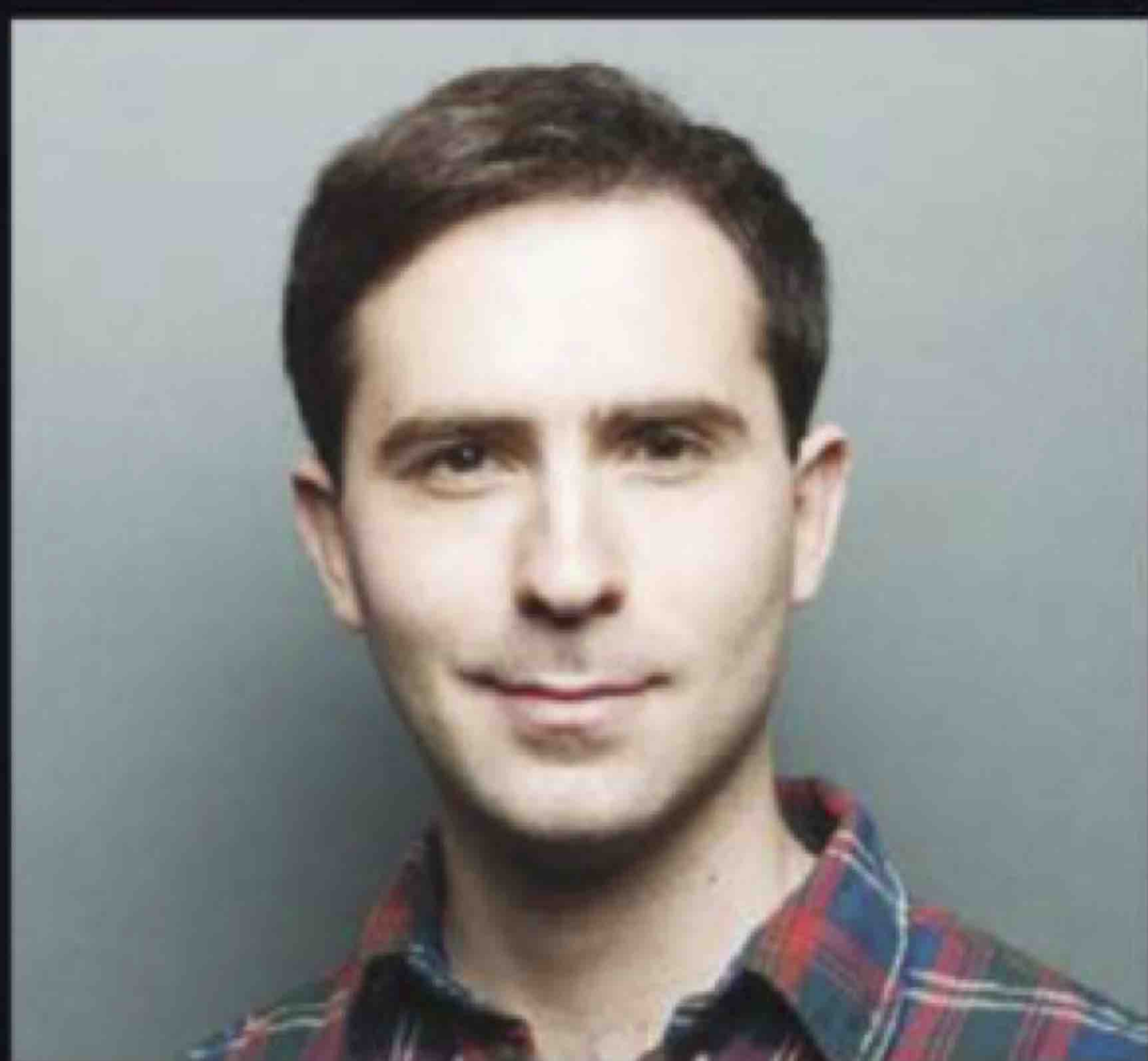
The Bad



IN THE AFTERMATH

of Microsoft purchasing developer Mojang for \$2.5 billion, Minecraft creator Markus Persson, chief executive Carl Manneh, and co-founder Jakob Porser are leaving the studio. Mojang says versions of Minecraft not on Microsoft platforms will not be affected by the move.

Quotable



"We're keeping most everything the same: our office, our employees, our brand, and most importantly our independence. But with Amazon's support we'll have the resources to bring you an even better Twitch."

— Twitch CEO **Emmett Shear**



THE XBOX ONE has released in numerous countries around the world, but without features such as voice commands and some content enjoyed by North American gamers. This isn't the best way to endear your console to a worldwide audience. In Japan in particular, the Xbox One has gotten off to a bad start, selling only 23,562 units in its first four days on sale according to Famitsu. In comparison, the PlayStation 4 sold 322,083 systems in two days after its launch in the country. 💎

The Ugly



THE WALKING DEAD: SEASON TWO

Telltale Games recently wrapped up season two of its violent and emotional *The Walking Dead*. The season ended with a bang, incorporating multiple endings for the first time. Telltale president and co-founder Kevin Bruner opens up about putting Clementine in the leading role, bringing back old faces, and how fan feedback shaped Telltale's direction. *by Kimberley Wallace*

When did Telltale start planning season two, and what were your initial ideas?

We started planning season two shortly after the finale of season one. First we kicked around ideas about what character would be playable for season two. We considered moving to a new group of survivors or revisiting the backstories of characters like Kenny. We were really gun shy about making Clementine playable. We were worried it would be strange to play her after the season one experience. We also certainly didn't want to leave her story untold, since that was what we felt was most interesting for the series. We even kicked around playing as a new "protector" of Clem, but that felt too much like replacing Lee.

Once we finally came to terms with making Clem the playable character we dove into the season two arc. It took a while to land where we did, but that's not unusual for us. One version of the story actually had an abandoned zoo and a tiger!

What did the team hope to accomplish with season two?

We felt like season one was about teaching Clementine how to survive in the apocalypse. But what Lee taught her was grounded in surviving the zombies. He taught her to fire a gun and keep her hair short. In season two, we wanted to explore how Clementine would deal with other survivors as she grew up. We thought we could let the player own this aspect of Clementine without tarnishing everything the player did as Lee.

Why did you decide to bring

Kenny back? Do you think it paid off?

We knew that many people were speculating about the fate of Kenny and answering that would feel really cool. I do think it paid off. Kenny is such an interesting and complicated character. We've personally experienced his loss in season one, and experiencing the apocalypse break was his purpose in season two. We hoped that players would feel that the world was harsh enough to break Kenny, but they were able to save Clementine.

It wasn't easy to figure out exactly what was going on with Sarah. Was she just a sheltered character, or was there more to it than that?

She was certainly sheltered, but there's more to Sarah than an over-protective father. Sarah exhibited many of the symptoms of something like PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder), which is something that people usually associate with combat veterans; however, it's something that can affect anyone, including children. It can occur in the wake of exposure to a terrifying event, and Sarah had experienced her fair share of that in the undead apocalypse. Sufferers often try to shut out or avoid anything that reminds them of the trauma that they experienced; Sarah's father, Carlos, was well aware of this. As players saw, he was incredibly protective of his daughter, and tried to put her inside a bubble. Sarah's behavior and personality was the result of the world around her, rather than any other factor.

Sarah's scene in the trailer tested the player's empathy to her plight. Acting on empathy to

aid another at risk to yourself can seem at odds with survival in *The Walking Dead*, but it takes empathy to build strong relationships, and "sticking together" was one of Lee's advice options to Clem in his final moments. We like to think that Lee probably would have done everything he could do to get Sarah out of that trailer, and by looking at the cumulative stats, Lee's advice seems to have had an effect because more than 70 percent of players did just that.

Telltale uses live development as a way to adjust what's working and what's not. What changed in season two due to fan feedback?

Tons of stuff changes due to fan feedback and our ability to look at telemetry from playthroughs. There are literally hundreds of tweaks to dialogue, editing and cinematography based on this data. I think one of the biggest things we were able to react to was our ability to ensure that people had strong connections to Jane. She enters the story late in the series, but is one of the most important people in the story. We had to make sure that Jane and Clem bonded in a way that would be satisfying to the player. Much of what Jane and Clem talk about when they leave the group (before finding Luke and Sarah) was driven by this process, with the subject matter being crafted around the way people interacted with Jane up to that point.

Season one had such a powerful ending and was met with wide acclaim. Did Telltale feel any pressure for the season two ending?

We knew we didn't want to

compete with the season one ending since that had landed in such a special place. Right from the start we decided instead to explore multiple endings. We wanted the season to empower Clementine to control her own destiny, but we had to make sure that it would be the most difficult choice she's ever made. The way in which the final scene was arrived at was interesting. We intentionally spent the season "growing up" Clementine by allowing her to become more like an adult member of the group. She gains more respect and responsibility from the adults as the season plays out. But when the stakes are at their highest, she's once again constrained by being small and unable to stop the adults around her. This forces her to take the situation into her own hands in the only way she can in that moment. In our eyes, that's when Clem finally takes complete control of her own destiny, and it's up to the player to decide. None of the endings are particularly happy (it is *The Walking Dead* after all), but they are all firmly Clementine's. We hope players feel like Clementine has grown significantly over the season and she is now ready for the world, even if that world is harsh and has forced Clem to leave her childhood behind.

Do you know yet how these endings will play into season three yet?

We can't really say anything about season three yet, but it's safe to assume that your season two ending will be an important part of it.

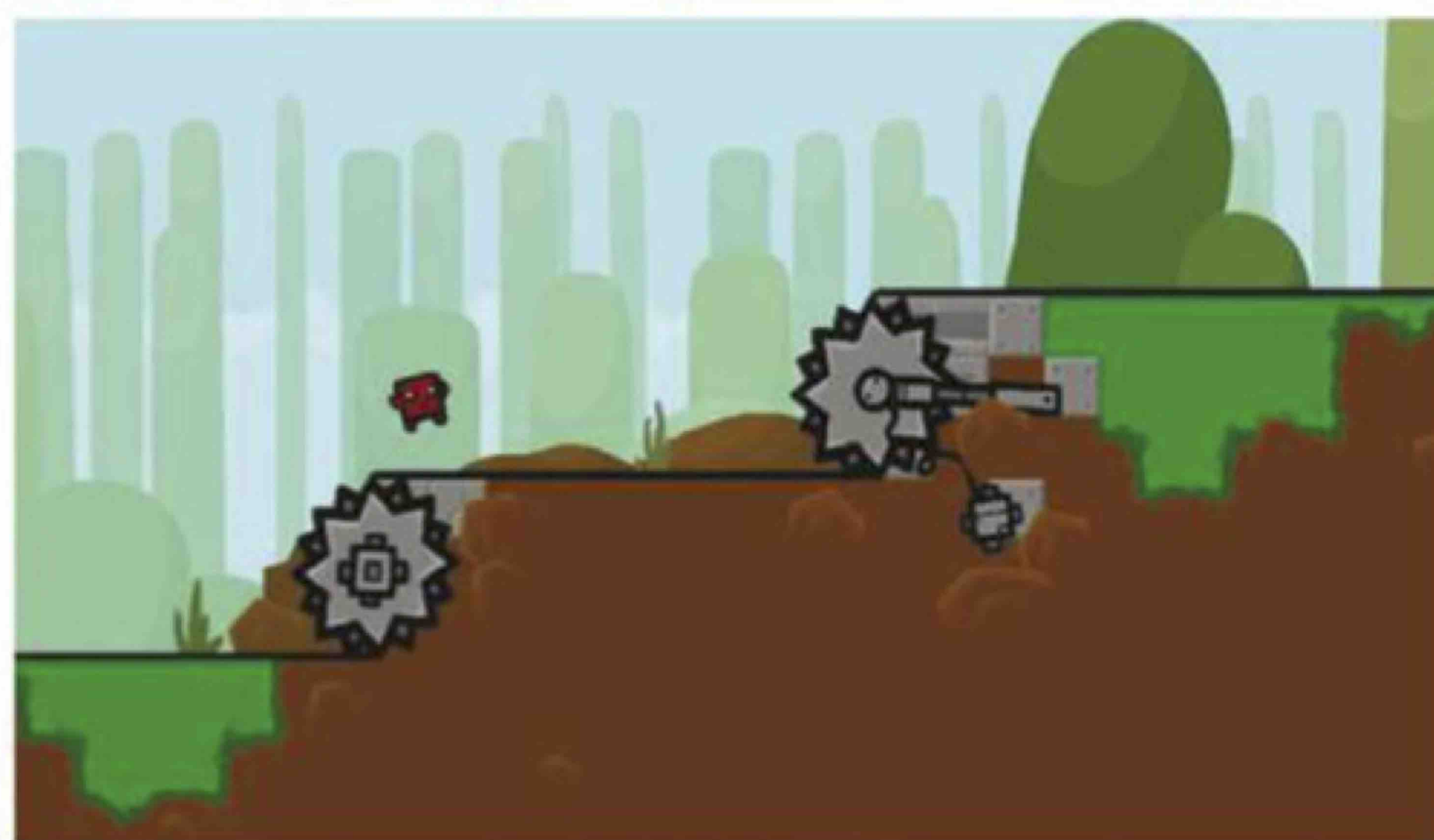
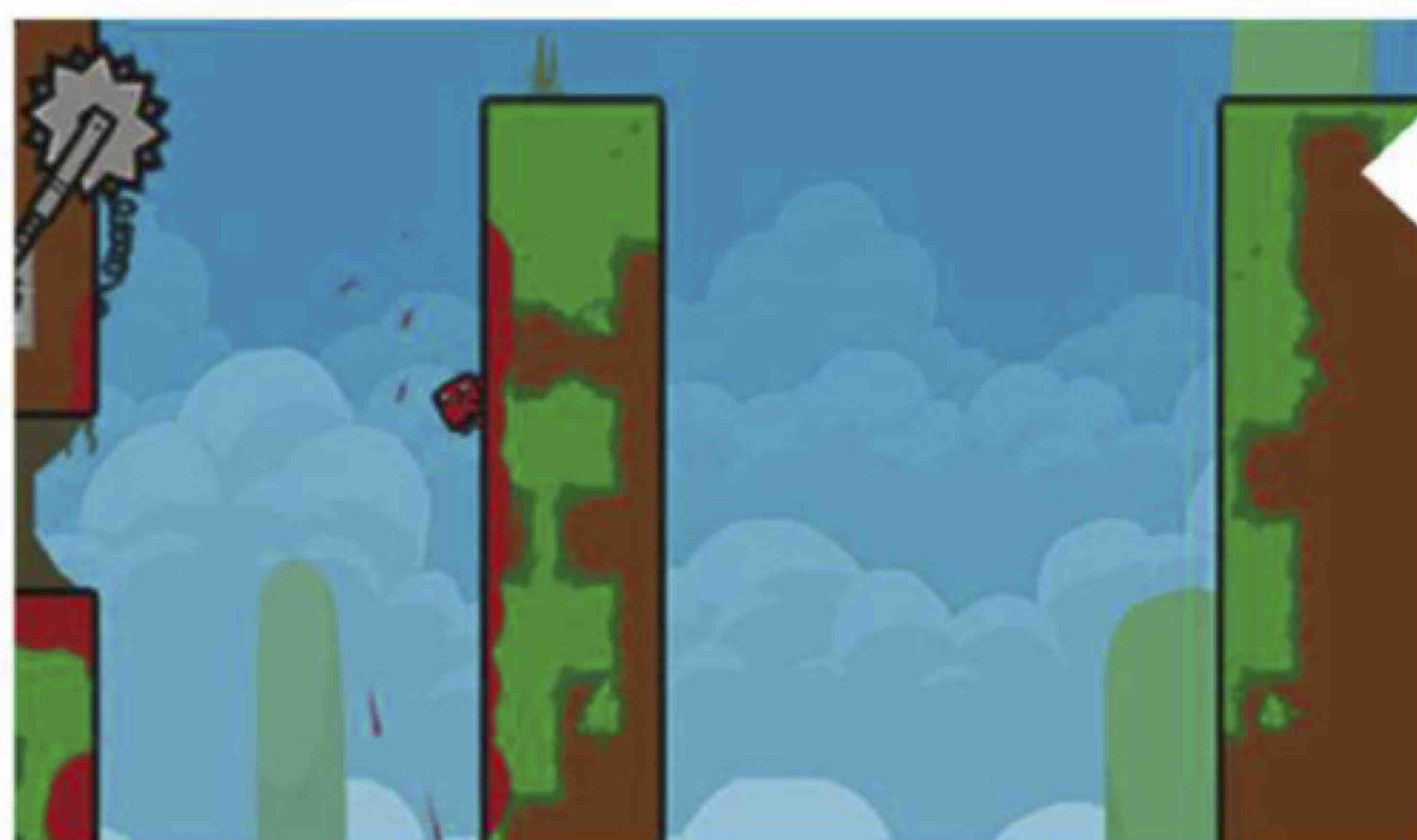
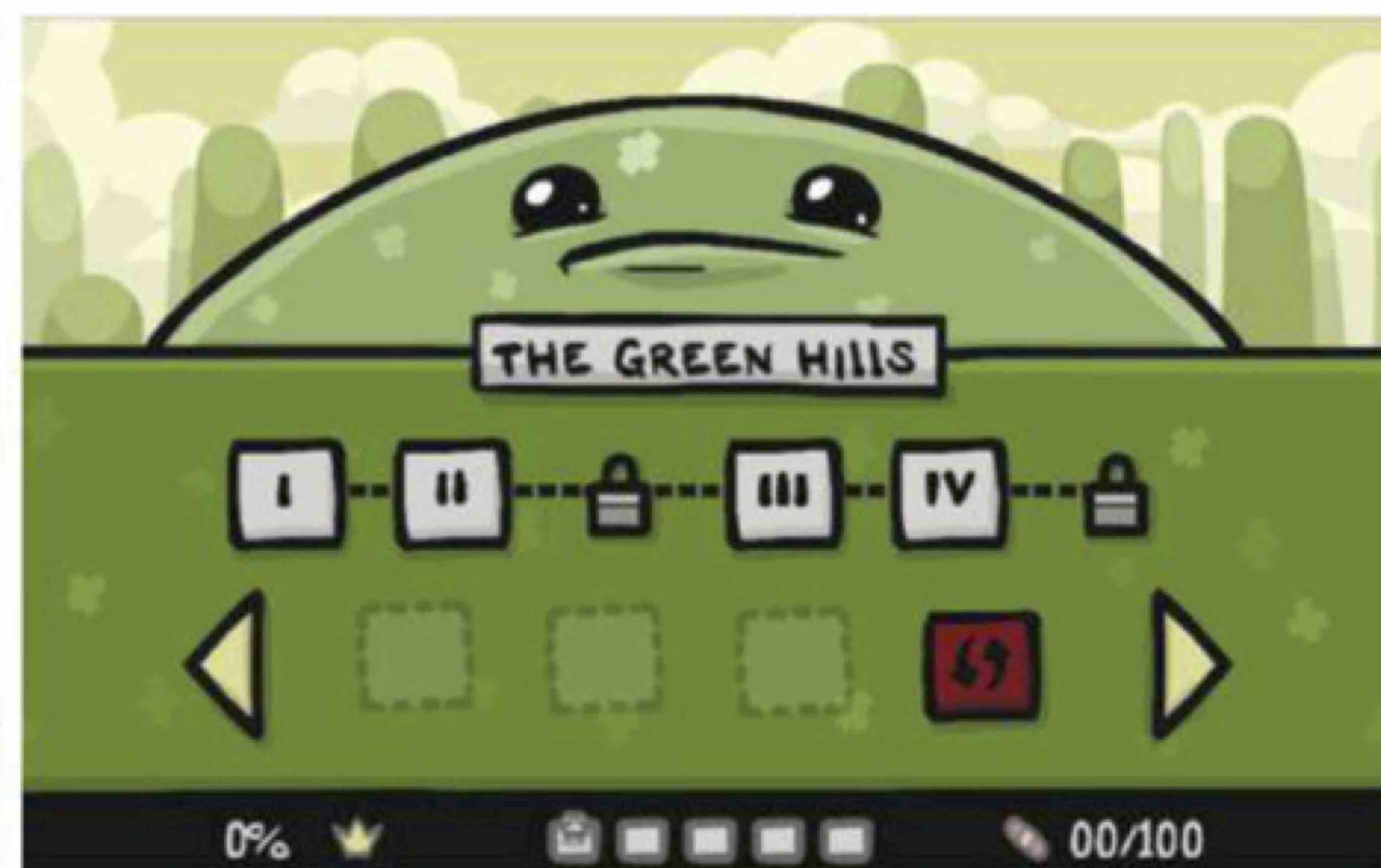
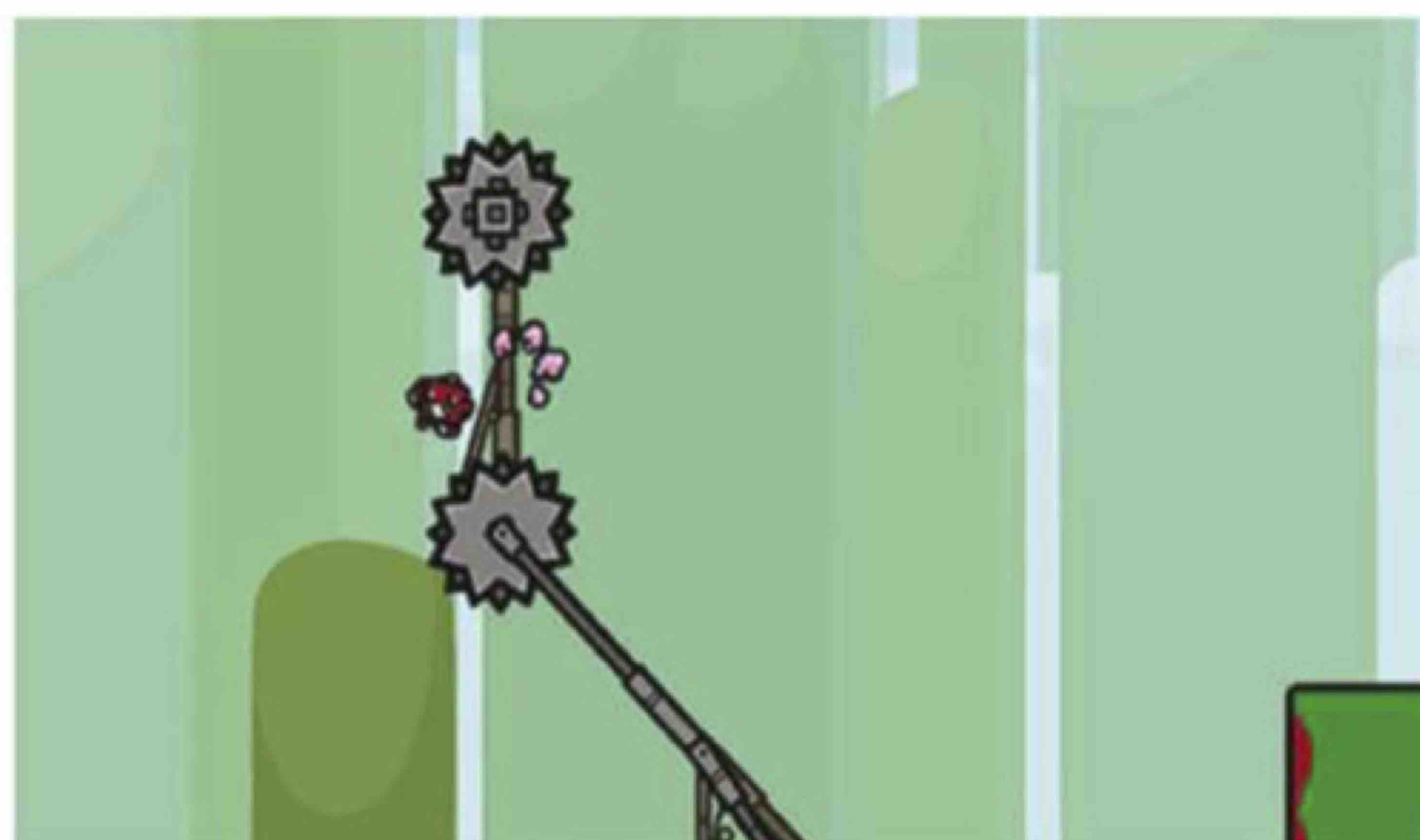
What can fans look forward to with season three?

We'll keep challenging ourselves as storytellers and pushing the boundaries of where we can take the player, but beyond that I'm afraid you'll just have to stay tuned! Just rest assured it'll be 100-percent Telltale and 100-percent *Walking Dead*. ♦

The Indie Games Of PAX Prime

by Mike Futter, Kyle Hilliard, Matt Miller, and Daniel Tack

Big conventions like E3 and Gamescom have no shortage of smaller studios seeking the limelight, and in recent years, a few of those teams have managed to find it. But with its direct line to the fans who might one day purchase these indie games, the Penny Arcade Expo is increasingly a hotbed of independent game announcements and reveals. This year was no exception, as we saw new details on a number of previously announced titles, plus some extremely exciting debut projects. So many games were on display that we're taking a super-sized look at some of our favorites in the coming pages.



Super Meat Boy Forever

Platform: iOS, Android, PC

The Team Meat development duo of Edmund McMillen and Tommy Refenes have been working hard on their latest game, Mew-Genics, for quite some time, which is why it came as a surprise to learn the two had decided to revisit their studio's namesake platformer. Super Meat Boy Forever should release before Mew-Genics, Refenes told us at PAX. This is currently the studio's full focus, and it's a little bit different from the Meat Boy we know.

Instead of straightforward levels with full control of Meat Boy's movements, Forever puts Meat Boy on autopilot, and the levels are made of randomized sections that change on each retry. You have two inputs: jump and fall faster. The latter is new to Meat Boy and helps give you some extra control, since you no longer have control over his left and right movements.

We were initially turned off by the randomized levels in our hands-on time because it's hard to memorize the levels beat by beat, but as we began to recognize the repeating sections, we warmed up to this new version of Meat Boy. It becomes more about fast reflexes, and less about knowing what's coming next.

Regarding Meat Boy's iconic death replay mode at the end of each level, Refenes says something comparable is planned for Forever. The big change this time around is the focus on mobile play; we're excited to play more of the ultra-hard platforming on our touchscreen devices when the game releases.

Looking for more independent games? Check out gameinformer.com/impulse for regular updates, previews, and reviews. For more in this issue, check out our extensive look at Kickstarter and The Flame In The Flood on p. 52. We also have previews of Never Alone (p. 67), Dreadnought (p. 73), Hand of Fate (p. 76), and Toy Soldiers: War Chest (p. 77).

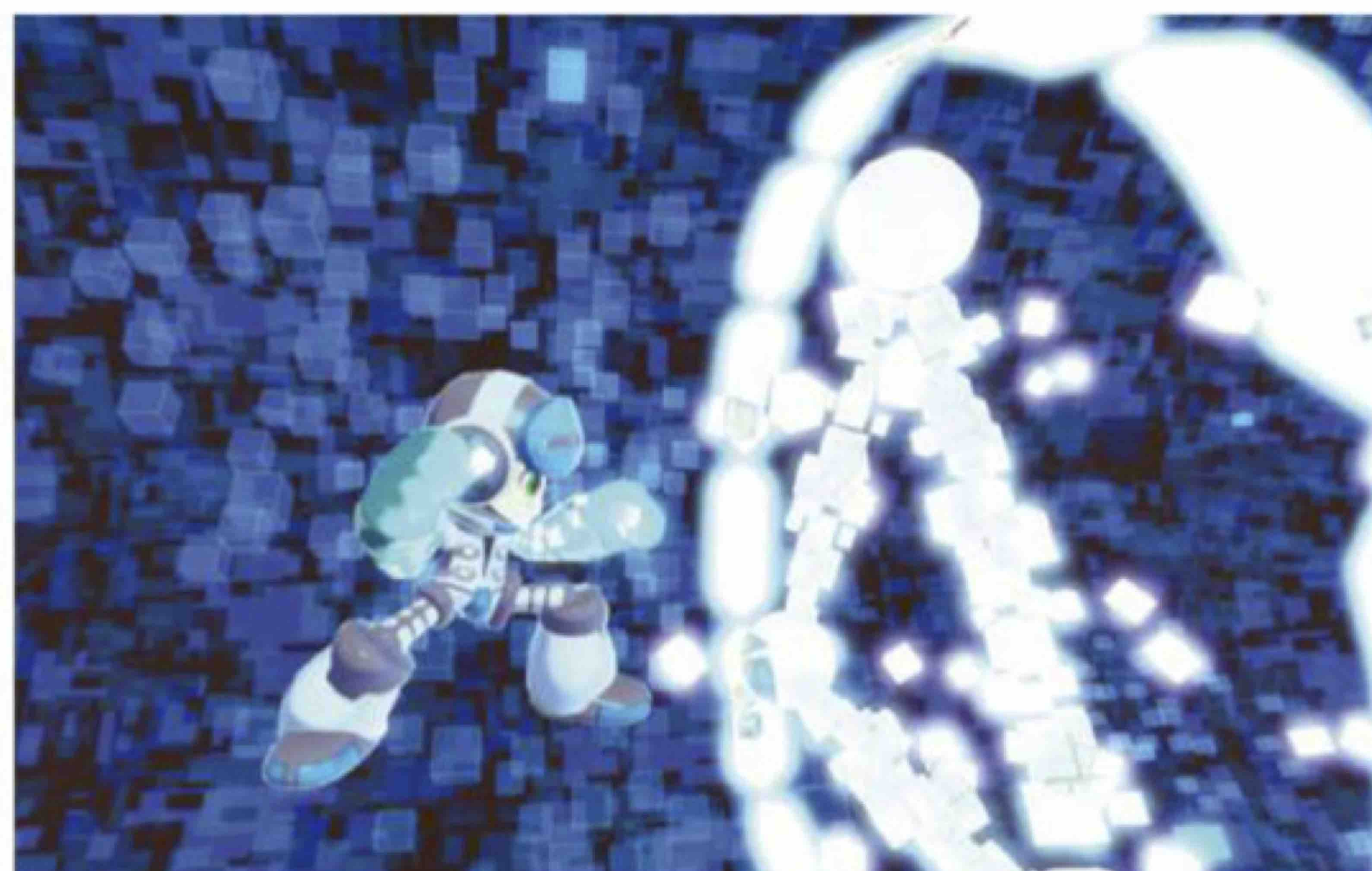
Behemoth Game 4

Platform: Xbox One, PC

The Behemoth is known for its distinct art style and its action gameplay. The renowned indie studio's past titles include side-scrollers (Alien Hominid), beat 'em ups (Castle Crashers), and platformers (Battleblock Theater). For its next game, Behemoth is trying out the strategy genre.

The game without a name (Game 4 is a temporary code name) retains the studio's art style and sense of humor, but places players in a world where knowing where to place your team is more important than how quickly you can press a button. It's not about using the right attack in the right area; it's about making sure your people are in the right position so they can attack on their own with limited micromanagement from the player.

After the world is struck by a gigantic space bear, everything gets discombobulated. Dimensions and time crossover to create battles where a medieval standoff with melee weapons can be interrupted by the appearance of a NASA spacecraft. The one or two-player battles are charming and crazy, and will hopefully open up hex strategy to a new audience. Game 4 and its final name are still a ways off, but the team is targeting a release on Xbox One and PC in 2015.



Mighty No. 9

Platform: PlayStation 4, Xbox One, Wii U, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, Vita, 3DS, PC

Keiji Inafune created and worked heavily on a number of franchises for Capcom, but he is most remembered for his work on the Mega Man series. When Inafune decided to leave Capcom and pursue his own independent projects, he launched a Kickstarter for Mighty No. 9 – a spiritual successor to Capcom's blue bomber – and it has easily become his most visible and anticipated project.

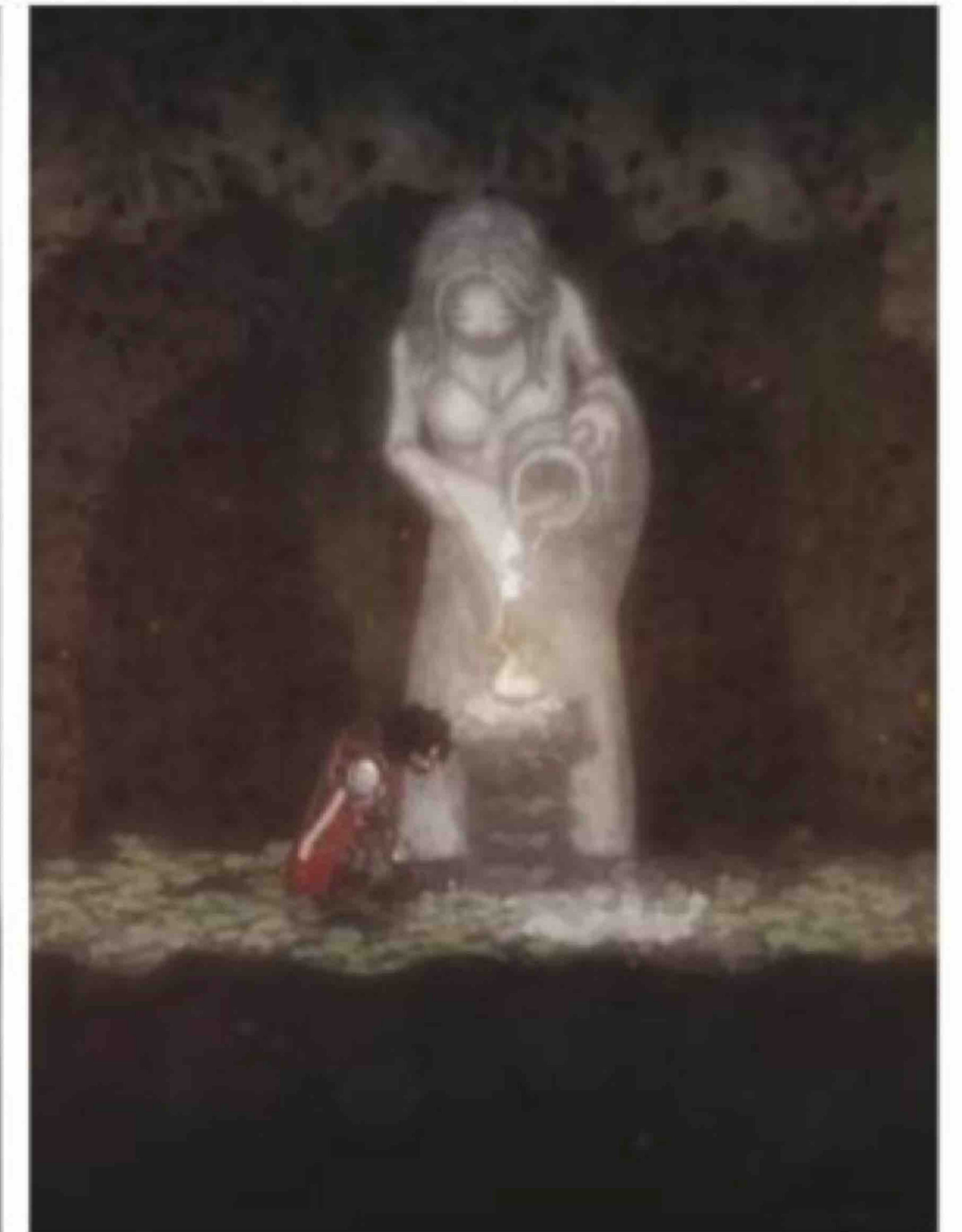
At PAX, we tried out the beta level. It feels like Mega Man, and makes no attempts to hide or diminish its influence in the best way. Mega Man's deliberate platforming is present, but so is Mega Man X's speed, making Mighty No. 9 live in a comfortable middle ground between the two franchises. Enemies can be defeated with the standard shoot-'em-till-they-blow-up attack, but the quickest, most rewarding way to defeat an enemy is to weaken them and dash through them. This is the main way Mighty No. 9 separates itself from its inspirations, and dashing into enemies to dispatch them is empowering. It is especially fun to use it as a final attack against the difficult bosses. If all goes well, we can expect to play a final version on our choice of platform in 2015.

Salt And Sanctuary

Platform: PlayStation 4, Vita

From two-person Ska Studios comes a game that combines Castlevania and Dark Souls for a 2D skill-based combat romp rife with dodging, parrying, and salt acquisition. Like the souls resource in Souls games, players accumulate salt and drop it after dying. Reaching bonfire-esque sanctuaries grants you checkpoints. Players have several weapons, consumables, and other treasures to master as they move through each area, taking on challenging foes and bosses.

During our demo, we had a brief opportunity to crack open some chests and explore some of the side-scrolling swordplay. The gameplay is fresh, and everything looks and feels great. This is a savvy genre blend, and it will be exciting to see how it comes together when it launches on PS4 and Vita during an-as-yet undisclosed exclusive launch window. After that initial release, Ska may target other platforms.



Gang Beasts

Platform: PC

Gang Beasts draws immediate comparisons to the Dreamcast fan-favorite Power Stone and Super Smash Bros., but this new game from Boneloaf has a silliness and excitement all its own. With established indie powerhouse Double Fine handling publishing duties, Boneloaf has crafted an addictive and hilarious opportunity to beat up on your friends.

Gang Beasts features local multiplayer battles in which several combatants attempt to destroy one another as multi-colored characters reminiscent of Pillsbury Doughboys. Inevitably, the matches unfold on stages filled with absurd and horrific environmental hazards, like spinning saw blades, spiked grinders, or speeding freight trucks. Players punch, grapple, and throw their opponents around the battlefield, as their victims desperately attempt to hold on to the environment (or their opponents) to prevent falling. The simple concept is great for parties, even in its Steam early access form. Future development aims to add more complexity, like crazy boss battles, but even the current version is a blast.

Distance

Platform: PC

Born from a DigiPen student project, Distance is the spiritual successor to a title called Nitronic Rush. After several of the student team members explored triple-A development for a time, they reunited as Refract Studios to evolve their racing project.

The opening of Distance's PAX demo shows a car with a computer display waking up from some kind of ambiguous computer shutdown and shooting off into a futuristic city. The racing and art aesthetic is reminiscent of games like F-Zero and Extreme-G – high speed, futuristic racers with more neon lights than are necessary. Distance falls into the racing genre, but the game plays more like a high-speed obstacle course. Instead of doing laps and taking on other cars, you try to stay alive while the course does everything in its power to destroy you with lasers, saw blades, and portals. Your car also has the ability to sprout wings and fly, giving a sense of freedom rarely felt on a race track. Flying consumes your boost power, so you can only do it for so long, but the opportunity for shortcuts and different paths opens the races up.

After spending time with the game, it feels like a racing platformer. We hopped and dodged, using the same mental tools we would in a platformer, but we were doing it in a car on a racetrack. Watch for a PC release of this strange racing amalgam next year.

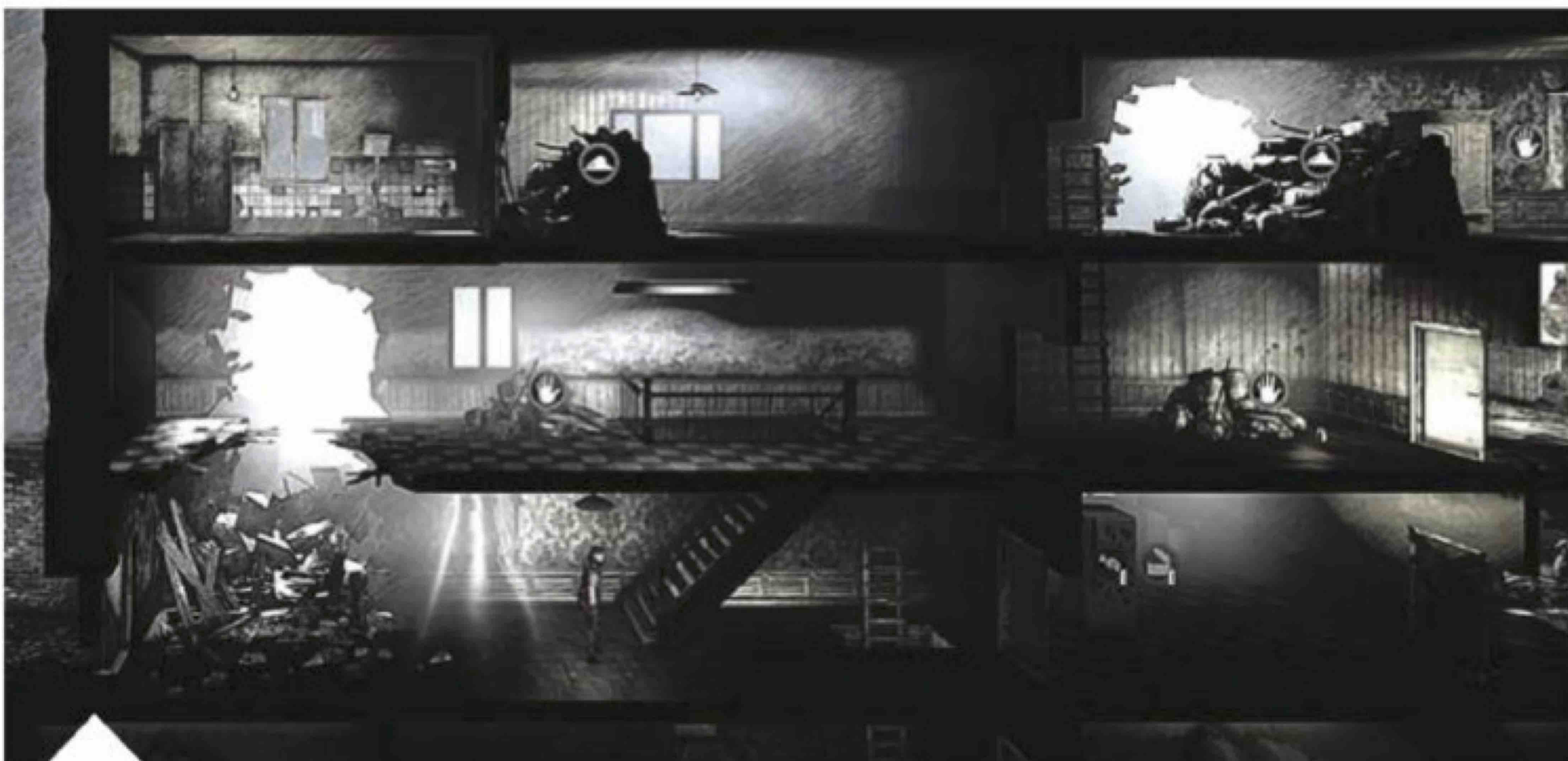
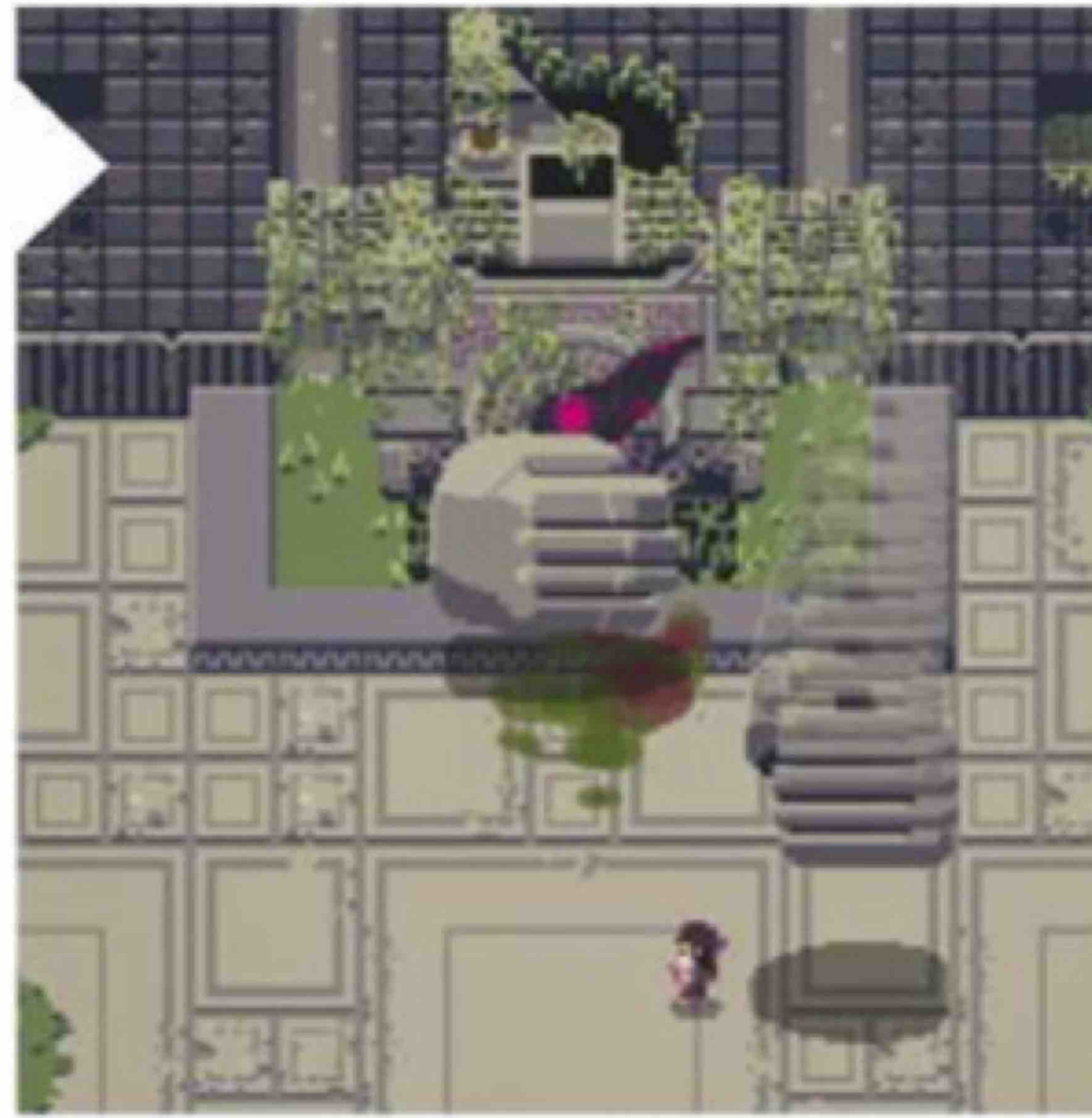


Titan Souls

Platform: PlayStation 4, Vita, PC, Mac

The unflinching, unwavering lack of hand-holding that permeates From Software's Souls series is inspiring new games to ride the challenge-can-be-fun wave. Acid Nerve's Titan Souls is unabashedly tough, with near zero forgiveness that belies its cutesy pixelated look. Dash, dodge, and seek your opponent's weak points as you scramble to take on challenging environments and bosses. Death is inevitable, but it's a learning experience that will harden you for the next attempt.

Over the course of a PAX Saturday, visitors to the booth had a chance to "Beat the Yeti Boss" to win a T-shirt. Of all the many, many participants, we were told that a mere 25 took home the prize. Spoiler: The Yeti beat us, too.



This War Of Mine

Platform: PC, Mac, Linux, iOS, Android

When we think of war in gaming, we often conjure images of historical (or futuristic) battlefields, scavenging for ammo, and pulling off sick headshots. There is another side of war, though. It isn't glamorous, there is no respawning, and you're no hero. You are just trying to survive.


This War of Mine puts you in control of a team of survivors, using daylight hours to improve their shelter and evening hours to scavenge for food, medicine, and building supplies. It's a balance of time and resources that creates an unsettling feeling. You can never do everything you want to, and there is no real sense of "winning."

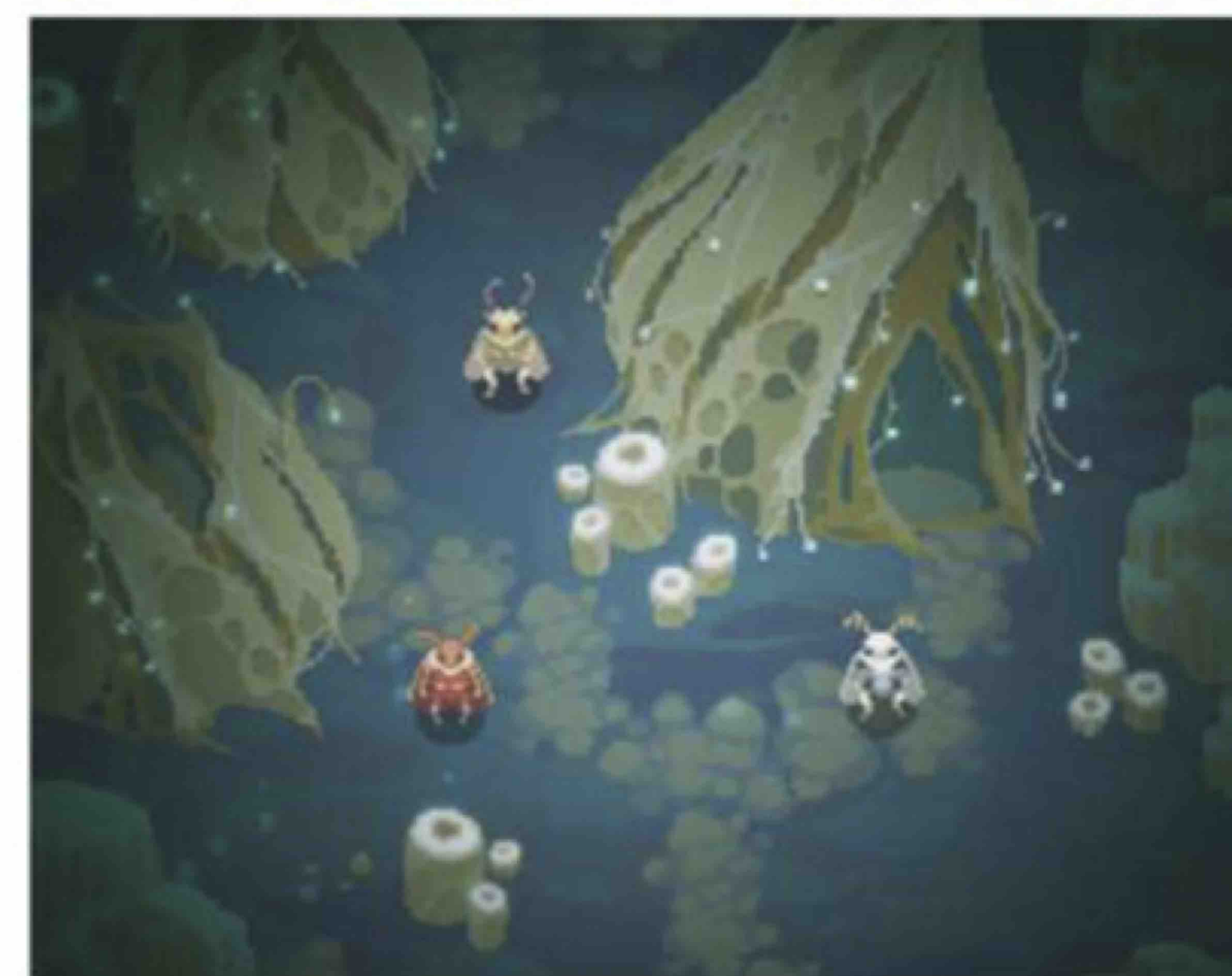
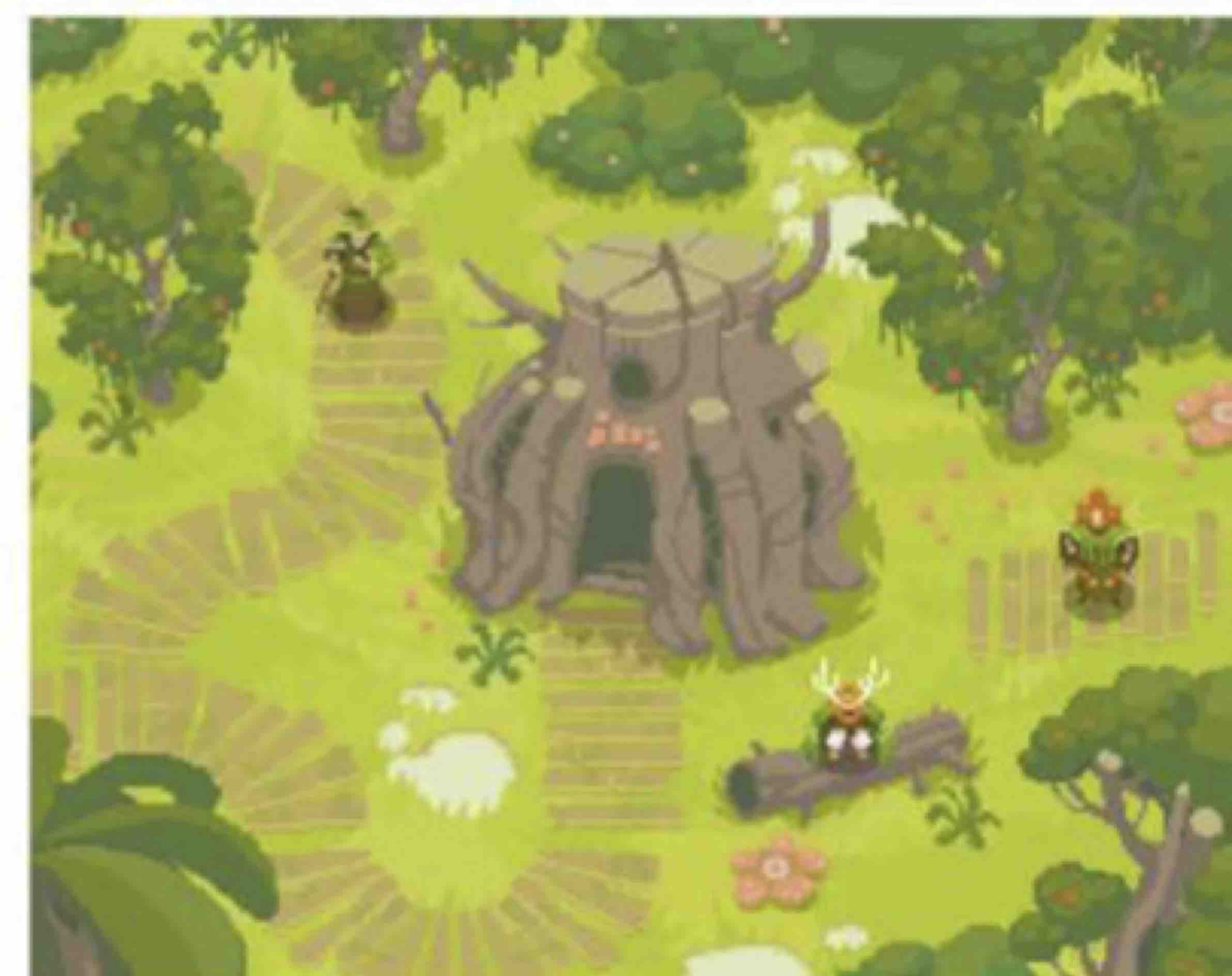
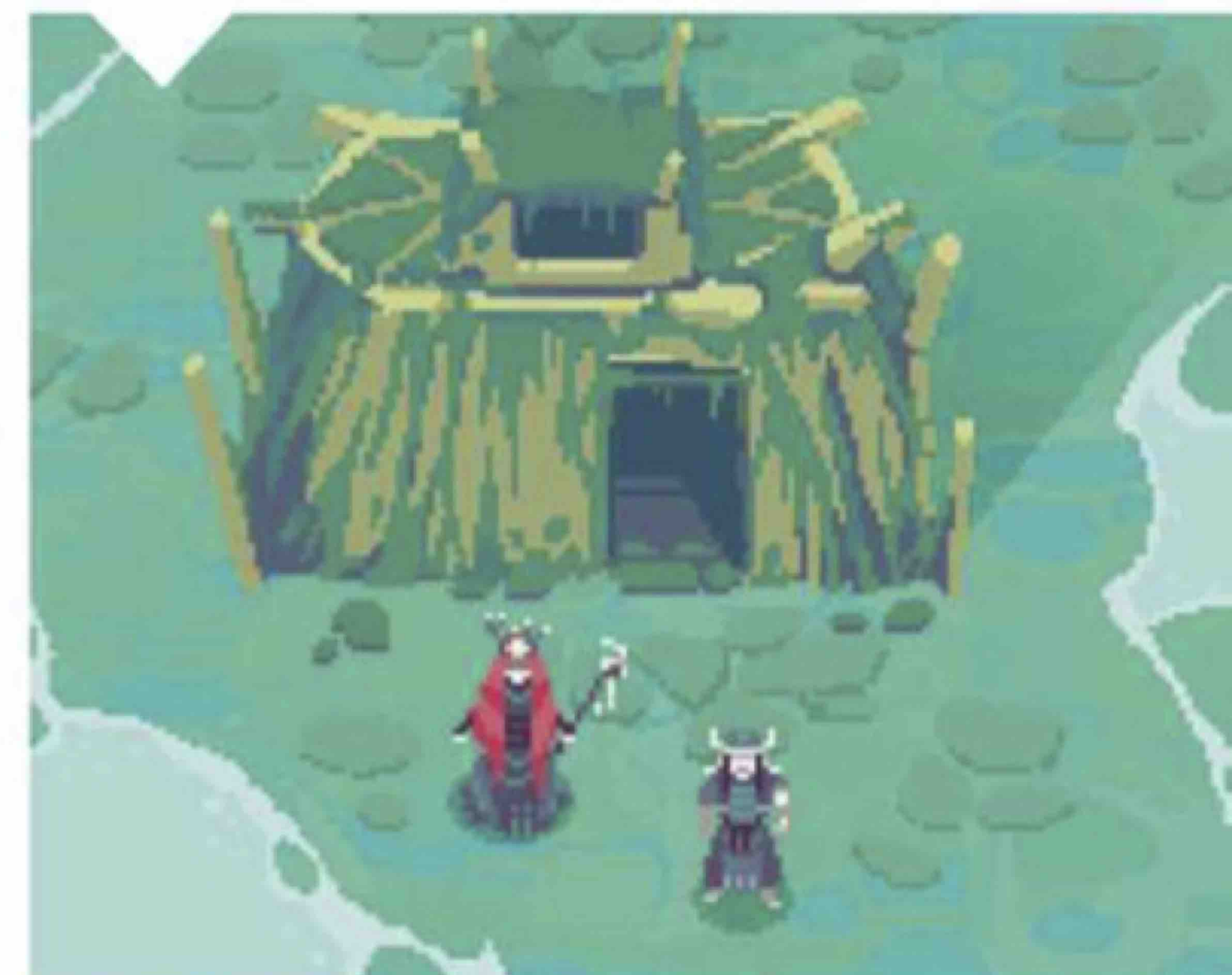
This War of Mine looks better every time we see it, offering a compelling mix of survival gameplay and humanitarian commentary on the horrors of war. Developer 11-bit studios is aiming to release the game on home computers and mobile platforms in the coming months.

Moon Hunters

Platform: PC, Mac

What if you pixelated The Legend of Zelda and Secret of Mana and merged it with some multiplayer RPG goodness? That seems to be the impetus behind Kitfox Games' Moon Hunters, an action role-playing romp that can field up to four players. With diverse hero choices like the Witch, Druid, Songstress, Spellblade, and Occultist, players can select a protagonist that suits their play style, whether it's a supportive team-boosting role or brutal melee expert. As your characters make choices, they determine how the world around them perceives them. For instance, saving a stranger at your own peril may enhance your Selfless trait.

With a randomized world and a game that can continue long after a single playthrough, Moon Hunters has us curious about its multiplayer potential when it launches on PC and Mac (with more platforms possibly coming later). 



interview

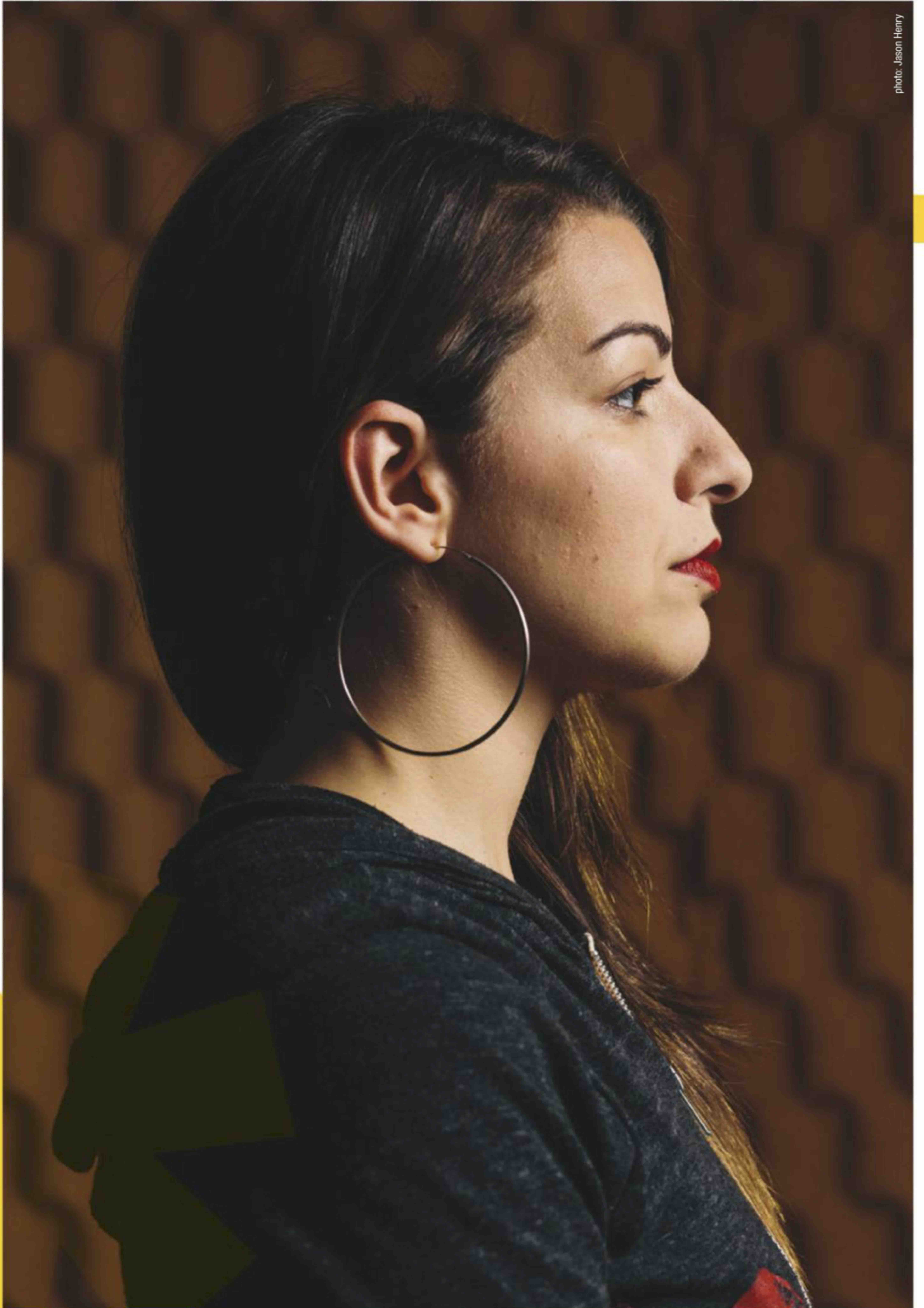


photo: Jason Henry

Critique & Controversy

Tropes vs. Women in Video Games presents Anita Sarkeesian's critique of the video game industry's portrayals of women. They've also made her the subject of much online controversy. We recently spoke with Sarkeesian about her work and critical theories.

interview by Matt Helgeson

How did you come up with the idea for Tropes vs. Women in Games?

There was a series I did called Tropes vs. Women that was in 2011. It was primarily TV and movies. Then the next year I decided to do Tropes vs. Women in Video Games. I wanted to do one specifically about video games because there were more tropes I wanted to cover. I've always liked games, but I've always had a very contentious relationship with them. I played a lot of games as a kid, and as I got older I sort of was in and out of liking gaming because I felt it's a really hostile terrain for women. When I got to grad school I was still playing games, but I wouldn't call myself a gamer because I bought into that myth about gaming being Grand Theft Auto, God of War, or Call of Duty. You had to play these macho posturing games and that's what it means to be a gamer. So even though I was playing Plants vs. Zombies, Spore, Donkey Kong Country Returns, de Blob, and Katamari, I didn't really think of myself as a gamer, which is kind of ridiculous. It was really the Wii that brought me back into it, like, "Wait a second, I am playing games. These are legit. I can call myself a gamer because I am playing games." I think the Wii did a lot for making gaming more accessible to a wider audience.

Talk about some of those games you mentioned, whether it's Call of Duty or God of War. Have you ever found enjoyment in those games, or do you find them too alienating?

It depends on the game. There are games that I play because it's my job to play them, because I'm getting footage; I'm doing research. There are some of those games that I wouldn't normally have played, and I actually enjoy them in various ways. One of the big pieces of the work that I do is to help people understand that you can both be critical and love a game or any piece of media at the same time. I think that most people actually have that kind of relationship with the media, especially if you come from a marginalized community. Because media isn't made for us, there's always going to be something that's problematic. There are definitely big blockbuster games that I love, and it's unfortunate that they have sexist or racist representations in it. Then there are other games that I don't like at all and have to get through in order to do the work that I do.

When it comes to gender or race portrayals in media, do you think that creators have the responsibility to challenge the status quo, or are you just looking for creators to look at their own preconceptions?

Well, both. One of the quotes that I like to come back to is by bell hooks. She says something to the effect that popular culture, for better or worse, is currently where the learning is happening. That means that TV shows, movies, books, video games are helping shape our collective cultural universe. Gaming plays a large role in our collective cultural understanding of the world. I think it's absolutely the responsibility of developers to challenge oppressive social norms, to do more with their games, and to challenge the status quo. I think part of what my series does is it gives people the language to understand what they're seeing in the media. It gives developers an opportunity to see the history of women's representations in games in a way they might not have noticed before.

What has been the reception to your work within the industry, among the people who actually make games?

I have visited some game studios and talked in workshops with them about women's representations in games. It's interesting, because the industry has been very receptive for the most part. When I started the series I didn't really consider developers part of my audience. I didn't really think about it. As the attention to my project got bigger, I realized that developers are actually watching this stuff, and they're interested and engaged. They bring it back into their studios and they have conversations around their representations. Sometimes there are debates, and sometimes they're like, "Hey, let's not do that." That's awesome, because part of what this series is hopefully doing is inspiring these conversations. It's inspiring people to start recognizing this stuff and make smarter, more intentional decisions about what goes in their games. Some developers whose games I have criticized have actually come out publicly and said, "Yeah, we did that. That was not a good idea. I'm not going to do that again in the future." I think that is really encouraging.

Did you have any idea that what you were doing with these videos was going to be as controversial as it's proven to be?

No, not in the slightest. When I launched the Kickstarter, we asked for \$6,000 to fund a series of five short-form videos. The night that I launched the Kickstarter, I was like, "I don't think we can raise this much money. What if we can't do this?" Within 24 hours, my Kickstarter was funded. Clearly, there were people who were interested in critical media analysis and feminist analysis around video games. The harassment started about a week-and-a-half to two weeks into the Kickstarter. I had no idea it would be this controversial. I've been running Feminist Frequency since 2009. I had gotten my fair share of harassment in terms of being a woman on the Internet. It's inevitable, sadly,

at this point. But the level of vitriol I received because of this Kickstarter project about video games was unlike anything I've ever experienced. I'm sure you know the story by now. Doxing, misogynistic slurs on all my social media accounts, and trying to hack into my accounts. Death threats and rape threats toward me and my family. It goes on. It was unbelievable to see how this unfolded. I've been terrorized and attacked for two years consistently.

Do you ever consider deciding that it's not worth it?

I'd be lying if I said, "no." Being attacked and terrorized for over two years is stressful, emotionally draining, and exhausting. But, you know, I'll get these emails from people like a mother and daughter who'll sit down and watch my videos together and talk about media literacy, using [my video] as an educational tool for her child's growth. The countless messages of support are incredibly encouraging and rewarding. All of that helps inspire me to keep going.

Those critical of your work argue that pressuring developers to reexamine their portrayals of female characters amounts to a form of censorship, that developers only have the responsibility to make the best games possible. How do you respond to that?

The argument of censorship is total nonsense. The work that I'm doing advocates critical thinking. I'm asking for games and the messages and values embedded in them to be taken seriously. I'm asking for developers and gamers to pay attention to the messages that their games are sending, both intentionally and unintentionally. I don't think that it's unreasonable to ask people to think critically about the media that we're engaging with or unreasonable for us to demand that game developers start recognizing a larger, more inclusive audience and what messages their games are sending to that audience. Anyone who says that that is censorship needs to look up what the word "censorship" means.

Looking to the future of these issues, what are some things that you hope will change in the next 20 years in video games?

I think a good starting point would be an end to this flippant, casual use of sexism that's so prevalent in the industry. I want to see more diverse and inclusive stories, and that means including a wide range of women's stories and stories of other marginalized communities. This means having more female characters that are good, bad, and everything in between. I also think that telling more original and engaging stories can provide an opportunity to form more diverse gameplay mechanics as well. ♦

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

1989
BIRTH OF A GAMER
Sarkeesian falls in love with video games, particularly Nintendo series like Kirby and Mario Bros.

2007
COMMUNICATING
Sarkeesian graduates from California State University Northridge with a degree in communications studies

2007
HEADING NORTH
In pursuit of a master's degree, Sarkeesian enrolls in York University in Toronto, Ontario. While at York, she takes classes from Jennifer Jenson, a game studies professor she cites as a major influence

2009
FEMINIST THOUGHT
Founds the website Feminist Frequency, a site devoted to the cultural study of race, sex, and identity in pop culture

2010
HIGHER ED
Sarkeesian completes her master's in social and political thought at York University

2012
PHENOMENON
Launches a Kickstarter to fund the Tropes vs. Women in Video Games video series, intended to take a critical look at portrayals of gender in games. The Kickstarter is highly successful, raising \$158,922 on a goal of \$6,000

2014
ACCOLADES
Sarkeesian wins the Game Developer's Choice Ambassador Award at the annual Game Developer's Conference

2014
CONTROVERSY
Sarkeesian releases a new Tropes video, "Women as Background Decoration," which becomes the target of harsh criticism online

2014
HARASSMENT
Now embroiled in the "GamerGate" controversy, Sarkeesian is the subject of death threats, which she reports to the FBI. It is later revealed that a bomb threat was called into an event at which she gave a speech

gear

NETGEAR NIGHTHAWK ROUTER



I

f your house is crowded with too many devices accessing your Wi-Fi router, the X6 may be the droid you're looking for. This antennaed Tri-band router gives you three wireless signals (one 2.4GHz and two 5GHz networks) to keep your gaming, streaming, and general web browsing untangled. The hulking, stealth fighter form factor may not be for everyone, but this feature-packed router can connect external drives via USB 2.0 or 3.0, stream iTunes, and even automate backups for your client PCs. Not everyone needs a router this robust or expensive, but for heavy users the X6 is worth a look.

VERY GOOD 

\$299 | netgear.com

by Matt Bertz & Ben Reeves



1 Polk N1 Gaming Soundbar

Need to improve your gaming audio but gun-shy about setting up a 5.1 surround sound system? The Polk N1 is a decent alternative. Though this sound bar lacks the elegance of other, sleeker options on the market, it delivers clear, booming sound for intense gaming sessions and comes with optimized sound settings for Halo and Forza – an added bonus for the Xbox faithful. The included remote control feels cheap, but the soundbar can learn to recognize other remote signals as well. While this setup lacks a subwoofer, the bass is thick enough to bring movies to life (though dialogue may be lost in the shuffle) and the Bluetooth integration gives you the option of using the N1 to stream your Spotify playlists as well.

AVERAGE

\$149 | polkaudio.com

2 Titanfall Angel City K'nex Set

Some of K'nex's smaller Titanfall-themed building sets don't feature the giant mechs, so the bigger sets based on Respawn's sci-fi shooter are the way to go. The set based off the Angel City map comes with more than 1,200 pieces and exclusive decals, so you can recreate the game's frantic battles. The set's highlights are the nearly 12-inch constructible Atlas and Ogre Titans.

\$119 | knex.com



ALT-J: THIS IS ALL YOURS

Named after the triangle created by typing the alt and j keys on a Mac keyboard, Alt-J started making waves with their first album *An Awesome Wave*. The English indie rockers' second album continues the tradition of blending folk-inflected dub-pop and soaring alternative rock.

\$9.99
altjband.com

THE BONE CLOCKS BY DAVID MITCHELL

Holly Sykes is not a normal teenager. The troubled young woman has always been a beacon for psychic phenomena, but after running away from home and wandering deep into the English countryside, Holly discovers her visions seem to be reordering reality into a life-like nightmare.

\$30.00
davidmitchellbooks.com

THE STRANGE RPG

After last year's award-winning *Numenera*, Monte Cook Games brings us this dimension-warping role-playing game. *The Strange* challenges players to travel between wildly divergent worlds of technology and magic in a vast multiverse, and perhaps even build a reality all their own.

\$59.99
montecookgames.com

VIKINGS SEASON 2

Inspired by Norsemen tales of early medieval Scandinavia, this addicting historical drama follows the exploits of the legendary Viking chieftain Ragnar Lothbrok who leads a series of daring raids in distant lands across an icy ocean.

\$39.98
history.com

Super Smash Bros. Diaries

Director Masahiro Sakurai shares his thoughts on the development of the latest game in the revered series



by Masahiro Sakurai

Hello to all Game Informer readers! My name is Masahiro Sakurai, and I'm the director of the Smash Bros. series. For more than 10 years, I've been writing a regular column for *Weekly Famitsu*, the biggest game magazine in Japan. Now, for a few months, I'll be doing the same thing for Game Informer.

I'm sure most of you are reading this because you're interested in hearing about Smash Bros., so let's kick off by answering a few of the questions I'm being asked frequently.

Why the dual-platform release?

The first reason is that I think both portables and home consoles have their own traits that make them fun. I've gone into that in previous interviews, so I'll omit the details here.

One big reason for this approach is because I'm a freelance game designer, one without his own permanent team or company. I'm always going to be at the center of any Smash Bros. project, but since I don't have my own personal studio, the staff changes in and out with each project. For this one, I'm working with Bandai Namco Games. Changing development studios like this also means that you can't build out from the know-how and in-house assets you've accumulated over time.

As a development environment, it's different from a publisher that can work on fighting games, shooters, and open-world titles all at once. For us, even if things look the same, it's all completely different, completely built from scratch. If we started with a console project then moved on to the portable platform, once one team finished up their work, we'd have to wait and hand everything over to another team. In other words, working on both at the same time is what finally allows us to provide the game on both platforms. The fact is, no matter who I'm working with, I need the ability to get things right as we go along.

Why were the two titles developed on two different timeframes?

The biggest reason was so we could

keep the debug schedules separate from each other. Debugging a game this size is a major project involving hundreds of people, and since the two platforms offer pretty different content, we wanted to avoid conflicts during the debug stages. If we were hell-bent on a simultaneous day-and-date release, we would have wrapped up one title, put it on the back burner, and launched both games in 2015. But I doubt most people would prefer that.

We also have to consider different markets around the world when settling upon a release date. The 3DS version is launching on different dates in Japan and North America, but both versions actually went gold on pretty much the same day.

Where is [insert character here]?

I know that no matter how hard we work to get lots of fighters in the game, there are always going to be people who only wonder about the characters that aren't there.

Among them are the Ice Climbers, who were actually in a working stage in the Wii U version during development. However, getting the two of them moving as a pair in the Nintendo 3DS version took a ton of machine power. I had the team innovate a lot to try and get them working, but we had to give up eventually. In fact, also with some of the other fighters we had to keep modifying and modifying until they finally worked.

When it comes to characters and series without any future plans – that is, without the prospect for new games to come out

soon – those are always going to be a lower priority. As for porting characters from Melee, the original data is now old enough that it's no longer a simple, straightforward process.

What kind of process do you go through, from the ideas behind each move to the final balancing?

First, I decide on a fighter, visualize their moves, snap poses using action figures, and bring that over to the spec crew as I work on frame timings. The general stats for moves – their speed, reach, and other traits – are more-or-less decided by this point. I then give instructions to the motion designers, and once they bring back animation for me, I directly program attack hit boxes and such.

Once a fighter is playable to some extent, I unleash them on the test players. We have around 12 of these players, and I have them play both two and four-player matches and get back to me on win/loss records and which moves seemed particularly strong or weak. That forms the basis for the long fine-tuning process.

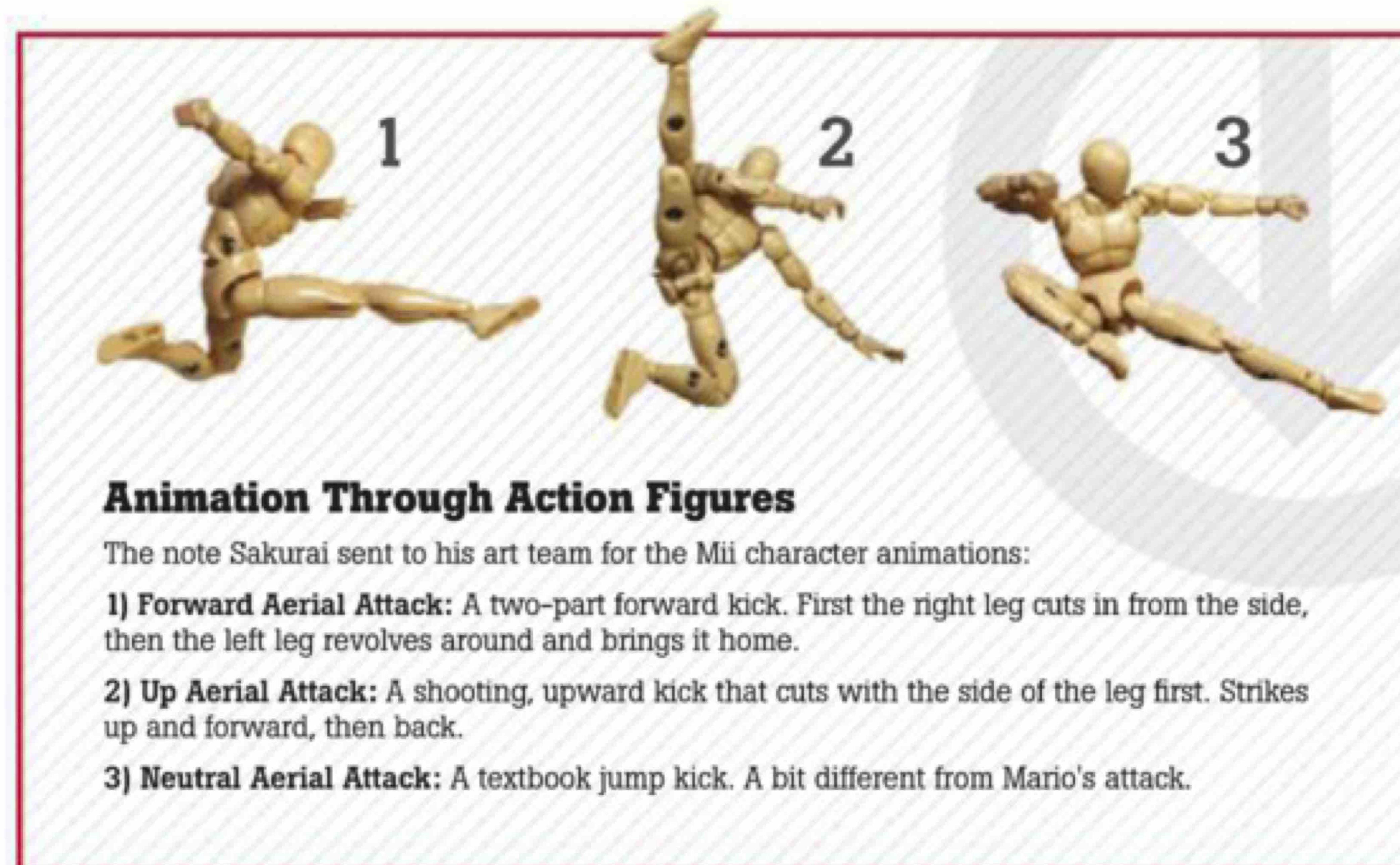
This work takes a tremendous amount of time and energy out of me, and it's something I wouldn't mind leaving to others, but that has never worked

well in the past. Even trying to oversee this much work already goes beyond a typical director's workload, but I'm piling even more on top of that, as well. All I can do is try to play catch-up on my off days. However, it's exactly this type of structure, with the director overseeing everything from the idea process to completion, which creates the consistency you see. We're never straying from our goals.

Speaking of which, if I took all of the battle records and tester feedback at face value and tried to make the game balance completely average and fair, that would make the game boring in some ways. Even if the balance is rough in spots, it's fun if it offers you a wide dynamic range to work with. That's something I hope we don't forget as we keep going.

One more thing before I wrap up. I'm active on Twitter [[@Sora_Sakurai](#)], but that service is meant to be Japan-only. If you have a message you're burning to send me, I would request that you not use an auto-translate service. English is honestly easier to read than that. Also keep in mind that, just as with Japanese, I'm not able to answer any questions that I receive over social networks – sorry!

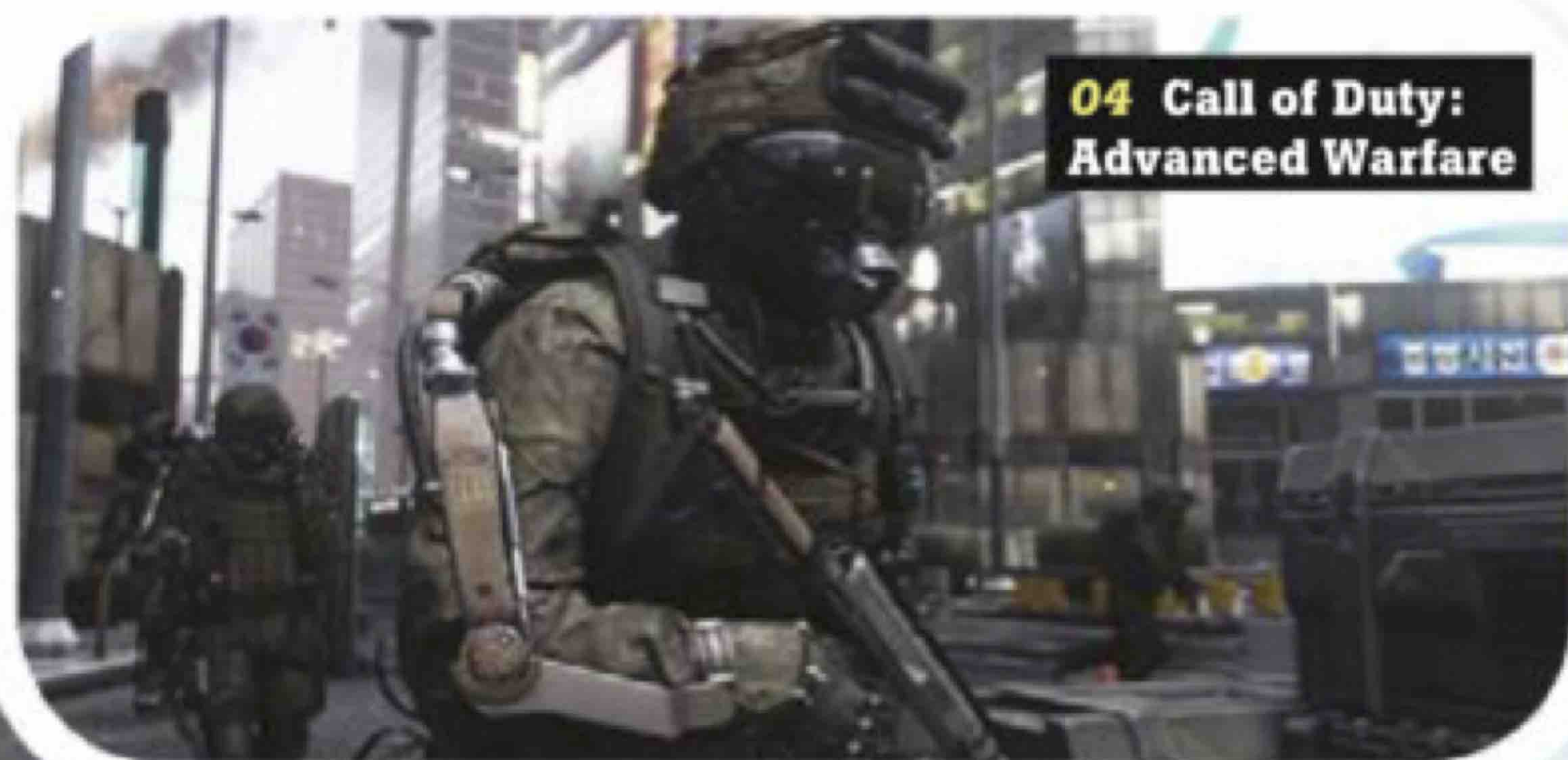
See you next month. ♦



Animation Through Action Figures

The note Sakurai sent to his art team for the Mii character animations:

- 1) Forward Aerial Attack:** A two-part forward kick. First the right leg cuts in from the side, then the left leg revolves around and brings it home.
- 2) Up Aerial Attack:** A shooting, upward kick that cuts with the side of the leg first. Strikes up and forward, then back.
- 3) Neutral Aerial Attack:** A textbook jump kick. A bit different from Mario's attack.



04 Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare



5.1



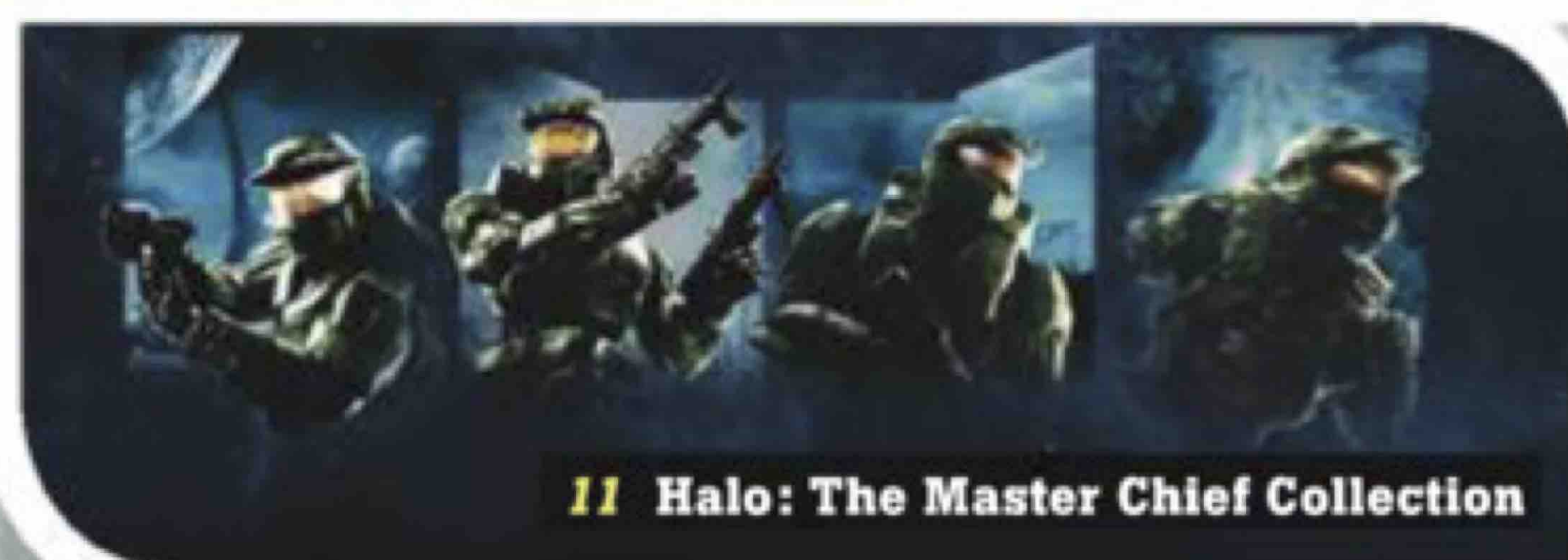
5.2



07



11 Assassin's Creed Unity



11 Halo: The Master Chief Collection



18 Dragon Age: Inquisition



18 Far Cry 4

November

04 New Releases

- › Akiba's Trip: Undead & Undressed (PS4)
- › Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare (PS4, Xbox One, PS3, 360, PC)
- › Payday 2: Safecracker Edition (PS3, 360)
- › Planes: Fire & Rescue (Wii U, 360, 3DS)
- › Rabbids Invasion (PS4, Xbox One)
- › The Wolf Among Us (PS4, Xbox One, PS3, 360)

05.1 The Story Of Skylanders

IDW Publishing is fleshing out the lore in Skylanders with a new ongoing comic-book series. Much like the Transformers cartoons of old, new characters debut in these Skylanders: Trap Team issues, and will later be seen in the games.

05.2 The New Face Of Thor

Marvel Comics has a new vision for its long-running universe, and one of the big changes is Thor becoming a female character. You'll see her in action for the first time today in the second issue of the new Thor series.

07.1 BlizzCon 2014

Blizzard Entertainment is having one hell of a year. The developer shipped Hearthstone: Heroes of Warcraft, and Diablo III: Ultimate Evil Edition, and will ship World of Warcraft: Warlords of Draenor on November 13. We're expecting another big announcement at this year's BlizzCon, which kicks off today in Anaheim, Calif. Tickets are already sold out.

07.2 Houston Arcade & Pinball Expo

Hundreds of coin-ops, all set to free play, are on display at this year's Houston Arcade & Pinball Expo. Tournaments for both pinball and various arcade and console games are planned across both days of this show, held at the Northwest Crown Plaza.

07.3 A Great Day To Go To The Movies

Call in sick to work, and plan on a doubleheader in the theater today. Two highly anticipated movies, Christopher Nolan's *Interstellar* and Disney's *Big Hero 6*, hit the big screen. One of these movies is clearly aimed at kids — *Interstellar* is about a dad with a cool job that involves going into space. *Big Hero 6*, on the other hand, is the sad tale of a fat robot. Be sure to bring your Kleenex.

11 New Releases

- › Assassin's Creed Rogue (PS3, Xbox 360)
- › Assassin's Creed Unity (PS4, Xbox One, PC)
- › The Crew (PS4, Xbox One, PS3, 360, PC)
- › Digimon All-Star Rumble (PS3, 360)
- › Halo: The Master Chief Collection (Xbox One)
- › Lego Batman 3: Beyond Gotham (PS4, Xbox One, Wii U, PS3, 360, 3DS)
- › Shape Up (Xbox One)
- › Sonic Boom: Shattered Crystal (3DS)
- › Tales of Hearts R (Vita)
- › Terraria (PS4, Xbox One)
- › Tropico 5 (360)

13 New Releases

- › World of Warcraft: Warlords of Draenor (PC)

14 We Didn't Ask For This

Get ready to feel old: The original *Dumb & Dumber* came out 20 years ago. Of all the movies that came out in 1994, that one is pretty low on our list of films that needed a revival. *Dumb & Dumber To* opens today, and we'll go see it to show our support, hopefully inspiring Hollywood to make sequels to 1994's *Forest Gump*, *Pulp Fiction*, and *The Shawshank Redemption*.

18 New Releases

- › Adventure Time: The Secret of the Nameless Kingdom (PS3, 360, 3DS)
- › Dragon Age: Inquisition (PS4, Xbox One, PS3, 360, PC)
- › Escape Dead Island (PS3, 360)
- › Far Cry 4 (PS4, Xbox One, PS3, 360, PC)
- › Grand Theft Auto V (PS4, Xbox One)
- › LittleBigPlanet 3 (PS4, PS3)

- › Middle-earth: Shadow of Mordor (PS3, 360)
- › Monopoly: Family Fun Pack (PS4, Xbox One)
- › Penguins of Madagascar (Wii U, 3DS)
- › Sonic Boom (Wii U)
- › Watch Dogs (Wii U)
- › WWE 2K15 (PS4, Xbox One)

21.1 New Releases

- › Pokéémon Alpha Sapphire/Omega Ruby (3DS)

21.2 Another Lengthened Finale

Following in the footsteps of Harry Potter, Twilight, and The Hobbit, *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay* is the latest book to be told in multiple parts on the silver screen. Part one opens today, in which we learn the supposedly sinister government that Katniss is trying to overthrow actually has everyone's best interests at heart, and our heroine is really ruining it for everyone. That's what happened in the book, right?

22 Canadian Video Game Awards

The fifth annual Canadian Video Game Awards show kicks off today at Toronto's Carlu. The games nominated are from June 2013-June 2014.

25 New Releases

- › Persona Q: Shadow of the Labyrinth (3DS)

26 A New Charlie Day Film

You probably didn't see *Horrible Bosses*, but you should. It has Charlie Day (*It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*) in it. That's also why you should see *Horrible Bosses 2*. You probably haven't heard of the other actors in these films, but don't let the lack of star power keep you from seeing Mr. Day in his full comedic glory.



» PLATFORM

PlayStation 4
Xbox One
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • PC

» STYLE

1 or 2-Player Action
(2-Player Online)

» PUBLISHER

Capcom

» DEVELOPER

Capcom

» RELEASE

Early 2015

STRANDED IN

HELL

EXCLUSIVE HANDS-ON WITH CLAIRE'S FATEFUL ESCAPE FROM
RESIDENT EVIL REVELATIONS 2'S SADISTIC PRISON

BY TIM TURI



Horror games are on the rise once again, but the genre wouldn't exist in its current form without Shinji Mikami's genre-defining Resident Evil. This 1996 PlayStation title solidified the series as one of the industry's biggest and coined the term "survival horror." The franchise reinvented itself in 2004 with Resident Evil 4, but the path beyond that influential shooter has been more polarizing. Resident Evil 6 released to mixed critical reception and failed to meet sales expectations – a dismal sequel compared to Resident Evil 5, which, as of last year, was Capcom's best-selling game ever.

The main numbered entries in the franchise may have recently lost the pulse of its enduring fan base, but a moody, portable, single-player focused spin-off named Resident Evil Revelations released months before Resident Evil 6 and scored Capcom praise. After being ported to consoles, the game sold nearly two million units. Revelations' numbers don't touch the main series entries, but Capcom recognized the serialized narrative structure as a current avenue for episodic distribution. Revelations 2, destined for current and last-gen consoles, refines the solid gameplay of its predecessor while telling the next chapter of one of the franchise's biggest characters.

We visited Capcom in Tokyo for an extensive hands-on session with Revelations 2. Capcom let us play through an exclusive section set in a deadly prison cellblock and we also spoke with producer Michiteru Okabe about the next chapter in Resident Evil's main numbered series. Our Tokyo trip also afforded us a chance to see Resident Evil Remaster HD in action and check out the revamped environments and game-changing control scheme.



Luring multiple enemies into the spinning blade traps is a good way to save ammo



THE REDFIELD AND BURTON WOMEN UNITE

More than a decade has passed since Claire Redfield's story trailed off. She premiered in *Resident Evil 2* alongside rookie cop Leon S. Kennedy, hunting for her brother Chris within the undead husk of Raccoon City. She discovered the outbreak was the result of a sinister corporation named Umbrella that was conducting experiments with terrible monsters beneath the city. Instead of letting that traumatic event cripple her, she dedicated herself to fighting bioterrorism. Her mission hit a snag in *Resident Evil: Code Veronica*, when she was captured infiltrating an Umbrella compound. She later awakened on a dirty jail-cell floor of Rockfort Island, an Umbrella training facility. Now, over a decade after that incident, Claire is back in the spotlight and finding herself in an unsettlingly similar position.

"Although her comeback to the games is a long time coming, there was a CG movie, *Resident Evil: Degeneration*, that showed us Claire after the Raccoon City Incident," says *Revelations 2* writer Hiroshi Yamashita. "*Revelations 2* takes place even further down the line –

between *Resident Evils 5* and *6*. So we paid close attention to making sure that we portrayed Claire as a character who has grown even more as a person."

Claire's repeated run-ins with evil companies performing illegal experiments have left her bitter and hardened. Her world-weariness shows, and she's quick to communicate her lack of trust for others. The benefits of her sworn mission include impressive weapon proficiency and quick reflexes – the best defenses against mutated monsters.

As in *Code Veronica*, Claire awakens in *Revelations 2* on the floor of a prison cell, this time with a glowing green bracelet on her wrist. This same accessory is highlighted in a trailer for the game, which shows passengers of a cruise ship wearing bracelets glowing green and vicious zombies with red ones. We don't know why or how she ended up here, but given the *Revelations* series' emphasis on mystery and flashbacks, Capcom is likely withholding her kidnapper's identity to create intrigue.

Claire's cell unlocks and she discovers the mysterious prison facility



Claire and Moira contemplate the meaning of these bracelets

A NEW CHAPTER, A NEW DISTRIBUTION METHOD

Resident Evil Revelations was developed on the 3DS with an episodic structure because Capcom theorized on-the-go players would want to play in smaller chunks. *Revelations 2* isn't in the works for 3DS or Wii U (likely due to *Revelations*' underperforming sales on those platforms), but the serialized TV-show formula remains intact. Similar to Telltale's *The Walking Dead* or *The Wolf Among Us*, each episode will be available individually for \$5.99, or you can get a season pass for \$24.99 which comes with extra content. A disc-based version will hit retail after all the episodes are released with even more additional content for \$39.99, though Capcom hasn't specified what the extras entail. The four episodes will release across four successive weeks, each taking two to three hours to play through.



Running from this juggernaut is a better idea than standing up to it

looks like it's been abandoned for decades. Rusted hooks line the walls, and implements of torture are displayed everywhere. Recognizing the danger here, Claire immediately goes on the hunt for Moira. This fire-cracker of a young woman is the daughter of Resident Evil fan favorite Barry Burton.

Barry was blackmailed into betraying his fellow S.T.A.R.S. team members during the Mansion Incident when series villain Wesker threatened his loved ones. The family man has been absent from the storyline since his cameo appearance at the end of Resident Evil 3, which also shows a snapshot of him playing with his two little girls. Revelations 2 promises to explore what's going on with the Burton clan, but will Barry be playable? Director Michiteru Okabe is being coy, but the answer may be between the lines.

"Without giving away too much, I will say it is a good story for familial relations – parents and children," Okabe says. "You'll glean a lot about these kinds of relationships in this storyline."

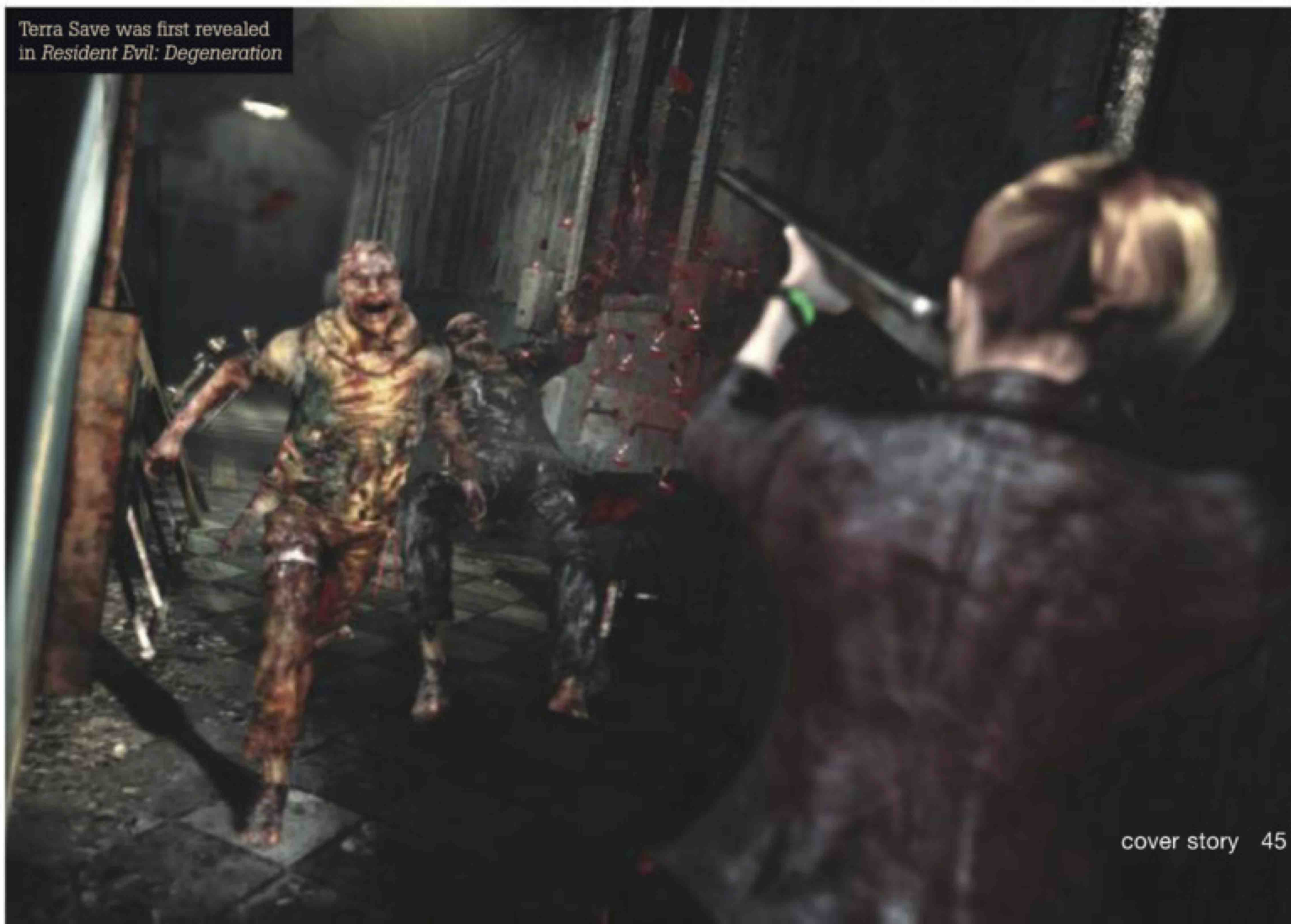
Claire finds Moira trapped in another cell, banging against the bars in frustration. Claire releases the lock by pressing a nearby switch and a relieved Moira flees from the cell. Moira is a new recruit in Claire's organization Terra Save, a group committed to battling bio-terrorism across the world. Moira is a rookie with an attitude and a big mouth, but her admiration of Claire is apparent. This duo's relationship presents another parallel to Claire's exploits in Raccoon City, where she protected youngster Sherry Birkin from her mutating mad-scientist father.

The pair winds through dark, narrow corridors with passageways blocked by locked gates or piles of decrepit junk. Their path leads to a large, open area with mine-cart tracks corkscrewing up along the walls. Dozens of hooks dangle from the ceiling, each impaling a gently swinging, burlap-wrapped body. One corpse suddenly drops right in the middle of Claire's path, offering a quick scare and reminder that Capcom

wants to rattle players' nerves more than in recent games.

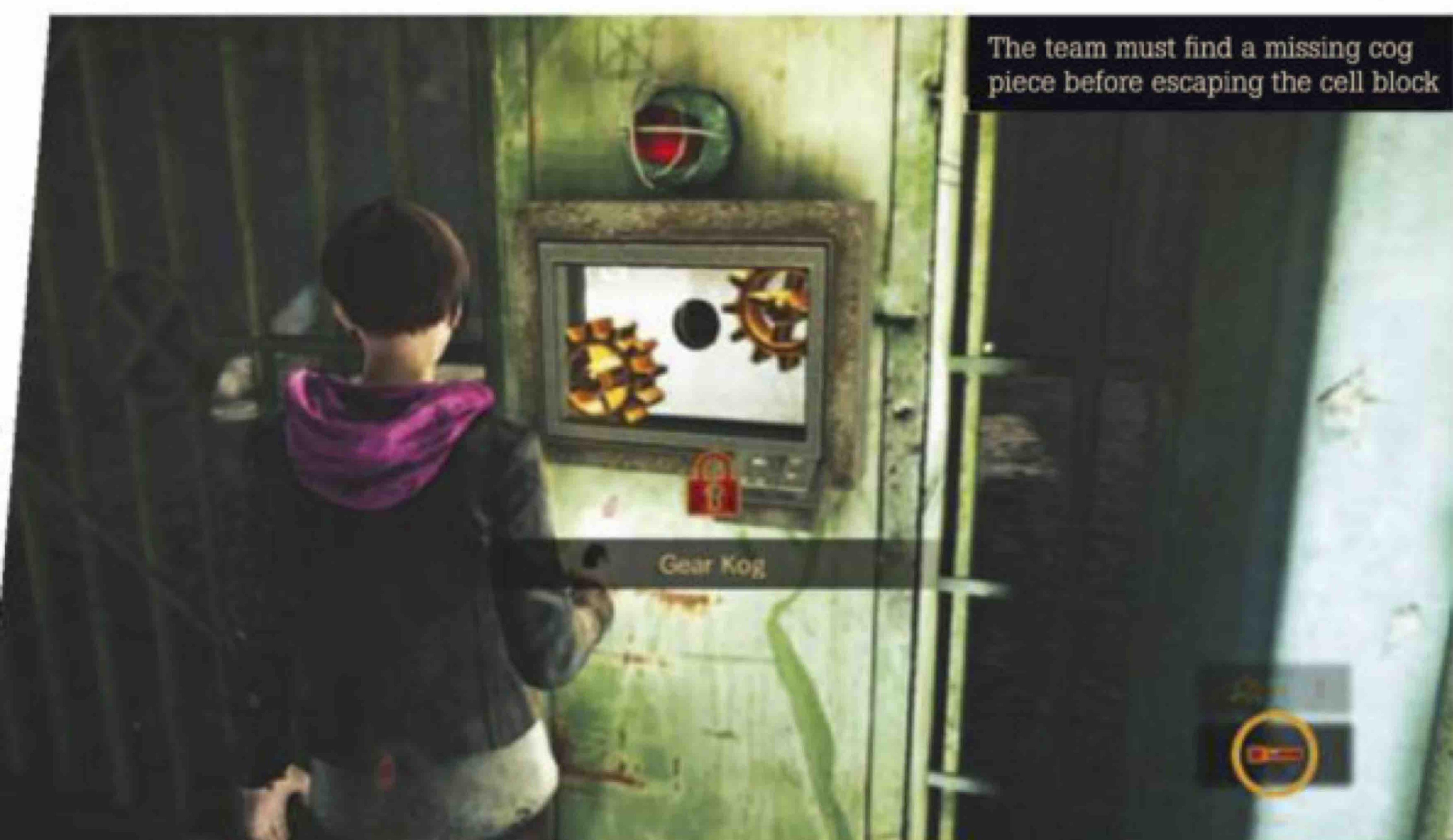
They hit a dead end in a surgery room with a huge pane of cracked glass. Claire goes on the hunt for something to bust it out. She uncovers a knife and a flashlight, handing the latter over to Moira. Now armed, Claire busts down the glass and the two explore the next room. Claire reads up on a file all about the monitoring and disposal of "test subjects." The memo prompts me to explore the environment a little more thoroughly, and I see a security camera pointed right at the ladies.

Terra Save was first revealed in *Resident Evil: Degeneration*

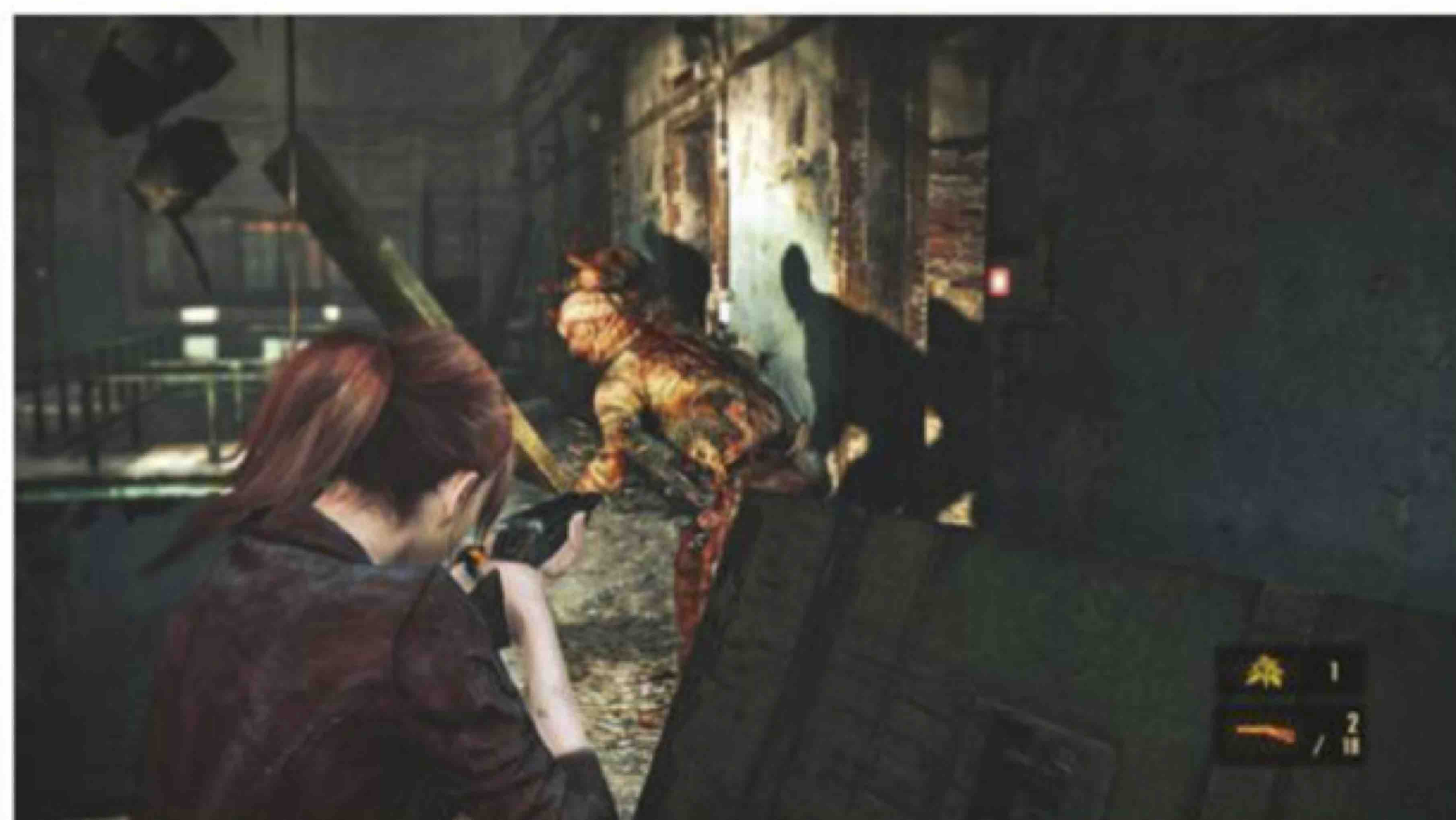




Capcom says the Afflicted are not Zombies



The team must find a missing cog piece before escaping the cell block



It doesn't take long before Claire and Moira get their first look at one of the subjects. I won't spoil how one of the twisted tortured fiends, named the Afflicted, makes its first appearance, but they look gruesome. These fleshy, terribly deformed humanoid monsters glisten with blood. Torture implements like spikes and barbed wire are driven into their scarred bodies, adding a sting to each swing they take. Claire wards off the first attacker with her knife as Moira curses in confusion, asking what she just saw.

"The Afflicted were subjected to some sort of specific kind of torture that's basically driven them completely bonkers," Okabe says. "They're insane now and extremely violent, going berserk. They are humans; they're not zombies. They are humans that have been pushed beyond their limits."

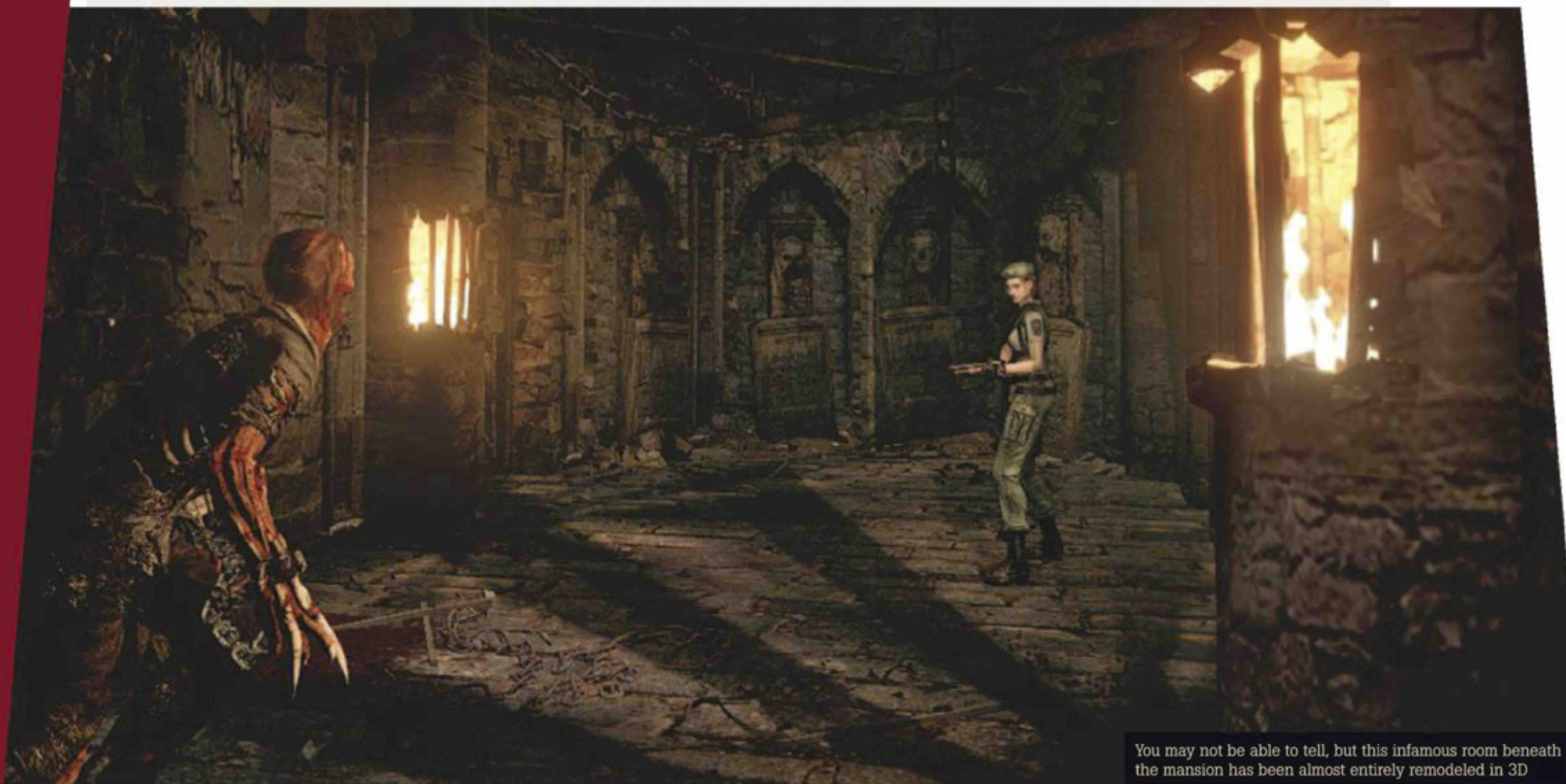
Claire's next encounter with these new foes is a white-knuckle introduction to Revelations 2's combat. The two are attacked after looting a dead cop's corpse for a pistol and a key. A trio of Afflicted close in, snarling and running toward Claire as Moira flees up a ladder. Without thinking, my instincts from hundreds of hours spent blasting the Ganados and Majini of Resident Evil 4 and 5 kick in as I shoot at the charging monsters' feet. To my surprise, the attackers stumble and fall to the ground. Unlike recent Resident Evil games, where attacking

specific body parts doesn't affect enemy movement, Capcom is bringing gunplay in Revelations 2 back to its roots.

A couple of clean headshots finish off one Afflicted, and I attempt to conserve ammo by slashing another fallen enemy with my knife. The other remaining Afflicted offers me no quarter, blindsiding me with a huge tackling leap. Series fans may have grown accustomed to enemies that sprint toward you and generously slow down when within a few feet. The Afflicted's animalistic rage makes them more of a threat, forcing players to keep moving. Thankfully, Claire's new multi-directional dodge move allows her to evade some of these tenacious beasts' attacks. The narrow timing window of the original Revelation's dodge ability has been replaced with one that lets players dash in a specific direction at will. It's a welcome change.

I barely survive the fight, having to rely on my knife to cautiously defeat the last Afflicted. Blood smears frame the screen, indicating Claire is on her last legs. Holding down a button allows Claire to mend her wounds with collected herbs after a healing gauge quickly fills. Hardcore Resident Evil fans will be happy to know that even for a seasoned series veteran, Revelations 2 looks to be punishing. The scarce resources and relentless enemies may have some players restarting at checkpoints more often than they expect.

INSIDE RESIDENT EVIL HD REMASTER'S MANSION MAKEOVER



You may not be able to tell, but this infamous room beneath the mansion has been almost entirely remodeled in 3D

Resident Evil Revelations 2 is embracing the series' figurative horror roots, but this remastered HD update is literally going back to its origins.

Much has been said about the GameCube remake of Resident Evil, and for good reason. It cleverly toys with players' expectations based on the original, like having a window crack instead of a zombie dog crash through it. It makes players rethink their strategies thanks to zombies that must be burned before they come back faster and stronger. Not least importantly, the 2002 release made a graphical leap in one generation that's nothing short of staggering. But Capcom's process for updating the already impressive visuals for the HD era is more involved than simply improving textures and offering an alternative to clunky tank controls.

During our visit with Capcom, the developer walked us through the process behind making the terrific-looking game look even better. GameCube titles were originally developed to output to standard-definition TVs. That built-in, fuzzy coat of Vaseline is gone now, so the team has to painstakingly ensure every last green

herb and flickering candle holds up under HD users' scrutiny.

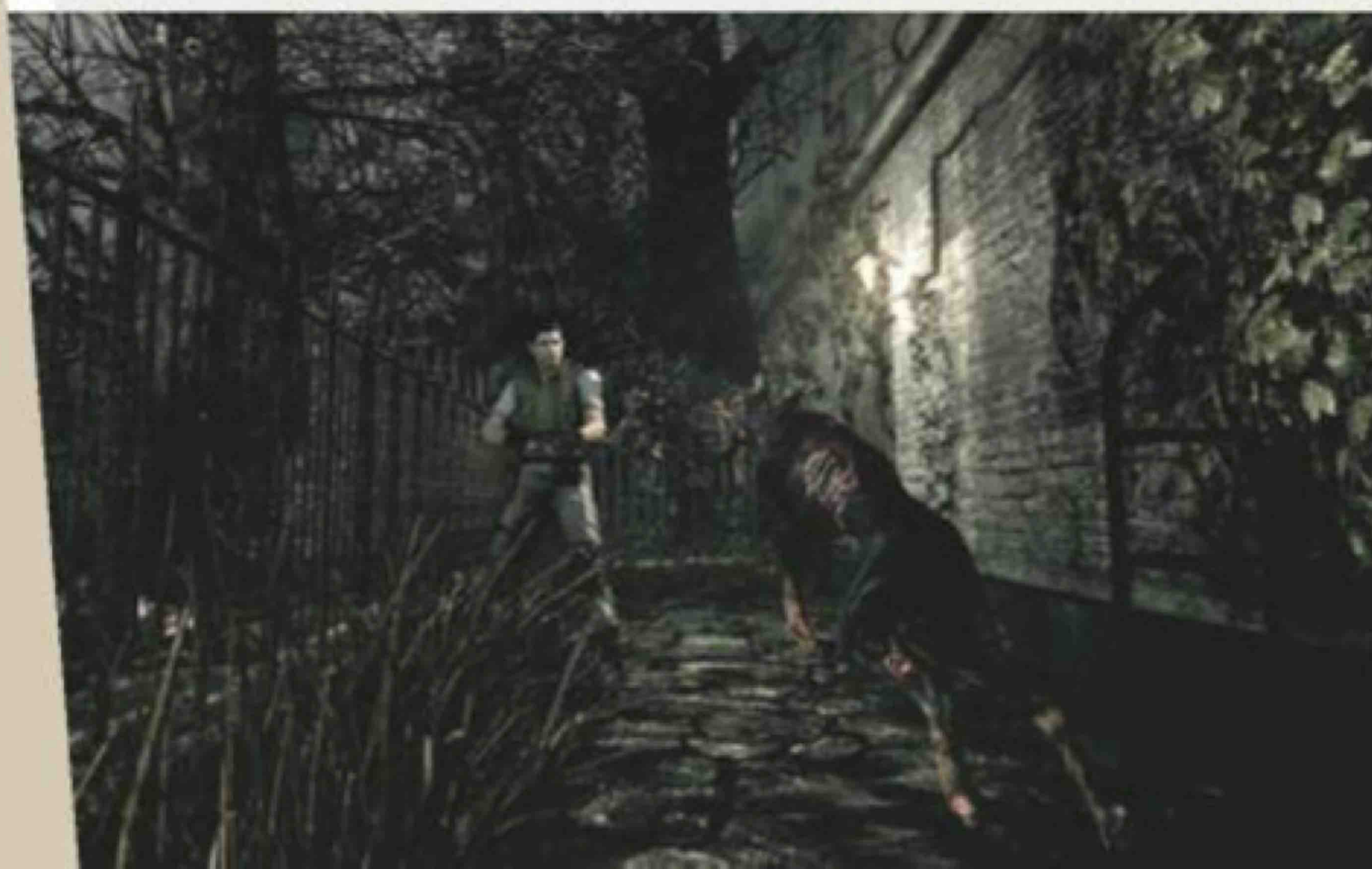
The RE remake differs from many HD updates that contain fully 3D game worlds, in that the mansion settings achieved their impressive level of detail thanks to Capcom's technique of using static backgrounds with looping ambient flairs, like moths flickering at a light or leaves rustling in the wind. These subtle elements along with the lighting system were baked into the environment because the game had no dynamic lighting system (save for the 3D character models). To update these aspects of the game, Capcom is completely recreating some scenery in 3D, like candle flames or tree branches. Additionally, the character models for every S.T.A.R.S. team member and enemy are being touched up to convey a greater sense of realism and gore.

Some rooms have been almost entirely redone, such as the infamous underground tomb where a Crimson Head zombie emerges from a dangling coffin. In order to maintain the dread-inducing mood of the room, Capcom remade the walls, floor, iron bars, hanging chains, and more so that the dynamic lighting system could play off the environment with more gloomy realism.

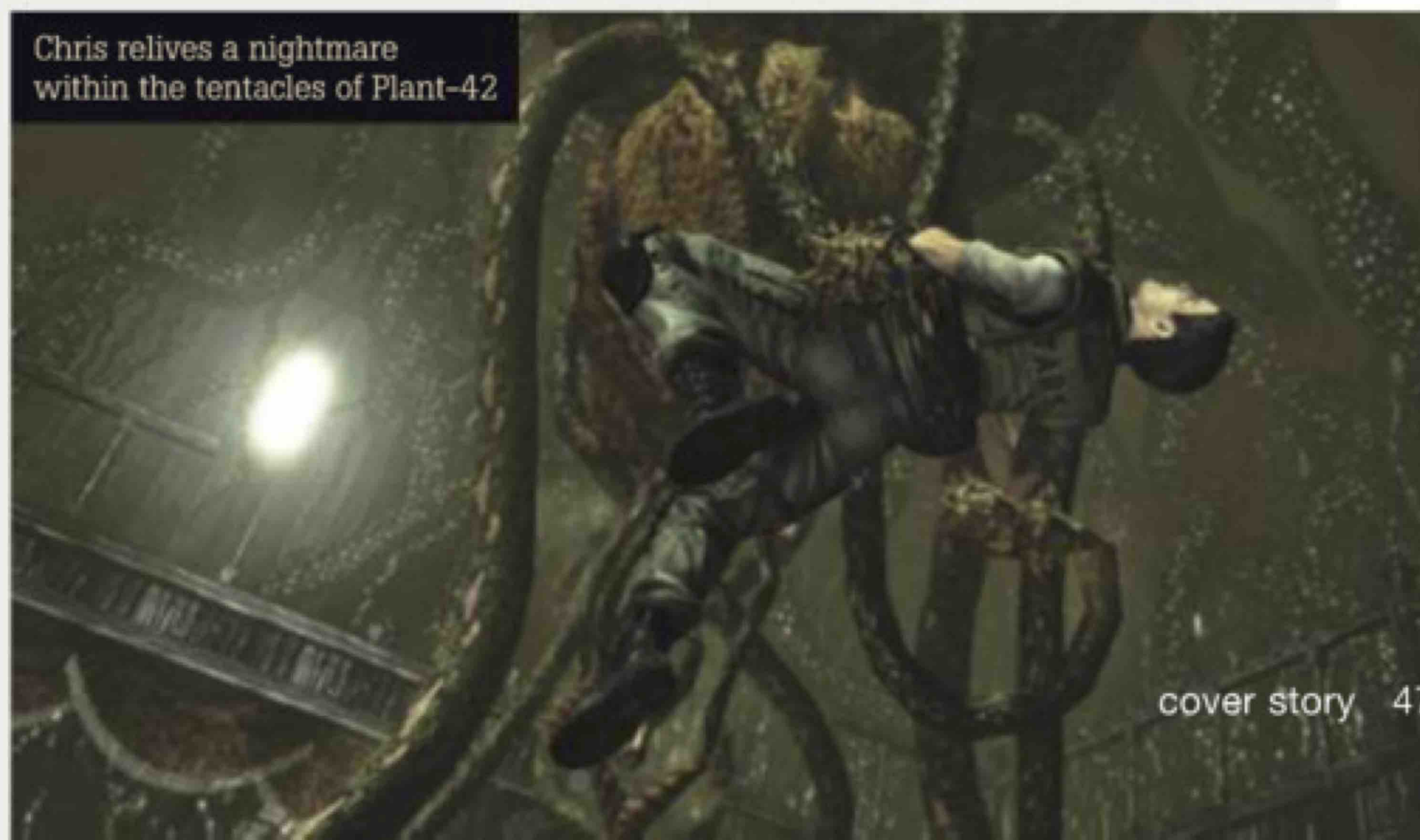
For a game so focused on instilling unease in players, this type of attention is paramount.

Capcom also showed off the new modern control scheme and cropped camera mode in action. The new controls allow the character to more nimbly move around the environment and evade enemies. Capcom admits this may disrupt some core balancing of the game's difficulty, such as enemies' A.I. not being able to compensate for the S.T.A.R.S. sudden spryness. Chris and Jill's speedier movements may also reduce some of the weight and tension of the original. A new view mode crops the action in 16:9 (opposed to the original's 4:3 ratio), with the concession of a camera that slowly tracks the characters. It's similar to watching a widescreen film in fullscreen – slightly jarring but not awful. Thankfully, players can swap between the original ratio and control scheme on the fly.

Finally, Capcom is giving fans a little something extra by including playable Resident Evil 5 versions of Chris and Jill in HD Remaster. All these enhancements and new options are coming together to present an enticing opportunity for diehard fans and newcomers alike when it hits current/last-gen consoles and PC early next year.



Chris relives a nightmare within the tentacles of Plant-42



A CAPABLE CO-OP PARTNER

The Afflicted present a formidable challenge, but thankfully Moira Burton has inherited her father's grit. Though unlike Barry, a former weapons expert for S.T.A.R.S., Moira doesn't do guns. Shortly after Claire picks up a double-barreled shotgun, she offers the firearm to Moira. She rejects the offer, adding that guns aren't her style. "Not after what happened," she says. Could Moira's aversion to guns stem from a traumatic family event? Revelations 2 sows the seeds of another intriguing mystery.

Moira is handy even without a gun or blade. Players can control Moira in single-player, swapping between her and Claire with the push of a button (reminiscent of Resident Evil 0). Alternatively, a buddy can pick up a controller for some local, splitscreen-only co-op action. Moira sticks to flashlight duty, shining the light around the environment to reveal sparkling items for the taking, like ammo and health. She can

also point the bright beam in enemies' faces, blinding them and leaving them open for a blast from Claire's shotgun or a roundhouse kick. But that's not all; Moira also carries around a hefty crowbar. She can stab fallen enemies with the business end of this tool for a one-hit kill, making her contribution to combat an invaluable way to even the odds and save ammo.

Moira uses the crowbar to pry a wooden barricade off a door leading to a new area that Capcom showed exclusively to Game Informer. Claire and Moira pass through a dark hallway until they see sunlight for the first time since awaking in this terrible place. A bright ray of light breaks through the crumbling roof of the compound, illuminating an open prison cellblock. A voice cuts in over the facility's P.A. system.

"Fear what you will become, and become what you fear," says the disembodied voice. Could this be the same person who is mysteriously



Though Moira is primarily defensive, she's still fun to control

CAPCOM TAKES ITS LEADING LADIES SERIOUSLY

The Resident Evil series' ever-changing representation of its female heroes is personified by Jill Valentine. She transformed from a uniformed police operative to a mini-skirted survivor, then to a brainwashed, spandexed vixen with a mind-control device attached to her cleavage. Capcom hasn't always handled its tough female characters with the class they deserve, so we asked producer Michiteru Okabe if that's changing with Revelations 2's more grounded representations of Claire Redfield and Moira Burton.

"Yeah, that is deliberate," Okabe says. "I think even though this takes place in a fantasy world, we've made an effort to keep things a little more on the realistic spectrum. Things that people actually wear in real life, and skew away from the cartoony things you see in other Japanese titles. We're making a concerted effort to avoid that with a lot of the stuff we're up to these days."



While stealth kills weren't active during our playtime, Claire will be able to perform silent, contextual takedowns

watching the duo fight through the prison?

"What? Who the f--- is quoting poetry?" Moira asks.

"Are you afraid? You can tell me. Talk to me," the voice says.

Claire and Moira worriedly talk amongst themselves as the bracelets on their wrists change from green to orange. The voice reveals that their bracelets change color based on their level of fear. Mirroring the health statuses of classic Resident Evil titles, green is presumably good, orange means they're afraid, and red is bad news according to promotional material showing zombie-like creatures displaying the color.

"You won't recognize this character just by the voice, but this is a known character that's very important to the RE universe," Okabe says.

"But you've got to be a core fan to know her. Really hardcore."

The voice stops, leaving the women to continue searching for a way out. They find a gated door locked by a cog mechanism. In classic

Resident Evil fashion, a gear is missing. Another locked door nearby requires a rusty key to open, which means I must have more exploring to do in the cellblock. Searching the upper cells proves fruitful – I scare up a few spare bullets and the rusty key I need. However, the necessary cog is behind one of the electronically locked cell doors.

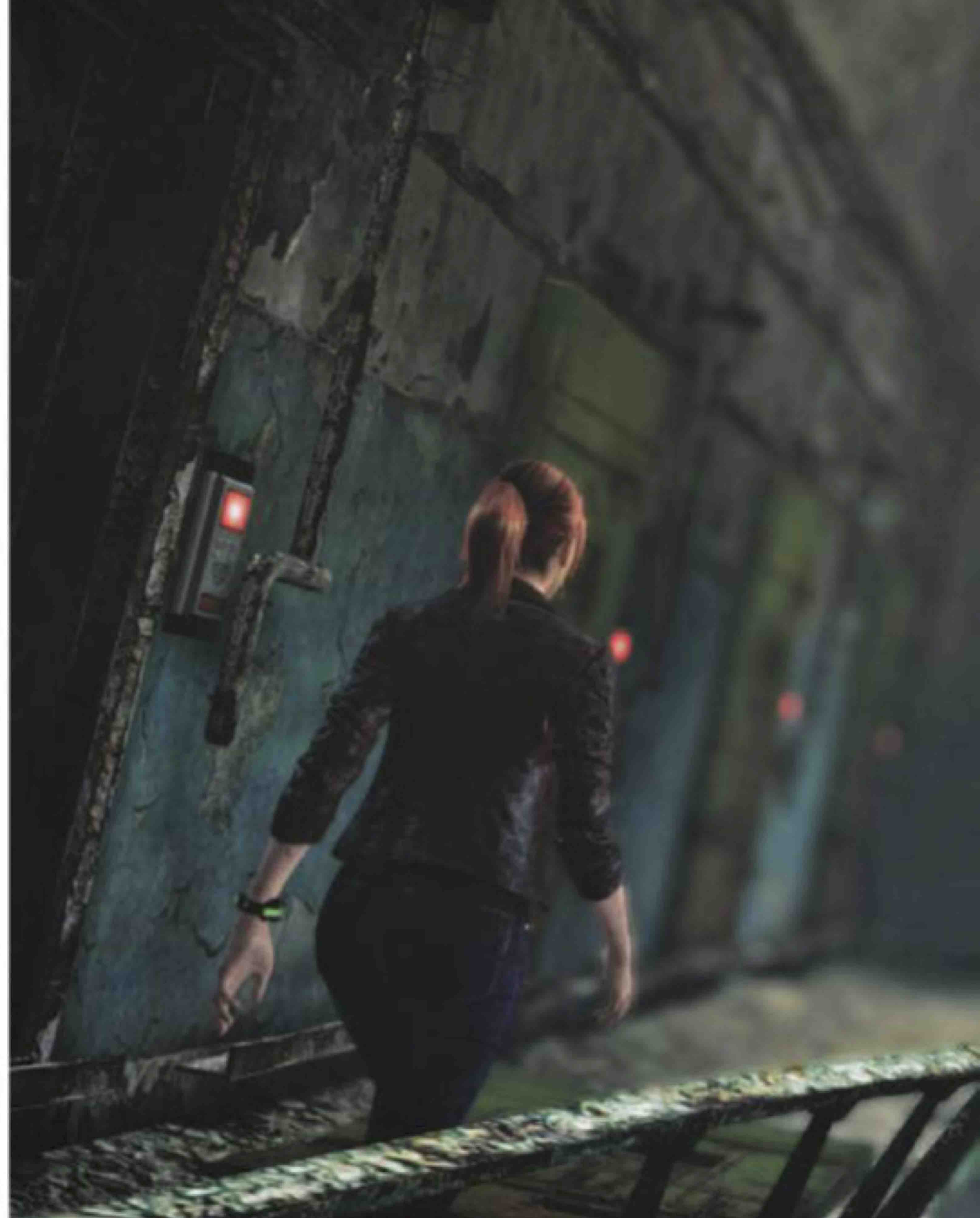
A cell door begins shuddering on the way back to the stairs. The twisted face of an Afflicted appears in the narrow view hole as the door rattles on its hinges. Feeling cavalier, I attempt to sprint past the door, only to jump in my seat as it busts open and Claire is sent falling to the ground below. A group of agitated Afflicted burst from their cells, rushing down the stairs. Spotting a strategic opening, I switch to my shotgun and take aim for right about where the heads of the two frontrunners will be. One blast turns their doughy faces to pulp and I carefully dismantle the rest with help from Moira's blinding flashlight and crowbar.



Claire and Moira can exchange health and ammo between inventories



Getting ganged up on by packs of Afflicted is never a good bet



Moira and Claire continue to venture deeper into the facility after using the rusty key, finally arriving at a dead end near a broken ladder and a sinister torture device. The mechanism appears to specialize in slowly crushing its victims with spikes. Claire throws a switch to raise the spike press. A decaying body slides off its impalements, revealing a key to a control room. Moira takes the key and Claire gives her a boost to explore up past the broken ladder. Exploring alone as Moira makes me feel considerably more vulnerable. I opt for safer routes as opposed to one corridor with Afflicted bodies littering the ground.

Moira eventually finds the control room, unlocks the door, and discovers a switch that appears to control some of the locked cells. She flips the switch, but to her dismay in addition to opening the door leading to the cog she opens every door in the prison. Swapping between characters is disabled for this brief sequence, so it's up to Moira to sprint

back to warn Claire about the coming horde. Enemies bust through the windows and pour into the hallway. I'm clever enough to flashlight stun an Afflicted, but make the dumb mistake of swinging at it with my crowbar. The beast immediately snags Moira and chews a hunk of meat out of her neck. I remember the dodge function and narrowly juke my way past the rest of them.

Once united, Moira apologizes to Claire for letting all the psychos loose and they make a run for the puzzle piece they need. The cog is in hand after a frenzied volley of bullets, buckshot, and crowbar blows cuts a path through the Afflicted. Inserting the gear begins the slow process of raising the gate. Paranoid from the last ambush, I peek behind me to see a huge goliath carrying a massive maul stalking towards us. "What? They come in lard size?" Moira yells.

The duo dodges the lumbering giant, leading it into the open cellblock area. I flee up the stairs as even more Afflicted rush into the room. One grabs Moira so I blast its head to smithereens with the shotgun. The hulking, masked Afflicted slowly walking up the stairs after us is reminiscent of the giant, nearly unstoppable butchers from Resident Evil 5. Moira insists that it's too strong for us and that we should run. I spot an opening in the railing from where the Afflicted surprise attacked me earlier. I leap down to the ground floor and the two make a dash for the exit. They work together to lift a steel shutter. Sunlight pours into the darkness once it's open, and the two run toward it.

Our time with Revelations 2 ends here, but fans don't have to wait long to get their hands on the first episode. This taste of Claire and Moira's mysterious journey to the sadistic torture island offers many answers about the sequel's new gameplay direction, but it also raises a series of tantalizing questions for Resident Evil fans. How did these two get here? Where is Barry? Who is the malevolent entity observing the trapped survivors? The only question fans shouldn't worry about is whether to be excited or not. ♦

Check out our Resident Evil Revelations 2 hub for a month of exclusive online content, including developer video interviews and a look the game in action at www.gameinformer.com/rev2



Claire takes aim at an Afflicted while Moira stuns it



Moira and Claire are never too far from each other

WHAT CAN WE EXPECT FROM RESIDENT EVIL 7?

Capcom is being very secretive about what's next for Resident Evil's main series (we don't even know if it will be called RE 7), but Resident Evil Revelations 2 producer Michiteru Okabe answered a few of our big questions.

What did the reception to Resident Evil 6 teach Capcom about what players want?

I think one thing that's become really clear is what people want out of the Resident Evil series is survival horror first and foremost. They want that to be the core of the gameplay. Anything we add above and beyond that is great and welcome, but it really has to have that core intact. I think the clearest lesson was what Resident Evil needs to do is not compare itself to, and try to compete with or try to be other big franchise. It needs to be itself.

Can fans expect a renewed emphasis on resource management and lethal enemies?

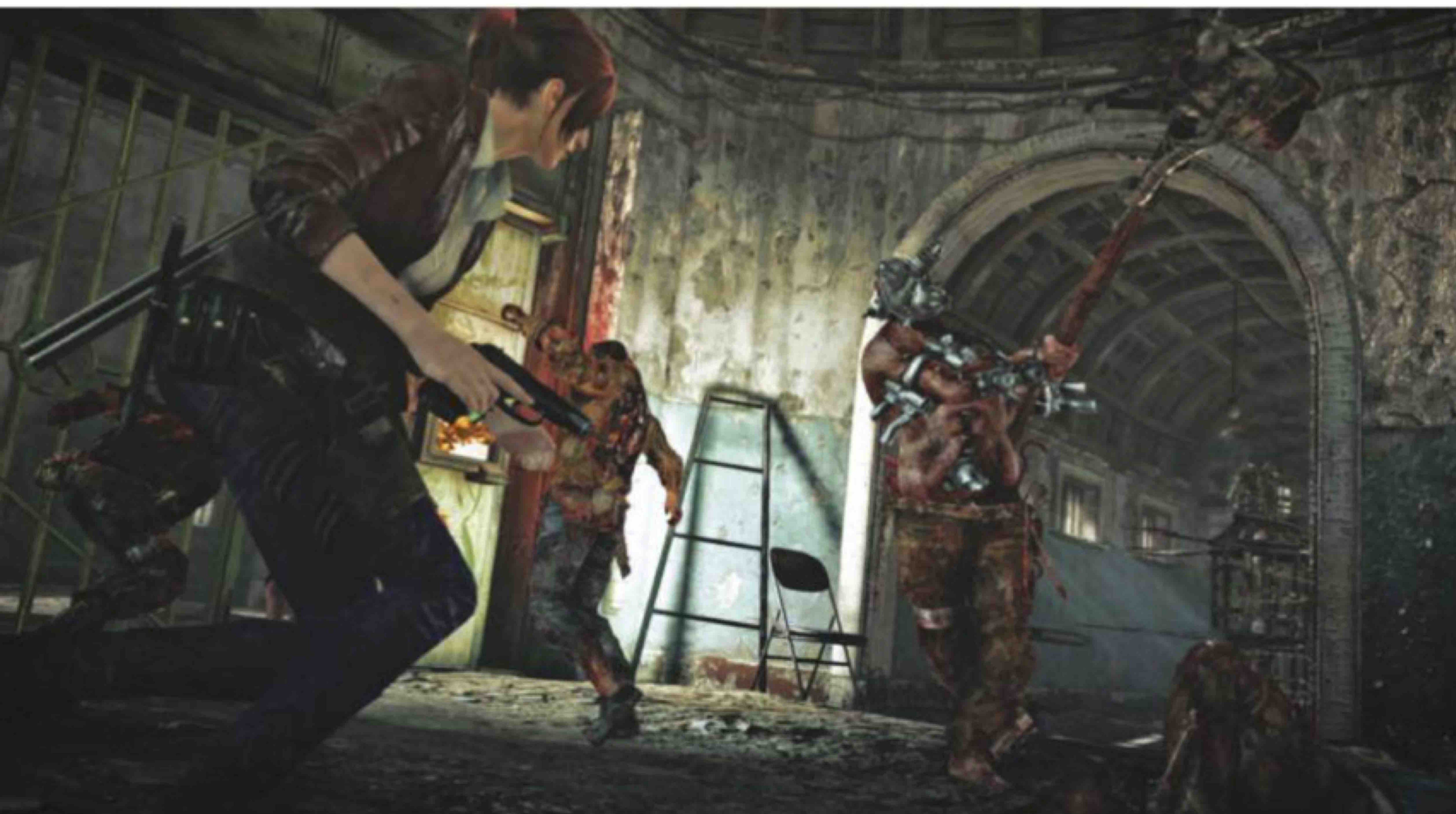
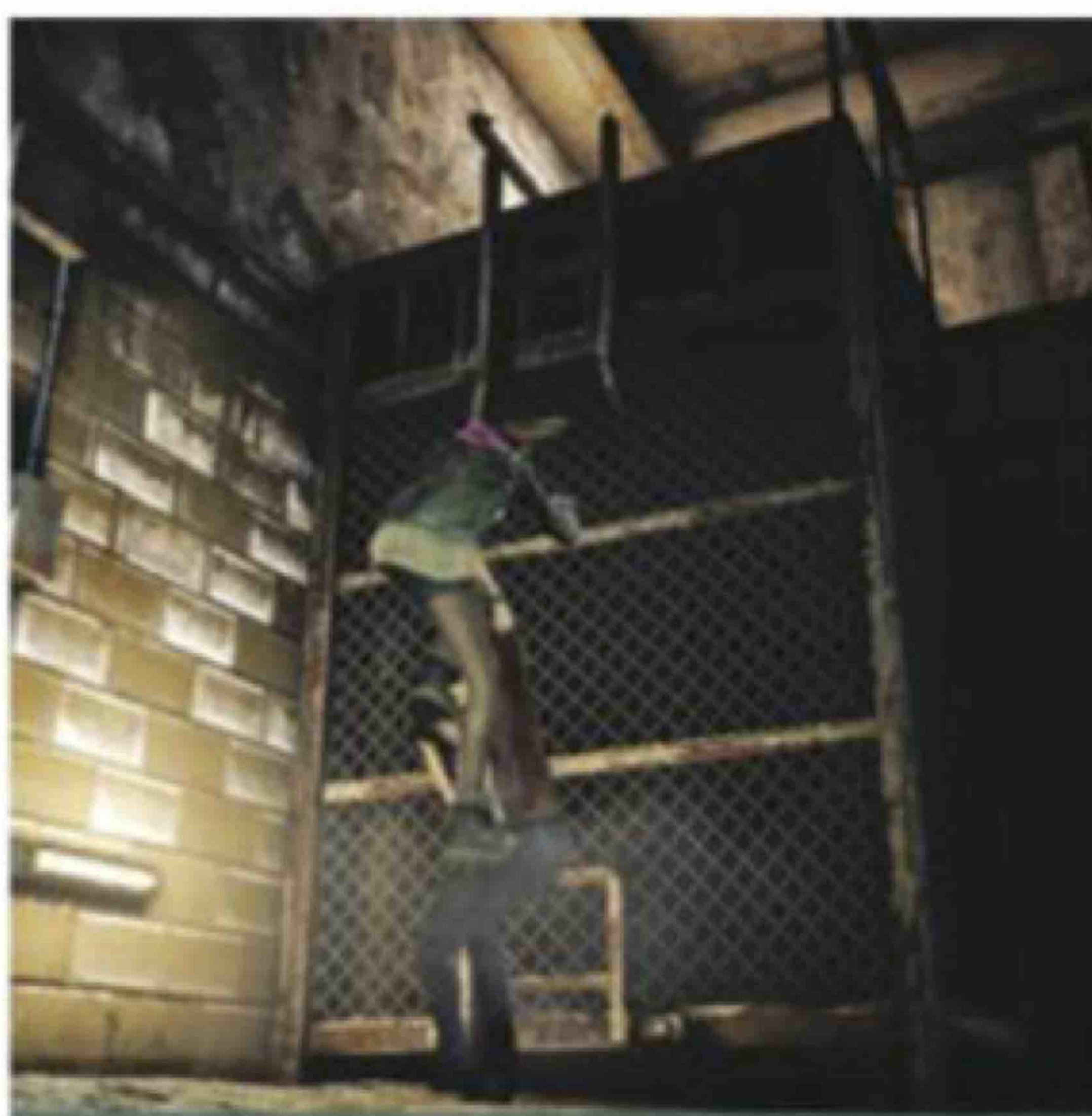
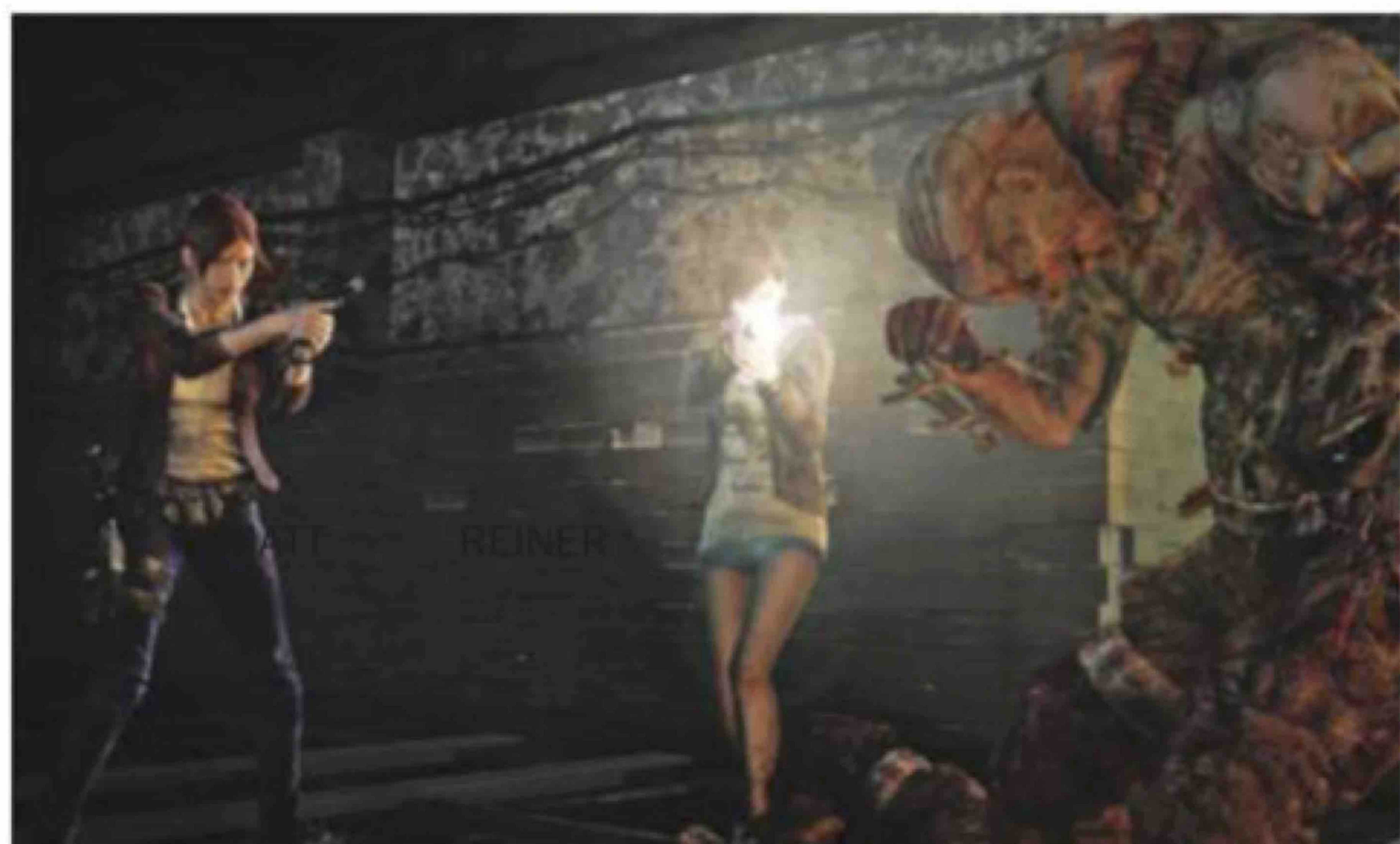
That's one avenue it could go, but I think it's a little more complicated than that. I think what we really need to do is take a serious look at what makes the series itself. Look at all the constituent parts – if resource management is important to survival horror, then why is it important, what does it mean, and what do these varying elements mean to the franchise? How can we then take that and work with modern technology? Since RE 6 we've got new consoles on the market. We have the potential for things like Oculus Rift and Morpheus. How do we take all these technological tools that are available to us and take the data we've learned from our careful analysis and really make something new and special?

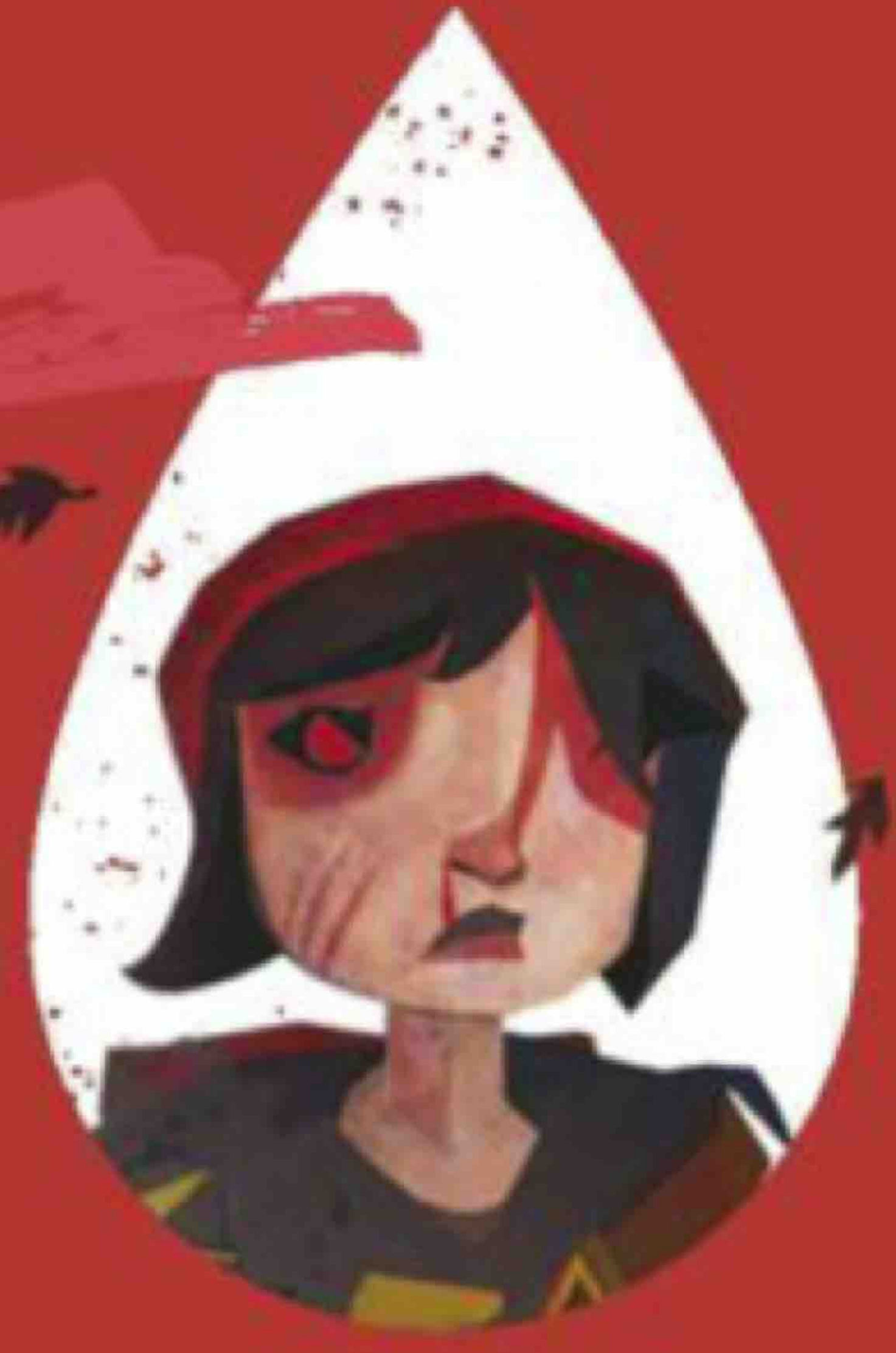
Could the next Resident Evil reboot the entire story for something new?

Speaking personally, I think it would be cool to try something new. I'd be open to that, but I also want there to be some link to what's come before, rather than going completely from scratch.

Do you have a final message for the fans?

The team back in Osaka spends a lot of time and a lot of energy thinking about what the future of the Resident Franchise holds. They're hard at work doing that. I can tell you that the engine we used for Resident Evil Revelations 2 is the 64-bit framework of MT Framework [Capcom's proprietary engine]. It's multi-platform and multi-generational. And to that, the Resident Evil franchise may be best served by a special, Resident Evil-specific engine.





WITHOUT A NET



BIOSHOCK VETS FACE LIFE AFTER IRRATIONAL
BY GOING INDIE WITH **THE FLAME IN THE FLOOD**

photos: Dan Perez de la Garza





In the Boston suburb of Cambridge, six people sit in a cramped room in the basement of a nondescript office building, working on a dream. In many ways, they are no different than hundreds of small indie developers; putting in long hours, pinching pennies, and subsisting on takeout pizza and ramen noodles. Unlike most of those small teams, the Molasses Flood (as they've named themselves) is made up of people who have worked on some of the most critically acclaimed games in history, including BioShock, Guitar Hero, Halo 2, and Rock Band.

Frustrated with the constraints of large-scale console development and worried by increasing instability in the industry, the team united around an ethos of creativity, collaboration, and friendship. Instead of pursuing lucrative jobs at major game studios, Molasses Flood – like so many former triple-A developers – is forging its own way with the promise of independence, ownership of its own creations, and the chance to build a company from the ground up. This treacherous path is filled with both possibility and uncertainty. This is their story.

BY MATT HELGESON



Before The Flood

As modern game development becomes increasingly complex and expensive, the old studio model is beginning to break. By the time a major triple-A game is released, the development team has often swelled to several hundred highly paid professionals. This immense overhead is proving hard to maintain, especially as the studio regroups to another cycle of prototyping and pre-production a new project, where smaller, more agile groups are needed instead of the massive production staff. The result of this is a new reality in which a job well done is rewarded by a round of layoffs. We've seen this story repeated dozens of times in the last few years with studios like Sucker Punch, Sony Santa Monica, and Eidos Montreal. Molasses

Flood's tale begins on February 18, the day when BioShock creator Ken Levine announced he was shuttering Irrational Games. Around the video game industry, this news was met with a mix of shock and disbelief. It seems unthinkable that a studio at the peak of its creative powers would be shut down so quickly. BioShock Infinite had earned rave reviews, a 94 Metacritic rating, and won over 42 game of the year awards. The game debuted at the top of the monthly NPD sales charts, and has gone on to sell over six million copies. If Irrational wasn't safe from layoffs, what studio was?

Forrest Dowling, who served as lead level designer on BioShock Infinite, recalls feeling unsure about the future in the weeks leading up to the closure. "I knew there had been questions about

the viability of the type of projects that Irrational had done up to that point," Dowling says. "Games are a super tough market, and making a big, expensive single-player narrative game is a difficult and risky proposition. There was a sense that [Irrational] was going to want to try something different. It ended up taking the form of something very small that didn't need that team size."

By coincidence, the news came down on a day when Dowling had planned to reconnect with a former colleague, Scott "Sinc" Sinclair, Irrational's former art director who had left prior to the layoffs. "I wanted to get back to my own art," Sinclair says. "Before games, I'd been doing art prints and album covers for bands. My hope was that I still had a foot in that door."



SCOTT "SINC" SINCLAIR

"I WANTED TO GET BACK TO A PLACE WHERE IT'S A SMALL TEAM AND I ACTUALLY HAVE TO MAKE THE ART, NOT JUST MANAGE THE ART TEAM."



Dowling had contacted Sinclair through his art website, and purchased a couple of prints from his online store. “There was a form where you put in your shipping information. My shipping information was, ‘Let’s get lunch and catch up,’” Dowling recalls.

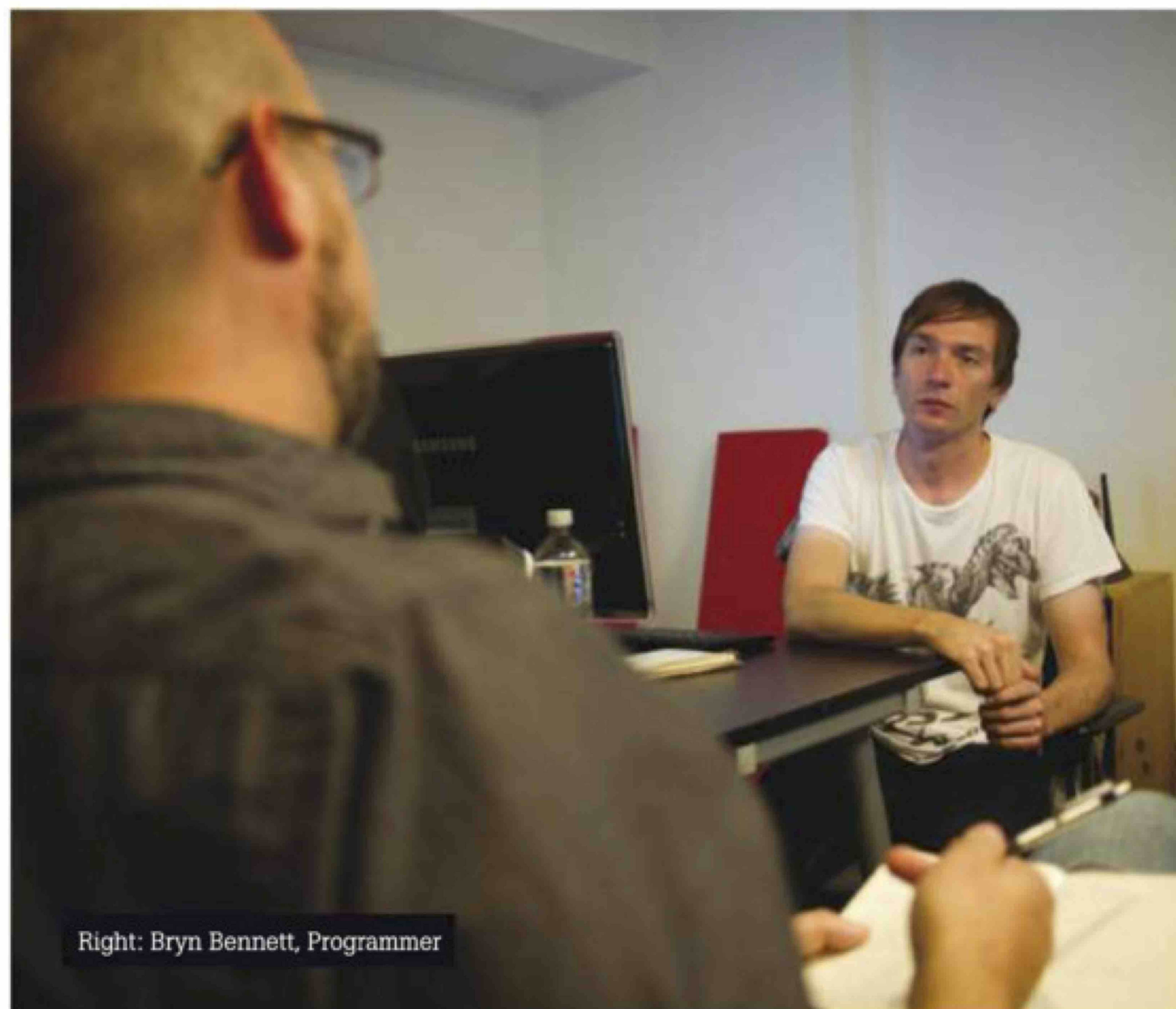
This casual lunch between old friends became more momentous than either could have anticipated. That morning, Dowling received word there would be an all-company meeting at Irrational. The message was clear: Nearly all of the staff was being let go. “We had the meeting and got our paperwork, and I thought, ‘Well, I guess I don’t have to go back after lunch,’” Dowling says.

Naturally, the conversation over lunch turned to the future, with Dowling and Sinclair talking about the challenges and

possibilities of the changing industry. As they both bounced ideas off each other, the pair left the restaurant with vows to keep in touch, but no concrete plans.

Despite the fact that Irrational had held a job fair, with companies like Riot Games and 343 Industries flying representatives down to court the studio’s former talent, the prospect of starting an independent game studio was in the forefront of Dowling’s mind. Soon, he decided. He was going indie and wanted Sinclair, one of the most respected leaders on the BioShock Infinite team, to come with him.

“I thought we could get a team of people willing to take a risk with us,” Dowling says. “All of us that were let go were given a severance, so that would give us some time to help get our feet underneath us. It snowballed from there.”



Right: Bryn Bennett, Programmer



Damian Isla, Programmer

For his part, Sinclair was eager for a new opportunity in games, and felt Boston was a perfect place to start. “I wanted to get back to a place where it’s a small team and I actually have to make the art, not just manage the art team,” Sinclair says. “At the time it happened, it wasn’t just Irrational; it was Turbine and Harmonix. I went to a game industry drink night, a layoff drink night, and it was this sea of programmers, artists, and designers – all laid off, all around the same time. You can see, even that night, groups of people splitting off and saying, ‘What if we did something?’”

Dowling and Sinclair began to piece together a team, which grew organically based on the pair’s long list of contacts and former colleagues in the Boston game community. Two members of the team that would become Molasses Flood had worked closely with Dowling and Sinclair on BioShock Infinite, animator Gwen Frey and artist Chad LaClair. Both welcomed the chance to work with their former comrades. Frey had been planning to go independent for years, quietly squirreling away savings. LaClair took a little more convincing, and even interviewed at other more established studios. However, he kept coming back to the idea of working with Dowling and Sinclair again.

“Scott called me up and asked me if I was interested,” LaClair says. “All the other interviews I had were colored by that. I had amazing studios I could have gone to, but I would have been missing out on this opportunity to work with guys that I really respect.”

Dowling rounded out the team by recruiting two expert programmers with

decidedly different personalities. Bryn Bennett, who had worked with Sinclair in the early days of Irrational, had spent the last few years working at Harmonix in between tours with his hard rock band Bang Camaro.

Damian Isla, who is more buttoned-down, was one of the chief engineers on Halo 2 and 3, and he also helped Irrational toward the end of BioShock Infinite. Isla had already made the plunge into indie development, forming Moonshot Games in 2009, which had recently released the noir-themed iPad game Third Eye Crime. “The day that I heard Irrational went down, I got on the phone with one of my friends there and said, ‘I know some startups are going to come out of this so let me know,’” Isla says. “A couple days later, Forrest called and said, ‘I heard you are interested.’ I was opportunistic. It was like your crush just broke up with her boyfriend.”

For all involved, this was a rare chance to have the artistic freedom of an indie studio with the experience of a veteran team. More importantly, starting with Dowling and Sinclair, the group had the inherent trust that comes from having been through “crunch time” on major projects together – the camaraderie of the foxhole. Dowling and Sinclair were voted president and creative director by the group, but each member of Molasses Flood is an equal partner. Any future profits will be equally split six ways.

“There’s not many times when you get to jump to a company with all really good people,” Bennett says. “It seemed like an opportunity that I didn’t want to let pass by.”

WHAT’S IN A NAME?

The Molasses Flood is an odd name for a game studio, but the true story behind it is stranger still. The Great Molasses Flood (also known as the Boston Molasses Disaster) occurred in 1919 when a molasses storage tank exploded in the North End neighborhood of Boston.

Molasses flooded the streets at a terrifying rate; reports say the flood advanced at speeds up to 35 miles an hour. Over 21 people were killed and 150 were injured in the accident. Cleanup of the incident took weeks.

“We were looking for something local,” says creative director Scott Sinclair. “We wanted a name that was memorable and wasn’t a tech-company name. We wanted something that spoke to where we’re located in Boston.”

“We want to do something that’s fun and light but also dark,” says Molasses Flood president Forrest Dowling. “The Molasses Flood is very much like that. It’s weird that this molasses covered the northside, it’s weird and funny. But people died and it actually led to a lot of new regulations for industry. That’s the dark side. That speaks to the creative decisions I want to make, that contrast.”

The New Frontier

The story of the Molasses Flood is one of dozens of similar tales in the game industry in recent years. With each passing month, more artists, programmers, and designers are leaving the triple-A games space for a more creative and uncertain future in the independent development. Increasingly frustrated by the inertia inherent in teams of hundreds of people (Dowling described making large-scale changes in a triple-A game as “trying to turn a battleship”) and eager to make games of a smaller, more personal scale, high-profile developers like ex-People Can Fly head Adrian Chmielarz (now working on The Vanishing of Ethan Carter) to Capcom’s legendary Mega Man creator Keiji Inafune (Mighty No. 9) have struck out on their own.

This movement has been made possible by an explosion of alternative avenues

of game distribution. Services like Steam, as well as new home consoles that have viable self-publishing programs, have created an environment where games like Limbo, DayZ, and Minecraft can reach large audiences while remaining independent. You no longer need the endorsement of a major publisher like EA or Activision to reach the audience.

“It seemed approachable now a way it didn’t a few years ago,” Dowling says. “I feel like I can take a shot now. Four years ago, it would have seemed like a much crazier risk. I have a huge respect for the indies that forged this path, the first people who were getting stuff out on Xbox Live. [Jonathan Blow] or Supergiant – they’ve done a great service for people like myself. I can see a way to form my own company and make my own games. There’s a path to customers without the backing of major publisher.”

Like many experienced developers, Molasses Flood is attempting one of the most potentially lucrative – and riskiest – new forms of funding: Kickstarter. Since Tim Schafer’s Double Fine raised over \$3.5 million in 2012 for an adventure game project that would become the still-unfinished Broken Age, scores of aspiring game studios have used the crowd-funding service to go directly to the fans.

If successful, Kickstarter is an ideal situation for a developer. The spoils include funding for a project, a good bit of pre-release publicity, and total creative freedom.

“Kickstarter removes all conflicts of interests and lets us work directly for the fans,” Frey says. “We get to make the game we want to make from the fans. All money comes with strings. If we accepted money from the publisher, they would have a say in when it ships, what

systems it comes out on. In some cases, they would own the IP and be able to make sequels without us. Some people thrive on that pressure of ‘Ship on this date or we will cut your funding.’ We have an experienced team and don’t need that pressure; we put pressure on ourselves. Everybody here has shipped games.”

However, with any potential Kickstarter money still months away, the team had to make both personal and professional sacrifices to stay afloat financially.

“For me, it was all savings,” Sinclair says. “For these guys, it was severance. Our [Kickstarter] date has to do with our internal funding flatlining. It’s been good pressure, but we’ve done a lot fast to try to stay ahead of that. And we are in Boston, a city where overhead is high. We were lucky to find this place. Collaborating face to face was something that we deemed important...

KICKSTARTER WINNERS & LOSERS

Kickstarter is a powerful funding tool, but often unpredictable. For every breakout success, there seems to be a “sure thing” game project that doesn’t reach its funding goal. Here are some of the most notable video game Kickstarter successes and failures.

WINNERS

STAR CITIZEN – No bigger Kickstarter success story exists than Chris Robert’s epic online space sim Star Citizen. Its original Kickstarter campaign blew through its \$500,000 goal, earning over \$2.1 million. However, the game kept taking donations through its own website and other avenues, and is currently closing in on a mind-boggling \$54 million raised through crowdfunding.

BROKEN AGE – This Kickstarter is effectively the “shot heard ‘round the world” of video game crowdfunding. As the first high-profile video game crowdfunding effort, Tim Schafer’s large cult following and the underserved adventure game audience let Double Fine Adventure, which was later renamed Broken Age, rake in \$3.3 million on a \$400,000 goal. It also showed the game development community that crowdfunding was a viable way to get a game off the ground. Now, if they’d only finish the damn thing.

TORMENT: TIDES OF NUMENERA – InXile Entertainment struck Kickstarter gold with this ambitious (and still unreleased) RPG based on the Torment tabletop universe. PC-oriented, hardcore RPGs have proven to be one of the most successful genres on Kickstarter, and Torment racked up an impressive \$4.2 million from its Kickstarter campaign.

MIGHTY NO. 9 – After Mega Man creator Keiji Inafune fell out with Capcom, he became the first major Japanese game director to strike out on his own with crowdfunding. He was pretty upfront that Mighty No. 9 is a direct extension of his work on the 2D Mega Man games, which apparently Capcom wasn’t interested in letting him make anymore. The blue bomber’s loyal audience made this an easy Kickstarter hit, and Inafune earned an impressive \$3.8 million. He’s hoping this inspires more Japanese game talent to follow his lead.

LOSERS

WILDMAN – Gas Powered Games had a strong track record in the industry, with games like Dungeon Siege and Supreme Commander under its belt. After Microsoft shut down the studio’s Age of Empires Online, the company conducted layoffs and tried to save itself with a Kickstarter for Wildman, a caveman-themed action/RPG in the Diablo vein. Despite its track record, it did not make its \$1.1 million goal.

THE ADVENTURES OF DASH – This project was the brainchild of Robert Bowling, one of the public facing figures at Infinity Ward during the heyday of Call of Duty. Bowling was well known in the game community, but his 2D action/platformer The Adventures of Dash failed to strike a chord, earning a paltry \$33,121 of its \$400,000 goal.

MUTANT FOOTBALL LEAGUE – EA’s Mutant League Football, a macabre, violent take on its Madden franchise, was a cult classic on the Sega Genesis. It’s a game that often came up on lists of titles gamers wanted to see revived, so creator Mike Mendheim decided to tweak the title, and crowdfund a spiritual successor. Perhaps there wasn’t as much interest as he thought, because the game ultimately fell far short of its \$750,000 goal.

YOGVENTURES! – This proves there’s something worse than failing to fund your Kickstarter game – failing to deliver your Kickstarter game. Yogsventures was an open-world sandbox game based on the popular Yogscast YouTube channel. The design was quite ambitious for the \$567,000 it eventually raised from Yogscast fans, and was also being developed by a unknown studio named Winterkewl. It was a perfect storm of Kickstarter mistakes: an overly ambitious, underfunded game design being attempted by an inexperienced developer. Inevitably, the project fell apart, causing much bitterness among backers, who were given only a Steam key for a completely different game for their trouble and money.

I'm used to ramen noodles anyway."

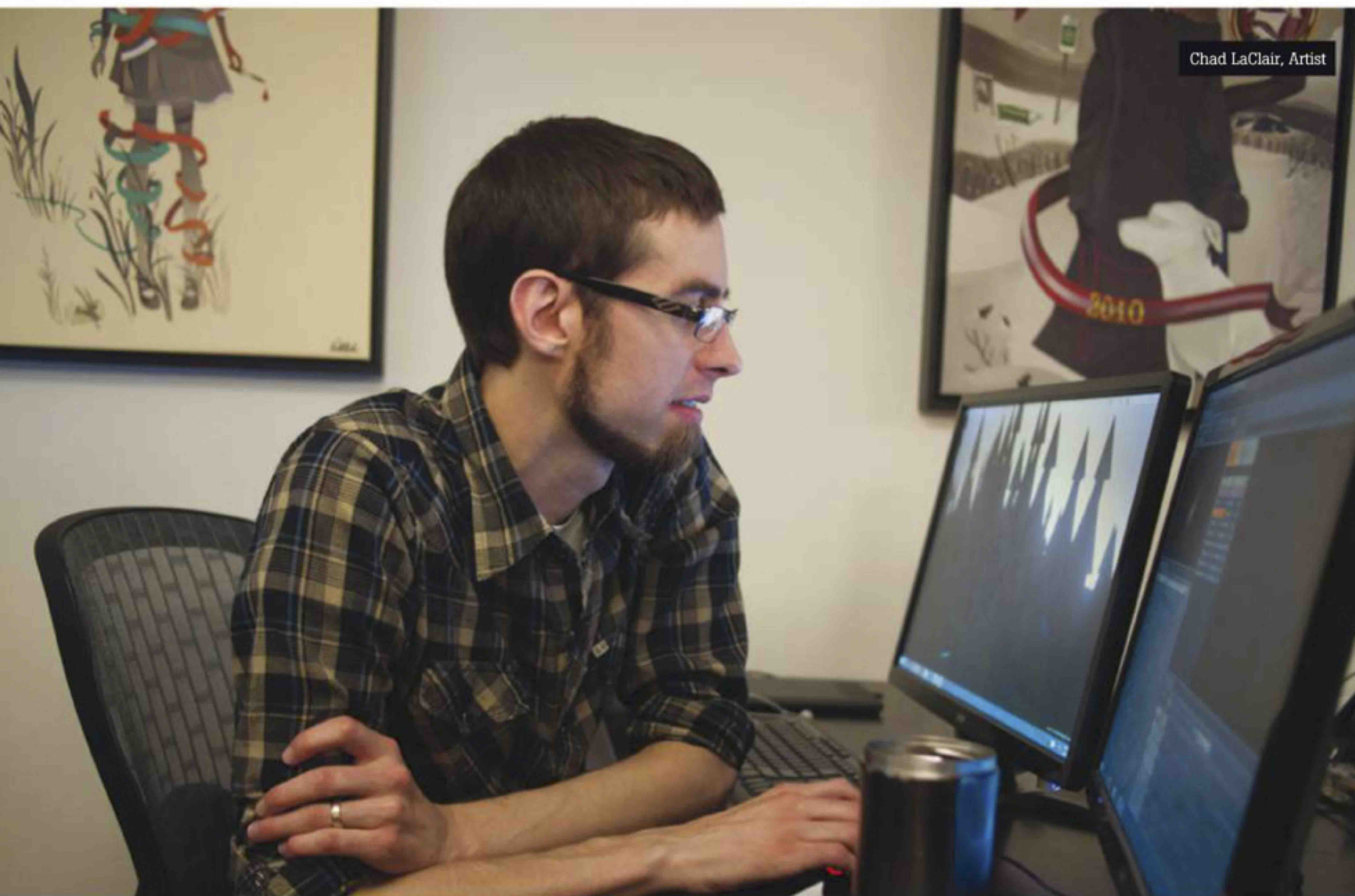
Other members of the team have all had to make adjustments to keep the small company afloat. Frey relocated from downtown Boston to a small studio apartment in the suburbs. She also credits "Obamacare" for giving her affordable health care after losing the coverage she had at Irrational. Most of the team is quickly burning through either severance or savings. When asked about the financial pressure inherent in going indie, Chad LaClair, whose wife is currently unemployed, admits that he's "starting to feel it."

Despite these hard realities, the atmosphere in the office is far from tense. If anything, they seem to share an infectious sense of excitement about their new undertaking, an enigmatic, charming take on the survival genre called *The Flame in the Flood*.



GWEN FREY

"KICKSTARTER REMOVES ALL CONFLICTS OF INTERESTS AND LETS US WORK DIRECTLY FOR THE FANS. WE GET TO MAKE THE GAME WE WANT TO MAKE, FROM THE FANS. ALL MONEY COMES WITH STRINGS..."



Down The River

The Flame in the Flood was born out of some early conversations between Dowling and Sinclair. After the intense development of *BioShock Infinite*, Dowling was ready to take another genre. "I'd been doing big, first-person shooters for nearly a decade," he says. "I knew what I did was about as critically acclaimed as it can be. I'm not sure I'll be able to do something that's substantially better, so I wanted to do something substantially different."

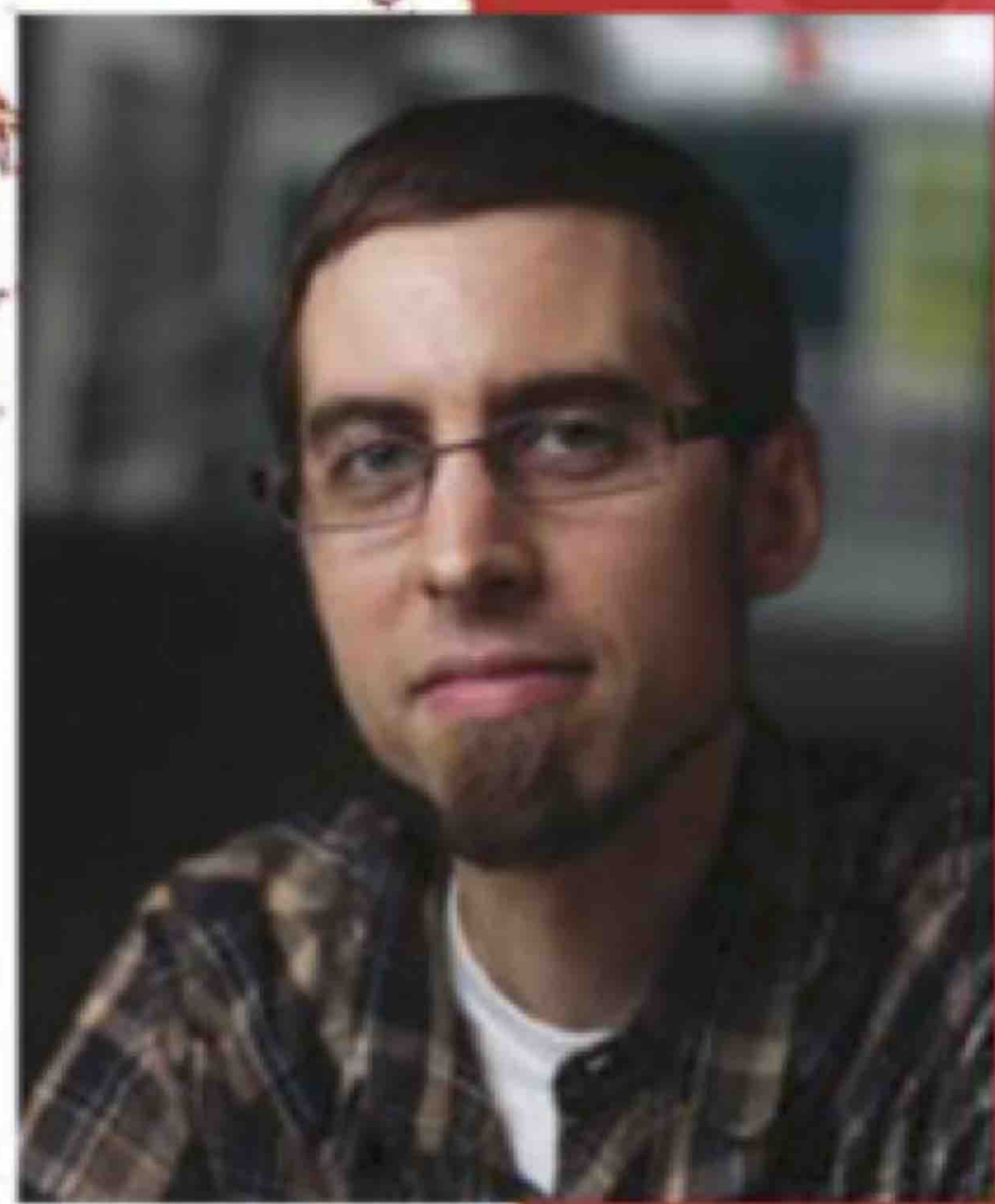
Sinclair had been taken with the idea of controlling "little ecologies," something

that dovetailed nicely into Dowling's recent love of survival games like *FTL* and *Don't Starve*. However, they wanted to take the genre in a different direction, one that could best showcase Sinclair's unique art and design aesthetic and the team's experience in environmental storytelling. "Most survival games are about building a base and homesteading," Dowling says. "We wanted the game to be about the journey."

Tired of the constraints of a linear, traditional first-person narrative, the team set about crafting a game that first and foremost is based on mood and

setting – one largely based on Sinclair's upbringing. "I was born and raised in Florida," he says. "There's something to the environment there. My father is a farmer. I'm a skateboarder and punk rocker, but I'm visiting my family and I'm on an airboat and I'm fishing and seeing these visuals of an old car in the woods or the shanty houses along the river with graffiti on them. There's this juxtaposition of two things I love, nature meeting the graffiti from punk rock and skate culture. I love to combine those things."

Another major influence was the acclaimed *Beasts of the Southern Wild*,



CHAD LaCLAIR

“WITH A LOT OF GAMES THAT HAVE PROCEDURAL ENVIRONMENTS, I FEEL LIKE THE ART IS ONLY UP TO A CERTAIN LEVEL.... WE’RE SHOOTING FOR SOMETHING THAT’S HIGHER THAN THAT.

I WOULD LOVE IT IF PEOPLE SAID, ‘THIS SCREENSHOT LOOKS LIKE A STORYBOOK.’”



a beautiful film directed by Benh Zeitlin that follows a young girl’s journey to survive in a near-future, poverty-stricken South. The film balances gritty realism with surreal moments; this tone of magical realism resonated with Dowling and Sinclair, who hope to achieve something similar with *The Flame in the Flood*.

The idea of travel and flight was foremost in their mind, leading them to build the game around a literary device that’s as old as America itself: a river voyage into the unknown. “It’s the notion of a river journey,” Isla says. “That has such a rich cultural and literary precedent to it. I like the thought that it’s *Heart of Darkness* and *Huck Finn* as well. I love that aspect of connecting the games we make to the real world.”

Like the films and literature that inspired it, *The Flame in the Flood* is intended as an impressionistic narrative in which the player slowly learns about the world through multiple playthroughs. In many ways, it’s the simplest tale of all: a girl trying to survive in a harsh environment. Her name is Scout.

“Scout is young and at a coming of age point in her life,” Dowling says. “She’s this survivor in this world who knows how to live, but young enough that there’s wonderment left. She’s competent, but she’s just coming to that stage of adulthood. There’s a dog who’s a faithful companion, but maybe not the fierce hunter he once was. The world itself is based on the idea of the American backwater, particularly the rural South, although we don’t want to put a specific time or place.”

A catastrophic flood has overtaken this alternate version of the South, which forces Scout and her dog to stay ahead of the coming rains on a makeshift raft. The team hit upon the idea of the river as a way to have an overland map that also offers its own gameplay. As you navigate the rapids, you steer the raft toward procedurally generated islands, each of which can be explored for food, shelter, and useful items. You might also encounter the odd character that still lives in this flooded land, each of which might offer a mission or just unravel another piece of the mystery of what happened to the world.

On the islands, Scout must survive using the three pillars of *The Flame in the Flood*’s gameplay: stealth, crafting, and exploration. Though the art style evokes a dark children’s storybook, the core gameplay is rooted in real-world survival techniques, with some nods to the classic ‘80s adventure game *Oregon Trail*.

Scout must survive at all costs, and much of the gameplay involves fulfilling her basic needs: staying fed, dry, and alive. Water is a key theme of the game; in this harsh landscape, getting wet means getting sick, something Scout can ill afford. Crashing your raft or just being caught in the rain can be as deadly as any predator. Drinking contaminated water can result in dysentery.

Speaking of predators, Scout must deal with those as well. Wolves and worse populate the wooded islands. Scout has no superpowers, so she must rely on stealth and her wits to survive. For instance, a pack of wolves could be distracted by fighting over a rabbit you caught in a makeshift trap, or killed by meat you poisoned with hemlock or another deadly plant.



Here's protagonist Scout and her faithful canine companion



The team is spending a lot of time getting the game's water physics right



Each island you explore will be procedurally generated

Crafting plays a large role in Scout's survival. The Molasses Flood's workspace is filled with outdoor survival manuals and wildlife guides, part of its effort to base all the tactics in the real world. If you catch the flu, you might be able to cure yourself with penicillin made from moldy bread. You can eat the roots of cattails and use the tops to pack in your coat as insulation. Dowling gives an example of how the team crafts gameplay out of the natural world: "If you burn sumac in the real world it creates a poison gas," he says. "Maybe there's a tool in the game where you have an empty jar, burn the sumac, and capture the poison gas in the jar and make a 'gas grenade.' That's about as far as it will extend into video game territory. It's that half step past reality."

Mastering these tactics is all-important. Like the roguelikes that are so popular on the PC market, *The Flame in the Flood* features permadeath; once Scout's gone, she's gone.

Perhaps the biggest challenge the team faced was the desire to create a huge, endlessly replayable world that also featured an evocative art style and

interesting environmental storytelling. Armed with the new Unreal Engine 4 – the key cog that programmers Isla and Bennett credit with allowing them to get the game up and running quickly – the team created a new concept for procedurally generated worlds that it hopes will allow them to make a world with endless variety and a true aesthetic vision.

"With a lot of games that have procedural environments, I feel like the art is only up to a certain level," LaClair says. "And not just how the art looks, but the story you're seeing and the overall presentation. We're shooting for something that's higher than that. I would love it if people said, 'this screenshot looks like a storybook.'"

The solution to the problem of creating randomly generated levels that still have variety and art direction is something Scott Sinclair hopes to solve by creating macro "sets" of art assets through a system of associations. Once one objective, character, or location is triggered, large sets of assets are excluded from appearing, and others pulled in. This prevents silly visual non-sequiturs or clashing art styles from breaking the mood.

The darkly American aesthetics are reinforced by the music, something that was important to the team. Sinclair called upon an old friend, Chuck Ragan of the bruising '90s post-punk group Hot Water Music, who has recently been recording acoustic, folk-based music with his new backing band The Camaraderie.

"Everything about the game is tone," Sinclair says. "It's about feeling and mood, not a linear story. That has to come through all layers of presentation, the music being a huge part of it. Chuck and I go way back. I met him in college; we played shows together in separate bands. I've done every one of their album covers. I've stayed in touch for decades...It's all real instruments, real singers, real journeys and travels...it's fiddle and upright bass and acoustic guitar. It's perfect."

The team is upfront about how early in development the game is. Many aspects of the world, gameplay, and story have yet to be decided. Dowling says his philosophy of game development is to "start in the middle" by making sure the basic tone, art, and gameplay mechanics are right before moving on.

"That's common wisdom in making games – you make the first level last," Dowling says. "Because, by the time you're making your last level, you know all the mechanics everyone needs to know, you know where you need to end up. It's easier to know where to start once you know what the journey is going to be."

As they flesh out Scout's unique story, the team is drawing on lessons learned from Ken Levine about slowly revealing a larger picture through small bits of environmental storytelling and interactions with incidental characters.

"Ken is challenging," Dowling says. "There are a lot of lessons working with him that I carry with me and inform what I do now. Ken is really good at understanding where the player is coming from – what is their point of view? You can have a lot of ideas about something, but if it's not on the screen it doesn't exist. It doesn't matter what the elaborate backstory is; if you don't show it and let the player understand, it doesn't exist. Forcing that kind of honesty is one of the best lessons I got."

Traveling Light

Going independent gave the Molasses Flood team the freedom to create a game as unconventional as *The Flame in the Flood*, but it's also forced them, just like their heroine Scout, to learn new skills to survive in a new environment.

While the team is glad to be free of the bureaucratic headaches that come with working on a team that numbers in the hundreds, there are times when it's hard not to miss the seemingly unlimited resources a company like Irrational or Bungie provides. "At Irrational and Bungie, I could walk over and say, 'I need this special jump' and two hours later you have it," Isla says. "There are resources that you don't have at a smaller company."

The team is learning that wearing multiple hats is a necessity to be able to stretch their dwindling cash reserves until the Kickstarter launches. In addition to hearing animating duties, Frey does the company's accounting and calls their lawyer for advice when necessary. Dowling, who seems to be the de facto leader in Molasses Flood's loose structure, has had to give himself a crash course in business, finance, public relations, and marketing.

"I've learned a lot about how to start and run a business," Dowling says. "What type of corporations exist? I didn't know that stuff. The only public interviews I've done before this was for BioShock DLC. Other people were the public face of BioShock. My experience was one day of interviews and a press presentation. Now, I'm getting to the point where I have to show this thing to people and communicate what we're trying to do. It's a new experience."

He's also poured himself into studying Kickstarter, paying close attention what other indie developers have done, observing their successes and failures. The crowdfunding site can be lucrative, but many established developers have fallen far short of their goals due to either a poor presentation, inadequate communication, or an idea that didn't resonate with the audience.

"In my research in looking at what Kickstarters succeed and which ones fail, I don't think all of us having BioShock on our resume matters all that much," Dowling candidly notes. "If you want to rest on your resume for money, going to a publisher or investor is a better path. To them, knowing that you've demonstrated the ability to ship something is extremely valuable. I wouldn't expect a consumer to fund something on Kickstarter because of the resume of the person that did it. All that matters is if the game we are making looks good."

Sinclair is more blunt in his assessment. "Kickstarter is total voodoo," he says. "You see a kid raking it in on potato salad one moment, then I see games fail where I think, 'How did that not get funded?' Kickstarter is a little like the Wild West. I scan it daily. Projects come and go, and the quality and presentation level varies so wildly for each."

In face of this uncertainty, the team's strategy is one that places the game itself front and center. Right now, development

is split between working on the game itself, and creating the in-game footage and art assets are needed for the all-important Kickstarter trailer. The team is determined to make sure that the trailer is not a CG sizzle reel, but in-engine footage that accurately reflects how the final game will look and play. This goal seems attainable; only a few months into a development, the core of the game is up and running.

"One thing we were certain about was that we didn't want to be one of those projects with a developer in front of a camera talking about why he wants money," Sinclair says. "Let's shut up, let the music roll, let the game roll, and ask, 'Was it awesome? Do you want to fund it?' We'll have it in-engine; you'll see the music and the gameplay. It will

be all in-game visuals. It will speak to our pedigrees. Hopefully there's some measure of faith there, that we can make good on this stuff."

The team hasn't determined how much it will ask for its Kickstarter goal, but the general strategy appears to be, in the words of Sinclair, "lowball and hope that it snowballs." Though ambitious, the team's experience in shipping triple-A games also gives the members a hard-won pragmatism. They know all too well the dangers of over-promising and under-delivering, or committing to features that can't be carried out to a high level of polish. The team intends to focus on the most core concepts and gameplay mechanics in *The Flame in the Flood*, perfect them, then move on to less

central aspects of the game. The phrase "minimum awesome" is thrown around – the baseline they must achieve to create something that they feel is an exceptional game experience. Certain aspects of the game they would like to implement, like the potential ability to customize Scout's raft, will come later or not at all, depending on how well the Kickstarter does.

Dowling is also aware of the fact that failure to reach funding is far from the only pitfall of Kickstarter. "There are examples of people miscalculating the cost of what it's going to take to do what they say they are going to do and end up blowing the Kickstarter money on filling rewards," he says. "If you don't do your due diligence on how much it actually costs to print 600 T-shirts and mail them around the



The game draws from "sets" of art assets to create randomized worlds with aesthetic themes

world, you can end up underwater right there. You need to anticipate the various fees associated with Kickstarter. You can make your goal but you didn't realize that you have to give five percent to Kickstarter and two-and-a-half percent for credit card transactions. Twenty percent goes to tax. Some other percent goes to your tech or middleware. If you don't anticipate those, you can hit your goals but actually get almost nothing out of it."

Though the mood in the Molasses Flood office is one of optimism, there is the question hanging over the company: what happens if the Kickstarter fails? Though the six are getting by on a combination of severance and savings at present, at the current burn rate they will need more money to keep going through

the next few months of development.

If they don't make their funding goal, Dowling says that the team would seek other forms of backing, like publisher funding or a private angel investor, but he cautions, "If the Kickstarter fails, it's not the end of the road, but it doesn't help. If you go to a publisher or investor and you ran a Kickstarter that failed, then already you're on your heels. You're asking for money to make something and they say, 'You had a chance to demonstrate that people wanted this thing and the demonstration was that they don't.' It will be rough if it fails. It's a bet, and I'm hoping it works out. We'll see."

While every team member reiterated that the project would continue with or without Kickstarter funding, there are no

guarantees. It's clear that the their love of the game they are making – and their genuine affection for one another – would make it hard to walk away.

"As the game progressed to this point, the idea of failure has gotten way less appealing," Sinclair says. "Not to be negative, but at first it was like, 'If it works, it works; if not – no harm, no foul.' Now, it would be pretty heartbreaking to shelve it. You're more attached to the game. When we do launch the trailer and the prototype art is replaced and it's firing on all cylinders, you'll see. There's something there that we really need to finish. We all believe in it." ♦

Check out *The Flame in the Flood's* Kickstarter page at themolassesflood.com/kickstarter



FORREST DOWLING

"I WOULDN'T EXPECT A CONSUMER TO FUND SOMETHING ON KICKSTARTER BECAUSE OF THE RESUME OF THE PERSON THAT DID IT. ALL THAT MATTERS IS IF THE GAME WE ARE MAKING LOOKS GOOD"





Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain

Big Boss buddies up

» **Platform**
PlayStation 4
Xbox One
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Konami

» **Developer**
Kojima Productions

» **Release**
2015

At this point, you may think that only the story of Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain can surprise you. You would be wrong. While Ground Zeroes already gave players a taste of the gameplay to expect from the upcoming installment, it doesn't encompass all of the features and systems in The Phantom Pain. At the Tokyo Game Show, Metal Gear mastermind Hideo Kojima demonstrated one of the interesting differences between the two chapters: the buddy system.

Though The Phantom Pain is a single-player experience, the buddy system allows players to team up with an A.I.-controlled ally to open up new tactical options on missions. During the TGS stage demo, Kojima showed Big Boss joining up with the voiceless sniper Quiet. A wolf named DD (short for "Diamond Dog") is also available, and other characters could presumably join the mix.

After a parachuting in for a dramatic entrance, Quiet stands ready to take orders. If you plan on being less than stealthy, you can have her follow you to help take out any opposition you encounter. If you want to be more calculating, however, you can send

Quiet ahead to scout the area. She seeks a good vantage point, marking all guards so they are visible to Big Boss. When Quiet is in position, you can also get more detailed information on the guards, like their health levels and remaining ammunition.

We've previously seen scenes set in deserts of Afghanistan, but this rescue takes

place in Africa. The forest environment means Quiet has plenty of places to hide, and she uses her superior positioning to lend other kinds of support. For example, if two guards are patrolling an area, you can target one yourself and order Quiet to focus on the other. As soon as you fire, she does too, preventing either of the sentries from

This dog, named DD, is one of the allies you can bring into battle thanks to the buddy system





raising an alarm. Since she is right there in the world with you (not just some helpful offscreen support) you may even see her give you thumbs-up after a successful piece of teamwork.

While this kind of assistance from a sniper is predictable, players have room to experiment with the buddy system and find more creative uses for their companions' abilities. In one case, Big Boss finds himself facing a helicopter, but with no more ammo for his rocket launcher. He does have a few grenades, though. After giving an order to Quiet, Big Boss lobbs a grenade off to the side of the chopper, and Quiet uses a perfectly placed shot to set the explosive hurtling toward the aircraft, which goes down in flames. As unlikely as the solution may be, the fact that it works is a testament to range of available options in *The Phantom Pain*.

The buddy system isn't the only new thing on display. We learned that the red robotic arm that we've seen on Big Boss isn't his only one; he has a yellow one (and maybe even more) that can emit an electric shock to incapacitate enemies. He has a supply of instantly inflating Snake-shaped decoys that can distract guards or bump them off ledges, perfect for hilarious stealth hijinks. Kojima Productions undoubtedly has more surprises in store, but with *The Phantom Pain*'s newly confirmed 2015 release window, Big Boss won't keep us waiting too much longer. » **Joe Juba**



As a sniper, Quiet is at her best when she views the situation from a distance. However, she can still handle herself in a traditional firefight

Quiet Strength

Characters with unexplained supernatural abilities have always been a staple of the *Metal Gear* series. *The Phantom Pain* keeps the tradition alive; a recent trailer demonstrates that Quiet has the unusual gift of turning invisible. She disappears in an inky black cloud – an exceptionally handy trick for a sniper. This ability may have other applications, since she is also able to use the ink to alter the pigmentation of her skin. Players have encountered some bizarre characters in *Metal Gear* over the years, but from what we've seen, Quiet's power ranks pretty high on the weirdness scale.



In addition to zapping foes with electricity, Big Boss' yellow mechanical arm can also create a sonic shockwave that acts as a kind of sonar



The inflatable decoy can cause a temporary diversion, but guards will eventually pop it and come looking for the genuine article

Battleborn

Bite-sized adventure for you and four friends



» **Platform**
PlayStation 4
Xbox One • PC

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

» **Publisher**
2K Games

» **Developer**
Gearbox Software

» **Release**
2015

When we featured Battleborn on the cover of our August 2014 issue, we went in-depth on the game's inspirations, art style, and gameplay. On our trip to Gearbox Software, we had the chance to play some of the competitive, five-versus-five mode.

Recently, we got a quick primer on that offering at a preview in New York City. Gearbox rattled off a number of features that sounded familiar. Despite shunning the term MOBA (the studio prefers "hero shooter"), the competitive gameplay shares a lot of mind-space with games like League of Legends, even if the player perspective is entirely different.

The cooperative modes deviate even more significantly from the center of the MOBAsphere. These aren't simply bot matches, but instead offer narrative threads and multiple, varied objectives as teams move through a linear map.

Just like in the competitive modes though, players will group up on a team of five. In-game progression starts anew as players land on the planet, with each level earning an upgrade on a helix. Unlike MOBAs, which allow players to choose multiple upgrade paths, Battleborn pushes players to choose one of two related boosts.

For instance, players that choose the

dapper robot Marquis will be able to increase base damage or critical hit damage, sprint speed or regular movement, and different boosts for his clockwork owl that increase its strike damage or allow you to send another into the field. Since there isn't the typical MOBA "return to base" for a breather to upgrade or buy items, Gearbox needed to streamline the process without muting the options for character building.

In the cooperative playthrough I saw, players land on the Jennerit homeworld (one of the game's five factions). This rocky, red-

skied world seems inhospitable.

The team of five is guided through the mission by two off-screen NPCs. Kleese pilots a salvage vehicle and Mellka is responsible for acquiring access codes so the team can make its escape. These characters are the source of some of Gearbox's notable humor, and the short demo included a number of funny moments. I was particularly pleased at the context-sensitive dialog among the playable characters, and Gearbox says that 500 to 700 lines have been recorded for each.

Unlike competitive play, the cooperative



Montana and Oscar Mike represent the Peacekeeper faction



mode rolls out closer to *Left 4 Dead*. The team progresses through the map, encountering setpiece moments that advance the encapsulated story.

In this setting, the squad first reaches a battle arena in which they have to take on waves of creeps, earning experience and leveling up. At level seven, ultimate abilities unlock, like Montana's "Mansformation," air strikes, group heals, and magical assaults. These are flashy and filled with their own humor (like Montana's *Kids in the Hall* style "crush your head" to target his Mansformation attack).

After wiping out the waves of enemies, the team moves on to a new objective. This time, it's all about defense, like protecting Kleese while he harvests an enormous fallen star shard. Enemies flood in waves, and it's a matter of holding them off until the invisible timer expires.

From there, it's a seek-and-destroy mission. A jammer is blotting out communication, and there's no escape until the team knocks it out. The rhythm of the co-op missions starts to become apparent: move, fight, level up, rinse, and repeat. In bite-sized chunks, everything can be centered around the objectives in a satisfying loop.

The demo ends right before an enormous boss encounter, but we get a sense for how the post-game plays out. There are three levels of progression: in-game, character, and profile.

Each of the characters will grow as you use them, affording new build options, but not greater power (you'll always start at level 1 in each encounter). Loot is earned at the end of the match, which will help you further customize your combatant beyond the helix upgrades.

Each of the five factions will have some common threads and their own restricted equipment. For instance, the Eldrin Battleborn don't have shields and the Jennerit typically have a life leech ability. This helps shape the narrative, but also creates some logic for the character design.

Your profile will allow you to unlock new characters, and will be the repository for all the loot you've earned playing. This will likely be a measure of your skill level and not tied to power gains, again focusing on balance within a single co-op or competitive mission.

There is still much we don't know about *Battleborn* (in part because Gearbox is still in development and decisions haven't yet been made). However, between our look at the game's competitive offering in August and our recent introduction to cooperative missions, it's looking to be a unique experience.

» **Michael Futter**



This large, wraith-like Varlsi stands in the way during a co-op mission





Dying Light

Night of the flying dead

» **Platform**
PlayStation 4
Xbox One
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • PC

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

» **Publisher**
Warner Bros.
Interactive

» **Developer**
Techland

» **Release**
January 27

For the casual fan of zombie games, keeping Dying Light and the Dead Island series straight can be confusing. Techland created the Dead Island franchise, but Spec Ops: The Line studio Jager is handling Dead Island 2. That sequel is still a first-person game all about teaming up with friends to hack away at zombies in an exotic environment. Dying Light shares those same elements, but distinguishes itself dramatically with fluid parkour mobility and a dynamic day/night cycle. Nowhere are those unique features better demonstrated than in Dying Light's Be A Zombie mode.

This exclusive pre-order mode allows sadistic players to invade friends' and strangers' games to terrorize them during the night as a highly mobile zombie (cowardly players can disable this altogether). A high-speed, asymmetrical battle begins once one of these Night Hunters enters the fray. Up to four co-op partners must put all their marksmanship, melee skills, and parkour abilities to the test in order to survive. The survivors' goal is to destroy three undead hives before the Night Hunter snuffs out their pool of lives.

The deadly Night Hunter evens the odds with apex predator-like speed and agility. Imagine Left 4 Dead's Hunter on steroids. This spry undead beast flies above the rooftops using sticky tentacles that shoot from its hands to swing around like Spider-Man.

Players can change direction mid-flight for accurate tentacle-slinging. The Night Hunter can even use the tentacle to pull itself toward unsuspecting survivors and pounce them for a potential kill. These strike-and-fade tactics force the survivors to stick together or risk being picked off one-by-one.

Players who love stalking others as the Night Hunter can even invest in a zombie-specific upgrade path. Expertly slaying the opposition allows you to increase your speed, coax A.I. zombies into helping you,

and disable some opponents' abilities. Unfortunately, none of the progression from Be A Zombie feeds back into Dying Light's campaign, meaning this mode is only for those lusting after the thrill of the kill.

Be A Zombie is another enticing mode that continues the trend of asymmetrical multi-player match types, like Evolve and Splinter Cell's Spies vs. Mercenaries. We're thrilled to see more developers abandoning worn team deathmatch structures in favor of something with more personality. » **Tim Turi**



Survivors can still elect to be invaded by Night Hunters even if they don't pre-order



Never Alone

Northern exposure of a different sort

The stories we tell each other are a fundamental part of what makes us who we are. While tales of space marines, soldiers, and sword-wielding heroes dominate the sales charts, some game developers are using the art form to their own unique stories. In the case of *Never Alone*, Alaska Natives are turning to games as a new way to pass along folklore that's been a part of their heritage for countless generations.

The game stars an Iñupiat girl named Nuna, whose village has been ravaged by a mysterious blizzard. The powerful wind and snow have made hunting impossible, and she seeks out the source of the trouble. The cutscenes are rendered in an animated scrimshaw style, which replicates the art form in which bone or ivory is etched and inked in intricate patterns.

Nuna is accompanied on her journey by an arctic fox, and players can swap between the characters at the press of a button. Each one has unique special abilities, and they need

to work together if they hope to succeed. To further emphasize this spirit of cooperation, a second player can take on the role of fox, too. According to Amy Fredeen, CFO and executive vice president of the Cook Inlet Tribal Council, the name is a dual reference to both Nuna and fox's relationship as well as the spirit of interdependence that's so vital to Alaska Native people.

I got to explore Nuna's life above Alaska's Arctic Circle, and quickly learned that surviving isn't easy. The wind makes jumping perilous, and you have to time your leaps across ice floes and other hazards to ensure you're not gusted away. Fortunately, visual indicators such as snow patterns and the blowing fur on Nuna's parka provide a heads up as to when she should wait and dig into the snow. Fox has a better jump distance, but he's not able to grab ropes with his paws or use bolas to break through sheets of ice. He can, however, commune with spirits in the world,

which help navigate tricky obstacles.

While spirit helpers can provide access to areas by acting as platforms, not everyone is eager to see them succeed. Take *Manslayer*, whose name speaks volumes. "Manslayer is one of those characters where his story is a lot more graphic than what we can talk about in the game," Fredeen says. "He really represents the antithesis of Alaska Native values, in that he's acting on his own behalf without the consideration of the community or the good of the community."

In *Never Alone*, he looks like a man with grotesque, twisted facial features. He's clad in a parka, and he pursues Nuna and fox relentlessly. Here, the screen autoscrolls, adding a sense of urgency as I fled to avoid his superhuman grasp. While Nuna may eventually get her comeuppance against the villain, I was only able to run away. We'll have to wait until the chill of November arrives to learn what ultimately happens. » **Jeff Cork**

» **Platform**
PlayStation 4
Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1 or 2-Player Action

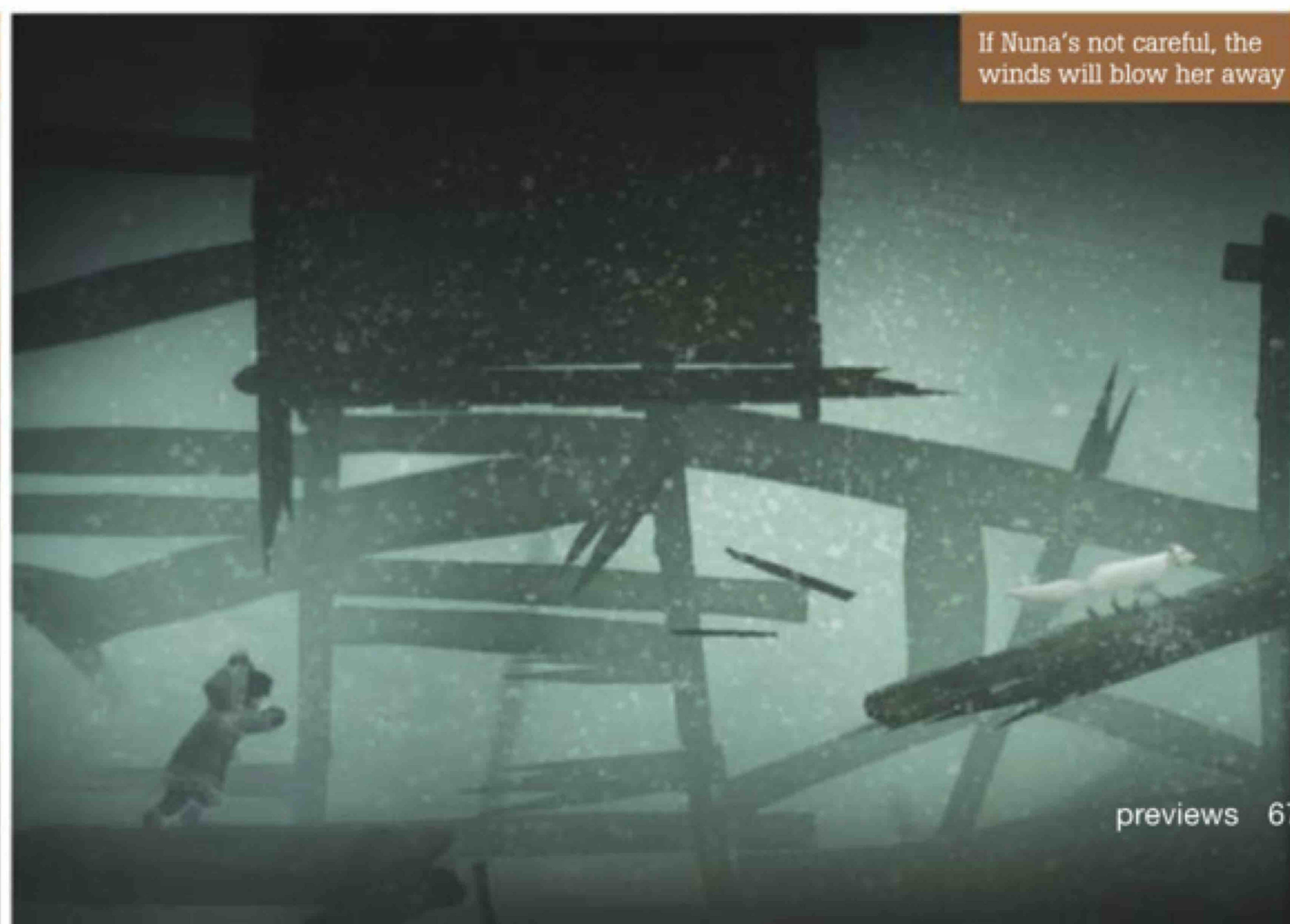
» **Publisher**
E-Line Media,
Cook Inlet Tribal Council

» **Developer**
Upper One Games,
E-Line Media

» **Release**
November 4



Manslayer is the antithesis of Alaska Native culture, pursuing his own destructive impulses



If Nuna's not careful, the winds will blow her away



The Crew

The Crew's beta is open for exploration

» **Platform**
PlayStation 4
Xbox One • PC

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

» **Publisher**
Ubisoft

» **Developer**
Ivory Tower,
Ubisoft Reflections

» **Release**
November 11

Ubisoft has been running multiple beta programs for The Crew since its delay, with large portions of the game playable.

These stress tests have revealed a game with cohesive story and free-roaming components anchored by a hearty car upgrade system. We played a recent closed beta and found that Ivory Tower's promises of a go-anywhere, do-anything experience are shaping up to be true.

The beta took place at the start of the game, casting you as Alex Taylor, a hotshot driver whose brother runs a local racing crew called the 5-10s. A rogue FBI agent and rival gang leader conspire and kill your brother, framing you for the crime. Five years later, another FBI agent named Zoe enlists your help to catch and expose the agent who set you up.

Regardless of how hokey the story is, you're soon let loose on the world, free to pick up a variety of missions. An appropriate

yet strange-sounding comparison for The Crew is the Assassin's Creed franchise. The game doesn't feature an age-old battle between Templars and Assassins, but the world's map and the way it unlocks content should be familiar to anyone who's played the fellow Ubisoft series.

Data stations are littered around the world, which ping your radar when you get close to them in the environment. Pull up to them and the various missions in the area show up on your world map. While you can look at the map and track these down methodically, drive in any one direction and you'll run into something soon enough.

Skill missions litter the world and can be replayed as often as you like for XP, depending on how well you do. Scramble tests ask you to smash targets, Slalom lets you weave through gates, and Jump tests how far you can fly. Others include Speed Test, Escape, Hill Climb, and Race Line. Bread-crumbed

story missions exist (including a quick co-op option for your crew), but it's a lot of fun to just cruise around and see what comes your way. We spent a good amount of time re-trying skills missions just because we knew we had a better run in us.

Leveling up earns you Perk Points that you can allocate for bonuses such as increased XP and money from missions (including co-op missions), parts discounts, and an increased chance of more Perk Points at future levels.

Any performance parts you garner while driving are awarded on the spot. In your garage, you can repair your cars, buy different kits (street, performance, circuit, dirt, and raid) to change what overall type of car it is, and customize the appearance of your vehicles. Maximizing your cars is a big component of the game, and in the beta it was easy to tinker around and come out with a suitable ride. Different kits can be applied to cars depending on how you plan to use them, although kits require a certain level and aren't available for all cars.

Out on the road, it's easy to spend time knocking down various skills missions or even sightsee a list of geographical landmarks, but navigating traffic can add challenge and the police will be on your tail if you drive too recklessly. Property damage is one of their determining factors, although the collision does a pretty good job of being lenient when necessary in order to create a fast and fun experience.

It will be interesting to see how The Crew holds our attention across a full story and the entire map of the U.S.A. littered with challenges, but the beta has proven that it has a strong, inviting structure. » **Matthew Kato**

In the beta, racing a car with a kit not specialized for a particular kind of race wasn't debilitating



NBA 2K15

Stacked with new modes, Visual Concepts eyes a title run



Last year NBA 2K14 came storming out of the next-gen gates with two rebuilt modes that gave us a glimpse of the future of sports games. This year developer Visual Concepts is focused on making sure the encouraging MyCareer and MyGM build off that foundation and take the game to new heights.

The role-playing favorite MyCareer returns in NBA 2K15 with a new premise. As an undrafted free agent, you must try and crack an NBA roster on a 10-day contract, then write your unlikely legacy as a superstar. Instead of focusing on shoehorned storylines like last year's rivalry with the fictional character Jackson Ellis, for 2K15 Visual Concepts recorded audio with players from every NBA team to bring team relationships to the forefront. After your first year in the league Doc Rivers will assume coaching duties for your team and take the role of a mentor, teaching

you how to become a better player. The mode also lets you skip games during the season this year, and a new upgrade path makes it harder to purchase your way to being an elite player.

The other cornerstone mode, MyGM, is receiving renovations to lessen the dependency on the in-game currency for upgrades and improve interactions with your players, the media, and your owner. The various people you converse with now remember your promises and react accordingly if you renege on your word. The new upgrade system awards you XP for every action you take, whether you are simming or playing games.

Another sim-friendly feature is the SimCast, which allows you to sim through a game but jump into the action at any time. If you prefer to leave the conversation behind and control each of the 28 NBA teams, you can do so in the new MyLeague mode. Customization

options include season length, fantasy drafts, custom rosters, trade-logic settings, controlling the morale system, and tweaking draft-class quality.

NBA 2K14 suffered many network issues at launch, but Visual Concepts is confident these are in the rearview mirror. The new MyPark mode should benefit most if this is true. This evolution of last year's effort lets you choose one of three home parks to represent, each of which imparts unique skill upgrades. You can squad up with friends before pick-up games, or if you prefer a more NBA-like experience you can participate in five-on-five matches with referees in the Rec Center. To encourage more unselfish play, Visual Concepts is migrating the teammate grading into the mode as well.

The bevy of improvements being touted for these modes is impressive, but that doesn't mean Visual Concepts is leaving the gameplay untouched. A new dynamic shot meter makes it easier to tell when to release your shot, player movement in small spaces has been corrected to give you more fidelity when controlling defenders, and enhanced A.I. has a better understanding of how to be useful after play breaks down.

To better differentiate between different NBA teams, the developers have installed each of their base sets. This helps teams play more organically, and the embedded knowledge means you can exploit repeatable situations on offense.

With this many new wrinkles being added to NBA 2K15, perhaps this is the year Visual Concepts finds a way to unseat FIFA as the reigning sports game of the year. We'll find out in October. » **Matt Bertz**

» **Platform**
PlayStation 4
Xbox One • PC

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

» **Publisher**
2K Sports

» **Developer**
Visual Concepts

» **Release**
October 7

Old-Gen Improvements

The majority of the features listed in this preview apply only to the new-gen version of the game, but that's not to say PS3 and 360 owners are being left in the cold. Replacing last year's LeBron: Path to Greatness mode, Visual Concepts is introducing a new mode called 2K Heroes where current and past NBA players pick their dream teams to compete against one another. Featured athletes include cover boy Kevin Durant, Steph Curry, Paul George, James Harden, and Shaquille O'Neal.





Tearaway Unfolded

Refolded into a bigger package

» **Platform**
PlayStation 4

» **Style**
1-Player Platforming

» **Publisher**
Sony Computer
Entertainment

» **Developer**
Media Molecule

» **Release**
2015

Many old games get updated re-releases or ports to other systems. But where most ports get enhanced graphics and smoother framerates, Media Molecule is pushing the boundaries of what constitutes a port by giving its Vita platformer a host of new mechanics tailored specifically to the PS4.

The original Vita game told the story of a cute anthropomorphic envelope and his journey through a papercraft world to deliver a special message to the player of the game. Along this journey, he battled with paper wad enemies called scraps and befriended local paper denizens as players customized the world around them.

While the overall premise and plot remain untouched, Media Molecule is making a lot of changes for the PS4 edition. Certain mechanics that involved using the Vita's rear touchpad and touchscreen lose their potency when the game isn't in your hands, so Media Molecule is replacing these systems with new mechanics and scattering new puzzles that leverage these mechanics around the world (see sidebar).

During a recent demo of the game, we were dropped into Maple Fields, one of the opening levels of the game. This area is about 50 percent larger on the PS4 than it was on the Vita, and the draw distance reaches much farther as well, giving the game a greater sense of scale. Media Molecule says each level also has a host of new areas and features a number of new collectable secrets.

While Media Molecule designed the Vita version to feel like a small world in the palm of players' hands, the bigger console version acts like a world inside players' TVs, which they interact with from a distance. Many

of the new mechanics reflect this ideal. For example, during our demo, the papercraft messenger threw a squirrel out of the TV and into our controller. Afterward, the controller started vibrating and we could hear the little creature squeaking from the speaker. When we swiped at the PS4 controller's touchpad, the squirrel would throw nuts back into the game world. Using his winter stash, we knocked down a series of targets that opened up new paths for our messenger as she rolled down a series of pipes.

Media Molecule has extended the platforming challenge of Tearaway – adding new platforming sequences to a game that was already great. In fact, the PS4 version of Tearaway looks different enough that we wouldn't blame some players for mistaking it for a proper sequel. Fans of the handheld version could have plenty of reasons to return to this platformer, and newcomers should have even more motivation to dive into this paper world for the first time.

» **Ben Reeves**

Out With The Old

Given the differences between the Vita and PlayStation 4, several of Tearaway's game mechanics are changing.

Out: Finger popping – The Vita version allowed you to touch the system's back touchpad, sending your fingers into the world to move objects and knock enemies out of the way.

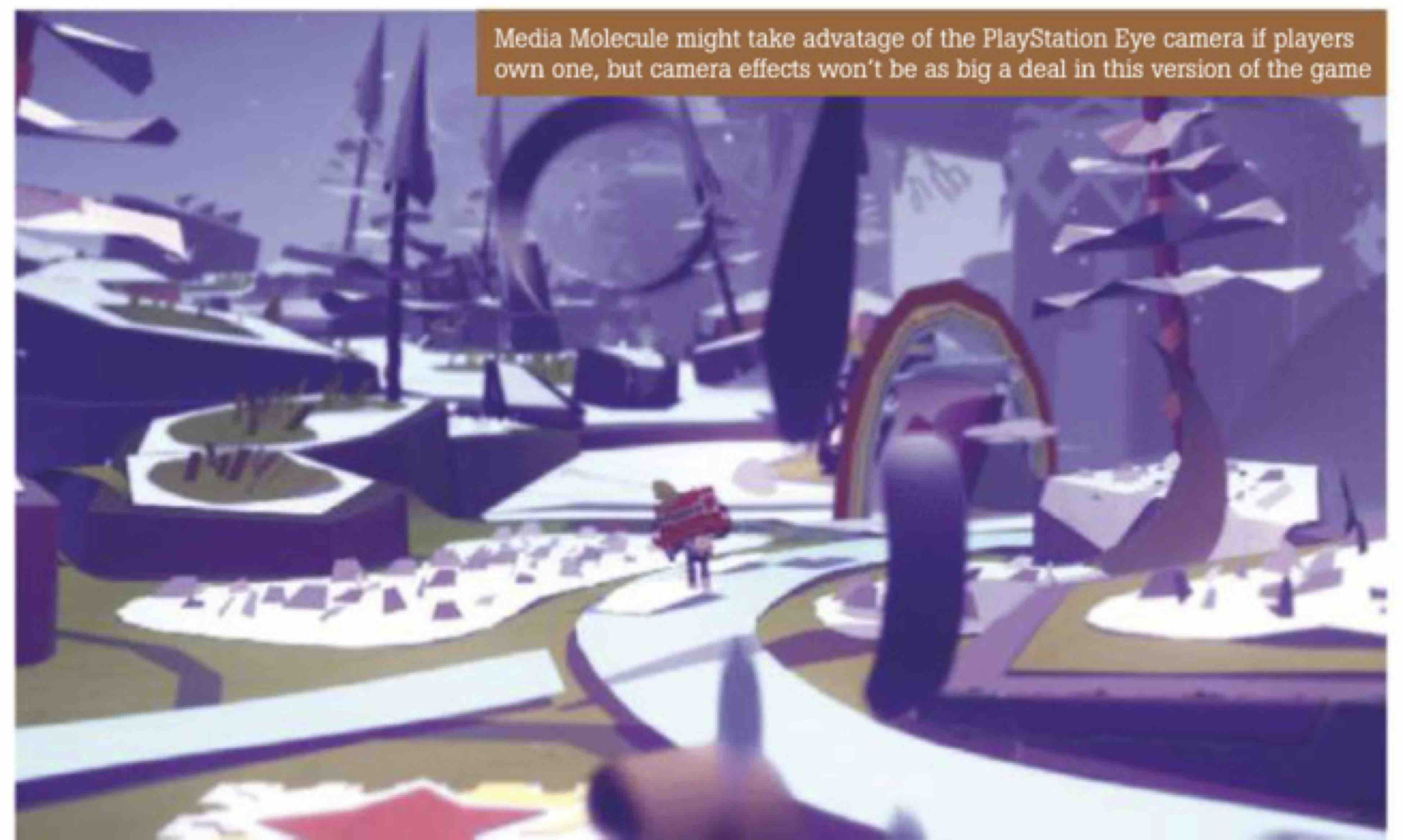
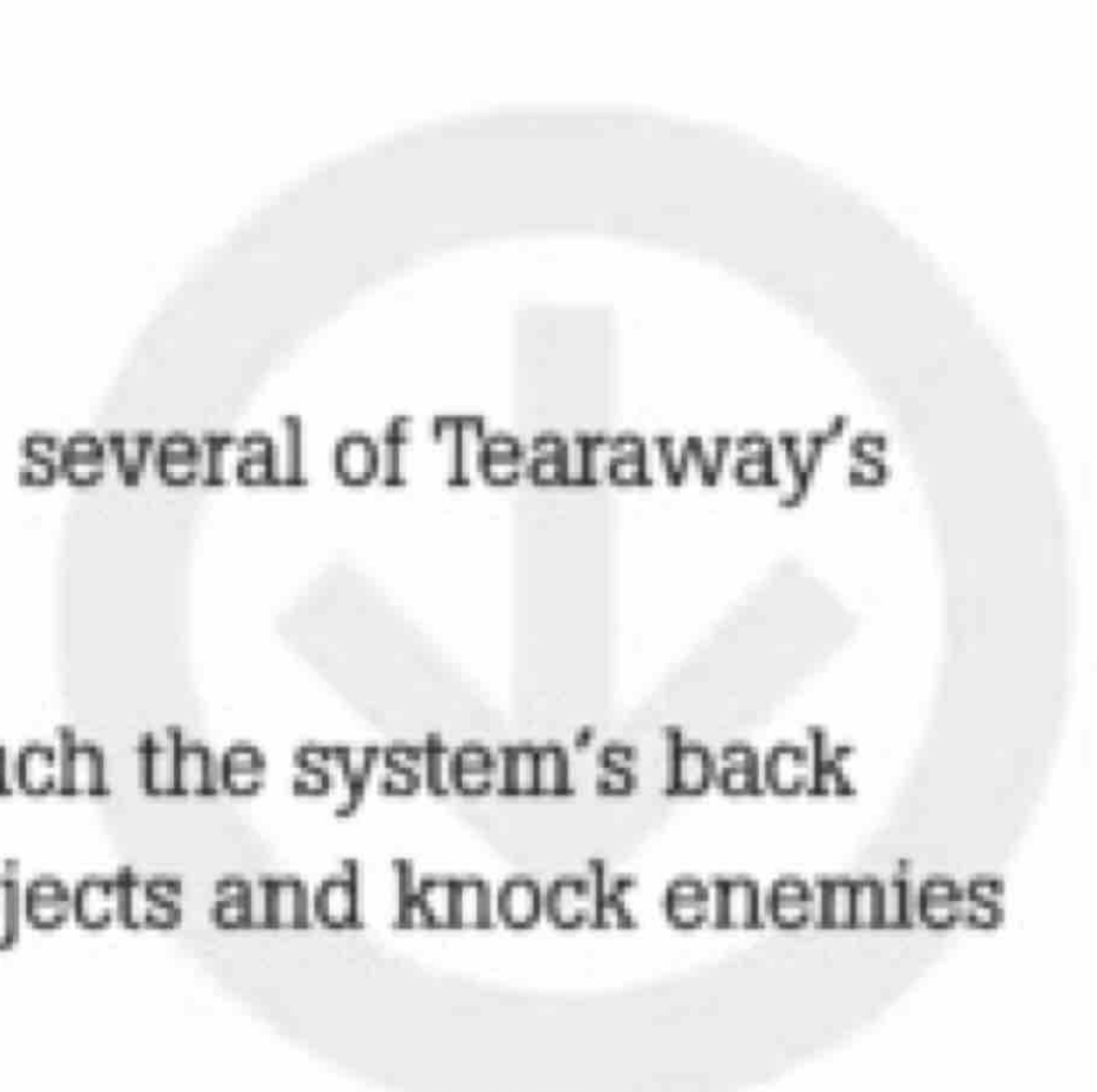
In: Creating wind – By touching the PS4 controller's touchpad, players can create gusts of wind that blow enemies and objects across the screen.

Out: Face time – The Vita version made good use of the handheld camera, often putting a player's face in the game. While Media Molecule might do some of this for players who own a PlayStation camera, the studio will tone down this element since it can't rely on people owning a camera.

In: Light show – The light on the bottom of the PS4 controller can shine into Tearaway's world, allowing players to grow plants, light fires, and illuminate darkened corners.

Out: Picture perfect – The original game let players use the Vita's camera to collect new patterns and import them into their papercraft world. This will no longer be possible on the console version.

In: Controller holding – Tearaway's messenger can throw objects at the player's controller, and players can then throw these items back into the world in order to destroy environmental barriers.



Media Molecule might take advantage of the PlayStation Eye camera if players own one, but camera effects won't be as big a deal in this version of the game



Tales Of Zestiria

Bringing exciting changes to battle

Though the PlayStation 4 has taken center stage, the Tales series is content to keep chugging along on the PlayStation 3. These games don't often break the mold for RPGs, but great character interactions and the evolving action battle system keep fans entertained. With Tales of Zestiria, Bandai Namco is striving to use the PS3 hardware better than ever before.

Zestiria already looks to be the most polished Tales' entry yet. The load times between battles are almost entirely absent, and the backdrops for battles are no longer static, but reflect where you are in the world. If you have an encounter in front of a tower, it appears during battle. The graphics are crisp, with more detailed character models and lighting and shadows, which makes the world feel more alive.

While plenty of enhancements are bringing the series forward, producer Hideo Baba also says he wants to get back to the series' classical roots. For the first time since 2008's Tales of Vesperia, the setting returns to swords-and-sorcery. Baba also indicated that the common theme of this entry is "passion;" the title is derived from the word "zest."

The story follows childhood friends Sorey and Mikleo, a human and a seraph, respectively. Baba hinted that co-existence, a common Tales' theme, would surface with their relationship. Their friendship extends to the battlefield: Sorey can use a seraph's power to transform in battle, and Bandai Namco went all out with the animations for the battle transformations. They make you feel like you've upped the stakes.

When Sorey isn't using a seraph's power, the seraph fights alongside him like a regular

party member. Only three members are on the battlefield when Sorey transforms with a seraph, otherwise it's the typical four-member party. The dilemma is choosing between extra hands versus extra power. The seraph system already seems more complex than Ludger's chromatous ability from Tales of Xillia 2, and I'm excited to see how deep it extends to battles.

In our hands-on time, we spotted four different seraph allies, each with a different elemental alignment that gave Sorey access to different artes. Because of seraphs' ties to elemental weaknesses, it's clear they play a huge part in your success. I especially noticed this in boss battles. If you're not damaging an enemy's weak point, combat can be a lengthy affair, so it's important to test out different

elemental attacks until you find a weakness.

The fields aren't as cluttered as Tales of Xillia. Classic treasure chests can be found, as well as plants for harvesting. You can also talk to party members while exploring these fields. Sometimes you receive dialogue options, and other times they give you items they've tracked down for you.

The battle transformations along with visual and technical upgrades are steps in the right direction. Now I'm curious if the new characters will break the Tales mold and not fall into the typical anime archetypes we've seen repeatedly in the series. Here's hoping that Zestiria takes the huge leap forward the franchise has been missing with its PS3 entries.

» **Kimberley Wallace**

» **Platform**
PlayStation 3

» **Style**
1 to 4-Player Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
Bandai Namco

» **Developer**
Bandai Namco

» **Release**
TBD

The fields definitely look more realistic than past games





Final Fantasy XV

Restoring confidence with a new direction

» **Platform**
PlayStation 4
Xbox One

» **Style**
1-Player Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
Square Enix

» **Developer**
Square Enix

» **Release**
TBD

From its first announcement at E3 2006, Final Fantasy Versus XIII was closely associated with its original director, Tetsuya Nomura (of Kingdom Hearts fame). After languishing in development for years, Square Enix decided the project needed a fresh start. That began with rebranding the title Final Fantasy XV, but the changes didn't stop there. At this year's Tokyo Game Show, the publisher announced Nomura is no longer on the project, with the director role being passed to Hajime Tabata, the mind behind Final Fantasy Type-0 and Crisis Core: Final Fantasy VII.

Square Enix knows fans have been waiting a long time to play Final Fantasy XV, which is why the company also revealed plans for a playable demo, entitled Episode Duscae. "It is the first time that fans who have been waiting for XV get a chance to try out the game,"

Tabata says. "The reason I wanted to make a demo is to let players see whatever portion is available right now and to understand that XV is still coming and we're still working on it."

Episode Duscae is a slice of the early parts of Final Fantasy XV, but it gives players an idea of the scope and possibilities of the full game. Some of the major features are apparent immediately, like the ability to drive vehicles. Noctis and his friends are cruising through the countryside, making the adventure feel a bit like a road trip among friends. Unlike some previous Final Fantasy titles (most notably XIII), players are not restricted to traveling down linear corridors. "Not literally everything is open world, but it is pretty vast, and you will be able to freely explore," Tabata says. "You can technically walk around the world, but we recommend using a vehicle, and it'll be a journey driving through the continent."

Combat also takes place out in the open, with no transition between exploration and battle phases. "You've got enemies that are roaming around in all areas," Tabata says. "There's not an 'encounter,' per se. It's all seamless." Like driving on safari, you might see giant lumbering beasts just feet from your vehicle. If you want to, you can get out and pick a fight, taking advantage of the action-heavy battle system. You slash your sword and fire off magic spells with immediate feedback, on the opposite side of the spectrum from a traditional turn-based system. You can switch between offensive and defensive stances with the push of a button, but we have to wait until we get our hands on the demo to understand the finer points of battle.

Episode Duscae should give players ample opportunity to explore the nuances of combat and exploration, since the demo provides plenty of content. "If you just play straight through the story, it's about one hour worth of gameplay," Tabata says. "If you go and explore the world map or go into a dungeon, it would be somewhere upwards of three to four hours." Square Enix hasn't revealed the pricing or release plans for Episode Duscae, but those who buy Final Fantasy Type-0 HD get a free voucher for the demo.

Final Fantasy XV is currently between 50 to 60 percent complete. That might not seem impressive for a game that has been in the works for over eight years, but it seems like the recent developments have put the game on a new and less ambiguous course. The release of Episode Duscae could go a long way toward restoring fan confidence in the Final Fantasy XV project, though Tabata (who joined the team two years ago) still isn't ready to announce a firm release date. "Unfortunately, it's still going to take a while," he says. "But I'm hoping people will reset their timers from when I joined the team and restart the count from there." » **Joe Juba**



Final Fantasy Type-0 HD

Class 0 gets a second chance

The last stage of the PSP's lifecycle was not characterized by a deluge of noteworthy releases, but support for the system had not completely dried up in 2011. That's when Square Enix released Final Fantasy Type-0 in Japan, but the PSP's flagging popularity meant that the title never made its way to North America despite its positive reception. Square Enix is fixing that with the release of Final Fantasy Type-0 HD, a remastered version of the PSP original for new-generation consoles.

Type-0 HD covers the exact same content as the original release. As a remaster (not a remake), this release doesn't make significant alterations or additions to the gameplay or the narrative. Type-0 focuses on Class 0, a group of academy students with exceptional powers and magical abilities. They are embroiled in a war involving an invading empire, and players guide them through the conflict.

Combat is fast-paced and action-packed, allowing you to swap between the members of Class 0 to take advantage of their different abilities. For instance, Ace uses energy-charged cards, while Seven has a whip-like weapon that can pull enemies in from a distance. You gain access to 14 different characters over the course of the game, so you're

bound to find a few favorites.

As the first Final Fantasy title on new-gen consoles, Type-0 HD is bound to receive some additional scrutiny. We got our hands on the game at the Tokyo Game Show, and while the visuals look good, don't expect to

see something that pushes the PS4 or Xbox One to their limits. This is still a PSP game at its core, and that legacy is apparent in areas. Even so, Final Fantasy Type-0 HD is a good first step toward ushering in a new generation of Final Fantasy titles. » **Joe Juba**



» **Platform**
PlayStation 4
Xbox One

» **Style**
1-Player Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
Square Enix

» **Developer**
Square Enix

» **Release**
March 17

Two Fantasies For One

The demo for Final Fantasy XV, Episode Duscae, is free with the purchase of Final Fantasy Type-0 HD. It isn't on the same disc, though; the download comes in the form of a voucher that can be redeemed when Episode Duscae releases. Square Enix has expressed a desire to launch the two products close together, but cannot confirm that Episode Duscae will release on March 17 alongside Type-0.

Dreadnought

Yager goes big with spaceships

Ship combat games often place players in dogfights with small spacecrafts. Yager is taking a different approach with free-to-play Dreadnought, as players load into capital-class star cruisers for deathmatch-style encounters above planets. Even the speedy ships with a focus on mobility are huge, with the titular craft being the biggest and most capable of absorbing extreme punishment.

Ships come in classic archetypes, from the slow, tank-like Dreadnought to support craft and "sniper" ships – giant artillery cannons that can dish out incredible damage from great distances. Each ship can be outfitted with

a loadout similar to the systems in place for most shooters, but here the options are tied to the ship "class." Support ships have healing capabilities that will keep your Dreadnoughts alive through even the most focused of fire, the artillery ship has cloaking options and countermeasures to handle incoming projectiles, and dreadnoughts simply plod along dealing out death with a variety of salvos and lasers.

There are three different manufacturers of each ship archetype in the game that ensure you're getting the craft that's the right core for you, in addition to four-ability custom loadouts and account-level ship crews that

add specific bonuses like lowering weapon cooldowns and enhancing shields.

In addition to 5v5 team deathmatch style gameplay and team elimination (no respawn) modes, Dreadnought will feature episodic single-player story content with writing by author Dan Abnett of Warhammer 40,000 book fame.

With single synchronous sessions titles and their fast matches and tight reward loops becoming more popular than ever on the PC scene, Yager may be crafting a compelling competitor in Dreadnought. The closed beta is expected to begin early next year. » **Daniel Tack**

» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
10-Player Online Action

» **Publisher**
Yager

» **Developer**
Grey Box

» **Release**
2015





Beryl

And for good reason!
Here comes company!



Amethyst

Gentleman, you are in luck!
For today you shall meet an
elegant defeat at my hand.

Tales Of Hearts R

Re-assembling a broken heart

- » **Platform**
Vita
- » **Style**
1-Player Role-Playing
- » **Publisher**
Bandai Namco
- » **Developer**
Bandai Namco
- » **Release**
November 11

North American gamers missed out on Tales of Hearts when it debuted on the Nintendo DS back in 2008. Bandai Namco isn't making the same mistake twice. The Vita remake, Tales of Hearts R, is making its way to our shores.

Tales of Hearts R stars Kor Meteor, a lad who's just started training to use his soma, an ancient weapon. Kor's grandpa is teaching him how to be responsible with it, but not without a few laughs along the way. From the get-go, the two have a great dynamic, bantering back and forth with Kor calling him "gramps." Kor can use his soma for healing or destruction, and his grandpa warns him about

being able to withstand his emotions and use it with care.

Kor doesn't find a reason to use his soma until he comes across a mysterious girl, Kohaku Hearts, who washes up on shore. Kohaku was separated from her brother after they tried to escape an evil witch. When Kor tries to help her, an accident occurs that causes Kohaku's heart to break into pieces. Now he must make things right by going on a quest to collect each missing fragment.

Heart and emotion are a huge part of the storyline and even play a role in the battle system. Kor can build up five of his soma's attributes: fight, endurance, sincerity, belief,

and mettle. You also unlock bonuses by building up neighboring attributes evenly. If you can't decide how you want to build these skills, the game will make suggestions for you. So far, battles play similarly to other Tales' action battle systems, with free run and the ability to jump or dash to avoid attacks.

My biggest takeaway from Tales of Hearts R is that it's self-aware. The game knows it's a bit cheesy and isn't afraid to poke fun at itself, and that's refreshing. I just hope the journey isn't predictable and takes its premise of exploring emotions to an interesting place. » **Kimberley Wallace**

Final Fantasy Explorers

Hunting with class

- » **Platform**
3DS
- » **Style**
1-Player Action/
Role-Playing
- » **Publisher**
Square Enix
- » **Developer**
Square Enix
- » **Release**
TBA

The number of fantasy games where brave adventurers fight off fearsome monsters is beyond counting, but different developers have different approaches to the formula. For its latest handheld adventure, Square Enix is leaving behind the turn-based mechanics typically associated with the Final Fantasy name, instead veering more in the direction of the Monster Hunter series. Final Fantasy Explorers isn't a direct imitation, but it certainly takes cues from Capcom's action/RPG.

Explorers uses a quest-based structure to pit your hero against a series of iconic Final Fantasy monsters. That includes smaller foes like chocobos and goblins, as well as massive beasts like Ifrit and Bahamut. The combat is

action-focused; you have an array of active attacks and skills, and fight through dungeons to gain experience, pick up loot, and gather materials. Between quests, you regroup in town to use your resources to prepare yourself for the next adventure – like using materials to craft better equipment.

While these elements are familiar to fans of titles like Monster Hunter, the class system is distinctly Final Fantasy. Your character advances through roles like monk, paladin, and dragoon to master various skills. Those skills can then be applied to other classes, giving you the ability to customize your hero. Though Explorers does have a narrative about heroes trying collect crystals and

save the world, the core of the experience is this constant striving for improvement and optimization.

Explorers can technically be played single-player, but the real strengths of the experience come out in the multiplayer mode. Up to four players can team up to take on the quests, leveraging different classes and abilities to get the best shot at victory. Of course, whether we can play at all – multiplayer or otherwise – is still up in the air. Square hasn't said whether or not Explorers is coming to North America, but based on our hands-on time, the gameplay seems fun and accessible enough to find support on our shores.

» **Joe Juba**





Bravely Second

Stocking for success once again

When Bravely Default finally launched in North America this year, it was a hard-won victory for fans who pleaded for its localization. After Square Enix wouldn't budge, Nintendo stepped in and published the title in the West. The game ended up selling well and garnered praise, which may have to do with its throwback to old-school Final Fantasy games. Now Square Enix is developing a sequel featuring Bravely Default's Agnes, taking place a few years after the first game. A big question on North American fans' minds is if Square Enix will be the one to bring over Bravely Second. Time will tell, but from a recent hands-on session with the game, I'd say it's a no-brainer.

Everything fans loved about Bravely Default is still intact. The hand-drawn backgrounds are still gorgeous, and even more noticeable is the more detailed environments you explore. The dungeons and fields don't seem quite as

vacant this time around. Even the character animations look better during cutscenes.

The intriguing brave/default turn-stocking system is still front and center, and not much has changed with it. It still brings a lot of thought to the turn-based battle system, like do you sacrifice a turn to heal a near-death ally or spend them all for an alpha strike? Just like the first game, it's about making the most of your turns and studying your enemies. Some enemies are immune to magic, while others won't take much damage from physical attacks. Battles are often about trying different tactics and seeing what works.

While Bravely Second doesn't stray too far from its predecessor, it does have a few new additions, including a new wizard class. It also has a new special ability, shushoku-ku, which lets you dish out two types of magic in one spell. Imagine if you didn't have to select between casting a healing spell or a damage

spell, but could do both in one turn. We don't yet know how this will be implemented, but it's a great idea.

The developer also indicates that they want to focus more on the story. Here's hoping the development team also looks at a way to reduce some of the repetition from the first game, which was by far its biggest blemish.

Bravely Second still hasn't been confirmed for North America, but let's hope fans don't have to fight as hard to play as they did its predecessor. » **Kimberley Wallace**

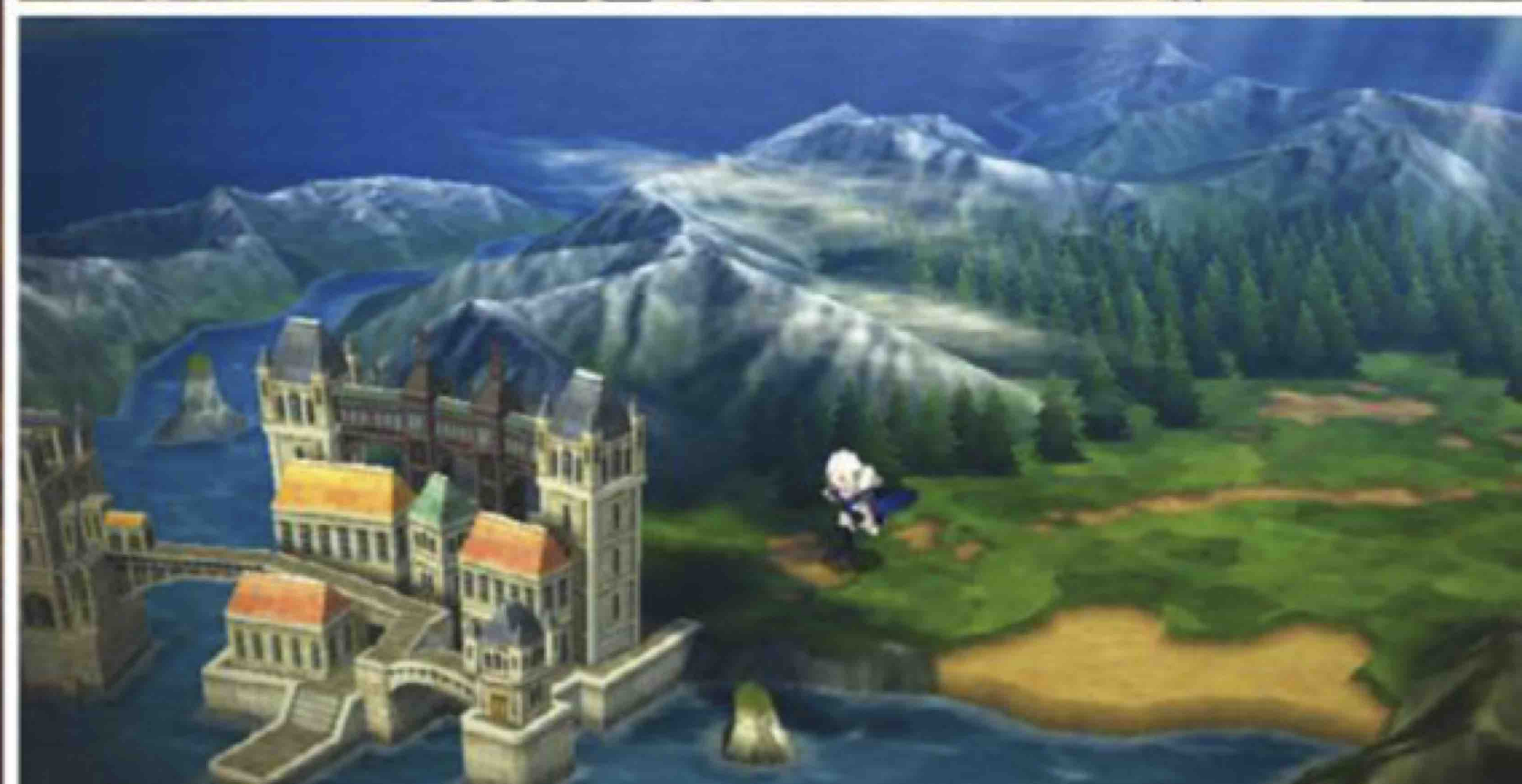
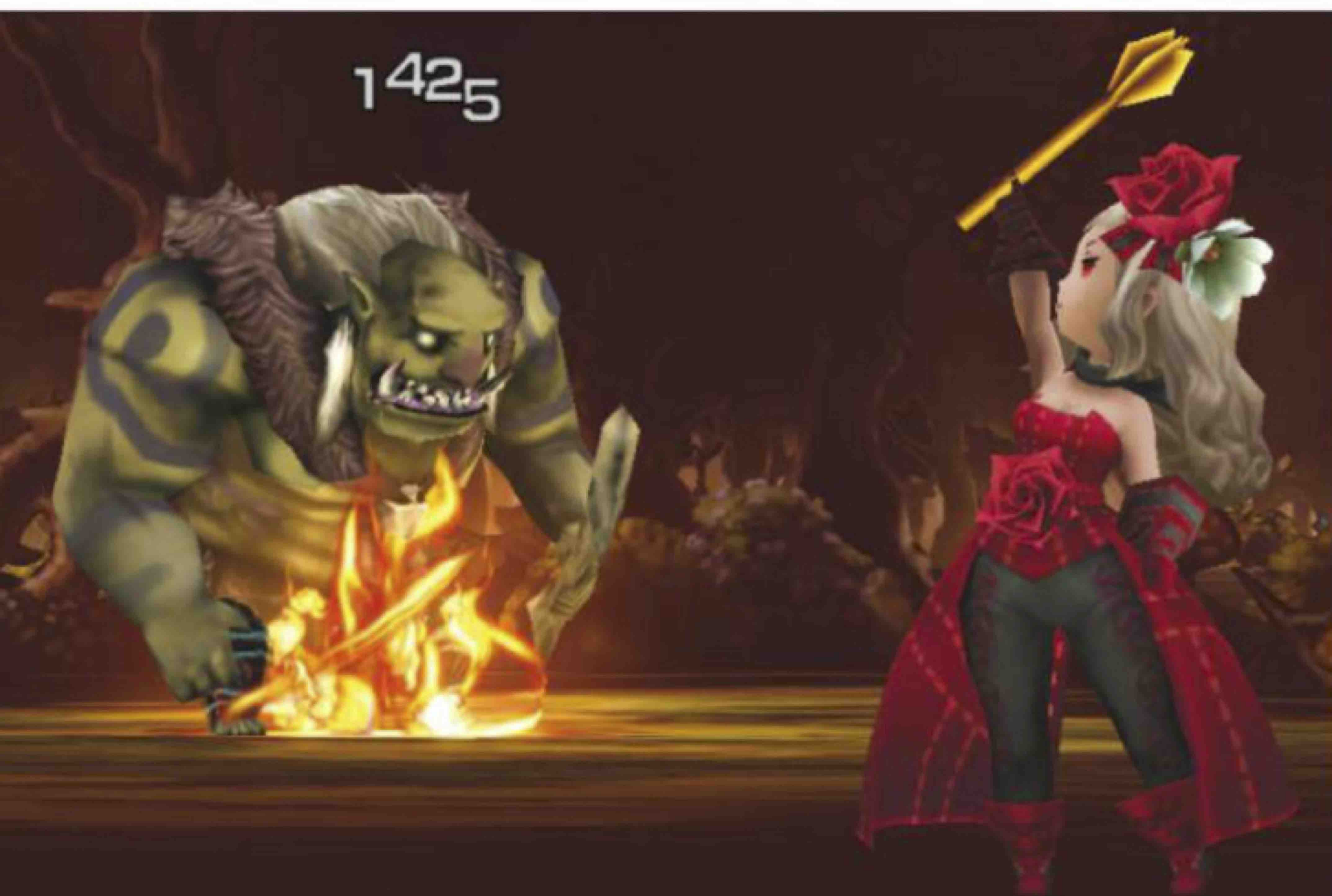
» **Platform**
3DS

» **Style**
1-Player Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
TBD

» **Developer**
Silicon Studio, Square Enix

» **Release**
TBA



Dead Or Alive 5: Last Round

Team Ninja's fighter gets the remastered treatment

» **Platform**
PlayStation 4
Xbox One
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360

» **Style**
1 or 2-Player Fighting

» **Publisher**
Koei Tecmo

» **Developer**
Team Ninja

» **Release**
Spring

The Roster

The confirmed roster so far includes Hayabusa, Hayate, Kasumi, Ayane, Rig, Momiji, Leon, Kokoro, Tina, Lisa, Brad Wong, Jann Lee, Hitomi, Leifang, Christie, Eliot, Leon, Gen Fu, Bayman, Bass, Zack, Helena, Marie Rose, and Phase 4. Virtua Fighter's Akira Yuki, Pai Chan, and Sarah Bryant who appeared in Dead or Alive 5's initial release are also included, as well as new Virtua Fighter guest fighters Nyotengu and Jacky Bryant.



Dead or Alive 5 released for last-gen consoles in 2012, and PlayStation 4 and Xbox One owners are receiving a remastered edition called Last Round. Like many of the games making the jump from the old to new systems, this new version jacks up the fidelity to 1080p and 60 frames per second.

Along with the better framerate and higher resolution, Team Ninja is employing a few new graphical changes to make everything look better. A new skin shader enhances the "slickness" of the characters, as Team Ninja refers to it. The particle effects related the assorted stages reacting to combat, such as explosions or sparks flying from someone getting tossed into a neon sign, have also been expanded. You should see a lot more carnage as the stage falls apart in response to battles.

Last Round includes more customization than previous iterations of Dead or Alive 5, with 300 unlockable costumes as well as new hairstyles and added accessories for all fighters. With upgraded re-releases like this, DLC is often bundled in, but not all of Dead or Alive 5's post-release content is included. Any DLC purchased on last-gen consoles, however, is transferable to Last Round on PlayStation 4 and Xbox One.

Team Ninja isn't saying much else about what's new for Last Round, but the ambiguous promise of additional "new content and

features" are also planned for the game. If you're still on the previous generation of consoles, but want to get your hands on the expanded version, the game is planned for release on Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 as well, but will only be available digitally on those platforms. » **Kyle Hilliard**



Hand Of Fate

Stacking the deck with fun

» **Platform**
PlayStation 4
Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Action/RPG

» **Publisher**
Defiant Development

» **Developer**
Defiant Development

» **Release**
2015

Build a deck of equipment, monsters, mysterious encounters, treasure, shops, and secrets – then play in it. This is the setup for Hand of Fate, which mashes the action/RPG genre with a deck-driven dungeon-crawling environment featuring randomized elements. While the mysterious dealer will always include certain cards to make up levels, you are responsible for selecting many of the card-driven adventures you'll have along the way. From traveling peasants to deadly avalanches, the card-driven dungeons generally have a mix of boons and burdens to encounter on the way to each level's boss.

The dealer starts off by inserting appropriate cards into a level's deck and then mixing your own deck with it to compose a sort of game board. You move your character like a boardgame piece over unexplored cards, uncovering secrets, challenges, and enemies. Each card space move consumes one food resource and gives the player some health. Run out of food and you begin to take damage for every space traveled. While you start with base equipment like an old axe and weak armor, you have opportunities to find treasure that allows you to score cards from your equipment deck. You increase in power quickly as your armory grows from level to level.

Many card tiles end with the player battling

foes in traditional action/RPG combat, but others are more classic board game dungeon-crawling fare, such as choosing what to do when faced with a starving peasant or trying to sneak by a couple of sleeping ogres. During these non-combat encounters, you'll see success and failure cards that are then shuffled and placed facedown and then pick one to see the results, ranging from critical success to critical failure – did you grab the

loot cache or did the guards wake up?

If the campaign isn't your thing, an endless mode is available to test your skills and make a play on the leaderboards.

Hand of Fate blends common smash-and-block action/RPG concepts within an original and interesting framework, and we're curious to see if this early access mash-up can draw a successful card when the game is finished next year. » **Daniel Tack**





Toy Soldiers: War Chest

The battle spreads to PlayStation 4

Signal Studios' Toy Soldiers games earned top-seller status on Xbox Live and later on PC. Because Microsoft published them, PlayStation fans never got the chance to experience this unique blend of third-person action and tower defense. But after Microsoft allowed Signal to buy the rights to the franchise, the door has opened for Toy Soldiers to appear on a PlayStation console for the first time.

Previous entries focused on World War I and a G.I. Joe-tinged U.S.-versus-Soviet campaign respectively. At launch, Toy Soldiers: War Chest includes four unique armies, each with their own campaign. The first two shown include returning hero Kaiser Wilhelm's WWI-style army and the all-new Lisa-Frank-meets-My-Little-Pony Star Power forces.

Our first demo features Kaiser's army defending a village surrounded by pine trees and a river, which is all a miniature diorama inside a sophisticated study. Early waves from the Star Power forces include colorful pixies and teddy bears. We placed anti-infantry turrets in a cemetery to thin their ranks. The player demoing the game took control of one of them to shoot the horde and earn bonus money and action points.

After scoring some resources, you can upgrade range, damage, and health of

current units (which will be visually represented for the first time in the series). As new units approach, we invest in alternate weapons. Armored unicorns are weak to arc shots, flying Pegasus units and fairies fall to the flak cannon, and powerful rolling cat piggy banks go down much easier with the help of a drivable tank. The final boss wave is led by a flying cloud castle that drops paint bombs and spawns smaller floating rainbow castles.

The other map on display is a sunny backyard sandbox populated with giant flowers and mushrooms. This Star Power base is defended by bubble guns (the ammo pops on the ground for splash damage), a toy snail slingshot that launches golf balls, and a concentrated sunbeam constructed of several mirrors and a magnifying glass. Eventually, you can summon a Pegasus and soar over the landscape, attacking the forces below. As opposed to controllable hero Kaiser, who wields a traditional machine gun, rifle, and grenades, the spritely Starbright leaves a trail of sparkly destruction in her wake using a glitter hand cannon, heart grenades, and a devastating cupcake wand.

The two armies announced so far couldn't be more different in both looks and play style. We're hoping the other two bring just as much variety when War Chest launches next year. » **Bryan Vore**

» **Platform**
PlayStation 4
Xbox One • PC

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

» **Publisher**
Ubisoft

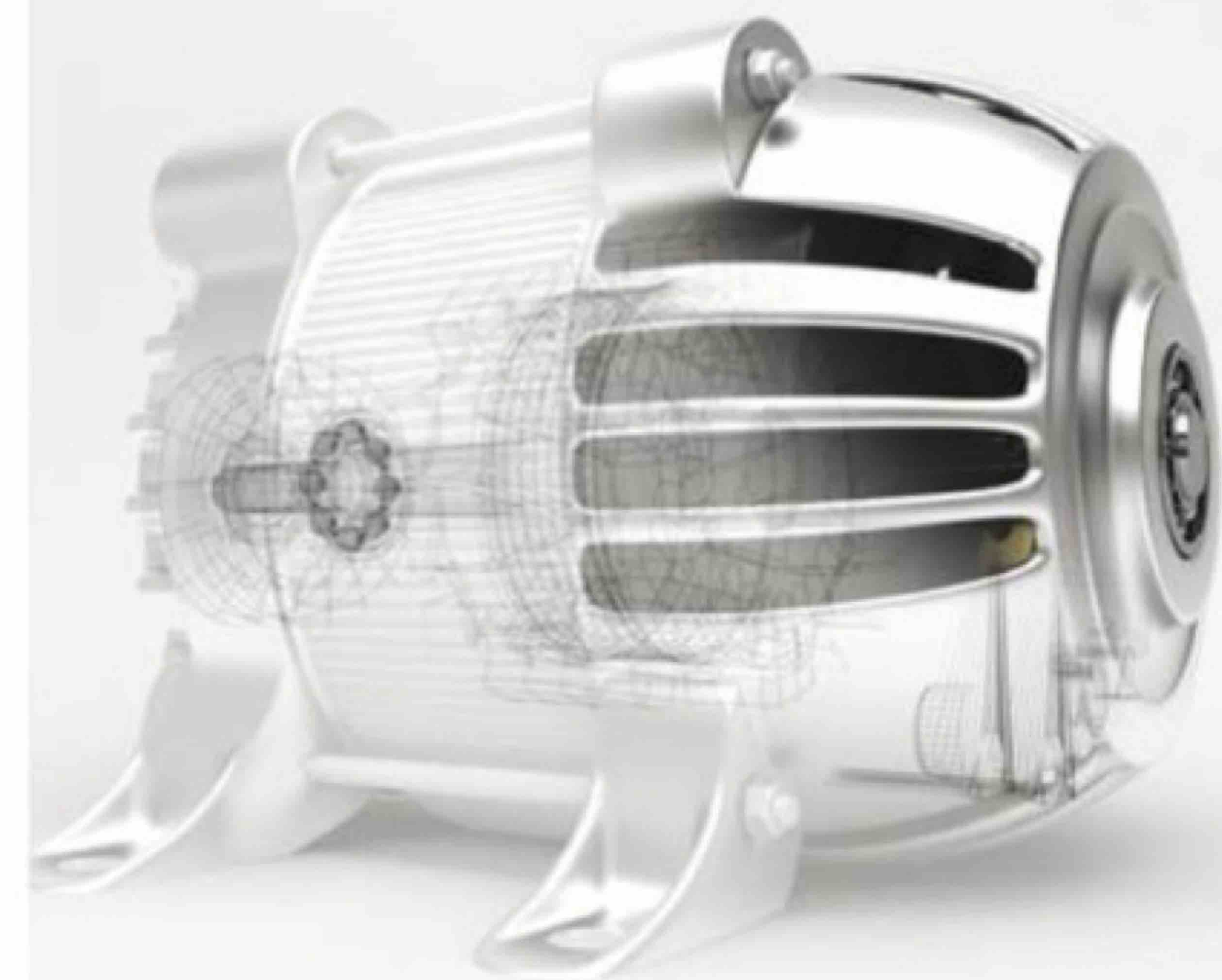
» **Developer**
Signal Studios

» **Release**
Early 2015



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gameinformer **GAME OF THE MONTH**

82 FIFA 15

After years of threatening greatness, FIFA 15 takes a big step forward for the series thanks to quality gameplay advancements. These combine with a deep feature set to deliver an experience that represents the franchise at its best, and which conveys the spectacle of the sport both on and off the pitch. This is the soccer title you've been waiting for.

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	Purple engram, blue item.

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



Lionheart

TACTICS

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Middle-earth: Shadow Of Mordor

Emergent action evolves

8.25

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept

Set out across the land of shadow on a mission of revenge, and cut a bloody swath through Sauron's army

» Graphics

The variety of enemy character models is the standout visual feature, but the environments, weather effects, and animation are all outstanding

» Sound

The score is at its best in its most reserved moments, including several memorable melodies. The voice work sounds like it's drawn out of Peter Jackson's deleted scenes, and showcases some sophisticated emotional range for such a violent tale

» Playability

A multi-layered set of in-game upgrade systems all interact with one another, and the complex controls take hours to master – not recommended for beginners

» Entertainment

A challenging and fascinating adventure in emergent gameplay, but not without growing pains

» Replay Value

Moderate

Style 1-Player Action Publisher Warner Bros. Interactive Developer Monolith Productions Release September 30 Rating M

Open world games often struggle to find balance between two extremes – the ability to craft a custom experience, and a linear progression that provides satisfying narrative. *Shadow of Mordor* explores a unique solution to the dilemma, offering an unfolding story that reacts to the player's choices. It's a fascinating experiment in emergent action on a grand scale, but the focus on those emergent elements can lead to frustration in the early game, and too much repetition later on.

Shadow of Mordor earns its Mature rating in the first few minutes, with a horrific but gripping scene that fuels the many hours of gameplay that lie ahead. The ranger Talion is united in death with a mysterious and ancient wraith, and their combined powers and lust for vengeance are enough to pose a threat to Sauron's emerging armies during the years between *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. The storytelling is one-note (revenge!), and it's delivered through melodramatic dialogue that is a precise match to Tolkien's declamatory style.

The commitment to Tolkien lore is admirable and extensive. Both the main story and side quests are filled with allusions to the broader fiction, and it's wonderful to see Monolith dig so deeply into the established lore. Whether by collecting artifacts from the lost ages of Middle-earth, or sneaking through the dreaded fortress of Durthang, a sense of place and history pervades the journey. Mordor's craggy peaks and grassy plains are filled with secrets to uncover,

many of which provide a deeper understanding of Talion or the wraith, and their connection to the classic story. Even with the close ties to the characters and events of Tolkien, *Shadow of Mordor* is tonally dissonant from its source material. Unlike that ultimately optimistic set of tales, this revenge-fueled ride is a bleak take on the universe. Many may be disturbed by the dark and oppressive imagery on display.

Shadow of Mordor's most fascinating feature is its nemesis system, in which many missions and conflicts arise from earlier combats and deaths. An army of named Uruk soldiers patrols beyond the Black Gate, each one vying to rise through the ranks and grasp greater power. Die in battle, and your slayer may be promoted and recall that early battle upon your next meeting. Horribly burn a foe and let him escape, and he screams for a rematch if he catches sight of you again. Dominate a puppet and turn him to your cause, and opportunities arise to move him up to warchief status. Many of these encounters happen naturally as you explore, but an equal number show up as new missions on the map. The dynamic makes for a remarkably engaging and custom experience. However, the system can get carried away into overdrive, with multiple named enemies converging on one location in a single mission, making it easy to get into fights that you are ill-equipped to understand or complete.

If the metagame is all about the ever-shifting conflicts of Mordor's war machine, the gears that turn that machine are the constant battles Talion faces along the way. Whether in stealth,

at range with his elven bow, or in furious melee, the fights are challenging and engaging. Combat carries a visceral punch, and is perversely satisfying with its brutal decapitations and revenge-fueled executions. Rhythmic inputs allow for a surprising array of moves, and button mashing is a sure recipe for failure. Mastering the system demands attention to all your enemies, changing up your maneuvers, and recognizing moments for a strategic retreat.

The melees are impressive and dangerous, but the power of combat's punch is blunted by repetition. Many open world games (including chief inspirations *Batman: Arkham City* and *Assassin's Creed*) offer palate-cleanser side content that changes up the player's focus. In *Shadow of Mordor*, whether completing story missions or side missions, the focus is all killing all the time. By the end of the lengthy campaign, the battles don't carry the same thrill.

Mordor's strongholds and open fields often play host to massive and often overwhelming conflicts. It's not unusual to end up in a fight with dozens of foes at once, and blaring alarms bring more all the time without careful work to contain the disaster. Named enemies each have an array of weaknesses and immunities, and keeping them straight in the midst of a fight is difficult. Battles can stretch for many minutes, and just a few mistakes lead to a grisly end. Later, things get even more confusing as you recruit your own soldiers, but the game does little to distinguish friend from foe. Players who refuse to engage with the tactical option of taking out bodyguards first and targeting enemy weaknesses are likely to find themselves overwhelmed. Even when doing everything right, moments of genuine frustration threaten to halt the fun.

I have nothing but praise for Talion's progression and upgrade mechanics. New powers offer meaningful and game-changing abilities that unlock gradually throughout the campaign. Confront tougher enemies, and you're rewarded with better runes to improve your weapons. Perhaps most importantly, all activities contribute to progression in some way, providing incentive for exploration.

The final hour of Monolith's Middle-earth adventure falls flat, as the story falteringly tries to pull together a number of disparate threads, and the mostly triumphant nemesis system fails to stick the landing. Even with these and other features that rubbed me the wrong way, I can't help but cheer for Monolith's ambition. *Shadow of Mordor* is an unabashedly challenging and complex experience, sometimes at the expense of accessibility. I'm thrilled that we've got a new franchise in the fertile ground of Tolkien's fiction. Add in a borderline revolutionary approach to mission design, and this is a firm foundation for a stellar new series. » **Matt Miller**

This review pertains to the PS4 and PC versions. The game is also available on Xbox One on September 30, and substantially different PS3 and Xbox 360 versions will release on November 18





Alien: Isolation

A deadly game of hide and seek

Style 1-Player Action Publisher Sega Developer The Creative Assembly Release October 7 Rating M

7.75

PS4 • Xbox One
PS3 • 360 • PC

» Concept

Escape a doomed space station while (hopefully) staying one step ahead of a towering, deadly xenomorph

» Graphics

The Creative Assembly nailed the look of the Alien universe, but the lighting and shadows are sometimes inconsistent or altogether nonexistent. Wooden character animations cause a lot of the attempted drama to fall flat

» Sound

Music and sound effects from the film series are used to great effect. The voice acting and dialogue are less impressive

» Playability

Players need lots of patience for sneaking through environments, peeking at enemies from behind cover, and coping with some frustrating checkpoints

» Entertainment

This is the closest a game has come to capturing the promise of the Alien franchise, even if its story doesn't add much to the lore

» Replay Value

Moderately Low

Alien fans are as unapologetic for their love of the films as they are for their disdain of games that fail to live up to the potential of the IP. While most Alien games take the James Cameron “shoot everything that moves” approach to the iconic sci-fi horror series, The Creative Assembly instead focuses on the original film’s claustrophobic intensity and the feeling of being relentlessly stalked by a far superior predator. The result is a game you must learn and play the way it wants you to, but the cat-and-mouse chases provide an experience that’s finally worthy of the Alien moniker.

Players take on the role of Amanda Ripley, whose desire to learn the fate of her missing mother brings her to a space station that has descended into chaos thanks to the appearance of a single, deadly xenomorph. Ripley must explore, fight, and – more often than not – run and hide to survive and find a way off the *Sevastopol*, while simultaneously trying to ensure that her extraterrestrial hunter doesn’t reach civilization. If that sounds familiar, most of *Isolation*’s plot points and twists will, as the script all too often parallels memorable scenes from the films. I had fun reliving these iconic moments, but would’ve preferred some more novel surprises along the way. Amanda exhibits little growth or personality, other than concern for her fellow humans and a desire to not die gruesomely, which – spoiler! – is going to happen to you all the time.

Isolation’s gameplay is far more engaging than the story, albeit in its own methodical and unforgiving way. Your encounters with the xenomorph are impossibly lopsided, as the vicious extraterrestrial is leagues faster than you, impervious to damage, and kills with a single hit. As such, caution is paramount; whereas many games try to accommodate as

many styles of play as possible, your options in *Isolation* are to be quiet and smart or dead. The occasional mad sprint to your objective may be a viable choice, but most of your time is spent under desks, in lockers, and peeking over railings. While so much hiding might sound boring, the constant threat of your unseen predator keeps you engrossed in the action, and every narrow escape and successful distraction instills a genuine sense of accomplishment. You unlock a variety of craftable items to help you in this regard, and while these new gadgets are empowering, they’re not foolproof. No matter how safe you are, you’ll still need patience for trial-and-error gameplay to fully enjoy the game.

When you’re not running from the alien, you have two more enemy types to deal with. Armed human survivors will shoot you on sight, and are best avoided when possible (or used as a tasty diversion if the alien is lurking nearby). Worker Joes, on the other hand, are cheap synthetic androids that require a jolt from a stun baton or EMP before they can be taken down, and aren’t on the alien’s menu. Each enemy type sports its own traits and A.I. behaviors, and figuring them out and adapting your tactics keeps the action fresh. Creative Assembly does a good job of mixing up the enemies and adding new wrinkles throughout the game, though on the whole the 25-hour campaign still feels too long. Most areas require sneaking through a maze of long, winding corridors and air ducts, only to trigger an objective and then make the long trek back. Exploring a new level is exciting the first time, but you return to most areas multiple times. By the end of the game Ripley has crisscrossed the station so many times she could probably draw the blueprints from memory, despite the fact that most of the

areas share the same sterile, “what-the-hell-happened-here” aesthetic.

While players must contend with an unhelpful map system and some annoying quick-time event sequences, the biggest source of frustration comes from the checkpoint system, which requires players to manually save at designated stations. While this structure necessitates even more backtracking, reaching a save station always provides a much-needed sense of relief, and I grew to appreciate the old-school mechanic. That said, the save system elicited more than a few curses. Losing a bunch of progress when the xenomorph pops out of nowhere and kills you with a single, unforeseen tail stab isn’t scary, just frustrating.

Despite the setting and source material, very little in *Alien: Isolation* is scary. Tense, certainly, and I jumped at more than a few surprise xenomorph encounters, but the environments and action fail to instill the sense of dread that the movies or other horror games have inflicted on fans. Despite taking more than its share of inspiration from the Alien series, I found *Dead Space* to be scarier than *Isolation*, even if playing through the genuine article is far more appealing.

Unlike its titular organism, *Alien: Isolation* is decidedly imperfect. The story falls flat, your objectives lack a sense of accomplishment, and the campaign drags on longer than it should. When the gameplay is at its best, however, *Isolation* delivers the thrill of being in the Alien universe, something fans like me have waited a long time to properly experience.

» Jeff Marchiafava

This review pertains to the PlayStation 4 and Xbox One versions. The game is also available on PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, and PC



FIFA 15

Sitting at the top of the table

9.25

PS4 • Xbox One
PS3 • 360 • PC

» Concept

An impressive leap in gameplay augments the already-full feature set

» Graphics

From the look of the players and the pitch to the overall presentation package, it's all top notch

» Sound

The timing and overall context of the commentary has improved from last year. The crowd's roar is mighty

» Playability

The controls (which have thankfully remained unchanged in the last few years) are in tight concert with the resultant gameplay

» Entertainment

The outstanding gameplay makes any mode a blast to play, and FIFA 15 is the best entry in the franchise

» Replay Value

High

gameinformer
OF THE MONTH

gameinformer
GOLD

Style 1 to 4-Player Sports (22-Player Online) **Publisher** EA Sports
Developer EA Canada **Release** September 23 **Rating** E

The FIFA series has long reveled in its own pomp and circumstance. Awash in league licenses and Ultimate Team microtransaction money, its self-belief was arguably greater than its on-the-pitch accomplishments. That being said, EA Canada deserves recognition for continually working on the series, adding to an ever-growing and vital list of game modes and chipping away at its gameplay to-do list. FIFA 15 is the big pay-off you've been waiting for. It isn't perfect, but it's a quality title that finally aligns many of EA's ambitions with firm results. Make no mistake – this is a golazo.

The title's crown jewel is its excellent gameplay. Players' possession of the ball feels a lot less pre-determined than in previous years. This goes well with the refined dribbling and defensive tackling, presenting a coordinated package that feels more organic and real, like you're playing by your own whims and not negotiating imposed constraints. Shirking off a challenge and retaining possession, or conversely winning the ball after a tackle and starting the counter attack happens fluidly. A foot race between two players for a free ball feels like a real contest, with physicality and unexpected ball baubles coming into play. Finally, there is freedom in FIFA.

The ball behaves differently, which is no small matter, since it also produces a greater variety of goals. Realistic deflections change the complexion of play instantly, and often players are quick to react, sticking a leg or a hand (for keepers) out to get a piece of the ball. That being said, I'd still like to see A.I. players react more aggressively when you call them in defensive support, as well as have more awareness of their own teammates so there's less bunching and bumbling.

The improved gameplay is FIFA 15's most notable distinction. Conversely, the career mode has seen only small organizational improvements. The ability to set instructions

for individual players (like telling a back to always overlap his runs) is great, but in general the career mode hasn't changed enough. Fatigue still isn't a factor (and there's no reserve system), international management has stagnated, and while more players are uncovered by your scouts, the transfer network still goes inexplicably dark at times. For a game that has such strong online modes, the lack of an online franchise mode is also surprising.

A revamped career mode is preferable, but there is so much cumulative meat in the modes that you have plenty of flavors to feast on. The addition of friendly seasons (where you can compete against a friend to see who wins a 10-match mini season) to both the Ultimate Team and Seasons modes adds more riches. Tournaments are back, and Pro Clubs gets a boost with more effective A.I. teammates. Ultimate Team also adds loan players and the ability to prep speculative dream teams from the transfer market, but I'd like them to adopt the unified deck structure like Madden.

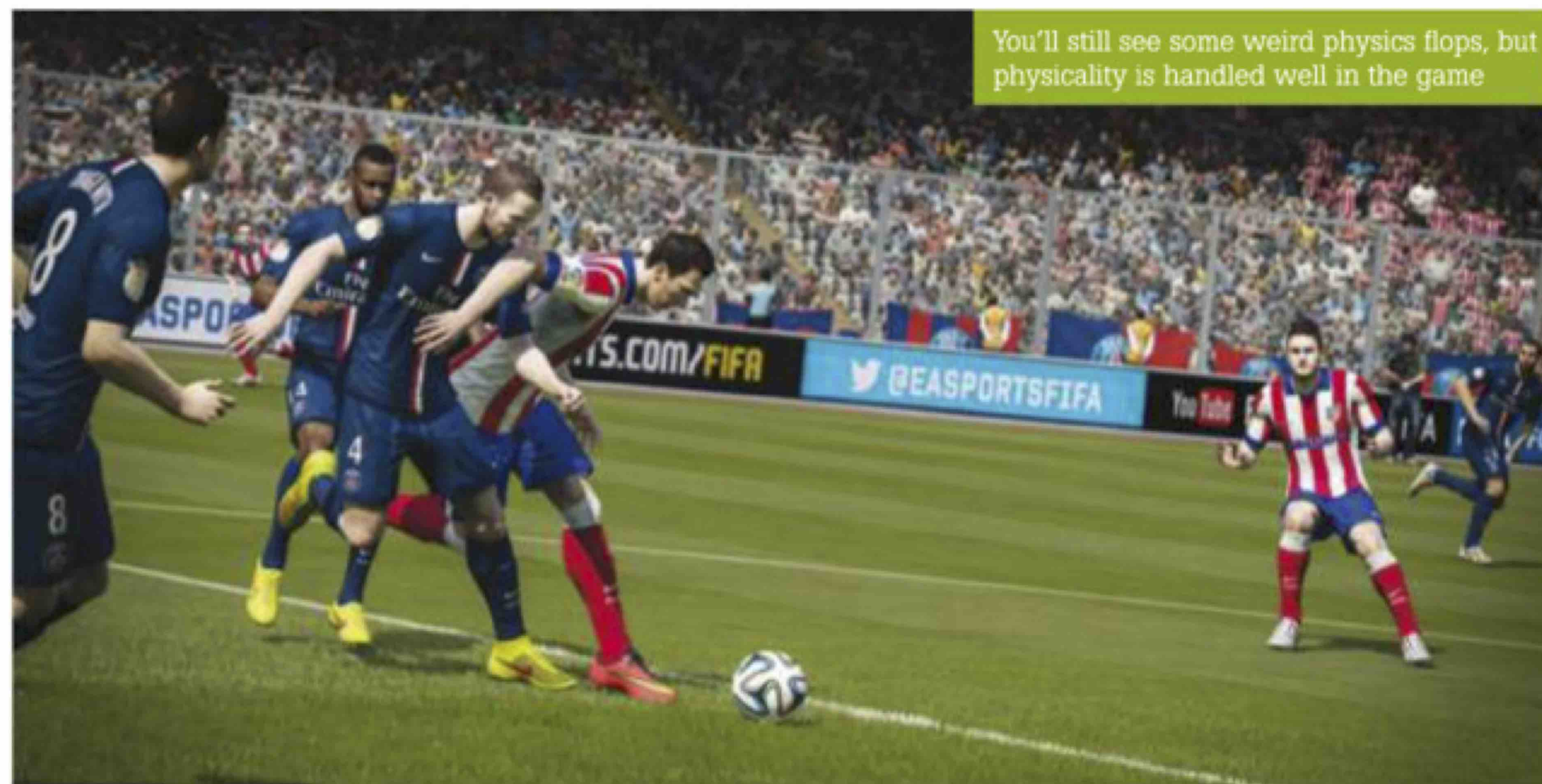
This bounty is wrapped in stirring TV-style

presentation that makes even the pause screen attractive. The commentary announces the sides' lineups, replays past goals, delivers more timely analysis, and even goes back to comments interrupted by the action. The new player emotion feature is surprisingly unremarkable, but I frankly don't care when the overall package is otherwise this good.

The FIFA franchise has gone from a game that was huge because of the de facto effect of its numerous licenses to a title that stands tall thanks to its own abilities. FIFA 15 takes the series into a whole other level with gameplay that betters the surmounting hype that threatened to engulf it. Playing it makes me believe I can do just about anything with the ball at my feet, and this self-assurance is powerful. If you have the desire, FIFA 15 meets the challenge. It does not disappoint. » **Matthew Kato**

This review is based on the PlayStation 4 and Xbox One versions. FIFA 15 is also available on PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, Wii, Vita, 3DS, and PC. The Wii, Vita, and 3DS versions are substantially different

You'll still see some weird physics flops, but physicality is handled well in the game



Ultimate Team On Xbox

The Xbox One and 360 editions of the game include more exclusive Legends players for Ultimate Team, including Roberto Carlos, Bobby Moore, and Alan Shearer.

NHL 15

Game misconduct for slashing



Style 1 or 2-Player Sports (2-Player Online) Publisher EA Sports Developer EA Canada Release September 9 Rating E10+

During the transition to the PS3/360 from the prior generation, EA Sports made a gross miscalculation in stripping many long-established modes from the new versions of its games. This put off lifelong fans who expected more – or at least equal – value on their new systems. Madden took years to recover from this gaffe, and moving into the PS4/Xbox One era EA assured us it wouldn't make the same mistake twice. NHL 15 proves that is a bald-faced lie.

Don't let the allure of authentic arenas and improved NBC-branded commentary fool you – NHL 15 is a colossal disappointment. Missing modes like the six-on-six EASHL, GM Connected, and Live the Life, NHL 15 starts the game down a man. When you add the fact that existing modes like Be a Pro and Be a GM have been fundamentally stripped of essential features, it's downright insulting to hockey fans everywhere.

At first glance, Be a GM looks like a fresh new experience thanks to its new menus. Spend a few hours with the mode and, like an undisciplined hockey club, it slowly starts to reveal its flaws. The RPG-style upgrade system for your GM is gone, as is the ability to play games with your AHL franchise. You can scout for prospects during the season, but EA inexplicably removed the ability to control the fate of your franchise in the draft. Why you would have one without the other is mystifying. The mode also lacks the ability to start with a fantasy draft.

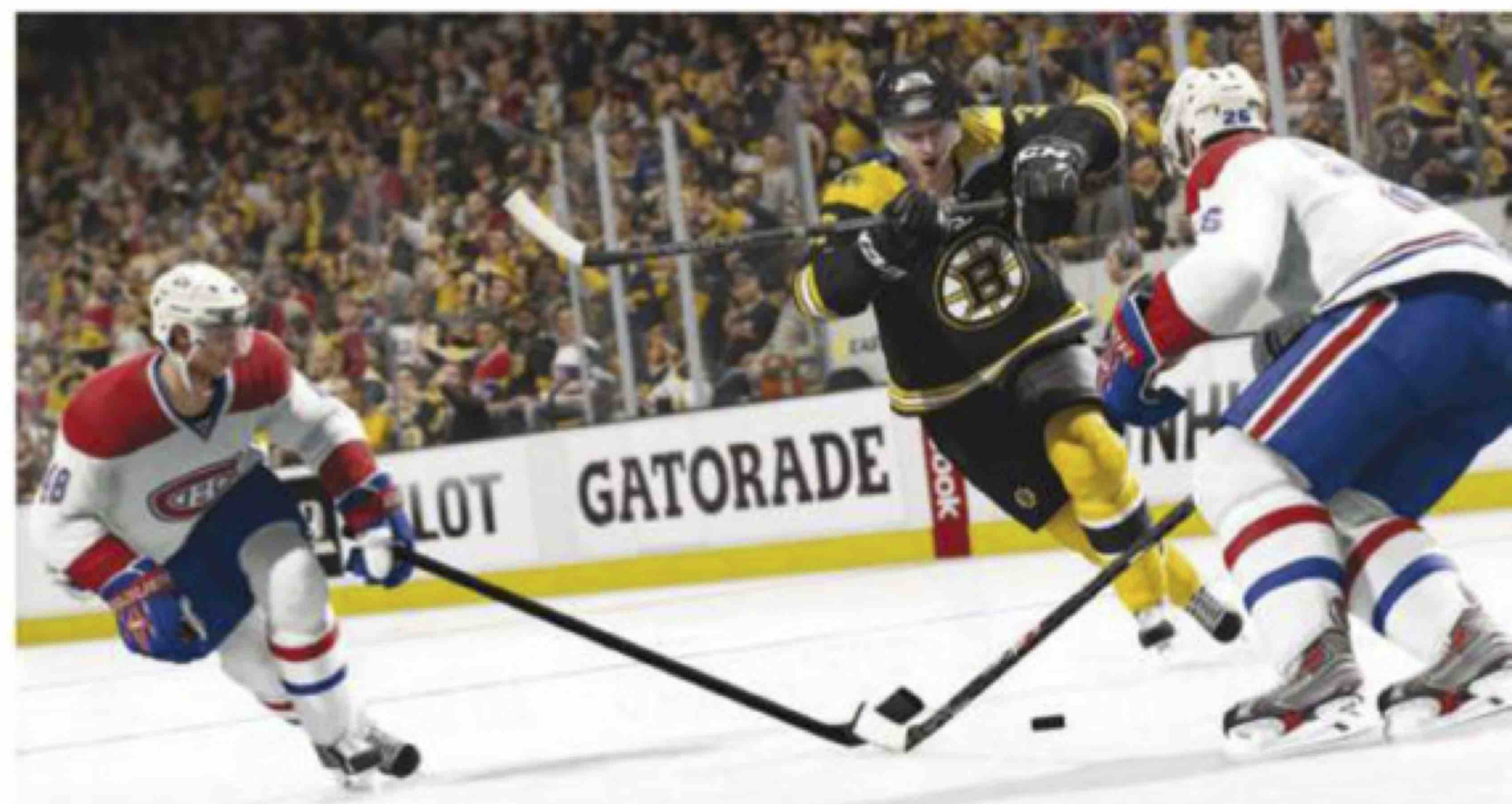
Be a Pro slides into the boards headfirst as well. EA removed the rookie showcase that determined your draft position, deleted the minor leagues from the equation altogether, and doesn't even bother to offer a critique or

grade of your performance during games. You can't even sim to the next shift, which means you get to sit and stew in the penalty box if you draw a five minute major for fighting.

EA says it plans to add some of these missing features, like five-on-five online teamplay (no human-controlled goalies), the GM draft, and Be a Pro coach grades in the next few months. Even with their inclusion down the line, NHL 15 still faces an insurmountable deficit.

I wish I could say things get better when you take the ice. For the transition to the new consoles, EA touted its brand-new puck physics and multi-player collisions. These small advancements are welcome – I especially think the puck physics change the way you play around the net – but they do little to make up for the deficiencies found everywhere else on the ice. Defensive controls like stick lifts and poke checks have been severely marginalized against A.I. opponents, which means your best bet to play sound defense is patrol passing lanes in the middle of the ice instead of actively engaging puck carriers. These controls work better against human opponents online. Even if you play sound defense, though, your sieve goalies will let you down by giving up bad angle goals. I rarely had a goalie with a save percentage over .800 in offline play, even if they faced a low number of shots from low percentage areas.

The slightly modified skill stick still gives you the opportunity to dazzle crowds and breeze past defenders with a few new moves, but don't expect much support from your A.I. linemates. Skating with these disinterested pylons is like playing with a team full of Dany Heatleys, who are more than willing to get into scoring position but offer no support along the boards,



rarely recognize when it's time to break out of the defensive end, and struggle to defend the backside from cross-ice passes that lead to one-timers.

Some serious bugs also plague the on-ice experience. During my time with the game, one backhand that sailed over the net was counted as a goal, a referee blew a shootout dead while I was in mid-shot, and I witnessed a puck gravitate through the net to a defender's stick (so much for realistic puck physics).

With the startling amount of missing content, kneecapped modes, and uneven gameplay in NHL 15, either EA Sports isn't giving EA Canada the same level of resources as its other sports franchises or the development team is woefully incapable of negotiating a console transition. If the publisher doesn't care to put a winning effort into its NHL series, hockey fans have no reason to jump over the boards and buy the game. » **Matt Bertz**

5.5

PS4 • Xbox One

» Concept

An ugly first step into new-generation consoles, complete with missing modes and unbalanced gameplay

» Graphics

The authentic arenas, varied crowds, and improved lighting look great, but the player facial scans still need work

» Sound

Commentators Doc Emrick, Eddie Olczyk, and Ray Ferraro inject some much-needed new blood into the broadcast

» Playability

Perfed defensive controls, poor A.I. support, and sieve goalies keep this game from Stanley Cup contention

» Entertainment

Hockey fans are better served playing the old-gen versions of the game

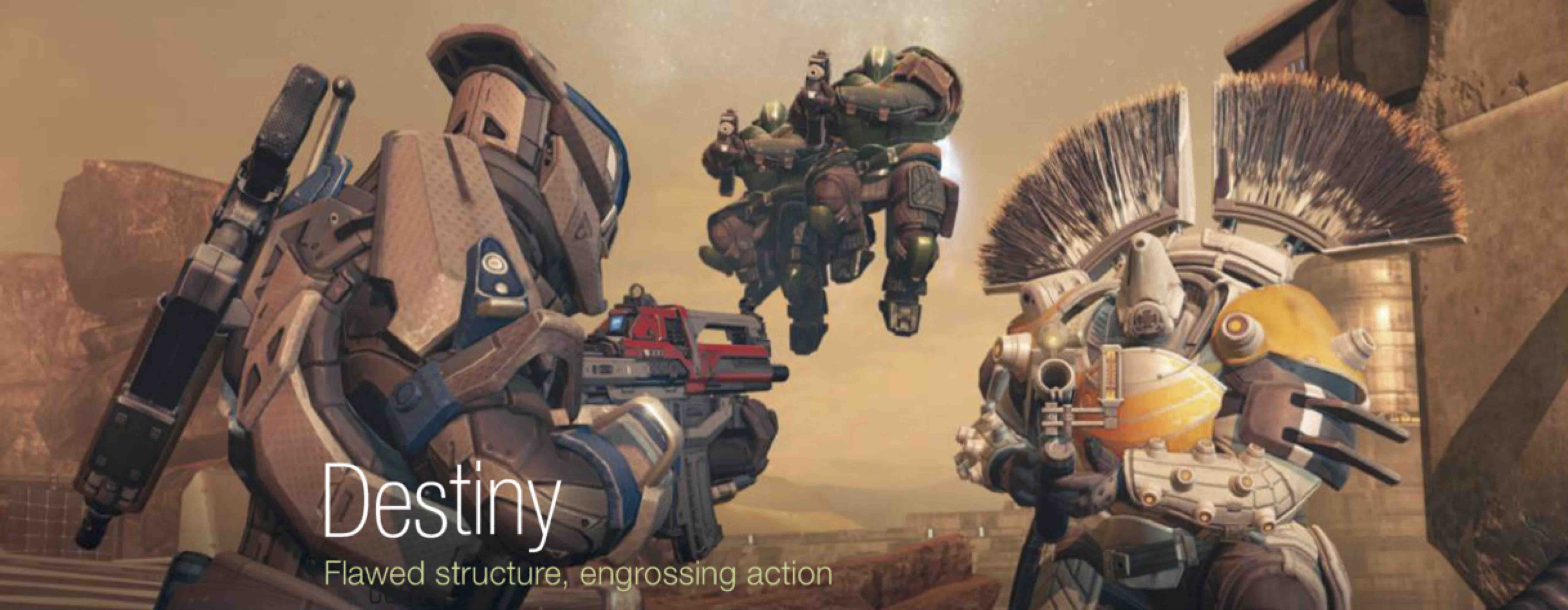
» Replay Value

Low

The Last-Gen Difference » 7

PS3 • 360

Unlike the PS4 and Xbox One versions, the last-gen NHL 15 is feature-complete, and the old A.I. is better than the new-gen counterparts when it comes to supporting puck handlers around the boards and initiating breakouts. Plus, it features the new broadcast commentary and player collision physics. That said, it doesn't all fit together. While playing in the Memorial Cup, Doc Emrick referred to it as the Stanley Cup, and talked about my team advancing to the next round while I was hoisting the cup in celebration.



Destiny

Flawed structure, engrossing action

8.75

gameformer
SILVER

Style 1 to 12-Player Online Shooter Publisher Activision Developer Bungie Release September 9 Rating T

PS4 • Xbox One
PS3 • 360

» Concept

Explore the solar system in an amalgam of shooting, RPG leveling, and MMO social features

» Graphics

Breathtaking science fiction art is bulwarked by powerful technical expertise

» Sound

The music is memorable and exciting in a way that few game soundtracks manage

» Playability

Precise controls and a steady difficulty curve are friendly to both veteran and fledgling guardians

» Entertainment

Even with several missed opportunities, Destiny is enormously fun, and only gets more engaging as you play

» Replay Value

Moderately High

Great expectations have followed Destiny since its announcement. As the latest brainchild from the Halo creators at Bungie, the game has garnered a level of anticipation only exceeded by the massive hype machine that declares its not-to-be-missed potential. Bungie's new game is not as gigantic or revolutionary as that hype may have led some to believe. In fact, it has several features that feel like missteps or problems. But that doesn't change the fact that the more I play it, the more I love it.

A benevolent alien intelligence arrives on Earth to gift humanity with its wisdom, and leads us into an unprecedented period of expansion and advancement. When our benefactor's ancient enemy arrives, humanity is beaten back to near extinction. Hundreds of years later, you stand as a guardian of humanity, finally ready to push back against the tide of darkness. Destiny has the seeds of a thoughtfully imagined universe, characterized by a humanistic and idealized vision of mankind's heroism and potential. The universe is supported by gorgeous art and one of the best soundtracks in years. Unfortunately, the story set within that backdrop is anemic. With little to no character development, a disconnected plot thread about alien attackers, and uneven narrative pacing, it seems that many of the fundamental staples of storytelling have been abandoned in the name of continuous action and discrete, standalone missions. Encyclopedic grimoire entries unlock with a modicum of additional story explanation, but the odd decision to include those only on the game's website means few will ever see these tidbits.

Thankfully, the story-sparse missions are a blast, offering a mix of activities for solo, cooperative, and competitive play. Destiny excels at providing activities for different moods and moments, from short planetary patrols to lengthy three-person instanced dungeons. These tasks often take you to interesting corners of the game world, but it's too bad that so many missions start in the same places, leading to a needless sense of repetition. That sense of repetition extends to mission objectives, which too often fall back on the same setup of your A.I. companion needing time to hack something while you

fight off attackers; thankfully, the layouts and enemies make the battles feel distinct.

Destiny's structure is particularly well suited to team play. Solo play is an ideal choice for players looking for a challenge, but any given mode is more fun (and easier) with a friend or two at your side. The potential for seamless flow between missions is halted by the regular need to return home to a central social hub to receive mission awards and gear up. That wouldn't be so bad, except that Destiny suffers from lengthy load times that stunt the momentum of a session. Bungie also needs to find more solutions to let players of differing levels play together; as it is, a mismatched team-up is doomed to either be too easy for one or too hard for another.

Intense, high-octane battles are Bungie's forte, and Destiny maintains the reputation. Each of several gun types feels balanced and rewarding, and the special powers, grenades, and melee attacks unique to each class are exciting to acquire and a joy to perfect. Enemy combatants often rely on numbers and damage potential over complex A.I. routines; it's fun to mow through dozens of foes, but enemies rarely provide a strategically engaging matching of wits. Characters are highly mobile thanks to the inclusion of class-specific movement modes, and the importance of understanding the aerial game is key to mastering the harder fights. In between battles, Bungie's solution to the MMO "mount" is a floating speeder bike that's more fun than it has any right to be, even if it is a blatant copy (sound effects and all) of the classic *Star Wars* vehicle.

The competitive offering includes fewer customization options than some contemporary shooters, but the fierce PvP battles that unfold in the few available modes are uniformly excellent. Double jumps and similar movement modes provide a verticality to the maps that adds tension and tactical depth. Weapon skill and sharp reflexes undoubtedly win the day, but the inclusion of supers ensures that even beginning players get brief moments of victory on the battlefield. None of the initial batch of maps stand out, but all include opportunities for compelling exchanges, from interesting sniping spots to hidden alcoves from which to ambush unsuspecting foes. Matchmaking is slow, but my matches have offered mostly well-balanced teams even in the early days

after launch. Unlike in the cooperative game, characters of different levels are able to play well together, but guardians who have not yet unlocked at least their core powers are at a notable disadvantage.

Character progression is shared across competitive and solo/cooperative play, lending a genuine sense of ownership over your guardian. The sense of investment is increased through the opportunity to level multiple subclasses and improve weapons with their use. Loot isn't plentiful, but it's often meaningful, so you're making interesting choices about which gun to equip rather than constantly clearing out dozens of useless objects. The three classes are more similar than they are different, but each has a few exciting ways to stand out, from the hunter's unbearably cool bladedancer attacks to the warlock's devastating nova bomb. Your guardian's options only become more flexible as levels rise, creating ample opportunities to tweak a build to your specifications.

The philosophy of depth over time extends to the rest of the game; Destiny reveals its complexity only after many hours. Unlike in many games, hitting level cap and completing the story is more of a mid-game marker. Farming reputation, using gear to level beyond the cap, and completing progression for each of your subclasses can be a lot of fun, but it won't appeal to gamers who hate grinding. For those that enjoy the process, it's exciting to uncover higher level versions of old missions and track down the little boosts and tricks, such as the ability to repower teammates' super abilities through careful timing of your deployments.

Like the MMOs from which Destiny draws inspiration, it's challenging to draw a line in the sand about what the game is or will be. Already, Bungie has plans in the works to expand the game with additional story content, raids, and regular new variations on competitive play. However, a game can't be judged for what it might be in the future. Even with its stumbles, the initial release of Destiny is a colossal achievement in interactive design, integrating a number of differing genre elements into a smart and unified whole. Bungie's latest futuristic opus is one of the first true event games of this new generation, and while it still has room to grow, it's worth your attention right out of the gate.

» Matt Miller



Disney Infinity: Marvel Super Heroes

Artists welcome, heroes stay away

Style 1 or 2-Player Action (4-Player Online) **Publisher** Disney Interactive Studios
Developer Avalanche Software **Release** September 23 **Rating** E10+

Disney Infinity's leap into the Marvel universe is bafflingly bad – a gut-punch of a sequel stripped of most of the magic, wonder, and imagination that made the play sets from the first Infinity game enjoyable for children and adults alike. The adventures offered for The Avengers, Guardians of the Galaxy, and Spider-Man rank among the worst superhero games of recent memory, pushing players to complete mundane tasks like “fetch a battery” or “activate this device” over and over again.

The initial Disney Infinity game shipped with individual play sets for Monsters University, The Incredibles, and Pirates of the Caribbean – all offering about three to six hours of adventuring. Marvel Super Heroes only offers one play set for The Avengers, an experience that is roughly the same length, plus two Power Discs that unlock a fun tower defense map and a strange isometric mini-quest.

While offering far less content than its predecessor out of the box, the action figures that come packaged with it all work with The Avengers play set, meaning you don't have to purchase an additional figure to play cooperatively with a friend.

The Avengers adventure gets off to a roaring start through a great comedic story sequence. This introduction establishes a fun, light tone for the game, and implants the desire to see more narrative moments. Sadly, they never come. The humor dies off.

Once the action kicks in, the game adopts a new identity – that of repetition. From the start of play to its final moments, this adventure becomes one-tracked, pushing the players to battle ice giants or smash icicles ad nauseam. Little effort is made to differentiate the conflicts, and the time players put in is not rewarded well – not with story, not with interesting unlockables, and not even with the thrill

of playing as one of Earth's Mightiest Heroes.

The play sets for Spider-Man and Guardians of the Galaxy (both sold separately) are equally as troubled and void of fun.

All of these disappointing play sets funnel directly into the Toy Box, the mode that allows players to build their own worlds and games. The Toy Box is this title's saving grace.

Avalanche has loaded this mode up with an excellent (and vast) selection of Marvel-themed items, including Avengers Tower, the Infinity Gauntlet, and shawarma (yes, you read that correctly). New Disney content is also available in great abundance.

The Toy Box functionality remains intuitive and quick, offering new options and tricks for seasoned builders, including a new mode designed for the creation of interiors. Up to 10 created areas can be linked together to make a larger play experience.

Avalanche doesn't make it easy to unlock the building pieces. There's a lot of fun stuff to play, but all too often there's a hoop that must be jumped through (often pushing you to play a set). Some of these restrictions hark back to the first game, but at least then I had a good time journeying through that game's sets.

Disney Infinity: Marvel Super Heroes is tale of two games: One that crushes the dreams of people hoping to wear spandex or a cape, and another that gives artists and creators more power. Stay away if your hopes lie with finally playing a great Avengers or Guardians of the Galaxy game. Come play if your ambitions lie mostly with building worlds. Even then, though, heed this warning: You need to play three bad superhero games extensively to round out your building options. » **Andrew Reiner**

6.5

PS4 • Xbox One
Wii U • PS3 • 360

» Concept

The Avengers, Guardians of the Galaxy, and Spider-Man star in three miserable adventures. Toy Box continues to grow in size and scope

» Graphics

All of the items – whether Marvel or Disney-branded – look like they are from the same toy set. The character animations (especially The Hulk's) look fantastic

» Sound

I never want to hear that Disney announcer again. He repeats the same lines in all three play sets. Most of the music is cringe-worthy, including loud dubstep in Spider-Man

» Playability

The characters control well, but the decision to limit moves before leveling up creates an odd dynamic when new figures are placed on the portal late in the game

» Entertainment

None of the play sets deliver thrills, but the Toy Box is once again great fun for aspiring artists or a group of people looking to mess around

» Replay Value

High



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Wasteland 2

The triumphant heir to the PC RPG – 26 years later

8.75

PC

» **Concept**

Command a group of rag-tag rangers as you try to make a difference in a post-apocalyptic, ravaged land

» **Graphics**

While they're nothing special in today's PC world, the visuals feature a variety of environments

» **Sound**

All of the gun jams, pipe bombs, and even the yelling of a goat that sounds like a human do their part in bringing life to the grim setting infused with dark humor

» **Playability**

Fans of tactical RPGs will find the systems immediately understandable and highly accessible. While the game does its best to facilitate players, there's still some trial and error

» **Entertainment**

The incredibly dark but somehow humorous trek through the wastelands delivers, with an excellent combat system, interesting challenges, and compelling puzzles

» **Replay Value**

Very High

gameinformer
SILVER

Style 1-Player Role-Playing Publisher InXile Entertainment Developer InXile Entertainment Release September 19 Rating M

Many years after Interplay's classic PC RPGs, InXile Entertainment and Brian Fargo have brought the genre back to the spotlight after decades "in exile" with the help of the Kickstarter model. Prepare to enter the grim post-apocalyptic world of Wasteland 2, where bullets are scarce and mercy is even scarcer. If you're a fan of Fallout 1 and 2, this game is for you.

Wasteland 2 is a direct sequel to the original title, but don't worry if you haven't played the 1988 Apple II game – you won't need to know anything going in, as the story immediately immerses you in the desolate wasteland of a world destroyed. You play as a group of Desert Rangers, doing your small part to help assist those in need and restore some semblance of civilization in an alternate history where a nuclear holocaust has turned the world into a radioactive hell. Supplies are limited and social niceties are absent.

Wasteland 2 tasks you with creating four characters and then sets you loose into the world armed with only a handful of ammunition and your brain. Your job is to craft a perfect team with all the abilities you'll need in the field, but you simply can't by design. You aren't awarded enough upgrade points to even come close to covering all your bases, so during character creation you're making permanent decisions long before your first battle or conversation. Some excellent character templates are available that follow long-standing RPG archetypes, but I recommend making your own team, perhaps after playing an hour or two with the premade options.

In classic RPG fashion, you divide skill points between core attributes like health, speed, and weapon skills, plus soft skills to persuade or intimidate NPCs, crack safes, heal damage, bust down doors, and trade with the denizens of the wastes. You won't have enough points to go around, so creating specialists that are experts in certain areas is the way to go. After trying a jack-of-all trades build at first, I rerolled and made a crew of professionals that couldn't

interact with every door or person I ran into, but were excellent at the encounters they were designed to handle. This also makes your team far more effective in combat. Avoid picking multiple characters with the same weapons specialization, as supplies of ammo are limited and you'll want some melee backup in the form of blunt weapons or fists. Guns can jam in combat, costing you precious turns, and reloading will also eat up your action points. Getting close can be tough sometimes, but it's good to have a sturdy bat or board with nails in it that won't ever run into these issues. Because of all the different moving pieces and options, determining how you want to go about approaching the game is a delightful conundrum.

Your four-man team encounters several follower characters during the course of the game that can flesh out your skillsets, like the drunk hobo Scotchmo, the vengeful Angela Death, or the computer-hacking Rose, who of course has a spiffy signature gun called Thorn. These players are fully controlled outside of combat and level up just like your regular characters, but they may choose to make their own moves in combat based on the points you've placed in the leadership skill. These characters also have their own motivations and ideals, and if you find yourself doing things they might not approve of – like killing their friends – they may leave the group. As with many other aspects of the title, it's nice to see that your actions are constantly shifting the game state.

Combat is the core of Wasteland 2. Similar to Fallout, the turn-based mechanic uses action points for moving, shooting, swinging, reloading, unjamming weapons, crouching, and setting up ambushes and headshots. It's a simple system with a lot of depth, and your options are constantly changing as new skills and weapons become available. A blast from one shotgun may cost six action points, but a good pistol may only take two to fire. Each character can equip a primary and secondary weapon, and switching between them is a free action during combat, so cover your bases.

The combat is slick and refined. Despite the fact that this game's roots lie in the sometimes perplexing PC strategy genre, Wasteland 2's combat is one of the more accessible yet complex systems available. The combat is mostly solid the whole way through, but can delve into repetitive and uninteresting territory at times, with many battles pitting you against the same stock wasteland bandits using the same moves over and over again. Like many other tactical RPGs, the camera can work against you and lead to unfortunate accidents, especially with area-of-effect attacks. The combat tunes can also get a little grating after hearing them over and over.

Conversation is a major activity outside of combat. While you always have a roster of appropriate keywords and phrases to draw upon when talking to important NPCs, the soft skills like "hard ass" unlock special dialogue options. These conversations can lead to bonus loot or unlocking entire new locations on the world map, so don't just hammer through the dialogue like a MMORPG player looking to jump back into the action. In addition to the canned responses, players can also type in their own words, and perhaps unlock even more interesting secrets – sort of an extra bonus for those paying attention to what's going on in the game.

Wasteland 2 is unflinchingly dark; players must make horrible life and death choices along the way and witness the consequences of their actions. Early in the game, you have the choice to help either the Ag Center, which is being overrun by infected plant life, or Highpool, under siege by your typical *Road Warrior* wasteland goons. Whatever your decision is, it will determine potential team members, and you'll eventually visit the other location later in the game, realizing that those calls for help that you didn't answer led to something terrible. This is just one example, as the game continually enjoys forcing you to make decisions with lives hanging in the balance.

Thankfully, an undercurrent of humor runs beneath the dark story, with in-jokes relating to other games or pop culture. These continual jovial jabs help put a smile on your face even as you begrudgingly sign someone's death warrant or splatter a bespectacled man's head with a scattergun.

The game is huge and offers strategy fans a substantial serving to devour. However, even with a handy quest log, not everything for critical progress is laid out in an understandable fashion. Even players familiar with the genre may find themselves wondering how to proceed at certain points after exhausting dialogue options.

Wasteland 2 feels like a perfect execution of what InXile hoped to accomplish with this Kickstarter-fueled project, not only an excellent retro nod to the computer RPGs of decades ago, but a great RPG of today. After a 26-year hiatus, this long-awaited sequel is a worthy successor to the PC RPG throne. » **Daniel Tack**

Your core team consists of four custom members, but you can add up to three followers on your journey



The Sims 4

Taking a step back

Style 1-Player Simulation **Publisher** Electronic Arts **Developer** Maxis **Release** September 2 **Rating** E

6.75

Devoted fans of The Sims spend years playing each entry, continually expanding their sims' lives. Some have family lineages that span generations, and others hone their building skills to create iconic landmarks. These dedicated players have worked hard building their worlds, so asking them to start over with a new iteration isn't a small request. To justify the transition, a sequel needs to provide compelling new content while building on the innovations it has already made. This is where The Sims 4 fails. It has some interesting tweaks, but doesn't do enough to entice players to upgrade.

The Sims 4 introduces some promising changes. I love that sims now multitask and naturally converse in groups. Seeing parents take their dinner upstairs to chat while kids do homework is just one example of realistic behavior. Sims are also more expressive thanks to the new emotion system. New dialogue options and extra activities appear based on your sims' emotional state; if my sim is confident, she can write a motivational book. Some activities tied to emotions are just stupid, though. Maxis has always had a sense of

humor, but being able to "pee like a champion" and "take an angry poop" doesn't add anything. Emotions also fluctuate too quickly during group conversations; going through three disparate moods in a flash doesn't give you time to capitalize on any benefits (and makes you question a sim's sanity).

Your basic needs bars are still present, but they take a backseat to the emotion system and drain slower. This gives you plenty of opportunities to socialize and build up your skills. The career system has been revamped, and professions eventually branch into more specific aspirations, like becoming an eSports competitor or a start-up entrepreneur. I like that the new career system rewards you with items when you're promoted, and how reaching certain career levels unlocks special items to purchase.

The Sims 4's greatest achievement is the small progression throughout your activities. If your sim is a gamer, expect access to more games as you enhance that skill. Eventually, you can even unlock the option to livestream. These clever changes don't turn the experience on its head, but I enjoyed seeing new things open up even after I'd been playing for 20 hours.

Unfortunately, familiar problems plague The Sims 4. While the A.I. pathing has been improved, it still has issues. For instance, if you send sims to the refrigerator too close together, one of them abandons the task even if they're still far away. Dish-clearing is apparently too complicated for them, as well. I had numerous times where my sims simply couldn't stack multiple dishes and would just put them down instead of washing them. I felt pretty confident leaving the A.I. sims to their own devices, but they still need to be monitored.

Still, just letting my sims free and watching the drama unfold remains one of my favorite things. I like that a game focused on control can still have unpredictability. My housekeeper

actually dropped dead for unknown reasons while cleaning my sink. I had to mourn his death, watch the Grim Reaper take him away, and then deal with the urn. Afterward, Death hung out and watched TV with my sims. Fun stories like this are what make The Sims 4 thrive.

That being said, The Sims 3 innovated on making the world feel alive, and one of The Sims 4's biggest disappointments is that a lot of those enhancements are gone. Simple things, like not being able to walk around the neighborhood, broke the immersion for me. The absence of the toddler stage makes it feel like your kids grow up too fast. The recreational lots are the most affected; you can travel between different neighborhoods, but these barren locales don't have much to do in them. You can fish and take your kids on the new playground equipment, but most of the activities can be done from your home, like grilling or playing chess. This doesn't give you much reason to leave the house except to socialize, which makes the world feel smaller.

The Sims has always been about making your options seem endless, but here they are limited. Even when making your sim with the improved creator, the outfits only have a few color variations. Builders are even affected, as basements no longer exist and there aren't many options for carpets or wallpapers. I like that the building tools are more accessible and provide less room for failure, but the minimal options restrict how far you can take your creativity.

I have no doubt that, like every other Sims title, this one will continue to grow with future expansions, but that doesn't do players any good right now. The Sims 4 needs to stand on its own. With all of the steps back from the baseline established by The Sims 3, it doesn't. I feel like I'm playing a game that's half-baked. The core formula is still fun, but The Sims 4 isn't an improvement. » **Kimberley Wallace**

PC

» **Concept**
Tweak The Sims' formula by adding new layers, such as emotions and multitasking

» **Graphics**
A graphical overhaul makes sims more expressive. They look the best they ever have

» **Sound**
Some of the sound effects, especially the ones indicating mood changes, are excessive. At least the iconic Simlish is still intact, conveying tone without using actual words

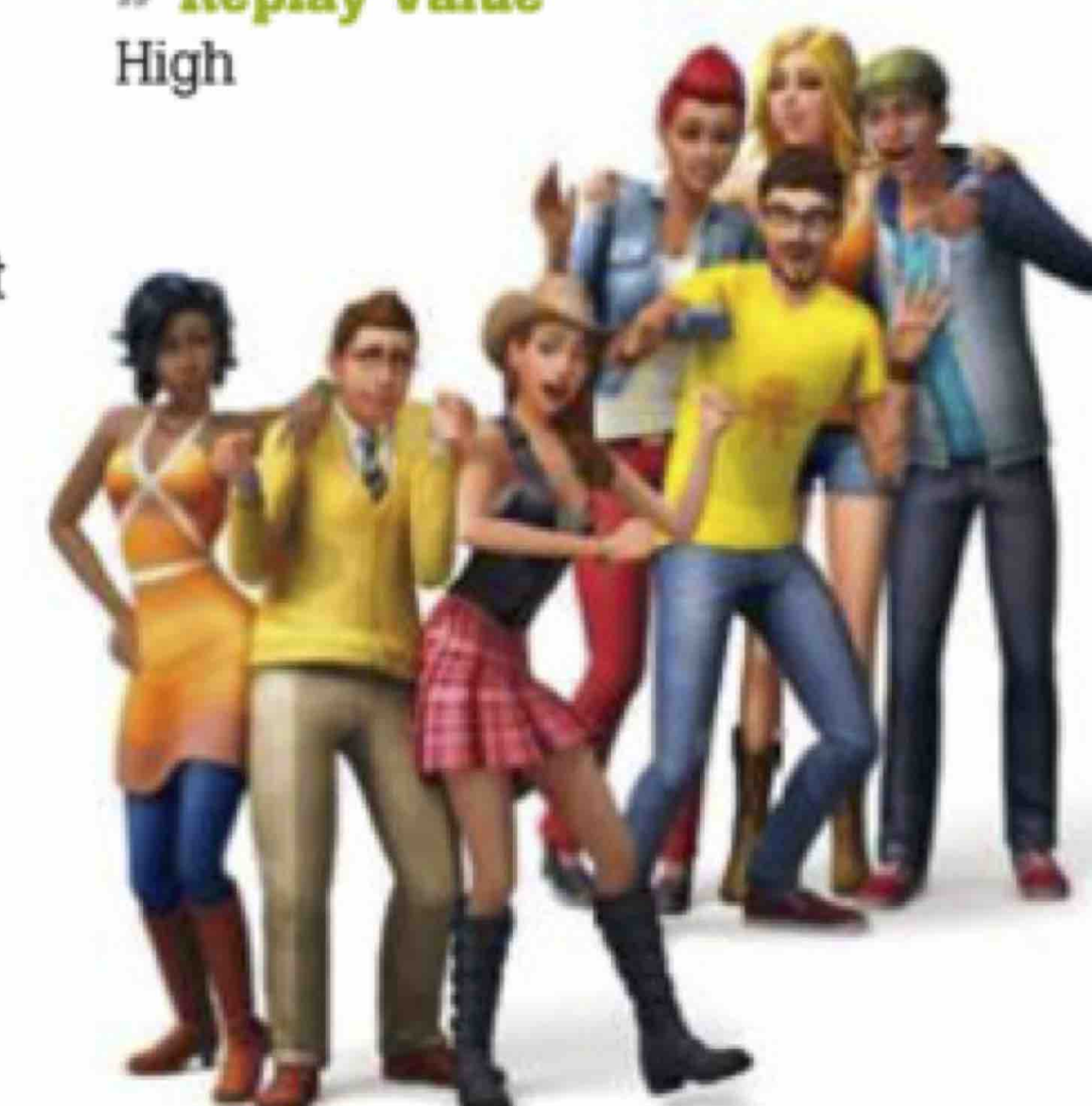
» **Playability**
The basics are easy to grasp, and you get tips along the way. The tutorial system needs to be less intrusive, instead of bombarding players with excessive information early on

» **Entertainment**
The Sims 4 is still fun with plenty of cool tweaks, but it feels somewhat empty without much innovation

» **Replay Value**
High

The Gallery's Lure

The Gallery is a great implementation. Inside the game, you can download other people's creations and place them into your world. The Gallery is great for players like me, who aren't the best builders. I found the process easy and smooth, and it looks like Maxis is doing a great job by having featured households and even challenges. I just hope the interface gets less cluttered. Right now, you can sort houses and people by most recent, most favorites, and most downloads, but cutting through the clutter is still difficult.



Forza Horizon 2

New horizons mean new challenges

8.25

Xbox One • 360

» Concept

Move the series to a new location and make some changes around the margins

» Graphics

It looks good, but the occasional pop-up can be distracting at high speeds

» Sound

I don't care for the soundtrack or Festival trappings, but at least they went through the trouble to record audio for the characters

» Playability

The cars feel a little like they're on a pivot, although the rumble in the triggers is nice

» Entertainment

This sequel is a good showing for the series on the new system, but it won't blow your doors off

» Replay Value

High

Style 1-Player Racing (12-Player Online) **Publisher** Microsoft Studios **Developer** Playground Games **Release** September 30 **Rating** E10+

Forza Horizon 2 isn't a hard restart for the offshoot series, but the game has shuffled the deck slightly for its new-gen debut. It keeps intact its plethora of races, abundance of cars, XP system, and credits, while augmenting online play, tweaking its overall structure, and offering more open landscapes. The sum of these changes splits both ways, making Forza Horizon 2 a worthy sequel that is not necessarily head-and-shoulders above its predecessor.

The game strips away some of the Horizon Festival structure (although the visual trappings and cheesy characters are still there) to present a progression more tailored to your whims. Critical-path race events to get your Horizon wristbands are populated according to which car you're driving, similar to Forza Motorsport 4. However, the Sponsorship Challenges and Horizon Outposts (with their requisite events required to unlock them) are gone. The breadcrumb trail is lessened, and so is some of the feeling that you're truly building up to something.

At least with the first Horizon's Sponsorship Challenges I felt I was working toward another accolade on my list. Similarly, the now-absent

Outposts were convenient ways to combine opening the map while exposing you to different activities like photo taking (there are no new promotion events like this, by the way). Forza Horizon 2 gives you more to do and makes it easy to experience, but I wish it were organized in a way that spurred me on more.

This is odd, because one of the game's great strengths – even without the Sponsorship Challenges – is its progression. XP and credits flow from everything you do, and the new Perks system for awarding skill points (for going fast or knocking stuff over, for example) confers great rewards. Bucket List Challenges are also a welcome addition. These put you in challenge-specific cars and have you do things like bomb down a forest mountain or notch a certain number of near misses with traffic.

Online races are easy to access and perhaps the biggest focus of the game. The map is full of free-roam events you can enter whenever you like, and Road Trips are developer-created playlists of events you and participating racers tackle and travel between in succession. While the plethora of events (including fun playground games like King and Infected) is a good

thing, I wanted more overall direction from the game.

Another example of Horizon 2's give and take is the open environments. You can blaze a trail while taking a shortcut or during a cross-country race, but the more you explore, the more you realize how empty the game can be.

Despite Forza Horizon 2's changes, it remains true to its core concept, and for that, it's a worthy game in the franchise canon. Challenging Drivatars you meet in the world to races (still only point-to-point events), buying liveries and chatting in car meets, and the ease of online play encourages you to explore and interact with a world whose new Italian/French surroundings look great and inspire your wanderlust.

Forza Horizon 2 may not be the perfect sequel, but it still delivers stiff challenges, fun racing moments, and a variety of experiences. Hopefully another few years on the Xbox One can create a clearer direction forward for the series and enable it to continue being a worthy branch of the Forza brand. » **Matthew Kato**

We reviewed the Xbox One version of the game. It is also available for the Xbox 360



Bayonetta 2

Topping over-the-top

gameformer
GOLD

Style 1-Player Action (2-Player Online) Publisher Nintendo Developer Platinum Games Release October 24 Rating M

Bayonetta did not change the face of stylish action games. That's okay; instead of adding new gimmicks or turning the genre on its head, Platinum Games raised the bar by refining the gameplay and making the action as ridiculous as possible. The intense combat, airtight controls, and over-the-top spectacle captured what I love about this genre. Bayonetta 2 does the same thing (albeit in many of the same ways), but with even more polish and depth.

Fluid and satisfying combat remains the centerpiece of the experience. No matter what you do, Bayonetta 2 makes you look and feel awesome while doing it. Tearing apart angelic juggernauts, demolishing hordes of demons, and sweating through high-precision duels all require different approaches to the combat system. The variety of encounters – and the set-piece moments that separate them – keeps the unpredictable action moving.

Bayonetta still has access to all kinds of magic powers, items, and abilities. Not every player is going to love every option, but the system is flexible enough to let you develop your own style of play – though you are more likely to switch between multiple methods than stick to one. My favorite addition is the Umbran Climax mode, which super-charges all of your attacks for a short span. This simple concept adds spikes of excitement and power into smaller encounters, making them more rewarding.

Even with so many options at your fingertips, Bayonetta 2 is as deep or as simple as you need it to be. If you want to perfect your technique, master dodge offset, and rack up pure platinum medals for every mission, you will continue to discover gameplay layers and wrinkles for hours. If you just want to mash buttons and see the story through, you can do that instead. I don't know why you would, though; the story is flimsy and obvious, but the combat is expertly tuned and balanced.

One of my few complaints is the feeling of déjà vu. You see many new weapons and enemies in name, but they don't impact the experience in different ways. Instead of gliding around on ice-infused skates like the first installment, you get fire-infused chainsaws. Wielding two swords feels a lot like wielding one. Many of the optional accessories are also repeated from last time. I appreciate that Platinum Games didn't want to monkey around with a winning arsenal, but the thrill of experimenting

with crazy and inventive weapons was a highlight of the first game. Not everything is a retread, but the general familiarity means that thrill is largely missing from Bayonetta 2.

One returning feature that I was happy to see is the abundance of post-game content. My first 10 or 12 hours were spent clearing all of the stages and completing the main story. After that, I dove into the additional challenges and unlockables. The array of accessories – like one that helps block incoming attacks, or another that automatically activates Witch Time – are realistically only affordable after you've finished the main missions. You can also buy an array of costumes, attempt the difficult Witch Trial bonus stages, and unlock new characters (who play differently and have their own moves and costumes to buy). This gives the action a remarkably long tail; if you love Bayonetta, Platinum Games and Nintendo open the floodgates and don't hold anything back.

Apart from the other unlockables, an online multiplayer mode lets you play cooperatively with a friend. You choose your characters, set up a series of battles, wager your halos to set the difficulty, and then try to kill the enemies while scoring more points than your friend. Playing alongside a partner is fun, and it's a great way to build up your cash reserves (any money you earn in multiplayer carries over to the single-player mode). However, the isolated battles can't match the grandeur of the campaign, and even a broad selection of encounters doesn't keep them from getting old after a while.

Creating a sequel to an already-polished game is a challenge, but Platinum Games' approach ultimately succeeds. Bayonetta 2 is rooted in its past while taking steps (but not strides) toward the future. Though I was disappointed by some of the familiarity, I was usually having too much fun to care. » **Joe Juba**

9

Wii U

» **Concept**

A Wii U-exclusive sequel to one of the best stylish action games ever made

» **Graphics**

The screen becomes a blur of violent special effects in the heat of combat, but the framerate holds up well

» **Sound**

Though some of the voice casting seems off, most of the key players nail the delivery

» **Playability**

A GamePad or Pro Controller is your best bet. While the touchscreen is technically an option, it doesn't give you the precision required to appreciate Bayonetta 2's strengths

» **Entertainment**

Crazy moments, smooth combat, and seemingly endless options help this sequel match its predecessor

» **Replay Value**

High



That's Our Bayonetta

Despite the Nintendo name on Bayonetta 2, the family-friendly company does not appear to have meddled much with the more controversial elements of the formula. Violence and suggestive poses abound, and the language seems even fouler than before. Like its predecessor, Bayonetta 2 does all of this with a smile and a wink, so it feels more playful and fun than crass and gross.

Hyrule Warriors

The crossover we didn't know we wanted

8

Wii U

» **Concept**

Cross the Zelda series with Dynasty Warriors for an unexpected mash-up

» **Graphics**

The art direction delivers very cool designs for familiar Zelda characters and enemies, even if the overall visuals seem dated

» **Sound**

I could do without the metal remixes of familiar Zelda music, but some of the tracks are quite good. I enjoyed the use of Zelda sound effects throughout

» **Playability**

Everyone moves and attacks well, and the warriors all feel distinct

» **Entertainment**

This aggressive version of Zelda can become repetitious, but there are still reasons to keep fighting

» **Replay Value**

Moderately High

Style 1 or 2-Player Action **Publisher** Nintendo, Koei Tecmo **Developer** Team Ninja, Omega Force **Release** September 26 **Rating** T

The Zelda series thrives on smart puzzle solving, exploration, and deliberate action against a small number of enemies. The Dynasty Warriors franchise thrives on none of these things. For this reason, Zelda fans are understandably skeptical about the franchise crossover, especially considering Nintendo's last partnership with Team Ninja produced the worst Metroid game in the series, Other M. This time around, the partnership delivers better results. Hyrule Warriors isn't a true Zelda game, but there's plenty here for Zelda fans to enjoy.

Hyrule Warriors' story begins with a dark power overtaking Hyrule, which cues the need for a hero – preferably one wearing a green tunic. From there, the alternate Zelda universes overlap in nerdy ways that fans who love to examine Zelda's many timelines will appreciate. It fully embraces the idea of many Hyrules existing across multiple universes. The way characters speak to each other, however, is cheesy and serves to set up flimsy excuses to make recognizable characters fight one another for no particular reason.

The combat is highly repetitive, as is always the case with the Dynasty Warriors series, but the context of the Zelda universe made me much more interested in trudging through the war. In Dynasty Warriors, motivations for fighting are deeply embedded in an exaggerated history full of characters I'm unfamiliar with. When you don't know or care why you're fighting, fun needs to be derived entirely from the repetitive combat – which dulls quickly. Playing Hyrule Warriors, I was excited to meet every character; their motivations are clear, and I was eager to enter battle. That said, the combat still boils down to powering up your special attack, firing it off, and moving on to the next area to repeat the process in traditional Dynasty Warriors fashion.



Boss fights fall more in line with Zelda games. Using items like bombs, boomerangs, or arrows to open up a boss to a bevy of attacks is much more fun than whittling down a powerful soldier's health. The final boss, in particular, forces you to use the lessons you've acquired through the course of the campaign to claim defeat in a satisfying way – a common trait of Zelda games, but unheard of in Dynasty Warriors.

Zelda references abound, whether it's on the battlefield, or in the menus and loading screens. Events like using Fi to fight Ghirahim should resonate for players who finished Skyward Sword, and the way you use a powered-up hookshot to attack a strong moblin is too awesome to spoil here. It's also nice to see a character like Zant

from Twilight Princess, an awesome antagonist who it seemed would only ever appear in one game, get another chance to battle.

Among the plentiful Zelda references, most of the nods come from Ocarina of Time, Skyward Sword, and Twilight Princess. I would have liked to see more Zelda games receive more time in the spotlight. Only those three titles receive dedicated levels with familiar locations (often with the same layout). You revisit them frequently outside of the main campaign, which stifles the environmental variety.

Playing cooperatively with one player on the GamePad and one on the TV is great use of the Wii U's technology, but you won't find much forcing you to work as a team. Mostly it's just helpful to have an extra fighter, and there's something undeniably fun about teaming up as familiar Zelda warriors to tackle familiar enemies and bosses like The Imprisoned from Skyward Sword.

The standout Adventure mode, where you explore the original The Legend of Zelda map tile by tile, helps alleviate some of the repetition that drags down the main campaign. Each grid offers a short challenge, like having to defeat a boss or a certain type of enemy. Completing the challenge rewards you with weapons and items you can use on the overhead map, like a candle to burn a bush to get a new weapon, or a raft to cross a river to unlock more challenges. Adventure mode wears its love for Zelda on its sleeve, and unlike the main levels, which can be long and grueling, the challenges are typically short and sweet.

The repetition of Dynasty Warriors pervades throughout Hyrule Warriors, but this unexpected crossover with the Zelda universe works. It might not be the Zelda game we expected for Link's first original Wii U debut, but it will happily hold us over while we wait for the console's first true Legend of Zelda experience.

» **Kyle Hilliard**



Lana is one of Hyrule Warriors' original characters, and she's fun to play as, even if you don't recognize her

Super Smash Bros.

Bros. on the go

gameformer
GOLD

Style 1-Player Fighting (4-Player Online) Publisher Nintendo Developer Sora, Bandai Namco Games Release October 3 Rating E10+

Nintendo's decision to put Smash Bros. on the 3DS struck me as an exceptionally weird move, even for a company that pressed its beloved characters into mortal combat in the first place. Smash is, after all, an over-the-top social game that's almost as enjoyable to watch as it is to play. Where's the fun in hunching over a pair of tiny screens, flicking away at that weird analog stub with aching hands? Well, I'm big enough to admit when I'm wrong. Super Smash Bros. has KO'd my assumptions and renewed my enthusiasm for the series.

The biggest surprise for me is how unsurprising it is once you start playing. You select your fighter from a roster of up to 49 characters (after unlocking several, of course), choose a stage, and then proceed to beat your opponents up and out of the ring. The cast is a mix of returning favorites and new additions, and overall it's a well-balanced crew. Once again, Nintendo is stepping beyond its brands, welcoming Pac-Man and Mega Man to the fray. Initially it seems like an incremental upgrade, but there's a lot more beneath the surface.

Most notably, you can select combat abilities from a list of several options. That expands beyond costumes for your Mii fighters, too. You can choose between a couple of different

fireballs for Mario's attack, for instance, or what happens when you use Donkey Kong's down special. Maybe you like his hand slap, or perhaps you'd prefer an alternate that generates pillars of flame. It's up to you, and discovering what works for you – and the characters you're familiar with already – is rewarding.

The 3DS is also home to a Smash Run mode. Here, you have a limited amount of time to run through a maze, battling enemies and collecting power-ups that increase stats like attack power, speed, and jumping. When time's up, the players converge in a final challenge that determines the victor. Some are straightforward, like a winner-takes-all battle. Others are more creative, like pitting the characters against one another in an obstacle-laden footrace. It's a fun diversion from regular smashing, though the local-only multiplayer makes me wonder how frequently people will use it.

Smash Bros. is all about competition, and local and online multiplayer are big parts of that. Online is one of the game's weak spots. When it works, it works beautifully, with blazing fast matches that rival the best of previous games. Unfortunately, it all comes crumbling down when someone's connection hiccups. Battles turn into painful slide shows

before ultimately stalling out. I battled against Japanese players without any problems, but ran into trouble when I took on GI editors in the same city. None of my co-workers reported connection troubles outside of the game, but it made for a maddeningly inconsistent time.

While the online might be suspect, Nintendo has made a variety of concessions to its more hardcore fanbase. Matches are split into two types: For Fun, in which rules governing things like stages, customized characters, and items can be tweaked and records aren't kept; and For Glory, which records stats and also eliminates items. For Glory also restricts matches to the Omega variants of each stage, which are based on the Final Destination level from past games.

Even on my best day, I wouldn't be confused with a tournament-level Smash player. After shifting my block and throw moves from the shoulder buttons to the face buttons, though, I was playing at the same level I do on Melee or Brawl. I won some matches, I lost a few, and I had a completely great time no matter the score. We all know the Wii U version of Super Smash Bros. is on the horizon, but the 3DS version is more than something to keep you busy until then. It's a must-play for Smash fans.

» Jeff Cork

9.25

3DS

» **Concept**
Nintendo's frenzied fighter goes mobile in an all-new entry designed for the 3DS

» **Graphics**
It makes the most out of the hardware's mediocre screens, though you can lose focus on what's going on when the camera is pulled back

» **Sound**
Classic tunes from the NES era and beyond provide great accompaniment to the chaos

» **Playability**
I'm impressed at how well the circle pad handles the action. Robust customization allows you to tweak the inputs if the default settings don't work for you

» **Entertainment**
Don't let the screen size fool you – Super Smash Bros. on 3DS is a riot, and it's worthy of the name

» **Replay Value**
High



PLAYSTATION 4

Amazing Spider-Man 2, The	5.5	Jul-14
Bound By Flame	8	Jul-14
Child of Light	8	Jun-14
Crimsonland	7	Oct-14
Daylight	6	Jun-14
Deception IV: Blood Ties	6.75	May-14
Diablo III: Reaper of Souls – Ultimate Evil Edition	9.25	Oct-14
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Entwined	5.5	Aug-14
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PLAYSTATION 3

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Sacred 3	7.5	Oct-14
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XBOX 360

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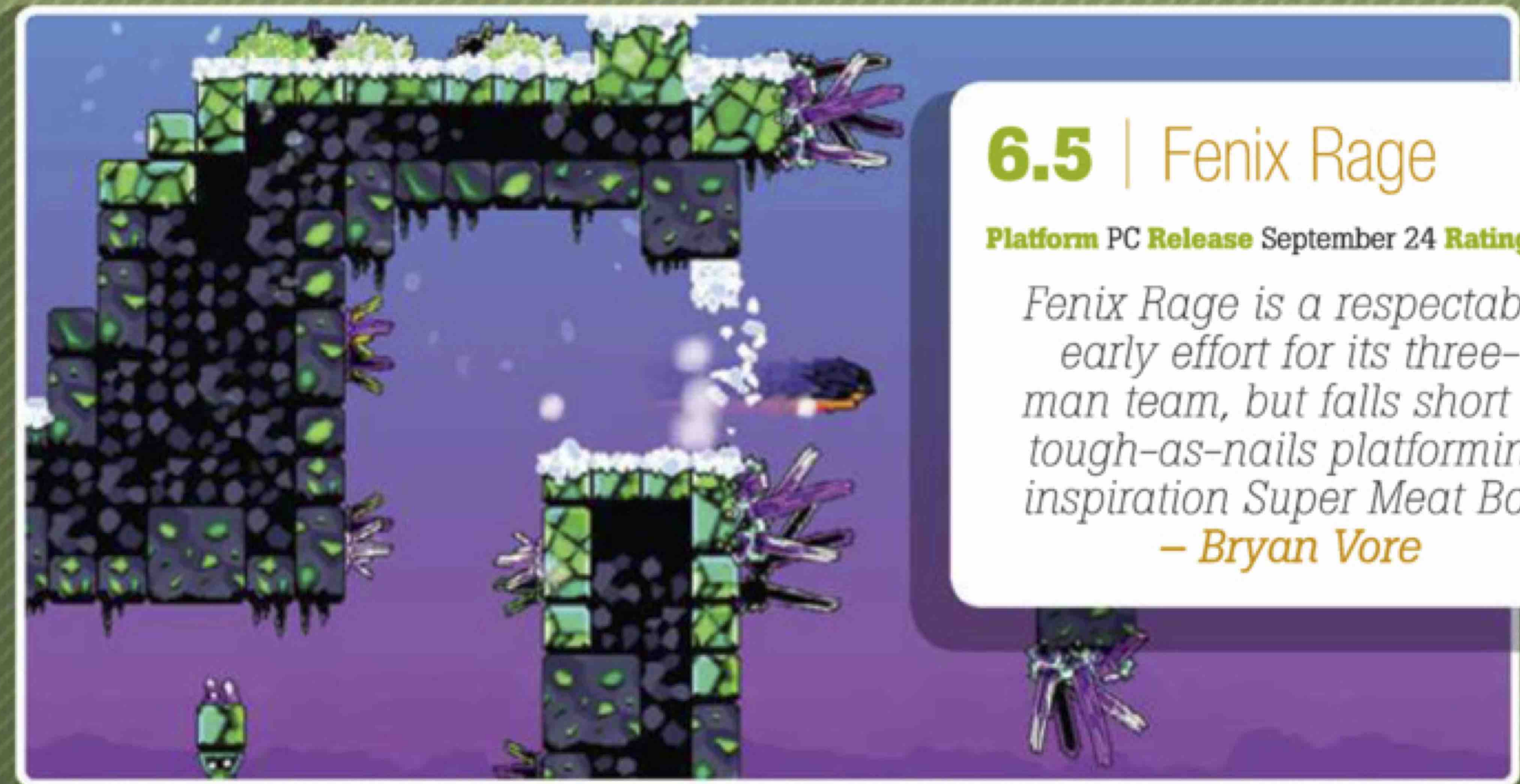
the score

8 | Azure Striker Gunvolt

Platform 3DS Release August 29 Rating T

Azure Striker Gunvolt is a worthwhile adventure, even if it's wrapped in a disposable sci-fi story about telekinetic adepts. It delivers some of the fun you remember from older Mega Man titles while injecting a jolt of new gameplay. – **Tim Turi**

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6.5 | Fenix Rage

Platform PC Release September 24 Rating NR

Fenix Rage is a respectable early effort for its three-man team, but falls short of tough-as-nails platforming inspiration Super Meat Boy. – **Bryan Vore**



7.5 | D4: Dark Dreams Don't Die

Platform Xbox One Release September 19 Rating M

Swery and his crew succeed again in making a game that is so weird and engaging that I can't fully comprehend it, but I want more of whatever it is. – **Andrew Reiner**

6 | Dance Central: Spotlight

Platform Xbox One Release September 2 Rating T

Dance Central: Spotlight's dancing is enjoyable, but overall it feels like a big step back for the series. With a mediocre soundtrack and scaled-back multiplayer, the fun personality of Dance Central has been excised in favor of a feature-lite experience that doesn't offer incentive to keep playing. When you're dancing, Spotlight is fun, but it is easily the weakest game in the Dance Central series. – **Kyle Hilliard**

geeked at birth



Wolf Among Us: Episode 3 – A Crooked Mile, The	8.5	Jun-14
Wolf Among Us: Episode 4 – In Sheep's Cothing	6.5	May-14
Wolf Among Us: Episode 5 – Cry Wolf, The	7.5	Sep-14
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ANDROID

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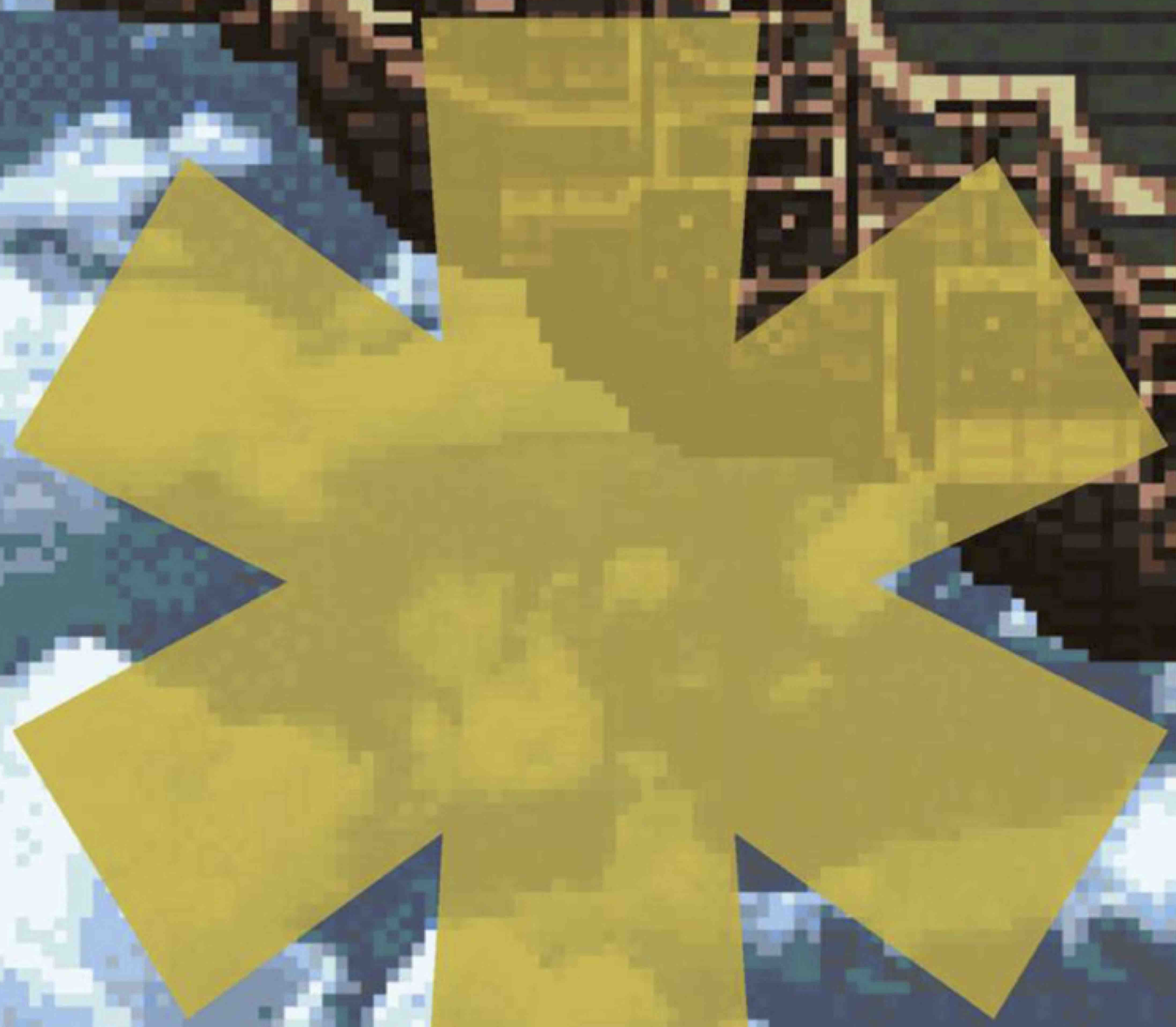
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Classic





The Best Of An Era

*Looking back at Final Fantasy VI's
20-Year Legacy*

Final Fantasy is one of the longest running series in the industry, and it has changed considerably over the course of its life. No matter how much the combat evolves or how gorgeous the graphics get, a portion of its audience will always have a soft spot for the franchise's 16-bit glory days. Final Fantasy VI was the last entry of the era, and this year marks the 20th anniversary of its North American release. We celebrate the occasion by looking back on the title with one of its directors, Square Enix's Yoshinori Kitase. **by Joe Juba**

Though Final Fantasy VI is an important part of gaming history, its venerable age means that some of today's gamers haven't played it for themselves. However, you don't necessarily need to play it to appreciate its impact. All you need to understand is how unique Final Fantasy VI is among its peers; it features a huge ensemble cast, complex themes, and a story that subverts the "plucky heroes save the world" structure. Gameplay surprises – like piloting airships in Mode 7 or entering fighting-game-style commands to execute special attacks – set a high bar for fun and variety.

One of the most distinguishing features is the way the game is split into two halves. The first is a traditional, linear adventure about an evil empire and the rebels who fight against it. This arc culminates in an apocalypse; players fail to stop the plans of the villain Kefka, and the world falls into ruin. The second half is more freeform, allowing players to wander across the shattered landscape, rejoining old friends and gaining the strength to strike back. This pioneering approach meant that the narrative was largely player-driven in the second half, focusing on smaller character-centric episodes instead of a following a prescribed

path with clear objectives. Though it differs in some ways, this formula is a part of the basic structure that open-world games would employ years later.

Final Fantasy VI also laid important groundwork for the future of the series. It featured "desperation attacks," a prototype version of the now-standard limit breaks. More importantly, it also moved toward a more cinematic presentation with moments like the iconic opera house scene – a sequence that, 20 years later, the industry in general still remembers with clarity and fondness.

Though it wasn't the last of the 16-bit RPGs, Final Fantasy VI is arguably the best of them – and a must-play for any role-playing aficionado. That achievement is even more impressive when you consider that in 1994 games weren't made by the massive teams we see today. The groups were smaller, and the content was more personal in some ways. Yoshinori Kitase, now a producer for the Final Fantasy series a whole, was one of the two directors on Final Fantasy VI (alongside Hiroyuki Ito). We spoke with Kitase to get behind-the-scenes insight into the elements that shaped Final Fantasy VI into one of the most revered RPGs ever made.

When you began making the game, did you know that it would be the last 2D Final Fantasy? If so, did that add any extra pressure to exit the 16-bit era in style?

I didn't imagine that this would be the last 16-bit game in the series. In fact, we started developing Final Fantasy VII for the SNES after we finished Final Fantasy VI. However, the Final Fantasy VII SNES team was temporarily dissolved when help was needed for the production of Chrono Trigger. As a result, Final Fantasy VI became the last 16-bit game in the series.

What do you think players connected with most when it first released?

"Everyone is the main character" was the theme we adopted when the production began. Thoroughly crafted stories dedicated to each and every character may have been the biggest factor that has appealed to fans and may be the reason this game has received their last-in support.

The two halves of the game are very different. How did the team arrive at the decision to split the game? Were you ever worried that players might feel lost in the second half without direction?

When we started developing the game, only the first half of the script was completed and the second half was still a blank slate (this was typical for Final Fantasy games back then). RPG storylines of that time often entailed an apocalyptic crisis and a hero who saves the world at a hair's breadth. Growing tired of the same old scenario, we decided to "end the world" with this game!

It was then that we finally started thinking about how the game would play out after the apocalypse. With the concept of "everyone is the main character" in mind, we felt and decided it would be best to allow players to choose and play their favorite character, resulting in a player-driven second half. Of course, there were concerns about players not knowing what to do next, but we resolved these issues through multiple

test plays and adding hints throughout the game.

Final Fantasy VI has 14 playable characters. Did that pose any challenges during development? Is there a particular reason the following games kept the cast smaller?

Back then, the entire development team contributed to the scenario instead of a single scenario writer creating the story. Even when establishing characters, the entire staff brainstormed and put forth many suggestions. Thanks to this, we never ran out of ideas. I would screen these ideas and ultimately adjust them to maintain consistency within the script.

For example, I created the setting for a character named Gau. Stories like *Flowers for Algernon* and the one about a boy raised by wolves served as an inspiration, and the character evolved from there. Tetsuya Nomura, the designer, created characters like Shadow and Setzer. At that time, he was a dot artist for monster designs, but he proposed

ideas regarding the character's personality and background in addition to the illustrations. Similarly, other staff members created characters based on their own imagination and inspiration.

There isn't a particular reason for the smaller cast in following games, although it may have been something to do with the transition to 3D that led to a more realistic expression of characters. Stories tended to delve into a single character, so the size of the cast may have been compromised due to the scenario structure.

Flying airships was an iconic part of early Final Fantasy titles. What inspired the decision to try it from a different perspective?

At that time, the concept of "the flying ship" was fascinatingly portrayed in Hayao Miyazaki's animation and captivated us by its dynamic visual expression. On the other hand, the NES specs only allowed for flat 2D graphics, and we yearned to express a game dynamically with depth in a similar fashion. With the

The Number Problem

Even though it is the sixth game in the Final Fantasy series, the Super Nintendo version released in North America as Final Fantasy III. The discrepancy is due to the fact that only two of the previous entries were available outside of Japan at the time, so the title was changed to keep the numbering consistent in North America. These days, however, you're better off referring to it Final Fantasy VI to avoid confusion, since those "lost" entries have since made it to our shores.



SNES, we were able to generate quasi-3D graphics called Mode 7, which finally enabled us to design an airship that was closer to what we had envisioned. It may be more accurate to say that we were finally able to generate something close to what we had originally desired rather than doing something different from the previous titles.

An early version of what we now call limit breaks exists in Final Fantasy VI, executed randomly when characters are low on HP. Where did this idea come from?

The Final Fantasy series started to see an increase in sales from around Final Fantasy IV, and our player base expanded to include both beginners and advanced players. In order to cater to different groups, an “easy mode” version of Final Fantasy IV was released; however, while this solution was well received by beginners, it generated some dissatisfaction among the traditional Final Fantasy fans. In an

effort to satisfy both types of players, we came up with an idea for a special move that triggers when the player is in a critical situation.

Beginners are more prone to receiving damage, so when the magic triggers at a time of distress, it provides the players with a chance for a comeback. On the other hand, advanced players are less likely to find themselves in such situations, so the magic triggers less frequently, creating a more challenging experience. Limit break was devised with a similar thought process.

The Kaiser Dragon super-boss was originally cut (but included in Final Fantasy VI Advance). Can you tell us about any other content that was planned but did not make it into the final version?

During the planning stages, there was an idea to make a game out of Strago cultivating a village. It was a city-building game similar to SimCity, but was canceled at a very early stage due to certain issues with the development schedule.

Final Fantasy VI deals with some mature themes – like suicide and loss – in a time when many of its peers were sticking to safer material. Did you have any reservations about including these topics during development?

Back then, video games were not widely recognized and were more or less perceived as children’s entertainment. I believe we had a strong desire to appeal to the public with sensational, mature themes (in hindsight, it was done in the rashness of youth). On the contrary, with video games having a greater social influence, we may have been a bit more hesitant to do so in this day and age.

What is your personal favorite moment in Final Fantasy VI?

Darill’s Tomb and the opera scene are

two of my favorites, as those are some of the scenes in the game that I directly supervised.

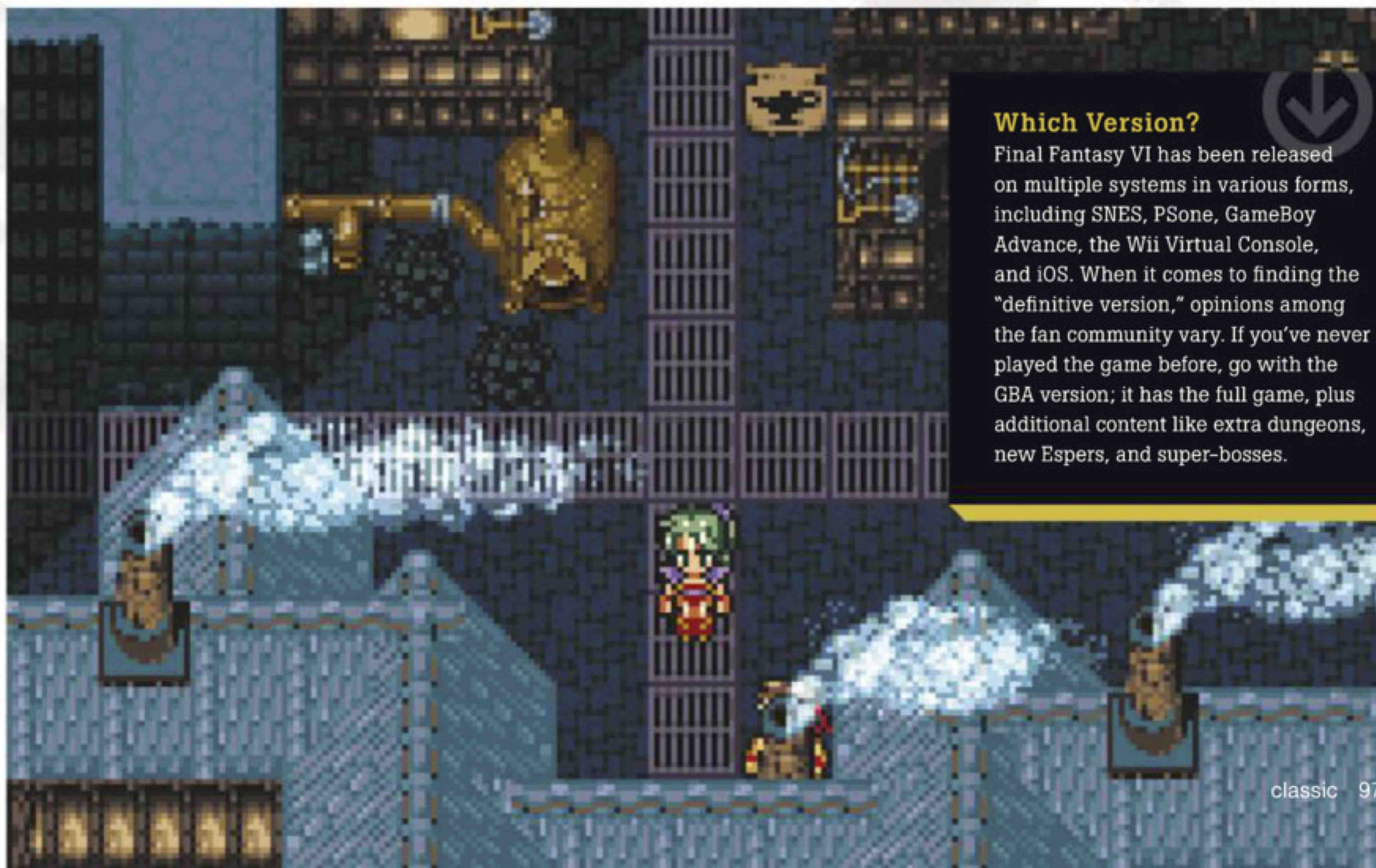
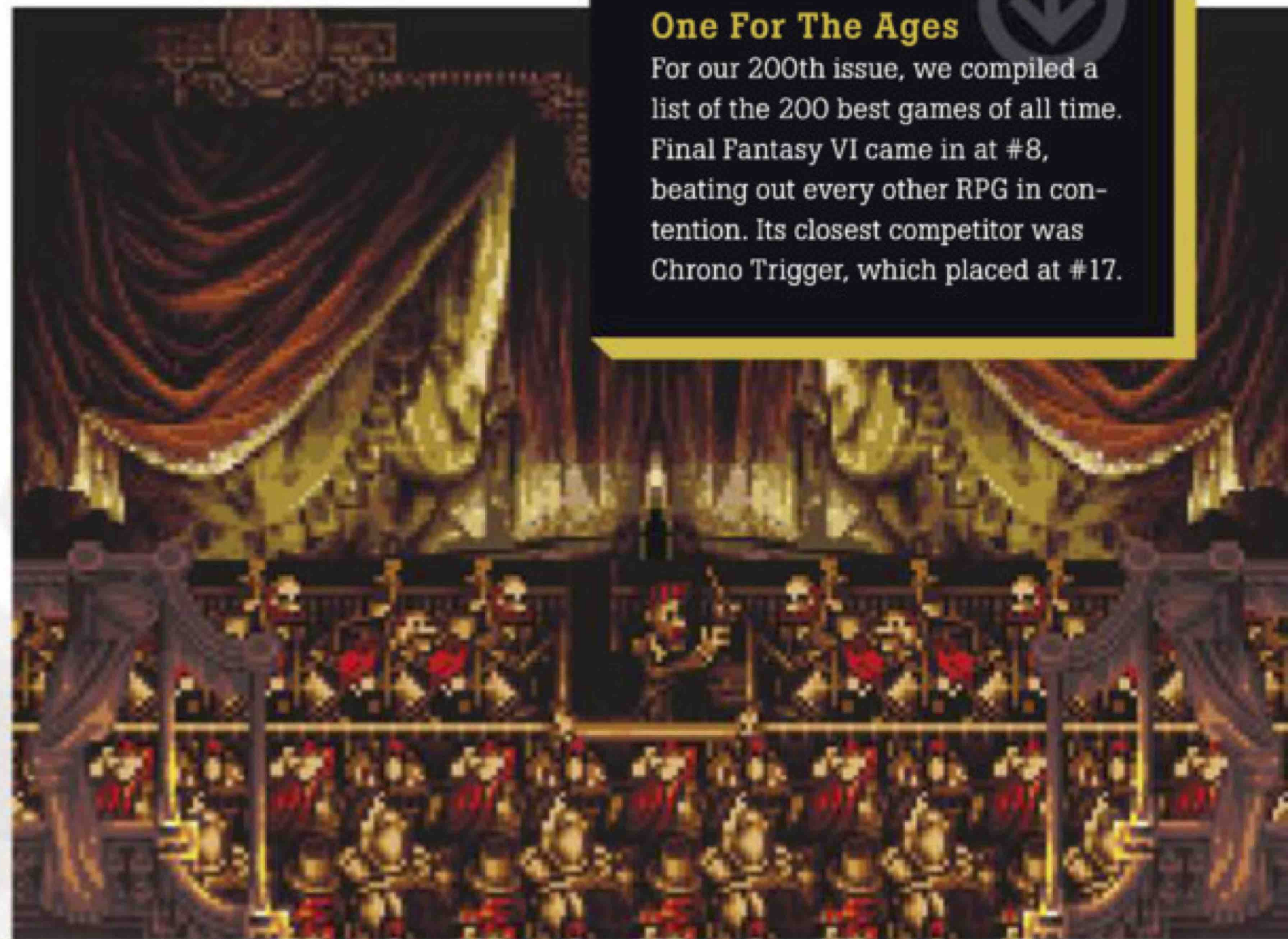
The opera scene is still brought up today as one of the most memorable moments in video games. Can you explain how that sequence originated?

When the producer, Hironobu Sakaguchi, gave me the plot, there was only one line written in the scene – “an event to be held at the opera.” From this brief line alone, I sensed that this sequence would become one of the most memorable moments of the game. My task was to expand on that single line.

I spoke to the composer, Nobuo Uematsu, and Hideo Minaba, the artist, about how we would go about structuring the sequence for several days. Alfred Hitchcock’s *The Man Who Knew*

One For The Ages

For our 200th issue, we compiled a list of the 200 best games of all time. Final Fantasy VI came in at #8, beating out every other RPG in contention. Its closest competitor was Chrono Trigger, which placed at #17.



Which Version?

Final Fantasy VI has been released on multiple systems in various forms, including SNES, PSone, GameBoy Advance, the Wii Virtual Console, and iOS. When it comes to finding the “definitive version,” opinions among the fan community vary. If you’ve never played the game before, go with the GBA version; it has the full game, plus additional content like extra dungeons, new Espers, and super-bosses.

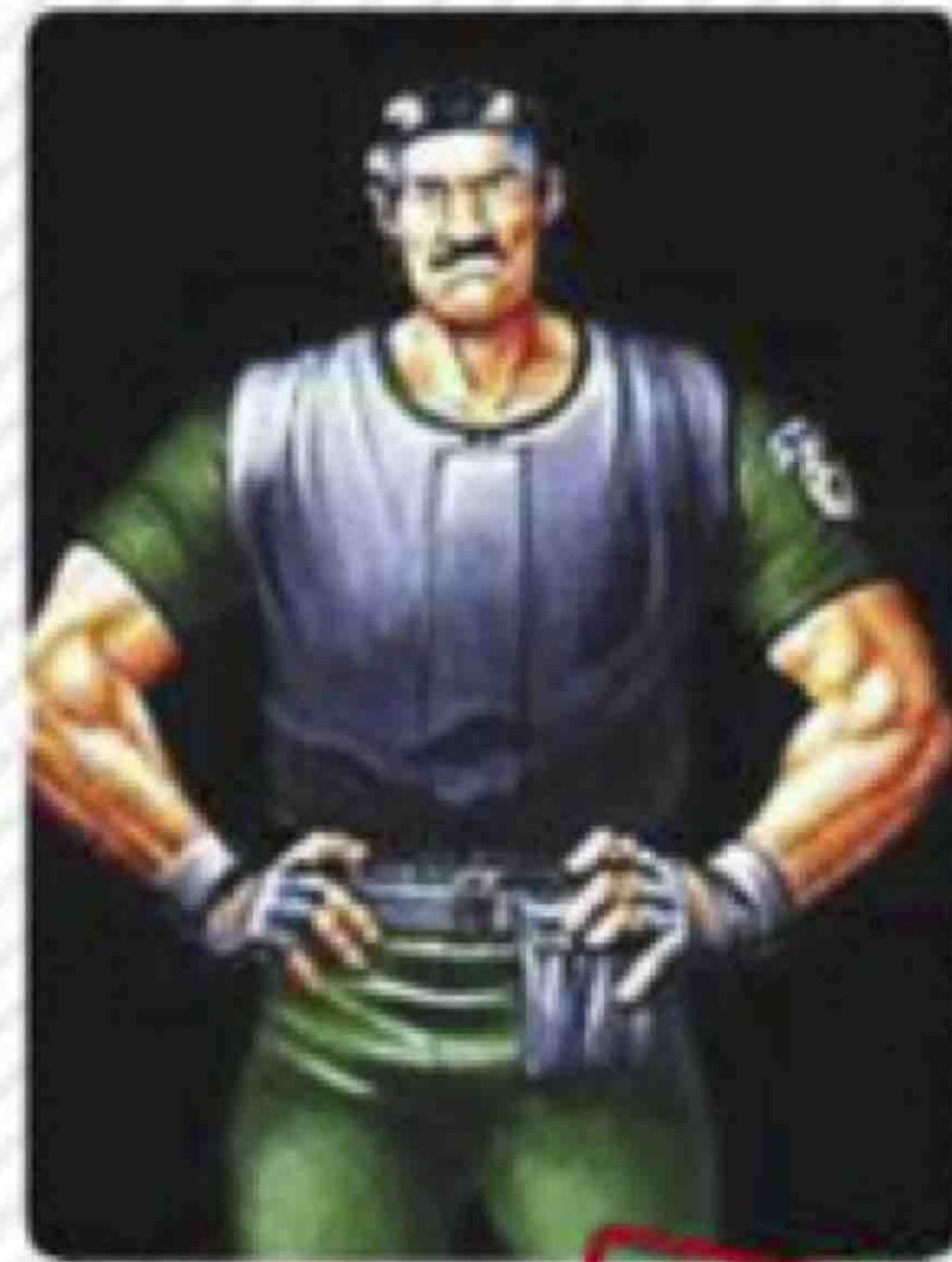
Remembering Resident Evil's S.T.A.R.S. Team

WHERE ARE THEY NOW?



The origin of the Resident Evil storyline traces back to the S.T.A.R.S.' (Special Tactics And Rescue Squad) mission to investigate reports of cannibalistic homicides in the isolated Arklay Mountains area. The catalytic Mansion Incident was a tough trial for the S.T.A.R.S.' Alpha and Bravo teams, orchestrated by the treacherous Albert Wesker to test Umbrella's monsters against trained professionals. Some survived to have storied adventures in the series, while others died swift, sometimes embarrassing deaths. *by Tim Turi*

BRAVO TEAM



Enrico Marini **DEAD**
(Captain)
Shot in the heart in dank caverns underneath the Spencer Mansion by his traitorous captain, Wesker.



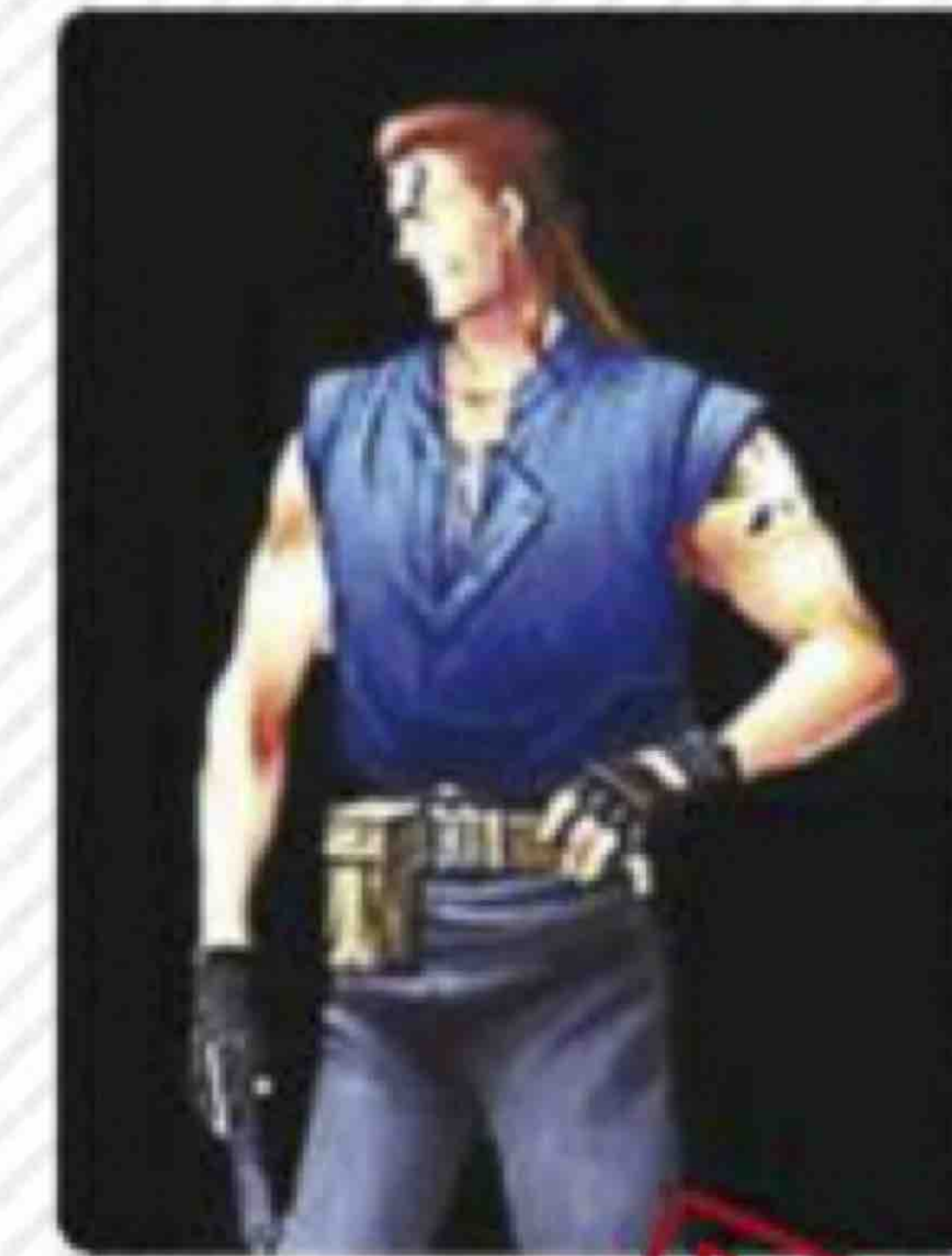
Richard Aiken **DEAD**
(Communications Expert)
Bitten by a gigantic, poisonous snake before dying on the mansion floor.



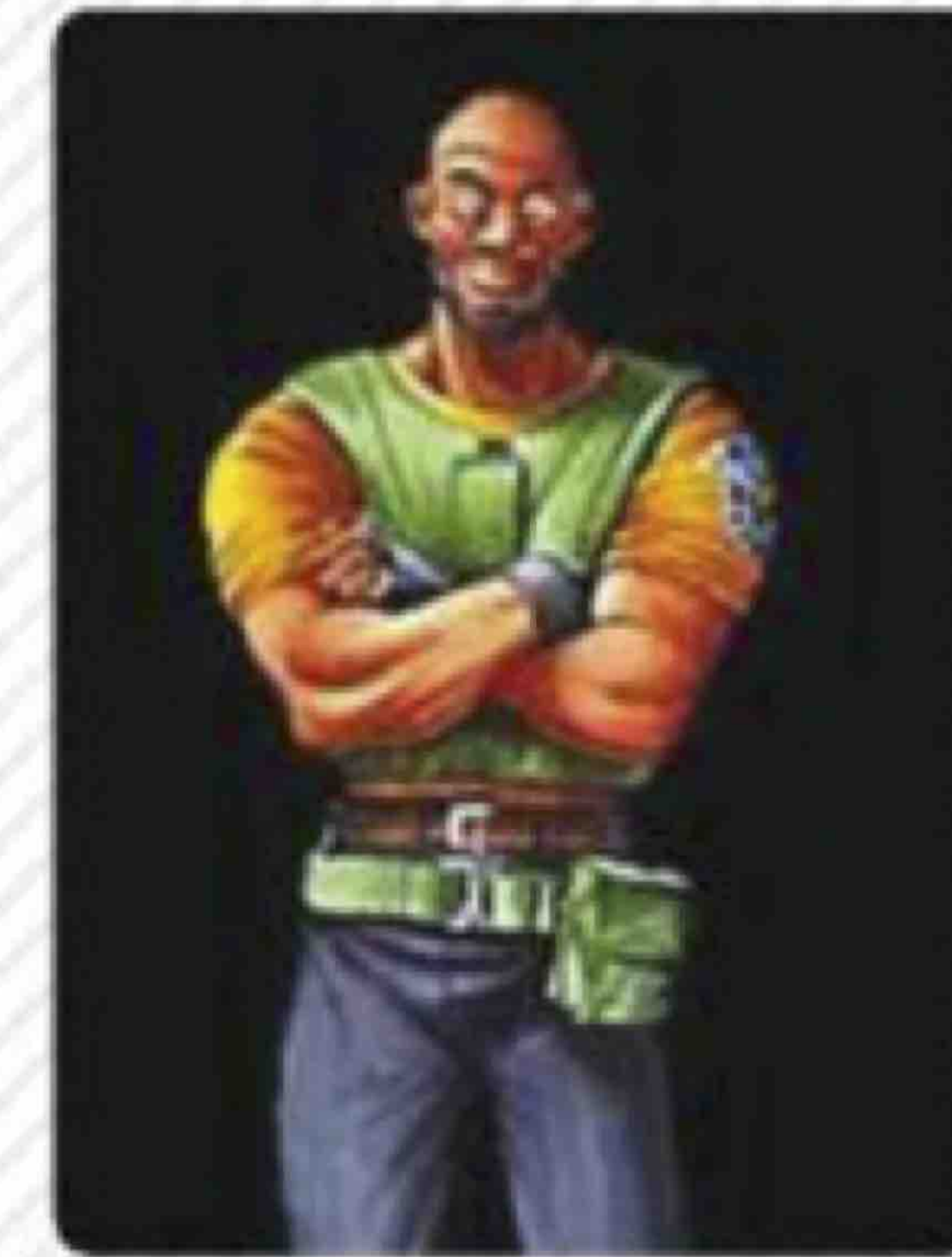
Rebecca Chambers
(Medic)
Bravo Team's sole survivor, Rebecca endured a fateful trip aboard the zombie-infested Ecliptic Express only to end up in the deadly Spencer Mansion. Her whereabouts are unknown.



Edward Dewey **DEAD**
(Helicopter Pilot)
Attacked and killed by zombie dogs where he sat in Bravo team's downed helicopter, just outside the mansion.



Forest Speyer **DEAD**
(Sniper)
Pecked to death by a murder of zombie crows on a mansion balcony. "It's presumed that he died" trying to fight off the birds with a bazooka.

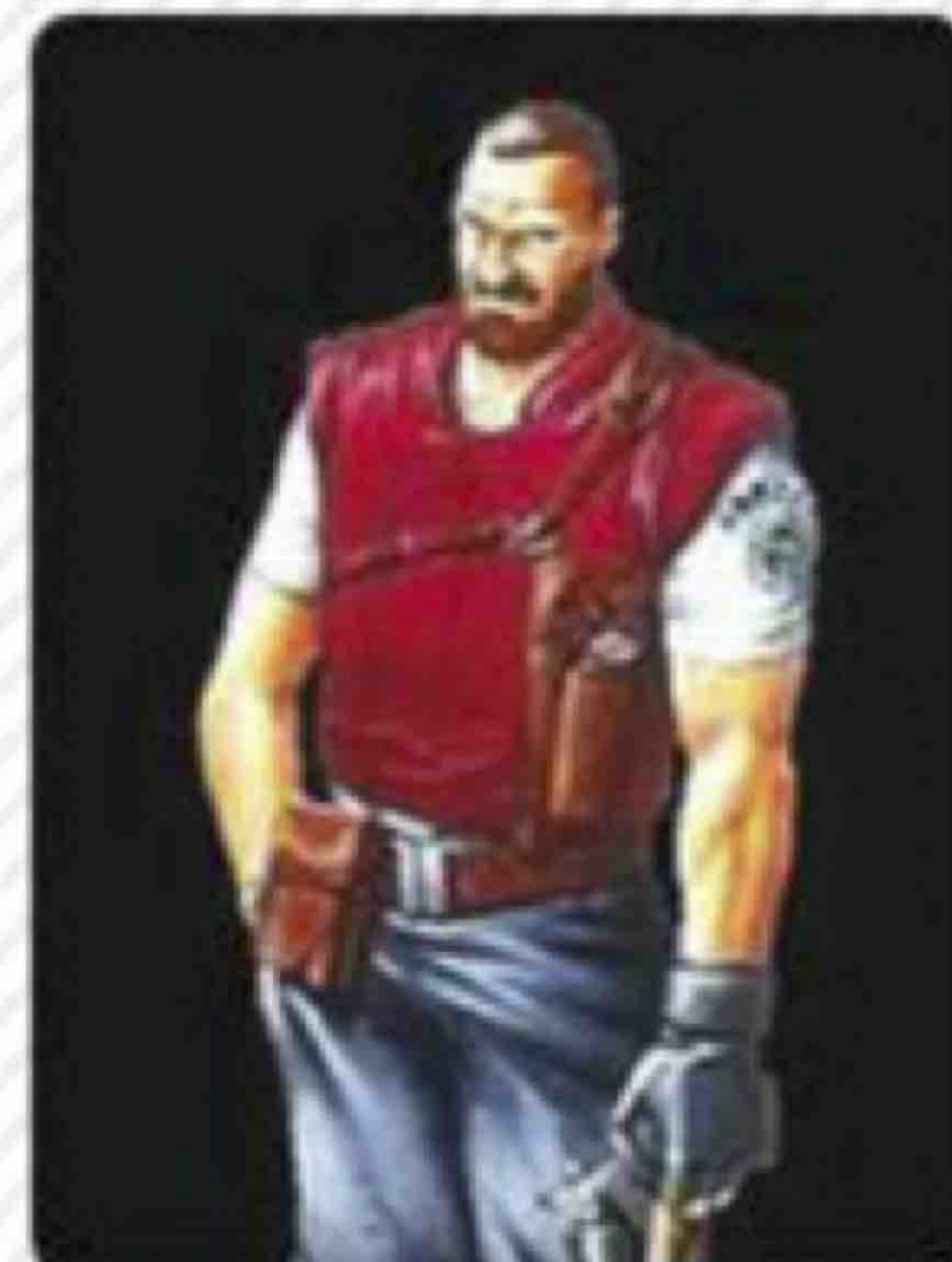


Kenneth Sullivan **DEAD**
(Chemist)
Attacked and beheaded by the first zombie encountered in Resident Evil. A mere shadow of his former self.

ALPHA TEAM



Albert Wesker **DEAD**
(Captain)
Alpha Team's traitorous undercover Umbrella agent died in a volcano after being shot in the eyes with rockets.



Barry Burton
(Weapons Expert)
Barry was last seen helping Jill Valentine escape Raccoon City via helicopter. Expect to hear more about this bearded wonder's whereabouts in Revelations 2.



Joseph Frost **DEAD**
(Maintenance)
Chewed to death by a zombie dog after Alpha team's helicopter landed outside the mansion.



Chris Redfield
(Sharpshooter, Co-Pilot)
After surviving the mansion incident, Chris' priorities shifted toward protecting the world from bioterrorism and popping steroids like candy.



Jill Valentine
(Master of Unlocking)
Survived the Mansion Incident, Raccoon City's nuclear scrubbing, and slavery under Wesker via a mind-control device in her cleavage.



Brad Vickers **DEAD**
(Helicopter Pilot)
Brad "Chickenheart" Vickers was nicknamed as such because he abandoned his compatriots at the mansion. Justice was served when Nemesis impaled Brad's face with a hand tentacle.



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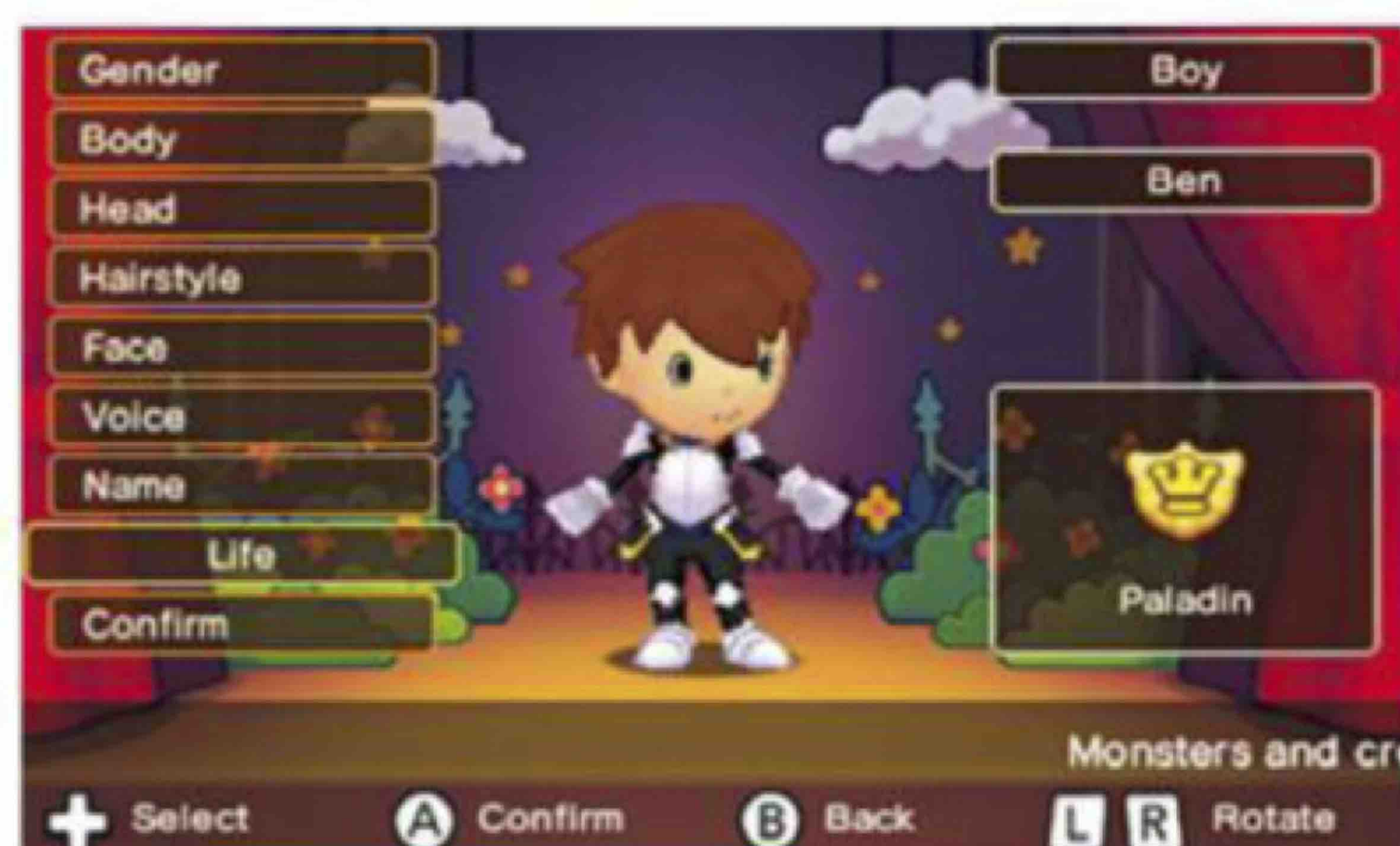
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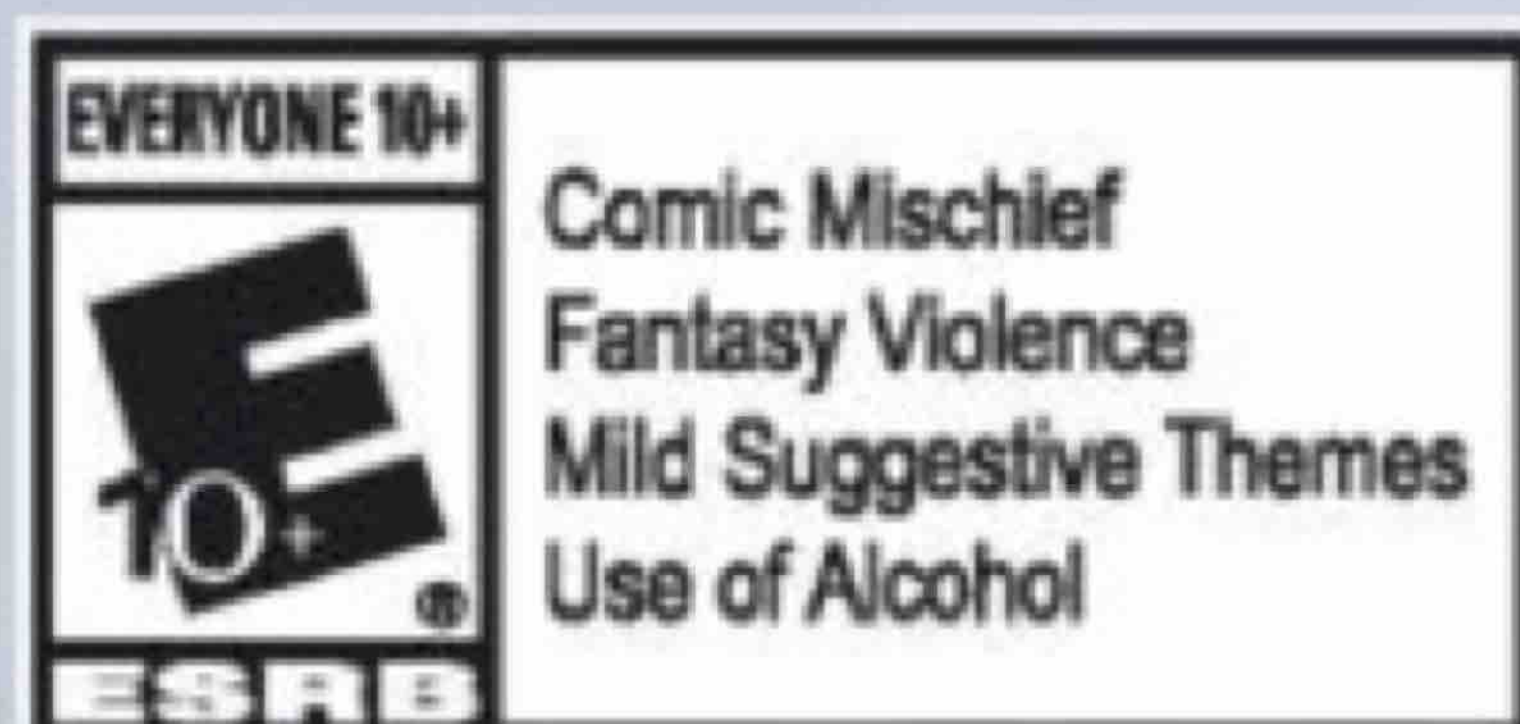
Start as one of the 12
life classes.



Easily switch to
another class...



...to expand your world
and your adventure.



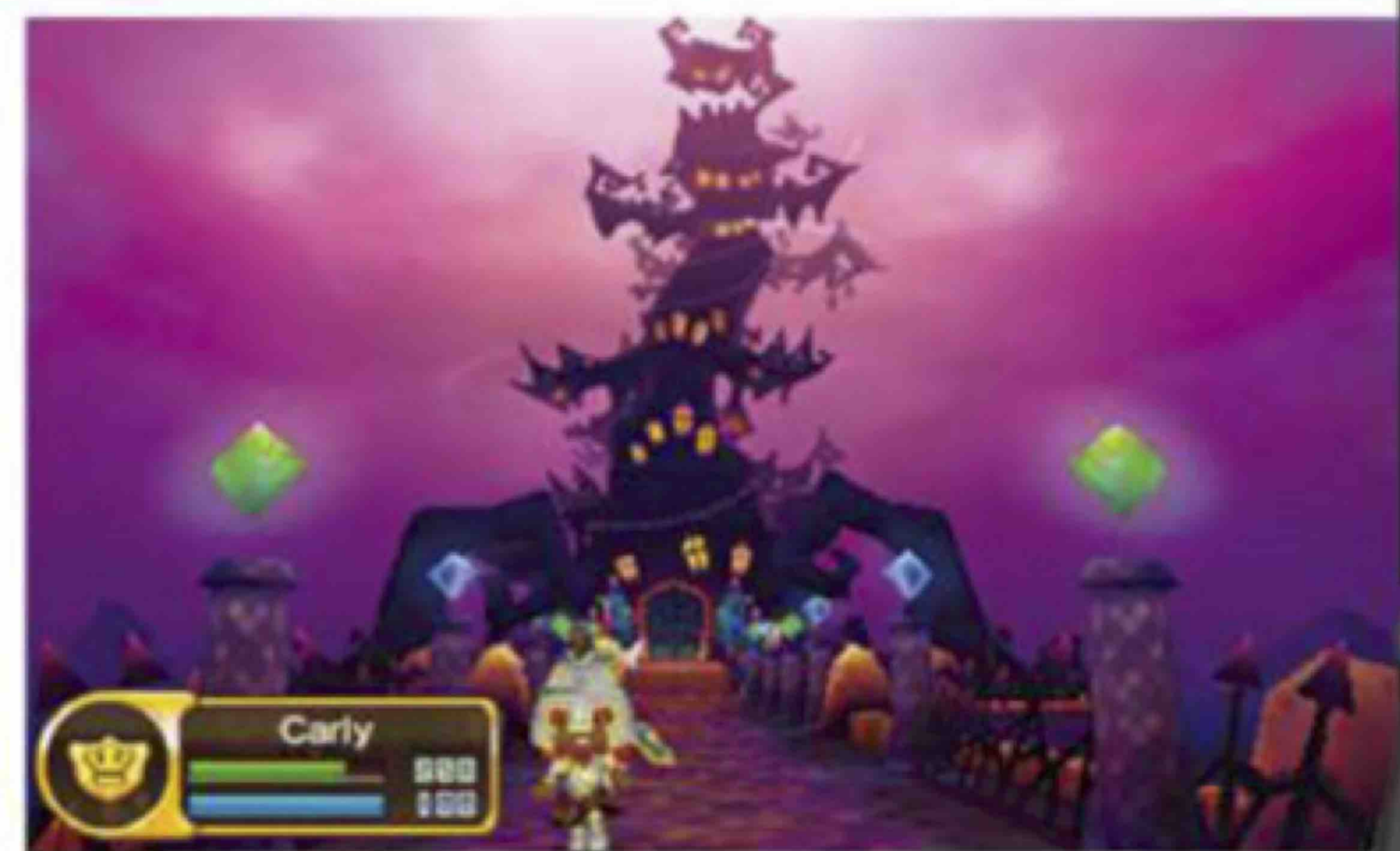
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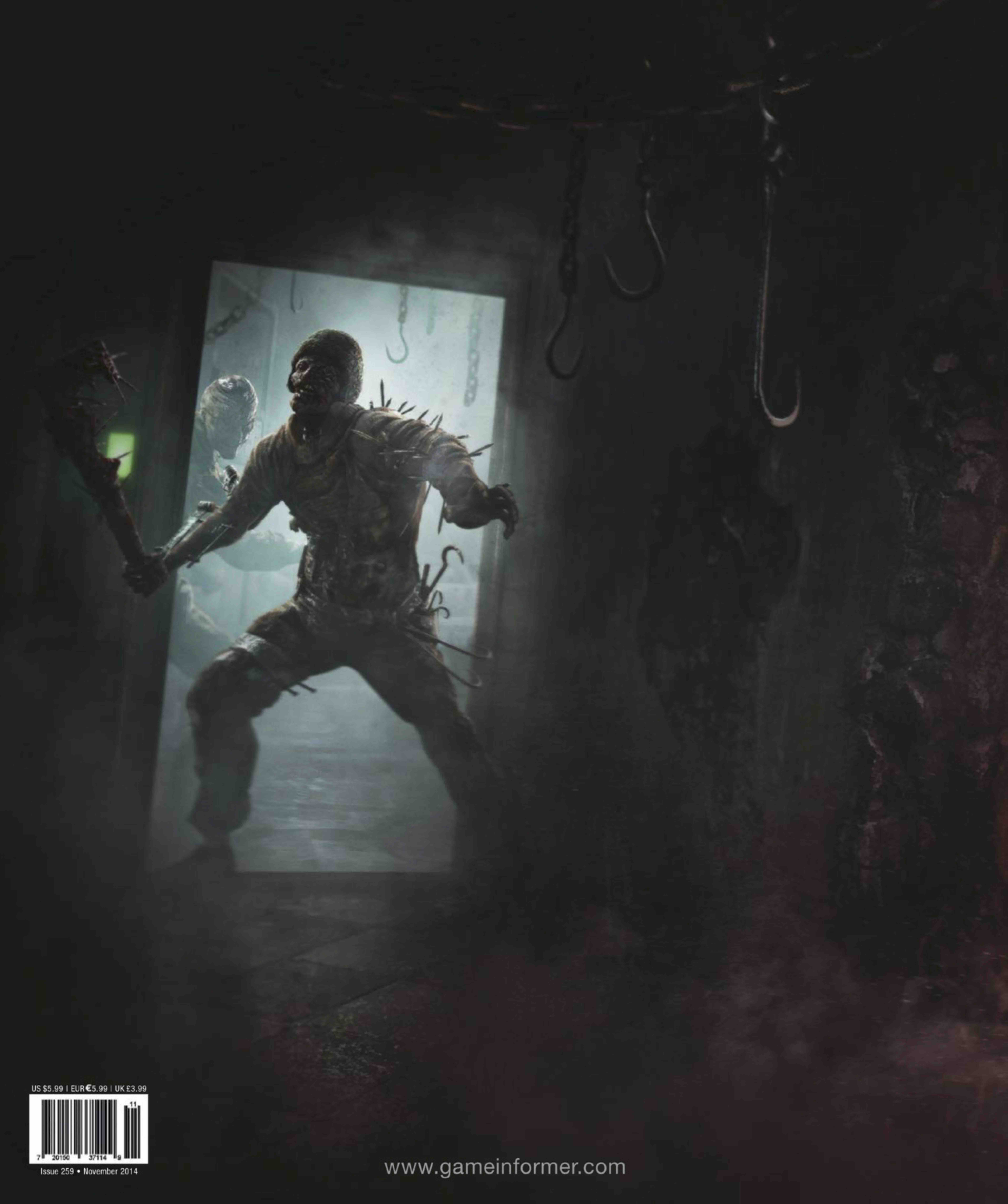
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