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ISSUE 164 DECEMBER 2006

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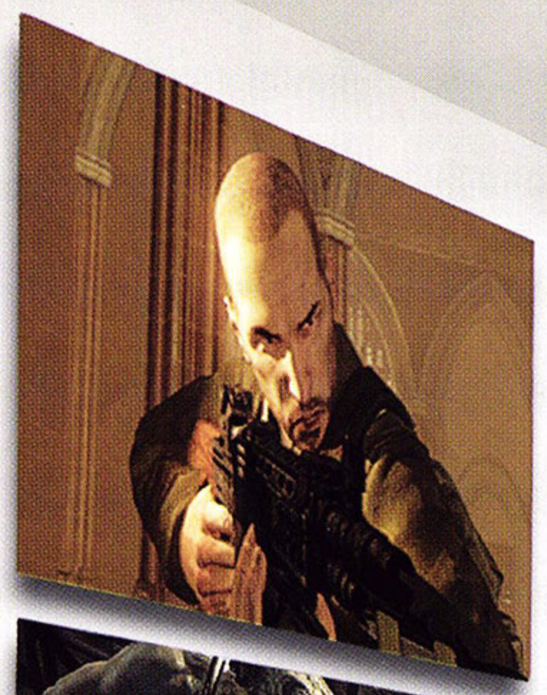

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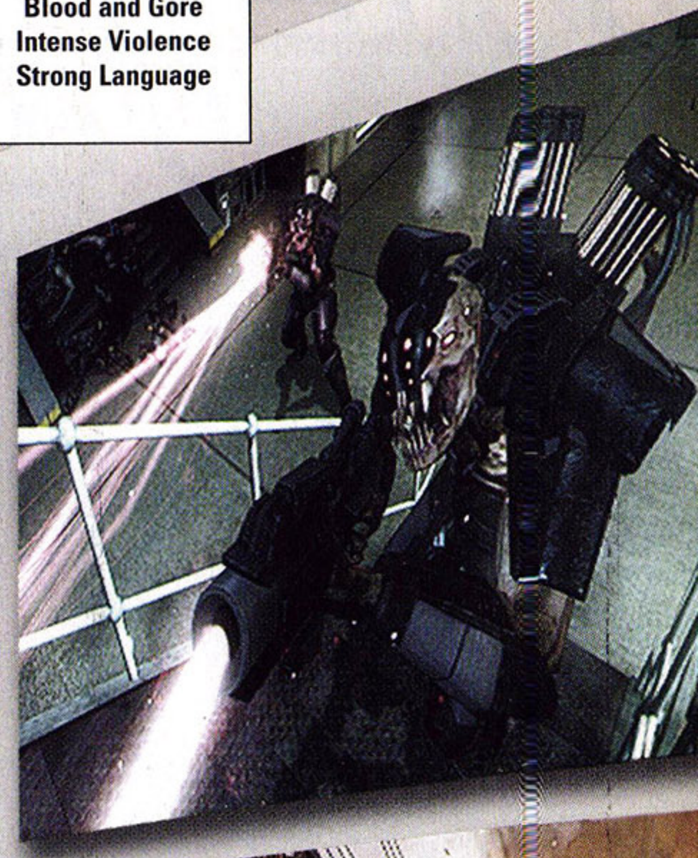

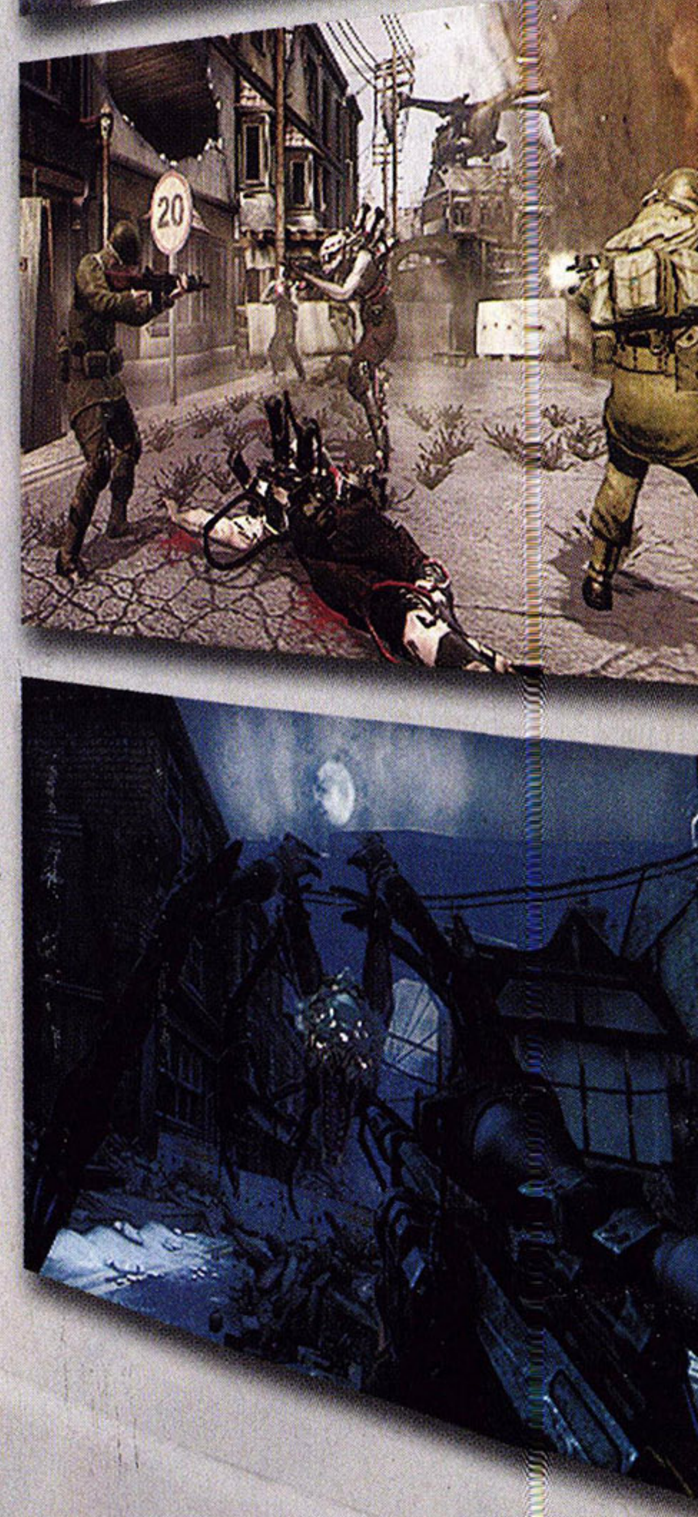

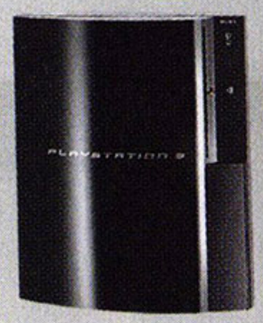

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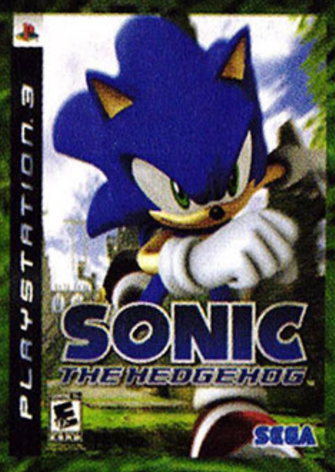

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4
CHARACTERS

23
JOB CLASSES

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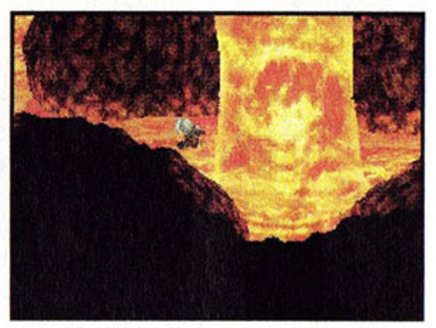

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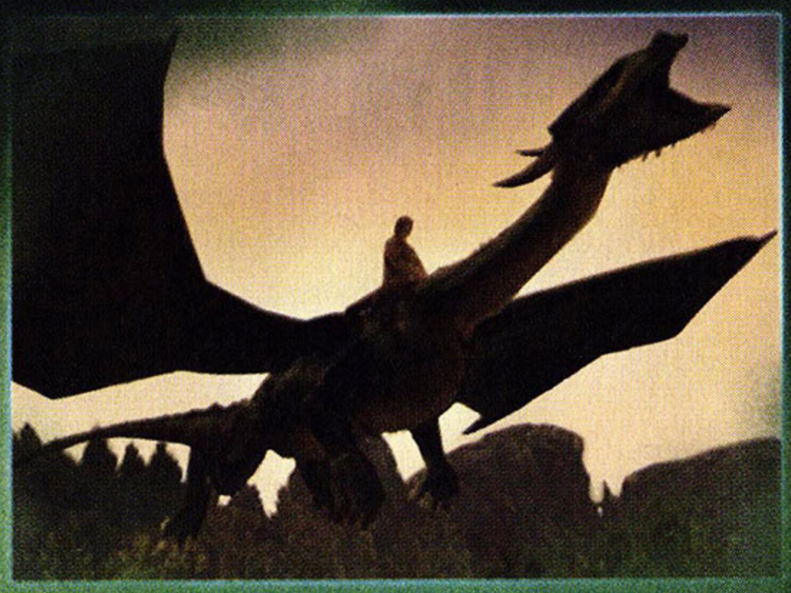

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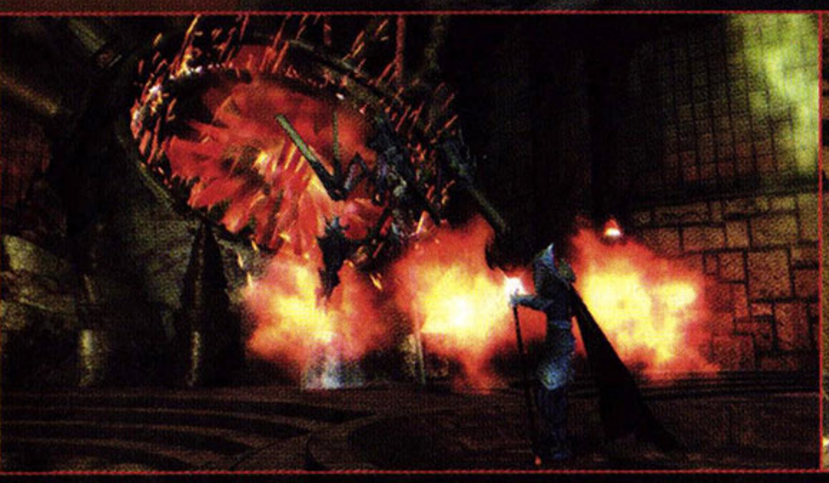

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CONTENTS

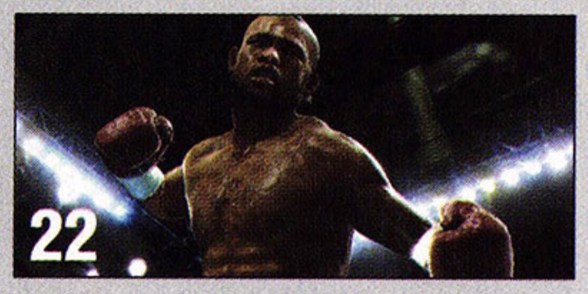
The "Monocles Of The Future" Issue

cover story

84 TOM CLANCY'S GHOST RECON: ADVANCED WARFIGHTER 2

We bring you the world-exclusive first look at the next evolution of Ubisoft's Ghost Recon franchise that will be appearing next year on Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3. Everything that made Advanced Warfighter excellent in its first incarnation on the 360 will be taken to the next level in this sequel, from the Cross Com to the outstanding visual effects. Advanced Warfighter 2 will take players to both sides of the Mexican border this time around, and we have the inside scoop on what this will all entail for squad-based action fans.

features



22 PLAYSTATION 3 LAUNCH EXTRAVAGANZA

What's in the box, what accessories you need, Sony's initial online plan – we drop all the knowledge and analysis you need to stay on top of this momentous event.

38 NEXT-GEN VENN DIAGRAM

What better way to figure out which systems you need to play the games you crave than a Venn diagram? You know, the thing with the circles and the intersections.

56 HOLIDAY BUYER'S GUIDE

There's a ton of cool stuff out there this holiday season. That's why we have 10 pages filled to the margins with totally sweet ways to run yourself out of money by the new year.

departments

14 STAFF
Read the team's latest favorites

16 GI SPY
Silly pictures of our life and times

18 DEAR GI
Your chance to fire back at us!

22 CONNECT
Where news, talk, and technology collide

52 INTERVIEW
We ask Martin Tremblay, newly appointed president of worldwide studios for Vivendi Games, about the company's past, future, and place in the video game industry

56 GEAR
Geeky gadget stuff for the masses

78 OPINION
GameTap's vice president of marketing, David Reid, opines that the PS3 and Xbox 360 may be the last home video game consoles

80 CALENDAR
Get hip to this month's happenings

94 PREVIEWS
Bethesda's new game, Rogue Warrior, as well as EA's Skate and Half-Life 2 on PS3 and 360 kick off this month's huge preview section

120 REVIEWS
Games of the Month: Gears of War and Resistance: Fall of Man

158 CHARTS
Retail Sales Data and the GI editors' Top 10 Games

160 SECRET ACCESS
Codes, strategies, and passwords

162 CLASSIC GI
Reliving gaming's greatest moments

165 ONLINE
See what's happening at Game Informer Online

166 GAME OVER
The end...or is it?

game index

GAME	PAGE #
Ace Combat X: Skies of Deception	157
Afterburner: Black Falcon	117
Age of Empires III: The Warchiefs	149
Alan Wake	104
Blazing Angels: Squadrons of WWII	118
Bully	132
Call of Duty 3	142
Capcom Classic Collections Volume 2	130
Crackdown	106
Crossfire	119
Dark Messiah of Might & Magic	148
dot hack//G.U. Vol. 1//Rebirth	133
Dynasty Warriors Vol. 2	156
EA Replay	156
Earth Defense Force 3	118
Elite Beat Agents	152
F.E.A.R.	144
F.E.A.R.: Extraction Point	150
FIFA Soccer 07	146
Final Fantasy III	152
Final Fantasy XII: Revenant Wings	117
Full Auto 2: Battlelines	116
Gears Of War	140
Genji: Days of the Blade	136
Gitaroo Man Lives!	155
Grand Theft Auto: Vice City Stories	155
Guitar Hero II	133
Gun Showdown	154
Gunpey	157
Half-Life 2	100
Justice League Heroes	130
Lost Planet: Extreme Condition	102
Lumines II	156
Mage Knight Apocalypse	149
Mage Knight: Destiny's Soldier	157
Marvel: Ultimate Alliance	122
Mass Effect	98
Medal of Honor Heroes	157
Metal Gear Solid: Portable Ops	110
Mobile Suit Gundam: Crossfire	137
Mortal Kombat: Armageddon	128
NBA 07	138
NBA Live 07	146
Need For Speed Carbon	126
Neverwinter Nights 2	151
ParaWorld	150
Pokémon Ranger	156
Resistance: Fall of Man	134
Ridge Racer 7	137
Rogue Warrior	96
Sam & Max Episode 1: Culture Shock	119
Shadowrun	118
Shin Megami Tensei: Devil Summoner	133
Sid Meier's Railroads!	149
Sims 2: Pets, The (Multi)	130
Sims 2: Pets, The (PC)	150
Skate	94
Splinter Cell: Double Agent	145
Star Wars Empire At War: Forces of Corruption	150
Star Wars: Lethal Alliance	119
Superman Returns	108
Thrillville	130
Tokobot Plus: Mysteries of the Karakuri	133
Tony Hawk's Project 8	147
Valhalla Knights	119
Viva Piñata	112
Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War – Dark Crusade	149
World of Warcraft: The Burning Crusade	114
WWE Smackdown vs. Raw 2007	124
Yoshi's Island 2	154

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STAFF

People Who Actually Get Paid To Play Video Games

MY HOLIDAY WISH LIST

ANDY McNAMARA
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

With the holidays just around the corner, I figured it was time for me to make a list of gifts that I want for the holidays. This is in a completely random order, with no particular meaning.

Gears of War – I can't even begin to imagine how much fun I'm going to have with this monster once I load it up on a 73-inch, 1080p monitor and crank up the sound so loud it wakes the dead.

Resistance: Fall of Man – If I can manage to get my hands on a PlayStation 3, this is easily the killer app (I guess I should add a wish that my contacts don't fail me on the PlayStation 3, but I'll just hope it all works out).

The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess – Since Wii Sports is now a pack-in, the only thing left to make my Wii life complete is a little Zelda. I do wish I could play it on GameCube first, but since that's coming out at a later date, the Wii edition it shall be.

World of Warcraft: The Burning Crusade – Sure I'm a paladin-hating member of Horde, but come the release of The Burning Crusade I'll be basking in the delights of Blessing of Wisdom just like the pathetic Alliance.

A Time Machine – So I can jump through time and play Mass Effect, Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots, Halo 3, Final Fantasy XIII (and Versus), Resident Evil 5, BioShock, God of War 2, Devil May Cry 4, Super Mario Galaxy, and about 50 other titles I'm dying to play.

A Magic Wand – So I could swing it around and force the video game powers that be to put out more quality titles for the PSP – it's a wonderful device that has been collecting far too much dust.

A Genie Bottle – My first wish would be to make Microsoft go back in time and make the hard drive standard equipment on the Xbox 360. The second would be used to make Sony rethink their launch and just make one PS3 available (the 20GB one) so I can stop hearing all the complaints about the $600 price tag. And the final wish is for a Ferrari – yeah, it's not game related, sue me.

Well that's it for my stupid list! And as another added bonus, Game Informer reviews will now be available online as close as we can get to when a game ships. So if you haven't gotten your issue in the future, make sure to look us up online so you don't accidentally buy Spy Hunter: Nowhere to Run when you should have been getting yourself a copy of Okami. And finally, we say farewell to Jeremy who has chosen to go to the dark side and join the gaming PR ranks.

Cheers,

Reiner >> *reiner@gameinformer.com*

Handle: The Raging Gamer **Expertise:** RPGs, Action, First-Person Shooters, Strategy, Sports, Fighting **Interests:** PlayStation 3 & Wii (Both Are Amazing Systems With Top-Tier Launch Games), Daily Sword Fights In The Office (Who Will Be The First One-Eyed Editor?), Getting Married **Dislikes:** The Sinking Feeling That My PlayStation 3 Is Actually A Cylon, Final Fantasy Bosses That Cast "Dissolve," PS3 Not Having Something Similar To Achievements **Current Favorite Games:** Marvel: Ultimate Alliance, Resistance: Fall Of Man, Gears Of War, Lumines Live, Crackdown, The Legend Of Zelda: Twilight Princess, Guitar Hero II

Matt >> *matt@gameinformer.com*

Handle: The Original Gamer **Expertise:** First-Person Shooters, Action/Platform, Action/Adventure, Action/Sports **Interests:** Zantigo, Choco Tacos, *STNNNG – Fake Fake*, *Life Of Monotony: Six Punk Bands From Minneapolis*, Termanology – *Hood Politics IV: Show And Prove* Mixtape, Blue And White Suede K-Swiss, Vikings Football, Wishing Jeremy Well In His New Career **Dislikes:** Election Ads ("Joe Juba: Radical Ideas We Can't Afford"), Almost Every Fox Sports Football Announcing Crew, Saying Goodbye To Jeremy **Current Favorite Games:** Resistance: Fall Of Man, Bully, Okami, Guitar Hero II, Grand Theft Auto: Vice City Stories

Kato >> *kato@gameinformer.com*

Handle: The Game Katana **Expertise:** Sports, Racing, Action/Adventure, Action/Platform **Interests:** The Wild's All-Slovak Line, Zantigo, *The Departed*, Corinne Bailey Rae, *Inside Man*, The Continent Of Zosstralia – May It Always Know Prosperity **Dislikes:** Scissor Sisters (Absolute F------ Crap), The Celebrity Guests On Monday Night Football, Pascal Dupuis (The Wild's Own Wild-Killer), Women Who Look Like Ronnie Corbett, Chuck Taylor Shoes **Current Favorite Games:** Gitaroo Man Lives!, Need For Speed Carbon, Resistance: Fall Of Man, Guitar Hero II, Bully, White Knight, Gears Of War

Jeremy >> *jeremy@gameinformer.com*

Handle: Gamezilla **Expertise:** First-Person Shooters, Survival Horror, Action/Platform, Fighting, Strategy/RPGs **Interests:** Moving On To A New Section Of The Gaming Industry, Writing One Year's Worth Of GI Covers, Having An Excellent Final Trip **Dislikes:** Saying Goodbye To All The Great People At GI, Working In An Office With 75% Less Nerd Saturation, Playing Games Like A Normal Person **Current Favorite Games:** Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter 2, Gears Of War, Splinter Cell: Double Agent, Marvel: Ultimate Alliance, Justice League Heroes, Disgaea 2: Cursed Memories

Adam >> *adam@gameinformer.com*

Handle: The Alpha Gamer **Expertise:** RPGs, Strategy, First-Person Shooters, Fighting **Interests:** Seeing Joe Cry At Weddings (He Totally Does), Wrecking Shop In The Burning Crusade Beta, Computers That Do What They're Told Without Any Back Talk, *Scrubs*, Hilarious Photoshops Of Cats **Dislikes:** Cats That Refuse To Ever Shut Up, Rappers Who "Retire" Only To Return To Huge Media Hype, The Thought Of Shelling Out Mad Cash To Eventually Upgrade My PC Once Again **Current Favorite Games:** World Of Warcraft, Neverwinter Nights 2, Dark Messiah Of Might & Magic, Gears Of War

Joe >> *joe@gameinformer.com*

Handle: The Real American Gamer **Expertise:** RPGs, Adventure, Action, Strategy, Puzzle **Interests:** Finally Conquering Zosstrailia And Deposing Its Ruler (Your Citizens Will Know No Peace!), Making Up Schnapps, The Masamune, Running For Office On The "Spaceships For Everyone" Platform **Dislikes:** The Spread Of Crying-Related Lies (I Am An Emotionless Machine, People!), People QQing About Warlocks (L2P!), Reiner's 3 a.m. Phone Calls About Imaginary Bosses And Spells **Current Favorite Games:** Final Fantasy XII, Dark Messiah Of Might & Magic, Lumines II, Lumines Live, Neverwinter Nights 2, Bully, Final Fantasy III

Miller >> *miller@gameinformer.com*

Handle: The Once And Future Gamer **Expertise:** RPGs, Action/Adventure, Fighting, Platform, First-Person Shooters **Interests:** Fondue Of All Varieties, Transformers Movie Info (I'm Cheering For You – Don't Let Me Down), The Discovery Of A Minneapolis-Based Purveyor Of Chicken And Waffles, My Balrog **Dislikes:** Waiting For Building Contractors To Finish My Basement, Jim And Pam In Separate Offices, No More Gamezilla (May You Zilla More Games Wherever You Go) **Current Favorite Games:** Guitar Hero II, Final Fantasy III, Okami, Splinter Cell Double Agent, Lumines II, Tony Hawk's Project 8

Bertz >> *mattbertz@gameinformer.com*

Handle: Lord Gamington III **Expertise:** First-Person Shooters, Sports, Action, RPGs, Strategy **Interests:** DirectX 10, *American Hardcore*, Putting People On Notice (www.shipbrook.com/onnotice), Miller's Dietary Habits (Dude Can Eat), Burninating The Countryside In Guitar Hero II **Dislikes:** Vista Delays, Annoying Madden Cutscenes (We Get It, A Ripped Backup QB Holds For Extra Kicks. Every Time.), Missing NYC, Everyone Leaving As I Arrive (Jeremy And Lisa, I'm Looking At You) **Current Favorite Games:** Bully, Gears Of War, Rainbow Six: Vegas, Company Of Heroes, Resistance: Fall Of Man

Ben >> *ben@gameinformer.com*

Handle: Your Friendly Neighborhood Gamer **Expertise:** Action/Adventure, Action/RPGs, Platform, Survival Horror, First-Person Shooters **Interests:** Having A Home (Yea!), Mountain Dew, L&L Hawaiian BBQ, 18th Century Magic Tricks, Freak Watching The L.A. Beaches **Dislikes:** Sitting In A Cab In L.A. Traffic, When People Call You Back Without Listening To Your Message, Japanese Beetles (They're Everywhere), The Still-Incessant Threats Of An Oncoming Cold Winter **Current Favorite Games:** Okami, Bully, F.E.A.R., Devil May Cry 3: Special Edition, Valkyrie Profile: Lenneth

Andy >> *andy@gameinformer.com*

Handle: The Game Hombre **Expertise:** RPGs, Action/Platform, Driving, First-Person Shooters **Interests:** PlayStation 3, Wii, *Studio 60 On The Sunset Strip*, *The Office*, *The Colbert Report* **Dislikes:** The Fact That There Are So Many Months With Nada For Games, Then Three Months Of A Billion Games I Want To Play **Current Favorite Games:** Resistance: Fall Of Man, Gears Of War, World Of Warcraft, Dark Messiah Of Might & Magic, Guitar Hero II, Marvel Ultimate Alliance, Need For Speed Carbon

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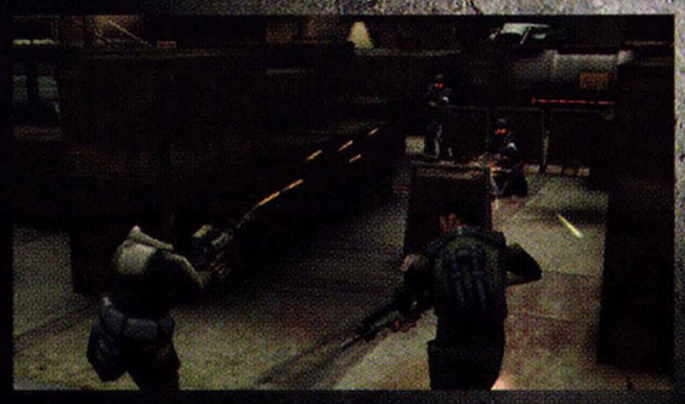
THE HELGHAST ARE BACK



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PSP
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GISPY

Candid Photos From The Seedy Underbelly Of The Video Game Industry

8

7

1

1 Kato and Sony's Corey Lewis look like they're up to something. We'll have to remember to keep an eye on them. Hey, what's that burning smell? **2** Freelancer extraordinaire Marc Saltzman plays on one of the world's largest high-definition televisions – the Jumbotron at the Rogers Center (Skydome) in Toronto. It's almost as big as Andy's TV **3** After the guests are gone, Jeremy decides to "redecorate" the Game Informer offices before he leaves. Fire in the hole! **4** Bobz "Pickle King" Fleischer of Sandbox Strategies parties with Shaq Daddy **5** Billy Berghammer of GI Online gets a chance to meet Grasshopper's mercurial genius, Suda 51, the man behind Killer 7 and the upcoming Wii title Heroes **6** Jeremy hangs loose with Sega's Tim Ernst, Jenny Sue, and Christopher Kaminski **7** At an event for Rogue Warrior, Miller chills with best-selling author and former Navy SEAL commander Richard Marcinko. If Miller looks calm standing next to a man that could kill him with his bare hands, it's because he's used to it (His desk is next to Adam's!) **8** The one and only Ludacris throws them 'bows at Sony's PlayStation 3 "Pimp Beyond" event

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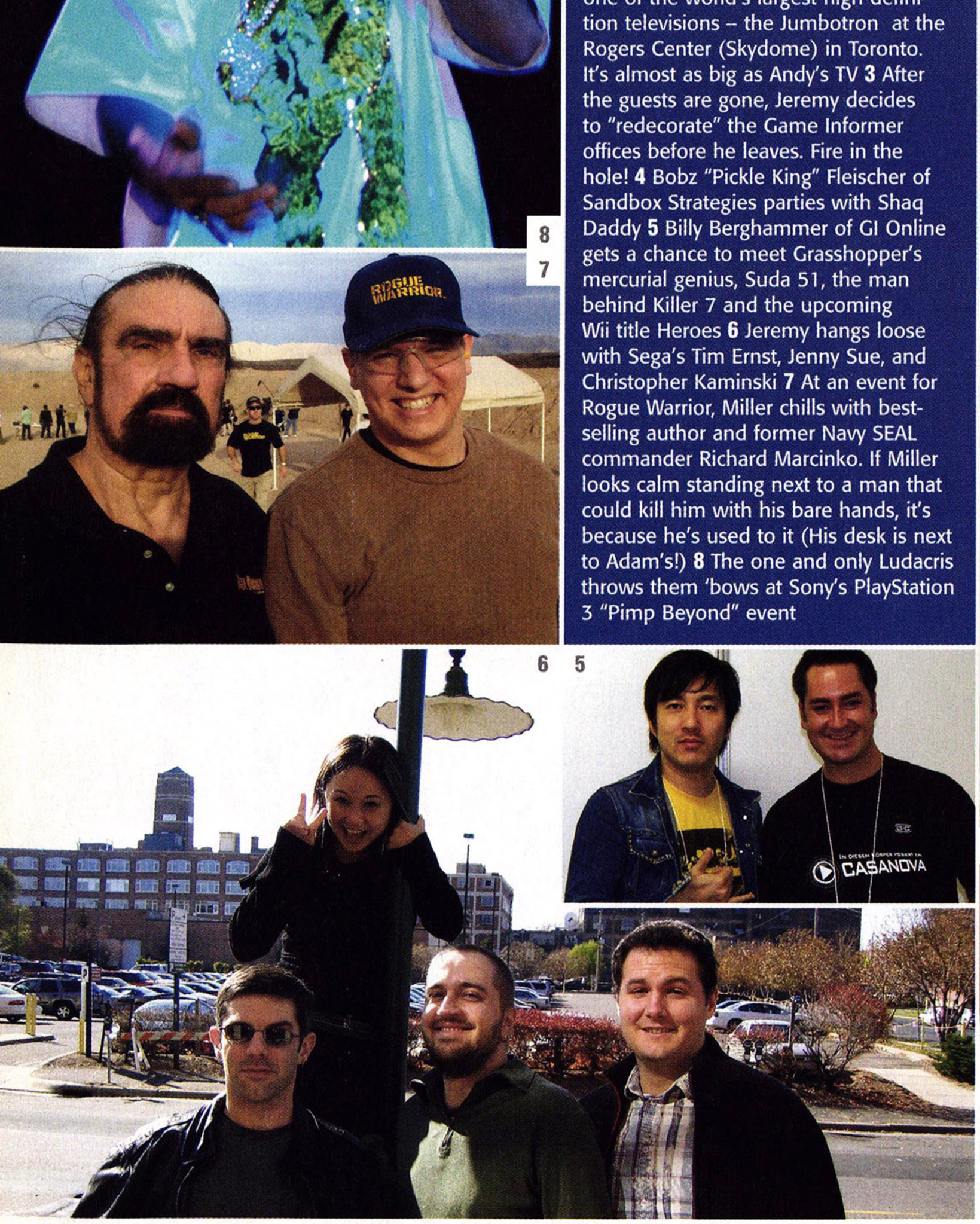

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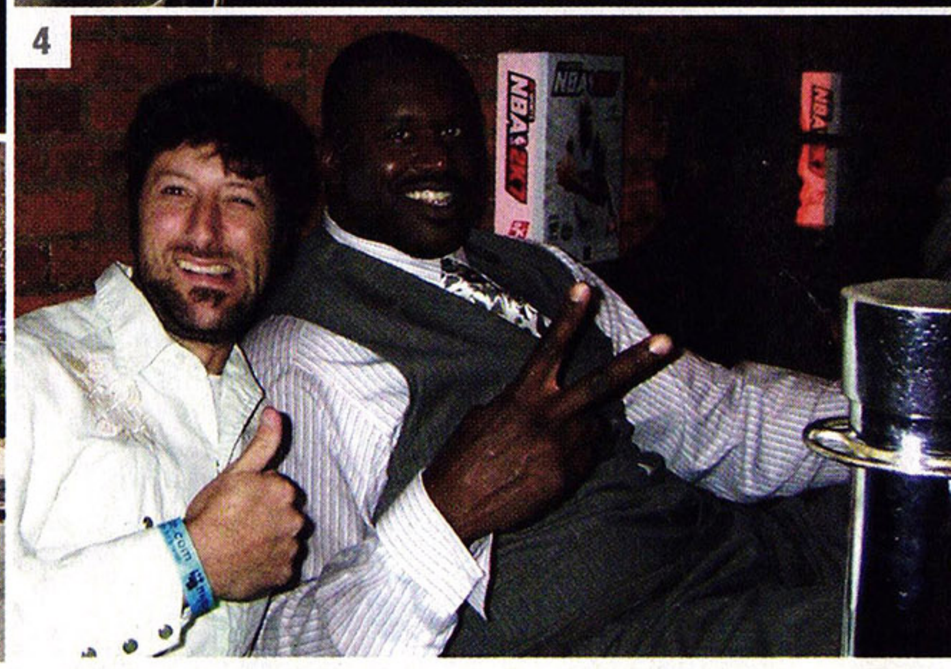

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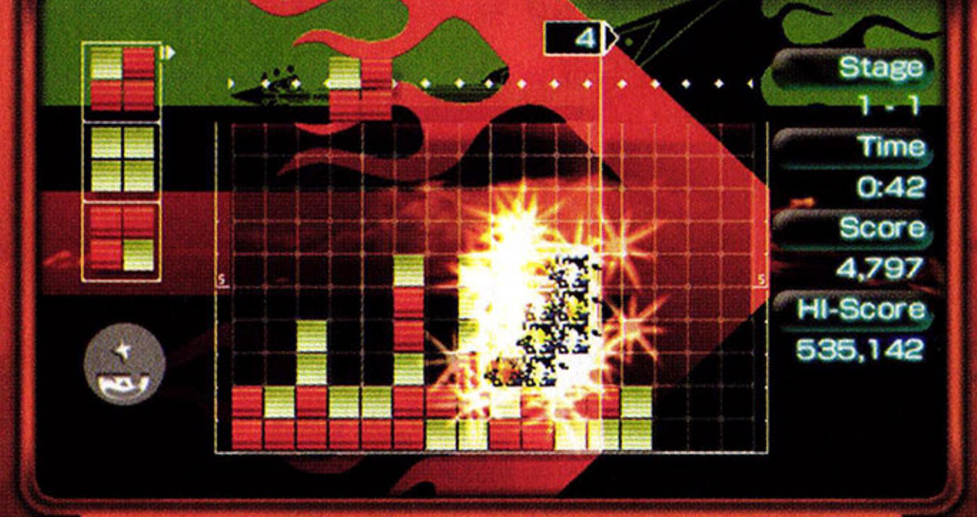

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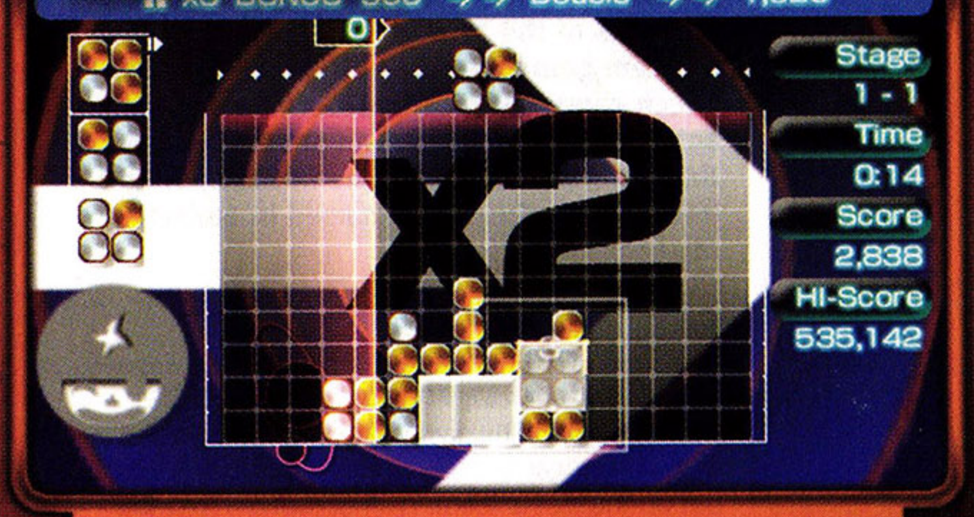

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DEAR GI

The Readers Strike Back

GI COMMUNITY

Game Informer has a thriving online community, and this is where they can sound off about issues facing the gaming industry today

THE QUESTION:
What gaming system(s) are you planning to buy this holiday season?

The Wii, because when you're thirteen with very limited income, you don't have the money to blow on a five hundred dollar PS3. I don't even think I'm going to be able to get a game with the Wii.
gamenskate

I will be buying the Xbox 360 because it will have been out almost a year since the launch. It appears that most of the kinks associated with the launch have been worked out, and there are a lot more games to choose from.
Cheech11

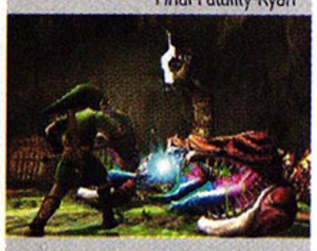
360. The last console I bought at launch was the Sega Saturn, and that taught me a valuable lesson. I like to wait at least a year so the manufacturing kinks can be worked out, and so the game library can build up a bit. The 360's library is looking great right about now, as is its holiday lineup.
Durandal

The Wii. Nintendo has first party titles I love, downloading games from yesteryear will beat searching for them in used game stores, and the controller looks to offer some innovative gameplay that appeals to me and probably my non-gamer friends.
trevis_w

With college, gas, and calculus around the corner, it looks like I'm going to buy a graphing calculator and play the games on that.
ceasarhaha

I worked my butt off this whole summer so when November comes by, I'll have enough to get me a PS3. Being a Metal Gear fan, a piece of me would be missing if I never got to play Metal Gear Solid 4. The PS3 looks to be the sexiest system coming out.
Baddude5408

This holiday season I'm going with the Wii. The low price, innovative control scheme, Virtual Console, and a new Zelda game allows me to happily hand over the 250 bucks with a cherry on top.
Final-Fatality-Ryan



Do you want to make your voice heard? Weigh in with your opinion at www.gameinformer.com/forums

GIVE PROPS

I just finished watching *Stay Alive*, and I had a question. At the end of the movie the game store receives a shipment of the game, and I noticed that when he went to put it in, there were two rows of Game Informer with *Stay Alive* on the cover. I never got that issue. Did you guys create it specifically for the movie?

Daniel Tuma
via yahoo.com

■ Yep, the cover was made exclusively for *Stay Alive*. As far as what's under the hood, we'll let you in on a little secret: It's actually just Issue 146 (Gears of War) with a special front, back, and spine. Even so, if you consider yourself a true GI collector, you'll probably want to head over to Game Informer Online (www.gameinformer.com). By signing up for our newsletter on the site, you could be eligible to win a poster-sized print of the unique *Stay Alive* cover, as well as copies of the movie itself. After all, you can never have too much Frankie Muniz-related merchandise! So, register and keep an eye on your inbox for more details.

THE MYSTERIOUS SWORDSMEN

I've always wondered something: In what games did Roy and Marth from Super Smash Brothers Melee originally appear in?

Chris Escalante
via aol.com

■ Roy and Marth are from the Fire Emblem series, though they may be unfamiliar to U.S. fans of the franchise. The first Fire Emblem game we received on our shores, which came out on the GBA in 2003, was actually the seventh in the series. By that time, Roy and Marth's time in the spotlight had passed; they both starred in earlier Japan-only entries.

EVIL AFOOT

I need your help. My Xbox Live account has a curse or something. Every time I join a big team battle slayer game online in Halo 2, I am always put on the losing team. I'm not joking about this – my teammates are idiots. How can I fix this?

Ryan Stearms
via yahoo.com

■ What injustice! Unfortunately, there is only one way to shake this embarrassing trend: Call Microsoft customer service asking why your account has been flagged with the "only team with chumps" tag. Once they (correctly) inform you that there is no such tag, you'll probably have to come to terms with the fact that your Xbox isn't cursed, and that you aren't always the lone competent hero on a team full of morons. Your team doesn't win because it doesn't kill enough of the other guys, and like it or not, you're a part of that problem. Don't be a sore loser by making excuses.

NEOCLASSICAL

I absolutely love retro games. Therefore, I skip right to the Classic GI section every time I get my newest issue, but I've been starting to get more and more displeased with some of the things I've seen in there. One issue had System Shock 2 from 1999? The issue before that had an article on the Silent Hill movie that came out this year?! What exactly do you consider "classic"?

Tim Hagel
via gmail.com

■ The subjects of the Classic GI aren't restricted to a rigid time frame. The section isn't just about reminiscing about 8- or 16-bit titles; video games have a rich history that continues to influence the games we play today. Yes, the Silent Hill movie just came out this year, but the series itself started almost eight years ago and has helped evolve the survival/horror genre. System Shock 2, in addition to being extremely influential, is a precursor to BioShock, one of the most-anticipated games of 2007. Our industry isn't just about what games are coming out this month – it's about having a sense of the games that came before them as well. We love retro titles, and sometimes we reach way back in time for a Classic GI spotlight. However, we we can't promise the section won't touch on more recent subject matter, so if you want all '80s all the time, just watch your old *Airwolf* tapes. If there's a name cooler than "Stringfellow Hawke," we haven't heard it.

SALUTE TO THE JUGGER

The reference you made in the Charts section of Issue 162 about football having a puppy skull and Juggers is obviously referring to Juggernaut multiplayer in Halo 2.

Ward Knippling
Spearfish, SD

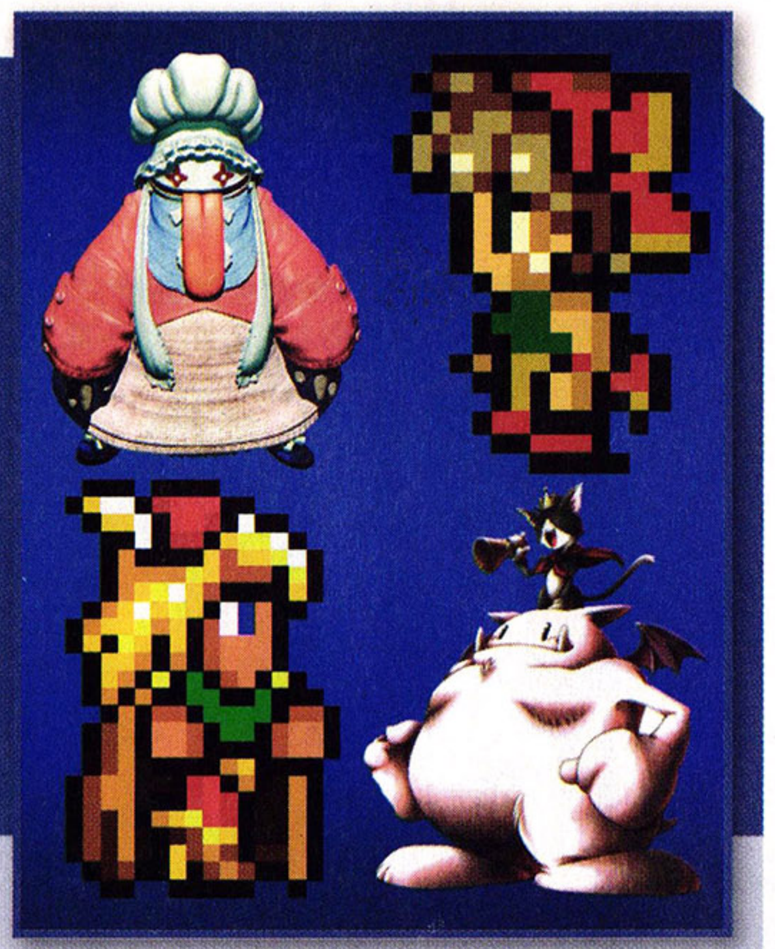
In your blurb under NCAA Football 07 there was an obscure reference to a Rutger Hauer movie involving dog skulls and football. You offered "10,000 bonus points for anyone who gets this reference." Everyone knows the author was referring to timeless classic *The Blood of Heroes*. My 10,000 points, please.

Daniel Rowe
New Kensington, PA

DEAD WEIGHT

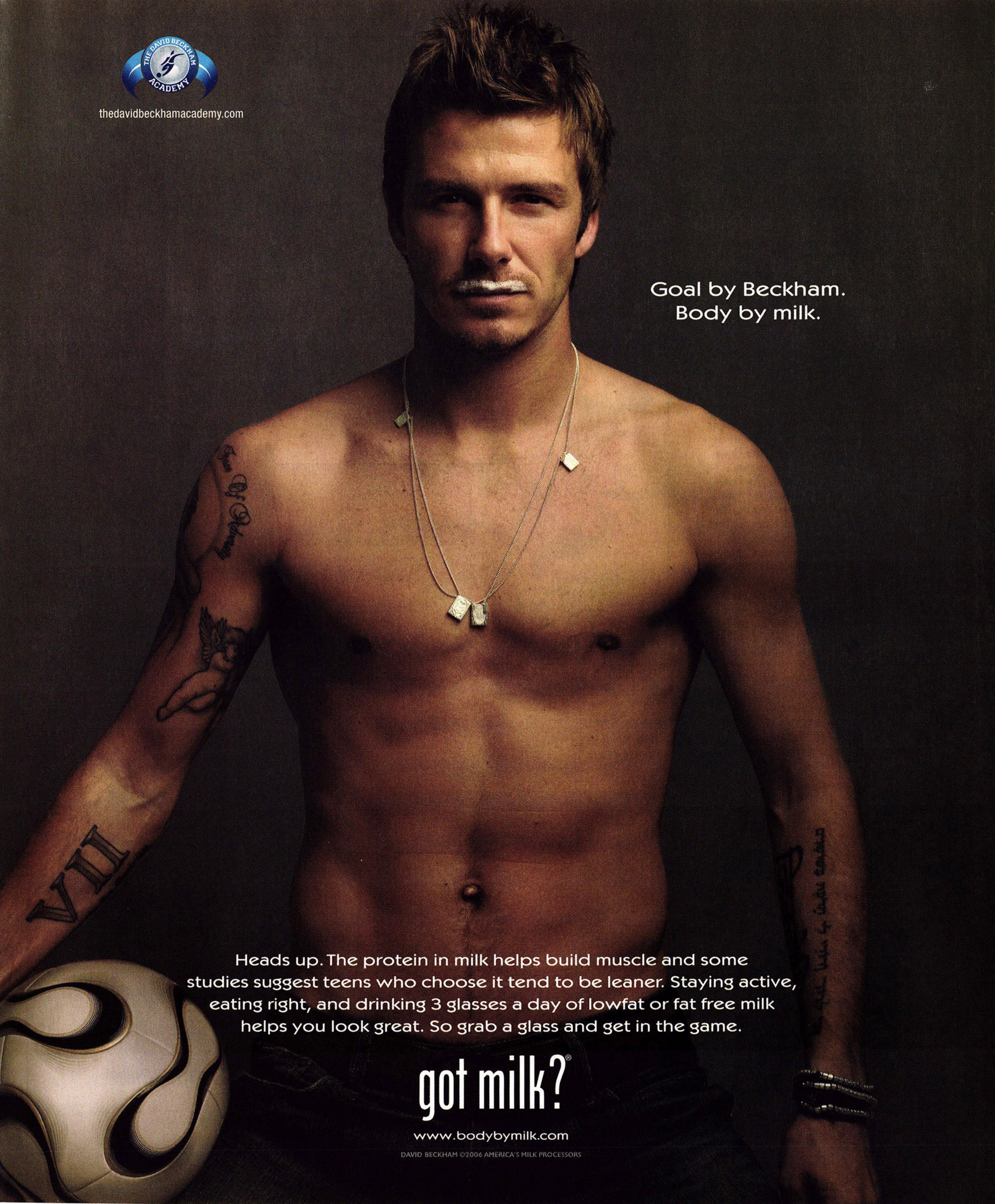
Something in your review of Dirge of Cerebus annoyed me. Referring to Cait Sith and Yuffie, Joe said that "any FF VII fan who actually knows how to play the game can tell you that these are the losers you abandon on the airship as soon as possible." They may not be the most trustworthy of characters, but the choice of leaving them behind is a matter of whether you like them, not whether you can play the game. I've used different teams through many playthroughs of the Final Fantasy titles, and I have never seen a single character that isn't useful in some situations.

Andrew Farris
via yahoo.com



■ If you've never seen Final Fantasy characters that are absolutely useless, you probably have a rare vision disorder called *Spoonybardicus Transparenta*. Those afflicted with this condition are simply unable to process the visual information emitted by characters that are total wastes of space. If you think you might suffer from this abnormality, simply look at the box above. If it appears blank and unpopulated, we're sorry: You are unable to see the lamest losers available in the Final Fantasy series. On the other hand, if looking at the box fills you with rage and frustration, just take a deep breath and think about Auron. There you go. Feel better?

Send your comments to Game Informer. Snail Mail: Game Informer Magazine • Attn: Dear GI • 724 North First St., 4th Floor • Minneapolis, MN 55401 Email: deargi@gameinformer.com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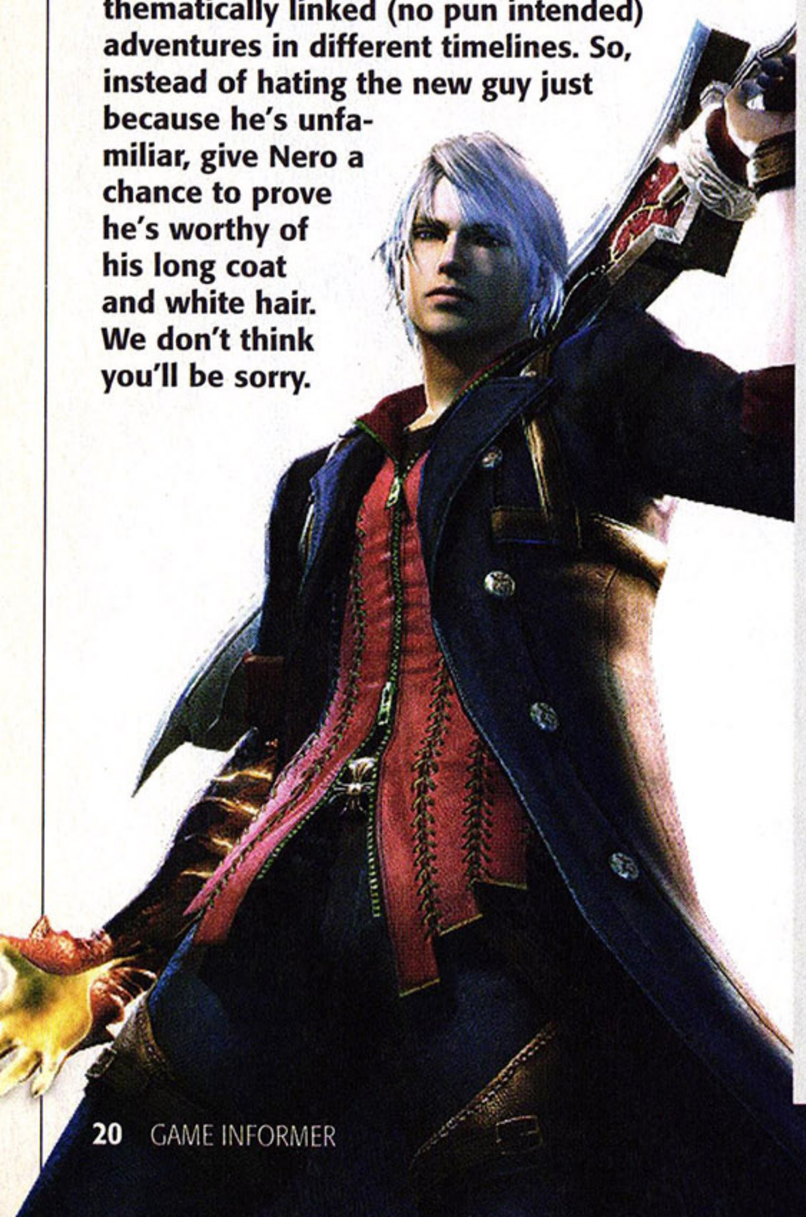
The 10,000 points goes to... Daniel Rowe! Your reward can be redeemed at your local RadicalMart store for a free purple nurple. We were indeed talking about *The Blood of Heroes*, the best post-apocalyptic inspirational sports movie ever made. It won every film-making award in existence when it released in 1989, just like every other movie Rutger Hauer has been in. *Blind Fury*, *Split Second*, *Omega Doom*. That guy's Hollywood gold!

FANS MAY CRY

Why does Hiroyuki Kobayashi think they need a new character for Devil May Cry 4? That's the craziest thing I have ever heard. Doesn't he know how much ass Dante kicks? I never finished Metal Gear Solid 2 because I couldn't get into playing as Raiden. I kept thinking to myself, "Yeah, this game is alright, but it would be better if I were controlling Snake right now." What's next? A new Zelda game where we don't play as Link? For shame.

Chris Jordan
Fall River, MA

Dante is certainly one of the coolest heroes of his generation, but there are some advantages to having players observe rather than control him. After all, didn't Solid Snake seem more awesome during MGS 2 in contrast to the inexperienced Raiden? By putting another character in players' hands, it's possible to strengthen the mythology behind the series' heroes. By setting them up as the wise and unstoppable veteran, it turns their every action into a memorable moment rather than something you see every second of the game. If that doesn't do it for you, you can take comfort in the fact that Nero won't change the spirit of the Devil May Cry gameplay. Nero looks like Dante, controls like Dante, and kicks ass like Dante. Even the Zelda series that you use for comparison has done something similar. The Link you control in Wind Waker isn't even the same Link from Ocarina of Time; they're just similar-looking characters who experience thematically linked (no pun intended) adventures in different timelines. So, instead of hating the new guy just because he's unfamiliar, give Nero a chance to prove he's worthy of his long coat and white hair. We don't think you'll be sorry.



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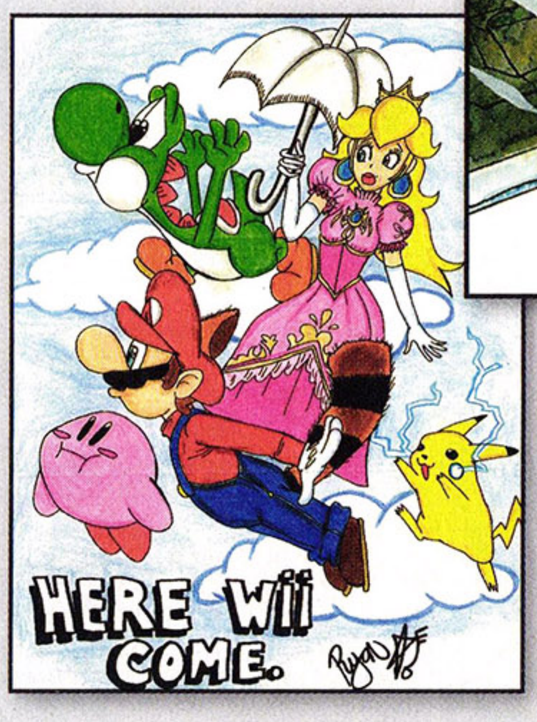
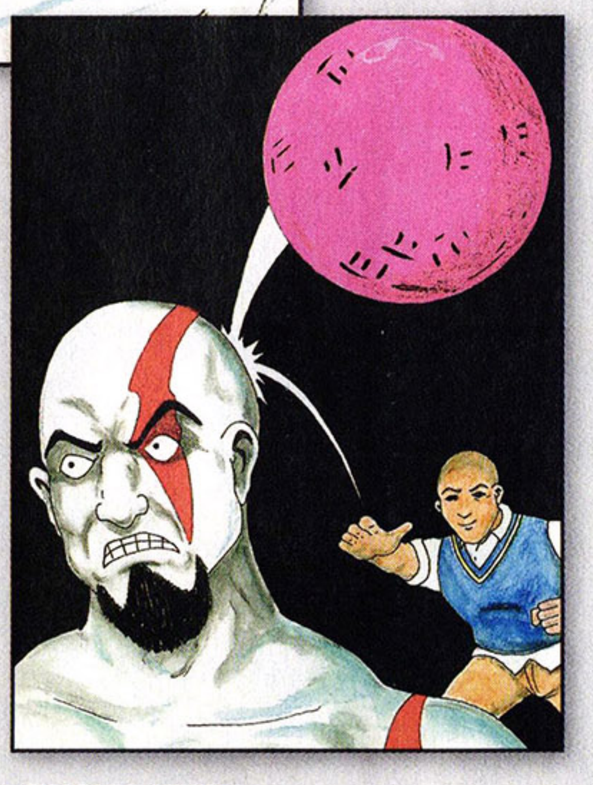
ANNA KRASNER
Kuribo's Shoe Casserole is the rarest dish in the Mushroom Kingdom

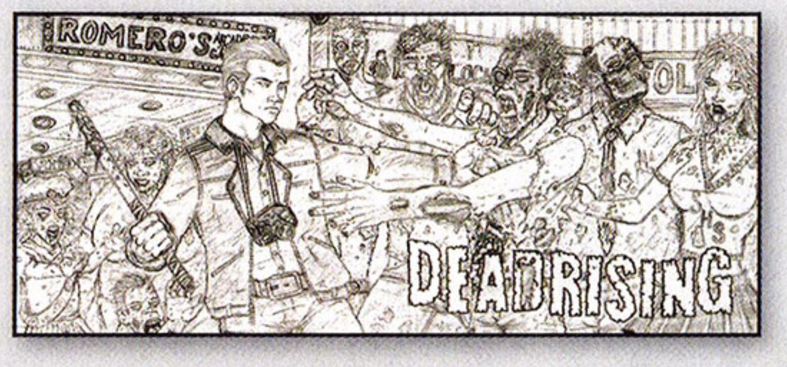


RYAN STARKEY
Here's a riddle: How'd these guys get in the air? By jumping out of the launch window! Bwa ha!



CHARLES ATKINS
Owned! ROFL!

SUZETTE ASHTON
Hey, that zombie looks like Courtney Love! And so does that one! And that one!



MELINDA TAGGART
Link, being red-green colorblind, thinks he's wearing a dashing grey suit

BRYNA JAQUA
Alucard is totally our favorite goth girl

CORRECTIONS

In our last issue (November 2006, GI #163), we misprinted the price of the World of Warcraft Trading Card Game's starter sets as being $29.99 apiece. The sets retail for $14.99. We apologize for the oversight.

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CONNECT

Breaking News, Views, And Technology From The Cutting Edge Of Gaming

THE PLAYSTATION 3 PRIMER

Up until now Sony has done a spotty job answering the public's questions about the PlayStation 3. However, the company recently held a press event in San Francisco on the eve of the system's launch that proclaimed to, in president Kaz Hirai's words, "tell you everything you want to know about the launch of the most advanced computer entertainment system that's ever been created." Of course, Hirai and company didn't answer all our questions, but the event – and our own hands-on time with the PS3 in our office – certainly did clear up some queries about the console.

When you first turn on your PS3 you'll encounter the system's Cross Media Bar, which is an easy-to-use interface similar to the one used by the PSP. You can create multiple user profiles upon which you can assign parental controls. Apart from the Game tab (which not only shows what's in the tray, but also any titles you've downloaded), some of the other icons on the bar point to the system's peripheral features, such as the ability to create photo albums, rip your music from CDs (and listen to them with an onscreen audio visualizer), and watch videos. The latter appear as thumbnails that preview the trailer, video, or movie you are about to select. The last tab on the bar is where you'll see who your friends are, each with their own selectable icon. A blue dot tells you that they are currently online, while red indicates they aren't. The submenus allow you to add or block people, see the players you've met, and chat or send messages to people. The PS3 supports USB keyboards if you don't want to communicate one letter at a time or via the pre-set word list. The console also supports Xfire, so if you are playing a game that uses the middleware, like Sony Online's Untold Legends: Dark Kingdom, then you will be able to chat with all other Xfire users whether they are on a PS3 or PC.

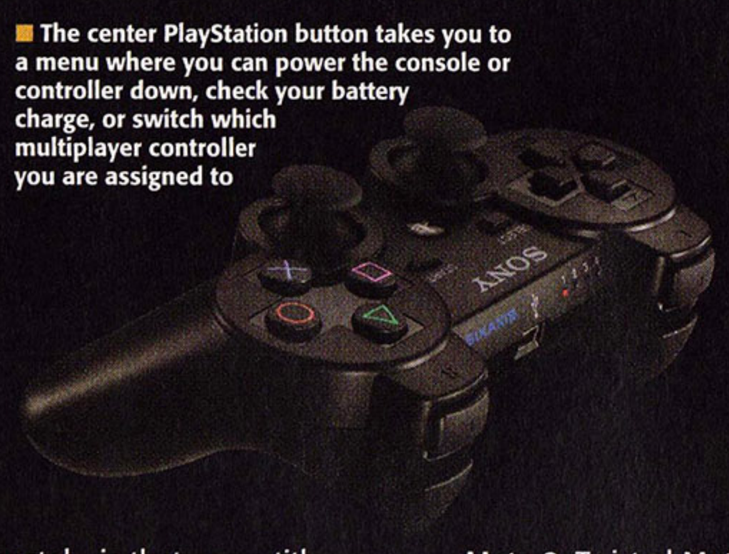
The highlight of Sony's presentation was when Sony's president of worldwide studios, Phil Harrison, explained the PS3's Network tab. Surfing the web is enabled via a free browser that's included, and you can bring up and easily cycle through multiple web windows. Harrison took this chance to take a dig at Kaz Hirai by pulling up a video of the Sony president's infamous "Rrriiiiddge Racer!" shout at E3.

Also accessible from the Network tab is remote play with your PSP. If your PS3 and PSP are wirelessly synched, you will actually see your PS3's cross bar on your PSP. Harrison demonstrated the synergy capabilities between the products by starting a trailer of the new James Bond film, *Casino Royale*, on his PS3, and then he continued to watch it – from the exact point he left off – on the PSP. Harrison says that photos, music, and movies will first be accesible between the two platforms in your own house, and later from a Wi-Fi hotspot anywhere around the world.

Sony Online's John Smedley then took the stage to talk exclusively about the Network's PlayStation store. SOE built the store, and it will be available on day one of the system's life and it can be integrated right into titles. Despite this, however, the question is how many games during the launch will actually have stuff to sell. The answer to that, unfortunately, is that some titles will and some won't. Sony plans to introduce things over time, and like the PSP, new features for the console can be downloaded via system updates.

The front page of the store has tabs or windows for things like Featured Items, What's New, Downloadable Games, Demos, etc. Many demos and trailers will be free, and parents can enact controls for downloads. Payment for things like downloadable games will be handled via either credit card or store-bought cards, and you can easily add money to your account. You can even add stuff to your online account from someone else's PS3. Sony wasn't giving out any official prices, but it did say that some games would cost as much as $14.99. Given that Wii's downloads of NES, SNES, and N64 titles sit in the $5 to $10 range, $14.99 is a bit steep. At least playing online itself is free.

In an attempt to challenge Xbox Live Arcade, Sony is also offering new downloadable titles with that arcade feel. God of War's Dave Jaffe was on hand at the event to show off his creation, Criminal Crackdown (see page 28 for more), and a handful of titles will be available at launch. Also visible on the PS3 store's front page was a tab of PSone games including MediEvil, Jet Moto 2, Twisted Metal, and Syphon Filter. Sony says that these titles will be playable on your PSP, and on your PS3 at some time in the future.



■ **The center PlayStation button takes you to a menu where you can power the console or controller down, check your battery charge, or switch which multiplayer controller you are assigned to**

The other showcase of the event was the system's Sixaxis controller, and we were able to spend significant time with it. The controller is lighter than the 360 wireless one, and has similar functions, allowing you to turn on the system from afar. A few added features include being able to see how much charge is left and being able to specifically select which of the four controllers you are in a multiplayer game. Uses of the Sixaxis' motion sensing control were evident in a variety of ways, from Lair's dragon flying to NHL 2K7's board checking. We talked to some developers who said that the sensitivity could be changed for the controller, but that would be something that a developer would have to enable in their game. Check out our reviews listed on the next page's table of contents for more on this controller's effect on gaming.

As it stands, the launches of the PS3 and the Xbox 360 are very similar. The 360 debuted on day one with three first-party titles, while the PS3 will offer four (if you count Sony Online's Untold Legends: Dark Kingdom) through

the end of the year. Both systems featured six exclusive titles, and about a third of the launch games are from the sports genre. The only difference here is that the 360 had 18 games on day one, while the PS3 will have 20 by 2007. Although it is too early to compare the quality of the launch games of the rival platforms, you could argue that the PS3 has benefitted from the 360's early launch. Games like Rainbow Six: Vegas, which were developed for the 360 and PS3 simultaneously (or an already existing next-gen game like The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion) will help the PS3's lineup simply because developers already have a year of next-gen experience.

One possible numerical difference between the systems may come in the number of consoles available for sale at launch. The Xbox 360 debuted with an estimated 400,000 units in America. Sony is aiming for a similar number, but we won't know how many hit retail until the launch.

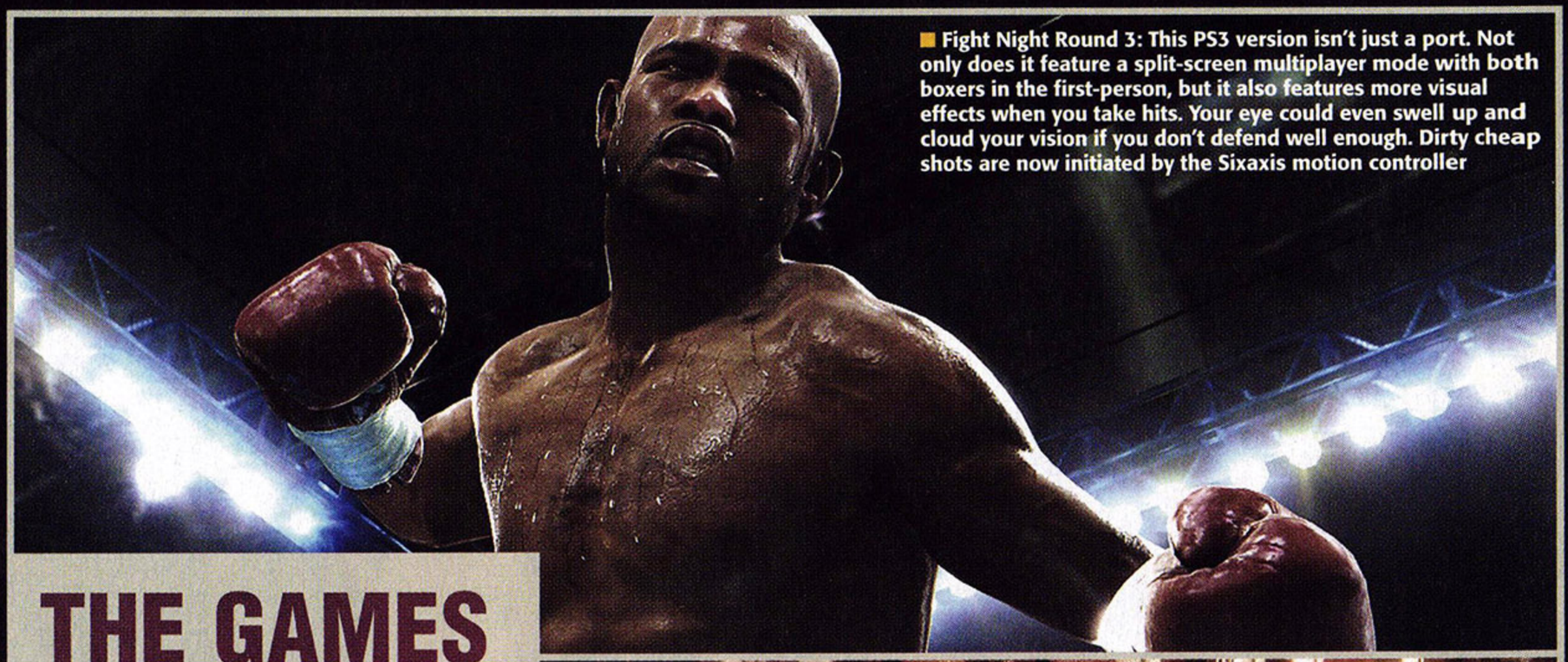
Sony's system is more expensive, but it's not for nothing. Apart from the built-in Blu-ray player (Microsoft is charging $199 for its HD-DVD add-on), the PS3 also features a bigger hard drive, wireless out of the box (both on the $599 model), and the motion-sensing Sixaxis controller. To get Wi-Fi networking out of the 360, you have to spend $99.99 for the adapter.

One area where the 360 has the advantage for now, however, is online. Online gaming on the PS3 may be free, but Sony's lack of a uniform online strategy that all games must adhere to means that any kind of Achievements have yet to be deliniated, and even e-commerce for the launch titles are not clearly defined.

This first in-depth look at the PS3 did answer several questions we had about the machine, but there are others that remain. Unfortunately, the units we played didn't have any of the Blu-ray, audio, or photo features fully enabled. We'd also like to take the controller's battery life through its paces and further investigate one instance we had when a controller's wireless signal dropped out on us. We'll take a deeper look into these things and more next month when we put our retail unit through its paces. Until then, take a look at the following pages for more on Sony's new system.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

The Games of the Season 23
Interview with Sony worldwide studios president Phil Harrison 26
What's in the Box? 26
Downloadable Games 28
PS3 Peripherals 30
Marvel: Ultimate Alliance 122
Need for Speed Carbon 126
Resistance: Fall of Man 134
Genji: Dawn of Swords 136
Ridge Racer 7 137
Mobile Suit Gundam: Crossfire 137
NBA 07 138



■ Fight Night Round 3: This PS3 version isn't just a port. Not only does it feature a split-screen multiplayer mode with both boxers in the first-person, but it also features more visual effects when you take hits. Your eye could even swell up and cloud your vision if you don't defend well enough. Dirty cheap shots are now initiated by the Sixaxis motion controller

THE GAMES OF THE SEASON

Twenty games will be available for the system through the end of the year, and Sony says it has sent out 10,000 dev kits to 208 companies worldwide. According to the company, this is 50 percent more than either the PS2 or PSone had at their respective launches. During his presentation, Hirai even dipped into a moment of self-deprecation, mocking his own E3 speech. While reading through the list of games, Hirai offered some extra enthusiasm for one title in particular: "And my favorite, especially for those in the game community, here goes, Riiiiddge Racer!"

Some notable absenses from this 2006 roster include a few titles that have been bumped into 07 which we were hoping would be at launch, including: Heavenly Sword, Motorstorm, Hot Shots Golf, Lair, and Warhawk. Hopefully, these titles can make our spring just as busy as our Christmas.

For more on some of this season's PS3 titles, check our review section starting on page 120.

PS3 GAMES THROUGH 2006

- Blazing Angels: Squadrons of WWII (Ubisoft)
- Call of Duty 3 (Activision)
- The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion (Bethesda)
- Fight Night Round 3 (Electronic Arts)
- Full Auto 2: Battlelines (Sega)
- Genji: Days of the Blade (SCEA)
- Madden NFL 07 (Electronic Arts)
- Marvel: Ultimate Alliance (Activision)
- Mobile Suit Gundam: Crossfire (Namco Bandai)
- NBA 07 (SCEA)
- NBA 2K7 (2K Sports)
- Need For Speed Carbon (Electronic Arts)
- NHL 2K7 (2K Sports)
- Resistance: Fall of Man (SCEA)
- Ridge Racer 7 (Namco Bandai)
- Sonic the Hedgehog (Sega)
- Tiger Woods PGA Tour 07 (Electronic Arts)
- Rainbow Six: Vegas (Ubisoft)
- Tony Hawk's Project 8 (Activision)
- Untold Legends: Dark Kingdom (Sony Online Entertainment)

■ Rainbow Six Las Vegas

■ The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion

■ Untold Legends: Dark Kingdom

■ Full Auto 2: Battlelines: This PS3-exclusive title adds on a new Arena mode from its predecessor, as well as six new levels

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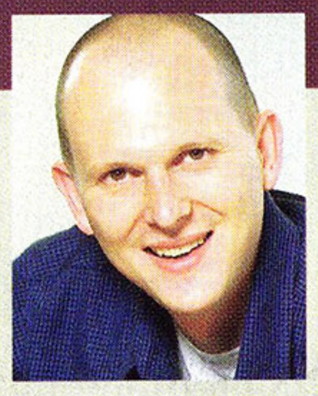


At the recent Sony Gamer's day showing off the PlayStation 3, Game Informer got the chance to sit down with Phil Harrison, Sony's president of worldwide studios. We grilled him on a variety of topics, including Blu-ray, load times, and what is or isn't in a name.

Why hasn't Sony come up with a marketable name for its online service like Xbox Live?
The PlayStation Store is the commerce destination and the download destination. The PlayStation Network is the actual name, but PlayStation is the brand. We are fortunate to have sold over 200 million units over the last 12 years. That gives us a very high brand awareness and a very high loyalty which we're incredibly respectful of and very proud of. Also, we've wanted to make sure that our online offering became a natural extension of our PlayStation DNA, rather than something separate. It just had to flow from what PlayStation was all about.

You mentioned that there are demos available for download right now. Will there eventually be full movies?
Yes.

Do you have a timetable for that?
It's not a technical issue; it's a business development issue. I would expect it to happen pretty soon.

You've said you'll eventually be able to access content from your PS3 on your PSP from anywhere on the globe. Is there any concern about bandwidth needs for something like that? Will your network be getting bogged down with all these downloads?
No, because that's peer-to-peer, your PSP talking to your PS3.

Will you be able to hook up your iPod or other MP3 player to your PS3?
We couldn't show all of the things we wanted to show because of time, but yes, you'll plug in anything via USB and it'll recognize it straightaway.

You have plans for arcade-style games like Blast Factor and Dave Jaffe's Criminal Crackdown. What kind of infrastructure is there to encourage five-person teams or individuals to make games for the service?
We announced at GDC this year something called the Electronic Distribution Initiative, which yielded hundreds of contacts from developers from around the world. Well, thousands, but some of them were not people that we could work with because they were still in school. But, from that, we are now working with 40 groups around the world to make games dedicated for electronic distribution in addition to our own internal teams like what we're doing with Incognito and Santa Monica Studio. We're providing them with finance; we're providing them with tools; we're providing them with technology, creative direction and production assistance, and we're seeing some really interesting things come through.

Microsoft has a very public way that it calls on indie developers. Is your tapping of basement or garage developers going to be that public?
It's not just basement and garage developers, it's any developer. I think what's slightly confusing to people is that we are an open platform. If you want to start a company and develop a game for PlayStation 3 and sell it via our PlayStation store, there's nothing to stop you from doing that.

Minidiscs and UMDs have struggled as media formats. Are there concerns about Blu-ray not taking off as a format?
Well, first of all, Minidisc is still the number one personal, portable, digital recording format in the world, 15 years after it came out.

But it didn't have the impact on the general consumer that, say, the cassette tape had.
No, because the world is digital now, the world's not tape. The UMD movie catalog on PSP is over 400 strong. There are a huge number of games for PSP that use UMD and we'll continue to push that format very strongly. Now, your question about Blu-ray discs actually needs to be clarified. Blu-ray is not a Sony proprietary format and that was clear in Jack's presentation. We are a partner of a much larger consortium that represents 80 percent of the consumer electronics industry, the world's largest computer companies, Dell and Apple, and also the consortium includes the vast majority of the major Hollywood studio content. Sony Pictures alone represents more than half the films ever made with MGM and Sony Pictures. So, I don't believe that there is any debate about Blu-ray discs being the next generation of high-definition movie format for the industry and for the world. But, that is completely incidental to the fact that we need Blu-ray discs as a game format. You can see from the richness and detail that's going into our games that we absolutely require that storage space.

On a gamer level, some people are talking about how Blu-ray holds more, but DVD is accessible faster.
That's not correct. It's indistiguishable from DVD. You saw it today that the loading times are not an issue. When you've got that much content accessible, the benefits of Blu-ray discs are clear. There is no consumer downside whatsoever.

Is user-created content for the store something you're looking at, whether it be user-created videos or games?
You mean like YouTube? Obviously having the open web browser gives us access to all of that capability day one as standard. However, we are developing a couple of games that are all about user-created content. Today's presentation is all about launch and the launch window of titles, but we'll keep a few secrets for you for next year. But we're doing some interesting things for next year that I'm sure you'll appreciate in that space.

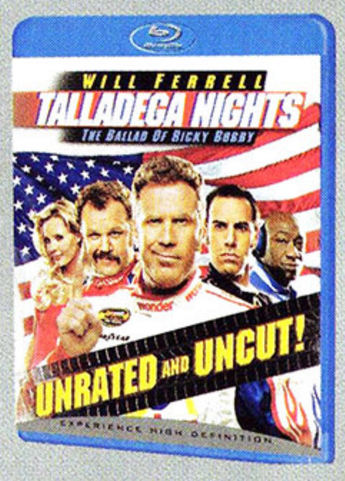
WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

When gamers open up their PS3 boxes they'll find a pretty simple set-up inside. The unit comes with an AC power cord (sans any 360 brick), a USB mini cable to power up the unit's Sixaxis wireless controller, ethernet cable, and composite A/V cables. It's too bad that the unit doesn't come with an HDMI cable or even component cables, but you don't necessarily have to run out and buy them if you want to see the PS3 in all its HD glory. Luckily, you can use the component cables from your PS2 if you have them.

■ **The differences between the $499 PS3 and its $599 big brother are as follows: The $599 unit has a bigger hard drive (60 GB vs. 20 GB), 802.11 b/g Wi-Fi, and Memory Stick, SD, and compact flash slots.**

RICKY BOBBY ALWAYS COMES IN FIRST

The first 500,000 PS3 owners will get a free copy of Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby *Blu-ray disc, and the movie will be available first with the system before it hits stores on December 12 for everyone else. That's what we call the ol' Shake 'n Bake!*



DRIVE SIDEWAYS

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PLAYSTATION 3

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DOWNLOADABLE GAMES

Similar to Xbox 360's Xbox Live Arcade, Sony is offering new games for download. At the time of this writing, the company has not yet set any official prices. At Sony's gamer's day the company unveiled some first-party titles that will be available via the system's store.

CRIMINAL CRACKDOWN ▲

Creator Dave Jaffe was on hand at the Sony event to debut this title co-developed by Incog. The game comes out in February, and features four-player off- or online play. Your job is to drive around and pick up criminals running around on the map. You get points for dropping them off at the cop shop. However, you get more points depending on which entrance you drop them off at. For instance, the three-point entrance is preceeded by a tricky narrow winding driveway. Of course, you'll have weapons you can pick up as you battle friends to see who can get the most points for bagging all the baddies.

FLOW ▶

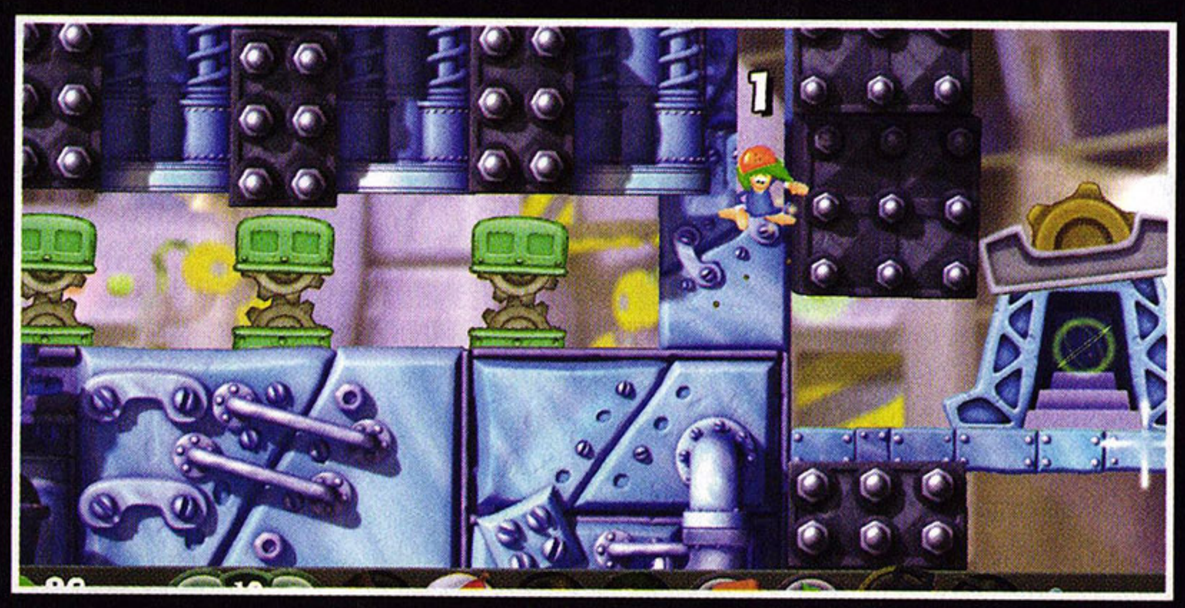
This game first started out as a flash game on the web, and was created as part of a Master of Fine Arts thesis. The title's lack of an onscreen HUD is an indication of the intuitive nature of this title where you evolve your organism simply by consuming those around you. Move to the bottom of the sea and you'll encounter boss battles. If you beat them, you are allowed to change the form of your creature. The game also features dynamic difficulty, making it a free-form experience.

BLAST FACTOR ▲

Developed by Bluepoint Games, this game looks a lot like – you guessed it – Xbox Live Arcade's hit Geometry Wars. This game about fighting viral microbes has you moving from cell to cell as you complete each area. The Sixaxis motion control feature is used in the game by moving it left and right, which in turn throws out shockwaves that stun enemies and sweep them to the side. Certain foes require that you use this attack against them in order to destroy them. You also have a slow-mo function in your arsenal as well. Blast Factor will feature an online leaderboard so you can see who's top dog. Sony says that multiplayer will be enabled after its release via a downloadable add-on.

LEMMINGS 2 ▶

This take on the classic puzzle game, includes new modes and features. It will also support global online rankings.



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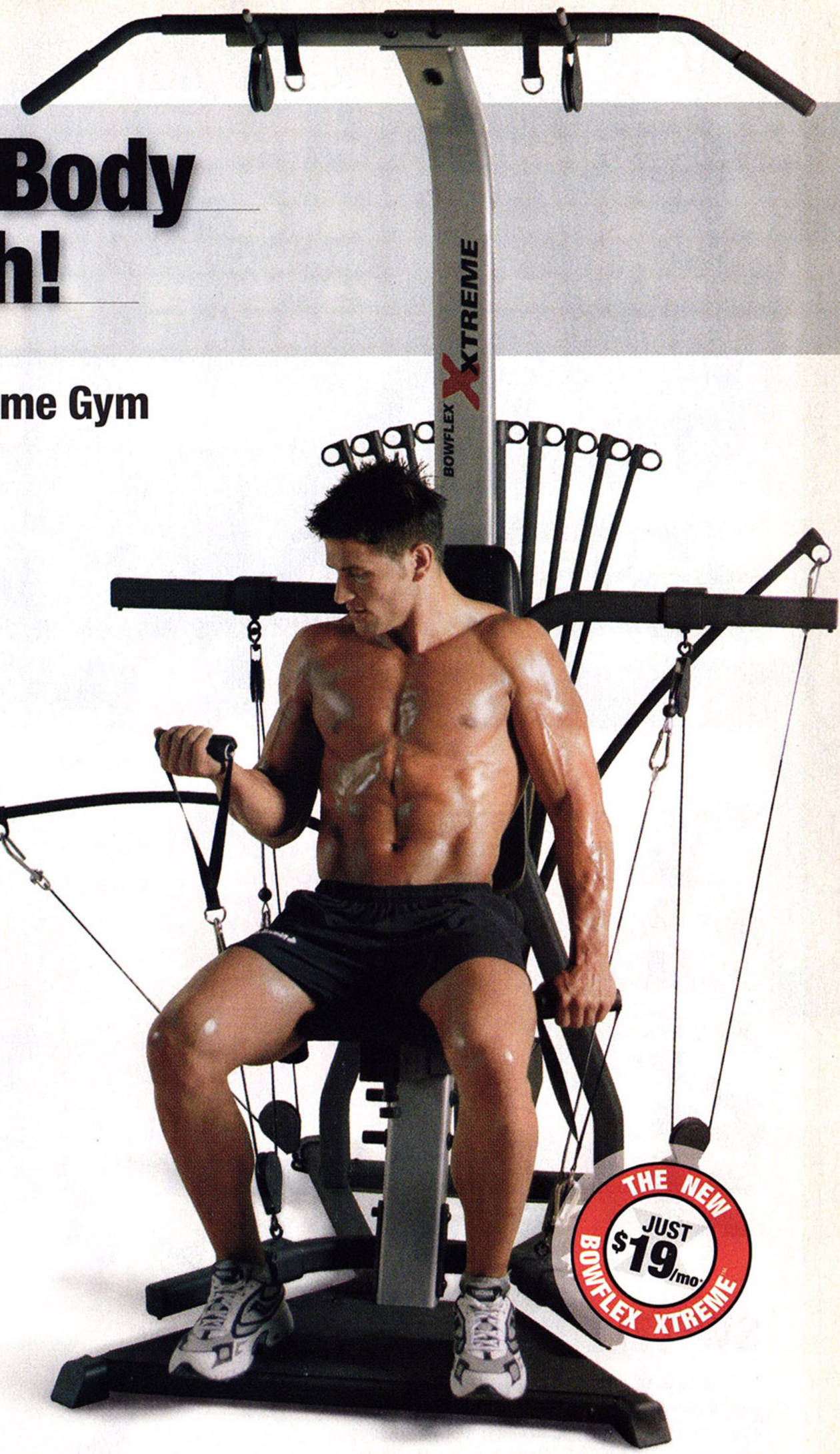

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BFMG0539 (1206)

SWIZZLEBLOCK ▲

This remake of an old puzzle game now allows you to play with up to four friends (including co-op), and the Hallucination option lets you see your blocks turn into animals. Believe it or not, this is one trip that's safe for kids.

GO! SUDOKU ▲

What you see is what you get with Sudoku, but it is kind of cool that the game has a multiplayer component (for up to four players) so you can sort out among your friends once and for all who actually is the smartest.

PS3 PERIPHERALS

If you need an extra wireless controller at launch, Sony is charging $49.99. The memory card adapter is going for $14.99. The adapter is necessary if you want to transfer your PSone or PS2 saves over to the PS3's HDD. The system's Blu-ray remote will be available in December for $24.99.

■ The Memory Card Adapter ($14.99)

■ The PS3's Blu-ray remote ($24.99) will be out in December

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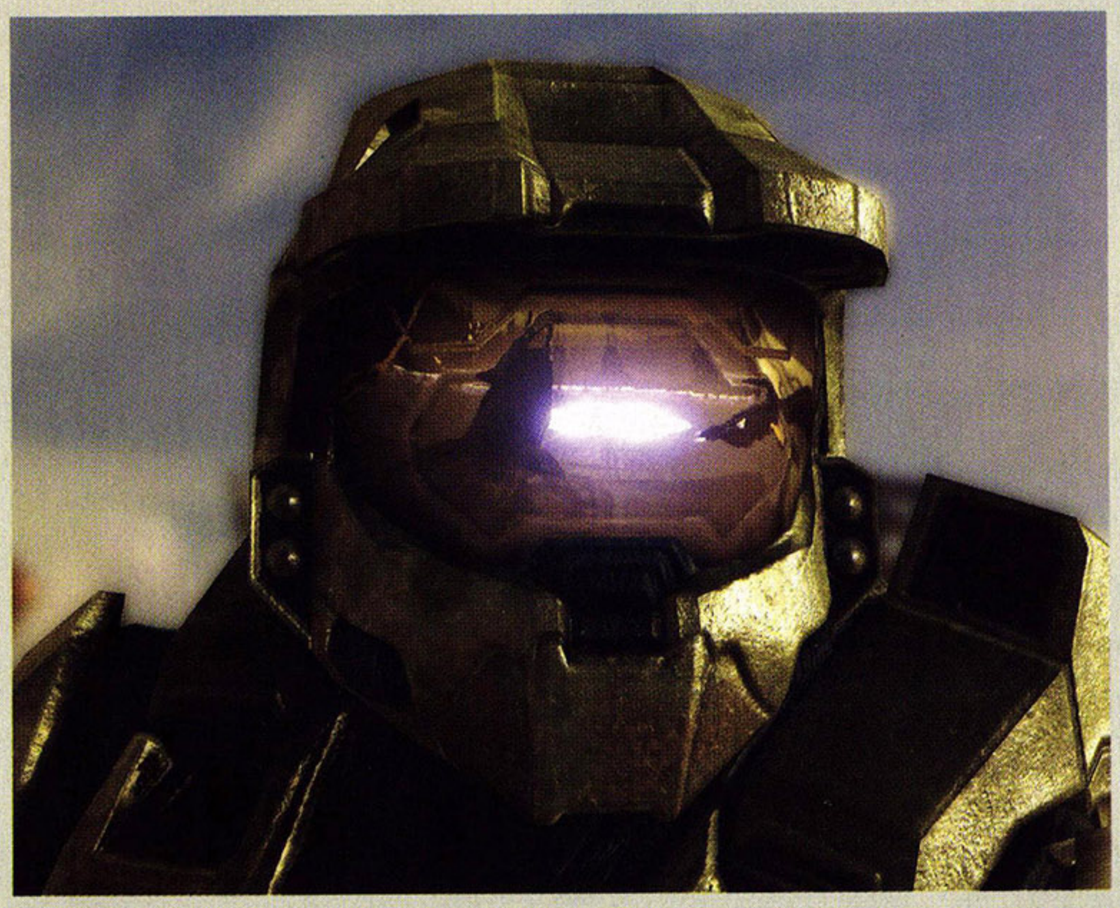
THE HALO WARS BEGIN

HALO RTS COMES FULL CIRCLE

One of the big items out of Microsoft's X06 event in Barcelona was the official announcement of Bungie's long-rumored Halo RTS project. Entitled Halo Wars, the game will be developed by Ensemble Studios (Age of Empires). The trailer at the event utilized concept art (and was not based on the game's actual engine) to show massive UNSC and Covenant forces going at it in an all-out war. Halo Wars' story takes place before the original Halo title when humans first come into contact with the Covenant. This is a homecoming of sorts for the franchise, which originally started out as an RTS before it was turned into an FPS.

Few other details are known about the game at this time, but we have learned that despite Microsoft's talk about simultaneous PC and Xbox 360 releases, Halo Wars will be an Xbox 360 exclusive.



games

HALO 3 DETAILS LEAKED!

THE MONGOOSE & MORE

We don't suppose you'd be interested in some info about a little title called Halo 3, would you? Some multiplayer details have come out about the upcoming game, and we're sure they won't disappoint. Halo 3 will come in three flavors: standard, Collector's Edition, and Legendary. The latter version is a four-disc set replete with documentaries, interviews, and more packed into a replica of Master Chief's helmet.

Developer Bungie is tailoring the title for its first appearance on the 360, and the new additions go right down to its core. Making full use of the 360 controller, the right and left bumpers will be used for reloading primary and secondary weapons. Bungie isn't talking, however, about what new functions will be mapped to the now vacated X button. To make use of the system's online focus, the multiplayer component will not feature bots; instead you can smile with the knowledge that all your kills were of the human kind.

Of course, new weapons and vehicles will also be included. The Mongoose ATV that was cut from Halo 2 is in the game, as are the Spartan Laser, a nail grenade, a Brute spiker, and a cannon that can reportedly launch and deploy players across the map. Moreover, all the damage you can mete out in either single- or multiplayer can be saved as a movie.

THE TOP SHOOTER OF 2005 LIVES ON*

"SAY HELLO TO THE SEASON'S FIRST FALL BLOCKBUSTER..." - IGN**

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PLAYSTATION 3

DAY 1 STUDIOS

MONOLITH

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*Awarded "Best Shooter of 2005" by GameSpot - December 2005 **GameSpot August 2006, IGN August 2006

"CONSOLE-ONLY GAMERS WHO LOOK JEALOUSLY UPON THE PC'S BOUNTIFUL FIRST-PERSON FRUITS WILL HAVE ONE LESS REASON TO COMPLAIN THIS NOVEMBER." - GAMESPOT**

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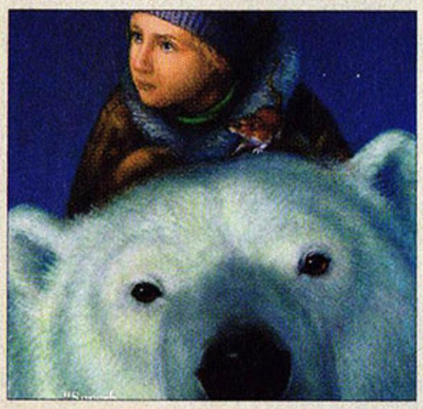
DATA FILE

More News You Can Use

SEGA'S DARK MATERIALS

Sega has snared the video game rights to the movie adaptation of Philip Pullman's His Dark Materials trilogy. The first movie in the series, *The Golden Compass* (starring Nicole Kidman and new Bond boy Daniel Craig) will appear in theaters next Christmas.



MARVEL ADDS SUPERHERO TO ONLINE TEAM

If you can't beat 'em, sign 'em up to do your game. Although Marvel once tried unsuccessfully to sue developer Cryptic over the content of City of Heroes, Microsoft and Marvel have signed Cryptic to create the 360/PC Marvel Universe Online title. Interestingly, the developer says that its work on City of Heroes and City of Villains will remain unaffected by the Marvel project, as each game will have separate dev teams.

MICROSOFT GETS A PAIR

At its X06 event in Barcelona, Microsoft not only announced Project Gotham Racing 4 for the 360 (no duh), but a new Banjo-Kazooie title from Rare. If Joanna Dark's less-than-glorious resurrection is any indication, some things might be better left to our memories.

WARRIORS CLAIM PSP TURF

Rockstar's The Warriors are coming out to play on the PSP this Christmas. Unfortunately it is unknown at this time if the console game's multiplayer feature will also be making the jump.

FOUNDATION 9 STRENGTHENS

Foundation 9 has acquired developer Shiny Entertainment from publisher Atari. The move is a part of Atari's massive restructuring, and bolsters Foundation 9's roster that contains developers such as Backbone Entertainment and The Collective. Foundation 9 currently has 20 titles in development.

news

JACKSON HEADS NEW HALO

WHILE THE HALO MOVIE IS POSTPONED

Director Peter Jackson has long been a video game fan, and his involvement with the Halo franchise goes deeper with the announcement that Jackson will partner with Microsoft and Bungie to form Wingnut Interactive, a new studio creating an all-new "Halo series" (i.e. not Halo 3). By using the word "series," it sounds like Jackson would be involved in a spin-off franchise away from the main storyline.

Jackson spoke about the endeavor, describing it as, "a form of entertainment that's not a game and [that's] not a film. It's a filmic game experience." This project will be one that spans multiple games.

"I think we're on a threshold of a new way to tell stories," said Jackson. "With that in mind, we decided that the first title should be something that will allow us to not have to devise a whole new world, but to allow us to tell the story."

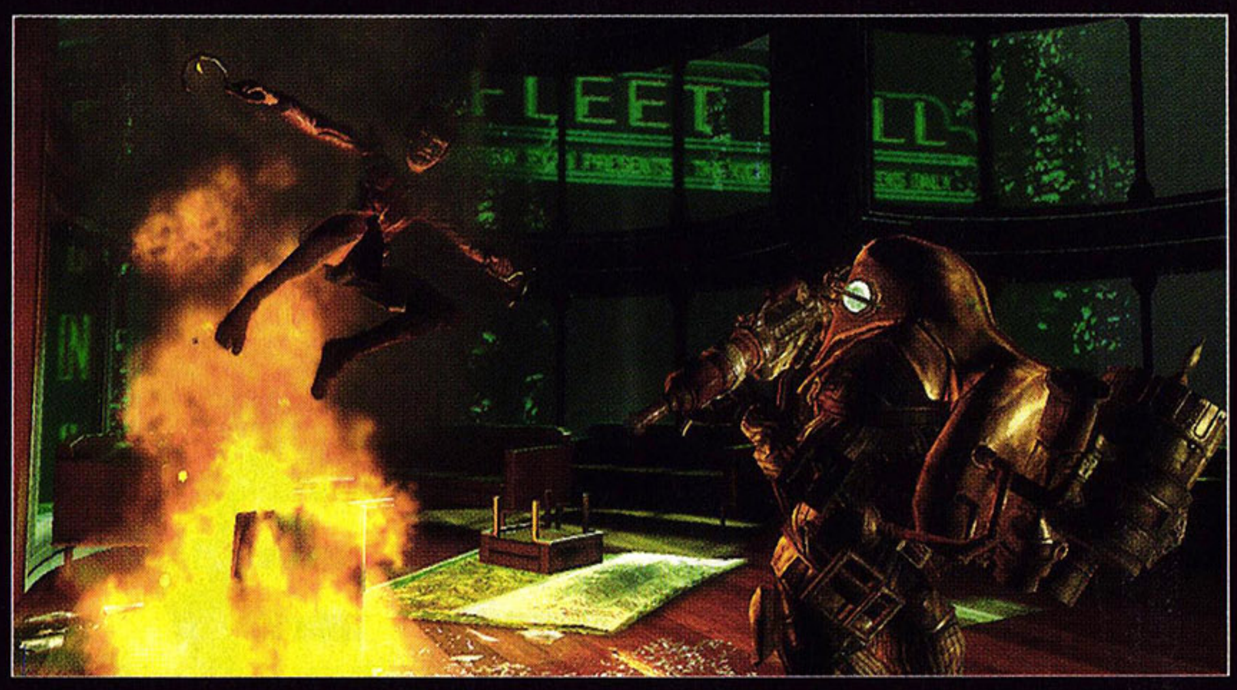
Jackson is also currently the executive producer of the Halo movie, which recently suffered a setback when film studios Universal and Fox pulled out of the project over a dispute regarding profit sharing with Microsoft and Bungie. Jackson has officially postponed the film until funding can be found. Although the group says they are still committed to the film, the movie is indefinitely on hold.

games

MICROSOFT NAILS EXCLUSIVES

GTA IV CONTENT & MORE FOR THE 360

Microsoft delighted audiences at E3 when it announced that the fourth installment of Rockstar's seminal Grand Theft Auto series would appear simultaneously on the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3. The GTA franchise, which has traditionally been a Sony exclusive, will hit both consoles on October 16, 2007. Now the Xbox creator has scored more street cred with the news that 360 owners will be able to get two exclusive GTA IV "episodes" over Xbox Live months after the game's fall release next year. Although no details have been given about the exact content of the downloads, Microsoft is saying that they will each offer hours of new gameplay.



However, Microsoft didn't stop there with the exclusive news. 2K's highly touted BioShock title (shown) will only appear on 360 and PC, as will the next iteration of Ubisoft's Splinter Cell series (i.e. after Double Agent). Although developer Irrational never had concrete plans to do BioShock for PS3, we're curious about Ubisoft's plans for Splinter Cell. The franchise has always been strongest on Microsoft's platforms, but Ubisoft has passed on exclusives in the past. Assassin's Creed was a PS3-only game – until the company announced that it wasn't. We shall have to wait and see if these deals hold true or if they are just temporary windows of exclusivity.

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THERE'S A REASON NIGHTMARES HAPPEN IN THE DARK.

Mankind has no one else to turn to. Nowhere else to run. The planet is falling apart. Its people cornered within the only safe area remaining. The Locust Horde has risen and they won't stop coming. They won't stop killing. The government turns to whoever they have left. The sick, the wounded, the imprisoned. An inmate named Marcus Fenix. Once left to die, he is now humanity's last hope. He can take comfort in but one fact.

The human race isn't extinct. Yet.

GEARS OF WAR

MATURE 17+
M
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Blood and Gore
Intense Violence
Strong Language

EPIC GAMES
Microsoft game studios
XBOX LIVE

Jump in.

XBOX 360

SPHERES OF INFLUENCE

We all know that at the end of the day the reason to buy a new game system is for the titles that are going to be available for that console. For those of you who have forgotten middle school, (or haven't yet finished it), the Venn diagram below can be read by observing where circles overlap to determine the status of a given game, including whether it's currently planned as an exclusive to a given system. Keep in mind some of these listings may change over time, but this is as close as we can come at the time of printing. Also, remember that this diagram is primarily designed for folks comparing the three major new consoles, and so it does not include listings for PC games or for current-gen releases, many of which may be playable on a system through backwards compatibility. We've also left off some lesser known titles due to space constraints. Hope this helps!

- Afrika
- Cipher Complex
- Devil May Cry 4
- Eight Days
- Eye of Judgment
- Fatal Inertia
- Final Fantasy XIII
- Final Fantasy Versus XIII
- Full Auto 2: Battlelines
- The Getaway
- Genji: Days of the Blade
- Gran Turismo HD
- Heavenly Sword
- Heavy Rain
- Hot Shots Golf
- Lair
- Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots
- Mobile Suit Gundam: Crossfire
- Monster Kingdom
- Motorstorm
- Naughty Dog Project (working title)
- NBA 07
- Ninja Gaiden Sigma
- Resistance: Fall of Man
- Ridge Racer 7
- Shirokishi (White Knight)
- SingStar
- Unreal Tournament 2007
- Untold Legends: Dark Kingdom
- Virtua Fighter 5
- Warhawk

- Battalion Wars 2
- Disaster: Day of Crisis
- Dragon Ball Z: Budokai Tenkaichi 2
- Dragon Quest Swords: The Masked Queen and The Tower of Mirrors
- Elebits
- Excite Truck
- Far Cry Instincts: Vengeance
- Final Fantasy Crystal Chronicles: The Crystal Bearers
- Fire Emblem
- Harvest Moon
- The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess
- Mario Strikers Charged
- Metroid Prime 3: Corruption
- Monster 4x4
- Project H.A.M.M.E.R.
- Rapala Tournament Fishing
- Rayman Raving Rabbids
- Red Steel
- Sengoku Musou Wave (Dynasty Warriors)
- Sonic and the Secret Rings
- Super Mario Galaxy
- Super Monkey Ball Banana Blitz
- Super Paper Mario
- Super Smash Bros. Brawl
- Super Swing Golf Pangya
- Tony Hawk's Downhill Jam
- Trauma Center: Second Opinion
- WarioWare: Smooth Moves
- Wii Sports

- Call of Duty 3
- Marvel: Ultimate Alliance
- The Godfather
- Madden NFL 07
- Medal of Honor Airborne
- Need for Speed Carbon
- Splinter Cell: Double Agent
- Tiger Woods PGA Tour 07

- Alone in the Dark
- Armored Core 4
- Army of Two
- Assassin's Creed
- Battlefield: Bad Company
- Brothers in Arms: Hell's Highway
- Burnout 5
- Clive Barker's Jericho
- The Club
- The Darkness
- Dark Sector
- Def Jam: Icon
- DIRT: Colin McRae Off-Road
- The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion
- Enchanted Arms
- F.E.A.R.
- Fight Night Round 3
- Frontlines: Fuel of War
- Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter 2
- Golden Axe
- Grand Theft Auto IV
- Haze
- Hellboy
- Indiana Jones
- Lord of the Rings: The White Council
- Mercenaries 2
- NBA 2K7
- NBA Street
- NHL 2K7
- Phantasy Star Universe
- Rainbow Six: Vegas
- Skate
- Sonic the Hedgehog
- Stranglehold
- Tony Hawk's Project 8
- Turok
- Vampire's Rain

Nope, we didn't forget to fill in these empty spaces. There just aren't any big games currently planned for just the PS3 and the Wii, or the 360 and the Wii. Take that for what you will

- Age of Conan: Hyborian Adventures
- Alan Wake
- Battlefield 2: Modern Combat
- BioShock
- Blue Dragon
- Burnout Revenge
- Chrome Hounds
- Civil War
- Crackdown
- Culdcept Saga
- Dead or Alive Xtreme 2
- Dead Rising
- Eragon
- Eternal Sonata
- Fable 2
- FIFA 07
- Forza Motersport 2
- Fuzion Frenzy 2
- Gears of War
- Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter
- Guitar Hero II
- Halo 3
- Halo Wars
- Hitman: Blood Money
- Infinite Undiscovery
- Just Cause
- Kane & Lynch
- LEGO Star Wars II: The Original Trilogy
- Lost Odyssey
- Lost Planet: Extreme Condition
- Lumines Live
- Marvel Universe
- Mass Effect
- NCAA Football 07
- NHL 07
- Ninety-Nine Nights
- The Outfit
- Over G Fighters
- Overlord
- Prey
- Rumble Roses XX
- Saints Row
- Shadowrun
- Superman Returns
- TimeShift
- Table Tennis
- Test Drive Unlimited
- Tomb Raider: Legend
- Top Spin 2
- Star Trek Legacy
- Tenchu Senran
- Too Human
- Viva Piñata
- Winning Eleven: Pro Evolution Soccer 2007
- World Series of Poker
- WWE Smackdown Vs. Raw 2007

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Fight your way through the many dungeons of Mana using swords and sorcery. Be it sword, flail, bow & arrows, or hammer, players can switch freely from their primary weapon to their secondary weapon with just a push of a button. Ferrik and his friends can also harness the abilities of the elemental spirits to inflict damage on their enemies. With the power of the Nintendo DS, you no longer have to dungeon crawl alone. For the first time in the Mana series, bring up to three friends into the fray using local wireless and vie for experience and treasure as you fight your way to saving the Mana Tree.

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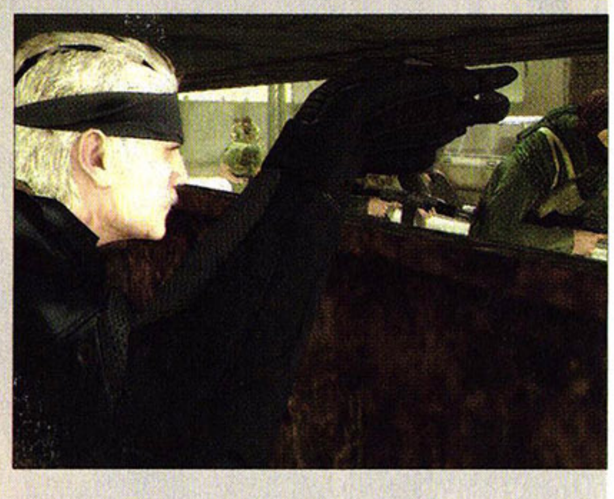
Release Date: Available Now **System: Nintendo DS** **www.nintendods.com/childrenofmana**

LOOSE TALK

Hot Gaming Gossip

WHY THE JAPANESE PS3 PRICE DROP?



Gamers were excited when Sony announced a modest price drop for the PS3 in Japan, but dismayed when those savings were not extended to the U.S. release of the system. The reason the drop is in Japan only is because both Square Enix and Konami were angry at Sony in Japan because both publisher/developers felt that if the high cost of the system produced a smaller installed base, then it would mean that traditionally successful series like Final Fantasy and Metal Gear, respectively, would suffer as a result.

HALO 3 DEMO COMING SOON

After the release of Halo 2, Microsoft was very vocal about releasing something Halo-related at the launch of rival Sony's PlayStation 3. Although we know that Halo 3 isn't ready yet, Game Informer Online has heard that Bungie is readying a demo for the first half of next year, with an announcement on November 17 to blunt the debut of the PS3. Microsoft won't comment on the rumor, but there also is speculation that this demo will be the first one which Microsoft charges for via Xbox Live.

MULTIPLAYER PS3 F.E.A.R.ED

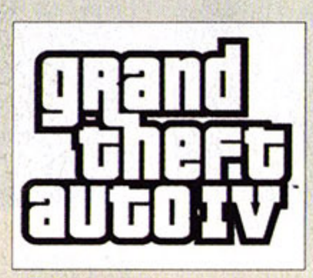
Although Day One Studio's PS3 port of Sierra's F.E.A.R. was name checked by Sony as one of the games that would be at the PS3's launch, Loose Talk has heard that the game will actually miss its 2006 launch window. This is because of problems being sorted out with the title's multiplayer component.

ROGUE GALAXY SEQUEL?

Japanese RPG developer Level 5 (Dark Cloud) is already contemplating a sequel to its upcoming PS2 title Rogue Galaxy. The company wants to wait and see how the game performs before it goes down that road. Rogue Galaxy will be out in January.

PS3 GETS EXCLUSIVE GTA IV CONTENT TOO?

Eurogamer has reported that Rockstar plans to provide the PlayStation 3 with its own exclusive GTA IV downloadable content, just like it has already announced it will do for Microsoft's Xbox 360. It's believed that the offerings for both consoles will be substantial in size, but the one last thing that nobody has heard about yet is what they will cost. Will one system's downloads be priced cheaper than the other?

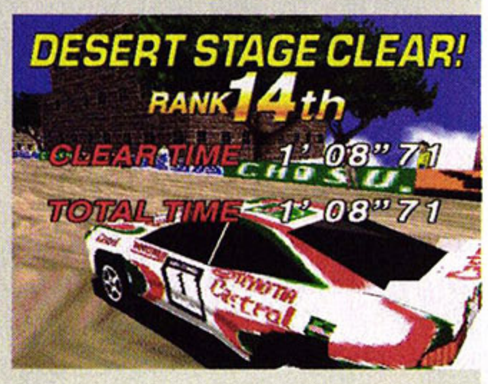


Got some insider info? Email us at loosetalk@gameinformer.com and we'll be all ears.

NAME THAT GAME

Test Your Sight

It's easy to think of Q Entertainment's Tetsuya Mizuguchi as nothing more than the artsy-fartsy guy who hangs around Kandinsky exhibits all day, and who gave the world music puzzlers like Lumines and Every Extra Extend. But Mizuguchi has a rougher side – a side that likes to put the pedal to the metal. The famed developer once was the producer on a racing project put out by former bosses Sega in the mid-nineties for the arcade and the Saturn. The title was lauded in racing circles, and that's not just because Mizuguchi went on to become famous. The game features some intense racing, and was challenging despite not being a classic sim-racer.



(Answer on page 46)

news

THE CALM BEFORE THE STORM

IS THE XBOX 360 SLUMPING?

As we sit on the eve of the holiday console war, it is easy to see Microsoft sitting in prime position with a year head start already under its belt. But what kind of lead does the Xbox 360 actually have? Despite all you have been hearing about the system, it might not be as much as you might think. Game Informer obtained NPD data that shows that through August of this year, the system has sold 2.4 million units in America. When you put these numbers into context, new questions are raised as we head into the all-important holiday season.

Game Informer contacted Microsoft for comment on the NPD numbers, and while it didn't outright refute them, the company offered its own take on the state of the console by not breaking down its numbers by country. It instead cited an installed base of 3.3 million units in North America total, as opposed to the U.S.-only NPD numbers. Microsoft says that it fully expects to have sold 10 million 360s worldwide at the end of the holidays.

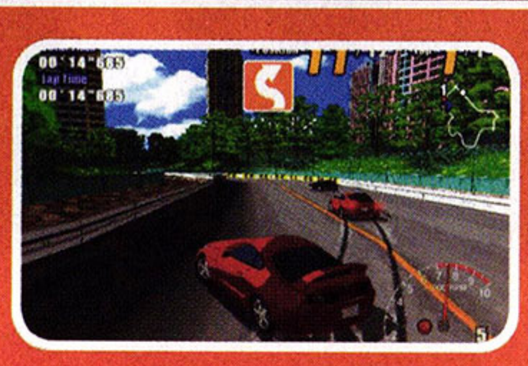
The interesting thing about the Xbox 360 sales numbers is that in total they are slightly worse than that of the original Xbox at equivalent times. As the Xbox approached its first anniversary in 2002, the system had sold approximately 175,000 units in the month of September. In September 2006, the Xbox 360 sold 260,000 units. However, in the first 10 months, the original Xbox sold 2.8 million units in the U.S. while the 360 only sold 2.5 million units.

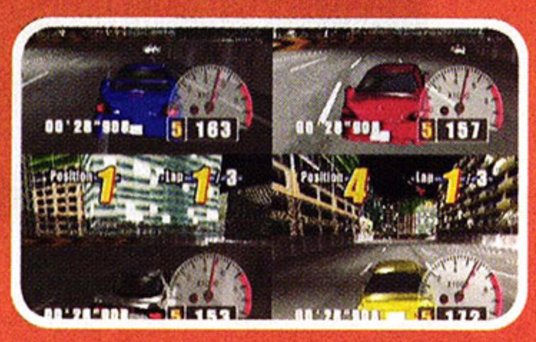
We talked to one industry insider who told us that they felt that in some ways the Xbox 360 was "let off the hook" after it came out, that some of the questions and concerns raised about the system before launch were swept under the rug. This created a hype factor that overshadowed the fact that the 360 wasn't selling despite the fact that the system was no longer in short supply in the spring of this year. It was as if the backlash preceded the honeymoon period.

The original Xbox, of course, had Halo to help it out, but software cannot be an excuse for Xbox 360 sales given how well rounded the launch window titles were. The 360 has hosted million-sellers such as The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion and Call of Duty 2, and has had a strong summer with well-received titles such as Dead Rising, Saints Row, and Prey. For a system with a generation's worth of established video game roots and a strong library of games – not to mention sole status as a next-gen system – the 360 has underperformed up until this point.

But it is software that can improve the system's situation. Gears of War is the 360's premier holiday title, and with exclusives such as the next Splinter Cell, Microsoft understands that to gamers it's about the games, and has gone about this aspect of its business smartly. This holiday season we should see once and for all if gamers have actually been holding back from the 360, waiting for a title like Gears of War, or if Microsoft's hand isn't as strong as it thought.

GT PRO SERIES





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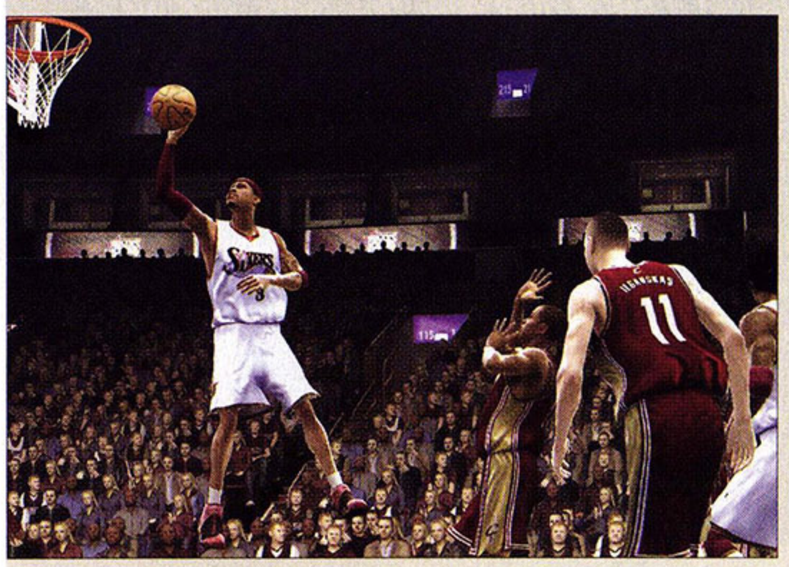
THE GOOD, THE BAD, THE UGLY

When You Want Your News Categorized With A Sarcastic Editorial Spin

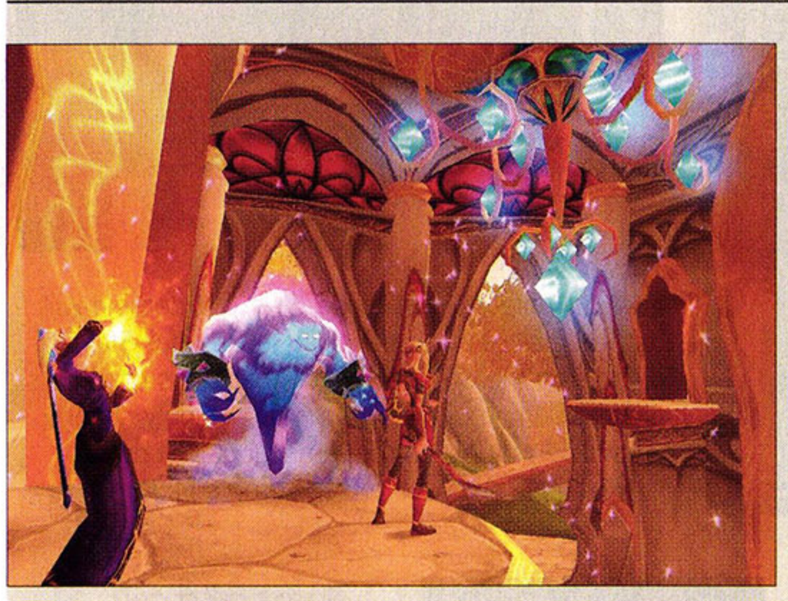


UGLY

An online petition has started on www.nbalive.com railing on EA Sports' NBA Live 07 and the company in general for what the fan site feels is poor quality and apathy on EA's part. Of course, you can't get a leopard to change its spots, and we're too busy having a good time with 2K Sports' NBA 2K7 to care.

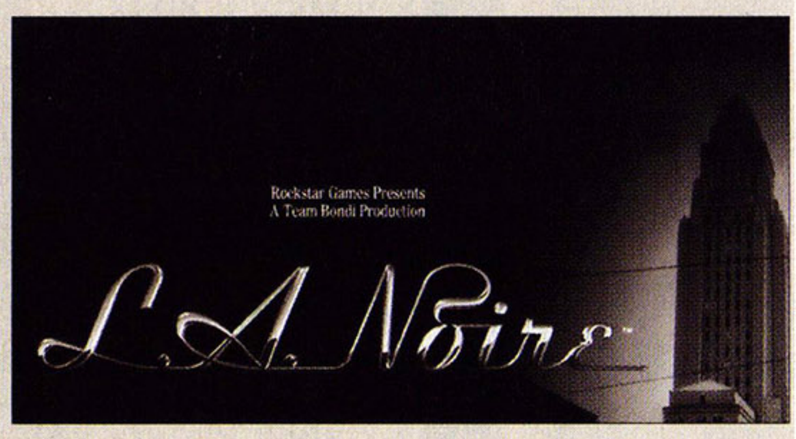
GOOD

No matter what console you have, it looks like Square Enix is committed to giving you games. In a recent interview, a company bigwig promised that Square Enix wants to spread its support among all the systems. It will be interesting to see if traditional PlayStation-only series like Dragon Quest or Kingdom Hearts see love on other platforms.



BAD

World of Warcraft's Burning Crusade expansion pack has been delayed until January. Developer Blizzard says that it's to "further refine the new content that will ship with the game," but they probably just want more time to make warlocks extra overpowered, especially against your class.

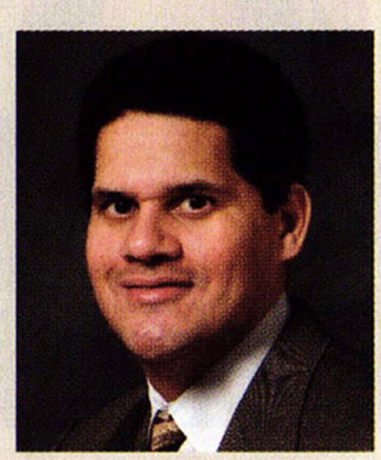


GOOD

Rockstar has unveiled its newest opus – L.A. Noire. The next-gen '40s detective game takes inspiration from the grimy world of Dashiell Hammett, Sam Spade, and films like *LA Confidential*. The game is being developed by Team Bondi, which was formed by former director of Team Soho (The Getaway) Brendan McNamara. L.A. Noire features the typical film noir backdrop of cops and corruption, and you can bet the game will throw in a mysterious blonde for good measure.

GOOD

Castlevania vampire hunters will be pleased to find that Konami is giving them a juicy incentive to stay on the trail until the game's release this December. Those who preorder Castlevania: Portrait of Ruin for the DS will receiver a limited edition wax-sealed box containing the game, a special Castlevania DS stylus, a soundtrack CD, a 48-page art book, a poster of the series' chronology, and a case that holds both Portrait of Ruin and the first DS title from the franchise, Dawn of Sorrow.



GOOD

Nintendo icon Reggie Fils-Aime will be in person at the Nintendo World store in New York for the debut of the Wii to hand out the first units of the platform to a few lucky customers. And we're sure if you ask nicely he will be more than happy to kick your ass.

GOOD

Microsoft's Robbie Bach, Best Buy, and Boys & Girls Clubs of America are spearheading a video game ratings awareness campaign called "Safety is no game. Is your family set?" The tour will hit 20 cities with an interactive bus designed to provide hands-on education for parents about video games, the ESRB ratings system, and how they can protect their children from undesirable content. The campaign will also feature an advertising campaign, meetings with politicians and city leaders, and in-store materials. For more, check out www.xbox.com/isyourfamilyset.

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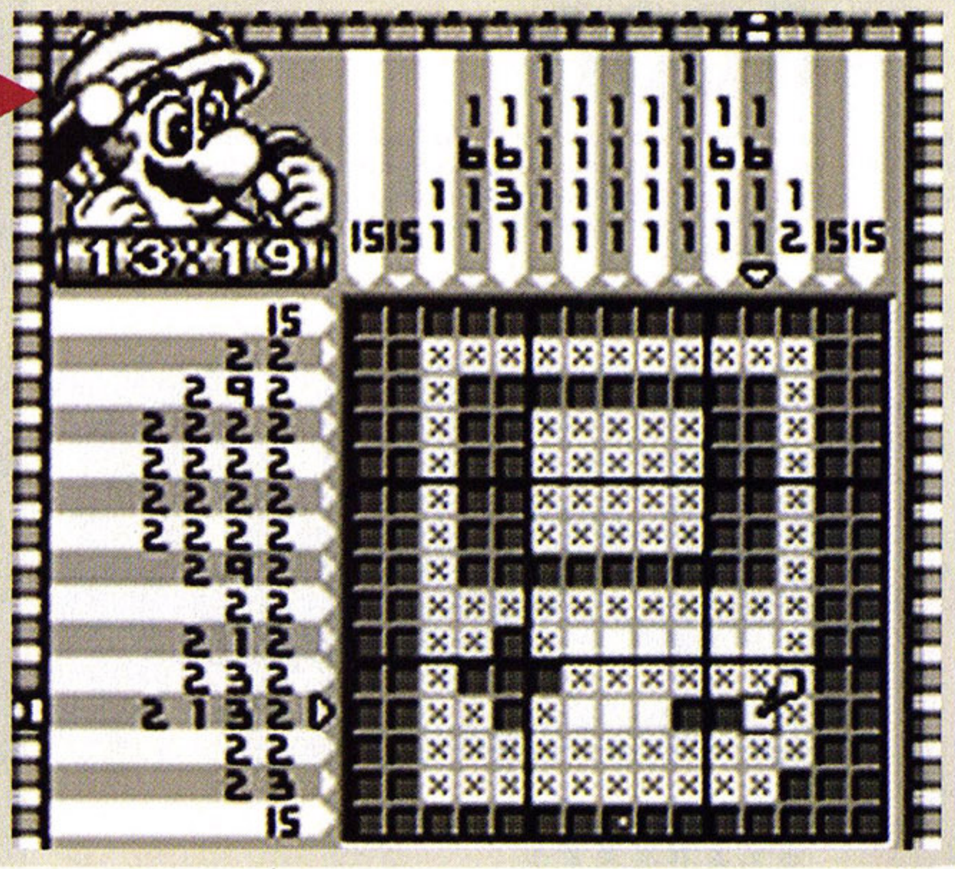
the top 10 we want to play on the virtual console

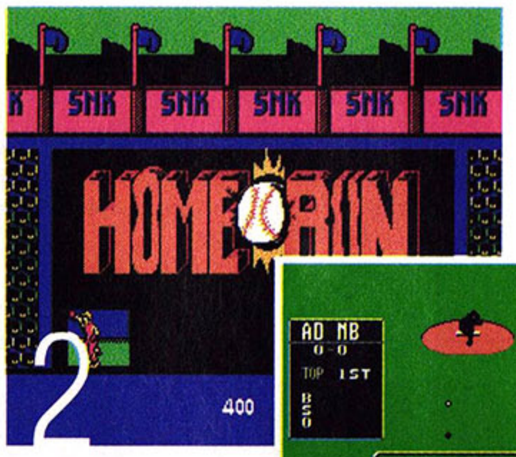
(APART FROM THE OBVIOUS)

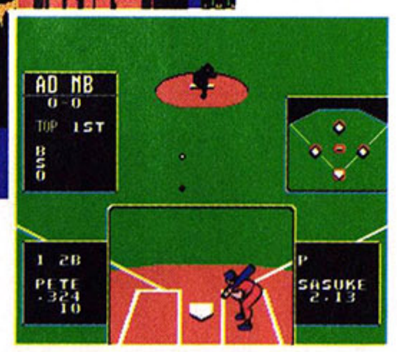
Zelda, Mario, and Metroid are no-brainers. But tons of other great old-school games have gathered a bit of dust over the years, and we'd love to get our hands on them again through the Wii's Virtual Console. Some of these will actually be available, and others probably won't. Regardless of the reality of the situation, in a perfect world these are the 10 retro games we'd be playing on day one.

1 Mario's Picross

Sure, it's a Mario game, but it is one of the best and most obscure of the plumber's ventures. It's a puzzle game where players mark squares to create recognizable patterns like scissors or Game Boys. Mario's Picross is challenging and addictive, and we've probably forgotten the solutions by now, so it'll be fun all over again!





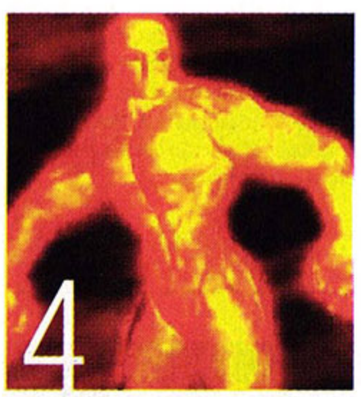


2 Baseball Stars

Tons of games have a create-a-player these days, but nothing will top the thrill of when we did it in Baseball Stars. It didn't stop there: we made whole teams of players with borderline offensive names. The only change we would propose is the removal of that damn mercy rule – we want to see some suffering.

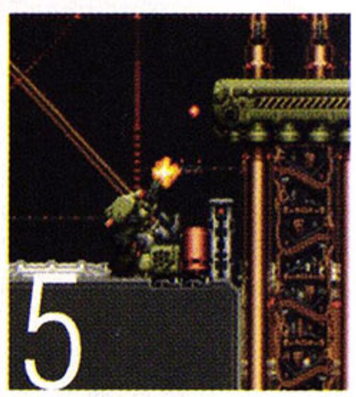
3 Secret of Evermore

This is a story of a young boy and his dog as they journey through a magical land. It is also the story of a bazooka, which Secret of Evermore taught us should be a mandatory weapon in every RPG.



4 Killer Instinct

What with all their parries, counters, and finesse, fighting games these days are like ballets. We miss the good ol' days where we could just rattle off a few button presses and send Fulgore on an unbreakable rampage. Eat that, T.J. Combo!



5 Cybernator

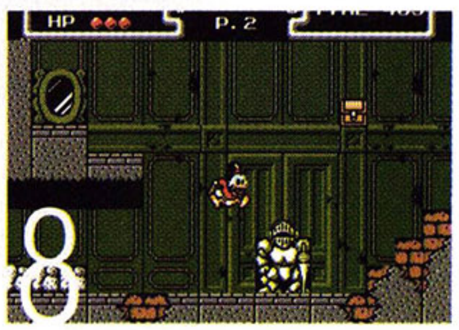
Sweet weapons, huge robotic bosses, and flashy explosions may be all people really expect from games like Cybernator, but it shamelessly delivers each element with gusto, along with rockin' soundtrack to accompany the carnage.

6 Zombies Ate My Neighbors

Dr. Tongue may not be the most intimidating name for a villain, but this exploration-heavy game has more than enough wacky enemies and weapons to make up for him. Blasting dolls, mummies, and (duh!) zombies just never seems to get old.

7 Military Madness

Originally released for the TurboGrafx-16, Military Madness is a strategic turn-based war over the lunar surface. Far from a simple board game, securing victory is done by using the terrain and resources to your advantage to wipe out the Axis Empire. Get off our moon, hoseheads!



8 Duck Tales

Never mind the cool levels, bosses, and inherent fun of bouncing around on a cane – a cantankerous old duck who swims around in money is a great hero. Plus, any game with GizmoDuck is automatically a must-play.

9 Actraiser

The 2D action segments and mythical bosses were fun and all, but the real joy of Actraiser was raising a thriving town from nothing only to devastate it with constant lightning strikes.

10 Sin and Punishment

Made by Treasure (of Ikaruga fame), Sin and Punishment was localized for the U.S. but never actually saw its intended N64 release. As a result, this rail-shooting action title is one of the holy grails of import gaming, and we'd love an easier way to get a hold of it.

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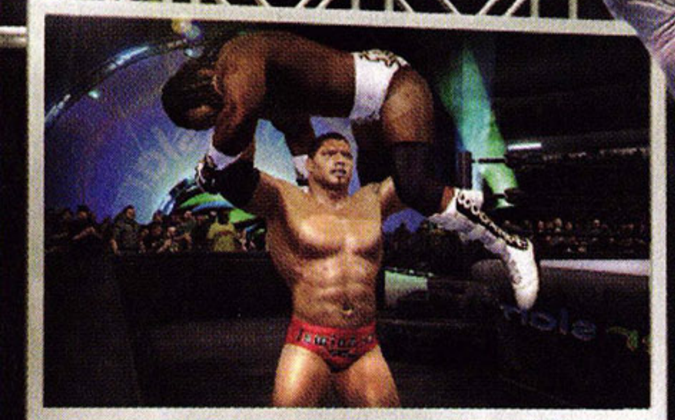

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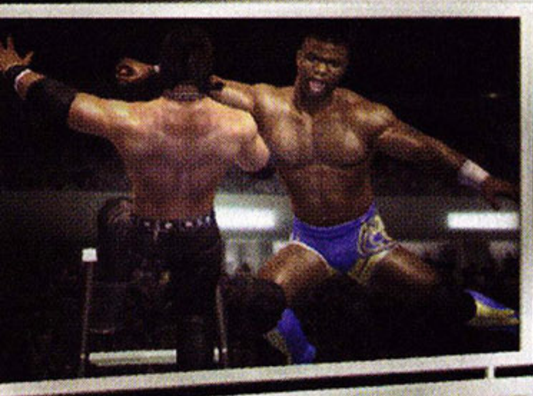

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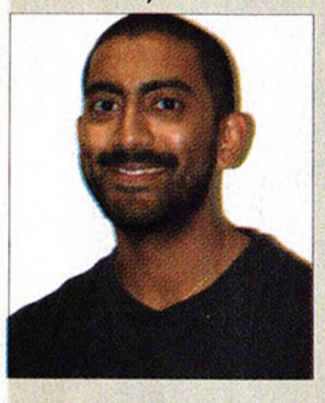
TOP FIVES

Favorites From Industry Pros And GI Readers

DEVELOPER
PRAS MOORTHY
Producer, The Creative Assembly (Medieval II: Total War)



1 Populous – PC
2 Street Fighter II – SNES
3 Shogun: Total War – PC
4 Speedball 2 – Genesis
5 Guitar Hero II – PS2

READER
SPRING SUSSMAN
East Sandwich, MA

1 Zombies Ate My Neighbors – SNES
2 ICO – PS2
3 Sonic the Hedgehog 2 – Genesis
4 Space Station: Silicon Valley – N64
5 The Neverhood – PC

Send Top Fives and a photo of yourself to:

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Minneapolis, MN 55401-9022
email: topfive@gameinformer.com
(attach digital picture)

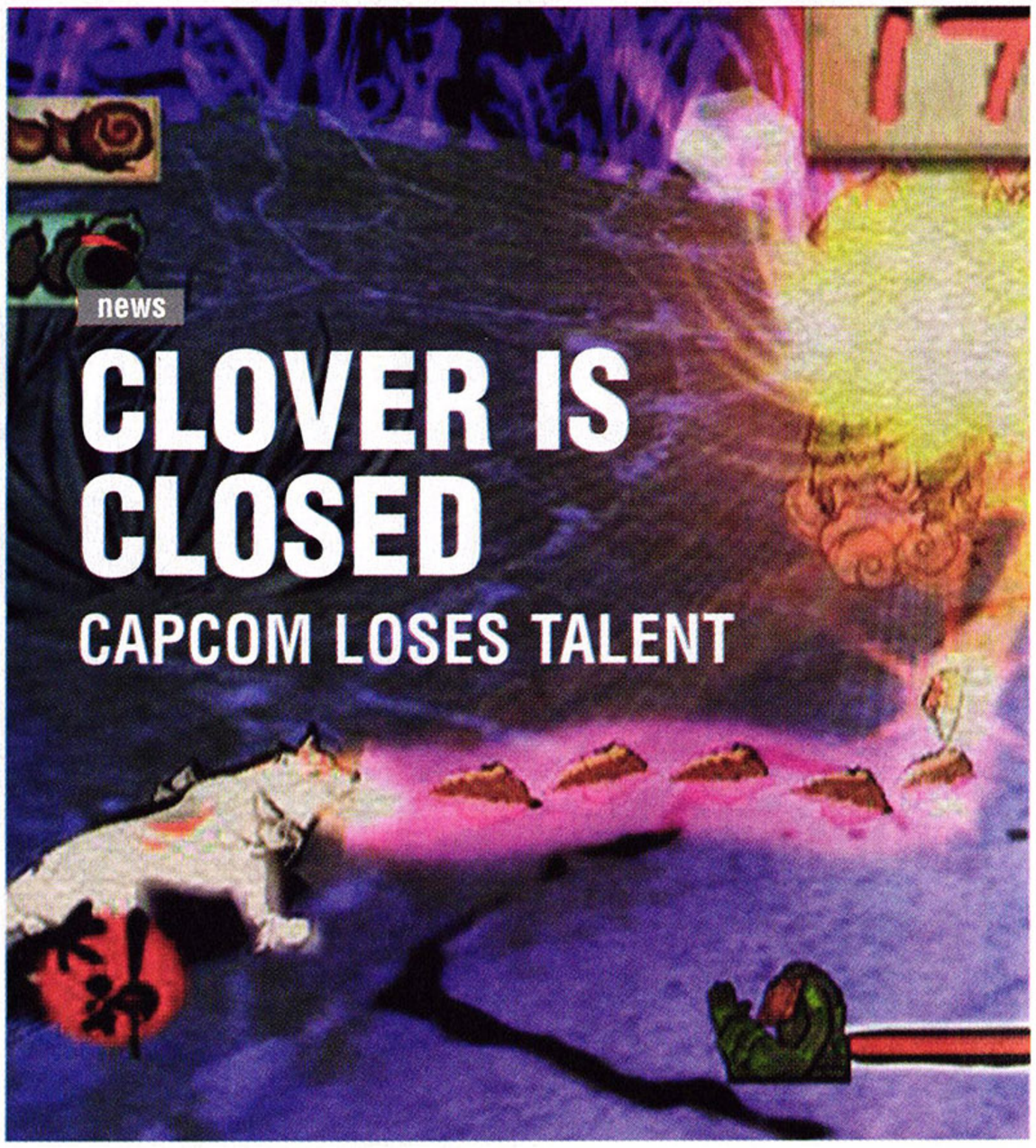
TOP TEN

Lists...Everybody Loves Lists...

Top Ten Reasons We Didn't Review Wii Games In This Issue

10 Reggie kicked our ass and took our name
9 Luigi's feelings are still hurt from our last Mario Party review
8 Fire ants. Think about it
7 We despise exertion in all its forms
6 Enormous PS3 and 360 units take all of the office space. Ben's working in the dumpster!
5 The system is the cheapest, and therefore probably junk
4 Sony painted a Sixaxis controller white, and told us it was the same damn thing
3 Nintendo not swayed by use of the word "please" accompanied by sobbing
2 Don't let the genial smile fool you. Miyamoto hates it when strangers hug him
1 Seriously, Nintendo just wouldn't let us

Name That Game Answer: Sega Rally Championship



news

CLOVER IS CLOSED

CAPCOM LOSES TALENT

Japanese publisher/developer Capcom closed its Clover Studio, the developer who produced games such as Okami, Viewtiful Joe, and God Hand. Clover, which was started in 2004, was headed by Viewtiful Joe producer Atsushi Inaba. A statement from Capcom on the matter read, "Clover Studio has met the goal of developing unique and creative original video game software. However, in view of promoting a business strategy that concentrates management resources on a selected business to enhance the efficiency of the development power of the entire Capcom group, the dissolution of Clover Studio has been raised and passed at the Board meeting."

Rumors have been floating around earlier this year that Inaba had left Capcom, something that the company confirmed. Devil May Cry creator Hideki Kamiya also left this summer. The company says that Clover's Shinji Mikami (creator of Resident Evil) remains working for Capcom on a contractual basis. It is unknown what effect weak sales – even in Japan – of well-reviewed titles such as Okami had on Inaba and others leaving the studio.

Clover Studio will close for good in March. Until then, it will work on PAL versions of Okami and God Hand.

news

VALVE EXPANDS STEAM

ACTIVISION/2K SIGN ON

Steam, Valve's download service, has recently snared some pretty high-profile clients. Third-party bigwig Electronic Arts already signed a deal with Valve last year, and now fellow successful publishers 2K Games, Activision, and Ubisoft have also entered into agreements to have some of their PC products distributed via Steam.

Call of Duty 2 (shown), Call of Duty, and Call of Duty: United Offensive will be offered by Activision, while 2K's initial batch includes Firaxis' Civilization III and Civilization IV. Sid Meier's Pirates! and Shattered Union will also be available for download.

Valve says that it has 10 million customers for its Steam products, spanning a range of game genres.

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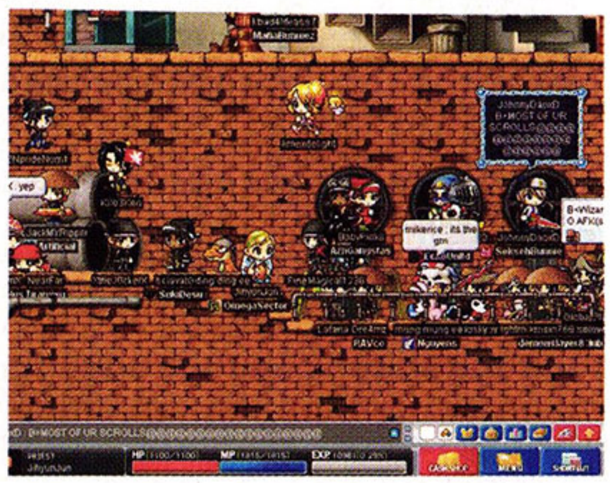

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DOES THE XBOX 360 LEAD MATTER?

Microsoft had the luxury of selling Xbox 360s for a full year before the competition even showed up to the battlefield. With the PS3 and Wii finally on the scene, we tackle the issue of whether or not Microsoft did enough to make the lead matter.

PRO

YOU HAVE TO BE PRETTY CONFIDENT to scoff at a 2 million-console lead. No doubt that as the undisputed winner of the last console war, Sony has the brand recognition and track record to back the bravado. But when you're rolling out a measly 400,000 units on launch day with a limited and repetitious software library, excessive sticker price, and hazy online strategy, it can come off a bit more like self-destructive narcissism. This seems especially true when the competition has the advantage of a holiday console surplus, two years of software development under its belt, and a fleshed out online service. Sony won't dominate as it did before.

Though both PlayStation and Nintendo have strong brand loyalty, the immediate question facing these two gaming juggernauts is how patient will their base be? Will PlayStation and Nintendo fanboys wait obediently for a PS3, which may not be in abundance until well into the next year? Or will that large sum of money burn a hole in gamers' pockets when they see the saliva-inducing lineup of Xbox 360 titles featuring blockbusters like Gears of War?

Add the capitalistic impulse to spend with the long-term potential of the Xbox 360, which has slowly eradicated Sony's hold over third-party exclusives like Grand Theft Auto, and the chances become greater that Sony's base will be withered before their console is running at full speed. Nintendo is still riding the post-E3 wave of enthusiasm, but how long will its fans be content with the noticeably last-gen graphics?

As with all console races, the game lineups will inevitably decide the winner, but to dismiss Microsoft's gains thus far is to forget who is setting the pace.—**BERTZ**

CON

MICROSOFT HAS MADE SOME GREAT STRIDES since entering the video game market. They've signed exclusives, created an awesome online service, and most importantly – turned the word "Xbox" into one of those bywords for video games as a whole. But despite these good deeds and the public's favorable perception of the platform, the sales numbers tell the truth: The company's sales lead on its rivals is not much of a lead at all. According to the NPD, only 2.4 million units of the Xbox 360 have sold in the U.S heading into this fall. That's not enough of a head start next to the strong PlayStation or Nintendo brand names.

There is a legion of PS2 owners waiting to get their hands on the PS3, and Nintendo always has a dedicated, built-in following that buys its systems. Even the doomed GameCube and N64 reaped the benefits of the Nintendo name. In my mind, the first million or two sales of a system don't matter. If and when you hit 10 million is when you start to create a legacy for your console. Rabid fans will always comprise that first million, but if you can survive into that 10 million unit territory, that's when you know that the casual audience is driving sales – and that's the audience that really thrusts your system into prominence.

In other words, Microsoft's lead at the moment is merely a single battle in the war, but we won't know who the victor is until the mainstream foot soldiers start marching.—**KATO**

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Puzzle Bobble

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X-Men 3

game2142

Blade:Trinity

game2143

World Poker Tour

game2144

Juiced

game2145

Age Of Empires

game2146

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Wallpapers

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pic8330

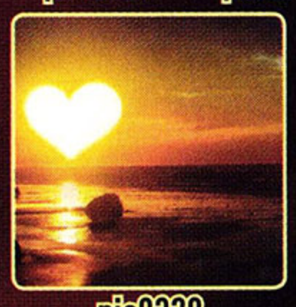
pic8331

pic8327

pic8332

pic8333

pic8334


pic8328

pic8335

pic8336

pic8337

pic8338

pic8339

pic8340

pic8341

pic8342

pic8343

Funsounds

The Crazy Frog - Crazy Train	fun8098
Hey Mutha	fun8099
Too Drunk To Ring	fun8100
Nanana - Ive Got A Text	fun8101
Old Telephone Ringing	fun8102
From Hell	fun8103
Dont Answer It	fun8104
Bleep Generic	fun8105
V8 Engine	fun8106
Zombies - Pick Up Your Phone...	fun8107
Alcohol Warning!	fun8108
Fat Car	fun8109
Bada Bing-Ring	fun8110

Screensavers

move4927

move4928

move4929

move4930

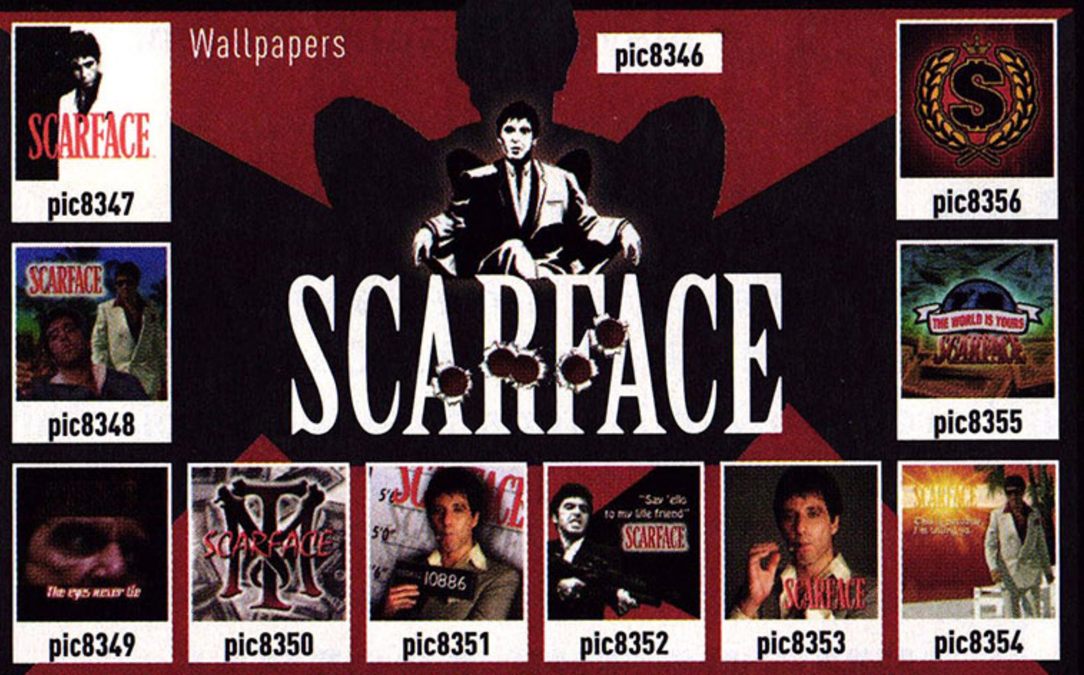
move4931

move4932

Realtones REAL

Chain Hang Low - Jibbs	true4303
Money Maker - Ludacris	true4304
Walk It Out - DJ UNK	true4305
I Know You See It - Yung Joc	true4306
Smack That - Akon	true4307
Snap Yo Fingers - Lil Jon	true4308
Sexy Love - Ne-Yo	true4309
Money In The Bank - Lil Scrappy	true4310
Stuntin' Like ... - Birdman & Lil Wayne	true4311
Lips of an Angel - Hinder	true4312
My Love - Justin Timberlake	true4313
Push It - Rick Ross	true4314
Show Stopper - Danity Kane	true4315
Sexy Back - Justin Timberlake	true4316
It's Okay - The Game	true4317
U And Dat - E-40	true4318
Chicken Noodle Soup - DJ Webstar	true4319
Far Away - Nickelback	true4320
Ring the Alarm - Beyonce	true4321
Shoulder Lean - Young Dro	true4322
About Us - Brooke Hogan	true4323
Say Goodbye - Chris Brown	true4324
Vans - The Pack	true4325
Peanut Butter&Jelly - C. Don & J Money	true4326
Ridin' (Ridin Dirty) - Chamillionaire	true4327

Wallpapers pic8346



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pic8351

pic8352

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Videotones

video367
Ain't No Other Man
Christina Aquilera

video369
Promiscuous
Nelly Furtado

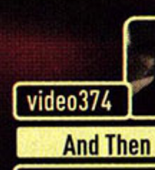
video371
What's Your Fantasy
Ludacris

video373
Me & U
Cassie

video368
Unpredictable
Jamie Foxx

video370
Trap Star
Young Jeezy

video372
Oh Yes
Juelz Santana


video374
And Then What
Young Jeezy

Themes

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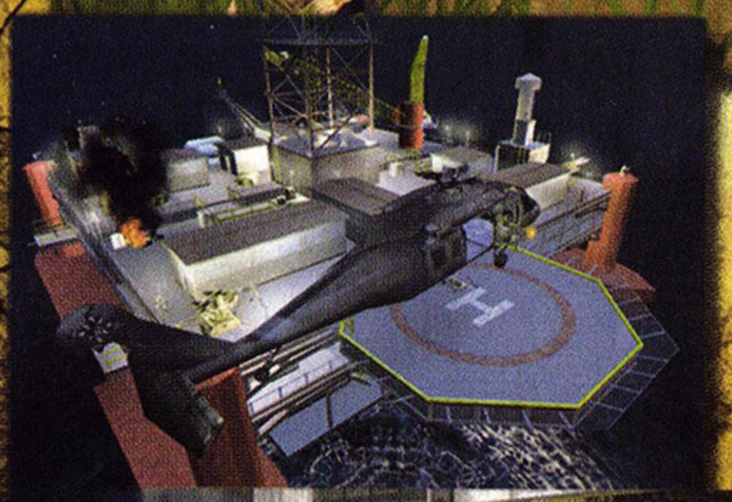

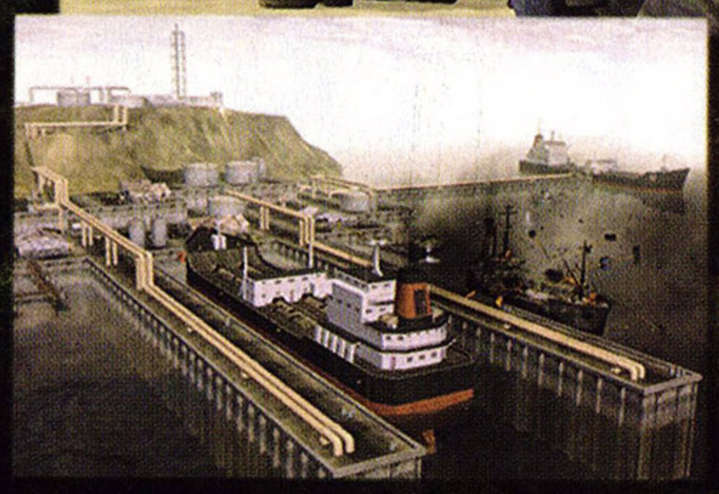

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MARTIN TREMBLAY

PRESIDENT OF WORLDWIDE STUDIOS/SIERRA ENTERTAINMENT

>> Based on his exceptionally successful stint as the head of Ubisoft's Montreal studio, Martin Tremblay is one of video games' most respected executives. Recently, Tremblay accepted a new position as president of world-wide studios, seeking to improve Vivendi and Sierra development across the board. We spoke with Tremblay about his vision for the company's future. <<

Obviously, Ubisoft Montreal is known in the industry as a very successful studio. What were the key factors in making it such a good studio?
I'll tell you that the success in Ubisoft Montreal was a team success. I was part of it and I've been able to bring people to work together. In video games, we have to give space to the creative [people] in the company. I think that I put in a system there that allowed creative people to be creative. Also, there's the rational part of the video game industry, which is the engineering and programming part that needs to be fostered in building technology in the long-term perspective. I think that combination is the real key to succeeding year after year. I'm very proud of what we have achieved over there by delivering year after year with amazing growth, while still keeping the quality in the game…. Fiscal concerns were important, but the game is ready when it's ready. I think it's one of the important elements. You create value in video games by creating franchises, and you can only create franchises if you're creating quality.

What was the opportunity you saw at Vivendi?
As I told you, I'm joining Vivendi, which is a game company, but it's more than that. It's an entertainment company. I had the feeling that, by joining Vivendi, I would be able to create franchises. If you look at their strategy, it's to create franchises. Most of our competitors have sequels and expansion packs. Now, I've made a lot of those in the past, and successfully, but at some point we need as a publisher to renew the industry and move forward. For us, '07 is going to be the first of our new IP.

Vivendi hasn't moved on creating a lot of new IP in recent years. So, you're saying this is a new focus for the company?
Absolutely. In fact, we are investing a lot of money into it. I don't want to tell you how many titles we have that are new IP, but it's amazing what's going to arrive in '08 and '09. Just based on what you see of the company today and what we will be at that time, it's going to be way different and way better.

When you came on to Vivendi, what did you see as the company's biggest strengths and weaknesses?
I'll tell you that its relationships with entertainment companies are its biggest strength. We're close to Fox, Universal, Paramount, and the relationship with Universal Music Group is key. If you look at the structure of Vivendi itself, we have a mobile company integrated in the company. We have an online company. We have the Sierra group, which is essentially the console and PC games. This year, as an example with Scarface, we released a very successful game. It's selling like crazy. We have another one coming out for Christmas called Eragon, based on a movie from Fox. We really believed we've leveraged that game on many aspects – on the mobile side, on the online side, on the PC, all platforms everywhere. I think it's a good execution of the movie, and we're building for the future. That's the vision we have. And, I'll tell you, the people here are quite dynamic people and very creative. We've acquired studios like Swordfish, High Moon, Radical, and Massive. Out of those studios in '07 and '08, there are going to be some amazing games.

Vivendi and Sierra have a lot of IPs that have a long tradition, but haven't been performing well lately, like Crash Bandicoot, Spyro, or King's Quest. Do you want to try to revive those franchises, which was something Ubi Montreal did with Prince of Persia?
You bring up a good point. If you look at the company, our own IP, like the games you mentioned, is part of our foundation. One of my goals in the company is to bring the quality to another level and revitalize Spyro and Crash. We need to make sure that, instead of getting an eight out of ten on Game Rankings, we'll look for a nine out of ten.

What's the status of Timeshift? It's been delayed several times.
I'm happy you asked me the question. You've seen Timeshift with Atari; you've seen the game with us. When I arrived at the company, I thought that the game had a huge potential, but I didn't think that the quality of the game I was seeing was enough to release the game. So, we decided to really revisit the strengths of the game. My goal with the creative director and developers of Timeshift – I went to Sabre in Russia two weeks ago – is to make sure that the game will be one of the big guns on every platform in the next generation because of the quality.

We've heard that High Moon Studios and Starbreeze are working on PS3 titles for Vivendi. Could you talk about those projects?
High Moon is working on PS3 and so is Starbreeze. PlayStation 3 is an important platform for us, and we are strongly investing in it. In fact, we thought we had a game for the launch on PS3, F.E.A.R., in North America, but the game will now be releasing in the beginning of January.

You announced one game for the Wii, but not too much else. Are you playing wait-and-see with that system?
There's more in development than you know about. There are some franchises we have that are perfect for the platform, and we will align those franchises to the Wii. You'll see a lot of titles for the Wii from us in '07 and '08.

> ***You create value in video games by creating franchises, and you can only create franchises if you're creating quality.***

Are you looking to acquire more studios or expand your internal development studios?
The answer is yes. We want to continue our growth internally. I'm a strong believer in internal development, but I'm also a strong believer in external development. We will maintain our leadership with external development, but we will increase our capacity in internal development over the next weeks and months. We are analyzing doing this in many different places in the world.

When you made the move over to the company, Ubisoft had filed an injunction to prevent you from leaving. Did that leave a bitter taste or impede your progress at Vivendi?
Absolutely not. We've had a conflict with them, but that can't erase seven perfect years I had with them. I had a great relationship [with Ubisoft]; they're a good publisher and good people. We both have to move on and do our best with our own companies. Believe me, whatever I built successfully at Ubisoft with a great team, I'm trying to do the same thing here. I won't be able to achieve something alone; I'll achieve something with a team. I think we're going to be one of the best publishers very shortly. I want Vivendi to be recognized for quality games, [and] I know how to do it. I think the people here know that also, they've been experienced with successful games in the past. We just have to focus.

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

1999 ▶ Getting in the Game
After beginning his career working at his father's manufacturing firm, Tremblay is approached by a headhunter about a job in the growing game industry. After several meetings with Ubisoft, Tremblay emerges as the head of its new Montreal studio

2002 ▶ A Sneaky Classic

Ubisoft Montreal makes a huge splash in the stealth genre with Splinter Cell, perhaps the best and most popular new stealth series since Metal Gear

2003 ▶ A Prince Reborn
After a few duds, Ubisoft Montreal hits its stride with a dramatic reinvention of a classic, Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time. The game perfectly captures the vibe of the classic series, while innovating 3D platforming for a new generation

2003 ▶ The Shield
The Montreal studio flexes its PC muscles with Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six: Raven Shield, a well-received expansion pack to the popular PC franchise

2003 ▶ An Interesting Miss

Although it didn't burn up the charts, Montreal released a very intriguing entry in the FPS genre, XIII, which was based on a graphic novel and featured stylish cel-shaded graphics

2005 ▶ Stellar Sequels
Enhancing two great franchises, Montreal delivers the solid sequels Prince of Persia: The Two Thrones and Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory

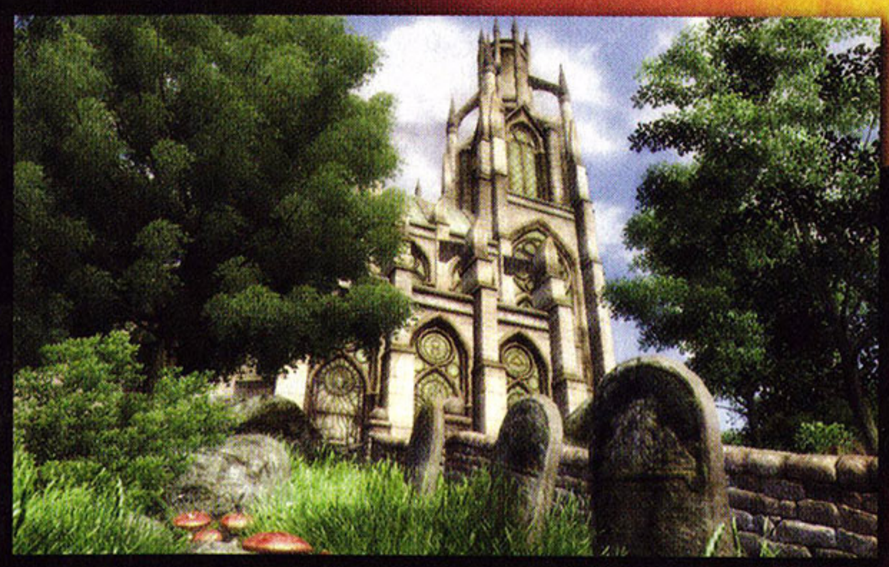
2006 ▶ Making a Move

After a great stint at Ubisoft, Tremblay moves to another French-owned game company, Vivendi Games. Here, he heads up its resurgent Sierra division and helps guide such high profile projects as Scarface: The World is Yours and games based on the film *Eragon*

SIERRA'S NEW LEADER

Photo: Ed Carr on

■ Martin Tremblay aims to guide Vivendi's Sierra division to the same level of quality he achieved at Ubisoft Montreal



Editor's Choice Awards

– Official Xbox Magazine, PC Gamer, Computer Gaming World, IGN, GameSpot, Team Xbox, GameZone

"Superb… A remarkable achievement"

– GameSpot

"An Absolute Masterpiece"

– Official Xbox Magazine

"If any game is worth the price of the PS3, Oblivion is it."

– Official U.S. PlayStation Magazine, November 2006

MATURE 17+

M

Blood and Gore
Language
Sexual Themes
Use of Alcohol
Violence

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2006 HOLIDAY BUYING GUIDE

Ho, ho, ho, and a very merry (yet inoffensive and religiously sensitive) seasonal greeting to you all! It's that time of year again. That time when malls get crowded and you have to make the big decisions about what to buy. Did you know a room can say a lot about a person, even what kind of gifts they wish for? That's why we've broken this year's Holiday Buyer's Guide into gamer rooms. Just turn to the page that best fits the personality of you or your loved one and then go buy everything we tell you to.

HOBBIT'S HOLLOW

Terribly sorry to hear about your amnesia, but the world is in danger on an apocalyptic scale and only you and three others infants can save it from a somewhat metrosexual pretty-boy. Since your hometown recently burned down, you will need some new things to start you out on your journey, so here's what to ask for.

■ This massive Balrog figure is the perfect gift for the nerd in your family

LORD OF THE RINGS EPIC SCALE

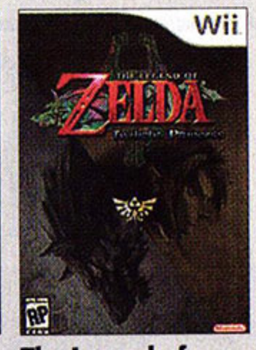
LIST PRICE: $39.99 (ARAGORN, LEGOLAS) $99.99 (BALROG)

The Lord of the Rings figures are all pretty sweet, but the Balrog is truly the mother of all of them. Set to scale with ToyBiz's Gandalf the Grey, this monster stands over 24 inches tall and has a wingspan of over 42 inches. It is also fully poseable, comes with a flaming sword and whip, and has an internal LCD so the flames on his back light up. You shall not pass this up!

TOP 3 GAMES

Final Fantasy XII Collector's Editon – PS2

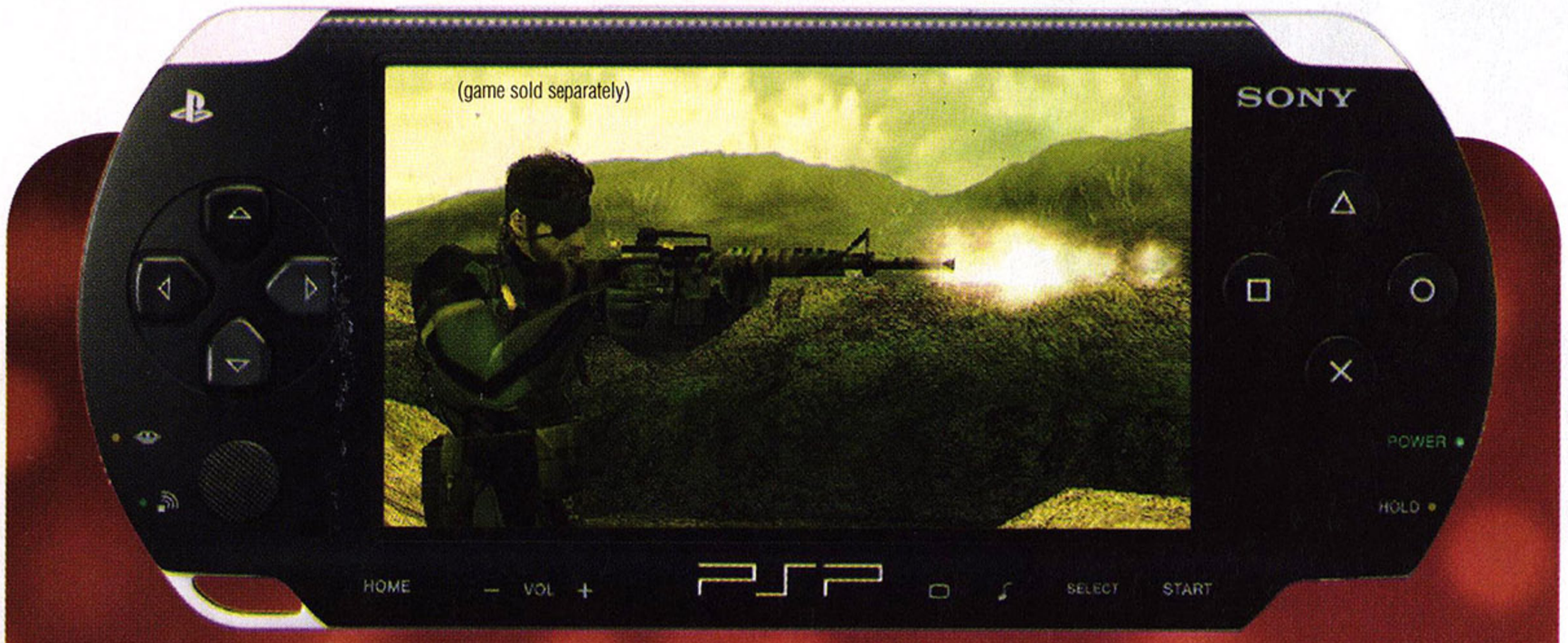
Dark Messiah of Might & Magic – PC



The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess – Wii

SPY HEADQUARTERS

So you've got more gadgets than Bruce Wayne and you want to know what new trinkets will make you feel more bad-ass than Solid Snake? We've got news for you buddy, nothing ever will; strength like that only comes from the heart. Chances are you've already got a handle on the hottest super sleuth tech, but here are a few toys you may have missed.



PSP

WWW.YOURPSP.COM
LIST PRICE: $199.99

Sony's attractive handheld still looks good under the tree, and now that it has been around for a while it's starting to amass a library of decent games. Considering it also plays music and movies and features some other cool peripherals, this Swiss army knife of portable entertainment makes a great gift for any James Bond wannabe.

1 SEPHIROTH'S MASAMUNE SWORD & CLOUD'S BUSTER SWORD

WWW.TRUESWORDS.COM
LIST PRICE: $44.89 (BUSTER SWORD)
$98.99 (MASAMUNE)

Sephiroth's is 68 inches long! We'll never get sick of that joke. True Swords has a decent selection of Final Fantasy weapon replicas ranging through FFs VII to X-2, and many of these include polished steel blades and leather-wrapped handles. Cloud's Buster Sword even includes two open materia slots. Now you can do something with all that extra materia you've been hoarding!

2 KINGDOM HEARTS II ACTION FIGURES

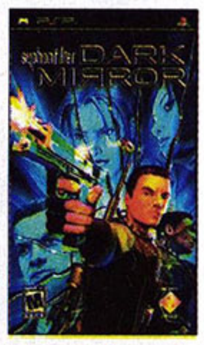
WWW.BIGBADTOYSTORE.COM
LIST PRICE: $29.99

You've beaten Sephiroth and gotten S ranking in all the Gummi Ship levels, and you still can't get enough of Kingdom Hearts? Try these Play Arts figures. Each has over 20 points of articulation and comes with their own display stands. Available characters are Axel, Kairi, Roxas, and Sora. Also available – but limited to a 3,000 unit run – are Valor Form Sora and Final Form Sora.

TOP 3 GAMES

Splinter Cell: Double Agent – 360, PS2, Xbox

Metal Gear Solid: Portable Ops – PSP



Syphon Filter: Dark Mirror – PSP

3 ITRIP FOR PSP

WWW.GRIFFINTECHNOLOGY.COM
LIST PRICE: $49.99

Griffin is releasing an iTrip for the PSP this year, so now you can listen to your games, movies, and music through your home or car stereo. This bad boy has a range of 10-30 ft. and transmits on a FM range of 88.1-107.9MHz. Sounds completely useless for sneaking around, but it's still awesome.

4 24 DVD BOARD GAME

WWW.B1MEDIA.COM
LIST PRICE: $29.99

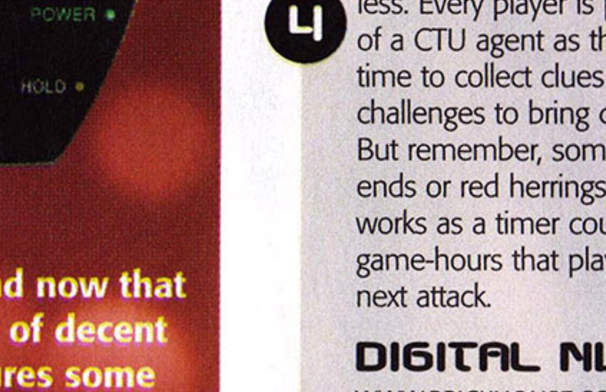
Sure, a DVD board game sounds like a contradiction, but they exist nonetheless. Every player is placed in the role of a CTU agent as they race against time to collect clues and win minigame challenges to bring down the terrorist. But remember, some clues are dead ends or red herrings. The DVD also works as a timer counting down the 24 game-hours that players have until the next attack.

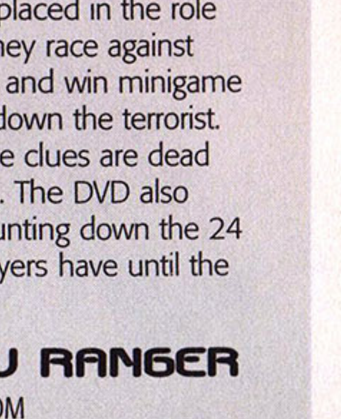
5 DIGITAL NV RANGER

WWW.BRICKHOUSE.COM
LIST PRICE: $399.95

Now you can finally live out your Sam Fisher fantasies. These night vision goggles are some of the best commercial NV devices on the market. The Ranger has a 5X magnification that manages to stay crystal clear; there are no dark spots or fuzzy areas around the edges. The ranger also has a video output, so with a peripheral recording device you can record what you see, but we're not sure you'd want any evidence of what you'll be doing with this thing.

3





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THE STORY OF YOUR FIGHTING IS

A POEM OF TWO WORDS:

YOU SUCK.

RED STEEL

Exclusively For Wii™

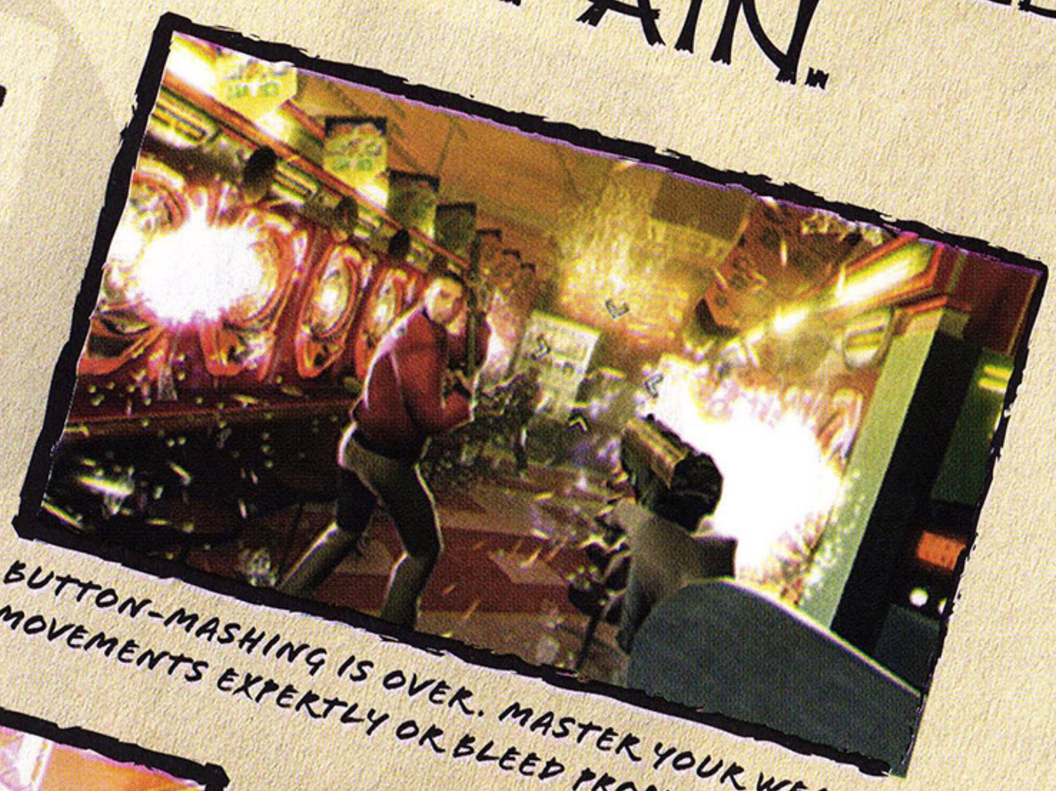
TEEN
T™
Language
Mild Suggestive Themes
Violence
ESRB CONTENT RATING www.esrb.org

www.RedSteelGame.com | Available Now

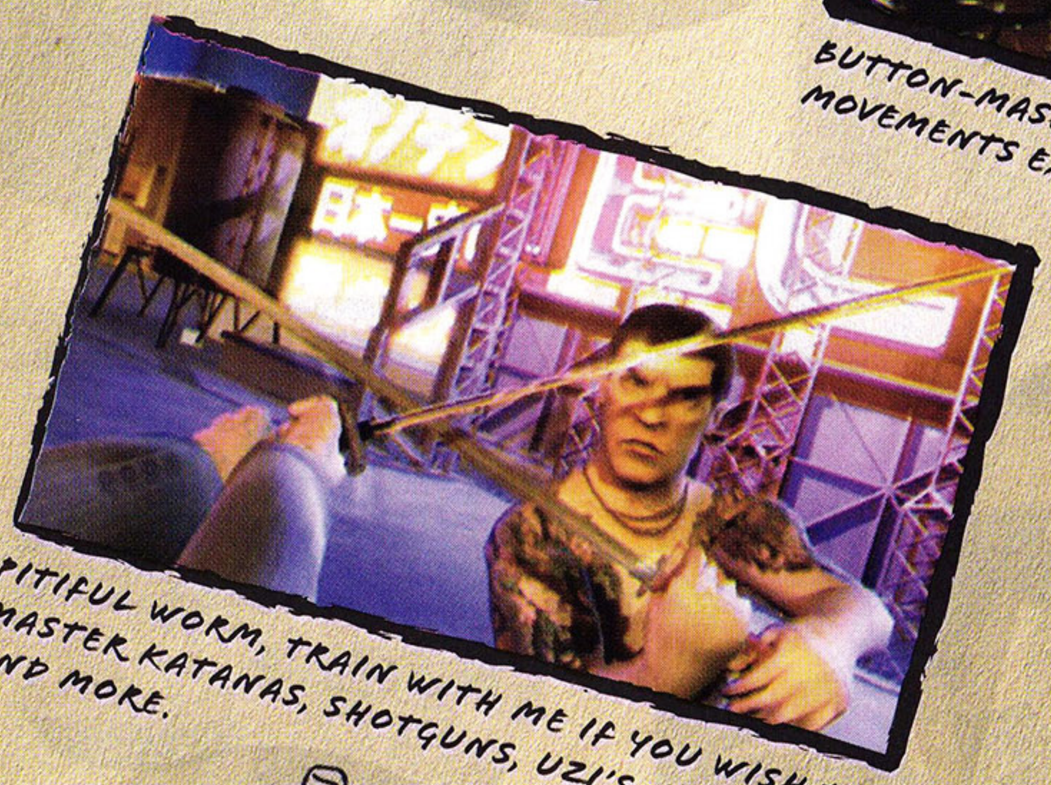
I CAN TRAIN EVEN YOU AT THE RED STEEL

DOJO OF PAIN.

REAL MOVES



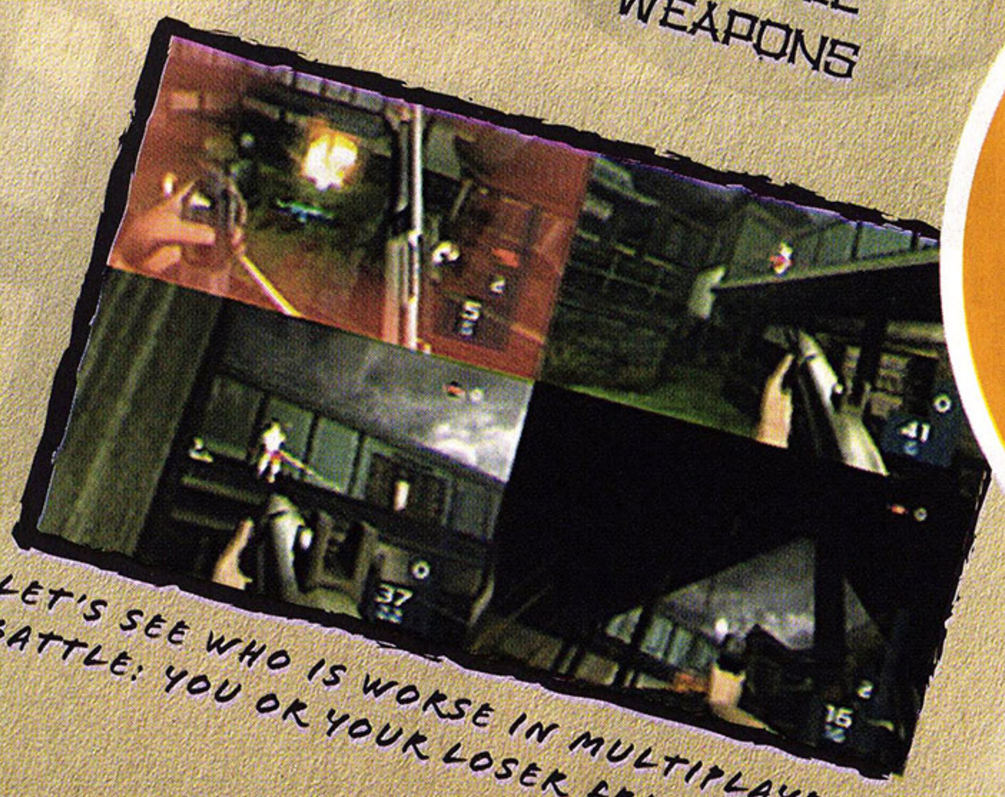
BUTTON-MASHING IS OVER. MASTER YOUR WEAPON MOVEMENTS EXPERTLY OR BLEED PROFUSELY.



PITIFUL WORM, TRAIN WITH ME IF YOU WISH TO MASTER KATANAS, SHOTGUNS, UZI'S, REVOLVERS AND MORE.

MULTIPLE WEAPONS

HEAD-TO-HEAD



LET'S SEE WHO IS WORSE IN MULTIPLAYER BATTLE: YOU OR YOUR LOSER FRIENDS?

HAVE THE SENSEI

CALL YOUR FRIENDS FREE!

Go to www.redsteelgame.com to get started.

1-877-RRD-STLL (773-7855)

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UBISOFT®

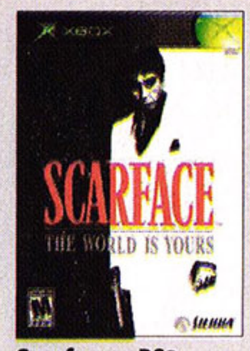
VILLAIN'S LAIR

You're the kind of guy who would rather kill all the villagers in Fable than rescue your sister from Twinblade. Sure, maybe you're on the naughty list this year and Santa won't be bringing you anything, but after you take over the world, you can kill him and take whatever you want. Hahaha! Yes being evil can be deliciously fun sometimes.

TOP 3 GAMES

Grand Theft Auto: Vice City Stories – PSP

The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion – PS3, 360, PC



Scarface – PS2, Xbox

VOODOO OMEN DESKTOP

WWW.VOODOOPC.COM

LIST PRICE: $3,200.00 (STARTING PRICE)

Voodoo's PC flagship the Omen comes packed with two graphics cards, which should allow you to play even the most monstrously taxing games on their highest settings. This high-end PC line features flexible configurations, innovative case design, and quiet operation. The PC innards are laid out so that the hot components are separated from the cold components, allowing everything to run with a more constant efficiency. Plus, the neon green cooling tubes look wicked sweet.

1

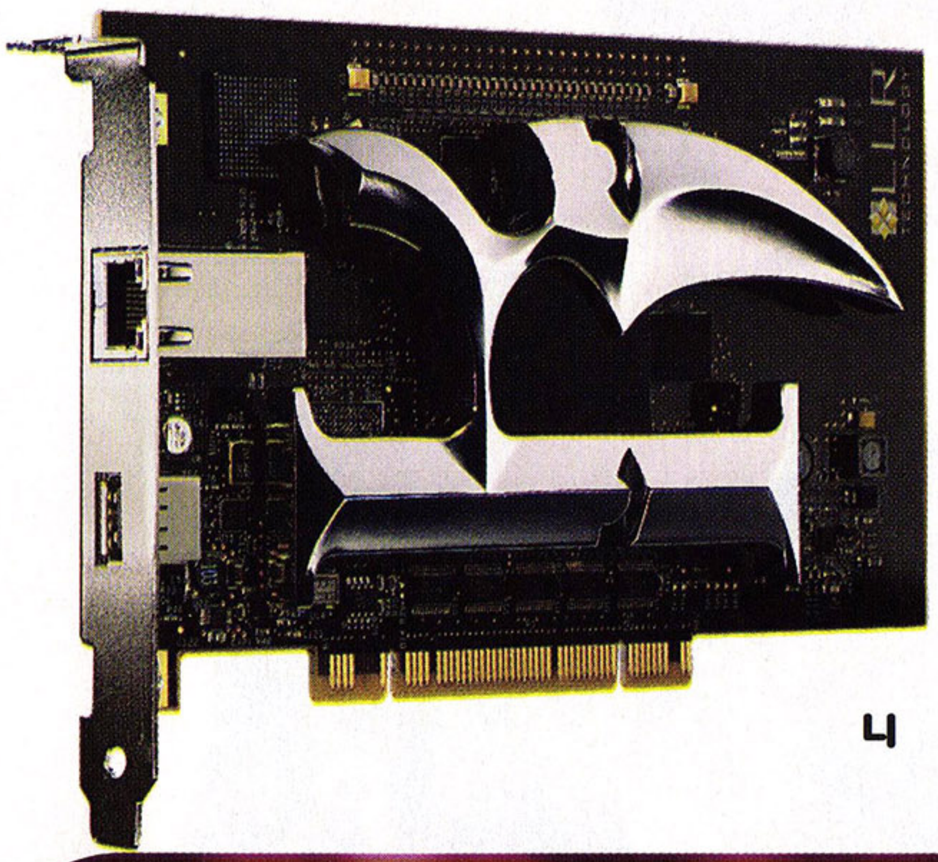
2

VILLAIN CHAIR

WWW.SUCK.UK.COM

LIST PRICE: $6,800.00

Come on, we know that little demon inside you squeals with glee whenever you look at this chair. This is the perfect throne to bankrupt the world with your extortion schemes. Can you think of a better place to sit and complete the Dark Brotherhood quest while you wait for that 100 billion dollars to start rolling in? No, we thought not. Now wipe the drool from your chin. It's unseemly for a dark lord such as yourself.



3

EVIL MONKEY SLIPPERS

WWW.SPENCERSONLINE.COM

LIST PRICE: $16.99

What the deuce? These things are freakin' sweet. Keep that evil monkey who lives in your closet underfoot, literally. Sure, you might be afraid to go into your closet to get them, but they'll keep your feet warm on these cold winter nights. Just remember he wasn't always evil. Maybe with a little love…

4

KILLER NIC INTERFACE CARD

WWW.KILLERNIC.COM

LIST PRICE: $279.99

This network card has been designed solely with gaming in mind. The Killer bypasses Windows Networking Stack, helping utilize the full potential of your PC and providing reduced ping during online gameplay. With 400Mhz of Network Processing power and 64MB RAM, this Killer really will help you spread your indiscriminant brand of gaming evil online. Plus, you'll probably be happy with the fact that your network card can kill other network cards with its giant blade.

PLAYSTATION 3

WWW.US.PLAYSTATION.COM

LIST PRICE: $599.99/$499.99

It's sleek, black, and powerful enough to blow holes in the moon. Why wouldn't any evil genius want one of these? You might have trouble finding one, considering that this will be the system in shortest supply this holiday season. But, as with pirate gold, rarity only makes the desire stronger. And don't forget the PS3 also plays Blu-ray movies. Who needs HD-DVD?

It's already devising ways to kill you.

The PlayStation®3 system can perform nearly two trillion calculations per second. And its Cell Broadband Engine,™ with its one Central Processing Unit (CPU) plus 8 Synergistic Processing Units (SPU), is capable of processing a multitude of tasks in parallel. The result of all this digital horsepower? A.I. becomes smarter. Everything becomes more real. And your untimely demise becomes that much more believable.

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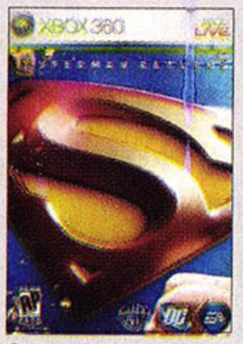
HERO'S SANCTUARY

The law is good, and obeying it can be lots of fun. That has always been your motto. But every now and then the buttery underbelly of evil spreads itself all over the toasted goodness of the world's justice, and who is going to stop evil then? That's right, you are. If you are really polite to the elderly this year maybe Santa will bring you world peace.

TOP 3 GAMES

Marvel Ultimate Alliance – PS3, 360, Wii, Xbox, PS2



Superman Returns – 360, Xbox, PS2

Justice League Heroes – PS2

1 PHILLIPS AMBILIGHT 50" PLASMA TV

WWW.FLATTV.PHILIPS.COM
LIST PRICE: $2,999.99

Phillips Ambilight technology envelops your room in a soft glow that matches whatever is onscreen. This 50" plasma comes equipped with a built-in HDTV Tuner, 2 HDMI inputs, and a 1366 x 768 pixel resolution. As an added bonus, all that light should keep the monsters in your closet at bay, kinda like the Spider-Man PJ's you wear to bed.

2 JINX SHIRTS/ PATCHES

WWW.JINX.COM • LIST PRICE: $17.99 (T-SHIRT) 34.95 (SWEATSHIRT) $3.99 (PATCHES)

Whether you are setting a drug-free example for young, impressionable children or displaying pride in your Night Elf heritage, these shirts from Jinx will make sure you get your message across. Most shirts come in five different sizes ranging from small to double XL. As an additional bonus, the WoW hoodies provide extra frost resistance during the cold winter months. That's the sales claim, at least, so don't complain to us if yours doesn't work.

3 SONOS DIGITAL MUSIC SYSTEM

WWW.SONOS.COM
LIST PRICE: $999.00 AND UP

With Sonos Digital Music System, you can wirelessly stream your Enya and John Tesh (What kind of music do good guys listen to anyway?) into at least 32 rooms in your house or office. Stream music from your radio, Internet, or your own digital collection. Want some Beethoven in the dinning room but Def Leppard in your bedroom? You got it, because the whole system is controlled by one 3.5 inch full-color LCD screen remote that fits in the palm of your hand.

4 THE ULTIMATE GAME CHAIR

WWW.ULTIMATEGAMECHAIR.COM
LIST PRICE: $299.00–$399.00

Hey, saving the world is hard stuff, so when your long day of defeating masterminds is over, why not treat yourself to a break? Besides being extremely comfortable, this game chair offers all the amenities a gamer could want: built-in beverage and remote holders, stain-resistant fabric, controller and headphone jacks, built-in speakers, and 12 vibration motors that synch up to the games you play. Need more? The chair also features lighting ground effects, perfect for making a dynamic entrance.

XBOX 360 + HD-DVD DRIVE

WWW.MICROSOFT.COM/XBOX
LIST PRICE: $399.99 (SYSTEM) $199.99 (HD-DRIVE)

Still watching your movies in 480p? That's so last-gen. Microsoft is ready to help you out with their HD-DVD attachment to enhance your cinematic experience (though it doesn't affect the gaming side of things). This little device attaches to your 360 via USB cable and utilizes the HD video outputs and digital surround sound of the system to deliver the best in audio/visual entertainment mankind will ever be able to offer until the Holodeck.

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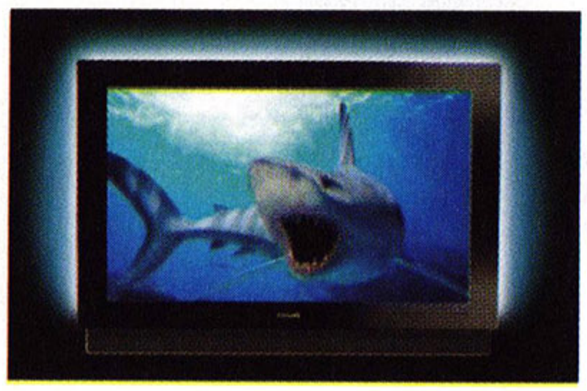

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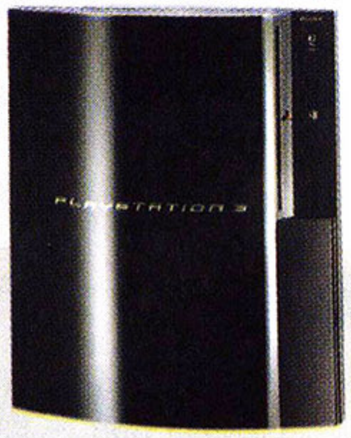
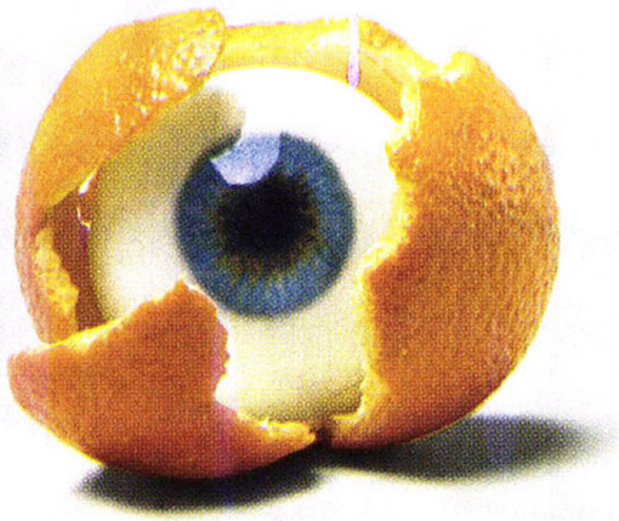




It dreams in Blu-ray.

With 10 times the storage capacity of standard DVDs and true 1080p image potential, you'll see levels that are truly massive, environments that are more complex and movies that are absolutely dripping with vibrant detail. Kind of makes you wonder what its nightmares look like.

Video output in HD requires cables and an HD-compatible display, both sold separately. Copy-protected Blu-ray video discs can only output at 1080p using an HDMI cable connected to a device that is compatible with the HDCP standard. HDMI cable not included. Additional equipment may be required to use the HDMI connector. "PlayStation" and the "PS" Family logo are registered trademarks of Sony Computer Entertainment Inc. Play B3yond is a trademark of Sony Computer Entertainment America Inc. All names, brands and associated imagery featured are trademarks and/or copyrighted materials of their respective owners.

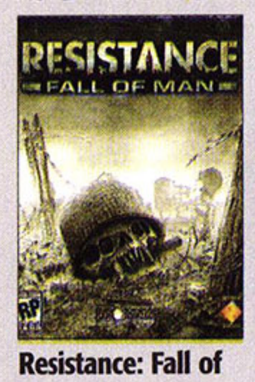
THE DANGER ROOM

ALIENWARE AURORA M9700 17" NOTEBOOK

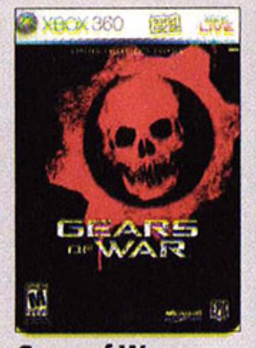
WWW.ALIENWARE.COM • LIST PRICE: $1,699.99

Greetings Earthlings, we have come from space to mine your planet for natural resources. But do not be upset, for we have brought you a gift: Alienware's Aurora m9700 line of notebooks. As the people of your planet might say, "for a little laptop this puppy sure can cook." Which makes no sense to us because with its 64-bit AMD processor, its dual NVIDIA graphics cards, and 1 GB of graphics memory, it plays games much better than it cooks omelets.

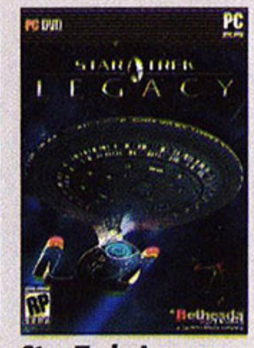
TOP 3 GAMES



Resistance: Fall of Man – PS3



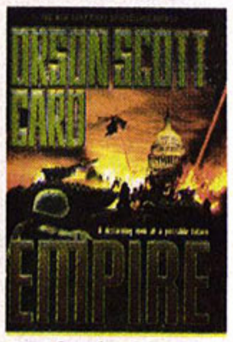
Gears of War Limited Edition – 360



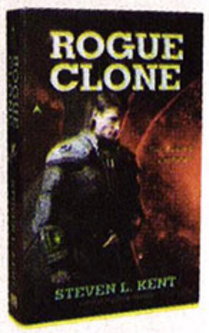
Star Trek: Legacy – 360, PS3

If you've even gotten into an argument over whether Mega Man or a Jedi would win in a fight, then this is the list for you. Sure, you're old enough to know that Santa isn't real, but you'll never be too old to stop dressing up as your favorite X-Man for a comic convention. Hey, who would win in a fight between a robotic Santa from the future or a vampiric Easter bunny with psychic powers?

TOP 3 BOOKS



Empire by Orson Scott Card
List Price: $24.99



Rogue Clone by Steven L. Kent
List Price: $7.99

Halo: Ghosts of Onyx by Eric Nylund
List Price: $12.95

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1 STARSCREAM TRANSFORMERS ACTION FIGURE

WWW.BIGBADTOYSTORE.COM • LIST PRICE: $99.99

This third figure in the Japanese Masterpiece line of Transformers measures 10 inches high in robot mode and 13 inches long as a jet. Made out of both metals and plastics, this is one of the most detailed and highly articulated Transformers figures out there. Starscream comes packaged with a display stand and even has swappable expressions. This figure is only in Japan for now, but if you don't want to wait for it to come to our shores you can import it online.

2 SKY SCOUT

WWW.CELESTRON.COM • LIST PRICE: $399.99

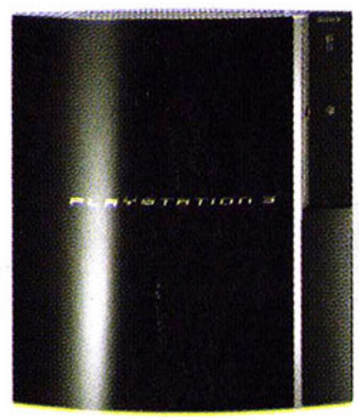
Simply point and click and the Sky Scout will tell you what star you are looking at. Is this some kind of dark magic you ask? No. This is called technology, and it is both futuristic and mysterious, but it works great. This device has a database that contains audio and textual information on all the planets, 6,000 stars, 88 constellations, and more. Plus, you can program it to recognize custom user objects, so if you ever get around to making your own star like you keep saying you will, you'll be set.

3 BATTLESTAR GALACTICA REPLICA SHIPS & CYLON CENTURION 12" FIGURE

LIST PRICE: $19.99 (SHIP) HASBROTOYSHOP.COM
$89.99 (CYLON) WWW.ENTERTAINMENTEARTH.COM

Have you finally finished your Star Trek diorama and need a new project to start? Well maybe these Battlestar Galactica toys will give you some ideas. This replica of the starship Galactica is just one in a line of several based on the hit sci-fi show. Since it won't be long before our planet is ruled by these mysterious beings we call robots, we might as well start showing our respect by purchasing their toys.

SIXAXIS™
WIRELESS CONTROLLER



Tilt. Pull. Thrust. Pray.

The SIXAXIS™ wireless controller utilizes sensors that are designed to read when a player angles, tilts, thrusts or pulls. Which means it feels more like an extension of your body, allowing for a more intuitive and immersive experience. Something to ponder the next time you're in a tailspin, one second from hitting the ground.

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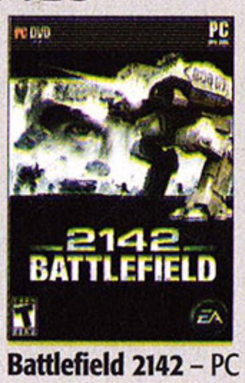
WAR MACHINES

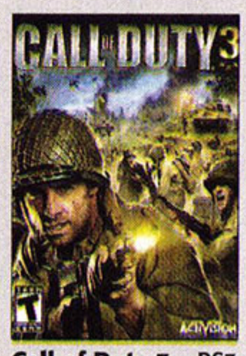
All right, soldier! This is not a drill. It's a war zone out there in the shopping malls, but someone's gotta go out there and get those presents. So, here is our list of holiday goodies that would make any Marine proud. What was that? You're not really a soldier? You just like to play games? You think you're funny, poindexter?! Drop and give me twenty!

TOP 3 GAMES

Rainbow Six: Vegas – PS3, 360, PC



Battlefield 2142 – PC



Call of Duty 3 – PS3, 360, Wii

VIEWSONIC VG 2021M

WWW.VIEWSONIC.COM • LIST PRICE: $315.00

War is an ugly thing, but who says it can't at least look good? This two-tone LCD monitor is a great choice for people who want crystal clear displays. The ClearMotiv feature allows for perfect focus even when projecting moving images, so whether you are wading knee-deep in the dead or running through an inferno, if you can't see what you're shooting at then it's not your monitor's fault.

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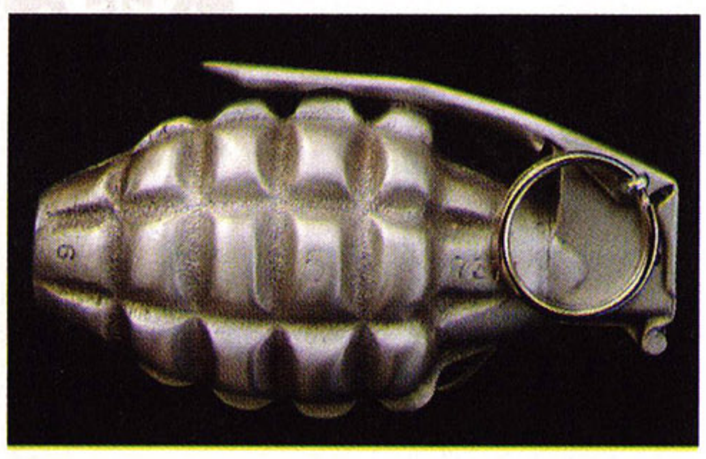

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1 CIVILIZATION CHRONICLES BOX SET

WWW.2KGAMES.COM • LIST PRICE: $69.99

This Civilization set is perfect for any RTS fan. Not only does it include every Civ game ever made – that's nine games for anyone counting – but it also comes packed with a decent number of extra goodies. To start, a 96-page book called *The Chronicles of Civilization* detailing the history of the game's world. But that's not all – a Civilization card game packed with 250 custom cards, posters, and a DVD containing presentations by the game's developers about the creation of Civilization IV are also included.

2 AUDIO 510 USB AND AUDIO 550 DSP HEADSETS

WWW.PLANTRONICS.COM • LIST PRICE: $59.99 (510 USB) $99.99 (550 DSP)

These stereo headsets are ideal for multimedia applications like gaming, music, and movies. With a lightweight design and 40mm speakers, they pump out sound with dynamic base response. Noise-canceling microphones cut out background distractions and enhance speech recognition accuracy. The Audio 550 DSP additionally features a digital signal processing chip that optimizes audio levels, giving music lovers full control over microphone and audio characteristics like volume, bass, and treble.

3 GRENADE BELT BUCKLE

WWW.BUCKLESHOP.COM • LIST PRICE: $12.95

If you gotta go to war, you might as well at least look stylish while you're there. This 4 1/2 inch by 2 1/2 inch buckle is made out of fine pewter. Just don't accidentally grab the buckle instead of your next grenade or you could end up mooning the enemy instead of blowing them up. Then again, what a way to go!

4 LOGITECH G7 LASER CORDLESS MOUSE

WWW.LOGITECH.COM • LIST PRICE: $99.99

This mouse has got a sweet list of features that might make your keyboard jealous. First, it's got a 500 reports/second USB connection, so you shouldn't experience any lag or interference drop-out. The Li-ion battery packs allow for seven hours of gameplay, and the hot-swap replacement system will mean that you don't have to miss a minute of the action. Also, the battery-level indicator on the side of the mouse lets you know how much game time you have left before the next swap.

PLAYSTATION 3

When you combine the blistering processing speeds of the PlayStation®3 system's Cell Broadband Engine™ the massive storage capacity and higher-definition capability of Blu-ray, you get the future of gaming. And that future is now with over 20 titles–spanning a wide range of genres–available in the coming weeks. Of course, games aren't all this machine plays. It also plays music CDs, DVDs and, of course, higher-def Blu-ray movies. Add to all this its "built-in" online connectivity, and you can see why the PlayStation®3 system is, well, beyond any console you've ever experienced. **Learn more at playb3yond.com.**

PLAY B3YOND™

PRODUCTS RANGE FROM EVERYONE TO MATURE
E-M
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Due to manufacturing differences, all optical discs may not perform properly. Requires broadband Internet service for online play. Cell Broadband Engine™ "PlayStation" and the "PS" Family logo are registered trademarks of Sony Computer Entertainment Inc. Play B3yond is a trademark of Sony Computer Entertainment America Inc. All names, brands and associated imagery featured are trademarks and/or copyrighted materials of their respective owners. The NBA and individual NBA member team identifications reproduced on this product are trademarks and copyrighted designs, and/or other forms of intellectual property, that are the exclusive property of NBA Properties, Inc., and the respective NBA member teams and may not be used, in whole or in part, without the prior written consent of NBA Properties, Inc. ©2006 NBA Properties, Inc. All rights reserved.

RETRO ROOM

Back in your day you didn't have all this fancy shmancy technology. Yes, back then there were no auto-save features, you had to walk 20 miles to the nearest checkpoint, uphill in the snow! Back then you only had two big red buttons and that was the way you liked it. Well grandpa, this is the list for you, straight out of 1980, back where video games belong.

TOP 3 GAMES

Capcom Classics Collection Volume 2 – PS2, Xbox

Sega Genesis Collection – PSP, PS2

New Super Mario Bros. – DS

DREAM AUTHENTICS PERSONAL ARCADE CABINETS

WWW.DREAMAUTHENTICS.COM
LIST PRICE: $3,500.00 TO $7,000.00

Oh man, if you get one of these then we totally want to come over to your house for Christmas dinner. These cabinets come preloaded with several ROMs, but new games can be easily uploaded. We are partial to the Eladius cabinet. With a spinner and illuminated trackball, four control stations, an authentic 33-inch arcade monitor, and an arcade sound system, it really is the ultimate gift for any arcade enthusiast.

1

(game sold separately)

OFFICE LENDORFF RETRO GAMING KNITWARE

WWW.OFFICELENDORFF.COM
LIST PRICE: $70.00-$160.00

This London-based knitwear company hasn't been around long, but its small size makes its prices cheaper than most designer outfitters. The prints are designed by hand and inspired by the arcade games of yesteryear. Some of our favorites include robots, level 5, game over, and 447 PTS. Office Lendorff only has one store currently in the U.S. (in New York), but you can also order from its online store.

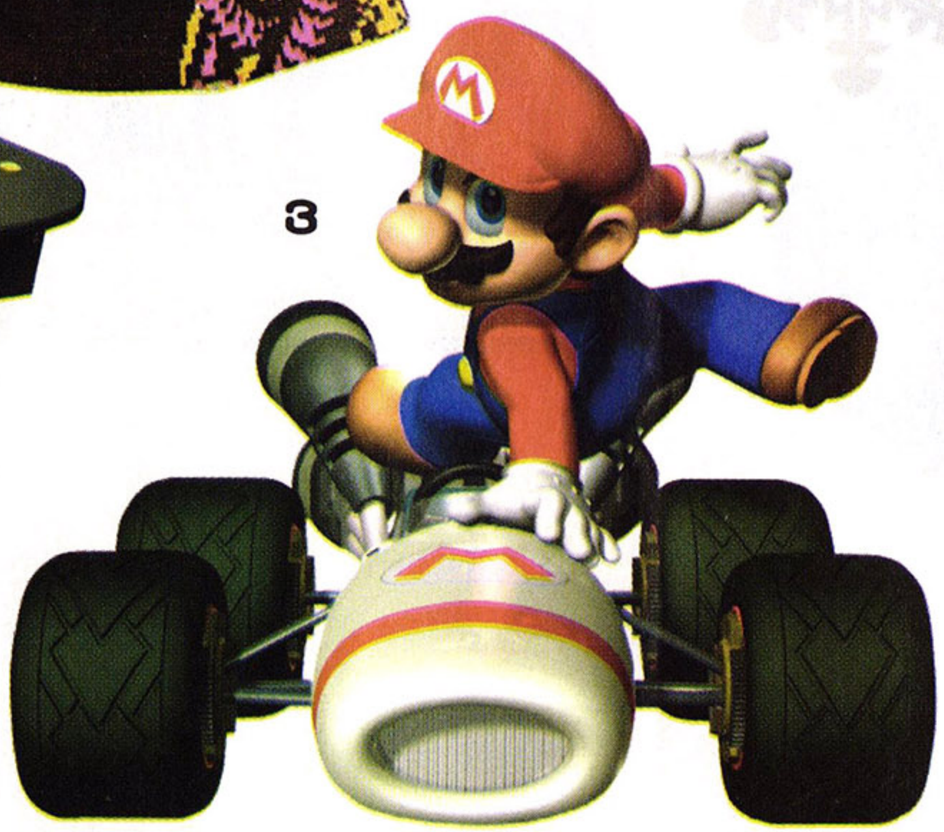
2

WALL SKINS

WWW.GAMESTOP.COM • LIST PRICE: $14.99

Is your wall naked? Still that plain old white color? Well, how do you think that makes it feel? And why should the TV get all the gaming fun? These decorative wall skins should help you liven up your gaming center. They're exclusive to GameStop, but you can find many of your favorite Nintendo characters including Link, Bowser, Mario, Samus, and Wario. Please help your walls retain a little self-respect.

3



DON'T BE A SECOND PLAYER HATER I AM 8-BIT ART PRINT

WWW.IAM8BIT.COM • LIST PRICE: $125.00

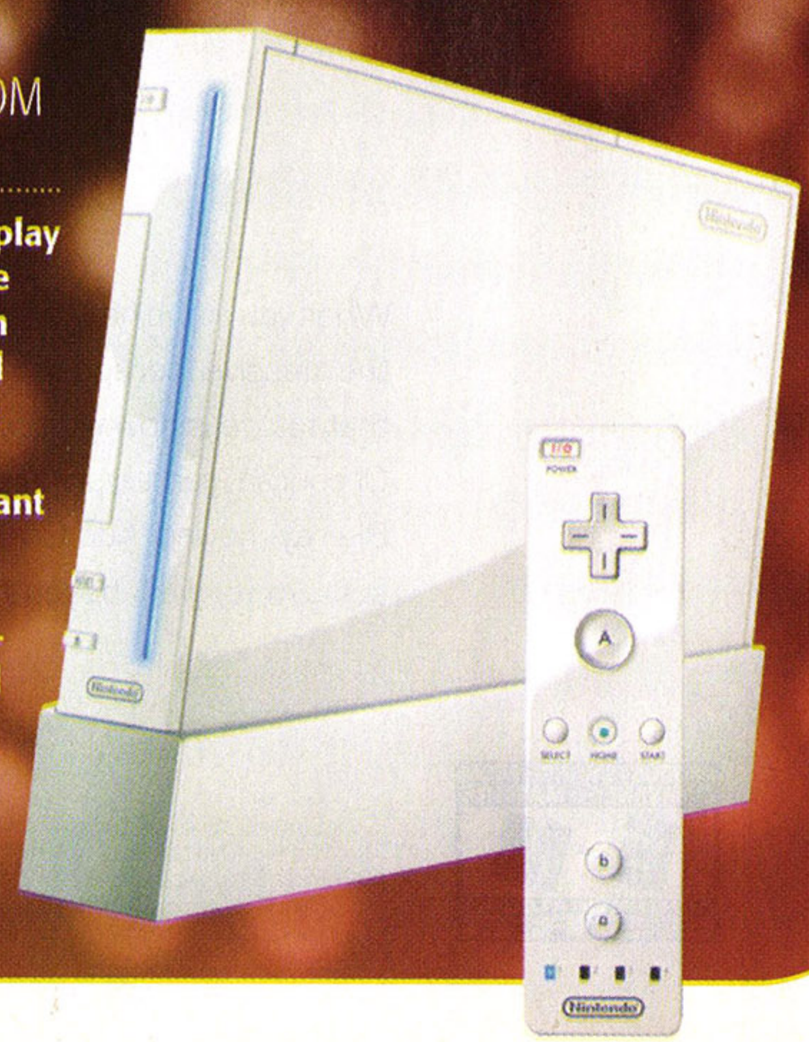
I am 8-bit is a great place to find crazy, cool, and often imaginative original artwork based on the glory days of console and arcade gaming. We like this 14.5" by 29" giclee print of Isaac Pierro's "Don't Be A Second Player Hater," which comes on heavy stock paper. When you look into the sad (possibly doped-up) eyes of Luigi, you can't help but feel pity for this downtrodden character. Why do you always have to play as Mario?!

4

WII

WWW.WII.NINTENDO.COM
LIST PRICE: $249.99

You're not going to try and play Zelda on the GameCube, are you? Sure, you can, but then how are you going to get all those sweet Virtual Console games from days gone by? Nintendo just knows you want to re-buy Super Mario Bros. 3. Actually, who are we kidding, we know we'll be buying it...again. Besides, you'll look pretty stupid swinging that GameCube controller around like a sword while Link just stands there.



ANY MORE REALISTIC AND YOU'D BE GROUNDED FOR MAKING SUCH A MESS.

Elebits™

Exclusively for Wii™

When you hunt for Elebits you're bound to make a mess. The Wii Remote lets you throw stuff around like crazy while looking for them. So pick it up and go Elebits hunting. And don't worry. You won't get in trouble for trashing the place.

EVERYONE
E
Cartoon Violence
ESRB CONTENT RATING www.esrb.org

KONAMI
www.konami.com

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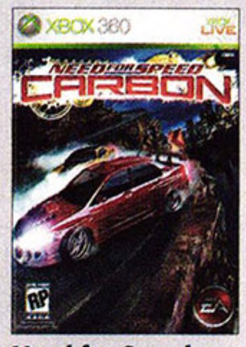
SPORTS DEN

So, you're into sports or you know somebody who is. This list of sporting paraphernalia should help improve anybody's off-field game. Sports and video games have made a good combination ever since – wait a minute! This introduction isn't very good. It hasn't been funny at all. We're sorry. We'll try harder next time.

TOP 3 GAMES

Madden NFL 07 – PS3, 360, PS2, Xbox, GC

NBA 2K7 – PS3, 360, Xbox, PS2



Need for Speed: Carbon – PS3, 360, Wii, Xbox, PS2

1 NERF CONTROLLERS FOR PS2

WWW.BESTBUY.COM • LIST PRICE: $29.99

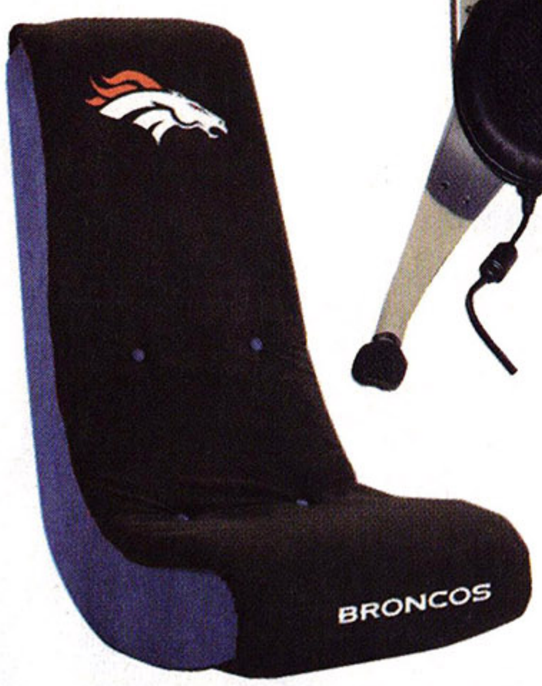
Want a controller that won't destroy anything if you throw it at your TV (or your brother)? Well, NERF and Pelican have finally taken that classic gamer problem and found an interesting and fun solution. These wireless controllers should be available by the time you read this and come in four colors: black, blue, red, and orange.

1

2 NFL TEAM GAMING CHAIRS

WWW.GIFTS.COM • LIST PRICE: $119.99

These comfortable NFL soft-backed micro fiber suede video rocking chairs come in just about any NFL team you can imagine. Made with a sturdy, balanced hardwood frame, these chairs will remain upright when you run to the bathroom during halftime. These are officially licensed products and the rubberized team logos are "welded" to the fabric in a patented process.



2

3 MOTOROLA GAMING HEADSET H205

WWW.MOTOROLA.COM • LIST PRICE: $49.99

Want to pretend you're the head coach of your favorite team? We don't mean turning red while screaming at questionable plays or throwing your clipboard when the ref turns his back. We already know you do that. These authentic looking headsets for PS2 and Xbox have flexible boom noise canceling microphones, full mono ear cups with adjustable headbands, and volume and mute controls.

3

4 SUPER CHEXX DOME HOCKEY

WWW.GAMEROOMWAREHOUSE.COM

LIST PRICE: $2,995.00

This is perfect for any game room. Providing great two- or four-player dome hockey, the Super Chexx also has a digital scoring system, a period clock, an automatic puck delivery system, and even a boo button (and you know that will be the most used feature. Don't wear it out). This baby is built with high durable plastics and should even stand up against your heated brawls. All you need now is friends.

4

MICROSOFT RACING WHEEL FOR XBOX 360

WWW.XBOX.COM • LIST PRICE: $149.99

Using input from the developers of Forza and the Project Gotham Racing games, Microsoft created this wireless wheel for the 360. With an innovative Force Feedback motor, 270 degrees of rotation, and slip resistant pedals you will feel more connected to the track. For a limited time, a force feedback-enabled version of Project Gotham Racing 3 will be included with the wheel. Already own PGR 3? Fear not, you can upgrade your copy with a download from Xbox Live.

Live like a mortal. Rock like a God.

GUITAR HERO II™

Mark, 19
Cashier

Stephen, 23
Accountant

Available November 7

www.guitarherogame.com

TEEN
T
Lyrics
ESRB CONTENT RATING www.esrb.org

Gibson PlayStation 2 ACTIVISION HARMONIX redoctane

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KIDS' PLAYLAND

Hey there little guy, wondering what to ask for from Santy Claus? Well, we understand what kids like: candy, math games, and Go-bots. So, let us tell you what you want. This is GI's certified kid-friendly list of holiday goods, which means you won't find any poop or fart jokes here…wait a minute…blast! Does that count?

AVATAR: THE LAST AIRBENDER

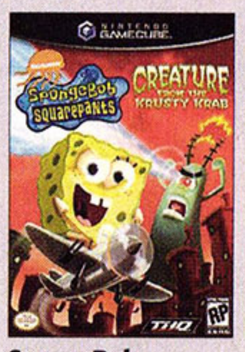
WWW.NICK.COM • LIST PRICE: $64.99 (DVD) $17.99 (FIGURES)

Sure, it's a kid's cartoon, but Avatar: The Last Airbender's animation is actually pretty good and it's about a bunch of Kung-Fu monks who fight each other with elemental powers. That doesn't sound as bad as something like SpongeBob SquarePants, does it?

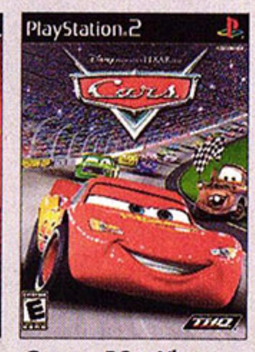
1

TOP 3 GAMES

LEGO Star Wars II: The Original Trilogy – 360, PS2, Xbox, GC



SpongeBob SquarePants: Creature from Krusty Krab – Wii, PS2, GC, DS



Cars – PS2, Xbox, 360, Wii, DS, GBA, PSP

NINTENDO DS LITE

WWW.NINTENDO.COM/CHANNEL/DS
LIST PRICE: $129.99

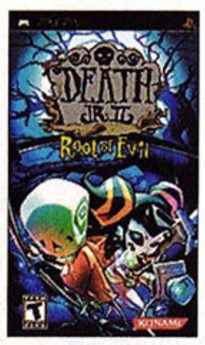
Hey you, come over here and touch this thing. No, it's okay – it's the DS Lite, and it was made to be touched. Nintendo's hot new handheld still makes a great gift for any kid or adult. There's already a stellar back catalog of games for the DS, and its library is only getting better with such recent additions as Yoshi's Island 2 and StarFox Command. Heck, even Grandma likes the Sudoku puzzles in Brain Age!

(game sold separately)

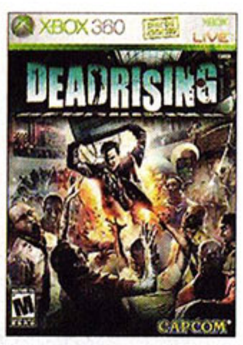
THE GRAVEYARD

So, you've got nerves of steel, eh? Your nightmares could give Stephen King a run for his money, but you feel more out of place than Jack Skellington during the holidays? Well, maybe this list will fit your style then. Remember, it may be another year until the holidays roll around, but it's only 310 days until Halloween.

TOP 3 GAMES



Death Jr. 2: Root of Evil – PSP



Dead Rising – 360

F.E.A.R. Extraction Point – PC

2

3

RESIDENT EVIL 10TH ANNIVERSARY TOYS

WWW.NECAONLINE.COM • LIST PRICE: $17.95 OR $69.95 (SET OF ALL FOUR)

Wow, it's been 10 years and we still know about as much of RE's overarching story as we did…well, 10 years ago. Still, we wouldn't trade those 10 years for anything, and we won't trade our new RE action figures either, so you are going to have to go get your own. We only have one question. Where's Barry?

2

GRAVEYARD GOTHIC GARDEN/ WITCHES WOODS TERRARIUM KITS

WWW.DUNECRAFT.COM • LIST PRICE: $24.99

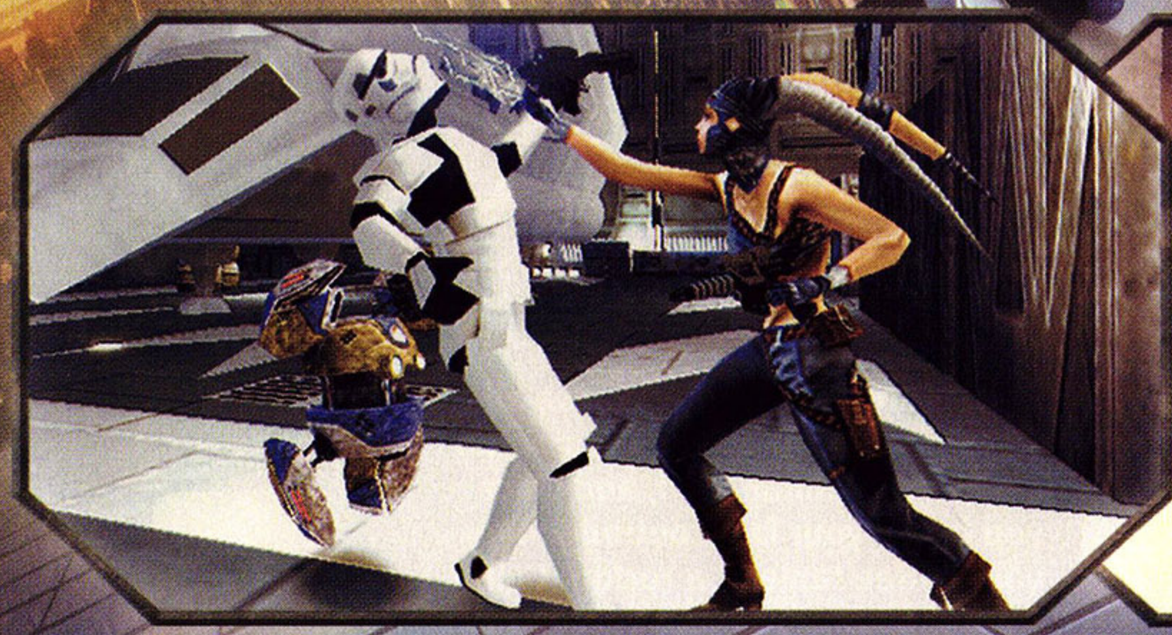
All right Harry Potter Jr., you say you need some help with your Herbology homework? This might be the best place for you to turn. Create your own macabre garden and celebrate the uglier, stranger, and sharper plants Mother Nature has to offer. These kits include five seeds packs, Tombstone Plant Stakes, Blood Rocks, assorted skulls and spiders, planting mixture, and a booklet detailing the Gothic history and lore of the included plants.

3

ALONE, YOU ARE STRONG.
TOGETHER, YOU ARE INVINCIBLE.

You are Rianna Saren, a skilled Twi'lek mercenary. Along with your security droid, Zeeo, battle your way through hostile forces and steal the plans for the Empire's most feared weapon, the Death Star.

- Play the first *Star Wars®* game developed exclusively for the Nintendo DS™ and PSP® (PlayStation®Portable) systems. Master one-of-a-kind collaborative fighting moves, including the Dual Cannon, the Hammer of Ryloth, and the Winds of Mustafar!



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STAR WARS LETHAL ALLIANCE™

www.swlethalalliance.com

TEEN T Violence CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

NINTENDO DS.

PlayStation Portable

LUCASARTS™

UBISOFT®

EVERYMAN'S LOUNGE

SHE'S SUCH A GEEK BY SEAL PRESS

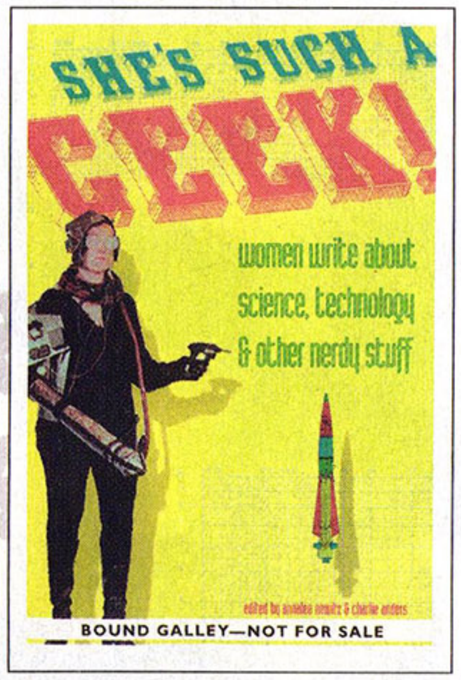
LIST PRICE: $14.95

Women who are into cool things like video games, comics, and anime are rarer than Unicorns, but they do exist. Seal Press rounded up 23 of these mythological creatures and had them write about how they succeeded in careers in the male-dominated industries of computers, video games, and science.

HOW COMPUTER GAMES HELP CHILDREN LEARN BY DAVID WILLIAMSON SHAFFER

LIST PRICE: $26.95

Tired of your parents hassling you about your excessive video game playing? Well, here is some ammo for your next confrontation. Based on 10 years of research, Shaffer explains how he believes video games can be used to help educate children.



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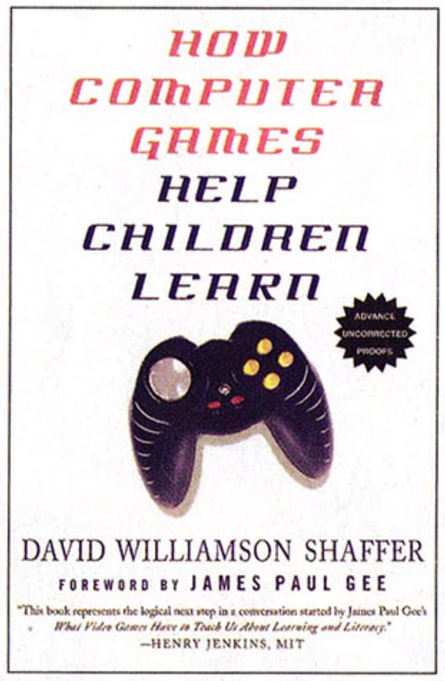

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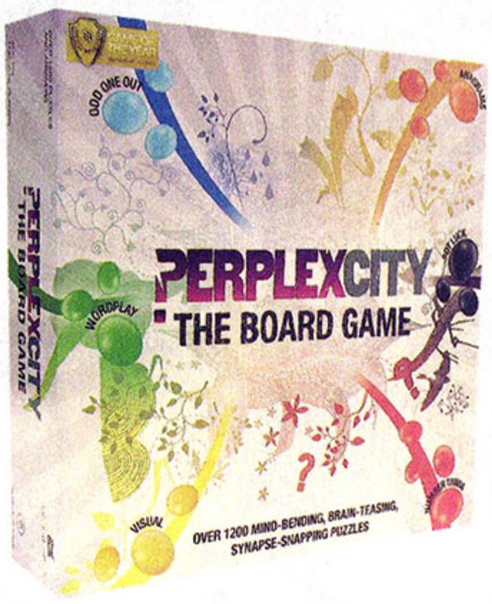
PERPLEX CITY BOARD GAME

WWW.PERPLEXCITY.COM • LIST PRICE: $44.95

Not all games have to include the word "video." No, seriously. In fact, there was a time when the board variety of games was fairly common. Perplex City is a brain-bending board game for 2-24 players ages 15 and up. This set contains over 1,200 questions in categories like anagrams, number trivia, word play, and visual puzzles. This game is affiliated with the alternate reality-game of the same name, but this one can be played at home.

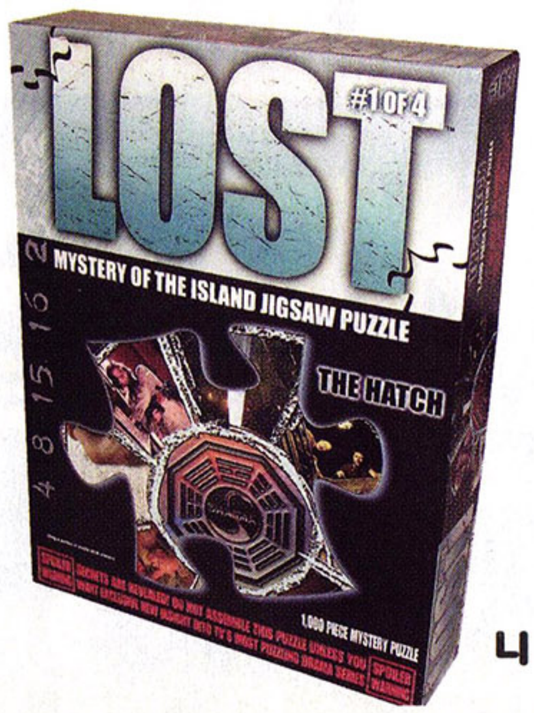


3

LOST JIGSAW PUZZLES

WWW.TDCGAMES.COM • LIST PRICE: $19.95

These puzzles were developed with direct input from the hit TV show's creators, and contain information about the Lost universe that cannot be found elsewhere. Once you put together each 1,000 piece puzzle, a collage of images related to a theme from the show will be revealed. Your job isn't done once you've put together the puzzle, however. Each collage contains a secret to the mysteries of the island. Once all four puzzles have been combined, an additional clue about the show will be revealed.

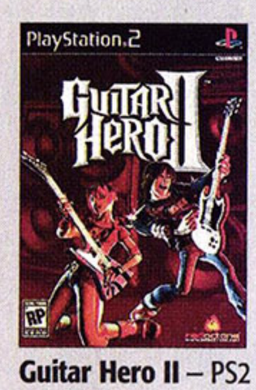


4

TOP 3 GAMES

Okami – PS2

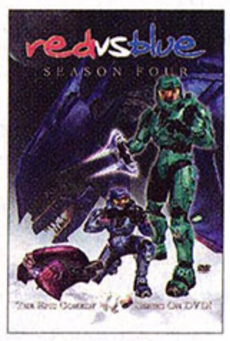
Lumines II – PSP



Guitar Hero II – PS2

You might be thinking, "Hey, this Holiday Buyer's Guide is amazingly helpful and informative. It's got to be the best thing I've ever read, except maybe last year's Holiday Buyer's guide. But what about the casual gamer? You know, people who just like games and defy stereotypes? What should they buy?" Well, that is why we created this page; it's just for you. Ignore that dirty rumor that we had some extra cool stuff and we didn't know where else to put it.

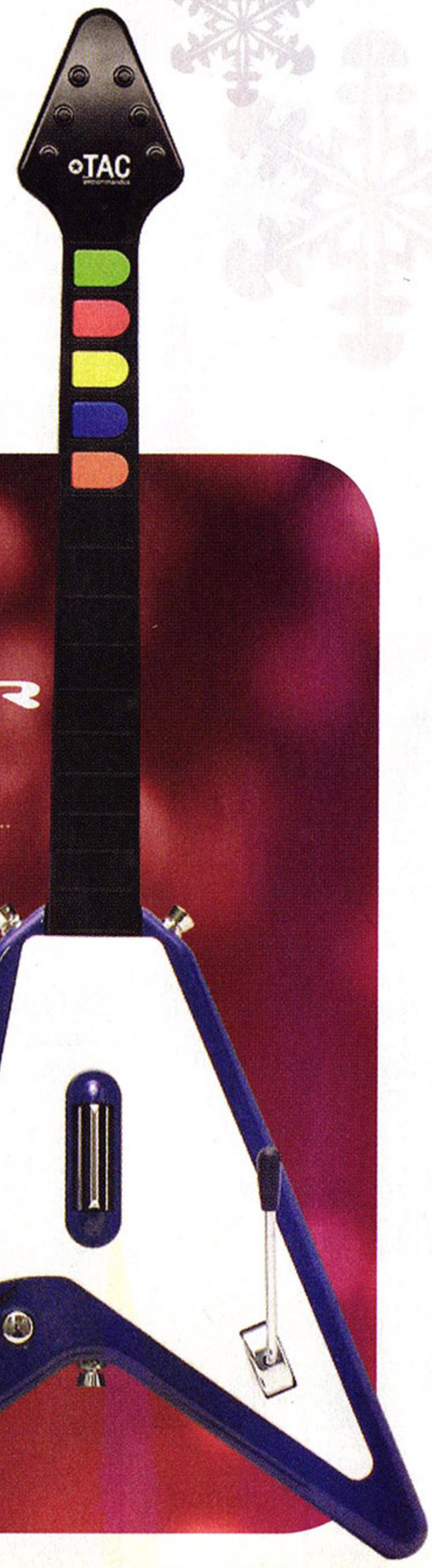
OTHER COOL STUFF



Red vs Blue Seasons 1-4
List price: $20.00

Xbox Live Marketplace Giftcards
List price: varies

V-Moda Earphones
List price: $50.00



FREEDOM V GUITAR WIRELESS CONTROLLER

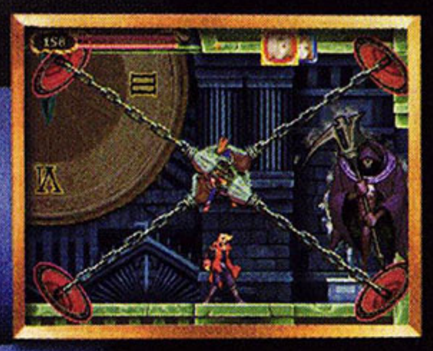
WWW.THEANTCOMMANDOS.COM
LIST PRICE: $59.99

We're sure that by now you've already started living out your rock star fantasies with Guitar Hero, and since you broke your last controller over your coffee table in a rockin' Guitar Hero II stupor, can we suggest a replacement? This Guitar Mania wireless controller for the PS2 has a hundred-foot radius, a sweet looking chrome and blue body, and a recessed start button so that you don't accidentally pause the game mid-song.

There are two sides to every ghost story.
It takes two to take back the castle.

Castlevania®
Portrait of Ruin™

Leather meets magic in the follow-up to the best-selling Castlevania DS adventure, Dawn of Sorrow. Take control of Jonathan, a young vampire hunter and Charlotte, a powerful spellcaster and journey through magical portals created within Dracula's castle. Defeat twin vampire sisters, an ancient vampire lord and uncover the mysteries of a noble spirit trapped within the accursed walls.



nintendo Wi-Fi connection

TEEN
T
Blood and Gore
Mild Language
Suggestive Themes
Violence
ESRB CONTENT RATING www.esrb.org

WINNER BEST OF E3 2006 1UP NETWORK www.1up.com

NINTENDO DS™

ign.com BEST OF E3 2006 NOMINEE

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www.konami.com

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SIN CITY IS ABOUT TO GET A WAKE-UP CALL.

Master counter-terrorism techniques like inverted rappelling, window entry, demolitions, and more.

Las Vegas, Nevada. It used to be America's playground. Now it's a battleground.

Use tactical planning to compete in split-screen or online multiplayer matches.

WWW.RAINBOWSIXGAME.COM

PRODUCTS RANGE FROM TEEN TO MATURE
T-M
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

PC CD-ROM SOFTWARE

XBOX 360™ | XBOX LIVE

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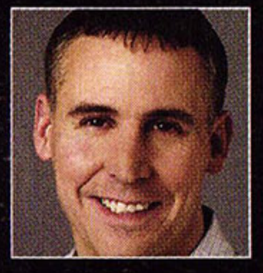
UBISOFT

TOM CLANCY'S RAINBOW SIX

PS3 AND XBOX 360: THE LAST GREAT CONSOLES?



BY DAVID REID,
VICE PRESIDENT OF MARKETING,
GAMETAP

It never fails – new consoles arrive, and the industry rumbles with "death of PC gaming" articles. The arguments are always the same: new consoles deliver more power at a lower price than PCs, driving PC game sales into another decline. I always remind people the PC is where innovation happens first – where online gaming began, and new genres like FPSs and RTSs were born. According to NPD's industry tracking, PC game sales really aren't declining when you factor in monthly subscription revenues from MMOs like World of Warcraft and games on demand services like ours at GameTap. Microsoft's Vista looks to solve the problems that make PC gaming hard and inaccessible to the mass market. The doom and gloom on PC games is dissipating dramatically.

But something different strikes me this time around. Between PS3's surprising price point and the lack of any bone-jarring leap forward in next-gen games, I'm thinking it's hardly PC gaming that's in danger. Maybe console gaming is becoming the endangered species.

Sure, it sounds crazy at first. Every analyst predicts tremendous growth in gaming revenues over the next few years. Console game revenues double and triple those of PC games every year, and with all next-gen consoles doing a big online push, shouldn't the console numbers improve? I've read all the reports too, but let's take the longer view.

Since the dawn of Atari 2600, consoles have rarely popped beyond 40 percent penetration in U.S. households. Compare that with DVD players, cell phones, cable TV, PCs, and broadband, which are all marching toward near-100 percent penetration. Each new-generation console hopes to "cross the chasm," but none has so far. And, despite the Blu-ray vs. HD-DVD saber-rattling, these format wars are likely to inhibit purchase among all but the most courageous early adopters. In the end, the new-generation consoles don't threaten to break that 40 percent barrier any more than their predecessors have.

So for all the talk about broadening the market, it's the core gamer who keeps the consoles afloat. It's a guy (and honestly, it is principally guys) who buys multiple consoles, orders 20-50 games a year, gets every accessory, subscribes to every service, and can tell all his friends which game is better than which.

So, let's focus on him. If he wants all three consoles appropriately configured, he'll need to shell out over $1,200 before he even gets a game or a second controller – compared to $800 in the PS2/Xbox/GameCube gen. That's a stiff price for bragging rights.

Even so, three consoles won't buy him much, because somewhere around 70 to 80 percent of all games are now cross-platform, and most of those are sequels. It's the Halos, Zeldas, and Gran Turismos that excite us most, but it's the Maddens, Tony Hawks, and movie-licensed games which reliably drive the highest revenues. Look at the Xbox 360 launch lineup – out of 18 games available on day one, 12 had titles that actually ended in a number, like Madden 2006, Call of Duty 2, and Perfect Dark Zero. Add Tony Hawk and Need for Speed to that mix and you've really got 14 sequels. Two more titles, King Kong and Gun, were cross-platform. Kameo and Condemned were the only new games to emerge – two out of 18.

The most alarming stat is analyst estimates that only 20-30 percent of games purchased are ever completed. With games getting bigger and longer, it just becomes hard to find the time to finish them.

So when our core gamer adds it all up, he'll probably buy a next-gen console, but maybe not two or three. If he shelled out $399 to get an Xbox 360 last holiday, he's looking hard at that $599 PS3, wondering just how much more "incremental gaming" he'll get. Does he really need to buy another console, just to play the shrinking amount of exclusive content, paying $60 each for games he won't even finish?

To understand where the console market might well be headed, consider two adjacent industries:

> **"So for all the talk about broadening the market, it's the core gamer who keeps the consoles afloat."**

sports cards and comic books. In the 1980s, both became lucrative hobbyist markets. New companies raced in, new products poured out, and revenues surged – before both hit "the wall." As a retailer in that market, I remember the plunge vividly. Every week, valuable customers canceled their subscriptions and pre-orders. The root cause was the same: it was just too hard to keep up. The cost was too high and collectors' time was still finite. When a guy who aspires to collect everything can't keep up, he often doesn't just pare back, but leaves the hobby altogether in disgust.

And yes, video games really are about collecting – not so much titles as experiences and expertise, which gamers "trade" with friends. If you pride yourself on being the most knowledgeable gamer in your circle, imagine not being able to tell from first-hand experience how much Halo seriously outclassed Killzone. Or missing out for two years waiting for GTA III to arrive for your Xbox. Or being the first person to love or hate the cel-shaded Link in Wind Waker. Knowing all that means owning all the consoles and perhaps all the handhelds – even though their value and enjoyment comes with diminishing returns.

Now, the industry is quite healthy overall, with exciting growth occurring in digital distribution, episodic content, casual games, and MMOs. But these opportunities don't require proprietary silicon cranked out of multibillion-dollar fab plants. They work just fine on devices you already own like broadband PCs, cell phones, and set-top boxes.

Comic books and baseball cards certainly didn't "die" and console gaming won't either. But just as these former burgeoning businesses never reclaimed their lofty heights, the PS3 and Xbox 360 may well be remembered as the high-water marks of console gaming. ■■■

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

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

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sun | mon | tue | wed | thur | fri | sat

december

01

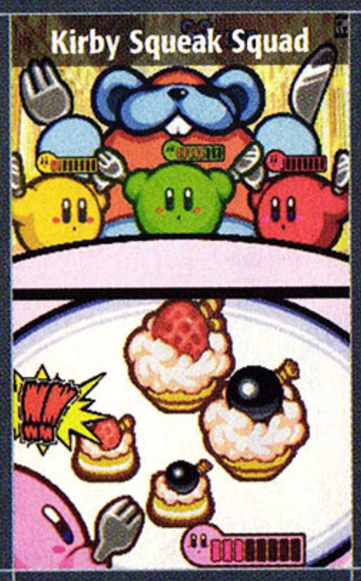
Admit it, you've always wanted 13 inches of Aquaman. This figure of the Justice League's brine-soaked buffoon features a trident and shiny pants. He talks to fish, but all he can say to them is "Please, end my misery. I'm Aquaman."

02

PHOENIX ANIME FESTIVAL DECEMBER 1-3

If you live in Phoenix, you deserve something good in your life. This convention has manga panel discussions, dances, round-the-clock anime screenings, and cosplay. If none of that appeals to you, with all of those androgynous characters walking around, you could just play "dude or not?" for hours. Ugh.

03



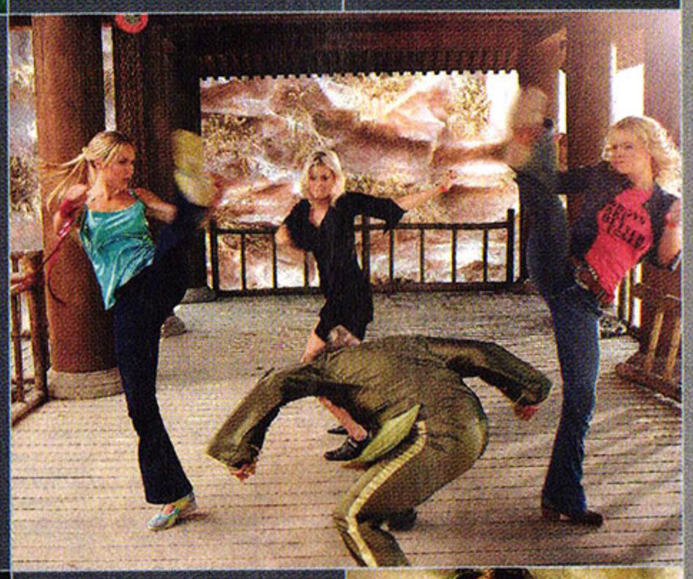
05-06

NEW RELEASES

- Blitz: Overtime – PSP
- Brothers in Arms – PSP
- Call of Juarez – PC
- Castlevania: Portrait of Ruin – DS
- Kirby Squeak Squad – DS
- Rainbow Six: Vegas – PS3, PSP
- Rayman: Raving Rabbids – PS2, GBA
- Star Wars: Lethal Alliance – DS, PSP
- Zatchbell: Mamodo Fury – GC

07

The Dead or Alive video games have always been about subtle reflection and refined elegance. The movie, which releases Friday, throws all that out the window and just focuses on pretty girls fighting instead. Pfff! Way to disappoint the fans, Hollywood.



10

BIG DAMN FLANVENTION DEC 8-10

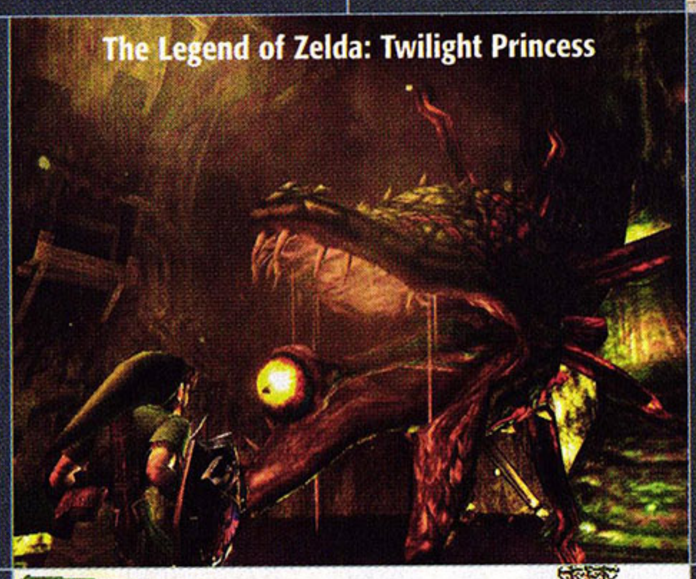
If you're not a fan of Joss Whedon, then you are no true nerd. This event in Burbank, California pays tribute to *Firefly* and *Serenity*, with most major actors from the series as guests. The convention is limited to only 500 people, so act fast – unless you want to be stuck at some lame *Babylon 5* convention instead.

11

12

NEW RELEASES

- Fight Night Round 3 – PS3
- Fullmetal Alchemist: Dual Sympathy – DS
- The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess – GC
- Mage Knight: Destiny's Soldier – DS



15

With a flurry of spellcasting and dragon-riding, *Eragon* hits theaters today. Based on the book by young author Christopher Paolini, scholars have called the film "Harry Potter meets *Dragonheart* in outer space." Wait a second...outer space has nothing to do with the story. We should probably stop calling those guys outside the dollar store "scholars."

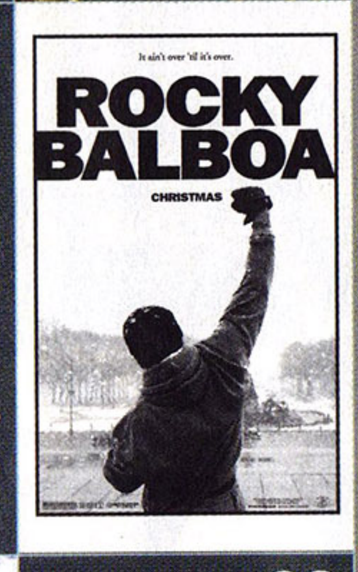
19

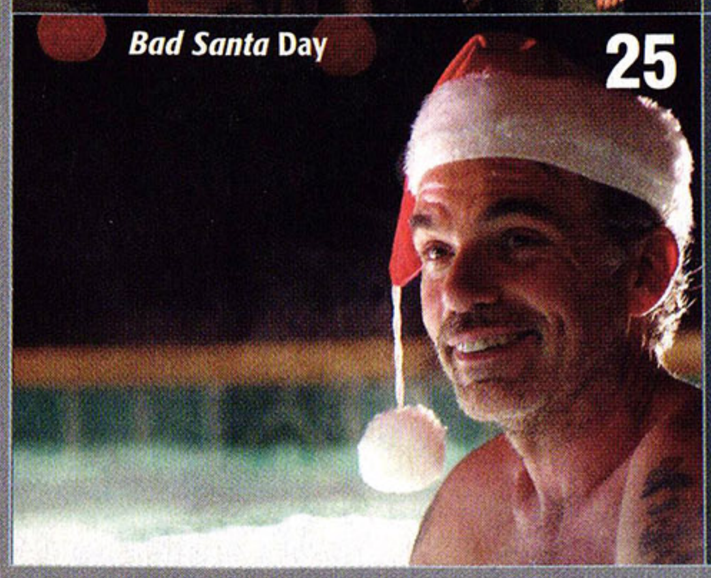
NEW RELEASES

- NBA Live 07 – PS3
- M.A.C.H. – PSP
- Metal Gear Solid: Portable Ops – PSP
- *The Simpsons: Season Nine* – DVD
- *Zombie Nation* – DVD

22

In some alternate universe, Ivan Drago beat Rocky to death in the fight at the end of *Rocky IV*, thus making *Rocky V* and *Rocky Balboa* (opening in theaters today) impossible. We envy the people in that universe.





25

26

EXCESS LUMBER DAY

If you want to build some kind of escape-raft, today is a good day to take a walk around your neighborhood. Driveways will be littered with discarded tinsel-laden trees, which you can bind together with twine and ribbons. Then, just go to your nearest frozen lake and set sail for freedom!

27

ULTIMATE SPIDER-MAN #103

As if having one of the best comics out there isn't enough, with this issue of Ultimate Spider Man, Brian Michael Bendis and Mark Bagley are making history. They will officially become the creative team with the longest continual run on a comic in the history of Marvel.

30

NEVER FORGET!

As we move in to a brand new year, the end of December is the perfect chance to pay your respects to the games lost or cancelled in 2006. Here's to Frame City Killer, Snow, Fear & Respect, and Starcraft: Ghost – we hardly knew ye!

All release dates subject to change. For future release dates, go to www.gameinformer.com

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> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (MULTIPLAYER TBA)
> **PUBLISHER** UBISOFT
> **DEVELOPER** RED STORM ENTERTAINMENT / UBISOFT PARIS
> **RELEASE** 2007

Tom Clancy's GHOST RECON ADVANCED WARFIGHTER™ 2

Roughly a week before we headed south to visit Red Storm, the Ubisoft studio originally founded by Tom Clancy, several key members of the Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter team were overseas accepting awards from the British Academy of Film and Television Arts. The original GRAW, as it is commonly known, won in two of the eight categories for which it was nominated: Technical Achievement and Best Game.

The pair of prestigious BAFTAs were perhaps not much of a surprise to some of the game's devoted fans – GRAW recreated the somewhat niche Ghost Recon franchise as a mainstream smash. Not only did it earn universal praise from the gaming community, it quickly shot to the top of the sales charts, becoming one of the best-selling games for the Xbox 360 and one of the most-played games on Xbox Live.

Despite all its success, Ubisoft is not content to rest on its laurels. Not only is Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter 2 on the way, but the GRAW team has been working on it since right before the original launched. Even though GRAW raked in sales, respect, and awards, everyone involved is convinced that they can do much, much better.

UNITED NATIONS

Unlike most other games, GRAW and its sequel aren't the result of a dedicated team and its hard work – they are the result of several such teams. The original GRAW was created with the combined efforts of four Ubisoft studios: Red Storm, Ubisoft Paris, Ubisoft Barcelona, and a lesser-known team called Tiwak. Red Storm spearheaded the multiplayer component, Paris handled single player, Barcelona worked on some of the in-game models, and Tiwak handled core technology development. Ubisoft has used this multi-team development style for many of its recent projects in order to tap into the broadest range of talent and produce massively ambitious projects on a reasonable timeframe. "For GRAW, the decision to do multi-studio development came about because obviously there are a lot of challenges with working on new next-gen hardware," said Christian Allen, creative director for GRAW 2's multiplayer. "There are a lot of technical challenges, and we wanted to make GRAW a key title. And it was great, because we didn't have to make compromises. A lot of things that you saw in GRAW wouldn't have happened if there weren't multiple studios."

As GRAW 2 is building off of much of the work for the first game, only the lead studios Red Storm and Ubisoft Paris are returning for the sequel. Fortunately, a few key members of the French team headed to the North Carolina-based Red Storm, so both teams were on hand to walk us through the new additions on tap for Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter 2.

Testament to how successful the first game was, GRAW 2 has no one primary change for gamers, but rather several smaller additions that will build on the solid foundation. Several new features are things that the teams wished they could have included in the first game, but couldn't implement in time.

Obviously, one of GRAW's biggest selling points was the stunning visuals, and several new factors will make the sequel even more gorgeous. There are also major new additions to your squad of teammates, which will make them more lifelike, useful, and add new strategic elements to your squad selection. Finally, and perhaps most important, major changes are in store for the Cross Com feature, the next-generation piece of military technology (based on the real-life Army Future Force Warrior program) that changed the way you commanded your team in the field.

Along with gameplay additions, GRAW 2 is also upping the ante in terms of the story. Building off the events of the first game, in which a rebel faction of the Mexican military staged an attempted coup against the Mexican government, GRAW 2 deals with escalating turmoil just south of the U.S. border. In the 2014 world of GRAW 2, the recently approved wall between the United States and Mexico has been constructed, and the chaos in Mexico represents a tremendous threat to U.S. security. The insurgent fighters from the first game have continued their campaign against the Mexican loyalists, and the country has plunged into full-scale civil war. With the Mexican rebels amassing along the border and claiming possession of weapons of mass destruction, the U.S. government once again sends Captain Scott Mitchell and his elite Ghost squad into Mexico to do battle with the rebel force threatening the safety of two countries.

Taking place over the course of 72 hours, GRAW 2's adventure will take the player through far more varied locations than the first game's Mexico City. Along with the urban combat that defined the original, the Ghosts will now battle through mountains, forests, and other wider areas that will allow the player more options on how to approach a combat situation. What's more, the combat will take place on both sides of the border. Divided into three acts, the first section of GRAW 2 will take place around the Mexican city of Juarez, while the second occurs inside the war-torn urban center. The final third tasks players with repelling a full-fledged invasion of U.S. soil, as the Ghosts cross back and forth over the border and battle for control of El Paso, Texas. Just like the first game, GRAW 2 will transition from one area to the next seamlessly, without any loading.

To demonstrate how far development of GRAW 2 has come since the beginning of the project, we were brought into a small conference room in the Red Storm office. There we saw several pieces of gear that serve as inspiration for the series' Integrated Warfighter System, including camouflage, helmets, and even a one-of-a-kind model of the MR-C rifle seen in the first game. Surrounded by this military paraphernalia, Ubisoft Paris' Sebastian Dore and Olivier Dauba walked us through an early level of the game, continually reminding us that it is an early work in progress. Yet, even in this early state, GRAW 2 already easily eclipses its predecessor in terms of visuals. The stage took place in an intensely damaged section of Juarez, and Dore explained that what the team saw as one of GRAW's failings was its environments. While they looked realistic and authentically captured the ambiance of Mexico, they didn't look like a war zone. That is something they definitely intend to fix in the sequel.

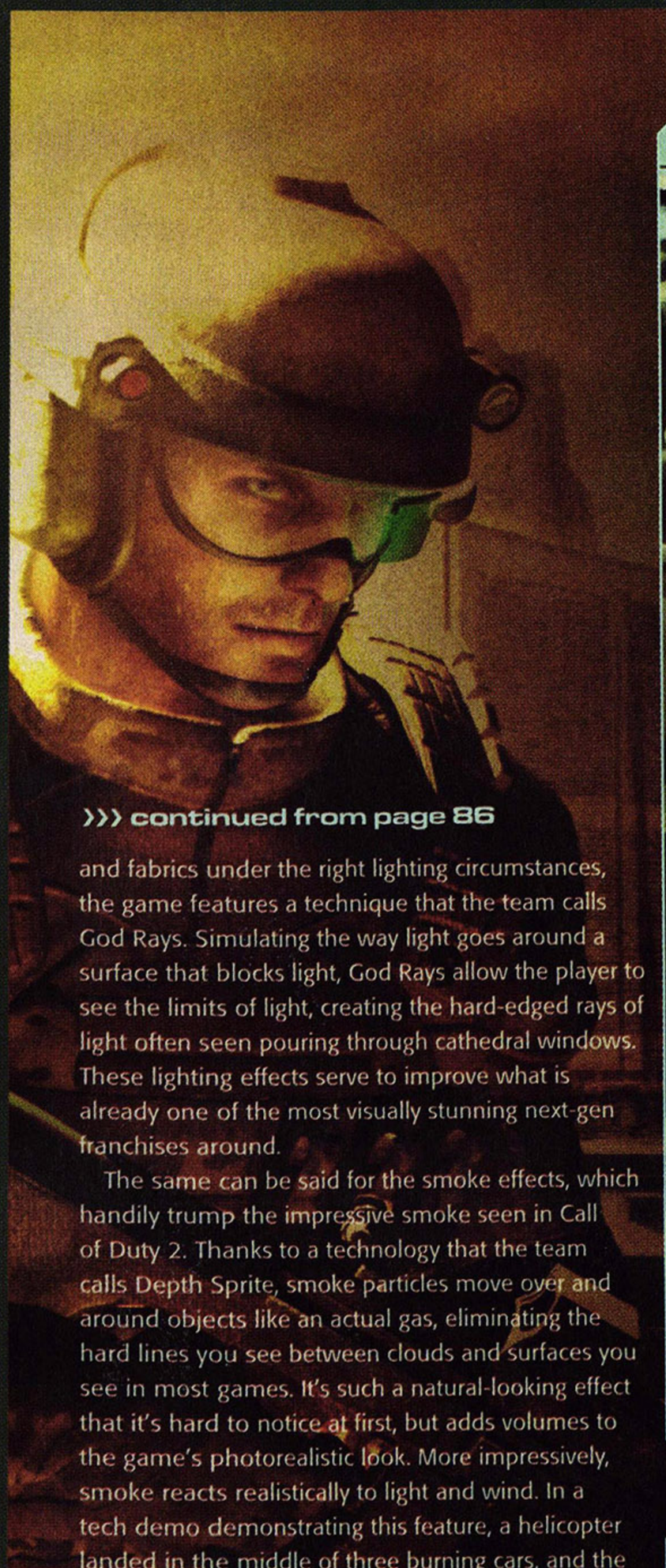
The stage demoed for us was filled with ruined buildings missing huge chunks of wall and ceiling, and was instantly recognizable as the site of intense combat. The area was positively devastated, and yet still alive with movement. Fire and smoke billowed from damaged structures, wind swept pieces of debris down the streets, and shadows fell across everything around. The stage even featured animal life around that reacted realistically to the outside stimuli – we witnessed a flock of pigeons take to wing when a sudden gunshot startled them away from their foraging.

While GRAW had great lighting that changed from one mission to the next, within a stage it was static. The light wouldn't change from the start of a mission to the end. In GRAW 2, everything in a level is generated dynamically. Light changes in real time; if you stand in one place long enough, you will actually see the shadows cast by trees and buildings grow longer. Of course, the gorgeous HDR (High Dynamic Range) lighting that gave the original GRAW its signature sun-drenched look returns, along with a few additional tricks that will enhance the realism even further. Along with Object Translucency, which will allow the player to see through surfaces like leaves

continued on page 88 ›››

■ The mission areas of GRAW 2 will look a lot more like authentic warzones than those in the first game

■ The roles of your squad members are now more defined, and you will be able to tell their class just by looking at them



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and fabrics under the right lighting circumstances, the game features a technique that the team calls God Rays. Simulating the way light goes around a surface that blocks light, God Rays allow the player to see the limits of light, creating the hard-edged rays of light often seen pouring through cathedral windows. These lighting effects serve to improve what is already one of the most visually stunning next-gen franchises around.

The same can be said for the smoke effects, which handily trump the impressive smoke seen in Call of Duty 2. Thanks to a technology that the team calls Depth Sprite, smoke particles move over and around objects like an actual gas, eliminating the hard lines you see between clouds and surfaces you see in most games. It's such a natural-looking effect that it's hard to notice at first, but adds volumes to the game's photorealistic look. More impressively, smoke reacts realistically to light and wind. In a tech demo demonstrating this feature, a helicopter landed in the middle of three burning cars, and the downdraft from the spinning blades forced the huge plumes of smoke down and away from the landing. In another demo, a smoke cloud was forced away from a sudden explosion, and the light from the fire reflected off of the particles in the cloud in real time.

Smoke effects that respond realistically to air movement wouldn't mean much without wind, which is why GRAW 2 will also feature new dynamic weather simulation. Some missions will take place during blowing sandstorms, while others will force the player to slog through howling rain. Since GRAW 2 takes place in a fully dynamic world, after a rain storm your mission area will glisten with moisture and feature standing pools of rain water on the streets.

Along with improved particle effects that send debris flying in explosions and chips exploding off walls when struck by a bullet, these new weather, smoke, and lighting effects add a new layer of believability to the world of GRAW 2. But they aren't simply for visual effect; they have an actual effect on gameplay as well. The new smoke effects will be tremendously useful in creating visual cover with smoke grenades, and the weather conditions will definitely present new challenges in locating your enemies. Even the shadow effects will be incorporated into how you play the game. Just like in real life, shadows will permeate translucent materials, which can be used to spot enemies. At the right time of day, an enemy hiding behind a bush will actually be locatable by his shadow emanating through the leaves, or a soldier inside a tent may be backlit by the sun through the canvas. A foe who thinks he's safe will actually be quite vulnerable to your powerful counter-snipe rifle.

While you may be able to get the drop on enemies lurking behind bushes, don't expect them to be a bunch of pushovers. The enemy AI is being amped up and made far more intelligent. In the demo stages we witnessed, rebel fighters who spotted the Ghost squad implemented flanking maneuvers, called for cover, and even tried to reach higher ground to get a more deadly vantage point on their targets.

Your teammates in the Ghost Squad are getting a boost in this department as well. In the original GRAW, they would shout out a generic "enemy spotted" alert when they spied a rebel soldier, but now playing the campaign is much more like playing an online game with real people. Your squad will now call out more detailed information, like number of enemies, their direction, and landmarks. Where your squad would once say "I've got visual," you'll now hear phrases like "I've got three enemies ahead, behind the red car to the southeast." They will also make more intelligent choices on when to take on the enemy. If you send a squad ahead in recon mode, they won't open fire until you tell them to or they are fired upon, eliminating their nasty habit of giving away your position as they did in the first game.

Making the Ghost squad more realistic and critical to the game was a big emphasis for the Ubisoft Paris team in GRAW 2. In the first game, most players would simply take the default squad selection offered, with no thought to customizing their team

continued on page 90 ›››

■ The medic can heal any soldier with using medkits, and can also heal the player's character, Scott Mitchell

■ The conflict in GRAW 2 will take place on both sides of the Mexican border

KEEPING IT REAL

One of the hallmarks of the Ghost Recon games has always been authenticity. Although the games have always taken place in the near future, the weapons and technology have been grounded in the real world. Even the gear that isn't currently used by the real U.S. military is based on actual projections of how military gear will evolve. To make sure that the Ghost Recon games always stay as true to life as possible, Red Storm had its own Authenticity Coordinator. Also part of the marketing department, Travis Getz is in charge of making sure the games' gear looks and functions as realistically as possible, although concessions are sometimes made for the sake of gameplay. Getz also helps maintain relationships between Red Storm and the United States Army Natick Soldier Center, which develops and tests new gear for the army, and other manufacturers. Red Storm maintains a small room of military gear that artists can use for reference, including guns, grenades, ammo, boots, helmets, uniforms, and more.

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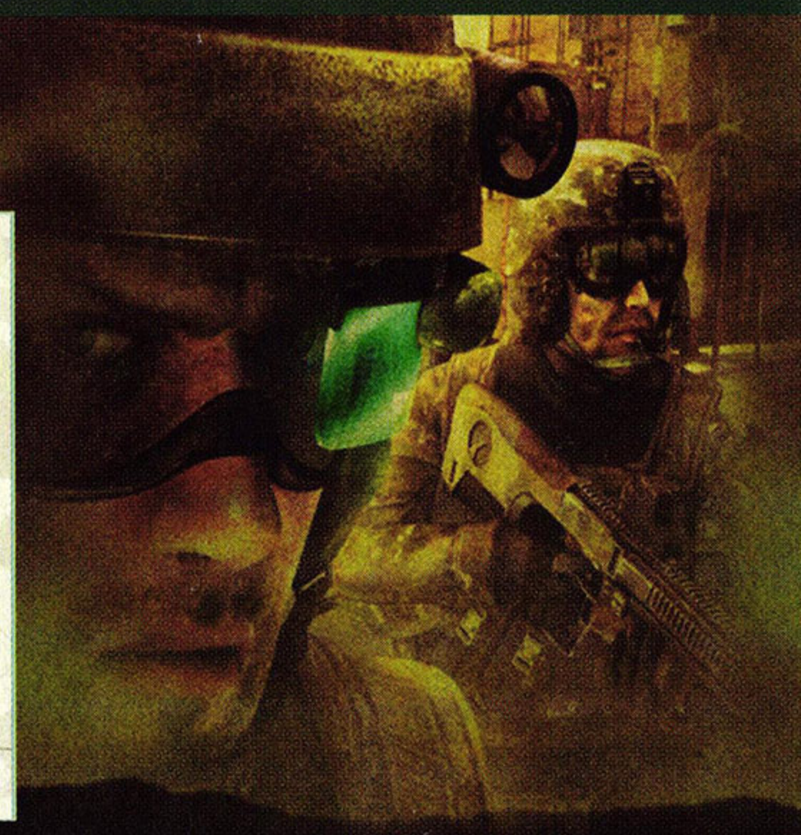
or its weapon loadout. A soldier was a soldier, and there was little connection between the player and their team. In GRAW 2, your teammates will be individuals, and not just in the sense that there are different classes. There are now only eight potential teammates to choose from, rather than 12. This will give players a better opportunity to get to know which soldiers are good at what, and each character will now have statistics displayed on the squad selection screen. These stats denote a character's potential for ranged combat, damage, anti-armor capabilities, and ability to heal. What's more, the different classes (rifleman, sniper, anti-tank-soldier, etc.) now look distinct enough that it's easy to tell them apart at a distance, whereas all soldiers in the original game looked pretty much the same. "We want the player to be able to tell who is with them on the field, and know how the different teammates will react," explains Dore. With their improved AI, distinct abilities and unique experience, your squad is now much easier to become more emotionally invested in. But why is making the player care about the squad a priority for the GRAW 2 teams? "Because we can," says Allen with a laugh.

Your squad selection will now also have more of an effect on the tactics you can bring to the battlefield, largely because of the addition of a new class:



the medic. Without a medic on your squad, you have a limited amount of medkits that you can use to patch up your team during a mission. But the medic can heal people an unlimited number of times. He's also the only character that can heal the player's character, Scott Mitchell. So why wouldn't you have a medic on your team at all times? When you have a medic on your squad, you can't have a second support character, like a sniper. Therefore, you'll have to make decisions on how to best approach certain situations, and who to bring with you. Will you try to get through a tough enemy emplacement by taking them on at long range with a sniper, or will you try to fight your way through in close quarters, and patch everyone up on the other side with the medic?

Regardless of which squad members you choose, you will now have even more control over your battlefield tactics, thanks to the evolution of GRAW's Cross Com feature. In the first game, the Cross Com allowed you to see through your squad's eyes through a small picture-in-picture video feed in your

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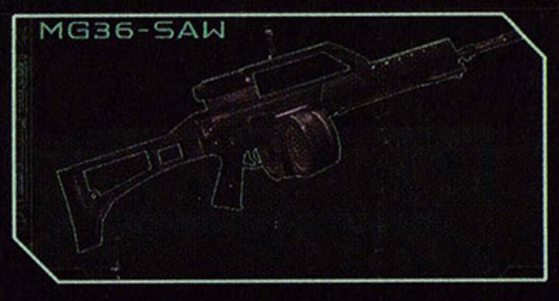
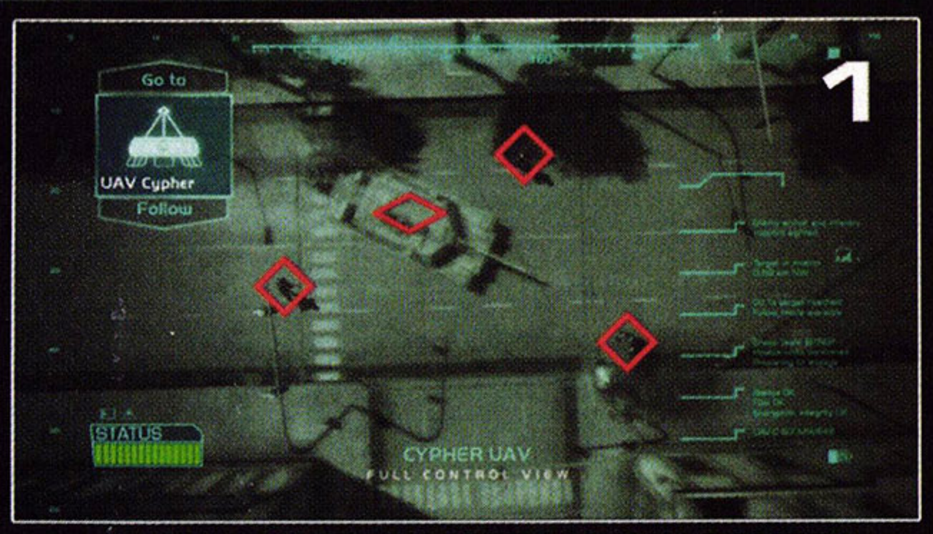
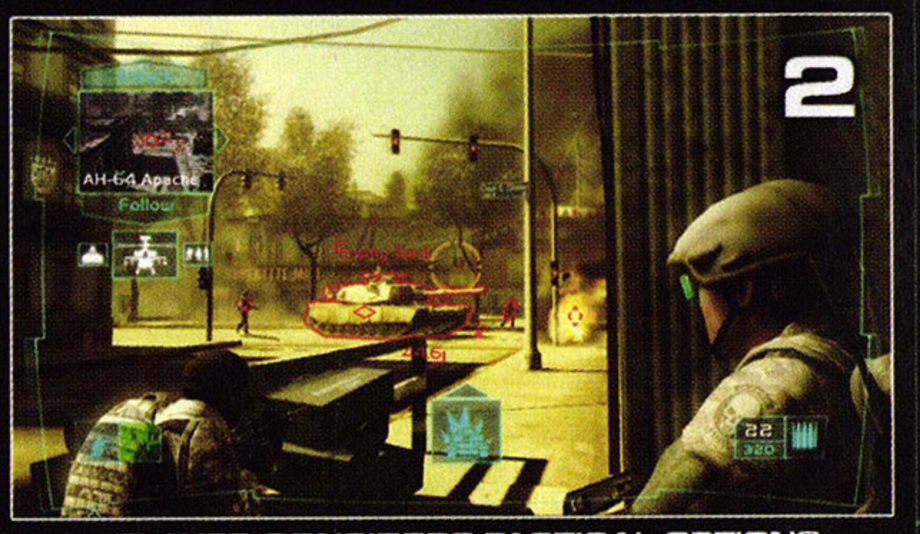


TACTICAL SUPPORT UNITS - FULL SCREEN VIEW

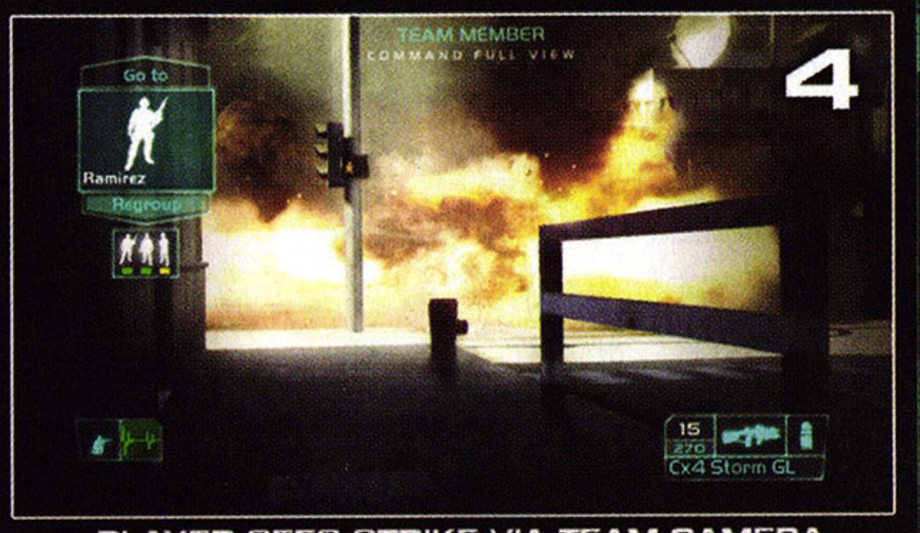


ENEMY UNITS LOCATED VIA UAV CAMERA



PLAYER CONSIDERS TACTICAL OPTIONS

MISSILE STRIKE IS ORDERED VIA APACHE CAMERA



PLAYER SEES STRIKE VIA TEAM CAMERA

■ The visuals in GRAW 2 will easily exceed those of the first game, thanks largely to improved smoke, lighting, and weather effects

■ Many new tools are at your disposal, including two kinds of unmanned drones, airstrikes, and even Mexican soldiers that you can command along with your Ghost squad

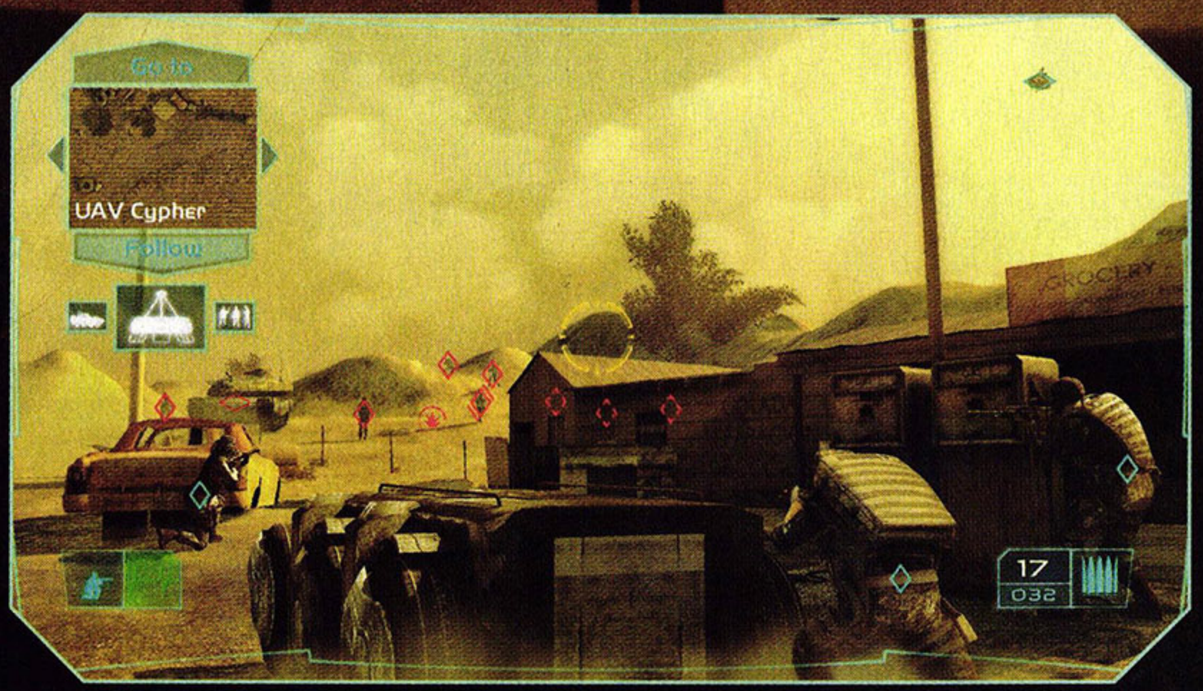
Integrated Warfighter System helmet, as well as access a situational map that showed a virtual reality layout of the area. GRAW 2 brings about the advent of Cross Com 2.0, which retains all of these features, and adds several more. In the first game, the Cross Com would relay information about enemies you spotted, such as distance and health. Now, the longer you keep an enemy in view, the more information on your target you'll receive. For example, soldiers may be identified by class, like sniper or medic. When you've discovered several enemies at once, your situational map may even specify which ones offer you the biggest threat.

The biggest addition is the ability to now see one of your squadmate's perspectives in full screen, which the team calls Full Command View. With the touch of a button, your entire view is replaced with what the camera in your squadmate's helmet sees. You have full control over the camera, so you can use this view to get a complete look at the area your teammate is in. What could seem like a minor addition to the Cross Com system suddenly becomes a major new feature when you consider the tactical implications. In the original GRAW, you could issue orders from the situational map, but since it was only a VR layout, you couldn't see what precisely an area featured in this view. On the other hand, your range of command was limited to your field of vision in the standard view. You couldn't command your soldiers to move to a place you couldn't see. With Cross Com 2.0, that has all changed.

In one of the areas that Dore and Dauba demonstrated, the Ghosts found themselves at the bottom of a rocky hill, with two paths through the boulders heading up the slope. Commanding his squad up one side, Mitchell headed up the other. Switching over to his squad's perspective, he could see the route through the rocks, and commanded his squad to follow it, even though the area was well out of his field of view. With this new Cross Com feature, it will be easier to bring more complicated maneuvers into the field, like two-pronged attacks on an enemy position. Your tactical options are further expanded by some of the new tools and weapons at your disposal.

One of the new gadgets added to the Ghost Recon formula in the last game was the UAV, an inordinately useful flying drone that could be used to spot enemy positions from the air. While you could tell the drone where to go on the situational map, it was at best an imprecise system. Now, players will be able to control the UAV drone directly. By switching to the Full Command View, you'll be able to steer the drone directly and spot enemy positions from the air, then maneuver the drone out of harm's way. The UAV is not the only drone you'll have at your disposal this time around, either. A new unmanned vehicle called the Mule has also been added to the mix. A ground-based vehicle that resembles a miniature troop transport, the Mule has three distinct purposes. Like the UAV, it can be manu-

■ Several environments will be more open than the cramped urban missions of the first game. As a result, you'll have more routes to an objective, but also be more exposed and vulnerable to enemy fire



making it ideal for ground-level scouting without putting your Ghosts in danger. It can also be used as mobile cover. In some of GRAW 2's more open mission areas, you will have to cross large expanses of open ground, which leaves you exposed and in danger. Since you can directly control the Mule, you can position the sturdy drone between cover points, creating a safe zone to duck behind as you traverse dangerous grounds.

The Mule's final use, and the one from which it draws it name, is as a mobile armory. The drone is loaded with weapons and ammo, so you can switch our your armaments as you see fit. If you need a rocket launcher to take out a tank, you will no longer have to carry it to the next rally point if the Mule is available. Simply switch it out with a more utilitarian weapon.

As in the original GRAW, there will be instances where you have both a drone and your Ghost squad at your command, and you'll be able to command them separately or as a group. Other times, you will have a vehicle under your command, like an attack helicopter. These vehicles are controlled by your fellow soldiers, so you won't be able to take direct control of them, but you will be able to switch to their perspective and issue commands from that view. To show off this feature, Dore and Dauba loaded up a level with a helicopter segment and demonstrated how you can designate targets from the view of the helicopter's gunner, who proceeded to blow apart enemy vehicles that had Scott Mitchell pinned down.

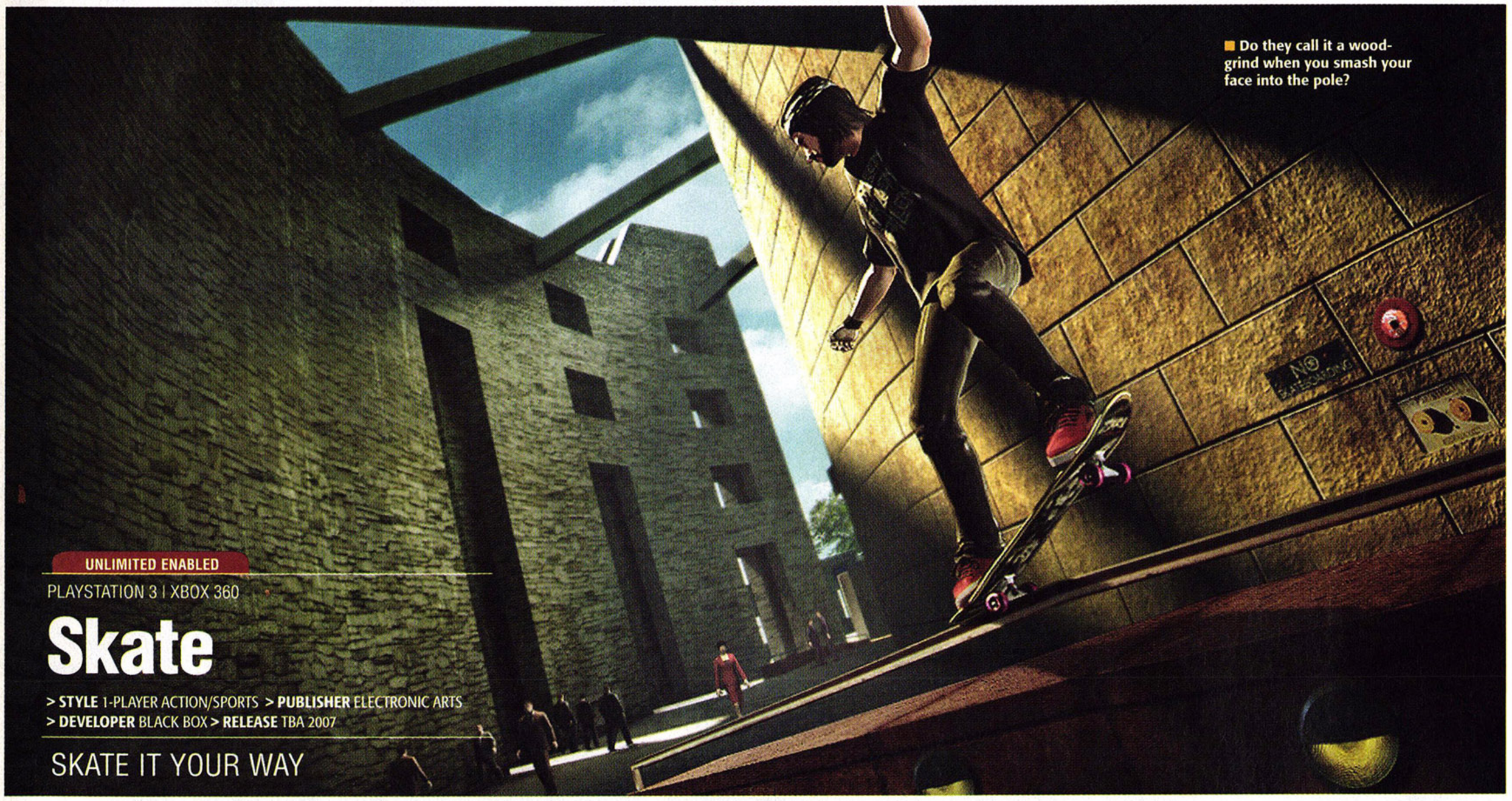
Along with some new vehicles, like fighter jets that can be called in for deadly airstrikes, GRAW 2 adds a second squad into the mix. Just as the game is a joint effort of teams from two countries, the American soldiers will be fighting alongside Mexican soldiers loyal to their government. In certain instances, you will have these loyalist soldiers fighting at your side, and they will take your orders like any other allied unit. Like the new Cross Com features, controlling a second squad of fighters will add new layers of strategy far beyond the original game.

Dore and Dauba walked us through all sorts of demos, videos, and gameplay segments to demonstrate the new features we can expect in the single-player game. But since the multiplayer portion is being handled by the Red Storm crew, they didn't have much to say on the subject. Neither, unfortunately, did anyone from Red Storm. The team is hanging on to details for the online section of the game until a later date. But we do know a few things about it. As the original GRAW is one of the top games on Xbox Live, it's obvious that GRAW 2 will have a huge multiplayer component, and the team promises that this mode will eclipse GRAW's multiplayer just like the single-player mode will outshine the original. Sixteen-player support is a given, and all of the new graphical effects like the light, smoke, and weather improvements will be present as well.

GRAW 2 will be available for both Xbox 360 and PS3, and should offer similar online experiences for either release, depending of course on the PS3's online service. "We're focusing on variety," says Allen. "We've got a bunch of really cool stuff planned, but I can't really say any more."

Sitting in the offices of Red Storm, we can't help but wish we could hear a bit more about the multiplayer aspect, as it is certain to be a huge part of GRAW 2's appeal. But we aren't disappointed with what we've learned about the game so far. It's clear that Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter 2 has two very talented and dedicated teams hard at work and devoted to delivering the best game they can. Even separated by an ocean, time, and language differences, it is obvious that Ubisoft Paris and Red Storm can work together to deliver a surefire hit game, one that outdoes the original in every way. Those fans who still play GRAW regularly can rest assured that although the sequel is well underway, support for their chosen online title isn't going away any time soon.

The day after our visit to Red Storm, GRAW received a multiplayer update that adds new Achievements and addresses some issues with gameplay and stability. It is this kind of dedication to their games that explains why the Ghost Recon series has always had a devoted following. What we learned from our visit with the Red Storm and Ubisoft Paris teams explained why that following is only going to get bigger. ■■■



■ Do they call it a wood-grind when you smash your face into the pole?

UNLIMITED ENABLED

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360

Skate

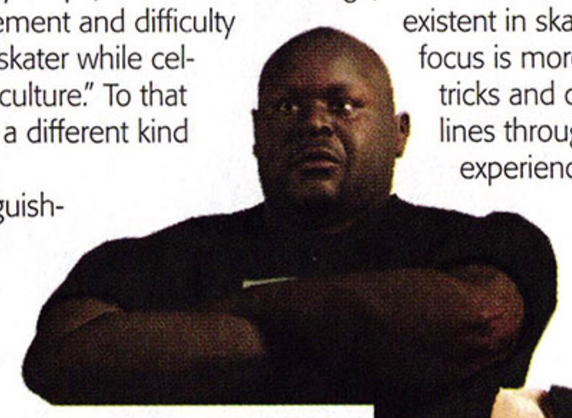
> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION/SPORTS > **PUBLISHER** ELECTRONIC ARTS
> **DEVELOPER** BLACK BOX > **RELEASE** TBA 2007

SKATE IT YOUR WAY

Electronic Arts' new skate game (ironically titled Skate) is trying to provide something that people might not be getting out of that other skating franchise: reality. While a number of video games have been influential in the development of Skate, according to Black Box's executive producer Scott Blackwood, Tony Hawk isn't one of them. In fact, the thing that has influenced Black Box's development the most isn't even a game. "The greatest challenge was competing against reality," says Blackwood. "How do we convey the feeling of being on a board doing real tricks at real speeds?"

Black Box has a theory about what real skaters want in their video games, and it isn't one that trivializes the challenges of skateboarding. "Skate isn't about grinding telephone wires, skating on a giant slice of pizza, or surviving 10 story drops; rather it gets the sense of achievement and difficulty that comes with being a skater while celebrating and sharing the culture." To that end, Black Box is crafting a different kind of skateboard game.

So, how is Skate distinguishing its gameplay from gaming's most popular skating franchise? It's taking the tried and true method of tapping out combos and throwing it out the window. "Skateboarding in real life is not about stringing together an endless number of combos," says Blackwood. "Interestingly enough, the word 'combo' is virtually non-existent in skateboarding." Skate's focus is more about mastering tricks and creating your own lines through the city in an experience that will hopefully challenge players in ways they haven't been challenged before.



The combo system isn't the only thing different about this skater: The whole face-button interface is gone too. Instead Black Box has created a unique dual thumb stick interface that they are calling "flickit." The controls work by simulating a skater's trick movements – for example, to perform an ollie, the right analog stick's movement will recreate the footwork for an ollie on a skateboard.

In addition, Black box has shied away from creating a heavy-handed story and is giving the player more skating freedom. Players will have the option to own skate spots, compete in contests, cruise through traffic and shoot videos, or just be completely aimless. In turn, the story will be molded to these actions.

Black Box hopes that players will be able to experience all the fun, creativity, and culture of real-life skateboarding in Skate. With a unique dual-analog control scheme, close to 20 of the most influential skaters lending their talent to the project, and a reactive city built by skaters for skaters, Mr. Hawk could finally have a serious contender to the skating throne. ■ ■ ■

No, we didn't screw up and run a pic of the newest SimCity. This is the world of Skate

UNLIMITED ENABLED

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360

Rogue Warrior

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 24-PLAYER VIA PLAYSTATION NETWORK OR XBOX LIVE) **> PUBLISHER** BETHESDA SOFTWORKS
> DEVELOPER ZOMBIE STUDIOS **> RELEASE** NOVEMBER 2007

THE REAL DEAL

It is a cool day, as far as standards go when you're in the middle of nowhere in the desert miles outside of Las Vegas. There, prone in the sandy dirt, pulling back the manual load of a sniper rifle, it's a little hard to remember we're actually here to see the premiere of a new game. Instead, the grizzled ex-Navy SEAL over our shoulder takes our full attention with his quiet instructions – relax, hand to the trigger, slowly breathe out, head shot!

We flew down to Nevada for this strange game announcement, mixing time viewing the game in a posh Las Vegas hotel with the very different experience of some hands-on time with some of the game's weapons out in the sandy dunes. Bethesda chose this venue to introduce Rogue Warrior, a brand new action franchise based on the best-selling books by Richard Marcinko – books based at least partially on the dark memories of their creator. Vietnam vet, originator of SEAL Team Six, and outspoken military eccentric, it's hard to imagine a more colorful main character for a video game. And that's exactly what Bethesda and developer Zombie Studios have planned. They want to transform all the irreverent humor, desperate situations, and real life-and-death struggles of Marcinko and his fellow soldiers from memories and autobiographies into one of the most realistic tactical shooters that anybody has ever seen.

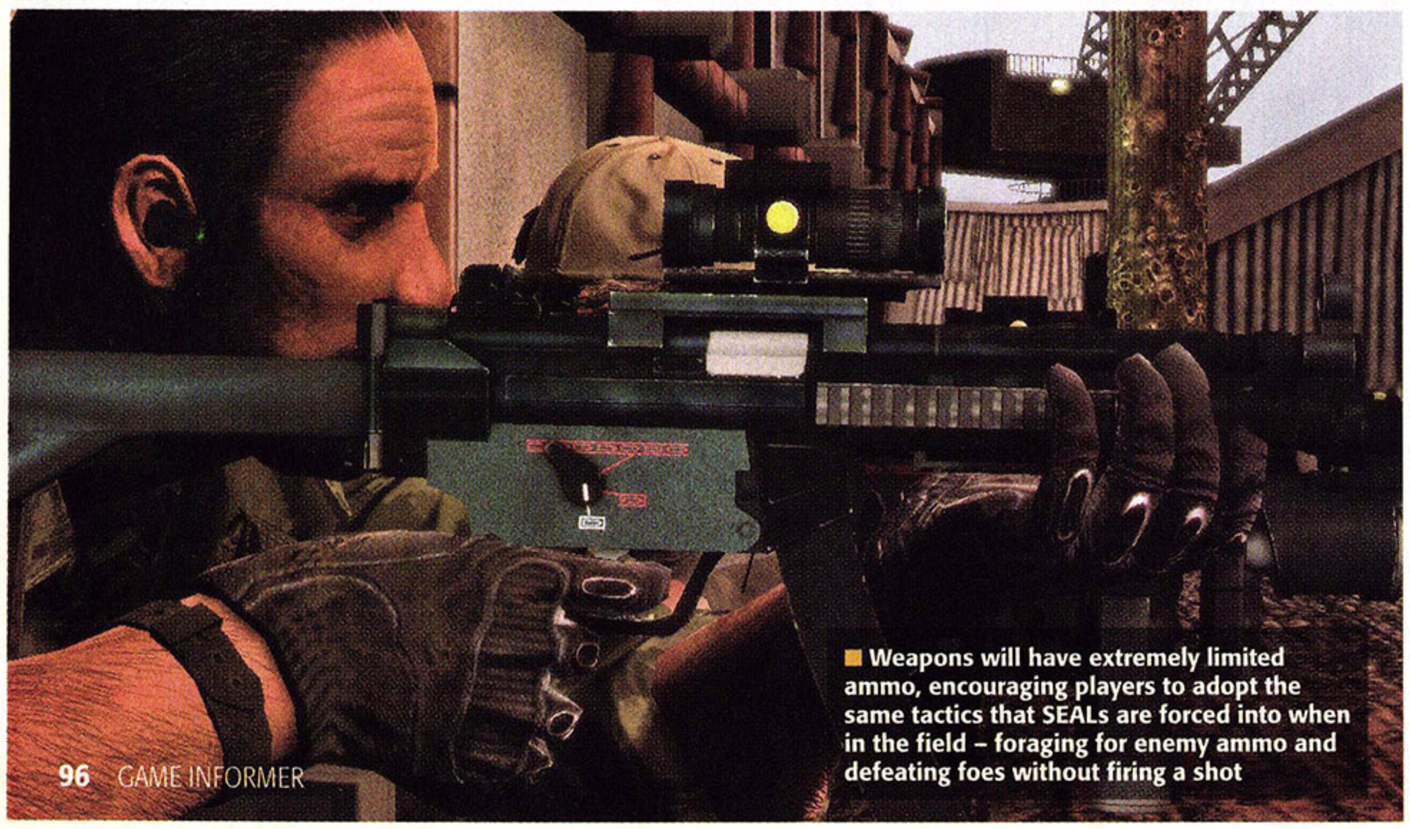
The game of Rogue Warrior is set during a fictional conflict that breaks out between North and South Korea. Marcinko and his three Navy SEAL squadmates are dropped in enemy territory. When their mission goes FUBAR, they're caught miles behind enemy lines without any support. The new mission becomes getting back into allied South Korea.

Zombie is using Unreal 3 and its streaming technology to create a seamless nonlinear game world, where levels are laid out as huge experimental playgrounds. Players can take any number of routes to complete their goals. When playing alone, your squad reacts at a button push to action requests, and will even complete complex maneuvers like sneaking up behind guards and silently taking them out. Enemy AI is sophisticated enough to respond to dead bodies when they don't radio in, but you have tools that allow you to booby trap those same bodies and take out others that come to investigate with a well-timed explosion. The combat plays out in either first- or third-person, and encourages teamwork and careful tactical preparation over a blind charge into battle. Best of all, the entire campaign includes four-player hot-swappable co-op, so friends can drop in and out of your game whenever you wish.

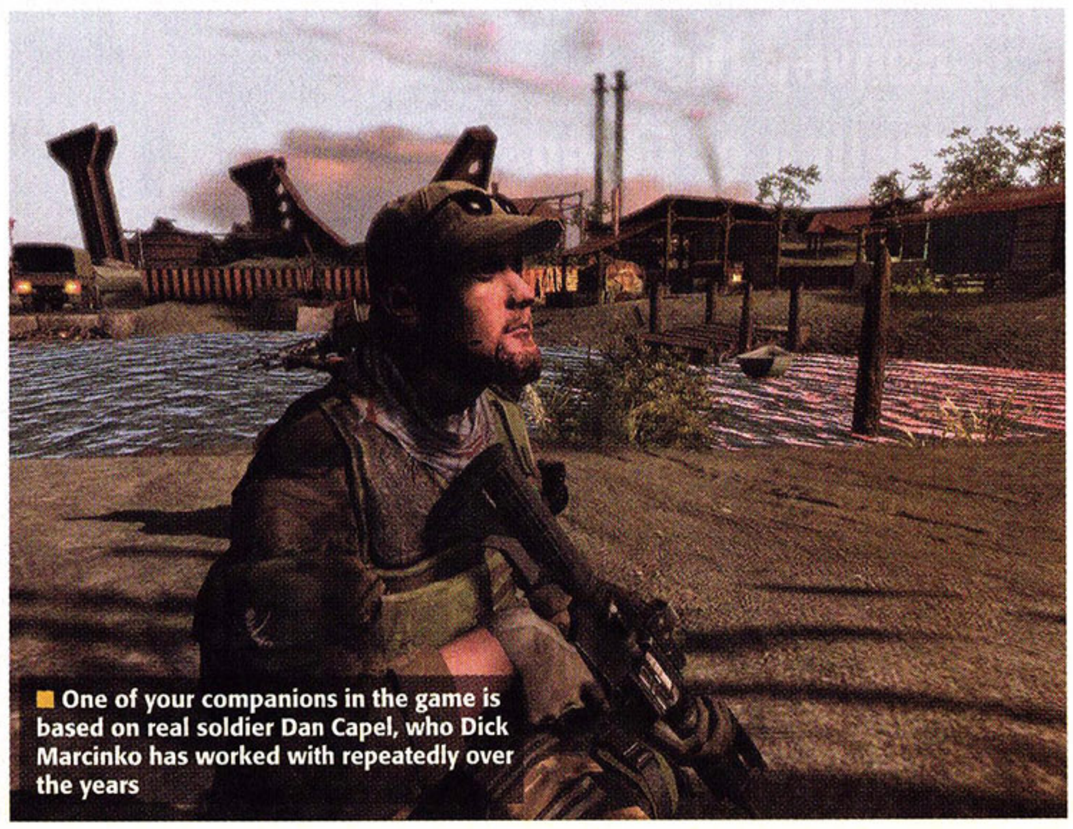
The competitive multiplayer component is equally ambitious, using a set of large environmental tiles to make up every board. Each of the two teams votes to set their home tile, and a third center tile is random. By blending the edges of these tiles together, there are hundreds of potential tile combinations, making every match unique. Regardless of whether you're wandering through a forested area or an abandoned factory, each environment offers plenty of hiding places, blind turns, and ambush-worthy paths to make for some tense interplay.

The company that brought us Oblivion clearly has high hopes for this foray into military combat and tactics. Marcinko's off-color humor and extensive combat experience have the potential to make for a remarkable game. Now it's just a matter of making the virtual experience of firing those guns as jarring and intense as the real thing. ■■■

■ Any given level encourages multiple paths to success. Circle to the right through the water, charge down the middle, or sneak amid the ship wreckage towards your objective

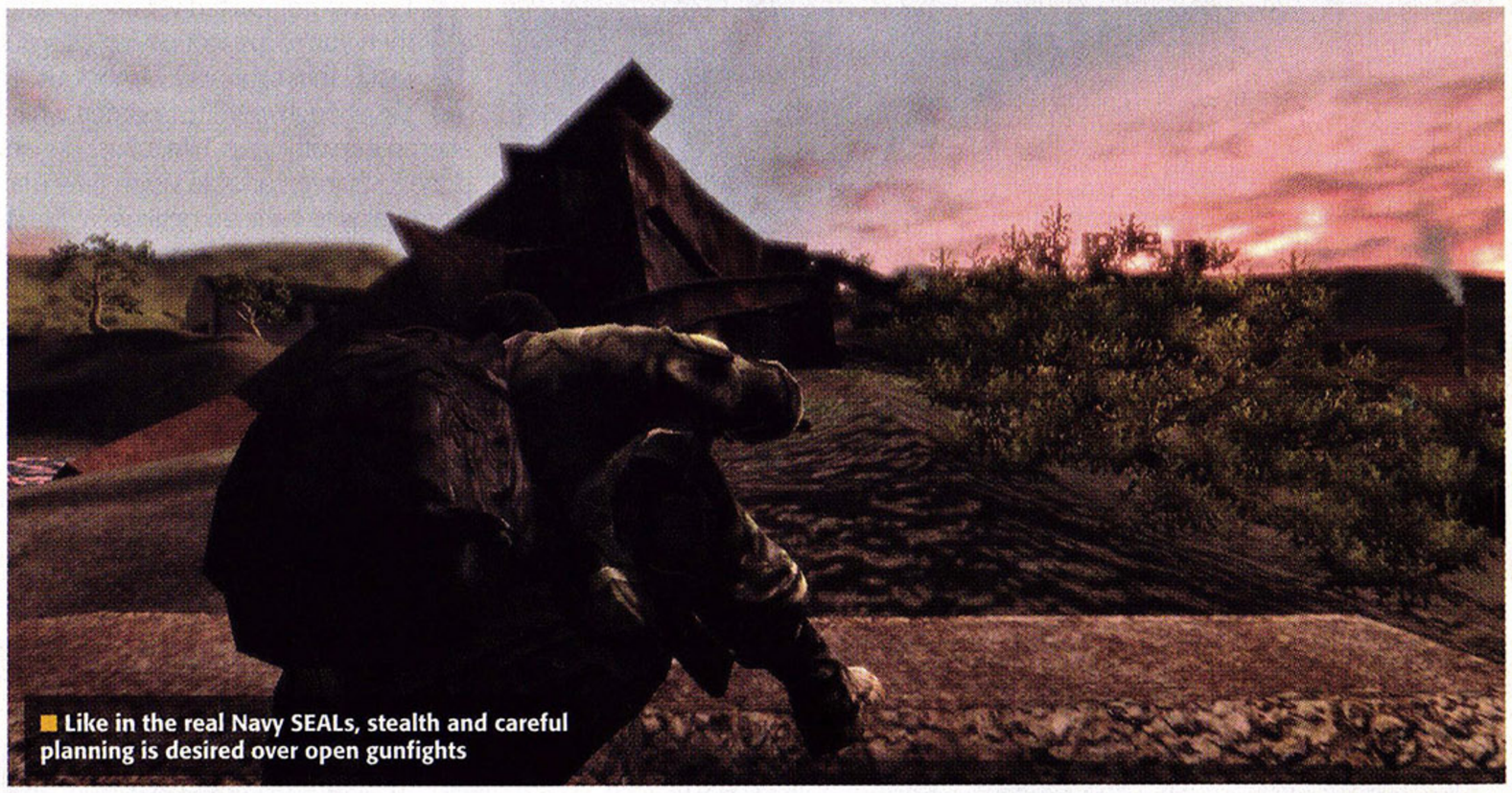


■ Weapons will have extremely limited ammo, encouraging players to adopt the same tactics that SEALs are forced into when in the field – foraging for enemy ammo and defeating foes without firing a shot

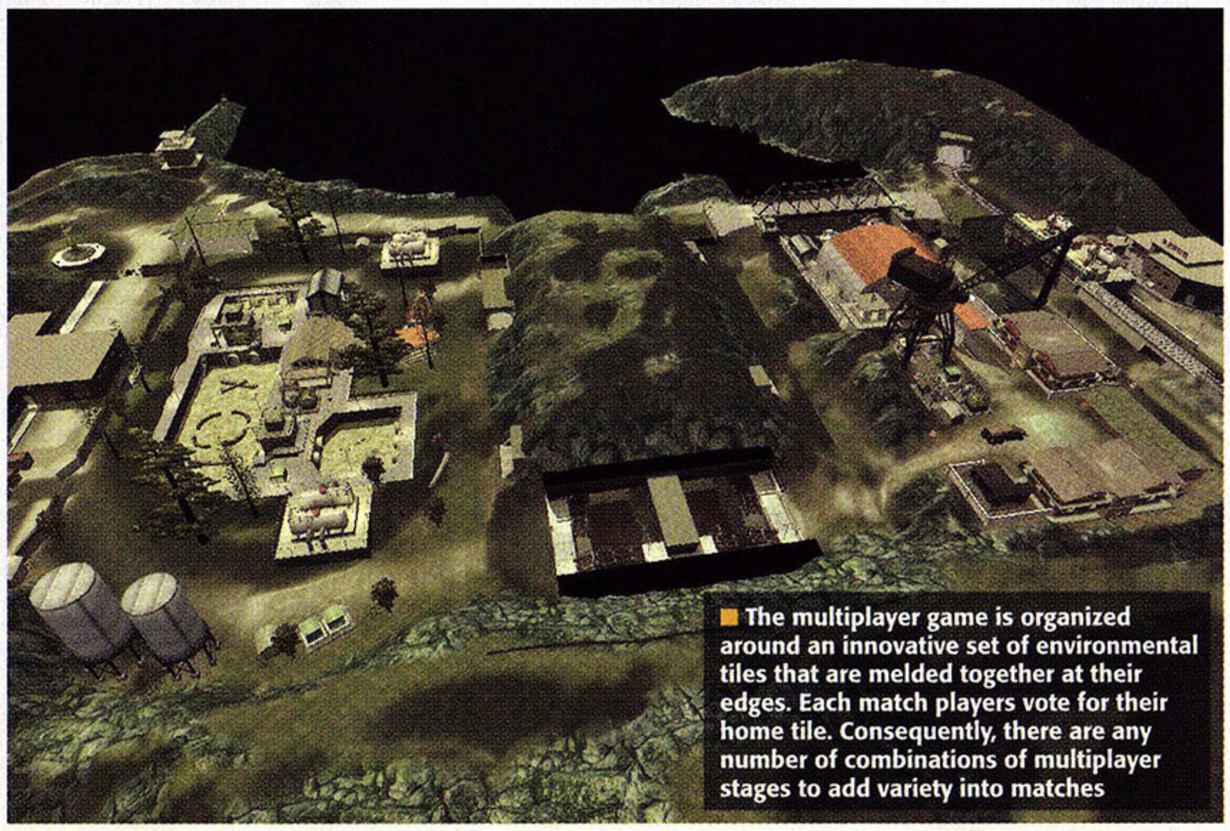


■ One of your companions in the game is based on real soldier Dan Capel, who Dick Marcinko has worked with repeatedly over the years

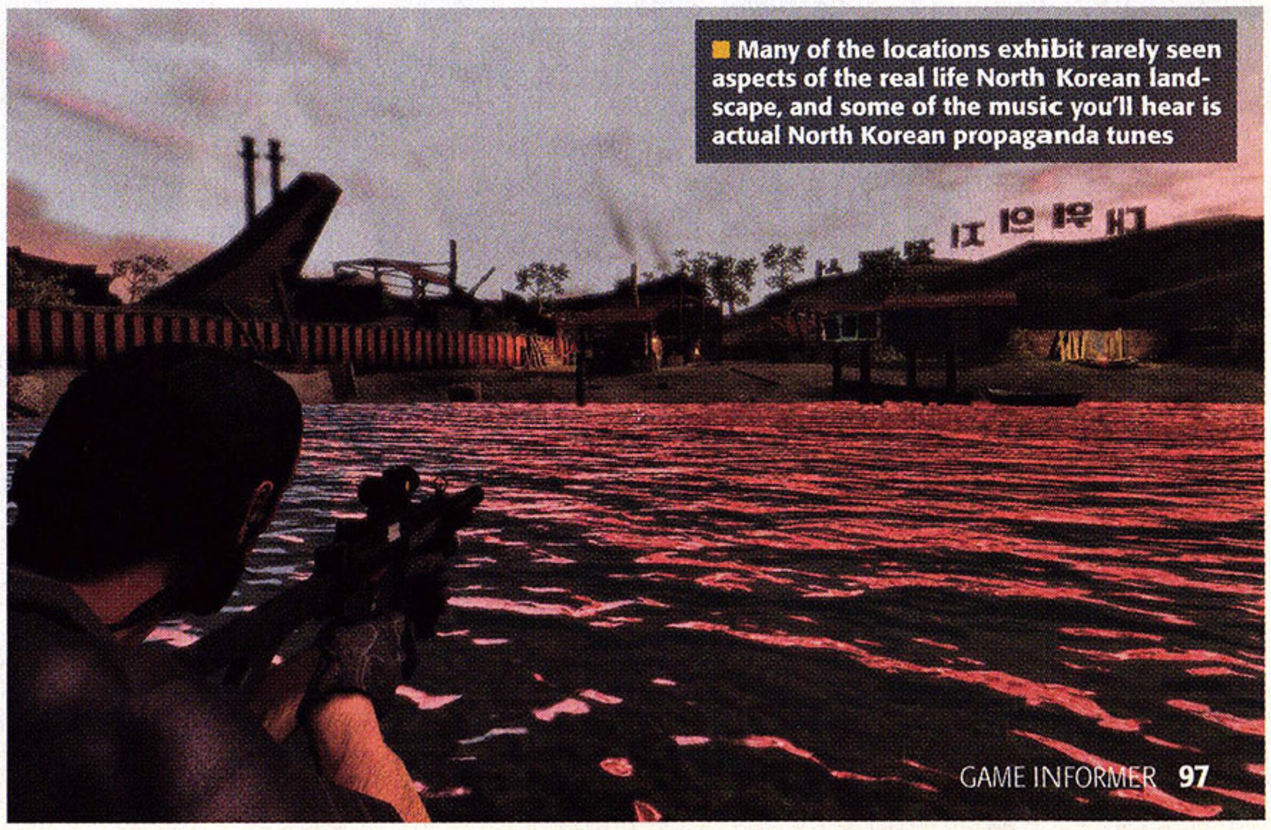
■ The ability to booby trap dead bodies makes for some priceless moments



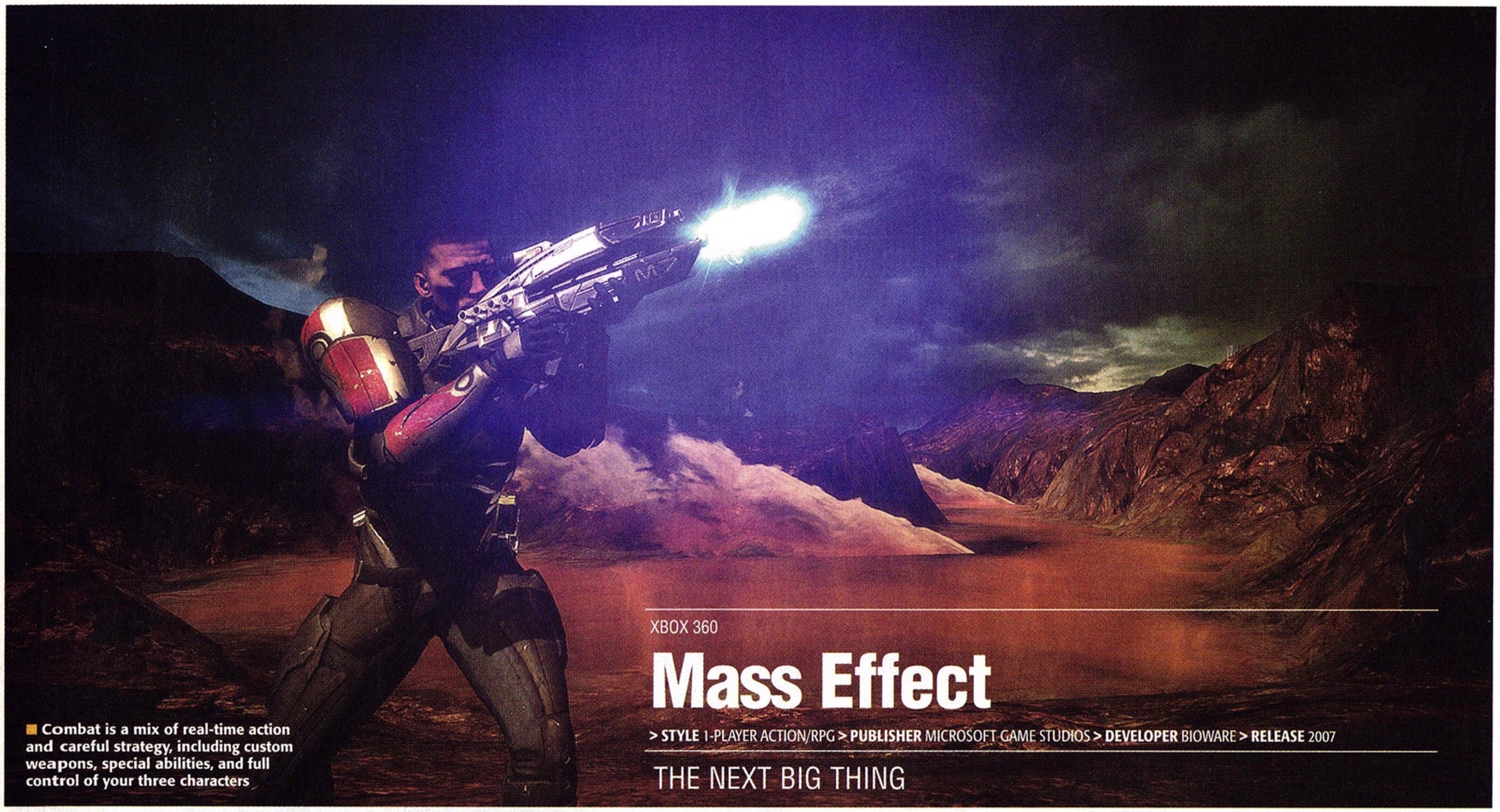
■ Like in the real Navy SEALs, stealth and careful planning is desired over open gunfights



■ The multiplayer game is organized around an innovative set of environmental tiles that are melded together at their edges. Each match players vote for their home tile. Consequently, there are any number of combinations of multiplayer stages to add variety into matches



■ Many of the locations exhibit rarely seen aspects of the real life North Korean landscape, and some of the music you'll hear is actual North Korean propaganda tunes



Combat is a mix of real-time action and careful strategy, including custom weapons, special abilities, and full control of your three characters

XBOX 360

Mass Effect

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION/RPG > **PUBLISHER** MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS > **DEVELOPER** BIOWARE > **RELEASE** 2007

THE NEXT BIG THING

Your base of operations is the Normandy, the ship you command as a Spectre, a sort of galactic policing agency

If you're not excited yet about Mass Effect, then you're just not paying attention. Let's rectify that right now. "Ambitious" is barely a big enough word to describe what BioWare is attempting with Mass Effect. Just like any title, how close to that remarkable vision they manage to hit remains to be seen until we've played the final version. If those plans come to fruition, Mass Effect may end up being a new benchmark masterpiece from the same folks that brought us Knights of the Old Republic and Jade Empire.

This month, not only did we get some cool new info on a few of the main characters and alien races in the game (see below), but we also saw a more full-featured version of the game in action, thanks to a lengthy demo coming out of X06. The first and most striking visual of the game is the galaxy itself. With numerous locations set aside for major story events, BioWare has promised that the huge number of other systems, planets, moons, and space stations that fill the galaxy are also open and available for exploration. By navigating through the galaxy menu, you can zoom down to any one of those spots and land your ship, the Normandy, to take a closer look. Once there, you'll have the option to traverse the alien landscape on your MAKO, a six-wheeled, all-terrain vehicle designed with jump-jets for mobility and access to enemies. That's right, we said jump-jets. That means you'll can send your characters bouncing across planets, flinging them into the air to target foes that are hidden from your ground bound perspective.

Once on foot, you'll navigate your team of three characters into both high-tension real-time con-

Commander Shepard

The customizable hero of Mass Effect is Commander Shepard. Last we heard, BioWare had full voice tracks planned for both male and female versions of the character, and their appearance should be further alterable upon character creation. As an elite Spectre, Shepard has unchecked authority to do what needs to be done to protect the galaxy.

Gunnery Chief Ashley Williams

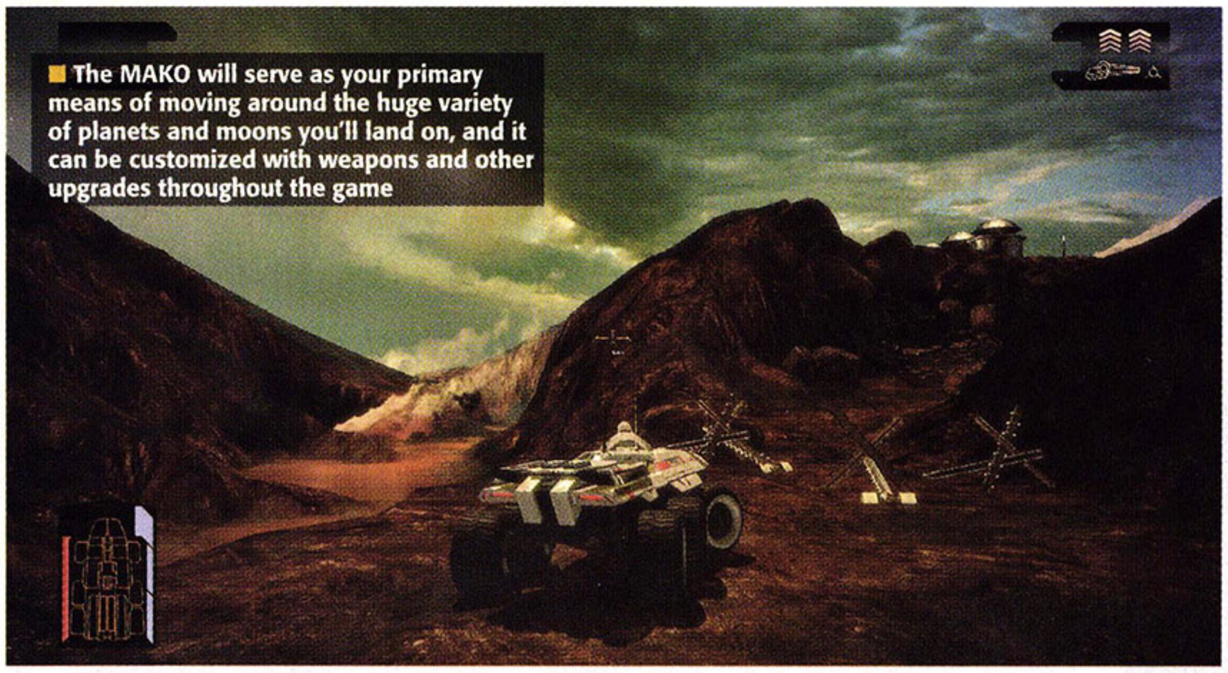
As a combat marine, Ashley's primary role on the team appears to be kicking ass. Hard edged and loyal to Shepard, she'll serve as one of your primary companions throughout your journey.

Salarian

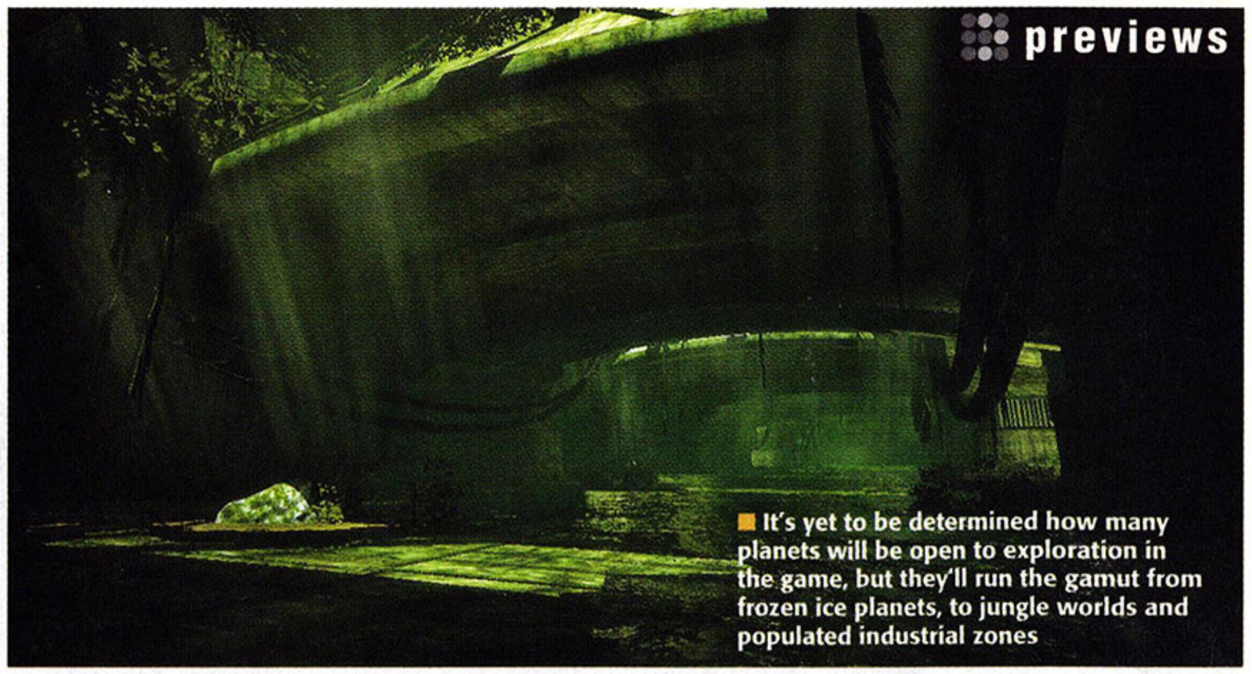
Salarians are a race renowned for their technical skill as well as their high aptitude for espionage. In the interstellar community, they've created many of the major technological advances that now fill the galaxy.

Turian

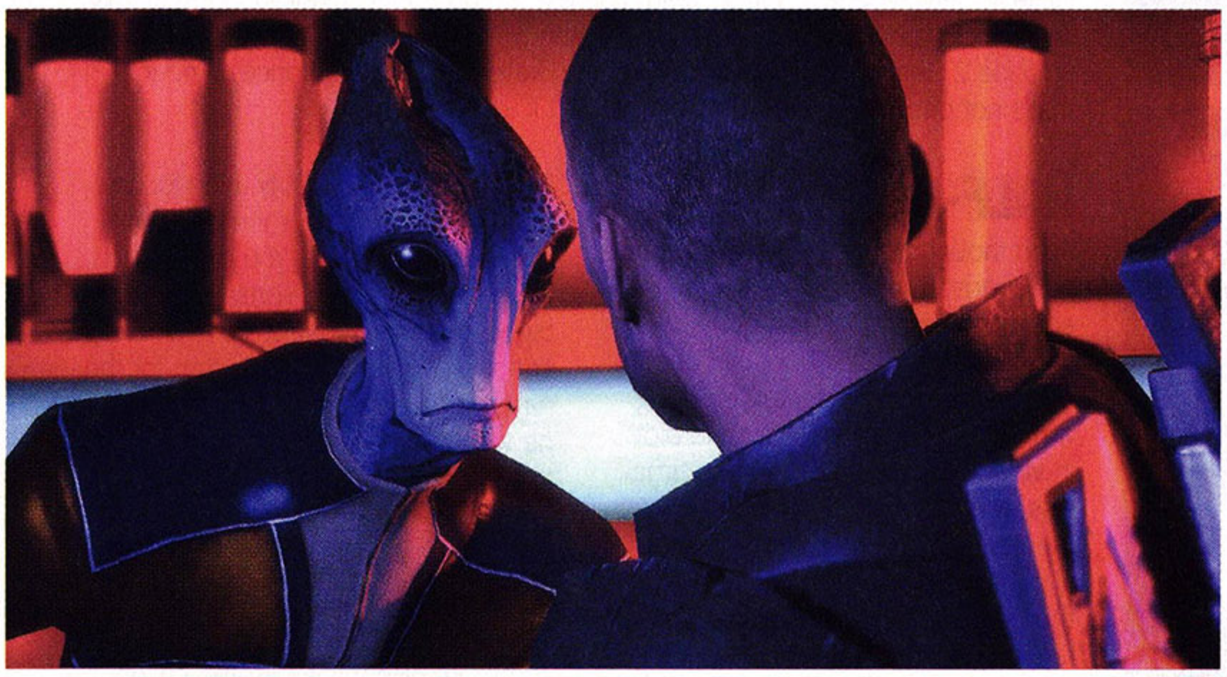
The honor-bound Turians are well known for their skill in battle and their unflinching discipline. Avian in appearance, their entire culture is based on a strict military hierarchy.



■ The MAKO will serve as your primary means of moving around the huge variety of planets and moons you'll land on, and it can be customized with weapons and other upgrades throughout the game



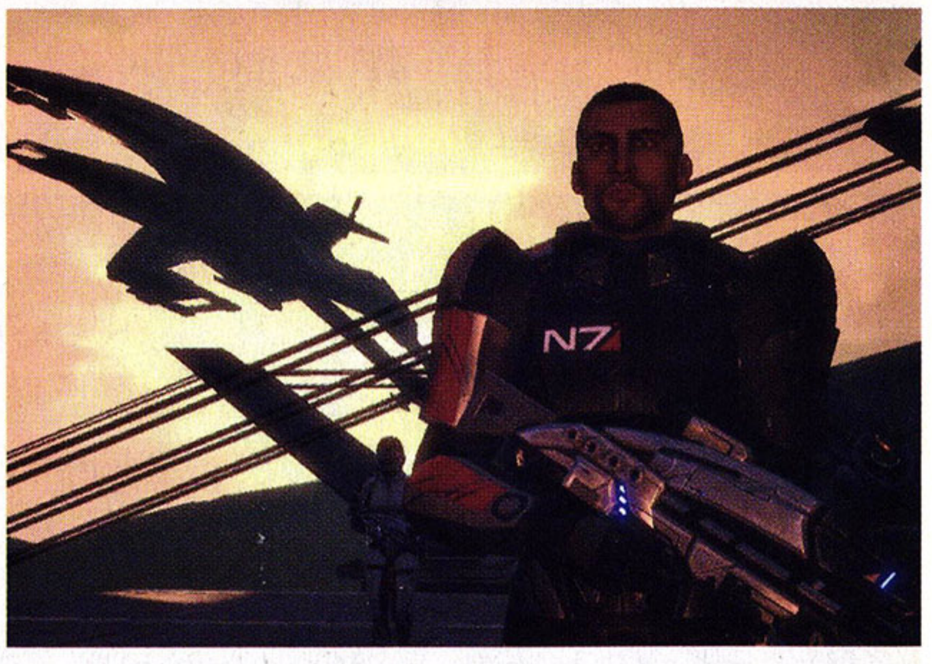
■ It's yet to be determined how many planets will be open to exploration in the game, but they'll run the gamut from frozen ice planets, to jungle worlds and populated industrial zones



versations with NPCs as well as tactical battle scenarios against aliens and the machine AIs that are threatening the galaxy. Each of the characters is customizable by the player, with four instant access weapon slots (available on the d-pad) as well as the capability to level up their special abilities. So far we've learned about soldiers who focus on weaponry, tech specialists who can take out shields and work with machines, and vanguard-focused characters who build up their use of biotics, the genetically upgradeable ability to manipulate objects with a sort of telekinesis.

Battles offer an interesting mix of action and strategy, as you can direct your companions to their best firing locations during a quick pause, and target enemies yourself as you switch between your three-person squad. The other side of the RPG equation is even more impressive, as the communication you initiate with the galaxy's denizens advances the traditional approach in some major ways. A simple tree of responses to anything a character says appears just before they finish speaking, allowing you a quick moment to peruse the responses and react. When you do, your character responds with the emotional gist of your choice, but expands it into a fully voiced and scripted response. If that weren't enough, the motion-captured faces that speak the words are remarkably lifelike and add another layer of immersion to an already impressive interaction scheme.

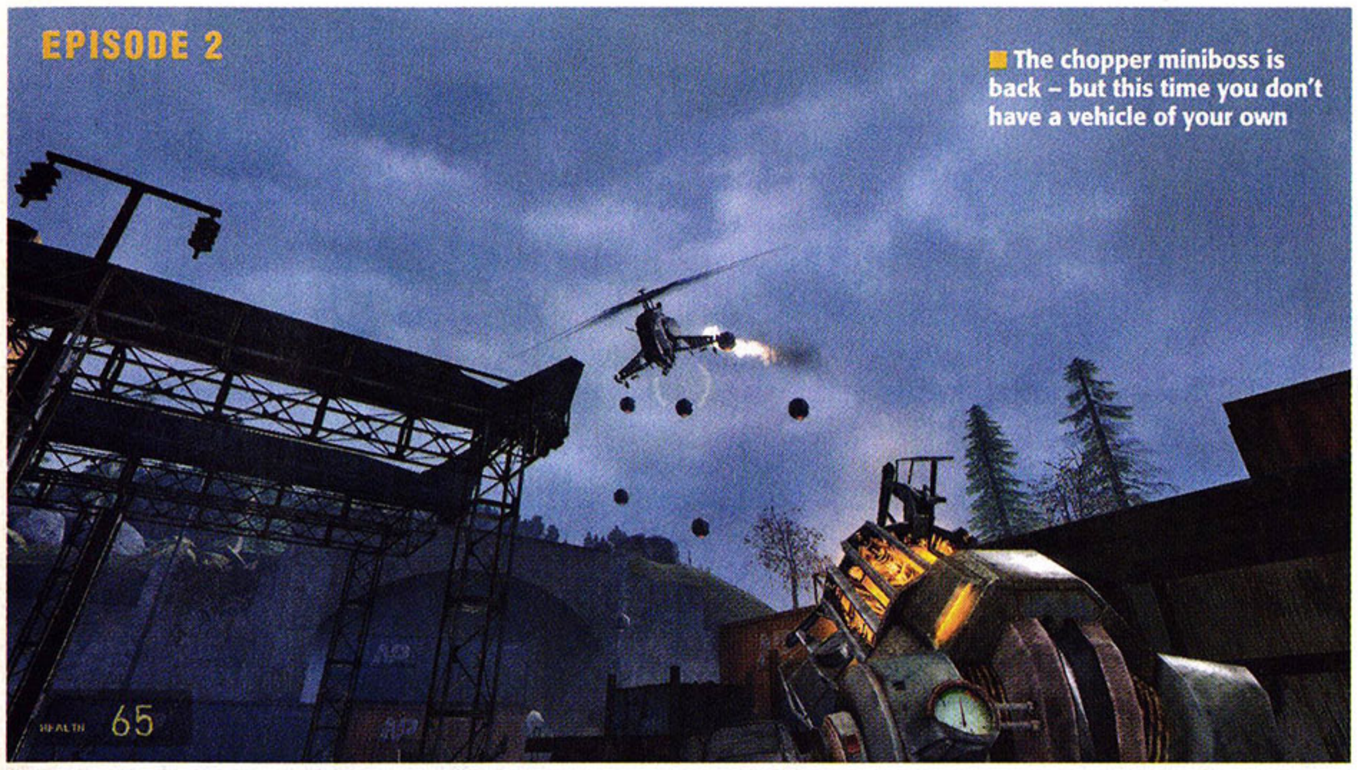
If only our excitement could make the game come out sooner. At E3 this year, BioWare was aiming for the first quarter of next year. Now, they've stopped making such promises, which, take it from us, is never a positive sign. We can always hope. Incidentally, if you're still not excited about Mass Effect, you may need a defibrillator. Seriously. ■ ■ ■

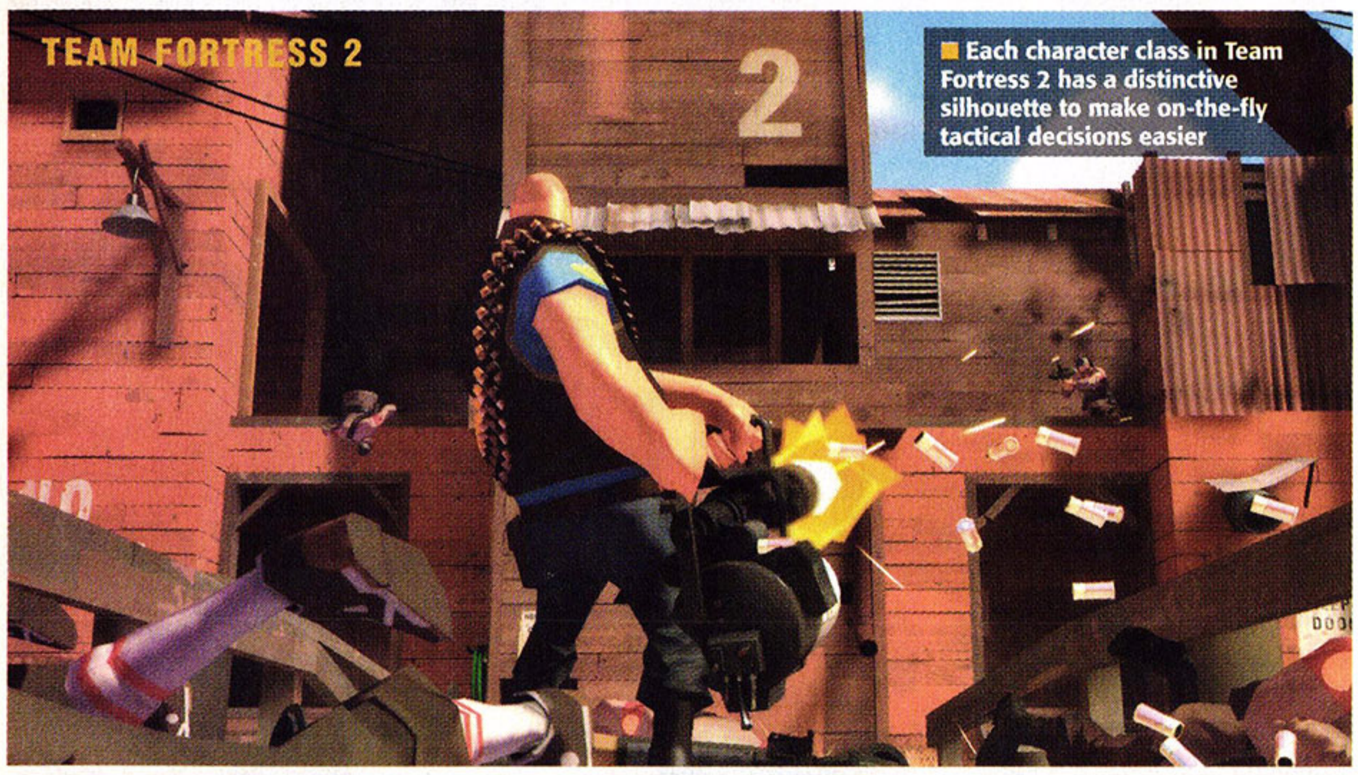


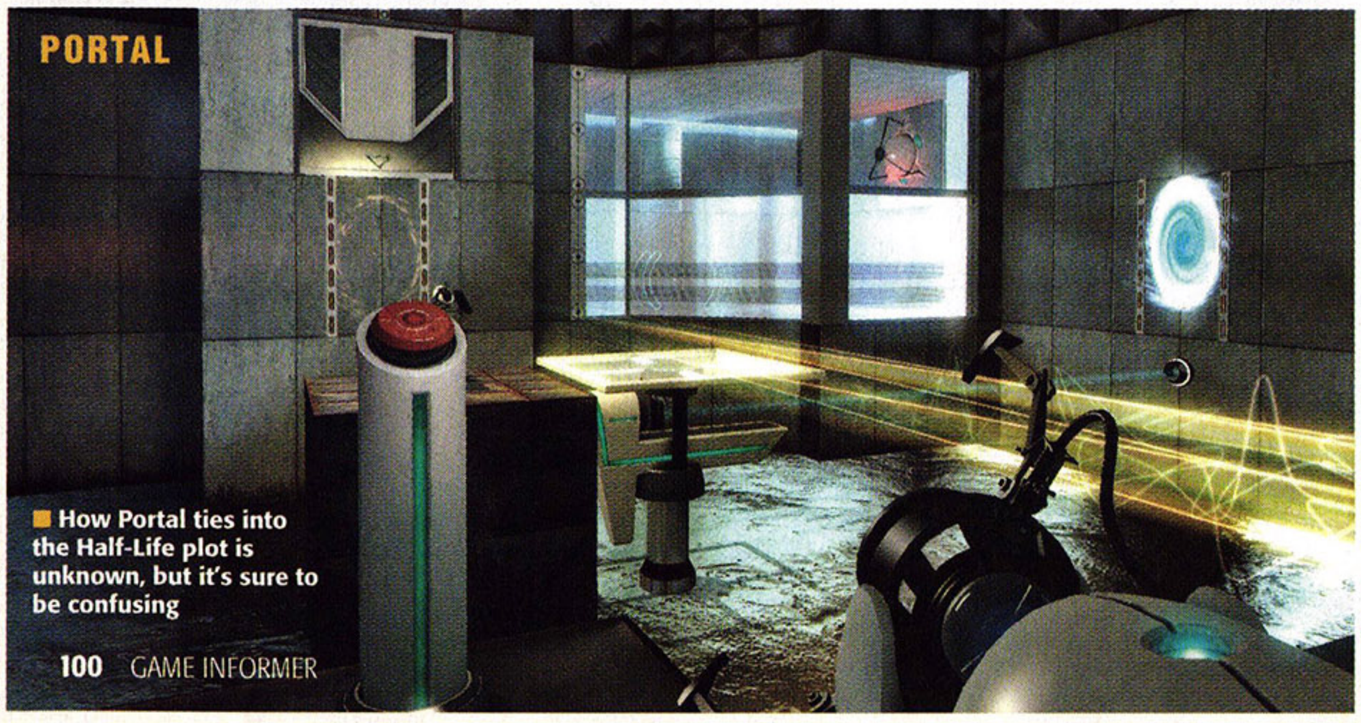
Volus
Little is yet known about the Volus, but their heavy clothing and breathing masks are apparently a necessary garb when away from the unique atmosphere of their homeworld.

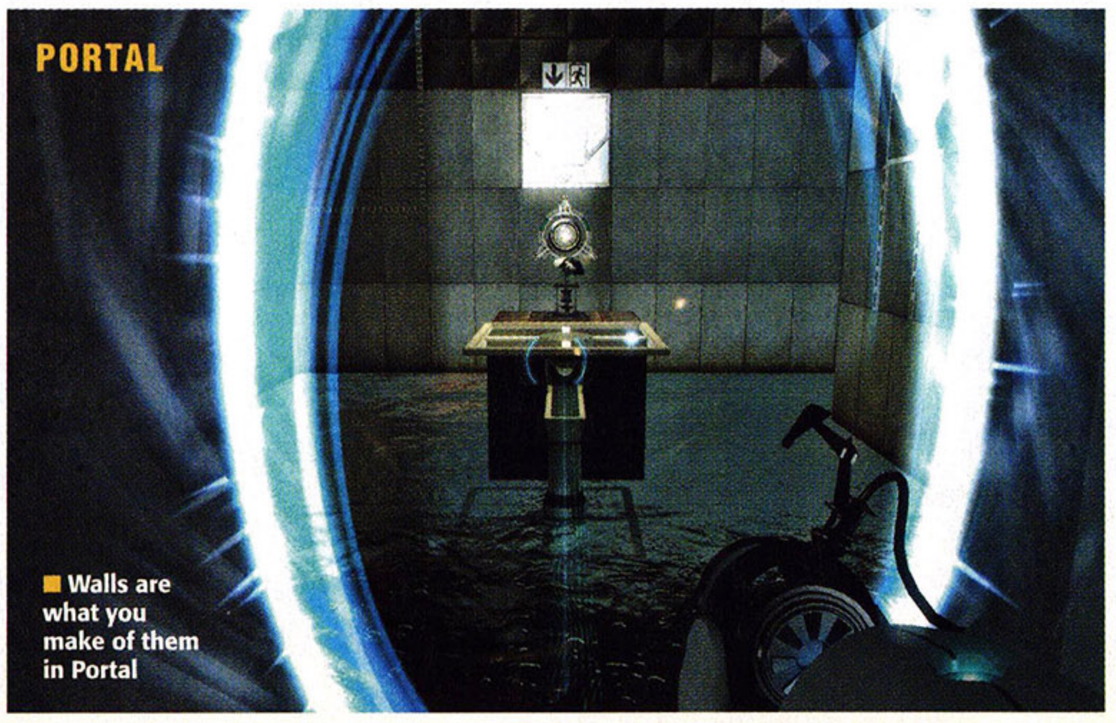
Krogan
The reptile race of Krogans are merciless and cruel, and for unknown reasons harbor a deep hatred for other intelligent species in the galaxy.

Geth
The machine race of AIs called the Geth were created nearly 300 years ago to serve as laborers and pawns of war, but with their networked intelligence they eventually rebelled and struck out on their own. When in combat, an individual Geth fights like a simple animal. When in groups, their networked capabilities make them dangerously intelligent.









UNLIMITED ENABLED

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360 | PC

Half-Life 2

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (MULTIPLAYER TBD) **> PUBLISHER** VALVE SOFTWARE
> DEVELOPER VALVE SOFTWARE **> RELEASE** 2007

THE BEST DEAL IN TOWN

Soon, Valve will be releasing its masterpiece first-person shooter, Half-Life 2, on consoles again. This time, however, the publisher/developer is sweetening the pot with a huge offering of content on top of the fact that the PS3 and Xbox 360 should have far fewer technical issues than the original Xbox did. Half-Life 2, Episodes 1 and 2, Team Fortress 2, and Portal are all included in this single purchase (PC users who already own Half-Life 2 will be able to purchase Episode 2, Team Fortress 2, and Portal seperately at a reduced price). And if that's not enough for your dollars, we don't know what is.

HALF-LIFE 2

Even though the game originally came out almost two years ago, this potent action-adventure has lost none of its appeal. Half-Life 2's rock-solid design and an amazing presentation, along with one of the most byzantine plots in video games, are as close to timeless as anything in this medium. Plus, the game has been retrofitted with all of the fancy recent additions to the Source engine, like high-dynamic range lighting, to make sure that it can compete with current titles on the visual front.

HALF-LIFE 2: EPISODE 1

Picking up literally at the moment that the base game ends, Episode 1 follows the adventures of Dr. Gordon Freeman and Alyx Vance as they attempt to escape from the crumbling Citadel and the remnants of City 17. Episode 1 may not be the biggest leap forward in expansion pack history, but there's nothing wrong with getting several more hours of delicious Half-Life 2 action.

HALF-LIFE 2: EPISODE 2

Continuing their journey away from the Combine-controlled urban areas, Gordon and Alyx are still doing their best to help rebuild the shattered Earth. Valve has big plans for Episode 2, most notably a big focus on huge outdoor environments with non-linear objectives. You can expect to see the enigmatic Vortigaunts play a bigger role in Episode 2's plot as well, and the combat is taking a turn for the nasty with Valve's promises of diverse new enemy forces that work together tactically to take you down.

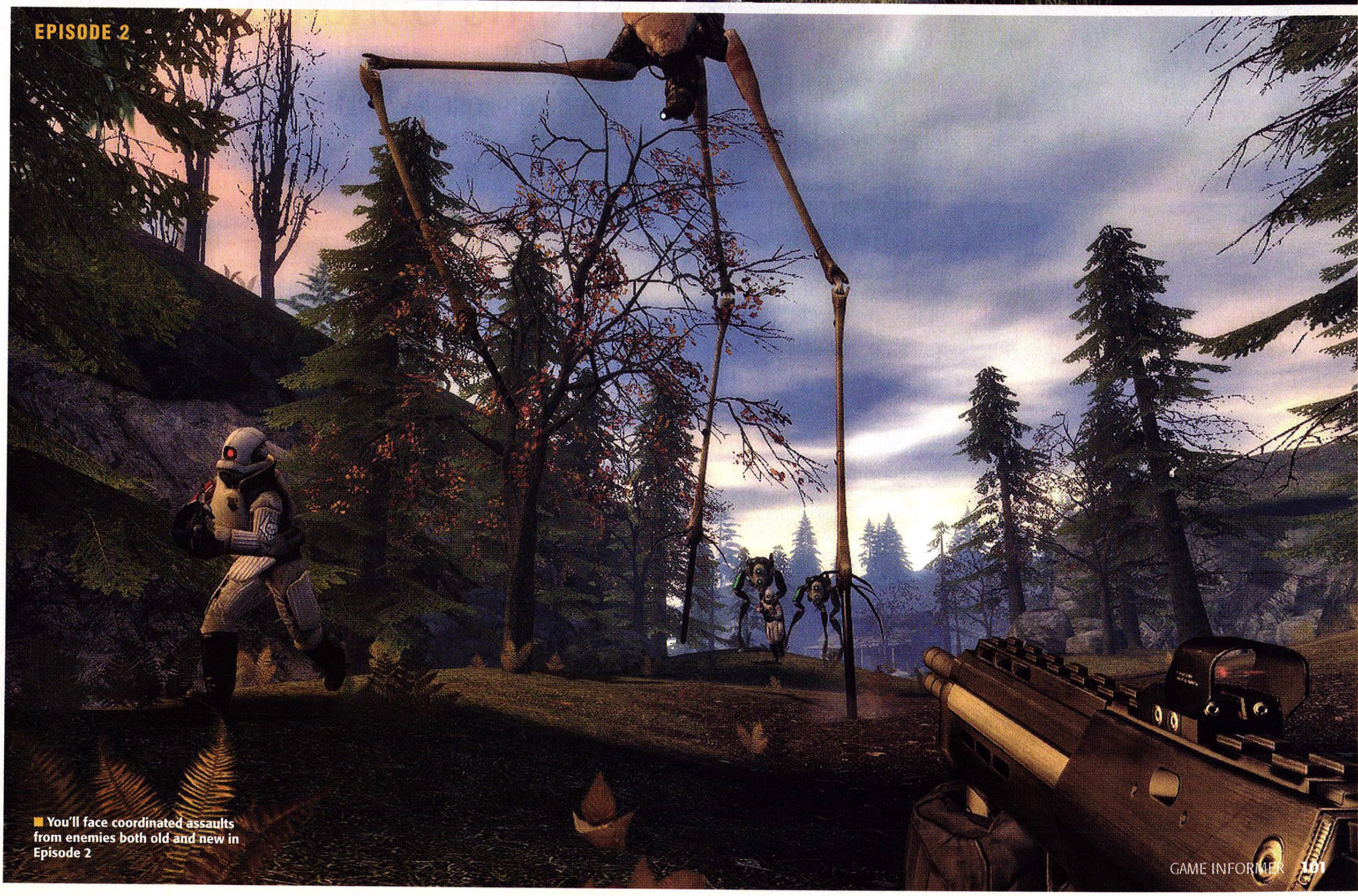
TEAM FORTRESS 2

Long promised but never arriving, Team Fortress 2 is finally on track to come out with this awesome collection. The original Team Fortress played a huge role in shaping the modern multiplayer shooter genre with its different player classes and outstanding maps, and Valve is hoping to retake the crown with this release. Based on the developer's track record, we certainly wouldn't bet against that happening.

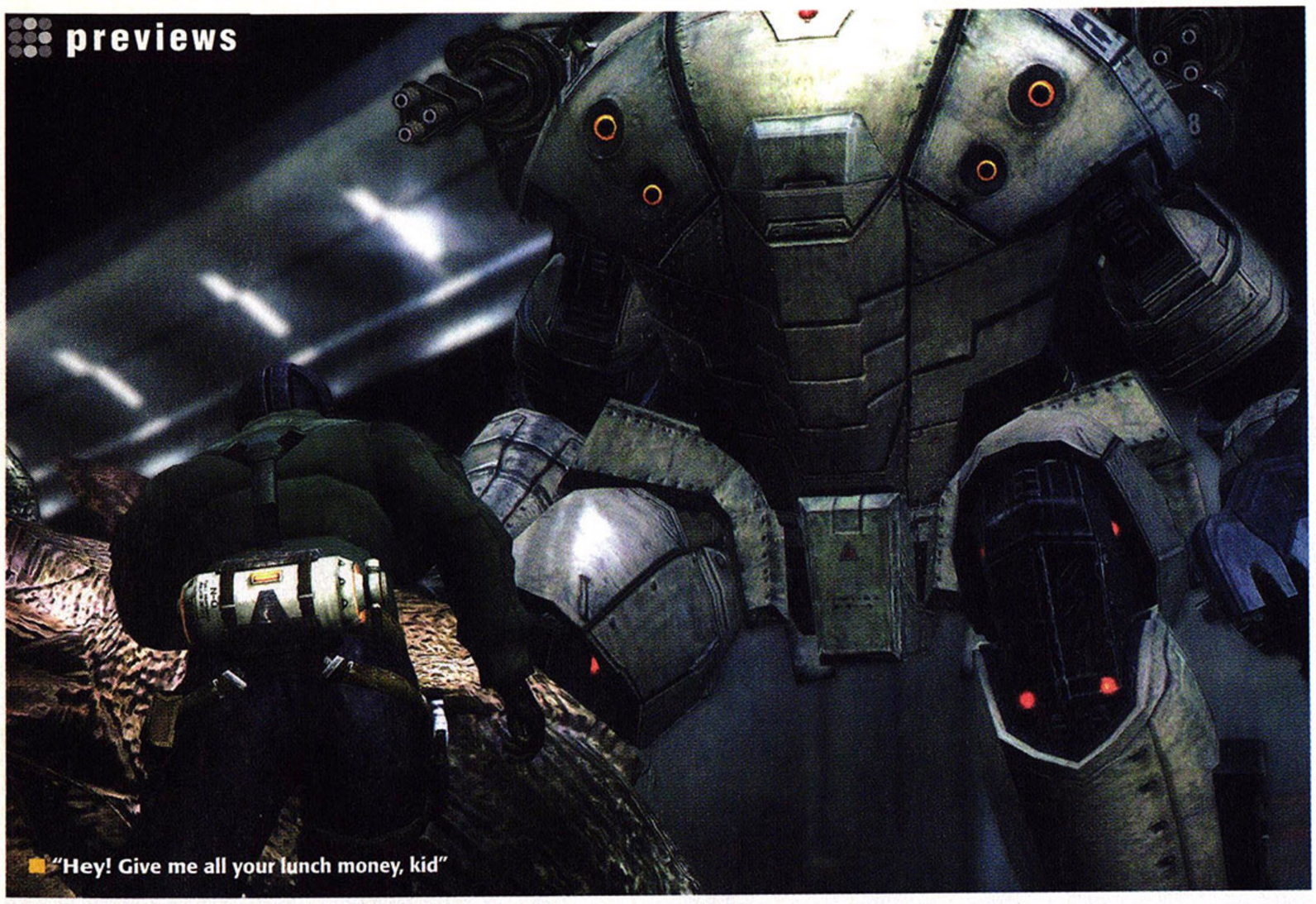
PORTAL

Originally born as a student project named Narbacular Drop, Portal has moved to the Source engine (as well as the Half-Life universe) and is nearing commercial release. Predicated on a gun that can link two points in space – effectively creating a portal – Portal's gameplay revolves around solving crazy physics puzzles and navigation challenges by bending your brain around the various uses of this crazy device. We can't wait to get our hands on this one.

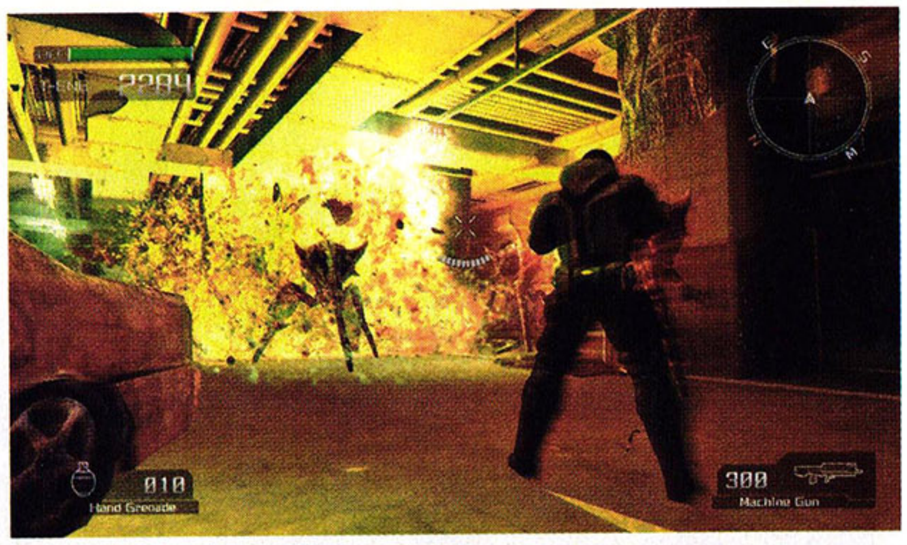
■ Friendly robot Dog may just be the best ally ever

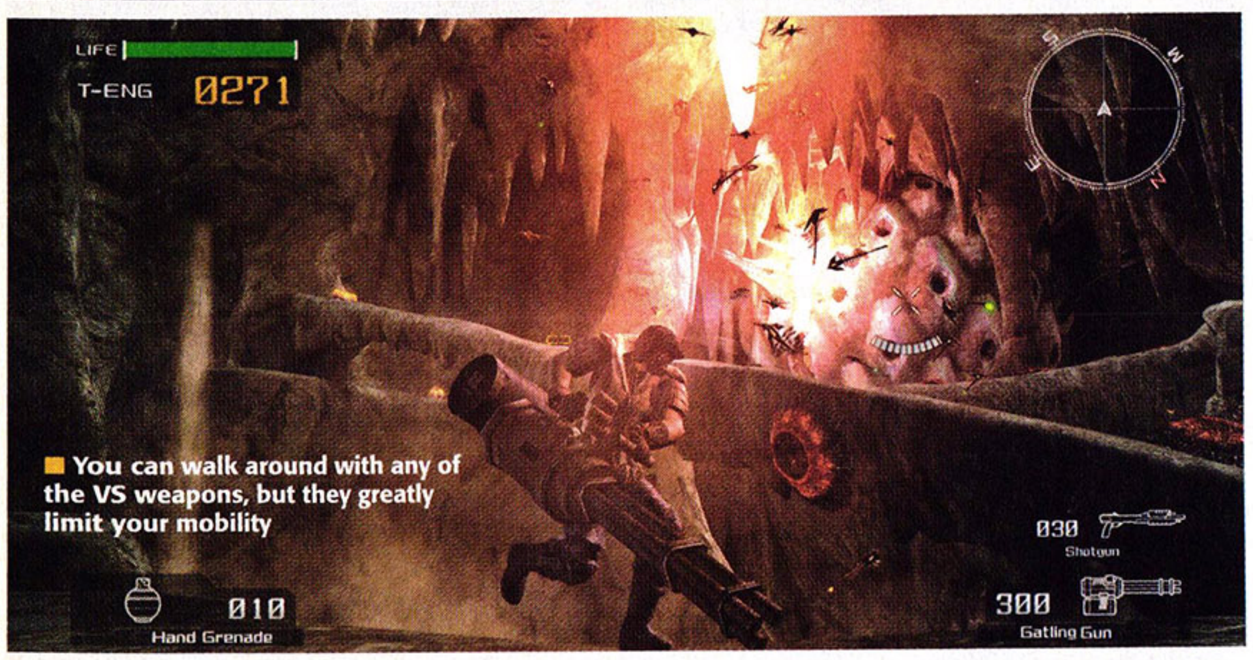


■ You'll face coordinated assaults from enemies both old and new in Episode 2



"Hey! Give me all your lunch money, kid"





You can walk around with any of the VS weapons, but they greatly limit your mobility

Sorry, but Kevin Bacon will not be appearing in this game

UNLIMITED ENABLED

XBOX 360

Lost Planet: Extreme Condition

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 16-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE) **> PUBLISHER** CAPCOM **> DEVELOPER** CAPCOM
> RELEASE JANUARY

HOW DID YOU LOSE A WHOLE PLANET, CAPCOM?

Sure, crossing an icy tundra sucks, but crossing the icy tundra of a distant and forbidden planet in a mech while battling alien monsters for their heat pretty much rules. We recently got our hands on a preview version of Lost Planet, and it seems to be shaping up fairly well.

The game's story follows Wayne (a name practically dripping with heroism), a young man who gets involved with a small rebel group trying to fight a corporation called NEVEC. This corporation has plans (apparently evil plans) to terraform the planet, claiming the lives of its inhabitants in the process.

In his journeys, Wayne fights humans — a group called the ice pirates — and the planet's indigenous beasts, called Akrids. In fact, it is necessary to battle these creatures to steal the thermal energy they leave behind.

In Lost Planet, the cold is your biggest enemy. The whole game seems to take place in the frozen wastelands of this chilly planet, so you have a thermal meter that slowly deteriorates over time. Wayne's arm is equipped with a mysterious device that allows him to convert thermal energy into health, so whenever you take damage your health is immediately refilled by converting heat energy into life energy. But once you run out of thermal reserves, your health slowly begins to deplete. This creates a tense atmosphere where your constant need for heat is always at the back of your mind.

The graphics are gorgeous. The Akrid character models and the explosive effects, in particular, are impressive. But the human character models don't seem as crisp, and it could get old looking at the same frozen wasteland the whole game.

The Vital Suits — Lost Planet's version of mech — are fun to walk around in, and it is possible to equip them with any two of the game's various weapons. These larger guns can also be detached and used on foot, but handle better on the VS. In addition, there are a handful of hoverbikes that work like the VS but move a lot faster and don't hold up against the same kind of damage. This all adds an exciting element to this action game, but expect to spend at least two-thirds of the game on foot.

At this point, the game is far from perfect, however. We noticed that the AI can be goofy at times — some enemies stood still facing the other direction while we casually gunned down their comrades. Another thing that bugged us initially was the grapple system, which lets Wayne latch onto buildings and other walls, but doesn't seem fully integrated into the game yet. The feature is pretty cool, but there were moments when we had trouble grappling up to places where we shouldn't have had trouble going. Other times, we grappled up the side of a building or rock face only to discover that an invisible wall kept us from going any further.

Aside from these minor complaints, Lost Planet is coming together well and we hope it will be a great game by the time it releases at the beginning of next year. ■ ■ ■

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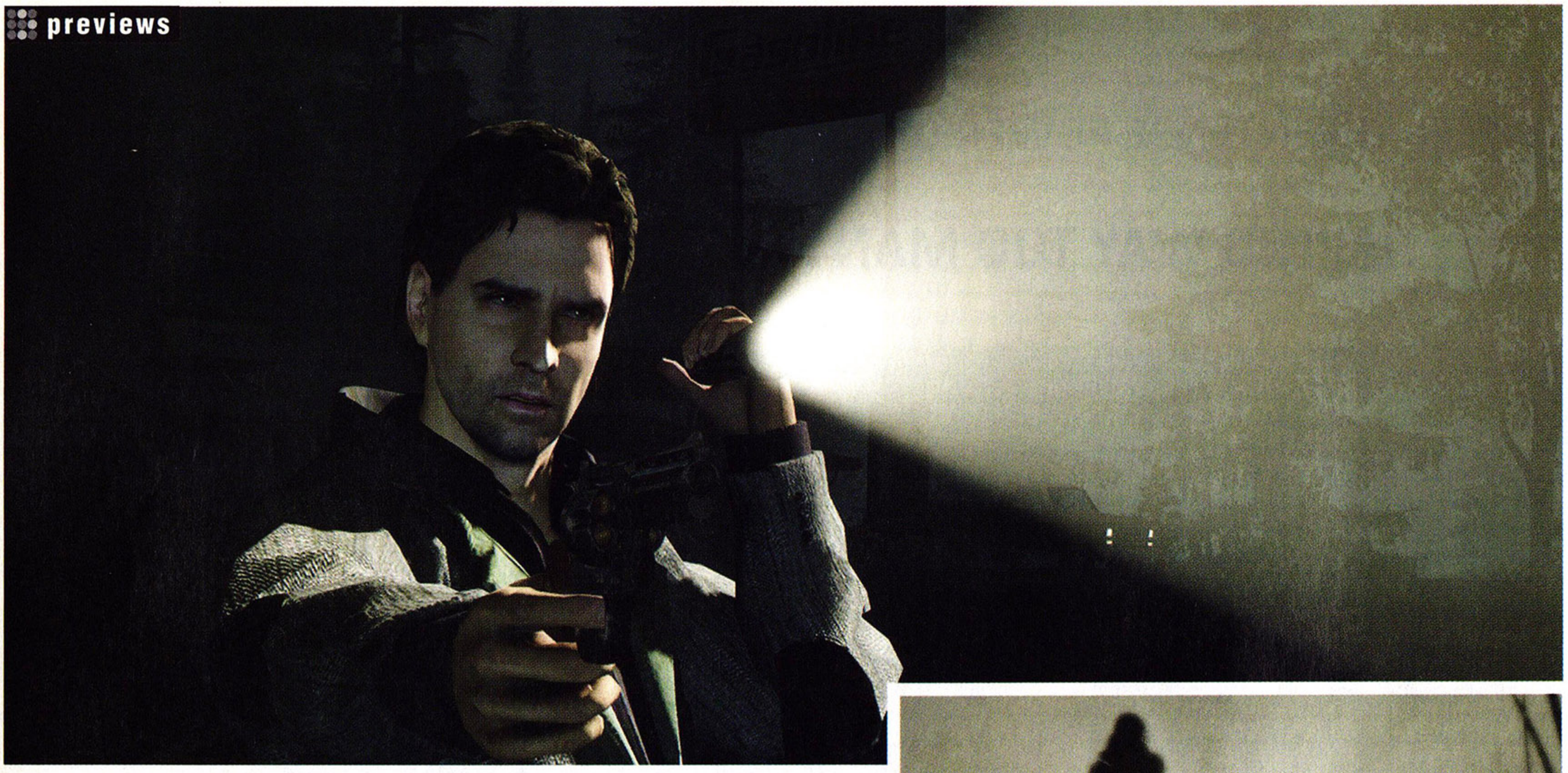


XBOX 360 I PC

Alan Wake

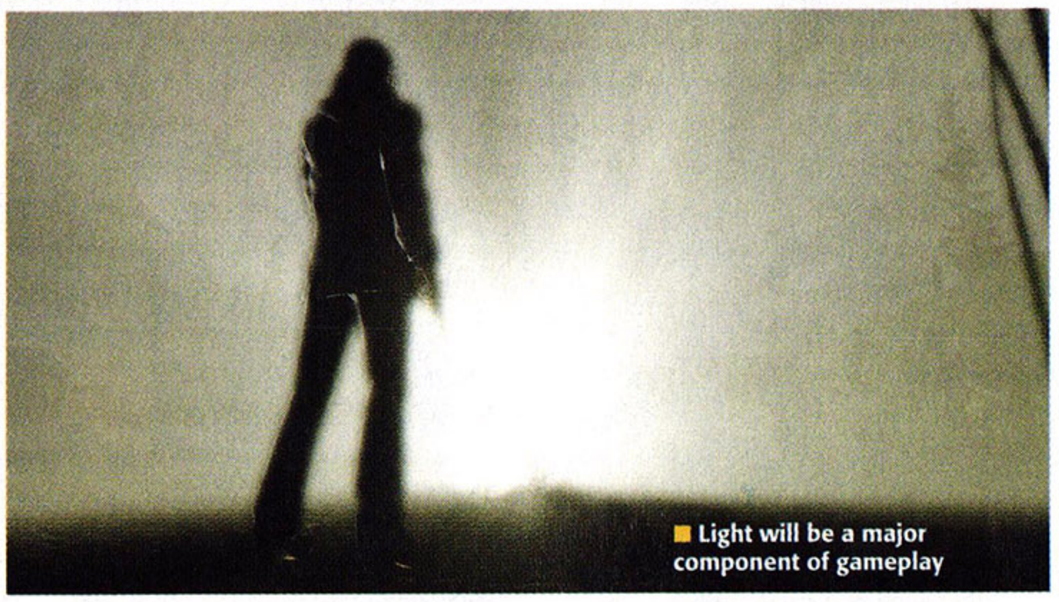
> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION **> PUBLISHER** MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS **> DEVELOPER** REMEDY ENTERTAINMENT **> RELEASE** TBA

I AM A WAKE

At Microsoft's recent X06 event in Spain, one title was transformed from an interesting project to one of the next triple-A games, all in the course of a single day. At the start of X06's single-day conference, appointments to see the game brought eight to ten journalists into the demo room at a time. But as the day went on, word of the amazing visuals and captivating story spread throughout the attendees, and by the end of the day, the demo room was packed wall to wall with journalists eager to see the game that everyone was talking about. That game was Alan Wake.

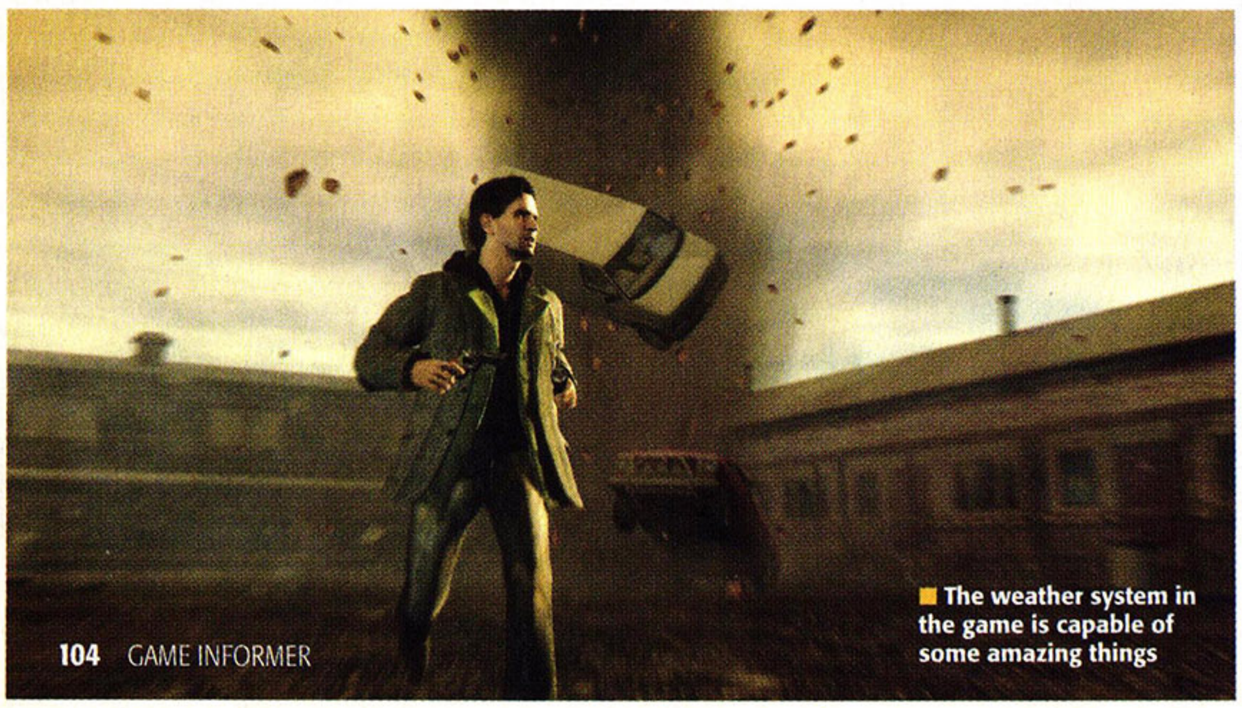
The Alan Wake project is one that people have known about for some time, but up until X06 all anyone had seen was limited to tech demos detailing the game's gorgeous world, and a bit about the plot. Alan Wake is the story of a man who meets a mysterious woman, begins having strange dreams, and then writes a best-selling novel based on his visions. When his girlfriend suddenly disappears, Wake is stricken with insomnia, and heads to a sleep clinic in Bright Falls, Washington. In the small town, Wake's eerie dreams begin to come to life.

At X06, we learned that Alan Wake is patterned after a season of a TV show (similar to another upcoming horror game, Alone in the Dark), complete with cliffhanger endings, narration, episode recaps, and everything else you would expect from a serialized TV program. More impressively, Remedy Entertainment demonstrated that this gorgeous game features an open, free-roaming world that the player can explore between story missions. Not only does the small town's Northwestern setting make for a more visually appealing locale than the urban areas of most open-world games, but Remedy also showed off how its lighting system added to the amazing look. Almost every object in the game casts real-time shadows, so the majestic trees take on a very different mood as the sun dips below the horizon. To top it all off, the game world also features a stunning weather system, which can recreate incredibly realistic conditions. On top of showing off rolling clouds drifting through the mountains, the X06 demo displayed a truly impressive tornado, which ripped apart a small motel, pulling objects like propane tanks and bits of wood into its cyclone – and dropping a van right in front of a fleeing Wake.

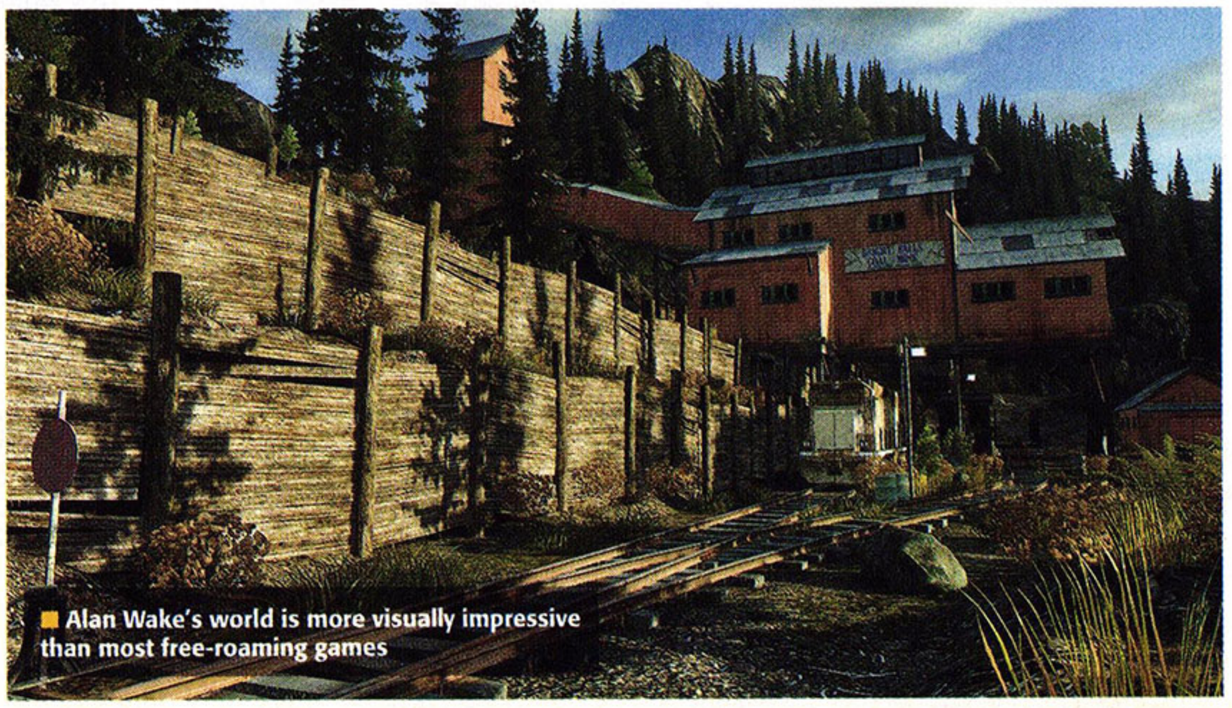


■ Light will be a major component of gameplay

The realism of the world was a big part of what drew so many viewers to the Alan Wake demo, but the actual gameplay looked just as interesting. Although Remedy didn't reveal too much, enough of the game was shown to make it clear that Alan Wake will play as a third-person action game that uses light as a central weapon against the strange nightmare creatures. We witnessed Wake running away from a spooky hitchhiker/shadow creature that seemed to absorb any light around it, but was weakened when Wake turned his flashlight on it and unloaded a flurry of bullets. It was this mix of new information and unanswered questions that made Alan Wake the talk of the show, and one of the upcoming titles that all gamers should keep on their radar. ■ ■ ■



■ The weather system in the game is capable of some amazing things



■ Alan Wake's world is more visually impressive than most free-roaming games

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XBOX 360

Crackdown

> STYLE 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION (2-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE) **> PUBLISHER** MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS **> DEVELOPER** REAL TIME WORLDS **> RELEASE** SPRING

THE SUPERHERO LIFE

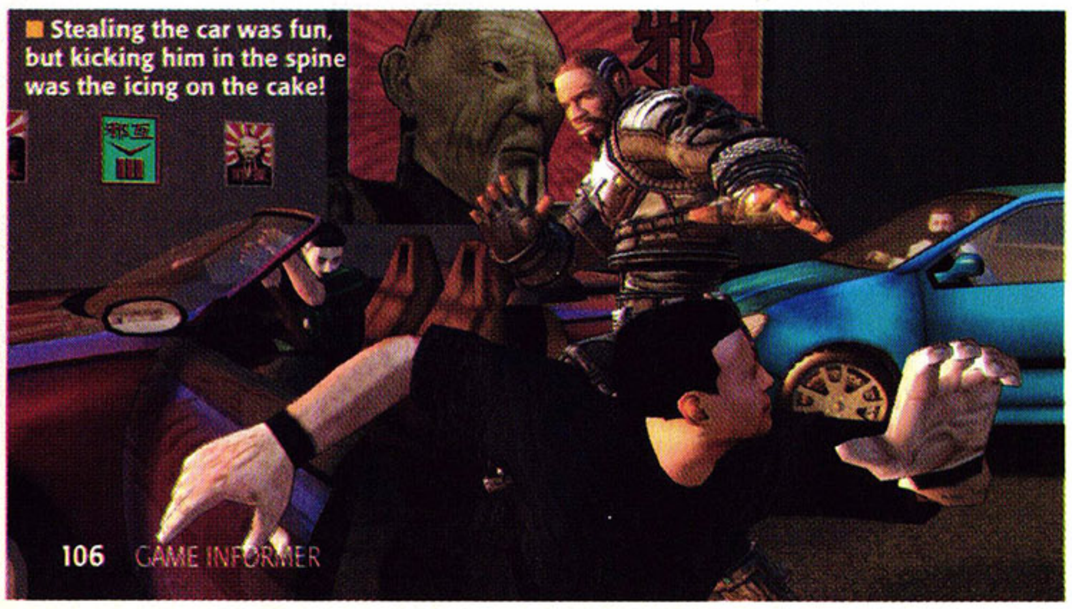
Crackdown is a title that has been often compared to Grand Theft Auto, and for obvious reasons. It is an open-world action game created by Real Time Worlds, a company helmed by David Jones, who helped create Rockstar's marquee title. Indeed, Crackdown has all of the features that you'd expect from a GTA-style game: non-linear gameplay, gangs, and chaos. But after we got some solid hands-on time with the game, we feel comfortable saying that Crackdown is far more than just another clone. In fact, it's far more like stepping into a living comic book than Vice City.

As a super-powered hero called an Agent trying to rid Pacific City of its 21 crime lords, players get to run around Crackdown's world, taking out enemies however they see fit. Sure, that means you can shoot your foes, brawl with them, or run them down with your car, but Crackdown offers you a little more freedom than that. The world is open to you from top to bottom, so not only can you run around the streets, you can climb to the tops of buildings and jump from roof to roof. Like the recent Spider-Man games and The Incredible Hulk: Ultimate Destruction, moving around this world without boundaries serves to make you feel more like a superhuman badass, and the more you do it the more powerful you become. Performing tasks like driving, shooting, jumping, and fighting levels up those particular skills, making you evolve based on how you play. Every mission in the game is open from the start, so you can take on the toughest crime boss right away, or wait until you've evolved into an unstoppable brute.

We spent much of our time running down criminals with cars, then jumping out and beating them with lampposts we ripped from the ground. It's as much fun as it sounds, and should be even more fun with a friend. While this feature hasn't been shown off yet, Crackdown will feature a co-op mode, both online and off. That means that if you're strong enough, you'll be able to throw a van with your friend inside into a guarded compound so he can start running down the thugs inside. If that isn't enough to put this game on your list of next year's hot titles, we don't know what is. ■■■

■ What's more fun than causing boundless mayhem? Causing boundless mayhem with a friend

■ Hope you've got good collision insurance



■ Stealing the car was fun, but kicking him in the spine was the icing on the cake!

■ Vehicles will level up and become more awesome as you improve your driving skills

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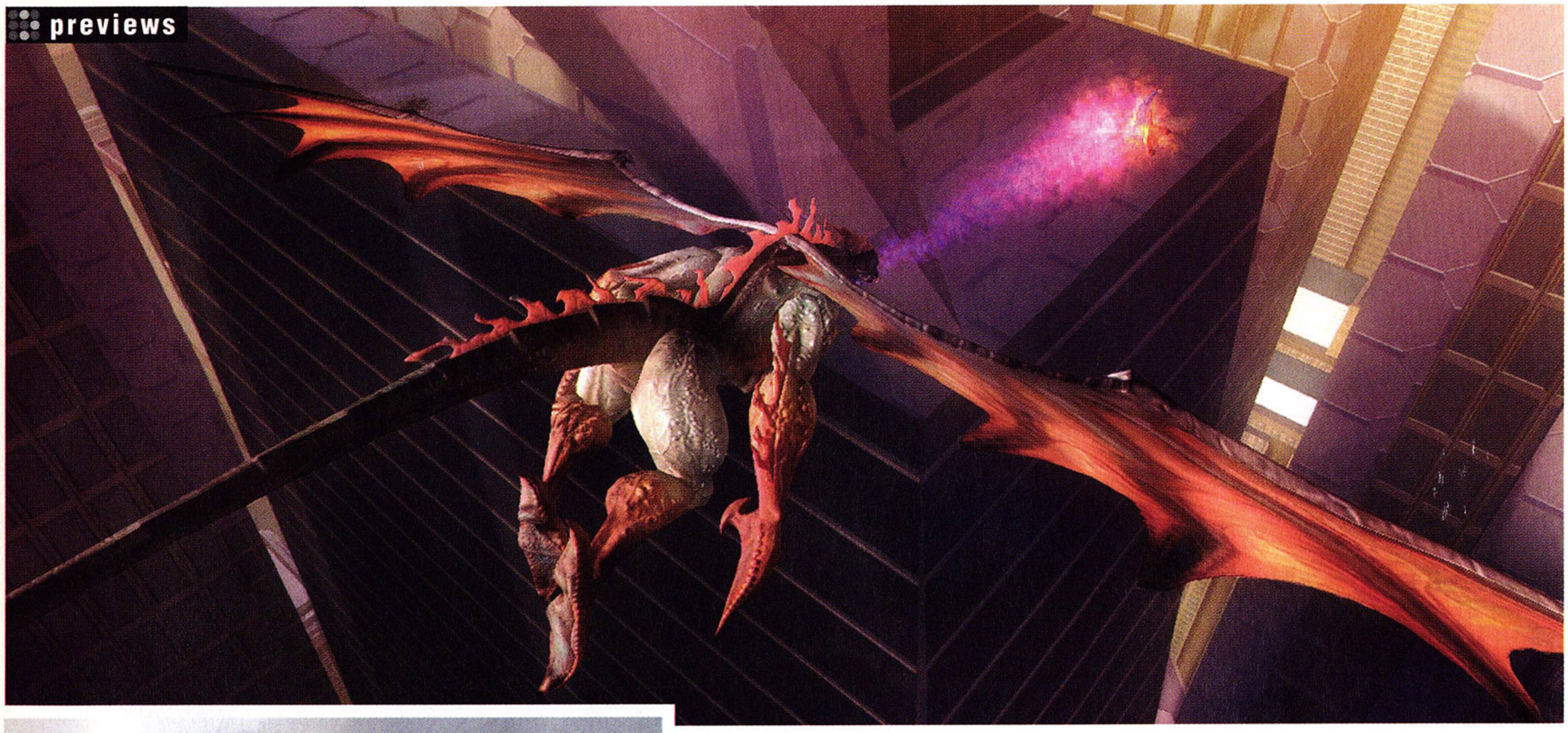
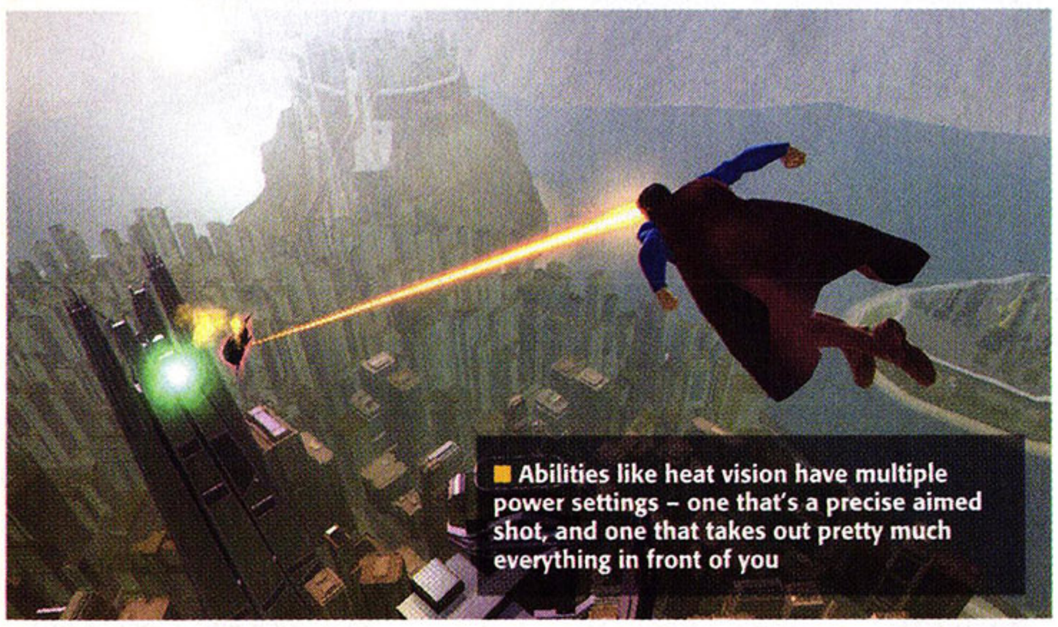
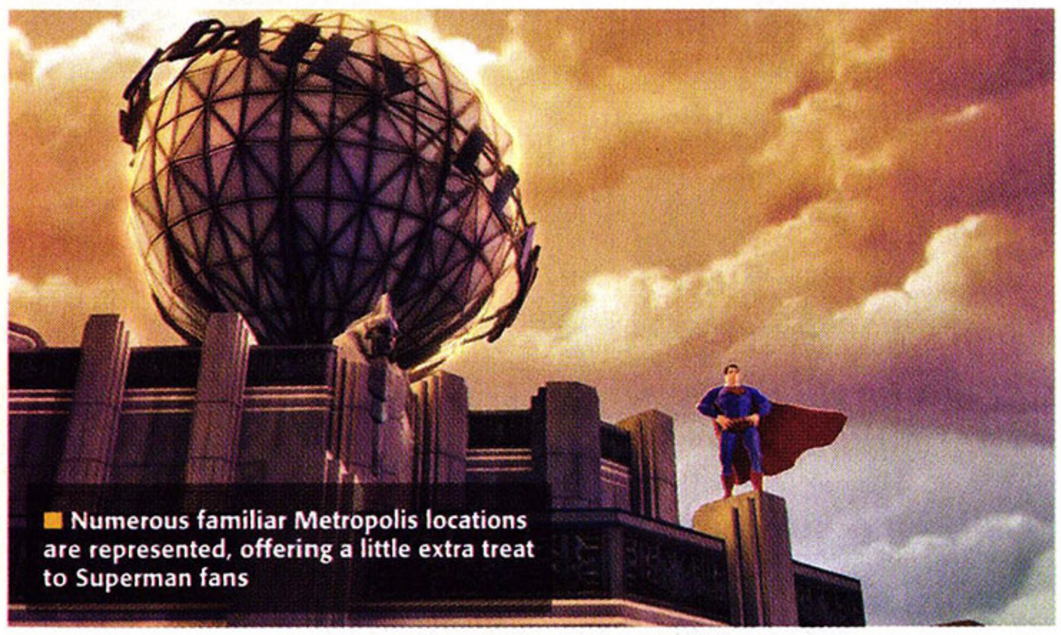
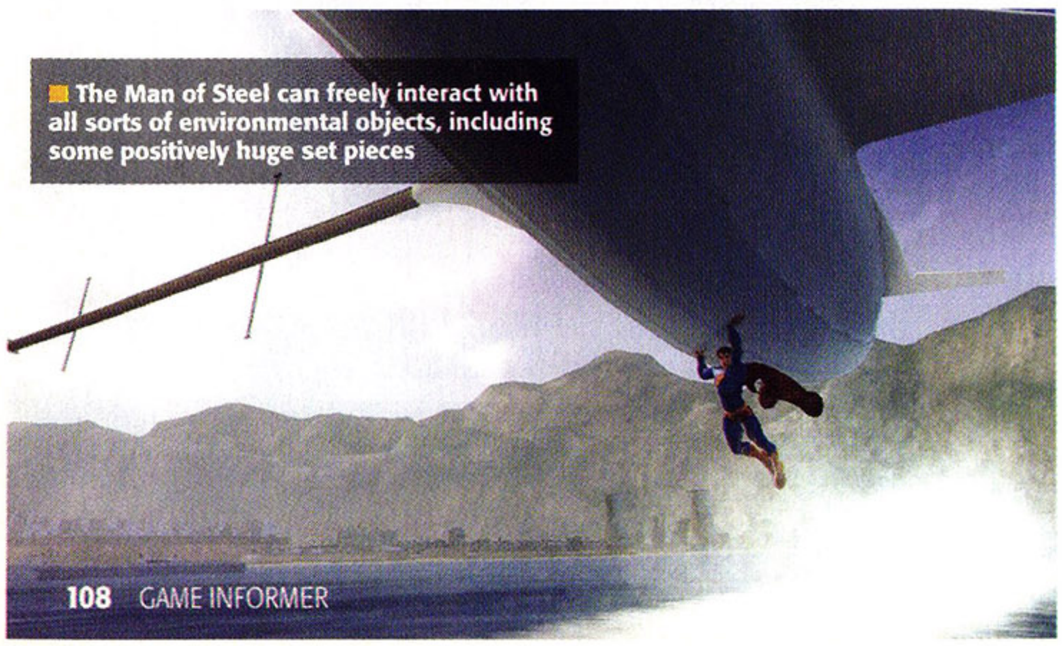




■ Abilities like heat vision have multiple power settings – one that's a precise aimed shot, and one that takes out pretty much everything in front of you



■ Numerous familiar Metropolis locations are represented, offering a little extra treat to Superman fans



■ The Man of Steel can freely interact with all sorts of environmental objects, including some positively huge set pieces

XBOX 360 | PLAYSTATION 2 | XBOX

Superman Returns

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION **> PUBLISHER** ELECTRONIC ARTS **> DEVELOPER** EA TIBURON **> RELEASE** NOVEMBER 20

A MIXED BAG

We finally got a chance this month to get some extended hands-on time with the Man of Steel and his latest adventure. What we found in our still-unfinished version was a game chock full of exciting super powers and epic conflicts, but also plagued by little annoyances that we hope can be ironed out in the last weeks before the game finally releases.

Like the movie, the early minutes of the game find Superman on his five-year hiatus in space. Unlike the movie, while on his return trip from ruined Krypton, he is kidnapped by Mongul and forced to engage in gladiatorial combat on War World, a familiar location to fans of the comic. These opening scenes serve as a tutorial of sorts, before players eventually return to Metropolis to begin the bulk of the game. There, players are immediately thrust into conflicts with the likes of Metallo and his robotic minions, a sequence of side missions involving Mr. Mxyzptlk, and later some fist fights with the ever-entertaining Bizarro.

Without a doubt, the constant action supplied by Superman's powers and abilities is immensely fun. The super speed mechanic lets you zoom across the city in a matter of moments, and the sense of speed is intense. Likewise, powers such as Superman's heat vision and freezing breath are a kick, and it's actually hard not to wreak havoc on the city with such fun capabilities at your disposal. The developers apparently thought of that, as they've kindly included a Bizarro mode that lets you actually play as Superman's strange opposite number, and you'll be encouraged to cause as much destruction as possible.

Meanwhile, the combat still felt a little loose in the version of the game we played, with some iffy targeting and frustrating boss battles. Also, moving around at high speed on or near the ground is a huge challenge, but one we hope we'll get used to after some more time with the game. We're also a little worried about the length and variety of action in the game, given that after a few hours of play our save file was already listing 40 percent completion, and we'd only fought a couple of major enemy types by that point. Admittedly, these are some major problems to see in a title so near release. However, they're also to be weighed against the excitement of finally having a game that lets players truly feel like Superman – a huge plus that may be more than enough to excite fans and allow them to ignore some missteps.

One way or the other, we'll have a more confident sense of how the game's final version plays after we dive into that next month. In the meantime, our hands-on impressions have emerged feeling that Superman Returns may turn out way better than many people worried it would be, and perhaps not everything some others had hoped. ■■■

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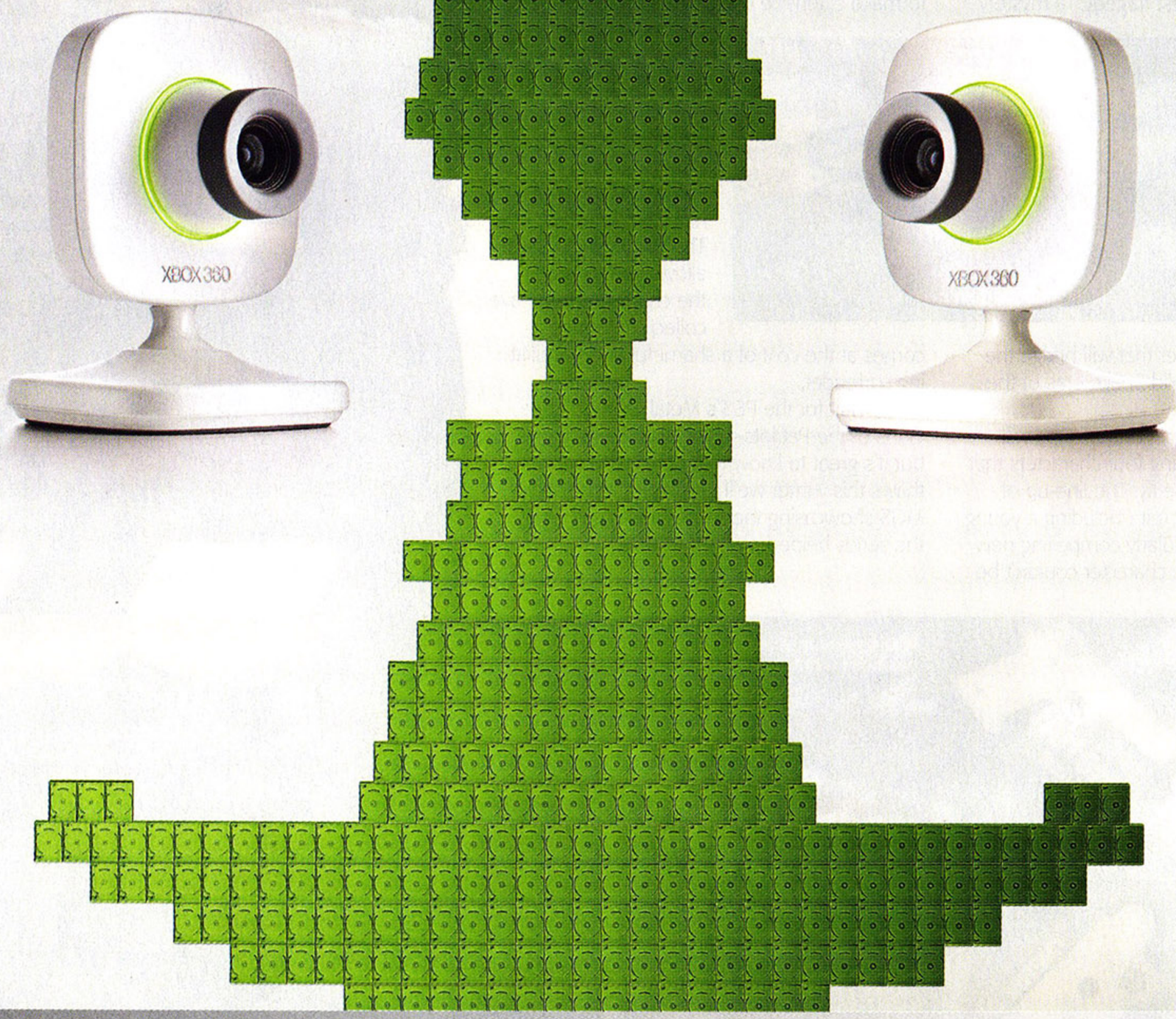

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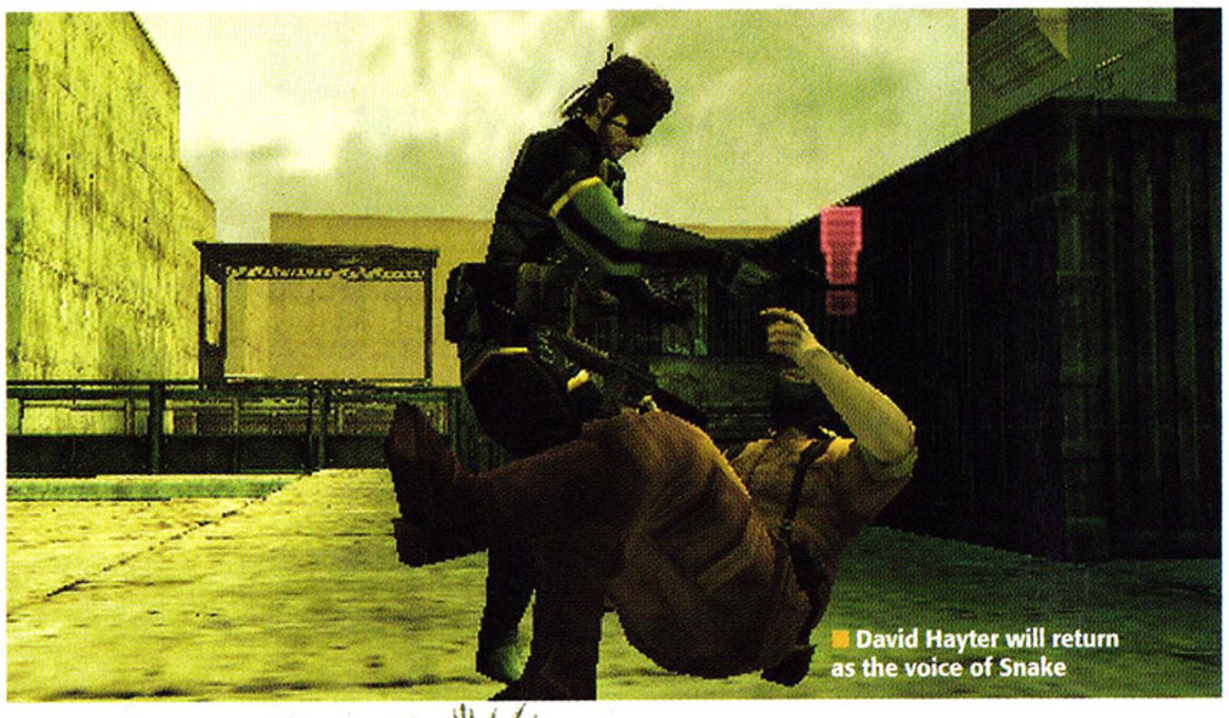
Jump in.

XBOX 360

Snake vs. Ninja... Ninja wins



David Hayter will return as the voice of Snake

PSP

Metal Gear Solid: Portable Ops

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA INFRASTRUCTURE) > **PUBLISHER** KONAMI
> **DEVELOPER** KOJIMA PRODUCTIONS > **RELEASE** DECEMBER 19

GO, SNAKE, GO!

The Metal Gear series may be best known for its gripping single-player story, but anyone who has spent time with the online mode in Metal Gear Solid 3: Subsistence can tell you how much fun the game's stealthy style is in a multiplayer setting. Soon that experience will no longer be confined to your living room; capitalizing on the wireless capabilities of the PSP, the upcoming Metal Gear Solid: Portable Ops will take its gameplay on the go while adding a brand new chapter to the life of Big Boss.

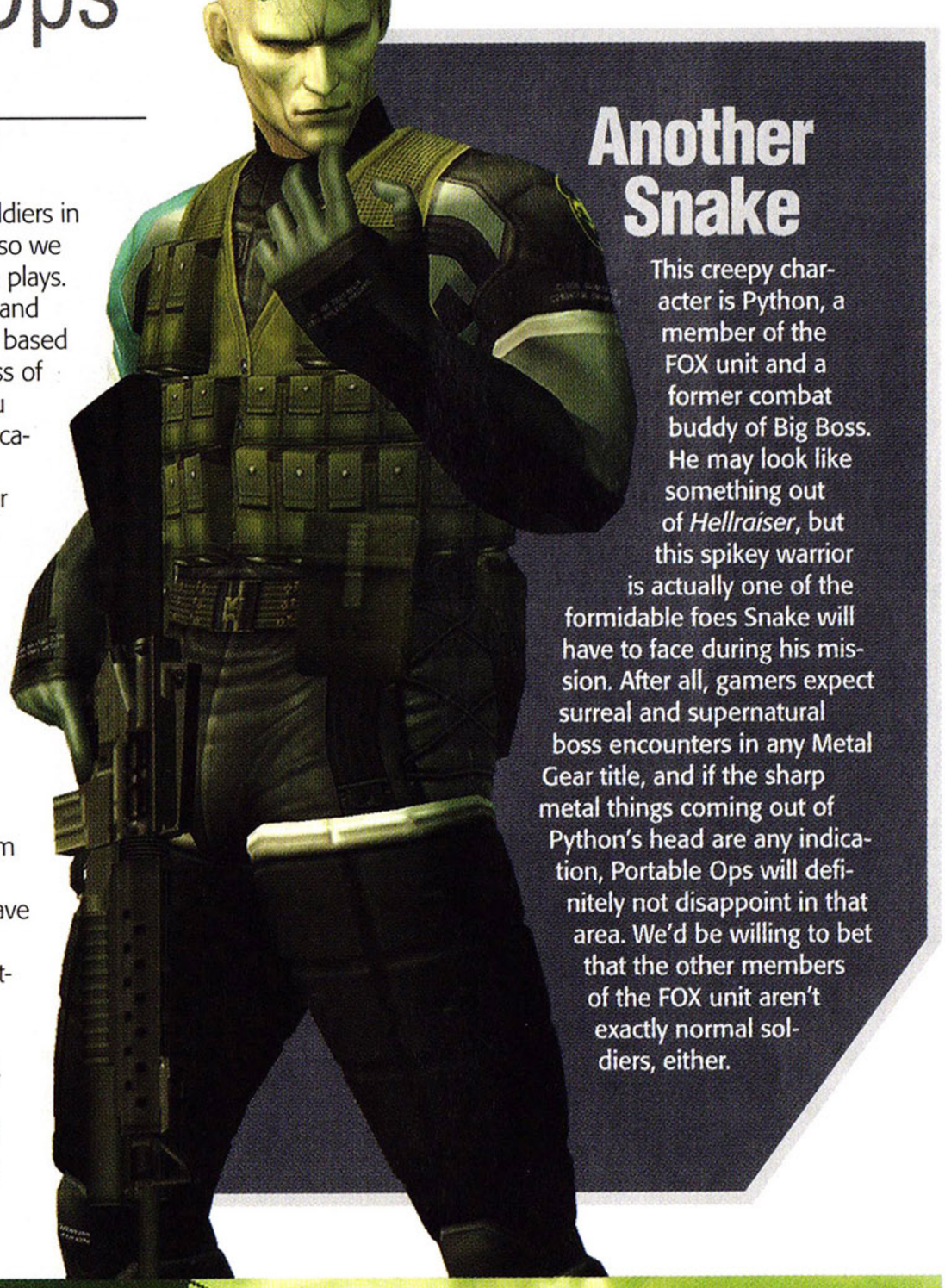
Set in 1970, the single-player campaign will detail what Konami is calling "Big Boss' greatest tragedy," a mystery that is the root of many of the series' later events. Many story elements are still being kept under wraps (as usual for Kojima Productions), but we do know that the game begins with Big Boss waking up in a prison only to discover that his FOX unit has instigated a revolt in South America. What happens after that will bridge the gap between the Big Boss and Solid Snake eras of the Metal Gear timeline.

CQC will remain an important part of combat

On the multiplayer side of things, Portable Ops will focus on team-based matches using four characters that players can switch between on the fly. The line-up of familiar faces that Big Boss will recruit (including a young Colonel Campbell) has one particularly compelling new addition: a ninja. Even though this character couldn't be the legendary Gray Fox, all sword-wielding soldiers in Metal Gear are traditionally totally awesome, so we can't wait to see what role this masked figure plays. Other characters from the series (like Ocelot and Eva) can be added to your four-person team based on your physical location. Using the IP address of the wireless hotspot you're connected to, you can download specific allies unique to that location, then lead them into battle.

If you manage to collect and assemble your favorite characters, you'll probably want to make extensive use of the Portable Ops' new White Flag mechanic. Normally, if all of your characters are killed, you lose the match and risk losing your hard-earned allies. The White Flag system allows you to keep the characters you have collected, though it comes at the cost of a shameful and humiliating surrender.

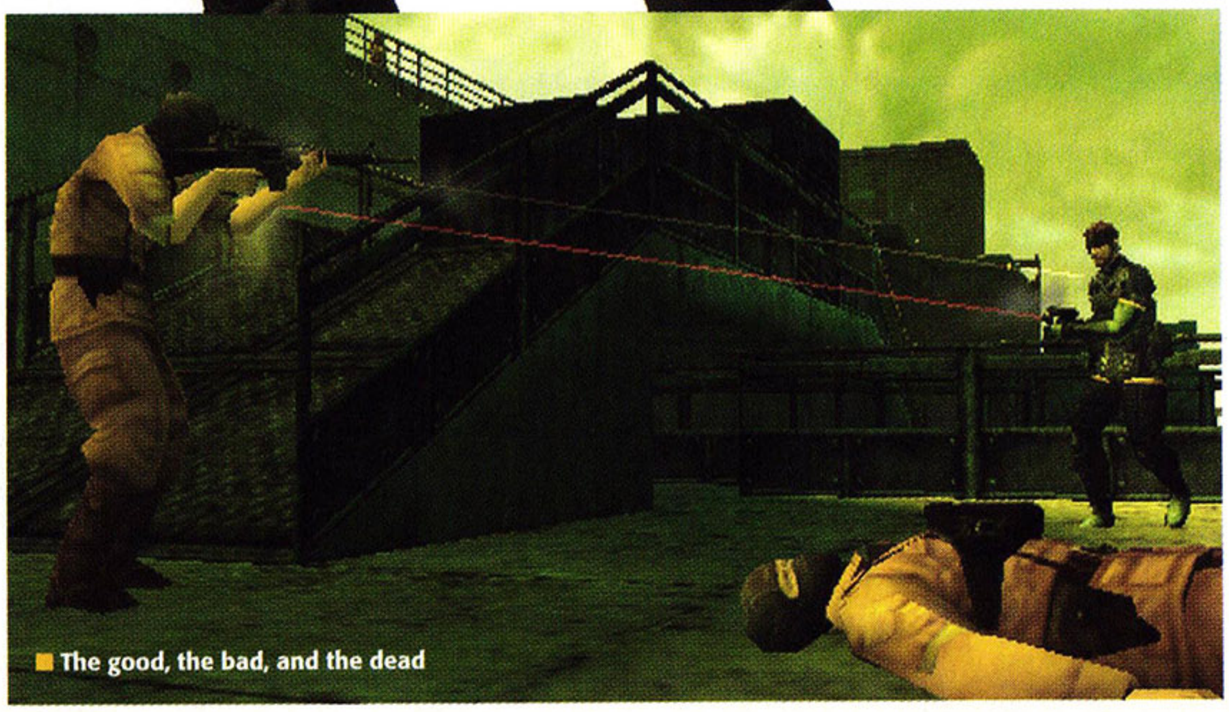
The wait for the PS3's Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots might still be a long one, but it's great to know that before the snow thaws this winter we'll be playing a handheld MGS showcasing the same stealth gameplay the series helped pioneer. ■■■



Another Snake

This creepy character is Python, a member of the FOX unit and a former combat buddy of Big Boss. He may look like something out of *Hellraiser*, but this spikey warrior is actually one of the formidable foes Snake will have to face during his mission. After all, gamers expect surreal and supernatural boss encounters in any Metal Gear title, and if the sharp metal things coming out of Python's head are any indication, Portable Ops will definitely not disappoint in that area. We'd be willing to bet that the other members of the FOX unit aren't exactly normal soldiers, either.

The weapon selection system has been totally revamped



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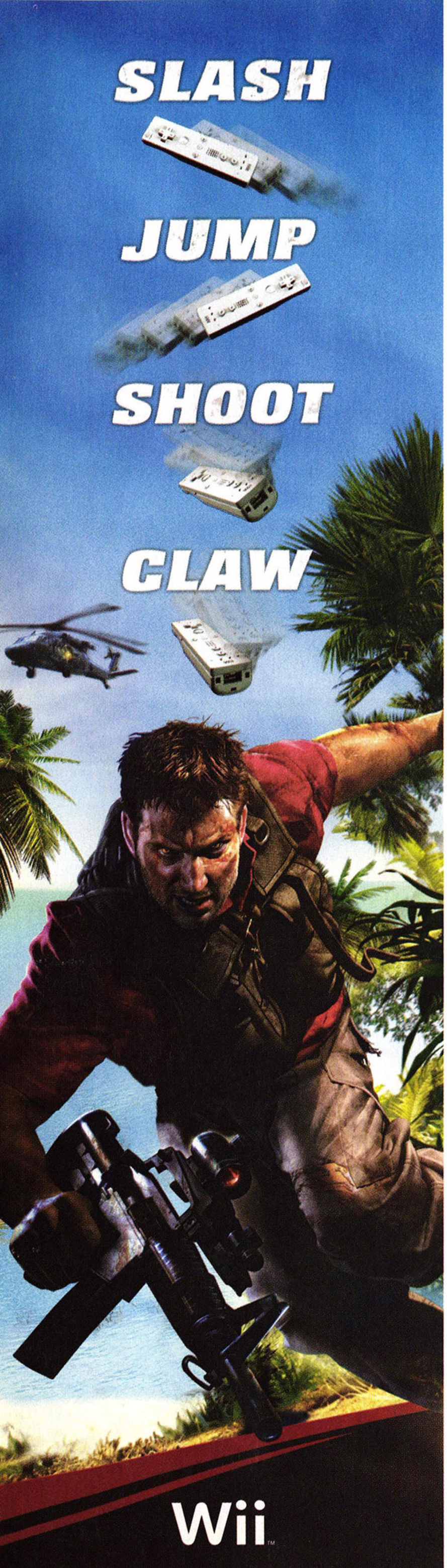

XBOX 360

Viva Piñata

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS > **DEVELOPER** RARE > **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 14

BUSTING OPEN THE PIÑATA

The Xbox 360 has some big games coming up this holiday season, and not all of them feature scowling space marines with big guns and bad attitudes. Although Microsoft balks at calling it a kids' game, Viva Piñata is on the way for a younger audience, and we got to spend some hands-on time with it to check it out. According to the publisher, the Saturday morning cartoon is pulling in roughly two million viewers per week, which is potentially a lot of kids howling for their parents to buy them the game.

■ Each animal has a goofy, snack-based name, like this Pretztail

Does Microsoft have an all-ages hit on its hands? Based on our time with it, it's tough to say. As lazy as it sounds to make this comparson, Viva Piñata truly does feel like an amalgam of Animal Crossing and Pokémon. By tending your small plot of land, you attract the attention of piñatas, who will become residents of your garden if you fulfill certain requirements. You can then make them produce offspring, hunt smaller piñatas, and other actions through easy minigames and direction. The interface is as simple as can be, and rewards come quickly for your actions. In the first few minutes of play, we had three different piñatas in our garden, and after a few hours, we had about a dozen.

While the gameplay that doles out constant kudos may haul in the kiddies, we have our doubts that Viva Piñata will cross over to older audiences. It's cute and looks nice, but in all honesty, can be quite boring. There are times when you simply feel like you can't do anything, and others when it feels like events will happen with or without you. Viva Piñata is undeniably a well-built game, but only time will tell if it fits the tastes of the gaming world. ■■■

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Wii™

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This is the scene that greets you upon entry into Outland

PC

World of Warcraft: The Burning Crusade

> **STYLE** MASSIVELY MULTIPLAYER ONLINE ROLE-PLAYING GAME > **PUBLISHER** BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT > **DEVELOPER** BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT > **RELEASE** JANUARY

DING 61!

We might not be the most hardcore of WoW players out there (High Warlords and Grand Marshals, we're looking at you), but we've done more than our share of endgame raiding and intense Battleground matches, and leveled alt after alt in the meantime. Needless to say, when our beta invite keys showed up in our inboxes we immediately hopped onto our mounts to hit up the Dark Portal. As soon as we stepped into Outland, we knew that our weeks of playtime in Azeroth were all worth it.

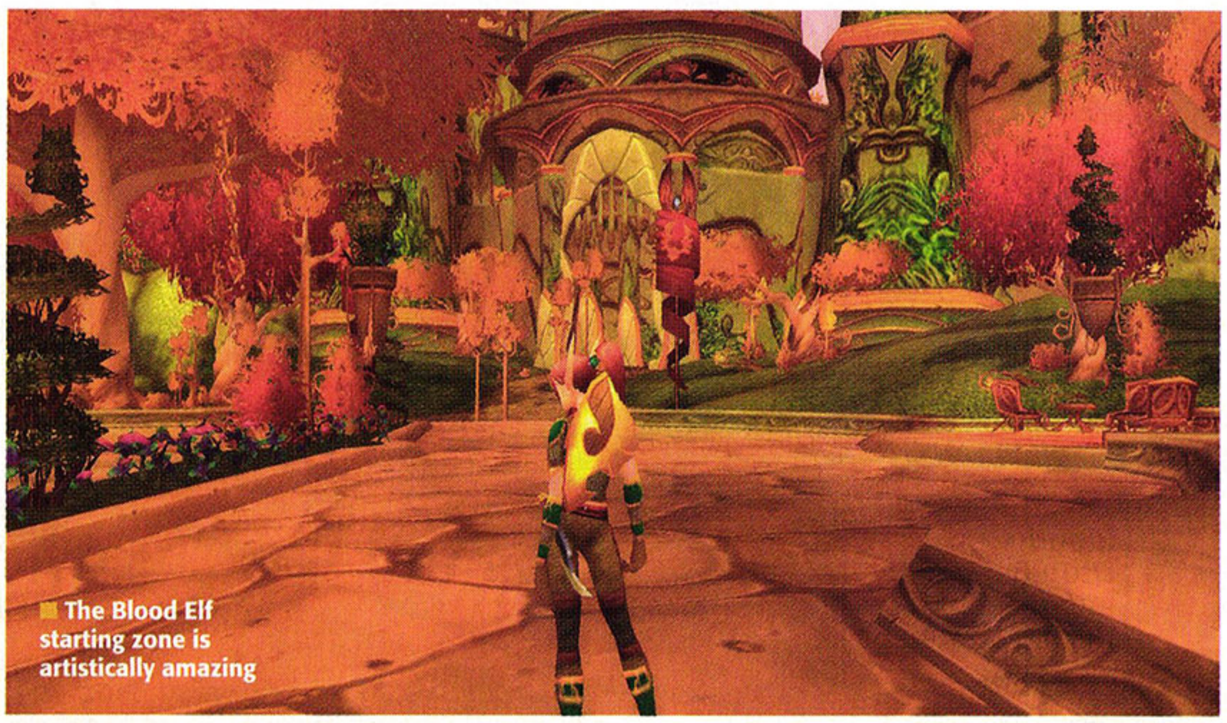
The Burning Crusade is in your face the moment you go through the portal. The scene that greets you upon entry into Outland is amazing: Enormous two-story-tall demons are constantly assaulting the combined Horde and Alliance forces at the Dark Portal in an effort to kick the do-gooders out. NPC mages for both factions keep portals to the capital cities open to maintain a constant stream of reinforcements to the front. No matter how epic your loots or how elite your skills are, these foes are beyond you. Luckily, flight masters await to send you to your faction's lesser encampments farther into Outland.

As cool as this opening sequence is, it's really only the tip of the Burning Crusade iceberg. The zones of Outland have clearly benefitted from Blizzard's experience in developing the base game. Everything feels much more alive, with cavalry riding out from Horde and Alliances bases to take the fight to the enemy and more "wild card" enemies wandering about just waiting for an unwary adventurer to pounce on. PvP objectives out in the world look very promising for rekindling the war between factions, and exploring the new dungeons simply couldn't get us more excited.

The design philosophy changes in Burning Crusade also hold great potential. Health pools are being buffed across the board, which is welcome news for people who are sick of the incredibly short fights that dominate current high-end PvP. Forty-man raid dungeons are a thing of the past, opening the door for smaller guilds to experience all of the content that Burning Crusade has to offer. The revamped PvP reward system will allow more people to upgrade their gear through that route, rather than the current game's horrendously time-consuming honor system.

Tooling around Outland with our decked-out level 60 mains, as well as creating new Dranei and Blood Elf characters, were some of the best experiences we've had in World of Warcraft to date, and that's no small accomplishment. We cannot imagine why any WoW player wouldn't purchase this expansion when it goes live – which Blizzard has recently confirmed will be in January. Though with the developer's track record, we'll believe it when we have the final box in our hands. ■■■

New flight paths should keep you from AFK'ing en route for a good week or so



The Blood Elf starting zone is artistically amazing

...continued from page 3

As the story continues to unfold down here on Earth about what may or may not be happening on the ship orbiting the planet, one thing's for sure, if those people are to [illegible] it will be thanks to their efforts

[illegible] st place Tommy even [illegible] the realization from which [illegible] people were taken. He was leading [illegible] life [illegible] mechanic [illegible] girlfriend, Jen, [illegible] It's a good thing for all of them up there that Jen [illegible] reluctant to go.

Tommy has never been very int[illegible] his ancestry, but if you ask his co[illegible] they'll tell you that he holds those clo[illegible] him very dear. He'll go to any length[illegible] protect the people he cares for.

The only thing we know about the h[illegible] ship that's circling us and stealing us [illegible] random is that no one come[illegible] there. We can only assume tha[illegible] being enslaved, killed or worse. [illegible] is an option, and if you ask what [illegible] worse than being killed, just think abou[illegible] for a second or two.

To combat forces like this someone needs to be relentless, tough, fearless and quick. Tommy embodies all of these characteristics and more. He has always been athletic. Blessed with a physique that holds muscle and a mind that keeps him alert, the Cherokee mechanic is ready for anything. Rest assured, his skills are facing the ultimate test as we speak.

He's always been in search of the ultimate adventure. Those who worked at the roadhouse with Jen remember him coming in before quitting time. "He would sit at the end of the counter and look through books about big cities, small campgrounds, beaches and foreign countries. The whole time, you could see the sparkle in his eyes like he was imagining himself in those pictures," says a waitress named Dawn.

His grandfather once echoed those [illegible] can not control w[illegible] wants. I chos[illegible] my life. He must ch[illegible]s," he said.

Shortly before the abduction, Tommy began telling those close to him that his grandfather, now deceased, had been appearing to him. If this is true, it's likely that his grandfather is up there with him now acting as a spiritual guide and helping him to make all the right decisions.

It's safe to say that this is the adventure he was looking for, he's got more than he can handle right now. Telescope images of the space ship reveal a sinister exterior. If the outside looks that bad, it's safe to say there's no carnival going on inside. Except maybe for Tommy. This could be just what he's been dreaming of. It might just be what inspires Jen to tell him she's ready to see the rest of the world with him. If they can just make it home first.

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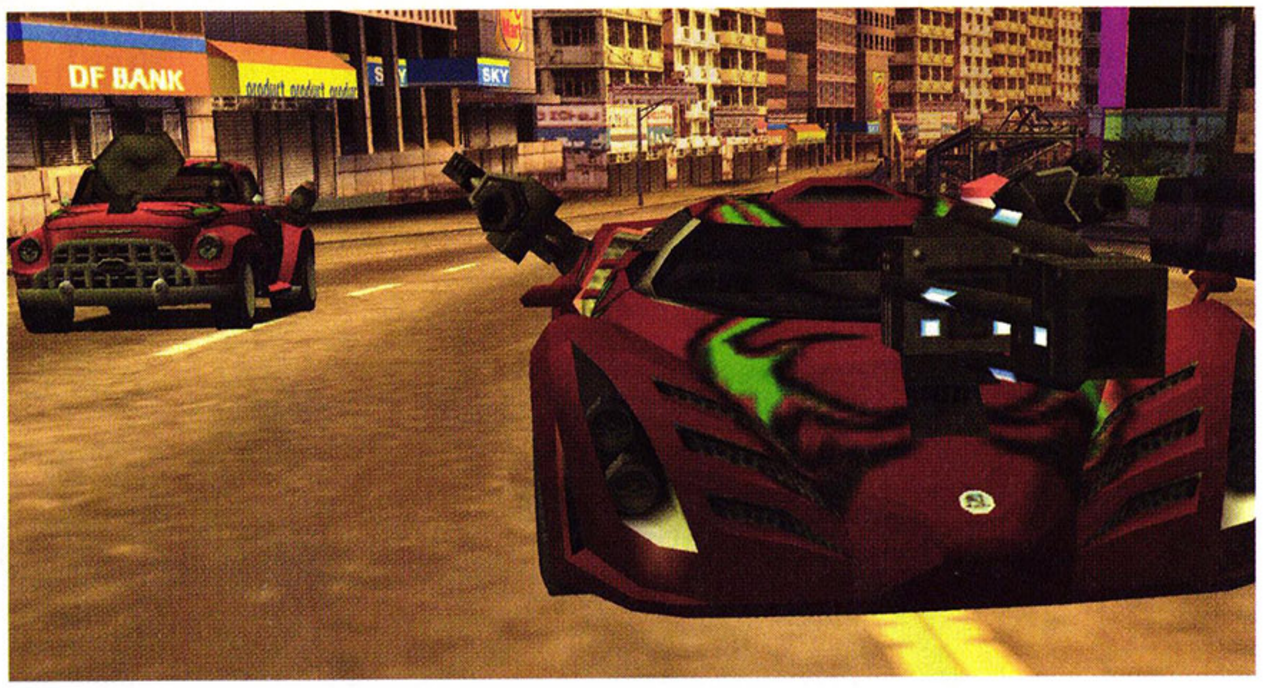
PSP

Full Auto 2: Battlelines

> STYLE 1-PLAYER RACING (UP TO 4-PLAYER VIA AD HOC) **> PUBLISHER** SEGA **> DEVELOPER** DEEP FRIED ENTERTAINMENT **> RELEASE** SPRING



DESTRUCTION DERBY

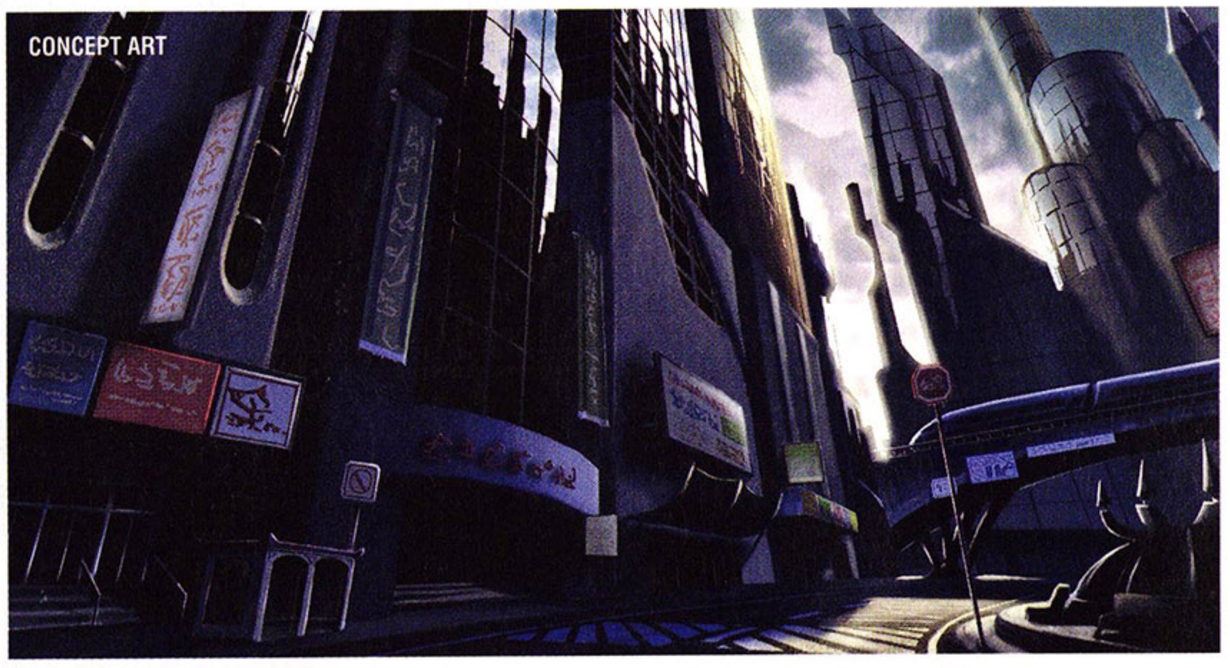
It's clear that Sega has big plans for the Full Auto franchise. Not only is Full Auto 2: Battlelines being included in the PlayStation 3 launch lineup, but there's another version of the game on the way for the PSP. While the PSP game shares its name and some features with the PS3 version, it's actually a brand-new title built from the ground up for Sony's portable machine. The game isn't due until spring, but we've gotten our hands on it now, because we're cool like that.

Developed by Deep Fried Entertainment, a new developer made up of veterans of several prestigious studios, Full Auto 2 takes concepts from the first game and the PS3 sequel and brings them to the PSP in a remarkably faithful fashion. Although the version we played was early, everything that fans of the series expect was there, including cars loaded with weapons, environmental destruction, and the unique time-rewinding feature called Unwreck. Both the PSP and PS3 versions of Full Auto 2 now have a meter that governs both Unwreck and boost, which both simplifies the interface and adds a new layer of strategy to the mix. Both versions also feature what Sega calls "destruction matters moments." In the first game, blowing up the environment looked cool, but that's about it. In Battlelines, the moments cause huge chain reactions of devastation that have an actual effect on the race. For example, in one level we played, shooting a certain point caused a giant avalanche of snowballs to roll across the track, crushing anything in their path. According to Sega, these instances have three uses: killing your enemies, blocking their paths, and discovering shortcuts.

While the two versions of Battlelines have some similarities, they also both have some exclusive content. The PSP version sports 15 cars (only four of which are returning from the previous game), 20 weapons, and 18 new tracks. There is also a lock-on feature which compensates for the lack of a second analog stick, and works pretty well in practice. The reticle turns yellow when there is a viable target to lock onto, which we used to trigger as many destructive chain reactions as possible. Four-player ad hoc multiplayer is also being included, although we didn't get a chance to see it in action.

Overall, the PSP version of Full Auto 2 is shaping up to be a fun little racer. It handles well and offers a lot of chaotic action. Besides, who doesn't want more games about cars with rocket launchers bolted to their hoods? ■■■

■ "I hate fruit so much!"



CONCEPT ART

■ The PSP version of the Battlelines features new cars, weapons, and tracks

PSP

Afterburner: Black Falcon

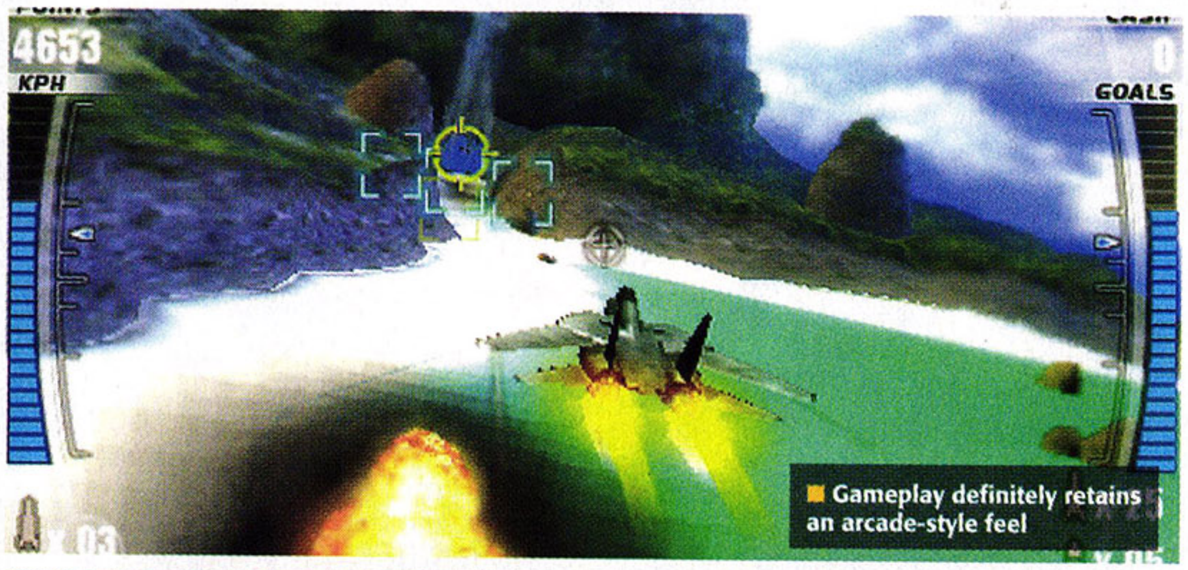
> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA AD HOC) **> PUBLISHER** SEGA
> DEVELOPER PLANET MOON STUDIOS **> RELEASE** SPRING

A CLASSIC RETURNS

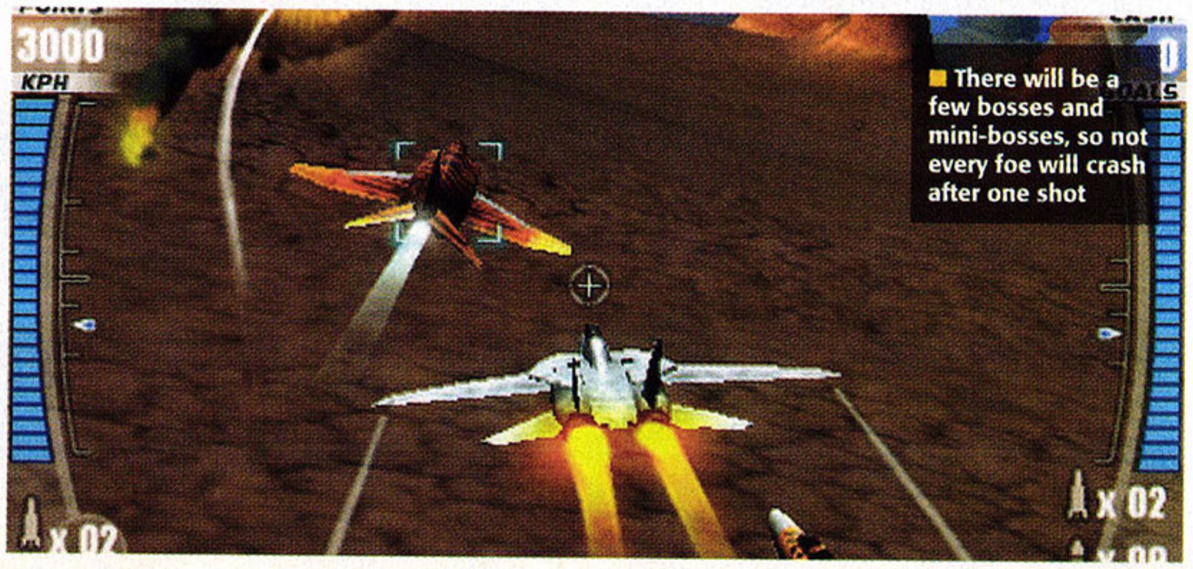
It may have been nearly 20 years since the last Afterburner game, but fans still remember it. That's why Sega has decided to revive the franchise. Not only is Afterburner: Climax on the way to arcades in November, but the franchise is also coming to PSP this spring with Afterburner: Black Falcon.

Developed by Planet Moon Studios, Black Falcon will feature all the arcade-style action that fans remember, along with several new features. For the first time, an Afterburner game will feature a storyline, albeit an intentionally over-the-top and ridiculous one about tracking down 13 prototype fighter jets stolen by some nefarious mercenaries. There are three playable characters to choose from and 19 licensed airplanes to pilot. In one of the most ludicrous (in a good way) feature announcements we've heard in a long time, you can customize your planes with custom paint jobs and cosmetic add-ons, as well as more functional weapons and armor upgrades.

With a game like this, it all comes down to gameplay. We got our hands on an early version of the game and are happy to report that Afterburner delivers the fast-paced arcade-style gameplay that you'd expect. Enemies are constant, weapons fire freely, and controls are easy to manage. Combined with two-player co-op and eight-player head-to-head multiplayer, Afterburner: Black Falcon is shaping up to be one to watch for fans of arcade-style gameplay. Please insert your own *Top Gun* reference here. ■■■



■ Gameplay definitely retains an arcade-style feel



■ There will be a few bosses and mini-bosses, so not every foe will crash after one shot

NINTENDO DS

Final Fantasy XII: Revenant Wings

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ROLE-PLAYING GAME **> PUBLISHER** SQUARE ENIX **> DEVELOPER** SQUARE ENIX
> RELEASE TBA

BAIL OUT!

Remember Final Fantasy: Mystic Quest? It was a Super Nintendo title that attempted to draw inexperienced gamers into the Final Fantasy series through simplification. Even though the game was seen as a disappointment to franchise fans, its accessible gameplay lowered the entry barrier for those who just wanted to enjoy a classic fantasy tale. With the upcoming Revenant Wings, a DS spin-off of Final Fantasy XII, Square Enix is once again hoping to tap into a more casual crowd.

Despite the name, players will not need to have played Final Fantasy XII to enjoy Revenant Wings. That's because the story isn't exactly a sequel – it's a standalone adventure that chronicles a period of time where both Vaan and Penelo are air pirates. The pair will have access to an airship from the outset, so the plot will probably unfold as players fly from location to location fighting battles and saving the world. How exactly the combat will proceed is a mystery at this point, but we do know that it will utilize the stylus in some capacity. Maybe you can draw cute little sweat beads over Vaan's adorably misproportioned head!

At this early stage, most of the specific gameplay details are still in development, so it's possible Revenant Wings could shape up to be yet another worthy entry in this great series. However, Final Fantasy fans have traditionally been drawn to depth and complexity, so we can only hope that the game doesn't sacrifice too much in the name of accessibility. After all, some of us are still feeling the sting from Crystal Chronicles. ■■■

PHOTOPHILE

Mini Previews With Big Pictures

XBOX 360 | PC

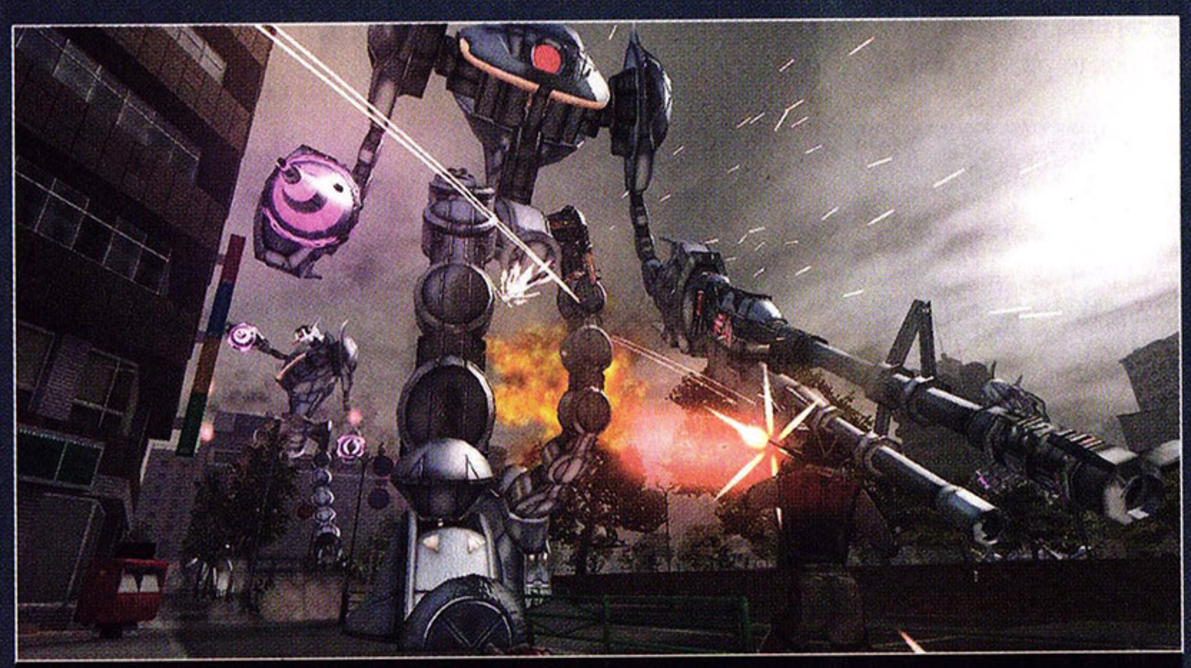
Shadowrun

Sorry, Shadowrun haters. The inaugural Live Anywhere game, which will allow 360 and PC games to play with or against one another, is nearing completion, and it has still failed to magically transform into a traditional RPG. Nope, it has remained a Counter-Strike style FPS that pits tech-using humans against magic-wielding creatures, and Microsoft and FASA Studios are planning on releasing it sometime next year. The game was shown off in playable form at X06, demonstrating the smooth, lag-free way it operated cross-platform. Despite the fact that there is a vocal contingent of gamers who refuse to have any interest in this project because of the rejection of its pen-and-paper RPG roots, Shadowrun is looking like a fun game that will probably sell well thanks to its Live Anywhere "launch" title status. We can recommend the number of a good grief counselor.

PLAYSTATION 3

Blazing Angels: Squadrons of WWII

Despite its misleading name, Blazing Angels is not about fire-shooting Seraphim. That was Legendary Wings. This game is about airplanes...which you probably know if you've played the Xbox, Xbox 360, or PC versions of the game. This release of Ubisoft's aerial action title for the PS3 isn't an exact port of those iterations, though. In addition to new missions and planes, the controls will utilize the console's motion-sensing capabilities, allowing you to pilot your craft by gently tilting the controller. Most of the other gameplay elements will remain the same, so if you missed it the first time, you can take to the skies with this title shortly after you pick up your PS3.



XBOX 360

Earth Defense Force 3

Just because the Earth Defense Force games fall under the umbrella of D3Publisher's budget Simple Series doesn't mean that this next-gen installment won't provide some out-of-this-world thrills. Giant ants, robots, UFOs, and other extra-terrestrial threats have landed on earth, and it is your responsibility to decimate them by any means necessary. Level entire blocks with your bazooka as you fire into a swarm of insects, or thin their ranks with machine gun fire. The action may not be deep or complex, but if we can't find joy in blasting apart space invaders, then we have lost already. Earth Defense Force titles traditionally only hit Japan, but we've heard rumors about a U.S. release, so you might to make sure your anti-alien weaponry (a.k.a. your 360) is in working order.

PSP

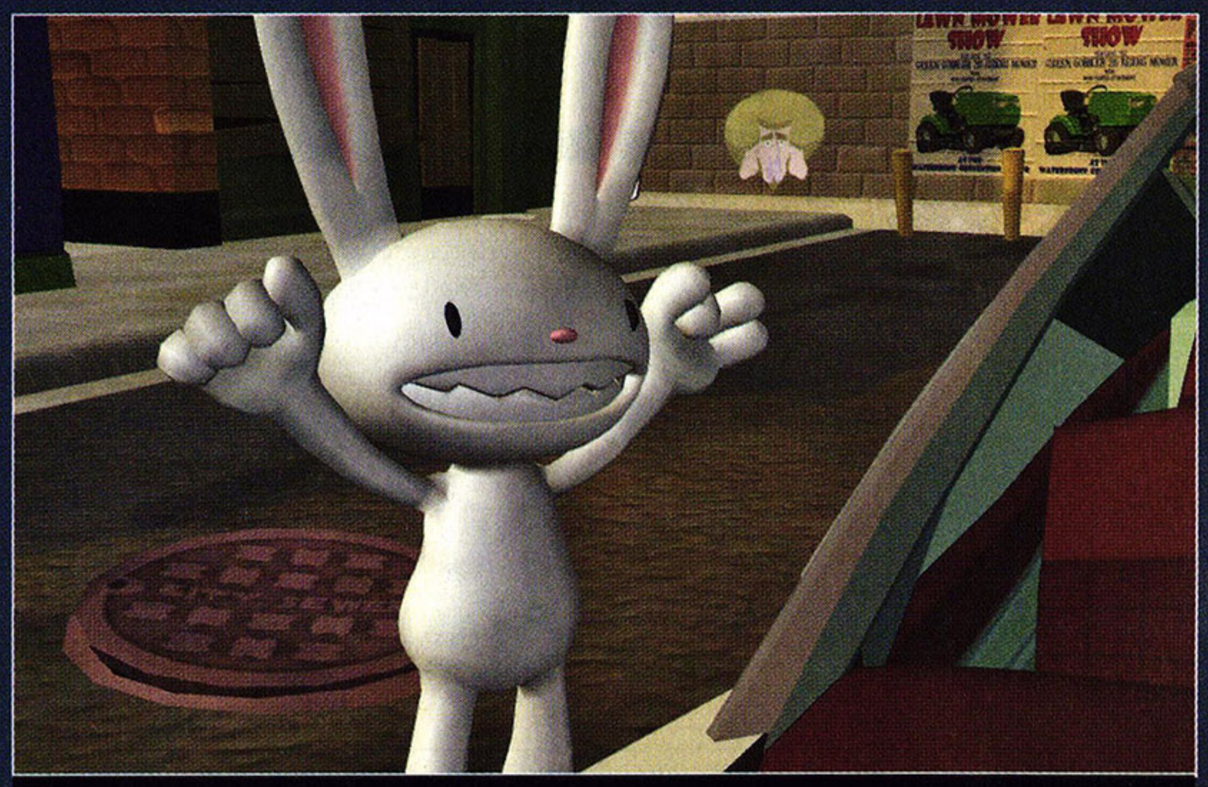
Valhalla Knights

The PSP has been home to a handful of action/RPGs, and the system is slated to get another courtesty of publisher Xseed (who brought us the delightfully off-beat Shadow Hearts: From the New World for PS2). Valhalla Knights features a real-time battle system where players control one of six party members, with the ability to switch among them at any time. There will be a single-player campaign in which the hero is attempting to regain lost memories, but you can also check out a separate multiplayer mode that has two-player co-op and versus missions. Valhalla Knights already had its Japanese release last summer, but you should be able to find it on our shores early next year.

XBOX 360 | PC

Crossfire

Going behind enemy lines to save the world through covert (and not so covert) operations may be pulled from the big hat of generic action shooter plots, but publisher Eidos looks to be jazzing up the gameplay in this Xbox 360 and PC title. Switching back and forth between the two main characters – or teaming up with a buddy for cooperative play – should provide a little more meat to the Crossfire experience, as the two soldiers will reportedly have to do everything from provide each other with fire support to create diversions for each others' benefit. We'll find out just how well this buddy shooter stacks up when it releases next year.



PC

Sam & Max Episode 1: Culture Shock

Serving as a colossal morale boost to dejected adventure gamers everywhere, Sam & Max have finally made their triumphant return. The beloved detective duo's first new case, developed by Telltale Games, is already available on the company's website (www.telltalegames.com), and it details an investigation into a group of former child stars known as the Soda Poppers. Culture Shock is only the first installment of the pair's new adventures, and future episodes will be available exclusively on GameTap at first, but from Telltale Games site shortly thereafter. Then, once all of the episodes are done, you'll have a chance to buy the entire series at once. It's been so long, we had almost forgotten the joys a violent, hyperactive rabbit can provide. Never again!

NINTENDO DS | PSP

Star Wars: Lethal Alliance

When presented with the phrase "between episodes III and IV," Star Wars fans will get a starry look in their eyes as they dream of Vader going lightsaber-crazy across the galaxy. While Ubisoft's Lethal Alliance is set in that enigmatic time frame, players won't be controlling the Dark Lord of the Sith; they get some Twi'lek girl and her droid instead. Darth Vader will make an appearance (as will Boba Fett), but this action/adventure title will focus mainly on the new protagonist and her efforts to expose the Empire's secrets. Tell your Bothan spies to keep an eye out for this handheld exclusive in December.

REVIEWS

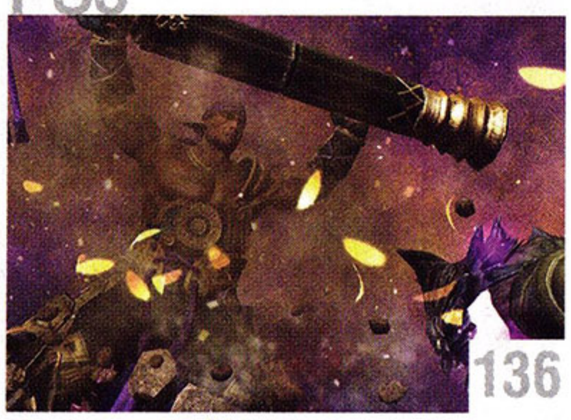
We Play The Crap So You Don't Have To

MULTI

122

Marvel: Ultimate Alliance

PS3



136

Genji: Days of the Blade

XBOX 360

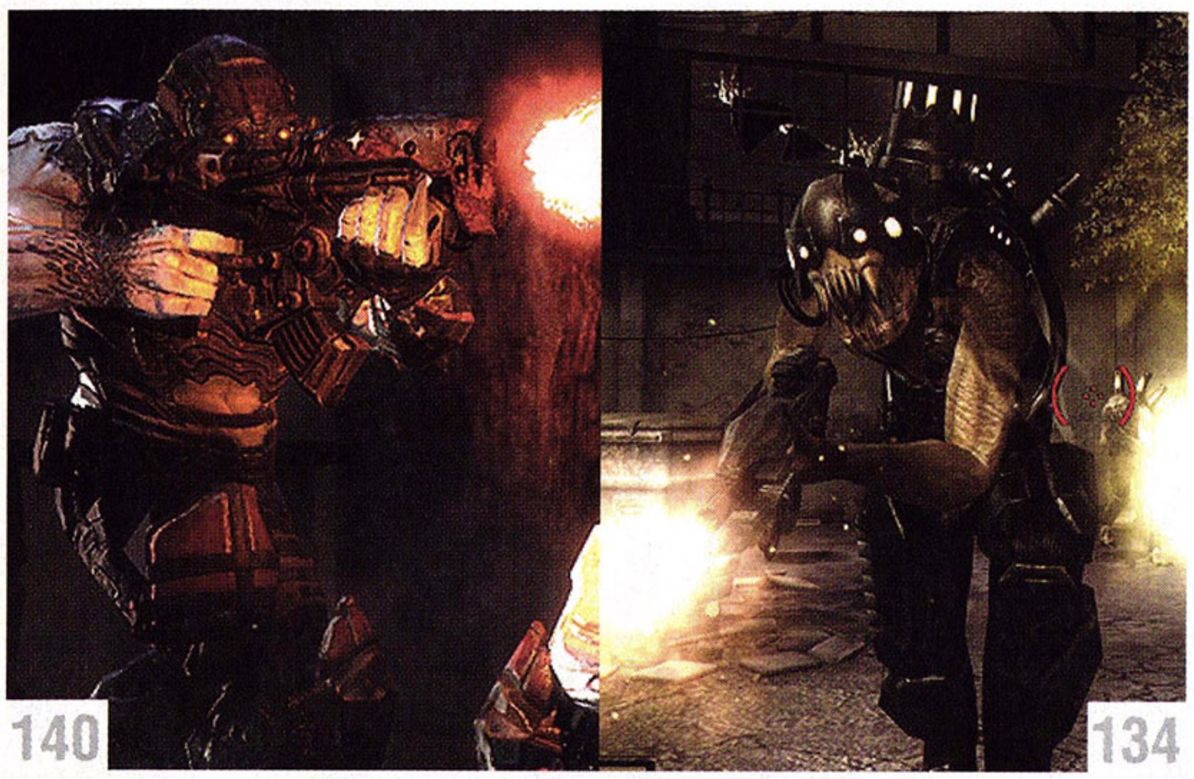
142

Call of Duty 3

PC

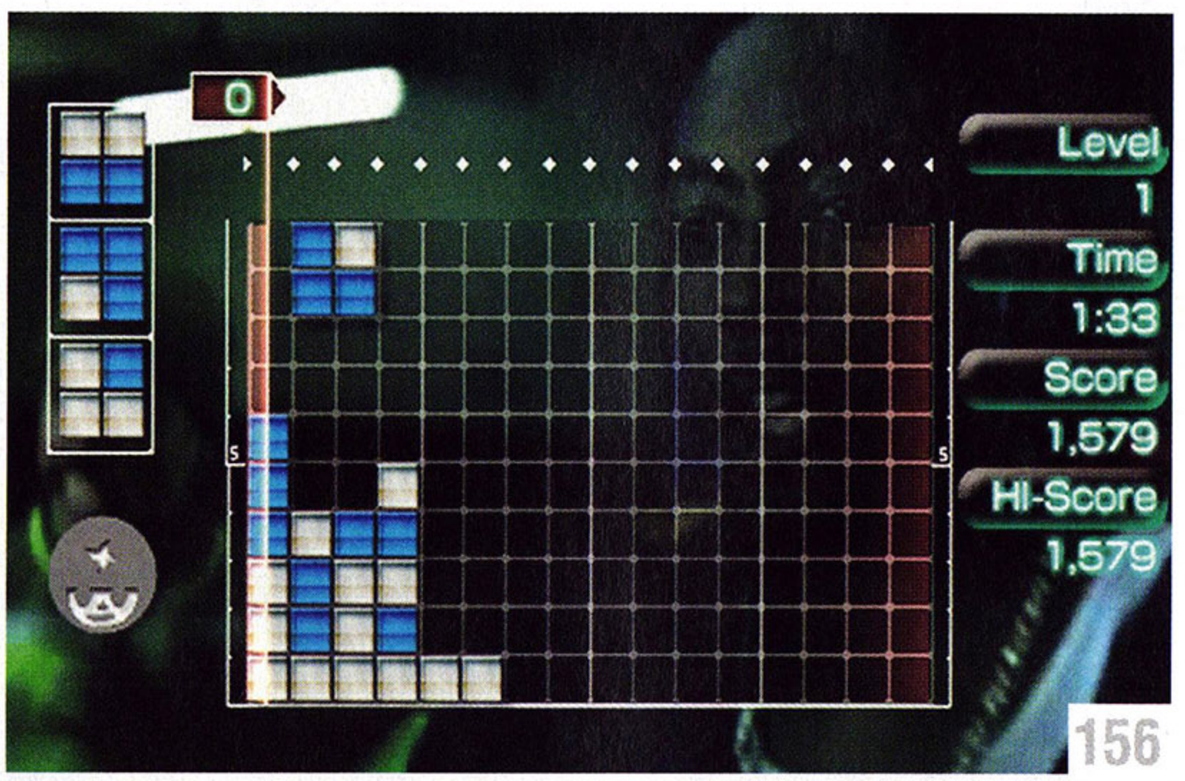
149

Sid Meier's Railroads!



140

134



156

GAME INFORMER GAME OF THE MONTH

Gears Of War and Resistance: Fall Of Man (tie)

We know you think it's a cop out, but it's hard to put one game ahead of the other when you are talking about two outstanding new properties like Gears of War and Resistance: Fall of Man. Not only are both the defining games of their respective systems, they both offer up amazing single- and multiplayer experiences. If you own either system, or both, you simply must play these games. Read the reviews on pages 134 and 140.

GAME INFORMER HANDHELD GAME OF THE MONTH

Lumines II

Puzzle gamers have been playing with colored blocks for years, but Tetsuya Mizuguchi's Q Entertainment continues to put a unique spin on this classic concept with Lumines II. This sequel to the PSP's smash hit has more skins, crazier music, and expanded gameplay modes that make it impossible to resist. No matter what your skill level, Lumines II can give you something to enjoy. Groove on over to page 156 for the full review.

Our crack (or crackhead, we can never decide which) review team rates games in a number of categories to help you sort out the great from the stuff you'll hate. Most games are reviewed by two staff members, and you will find both their opinions on each review. To make things a little easier we have put together some definitions of what the numbers mean, what we look for in a game, and also a cheat sheet so the newbies can understand our advanced video game jargon. It is important to note that the Game of the Month is determined only by the main review score, not an average of the two opinions.

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.
9	Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.
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.
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.
6	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.
5	Passable. 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.
4	Bad. While some things may work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions to varying degrees or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
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.
2	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
1	Shots Fired! This game has declared war on you and everything you hold dear. Initiate retaliation.

> Concept: What new ideas the game brings to the table and how well old ideas are presented.

> Graphics: How good a game looks, taking into account any flaws such as bad collision or pop-up.

> Sound: Does the game's music and sound effects get you involved or do they make you resolve to always play with the volume down?

> Playability: Basically, the controller to human interface. The less you think about the hunk of plastic in your hands, the better the playability.

> Entertainment: Flat out, just how fun the game is to play. The most important factor in rating a game.

> Replay Value

- **High** – You'll still be popping this game in five years from now.
- **Moderately High** – Good for a long while, but the thrills won't last forever.
- **Moderate** – Good for a few months or a few times through.
- **Moderately Low** – After finishing it, there's not much reason to give it a second go.
- **Low** – You'll quit playing before you complete the game.

DS

152

Final Fantasy III

PSP

155

Grand Theft Auto: Vice City Stories

148

GAME INFORMER PC GAME OF THE MONTH

Dark Messiah Of Might & Magic

One of PC gaming's oldest franchises is back courtesy of Ubisoft, and there is little to complain about for even the hardest-core Might & Magic fans here. Sure, this is an action/adventure title rather than the deep RPGs that the series was built on, but Dark Messiah's unique take on first-person combat is one of the better innovations we've seen in recent years. No PC gamer should be without this excellent release.

REVIEWS INDEX

Ace Combat X: Skies Of Deception 157
Age Of Empires III: The Warchiefs 149
Bully 132
Call Of Duty 3 142
Capcom Classic Collections Volume 2 130
Dark Messiah Of Might & Magic 148
dot hack//G.U. Vol. 1//Rebirth 133
Dynasty Warriors Vol. 2 156
EA Replay 156
Elite Beat Agents 152
F.E.A.R. 144
F.E.A.R.: Extraction Point 150
FIFA Soccer 07 146
Final Fantasy III 152
Gears Of War 140
Genji: Days Of the Blade 136
Gitaroo Man Lives! 155
Grand Theft Auto: Vice City Stories 155
Guitar Hero II 133
Gun Showdown 154
Gunpey 157
Justice League Heroes 130
Lumines II 156
Mage Knight Apocalypse 149
Mage Knight: Destiny's Soldier 157
Marvel: Ultimate Alliance 122
Medal Of Honor Heroes 157
Mobile Suit Gundam: Crossfire 137
Mortal Kombat: Armageddon 128
NBA 07 138
NBA Live 07 146
Need For Speed Carbon 126
Neverwinter Nights 2 151
ParaWorld 150
Pokémon Ranger 156
Resistance: Fall Of Man 134
Ridge Racer 7 137
Shin Megami Tensei: Devil Summoner 133
Sid Meier's Railroads! 149
Splinter Cell: Double Agent 145
Star Wars Empire At War: Forces Of Corruption 150
The Sims 2: Pets (Multi) 130
The Sims 2: Pets (PC) 150
Thrillville 130
Tokobot Plus: Mysteries Of The Karakuri 133
Tony Hawk's Project 8 147
Warhammer 40,000: Dawn Of War – Dark Crusade 149
WWE Smackdown vs. Raw 2007 124
Yoshi's Island 2 154

pg.145

theedge

When All Games Aren't Created Equal

This is where GI breaks down multi-platform games. So whenever you see this logo, there is important multi-system information regarding that product.

EARLY CHILDHOOD eC CONTENT RATED BY ESRB	Content suitable for persons ages 3 and older.	MATURE M CONTENT RATED BY ESRB	Content suitable for persons 17 ages and older.
EVERYONE E CONTENT RATED BY ESRB	Content suitable for persons ages 6 and older.	ADULTS ONLY AO CONTENT RATED BY ESRB	Content suitable only for adults.
EVERYONE 10+ E 10+ CONTENT RATED BY ESRB	Content suitable for persons ages 10 and older.	RATING PENDING RP CONTENT RATED BY ESRB	Product is awaiting final rating.
TEEN T CONTENT RATED BY ESRB	Content suitable for persons ages 13 and older.		

For our newer readers, here is a glossary of terms and acronyms that commonly appear in the magazine. Video game veterans should move along (these aren't the droids you are looking for).

1080i – A resolution specification used for HDTV. 1080i stands for resolution of 1920x1080 pixels. The "i" means that the video is being interlaced

480p – Progressive scanning, this option ("p"= progressive), creates a picture signal with double the scan lines of a conventional interlaced picture, 480i (i = interlaced), to create a noticeably sharper image. The 480p image offers higher picture resolution and eliminates virtually all motion artifacts in a 640x480 pixel resolution setting

720p – A resolution specification used for HDTV. 720p stands for resolution of 1280x720 pixels. The "p" means that the video is in progressive format

action – A term we use for games like Devil May Cry and Viewtiful Joe

ad hoc – A type of wireless connection that connects you with other players in your immediate vicinity

adventure – A term we use for games like Myst and Escape From Monkey Island

AI – Artificial Intelligence. Usually used to refer to how well the computer reacts to a human opponent

bloom – An effect that simulates the soft, blurred glow of bright light reflecting off of surfaces

board – A term we use for games like Jeopardy! and Mario Party

cel shading – A technique used to create 3D rendered objects that resemble hand-drawn animation cels

E3 – Electronic Entertainment Expo. The world's largest convention for video games

fighting – A term we use for games like Mortal Kombat and Dead or Alive

first-party – A game made by a console manufacturer's internal development teams exclusively for its own system

FMV – Full Motion Video. Usually refers to an animated CG cutscene

FPS – Frames Per Second. How many animation frames happen in one second. Also used to denote First-Person Shooters like Halo, Doom, and Call of Duty

framerate – The frames of animation used to create the illusion of movement

frontend – A game's menus and options

GBA – Game Boy Advance

GC – GameCube

HDTV – High Definition Television

infrastructure – A type of wireless connection that uses the Internet to connect with other players over long distances

isometric – Three-quarters top down view, like StarCraft or Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance

ISP – Internet Service Provider. The company that provides you with access to the Internet

jaggies – Graphical lines that are jagged when they should be straight

LAN – Local Area Network. Connecting computers or consoles together within a small space to allow communication between them. Provides fast, simultaneous gameplay

May the Force be with you – A phrase not typically heard at weddings. Except Reiner's

MMO – Massively Multiplayer Online. Usually applied to role-playing titles, we use this term for games with persistent, multi-user online worlds like EverQuest and World of Warcraft

motion blur – Phantom frames follow an object to give the impression of realistic speed

normal mapping – A graphical technique in which a hi-res skin containing 3D information, revealed by light reflecting off the surface, is wrapped around a low-res model

NPC – Non-Player Character. Those people and creatures you see wandering around in games that are not being controlled by actual humans

particle effects – Things like smoke or sparks created in real-time

platform – A term we use for games like Super Mario and Crash Bandicoot

pop-up – When objects onscreen suddenly appear, typically due to poor draw distance

PS2 – Sony PlayStation 2

puzzle – A term we use for games like Tetris and Puyo Pop

racing – A term we use for games like Gran Turismo and Mario Kart

RPG – Role-Playing Game. A game that involves character improvement through collecting and spending points. A term we use for games like Final Fantasy and Xenosaga

shooter – A term we use for games like Ikaruga and Gradius

sports – A term we use for games like Madden NFL

strategy – A term we use for games like La Pucelle and Front Mission

third-party – Something made for a console by a company other than the console manufacturer

Moving forward, no game is complete without Thor

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360 | PLAYSTATION 2 | XBOX

Marvel: Ultimate Alliance

> STYLE 1 TO 4-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 4-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE, PS3 & PS2 ONLINE) **> PUBLISHER** ACTIVISION
> DEVELOPER RAVEN SOFTWARE **> RELEASE** OCTOBER 24 (XBOX 360, PS2, XBOX), NOVEMBER 17 (PS3) **> ESRB** T

THE FIGHT OF THE CENTURY

Like many of the gifted students that have departed Xavier's school of mutants, developer Raven Software is spreading its wings and striking out into the larger world of the Marvel universe. The X-Men Legends games were greatly satisfying, but now seem like small, insignificant blips when stacked up against the war that erupts in Marvel: Ultimate Alliance. Led by Doctor Doom, the world's deadliest villains have joined forces and are intent on global domination. The fate of the world rests upon the combined strength of the Avengers, X-Men, Fantastic Four, and the rest of Marvel's champions. Not even a comic book could capture the magnitude of this epic superhero throw down.

It's not just the scope of the battle that has expanded. The shape of the game itself has taken on a much different shape. The X-Men games followed the hack n' slash convention fairly closely. While these rules worked well, it always seemed strange that Cyclops would have to sneak off to drink a blue potion to recharge his optical blast. In this game, you no longer need to stock potions. When an enemy is slain, there's a chance that the fallen will gift you with a cluster of healing orbs that automatically zoom to your character. This change not only removes the clunky system of healing, it makes you feel more like a hero. Your focus is always on the battlefield, not a meter.

As much of a rush as it is to tear apart a legion of robots in seconds flat, the mindless and repetitive grind that accompanies dungeon crawlers isn't necessarily the best fit for those adorned in tights, either. Amid the brawl, Raven has dispersed a number of minigames that act as tests of strength, speed, and skill. You may be tasked with jamming on a button to lift a heavy object, or tapping the correct sequence of buttons to defuse a bomb. The level designs and environments are also far more dynamic. In one stage, you'll find yourself running along a side-scrolling path. In another, you'll find yourself trolling the great seas in search of dear ol' Namor. Having a greater variety in both the levels and interaction you have within keeps you on your toes and removes the dungeon crawling trance that many usually fall into while playing these games.

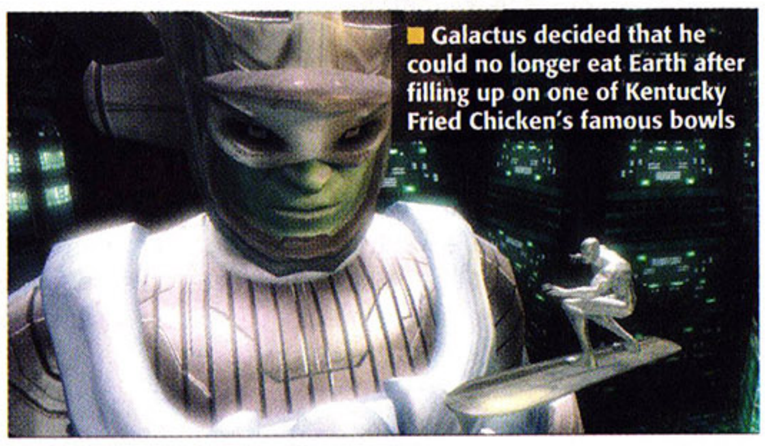
The X-Men games have also offered a wide selection of characters, but most of those characters wouldn't even make the B-team in this game. These are the heavy hitters from the Marvel universe that you see popping up when a world-ending threat arises in the comics. Like every other facet of the game, the gameplay tied to the characters has also received powerful upgrades. A character like Captain America is equipped with the same type of combos and super moves that you saw in the X-Men titles, but he also has a shield at his side. When thrown, the shield will ricochet in the room causing additional damage. When the shield is airborne, if you hold A, you can control where it goes. When you select your party, if you have all of the Fantastic Four on the field at once, or four Avengers, the game will recognize this and give you stat bumps.

The RPG elements in the game are not quite as deep as before, but rather, new attributes and skills can be assigned when you change a character's costume. The old system definitely made me feel like I had more ownership over my character, but at the same time, I really like the fact that there's a reason to change between Spider-Man's regular gear and his symbiote.

The critical path is incredibly long and is joined by bonus comic missions for most of the characters. The teammate AI is very impressive, often getting to baddies before you even see them, but once again, Raven has designed a game that is better through cooperative play.

Marvel: Ultimate Alliance is easily the best comic game out there and a far better product than Raven's previous works. With the changes that have been made, Raven really is making this genre their own. Excelsior!—**REINER**

You can either hit these enemies from behind or tear their shields from their hands



Galactus decided that he could no longer eat Earth after filling up on one of Kentucky Fried Chicken's famous bowls

theedge

When All Games Aren't Created Equal

The Xbox 360 and PS3 versions are the only two that have Colossus and Moon Knight as playable characters. The current-gen games do, however, have a more decidedly comic book look, whereas the next-gen games look more like The Ultimates comic. The PS3 game also uses motion-sensing to enhance attacks and boss fights. It also runs in 1080p. No version really stands out over the others, but having two additional characters is never a bad thing.

BOTTOM LINE 9.25

> Concept: Raven worked wonders with the X-Men license, but with the entire Marvel universe at its disposal, this developer is showing us that a superhero fight can be far more explosive

> Graphics: High levels of destructibility, huge multi-story bosses, and a great level of variety in the environments makes this game a graphic darling

> Sound: The voicework is spot-on. Spider-Man is hilarious and Mr. Fantastic complains the entire time. The effects are top-notch as well

> Playability: It's not just a button masher anymore. Character move sets are far more diverse, and the rhythmic minigames add another layer to the carnage

> Entertainment: It does both comic books and video games justice. It's easily one of the year's best

> Replay Value: High

Second Opinion 8.5

Without a doubt, Marvel Ultimate Alliance is this holiday's best comic book game, but it's also not a huge improvement over the excellent X-Men Legends games from which it was born. In fact, I have to place it in the minor letdown category. Don't get me wrong – this is a fun game with good core gameplay and tons of interesting playable characters, but it is undeniably a very simple experience. Most of the RPG depth offered in the last Legends has been stripped away, and your characters are far less customizable than they were in that game. Replacing potions with orbs that automatically fuel your health and power makes you feel more heroic, but definitely removes a lot of strategy as well – you basically can't die, unless you suck on Spider-Clone levels. But even though Marvel Ultimate Alliance focuses on a streamlined gameplay experience rather than a deep one, it's still going to be one of my top co-op games this year, because teaming up with friends to become the most awesome superhero group around is just too fun to deny.—**JEREMY**

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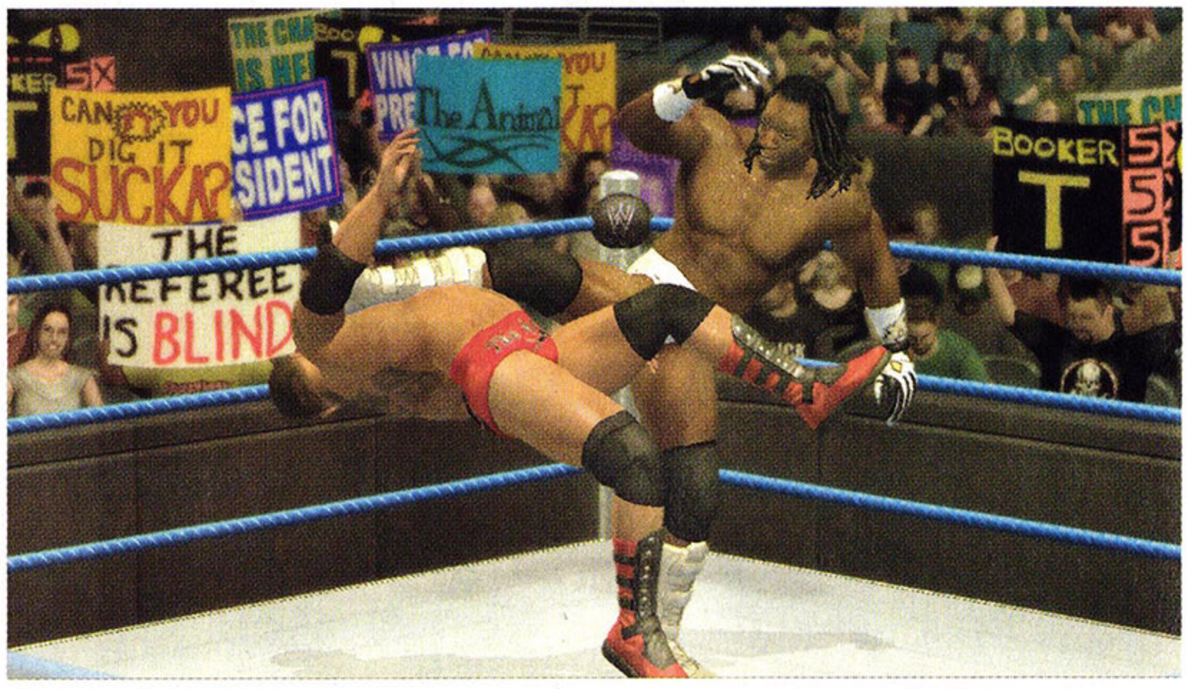


XBOX 360 | PLAYSTATION 2

WWE Smackdown vs. Raw 2007

> STYLE 1 TO 4-PLAYER FIGHTING (UP TO 4-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE OR PS2 ONLINE) **> PUBLISHER** THQ **> DEVELOPER** YUKE'S **> RELEASE** NOVEMBER 14 **> ESRB** T

DEFENDING THE TITLE

For the last three years, the Smackdown vs. Raw series has easily outshone every other wrestling titles, including the other WWE titles. It's not surprising then that THQ has ditched the other WWE series like Day of Reckoning and taken the formerly PS2 exclusive SDvsR games multiplatform. This year, the Xbox 360 and PS2 both get the game, and it remains the best wrestling title around – not that there's any real competition.

On both systems, SDvsR feels much like last year's game – which is far from a bad thing. A few key features have been added, which should prevent players from feeling that unpleasant sensation of gaming deja vu. Grappling has been moved to the right analog stick, giving players more control over certain moves. You can now lift up your opponent and slam him down when and where you want, making you feel more involved and adding to the strategy. In the ladder matches (another area of the game that has been tweaked this year), I'd often lift up my enemy, walk over to the rope, and slam him down to the concrete below so I could climb the ladder without my foe in the ring. These analog controls really bring a lot to the formula, although in every other respect SDvsR 2007 feels just like the 2006 game. You can even revert to last year's non-analog scheme if you want.

Though the in-ring action is the core of the game, it is the bevy of extras THQ includes that makes this game a wrestling fan's dream. Thanks to the slew of feedback and reports offered in GM mode, I got far more sucked into this mode than I did the year before, which lets you run one of the WWE brands the way you see fit. Planning big matches, interfering with the other show, managing financials, and maintaining wrestler happiness was far more addicting that I thought it could be. The same goes for the longer career mode, which kept me wrapped up for hours with its blend of high drama and light RPG elements.

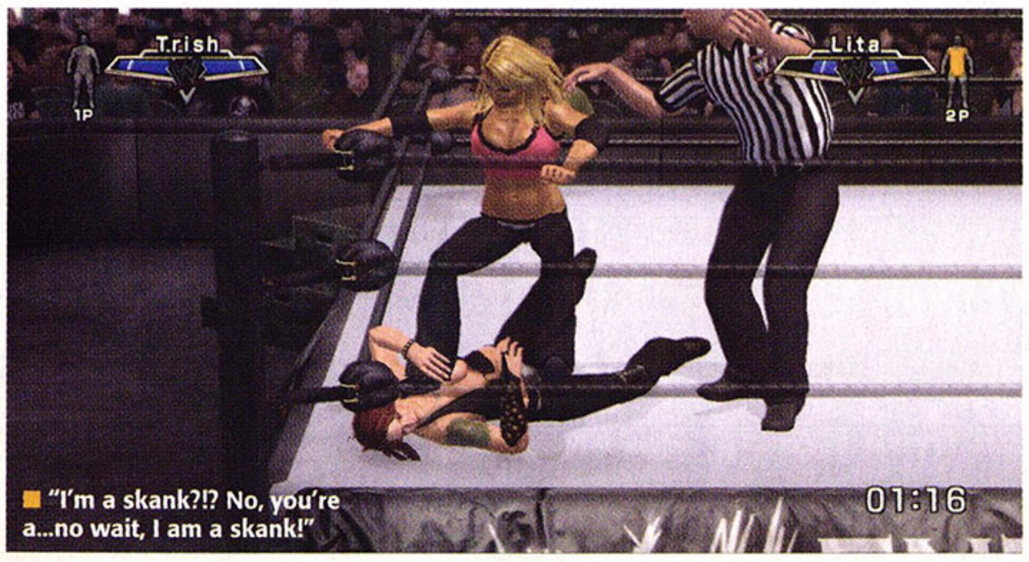
Although the improvements made to this year's entry will keep me hooked for months, I can't quite call SDvsR 2007 the perfect wrestling experience. There are still flaws here and there that irk me, like Diva matches that feel far too automated and the difficulty balancing in some of the tougher game modes. The ladder matches are a particular source of frustration. Since all the actions are mapped to the same buttons, I'd find myself climbing the ladder when I wanted to pick it up and move it, or vice versa. Still, my gripes are relatively minor, as the core of this game is far too good to not enjoy. For fans of wrestling or fighting games in general, this annual series has become a required purchase.—**JEREMY**

Certain areas trigger minigames with analog control

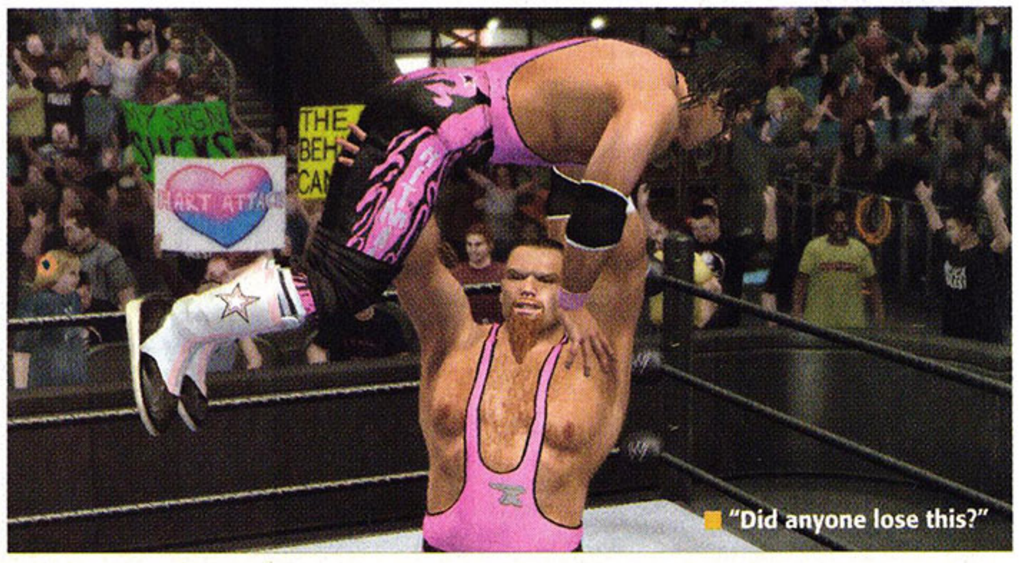
theedge

When All Games Aren't Created Equal

The Xbox 360 version wins hands down. Improved graphics, Achievements, and superior online usability make the 360 version the clear winner in this title fight.



"I'm a skank?!? No, you're a...no wait, I am a skank!"


"Did anyone lose this?"

BOTTOM LINE 8.75

> Concept: New analog grappling adds more user control to everyone's favorite sweaty man simulatin' series

> Graphics: The 360 version brings the most realistic renditions of the WWE stars to date, highlighting exactly how ugly Kane really is

> Sound: The infinitely repeating commentary chatter is still my least favorite part of this franchise

> Playability: The analog controls are a nice addition, but 2007 plays largely like the previous entries

> Entertainment: For WWE fans, this game is as mandatory as a giant tagboard "Vince Sucks!" sign

> Replay Value: High

Second Opinion 9

After beating my opponent over the head with a crutch that I stole from a spectator, I strangled him with a speaker wire, then rammed his head into a TV until it sparked and exploded. Is this wrestling or attempted murder? As ridiculous as the backstage interactions may be, this is the level of interactivity that this series has needed. In past iterations, most matches ended with a finisher. In this installment, you never really know where a match will go. The action in the squared circle also feels better than it ever has, thanks to a new control scheme that opens up the grappling game and allows for more precise movement. Given the high quality of the gameplay, you want to spend more time making fools tap out. Now you can; season mode stretches across multiple years, and General Manager mode finally has some depth to it. It has some serious load times, and the wrestlers' transitional animations are a bit crude, but this game hits you where it counts. It replicates the over-the-top action of the WWE better than any game before it.—**REINER**

pro gamer: Tsquared | i885 MOTOROLA

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PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360

Need for Speed Carbon

> STYLE 1 OR 2-PLAYER RACING (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE OR PS3 ONLINE) **> PUBLISHER** ELECTRONIC ARTS
> DEVELOPER EA BLACK BOX **> RELEASE** OCTOBER 31 **> ESRB** E10+

INTO OVERDRIVE

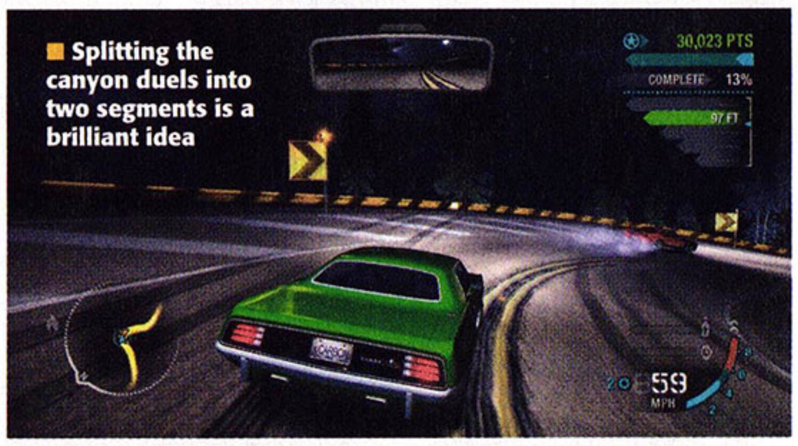
Some carrots are better than others. Carbon does a much better job than NFS: Most Wanted of leading you on and spurring you to master its curves. And the biggest and juiciest carrots of them all are the canyon races, which are the perfect payoff to the more routine business of acquiring and holding your territory across the city. While this new element to NFS makes Carbon worth getting, it does expose the need for growth in other areas of the series.

On the face of it, the canyon duels in Carbon are one of the few outright improvements from its predecessor, Most Wanted. That sounds like faint praise, but when you play Carbon you quickly realize how important they are to the game. Instead of your progression being tied to a menu-based Blacklist and a cheesy story like in Most Wanted, you are instead pushing the envelope on Carbon's streets for an even bigger rush once you hit the canyons. It's like an adrenaline-filled cherry on top of a nitrous-flavored sundae.

Despite the fact that Auto Sculpting or teammates aren't necessarily crucial to the game, the more I tried to compare the feature sets of Carbon and Most Wanted, the more I realized how different people are going to love different things about the game. You might spend hours Auto Sculpting your very own Frankencar, while your friend is more excited about using teammates to get ahead during races. I loved the races that were all about drifting, but someone else might be consumed enough to complete the Challenge Series and get all the Reward Cards. Some racing titles focus so much on parts, customization, or physics, that having fun on the track becomes an afterthought, while others bore you with one circuit race after another. Carbon lets you dabble in various areas all you want, while still delivering some smokin' racing action – the canyons see to that at a minimum. Of course, PS3 players can use their controller to influence their cars around corners, but it didn't do much for me.

Regardless of which elements of Carbon you like the best, I highly suggest you go online. Carbon has two online-only race types that you've got to experience: Pursuit Knockout and Pursuit Tag. The first is a circuit race where after each lap the car in last place turns into a cop who can go through the lighted barriers, while the second is a free-for-all with one fugitive car chased by the cops. The player who races as the fugitive changes each minute depending on which cop has the highest Busted meter when time is called.

As well put together as this game's parts are, it could have been more cohesive. I didn't feel like territory was crucial enough, and the bonuses for keeping it seemed inconsequential. The open-world aspect in general was underdeveloped. I realize EA messed it up in NFS: Underground 2, and there may be technical limitations, but how sweet would it have been to have the Boss races on the mainland seamlessly flow into the canyon duels? Furthermore, the city's sections felt too similar to each other. I admit, I don't have all the answers on making a perfect open-world racing title, but Carbon falls short in this area. Don't worry though, the speed in this game is enough to outrun such criticisms.—**KATO**



■ Splitting the canyon duels into two segments is a brilliant idea

■ Go big or go home: Auto Sculpt lets you make your car as ugly as you want

BOTTOM LINE 8.5

> Concept: The racing isn't too different from Most Wanted, but the canyons in particular make this more than Most Wanted ever was

> Graphics: Pretty sweet looking, with a high amount of speed blur and top-notch hood reflections

> Sound: The special music for the Canyon runs is a nice touch, and the cop chatter is equally cool

> Playability: It's really too bad you can only drift during the specified drift races

> Entertainment: I think every stripe of racer will find something here that they really like, and the game does it without having to sacrifice any of its racing fun

> Replay Value: Moderately High

Second Opinion 8.75

My car careens down the sheer edge of a canyon road, teetering on a razor thin edge where at any moment I could lose control. I apply the handbrake and start to slide around the turn, inches from the guardrail. I just know I'm going over the edge. But somehow, almost miraculously, my back tires manage to hold their traction on this gravelly mountain road. Only after this is do I realize that I have been clenching my leg muscles. After the race, I'm so hopped up on adrenaline that I think I need to take a run around the block to burn it off. I haven't played a Need for Speed since the first Underground, and after playing Carbon I can't remember why the series ever fell off my radar. Sure, the game has a few problems, namely your AI companions screwing your chances of winning a race every now and then, and the difficulty spikes in the game's home stretch. But, I feel that Need for Speed series has always been about how we imagine these souped-up cars would perform rather than an actual uber-real racing simulation, and to that end Carbon is a wonderful white-knuckled dream.—**BEN**

GENERATION GAP PS2 / XBOX **7.5**

> STYLE 1 TO 4-PLAYER RACING

NEED MORE NEED FOR SPEED?

It's one thing for the current-gen versions of this game to be not as visually compelling (such as the sense of speed not being as good), but it's unfortunate that you only race against three other cars during typical challenges. Plus, one of those three is a teammate, so you're really only got two other competitors out there. Add on the fact that these versions have no online at all, and the differences aren't minor.—**KATO**

The #1 Street-Racing Game on Nintendo DS™ Returns

ASPHALT 2

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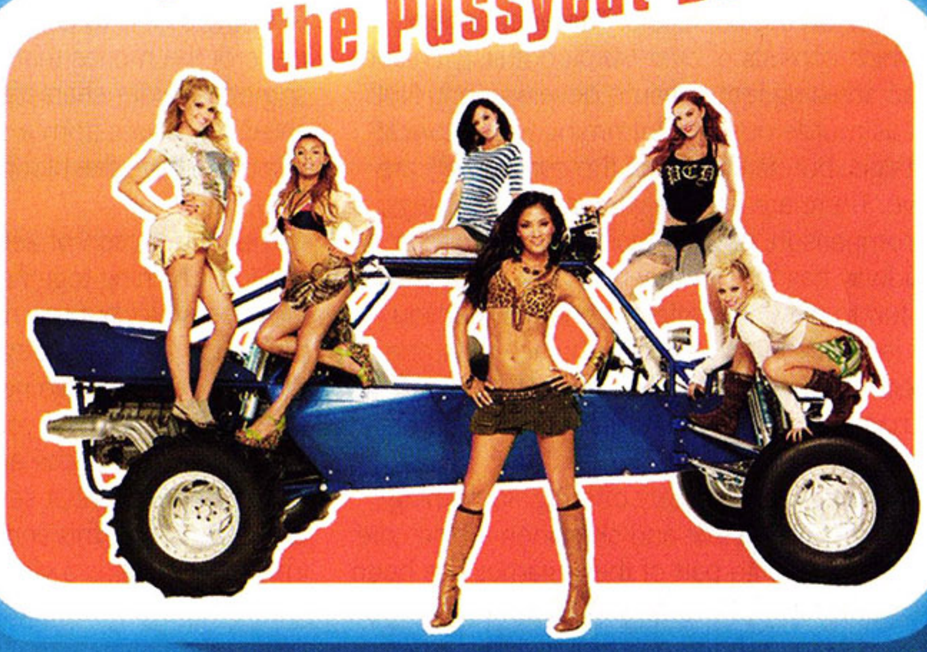

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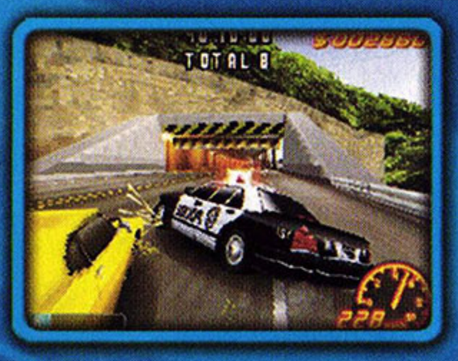

EVERYONE 10+ CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Mild Suggestive Themes
Violence

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Boss battles consist of brute strength and slow movement

Each of the 60-plus characters brings a unique combat prowess to the fight

PLAYSTATION 2 | XBOX

Mortal Kombat: Armageddon

> STYLE 1 OR 2-PLAYER FIGHTING (2-PLAYER VIA PS2 ONLINE AND XBOX LIVE) **> PUBLISHER** MIDWAY **> DEVELOPER** MIDWAY
> RELEASE OCTOBER 16 **> ESRB** M

FINISH THE FIGHT

Every character that has ever been impaled on spikes, cleaved in two, or flung into a vat of acid now has the chance to bloody their hands, exact revenge, and ascend a mountain of corpses as they show the world who the true victor of the Mortal Kombat tournament is. The series' creator, Ed Boon, and his team at Midway approached the development of this game with closure in mind. The Mortal Kombat tournament that has kept fans captivated since its arcade debut in 1992 needs to end. Within this game, the final drop of blood will at last be spilled.

Every combatant that has ever stepped into the ring in a Mortal Kombat game is playable, fleshed out with a conclusive story, and more impressively, a lethal force on the battlefield. The encyclopedic roster, which consists of over 60 bloodthirsty characters, is an amazing feat of game development. Not only is this murderous cast brimming with intoxicating nostalgia, but hardly any of the combatants are derivative. There are fighting games that have legs, but by comparison, nothing really comes close to what Midway has thrown together here. Each character is fun to play, and different enough that you have to rethink your strategies with each new one you select. The balance that is struck between all of the characters is also another incredible feat on Midway's part.

In developing such a meaty offering, something had to give. As aggressive and skill-laden as the core combat is, my favorite part of these games has been always adding insult to injury with a barbaric Fatality. The moment at which the announcer says "finish him" is unlike anything else in gaming. You have already won the match, but for some reason, this is the most intense part of the game. I always sweat bullets and fumble with the controls when it comes to entering in a Fatality sequence. Conversely, when the screen fades to black and the torture begins, you really feel like you've won something that you worked hard for. What you usually win is a creative and often overly brutal or comedic death sequence. Fatalities are still a prominent part of the picture, but they neither capture your imagination nor demand precise execution. You now get to customize your own Fatality on the fly. By inputting different control sequences your character will perform a specific move that is tied to the command you entered. As amusing as it is to chain a bunch of moves together, none of the moves that you perform really feel like something your character would do. You are just selecting moves from a shared pool. The Fatalities just don't have the blood-splattering punch that they once had.

The introduction of aerial combat also falls hard on its face. Chaining together high-flying combos is certainly possible, but this mechanic just doesn't have the polish or visceral edge like the remainder of the fray. On a positive note, you will have to adjust your attack patterns if you face an opponent who chooses to take to the air.

The Mortal Kombat series has had its ups and downs, and this sequel embodies it all. The immense roster is a glorious thing, but by altering the sacred Fatality, the action just isn't up to the series' standards or what fans expect.—**REINER**

After competing in the MK tournament, Meat became a McDonalds' delicacy

BONUS CONTENT

THESE DAYS, THE MORTAL KOMBAT GAMES OFFER JUST AS MUCH CONTENT ON THE FRINGE AS THEY DO IN THE ARENA

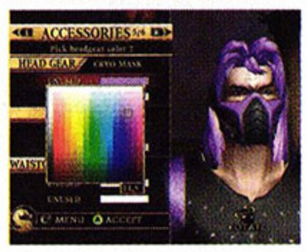
KONQUEST MODE

Konquest mode isn't new per se, but it has been tweaked significantly. It still possesses the graphical qualities of a game that you would expect to find free in a box of cereal, but it does offer a decent quest, another interesting sliver of the story, and mindlessly fun brawling.

MOTOR KOMBAT

This racing minigame doesn't deliver much in terms of single player, but the multiplayer is quite impressive. Each of the characters' signature fighting moves are incorporated into silky smooth driving.

CREATE A FIGHTER



This series' first character creator allows players to create combatants that are just as detailed and unique as the existing roster. Of course, this option is best suited for multiplayer fighting.

BOTTOM LINE 8.25

> Concept: Every character ever. Enough said

> Graphics: Still quite stunning. The destructible environments, blood effects, and character models are all of the highest quality

> Sound: Classic MK grunts, moans, splatters, and music

> Playability: The same hard-hitting gameplay as before, but the new Fatality system just isn't nearly as enthralling

> Entertainment: Loaded with longevity for both single- and multiplayer. Motor Kombat is an enjoyable distraction, and it's nice to finally be able to create your own personality

> Replay Value: High

Second Opinion 8

Armageddon is the Old Country Buffet of fighting games. You get an absolutely obscene amount of content for your dollar, but by the time you're done, you might find yourself feeling grossly overstuffed. Having every character in the MK universe in one game is awesome, but it can't counteract the fact that Armageddon feels almost exactly like the two games before it. Granted, all three are great, well-balanced fighters with a ton of extras, but I felt like I'd already played this game before – twice. Sure, Armageddon has some nice new features – an improved Konquest mode and Krypt, plus a character creation system that seems designed specifically to make skanky chicks. However, the "been there, done that" feel and the sagging graphics engine makes me yearn for more significant growth with the next entry. But while I'm waiting, I'll be sinking hours and hours into Armageddon, which is undoubtedly a solid, engaging fighter despite the familiar feel.—**JEREMY**

Many of the arenas feature hidden sections and stage Fatalities

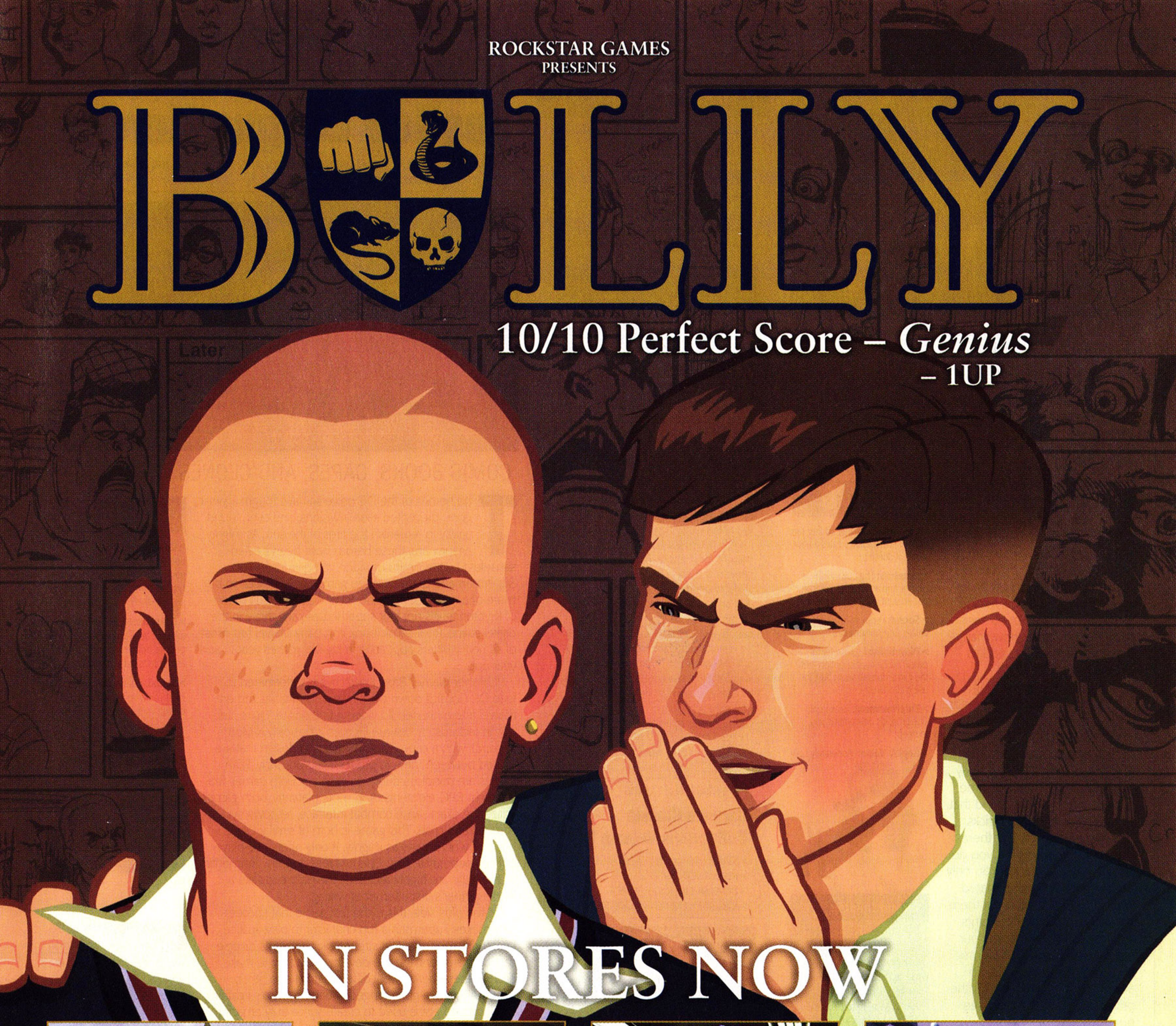
When will people learn... wampas live in cold places!!!

The track record of MK bosses being a pain in the butt continues with Blaze

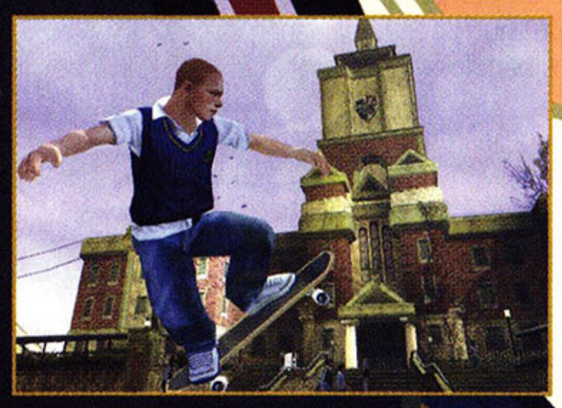
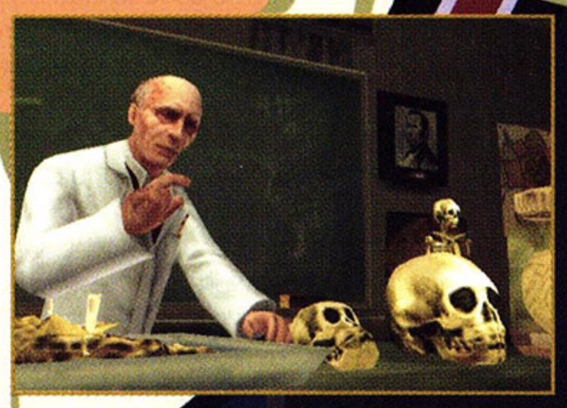
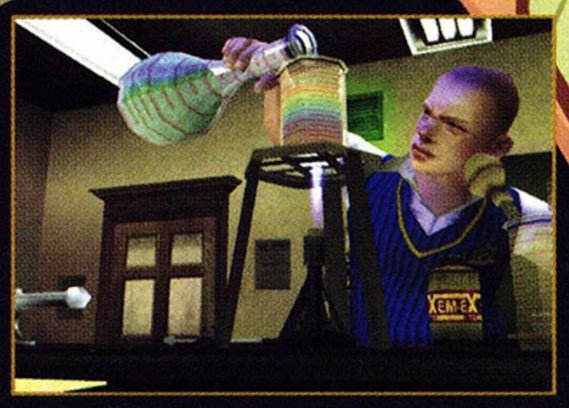
ROCKSTAR GAMES
PRESENTS

BULLY

10/10 Perfect Score – *Genius*
– 1UP



IN STORES NOW

WWW.ROCKSTARGAMES.COM/BULLY

TEEN
T
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Crude Humor
Language
Sexual Themes
Use of Alcohol and Tobacco
Violence

PlayStation®2

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PLAYSTATION 2 | GAMECUBE

The Sims 2: Pets

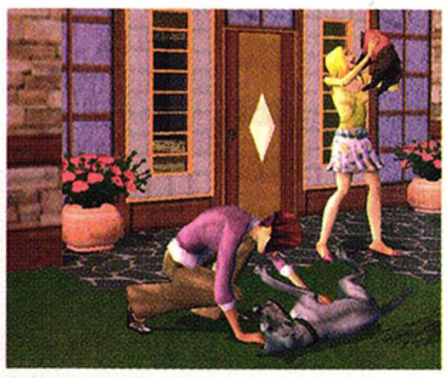
> STYLE 1-PLAYER SIMULATION **> PUBLISHER** ELECTRONIC ARTS
> DEVELOPER EA REDWOOD SHORES **> RELEASE** OCTOBER 20
> ESRB E10+

PLAY DEAD

Everyone knows that most problems can be fixed by throwing a few pets at them. Are your kids crying? Give them a puppy. Are you lonely? Buy dozens of cats. Sadly, the gameplay problems from the console version of The Sims 2 are not so easily mended, no matter how many furry companions you add to the mix.

After I chose my new dog from a huge selection of breeds (how do Labradoodles make the cut and Tibetan Terriers don't?) and dressed him up in a bunch of crazy crap, I quickly came to realize that the game doesn't offer much beyond that. You can teach your pet tricks and play with them, but there isn't much of a payoff if you do. New items for your pet can only be purchased at a designated community lot, and to get them you need to spend Pet Points, a currency separate from your regular simoleans. This clumsy implementation feels like an awfully high price to pay for the privilege of scrubbing cat pee out of your carpet.

Apart from the animal stuff, the core game has also undergone some tweaks, like a greater sense of ownership of your surroundings. It doesn't make Pets more fun, though; the lack of sufficient rewards and direction neuters the whole experience and makes it a chore to play.—**JOE**



BOTTOM LINE 6

> Concept: Hope that adding cats and dogs magically creates a new game. It doesn't

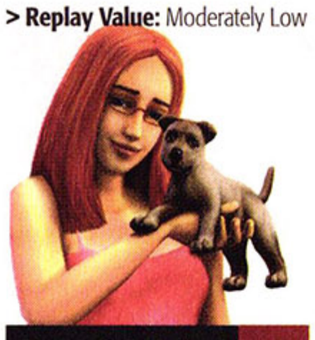
> Graphics: The outlandish clothes and accessories you can put on your pet are pretty funny

> Sound: Peppy music, gibberish voices, and no surprises

> Playability: I still prefer the classic mode control option, but the game doesn't seem built to use it effectively

> Entertainment: How ironic. This time, it's pets putting *you* to sleep!

> Replay Value: Moderately Low



Second Opinion 6

The Sims has been a great franchise, but it seems like a series that is beginning to run out of ways to reinvent itself, as it's done so well for the past six years. Pets adds a host of animal-oriented items and activities to the mix, but most of this ground was already covered in the Unleashed expansion for the original game. What's worse is that I didn't really feel that my canine and feline companions added much to the experience. Sure, it's fun to dress up a dog and teach him a few tricks, but after a while my pets started to feel like just another set of chores to do in a game that's already too bogged down in the tedium of everyday life. The Sims needs to evolve, but something tells me that evolution is going to take place in Spore, the project that clearly has creator Will Wright's full attention right now.—**MATT**

MULTI QUICKIES

PLAYSTATION 2 | XBOX

Thrillville

> STYLE 1 TO 4-PLAYER SIMULATION
> PUBLISHER LUCASARTS
> DEVELOPER FRONTIER DEVELOPMENT
> RELEASE NOVEMBER 15 **> ESRB** E 10+

BOTTOM LINE 7.75

Thrillville is LucasArt's attempt at bringing the "theme park" genre to an audience that may have found the more complex and PC-oriented titles on the market too off-putting. By organizing the daily tasks of the management and building process into discrete missions, it does manage to make it more approachable for younger gamers or those that simply don't want to get bogged down in the minutia of hot dog pricing. It also has a large number of minigames, ranging from a rhythm dance contest to small-scale FPS levels. It's definitely fun, and demonstrates an offbeat sense of humor (especially in your interactions with customers), but probably doesn't have the depth to give it the long legs of other titles in the genre. However, it's likely that this could succeed in bringing new gamers into the simulation fold.—**MATT**

PLAYSTATION 2 | XBOX

Capcom Classic Collections Volume 2

> STYLE 1 TO 4-PLAYER ACTION
> PUBLISHER CAPCOM
> DEVELOPER DIGITAL ECLIPSE
> RELEASE NOVEMBER 14 **> ESRB** T

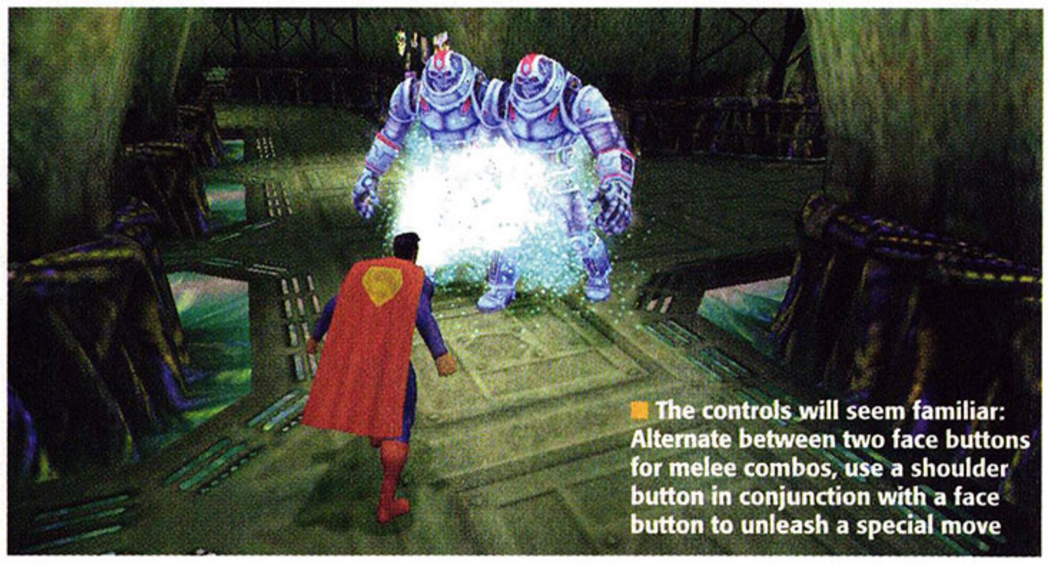
BOTTOM LINE 7

There is nothing quite like revisiting the past, and Capcom Classic Collections Volume 2 manages to give gamers a healthy jolt of nostalgia – to a degree. This collection offers up a wide range of brawlers and shooters from days long gone, but sadly, not many of these are all that memorable. Besides Side Arms, Strider, and the Street Fighter games, I had to dig deep to remember some of the collection, as most were only released in Japan. Known or unknown, most of these games are competent, with Three Wonders being a personal favorite. Thankfully, this collection is cheap, but I wouldn't expect to be wowed by it.—**ANDY**

XBOX | PLAYSTATION 2

Justice League Heroes

> STYLE 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION **> PUBLISHER** WARNER BROS. INTERACTIVE **> DEVELOPER** SNOWBLIND STUDIOS **> RELEASE** OCTOBER 17 **> ESRB** T



■ **The controls will seem familiar: Alternate between two face buttons for melee combos, use a shoulder button in conjunction with a face button to unleash a special move**

COMIC BOOKS, CAPES, AND CLONES

The heroes of the DC universe have fought against gods, prevented alien invasions, and even found a way to replenish the fires of the sun. As mighty as they are, these heroes have been beaten senseless by the ominous video game industry. For Superman and Batman, video games have proven to be more of a nuisance than the Joker wearing a suit made of Kryptonite. It's not that superheroes can't thrive in the digital space. Rival comic book company Marvel has most of its heavy hitters appearing in top-tier games year in and year out.

Publisher Warner Bros. Interactive is determined to lead DC Comics down the same path that has turned Marvel into a household video game name. Quite literally, in fact. Justice League Heroes is basically X-Men Legends with a cape. The similarities in design that are shared between the two products are uncanny. Both games are mindless dungeon crawlers. Both games feature light RPG elements. And more blatantly, both games utilize the exact same combat interface, respawn system, camera, and map. This game is born of similar DNA, but it's by no means as mighty. It only offers two-player offline cooperative play. Enemy types and environmental architecture are highly recycled. The plot reads like a kindergartner's first attempt at writing.

On the plus side, this is the first game that successfully makes Superman a fun character to play. Justice League Heroes' greatest strength lies within its diverse cast of characters and the developer's ability to make each of these heroes feel different from one other. Green Arrow is a great ranged character. Flash's lightning quick movement is used to create some truly amazing combos. Green Lantern's ring can provide much needed protection. Every one of these leaguers is handled with great care.

It's a shame that the rest of the game doesn't embody the same quality – which is quite shocking given developer Snowblind Studios' pedigree with this genre and games like Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance. Justice League Heroes won't set the world on fire, but it does show that there's great video game potential emanating from the DC universe. Not even the strongest man on earth can save a mediocre game.—**REINER**

■ **Scoure levels to find tokens lying around that can be exchanged for new playable characters like Huntress, different Green Lanterns, Hawkman, and Green Arrow**

BOTTOM LINE 7.25

> Concept: Superman and Batman both have a pathetic track record in games. But what happens when these two heroes join together?

> Graphics: Nice attention to some details, but repetition plagues both the enemy types and objects in the environments

> Sound: Campy dialogue and what could be the worst voice casting ever. Batman comes across like a depressed mental patient

> Playability: Each character holds true to their comic book counterparts

> Entertainment: Not nearly as long as the Legends or Baldur's Gate titles. And not nearly as good, either

> Replay Value: Moderately High

Second Opinion 7.75

I've always preferred Batman to Spider-Man and Superman to Captain America. As much as I love the Justice League and its characters, JLH simply can't take the Marvel dungeon crawlers in a brawl. But at least DC's heroes put up a good fight. The different characters feel nicely distinct, and I like how the RPG elements will let you be as involved or hands-off as you want to be. Co-op play is fun, but the single-player campaign is a bit shaky, with some iffy companion AI. And although JLH lacks the four-player co-op of the Marvel games and isn't as engaging in the story department, I'll still wholeheartedly recommend it to comic fans who want to command their favorite DC heroes. Batman and Superman in the same game? How can you pass that up?—**JEREMY**

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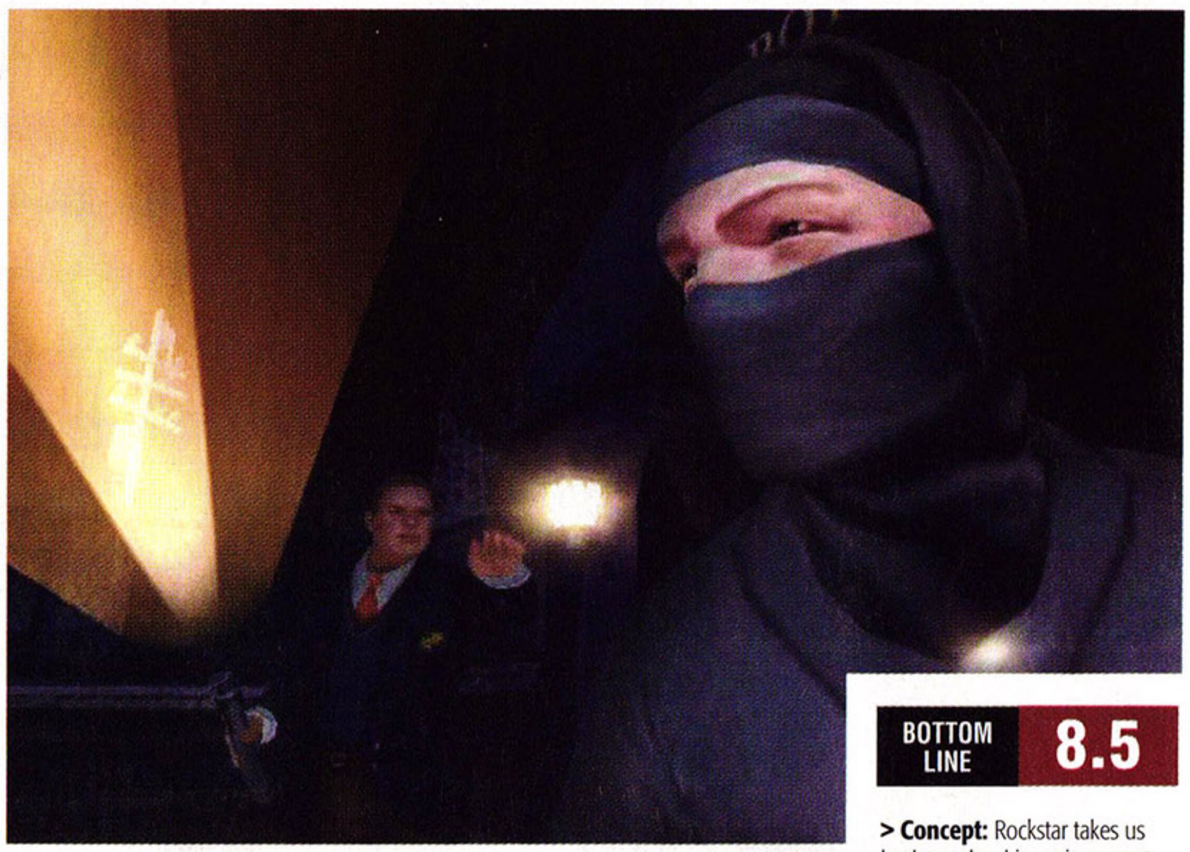


PLAYSTATION 2

Bully

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION **> PUBLISHER** ROCKSTAR GAMES **> DEVELOPER** ROCKSTAR VANCOUVER **> RELEASE** OCTOBER 17 **> ESRB** T

SCHOOLBOYS IN DISGRACE

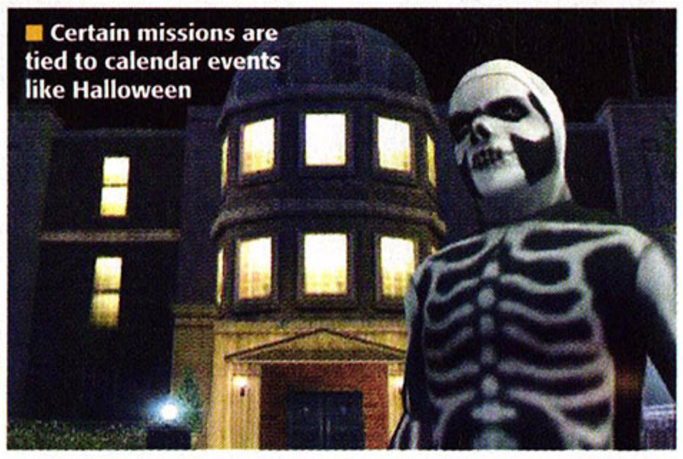
It's impossible to talk about Bully without at least touching on the controversy that's surrounded this game since it's been announced. So, let's get this out of the way right off: Bully is not a "Columbine simulator." In fact, you'd have to be a delicate sort to even term this game "mildly offensive." Everyone can relax – Bully is just a game. Actually, it's more than that; it's an engaging and unique title that I think will be among the most memorable of the year.

Ironically, the very thing that made Bully the subject of so much criticism – the school setting – is also its greatest strength. In Bullworth and the surrounding town, Rockstar Vancouver has created an extremely detailed universe, full of secrets, humorous characters, and hidden activities. Each and every pedestrian in school has a unique personality, affiliation with a social group, and often an agenda. In this way, I think Bully succeeds in creating an immersive world even more than the Grand Theft Auto series does. It's a testament to how much time and effort Rockstar puts into developing characters and environments.

"...it's an engaging and unique title that I think will be among the most memorable of the year."

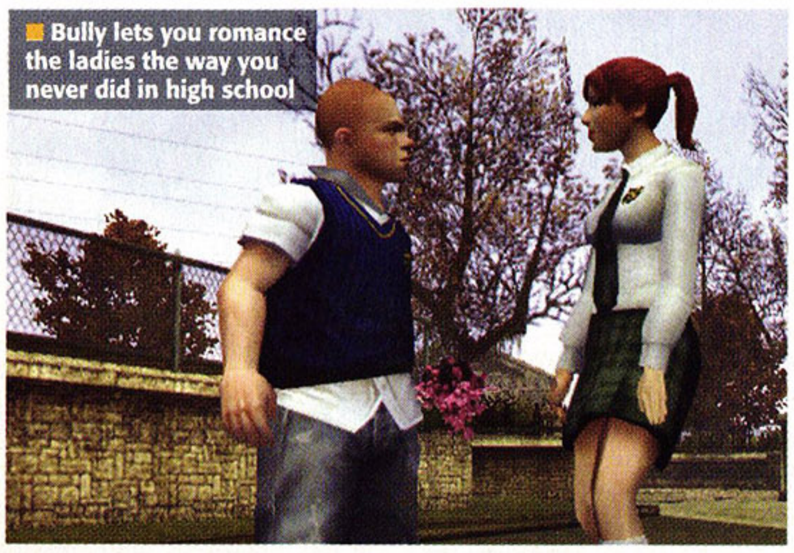
The way the writers expertly skewer high school society is at the core of Bully's appeal. Harking back to great teen movies like *Sixteen Candles* and *American Pie*, no group escapes the game's clever satire; jocks, teachers, nerds, and more are mocked with an eye for detail that's as loving as it is biting. What's more, as you play through the game, you'll often find that the characters are much more than obvious stereotypes; nerds often reveal themselves to be every bit as petty as the preps, and the cheerleader you thought was just a superficial bitch is actually a human being after all.

The gameplay itself is exactly what we've come to expect from Rockstar, incorporating elements of its previous titles. The brawling mechanics are essentially a less violent version of those from The Warriors, and you'll recognize a number of "pizza delivery" type objectives from the GTA series. Combat is not spectacular, but very functional and surprisingly deep given how simple the control scheme is, and enhanced by a variety of schoolyard weapons like slingshots and potato guns. At times, the main missions can get a bit repetitive, especially the inordinate number of objectives that revolve around retrieving a series of items for a certain character. Thankfully, these are broken up by more unique tasks like races or brief track or potato gun turret shooting sequences, which add a much needed sense of urgency to a game that can be a bit too lackadaisical for its own good. Another bright point is – surprisingly – the classroom activities. Whether doing PaRappa-style button pressing in Chemistry, word jumbles in English, or playing dodgeball in Gym, you'll find yourself actually excited about improving your marks and abilities.



Certain missions are tied to calendar events like Halloween

However, the real draw of Bully comes in the simple joys of exploring and interacting with the world and advancing the story. By choosing such a timeless setting, Bully manages to tap into something that resonates a bit more deeply than another game about a space marine or fantasy warrior. By playing Jimmy, we all get a chance to do high school over again – except this time we get to do it the way we wish we would have the first time. For this reason, Bully is a game that everyone can relate to, because it speaks to something that everyone has gone through. I certainly hope more developers begin to look beyond the usual stew of sci-fi and action flick clichés for their source material, because we need more games like this.—**MATT**



Bully lets you romance the ladies the way you never did in high school

The comic shop is nerd central

BOTTOM LINE **8.5**

> Concept: Rockstar takes us back to school in an irreverent, sometimes sweet, adventure that delivers across the board

> Graphics: One of the best looking Rockstar games to date; features great character models, animation, and a detailed and colorful world

> Sound: An amazing score; subtly covers a number of current and past genres while maintaining a timeless feel

> Playability: Not everything is perfectly tuned, but Bully more than makes up for its few flaws with a ton of variety

> Entertainment: Rockstar took a major chance on this game, but the setting and characters are the key making Bully the compelling game it is

> Replay Value: Moderately High

Second Opinion 8.75

Pull away the layers of controversy surrounding this release, and you'll find a lighthearted story about a troubled youth finding his lot in life at a school of hard knocks. Like most Rockstar games, Bully embraces an open-world mentality, letting players decide whether their hot-tempered miscreant will attend class, find love on campus, or help the nerds rise up against the jocks. These activities are brilliantly captured and are joined by clever gameplay designs. You can't help but feel a sense of satisfaction wash over you when you stand up for a kid that is being picked on. Conversely, you can't help but laugh out loud when you give someone a wedgie. Bully is loaded with content that everyone can relate to, and may even have experienced in their childhood. It's witty and fun, but it's the moments that hit close to home that really makes this game a must play. There's nothing else out there that is even close to this.—**REINER**

PLAYSTATION 2

Guitar Hero II

> STYLE 1 OR 2-PLAYER MUSIC **> PUBLISHER** RED OCTANE **> DEVELOPER** HARMONIX **> RELEASE** NOVEMBER 7 **> ESRB** T

WE'RE GETTING THE BAND BACK TOGETHER

BOTTOM LINE 9

The fact that Guitar Hero II is headed your way as one of the finest music-based video games in history shouldn't come as a surprise – particularly if you've ever tried the first one. With the simple button presses of that little toy guitar controller, the first installment managed to make more people graduate up from air guitar than anyone might have imagined possible. With such a tremendous success under its belt, Red Octane and Harmonix together set out to take the next logical steps. Guitar Hero II is bigger and badder than its predecessor in every way. But is it better?

In everything related to gameplay itself, the answer is yes. Individual guitar lines in the career mode feel even better than before, and the wailing solos and tricky riffs are all the more satisfying to nail thanks to some awesome note layouts and little additions like three note chords. The excellently designed practice mode offers exactly what the first game didn't – a chance to hone your skills at multiple speeds and starting from anywhere in any song. Most importantly, the new cooperative duet mode is the clear star of the performance. You're honestly doing yourself a disservice to buy the game and not get a hold of a second rig. With independent lines for lead and rhythm or bass guitar, there's a genuine sense of teamwork unrivaled in any games except the best cooperative shooters.

So is the music as much improved as the gameplay? That's a harder question to answer, and depends largely on what you like. Certainly there's a lot more music – 64 tracks should keep you busy for months. However, I'm not sure the hype machine behind this game has convinced me that the track listings are altogether better than before. While some huge bands are represented, in many cases it is with individual songs that are lesser-known titles – a fact that could be good or bad depending on your musical tastes. While I'm all for introducing new music to the masses, I think the game could have been served by a few more familiar toe-tappers thrown in the mix.

It's an issue that serious players are almost certainly not going to mind, since the music that is here (well-known or not) is excellent and implemented into the game so well. It's so good, in fact, that there are few gamers I wouldn't suggest this to, if only for how great of a tool it is to evangelize gaming to friends and family. The high cost of admission is most certainly worth it – this is a show you don't want to miss.—**MILLER**

> Concept: Rock to your heart's content, this time with a buddy by your side

> Graphics: A great art style is enhanced by clever camera work to make you feel like you're really stageside – if you can tear your eyes from the track

> Sound: An amazing song list that might steer a little bit away from the popular curve

> Playability: Remarkable connection between the player, the controller, and the game makes this one of the smoothest interfaces around

> Entertainment: Hugely fun, this is a game to convince others why you spend so much time with a controller in your hands

> Replay Value: High

Second Opinion 9.25

The sequel to Guitar Hero leaves Harmonix's perfect ax-shredding gameplay intact, while managing to improve it with several key additions. For one, the song list is larger and better selected, balancing classic rock standbys like "Freebird" and "YYZ" alongside a great mix of known and up-and-coming newer acts. I'm impressed how Harmonix selects songs that are not only great but fun to play, like the inclusion of Thin Lizzy's "Bad Reputation" over the more popular "Boys Are Back in Town." In addition to the wider selection of items, the new encores add a little drama to the career mode. Most important is the ability to play bass, either in practice mode or in a duet with a friend. It works so well that I wonder why they don't allow you to complete Career mode as a bassist. Either way, it's a near-perfect game.—**MATT**

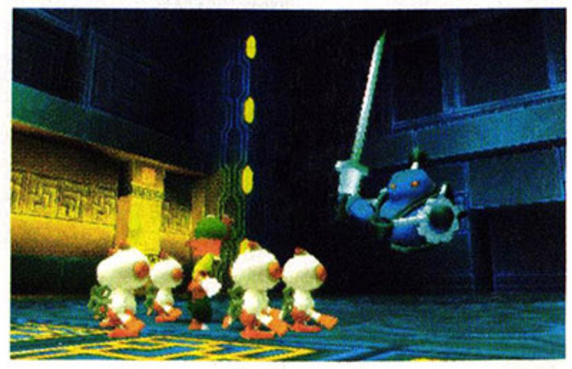
PLAYSTATION 2 QUICKIES

PLAYSTATION 2

BOTTOM LINE 7.25

Tokobot Plus: Mysteries of the Karakuri

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION/PLATFORM **> PUBLISHER** TECMO **> DEVELOPER** TECMO
> RELEASE OCTOBER 10 **> ESRB** E



In my review of the PSP version of Tokobot several months ago, I suggested that the franchise was worthy of a major console release, but I should have been more specific. I'd like to see a *new* game, rather than this half-assed port. The camera is still a problem, controls are still awkward, and save point restarts are still a pain in the butt. However, unlike on the PSP, there are fewer excuses for these flaws on its more established big brother. Even so, there's a charm to these versatile little robots and their ability to help you zip through the world, conquering platforms and enemies alike. Bouncy music, cute characters, and old school charm are all well and good, but nothing about the new additions indicate that this franchise is ready for the big leagues.—**MILLER**

PLAYSTATION 2

BOTTOM LINE 5.75

dothack//G.U. Vol. 1//Rebirth

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION/RPG **> PUBLISHER** NAMCO BANDAI **> DEVELOPER** CYBER CONNECT 2
> RELEASE OCTOBER 24 **> ESRB** T

The .hack universe is set in a fake MMO called "The World," and after spending time with Rebirth, it's easy to see why The World is only imaginary: No one would ever play such a garbage game. The dungeons are repetitive and graphically butt-like, the combat is unimaginative, and you rarely experience any sense of satisfaction. I might have recommended Rebirth for the story, which is occasionally pretty cool, but I can't even do that. The dialogue is littered with words like "PK" and "noob" that sound like your parents' lame attempts to be hip by saying "Who let the dogs out?" The only people who should pick up this game are those who need a lot of practice wincing.—**JOE**

PLAYSTATION 2

BOTTOM LINE 7.5

Shin Megami Tensei: Devil Summoner

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ROLE-PLAYING GAME **> PUBLISHER** ATLUS **> DEVELOPER** ATLUS
> RELEASE OCTOBER 10 **> ESRB** M

For anyone who has enjoyed the previous Shin Megami Tensei games on PS2, Devil Summoner may be surprising. Forgoing the series' Press Turn battle system, the game uses real-time combat in its random encounters, giving players direct control of the main character. While this change diminishes the strategy, it also opens up some cool new ways to use your demonic allies, especially during boss fights. The exploration aspect has changed too, revolving more around gathering clues than dungeon crawling – which unfortunately will often leave you wandering aimlessly searching for a vague objective. Even with these changes, Devil Summoner is unmistakably an SMT title: It still features the distinctive art of, Kazuma Kaneko, demon fusion, and an atmospheric story. It may not have the gameplay or challenge that fans have come to expect, but it does a good job of taking small steps toward the mainstream without renouncing its roots.—**JOE**

PLAYSTATION 3

Resistance: Fall of Man

GAME INFORMER GAME OF THE MONTH

> STYLE 1 TO 4-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 40-PLAYER VIA PS3 NETWORK) **> PUBLISHER** SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT AMERICA **> DEVELOPER** INSOMNIAC GAMES **> RELEASE** NOVEMBER 17 **> ESRB** M

■ Each weapon has its own personality

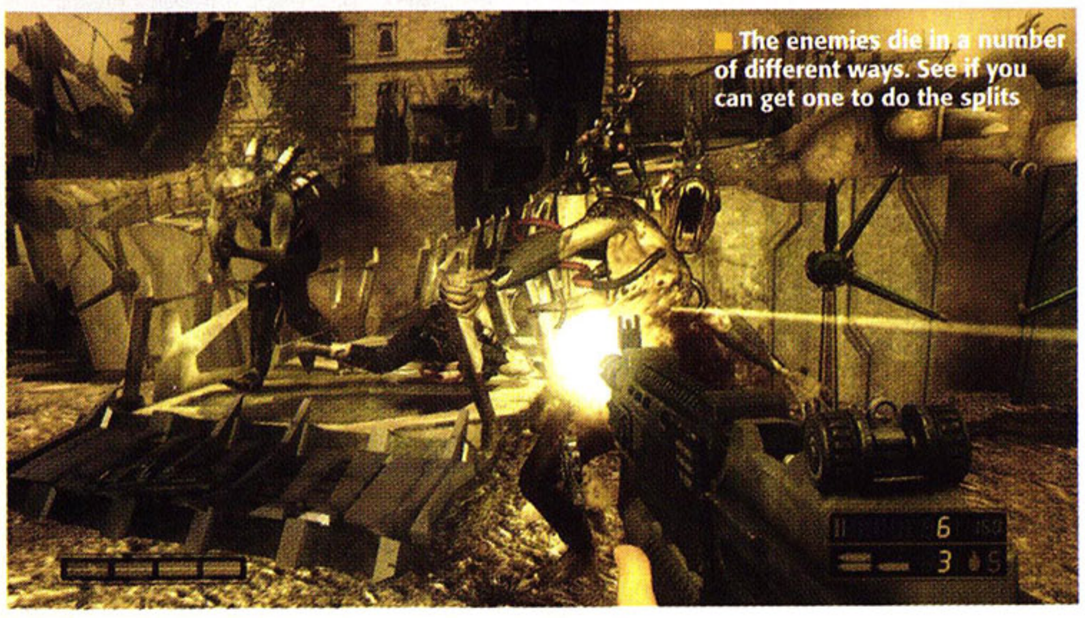
A PLAYSTATION 3 ESSENTIAL

Few people may actually remember that before developer Insomniac Games got big with Sypro the Dragon and Ratchet & Clank, it made a first-person shooter called Disrupter. It was a good title, but like many games of the era, it was limited by the hardware of its time. As Insomniac gets back to its first-person shooter roots with Resistance, there is a pedigree here that I think few people expected. Combine that with the power of the PlayStation 3, and Insomniac has pulled off one of the best launch games I've ever seen, up there with the likes of Halo and Call of Duty 2.

The setting is an alternate history where World War II doesn't happen because the planet is invaded by an alien race known as the Chimera. This sets the stage for a game rooted in reality with a satisfying twist of science fiction.

This melding of aliens and reality is most obvious in the game's selection of amazing armaments. For anyone familiar with Insomnaic's Ratchet & Clank series, you can get a good idea of the variety and execution of the weapons and how they affect gameplay.

■ The details on the character models and environment are impressive



■ The enemies die in a number of different ways. See if you can get one to do the splits

The players start out with a standard issue Carbine that does plenty of damage, but as you advance through the game you get a taste of the game's awesome weaponry. One of my personal favorites is the Bullseye, which lets you paint a target with the alt fire button, then bend bullets around corners from the safety of cover. My other favorite weapon, the Auger, lets the player fire through walls. It may sound cheap at first, but since the enemy has the weapon as well, it makes for some very interesting gameplay mechanics. Plus, the effect looks like bullets dripping water-like through walls as they burrow their way through the environments to reach the target.

This is just a taste of the awesome weapons that the game puts at the player's disposal, but how they affect the gameplay is most important. When I came upon a nest of Chimera, I often found myself strategizing about which weapons I would use to best get me through the situation.

The single-player game features three difficulties that will challenge players of any level. I thoroughly enjoyed the single-player experience, even though the story doesn't ever really develop as much as I would have liked. Resistance's story mode can also be played co-op, but unfortunately this option is only available in split-screen, not through the online service.

This is about the only online service that Resistance doesn't offer (for free, I might add. There is no Xbox Live-type service that you need to sign up for to play). In fact, Resistance's online multiplayer options are quite impressive. With six different multiplayer games that support up to 40-players, you can quickly find yourself lost in its spectacular online offerings. Deathmatch,Team Deathmatch, and Capture the Flag modes are standard fare, but the game's Breach and Meltdown options give the players strategic positions on the giant maps to acquire and protect. Plus, the final mode, Conversion, offers a fun twist on the classic Deathmatch game by letting players play as the Chimera and human races. Since each race has unique powers, players must use both races to counter any perceived advantages one may have over another.

The surperbly implemented online tracking and ranking services, plus the rich and varied content, makes Resistance's multiplayer one of the game's strongest features.

Graphically, the game is simply stunning, and when you tie in all the single player and mutliplayer components it is easily the PlayStation 3's premiere, must-have title.—**ANDY**

BOTTOM LINE 9.5

> Concept: Aliens invade before World War II, which changes the course of history and mankind

> Graphics: Not only does this game look fantastic, it has perhaps the most on-screen action I have ever seen in a first-person shooter

> Sound: The soundtrack is good enough to make most Hollywood movies pale in comparison

> Playability: Nothing terribly new in the gameplay department, but it does it all well

> Entertainment: The story doesn't develop as well as you would hope, but the online multiplayer options are outstanding

> Replay Value: High

Second Opinion 9.5

There's a good reason why Master Chief has been looking pale these days. Sony just dropped a bomb down his pants. No matter how you cut it, Resistance is PlayStation's answer to Halo. It bombards you with relentless action, opens your mind to new gaming possibilities with its inventive selection of weapons, and offers a multiplayer experience so deep and dangerously addictive that your hands may permanently form to the contour of the controller. Insane 40-man online battles, weapons that can shoot through walls and around corners, having to violently shake the controller to free yourself from an alien that has latched onto your neck – there are few experiences in gaming that are this exciting, and thanks to the development muscle of Insomniac, this finely polished and balanced. The only blemish that this game has is the uneventful finale to the single-player campaign. Outside of this, Resistance pounds you into submission with its remarkable gameplay. Without question, it's worth getting a PS3 just for this game.—**REINER**

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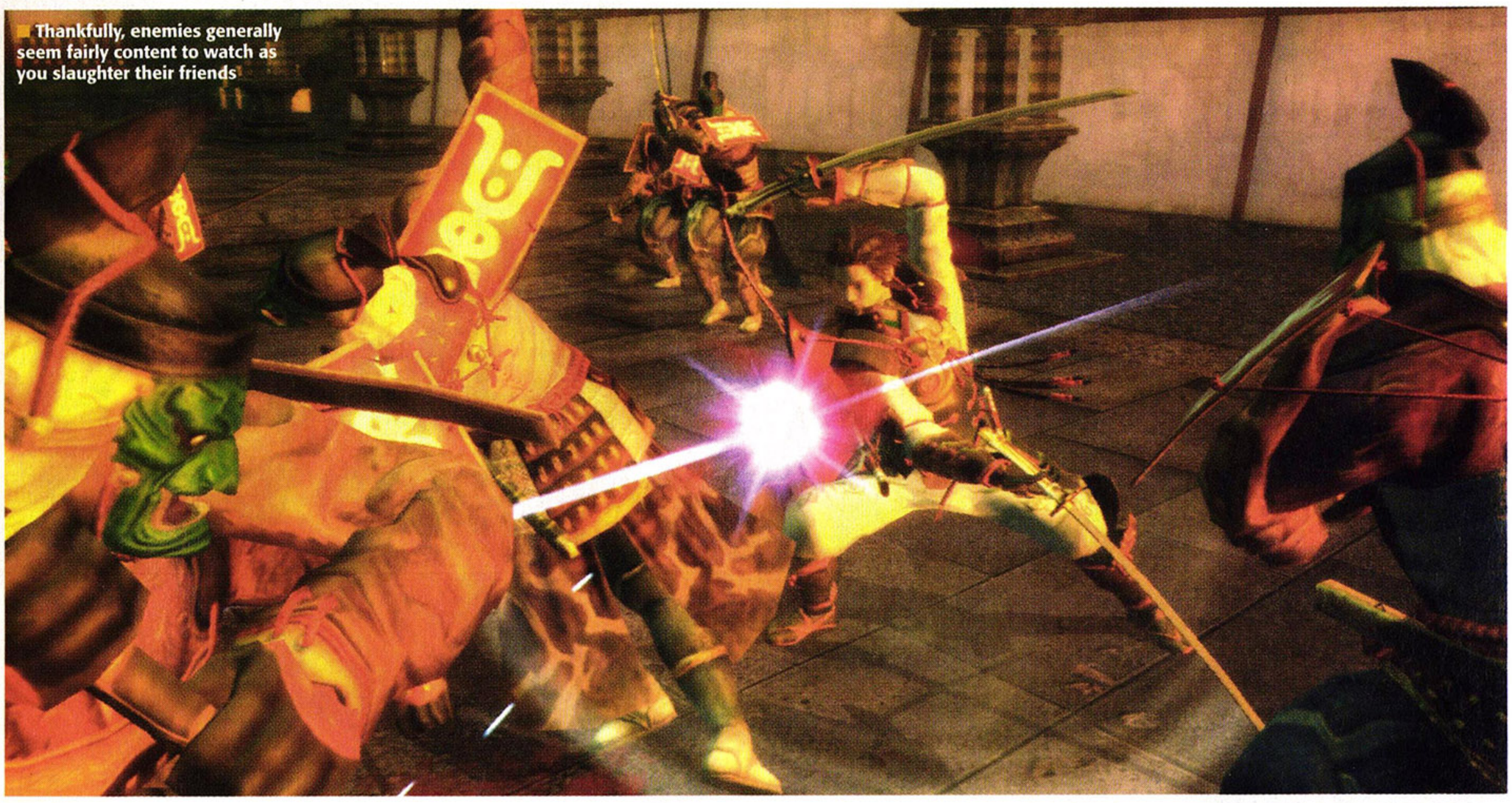
SONY PICTURES HOME ENTERTAINMENT


Thankfully, enemies generally seem fairly content to watch as you slaughter their friends

PLAYSTATION 3

Genji: Days of the Blade

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION **> PUBLISHER** SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT AMERICA **> DEVELOPER** GAME REPUBLIC/SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT JAPAN **> RELEASE** NOVEMBER 17 **> ESRB** T

I'M IN UR JAPAN, KILLING UR D00DZ

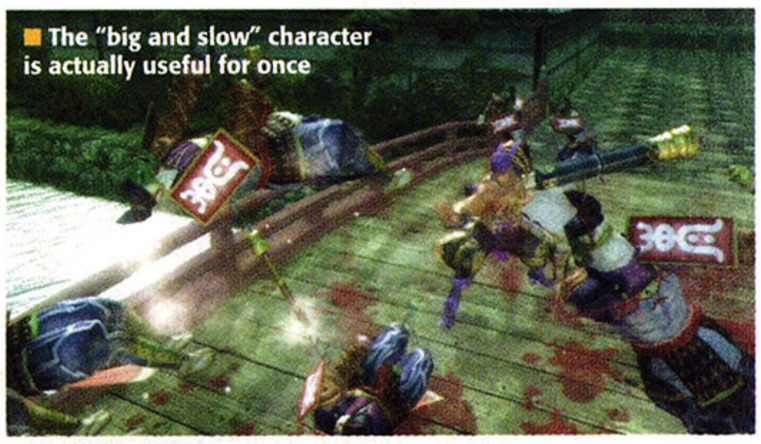
I'd be lying if I tried to play like I didn't have a good time messing around with the PlayStation 3. The machine is amazing in many, many ways. It's too bad that this garbage was clogging up the disc drive instead of a well-designed game. Genji: Days of the Blade is a picture-perfect example that any piece of hardware is only as good as the software it's running.

The meat and potatoes of Genji's gameplay – hack n' slash brawling of the most basic kind – is, at least, marginally competent. On a very simple level, beating up dudes is fun for a while. And, to be fair, on the rare occassions that Genji's combat gets going and doesn't trip over its own feet, it's an enjoyable play. Three of the four characters have unique fighting styles that each work well under certain conditions (the fourth is a total mess – Bosun is literally the worst brawler character I've ever used), and utilizing the different heroes' abilities to your advantage is at least somewhat interesting. That's about where the positives here stop.

I cannot think of a worse camera system than the one used in Genji. God Hand's horrendously pulled-in and clunky view is miles above this trash. Constantly – as in nearly every fight – you'll be attacking off-screen enemies. The interesting-looking aerial combos that nearly all characters have are completely worthless, since a single jump sends you out of your field of vision. To make matters worse, you have absolutely zero control over the camera angle. Your only recourse for the inevitable times that the game becomes unplayable due to the view is to move until the camera decides to let you see what's going on. It is entirely ridiculous that this high-budget, high-profile title is hamstrung so badly by a simple camera.

The issues don't stop there. Poorly designed platforming sections are thrown at the player frequently and merely serve to remind you that there is, in fact, something worse than dealing with the horrid camera during combat. No matter which character you use, you're constantly locked into some animation or another, preventing any kind of reaction to the flow of battle. Recovery times when you inevitably get hit are obscene – some attacks leave you standing in place for several seconds, totally unable to move or defend yourself in the middle of a dozen enemies! Every time I started having genuine fun by wrecking a whole bunch of baddies, one of these issues would crop up and kill the buzz.

All the beautiful graphics in the world can't save a game as badly designed as Genji. Unless you're looking for nothing more than a pretty face, stay well away from this mediocre-at-best effort.—**ADAM**


The "big and slow" character is actually useful for once

Still screenshots don't do the game's visuals justice. It seriously looks about a dozen times better in motion

Kamui mode and its button-sequence minigames make a return

Shizuka's unique fighting style performs very well against groups of enemies

BOTTOM LINE 6

> Concept: Hmm, let's see. Let's have some hacking! Yeah, yeah, and maybe some slashing! Brilliant!

> Graphics: Amazing. The PS3 is truly a capable machine. The outdoor environments in particular are unparalleled

> Sound: What the heck kind of accents do these characters have? Whatever "flavor" they're supposed to have, they're simply bad

> Playability: Constantly having to attack off-screen enemies is seriously the least of this game's problems

> Entertainment: Maybe if every other PS3 launch title is sold out and you really need something to slide into that slot, this'll serve

> Replay Value: Low

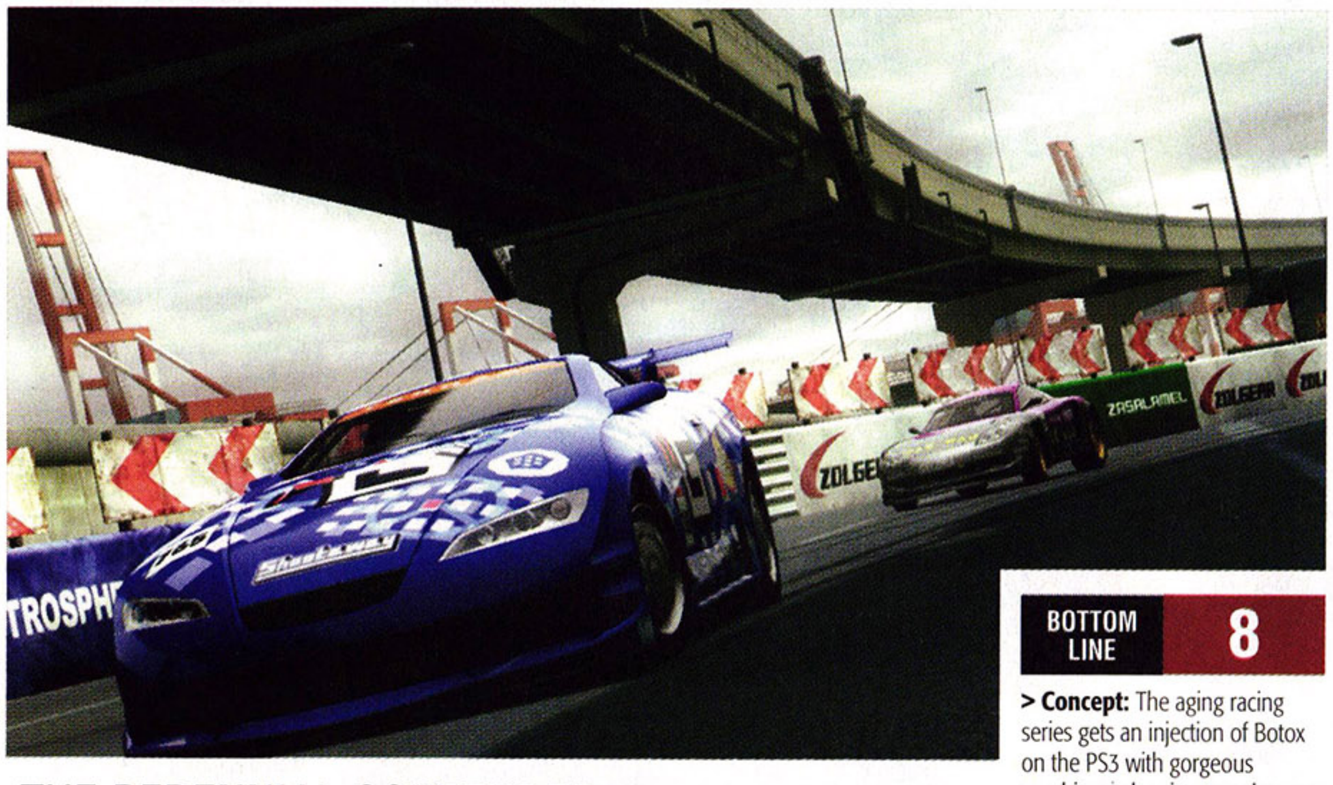
Second Opinion 6.5

While the graphics are most definitely next-gen, Genji's gameplay and level design are so five years ago I half expected the game to ask me if I could score it some good tickets to the Limp Bizkit concert. The game features all the classic character types you're familiar with – Big Clumsy, Quick Wimpy, Average Sword Dude, and Completely Worthless Guy – doing the same hack n' slashing you've enjoyed in games like the original Genji and the Onimusha series. It's certainly gorgeous at points, and provides a decent base of frenzied combat and a passable character advancement system. It's a shame Genji is hampered by a completely broken camera system and numerous sequences that are far more frustrating than fun. If you want to chop up a bunch of dudes on your PS3, this is one way to do it, but I really don't think this the kind of game you're dropping $600 to play.—**MATT**

PLAYSTATION 3

Ridge Racer 7

> STYLE 1 TO 2-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 14-PLAYER VIA ONLINE) **> PUBLISHER** NAMCO BANDAI **> DEVELOPER** NAMCO
> RELEASE NOVEMBER 18 **> ESRB** E



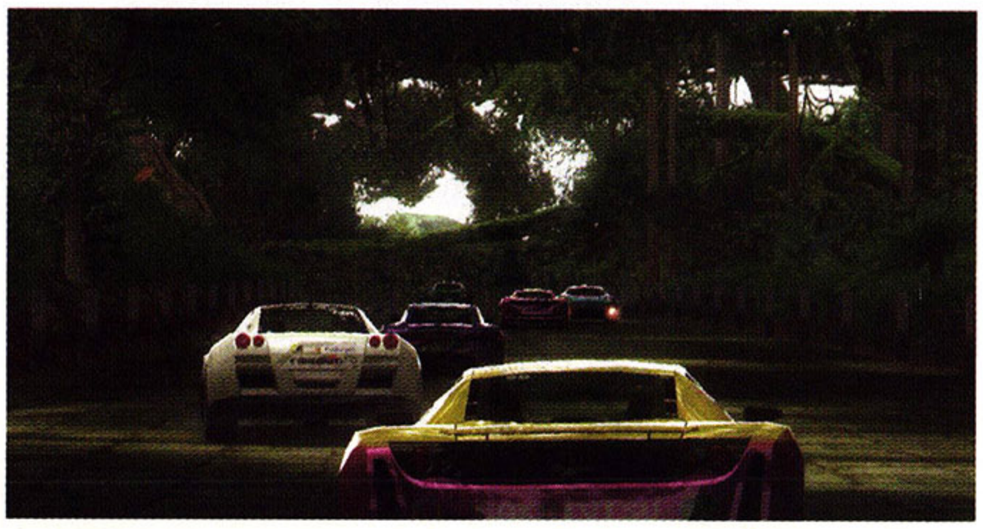
THE PERENNIAL CONTENDER

The Ridge Racer series appears at the launch of a new console as naturally as summer fades into autumn. In its own way, it's as much a part of a new PlayStation debut as people complaining about Sony, hardware shortages, and people eBaying pre-order units for big bucks. As successful as it has been, it's also one of the most static racing franchises around, staying true to its arcade formula while others in the genre attempt to push the envelope.

After a disappointing bout with Ridge Racer 6, I'd begun to give up on this series. Thankfully, I was pleasantly surprised by the seventh entry, which manages to improve the game considerably within the confines of the limitations that Namco places on it. Most notable is the new career mode, which expands beyond the odd systems of dots that represented the races in the last edition. Now, while you progress through the typical Grand Prix schedule, you're able to attempt special single events and manufacturers' challenges that allow you to open up new cars and parts dealers. While it's not radically different from anything offered in a number of racing games, it did make me feel more connected to my career progression.

Graphically, Ridge Racer 7 is a tour de force, and demonstrates just how pretty games can look on PlayStation 3. The car models are extremely detailed and can be customized for both improved performance and cosmetics. More striking are the environments, which shine in the small details like foliage and even animated cars driving high up on mountain passes in the background.

While all these improvements are welcome, they can't totally obscure the fact that this is – at the end of the day – exactly the same Ridge Racer we've been playing for years. There are still no real auto makers, and the vehicle and collision physics are largely nonexistent. Conserving nitrous adds a bit of strategy to racing, but it's still largely a matter of mastering the ever-present powerslide (an undeniably fun mechanic, to be sure). It does offer the ability to steer with the PS3's Sixaxis motion-sensing functions, which works well but failed to convince me to eschew the traditional setup. While I'm sure hardcore fans will be well pleased, there are so many ways in which Ridge Racer could build off an already solid base.—**MATT**



BOTTOM LINE 8

> Concept: The aging racing series gets an injection of Botox on the PS3 with gorgeous graphics and an improved career mode

> Graphics: Ridge Racer has always looked good, but ver. 7.0 dramatically steps up the visual quality

> Sound: Fans love its trademark smooth techno. For the rest of us, it sounds like lite-jazz Muzak with a drum machine

> Playability: The recently added nitrous appears again, but it's still all about powersliding

> Entertainment: Ridge Racer continues to rest on its laurels, albeit very pretty and finely tuned laurels

> Replay Value: Moderately High

Second Opinion 7.5

Acting as a nice showpiece for how clean and sharp the PS3 can look, Ridge Racer gives this launch the same thing it's been offering systems for years – a solid if predictable racer with all the personality of an apricot. Luckily for us early PS3 adopters, the new game also bumps up the gameplay in some cool ways, which is more than I can say for many entries in this series. The importance of slipstream has been ratcheted up, pushing you to deal more frequently with passing and being passed on the road. I was also impressed by the career mode, which offers a smooth interface and a nice variety of race choices. Sadly, the unbalanced AI still bugs me almost as much as it always has. As for the car physics, they're as floaty as ever, but this is Ridge Racer, man. I'm not looking for a simulation here. I want arcade fun, and Ridge Racer is still serving it up.—**MILLER**

PLAYSTATION 3

Mobile Suit Gundam: Crossfire

> STYLE 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION **> PUBLISHER** NAMCO BANDAI **> DEVELOPER** NAMCO BANDAI
> RELEASE NOVEMBER 17 **> ESRB** T

GUNDAMNED

Imagine that you've worked hard and saved for years, and finally bought the luxury sports car of your dreams. You open the door and get in for the first time, carefully adjust the mirrors, program the radio and then, once you're comfortable, take a giant dump on the seat.

That's essentially what you're doing if you spend the money on a fancy new PS3 and choose this as your launch game of choice. Mobile Suit Gundam is an abominable demon that has taken the form of a Blu-ray disc in the hopes of corrupting unsuspecting souls.

Even if you're a huge fan of the Gundam franchise, you'll be disgusted with this title. It's ugly, plays like crap, and is about as user-unfriendly as it gets. It's the Roseanne Barr of games. Forget the CG trailers you may have seen – next-gen this ain't. Gameplay doesn't respond any better than an early PS2 game, and the menu screens (of which there are a lot) are straight out of the PSone days. I'm not kidding. Even if the game weren't hideous, the gameplay is so horrible that I was tempted to declare this game a witch and have it burned. The sluggish gameplay alternates between frustrating and boring. The lock-on feature only occasionally works, and the framerate drops whenever there's more than two things on screen, or something really graphically intensive – like a tree.

I have nothing positive to say about this game. I even hate the menu screen. Perhaps the best thing I can come up with is that this miserable piece of trash is so awful that it's destined to be the worst-selling game of the PS3 launch. So maybe in 20 years, it will be rare and valuable, because people will have forgotten how truly terrible Mobile Suit Gundam: Crossfire really is.—**JEREMY**

■ **Believe it or not, the game actually looks worse in motion**

BOTTOM LINE 3.75

> Concept: "Hey, we can charge more for PS3 games! Let's inflict the new Gundam on that system, even though it's not remotely next-gen – or good!"

> Graphics: If this is the first game you see after buying your new $600 machine, you might be tempted to smash your PS3

> Sound: Like hearing the same obnoxious screams over and over? This is the game for you!

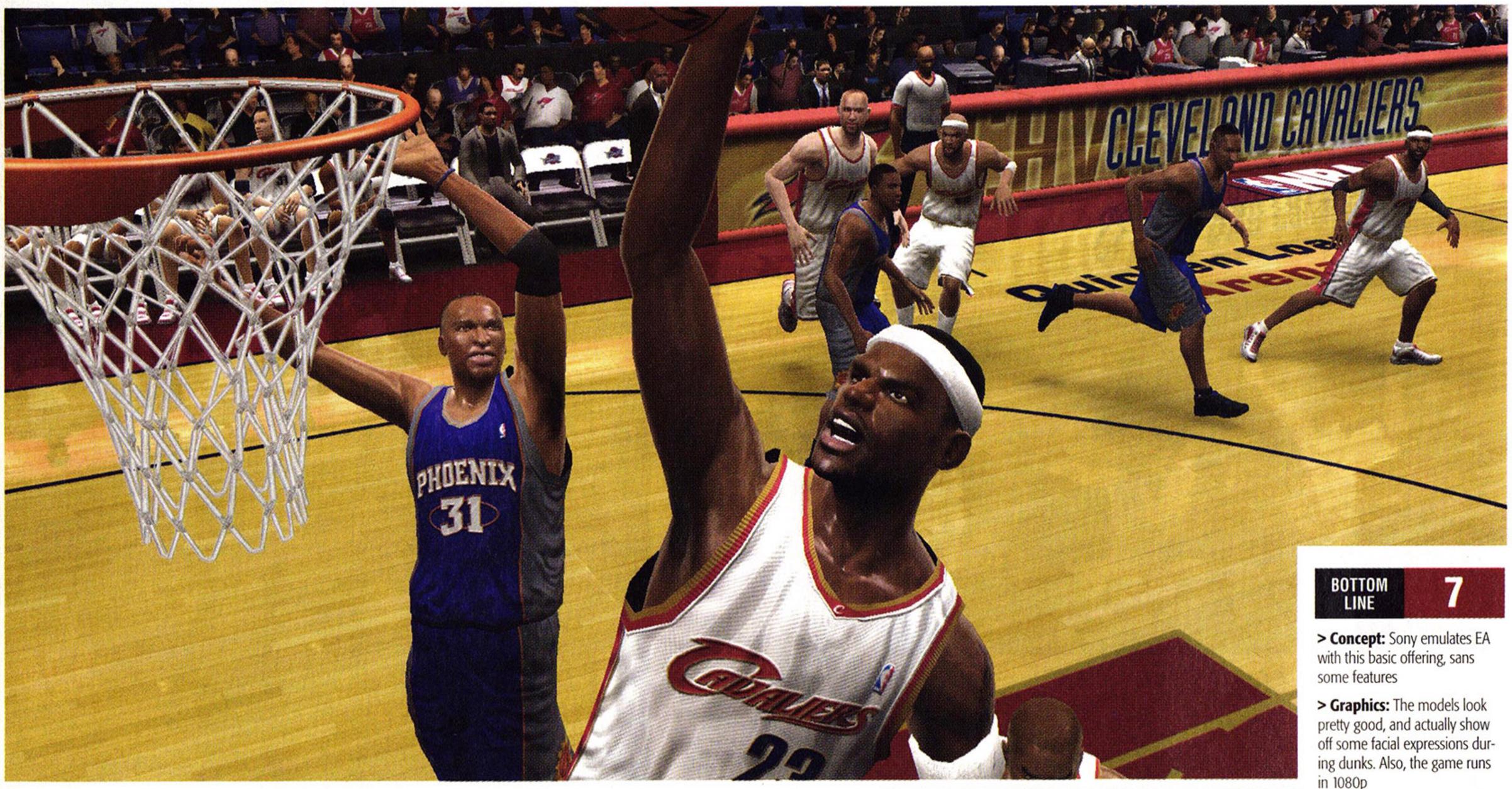
> Playability: Even drunk robots control more smoothly than these mechanical losers

> Entertainment: If you're not a Gundam fan, you should never, ever touch this game. And if you are, you won't be after playing this

> Replay Value: Low

Second Opinion 4.5

Every aspect of gameplay that Mobile Suit Gundam: Crossfire touches turns to ash and poison. It can't even pull off the diversionary "Hey, I play like a trainwreck, but don't I look next-gen?" tactic. The textures are terrible, the framerate chugs at the slightest movement, and the control scheme makes you feel like you're piloting some kind of homemade elephant. My time with Crossfire was spent one of two ways: playing one of the insufferable missions, or swearing at the TV as I waited for the next practically identical mission to load. It was almost a year before the Xbox 360 got a truly awful title, but the PS3 has one of the worst games of the year right out of the gate.—**JOE**



PLAYSTATION 3

NBA 07

> STYLE 1 TO 4-PLAYER SPORTS (2-PLAYER VIA PS3 ONLINE) **> PUBLISHER** SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT AMERICA **> DEVELOPER** SCEA SAN DIEGO **> RELEASE** NOVEMBER 19 **> ESRB** E

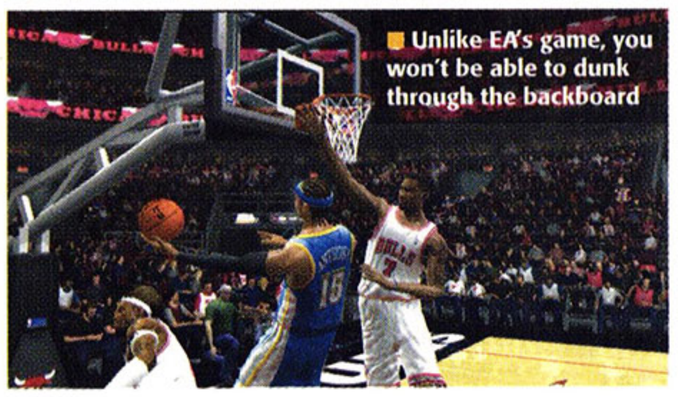
TAKING ITS OWN LIFE

I've been a recent fan of Sony's NBA series because of The Life career mode. So what happens when this PlayStation 3 edition drops that engaging feature? The game is left to stand on its gameplay – which is not, and never has been, a strong feature for the series. It's akin to the Lakers needing points and giving the ball to some guy not named Kobe.

Without The Life, this title can't quite fill the void left by its absence. The season mode is very basic and unfulfilling, and is nothing more than a calendar filled with dates and teams. There is a trio of minigames to play (which aren't online), but the only really interesting feature the game offers is a NBA Replay mode where you make your way through 50 situations in which you must complete specific goals to advance. If you go online, you can even download five additional situations every week that mirror happenings in the real-life NBA. I like this concept, but I'd also like the option to write my own history and build a dynasty in a more fleshed out career mode.

On the court, this game is dribble-for-dribble the same as the current-gen version. You'll see the same exploitable AI, and the play in general is predictable and basic. If there's one area where I think that this series is acceptable, it's the special moves. As is par for the course, they aren't super flashy or extensive, but I like that you can actually pull them off. In the other NBA games, special moves are too complex, too inconsistent to rely on, or they don't synch up correctly with their animations – leading to guys doing the funky chicken instead of driving the lane. At least in this title I know what I'm going to get every time I press a button. This more or less translates to the PS3's Sixaxis motion controls, which you use to perform special moves (or you can just use the buttons). I quickly got used to using them, but they didn't change my opinion of the overall experience. It's too bad there aren't any post moves using the controller's motion sensing.

The noticeable graphical uptick and the Sixaxis controller are not nearly enough to warrant a purchase over Sony's own current-gen NBA title, and certainly not over the 2K series. I hope for the franchise's sake that next year doesn't simply add The Life mode to the PS3, because even that kind of positive addition would just be a sidestep to obscure the real gameplay progress that this series needs to make.—**KATO**



Unlike EA's game, you won't be able to dunk through the backboard

BOTTOM LINE 7

> Concept: Sony emulates EA with this basic offering, sans some features

> Graphics: The models look pretty good, and actually show off some facial expressions during dunks. Also, the game runs in 1080p

> Sound: There aren't any in-game announcers, but new menu songs were recorded. Weird

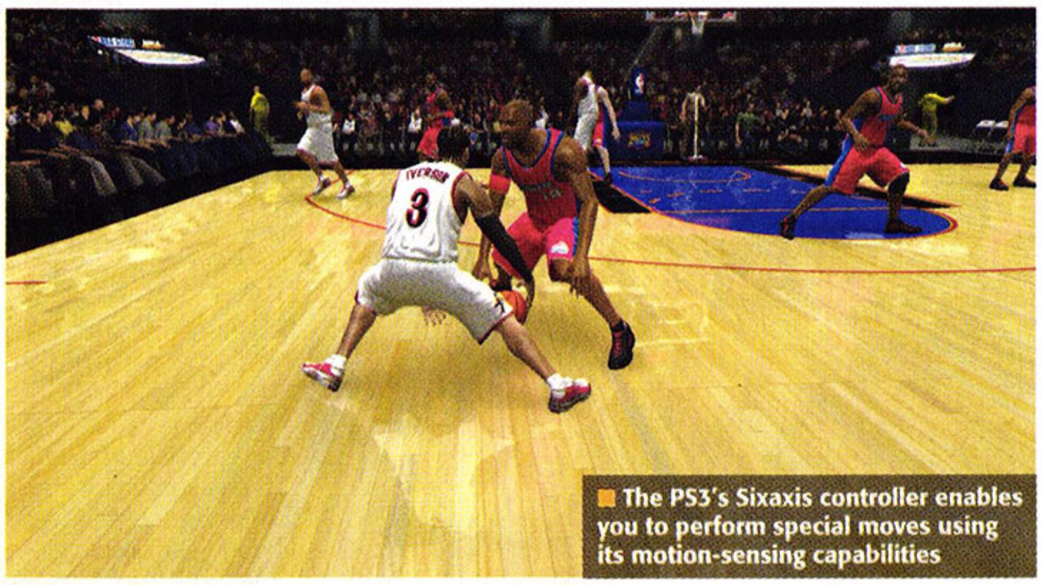
> Playability: The Sixaxis special moves are relatively easy to pull off

> Entertainment: A part of me likes the pick-up-and-play nature of the game, but this title succeeds only if you don't ask too much of it

> Replay Value: Moderate

Second Opinion 5

In just my third game of NBA 07, I threw down 94 points with Gilbert Arenas. After maxing the difficulty level, my numbers took a hit – Arenas was held to a mere 72 points his next game. The point is not to showcase my unbelievable skillz on the court, but rather to point out the excruciating lack of defense. The basketball gameplay in Sony's NBA series has always been on life support, and without the entertaining The Life mode, NBA 07 easily achieves flat-line status. Even the presentation feels dead on arrival. The game has TNT tattooed all over the court, yet features no commentary. You cannot sort individual stats or look at team statistics in the game menu. Even though the draft was in June and the game comes out well into the new NBA season, Sony was too lazy to include the rookie class. This type of performance is inexcusable on a next-gen console, or any console for that matter.—**BERTZ**



The PS3's Sixaxis controller enables you to perform special moves using its motion-sensing capabilities

The crowd is individually rendered and will come into focus as you bring the ball down the court

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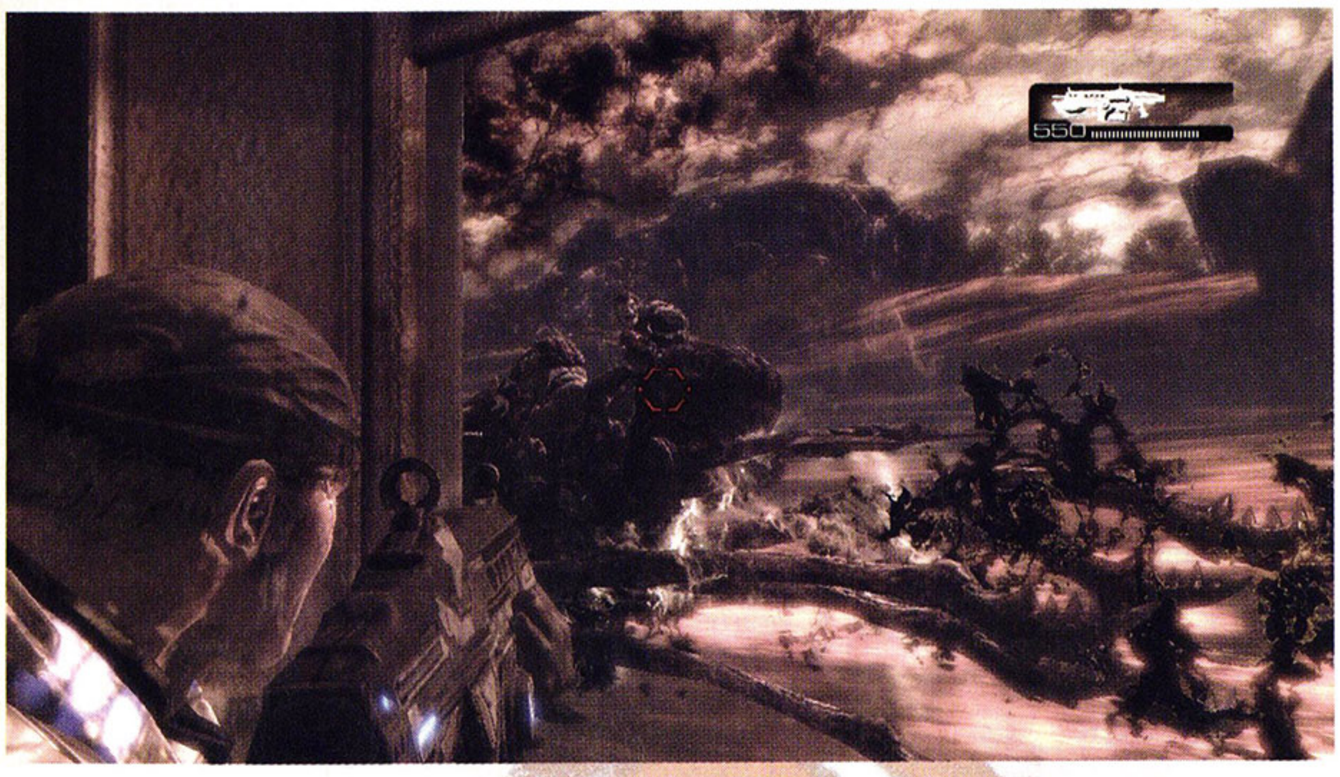
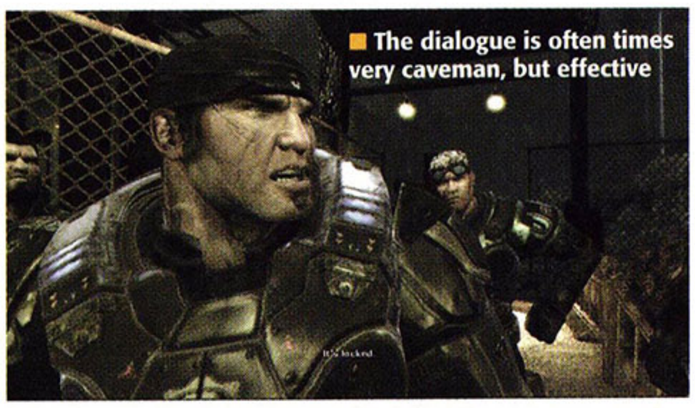



The dialogue is often times very caveman, but effective

The rain effect in Gears is second to none

The Berserkers are blind and use sound and their sense of smell to track you

XBOX 360

Gears of War

> STYLE 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE) **> PUBLISHER** MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS
> DEVELOPER EPIC GAMES **> RELEASE** NOVEMBER 7 **> ESRB** M

GAME INFORMER GAME OF THE MONTH

UNLIKE ANY OTHER

My expectations for Gears of War were quite high coming into this review. Every time I got time with the game over the past year, I couldn't help but find myself smiling with glee and dreaming of it often in the days that followed. So, to put it lightly, I expected the finished product to not only deliver a ton of water-cooler moments, but also one of the most intense roller-coaster rides in video games.

In many ways, Gears delivers. The graphics, which feature complex textures on just about every surface, are quite a sight to behold. There are times when animations don't quite match up or when the cutscenes don't run as silky smooth as I'd like them to, but overall the minor glitches are acceptable.

Play control in duck-and-cover control schemes has typically been shaky at best, and I'm pleased to report that Gears nails this to a tee. Sure, there are times when you stick to columns that you wanted to navigate around, but without failure these can be attributed to user error over game mechanics.

Gears' enemy and team intelligence is also very well-executed. When you look at all the overall parts, it seems like the single-player simply can't miss.

Unfortunately, the campaign mode does manage to falter in a couple of areas – most notably the story. The lead role of Marcus Fenix as a tough-as-nails grunt who speaks like a *Predator*-era Jesse "The Body" Ventura is almost too much. While his over-the-top dudespeak is somewhat entertaining, it's mostly groan-inducing. Many lines are just plain bad, as is most of the story – simply because it never really goes anywhere. It's just a series of events that are tied to the Locust Horde invasion and your team's trial by fire. This is a real shame, as there are some good elements in Gears' story line; it just doesn't do anything with them.

The misfires continue in other areas as well. Most of the giant, oh-god-I've-been-waiting-for-this-the-entire-game moments are less than spectacular. The Hammer of Dawn, a weapon that calls in a laser strike from an orbiting satellite, should be the most awesome weapon I have ever seen. Instead, it's a simple stream of light that delivers next to no payoff when it rains its payload of death from above. Most of the boss battles are similarly disappointing, with simple solutions that rarely challenge the player to use the skills you learn during most of the game.

Now I must point out that most of these gripes, while annoying, are most certainly minor (but need to be clarified because you know you wanted Gears to be a 10). Most of the game, which is spent basking in the duck-and-cover mechanic, is pure genius. Hiding and moving from point to point as you blast through the game's well-designed and executed encounters is extremely enjoyable.

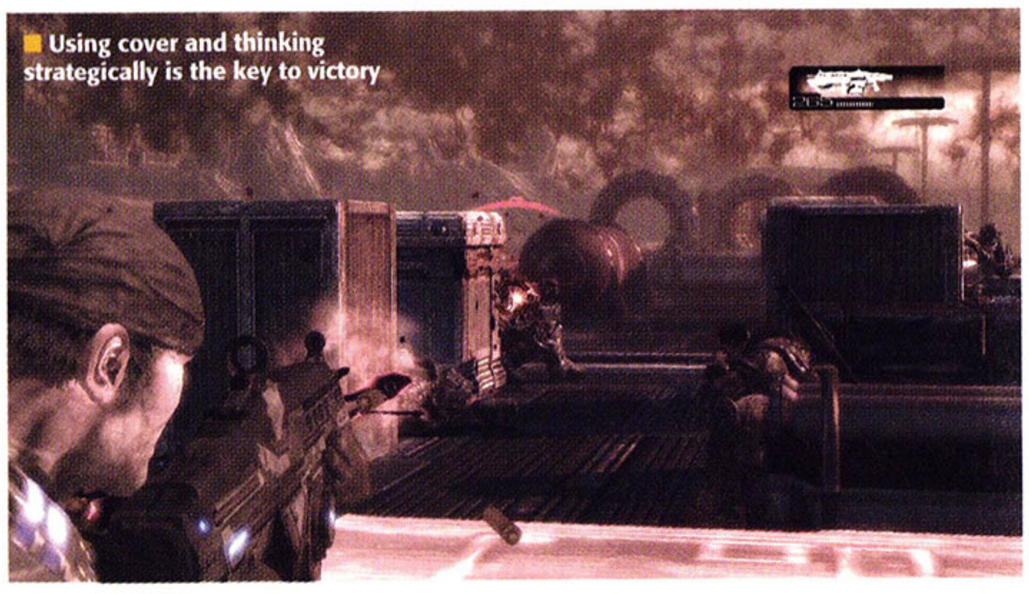
There are two standout pieces of the game that really make it click. Instead of the standard reload, Gears offers an active reload system that lets you double click the reload button along a standard golf swing-esque meter. Time it right and your reload time shrinks. Miss it, and your on-screen character will curse, the reload will jam, and the time it takes to get back into the action will be significantly longer. The second is the chainsaw bayonet. Getting up close and personal to deliver this finisher is satisfying on so many levels.

The game's enjoyment doubles when you play it co-op with a friend (which can be done through split-screen, a local network, or through Xbox Live). This is one of the best co-op games I have played, especially when you crank the difficulty past Casual and up into the Hardcore and Insane levels. Working with your buddy to flank and outwit the enemy is a blast. Plus, there are many points in the missions where you get to split up and work together to conquer the various challenges.

The final piece to the Gear's puzzle is the online multiplayer, which is where this game really shines. Sadly, there are only three fairly similar game types, but working together and trying to out-maneuver your opponents is one of the game's greatest charms, and in multiplayer matches the intensity certainly steps it up a notch.

Gears of War is, without a doubt, the must-play Xbox 360 title of 2006. I have some minor qualms with the single-player game, but as a co-op or multiplayer game it's a treat unlike any other. The gameplay is fresh, and the graphics are simply stunning.—**ANDY**

Some of the bosses are big...really big


Using cover and thinking strategically is the key to victory

BOTTOM LINE 9.5

> Concept: Huge dudes with huge guns shoot huge enemies for huge enjoyment

> Graphics: The entire world is a thing of rendered beauty

> Sound: The voice-work and soundtrack are acceptable, but certainly not outstanding. The closing credits song is either really horrible or really funny – I'm not sure which

> Playability: This is by far the best use and execution of the duck-and-cover mechanic, and will surely inspire plenty of wannabes

> Entertainment: The single-player experience is very good, but where this game shines is in its multiplayer and co-op play

> Replay Value: High

Second Opinion 9.5

Nearly all of the superlative praise that has been directed toward Gears of War has turned out to be deserved. Gears' design strategy of slowing down the shooting action works incredibly well, and creates more tactically focused battles. When facing competent opponents, stepping out into the open is likely to get you killed in short order – which engenders a tense atmosphere that is entirely unlike the frantic pace of most action titles. Even though the vaunted cover mechanic doesn't change the way you use cover all that much, it generally makes it easier to control the action from Gears' third-person perspective. Once in a while you'll meet your end by sticking to walls instead of diving out of the way, but those occasions are few and far between. This smooth gameplay package, wrapped around the genre-defying combat mechanics, puts Gears of War solidly into the upper echelon of this year's crop of games. Except for the unbelievably bad story and dialogue that mar the otherwise-solid campaign, there is almost nothing negative to say about this game.—**ADAM**

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TEEN T CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Violence

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PSP® PlayStation Portable

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Respect the tank

XBOX 360

Call of Duty 3

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 24-PLAYER VIA PS3 ONLINE OR XBOX LIVE) **> PUBLISHER** ACTIVISION
> DEVELOPER TREYARCH **> RELEASE** NOVEMBER 7 **> ESRB** M

INEVITABILITY

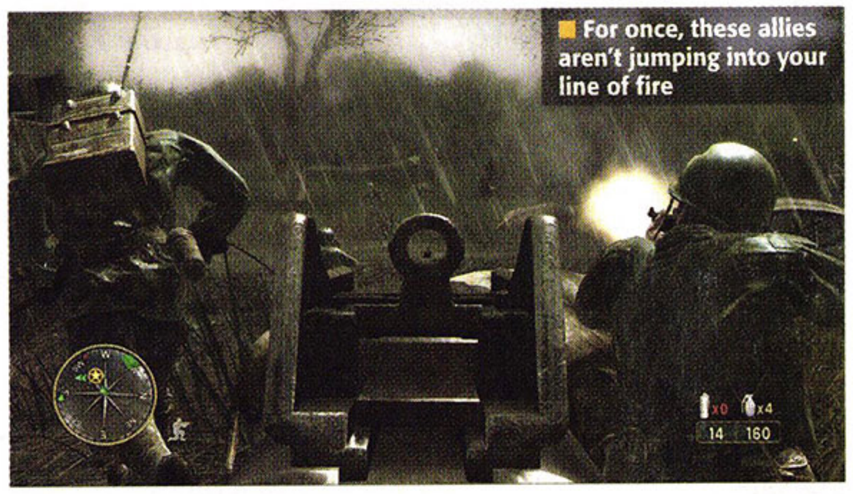
If you've paid any attention whatsoever to the way that most big publishers handle their franchises, the fate of the once-seminal Call of Duty franchise should come as no surprise. Yearly sequels to big series – even if that timeframe precludes any kind of real creativity going into the project – are the preferred way to get the maximum profit out of the investment. Publisher Activision passed the reins from series creator Infinity Ward to Activision-owned Treyarch for Call of Duty 3, and the developer clearly didn't go far out of its way to improve the Call of Duty formula.

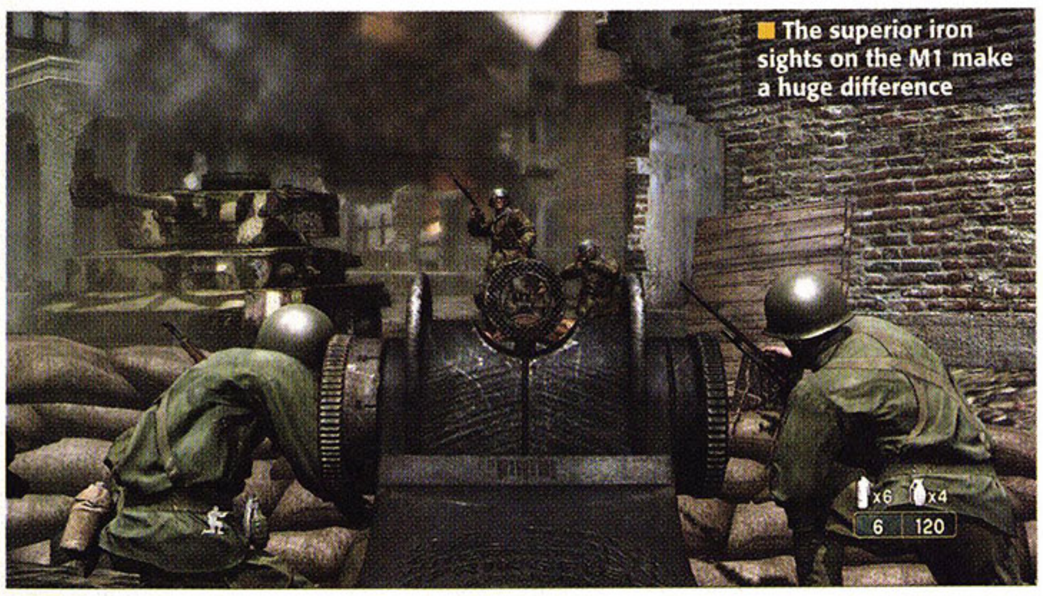
During every minute of playtime, I continually questioned Activision's decision to grace it with the "3" moniker. Everything about this title screams expansion pack. The Nazis look, sound, and fight the same. The graphics are only marginally improved. The level design is of similar quality, and several of the maps still use cheap infinitely spawning enemy tricks to artificially inflate the difficulty. The few new elements that Treyarch added to the mix, drivable vehicles and button-press minigames for actions like setting charges, are nothing more than gimmicks that hardly affect the gameplay. Even so, the core action that was created in Call of Duty 2 and is present here is solid and fun enough to mostly transcend these issues.

At the end of the day, shooting Nazis is a hell of a lot of fun – especially when you have such a great framework to do it in. The presentation is nearly flawless, with amazing smoke effects, the best audio in the genre to date, and gorgeous environments that run the gamut from deciduous forests to bombed-out urban centers. The weapons handle perfectly. Treyarch has also done an admirable job of anchoring the plot of the game in the real history of the war; I even learned a few things about the post-Normandy European theater. If getting your World War II on is what you're after, Call of Duty 3 has you covered, even if it won't blow your mind in the process.

Multiplayer, on the other hand, is as skillfully implemented as any FPS player could ask. A variety of modes ranging from classic team deathmatches to variants on the concept of node control present nearly limitless replayability. The several kits available each bring something unique to the team, and most have an interesting secondary ability like mines or rifle-mounted grenades that allow for creative tactics. Map design is likewise outstanding, with good use of all three dimensions and generally well-placed spawn points. A quick, easy matchmaking system and ranking ladders make it incredibly simple to get in and get competitive within seconds. Online multiplayer doesn't get much better than this.

Call of Duty 3 is a legitimately good game that beats the pants off of plenty of products on the market this holiday season. There's little to complain about outside of the lack of innovation. However, it pains me deeply to see this franchise, which has done so much to push the first-person shooter genre forward, moving down the dark path of mediocrity that Medal of Honor has been walking for the last several years. Here's hoping that it doesn't forever dominate Call of Duty's destiny, and that the yearly update mandate doesn't sap everything that made the franchise special in the first place.—**ADAM**


For once, these allies aren't jumping into your line of fire


The superior iron sights on the M1 make a huge difference

In case you're still living in the Stone Age, split-screen is available

Drivable vehicles add a lot to multiplayer

BOTTOM LINE 8.5

> Concept: Crank out a by-the-numbers single-player game while tuning up the online play to new heights

> Graphics: It's hard to find any faults in this amazing presentation. The smoke effects are particularly awesome

> Sound: Why do the Nazis insist on referring to me as French infantry, even when I'm playing as an American, British, Canadian, or even Polish soldier?

> Playability: The Halo-style health mechanic still feels weird and out of place in a WWII setting

> Entertainment: No, it's not innovative or new in any way. You can't ask for much more polish in the multiplayer, though

> Replay Value: Moderately High

Second Opinion 8.75

By this point in my military career, I've smoked enough Krauts to make Patton jealous. I winced at the thought of picking up my M1 Garand for one more campaign in the European Theater, but Call of Duty 3 rewarded me with a well-tuned and frantic war experience. The game won't win any creativity awards, but it does offer a good 10 hours of Nazi hunting for Hitler (er, History) Channel fanatics and die-hard fraggers. Rather than throw you into various theatres of war spread throughout Europe, COD 3 focuses on the Normandy Breakout in France. The Joes, Brits, and Poles work together to liberate the white-flag friendly Frenchies after they graciously welcomed ze Germans into their cities. The centralized focus works well, as each battle feels like it directly effects the others. Like its single-player counterpart, the multiplayer mode offers no real innovation, but that hardly keeps the action from being addicting.—**BERTZ**

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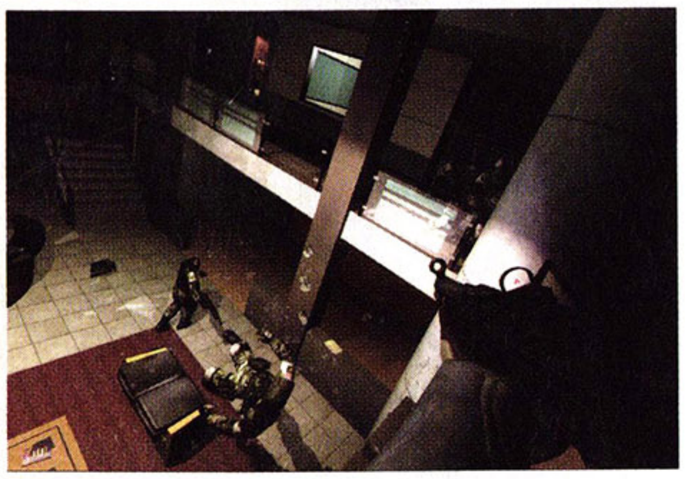


Despite what it looks like in these screens, guns do get fired in this game...a lot

XBOX 360

F.E.A.R.

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 16-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE) **> PUBLISHER** VIVENDI GAMES **> DEVELOPER** DAY 1 STUDIOS
> RELEASE OCTOBER 31 **> ESRB** M

OUR PANTS ARE STILL WET

If I can only say one thing about F.E.A.R. it would be that it earns its name. The game is filled with tons of "what the hell," jump-out-of-your-seat terrifying moments that would be right at home in the best Japanese horror flick. One instant you're shooting bad guys and the next you are falling into a room filled waist-high with blood, the torturous sounds of a science experiment gone wrong ringing in your ear. Later you're diving through a window to avoid a freaky little girl with a striking resemblance to Samara from *The Ring* who is causing the air around you to explode.

As cool as the horror bits are, they are somewhat counterbalanced by the story, which adds nothing to the experience. Because these horror elements worked so well, I wished all the more that a compelling story were there to complement them. Instead, I got a vague tale about a failed government project and some creepy psychic/psychotic antagonists.

On the gameplay side, you have a pretty standard FPS, with one exception. In F.E.A.R. you can slow down time. While it's nothing we haven't seen before, it is the crucial gameplay element that elevates this FPS above average. Slow-mo does two things. First, it lets you revel in the gorgeous destruction you cause, like cutting guys in half with your shotgun. Second, it makes the game playable – without slow-mo, F.E.A.R. is brutally hard. Not that this is a bad thing; the challenging enemy AI and fast gameplay speed merely solidify your reliance on this power. I sat through the whole game with my finger poised over the slow-mo button, and enjoyed every minute of it. This feature truly makes your anticipation for the next shootout all the more thrilling.

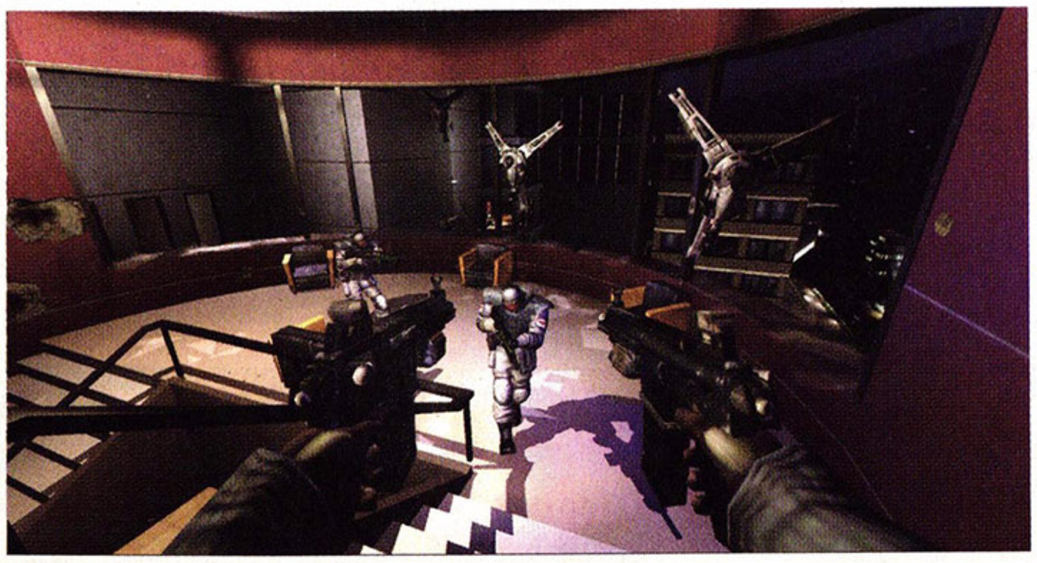
However, given my score, you already know this game isn't flawless. It drags a little in the middle. The wicked-cool horror bits all but disappear until the end, when they resurface. This middle section is also where the action falters; there is more switch throwing and level backtracking here than anywhere else in the game, and it just isn't as fun. Plus, the firefights are more spread out – and by that I mean poorly paced.

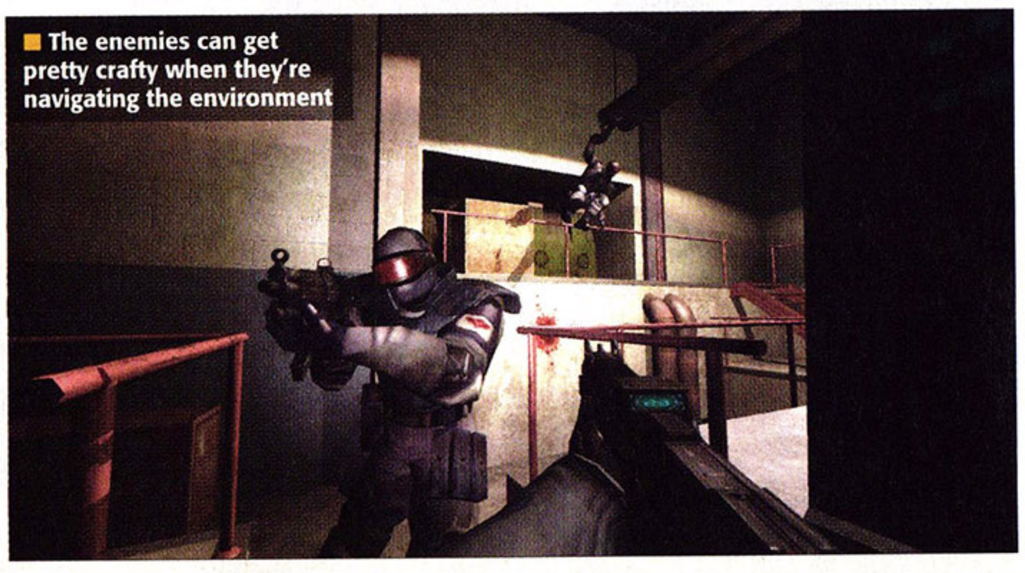
F.E.A.R. also gives off an interesting illusion that you can take multiple paths through the levels, but this is not the case as every fork is just a different bend that leads to the next open area. This ends up being a problem when navigating the levels, and the lack of a map feature doesn't help things. Many of the areas look very similar, and you'll quickly tire of wandering through warehouses and office buildings through most of the game. All these complaints seem more forgivable once you take over a turret and gun down a dozen foes. So, if you are looking for a shooter with some teeth to play in the dark, F.E.A.R. is definitely worth a try.—**BEN**

HOW DOES THAT WORK?

Wondering how slo-mo works in multiplayer? So were we. A booster is available in some Deathmatch and CTF games, and the player who finds this booster first has the option to slow down the reaction speed for everyone in the game. Only that person (or team) with the booster remains unaffected. If killed though, anyone else can pick up the booster. While not revolutionary, this does add a nice spin on F.E.A.R.'s decent multiplayer.

It's actually a really bad idea to get this close





The enemies can get pretty crafty when they're navigating the environment

BOTTOM LINE 8.5

> Concept: All the spooky moments and atmosphere from a good Japanese horror movie mixed in with the brutal action of any good FPS

> Graphics: Great PC-looking visuals...from a year ago. This game doesn't look out of place on the 360, but it's not the sharpest game on the box either. The improvements on an HDTV are substantial

> Sound: Spooky and atmospheric; the effects and music are how this game sells the horror aspects so well

> Playability: The controls are solid. Don't forget about the slow-mo ability or you'll have one hell of a time trying to get through the more challenging parts

> Entertainment: If you like heart-stopping scary moments and gory shootouts, then this is your game

> Replay Value: Moderately High

Second Opinion 8

Maybe it's because I've played this game before, but F.E.A.R. doesn't get my blood pumping like it once did. It comes with all the little irritations that characterize PC-to-console conversions, like drops in the framerate during intense action and slightly over-generous auto-aim. Or maybe it's just because I've played more intense shooters since the original came out. For whatever reason, F.E.A.R. now feels more like a good game than a great game. And it is a good game – the firefights are still fun, especially when using the slo-mo effect, and some of the creepy parts are downright unsettling. Those who have played through F.E.A.R. on the PC don't have much reason to pick up the console version, but if you missed it, this is a good opportunity to play a solid shooter with some neat ideas. —**JEREMY**

Some of the new environments are quite different for the series

XBOX 360

Splinter Cell: Double Agent

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 6-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE OR SYSTEM LINK) **> PUBLISHER** UBISOFT **> DEVELOPER** UBISOFT SHANGHAI **> RELEASE** OCTOBER 31 **> ESRB** M

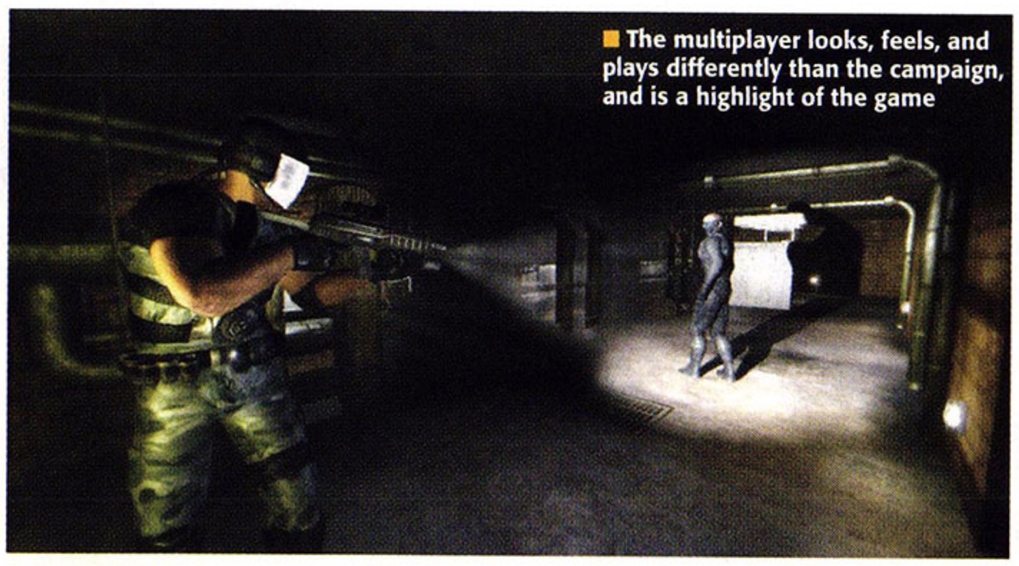
BALANCING ACT

Splinter Cell: Double Agent is intended to be somewhat of a rebirth for the franchise, a new beginning that switches up the gameplay to both appease fans and draw in new players. This entry does indeed bring the franchise its most significant change since the addition of multiplayer in Pandora Tomorrow, in the form of undercover missions and dual objectives. But do these new features manage that tricky balance of keeping fans happy and allowing new players to jump onboard? Yes and no.

Ever since the aforementioned second title, the Splinter Cell games have really been two in one: single and multi. For me, single-player has always been the main draw, yet Double Agent's campaign is alternately brilliant and disappointing. In earlier games, Sam would go from mission to mission until the end of the game, but now these missions are interspersed between visits to the JBA headquarters, home of the terrorist group Sam has infiltrated. Headquarter stages require the player to complete objectives for the JBA and his true bosses at the National Security Agency, and it's not always possible to accomplish both. These stages deliver some of the most tense, nerve-shattering moments in the series without so much as a gunshot. Snooping on your so-called friends when you're supposed to be completing the tasks they gave you is incredibly pulse-pounding, especially since being caught means game over. This undercover dual objective gameplay is a fantastic addition to the series, making it the most authentic-feeling spy game yet, and I can't imagine the franchise ever going back.

On the other hand, the traditional Splinter Cell missions are a bit of a letdown. There are some cool environments (like an African war zone, a sunny cruise ship, and a frozen wasteland), but none offer the great open level design of the series' last entry, Chaos Theory. Unlike that game, every stage feels like it has only one "right" way to do it. Deviate from the intended path and you're dead. Considering how open and free the headquarter levels feel, the mission stages feel frustratingly linear. Coupled with spotty AI that seems omniscient at times, these stages just didn't feel as fun as the previous games. The presentation on your missions is more minimal as well. Gone are the shadow and noise meters, replaced with a light on your character that displays whether you're hidden, at risk, or spotted. It's a simpler stealth system, but one that does away with much of the previous games' subtlety.

Then there is the fantastic multiplayer, which has been completely redesigned with new players in mind. The spies versus mercs setup remains the same, but nearly everything else has been reworked to make some of the most uniquely addictive multiplayer around. The ways it has been made more user-friendly are almost too numerous to list, and the level design is stellar. Even players who have been turned off by Splinter Cell's notoriously hostile online climate owe it to themselves to check it out. I came for the single-player, which I liked rather than loved, and stayed for the multiplayer, which I used to like and now adore. I have a feeling many other fans will feel the same way.—**JEREMY**



The multiplayer looks, feels, and plays differently than the campaign, and is a highlight of the game

Some levels have special moves, like breaking through ice to drag an enemy under

BOTTOM LINE 9

> Concept: Sam Fisher goes undercover in a new game designed to open up the series to more players

> Graphics: Like all Splinter Cell games, Double Agent looks amazing

> Sound: The voice work is still great, but the music is far more forgettable than Chaos Theory's

> Playability: The gameplay has been streamlined from previous games, but should be instantly familiar to veterans

> Entertainment: The campaign mode has more ups than downs, and the multiplayer is flat out fantastic

> Replay Value: High

Second Opinion 8

In my mind, Sam Fisher is a vampire. This guy should never have the opportunity to get a tan. He is one with the shadows and night. Strangely, in his next-gen debut, our stealthy protagonist spends a good deal of time basking in the sun. This, of course, leads to a drastically different Splinter Cell experience. Although loaded with amazing water cooler moments, such as having the ability to lunge through a sheet of ice to pull a soldier down to a watery grave, the sunny settings greatly diminish the thrill of stalking your prey from the shadows. I found myself running and gunning, which really isn't Sam's style. Taking another wrong turn, most of the missions follow a trail of breadcrumbs and lose the open-ended brilliance that pushed players to think outside of the box. On the multiplayer end, the competitive matches have been dumbed down, and co-op has been butchered and is nothing more than the competitive matches with bots. All told, this game feels like Splinter Cell Lite. It still delivers breathtaking visuals and amazing moments, but like Sam sunbathing, this installment loses the series' identity.—**REINER**

XBOX 360

FIFA Soccer 07

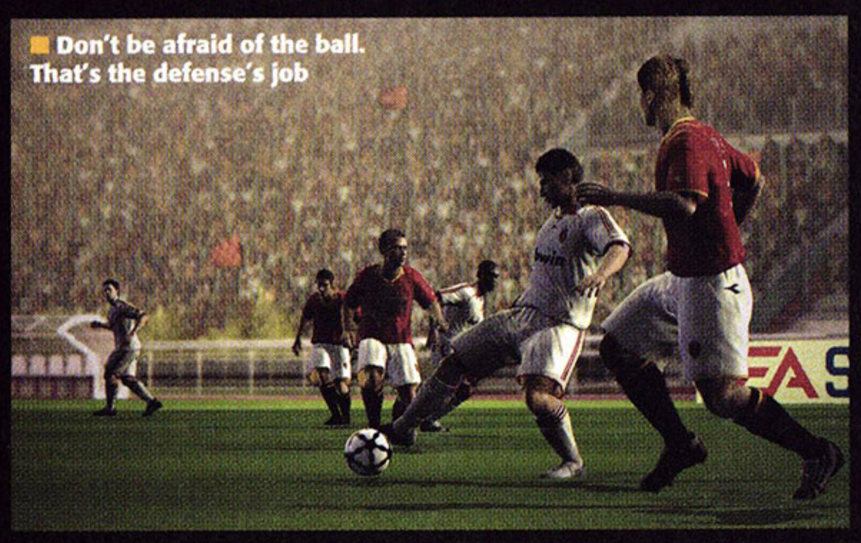
> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER SPORTS (2 OR 4-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE) > **PUBLISHER** EA SPORTS > **DEVELOPER** EA CANADA > **RELEASE** OCTOBER 31 > **ESRB** E

WHERE'S THE BALL GOING TO BOUNCE?

Change is something that happens all too often in the FIFA series. It's usually for the worse, when controls drop out or promising directions go unfulfilled. Hopefully this aimlessness will stop after this year, as developer EA Canada has finally taken the step forward that we've been begging them to for all these years with the new ball physics.

Because the ball is treated as a separate entity than the players, it creates much more realistic and unpredictable situations on the pitch. Because the ball is no longer just a magnet to be attracted to players' feet, you can use your imagination more in constructing an attack. Although the free ball physics improve your ability to put the ball into open space, its positive effect on the game is tempered by the fact that who actually gets possession of the ball is often pre-determined. So you may be running to the ball and think you're going to gain possession, but a late-arriving player may easily get the ball instead. This dichotomy between a free-moving ball and players who sometimes lack their own freedom can be jarring. When you take into account the game's bad AI (which makes playing defense an uphill battle), you can actually say that the ball is smarter than the players themselves.

Add in the fact that this game features a paltry six international leagues (as opposed to the over 20 of some past FIFAs), the double-team defensive feature still doesn't work, players' collision fields are too large, the AI shows very little movement in the box on your corner kicks, and that shots and passes have little accuracy, and you'll find that this game has taken steps back which counter its promising progress – not unlike the American national squad. We hope this is a way forward for the FIFA franchise, but you never know, next year they might just ditch everything and start from scratch – again.—**KATO**



■ **Don't be afraid of the ball. That's the defense's job**

BOTTOM LINE 7.25

> **Concept:** FIFA tries to do something new – and lo and behold, it actually works!

> **Graphics:** They've stayed away from the close-ups of the waxy facial models, so that's good

> **Sound:** Who cares how star-studded the soundtrack is when the game has these kinds of problems

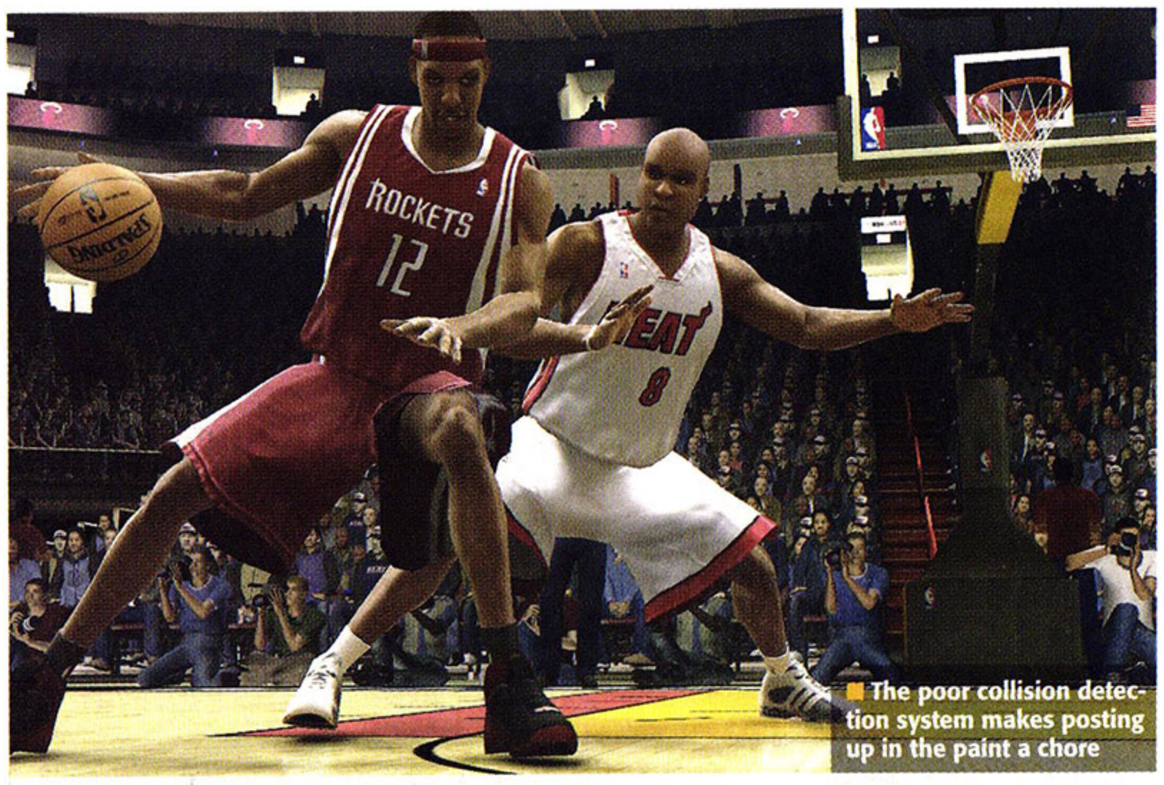
> **Playability:** Players' movements aren't very graceful, and playing defense is a chore

> **Entertainment:** As heartening as it is to see this series make progress, it's not enough

> **Replay Value:** Moderately High

Second Opinion 7.5

The real ball physics on display in this year's 360 FIFA are the future of video game soccer, as far as I'm concerned – too bad the player AI isn't up to the task of handling the randomness that results. Their inability to get true control over the action is frustrating, even while it's simultaneously mesmerizing to watch the uncanny movement of the ball. Automatic player switches happen at the strangest of times, and individuals won't always recognize the presence of the ball, even when it's clearly been passed to them. The defensive game feels somehow off as well. Even with all of these drawbacks, the action is intense and FIFA is still a kick. Minus AI issues, most of the game mechanics are spot-on. Plus, the visuals are a major step up from last year's waxy faces and stiff movement. Here's hoping next year the rest of the game catches up to the snazzy physics.—**MILLER**



■ **The poor collision detection system makes posting up in the paint a chore**

XBOX 360

NBA Live 07

> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER SPORTS (2-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE) > **PUBLISHER** EA SPORTS > **DEVELOPER** EA CANADA > **RELEASE** SEPTEMBER 26 > **ESRB** E

TOP PLAYER? TRY BENCHWARMER

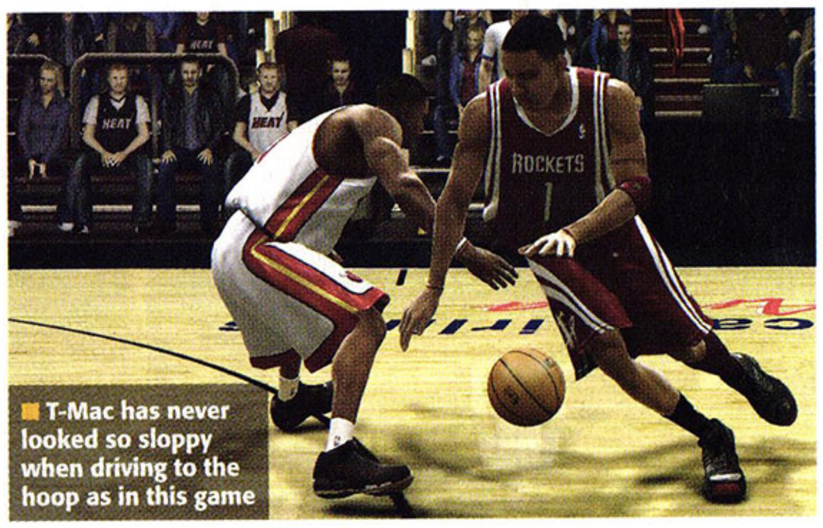
NBA Live 07 for the 360 is the video game equivalent of the New York Knicks – a once-great franchise that can't seem to finds its keys to victory. For the sake of all NBA Live fans, let's hope Isaiah Thomas isn't making any of the decisions at EA, or they could be in for a long, painful decade of bad basketball.

The list of major faults in this game is longer than a roll call of Wilt Chamberlain's one-night stands. Shooting motions are jerky, as if players are being pulled back to the ground by a tractor beam. Dunk animations move with superhuman speed and no boundaries. Dwayne Wade's arm went through the backboard more than one time for an absurd dunk. The collision detection is laughable when players drive to the hoop, and the opposing team AI is on par with the Washington Generals. Even stacked teams like Dallas never go to the bench unless someone is having foul trouble.

The gameplay is equally unrefined. Scoring is as simple as feeding a big man like KG in the post and pressing the X button. When players aren't going through backboards, they are missing wide-open dunks. Offensive rebounds are off the charts when players miss free throws.

The game presentation also lacks refinement. The arena sound and commentary are solid (if you are into listening to Steve Kerr make a fool of himself), but the stat boxes often disappear as quickly as they appear and rarely seem to show up when it seems relevant.

On the plus side, EA shored up the 360 version's lack of features (a full All-Star Weekend is included on top of the deep Dynasty mode). But the list of shortcomings is so long that you wonder how the company has the cajones to charge $10 more for this version over the current-gen titles. Those are some big brass basketballs.—**BERTZ**



■ **T-Mac has never looked so sloppy when driving to the hoop as in this game**

BOTTOM LINE 5.25

> **Concept:** Last year's 360 effort was called for a foul with its weak feature set. Live 07 takes corrective measures by nearly matching the current-gen version

> **Graphics:** The player models look great – as long as they aren't in motion. These virtual superstars move with none of the grace of their on-court counterparts

> **Sound:** The great arena sounds stand out, as does Steve Kerr's inane commentary

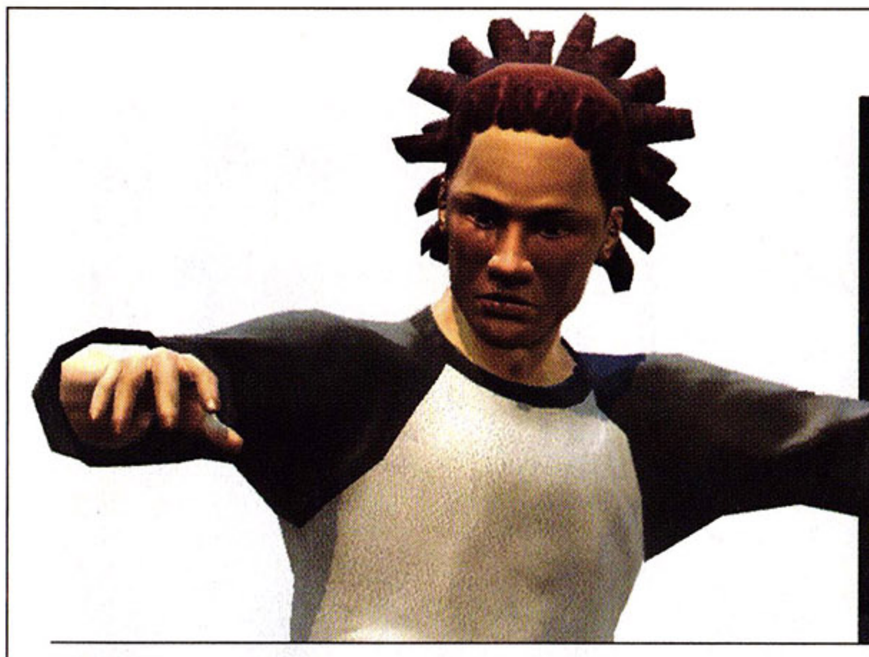
> **Playability:** Wanna score? Pass to your star in the post and hit "X." Works nearly every time, and that isn't a good thing

> **Entertainment:** The deep franchise mode is the one saving grace of this title. Forget the NBA All-Star weekend circus sideshow

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion 6

Instead of contending for the video game crown, this year's Live gets an early offseason. The new movement system only makes the game clunky, and when combined with poor AI, bad collision, auto animations, and some less than impressive Freestyle moves, this game's more awkward than Andy vs. the Globetrotters. At least the dynasty mode is more fleshed out (including NBA rumors), but it's gonna be a long season if you've got to contend with this game's problems. Here's a rumor you can investigate: EA sent out this product unfinished.—**KATO**



XBOX 360

Tony Hawk's Project 8

> STYLE 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE) **> PUBLISHER** ACTIVISION
> DEVELOPER NEVERSOFT ENTERTAINMENT **> RELEASE** NOVEMBER 7 **> ESRB** T

EVERYTHING OLD IS NEW AGAIN

Since its inception in 1999, I have been a hardcore Tony Hawk fanatic. There's something about the series' complex interface and combo system that happily puts me in front of my television searching for lines and trying to master all the games' subtle nuances.

While the level design has always been one of its hallmarks, the series has been searching for a soul ever since it changed its overall architecture with Tony Hawk's Underground. From wacky vehicles to on-foot missions, the series has slowly moved away from being about skating to just creating a giant world with lots of training missions and zany madcap antics.

Enter Project 8, Neversoft's first true next-generation product. Not only has the game been reworked with a new physics model and much-improved graphics, it also goes back to what makes the Tony Hawk series so addicting: challenging the player's skating abilities. The thing that impressed me most was the new mission structure that gives the players complete freedom to pick and choose what level challenges they wish to conquer.

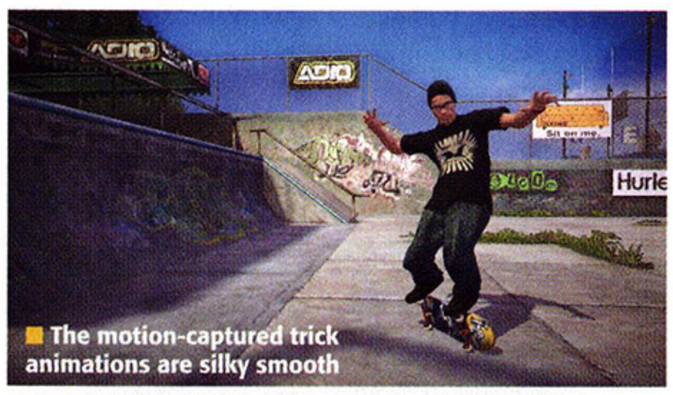
The basic framework of the game is that Tony Hawk is looking for eight elite skaters, his "Project 8" out of a field of 200 skaters. You must complete challenges of various difficulties to work your way up the ranks in hopes of achieving the elusive number one spot.

Every challenge in the game is set up so that you can complete it on any of the three difficulties at any time. Start a grind challenge, and depending on how far you take the line you can be awarded the Amateur, Pro, or Sick reward. At the beginning, there is plenty of challenge in just completing the Amateur level (and this is from someone who has beaten every single Tony Hawk game on Sick). However, since you can revisit any challenge at any time, you will often find yourself going back again and again trying to master all Project 8 has to offer.

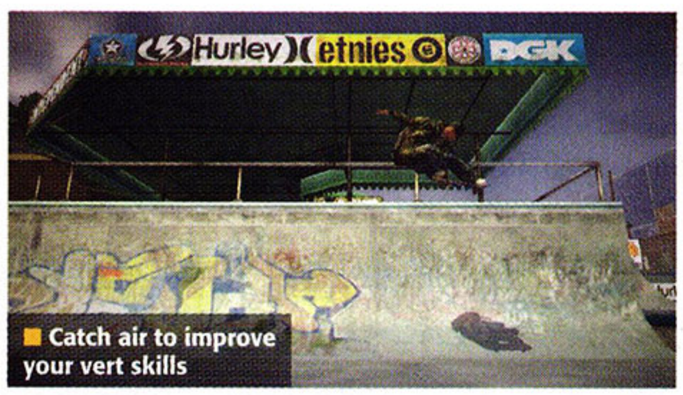
And there is a lot here. While the game can be "beaten" by completing most of the Amateur challenges and breaking into the Project 8, it takes a lot of skill and a lot of time to take the top spot. In fact, it's extremely difficult, which – in the mind of this Tony Hawk fanatic – is the best thing to happen to this series in a long time. The game is no longer one giant training mode, it's a real skating game with real skating challenges for all players.

That said, the game has its flaws. Like any first-generation game, there are oddities since the gameplay engine hasn't been streamlined from iteration to iteration. The physics, while new and improved, also bring in a plethora of odd gameplay abnormalities that sometimes frustrate more than entertain. These are growing pains I'm willing to deal with, however, as the game design is simply the best Neversoft has made since Tony Hawk 3, which is still one of my favorites.

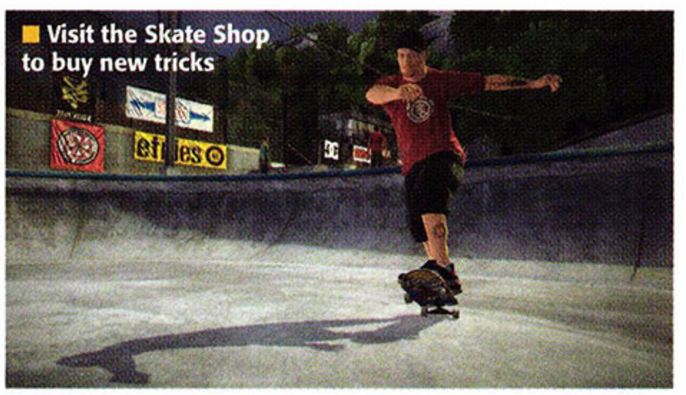
If you love Tony Hawk, there is no reason not to pick up Project 8; it's really that good. The new Nail the Trick mode, which enables the player to control each foot's movement with the analog sticks, adds yet another new move to Tony's long list of techniques. I'm happy to report that it works well within the established arsenal of moves. Add it up, and you will be playing this Tony Hawk both online and off well into the new year.—**ANDY**

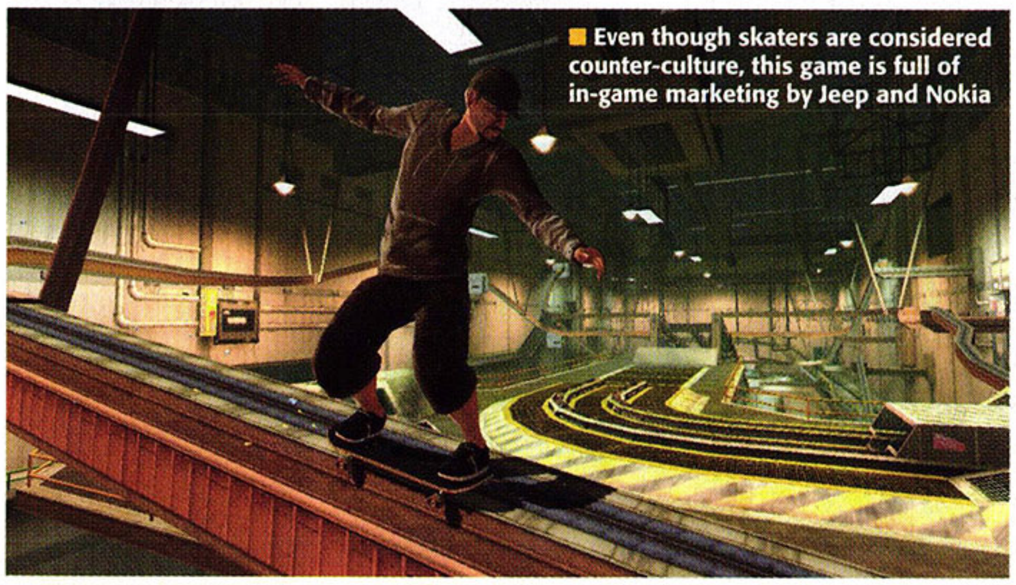


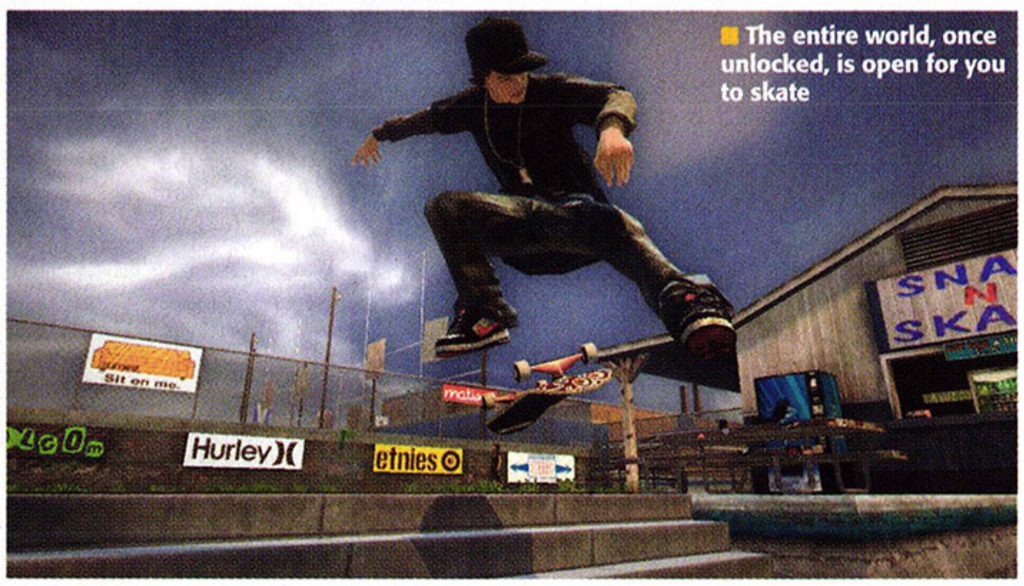
The motion-captured trick animations are silky smooth



Catch air to improve your vert skills


Visit the Skate Shop to buy new tricks


Even though skaters are considered counter-culture, this game is full of in-game marketing by Jeep and Nokia



The entire world, once unlocked, is open for you to skate

BOTTOM LINE 9

> Concept: Rebuild and retool Tony Hawk for the next generation of consoles

> Graphics: The animations are top notch, and the graphics aren't too shabby either

> Sound: The soundtrack has some truly outstanding stuff, but I would say it is one of the series' weaker line-ups

> Playability: The addition of Nail the Trick expands the tried-and-true gameplay

> Entertainment: Most of the hijinks are set aside, and the game is once again purely about skating…finally!

> Replay Value: High

Second Opinion 9.25

If you've hopped off the Tony Hawk wagon, now may be a good time to climb back on. The visual overhaul is a most welcome change, and turns this from a title that is all about the gameplay to one that is also a marvel to look at. Objectives flow into each other with ease, and the integration of Classic mode into the larger game works way better than I thought it would. Nail the Trick is quite sweet, but it takes a little while to get used to. I wish there was a little more flexibility to the character creator, as I'm a sucker for that kind of thing. I also wasn't a huge fan of the exaggerated physics when you bail. And what's with the never ending flow of product placement in this game? Oh, well. It's certainly not enough to keep me away from the best Tony Hawk in years. Striking a balance between new and old that's been missing in recent entries, Project 8 is more than enough to send me back to the skate park.—**MILLER**

Roleplaying as Trogdor is totally an option

The multiplayer maps feature all of the outstanding artistry of the offline quest

PC

Dark Messiah Of Might & Magic

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 32-PLAYER VIA INTERNET OR LAN) **> PUBLISHER** UBISOFT **> DEVELOPER** ARKANE STUDIOS/KUJU ENTERTAINMENT **> RELEASE** OCTOBER 25 **> ESRB** M

GAME INFORMER PC GAME OF THE MONTH

BURN, IMPALE, OR CHOP TO BITS?

Lots of games attempt new and interesting concepts, but relatively few successfully implement them into actual fun gameplay. Fewer still manage to gel these innovations with tried-and-true ideas to form a seamless, well-executed whole. Dark Messiah of Might & Magic is one of these rare titles. The core first-person melee combat is incredibly solid and the exploration, storytelling, and character growth are integrated brilliantly to create a unique and compelling experience.

The lengthy single-player game (roughly 20 hours in our first playthrough) is outstanding. Whether you focus your talents in stealth, magic, melee, or archery, the wide variety of situations that protagonist Sareth finds himself in provide plenty of room to get creative with Dark Messiah's combat system. Even within each style of fighting, there are many different ways to come up with the end result of dead enemies. Melee fighters can dance around and trick foes into environmental traps or use the blocking and counter system to beat them down face to face. Stealthy backstabbers can lure enemies into the shadows for a quick disposal or hide the corpses for a clean getaway. Finally, magic users have a decent selection of spells to adapt to any situation.

Beyond the combat, the ancillary aspects of the game – exploring Dark Messiah's fantastic world, enjoying the plotline, and simply basking in the great ambiance that Arkane Studios has created – are savory distractions that never get in the way of the core gameplay. From start to finish, the adventure is an amazing experience that demands respect both for its overall excellence and its entirely unique gameplay.

If there's one thing that I take issue with in Dark Messiah's single-player mode, it's the lack of variety in the enemies. The many different environments, with the separate restrictions and options that they present, certainly help to keep the relatively few enemy types interesting to fight, but cracking a hundred orc skulls is going to eventually get old no matter what. Even so, this is a minor quibble in the grand scheme of things – the pacing of the adventure is skillful enough that it was rare for me to be even slightly bored, despite the total linearity of the quest.

Multiplayer in Dark Messiah is surprisingly fun, if not fantastic. Crusade mode, which pits two teams against each other in a territory-based tug-of-war similar to Unreal Tournament's Onslaught gametype, is a decent way to extend your time with Dark Messiah. There are certainly issues, like magic users being horrifically weak until they gain some experience, and the fast-paced nature of the online fighting making it awfully difficult to connect in melee combat sometimes. However, for gamers who are looking for a new reason to talk smack over the 'Net, Dark Messiah's multiplayer is definitely a serviceable option.

Ubisoft may have somewhat overpromised early on – boss fights aren't all they're cracked up to be, and more complex interactions like manipulating different enemy factions to fight their own battles are barely present – but Dark Messiah is nonetheless a truly great game. I can't think of a single person who I wouldn't recommend this to, barring those who don't have much stomach for the brutal kind of violence on display here.—**ADAM**

BOTTOM LINE 9.25

> Concept: Find new and interesting ways to stop your enemies from breathing

> Graphics: Valve's Source engine hasn't lost a step – this is a breathtakingly gorgeous game

> Sound: Most of the voice acting is actually good! The bone-crunching combat effects also add to the already-intense experience

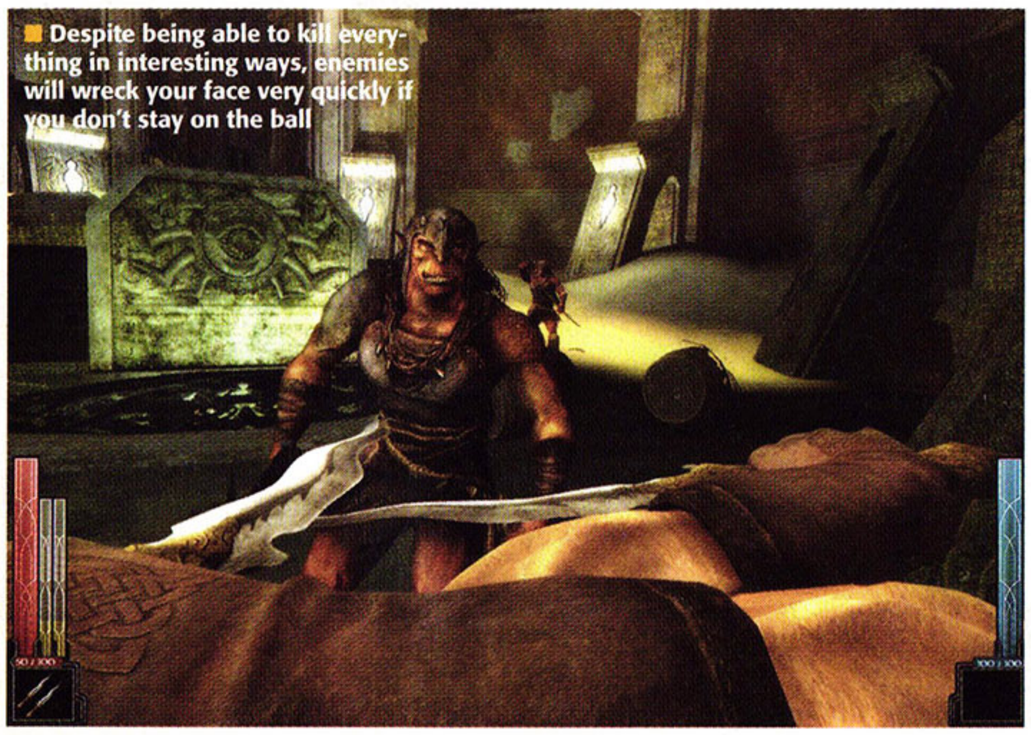
> Playability: The first-person melee combat is incredible. And that's a sentence I never thought I'd write

> Entertainment: This isn't quite Deus Ex, but it's the next best thing to that timeless classic

> Replay Value: High

Second Opinion 9

Do you want to kick that orc into a wall of spikes, power attack his face off, or shoot a lightning bolt into the water he's standing in? Dark Messiah puts so many mouth-watering instruments of death at your disposal, you'll feel like a kid in a candy store. A seriously messed-up kid. You don't need to be an aspiring sadist to appreciate the fast and unrelenting combat, though. The option to kick objects and enemies opens up hilarious new possibilities at every turn and forces you to constantly be aware of your surroundings. Even when I wasn't delighting in bloodshed, Dark Messiah's excellent pacing and gorgeous visuals kept me enthralled, and the objective-based skill points are an ingenious way to accommodate different play styles while encouraging creative problem-solving. The story isn't great, and the hit detection could be more precise, but for viciously addictive action, Dark Messiah is my savior.—**JOE**


Despite being able to kill everything in interesting ways, enemies will wreck your face very quickly if you don't stay on the ball

The advantage that magical weapons give you is absolutely necessary late in the game

PC

Sid Meier's Railroads!

> STYLE 1-PLAYER SIMULATION/STRATEGY (UP TO 4-PLAYER VIA INTERNET OR LAN) **> PUBLISHER** 2K GAMES **> DEVELOPER** FIRAXIS
> RELEASE OCTOBER 16 **> ESRB** E

NON-STOP TRAINING

Sometimes a guy needs a break from saving the world. When that happens, it's nice to put down the ol' energy sword and chain gun and go back to a simpler time – a time when J.P. Morgan was a bigger threat than some invading alien army. Sid Meier's Railroads is an excellent way to make that escape; blending the previous Railroad Tycoon titles with a model train aesthetic, this sim from Firaxis plays like a well-oiled machine.

On your way to becoming a rail baron, your job is to manage the supply and demand of growing towns by delivering and hauling cargo across the countryside. You don't have to worry about delving too deep into the economics involved – you see that a town needs food, so you build a track and set train routes to bring food. By establishing many of these transactions across the map, you can generate a healthy cash flow that fuels more building and, more importantly, other investments. Bidding on exclusive technology can give you an edge, and buying out your opponents' stock is the win condition for multiplayer matches. While you can choose to play in a sandbox mode, the strategy in Railroads shines brightest when you're scrambling against other magnates (human or AI) for control of key resources and territory.

The only real problem with the game is that it sticks pretty close to its prescribed formula. You build trains, make money, and drive competitors out of business. You won't uncover layer upon layer of depth, you'll just get more efficient. Once you hit the plateau, Railroads (like its model train inspiration) feels more like a peaceful distraction than a challenge, but that doesn't stop it from delivering a lot of fun.—**JOE**

BOTTOM LINE 8

> Concept: Build a steam-powered empire with ease

> Graphics: Stylized and simple, but in a way that fits the game's tone perfectly

> Sound: A great background soundtrack captures the era of expansion

> Playability: Artfully avoids bogging the player down in menus, though some of the interface is still a bit awkward

> Entertainment: Not exactly heart-pounding excitement, but it's satisfying and engrossing nonetheless

> Replay Value: Moderate

TYCOON OR NOT?

Sid Meier started the whole Tycoon trend in PC gaming with the original Railroad Tycoon, so it may seem strange that his return to the series doesn't carry that iconic name. So what's different? Most of the concepts are the same in Railroads, but the execution is much more user-friendly and less detail-oriented, like the ability to just drag the mouse to lay track instead of building individual tiles. Even though you're focusing more on the high-level decisions, Railroads is unquestionably the next installment in the classic franchise.

You can't set explosive charges on the bridges or tie townspeople to the tracks, but Railroads is still cool

Second Opinion 8.5

Railroads helped me realize the childhood dream of playing with trains that I never knew I had. The game's mechanics of balancing the economics of supply and demand between cities can get a little complicated, but in a challenging, chess-like way that's actually fun. Figuring out how to weave a web of tracks so that your trains don't get backed up somewhere along the way is a whole other mess of strategy–unless you adjust the difficulty so that they phase through each other like ghost trains (Ghost trains! Holy crap, this game does sound awesome). Still, this is largely a game about economics, and while that doesn't sound fun, it will appeal to that certain crowd.—**BEN**

PC QUICKIES

PC

BOTTOM LINE 8.75

Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War – Dark Crusade

> STYLE 1-PLAYER STRATEGY (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA INTERNET OR LAN) **> PUBLISHER** THQ
> DEVELOPER RELIC ENTERTAINMENT **> RELEASE** OCTOBER 10 **> ESRB** M

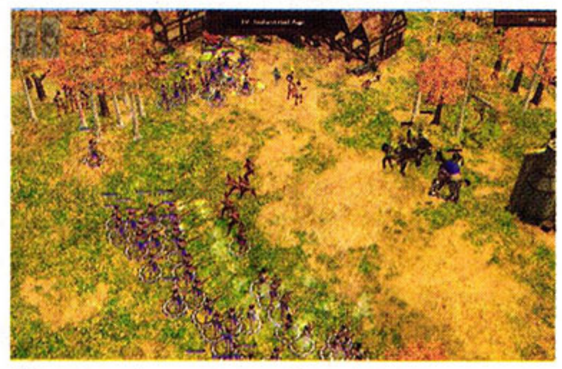
Dark Crusade can be enjoyed by new and experienced players alike, regardless of whether you own the earlier installments – even if the hefty challenge makes it more appropriate for veterans. Stuffed with seven playable races, there's a constant need to rethink your approach to match your current opponent. A new campaign mode has you navigating a Risk-style map upon which you'll move your troops around as you take over the war-torn planet that all of these pissed-off races have converged on. Sadly, any semblance of a real story has almost completely disintegrated, and the sweet new factions almost upset the game's intricate balance. That's not to say that this doesn't continue to be one of the best RTS experiences in years – it is most certainly that, but not dramatically different from what you've already played and loved.—**MILLER**

PC

BOTTOM LINE 7

Age of Empires III: The Warchiefs

> STYLE 1-PLAYER STRATEGY (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA INTERNET OR LAN) **> PUBLISHER** MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS **> DEVELOPER** ENSEMBLE STUDIOS **> RELEASE** OCTOBER 17 **> ESRB** T



If all that matters to you is more content for your aging copy of Age of Empires III, then The Warchiefs has you covered. However, if your taste in expansion packs is slightly more refined, this title will leave you wanting more. The newly playable native factions don't perform particularly well, and the campaign is the very definition of average. Some different rulesets for online play may cater to certain fans, but The Warchiefs would come much more highly recommended if it did anything to clean up the messy unit AI that hampers nearly every aspect of play. The way that this title forces you to micromanage your economy, despite the fact that your army requires all of your concentration just to keep from tripping over its own feet, is simply stupid.—**ADAM**

PC

BOTTOM LINE 6

Mage Knight Apocalypse

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 5-PLAYER VIA INTERNET OR LAN) **> PUBLISHER** NAMCO BANDAI GAMES **> DEVELOPER** INTERSERV INTERNATIONAL **> RELEASE** SEPTEMBER 26 **> ESRB** T

Mage Knight Apocalypse is a lot like eating the generic store brand equivalent of Lucky Charms. It has everything you expect, but doesn't taste quite right. Apocalypse is a fairly competent dungeon crawler, but has a lot of rough edges and nothing that sets it apart in any way. Despite an in-depth skill tree and some crafting mechanics, combat is dull, and there is absolutely no challenge whatsoever thanks to enemies that retain damage after you respawn. Overall, Mage Knight Apocalypse is simply boring. It might fulfill your hack n' slash needs if you're desperate, but is far from the tastiest choice out there.—**JEREMY**

PC

Star Wars Empire at War: Forces of Corruption

> STYLE 1-PLAYER STRATEGY (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA INTERNET OR LAN)
> PUBLISHER LUCASARTS **> DEVELOPER** PETROGLYPH
> RELEASE OCTOBER 24 **> ESRB** T

REWRITING FICTIONAL HISTORY

The original Empire at War was to Star Wars fans what bacon is to a hungry golden retriever. They (and by "they" I mean "we") gobbled it up, regardless of if it wasn't always the finest quality. And why not? The chance to act out those childhood fantasies of X-wings and AT-ATs with such visceral battles was intoxicating, even if the strategy element wasn't entirely polished.

Forces of Corruption takes things in a direction that will or won't work for you based on a simple formula. If you're one of those guys (or gals) that can quote every line from every movie, but you've never heard of Grand Admiral Thrawn, then Forces of Corruption isn't for you. Meanwhile, if you know the details of how Darth Maul was trained, or who exactly Aayla Secura is, then come on in to the pool that is Forces of Corruption. The water's fine!

Gameplay-wise, the new faction has ships equipped with those swarming little buzz droids, new heroes including the infamous Boba Fett, and a new approach to world takeovers through corruption and subversion of the populace with activities like racketeering and pirating. While it certainly doesn't feel like we need a third faction in the Galactic Civil War, the balancing has been well conceived. The Zann Consortium manages to be a worthwhile addition, even if their campaign is a tad bland. For me, the "expanded" aspects of the game make it feel less Star Wars rather than more. In the end, I think I might have been just fine with another round in my X-wing, but that might just be me.—**MILLER**

BOTTOM LINE 7.5

> Concept: Introduce a third army into the Galactic Civil War. What, you don't remember that happening in the movies? Huh.

> Graphics: Remarkable numbers of tiny laser beams and destruction effects are gorgeous, even if individual ships and characters don't hold up under close inspection

> Sound: When we're all 90, will we still love this music this much?

> Playability: A solid interface integrates space and land battles well, but some aspects could be better explained

> Entertainment: Who doesn't like blowing up Star Destroyers?

> Replay Value: Moderately High

Second Opinion 7.25

Empire at War, despite its shortcomings, is nonetheless a great way to enjoy the massive battles that are such a great part of Star Wars. The feeling you get when you see your fleet of Star Destroyers warp in to crush some rebellious planet is like nothing else. Forces of Corruption, while a totally servicable expansion pack, doesn't do a whole lot to improve the gameplay. The new faction's ability to corrupt planets without conquering them is kind of cool, but falls a little flat due to the arbitrary prerequisites to carrying out those missions. Empire at War nuts only need apply to this expansion.—**ADAM**

PC QUICKIES

PC

ParaWorld

> STYLE 1-PLAYER STRATEGY (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA INTERNET OR LAN)
> PUBLISHER ASPYR
> DEVELOPER SUNFLOWERS/SEK
> RELEASE SEPTEMBER 27 **> ESRB** T

BOTTOM LINE 7

Playing ParaWorld is like rooting through an old toybox and making all of the action figures (like Dino Riders, Robotech, and G.I. Joe) fight it out in anachronistic chaos. This game's biggest selling point is the crazy juxtaposition of its units (ninjas, Triceratops, and jetpack-wearing Norsemen are all there), but it certainly doesn't fall flat in other areas. A familiar "gather resources, build units, crush opposition" formula is present and predictable, and the graphics are impressive – providing you're not watching one of the ugly cutscenes advancing the slapdash story. ParaWorld won't revolutionize the RTS landscape, but I can't deny that it is incredibly rewarding to tell armored mechs to go attack some cowering spearmen.—**JOE**

PC

The Sims 2: Pets

> STYLE 1-PLAYER SIMULATION
> PUBLISHER ELECTRONIC ARTS
> DEVELOPER EA REDWOOD SHORES
> RELEASE OCTOBER 17 **> ESRB** T

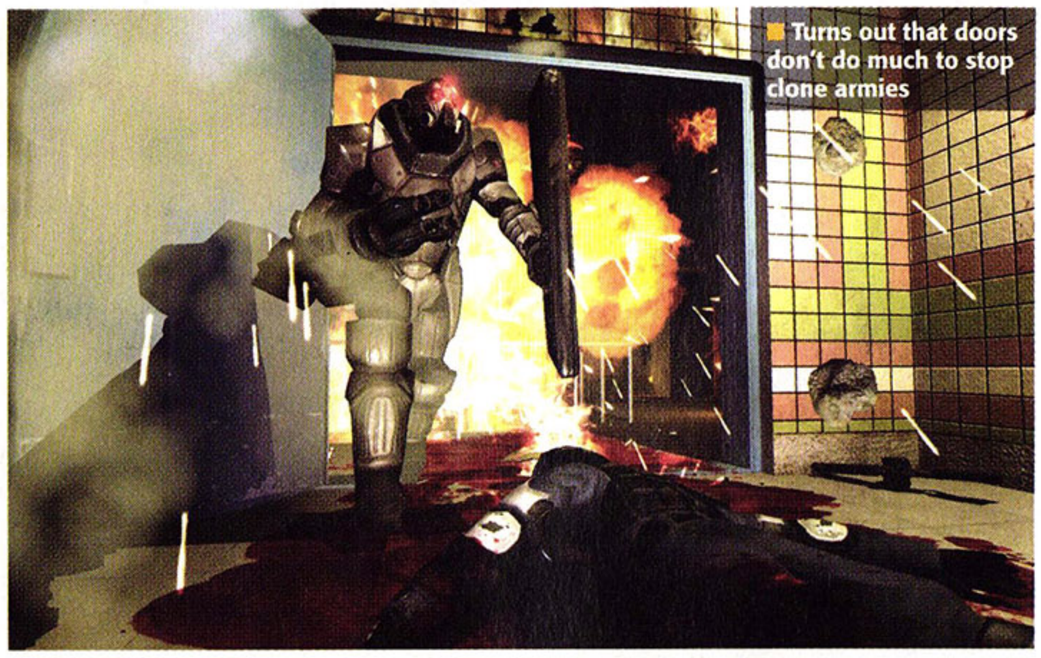
BOTTOM LINE 6

In real life, the benefits of owning a pet may outweigh the cost, but apparently that is not the case in PC expansion packs. A slim offering of new items and interactions in Pets adds less to the core gameplay of The Sims 2 than any previous expansion. Hell, the addition of animals and animal-related junk isn't even new for the series – Pets is basically a remake of Unleashed (from 2002, by the way). If you're one of those "Isn't my kitty just soooo cute?" saps, you'll enjoy spending time on the pet creation and customization screen, but more reality-connected gamers should only pick this one up with a pooper-scooper.—**JOE**

PC

F.E.A.R.: Extraction Point

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 16-PLAYER VIA INTERNET OR LAN) **> PUBLISHER** SIERRA
> DEVELOPER TIMEGATE STUDIOS **> RELEASE** OCTOBER 24 **> ESRB** M



Turns out that doors don't do much to stop clone armies

UNDEAD GIRLS AND ROCKET LAUNCHERS

A year ago, F.E.A.R.'s creepy atmosphere and intensely visceral firefights made it an interesting and entertaining new take on first-person shooting. Today, the added content in this expansion is still fun – but it's more like lunch with an old friend than a sizzling date with a hottie you just met.

Though Extraction Point was made by a different developer than the original game, it retains every single good element that was present there. The creepy in-game hallucinatory scenes are still in full effect, and even better this time around. In many of them you have a very real chance of dying, which adds a great deal of tension over the mostly safe scenes in the original. The gunplay is as awesome as ever, and the few new weapons all have their place in combat. Most importantly, though, Extraction Point never leaves you feeling like you're trudging through the same environment over and over – the endlessly repeated hallways, office buildings, and broken-down industrial districts of the first adventure are nowhere to be found.

Even though marginal improvement is present throughout the game, the vast amounts of recycled content make this expansion feel like more of the same. Remember those faceless clone soldiers that filled the first game? Get ready to fight another couple hundred of them using the same tactics, the same sounds, and the same weapons! Those stains of blood that cover the floors and walls seem a bit familiar, by chance? That would be because they're the same decals that were used so extensively a year ago.

It seems that Sierra and Timegate Studios decided to tighten up the F.E.A.R. formula without introducing much new to the mix, and that's not a bad thing. But neither is it unreasonable to expect something new and cool for your $30, rather than some of the old puzzle pieces rearranged into a slightly better shape.—**ADAM**

The firefights are as excellent as ever

BOTTOM LINE 8

> Concept: Tack on several more hours of the same gameplay, but with fewer identical hallways

> Graphics: Still gorgeous. An awful lot of assets are recycled from the base game, though

> Sound: Same deal – very well done, but some new audio would have been nice

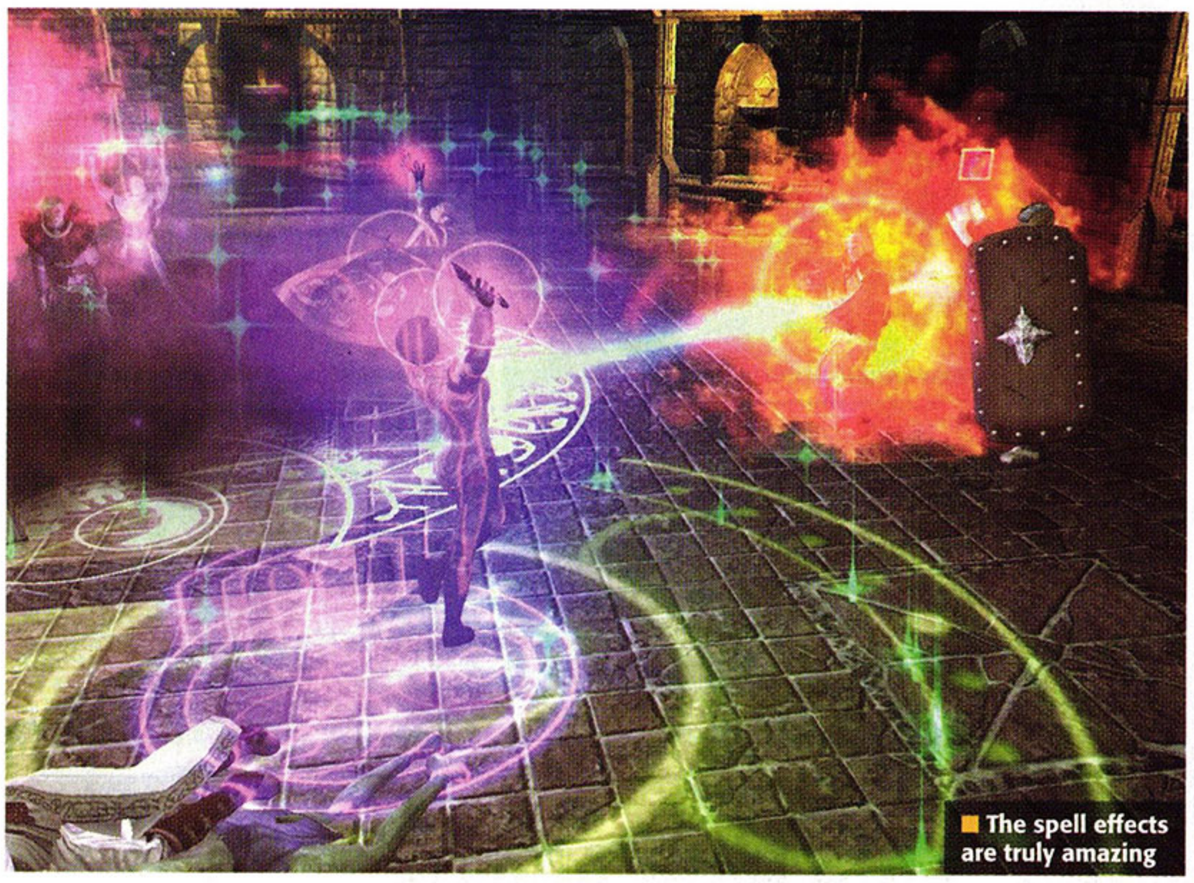
> Playability: It's a mouse-and-keyboard shooter. Make your own damn keybindings

> Entertainment: More of the same, but slightly better-implemented. Classic expansion stuff

> Replay Value: Moderate

Second Opinion 8

The original F.E.A.R. was a crazy trip of bullets and horror that not only challenged your skills, but threw in a fair amount of interesting story to shock and confuse. Extraction Point doesn't fall far from the tree and offers up a healthy serving of the game's signature bullet-time-esque Reflex mode, which basically empowers you to blast as many holes in your enemies as possible before you need to retreat and refill this essential time-slowing tool. So in that regard, Extraction Point definitely delivers, as the shooting mechanic is as indulgent and satisfying as ever. However, it is also just a lot more of the same, so don't expect too much.—**ANDY**


The spell effects are truly amazing

Not all of the encounters are simple hack n' slash

PC

Neverwinter Nights 2

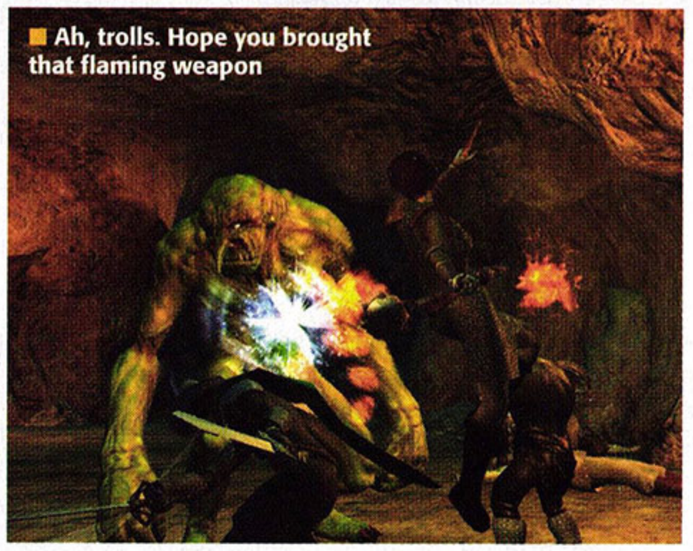
> STYLE 1-PLAYER ROLE-PLAYING GAME (UP TO 64-PLAYER VIA INTERNET OR LAN) **> PUBLISHER** ATARI **> DEVELOPER** OBSIDIAN ENTERTAINMENT **> RELEASE** OCTOBER 31 **> ESRB** T

CHOOSE YOUR OWN ADVENTURE

My inner dork loves nothing better than building the most efficient and powerful character possible within any given ruleset, and then utilizing my hero's power to beat up on some bad guys and probably save the world in the process. Neverwinter Nights 2, for all of its flaws, does an excellent job of providing a framework for me to indulge in that, and for that I'm grateful. I just wish that it wasn't so freaking frustrating some of the time.

With a few rare exceptions, NWN 2 is an even better translation of the tabletop Dungeons & Dragons ruleset into the virtual space than its predecessor. This title easily trumps the original NWN's campaign with a vastly superior story and characters – not to mention the Knights of the Old Republic-like party system that takes the place of overpowered summons and hirelings. Developer Obsidian has created one of the best single-player fantasy tales around, with numerous branching paths and side missions to explore. NWN 2's modular nature also means that you can play through the official campaign (or most any downloaded module) cooperatively with a friend or two.

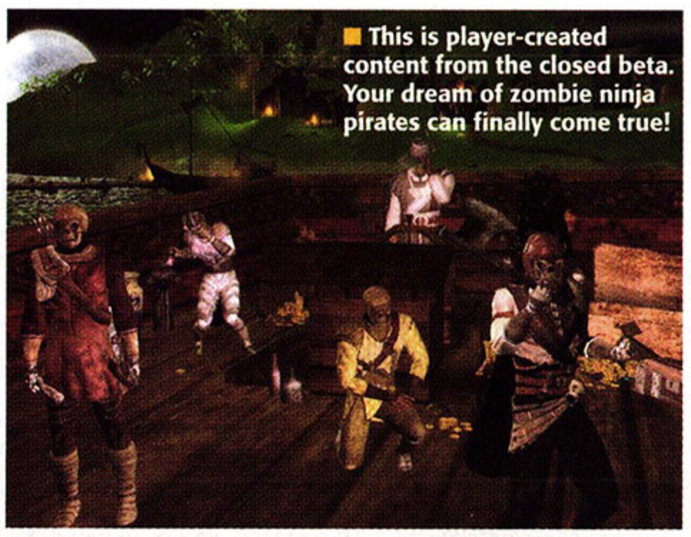
The included campaign blows the first game's story out of the water with a gripping tale of an evil cult that seeks Neverwinter's destruction along the path to domination of all of Faerun. Players even have a decent amount of input, through the choices they make, over how the plot unfolds. However, the gameplay has a tendency to feel disturbingly similar to the original's clunky framework. The interface is noticeably improved, but the odd way the engine assigns attacks of opportunity, as well as the horrid pathfinding and AI for both allies and enemies, are entirely unchanged. Under the hood, NWN 2 is almost identical to the original. While that's not the worst thing in the world, asking for a little evolution in gameplay for a five-years-in-the-making sequel isn't exactly unreasonable.


Ah, trolls. Hope you brought that flaming weapon

The true test of this title's worth, however, is whether or not the online mod community embraces it with the fervor that keeps its predecessor popular to this day. The tools certainly won't hold amateur creators back; Obsidian is kind enough to ship the tools that were used internally to make the official campaign. Which, of course, makes NWN 2 one of the very best titles available for modders' purposes.

All that being said, the score reflects what comes in the box: a very entertaining, classic D&D tale that will provide dozens of hours of entertainment to RPG fans, as well as some mod tools with great potential. If the online scene takes off, though, you can expect many years of outstanding gaming out of this little package.—**ADAM**

These guys probably aren't evil


This is player-created content from the closed beta. Your dream of zombie ninja pirates can finally come true!

BOTTOM LINE 8

> Concept: Deliver the definitive Dungeons & Dragons experience on PC

> Graphics: Great if you have the machine to run it well, but low- and mid-end boxes will suffer

> Sound: At least your allies generally say something when they're about to run off and go do something stupid

> Playability: The game flows decently once you tinker enough with the AI settings, but controlling the action is still more of a chore than it should be

> Entertainment: D&D fans will certainly enjoy this faithful representation of the tabletop RPG

> Replay Value: Moderately High

Second Opinion 8

The number of video games that Dungeons & Dragons has influenced is probably incalculable, but the ones that implement the tabletop RPG's d20 ruleset are far less common. Of those titles, Neverwinter Nights 2 provides the most faithful digital translation of the D&D experience that I've ever played. The controls are intuitive and simple, allowing you to cast spells, cleave orcs, and sneak around with ease. The new party system is a vast improvement, teaming you with cool characters (not just doofus hirelings) and giving you the ability to dictate their every move – which is great in theory. In practice, however, some dodgy AI and pathfinding had me doing more babysitting than a 10th level barbarian should really require. Nonetheless, Neverwinter Nights 2 is good cosolidation of D&D concepts, but it doesn't gather the momentum to rise above the sum of its parts.—**JOE**

NINTENDO DS

Final Fantasy III

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ROLE-PLAYING GAME > **PUBLISHER** SQUARE ENIX > **DEVELOPER** SQUARE ENIX > **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 14
> **ESRB** E10+

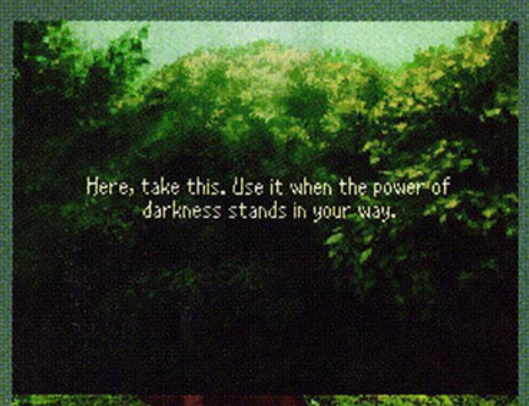
THE MISSING LINK

Thousands of years in the future, when video game archaeologists unearth Final Fantasy III on the DS, it's going to be difficult to place in the series' evolutionary chain. Visually, the game looks like it belongs right between VIII and IX, but the gameplay style (not to mention the affixed Roman numeral) place it much earlier on the timeline. As good as the updated graphics look, make no mistake: this is an old-school adventure, with all of the pitfalls and payoffs that entails.

Despite a rewritten and expanded story (as compared to the 8-bit Japanese release), the plot is a pleasantly familiar excuse to put your characters in constant peril. Fighting your way through said peril is a delight thanks to the centerpiece of the game's combat, the Job system. By leveling up your party in a variety of available classes (like Black Mage, Knight, and Ninja), you ensure that you'll have the flexibility to adapt to any environment.

In one case, all of my guys were miniaturized, rendering their physical attacks useless. To cope, I just switched the characters over to their already-learned mage classes and nuked my way through the dungeon instead. It's not a perfect system; I wish that new jobs were made available quicker, and that fewer of them were redundant (for instance, all other casting classes are basically pointless once you get the Sage). But it opens a lot of doors for different play styles, and gives you plenty of opportunities to experiment with job abilities – partly owing to the fact that you'll spend a good chunk of time grinding levels once you hit specific areas or bosses.

For all of the battle system tweaks and new dialogue, FF III has something bigger in its favor that is more abstract: It captures the magic of a classic RPG. It doesn't use "old-school" as an excuse for crummy design choices, but instead taps into time-tested traditions and makes them feel new. Providing you're the type of person who doesn't have any trouble going back and playing 8-bit games, Final Final III is an excellent handheld homage to a bygone era.—**JOE**



"Get off my porch!"

Bosses often get several attacks per turn. Hax!

BOTTOM LINE 8

> **Concept:** There were good reasons why FF III never came out here. Fix those reasons and add some new bells and whistles

> **Graphics:** Purely classic Final Fantasy (minus the sprites). Closer to FF IX than any other in the series

> **Sound:** What's there is great, but the variety is sorely lacking

> **Playability:** Touch-screen controls are totally pointless, but you won't need to use them at all

> **Entertainment:** A nostalgic mix of fun and frustration

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion 8.5

It's a shame that a game this simple and fun was ever held back from this side of the Pacific. Old-school charm oozes from every minute of playtime. Though the story comes nowhere near the scope of more recent Final Fantasy titles, something here speaks to the wonder and sense of exploration that so many other RPGs try for and fail to reach. An amazing score from series mainstay Nobuo Uematsu is filled with both new melodies and the familiar motifs of earlier games, and might be reason enough to play if only for how those themes recall your earliest console role-playing memories. I even found the job system rewarding, in the way it gives players such a broad latitude for building their own unique party. So maybe the combat is clichéd, and the plot is a straight line from beginning to end. But you can't blame a fish for swimming instead of running on land, and this fish should swim proudly in the school of the old-style classics.—**MILLER**

NINTENDO DS

Elite Beat Agents

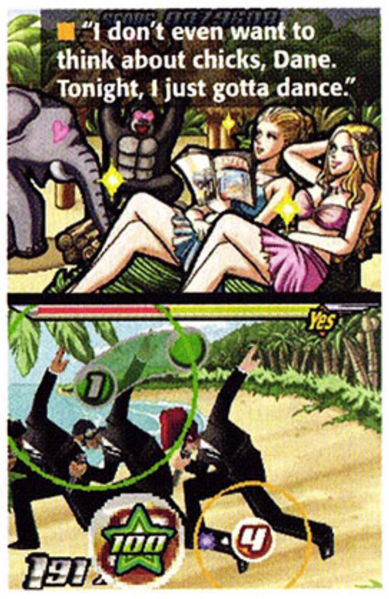
> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER MUSIC (4-PLAYER VIA DOWNLOAD PLAY) > **PUBLISHER** NINTENDO
> **DEVELOPER** INIS > **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 11 > **ESRB** E10+

BEATEN

Leanard is 27, he's an artist in 15th century Florence, and his hat collection is said to be the largest in the world. As you would expect, the women swoon all over him. All but one, the woman he desires most. In order to woo her he must help her realize her dream of flying and save her from a stampede of bulls, all while concealing the fact that he wears a toupee. Naturally, he is going to need an elite group of gentlemen who can travel through space and time to sing and dance him through this whole process. He needs the Elite Beat Agents.

Believe it or not, Elite Beat Agents is filled with many stories like this one, some of them even weirder. These wildly eccentric tales range from a lost dog trying to find his way home to (and I'm not kidding here) a white blood cell's fight against a virus. Their kookiness and the quirky comic-style cutscenes that accompany them are actually the most endearing quality of this game. The music selection isn't bad either. There is a good variety and I think there's something here to please just about everyone.

Sadly, I can't talk as highly about the gameplay. As the songs progress, several circles appear surrounding points on the DS touch screen. The circles begin to shrink and the goal is to touch the center dots as their circle shrinks into it. Like with most rhythm games, this is in tune to the music, but the circles can become hard to follow as the difficulty begins to ramp up and more and more of them pop onscreen. The bigger issue here, however, is that something always felt a little off when using the touch screen. I just don't think this kind of touch interface is well suited to the rhythm game genre. After awhile I actually did start to enjoy myself a little, but Nintendo was never able to convince me that the game works well.—**BEN**



BOTTOM LINE 6.75

> **Concept:** A touch music-themed game filled with Nintendo weirdness – read: insane

> **Graphics:** Nothing too noteworthy here, the comic-styled cutscenes are neat though

> **Sound:** A pretty varied and decent selection of music, but the sound effects can get a little annoying while you're trying to keep a beat

> **Playability:** The touch interface takes some getting used to and never actually feels as intuitive as other button press rhythm games

> **Entertainment:** There is some appeal here for the music enthusiasts, but it won't convert anyone to the genre

> **Replay Value:** Moderately High

Second Opinion 7.75

Elite Beat Agents is certainly not a bad game; the touch-screen mechanics lend a new spin to the music game genre and the hilarious (and very Japanese) cutscenes had me in stitches more than once. However, I find Elite Beat Agents to be lacking that extra something that brings me back to such past classics as Um Jammer Lammy or Guitar Hero. For one, I really dislike the garish and loud sound effects that occur whenever you hit a beat; it's like listening to a hyperactive two-year-old drumming all over the track. In addition, I found that the touch screen controls weren't dead accurate enough for me to really get into the flow (a problem exacerbated by the note placement, which is sometimes rather unmusical to my ears). Unique? Yes. Creative? You bet. Great? Not quite.—**MATT**

ADVERTISEMENT

MAGICAL STARSIGN™

Science Fiction and Fantasy collide head-first in this epic RPG adventure

"THE BOSSES YOU ENCOUNTER ARE AMAZING IN DESIGN"
- Game Informer Magazine

When a teacher at Will-o'-Wisp Magic Academy doesn't return from a dangerous trip in space, her students set out to use the knowledge she imparted to discover her fate. The students find a hangar of rocket ships and take off one by one, each landing on a strange and dangerous planet. Your hero must travel from planet to planet to bring the class back together, battling fearsome foes along the way.

When the students learn of an evil sorcerer who once went to the academy, they set out to stop him from destroying the galaxy with ancient magic. Magical Starsign brings together several great elements from traditional turn-based role-playing games with the innovative interface of Nintendo DS. Players can perform melee attacks, cast spells, or use items at the tap of the stylus. Gain experience, collect treasures, and purchase new items from shops you'll visit along your journey.

■ The DS Stylus controls everything from conversations to combat, including power boosts and defensive moves in battle.

■ Time your attack perfectly and tap your character to unleash an extra burst of energy.

■ Experience a sci-fi adventure while traveling across the solar system on an interplanetary rescue mission.

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Hop on board a magical rocket and explore strange planets with jungles and frozen wastelands as you uncover the secret behind your teacher's disappearance. Everyone, friend and foe alike, has a starsign linked to one of the planets. Know the signs and your party members' magic will grown more powerful as their planets move into alignment--however, the same is true for your enemies. Tap your party members at crucial moments in order to boost the power of their spells.

EVERYONE
E
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
Comic Mischief
Mild Fantasy Violence

NINTENDO DS™

Release Date: Available Now! **System: Nintendo DS** **www.nintendo.com/magicalstarsign**

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PSP

Gun Showdown

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 6-PLAYER VIA AD HOC) **> PUBLISHER** ACTIVISION
> DEVELOPER REBELLION/NEVERSOFT **> RELEASE** OCTOBER 10 **> ESRB** M

A LITTLE SLOW ON THE DRAW

The first Gun on the consoles was a moderate commercial disappointment, but that's not to say that the game didn't have some legs on it. It had an excellent story, and enough side missions in its open world to keep you busy. Some players didn't like that these errands weren't more integrated into your journey, but this PSP version rectifies that with a number of special missions folded into the critical path. Does this finally give the game enough ammo?

As much as I am glad to see that this port loses none of the story and swagger of the console edition, Gun Showdown has a couple of hitches in its giddy-up. As always, the PSP itself plays the villain due to its lack of a second analog stick. I got used to using the face buttons for aiming, but it took me out of my zone. Speaking of which, I can say that the slow-mo, focus-based Quickdraw feature works well as initiated via the analog nub.

The most disappointing thing about this game, however, could have been avoided. The retail copy we played was simply buggy. The biggest shame was that many of the well-done cutscenes were cut off – including bits of dialogue. Add to this the fact that the collision is off, the horse missions suffer from a wonky camera, and that the enemy AI is a little strange, and this conversion definitely loses something in the translation.

I'm glad Activision tried to address some of the problems in the original game (including adding multiplayer), but Showdown suffers slightly by drifting away from what it had already perfected.—**KATO**

BOTTOM LINE 7.75

> Concept: Pack a Colt .44's worth of content in a Derringer-sized UMD

> Graphics: There was some pop-up, but I was relieved that the title was otherwise intact

> Sound: The game's effective score thankfully remains in place

> Playability: No matter how you slice it (or what control scheme you use), the game could be more comfortable and easy to play

> Entertainment: Although this game screws up at several turns, the fun console game it was ported from manages to come through

> Replay Value: Moderately High

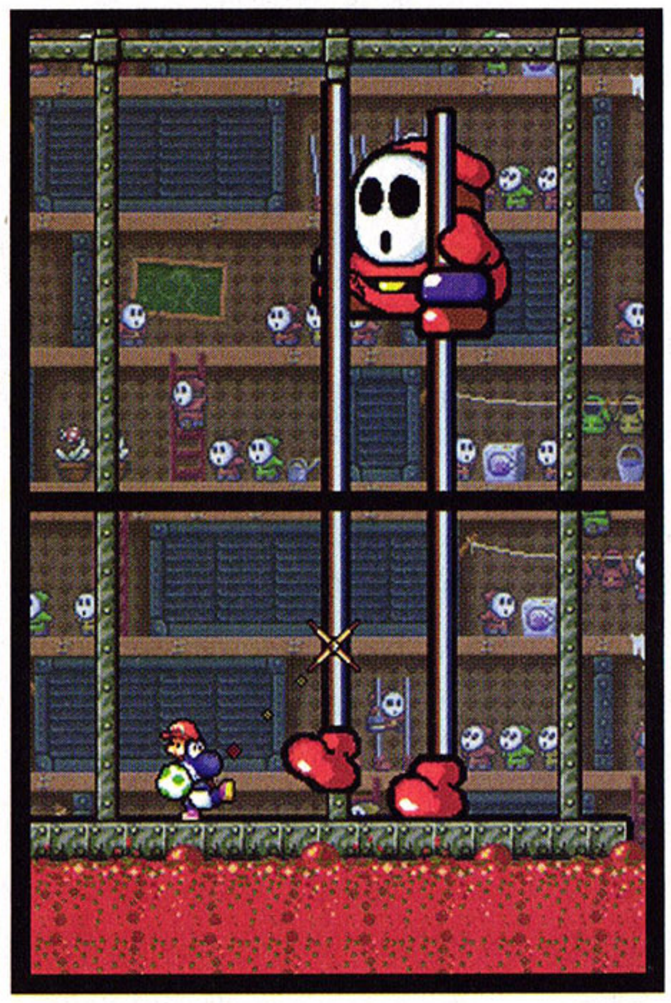
Second Opinion 7

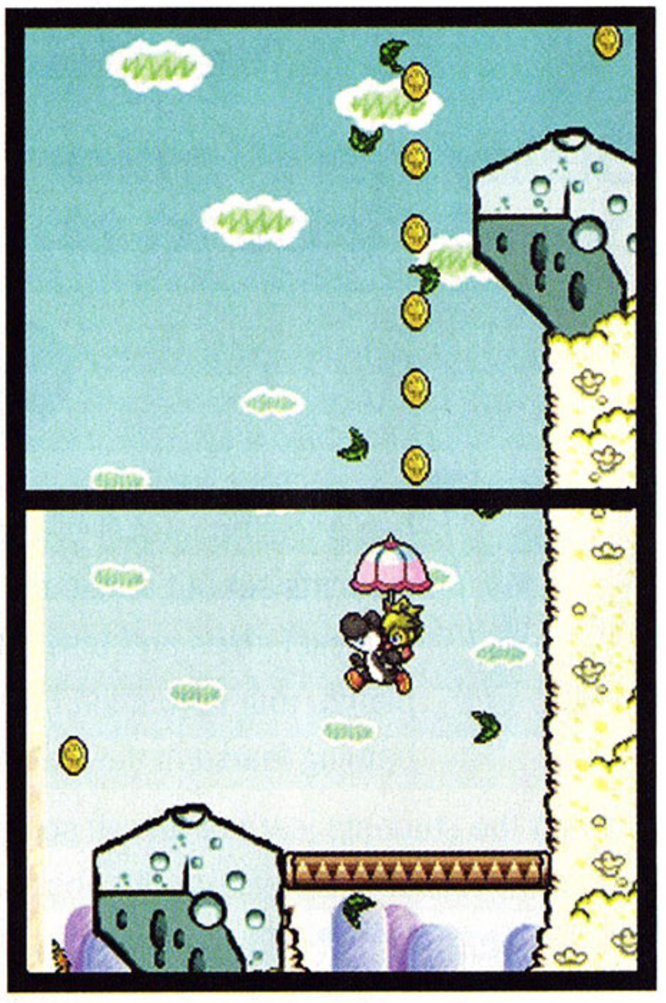
No matter how you adjust the settings, Gun's controls make you feel like you are wrestling a bear. Sure, the GTA meets cowboy gameplay is a great idea, and the story really pulls you in and makes you want to see the finish. The cutscenes taken from the console versions help disguise the downgrade in graphics, though the PSP graphics aren't too bad anyway. However, I can't honestly recommend it to anyone who has access to one of its console brethren.—**BEN**

DS

Yoshi's Island 2

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION/PLATFORM **> PUBLISHER** NINTENDO **> DEVELOPER** ARTOON **> RELEASE** NOVEMBER 6 **> ESRB** E





BABY'S GOT BACK

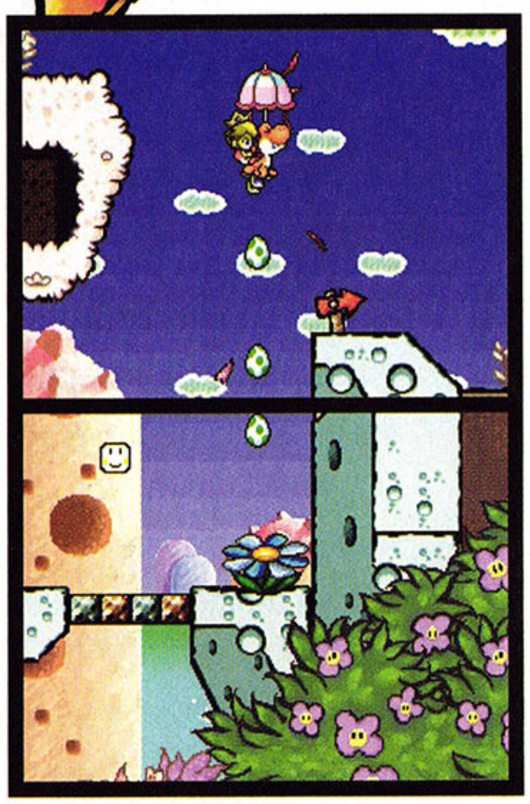
With a moniker like Yoshi's Island 2 from Nintendo, the easy assumption is that this is yet another re-release of the classic Super NES title with some new touch-screen options and dual screen support. After all, the original Yoshi's Island was released for handhelds as Super Mario Advance 3: Yoshi's Island. Thankfully, even with Nintendo's history of repackaging, nothing could be further from the truth.

Yoshi's Island 2 is a brand new adventure from beginning to end that takes full advantage of the DS's multiple screens, and offers up a heaping helping of new gameplay by adding in multiple babies to the mix.

The original Baby Mario returns, but this adventure also features Baby Peach and Baby Donkey Kong, who add much-needed dimension to the gamplay. Other babies make cameos as well, with Baby Wario and Baby Bowser appearing for short stints.

Each of the babies offers up different powers. For example, Mario enables Yoshi to run faster, break Mario blocks, and ricochet eggs around corners. Peach uses her parasol to float through the air and to ride air jets. But even better is Baby DK, who empowers the player with a Dash Attack for smashing blocks, as well as the ability to climb vines a la Donkey Kong Junior.

With tons of hidden items to collect across the game's five worlds, numerous minigames to unlock, and fantastic use of the multiple screens, Yoshi's Island 2 is an outstanding addition to the DS's list of impressive platformers. I must admit that I had grown a little tired of the original Yoshi's story, but this game has given the series new life for me, and I highly recommend it for any platformer fan.—**ANDY**



BOTTOM LINE 8.25

> Concept: A new Yoshi's Island adventure with new babies to expand the gameplay

> Graphics: Who doesn't love Nintendo's classic 2D art style?

> Sound: The whining babies will drive you crazy, but the catchy soundtrack will bring you back for more

> Playability: The addition of new powers via Baby Mario, Peach, and DK gives the game added depth and playability

> Entertainment: Easily the best Yoshi's Island game yet, with plenty to do and see

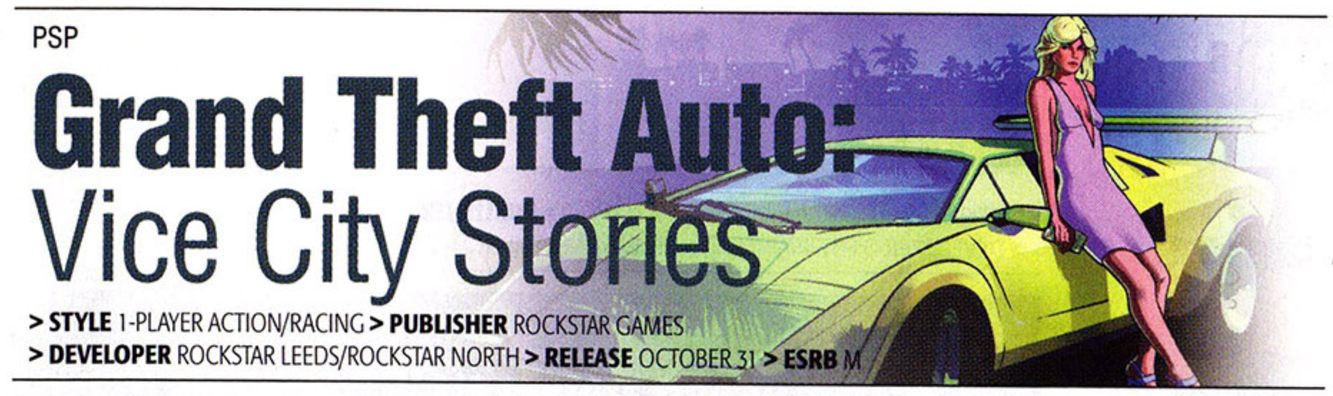
> Replay Value: High

Second Opinion 7.5

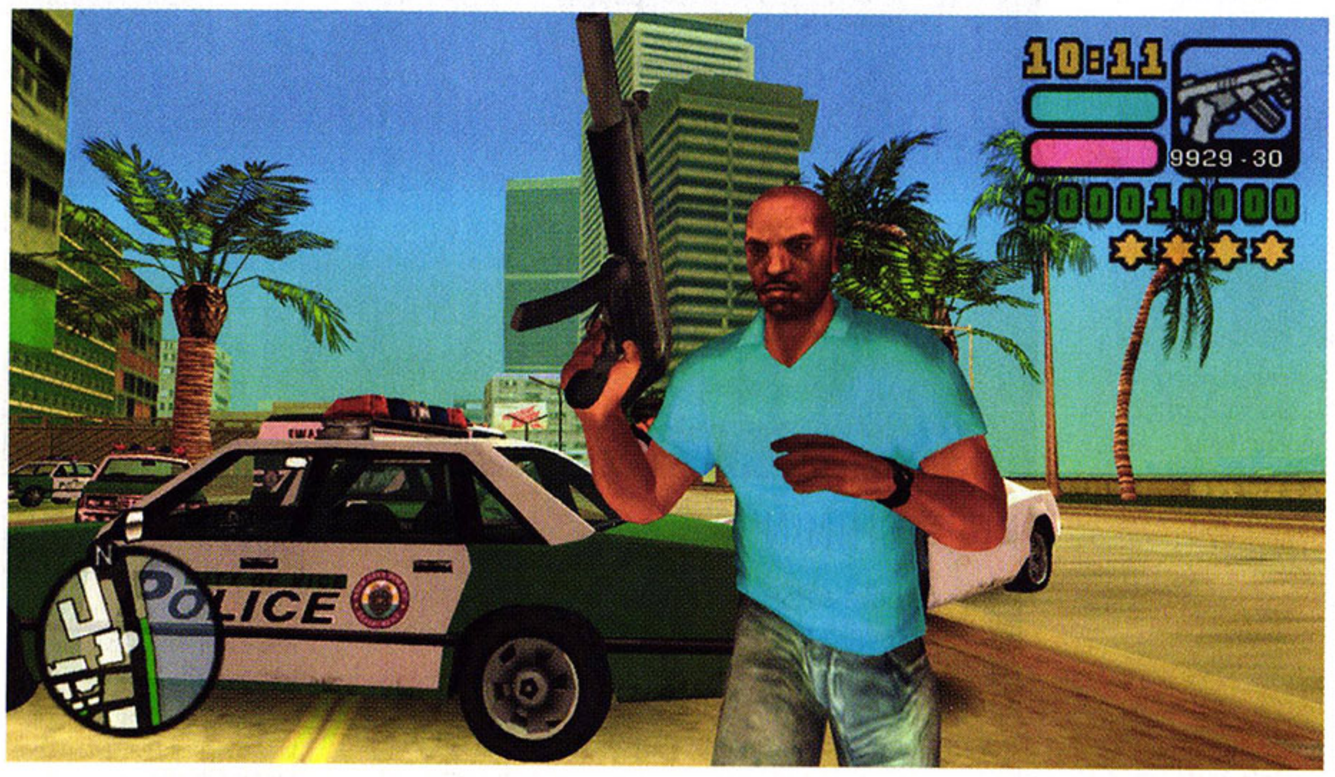
I feel like I should like Yoshi's Island more than I do. It's got a fun, distinct art style and some well-rounded level design, yet still I find myself not looking forward to the next level. It lacks that old school charm that I've come to enjoy in other DS games. The whole experience comes off as a little boring. It's not a bad game by any means, so give it a try if you're in the need of a 2D platformer – as long as you've already finished the other AAA Nintendo titles like New Super Mario Bros. and Super Princess Peach.—**BEN**

PSP

Grand Theft Auto: Vice City Stories



> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION/RACING **> PUBLISHER** ROCKSTAR GAMES
> DEVELOPER ROCKSTAR LEEDS/ROCKSTAR NORTH **> RELEASE** OCTOBER 31 **> ESRB** M



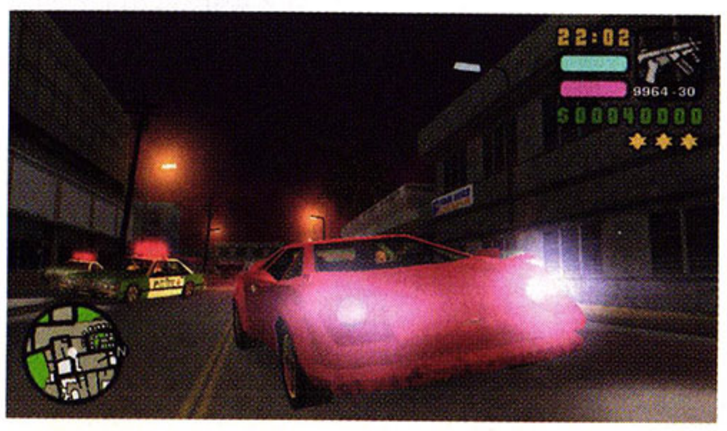
MIAMI REDUX

I've loved Grand Theft Auto since its inception, and welcomed the chance to return to Vice City, perhaps the most beloved of all the games for many fans. I had a lot of expectations for this game, and I'm happy to report that – like the recent Liberty City Stories – this title gives gamers everything they've come to love about GTA, and a lot of the things I'm beginning to tire of.

Like Liberty City Stories, VSC incorporates elements of all the GTA games into a shiny new package. Technically, it shines, showing great reflective effects and improved water physics. There's also a greater emphasis on new vehicles, including jet skis and helicopters, which can be piloted by the player in some unique missions. Also new are the light empire-building elements, which allow you to buy and improve storefront operations like protection rackets and prostitution rings.

On paper, this seems every bit the equal of any of the GTA games, save the ambitious, sprawling San Andreas. Still, something about Vice City Stories didn't grab me quite as much as past titles. At least part of this is the writing, which I felt was a bit too serious in tone considering this is the sequel to perhaps the most irreverent GTA of them all. While it does become more ingratiating as it goes on, the early portion of the story was a bit too grim for my taste, especially the domestic abuse storyline that – quite frankly – I didn't find funny. In some ways the tone is positive, as it delivers – especially in protagonist Victor – more real, affecting characters. However, I think this is a bit contrary to the feel of the original Vice City, making the game seem more like San Andreas in the '80s.

Is this a great game? Absolutely. Still, as the years go by, some of this series' inherent flaws are becoming more and more aggravating. While Rockstar Leeds has taken steps to improve the targeting, there are far too many times when large-scale conflicts play out like an absolute mess. Also, if you've played all the GTA games, you'll recognize too many of the same old mission types that we've done dozens of times in the past (I'm seriously never giving a hooker a ride again). In the end, Vice City Stories reminds me of why I love Grand Theft Auto, while at the same time pointing out just how much it really needs to evolve in the upcoming Grand Theft Auto IV. Given how much effort and love Rockstar puts into these games, I have no doubt they can do it.—**MATT**



BOTTOM LINE 8.5

> Concept: An epic return to the most glamorous of the GTA games

> Graphics: Rockstar continues to impress on the PSP, delivering graphics that hold up alongside the console releases

> Sound: Great selection of '80s tracks, plus the usual mix of humorous radio personalities and ads

> Playability: All the variety you expect is still there, as is the extremely flawed targeting system

> Entertainment: You won't get more bang for your buck on PSP, but I am beginning to tire of some of the conventions of GTA

> Replay Value: HIgh

Second Opinion 8.25

It's hard to argue with the dozens of hours of gameplay on this return trip to Vice City, and I got over my intial hang-ups with the darker toned story after getting lost in the missions for awhile. It is that constant force-feeding of fun but mindless activities that keeps me coming back for more with GTA, but this time the formula started to run a little thin. I've pimped, extorted, and murdered my way to the top so many times now, the thrill of criminal indulgence has finally begun to fade. This is more of the same from the franchise, with a few more serious themes thrown in. But if you've already drunk your fill of the free-roaming gangbuster cup, then this mix is going to taste a little stale.—**MILLER**

PSP

Gitaroo Man Lives!

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (2-PLAYER VIA AD HOC) **> PUBLISHER** KOEI **> DEVELOPER** KOEI/INIS CORPORATION **> RELEASE** NOVEMBER 14 **> ESRB** E

THE KILLER AXE

Rock and roll never dies, it just gets ported to the PSP. I'm glad that my love for this game's songs and gameplay have only increased since I played the PS2 original in 2002 – especially in this day and age where everyone's talking about that other guitar hero…

As much as I love Guitar Hero, the brilliance of Gitaroo Man is that you not only have to hit keys in-time to the music, but you also have to correctly follow a moving trace line with a target cone you control with the PSP's analog nub. In this way, Gitaroo Man gets me into the music more because I'm not just keeping in time to the music, it's like I'm riding around on sound waves and getting in tune with the vibes of the songs. The flow created by this gameplay does a better job of conveying the feeling of a song than just the flat plane of Guitar Hero – no matter how cool its peripheral is. In fact, the PSP version of this game makes playing Gitaroo Man easier than the original PS2 edition because the tightness and responsiveness of the analog nub is better suited to following the songs' trace lines.

Although I could easily live with this being a straight port, the game adds a new Duet mode, which offers two new songs for you to play. You can experience this mode by yourself, but if you play with a friend it's co-op, so you'll both get individual lines from time to time in the songs. The downside is that it only spans two songs, so all told, this game isn't much different from its PS2 brother.

I couldn't get enough of playing Gitaroo Man Lives, with its infectious tunes and gameplay, and I think that if you have any soul at all you'll rock out to this game.—**KATO**

■ **Pluto's not a planet, but it does throw one hell of a rave**

BOTTOM LINE 9

> Concept: Port one of the best music video games with a new multiplayer mode

> Graphics: The color palette makes the title pop out even on the small PSP screen

> Sound: The original songs that make up the game feature many genres, and comprise perhaps the best soundtrack I've ever heard for a game

> Playability: More friendly on the hands than you'd think

> Entertainment: A test for your skills and a delight for your ears

> Replay Value: Moderately High

Second Opinion 8.75

Sure, this is just a (slightly) enhanced port of an old PS2 game, but hell if I'm going to complain. It's been few years since I last picked up the old axe in Gitaroo Man, and I'm pleased to report that it's aged very well. The use of the analog stick alongside the traditional face buttons adds so much to the PaRappa formula, and makes this one of the best music games in history for my money. I also think this is the first and only time I'll ever make this statement: I actually like playing this better with the PSP's nub. If you are a fan of music games in general, or just all-out quirkiness, I can't think of a reason you wouldn't want to play this.—**MATT**

NINTENDO DS

Pokémon Ranger

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION **> PUBLISHER** NINTENDO
> DEVELOPER CREATURES, INC./HAL LABRATORY
> RELEASE NOVEMBER 1 **> ESRB** E

RUNNING IN CIRCLES

As various Pokémon RPGs have proven over the years, there are times when the this kid-friendly franchise can transcend its Saturday morning roots and present gameplay that is both addictive and fun. This is not one of those times. Instead of leveling up or learning new moves, Pokémon Ranger zeroes in on a gameplay concept that most gamers mastered before kindergarten: the circle.

Controlling a young ranger with the stylus or d-pad, you wander around a bunch of towns, basements, and forests until something gets in your way (i.e. a boulder or fence). At that point you need to find a Pokémon with a relevant trait (like strength for breaking stuff) and engage in a "fight." I use ironic quotes around that word because battles really only consist of watching a handful of Pokémon skitter around until you draw a bunch of circles around them. After that they're your friends, and will use their abilities to knock down whatever is in your way. Then they leave. It is very boring.

While things get marginally more complicated as the experience wears on (like having to use your partner Pokémons' abilities to help you capture others), it never gets less agonizing. The dull, simplistic puzzle-solving relies on a gimmicky control scheme to distract you from the fact that it's barely a game in any sense of the word.—**JOE**

BOTTOM LINE 5

> Concept: It's Pokémon, so people won't know it sucks until they buy it. Chumps!

> Graphics: Your basic top-down villages, dungeons, and sprites, with a few nice effects

> Sound: I could almost hear The Count from Sesame Street bellowing "One! Two! Three circles! Mwa ah ah!"

> Playability: Despite stylus navigation being sluggish, everything works for the most part

> Entertainment: Contains only the joy of drawing simple shapes, which most gamers have probably outgrown

> Replay Value: Low

Second Opinion 5.25

The basic premise of Ranger's fight system isn't bad...for a minigame. You try to capture Pokémon by drawing circles around them with the stylus while preventing them from touching your lines. There is some simple charm to this game, but not enough to keep you occupied for more than 20 minutes. The problem is Nintendo tries to pass this half-cooked concept off as a full-fledged game, and I don't think it will fool anyone over the age of six.—**BEN**

HANDHELD QUICKIES

PSP

Dynasty Warriors Vol. 2

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 4-PLAYER VIA AD-HOC) **> PUBLISHER** KOEI **> DEVELOPER** OMEGA FORCE **> RELEASE** OCTOBER 10 **> ESRB** T

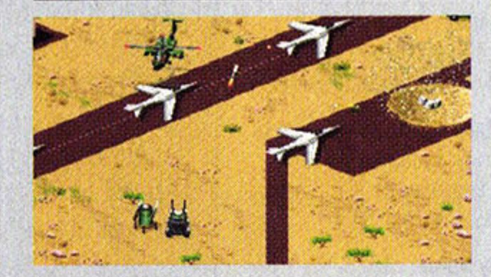
BOTTOM LINE 5

You don't need me to tell you about this game. If you're into video games enough to be reading a magazine about them, then I'll assume you're savvy enough to know that Dynasty Warriors is one of the most overcooked franchises on the market. There is nothing here that you can't experience elsewhere in a better game. The load times are long, the story is dry and confusing, and the action is rather bland. Seriously, this game is so mindless I once stood still to see how long it would take the enemy to kill me, but my army ended up completing the level for me anyway.—**BEN**

PSP

EA Replay

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (2-PLAYER VIA AD HOC)
> PUBLISHER ELECTRONIC ARTS
> DEVELOPER EA CANADA
> RELEASE OCTOBER 31 **> ESRB** T



BOTTOM LINE 6.75

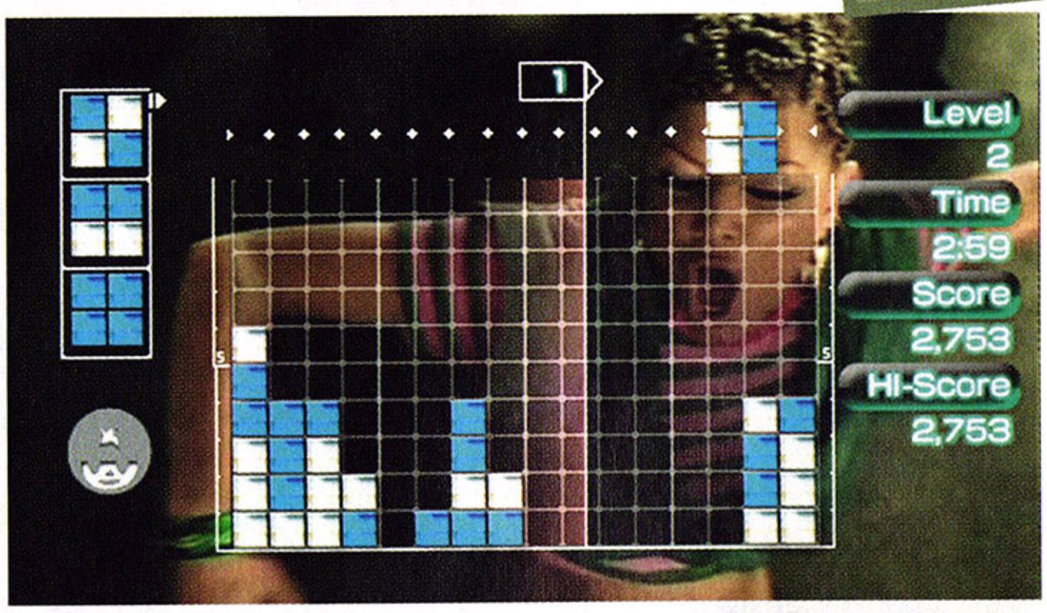
Your first glance at this mix of 14 classic '90s titles may send you jumping for joy – Syndicate, Desert Strike, Mutant League Football, Road Rash, Wing Commander, and Ultima the Black Gate all make appearences just to name some heavy hitters. Just be warned: the sheen of newness that once glossed these games has faded with time, and several might be better left in your memory. But if you're committed to reliving the good old days, this is a reasonable way to go. There's even some multiplayer ad hoc options on a couple of the games for good measure. I certainly thought I was going to have an awesome time with this mix, but it just didn't work out that way. What else can I say? You've been warned.—**MILLER**

PSP

Lumines II

> STYLE 1-PLAYER PUZZLE (2-PLAYER VIA AD HOC) **> PUBLISHER** BUENA VISTA GAMES
> DEVELOPER Q ENTERTAINMENT **> RELEASE** NOVEMBER 2 **> ESRB** E10+

GAME INFORMER HANDHELD GAME OF THE MONTH



KEEP SHININ'

If you have a PSP, you should also have Lumines. If you neglected to buy the best title of the handheld's launch for some reason, now is your chance to fix the problem. Lumines II uses the same hypnotic and addictive gameplay as the original, but the musical and front-end enhancements are enough reason to pack up last year's version and put it back on the shelf.

There are no radical changes to the way Lumines II plays; you are using the same strategies and techniques to drop and erase colored blocks. Apart from an expanded Challenge Mode (the basic single-player experience), there are additional game types to explore, like a music sequencer, missions, and the return of the mind-bending puzzle mode.

While these options add more dimension and replayability, the biggest improvements show up in the way the music responds to your actions. I know it sounds abstract, but interplay between music, effects, visuals, and gameplay is much tighter this time around.

Purists may be upset by the inclusion of mainstream artists (like Gwen Stefani, Beck, and The Black-Eyed Peas), but it isn't like the game has become a Top 40 countdown. There are still a ton of great underground tunes mixed in ("Girls" might even be better than "Lights"), along with plenty of favorites from the original. Practically every skin has the power to unfocus your eyes and put you into a impulse-driven trance.

I can only think of two kinds of gamers who should steer clear of Lumines II: those who categorically dislike puzzlers, and those who tried the first Lumines and weren't impressed. Otherwise, everyone should see how the best block-dropper since Tetris is building on its foundation and moving forward.—**JOE**

BOTTOM LINE 9

> Concept: Fill in the gaps where stuff was missing the first time around

> Graphics: Videos playing in the background for certain skins can be distracting, but only to the point where they add an interesting challenge

> Sound: The integration of music and action is even better than the original

> Playability: Tutorial and Tips options show you the ropes and help you get further faster

> Entertainment: So addictive, it's a wormhole to a universe where time has no meaning

> Replay Value: High

Second Opinion 9

The fact that Lumines II is the best puzzler of recent years isn't why you should own it. The reason that you should feverishly return night after night to the blocks and beats of this addictive game is that you owe it to yourself. That's right. You work hard day in and day out, and you deserve a game with so many fun modes – a game that does such an amazing job of appealing both to new players and those who have already mastered its predecessor. You've earned the right to listen to the remarkably wide sampling of music that will be at your fingertips. You owe it to yourself to see how well that music is integrated with the gameplay and backgrounds that will so enrapture your eye. On the other hand, you most certainly won't deserve anything as good this time next year, since all you will have done is play Lumines II for months on end. What were you thinking?—**MILLER**

OVER THE TOP

Some hardcore fans of the original Lumines were dismayed by the game's 999,999 point barrier, but Q has added a few more digits this time around. You can (theoritcally) rack up a staggering 999,999,999 points in Lumines II, so it will be a long time before anyone hits the score ceiling.

PSP

Medal of Honor Heroes

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA AD HOC, UP TO 32-PLAYER VIA INFRASTRUCTURE) **> PUBLISHER** ELECTONIC ARTS **> DEVELOPER** EA CANADA/EALA **> RELEASE** OCTOBER 23 **> ESRB** T

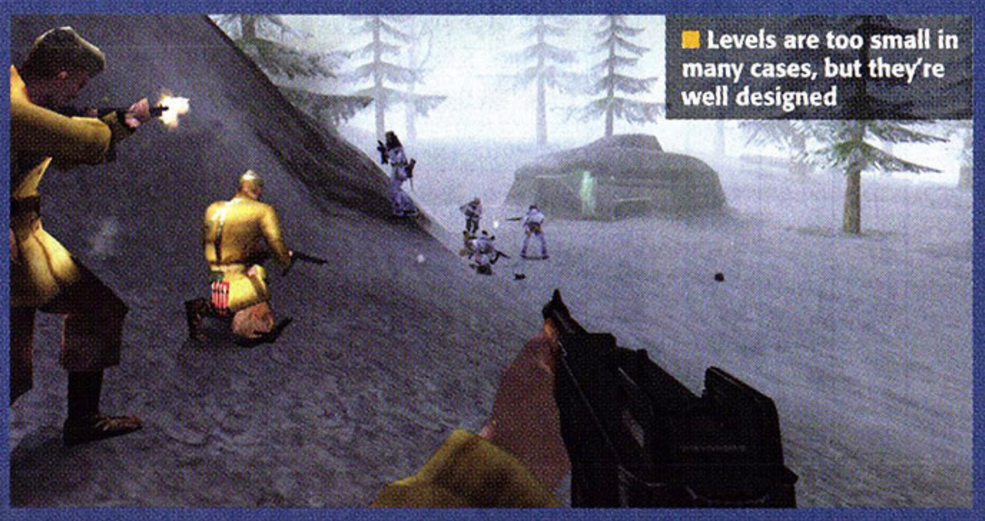
THERE ARE STILL MORE NAZIS?

It's appropriate that the three starring characters of this first PSP Medal of Honor game are all protagonists from earlier incarnations of the series. Everything about Heroes feels like a rehash of old concepts, even if this is effectively a new game. As a full-on PSP FPS that manages to work and control moderately well, that may be enough to satisfy some players. The rest of us, meanwhile, are going to feel like we've seen this game a hundred times before, and not only are we ready for something new; we've played that something new in the form of other, better titles.

The single-player campaign has you shooting your way through various battle sites in the European theater of World War II. The missions and characters are forgettable, which is unfortunate since the use of previous game heroes could have allowed for some fun character growth. As it is, whether you're playing one or the other barely enters your consciousness. Instead, you're left to focus on how slowly your character meanders through the world and how terrible the AI on your fellow nameless soldiers is. Guys, when I set an explosive charge, standard military procedure does not, in point of fact, suggest that you haphazardly run towards the blast radius until you die a fiery death. And you Nazi dummies aren't any better as you wildly charge my entrenched machine gun as one after another of you falls beneath its hail. More than that, objectives are by-the-numbers fetch quests or area domination jobs, some of which actually double as multiplayer levels, which kind of blows.

On the other hand, it's hard for me to not praise the juicy multiplayer modes themselves, where full-on 32-player matches can be played online, or eight of your friends can play together in an ad hoc network. These matches are almost all game types that will feel overly familiar, but it's definitely cool to have a large scale FPS multiplayer option like this that works well on the PSP. There's a little slowdown and some questionable spawn points, but it's a small price to pay for the chance to play through some titanic conflicts.

There's nothing fundamentally broken about EA's latest milking of their World War II franchise, but neither is there a great deal that will blow you away. It's a retread of familiar territory in every way, such that a game like this five years ago would have had me reeling, but now leaves me feeling flat.—**MILLER**



Levels are too small in many cases, but they're well designed

BOTTOM LINE 6.75

> Concept: Return, yet again, to the battlefields of World War II. Apparently freedom needs yet more defending

> Graphics: Lots of pixels, but not bad for a first run at the portable scene

> Sound: It's too bad the great theme music isn't more interwoven into the gameplay

> Playability: Even without a second analog, controls are smooth and responsive, but the character movement is a little sluggish

> Entertainment: It would be great if you hadn't already played this game before – a lot

> Replay Value: Moderate

Second Opinion 6

As with all shooters on the PSP, half of the problem with Medal of Honor Heroes is the device it calls home. You can't shoehorn a second analog stick into the right button layout. It simply doesn't work. Please stop trying. EA didn't do itself any favors with the lackluster campaign, either. The short missions feel scatterbrained and underwhelming. You rarely feel a sense of accomplishment after smoking herds of lemming Nazi foot soldiers or recovering Top Secret documents, many of which just happen to be lying in the open. Heroes scores points for its ambitious multiplayer, though I'd prefer my soldier to move above a snail's pace when he's dodging bullets in the hot zone.—**BERTZ**

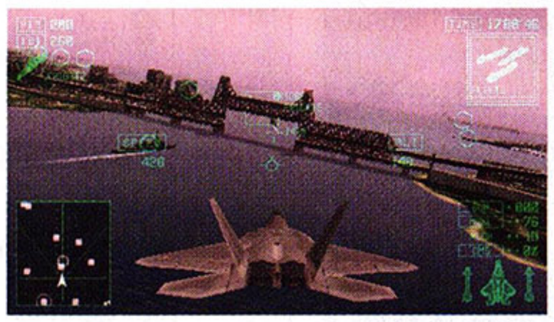
HANDHELD QUICKIES

PSP

Ace Combat X: Skies of Deception

BOTTOM LINE 8.25

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 4-PLAYER VIA AD HOC) **> PUBLISHER** NAMCO BANDAI **> DEVELOPER** NAMCO BANDAI **> RELEASE** OCTOBER 17 **> ESRB** T



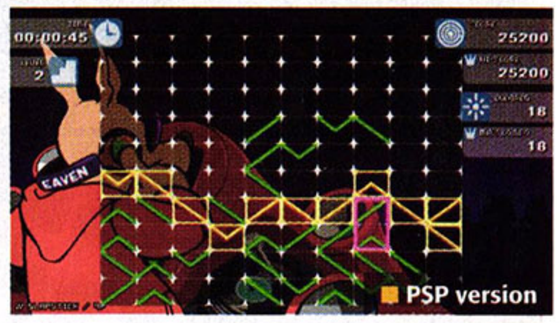
Impressive enough to sit beside the earlier PS2 games in the Ace Combat series, Skies of Deception gives players the same thrilling air dogfights that they've come to expect, but on a much smaller screen. I'd challenge anyone to find very much to complain about in the visuals or even in the wider production values of front-end menus, sound effects, and voice-acting. I was a little disappointed not to see a greater focus on teamwork with your AI companions, a feature I've really enjoyed in the recent PS2 entries. Otherwise, the missions find the right balance between challenge and ease of play. Having battles against enemies like giant flying fortresses offers enough fantasy to balance the realistic military vibe. There's even some ad hoc multiplayer, if that's your thing. This is the first entry in this genre for the PSP, and I'm happy to say that a pretty high bar has been set.—**MILLER**

PSP | NINTENDO DS

Gunpey

BOTTOM LINE 7.75

> STYLE 1-PLAYER PUZZLE (2-PLAYER VIA AD HOC) **> PUBLISHER** NAMCO BANDAI **> DEVELOPER** Q ENTERTAINMENT **> RELEASE** NOVEMBER 14 **> ESRB** E



PSP version

Handheld fans are no strangers to Gunpei Yokoi, father of the Game Boy. Puzzle fans are no strangers to Tetsuya Mizuguchi, creator of Lumines. Gunpey is the bridge between the two luminaries: a puzzle game conceptualized by the former and re-imagined by the latter. The result is a worthy puzzle game with two very different faces. Lumines fans will appreciate the PSP version's sleek, futuristic look and techno soundtrack. DS gamers gain the added benefit of touch screen functionality, but the aesthetic is much less appealing (unless you prefer loud pastel colors, hokey music, cardboard cutout characters, and a storyline).—**BERTZ**

NINTENDO DS

Mage Knight: Destiny's Soldier

BOTTOM LINE 4.5

> STYLE 1-PLAYER STRATEGY **> PUBLISHER** NAMCO BANDAI **> DEVELOPER** BIG BLUE BUBBLE **> RELEASE** SEPTEMBER 26 **> ESRB** E10+

It pains me to say this, because I adore the complex ruleset behind the Mage Knight strategy system (which is amazingly well-recreated in this transition to the video game world). But facts are facts, and some fundamental problems make this a game that is likely to be frustrating to experienced players of the miniature game and nearly impossible to grasp for newcomers. The detailed flow of battle and unit types is never explained to a level that players will really understand unless they already know the game from its tabletop variation. Furthermore, abysmal balancing makes a playthrough of the campaign almost impossible without a poker champion level of good luck. I would absolutely love to see someone go back and do an accessible and fun version of these rules for a video game, but sadly this outing just isn't it.—**MILLER**

CHARTS

An In-Depth Listing Of The Best Selling Games

TOP 20

Listings Based Upon NPD Data For August 2006 Based On Units Sold

Rank	Title	L. Mo.	System	Score	Release	Price
1	Madden NFL 07	1	PS2	8.25	08-06	$48
2	Saints Row	N/A	360	8.75	08-06	$60
3	LEGO Star Wars II: The Original Trilogy	N/A	PS2	8	09-06	$39
4	Pokémon Mystery Dungeon: Blue Rescue Team	N/A	DS	3	09-06	$31
5	Madden NFL 07	2	360	7.75	08-06	$58
6	Pokémon Mystery Dungeon: Red Rescue Team	N/A	GBA	N/A	09-06	$31
7	LEGO Star Wars II: The Original Trilogy	N/A	GC	8	09-06	$39
8	Madden NFL 07	4	XBOX	8.25	08-06	$49
9	Star Fox Command	N/A	DS	8	09-06	$32
10	New Super Mario Bros.	6	DS	9.25	05-06	$35
11	NBA Live 07	N/A	PS2	7.5	09-06	$38
12	LEGO Star Wars II: The Original Trilogy	N/A	360	8	09-06	$49
13	LEGO Star Wars II: The Original Trilogy	N/A	XBOX	8	09-06	$39
14	Final Fantasy VII: Dirge of Cerberus	5	PS2	9.25	08-06	$49
15	Test Drive Unlimited	N/A	360	8.25	09-06	$40
16	Dead Rising	3	360	9.25	08-06	$60
17	Mario Hoops 3 on 3	N/A	DS	6.5	09-06	$32
18	Okami	N/A	PS2	9.5	09-06	$40
19	Grand Theft Auto: Liberty City Stories	8	PS2	9.25	06-06	$20
20	Madden NFL 07	17	PSP	8.25	08-06	$40

Source: The NPD Group/NPD Funworld®/TRSTS® • David Riley 516-625-2277

1 MADDEN NFL 07 (PS2)

We would imagine that every year around this time, John Madden strips naked, oils himself up, and rolls around in the big piles of money he earns from this game. We *would* imagine that, but then our brains would fry, and all we'd be good for is watching *Two and A Half Men* and listening to old Jerky Boys tapes.

2 SAINTS ROW (XBOX 360)

Oh snap! The next-gen GTA biter be blazin' up the charts, yo! Okay, we'll stop now. Seriously, this game did so well because people want a next-gen Grand Theft Auto. Well, we want a next-gen Bionic Commando. It'll sell as well as Saints Row, we promise! If it doesn't, we'll buy Capcom a refreshing Coca-Cola.

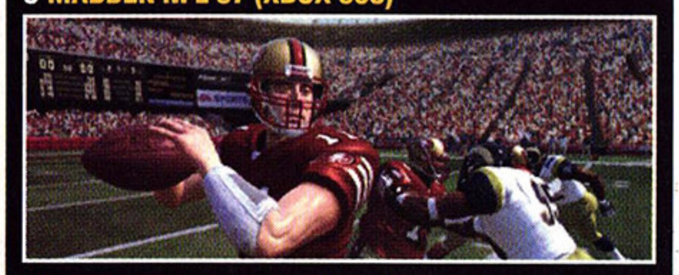
3 LEGO STAR WARS II: THE ORIGINAL TRILOGY (PS2)

Star Wars plus LEGO equals giant piles of cash that would make a naked John Madden happy. But now that all six movies have appeared in a game, expect future sequels to tie into other construction toys. Lincoln Log Star Wars, Erector Set Star Wars, and Play-Doh Star Wars FTW!

4 POKÉMON MYSTERY DUNGEON: BLUE RESCUE TEAM (DS)

Apparently, the fact that this game is worse than shrimp cocktail-flavored schnapps didn't stop fans from showing up at stores to pick it up. For every copy of this game sold, there's a kid out there convinced that Pikachu has died, and the smell of his rotting corpse is now wafting out of their DS.

5 MADDEN NFL 07 (XBOX 360)



We meet again, Mr. Madden. How have you been since we saw you last? We feel like we haven't seen you in...seconds! What's new? Have you lost weight? Oh, you've gained weight. How much? Forty pounds! How is that even possible? Maybe you should lay off the deep-fried lardwiches.

TOP 10 JAPAN

Rank	Title	System
1	Dragon Ball Z: Sparkling! NEO	PS2
2	Pokémon Diamond	DS
3	Pokémon Pearl	DS
4	Gundam Battle Royale	PSP
5	New Super Mario Bros.	DS
6	KanKen DS	DS
7	Everybody's Tennis	PS2
8	Final Fantasy III	DS
9	DS Training for Adults: Work Your Brain 2	DS
10	Animal Crossing: Wild World	DS

1

6

TOP 10 GI

Rank	Title	L. Mo.	System
1	Gears of War	N/A	360
2	Resistance: Fall of Man	N/A	PS3
3	Dark Messiah of Might and Magic	N/A	PC
4	Lumines II	N/A	PSP
5	Guitar Hero II	N/A	PS2
6	Bully	N/A	PS2
7	Tony Hawk's Project 8	N/A	360
8	Marvel Ultimate Alliance	N/A	Multi
9	Splinter Cell: Double Agent	N/A	Multi
10	Gitaroo Man Lives!	N/A	PSP

2

5

The Staff's Favorite Picks

TOP 10 PC

Rank	Title	L. Mo.	Price
1	The Sims 2 Glamour Life Stuff	N/A	$18
2	World of Warcraft	1	$32
3	Company of Heroes	N/A	$49
4	The Sims 2	2	$40
5	Paws & Claws Pet Vet	7	$16
6	Civilization IV	6	$42
7	LEGO Star Wars II: The Original Trilogy	N/A	$29
8	Cars: Radiator Springs Adventures	9	$19
9	Seaworld Adventure Parks Tycoon 2	N/A	$15
10	The Sims 2: Open for Business	5	$31

3

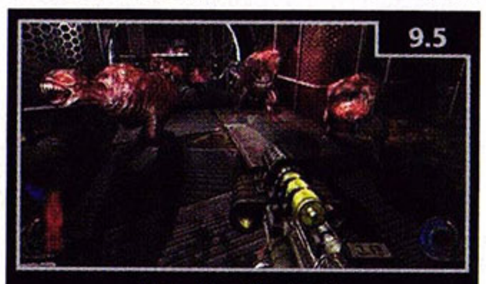
6

Based On Monthly Units Sold

REVIEWSARCHIVE

XBOX 360

2006 FIFA World Cup	8.5	Jun-06
Battlefield 2: Modern Combat	7.75	Jun-06
Blazing Angels: Squadrons of WWII	7.5	May-06
Bomberman: Act Zero	3	Sep-06
Chromehounds	7	Aug-06
Dead Rising	9.25	Sep-06
Dynasty Warriors 5: Empires	6	May-06
Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion, The	9.5	May-06
Enchanted Arms	6	Oct-06
Far Cry Instincts: Predator	8.75	Jun-06
Final Fantasy XI	7.25	Jun-06
Godfather, The	7.75	Oct-06
Hitman: Blood Money	7.75	Jul-06
Just Cause	7.25	Oct-06
LEGO Star Wars II: The Original Trilogy	8	Oct-06
Lord of the Rings: The Battle Middle-earth II, The	8	Aug-06
Madden NFL 07	7.75	Oct-06
Major League Baseball 2K6	7	Jun-06
Moto GP '06	8.75	Jul-06
NBA 2K7	8.25	Nov-06
NCAA Football 07	7.75	Aug-06
NHL 07	7.25	Oct-06
NHL 2K7	8.25	Oct-06
Ninety-Nine Nights	7.5	Sep-06
Over G Fighters	5	Sep-06
Prey	9.5	Aug-06
Rumble Roses XX	5.75	May-06
Saints Row	8.75	Sep-06
Samurai Warriors 2	6	Nov-06
Table Tennis	8	Jul-06
Test Drive Unlimited	8.25	Nov-06
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 07	8	Nov-06
Tomb Raider: Legend	8.75	May-06
Top Spin 2	8.5	May-06
X-Men: The Official Game	4	Jul-06



Prey – Xbox 360 – Aug-06

PLAYSTATION 2

2006 FIFA World Cup	8.5	Jun-06
Ace Combat Zero: The Belkan War	8.5	May-06
Atelier Iris 2: The Azoth of Destiny	7.5	Jun-06
Cars	7	Aug-06
Commandos: Strike Force	5.5	Jun-06
Dance Factory	8	Jun-06
Da Vinci Code, The	6	Jul-06
Destroy All Humans 2	8.5	Nov-06
Dirge of Cerberus: Final Fantasy VII	6.75	Sep-06
Disgaea 2: Cursed Memories	8.75	Sep-06
Driver: Parallel Lines	6.75	May-06
Dynasty Warriors 5: Empires	6	May-06
Eureka Seven Vol 1: The New Wave	5.25	Oct-06
Fast and the Furious, The	6	Nov-06
FIFA 07	7.75	Oct-06
Final Fantasy XII	9.25	Nov-06
FlatOut 2	7.5	Sep-06
Gallop Racer 2006	6.75	Jul-06
God Hand	6	Nov-06
Godfather: The Game, The	7.5	May-06
Grand Theft Auto: Liberty City Stories	8.75	Aug-06
Hitman: Blood Money	7.75	Jun-06
Jaws	4.75	Aug-06
Just Cause	7.25	Oct-06
Legend of Spyro: A New Beginning, The	7	Nov-06
LEGO Star Wars II: The Original Trilogy	8	Oct-06
Madden NFL 07	8.25	Oct-06
Metal Saga	5.25	May-06
Micro Machines V4	7.5	Aug-06
Midnight Club 3: DUB Edition Remix	9.5	May-06
MLB SlugFest 2006	5	Aug-06
Monster Rancher EVO	8	Jun-06
Naruto: Ultimate Ninja	6.5	Jul-06
NASCAR 07	7.75	Oct-06
NBA 07	7.5	Nov-06
NBA 2K7	8	Nov-06
NBA Live 07	7.5	Nov-06
NCAA Football 07	8.25	Aug-06
NFL Head Coach	6.75	Aug-06
NHL 07	7.75	Oct-06
NHL 2K7	6.75	Oct-06
Okami	9.5	Oct-06
One Piece: Pirate's Carnival	4	Sep-06
Outrun 2006: Coast 2 Coast	7.5	Jun-06
Pirates of the Caribbean: The Legend of Jack Sparrow	5.75	Aug-06
Rampage: Total Destruction	6.5	May-06
Real World Golf	7	Jun-06
Rogue Trooper	7.25	Jun-06
Rule of Rose	6.25	Oct-06
Samurai Champloo: Sidetracked	6.75	May-06
Samurai Warriors 2	6	Nov-06
Scarface: The World is Yours	8.5	Nov-06
Spy Hunter: Nowhere to Run	3	Nov-06
Steambot Chronicles	5.5	May-06
Street Fighter Alpha Anthology	7.5	Jul-06
Suikoden V	7.5	May-06
Super Dragon Ball Z	6	Sep-06
Super Monkey Ball Adventure	4.75	Sep-06
Tales of the Abyss	7.25	Nov-06
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 07	8	Nov-06
Tomb Raider: Legend	8.75	May-06
Tourist Trophy: The Real Riding Simulator	8.5	May-06
Urban Chaos: Riot Response	7.75	Jul-06
Valkyrie Profile 2: Silmeria	8	Oct-06
Winback 2: Project Poseidon	4	Jun-06
Xenosaga Episode III: Also Sprach Zarathustra	8.5	Sep-06
X-Men: The Official Game	4	Jul-06
Yakuza	6	Sep-06

GAMECUBE

Baten Kaitos Origins – GC – Nov-06

2006 FIFA World Cup	8.5	Jun-06
Baten Kaitos Origins	7	Nov-06
Cars	7	Aug-06
FIFA 07	7.75	Oct-06
Legend of Spyro: A New Beginning, The	7	Nov-06
LEGO Star Wars II: The Original Trilogy	8	Oct-06
Madden NFL 07	8.25	Oct-06
Rampage: Total Destruction	6.5	May-06
Super Monkey Ball Adventure	4.75	Sep-06
X-Men: The Official Game	4	Jul-06

XBOX

2006 FIFA World Cup	8.5	Jun-06
Blazing Angels: Squadrons of WWII	7.5	May-06
Cars	7	Aug-06
Commandos: Strike Force	5.5	Jun-06
Da Vinci Code, The	6	Jul-06
Destroy All Humans 2	8.5	Nov-06
Dreamfall: The Longest Journey	8	Jun-06
Driver: Parallel Lines	6.75	May-06
FIFA 07	7.75	Oct-06
FlatOut 2	7.5	Sep-06
Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter	7.5	May-06
Godfather: The Game, The	7.5	May-06
Hitman: Blood Money	7.75	Jun-06
Jaws	4.75	Aug-06
Just Cause	7.25	Oct-06
Legend of Spyro: A New Beginning, The	7	Nov-06
LEGO Star Wars II: The Original Trilogy	8	Oct-06
Madden NFL 07	8.25	Oct-06
Midnight Club 3: DUB Edition Remix	9.5	May-06
MLB SlugFest 2006	5	Aug-06
NASCAR 07	7.75	Oct-06
NBA 2K7	8	Nov-06
NBA Live 07	7.5	Nov-06
NCAA Football 07	8.25	Aug-06
NFL Head Coach	6.75	Aug-06
NHL 07	7.75	Oct-06
NHL 2K7	6.75	Oct-06
Outrun 2006: Coast 2 Coast	7.5	Jun-06
Painkiller: Hell Wars	7.75	Oct-06
Rogue Trooper	7.25	Jun-06
Scarface: The World is Yours	8.5	Nov-06
Sonic Riders	5	Apr-06
Spy Hunter: Nowhere to Run	3	Nov-06
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 07	8	Nov-06
Tomb Raider: Legend	8.75	May-06
Torino 2006	4.25	Apr-06
Urban Chaos: Riot Response	7.75	Jul-06
WarPath	7.25	May-06
Winback 2: Project Poseidon	4	Jun-06
X-Men: The Official Game	4	Jul-06

PC

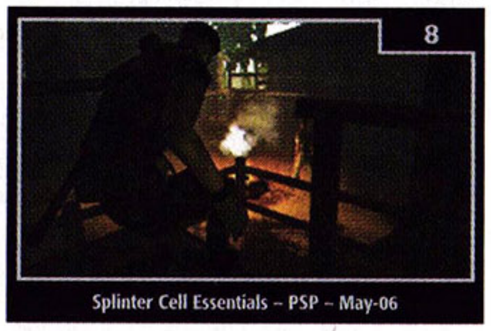
AutoAssault	7	Jun-06
Battlefield 2142	8.5	Nov-06
CivCity: Rome	8	Sep-06
Commandos: Strike Force	5.5	Jun-06
Company of Heroes	9	Oct-06
Darwinia	7.5	Jul-06
Dreamfall: The Longest Journey	8	Jun-06
Dungeons & Dragons Online: Stormreach	8	May-06
Dungeon Siege II: Broken World	7.5	Oct-06
Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion, The	9.5	May-06
Full Spectrum Warrior: Ten Hammers	7.25	Apr-06
Galactic Civilizations II: Dread Lords	8	Apr-06
Half-Life 2: Episode One	8.75	Aug-06
Heroes of Might & Magic V	8.25	Jul-06
Hitman: Blood Money	7.75	Jun-06
Just Cause	7.25	Oct-06
Lord of the Rings: The Battle for Middle-earth II, The	8.5	Apr-06
Marc Ecko's Getting Up: Contents Under Pressure	7.25	Apr-06
Paradise	5.25	Jul-06
Prey	9.5	Aug-06
Rise & Fall: Civilizations at War	5	Aug-06
Rise of Nations: Rise of Legends	9.5	Jul-06
Sid Meier's Civlization IV: Warlords	8	Sep-06
Sims 2: Open for Business, The	7	Apr-06
SiN Episodes: Emergence	7.75	Jul-06
Sword of the Stars	7.5	Sep-06
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 07	8	Nov-06
Titan Quest	8.25	Aug-06
WarPath	7.25	May-06

NINTENDO DS

Big Brain Academy	7.75	Aug-06
Brain Age	8.25	Jun-06
Break 'Em All	7.5	Sep-06
Children of Mana	7.75	Nov-06
Contact	7	Oct-06
Cooking Mama	6.5	Oct-06
Deep Labyrinth	4	Oct-06
Dragon Quest Heroes: Rocket Slime	8.25	Oct-06
Guilty Gear: Dust Strikers	6	May-06
Hi Hi Puffy AmiYumi: The Genie and the Amp	5.75	Sep-06
Lost Magic	6	Jun-06
Magical Starsign	6.5	Nov-06
Magnetica	7.25	Aug-06
Mario Hoops 3-on-3	6.5	Oct-06
Mario vs. Donkey Kong 2: March of the Minis	6	Nov-06
MechAssault: Phantom War	7.75	Oct-06
Mega Man ZX	7	Oct-06
Metroid Prime: Hunters	8.5	May-06
Monster House	6	Oct-06
New Super Mario Bros.	9.25	Jul-06
Point Blank DS	4.5	Aug-06
Pokémon Mystery Dungeon: Blue Rescue Team	3	Nov-06
Rub Rabbits!, The	7.5	Apr-06
Scurge: Hive	7.5	Nov-06
Star Fox Command	8	Oct-06
Super Monkey Ball: Touch & Roll	8	Apr-06
Tamagotchi Connection: Corner Shop	6.5	Apr-06
Tao's Adventure: Curse of the Demon Seal	2	Jun-06
Tetris DS	9.25	Apr-06
Touch Detective	6.75	Nov-06
Worms: Open Warfare	7	May-06

PSP

50 Cent Bulletproof: G Unit Edition	6.25	Nov-06
Astonishia Story	4.25	Aug-06
Blade Dancer	5.5	Aug-06
Bounty Hounds	6.25	Nov-06
Capcom Classics Collection Remixed	8.5	May-06
Daxter	8.75	Apr-06
Death Jr. 2: Root of Evil	8.25	Nov-06
Def Jam Fight for NY: The Takeover	8	Aug-06
Every Extend Extra	8.25	Nov-06
Field Commander	7.5	May-06
Fight Night Round 3	7.75	Apr-06
From Russia With Love	6.75	May-06
Gangs of London	6	Nov-06
Generation of Chaos	5	May-06
Godfather: Mob Wars, The	4.5	Nov-06
Gradius Collection	8.5	Jun-06
Juiced Eliminator	7.75	Aug-06
Killzone: Liberation	7.25	Nov-06
Legend of Heroes II, The	6	Jul-06



Splinter Cell Essentials – PSP – May-06

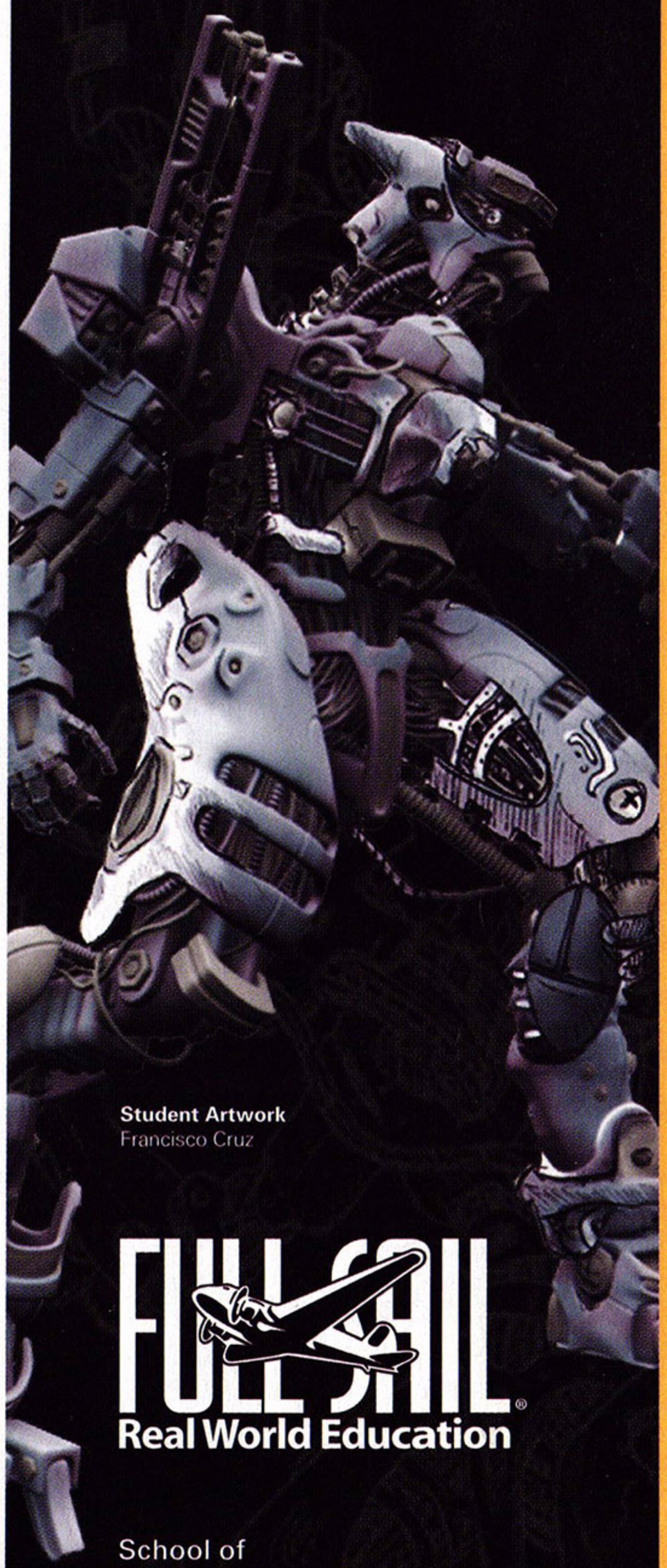
Lemmings	7.25	Jul-06
LocoRoco	7.5	Oct-06
Me and My Katamari	8	May-06
Mega Man: Powered Up	8.25	Apr-06
Mercury Meltdown	8	Sep-06
Metal Gear Acid 2	8	Apr-06
Miami Vice	6.75	Oct-06
MLB '06 The Show	7	Apr-06
Monster Hunter Freedom	4	Jun-06
MX vs. ATV: On the Edge	8	May-06
NBA Ballers: Rebound	8	Apr-06
NCAA Football 07	8.5	Sep-06
Outrun 2006: Coast 2 Coast	7.5	Jun-06
Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest	3	Sep-06
Power Stone Collection	7.75	Nov-06
Pursuit Force	6.25	Apr-06
Race Driver 2006	8.5	Aug-06
Samurai Warriors: State of War	7	May-06
Spectral Souls	5.5	Nov-06
Splinter Cell Essentials	8	May-06
Street Supremacy	6.75	Apr-06
Syphon Filter: Dark Mirror	8	May-06
Tekken: Dark Resurrection	8.25	Sep-06
Tomb Raider: Legend	8.25	Jul-06
Ultimate Block Party	7.5	Jun-06
Ultimate Ghosts 'n Goblins	7.25	Oct-06
Untold Legends: The Warrior's Code	8.25	Apr-06
Valkyrie Profile: Lenneth	8	Aug-06
Viewtiful Joe: Red Hot Rumble	7	May-06
Worms: Open Warfare	7	May-06
WRC: FIA World Rally Championships	8.75	Apr-06
WTF	7	Nov-06
Ys: The Ark of Napishtim	6.75	Apr-06

GAME BOY ADVANCE

Mega Man Battle Network 6: Cybeast Gregar/Cybeast Falzar	6.5	Aug-06
Summon Night: Swordcraft Story	7	Aug-06
Super Robot Taisen: Original Generation	7.5	Aug-06
Tower SP, The	7	Jun-06

ONE OF THE TOP FIVE GAME-DEGREE PROGRAMS

– Electronic Gaming Monthly



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SECRET ACCESS

Codes, Strategies, Hints, Droids, And Tips

Mortal Kombat: Armageddon

Fatal Strategies From Midway

AIR KOMBAT

Perhaps the most dramatic addition to the fighting engine, Air Kombat brings back many of the strategies used in the 2D Mortal Kombat games. Players can now "jump-flip" and "jump-attack" forwards and backwards as they used to on the older MK games. The ability to jump and (air) attack so freely makes the pacing of fights much more unpredictable, as old-school strategies of turnaround "flip-over-kicks", flipping over projectiles, and catching someone off guard by meeting them mid-air are now mixed in with the more modern 3D strategies of dodging attacks, counter attacks, and 3D rolling. In addition, the multi-hit combos that previously could only be executed on the ground can now be performed in the air.

START YOUR COMBO ON THE GROUND AND FINISH IN THE AIR

While surprising your opponent in the air is one method of starting an air combo, the easiest is probably to perform a combo that launches your opponent into the air. While he is being launched up, all you need to do is push up on your directional pad and your fighter will leap forward towards your victim where you can continue your combo in the air.

BEWARE THE AIR ATTACKS THAT "BOUNCE" YOUR OPPONENT ON THE GROUND

There are a number of air attacks (and throws) that slam your opponent on the ground, resulting in him bouncing back up to you where you can continue your air combo with additional attacks. If your opponent is pressing up, down, or back when he hits the ground, he can escape out of your combo by rolling back to his feet. He can also hold block (when hitting the ground) and remain lying on the ground, also ending your combo. To avoid this situation, you probably want to avoid using the "victim bounce" attacks if they know how to escape during the bounce.

USE MOVES THAT STUN YOUR OPPONENT AS A WAY TO SET UP AIR COMBOS

A number of characters that have special moves that stun their opponent. Use these opportunities to easily pop your opponents in the air and start an air combo.

THE PARRY MOVE

The addition of the parry move in Armageddon adds another layer to the defensive strategy of the fighting. A parry can be thought of as a block move that (if contact is made briefly) disables an attacking opponent. By holding your directional pad away from your opponent and pressing block your fighter goes into a special block state (very briefly) where he

will "reverse" an incoming (non-low) attack, disabling your opponent's ability to block for a short period of time. During this time you can counter with your own attacks. The trick with the parry move is to time it just right so that your opponent's attack hits you while you are in this special block state.

DON'T PARRY TOO OFTEN

As just mentioned, the best strategy with the parry move is to use it sparingly to surprise your opponent. Using it too often gives your opponent many opportunities to attack while you are in the parry's vulnerable state.

TAKE ADVANTAGE OF PLAYERS WHO PARRY TOO MUCH

Timing the parry move incorrectly results in you not being able to block attacks for a short period of time. The secret to the parry move is to surprise your opponent with it. You can take advantage of players who try to parry too often by waiting for them to parry and then following it with your best combo.

WAKE UP ATTACKS

Another new move that changes the way MK is played is the "wake-up" attack. These attacks are very useful when your opponent knocks you down and continues to charge at you before you get back up. As you hit the ground you can hold the block button which causes your fighter to remain lying down. This lying down state can be thought of as a "wake-up state." While in the wake-up state you can perform a special set of very quick attacks called wake-up attacks. There are three types: low, medium, and high. Your opponent has to guess which one you might be attacking him with. These attacks are very useful in keeping overly aggressive players from attacking you immediately after knocking you down.

MIX UP THE DIFFERENT WAKE-UP ATTACKS

As mentioned above, there are three different types of wake-up attacks: low, medium, and high. This means your opponent will need to either keep his distance or be fast enough to block (high or low) or parry your wake-up attack. You definitely want to mix up which wake-up attacks you do or your opponent will know how you counter the attack. Mixing between low, medium, and high will keep him guessing, giving you the advantage.

USE WAKE-UP WHEN SLAMMED INTO THE GROUND FROM AN AIR COMBO

Keep in mind that you can get into a wake-up-state when you are slammed on the ground from an air combo. This is a good way to break out of some of the more devastating air combos.

PLAYING AGAINST BOSSES

Armageddon includes all the boss characters from the previous MK games. Several of these bosses are so big and heavy that they react differently to various attacks. For example, three of the giant characters (Blaze, Onaga, and Moloch) are immune to projectiles. They also (along with Goro and Kintaro) can not be popped up as easily for air combos. Unless you are also a giant boss, you will not be able to throw one of them. Try to use combos that keep your opponent on the ground. Popping up boss characters does not open up as many air combo opportunities as when you fight against normal-sized opponents.

PLAYING AS BOSSES

The bosses' strength obviously lies in the amount of damage they can inflict on their opponents. Try to stay as close as you can to your opponent and just unleash combos! If you are playing as Blaze, Onaga, or Moloch, don't worry about your opponent shooting projectiles at you, they will not affect you at all. It might take some time to get used to that idea.

Mod World

XFIRE
http://www.xfire.com

Xfire has been around for some time, but the service has truly found its groove lately. This nifty little app provides a central friends list and cross-game chat features (without even having to alt-tab out of the game you're playing). It also allows you to join up with your buddies in any supported game simply by clicking their name and the "join" button.

Xfire's abilities don't stop there, either. It features integrated server browsers, voice chat, profiles complete with stat tracking, and peer-to-peer download channels for patches and mods. This whole package comes at the low, low price of a small advertising window within the Xfire client (obviously, you won't have to look at it while playing whatever game you're in, though).

In the past, we've avoided covering Xfire because its usefulness was very dependent on which game you were playing. However, these days the majority of high-profile releases support Xfire natively, including Dark Messiah of Might & Magic, World of Warcraft, Call of Duty 2, and Star Wars: Empire at War. Xfire's claim of having nearly 5.5 million subscribers might seem outlandish, but it's easy to believe once you see how useful it can be.

Code of the Month

Scarface: The World is Yours

It's a big open world crime game, so you knew there were going to be some codes, right? Well, lucky you. We've gathered them together here for your perusal. Give Tony some new duds, mess with the cops, create a sweet ride out of thin air, or even alter weather patterns. I mean, it's like you're some sort of drug kingpin who can get whatever he wants. Huh. To enter your desired codes, you'll need to pause the game, select CHEATS, and then enter one of the following before you can activate it in the menu.

Black Suit Tony – BLACK
Blue Suit Tony With Shades – BLUESH
Change Time Of Day – MARTHA
Decrease Cop Heat – FLYSTRT
Decrease Gang Heat – NOBALLS
Fill Balls Meter – FPATCH
Gray Suit Tony – GRAY
Gray Suit Tony With Shades – GRAYSH
Hawaii Shirt Tony – HAWAII
Hawaii Shirt Tony With Shades – HAWAIIG
Increase Cop Heat – DONUT
Increase Gang Heat – GOBALLS
Max Ammo – AMMO
Musical Track "The World Is Yours" – TUNEME
Refill Health – MEDIK
Repair Tony's Vehicle – TBURGLR
Sandy Shirt Tony – SANDY
Sandy Shirt Tony With Shades – SANDYSH
Spawn Ariel Mk III – OLDFAST
Spawn Bacinari – 666999
Spawn Bodog Stampeded – BUMMER
Spawn Bulldozer – DOZER
Spawn Odin VH88 (Dumptruck) – DUMPER
Toggle Lightning – SHAZAAM
Toggle Rain – RAINY
White Suit Tony – WHITE
White Suit Tony With Shades – WHITESH

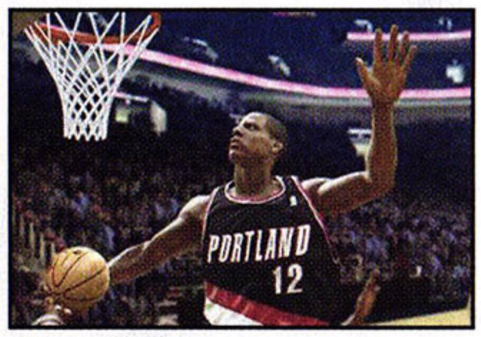
Miguel Rodriguez
Santa Fe, New Mexico

Attention All Cheaters!

Cheat codes, by their very nature, are in many cases buggier than Virginia in August. So, unless you don't mind re-doing those 70 hours you put into the latest game, do yourself a favor and back up your save before using any codes.

On a lighter note, you can send your codes to secretaccess@gameinformer.com for a chance to be featured here and win a very special prize!

MULTI-SYSTEM



NBA Live 07

Go to the NBA Codes Screen and enter one of the following codes to get some new jerseys or shoes.

JERSEYS

Charlotte Bobcats 2nd Road Jersey – WEDX671H7S
Eastern All Star 2007 Road Jerssey – WOCNW4KL7L
Eastern All Stars 2007 Home Jersey – 5654ND43N6
New Jersey Nets 2nd Road Jersey – D4SAA98U5H
Washington Wizards 2nd Road Jersey – QV93NLKXQC
Western All Stars 2007 Away Jersey – XX93BVL20U
Western All Stars 2007 Home Jersey – 993NSKL199

SHOES

C-Billups All Star Edition – BV6877HB9N
C-Billups Vegas Edition – 85NVLDMWS5
Gil-Zero All Star Edition – 23DN1PPOG4
Gil-Zero Mid Away – 369V6RVU3G
Gil-Zero Mid Home – 1GSJC8JWRL
Gil-Zero Vegas Edition – QQQ3JCUYQ7
KG Bounce All Star Edition – HYIOUHCAAN
KG Bounce Vegas Edition – KDZ2MQL17W
Stealth All Star Edition – FE454DFJCC
T-Mac 6 All Star Edition – MCJK843NNC
T-Mac 6 Vegas Edition – 84GF7EJG8V

Saints Row

As promised, here are some more codes for THQ's massive gang brawler. To enter these, tab over to your phone in the pause menu, press DIAL, and enter a code. Then go into the CHEATS menu to enable the unlocked effect. Remember, once you turn on a code, it's a good idea not to save the game, as you'll lose the ability to gain achievements.

Give Anchor – #Anchor
Give Aqua – #aqua
Give Baron – #baron
Give Betsy – #betsy
Give Bulldog – #bulldog
Give Bulldozer – #bulldozer
Give Cavallaro – #cavallaro
Give Compton – #compton
Give FBI – #FBI
Give Fer De Lance – #ferdelance
Give Five-O – fiveo
Give Gunslinger – #gunslinger
Give Halberd – #halberd
Give Hammerhead – #hammerhead
Give Mag – #mag
Give Newman – #newman
Give Quasar – #quasar
Give Rattler – #rattler
Give Shogun – #shogun
Give Taxi – #taxi
Give Traxxmaster – #traxxmaster
Give Voxel – #voxel
Give Zenith – #zenith

"GI Droid"
(location unknown – last seen teaching kindergarten kids how to eat paste)

Xbox Live Arcade Spotlight

Castlevania: Symphony of the Night

We've seen some exciting re-releases through Xbox Live Arcade, but nothing so ambitious as Konami's upcoming offering. Symphony of the Night is widely recognized by all sorts of folks as a pinnacle not only of the PSone era, but of the wider category of 2D action games. With a wealth of secret items and power-ups to be found, the game offers hours and hours of exciting vampire-slaying fun melded with creepy visuals and a remarkable musical score. Now that same excitement is headed to Live Arcade, tentatively planned for sometime in 2007. While it doesn't sound as if any major changes are planned for the title, we'll certainly have some cool Achievements to go after. Can anyone say multiple endings?

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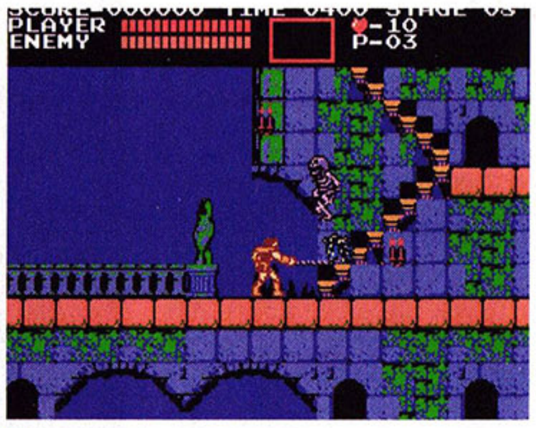
THE ETERNALLY EVIL CASTLE

A CASTLEVANIA RETROSPECTIVE

Born in a Konami development lab in 1986, Castlevania has grown from a simple 8-bit side-scrolling hack n' slash into one of the longest-running series in video games. Though the more successful titles in the franchise retain many of the original's classic sensibilities to this day, Castlevania has had more than its share of great moments in its two-decade-long history. We had a recent opportunity to speak with current Castlevania director Koji Igarashi to add some insight to this tribute to the original gothic action-adventure.

A Myth is Born

One of the primary draws of Castlevania has always been the enduring legend of the Belmont clan's eternal struggle against the forces of darkness as personified in the evil vampire Count Dracula. Even though the 1986 original was little more than a side-scrolling brawl against zombies and skeletons, the tone was set. Gothic-inspired visuals and a haunting musical score were a noticable departure from the colorful graphics and cheery tunes that dominated the NES generation of games, and Castlevania continued to push the envelope with the ahead-of-its-time Castlevania II: Simon's Quest in 1988.



Castlevania

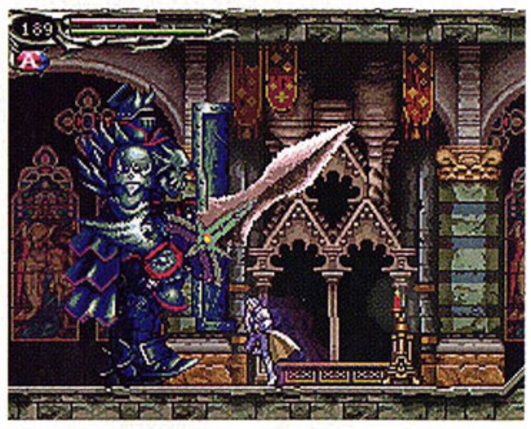
Castlevania: Simon's Quest

Simon's Quest, like Zelda II: The Adventure of Link, was an entirely different game than its predecessor. Infusing role-playing elements into the action made this adventure an experiment that truly pushed the boundaries of 8-bit gaming. This broadening of the game's scope also led to the plot being much better developed in this sequel, which in turn helped firmly establish the central myth in the minds and hearts of gamers everywhere.

Reactions to Simon's Quest were mixed, however. The game's high ambitions came at the price of less-than-polished gameplay in several areas, and Konami took Castlevania back to its roots for the next eight years. Castlevania III: Dracula's Curse, Super Castlevania IV, Castlevania: Bloodlines, and Castlevania: Dracula X were all excellent titles in their own right, and did much to shape the two-dimensional action genre as we now know it. The themes of good vs. evil and cursed heroes remained constant throughout, but it wasn't until 1997 that the franchise broke through to the next level.

A New Paradigm

The arrival of director Koji Igarashi on the Castlevania series from his previous work at Konami signaled big changes for the venerable franchise. Igarashi, while a big fan of Castlevania, was not confident that there was any further room to grow within the series' current gameplay model. "There was a situation – players did not buy new products because they got tired of linear type video games which had short gameplay time," reveals Igarashi. "We could set the game difficulty high, but it just narrowed players...and I did not like it. Some players might be satisfied with it, but then it shortens the life of the franchise. Therefore I came up with the idea of Symphony of the Night's system."


Castlevania: Dawn of Sorrow

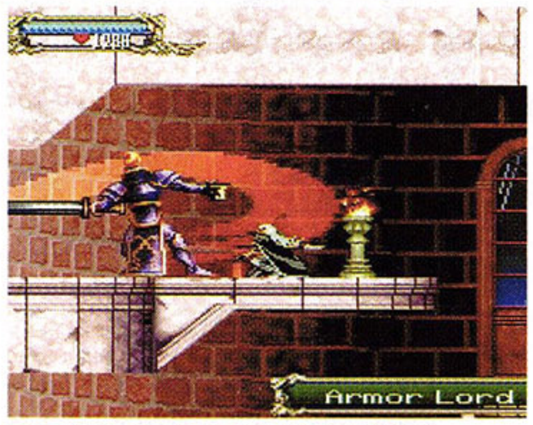
Castlevania: Harmony of Dissonance

Eventually, Igarashi's team released Castlevania: Symphony of the Night for Sony's upstart PlayStation console in 1997. Even more so than Simon's Quest, Symphony of the Night pushed Castlevania in a new and exciting direction – and this time the change stuck.

Though some jaded gamers dub Symphony's gameplay formula "Metroidvania" due to its resemblance to Nintendo's beloved franchise, there can be no argument that bringing the concepts of an open castle layout and RPG-like character advancement breathed new life into Konami's aging series. Puzzle elements and a huge variety of weapons and attacks, not to mention the sheer volume of secrets to be found in Symphony's immense castle, resulted in a depth of gameplay well beyond the simple action of previous entries. To this day, Symphony of the Night remains one of the

most revered titles of the PSone era – so much so that it's being rereleased on Xbox Live Arcade later this year.

Symphony's basic concepts of exploration and hero growth have been mainstays of all of the two-dimensional Castlevania titles ever since. This new generation of Castlevania has resulted in a slew of amazing adventures. Circle of the Moon, Harmony of Dissonance, Aria of Sorrow, Dawn of Sorrow, and the upcoming Portrait of Ruin all iterate on these ideas in new ways, but these handheld games owe the vast majority of their design to Igarashi's seminal Symphony.



Castlevania: Symphony of the Night

Castles of the Future

As fantastic as all of those Symphony-inspired titles are, recent years have not all been so kind to the Belmont clan. The series' four forays into three dimensions – Castlevania 64, Legacy of Darkness, Lament of Innocence, and Curse of Darkness – have been less successful. Even Igarishi admits, "Unfortunately, I have not been able to crystallize my ideal 3D Castlevania yet. The reasons are various, such as lacking the technology, budget, etc. The biggest problem is details. I believe we should not be proud of games which are not supported by the players."

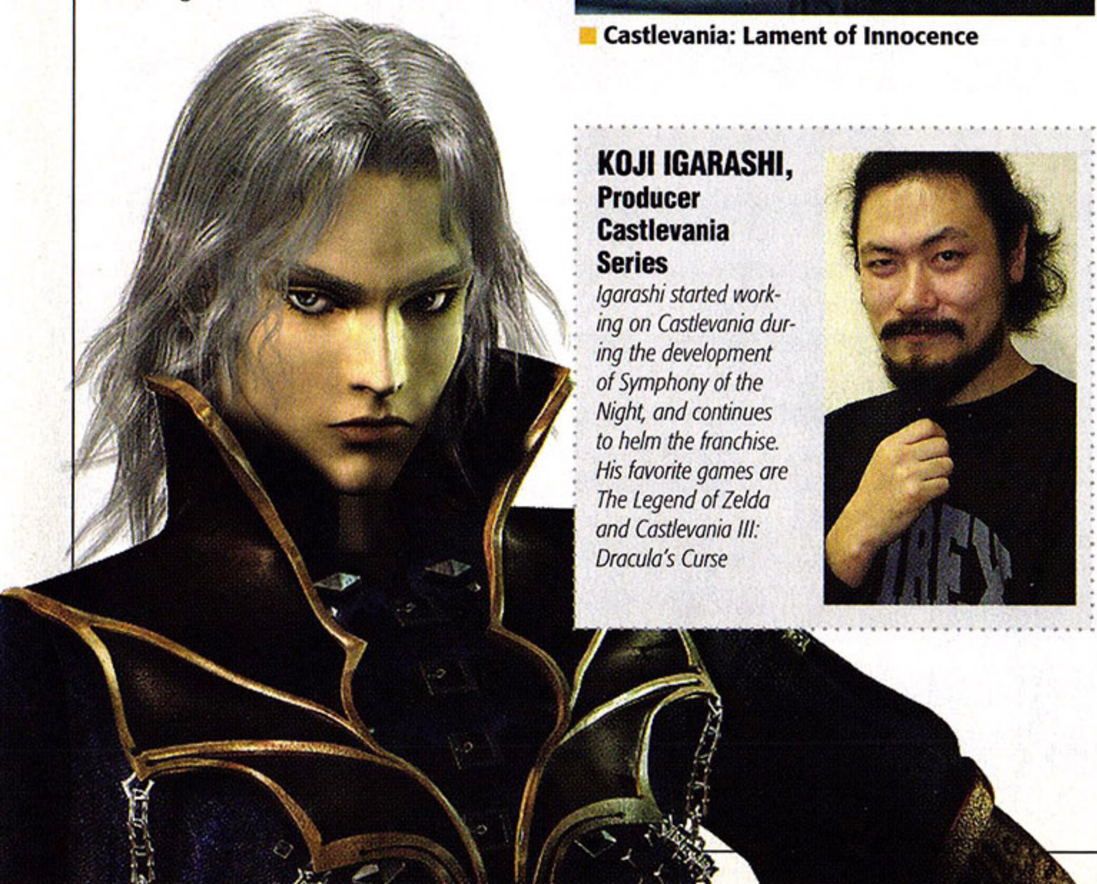
The whip-slinging action has just never felt right in the 3D games, but fans still hold out hope that Castlevania will get the home console treatment it deserves someday, Igarashi among them. "The post-Symphony gameplay is the present of the franchise and it is not the future of the franchise," he says.

With the launch of Nintendo's Virtual Console looming near in the future, gamers of all generations will have the chance to check out this celebrated series' roots. We highly recommend it – there are few franchises as enduring, historically significant, and flat-out entertaining as Castlevania ■■■

Castlevania 64

Castlevania: Curse of Darkness

Castlevania: Lament of Innocence



KOJI IGARASHI, Producer Castlevania Series

Igarashi started working on Castlevania during the development of Symphony of the Night, and continues to helm the franchise. His favorite games are The Legend of Zelda and Castlevania III: Dracula's Curse

GAME TIMELINE

Castlevania (1986; NES, Famicom, MSX)
Castlevania II: Simon's Quest (1988; NES)
Haunted Castle (1988; Arcade)
Castlevania Adventure (1989; Game Boy)
Castlevania III: Dracula's Curse (1990; NES)
Super Castlevania IV (1991; SNES)
Castlevania 2: Belmont's Revenge (1991; Game Boy)
Dracula-X: Rondo of Blood (1993; PC Engine Super CD-ROM2. Turbo Duo – Japan Only)
Castlevania: Bloodlines (1994; Genesis)
Castlevania: Dracula X (1995; SNES)
Castlevania: Symphony of the Night (1997; PSone, Sega Saturn)
Castlevania Legends (1998; Game Boy)
Castlevania 64 (1999; Nintendo 64)
Castlevania: Legacy of Darkness (1999; Nintendo 64)
Castlevania Chronicles (2001; PSone)
Castlevania: Circle of the Moon (2001; GBA)
Castlevania: Harmony of Dissonance (2002; GBA)
Castlevania: Aria of Sorrow (2003; GBA)
Castlevania: Lament of Innocence (2003: PS2)
Castlevania: Dawn of Sorrow (2005; DS)
Castlevania: Curse of Darkness (2005; PS2, Xbox)
Castlevania: Portrait of Ruin (2006; DS)

CHRONOLOGICAL TIMELINE

1094 Castlevania: Lament of Innocence
1450 Castlevania: Legends
1476 Castlevania III: Dracula's Curse
1479 Castlevania: Curse of Darkness
1576 Castlevania Adventure
1591 Castlevania 2: Belmont's Revenge
1691 Castlevania
Super Castlevania IV
Castlevania Chronicles
Haunted Castle
Vampire Killer
1698 Castlevania II: Simon's Quest
1748 Castlevania: Harmony of Dissonance
1792 Dracula X: Rondo of Blood
Castlevania: Dracula X
1797 Castlevania: Symphony of the Night
1830 Castlevania: Circle of the Moon
1844 Castlevania: Legacy of Darkness
1852 Castlevania 64
1914 Castlevania: Bloodlines
1944 Castlevania: Portrait of Ruin
2035 Castlevania: Aria of Sorrow
2036 Castlevania: Dawn of Sorrow

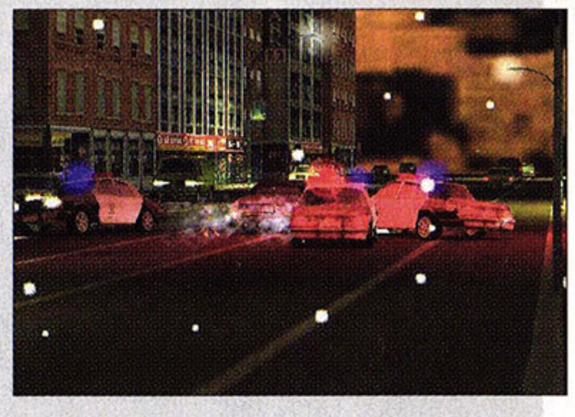
GREATEST GAME OF ALL TIME

By Joey Gangemi

DRIVER

> **FORMAT** PSONE
> **PUBLISHER** GT INTERACTIVE

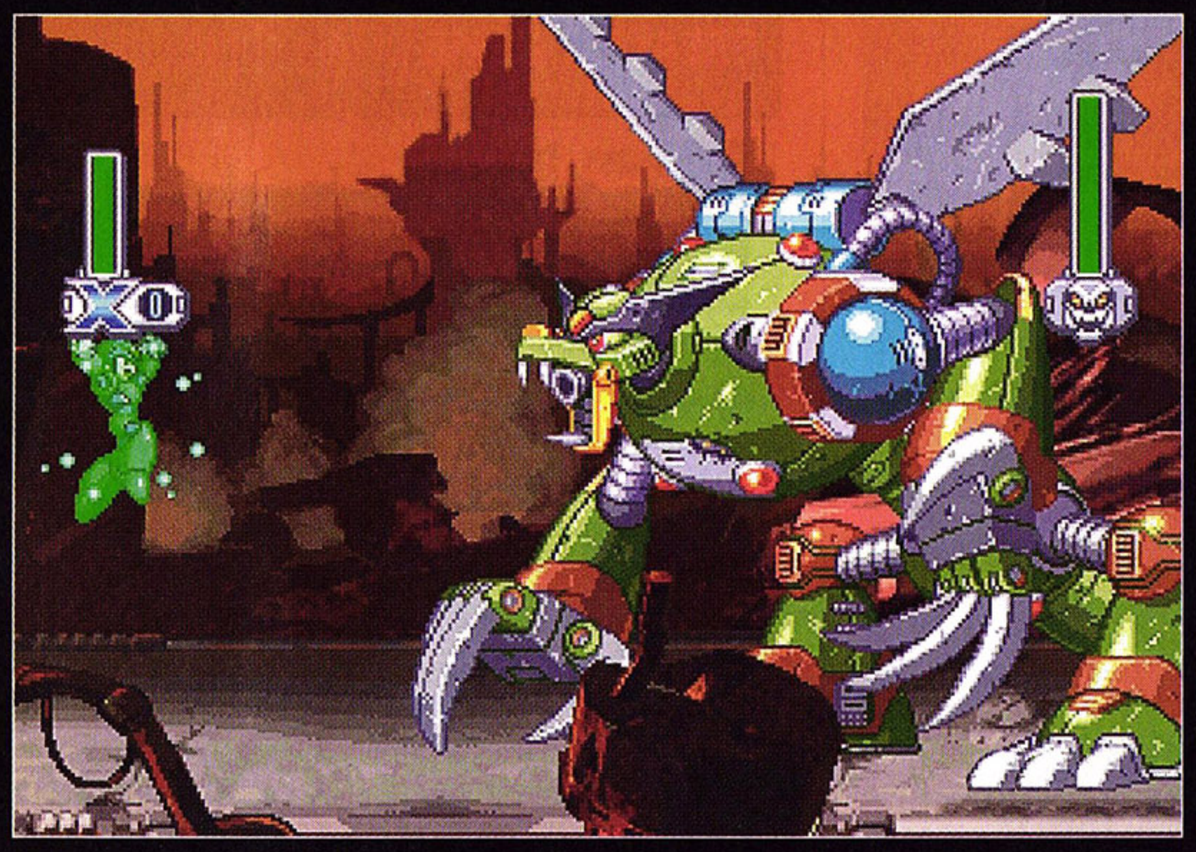
Combining incredible gameplay and the most realistic car physics gaming has ever seen, Reflections truly has created one monster of a game. Driver is basically a Grand Theft Auto III Lite. Although it isn't as open and free-roaming as GTA III, it still provides the same much-loved gameplay and concept. You'll find yourself enthralled just by driving around the gigantic environments, running from cops, swerving in between cars, finding secret alleyways, and more. Despite the incredible amount of pop-up that you'll notice, the graphics were amazing at the time of its release. As for today's standards, it ain't no Ninja Gaiden, but what do you expect from such an aged game? The story is quite good too: You're Tanner, an undercover cop doing errands for various gang leaders, mob bosses, and more. You'll find yourself doing a wide array of missions through four super huge and detailed cities. Some of the missions include being the wheelman for escaping bank robbers, picking up contraband and delivering it to a specified location, and much more. I still consider this the greatest driving game of all time, and the unbelievable handling really adds to that already strong label. There is so much depth in this scheme, you may not even believe that it's necessary, and that it got thrown in there for a little gag. For example, if you stop at a red light and hold down the triangle button and either left or right, you'll make the blinker come on! It's little things like these that create such legendary games. There really is something for everyone to love in this game. If you're a fan of GTA III, I'm sure you'll be more than happy to try out the game that started it all.



THIS MONTH IN GAMING HISTORY

On December 17, 1999, French publisher Infogrames (now known as Atari) turned another page in the consolidation of the gaming industry into a few giant publishers by announcing that it had sealed the deal to purchase GT Interactive. This acquisition netted Infogrames publishing deals for games like Driver (remember, this was when it used to be cool), Unreal, and Oddworld.

GT Interactive Software

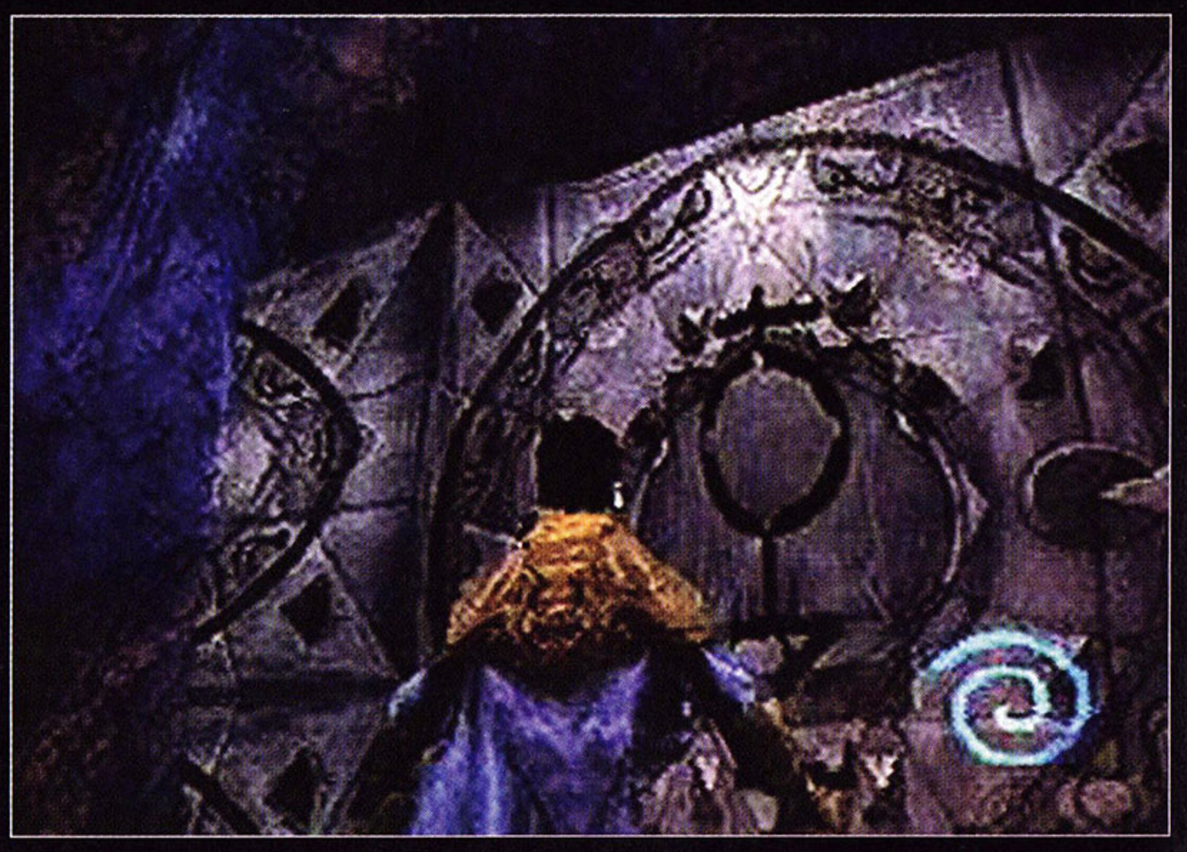


PSONE

MEGA MAN X4

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION **> PUBLISHER** CAPCOM **> DEVELOPER** CAPCOM **> RELEASE** 1997

To the untrained eye, all Mega Man games are indistinguishable. They all feature some robot protagonist, eight robot masters, and a bunch of different weapons that you get along the way. While Mega Man X4 certainly isn't an exception in those departments, it has an abundance of little details that set it apart as one of the better games in this classic series. More mini-bosses and hover bikes, plus some slick anime cutscenes are all nice improvements, but the best part is the character selection. Depending on whether you choose to play as X or Zero at the outset, you'll develop different skills and fighting styles; X acquires new weapons to shoot from afar, and Zero learns new techniques that must be executed up-close. Though the story doesn't change much from hero to hero, these two styles of gameplay add a level of replay value that isn't commonly found in the franchise. Providing you don't mind knowing what to expect, Mega Man X4 delivers solid 2D thrills, plus a lot of exploding robots.



PSONE

LEGACY OF KAIN: SOUL REAVER

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION/ADVENTURE **> PUBLISHER** EIDOS INTERACTIVE **> DEVELOPER** CRYSTAL DYNAMICS **> RELEASE** 1999

Soul Reaver plays like a gothic mix of the 64-bit Zeldas and the earlier Tomb Raider games, but that crazy combination works great. It is a shame that the camera hasn't stood up very well against the test of time, because otherwise this game is a remarkable experience. Soul Reaver is filled with a good number of puzzles that will have you scratching your head for awhile, but the solution is always clever enough that you feel a sense of accomplishment when you solve them. It's fun to power up Raziel with new abilities and spells, and the boss battles are generally clever and enjoyable. The aforementioned camera is a problem whenever you get into a tight environment, the combat is truly bare bones compared to today's standards, and the clifhanger ending is worse than Halo 2's. But, the real selling point of this game is the story/dialogue/voice acting, which still rank in the top tiers of video game storytelling, though that might not be saying enough. Soul Reaver can compete with most cinematic or textual adventures.

PSONE

ROSCO MCQUEEN: FIREFIGHTER EXTREME

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION **> PUBLISHER** PSYGNOSIS **> DEVELOPER** SLIPPERY SNAKE STUDIO **> RELEASE** 1997

Rosco, doofus that he is, still had some good intentions with his debut effort. There's a good bit of variety to his firefighting adventures, as you spray down fires with your water hose, chop through doors, rescue trapped building workers, and take out some wily out-of-control robots as you go. However, every one of these activities shows up in the first few minutes of gameplay, and the schtick loses its charm only a few minutes after that. Visuals hold up better than many games from the era, but the music and hackneyed voice clips don't fare as well. As family friendly fare, you could do a lot worse than some alone time with this goofball fireman and his oversized hose (okay maybe not totally family friendly), but we haven't heard anyone clambering for a return of this barely passable franchise, and we're pretty much fine if it stays that way.

*Score given to the game when it first appeared in Game Informer. Legacy of Kain: Soul Reaver (GI #77 09/99) Rosco McQueen: Firefighter Extreme (GI #66 09/98),

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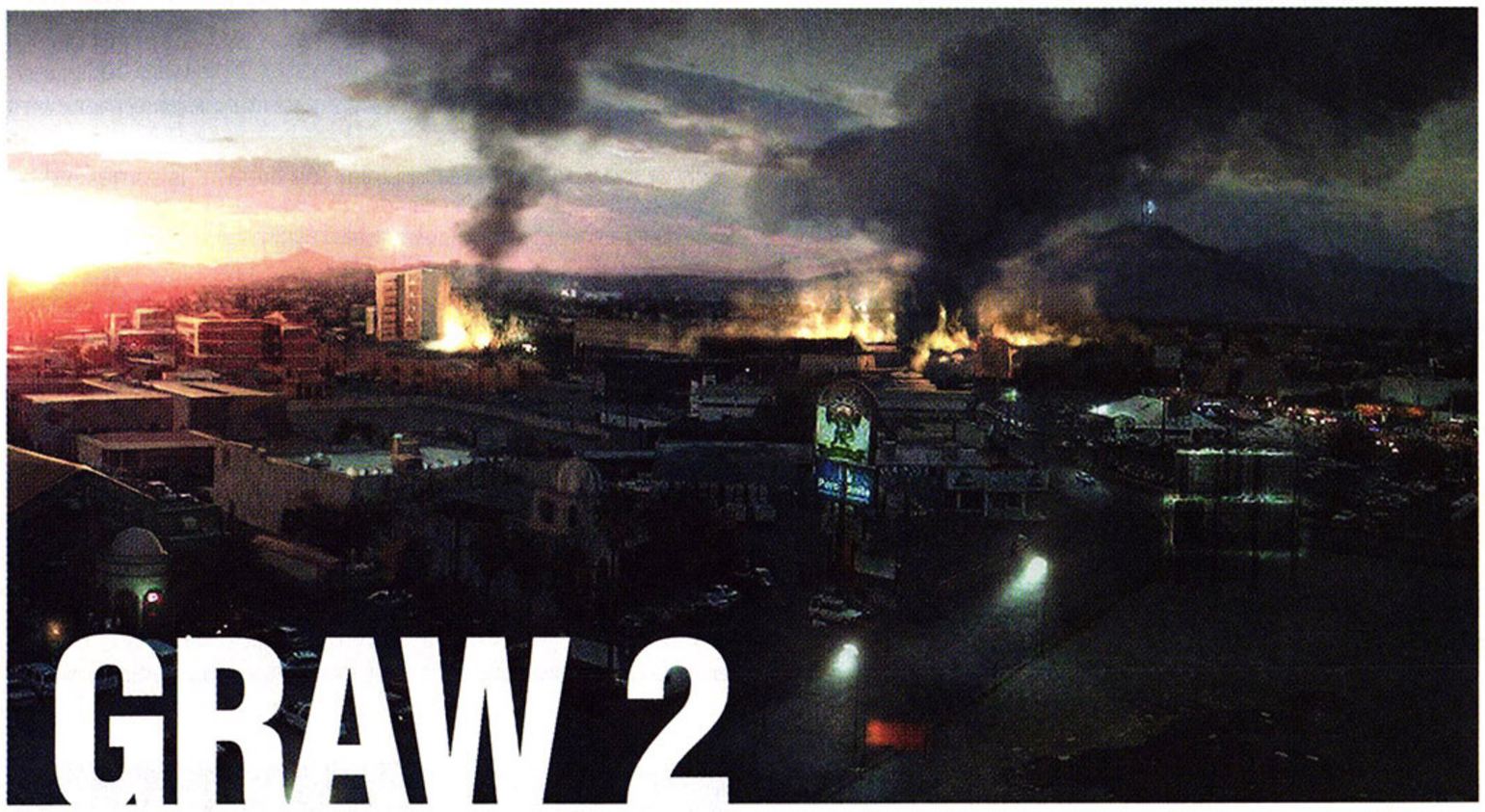
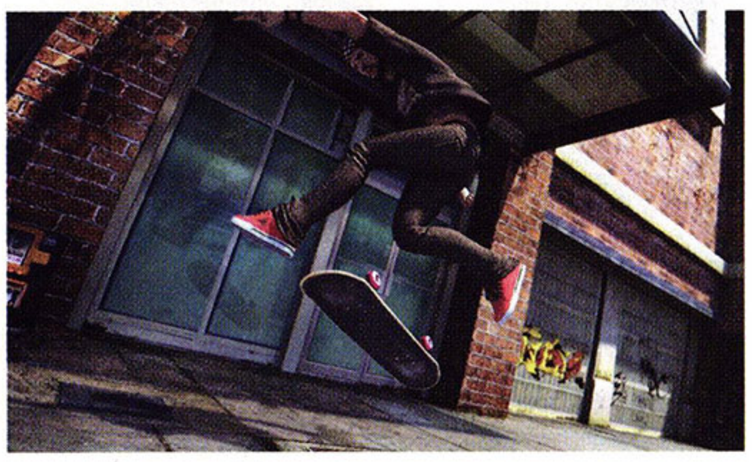


Get more GRAW 2 with an extra ration of our exclusive screenshots and images of the actual weapons, armor, and camouflage that inspired the in-game arsenal.

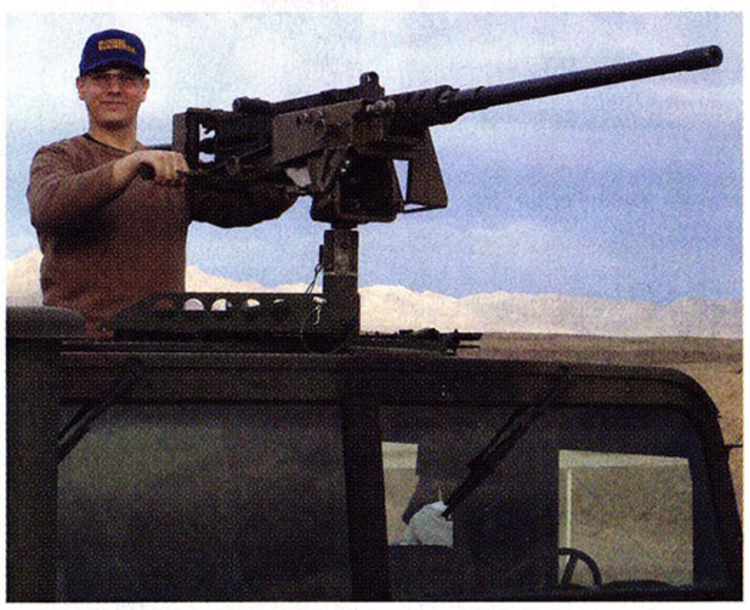


Skate or Die

No one can match him on the half-pipe, but EA is trying to dethrone one of skateboarding's icons, Tony Hawk, with its new title Skate. Check out our full developer interview to dig deeper than our preview in this month's issue (page 94).

Miller Chickens Out

See if you can pinpoint the exact moment Miller chickens out from asking Lacey Chabert out on a date during his interview with the young starlet over her involvement in Sonic the Hedgehog.



Miller Prepares for Revenge

Check out pictures of Miller's shooting range experience in the desert for the Rogue Warrior press event. We dared and chided Miller to ask out Chabert before he learned to shoot an AK-47. Looking back, it may not have been our best idea.

ALSO ONLINE THIS MONTH:

GI Online counts down the days to your favorite releases with previews, screenshots, and exclusive interviews. Plus, we take a sneak peak at what the PS3, Wii, and Xbox 360 have to offer in 2007.

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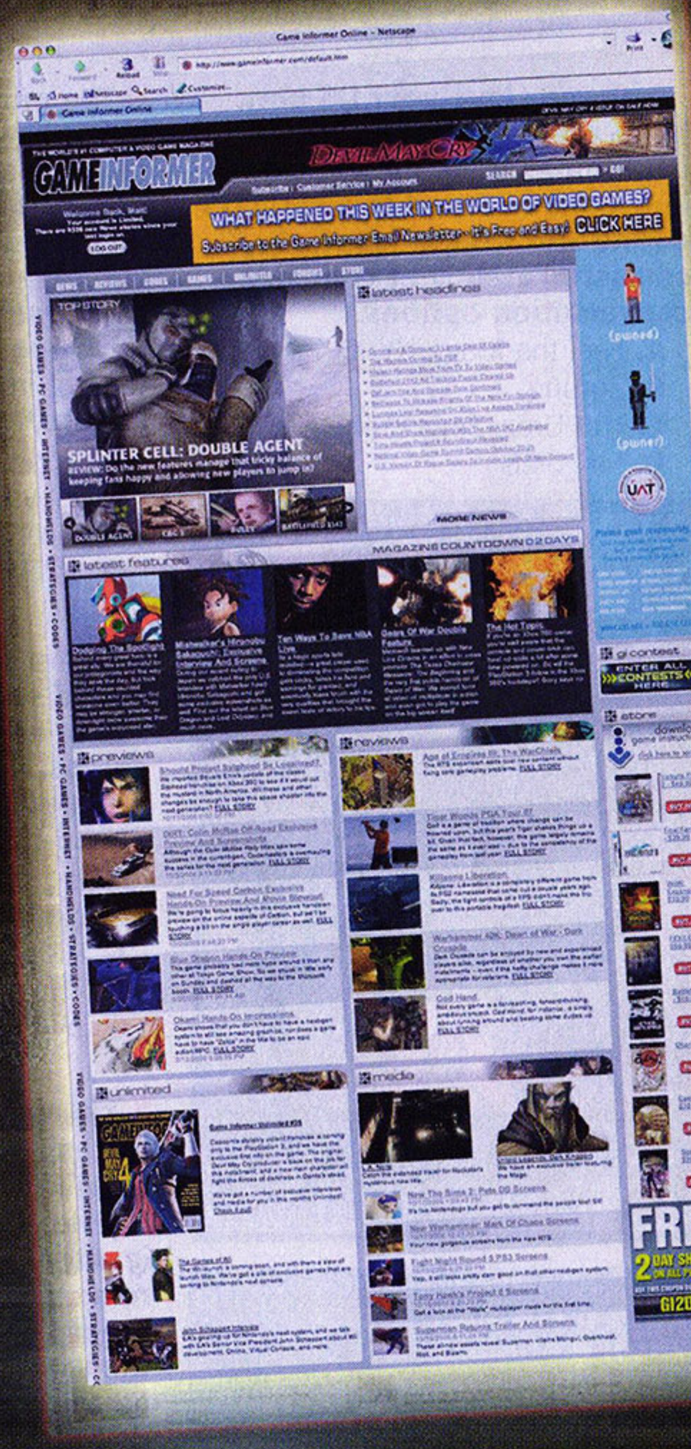

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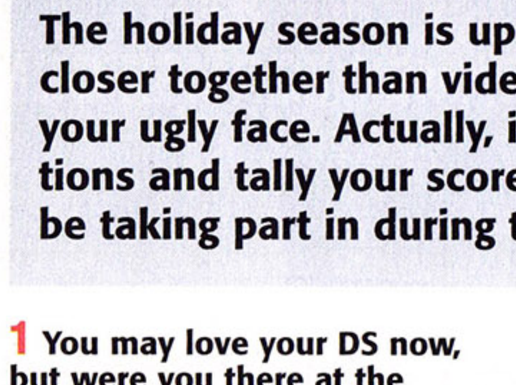
VIDEO GAME TRIVIA

The holiday season is upon us, and nothing warms the heart and brings people closer together than video games. If you don't believe us, you can cram it in your ugly face. Actually, instead you should just answer the following questions and tally your score to find out what game-related holiday activity you'll be taking part in during this festive time of year.

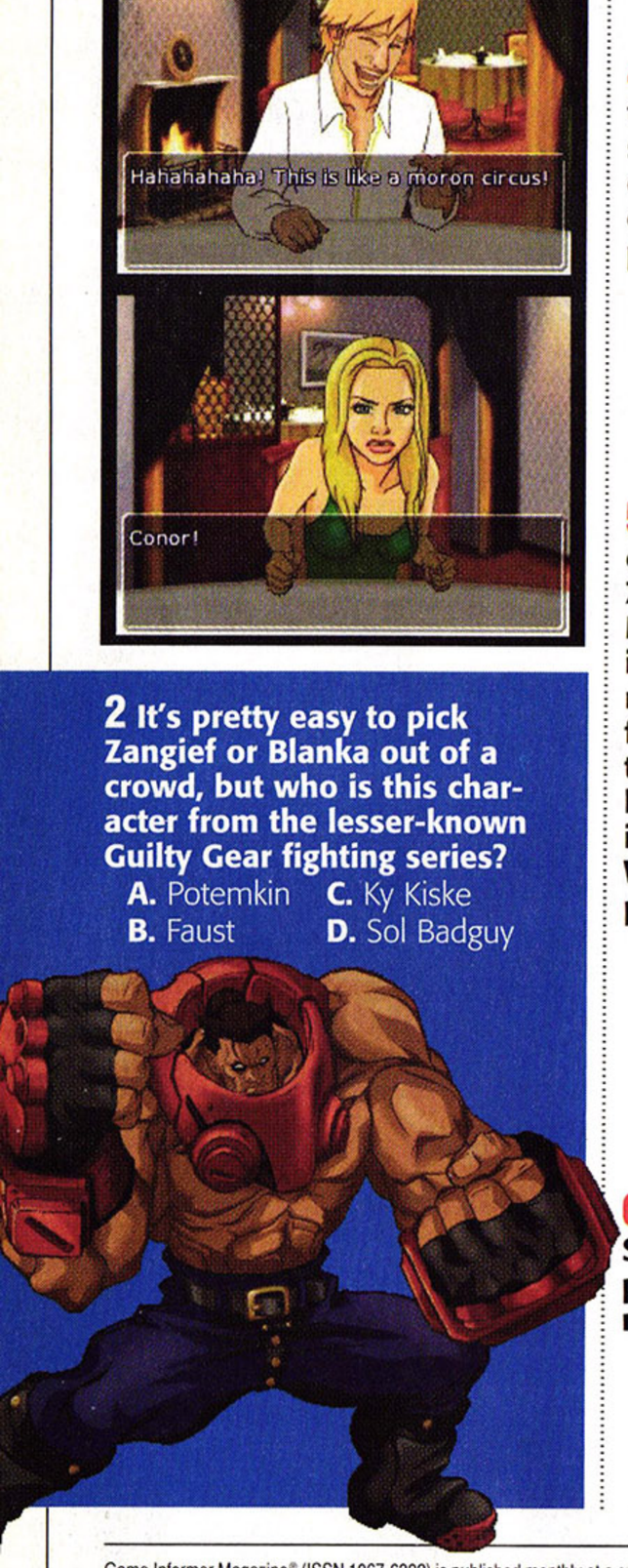
1 You may love your DS now, but were you there at the beginning? If so, then you'll know the name of this early DS dating sim whose "gameplay" consisted mainly of choosing conversation options.

A. Feel the Magic XY/XX
B. Sprung
C. The Urbz: Sims in the City
D. Ping Pals

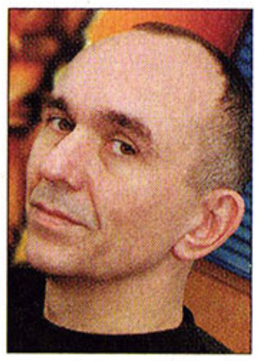


2 It's pretty easy to pick Zangief or Blanka out of a crowd, but who is this character from the lesser-known Guilty Gear fighting series?

A. Potemkin
B. Faust
C. Ky Kiske
D. Sol Badguy



3 The mind behind games like Fable, Black & White, and Populous, what legendary game developer is posing in this picture?

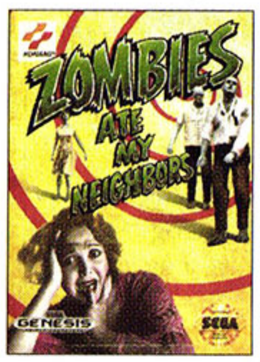


A. Denis Dyack
B. Toby Gard
C. Peter Molyneaux
D. Will Wright

4 Fester's Quest for NES contained something you don't see in modern games: power-downs. If you touched red icons dropped by enemies, what happened to Fester?

A. He lost health
B. He lost money
C. His weapon level dropped
D. The controls were briefly inverted

5 The 16-bit cult classic Zombies Ate My Neighbors is often remembered fondly, though the same can't be said for its follow-up. What was that poor imitator called?



A. Day of the Tentacle
B. Ghoul Patrol
C. Ghosts Got Grandma
D. Zombies, Still Hungry After Last Time, Are Continuing To Eat My Neighbors

6 True or False: A sequel to Sega's hit Vectorman was planned for the Genesis but never released

A. True
B. False

7 In the X-Com series, what does "X-Com" stand for?

A. Extremely Complicated
B. Exiled Commander
C. Ex-Commandos
D. Extraterrestrial Combat

8 It's time to sound edgy! Which of the following phrases has never been used in one of EA's Need for Speed titles?

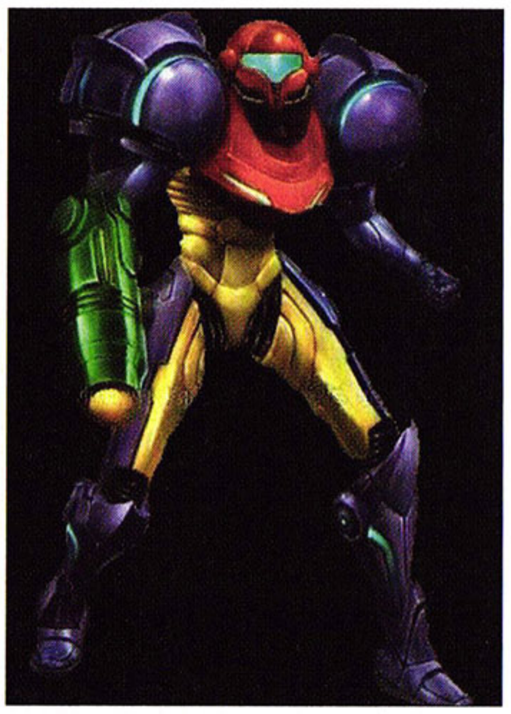
A. Hot Pursuit
B. High Stakes
C. Vegas Rollers
D. Most Wanted

9 The Wheelycat may be an extinct (or made up) animal, but it lives on in gaming. Which of these shooters features an extra mode that allows you to control felines on wheels in timed races?

A. Cold Winter
B. XIII
C. Painkiller
D. Timesplitters: Future Perfect

10 Wouldn't Master Chief and Samus make, like, the cutest couple?

A. Yes! And they would have the awesomest babies!
B. Ugh, no. Get a life
C. Never ask me this again



BREAKDOWN

78% of the things we've thrown at Ben and Bertz were just our strange way of saying "welcome." The other 22% were bottlecaps

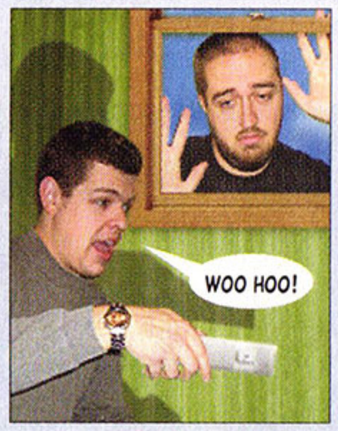
97% of the world's population think "Amaterasu" is some kind of frou-frou dessert. Play Okami, dummies!

45% of "heavy gamers" (as in hardcore, not overweight) are between the ages of six and 17, according to recent data from the NPD group.

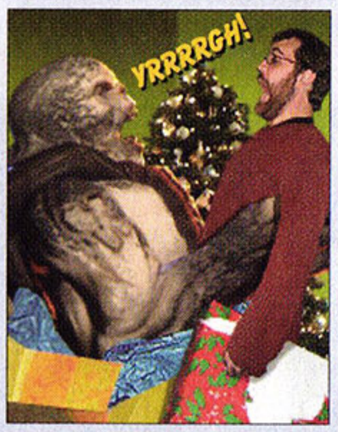
3 times as many people were at the Tokyo Game Show than E3 this year. An estimated 60,000 were at E3, but over 192,000 attendees graced TGS

0% of cool people recognize the name "Alpha Trion." Sorry, Miller

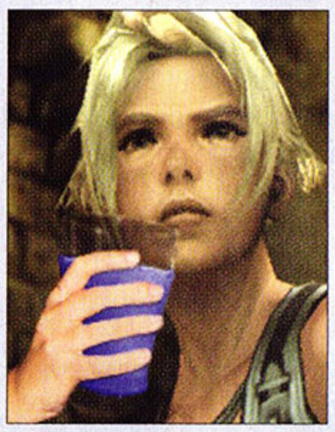
★ Trivia Score & Rank ★



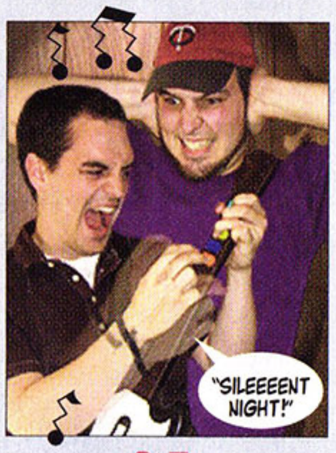
0-1:
Wait for Zelda on Gamecube



2-3:
Open Emergence Day Presents

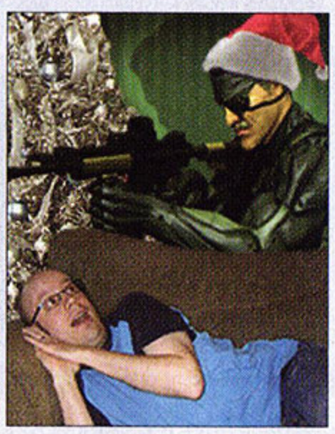


4-5:
Drink Potion Nog



6-7:
Rockin' Carols

8-9:
Decorate the Mana Tree



10:
Stay Awake For Santa Snake

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Video Game Trivia Answers: 1. B 2. A 3. C 4. C 5. B 6. B 7. D 8. C 9. D 10. B or C

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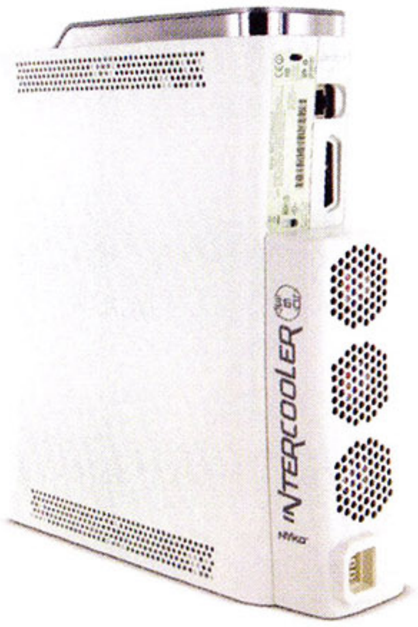

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