gameinformer®

The
CO-OP
ISSUE

Featuring:

- **ARMY OF TWO: THE DEVIL'S CARTEL**
- **THE TOP 30 CO-OP GAMES OF ALL TIME**
- **WHAT'S COMING IN CO-OP**

Walk, Fire, Co-op

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

Before cooperative games existed, cooperative games existed. Who can say when it all started? The instinct to use teamwork to overcome obstacles is ingrained in the human psyche. Just like early humans cooperated to improve their chances for survival, gamers have huddled together to conquer virtual space.

The moment games pitted us against an artificial nemesis, we made them cooperative – even if that wasn't the designers' intent.

I remember what I did when these immortal words from Zork flickered on my friend's computer screen back in 1981:

West of House
You are standing in an open field west of a white house, with a boarded front door.
There is a small mailbox here.

After we looked at each other, confused for a moment by this strange and wonderful new type of game (to us, anyway) called a "text adventure," we immediately proceeded to solve puzzles together. We made maps. We re-enacted critical scenes. We argued over where we were and how we got there. We worked together to make sure we did everything possible to avoid being eaten by a grue.

This simple single-player text game became cooperative from the first line – all it took was a fellow adventurer. Such is the tale of gaming's past, present, and future. Games are amazing alone, but even better with a friend – and better still when designed with co-op play in mind.

I remember beating Contra with a friend after entering the now-legendary code.

I remember solving puzzles with Reiner in Portal 2, thinking "Oh, he is the dumb one," while he thought the exact same of me.

I remember being the last person alive in Halo Firefight with my friends cheering me to hold on for just one more round.

We all have memories that we cherish from co-op games and of the friends that were along for the ride. I hope our co-op issue helps you relive some good times, or even better, helps you find some new co-op gems to fill the memory banks.
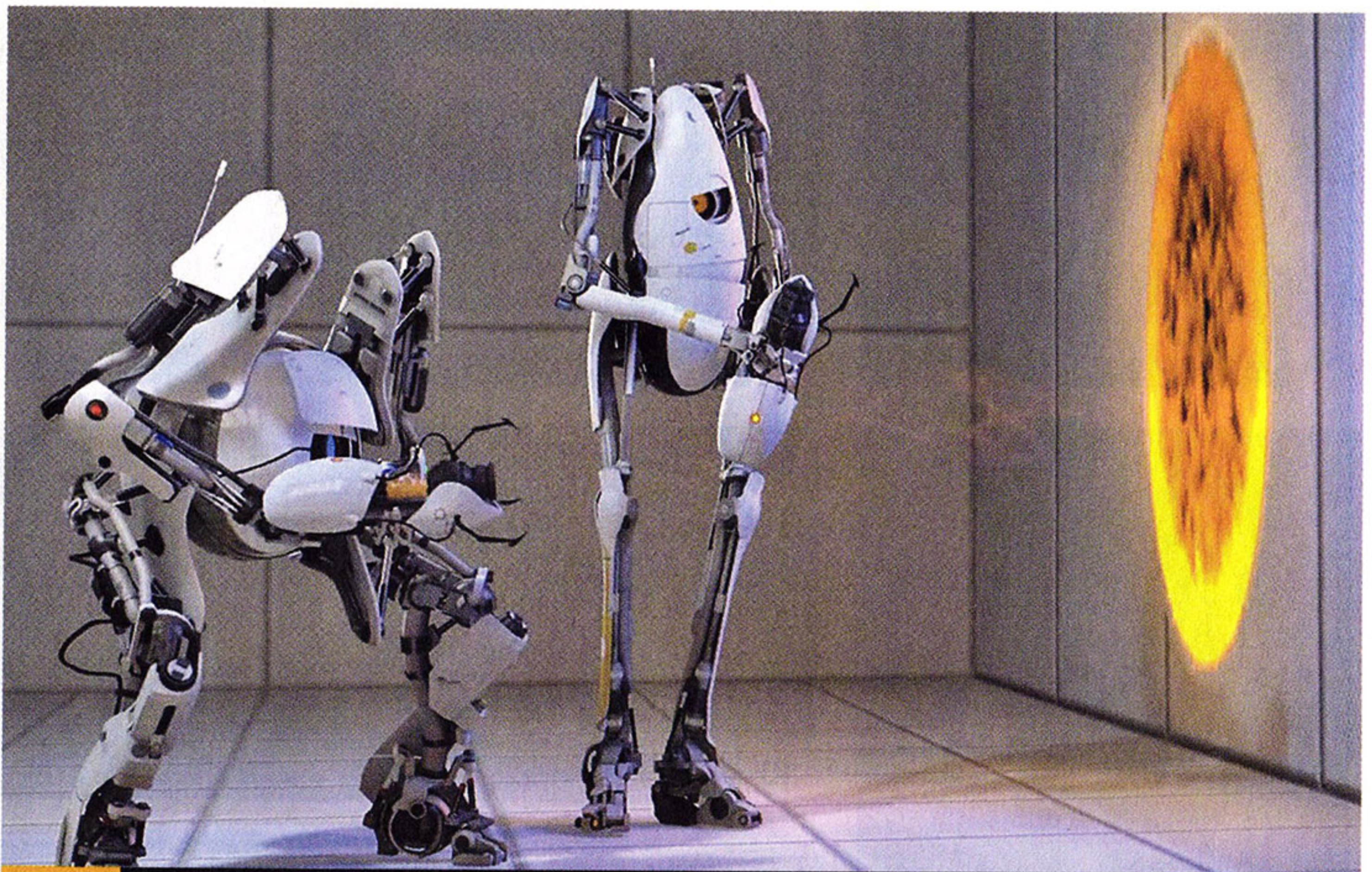
Here's to co-op!

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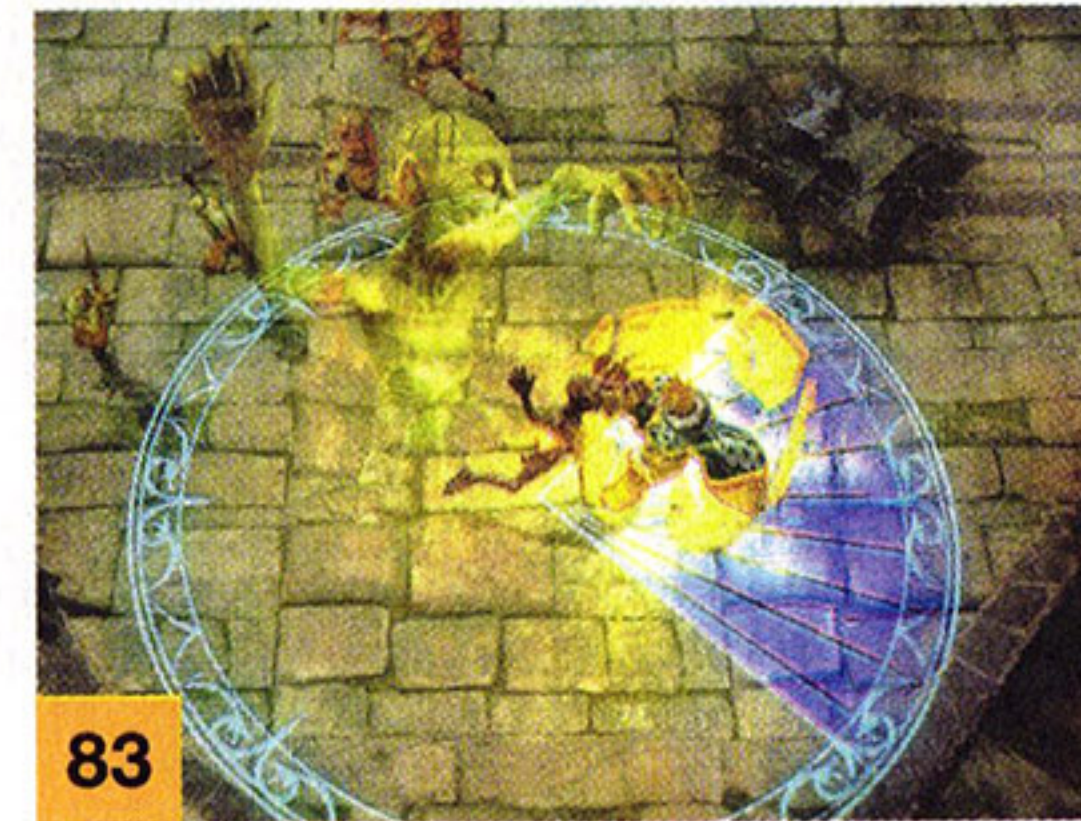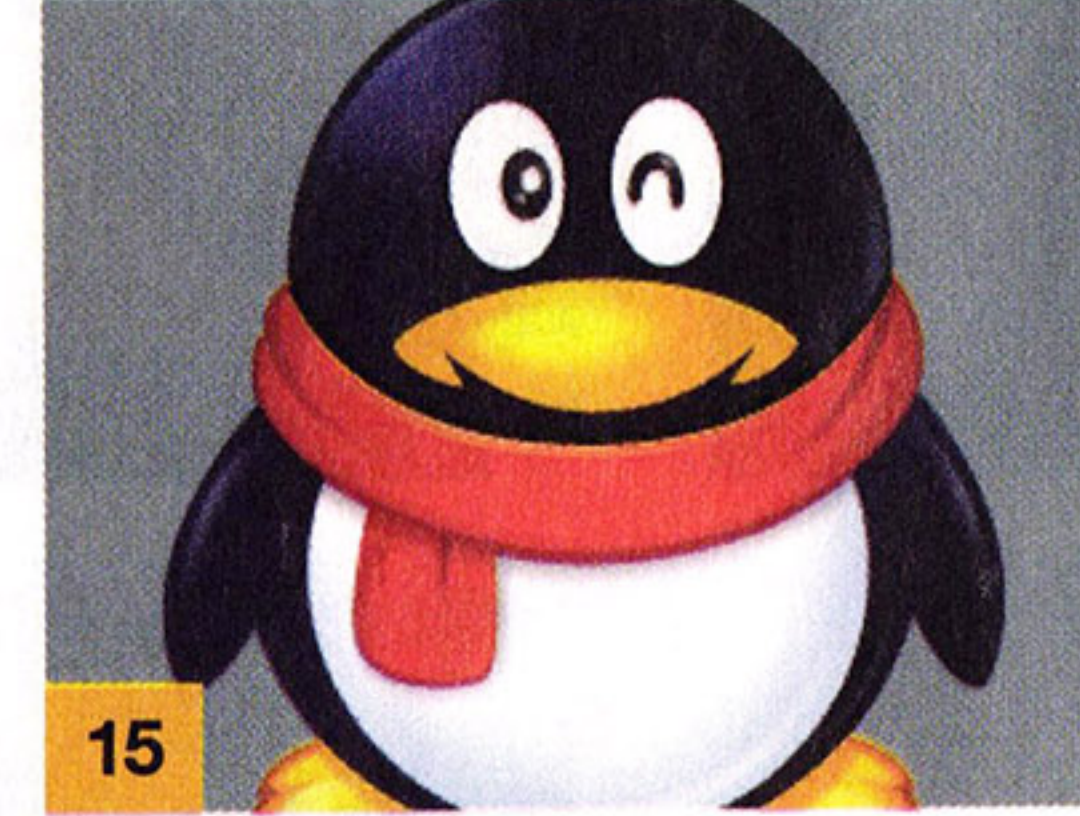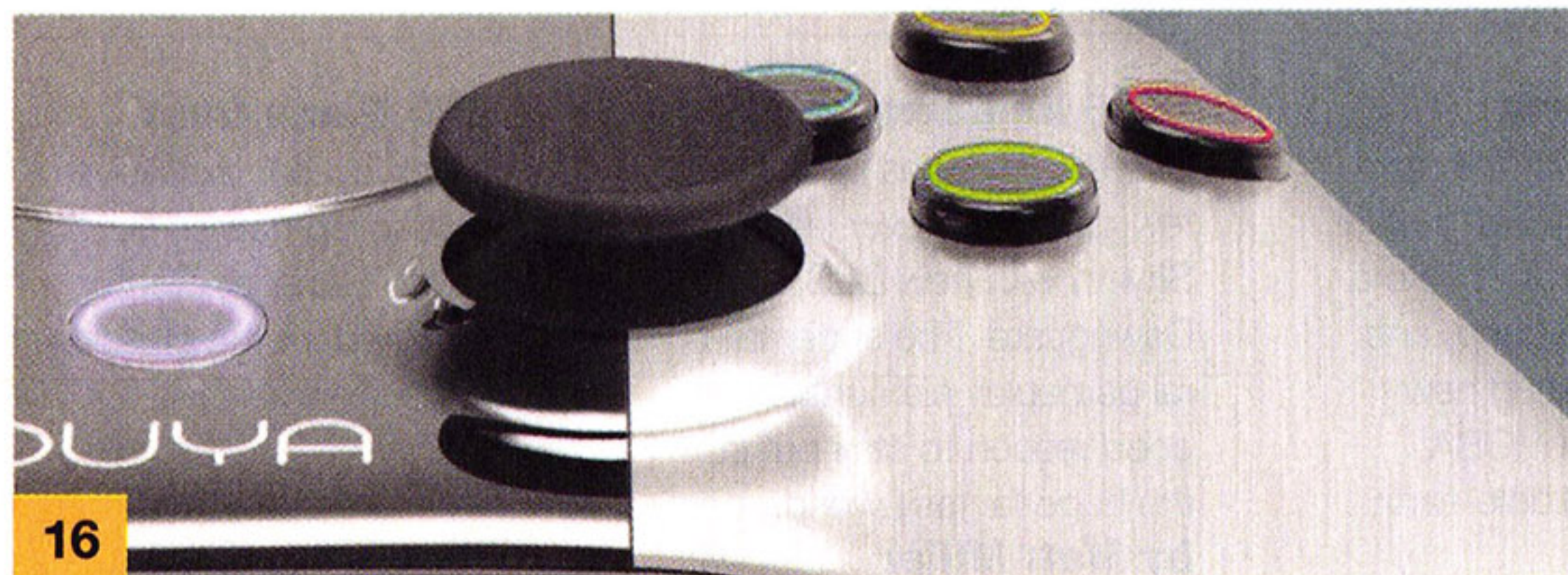
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games index

This month in Feedback, readers anticipate the advancements of Unreal Engine 4, question how pretty a female warrior needs to be, request some timely boycott advice, and seek the holy grail of all gaming perverts: the universal nude code.

Judgment Day

I loved Gears of War 3 but I still want more of the series. So when I saw Baird on the cover of the new Game Informer, I jumped with joy. I flipped to it and was amazed at the new campaign and multiplayer. The new characters look and sound awesome, and I cannot wait for the mash-up of Horde mode and Beast mode that is OverRun. Adding different classes is also genius. I will definitely be playing this game nonstop when it comes out.

Vincent Gugliotta
via email

When I first looked at the cover of issue 231 and saw the COG armor, I sighed with disappointment. I couldn't believe they were going to make another Gears of War. However, after reading the article, I find myself excited. I think that Epic is doing exactly what is needed to bring a breath of fresh air to the franchise. I'm definitely going to consider buying Gears of War: Judgment when it comes out.

Mike Mallengar
Zolfo Springs, FL

While we received a few letters bemoaning Gears of War: Judgment, most readers are excited to see what Epic Games and People Can Fly come up with for the fourth installment of the series. Given the innovations Epic has already made in the co-op realm (see our Top 30 Co-op Games feature on page 44), we're excited too.

To Wait or Not to Wait

I've noticed that your magazine is a great way to complain, so here I go. I am very disappointed with game of the year edition games. First, we buy the game for 60 bucks. Then, we pay more money for DLC. Finally, the same game comes out as a game of the year edition for less money with all the DLC and sometimes new stuff too. This is bull. I know it, you know it, and everybody knows it. Now I'm scared of buying a new game because six months later a GOTY version will be released. At least they should give the new content to the people who have the regular editions for free.

Abelardo Garcia
via email

Game of the year editions are a great way for developers and publishers to get more players interested in a title after initial sales have died off. Someone else paying less for a six-month-old game doesn't detract from your experience or enjoyment of the game, so you have no reason to be angry or demand free content. If you feel like the GOTY edition is a better deal, then wait for it to come out. Preferably in silence.

Not a Fan of Indie Games

It makes me sick that your rag considers "indie games" like Journey and Fez to be better than games that people actually had to work to make. I know you're a part of the liberal, elitist media that likes whine [sic] and cheese parties and is constantly defending video games as an art medium. Video games are about having fun. Not some fancy pants artistic buttf---athon. Stop being so insecure about yourselves as gamers. It's okay not to be recognized by your elitist peers.

Michael Shulski
via email

Listen up, Mike. You can imply that indie games don't take any effort to make, and that we only pretend to like them because of how insecure we are as gamers. But don't you dare mock our "whine" and cheese parties. We spend a lot of time ensuring they have just the right complaining-to-cheese ratio.

Is Pretty Important?

As anyone who's played the God of War games can attest, the artists at Sony Santa Monica are some of the best in the industry. It's baffling, then, that they would exclude female characters from God of War: Ascension's multiplayer because they "do not look pretty" in combat equipment, as game director Todd Papy stated in your preview in issue 231. Not only is it disappointing for gamers, but it's insulting to the artists. If making them look pretty was a requirement, of course the studio could pull it off – or they could design cool-looking female characters regardless of prettiness. Greek mythology has no shortage of women warriors, and earlier games in the series already had the likes of Athena, Lachesis, Atropos, and Erinys, who were perfectly at home next to Kratos and the other gods. I suspect Sony is either afraid to alienate their "dudebro" audience or they simply don't have the budget for the additional effort. Either way, the reasoning that they wouldn't "look pretty" is a load of garbage.

Joe Rinaldi
Austin, TX

Sony's explanation for omitting female characters from Ascension's multiplayer struck us as dubious as well. Surely we've moved beyond the point where women in video games are merely sexy eye candy, right?

Don't Answer That…

Back when Tomb Raider first came out, a lot of people were looking for a nude code to enjoy a more "natural look" for Lara Croft. Nowadays, games like The Witcher have some sex scenes that, while they are pleasant to the eyes, are still not enough. PC gamers have found a way to give the nude code to these games, but we console owners have no way of doing this. Why not put a section for mature players in your mag that covers how to do the nude code? I know I am not alone in this. If you think it will decrease Game Informer sales, a solution may be to make a mature-only game magazine in which to cover nude codes and even some sex games. If not, could you send me the code?

Javier Morcilio
via email

Your suggestion that we turn Game Informer into a video game pornography magazine is an intriguing one, but we'll keep things the way they are. Since you asked nicely, we'll give you the universal nude code for all games across all consoles that you're looking for. It's Up, Up, Down, A, B, Triangle, L3, L4, the middle trigger button, 2.
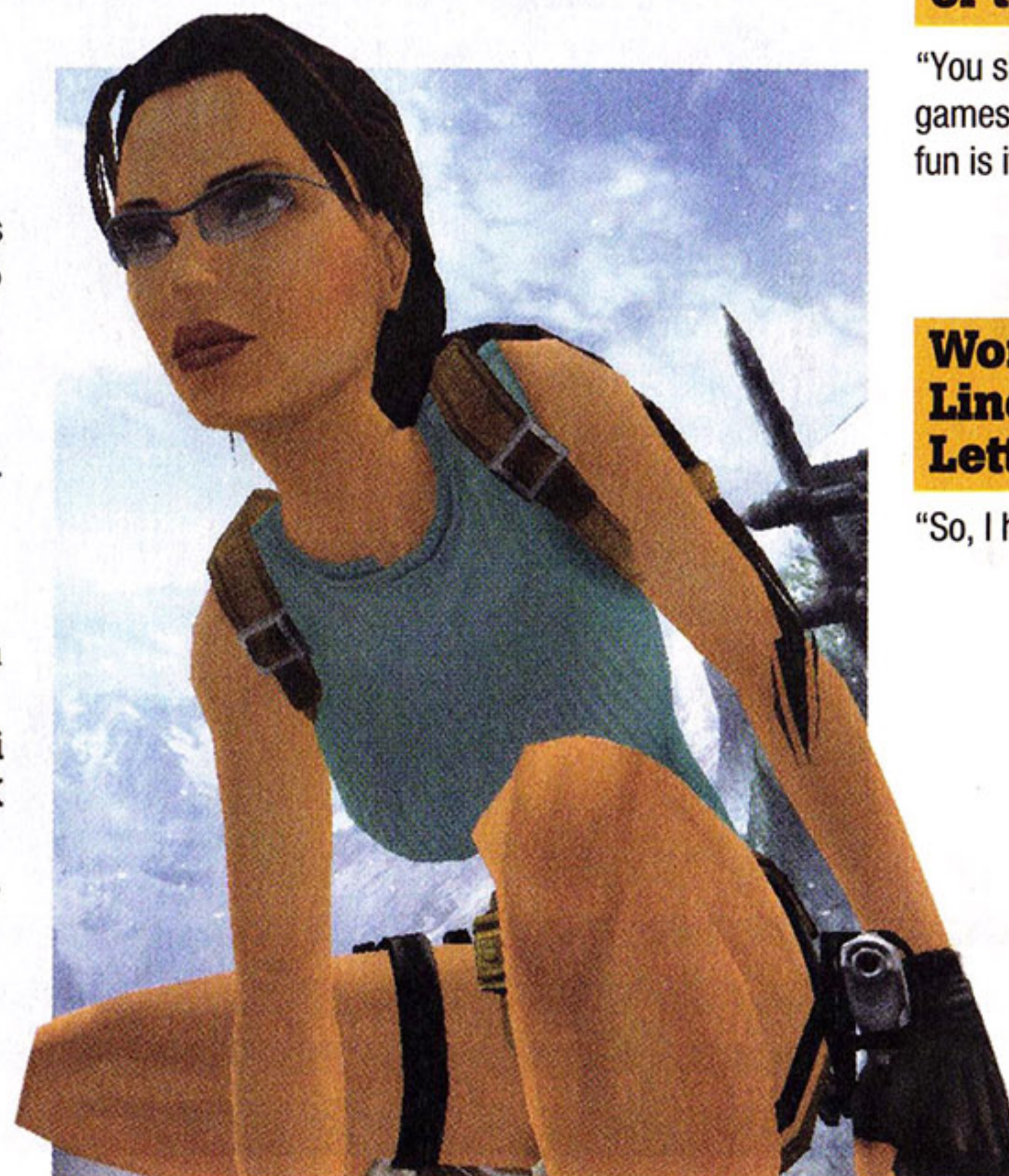
CANDID PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

(Left) GI community blogger Kyle Wadsworth took time out of his busy E3 schedule to catch up with the Game Informer crew. (Right) This month the mastermind behind our weekly online Blog Herding feature, Rich "Saint" Dickinson, stopped by the GI office for a visit. Read his work at gameinformer.com.

E3 Reactions **29%**

Violence in Video Games **26%**

Unreal Engine 4 Chatter **17%**

Gears of War: Judgment Hype **14%**

Mass Effect 3 Ending Complaints (Seriously, Just Stop) **11%**

Readers Being Babies over Top Ten Video Game Babies **3%**

Unreal Expectations

I was so excited to read the article on Unreal Engine 4 (Start Your Engines, issue 231). Before reading the article I didn't think graphics would improve much more than what they currently are, but now I see there are still huge leaps to take. I'm now very eager to see the next generation of console gaming hit the market.

**Derek Noe
via email**

I thoroughly enjoyed your recent article on the new Unreal Engine 4. I have always considered myself an advanced gamer, but was never aware of the Unreal Engine series or its overall impact on the gaming world. I found it extremely interesting to know that the Unreal Engines basically dictate the next generation of game consoles and PCs. Thanks for keeping me informed.

**Randy H.
via email**

The first demos of Unreal Engine 4 are visually stunning. Here's hoping developers use the new software to evolve next-gen gameplay as well. For a look at the first game to use Unreal Engine 4, check out our Fortnite preview on page 12.

Boycott Blizzard?

Thanks for the Jason West and Vincent Zampella interview (issue 231). I was confused about what happened between them and Activision, and now I have a better understanding – from one point of view, at least. After reading it, I'm going to have a hard time buying a game with "Activision" written on it. I shouldn't punish other developers and avoid games that might be great, but that's a little too much shady behavior to continue supporting the publisher. To be honest, I wasn't planning on buying another Call of Duty anyway (I'm tired of the genre), but now I wish I hadn't bought Modern Warfare 3.

**Cory Rogers
via email**

This whole dramatic conspiracy with Activision has my head spinning and my eyes leaking some sort of salty discharge. I've been a huge Blizzard fan since the day I was born. But now I'm left feeling betrayed. Should I hate Activision Blizzard for this nonsense they're putting Jason and Vince through, or can I justifiably continue being a fan without appearing like a total jerk who enjoys watching other people get ripped off?

**Wyatt Arent
via email**

You're not alone, Wyatt. We've heard from a number of respondents vowing to boycott Activision after reading our West and Zampella interview, which covered their now-settled lawsuit with the publishing giant. But don't feel obliged to forgo Blizzard's offerings. Activision won't see the connection between you skipping out on your favorite games and its handling of the former heads of Infinity Ward.

Jason West and Vince Zampella

(**Left**) Adam got the thumbs up approval from Final Fantasy XIV producer and director Naoki Yoshida. (**Right**) Dead Space 3's associate producer John Calhoun and Bryan were more than happy to throw a bag over Ben Reeves' head and torture him. Who wouldn't be?

GI SPY

WINNER

1 Alex Oscavich If Calvin was a kid in 2012, he'd be imagining Hobbes as his Captain Price.

2 Katerina Chantzis Dudley is peeved that hipsters co-opted his ironic facial hair obsession.

3 Jordan Welty Little known Nintendo fact: Link is voiced by that dude from Blur.

4 Darbi Lamb Don't wake this Moogle until Final Fantasy Versus XIII comes out.

HYLIANZ

TWILIGHT DAYS
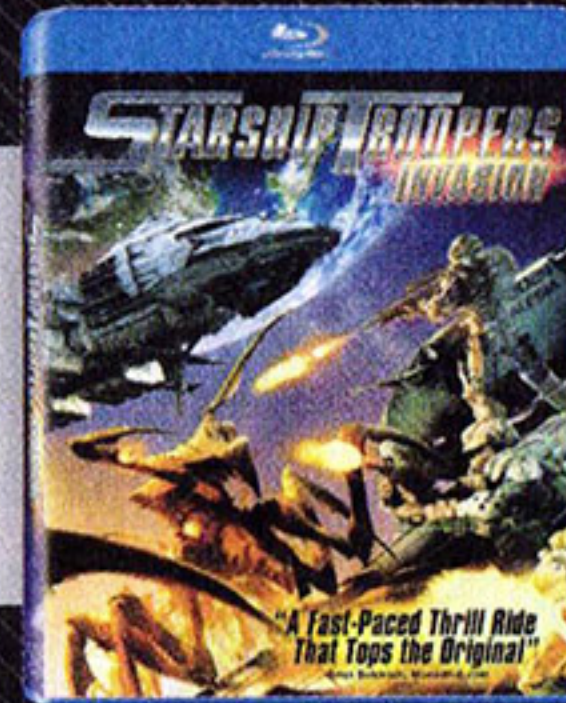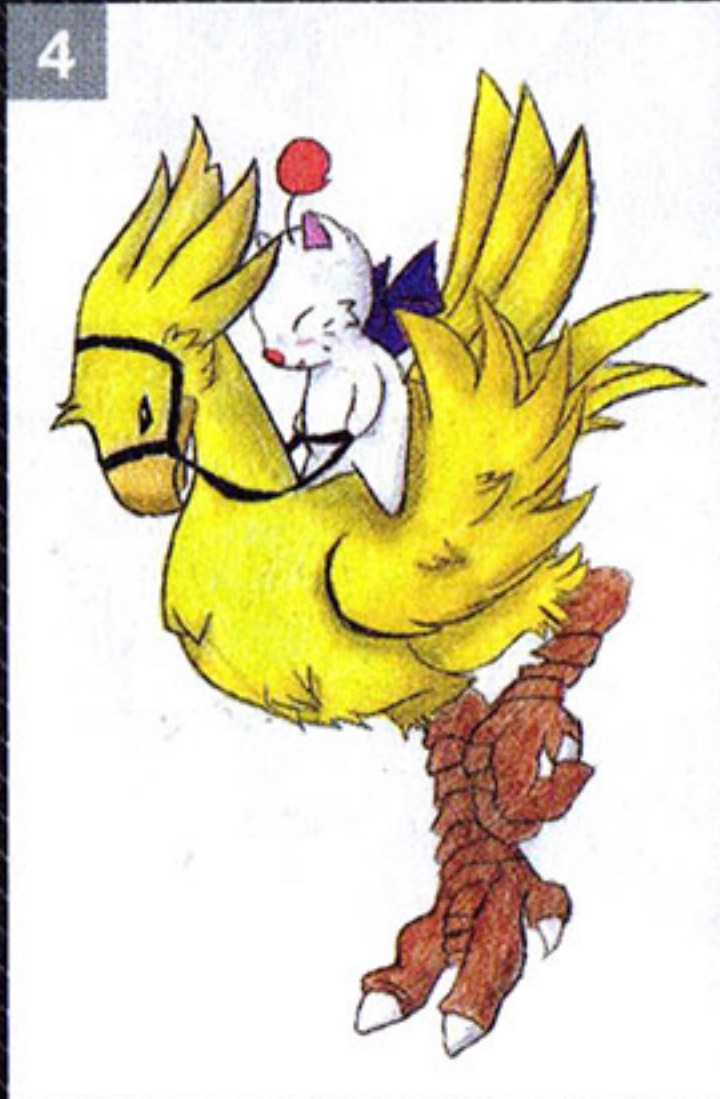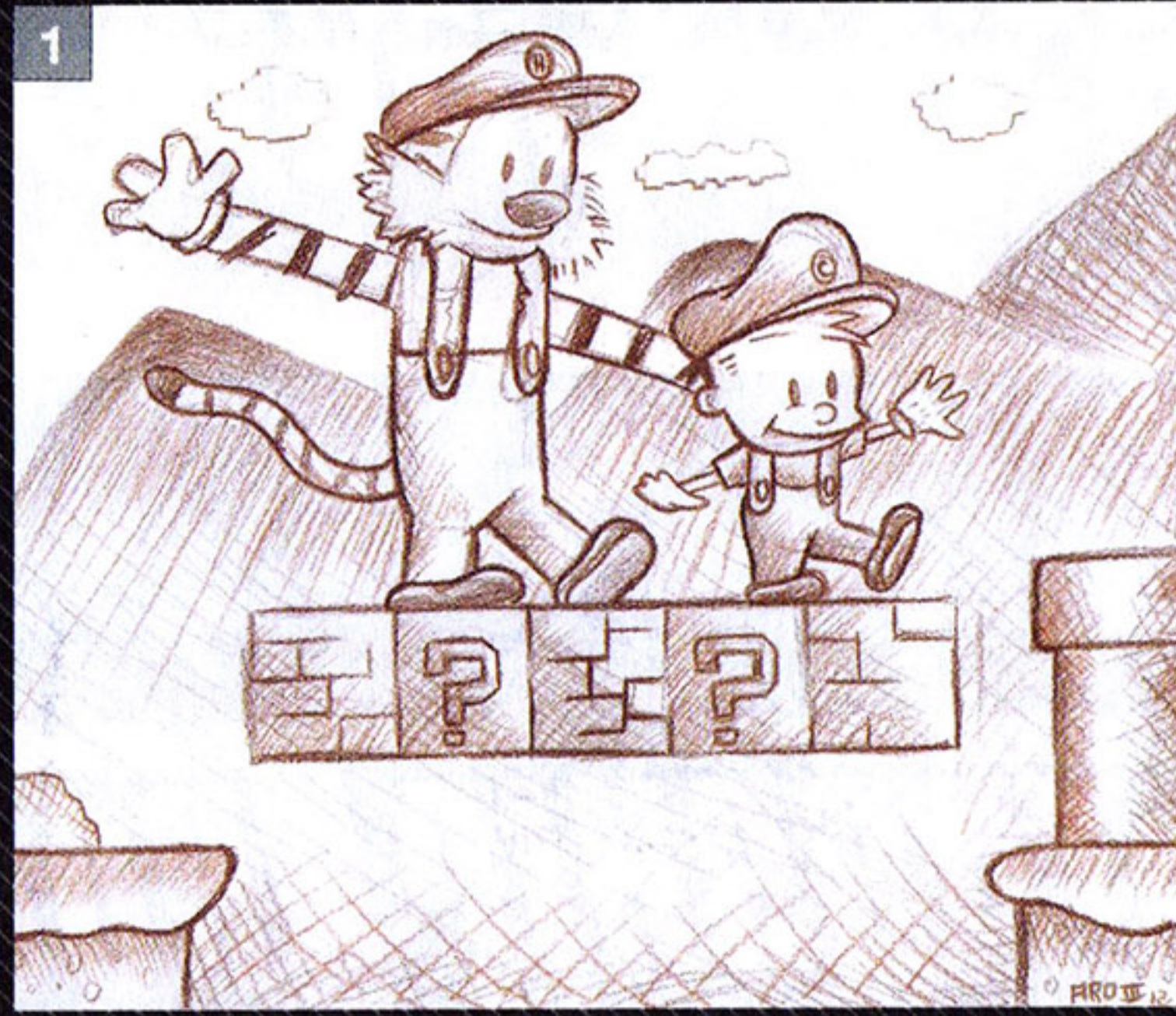
WINNER This month's winner will receive a copy of Starship Troopers Invasion on Blu-ray DVD.

Corrections:
In issue 232's Dead Space 3 preview, we referred to the game's creative director as Ben Wanhe. His actual name is Ben Wanat. Sorry, Ben!

Does Violence Matter?

In issue 231, we asked readers if violent content affects their purchasing decisions. While most gamers are fine with digital bloodshed, many parents shy away from gory games for the sake of their children. Additionally, a few of our readers are just plain creepy. Here are some responses.

I believe violence in a game should be explained and not just randomly included. If the game has a good plot, violence is perfectly okay. However, if there's no reason for violence, it becomes completely mind numbing. After a while I find myself questioning why I am playing a game that cannot keep me entertained without mutilating an enemy every few seconds.

Forrest A.

As a 37-year-old gamer, my life has been saturated with violence courtesy of mainstream media, so video game violence doesn't cause me any qualms. However, as a parent with two young kids, it does affect when I get to play those games – as in, before or after the kids are in bed.

Frank Loyd

No, it doesn't. Because I am a grown-ass woman who knows the difference between right and wrong, and I was a little-ass child who knew the difference between right and wrong because my parents took the time to teach me.

Leah Young

Violence does affect my decision in buying a video game. If Cooking Mama allowed you to use a spork to scrape out someone's guts and sauté them in mango chutney, I would totally buy it.

Chris Pecora

(Left) Reiner did his best David Caruso impression when meeting EA's Charlie Sinhaseni and Lauren Scherr during E3.
(Right) Ben Hanson and Adam were all smiles when they caught up with StarCraft II lead producer Chris Sigaty.

Epic Games *Unveils* Fortnite

The developer finally delivers details on its PC-exclusive building project
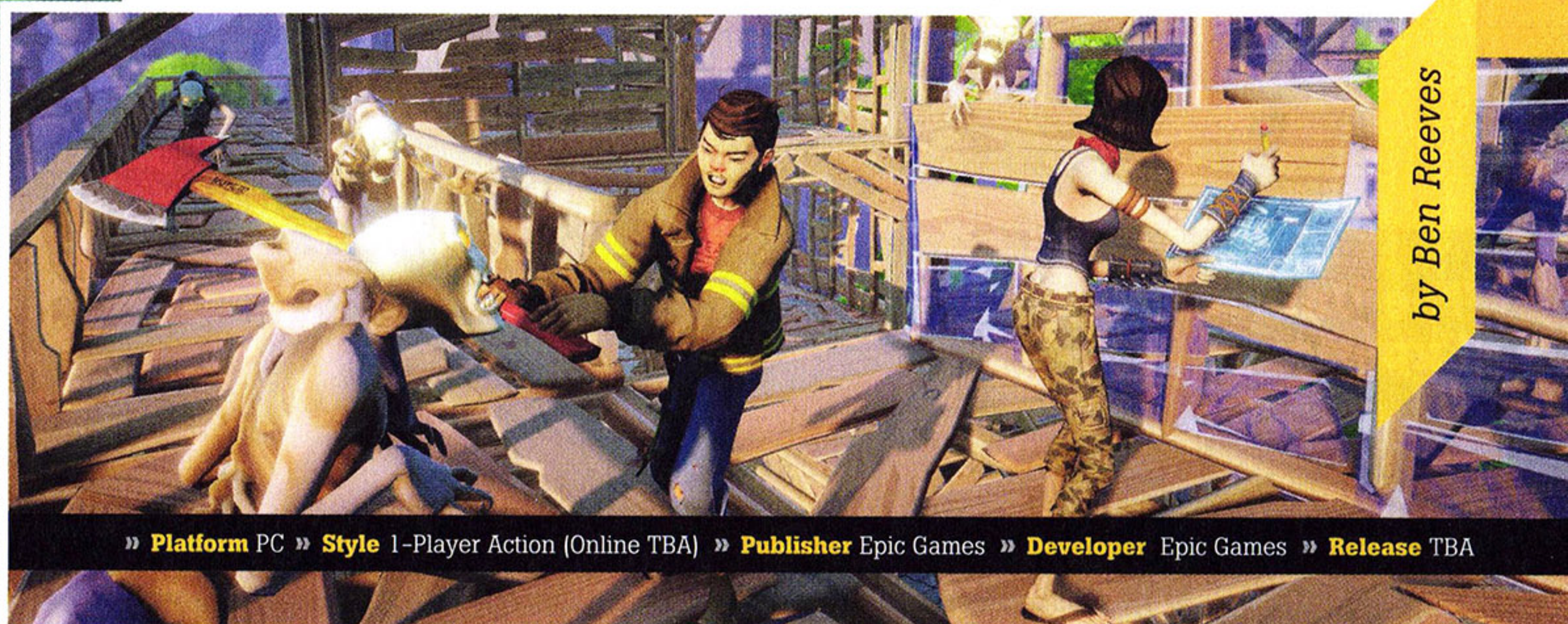
by Ben Reeves

» **Platform** PC » **Style** 1-Player Action (Online TBA) » **Publisher** Epic Games » **Developer** Epic Games » **Release** TBA

Some of the best ideas in the world are born out of collaboration and experimentation. This philosophy led Epic Games to schedule weeklong "game jams" that allow its designers to explore their most creative ideas. Over the years, these experimental sessions resulted in the development of titles like the upcoming iOS dungeon crawler Infinity Blade Dungeons as well as Epic's new sandbox crafting game, Fortnite.

During a recent game jam, Bulletstorm producer Tanya Jessen used her free time to toy around with the idea of getting people to play cooperatively using disparate game types. "For example, how do you get one player who is interested in scavenging to interact with a player who is more interested in combat or exploration?" Jessen asks. At the same time, an Epic designer was interested in creating a game type that features open spaces and crafting, and another programmer wanted to design a hub-based game that works around scripted enemy encounters. After the game jam concluded, these ideas eventually collided to form Fortnite.

"We are harkening back to when we were building forts as kids and having fort battles," Jessen says. "Whether you were building it in the woods or in your parents' living room, everything around you was really important to the end goal of making an awesome fort. Fortnite was built on these ideas."

Like a more dangerous Minecraft, Fortnite puts players into a procedurally generated world where monsters have taken over, society has crumbled, and it's up to players to survive by building forts to hold back the zombie-like hordes that come out at night. Players explore abandoned neighborhoods and scavenge every building for parts that can be used to build an ever-evolving fort.

To streamline the design process, Epic developed a fort-building system that allows players to lay out a 3D blueprint of the structure first. Once players form a general layout for the fort, they can use the tables, signposts, and cardboard boxes they've scavenged as the bricks and mortar.

"Even after you've laid out your foundation, you can go through and edit the whole thing," Jessen says. If you're placing a wall you can add windows and doors, make it a half-height wall, turn it into an arch, build different types of stairs, or create floors that have railings or are half width. "It's pretty much up to your creativity to build out the building and make it look awesome," Jessen says.

Unreal Engine 3

Unreal Engine 4

The Unreal Experience

Fortnite is one of the first projects to show off the power of Epic's new Unreal Engine 4. The new engine gives developers a greater level of freedom as it streamlines the development process. For an example of how Unreal Engine 4 allows artists to develop environments in greater detail, check out these comparison images.
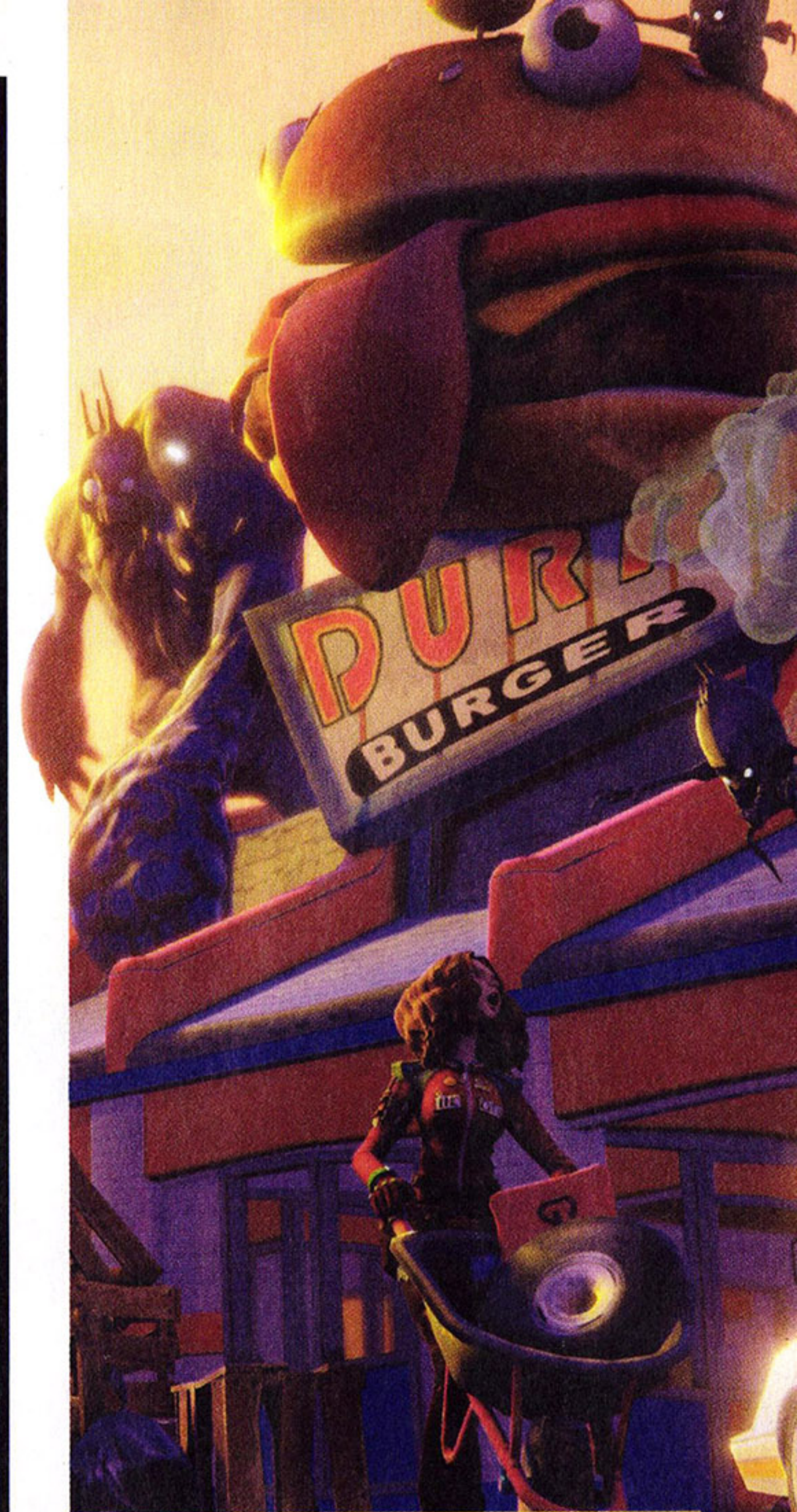
Fortnite's graphics are inspired by old Looney Toons cartoons

Players must think strategically as well as aesthetically while building their forts, since Fortnite's enemies give them no respite. Creatures called husks are the worker-bee enemies of Fortnite. They are designed to burrow through walls and overwhelm players. A single husk may not be very dangerous, but they rarely travel alone.

Fortunately, every enemy has a weakness, and players can upgrade their forts to take advantage of them. Husks have no problem burrowing through level one wooden walls, but if players upgrade their walls to level two by adding better materials, they'll stop husks in their tracks.

Husks aren't the only foe players contend with, and many of the enemies play well together. While husks overwhelm players with numbers, smashers are brute-force enemies designed to break through walls and allow husks to get inside a player's base and cause havoc. Trolls, on the other hand, are sneaky enemies who can teleport through walls. These ugly guys don't have many hit points, but they sneak through the shadows and can slip through cracks in a fort's defenses to open doors or windows for the husk swarms. Trolls also steal from players, further weakening a fort's defenses.

Epic isn't ready to talk specifics about Fortnite's combat, item crafting, or how the day/night cycle affects enemy behavior. The developer is still experimenting with how many users they can get into one game world, but Jessen promises that it supports more than two players.

Minecraft proved that open-world crafting games appeal to a large market. Fortnite's sharp visual style and twist on structure building should appeal to fans of this genre, but we're also eager to see if it recaptures the childlike thrill of building forts. ◈

Going Out West

by Matt Bertz

The top web portal in China, Tencent, has started investing heavily in Western game developers. What does this signal for the future of gaming?

What is Tencent?

The third-largest web company in the world behind Amazon and Google, Tencent is a holding company that owns and operates China's biggest Internet service portal. Its most popular product is QQ Instant Messenger, which has more than 700 million users. The company also has made successful forays into social networking, search engine technology, and online advertising. Considering that the Internet penetration in China is only at roughly 40 percent of the total population, the company still has a lot of room to grow in its homeland.

What do they have to do with games?

Tencent owns and operates the QQ games portal, which is the largest online gaming community in China. The company develops and operates shooters, MMOs, strategy games, and casual products predominantly driven by microtransactions.

Why should I care?

Tencent has become increasingly involved with Western publishers and developers. Last year, it bought a controlling stake in League of Legends developer Riot Games. Two months ago, it acquired a minority stake in Epic Games, the creators of Gears of War, Infinity Blade, and the Unreal Engine. Tencent also announced a partnership to bring 2K Sports' NBA 2K series and Activision's Call of Duty Online to its QQ games portal as free-to-play games.

What does Tencent gain from these deals?

In one word, craftsmanship. Each of the partnerships Tencent has entered over the past two years are with proven companies and quality products. The Epic Games deal also presumably gives them easy access to technology like the Unreal Engine 4. Analysts like Wedbush Securities point man Michael Pachter believe these deals could be a precursor to Tencent eventually opening up shop in the United States and Europe. If Vivendi decides to sell Activision Blizzard (as has been rumored), Pacific Crest analyst Evan Wilson believes Tencent is one of the few companies with enough capital and incentive to make the acquisition.

What's in it for game developers?

Though several companies have successfully employed the free-to-play model in the United States, the market is still largely dependent on conventional retail or digital sales. By working with Tencent, Western companies gain access to the lucrative Chinese market, which is predominantly based on free-to-play titles. These publishers can gain firsthand experience with this surging economic model before making the broad free-to-play push in the Western market that many companies (including big publishers like EA) believe could be the primary revenue model in the near future. The big checks Tencent is cutting also help close the deals. ◆

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Disney

by Jim Reilly
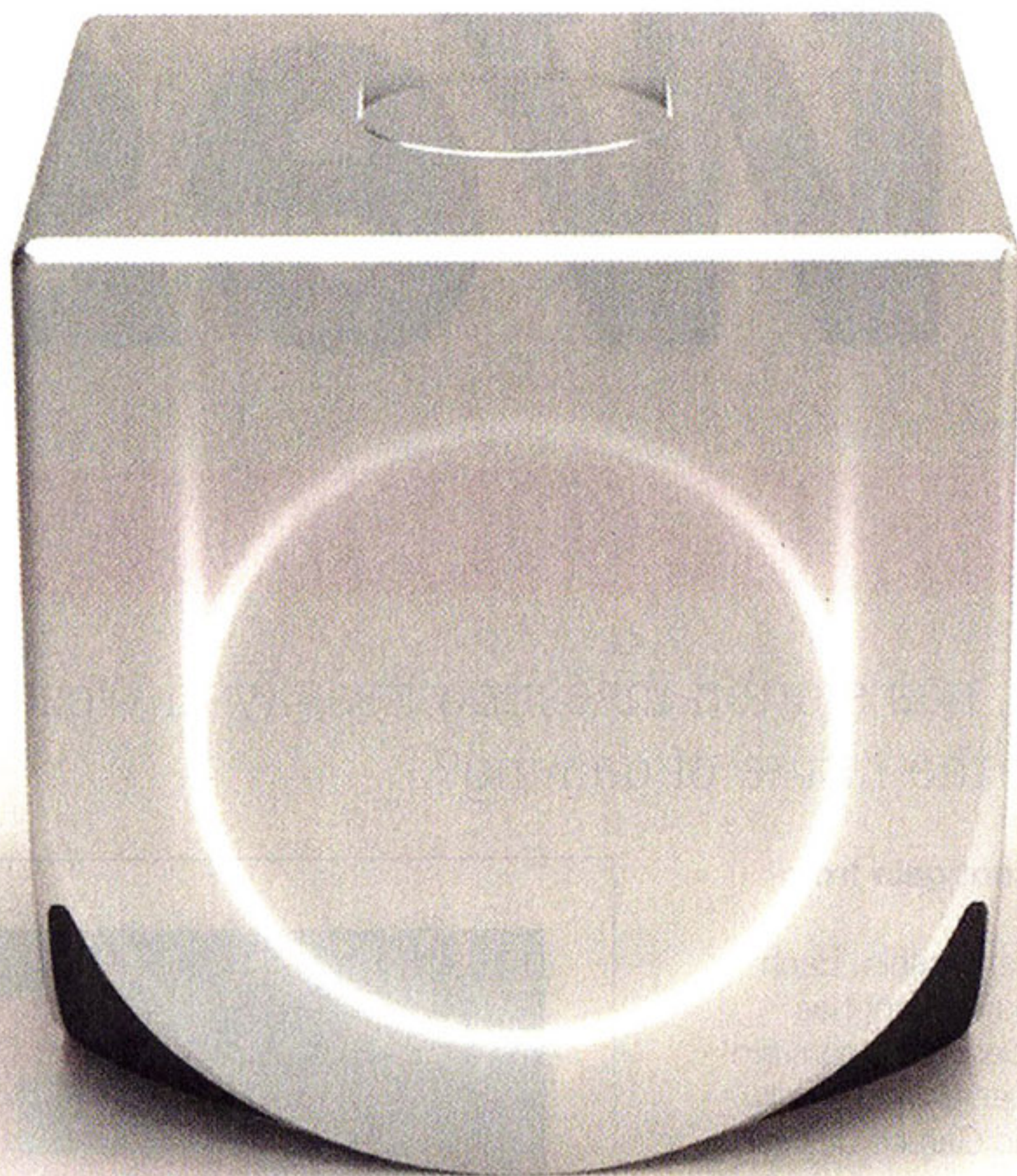
Ouya

The Next Big Thing?

In less than a day, the gaming industry fell into a craze over a new console that hopes to find a space between high-definition console gaming and the ever-growing mobile market.

On July 10, a California-based start-up revealed Ouya, an open-source, Android-based console that promises television-based gaming with a cheap price point of $99. After securing an initial investment from friends and family, the company turned to Kickstarter, a popular crowd funding website, to help get its idea off the ground and into full production. Questions surrounding the Ouya concept's popularity with gamers were answered in the first eight hours, as its $950,000 pledge goal was reached in record time. As of press time, the project has nearly 40,000 backers and has raised over $5 million, the second largest in Kickstarter's history.

With console sales stagnating and talent fleeing the high-end market, Ouya CEO Julie Uhrman recognized an opportunity to bring those estranged designers who left to make mobile and social games back to consoles with an open platform. "There's been a lot of talk about 'Are consoles dead?' We don't think they're dead," Uhrman says. "We think it's time to rethink the way we do business. The current pricing is still too high for gamers, and it's becoming expensive for developers to bring games to the TV."

With Ouya, the developers set the pricing for their games; the one catch is that every game must have a free portion available, whether through a demo or free-to-play model. The console also supports other Android apps, such as TwitchTV, which comes included. The console comes with a controller that features dual analog sticks, a d-pad, eight buttons, and a touchpad.

The console sports a Nvidia Tegra 3 quad-core processor, the same chip in the new Google Nexus 7 tablet. This chip doesn't quite match the horsepower of current consoles on the market; developers we spoke with suggest Ouya games will likely have a similar graphical fidelity to that of current iPad titles.

Show Me The Games

So far, only one developer has announced a project in development for Ouya. Robotoki, a studio headed by Robert Bowling, is planning a series of exclusive episodic prequel games based on his new zombie franchise, Human Element.

"We're excited about how Ouya will allow us to deliver episodic content for the game in an innovative new way, by rapidly prototyping gameplay experiences, features, and mechanics on their Android-based development SDK in a way that would be too costly or risky on more traditional platforms," Bowling says. "This flexibility and accessibility from a design standpoint, is allowing us to bring experimental gameplay to the living room earlier and easier than we could ever do it before."

Beyond that, many speculate that since the console runs on Android, we'll likely see existing games, such as Minecraft and Angry Birds, ported over for launch. Still, Ouya has support from a number of other game makers. Brian Fargo, CEO of inXile Entertainment, served as an early adviser for Ouya and says he supports any idea that opens the market up for smaller game companies.

"It is quite clear from their success on Kickstarter that developers and consumers want what Ouya is setting out to do," he says. "A closed system can never ultimately compete with what an open one can do, and no developer wants to be locked out of the TV market."

Fargo says Ouya's success could create a marketplace closer in nature to the iOS platform than the heavily curated console market that currently exists. "This can be both a blessing and a curse, as the number of titles can grow rather exponentially," he notes. "But again, I'll take an open, crowded system over a closed one. With a well-run store there should be an opportunity to have the good games highlighted so that the wealth can be spread around a bit. A large group of talented developers are clamoring for a chance to make a decent living at something they love."

Thatgamecompany co-founder Jenova Chen (Journey, Flower) and Mojang (Minecraft) have also publicly endorsed Ouya.

Several other developers are taking a wait-and-see approach. Gearbox Software president Randy Pitchford says if Ouya succeeds he'd love to develop for the audience. "It would be interesting to see Borderlands on the platform," he says. "We've done some work with the chipset through a great relationship with Nvidia. I think it could work out well."

Jeremiah Slaczka, CEO and creative director at Scribblenauts developer 5th Cell, says he'd consider supporting Ouya if his studio already had an Android game made, but wouldn't create a game specifically for Ouya until it's proven to be a viable market.

"I think Ouya is a lot more pipe dream than game changer," Slaczka says. "Even if they manage to nail down their manufacturing, hardware shipping, digital distribution portal, and business models they are still, at best, offering a niche product which will likely launch with ported software from tablets while competing with existing and future consoles."

Don't Believe The Hype?

The early groundswell of support hasn't turned every developer into an Ouya supporter. Twisted Pixel lead designer Dan Teasdale doesn't believe the hype, saying Ouya brings nothing new to the table. "All I see is someone putting an underpowered mobile board in a box and calling it a console," he says. "It's boring and has no unique hook."

Teasdale suggests that even with the millions of dollars Ouya received from Kickstarter, it will be tough for the company to cover the costs of building, shipping, and ultimately launching the hardware, in addition to covering extra development expenses. It may also prove difficult for developers to generate a profit.

"If I wanted to actually make money off a game, the tiny install base combined with what will be a stupid crazy piracy rate on a fully rootable Android console shoots that idea in the head," he says. "I'd rather target Steam Greenlight or Xbox Live Indie Games, both — even with their faults — far healthier platforms for developers to get their start and make money off their games than Ouya."

Measuring Impact

Even if Ouya is a home run with developers and consumers, it won't necessarily turn the industry on its head. Wedbush Securities analyst Michael Pachter believes it has no chance of supplanting the traditional game consoles from Sony, Microsoft, and Nintendo.

"I don't think it hits the industry much, if at all," Pachter says. "This is a supplement to new consoles, or a cheaper alternative for people who can't afford new consoles. It could lead to a broadening of the market, serving as 'training wheels' for some people who aren't sure if they want to buy a next-generation console."

Slaczka agrees, adding that several alternatives already exist for independent developers to release profitable games. "This isn't a console that is going to sell millions, and indies already have PC and other digital platforms to get their work out," he says. "However, I still think it's a very noble effort, and I'm excited that the company is setting such lofty goals."

Ouya is currently scheduled to ship in early March, with backers of the Kickstarter getting priority. Additional launch details have not been announced. ◈
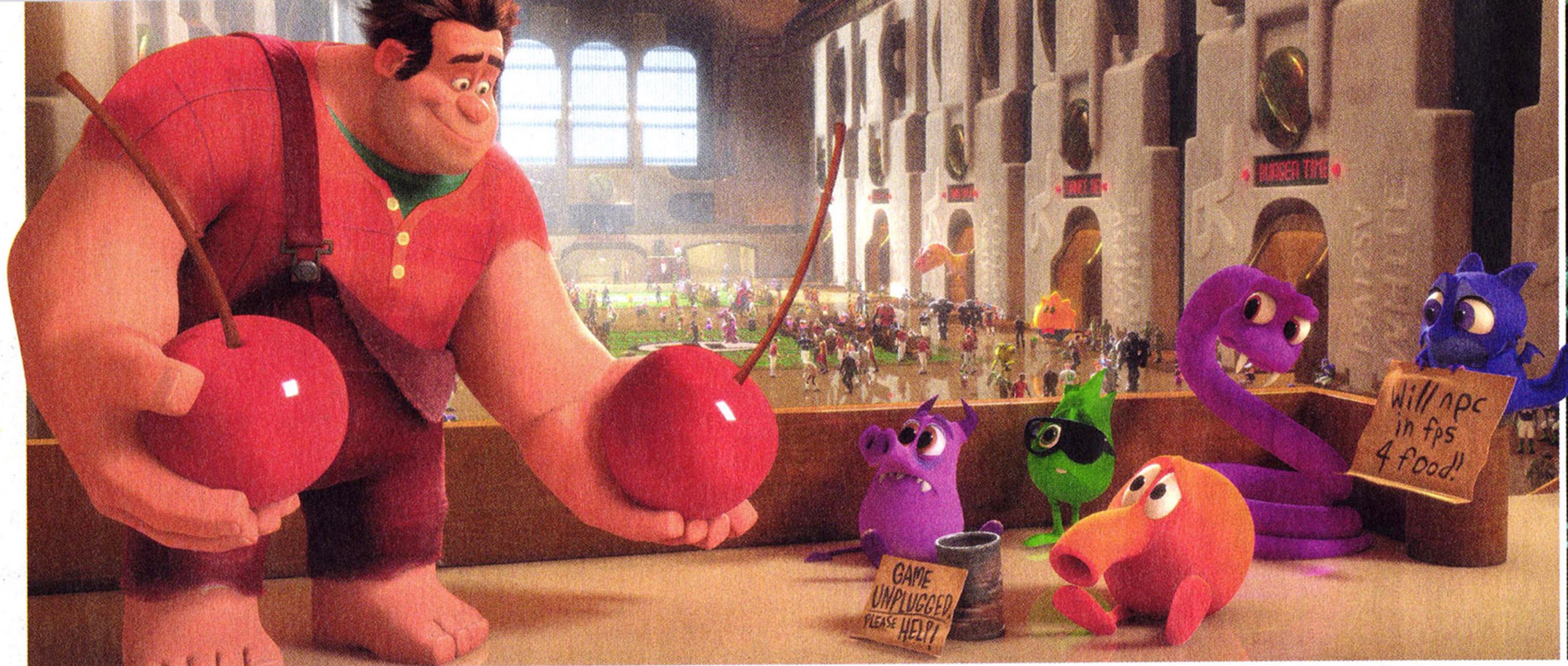
What a Wreck!

Disney Shakes Up Video Game Films with *Wreck-It Ralph*

interview by Ben Reeves

During the early '90s, Rich Moore helped shape prime-time television with his work on some iconic episodes of *The Simpsons* – including "Treehouse of Horror" and "Flaming Moe's." Moore later went on to work on shows like *Futurama*, *The Critic*, and *Drawn Together*. All the while, the director has retained his love for video games. During the production of his upcoming Disney film, *Wreck-It Ralph*, Moore blew off steam with games like Skyrim and Saints Row: The Third.

Moore's love of games shines through the film's early trailers; *Wreck-It Ralph* already looks like one of the best video game–related films ever made. Set in a world where arcade characters come to life, *Wreck-It Ralph* tells the story of the villain from the fictional arcade classic Fix-It Felix Jr. After spending 30 years terrorizing his virtual word, Ralph grows tired of being the bad guy, and sets out to explore the fellow game worlds in his arcade and find a greater purpose.

Moore's new animated film displays a reverence and respect for the medium that most feature length films (even those with game licenses) often lack. We sat down with Moore to talk about the original concept for the movie, how he worked to get characters like Bowser and Pac-Man into the film, and how Disney hopes to wreck video gaming's terrible movie legacy when the film releases this November.

Did you grow up playing a lot of games?
I grew up during that generation when video games first hit the scene. When Pong came around, I can remember playing that. Space Wars was a big one in my town, and Asteroids right after that. I was always at the arcade with my friends. I would hang out and spend a lot of money at a place called Golf 'n' Stuff in Venture, California. Looking back, you never think, "Wow, I'm going to be nostalgic for Golf 'n' Stuff." But really, those were great, formative years. It was around the time when *Star Wars* came out. So for a young person in the late '70s, there was a lot of fuel for the fire. I feel like those hours of playing Crazy Climber, Dig Dug, and Pac-Man are finally paying off.

When you started working on *Wreck-It Ralph*, you weren't even sure you'd do classic games. What was your original pitch for the movie?

The thought was: no one has ever done a feature-length movie set in games – besides Tron; that's its own kind of genre. It seemed like the life of video game characters is interesting. It's a really rich world. Visually, it would be stunning. But at first, I didn't think it would work, because video game characters – they have no choice; there's no free will. They're programmed to do one thing and that's it. That's not compelling. From there, the next step was, "Well, maybe that's the conflict in the story." Maybe there is a character who wants more out of life than what he's got, what he's programmed for. And that little spark was the human aspect of it. That's the deep internal core of the story.

How much did that initial concept evolve as you went?
At one point, the movie was going to be about the Felix character – the good guy character, and we thought [it wasn't] very interesting. It would be more interesting to watch a story about Donkey Kong than Mario, because Mario's just good. Where's the conflict in that? Where's the interest in that? But once we got that nailed down, [it took] a good nine months to a year to decide, "Okay, this should be a movie that everyone can relate to. Not just gamers." We said, "Let's just track the human story of this thing." Once we got that nailed down, then we could play around.

How were you able to get actual video game characters in the film? Companies like Nintendo are notorious for not working well with others.
We took the creative road. We didn't send lawyers to say, "What's it gonna take to get these characters?" We said, "Which characters do we like? Which characters are appropriate for these scenes?" Then, we built relationships with those companies. At E3 2011, we met with people from Namco. It was surreal to be at E3 in a temporary office, where you can hear the din of the convention going on around you, meeting with Kudo-san from Namco, and pitching the movie to him. He actually laughed when we told him what we wanted Pac-Man to do. Then the lawyers met and they went through the back and forth. But it began with personally meeting and saying, "This is what we'd like to do. We would love to have Pac-Man and Dig Dug in the movie. These are seminal characters. The movie would not be as good without them."

Did some companies place restrictions on how you could use their characters?
Like you said, Nintendo is stringent. They're strict with how their characters are presented. We have this scene with Bowser, and they wanted to see things and have the authority to say, "Okay, we like it." So we would send things back and forth. There was a point where Capcom and Nintendo were kind of bickering back and forth

Rich Moore (right) with *Wreck-It Ralph* stars John C. Reilly and Sarah Silverman
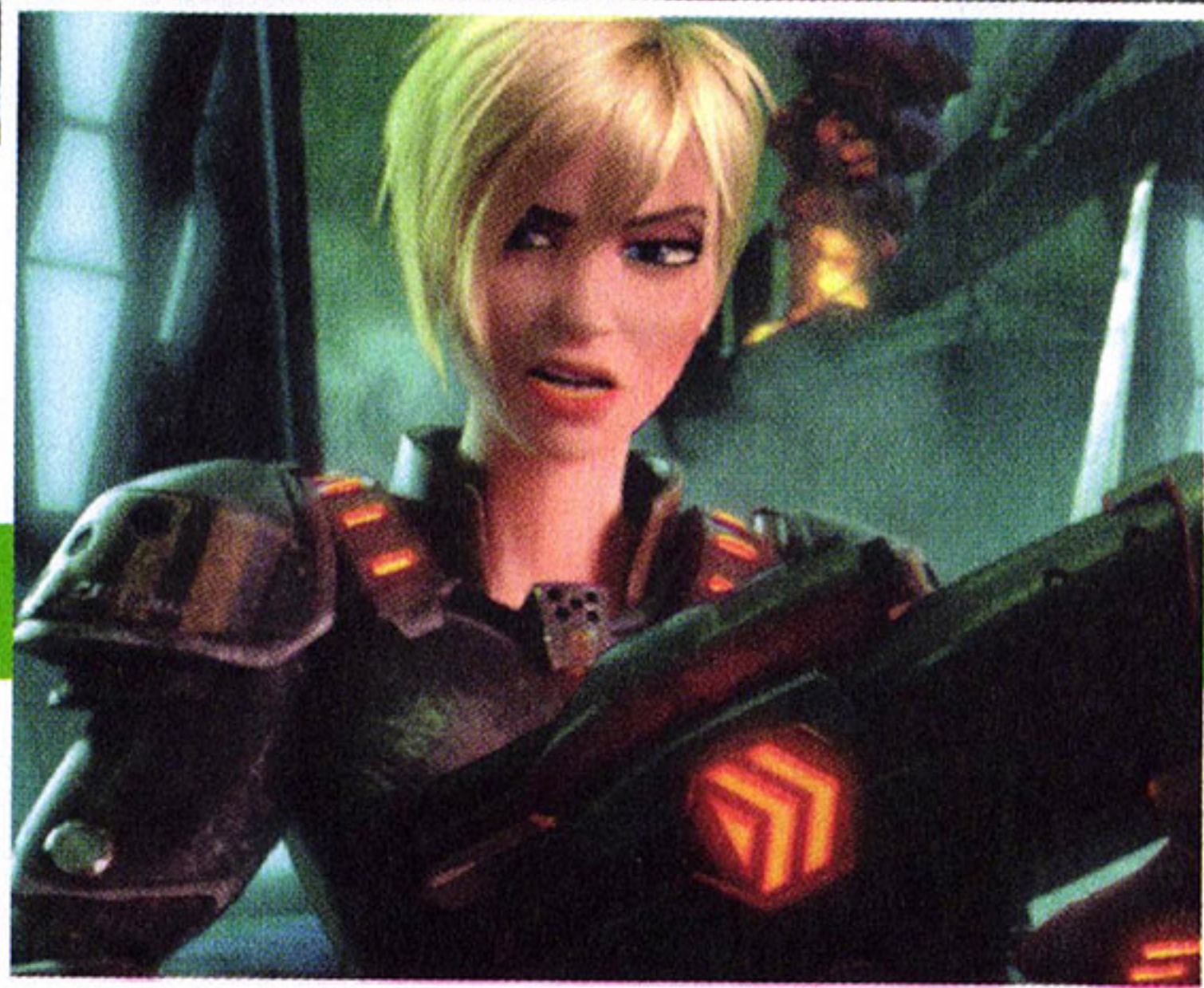
through us. Nintendo would say, "Bowser's bigger than that. He's taller." So we said, "We'll make him bigger." Then the guys at Capcom would see him and say, "M. Bison is much, much bigger than that. He's at least as big as Bowser." So we made M. Bison bigger, and then the people at Sega would say, "Robotnik is much taller. He looks very small compared to Bowser and M. Bison." I was like, "Guys, if we keep making these characters any bigger, it's going to be three titans sitting in a room of all these midgets.

There was some back-and-forth like that. But honestly, it made the scene better. These companies know their characters. They want to make sure they're represented right. If Nintendo says, "Bowser wouldn't make that shape with his mouth when he drinks coffee," at least they're letting us have him drink coffee and do a spit take. That's what I would always tell the crew. We've still got Bowser in the scene. We're having him drink coffee and spitting it out. How he spits it is not a big deal.

Video game movies have a poor track record of quality. What's different about this movie and your approach to the video game medium?
Those movies, like *Tomb Raider* and the Resident Evil movies…I don't think that those are about video games. I think that those are about stories from a video game. I never felt like those were about real people. I never thought, "Oh, I'm watching the character in a video game." Our film is about characters that come from video games. The way that *Toy Story* was about toys in a room that all live together and they know that they're toys. We're doing that with games. I think it's different in that respect. It's owning up to the fact that these are video game characters. Those

other video game movies always seemed so serious to me, and I think there's a lot of humor in video game culture. I think they always miss the comedy. To me, the way Pac-Man dies is funny. There are elements in games that I think are comedic.

It seems like you guys started with the story, as opposed to starting with a license.
Right. Like, how do we make Lara Croft? First you get Angelina Jolie. Then, you put her in shorts. I think *Wreck-It Ralph* has a good heart to it.

I played the *Wreck-It Ralph* game that's on the film's website, and it was fun. How did that come about and who developed it?
We have a game [division]. Disney's so big. Anything that you can think of in entertainment – there is an arm for it. It's a gigantic entity. It's great, and also kind of scary. We decided at one point that it would be great to come up with an old 8-bit version of this game. We wanted to do cabinets that we can actually build, and we wanted it to feel exactly like it came from 1982. We wanted it to reek of that kind of authenticity. I told the guys that "It has to feel exactly like an 8-bit game."

There was a point where they said, "We're going to go to a programmer who still uses 8-bit boards to program games. Let's see what he does." Now we have a bunch of cabinets that we're touring around. I'm really proud of them – as proud as I am of the movie. One night, I was playing until midnight at the studio. It got its hooks in me; I felt like I was at Golf 'n' Stuff again.

Three Questions With *Wreck-It Ralph* Star John C. Reilly

Did you play games when you were a kid?
When I was a kid, yeah. My parents would never go for spending the big money on the good games. I played a lot of games in arcade. I remember when Space Invaders first came out – it was like, this radical thing. After a childhood of pinball, suddenly there was this crazy game called Space Invaders. My parents finally – after I begged them to get me a home console – they got me this thing called Odyssey. It had a keyboard and some of the games on it were okay, but I was like, "Mom, I didn't say Odyssey – I said Atari!"

What drew you to this role?
The story itself is more the guy's journey as a character, which is more about my own life. I'm in my late 40s and that's the classic time for a mid-life crisis or a reevaluation about what life's all about. You've accomplished certain things with work and your life, and then you can start to see the other end of the lifespan, and you start thinking, "Is this all there is?" That's what my character goes through. He realizes, "Wait a minute. I've been smashing buildings for 30 years and everyone hates me. Is that really all I'm ever going to do?" So he decides to leave the game, go out down the power cord into some other games.

Video game movies generally have a reputation for not being very good. Is there something you feel that this movie has that those other ones have lacked?
Most have [tried] to take an existing video game and turn it into a compelling story – which is difficult because video games themselves are not linear. What makes this movie cool is that it's what you've always wondered when you play a video game. What's it like for that character? If that character had an off-screen life, what would it be like? It's kind of a fun version of the universe of video games where the video game characters know about each other, and they meet in the surge protector – that's the kind of central station. So my character is aware of Q*bert and Frogger and Zangief, and these other characters from other games. It's a fun way to go about it.

Create Your Own Suda 51

by Joe Juba

Grasshopper Manufacture CEO Goichi Suda (a.k.a. Suda 51) has a reputation for making some of the industry's most stylish games. Killer 7, No More Heroes, and Lollipop Chainsaw each have cult followings and demonstrate the studio's unique approach to development. But why should Suda 51 be the only one creating this breed of bizarre interactive entertainment? By filling in the blanks using the designated word banks, you can design your own Suda-like game and become an auteur developer yourself!

The main character is a _____(1)_____ _____(2)_____ whose life is turned upside-down thanks to a chance

meeting after a _____(3)_____ . Upon encountering a _____(4)_____ _____(5)_____ – who eventually

becomes the protagonist's _____(6)_____ – players are mysteriously transported into a _____(7)_____ plagued

by perpetual _____(8)_____ . The hero must _____(9)_____ , but that is harder than it sounds. The quest involves

lots of _____(10)_____ and _____(11)_____ , culminating in a _____(12)_____ ending that makes

_____(13)_____ sense. Of course, little of the exposition is delivered conventionally, instead relying on _____(14)_____

to convey the main plot points. The game is called _____(15)_____ _____(15)_____ _____(15)_____ .

Unfortunately, the publisher doesn't throw much marketing support behind the project. Upon release, sales are _____(16)_____ ,

though it eventually earns a cult following. Gamers praise it for its _____(17)_____ , but are almost unanimously disappointed by

_____(18)_____ . Better luck next time!

1
Psychotic
Clockwork
Remorseless
By-the-book
Drug-addicted

2
Lead singer
Assassin
Cheerleader
Detective
AI Construct

3
Punk rock concert
Surreal philosophical journey
Football game
Battle with hundreds of guys
Prison sentence

4
Deformed
Magical
Shrieking
Quivering
Wise

5
Skull
Succubus
Luchadore mask
Television
Baby

6
Love interest
Alternate identity
Ultimate weapon
Spiritual guide
Face

7
Haunted hotel
Parallel dimension
Video game
Deserted school
Demon's stomach

8
Dinnertime
Darkness
Acid rain
Zombie attacks
Annoying noises

9
Rescue a family member
Kill everything
Avenge a lost love
Find enlightenment
Prevent doomsday

10
Swearing
Cleavage
Wang jokes
Gore
Wrestling

11
Motorcycles
Backtracking
Shallow combat
Grinding
Upgrades

12
Bombastic
Philosophical
Perplexing
Twist
Depressing

13
A little
No

14
Music videos
Fortune cookies
Obtuse rambling
Voicemail messages
Loading screens

15
Viscous
Cinnamon
Startling
Baseball
Nineteen
Tornado
Avalanche
Discharge
Flower
Rubbery

16
Slightly above average
Okay
Sluggish
Below expectations
Poor

17
Visual style
Soundtrack
Outlandish premise
Clever writing
Quirky characters

18
The gameplay

The Good

The Bad

ANOTHER GEARBOX GAME, another delay. Studio co-founder Randy Pitchford recently announced that Brothers in Arms: Furious 4 is indefinitely delayed, citing an evolution to the development team's approach. Maybe Gearbox is delaying the game in hopes that everyone will forget about *Inglourious Basterds* before the game comes out.

ACTIVISION & HIGH MOON Studios have announced a Deadpool title featuring the all-star voice acting of Nolan North. The game comes out sometime next year, but Activision has not revealed which consoles it will ultimately appear on. The initial trailer for the game didn't show any gameplay, but it did attempt to capture the humor and brutality of the character.

Quotable

"We won't make the same mistake that we did with the 3DS, which was considered relatively high by consumers."

The Ugly

ACTIVISION halted game development at internal studio Radical Entertainment, creators of the Prototype franchise. The series hasn't lived up to sales expectations, so Activision laid off the majority of the staff and is considering selling the developer. The remaining staff is serving in a support role for other Activision titles. In the past two years, Activision has closed Bizarre Creations, 7 Studios, Luxoflux, RedOctane, Budcat Creations, and Underground Development.

— Nintendo president **Satoru Iwata** assures the public the Wii U price won't be excessive

01

NOW LOADING !
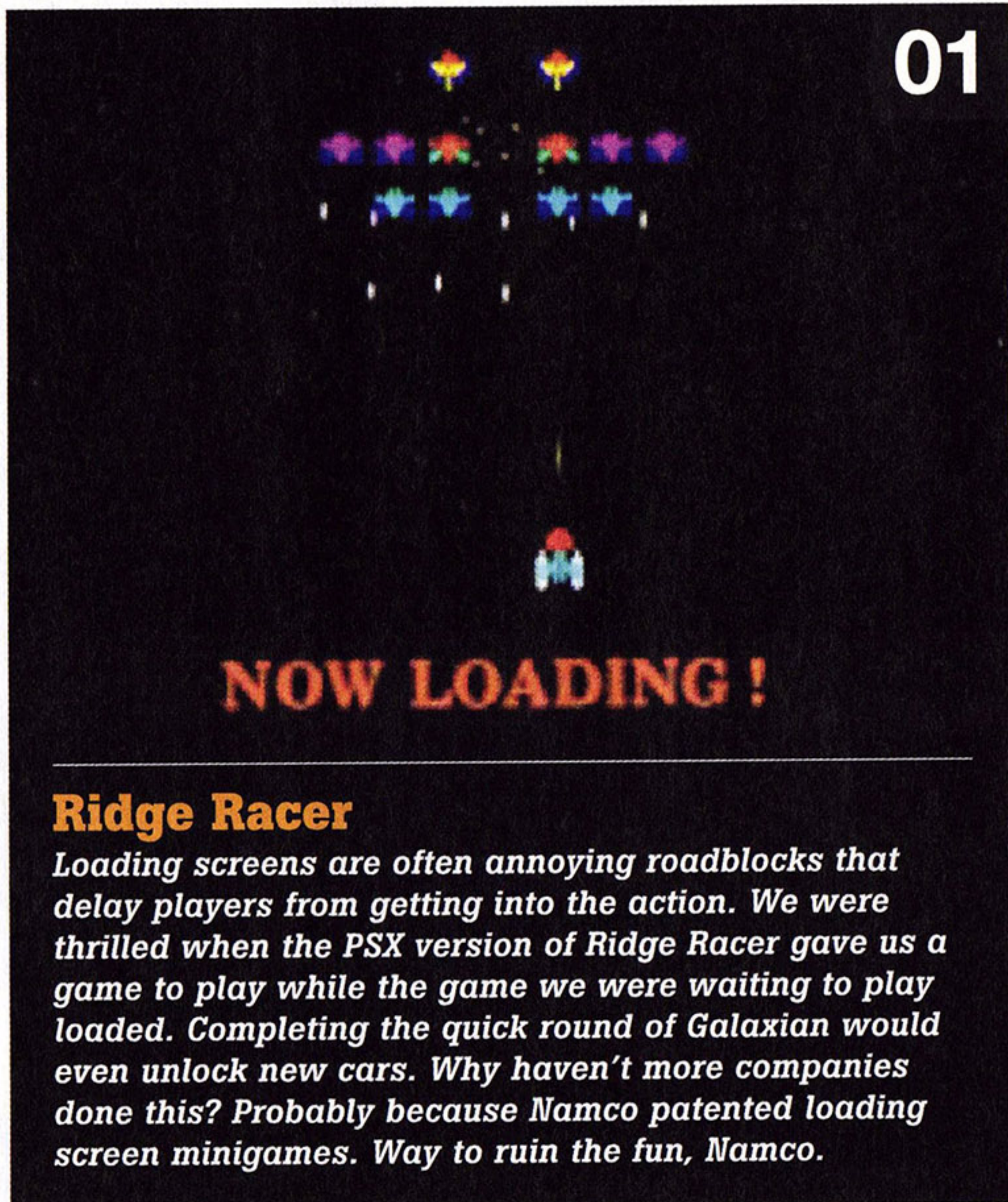
Ridge Racer

Loading screens are often annoying roadblocks that delay players from getting into the action. We were thrilled when the PSX version of Ridge Racer gave us a game to play while the game we were waiting to play loaded. Completing the quick round of Galaxian would even unlock new cars. Why haven't more companies done this? Probably because Namco patented loading screen minigames. Way to ruin the fun, Namco.

Okami

02

The stark white loading screens of Okami may seem like standard fare, until players start making paw prints with the press of a button, revealing two minigame variations that grant the player Demon Fangs if completed successfully. If only the muddy prints your puppy leaves on the couch were that helpful.

Call of Duty: Modern Warfare series

03

Perhaps the best loading screens are the ones you don't even notice. The Modern Warfare series seamlessly presents players with their next mission briefing during load times, distracting them with enough holographic globes and electronic layover images to give Jerry Bruckheimer feelings of inadequacy.

Bayonetta

04
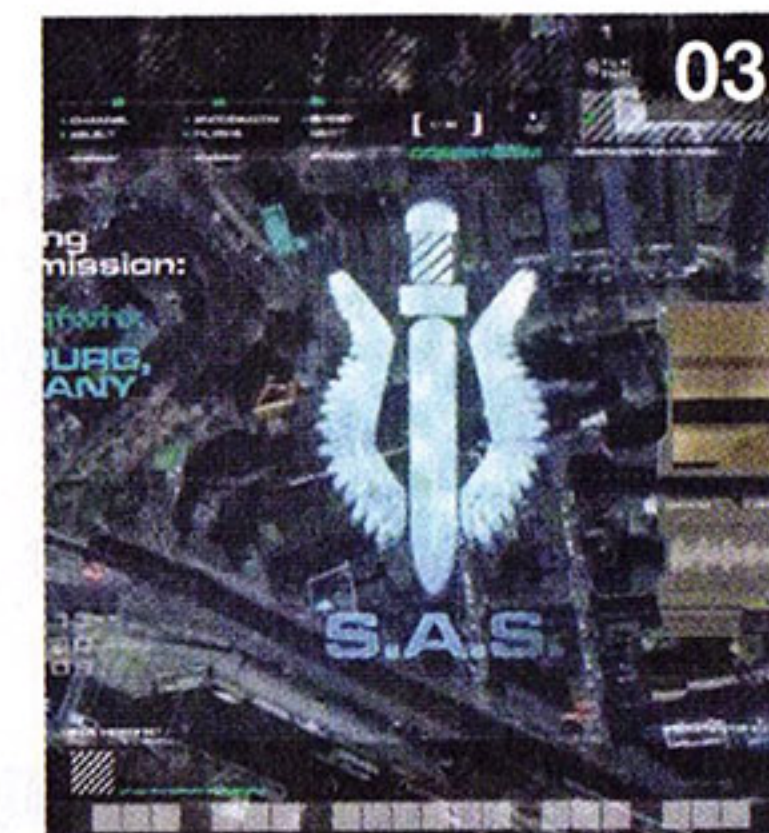
Platinum Games' sexy witch simulator puts its loading times to good use by allowing players to practice Bayonetta's combos. The loading area doesn't have enemies to practice the moves on, but for a game with such an entertaining move set, we're happy to spend the occasional minute kicking nonexistent butt.

Resident Evil

05

Who could forget Capcom's noble attempt to dull the pain of Resident Evil's constant loading with its interstitial cutscenes? Whether we were slowly opening creaky doors, walking down flights of stairs, or climbing ladders one rung at a time, Resident Evil's brief cutscenes heightened our fear of what was up ahead — at least the first dozen times.
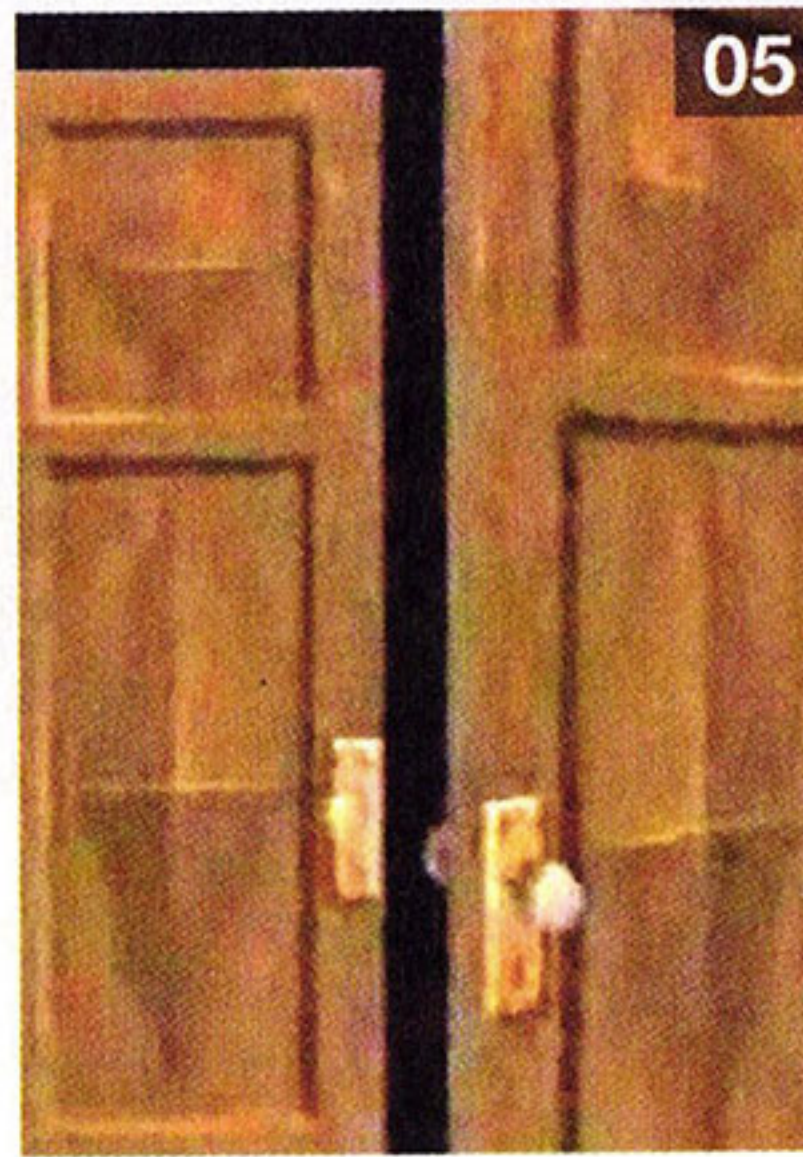
NBA Live 06

06

EA's NBA Live series has a rocky history, but the 06 installment introduced a feature that gamers unanimously embraced. The ever-present practice gym lets players shoot hoops to their heart's content while loading match-ups. The shots you make don't count toward anything, but it beats staring at art of sweaty NBA players.

07
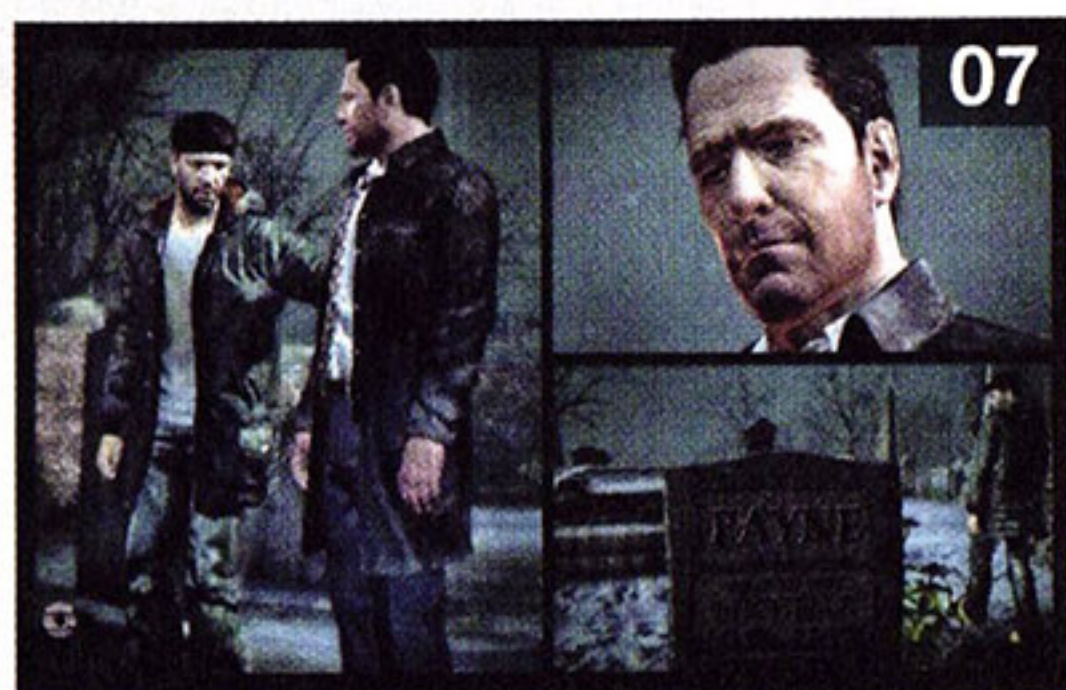
Max Payne 3

Rockstar's hard-boiled detective is one of the unluckiest characters in all of gaming, so we can understand if you forget what calamity he's suffering through in between sessions of Max Payne 3. Thankfully, the comic book-esque loading screens present the player with a helpful recap of the events leading up to where you left off in a style that nicely complements the slick presentation.

08

The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim

How do you keep Elder Scrolls fans entertained during load times? Apparently, you just throw the model for an in-game object on screen and give players the ability to twirl it around and zoom in. It sounds trivial, but that hasn't stopped us from rotating that dragon about a million times.

09
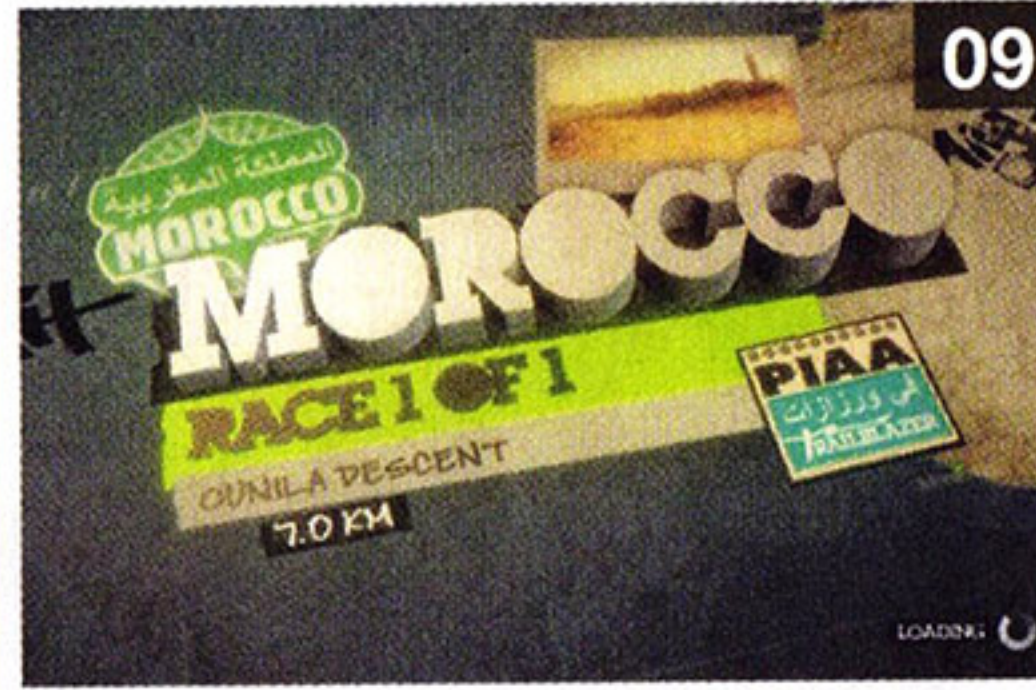
Dirt 2

Another example of a little control going a long way, Dirt 2 allows you to pan and zoom the camera in on a variety of stats while your next event loads, including mission progression, unearned achievements, and the driver lineup for your next race.

10

Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots

MGS 4's lengthy install is the perfect time for a smoke break — if you're Solid Snake, at least. For eight minutes, players watch the grizzled operative suck down a cigarette in real time, as a smattering of tips appear on screen, including a health warning for the dangers of smoking.

by Matt Miller

Two **Hot** Downloadable Games
On the Horizon

Hell Yeah: Wrath of the Dead Rabbit
PlayStation 3 • Xbox 360 • PC

Hell Yeah: Wrath of the Dead Rabbit isn't just weird; it's bonkers. That's exactly the intent. Developer Arkedo embraces its over-the-top concept and wraps it around the tried and true "Metroidvania" gameplay. Players slip into the skin of Ash, the devil rabbit prince of hell who has to correct an image problem. Pictures are surreptitiously making the rounds among the hellspawn of the prince in a compromising situation with a rubber duckie. The prince believes he deserves more respect, so he jumps into his giant circular-saw-blade vehicle and sets out to beat, grind, and shoot some sense into his subjects.

The juvenile and silly art style captures a weird cartoon vibe that sits somewhere between *Ren & Stimpy* and Ubisoft's *Rayman Origins*. Smooth, colorful animation highlights grotesque and absurd situations, from grisly body parts flying everywhere to trampolines made from fleshy butts positioned strategically through the world.

Hell Yeah's ridiculous premise and art are the window dressing on a bracing action/exploration game. Maintaining the tenets of the genre, you'll pass several inaccessible locations until you unlock a new ability and backtrack to the mysterious gate. The strange saw-blade vehicle you inhabit is a handy tool for exploration, allowing Ash to stick to walls and reach seemingly inaccessible areas. Beyond its obvious melee potential, the prince's strange chariot can also fire missiles and other projectiles at enemies. During some enemy kills you can trigger execution animations with special button-mash moments that result in an array of strange and quirky deaths. After you finish them off, the unfortunate demons leave some money that players can use to upgrade Ash's arsenal or alter the way he looks.

Hell Yeah is deranged, but its colorful visuals and taut action prove to me that it's more sophisticated than its sophomoric sense of

humor would have us believe. We'll see if this prince of hell has what it takes to impress audiences when the game releases later this year.

Part musical experiment, and part platforming action game, **Sound Shapes** is the new project from Jonathan Mak, who gained notoriety on the indie scene with Everyday Shooter. Along with indie electronic musician Shaw-Han Liem, the duo crafted the fundamentals for the game before inviting other developers and artists like deadmau5, PixelJam, Capy, and Jim Guthrie to contribute to the sound and visual design.

On the surface, Sound Shapes is a challenging platforming game in the vein of Super Meat Boy filled with dozens of small, discrete stages. The levels split out into albums, each of which shares a common musical and visual thread. Players navigate a little blob character through increasingly challenging sequences. The levels I played in early builds offer plenty of challenging jumps and carefully timed dashes between safe locations.

Sound Shapes distinguishes itself through the way music works its way into gameplay.

As you collect the musical notes strewn around a level, they layer into the music you're hearing as you play, as if the screen in front of you is a single loop of a musical track. Your movements and actions in the game world also layer in additional sounds, helping enmesh you in the musical soundscape that you are, in part, helping to create.

This creative experience extends beyond the platforming levels into the level crafting. An easy-to-use sound editor lets you place shapes onto the screen and slowly piece together your own song. Conceivably, some gamers could have a great time just experimenting with the editor. Your songs/levels can then be shared with others.

Queasy Games has been developing Sound Shapes for a long time, but the game should be out within days of this magazine's release for both Vita and PS3. Buy it on one, and you get both versions. If you save your levels on the cloud, you can even flip back and forth without a delay between different platforms. 🔥

For more on the downloadable and independent game scene, check out daily updates at gameinformer.com/impulse. For more in this issue, read our review of Tony Hawk's Pro Skater HD on p. 91, and our scores for Dyad, Penny Arcade: On the Rainslick Precipice of Darkness 3, Pocket Planes, Endless Space, Spelunky, and Zuma's Revenge on p. 96.
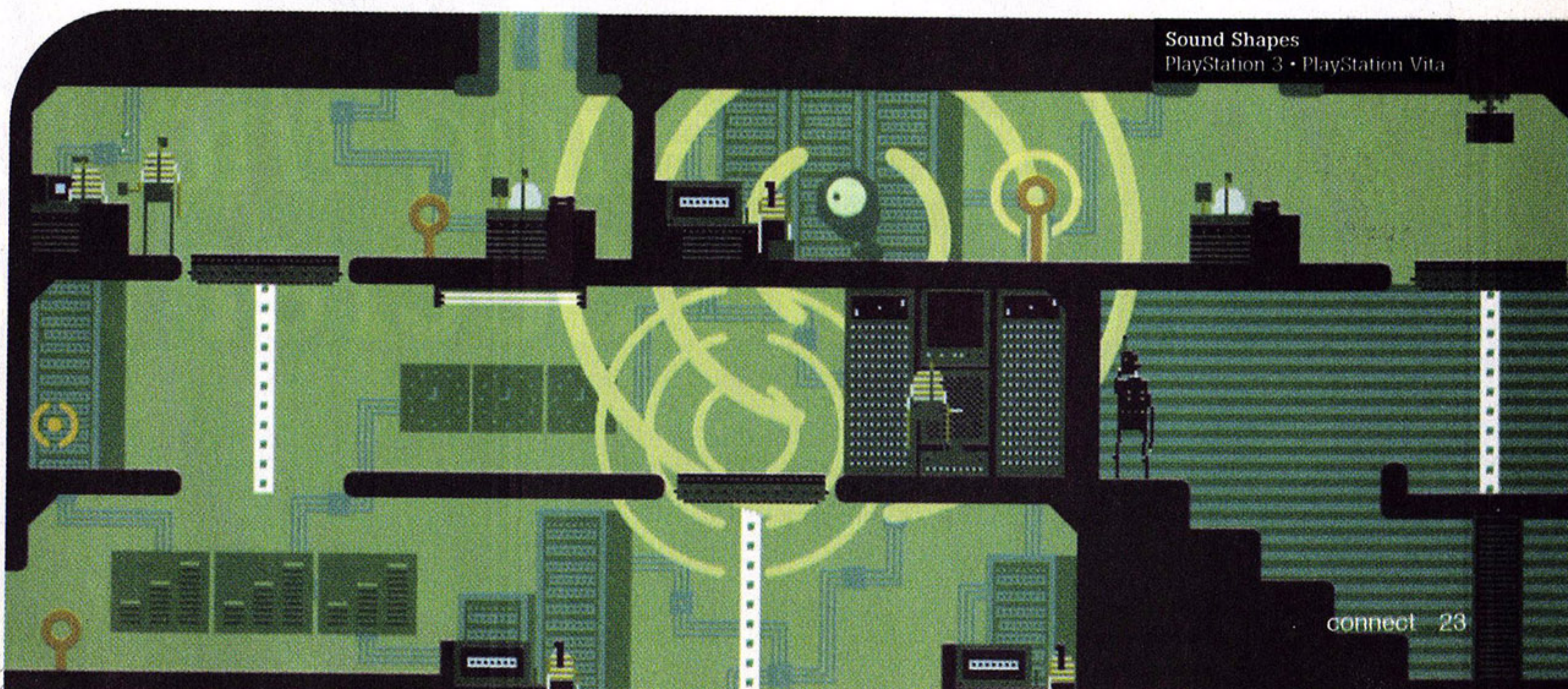
Sound Shapes
PlayStation 3 • PlayStation Vita
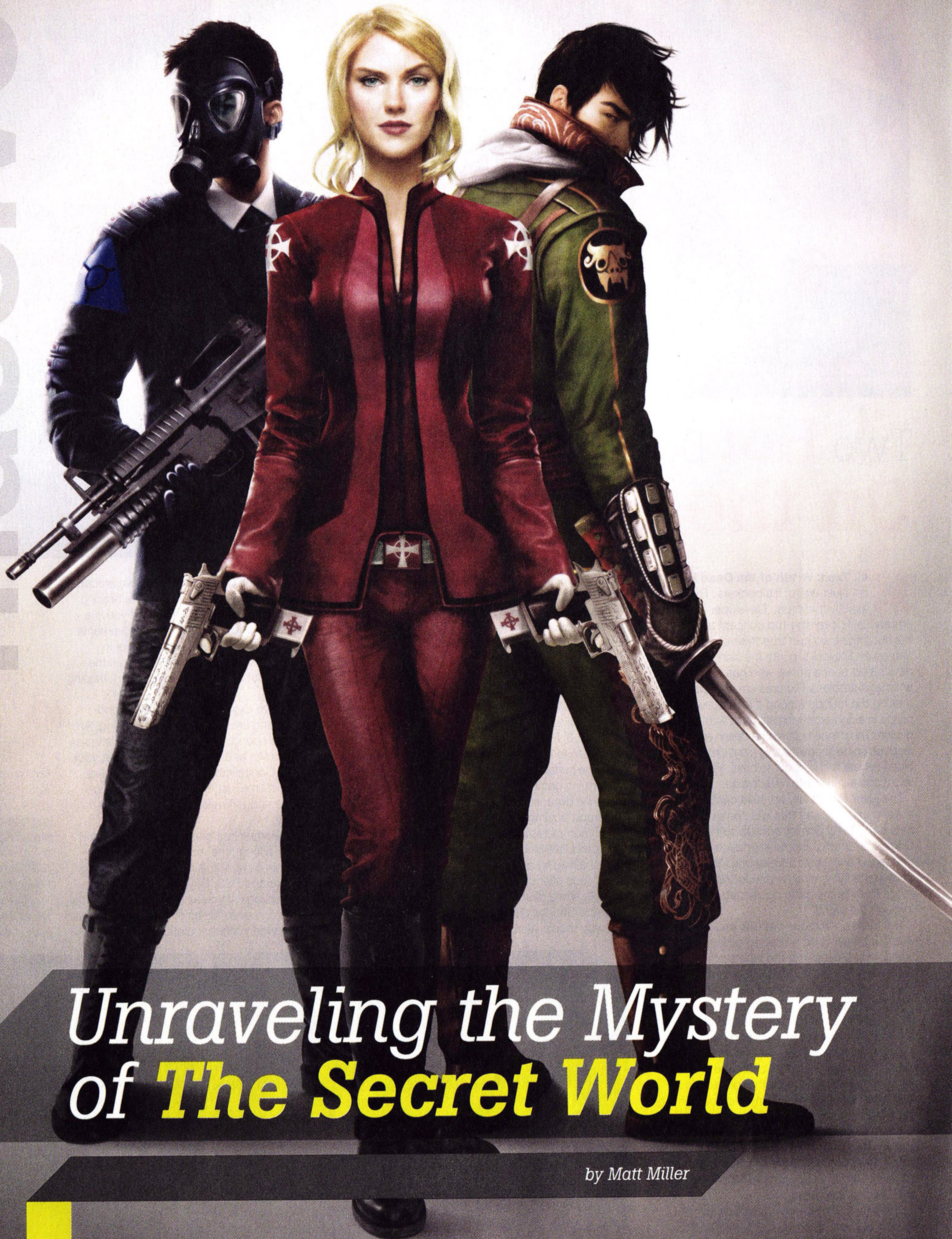
Unraveling the Mystery of The Secret World

by Matt Miller

Somewhere between the inexplicable horror of H.P. Lovecraft, the secret conspiracies of *The X-Files*, and the slick action of *The Matrix* lies The Secret World. Funcom accentuates this unusual MMO's unique premise with a number of features that make the project feel distinct from its competition. While not every element of the game holds up to extended scrutiny, my experience during the first few weeks of The Secret World revealed a deep game system that rewards thoughtful play and exploration over cookie-cutter missions and grinding.

Your journey into The Secret World begins when a modern-day, run-of-the-mill human character discovers a sudden supernatural capability. Within days, he comes to the attention of one of three secret organizations – the Templars, Illuminati, and the Dragon – each of which is trying to cement a clandestine hold over the world by harnessing supernatural powers. You're drawn into the fold and tasked with furthering your faction's interests in the world. Though each organization has its own starting area and NPC characters, I didn't find that my choice of faction had a profound effect on the game going forward.

The creators behind The Secret World should be proud of their game world. Whether you're exploring a shattered Maine township overrun by undead or investigating ancient Egyptian tombs, the game zones are grounded in reality and filled with detail. Strongly acted, fully voiced characters appear in frequent cutscenes to introduce quests. The witty, self-aware writing may try too hard to be clever at times, but at least it's not boring. These mission briefings paint a potent picture of the horror and danger inherent to this fiction, but it feels weird that your character remains silent in the exchanges.

While some of the missions fall into the familiar "kill five zombies" or "take this object from point A to point B," a majority of quests break that trend and demand more thought. One memorable mission early in the game sent me in pursuit of a flock of black ravens as they led me to an incomplete occult ritual. Examining the notes of a nearby dead researcher, I learned that I needed to lay raven feathers around a circular pool to summon a demonic creature and defeat it. Special investigation missions take things a step further, demanding critical thinking and even research outside of the game to find solutions; an in-game web browser is included so

as not to break immersion. For one early puzzle, I had to look up the works of a Danish painter, use the hands of a clock to track down a bible verse, and translate a Latin phrase to obtain an email password. I love the way these quests drew me into the conspiracies of modern-day myth. My only complaint about the mission structure is it severely limits how many missions one can tackle at a time. The goal here is undoubtedly to keep players focused on a few tasks at a time, but this results in more backtracking through areas than I would have liked.

Your character progresses as you complete the varied missions, but not through traditional leveling. Instead, experience points in The Secret World contribute to a pool of ability and skill points that you can apply any way you desire. Want a blade-wielding swordsman who dabbles in blood magic? How about a shotgun-toting thug who pulls out a giant hammer in close quarters? You have the flexibility to craft the character you want, and the game encourages you to experiment with various ability combinations; at any time you can field seven active abilities and seven passives that accentuate those actions. I love the variety of characters that emerge, but it's also easy to make bad decisions, and the lack of a clearly designated level number makes it tricky to figure out where you're at in relation to other players.

However you distribute ability points, you use those attacks to confront all the horrors that modern mythology can throw at you. Combat in The Secret World puts a high priority on positioning and movement, and battles feel dynamic and more engaging than many hot-buttoned MMOs. Players are rewarded for careful observation of enemies and exploiting status effects applied by different abilities. Unfortunately, character movement often feels floaty, and neither spells nor weapons feel like they connect with your enemies despite a wide variety of interesting animations for each action. Many battles stretch on several seconds longer than they should as well. I'd prefer battles to feel tense and dangerous over long and repetitive.

Much of The Secret World is solo friendly, but instanced dungeons and player vs. player battles offer reasons to hook up with fellow players. The couple cooperative instances I encountered in the first 40 hours of play were entertaining romps through a string of imposing bosses. It's standard MMO fare, but even at low levels you run into epic monster fights. PvP offers three distinct conflicts at launch. Stonehenge
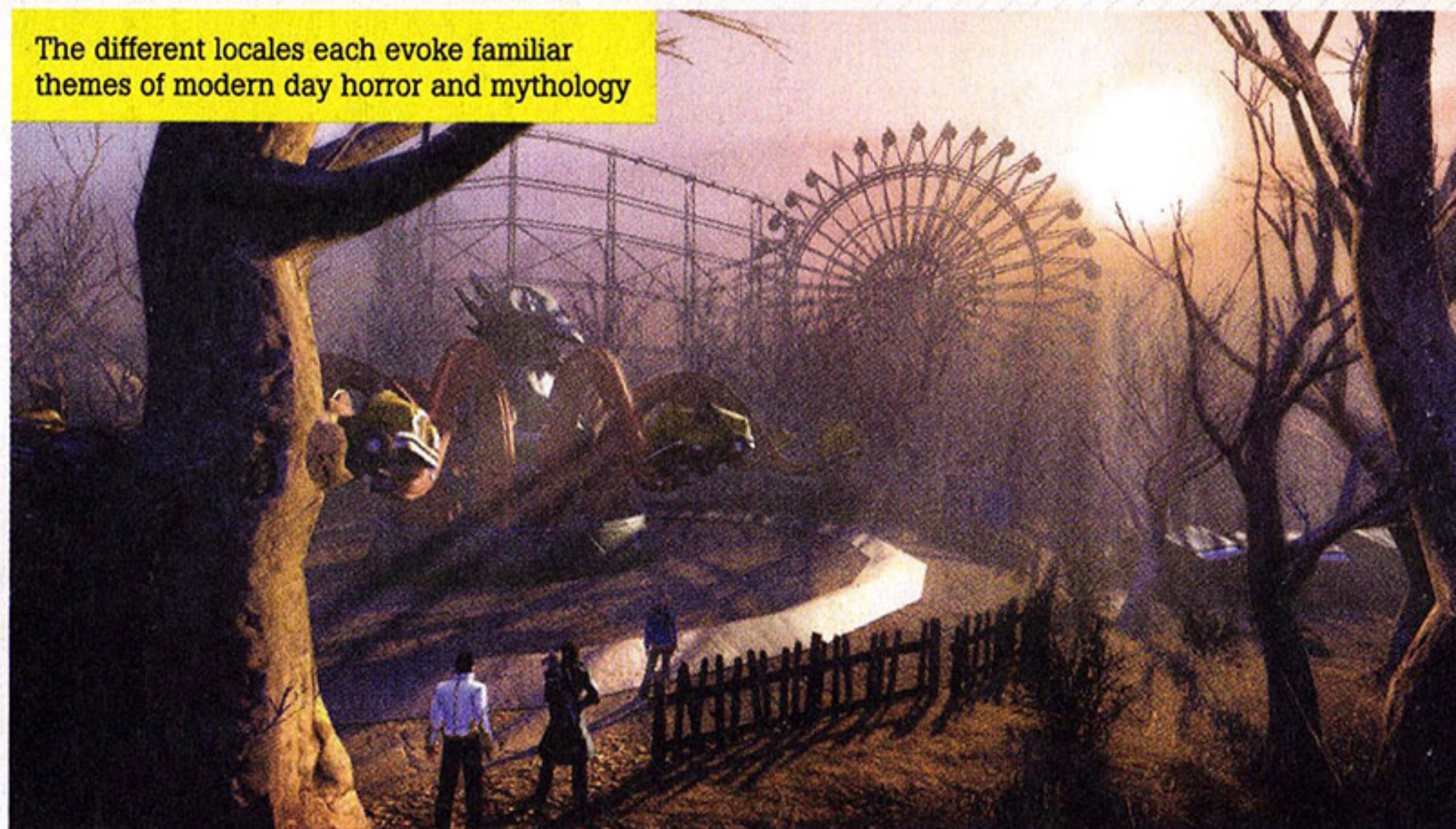
is a straightforward fight to hold the center and eliminate enemy soldiers. El Dorado is a fun team skirmish to control a set of relics scattered around ancient ruins. My favorite is the Fusang Projects. Players drop into this sprawling, persistent battleground with dozens of other players at one time. The competing factions each try to capture objectives around the level, all the while killing each other in the streets. I love the emergent dynamics that result; a team of five players might think they're rolling deep as they round a corner only to come face to face with a gathering of 30 enemies and flee in terror.

Despite some broken quests and other technical hiccups in the first few days after release, The Secret World managed a relatively smooth launch. More importantly, I'm ready to throw more of my time at the game, which is perhaps the best recommendation a game reviewer can offer after crunching through a time-intensive game. I have doubts about Funcom's decision to charge both a subscription fee and use an in-game real-money store for character elements like new outfits, but it doesn't harm the gameplay so we'll see what the player base has to say about it.

The Secret World isn't perfect, but for MMO players ready for a break from the medieval fantasy and level grinding of most games on the market, it's a refreshing change from the norm. ◈
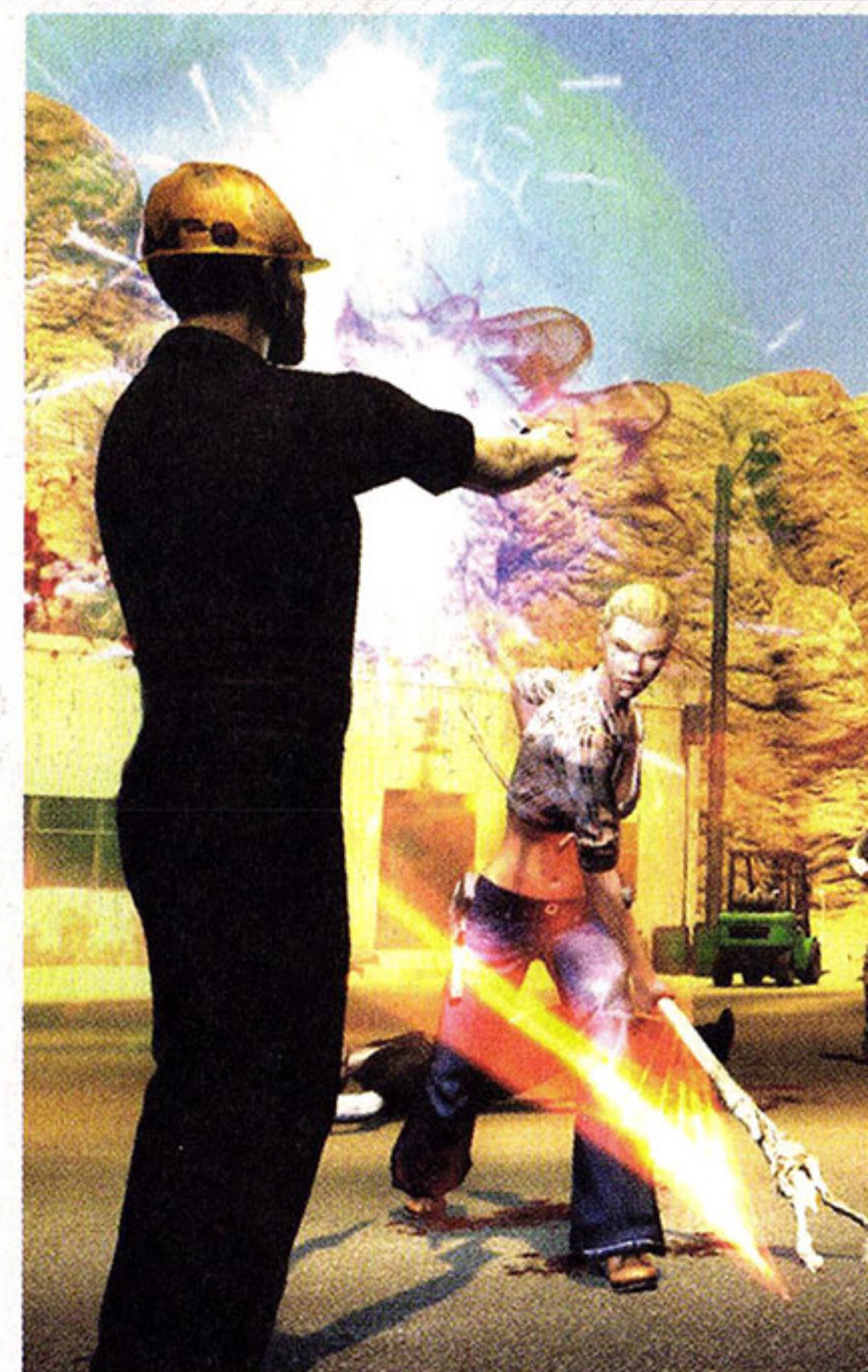
Wargaming.net Explodes the Free-to-Play Market

Anyone who saw the company's huge display at this year's E3 knows that Wargaming.net is not the niche publisher of military strategy games it used to be. With over 30 million registered users of its free-to-play World of Tanks MMO, CEO Victor Kislyi has his sights set on big things.

interview by Matt Helgeson

You made retail PC releases for a long time. Now, you've moved to a free-to-play model. Why did you become frustrated with the retail system?

It is really painful, especially when you are a small independent developer. This publisher, the contract, the milestones, the payments, the royalties, the distribution, and the deadlines… and piracy. We realized whenever you release a retail product it is going to get pirated within, at that time, maybe a week. Now it is literally 24 hours.

Do you think that the current retail system is going to become a thing of the past?

Absolutely. I think that historically, philosophically, and from a civilizational standpoint this is very illogical that a product that is essentially digital is still being sold like a basket of grain in Bethlehem or Babylon 5,000 years ago.

How did you come up with the idea for a free-to-play massively multiplayer online tank game?

The good news for us was that free-to-play madness started in Asia and [made] its way westward through Russia. Ugly-looking browser games with stupid turn-based or real-time mechanics, but they were free-to-play. But when you learned the revenue numbers – maybe one or two or three million a month – you would say, "Wow." After we decided to not make any more boxed games, we started to make an MMO. The first concept was fantasy, because 98 percent of all MMOs at that time were fantasy. Then [someone] said, "Are you sure you want to make another fantasy game? Why don't we make an MMO about something which we really know well?" That was tanks. We had already made 10 games featuring tanks – sci-fi tanks, World War II tanks. We looked at this and said, "Let's take a risk." So we stopped producing fantasy creatures and we turned 180 degrees and started to make the first MMO about tanks.

It is a risk that has paid off incredibly. What kind of numbers do you have right now for the people playing World of Tanks at any given time?

Right now World of Tanks is launched in the following territories: Russia, Europe, North America, and China. In China you have to go through a partner. We have more than 30 million registrations so far. In free-to-play, one registration does not equal a World of WarCraft registration because in World of WarCraft you have to pay $15. They have this kind of free-to-play approach, but in general one World of WarCraft registration is generating more money than a free-to-play registration. On the other hand, when you have 30 million players or more that is also a sweet, sweet number.

Do you find that your revenue is generated by most of the players buying a small number of things or a few select players that buy a high volume of items?

Seventy-five percent of people will never buy anything. Little boys or teenagers – they play for free. You have to provide them with the same kind of software quality and service as the paying users. You have to cater to those 75-percent of non-paying users anyway, and we are catering to them. Those people who pay spend on average around the price of two movie tickets. That is the golden rule of free-to-play; you don't try to squeeze more than two movie tickets [out of a player]. In America, that would about $25 per paying user, approximately. In China that's of course less, [because] movies are cheaper in China.

World of Warplanes was shown at E3. Are you confident that you guys can handle aerial combat?

I don't perceive World of Warplanes as a copycat of World of Tanks. In the first place, it is being made by another team in Ukraine. We are aware of the fact that this is a 3D dogfighting game that requires more of a 3D spatial kind of orientation. [Making a] game is simple: it's experimenting. Make the first prototype and show it to people. We have millions of World of Tanks players, so we can from time to time [ask them] to test internal versions of World of Warplanes. Then you do closed beta. We are now in closed beta, and you attract thousands of people and you see how they play, how they react.

You have also mentioned World of Battleships in recent interviews. Is the end goal having a huge free-to-play online world where some people are playing in planes, some people in tanks, and others in battleships?

First of all, we have to make World of Tanks, World of Warplanes, and World of Battleships enjoyable games on their own. Virtual pilots would kill us if we sacrificed dogfighting excitement for the sake of also driving in a tank. Trust me, making even one game with a single kind of weapon is a big endeavor…. But at this year's E3 we announced Wargaming.net as a service. You [know] another big company that has this unified .net kind of service where you log in and you have access to all those fantastic games. You know what I am talking about. This is not rocket science. It is easy, you just have to have a nice login, a nice website where you can get all of your statistics and have access to all the wonderful games you have. You can compare your statistics with your friends, you can participate in tournaments and ladders, clan wars, get special discounts – all of your social gaming life happens under one login. We'll also allow – and this is unique – you to transfer, for example, the experience points you earned in World of Tanks into World of Warplanes and immediately unlock a top-tier Messerschmitt 109 BF. We ran this idea through our forums and people are ecstatic about this.

Would you pursue the console market if the next generation of consoles were more open to the free-to-play model?

I would be moderately optimistic on that. We are not experienced in console games as a company. Right now you can read a lot of analysts and [everything] is up in the air. Nobody knows what will happen – whether consoles will die off, or if Sony and Microsoft will have to change significantly to suit this digital universe we live in. What I can be really sure about is mobile. Mobile is going to conquer the world, and I am talking to you using my iPhone, like everyone else. So mobile will be there.

As long as you have a screen and the Internet, I think we as a company will survive. The input device or the size of the screen does not matter. A well-designed free-to-play game succeeds on the gameplay and the experience. So, let's say that PC dies three years from now and everyone has a tablet and it can be connected to a TV. I think we as a company will survive. We'll change World of Tanks in a way that it is playable on a tablet with touchscreen or a joystick you can attach. It is all about experience. We know that this whole PC dominance of PC free-to-play will not be forever. It is going to be mobile and then probably some smart console concept that we cannot even imagine now. You have to keep looking at those new concepts and adapt your gameplay to that new platform. ◈

Router

by Ben Reeves and Matt Bertz

Rundown

A stable network connection can make the difference between landing that critical shot on an enemy arming an M-Com station in Battlefield 3 or giving up the frontline. In our never-ending search for network stability, we took two high-end routers for a spin that boast priority streaming technology that manages traffic flow to make sure your gaming session continues uninterrupted even if another family member is streaming video or downloading music. Which router rules the roost? See below.

Belkin Advance N900

Though its vertical standing design may be impractical for certain people, if you can look past its awkward exterior the N900 is a capable media streaming router. Unlike the D-Link router, the N900 delivered great speeds throughout the loftspace on both the 2.4GHz and 5GHz frequencies. Thanks to its Intellistream technology, the router capably handled Battlefield 3 multiplayer sessions, Netflix video streams, and Spotify music streams without sacrificing in-game network performance. Like the D-Link, console owners need an adapter to enjoy the increased/stabilized wireless speeds afforded by the 5GHz 802.11n frequency, but newer devices like the iPad 2 can take advantage of the new speeds out of the box. The only area the N900 needs improvement is with the setup. Modern routers shouldn't have to install unccessary software on your desktop, and you need to restart the router every time you make a settings change.

VERY GOOD ■■■■■■■■□□

$199 | belkin.com

Console owners need an adapter to enjoy the increased/stabilized wireless speeds

D-Link DIR-857 HD Media Router 3000

The DIR-857's boxy design won't win any style awards, but it's inconspicuous enough to slide onto your desk without calling attention to itself. Straightforward setup makes it a breeze to get up and running, and the web-based interface offers several customizable options for advanced users. The router pushes two 450Mbps data streams, one at the overcrowded 2.4GHz frequency and another on the 5GHz band. During our tests we experienced no hiccups streaming an HD Netflix video on the 5GHz frequency, engaging in a multiplayer match via the Gigabit Ethernet connection, and downloading files on the 2.4GHz band. The only major knocks we have against this high-powered router is the weaker wireless signal range. For the price, we expected a more stable performance at any corner of the loftspace for such a simple task.

AVERAGE ■■■■■■□□□□

$189 | dlink.com

BELKIN

D-Link

DIR-857 MEDIA ROUTER

1
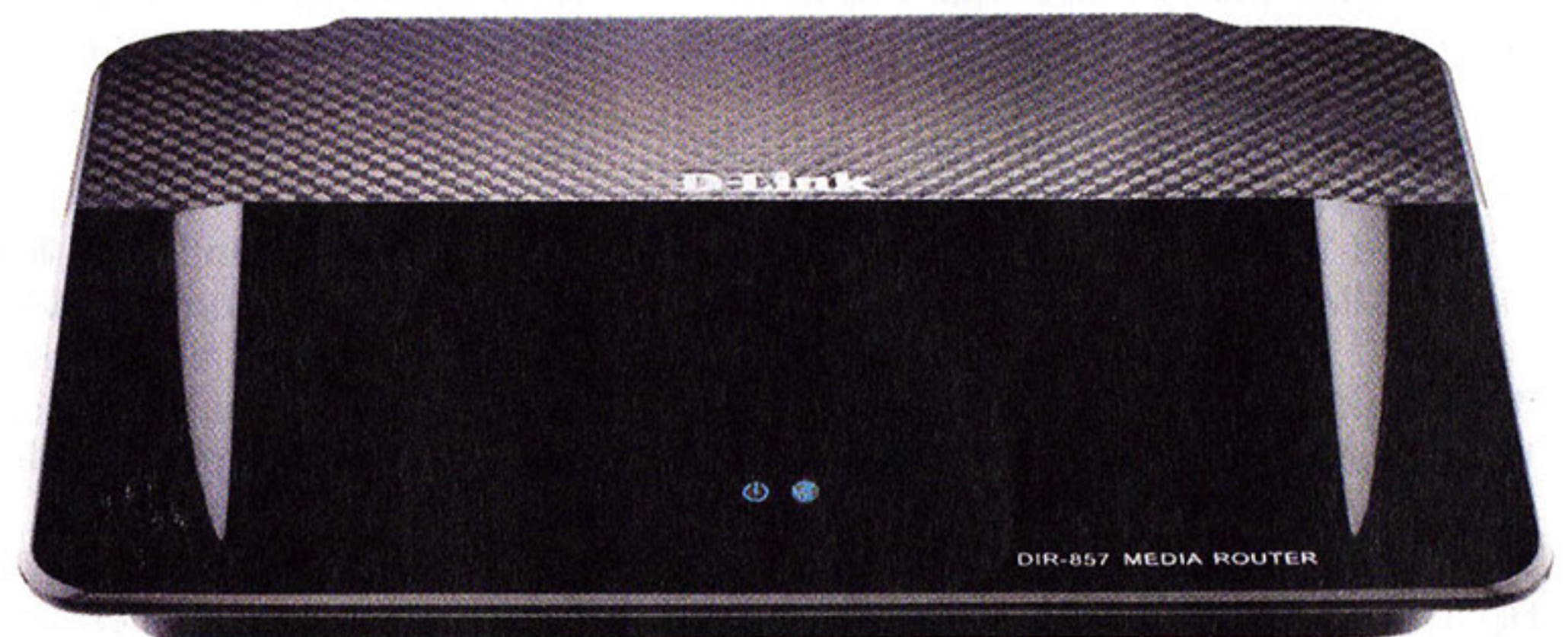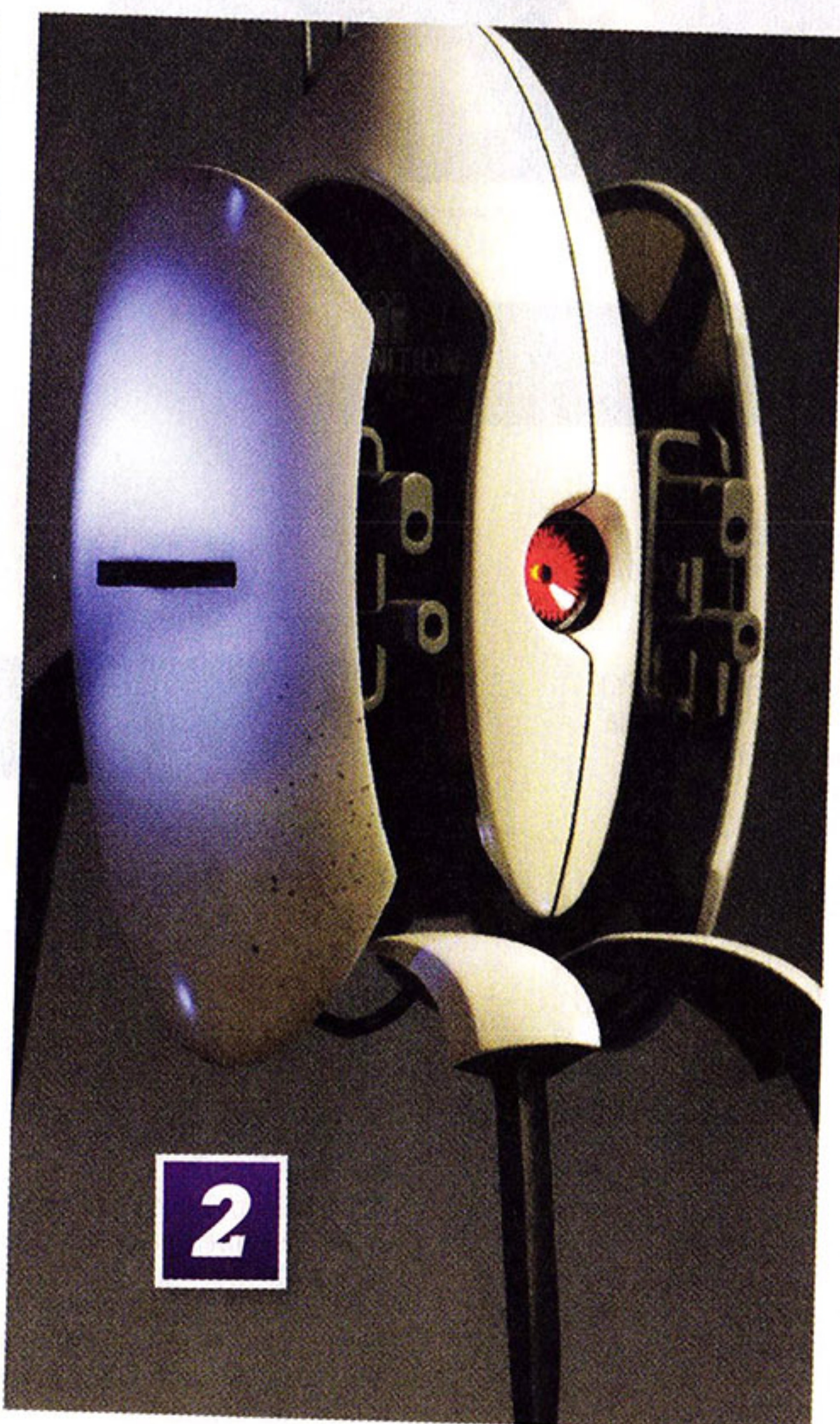
1 Nexus 7
So many people are jumping into the tablet market these days that it's hard to keep track, but when Google gets behind a system, you have to take notice. Developed in conjunction with Asus, the Nexus 7 features a 1280×800 IPS touchscreen, an eight-hour battery, and a textured, non-slip grip. This seven-inch tablet may be small, but with an Nvidia 1.2GHz Tegra 3 quad-core processor, it's also powerful. Furthermore, it's the first tablet to make use of the new Android 4.1 Jelly Bean operating system. The Nexus 7 cruises through most modern apps and games, and is an enticing way to consume your favorite books, magazines, and movies. Its price also makes it a hard bargain to resist.

$199.99 (8GB), $249.99 (16GB) | *google.com/nexus*

2 Portal 2 Turret
Gaming Head's 16-inch replica of Portal 2's deadly turrets features a motion sensor that activates the red lights when something passes in front of it. But be warned, Portal 2 replica turrets will not protect your children or pets from home invaders. They will not prevent your merchandise from theft. They will not love you. However, they will provide you with hours of statuesque posing on the mantle of your choice.

$299.99 | *gamingheads.com*

2
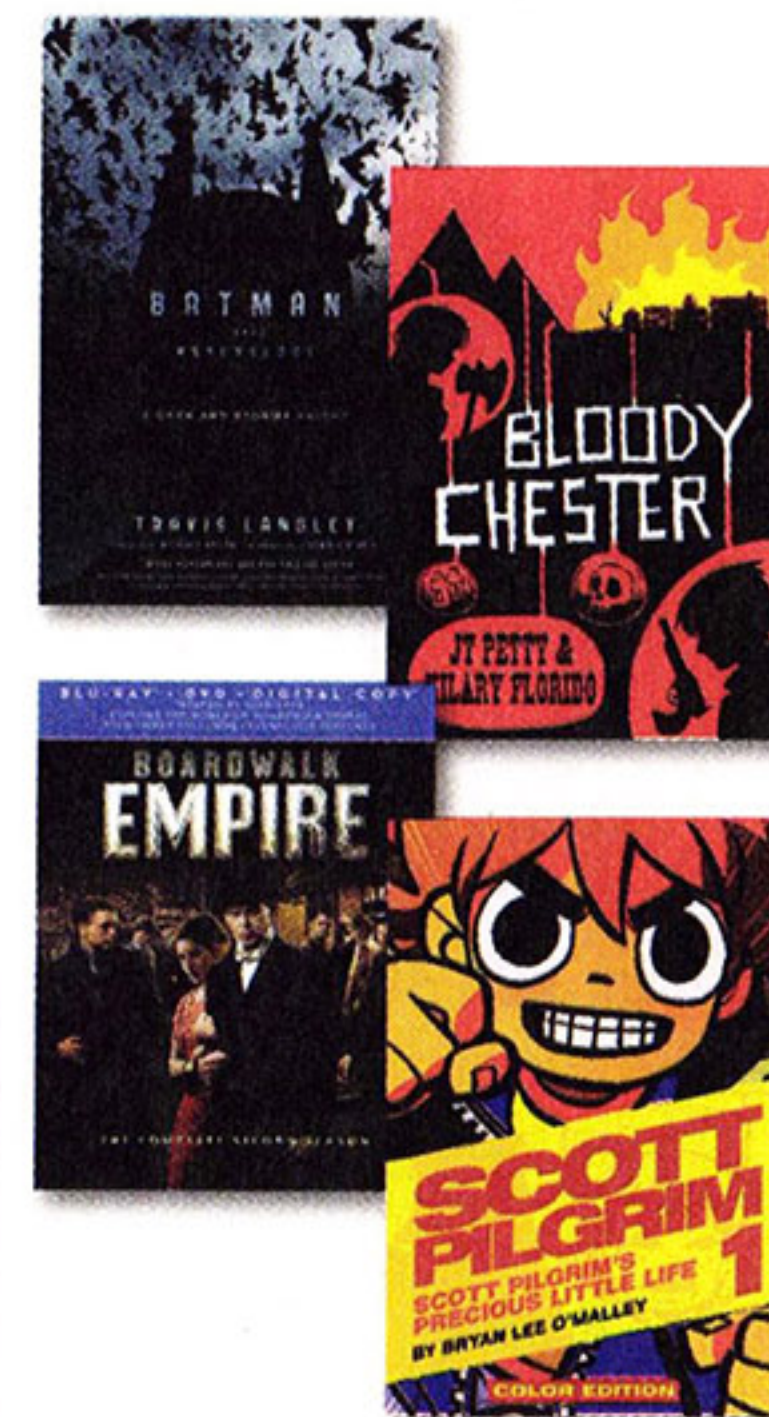
BATMAN AND PSYCHOLOGY: A DARK AND STORMY KNIGHT BY TRAVIS LANGLEY

Batman may be insane, but our society has an obsession with him. Langley – a professor of psychology at Henderson University – puts Batman on his couch and dives under the mask, examining the Dark Knight's psyche and what makes him such an interesting figure.

$17.95
wiley.com

BLOODY CHESTER BY J.T. PETTY

Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow author J. T. Petty tells a well-paced horror-western about a young man hired to burn down a ghost town only to discover that many of the town's inhabitants died from a mysterious plague.

$18.99
macmillan.com/bloodychester

BOARDWALK EMPIRE: THE COMPLETE SECOND SEASON

It's hard to stop watching HBO's stylish prohibition-era series. In season two, nearly every character leads a double life. How will Atlantic City treasurer Nucky Thompson maintain order after some of his closest allies commit insurrection?

$79.99
hbo.com/boardwalk-empire

SCOTT PILGRIM COLOR HARDCOVER VOLUME 1: PRECIOUS LITTLE LIFE BY BRYAN LEE O'MALLEY

One of the advantages the Scott Pilgrim movie had over the comics was color. No longer! This remastered 6 x 9-inch hardcover recounts the challenges of Canadian slacker Scott Pilgrim and showcases his battle with Ramona's first evil ex in a rainbow of color.

$24.99
onipress.com
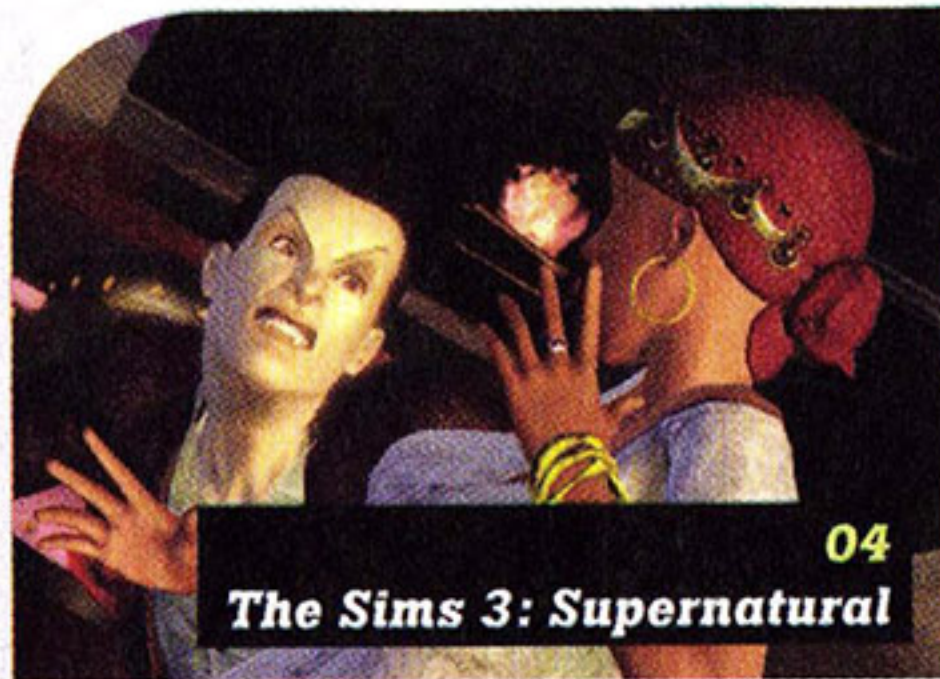
The Sims 3: Supernatural — 04
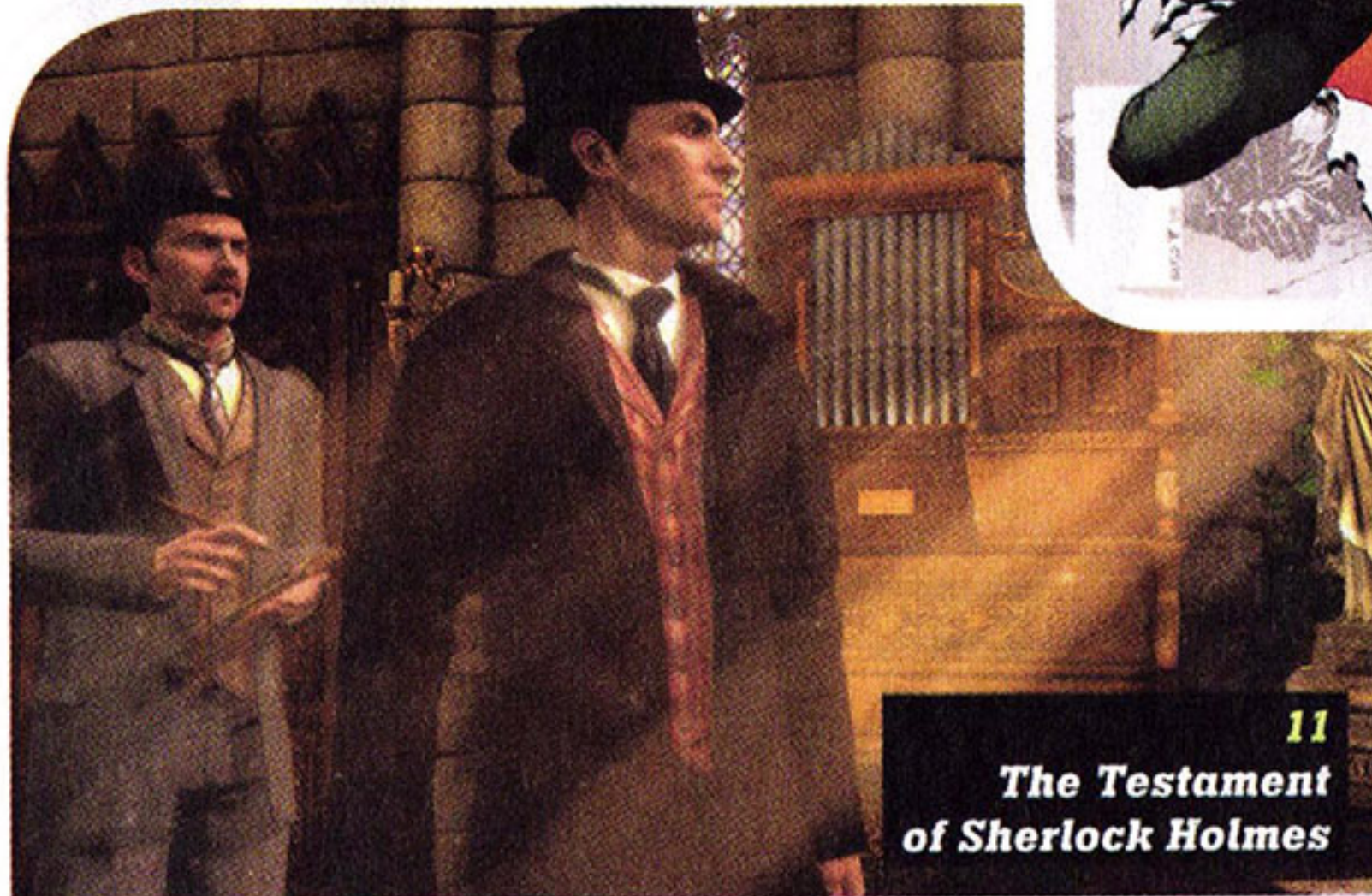
05.1 (Batman)

Tekken Tag Tournament 2 — 11

The Testament of Sherlock Holmes — 11
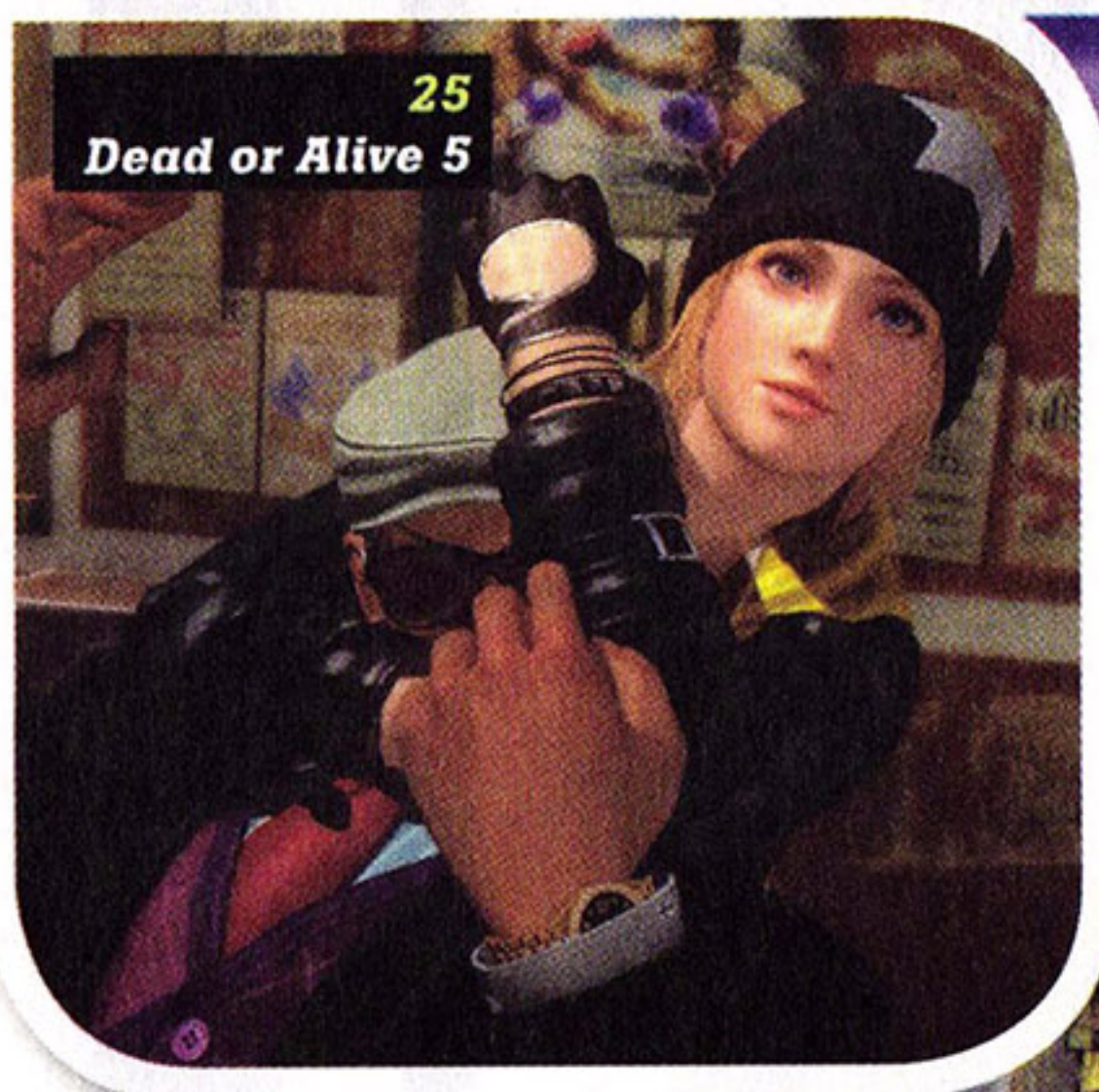
14 (World War Umbrella)

Dead or Alive 5 — 25

Street Fighter: 25th Anniversary Collection — 18.2

Borderlands 2 — 18.1

timeline

September

01.1 PAX Prime Continues
Downtown Seattleites, do not be alarmed if you stand behind a space marine in a Starbucks line or bump into a human dressed up as a Transformer as you cross Pike Street. Penny Arcade Expo is in full swing, and cosplayers are in full force. This is a great show for new game announcements, developer panels, and people watching. The show ends on Sunday.

01.2 Meta in Minneapolis
If they're not eating a Waluigi sandwich at 708 Deli, Minneapolis gamers should be attending Meta Con, a three-day show held at Bloomington's Double Tree. The annual costume contest is the highlight, but you can also get your game on in tournaments held all weekend long. Who knows, you may even see Reiner teasing cosplayers.

04 New Releases
› Harley Pasternak's Hollywood Trainer (360)
› Ratchet & Clank Collection (PS3)
› The Sims 3: Supernatural (PC)

05.1 DC Comics Turns Zero…Again
All of DC Comics' New 52 books for the month are numbered issue 0. The purpose of this numerical retreat is to flesh out origin stories and provide more history for the characters and their universe. This event marks the debut of a new Batman series called Talon, starring Calvin Rose, a former Court of Owls assassin.

05.2 Cowboys Versus Giants
If your first thought is "a sequel to Cowboys Versus Aliens?" pat yourself on the back; you're an amazing nerd. September 5 doesn't mark the release of a new film, but rather the kick off of a new NFL season, starting with a showdown between the Cowboys and Giants.

07 Finally Something to Do in Madison
Madison can be boring if you aren't into cheese curds or college football. Geekkon, a three-day event for gamers and anime fans, is held at the Madison Marriott West. Activities include LAN gaming for StarCraft and Team Fortress, plus plenty of tabletop gaming opportunities.

11 New Releases
› NBA Baller Beats (360)
› NHL 13 (PS3, 360)
› Ragnarok Odyssey (Vita)
› Tekken Tag Tournament 2 (PS3, 360)
› The Testament of Sherlock Holmes (PS3, 360)

14 World War Umbrella
You may not like the Resident Evil movies, but they make a lot of money. Today marks the theatrical release of the series' fifth entry, Resident Evil: Retribution. In this installment, Umbrella is doing bad things, and heroes want to stop them. But in a surprising twist…just kidding! There's no surprising twist, just a bunch of standard action movie clichés filmed in 3D. Duck! An axe is flying at your head!

16 New Releases
› Kirby's 20th Anniversary (Wii)

18 New Releases
› Borderlands 2 (PS3, 360, PC)
› Disney Princess: My Fairytale Adventure (Wii, 3DS)
› End of Nations: Collector's Edition (PC)
› Mugen Souls (PS3)
› NCIS (3DS)
› Street Fighter: 25th Anniversary Collection (PS3, 360)
› Thundercats (DS)

21 RoboDredd
Fans of the comic book series pretend that the 1995 Judge Dredd film starring Sly Stallone didn't happen. With today's release of Dredd, they may finally get what they want. It features a futuristic law enforcement officer, cool helmets, and a new illegal drug taking over the streets. Wait… Is this a Judge Dredd reboot or a remake of RoboCop 2?

25 New Releases
› Dead or Alive 5 (PS3, 360)
› Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse (PS3, 360)
› FIFA 13 (PS3, 360, Wii, PC, 3DS, PSP, Vita)

29 Game Chasing in Portland
Portland Retro Gaming Expo kicks off today at Oregon Convention Center. Classic video game systems are set up across the venue and are free to play. Activities include tournaments, shopping, and a panel by Internet sensations The Game Chasers. The show ends on Sunday.

2012

The
CO-OP
ISSUE

While the thrill of competition drives the majority of today's multiplayer experiences, countless gamers favor playing with their friends instead of against them. Their preference hasn't gone unnoticed by developers. After weighing the shifting landscape of the video game industry, we decided to take a closer look at co-op gaming in all its glory.

This month's cover story provides an in-depth look at a game being built from the ground up for co-op, but we're not stopping there. We're delivering an issue packed with features that celebrate the art of playing games with your friends. After checking out the world exclusive reveal of Army of Two: The Devil's Cartel, continue on to our list of the Top 30 Co-op Games of All Time. The ranking provides you and your buddies with plenty of amazing games to play together, while our Co-op's Guilty Pleasures list highlights a few not-so-amazing games that can still be a blast with the right crowd. Finally, we break down all of the upcoming games featuring online and split-screen co-op options in our eight-page feature What's Coming In Co-op.

Know Your Co-op:

Local co-op

Online co-op

Local + online co-op

LAN/System link

Army of Two:

THE DEVIL'S CARTEL

» **Platform**
PlayStation 3 • Xbox 360

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

» **Publisher**
Electronic Arts

» **Developer**
Visceral Montreal

» **Release**
March

The DEVIL is in the DETAILS

Can a major shift in tone help the Army of Two series shed its dudebro stigma and live up to its potential as a destination co-op game? The early signs are good.

by Jeff Cork

The Army of Two series is well known, though for less-than-enviable reasons. "I felt like the first two Army games were good games, but they weren't great games," says Visceral Montreal producer Zach Mumbach, in what could be considered a massive understatement.

The previous installments received Metacritic scores that hovered in the low to mid 70s, but even those C-grade ratings mask a serious amount of notoriety.

The first game's macho posturing of performing high fives and silly moves in the midst of killing people was a distraction from the game's main draw – a focus on co-op multiplayer. The sequel, Army of Two: The 40th Day, shifted toward a slightly serious tone, though it was hurt by a meandering story and inconsistent action. The most polarizing aspect of the series, however, was tough to ignore: the playable heroes Elliot Salem and Tyson Rios.
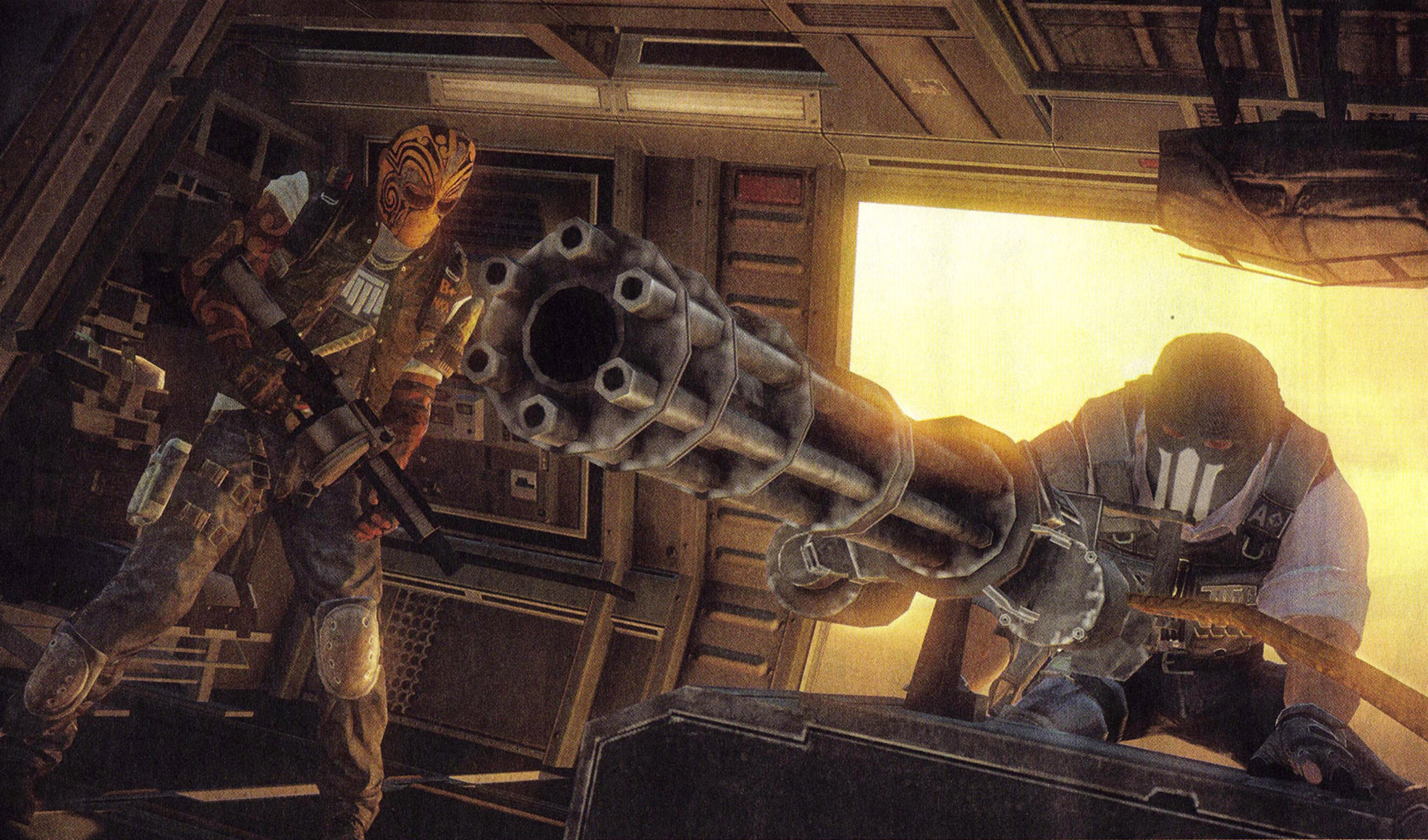
FOR SOME, THE MASKED DUO WAS THE GAMING EQUIVALENT OF ACTION-MOVIE HEROES.

Others were turned off by what they saw as an overly ham-fisted, air-guitar-playing bro-mance. Where one person saw their cavalier attitudes as fatalistic gallows humor, another player thought of them as knuckleheads on a machine-gun vacation.

Visceral Montreal is keenly aware of the divergent reactions to the past games, and it's taking a bold approach in The Devil's Cartel. Salem and Rios, the original army of two, are stepping out of the spotlight. Why distance yourself from the most recognizable elements of the franchise? For Visceral, the answer is simple. "It's much more straightforward to start with characters that are in the universe but aren't the ones you had before," says executive producer Julian Beak.

Army of Two: The Devil's Cartel adds new characters, a new setting, and, perhaps most importantly, a more mature tone to the series. It's a challenging task, but the studio's already on track to bring the series to the level it deserves.

"The Army franchise has been successful for us," says EA executive producer Jeff Gamon. "There's an established fanbase, and there's a reason for that. I think we believe the reason is that there's gold at the core of this concept."

A NEW TONE
When EA wanted a third entry in the series, it approached Visceral Games' general manager Steve Papoutsis. He says one of his mandates is to revitalize existing IP, and Army of Two was a great fit for Visceral's Montreal branch. After all, Visceral Montreal shares a building with EA Montreal, developer of the earlier Army of Two games. Despite their close proximity to its original creators, the majority of the team is new to the series. Zack Mumbach, a founding member of Visceral and veteran of the Dead Space franchise, was shipped to Canada to help lead the project, and it's obvious that the new team is approaching it with a fresh perspective and enthusiasm.

"[The first two games] were memorable and

they were fun to play, but they weren't on that level where you're going to tell all your friends, 'Man, you have to play this game.' I think that Visceral being involved, especially on Frostbite 2, is just a huge opportunity," Mumback says.

Most notably, Army of Two: The Devil's Cartel takes a more serious approach than past installments, which would have put Salem and Rios in an awkward position. It would be strange for the characters to take a 180-degree personality shift, so they're adopting support roles. Make no mistake – Salem and Rios are in the game, and they're still a critical part of the story. They're just taking a background role as top executives of the Tactical Worldwide Operations organization. A new duo, known throughout the game only by the designations Alpha and Bravo, is taking over.

Unlike The 40th Day, which took place in a disaster-ridden Shanghai, The Devil's Cartel is more grounded in reality. It's set in Mexico, a nation besieged by extraordinarily violent drug cartels. Tens of thousands of people

have been murdered by cartels over the past decade, including people involved in the lucrative drug trade as well as civilians. The scale of violence is horrifying, with decapitated bodies left in streets, and mutilated corpses hung from public places to serve as warnings.

It's a sensitive subject, and Visceral says it's going to great lengths to treat it maturely. "The cartel wars are something that's going on in Mexico, and it's topical, and we want to make sure that we're respectful," says producer Scott Speirs. "It's also a great opportunity to shift the tone a bit and take the situation seriously. The characters are going to take it seriously, and we hope the player will as well. We're not setting this up as a game that's going to solve the problem. [Alpha and Bravo] are not going to fix everything for Mexico. It's in the background and we're caught up in it, but it's a more personal story to them and using the backdrop as the situation."

"You're not going to be high-fiving in the middle of gunfire or anything like that," Mumbach says. "I'm not going to knock those games, but it's just not where we're going with this one."

The story begins with T.W.O. taking on a relatively straightforward mission: protect Juan Angelo Cordova, the mayor of La Puerta. He's only been in office a short while, but he's made his share of enemies by taking on the La Guadaña cartel. This fictional organization, also known as the Scythe, has already murdered Cordova's family in retaliation for his anti-cartel stance.

Cordova has good reason to fear for his safety. Esteban Bautista has built La Guadaña into an international crime syndicate by gun running and drug smuggling. His organization has also become a strong paramilitary force, boldly taking on the Mexican military and controlling many of the police, judges, and politicians.

Cordova's reelection committee hired T.W.O. to provide security for a political rally in La Puerta. The mercenary company has grown since the events in The 40th Day, in both size and reputation. The group is no longer operating in secrecy, openly working with the Mexican special forces, known as GAFE. Things quickly spiral out of control, but Visceral says its strong story will keep things together regardless of how chaotic the action gets.

"You play some games and it's like all the exposition is cut out, and you're just getting the big moments," Speirs says. "We want to make sure that you're getting context for those big moments – why you're doing it and why it's happening. You want to see what happens next. That's building strong characters. That's having a plot that the player understands where they were, where they're going, and why they're doing it."

Alpha and Bravo aren't just mindless drones, either. Specifics are scarce at this point, but Visceral says they face difficult choices that pit following orders against their moral instincts. Though they team up with GAFE, fellow T.W.O. operatives, and even Salem and Rios during the story, the protagonists are largely without reliable backup. La Guadaña outnumbers Alpha and Bravo (and T.W.O.) in nearly every area – money, personnel, and weapons.

Alpha and Bravo packed their blades for this trip; melee kills are quick and brutal

Meet the Team

You won't learn Alpha and Bravo's real names during The Devil's Cartel, and Visceral has a reason for this relative anonymity. "Sticking with a codename, it lets the players inject themselves into the character a bit more, so they can take on the persona of Alpha or Bravo and make it their own," says producer Scott Speirs. That doesn't mean that the characters are complete ciphers. Visceral's bios of the two characters should give you a sense of these guys.

Alpha

Alpha is a veteran of multiple armed conflicts with the U.S. military and special forces. He never thought about becoming a mercenary until Rios offered him the opportunity to use his tactical skills "for good," as it were. He still sees himself as more of a soldier or operative than a mercenary. He's a born leader and thinks of T.W.O. as a chance to bring military precision and ruthless efficiency to a paramilitary environment.

Bravo

Bravo served one tour with the U.S. Army and decided that military life wasn't for him even though he had a talent for the work. When he got back to the U.S., he took odd jobs here and there, working freelance with various private military companies around the world. T.W.O. headhunted Bravo after a high-profile urban rescue operation in the Balkans, and he jumped at the chance to work with Elliot Salem. Compared to Alpha's military precision, Bravo relies on quick reactions, instincts, and raw talent to keep him alive in battle.

How'd We Get Here?

Army of Two: The 40th Day featured three endings, which leads to an obvious question: Which one is canon in The Devil's Cartel? Visceral is being coy at the moment, but we'll examine three possibilities. Note: This includes spoilers about the end of The 40th Day, so proceed with caution.

Jonah Wade is a former high-ranking military man and head of the terrorist organization The 40th Day. The group attacks Shanghai to prove that people are nothing without a government to lead them, and Wade escalates the situation at the game's ending. He holds a dead-man's switch connected to a nuclear weapon, which, if detonated, could kill up to seven million civilians. In a lecture to Salem and Rios, Wade offers a way out in classic Double Dragon fashion: If one of the pair kills his partner, the bomb will be disarmed.

Ending 1: Salem and Rios shoot Jonah

Salem and Rios haven't fought this hard to turn against one another. No deal. The duo fire at Wade, who drops the trigger. Fortunately for all involved, it's a dud. The ending is fairly ambiguous, with Salem and Rios leaving Shanghai and a comic-book sequence that shows a bloodied Wade apparently on the street. Did he manage to escape? Unless he suddenly became embroiled in cartel politics, it's doubtful that Wade will play a role in The Devil's Cartel.

Ending 2: Rios shoots Salem

It's a tough decision, but millions of lives are at stake. Rios shoots Salem, Wade disarms the bomb, and Rios shows his appreciation by executing the 40th Day's leader. It appears that Salem was shot in the arm, but the ending cinematic has Rios looking back at the situation with deep regret. We know both men are in The Devil's Cartel, and they're working together at T.W.O. Friendship apparently runs deep, if this is seen as the true ending.

Ending 3: Salem shoots Rios

In a climax similar to ending two (only reversed), Salem weighs his options and opts to kill his partner. Wade still dies, and Salem is clearly shaken by his decision. We heard Rios giving Alpha and Bravo mission briefings over their headsets, which can only mean one thing if this is the canonical end: Salem needs to learn how to check a pulse.

BOOTS ON THE GROUND

We launch into the demo as Rios explains the situation to Alpha and Bravo on their headsets. Rios is in a chopper near a La Guadaña stronghold, and the new characters need to get to the rooftop after clearing out the area and making it safe for evacuation. The raid is part of a joint operation between T.W.O. and the GAFE, and Visceral says it takes place about halfway through the game.

The base is in a hangar-like structure that's clearly past its prime. The walls are covered with peeling paint and fresh gang graffiti. It's still an important place for the cartel, and its armed patrols aren't likely to leave without a fight.

Alpha and Bravo start quietly working their way up the structure to a spot that provides critical access to the extraction zone. The pair climbs up using the familiar step-up maneuver, providing access to an elevated area that rings an open space below. A few gangsters patrol the ground level. Unlike the private military contractors and soldiers that Salem and Rios previously battled, these cartel members don't follow any particular dress code. Some wear dark clothing and skull masks. Others have cowboy hats or bandanas, Western-style shirts, and jeans. Regardless of their irregular fashion choices, their submachine guns make it clear that they're not to be underestimated.

Neither are Alpha and Bravo. They move to a comfortable perch overlooking the cartel members below. Playing as Alpha, I tell my partner that I have the right side covered, and he moves into position on the left. I toss a grenade into a cluster of men, and the fight is on. The explosion takes down a few enemies from the outset, and the survivors fan out to find cover. They immediately start attacking my position, which doesn't seem as great as I initially thought. I fire blindly with my weapon as the wooden planks that serve as cover get eaten away by gunfire, thanks to the Frostbite 2 engine's powerful destruction capabilities.

Cover is a big part of the game, in both how it's destroyed and how it's implemented. "In Devil's Cartel, our main focus is that cover is not just a little side feature on top of the regular gameplay," says engineer Sandy Thompson. "We really wanted it to feel like an extension of the regular locomotion of the player."

Unlike The 40th Day, where players walked up to objects and characters automatically entered into cover animations, The Devil's Cartel requires players to take an active role by pressing a button to duck into or behind safety. I wasn't sold on the idea at first, but once I became accustomed to it, I felt more in control. Once in cover, I could scan nearby areas for other cover zones, which are marked with an icon. Like in Ghost Recon: Future Soldier, a quick press of the cover button moves me to the new area, ducking or sliding automatically to avoid exposure. If a grenade blast destroys my cover destination as I'm running, I can easily cancel the animation by moving in another direction. The cover button is also used to vault over low objects, such as air-conditioning ducts. The maneuver can be combined with the run button, allowing Alpha or Bravo to move up and over smaller cover items in a fluid animation, like Faith in Mirror's Edge. It's not based on timing; it's just a matter of holding down both buttons simultaneously.

My partner takes advantage of the chaos, moving downstairs into a flanking position and

One of the hallmarks of Army of Two is the onscreen indicator that shows the amount of enemy attention you've accumulated at any given point. This "Aggrometer" was a handy tool for managing tactics on the fly. When your partner had aggro, enemies would focus on them, giving you a better chance to infiltrate their defenses or flank them.

Visceral is leaning toward a new HUD direction in The Devil's Cartel, which means the flashy Aggrometer is a likely casualty of war. The new Overkill meter takes its spot on the HUD, but just because it's not displayed with the same visual flair doesn't mean that the concept of aggro is any less important to the revised Army of Two experience.

"What we want to do in this one is make it obvious if you have the aggression of your foes," says executive producer Julian Beak. "If they're shooting at your cover and it's breaking into pieces and the audio experience is almost deafening and they're yelling, you'll feel the aggro – that's our hope. You won't be in a situation where you need a HUD element to tell you whether you're in danger and you have their attention."

Co-op is still an integral part of the Army of Two brand

If you're not satisfied with your default loadout, you can enhance your weapons with a variety of attachments

sniping the exposed enemies with ease. My cover now gone, I move behind a concrete pillar and wait for the right opportunity to pop out and return fire. I'm not alone up top anymore, and shots whiz by on the left. I move the right stick to the left, and Alpha slides over to that side – no more pressing the stick in to switch orientation. My foe is also behind a pillar, and I roll a grenade toward him. He tries to escape the blast, but he's too late. His body flies in the air as chunks of the column shatter off and fall to the ground.

OVERKILL

I go downstairs to help my partner, who's been pinned down by a group of new enemies. We're severely outnumbered, and bullets are hitting hard. It's as good a time as any to use the new Overkill mode.

"The entire thought behind the Overkill feature was to make the player experience what they did in the previous games through the back-to-back moment," says lead designer Julien Lamoureaux. "We felt it was something that was iconic in the license and something

Army of One?

Cooperative gameplay runs thick in Army of Two's blood, whether players are teaming up with buddies online or on the couch, or running through the campaign solo with an AI buddy. In the past, those solo players managed their partner through a series of commands mapped to the d-pad. They included orders to advance, follow, or hold position, while adding aggressive and defensive posturing to each command. In Army of Two: The Devil's Cartel, Visceral is taking a more streamlined approach.

"We didn't want the player to micromanage the AI," says lead designer Julien Lamoureaux. "We really tried to streamline the orders that you can give to the partner AI, but we want the orders to make sense within the game." That philosophy translates to simpler controls, matched with a smarter partner.

The interface is still being hashed out, but at this stage in development there are two main orders – follow and advance. The AI is now more aware of how combat is unfolding, and it's designed to act appropriately. If you're pinned down and enemies are focusing on you, for instance, your partner recognizes it as a great opportunity to flank and catch the bad guys unaware.

Visceral is balancing partner AI so it's tactically useful while not completely taking over. After all, players want to feel like heroes, not the submissive actor in an escort mission. When the characters split up, such as the helicopter sequence we saw in our hands-on demo, players are free to choose which part they want to play. The AI is a capable partner, whether it's providing cover from above or clearing out cartel members on the ground.

that people enjoyed, but in previous games it was really driven by the designer. In this game we want people to be able to trigger these back-to-back moments, but whenever you feel like. On top of that, we want to make sure Overkill not only reinforces co-op but actually rewards it." That means teams get additional Overkill by flanking, performing simultaneous attacks on enemies – basically anything that requires teamwork.

Bravo sees that I've activated Overkill, which he takes as a cue to activate his. The action slows down, the audio warps to a crawl, and the screen takes on a sepia tone now that we're in Double Overkill. Our overpowered shots literally blast cartel members apart. Errant shots obliterate our surroundings, exposing pillars' rebar skeletons and

rendering anything that resembled cover completely worthless. When the Double Overkill sequence ends after about 15 incredibly satisfying seconds, the skirmish is effectively over. The area is quiet, aside from the sound of rustling papers falling to the ground.

Lamoureaux says Overkill creates an interesting feedback loop, which keeps players engaged. "You start to cooperate, and you get even more money and more Overkill points," he says. "Then you unleash Overkill – even more money. With the money, you can invest in even better weapons and really make sure that these investments are representative of your style of play." It all feeds into an ecosystem that gives players a reason to work together, as well as the incentive (and ability) to regularly upgrade weapons.

SPLITTING UP, TEAMING UP

We work our way through the building, taking separate high and low paths at one point. Gameplay is the same, but I'm much more vulnerable without my partner around to revive me if I die. Fortunately, we methodically dispatch groups of enemies without dying. It doesn't hurt that the gunplay is precise without being overly touchy. Players are able to adjust their weapons' level of accuracy and recoil through upgrades, too. As it stands, I didn't have any complaints with the controls. And Visceral isn't kidding when they say the Overkill mode lures players into working together. I enjoy getting a few points when I lone wolf my way around, but it's hard to resist the added benefits that come with flanking targets and performing other co-op based tactics.

Those tactics are tested when we encounter a heavy enemy. I know something significant is about to go down when a mission marker appears over the armored behemoth with the simple objective of "Kill." He's armed with a bullet hose of a weapon, spraying streams of lead that destroy cover in panic-inducing seconds. To make things even more interesting, a few regular goons join the fun. I chuck a couple of my remaining grenades in his direction, run to the relative safety of cover, and hope for the best. Success! The cartel members are wiped out, and the heavy is taken to his knees. My partner swoops in from the side and shoots at the heavy's back. The enemy gets up and begins firing at Bravo. It's my chance to act, and I rush in from behind, guns blazing. The heavy is overwhelmed and falls down one last time.

Visceral isn't spilling many details at this point, but they say heavies won't follow the template of The 40th Day. Instead of falling into specific types – shotgun heavy, flamethrower heavy, chaingun heavy, etc. – they have a variety of weapons and AI styles to draw from. Some of these dudes are going to be downright sneaky, which adds a nice twist to the existing formula.

BIG MOMENTS

Eventually, we head up to the rooftop. The cartel members have figured out the evacuation plan by now, and they're making one final push to stop us. More enemies are around than before, which makes Rios and his chopper a welcome sight. My partner and I reach the airborne vehicle, and I boost him into it. He takes off, and I head up a spiral staircase. This section is an absolute blast from both perspectives. In my first time through the demo, I battle cartel members while my partner provides air support from the helicopter. I'd routinely think I had the drop on the bad guys until they were shredded into chunks before my eyes from the chopper's mounted chaingun. It didn't feel as though I was being upstaged, either. Instead, I

Even non-essential environmental pieces, such as this sign, are affected by gunfire and explosions

Rios hops into the fray in The Devil's Cartel, though he's taking on a supporting role instead of being a playable character

What's In, What's Out

In taking over the Army of Two franchise, Visceral Montreal has a great opportunity (and challenge). The series had established a variety of gameplay gimmicks, both successful and not, and the studio picked the elements it considered to be highlights and left the other parts behind. Here's a quick look at how some of those smaller elements are changing in The Devil's Cartel. Bear in mind that these are subject to change before the game's release.

GPS: Salem and Rios used GPS devices on the field to navigate their surroundings and tag enemies. It functioned similarly to Isaac Clarke's objective markers in the Dead Space series. The Devil's Cartel brings that feature back, but it's not exactly the same as before. "We want to take that one further, but further doesn't always mean more HUD, and it doesn't always mean that it's the previous feature with more bells and whistles on top," says executive producer Julian Beak. "We're taking it in a new direction that we feel is going to tie into tactical co-op really well."

Customization: Weapon customization is a hallmark of the Army of Two games, giving Salem and Rios the ability to add attachments such as new scopes and larger magazines to their weapons, and to dress them up with flashy elements like gold-plated finishes. Visceral isn't going into great detail at this point, but weapon customization is coming back in The Devil's Cartel. The studio also dropped a hint that character customization could extend beyond adding designs to Alpha and Bravo's masks.

High-Five Moments: High-fiving and head-butting your partner carried deeper implications than merely adding machismo to the battlefield. Those maneuvers also gave players who may not have been wearing headsets a visual way to provide feedback with their partners. After all, what better way to say "You suck, dude," than a nice punch to the jaw? These are being scrapped in the latest entry. "We didn't put a priority on communication in the game potentially replacing communication over the headset or communication on the couch," Beak says. "We don't want the controller to become the medium in which the players interact with each other."

Shared Shields: Salem and Rios shared a lot during their adventures, including mobile cover. When one player acquired a shield, the other could latch on behind him in a snaking maneuver. It provided cover for both characters, with the shield carrier controlling navigation and the other player providing backup. That mechanic is back, though it's been refined. Now the shield bearer acts like a mobile cover point, allowing the second player to enter and exit the safe zone as though it were any other cover object. It feels much more natural than its overly loose predecessor, and it's easy to snap in and out of the position when it's no longer advantageous to be latching on to your buddy.

Although The Devil's Cartel sticks to Mexico, Visceral Montreal plans to offer plenty of environmental variety
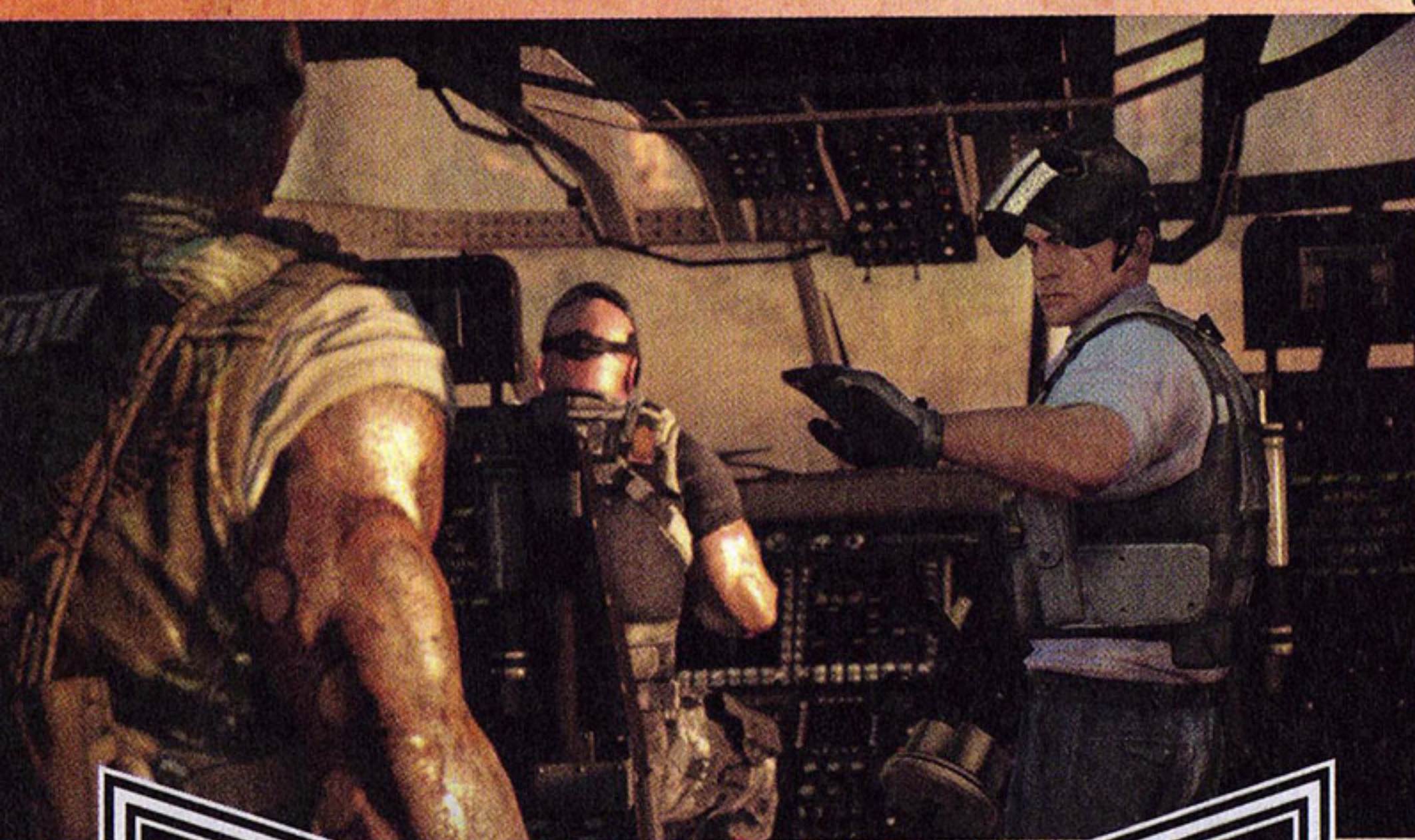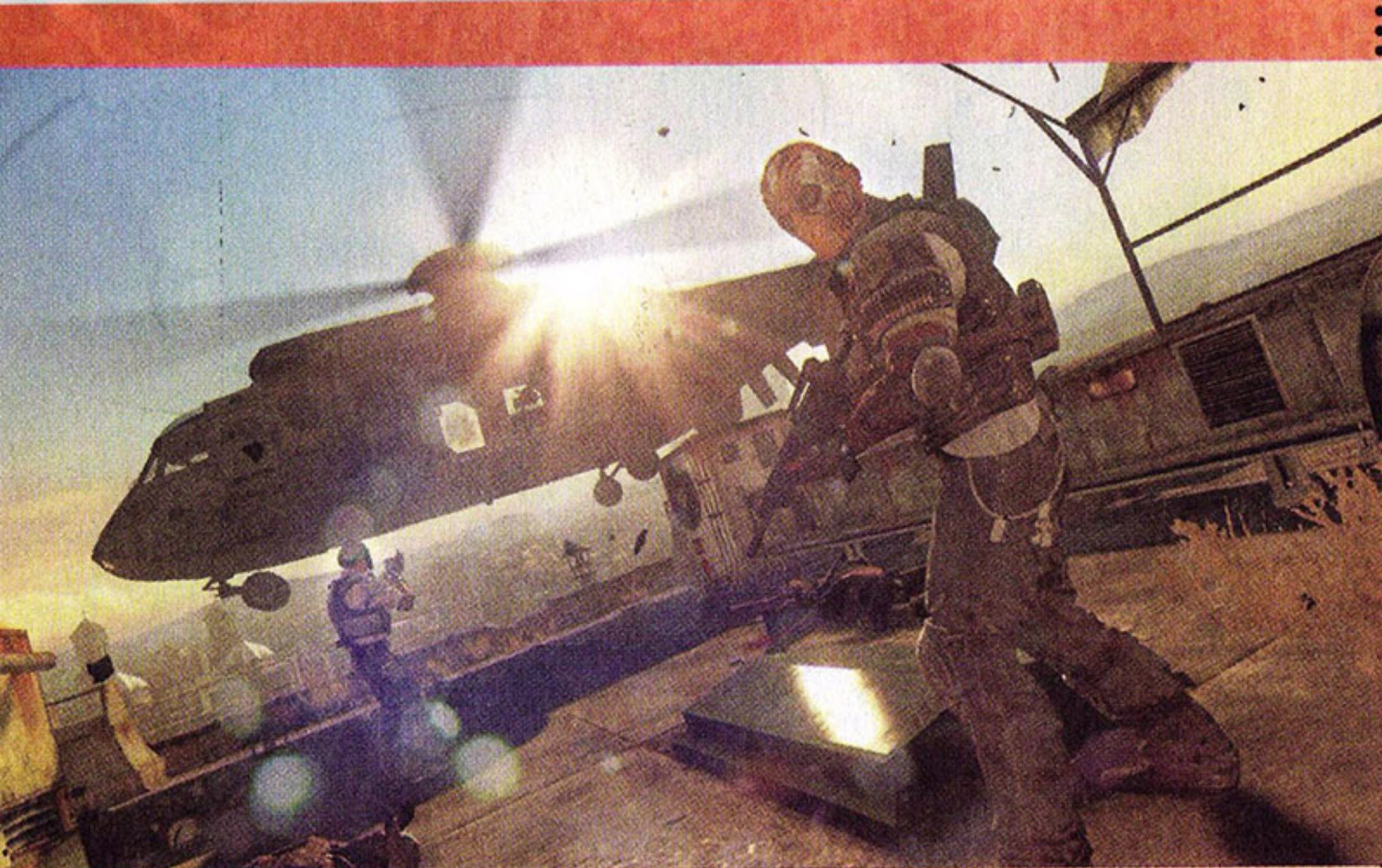
Multiplayer Madness

Rumors circulated that the next installment in the Army of Two series would be a four-player co-op game called Army of Four. EA didn't help matters when it registered a number of web domains that seemed to confirm that speculation. It looks like that maneuvering was a classic case of misdirection.

"It's more of a date than a party," jokes EA executive producer Jeff Gamon, dismissing any notions of four-player co-op. Producer Zach Mumbach agrees, saying that having four characters waters down tactics as teams rush toward their next objectives.

"That boy band experience is difficult to do," adds executive producer Julian Beak. "How do you focus on four characters and make them all heroes at that moment?" Beak says that other games have successfully taken that approach, but that Visceral recognized that Army of Two's strengths lay in the two-player co-op experience.

In a similar decision to its California-based counterpart Dead Space 3, Visceral has abandoned competitive multiplayer for The Devil's Cartel. Rather than dilute resources with other modes, the team ruled in favor of funneling development energy into the campaign. Beak says the campaign features an element of competition, but it manifests itself as a battle for bragging rights. You still want to work together, but if you're more effective in battle, it'll give you something to hold over your buddy.

felt like part of an insanely powerful team as I wiped Bravo's leftovers off the rooftop.

The destruction is made possible thanks to the Frostbite 2 engine. If you've played Battlefield 3, you have a good idea of what you can expect. The level of destruction ranges from small elements, such as cover being blown into bits, all the way up to cinematic showstopper moments. During another demo, we watched in awe as a chopper hugged a cliffside road and attacked an armed convoy. Watching cars and guardrails explode and splinter was impressive, but I wasn't expecting to see an entire side of the cliff smash apart, destroying everything in its path. Visceral says these showcase moments are a big part of the game, peppering the entirety of the experience instead of being reserved for a few important scenes. The engine certainly does a convincing job of tearing things apart, whether it's a piece of cover or a machine-gun tower.

In our second playthrough, I played the role of the gunner. I wasn't piloting the helicopter, but I was along for the epic ride. I watched Alpha weave through air-conditioning vents and sheds as I kept my eyes open for target markers. Propane tanks, ducts, and even entire roof sections were no match for my deadly,

indiscriminate hail (it's a good thing there's no friendly fire in Devil's Cartel). Although I was beyond powerful in the chopper, I wasn't invincible. As the vehicle swooped from position to position, I'd occasionally get stuck with a less-than-optimal line of sight. In those sections, it was crucial for my partner to cover my back, eliminating RPG positions and anything else that might take me out.

The demo section ends with the player in the helicopter knocking an antenna down with his chaingun. The other player walks across, just in time to see his friend shot out of the sky by a cartel helicopter pilot. The chopper woozily whirls around in orbit before it falls and explodes. The player in the helicopter is pinned down by the wreckage, which slides down the side of the building. Alpha and Bravo grip hands before the fall proves deadly, just in time to see the enemy chopper circle around to take out the players. The pilot's smirk is quickly erased as Alpha and Bravo take out their sidearms – one team member dangling off the edge, and the other desperately holding onto him from above. Time slows, and the players empty their weapons into the cockpit. The now-pilotless chopper spins dangerously low overhead before hitting the rooftop and

Overkill mode is an effective way to clear rooms when Alpha and Bravo are outnumbered

Frostbite 2 isn't solely focused on destruction; the tools allow artists and other nonprogrammers to easily modify objects and effects

erupting into a ball of flames and debris. Whatever happens next, I know one thing for sure: This battle is far from over.

"If you have a big story moment, I don't mind a cutscene; that's cool," Mumbach says. "It would be really easy to make that helicopter explosion moment a cutscene, and probably most people would be like 'That's cool.' But it's got to be playable. It's a Visceral game. It's the same thing for Dead Space. If it's cool, it's got to be playable. Otherwise, what are we doing? Are we making a movie or are we making a video game?"

The demo didn't contain much overall context, so it's hard to say whether Visceral will make good on its promise to deliver a more mature experience. However, Alpha and Bravo seem more professional than their predecessors, with most of their dialogue focusing on the situation at hand instead of, say, talking about having sexual relations with a panda.

"Suffice it to say that we really want to invite people in with a tone that's appropriate for adults wanting to buy a game, enjoy it, have fun, and not feel dirty about it," Beak says. "This is exactly what you'd expect if you were

to watch an action blockbuster. This is the tone that you're going to see."

"You see games where you get to the second or third game they make little jumps, but I think that with this third game we're going to be making a great leap," Mumbach adds. ◆

We're deploying a month's worth of even more exclusive Army of Two coverage on www.gameinformer.com/armyoftwo. Get a tour of the game's impressive soundscape from audio director Francois Lafleur, learn more about weapon customization, and see how the Frostbite 2 engine is helping Visceral build (and tear apart) The Devil's Cartel's world.

The
TOP 30
CO-OP GAMES
of all time

From classic arcade machines to the online playing fields of modern consoles, cooperative gaming has always been a hit with players. Co-op games allow us to share some of gaming's best experiences with our friends, and the added challenge of combining and coordinating our efforts has made teaming up more rewarding than going solo.

This month we turn the spirit of cooperation into a competition, ranking the top 30 cooperative games of all time. We weigh each candidate on its historical impact, originality, and above all, fun factor. These titles have defined gaming with friends over the decades. The fact that they're still fun today is a testament to their quality.

by Game Informer Staff

01 | LEFT 4 DEAD

Platform Xbox 360, PC   *Publisher* Valve/Electronic Arts   *Developer* Valve/Turtle Rock Studios   *Release* 2008

No game embraces the cooperative experience more gracefully than Left 4 Dead. For most titles, co-op is usually a tacked-on campaign enhancement or trivial add-on. In Left 4 Dead, working together is a requirement. Surviving the zombie outbreak is no solo endeavor. If you wander off ahead of your group, you will die. If you hog all the resources and leave your comrades to fend for themselves, you will die. The only proven way to successfully reach the next safe house is to protect your fragile alliance of strangers by sharing first aid kits when someone needs medical attention more than you, backtracking to rescue trapped teammates, and staying in constant communication about where the threats are coming from. Because of its masterful implementation, Left 4 Dead is our favorite cooperative game of all time.

CONTRA

Platform *Arcade, NES* **Publisher** *Konami* **Developer** *Konami* **Release** *1987*

C onsidered by many to be one of history's most difficult games, Contra is too grueling to tackle on your own. Having two machine guns to throw bullets at the alien hordes helps tremendously. Working together by coordinating power-ups is required to make it all the way to the end, an achievement shared by only a select few without using the famous Konami code.

ROCK BAND

Platform *PlayStation 3, Xbox 360* **Publisher** *MTV Games/Electronic Arts* **Developer** *Harmonix* **Release** *2007*

H armonix laid the groundwork for the music game craze with Guitar Hero, but it wasn't until Rock Band that the developer hit its full stride. Whether your whole family is gathered around the TV with plastic instruments in hand or you're at a riotous party with friends butchering the greatest rock music in history, Rock Band lets us all summon our inner Mick Jagger. The game allows four players to each take on a different part in a four-piece band and smartly rewards teamwork by letting players save each other when things get hairy or boosting points through the coordinated implementation of overdrive. In Rock Band, everyone receives applause together, or gets booed off the stage together.

04

HALO: COMBAT EVOLVED

Platform Xbox **Publisher** Microsoft Game Studios
Developer Bungie **Release** 2001

H alo: Combat Evolved established once and for all that shooters could be fun and successful on consoles, and heralded the arrival of Microsoft as a world power in video games. Key to the game's success is its option to throw down against the clever Covenant and ravenous Flood aliens with a buddy sitting by your side on the couch. Each player relies on his or her partner to stay in the fight; when one player dies, the other is wise to find a speedy exit from combat to trigger a partner respawn. Even after an initial playthrough, Halo's Legendary difficulty offers a new trial for seasoned gamers, and a second player helps make the challenge surmountable. Entertaining, accessible, and rewarding, the modern co-op shooter phenomenon started with Halo.

Guilty Pleasures

Putting together our Top 30 list brought back memories of a lot of great games, but it also reminded us of some entertaining co-op experiences that aren't the best gaming has to offer.
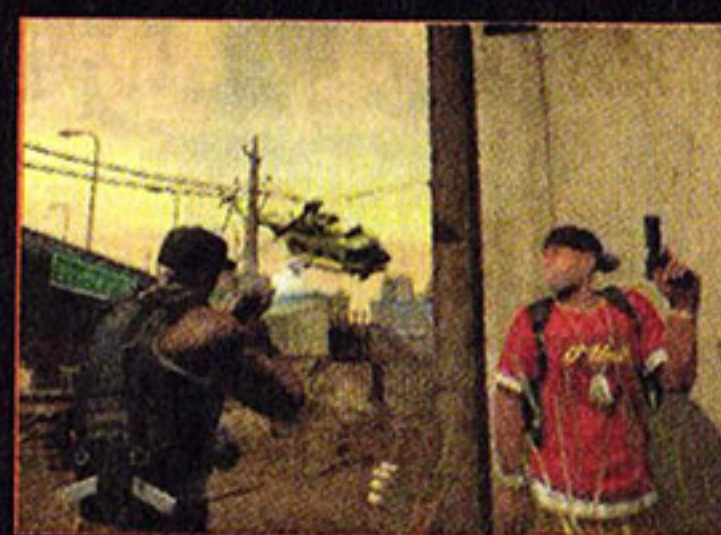
50 Cent: Blood on the Sand
→ PS3, Xbox 360
This THQ title centers on rapper 50 Cent as he leads his G-Unit soldiers on a quest to the Middle East to recover his diamond-encrusted human skull. A ludicrous story like this deserves to be experienced with a friend by your side, as it features plenty of one-liners and situations that seem too stupid to be real.

Altered Beast
→ Arcade, Genesis
Turning from man into more-muscular man into much-more-muscular man into an animal was a sweet concept in 1988, and Altered Beast featured full cooperative support. Playing as two werewolves with a friend can be a lot of fun, even if the gameplay consists of little more than mashing the attack button.

Star Wars Kinect
→ Xbox 360
This LucasArts title neatly compiles many complaints about Kinect, including spotty motion detection, a linear campaign, and a tacked-on dancing minigame. It may have a ho-hum campaign, but it serves up some laughs when a partner gets off the couch for some cooperative flailing action.

Simpsons Arcade Game
→ Arcade
Gamers (and Simpsons fans) have fond memories of this arcade title, but its recent XBLA port quickly reminded us of how simplistic it is. While its gameplay didn't hold up against the test of time, there's still some nostalgic joy in taking down goons as Homer and the rest of the family.

Earth Defense Force 2017
→ Xbox 360
In many ways, EDF 2017 is an awful game. Its repetitive objectives, assortment of glitches, and cheesy voice acting have all the makings of a disaster, but they wind up creating an entertaining experience on the same level as a great B-movie.
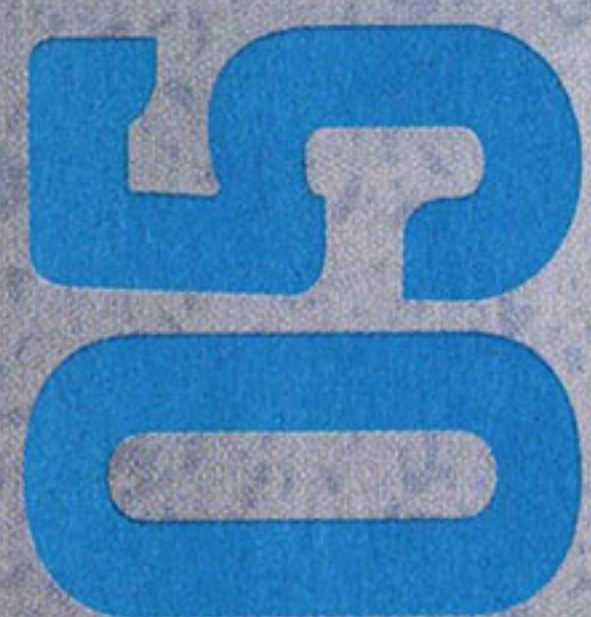
05 | PORTAL 2

Wrapping your head around space-bending puzzles is tricky enough in single-player, but Portal 2's co-op campaign throws an extra set of portals into the equation. With the added complexity, you and your partner need to approach situations differently. Experimentation and communication become even more important, and Valve adds a few new tricks to your puzzle-solving vocabulary that aren't even possible alone. Portal 2 gets right to the core of cooperative gaming's appeal; it makes you coordinate your efforts for mutual gain while providing a unique experience that you can't get playing solo.

07 DIABLO II

Platform PC *Publisher* Blizzard Entertainment
Developer Blizzard North *Release* 2000

The original Diablo debuted Blizzard's Battle.net service, which allows gamers to easily talk to other players and find online multiplayer games, but the sequel pushed the genre to new heights. Diablo II featured five character classes, three unique skill trees, and an ocean of ever-improving weapons and armor. The only thing more enjoyable than grinding through Diablo II's shape-shifting dungeons is taking down Diablo and his demonic brothers with a few friends.

06 NBA JAM

Platform Arcade *Publisher* Midway
Developer Midway *Release* 1993

If you walked into an arcade in the early '90s, you could have a blast catching fire and performing tomahawk dunks by yourself in NBA Jam. Unfortunately, that also meant you had to put up with an AI as your teammate in this two-on-two hoops classic. If you grabbed a friend and a handful of quarters, the game experience was enhanced with team tactics like perfectly timed alley-oops. Just make sure that you know when to hog the ball, because it's always beneficial to keep it in the hands of a player who is heating up.

08 TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES: TURTLES IN TIME

Platform Arcade *Publisher* Konami *Developer* Konami *Release* 1991

In the early '90s, Konami capitalized on the popularity of *The Simpsons*, *X-Men*, and *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* cartoons with several coin-op adaptations, all designed as brawlers. The standout of the bunch is Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Turtles in Time, a four-player co-op experience lauded for its deep move set, fluid animations, and focus on making each turtle unique. Teaming up to topple Krang and a handful of formidable bosses remains as much fun today as it did when this game became a fixture in arcades.

09 WORLD OF WARCRAFT

Platform PC **Publisher** Blizzard Entertainment **Developer** Blizzard Entertainment **Release** 2004

By the time Blizzard released its blockbuster massively multiplayer game, games like Ultima Online and Everquest had already introduced players to the fun of grouping up to confront dungeons, raids, and other fantasy quests. World of Warcraft refined the formula and made the experience more appealing to a wider gaming audience through smart quest design, detailed world building, and accessible leveling. Over time, Blizzard has introduced increased incentives for guilds to work together and prosper, tools to help groups and raids find each other, and regularly released new instanced dungeons and raid areas to keep players coming back and communicating with their friends. Azeroth is a thrilling world to explore made twice as enjoyable with friends at your side.

10 BORDERLANDS

Platform PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, PC **Publisher** 2K Games **Developer** Gearbox Software **Release** 2009

When we debuted Borderlands in September 2007, Gearbox's "role-playing shooter" bore little resemblance to the unbridled monster it would evolve into. After a lengthy delay to accommodate an 11th-hour art style change, Borderlands reemerged with a soul. Its unique new look complemented the game's psychotic sense of humor and surreal, unending arsenal. The lengthy campaign and four-player co-op gives shooter fans dozens of hours of content to chew through, and the character classes and skill trees are diverse enough to make each member of your team a vital asset. Four hefty DLC expansions have kept us playing Borderlands into 2012; the only game that has a chance of making us stop is its upcoming sequel.

GEARS OF WAR 2
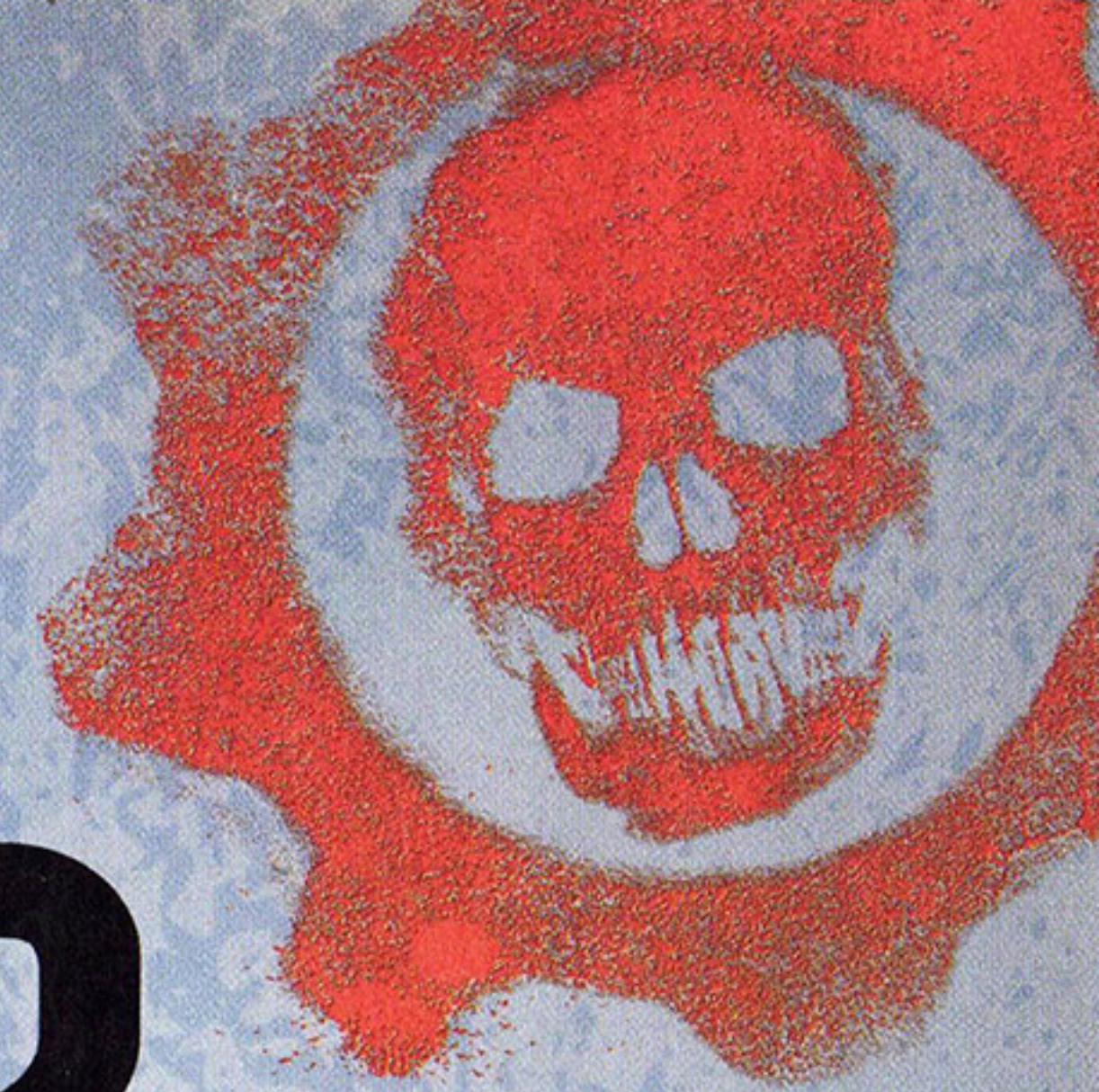
The first Gears of War touted an incredible co-op campaign, whether playing online or split-screen. The sequel expands on what made the original title great with a longer campaign and frantic set piece moments like a battle inside a gigantic worm. The biggest reason Gears of War 2 earns a spot on this list over its predecessor is Horde mode, which allows four players to team up and tear apart waves of Locust. Horde also sparked a new trend for co-op; these days it's hard to find a new shooter that doesn't offer a similar mode.

12

LEGO STAR WARS III: THE CLONE WARS

Platform *PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, Wii, PC* **Publisher** *LucasArts* **Developer** *Traveller's Tales* **Release** *2011*

Traveller's Tales has mastered the art of delivering games that both kids and adults can enjoy. The studio has subtly tweaked its formula over the years, and this entry offers the best co-op experience so far. Features like dynamic split-screen and drop-in gameplay make it a perfect choice for families – even those who don't give a rip about Clone Wars-era Star Wars. If you're left wanting more once the credits roll, check out the Lego games based on Harry Potter and Batman. They may not be as refined or expansive as the Clone Wars, but they offer much of the same brick-smashing fun.
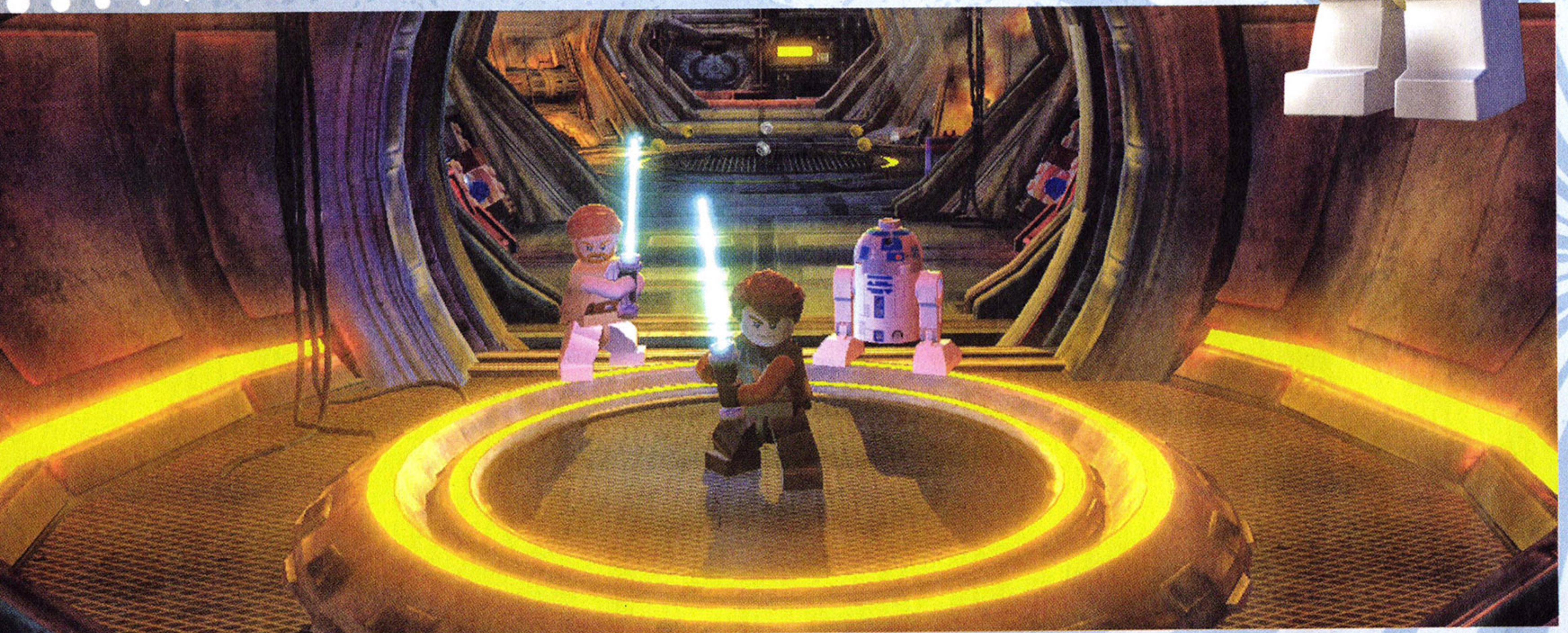
13

BATTLEFIELD 2

Platform *PC* **Publisher** *Electronic Arts* **Developer** *DICE* **Release** *2005*

Though predecessors like Team Fortress introduced squad-based tactics to competitive shooters, Battlefield 2 popularized the approach. It was also the first shooter that made team chat seem necessary. DICE encouraged teamwork by allowing teams to divide into squads who could then respawn on one another. Working together is imperative to gaining an upper hand in firefights; medics can revive fallen soldiers, the support class can replenish ammunition, and engineers can repair damaged vehicles. Each team also has a commander who can orchestrate the 64-player battle by issuing orders, and squad leaders can request artillery fire from the commander. This cooperative template has served Battlefield well; the franchise has soared in popularity.

14

TEAM FORTRESS

Platform PC *Publisher* Team Fortress Software
Developer Team Fortress Software *Release* 1996

Originally a mod for Quake created by Robin Walker, John Cook, and Ian Caughley, Team Fortress wasn't commercially released until it moved to a different game engine in Valve's port Team Fortress Classic. This innovative shooter brought a more complex team dynamic to competitive multiplayer, with players choosing from a variety of specialized classes and taking sides on either red or blue teams. More than any other game, it pointed the way toward the highly successful co-op team play of franchises like Battlefield.

Top 5 Ways To Grief Your Co-Op Partners

1. Steal the food
Your health is almost full, but your buddies are running low. The decent thing would be to let one of them grab that succulent piece of meat, right? Probably, but you're closer to it, and those two slivers of health won't restore themselves. Just grab it!

2. Want a ride?
Vehicles can only be controlled by one player at a time, which leads to co-op comedy gold. Wait until your partner is about to get in, then floor it. Apologize profusely, waiting for your ally to get close again. Then floor it again, repeating as often as desired.

3. Pit-toss
The ability to pick up or smack other players inevitably leads to countless deaths related to bottomless pits, lava pools, and acid vats. If you don't think that sounds hilarious, you are letting yourself be tossed too often. Time to return the favor.

4. Charging in
All of that planning for a big MMO boss fight gets pretty boring, but you can speed the process along by barreling forward and pulling the monsters toward your group. Don't worry – unless they want their work to go to waste, your friends will heal you.

5. Stop moving
You can make even the simplest jumps a chore for your friends if you simply refuse to move, preventing the screen from scrolling. As an added bonus, this trick can also delay the group's progress until your arbitrary demands are met.

15

MINECRAFT

Platform Xbox 360, PC *Publisher* Mojang *Developer* Mojang *Release* 2009

Minecraft doesn't have defined goals, so the co-op experience takes on a different form than most games. If feels more like sitting down with friends and playing with Legos, with an emphasis on shared creation and exploration. Other players on your map can carve out their own mines and build elaborate bases, or you can work as a team to gather resources and create communal structures. Even if you're doing your own thing, it is fun to be in the presence of other players to see what their imaginations have dreamed up. They can also help you get your life back together after the inevitable Creeper attack.

CRACKDOWN

Buddy cop movies are staples of the film industry for a reason: Crazy police work is more fun as a duo. Powering up your agent to godlike levels is rewarding, but the true potential of Crackdown's formula is only realized with a co-op partner. What was a straightforward, brute-force assault in solo mode becomes a tactical strike with two players as you split the enemy's attention, flank them, and move in for the big kill. Crackdown doesn't have subtlety, but when you have two sets of grenades, rockets, and machine guns firing, taking down those gang kingpins is all that matters.

17

DOUBLE DRAGON

Platform Arcade **Publisher** Taito **Developer** Technos Japan **Release** 1987

When a gang kidnaps their (?!) girlfriend Marian, twins Billy and Jimmy Lee pummel their way from left to right to save her. Two players can simultaneously take on the Black Warriors gang, kneeing their faces to a pulp and using weapons like whips and barrels to reduce the bad guys into flashing sprites. The co-op formula turns on its head at the end, when the brothers (and players) have to battle each other to see who gets the girl. She must have a spectacular personality if she can split up the Abobo-battling duo.

18

LITTLEBIGPLANET

Platform PlayStation 3 **Publisher** Sony Computer Entertainment **Developer** Media Molecule **Release** 2008

LittleBigPlanet's charming look and innovative design helped revitalize the side-scrolling platformer, so much so that one of its main features, co-op gameplay, was emulated by the genre's godfather, Mario, in New Super Mario Bros. Wii. The game puts a spin on co-op, called "coopetition," that allows players to aid each other to reach new areas of the game and progress while competing for points. LittleBigPlanet's groundbreaking level creation tools also introduced a new type of cooperative play in games: the joy of making something new with a friend.

RAINBOW SIX VEGAS

Platform PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, PC *Publisher* Ubisoft *Developer* Ubisoft

One false move by any soldier can lead to civilian executions or an entire Rainbow Six team being wiped out. Rainbow Six: Vegas turns teamwork into a necessity. Coordinating tactics to breach rooms and silently dispatch guards requires a high level of communication between all four players, and some risky moves, such as inverted rappelling. All of Vegas' campaign missions support co-op, and Terrorist Hunt mode offers unlimited depth for the cooperative experience.

GAUNTLET

Platform Arcade *Publisher* Atari *Developer* Atari *Release* 1985

Gauntlet wasn't the first co-op game, but Elvis wasn't the first rock n' roll singer, either. Despite some precursors (most notably Dandy Dungeons, which Ed Logg credits with inspiring Gauntlet, see our interview on page 100), this four-player arcade unit became one of the most popular mid-'80s games. Logg helped create the template for co-op games like Diablo with top-down dungeons, an emphasis on collecting loot, and four character types with different attacks and play styles. All these years later, the Wizard still needs food, badly.

CASTLE CRASHERS

Platform PlayStation 3, Xbox 360 *Publisher* The Behemoth *Developer* The Behemoth *Release* 2008

Don't let the evil wizards, damsels in distress, and valiant knights fool you – Castle Crashers is a far cry from the standard fantasy brawler. Filled with gonzo action and The Behemoth's signature sense of humor, Castle Crashers is ideal for a group of friends. By allocating skill points, your characters can specialize in different disciplines, taking down bosses with a mixture of melee, magic, and archery. Party balance isn't the major draw, though; the fun of Castle Crashers is absurd enemies, hilarious moments, and ensuring that one of your friends has to kiss the final princess.

22 SAINTS ROW: THE THIRD

Platform *PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, PC* **Publisher** *THQ*
Developer *Volition* **Release** *2012*

Volition introduced co-op to Saints Row 2, but playing with a friend in Saints Row: The Third reigns as the best experience in the series. Whether you're tackling core campaign missions or laying waste to Steelport in Tank Mayhem, this game keeps you laughing with no shortage of over-the-top action. Taking down populated enemy strongholds is fun when you're playing solo, but coordinating insane assaults with a friend makes the chaos more enjoyable. Plus, it's always good to have a Sublime sing-a-long buddy.

23 BALDUR'S GATE: DARK ALLIANCE II

Platform *PlayStation 2, Xbox* **Publisher** *Interplay*
Developer *Black Isle Studios* **Release** *2004*

Cast in the Gauntlet mode of co-op dungeon crawlers, Dark Alliance and its sequel (featured here on the strength of superior character progression and gameplay) lays a thin Dungeons & Dragons veneer over the familiar hacking and slashing. Dark Alliance II's three characters each offer a unique, amazingly powerful, and fully customizable skill set, which make thrashing the hordes of evil a cathartic release. Sure, there's the occasional cheap death, but that just keeps you on your toes.

24 NEW SUPER MARIO BROS. Wii

Platform *Wii* **Publisher** *Nintendo* **Developer** *Nintendo* **Release** *2008*

Everyone is familiar with the "each player takes a turn" Mario and Luigi faux co-op of the original Super Mario Bros., but it wasn't until 2009 that Nintendo let us play together as a team. Playing with up to three additional players opens up opportunities to save and be saved from death and jump off each others' shoulders to reach higher platforms. It also opened up a dark side of Mario we never knew existed, where you could pick up players and throw them over the edge, or intentionally bounce against them to send them to their death while navigating over a precarious pit. Now that the evil traitorous Mario door is open, it won't close, and we wouldn't have it any other way.
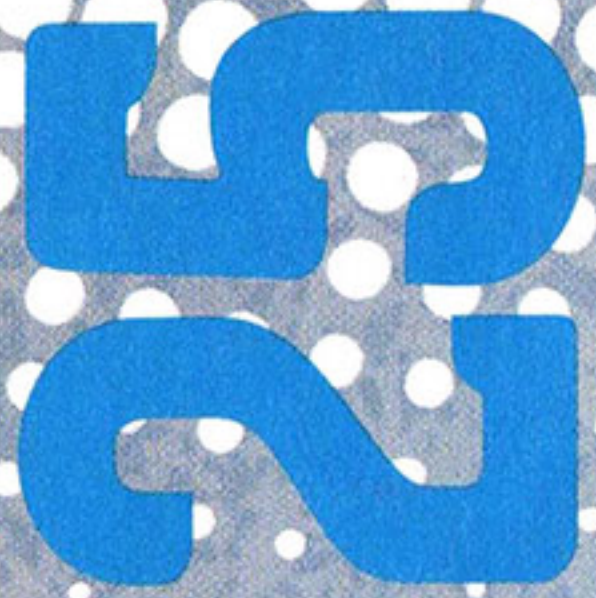
JOURNEY

Platform PlayStation 3 **Publisher** Sony Computer Entertainment **Developer** Thatgamecompany **Release** 2012

Thatgamecompany's critically acclaimed downloadable title matches you with a random online player when you start the game, so much of your co-op experience comes down to the luck of the draw. While some players end up exploring Journey's striking vistas alone, those paired with a worthy partner praise the game for instantly creating a bond with their fellow traveler, despite the inability to communicate with each other beyond simple chirps. Several gameplay mechanics encourage pairs to stay in close proximity, but for most players, having someone to share Journey's stunning voyage with makes the game's allegory all the more impactful.
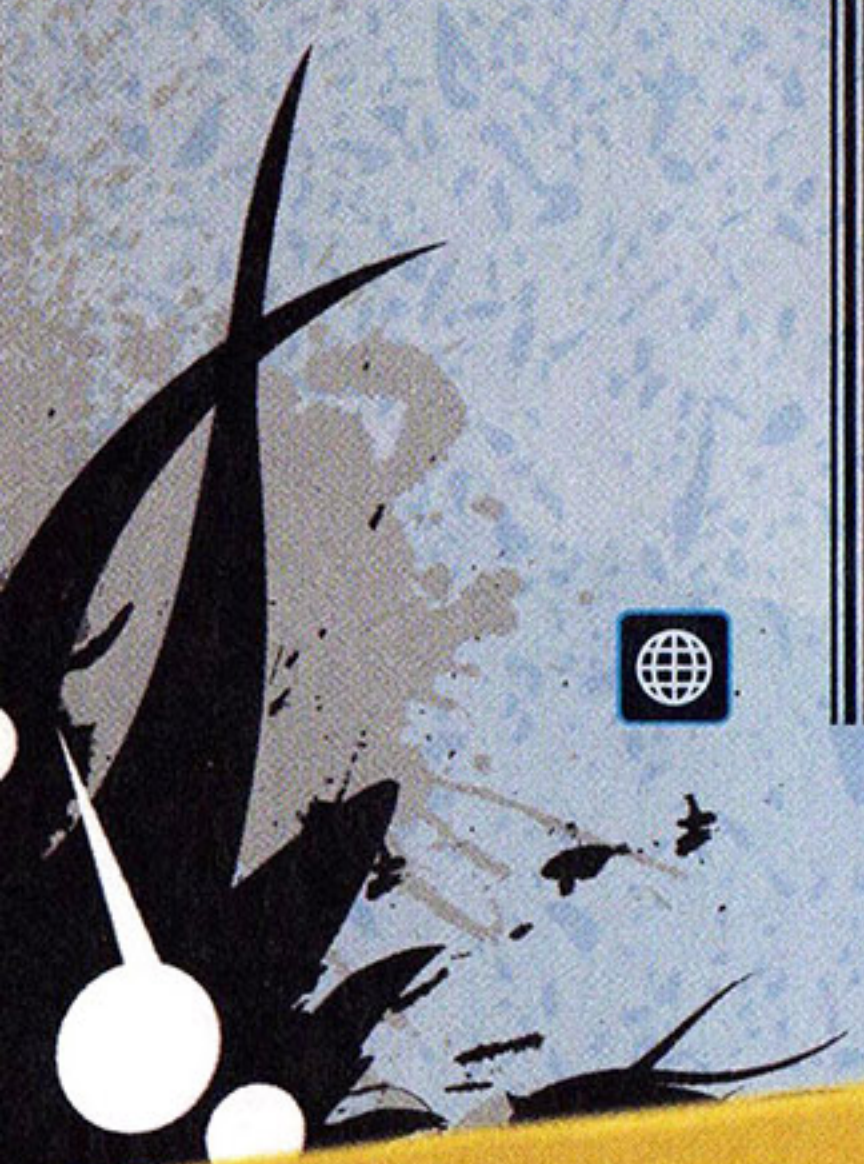
SMASH TV

Platform Arcade *Publisher* Williams *Developer* Williams *Release* 1993

The popularity of the dual-stick-shooter genre has faded over the past year or so, but there's a reason we saw its resurgence in the first place: Twin-stick shooters are one of the purest tests of twitch reflexes out there. Designer Eugene Jarvis took the basic structure from his earlier arcade hit Robotron: 2084, tossed in references to *The Running Man* and *RoboCop*, and let two players compete in a futuristic game show side by side. While players teamed up to fight robotic drones and various mutants, they also competed to snatch the most cash and prizes from the chaotic playfield to claim bragging rights between levels. Big money, indeed.

The Split-Screen Conundrum

Players are increasingly using online connections for co-op gaming, which puts developers in a tough position. Why spend the resources on creating split-screen multiplayer if you aren't sure that anyone's going to play it? Split-screen co-op may not be as prevalent as it used to be before the days of Xbox Live and PlayStation Network, but that doesn't mean it's gone. The studios behind the Borderlands and Army of Two franchises, among others, still think couch co-op is relevant.

"It's true that multiplayer is constantly growing, but I think that there's still plenty of room for good split-screen games out there," says Julian Beak, executive producer of Army of Two: The Devil's Cartel. "Obviously when you're talking about adversarial games [online] multiplayer is the way to go, but sometimes your friends don't have the same game, console, or gaming schedule…Talking, yelling, and screaming makes everything more fun. Split-screen makes this easy and together with co-op you get something really memorable."

Beak says his team needs to make graphical concessions to accommodate two independent viewpoints, but that they work hard to ensure those changes aren't jarring. Gameplay is ultimately identical.

"There are some things scaled down, simplified or drawn differently, but we spend lots of time developing ways to make these differences almost impossible to notice," he says. "We also keep a very similar aspect ratio in split-screen to the one we have for our single-player so that the player cameras and HUD elements look good in both modes."

In some ways, Beak says split-screen actually holds advantages over online co-op. "Split-screen provides a few surprising advantages over full screen for destruction, particularly in scenarios when one player is throwing a grenade or helping his co-op buddy by raining down bullets from a chopper. They can see the destruction from two perspectives, which is very satisfying."

GUNSTAR HEROES

Platform Genesis *Publisher* Konami *Developer* Treasure *Release* 1994

Nintendo fans could always turn to Contra for punishing, arcade-style shooter chaos, but for a while the Genesis lacked similar games. Konami released Treasure's colorful Gunstar Heroes to sate Sega fans' thirst. The game features two-player co-op, tons of weapon pick-ups, and myriad boss battles. The way weapon pick-ups can be mixed and matched to create unique firearms, such as a homing laser beam, preserves Gunstar Heroes as a viable co-op option today.

28

THE HOUSE OF THE DEAD 2

Platform Arcade *Publisher* Sega *Developer* Wow Entertainment *Release* 1998

On-rails light-gun shooters have always been a staple of the arcade. Teaming up with a partner in The House of the Dead 2 was like going to the firing range, except without the need to wear those gigantic noise-dampening earmuffs. Even with our Mortal Kombat childhoods, The House of the Dead 2 still delivered a startlingly violent cooperative tour through a monster-ravaged Venice. One gun simply wasn't enough.

29

STREETS OF RAGE 2

Platform Arcade *Publisher* Sega *Developer* Sega *Release* 1992

After Double Dragon popularized the genre, the market was flooded with side-scrolling beat 'em ups. The Streets of Rage series floated to the top as one of the generational benchmarks. Streets of Rage 2 didn't stray far from the template.

Players punch gangbangers in the jaw as they march from left to right across a riotous New York, cracking open boxes to reveal health-replenishing fruit. Streets of Rage 2 didn't need originality, because its flash and style set it apart.

30 RESIDENT EVIL 5

Resident Evil 4 proved the series could thrive as an action-packed shooter, and Resident Evil 5 established that shooting mutant freaks is even more fun with a friend. The lengthy campaign is filled with huge boss fights requiring coordinated teamwork and plenty of back-against-the-wall moments that wouldn't be as rewarding alone. Mix in weapon/item sharing and split-screen or online co-op and you have one of the best Resident Evils ever.

WHAT'S COMING *in* CO-OP

T hanks to the success of recent franchises like Left 4 Dead and Borderlands, the industry is undergoing a co-op renaissance, with more games than ever allowing you to team up with your buddies. The next eight pages are your guide to the upcoming games featuring co-op, detailing when they're coming out and what makes each title special. Like on our Top 30 list, the co-op symbols tell you which games have confirmed online, split-screen, LAN, and split-screen plus online support. You'd better start recruiting friends now.

by Jeff Marchiafava
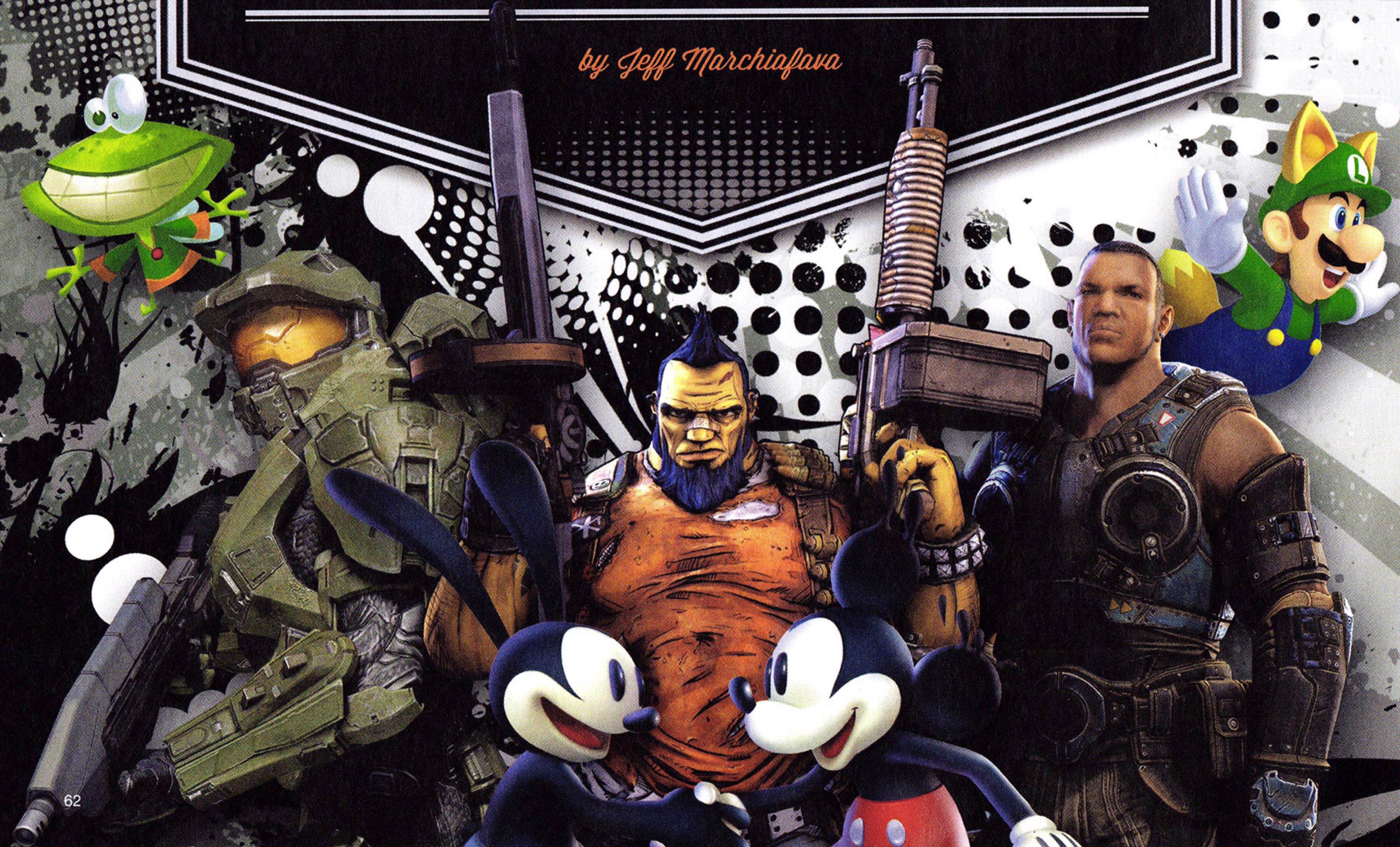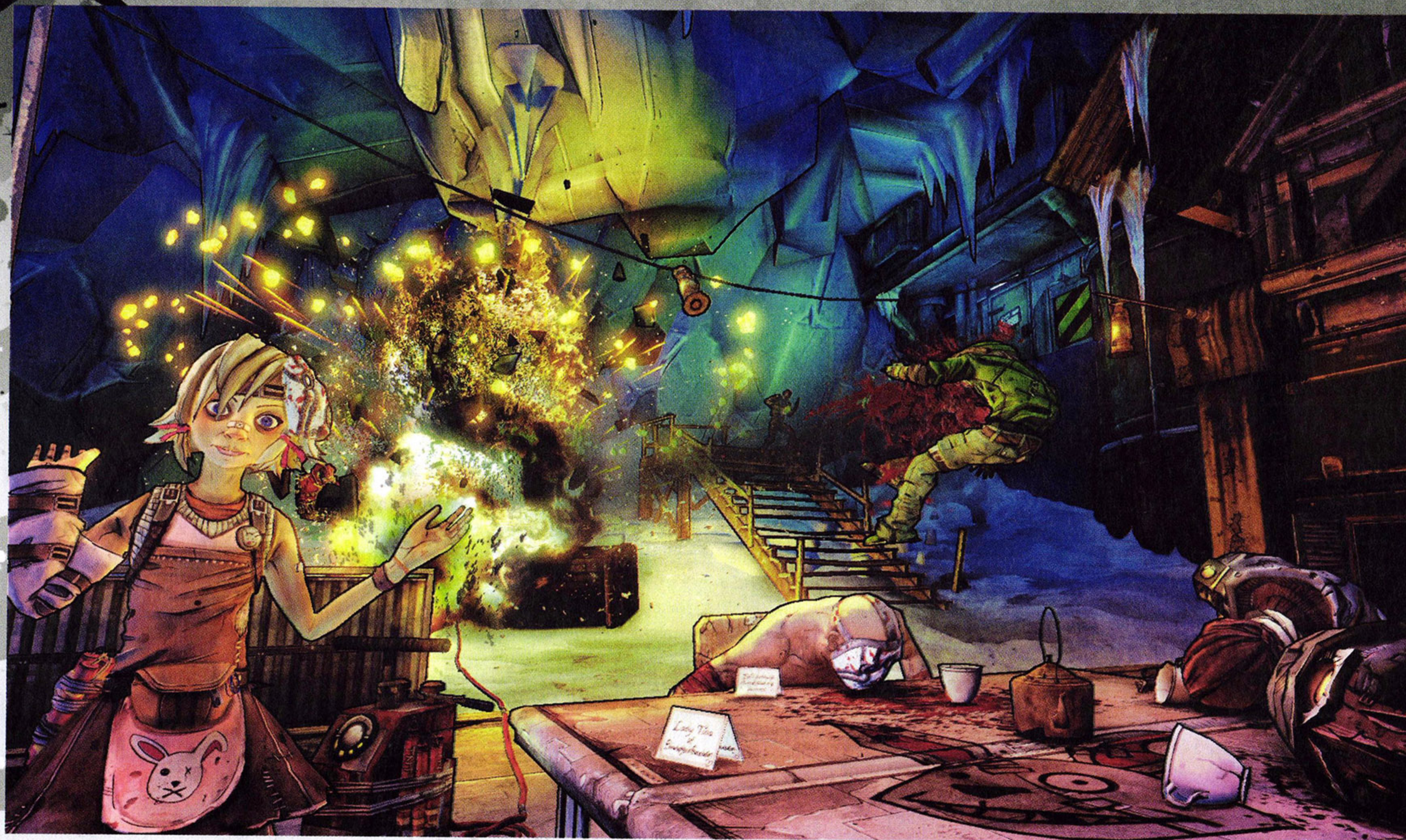
BORDERLANDS 2

Two hours with Gearbox's refined looter shooter

Gearbox struck gold with its first-person shooter/role-playing hybrid Borderlands. Nearly six million players have scavenged Pandora's countryside for its nearly limitless cache of unique weapons. But even three years after its release, we still hunger for more creative weapons of destruction. We took several of the guns from Borderlands 2 to the firing range and are happy to report that this sequel is bigger, better, and more explosive. Here are some of the reasons you shouldn't miss Borderlands 2's release on September 18. » Ben Reeves

A better (and very funny) narrative

Nearly five years after the first game, a man named Handsome Jack aims to reshape Pandora in his image. Handsome Jack illegally acquired the wealth locked in the vault from the first Borderlands and has used this fortune to underhandedly take over the Hyperion corporation and enforce his personal law across Pandora.

During the demo, I took control of Axton, a commando who escapes Jack's clutches early in the game and teams up with some of the original vault hunters to stop the dreaded villain. During one mission, I run into Roland from the original Borderlands, who tells us that Handsome Jack is trying to track down a second vault that contains an ancient creature of immense power. If Jack gets his hands on the creature, he'll be able to turn it to his will and nothing will stand in his way. Someone has to get to the vault before Jack does, and Roland thinks we're right for the job.

The rest of my time is spent running jobs for a new character named Tiny Tina, a disturbed 13-year-old explosives expert who has me kidnap an enemy only to torture him during a "tea party." The game's humor is insane in the best kind of way. Tiny Tina is voiced by Ashly Burch, whose brother, Anthony Burch, is writing the game. The siblings are known for their web series *Hey Ash, Whatcha Playin'?*, so Borderland 2's story is in capable hands.

Larger, livelier cities

Sanctuary is Borderland 2's largest municipal hub. The city buzzes with more activity than any environment in the original Borderlands. As I wander its streets, I talk to citizens who ramble on about various happenings and provide me with an endless stream of side quests. Borderlands 2 features almost seven times more dialogue than the original game, and players receive the majority of quests from active NPCs rather than a static menu. Gearbox says the game also has more side quests; gamers hoping to check every one off their to-do list will clock in over 50 hours of playtime.

More engaging firefights

Many enemies level up as you fight them. I saw one insect-like enemy, called the Varkid, evolve right in front of my eyes. Varkids attack in packs, so while you're handling one group, a single Varkid might cocoon itself in one corner of the environment and transform into a more evolved form. You can easily squash these enemies while they're cocooned, but if you don't act fast, they emerge as an evolved form that is harder to take down.

Other enemies alter their attack patterns in different ways. The brutish Goliath's head is encased in a metal box. If you shoot at his head and break

Borderlands 2 allows for more customization. Players can find new skins for their character and vehicles, which they can use or trade with friends

open the box, the Goliath becomes enraged and charges at you. This strategy isn't always bad, since an enraged Goliath sometimes attacks other enemies as well. But after a Goliath kills another foe, it levels up and becomes tougher. Advanced Goliaths also deliver more experience when they finally hit the ground.

More ways to blow things up

As Axton levels up, I start exploring his three diverse skill trees. Every Borderlands 2 character has his or her own skill tree. Each tree contains a few special skills that Gearbox calls Game Changers. These unique talents dramatically alter a class skill. For example, Axton's class skill allows him to deploy an automatic turret that fights by his side for a limited time. This turret gradually evolves as he unlocks more Game Changer abilities.

One upgrade gives Axton's turret a shield that boosts its defense. Other upgrades allow Axton to deploy two turrets at once or throw his turret across a battlefield to more strategic locations. One upgrade turns the turret into a nuke. After deployment, a large mushroom cloud vaporizes any foes in the surrounding area. Once the smoke clears, Axton's turret spins to life, ready to take care of any remaining enemies. All of these Game Changers can be stacked, so you can create a nuke turret that you throw across the battlefield or deploy two turrets with bubble shields.

ALIENS: COLONIAL MARINES

Platform PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, PC *Publisher* Sega *Developer* Gearbox Software *Release* February 12

This first-person shooter from Gearbox has seen more than its share of delays, but we're still pumped to take on the iconic xenomorphs in Colonial Marines' four-player co-op mode. Colonial Marines' leveling system allows players to upgrade their weapons and abilities over multiple game modes, but even if things go wrong, at least you can whine, "Game over, man!" to all your friends.

STAR TREK

Platform PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, PC **Publisher** Namco Bandai/Paramount Digital
Developer Digital Extremes **Release** 2013

Based in J.J. Abrams' 2009 reboot of the Star Trek universe, Digital Extremes' third-person action game pits two-player teams against the mighty Gorn. You and a friend control Captain Kirk and Spock, and each character's personality matches their play style. We're guessing that means Spock does all the strategizing, while Kirk hits on alien babes.

HALO 4

Platform Xbox 360 **Publisher** Microsoft Studios
Developer 343 Industries **Release** November 6

Halo 4 is the first installment of the series from 343 Industries, and the developer has already announced its ambitious new Spartan Ops co-op mode. Spartan Ops provides gamers with a brand new co-op mission every week, telling an episodic story that augments the single-player campaign. The weekly missions can be played with up to four players.

RAINBOW 6: PATRIOTS

Platform PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, PC
Publisher Ubisoft **Developer** Ubisoft
Montreal **Release** 2013

Ubisoft has been tight-lipped about Rainbow 6: Patriots since our cover reveal last year, so we still don't know anything beyond the publisher's promise for a "huge variety of new innovative co-op and multiplayer experiences." Given the integral role co-op has played in the series in the past, we're keeping Patriots on our radar.

GEARS OF WAR: JUDGMENT

Platform Xbox 360 **Publisher** Microsoft Studios **Developer** Epic Games / People Can Fly **Release** March 19

Epic's ultraviolent Gears of War series has provided gamers with a variety of co-op innovations in the past, and the newly announced prequel is no exception. In addition to its four-player co-op campaign, Judgment's new class-based OverRun mode allows two five-player teams to face off as COGs and Locust, blending cooperative and competitive play into a whole new beast.

NEW SUPER MARIO BROS. 2

Platform 3DS *Publisher* Nintendo *Developer* Nintendo *Release* August 19

The sequel to Nintendo's handheld hit has a new focus on coin collecting, but the bigger scoop is that the 3DS installment features a simultaneous two-player mode. Co-op is restricted to local play only, but driving to your friend's house should be worth it to have Mario and Luigi working side-by-side again.

FAR CRY 3

Platform PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, PC
Publisher Ubisoft *Developer* Ubisoft Montreal / Massive *Release* September 4

Far Cry 3's mind-bending single-player campaign stole the spotlight at E3, but its multiplayer options should keep co-op fans happy come September. Far Cry 3's domination mode introduces a Team Support point system that rewards players exclusively for working together, and the four-player co-op campaign features a completely different story than single-player.
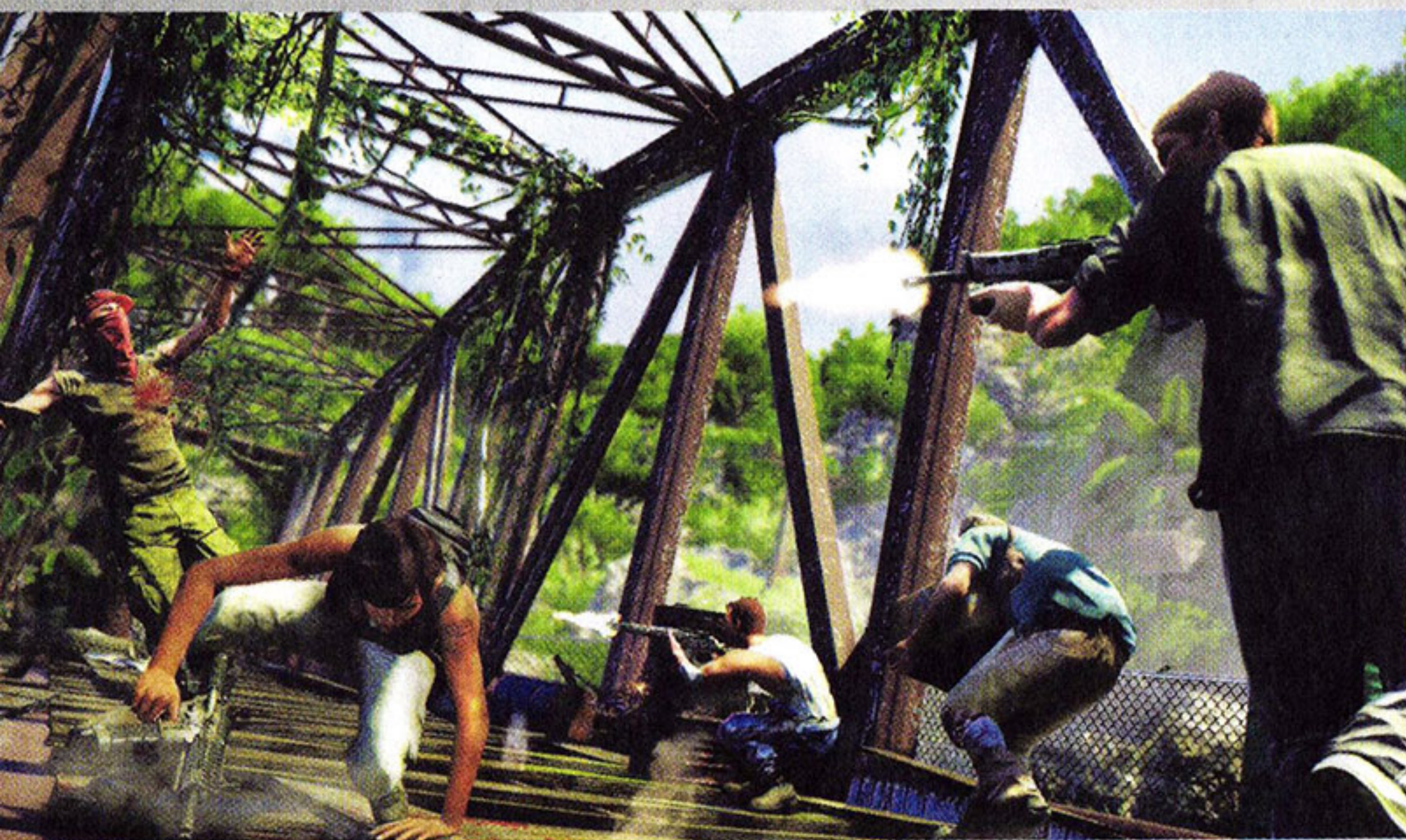
TRANSFORMERS: FALL OF CYBERTRON

Platform PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, PC
Publisher Activision *Developer* High Moon Studios
Release August 21

High Moon is axing War for Cybertron's co-op campaign, but the popular Horde-like Escalation mode is making a major comeback. Whereas the team-based competitive multiplayer allows players to create their own Transformers, Escalation mode hands over control of iconic characters such as Megatron and Starscream, each of whom has his own special abilities.

NEW SUPER MARIO BROS.U

Platform Wii U *Publisher* Nintendo
Developer Nintendo *Release* Holiday

Nintendo is taking the addictive four-player co-op mode of New Super Mario Bros. Wii and adding a new wrinkle for the Wii U sequel. A fifth player can use the console's GamePad to assist players by laying down extra platforms or turning them into coin blocks. The new HD graphics make this the most visually impressive Mario game yet.

RESIDENT EVIL 6

Platform PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, PC
Publisher Capcom *Developer* Capcom
Release October 2

The newest installment of the iconic survival horror series takes Resident Evil 5's co-op to the next level with three separate two-player campaigns. Each storyline lets duos take on Resident Evil 6's undead adversaries together, occasionally teaming up with other random online pairs for new four-player segments.

CALL OF DUTY: BLACK OPS II

Platform PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, PC   *Publisher* Activision   *Developer* Treyarch   *Release* November 13

Treyarch is keeping most of its multiplayer plans under wraps, but the studio has confirmed the return of its popular Zombies mode, featuring bigger maps and new gameplay modes. Treyarch Studio head Mark Lamia recently told *Official PlayStation* *Magazine UK* that by transitioning Zombies mode into their multiplayer engine, they can now support twice the number of zombies and co-op players as Black Ops.

LEGO LORD OF THE RINGS

Platform PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, Wii, 3DS, DS, Vita, PC   **Publisher** Warner Bros. Interactive   **Developer** Traveller's Tales   **Release** Fall

Traveller's Tales is bringing its time-tested gameplay formula to J.R.R. Tolkien's iconic fantasy world, and Lego fans should know exactly what to expect. The game covers the events of all The Lord of the Rings movies and boasts 80 playable characters, including all nine members of the fellowship. RPG elements augment the typical block-busting gameplay, and if it's anything like Traveller's Tales' previous games, Lego The Lord of the Rings should be more fun with a friend.

DEAD ISLAND: RIPTIDE

Platform PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, PC
Publisher Deep Silver **Developer** Techland
Release TBA

So far Deep Silver has only released a teaser logo for the sequel to its open-world action/RPG. If the excellent four-player co-op of the original Dead Island is anything to go by, Riptide should contain plenty of zombie-slaying excitement for you and your friends.

RAYMAN LEGENDS

Platform Wii U **Publisher** Ubisoft
Developer Ubisoft Montpellier **Release** TBA

We're still not sure if Rayman Origins was easier or harder playing with three friends, but Ubisoft Montpellier's colorful sequel promises to deliver the same frantic, slapstick action. Similar to New Super Mario Bros. U, Rayman Legends allows one player to use the GamePad to aid the on-screen characters, this time by opening new paths and tapping out platforms during impromptu music/rhythm sequences.

DEAD SPACE 3

Platform PlayStation 3, Xbox 360 **Publisher** Electronic Arts
Developer Visceral Games **Release** February

This year's E3 introduced players to Dead Space 3's new co-op mode, which allows a second player to help out Isaac Clarke as EarthGov Sergeant John Carver. The pair can work through the necromorph-filled campaign together for a more action-oriented experience, while solo play provides the same survival horror gameplay Dead Space fans know and fear.

EPIC MICKEY 2: THE POWER OF TWO

Platform PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, Wii **Publisher** Disney Interactive Studios
Developer Junction Point Studios **Release** November 18

Mickey Mouse is gearing up for another paint-spewing adventure, and this time the long-forgotten Oswald is coming along for the ride. The co-op mode is split-screen only, and requires the rodents to use their separate abilities to solve Power of Two's myriad environmental puzzles. That's why it's called Power of Two, after all.

SKYLANDERS GIANTS

Platform PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, Wii, 3DS
Publisher Activision **Developer** Toys for Bob **Release** Fall

Parents better start preparing for a new round of figurine hunting, as the sequel to Toys for Bob's runaway hit offers players dozens of new and Series Two figures to collect. Luckily, Skylanders Giants also increases the level cap for all characters to 15, giving families plenty of opportunities to improve their old and new characters alike. ◈

THE PURSUIT OF
VENGEANCE

BY JEFF CORK

Starting from the murder that sets everything in motion, we take a plunge into the world of Dishonored with an exclusive hands-on session
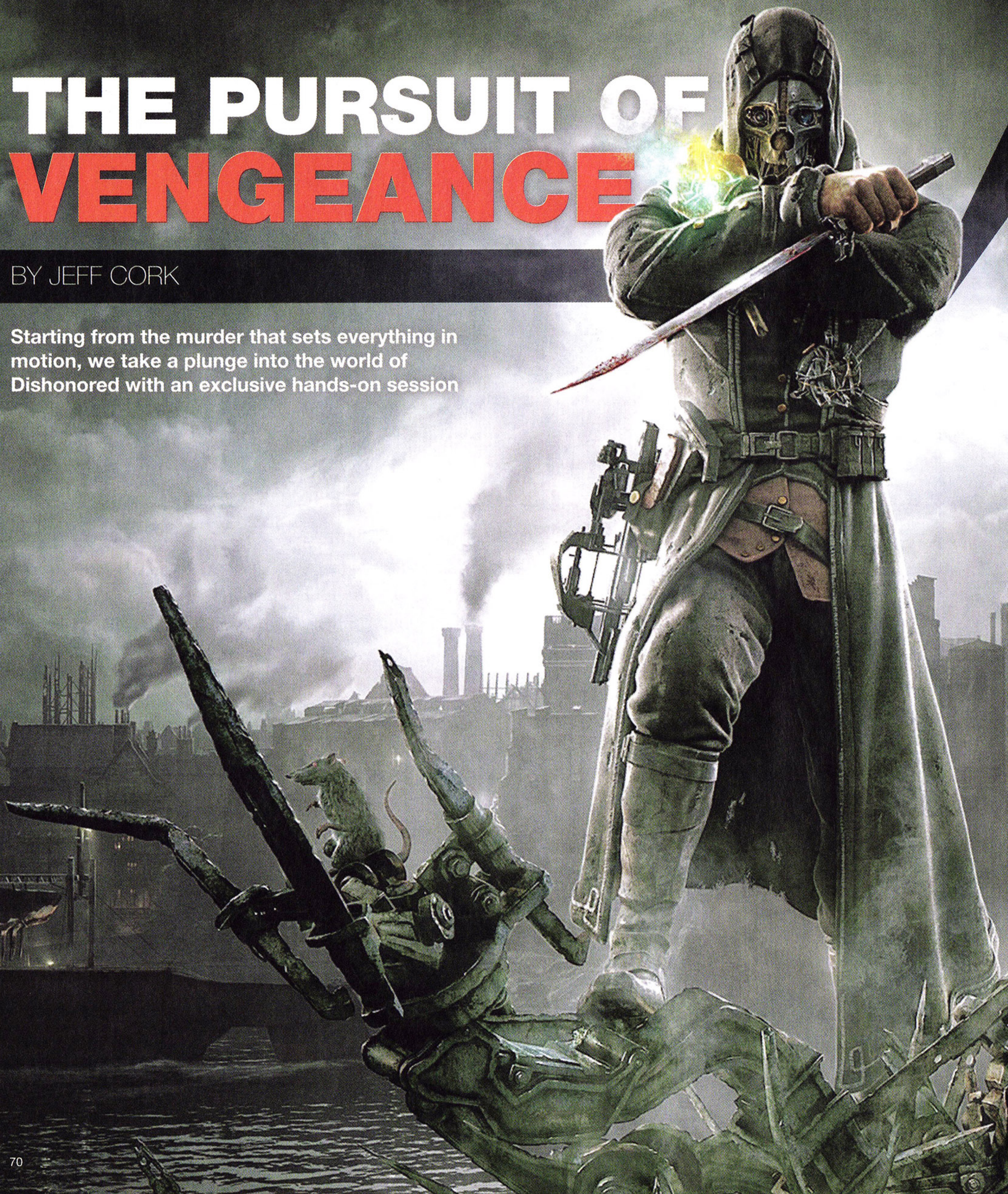
DISHONORED

Dishonored is a tale steeped in revenge. After Empress Jessamine Kaldwin is murdered, Corvo Atana – the man entrusted with keeping her safe – is framed for the crime. Beyond those broad strokes, the details behind the game's shadowy conspiracy have remained hidden. Instead, Dishonored's highly variable combat has drawn much of the attention – and rightfully so. But you can't pursue vengeance without first being wronged.

Not surprisingly, Corvo has his reasons. Empress Kaldwin was killed in front of his eyes moments after he returned from an important mission. The city of Dunwall is overwhelmed with a plague, and she sent Corvo out to seek assistance from its neighbors. The first few assassins, who appear in the palace's gazebo in a slick phasing/teleporting effect, are easy enough to take out with a sword and pistol. Eventually, one of the masked attackers finds an opening and strikes her down. The assassins blink away from the scene, kidnapping the empress' daughter Emily for good measure,

and Corvo is caught with blood on his hands.

Corvo's set to be beheaded for his supposed treason, but first he gets a visit from the wicked high commander, Thaddeus Campbell, and spymaster Hiram Burrows. As Corvo sits helplessly in the jail cell, the commander explains the situation in true bad-guy fashion. Empress Kaldwin was assassinated because she was weak, the commander says, and Corvo's mission to the nearby provinces was possibly the last straw. Fortunately for the people behind the setup, one of the biggest loose ends is about to be snipped. "No one will ever know the truth," he taunts. If it's any consolation, he adds, Corvo's sacrifice was ultimately for a good cause. "The country needs strong leadership in its time of trouble," the commander says, and that's where he and his conspirators come in. "It was nothing personal," the commander assures Corvo before slamming the bars shut.

EXIT STRATEGY

Players don't have to worry about seeing that sentence through to the end. A jailer brings Corvo what should be his last meal, which contains a surprise. Someone calling himself or herself a friend has left a note and, even better, a key to the cell. I make my escape, winding through (and under) Coldridge Prison. The place is filled with guards, obviously, and I make a point to stay in the shadows whenever possible.

When I do accidentally blow it, an onscreen indicator gives me a heads up on a patrol's alert status. It has three levels, roughly translating to "Hey, what's that?" to a full-on "I know you're here and I am going to murder you big time." To stay hidden, I make liberal use of distractions such as throwing empty bottles and covering my tracks by moving unconscious or dead guards out of sight. Without special powers or any of Corvo's gadgets, this section plays like your typical stealth game. Combat opens up significantly after Corvo makes his way out of the prison and meets up with a group of loyalists.

We've seen Corvo make deadly use of supernatural abilities such as slowing time and summoning swarms of deadly rats, but we hadn't yet seen exactly how Corvo acquires those powers. As I learned in my hands-on session, it all starts with a fateful encounter with the Outsider.

The Outsider is an important figure in Dishonored's world. This supernatural being straddles the line between man and deity, and he's a part of everyday life. I spot graffiti near the Hound Pits pub, the loyalists' base of operations, which says the Outsider "walks among us."

After meeting with representatives from the resistance, including noble proxy Lord Pendleton and military leader Admiral Havelock, I take a long-deserved rest. Jailbreak takes a lot out of you, after all. In my dream, I'm approached by the Outsider, who grants me the blink ability.

He also etches his mark on my hand.

Mobility is a big part of Dishonored, and blink is a critical component. This power enables Corvo to travel short distances in an instant, escaping danger or closing the gap between enemies. It's also a handy way to get around levels. After selecting the blink power from the wheel interface, I activate it by pulling a trigger. Before I release it, I move a cursor to where I want to go. It's not limited to the plane Corvo's on, and I use it to pop through open windows and safely zip to the ground in what would otherwise be fatal falls.

Now that I've acquired the first of what will be many powers, it's time to dole out justice in earnest, assassination by assassination. Empress Kaldwin will be avenged.

RATS ARE BAD

A few lone rats patrol the tunnels leading out of Coldridge. They're easy to one-shot, and I almost feel guilty for doing so. That feeling evaporates when I see what swarms of the little buggers could do together. I walk over a grate early on and spy a pair of guards talking. In a flash, they are covered in dozens of rats, killing both men in a flash. If that wasn't bad enough, I watch as the vermin gnaw the corpses until they are little more than bloody puddles soaking into the cobblestone. Their insatiable appetite for human flesh is bad enough, but don't forget that little matter of the plague. Bodies of plague victims line the streets, and I encounter a few living infected, known as weepers. The zombie-like enemies don't have any superhuman abilities, but their lurching movements and running sores make it clear that you don't want to hang out with these guys any longer than necessary.

ORDER SHALL PREVAIL

Even when my best attempts at stealth failed and I had to engage enemies head on, I never felt like I was flailing around to delay an inevitable game over screen. Corvo's skills with a blade extend beyond stabbing necks from behind; I parried incoming attacks and took advantage of stumbling foes with ease. Wiping out enemies who wisely choose to hang back is similarly possible (and enjoyable) thanks to a nice array of ranged weapons, including a pistol and crossbow.

CRASHING THE PARTY

At this point in the demo, I jump ahead to approximately the midpoint of the story. In the E3 demo, players kidnapped an imperial scientist named Anton Sokolov. Now that he's in custody at the Hound Pits, I have to extract information about the plot from him. He's reluctant to reveal the identity of one Lady Boyle until I give him a bottle of his favorite booze (I could have tortured him with rats, instead). He did, indeed, paint her portrait, but it was under unusual circumstances – he painted her from the back. Without a clear sense of her identity, I head to the Boyle estate. As luck (or fate) would have it, there's a masquerade ball tonight just waiting to be crashed.

Dishonored has impressed me with the number of tricks Corvo has in combat (including avoiding it altogether), but I wasn't sure if that flexibility expanded further. If this assassination mission is any indicator, we're in good hands.

I start out at the docks near the estate. It's night, and tallboy sentries patrol the streets on their mechanized stilts. I know they're not to be underestimated, so I cautiously lurk around them, paying close attention to their routes. I blink across the street and find a tunnel entry near the locked gate. It leads to the grounds outside trhe party. I don't have an invitation, but one of the guests inadvertently lends a hand; she drops hers, and it blows into the nearby sewer. Her companion chides her not to follow it, but I don't have a similar sense of pride. Once I flash it to a guard, I'm in.

This target provides an interesting challenge. As it turns out, there are three Boyle sisters. Keeping with the masquerade ball theme, each of them is wearing a costume. They're identical, save for the fact that one is red, another is white, and the final one is black. I don't know anything about my target beyond that – even her first name. It's time to investigate.

I chat with the other guests for a while, eventually learning that more clues may be h idden in their bedrooms upstairs. The stairwell is blocked off with an electric field and a few surly guards. It's a perfect time for my possession ability. I control a nearby rat (housekeeping should be ashamed), and scurry up a ventilation shaft. Once I make my way to a bedroom, I transform back into my human form. I grab a few clues, including notes that provide her name, the color of her costume, and a mention of her interest in music. Armed with that information, I hop over a nearby balcony and make my way to the music room.

As interesting as this scenario is, it's made even better after learning that the sisters' names, costume colors, and interests are randomized for each playthrough. If you get

POWERS AND CHARMS

Corvo is full of surprises – and powers. Bethesda gave us official descriptions for three of his supernatural abilities.

DARK VISION:

Reveals the outline of living beings through solid walls. In addition to displaying an enemy's field-of-view, Dark Vision also provides a visual representation of sound, making it especially useful for stealth. Level two highlights security systems and valuable objects.

POSSESSION:

Physically merge with any creature's body for a limited time, allowing you to hide or pass through small spaces undetected. Level two allows for the possession of humans.

BEND TIME:

Dramatically slows the world around you for a limited time, allowing you to fight or sneak more effectively. At level two, time is completely stopped, during which enemies and security systems will be unaware of you.

In addition to the active powers that Corvo can purchase (and upgrade), he can track down special bone charms scattered throughout levels. These charms provide passive abilities, and players can activate up to three at a time. Some of the effects include charms that reduce rat aggression, increase the rate of mana regeneration, and provide more of a health boost from food. Lead designer Harvey Smith's personal favorite is Shadow Kill, which reduces victims to piles of ash. Perfect if you don't want to strain your back hauling corpses around.
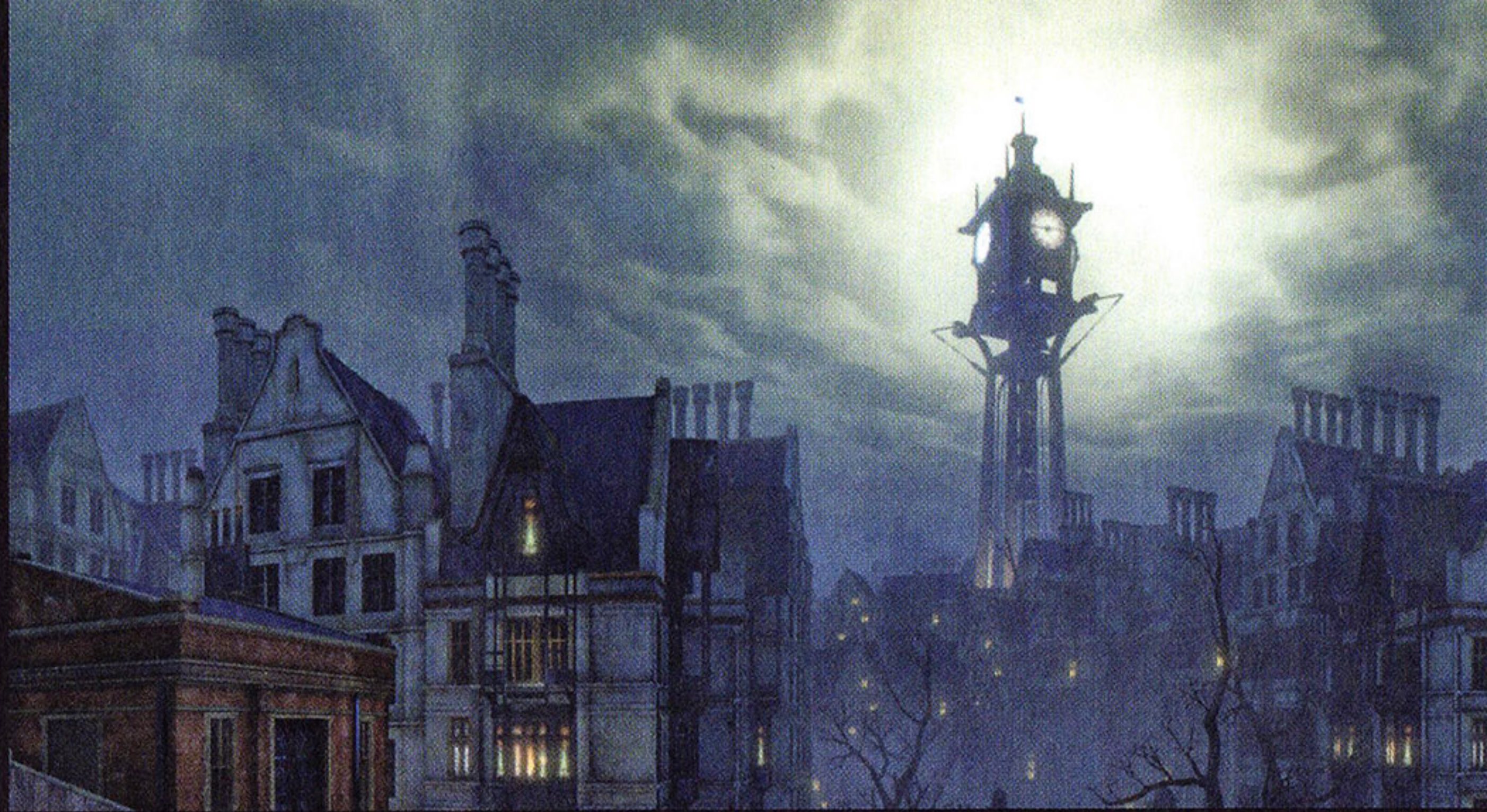
stumped and think you can just look it up online, think again.

I find my target, Lydia, in her black dress, and approach. Earlier, I was approached by a desperate partygoer who said he knew my intentions and pleaded for me to be merciful. Instead of killing his love, he begged me to take her to the cellar alive and let him take her away forever. I'm a softie, so I decide to take a nonlethal approach. I lure her to a quiet spot and then choke her out. After slinging her over my shoulder, I head to the cellar. As promised, the masked man is waiting for us. Before he leaves, I learn that this relationship may not have been as mutual as I thought. "Someday, she'll learn to appreciate me," he says mournfully, adding that she'll have her whole life to reach that conclusion.

A few kitchen workers saw me carrying the unconscious host around the place, so the guards are on high alert. I know when I'm not wanted, and I bolt from the place, cutting a few down with razor traps and slowing time to evade their shots. I dive into a canal just as a gate slams the exit shut. I hop onto a nearby boat, and I'm out of there.

Now I get a chance to see another way of approaching the scenario.

Instead of going into the party through the tunnel and getting an invite, Corvo sneaks in from above. He explores a large residential section that I completely bypassed, blinking his way into an interior. Weepers have infested the place, but they're no match for a few clockwork grenades. The Boyle estate is certainly an upgrade from these dingy apartments, but fortunately they're right next to one another. A few more blinks, and Corvo's in one of the sisters' bedrooms.

Corvo is more brazen in this playthrough, hopping over the balcony and then immediately engaging the guards. Guests scream as the masked stranger tosses grenades with abandon and blasts his way through the guards. The sisters are nowhere to be found, and Corvo heads back upstairs. There, he finds them huddled together in a corner. One by one, he assassinates them all.

The usurpers certainly showed Corvo no mercy, and it's up to players if they'll respond in kind. ◈

STAYING POWER

Arkane Studios is putting a premium on gameplay flexibility, and wants to make sure that players have a chance to try new ways of approaching missions. Dishonored doesn't have a new game plus feature, but you can revisit missions once you've completed them. You raise different amounts of chaos depending on how you play through scenarios, and are rated on your performance when they conclude. Chaos is more than an arbitrary meter, too, Bethesda says. Depending on your play style, the plague and rat infestations could grow or shrink, and even the game's ending can change. I didn't see this in action, but it's certainly an interesting approach.

Crysis 3

Prophet goes on a vision quest

Prophet's life would make for one hell of an *I Survived* episode. A first responder on the scene of an alien invasion, the Delta Force squad leader helped repel the initial Ceph attack on an island off the coast of Korea, survived the nuclear strike meant to wipe it out, went rogue when he found out his squad were test subjects against the aliens, and eventually committed suicide. End of story? Not quite. His spirit lived on in the circuitry of the nanosuit, and he eventually overtook the new suit wearer, Alcatraz, after he saved Manhattan from the alien threat.

After serving 20 years in prison for stealing a nanosuit, Prophet starts Crysis 3 seeing visions of the end of the world at the hands of a Ceph battle force. Rather than waiting around to die a second time, he journeys into the heart of the Liberty Dome covering New York City to look for answers. Along the way he runs into an old friend in Psycho, the protagonist from the Crysis Warhead expansion.

"Between Crysis 1 and 2 there really weren't deep meaningful interactions between the characters, so we really want to focus on that between the core group of characters we have like Prophet, Psycho, and the few others that we'll be revealing in detail as time moves on," says producer Mike Read. "You're going to see a lot of push and pull between the two of these guys as the story progresses."

Though the nanosuit isn't undergoing any drastic revisions outside of decoupling the sprint energy from the nanosuit energy, that doesn't mean Prophet won't have new tricks up his sleeve when confronting enemy threats. Crysis 3 boasts a new nanosuit upgrade system that gives players the flexibility to create three unique loadouts to confront different scenarios they may encounter.

"Basically, you could create a close combat kind of loadout where maybe you can punch a little bit harder, a more long-range loadout, or maybe something that's more apt to stealth," Read says. "It adds a ton of more options as opposed to the fixed methods that you had in Crysis 2 where you picked up nano catalysts."

Crytek isn't sharing how players receive these suit upgrades yet, but Read says it will be a simplified process with a wealth of different options. Don't expect to unlock everything on one playthrough; you will have to make tough decisions on which of the upgrade tracts you want to pursue. » **Matt Bertz**

New secondary objectives and hidden bonus rewards drive map exploration for players who want to spend more time checking out their surroundings
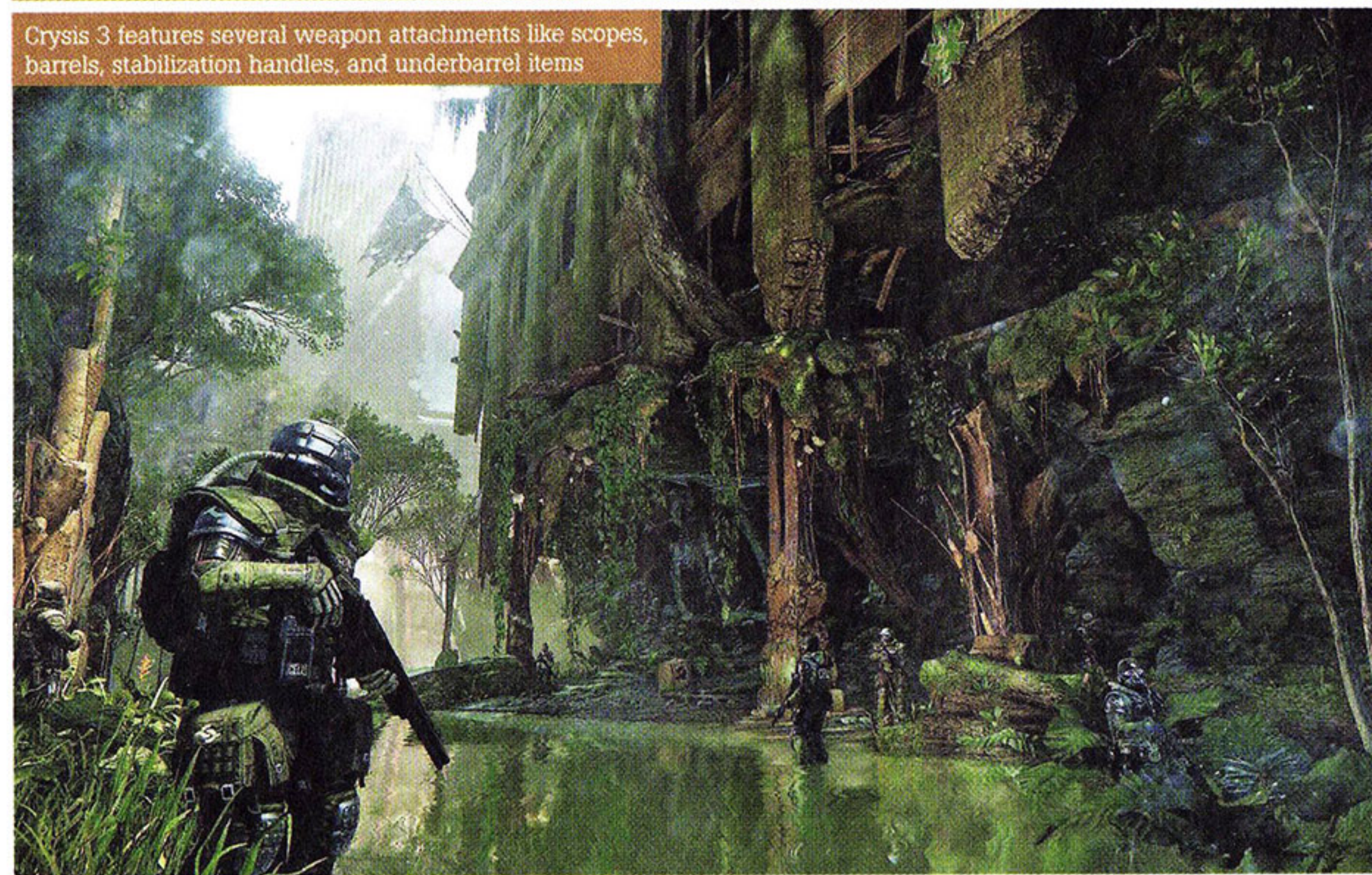
Crysis 3 features several weapon attachments like scopes, barrels, stabilization handles, and underbarrel items
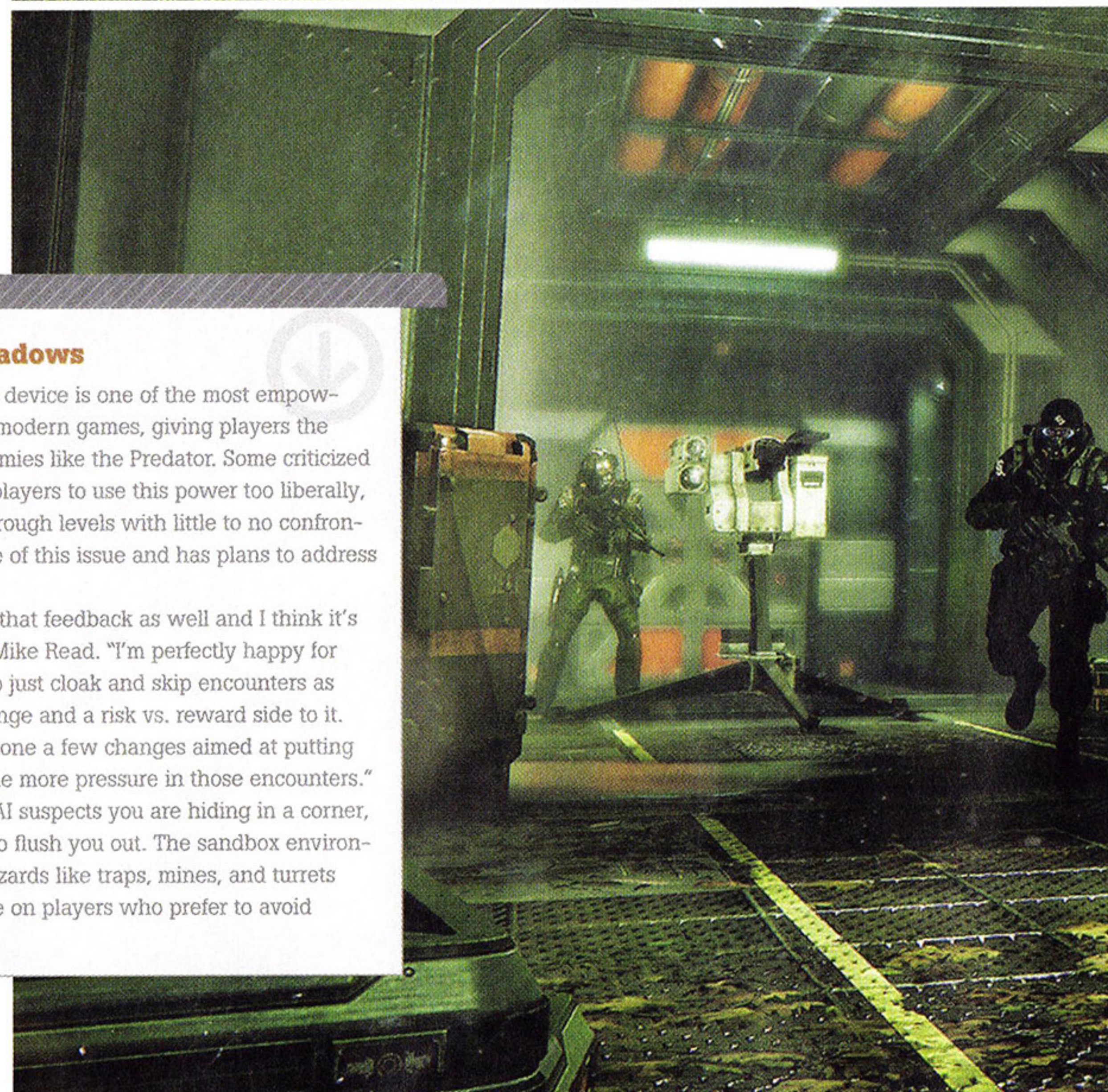
The Game of Shadows

The nanosuit cloaking device is one of the most empowering technologies in modern games, giving players the ability to toy with enemies like the Predator. Some criticized Crysis 2 for allowing players to use this power too liberally, essentially running through levels with little to no confrontation. Crytek is aware of this issue and has plans to address it in Crysis 3.

"We definitely read that feedback as well and I think it's valid," says producer Mike Read. "I'm perfectly happy for players if they want to just cloak and skip encounters as long as it has a challenge and a risk vs. reward side to it. From our side we've done a few changes aimed at putting the player under a little more pressure in those encounters."

For example, if the AI suspects you are hiding in a corner, it can throw an EMP to flush you out. The sandbox environments also contain hazards like traps, mines, and turrets that put more pressure on players who prefer to avoid armed combat.
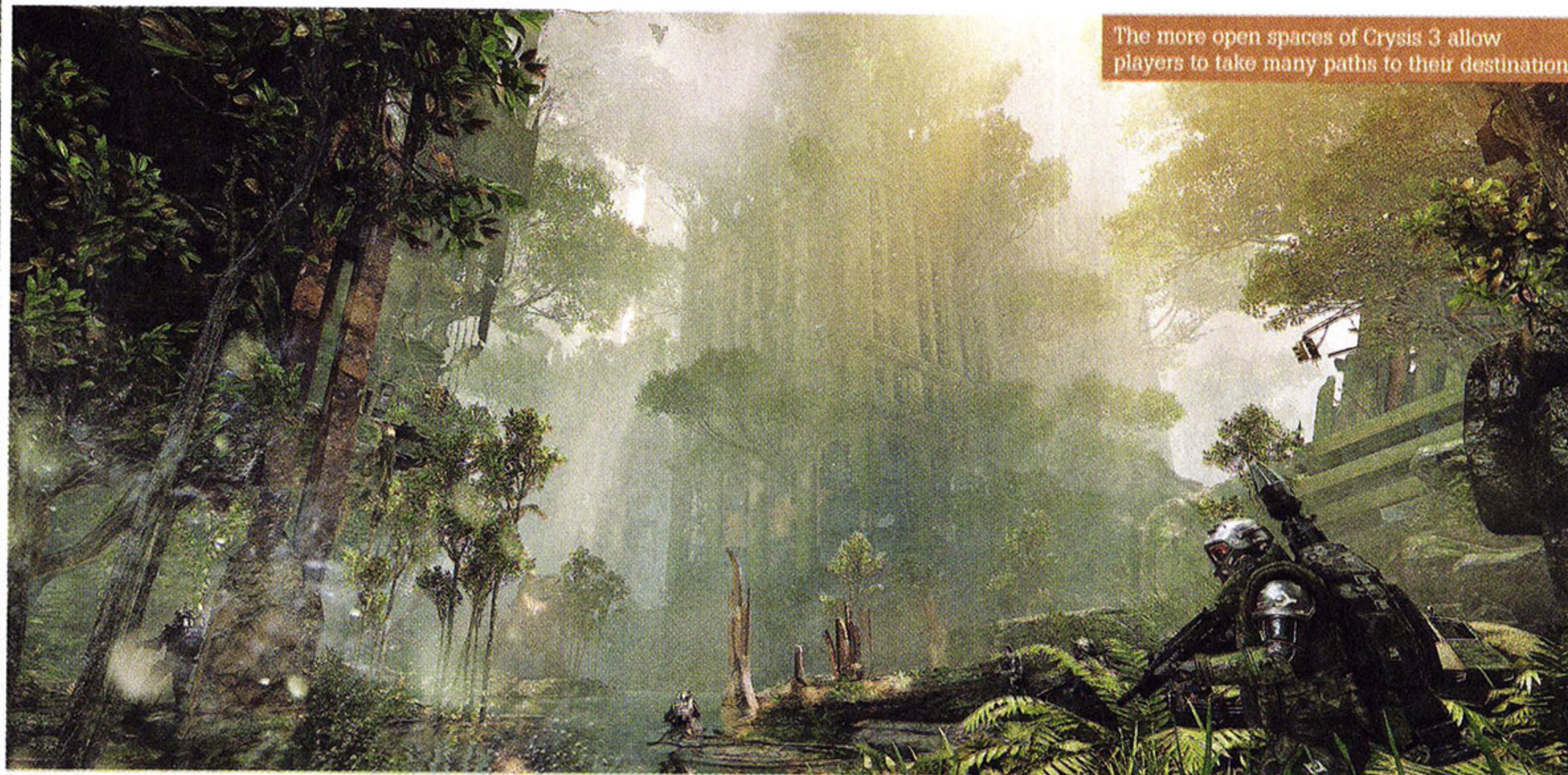
The more open spaces of Crysis 3 allow players to take many paths to their destination
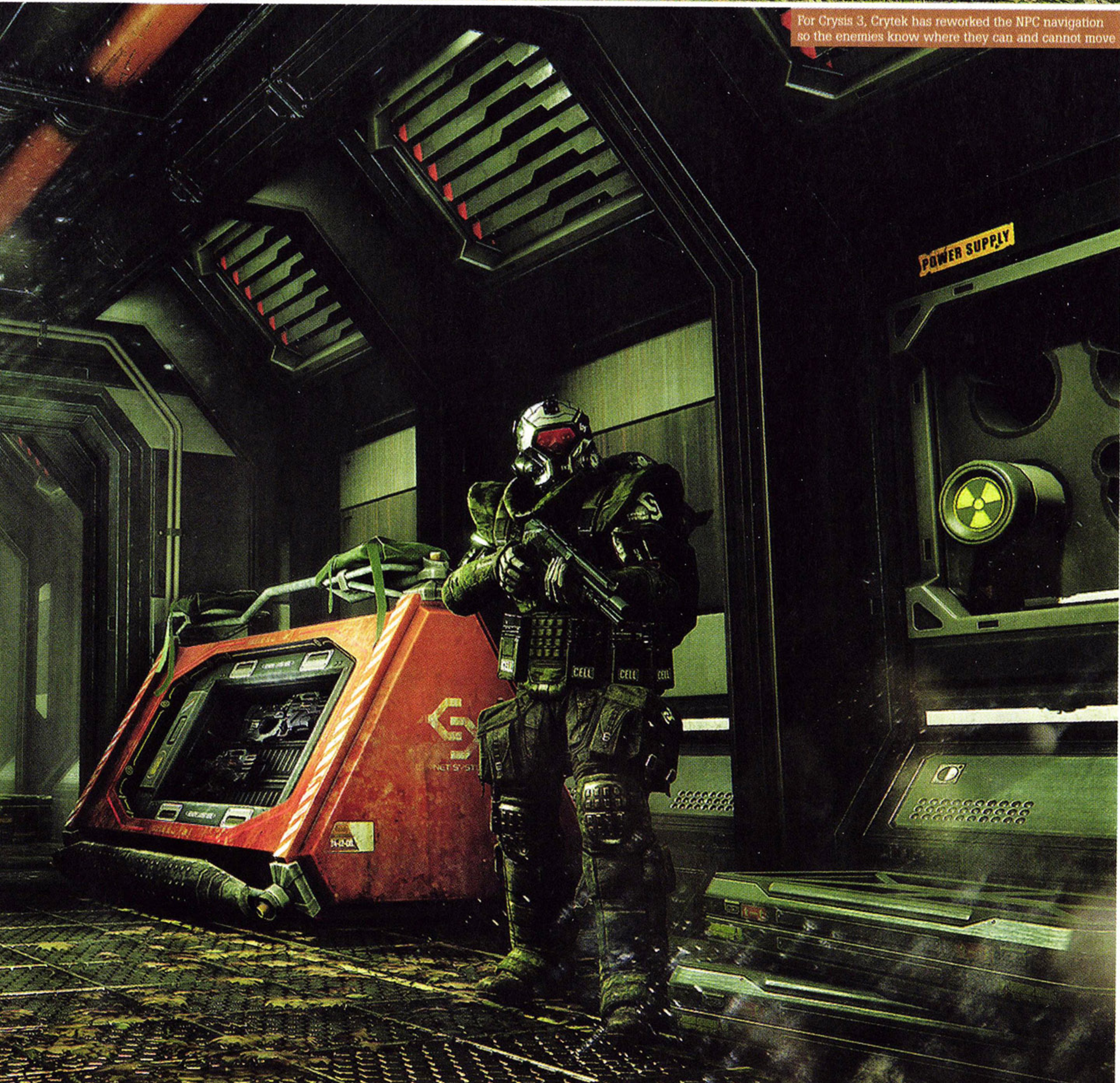
For Crysis 3, Crytek has reworked the NPC navigation so the enemies know where they can and cannot move

Get Smart

Ever since the impressive non-scripted enemy AI in Far Cry, Crytek has had a reputation for crafting engaging combat. With Crysis 2 that renown took a hit when several YouTube videos surfaced showing enemies getting caught up on railings, walking slowly in place next to cover, and struggling to identify their target. Crytek hopes to redeem itself with Crysis 3.

"We've been looking at making sure the lower-level AI systems are bug free," says level design director Chris Auty. "A lot of that comes down to things like navigation and threat detection. For Crysis 3 we've really tried to go through those low-level systems and clean them out to make sure they are working as we want them to be working so the AI is able to navigate correctly, cleanly, and smoothly."

To do so, Crytek created a new piece of technology called a layered navigation mesh that automatically handles movement for the non-player characters. By allowing the engine to control navigation paths based on physical properties of the environment instead of having a designer hand-draw them, Crytek says the performance is more reliable and the NPCs always have an accurate understanding of where they can and cannot go.

Total War: Rome II

Conquer the known world and more

Proud and gleaming under the North African sun, the Roman legions are nonetheless dwarfed by the high walls before them. Behind that daunting obstacle, streets and alleys crisscrossing the hill leading up to the Carthaginian city center portend a grueling march to victory. The vanguard screams the legion's war cry as the siege towers brave the trebuchet-flung rocks and arrows. Defenders mass along the walls and in market squares behind them, ready to throw themselves into any breaches. Numerous though they may be, the Romans would be doomed if it weren't for the massive navy in the harbor, pounding the walls with bow-mounted catapults and disembarking reinforcements onto the beach.

Naval warfare has never played a holistic role in Total War, instead being segregated in both the strategic and tactical layers into troop-ferrying and trade route protection duties. That changed for the better in 2011's Total War: Shogun 2 and its expansion Fall of the Samurai, with ships delivering off-map artillery support during land battles and bombarding structures on the strategic map. Rome II takes a much larger step, allowing armies and navies to fight side by side. Not only does this allow for much bigger battles, as full stacks of land and naval units can enter the battlefield on each side, but it opens doors to new ways of approaching tactical combat and military composition.

Total War's appeal has two major facets. The example above, as shown by Creative Assembly in a recent visit to the Game Informer offices, is an illustration of the first: the best-in-class rendering of dramatic clashes between thousand-plus strong armies. Creative Assembly is stepping up its game yet again for Rome II,

with much more detail on unit faces and custom animations and behaviors by culture. Where every spear levy in Shogun 2 looked and behaved the same, now barbarian hordes flow around disciplined Roman formations, and captains shout contextual orders and encouragements to their men. A wedge of mounted shock troops crashing into a line of infantry looks better than ever thanks to the work being done on depicting weight and momentum in battles.

The bloody impact of a cavalry charge may generate the most headlines, but the series' true depth has always been its continent-spanning grand campaigns. The scenario showcased above is the result of a long chain of events – building the army and navy, developing the infrastructure needed to recruit and sustain them, managing diplomacy well enough to free up your forces for large-scale conquest, and much more. Rome II expands and improves on every one of these strategic aspects.

The map is much bigger than the original Rome: Total War, though Creative Assembly won't divulge its exact boundaries. Every culture in that vast area has its own goals, fighting style, and of course territory. Provinces are laid out differently than in previous Total War games. Resource-producing sections of territory can be captured on their own, without laying siege to the fortress protecting the province's capital. The dev team hopes that pushing more battles out into the open field injects more variety, as grand campaigns typically center on sieges since holing up in a castle is so much easier and has relatively few downsides. The team doesn't want managing your domains to be any more granular than in the past, though, so Rome II streamlines the process by abstracting governing decisions to

the province level.

Micro-managing a large-scale empire is tough on players' attention spans, so with Rome II the developer hopes to streamline governance. Without going into details, Creative Assembly says the new system encourages players to worry about larger matters like whether the Eighth Legion needs to help the Fourth pacify the unruly Gauls rather than manually moving individual units of pikemen around western Italy. This sounds great in theory, but strategy developers have often struggled to implement these kinds of systems well. Given Creative Assembly's impressive track record, though, we doubt the team will fail on the level of Master of Orion 3.

Rome II also introduces an enhanced dilemma system, which puts players on the spot by forcing them to choose a response to a randomly generated event. Shogun 2 features one-off events like foreign traders or missionaries coming ashore, but they are mostly standalone happenstances without huge consequences. Rome II bunches them together into branching storylines that play out across large sections of your campaign. Instead of a simple choice between a military or civil research bonus, the dev team wants players to get the sense of navigating the swirling, treacherous politics of backstabbing Roman noble families. Also to that end, Creative Assembly says it is giving characters in the world more personality than they've had in the past.

Rome: Total War is still dearly beloved to this day. With Creative Assembly coming off the success of its most polished, well-crafted title to date in Shogun 2, the sky is the limit for how far Total War: Rome II can push strategy gaming when it comes out in the second half of 2013. » **Adam Biessener**

Chances of naval battles being better than ever in Rome II approach 100 percent

Legions themselves will develop traits that make them unique; it's not limited to generals this time around

Dividing the Realm

Shogun 2's "realm divide" mechanic, which pits players against the rest of Japan once their clan reaches a certain level of power, is a wonderful solution to the traditional strategy game problem of making the endgame interesting. Creative Assembly hasn't entirely fleshed out Rome II's endgame mechanic, but it definitely follows in Shogun 2's footsteps. At the core of the endgame lies the player's choice of whether to save the Republic or declare himself Emperor. How this plays out is unknown, but the team wants the final act of a grand campaign to follow a more cinematic pace. Expect the finale of Rome II to build to a frenzied climax as social, military, and political forces try to grind Rome to dust under the wheels of history. The potential is clear when you think about the chain dilemma system, increased personality and memory for individual leaders within and without Rome, and the vast asymmetry between Roman factions and other cultures.

Real Time Action?

With Rome II, Creative Assembly is putting a lot of effort into emphasizing "the human face of Total War." Rome II lets players pull the camera all the way in to a single unit's viewpoint, which is a great way to admire the animation of the detailed unit models. It is also an effective way to get a bunch of your troops killed while their general is admiring how pretty his men are instead of commanding the battle. The studio wants players to use this camera, though, so it's adding an unannounced "gameplay incentive" to lure in players. The team is being coy about it, but we hope that it's something more impactful (though ideally as equally hilarious) as the first-person Gatling gun and cannon views in the Shogun 2 expansion.

The ability to temporarily prevent minerals from being harvested is infuriating to play against

StarCraft II: Heart of the Swarm

Investigating the upcoming multiplayer upheaval

The first expansion to StarCraft II brings a changed multiplayer landscape. The handful of new units and abilities on each side may not look like much to an outsider, but this is a game where even moderately skilled players plan their build orders out to the second each facility begins construction. A change as trivial as reducing the armor on a single unit has broad consequences, so Heart of the Swarm's additions are more impactful than they appear at first glance. Each unit fills a gap in current strategies by posing problems to opponents who rely too much on certain builds. This serves Blizzard's goal of promoting diversity in unit mixes, overall strategies, and build orders. The company had not announced a release date as of press time, but public comments from the developers calling the game "99 percent done" and my own hands-on experience with both single- and multiplayer strongly suggest that it won't be long now. Here's a rundown of the new units:

Terran

Widow mines, a non-tech lab factory unit, are incredibly powerful suicide units that punish opponents with an area-effect explosion a few seconds after they attach to a unit from a burrowed hiding spot. Deploying mines is a fantastic way to break up a big mass of units, which Blizzard is explicitly trying to do with this expansion. The terrans' quick recon vehicle, the hellion, can now be upgraded with a mech-like transformation that trades speed for dramatically increased armor and a powerful anti-biological cone-area attack that demolishes otherwise problematic swarms of zerglings and zealots. Warhounds, a new mechanical unit, autocast anti-vehicle smart

missiles that shred foes from stalkers to siege tanks. They should break up the monotony of terran-vs-terran matches, which strongly favor mechanical strategies currently.

Zerg

Breaking heavily fortified enemy lines is considered one of the biggest problems facing zerg players. Blizzard's proposed solution in Heart of the Swarm is the introduction of two new units: the swarm host and the viper. Swarm hosts continuously spawn free locust units while remaining burrowed, granting attrition-absorbing shock troops in larger battles or committing stealthy long-range assaults on their own. Vipers are flying casters that can yank an enemy ground unit from extreme ranges to their position, neutralizing emplaced siege tanks and imperiling expensive units like archons and the mighty thor. Ultralisks can now "burrow charge" after an upgrade, which is effectively a short-range teleport that alleviates the positioning issues the behemoths currently suffer from. Where the terran faction gets a few new units focused on countering

specific unit mixes or strategies, zerg players have more general-purpose tools on the way.

Protoss

The mothership core fundamentally alters the underlying fabric of the protoss game plan – which might forestall the revolts sure to come if Blizzard cuts the iconic carrier as it is considering doing. This unique unit (like the regular mothership, you can only have one) comes out very early and provides three indispensable powers from its roost atop a friendly nexus, each at the cost of energy. Protoss players should think about it like a zerg thinks about her queen. Its short-term turret ability has straightforward applications when your base is under attack. Mass recall, a much-beloved power from the original StarCraft's arbiter, lets you teleport an entire army back to the mothership core. This allows you to raid with impunity or demolish an unguarded enemy expansion when he thinks you're elsewhere. The mothership core also recharges friendly buildings (we require more chrono boost!) or units (more psionic storms is always the correct answer). Upgrading the core brings the terrifying mothership itself online. Other new units include the extreme-range tempest aircraft and the speedy airborne oracle, which is a harasser's dream with its ability to shield mineral fields from being harvested. » **Adam Biessener**
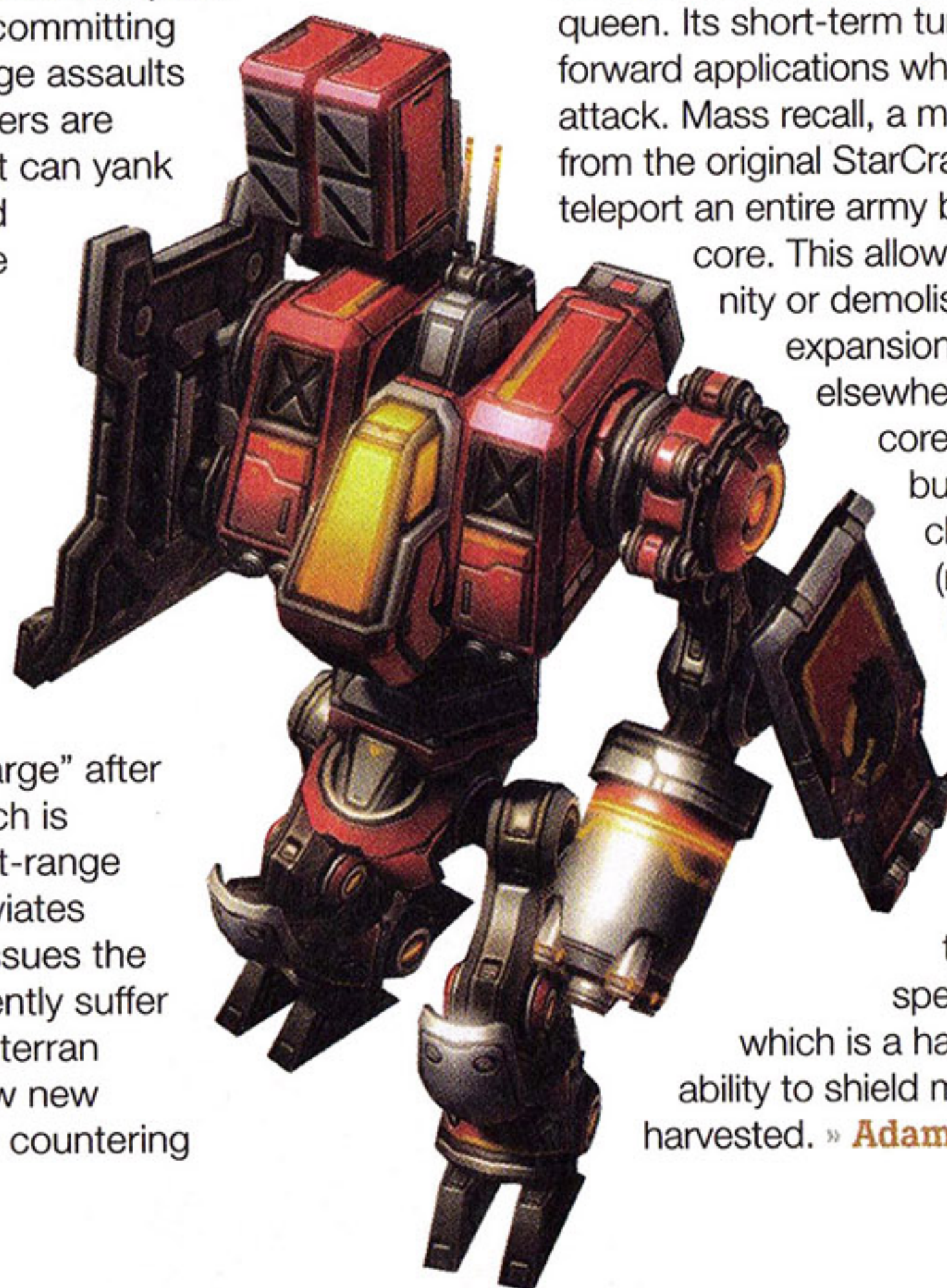
Hawken

Mech combat for a modern gamer

Free-to-play games are quickly approaching a level of polish and quality that rivals retail releases. At first glance, you wouldn't be blamed for assuming that Hawken would appear on a shelf with a $60 price tag on it. We haven't been afforded much playtime yet, but from a strictly graphical standpoint, this free-to-play game looks amazing.

Hawken puts players inside highly mobile mechs in an over-industrialized world where skirmishes are constantly breaking out in the disheveled cities as humans fight for scarce resources. The mechs move around the environments with an impressive grace. They have the weight you would expect of a mechanized suit, but they can also dash around the environment at high speeds. "Our goal was to create a modern-feeling mech game that balanced the faster pace of some past mech titles with the more simulation type experience that others offered," says Jason Hughes, technical director for Hawken and co-founder of Adhesive Games.

Outside of the surprisingly fast-paced action, two of Hawken's most enticing qualities are the sound and visual designs. Mechs groan and creak as they move, and bullets clang against metal with satisfying pops. Creative director Khang Le describes the post apocalyptic visual style with a term used by model makers – kitbashing – which means using every piece of material available to you, even if it's not for the originally intended purpose. "I want it to look as if our mechs were built in World War I, Frankensteined together, on the verge of breaking apart," Le says.

In lieu of limited ammunition, weapons overheat and become temporarily unusable. A fuel meter dictates how often you can use moves like quick dashing or making speedy 180-degree turns. Three classes of mechs are available: heavy, medium, and light. As in any good mech game, you can customize each of them to fit your play style. Along with switching out guns and items, a skill tree is available for players to level their mechs to their specific play-styles. Along with firing on enemies with your mech's guns, your team can also activate stationary turrets in the environment and take advantage of deployable turrets.

Hawken currently has three game modes: deathmatch, team deathmatch, and Siege mode. In Siege mode, players fight to collect energy to power a giant flying ship. If your team powers up the ship, it starts raining down fire on its path toward the enemy base. Once it reaches the base, it sets up shop so your team can run in and take over. Players also fight for control of an anti-aircraft weapon that can counter the airship. Adhesive plans to have a fourth, unannounced mode ready in time for the release later this year as well.

Adhesive Games is currently accepting applications to take part in the beta at www.playhawken.com. Once the game is available, all you have to do is download it to start playing. » **Kyle Hilliard**

The combat stages are multi-tiered, injecting verticality to a genre that has typically stayed grounded
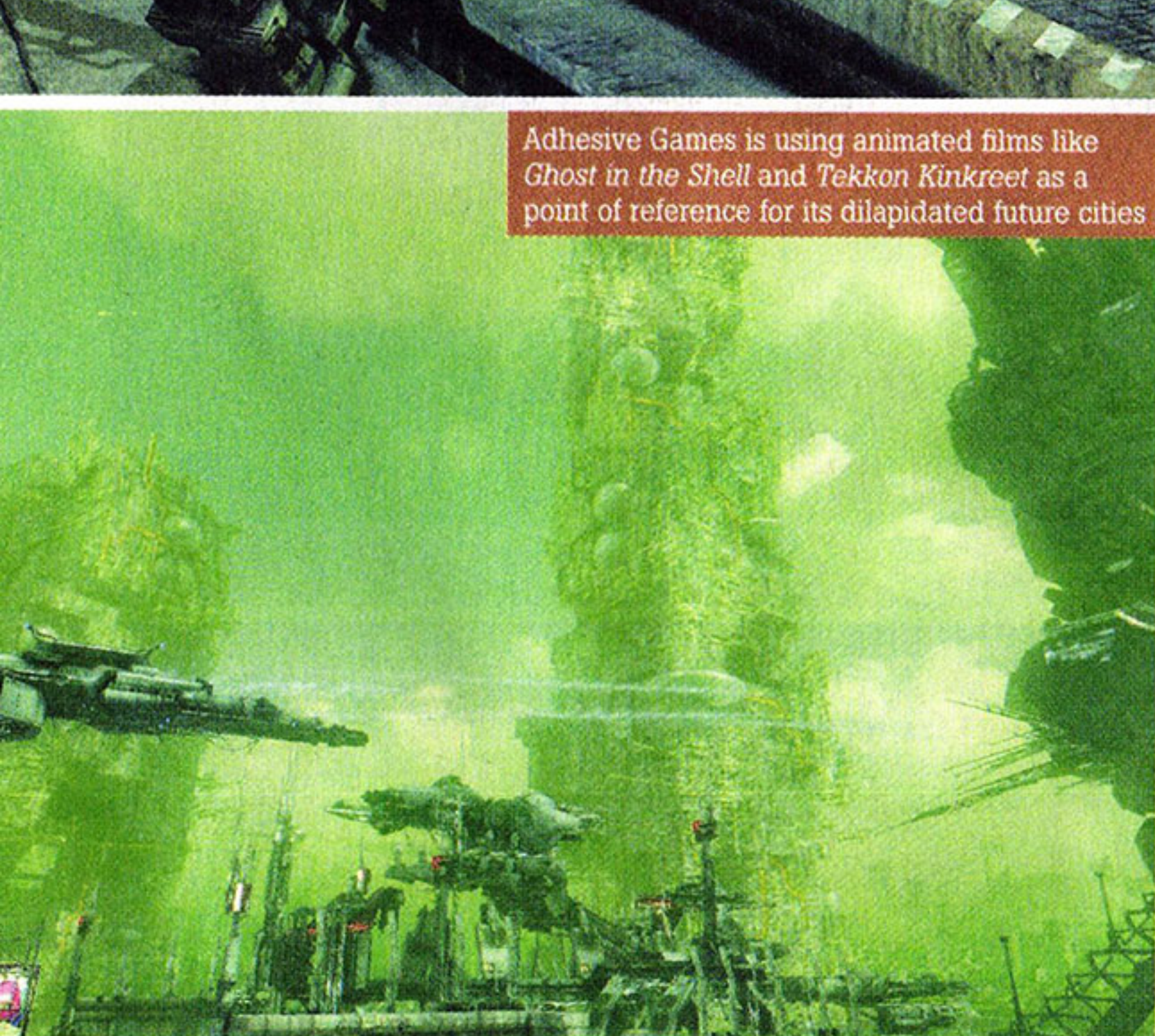
Adhesive Games is using animated films like *Ghost in the Shell* and *Tekkon Kinkreet* as a point of reference for its dilapidated future cities

Monetizing Hawken

Adhesive Games hasn't revealed how it plans to monetize Hawken. Technical director Jason Hughes says the primary focus will be on mech customization. Without going into too much detail, Hughes says there is a point system in place that allows players to acquire additional materials through game progression. The goal for Hawken is to avoid an unbalanced "pay to win" system. "We don't think it will really do Hawken players much good in our eyes, and hurts us as a result," Hughes says.
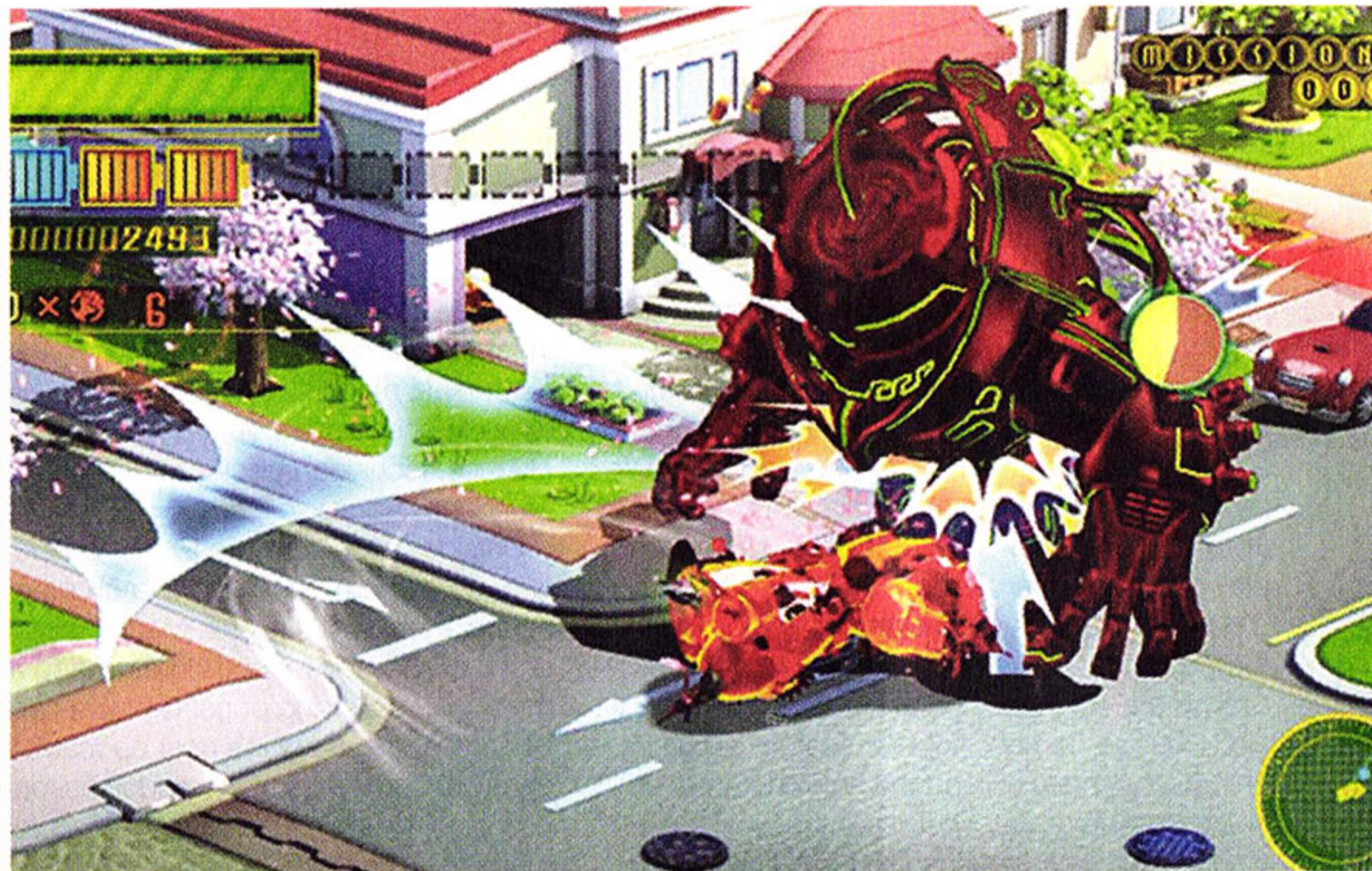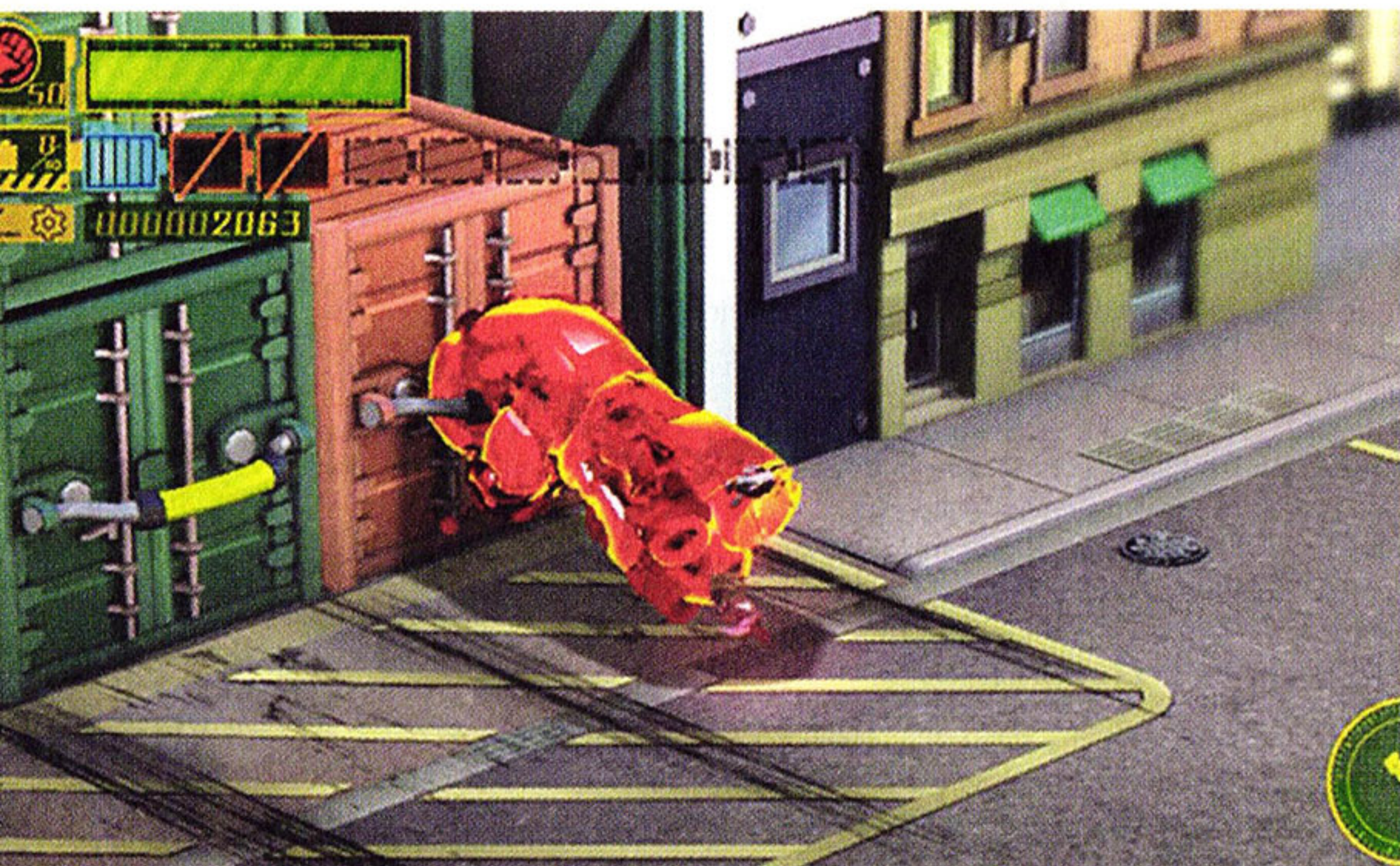
Project P-100

Turning average Joes into the planet's last hope

» **Platform**
Wii U

» **Style**
1 to 4-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Nintendo

» **Developer**
Platinum Games

» **Release**
Holiday

Platinum Games has a history of eccentric action titles, from the ultraviolent MadWorld to the flashy quirks of Bayonetta. Project P-100, its first Wii U offering, is a more family-friendly affair than its previous work. It puts players in control of superheroes with names like Bonzai Man, Vending Machine Man, and Toilet Bowl Man to protect the planet against an alien invasion.

Project P-100 makes frequent use of the Wii U GamePad. Drawing circles around groups of citizens alerts them that it's time to transform into superheroes and join your team. Once your roving band of heroes is big enough, you can perform touchscreen inputs to assemble them into various forms. A circular motion causes them to turn into a giant fist, an upward swipe turns them into a sword, and a sideways "L" shape turns them into a living pistol.

Your touch commands aren't solely of the offensive variety. The debut trailer showcases the heroes forming into a gelatinous green blob that protects against enemy attacks. Ladders and planes can also be formed, allowing for new ways to explore the world. The fist form can pull boxes around, which should come in handy when the gameplay shifts to puzzle-focused areas.

From the early looks at the game, it appears to share elements with Pikmin. Your citizens-turned-heroes are scattered and stunned when attacked by enemies, and you perform revives by walking over them. Keeping large numbers of them alive is in your best interest, as your attacks pack more of a punch if they're backed by plenty of recruits. At least one huge boss fight is included, as the demo concluded with a shot of dozens of heroes standing on the arm of a towering robot. Considering how tiny your heroes appear onscreen, we wouldn't be surprised to see plenty of large-scale boss battles.

Nintendo showcased Project P-100 as a single-player game, and its official website lists the player count at one. Despite this, the debut trailer clearly showcases four groups of heroes with "1P, 2P, 3P, 4P" icons above their heads. We expect to see confirmation of multiplayer shortly, as it's a no-brainer for this type of game. While fans of this style of gameplay may have their eyes set on Pikmin 3 during the Wii U launch window, it might also be worth paying attention to Platinum's newest IP. » **Dan Ryckert**

This sword attack becomes more powerful as more heroes are assembled
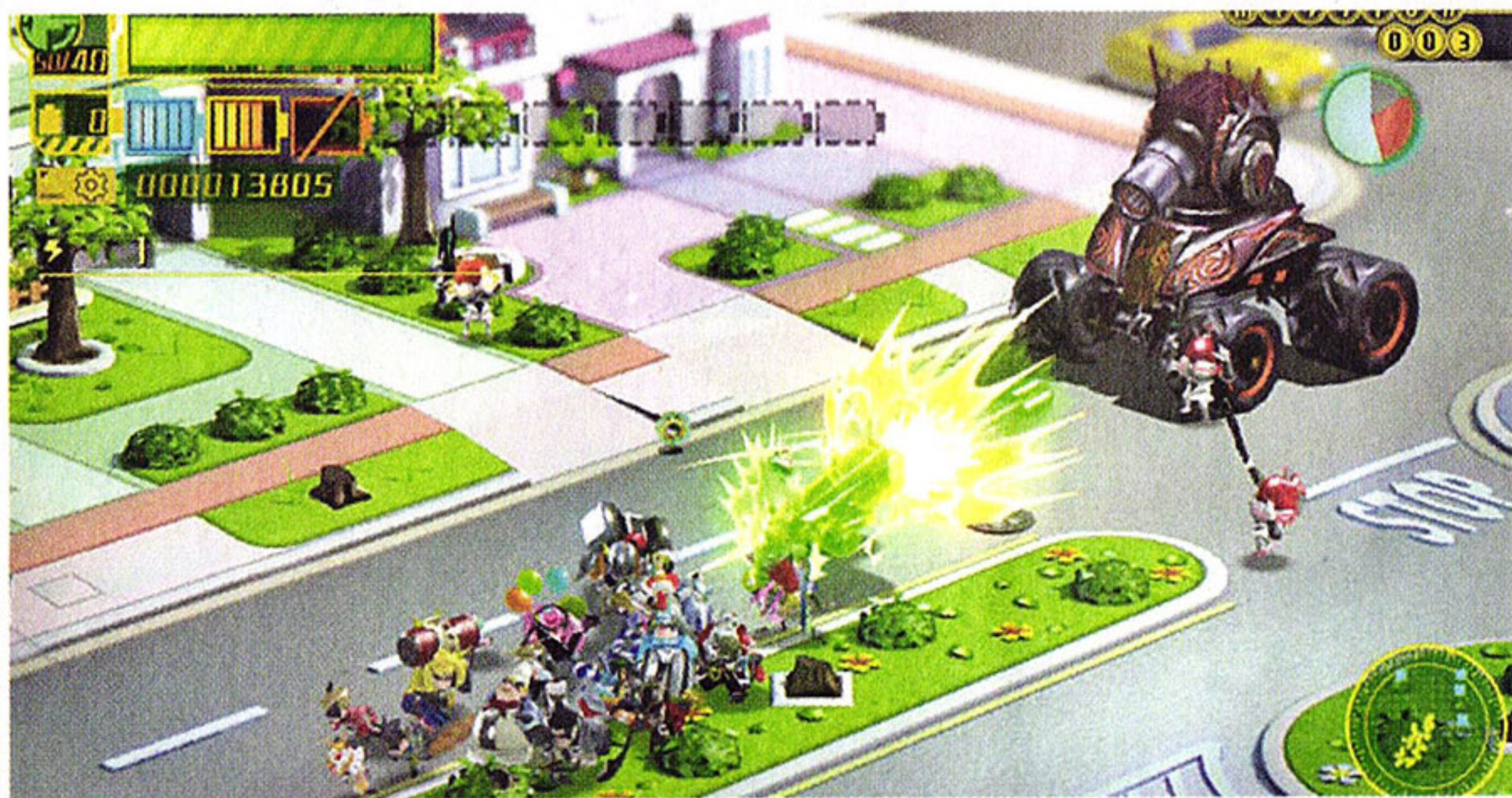
Based on our early look at the game, we expect boss battles
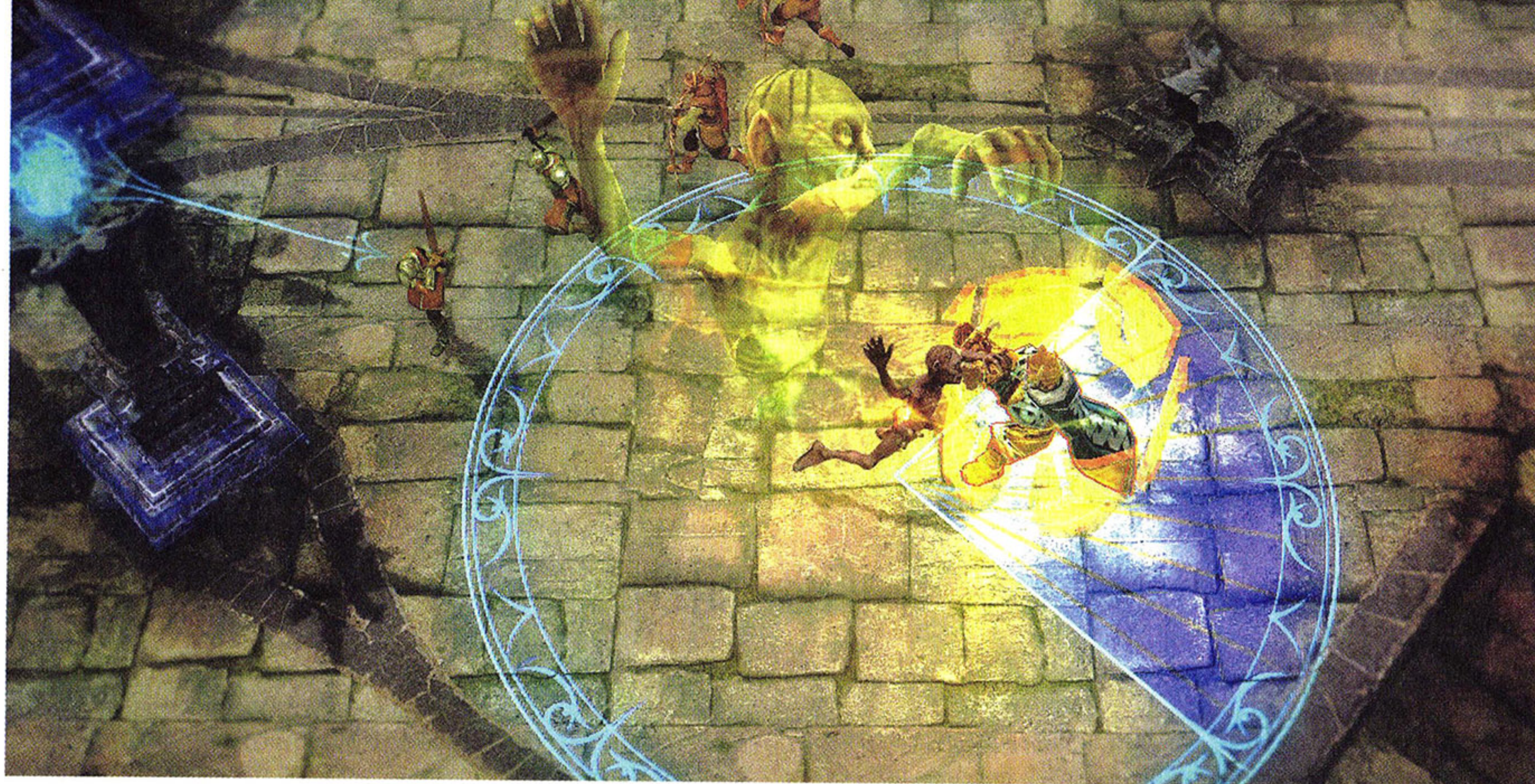
Guardians of Middle-earth

MOBA meets Lord of the Rings on consoles

Outside of Awesomenauts, the Multiplayer Online Battle Arena titles (MOBA) genre is largely untapped on consoles. When Warner Bros. Interactive started looking to capitalize on The Lord of the Rings franchise in a unique way, it enlisted internal studio Monolith (Gotham City Impostors, F.E.A.R., and Condemned) for the job. The team wanted to build a downloadable MOBA that would be fun and functional on a controller. Thus, Guardians of Middle-earth was born.

Guardians features traditional MOBA maps with a mirrored three-lane structure, which allows for plenty of strategy and tactics. Two teams of five face off against each other, with squads of AI "creeps" at the side of their controllable hero units. The goal is to wipe out the other side's towers and as many rival players as you can along the way. Elements of tower defense and offense are in play as you upgrade both your defending towers and offensive creeps. The onscreen mini-map displays the full playing field, showing allies and enemies, standing and taken towers, and the status of shrines. Either team can seize these shrines, which provide stronger team buffs as you control more.

Each player controls a hero unit, known as Guardians. The game ships with 20 guardians ranging from heavy hitters like Gandalf, Galadriel, and Sauron to obscure characters like hobbit Hildifons Took, who "went on a journey outside the Shire and never returned." Each character has a suite of four unique specials like a stun-escaping dash, an arrow shot that slows down enemies, and powerhouse moves with long cooldown timers that do massive damage.

My hands-on time with the game proved that the controller is an effective replacement for a mouse and keyboard. Classic analog-based movement and aiming is augmented by an informative blue circle surrounding your character that displays both the range of your potential attack and the width of the attack cone. A concise radial menu makes assigning skill points easy, which is important since you start from level one at the beginning of each match and climb a flexible upgrade path during the heat of battle.

Guardians also features a single-lane map that encourages face-to-face fighting. With only one front to worry about, players constantly clash, racking up more kills and waiting through more respawns. While you're waiting to be resurrected, you can browse through a clear list of all the actions that just contributed to your death. This should help players feel less ripped-off, as deaths that seem controversial are explained and may provide attack strategies that they can steal and use against others in the future.

Monolith wouldn't speak to the possibility of adding downloadable characters once the game is released, but they seem open to the idea if there's a demand. Based on what we've played so far, that seems likely. » **Bryan Vore**

Watch our video of an entire single-lane match at gameinformer.com/mag

For MOBA Veterans? Warning: Heavy Jargon Incoming!

As a longtime League of Legends and Dota player, Guardians impressed during my hands-on time. Almost everything I love about the genre is there: juking, maintaining or closing range, exploiting lane matchups, ganking, counter-ganking, and more – and it plays great on a gamepad. I don't mind the de-emphasis on jungling and the tiny distance between lanes, since it pushes ganking and team fights even harder. The increased focus on sustainability is fine by me, as it makes my preferred support heroes even more important. The one big exception is the money game. There is no last-hitting or income at all; instead, you progress down a pre-configured set of stat increases as you level up. You have a lot of freedom to define how your power grows as you level, but it's all done outside the match. I like the fact that removing the whole system of item builds gets rid of the genre's worst newbie trap, but it takes away a significant vector for in-match strategy. The overall experience was comparable to a mid-level League of Legends game in a good way. » **Adam Biessener**

It's not looking good for the defending team
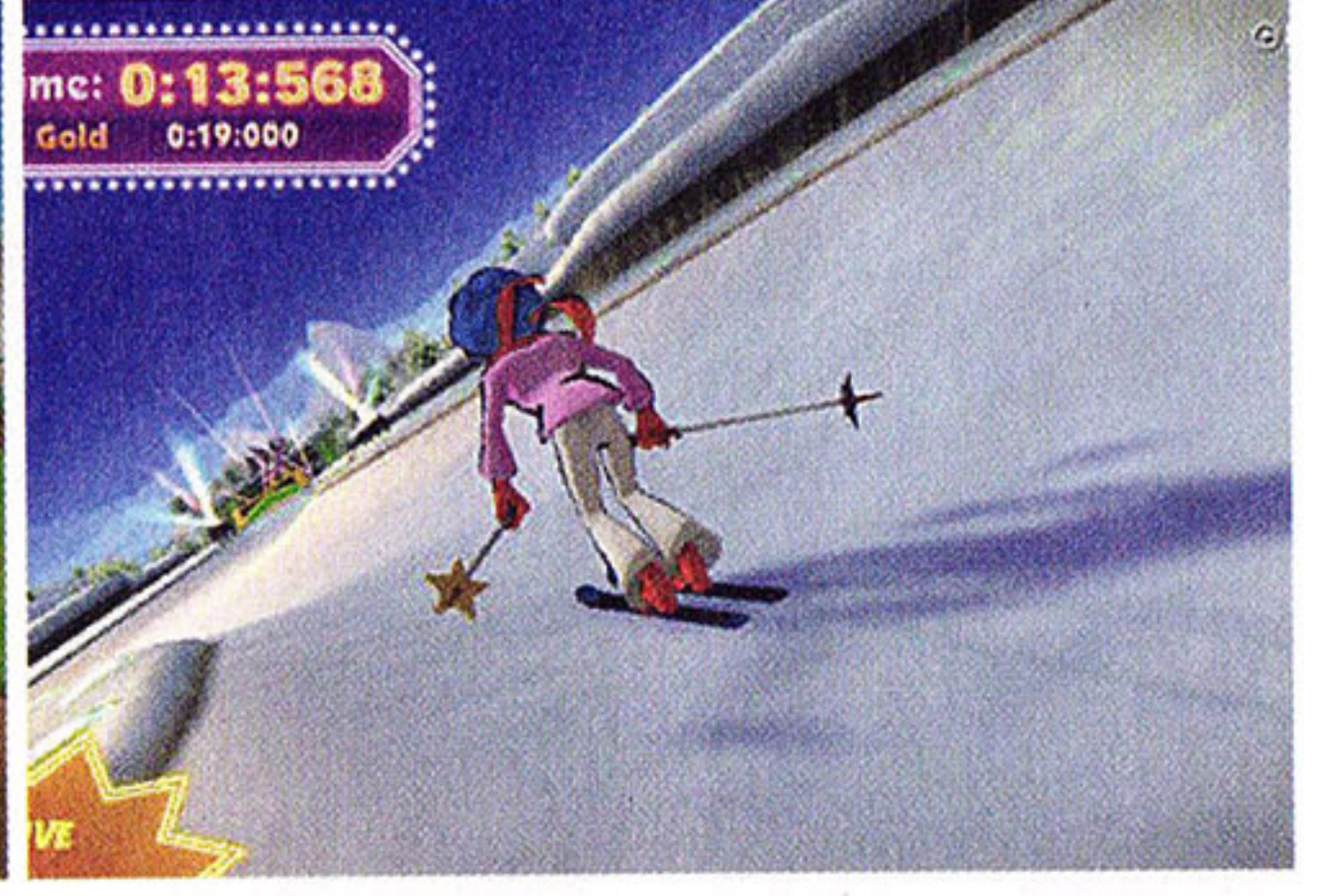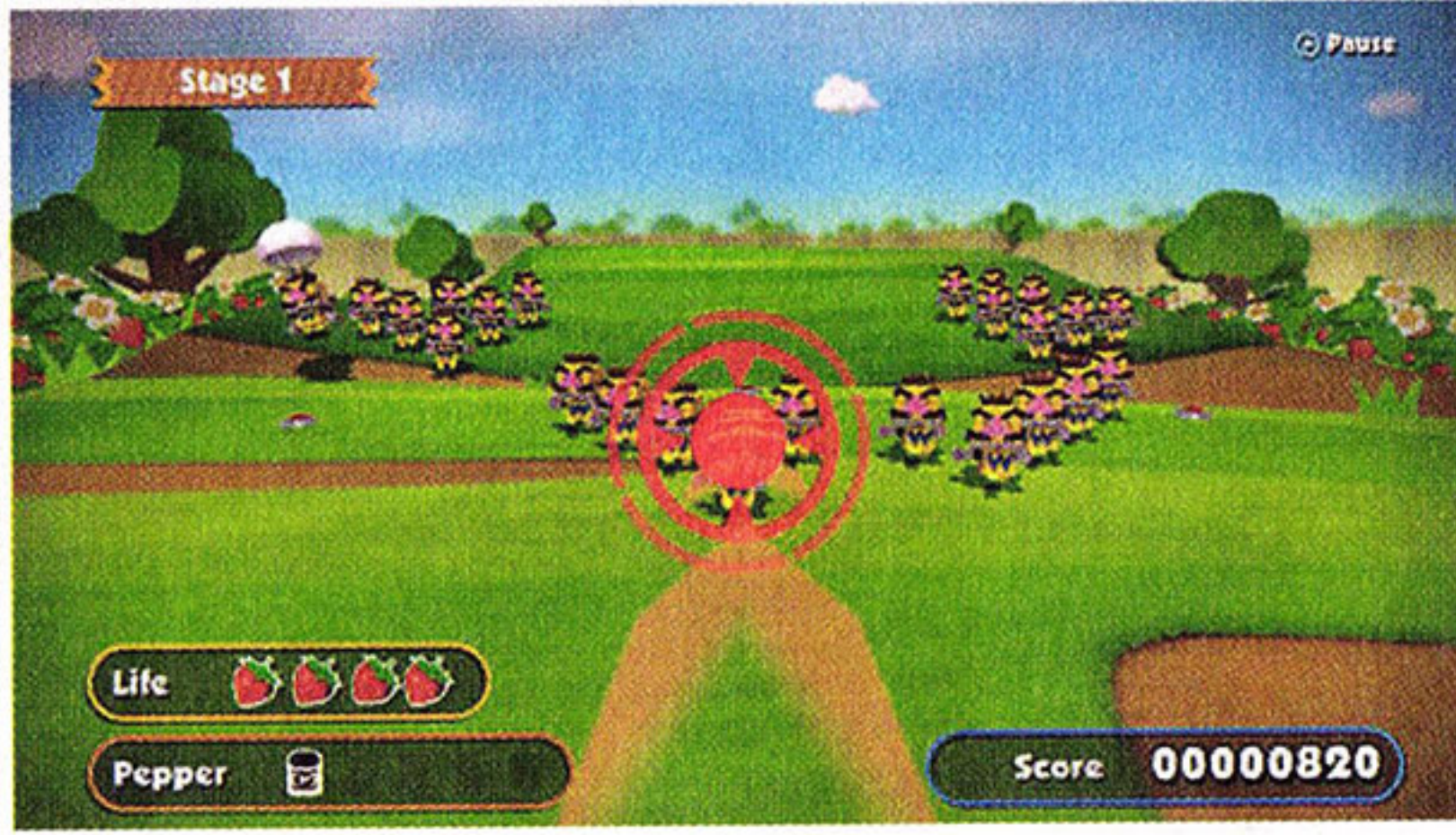
Game & Wario [working title]

Warioware's microgames graduate to minigames

» **Platform**
Wii U

» **Style**
1 to 5-Player Party

» **Publisher**
Nintendo

» **Developer**
Nintendo/
Intelligent Systems

» **Release**
2012

During Nintendo's E3 2012 press conference, the company neglected to announce a new Wii U game in the vein of the absurd Warioware games called Game & Wario (working title). The title uses the Wii U's tech in the strangest ways. Thought it sounds odd, using the Wii U controller to fire a nasal bow and arrow is a lot of fun.

Longer than Warioware's microgames, these are full-fledged minigames. The first game I played involves olfactory archery. A bow shaped like Wario's jagged mustache is displayed on the GamePad screen, complete with an arrow sporting a nose-shaped head on it. The goal is to ward off waves of marching toy Warios. You do so by pulling back the arrow, aiming the GamePad at the incoming enemies, and letting it rip. Aiming for landmines or rubbing a little pepper over the nose-arrow to create an extra powerful sneeze-powered projectile helps clear out more enemies at once. If the mechanical foes overwhelm you, they leap from the TV screen to the touchscreen display on your GamePad, forcing you to tap the little buggers as they attempt to destroy potted plants. The minigame concludes with a battle against a gigantic Wario robot with weak spots that must be systematically targeted and destroyed. Though it's simple, this odd archery game is one of the better experiences I've had with the Wii U.

Another game features Warioware's disco-loving, afro-touting Jimmy and downhill skiing. Players control the slalom speedrun by tilting the Wii U controller left and right. The gameplay unfolds on the Wii U controller, while spectators can watch more cinematic angles of Jimmy launching off jumps and performing stylish tricks on the TV. This ski game doesn't feel more remarkable than any tilt-enabled iPhone game, but I like that onlookers can watch the TV rather than peek over your shoulder.

After playing Game & Wario, I have no idea why Nintendo didn't draw more attention to it during E3. The goofy characters, random scenarios, and charmingly stupid presentation earned plenty of chuckles. While I only saw two of the minigames, Nintendo says many more are included in the Wii U launch title, including a fruit-thieving multiplayer game. » **Tim Turi**

Nintendo Land

Taking the lines (and possibly the fun) out of theme parks

» **Platform**
Wii U

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

» **Publisher**
Nintendo

» **Developer**
Nintendo

» **Release**
Holiday

If you've been paying attention to Nintendo's Wii U strategy, you know that the publisher is going all-in on Nintendo Land. The company is fond of launching new hardware alongside games that are specifically tailored to showcase its abilities (Wii with Wii Sports, MotionPlus with Wii Sports Resort), and this amusement park-themed title is custom-made to show off what the Wii U's GamePad can do. It features a dozen attractions based on the publisher's back catalog, and I recently played three of them.

Based on the Japanese-only NES title Nazo no Murasame-jō, Takamaru's Ninja Castle tasks you with flinging shurikens at paper ninjas. This is accomplished by turning the GamePad sideways, pointing it at the enemy, and swiping your finger forward across the screen. Your toss is determined by the speed of the swipe and the way the GamePad is tilted. As the levels progressed, I encountered enemies that threw their own shurikens and bombs my way. I shot these down in mid-air, sometimes doing damage to nearby enemies if I hit a bomb early enough.

The Zelda-themed Battle Quest allows for up to four players, with one player holding the GamePad and the rest using Wii remotes. Miis dressed as Link progress down a linear pathway, with the remote users swiping swords and the GamePad player shooting arrows. Moving the GamePad around changes your perspective, and the right analog stick is used to fire your bow. The combat isn't exactly rocket science, and the same can be said about the minigame's light puzzle elements. When the Miis arrived at a blocked path, the foot soldiers had to swipe at two spheres while the archer shot an arrow at an elevated sphere. This opened the gate, allowing the team to continue on the pre-determined path. Moving the GamePad to spot enemies was a nice novelty at first, but the bare-bones gameplay left me hoping for more.

My last demo was Donkey Kong's Crash Course, which tasks players with guiding a cart through a massive obstacle course. The entire course is visible via the TV's zoomed-out view, but the GamePad's closer view makes the obstacles easier to navigate. Your cart features two wheels with your Mii's image suspended above it, and you lose a life if it crashes or flips. Tilting the GamePad causes the cart to roll back and forth, while L, R, and the right analog stick activate various ramps and mechanical elements of the course. Checkpoints help to lessen the blow of deaths, but the massive course should still be a challenge to complete.

From what I've seen, I can't imagine Nintendo Land having the same widespread impact that Wii Sports did. I only had a chance to play three of the twelve attractions, but they all seemed extremely basic and lacked the entertainment value of the Wii's pack-in title. I'm intrigued by the capabilities of the Wii U GamePad, but Nintendo Land didn't exactly blow me away through my first experience with the controller. » **Dan Ryckert**

PDP

MUTE

MODE

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GAMING HEADSET
September 2012

INCREDIBLE SOUND

50mm custom drivers with **angled acoustic baffle** for best sound projection.
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AFTERGLOW®

FIFA 13

Putting the weight of the world on your shoulders

Earlier this summer, the soccer world's attention was focused squarely on the Euro 2012 tournament in Poland and Ukraine. Whether it was the impressive production of Portugal's Cristiano Ronaldo, Germany's embarrassing exit, or Spain's dominance, there was always something to talk about. This is what happens when you put some of the best players on the planet on the same stage. FIFA 13 finally embraces the pride and excitement of international club action with a full schedule of friendlies, qualifiers, and tournaments integrated directly into the normal player and manager careers.

After you sign up as a manager for a club team, you get offers from national teams interested in you depending on your current performance and the prestige of your club and league. Each national team has different, realistic objectives for you to complete in your yearly contract, such as qualifying for the world tournament or making it to the semifinals of the big regional tourney. As manager, you control both the national side and your club team at the same time. When an international match comes up, you pick your squad from a deep roster of eligible players.

In the player career, the experience is different. You start with lower attribute ratings and will likely be loaned out to other clubs before earning playing time with your home club. You also have to work your way up the national team ladder by improving your attributes and playing well in national team friendlies and other non-critical games on the calendar.

The AI making this kind of distinction is an important feature of FIFA 13 that filters down to the rest of the game. Players know to ask for more money during the second transfer window if they're having a great year, AI clubs show better logic of who to sell and when, and players are smarter about their requests for playing time (as surfaced via the game's newspaper headlines). A reserve player won't pout about not seeing the field regularly when your team's already packed with superstars, but he will lobby you for a substitution role or for a look in a non-critical match. Unfortunately, this kind of player interaction is absent from your national squad.

The concept of player roles extends to pitching players during the transfer periods. You can make promises of playing time to prospective players looking to sign with your club, and their expectations are based on their skill. FIFA 13 further augments its signing system with the ability to make counteroffers and propose cash-plus-player transactions.

Last year the FIFA series continued building its career structure after FIFA 11 tore the guts out of the mode. Now it is moving forward in dramatic fashion with the long-desired integration of national teams into the mix, which should take the world's game to a new level of power and glory. » **Matthew Kato**

Honing Your Skills

To teach newcomers the finer points of skills like free kicks, dribbling, and lob passes, FIFA 13 features a new collection of drill-based minigames. They also serve as fun and informative exercises for vets. Divided into eight different groupings, each minigame grouping has a bronze, silver, gold, and "skill challenge" level. The successive tiers are not only harder than the previous one, but also slightly different. These minigames are available while you're waiting for a match to load. Successfully completing them lets you accrue achievements/trophies, posts your score to online leaderboards, and earns XP for your EA Sports Football Club.

Enter the ring to the cheers and adoration of your country with a full national squad career
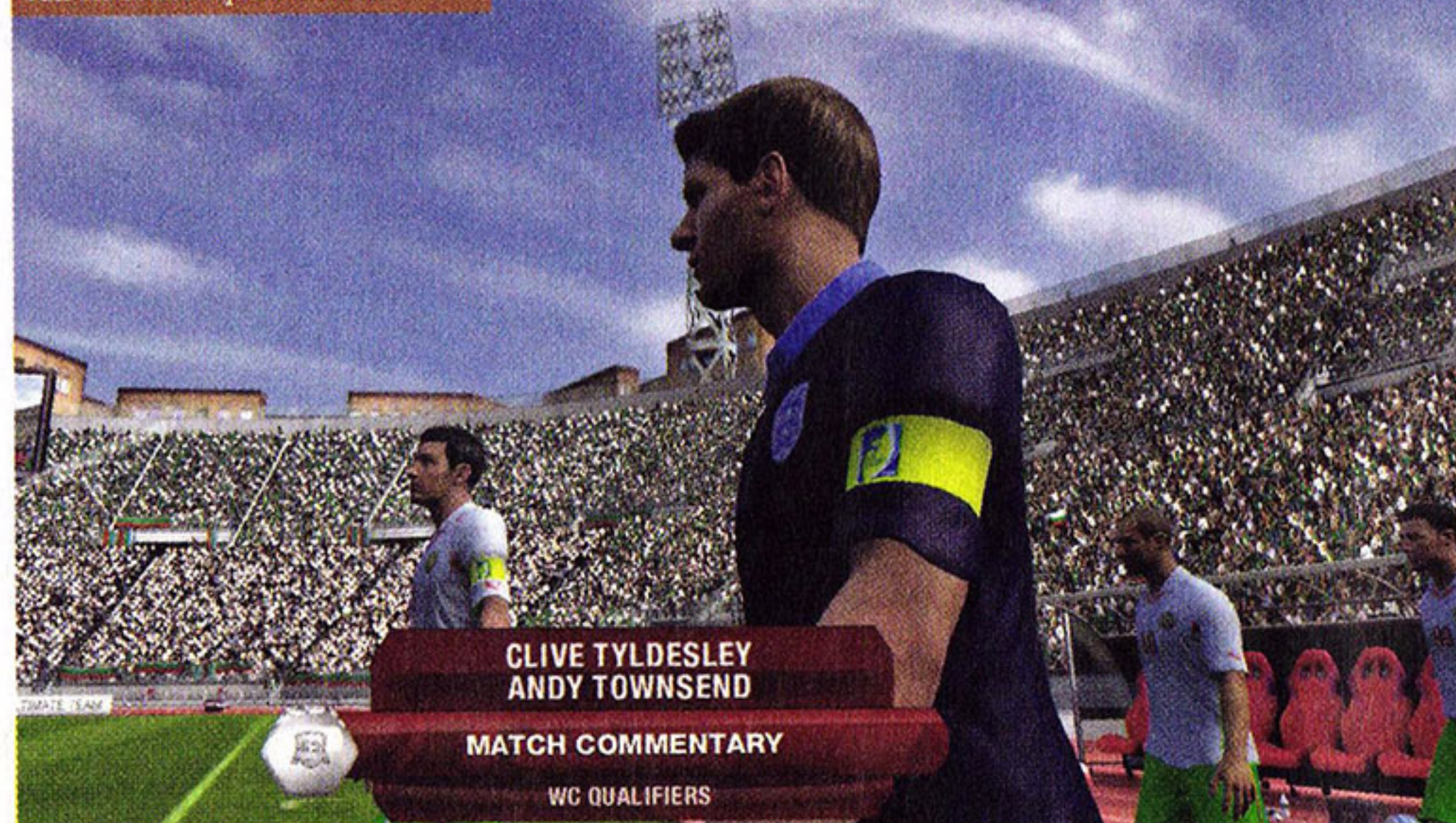
Pro Evolution Soccer 2013

Pro Evo keeps its blistering pace

The Pro Evolution series is known for its breadth of control options. The latest edition further empowers your fingertips and puts the world at your feet. Pro Evolution Soccer 2013 both refines its control set and bolsters its AI to make every touch of the ball an opportunity to do great things. This starts with a good first touch. Instead of first receiving the ball by trapping it, players can immediately transition into flicks, feints, and other moves as soon as the ball touches their feet (assuming they have the skill). You can also showcase your moves with smaller deft dribbling touches that expand upon the already useful slow dribble mechanic.

Developer PES Productions is further fine-tuning by improving manual passes, give-and-gos, and introducing Full Manual Shooting. It's unclear how this latter feature expands on the traditional nine-direction shooting system, as the studio says it involves the standard combination of direction and shooting power. This isn't new, but hopefully the results are.

Defenses keep up with this influx of offensive skill via improved goalkeepers (including different playing styles), good back line defensive shape, and the ability to quickly initiate the counterattack off of a successful tackle. If all this sounds like a lot to absorb, don't worry. New Performance Training drills help you with the controls and different on-the-field situations. You can also improve your players' skills in the career-based Football Life mode by buying equipment items like a recovery trainer, cycling machine, physiotherapist, and more.

The Pro Evolution online mode has lagged behind the FIFA series, so for PES 2013 PES Productions hopes to improve through an online structure where you play against friends in a region-based community as well as against other communities. The more wins you tally, the higher you climb up the Rival Rankings board, and all your stats are collected in a MyPES account that you can broadcast via Facebook.

Sometimes more can be too much, but when you're trying to replicate extraordinary feats of footballing skill – as well as match a strong rival in FIFA – you need to touch all areas of your game to bring out your best. » **Matthew Kato**

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

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

» **Publisher**
Konami

» **Developer**
PES Productions

» **Release**
Fall

New Little King's Story

Your reign continues on Vita

The original Little King's Story is a hidden gem in the Wii catalog, though fans all but gave up hope for a sequel when developer Cing closed its doors. Thankfully, things aren't as bleak for young king Corobo, since Konami is resurrecting this charming kingdom-builder and bringing it to the Vita.

New Little King's Story takes place after the first game. King Corobo is a bit older, but the protagonist aging a few years isn't the only visual change. In the transition to a new developer, the entire art style has shifted. The visuals now have a more anime-inspired vibe, but the colors remain vibrant and the environments still have a storybook quality. Much of the cast is composed of fresh faces, but Corobo isn't the only returning character – favorites like Howser are still around to help guide your realm to prosperity.

Despite the artistic change, the gameplay should be familiar to fans. The action revolves around rebuilding a destroyed kingdom, assigning tasks to your loyal subjects, and fighting the monsters occupying your turf. The formula incorporates elements from Nintendo's Animal Crossing and Pikmin franchises, but has enough charm of its own to prevent it from feeling derivative. New additions for the sequel include touchscreen controls (of course) and the ability to download additional costumes and abilities post-launch.

The previous entry received plenty of critical acclaim, but didn't generate impressive sales. That may be why Konami is taking a less risky approach with the sequel; New Little King's Story is a download-only title from the PlayStation Store. It may not be the royal treatment fans know King Corobo deserves, but it's better to sit on a smaller throne than to lose it entirely. » **Joe Juba**

» **Platform**
Vita

» **Style**
1-Player Action/
Adventure

» **Publisher**
Konami

» **Developer**
AQ Interactive

» **Release**
Summer

They Grow Up So Fast

The new visual style is one of the major changes in store for New Little King's Story. To illustrate the shift, compare these images of young Corobo from the previous game (left) and his new incarnation (right).

gameinformer
GAME OF THE **MONTH**

94 Kingdom Hearts 3D: Dream Drop Distance

Tetsuya Nomura and company deliver another winner in the decade-old Kingdom Hearts franchise. New flowmotion attacks expand the combat system organically and dream eaters bring a fresh approach to both enemies and collectible allies. Not to mention that this is the final pitstop before the long-awaited Kingdom Hearts III.

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 Flawed. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.

4 Bad. While some things work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.

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 #YOLO.

AWARDS

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

Sleeping Dogs

A solid yet unremarkable criminal adventure

7.75

PS3 • 360

» **Concept**
Take players on a crime-filled tour of Hong Kong

» **Graphics**
Decent visuals during gameplay, but cutscenes display stiff facial animations

» **Sound**
A fantastic and fitting soundtrack accompanies your drives around the city

» **Playability**
Hand-to-hand combat feels good, but gunplay leaves something to be desired

» **Entertainment**
Fans of open-world games should find enough to like about Wei's undercover assignment

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

Sleeping Dogs' story is typical gangster fare

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Square Enix **Developer** United Front Games **Release** August 14 **ESRB** M

Saved from the brink of cancellation by Square Enix, the former True Crime: Hong Kong has been reborn and repackaged as Sleeping Dogs. Putting players in the shoes of undercover cop Wei Shen, the game tasks players with infiltrating Hong Kong's expansive Triad criminal organization. The experience is worth playing, but the buggy gameplay makes former publisher Activision's lack of faith in the title understandable.

Sleeping Dogs is organized in a manner similar to Grand Theft Auto's tried-and-tested formula. Wei is free to explore the city at his leisure, performing side quests or story missions whenever he chooses. While the story itself doesn't offer much in the way of creative mission objectives,

a healthy assortment of distractions are available. Wei can arrange drug busts via security cameras, participate in fight clubs and street races, find hidden statues that unlock new melee moves at the dojo, and pray at shrines to increase his maximum health.

Most activities take you down a unique progression ladder. Performing police-oriented duties like drug busts unlocks new gunplay abilities. Staying undercover and performing tasks for the gang levels up your Triad ladder, which grants you new melee skills. Helping the citizens of Hong Kong raises your Face level, which allows you to purchase fancier cars and clothing. Fans of GTA's hidden packages can keep an eye out for dozens of hidden lock boxes throughout the city. They reward you with tons of cash, but there isn't much to spend it on outside of cars, clothes, and food that grants temporary stat boosts.

Fans of Rocksteady's Batman games should enjoy Sleeping Dogs' fighting system, as it features Wei countering and attacking like he's the Caped Crusader. Sleeping Dogs features satisfying (albeit familiar) encounters, and you learn several painful-looking moves throughout the game. You can also pull off brutal environmental attacks. My personal favorite is body-slamming an enemy into a wooden pallet of swordfish heads, impaling him on their sharp noses.

Taking on Hong Kong's underworld with your fists and feet is great, but the gunplay is cookie-cutter by comparison. Shootouts only become frequent later in the game, and their generic nature made me want to charge out from behind cover and deliver a few jump kicks

instead of shooting bullets.

Unfortunately, I encountered several bugs and other issues. During a mission that featured me being driven around, a vehicle blocked the road and I couldn't proceed. While learning a new melee move at the dojo, the game forced me to quit the mission because it didn't recognize that I was performing it correctly. I had to restart one mission multiple times because the non-player character I was supposed to follow wouldn't spawn (although I could hear his voice). On top of bugs like these that forced checkpoint restarts, I also experienced minor annoyances like a lack of transitional animations during combat and lines of dialogue that abruptly cut off.

When everything works correctly, Sleeping Dogs is fun. Combat is rewarding, the leveling system stands out from the open-world pack, and driving feels natural (not to mention fun, considering the ram ability that every car possesses). Even if the game was bug-free, the ho-hum mission structure and unexciting gunplay are still causes for concern.

Sleeping Dogs has enough entertainment value to justify Square Enix's decision to save it from cancellation, but it also displays a lack of polish that makes its troubled development evident. For fans of open-world games, it comes at a good time. Gamers who purchased Saints Row: The Third most likely finished it months ago, and we still don't have a confirmed release window for Grand Theft Auto V. If you're looking to explore the criminal underbelly of a city and get in some trouble, you could do worse than Sleeping Dogs while you wait for Rockstar's top dog. » **Dan Ryckert**

The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim – Dawnguard

Skyrim diverts into the macabre

Style 1-Player Action/Role-Playing **Publisher** Bethesda Softworks **Developer** Bethesda Game Studios **Release** June 26 **ESRB** M

8

360

You don't dabble in Skyrim. Most gamers interested in Dawnguard have probably already devoted a big chunk of time to Bethesda's open-world masterpiece. Though the vampire plotline is a tonal step removed, players should have no illusions; Dawnguard is squarely targeted to folks who have exhausted the base game's substantial storylines and still hunger for more.

Like the civil war plot thread of Skyrim, Dawnguard's story brings you into one of two opposing sides of a conflict. The Dawnguard is a legendary organization of vampire hunters who must prevent a looming undead apocalypse. You gain access to the new crossbow weapons, summon armored trolls into combat, and even develop new abilities as a werewolf, if that's your thing. If you choose the other side, you become a fledgling vampire lord and potentially attempt to bring unending night down upon the world as you drain your enemies' blood. Bethesda has done an admirable job in both plotlines of offering meaningful choices at several junctures, letting you guide how things turn out. Distinct characters and missions are available in both story paths, but don't expect entirely different experiences; most locations and goals echo each other.

Whether delving into the life of a vampire lord or exploring the new werewolf perk tree, I wasn't totally sold on the experience. Your actions in these alternate forms help to improve your monstrous abilities, from turning into mist as a vampire to increased healing from your feedings as a werewolf. The problem is the mechanics themselves; in the heat of battle, transforming takes precious seconds, and you're then forced to play in third-person as you wreak havoc – not Skyrim's strong suit. Moreover, the increased size of your monstrous form doesn't fit through the tight spaces of many corridors, so you have to change back before proceeding. Frankly, I was happy to stick with my powered-up weapons and magic skills when things got really challenging.

I appreciate that no matter your choices, Dawnguard doesn't cling too tightly to its gothic vampire milieu. The Elder Scrolls universe is vast and interconnected, so seeing the tale veer into other planes, long-lost elven races, and forgotten hidden vales is thrilling. New dungeons and outdoor areas provide the sense of discovery and wonder at the heart of the Elder Scrolls experience, and new monsters help the combat feel fresh.

Dawnguard is limited in scope, and its 10-plus hours of playtime is significant, but only a drop in the bucket when compared to its base game's hundreds of hours of quests. I had a blast returning to Skyrim after a few months away. Even so, Bethesda did such a fine job of entertaining me the first time out that Dawnguard feels more like an added bonus than an essential ingredient of the whole. » **Matt Miller**

» **Concept**
Return to Skyrim to confront or join a new vampire threat

» **Graphics**
Nothing substantial has changed from the lush and imaginative visual style of the base game

» **Sound**
Several new characters are well-voiced, and the Skyrim soundtrack continues to amaze

» **Playability**
Vampire and werewolf forms are a focus of this expansion, but exploration and certain attacks (not to mention the forced third-person perspective) are problematic when you're transformed

» **Entertainment**
With meaningful story events and some great new environments, you have good reason to return to last year's role-playing juggernaut

» **Replay Value**
Moderately High

Tony Hawk's Pro Skater HD

Tony creates a new kind of stalefish

Style 1-Player Action/Sports (4-Player Online) **Publisher** Activision **Developer** Robomodo **Release** July 18 **ESRB** T

7.5

360

I vividly remember how the demo for Tony Hawk's Pro Skater on PlayStation sucked me in. With the passing of time and the fall of the franchise, that nostalgic moment has passed and is not fully recaptured in this downloadable title encompassing parts of the first two Tony Hawk games. I wouldn't want it to be exactly the same, but Tony Hawk's Pro Skater HD adds some of its own problems and preserves a few from the original games.

Pulling off insane trick combos and traversing the expansive and varied environments is still surprisingly easy. It may feel like your hands are manipulating the controller like you're doing a Rubik's Cube speed run, but the gameplay is solid enough that your hands can keep up with your mind. Tricks can also be executed with the 360's left analog stick, which I liked – except for tricks where you must tap twice in the same direction. The d-pad, meanwhile, is up to the task, albeit a little stiff.

Robomodo has culled a good selection of levels from the first two games. I particularly like the mall, warehouse, Venice Beach, and the downhill jam from the first game. The level design goes hand-in-hand with the trick system, allowing you to put together all unique runs no matter how many times you play the levels. The injection of manuals and switch stance also creates possibilities.

As strong as the gameplay is, a few hitches take it down a peg. Half-pipes runs are hampered by the fact that your skater tends to drift away from the lip of the pipe while in mid-air. This means that you sometimes land in the middle of the transition and fail landings you would have made in the original games. Moreover, the lack of transition animations robs the skating of fluidity and sometimes makes skaters jarringly jump to new railings. The physics and collision systems also sometimes propel you spectacularly into the air.

Adding to these technical problems, one aspect of the original titles that hasn't aged well is the objectives. Kudos to developer Robomodo for adding new objectives to the levels in the spirit of the original games, but most of these are fetch quests. While I don't love the crazy objectives in the later Tony Hawk games, having to collect X amount of objects in a level wears thin. Moreover, the menu has a map of all the collectibles in the level – including the secret tape and hidden areas. This undercuts the fun of exploring the levels.

A handful of multiplayer games – Trick Attack, Graffiti, and my favorite, Big Head Elimination mode – are slightly more successful. In Big Head mode you must constantly pull off tricks so your head doesn't swell up and explode before your opponent's.

Tony Hawk's Pro Skater HD recreates the gameplay that made the franchise famous, but to mixed results. It lands the trick, but doesn't do it cleanly. » **Matthew Kato**

» **Concept**
An uneven translation that proves that the original titles were not saints either

» **Graphics**
The game looks better than the first two, but it still suffers from stilted animations every now and again

» **Sound**
Includes only one song from the first Tony Hawk game, followed by six from THPS 2 and seven new tunes

» **Playability**
Ramp runs are a little harder because your character lands tricks farther down the transition than the original, which causes some biffs

» **Entertainment**
This is fun (and not just for the blast of nostalgia), but its limitations are exposed

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

The XBLA Summer of Arcade Exception

Tony Hawk's Pro Skater HD is one of Xbox 360's Summer of Arcade titles, but it will also come out on PSN later in the summer. We'll evaluate that version at a later date and publish a separate review if it warrants one. If not, consider this the definitive review.

The Last Story

When good ideas go wrong

6

Wii

» **Concept**
A Wii-exclusive RPG from the creator of Final Fantasy

» **Graphics**
Character models look great, but the environments are ugly and muddy in comparison

» **Sound**
Nobuo Uematsu holds up his end of the bargain with a memorable soundtrack, and the voice actors do the best they can with the dialogue they're given

» **Playability**
Camera problems and sluggish response make some battles frustrating. I recommend using the classic controller instead of the remote/nunchuk combo

» **Entertainment**
The potential for fun is here, but sloppy execution and a predictable story hold things back

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

Multiplayer In An RPG?

In a rare move for a traditional role-playing game, The Last Story has both cooperative and competitive multiplayer options. The co-op mode pits players against super bosses, and requires teamwork and coordination. The competitive mode involves standard deathmatch and team deathmatch. Both modes set character levels equal, so you don't need to finish the game before participating. I had fun with these matches and enjoyed seeing the The Last Story's mechanics applied in a different context, but the addition of multiplayer isn't enough to make the game worth buying.

In my years of enjoying role-playing games, I've saved multiple princesses-in-disguise, toppled countless evil empires, and learned the value of teamwork and friendship several times over. After playing The Last Story, I can add another mark under each of those columns, along with several other well-worn RPG conventions. The Last Story makes no attempt to evade or disguise these genre clichés, relying instead on its action-heavy combat to fill the entertainment gap. If the battle system was executed well, that strategy might have worked.

The Last Story's problems encroach from multiple fronts, but the first one players encounter is the narrative. A mercenary named Zael is the main character. His village was burned down when he was young, and now he dreams of becoming a knight. Zael and his ragtag band of swords-for-hire get wrapped up in a war between two nations – but Zael alone can bring about peace and save the planet. Does that sound familiar? Yes, it does.

Because the predictable tale holds virtually no surprises or fresh angles, I couldn't get invested in the boilerplate world or plot. Zael lacks strong convictions and falls flat as a hero, while each of his companions are defined by a single personality hook (e.g. the ladies' man, the drunkard, etc.). Actually, let me take that back; one character has two personality hooks. The villains are equally shallow – evil suitor, evil count, evil king – resulting in a general lack of drama throughout the 20-hour adventure. For instance, the final stretch throws a twist at players that the game treats like a big reveal, despite the fact that it is telegraphed hours in advance.

A familiar story isn't necessarily a kiss of death, assuming that a game can innovate in other areas. The Last Story tries to pull this off, and I give it due credit for attempting to jettison the conventions of RPG combat. Zael and his friends fight in fast-paced battles with plenty of strategic potential, but with no cumbersome menus or interface to slow down the action. Players only control one character (usually Zael), leaving the rest to AI. Pressing the analog stick toward opponents initiates an attack automatically, so button mashing isn't necessary. Magic consists of laying enchanted circles down on the ground, which have various effects on those standing inside them, and different effects when diffused. All of these ideas sound great in practice, but something went wrong during the transition from conception to implementation.

Combat wasn't adequately play-tested for fun or functionality. It's enjoyable for the first few hours, but gets dull quickly since your characters develop so few abilities. I used the same handful of skills and strategies for the whole second half of the game, which kills any sense of progression or growing power. Zael can eventually issue commands to party members, but you don't have enough control over their positions to execute a strategic coup. Plus, you can only issue commands when a meter is full, making it hard to count on in a pinch. Not that I was in a pinch often; most battles are extremely easy, so delving into tactics seems pointless since victory is assured regardless. That goes out the window late in the game, where a few boss fights are made difficult by the sloppy, imprecise controls.

The lack of polish throughout the experience makes The Last Story hard to appreciate, even when other things are going well. Slowdown and a choppy framerate plague the battle system, and are most prevalent when they are most inconvenient. Taking cover against a wall or behind a pillar suddenly inexplicably makes enemies lose track of Zael, even if they are only feet away and looking right at him. Heaven help you if you want to do a side quest, because you won't find any in-game guidance. You talk to random townspeople, hope one of them gives you a quest, and then keep track of where they are and what they want manually. Even the epilogue chapters are buried under obscure conditions, meaning that some players may think they've beaten the game before the credits roll and the new game plus option opens up.

The Last Story is the latest project from Final Fantasy creator Hironobu Sakaguchi, and industry luminary Nobuo Uematsu composed the soundtrack. Previous collaborations involving these two legends have resulted in titles like Final Fantasy IV, Chrono Trigger, and Blue Dragon. I had high hopes for this Wii-exclusive RPG. Given its pedigree, I never imagined that it would fail to meet the low bar set by dozens of middling entries in the genre. » **Joe Juba**

Resonance

Something old and something new

8

PC

Point-and-click adventures aren't the industry's blockbusters, and they don't establish developers as major players. If a team is creating an adventure game in this day and age, you know that a desire for wealth and fame isn't the driving force; it's passion. That love for the genre shows through in Resonance. Its excellent writing and believable characters follow in the footsteps of the adventure game greats, while twists on the familiar formula keep the surprises coming.

As a narrative-driven experience, Resonance's best moments come from its cast. The story follows four characters who meet in the wake of a mysterious explosion, then work together to find out the cause and prevent further incidents. Saying more than that would reveal too much, and unraveling the plot is part of the fun. The four main characters are variations on standard archetypes (nerdy scientist, gruff cop, etc.), but they are well-written and don't always act as you expect, resulting in some cool and memorable developments.

If you've played any of the '90s adventure games from LucasArts or Sierra, the basic controls are easy to grasp. You click on things, and characters grab them, talk to them, or say something about them. Where Resonance sets itself apart from its predecessors is the implementation of the memory system, which essentially gives players a mental inventory in addition to

standard physical objects. The concept works great; your memory allows you to talk to characters about events or objects instead of just showing them things you're carrying. Since any object in the world can be dragged to memory, this adds a new degree of freedom and invites a different kind of experimentation than the usual "use this item on this item" crutch.

For all its innovation, Resonance falls into some old traps. It generally avoids item-combination puzzles, but that makes them more unexpected and aggravating when they do happen – especially since your required components could be split among multiple characters' inventories. Resonance is also short, clocking in around seven hours for me. That isn't a problem from a value perspective (it costs $10), but it limits how much the characters can use their unique skills. The four leads still have opportunities to shine, but more time in the spotlight would have made even more compelling heroes.

Resonance feels like a lost classic from the golden age of adventure gaming. It has some of the same shortcomings, but it also captures the thrill of exploration, the satisfaction of figuring out interesting puzzles, and the payoff of a well-told story. These elements demonstrate a reverence for the genre that can't be manufactured, and anyone who shares the same passion shouldn't miss Resonance. » **Joe Juba**

» **Concept**
A point-and-click adventure incorporating a modern narrative style

» **Graphics**
Looks like an adventure game from the '90s. That's supposed to be a compliment

» **Sound**
Quality voice acting helps make the characters convincing

» **Playability**
A few puzzles have obtuse solutions, but most situations just require experimentation and conversation

» **Entertainment**
Adventure game fans should enjoy Resonance's combination of storytelling and puzzle solving

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

Office chair

Kingdom Hearts 3D: Dream Drop Distance

Kingdom Hearts III Is Coming: The Game

8.25

3DS

gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH

» **Concept**
Bring monster collecting and 3D to the Kingdom Hearts franchise

» **Graphics**
Visuals are crisp, colorful, and creative. The framerate holds steady in all but very rare cases

» **Sound**
The excellent voice cast impresses once again (except the atrocious Beat dialogue). The classical music in the *Fantasia*-inspired level steals the show

» **Playability**
Combat works smoothly, but constantly digging through menus gets to be a drag

» **Entertainment**
This sets the table for Kingdom Hearts III, so jump aboard if you're looking for a quality refresher course

» **Replay Value**
Moderately High

While some players won't tune into the Kingdom Hearts series again until the title includes a "III," others keep up with the new installments no matter what. Dream Drop Distance is one of those titles that reaffirms your faith in Kingdom Hearts (like Birth by Sleep) rather feeling like an obligation (like Re:coded).

The story picks up after Re:coded with Sora and Riku tasked by Yen Sid (the sorcerer from *Fantasia*) to take the Mark of Mastery exam, become keyblade masters, and grow powerful enough to face the coming of villain Master Xehanort. To pass, they must awaken seven sleeping worlds based on Disney properties, as usual.

Some levels are new to the series, like *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, while stages based on *Tron: Legacy* and *Pinocchio* feel new since you're dabbling in different areas that weren't in the previous games. The stages are entertaining and introduce creative exploration mechanics via "reality shifts," like drawing a line on the touchscreen to zip up to higher platforms, or doing a music minigame to open new areas.

Combat this time around is based entirely around dream eaters. These colorful creatures, based on animals like elephants, cats, and dinosaurs, serve as your primary enemies (nightmares) and allies (spirits). Rather than catching them all like Pokémon, you craft them using recipes. They level up by fighting at your side or via a variety of minigames. In turn, they each have a custom ability board that serves as Sora and Riku's primary upgrade mechanic. Petting and feeding spirits to get the most out of them is cumbersome, and I felt obligated to constantly check my boards and deal with pesky loading. Some kind of alert that you could put on abilities you're gunning for would have alleviated much of this frustration, since I enjoyed the ability board system overall.

The mix of physical attack specials and magic is effective once you get the right combo. You're always unlocking something new, and I loved experimenting and finding surprisingly powerful abilities. The new flowmotion attacks allow you to perform environmental specials at almost any time with no cooldown time. These moves are integrated smoothly into the traditional battle system; you'll spring off a wall and drill into an enemy, spin around a pole and smash foes in a wide area, or grab stunned nightmares and toss them across the map.

Since you're playing as both Sora and Riku, Square Enix

decided to have more of a back-and-forth of control this time rather than entirely separate campaigns like in Birth by Sleep. I'm torn on this new "drop" mechanic that forces you to change characters when a timer runs out. It allows you to keep up with both characters' stories regularly, and it creates cliffhangers similar to TV episodes, but switching characters can be disorienting and annoying. The negative side of the drop system is softened by several options to extend your timer, but there are a few gates throughout the game that force you to drop to proceed.

I found the standard difficulty mode to be a nice pleasant stroll without the need for too much grinding. This all screeches to a halt at one of the final bosses. Not only is the fight disproportionately hard, it also includes a timed touchscreen minigame that shoots you back to an earlier stage of the fight if you fail.

Fans who are tired of Kingdom Hearts side-stories should be glad to know that this is definitely the last game before Kingdom Hearts III. I'm not going to tell you why, but the fact is made very clear. If you want to know the setup for the next big entry, you have to play this game to find out what's in store for the conclusion of the Xehanort arc. You could just watch some cutscenes online, but you'd be cheating yourself out of a lot of fun. » **Bryan Vore**

Theatrhythm Final Fantasy

Solid rhythm gameplay meets a legendary tracklist

8

3DS

» **Concept**
Tap and flick along to dozens of the best Final Fantasy tunes ever

» **Graphics**
The cutesy and colorful art style suits all the characters and monsters well

» **Sound**
The greatest tunes the Final Fantasy universe has to offer, which is saying a lot

» **Playability**
Simplistic to a fault at times, but unlocking the highest difficulty tests your rhythm and precision

» **Entertainment**
A great time for any video game music fan or appreciator of rhythm games

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

Final Fantasy games are adored for their music just as much as their stellar stories and RPG gameplay. Just one measure of any Nobuo Uematsu composition is enough to get your nostalgic juices flowing. Theatrhythm allows players to enjoy a plethora of Final Fantasy tunes by tapping along to the rhythm on their 3DS. The basic formula is simple and fun, despite some useless experience based-progression garnish.

All the favorites are here, from the rousing 8-bit battle theme you killed your first goblin to in the original Final Fantasy to the distorted guitars of Final Fantasy XIII. Your job is to tap and flick the stylus to the melody as colorful notes pass by on the screen. The game recognizes every move without flaw. You only have your own lack of rhythm to blame if you fail a song, but that shouldn't happen often given that the game is easy to a fault on all but the most challenging difficulty level.

Theatrhythm allows you to customize a battle party of popular characters, including charming cartoony versions of favorites like Cloud and Terra. They don't do much aside from prance across fields and aimlessly hack away at monsters, but they look adorable doing it. Your party acquires experience points and items as you progress, but I didn't notice any significant change to the core gameplay despite my characters leveling up and automatically tossing around potions and other items. The hollow progression feels like an excuse to play the iconic victory fanfare at the end of each piece. Despite feeling useless, the superfluous layer of complexity doesn't detract from the fun.

Players can jump around the series timeline to play a collection of three tracks from a specific game, take on tunes at higher difficulties in challenge mode, or team up with a buddy to tackle random ditties in the chaos shrine. Up to four players can play together locally in Chaos Shrine mode, but sharing the burden of missed notes is more nuisance than fun and can lead to quick game overs.

As a big Final Fantasy fan and enthusiast of video game music in general, I love being able to appreciate these classics in a new way. I'll always get a chill listening to the intense orchestral version of "One-Winged Angel" or the happy-go-lucky chocobo theme. The tacked-on progression system may be unsatisfying, but it doesn't stop Theatrhythm from being a fun, simple rhythm game with an amazing musical library. » **Tim Turi**

PLAYSTATION 3

Title	Score	Date
Ace Combat: Assault Horizon	8.25	Dec-11
All Zombies Must Die	7.5	Mar-12
Amy	3	Mar-12
Armored Core V	6.5	May-12
Asura's Wrath	8.5	Apr-12
Awesomenauts	8.5	Jul-12
Battlefield 3	9.25	Dec-11
Binary Domain	7.5	May-12
Birds of Steel	7	Jun-12
Blades of Time	4.5	May-12
Crysis	8.25	Dec-11
Darkness II	7.5	Mar-12
Devil May Cry HD Collection	8	May-12
Dirt Showdown	7.5	Jul-12
Disney Universe	6.5	Dec-11
Dragon's Dogma	8.5	Jun-12
FIFA Street	7.25	May-12
Game of Thrones	6	Jul-12
Ghost Recon: Future Soldier	7.5	Jul-12
Gotham City Impostors	8	Apr-12
Grand Slam Tennis 2	8	Apr-12
House of the Dead: Overkill Extended Cut	8	Dec-11
Inversion	6	Aug-12
Jak and Daxter Collection	9.25	Mar-12
Journey	9	Apr-12
Kingdoms of Amalur: Reckoning	8	Mar-12
LEGO Batman 2: DC Super Heroes	8.25	Aug-12
Lollipop Chainsaw	7.5	Aug-12
Lord of the Rings: War in the North	5.5	Dec-11
Major League Baseball 2K12	6.75	May-12
Mass Effect 3	10	May-12
Max Payne 3	9.25	Jul-12
MLB 12: The Show	8.75	May-12
NASCAR Unleashed	7	Dec-11
NCAA Football 13	8.75	Aug-12
Need for Speed: The Run	7.75	Dec-11
NeverDead	4	Mar-12
Nexuiz	6	May-12
NFL Blitz	8	Mar-12
Ninja Gaiden 3	6	May-12
Okabu	8	Dec-11
Payday: The Heist	6.5	Dec-11
Prototype 2	8.5	Jun-12
Quantum Conundrum	8.5	Aug-12
Ratchet & Clank: All 4 One	8.75	Dec-11
Rayman Origins	8.5	Dec-11
Resident Evil: Operation Racoon City	6	May-12
Ridge Racer Unbounded	6.75	Jul-12
Rocksmith	8.25	Dec-11
Saints Row: The Third	9	Dec-11
Shank 2	7	Apr-12
Silent Hill HD Collection	8	Apr-12
Silent Hill: Downpour	7	Apr-12
Sims 3: Pets, The	7.5	Dec-11
Skullgirls	8	Jun-12
Skylanders: Spyro's Adventure	8	Dec-11
Sniper Elite V2	8.25	Jul-12
Sonic Generations	6.75	Dec-11
Sorcery	6.75	Jul-12
Soulcalibur V	8.5	Mar-12
Spec Ops: The Line	7.75	Aug-12
Spider-Man: Edge of Time	6.5	Dec-11
SSX	7.75	Apr-12
Starhawk	7.5	Jul-12
Street Fighter X Tekken	8.75	May-12
Syndicate	8	Apr-12
Tales of Graces f	7.75	Apr-12
Test Drive: Ferrari Racing Legends	6.5	Aug-12
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 13	8	May-12
Twisted Metal	8.5	Apr-12
UEFA Euro 2012	6.75	Jun-12
Uncharted 3: Drake's Deception	9.5	Dec-11
Walking Dead Episode One: A New Day, The	8.25	Jul-12
World Gone Sour	6.75	Jun-12
Yakuza: Dead Souls	7.75	May-12

XBOX 360

Title	Score	Date
Ace Combat: Assault Horizon	8.25	Dec-11
Alan Wake's American Nightmare	7.75	Apr-12
All Zombies Must Die	7.5	Mar-12
Amy	3	Mar-12
Armored Core V	6.5	May-12
Asura's Wrath	8.5	Apr-12
Awesomenauts	8.5	Jul-12
Battlefield 3	9.25	Dec-11
Binary Domain	7.5	May-12
Blades of Time	4.5	May-12
Darkness II	7.5	Mar-12
Devil May Cry HD Collection	8	May-12
Dirt Showdown	7.5	Jul-12
Disney Universe	6.5	Dec-11
Dragon's Dogma	8.5	Jun-12
Fable Heroes	4	Jul-12
Fez	9.25	Jun-12
FIFA Street	7.25	May-12
Forza Motorsport 4	9.25	Dec-11
Game of Thrones	6	Jul-12
Ghost Recon: Future Soldier	7.5	Jul-12
Gotham City Impostors	8	Apr-12
Grand Slam Tennis 2	8	Apr-12
Guardian Heroes	8.25	Dec-11
Hulk Hogan's Main Event	1	Dec-11
Inversion	6	Aug-12
Just Dance 3	6	Dec-11
Kinect Star Wars	5.5	Jun-12
Kingdoms of Amalur: Reckoning	8	Mar-12
LEGO Batman 2: DC Super Heroes	8.25	Aug-12
Lollipop Chainsaw	7.5	Aug-12
Lord of the Rings: War in the North	5.5	Dec-11
Major League Baseball 2K12	6.75	May-12
Mass Effect 3	10	May-12
Max Payne 3	9.25	Jul-12
Minecraft Xbox 360 Edition	8.75	Jul-12
NASCAR Unleashed	7	Dec-11
NCAA Football 13	8.75	Aug-12
Need for Speed: The Run	7.75	Dec-11
NeverDead	4	Mar-12
Nexuiz	6	May-12
NFL Blitz	8	Mar-12
Ninja Gaiden 3	6	May-12
Prototype 2	8.5	Jun-12
Quantum Conundrum	8.5	Aug-12
Quarrel	8.5	Apr-12
Rayman Origins	8.5	Dec-11
Resident Evil: Operation Racoon City	6	May-12
Ridge Racer Unbounded	6.75	Jul-12
Rocksmith	8.25	Dec-11
Saints Row: The Third	9	Dec-11
Shank 2	7	Apr-12
Silent Hill HD Collection	8	Apr-12
Silent Hill: Downpour	7	Apr-12
Sims 3: Pets, The	7.5	Dec-11
Sine Mora	8	Jun-12
Skylanders: Spyro's Adventure	8	Dec-11
Sniper Elite V2	8.25	Jul-12

6.75 | The Amazing Spider-Man

Platform PS3 • 360 **Release** June 26 **ESRB** T

Not only does Amazing Spider-Man fail to deliver, it may also diminish my enjoyment of this summer's film. – Ben Reeves

8 | Spelunky

Platform Xbox 360 **Release** July 4 **ESRB** T

As exciting as it is to play a platformer with an infinite number of new levels, the novelty comes at a cost. You need ample patience, time, and skill to make it through Spelunky's ever-changing caves. – Jeff Marchiafava

7.5 | Pocket Planes

Platform iOS **Release** July 14 **ESRB** N/A

Though it doesn't have the depth of a full-fledged simulation, the accessible mechanics and tempting rewards make Pocket Planes worth some short-term attention. – Joe Juba

8 | Zuma's Revenge

Platform 360 **Release** July 11 **ESRB** E

I had a great time with Zuma's Revenge, but can't help but feel a little disappointed that I completed it in one sitting without cursing once. The new formula delivers a more relaxing thrill – which isn't a bad thing – as opposed to pushing the players to hone their skills. – Andrew Reiner

7.25 | Endless Space

Platform PC **Release** July 4 **Rating** T

Endless Space is far from a disaster despite its bad AI and unfortunate tedium, with excellent online play making it one of the better multiplayer turn-based strategy games around. My decade-and-a-half wait for the space empire savior continues, though. – Adam Biessener

8 | Penny Arcade's On The Rain-Slick Precipice Of Darkness 3

Platform 360 • PC **Release** June 25 **ESRB** N/A

What the game lacks in perceptible story, it makes up for with interesting combat, great music, and pure nostalgia. – Kyle Hilliard

6 | Krater

Platform PC **Release** June 12 **ESRB** N/A

Krater introduces a three-character party to the classic Diablo formula. Unfortunately, it stumbles in creating the tight tactical moment-to-moment gameplay that both action/RPGs and real-time strategy games need to excel. – Adam Biessener

8.25 | Dyad

Platform PS3 **Release** June 17 **ESRB** E

Playing for long stretches feels like sensory over-indulgence, which could be good or bad depending on your sensitivity. No matter how busy the onscreen action becomes, Dyad is consistently entertaining and rarely frustrating. – Tim Turi

Square's Unsung Opus:

Reflecting on The Secret of Mana

by Tim Turi

SQUARE IS THE UNDISPUTED KING of 16-bit role-playing games. The legendary Final Fantasy titles, the time-bending adventures of Chrono Trigger, and the good, clean fun of Super Mario RPG have cemented the Japanese company's legacy. Another gem often gets overlooked while recounting Square's rich history. The Secret of Mana is about a boy, a princess, and a sprite on a quest to restore a magical sword and save the world from certain doom. While the plot may not be dripping with originality, the 1993 SNES adventure features groundbreaking real-time RPG mechanics and a sprawling world rivaling the size of Hyrule. Here's why we love The Secret of Mana.

Enthralling Music

How Square packed such a huge, beautiful soundtrack into one 16-bit cartridge is befuddling. The Secret of Mana blends delicate, haunting melodies, bass-heavy tribal beats, and Celtic-inspired tunes into a diverse collection. The title theme's otherworldly whale bellows and soft piano expertly introduces players to the mystical world of Mana. The robust musical variety and sheer wealth of songs places this soundtrack among the best video game scores ever.

Rewarding Combat

By blending The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past's combat with a worthwhile leveling system, The Secret of Mana has a recipe for success. Players wield swords, spears, and magic spells to combat evil rabbits, bandits, and other bad guys. Gaining experience, growing stronger, and clearing the world of enemies without being teleported to a separate battle screen was a revelation at the time. The game also incorporates a unique stamina-based combat system and innovative circular command menu for selecting spells, weapons, and items – something still seen in games like Mass Effect 3 and Max Payne 3.

Secret Sequel

The Secret of Mana is technically the second game in the series. The franchise is called Seiken Densetsu in Japan, and the first game was released in the West as Final Fantasy Adventure on the Game Boy. The simplistic 1991 title features combat and an overworld reminiscent of The Legend of Zelda on the NES, but with the leveling system that sets the Mana series apart. The Super Famicom sequel, Seiken Densetsu 3, never made it overseas, but a handful of other games in the Mana series have released on handheld Nintendo systems.

Talented Creators

The creative leads for The Secret of Mana are important figures in Square's talented roster. Koichi Ishii, the game's director, worked on each Famicom Final Fantasy title before starting the Mana series. Ishii's current development studio, Grezzo, recently helped develop The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time 3D for the 3DS. Hiromichi Tanaka, producer for The Secret of Mana and other games in the series, also worked on the Famicom Final Fantasy titles along with Xenogears, Chrono Cross, and several Final Fantasy side projects.

The World

This Square title lacks the zoomed-out overworld map seen in many other RPGs. Instead, it stitch-es together assorted locations to create one huge world that Link would feel at home exploring. The Secret of Mana's world has similarities to Chrono Trigger – a fusion of medieval and high-tech elements. These contrasting themes provide players with fantastic settings ranging from ancient ruins to a futuristic flying battleship. Plus, you get to travel around the world by being fired out of a cannon and riding an awesome dragon.

Three-Player Co-op

The current console generation ushered in a co-op renaissance, but long before it The Secret of Mana offered a three-player role-playing experience. After acquiring all three main characters, players can plug in a second controller (and a third with a multi-tap) to blast through the quest together. Square RPGs are time-intensive commitments, but embarking on them with friends makes the hours fly by. The trio of players can develop cooperative tactics using a variety of defensive and offensive support spells, deadly elemental magic, and swordplay.

How To Play Today

Square Enix is well aware that the RPGs developed back in Square's heyday have a devoted fanbase. In recent years, the company has made The Secret of Mana available on the Wii's Virtual Console and iOS devices. We suggest playing the game any way you can, but the Wii provides the best modern experience. Linking up three Wii Classic Controllers and diving into The Secret of Mana's co-op is the way to go. Now cross your fingers that Seiken Densetsu 3 gets a similar treatment. ◈
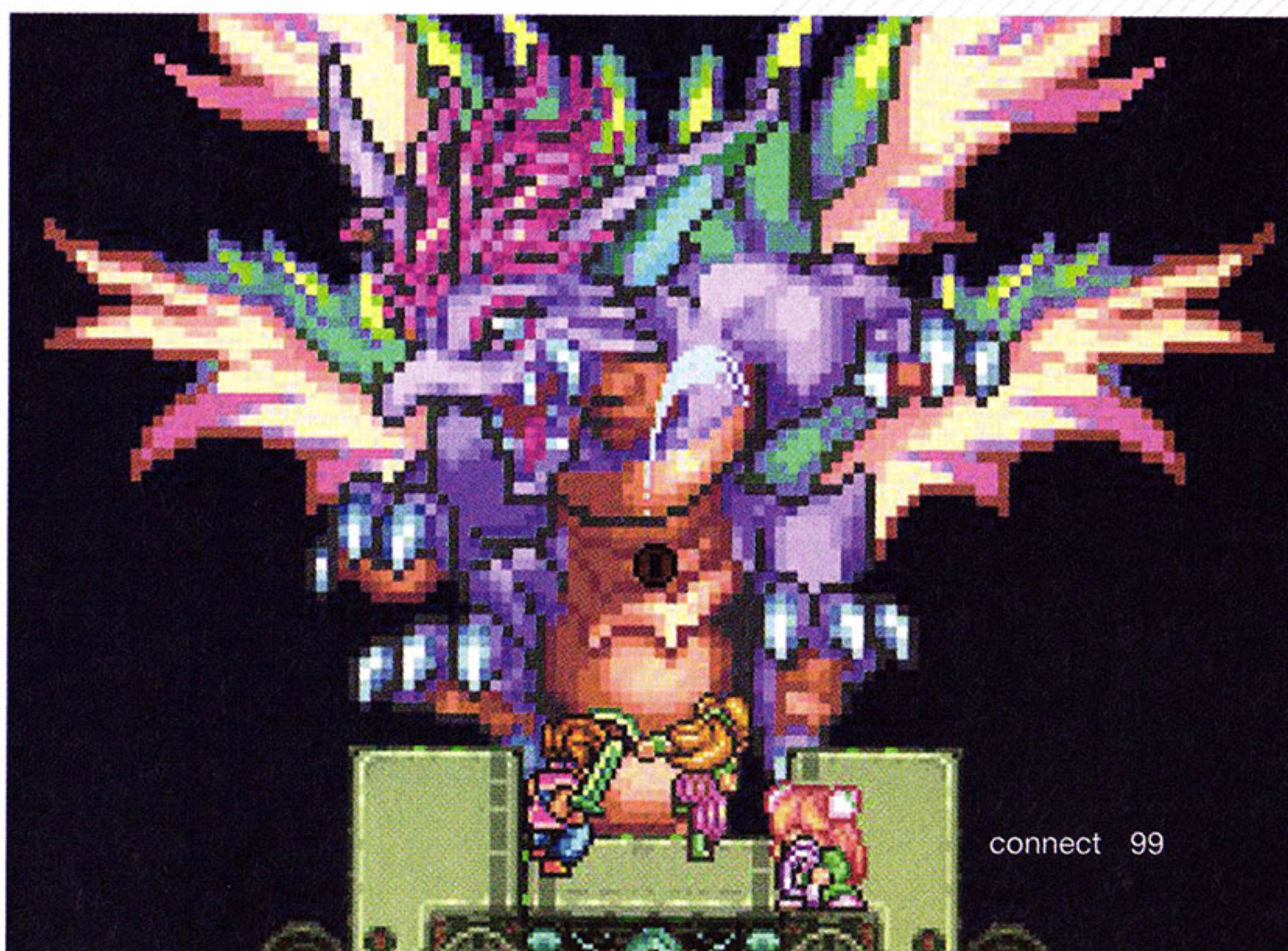
The Godfather of Co-Op Speaks!
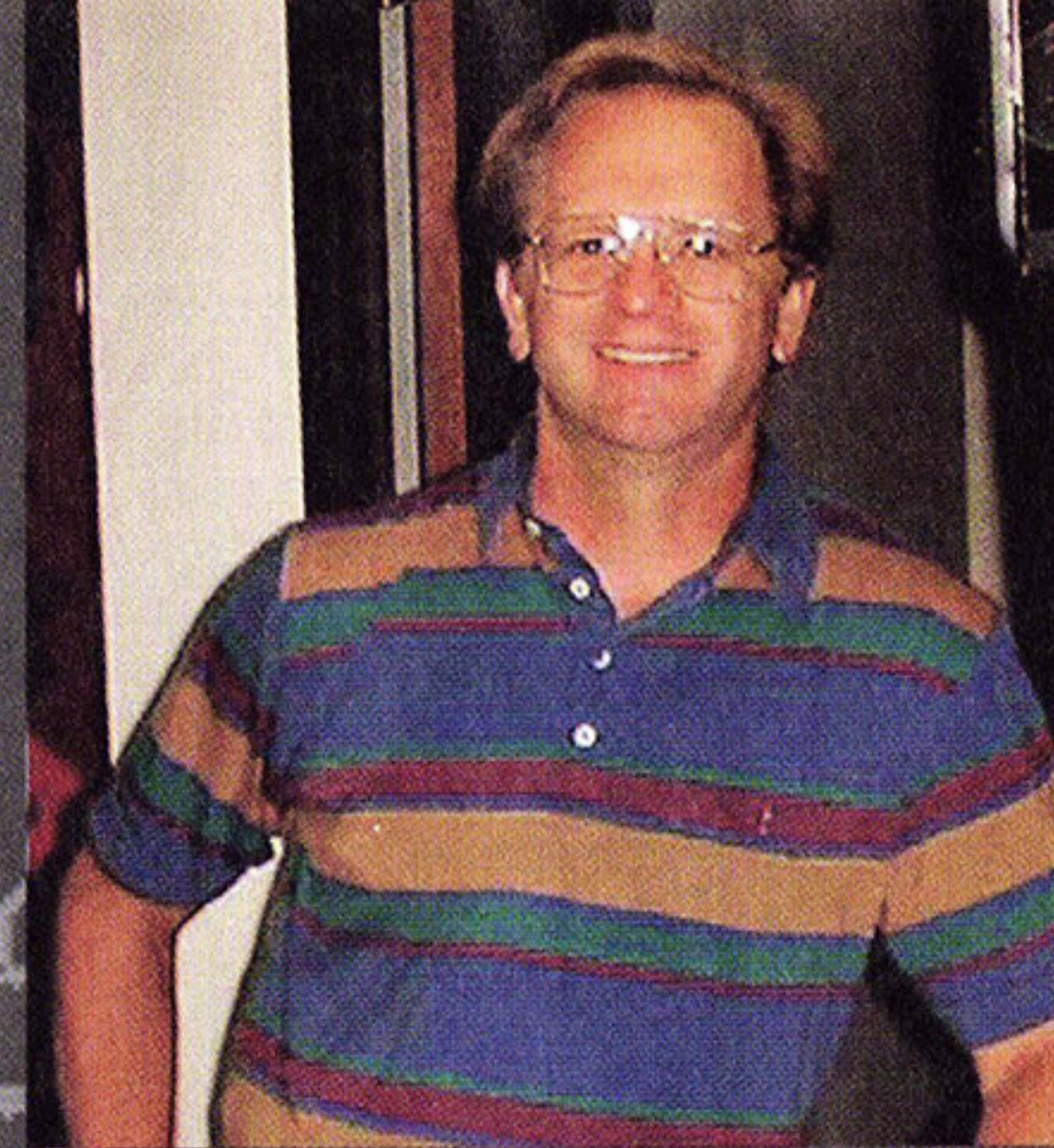
ED LOGG

Though today we think of co-op as a primarily online experience, the first game that made cooperative play a mass-market phenomenon was Atari's Gauntlet. The four-player dungeon crawler became a permanent fixture at many arcades and helped establish the formula that still resonates today in games like Diablo III.

In keeping with this issue's celebration of co-op, we interviewed Gauntlet designer Ed Logg about the game's development and lasting impact.

by Matt Helgeson

+ What were some of your inspirations for Gauntlet — especially in making a cooperative multiplayer experience?

I always wanted to do a Dungeons & Dragons game, partially because my son was into it and he was constantly asking me to do a D&D game. I just could not figure a way to make a coin-operated game from D&D gameplay.

+ Gauntlet had a less famous co-op predecessor named Dandy (later called Dandy Dungeon). How was Gauntlet different from that game?

I played a game called Dandy that was brought into Atari by Robin Ziegler. Once I played this game I knew how to do a D&D game for the coin-operated market. There were many differences between Dandy and Gauntlet. The part I took from Dandy was the scrolling playfield that was bigger than the level and limiting the players to the visible portion, as well as the monster generators and the ghosts. Of course, both games had multiple players (up to five for Dandy and four for Gauntlet) as well as heath, treasure, and enemies to fight. Dandy didn't have power-ups, transporters, thieves, secret rooms, or enemies that shot back. Dandy did not have the Dungeon Master – which provided the voice for many [of Gauntlet's] popular phrases… things like, "The elf has eaten all the food lately."

+ Were there any production problems you encountered in designing and manufacturing the game? Was Atari concerned that the cabinets would be more expensive to produce?

The cost of the cabinet was never an issue. However, there was a problem with a game without plexiglass covering the monitor. I had decided to remove the plexiglass to prevent any glare problems that would affect some players' view of the screen. [Arcade] operators were not used to this. The most difficult problem was not manufacturing but convincing marketing that I could get strangers to play the game together.

+ Did you have any idea how powerful the draw of cooperative multiplayer was going to be?

I knew how powerful multiplayer play would be. Not only had I been a big fan of games like Rip-Off or Warlords, but also I saw how everyone liked playing Dandy. Growing up with board and card games, it becomes obvious having more people is often more fun than just playing against bots that you cannot taunt or verbally harass.

+ Why do you think it was so successful?

I think there were many reasons why this game was so successful. Cooperative play was certainly the most obvious, but Gauntlet solved a very important problem we had in the video game industry at the time. The cost to play was just one quarter and [players] expected to get 90 to 120 seconds of play. So it was very hard to increase [revenue] without doubling the cost – which would not be popular with players. We failed many times to get a 50-cent play. Gauntlet allowed the game to earn $1 for the same amount of time most games earned 25 cents without affecting the cost to the players.

+ Early on, did you have a feeling that Gauntlet was going to be a phenomenon?

We field-tested our games to determine popularity (how much it earned compared to other games) and the game's longevity (how long it continued to earn). In our case, Gauntlet was tested in a small arcade in a shopping center away from our normal field test locations. Field-testing locations agree to keep the game and earnings secret. But, when I went out there after the game had been in the location just a few days, I found David Rosen of Sega there, along with several others, taking pictures and notes. I had to pull the game after one week. I believe that was the only time Atari had ever done that. Also, there was a small sign over the game limiting the number of plays per person [in order] to allow others to play. I had never seen that before, either. So, from all these "hints" as well as future field tests, it was clear we had a winner.

+ Have you seen any of the "Wizard Needs Food Badly" merchandise people sell on the Internet? What's your opinion of that?

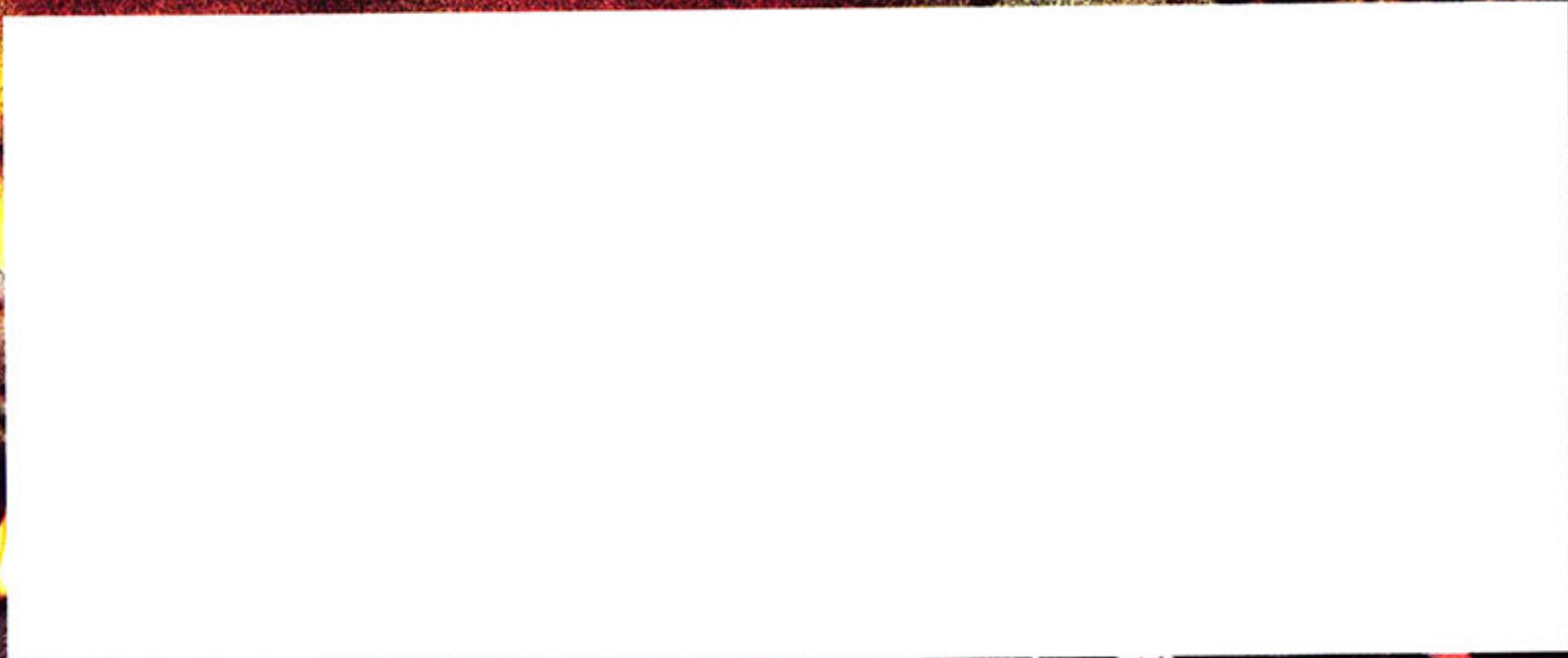No, I have never heard of this. I guess it is a result of a widely popular game. It is very flattering! ◆

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