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» **ROCKSTAR'S** GRITTY **DETECTIVE** TALE
EXPLORES THE **DARK HEART** OF LOS ANGELES

"WE WILL BE REBORN IN THE COLD WOMB OF THE OCEAN"

THE WAY
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February 9, 2010
www.bioshock2game.com

PS3 PlayStation.3

PlayStation Network

Games for Windows LIVE

XBOX 360.

XBOX LIVE.

Decisions That Matter

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

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

There is a lot to love about Mass Effect 2. I'll let Reiner's review do most of the talking (see review pg. 80), but I want to throw in my two cents as well.

I remember being in a hot and cramped room – in Amsterdam, of all places – when I first heard of Mass Effect. It was one of those head-spinning moments, and I don't mean because I had been out enjoying the city the night before. Moments after BioWare revealed the Mass Effect project, the team stressed that it wasn't just a game – it was designed from the ground up as a trilogy. Frankly, I didn't really think much of it at the time, as I hear a lot of PR rhetoric in my line of work. I had also just come out of a meeting in the room next door where I had been told that Too Human was also a trilogy (yeah, right). BioWare's description of its team dedication to the science fiction story and how decisions in the trilogy would matter didn't fall on deaf ears, I just didn't realize how much impact these design choices would have on the game until I saw the fruits of their labor come to life in Mass Effect 2.

If you have a previous save of the first game to import into Mass Effect 2, the imprint of those previous decisions are all over the sequel. For me, that means the decisions I made in 2007 are affecting the game I'm playing in 2010. Consider my mind blown.

I don't just want to play Mass Effect 2 multiple times to see how the various decisions affect this game. I want to replay an old game to see how it changes the sequel. I have a strange feeling I'm going to want to play all three games over and over once Mass Effect 3 comes out a few years from now.

Imagine if you could make decisions in Star Wars that changed *The Empire Strikes Back*. That's what BioWare has accomplished with Mass Effect 2, and it's simply amazing.

cover story

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L.A. Noire

Game Informer digs into Rockstar's epic new 1940s detective adventure, getting the scoop on its deep gameplay and mind-blowing animation technology.

by Matt Helgeson

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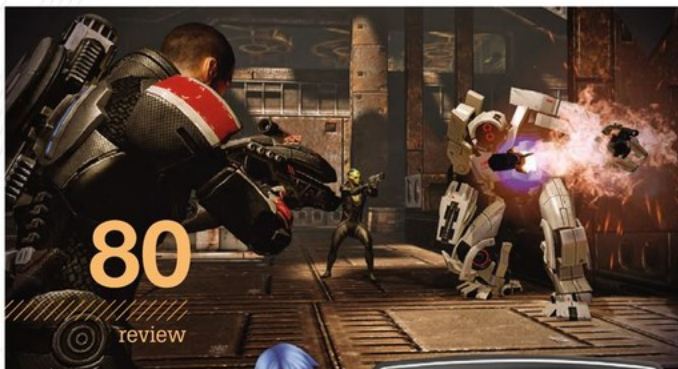
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This month in Feedback, we assuage a Transformers fan's fears, explain why Dead Space 2 hasn't lost its edge, make a joke at 3D Realms' expense, and help a Final Fantasy newcomer figure out where to start.

Fear Factor

Something I read in your Dead Space 2 cover story really bothered me: the fact that the team is bending over to accommodate the crybabies who thought the first game was too scary. This is a plea from all hardcore Dead Space fans – please don't change the scare factor or difficulty in Dead Space 2! So many games already make players feel powerful and heroic, and the fear and hopelessness in Dead Space were the things that set it apart. As I passed each chapter, that's where I got my sense of accomplishment. I didn't need extra ammo or a super weapon – I just wanted to survive. Visceral Games needs to get with the program. If I want power, I'll eat a mushroom or enter the Konami Code.

Steve H.
Chicago, IL

Dead Space 2 is still a survival horror game. Necromorphs will creep up behind you, resources will be scarce, and Isaac will still fight for his life. Visceral Games isn't transforming the Dead Space franchise into a mindless power fantasy; the team's concern about the first game being too scary pertains to the pacing rather than the style of gameplay. By forcing players to constantly monitor health and ammo, the original Dead Space maintained a uniform level of intensity. In Dead Space 2, the arc of the action will be broken up with brief reprieves, but that also means you can expect more intensity spikes and scare moments.

The Shortest War

Okay, I'm sitting down in front of my TV to play Modern Warfare 2 for the first time. I've got the volume turned up and a line of energy drinks at my side. Five hours later, I see the credits roll. My jaw dropped, but not because of the epic ending of the game – more because of how quickly it came. Even with Spec Ops, I finished the game in no time. As a gamer who enjoys single-player campaigns (but not online multiplayer), I don't think a game that only lasts five hours is nearly long enough. I feel scammed, and I don't care how much replay value it has. It seems as though since Call of Duty came out, each game is shorter and shorter just so they could make more money with each release, pumping all of their effort into multiplayer. I wouldn't be surprised if the next Call of Duty didn't have any single-player mode at all.

Joe Kobusinski
Erie, PA

Short games are not necessarily bad. Getting your money's worth out of a game is important, but do you really want to play through some tacked-on levels to squeeze a few more hours out of the experience? The five hours of Modern Warfare 2's solo campaign are packed with non-stop explosive thrills – would you rather see those moments spread out and diluted solely for the sake of filling an arbitrary time requirement? You may be right in your observation that single-player is an area of diminishing

focus. However, most of Modern Warfare's fanbase is primarily interested in the multiplayer component, and it's difficult to blame Infinity Ward for serving its community. At the same time, the studio may be alienating the gamers who are only interested in fighting solo.

Most Corrected Mistake

Several readers were kind enough to point out that our score of 6.5 for Call of Duty: Modern Warfare – Reflex Edition (issue 201) was too low. This was not an error on our part; just because a game is on the Wii doesn't mean that you need to lower your standards, people. Play a good game on the system instead, like New Super Mario Bros.!

Contact Us

feedback@gameinformer.com

THE BATTLE WITHIN BEGINS

Rise up against your destiny to save a world
that no longer welcomes you.

3.9.2010

Go Defense Force!

I was disturbed and offended by your response to a letter in issue 201: "[W]e can't imagine the kind of gamer for whom the PSP Go is a worthwhile product." I am 31 years old, a medical professional, and consider myself tech savvy. Who can argue with the supremacy of digital-only content made popular by the iPhone and iTunes? The untapped demographic Sony sees is the millions of consumers who already utilize digital-only content daily. The PSP Go appealed to me because (a) no UMDs to carry around and (b) for a 16GB flash memory device. The price is comparable to the PSP-3000 with a 16GB Memory Stick Pro Duo. Granted, the price and lack of appeal for previous generation PSP owners (who own a substantial number of UMDs) appears to be a difficult barrier for the product to overcome. However, the construction and portability work in the PSP Go's favor; it is perfect compliment to the almost-but-not-quite gaming possible on the iPhone.

Michael Hanlon
La Mesa, CA

UMDs: Now Even More Worthless

Maybe we went a little too far when we said the PSP Go was only for people with "a surplus of money and a deficit of common sense." Clearly, the PSP Go is the right product for a certain kind of consumer – just not us. No matter how much storage space the device has, it doesn't fix the PSP platform's biggest problem: the severe drought of software support. We're not buying a tarted-up, digital-only redesign unless Sony can demonstrate that there will be fun games to play on it.

No More Earth No More?

Way back in the issue 171, there was a story about a survival game called Earth No More. It was about a group of people who are trying to survive against a spore that is spreading across the Earth. From that issue to now, I haven't missed an issue, and I can't recall hearing about that game since. It was set to release in 2009, so I was just wondering what happened to the game. Has it been cancelled or something?

Anonymous
via email

Earth No More hasn't officially been canceled, but things aren't looking good. After being passed off from beleaguered 3D Realms to Radar Group, the survival game missed its targeted 2009 release and is not currently in active development. On the other hand, Prey 2 (which also moved from 3D Realms to Radar Group), was recently sold to Zenimax, the parent company of Bethesda and id – so, maybe not everything 3D Realms has touched in the last few years will turn to poison.

gi spy

CANDID PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

(Left) Our Super Badass Edition of GI Spy begins with this shot from the Jace Hall show, where Carl Weathers and Dolph Lundgren reprised their roles as Apollo Creed and Drago in a vicious Wii boxing match **(Right)** This picture of Forty-seven Communications' Sibel Sunar, Nick Ahrens, and Laura Klang Glienna might not look badass until you find out that Sibel is actually an eight-degree black belt in taekwondo

Beginning The Fantasy

I've been a gamer my whole life, but I have never gotten into the Final Fantasy series. Lately, though, they have been looking really good. I never played the original ones, but now I want to give them a try. Where should I start? I feel like I can't begin with Final Fantasy XII (even though it looks the best of all of them so far) because I won't know what's going on. What should I do?

Corey Posnanski
via email

On Your Mind

■ Replaying Mass Effect: **33%**
■ Holiday Red Ring Horror Stories: **29%**
■ Music Game Overload: **17%**
■ PSP Go Defenders: **16%**
■ How much Bertz's Army of Two review sucks: **5%**

The core games in the Final Fantasy series (the ones that only have roman numerals in their titles) are all standalone adventures. You can play them in any order, because they are self-contained stories set in different worlds with different characters. If you're looking for a good place to jump in, read our review of Final Fantasy XIII on page 88 and decide if it sounds like a good place to start. If not, brush up on the series' history; we'd recommend starting with Final Fantasy X on PS2, or if you want to go old school, Final Fantasy III (a.k.a. Final Fantasy VI) on SNES. If you don't like either of those, maybe the series just isn't for you.

The hunt for a good Transformers game travels to the robot homeworld
by Phil Kollar

TRANSFORMERS: WAR FOR CYBERTRON

Sterner Stuff

Another Transformers game? Is that really necessary? I mean, I look forward to a plot not linked to the crappy movies, but based on what we've gotten before...I just hope that War for Cybertron has features other than picking what side to be on and a bad flying mechanic. Your preview claims that there'll be this "game-changing" multiplayer experience, but the Transformers have already suffered failed multiplayer in previous games. Sorry to sound so skeptical...I just don't want to be disappointed again.

Andrew Hibbert
Oswego, NY

We can't blame you for being wary. Transformers certainly has a damaged video game reputation, and fans of the franchise have been burned before. While the game is too far from release to make any judgments about its quality, our visit to developer High Moon Studios did convince us of one important fact: The team behind War for Cybertron are true Transformers fans. They know what's cool about the series, and they want a good Transformers game as much as you do. Of course, devotion doesn't always equate to quality, but we wouldn't count the Transformers out just yet. Remember that Batman was a doomed video game property before Rocksteady did things right with Arkham Asylum.

→ **GI SPY**

(Left) Annette gets some advice on her upcoming facial tattoos from none other than Iron Mike Tyson! Seriously. That's Mike Tyson! **(Center)** Dan and Matt hang with Team Bondi's Oliver Bao, Rockstar's Jeronimo Barrera, and L.A. Noire mastermind Brendan McNamara. These guys might not look badass, but the game is, trust us **(Right)** Nick and Debby Chen congratulate big baller freelance specialist Darren Gladstone. Where did he get that $61? From winning an unsanctioned MMA fight in Las Vegas

Enter the Game Informer Reader Art Contest. All you need to do is draw, paint, scratch, spit, or carve the best darn art you can think of and send it to us. Please include your name, phone number, and return address. If you're the monthly winner, we'll feature your work in GI and you'll receive a video game prize from the Game Informer vault. All entries become the property of Game Informer and can't be returned.

Send to:

Game Informer

Reader Art Contest

724 1st St. N.,

4th Floor

Mpls, MN 55401

WINNER **1 Patrick Waugh:** No longer content to be a comic relief villain, Bowser proves he can actually be terrifying **2 Deonta Head:** Too bad there's no post-apocalyptic White Castle. War could have ordered some darksliders **3 Kevin Cox:** Cloud blows another paycheck on X-ray specs. Unfortunately for him, Sephiroth wears lead pants **4 Anthony Mesteth:** We're pretty tapped on zombie jokes, so here's a fun fact about helicopters: Did you know helicopters, um…huh. We're also tapped on helicopter fun facts **5 C. Nate:** Pay attention, Canada: If Snake can't pull off the mullet, neither can you
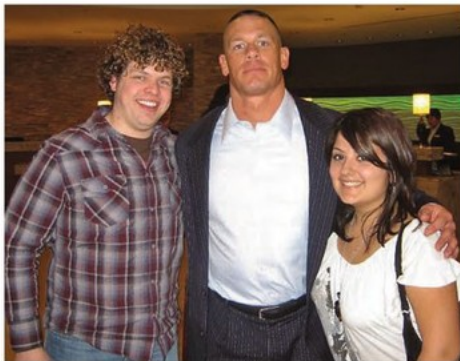
(Left) Our Super Badass Edition of GI Spy cont…oh wait…sorry…that's Adam. He's such a wuss. MLB 2K10 producer Ben Bishop and Access PR's Ryan Jones are pretty tough, though **(Right)** Oh yeah! Here's some real American beefcake that's capable of laying the Smackdown. We're not talking about John Cena, we're talking about Ben "Bruiser" Reeves, who was nice enough to let Annette protect Cena from his wrath

TOM CLANCY'S

"After dedicating my life to the service of my country, I'd seen The agency I gave myself to turn around and throw me to the dogs. I'd lost my daughter. I'd shot my best friend. Betrayal made me question everything, so I started looking for answers. Now, I will stop at nothing to learn the truth."

SPLINTER CELL
CONVICTION™
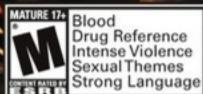
EXPERIENCE THE POWER OF CONVICTION

Jump in.

Star Fox

Last Known Whereabouts

Star Fox Command (2006, DS)

The Company Line

Shigeru Miyamoto expressed interest in bringing Fox McCloud back from his exile of cameo roles in other series like Super Smash Bros. Miyamoto recently told MTV Multiplayer that he hopes future Star Fox games can do right by fans. "We still try to make them more fun and hopefully people will see the appeal in those games."

Likelihood of Return

Average. Although Miyamoto hasn't closed the door on the franchise, Nintendo has struggled to pair the series with a studio that could bring success. It's gone through a revolving door of developers, including Rare, Namco, and Q-Games. Perhaps Nintendo is waiting for a studio that can demonstrate they've got a winning plan for Fox.
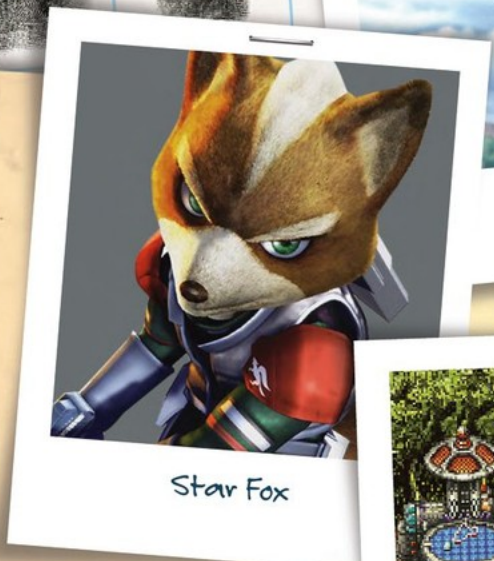
Star Fox

Chrono Trigger

Last Known Whereabouts

Chrono Cross (1999, PSone)

The Company Line

Square Enix wouldn't shed any light on this topic, but Square Enix senior vice president Shinji Hashimoto clearly wasn't keen on bringing the franchise back when he said of the 2008 re-release on the DS: "If people want a sequel, they should buy more!"

Likelihood of Return

Not Good. The original development team is scattered, including creator Hironobu Sakaguchi (who is over at Mistwalker). Moreover, the unsatisfying sales numbers of Chrono Trigger on the DS don't bode well for the future.

Twisted Metal

Last Known Whereabouts

Twisted Metal: Head-On: Extra Twisted Edition (2008, PS2)

The Company Line

Scott Rohde, Sony's vice president of product development, wouldn't say anything about Twisted Metal directly, but he did tell us: "We're always looking at our classic franchises to see if a reintroduction makes sense. I'm sure you'd like to hear a little more detail, but we have to keep a couple of surprises in our back pocket…"

Likelihood of Return

Very Good. Numerous rumors have circulated regarding a Twisted Metal for PS3, and series co-creator David Jaffe fueled the fire with coded messages to this effect with the Head-On: Extra Twisted Edition in 2008. We expect to hear about a new Twisted Metal at this year's E3.

Your Local Arcade

Xbox Live brings you the classics

Maybe some of you younger gamers never got to hang out down at the local arcade. Well don't worry, because all you have to do to experience the cabinets of yesteryear is turn on your Xbox 360. This spring Microsoft will launch the Game Room virtual space, which is filled with arcade classics that you can navigate to through your Xbox Live dashboard.

Your Game Room (which is actually composed of multiple rooms) will debut with 30 titles available at launch including hits like Asteroids Deluxe, Centipede, Tempest, and more from the likes of Atari, Intellivision, and Activision. Microsoft says each of the games has its original graphics and music, with no alterations to refine them for the console experience like we've seen in the past with popular arcade games like Pac-Man and Tapper. In fact, none of the XBLA arcade titles you already own will transfer over to the Game Room.

It wouldn't be right hanging out in an arcade without a few friends, so the Game Room features social aspects as well. Your avatars will show up to play the games, but you won't actually move them around like in PS3's Home. You can, however, customize your rooms with decorations and by rearranging your cabinets. The multiplayer options will be limited at launch, but players can check out universal leaderboards, compete via local two-player (when applicable), play a cabinet the same time as a friend in Parallel mode, or take turns in Round Robin mode. Unfortunately, online versus multiplayer won't be available at launch, with Microsoft saying it's evaluating that feature for the future.

Microsoft and its partners plan to make additional arcade cabinets available in the future; the company says it wants to have 1,000 titles available in the next three years, shipping at least seven per week. Players can try every arcade game for free if a friend owns it, and the games will cost 240 to 400 Microsoft points ($3.00 to $5.00) to own or 40 points (50¢) to play. Funny, didn't most of these games actually cost a quarter back in the day? » by Matthew Kato

December Top 20

Rank	Game Title (System)	Rank Last Month	Months in Top 20
1	**New Super Mario Bros. Wii** (Wii)	3	1
2	**Wii Fit Plus** (Wii)	7	2
3	**Wii Sports Resort** (Wii) Nintendo has not only captured the top three spots, but the company dominates the month — including the re-emergence of old titles like New Super Mario Bros. DS (#12) and Mario Kart on the DS (#17).	6	4
4	**Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2** (360)	1	1
5	**Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2** (PS3)	2	1
6	**Wii Play** (Wii)	11	35
7	**Mario Kart** (Wii)	10	21
8	**Assassin's Creed II** (360)	4	1
9	**Left 4 Dead 2** (360)	5	1
10	**Mario & Luigi: Bowser's Inside Story** (DS)	14	3
11	**The Legend of Zelda: Spirit Tracks** (DS)	–	
12	**New Super Mario Bros.** (DS)	–	44
13	**Mario & Sonic at the Olympic Winter Games** (DS)	–	
14	**Mario & Sonic at the Olympic Winter Games** (Wii)	12	1
15	**Madden NFL 10** (360)	20	5
16	**Scribblenauts** (DS) Scribblenauts surged back into the top 20 after dropping off the charts last month, which has to make developer 5th Cell ecstatic. Interestingly, beloved DS puzzler Professor Layton and the Diabolical Box – which debuted the same month as Scribblenauts – has not reappeared in the top 20.	–	1
17	**Mario Kart DS** (DS)	–	51
18	**Assassin's Creed II** (PS3)	8	1
19	**Madden NFL 10** (PS3)	–	4
20	**Just Dance** (Wii)	–	

Listings based upon NPD data of units sold for December 2009

You don't just have to decorate your arcade rooms with company-specific stuff; you'll have posters, doo-dads, and even trap doors available

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly
NEWS WITH A SARCASTIC SPIN

the good

(LEFT) The assassin's blade never rests. Ubisoft has already announced another all-new Assassin's Creed title starring AC II's Ezio Auditore. The new game, which will be full priced, is scheduled to appear before March of next year, and will include a multiplayer component.

(ABOVE) Like the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 before it, the Wii now has Netflix support. Wii owners can access streaming movies from their queue provided they have a Netflix account, are connected to the Internet, and send away for a required free disc. Unlike the other two consoles, however, HD content won't be viewable on the Wii. Reggie doesn't think you need an HD Wii.

the bad

(LEFT) It always seemed strange that Sony planned on releasing its PS3 motion controller in a few months when it didn't even have a name yet (the current rumor is that it's called Arc), but it looks like that problem just solved itself. The company now says the device will come out this fall. While a delay is never fun, Sony should be smart and use the time to try and drum up some momentum for this thing.

the ugly

(LEFT) Ubisoft CEO Yves Guillemot says the company is steering its ship away from the Wii and concentrating on the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3. Guillemot called those two consoles the ones that are "expected to experience sustained sales growth in games for gamers in calendar 2010." "Games for gamers" certainly is a phrase we like to hear coming from an executive.

(ABOVE) New year, same delays. Pushed out past March: Lost Planet 2, Super Street Fighter IV, Splinter Cell Conviction. Bumped past April: Ubisoft's strategy title R.U.S.E. (see last issue, page 82 for more). Speaking of Ubisoft, I Am Alive is switching over to the Splinter Cell engine, and will now not come out until April 2011 at the earliest.

> "We are considering ways to separate the roles of activities in Japan and overseas. We plan to develop new titles primarily in Japan.

Is Airtight Games' Dark Void the last original IP Capcom will give to a western developer?

Capcom president Haruhiro Tsujimoto on the company's new split between Japanese and western developers it employs. He says that western studios will be used mainly in a support role."

Honoring Indies

The IGF's nod to top independent titles

by Meagan VanBurkleo

Braid, Castle Crashers, and World of Goo helped introduce indie games to the masses, but small teams of dedicated developers have been pushing the creative envelope for much longer. The Independent Games Festival, now in its 12th year, has had its finger on the pulse of autonomous game developers for more than a decade, and once a year independent talent convenes in San Francisco to celebrate their collective work. The festival includes a pavilion of playable games to expose indie forerunners to the press, a summit of lectures to encourage the movement of ideas between indie developers, and an awards ceremony that puts the spotlight on fresh talent each year.

The ceremony recognizes 20 finalists in six unique categories. Accolades are given for excellence in visual art, audio, technical execution, innovation, and overall design. Additionally, one lucky developer leaves the Bay Area with the Seumas McNally Grand Prize – securing the ceremony's top honor and a lofty $20,000 prize. More important than any monetary reward, however, is the platform that IGF provides. Contestants garner the attention of consumers, critics, and potential publishers, each of whom are interested in the fruits of their long and sometimes unpublicized labor. The three aforementioned indie darlings owe a great deal to the IGF for this exact reason, and pay it forward each year by educating and inspiring future leaders in the indie sphere.

The months following the IGF awards are pivotal for nominees, allowing them to snowball the hype surrounding their projects. Success stories inevitably follow in the awards' wake, with one of the more highly touted examples involving a game created by students from the DigiPen Institute of Technology. Narbacular Drop caught the eye of developer/publisher Valve after receiving high honors through the IGF, and the team was subsequently hired in order to further flesh out the project. The resulting collaboration produced Portal, one of 2007's most critically acclaimed titles.

Winners of the 12th annual IGF Awards will be announced on stage at the 2010 Game Developers Conference, Thursday, March 11. As you read this, nominees are working feverishly to put the final polish on festival builds. As that day draws near we will provide comprehensive impressions of these titles on gameinformer.com. In the meantime, here's an early peek at the IGF's top contenders.

Be sure to visit gameinformer.com/mag as we roll out Indie Week March 1 through 7, leading up to the 2010 Game Developers Conference. There you will find full previews of all 20 IGF finalists, in addition to a breakdown of the big winners from the award show once the festivities conclude.
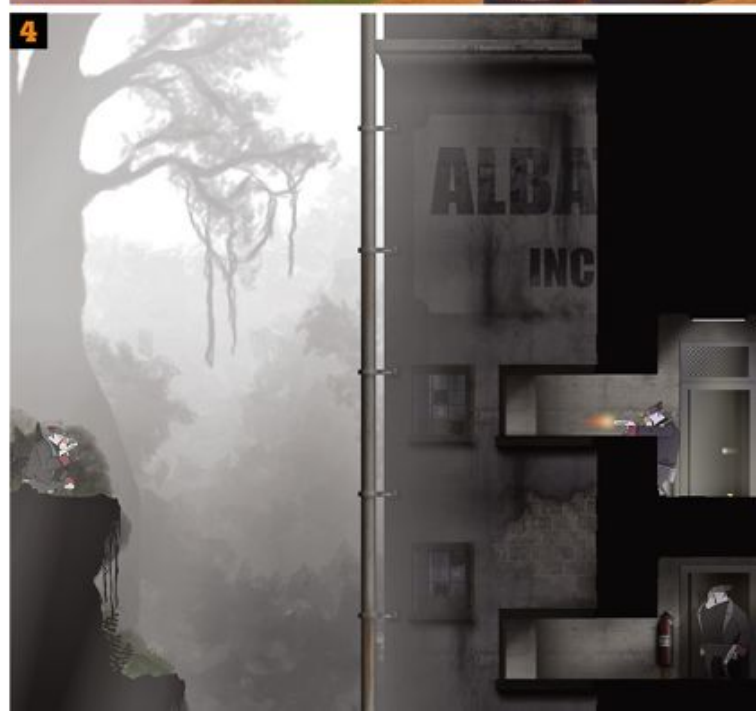
Top Contenders

The contenders for this year's Seumas McNally Grand Prize are diverse, featuring the trials and tribulations of a boy made of meat, a stylish 8-bit crime caper, and a game that explores what it means to be a true "Cock of War."

INDEPENDENT GAMES FESTIVAL
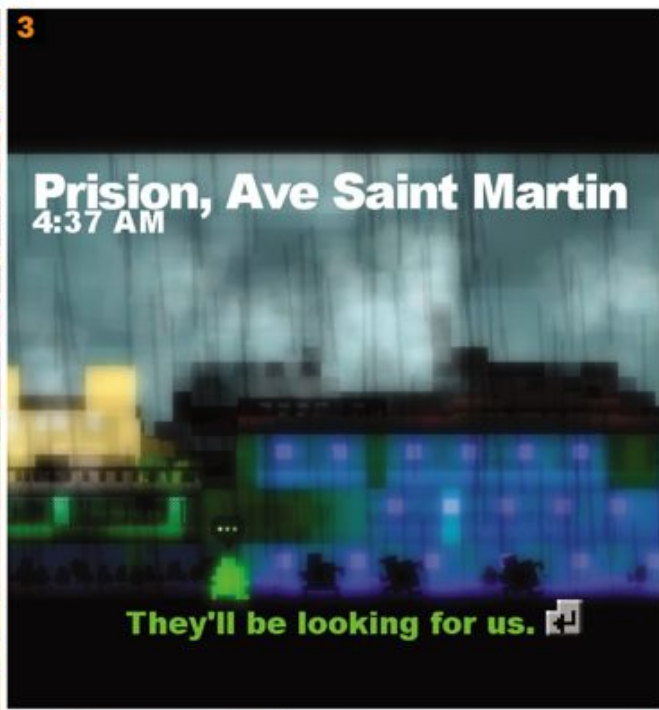
1 Trauma

Developer: Krystian Majewski **Platform:** Flash, Web Browser **Release:** Q1 2010

A point-and-click/hidden object hybrid, Trauma tells a story of survival and recovery by a young woman fresh from a car accident that killed her parents. Much like the process of healing, Trauma unfolds in fits and starts, using a unique interface of photos stitched together in an unnervingly surreal manner. Discovering hidden Polaroids will trigger memories and teach the player how to move through the environment to interact with key objects. There is no single path that will lead you through Trauma, and you will be constantly learning new ways to "play" the game. This can be confusing, but that seems to be the point. Trauma is a powerful, shortform game full of metaphor and meaning, and fully deserving of a few hours of undivided attention.

2 Joe Danger

Developer: Hello Games **Platform:** TBA **Release:** Spring 2010

Joe Danger is one of the finalists with the highest production value and polish – and for good reason. Developer Hello Games was founded by employees who left behind studios such as Criterion, Sumo, Kuju, EA, and Climax in order to satiate their desire for more creative freedom. A lighthearted arcade stunt racer, stuntman Joe Danger's simple goal is to impress fans and break records. With a massive library of tricks to draw on, Danger will bunny hop, wheelie, and flip his way to the finish line, chaining together colossal combos along the way. Trophies are rewarded based on player performance, pushing you to take advantage of every tick of the clock, every second of air, and every environmental aid to nab that impossibly high score. Joe Danger is shaping up to be lengthy, silly, and above all, fun.

3 Monaco

Developer: Pocketwatch Games **Platform:** TBA **Release:** TBA

Monaco is a simple and satisfying tribute to crime capers and classic French heist movies. Set in a modern Monte Carlo, players choose from four different thief classes, each with their own unique attributes. The Locksmith, for example, can fly through locked doors and open safes in a breeze, while the Hacker can shut down alarms and security cameras in a snap. Each heist necessitates weighing risks and rewards. Nabbing a key item at each location allows you to progress to loftier heists, but the real challenge is seeing if you can pillage each environment to its fullest without getting caught. Keep in mind – armed guards, locked doors, and security cameras are ever-present to stall your progress. Monaco reaffirms the Hollywood basics: know the floor plan, map the patrol routes, mark the security cameras, and, as always, have an exit strategy ready.

4 Rocketbirds: Revolution!

Developer: Ratloop Asia **Platform:** Web Browser **Release:** Available Now

Rocketbirds: Revolution! is a serious game that doesn't take itself too seriously. In the adventure you take control of HardBoiled Chicken, the "original Cock of War," who spearheads a rebellion against draconian penguin oppressors. In an attempt to weaken their iron-fisted grip over Albatropolis, HardBoiled will run and gun his way to victory, pausing only to solve puzzles and engage in witty banter with his foes. The beautiful 2D environments and the tongue-in-cheek cutscenes make each scripted respite a treat. HardBoiled scrolls through level after level, unraveling a quirky mystery and taking on hostile avian enemies with an arsenal of different weapons. Ratloop had a vision – albeit an odd one – and stayed true to it all the way through. Rocketbirds: Revolution! proves that in the world of avian baddies, roosters reign supreme.

5 Super Meat Boy!

Developer: Team Meat **Platform:** WiiWare, Steam, Retail (PC/Mac), Undisclosed Console **Release:** Mid-Late 2010

Super Meat Boy is as bizarre as it sounds. You play as a cube of sentient meat, in love with a young lady made of bandages, who is spirited away by an evil fetus in a jar wearing a tuxedo. Not willing to rest on intrigue alone, Super Meat Boy is a comprehensive and punishing platformer developed with masochists in mind. A simple set of moves (run, leap, and wall jump) are counterbalanced by levels that increase in difficulty at an alarming rate. Spinning saw blades, pits of fire, and pools of dirty syringes all equate to instant death. Each level requires a steady hand and impeccable sense of timing to string together combos, with runs lasting less than 30 seconds when finally perfected. Over 200 levels are promised in the final version, meaning fans of old school charm (who can handle a borderline infuriating challenge) will find Super Meat Boy an entrée worth consuming.
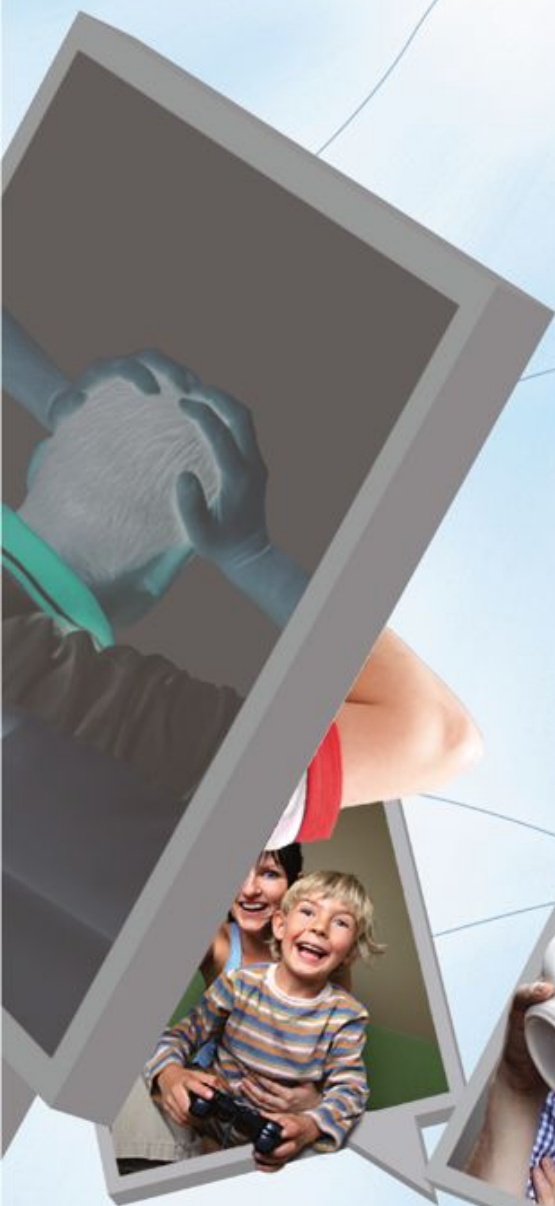
Prision, Ave Saint Martin
4:37 AM

They'll be looking for us.

TIMER 7.66

User Blogs

Dimensional Dilemma?

The 2010 CES was brought to you by the number 3 and the letter D, but whether consumers are ready for the leap remains to be seen. *by Nick Ahrens*

Like every year before it, the 2010 Consumer Electronics Show debuted a bevy of hot new technologies. But looking over the massive convention, the overwhelming trend of the year was home theater 3D. Several companies touted razor-thin LED televisions that support 3D, with next-generation 3D capable Blu-ray players often standing at their sides. Heavyweights like Discovery Channel and ESPN announced dedicated 3D programming. But for every sexy device shown on the Las Vegas Convention floor, there was a goofy, uncomfortable looking pair of 3D glasses plastered to a show attendee's face. Several media outlets, including *The New York Times*, expressed grave concerns about the lack of a unified standard, the high cost of the auto-shutter glasses, and whether consumers are ready for another technology leap considering many are still in the process of adopting to HDTVs. Which poses the question: Do we even care about having 3D in our homes?

All of the major companies invested in the technology sure hope so. But it's not just the Samsungs and LGs of the world trying to woo you into the third dimension; several game publishers are also showing interest. Just last holiday, we saw the release of cinema legend James Cameron's *Avatar* in theaters, where it crushed box office records left and right, and at home on Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3, where it failed to capture the attention of gamers regardless of being "built from the ground up for 3D." But we cannot take one game as a sign that 3D gaming is destined for failure, and some publishers like Sony seem genuinely interested in trailblazing with 3D technology.

Walking into Sony's booth this year, attendees were treated to several 3D demos, half of which were dedicated to video games. The booth featured playable versions of PS3 games like MLB 10: The Show, Gran Turismo 5, and Super Stardust HD. We tried out all three demos, and each of them felt like a gimmicky last-minute implementation of the technology. While situations like staring down a pitch from home plate in MLB 10 delivered a cool depth-of-field sensation, issues like blurry user interfaces and camera angles that don't jibe with 3D soured the experience. None of the games were developed for the technology from the ground up, so it's tough to tell how immersive the experience could be if someone put in the time to focus on 3D.

Nintendo, which didn't attend the show, has been mum on the topic of 3D even though talented experimenters like Johnny Lee have reverse-engineered the Wii to head track in 3D (with no glasses, mind you). Microsoft is ready for 3D, but the company is taking a wait-and-see attitude before committing an abundance of resources. "We're a fully 3D-capable console today," Microsoft's Aaron Greenberg told us. "As consumers' tastes for 3D grow – and I don't know what they are and what they will be – we'll grow with that. We're more focused on the here and now, and for us that's Project Natal."

Regardless of whether or not consumers are interested in bringing 3D entertainment into their homes, a lot of money is being spent to market the idea. Interestingly, this new trend seems to be at odds with the most recent fad in console gaming – social gaming. All three console manufacturers are highly invested in motion controllers and delivering highly accessible social experiences to lure the whole family to the console. At upwards of $80 for a pair of bulky and uncomfortable 3D glasses, the cost of the 3D experience is prohibitive. Plus, the age-old 3D question still stands: Are you willing to put on a pair of glasses – and for some of us vision impaired gamers, two pairs – just to watch TV or play games?

What do you think of 3D? Sound off in our forums: gameinformer.com/forums

HELLO

EXPLORING THE MEANING OF YOUR FAVORITE CHARACTER'S NAME

Would a rose by any other name smell as sweet? Probably. But if it was called the buttflower, how many people would be sticking their noses in it? The point is names are important, even in video games. The history of a character's name can sometimes show us significant traits that character has and possibly reveal the creator's intentions. Join us as we explore the true meaning of the names belonging to some of gaming's most recognizable faces. *by Ben Reeves*

ALTAÏR (Assassin's Creed)

The name of Ubisoft's top assassin means "high flying one" or "bird of prey" in Arabic. Altaïr is also the name of a star in the constellation Aquila – Aquila being another name meaning eagle. Not coincidently, Ezio (from Assassin's Creed II) is the Italian form of a Greek name that also means "eagle." However, the name of the man reliving the memories of both men from the future is Desmond. His name literally means "a man from south Munster." Maybe he got lost and ended up in the wrong game.

CAIT SITH (Final Fantasy VII)

The annoying stuffed puppet from FFVII is a reference to an ancient fairy creature found in Scottish mythology. A Cat Sith is said to resemble a large black cat with a white spot on its breast. Legend tells us that this specter is a disguised witch, and rumors hold that it still haunts the Scottish Highlands today. If that creature had been in Final Fantasy VII, we might have actually used it.

CHRIS REDFIELD (Resident Evil series)

Christopher is a late Greek name meaning "bearing Christ." The name was used by early Christians as a metaphor expressing how they carried Christ in their hearts. Redfield, on the other hand, is a bit redundant. It derives from two words, the Olde English *ryd* meaning "a cleared area suitable for agriculture," and *field*, another old word meaning "area cleared for agriculture." Chris Redfield's full name could be literally taken to mean to carry across fields of fields – symbolic perhaps for all the backtracking he did in the early entries of the Resident Evil series.

CHUN-LI (Street Fighter series)

In Mandarin, the name of Capcom's leggy femme fatale is 春麗 (春) meaning "Spring", and li (麗) meaning "beautiful." In other words, Chun-li is a young girl filled with the beauty of spring. Maybe Capcom should have considered a different name, like Dà-Kuà (大胯), meaning "large thighs."

FRANCIS (Left 4 Dead)

Most of the cast from Valve's co-op shooter have names appropriate for a zombie apocalypse survivor. Bill, for example, comes from the Germanic name Willahelm, which was composed of *wil*, meaning "will or desire," and *helm*, meaning "helmet or protection." Louis derives from the Germanic name Ludwig, which means "famous warrior." Zoey derives from an old Greek word meaning "life." Francis, it seems, is the black sheep. Francis is the English form of the Late Latin name Franciscus, which literally means "Frenchman." Frenchmen? Proof that Francis was the weakest link.

MARIO (half of Nintendo's lineup)

The popular story is that Mario was named after Nintendo's U.S. landlord during the early '80s. However, the name Mario is actually the Italian form of the name Marius, which means "child of Mars," Mars, of course, is the ancient Roman god of war. Mario's brother Luigi is no slouch either. Like Louis from Left 4 Dead, his name is the Italian version of the German name Ludwig, which means "famous warrior." Maybe he was switched at birth.

ZELDA (Legend of Zelda series)

The name Zelda (alternately Selda or Segula) might not be used much any more, but this old Yiddish name means "blessed, happy, or lucky." Considering how often this chick gets kidnapped, maybe it's time she changed her name. May we suggest Terah? It means "easily fooled" and "old goat."

Bayonetta

In a medium dominated by Y chromosomes, it's easy for a strong female lead like Bayonetta to stand out. It doesn't hurt that she has style and holds her own against axe-wielding angels and giant serpents. Platinum Game's newest release may stand next to Devil May Cry and God of War, but the game's unique flair left us with a few questions. Where did Bayonetta's character design come from? Why is she covered in hair? And why does the Space Harrier sequence seem to go on forever? Using staff and reader-generated questions, we grill Platinum Games' director Hideki Kamiya.

Where did the name Bayonetta come from?
The base of the name is the bayonet. Bayonet became Bayonetta to feminize the noun, as the idea of a bayonet, a bladed weapon placed upon a gun that allows the gun itself to become a means of attack, matched well with Bayonetta's fighting style – striking enemies with her gun and further firing her weapon to attack them. We then just used her name as-is in the title of the game. This idea for the title was actually the first working title that I wrote on the initial design document. I wanted to express plainly to the team that we were going to make a leading edge, sharply honed action game. So I thought of a title that reverberated with personification of this ideal. However, the title doesn't really explain what goes on in the game, so when it went from idea to product, I thought that we should think up a title that did more to explain what the game was about in an easier fashion and change it to that. But everyone involved on staff and in the company became hooked on the sound of Bayonetta, and we decided to go ahead with the title.

It seems impossible to buy everything in the store after just one playthrough. Why did you make all of the accessories and items so expensive?
It isn't limited to just the accessories. I feel that along with the accessories, the idea of slowly developing a player character's abilities as you proceed through the game also has an element of tutorial to it. Obviously, slowly adding new actions is fun in and of itself, however, ultimately Bayonetta's abilities are kind of like an F1 car – high end and refined. It should take players some time to come to grips with them. Accessories are kind of the same way. If you were to try them all in one go around, you would cast them off before you ever came to truly understand their individual abilities. That is why we tuned the game so that you won't acquire them all in one playthrough – to give the player time to try them out thoroughly and learn the accessories.

Bayonetta is unapologetically girly. Were you worried about turning men off with the femininity of all the butterflies, flowers, and lollipops? Conversely were you worried about turning women off with Bayonetta's overt sexuality?
Bayonetta the character was designed by a female designer. This is part of a longer discussion. To put it simply, what we created was born of advocating a design that didn't pander to the desires of men, but instead was both high-class and fashionable. Bayonetta may be sexy, but she is absolutely not vulgar, and we stressed making her beautiful above all else in the design. I think that is evident in what we created, do you not? There shouldn't be anyone, male or female, that dislikes beautiful things.

Dressing a character in a costume made from her hair seems like an odd choice. Where did this idea come from?
Once we decided that our lead character would be female, we thought of some way we could effectively use her hair. You know, as they say in Japan (and maybe the world over), "hair is a woman's life." At the very least, I thought that we would use her hair as a prop to display the dynamic nature of her action in the same way Dante's coat or Joe's scarf operates. However, it backfired, as implementing a long-haired character model in the game ended up obscuring the entirety of her body, and created a problem in that it was harder to see the action taking place. We ended up returning to the first concept design that Mari Shimazaki created for Bayonetta. In that design, her hair came down over her arms, draping like it was a fringe. I realized that this visual expression was interesting, and came up with a new idea. I said, "What if we didn't just stop at the arms, but draped her entire body in her hair? Witches should be able to do that." By doing that, her hair was able to flow off of her arms, and we were able to obtain the flowing locks we were looking for without obscuring her body. Once that was in place, I realized that if she was using her hair to summon these demon attacks then her hair had to disappear off her body when she did this. Then what would happen!? Needless to say, the guys on the team were incredibly happy with the idea.

Bayonetta's character design is fairly long and spindly, which is unusual for a female in video games. What were the reasons behind making her look this way?
To create the action we wanted, Bayonetta needed to swing and project her limbs out with incredible vigor. Bayonetta has the best proportions to illustrate this dynamic action. We also didn't want to appeal overtly to ideas of base sexuality, but instead aimed to show Bayonetta off as stylish, like a fashion model.

We liked the game's Space Harrier sequence, but that shoot- ing seemed to go on for a really long time. Why is this?
Hey, I don't think it is too long. (Laughs) I think that gamers of my era excelled at the ability to approach games in the vein of "I'll find the fun in what I've been given," and not "You guys need to give me what I want." Maybe I expressed my feelings of nostalgia for that era a bit too strongly. But even that is just one of the idiosyncrasies that make up Bayonetta, and I would be really pleased if you enjoyed it as such.

Near the end of the game you switched things up by throwing on-rail sequences and other minigames at the player instead of continuing to build off the combat system that players had spent the whole game using. What was the design philosophy behind this?
I don't think that a game should be held captive to just one thing, but should have lots of different types of play. I think if you take a look at Devil May Cry, Viewtiful Joe, etc. you will understand my belief in this. I don't think of these things as individual parts. I think of the whole picture and how it all flows together as one.

The guys at Platinum seem to jump around from series to series, does that mean you'll be doing something new next, or will we see a Bayonetta 2?
Well, we obviously have love for the work we have created, so I don't see anything wrong with Bayonetta 2. Personally, I'd like to approach the world of Bayonetta from a different angle, in the form of a spin-off. However, right now we're having fun dreaming up wild ideas, and haven't made any decisions at all. ◈

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It's Under Control

Family controls give parents tools to keep inappropriate games out of kids' hands. But are they easy to find and set up for non-gamer parents? *by Jeff Cork*

The other day I asked my wife to imagine that our house had fallen into a time tunnel and we were suddenly the parents of two young teen boys. She didn't run screaming out of the house, which was my initial fear. I then told her that we were concerned about our hypothetically aged kids being exposed to those darn M-rated games, and it was up to her to access and adjust the parental controls on our PlayStation 3, Wii, and Xbox 360 so that such content would be blocked. Fortunately, she's nothing if not patient. Sometimes.

She'd heard a few vague things about family settings on the consoles, but there hadn't been any real reason for her to mess around with them. The last time she'd even spent time with a game was with Alias on the Xbox, so it'd been a while. I figured she was as good a test subject as any for my little plan. Could someone with the interest, but not necessarily the know-how, easily figure out how to access and set appropriate content limits for their children? The answer, as I'd find out, was a resounding "Kind of!"

Nintendo Wii

She started out with the Wii, since she thought it would be the easiest nut to crack. I didn't let her look anything up online, because that would have been too easy. The trickiest part for her was finding where the settings were grouped. From there, it was a pretty simple ride (as it turns out, this was a pretty common theme. See the sidebar for the locations of each console's family settings). All three consoles allow parents to restrict games by content. If a user tries to access such restricted content, they'll have to enter a passcode (set up by the parent) to proceed. The Wii has a Web browser, and parents can also choose to limit access to the Internet as well as the console's news channel. Parents can also choose to limit the use of Wii points, to prevent kids (or spouses) from downloading content and spending money in the process.

Overall grade – B

Xbox 360

Microsoft's Xbox 360 interface was redesigned to make the system more accessible to non-gamers. Judging from how quickly my wife found the family settings, I'd say they succeeded. In addition to game content, parents can adjust the settings for TV shows, videos, and movies. Parents can also block Xbox Live or some of the system's communications functionality. Perhaps the slickest feature is its family timer, which lets parents dole out minutes of playtime for each account holder. Once the timer is out, no more games. It's a simple and effective way of limiting gaming time that still gives kids some measure of control.

Overall grade – B+

PlayStation 3

The PlayStation 3's controls were probably the trickiest for my wife to handle. They weren't easy for her to find, and Sony's way of handling restrictions is a little strange. Rather than have parents choose appropriate ratings for their kids, Sony has parents select from a sliding scale of 1-11, with one having the tightest controls. There's no easy way to understand what these numbers correlate to, and even Sony's Web site isn't that helpful (we cheated afterward). Expect a little trial and error. The PlayStation 3's online access can be finessed a bit with third-party filtering software (available for less than $25), which gives more flexibility than the Wii's simple on/off solution. The PS3 also lets parents set spending limits for kids on the PlayStation Network.

Overall grade – C

Ultimately, my wife did a great job. She was able to tweak three consoles in less than an hour, and our make-believe teen sons are the better for her having done so. Sony's sliding scale was a source of frustration, but she powered through it. After spending time with the parental controls, I'd like to see more flexibility overall. Having restrictions based on ratings is a good start, but parents should be able to make exceptions on a game-by-game basis. Halo 3 might be perfectly acceptable for a kid who's not quite ready for a Grand Theft Auto.

As gamers grow up and have families of their own, I expect more parents will take advantage of these kinds of built-in settings. They're easy to access, even for parents who don't play games, and they're a good safeguard for when kids are playing unsupervised. ✦

Player 1
$1,280
29

LAUNCHING

$30

Toy Soldiers
Xbox Live Arcade

Xbox Live Arcade gets three new exclusives, and MotionPlus comes to WiiWare *by Matt Miller*

This year's 2010 Consumer Electronics Show brought us lots of news about 3D tech and tablets, but Microsoft also snuck a couple very cool new downloadable games into the mix. The first is **Toy Soldiers**, an action/strategy hybrid developed by Signal Studios that Microsoft considers one of the big releases headed to Live Arcade this year. Players join one of two miniature toy armies on either side of a World War I model diorama as they fight across the wooden and plastic landscape. Players can control the 50 different units in the game from a strategic command perspective, or commandeer a unit on the field and join the fight for some third-person action. That includes the squads of antique toy soldiers, but also more destructive units like zeppelins, planes, and tanks. Go head-to-head with a friend in five different maps using split-screen and Xbox Live, or sharpen your skills in the tower defense style single-player campaign. My early glimpse at the game has me pretty stoked.

Microsoft's other big Live Arcade announcement also defies easy genre classification. Created by N+ developer Slick Entertainment,

Scrap Metal is a top-down racing game in the style of R.C. Pro-Am with serious action game overtones. Custom rides are a big focus for the game, which includes 60 single-player racing missions. There are muscle cars, bulldozers, airboats, and monster trucks hidden amid the 20 unique vehicle options. The vehicles are strapped with absurd weaponry like flamethrowers, chainsaws, and rocket launchers. Multiplayer modes include King of the Hill and Demolition Derby, plus a GTA-styled Survivor mode where players must try to complete laps under the duress of an increasingly intense police chase featuring cop cars, choppers, and even tanks. I've yet to get my hands on the game, but I'm already marking it as one to watch as we near its spring release.

Risk: Factions should draw in strategy gamers who don't mind a little kooky humor thrown into the mix. The classic board game

Risk: Factions
Xbox Live Arcade

ATTACK   CHAIRMAN MEOW

has been reinvented for XBLA, combining familiar dice-rolling world domination with new animations for the five outlandish factions. The family-friendly title adds new components to the standard rules, but still serves as a cool way for parents to introduce the game to their kids.

Rage of the Gladiator is an intriguing new WiiWare title – the first I'm aware of that utilizes Wii MotionPlus. Take Punch-Out, blend in weapons and a fantasy arena, and you have a good understanding of the game. Swinging their swords and defending with shields, players take on 10 boss fights in sequence, each requiring its own timing and battle strategy. You can gain access to over a dozen crazy finishing moves, from creating pillars of fire that engulf your foe to causing a solar eclipse. A lot of attention has been paid to nailing the animations so that monsters respond to your distinct swings – a feature that's especially cool when utilizing MotionPlus. If you're still in the dark ages of the original controller, worry not; the game works without MotionPlus as well.

For additional coverage of downloadable and independent games in this month's issue, read our preview of Mega Man 10 on p. 71, and details on the grand prize nominees for this year's Independent Games Festival on p. 20. If that doesn't fill your quota, check in at gameinformer.com/mag to learn which downloadable games are releasing every week

Scrap Metal
Xbox Live Arcade

10200594

Racing Stripes
Body Kit
Cancel
Apply!

Cancel   Change

Rage of the Gladiator
WiiWare

Horlan the Crusher

PlayStation 3

To access the parental settings on the PS3, first scroll over to Game Settings, which is on the left side of the main menu. From there, move down to Security Settings. You'll be prompted to enter a password before you can make any changes. The default is "0000," but you'll probably want to change it. Once you've entered the password, you're free to change game settings, DVD settings and more.

Wii

First, go into the Wii settings, which are accessed by pressing the Wii button in the Wii Channel menu. Then select Parental Controls on the second page of settings. You'll need to create a four-digit PIN and secret question to proceed. From there, you can change the various settings, including access to games, online content and more.
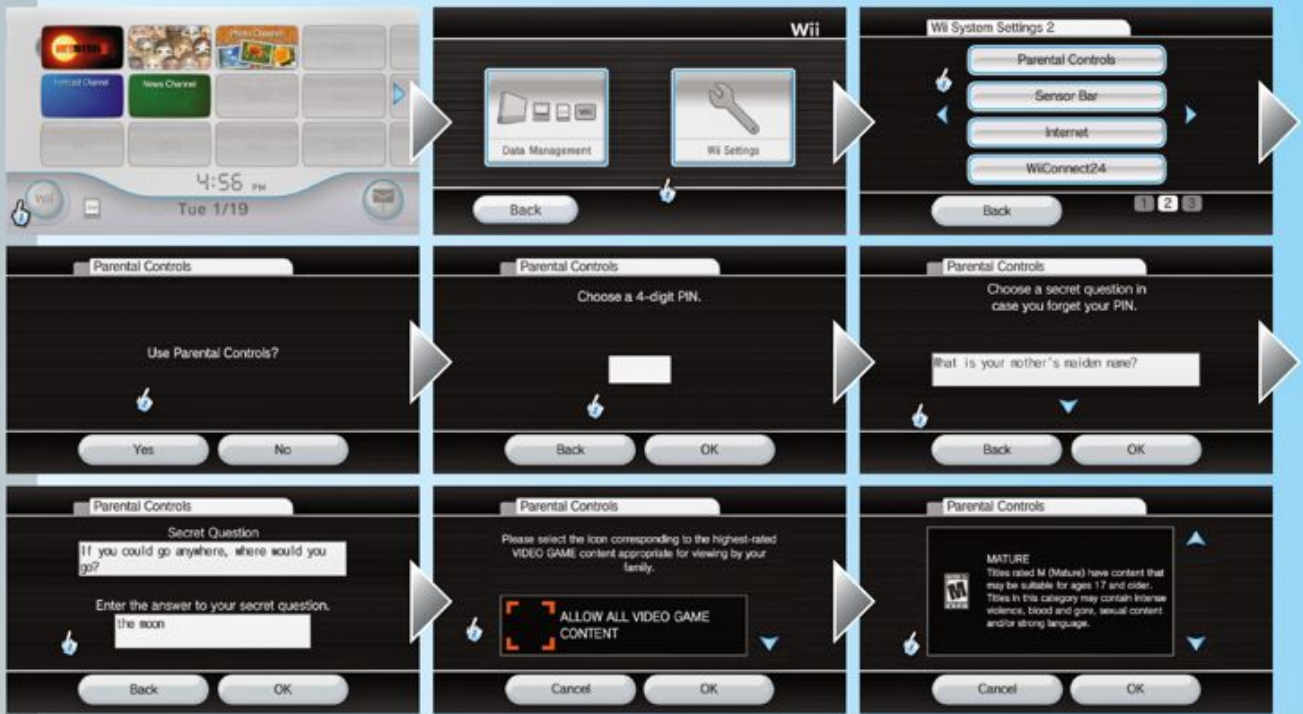
Xbox 360

From the My Xbox pane, move to the System Settings over to the right. Then move to Family Settings, Console Controls. As with the other systems, you'll have to create a passcode and passcode reset question. The 360 is a bit different, since the code is based on the controller's buttons instead of PIN. Once you're in, you'll be able to adjust access to games and DVDs and set up gaming time limits if you're interested.

TOP 10 FPS MULTIPLAYER MAPS

By Nick Ahrens

Dust – Counter-Strike

Arguably the most played multiplayer map of all time, Dust is the face of Counter-Strike. From its place in competitive gaming to the countless hours spent at home playing against the "1337" of the world, this simple-to-understand yet impossible-to-master map is filled with natural choke points and will go down in history as one of the cornerstones of multiplayer development.

Lost Village – Desert Combat
The first time playing Lost Village mod for Battlefield 1942 is like watching an epic war film. One team starts on the edge of a lake. On the other side are the enemy team and the conquest objectives. The only solution is to load up the Blackhawks with troops and go in guns blazing. Trauma Studios, the makers of the popular mod, went on to form Kaos Studios and release Frontlines: Fuel of War.

Wake Island – Battlefield 1942
The island map to rule them all. Its famous horseshoe shape creates a teeter-totter effect for gameplay flow that makes it a challenge for one team to maintain control of the flags, even if they control the tanks and planes. This popular map hasn't lost any glamour since its original release in Battlefield 2, and serving as the creative impetus for Battlefield 1943.

Blood Gulch – Halo
This map from the original Halo was so popular that Bungie remade it for Halo 2 and Halo Wars. The giant open battlefield with two small bases at either end gives ambitious players an awesome "charge the enemy" mentality when they spawn, while snipers have perches along the edge of the mountainside that encompasses the map.

Crash – Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare
With a downed helicopter in the middle to fight over, Crash presents a hectic urban battleground that delivers a chaotic *Black Hawk Down* feeling every time. Whether you find yourself spawning in the three-story building or at the shop down the street, Infinity Ward's standout map keeps the frantic action front and center.

2Fort – Team Fortress
One of the most beloved maps in PC gaming, 2Fort delivers the ultimate base vs. base gameplay. While both teams' complexes have multiple entrances and exits, the real battle always ends up on the bridge between the two. Teamwork is the only foolproof strategy.

Facility – GoldenEye 007
Let's be honest here, you bought an N64 for Golden-Eye. Rare made console multiplayer a reality way before Halo had a spark of life. Whether you play slappers only or call the "No Oddjob" rule, Facility is the ultimate map to rip your buddies to shreds. Especially with proximity mines.

Strike at Karkand – Battlefield 2
Loading up a 64-player match for the first time on Strike at Karkand made gamers drool all over their keyboards. Rolling an M1A1 tank down the street taking flag after flag or bum rushing the points on the outskirts of town never gets old. The sheer scale of the map – which contains a small city, village outpost, and large bridge crossing – is still impressive to this day.

Calypso Casino – Rainbow Six Vegas
Given the large amount of breach points on this map, no one's safe when they're guarding the Calypso Casino. Whether it's the attacking team repelling through the skylight, taking the stairs, or even using the elevator shafts, this map gives the defending teams paranoia and a sense that the bullets could start flying from anywhere.

Tokay's Tower – Quake II
The ultimate map for hardcore Quake fans. Just grab a rocket launcher and it's on. Tokay's Tower is a spiral of death filled with exploding missiles and colorful-but-deadly railgun tracers. If you don't fall to your death, then you'll mostly likely get rocked by the splash damage of a quick-moving foe.

ZOMBIES!

WILL YOU SURVIVE THE UNDEAD APOCALYPSE?

There is no such thing as safe harbor from zombies. Over the years they've infiltrated peaceful towns, ominous mansions, space, and even Nazi Germany. They can spread their infection like wildfire, survive without their limbs, and they're always hungry. The odds are not in humanity's favor, but if you make the right decisions you might survive the imminent zombie apocalypse.

PROCEED TO...

Escape on helicopter → Sequel

Have they escaped? — Yes / No / Uh-oh

Everything is probably fine

OMG
ZOMBIE BOSS ROCKET LAUNCHER FIGHT!

Fleshy, asymmetrical monsters floating in massive incubation tubes

Activate self-destruct while villain is distracted

An unskippable cutscene starring the recurring villain

What do you see?

This is boring, I'm going to make a sandwich

Cut to preachy monologue about the nature of man

SOME LAB

Crap, I exchanged my ammo for an ink ribbon

Struggle with tank controls

Run! / Fight!

MANSION

PROCEED TO...

OMG
ZOMBIES!

Battle through zombie horde

What is this, some kind of elevator?

Move bookshelf

What is this, some kind of tunnel?

Play magic piano / Find a heart shaped key

What is this, some kind of ladder?

Win a deadly game of chess / Read a diary

What is this, some kind of hand trolly? Are you serious?

OMG
PUZZLES!

Yes

Are you alone?

Time to split up! / No

Zombie Survival F

How attached to her are you?
- Love of my life → **OMG ZOMBIE HONEYMOON!**
- Meh… → "It's not you, it's me," reach for breakup shotgun → Set collision course for sun → **OMG TENTACLE BOSS ZOMBIE!** → Escape via pod and crash land

OMG ZOMBIE GIRLFRIEND!

Searching for lost girlfriend

Answering distress beacon → It's a trap, obviously → **OMG SPACE ZOMBIES!**
- Dismember undead crew
- Space weapons are hard

OMG I'M NAKED AND THAT'S A ZOMBIE!

Why are you here?
- I don't know, I just thawed

Complain about being in space

SPACE?

WHERE ARE YOU?

Are you with…
- The military → What are they armed with?
  - Dreamcast keyboards → Words per minute < 13
  - Guns → …but no armor → Listen to them whine about inevitable flesh wound
    - Shoot them in the face
    - Wait it out → **OMG EX-COMRADE ZOMBIES!** → Sgt. Fodder gives you love bite → Start feeling ill, chronicle symptoms in diary
- A biker, veteran, student, and systems analyst → Seek shelter at…
  - Parents' house → Is that a zombie on the lawn? → We don't want zombies on the lawn → **OMG PLANTS VS. ZOMBIES!** → Not enough sun!
  - Motel → Talk to manager with glass eye about End of Days → Cue preachy monologue about the nature of man → Impolitely seize glass eye and stash in inventory → Conveniently stumble upon large iron gate with eye-shaped hole

RURAL TOWN

SHOPPING MALL → **OMG ZOMBIE CONSUMERS!**

LAST THING I REMEMBER IS A CRASH…

Are you in a barn?
- Yes
- No, it's a shed → Close enough, wise ass

Is it 1943?
- Yes → **OMG NAZI ZOMBIES!**
- No, it's 1955 → You are Marty McFly

Who do you team up with?
- The endearing old couple → That was stupid
- The promiscuous co-ed → Barricade selves in food court, defile Orange Julius stand → Zombies break your barrier of chairs and KFC buckets → Totally worth it
- The janitor with the walkie-talkie → Listen to his life story → Take maintenance tunnels to roof where rescue awaits → Last stand against zombie horde
  - Help janitor → Shed single tear
  - Leave janitor
- Disgraced ex-cop searching for his daughter → Provide comic relief while cop does all the killing → Cop helps you believe in yourself as you make it to the roof → Last stand against zombie horde
  - Cop abandons you
  - Cop abandons you, aim for chopper's gas tank in retaliation

PROCEED TO…

YOU ARE DEAD!

While You're Waiting For...

DIABLO

Blizzard's long-awaited sequel to one of the best-selling games of all time is still a ways off. Numb the pain of pining for Diablo III with these, some of the better games inspired by the franchise

Torchlight (PC) was built in a single year by a small team, yet it capably recaptures the kill-loot-level magic in its single randomly generated dungeon

Sacred II (360, PC) supplements its huge open world with the most unintentionally hilarious in-game music video in the history of gaming

Diablo II: Lord of Destruction (PC) is still the king. No, really. The new patch (still in beta as of this writing) breathes just enough new life to keep this rocking a decade later
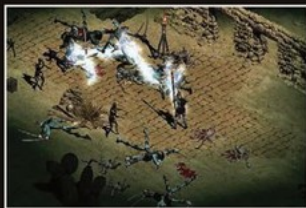
Is Duke Really Dead?

A legal expert sees a silver lining in 3D Realms' studio closure *by Bryan Vore*

For over a decade, the name Duke Nukem was synonymous with the most delayed game in history. Last year, however, the franchise got a second black eye from the legal battle between Duke owner/developer 3D Realms and publisher Take-Two Interactive. While lawsuits and 3D Realms laying off its entire development staff appeared to be the death knells for Duke Nukem Forever, these factors could be just what's needed for the game to finally see release.

Take-Two Interactive and 3D Realms' publishing agreement is nearly a decade old. Due to 3D Realms' massive haul from Duke Nukem 3D and other projects, the company was able to develop without outside money for years. In 2007, a contract was drawn up to transfer $2.5 million from Take-Two to 3D Realms. This money is due back on October 22, 2012. So why are lawsuits flying around now? Negotiations for further funding broke down in late April last year. On May 6, 3D Realms surprised the gaming community (and Take-Two) by laying off nearly the entire development staff working on Duke Nukem Forever. Less than a week later, Take-Two filed a lawsuit against 3D Realms. Both sides declined to comment on this story.

Two Sides

Take-Two sees 3D Realms' studio closing as definitive proof that the developer has no intention of completing DNF by the 2012 deadline and wants its $2.5 million back plus interest. It also claims it has the right to develop the console versions of the game as part of the 2007 contract, and wants the PC source code in order to do so. Additionally, Take-Two requests payment for all of the lost profits that it would have made through the release of DNF. How much would that be? Take-Two didn't specify in its filings. "That is really a dicey area," says Merchant & Gould intellectual property attorney Eric Chad. "I don't particularly think that's something they'd be likely to get, because who's to say after 12 years that what the profitability would be?"

3D Realms argues in a counter-claim that it doesn't owe Take-Two a cent until the 2012 deadline. 3D Realms also says it never agreed to provide source code, only the object code – more commonly known as a gold master disc – and that Take-Two has no right to develop a console version of DNF until the PC edition is released at retail. Furthermore, 3D Realms accuses Take-Two of canceling a game called Duke Begins, which Take-Two had contracted out to Borderlands developer Gearbox. The title

was supposedly due for release in mid-2010. 3D Realms claims that Take-Two is purposely shutting this game down so that the studio cannot earn any royalties, and therefore may eventually have to sell off the Duke Nukem IP for cheap to settle the debt.

All of the arguments in this case are hinged on the elusive 2007 contract. "Some of the mystery surrounding the whole [issue] is that the contract hasn't been made public," Chad says. "I don't know what the reason is, but it's not online or on file with any of the courts publicly, so it's hard to say what exactly the contract says."

Possible Outcomes

Chad speculates that if everything goes Take-Two's way, it would get the $2.5 million, the source code, and the option to develop and publish at least one Duke Nukem console game. "The only way really that Take-Two could get the IP would be if 3D Realms sold it to them, and there's nothing at law that says 3D Realms has to do that," Chad says. "Although, if [3D Realms needs] to file for bankruptcy, the court may force them to sell their assets like the IP on the Duke Nukem franchise and then Take-Two would be probably one of two other publishers that could afford those rights, with maybe EA and Activision. An extra wrench is

thrown in there as well – no matter who buys the rights, Take-Two has the right to publish the next game. So they might be the only ones interested in buying the rights."

3D Realms claims that even though its internal development studio has closed down, work on DNF continues. This seems to point to a contracted third-party developer who would push to finish off the game by the contractual deadline. "I think that is actually in my mind what would probably be the most palatable solution for all the parties," Chad says. "A lot of these sorts of contracts will have a clause like '3D Realms can't license away or assign their rights to develop unless Take-Two approves.' Although, at this point, I don't know why Take-Two wouldn't approve of that because whatever they're going to make from Duke Nukem I would guess it stands to be a lot more than $2.5 million."

"There are a few dockets in federal court that are considered rocket dockets that get cases done very quickly. The southern district of New York is not one of those," Chad continues. "I would guess that if the parties aren't able to reach a peaceful resolution it could easily be 2012 or even 2013 before we have any idea what the court is going to do if the case ends up going to trial."

3D Realms is clearly at a disadvantage

when it comes to awaiting trial. "3D Realms has shown they don't have a lot of assets. It doesn't sound like they're at least immediately able to pay that 2.5 million back to Take-Two," Chad says. "I'm guessing that litigating this case to the end with a big company like Take-Two would cost at least that $2.5 million. It's definitely in their interest to settle the case and reach a resolution. And civil lawsuits almost always do settle in one form or another. Rarely do they go to trial."

Settling would likely lead to loads of money for both Take-Two and 3D Realms, and it would finally grant gamers' wishes worldwide with a legally agreed upon release date. At times, however, another factor becomes more important than any pile of cash. "Sometimes you'll get two companies that just hate each other and regardless of whether it's in their best interest to settle the case and figure out some non-court remedy. They want to win rather than compromise," Chad says. "Maybe that would keep them from compromising, but I think that in this case a compromise would be the best thing. 3D Realms would keep their IP, but Take-Two would still get to publish a game."

Trek for Trek Fans

Star Trek Online nails the fiction, and keeps the focus squarely on the existing fanbase *by Matt Miller*

Cryptic Studios has journeyed into the tumultuous universe of licensed MMOs before, but Star Trek Online is its most ambitious outing. Star Trek has 40 years of history behind it and a dedicated fanbase that practically defined the concept of a cult following. The challenge of establishing an MMO under this intense scrutiny is apparent, but Cryptic has embraced the inherent opportunity as well. After dedicating dozens of hours to space exploration in the nearly complete beta, I have no doubt the developers have brought a deep and abiding love for the Star Trek fiction, characters, ships, and universe to the table. They've also created an original gameplay experience quite apart from other MMOs on the market. Whether the game is ready for prime time – well, that's a different story.

> **"Star Trek Online has a lot of smart ideas, and the best of them is providing varied gameplay to its players."**

Star Trek Online has a lot of smart ideas, and the best of them is providing varied gameplay to its players. The game has multiple strata. On the largest scale, players warp across the galaxy in the map-like sector space. Players can set a course to move across light years of space in just a few minutes, during which they can improve skills from a menu, sell inventory items, and apply new equipment to their ships and crews. Reach your destination and you'll enter system space, where the meat of gameplay resides. Players can explore asteroid belts, blow up Klingon battle cruisers, and scan anomalous energy readings on the planet surface. When the scans come up inconclusive, then you'll beam down with an away team to engage in ground exploration and combat. Between these constantly shifting gameplay models, players are rarely caught in a rut of having done the same things for hours on end.

Variety also arrives via Cryptic's specialty – customization. From crafting an original galactic race to altering the shape and color of your ship, the game offers myriad ways to shape the aesthetics of in-game avatars. More substantially, your choice of skills, equipment, crew assignments, and ship classes create increasingly diverse and specialized player characters. Cryptic has also split up the styles of play between the two major game factions. Interested in PvE story missions, cooperative fleet battles, and exploring the galaxy? The Federation is for you. Care to specialize in PvP, counting up kills, and expanding territory? The unlockable Klingon Empire is right up your alley.

Of the different gameplay modes, the ship combat provides the most engaging experience, no matter your faction. Deliberate, naval-style battles demand careful asset management of rechargeable abilities and an attention to ship facing, speed, and power levels. This is how Star Trek ship battles should be handled, and it only gets more fun as increasingly complex ships come under your command.

The same can't be said for the ground game. On-foot battles are usually a matter of running through corridors, pausing to tap your weapon fire button until the enemies fall down, and then moving on. Missions feel too similar to each other, and the objectives are often unclear or unmarked. I like the feel of constant phaser fire and charging enemies, but the battles are rote when enemies all act the same way. Deeper, more complex quests, an increased focus on strategy and cover, and more abilities for your main character would all go a long way to improving these sections.

My other concern comes with a major caveat: As of this writing, the final game hasn't gone live, and won't for another week. So when I say that there are a lot of technical problems plaguing Star Trek Online, my words have to be tempered by the knowledge that at least some of them will be resolved in the coming days. But all of them? Not even Scotty has that engineering know-how. As it is, early players should resolve themselves to some persistent bugs, balance issues, and unpolished content in the early weeks.

Despite the problems, I'm cautiously optimistic about Star Trek Online. It's a game that knows its audience and embraces it whole-heartedly. Non-Star Trek fans will scratch their heads and wonder why their buddies are so excited about choosing starship nacelles – they won't even know what nacelles are. But for those who do, this game is a treasure trove, propelling the story of one of the longest running and beloved franchises in sci-fi history into a new generation. ◈

massive

gameinformer.com
Online Exclusives
All Month Long

L.A. Noire

Exclusive screens not found in the magazine

In-depth feature on the game's literary and cinematic inspirations

Exclusive info about how the team recreated 1940s Los Angeles, the largest and most detailed open world in a Rockstar game to date

Groundbreaking motion capture and facial modeling technology revealed – See how developer Team Bondi turned GI editor Dan Ryckert into a character in the game.

This and much more
continuously updated all month long!
Only at:
http://gameinformer.com/lanoire

Photo: Damon Coulter

Sony's Head of Worldwide Studios Touts A Creative Approach To Game Development

✳ Sony Computer Entertainment's senior vice president of product development, Shuhei Yoshida, oversees the company's internal development studios. We recently spoke to Yoshida about Sony's game development philosophy, the new motion controller, and its 3D gaming initiatives.

You have a couple of games coming this year, Heavy Rain and the Last Guardian, that are very innovative but also commercially risky. Much of the industry is turning away from more unique projects like this. Why are you willing to take the risk?
The culture we developed under SCE appreciated and supported talent who had a vision, like Kazunori [Yamauchi], or David Cage, or, Alex [Evans] and the people at Media Molecule. We get genuine pleasure from supporting these people. We want people that make games to be well respected and well known. Our origin was a joint venture between Sony and Sony Music, so a lot of the thinking came from how the music industry worked with the musicians and talent. That kind of culture has been shared among all our territories and studios. As games become a bigger investment, one failure can cost a company tens of millions of dollars, so it's true that it's becoming a more institutional effort. But still, at the core…there is a natural understanding and appreciation that very talented human beings create these games.

You've made a push to create new internal IPs for this generation, but is there any thought to bringing back some established brands, like Twisted Metal and Syphon Filter, on the PS3?
Actually, this morning I was listening to your podcast and I smiled when someone mentioned in the predictions segment that Sony should bring back Twisted Metal and Syphon Filter. It's an honor to hear those sorts of requests. We always talk about these things amongst the management group at Worldwide Studios. We believe that when we launch a new platform that it's an excellent opportunity to launch a new IP. Because it's at the beginning of the platform, the number of games is limited and consumers will be more willing to try new IPs. However, we have existing IPs we'd like to evolve as long as they are based on new ideas from the studios and requests from the consumers. After many years in the industry, we are lucky to have more IPs to work on than we have resources.

You recently released the God of War Collection for PS3. In retrospect, do you wish you had held God of War II back to release it at the launch of PlayStation 3?
[Laughs] Well, while we were developing God of War II, I was the head of the U.S. studio group. We had a lot of debates about it, actually. I always firmly stood by keeping it on PS2. Many people, including marketing, suggested that maybe it should be moved to PS3. What I believed was that God of War II would be the best-selling and best game of the year. We had always seen that, at the launch of a platform, the developer has to spend a lot of time becoming familiar with the platform and software tools. Technical issues take up a lot of the development, perhaps leaving less time for really polishing the game. Towards the end of a platform is when you see really great games, after developers really begin to understand the hardware.

In the God of War franchise, I saw an opportunity for the Santa Monica team to complete their vision for the second game on a platform they totally understood. That was my argument and the company and team supported it. I'm very happy with the result. So to your question, I have never regretted the fact that we released God of War II on PS2.

You are very supportive of Polyphony Digital and have given them what seems like almost unlimited time to make Gran Turismo 5. Obviously, they want to make the best game they can, but from a management perspective does it reach the point where you say enough is enough?
[Laughs] Well, with developers like Yamauchi-san, it may look from the outside that they don't care if they spend as much time as they want, but they really do work hard to get the game done. They wish that they could release these games more frequently. But because of the pressure they put on themselves, they have been doing the best that they can.

It's true that it's been five years since the last true game – Gran Turismo 4 – was released; when you look at it like that the team seems to be taking forever. But Gran Turismo is one of the faces of the PlayStation brand, so they always get requests from the platform side to make technical demonstrations. Kazunori would remind you that, from Polyphony's standpoint, they have released something almost every year, like Gran Turismo HD, the one-track demo or Gran Turismo Proto or the PSP Gran Turismo. So, yes, they aren't like other developers that can release games year after year, but they are also in the situation that they have additional responsibilities to the platform. So I'm half-agreeing with your statement, but also trying to explain the situation around Gran Turismo.

ModNation Racers is another racing product you have coming out, which is the latest in your Play, Create, Share initiative that began with LittleBigPlanet. Do you have more products planned that fall under that banner?
LittleBigPlanet was the best-selling game of that year for us; I think it's past three million units sold. We are very excited about the creation and sharing side of LittleBigPlanet. Clearly, we want to continue to tackle this area of games in many different ways. ModNation Racers came about because the developer, United Front Games, was at Game Developer's Conference when we demonstrated LittleBigPlanet. They were impressed by the presentation and wanted to do something like that. Their background and expertise was in the racing genre, so the idea came about to adapt Play, Create, Share to the racing genre. To me, that was the ideal way of a project happening, instead of us corporate guys saying, "This is what you have to do. Put the Play, Create, Share aspect in your game." Those kinds of things are happening with games that we haven't announced yet, but you will see in the near future.

The push towards 3D television was huge at the recent Consumer Electronics Show. How much are you working on 3D gaming?
Yes, we are a very big part of Sony's 3D strategy. The 3D TV idea has been around for decades and sometimes it's been joked about, but we believe it is real this time. A lot of things are aligned now. One thing is the effort being made in Hollywood movies. They have made lots of progress in R&D to use stereoscopic technology in a natural and unobtrusive way. After about five minutes you forget you are watching a movie in 3D, you are just more immersed. That's the best way to use 3D. Stereoscopic 3D is nothing new; it's how we watch the world. It's easy to make something jump out of the screen at you. That's not the direction the [game] industry is going. If we do our job right, we can make games even more immersive.

I know you can't speak in too much detail, but what kind of games we can expect for the Sony motion controller? A lot of hardcore gamers feel that the Wii has been too bogged down with gimmicky party games. Are you going to have motion-control games for hardcore gamers?
The answer is yes. The motion controller – the hardware itself – has been a collaboration between the hardware group, the Worldwide Studios teams and [EyeToy creator] Richard Marks' U.S. R&D group. We were looking at the Wii and how it changed the games and industry. We are aware that we do certain things well and don't do certain things well. I don't want to talk about other companies' technology, but I firmly believe this is the beginning of something much, much bigger. A lot of game ideas that were not possible with existing technology can now be done. So we are developing games for existing, core audience genres and also some new, more casual things. This controller is precise; it has the response time of the Dual Shock. That was always our goal. We have achieved that. We are able to make games that are easy to get into for casual gamers but also have the depth that core gamers enjoy.

» *interview by Matt Helgeson*

High quality navigation meets real-world usability

TomTom's new five-inch navigator steps up the size and usability of its line of GPS devices. The large and responsive touchscreen makes punching up a new location effortless, and the refined UI is clear and eye pleasing, leaving little confusion on how to operate the device. Some of the standout features include spoken street names, seven million points of interest, and advanced lane guidance. Map Share, the slickest feature, is like a social network for maps. If a road is suddenly closed down, you don't have to wait for TomTom to update the maps. Instead, you can submit the change yourself to share the info with the community. The best part? The big screen and huge feature set will only set you back a reasonable $299.

$299.99

tomtom.com

editor's choice

New York City

4.5 M

11:02 am

15 min

11:26 am

60 mph

TomTom XXL 540s

1 | Earthquake Audio Quake

Tired of the sissy subwoofer that came with your home theater system? Check out Earthquake Audio's Tactile Transducers. The high-end speaker company has created an alternative that will literally shake your couch. Once we bolted the sub-harmonic driver to our couch and fired up a movie, the difference was obvious — we could feel every amplified explosion and the bass from songs hit right through the couch. The complementary amplifier hooks up to your subwoofer port, eliminating the need to connect with your speakers, and the system can even be built to support up to four drivers. While it's definitely an investment to get these puppies going in your house, anyone serious about home theater will enjoy the complement to action movies and explosive gaming.

VERY GOOD ■■■■■■■■■□

$325.00 (MQB-1), $550.00 (XJ-300R)
earthquakeaudio.com

2 | Track Scan Vibras Five.One

The Vibras Five.One from racing-bred headset company Track Scan is a solid first entry into the gaming space, but the company still has a way to go before it unseats the mainstays. Unlike many other 5.1 surround sound headsets, the Vibras use discrete channels for real Dolby Digital (other sets simulate the effect). This creates the most accurate surround we've ever heard in headphones. Unfortunately, the balance between lows and highs sounds off, which can create a confusing mix of frequen-

cies. The bass drivers shine, producing an undistorted rumble that delivers booms and explosions with aplomb. The decoder box has an optical input, but in a head-scratching move, forgoes a standard 3.5mm input found on many digital audio players for the almost extinct coaxial port. The biggest mark we have against the Five.One is the detachable microphone for game chat. It requires two AAA batteries, and the poor voice quality hurts the online gaming experience. Even with all its faults, we give Track Scan credit for cramming as many drivers as it did on these headphones and the 5.1 experience it creates.

LIMITED APPEAL ■■■■■■□□□□

$199.99
track-scan.com

3 | Flo TV

The U.S. may be playing catch up with the rest of the world when it comes to mobile television, but Flo TV signals that it may be the next big market for American broadcasters. If you're willing to shell out cash for the unit, throw down additional money for the monthly fee, and sit through limited commercials, Flo TV is a great way to get your programming fix on the road without killing your cell phone battery. The cellular-based unit made by HTC is small enough to slide into your front pocket, and features easy-to-use touchscreen navigation. The sleek black design is sexy, but strangely lacks a widescreen format, a questionable decision to say the least. The service offers roughly a dozen major channels, including must-

haves like Comedy Central, MTV, and ESPN. Unfortunately, the picture quality suffers from noticeable artifacting and stuttering on both strong and weak signals, which may be a deal breaker for some.

AVERAGE ■■■■■■□□□□

$249.99 (plus $15/month)
flotv.com

4 | Gunnar PPK

Designed with the gamer in mind, the Gunnar PPK glasses are engineered to reduce the eye strain common with staring at computer monitors and televisions for long fragging sessions. The lenses' yellow tint is distracting when playing games in a well-lit environment, but it was hardly noticeable in dimly lit rooms. Though the frames feel flimsy, the flexible ergonomic design rests comfortably on your head even when wearing a gaming headset. We didn't experience any eye fatigue while wearing the glasses, but one of our editors said the yellow tint gave him a headache during an intense gaming session. The glasses come in an onyx, espresso, or chrome finish. Though many professional gamers swear by the glasses, given our staff's lukewarm response and the glasses' steep price, consult your optometrist before purchasing a pair.

AVERAGE ■■■■■■□□□□

$79.99
gunnars.com

MARKETING TO REMEMBER

Can't recall a game release date? Don't blame your memory, blame ad campaigns

*by Andrew Reiner
executive editor,
Game Informer*

Why is it that I can tell you off the top of my head when *Iron Man 2* or *Clash of the Titans* are hitting movie theaters, yet I have to search a website or visit a game store to find a video game release date? The answer is simple: Most game publishers are not doing enough to market new releases.

Hollywood studios bang movie release dates into our minds with a hammer made of feathers. When I turn on my TV, I see a trailer with a release date. When I surf the web, I see advertising for the same movie (again with a release date). When I cross a street, I see that movie advertised and its release date plastered on billboards, buses, and walls. Long story short, it would be nearly impossible for me to live my life without seeing an advertisement for said film. Even if I don't have interest in it, I know what it is, I know when it's coming, and even weeks after the film hits theaters, I am reminded of why I should see it through "critics agree" or "this summer's number one film" post-release TV spots.

Motion picture advertising has even infiltrated the game space. I see movie ads more often on Xbox Live than I see game advertisements. This isn't a conspiracy. Hollywood studios aggressively market their product. Video game companies do not.

When I see video game advertisements on television, roughly half of them follow the path of beer companies, with joke-filled spots. Others show CGI clips that are nowhere to be found in the game. Only a few each year show actual in-game gameplay along with a release date. But these ads are usually one-offs. How many movie trailers do you usually see for any given film? How many TV spots?

All of this boils down to how much a publisher is willing to spend on marketing. The immediate thought, for me anyway, was that movie companies spend more on their blockbusters than game companies do. Not true. After talking with several game manufacturers, I found game marketing budgets can be just as large as movies. The divide comes with where these dollars are spent.

Bethesda Softworks' vice president of PR and marketing, Pete Hines, sums it up best. "While you'll see bigger game campaigns use things associated with movie marketing, like lots of TV or outdoor, you have to remember that pretty much anyone can see a movie, whereas not everyone can play a 360 or PS3 game (if they don't own the console)," he said. "So movie marketing can afford to be more mass, while game marketing needs to make sure it is reaching people who can actually buy and play the game."

Basically, a good portion of budgets is spent in game stores, game websites, magazines, and on television shows with large gamer demographics. With Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2 pulling in over a billion dollars and Assassin's Creed II topping eight million units sold, it's hard to say that video game marketing is failing. Apparently, marketing to mostly the core user is enough to reach desired sales goals.

But even these targeted marketing campaigns often fail to deliver the key message of a game's release date. Write this off as a rant from a gamer if you must, but I strongly feel game companies need to do a better job of promoting upcoming releases. The answer isn't as simple as putting God of War III's release date on billboards spread across every major U.S. highway. That's like playing an RPG and spending all of your experience points on "luck."

What is the answer? Finding a system that pounds game releases into people's heads. I have no interest in seeing films like *Julie & Julia*, but I saw plenty of advertisements for it within my daily entertainment. As I mentioned earlier, Hollywood has a strong presence on game consoles and in gamer culture, while games haven't infiltrated the movie space in the same way. Only a select few DVDs feature game trailers in the previews section, and in-theater video game advertising often plays at the same time as the car commercials and local ads before the lights dim and the film previews start.

The success of the video game industry cannot be denied. Something is being done right. At the same time, the fact that release dates have to be written on to the back of your hand shows that something is definitely wrong.

timeline

Battlefield: Bad Company 2

02 tue

New Releases
› Alice in Wonderland *(Wii, DS)*
› APB *(PC)*
› Battlefield: Bad Company 2 *(PS3, 360, PC)*
› Deca Sports *(DS)*
› Major League Baseball 2K10 *(PS3, 360, PSP, DS, PC)*
› MLB 10: The Show *(PS3, PS2, PSP)*

› Ponyo *(Blu-Ray, DVD)*
› Project Runway *(Wii)*
› Sonic Classic Collection *(DS)*
› Supreme Commander 2 *(PC)*
› Sushi Go Round *(Wii, DS)*

05 fri

Because No One Asked for It
Most people view Tim Burton as a visionary. We agree. No one can ruin classic children's stories like he can. He had Johnny Depp destroy *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, and in today's release, Burton's calling upon him again to make a new generation of kids hate *Alice in Wonderland*. If your six-year-old is an aspiring film critic, this movie will provide great material for practicing a "no stars" review.

New Releases
› Final Fantasy XIII *(PS3, 360)*
› Pizza Delivery Boy *(Wii)*
› Pokémon HeartGold, SoulSilver *(DS)*
› Resident Evil 5: Gold Edition *(PS3, 360)*
› Resonance of Fate *(PS3, 360)*

09 tue

Final Fantasy XIII

10 wed

Before You See Iron Man 2...
...you'll want to read *Iron Man 1.5*. This comic book fills in the gap between the two motion pictures. Without giving away any spoilers, *Iron Man 2*'s plot picks up one month after the conclusion of the first film. So what happened after Tony Stark foolishly said, "I am Iron Man"? This official movie tie-in is the only place you'll find the answers.

Independent Games Festival
Independent game developers worldwide convene in San Francisco today for the 12th Annual Independent Games Festival Awards. The ceremony doles out prizes to 20 finalists in six categories, giving accolades for excellence in visual art, audio, technical execution, innovation, and overall design. Additionally, one lucky developer will walk away with the Seamus McNally Grand Prize – securing the top honor and $20,000 to line their pocketbooks with. Notable past contenders include Castle Crashers, World of Goo, Braid, and Blueberry Garden. Be sure to visit gameinformer.com for the full list of winners after the ceremony draws to a close.

11 thu

Halo Toys: Now in Shades of Yellow
McFarlane's seventh series of Halo action figures ditches the olive green tones in favor of the leftover paint from the Mighty Morphin Power Rangers toys. Not only can fans add a yellow elite to their collection, they can spice it up even further with a vibrant blue rogue. Series 8 will likely bring Lavender Chief and Passionate Puce Arbiter.

13 sat

Dragon Age Origins: Awakening

New Releases
› Assassin's Creed II *(PC)*
› Command & Conquer 4: Tiberian Twilight *(PC)*
› Dragon Age Origins: Awakening *(PS3, 360, PC)*
› Fragile Dreams: Farewell Ruins of the Moon *(Wii)*
› Infinite Space *(DS)*

› Metro 2033 *(360, PC)*
› Moto GP 09/10 *(PS3, 360)*
› Sonny with a Chance *(DS)*
› South Park: Season 16 *(Blu-Ray, DVD)*

16 tue

Here Come the Oscar-Worthy Films
John Cusack has a keen eye for compelling roles that win him Oscar nominations every year. After his huge success with *2012*, *Must Love Dogs*, and *1408*, he's striking gold again with today's release, *Hot Tub Time Machine*. He faces some stiff competition, though, since *Season of the Witch* also hits theaters today. That one stars Nic Cage with long hair – an impossible-to-beat combo.

19 fri

New Releases
› Just Cause 2 *(PS3, 360, PC)*
› Red Steel 2 *(Wii)*
› Sakura Wars: So Long, My Love *(Wii, PS2)*
› Shin Megami Tensei: Strange Journey *(DS)*

Just Cause 2

23 tue

26 fri
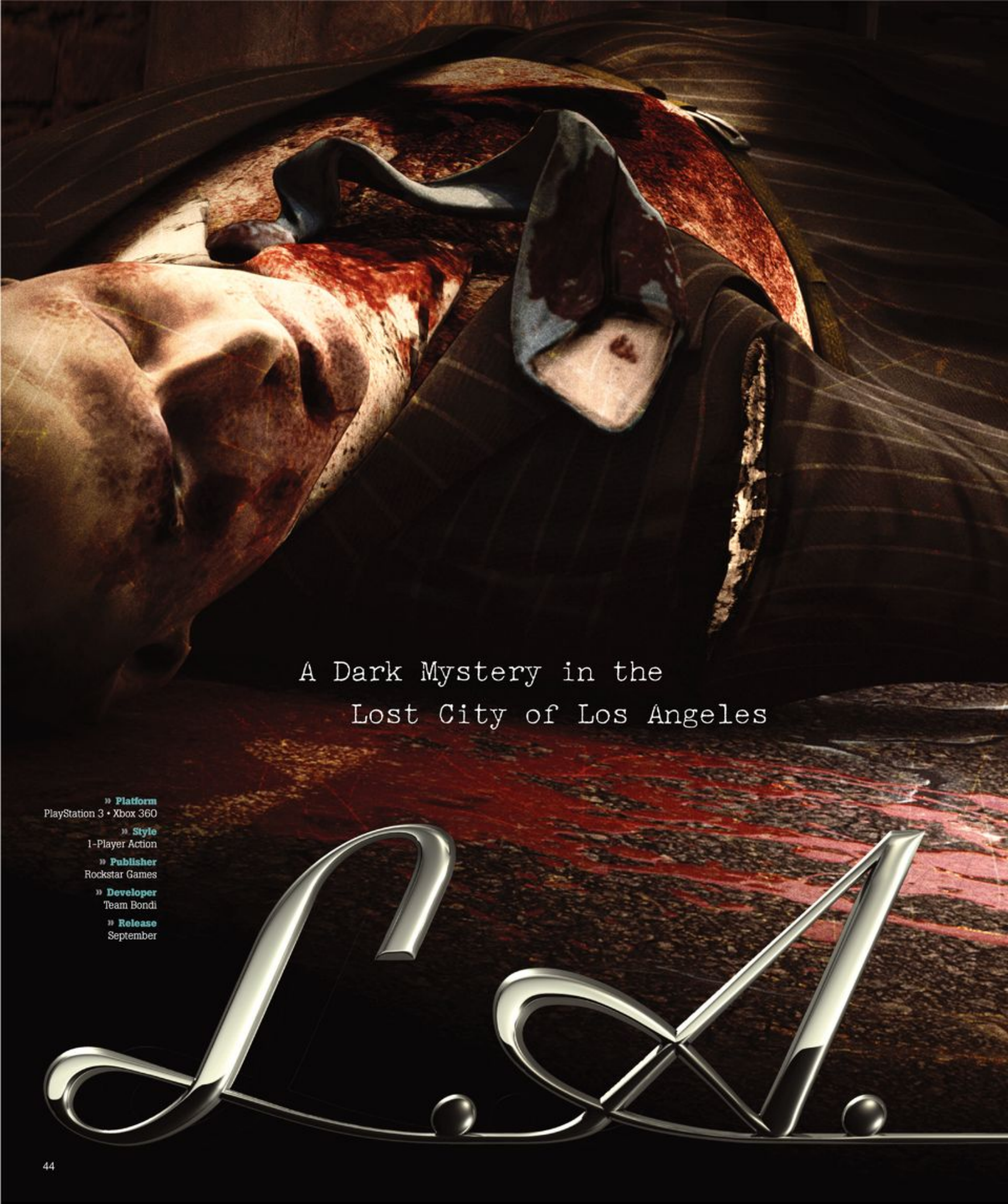
Welcome to Rip-Off City
Hollywood once again rips off a video game idea. Today's release, *Clash of the Titans*, is basically *God of War: The Movie*. Hydra? Seen it. Minotaur? Boring. The movie even steals locations, like Athens and Hades, straight from the game. Shameless. Just shameless.

New Releases
› America's Test Kitchen: Cooking *(DS)*
› Disney's Stitch Jam *(DS)*
› Front Mission Evolved *(PS3, 360, PC)*
› Mimana: Iyar Chronicle *(PSP)*

› Quantum Theory *(PS3, 360)*
› Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War II – Chaos Rising *(PC)*
› WarioWare D.I.Y. *(DS)*

30 tue

Quantum Theory

A Dark Mystery in the
Lost City of Los Angeles

» **Platform**
PlayStation 3 • Xbox 360

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Rockstar Games

» **Developer**
Team Bondi

» **Release**
September

L.A.

Ambition.

No word better describes Rockstar Games. In the nine years since the release of its open-world crime epic Grand Theft Auto III, which stands among the most influential and successful games ever released, the company has used its GTA war chest in pursuit of games that few other companies in the industry would even attempt. From the brutal, violent stealth of the controversial Manhunt to the charming comic mischief of Bully, Rockstar continually digs deep into the history of pop culture and film for inspirations beyond the usual fantasy, military, and sci-fi clichés that fuel much of the industry's output.

Despite courting controversy both outside the industry and within, it's hard to argue with the results. The company's games have exhibited enormous scope and unparalleled production values. When Rockstar offers you a chance to get a behind-the-scenes look into what they call their most ambitious title to date, you say yes.

Though L.A. Noire's existence has been known for several years, facts about this title have been as hard to find as clues to the seedy murders that L.A. Noire's protagonist, Cole Phelps, unravels throughout the course of the game. After seeing the game and the development process in action, it's clear why the publisher has been so secretive. Team Bondi, the studio behind L.A. Noire, has set the bar almost impossibly high with this game. It's not only creating the largest, most detailed open-world game to date, it's attempting to resurrect the long-lost Los Angeles of the 1940s while adding an engaging new adventure-style investigation system to the familiar drive-and-shoot gameplay model. Oh, and along the way the company is pioneering some groundbreaking new technology that it hopes will forever change the way video games are made.

Noire

by Matt Helgeson

Filming Noir

Walking into a nondescript building in Los Angeles, I'm introduced to Team Bondi's game director Brendan McNamara, who is wearing a headset microphone and quietly oversee-ing a buzzing scene that more resembles a Hollywood film production than a game studio. The soft-spoken Australian seems fairly relaxed considering his team is entering crunch time on his first major project since he shipped the PS2 gangster hit The Getaway in 2002. Numerous Rockstar and Team Bondi staffers are scuttling around, shuffling between the various rooms in the spartan warehouse facility.

In one room, Australian actress Erika Heynatz (famous as the original host of *Australia's Next Top Model*) is sitting down for hair and makeup in a room filled with mirrors and hair dryers. Her hair is meticulously coifed into tight, elaborate buns and covered with a hairnet in the classic '40s style.

After some introductions, McNamara takes us to the heart of the operation: a soundproofed white room that feels like a lost set from the film *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Heynatz sits in a chair as makeup artists make last minute adjust-ments to her hair and cosmetics. Surrounding her is complex scaffolding equipped with 32 stereo-matched cameras and assorted micro-phones that will capture her image from every possible angle.

Once up and running, the actor interacts with the director through a monitor posted directly in front of her head, getting the crucial line prompts and feedback on the performance. Once com-pleted, every detail of the performance – dia-logue, expression, eye movement, even makeup details like black eyes or burns – are directly pipelined into the game with no involvement from animators. In this way, L.A. Noire repre-sents a total break with conventional game development and animation. Instead of record-ing dialogue, animating, and performing motion capture as separate steps of the process, Team Bondi (using technology developed by its sister company Depth Analysis) is captur-ing human performances just as a filmmaker would – except instead of generating movie footage, they come away with fully animated 3D models.

It's a tremendously advanced pro-cess – Depth Analysis' Oliver Bao, head of research and development, reveals that the company's Australian facility is equipped to store 200 terabytes of capture data – but one that allows them to work more quickly than with traditional hand-animation tech-niques. "That's the great thing about this system, there's very little human interac-tion," Bao observes. "Traditionally, one minute of facial animation could take a couple of animators a month. The idea is that we can mass-produce. We can pro-duce about 20 minutes of final footage a day, and it's seamless – I don't even have character artists or animators working with me."

For McNamara, it's perhaps the most crucial aspect of L.A. Noire, because the game features an unprecedented volume of spoken lines, encompassing a script of around 2,000 pages. To put it in perspective, the average hour-long television show has about 50 pages,

and a longer feature film's script would be 200 (approximately one page per minute of running time). With these new tools, Team Bondi can produce results that are both faster and vastly improved over games of the past.

"We hadn't had really good results with motion capture, using facial markers and all that," McNamara recalls. "I'd been doing some research in the U.K. for a number of years on how you could do capture without markers. What we wanted to do was capture the exterior of people instead of the bones. What we have here is the final end of that process, where you put an actor in the chair and as we record it's instantly turned into 3D. We think it's pretty sig-nificant. The great thing about that is we think that the whole uncanny valley thing is out the window, because you can see people in the game and literally lip-read what they say."

Seeing side-by-side comparisons of the actors with their in-game likenesses, it's clear McNamara's technical team (staffed mostly by Team Bondi's sister company Depth Analysis) is treading new ground in terms of facial anima-tion in games. At first, it's almost eerie. From

"...the whole uncanny valley thing is out the window."

—Brendan McNamara

Rebuilding Los Angeles

"It's like a time machine," says L.A. Noire production designer Simon Wood. "That was my mantra."

As the man tasked with recreating a massive swatch of 1947 Los Angeles, Wood has taken on this job with a near-obsessive commitment to detail. By Rockstar's estimation, L.A. Noire will feature a game world that's bigger and more detailed than any it's created so far, and will be a near one-to-one recreation of the city at the time. That's not to mention the over 140 interiors (many of which are multi-room structures) and the mind-boggling number of fully rendered objects that Cole Phelps can examine in his investigations.

To pull this off, Wood and his team conducted massive amounts of research, utilizing resources often reserved for history graduate students. From the UCLA and USC archives the team secured over 180,000 photographs from period newspapers like the *Los Angeles Times*, *The Herald Examiner*, and *The Daily News*. Placing these pictures side by side, they were able to get a view into a forgotten world. This exhaustive photographic data provided insight into everything from long torn-down L.A. landmarks to everyday details like how people dressed and how much food cost at local diners. For items they couldn't track down, they consulted famous Hollywood prop and wardrobe houses like Western Costume to secure authentic period clothing (some of the clothes in the game were used in films like *Saving Private Ryan* and *King Kong*) and set pieces.

In crafting the game's massive in-game map, which spans from the old downtown out to Hollywood, Wood realized the team would be recreating something almost unimaginable to current residents of the city: Los Angeles without freeways.

"It never dawned on me that L.A. didn't have freeways," Wood comments. "It's like Sydney has an opera house and a bridge, L.A. has freeways. Some [landmarks] were still standing, but with the L.A. building boom, they level things quickly. Nothing stands for long. [In the game] you can drive down streets that don't exist anymore."

In L.A.'s Huntingon Library, the team pored over massive, hand-drawn maps created in the '40s by President Franklin Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration, as well as early aerial photography of the area. While not willing to say that it's 100 percent accurate, Wood feels that the streets of L.A. Noire are as close as humanly possible to the actual L.A. of the time, right down to the storefront windows, which are modeled in 3D with accurate period products.

Help in modeling the numerous vintage vehicles in the game came from a slightly less academic source: late night comedian Jay Leno. "We photographed Jay Leno's private car collection," remembers Wood. "You can drive around in Jay Leno's private fire truck! He's got a garage like in Iron Man or Wayne manor. He was there, and when he opened it up, the boys were gobsmacked. It's endless."

Team Bondi and its sister company Depth Analysis have created a groundbreaking facial capture system that allows them to instantly render and animate the game's actors, including *Mad Men's* Aaron Staton, who plays the game's lead character Cole Phelps

"Even the [games] I look at now that are great, there's something about [the characters] that makes me think of a goldfish."

—Brendan McNamara

You don't see many windmills in Los Angeles these days

slightest raise of an eyebrow, the facial models are virtually indistinguishable from the real thing. "The actors are weirded out at first – everyone's used to seeing themselves in 2D," McNamara reveals.

Since the physical performance and dialogue reading are done at the same time, lip synching problems are non-existent, allowing the player to finally react to the characters as real actors in a way that even games like Uncharted 2 or Mass Effect haven't achieved.

"Even the [games] I look at now that are great, there's something about [the characters] that makes me think of a goldfish," McNamara comments. "You have a million years of evolution that tells you how to read faces, so you just have to see one thing and it throws you off. With this game, it's a line in the sand – before and after. That's what it feels like to me. We used to do that; now we do this. In the end, we want you to interact with this and you don't even ask the question 'Is this real or not?'"

A Cast of Hundreds

This new way of working allows Team Bondi to work much faster, but it also brought about a host of new challenges. For one, since every character – from the protagonist to the last random pedestrian – had to be fully voiced and animated, the casting and capture process has grown to epic proportion. Right now, there are well over 300 actors and actresses being used in L.A. Noire.

The most notable of these is Aaron Staton, who plays lead character Cole Phelps. Best known as Ken Cosgrove in the acclaimed AMC series Mad Men, Staton is tasked with embodying the emotional core of Team Bondi's epic noir saga. Speaking with him as he prepared for some test takes, the actor, a lifelong gamer, seemed enthusiastic about the project.

"Yeah, I've played most of [Rockstar's games]. I played all the Grand Theft Autos. My favorite was Vice City. As far as open-world games, or anything with a story, in the past, I've usually skipped the cutscenes to go into the gameplay. Which is a funny thing, but I'm just being honest," Staton observes. "[This game] is about trying to enhance the experience and bring those two together into a singular experience, rather than two separate things, where you're playing, then you put the controller down and watch."

The sterile confines of the recording unit present a challenge to even the most experienced actor. "I was in there for about an hour and a half, and this is my second day," Staton says, "but my initial impression was that I'd never been in a completely soundproof room. That I realized once the door closed. It was just 'whooooosh' when it shut…The acting part of it is a strange thing. I have to rely on [the directors], because you're sort of limited. You can only move side to side to 45 degrees. Within

that, there is a lot of freedom, but it's finding what the boundaries are and defining them so I can relax and feel comfortable within it."

To help get natural performances from the actors in this unnatural environment, Team Bondi has hired veteran director Michael Uppendahl, who had previously worked with Staton on Mad Men.

"I try to stage people in a way that I think is lively and helpful to the story," says Uppendahl. "I try to monitor the performances to make sure we're getting the human element that's going to make it compelling and interesting."

For McNamara, who wrote a majority of the game's script, Uppendahl's assistance has proved invaluable, allowing them to quickly move through the reams of dialogue that must be recorded each day.

"We don't cut until we have something that feels real. That's the benefit of having Mike," says McNamara. "If I try to explain something, I always explain the whole bloody 5,000 page story. Mike can cut through that because he works with these guys a lot. He knows what two words will get them to the right place. I'll go 'Well it's blah, blah, blah, blah, blah' and then he'll say, 'Louder!' and it works. [Laughs] The convergence of media is a big thing for me. People have talked about it for a long time, but my skills are converging with Mike's skills and Aaron's skills and vice versa. We are somehow getting what we want out of that."

While it's focused on conducting investigations, L.A. Noire will still have enough gunplay to please action fans

Reading Faces, Solving Cases

Technology for technology's sake is one thing, but in L.A. Noire Team Bondi's impressive new techniques aren't just there for window dressing. It's a core building block of the game itself.

L.A. Noire is not GTA in 1940s drag. The game revolves around real police work: interviewing suspects, collecting data, and piecing together the facts to reveal the truth. To do that, you have to be able to read faces and decide whether or not you're being lied to – something only possible through the stunningly realistic facial capture Team Bondi has worked so hard to accomplish.

"It's obviously cool technology, but the key thing for us is that when you're interrogating someone, you can read their face and tell if they are lying," McNamara claims. "That's a key component of the gameplay."

Producer Jeronimo Barrera considers L.A. Noire "an adventure game that plays like a GTA."

At the beginning of our demo, Phelps and his partner Stephan Bekowsky pull up at a freight yard to check out a report on an abandoned car. Something fishy is going on. Phelps inspects the scene, noting that the car's interior is drenched with blood. Nearby is a bloody pipe, which seems to suggest foul play. A street cop on the scene tells us the car is registered to a Mr. Eugene White, who has been reported missing.

Walking around, Phelps gathers more clues from the scene, showing off another of L.A. Noire's important features. Instead of finding simple items that sit on top of tables with an otherworldly glow around them, this game forces you to use your powers of observation to gather information. Thousands of period items have been fully modeled, and can be manipulated by the player. Near the car, Phelps sees a pair of broken glasses and a wallet. Opening the wallet, he pulls out the various cards and photos, jotting down White's address while noting a picture of White and his wife in happier times and the name brand of the glasses. Phelps picks up the bloody pipe, rotating it around

to view the inscription "Instaheat." Elsewhere, he sees a receipt for one live pig purchased by an A. Hogan.

All this data is recorded in the player's notepad, which serves as an information hub for all your investigations. All locations, people, and facts related to a case are stored there, allowing you to access it instantly during an interrogation. The more facts and evidence you gather, the greater your options will be during an interview.

After a conversation with a worker who reported the missing vehicle, Phelps leaves the scene to go to the address found in the wallet, Eugene White's residence. Elizabeth White meets us at the door. The sequence that follows gives us our first glimpse of how L.A. Noire's animations, writing, design, and attention to detail combine to form a gripping gameplay experience.

After inviting him in, a clearly concerned Mrs. White shows Phelps to the living room. Phelps informs her that her husband appears to be missing, and that foul play is suspected. In her reaction, we see the real power of Team Bondi's digital filming process. "I knew something was wrong when he didn't come home!" she exclaims, furrowing her brow and darting her eyes in panic. It's real fear we see in her face – a truly human performance by a human actress. Compared to this, even the best game animation seems plastic and stilted.

Giving Mrs. White some time to calm down, Phelps begins to look around the house. Noting that the couple apparently sleeps in separate bedrooms, he inspects Eugene White's room. Near a table is a ticket to Seattle and signs of a missing suitcase. On another is a picture of Mr. White. Picking it up, Phelps pulls the picture out of its frame and inspects the back. Written on the back are the words "To My Eugene. Love, Nicole." Clearly there's more to this story.

Working his way around the back, Phelps stops in the kitchen, noting a matchbook from Cavanaugh's Bar. From there, he walks outside to inspect the exterior of the house. On the side is a dismantled Instaheat water heater, the same brand as the pipe that was found at the scene. After assembling the pieces, it's clear the murder

weapon is the missing piece.

Pausing to call in for the address for Cavanaugh's Bar, Phelps sits down to resume the interview with Mrs. White. Here we begin to see how the game's interrogation process is used to extract information from witnesses. Following each response, you have three questioning options: coax, accuse, and force. Much like in Mass Effect, they set a general tone for your next response without tying you to canned dialogue options. While it's easy to be tempted to play the heavy, pushing too hard will sometimes cause a witness to shut down entirely, making it impossible to extract any further information. However, if you can refute their statement with a fact or clue from your notepad, they will quickly backpedal, making each encounter a subtle game of verbal strategy.

Sitting down with Mrs. White, Phelps eases into the interrogation, asking her about the last time she saw her husband. She says he went out to meet a friend, Arthur, for a drink, noting that he did come home from work unusually early that day. Phelps then asks about the receipt for a live pig found on the scene, made out to "A. Hogan." Making a face that clearly shows her disdain, she says, "A pig? Eugene runs a tool business. That would be Arthur Hogan. God knows what he's up to."

So far, Mrs. White's body language and expressions indicate she's being truthful. However, things quickly become tense when Phelps asks about the picture in the bedroom. Suddenly, her expression hardens and her eyes dart around the room. She blurts out, "What is there to tell? It's from his recent business trip to Seattle." Phelps changes tacks, selecting the "Accuse" option. "There's more to tell and you know it!" exclaims Phelps. Mrs. White continues her denials, saying she knows nothing, but her face tells a different story. Consulting his notepad, Phelps selects the piece of evidence that should refute her story – the inscription from "Nicole" on the back of the photo.

Suddenly, her hard exterior cracks, and she breaks down in tears, admitting she knew about the affair. Faced with a murder weapon that came from the house, an adulterous husband, and a spurned wife, Phelps accuses her of the murder.

True Crime

Though told through the lens of a crime drama, L.A. Noire is Team Bondi's game director Brendan McNamara's attempt to explore a city and a time period that has long fascinated him. As with The Getaway, the sense of place is key to the game.

"For me, when you write something there's always some reason." McNamara says. "The Getaway for me was because I'd lived in London for some years. It was in a sense what London meant to people, whether you were Australian, or Jamaican, or British. With this, I grew up in that post-Vietnam mindset of what America is about. You see all the old movies and think that America had this amazing moral authority post-World War II. It's been a constant slide since then and I wondered where that started. [In the '40s] there was this veneer of what America was, and then there was this undercurrent of what was really happening. Hollywood was marketing this model of the world to everyone – the California dream. We bought into that even in Australia."

McNamara uncovers the dark side of the Golden State in that game's criminal cases, which occupy much of your time in the game. To make sure that L.A. Noire feels as real as possible, he conducted countless hours of research, reading crime reports from local newspapers. Over 90 percent of the game's cases are based on

real incidents, with some alterations to make sure the action is engrossing and to ensure that participants in the events or their living relatives are not brought to light. In conducting research, the team quickly learned that the 1947 L.A. was far from the sunny, pastoral city portrayed in many films.

"Early on, when I met Brendan and he was showing me the research stuff, the crime books from the time were unbelievable," says Rockstar producer Jeronimo Barrera. "We have this perception that the late '40s were idyllic, but it was brutal. The amount of things that we won't touch on in the game, like child abuse, was horrific."

"Some of them were too wild to use," adds McNamara. "One was about a preacher walking down Broadway with a bullwhip, whipping non-believers. [Laughs] We thought that was a great story, but we didn't know how to work it in. There was a guy in Santa Monica who was driving a four-engine plane down the street at midnight. He had an accident because he didn't have lights on the plane – if you came up with that at a design meeting, people would throw you out!"

INTERVIEW ROOM 2

"[L.A. Noire] is an adventure game that plays like a GTA."

—Jeronimo Barrera

L.A. Noire's facial animations are the most realistic and natural looking in a game to date. Also, notice the detail on that Smith & Wesson

The Life of a Detective

L.A. Noire draws on reams of real-life history, but the saga of one man, Cole Phelps, holds it together. While Rockstar didn't reveal the game's story in much detail, it's clear that Phelps' personal history hides some secrets.

Aaron Staton, who plays Phelps in the game, sees Phelps as a flawed, but ultimately good, man.

"He's a man with strong convictions and ambitions," Staton comments. "He's certainly conflicted and harbors some dark regrets and guilt about some of his actions in the past, in World War II. There have been promotions and accommodations that – to most people – would seem like a positive thing. But when you're rewarded for something questionable, I think you carry a shame about it. In all of these missions, he's trying to prove to the people around him and to himself that he's worthy. I think he climbs the ranks quickly because he's intelligent and capable, but that doubt leads him to making mistakes as well."

Throughout the game, Phelps will progress through the ranks of the LAPD through what Team Bondi calls the "desk system." As in a real police force, there are different departments (desks) that deal with specific types of crime. At first,

Phelps will be a simple beat cop, skulking through L.A. alleys for evidence on simple crimes. As he solves more cases, he'll be promoted to different desks like traffic, vice, burglary, and arson. Ultimately, he'll make homicide detective, the most prestigious job in the department. At each desk, he'll be teamed with a new partner, some of whom are more useful (and trustworthy) than others. Along the way, he'll learn that the police themselves are not saints – Team Bondi's game director Brendan McNamara points out that the real-life corruption that scandalized the force in the late '40s will definitely impact Phelps during the game.

For McNamara, the real challenge was to create a character that will go through real changes over the course of the adventure, something games have struggled to do.

"Who he is at the beginning is completely different from who he is at the end," McNamara says. "There's a journey. In most games – even my old games – who someone is at the beginning is who they are at the end. You don't get that in movies or literature – people change. We want you to go on a journey with him. We're trying to pull that off."

It's clear he overplayed his hand. Although she doesn't have an alibi for the evening – she claims to be home alone – she clams up, telling us if we accuse her without proof the LAPD can expect a lawsuit. Since Phelps has no actual clues to refute her testimony, this part of the case is shut down.

Cavanaugh's Bar gives Phelps a new location to investigate, hopefully to locate the supposedly shady Arthur Hogan. After warping to the location via the map screen (the game gives you this option for those that tire of driving), we start exploring the dank dive bar. In the back room is Arthur Hogan, already well on his way to drunk. Hogan's clearly a hard case, angrily spitting back, "Who wants to know?" when we ask his name. We ask if he knew that Eugene White was missing, to which he offers a nervous, completely unbelievable denial. Something smells fishy here. Phelps chooses to accuse, taking an aggressive approach. When Hogan denies being on the scene, Phelps reaches in his pocket and shows him the receipt for the pig found by the abandoned car. Hogan confesses that he and White had staged a fake murder, splashing pig's blood on the scene (keep in mind this is before the days of CSI and DNA testing) so White could be free to join his mistress in Seattle. Seems like this "murder" isn't a murder at all.

After Phelps threatens to take him into the alley and knock some sense into him, Hogan reluctantly gives up White. He's hiding out in Hogan's apartment on the corner of Temple and Figueroa, apartment two. After Phelps knocks on the door, White opens the door briefly and quickly slams it in our face. Phelps kicks the door down and gives chase over the rooftops. Pursuing White down a ladder and onto a patch of grass, we're relieved to see that our partner Bekowsky has flanked around back and pulled our car around. He stops White at gunpoint.

White confesses that he staged everything to get away from his wife, stammering "I…I thought it would be easier."

"Hope she was worth it," notes Phelps wryly before applying the cuffs.

A New Formula

The White encounter is just one example of the myriad cases, both small and large, in the game, but it gives a great look into how L.A. Noire hopes to bridge the gap between adventure, action, and open-world gaming. Rockstar's Barrera hopes the project will open up a new paradigm for the genre.

"The first time we got into the game I got the same sensation I got the first time I saw The 7th Guest [a classic PC adventure game – Ed.], but that was very simplistic," he says. "This is the next evolution. When we were showing people the actors in the game, we actually had to put in the camera rotating them to show that it was a game and not video."

With its smoky jazz score, period vibe, and a cerebral focus on storytelling and investigation, L.A. Noire is certainly a different kind of open-world game. Though passionate about the direction he's chosen, McNamara realizes that the game needs to provide fans of Rockstar's other, more visceral games enough thrills – something for which he's relied on advice from his partners at Rockstar to provide.

"With The Getaway, the storytelling and characters were great, but it was just too hard to play," McNamara comments. "Rockstar is really good at distilling it down to what kind of gameplay we want to get into. That comes across in what you've seen so far. We have the investigative stuff that makes it really interesting, but we also have the stuff that's going to appeal to people who like shootouts and action. They have an incredible attention to detail. That's been great for us, because we are a new team and we're trying to do a groundbreaking game. We're trying to do something that no one's ever done before. Their help is important."

Barrera feels they've hit on a formula that can both innovate and satisfy more casual fans. "It's about opening it up for a lot of people and giving the people the option of playing it a lot of different ways," Barrera declares. "The big challenge is that this isn't a big body count game. You're not running into people or starting big shootouts in the middle of the street. But we had to make things fun for people that like that sort of stuff. Or people that like to try to 'break' the game or the mission. We had to have those sorts of angles."

Though the investigations and characters are the core of the experience, the gameplay we saw featured plenty of action-flick fireworks, including a car chase, a shootout with some corrupt soldiers (working on behalf of the legendary shut-in millionaire Howard Hughes), and the aftermath of an explosion that levels several city blocks. At its best, the game combines the wide-open feel of a traditional sandbox game with the finely crafted interactive storytelling and player choice usually associated with the RPG genre – all in a setting and locale that feels far fresher and engrossing than the usual urban wastelands or war zones that are the staples of modern developers.

Whatever the end result, L.A. Noire already appears to be a very significant game. On the one hand it's pushing the technology of game development in exciting ways. On the other, it's using that technology to create a game that feels, in many ways, more human and personal than anything Rockstar has released so far. By tapping into a fascinating era in American history, bringing to life a Los Angeles that's been lost to time, and creating characters with real emotional resonance, L.A. Noire could well be the most epic title yet from a company that's spent the last decade remaking the gaming landscape.

Is it a risk? Sure, but Rockstar and Team Bondi seem confident that L.A. Noire will please its established fans while at the same time reach a new audience.

"I worry about it constantly," Barrera reveals. "But that could be said about any of our games. Is it compelling? I love games and I play everything that comes out. Sometimes working on our games you get a little bit tired of what you've been working on. The whole time I've been working on this, it's been really compelling to play this and watch the performances and unravel the mysteries. Then you also have the action there. For me, it's a complete package."

While it's usually best to coax information out of witness, sometimes a more forceful approach is necessary

God of War III

Kratos returns with a vengeance

» **Platform**
PlayStation 3

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Sony Computer
Entertainment

» **Developer**
Sony Computer
Entertainment Santa
Monica

» **Release**
March 16

Only a few years have passed since we were left with the cliffhanger at the end of God of War II, but it feels like an eternity. Kratos, riding on the back of the titan Gaia, was scaling Mount Olympus and preparing to deal killing blows to the entire Greek pantheon of gods…and then the credits rolled.

In just a few weeks, gamers will finally pick up where they left off and satisfy their desire for deicide. Don't expect too many more big reveals out of the team at Sony Santa Monica; with God of War III's much-anticipated release in sight, all that remains is to get your hands on the game and see how Kratos' epic struggle concludes for yourself. Game director Stig Asmussen provided us with some closing comments about what gamers can expect from the scope, story, and combat in the third entry of Sony's flagship series. » **Joe Juba**

For more God of War III screens, head to gameinformer.com/mag
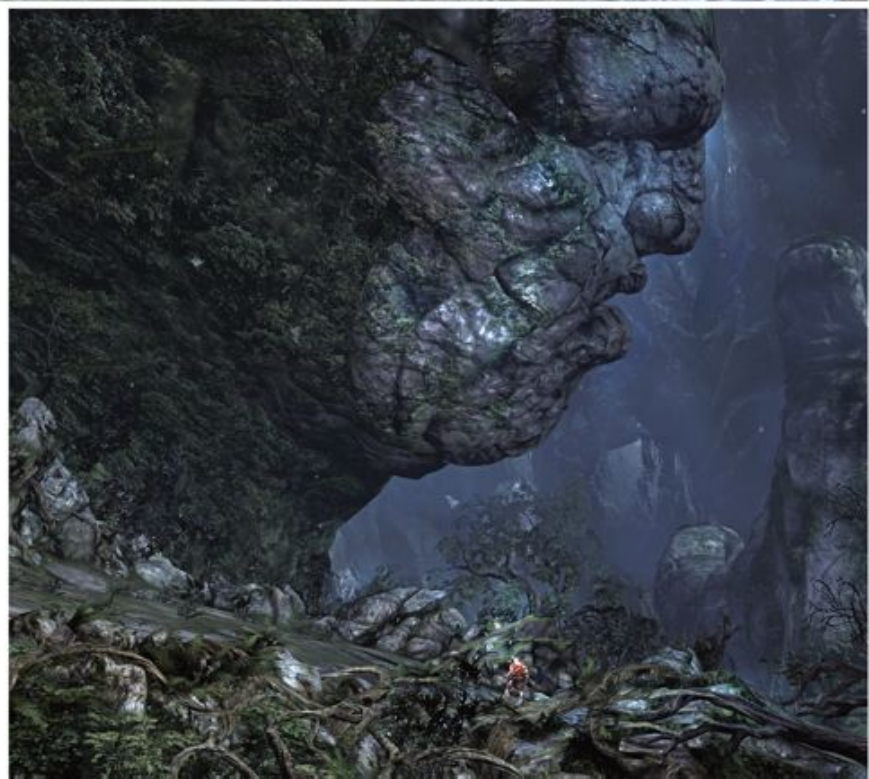
When the titan reaches its arm back, the ground under Kratos' is inverted. He then dangles from his blades, continuing his assault

These skeleton warriors are minions of the gods, but don't be surprised if you eventually find yourself fighting the titans, too

This battle occurs early in the game, and will incorporate a lot of dodge-and-counter maneuvers

On the horse monster in the screenshots

"The summit of Mt. Olympus is blocked by an immense force, essentially a collection of all of the fiercest elements of the sea. Take one part seahorse, one part crab, and glue it together with coral and water. It is not based off any creature in Greek mythology, but I think it's safe to say that it is inspired by them. The Greeks were always morphing animals together to create insane monsters."

On Kratos' allegiance

"Kratos serves only himself. It doesn't matter if it is a god or titan – if they stand in his way, then they must be destroyed. You will have to play the game to see how this pans out."

On varying the style of combat

"We always pace out our fights very specifically. Oftentimes it depends on how and where we teach a mechanic. If we paced a certain move to be learned in a certain area, it will usually become a focus move in the next boss fight. We try to do all of the training under the hood, so by the time you get to the fight you feel you have mastered the mechanic. If a fight happens early in the game, the approach the player will have to take to defeat the boss should be pretty basic. By the end of the game we are confident the player understands all the moves, and at that point we can throw the kitchen sink at 'em."

On the size and reality of the titans

"The whole thing is very scripted, but let me stress, it is all real. On the finished product we can still pull the camera out and rotate around, and for the most part everything holds up. We made a decision very early with the titans to 'keep it real,' and I think holding true to this is what helped make it so convincing. Bottom line: The titans are not a handful of set pieces. They are real 3D models and can be rendered from multiple angles and distances."

On the importance of puzzle elements in boss fights

"Not as much as God of War, but more so than God of War II."

On the evolution of God of War

"We continuously strive to build things bigger and make the scope of the experience larger. You can see that we have raised the bar with the titan scenarios. We also have some great moments in the game that really demonstrate Kratos' anger – make you feel in touch with it. Take a look at the Helios kill from the demo; expect to play more moments like that. Combine the scope and the anger element and I really think we are pushing things."

On why the team isn't talking about the story

"We are keeping things quiet for a reason. I don't want the game to come out and have everyone feel like they have played it by reading previews and watching videos. Of course the experience is different when you have your hands on it, but watching gameplay videos can really spoil things for a game as scripted as ours."

Nier

Square Enix introduces a darker RPG

Apparently in the world of Nier the best defense against magic attacks is lingerie

When Square introduced Nier at last year's E3, many walked away labeling it an action game in the vein of Devil May Cry or God of War. But while the titular protagonist may dispatch his enemies at a pace similar to Dante or Kratos, Square Enix considers Nier an RPG first and foremost. After sitting in on a demo that showed off some of its publisher's hallmarks – mainly deep character progression and an insane, twisting plot – we're starting to agree.

While much of the story remains a mystery, here's what we do know. In the summer of 2049, a deadly disease begins killing off massive segments of the population, causing doctors to release an experimental cure. The cure backfires, unleashing the even deadlier Black Scrawl virus, which mutates its victims into ghostly monsters called Shades. The Black Scrawl has pushed an already suffering society to the brink of collapse, but for Nier, the only thing that matters is that his daughter Yonah has become infected. It's up to him to find his own cure.

The premise feels appropriate enough for a Square Enix RPG, but one thing fans might not expect is the dark and violent tone; the fast-paced combat is unapologetically bloody, and the dialogue is peppered with curse words. Behind the garish tone is all the depth an RPG fan would expect. Many towns are available to explore, each with a plethora of side-quests to undertake and NPCs to meet and team up with as you pursue your daughter's cure. Players can also learn plenty of magic spells, acquire new physical attacks, and upgrade weapons.

Your main ally is Grimoire Weiss, a talking magic book that endows you with dark magic abilities and offers snarky commentary throughout your journey. We didn't see enough of the game to tell whether his antics will get old or not, but he provides some of your most powerful attacks, so we're not complaining. These attacks include the unimaginatively named Dark Hand Power (a giant fist that comes out of the book and punches multiple enemies), Dark Execution (an area attack that causes spears to shoot out of the ground), and Dark Blast (glowing orbs that blast enemies). All of the action takes place in real time, requiring players to time their attacks and dodge their enemies just like in any third-person action game.

Cavia is throwing even more genres into the mix: The Dark Blast move introduces some light shooting elements, and in certain battles the camera switches to a top-down perspective, evoking the spirit of old school shoot-em-ups. Additionally, indoor areas switch to a pseudo-2D side perspective and incorporate platforming. Whether these gameplay elements will feel like balanced, worthwhile additions or tacked-on distractions remains to be seen, but so far Nier appears to have both depth and variety to spare.

In addition to magic attacks, Grimoire also provides the game's upgrade system, which revolves around learning words from a fictional language. Over 100 words can be collected during the game, each capable of boosting various stats. These words can be applied to each of your weapons, martial arts skills, and magic abilities. They can also be combined and reassigned at any given time as you experiment with your approach to different (and sometimes gigantic) enemies.

One such enemy came at the end of the demo, when Nier faced a monster only slightly smaller than the town it was attacking. The pulsating creature streamed projectile attacks that required artful dodging (made easier by Nier's double jump ability), and was only taken down by unleashing special attacks activated by damaging certain target areas in rapid succession. The action was manic, but even more appealing was the amount of strategy required to topple the beast, both in your tactics on the battlefield and the management of your weapons and upgrades.

The only unpleasantness we've seen from Nier has been in the quality of the visuals, but given the early state of the preview build, there's no cause for concern yet. With enough polish, Nier could be a solid option for RPG fans seeking an M-rated adventure. » **Jeff Marchiafava**

For more screenshots and videos of the game in action, check out gameinformer.com/mag

All the action takes place in real time, but boss battles still require a fair amount of strategy

I won't let them hurt you, Yonah. I promise.
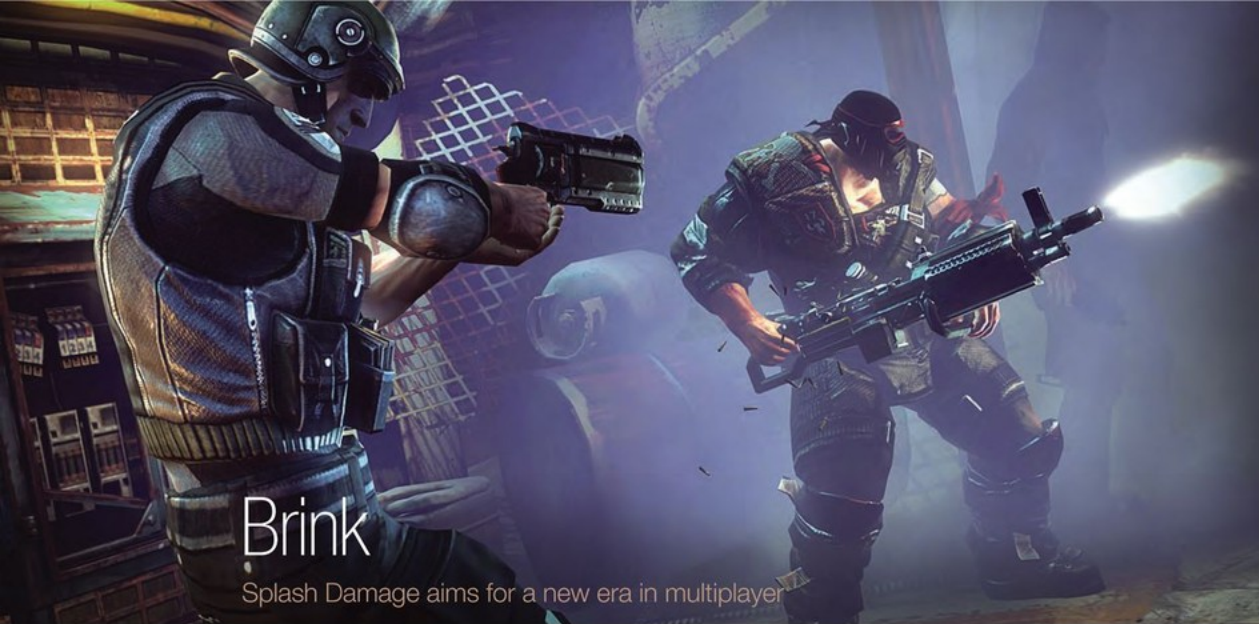

Ha! These foes are hardly worthy of our steel!
Grimoire Weiss

Multiple upgrades can be applied to your weapons, magic, and martial arts abilities

Brink

Splash Damage aims for a new era in multiplayer

In a genre dominated by team deathmatch and conquest modes, taking a different approach to online multiplayer is always a risky proposition. Splash Damage is a developer built on creating its own brand of multiplayer warfare and Brink is no exception. Like the company's Enemy Territory franchise, Brink breaks down FPS action into a series of objective-based competitive maps. Splash Damage's previous offerings were were merely multiplayer components for existing games like Quake and Wolfenstein. Brink is the company's first standalone game, which means not only is it in charge of the gameplay mechanics (which include extensive customization options and a dynamic objectives system), but also crafting an original and meaningful story to compliment the online action. We talked with the project's creative director, Richard Ham, to get more details on the most interesting aspects of Brink.

The Story

Brink's story centers on The Ark, a utopian city and the last safe haven for survivors of an otherwise flooded Earth. Players take up arms as either the Resistance (refugees trying to gain access to the city) or the Security (guards trying to keep anyone else from entering the already packed metropolis). Both sides tell a different story, which unfolds as players tackle various areas of The Ark that act like standard maps. These maps tell an overarching story, but can also be played separately or out of order. "It's been a tricky feat of writing, but basically, each mission in Brink is completely standalone if that's how you want to experience it," Ham says. "You can jump around from mission to mission in any order you want, and always have a clear understanding about what's going on and what you need to accomplish."

Character Customization

Players choose from three different body types (heavy, normal, and light), which affects a variety of gameplay mechanics. These include standard things like HP and movement speed, but also how high you can climb and what kind of weapons you equip. Your character's look is completely customizable as well. New clothes and hairstyles will be unlocked as the player levels up, and the deep variety allows for some unique styles. These changes are purely aesthetic, however. "We decided early on that we wanted players to make decisions about their appearance based on what they feel looks cool, instead of what they feel they need to wear to be competitive…your look is all about just that: your look," says Ham.

A Class Of Its Own

Brink treats the idea of character class differently than most shooters. The game still has stan-

Members of the same faction can look completely different

Lighter characters will be quicker and more agile than heavier characters — but weaker too

All weapons and abilities you unlock become available to you for both factions

HP is determined by body type, not apparel, so feel free to enter battle draped only in prison tats, if that's your thing

dard categories (soldier, medic, operative, and engineer), but because weapons are limited by body type alone, any class can carry any weapon (there are 24 different guns to unlock, plus a variety of attachments). Each class has a variety of abilities to unlock, but you can change your class at any time on the battlefield via command posts. "[Changing classes on the fly] creates a lot of really rich and dynamic situations where you can radically change the course of a mission, and the type of gameplay you're involved in, by changing your class and focusing on an entirely different set of objectives," Ham tells us. "And because you change, your teammates and the enemy will change as well to adapt."

Dumbing Down or Playing SMART?

Splash Damage made waves when it announced Brink features a SMART (Smooth Movement Across Random Terrain) button to help automatically perform the game's parkour-like manipulation of the environment. Some gamers worried it was an attempt to simplify gameplay for broader appeal, but you can perform all of the moves manually as well. Ham thinks it may even give you the upper hand: "The player who does all his own jumping and ducking and climbing and sliding will actually have a slight advantage over the player who uses the SMART button for all

those actions…he can make his climbs a bit faster, his slides a bit more smooth."

Silent Communication

As anyone who has played an online shooter can tell you, coordinating with a group of random players on your team can be a difficult – not to mention unpleasant – task. Luckily, the developers have an answer. "We don't feature players giving orders to each other, because we find that in real online games, players don't tend to listen to each other," Ham remarks. "However, players generally will listen to a central voice of authority if that voice comes from the game. So everyone on the team – you and your squad mates, human players and AI-controlled characters alike – all take orders from the central AI Commander."

At any point during a match, players can pull up their Objective Wheel, which is populated with tasks from the AI Commander. Each objective offers the player a certain amount of bonus XP, depending on the difficulty/necessity of the action being performed. This way even the most selfish jerk is inclined to help out the team. Once an objective is selected, the game automatically alerts the rest of the team of your intentions, so even those who prefer to play without a microphone and their teammates muted will still know what's going on.

Blurring The Line

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Brink is the hybridization of single-player and multiplayer. Whether you're playing alone offline, cooperatively with a group of buddies, or in a full 16-player online match, the game's structure remains the same. AI teammates fill in for any non-human players, while the AI Commander dynamically creates objectives based on the state of battle. In essence, the game doesn't care who's real and who's not.

"If you're playing online, the storyline is identical [to the solo campaign], but the enemies are controlled by real players," Ham said. "Those human players who are your enemies in a mission? They're actually playing through their own separate storyline, and to them, you're the enemy they have to defeat to complete their campaign."

How meaningful Brink's storyline remains unknown for now, but for FPS fans, the idea of playing an entire campaign with and against other human beings is an exciting proposition.

» Jeff Marchiafava

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To read our full interview with Richard Ham, check out www. gameinformer.com/mag

Kingdom Hearts: Birth by Sleep

An extensive import hands-on reveals the future of the franchise

» **Platform**
PSP

Style
1-Player Action/RPG
(Multiplayer TBA)

» **Publisher**
Square Enix

» **Developer**
Square Enix

» **Release**
Summer

The latest chapter of the Kingdom Hearts series is out in the wild. Unless you're fluent in Japanese (or have two helpful co-workers who are), however, you're out of luck until sometime this summer. Square Enix told us that the North American release of Birth by Sleep will hit sometime between June and August. To help with the wait, we've prepared a comprehensive breakdown of the major new features. » **Bryan Vore**

THE SETUP

As followers of the game may already know, Birth by Sleep takes place roughly a decade before the original Kingdom Hearts and stars new characters Terra, Ventus, and Aqua. Now that we've played the first several hours, we have a better understanding of the narrative direction. These three serve as apprentices under keyblade masters Eraqus and Xehanort. The story begins with Terra and Aqua undergoing the final test to become masters (Ventus is too young). During the exam, Master Xehanort sneakily coerces some dark tendencies from Terra. Due to this, Terra is denied master status, while Aqua passes. Resentment ensues.

To help Terra deal with his demons, Master Eraqus sends him on a mission to stop a new threat called the Unversed (a likely precursor to the Heartless) and track down Master Xehanort, who recently disappeared. Ventus follows him without permission at the urging of Master Xehanort's agent Vanitas. Once Master Eraqus realizes this, he dispatches Aqua to keep an eye on Terra's dark side and retrieve Ventus.

THE STRUCTURE

Players can choose to begin with Terra, Ventus, or Aqua. Each character's campaign is said to last over 10 hours, and all offer a different perspective on the main story. For example, when Ventus visits Cinderella's world, he helps her mouse friend to complete a dress for the upcoming ball. Terra steps in when the Fairy Godmother hooks up Cindy with the carriage and fancy getup. Aqua finishes off the plot thread when frumpy Cindy tries on the glass slipper. Each character experiences the beginning, middle, or end of a world's story, so you'll have to play all three to get the big picture. So far we haven't seen any repeats of old worlds like Agrabah that had previously been recycled to death in the Kingdom Hearts series.
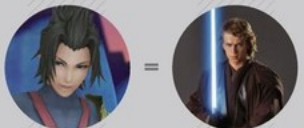
THE STAR WARS CONNECTION

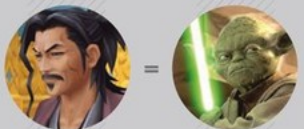Birth By Sleep seems to be heavily influenced by a certain space odyssey. Here's a handy chart to help clarify.

Keyblade wielders	=	Jedi/Sith
Terra	=	Anakin Skywalker
Master Eraqus	=	Yoda
Master Xehanort	=	Senator Palpatine
Aqua	=	Obi-Wan Kenobi
Vanitas	=	Darth Maul
Ventus	=	uh, Ahsokah Tano?

DECK COMMANDS

Don't worry, Birth by Sleep does not have a card battle system similar to Chain of Memories despite the word "deck" being in the combat system name. Players easily trigger basic attack combos by mashing the circle button without spending any kind of resources. The deck in question concerns a short list of magic, special attacks, or items that you can scroll through with the d-pad and execute with the triangle button. Instead of spending a card or using magic points, all of these actions recharge over time. Though you'll start with only three slots, these expand throughout the course of the game. All of these moves level up with use, so it's in your best interest to incorporate them into combat as much as possible.

COMMAND GAUGE

As you string together standard attacks and deck commands, this gauge quickly fills up. If you fill the gauge using standard attacks, a strong one-time finisher will be available for use. If you use magic or special moves from the deck instead, you'll be temporarily powered up. Aqua gains Magic Wish, for example, which allows her to hover and blast energy from her keyblade.

D-LINK

Short for Dimension Link, this replaces the traditional summoning system. When the blue gauge fills up you can link to a teammate or certain Disney characters you've met along the way. Instead of the character appearing in the world, however, you'll gain a custom deck of powerful magic and specials. After enough combat in D-Link mode, another gauge fills up, allowing you to execute an extravagant finisher that features a minigame starring the linked character.

SHOOT LOCK

Once the orange focus gauge is full, players can hold the L and R triggers to enter a first-person targeting mode. Once you're in the mode, you have a matter of seconds to paint as many enemy targets as possible until the so-called Shoot Lock maxes out or an enemy disrupts you. Early Shoot Locks include Terra's flurry of melee attacks, Ventus' spread of fireballs, and Aqua's barrage of bubbles.

MULTIPLAYER

Players can travel to a place called Mirage Arena for multiplayer just like any of the other Disney worlds. Here you can select a username and a color for your armored character using three sliders. Three players can team up to take on waves of enemies in Arena Mode or fight each other in the six-player competitive arena. The Command Board game is also available to play against real people, as is the six-player Rumble Racing mode. By completing these games, some of which include a single-player component, you'll receive medals to spend on rare equipment. It's unclear at this point if the U.S. version will feature local, online, or both multiplayer options.

COMMAND BOARD

This Mario Party-esque board game is accessible at any time through the pause menu. Competing against two AI opponents, players roll the dice to move around the board and buy spaces kind of like Monopoly. Once opponents land on one of your spots, they have to pay you in Board Points, the board game's currency. The first to earn a predetermined amount of BP wins.

THE SUITS

Kingdom Hearts fans may be wondering why the main characters are no longer wearing the bunny knight suits from the secret movie at the end of Kingdom Hearts II. They still do, just not all the time. Terra, Ventus, and Aqua don these suits to travel between worlds in outer space. Their keyblades also transform into sweet vehicles to get them around as an alternative to gummi ships. The suits also come into play in multiplayer.

LEGO Universe

NetDevil introduces build-your-own MMO play

Forging Its Own Path

Unlike many post-World of Warcraft MMOs, LEGO Universe takes minimal cues from Blizzard's esteemed title. Rather than saddle players with inalterable character classes or abilities, LEGO embraces a free gameplay platform in which the clothes you're wearing and weapons you're wielding determine your avatar's skills. The game also eschews player leveling and progression in favor of an achievement system that rewards players with new accessories and LEGO pieces with which to build. This allows much greater flexibility for casual users disinterested in a linear progression path.

» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
MMO Action

» **Publisher**
The LEGO Group

» **Developer**
NetDevil

» **Release**
2010

Following the stillborn MMO launches left in the wake of World of Warcraft, it doesn't take a financial analyst with a fancy title to conclude that building a compelling massively multiplayer experience is hard. Backed by the creative ideas of its rabid fanbase, an MMO veteran in NetDevil (Jumpgate), and international brand power, LEGO Universe hopes its easy access gameplay can succeed where many others have failed.

The key to finding success for the Danish toy company is sticking to what LEGO does best: engaging the user's imagination by allowing them to create new experiences out of the sea of bricks – over 80,000 color and size combinations total. With the help of the biggest LEGO fanatics in the world, developer NetDevil has engineered a remarkable set of building tools that gives players the flexibility to hastily throw together LEGO creations with the tap of a button (like in the Traveller's Tales games) or get deeply

involved in the piece-by-piece crafting. With a scripting tool that operates similarly to the one in LittleBigPlanet, players can then assign behaviors to their objects. For instance, players can rig a booby trap to trigger an axe falling on a person's head after they walk through an open door. Several friends can work together simultaneously to create new instances and maps for other LEGO users to visit.

These creative sessions are balanced by an overarching story guiding the core LEGO experience. An evil force called the Maelstrom has emerged from the negative thoughts in the world and seeks to destroy imagination. When the force disrupts your LEGO character's space expedition, you must quickly assemble an escape rocket and travel to the planets of the LEGO Universe to squelch the evil force, rebuild fallen cities, and restore peace and order.

The instance-based action allows players to journey solo or join a group of friends to take on

quests throughout the LEGO Universe, which includes several worlds based off its many toy lines. Those who played the Traveller's Tales game will feel right at home with the combat system and the ability to smash objects to collect coins and LEGO bricks. The world maps focuses more heavily on platforming than the previous LEGO games, and players can use their imagination meter to quickly assemble objects to help them navigate the worlds.

NetDevil plans to launch a spring beta for LEGO Universe, which has a tentative 2010 release window. The game will use a subscription model and be available in both retail locations and as a download. Stay tuned in the coming months to learn more about the ambitious brick building MMO. » **Matt Bertz**

Visit gameinformer.com/mag to watch the LEGO Universe debut trailer

Lost Planet 2

When facing building-sized Akrids, four guns are better than one
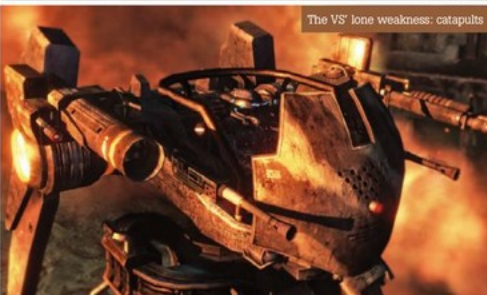
The VS' lone weakness: catapults

If you can't find the weak spot, go back to video games 101

First pushed from the holiday game blitz, then strategically delayed again into the second half of 2010 to "maximize revenue potential," Lost Planet 2's release date is a moving target. But as a recent demo during CES proved, the culprit definitely isn't the game's quality.

The latest demo starts with a four-player squad tasked with securing a giant cannon emplacement atop a train. As we fire our way through an industrial complex en route to the cannon, we capture a series of data posts that can be used as spawn points if a player falls in battle. When our squad gets close to the objective, all hell breaks loose. A giant Category G Akrid, which looks like the love child of a gigantic spider and a dragon, appears atop of a neighboring building and charges directly toward the cannon. A nearby soldier moves quickly to the weapon's controls and shoots a huge rocket directly into the face of the three-story Akrid, causing the massive beast to collapse.

But this fight is far from over. The monster soon recovers from the incapacitating shot and rejoins the battle with renewed fury. The new monstrosity, dubbed Akrid X, wreaks havoc over the area, spamming the battlefield by hurling train cars, spitting fire, and shooting electricity. With our assault rifles doing little to no damage, our squad makes a mad dash for the nearby Vita Suits to even out the fight. As I step into one of the powerful mechs, I notice additional turrets attached to my shoulders, which two other soldiers could jump into and start using to turn my VS into a formidable bullet-spewing machine. With the target damage points highlighted in neon orange as in the last Lost Planet, taking down this massive beast becomes an exercise in concentrating fire on highlighted areas while avoiding the occasional tentacle swipe.

Once we finally riddle Akrid X with enough bullets to put it down, several loot containers shower the battlefield. Collecting this loot plays into the new customization options players can access between game stages. As players rack up their kill counts and reap the rewards, their characters will level up and unlock new persistent abilities.

Capcom has been tight-lipped about the multiplayer modes beyond the four-player co-op, but look for an announcement as we move further into 2010. » **Matt Bertz**

Visit gameinformer.com/mag to check out more screenshots of Capcom's upcoming sci-fi shooter
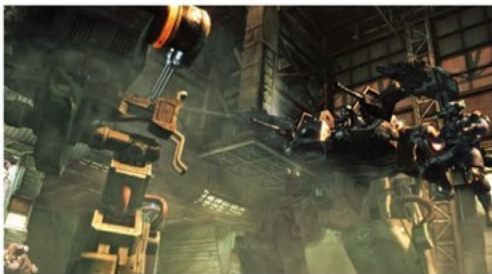


Notice the heavy butt-armor – critical for jetpack users

The Gnarled Forest features a LEGO staple, the angry pirate brigades

What About Traveller's Tales?

LEGO Universe isn't being developed by Traveller's Tales, but the studio that put LEGO games on the map holds frequent development summits with NetDevil to discuss the new ideas being implemented in their respective LEGO games. When we asked if NetDevil was including the LEGO Star Wars, Batman, Harry Potter, and Indiana Jones worlds in the LEGO Universe, the game's representatives hesitated and said, "Not at launch." When we pressed the issue and asked if they intended to expand to these properties eventually, they again responded, "Not at launch." It sounds likely that we'll eventually be wielding lightsabers and attending quidditch matches in the LEGO Universe.

Professor Tophat shows off his new economy vehicle that runs off the tears of children

The pirates of the Gnarled Forest are the rival faction of the ninja, who have yet to come under the influence of the Maelstorm
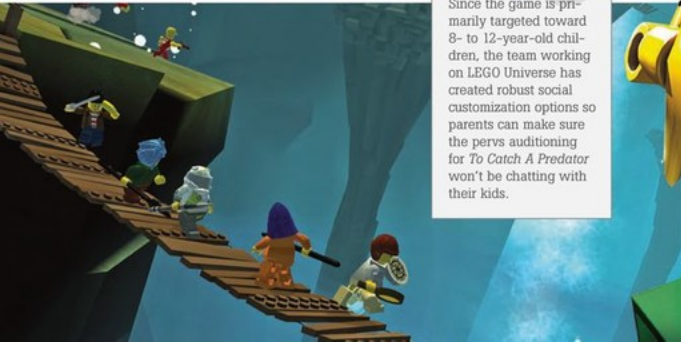
Plays Nice With Others

Since the game is primarily targeted toward 8- to 12-year-old children, the team working on LEGO Universe has created robust social customization options so parents can make sure the pervs auditioning for *To Catch A Predator* won't be chatting with their kids.

Command & Conquer 4: Tiberian Twilight

Going resource-free moves C&C in a different direction

Kudos to EA for having the stones to reimagine Command & Conquer from the ground up. I enjoyed C&C 3 and Red Alert 3 as much as the next gamer, but the nuts and bolts of gameplay hadn't changed in a decade. C&C 4 incorporates elements from Massive's sadly underappreciated Ground Control series, Relic's unusual Dawn of War II, and the team's own original concepts. The result is a fast-paced, teamwork-oriented struggle for control of strategic points. My time with the beta has been a fascinating process of discovery as I explore the new face of C&C.

Everything flows from your Crawler. An all-in-one base and unit factory, this bad boy can unpack to start pumping out units (until you hit the relatively low population limit), or uproot itself to get to a more tactically advantageous position. Auxiliary structures like turrets and bunkers must be deployed near an unpacked Crawler, and any units nearby will automatically repair. As the source of all this plus any reinforcements (and heavy weaponry itself, for some factions), the Crawler is a fantastic tool for controlling an area. Since much of C&C 4's gameplay is based on map control, managing your Crawler is central to any strategy.

C&C 4 matches are chaotic mash-ups between Battlefield's victory point scoring, Unreal's vehicle-based capture-the-flag, and a whole host of Dawn of War's innovations. Destroying an opponent's Crawler doesn't guarantee victory – just a few seconds of free reign while he waits for another one to deploy from orbit and start rebuilding his army. More important is control of strategic points on the map. Some of these generate victory points, others spawn crystals that can be brought back to your deployment zone to unlock upgrades, and others are just really big guns. Each helps you win in its own way.

I am most impressed by how this structure eliminates several frustrations I've had with multiplayer RTS since its inception. Coming back from a losing position is far easier since you're not being out-resourced by definition, and lame rush tactics are all but impossible given the victory point system and respawning Crawlers. Each match is a tense, exciting half-hour that ends with a bunch of experience and achievements being added to your persistent profile to unlock new units and upgrades.

The Attack, Defense, and Support roles for both GDI and Nod are nicely differentiated. Each has its specialty, and seems viable for one-on-one combat. Working together in the hands of competent players, however, is where they shine. C&C 4 strongly encourages teamwork with how well the units and abilities of the various factions play off of each other, offering tons of opportunities to come up with innovative tactics with your comrades in arms. Launching a suicidal blitz with strong Attacker tanks might well be worth it if it covers your Defensive buddy setting up a forward position that denies opponents a critical point or route. That's just the tip of the iceberg; with dozens of units and upgrades, the possibilities are endless.

There are a few things that I hope get changed between now and release, like the stupidly low amount of upgrades available to low-level players, still-problematic unit AI and pathing, and consumer-unfriendly anti-piracy measures (see sidebar). I'm unable to speak to the quality of the campaign, as I didn't have access to it. Still, I'm much more interested in Command & Conquer 4 after seeing its unusual design firsthand. » **Adam Biessener**

Always On

Command & Conquer 4 insists that players always be connected to EA's servers. While this has some minor payouts in terms of the integrity of online stats, the obvious reason for it (whether EA wants to say so or not) is to prevent piracy. Fair enough; EA has every reason to try to get people to pay for its games. As implemented in the beta, however, a hiccup anywhere in the network can torpedo an entire gameplay session. I lost entire scenario's worth of progress because I briefly lost connection to the servers. Not only do you lose any XP and stats accumulated during a multiplayer or skirmish match, you also have to restart and replay any in-progress campaign missions. I try not to get too upset when publishers inconvenience me with anti-piracy measures, but if left unchanged, this is a straight-up middle finger to paying gamers. I hate to say it, but we all know the pirates are going to crack it inside a month anyway. They won't lose any progress when their router takes a dump, but I will.

Not shown in these screenshots is the targeting reticle displayed on enemies when you have their counter-unit selected

Red Steel 2

The good kind of lone gunman shows off the potential for Wii MotionPlus

Red Steel 2's premise is about as simple and satisfying as it gets: You are a badass with a sword and a gun, and you fight a bunch of bad guys in a bizarre Old-West-meets-Japan setting using said weapons. I've had the chance to play it in short blasts over the past few months, but it wasn't until now that I've been able to sit down and enjoy it in one big, uninterrupted chunk.

The game starts off with your character – known only as the Swordsman – waking up in the desert with his hands tied together. To make matters worse, the other end of the tether is fastened to a motorcycle being driven by a complete lunatic. During this first-person cutscene, the Swordsman is bounced and dragged through a canal and into a tunnel before he pulls out a pistol and blasts the bike into smithereens.

Running into some of his old friends, players then learn that the enigmatic Swordsman is the last of the Kusagari clan, which has been slaughtered by a gang called the Jackals. Vowing revenge, he must track down those responsible and deliver justice. The comic-book-esque story is perfectly complemented by the cel-shaded visuals. To say that it's one of the best-looking games on the Wii is an understatement.

After spending several hours with a preview build, I'm happy to say that it plays almost as well as it looks, too. The gameplay is far deeper than simply waving your Wii MotionPlus-enhanced controller around and hoping for the best. That kind of frenzied flailing might work against the first few chumps, but until you take the time to learn the combat system in depth it will inevitably lead to restarts. Your success depends on paying attention to your opponent's stance and weaponry, and knowing when best to stay on defense before launching an attack. A heavier enemy might charge in close, necessitating a quick directional block followed by a series of armor-crunching swipes. Once he's softened up, it's easy to dash toward him and seamlessly stab his now-vulnerable middle. The swordplay feels a touch laggy at times, but it never caused me to miss a combo or interfered with gameplay.

One of my favorite parts of the game is how various moves blend together. As the Swordsman trains, players get access to a variety of specialized techniques. They include an air launcher and something along the lines of a Force push. When an opponent is knocked skyward, time temporarily slows down, providing a ripe opportunity to switch to the pistol and take an easy headshot.

Red Steel 2 is the latest example of why Ubisoft is one of the best Wii developers around. Even with a few annoyances like a frustrating safe-cracking minigame and some long pauses between areas, it's stacking up to be a showcase game that takes another step toward reaching the Wii's potential. » **Jeff Cork**
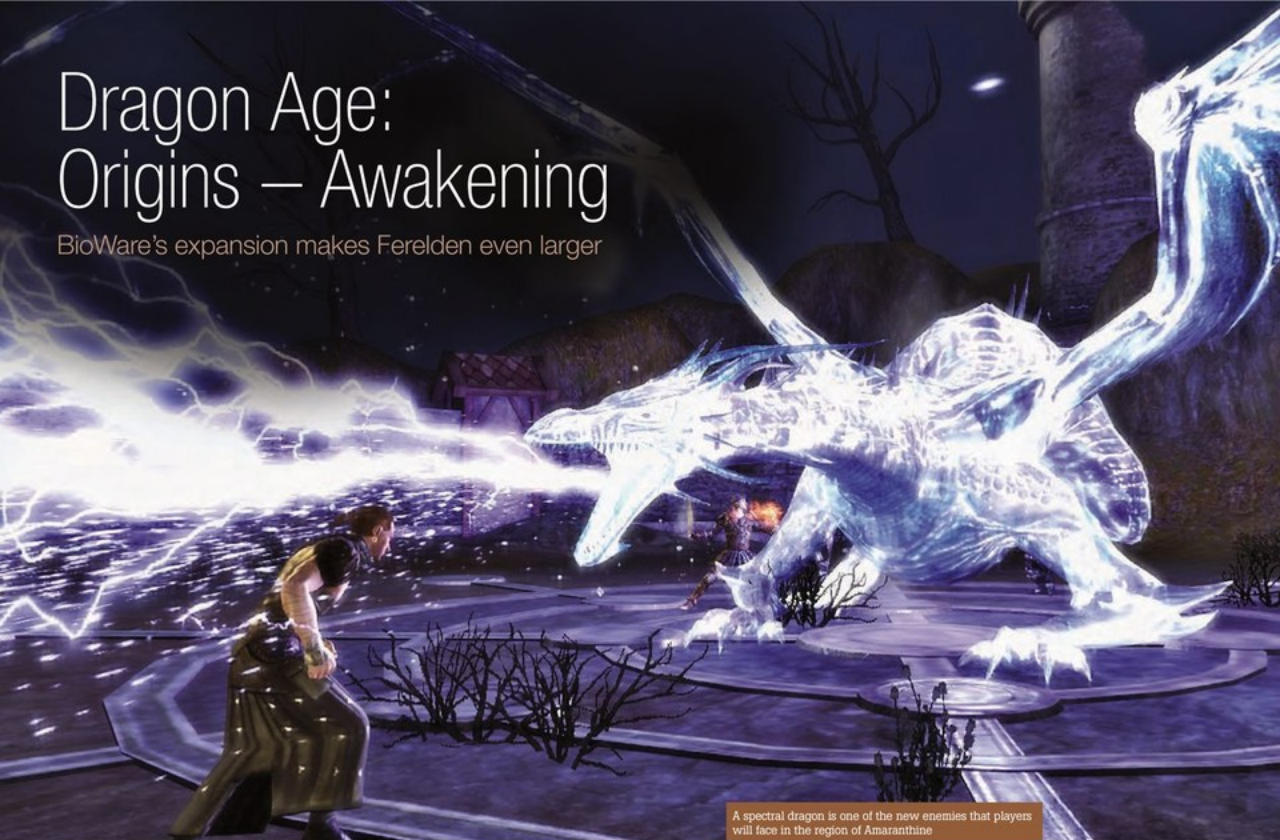
Auto-targeting is on by default, letting players focus their attention on the myriad combat options

Most enemies have specific weaknesses, with bullets being one of the more common ones

Dragon Age: Origins – Awakening

BioWare's expansion makes Ferelden even larger

A spectral dragon is one of the new enemies that players will face in the region of Amaranthine

Many gamers are still in the midst of their first Dragon Age playthrough. With a huge main storyline, dozens of hours of side missions, and three downloadable quests, seeing everything the nation of Ferelden has to offer is no small task. Despite the massive amount of content already available, the rich world of Dragon Age is about to get even bigger with its first official expansion.

Awakening continues the saga of the Grey Wardens and deals with the aftermath of the archdemon's defeat. The story picks up in Amaranthine, a region granted to the Grey Wardens at the end of Origins, where players are tasked with rebuilding the ancient order. New threats are scattered through the unfamiliar land-scape, like a spectral dragon, a towering golem, and a ruthless darkspawn general who leads the remnants of the archdemon's army. Additional spells and skills will help you take down these foes, as will five all-new party members – plus one returning ally that BioWare would only iden-tify as "an old favorite."

You can experience the expanded content through the eyes of your previous main charac-ter (imported from the core game), or start fresh by selecting Awakening's new origin story – a Grey Warden from the neighboring country of Orlais. Because the plot takes place after the events of Dragon Age, the Orlesian origin is only accessible in Awakening. Unfortunately, the separation between the two games isn't complete; even though the stories aren't directly connected, Awakening is not a standalone expansion, so you'll need to own Dragon Age: Origins in order to play.

Fans will undoubtedly be happy to get more of the game they love, but they may be less thrilled about the cost. The $40 price tag has left some gamers upset, especially since the expansion is releasing only a few months after the original hit shelves. Cost issues aside, there's no debating that BioWare has crafted a detailed and compel-ling world for the Dragon Age franchise, and we can't wait to jump back into it. » Joe Juba

To see additional concept art from Dragon Age: Origins – Awakening, go to gameinformer.com/mag

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

» **Style**
1-Player Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
Electronic Arts

» **Developer**
BioWare

» **Release**
March 16

Do darkspawn dress up and go to renaissance fairs? Apparently they do

Man vs. Dragon, this fall on Fox

Split Second

Split Second's destruction isn't so wanton

Some of the shortcuts you trigger have short windows

PRESS A TO TRIGGER

This isn't the first time we've played Split Second, and yet every time we get our hands on the upcoming racer from the developers of Pure we come away impressed by different things. We're familiar with the game's mix of fast racing and player-triggered destructible levels, but what caught our attention this time as we ran through two levels of the game – the dockyard and downtown – were the choices that we had to make and how these affected our racing experience. Some were made in the blink of an eye and others were more deliberate, but all of them made an impact.

Before the start of the race, it's important to choose the right car. The lighter super cars offer more speed at the expense of strength. Strength is important because when an explosion rocks the level you're racing through – and this happens often – a stronger car can withstand the shockwaves that shake your chassis and cause you to lose control. A truck, meanwhile, has the opposite characteristics of the super cars, and the muscle cars are somewhere in the middle.

Racing through both of the demo levels, I was concentrating on dodging the flaming wreckage,

navigating the corners, and banging bumpers with all comers, but using power plays at the right time is also important. The game throws up color-coded icons telling you when you can unleash hell on your opponents; hitting the right timing to deploy a power play correctly can make all the difference. A poorly timed power play can cause you to miss an opponent (or not blow up as many as you otherwise could have) and even lead to your own car getting caught up in the carnage.

Saving up smaller power plays in order to trigger level-changing events is one strategy, but sometimes you get so mired in the middle of the pack that triggering a crane to sweep a giant construction bulldozer across the racetrack to collect your foes is what needs to be done for more immediate relief. Thankfully the game's AI is varied enough that each lap and race will call for different approaches. Moreover, the AI can trigger some of the big race-changing moments (like a derailed train crashing from the highway above) by itself. Don't worry, however, as the AI actions are not scripted.

Later levels of Split Second feature tracks from earlier in the game, but by then you'll have

bigger and badder power plays at your fingertips, so you can morph the level in increasingly unexpected ways. As you progress through the game's career mode, you'll also participate in new modes. I got my hands on Nemesis mode, where you try and pass as many tankers before time runs out. The trick is that these tankers spill numerous smoking, explosive kegs across the track. You're trying to cruise past these trucks as fast as you can while blindly plowing into voluminous smoke clouds and hoping that there isn't a big crash waiting for you on the other side. It's an addictive mode that simultaneously calls for bold moves, caution, the ability to predict the future, and a little bit of luck.

Black Rock has additional modes that will punctuate the career mode, but it's keeping those (and multiplayer details) under wraps for now. I guess it's fitting that this game still has surprises in store. » **Matthew Kato**

For tons of extra screens and gameplay movies, head over to gameinformer.com/mag

» **Platform**
PlayStation 3 • Xbox 360

» **Style**
1 or 2-Player Racing
(8-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
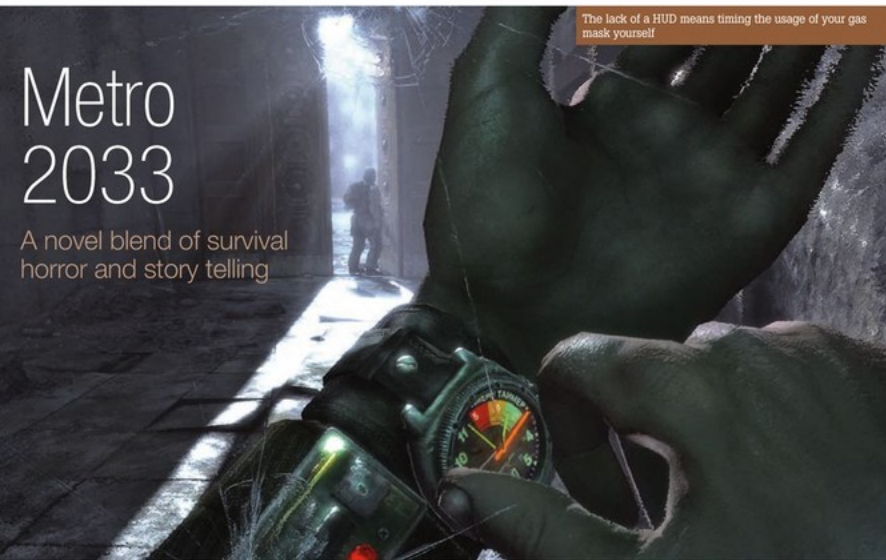Disney Interactive Studios

» **Developer**
Black Rock Studios

» **Release**
May

The lack of a HUD means timing the usage of your gas mask yourself

Metro 2033

A novel blend of survival horror and story telling

Every train station functions as its own society, complete with differing styles of government

We've tread so many post-apocalyptic landscapes over the past few years that new games set in futures ravaged by disease or nuclear war are starting to evoke more skepticism than excitement. That isn't stopping 4A Games from creating its own nightmare scenario, and it knows the best games detailing the end of the world start with a good story.

While several of 4A Games' staff worked on S.T.A.L.K.E.R. (another post-apocalyptic FPS) at GSC Game World, the team is finding its inspiration from a popular Russian novel by Dmitry Glukhovsky. The novel tells the story of Artyom, a young man who has spent most of his life living in an underground Russian train station, one of the few places hospitable to life after an unnamed apocalyptic event. A new threat – mutated beasts called "Dark Ones" – are encroaching on the meager existence Artyom and his fellow survivors have become accustomed to, forcing him to explore the underground tracks and occasionally the aboveground wasteland.

Most of Artyom's time is spent battling a variety of freakish abominations with scavenged weapons as he explores the Metro's interconnected train stations, each of which has its own economy and societal structure. It sounds like the perfect source material for a story-driven FPS, and Glukhovsky is working closely with 4A to ensure the game also captures the atmosphere and desperate tone set by the novel.

So far the developers are on the right track. The absence of a HUD requires the player to pay close attention to visual cues for health and the amount of ammo you have remaining, while many simple gameplay elements that are usually taken for granted require extra attention. Your handy flashlight needs to be manually charged via periodic button presses, and your map is an actual map that needs to be pulled out and looked at without the luxury of pausing the in-game world, which makes you a sitting duck for predators sneaking up in the shadows.

Another interesting addition is your gas mask, which is essential to surviving in the poisonous atmosphere outside the safety of the train stations. Wearing the gas mask not only affects your field of vision, it requires careful management of the temporary filters that allow you to breathe. Like other elements in Metro 2033, there is no indicator for how long you have left – players must time it on their character's watch via another button press. The result is an immersive first-person experience blended with the desperation of the survival horror genre.

Adding to that desperation is the game's currency: ammunition. Buying new and more powerful weapons comes at the expense of having fewer bullets to shoot at your enemies, and each missed burst of machine gun fire is just as threatening to your future as the monster you're failing to hit. Ammo as currency makes a lot more sense from a story standpoint than using something like bottle caps or other generic forms of currency; this clever twist has our interest piqued. It's also worth noting that the novel is known for being terrifying and having a spectacular twist ending – something we'll have to wait until March to see for ourselves. » **Jeff Marchiafava**

Check out a trailer for Metro 2033 at www.gameinformer.com/mag

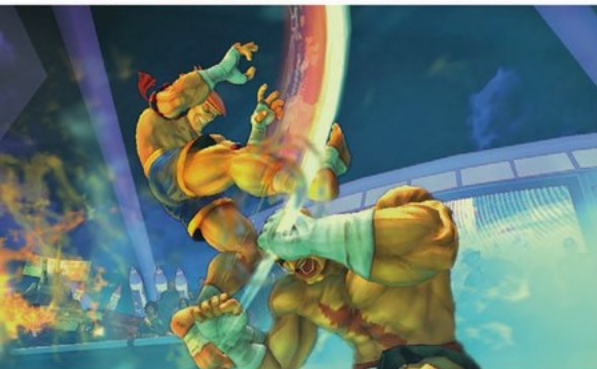# Super Street Fighter IV

The modern hit gets a classic treatment

Cody doesn't fight fair

Adon's patented knee-to-the-crotch

Guy from Final Fight with a high-speed kick

Capcom knows how to please its rabid fan base. When it announced Super Street Fighter IV, aficionados did a collective fist pump of excitement. Just like Super Street Fighter II, SSF IV ups the ante in just about every department, from new characters to new Ultras. To get the lowdown on just some of the new things to expect, we asked Capcom's special advisor on Super Street Fighter IV, Seth Killian, to run down the latest info on the updates. » **Nick Ahrens**

Guy

"Guy is our favorite ninja, known from the Final Fight series. Guy is very quick with a huge variety of special moves both on the air and ground, including throws, slides, and overheads. His core offense is built around the Bushin Flip technique, which acts like a jump, but can be canceled either into a grab or a flying elbow that drops straight down. He's also got a run technique, which gets him instantly in your face, and can go straight into a slide or overhead flying kick."

Cody

"Cody is another returnee from Final Fight. His backstory involves some jail time, so he gets down and dirty and is willing to fight with dirt, rocks, pipes, wrenches, or even a knife. He's a great fighter from middle-to-close ranges, and has perhaps more ways to get around fireballs than any character in SF history. If you're up against a lot of Kens, Ryus, and Sagats, give Cody a try."

Adon

"Adon was actually in the original Street Fighter, but most players know

him from his SF Alpha appearances. SSF IV Adon has all of the moves you remember and love, as well as a couple of brutal Ultra combos and the most dangerous overhead attack in the game. He's full of high-flying action, with a wide range of kicks that take him off the walls and into the air. Very high-energy guy compared to his fellow muay thai practitioner, Sagat."

New Stages

"The new stages are a sky-high Metro City construction site, an African savannah during an eclipse, a Korean street market, and Indian street scene, and of course Seth's S.I.N. lab in ruins — the whole thing is about to blow."

Bonus Stages

"All of our levels are interactive in that the background elements react to the fights. People cheer and dodge, glass shatters, meerkats taunt you, and hippos topple. Beyond that, we've got the barrel and car crushing bonus stages. They're some nice retro fan-service where you compete against the clock to destroy everything."

Ultras

"The new ultras are different for every character, but they're designed to give you a real choice in the way you want to play. Do you want something that helps extend a combo or a special throw? Do you want something that gives you better defense or something you can use creatively on offense? You can choose a new one each game to see what best suits your personal playing style."

Mega Man 10

Capcom continues Mega's retro sequel rampage

Mega Man 9 fans rejoice! Capcom has announced a sequel to the Blue Bomber's 2008 8-bit downloadable outing. This old school follow-up includes all the trimmings you'd expect from a new Mega Man game straight from the NES era. Brand new playable characters are on their way, along with an easy mode for all the crybabies who thought Mega Man 9 was too tough.

Just in case you give a damn about Mega Man's motivations for blastin' bots, the sequel comes with a story. In the year 20XX, robots across the world come down with an illness known as Roboenza. Corrupted by the disease, these robots malfunction so badly that they go maverick and try to take over the world. With Mega Man's sis, Roll, being one of the victims of the catastrophe, the battle gets personal. This time around, both Mega Man and brother-bot Proto Man take up arms against the pandemic. There's no confirmation that Dr. Wily is behind the outbreak, but we're willing to bet he's to blame.

Those familiar with Mega Man 9's Proto Man DLC already know what to expect from one of this sequel's playable characters. Proto has some nifty abilities that his bro doesn't, packing a charge shot, slide move, and projectile-deflecting shield. These talents come with drawbacks. The scarf-wearing enigma takes more damage and can only fire two plasma shots at once. There is also another character who has yet to be announced. Could it be a returning character such as Bass or a brand new buddy enlisted to help conquer Wily?

Kind-hearted killing machines are worthless without enemy-filled levels to decimate. Mega Man 10 comes with the requisite eight new Robot Masters (see sidebar), each sporting a unique new stage. Battle baseball-tossing baddies in a stadium-themed level, weather tumultuous sandstorms in a desert stage, and dodge dangerous cutlery in Blade Man's castle. Mega Man 10's levels look every bit as harrowing as the patience-testing previous game. It's not rec-

ommended for the weak of heart.

Those interested in a Mega Man experience that's less blisteringly difficult are in luck, as Mega Man 10 marks the return of easy mode. Activating this mode smoothes over a good chunk of the rough challenge, hopefully allowing more players to witness the end credits. Pits of deadly insta-kill spikes are miraculously covered with platforms, enemy numbers are whittled down into more manageable forces, and incoming projectiles and the bad guys shooting them are dramatically slowed. Die-hard Mega Man fans thrive on the series' famous and unrelenting difficulty, but easy mode may be the training wheels that blaster-shy gamers need.

Capcom's's unmistakable polish and meticulous attention to every retro detail already has Mega Man 10 looking better than the previous entry. We can't wait to take on the challenge. Save up your swear-jar money now, because you're going to need it come March. » Tim Turi

STRIKE MAN
Originally built as a batting practice robot, this Robot Master packs a mean fastball and a high vertical that will have you benched in no time.
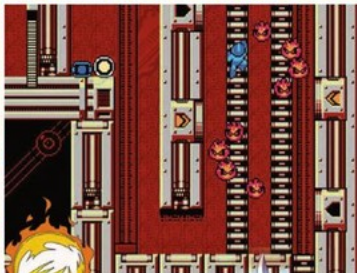
SHEEP MAN
A sheepherding robot with the power of electricity, Sheep Man can transform into clouds of wool and cast down deadly bolts of static electricity.

PUMP MAN
This water treatment robot can beckon the power of water to enshroud him in a Water Shield, deflecting damage from enemies.

Sandstorms in Commando Man's level are sure to make platforming tough

NITRO MAN
Stunt robot extraordinaire, Nitro Man has the ability to transform into a motorcycle and burn rubber all over the opposition.

CHILL MAN
Global warming is still a problem in 20XX, which Chill Man was tasked with correcting before he went rogue. Watch out for his Chill Spike attack.

SOLAR MAN
Be careful what attack you throw at this artificial sunlight research facility robot, because he absorbs and harnesses energy for his own attack.

BLADE MAN
Custodian of an old castle, this blade-wielding robot dashes and dices circles around Mega Man in an attempt to cut his journey short.

COMMANDO MAN
Built to detonate land mines, Commando Man now uses his Commando Bomb to blast troublesome pests to bits.

Major League Baseball 2K10

With 2K10, Visual Concepts finally recognizes the show

Similar to Milton Bradley's stint with the Chicago Cubs, last season's MLB 2K title deserved to be booed, mocked, and benched for the remainder of the season due to its inability to play Major League level baseball. Publisher 2K Sports only recently came clean on the fact that 2K9's newly appointed developer, Visual Concepts, acquired the project late and only had three quarters of the time in a typical baseball development cycle to get accustomed to the code and release the game in time for spring training.

Winning back fans will be difficult. Even with a full development cycle, Visual Concepts has to prove that it's a capable baseball developer. This studio won me over with its football franchise (wouldn't it be great if we had a new NFL2K5 every year?), but last season's baseball effort was one of the poorest I've seen from any sports developer in my tenure as a game critic.

I had the chance to put this year's game through its paces, and it feels like the franchise is turning a corner. But is it turning enough to be deemed a quality baseball simulator? That question still looms large.

From a content standpoint, Visual Concepts offers something for everyone. The biggest addition is a mode dubbed My Player, which is a direct response to Sony's Road to the Show mode, although 2K says it's based on a similar mode in its NBA title (nice try at keeping innovation in house, but we all know where the idea came from).

Like Road to the Show, My Player is best described as a baseball RPG. This mode asks you to create a player, nurture his development as he works his way through the minor leagues up to the sho…er…majors. Perform admirably, and your fictional athlete will earn skill points that can be used to enhance his abilities. Separate points are handed out for bat-

ting and pitching, meaning a pitcher won't have to waste valuable points on his drag bunting skill (yes, that's a slam on Sony's mode). In addition to games (which zoom directly to your player's next appearance), you can also earn points through a variety of drills.

While I didn't get to spend much time with My Player, it has a ton of potential. Games load quickly, the skill system covers every base, and I love how the minor league presentation is scaled back – you don't get the three-man booth, flashy replays, or presentation that you do in the MLB games.

In game, I can vouch that the pitcher and batter battle is on the right track. The pitching mechanic offers an improved interface that makes the series' signature gesture-based system easier to use. The addition of defensive swings brings a higher level of realism to two strike counts. On top of this, a new pitch tell system tips off quality hitters of the location and speed of an incoming pitch. Although I hit several homers during one game, both sides of this duel feel great at this point in development.

While the hitting and pitching have improved, fielding remains a question mark. I threw out a runner at first from right field, and many balls hit to the wall went for singles. The inability to change your target on a pre-loaded throw means that a single button press can turn the tide of a game. These issues need to be addressed for 2K to play in the big leagues. Visual Concepts said fielding is being worked on extensively, but we won't be able to see how far this aspect of the game has come until we review it next month. » **Andrew Reiner**

For an interview with the 2K10 development team, visit gameinformer.com/mag

The new defensive swing mechanic produces more foul balls than hits, but it does allow the player to work the count – something baseball games have never allowed

The real reason why the Tigers are terrible: "Just one more strike and this inning is histor… Oh god! That tiger is still staring at me! Can't focus… HELP ME!!!"

MLB 10: The Show

A new perspective for video games' top baseball sim

American League MVP and proud grower of baseball's finest side-burns, Joe Mauer, is this year's cover boy for MLB 10: The Show. He certainly earned the honors. Last season he won his third American League batting crown, belted 28 homers, and ended the year with a towering .444 on base percentage. As impressive as Mauer's numbers are, it may not have been his bat that landed him the cover. The decision may have been based on the position he plays.

For the first time, players will have the chance to strap on the pads and call a game from the catcher's perspective in this series' long-running Road to the Show mode. As you would expect, this role asks that players call the game for the pitcher. You'll give a sequence of signs and select the pitch placement. You'll even have the ability to position yourself to cover balls thrown in the dirt. How fast will you react to a wild pitch?

I haven't had a chance to see this new position in action yet, but it sounds like it could be just as rewarding of a position to play as pitcher has been in previous Road to the Show modes. If you don't get into the role-playing aspects of this mode, the catcher will play a more vital role in exhibition, season, and franchise modes as well. They'll walk your pitcher through a series of signs based on hitter statistics and tendencies, and do everything in their power to keep botched pitches in front of them.

If you get into the role-playing aspect, but have no interest in squatting behind home plate for an entire game, Road to the Show mode has received a shot of an unidentifiable substance to make it beefier than ever. Rather than having your created player start his career with MLB-level spring training games, your first game is now played in AA. You must earn

the right to be invited to spring training, which will be a much trickier task. A new mistake tracking system penalizes your player when he throws to the wrong base, botches a catch, or forgets to cover a base. Your base running aptitude is also scrutinized with the new Green Light running system. If you attempt to steal a base when the green light is off, your playing time could be affected, and you'll have to earn the respect of the coach again to get another green light.

All of the on-field action is framed through dynamic new camerawork, but none of the core gameplay mechanics have changed since last year (or the previous year for that matter). Other additions are minor, but should lead to a more complete experience. Home run derby returns with the inclusion of some of baseball's all-time greats, like Babe Ruth and the real single season home run leader, Roger Maris. Sony is also adding a slew of new and historic stadiums (including five minor league-only parks), and players can now access Movie Maker from the in-game pause screen.

The Show was the only logical choice for baseball fans last season. Visual Concepts is trying to make the competition interesting again this year, but it's going to take a hell of an effort to rock the solid foundation Sony has built on the PlayStation 3. » **Andrew Reiner**

To see videos of The Show in action and to read an interview with cover athlete Joe Mauer, visit gameinformer.com/mag

It doesn't matter if Joe Mauer applies the tag or not. He's a Yankee. He's out!

Mark McGwir…er… Albert Pujols is a home run-hitting machine

YOU'RE OUT!!!

Prince of Persia: The Forgotten Sands

Ubisoft returns to an established hero

In a surprise shift in gears for the franchise, Ubisoft recently announced that the next Prince of Persia game returns players to the universe of The Sands of Time, the trilogy of games that ran from 2003 through 2005. While this new game is not tied to the upcoming movie, it does conveniently release in May, around the same time as the upcoming Bruckheimer-produced film. Luckily for gamers, it doesn't appear that The Forgotten Sands will bear the fate of so many games released beside films of the same name. Ubisoft Montreal has been working on this new installment since January 2008, even before the recent reboot of the game series released. We talked with level design director Michael McIntyre and producer Graeme Jennings to get the scoop on this startling new direction for the series.

The Forgotten Sands is set in the months after the first Sands of Time game, somewhere in the seven-year gap between that game and its sequel, Warrior Within. The Prince transformed into a more brooding character between those installments, and this new game will tell us why. After his ordeal with the Vizier, the Prince travels to the nearby kingdom ruled by his older brother, Malik. He finds the city under siege and his brother ready to unleash a supernatural army to defeat his foes. Pointing out the eerie parallels between Malik's decision and the Prince's earlier mistake with the Sands of Time isn't enough to stop the disaster. The army is released, control is lost, and the Prince is left to save the day as a titanic sand storm sweeps through the city, slowly engulfing everything. "The look of the game is the realism of Assassin's Creed but with the look and style of Sands of Time," Jennings explains. "We have a gritty, grainy historical quality, with realistic architecture," McIntyre interjects. "But we also have the Arabian Nights influence, where this is not purely historical – there is magic in this world. There's a bit of a fairy tale vibe to it."

The Forgotten Sands aims to emulate the fun, pacing, and gameplay structure of the original Sands of Time game – just ratcheted up for a new generation. Players platform across a dangerous world of traps and passages filled with climbing puzzles. The combat is once again focused on large groups of enemies, and the Prince must use his agility and powers to outwit and defeat them. However, this time the Prince may face up to 50 enemies attacking at once.

To combat such overwhelming odds, the Prince must rely on magic, much of which is provided through a beautiful new female character – a spirit named Razia. With her help, the Prince gains access to a dramatically expanded arsenal of powers. "The one thing from a gameplay perspective that is new is that he doesn't just have time powers," McIntyre tells us. "He has the rewind, but he also has all these new powers that are focused on the elements of nature. He has earth, fire, air, and water. The Prince starts off with a water-related ability. It allows him to freeze water in time for a brief moment. He can make all water solid, so he can interact with it." Mastering each element gives the Prince a static environmental power that aids in mobility, as well as a combat application that can be upgraded over time. For instance, the Prince can now air dash to reach distant platforms. However, in combat his control of the air lets him sweep his enemies up into a swirling tornado. A fire ability gives the Prince the power to light a trail of flame as he passes, encircling his foes in a wall of deadly heat. One of the earth abilities allows our hero to glimpse rock and earth as it once existed, and then interact with it; a fallen pillar can become a climbable structure for a few seconds.

The team at Ubisoft Montreal was tight-lipped on whether we'll ever see a return to the most recent Prince of Persia universe – many questions remain unanswered about Ahriman and Elika. Even so, it's hard not to be excited about the prospect of another adventure in the shoes of an old hero coming from the same studio that delivered the fantastic series in the first place. » Matt Miller

The Prince will face many human-sized opponents, but the new game also puts a focus on combat with some much larger foes

New powers explore the elements of nature – water, fire, earth, and air

Combat can include dozens of enemies at one time, but the Prince has many more powerful abilities at his disposal

photophile

PS3 • 360

Clash of the Titans

A big Hollywood movie is coming up with swords and monsters, and you know what that means. That's right! Movie tie-in game! The video game treatment for *Clash of the Titans* comes from Game Republic, who gamers may recognize as the team behind the Genji games and PS3 action/RPG Folklore. Our short hands-on time with the game revealed a combat system in need of some significant balancing and polishing before release. Here's hoping for a heroic effort from Game Republic in the final weeks before release; the game hits shelves around the time of the movie debut in late March.

Wii

Trauma Team

"No Guilt or Stigma appears in this game. No bug-like things running around the human body with a different name, either," says Trauma Team director Daisuke Kanada. This is great news for fans of Atlus' Trauma Center series who enjoyed surgery gameplay, but wished it was more grounded in reality. Dive into six medical disciplines (emergency medicine, surgery, orthopedics, endoscopy, diagnostics, and forensics) on April 20.

Yakuza 3

Yakuza 2 took nearly two years to finally make it from Japan to the U.S., but the third installment cuts the wait in half when it hits in March. In order to stay authentic, Sega is retaining the original Japanese dialogue tracks combined with English subtitles. It's a win-win – Sega gets to save a bunch of cash, and Japanophile fanboys get to hear a language they love, but don't understand.

PC

M.U.D. TV

Design a studio, hire actors and producers, and make some money in this strategy/simulation title from Kalypso (Tropico 3). M.U.D. TV hopes to layer amusing social commentary on top of its gameplay when it comes out in March.

DS

WarioWare D.I.Y.

WarioWare fans can finally create their own deranged microgames come March 28. In addition to blasting through a normal "career" mode, players can design everything from the look, the rules, and the music of their own microgame. Creations can be shared locally or online with friends, or transferred to the upcoming WiiWare game, WarioWare D.I.Y. Showcase, which will launch alongside the DS game. In Japan, Nintendo is consistently releasing two new microgames a week for download, so this title may have longer legs than previous franchise entries.

80 Mass Effect 2

If you think BioWare pulled out all the stops for the first Mass Effect, just wait until you play the sequel. Mass Effect 2 delivers on the series' promise: continue the epic sci-fi trilogy based on all the decisions you made in the first game. Even if you don't have a Mass Effect 1 save, this RPG-lite wrapped around a solid third-person shooter framework probably has one of the most polished narratives you'll experience all year. If you don't already own the game, turn to page 80 to find out why you should.

THE **SCORING** SYSTEM

10	Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.	**5**	Passable. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.
9	Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.	**4**	Bad. While some things work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
8	Very Good. Innovative, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.	**3**	Painful. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
7	Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.	**2**	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
6	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.	**1**	3D. No matter how much companies want you to care, you don't.

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

Mass Effect 2

The mystery deepens in BioWare's second act

Developing battlefield chemistry with teammates is finally possible

9.75

360 • PC

» **Concept**
Break down the walls holding storytelling in check by allowing players to continue the personal tale they created in the first game

» **Graphics**
Even more cinematic than the first. During story moments, characters interact with their environments, the camera frames each shot better, and facial expressions show a wider range of emotion

» **Sound**
The voice acting is excellent (although I'm pretty sure Seth Green thought he was recording an episode of *Family Guy* for one line). The score also flows beautifully in both the story and action sequences

» **Playability**
The gunplay is now as polished as the other components, allowing players to combo firearms and biotics, and turn to their teammates to get them out of a bind

» **Entertainment**
It's a sequel of a new order, and one of gaming's most engaging stories

» **Replay Value**
High

Cinematic Flair

BioWare's groundbreaking conversation system has received two significant additions. The first is the ability to interfere with a conversation by applying renegade or paragon actions. At scripted points in conversations, players have the ability to change the tone of the scene by physically interfering. This plays an instrumental role in shaping your character, your team, and the narrative. The second addition plays just as large of a role in the story, but you have no direct control over it. The cinematic quality has been heightened to the point that the player can read characters solely from the way they emote.

The second chapter in the Mass Effect trilogy is more of an enigma than the first, weaving enough moral ambiguity, ghost-like images, and misleading plot twists to make the writers of the TV show *Lost* take note. Who are the Collectors? What interest does the mysterious Illusive Man have in Commander Shepard? Where are the Reapers? Why has Cerberus come out of the shadows? Why is mankind the only species in the universe being hunted?

Lost has teased its viewership for years with mystifying answers that lead to even more questions, but in Mass Effect 2, the scribes at BioWare slowly pull the curtain away to reveal the answers you seek. By the time the credits roll, most questions are addressed, Commander Shepard's role in the universe is cemented, and the last image that appears on screen makes the wait for Mass Effect 3 seem unfair.

If you import your save file from the first game, the connection you have with this adventure is heightened to the point that you're doing yourself a disservice if you create a new character. The save transfer retains your character likeness, remembers all of the decisions you made, and ultimately delivers the sensation that you are sculpting the story and are not a passenger on a prescribed ride. The state of the universe is very much how you left it, and the decisions you make moving forward will carry over into Mass Effect 3. If characters died in the first game, they won't return in this sequel.

Mistakes you made in the past could come back to haunt you. You'll see the aftermath to decisions you thought right at the time. And don't be surprised if you stop dead in your tracks to get a better look at familiar faces on the streets. These characters may be an old acquaintance, and if you talk to them, the conversation will play out like a chance reunion.

With this kind of depth, Mass Effect 2 revels in its relationships. The bond created between Commander Shepard and his or her crew is much stronger this time around, with their personal lives sewn tightly into the plot. As they come to know Shepard, their tormented histories, relationships with loved ones, and ghosts from their pasts are dissected. The cast is likeable, and their stories tug at Shepard's soul in myriad ways.

The situations you are asked to dictate are not as black and white as the first game. Doing what you think is right at the time could backfire, or lead to a teammate shutting down emotionally.

The narrative bounces between engaging mysteries and moments that attack your conscience, all while pulling you deeper into a game universe than you've ever been. BioWare's scribes have not only created one of video games' greatest stories with Mass Effect 2, they have redefined how stories are told in this medium.

As familiar as this universe will feel for fans of the original game, the majority of the gameplay will feel alien. Most of the role-playing elements have been removed outright. Weapon and player customization – two confusing menu-driven distractions from the first game – have been stripped to the bones. Most of the role-playing content is replaced with modern day shooter conventions, such as regenerating health and limited ammo.

In my soldier class playthrough, I only discovered 14 different firearms. None of the weapons are technically better than the other – they just offer different functionality. You cannot apply individual upgrades to the firearms like you could in the first game, either. All upgrades (of which there are few) are automatically applied to every weapon in the same class. Likewise, the inventory system has

> Mass Effect is multi-faceted game. Below is a listing of games sharing similarities to the game's particular components. If one of these aspects tickled your fancy, you may want to check out the game listed.
>
> **Plot**
> Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic
>
> **Mystery**
> Assassin's Creed
>
> **Gunplay**
> Gears of War
>
> **Powers**
> Infamous
>
> **Relationships**
> Dragon Age: Origins

Biotic powers are more over the top, yet still fit into the Mass Effect universe

been removed in favor of a similar armor upgrade system. Since this is all automatic, you no longer have to deal with making sure your team is outfitted with the latest gear.

The shift away from RPG-style customization may sound like a major setback, but the new format keeps the focus on the action. The combat scenarios deliver more excitement, not to mention a wider breadth of enemy types. Teammates no longer mindlessly shoot walls like they did in the first game. Rather than acting like flashbang victims, they demonstrate intelligence on the battlefield as they take cover, advance, and unload everything they can on the enemy.

BioWare also rethought the control mapping, allowing players to assign biotics to buttons and view cool-down meters mid-battle – both of which remove the need to visit the pause screen. From a tactical standpoint, you are no longer shoehorned into relying specifically on Shepard's class specialties. You can snipe from ridges, create biotic and firearm combos, and even use melee/shotgun-style assaults. All of these options feel great, and are balanced to create exciting battles.

With its amazing storytelling and combat, it may seem BioWare can do no wrong, but this journey is littered with unpleasant minigames tied to planet mining, computer hacking, and lock bypassing. Each of these diversions are as mind-numbingly dull as they are repetitive in design. Given how heavily they tie into the gameplay, you'd think BioWare would have given them the same care that clearly went into the rest of the game. Although unwanted, the minigames don't derail the experience. The only element of this finely sculpted game that stands out as a grievous error is the last boss' design – its look screams X-Men more than it does Mass Effect.

The loss of RPG elements may hit some people hard, and the repetition in minigames may lead to yawns and tired eyes, but none of these faults hold Mass Effect 2 back from being a work of bold ambition, and one of gaming's most exciting sequels. » **Andrew Reiner**
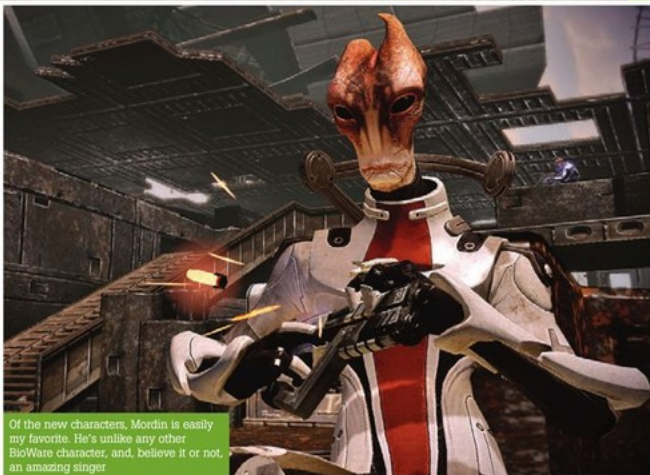
Of the new characters, Mordin is easily my favorite. He's unlike any other BioWare character, and, believe it or not, an amazing singer

All weapons are shown cosmetically on Commander Shepard. Wait until you see what he looks like wielding the nuke launcher!

Second Opinion 9.75

BioWare doesn't fix problems. It gets rid of them. Thought Mass Effect's inventory system was a mess? Don't worry, in the sequel you don't have to manage a single piece of ablative plated armor. Didn't like the Mako's handling in the first game? That little rock crawler has been taken to the scrap heap. Surprisingly, I missed none of the features BioWare unceremoniously removed from the franchise. Everything that's important about Mass Effect has been improved. The combat feels like a more polished shooter, the additional hotkeys let you utilize your biotic and tech powers to a greater degree, and the side missions feature more variety. Even your allies have a larger role to play this time around, and your relationships carry a greater weight. Most importantly, the Mass Effect universe is displayed in impressive detail. Whether you get stuck watching an advertisement for funeral homes after a billboard addresses you by name, you overhear a hapless Turian's attempts to pick up a Quarian at a spaceport bar, or you are exploring the confines of a derelict beached starship, the worlds in Mass Effect 2 are filled with a million little untold tales. The end of Mass Effect made it hard to wait for the sequel, but the end of Mass Effect 2 makes the wait for number three almost painful. » **Ben Reeves**

BioShock 2

In the return trip, Rapture loses some luster

8.25

PS3 • 360

Style 1-Player Action (10-Player Online) **Publisher** 2K Games
Developer 2K Marin/2K Australia/2K Shanghai/Digital Extremes/Arkane Studios **Release** February 9 **ESRB** M

no longer feel like a tourist in Rapture. Once wondrous and foreboding, this underwater society now has the familiarity of a local shopping mall. Audio recordings of Andrew Ryan detail the need for rational selfishness in a controlled world, Big Daddies moan dejectedly in every corridor, and the biggest decision we are faced with is to save or harvest a Little Sister. For roughly 10 hours, BioShock 2 follows directly in its forefather's footsteps, too fearful to inject anything new into this twisted world.

The developer's stubbornness to not veer off of the beaten path clashes with the game's premise. In this installment, players assume the role of the first Big Daddy. Had the game not made this abundantly clear within the introductory cutscene, I would have thought I was playing as a character similar to the original game's protagonist. Because the Big Daddy's suit appears to be made of cotton, splicers pose just as great of a threat to your Big Daddy as they did to BioShock's human lead. Shouldn't I be just as big of a threat as the other Big Daddies in the world? Apparently not.

This inconsistency in BioShock's lore stretches into the realm of the absurd when your Big Daddy's drill is in play. Yes, this violent device turns splicers into satisfying smears, but it guzzles gas faster than a Hummer. After just a few uses, it runs out of fuel. When this happens, its role is demoted to that of a whacking tool… like a wrench.

With writer/director Ken Levine and his team at Irrational Games not returning for this sequel, 2K Marin (and four additional development teams) took on the task of continuing the BioShock franchise. For the majority of this experience, these developers seem to be spinning their creative wheels, and the tiny bits of new content feel tacked on. The Big Sister is the most noticeable mistake. Early in the adventure, her role seems to be similar to Resident Evil's Nemesis – dropping in unannounced to wreak havoc. Her combat prowess dwarfs yours to a degree that you immediately think, "I'll never be able to take her down." As imposing as she is initially, you end up defeating her within the first hour of play. As the game progresses, her class type becomes a reoccurring boss (usually confronting you at the end of each level). Given the potential she exhibits in the first hour of the game, I'll never understand why 2K Marin opted to change her from a unique antagonist (the original plan and reason why the game was delayed) to a faceless enemy type.

Another odd addition is the hack tool. Remember how tricky it could be to navigate rooms with cameras and turrets? With the hack tool, which fires just like a gun, you can take control of stationary targets from a safe distance. Why even have them in the game if you are going to demote their role to being mild nuisances?

Way to bring a revolver to a Gatling fight, genius

Would a Big Daddy really use the stealthy approach? When I played as the Big Daddy in the first BioShock, I thought it was an underdeveloped section of the game. I get the same feeling from BioShock 2.

Eventually this disappointing adventure does turn a corner. It takes 10 hours to get there, but the final two acts (lasting approximately three hours) are brilliant. One plot twist in particular shows you a side of this world that you never thought you'd see. Don't worry, it isn't a spin on "would you kindly." It comes out of nowhere and helps this game find unique footing. The twist gives reason to plow through the rest of the game, and rewards players with a fantastic conclusion.

This crucial turning point also brings on new gameplay dynamics. When your plasmids are leveled to the max, when the final weapon is obtained, and when your Big Daddy finally

realizes he can run fast, the Adam hits the fan. You become a cold-blooded murderer capable of downing multiple splicers, Big Daddies, and Big Sisters in one fight. The pacing gets a welcome shot of urgency, and you finally feel like…well…a Big Daddy.

When this game recognizes its true potential, it shines. It's just a shame that it wanders misguidedly for so long. The first 10 hours are not bad or forgettable, they just don't branch out from the safe confines of the first BioShock. The controls are just as tight as they are in the first game, and the explosive plasmid play once again makes brutality against splicer nation an undeniable blast.

Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of this game's multiplayer component. I love that it has a deep leveling and reward system, but the weapon functionally doesn't feel right, and limiting plasmids to just two per loadout limits

the strategies you can concoct on the fly. Using Little Sisters, who are kicking and screaming the entire time, as alternatives to flags is an ingenious move, but outside of this laugh, most of my time with multiplayer was spent complaining about the gunplay and map designs. If you can live with these faults (which I could never do), reaching the level 40 cap will take a significant amount of time.

If your interest lies solely with the single-player experience – and let's be frank, this is why we counted down the days until BioShock 2's release – I walked away from it pleased, but also unfulfilled. BioShock 2 eventually becomes the sequel I hoped for, but spends too much time getting there. » **Andrew Reiner**

To read BioShock 2 Tidbits, visit gameinformer.com/mag

Battlefield: Bad Company 2

DICE declares war on Infinity Ward

New squad mechanics allow you to kick unwanted squad mates and spawn on anyone in your group

9.5

PS3 • 360

» Concept
Challenge Infinity Ward for the crown of best military shooter

» Graphics
The heavy use of particle effects in the desert sandstorms and mountain peak blizzards adds a wild card element to firefights

» Sound
From head-rattling explosions to the clatter of bullet casings hitting the ground, this is the best sound design in the genre. It's so detailed you can hear the footsteps of soldiers approaching from behind

» Playability
Smoother aiming and tightened vehicle controls improve the moment-to-moment experience, and the new health regeneration system greatly aids the pacing of the single-player campaign

» Entertainment
A vastly improved single-player campaign complements some of the best tactical multiplayer action on the planet

» Replay Value
High

gameinformer GOLD

Style 1-Player Action (24-Player Online) **Publisher** Electronic Arts **Developer** DICE **Release** March 2 **ESRB** M

Second Opinion 9.5

Wow, what a fun ride. Battlefield: Bad Company 2 brings the boys from Bravo Company back and sets them on another crazy adventure they didn't ask for. Delivering an experience on par with a summer blockbuster movie, the single-player campaign took me on an adventure through South America that spanned snow-covered mountains and rainy, dense jungles. Explosive set pieces, mysterious weapons, and wisecracking squad members kept me hooked through to the end – but the real star is the amazing multiplayer. DICE has brought the magic of Battlefield 2 to the living room with some of the most balanced and addictive online multiplayer I've ever seen. With the blend of new ideas and improvements from the previous title, Bad Company 2 is set to become a juggernaut in the multiplayer space. » Nick Ahrens

Nothing improves competition like a great rivalry. After years as the kingpin of military multiplayer, Battlefield creator DICE found its title in jeopardy as FPS gamers abandoned PCs in favor of consoles and Call of Duty became the gold standard. At the core of Infinity Ward's world-beating shooter was the Battlefield blueprint. The studio borrowed the persistent rankings and unlockable weapons concepts from Battlefield 2, refined them to unprecedented levels, and matched its robust online offering with an expertly crafted single-player campaign featuring thrilling scripted sequences that put action flicks to shame. Not content to settle for second place, DICE throws down the gauntlet with Bad Company 2, delivering its best multiplayer package since Battlefield 2 and a remarkably improved single-player campaign that openly mocks its rival while cribbing from them at the same time.

As with all Battlefield titles, a phenomenal multiplayer mode serves as the heart of Bad Company 2. The game successfully blends many innovations from the series' past with impressive new features to create a robust experience that rightfully challenges Modern Warfare for the multiplayer crown. All the Battlefield staples return – player progression, rankings, squad groupings, unlockable weapons, and huge maps that allow players to attack via land, air, and sea. The deep progression system constantly dangles the carrot of achievement in front of you, offering a wealth of unlockable weapons, gadgets, and specializations with nearly every round. An impressive array of pins and insignia document your battlefield prowess, and the dog tags return as boast-worthy incentives to knife unsuspecting enemies.

Conquest and Rush still serve as the multiplayer pillars, but Bad Company 2 also introduces two new change-of-pace modes. Squad Rush places a four-player team in the role of attackers who must best the four defenders by destroying two crates. Squad Deathmatch, on the other hand, pits four teams of four against each other in a battle for kill counts and bragging rights. Both modes feature more intimate maps and take much less time to complete than the standard Rush mode. Teamwork and coordination are stressed to new degrees as well. Keeping close proximity to your squad is essential for reviving fallen teammates, which can spell the difference between successfully defending a crate and losing it while half your squad waits to respawn.

The multiplayer modes are complemented by a fantastic array of maps. Many pay homage to great maps from Battlefield's past, and the diversity in locale and terrain assures every battle plays out differently. Some concentrate on vehicular combat, where controlling the air with choppers or mounting an assault with tanks are the keys to winning the war, while others stress infantry tactics in tighter urban locales. These expertly crafted environments are a far cry from their cramped and frantic counterparts in Modern Warfare 2, giving players room to orchestrate coordinated assaults.

A pair of useful new tools bolster the team tactics. The spotting mechanic helps improve communication by allowing players to mark enemy positions as they identify movement on the battlefield. In addition, the overpowered artillery from Bad Company has been removed in

The improved destruction engine lets you raze buildings in both single and multiplayer

favor of a player-guided UAV that allows you to track and mark enemy movements from above between missile barrages.

DICE made many logistical changes to the multiplayer experience, but failed to address some other minor hindrances. You can finally kick unwanted players from your squad to make room for a buddy, but large groups will gripe when their party gets split by the sometimes unaccommodating matchmaking system. The sketchy statistics updater still takes awhile to post the results from your most recent match (a legacy problem that's plagued Battlefield for years), and the annoying kill cam is sure to anger players using the recon class because it gives away players' sniping positions. Snipers also won't be pleased that DICE once again doesn't allow players to go prone. Thankfully, you can ditch the kill cam in the new Hardcore mode, which also turns off many HUD elements and increases the damage to deliver a more realistic war experience.

As great as the multiplayer is, DICE takes its biggest strides forward with the drastically improved solo campaign. The follow-up to the Swedish studio's first attempt at a crafting a meaningful single-player experience finds success in mimicking some of the best games to date – keen gamers will notice borrowed elements from Call of Duty and Uncharted 2 sprinkled throughout the campaign. The most drastic improvement comes with its renewed sense of pacing. By ditching large open-world environments in favor of a more linear path, DICE is better able to craft memorable scripted sequences that the first game sorely lacked. Amazingly, DICE pulls this off without sacrificing the player's sense of freedom – the levels are still big enough to offer several tactical options for players to explore.

The jokers from B Company resume their role as the loveable heroes, but DICE trades in the humorous *Three Kings* storyline of the first game in favor of a more somber mission. When the U.S. learns the Russians are after a secret WMD the Japanese developed during WWII, a routine mission turns into a globetrotting escapade that takes B Company from the jungles of South America to the peak of the Andes mountains. Though the stakes are higher, that doesn't stop Sarge, Sweetwater, Haggard, and Marlowe from cracking jokes at each other's expense. The comedic dialogue shines throughout the game; these eccentric soldiers have more personality than all the protagonists from Call of Duty, Rainbow Six, Ghost Recon, and Medal of Honor combined.

A number of subtle improvements keep the campaign moving along with the clip of a Hollywood blockbuster. DICE ditched the health syringe from the first game in favor of a regenerative health system, the forgiving checkpoint system doesn't punish players, and you never have to babysit your more-than-capable squad during the intense firefights. The only thing the campaign lacks is co-op; since four heroes are already fighting side-by-side throughout the game, this was a missed opportunity for DICE to one-up the competition.

Though the campaign doesn't top the brilliant set pieces found in Modern Warfare, the drastic improvements bring it near the level of Infinity Ward's juggernaut. Placed in tandem with the exceptional multiplayer, Bad Company 2 is a memorable shooter that should be a favored destination on Xbox Live and PlayStation Network for much of 2010. » Matt Bertz

Unlike many shooters, the vehicle levels in Bad Company 2 don't suck

Dante's Inferno

Hell needs more good ideas

7

PS3 • 360

» Concept
Tap a classic poem for the story and a standout series for the gameplay

» Graphics
The character models are rough, but some circles of hell look impressive

» Sound
The orchestral soundtrack serves the story well

» Playability
The combat is God of War from beginning to end, which isn't a bad thing

» Entertainment
Beneath the repetition and unoriginal gameplay, there's a solid title

» Replay Value
Moderate

Style 1–Player Action **Publisher** Electronic Arts **Developer** Visceral Games **Release** February 9 **ESRB** M

Second Opinion 6.75

Dante's Inferno is a difficult game to score. In terms of gameplay, Visceral Games did a solid job creating some well-worn but enjoyable button mashing. Despite being a mostly entertaining experience for the eight hours it lasts, several circles of Hell – Greed in particular – demonstrate terrible platforming and lackluster level design. However, problems with the gameplay don't come close to matching the stupidity of the story. I'm not against adapting classic literature for modern formats, but this delicate process must be handled with a certain level of respect that Visceral lacks. The enemies and locales of Hell are interpreted in visually interesting ways, but the great poet himself has devolved into a knuckle-dragging Kratos clone with a dark sin-filled past in the Crusades. As he works through each circle of Hell, Dante relives flashbacks that are supposed to make him more complex, but end up making him unlikable. If you can get past EA crapping on the source material (and its author), Dante's Inferno holds a brief, but mostly fun, hellish journey. This English major couldn't stomach it. » **Phil Kollar**

I f ripping off the gameplay of another title was a sin, there'd be a circle in hell reserved exclusively for Dante's Inferno. Its combat, magic system, finishing moves, and various other gameplay mechanics unapologetically ape God of War to the point where Kratos fans will feel right at home in Lucifer's den. Inferno mimics even the most mundane and inexplicable tasks, like requiring the player to mash the action button to open doors, cementing this title's status as a bonafide God of War copycat.

The result of this imitation however, is that by and large the game is fun to play; the combat is tight and satisfying, and the finishing moves are brutally graphic. Despite being a poet in the source material, Dante is transformed into a badass warrior, almost rivaling that of his Greek counterpart. Minor additions to the formula, such as branching skill trees for learning new moves, hidden relics that can be equipped to boost various stats, and the ability to condemn/absolve souls give Dante's Inferno some individuality, even if it's never fully realized.

While the gameplay is largely unoriginal, Inferno's story is unique to say the least. Tapping a 14th-century poem as inspiration for a hack and slash action title is enough to make even the most forgiving gamer cringe, but Visceral Games uses Inferno's premise to good effect. The game is scandalous and over the top, but as controversial as the topless lust demons and unbaptized spider babies might be, they are also entertaining and more or less justified – this is supposed to be hell, after all. Literature buffs will likely be offended by the many liberties taken with the source material, but if you can get over the story compromises made for the sake of

gameplay, Inferno's creativity may pleasantly surprise you.

The classic work serves as more than a starting point for the game. Your ability to judge characters that Dante meets in the original poem (which are used to independently level up your Holy and Unholy powers), and Virgil's monologues add some authenticity in light of the sweeping story changes. The poem also inspires the game's vision of hell, and fortunately the developers pulled no punches in bringing their interpretation to life. Although the level of detail for the character models is oftentimes underwhelming, the early environments are unique, twisted, and memorable. The game lacks the brilliant level design of the God of War series, but there are times when Dante's Inferno faithfully recreates descriptions from the poem, resulting in some remarkable sights.

Inferno's ultimate sin is that the game can't sustain its early pace. Of its nine circles of hell, the first three – Limbo, Lust, and Gluttony – contain the game's best ideas and most impressive creative vision. Later circles offer memorable sights as well, but for every river of boiling blood or ride on the back of Phlegyas there are a dozen drawn-out battles against groups of recycled enemies. After the variety introduced in the beginning, it was disappointing (and nonsensical) to see the same enemies popping up

again and again in later circles, requiring little in the way of fresh tactics to beat.

This problem ironically culminates in the circle of Fraud, which is composed of 10 different challenges in identical arenas. Each challenge introduces a different element, but most can be beat with either your heavy attack or projectile combos. Despite the plethora of moves to unlock, these two techniques will get you through the vast majority of the battles you'll face, making the game feel like more of a grind than it has to be.

Dante's Inferno features some interesting aspects (like its combat), but early innovation loses out to repetition. The game's biggest strength – Visceral's recreation of hell – wanes during the second half. Some entertaining unlockable content adds to the replayability, but for most gamers, Inferno doesn't have enough new ideas to warrant a return trip through hell. » **Jeff Marchiafava**

Aliens vs. Predator

Two monsters fight their way to the bargain bin

Style 1-Player Action (18-Player Online) **Publisher** Sega **Developer** Rebellion
Release February 16 **ESRB** M

5.75

PS3 • 360

*A*lien came out in 1979 and almost single-handedly defined sci-fi horror. *Predator* released in 1987 and re-envisioned monster movies, creating a new terror for twelve-year-olds to obsess over. This year Rebellion releases Aliens vs. Predator for home consoles, and like an antithesis to Reese's Peanut Butter Cups, it proves that two great flavors don't always taste great together.

Set after the events of *Aliens 3*, a group of scientists on planet BG-386 begins breeding Xenomorphs for war. A war party of Predators learns about these experiments and decides the best thing they can do for the universe is to travel to BG-386 and put a stop to this bad idea by wiping out the colony. Players play through three different campaigns, each one telling a different side of the same story.

Each campaign contains it own special set of problems. The human marine section is set up like a survival horror FPS. There are a few good scares within these corridors, but after getting locked inside a room and having to fight off a horde of Xenomorphs for the 100th time, the repetition drowns the experience. It doesn't help that your flashlight is as useful at lighting up dark corners as a laser pointer would be for reading a newspaper in the dark.

The Predator sequences put you behind the heat-visioned stare of a young hunter trying to prove himself to his clan. I had fun using the Predator's iconic

arsenal, but the heavy focus on stealth, limited melee combat, and linear level design made me want to hang up my hunter's dreads.

The Alien campaign plays like a combination of the other two. Like the Predator campaign, it has a stealth focus, and like the marine campaign, it sucks. As an alien bred for war, you fight your way out of captivity, eviscerating marines trained to ignore strange sounds and forget about missing allies. Xenomorphs are supposed to be the deadliest creature in the universe, but considering how many times you have to slash at these wimpy scientists before they fall over, you'd think you were tickling your enemies to death. Worst of all, the Xenomorph's ability to walk on walls makes navigating the world a disorienting affair; your biggest battle in this campaign will be fighting off motion sickness.

Some gamers might appreciate how all three races can go head-to-head in online deathmatch, but nothing else about multiplayer feels fresh, and many of the single-player problems – such as the frustrating alien controls – carry over.

Curiously, Rebellion's 1999 PC release, Aliens vs. Predator, was well received, but this update captures none of that game's unique spark. Instead we have a title trying to live off the fumes of two dormant franchises. » **Ben Reeves**

For more screens of Aliens vs. Predator in action check out gameinformer.com/mag

» **Concept**
Three different campaigns and several full-featured multiplayer modes provide plenty of content for those who can put up with the rest of the game
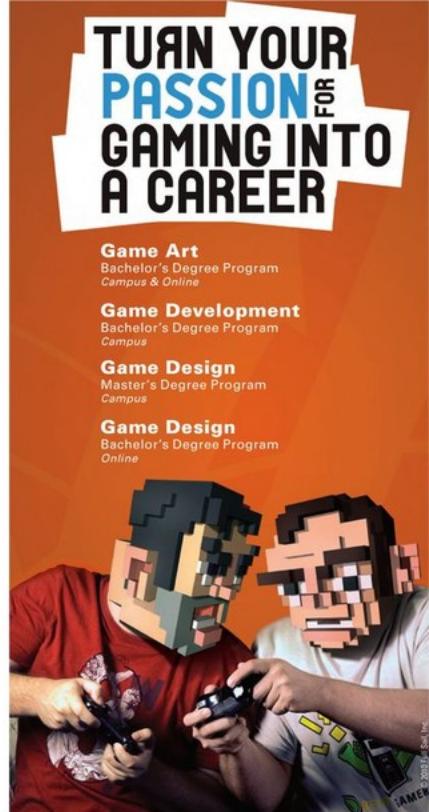
» **Graphics**
If the lighting was better and the environment a little more detailed, AvP's atmosphere could have been moody. As it stands, it's just plain

» **Sound**
Listening to the aliens crawl through vents and jump out at you would be scary if your motion sensor wasn't constantly bleating in your ear the whole time

» **Playability**
Poor melee combat results in a few frustrating encounters, but the game's poor AI keeps things relatively easy. Good thing these marines never figured out how to look up

» **Entertainment**
The original Aliens movies changed film forever, but this game is more derivative than a straight-to-video Steven Segal movie

» **Replay Value**
Low

Final Fantasy XIII

Square Enix delivers a great game, not a savior

Devil's Advocate

The "Other" Perspective
It may be an excellent RPG, but Final Fantasy XIII's right to bear the Final Fantasy name could be called into question. Many of the series' conventions are either highly modified or simply thrown out the window; there are no sidequests to undertake until about 30 hours into the adventure, no towns to explore (all of your shopping is done from save points), and no revisiting old areas via airship. It's game over if your party leader is knocked out (regardless of how much health your other allies have), and the summons' ability to turn into drivable racecars and motorcycles is bizarre. None of these things are necessarily bad, but they are certainly drastic deviations from Final Fantasy's established traditions.

Style 1-Player Role-Playing **Publisher** Square Enix **Developer** Square Enix **Release** March 9 **ESRB** T

Final Fantasy XIII has ascended to a nearly religious significance in the eyes of many gamers. A piece of heavy artillery in the constant console war, it was initially cited by many as the game to single-handedly justify a PS3 purchase. When it went multiplatform at E3 2008, the announcement was considered the biggest coup of the show, literally bringing some ardent fans to tears. With all of the emotions and expectations it carried before it was even a playable game, Final Fantasy XIII became more than just the next entry in this storied franchise. It became a symbol – a promise for the future of gaming.

Once you begin playing, the fog of mythology surrounding the title quickly lifts, and you realize that Final Fantasy XIII is just a role-playing game. It doesn't have any mystical powers or curative properties. It has systems, just like any mortal RPG – battle systems, leveling systems, and upgrade systems are all here, and they are exceptional. FF XIII is not the Game Whose Coming Was Foretold, but every aspect of the gameplay is precision-tuned to deliver the most technically impressive title in Final Fantasy history.

Since this series has long relied on a series of simple commands – like attack, magic, and item – to govern enemy encounters, I am surprised to report that combat is the greatest triumph of FF XIII. Square Enix has overhauled the concept of battle, focusing more on guiding the tactical flow of the fight rather than each character's specific actions on a turn-by-turn basis. The result is a kinetic, fast-paced system that stands out as my favorite in the series.

The mechanic revolves around the concept of paradigms, which are arrangements of characters with specific jobs and abilities. You will only have direct control over the party leader, while the other two members behave according to their assigned roles. A character in the sentinel role will soak up damage and attract enemy attention, allowing the other two to perform duties like debuffing or casting offensive spells. However, the tides turn often, and you'll need to switch your paradigms mid-battle to adapt. You may have to bombard a well-armored robotic juggernaut with electrical spells until its defenses are down, and then quickly swap to a paradigm focused on physical attacks to do some real damage. After you get burned by the same robot's super-attack, you may want to spend a few seconds in an all-medic paradigm to recover your HP before going back on the offensive.

The idea seems simple at first, but the game gradually builds the complexity until you feel like a strategic powerhouse, creating and exploiting weaknesses by switching your paradigms every few seconds. It's fun, easy to use, and a refreshing departure from the RPG norm. After just a couple hours, I abandoned my stubborn tendency to manually enter commands for my party leader; it slows down the frenetic pace, and the auto-battle command is more than adequate. Plus, it frees your attention to marvel at the breathtaking graphics and visual effects.

The battles aren't the only reason you should play FF XIII. The process of leveling up your

What about 360?

Due to time-related factors, Square Enix could not provide an Xbox 360 version of Final Fantasy XIII for review in this issue. When we obtain our copy, we will evaluate it separately and report on any substantial differences between the two versions. Until that time, remember that this review pertains exclusively to the PlayStation 3 iteration of the game.

Lightning is undoubtedly cool, though none of your party members have much dimension

You can queue up your actions manually, but the auto-battle command is more efficient

characters, called the Crystarium, is a great hybrid of the sphere grid from Final Fantasy X and the job system from Final Fantasy V. You choose how each character progresses in his or her available roles, though the full Crystarium doesn't really open up until relatively late – mainly because the plot dictates your party composition for the majority of the game. The ability to tweak and customize your party doesn't really become possible until chapter 11 (of 13), which is also the only section of the game where I found a few hours of grinding necessary to progress.

The only key area where FF XIII betrays fans – and this is heartbreaking for me to admit – is the story. The narrative makes a number of small missteps, but they all tie back to one larger issue: the characters. The game is largely driven by the personalities of the six main party members – their goals, mindsets, and personal revelations. Unfortunately, these revelations feel extremely rushed and artificial, forced by the necessity of moving the plot forward. These moments range from insipid to obvious, like "I was fighting because I was too scared to face my fate," or "I didn't tell anyone this piece of critical information because I thought they wouldn't like me." Periodic updates on the characters' vacillating attitudes are poor substitutes for a clear long-term goal and a compelling antagonist. Even

the Final Fantasy series' B-squad bosses, like Zeromus and Necron, make more sense than your ultimate adversary in FF XIII.

A good story is of paramount importance in a role-playing game, but the fact that FF XIII's other elements compensate for its disappointing narrative is a testament to the overall quality of the experience. For years, gamers have had visions of this title as an industry-transforming epiphany, but no game could possibly live up to such

astronomical expectations. That's no reason to lose faith; though reality doesn't match the myth, Final Fantasy XIII is a phenomenal RPG destined to be remembered as a technical milestone for the series. » **Joe Juba**

Not sure if Final Fantasy XIII is for you? Read our breakdown of how Final Fantasy XIII borrows and adapts concepts from your favorite games in the series at gameinformer.com/mag

This isn't a cutscene. You actually fight these things

White Knight Chronicles

MMO gameplay meets single-player styling to middling success

» **Concept**
Save the princess in a straightforward role-playing fantasy, and throw in a wealth of MMO-style quests to play with friends

» **Graphics**
Attractive cutscenes and a few impressive environments, but the overall visual presentation feels generic

» **Sound**
While the extensive voice work is well implemented, the music is too ordinary to be interesting

» **Playability**
The complex skill and combat system is troubling to navigate, and the sensation doesn't improve over time

» **Entertainment**
Highly customizable and large in scope, but lacking imagination and exciting gameplay

» **Replay Value**
Moderately Low

Style 1-Player Role-Playing (4-Player Online) **Publisher** Sony Computer Entertainment America **Developer** Level-5 **Release** February 2 **ESRB** T

White Knight Chronicles is a game caught between genres. It frames many classic Japanese RPG tropes – the unexpectedly powerful boy hero, the kidnapped princess, the shadowy and insidious magical organization – in an equally familiar single-player gameplay structure. At the same time, the game offers a deep multiplayer component, delivering MMO-style combat and quests for players to tackle with up to three friends. The gameplay that emerges isn't very compelling, but there is a large world, a deep skill system, and a whole lot of combat for anyone with the patience to make it through.

The most unusual aspect of the single-player game is your avatar. The character customizer has more flexibility than any JRPG I can think of, and it's easy to get excited about the potential of taking your new creation on the upcoming adventure. Don't be fooled. This guy or gal you've just created is about to embark as the biggest tagalong in the history of RPGs. The avatar is present during story events, and tangentially a member of the party, but his or her only purpose is to serve as your multiplayer face if you choose to hook up with friends.

The actual main character is a boy named Leonard. You learn early on that he's got a special ability to bond with and transform into a hulking white knight with a giant sword. Wrecking baddies as an armored titan makes for the most enthralling moments in the game. Unfortunately, this mechanic also shatters any sense of good balance that the game might have had. Normal fights are too easy thanks to the presence of the White Knight, and boss fights are nearly impossible without him or one of his equally huge buddies.

The game plays out across enormous play fields with numerous branching paths. Missions often involve a lot of backtracking and long periods of wandering, slowing the pace of the story. The third-person combat tries to look and feel a lot like an MMO, with its hotbar of skills and recharging attacks, but it makes for a cluttered HUD. While you only control one character at a time, fellow party members can be tasked with basic tactical commands.

The upgrade and skill system is deserving of praise, if only because it offers a high degree of customization to every character in the party.

You choose who will be your mage, your spearman, or your swordswoman, and then build their abilities accordingly. Sadly, implementing and setting these abilities is a pain – every time you add a new skill or combo, you must reshuffle your hotbar selections.

As a lone player, you'll take these highly customized heroes through an achingly generic storyline peppered with some nice cinematics and a few very cool environments, such as the giant volcanic caldera that contains a city on the back of a hulking monster. These moments of originality are at odds with the shallow interpersonal interactions and one-dimensional plot reveals that characterize the rest of the game.

The standout feature for White Knight Chronicles is its multiplayer component. At any point in the game, you can take a break from the princess-saving adventure to tackle a few guild side missions with up to three friends. Finally bringing your avatar to the fore, you'll move through the same locales as the single-player game, but with special tasks and monsters to fight along the way. There's a ton of these missions to explore, adding many hours to an already lengthy game.

White Knight Chronicles was a disappointment for me, especially coming from a quality developer like Level-5. Some of the studio's trademark customization helps to give the game some legs, as does its hefty multiplayer component. However, for interesting combat, deep characters, and an engaging fantasy, I'd look elsewhere. » **Matt Miller**

Heavy Rain

Quantic Dream raises the bar for video game storytelling

9.5

PS3

» Concept
An interactive drama where your choices shape the plot and characters

» Graphics
These are the best-looking video game characters to date, with astounding detail and facial animations

» Sound
The moody musical score works well, and some of the voice actors are exceptional. Others are far less impressive

» Playability
Directing the action is made simple through clear on-screen prompts

» Entertainment
Watching the mystery and characters blossom because of your choices is more engaging than you would think

» Replay
Moderately High

A video game can encompass a multitude of experiences, transforming gamers into the heroes of intergalactic wars or the saviors of underwater civilizations. While the settings and scenarios may be different, most titles use similar gameplay vocabularies to immerse and entertain us. Concepts like shooting the bad guys, leveling up your character, and acquiring new items are so pervasive that they have been inextricably woven into most players' definition of what it means to be a video game. Heavy Rain forces you to reconsider that definition. It is barely a game in the popular sense of the word, but Quantic Dream's masterpiece makes groundbreaking strides in storytelling and character development, demonstrating that interactive entertainment still has a deep well of untapped potential.

Heavy Rain is a game about choice – but not the kind of black-and-white moral decisions upon which games typically rely. It's about choices that send ripples through the entire experience, changing what you see and coloring your perception of the characters. On a basic level, you watch the mystery of the Origami Killer unfold. Beyond that, how the plot and characters develop is up to you. Fight or flee? Surrender or suffer? Kill or be killed? Your decisions aren't just brief forks in the road before the paths reconverge. Two players could follow unique arcs through the story, see different characters live and die, and come away with an entirely different idea of what happened and why.

Playing out like the chapters of a book, your control alternates between four protagonists, each gathering clues and driven by their own

agenda. The order you play the characters and the direction of their stories vary depending on how you interact with the world during freeform exploration and context-sensitive button presses and motions, which comprise the entirety of what Heavy Rain offers in terms of traditional gameplay. Simply pressing a button may not sound compelling at first, but when your character's finger is on the trigger, or when a child's life rests in your hands, that single motion is just as intense as any boss fight. When you can read the conflict and pain right on the characters' expressions (thanks to the game's amazing facial models), the choices are even more powerful. During one particularly rough sequence, I was literally cringing as I pressed down, forced to decide between two equally reprehensible options.

While these harrowing decisions give the story its edge, the quiet and subtle moments are just as integral to shaping your vision of the characters. Allowing the dad to lose a toy sword fight with his son, deciding what the insomniac journalist does at two in the morning, or making the gruff private investigator close his desk drawer without taking a swig of whiskey – these are the incidental events that slowly uncover complex emotions like trust, grief, and love. The characters are defined through these casual choices, building a foundation to work from when you're faced with dictating their actions in the high-stakes scenarios.

Your little choices and big ones fuse in a single, seamless narrative. No matter how you perform during the timed button presses, the story goes on, and the chapters flow from one to the other

so brilliantly that you'll have trouble imagining how things could have happened any other way. I strongly recommend you avoid the temptation to replay chapters if things don't go as you hope; there is no success or failure, and by retrying until you "win," all you'll end up with is a more disjointed view of the events.

Not all of the stumbling blocks in Heavy Rain's story spring from replaying chapters. While the plot is remarkably cohesive given the game's ambitions, cracks appear in a few areas. One seemingly major thread is unceremoniously dropped about halfway through, and several of the side characters feel more like stock archetypes than believable people. The voice acting can be tough to bear at times, too – especially when no one can consistently pronounce "origami." But for every instance where the game's composition falters, there are dozens where it gracefully glides on uninterrupted.

Taking the right lessons away from its previous title, Indigo Prophecy, developer Quantic Dream has shorn away most traditional video game trappings from Heavy Rain. What remains is an innovative journey through an engrossing and well-paced mystery. You're given just enough gameplay to forge a connection to the world and its characters, but not so much that it interferes with the game's cinematic sensibilities. Heavy Rain is a truly pioneering title, and hopefully the vanguard for a new genre of interactive narratives. **» Joe Juba**

To see what other GI staffers have to say about Heavy Rain, check out the editor blogs at gameinformer.com/mag

Second Opinion 8.5

While Heavy Rain succeeds in giving players more control over the narrative, the results of this experimental game are mixed. The game's choose-your-own-adventure approach sometimes results in questionable plot devices and redundant story threads that make it feel more like a pulpy dime novel than a serious action thriller. Characters often act unnaturally, and the voice acting isn't strong enough to compensate for the questionable writing. But it's not the story that makes Heavy Rain a worthwhile experience; it's how that story is told. I walked away with a strong sense of ownership over the plot, and certain sequences – such as escaping from a burning building – had me on the edge of my seat. Heavy Rain won't be for everyone; the quick-time action sequences are great, but that limited gameplay is fairly one-dimensional. Those who put up with Heavy Rain's slow pacing, however, will find that it is one of the most unique and compelling experiences interactive entertainment has to offer. **» Ben Reeves**

8.75

360

» Concept
Build a functioning economy on a mid-20th century Caribbean island while keeping the respect of your people and decent relations with both the U.S. and U.S.S.R.

» Graphics
The cluttered UI isn't ideal and some of the fancier fullscreen effects from the PC version are missing

» Sound
The radio broadcasts are clever and informative the first few times, the next several hundred, not so much

» Playability
Is gamepad control as precise or responsive as a mouse and keyboard? Of course not. It's entirely playable, though

» Entertainment
The solid gameplay, variety of scripted scenarios, and sun-dappled charm of Tropico's jungle islands combine for a solid experience

» Replay Value
High

Tropico 3

Console port preserves city sim's brilliance

gameinformer SILVER

Style 1-Player Simulation **Publisher** Kalypso Media
Developer Haemimont Games
Release February 2 **ESRB** T

My affection for Tropico 3's flavor of campy economic simulation is no secret; the PC version has held me entranced for months (read my review online or in issue 199). I'm happy to report that the delayed Xbox 360 port is nearly as good, and gives console players a chance to dig into a genre that traditionally hasn't had much of a presence beyond the PC universe.

As El Presidente of a small country in the Caribbean, players have to juggle several factors as they try to develop their impoverished island into a viable economy through commissioning buildings, setting tax rates, issuing edicts, and the like. The several factions of your people (capitalists, religious folk, nationalists, etc.) must be mollified lest they vote against you or even rebel. The U.S. and U.S.S.R. are all too interested in poking their super-powered noses into your business, so you have to take their wants into account. Of course, the national treasury is an ever-present concern as well. Keeping all

of these balls in the air lends constant challenge and tension to the gameplay, and effectively has me glued to my island for hours at a time.

The campaign offers dozens (if not hundreds) of hours of playtime in scripted scenarios that twist the basic formula in entertaining ways. One might give you dozens of unskilled refugee immigrants, while another has you choosing whether to let a superpower buy the rights to build an army base on your island. Each mission has specific goals, timeframes, and challenges. Developing ways to cope with the frequent curveballs thrown at you is half the fun.

Sandbox mode in Tropico 3 is less compelling. Once the money is flowing in from a stable, advanced economy, your problems are simple to buy your way out of. It's amusing enough to build a functioning city, but the challenge and rewards just aren't there.

A solid interface makes this Xbox 360 port a reasonable – though not ideal – way to play Tropico 3. A few uncommon actions, like setting worker wages and hiring foreign specialists, are noticeably harder on a gamepad. Other than that, there's very little between you and the amusement of having your own private banana republic. **» Adam Biessener**

7.75

360

» Concept
Cyanide Studio transports Games Workshop's original game to the 360, adding online play and additional (and optional) rules in Blitz mode

» Graphics
Blood Bowl is not a feast for the eyes (it does have orcs, after all), but being able to zoom in and out of the action at any point is handy

» Sound
The whimsical announcers are a perfect fit for the game's tone, which mixes bloody conquest and sports irreverance

» Playability
Although the HUD provides plenty of important info, some of the game's more subtle aspects could have been conveyed onscreen instead of leaving you in the dark

» Entertainment
This isn't Mutant League Football; this is a hardcore strategy game. Think and act accordingly

» Replay Value
High

Blood Bowl

A hail mary with spikes

Style 1 or 2-Player Strategy (2-Player Online) **Publisher** SouthPeak Interactive **Developer** Cyanide Studio **Release** January 26 **ESRB** T

For a guy who has a good understanding of the myriad rules and tactics in football, it came as a shock that I was a total novice when it came to Blood Bowl. It turns out the two sports have almost nothing in common. I will say this, though: If you've ever seen a football coach smile on the sidelines after a routine play because everything went exactly the way it was drawn up, then you'll have an appreciation for the strategic intracacies and moving parts that have to come together to perform basic moves in Blood Bowl.

The game uses Warhammer-esque fantasy races (each with different characteristics) in 11-on-11 contests where the objective is to score the most touchdowns. The action features ref bribes, the injury or death of players,

dice re-rolls, fan interference, mercenaries, and more as regular occurances. This 360 version adds online play and a new Blitz mode to the classic game that allows you to play in realtime and features equipment upgrades, contracts, training, and other enhancements. These new elements add quite a few cool nuances to the traditional gameplay.

Almost every move you make in the game is determined by dice rolls checked against your player's attributes and the appropriate modifiers. While this is nothing new, Blood Bowl adds a heartbreaking twist: In most cases a failed dice roll means your turn is automatically over. When I say "most cases," I'm talking about some fundamental moves in the game like picking up the football or blocking. Consequently, everything

you do in the game requires a high degree of risk assessment, and your turn is always a carefully constructed sequence of events with little margin for error. Good players know how to play the odds in their favor, but in the end the game still comes down to the tumbling dice.

If you're already a Blood Bowl vet, the Blitz mode makes this version worth your time. But even though I find satisfaction in pulling off even the simplest of the game's maneuvers, setting up all of its dominos is just too exacting for my taste. **» Matthew Kato**

For a tutorial video on Blood Bowl, check out gameinformer.com/mag

Divinity II: Ego Draconis

Lame combat limits the appeal of a beautiful world

Style 1-Player Action/RPG **Publisher** CDV Software Entertainment
Developer Larian Studios **Release** January 5 **ESRB** M

7

PC

Combat and character development separate role-playing games from the adventure genre. Divinity II: Ego Draconis would have been better off as an adventure game. Its world and background fiction are top-notch, expertly fleshed out by dozens of in-game books and extensive voiced dialogue. The third-person action, on the other hand, is designed and implemented so poorly that every encounter is a chore.

The care poured into the setting is evident in the art as well as the rich, detailed fiction. The extensive world is crammed full of little touches, from skeletons jutting out of ancient cave-ins to bloodstains in a torture chamber that horribly detail the order in which the devices were used. Every house, every mini-dungeon, and every abandoned shrine in the wilderness has its own story. The game does a fantastic job of not holding your hand and letting you explore on your own terms. This strikes a great balance between the large but often soulless expanses of Oblivion's Cyrodiil and Dragon Age's small but meticulous areas.

The price you have to pay to take in these wondrous sights can be steep. The hack n' slash combat is little more than hammering on your primary attack

while interjecting special moves when they're off cooldown. You'll spend the majority of your combat time locked into animations. Balancing is completely off; every boss fight I came across required several reloads to pass. One boss could consistently two-shot my character with a bow – and that's with all my stat points spent on ranged defense and hit points! Combat isn't tactically interesting, either. You'll most likely use between two and five abilities for the entire game.

Turning into a dragon has been touted as a big selling point, but it results in gimmicky one-off sequences rather than a revolution in the gameplay. Likewise, customizing your own Battle Tower to serve as a home base ends up being little more than a convenient collection of vendors. Building your own undead creature from the body parts of fallen foes is neat, but nowhere near enough to salvage the combat from mediocrity.

Divinity II isn't without its charms, but weak game design sullies the thrill of digging into the many secrets of its outstanding world. » **Adam Biessener**

See the full review of the Xbox 360 version and see which platform is the better choice at gameinformer.com/mag

» **Concept**
Explore a richly detailed fantasy world in your quest to become a dragon and stop an ancient evil

» **Graphics**
Environments are fabulous, but a mere half-dozen faces for each gender and wonky animations make the people less of a draw than the setting

» **Sound**
The content-appropriate score does its job, and most of the extensive voice work is solid

» **Playability**
The control itself isn't bad, but horrific balancing will make you curse

» **Entertainment**
The sense of discovery imparted by journeying through Divinity II's world is grand, but the action is passable at best

» **Replay Value**
Moderately Low
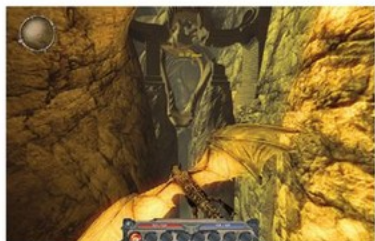
No More Heroes 2: Desperate Struggle

Suda51 finally strikes a balance

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Ubisoft **Developer** Grasshopper Manufacture **Release** January 26 **ESRB** M

Suda51 and his development studio, Grasshopper Manufacture, have always struggled to balance high ambitions with accessibility. Case in point, the original No More Heroes – a brawler that parodied anime and video games, but included frustratingly boring side missions that were required to gain money to unlock progression.

In interviews about the game, Suda51 implied that he was reluctant to do a sequel – usually a bad sign – but perhaps forcing his team to focus on refining a single idea was the best thing that could have happened. In No More Heroes 2: Desperate Struggle, they have crafted everything fans could want out of a sequel. All the bad stuff from the original is gone or fixed in some way, and all of the good elements are magnified and improved.

The bland open world is ditched in favor of allowing players to jump between locations by selecting them on a map. Opening up ranking battles – the game's main missions – no longer requires cash, so side jobs are now optional since money is only used for purchasing upgrades or new clothing. That said, the side jobs are worth playing this time around even without the necessity. While you're still tasked with mundane chores like collecting coconuts, filling in as a cook at a local restaurant, or plumbing in the city's sewers, this manual labor is presented in the form of charming 8-bit vignettes complete with a tiny, pixelated version of protagonist Travis Touchdown and NES-style music that would make Capcom jealous.

Despite the removal of time wasting in the open world, No More Heroes 2 is just as long as its predecessor – if not longer – thanks to the significantly increased size and number of missions. Instead of working through 10 ranking spots, Travis must now slowly wind his way up a list of 50 assassins to prove that he's the best killer in town. Without giving too much away, there aren't anywhere near 50 boss battles, but the game still feels crammed full of levels and enemies that are more detailed and visually interesting than last time around. As a bonus, two returning characters are also playable for a handful of levels, each bringing unique special abilities to the mix.

Travis also ups the otaku fever dream quotient with a number of new weapons and moves, most impressively a dual-beam katana nicknamed "Rose Nasty." Strangely, beyond the opening cutscene, Travis is treated much less like a joke in No More Heroes 2. The game is still a parody, and the writing is much funnier and more lucid than the previous game, but the humor gets sidetracked too often by noir-ish recurring flashback sequences and monologues that come dangerously close to taking themselves seriously.

The game never gets *too* heavy though; the simple-but-fun beat-em-up combat and ridiculous boss scenarios rise above any minor remaining issues with No More Heroes 2. A few of the later boss battles and levels that attempt to mix things up contain some of the frustrations that dragged the first game down, but for the most part this is yet another third-party Wii exclusive of which Nintendo faithful can be proud. Finally, Suda51 delivers a game that almost anyone can appreciate. » Phil Kollar

Visit gameinformer.com to read our post-release interview with Grasshopper Manufacture CEO Suda51
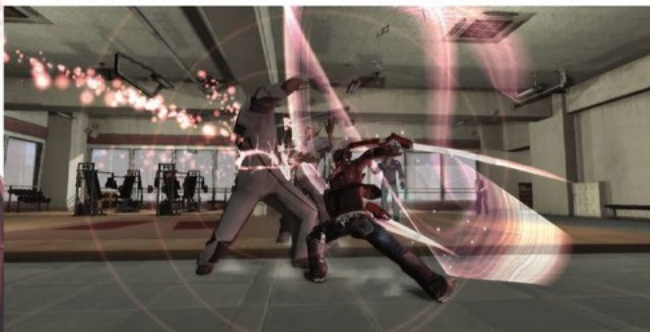
Ace Attorney Investigations: Miles Edgeworth

While the mechanics improve, Ace's storytelling loses some punch

Style 1-Player Adventure **Publisher** Capcom **Developer** Capcom **Release** February 16 **ESRB** T

Miles Edgeworth has softened up over the years, moving from stone cold Phoenix Wright rival to helpful ally. While I liked Edgeworth's jerky side, it makes sense that Capcom transformed him into a relatable protagonist to carry his first solo adventure.

The more drastic change in this spin-off of the Ace Attorney franchise is a new zoomed out third-person perspective. Character sprites are animated well and actually show people interacting instead of simply describing what happens. Having direct control over Edgeworth's movements in a crime scene feels more natural than tapping all over a room with the stylus. Investigations are contained to smaller areas this time around, which thankfully fixes the issue of forcing players to hike all over town to find that one person or piece of evidence needed to move the game forward.

The new logic system finds Edgeworth collecting clues outside of traditional physical evidence. For example, you'll take note of a contradiction such as: "Why isn't there any broken glass on the ground if this object supposedly crashed through the window?" Once a handful of clues are gathered, you can piece two together at a time. While it adds another perspective to investigations, I found the game's logic a little too easy overall. It ends up being more of a process of elimination than true deduction.

While mechanics are certainly important, many fans of the series judge an Ace Attorney by its cast and plot. Without spoiling anything, I can say that the silly tone remains intact, and murder mysteries are just as ridiculous and tough to solve as ever. Myriad cameos and references pay fanservice in spades, however unlikely the setup. The new obligatory teenage girl sidekick, Kay Faraday, provides adequate spunkiness and causes Edgeworth to make his embarrassed face quite often. New rival Shi-Long Lang loves talking about wolves, hates prosecutors, and cares a little too much about his faithful team of 99 investigators. That said, I didn't find Lang to be as compelling as previous foes like Godot or Franziska.

The overall plot didn't pull me in as much as previous installments, either. Nothing is really at stake for Edgeworth personally in the final run. Usually, there's a snowballing sense of urgency to solve the last case, but the end of Investigations just drags on. I enjoyed my time with Edgeworth, but it's the weakest entry in the series » **Bryan Vore**

7.5
DS

» **Concept**
Pull the camera out on the traditional Ace Attorney formula

» **Graphics**
Sprite versions of characters look great and add some nice dimension

» **Sound**
New tracks, like Lang's theme, blend well with the classic tunes

» **Playability**
Third-person maneuverability improves crime scene navigating

» **Entertainment**
Fans of the series will enjoy the small evolutions

» **Replay Value**
Moderately Low

Puzzle Chronicles

Puzzle Quest devs unleash another RPG/puzzle hybrid

7
DS • PSP

» **Concept**
Take a falling gem game, move it on its side, and have characters battle on a shifting battlefront

» **Graphics**
Gems are nondescript blobs and the cutscenes feature some of the worst art in memory — recent or otherwise

» **Sound**
The stirring score is appropriate for the battles, though it loops too frequently

» **Playability**
The controls are simple and respond well, but the gem dropping feels sluggish

» **Entertainment**
Setting up combos is rewarding, but the game's single-player mode doesn't offer much longevity

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

Style 1-Player Puzzle (2-Player Online) **Publisher** Konami **Developer** Infinite Interactive **Release** February 18 **ESRB** E10+

Creating a hybrid from the simple and addicting gameplay of puzzle games and the character customization from RPGs sounds bizarre on its surface, but it proved to be a surprisingly great match. After the success of 2007's Puzzle Quest: Challenge of the Warlords, everyone was happy to crib from its formula — including its own developer, Infinite Interactive.

Puzzle Chronicles does the best job so far of combining both gaming genres into a new creation. A lot of head-to-head puzzle games rely on a mechanic where players deluge their opponents' screen with trash gems in an attempt to overwhelm. Puzzle Chronicles takes a different, more interesting take, with battles that have a tug-of-war flavor.

Making combos and stringing together clusters of similarly colored gems fill up an attack meter, which pushes a center barrier toward your opponent. Large blocks unleash items that you collect on your travels, which offer defensive bonuses or deadly attacks. Different enemies have unique abilities, such as stealing gems or becoming temporarily invulnerable to attacks.

Character progression is interesting at first, but the game quickly becomes trivially easy. After sinking points into various talent trees and finding decent gear, matches can routinely end after a few seconds. I don't know how many times I patiently set up a ridiculous combo only to be surprised with a victory screen before I could unleash my full fury. The final boss is a pushover even at the highest difficulty setting. It's fun to feel like an unstoppable force, but aside from a multiplayer mode the game doesn't provide many reasons to continue playing after the credits roll. » **Jeff Cork**

Puzzle Chronicles will also be released as a downloadable game on PlayStation Network and Xbox Live Arcade. If the game is substantially different on those platforms we will revisit it in another online review. Otherwise, accept this as our final review for the game.

Shin Megami Tensei: Strange Journey

Atlus takes the hardcore RPG to a new dimension

8.75

DS

» Concept
Fight and capture demons in an old-school first-person dungeon crawl with a unique sci-fi plot

» Graphics
Beautiful demon designs make up for muddy dungeon visuals

» Sound
The excellent soundtrack is packed in with the game

» Playability
Hardcore turn-based battles are still more approachable than previous franchise entries

» Entertainment
Finding and fusing new demons is as addictive as hitting the next plot twist

» Replay Value
Moderately High

Style 1-Player Role-Playing **Publisher** Atlus **Developer** Atlus **Release** March 23 **ESRB** M

Do we control technology or does it control us? In the world of Shin Megami Tensei: Strange Journey, that question is more important than you realize. The game has numerous troubling means of highlighting the tension between technology and nature.

The protagonist explores an odd Antarctic anomaly known as the Schwarzwelt via the use of the Demonica, a special military-issued suit that allows him to survive alien atmospheres and contain and summon demons. Quests are doled out from a cold, unfeeling computer on board your crashed ship whose primary concern is completing the mission no matter the cost.

On the other hand, players also have plenty of control. Once you've talked a demon into joining your cause, you have full reign over its abilities. The demon co-op system, which rewards you with bonus attacks to inflict even more damage on enemies, also makes Strange Journey's brand of hardcore RPG combat significantly more approachable than previous Shin Megami Tensei entries. As long as you approach the battles strategically, you'll be able to dispatch enemies faster than they can kill you off and in a much easier way than the norm for this series.

Since your primary mission is to explore the Schwarzwelt, walking around and investigating each environment takes up a lot of time. Luckily, this isn't just a straightforward dungeon crawl. Even at 40 hours in, the game continues introducing new concepts with each floor of each sector, from booby-trapped tiles that make you fall asleep to conveyer belt mazes that briefly take away control over the direction in which you're moving.
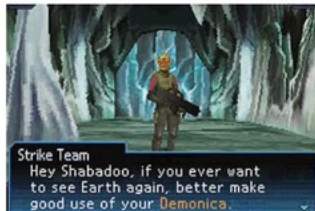
Uncovering all the Schwarzwelt's secrets will keep you glued to your DS for hours of intense RPG action. It will be worth all those hours to experience Strange Journey's masterful blend of an intricate, unique storyline with the addictive demon-hunting gameplay for which the Shin Megami Tensei series is known. As for whether or not humans control technology or vice versa,

I'll leave it to you to discover the game's well-developed insights. All I can say is that if Atlus is in charge of the software, then technology has already won. **» Phil Kollar**

Lunar: Silver Star Harmony

A new art style spices up traditional RPG gameplay

Style 1-Player Role-Playing **Publisher** XSEED Games **Developer** GungHo/GameArts **Release** February 23 **ESRB** T

8

PSP

» Concept
Give Lunar fans another remake of the Sega CD classic

» Graphics
The colorful new visual style is the star of the remake

» Sound
Voice actors ham it up, but the music stays appropriate throughout

» Playability
If you played a JRPG in the early-to-mid '90s, you'll feel right at home

» Entertainment
Longtime fans will appreciate the new visuals, but newer fans may be put off by the dated gameplay

» Replay Value
Moderately Low

With the number of times that 1992's Lunar: The Silver Star has been tweaked and remade, you'd think George Lucas was at the helm. The story of Alex and his man-crush on Dragonmaster Dyne has been told on no fewer than five consoles over the last 18 years, and it's received a full graphical overhaul with Silver Star Harmony.

Lunar's original Sega CD outing featured a visual style that could have been replicated on an SNES, so the new crisp and colorful visuals are a welcome change. Everything from the menus to the environments is clean and visually appealing this time around, and battles feature some flashy effects that keep the action from getting too monotonous.

While it may look pretty on the high-res PSP screen, the game's ultra-traditional JRPG gameplay shows its age. Moving the story along is a strictly linear process, requiring you to perform specific (and oftentimes ambiguous) objectives in an effort to get the plot rolling. Conversely, the game's tactical organization is still a great platform for a combat system, allowing you to issue a customized order to your entire party with the press of a button. Lunar

Legend's Arts Gauge system returns, giving your characters access to huge screen-clearing attacks and spells that heal the entire party. Like many classic JRPGs, you'll be doing plenty of XP grinding, but the omission of random encounters is a blessing.

While longtime Lunar fans may love the new aesthetic, its dated gameplay could turn off fans of more recent RPGs. Silver Star Harmony follows an old blueprint of the genre, but maintains a level of charm and humor that still works in 2010. **» Dan Ryckert**

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the score

7.75 | Matt Hazard: Blood Bath and Beyond
Platform PS3 • 360   **Release** January 6   **ESRB** M

Playing solo feels unbalanced, unfair, and downright not fun. Have a buddy suit up as Dexter, however, and you have a fine-tuned level of rewarding challenge.—Tim Turi

URL: gameinformer.com/mag

6.5 | Divinity II: Ego Draconis
Platform 360   **Release** January 5   **ESRB** M

Divinity II's many technical flaws are exacerbated in the transition to the console. Frequent framerate stutters are the least of the 360 build's problems…. Divinity II is a noticeably inferior experience on the Xbox 360.—Adam Biessener

URL: gameinformer.com/mag

7 | Star Ocean: The Last Hope – International
Platform PS3   **Release** February 9   **ESRB** T

Even PS3 gamers who would be playing it for the first time should be wary about a purchase – especially with the release of Final Fantasy XIII nearly upon us.—Joe Juba

URL: gameinformer.com/mag

5 | Data East Arcade Classics
Platform Wii   **Release** February 9   **ESRB** T

This arcade collection includes 12 Data East titles, and unfortunately only half are mildly entertaining. Unless you're a hardcore fan of BurgerTime, Peter Pepper's Ice Cream Factory or Bad Dudes, you're better off saving your quarters.—Annette Gonzalez

URL: gameinformer.com/mag

With the revelation of Rockstar's L.A. Noire, now is the perfect time to cast a light upon an often overlooked and influential film genre that has been skulking in gaming history's shadows: film noir. These films are traditionally known for their black and white, heavily shadowed cinematic style with rough private eyes in trench coats solving crimes and seducing femme fatales. Beyond the trappings of these well-worn genre stereotypes, noir as a style is filled with antiheroes, moral grays, and flashback storytelling couched in somber overtones. L.A. Noire's hard-boiled influence is obvious, but the genre's gritty themes and archetypes have been present in the world of gaming for a long time.

HERE'S LOOKING AT YOU...

a Retrospective of

Film Noir in Gaming's Past

by Tim Turi

DÉJÀ VU (1985, Multi)

Releasing for everything from the Apple II to the NES, this point-and-click adventure from Mindscape thrusts players into a 1941 Chicago ripped straight from the pages of classic noir novels and films. When private eye Theodore "Ace" Harding wakes up in a bathroom stall with a savage headache and a bad case of amnesia, gamers are tasked with combing crime scenes for clues and collecting anything not nailed down while the authorities breathe down Ace's neck for a frame job. Déjà Vu spices up the usually utilitarian environment descriptions found in many early adventure games by incorporating the overwritten tone of classic detective stories.

SHADOWRUN (1993, SNES)

Many noir-influenced games start with a character suffering from amnesia, but few of them have the main character regain consciousness to in a morgue. Such is the plight of Jake Armitage, a lone shadowrunner mercenary in the year 2050 attempting to unravel the mystery surrounding his attempted assassination. Shadowun's moody music and dark streets set the somber tone for this RPG's prying conversations and self-reflective narrative.

SNATCHER (1994, Sega CD)

Hideo Kojima's knack for creating cinematic video games is undisputable, but before Metal Gear Solid's theatrical cutscenes, the legendary designer delivered Snatcher. Set in the year 2047, the game has a genre mashing premise – imagine Phillip Marlowe replacing Harrison Ford's Rick Deckard in *Blade Runner* and hunting down Terminator-esque androids called Snatchers. As a Junker, protagonist Gillian is a special detective who investigates crime scenes, takes on convoluted cases, seduces the lovely ladies of the future, and, of course, suffers from amnesia. Throw in Gillian's trademark brown trench coat and a moody soundtrack and it becomes clear that Snatcher was the stuff of which dreams were made.

UNDER A KILLING MOON (1994, Multi)

Tex Murphy's third adventure game follows the down-on-his luck, clumsy private investigator as he unwittingly gets tangled in a case revolving around a mysterious cult. Set in a mutant-infested, radioactive 2042 New San Francisco, Under a Killing Moon features multiple film noir archetypes and a comedic flair.

GRIM FANDANGO (1998, PC)

Tim Schafer's final LucasArts adventure game eschews the colorless grays of noir while maintaining the genre's moral ambiguity. Manuel "Manny" Calavera is a travel agent of the Underworld tasked with selling trip packages to the wealthy deceased in an effort to pay off a debt. Grim Fandango's art style combines the Art Deco designs of the 1930s with Mexican holiday El Dia De Los Muertos, resulting in a colorful cast of chain-smoking skeletons wearing fedoras. If that isn't enough, the game's entire second act is an unflinching homage to *Casablanca*, a film classic with noir tendencies.

MAX PAYNE & MAX PAYNE 2
(2001 & 2003, Multi)

L.A. Noire is not Rockstar's first foray into publishing pulp fiction-influenced video games. That honor goes to bullet-dodging detective Max Payne. Max has had a hard lot in life. His family was murdered by junkies, he was framed for murder, and his assassin-turned-love interest died in his arms (depending on what ending you got). The effects of these grave events are perfectly conveyed by the cold and cynical protagonist's melodramatic internal monologues. Richly illustrated graphic novel frames deliver the game's dark narrative with all the trappings of the detective comics the game emulates so well. Part John Woo film, part Frank Miller's *Sin City*, the Max Payne series has thus far been film noir's defining presence in video games.

"...the Max Payne series has thus far been film noir's defining presence in video games."

a. Ash
After slaughtering his own family, the ashes of his deceased loved ones were permanently fused to Kratos' skin – a constant reminder of his terrible mistake. Their pallid hue is the source of Kratos' other moniker, the Ghost of Sparta.

b. Golden Fleece
Retrieved in the Bog of the Forgotten during the events of God of War II, this legendary piece of armor is nearly impenetrable, granting Kratos the ability to reflect projectiles and parry attacks.

c. Athena's Blades
In the original God of War, Kratos lost his Blades of Chaos during the final battle with Ares. The goddess Athena granted him these practically identical weapons when Kratos took his throne on Olympus as the new god of war.

d. Chains
Thick chains permanently attached to his forearms allow Kratos to swing his blades at distant enemies, making him a threat at any range. The chains also grant him added mobility, since he uses them to swing across gaps.

e. Scar
This long, jagged scar was created when Zeus impaled Kratos with the Blade of Olympus at the beginning of God of War II. The wound reminds Kratos of the treachery of Zeus – who also happens to be his father.

f. Sandals
These epic pieces of footwear protect Kratos' mighty arches from the perils of small, sharp rocks and brambles.

KRATOS

ANATOMY OF A CHARACTER

The life of Kratos is filled with tragedy and triumph, and he has the scars and spoils to prove it. As players take control of the Ghost of Sparta in God of War III, they will notice that he bears the marks of his past, including the legendary artifacts and wounds that he has collected along the way.

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