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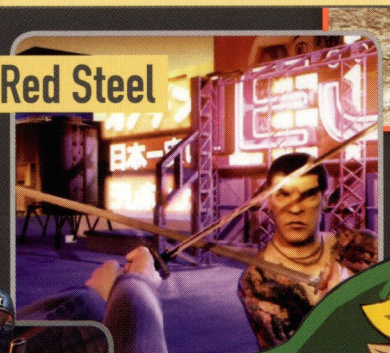

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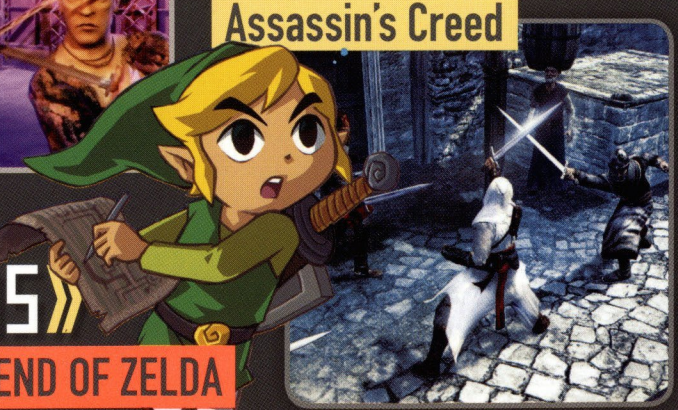

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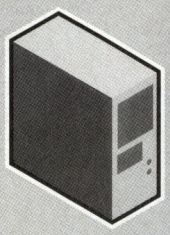

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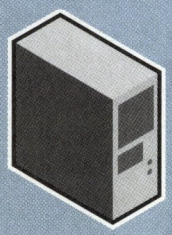

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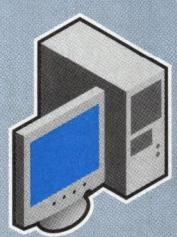

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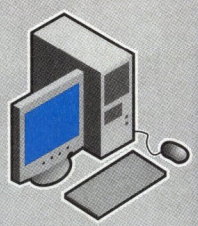

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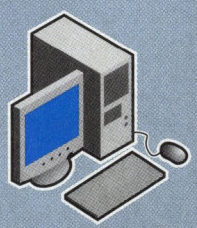

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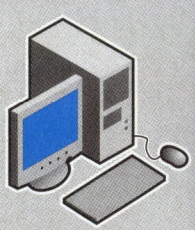

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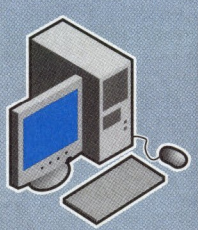

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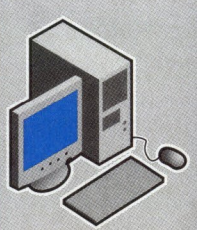

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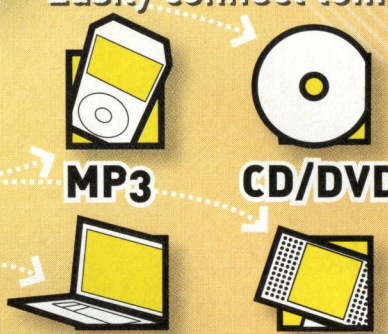

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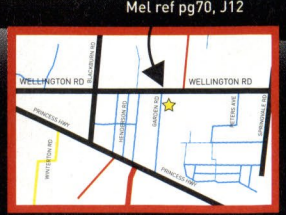

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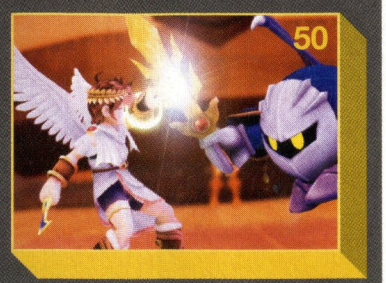

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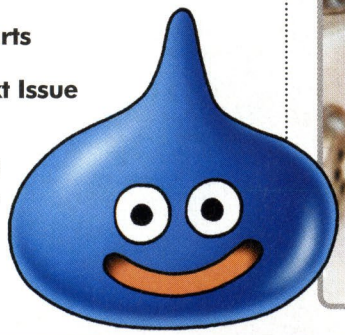

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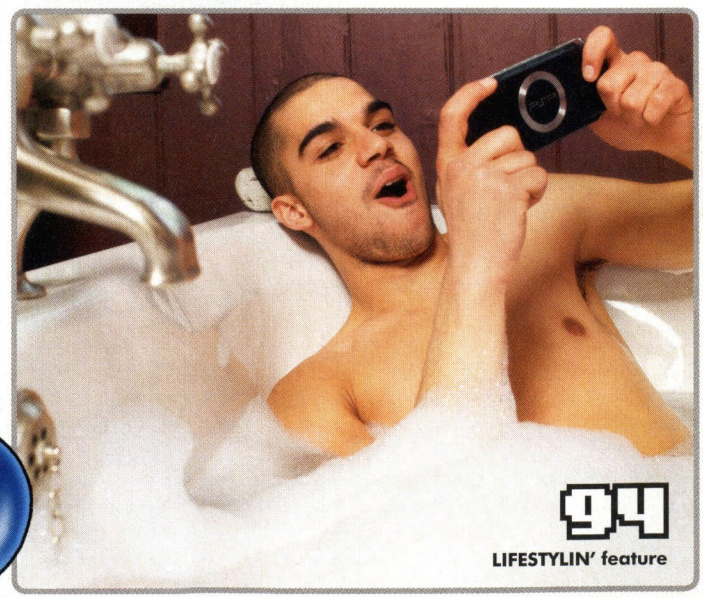

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EDITORIAL

>> Dealing with Japanese game companies is never easy; in fact it's mostly a nightmare. Despite the often wonderful game content that comes out of Japan, the vast majority of development houses and publishers there still adhere to a rigid corporate culture, where bureaucracy is the order of the day, and it's often impossible to establish a productive dialogue. Not that we're able to talk directly to Japan of course – there are a couple more layers to slow things down. For us to make a request of a Japanese game company, there's due process to respect. This means getting in touch with the local publisher, who then – more often than not – forwards our request on to the European or American publisher, who can then finally go to Japan. It can often feel quite impenetrable, and when you factor in the language barrier and the fact that Australia really isn't seen as a priority, you've got quite a mountain to climb.

There are signs that things may be changing – the trip to Sega Japan a couple of months ago was a huge deal for Sega and will hopefully serve as a great example that it is possible for Western journalists and Japanese game developers to directly interact, with both sides getting something out of it. But at the moment that's certainly the exception, and this issue is proof that we're still held at arm's length, mired in the system. I'll let Alexander Gambotto-Burke tell the story for himself, but suffice to say, Konami is now officially off the Hyper Christmas card list. Even with the dramas getting our MGS4 coverage happening, issue 154 is still one of the best we've ever done. The videogame industry is alive and well and we've got 100 previews of the hottest games on the way to prove it. Enjoy.

Cam Shea >> Editor

HYPER CREW Monthly Top 5 Games

Cam Shea - Editor
1. LocoRoco – PSP
   "Awesomely awesome."
2. Half-Life 2: Episode One - PC
3. Micro Machines v4 – PS2
4. Quake III Arena - Mac
5. Saint's Row – Xbox 360

Daniel Wilks - Deputy Editor
1. Titan Quest – PC
   "Doin' it Greek never felt this good."
2. LocoRoco - PSP
3. Micro Machines v4 – PS2
4. Oblivion - Xbox 360
5. Chasing up the people who owe me money.

Malcolm Campbell - Art
1. LocoRoco - PSP
   "Hide and seek with happy beanbags."
2. Sensible Soccer - PS2
3. Micro Machines v4 - PS2
4. Quake III Arena - Mac
5. Urban Chaos - PS2

Daniel Staines - Writer
1. New Super Mario Bros. – DS
   "Yay for me: Luigi!"
2. Metal Gear Ac!d 2 - PSP
3. Micro Machines v4 - PS2
4. Quake III Arena - PC
5. Oblivion - Xbox 360

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AUGUST 2006

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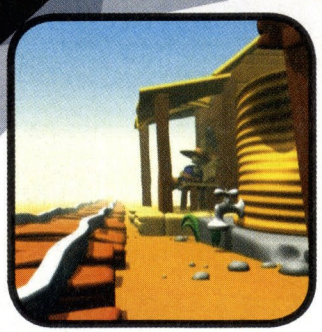

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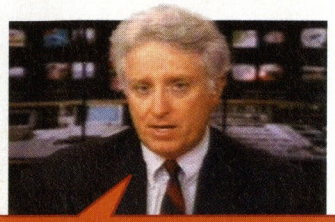


IN THE NEWS: "Nobody shoots anybody in the face unless you're a hit man or a video gamer" - *Jack Thompson*

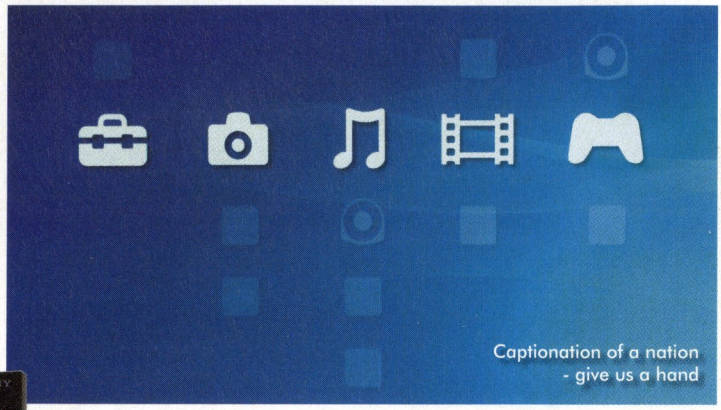
HANDS ON

PS3 INTERFACE GETS CROSS

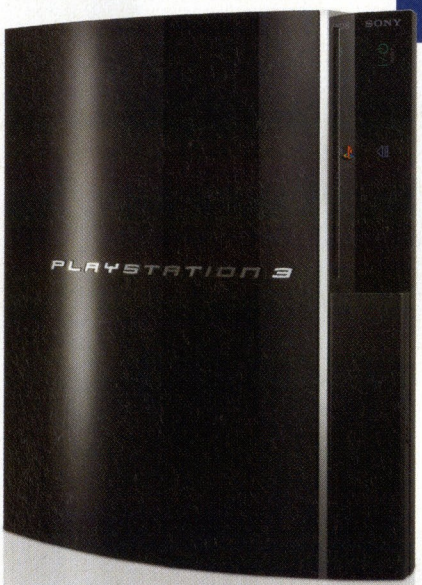
Navigating Sony's new baby

Surprising to no one who owns a PSP, the PlayStation 3 interface has been revealed to be an extended version of the 'Cross Media Bar' system. Not only used in the PSP, this is becoming a Sony standard, appearing in some Sony televisions and their PSX digital video recorder.

For those out of the loop, the Cross Media Bar features a simple bar of horizontal section options, each with a vertical list of menu items. Sections visible when we got a sneak peek included Home (where most of your settings are controlled), Photo, Music, Video, Games, Network, Friends and Users. These last two are new, with Friends the home of the PS3 online community features and Users set to offer a profile switching system.



Captionation of a nation - give us a hand



Most of the menus were placeholders, with detailed options unavailable for us to see. But there is an obvious focus on expanded tools within the media playing areas, given the big talk about this all being 'so much more than a console'.

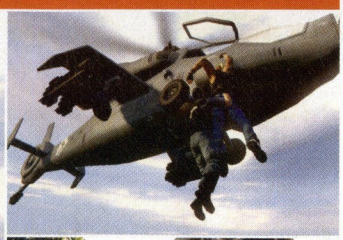
Sadly, this demo was still a long way short of showing us the meat of what we can expect to see available within the main interface area of the PS3. Will we get easy CD ripping to the hard drive? What kinds of image slide shows can we expect? How will controls operate during playback of Blu-Ray and DVD movies? On that last, if we refer to the PSP experience we may get a good idea of what to expect — an overlay of control option icons — though hopefully updated to suit the big screen.

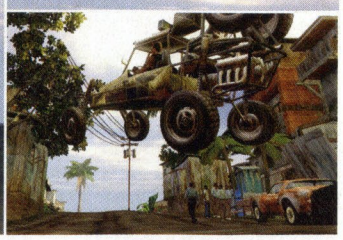
This is a fast and simple system, and it looks pretty slick too — the black and silver wave style default looked great, and if PSP is a lead, there will be style customisation galore.

First Look!

DUE: In the future we'd wager

MERCENARIES 2: WORLD IN FLAMES PS3 • **Developer:** Pandemic • **The Hype:** "You have your own code: fulfill the terms of the contract, no matter what."





PAAANCH

DREAMS DO COME TRUE

I think I can beat Uwe Boll

It's a dream that many of us have had. Stepping into a ring and smacking seven shades of shit out of hack director Uwe Boll may sound like a pipe dream but for five lucky people their dreams will become a reality. Uwe Boll, apparently fed up with bad press which he claims is written before any of the critics see his films, is challenging his five greatest critics from print press and especially the internet to strap on some boxing gloves and go at him for ten rounds in the ring. Footage of the fights (undoubtedly edited to make Uwe look better and because as he testified in the commentary of House of the Dead, the more edits in a scene the better it is) will then be used in his next opus, Postal. Hyper's own Daniel Wilks, an outspoken Boll hater responsible for an article called "Uwe Boll is the Devil" was planning on nominating himself as a potential punching bag but Boll, ever the killjoy has put a nix on that, limiting the weight of contestants to a maximum of 86kg. Does anyone else find that hilarious? He's targeting internet nerds and people who watch movies for a living as the enemy and challenging them to a fight but has weight as a limiting factor. Jebus wept.

OVERFLOW

Nintendo boss Satoru Iwata has revealed that the Wii's Virtual Console download system will accommodate more than just classic old games. Nintendo are actively encouraging new games to be made for the service, seeing it as a vehicle for simple, but fun games that will cost a fraction of full retail titles. Sounds like a great fit to us.

Sony's promise of full PS2 backward compatibility for PS3 may not be through software emulation as thought. At least not initially. Rumour has it that – like the PS2's support for PSone before it – the PS3 will have an integrated PS2 chipset to provide the compatibility. In future revisions of the console this will be replaced by software emulation.

By the time you read this, the premium content package – Chapter 2 - for Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter on Xbox 360 should have hit Xbox Live. It's a beast too, with four new co-op missions, eight revisited multiplayer maps (they're relit for different times of day), two new game types (Team Blind Siege and Team Battle), five new weapons and more.

Take-Two have axed Snow, the game where you're "an out of work actor who has given up his dreams of stardom to acquire wealth through drug smuggling." Gee, wonder why they canned it?

Winners! HYPER 152

ADVENT CHILDREN AND UNDERWORLD EVOLUTION

- Chris Tang, Mascot, NSW
- Brent Lowe, Smithfield, QLD
- Gene Megaritz, Melbourne, VIC
- Ruki Ponnudurai, Nollamara, WA
- Jenny Wong, Brentwood, WA
- T Jameson, Hornsby, NSW
- Shane Lees, Somerset, TAS
- John Brunckhorst, Woolloongabba, QLD
- Norman Chan, Chatswood, NSW
- Robert Scurrah, Ellenbrook, WA

RED DWARF

FIRST PRIZE WINNER

- Kirby Scarfe, Fortitude Valley, QLD

RUNNERS UP

- Michael Deveney, Springwood, NSW
- Justin Low, Murdoch, WA
- Michael McFarlane, Kangaroo Flat, VIC
- Tim Paladin, Sunnybank, QLD
- Jadine Kann, Red Hill, QLD

FAILURE

NINTY SUCCESS

Lite release triggers heavy sales

In a move that's surprised nobody aside from maybe Phil Harrison who claimed that the DS Lite would tank because it was simply a gimmicky new version of older tech, the DS Lite has been selling like hotcakes in the US. In the first two days of release the handheld sold a staggering 136,500 units. Not only that, the release of the updated DS has solidly boosted the sales of other DS games, with sales of Brain Age tripling since the release of the Lite and New Super Mario Bros. leaping to the top of the sales charts in May even though it was only on sale for 13 days. The rate of sales of New Super Mario Bros. roughly correlates to one unit being sold every four seconds since release. Man, we wish we lived in happy Phil Harrison land; it would be awesome if Hyper flopped that badly. (Yes, it's a slow news month).

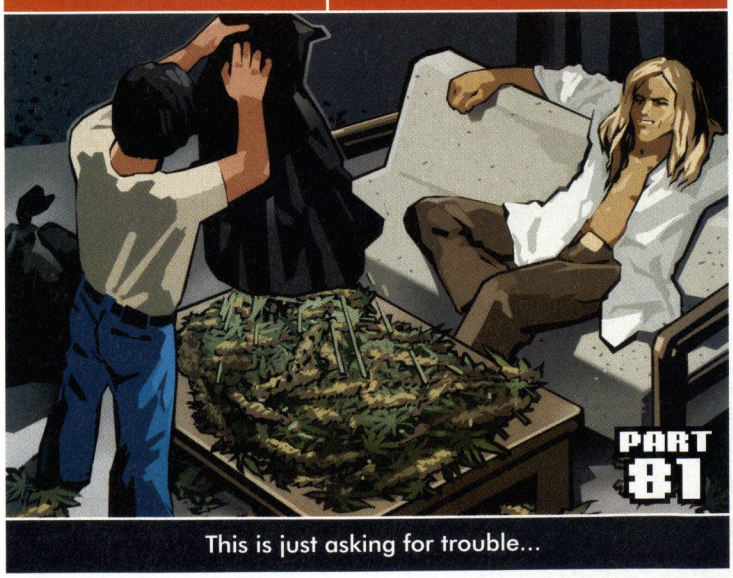
Coming Soon!

DUE: Sep/Oct

BATEN KAITOS: ORIGINS **GameCube** **Developer:** Monolith Software
The Hype: "A prequel, players will learn about the origins of the world itself and why the Lost Ocean is returning."

CAPTION THIS!

Come on, make us laugh. Just send your funny screen captions to us at captionthis@next.com.au with **Caption This Part 81** in the subject line.



This is just asking for trouble...

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The DS Lite is here and it's very special indeed. Forget carrying a clunky grey box around with you – the DS Lite is smaller, lighter and funkier in design, and comes in a gorgeous Polar White finish. Of course, we all know it's the gaming that counts and the DS Lite doesn't disappoint on that front either. The redesigned buttons and D-pad are more comfortable to use, sporting a softer touch, and the screens are incredible - so much brighter than the old DS, suddenly every game looks that much sharper and more colourful. Seriously, you won't want to go back after giving the Lite a go.

You know what we're getting at here - the DS Lite rocks. You want one and we can give you one. Thanks to our friends at Nintendo Australia we have eight of these babies to give away to eight lucky subscribers. Each winner will also receive a copy of Big Brain Academy. You'd be crazy not to subscribe!

Nintendo

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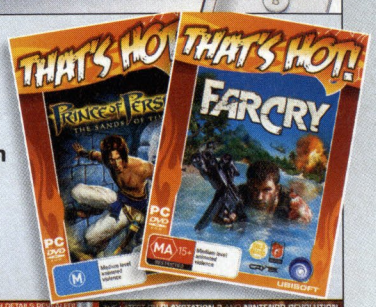

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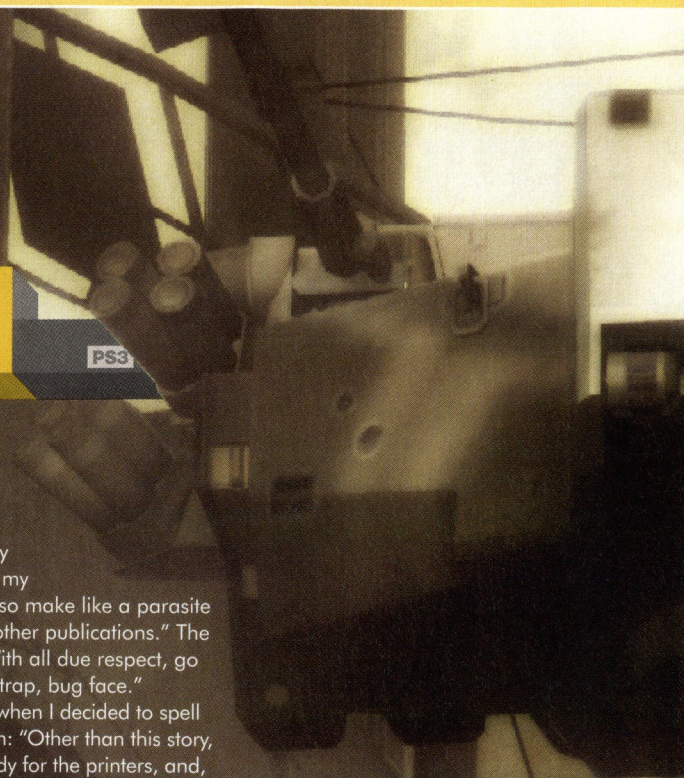
HYPER» HY0154

THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND HIDEO KOJIMA.

by ALEXANDER GAMBOTTO-BURKE

Metal Gear Solid 4

Action stealth • by Kojima Productions • out TBA



This is an account of my journey into the bowels of hell. Not in the Christian sense, mind you; the hell in question is less fire, brimstone, pointy tails, and Ozzy Osbourne, and more endless calls to Japan, email tennis, openly hostile international managers, and the scariest phone bill of my life. So why, you must be wondering, would I venture from the warmth and comfort of my book-lined abode into such an inferno? Simple. It's because I love you like the son I hope to have some day, and couldn't live with myself if I didn't bring you the latest juice on one of the sexiest games on the PS3, Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots.

WE AIM TO PLEASE

Hyper, you see, isn't in the business of disappointment. Cam promised you an exclusive interview with the legendary Hideo Kojima, and that's exactly what you're going to get. It just isn't very long. Why? Well, according to Kojima PR dude Ryan Payton – or, as I've come to know him, "Ryan-Payton-is-not-at-his-desk" - the creator of Metal Gear refuses to answer more than ten of my 27 questions. In nearly a month. Which is curious, given the many online interviews in which Kojima waxes lyrical. Still, beggars can't be choosers, right? And in Konami's world, us Australians are the beggars.

One of the ten questions answered - and the biggest raised by fans and press alike - involves rumours about whether MGS4 is, in fact, the last game in which Kojima wears his "director" tiara. "I believe this will be the last time I do scenario, game design, and direction on a Metal Gear Solid game," he reveals. "I'm creating MGS4 with the idea that this will finally complete the total Metal Gear saga. However, I know that there are many MGS fans around the world, so the series will continue. I will then become producer and my younger staff members will take a larger role, and I will support this new team."

If that's getting your tear ducts working, don't worry: Kojima said almost exactly the same thing after MGS3. Sure, there's always a chance he'll be hanging up his designer booties for good, but he's certainly given the impression that he just can't resist getting back to the saga of Snake 'n' pals. Although, maybe Snake is exactly why he won't be directing a potential MGS5 – from the looks of MGS4's trailer, everyone's favourite bearded sneaker looks like he's ready to go on a long, relaxing cruise with the Ferryman. Yep, advanced cell degeneration and suicidal ideation – Snake's shown with a gun in his mouth at the end of the trailer – aren't great for a man's life expectancy, and although Kojima's confirmed Snake won't be clocking off in MGS4, old age might be an easy way to phase him out of playability. And if you're a MGS stalwart, the near-absence of a playable Solid Snake in MGS2 and MGS3 should be a giveaway sign that Kojima's growing a little tired of the character.

Still, he understands why players have a thing for ol' Snakey. "I think Snake is popular not just because he's a strong character," he muses, "but because he has serious problems and a certain darkness to him. He's got strong and weak points and I think that is fun for the user to explore." Either way, there's little doubt MGS fans love the guy to bits, and it's no coincidence that MGS3 – which featured a Snake-lookalike, "Naked Snake," soon to become über-villain Big Boss – was much better received than MGS2, which had you in the shoes of girly-man Raiden. And now that the one true Solid Snake is returning in MGS4? Well, catch me in a public toilet and call me George Michael – looks like this game's gonna kick big, donut-fuelled ass.

> "SNAKE IS POPULAR... BECAUSE HE HAS SERIOUS PROBLEMS AND A CERTAIN DARKNESS TO HIM"

At least I think so. Y'see, when I suggested Ryan-Payton-is-not-at-his-desk contribute some of his own thoughts for the piece – what with him being a company representative and all – he replied: "The world of MGS4 is vast and we've already revealed a lot of the new game through trailers, podcasts, etc. I'm sure you can write a great 3,000 word piece! Good luck! It's 1AM here in LA now. I'm off to bed." Translation: "I'm too lazy to publicise my employers, so make like a parasite and quote other publications." The subtext? "With all due respect, go sniff a jockstrap, bug face."

Which is when I decided to spell it out for him: "Other than this story, Hyper's ready for the printers, and, after repeated reassurances that you would be supplying answers to all the questions, you've given us close to nothing. So either share that brilliant mind of yours with Australia, or get Kojima on the phone and finish the interview yourself." Words to that effect, at any rate. His response? "Alex, if you want to continue working directly with Kojima Productions, may I suggest that you do not give me advice on how to do my job?"

NO PLACE TO HIDE – EXCEPT BEHIND A SECRETARY

So: despite Ryan-Payton-is-not-at-his-desk's apparent mission to make me despise both Kojima and his latest project – this apparent mission aided, it seems, by the great man himself - I still can't help but be excited. Consider the "No place to hide" theme that's been bandied around on websites, in interviews, and trailers. MGS was a pioneer in the stealth-action genre and MGS4, through use of the PS3's sexy tech, looks to take this further than it's ever gone before. Now, thanks to real-time physics (we presume), that wall players hide behind may well be rendered rubble by a wandering Cow-Robot – you'll need to watch the trailer to understand. Of course, Kojima maintains the game won't stray too far from its stealthy roots.

"This Metal Gear Solid will continue being a 'stealth action' game," he says. "This time around, Snake will need to hide behind things that can be removed from the environment, so you'll need to stay on your toes. A key component to this new gameplay mechanic is Octocam, which allows Snake to blend in with his surroundings. Of course, there will be plenty of action elements as well. Don't be surprised if the 'safe spot' you found on the battlefield all of a sudden crumbles right before your eyes. MGS4 is fundamentally an MGS game. When you play MGS4, you will automatically feel that it belongs in the series. However, because the infiltration location is the battlefield, we're approaching many gameplay aspects in a totally unique way."

The "unique-ness" of MGS4's gameplay goes beyond destructible terrain. As almost every gamer is now aware, Sony has opted for motion-sensing technology in the PS3's controller instead of the traditional "rumble" feature. And when fanbois stop crapping on about how they're ripping off Nintendo, we might begin to see this technology being put to good use. So will MGS4 be making use of the PS3 controller's motion-sensing technology, Hideo? "Yes, we will make use of the PS3 controller's motion-sensing technology." Really? Thanks for that. We are now enlightened.

Thankfully, Kojima's a little less stitch-lipped about working for the PS3 in general. Which is fortunate, as not only does it give me confidence that he's not just copy-pasting my questions into his responses, but also helps shed light on Sony's controversial console. "While we don't have the final, fixed version of the

PS3 yet, it's a high-quality machine with high-def graphics and great sound that we're still investigating," he explains. "That, in itself, is an enormous undertaking. We are drawing closer to the age where in-game graphics are approaching those of pre-rendered CG movies – I think it's the natural step. But with developing on PS3, I think it's more about the production values than overcoming technical hurdles."

One of the more interesting parts of MGS4's production values involves the employment of psychiatrists by Kojima Productions to clarify the "mental battle" between Snake and his enemies. I couldn't get Kojima to elaborate, as that went over the Ten Question Limit. So, you know: tough cheese, bucky boy.

DAMN YOU NEIGHBOURS!

Ryan-Payton-is-not-at-his-desk's first reply to my frantic email: "Mr. Kojima is looking over the questions right now. I expect him to get them done by Monday or Tuesday." Four days later, he replied to another: "My secterary [sic] told me that you called. Sorry I missed it. However, moving forward, can you please contact me exclusively through email? I am rarely in my seat and frequently out of the country." A day later: "Mr. Kojima just wrote me and said that he's working on the answers, but currently he is away on business and probably doesn't have much access to his email ... I think he might finish it late tonight." Five days later: "I'll make one more push today to make sure it comes in on time. Usually he doesn't take this long. My apologies." Two days after that: "I got the answers from Mr. Kojima just now. I'll be translating them and sending to you within the next few hours." Six hours after that: "Mr. Kojima answered ten of your questions."

So why does Hideo hate Australia? Was it Neighbours? Holly Valance? Shane Warne? I really don't know. All I know is that we've always loved his MGS games, and he seems to expect Hyper to froth all over his latest when he can't even be bothered to answer a few questions properly. Once again, though, I have to concede while he's a dead interviewee, he does do great game. And the theme of "Senses" in MGS4 does sound pretty darn swish.

"The theme for the Metal Gear Series has been 'What to pass on to the next generation'," Kojima says. "What must we tell our children? In MGS1 that thing was GENE, in MGS2 it was MEME, and MGS3 was SCENE. For MGS4, it's not just about genes but about a person's heart, their will, their emotions – it's the SENSE." Which makes about as much sense as a David Lynch flick, so I'll clarify: thanks to the PS3's power, MGS4 will be relying much less on abstract visual cues than other games in the series, which means no exclamation marks. Additionally, Kojima will be focusing on the invisible in MGS4, so it looks as if sound is going to have an important role to play in the game.

Added sophistication? Well, you'll be seeing ridiculously customisable weapons, for one – silencers and other enhancements will all make an appearance, and each gun should yield many different possibilities. Interestingly, even if you're packing big guns, it's been revealed that baddies in MGS4 won't necessarily be hostile to you straight away. Your actions will come to shape how opposing forces come to see you. This should, hopefully, allow for highly dynamic gameplay and re-playability.

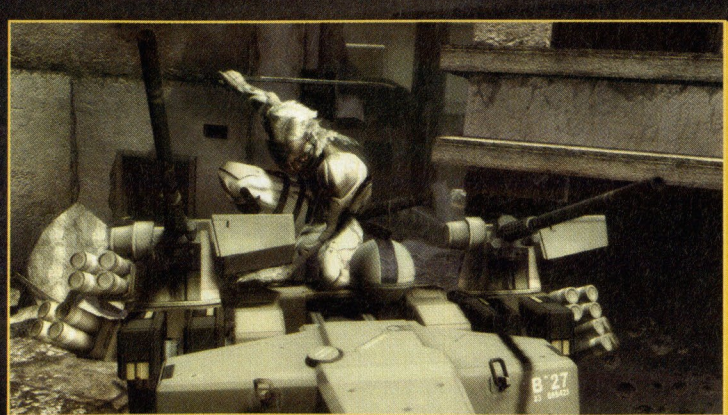
Story-wise, MGS4's unlike any other game in the series. Why? You're being dropped right in the middle of a battlefield! Apparently, Liquid Snake, Solid's nemesis, has taken control of Outer Heaven (the terrorist group formed by Big Boss), and is manipulating private military groups to assemble an army to rival that of the US. So: hired soldiers fighting each other in a war of commercialism. No guesses where this game's set, folks – that's right, you're off to the Middle East. Art or coincidence? Kojima has no compunction linking his new story to world politics. "Yes, I think current events have affected the MGS series," he concedes. "I'm drawing inspiration from a number of real-life phenomena which have helped me create a world that I envision in five to ten years time. I think it's already becoming [like the world you see in MGS4]. Terms like the 'economics of war' will become more and more common."

Certainly, Kojima's vision of the future is bleaker than ever. In MGS4's latest trailer, a tired, gravelly Snake mourns the state of war and senseless fighting. The overall mood of the trailers and MGS4's promotional material suggest a much darker storyline than those seen in past MGS titles; Kojima has said this reflects his desire to make a game for older audiences. At the grand old age of 42, the Metal Gear creator has decided it's time to focus on more mature and sophisticated games... that just happen to feature Cyborg Ninjas and mooing, bipedal tanks. Juvenile ephemera notwithstanding, Kojima's always brought his cinematic flair to the largely silly and derivative world of videogaming, so it'll be interesting to see what he can do now that he's not trying to rake in the whippersnappers.

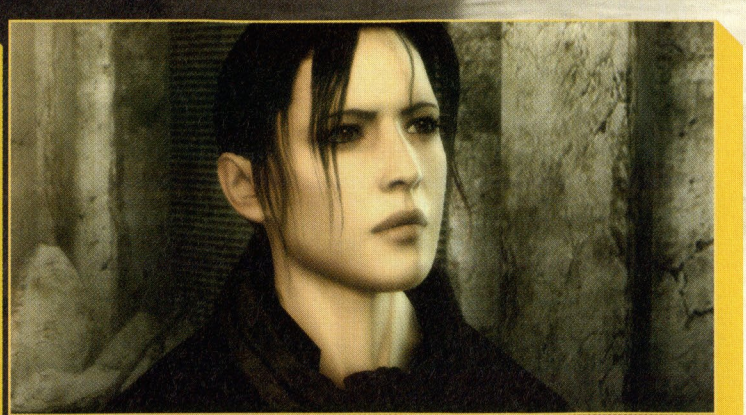
In terms of cinematic gameplay, Kojima's making the smart move of using the free-spinning camera system tested out in MGS3: Subsistence, rather than the traditional MGS camera. He's also said that he wants to use graphics to evoke feeling. How he'll pull that off, I don't know, since by answering that question, he would have surpassed the Ten Question Limit, and quite possibly exploded. Which would be a bad thing, as Ryan-Payton-is-not-at-his-desk would then assume the directorial mantle, thereby creating unnecessary delays in production and eventually releasing the game at less than half its proposed length with most of the cool features omitted. And then he'd tell you to go sniff a jockstrap.

"Hogaaaaaaaaaan!"

"THE THEME FOR THE METAL GEAR SERIES HAS BEEN 'WHAT TO PASS ON TO THE NEXT GENERATION' "



Tanks for the answers Hideo



There's always time for hair and makeup in a warzone

Ryan, patch me through to Hideo.
Ryan? Ryan! Ryaaaaaaan!

Luckily, Kojima didn't overstep his boundaries, so he'll be alive to integrate yet another exciting feature in MGS4 – the next version of Metal Gear Online. If you hoovered the online content in MGS3: Subsistence like the hungry piglet you are, you should be soiling your pants right about now over this news. Whilst not much has been said, the idea of putting MGS4's slick gameplay into multiplayer sounds hella awesome, and, hey - if you're so inclined, you can play as Raiden! (You may find yourself compared to Julian Clary, but at least you'll have Hideo's blessing: he's said in interviews – ones longer than ours, that is – that he likes Raiden as a character and hopes to win players over with his depiction in MGS4.)

SNAKEYPANTS

Overall, MGS4 is looking astounding. If Kojima pulls off everything he's hinting at, the PS3 may well have a classic in its very early days. Weapon customisation is always fun, and the idea that the game will react to your actions is also satisfying when we're adrift in a sea of stagnant action titles. Additionally, the dynamic battlefield – where your cover can be easily destroyed so that the stealth gameplay becomes systemic – could be revolutionary, if used consistently.

And importantly, we get to be Dr. SnakeyPants again!

In some ways, I'm actually grateful Ryan-Payton-is-not-at-his-desk was by my side throughout this infernal endeavour, if only because he always managed to address me by name in his emails. This was good of him, since after I had to spell it out to the Konami switchboard every time I called, it had begun to lose all meaning (I started simply referring to myself as "Mmmmm"). Hideo's responses, too, were inspiring... in a Zen sort of way. But seriously, firetruck you guys for dicking around with Hyper's deadlines, and forcing me to put way more stress into this piece than any preview warrants, especially when I have a wife and child to support. Oh, and Ryan? See you in hell. <<

"JUMP! JUMP! JUMP! JUMP!"

Assassin's Creed

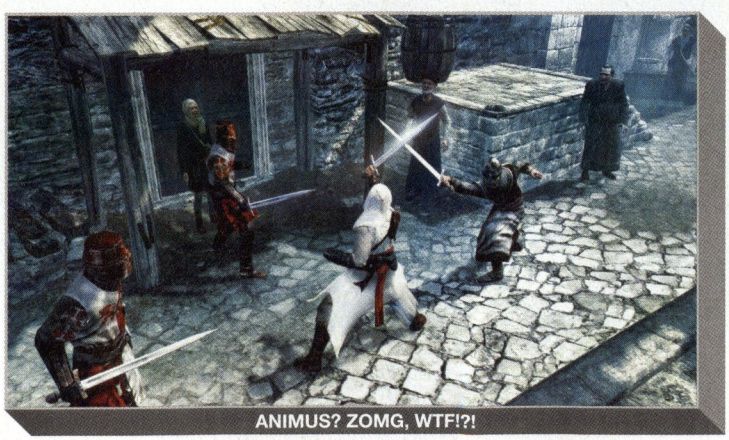
PS3

Action • by Ubisoft Montreal • out not soon enough

Every now and then you have the privilege to see a game that instantly grabs your attention, sending those little shivers up your spine in the unconscious realisation that what you just saw is destined to be something pretty special. The instant I saw a snippet of the trailer for Assassin's Creed I couldn't wait for my behind closed door session with the game. The reason for this sense of anticipation was simple – I love Prince of Persia and the sense of freedom of movement (although it is by necessity constrained by level design), and I love my history, so the idea of a game where you play a fleet-footed assassin during the Third Crusade using your abilities to knock off all of the people responsible for keeping the war going just sounded too good to be true.

HOLY HAND GRENADES

Set in 1191AD, players will take the role of Altair (a name that means "The Flying Eagle" in Arabic), a member of the secretive and terrifying Assassins, a group hell bent on stopping the Third Crusade from tearing the Holy Land apart by "suppressing both sides of the conflict" – killing anyone who has a hand in controlling the war. The name Altair is very fitting for the anti-hero; he moves in a way that is at once beautiful and exhilarating, based for the most part on Le Parkour, the French sport of free running. The demo began with Altair jumping on a horse and riding into the city; the code was obviously totally un-optimised as there was a fait bit of slowdown but even in its rough state Assassin's Creed looks pants tentingly gorgeous. The city itself was teeming with life; peasants went about their daily lives, as did guards, merchants, clergy and the rest. The crowd mechanics play a very important role in the game but more on that later. Our demonstrator showed off a bit of Altair's movement, scrabbling up walls, leaping from rooftop to rooftop, climbing, jumping, rolling, sliding. All of the animations looked incredibly organic with the transitions between animations flowing flawlessly. It's hard to describe the actual fluid look of the animation but try to think of how the Prince of Persia moves and then apply real world physics to it; he may not be able to make huge wall runs and defy gravity but Altair can and will grab onto anything that projects two or more inches from a surface, effectively making nearly everything climbable.



ANIMUS? ZOMG, WTF!?!

After finding a good high perch, the demonstrator utilised Altair's "Eagle Eye" power, causing the intended victim to be highlighted and the corners of the screen to blur. After zeroing in on his target the demonstrator explained that in play you could choose to simply snipe the victim from your rooftop haunt as you will have an easy escape but accuracy may play against you. Instead the demonstrator chose to get up close and personal, using a concealed wrist blade to add some perhaps unnecessary modifications to the victim's head. Getting close to the victim was easier said than done as he was surrounded by guards and a grim man with a hood kinda stands out from the crowd – especially one that just jumped off a roof. Instead of taking a direct approach Altair instead chose to blend in with a passing group of clergy, the demonstrator hinting that you can get in their good graces with a bit of clandestine murder earlier in the game. When the passing group got close enough to the victim, Altair jumped out and in a rather brutal fashion punched his concealed blade through his throat. There was no hard button combination or special move – get close enough and your victim is dead. It's that simple. The hard part is getting away with it.

Mr. Inconspicuous rides again

The crowd has a lot to do with getting away with murder. They react not as a uniform group but as a mob of individuals. Seeing a murder, some of the crowd may flee screaming, others may turn macho and try to stop you, others still may run and get guards or just stand shocked. It depends on the character, the situation, what they saw, who they are and what Altair has done to the crowd in the first place. While it is possible to glide through a crowd, trying to remain unobtrusive and unnoticed, the demonstrator also showed it was entirely possibly to be, for want of a better word, a jerk and push people around. Unsurprisingly they take offence. This independent AI seems to allow for a living city and dynamic content – in my demonstration Altair came upon two soldiers trying to rape a girl in a back alley. He quickly dispatched them, much to the relief of the girl.

LET THE SPECULATION BEGIN!

As appealing as all that sounds, what is most intriguing is what Ubisoft is not telling us about the game. The stark white, sterile looking room the game was demoed in wasn't laziness on the part of the demonstrators but part of the demo itself. The demo itself ended with one hell of a kicker, making me wonder just what in the hell was going on – in a good way.

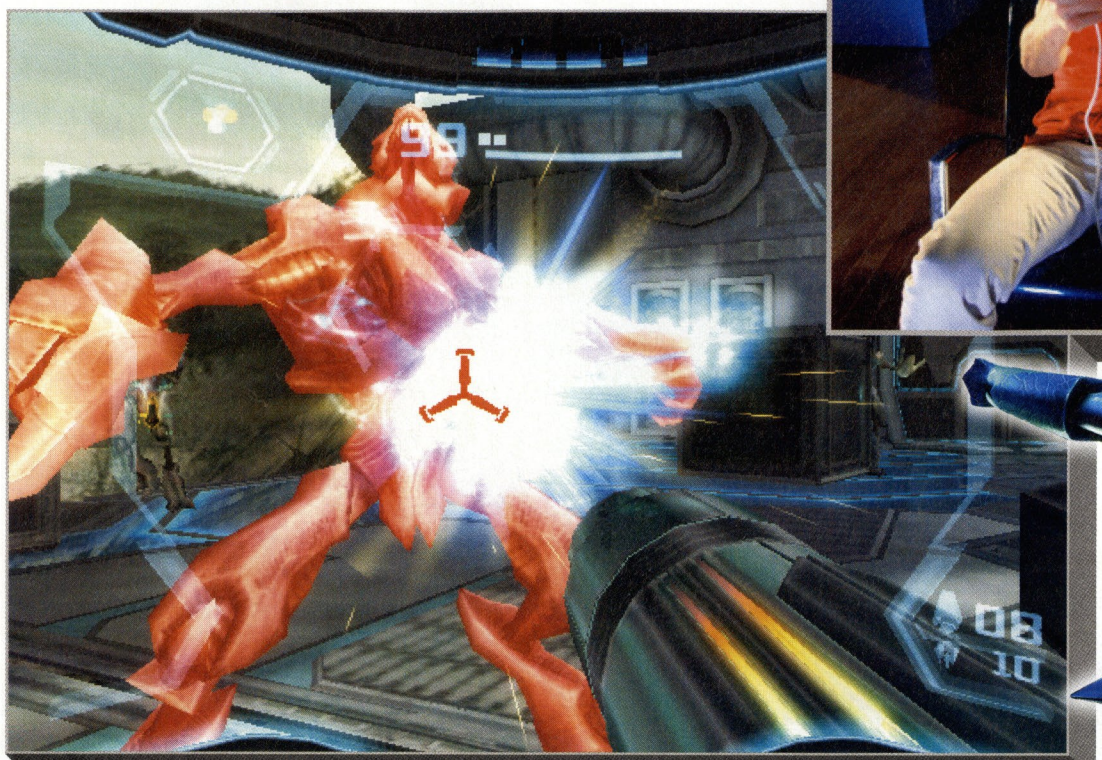
You see, after killing his mark the demonstrator started to make his escape but due to the bastardry he'd shown the citizens earlier in the demo (apparently they didn't appreciate being shoved or stabbed a little) they decided to get in the way and stop his egress. By the time Altair reached the now locked city gates he was surrounded by guards and angry peasants. Although Altair can fight he was eventually struck down; each blow saw the game artifacting and the screen beginning to show some static interruption. Not knowing that the demo was almost over I thought that the dev kit may have been overheating (it was the end of the day) but to my surprise the screen faded to white to have the words SYSTEM OFFLINE. Then it got stranger; the muted colour palette of the medieval setting was replaced by a sterile room and the face of a young woman looking down at where you are presumably laying. Then the word ANIMUS was superimposed over the screen like a computer readout. If I was prone to speaking in internet abbreviations I would have been like "ZOMG! WTF!?!" but as I am not I started paying more attention to the code. I noticed some more intriguing signs that all was not as it seemed. The loading bar (assuming that it was not placeholder) was very clean and anachronistic and the book-ending title screens of the game were the title overlaid on the sterile white background with the occasional hint of chemical-like diagrams crawling around the corners. After my initial blurted out exclamation about the possibility of a time travel motif or a Quantum Leap style personality time travel gimmick were quickly shot down by all and sundry who represented Ubisoft (who didn't offer any alternatives, the bastards) I gave up on speculation and just wanted to see it in action again.

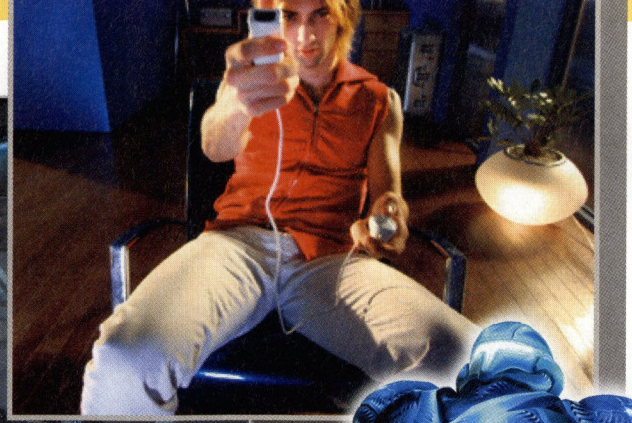
So far Assassin's Creed has only been announced for the PS3 but considering that Ubisoft have announced that Creed will be a new franchise we wouldn't be surprised to learn of 360 and PC version somewhere down the track. The game is due for release in Q1 2007 – only 300 odd sleeps to go.

Daniel Wilks

Spider-Man has gone through a lot of costume changes

!!! Do a google video search for "Le Parkour" or "Russian Climbing" to get a look at the inspiration for Altair's movement style!





"Hey Wilks, if I ever look like that guy, just put me out of my misery okay?"

Metroid Prime: Corruption

Wii

FPS/Adventure • by Retro Studios • out TBA

Lets see what we have here; Samus being all independent and tough yet feminine? Check. Space Pirates doing spacey piratical things? Check. Ridley coming back from the dead and being killed again making him one of the hardiest bad guys who was ever bad? Check. Metroid Prime: Corruption is on its way and it's definitely what we've come to expect from a current/next generation 3D Metroid. Apparently Dark Samus and the Space Pirates are travelling from planet to planet sowing corruption in the shape of Phazon Seeds and it's up to Samus to chase them down, end the corruption and finally take down Dark Samus once and for all (until Metroid Prime 4).

QUICK TURNAROUND

As with all of the Wii games we have tested so far, control takes a little getting used to. The Wiimote is used for jumping, firing and controlling the aiming reticule as well as for turning by moving the reticule to the edge of the screen, while the Nunchaku is used for movement and grappling. It's a system that is at once intuitive and a little frustrating. Turning Samus is definitely a skill that will require a bit of practise; as it currently stands it's all too easy to move the reticule to the side of the screen and start spinning almost uncontrollably if you get a little too enthusiastic. Probably the cleverest control mechanic we've seen so far is the grapple, a move that requires the player to thrust forward with the Nunchaku and pull back on the analogue stick. In actual play it's hard to describe aside from saying that the move feels right, just like throwing the grapple out and reeling it back in. Other, familiar moves and abilities remain intact from the previous games including Morph Ball and the brilliant lock-on combat mechanic. The demo didn't feature any new abilities, weapons or HUDs but it can be safely assumed that some new toys will be available in the final game.

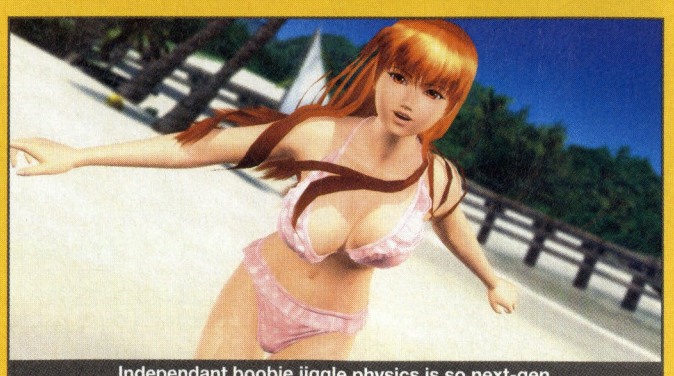
Unfortunately for all the new controls, Metroid Prime: Corruption is currently really just what we have come to expect from a Metroid Prime game with the same door puzzles, the same Space Pirate fights and the same Morph Ball sections. We have our fingers firmly crossed that when we see more finalised code – Retro were quick to point out the very unfinished nature of the code – there will be gameplay elements that take advantage of the unique nature of the Wii configutation such as Morph Ball sections that utilise nothing but the motion sensitivity of the controller (battle Marble Madness anyone?) or fights that require the precision of direct pointing instead of lock-on. It's really too early in the development cycle to judge the game too harshly as it is definitely looking good, we just hope that the game will turn out as Metroid Prime: Wii instead of simply a Metroid Prime game that utilised the Wii controller.

Dead or Alive: Xtreme 2

X360

Fluff • by Team Ninja • due late 2006

Team Ninja head honcho Itagaki has peered through his rockstar sunglasses and seen the future of videogames. Want to know what it is? Independent jiggle physics. Forget breasts bouncing in unison – that's not realistic. In the 'real world', gargantuan gravity defying breasts are independent entities and jiggle separately. And that's what Xtreme 2 sets out to capture. We know, we know, it's a lofty vision, and one that at first seems beyond the grasp of mere mortals, but somehow Itagaki and Team Ninja have made it happen. Whether they'll bother to try and frame a decent game around it this time remains to be seen. The original DOA: Xtreme Beach Volleyball was a shocking excuse for a game (although some would disagree – Staines we're looking at you), so you'll forgive us if our hopes aren't too high for the sequel. Some of the confirmed activities in the game are: jet ski racing, beach volleyball, waterslides, rope pulling, hip wrestling and gambling.



Independant boobie jiggle physics is so next-gen

FABULA NOVA CRYSTALLIS: Final Fantasy XIII

PS3 | MOB | +more?

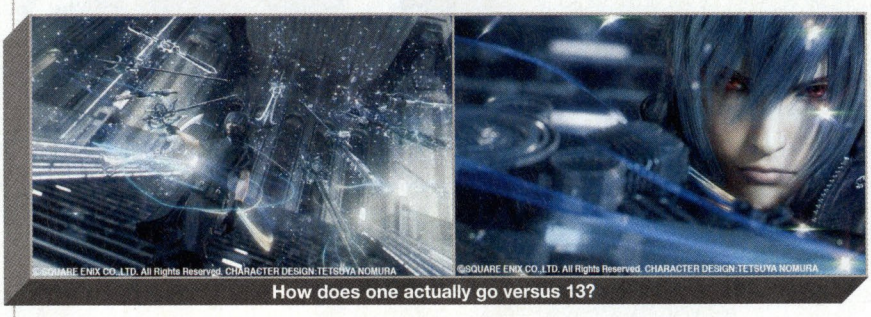
RPG • by Square Enix • out TBA

What do we know about the Final Fantasy XIII universe and story? Bugger all. What about the mechanics? Well, we speculate based on the footage we have seen that the game may feature a single character with real time combat but in all honesty the real answer once again is bugger all. Why are we dedicating half a page to the game then? Final Fantasy XIII is shaping up to be the most ambitious project from Square Enix to date. You see, Final Fantasy XIII is not just one game, it's multiple games over multiple formats telling multiple stories from a shared universe. While each of the games named so far, FABULA NOVA CRYSTALLIS Final Fantasy XIII (PS3), Final Fantasy Versus XIII (PS3) and Final Fantasy Agito XIII (Mobile) may tell different stories and feature different characters they will all inhabit and detail the same shared mythology.

Real time action?

Not a lifestyle shot

There have been no announcements as yet as to any type of crossover between the titles, but it can be safely assumed that many of the games will have limited ways to interact with each other; if you have a save from FF XIII on your memory card it may unlock something in Versus or if you unlock something in Versus it may send it to your Bluetooth capable mobile phone for Agito. Aside from the three games there have been no other parts to the Final Fantasy XIII series announced as of yet but we wouldn't be at all surprised to see a handheld version on the PSP and maybe a Crystal Chronicles themed Final Fantasy XIII on the Wiii. Of course, it's still a little too early to even begin to speculate about a possible launch window in Australia. We haven't even got Final Fantasy XII yet.



How does one actually go versus 13?

Lost Planet

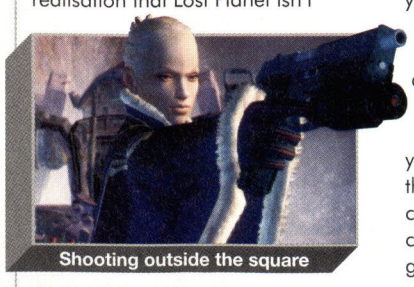
X360

Action • by Capcom • due early 2007

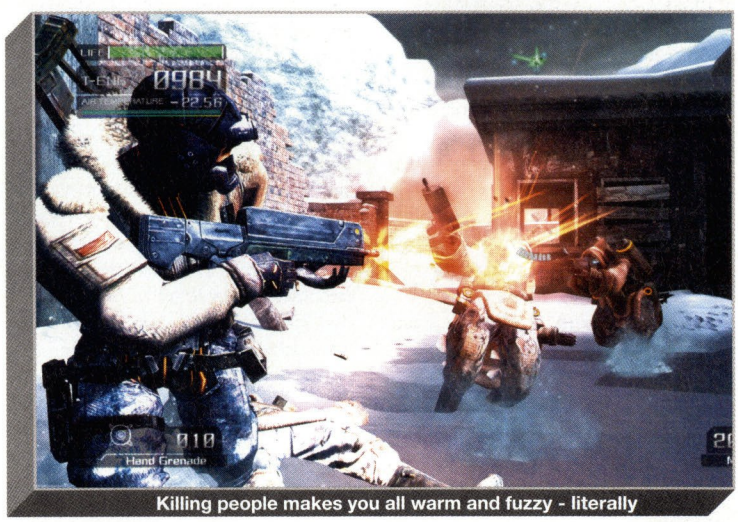
To be honest we weren't sure what to expect from Lost Planet – Capcom's new 360 exclusive shooter, but thankfully we were in for a very pleasant surprise. It is, in a word, awesome. At first you'll probably just see a stylish, but rather standard third person shooter set amongst perilous valleys and snow drifts, frozen enemy compounds and derelict warehouses. There's no doubt that this is a very pretty game - the bleak cold blue colouring contrasts wonderfully with the incredible explosions, the eerily lit caves swarm with giant insects flitting about, ready to swoop in for the kill, even the chunky snow that you trudge through helps give substance to the setting.

But as you play, this initial impression soon gives way to a realisation that Lost Planet isn't just another shooter. There's the grappling hook for one – fire it at a surface and it reels you in, boosting you up and over its point of contact. This simple inclusion completely opens up the levels, giving strategic depth to the more open layouts. There are other cool touches too, like piloting mechs – or just ripping off one of its mounted chain guns for a little Arnie-style action. Fortunately you can re-attach it later if need be.

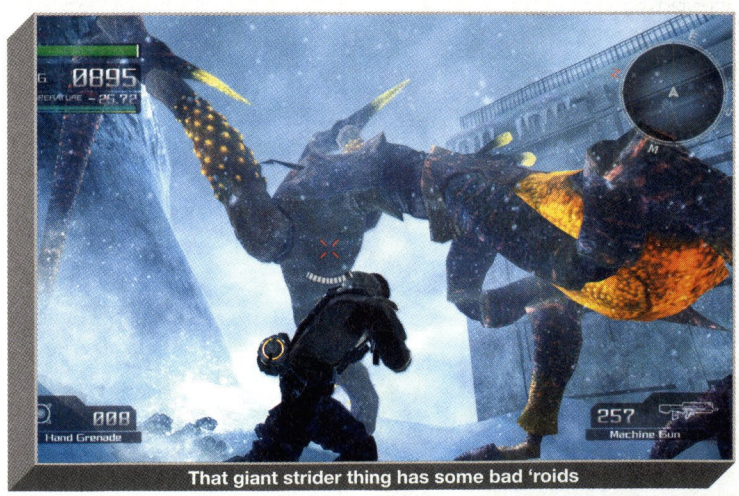
The greatest strength of Lost Planet, however, is its desolate, frozen setting and the way Capcom have factored it into gameplay. The protagonist wears a vital suit to shield him from the cold, but it's constantly expending energy keeping you warm. Every second you're out in the cold (there's a temperature reading on screen) your suit's energy levels are ticking down. Reach zero and you freeze to death. Kill enemies, however, and you can harvest their energy to top yours up. It's a great system, and one that puts pressure on you to make steady kills (and avoid the enemies with weapons that can drain your energy), as well as changing the way you approach the game. Great fun.



Shooting outside the square



Killing people makes you all warm and fuzzy - literally



That giant strider thing has some bad 'roids

This looks like a fair fght

Bioshock

PC X360

Action/Adventure • by Irrational Games • out 2007

As soon as the demonstration of Bioshock began, our host stated that at Irrational they didn't think monsters were particularly scary; it was humans that scared the piss out of them. After seeing Bioshock I can't but agree. Humans are scary, especially those who have gone that one step beyond normalcy and become something simultaneously more and less. The inhabitants of the crumbling underwater setting of Bioshock are this kind of scary monster – once human but moulded by genetics to become something other.

GENETIC SUPERIORITY

Players will take the role of the sole survivor of a plane crash who comes across a lighthouse (in the middle of the sea) which serves as the entry to Rapture, an experimental underwater capitalist Eden established in the 1940s but quickly forgotten about by all but the inhabitants. The people, if you can still call them that, of Rapture had an almost Aryan dream of genetic superiority using a substance called ADAM to augment their bodies. Initially only using genetic modification to improve their looks, the population of Rapture began to meddle with physical augmentation to improve their abilities. As with everything Man Was Not Meant To Know™, this went horribly and tragically wrong. The more they modified themselves the more addicted to modification they became until eventually it appears that the entire society degenerated into roaming bands of no longer human junkies scouring the avenues looking for ADAM. This wouldn't be so bad if it weren't for the fact that there is only one way to get ADAM - by hunting down and killing other inhabitants of Rapture and harvesting the ADAM in their bodies.

Bioshock is shaping up to be the very definition of open ended gaming. Rapture is a sandbox populated with a society (if it could be called that) that functions independent of the player. While players' actions may trigger some events, the world can exist happily by itself. It has a very specific and unnerving ecosystem, some of which we were introduced to early in the demonstration. Soon after the demo began we witnessed a huge, hulking figure plodding along a hall, obviously making some kind of patrol. This, it was explained, was a Big Brother – a territorial but normally non-combative denizen of Rapture that kind of looks like what you would get if you put a professional wrestler in antique diving gear. If you stay out of their way, Big Brothers will ignore you. Stray too close and they may grunt at you in warning. Get closer still and you may get shoved away, with a bone-jarring amount of force. Not solitary by nature, the Big Brothers serve as protectors of Little Sisters; tiny, spindly little girls with enormous sad eyes. They are the only "race" capable of harvesting ADAM from the dead, using the enormous syringes they routinely carry. Little Sisters are timid creatures who will run and hide behind their Big Brother rather than chance confrontation. As these strange little girls are the only source of refined ADAM in the game it was hinted to us that protecting them could be in the player's best interests – but so could farming them, if your morality was that way inclined.

Throughout the game the player will be given opportunities to use ADAM and "plasmid" (genetic alteration) upgrades to give you greater abilities; you could use a speed upgrade (kind of like bullet time) to get past a sentry gun without getting shot or use an irritant power to tag an enemy as hostile so the other beasties nearby will attack it. This sense of freedom in how to approach an objective is one of the core gameplay mechanics in

Thanks Japanese horror

Thanks again

MOOD LIGHTING!

Finally a Big Brother we actually want to watch

Bioshock. Although this freedom is paramount it is not to say that there are no missions in the game; there are, it's just that players will have more or less free reign with how to approach them. One of the sample missions we were shown involved having to track down a record in a music store. One of the last human survivors in Rapture is a mad hermit composer with a nearly homicidal hatred of a rival musician. Playing his rival's record will bring him out of hiding. Although a direct run and gun approach to the record store is definitely possible, our demonstrator took a more subtle route, using an Plasmid power to tag a Splicer - a creepy wall climbing woman-thing with a penchant for hooks and incidentally the only aggressive enemy in the demo – as a threat causing a nearby security camera to call some security drones to come and take it out. With the Splicer out of the way the path was clear.

OTHERWORLDLY

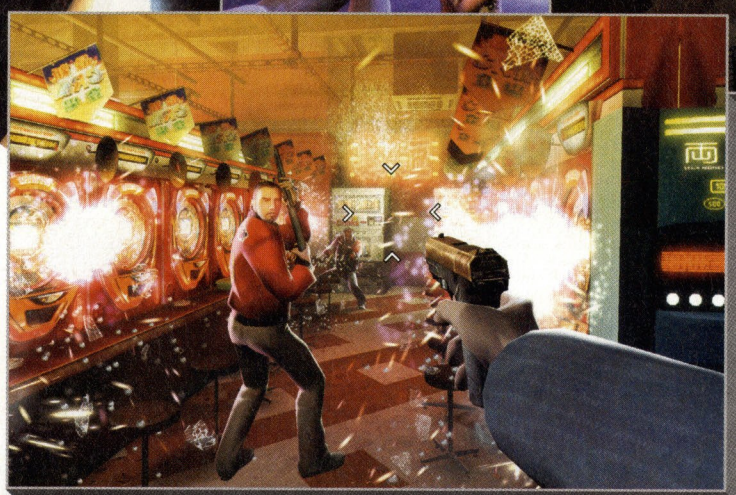
The art-deco styling of Rapture is nigh on perfect; at once familiar and alien. The effect is creepy as hell. It looks like a relic from another time but one with enough links to the world we know that there is that sense of familiarity and belonging but the sheer anachronistic weight of the retro-futuristic art-deco look places it in a realm outside our common sphere of influence. Although otherworldly in and of itself, the art-deco design is made even more frightening by the all pervasive water. While the areas we saw in the demo were not sodden or under water in any way but the obvious, the sense of being submerged leant a wonderfully claustrophobic air to the proceedings. Everywhere we looked in Rapture there were hints that we were under water, ranging from the obvious, such as large windows showing the ocean through to more subtle references like slow leaks leaving puddles on the ground and shifting, liquid shadows. You can almost feel the unimaginable pressure being exerted on the facility and we found ourselves tense with the expectation that something would burst and flood the underwater city at any moment.

Not quite an FPS and not quite an adventure game, Bioshock is shaping up to be one hell of a title. The game itself looks amazing with beautiful character design and architecture but more importantly the gameplay looks nothing short of spectacular. We have no idea when Bioshock is due as yet aside from the ephemeral Q1 2007 but after seeing it in action we're more than willing to wait however long it takes.

Daniel Wilks

Not quite an octopus' garden but there's still shade

You can actually hold the controller on the side to go at it gangsta style!



Damn you Pachinko, DAMN YOU!

Red Steel

Wii

FPS/Adventure • by Ubisoft • due TBA

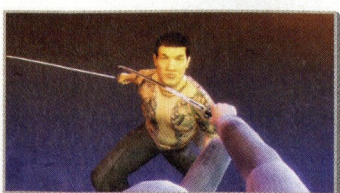
As much as we'd love to love Red Steel the game, at its current level of development it shows a lot of promise but will also need a lot of tweaking to make it the game we really want it to be. Players take the role of an American in Japan who has his lady love (who happens to be the daughter of a good-guy Yakuza boss) kidnapped by some nasty Yakuza types and goes on a trail of revenge to get her back, gun in one hand, katana in the other. The premise is great for what it is and the promise of Wii powered FPS/sword fighting is also very exciting but the actual execution from what we've seen leaves a little to be desired.

ALMOST AWESOME

The problem from where we stand comes in terms of sensitivity. The Wiimote is used as a direct pointing device during the shooting sections, pulling the trigger to fire. In principal this is about as intuitive as you can get with a first person shooter. Unfortunately the demonstration machines showed a huge level of sensitivity making aiming at enemies a chore. This can either be put down to the machines on display, the fact that the sensitivity may have been set for a different game that had been played on the machine before, or simple wear and tear from a long day of nerds pawing the controller and rubbing up against the detector strip but it really was no way to show off the game. With that in mind the idea of using the Wiimote as a gun is an incredibly natural one and when the sensitivity issues are sorted out it will likely make for a truly easy to pick up and immersive experience.

The sword fighting sections see the player swinging the Wiimote and blocking with the Nunchaku controller but rather than accurately mapping the movements of the remote (as was demonstrated in Wii Sports Baseball), swinging the controller triggers one of the canned attack animations; swinging the Wiimote from left to right will result in a slash from the left, right to left a slash from the right, a downwards swing results in a downwards attack and an upwards swing gives you... a downwards attack. Once again those problems could come down to sensitivity with the controller not accurately mapping the player's movements but the decision to use the swing of the Wiimote to trigger an attack rather than as the attack itself strikes us as a slightly odd one. Of course, this may have been implemented only for the E3 build of the game (nobody we asked was willing to say if this was close to finished code or not) and we may see actual motion control in later builds.

Like we said, Red Steel is a game that shows a hell of a lot of promise and could potentially shape up as one of the must have launch titles for the Wii; a hybrid FPS/sword game utilising motion control and direct pointing is definitely appealing. It just needs a bit of tweaking and redefining of mechanics before it's ready.



The creation of KUTARAGI HEAD!

Every Extend Extra

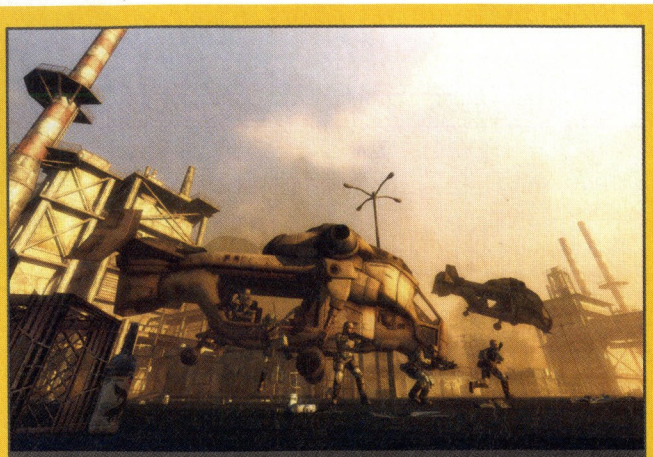
PSP

Music shooter • by Q Entertainment • due late 2006

It's hard to imagine, but the man behind Rez and Lumines is behind the reigns of the PSP version of a game that is like the love child of both. Every Extend Extra sees beats-based gameplay return in the form of a philosophical shooter — you don't shoot, you throw yourself at the mercy of your enemies, and await the waves of destructive chain reactions that follow your sacrifice. You earn extra ships, or extends, as you score big with the points, and you have to keep scoring bigger to stay ahead of your need for surplus ships that you're only going to destroy again. Hmmm... is this some grand metaphor for the futility of war?

The graphics are retro intense, though lacking the polish of Geometry Wars, so it will rely on seeing more levels to know if it has long term appeal. Certainly shaping up as a worthy successor to two very unconventional, very original games.

Mayhem, Mizuguchi style



In the future, giant floating metal fish give birth to soldiers

ET: Quake Wars

PC

FPS • by Splash Damage • out TBA

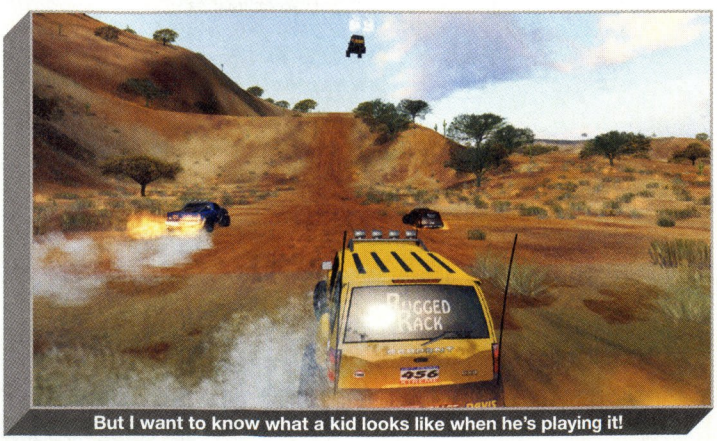
The GDF (Global Defence Force) and the alien Strogg are at each other's throats again but not in a way we have seen before. Using the classic class based, two-sided multiplayer FPS format, Splash Damage are shaping up to reignite the Quake world with action that mixes twitch shooting and a heavy dose of strategy. Each of the sides has access to five different classes, each with unique abilities such as being able to disguise themselves as enemy players, calling in air-strikes or placing artillery, and battle it out on large maps using progressive objectives; on the map we saw the GDF need to repair a bridge, get a mobile command point to a bunker, hack into a security post to lower a shield and launch a nuke at the now defenceless structure. It's fast, fun, looks great and should ship with around 12 maps. Look forward to it. We are.

Excite Truck

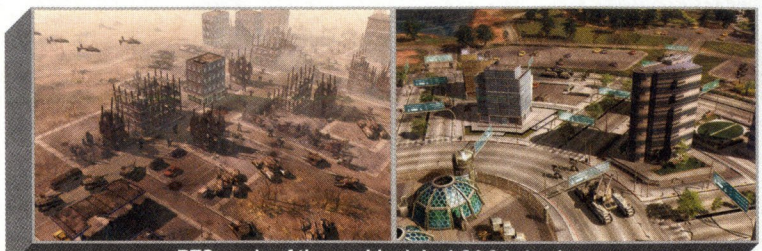
Wii

Racing • by Nintendo • out TBA

A worthy sequel to Excite Bike. That's all we really need to say. It's fast, fun and the central conceit of boosting by landing massive jumps on all four wheels is exhilarating and is a nice showcase of one of the many uses of the Wiimote. Our hands on time featured two maps, one in Fiji and the other Mexico and only one style of truck, but the central mechanics and speed were in place. One nice feature we discovered but didn't have time to fully explore was the ability to modify the tracks in real time by hitting "?" icons. When hit these icons would raise massive hills enabling you to get huge air, essentially giving you an aerial shortcut with a convenient turbo boost at the end. This is shaping up to be a must have launch title.



But I want to know what a kid looks like when he's playing it!



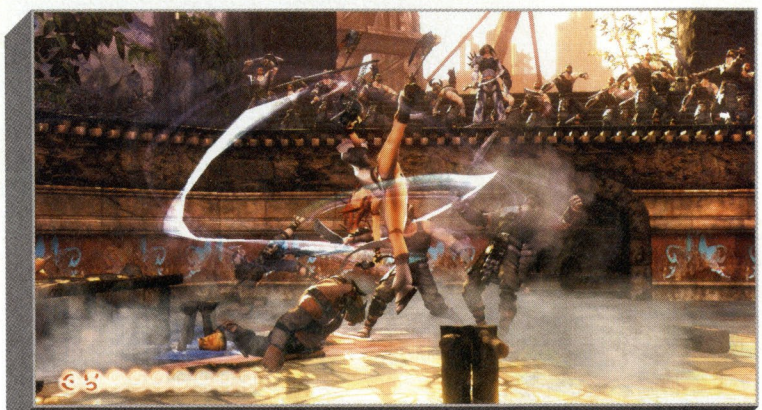
RTS nerds of the world rejoice! C&C is back...

C&C Tiberium Wars

PC

RTS • by EA • out 2007

The year is 2047 and the GDI (Global Defence Initiative) and The Brotherhood of NOD are still at war over the fate of the Earth. Tiberium, the self replicating alien substance that is turning much of the planet into a radioactive wasteland is the dividing line; the GDI want to halt its progress and Kane, leader of NOD wants to use it to twist Earth into his own perverted vision of the future. It's epic strategy, that's for sure. The game looks amazing from the footage we've seen and the way that a very strong storyline is integrated intrigues us. We're not sure but it seemed to be hinted that this might be the game where we actually find out who infected Earth with Tiberium and maybe even fight them!



A nice fan service screenshot (with no quicksand in sight - phew!)

Heavenly Sword

PS3

Third Person Action • by Ninja Theory • out TBA

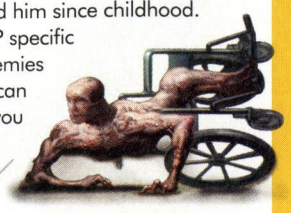
Devil May Cry seems to be responsible for the development of God of War, and God of War seems to be responsible for the development of every single third person action game to go into production since its release. Heavenly Sword stands out from the pack for one reason – it's incredibly beautiful to watch. Hundreds of context sensitive combat animations blend fluidly into each other to make for some wonderfully cinematic fights. We know little of the story so far but the E3 demo was easy to pick up and play, and an immediately immersive fighting experience. The fact that Andy Serkis, the world's most famous CGI actor is playing the villain and directing the voice acting and cutscenes is just the icing on the cake.

Silent Hill: Origins

PSP

Survival Horror • by Climax • out 2007

Not only is this game being specifically developed for the PSP, it will also finally tell gamers why the sleepy little hamlet of Silent Hill was transformed from being said sleepy little hamlet to being a terrifying pit of... um... terror! Players will take the role of a lone truck driver trapped in the titular burg during a routine delivery and forced to contend with the nightmarish creatures inhabiting the area, as well as strange hallucinations that have plagued him since childhood. Familiar gameplay mechanics will be enhanced with PSP specific controls and a new ability to barricade doors to stop enemies from following you. The only downside to the game we can see at the moment is that you'll looks like a dickhead if you scream like a little girl while playing on the bus to work.



Super Mario Galaxy

Wii

Action Platformer • by Nintendo • due TBA

Nintendo are really going out on a limb with the premise for Super Mario Galaxy. You really won't believe it; Princess Peach has been, wait for it, kidnapped by "some creature" and taken into the depths of space and it's up to Mario to give chase, explore a bunch of strange planets and stomp some head. It's a storytelling revolution!

Aside from being a new setting, the move to space really adds a lot to the game, essentially bringing the franchise into true 3D in its ability to utilise all axis instead of just jumping and climbing. The low gravity environment of space allows for some truly massive jumps, as well as allowing Mario to run on just about any surface, no matter the orientation on a number of levels.

The new control scheme utilising the Wiimote and Nunchaku is probably the most comprehensive we've seen on the Wii so far as it not only uses the Wiimote as a pointer and the Nunchaku for manoeuvring but utilises all of the buttons and motion control for special moves. The control takes some getting used to and you may not want to play in a crowded room if you're a little self conscious because you'll inevitably wind up looking like you're having a fit.

Super Mario Galaxy is definitely shaping up to be a great game. Sure, it's not the fabled Mario 128 that we have been hearing about since Mario 64 but it is Mario made new again with a combination of setting and control. Although we were not able to see any multiplayer, our press materials do indicate that the game will be for 1-2 players; here's hoping that it's a co-op experience (Mario and Bowser teaming up to rescue Princess Peach from the new kidnapper perhaps) and not just some mini-games.

Insert "so high right now" joke here

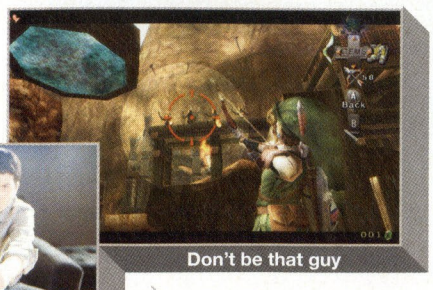
The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess

GCN Wii

Action Adventure • by Nintendo • due Wii launch

We're still in two minds about The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess after seeing it at E3. On the one hand it's shaping up to be a truly awesome Zelda game with a great premise, an exciting new hook and a sexy new look. On the other the simultaneous release of the game on both the GCN and Wii leaves us wondering whether there is any real point to the Wii version of the game; sure it looks a lot better and uses the new control system but there is no indication that there will be any point of difference in the games, aside from looks and control system.

Worries aside, the new game has us tense with anticipation. Hyrule has been shrouded in darkness and Link, a young wrangler, is ordered by his village mayor to attend the Hyrule Summit to find out what is going on. As link enters the Twilight Realm (the areas shrouded in darkness) the boy is transformed into a wolf, is captured and subsequently released with the aid of a mysterious girl named Minda. The game itself is based around Link exploring the world, interacting with the population, solving puzzles and battling evil utilising his skills, wolf abilities and Minda's magic to try to bring the light back to Hyrule. In addition to his wolf powers, Link will be able to fight from horseback. The Wiimote is used for sword attacks and direct pointing/aiming as well as fishing but as far as we know it doesn't offer up any more options than are available in the GCN version. Both versions of the game will be available at the Wii launch.



Don't be that guy

Shiny happy guerilla warfare

Haze

FPS • by Free Radical • due TBA

X360 PS3 PC

Our first thought when seeing this upcoming FPS was that it was "bloomtastic" or even "bloomtacular", but by the end of the demo we understood why. Set in a dark near future with privatised warfare and biomedical conglomerates, Haze tells the story of one of these private soldiers fighting a dirty little civil war. What makes the game stand out is the strange morality that became apparent in the demo. What initially looks like a beautiful lush jungle filled with well armed mercenaries is transformed into a broken wilderness defended by peasants when something called "Administrator" malfunctions. It made for an intriguing little kicker and something that definitely whet our appetite.

Positively bloomtacular

Final Fantasy III

RPG • by Square Enix • due September 2006

DS

Final Fantasy III was never localised in the West, much to the pity of numerous FF Fanboys, forcing them to wade through Japanese versions or simply skip the game. Good news; Final Fantasy III is finally making its way to our shores. Not just a simple port, FFIII is a total overhaul of the game, keeping the core the same but modifying the graphics and interface to fully take advantage of the DS. Beautiful 3D cutscenes and graphics and a touch screen interface should make this decade old game fresh again. If nothing else it will give us something to play while we wait for FFXII and FFXIII.

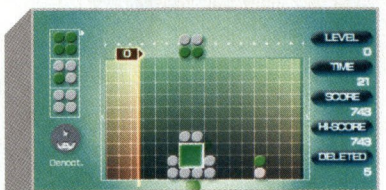
Next gen would be: FFIII 3D Wii

Lumines 2

Puzzle • by Q Entertainment • due TBA

PSP

Lumines. The very name itself brings a few shivers of joy to the back and bathing suit area. It's a near perfect puzzle game combining excellent gameplay and a truly kick arse soundtrack that enhances said gameplay. We managed to get some hands on with the hotly anticipated sequel on the show floor and, honestly, we couldn't really tell the difference between the original game and the sequel. Apparently the game features a host of new tracks and battle modes but the latter were unavailable in the build and the former were impossible to hear over the screaming of a billion (give or take) screaming nerds.



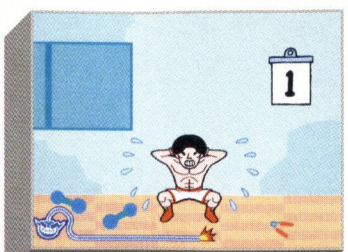
Second verse same as the first

WarioWare Smooth Moves

Microgames • by Nintendo • due Late 2006

Wii

If you've ever played a WarioWare game you know what to expect from the latest in the franchise; a bunch of silly microgames each lasting a few seconds. This time however, the silly little microgames are made even sillier by the fact that players have to do silly things with the Wii controller. Silly x Silly x Silly is Silly cubed, so you can imagine this is one rather silly title. The motion sensitive Wiimote make the microgames a good deal more physical and amusing to watch than ever before. It's bound to be a popular party game. We can't imagine anyone not having a laugh at their drunk mate holding the Wiimote by their hip and gyrating like they are trying to hula-hoop.



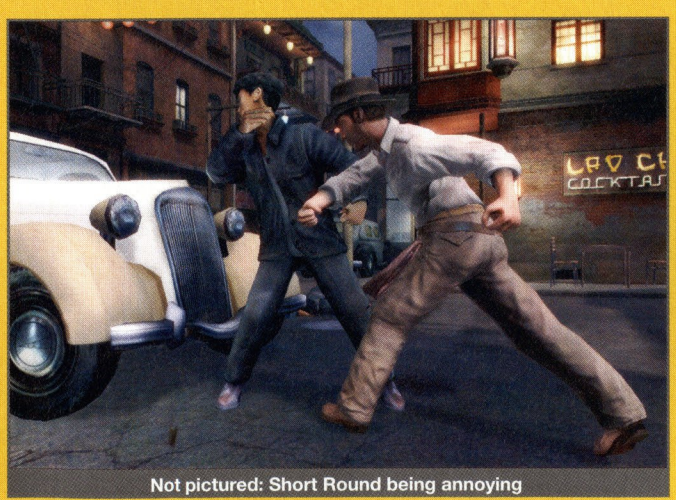
His butt's gonna blow!

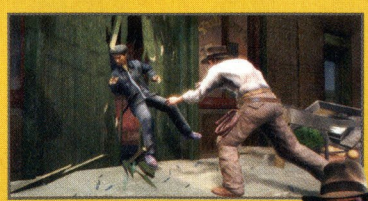
Indiana Jones

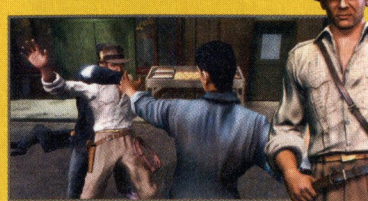
Action • by LucasArts • due 2007

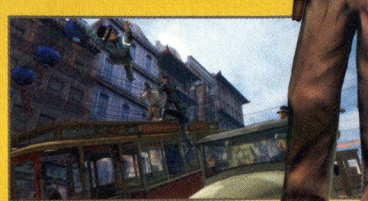
X360 PS3

Although we haven't seen a great deal of the new Indy game yet, what we have seen has launched it right to the top of our must have list. We don't know a name – presumably LucasArts is waiting to see if they're going to tie it in with the planned Indiana Jones movie – and we have no idea about a plot. What we do know is that LucasArts have licensed some amazing new technology by NaturalMotion Ltd. The Euphoria behavioural simulation engine enables characters in the game to move and react to stimulus realistically without having to resort to normal animation. Essentially this means that characters in game will move more fluidly and interact with the environment in a much more believable way than we've seen before.


Not pictured: Short Round being annoying







Crysis

PC

FPS • by Crytek • out early 2007

No one doubts the raw quality of Crytek's 2004 shooter Far Cry. Here was a game that became a benchmark for testing how much PC hardware could handle, with breathtaking visuals and a physics engine. But in the age of Halo and Half-Life, a game needs to pack a big punch on the story front as well, and Far Cry was never going to win awards for its writers. But with Crysis, Crytek are promising big things on all fronts.

This time out the Earth, circa 2019, is faced with a major problem as an unidentified object crashes into a heavily contested archipelago *(it's always an archipelago with these guys – Ed)* in the South China Sea. It looks like this isn't just some meteorite, so you, in your role as a US operative, are sent in to find out what the object is, while dealing with concurrent investigations by Chinese and North Korean forces. Everyone is trying to 'secure' the object first. Humble, perhaps even typical, beginnings for a first-person shooter.

[SPOILER ALERT] But things change up rather quickly as a strange bubble flash freezes the island. From here, the game enters a different phase of activity and alien forces have to be taken down.

This is all we know of the story, and it definitely gives off some of those entertaining Halo vibes with the way things get changed up dramatically part way through. Just as you're getting down with one kind of enemy, it becomes time to take care of another. [END SPOILER ALERT]

I'll leave the spoilers there for now, as it's often best to save some of the surprises for when you get into the game yourself. And if they really can deliver some big surprises, this is shaping up very nicely.

GET IN TOUCH WITH NATURE

All this doesn't matter a damn to many graphics whores. They just want a major evolution of the Cry Engine — and that's exactly what they're getting. I spent some hands-on time with the game and this new engine is mind blowing. Seriously. It is hard to play this and believe what you are seeing is happening in engine. But, with hands on the controls, there was no mistaking that there were no pre-rendered shenanigans involved.

Tanks for the help (no, we'll never stop - blame Eliot if you must)

On initial inspection, the environment is looking beautiful. Densely detailed jungle was on show here. And the way the trees and brush move about is remarkable. Everything here reacts to everything else with a subtle ebb and flow, with subtlety on individual trees down to single leaves, and when you see a breeze blow across a few trees here you know you've never seen anything like it in a game. As you move through the space, there is no doubt you effect the environment, which comes into play very quickly — sneaking around will be very tough in this engine.

The level of detail in the engine goes well beyond the interactive and into the dirtier realm of the destructible. I'm talking about something that seems to drop down to what for practical purposes seems to be a near pixel level, as you can break things with very precise control.

As part of tasting this destruction myself, I was encouraged to shoot up the forest. Spraying bullets left and right, this led to the kind of deforestation that would make even an Amazonian farmer blush. Trees were cut down at exactly the level you were shooting, even falling with a dramatic flop, complete with subtle motion blur that really polishes the cinematic feel of the engine.

At this stage, it could also go without saying that grenades are looking more devastating than ever in this kind of terrain. But would it be fun to not say it? Of course not. Grenades look vicious! Particularly when things change up part way through the game.

I also got a taste of a mounted gun and of a rocket launcher, each showing how powerful things get. And beyond the environment, taking down buildings is just as deformable as the terrain. And enemies? We're talking rag doll ballet.

So I have to come back to a touch of the spoiler territory, but it's a must to show just how far this engine goes. While the jungle gives a real sense of foliage and natural movement, and breaks in a very real fashion, the way the engine responds to the flash freezing of the island shows even more accomplishment than first suggested.

In the demo, I was able to walk into a kind of cryo-bubble on the island, which completely changed the environmental dynamics. Now, shooting a spray of rounds was really nasty, as the frozen trees shattered into glittering shards. Grenades, as suggested above, are nothing short of devastating, as they completely destroy anything in their blast radius.

We'll leave that tasty morsel there for now, though it could be hinted that freezing play will appear in a few more places in the game as things progress. Be warned!

If you don't want a spoiler then don't, erm, look at this screenshot. Oops...

This is my rifle, this is my gun

BETTER AI, BETTER GAMEPLAY

This engine is tied into an improved AI system beautifully, showing how each will compliment the other for a more complete game experience. With such terrain subtlety, it's a tall order to avoid alerting enemies to your movements. Likewise replay value is potentially much greater, as this kind of world will make it very hard to move exactly the same way through the environment again and again. The AI will spot and hear different things each time.

The way they choose to respond is a real challenge too. AI will use available weapons, and move through cover when they can. And when there are a few enemies working together, they will even work on flanking you. But you can also use the environment to fool them, throwing stones to get their attention to move elsewhere so you can slip by, if you want to take the stealth approach.

In fact, Crysis will offer a very open system of level design so you can choose how you want to play. If you prefer to shoot, shoot. Prefer to slip by, slip by.

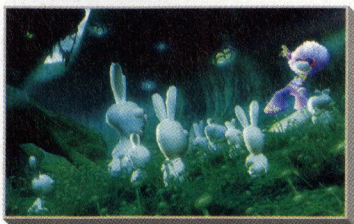
Showing how serious they are about looking to be everything to everyone in this regard, the main character is wearing a nano-enhanced suit that lets you augment a particular physical skill — speed, strength or armour. Switching quickly and carefully will be a big part of playing the game well, while letting you make your own choices on which to emphasise.

Crytek has been impressively candid in their desire to fix what was wrong with Far Cry, and this is clearly translating into a second engine and second game that should exceed the original in all departments. Getting to taste their Crysis demo has certainly shown they are again pushing the limits of what hardware (and the as yet unreleased DirectX 10) will do for PC gaming. Crytek has stated Crysis is very much a Windows only title, and with these graphics it's easy to see why — this engine helps show how quickly console hardware can be seen to date compared to constantly upgradeable PC hardware.

Considering we are still at least six months away from their release date, PC gamers have something heading their way that looks like it is set to make the idea of consoles being 'next generation' seem a quaint marketing pitch.

Seamus Byrne

Where's a rabbit proof fence when you need one?



Rayman Raving Rabbids

Wii

Action Adventure • by Ubisoft • due TBA

Anyone who grew up on The Goodies knows that rabbits are inherently evil. We all know that Big Bunny has plans for the world and they really don't involve us. Now, 33 years after Graeme, Tim and Bill fought the insidious menace, the French, under the watchful eye of Michel Ancel have decided to keep fighting the good fight against evil rodentia using the Frenchest hero of them all, or at least the Frenchest hero who is not Jerry Lewis, Jean de Baton de Baton or Tintin (who is actually Belgian but speaks French rather than Flemish). That's right, Rayman is back and he's beating up bunnies. Why is he beating up rabbits? Well, aside from the fact that it's just plain fun to smack the fuzzy little bastards, apparently the rabbits have been conspiring for centuries to rise up and take over the world. Michel Ancel is the first to admit that the premise of the game is rather stupid and doesn't really lend itself to deep storytelling, but that's not the aim of the game. The fourth Rayman is shaping up to be broad absurdist comedy – much like The Goodies or Monty Python.

ANYA HATES THEM TOO

Although the game will be available across the entire spectrum of next generation machines, the Wii version of the game is shaping up to be the most interesting due, once again, to the control scheme. The game will fully utilise the motion sensitive nature of both of the controllers for moving and fighting with Rayman. On a simple level, throwing a punch with the remote will cause Rayman to do the same action in game but there are a number of other control mechanics that come into play. Rayman will also be able to grab nearby enemies using a quick flick of the Nunchaku and you can spin them around to hit other enemies by swinging the controller around your head. Swinging both controllers down simultaneously will unleash a ground-pound style special attack. Throughout the game Rayman will be able to ride a number of creatures ranging from eagles to sharks and beyond. These will be controllable through the motion sensitivity of the Wiimote, though at this time we have no idea of the orientation of the controller that will be used.

Aside from combat, Rayman's most powerful tool to stop the rabbit invasion is his ability to get down and boogie. At different stages during the game, Rayman will be able to hypnotise bunnies by breaking into dance. Dancing utilises both controllers and from what we understand is based around the player's ability to move the controllers to the rhythm of the music being played. Rayman has numerous costumes ranging from 50s suburban housewife through to emo kid, each with their own dance styles and music so there is a great pool of comedy gold to draw from.

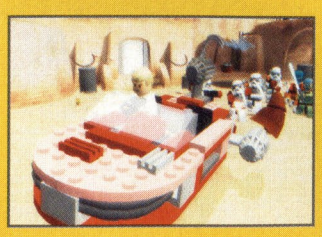
We didn't think that we'd be so enthusiastic about a Rayman game but Raving Rabbids has us excited. It's got a clever and fun control scheme, a silly sense of humour that is definitely appealing (have a look on the interweb for some of the Rayman Bunnies Very Useful Scientific Facts), fantastically stylish visuals and Michel Ancel back behind the reins. What more could you want from a Rayman game?

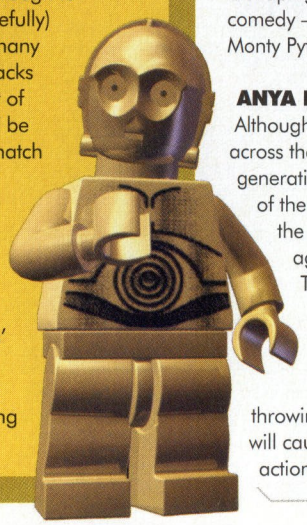
GCN | PS2 | XBOX | PC | PSP

LEGO Star Wars II: The Original Trilogy

Action • by Traveller's Tales • due September 2006

LEGO Star Wars was a surprisingly fun action romp, with its tongue firmly planted in cheek. The sequel looks to be better in every way, not least because it's based on the first three films (the original trilogy that is) with all the iconic scenes you'd expect, from Leia on board the Blockade Runner through to the assault on the second Death Star. Yes, it's the era of Lando baby! So, changes to gameplay. You can now ride (and build!) vehicles, such as speeder bikes and AT-STs, as well as getting around on creatures like banthas and tauntauns. There will be 50 playable characters, from Luke, Han and Darth through to Greedo and (hopefully) gold bikini Leia, many with their own attacks and combos. Best of all though – you'll be able to mix and match body parts from all the playable characters to create your own SW hybrids! Now if they can make the 'puzzles' a little more involving this time around this is going to be a winner.





Mortal Kombat: Armageddon

PS2 XBOX

Fighting • by Midway • out late 2006

After getting some hands on with Armageddon we can safely say that this is how a series should end (or end on the current generation at least). With a bang. A really big bang. MK: Armageddon still uses the same canned combo style the franchise has been (in)famous for but in this final version fans of the series are in for a real treat with every character from the franchise being playable. That's 50+ characters (or about 35 if you don't count the re-skins with slightly different move sets). What's more the game features a very comprehensive character creator that not only allows you to modify appearance but also choose fighting styles, individual attacks and even customise fatalities. Although not as attractive as, say, SoulCalibur 3, Mortal Kombat: Armageddon has probably the best create a fighter mode we've seen.

Prepare for some spine ripping

Warhawk

PS3

Action • by Incog Inc • out TBA

The E3 demo of Warhawk was not really indicative of the game, as there will be a good deal more to it than flying around in the Warhawk using the tilty controller. The final game will feature both land and air combat, the former on foot and in vehicles. The game will cover hundreds of square miles of dynamic world with a progressive, ambient mission structure. It is definitely a game we are interested in but showing a very incomplete form of part of a game that has been very recently redesigned for a new controller nobody seemed aware of definitely wasn't the way to build up hype.

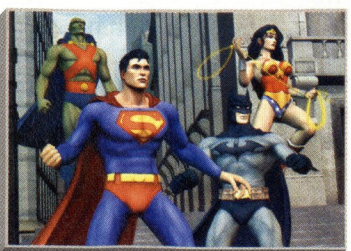
Fly the empty skies

Justice League Heroes

PS2 XBOX PSP

Action RPG • by Snowblind Studios • out soon

There are two reasons to look forward to Justice League. Firstly, the game is being developer by Snowblind Studios, the company that basically created and mastered the semi-isometric console action RPG with Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance, Champions of Norrath and Return to Arms. The second reason to look forward to the game is the fact that the mighty RON PERLMAN (a man so great his name deserves to be written in capital letters) is doing the voice acting for Batman. Come on now, what could be better than that? Nothing. Nothing at all. Apart from maybe if RON PERLMAN was doing the voice acting for all of the characters, including Zatanna and Wonder Woman. He's RON PERLMAN for pete's sake.



RON PERLMAN!

Follow the brown cracked road... la la la la la la etc

Untold Legends: Dark Kingdom

PS3

Action RPG • by SoE • out November 2006

Untold Legends on the PSP is a fun and unpretentious stab at the action RPG genre. Untold Legends: Dark Kingdom looks as though it will take pride of place as the first unpretentious stab at action RPG fun on the PS3. From what we understand so far, players will be able to choose from three customisable characters to bash their way through an epic storyline about evil people doing things evil enough to warrant stopping them. The next gen platform will afford the game some really impressive looks, as evident in the screenshots. What is not evident from the screenshots is the new physics integration that should make for a lot of things getting broken, enemies being tossed around and even used as weapons.

Gods and Heroes

PC

MMORPG • by Perpetual Entertainment • out late 2006

Yet another MMO in development but unlike the vast majority of the crop, Gods and Heroes looks interesting. Really interesting. Set in ancient Rome, Gods and Heroes combines history and mythology for the setting but this isn't what is most intriguing about the title. What whets our appetite is the fact that the combat system is designed by Stieg Hedlund, lead designer of Diablo II and that the game will allow you to recruit and lead units of men in squad combat. The combat system will allow for fast paced, cinematic combat as well as combos and finishing moves. In a marketplace that is quickly becoming glutted with all but identical product (some would argue that it already is glutted) it's nice to see a title with pedigree and potential. One to watch out for.

I love the sexy slither of a lady snake, oh baby!

Now that's some serious two gun mojo!

Army of Two

PS3 X360

Co-op action • by EA • due TBA 2007

Two man tactical shooters aren't a new thing, but EA is looking to level up the cooperative gaming experience. Here in Army of Two, there is no single play option — if you're on your own, you'll be accompanied by an AI.

Taking a very early peek at the game with its team from EA Montreal, the game clearly wants to bring great strategy and tactics to a shooter that brings a rock star aesthetic to the idea of being a soldier for hire. You are part of a duo from a near future Private Military Company, being sent out on missions around the world and making good dough for your efforts.

We were delivered a demo that highlighted a few cool two-man elements in the game. Formations like back-to-back fighting were shown off, with some smart mouth dialogue from your teammate AI — hopefully they've got a deep vocab here, or it will get very tired, very quickly. Still, you'll be able to tell him to shut up too – the game supports voice recognition so you can give commands over a headset. That doesn't mean your AI ally will listen however.

The best of two-man we saw were moves like throwing your teammate a weapon, helping each other climb a wall, dropping your teammate off a roof and lowering on a rope, and a classic revive mode when your teammate goes down — you apply rhythm-based CPR while they run away from the light.

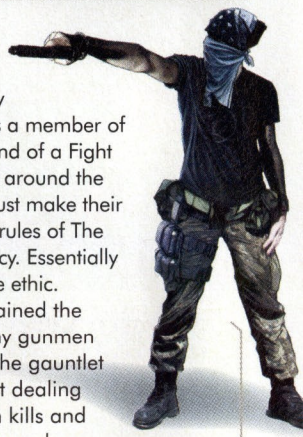
Add to all this an equipment upgrade system that comes straight out of the Pimp My Ride school of upgrades. Because you aren't bad ass unless that gun gleams in the sunlight.

The game should run with seamless drop-in, drop-out so you can just jump on board for a while with a friend and if they leave you won't even notice the change to AI. If they can nail the AI and get this 'cool war on terror' style to stay fresh for the whole game, EA may be on a winner. Oh, and for the graphics fiends out there, Army of Two is the new leader in the Best. Water. Ever. stakes.

The Club

PS3 X360

Shooter • by Bizarre Creations • due 2007



We only got the briefest of time with The Club, a new third person shooter from Bizarre Creations, but what we saw – a single level – made us ever so hungry for more. The premise of the game is that the player is a member of The Club; an underground "sporting" organisation, kind of a Fight Club for gun nuts. The events organised take place all around the world but follow the same format – a lone gunman must make their way through a gauntlet of killers following the simple rules of The Club; you must kill quickly, stylishly and without mercy. Essentially The Club is a shooter working off of a racing game ethic.

From what we saw and by the way it was explained the levels are essentially race tracks; all of the enemy gunmen stand in the same positions every time you run the gauntlet so it's more about learning the track than about dealing with enemy AI. Points are scored through stylish kills and kill combos with each kill refilling a dwindling combo meter. As long as you keep the meter full your score will keep multiplying. Throughout the levels there will be numerous targets that can be shot to keep a combo going, further heightening this feeling of needing to learn the track.

Bizarre were more than happy to say that their game didn't really have a plot but rather a cool setting and great mechanics and that made us happy – it's nice to see a developer worry solely about gameplay rather than hiring some unknown Hollywood scriptwriter to make a story or film a bunch of boring cutscenes made up entirely of chin (yes, we are still bitter about Black). There has been no real word as yet as to if there will be any multiplayer but the guys from Bizarre did hint that online competition would be more about time trials and kill score than actual head to head combat.

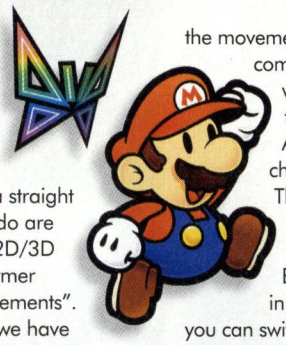
Now where's Godzilla?

See the world as Shiggy does

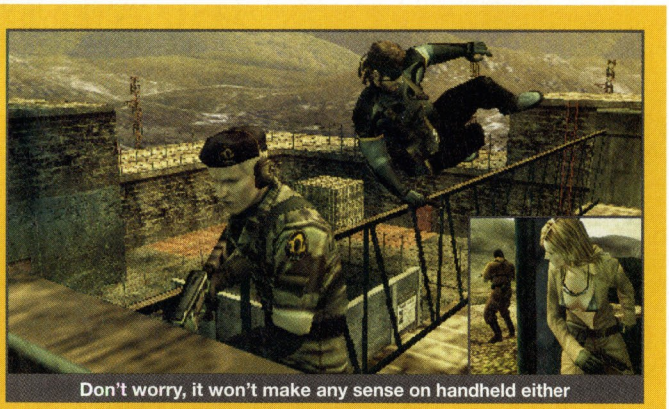
Super Paper Mario

GCN

Platformer/RPG • by Intelligent Systems • due late 2006



Super Paper Mario is looking to be quite a departure from previous Paper Mario games. Rather than being a straight action RPG, Nintendo are calling this one a "2D/3D Sidescrolling Platformer with Role-Playing Elements". Indeed, everything we have seen so far (which admittedly isn't much) seems to be fairly traditional platforming with the twist that the game slips between dimensions – one moment you're playing what appears to be a side on old school 2D platformer, the next the perspective changes 90 degrees and it's actually 3D, with depth to the movement plane and a completely different way to view the path ahead. Another significant change is that where Thousand Year Door allowed you to play as Peach and Bowser at certain times, in Super Paper Mario you can switch between the three characters (or at least between Peach and Mario) at any time, allowing you to combine ability sets. We suspect this has something to do with the neon butterfly and its partner that now follows you everywhere. And as is becoming the trademark of the series, the visual style is incredibly vibrant and interesting. Hot.



Don't worry, it won't make any sense on handheld either

Metal Gear Solid: Portable Ops

PSP

Stealth/action • by Kojima Productions • due TBA

Rather than a spin-off like Metal Gear Acid, Portable Ops is a fully fledged Metal Gear Solid title for PSP and continues the storyline of Snake Eater, six years later. Naked Snake has been charged with treason and must go up against his former FOX operative comrades to clear his name, filling in some gaps in the overarching storyline along the way. The game looks fantastic and has some cool new concepts such as being able to recruit NPCs during the story to form a crack fighting unit (and if they die, they stay dead), but it doesn't stop there. Portable Ops also comes with online play – think a tweaked version of the online deathmatch gameplay in MGS3 Subsistence and you'd be on the right track. Keeping with the stealth theme, you now have a 'sound radar' which shows up the direction that enemy movements or fire are coming from. It seems like a good way to give you a heads up while also making stealthy movements tactically important online. This is going to be a killer app for PSP.

Genji 2

PS3

Action • by Game Republic/SCEJ • due TBA

You'll forgive us if we sound a little cynical but there's very little about Genji 2 at this point in its development that screams 'next gen'. In fact, there's very little about it that even screams 'interesting' for that matter either. Genji 2 looks very much like a cookie cutter hack and slash action game set in feudal Japan. Sure you can switch between the main characters Yoshitsune and Benkei on the fly (and eventually you'll have four to swap between), which means you can pull off some cool juggles between characters, and sure there are some impressively large enemies to face off against, but unless something drastic changes before release we've played this one before.

Historic Japanese Battles = Crab Boss

Ape Escape Million Monkeys

PS2

Action • by SCEI • due TBA

For the fourth proper game in the series (we don't count the rubbish PSP titles), Sony are taking a bit of a side step. Forget catching them all, in Million Monkeys it's all about action and taking them down. As the name suggests, this time you're up against massive numbers of the buggers, and they're well organised. In fact, they've formed an army and are out to take over the world. We'd be willing to bet that Gizmo/Spike/Specter/whatever he's called will be involved too. To help you on your monkey kicking way you'll be armed with more than just gadgets – this time you'll get behind the controls of high-tech vehicles and earn custom weapons, and the look of the game is a nice mix of cel shaded characters and highly realistic looking environments.

Monkey robot - no more to say

Yoshi's Island 2

DS

Platformer • by Nintendo • due late 2006

It may not have a definite name yet, but this is already one of our most anticipated titles coming to DS (or any other system for that matter). The macguffin for the game is that a mysterious floating island has appeared over Yoshi's Island and a bunch of local kids go missing. Naturally, it's up to Baby Mario, Baby Peach and Baby Donkey Kong to come to the rescue. Here's the cool part though – each of these characters gives Yoshi a different special ability when they're riding him. Baby DK for instance is able to grab and pull the pair along vines, while Peach's umbrella is used for extra distance in the air. Unfortunately that's all we know about the gameplay for now. We can tell you, however, that the game is looking great, capturing the wonderful crayon-infused art style of the original game and utilising both screens to give you a much expanded view of the world.

Is it late 2006 yet?

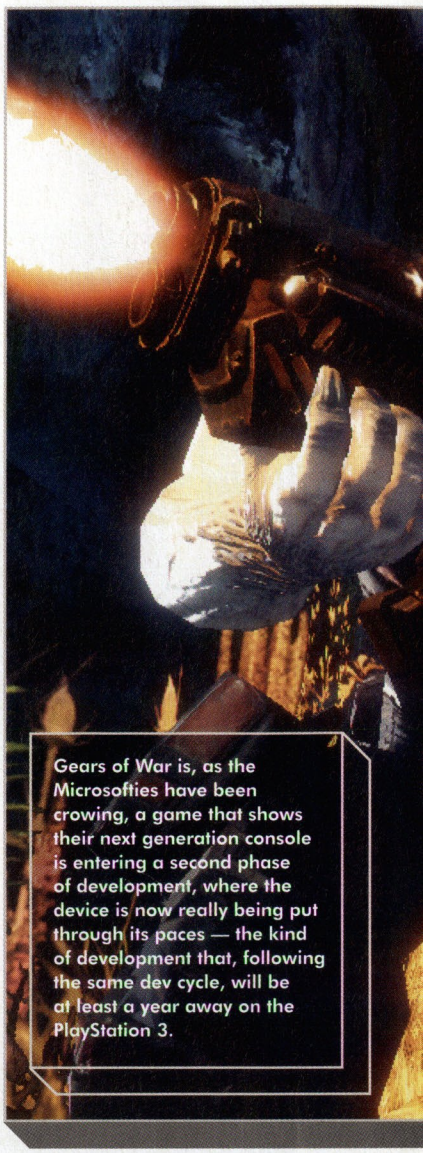
Not really a tournament

It appeared the Locusts were using the same weapons as us humans in the map we played. This may have simply been for demo balancing, and they will have distinct weapons down the track.

X360

Gears of War

Tactical shooter • by Epic Games • out late 2006



Gears of War is, as the Microsofties have been crowing, a game that shows their next generation console is entering a second phase of development, where the device is now really being put through its paces — the kind of development that, following the same dev cycle, will be at least a year away on the PlayStation 3.

Epic Games were eager to deliver something new with the third iteration of their Unreal Engine. Another Unreal Tournament, which, no doubt, will be welcome when it comes, just wasn't going to do it for CliffyB and the gang. It seems they were eager to plant the flag on a next gen console, to deliver a true marquee title, and Gears of War was their concept of choice.

And Epic has gone for an epic. The Gears of War story fits the 'rag tag human squad takes on the too powerful, too numerous, murderous, alien hordes' shooter genre. Here you take on the role of Marcus Fenix, a former POW from recent human conflicts, as unknown subterranean creatures, known as the 'Locust Horde', overrun the planet Sera. That's your planet, m' boy. Best you get out there and stop 'em in their tracks.

Epic's aim for this game is to deliver a fresh third-person (over the shoulder) tactical horror shooter. Not like F.E.A.R. either. Indeed CliffyB is happy to share his influences, with Resident Evil 4 being a biggie. Gears of War single player will be aiming to deliver team-based action that also features some major set pieces that live on in gamer memory.

Sadly, we're yet to play any of this single player in the flesh. We have, however, gotten some hands-on with the multiplayer mode, which has given us a juicy insight into how this is all going to play out.

POP AND STOP

In discussions prior to our session at the console, the Epic crew were very eager to point out that this isn't just some run and gun game. "Pop and stop" was the term they liked to use, as Gears has a major emphasis on getting behind cover and using terrain carefully to make your way through the game. This certainly seems to gel with the concept of a too powerful enemy in the main game, where your typical shooter tactic of charging mindlessly and hoping for the best just wouldn't get the job done.

Here in multiplayer, the game mode we're about to play works like Counter-Strike. Short rounds are the order of the day, with no respawn for downed teammates. There is one out for the down but-not-out, though. If a teammate gets there first, they can be revived and re-enter the conflict — very valuable given the game mode. But if an enemy gets there first, they can use, in CliffyB's words, a curb-stomp to finish them off.

Too small to caption

ROUND ONE: Fight!

Jumping into the fray, the map world looked stylish in an urban, post-apocalyptic style. Teams started tucked away in alleyways that turned a corner and out into the main combat space. This was a small map, which was perfect for the four on four scenario. I caught on to why 'pop and stop' beats 'run and gun' the hard way. After using the fantastically cinematic 'rodeo rush' to get out into the battlefield quick smart, I forgot to jump behind a nearby dead car for cover. I was dead in a flash. That said, the rodeo run is great. You get that visceral war correspondent feeling as the camera shakes while you charge forward. This is a fast run mode, but you also lose a lot of steering control, so you have to use it at the right time. I hadn't. I watched the rest of round one in spectator mode.

Those who had caught on were looking good, and I wondered if they'd already had a taste of the game. Our team won (no thanks to me) and we were ready to roll again.

ROUND TWO: Cover up

This time I used the rush to get to the field quickly, but grabbed cover at the first opportunity. This is where I saw why everyone who had grabbed cover did so well. The A button was a beautiful 'All' button that would take care of all your cover concerns. Tap to grab cover when close, use again to leave cover, or even dive over the cover, or dive roll to the side. Basically the A button was all about your evasive capabilities. Using it liberally saved my ass.

This time I moved from cover to cover and worked toward a raised area, keen to stay alive. With the Bee Gees anthem at centre of mental frame, liberal use of cover was the order of the day. And it was easy while never making you feel you were out of the game. The third-person view meant you could still keep an eye on the field of play and watch for your opportunities to pop while stopped. Left-trigger and you pop up and enter aim mode, ready to fire off a few rounds with

I think he's trying to get her attention

Not Strogg

the right-trigger. Simple. Effective.

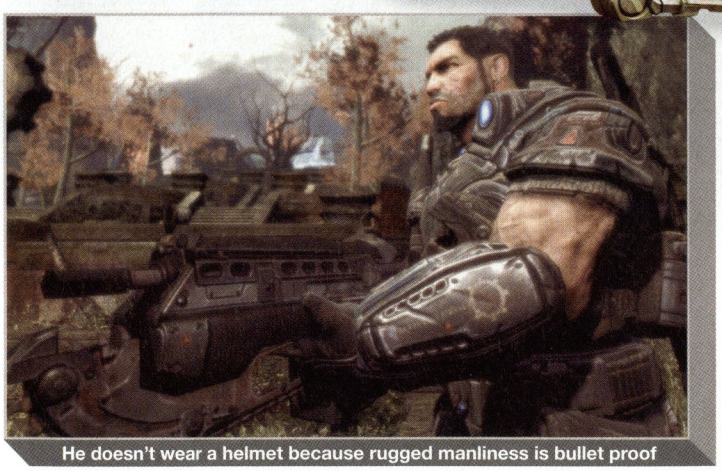
Once in good position, I did some sniping, which worked very nicely. Aim from cover, switch up to higher magnification, perform remote brain surgery. So much cover around, snipers will be a real bitch to spot in this game. Round over. We win again.

ROUND THREE:
Gunning for glory

A bit more confidence and so a little less cover use in the name of weapons testing. By less, I still mean liberal cover, but a lot more popping along the way. This time the reload system came into play, and it plays like a mini game. Hit once to reload, then try to time a second tap like a golf swing meter as you aim for a 'perfect' reload. Get it right and you'll receive a damage bonus on the next clip of rounds.

Part of the pop and stop focus is also on a limited ability to aim while moving in open play. So you really want to get into aim mode for maximum effect, which you should only be doing from cover if you don't want to die swiftly.

Likewise your grenades will only hit the mark with some careful attention. Bring up their aim and a throwing arc appears, showing the rough location you'll hit. It feels tougher than in other games, but partly because you actually feel a sense of real control over the throw. A few practice throws and I was lobbing them where I wanted.



He doesn't wear a helmet because rugged manliness is bullet proof

ROUND FOUR:
Up close and gruesome

Well into the swing now, I was after a melee kill. While some weapons were a simple crack on the head attack, the gold standard in Gears is the chainsaw bayonet. Hey, I just wanted to suss out the blood render quality!

Trying to stalk a foe in a game where you know the gun blasts can take you down quick smart? Running between cover, peeking around corners, spotting and then losing enemies who are doing same? The tactical horror vibe started to come across (it helped that the other team were the Locusts).

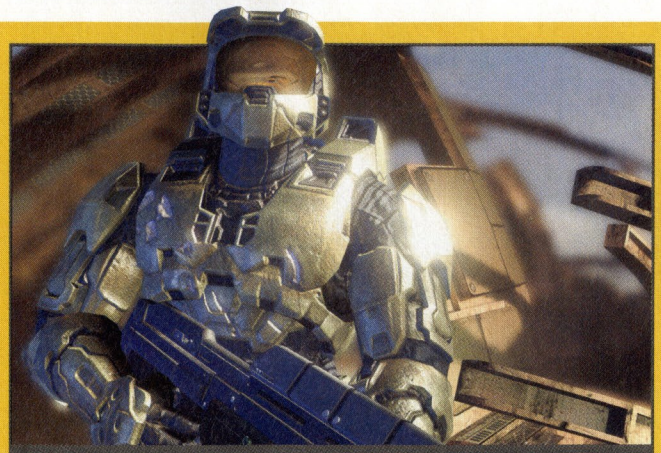
I think I entered a situation where, as I rounded a corner on my mark, he also had his chainsaw ready. Luckily, I got the jump. I'm not sure if we did have a double spray of chainsaw blood, but the gore fest was exquisite. Is that a bad word to use here? Who cares. The graphics were glorious, offering a shower of the red stuff that made for great laughs, without being stupid, while the sound effects drove home the idea you were in there delivering like Ash on a deadite.

We win again. Clean sweep. I hear the other team had their media passes taken away...

EPILOGUE

One map. Four rounds. I was left itching for 'just one more'. Gears of War multiplayer was a surprise package that showed this game will nourish even the most avid Halo players as they await its 360 arrival. And if we can take this as a sign of how 'pop and stop' is going to feel in single player, Gears is certainly on target for claiming fresh ground in the development war of tactical shooters.

Seamus Byrne



Still not as cool as Master Chef. Where's our recipe for Flood Stew?

Halo 3

X360

FPS • by Bungie • out 2007

Halo 3 is set to conclude the current story arc, with the Master Chief returning to Earth where the Covenant occupation has unearthed a colossal artefact somewhere in Africa. The Covenant are at civil war, while Cortana is still imprisoned by the Gravemind, the leader of the Flood. Naturally, it's up the Chief to set things right. Bungie are being understandably tight lipped about this one, but we can confirm that the announcement trailer was in real-time using the brand new game engine. Plus, you can bet that Halo 3 will only get better in the visuals department as Bungie keep plugging away at the hardware. Perhaps the most impressive part of what we've seen so far is the incredible scale capable with the new engine, but you can bet your jaw will hit the floor when we start to see some of the more detailed environments complete with hoopy techniques like HDR lighting and pre-computed radiance transfer.

Mobile Ops: The One Year War

X360

Mecha action • by Dimps • out late 2006

The future is giant robots. You know it, we know it. It's inevitable, and the sooner we get some serious mecha pilot training in, the sooner we, the gamers of the world, can rise up and defend the Earth. Or brutally take control. One or the other. Anyway, as far as training sims go, Mobile Ops is looking pretty hot. It has the Gundam license so each of the many mecha look exquisite and familiar, and rather than focusing on just ranged combat, Mobile Ops is also implementing a wide range of melee weapons such as beam sabers and heat hawks so you can get up close and stabby. Plus, unlike many giant robot games you'll get a good sense of scale as the battle isn't always in a mobile suit – you'll also be on foot with other troops and in vehicles, and are free to switch between the three modes as you see fit. Tactically though, we think we'll just stick to the giant screen filling robot.

It's good to see the war has a definite end date

Age of Conan: Hyborian Adventures

PC

MMO Action RPG • by Funcom • out late 2006

The world of Conan is a brutal and uncompromising one, and Funcom are out to capture it in all its bloody glory. This is an MMORPG that not only focuses on action and battle, but wants you to feel like you're in the thick of it – not just clicking at enemies. From everything we've seen they're well on track to achieve that goal; sword swings are completely under your control, while you can even charge into battle on horseback. And here's another great touch. There'll be no such thing as noobs. Your introduction to the world, indeed, the first 20 levels of your character's growth, will be server-based single player. You'll learn all the skills and gain some of the power you'll need to survive in the world, before being let loose with all the other players. It's a great concept, allowing the team to really give you some narrative, and also ensure that everyone in the massively multiplayer portion of the game means business.

Crom! I've cut me bloody swathe!

Children of Mana

DS

Action RPG • by Square-Enix • out late 2006

It's been out in Japan for a little while now, but with the localisation nearing completion we're finally allowing ourselves to get really excited about Children of Mana. Simply put, it's about time we had a Mana sequel to get stuck into, and not only does Children of Mana retain the old school sprite-based characters and hand drawn 2D backgrounds, but you can play through the main game with up to four other people wirelessly – which is how it should be. Things truly get hectic with four players, and we love the fact that it's a dynamic system. In other words, if you're having trouble with a boss your friend could hop in with his character to help out, then leave when the boss is defeated. This flexibility means that you don't have to wait for friends to continue playing, but you can bet that it'll probably be more fun if you do.

Handheld heaven?

Dawn of Mana

PS2

Action RPG • by Square-Enix • out TBA

Ever wanted to know the origins of the Mana Tree and the Sword of Mana? Well, in this PS2 exclusive title – and the first true Mana sequel in over ten years – you'll be able to find out. Set at the start of the Mana storyline and ten years before Children of Mana on the DS, Dawn of Mana is nothing if not cute. But the bright and colourful visuals come hand in hand with some compelling looking real-time combat against decent numbers of enemies, plus a much more interactive world. Using a chain whip, you're able to whip enemies into one another, uproot trees and start rocks falling. Let's hope the interactivity carries through to be meaningful and entertaining as far as the gameplay is concerned. And let's also hope that Square-Enix haven't forgotten the importance of co-op to the series.

So bright it burns

Arthur and the Minimoys

PS2 PSP PC

Adventure • by Etranges Libellules • out late 2006

Arthur used to be a normal boy. A normal boy living a normal life... until one day, everything changed. Imagine his fright when he woke up one morning, looked in the mirror and discovered he'd turned French overnight! Sacre bleu pants tres bien! Determined expression etched on his lady killing looks, he wolfed down his breadstick, jammed his beret and striped shirt on, packed his "Guide to French Stereotypes" booklet into his pocket, then hopped on his bike, in search of the only people who could make him normal once more – the fabled Minimoys. Okay okay, so that has nothing to do with the game based on the upcoming animated feature from Luc Besson, but what else are we going to tell you? That the film is really pretty and that the game, while looking solid, will probably be yet another licensed adventure/platformer that none of you will play?

Frenchy and the Francophiles

Hope they've got a good SPLAT sound effect...

Crackdown

X360

Open world • by Real Time Worlds • out TBA

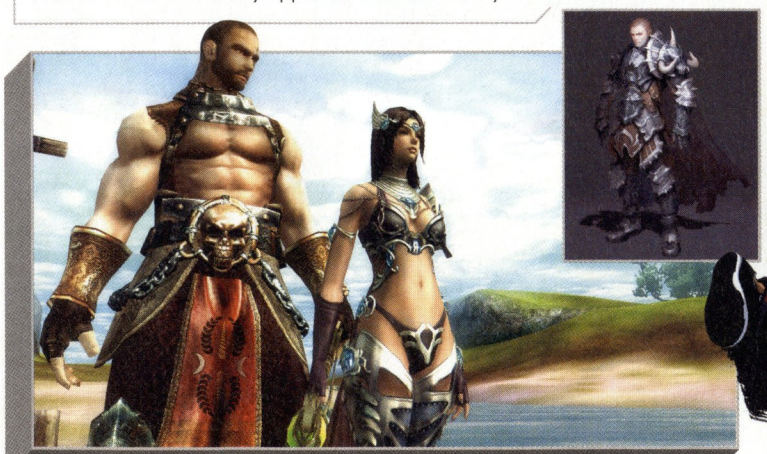
Announced last year but playable for the first time, Crackdown is an open world title with a slightly different approach to GTA. Firstly, this puppy is far more over the top in terms of action. As your stats in five distinct areas improve it isn't long before you're kicking and throwing cars at enemies, running at speed, leaping from tall buildings and doing other superhero-esque stuff. The explosions are big too. Fire a rocket launcher at a busy intersection and you'll set off a massive explosion that will rain debris and rag dolls over an entire city block. The world is persistent too, so the remnants of your destruction remain. The other big point of differentiation is the visual style. The look is comic book, with colourful city buildings and cel shaded characters. We're not sold on the graphics just yet, but Crackdown definitely has promise.

Soul of the Ultimate Nation

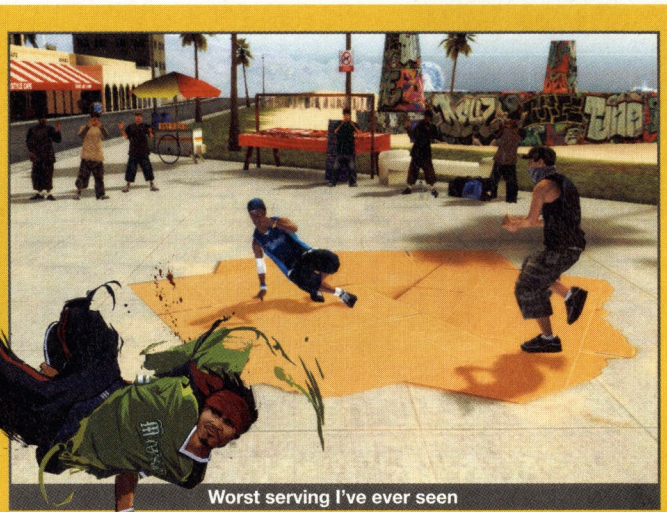
PC

Action MMORPG • by Webzen • out 2007

Soul of the Ultimate Nation (SUN) is yet another promising MMORPG from Webzen. Utilising a proprietary graphics engine it's gorgeous to behold, and implements some interesting features to separate itself from the pack. Webzen are planning an epic storyline for the game, with instanced missions that help advance the plot. The cool part though, is that beating a mission unlocks the terrain, allowing you to revisit it for hunting missions and PVP. Apparently you'll also be able to set parameters before going back into these settings, bringing an element of enemy customisation to proceedings. The game has five character classes: Berserker, Dragon Knight, Elementalist, Valkyrie, and Shadow, and with its combat heavy approach should definitely win over some fans.



There's some practical looking armour



Worst serving I've ever seen

BattleZone

PSP

Action • by Paradigm Entertainment • out November 2006

We would say that this is a reinvention of the classic arcade game, but that's already been done, and successfully too (the excellent RTS remake for PC in 98). That said, this BattleZone has more in common with the spirit of the original; it's more of a straight up action title - hop behind the controls of a hover tank and engage in small scale battles against other hover tanks. It's looking a little rough at the moment, but we're hoping that vehicle customisation and upgrades will keep us entertained for the duration. Also cool is that the team are planning downloadable game content through the website, as well as leader boards and an online level builder tool. There'll be a range of game modes for up to four players over WiFi multiplayer: Deathmatch, Capture the Flag, Team Deathmatch, Hotzone, Knockout, and Fox and Hound.

CrapScreenshotZone

B-Boy

PSP PS2

Breakdancing • by Freestyle Games • out September 2006

He got served here, here and here. Worst I've ever seen. Welcome to You Got Served: Breakdance Edition. Except that B-Boy will hopefully be much, much better. If you've ever played one of the Bust a Groove games you'll have some idea of what to expect here – poppin' and lockin' one on one breakdance face-offs, where (hopefully) you can really run wild inventing killer sequences and combos. Sony are going all out on the authenticity front, with a whole host of famous b-boys starring in the game, including your host, Crazy Legs (of Rocksteady Crew fame), as well as Kamel, Lillou, Ivan "The Urban Action Figure", Crumbs, Hong10 and Mouse. With 40 rival b-boys to battle, a "B-Boy Life" mode where you build up a crew and battle your way to the top, and 40 hip hop/funk tracks we're definitely curious. And if there's a sequel? The name writes itself - B-Boy 2: Electric Boogaloo.

Let's hope Sipowicz is in there

The Darkness

PS3 X360

FPS • by Starbreeze • due late 2006

Starbreeze, makers of the excellent Chronicles of Riddick: Escape From Butcher Bay, are now turning their talents to the PS3 and Xbox 360, and another license, this time Top Cow's appropriately titled series of comics The Darkness. It's another moody and uncompromising world, and is already looking like one of the strongest next gen titles on the horizon.

WAKIE WAKIE

You play as Jackie Estacado, a hitman for the Franchetti crime family, who, at the beginning of the book and presumably the game, is living a hyper violent and entirely amoral life. Now that, thankfully, doesn't change. What does, however, is that on his 21st birthday, his Darkness powers are awakened. What does this mean? It means that Jackie, unlike other 21 year olds, can sprout black barbed tentacle like protrusions from his back which can pick up and throw things around (think the Vectors from Elfen Lied and you're on the right track).

He can summon minions in the form of Darklings to do his bidding. He can create black holes at will, sucking enemies into a soul crushing singularity (see the screen on the right). And he can handle a gun while he's doing all of the above. Now that's a character we want to play as.

From what we know, the story will see Jackie going up against the Franchetti syndicate and his Uncle Paulie, as well as legions of cops and unspeakable creatures from the Otherworld, all in the seediest most rundown parts of New York. And maybe a few penthouses too. It's been written by Eisner Award winner and Darkness author Paul Jenkins, so we're sure it's in safe hands.

A true next gen title, shadow and light plays a large role in gameplay: your Darkness powers are fuelled by – you guessed it – the darkness, so lurking in the shadows and shooting out lights will do more than just build the mood. There's also a heavy physics sandbox feel, but rather than being gimmicky it all adds to your sense of power, and perfectly complements the malevolent and twisted world you're in as you rack up the mayhem with your extra appendages. Of course, having a set of tentacles isn't just useful for throwing cops or cars, they can also be used more strategically as spy cams – send one down a ventilation shaft or to take a peak around the next corner to see what's ahead. It will be really interesting to see how intuitive it will be to use them while also loosing off shotgun blasts, but we're sure Starbreeze will come up with a great system. Tasty.

Oh noes! A non-theoretical Black Hole!

Shadowrun

PC X360

Not an RPG • by FASA Interactive • due TBA

Take a well loved and long running RPG setting, remove all of the well loved RPG elements and replace them with multiplayer only FPS shenanigans and you have Shadowrun, a game that just left us scratching our heads wondering why? Why was it made? Why was the license chosen if nothing about the license aside from the thin premise of magic and technology co-inhabiting a world were to be used and finally why should we care about another capture the flag/deathmatch game, especially when it looks so pedestrian compared to its contemporaries? The overall impression we got of Shadowrun was that originally it was developed without the license and was simply kludged into the Shadowrun world later in the development cycle to cash in on fond memories.

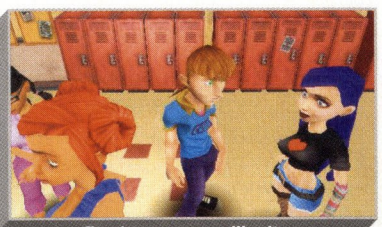
This just screams Shadowrun to us. Make the screams stop!

Brooktown High: Senior year

PSP

Dating Sim • by Backbone Entertainment • due 2007

Will we play it? Probably not. Will it even come out here? Doubtful. Why are we covering it then? Because it's the world's first dating sim created for the US market on the PSP. Think of the hilarity that idea contains. A dating sim aimed towards American gamers. From what we've seen the character models are ugly and the gameplay consists of playing a bunch of mini-games like "shopping" or "having a conversation with a member of the opposite sex". Actually, if that last bit we wrote is true we may have to import a copy for Wilks. It sounds educational and lord knows he needs to get out more.



Boobtown more like it

Phoenix Wright: Justice for All

DS

Adventure • by Capcom • due early 2007

Everyone's favourite fledgling attorney with awesomely big hair will be back for a second adventure in early 2007. While we haven't had the chance to play code yet, we have managed to dig up some facts. The new game will feature four new cases, each made up of two phases, investigation and court. Phoenix will now have a life bar that will represent his standing in court which will reduce when bad evidence is given. The only way to increase the health bar is to beat an opponent in a "Psyche-Lock"; asking the right questions to pick out incorrect testimony. Not a huge difference from the original then. Many old characters will be returning and some new ones will make an appearance, such as Franziska von Karma, the new DA and daughter of Phoenix's old adversary, Manfred von Karma.

We know little about her...

...but we sure like her

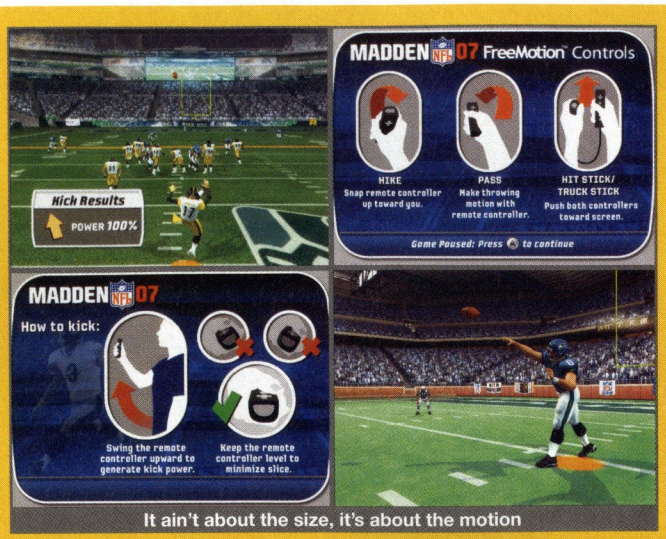
Lunar Knights

DS

Action RPG • by Kojima Productions • due late 2006

An action RPG made for the DS by Kojima Productions. What? You need more information to be interested? Fine, how about this. Players take the role of two characters, one who operates under the light of the moon and uses swords, and the other who is solar powered and uses guns. The day/night cycle and weather in the game will have a direct influence on gameplay. Players control special abilities with the touch screen as well as the microphone. There will be shooter sections as you blast away at an undead army. The cutscenes are done by Studio 4 Degrees who were responsible for segments in Memories and The Animatrix. If you're not excited now then there's no hope for you.

We guess this is night time



It ain't about the size, it's about the motion

Madden 07

Wii

Sports • by EA • due late 2006

Sure, Madden is coming out on basically every console format known to man but the one we are really interested in (and have had some hands on time with) is for the Nintendo Wii. The new control scheme makes it a far different game from previous iterations of the title. Using the Wiimote to hike, throw and kick the ball is a great visceral boost, as is the ability to stiff arm and tackle other players by thrusting both controllers. Is it a radical departure from the Maddens of the past? Game wise not really; you still choose plays in the same manner as before, but the new control system really does make it an accessible and refreshing experience.

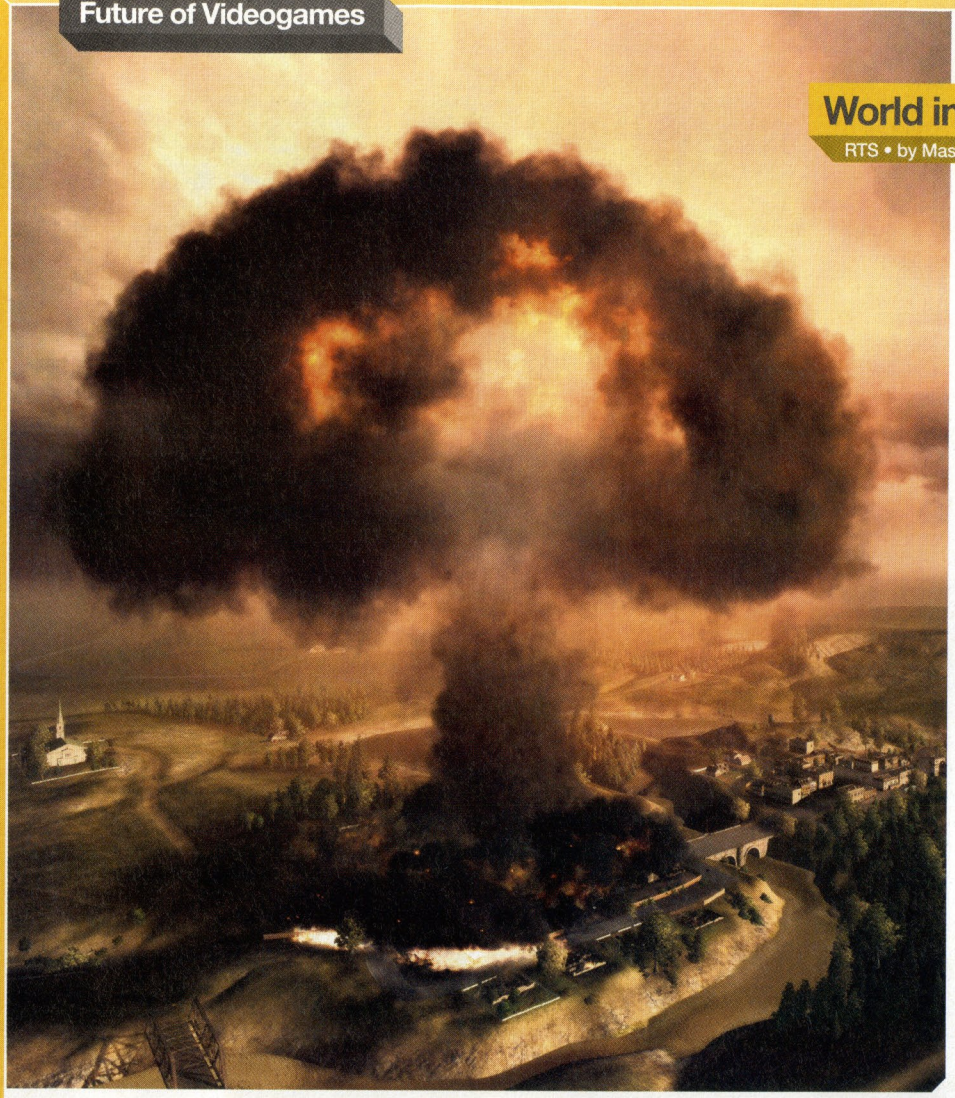
Marvel Ultimate Alliance

Everything bar DS

Action RPG • by Raven • due Q3 2006

Take 140 well loved Marvel superheroes, make 20 of them playable out of the box, allow players to create their own dream teams, have a heap of unlockable content including a special mission for EVERY unlockable character in the game and then whack on some real time lighting, normal mapping and some very nifty cutscenes and you have Marvel Ultimate Alliance in a nutshell. Instead of simply bashing their way through the game to get to a predetermined end point as in Raven's last Marvel outing, X-Men Legends, Marvel Ultimate Alliance will feature endings that reflect the actions taken by the player throughout the course of the adventure. If multiplayer is your thing MUA will also feature co-op, competitive co-op and even the ability to play the enemies during the comic book missions. Sounds like a fanboy's dream.

Not exactly our ultimate teamup - Ghost Rider... honestly



World in Conflict

PC

RTS • by Massive • due early 2007

When is a real-time strategy not a real-time strategy? We're really in the midst of a major spread in what the RTS genre covers, and World in Conflict looks like it wants to further bust out of the shackles of the genre's expectations.

An alternate history concept, World in Conflict sees the battlefront on US mainland post-Soviet invasion — Cold war goes nova. Fun times!

There wasn't much to see of the single player campaign, but the multiplayer (up to 16) was in full effect and so were the innovations that lift this beyond classic RTS fare.

Up front is a system of role distribution more akin to team shooters, with each player in the multiplayer force taking on the management of a particular section of the forces — air, armour, support or infantry. This works really well as far as focusing on what you need to do to win the battle (and knowing who screwed up when things go wrong).

A real winner here is a resource system free of the cloying need for acquisition, control and collection. Instead, we have a system of finite supply points that you can spend right up front to get a fast drop of a full compliment of units. Then the supply points slowly regenerate based on units lost, so you will always, at some point, regain access to that same starting value worth of units.

Along with this is a tactical points system, gained through the capture of control points. Spend these on artillery and air strikes, or paratrooper drops. Or maybe even save your points up for the big boom of a nuke strike, which can have a particularly impressive effect when it comes to turning the tables.

RTS where the real-time doesn't stand for long wait before the action starts? I, for one, welcome the return of Reagan versus Gorbachyov hostilities. Where's my big red button?

Vanguard: Saga of Heroes

PC

MMO • by Sigil Games • due late 2006

The MMO made by the former Everquest crew who left SOE because they were unhappy, taking their efforts to work under the Microsoft Game Studio banner, only to buy back their rights and take the game back to SOE. Is this a soap opera?

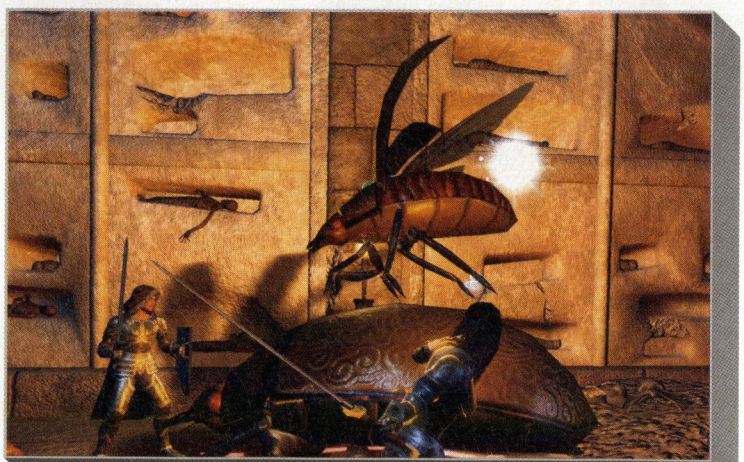
Out of game dramas aside, Vanguard is an MMO with a lot of potential for one fact — it doesn't want to be World of Warcraft. Stories abound of a playtest community that is entirely anti-WoW, well beyond the point of reason. But this is massive multiplayer for the hardcore crowd, where heavily detailed characters and locations are the order of the day.

We spent some time in the character creation system, which is so deep you could spend your first evening just in the generator. Model tweaks are extensive, opening the capacity for seriously individual toons. The devs were quick to point out this is a clever use of a single character model, so the game won't be weighed down by this capacity.

What we didn't see but got some gossip on was the player housing system, which is even more detailed. Thousands of items will be available to make a home, and special rules for house access will be in place so you can mix business and pleasure all in the one home.

More and more detail reveals itself in the environments, which will see weather patterns that aren't just for show. Certain classes might even see their powers influenced by the prevailing weather.

All this stacks up to form a game that will have trouble appealing to the more casual MMOGer. The developers have long held a desire to deliver something with a fast twitch action flair, which plays to a game audience who like their games to be hard. If that sounds like your thing, prepare for a real treat.



Haven't I seen you somewhere before? Last year, LA, around May?

The long journey to find new screenshots proved fruitless

"Cut cut cut. You, in the front - stop looking at the camera"

Hellgate: London

PC

Action RPG • by Flagship Studios • out TBA

Hellgate: London is rapidly fulfilling its potential as heir to the Diablo throne, thanks to its dark post apocalyptic London setting and increasingly polished balance of intense combat against swarms of enemies and heavy RPG elements. Both the third and first person perspectives play really well, so whether you're more of a twitch projectile wielder (you can equip a weapon to each hand too) or more of a melee clicker, you'll find a perspective that suits you.

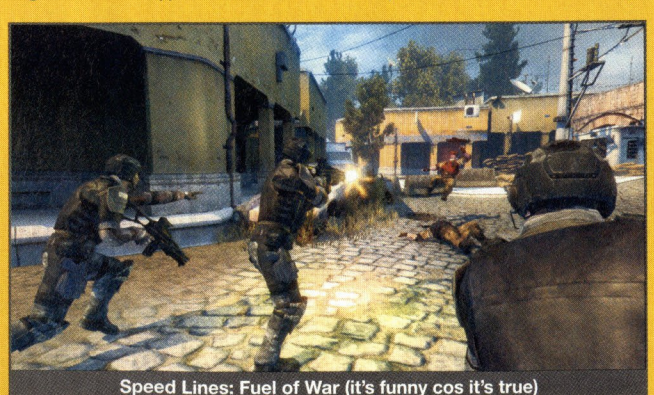
This year, in addition to the Templar class (the warrior/paladin), we got some hands on with a new class, the Cabalists. These guys are more like necromancers/wizards and can summon and control demons and even absorb aspects of the demon, transmogrifying themselves along the way. Also revealed was the ability to journey into 'hellrifts' in the game – essentially short, dungeon-like sections of hell with high level enemies and limited time.

Frontlines: Fuel of War

PC PS3 X360

Open World FPS • by Kaos Studios • out 2007

Kaos may be a new dev studio but with a whole host of ex-Trauma Studios staff (the guys that made the hugely popular Desert Combat mod for BF1942), they're hardly babes in the wood. And for Frontlines: Fuel of War they're making an FPS designed to give you a taste of warfare in the near future. They've designed 60 near future vehicles and weapons, including gun cams and remote controlled drones, and have incorporated advanced information sharing into gameplay so tactical information about targets is always at your fingertips. The goal is to create a game with a hyper modern style of combat that still feels real world. The most enticing part of the game, however, is the moving frontline. In both single and multiplayer games you'll be constantly working to advance the front, which will keep the fighting localised but progressive, as well as throwing up a range of interesting and varied objectives to capture the next bit of territory.



Speed Lines: Fuel of War (it's funny cos it's true)

Do you have Tuff Nuts?

Tekken Dark Resurrection

PSP

Fighting • by Namco • out late 2006

You all know the basics – 35 characters (including arcade newcomers Lili and Dragunov and the return of Armour King), hugely impressive graphics, and the latest evolution of the Tekken series' gameplay, all on Sony's handheld. But there's definitely more. Namco have built on the character customisation from Tekken 5, doubling the number of items you can buy, plus they've thrown in a whole host of modes. Tekken Dojo sounds pretty cool, with a top down map that you must progress through, beating the fighters in each dojo along the way. Arcade Battle is all about working your way through the ranks and earning money by defeating ghosts. No, really. Plus there are the usual assortment of Story, Survival and Training modes. And let's not forget wireless multiplayer! Dark Resurrection is fast becoming the must-have 3D fighter for the PSP.

Too Human

X360

Action • by Silicon Knights • out Christmas 2006

Silicon Knights seem to be putting the psychological scares of Eternal Darkness to one side for Too Human, the first in a planned Xbox 360 trilogy. You play as the cybernetic god Baldur, one of the only beings that stands between the machines and the eradication of human life. The action is front and center in this title, with epic environments and a Devil May Cry-esque mix of sword and gunplay (including, of course, sword launching then shooting enemies in mid-air). Running on the Unreal Engine 3 it's a gorgeous game, throwing stacks of highly detailed enemies at the player at once, but we haven't seen a great deal of substance yet. Fear not, Silicon Knights fans; we're sure they'll wrap the action up in a great narrative.

Cybernetic gods: when meat gods just don't cut it anymore

Ratchet & Clank: Size Matters

PSP

Action • by High Impact Games • out early 2007

While it's not being developed by Insomniac, Size Matters is very much staying true to the spirit of the earlier games in the series, with an engaging mix of action and platforming. Clank will have some of his own missions this time around, with new gameplay mechanics to boot, and players will be able to utilise an armour upgrade/customisation system for Ratchet, choosing breast plate, helmet, gloves and boots. With truly smooth controls, a host of cool weapons that ramp up as you play – the Blitz Cannon, Shrink Ray and Agents of Doom to name a few, and possibly even the return of Captain Quark, what more could you want?

PENIS JOKE!

Dust Storm!

Motorstorm

PS3

Racing • by Evolution Studios • due late 2006

It's been a long time coming, and it's promised to bring a new bag of tricks to the racer scene. We've finally had our chance to get hands on, and Motorstorm is looking good.

Racing has always been an apartheid kind of sport, where only like and like ever meet on the track. With Motorstorm, Evolution Studios is working to bring us the ultimate open format racer, where every kind of vehicle in the game can sort out their differences on the same track, at the same time.

There will be around seven different vehicle classes on offer, from big rigs to dirt bikes, buggies to 4x4s, each with their pros and cons. Within each class, we'll eventually see around five distinct vehicles, for a total of 35 in the game.

If this were straight up track racing, it would be a struggle to see how these vehicles can get together and keep the competition close. But it is in the track styles that these varied driving machines are balanced to ensure everyone has a chance to take out the trophies. The off-road racing format is perfect in this scenario, with Motorstorm using a distinctly next generation physics engine to make the track a highly deformable terrain. As each lap passes, the dirt carves up and things get tougher, particularly on the faster, lighter vehicles. Meanwhile, the trucks just keep making it a lot worse. For the small guys, spotting ramps and shortcuts to keep away from the big boys is a big part of the action.

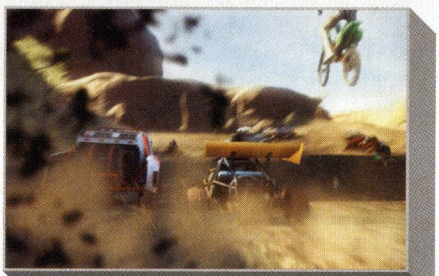
With this kind of physics engine, you'd also be right that the vehicles themselves have a knack for getting destroyed in spectacular fashion. Wheels, engine parts, panelling... it can all come apart given the right 'encouragement' from your competitors.

The hands on showed us this is also one of the most comfortable racing games we have ever had the pleasure to jump in and play. Not really one for the sim fans, but certainly one of the best handling arcade racers we've touched in some time. Controls are simple and everything just seems to be in the right place. In the demo, we were in a buggy, which seems to be a good midpoint vehicle in the range of options, as we had some good speed and great suspension — very apparent as you land a ramp jump that leads to a ledge drop to return to the main track.

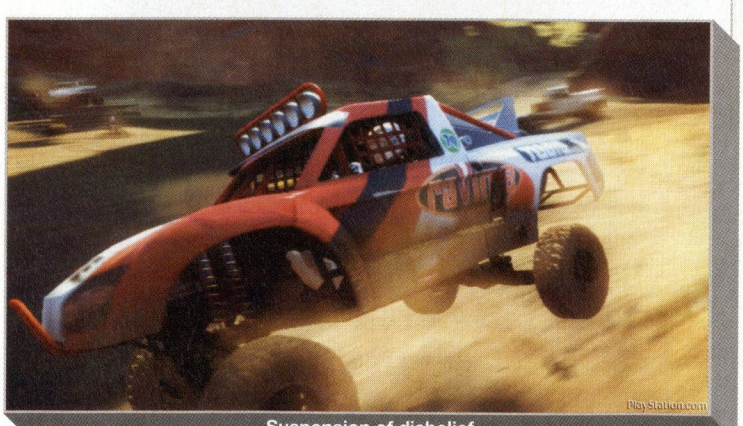
It was also quickly apparent there was a real need to use the look around buttons, as the AI of close competitors worked diligently to send you packing off the nearest cliff or into a canyon wall. Keeping good position is as important as setting a good pace. And you will also find it isn't all about getting to the front, but instead you get more of a sense that you need to time your move carefully, lest you become somebody's juicy target.

Graphics were among the best we've ever seen in a racer. Others may be excited about the perfection of modelling hitting the scene, but this was all about giving a dirt churning extravaganza that looks part WRC, part Mad Max. Beautiful HDR lighting, blooming, motion blurs and more particle dirt action than even industrial strength OMO could get out in the wash.

Motorstorm looks good and feels good. If it delivers on the promise of the demo, this could be a very important launch title for Sony's next gen ambitions.



Particle Physics!



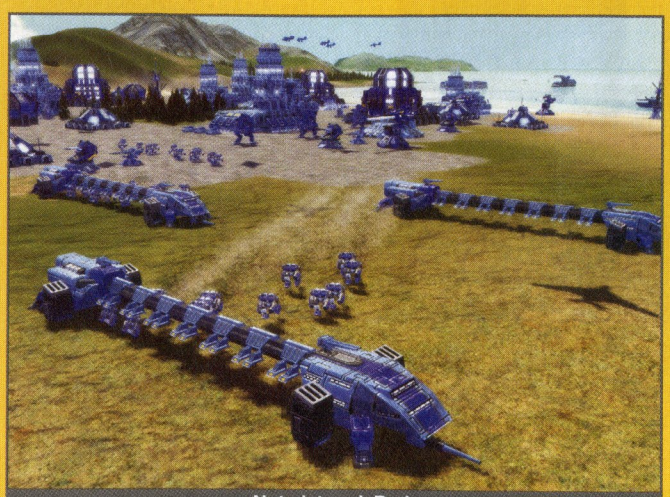
Suspension of disbelief

Supreme Commander

PC

RTS • by Gas Powered Games • due TBA

Aside from the fact that Supreme Commander is the brain-child of Chris Taylor and Gas Powered Games there is another reason to be excited about Supreme Commander; the sheer sense of scale. It's not hyperbole to say that Supreme Commander is quite literally the biggest RTS we have ever seen – huge futuristic battles and a wonderfully scalable engine mean that the player can zoom from up close and personal micromanagement right out to a world view, controlling entire platoons of troops with a simple click, making it easier to coordinate attacks and tactics. And there are nukes. Nukes for every occasion according to Taylor. We only saw one but it wasn't a little localised boom like we've become accustomed to in games. This explosion was a devastating force of nature, not only changing the tide of battle but the very battlefield itself. Like we said, this game is BIG.



Not pictured: Red

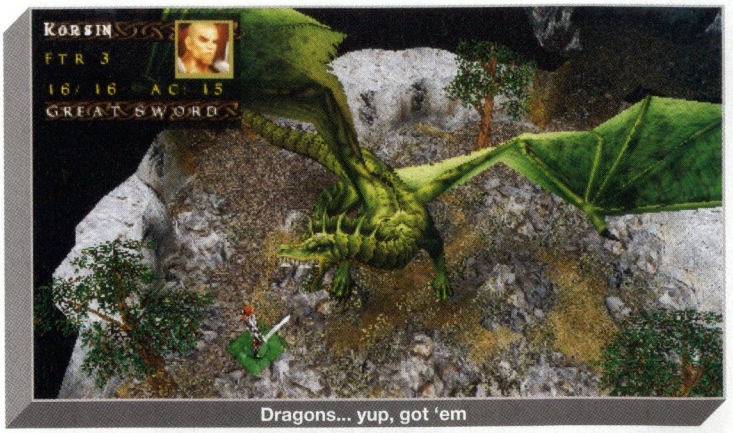
Dungeons & Dragons Tactics

PSP

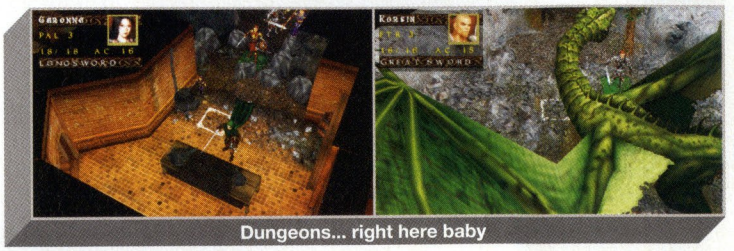
Turn Based Strategy • by Kuju Entertainment • due November

It's no secret that we here at Hyper have a big old love for turn based strategy games. We also have fond remembrances of the old gold box D&D games as well as the modern D&D titles such as the Baldur's Gate series and Neverwinter Nights. The fact that the two things are being brought together for the first time has us excited. Set in an entirely new D&D world and using the full 3.5 rules set, D&D Tactics will see players making a party of six adventurers from all of the available class and race combinations (including two psionic classes, the Psion and Psychic Warrior) and fight their way through numerous dungeons strung together by an epic plotline.

When we saw the code the first thing that leapt out was the sheer scale of the game – maps don't simply make up a single screen – they go on for miles and miles (subjectively of course) making clearing a dungeon a rather epic undertaking. The level of character detail, spell effects and customisation also impressed us no end. Different items were modelled on characters as equipment was changed and massive fireballs exploded across the PSP's screen. Players will not be capped at the number of characters they can create – the only limit is the storage capacity of your memory stick – and it will also be possible to trade characters wirelessly between players. From what we understand alignment will play a very strong role in D&D Tactics. Starting alignment can vary the quests offered but action in game can start to swing the characters to differing alignments from what they began with, leading to numerous endings. The game will take advantage of the PSP WiFi and feature co-op multiplayer as well as a number of as yet unannounced "adversarial" multiplayer modes.



Dragons... yup, got 'em


Dungeons... right here baby

...so this must be the &

Tabula Rasa

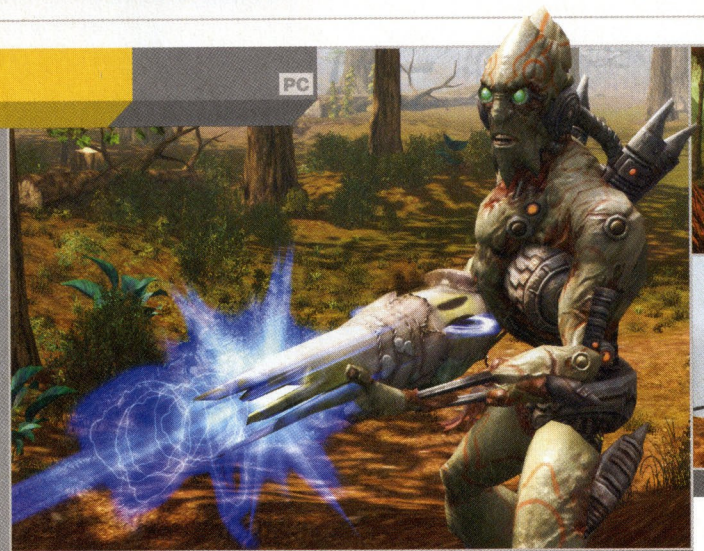
PC

MMO • by Destination Games • due TBA

Richard Garriott is one hell of a well known name in the world of RPGs. The man is Lord British for Jebus' sake. He is Ultima. This is why Tabula Rasa comes as such a shock. Everyone expecting some type of Ultima styled MMO (that isn't Ultima Online) found something completely different – a melding of MMORPG and FPS that looks, for want of a better word, amazing. Direct from the press release, "From the ashes of an ancient conflict, a cosmic war threatens all sentient beings with enslavement or extinction. As the Eloh and Bane amass their forces for the final battle, the galaxy's last free sentient beings are the thin line between life and death, between good and evil. From lush forest planets to volcanic moons, the Allied Free Sentients are making their last desperate stand against the relentless Bane".

From what we've seen, the world(s) that make up Tabula Rasa combine science fiction and fantasy elements; whilst the majority of the combat seems to be using ranged weapons, players will also have access to alien "Logos" powers.

Instead of traditional MMORPG, Tabula Rasa follows a gameplay aesthetic closer to that of large scale multiplayer FPS games such as Battlefield 1942 and its ilk but adds in MMO tropes such as a persistent world, quests, AI controlled mobs and large scale "raid" style events. One of the most interesting aspects of Tabula Rasa is the ability to save a template of your character before making a character progression decision. This will allow players to explore different character paths without having to start a new character. The code will also integrate voice communication protocols so players will be able to talk to each other without having to use a third party program such as Ventrilo or Teamspeak.


We think this is one of the Bane

Even if it's not evil, it sure is ugly

What happens in Vegas doesn't necessarily stay in Vegas

Rainbow Six: Vegas

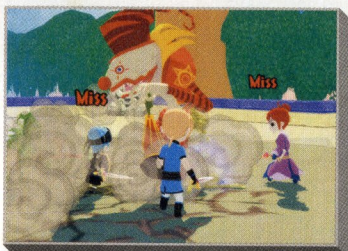
PS3 X360

Tactical shooter • by Ubisoft • due late 2006

Of all the gaudy holiday destinations in the world, or all the Meccas of vice and sin, of all the cities that use more electricity every night than some small countries, terrorists would have to attack Las Vegas. We don't know why the terrorists are attacking Vegas at this point (aside from the obvious reason to cause terror, as is indicated by the terrorist name) but what they are doing is taking people hostage and blowing shit up. Obviously they have to be stopped and the Rainbow Six team are the obvious choice to facilitate said stoppage.

One of the major problems that holds a number of tactical FPS games back is the "hardcore" nature or inaccessibility of the gameplay – for many players ordering around squad-mates, planing in-depth tactics is a little too confronting to make the games appealing.

Rainbow Six: Vegas looks immensely approachable whilst still retaining the hardcore edge. AI squadmates offer tactical advice during firefights or the planning stages to ease players into the role of the R6 team leader, and new abilities and mechanics keep the action flowing whilst still keeping the tactical edge. The level we were demoed showed the team infiltrating a casino to rescue some hostages from terrorists. While the action remained similar to previous Rainbow Six titles the demo showed new abilities such as being able to peak under doors with a "snake cam" and more importantly the ability to tag enemies for your squad mates to concentrate fire upon before entering a room. This ability to tag enemies is the most important new addition to the game as it allows for a good deal of tactical depth but keeps the action flowing smoothly instead of forcing a player to give commands on the fly. At this stage Rainbow Six: Vegas is destined only for PS3 and Xbox 360 but we wouldn't be surprised if there was an announcement of a PC version soon.



Triforce who?

Panda Y Panda?

Project Wiki

PC

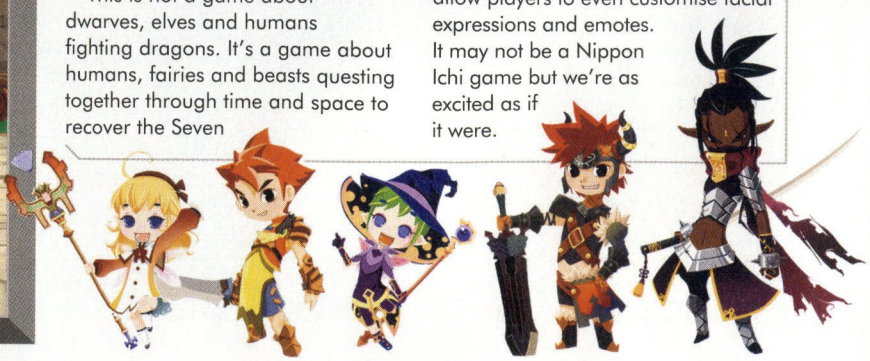
MMORPG • by Webzen Inc • due TBA

In all honesty, after seeing Project Wiki we are absolutely amazed that Nintendo aren't suing the pants off Webzen. If you've ever thought to yourself, "I really wish Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker was an MMORPG" then your wish is about to be granted. The visual style of the game is so similar to that of Wind Waker that when we first saw footage running at E3 we thought it must have been part of a new Nintendo announcement. When we discovered it was not we were intrigued; a mixture of car-crash fascination (mostly wondering if Ninty lawyers would swoop from the rafters) and genuine charm sucked us in. What we discovered was that the game actually shows a great deal of potential to be something different in the marketplace.

This is not a game about dwarves, elves and humans fighting dragons. It's a game about humans, fairies and beasts questing together through time and space to recover the Seven Crystals of Time. Rather than a (semi)serious fantasy world, Project Wiki looks to be approaching the market more as a massively interactive fairytale with huge worlds to explore, monsters to fight and civilisations to immerse yourself in.

From what we understand, how you act in the game will directly influence your experience of playing it. NPC demeanour towards the character could mean that whilst one NPC could tell a character they like about a new quest or the location of a great treasure, he could point another to a totally different quest, lead them into danger or simply not talk to them at all. Project Wiki also promises a huge degree of character customisation; not only will you be able to change the look of gear, hair and facial features (which is fairly common to the genre), Wiki will allow players to even customise facial expressions and emotes. It may not be a Nippon Ichi game but we're as excited as if it were.

Project Wiki: The Lawsuit Waker

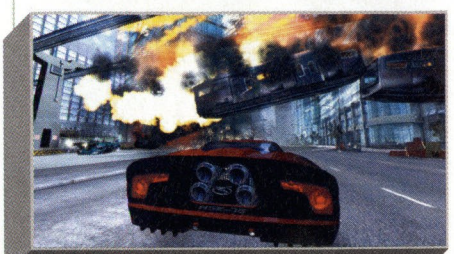


Full Auto 2: Battlelines

PS3

Car Combat • by Sega • due TBA

Full Auto was exclusive to Xbox 360. The sequel will be exclusive to the PS3. Rather than rework the game from the ground up, Full Auto 2: Battlelines looks to refine the car combat gameplay of the original and adds in a new Arena Mode which is in essence a car based deathmatch or team deathmatch. We had some time to fight it out with other journos in the Arena and it's stacking up to be a very nice multiplayer addition. Like the original game it's not going to set the world on fire but the sheer amount of destruction, tracks and fast paced fun should rank it up there as one of the picks for third party launch titles.



Good morning Michael

Genesis Rising: The Universal Code

PC

RTS • by Metamorph Studios • due September 2006

Space RTS is a genre that has been done before but Genesis Rising: The Universal Code brings something new to the table – meat ships. All of the player's ships in Genesis Rising (aside from those bought from mechanical mercenaries) are genetically engineered and live off blood. They are, in essence, flying doom steaks. Flying doom steaks with lasers to be precise. Ships can be genetically modified for new weapons or abilities during play by activating or buying the correct DNA sequence and feeding it enough blood. Disturbingly you can see the new protuberances grow right out of the ship. The overall strangeness of the scenario and the disturbing look of the genetically engineered ships really makes Genesis Rising stand out. Hopefully gameplay stacks up to the potential.

Not one of the flying doom steaks

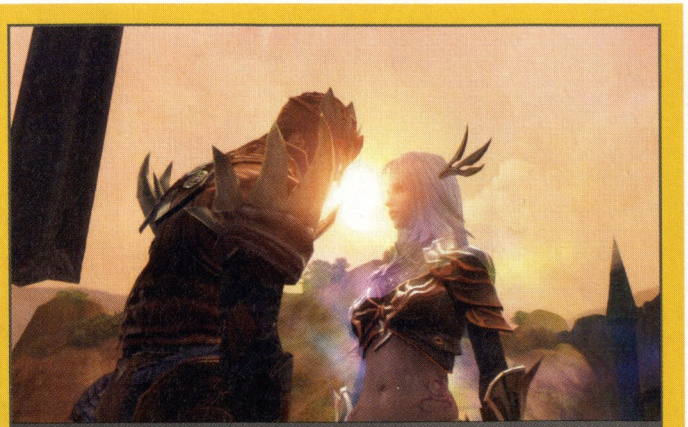
Valkyrie Profile 2: Silmeria

PS2

Action RPG • by tri-Ace Inc • due TBA

Valkyrie Profile was never released in Australia. More is the pity as the game reviewed very well. We're not sure that Valkyrie Profile 2 will reach our shores either but after what we saw at E3 we're definitely keeping our fingers, toes and other prehensile bits of our anatomy (don't ask) crossed. On the surface the action RPG looks very good, pushing the limits of the PS2 but the deeper mechanics of four character simultaneous real time combat really sucked us in. We don't know much about the story but we have faith that it will be suitably quasi-philosophical and full of religious ponderings – just like nearly every other Japanese RPG.

Please come out here



"I can totally see down your top"

Aion

PC

MMORPG • by NC Soft • due TBA

Aion is billed as the most beautiful MMORPG ever and it may well be (at the moment at any rate) – the Crytek engine is known for pumping out some rather attractive graphics. It's also known for being something of a system hog so how well it operates in the online arena is an unknown quantity. In any case, Aion boasts an interesting premise of warring angels and demons with a common enemy, the dragons, and server independent player driven plotlines. Most interestingly, Aion will allow players complete three dimensional freedom; you can climb sheer cliffs, scale walls and even fly – those angel wings aren't just for show.

Mortal Kombat: Unchained

PSP

Fighting • by Midway • due late 2006

We've been whining for a while about the lack of 3D fighting games on the PSP but take heart. Mortal Kombat is coming to the handheld space in a big way. Featuring all of the game modes that have appeared in recent Mortal Kombat titles, Unchained also features the added bonus of wireless combat (or kombat as Midway are want to misspell it). This is what gets us most excited – the ability to challenge people around the office wirelessly and get a chance to rip out their spines, mash them to a creamy paste or maybe just set them on fire with some eye lasers.

Handheld fatality

The Legend of Zelda: Phantom Hourglass

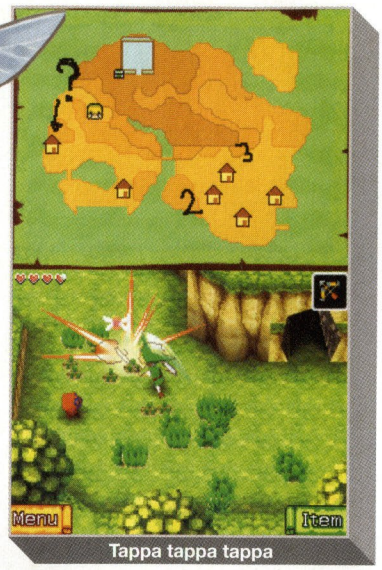
RPG • by Nintendo EAD • due late 2006

Months after the events of The Wind Waker, Link, Tetra and her pirate crew discover a deserted ship in amongst heavy fog. When Tetra is endangered searching the vessel Link tries to rescue her and falls into the sea. As is the way of things, he comes to after washing up on a mysterious island. This new Zelda is not just the story of Link finding out what happened to Tetra and her crew, but also of the Phantom Hourglass, a mysterious object that we know nothing about at this stage, other than that "time grows short, and only the Phantom Hourglass can buy Link the minutes he'll need to survive," which sounds pretty cool.

Nintendo are keeping the story largely under wraps at the moment, but that's fine by us because we've played through several sections of the game and it's the mechanics that are going to make this such an important title. Simply put, Phantom Hourglass revitalises the classic Zelda gameplay as only the DS can. Almost everything in the game is stylus driven – you control Link by tapping where you want him to go, or by keeping the stylus ahead of him (horse and carrot style). You talk to people by tapping on them, and attack enemies by tapping them or by drawing a circle around Link for his trademark spin attack. Keep the stylus over an object to get Link to pick it up, then double tap an enemy to make him throw it at them.

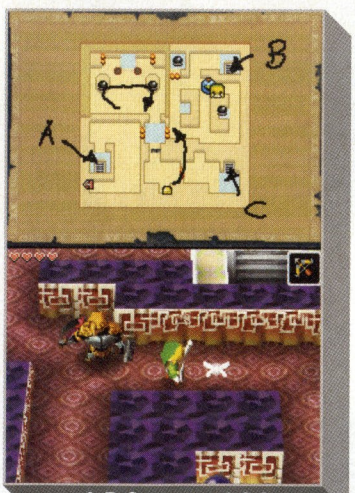
But that's only the tip of the iceberg. When you're exploring a dungeon, you can make notes on the map screen. Normally it sits up on the top screen but you can pull it down, make annotations then send it back up. An example of this during our play was a door with five dots arranged on it – the outline of an hourglass. You need to use door markings nearby to work out what order to connect the dots (again using the stylus), so we just jotted it down on the map. The stylus abilities extend to all the weapons in the game, so if you need to throw Link's boomerang to hit several switches, you can simply draw in the line you want it to take. Easy!

That's not the only example of mapping out paths in the game either. Since this is a Wind Waker sequel, sailing the seas plays a large role. Rather than changing the direction of the wind and manually sailing, however, you can just draw where you want to go on the map and off you go. This isn't just a time saver either – it factors into gameplay. You're now free to use the touch screen to fire cannons at the many seaborn enemies, and there's even a boss we saw that required you to plot a course around him in order to exploit its weak spot – the eye.

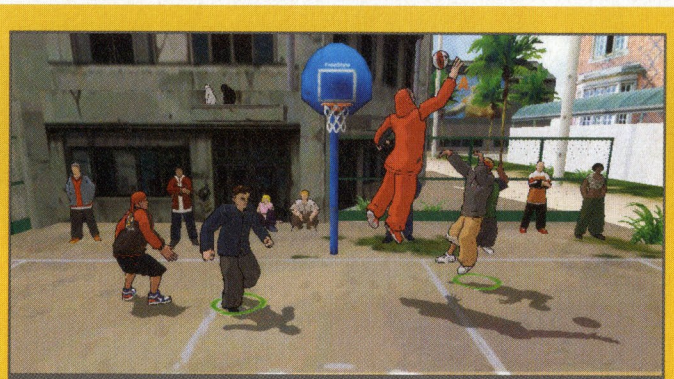


Tappa tappa tappa

Nintendo also hinted that there would be two player wireless functionality too – most likely in specially designed dungeons where you can play as Link in search of the Triforce or control the forces arrayed against him! Must. Stop. Drooling. Factor in some of the most impressive visuals yet on DS - a 3D world with all the cel shaded charm of Wind Waker, and you have one of our most anticipated titles of 2006.



A-B-C, easy as 1-2-3



Way to coordinate the colour red

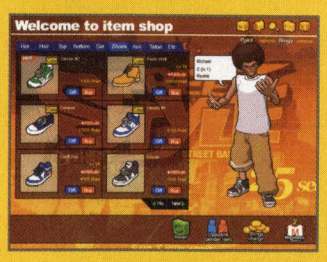
Freestyle Street Basketball

PC

Sports MMO • by JC Entertainment • due early 2007

Take a quick guess at what kind of game this is. I bet you're wrong. Or you've already heard... it's an MMO! Yes, you can take your virtual ball skills to the streets and prove white men can jump (unless you ain't white, of course... or a man). Develop your skills for court time and get your streetballer customised in the slickest outfits you can get your hands on — because I gotta look good when I'm dunking on yo mama!

What makes this a real eye catcher is the way the developers have gone for a cel-shaded game style. Having such a distinctive, artistic flair should definitely encourage gamers to dress their ballplayer for success. A variety of gameplay options are planned, from x-on-x games to trick stuff like HORSE. A micro-payment system is said to be the driving force behind things. Oh yeah, and it is Korean. And Korea plus MMO equals HOT.



The coolest Link since Lancelot

Sid Meier's Civilization IV: Warlords

PC

Strategy • by Firaxis • due July 31

Warlords is set to deliver Civ freaks six new scenarios - Chinese Unification in 350 BC (bring together Ancient China's kingdoms through warfare and/or diplomacy), the Peloponnesian Wars in 430 BC (Athens and Sparta fight over Greece), Alexander's Conquests in 330 BC (take on the Persians, Egyptians and Indians as Alexander the Great), the Rise of Rome in 300 BC (fight as Rome, Egypt, Carthage, Greece or Gaul for dominance of the Mediterranean), the Vikings in 800 AD (acquire the most loot in raids against Europe), and Genghis Khan in 1206 AD (rampage through Asia, razing cities to the ground). Then there's the incredibly useful new great person type – the Warlord (who gains 50% more experience and gives two free upgrades to units in his stack), plus new leaders, leader traits, wonders, items and more...

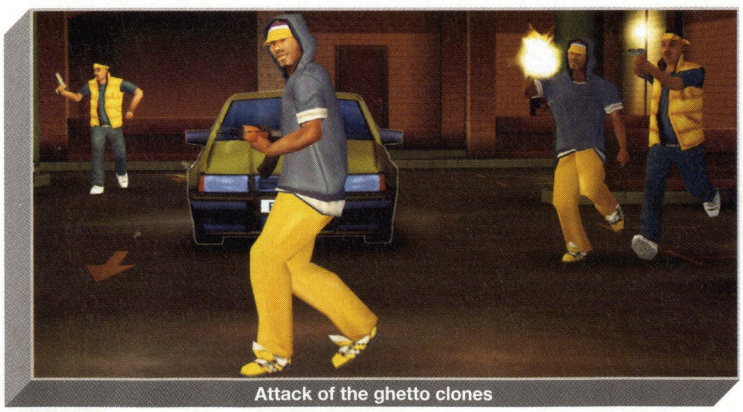
Definitely Civ

Gangs of London

PSP

Shooter • by Sony London • due late 2006

Putting aside our feelings about The Getaway for the moment, Sony's latest effort for PSP, Gangs of London, looks to offer a different kind of experience. Rather than the emphasis on 'story' (i.e. people talking into mobile phones in cutscenes) shown in its big brother's titles, Gangs is much more action orientated. Pledge allegiance to one of five gangs and set about taking the rivals down across 60 missions. Over the shoulder gunplay and a simple gang command system keeps the action hectic, with driving challenges and tactical battles utilising a top down map on the side to spice things up – not to mention the ability to go to the pub and play darts, pool and skittles. To be honest Gangs is looking a little clunky at this stage, but with some polish this could be a great showcase for the PSP.



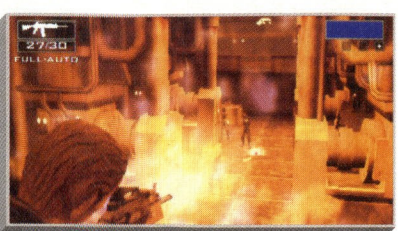
Attack of the ghetto clones

Miami Vice The Game

PSP

Action/Stealth • by Rebellion • due August 3

Sonny Crockett and Ricardo Tubbs would have to be two of the stupidest names ever committed to popular culture, and come August they're going to be committed once more on both the big and small screen. Yes, there's a Miami Vice film coming out, and yes, there's a PSP game accompanying it. In development by Rebellion, you're looking at a – yep, you guessed it – third person action/stealth game with lots of guns and no doubt a drug baron or ten who needs to be killed. Still, it's refreshing that it's being made specifically for PSP, and not for every platform under the sun. Plus, the last Miami Vice games (based on the old series, not the film) scored around 25% on average so the only way is probably up. We'll know soon. enough.



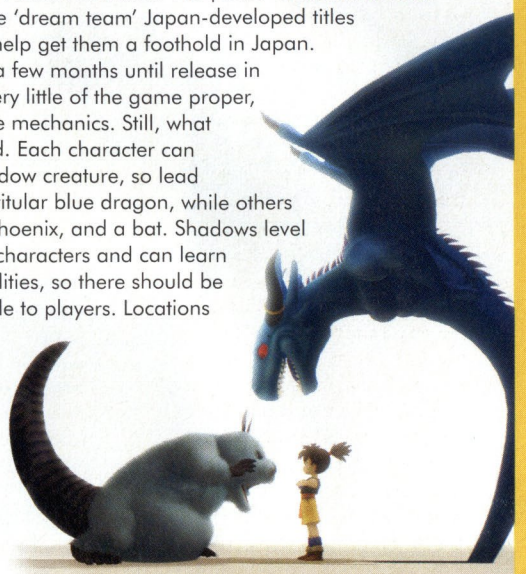
What button rolls up your coat sleeves?

Blue Dragon

X360

RPG • by Mistwalker and Artoon • due late 2006 (Japan)

All the elements are there. The guiding hand of ex-Final Fantasy heavyweight Hironobu Sakaguchi. Character designs and art by Akira Toriyama. Soundtrack by Nobuo Uematsu. The power of the Xbox 360. Blue Dragon is one of the 'dream team' Japan-developed titles that Microsoft hope will help get them a foothold in Japan. Unfortunately, with only a few months until release in Japan, we've still seen very little of the game proper, and nothing on the battle mechanics. Still, what we have seen looks good. Each character can summon a phantom shadow creature, so lead protagonist Shu has the titular blue dragon, while others have a minotaur, tiger, phoenix, and a bat. Shadows level up independently to the characters and can learn a variety of specialist abilities, so there should be plenty of options available to players. Locations we've seen ranged from a village under attack from a swarming purple storm, through to ancient ruins with long forgotten machines. The art style and concept are certainly charming, but we need to see more.



"How come my hand doesn't glow?"

Infernal

PC X360

Shooter • by Metropolis • due Q3 2006

Formerly known as "Diabolique: License to Sin", Infernal is a third person shooter that's actually shaping up to be pretty cool. While a lead character with demonic powers is nothing new, Ryan Lennox can do some pretty nifty stuff. Telekinesis allows you to not only pick up objects/people but to blow them up too. And then there's the ability to teleport short distances – you can even chain up three sequential teleport locations, allowing you to quickly zip through them, giving you the strategic edge against your enemies, and opening up some cool puzzle potential. Throw in a heap of weapons, melee attacks and gadgets, the ability to recuperate both your health and your demonic energy by absorbing the souls of defeated enemies, plus some stylish graphics, and this is a game to keep an eye on.

Sonic Wild Fire (WORKING TITLE)

Wii

Platformer • by Sega • due TBA

When they declare that this is the first time since the original Sonic the Hedgehog that our spiky blue friend has gone solo in a computer adventure, the Sega team almost sound proud. Do they not realise this has been a big part of the problem? Maybe it's been some warped quest to water down what made the original good — fast, frenzied platform action like we'd never seen before.

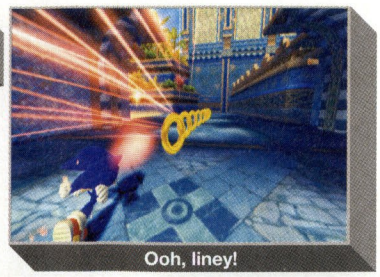
So here we are, 15 years on, and we're getting our hands on Sonic's Wii debut. Here you hold the Wii remote like a control pad, tilting left and right to steer and using one button only for jump. A fun flicking motion gets Sonic up to a blistering pace as well as performing his smack down attacks, which you jump first to perform.

While this is a 3D environment, Sonic is on a track, so it isn't some free roaming affair. That said, it is a loose track with a bit of room in the steering, which makes it a challenge when it comes time to grab rings along the way as you round a corner at high speed. Definitely some room here for replay in a quest to get a perfect collection run.

The demo level had some stylish twists and turns, collecting rings while rounding bends and running up and across walls, where you're in trouble if you run out of steam.

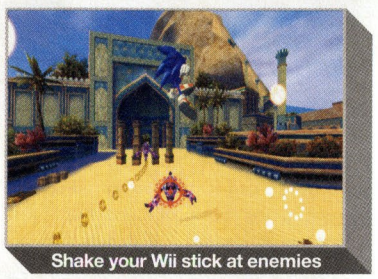
On the negative front, the Wii controls do seem a bit 'so what' in a game like this. What do they really add? Hard to say this was adding something to the game. No mistaking it was fun for five minutes of demoing, but over a few hours we're not so sure.

And finally, we don't care what the naysayers think. The Wii graphics were looking good — certainly better than 'current' gen. There really isn't anything to complain about on that front. When you nail the artistry, who cares about polys and shaders?



Ooh, liney!

Run into the light Sonic



Shake your Wii stick at enemies

Like Pandemonium, only not crap. Score!

Sonic Rivals

PSP

Platformer • by Sega • due October 2006

It may be that as part of Sonic's 15th anniversary celebrations, Sega finally wakes up to the fact they've been on an RSPCA watchlist for cruelty to hedgehogs and they get their act together and deliver a Sonic game that doesn't suck. Maybe even more than one?

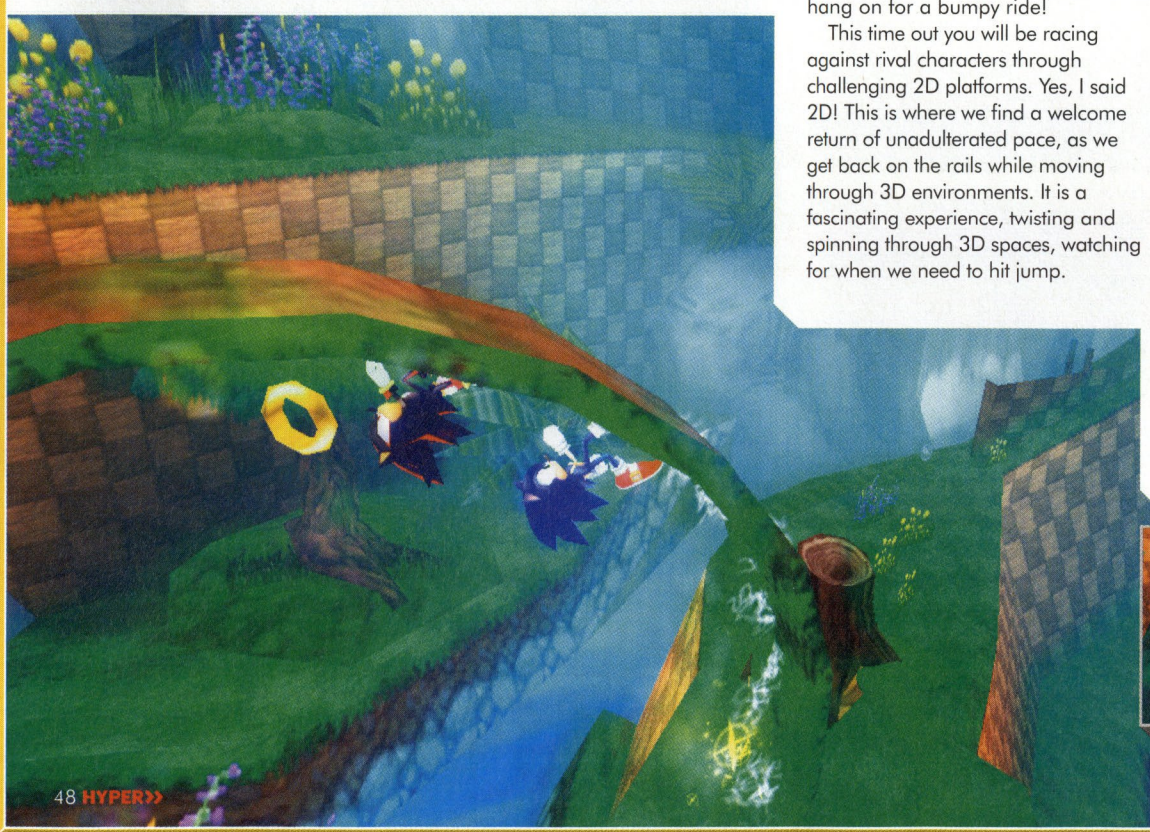
A hands on with this title held a welcome sense of raw speed — leave your finger on forward and hang on for a bumpy ride!

This time out you will be racing against rival characters through challenging 2D platforms. Yes, I said 2D! This is where we find a welcome return of unadulterated pace, as we get back on the rails while moving through 3D environments. It is a fascinating experience, twisting and spinning through 3D spaces, watching for when we need to hit jump.

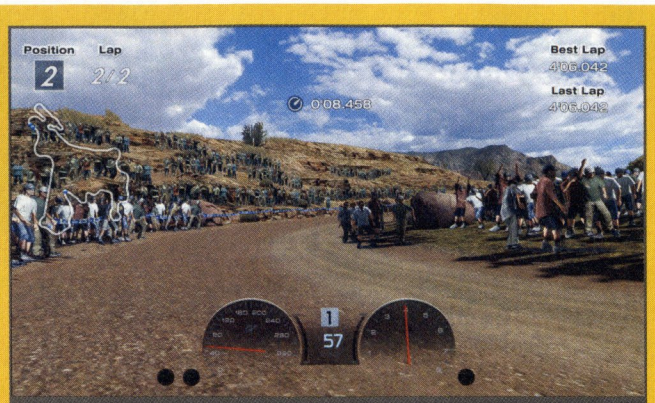
In the time we had, you couldn't help but miss a lot of available gameplay as you sped by. And that's a good thing! We've been waiting to get back to fast, direct platforming with our favourite blue hedgehog for a long time. Encountering enemies, collecting rings — and losing them all — while speeding our way to a final destination felt like we might be on our way home again after a terrible case of amnesia had us lost in the slums.

In terms of the race element, there are multiple tracks within each course, reachable depending on timing your jumps and getting your speed just right. Add wireless multiplayer and you really get a sense this could be fun on tap.

The track we tested wasn't perfect, but even as it was it felt like a game that would deserve a spot in our UMD roadcase. Not that it has been overflowing with killer titles, but with a lot of good PSP titles on their way finally, Sonic Rivals has the potential to be one of the best for that casual on the road gameplay.



"A Bridge Too Fire"



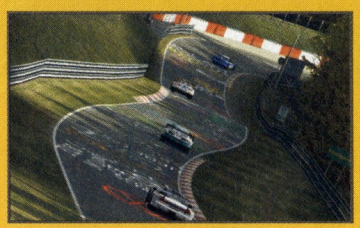
Hooray, another Gran Turismo

Gran Turismo HD

PS3

Racing • by Polyphony Digital • due TBA

We simply can't overstate how incredible Gran Turismo is going to look running at 1920x1080 in progressive scan. Seriously. Think how incredible GT4 looked in standard definition - this is going to be like you're actually there. Polyphony Digital President Kazunori Yamauchi reckons "the visual quality in 'Gran Turismo HD' is 12 times higher than Gran Turismo 4 on PlayStation 2" so there you go. The demo we've seen, however, is just a prototype, utilising old art assets to boot. Yes it looks amazing, but the degree of detail that the team will be aiming for – not to mention implementing compelling online play, is going to be a massive undertaking. Still, Yamauchi san sounds pretty confident, saying that "The wait for the next generation of Gran Turismo, post launch of PS3, may not be as long as you think." We can't wait.



Hotel Dusk: Room 215

DS

Graphic adventure • by Cing • due late 2006

For Cing's latest graphic adventure, players are taken back to 1979 as ex-cop Kyle Hyde, who's on a mission to find his missing friend. He finds himself at a decrepit old hotel, a hotel that's rumoured to have a mysterious room (Room 215 we'd say – just a guess) where wishes are granted. It sounds like an interesting premise but what's really cool about this title is the mix of visual styles – sketched characters meet 3D environments and a top down map for navigation. Another nice touch is that you hold the DS like a book, so conversations can go back and forth between screens. Cing are promising a large cast of characters and interesting puzzles. Should be good!

Now that's damn stylish...

Mario Hoops 3 on 3

DS

Basketball • by Square Enix • due late 2006

Playing a basketball game with a stylus sounded like an awful idea to us… but then we got our hands on it. Mario Hoops is a really clever implementation of arcade style basketball on the DS. The action takes place on the top screen with a top down map of the court on the touch screen. You control your character with the D-pad and switch characters with the left shoulder button, while the touch screen is used for almost everything else. Tap the screen to move faster when dribbling, swipe up to shoot, swipe to either side to pass, you get the idea. Throw in a bunch of over the top dunks and special passes, powerups/items on court and four player wireless and you have a potential hit on your hands.

And 1 Mario Style

Resistance: Fall of Man

PS3

FPS • by Insomniac • due TBA

Insomniac haven't let us down yet, but with Resistance they're starting to look perilously close to doing just that. While there is nothing technically wrong with the game from what we've seen, it just seems like such a pedestrian concept. Call of Duty: Monster Edition would be the quick way to sum it up. We're talking about an alternate history WWII shooter essentially - fighting it out amongst the wreckage of European cities against hordes of demonic foes, with a more old school arcade approach to the action – fast and furious is the order of the day. Unfortunately Resistance doesn't seem to have much we haven't seen already. Fingers crossed Insomniac have plenty more up their sleeve.

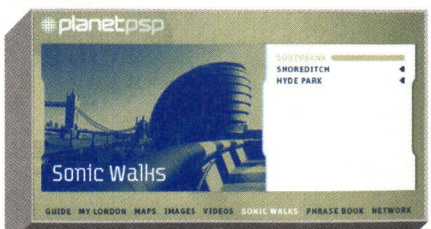
"They're coming out of the walls!"

Planet PSP

PSP

Information • by London Studios • due soon

This is the kind of software we'd like to see more of for PSP. Planet PSP takes information on six European cities (Amsterdam, Barcelona, London, Paris, Prague and Rome) from the Lonely Planet series of travel books, adds a whole lot of multimedia and packs it into your handheld. The information on each city features 250 points of interest – from food and accommodation through to clubbing and shopping. You'll also find info on getting around and finding essential services. Then there are audio tours, video footage and itineraries (both pre-planned and ones you can create yourself), as well as downloadable updates. It's a great idea and it will be interesting to see how it goes.



Not actually a game

Chub vesus Twink

Tug those heart-strings

When Geometry Attacks 2

Super Smash Bros. Brawl

Wii

Fighting • by Nintendo • due 2007

While the big push for Wii is obviously motion sensing control, if it doesn't fit, Nintendo aren't going to force it. And that's just what happened with Super Smash Bros. Brawl. According to the game's director Masahiro Sakurai, "trying to implement too much of... the motion sensing stuff gets a little bit in the way of the gameplay, so... we're trying to keep the control simple as it has been". Simplicity, in this case, is most definitely a virtue, and most definitely a good thing.

FARTTACK

The control may be 'traditional', but there's a huge amount to look forward to with this title, including a number of new characters. Who has been confirmed? Well there's Meta Knight, Kirby's nemesis, a blade wielding blob whose cloak can be used to deflect attacks or as bat wings, Pit from Kid Icarus, whose bow can be snapped in two to create short blades, Zero Suit Samus whose skin tight suit and pistol/light saber combo are sure to get the fan boys excited, and Wario who, well, he has a fart attack... and he's Wario, so that's enough for us. The biggest surprise, however, was the inclusion of Solid Snake from the Metal Gear series, who will no doubt have a cardboard box move of some sort (in the game's trailer he's doing "reconnaissance" by hiding in a cardboard box watching a fight progress), as well as explosives. He looks fantastic too, and his gritty look is thankfully not at odds with the other character designs. The story of Snake's inclusion actually goes back to the development of Smash Bros. on Cube. Shigeru Miyamoto told us that Hideo Kojima "practically begged" him to include Snake in the game. Unfortunately the title was too far along at the time to do so, but now Kojima gets his wish. Cool huh?

Nintendo are still deciding on the final character list – and indeed asked a select group of journalists at E3 for suggestions (to which Wilks responded with "Waaa" for Waluigi), so no doubt there will be other surprises in store.

The Wii churns out some impressive graphics for Brawl – seeing the old GCN character models alongside the new ones shows just how much more sophisticated the visuals are. Lighting and shadows are more nuanced than before, and Link in particular looks stunning, resplendent in his mature Twilight Princess form. That said, the visual style of the game is still very much in keeping with previous titles in the series.

The action is as hectic and lightning fast as ever, and several characters have mindblowing screen filling attacks. It will be interesting to see how the pace is maintained online, as lag could seriously impede gameplay, but knowing Nintendo they'll make it work. We're also hoping that online play will be more than just the bare bones offerings we've seen in titles like Mario Kart DS. We'd like worldwide leader boards and downloadable replays of high ranking bouts. Unfortunately, we're not likely to find out more about online play – or the robust single player component we've been promised - until early next year.

Hellboy

PS3 X360

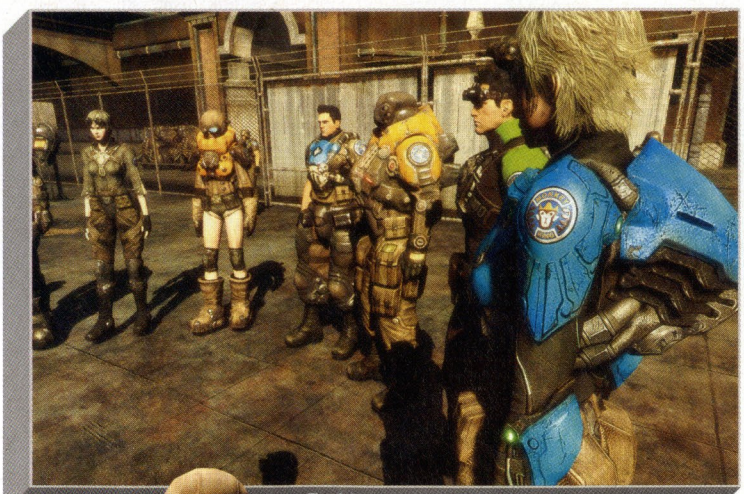
Brawler • by Krome Studios • due 2007

Even though we think that Mike Mignola's iconic comic book creation Hellboy would be better served by making an action/adventure or RPG, Konami and Krome have seen fit to create a third person brawler. With thoughts of the ill fated, ill conceived and all round shitty Hellboy PC game we had a look at the new game – and it actually looks good. Really good. Fast paced, clever, charming and funny, just like the comic book. And you get to beat up demons, Nazis and demon Nazis with the Right Hand of Doom.

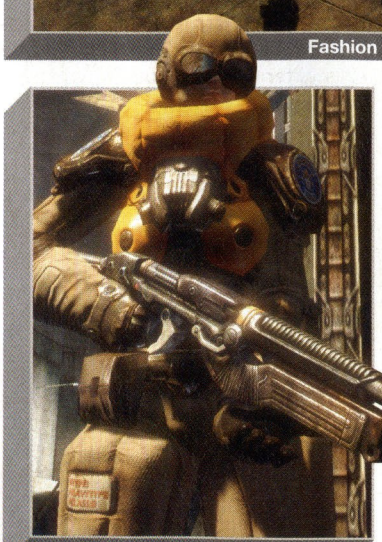
On the trail of a witch, Hellboy learns of a Nazi plot to take over the world (is there any other kind of Nazi plot really) and must find a way to stop Hermann von Klempt before said evil Nazi world domination plot can occur. Basically what this means is that Hellboy has to punch a hell of a lot of people with his giant stone hand. The fighting engine at this stage looks interesting with a lot of context sensitivity and combos. The footage didn't really show off the gameplay too much but from what we saw it looks as though the game will follow the fairly traditional third person action format but add a whole heap of destructible environments and points of environmental interaction. Liz Sherman and Abe Sapien will be available as playable characters in the co-op mode though at this stage it has not been announced as to whether they will be playable in the single player campaign. It has also not yet been announced as to whether the mighty RON PERLMAN (He Who Shall Be Named in Capitals) will be reprising his role as Hellboy but we are keeping our fingers firmly crossed.

RON PERLMAN!

Right Hand of Doom, Left Hand of Minor Punishment



Fashion victims of the dark future



Metal Scarf Solid

By now you've probably all heard of Huxley, the PC/360 massively multiplayer first person shooter that sports persistent worlds and battles with up to 200 players. But did you know that this isn't just going to be a showdown between species on the battlefield, but between systems too? The latest is that PC gamers will be able to choose from two of the races (well, human mutants) - Sapiens and Alternatives, while 360 players will enter the game as Hybrids. It's a pretty interesting twist, and one that hopefully won't become a mockery when control pads go up against mouse/keyboards.

Huxley

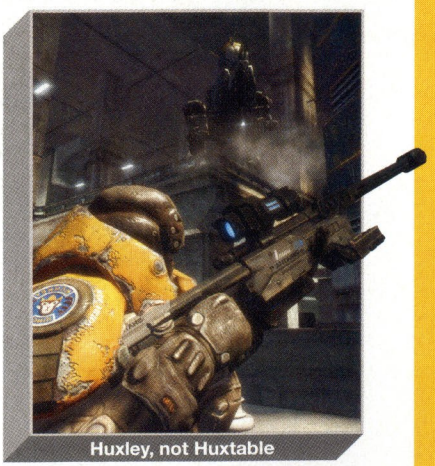
PC X360

MMOFPS • by WEBZEN Inc. H-Studio • due 2007

While the action may be twitch, the rest of the world is much more in line with MMORPGs. You'll have dense cities to explore, full of players to talk to, housing to buy, stores to shop in, repair facilities, banks and quest vendors to visit. And as you can see from the screens, the industrial world of Huxley is likely to be one you're going to want to spend some serious time in.

As we understand it, each race will have three classes to choose from. The first two are the Enforcer and the Avenger; both excel at traditional armed combat, with the Enforcer's specialty being close range thanks to his heavy armour, while the Avenger likes to have some distance between himself and his kills. The third class is the Phantom – the Sniper, and you're going to want to have a good mix of all three in any skirmish. Of course, there's much greater specialisation, with a wide variety of abilities able to be equipped in your armour, although each class will have different numbers of slots – the Phantom, with their light armour, will have many more slots than Enforcers for instance. All classes, however, will have access to cool abilities that will help them on the battlefield. The Enforcer, for instance, can equip a speed boost to close gaps quickly, while the Phantom can utilise a cloaking device.

Players will be capped at Level 50, but the game stratifies the system so that with each ten levels or so players will get a new rank which gives them access to better weaponry/hardware. As you can see from the screenshots, this game is drop dead gorgeous and although still a way off, the gameplay is coming together nicely too.



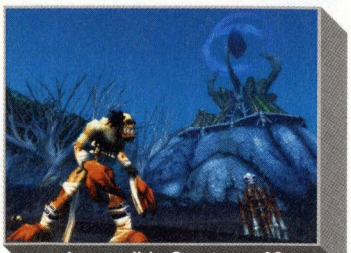
Huxley, not Huxtable

World of Warcraft: Burning Crusade

PC

MMORPG (Expansion) • by Blizzard • due when it's done

The expansion to the most successful MMO of the current era is on its way and having given it a good solid thrashing we can say, quite categorically that it is amazing. The Outlands, accessible through the Black Gate in the Blasted Lands are huge and deadly. Each of the zones contains numerous new creatures but more importantly they also contain PVP objectives prompting world PVP at every turn. The way it was described to us was a constant, multi-objective Battleground with no limits on number and no time limit and we have to agree.



Impossible Creatures 2?

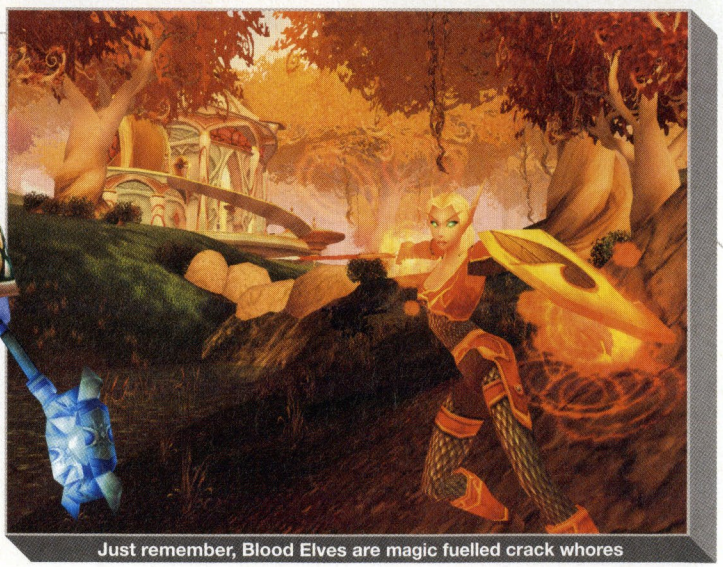
BEDAZZLING

We all know now that the two new races will be the Blood Elves for Horde and Draenei for Alliance but up until this point two of the other additions to the game, Jewelcrafting/Socketable items and Flying mounts have been something of a mystery. The Jewelcrafting trade skill will allow players to create rings and necklaces (and a few trinkets) as well as socket gems. Other trade skills will allow players to create socketable items. These socket gems are the most interesting facet of the skill as they will allow players to customise weapons and armour to fit their characters. Rather than simply giving set stats or abilities, socketing gems will also feature a kind of synchronicity allowing for some quite powerful items; although it will be possible to simply stack three gems that give intelligence, for example, into a weapon, the gem synchronicity may mean that if you stack a number of blue gems into the one item the effect will become more powerful or alternately if you use gems of all different colours it may unlock more powers. Although we didn't have much time to experiment with this skill (as it's still presumably being worked on), Jewelcrafting has us excited – not only will it give players the chance to make the gear they really want, it should do away with fights about who should get what piece of gear.

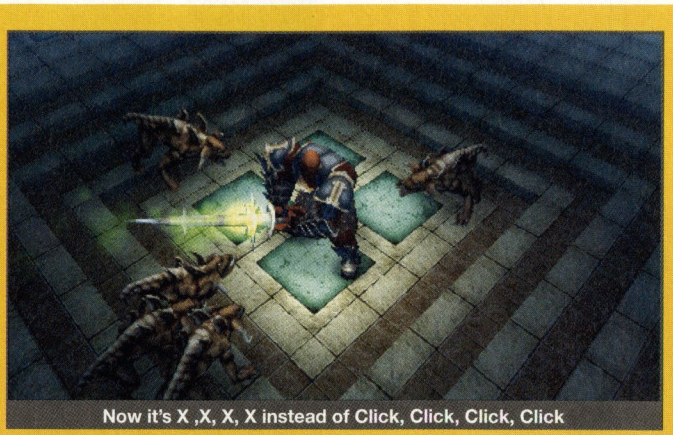
Flying mounts. These have been a point of contention amongst WoW players for a while, wondering back and forth as to whether they would act more like the current flight paths or whether they would actually be a proper, controllable mount. Wonder no longer – here's the scoop; flying mounts will be available only in the Outlands and will be fully controllable. If you see a spot in the distance you want to check out you can simply fly there. On the ground (they will be able to function as a standard mount) the flying mounts will move faster than the current epic mounts and will move faster again in the air. Unfortunately for all of you that are looking forward to getting your flying mount in the expansion it may take you a while; the mount will only be available to level 70 characters and whilst we weren't directly told what would be required to get one it was strongly hinted that the mounts would require some questing and probably a whole bunch of gold. We asked whether druids would get a flying form instead of a mount but our questions were only met with polite smiles and a lack of acknowledgement.

Players who do not purchase the expansion will not be able to access the Outlands, new races or tradeskills but will be able to level to 70 (the new level cap) and can buy socketable items and gems from the AH. The expansion is tentatively scheduled to release at the end of the year but knowing Blizzard this deadline could easily blow out to some time next year as they are rather infamous for delaying and tweaking product until they think it is just right. At any rate, we'll release more details as they come.

Finally an attractive Horde city



Just remember, Blood Elves are magic fuelled crack whores



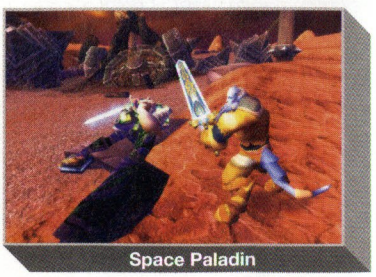
Now it's X ,X, X, X instead of Click, Click, Click, Click

Dungeon Siege: Throne of Agony

PSP

Action RPG • by SuperVillain Studios • due late 2006

SuperVillain Studios look to be doing a great job bringing the essence of Dungeon Siege to the PSP. While it's certainly less sprawling and exploration heavy (no more streaming world – there's a hub system in place instead), the core gameplay is certainly there and the engine has grunt. While you'll only be able to choose from four characters, there's a fair amount of customisation as you level up – eight Hero classes, then 16 Legendary classes. Plus, there are over 16 Pets and Companions, each with special powers you can utilise. The aspect we're most looking forward to though, is playing through the game in two player ad-hoc co-op.



Space Paladin

Cue Deadwood style profanity

Call of Juarez

PC

FPS • by Techland • due soon

South Texas. 1882. Billy Candle has just turned 19 and he stands accused of murdering his mother and stepfather. Hot on his trail is Reverend Ray McCall, his stepfather's brother and an infamous gunfighter who believes the Lord has chosen him to be Billy's judge, jury and executioner. Call of Juarez is an epic western adventure about vengeance, survival and the search for a legendary lost treasure. That comes direct from the press release but it sums up the attraction of the game perfectly. Call of Juarez nails the western feel almost perfectly, from the look and character through to the feel of the weapons. The fact that the multiplayer levels are based around real life events, like Billy the Kid's shootout at Stinking Springs Ranch makes it even more appealing.

King of Fighters 2006

PS2

Fighting • by SNK • due soon

The sequel to King of Fighters: Maximum Impact is, at this stage, looking really quite solid. Characters move quickly and fluidly and look good whilst doing it. The fights seem to play a whole lot faster than they did in Maximum Impact, bringing it more into line with the feel of the previous 2D KoF games. The entire roster of Maximum Impact characters will be available (yes, that does mean that Mai's enormous Gi puppies will be the most played thing in the office for a while) as well as a number of unlockable and secret characters. Fingers crossed that KoF 2006 will have a better boss than Cheapy McCheap from Maximum Impact with his rubbish chainable super moves that could kill you as soon as the fight began. Not that we're bitter or anything.

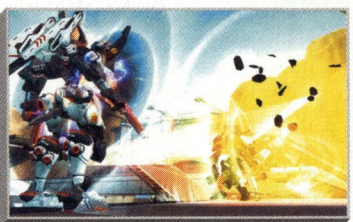
Iori means "Stupid Pants"

Exteel

PC

MMORPG/FPS • by NC Soft • due TBA

Combine a little MMO and a lot of twitch style action and add some mecha and you have Exteel. Players create a mercenary NxG (mecha) pilot for furious PvP battles against other mecha. The game will boast a huge number of mech upgrades allowing for character progress and personalisation. We've had a short hands on with the game and it's shaping up well – the action is very fact paced, more akin in speed to a twitch FPS than a traditional mech combat game but after coming to terms with the controls it's a blast. For those of you interested there is even more incentive to give the game a look – basic play will apparently be free; you will only need to pay for premium content.



'Splosion!

Gitaroo Man Lives!

PSP

Rhythm Action • by Koei • due late 2006

Rocking Out

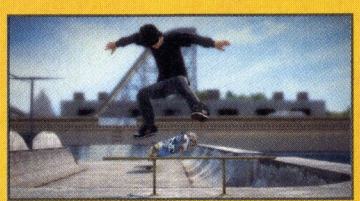
Nowhere near enough people played Gitaroo Man when it came out on PS2 so we're glad it's getting a second shot on PSP. Summed up briefly it's a funky rhythm action game with slightly different mechanics (you follow a squiggly line with the analogue stick as well as the standard on screen button commands), all in the name of rocking out. While Guitar Hero has far superior gameplay, Gitaroo Man is very cool in a Japanese kind of way, with an awesome lead character, a zany story, excellent art and an eclectic soundtrack. We actually think the PSP's analogue nub will work better gameplay-wise than the Dual Shock's analogue stick, and new game modes include the ability to play wireless co-op through the story mode, and of course, versus mode. Apparently the game will have some new tunes too! Looking hot!

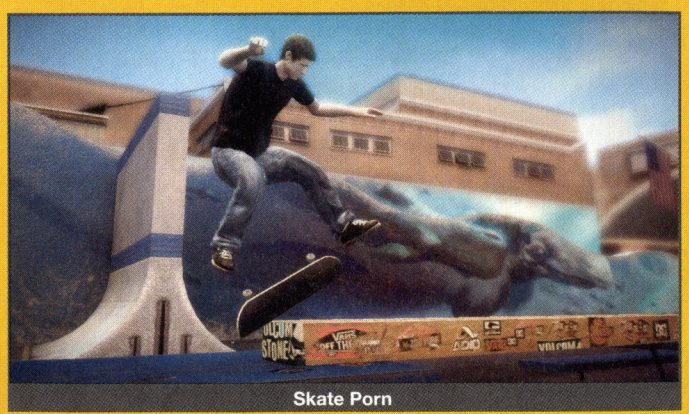
Tony Hawk's Project 8

XBOX PS3

Skating • by Neversoft • due late 2006

While this game will be coming out on a number of platforms, it's definitely the next gen versions that have us the most excited - and that are being developed by series creators Neversoft. Remember when Criterion told us Black would be gun porn? Well, Tony Hawk's Project 8 is shaping up to be skate porn. Not only has the level of detail been upped considerably, but the animation system has been completely overhauled. Any one trick or movement now integrates and blends a number of different animations based on real-world physics to make everything you do look true to life. And better still to make every trick look unique. The result is stunningly organic. We're also really hyped about some of the gameplay changes. Filming videos and following the cameraman's instructions should be awesome, as should the moveable ramps and rails throughout the city (allowing you to create new lines) and even the "rep" system where you need to impress the locals.





Skate Porn

Card games - buy once, pay forever

Eye of Judgement

PS3

Card battle • by SCEA • due 'near launch'

Cards that come to life and do your bidding is the stuff of nerd fantasies, or Jumanji, or, in the case that makes it true, it's the stuff of next generation Eyetoy. Sony's demonstration of Eye of Judgement was a revelation, as cards were laid down on a real table for us to watch them burst to life in the virtual world of the TV screen. That these creatures would continue to be directly associated with the card and the board the card was placed on is intriguing. When you get to stand by this thing in action, you just can't help but get in there and wave your arms about. It was explained that this is no ordinary Eyetoy, but a new PS3 camera technology. We're actually hoping the big funky arm the camera in our demo was mounted on will be part of the final available solution.

A big part of the idea behind this is a kind of multiplayer card game, which will "probably" be available for play online via two of these Extreme Edition Eyetoys. No, we just made that name up. Catchy though, eh?

When you buy the game, Eye of Judgement comes with 30 cards — 15 creatures and 15 lands. 100 cards are planned, which we can assume will be available for purchase like most customisable card games on the market today. This is a game of strategy and tactics. With creatures aided or hindered by certain kinds of terrain, attack and defence must be planned carefully. At this stage we're not entirely sure what is to be attacked or defended, apart from your creatures, but there is no mistaking this is a catchy concept title that looks well placed to bridge the gap between the virtual and real customisable card game markets.

More interesting than Magic

It's no Monkey Bowling... but then, what is?

Super Monkey Ball Banana Blitz

Wii

Monkey cruelty • by Sega • due late 2006

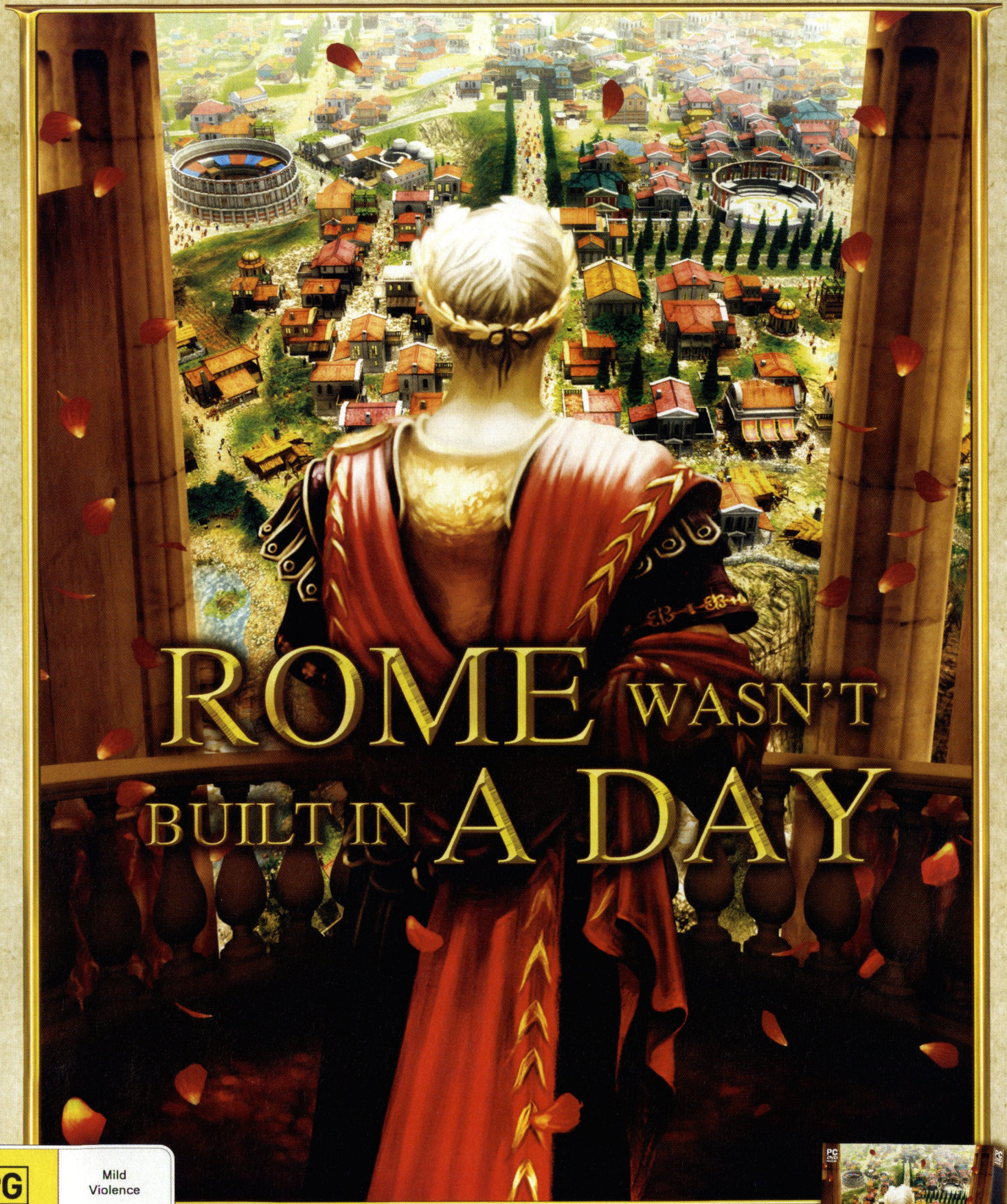
Ready to roll that hamster, err, monkey ball one more time? They've put the band back together for a fresh new outing on the Wii, with puzzles, platforms, and party games to test your resolve against the forces of cuteness. Of course, you now have a new way of getting involved with the action thanks to the Wii remote.

Tilting to steer was one thing, but gesturing upward to jump was an interesting mechanic that is sure to change what you previously knew about rolling a monkey ball. But it was certainly in the thick of the party game modes that the Wii remote delivered on its promise, not unlike the way it has been showcased by demos of Wii Sports and WarioWare. A stand out was the hammer throw game, where you twirl the remote — awkwardly, it must be said, but this is all a new experience — and look to fling it forward at the right moment to send it flying.

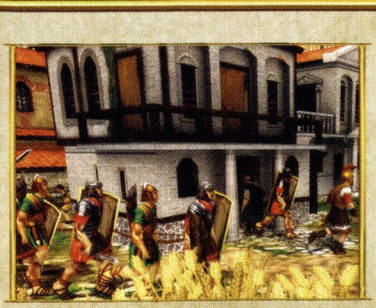
The Wii feels like it hits its stride when you enter the arena of multiplayer party games. When you stand there doing awkward things by yourself, you feel a bit stupid. We're sure that feeling will pass once we've been doing this a while. At least, we hope so. But once you get a few people together and you start waving your arms around, it feels like you're doing some kind of mute karaoke, where it no longer matters what you look like, you just have to follow along to the beat of the screen.

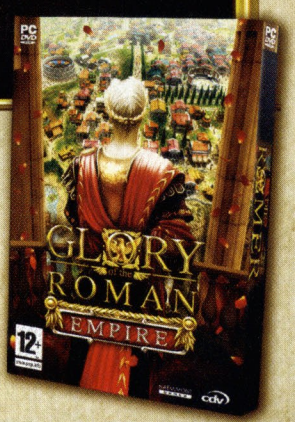
Along with the sporty stuff touched on above, there are ring toss games and even some whack-a-mole action. Super Monkey Ball might have found its spiritual home here on the Wii.

Yep, definitely Monkey Ball



PG Mild Violence





"Glory of the Roman Empire: ...the animations and the level of detail are spectacular!" GameSpy.com April 3, 2006

PC DVD ROM

HAEMIMONT GAMES

www.glory-of-rome.com

JULY MMVI (2006)

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Nerd Versus Nerd

Films Based On Games: The Critics Speak

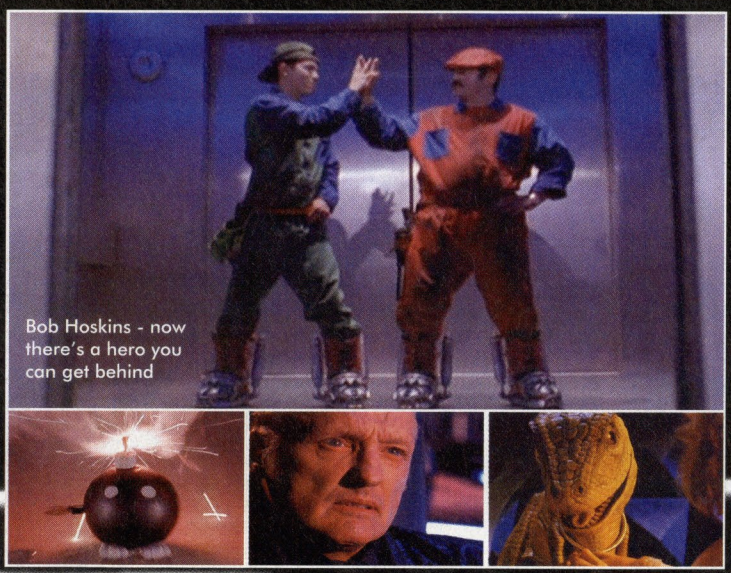
Ben "Yahtzee" Croshaw puts his twin personalities to good use...

In 2001 a film about boobs came out, called Tomb Raider. In this film, some plucky boobs bounced and jiggled playfully while the lady they were attached to sought to put herself into positions that would create the most efficient and aesthetic displays of boob wobble. Upon its release, large numbers of people who enjoy boobs flocked to cinemas worldwide in order to view the boob extravaganza.

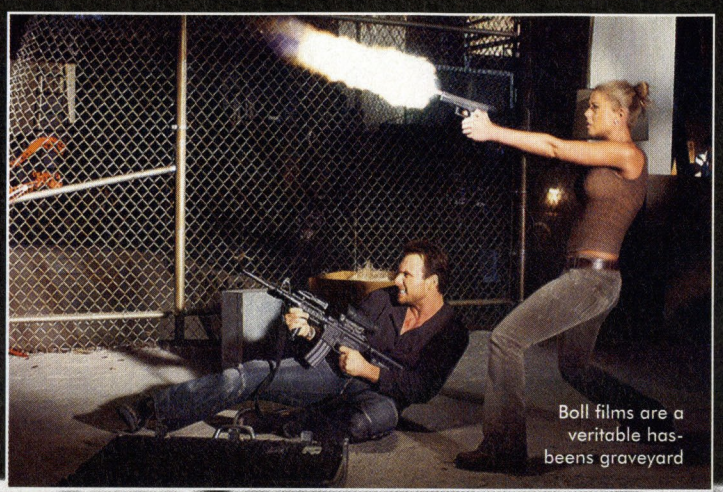
The people who run Hollywood are too busy shouting into cell phones and sitting around pools full of bikini girls to think properly and as such use a different form of logic to everyone else. And so when the boob fans paid lots of boob money to see the boob film, a lot of Hollywood producers concluded that people really like films based on videogames, and endeavoured to make a crapload more in the hope that the law of diminishing returns might not prove accurate for once.

I think it's pretty safe to say that the parade of videogame based movies going through cinemas of late have been at best mediocre and at worst a crushing judo chop to the groin for fans and casual cinemagoers alike. But is this really a fair statement? After all, having already played the games, we had preconceptions and expectations that made us biased. If we could free ourselves of these and judge the films by their own standards, perhaps we could re-assess them.

I will run through a random selection of videogame movies ('random' meaning 'whichever ones I could find at my local rental shop') and give brief capsule reviews firstly from the point of view of a gamer and secondly from that of a film nerd, forcing myself to forget everything I already know about the games on which they are based. Hopefully this way we can go back over a few crucified films and either reprieve them or hammer in a few more nails.



Bob Hoskins - now there's a hero you can get behind



Boll films are a veritable has-beens graveyard

Super Mario Brothers

Game Nerd

I think everyone with even the slightest knowledge of the Mario Brothers games had a preconception against this film, because a somewhat sparsely-plotted 2D platformer is second only to Pac-Man in terms of bloody stupid things to make major Hollywood movies about. But what the hell, right? They made a cartoon series, why not make a film about the bright, colourful and cheery Mushroom Kingdom? Except somewhere along the way 'bright, colourful and cheery' became 'dark, gritty and industrial' and 'Mushroom Kingdom' became 'evil parallel universe where man evolved from dinosaurs or something'. The end result was Super Mario Brothers in name only, no better than overdubbing the dialogue in The Shawshank Redemption and reselling it as a Dig Dug film.

3/10

Film Nerd

Mentally disregard the tenuous references to the games and it's actually a pretty entertaining fantasy adventure with a refreshingly original premise. With the fabulous Bob Hoskins capering around in red dungarees on one side and Dennis Hopper channelling Frank from Blue Velvet on the other you've got some great performances on both ends of the moral spectrum. Change the names, switch the dungarees for tuxedos or something and they could have resold this as 'Dinosaur Plumbing Excitement' and been the next big thing.

8/10

Alone in the Dark

Game Nerd

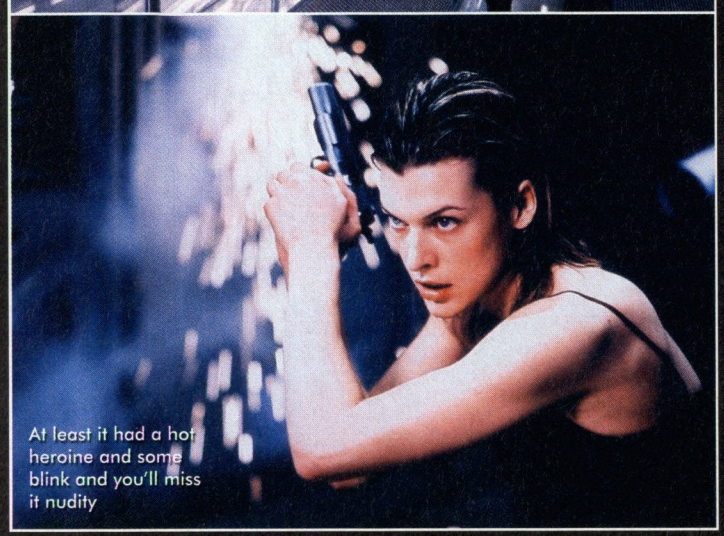
This was the only Uwe Boll film I could find on the shelf, and I suppose we should thank heaven for small mercies. Uwe Boll is the German director who has bought up all the game licenses he can get his grimy little arms around and proceeded to violate them with fistfuls of bloodstained money, and Alone in the Dark is a prime example of his methods. His approach to adapting a lucrative game license involves taking the names of the main characters and sticking them on the main characters of a mediocre action film that is an adaptation of the game in the same way that a picture of a horse drawn out in urine on a patch of snow is an adaptation of Black Beauty.

0/10

Film Nerd

Uwe Boll seems to subscribe to the 'dog's dinner' school of filmmaking, in that he has a tendency to throw everything in and make a huge mess. In Alone in the Dark we're introduced to our macho hero with a dark secret past, wearing a leather trenchcoat and black wifebeater, who gets into a car chase and a gunfight within about forty-five seconds of entering the film. Before long he's met and banged the female lead so that the two of them can go on a globe-trotting adventure involving some mystical archaeological artefacts, some monsters, and an evil British scientist. Some things get exploded for no reason, and the whole thing unwinds with a dreadful sense of inevitability. Sort of what you'd get if you took the cast and crew of an Indiana Jones film and beat them severely about the head with planks throughout the entire production.

1/10



At least it had a hot heroine and some blink and you'll miss it nudity

Resident Evil

Game Nerd

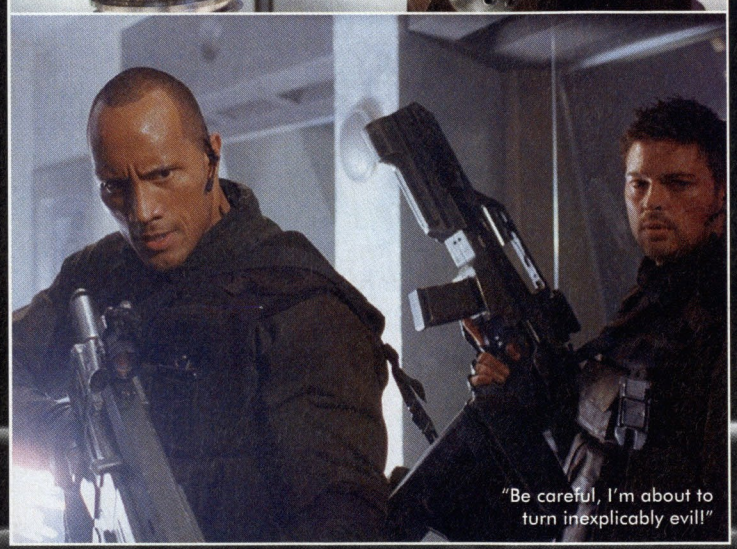
Paul W. S. Anderson is second only to Uwe Boll in his attachment to videogame movies, having directed all the Resident Evils, the first Mortal Kombat and Alien Vs. Predator. In the first Resident Evil film, Raccoon City and the Umbrella Corporation are there, but he invents a cast of all-new characters for us to not care about in the slightest. He gives way to the fans in time for the sequel, though, when Jill Valentine and Nemesis show up, and I guess once you have those two and a whole bunch of zombies there is little for the game nerd to complain about. Remembering to put in dog zombies is probably worth an extra point, too.

7/10

Film Nerd

I guess it has some interesting ideas, but really, if you've ever seen Alien, or The Thing, or indeed any film where a group of people are trapped somewhere with something nasty, then you've seen Resident Evil. It's the standard delete-as-appropriate plot summary: A group of people with at least two individuals belonging to minority groups are trapped inside an underground bunker / space station / undersea complex, and are being stalked by some kind of horrible monster(s). They've only got a certain amount of time before the whole place seals shut / explodes / floods and they're working against the odds. On the way, one of their number becomes / turns out to be evil. The cast are killed by the monster(s) in ascending order of importance until only one or two of the heroes and the evil guy remain. The evil guy is elaborately killed by the hero who once trusted him / the monster(s) he hoped to manipulate and the hero(es) escape with seconds to spare.

5/10



"Be careful, I'm about to turn inexplicably evil!"

Doom

Game Nerd

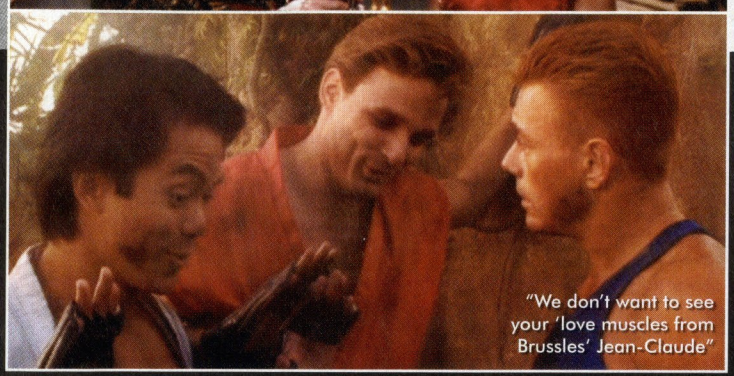
Yeah, okay, guys, you're going to make a Doom film but it's not going to have anything to do with Hell? Good luck with that. I'll be sure to bring my popcorn that I make from bits of polystyrene packing material. Doom without Hell is like a skyscraper with the bottom three floors missing; you can make it look as impressive as you want, but it's not going to stand up. And then, after taking out Hell, they think they can make it up to us by including the BFG 9000 and naming some of the minor characters after some of Doom's original development team. It's like kicking us in the groin, then apologising by doing it again.

1/10

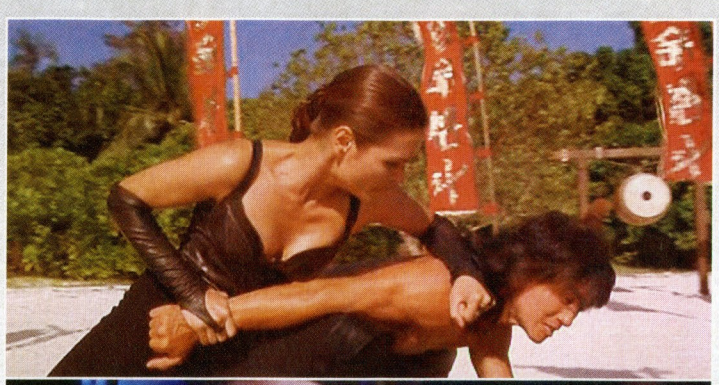
Film Nerd

A group of people with at least two individuals belonging to minority groups are trapped inside a space station, and are being stalked by some kind of horrible monster(s). They've only got a certain amount of time before the whole place seals shut and they're working against the odds. On the way, one of their number becomes evil. The cast are killed by the monster(s) in ascending order of importance until only one or two of the heroes and the evil guy remain. The evil guy is elaborately killed by the hero who once trusted him and the hero(es) escape with seconds to spare.

2/10



"We don't want to see your 'love muscles from Brussles' Jean-Claude"



"Talk to the hand"

Street Fighter

Game Nerd

Writer/director Stephen de Souza probably set off on this film with the best of intentions. Judging by the large number of characters he attempted to crowbar into his opus, he seemed to have a genuine desire to make something fans of the games would enjoy. Unfortunately he either didn't know or didn't care that all those characters already had backstories, because for the film he made up completely new ones and in a stroke alienated pretty much his entire potential audience. Do yourself a favour and catch the anime movie instead. It might look like all the characters suffer from elephantisis of the muscular system but at least you get to see Chun Li in the shower.

1/10

Film Nerd

Deliberately forgetting that this film is based on the game raises all sorts of problems, because like I said the director really seemed to have his sights on the fans for this one. If you've never heard of the games then watching the film raises awkward questions, like 'Why are ten million main characters introduced and given about five seconds each for characterisation?' 'Why do they keep shouting out the names of their martial arts moves when they execute them?' and 'Why is this film called Street Fighter when no one fights in any streets?'. That said, Raul Julia's performance as M Bison lights up the screen, even if he does look like a member of the Royal Shakespeare Company starring in a high school production of Peter Pan.

3/10

Mortal Kombat

Game Nerd

It's another Paul W. S. Anderson film, but this time he actually sticks with the existing material and makes a very faithful adaptation of the games. Having said that, though, the plot of the games rarely extends beyond 'a bunch of dudes come and have a fight' and so being faithful is pretty easy. They could have set the film in an office building or a women's shower room and no-one would have complained as long as a bunch of dudes came and had a fight. And making the characters faithful to the games wasn't hard either, not when most of them can be summed up with short phrases like 'blue ninja' and 'yellow dead ninja'. Also, a guy says 'Flawless victory' at one point, which is kind of cool.

7/10

Film Nerd

Little to complain about here. Christopher Lambert is on top form as an aloof thunder god. The four-armed Goro actually looks convincing. The plot is solid and consistent, even if it borrows from Enter the Dragon somewhat. But it's difficult to criticise this film because it's a martial arts flick, and martial arts flicks operate under a whole different set of standards. Yeah, maybe the make-up's really good and the lighting is unusually well-arranged but the only thing that matters is, do people flip out and go kung fu nuts in a variety of interesting ways, and do other people get wrecked up in the process? By this criteria, Mortal Kombat is a good film. Let's move on and forget the sequel ever happened.

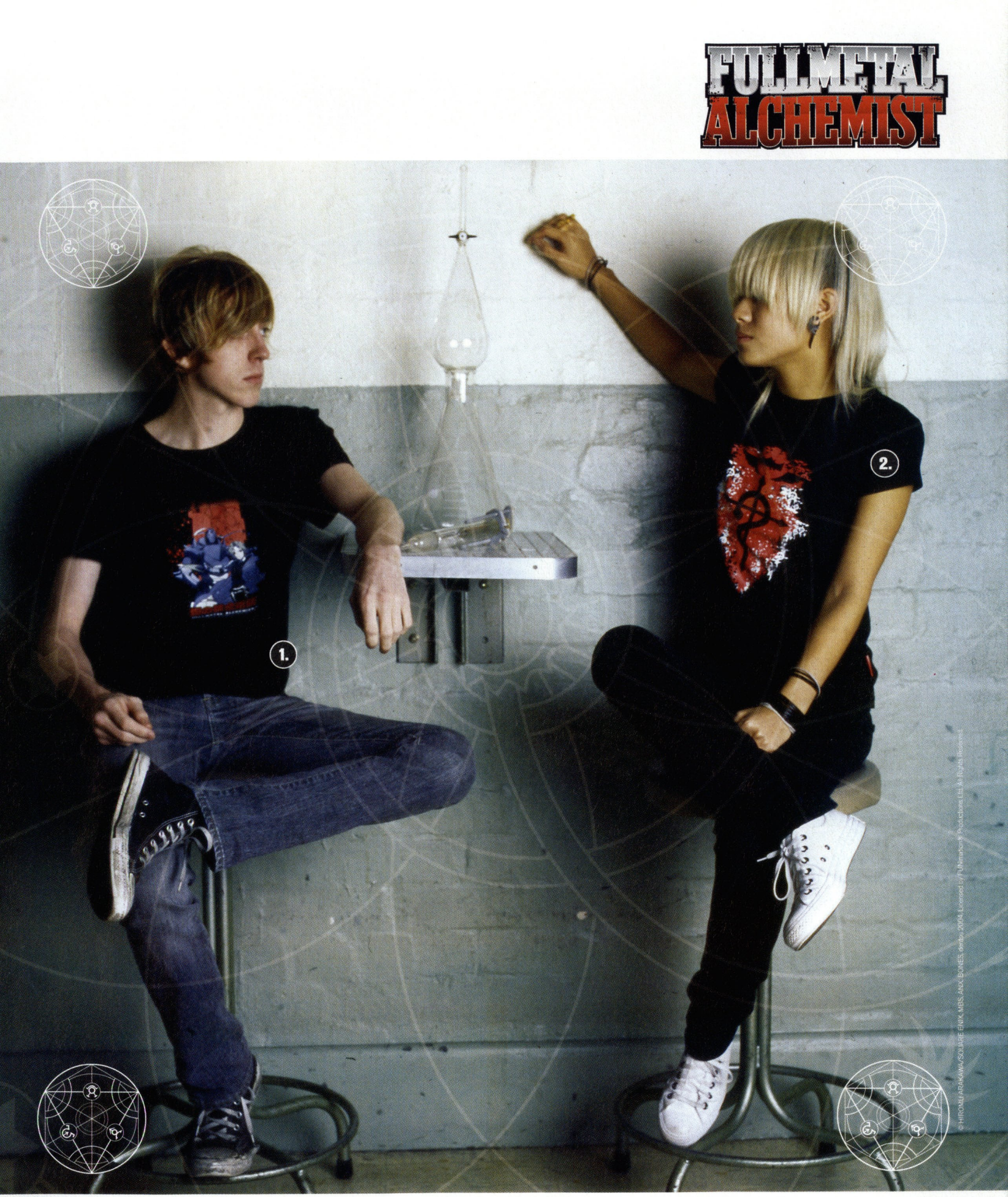
8/10

The last word

The avalanche of videogame movies doesn't seem to be slowing. Silent Hill is already released in some countries, although Australia has to wait until August for some stupid reason. Uwe Boll still has Dungeon Siege, Postal and Far Cry on his list of properties to murder. Names are being put down for adaptations of Castlevania and Prince of Persia. The fad will no doubt stretch on for a couple more years yet. And it's not just videogames. Film adaptations of comic books, anime and classic TV series' are also being churned out by the dozen as Hollywood tries to see how much money they can make without having to come up with their own ideas.

But it needs to be strongly communicated to filmmakers that some stories really do not translate well to the screen. It seems to be some kind of reflex action these days that anything with the slightest amount of appeal gets the movie rights bought by some twitching mogul, and it's about time someone noticed that most of the output is execrable. A lot of videogame stories are designed to unfold over around twenty hours of play time, and however you adapt that it's not going to work. If you're too faithful the fans will complain about what was left out. If you make big changes you might as well just make something original and spend the license money on ice creams.

Maybe once in a while a videogame movie will actually be worth seeing, but the ratio of bad to good so far is so off-balance that you might as well not bother. Hollywood needs to leave videogames alone and concentrate on what they're good at, like absorbing cocaine and crushing people's dreams.



1. Ben wears fullmetal alchemist guys posse t-shirt
2. Larrisa wears fullmetal alchemist girls symbol spray t-shirt

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62 HALF-LIFE 2: EPISODE 1
The ruins of the Citadel await...

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Game Theory

SEAMUS BYRNE

The science of magic

Many gamers, like it or not, love to 'game' the system when they get the chance. Games are, in their essence, a balance of carefully crunched numbers. When we get the chance to take a look behind the curtain, it can be hard to resist the urge to do some maths of our own to work out the 'best' ways to beat the game.

For those who enjoy this almost as much as playing the games themselves, they'll be pleased to know that they're part of a tradition that runs back to Babylonian times. It's all about 'Game Theory' in its truest sense of the term, as people have searched for perfect solutions to complex outcome scenarios for both fun and profit.

The school of mathematics behind game theory goes well beyond applied maths and into pure theory, often building games of infinite length in order to analyse whether there are pure winning strategies available, or whether there are no inherent successful strategies — this later would perhaps be the aim of every game designer, as winning or losing would be about applied effort rather than learning a button sequence.

So for a game designer, hundreds of hours of playtesting go into developing a balanced set of weapons, armour, encounters, classes, spells, and down to room and map sizes, all in the name of not only making the game enjoyable, but encouraging players to use all the tools and skills at their disposal.

This last is maybe the toughest of all. Individual players might find a weapon of choice in a game, which is part of the fun. But if it becomes apparent that one weapon is the 'ultimate' option, and everyone runs around using nothing else, has the game lost some value? If a weapon sits in an arsenal, but no one ever uses it, does it really exist?

With the playtest phase becoming a science of balance, it seems no amount of testing can counter what takes place when the game hits the hands of thousands of gamers. And the more hours of play the game is likely to see, the more chance gamers will try to get under its skin.

On the one hand, there are the hackers. I'm going to leave these people to rot in the hell they deserve.

On the other, there are the 'gamers'. They analyse the options to develop their 'for the win' solutions to a variety of complex 'versus' scenarios. There is some pretty deep calculations attached to some of this analysis, which seems to put many gamers off the idea. Is this a game or a maths challenge? Well, can't it be both? It can and it is for the hardcore geeks out there.

A big target genre for such analysis is the MMO. Players are given detailed insight into how many game mechanics operate, and there is such a devotion of time, many calculations can be made. Skill and talent combinations as well as move sequences can be developed to maximise damage return. Mana efficiencies are a major source of debate, as such issues as damage per point of mana, and damage per second of time inclusive of casting time, are used to investigate 'for the win' solutions.

Is it still gaming to do this? Absolutely. From cards, to chess, to cricket, any game benefits from a more complete understanding of how its system works. It may require rules adjustments at times, or patches in our hobbies case, but with deeper understanding comes a more complete experience. In some ways, it makes the game less of a waste or time, allowing it to become a true test of mental prowess.

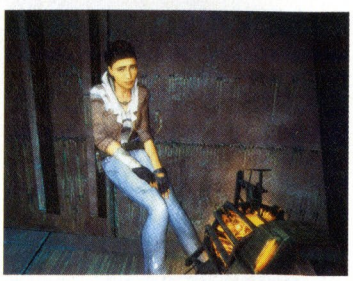
THE HYPER SCORING SYSTEM - What's it all about?

0-49	50-59	60-69	70-79	80-89	90+
Great Giana Sisters	That chick from Silent Hill 3	Jade	Lara Croft	Ayane	Alyx

Half-Life 2: Episode One

CAM SHEA would like to thank the Vortigaunts for Episode One

Could there be a sweeter sight for the Half-Life 2 fan than a raging maelstrom of smoke and storm swirling atop the Citadel? To know that the journey through the heart of darkness at the end of Half-Life 2 was not for nought, and that somehow, both Gordon and Alyx live to tell the tale? The opening scene of Episode One is sweet all right, but it's tinged with bitterness. City 17 is on the verge of destruction, and while the Combine may be greatly weakened – their teleporters destroyed, cutting their home world off from Earth for the moment, they still have forces in the city, ready to defend their brutal regime with what's left of their lives. In short, the war is far from over.



[up] "Where's my gravity gun, huh?"

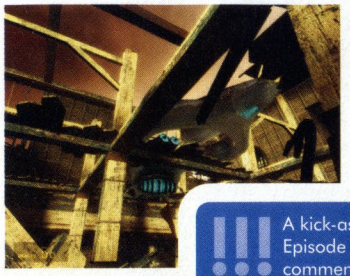
GORDON, NOW THERE'S A HERO'S NAME

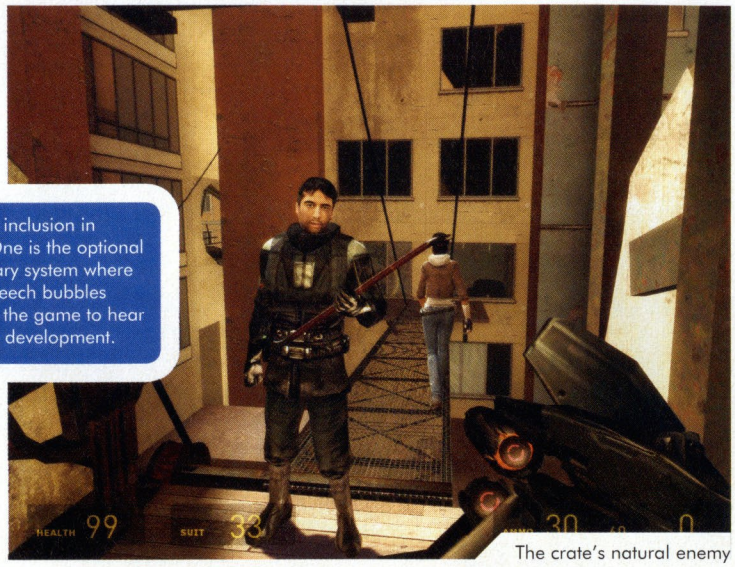
Episode One marks the first of a three part story arc, confusingly enough still under the Half-Life 2 banner. It's not hard to see why though, as not only does the story follow directly on, but so too the gameplay. Don't expect a treasure trove of new weapons in other words, as Episode One very much delivers more of the same. That said, while the ingredients may be similar, the brew is refined and altered enough to keep you locked to your monitor for the duration.

One of the most obvious changes is that Alyx plays a much larger role, accompanying Gordon for most of the play time. She's an able companion, picking off head crabs, disabling energy fields, scaling walls and manning gun turrets when needed. She'll also alert you to enemies sneaking up from behind, and occasionally makes a wisecrack or too, mostly about Gordon's vent crawling proficiency.

Another change is one of emphasis. There are some very survival horror-esque sections which work nicely to leave you feeling vulnerable and freaked out, much like Ravenholm did in the original game, while exploring territory that Half-Life 2 didn't. Without giving too much away, these sections are all about the darkness – about not knowing what's a few metres in front of your face. One area has you trapped in a locked box, a cold, concrete tomb; claustrophobic from the inky blackness pushing in. Mutants and monsters come at you from all directions, leaving you wheeling in the darkness, the light from your torch seemingly growing more feeble by the second. You've lost track of your orientation and surroundings – murky as they were before the fight, now your sense of space is non-existent. You're peering desperately into the darkness, somehow unable to see anything save the monsters when they get close enough. Alyx is shouting for you to shine the torch on the next wave, as it's her only source of light too. And then you realise you're almost out of power. As the last zombie falls you chance a few seconds in complete darkness while your energy recharges... and pray nothing comes for you. It's moments like these that really help give Episode One a flavour of its own.

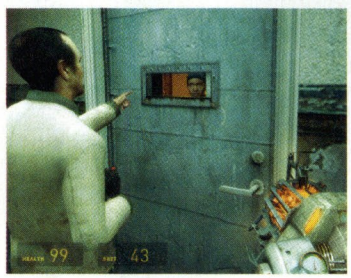
[up] Fatigues courtesy of the Stolier Bros

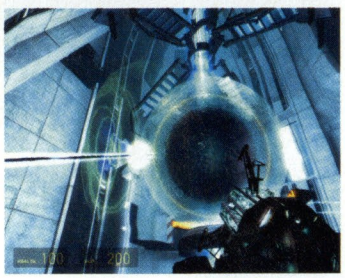




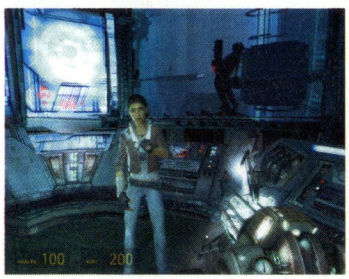
The crate's natural enemy

!!! A kick-ass inclusion in Episode One is the optional commentary system where you can click on speech bubbles located throughout the game to hear about aspects of its development.





"Sic 'em Rex"



[up] Love the Hyper Grav Gun

THE COMBINE... STILL HAVE FORCES IN THE CITY, READY TO DEFEND THEIR BRUTAL REGIME

PACEMAKER

Across the five chapters Valve keep the pacing spot on, never quite letting you settle before they move on to the next gameplay rhythm. The combat is as compelling as ever, and Valve have mixed things up a little more this time, not only introducing a new enemy – the kamikaze Zombine (a zombie Combine, duh), but exploring the chaos of the setting. Battles are often a melting pot – zombies, soldiers and antlions, all in the mix. Just as Half-Life 2 did a great job near its conclusion of making you feel like you really were fighting a war, standing strong with a handful of troops against a much more powerful aggressor, Episode One anchors its events in a volatile reality. Moving on the periphery of a shootout between Combine and zombies in an old and thoroughly creepy hospital was one such believable moment.

As you'd expect there are some great set pieces – cinematic shootouts, floors dropping out from under you, booby trapped rooms and so on. The puzzles are as good, if not better, this time around too. By and large they're very logical, leaving you feeling satisfied when you realise what you need to do. That said, it's probably time to leave the see-saw physics puzzles behind (been there, done that), and there was perhaps a little too much repetition in the antlion sections. But hey, we're really nitpicking now.

Overall, Episode One sees Valve hone what was already one of the greatest gameplay experiences of all time. It may only be five or six hours long, but for the price it's great value for money, and once you've cruised through on normal, there's always hard to give you more of a challenge. And if the end of the game is any indication, Valve may just be thinking about shifting things up somewhat for Episode Two. <<

>> SERENDIPITOUS - You can't help but love it when physics and luck combine to create a moment of pure cool in videogames. At one point in the game I was running along a walkway with a Strider firing at me. There were a series of jumping mines on the ground which I knew I'd have to negotiate under fire. As I reach the first I glance up to see a Combine soldier firing on me through a hole in the roof. I quickly aim and happen to fire my shottie shell at the exact moment the jumping mine in front of me hops up, neatly propelling it up and into the Combine soldier's face. Sweet.

AVAILABLE ON:
X360 / PS3/ Wii/ **PC**

DETAILS:

CATEGORY: FPS
PLAYERS: 1
DEVELOPER: Valve
PUBLISHER: Valve/EA
PRICE: $29.95 (or over Steam for US $19.95)
RATING: M • **AVAILABLE:** Now

HYPER VERDICT:

PLUS: Gorgeous, great pacing, compelling gameplay, Dog.

MINUS: A little easy, we have to wait for Ep Two!

VISUALS	SOUND	GAMEPLAY
94	91	91

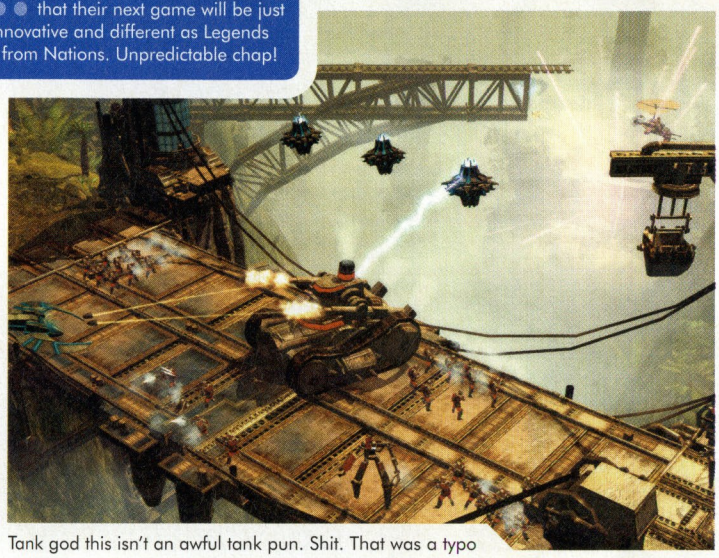
OVERALL

92

A worthy addition to the Half-Life saga...

HYPER BIG RUBBER STAMP OF APPROVAL

!!! Big Huge Games' Brian Reynolds has already hinted that their next game will be just as innovative and different as Legends was from Nations. Unpredictable chap!



Tank god this isn't an awful tank pun. Shit. That was a typo

Rise of Legends

ELIOT FISH wonders when we'll see the fall...

Rise of Nations was a big hit for Microsoft, even selling enough copies to warrant the Thrones & Patriots expansion pack. It's a bit of a surprise then that Rise of Legends completely does away with the real-world historical setting of the original and introduces a new, entirely original fantasy world. It's like someone swapped their school text books with copies of Jules Verne's Journey to the Center of the Earth, and then put a little something in their Kool-Aid. But hey, we're not complaining.

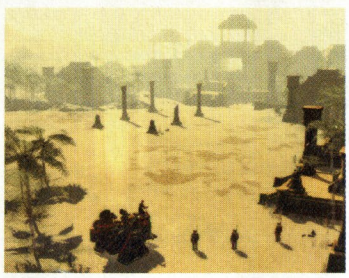
OF MEN AND MACHINES

The solo campaign in Rise of Legends revolves around the Vinci civilisation and its hero, Giacomo, a master inventor. The Vinci are clearly based on the imaginative work of Leonardo Da Vinci, but their technology also crosses over into steampunk. Musketeers, huge clockwork robots, mechanical spiders and steam-driven tanks make up some of their battle units – lots of gears, grease and moving parts. They also have allies in the Pirata - a collection of air pirates, essentially – who provide the Vinci with Flyers and other airborne units that are good for scouting and bombing.

The Vinci are initially fighting against a big fat bad guy called The Doge, but the campaign eventually brings another two of the game's playable civilisations into the action. There are the Alin, who mainly use magic and monsters to do their dirty work, controlling the powers of fire, sand and glass, they're almost like an extension of something you'd find in the Prince of Persia games. Then finally there are the Cuotl, an ancient alien civilisation that blends extraterrestrial technology with mystical Mayan influences.

Each civ has a selection of hero characters who help lead their armies into battle, providing unique attacks and powers that can aid their troops or have a devastating effect on whole groups of enemy units. Whilst the Vinci are led by human characters, the other two civs use more outlandish summoned beings and god-like creatures. What's great is that the hero powers aren't just recycled across the characters – each unit has specific abilities unique to their civ.

For example, Giacomo can heal his units, use a Sonic Burst to knock down the enemy, or "invent" three clockwork bombers on the spot, who will then detonate at any given location. The Alin's Sawu, a gruesome looking genie, can use a glass prison to trap enemy units for a short time, summon monsters or generate whirling blades to damage enemies in his vicinity. The Cuotl, on the other hand, have heroes such as Czin the god of death, with cool powers such as a death grip that sucks the life from enemies, a plague attack that not only hurts his opponents but also spreads to other nearby units, and a Death Gate that creates a nasty "black hole".



[up] Painstaking sand preparation

There's simply a lot to play with in Rise of Legends, so each battle isn't just a case of directing your units to a location and then sitting back to watch the carnage. You can constantly fiddle as battles play out, directing your hero units to use their special abilities when you

Giant floaty stone things but no Zardoz in sight!

There be Dragons

deem it necessary (their powers slowly regenerate over time, so you can only use them sparingly), whilst also juggling the expansion of your cities and the production of better tech and new units.

THE DA VINCI CHEAT CODE

The basic mechanics of Rise of Legends are very similar to Rise of Nations, in the sense that you must capture infinite resource sites, earn gold through merchants, and build segments of your city in stages so as to slowly chip away at that tech tree and expand the influence of your borders (enemy units trespassing over your borders suffer from attrition). In many respects it's maybe not much of an evolution from its predecessor in terms of raw gameplay; however the three distinctly different civilisations give Rise of Legends a lot of flavour and variety in play. The Vinci, Alin and Cuotl do play very differently, with radically different technologies and strategies for building up your bases and dominating in battle. They really are balanced exceptionally well and should prove to be a multiplayer hit over time.

If there's anything to really gripe about, we would probably point the finger at the new story-driven world map component. In-between battling it out in missions, you have the ability to move your hero across a map, choosing which territory to tackle next, with the story evolving depending on your choices. It's just not as involving, deep or interesting as the campaign maps from games like Total War. It may appear to offer non-linear progression to the final objective of each campaign, but ultimately there's little strategy involved with working your way across the territories – you could almost just be selecting each mission from a drop-down menu for what it's worth, but at least it looks pretty.

THE THREE DISTINCTLY DIFFERENT CIVILISATIONS GIVE LEGENDS A LOT OF FLAVOUR AND VARIETY

The new 3D engine here is a bit of a mixed blessing. It looks gorgeous with all the settings turned up to max, but you'll need a beast of a machine to get it running well – especially when you hit a big battle with tonnes of units. The animation of the units is also a bit mixed, with some of their actions looking a little choppy as if frames are missing.

All the maps do look beautiful, however. The environments are extremely rich in detail and a lot of fun to explore. The only thing we found bothersome with the presentation is the inability to zoom out further with the camera. Sometimes it feels as if there's far too much map scrolling, even on a high resolution with the highest view point. Of course, some of the fantastical units look so cool that you'll often be tempted to zoom right in so you can appreciate them in action.

Overall, Rise of Legends is an epic strategy game that's deeply rewarding once you get into it. Because it's such a weird mix of original fantasy concepts, it can be initially hard to fall into a groove and learn what every unit has the ability to do. But once you're engrossed, you'll find it exceptionally fine gaming. Oh, and the intro cinematic is totally awesome. <<

AVAILABLE ON:
X360 / PS3/ Wii/ **PC**

DETAILS:

CATEGORY: RTS
PLAYERS: 1-Multi
DEVELOPER: Big Huge Games
PUBLISHER: Microsoft
PRICE: $99.95
RATING: PG
AVAILABLE: Now

HYPER VERDICT:

PLUS: Well balanced, imaginative units, addictive and involving battles.

MINUS: A few pathfinding issues, some slowdown, campaign map.

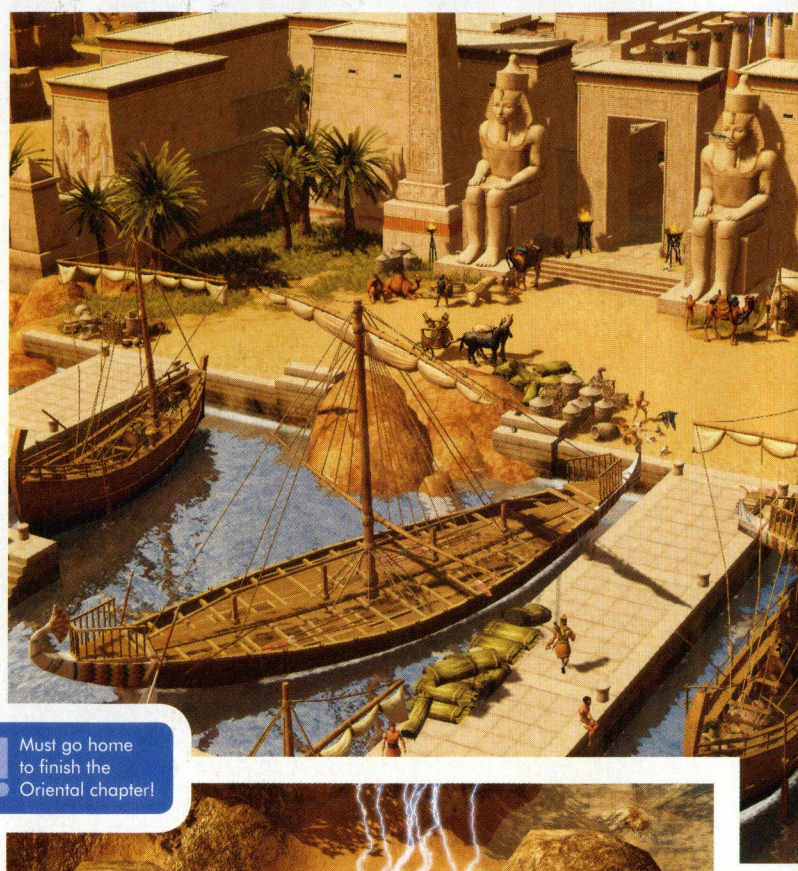
VISUALS	SOUND	GAMEPLAY
88	85	89

OVERALL

88

Not quite legendary, but close!

Somebody's parents loved their horse a little too much



What's so great about this Chinese wall?

!!! Must go home to finish the Oriental chapter!

Turtle soup for dinner again

Titan Quest

DANIEL WILKS loved Diablo but wouldn't it be cool if...

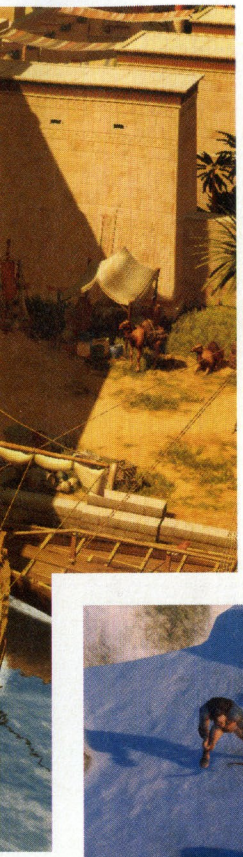
Have you ever seen the South Park episode, "Simpsons Already Did It", in which Butters' alter-ego Professor Chaos plans numerous ways to cause havoc in town but his off-sider General Disarray shoots down every idea by saying "Simpsons already did it"? Titan Quest could be titled, "Diablo Already Did It"; the fingerprints of Blizzard's best selling game franchise are all over it - the simple point and click combat system, fixed camera view point, simple linear quest progression, town portals, item drops ranging from simple items through to uniques and sets, the ability to add enchantments to items through drops... Hell, even the look, feel and pace of the game recall Diablo to a staggering degree. Titan Quest is also like the episode "Simpsons Already Did It" for one more salient reason; at the end of his rampage and after nearly going mad Professor Chaos realises that The Simpsons have already done everything so worrying about it is pointless and they in turn had stolen ideas from countless other sources. That describes Titan Quest to a T; sure it's derivative as hell but it's also pretty damn good.

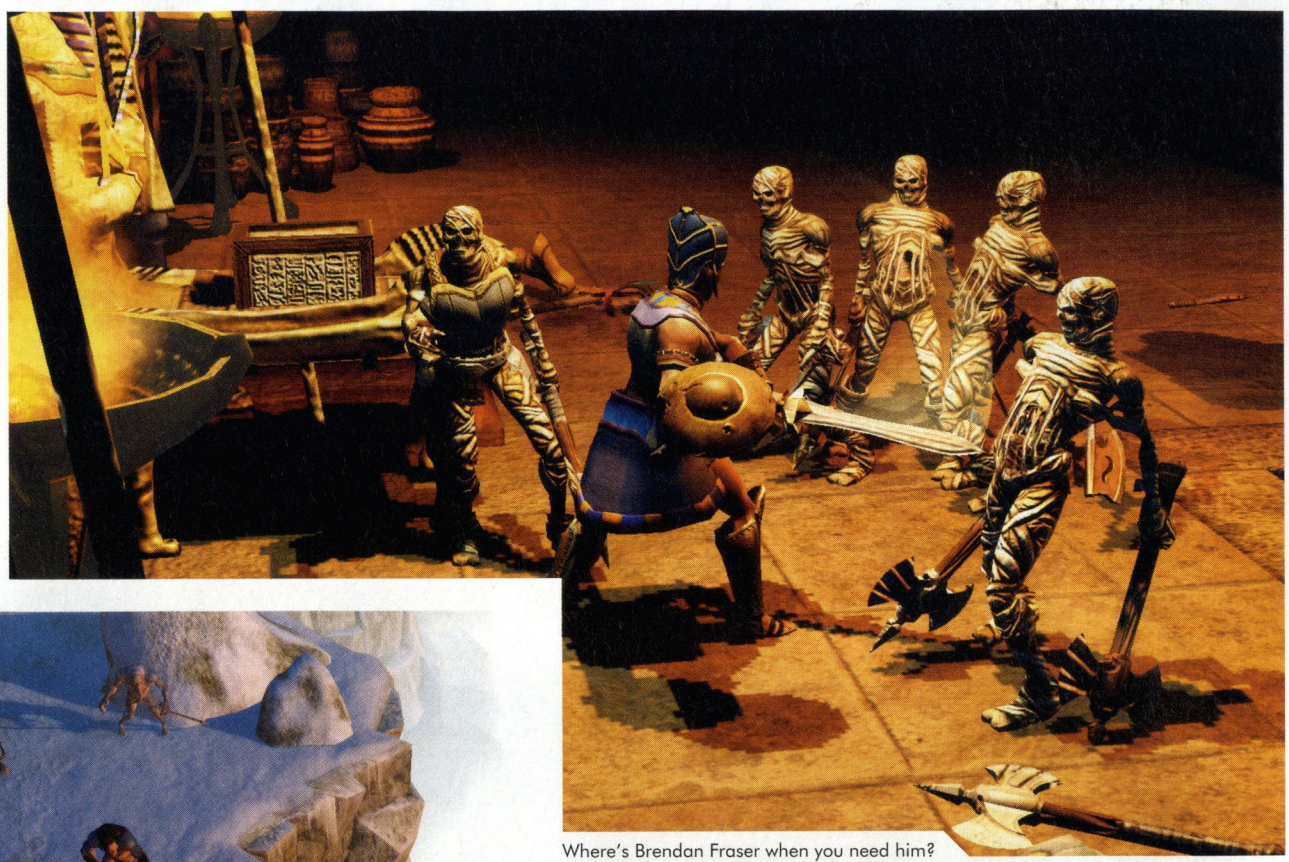
WHICH TUNIC WILL I WEAR TODAY?

Set in the mythical Greece in which time periods all blur into one and monsters, as well as the most Eastern European sounding Greek people ever coexist, Titan Quest casts the player as a burly but non customisable (aside from tunic colour) manly man hero type thrust into world events about beating up some titans who have it in for the gods and are smashing stuff up in a big way. Plot wise it's nothing to speak of but as an excuse for the action it's perfect. Starting in Greece the hero smashes, nukes or shoots his way across Greece, Egypt and the Orient in three large chapters. The mechanics will be familiar to anyone who has played an action RPG in the last decade; health and mana bars, one click attacks, special attacks keyed to the right mouse button, paper doll style inventory and equipment selection. Left clicking the ground sends the character to where you want to go and holding down the button allows for constant movement. Like Dungeon Siege, holding down the left mouse button causes the character to continue attacking the current target.

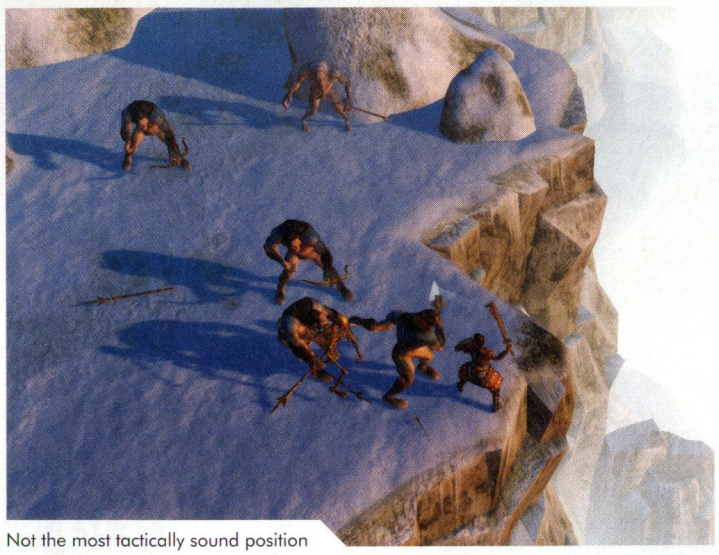
While the basic gameplay of Titan Quest is extremely similar to that of Diablo, the skill trees are remarkably different and are quite an improvement. Instead of choosing a character class at the beginning of the game as in Diablo, players instead choose a Mastery from one of eight when they hit second level. The Masteries range from melee attack and dual wielding through to healing, fire and earth magic, nature magic, necromancy, hunting (bow and spear use), protection and the like. Once a Mastery is chosen players have access to the skill trees contained within and can distribute their skill points as they see fit. Later in the game players are able to choose another Mastery to open up a second set of skills. The eight available Masteries and combinations thereof give the game a lot of replay value and as a nice added touch players can actually pay gold in game to reallocate the skill points in their chosen trees if they chose poorly or would like to try a different character build.

The actual inventory is one of the niggling problems with the game as a simple oversight adds a level of unwanted micromanagement to the proceedings. You see, there is no inventory arrangement button and no automatic optimisation of item placement in bags so every few minutes you need to go into your

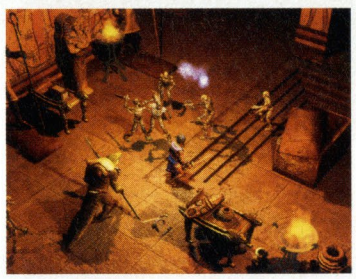




Where's Brendan Fraser when you need him?



Not the most tactically sound position



inventory and shift things around. This gets especially frustrating towards the ends of quests and chapters where a treasure room may contain upwards of 15 items. This highlights another problem; item drops in Titan Quest are a little too frequent, especially in the second two chapters; it's not uncommon to have to portal back to the nearest vendor every 10 or so minutes to sell your latest batch of magic items. Once again this isn't a huge problem but it does mean that there are frequent breaks in gameplay unless you simply plan on leaving everything where it drops, plus it means that money is so easy to obtain that it becomes meaningless. It's quite easy to have accumulated one million or more gold pieces by the end of the first chapter making it a little too easy to buy the best gear when it appears in shops.

THE MECHANICS WILL BE FAMILIAR TO ANYONE WHO HAS PLAYED AN ACTION RPG IN THE LAST DECADE

TITAN PC

Titan Quest is a bit of a mixed bag when it comes to visuals. On the one hand the enemy design is superb, the level of detail in some areas is great and it's got some sexy looking water but on the other the main character is bland, runs like an idiot and you need a pretty beefy machine to run the game with enough detail to stop the shadows from looking like jagged black strobe lights. The readme claims that TQ only requires a 1.8 GHz Intel Pentium IV or AMD Athlon XP, 512 MB RAM, 64 MB NVIDIA GeForce 3 or ATI Radeon 8500 but unless you want to play the game like a slideshow at 800x600 with every detail set to minimum you'll want at least a 3GHz processor, at least a gig of RAM and a series 7 GeForce card. One of the reasons for the game being so system intensive could be the integrated physics system. Sure, it's cool to critically hit a monster and send it flying forty feet into the air but aside from the "wouldn't it be cool if" factor there's no reason for having the physics engine and enemy ragdolling. In fact, the physics often lead to frustration – keep your fingers crossed when you open a chest next to a river or cliff or you just might see all your hard won loot go tumbling off the edge into oblivion.

Sure it's derivative and the developers seem to have included every feature under the sun they thought might have been cool whilst neglecting some that seem like obvious choices but Titan Quest still manages to more than ably to pick up and carry the action RPG flag. It has all the time dilating magic of Diablo and its sequel (WTF? Why is the sun up?), looks sweet and contains about 20 or so hours of gameplay at normal difficulty. <<

>> HYPER DIDN'T DO IT - We haven't been able to test out the higher difficulty levels yet as they are unlocked after finishing the game at the previous difficulty level but we are assured that along with the new level of challenge come new rewards, a few new boss fights and legendary weapons. Likewise we haven't been able to test the multiplayer but it allows up to six players to work their way cooperatively through the story mode.

AVAILABLE ON:
X360 / PS3/ Wii/ **PC**

DETAILS:

CATEGORY: Action RPG
PLAYERS: 1-6
DEVELOPER: Iron Lore
PUBLISHER: THQ
PRICE: $89.95
RATING: M 15+
AVAILABLE: Now

HYPER VERDICT:

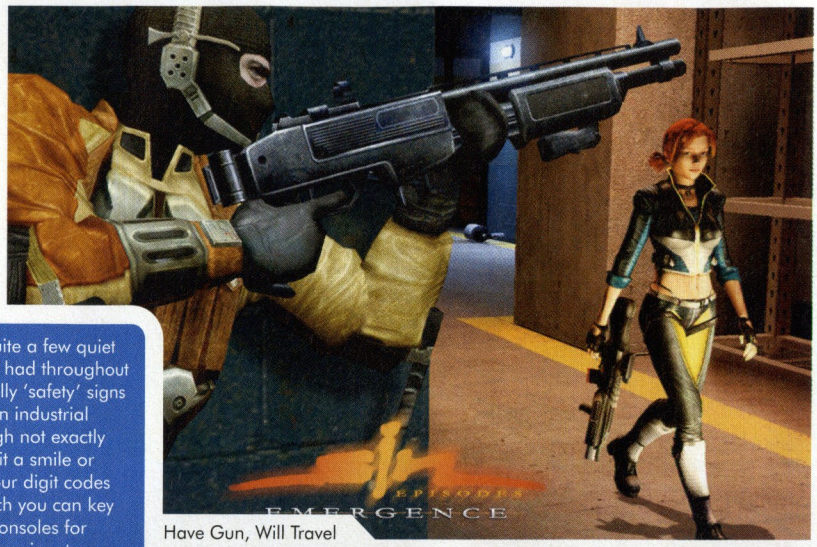
PLUS: Skill Masteries, addictive, where did the time go?

MINUS: System hog, inventory, where did the time go?

VISUALS	SOUND	GAMEPLAY
89	86	90

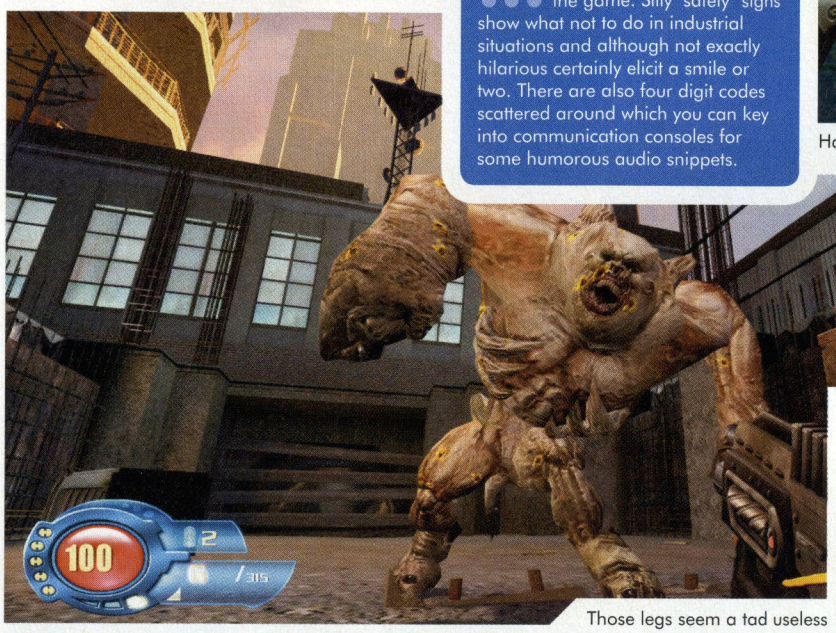
OVERALL
89

Prepare to lose sleep...

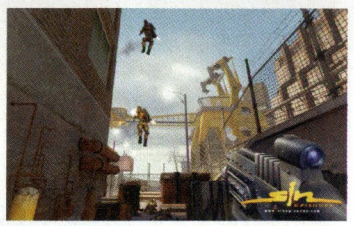


Have Gun, Will Travel

There are quite a few quiet laughs to be had throughout the game. Silly 'safety' signs show what not to do in industrial situations and although not exactly hilarious certainly elicit a smile or two. There are also four digit codes scattered around which you can key into communication consoles for some humorous audio snippets.



Those legs seem a tad useless



SiN Episodes: EMERGENCE

DYLAN BURNS thinks this is a slightly tentative emergence...

You may be forgiven, behind all the kerfuffle over SiN Episodes being episodic and all (and delivered over Steam for cheap), for forgetting that there is actually a game to be played here. Stepping into the boots of Colonel John Blade, the same guy from the original SiN game, you are thrown into a tumultuous though fairly generic story that sees you shooting your way through wharfs, science labs and industrial complexes, all utilising Valve's Half-Life 2 Source Engine to great effect.

THERE'S ALWAYS A SHOTTIE

Blade's arsenal consists of only three weapons: the magnum, scattergun (shottie) and assault rifle. Each weapon has a secondary fire and can zoom in for accurate fire to some extent. The bad guys are quick and accurate but Emergence offers an interesting way of keeping players challenged: a reactive difficulty. Upon starting the game, you choose your difficulty and how much assistance you want via two sliders. During play, if you're cleaning up enemies easily the AI gets slightly tougher, nastier enemies appear and you're in firefights up to your neck before you know it. Other side of the coin – die a lot and there are fewer enemies and more health packs. It's a fairly dynamic system but those of you who are FPS experts should prepare for some hurt as squads of enemies converge upon you in battles of epic (and bloody) proportions. Situations can get downright unrealistic as wave after wave of enemies spawn. I'm still not quite convinced that this is much better than static difficulty levels, where some effort would actually go into enemy AI and placement.

Physics is the new black it seems and you'll have a field day shooting exploding gas bottles that whiz off towards your enemies (or you!) before exploding, sending debris across the room and blowing bodies over rails. It's not uncommon for entire rooms to be blood-soaked and blackened from explosions and hectic, messy firefights. The game's version of bullet time is, sadly, not very helpful. Gas from conveniently placed green canisters allows Blade to enter into slowed time, but the wavy screen effect and the fact that you still aim and reload at a slowed pace tends to negate any advantage.

Being the first SiN episode, Emergence certainly feels like an introduction. Level design is quite good but is extremely linear and heavily scripted. The limited weaponry does tend to get a little samey too. And of course there's the length. Given the budget price, four to six hours of solid FPS action is what you get here – more if you crank the difficulty - but gamers wanting a world-changing experience need not apply.

Episodes is a difficult game to score because, given its episodic nature, the rest of the game is yet to be made. It's already quite clear that the advantages of episodic release include being able to shape the game to suit gamers' preferences and the ability to react to the failures of each installment. With that in mind, this first episode really feels like a testing of the waters, a vignette to wet the appetite and prepare you for something entirely more satisfying. Here's hoping that the potential hinted at is reached in subsequent episodes and that the series does not outstay its welcome. <<

AVAILABLE ON:
X360 / PS3 / Wii / **PC**

DETAILS:

CATEGORY: FPS
PLAYERS: 1
DEVELOPER: Ritual Entertainment
PUBLISHER: Valve Software
PRICE: $19.95 US via Steam, $44.95 boxed.
RATING: G • **AVAILABLE:** Now

HYPER VERDICT:

PLUS: Pure FPS fun, physics, interesting episodic concept.

MINUS: Dumb enemies, very linear, the wait for the next episode.

VISUALS	SOUND	GAMEPLAY
87	80	84

OVERALL

83

Blade walks the razor's edge.

When too many guns are barely enough

Not the best water vehicle

We have been unable to test Chrome Hounds' online multiplayer as yet but we'll let you know the verdict as soon as we can.

Chrome Hounds

DANIEL WILKS is a giant missile launching robot at heart

The allure of stomping around in a giant mech blasting other mechs into oblivion (quite literally – they disappear as soon as they are destroyed) and squishing silly little soldiers is pretty hard to beat but traditionally the genre has been pretty hard to approach for a non-hardcore gamer due to the relative lack of speed compared to other third/first person games and the often overly complex controls. Chrome Hounds looks set to change a lot of that with relatively fast paced gameplay and simple contols. Add to that the ability to create your own mech from various parts scrounged off the battlefield and a silky smooth frame rate and you have what should be the best in the genre.

A FEW FLOORS HIGH

I say should because Chrome Hounds has a few flaws that stop it from being the great game we so dearly want it to be. Set some time in the generic dark future where made up European nations fight one another for some reason, Chrome Hounds sees the player as a mercenary contracted to one of the armies, driving a succession of Hound RTs (Role Types) through a series of missions ranging from blow everything up to capture a number of radar points. Soldier RTs are the standard style of mech we are used to seeing in games; fairly mobile and well armed, just the thing for standard firefights. Scouts are fast moving, Mars Rover looking wheeled vehicles that aren't too crash hot on the shooting but have a number of useful gadgets for sensing mines and the like. Defenders are essentially tanks, heavily armed and armoured for close up combat, Snipers are masters of long ranged combat, Heavy Gunners are essentially mobile artillery and Commanders give the orders. Each RT has seven story missions to work through with difficulty changing depending on which RT you choose; Soldier and Sniper are easy, Defenders and Scouts are medium and Commanders and Heavy Gunners are hard. Aside from stock mechs, players are rewarded with Hound parts after successfully completing missions to create their own Hounds. Although it takes a good degree of trial and error to make a workable mech, building a giant robot is good fun and especially satisfying when you blast an enemy to pieces.

While the control scheme is nice and simple it lacks any real depth and for the most part combat degenerates to simply firing a weapon, switching to the next and so on and so forth as you destroy enemies and wait for weapons to ready their next shot. It can and does get a bit dull after a while. Although the controls may be overly simple, the HUD contains one piece of genius that all but makes up for it; the top right hand corner shows a targeting view enabling the player to pull off quick shots and when the player enters the first person perspective for more accurate shooting the top right hand corner shows a third person perspective so you can still lumber around with some accuracy.

Although Chrome Hounds offers up six different RTs, the promise of varied gameplay isn't truly fulfilled – sure Commanders, Heavy Gunners and Scouts play differently but Defenders, Soldiers and Snipers are by and large the same with the only real difference being small increments of range.

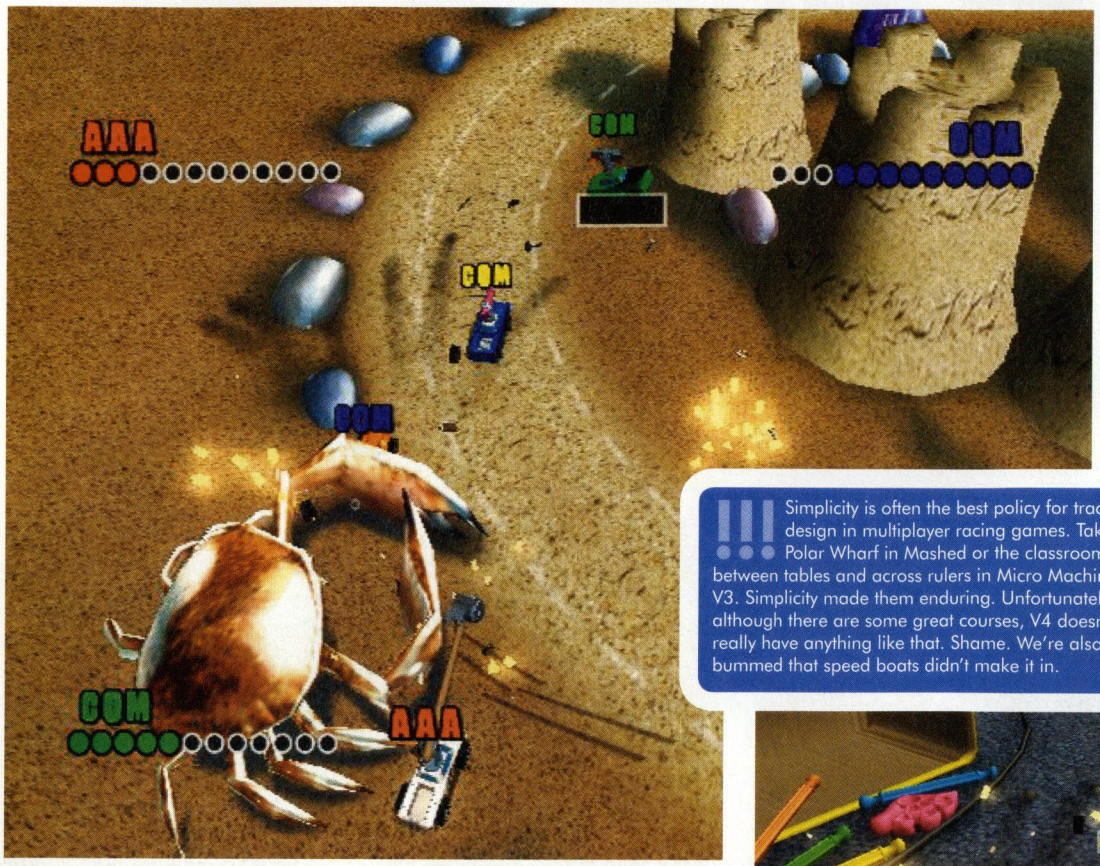
AVAILABLE ON:
X360 / PS3/ Wii/ PC

DETAILS:
CATEGORY: Mech Action
PLAYERS: 1-Multi
DEVELOPER: From Software
PUBLISHER: Sega
PRICE: $109.95
RATING: M
AVAILABLE: July

HYPER VERDICT:
PLUS: Build your own mech, squishing soldiers, silky framerate.
MINUS: Lack of variety, disappearing corpses.

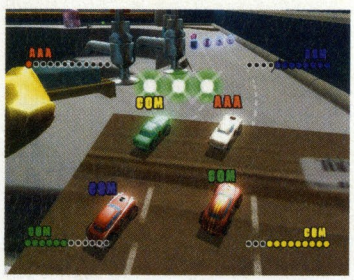
VISUALS	SOUND	GAMEPLAY
88	84	80

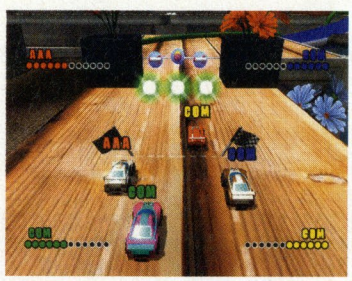
OVERALL
80
Easy to play but not still not perfect



Simplicity is often the best policy for track design in multiplayer racing games. Take Polar Wharf in Mashed or the classroom race between tables and across rulers in Micro Machines V3. Simplicity made them enduring. Unfortunately, although there are some great courses, V4 doesn't really have anything like that. Shame. We're also bummed that speed boats didn't make it in.

AAA about to Joe Orton COM





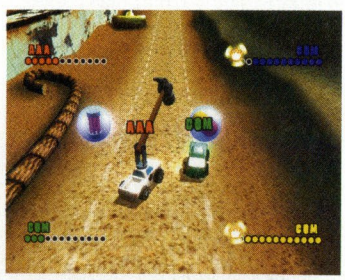
Micro Machines V4

CAM SHEA wonders where the playtesters went...

Micro Machines V4 feels really rushed. It's that simple. There are moments of compelling multiplayer brilliance, but for every great course, there's at least a couple of average ones, and for every course that has an appropriate vehicle, there's one that could be so much better, if only the player wasn't constrained in vehicle selection. It's frustrating, and made all the more so because many of Micro Machines V4's most crippling problems are the result of poor game design at a fundamental level. These are issues that simply shouldn't exist.

POLAR WHARF ANYONE?

Unlike Mashed, which was also developed by Supersonic, you don't have to unlock courses in single player before you can use them in multiplayer (which is good because the single player game is just as dull as you'd expect). Instead, the multiplayer game works on a points system, unlocking courses at certain thresholds. There are some decent tracks too, spanning the usual array of Micro Machines locations – the beach, bedroom, pool table, garden, even a butcher's shop. It's the points system, however, that is the first major stumble in the design of the game. Every player has a cumulative points total. Not cumulative for the session – more like your total EXP with the game. Every player has their own profile and associated points total, and the default setting for the game sees each profile saved individually to memory card (we reviewed the game on PS2) after EVERY race. This is achingly slow and completely ruins the pace of the game. Thankfully you can turn auto save off to speed things up (although you still can't skip the annoyingly leisurely tallying of points after every race), but the only way to do this is in the single player menu! That also means that to actually save everyone's points total at the end of a session, you'll need to exit out of multiplayer and into the single player menu, and individually save every profile. It's such a colossal cock-up of a system that we can't believe it wasn't nixed by the alpha build.

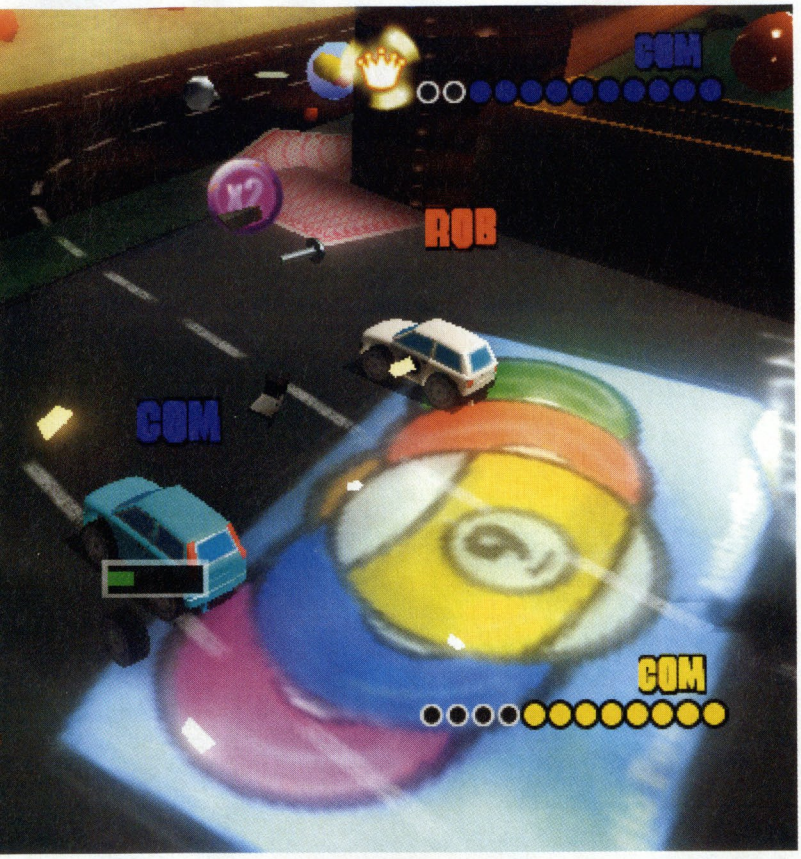


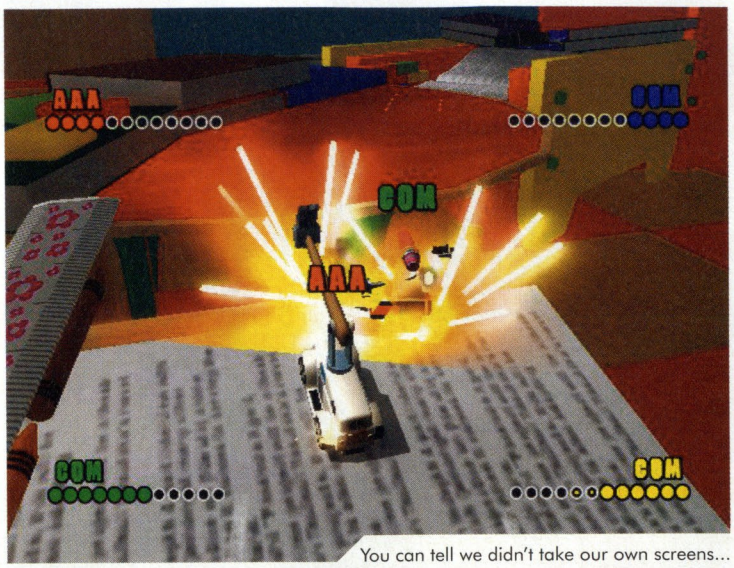
[up] You can't touch Hammer

The points also distract from the task at hand – beating your friends. If I have three thousand points and a new player comes in, their profile starts with zero. Now, while there's a win/loss ratio for each multiplayer session, the points total dominates the screen, which makes no sense. Why even have points that aren't directly related to the multiplayer session at hand? The unlock system could be built around total races completed/won and all be saved to a single file on your memory card. We understand that there are individual profiles because everyone unlocks vehicles independently, but that in itself is mostly pointless and a bad trade-off for ease of use.

[up] Normal racing = Macro Machines?

Here's how the vehicles work. There are about a zillion to unlock and they're broken up into classes. You're able to trade them with friends, which obviously ties into the Micro Machines license. Unfortunately, within each class every car is essentially just like a toy Micro Machine – they may look different but they're functionally exactly the same. Which leads us to the kicker - you





You can tell we didn't take our own screens...

...cos if we did the names would be much more juvenile

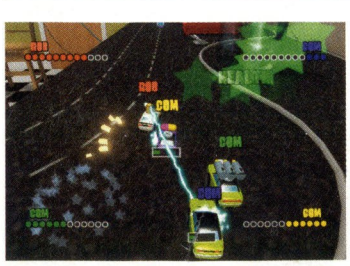
can't change the course/vehicle mix in any meaningful way. Every course is assigned a specific car class, so while you can switch to a functionally identical car from the same class, you can't actually change the gameplay up. Why can't I move from muscle cars to F1 cars if I want to? Remember in Mashed how much difference changing vehicles could make to each course? It gave the game much greater longevity and variety. Well you can't do that here – it's all set in stone by the developer. Making matters worse, some of the course/vehicle class pairings are absolutely awful. A windy course with super fast cars that cause everyone to bounce out of bounds on every second corner? A course with lots of hills where you're driving ice cream vans that can barely make it up the inclines? That makes no sense. Like we said – rushed. Some courses have the perfect vehicle and great weapon layout but they're the exception to the rule. There are also courses that you won't ever play more than once they're so poorly designed. One has escalators that strobe so badly while you're driving down them (which seems to take forever) that it actually gave some of the crew headaches. No shit.

SOME COURSES HAVE THE PERFECT VEHICLE AND WEAPON LAYOUT BUT THEY'RE THE EXCEPTION...

Perhaps most mystifying of all, there's no option to create multiplayer GPs. Instead you go race to race, which is fine for the most part, but just another example of Supersonic denying us common sense options.

Adding to the feeling that this would have been way better as a Christmas release, MMV4 also has numerous glitches and weird irregularities with when it eliminates racers and who gets points before each restart. Sigh.

But the crazy thing is – Micro Machines V4 is still awesome fun if you stick to the courses you like and play with the full complement of four people. Hence the score. It just could have been so much better. Worth a look, but it's no Mashed. <<



>> THE ARMOURY - By and large the weapons work quite well in V4. There's everything from an oversize hammer and explosive fluffy dice through to rockets, homing missiles, a (perhaps overly) powerful energy draining weapon and of course, health packs and double damage. The weapons bring with them vehicle damage, and this has a hugely noticeable impact on performance. Get hit a few times and you'll be driving on one or two wheels, struggling to keep up. Of course even then you're only a health pack away from being back in the running. On some courses you can actually play an offensive weapons-based game as opposed to racing to win, which helps mix up play styles nicely.

AVAILABLE ON:
PS2 / XBOX / **PC** / GCN

DETAILS:

CATEGORY: Multiplayer racing
PLAYERS: 1-4
DEVELOPER: Supersonic
PUBLISHER: Codemasters
PRICE: $69.95 (PS2) $49.95 (PC)
RATING: G
AVAILABLE: Now

HYPER VERDICT:

PLUS: Can be brilliant with four people.

MINUS: Terrible sound effects, bad menu design and lack of options.

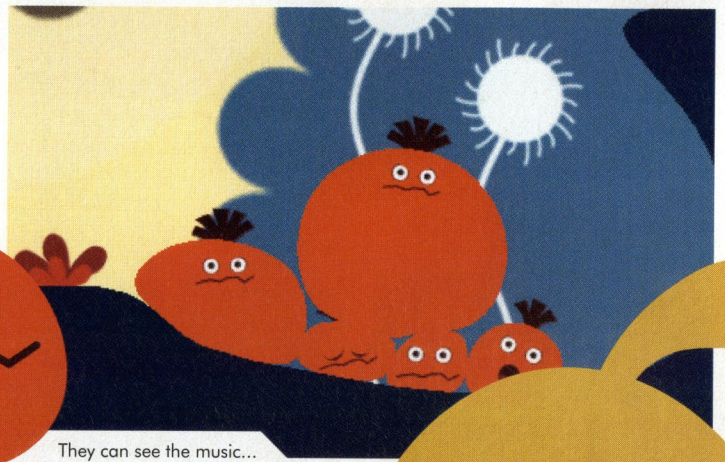
VISUALS	SOUND	GAMEPLAY
70	50	85

OVERALL
84

Great fun if you're patient and forgiving.

There are six different LocoRoco in the game and they're all imbued with an amazing amount of personality. They each have their own song and when left to their own devices will bop around, bumping into each other and making faces. In one level they even started copying the sound the enemies made...

You can never have enough buds



They can see the music...

Loco Roco

CAM SHEA goes loco

The gaming industry needs titles like LocoRoco. It needs them like the Earth needs the Sun, like Germany needs the Hoff, and like gamers need a piano to inexplicably fall on Uwe Boll's head. This is a game to nourish the industry, to prove that style and substance can co-exist, and that wildly unique design still has a place. Hyperbolic? Perhaps, but it's rare that we're so effortlessly won over by a game's charm. Simply put, LocoRoco is very much in the same league as the likes of Vib Ribbon and Katamari Damacy, and that's an elite group.

BASS DROP

LocoRoco is simple in concept, elegant in design and absolutely bursting with personality. The world of LocoRoco is a sing song one, effervescent and bouncy, where the landscapes are all curves and pastel colours, where LocoRoco are whipped along air currents that joyfully loop the loop before dropping them to cascade through pachinko like arrangements of pegs, bounce pads, wheels and mechanisms, where you'll journey into the spongy insides of giant whales and frogs, and where strange Gumby head creatures are woken from their slumber with a song and then rumble their approvement in sub-bass. It's part platformer, part puzzle game, part rollercoaster and part art project. Thankfully, it's also all gameplay.

Each level starts with a solitary LocoRoco who you can roll along by tilting the world left and right with the shoulder buttons, or hold both then release to jump. Being the smiling, singing, curious critters they are, LocoRoco need friends, so as you roll and jump you'll collect little orange buds which add another LocoRoco to your squishy LocoRoco ball. The basic aim for each level is to find all 20 LocoRoco and get them safely to the end. Sometimes you'll need to coax the bud from the ground, sometimes you'll need to tap circle to split into individual LocoRoco to get through a section or into a secret area, and sometimes you'll need to nail a precarious set of well timed jumps.

Along the way you'll have to contend with a handful of enemies such as pointy black spikes and what appear to be floating dreadlocks with eyes. This really isn't a game about head bopping, however, it's about discovery and collecting. Behind the seemingly simple paths lie countless secrets; mostly hidden areas that lead you to more LocoRoco, to the three MuiMui that are secreted away on each level, or to any number of other denizens of the world. There's a huge amount to collect in each level, so if you hope to find everything you'll have to go through each level many times to plumb its hidden depths.

There are five worlds and over 40 levels in LocoRoco, ranging from lush green forests complete with grassy paths, waterfalls and the sounds of birds chirping through to more arid locations dominated by angular rocky land. And of course, what platformer would be complete without ice worlds? None, and LocoRoco does them better than any before – they're like gloriously fast slaloms for the most part, building up steam as you slide along before leaping to the next downhill section. And just when you think you may have seen all the game has to offer, a new twist is thrown in, whether it be the owls that chew you up and spit you out as a square or an oblong, or some other new element that's introduced into the environments.

As if you haven't worked it out already, LocoRoco is a must play. The game design is tight and compelling, the visual style is mind-blowing, the soundtrack is genius (as are the sound effects) and at every turn you'll pick up on yet another small touch that has been lavished on the game. A classic. <<

AVAILABLE ON:
DS / **PSP** / GBA

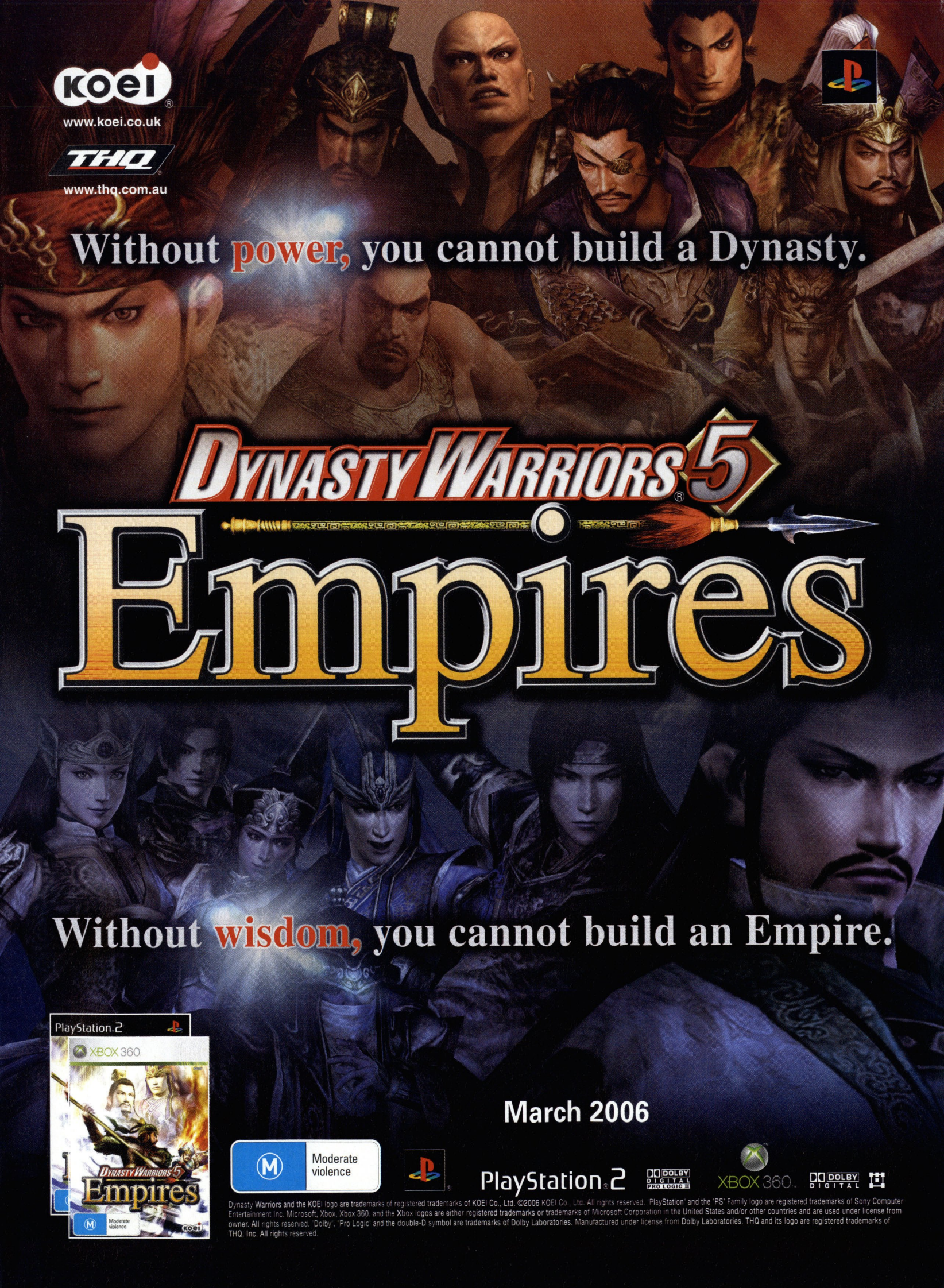
DETAILS:

CATEGORY: Platformer
PLAYERS: 1
DEVELOPER: Sony Japan
PUBLISHER: Sony
PRICE: $79.95
RATING: G
AVAILABLE: Now

VISUALS	SOUND	GAMEPLAY
94	91	90

OVERALL 92

HYPER BIG RUBBER STAMP OF APPROVAL



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Metal Gear Ac!d 2

The only bad thing about Metal Gear Ac!d 2 is the peripheral it's packaged with – the so-called "Solid-Eye". This thing is so ridiculous that I don't understand how anyone could have ever thought it a good idea. I mean, it's a cardboard box with two holes in the top of it, for Chrissakes. It's supposed to be used to view the game's (thankfully optional) pseudo-3D sequences, but it's so clunky and painful to use that I can't see anyone bothering with it. Even the bonus videos in the Solid-Eye Theater – the ones with the hot Japanese girls in bikinis playing with assault rifles – doesn't make it worthwhile.

The game itself is great, though. It basically takes everything that was good about the original MGA and amplifies it, improving the already excellent presentation and gameplay. Additionally, it also fixes a number of flaws present in the first game. The tutorials are no longer utterly worthless and the interface has been revised to make simple actions easier to perform. Remember how in MGA you'd have to use something like four cards just to turn around? In this one, you just press a button. Oh, and guess what? The story makes sense this time! It's perfectly clear what's going on at all times and you never get lost or confused. For reals!

Ha ha ha – just kidding. It's complete nonsense. But it wouldn't be a Metal Gear game otherwise. And Ac!d 2 (like its predecessor) is very much a Metal Gear game, both in content and in quality.

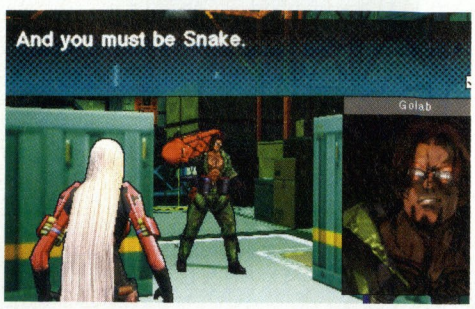
Daniel Staines

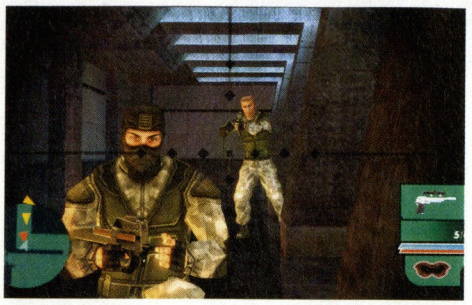
AVAILABLE ON: DS / **PSP** / GBA

DETAILS:

CATEGORY: Strategy / **PLAYERS:** 1-2 /
DEVELOPER: Kojima Productions / **PUBLISHER:** Konami /
PRICE: $79.95 / **RATING:** M / **AVAILABLE:** Now

VISUALS	SOUND	GAMEPLAY	OVERALL
85	90	80	84





Syphon Filter: Dark Mirror

Dark Mirror won't win any awards for originality but what it does do is execute almost flawlessly on a very particular piece of hardware – the PSP. Plenty of thought has gone into how to play to the PSP's strengths and the end result is the most compelling stealth-action game on the system (even if the competition is rather thin on the ground). Missions are relatively short making them perfect to pick up and play in short bursts. The overall presentation is tight, with great visuals and interesting level design: although rather small and linear, you've usually a couple different options when it comes to approaching an area, not to forget a range of different objectives to play through.

Dark Mirror's real strength however is that it's just so easy to play. While the learning curve is a little steep, it's not long before you're rappelling into a hot spot and performing a sneak attack on an unsuspecting guard or fending off a wave of attackers from behind cover with ease.

And once you've mastered that there's a sweet bunch of multiplayer options to plough through – 8 player games over local or internet play, full voice and clan support.

There's really only one area letting this whole game down – the totally forgettable storyline and characterisation. While it needn't be quite as campy and over-the-top as the Metal Gear Solid series, Syphon Filter could well do with a fair bit more soul. As it stands, proceedings are delivered in a straight-up and derivative way. C'mon guys – give us something more than gravel-voiced, secret-ops unit X infiltrating Alaskan installation Y because Government Z reckons the situation is too hot handle by official means. Puh-lease...

March Stepnik

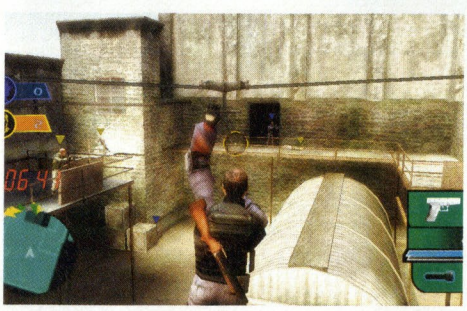
AVAILABLE ON: DS / **PSP** / GBA

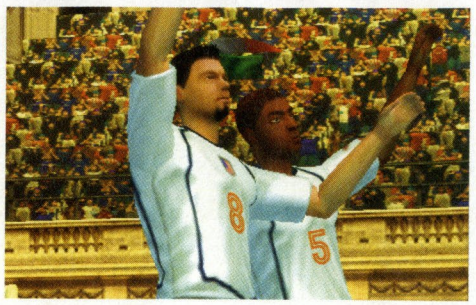
DETAILS:

CATEGORY: Action / **PLAYERS:** 1-8 /
DEVELOPER: Sony / **PUBLISHER:** Sony /
PRICE: $79.95 / **RATING:** TBC / **AVAILABLE:** Now

HYPER BIG RUBBER STAMP OF APPROVAL

VISUALS	SOUND	GAMEPLAY	OVERALL
84	80	90	90





World Tour Soccer 2

Where Pro Evolution Soccer brings deep simulation play to the PSP and the FIFA series features all the bells and whistles, World Tour Soccer 2 is all about cheap and easy thrills.

And it does a pretty good job of it, too. Built around two main play modes – World Tour and Medal Mode – a straight-up game of football is just a bit too square for this game. Instead, you've got games with a particular theme (like the shot clock challenge – try your luck on goal before the timer runs down, or the all-rounder – where you've got to pass to each team member before your goals will count) to play through.

What SCE Europe has nailed with WTS2 is the whole arcade progression thing. Points are awarded for stylish play (through passes to a striker, headers, ball turnovers and goals) and deducted for being sloppy (losing the ball, penalties, or conceding a goal) – and the number of points you earn dictates the medal you earn at the end. Medals unlock further play modes and challenges. Combine these modes with short sharp matches (games last little more than 4 minutes – only exhibition play allows you to crank games up to the maximum ten minutes) and it's not long before you're hooked by all the fast and furious rewards coming your way.

And that's pretty much the point of WTS2. While the difficulty curve is nicely stacked, the actual simulated game of soccer takes a back seat here. Heavily slated towards attack rather than defence – WTS2 doesn't challenge the aforementioned king and queen of console football. It instead offers a different take on football which seems perfectly suited to PSP – quick and lite-like.

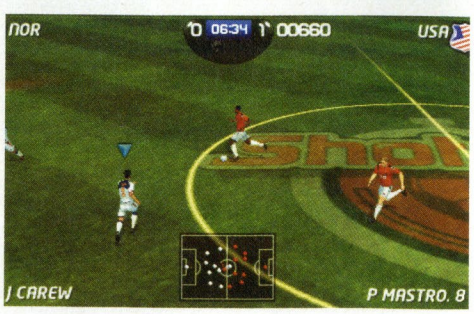
March Stepnik

AVAILABLE ON: DS / **PSP** / GBA

DETAILS:

CATEGORY: Sport / **PLAYERS:** 1-4 /
DEVELOPER: Sony / **PUBLISHER:** Sony /
PRICE: $79.95 / **RATING:** G / **AVAILABLE:** Now

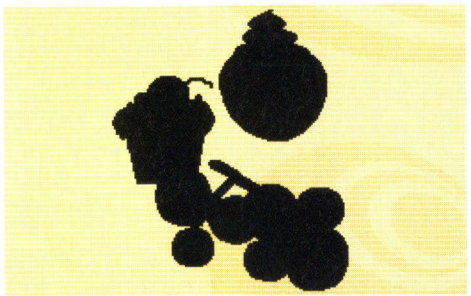
VISUALS	SOUND	GAMEPLAY	OVERALL
71	67	73	70



Astonishia Story

Playing Astonishia Story is kind of like sitting down and playing Popolocrois 2: Electric Boogaloo. It's essentially the same game working with essentially the same mechanics with that same outmoded, "my first RPG" feel to it. There's no wonder it feels outmoded really – the game is a port/remake of a 12 year old Korean DOS title. There is only one thing to recommend Astonishia Story above any other PSP RPG and that is the script. Not because it's good, because it's one of the most inept and hilarious bits of poor translation we have ever seen, made even more obtuse by the plethora of 12 year old Asian pop-culture references that pepper the dialogue. No matter the overall blandness of the game it's hard not to be amused by a big headed anti-piracy mascot thing appearing to tell you off for pirating the game because you don't have the password in the manual who you then go on to berate for being old school because we don't do that type of crap any more. Or when you catch a Warez Fairy and force it to give you free stuff only to have it immediately taken away by Mr. Sonnori, some other big headed anti-piracy guy who then proceeds to punch you in the stomach. Or the guy who appears to be a parody of Kenichiro from Fist of the North Star who heals people by punching them in the face. Or the naked bathtub scene after which you are told you look like you have an axe wound. Or the time when...

Daniel Wilks



Big Brain Academy

Brains is for smart making and also apparently for the money making if the current crop of brain training/IQ testing games that are selling like hotcakes is anything to go by. Instead of judging the apparent age of your brain, Big Brain Academy scores in weight; the better you play the heavier your brain is. After playing for a few hours my neck is very sore. Whilst I could put this down to craning my neck to peer at the DS on my desk I think that it is more likely due to the phenomenal weight of my brain taxing my atrophied nerd muscles.

The academy is made up of five different branches, Think, Identify, Compute, Analyse and Memorise and each branch consists of three one minute time limit mini games/tests, such as counting the number of cubes on screen, simple math, memorising a sequence of numbers or working out the final square a dog will rest on from some instructions flashed up on screen. The tests themselves are fun but the real problem with the game lays in the fact that it only takes a few hours to achieve gold medals in all difficulty levels on each test making it easy to put down and never pick up again. Aside from multiplayer that is. Up to eight players can play against each other and the clock from one cartridge to see who has the bigger brain. Mine is positively huge.

Daniel Wilks

The Plan

Apparently the plan in game is to steal some painting that one of your ex-criminal partners stole after a bungled heist or some such nonsense but the real plan should be to find every copy of the game, gather them together and bury the developers so they can never do it again. There's a rare moment of honesty about 30 seconds into the first mission of The Plan; one of the characters, each as indistinguishable as the next, is in prison. His Prison number is 8008, or "BOOB" in upside down calculator speak. This prison number is at once an accurate representation of the character and an insight into the level of "cleverness" seen in the scripting. Characters spout post Tarantino clichés community theatre style and the plot seems to be a direct rip off of nearly every heist film or TV show made in the last decade. Actually you don't need to worry about the dialogue for 50% of the game as the sound inexplicably cuts out at random, even in the so called finished code. Gam3play? Well, the 3 we just threw into gameplay for no apparent reason isn't just to be super l33t; it represents the fact that you control three characters per mission, using the "skills" of each to solve puzzles. Puzzles like holding a door open so your partner can walk through or boring a guard by talking about your hair while another character sneaks past outside of their 45 degree vision arc. The idea is good but we strongly suspect that a more competent group of post modern crimes may have executed an even better plan to steal the fun.

Dirk Watch

AVAILABLE ON:
DS / **PSP** / GBA

DETAILS:
CATEGORY: Badly translated RPG / **PLAYERS:** 1 /
DEVELOPER: Sonnori / **PUBLISHER:** Ubisoft /
PRICE: $79.95 / **RATING:** G / **AVAILABLE:** Now

VISUALS	SOUND	GAMEPLAY	OVERALL
58	54	51	50

AVAILABLE ON:
DS / PSP / GBA

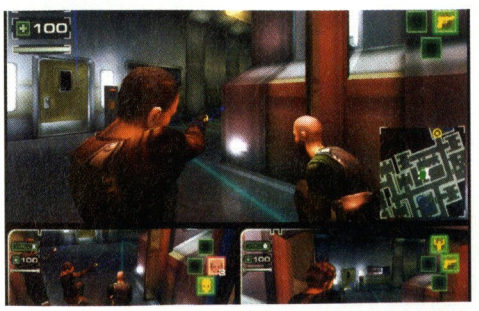
DETAILS:
CATEGORY: IQ / **PLAYERS:** 1-8 /
DEVELOPER: Nintendo / **PUBLISHER:** Nintendo /
PRICE: $69.95 / **RATING:** G / **AVAILABLE:** Now

VISUALS	SOUND	GAMEPLAY	OVERALL
60	58	81	78

AVAILABLE ON:
PS2 / XBOX / PC / GCN

DETAILS:
CATEGORY: Boredom simulator / **PLAYERS:** 1-3 /
DEVELOPER: EkoSystem / **PUBLISHER:** Monte Cristo /
PRICE: $69.95 / **RATING:** M / **AVAILABLE:** Unfortunately

VISUALS	SOUND	GAMEPLAY	OVERALL
50	some-times	35	31



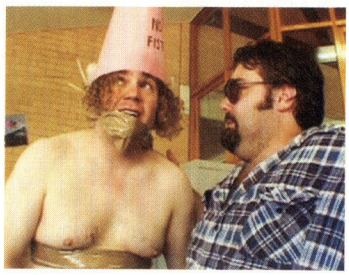
Steve Foxx: A hero for our time

Double the Fist VOLUME 2

ABC, M

It only goes to prove Steve Foxx's point about the ABC being too weak for *Double the Fist* that the second DVD of the AFI award winning series was released more than a year after the first. The DVD completes the adventures of the Fist crew and the never-ending goal to crush the weak and prove to the world what fist-worthiness really is but the final four episodes follow more of a narrative than the first four. Through the episodes we see Steve Foxx prove that he is the most fist-worthy man on planet Earth when he single-handedly crushes a terrorist cell and saves the planet. We see the death of Blue Womp, a burgeoning love affair between Tina T (replacing Mephisto who was possessed by an evil Incan stone head in the episode Terror Factory) and Rod Foxx and even the return of Mephisto.

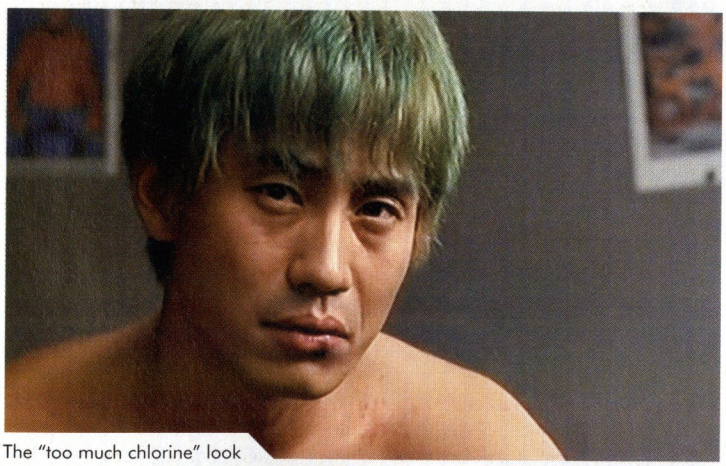
Although narrative based, the show continues with the theme of shoddy special effects and over the top comic violence, extreme sports motifs and is, most importantly, funny enough that you might just piss yourself a little bit. Keep a special eye out for one of the best fat guy fight scenes ever (coming in a close second to Sammo Hung in Pedicab Driver) as Steve shows a terrorist cell the true power of fist.

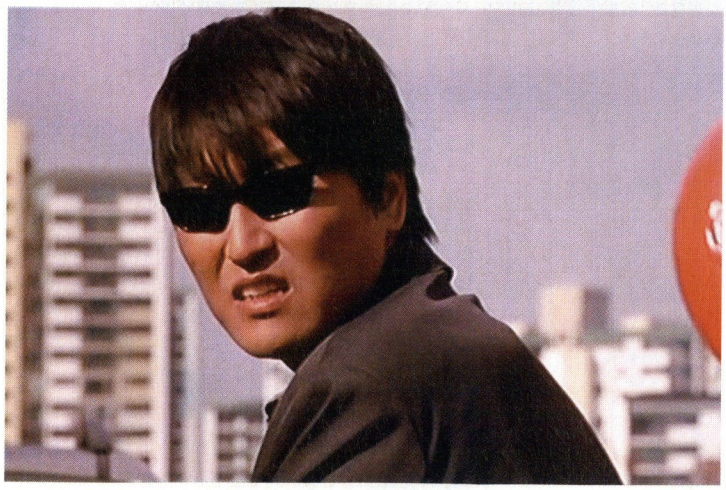

[up] Tony was actually like this at uni

The DVD comes quite packed with some excellent special features including outtakes, bloopers, a making of and a very bittersweet documentary called "From Nobodies to Nobodies" charting the creation of the show to the total lack of industry interest after it aired. Fingers crossed that Craig, Tony, Bryan and Doug get another show sometime soon.

Daniel Wilks

MOVIE: 9 / EXTRAS: 9


The "too much chlorine" look



Sympathy for Mr Vengeance

EASTERN EYE, TBA

Many people have seen *Oldboy*, the second in the thematically related Vengeance trilogy but now for the first time *Sympathy for Mr Vengeance*, the film that kicked off the Vengeance cycle is available on Australian shores.

Ryu, a deaf mute line worker spends his days working and his nights dividing his time between the two women in his life, his overly political girlfriend and his dying sister badly in need of a new kidney. After an ill fated trip to some black market types that leaves Ryu penniless and one kidney short he formulates a plan to kidnap the daughter of his boss for ransom, hoping to use said ransom to save his sister's life. To say things go wrong is a horrible understatement. Initially a fun, though mordantly pitch black comedy (so black that smaller comedies are sucked into it never to be seen again), *Sympathy* transforms into a staggeringly brutal and downright horrific study of two different men driven to extremes to protect their kin.

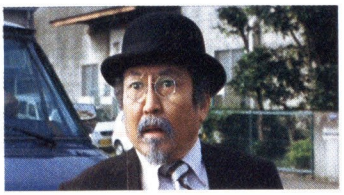
It's not an easy film to watch, not just for the violence but also for the very human playfulness of the characters and the way the film drives you to keep watching, even though you want to look away, making the audience complicit in the unspeakable actions being portrayed on screen. Director Park Chan-Wook has an almost obsessive approach to the film with every frame being used to maximum impact and every shot framed to lend a lyrical beauty to the ugliness within; burying a little girl becomes the centrepiece of a tranquil landscape and mechanical sex becomes a window into a character's head. It's a not a film you can forget after seeing and it's not one that will leave you feeling good – it's more than likely you'll come out feeling you've been beaten up but *Sympathy for Mr Vengeance* shows that Park Chan-Wook is one of, if not the most exciting talents in world cinema today.

Daniel Wilks

MOVIE: 9 / EXTRAS: 8

Tetsujin 28

EASTERN EYE, M 15

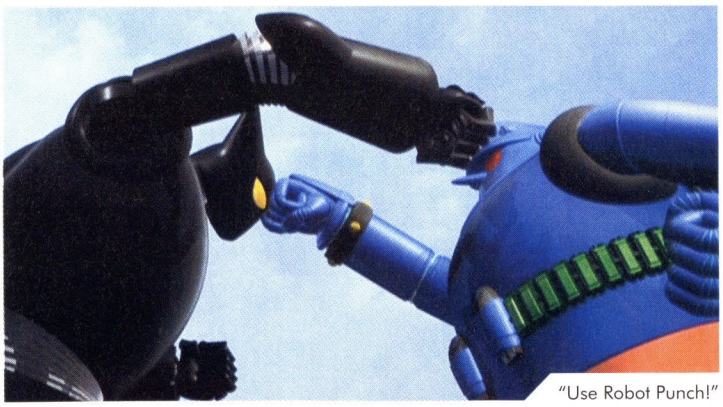


When the giant evil robot Black Ox starts tearing Tokyo a new one there's only one thing that can stop it, a good giant robot created in WWII and long thought destroyed, resurrected by a crazy grandfather and remote controlled by a little boy, Shotaro (a true Kenny with his short shorts and knee high socks), Tetsujin 28!

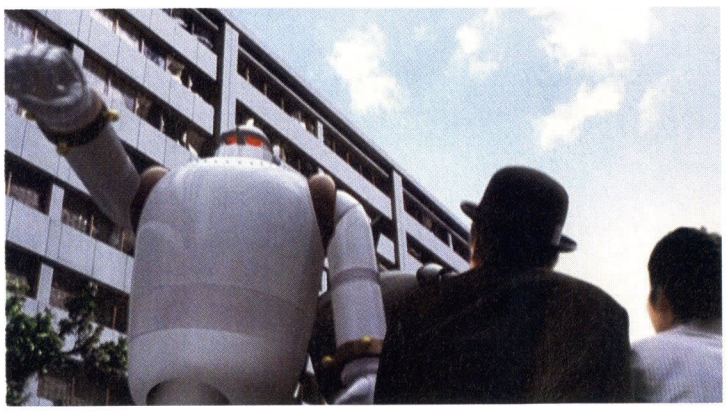
Based on the long running manga and animated series known in the West as *Gigantor*, *Tetsujin 28* should be a wonderful piece of nostalgia offering wide eyed thrills as live action (CG) giant robots battle to decide the fate of the city and the heart of a young boy but instead what we get is a long, often painfully slow nothing with very little action, phoned in performances and some downright shoddy effects. There are times when the film shows the audience what it could have been, like when Black Ox tears up the Tokyo tower or the first confrontation between Tetsujin 28 and Ox where both robots have a real sense of weight and dimension but after this brief glimpse of greatness things degenerate once again to nothing really happening and bored sounding people delivering lines with just enough gusto to warrant a paycheque. Even when the "action" happens it still comes across as bored and lazy; instead of knock down drag out robot fights most battles consist of a few lazy punches with no real sense of impact, as though the director was determined to show how the robots would actually move given the limitations of their design. They're giant robots – realism is not needed. Ultimately the film would have been better served with miniature sets and guys in rubber suits.

Daniel Wilks

MOVIE: 4 / EXTRAS: N/A



"Use Robot Punch!"



Chiaki Kuriyama: Typecast till the end

Azumi 2: Death or Love

EASTERN EYE, TBA

Death or Love sees the titular nubile young jailbait ninja Azumi and Nagari continuing on their mission to bring peace to Japan by offing the last warlord on her list. Standing in her way are Kanbei, a vengeful samurai after Azumi's head for killing his master in the first film, and his hired band of high tech super ninjas. Not being one to let a few gaudily dressed guys in masks get in her way, Azumi and Nagiri make their way towards their objective, picking up a sexy little giggling ninja girl (Chiyaki Kuriyama of Kill Bill fame) and an itinerant conman, rogue, Ginkaku who just happens to look like the friend/potential lover, Nachi, that Azumi was forced to kill at the culmination of her training in the first film, giving rise to a tacked on teen romance subplot and a lot of dime store philosophising about fighting for peace.

While there is a lot of sword play and the fight with the "Earth Spider" is quite outstanding, the film lacks the visual panache the original director Ryuhei Kitamura delivered. Whereas Kitamura made up for the shortcomings of the actors (or non-actors) in terms of fighting ability and choreography with lightning edits, his trademark vertiginous spinning camera and warped angles, new director Shusuke Kaneko seems to be sticking to his Kaiju roots and sitting the camera back and letting the action unfold. The end result looks a little clumsy, but *Azumi 2* still has some moments of greatness and is a pleasant way to spend a few hours.

Daniel Wilks

MOVIE: 6 / EXTRAS: 5

Koma

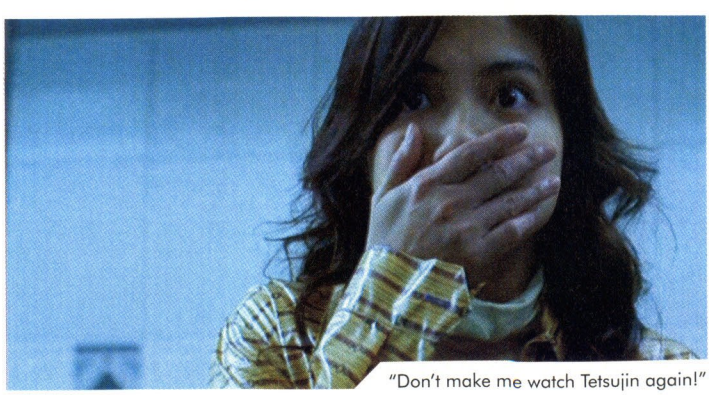
EASTERN EYE, MA 15+

Koma is something of a rarity in the current market of imported Asian horror/thriller movies. Rather than maintaining tension and working towards one or two big scares (which seems to be the desire of every director post Ring), *Koma* fills the lean 88 minute running time with enough tension, plot twists and atmosphere to keep the pace nice and fast. Taking its kick off point from an urban myth – waking up in a bathtub full of ice after a drunken party and finding out you're down a kidney, *Koma* quickly evolves into a taut psychological thriller with two strong female leads.

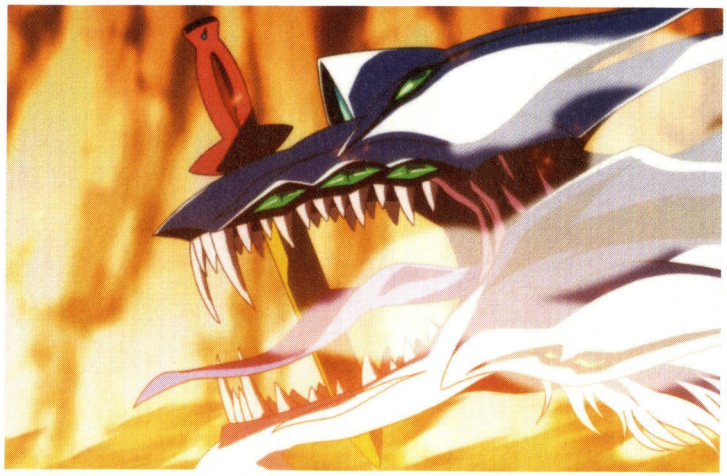
In a drunken stupor one night, Ching (a woman suffering from renal failure) stumbles into a hotel room to witness a woman covered in blood crawling across the floor; the latest victim of black-market organleggers. Later in a police line up, Ching points out a woman she witnessed acting suspiciously just before she discovered the unwilling kidney donor. Although she is aggressive, Sue Ling is soon dismissed as a suspect but not before the audience discovers she has it in for Ching and has links to the other woman's past, most specifically her boyfriend Fung. It is around this point that the major failing of *Koma* shows itself – due to the pacing of the film the narrative relies way too much on coincidence and leaps in logic and/or faith to propel the action. It's a pity because the two leads Angelica Lee and Karena Lam as Ching and Ling respectively deliver great performances.

Daniel Wilks

MOVIE: 6 / EXTRAS: 6



"Don't make me watch Tetsujin again!"



That's one angry puppy

My-HiME VOLUME 1

PRODUCTION: SUNRISE
GENRE: MAGICAL GIRL/ACTION

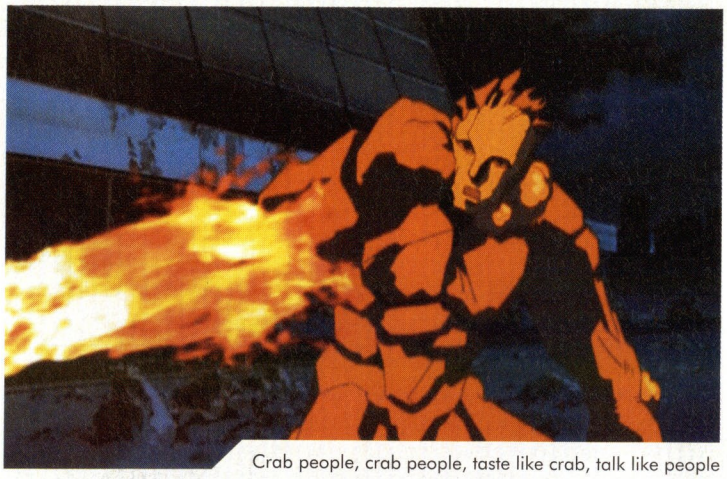
The Fuka Academy is no ordinary school, and Mai Tokiha who, along with her brother, is arriving on a full scholarship, is no ordinary girl. It's not exactly a novel premise, but after watching the first disc of *My-HiME* we're definitely on board. Without giving too much away, it turns out the school is under attack from creatures known as Orphans, mystical beasts that can only be beaten by HiME – girls with incredible powers. The acronym, by the way, stands for Highly-advanced Materialising Equipment, an ability that opens up incredible potential for the fight scenes. In the opening episode alone, the series gets off to a fantastic start, introducing us to two of the HiME through an epic battle on a ferry. Natsuki is able to summon guns directly into her hands, as well as a sentient mech-wolf, while the cat-like Mikoto has a sword that's so huge she needs to sweep it around on the ground to build up momentum to attack. Naturally Mai is drawn in and comes to realise that she too has powers.

Over the course of the first disc it's revealed that while the HiME are being brought to Fuka academy to fight the demons, there may be something else in store for them, which is why Natsuki is fighting to prevent new HiME from arriving. We're also only introduced to a few of the HiME, leaving the viewer anxious to see more.

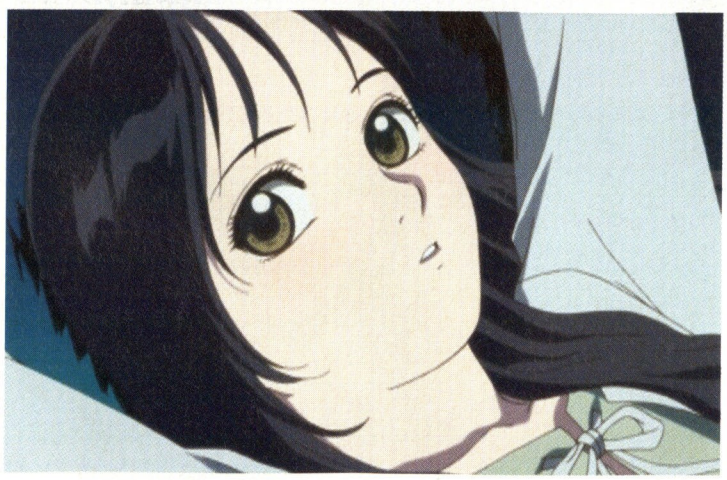
My-HiME is an interesting – although somewhat unnecessary - blend of the magical girl genre with moments of heavy fan service. In one of the vignettes at the end of each episode, Mai recounts the purchase of her first bra and the realisation that her breasts are larger than her classmates. Okaaaaay. Then there's the episode where a rogue Orphan is stealing bras and panties from all the girls in the school, and the normally reserved and mysterious Natsuki turns out to have the largest collection. Again, we say okaaaaay. But fortunately, putting that to one side, *My-HiME* is still very entertaining and the first volume lays a solid foundation for the rest of the series. Check it out.

Cam Shea

ANIMATION: 7 / STORY: 6
EXTRAS: 2 / OVERALL: 7



Crab people, crab people, taste like crab, talk like people



Zaion: I Wish You Were Here

PRODUCTION: GONZO
GENRE: ACTION/DRAMA

Imagine having nano machines coursing through your bloodstream, ready to be called into action at the slightest thought. Imagine running into battle, a cool mech hard suit springing over your skin as the nano machines do their work. That would rock, and it's by far the coolest thing about *Zaion*. The hard-suit-springing, nano-coursing-soldiers in question work for a military organisation, the NOA. They're experimental warriors in the battle against the M34 virus, a virulent pathogen that arrived with a meteor shower and has been infecting humans, transforming them into spiked, golem like mutants that go on killing sprees, ever since.

Problem is, they're losing the battle. Every time they go out, several of their team don't come back. It's no wonder then, that the male lead Yuuji is such an angry, rebellious (stereo)type. Fortunately, there's another weapon in development, based around the powers of a 16 year old girl, Ai. Being treated as an experiment is all Ai has known of life – she's looking for a reason to live and lo and behold, she meets Yuuji. It's not that *Zaion* is completely awful, more that four episodes isn't enough to make a love story, let alone an apocalyptic scenario, meaningful.

This OVA would have been much better served as a slightly longer series – it would have given the characters more time to breath, it would have given Gonzo the time to actually wrap the story up and it would have let them explore the evolution of Yuuji's powers – by the end he's shaping up to be a certifiable bad-ass, but we never get to see that. As it stands the whole thing feels undercooked. It also doesn't help that so much of the design is utterly generic and forgettable, and that the 3D models clash really badly with the traditional animation. Disappointing.

Ashok Flitcroft

ANIMATION: 4 / STORY: 4
EXTRAS: 4 / OVERALL: 4

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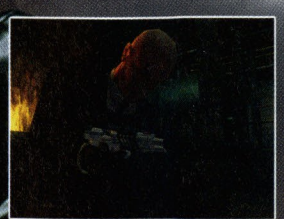

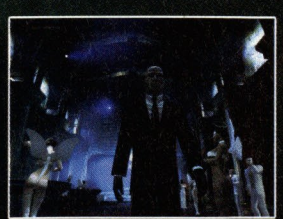

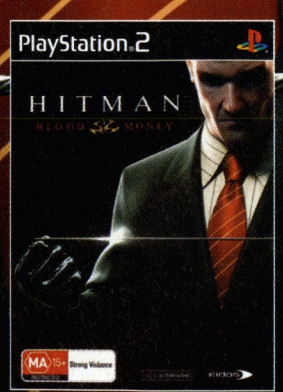

MA 15+ RESTRICTED Strong violence, Coarse language

XBOX

XBOX 360

PlayStation.2

PC DVD ROM

Io-Interactive

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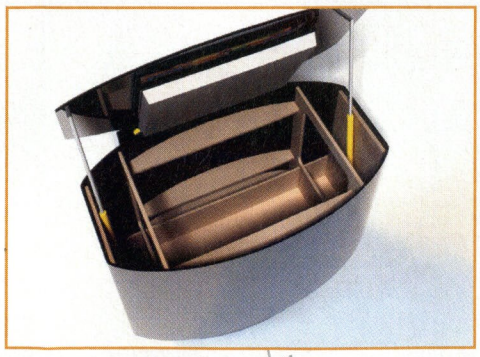
THE KILLER CABINET

Interview with Arran Potter, DIY videogame cabinet maker

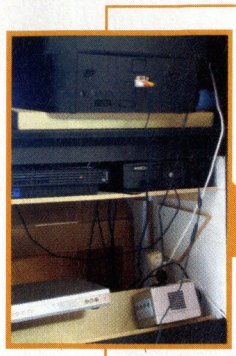
Some people think that the slickest gaming setup is all about home theatre – the projector and the surround sound speakers with the earth shattering bass, but if you're prepared to put in some serious effort you can create your own custom setup, and in the case of Arran Potter's project that means marrying an old school cocktail cabinet design with the latest tech and building in the ability to run both a PC and every next gen console in one. After seeing some pics we just had to know more so we got in touch with Arran to find out all about it...

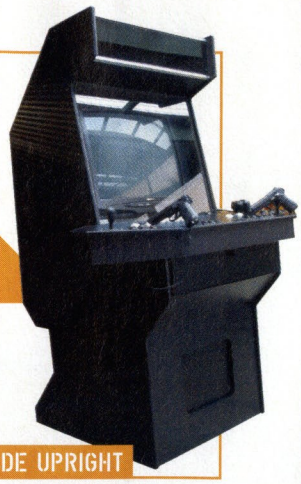
3DSMAX CONCEPT RENDERS



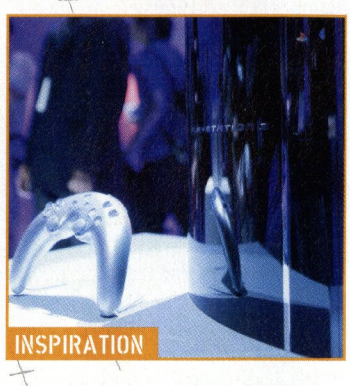
HYPER: So how did you get into making gaming cabinets?

Arran: As a child of the 80s I grew up sneaking out to the local Arcade to shove 20-cent coins into Pitfall and Tron. This childhood addiction holds incredible nostalgic value and even crappy 3 beat music brings back flashing vibrant memories. Prior to this cocktail cabinet I built a quad arcade cabinet *[see boxout]* from plans off the internet. I absolutely loved building the Upright. The upright had all consoles running on it except a PC. It was huge and heavy – I mean really huge, I swear it was a lot smaller in my memories. The upright was a lot of fun but the shear scale of the thing made it difficult to move and also the wire confusion of having all the consoles meant only I could venture behind the cabinet and actually know what was going on. The upright Machine lived at my old work for a year before being sold on EBay (that was a sad day). The fund injection helped spawn a new idea and concept – one a lot more compact and user friendly. I am a 3D Animator by trade so I was able to nut out a new design in 3DSMax before cutting anything, I always planned on making a cocktail cabinet I just didn't plan on doing a modern take on the classic.





QUAD ARCADE UPRIGHT



INSPIRATION

Was it difficult designing something in Max to both look good and store everything you wanted under the hood? Do you have a background in industrial design as well as 3D animation?

No industrial design background (laughs). If an industrial designer could see the skeleton of my cabinet I am sure they would also laugh. This cabinet is more of a proof of concept, something I could send to China to get mass produced flat pack style.

What inspired the design?

I decided to go with a modern take on the old retro Cocktail cabinet. My design was based on the up and coming PS3 with its glossy black finish and its curved body. I remember my brother telling me that I was crazy to attempt a curved cabinet - it was only until I was too far into building it that I realised my brother was onto something. I must admit there were plenty of hitches on the way most of which I am sure I have subconsciously erased from my memory.

What were some of these problems?

The one major hitch that I won't forget anytime soon, was the hinge mechanism used for the lid. This hinge even stumped a seasoned professional (the gas strut man) - I eventually made my own design using 2 kitchen cabinet hinges placed next to each other. This method is currently working well but I am not so sure it will last as these hinges were not meant to work this way. As I wanted the lid to open and close I decided to

install 4 x 80mm case fans at the back to remove the heat build up from the LCD monitor and internal computers, and I installed 2 x 120mm fans at the side to pump in cool air and keep the air circulating. These fans mean I can play the cabinet with the lid closed – retro style. Oh and another problem was the size of the rear wire access underneath the controls, when I cut it my hand could fit easily in but once all the buttons and joysticks were in place my hand could barely fit, wiring was a blind, stressful, painful thing done over 3 nights – usually that's the enjoyable part.

So what's inside the box?

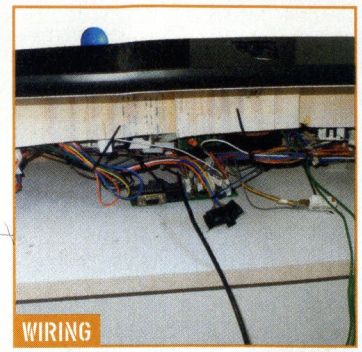
I wanted my cocktail cabinet to be more useful than my upright cabinet so I made sure it supported all the latest consoles and not just my Mame PC. So I built this cabinet with expandability options - for example I used a 24 Dell monitor because it is capable of running HD for the new consoles hitting the market, and also the Dell has so many inputs that it's perfect as an AV consoles switcher. I also used the X-Arcade BYO kit for all the wiring. The X-Arcade supports all major consoles so if I wanted to use the joysticks to play Xbox I could. I say "if I wanted to use the joysticks" as they aren't ideal because of the lack of actual Analogue sticks which all console games rely so heavily on. Yes I do know the X-Arcade joysticks can be switched to Analogue with a button combo but this method mid game play is far from ideal and I wouldn't recommend it to anyone. When I play consoles I will just use the wireless controllers and leave the joysticks for the Mame stuff. I also installed a 3" trackball which acts as a mouse (really cool) and can be used in Mame with games like Marble Madness (lots of laughs).

Do you have a full PC in there or have you mounted the internals in the case? And where will the drive trays for the consoles sit?

I plan on adding all consoles to this cabinet - Xbox 360, PS3 and the Wii when they all arrive. Currently I have a mid size tower inside running Mame and the internet. This midtower is too large and will be replaced by a tiny Mac mini running 'Boot Camp' from Apple. Boot Camp can run both operating systems - OSX and Windows XP. This means I would have all bases covered for the ultimate all in one cabinet. I am contemplating mounting PC internals just so I can enter in the HotBox competition in Atomic Magazine.

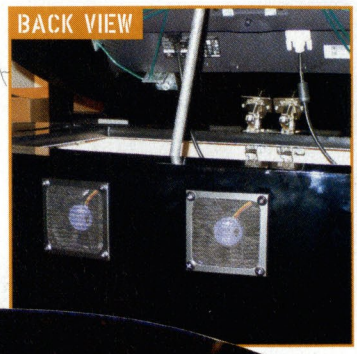
EARLY WORK

ORIGINAL HINGE



WIRING

FINAL HINGE



BACK VIEW

Tell us about the paint finish.

Once I built the cabinet I was faced with the decision of whether to SprayPaint, cover in Perspex, or laminate. Laminate is quite costly - maybe around $600 for enough material to cover the surfaces but then I was faced with tricky corners and curved surfaces to laminate to. Perspex would have looked fantastic but was super expensive with quotes between $2000-$4000 (like that was ever going to happen) so in the end I opted to spray-paint which cost around $500. The guys at Interspray were awesome - they patched up and smoothed all problem areas and sprayed it with 2xPack gloss black - the result was mind-blowing. It looks really cool and everybody who sees it can't believe the finish achieved. There is one problem with spraying things glossy black... finger prints! I might think twice about doing this again in the future even if it does look insane.

How long have you worked on it?

In total this project has taken me 10 months of tinkering on occasional weekends and after hours and has cost me about $3000 (that includes the Dell monitor).

So now that you've finished it, what games are you playing the most?

Street Fighter – I know that's the easy answer but it's the truth. I am looking forward to the Wii especially with its strong retro ties mixed with future playing style concepts – basically what my cabinet is about. So here's the real question. Why build a $3000 dollar / 100 man hour Street Fighter machine? Why not!! <<

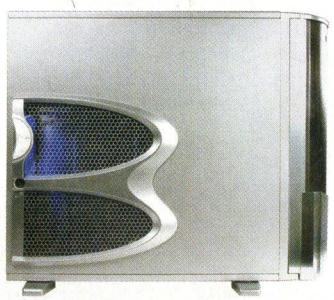
FINSHED CABINET

THERMALTAKE EUREKA HOME SERVER

RRP: $349 / WWW.THERMALTAKE.NET

PC cases don't usually get us hot and bothered. Actually, scrap that, they often do – but for all the wrong reasons. Over the years it's been a nightmare getting inside cases, and more often than not you'll end up cutting yourself while putting your machine together or swapping in a new drive. Thankfully, case designs have improved in leaps and bounds over the last few years, and now we're finally at the stage where cases aren't just functional, but stylish to boot (pun intended).

Case in point (sorry), Thermaltake's new Eureka case. This full tower isn't just massive and slick, with its curved speaker-style/brushed aluminium front and honeycomb scoops on the side (with blue LED glow coming through when the system is on – natch), it's also really user friendly. You've got space for five optical drives and five HDDs (which have their own individual trays that slide out towards the side- nice), a removable motherboard tray, tool free PCI slots access, plus USB 2.0, firewire, mic in and audio out ports on the side at the front. Throw in 120mm case fans at front and rear and a 430W power supply and you're laughing. The only problem is fitting it under your desk...



PLANTRONICS PULSAR 590A BLUETOOTH HEADSET

RRP: $299 / WWW.ANYWARE.COM.AU

Simply put, the Pulsar 590A is a pretty sweet little headset. The design is nice and functional, it feels like a quality item when worn rather than some cheap plastic parts, it's comfortable and the sound is good though unspectacular. The headset syncs easily with any Bluetooth capable device such as mobile phones but the best feature of the headset is the adaptor that allows it to be used in conjunction with any device with a 3.5mm headphone jack. Rather than a boom mic, the Pulsar instead uses a telescoping microphone tube. While this is less obtrusive and prone to break that a boom it does lead to a bit of fiddling to get the headset to sit in just the right position on your head for optimal audio quality. You can get a good ten or so hours out of a single charge and between times the docking bay serves as a nice way to store and/or display your rather natty looking headset.

CREATIVE TRAVELSOUND 400 SPEAKERS

RRP: $79.95 / WWW.CREATIVE.COM

The next time one of us packs up our bags and heads off to some far flung country to visit a developer, we'll seriously consider slotting one of these babies in our luggage. The Travelsound 400 speakers caught our eye with their sleek design and cool swivel function (you rotate the satellites down so they don't get damaged), but the real gold here is the sound quality and the ease with which you can just plug in your laptop or mp3 player and get some tunes going. If you can't get to a power point the speakers run for up to 35 hours (probably not at our volume) off AAA batteries. They're cheap too.

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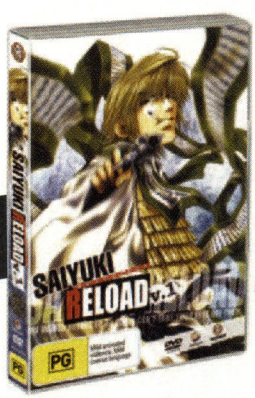

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The WOW Chronicles

ELBASTARDO

Elves: It seems that no matter the world that they are in, no matter how people want to redefine them, draw them, write them, it all comes down to one thing – ponceness. Elves, my friends, are ponces. They talk like every pronunciation they make was from the frigging Bible and routinely have very, very girly hair cuts. I have never liked Elves and WoW has ensured that I never, ever will. So it was that, a brave level 12 Paladin, I knew that operating out of the Elvish town of Auberdine would be hell and, yes, it was.

I should have been aware of the coming pain quotient when the first thing I saw, coming off the boat, was a quest from a chap standing on a dock, brooding mournfully, overlooking a grey sea. With great hesitation, I took his quest. Oh, Jesus Wept. He wanted someone to go and find the ghost of his lost love. Normally, the idea of helping out a poncy elf stalk his girlfriend from beyond the grave wouldn't appeal to me but experience points makes whores of us all. The quest itself was easy. Run around, find some ghosts, steal stuff off them, then come back and hand it over. Money and XP, baby! No. You then have to sit through five minutes of "oh, mine eternal darling, without you infinity is a cold and grim blah" Eventually, a crowd of well wishers began simply screaming out homophobic epithets at the poor elf, who soldiered on with his poncing. Such is the rich role-playing experience of Warcraft.

Auberdine is surrounded by forest and beaches, which means you can't wander for three feet without being attacked by a bear, some sort of supernatural tiger or emu/turkey hybrid. That's alright though. Slowly but surely, experience builds.

It's out in the forests of Auberdine that I find an elf woman called Djani. Now, usually, teaming up with a party of strangers is much like walking in to a Turkish steam bath, dressed only in a pair of speedos, while blowing kisses to everyone there. Sooner or later, you'll find yourself in a dangerously intimate situation with a stranger, who won't tell you their name. But Djani and I get on, we both are apparently unemployed, given our playing time and so we finish the Tower of Althalaxx quest. This involves spending forty five minutes running to a different, equally monster packed forest, clearing out demons, running another forty five minutes, running back, then clearing out more demons. Djani is a Druid, I'm a Paladin, which in game terms means we are both healers with fairly OK average powers. How this translates is that while we don't die much, killing your average rodent takes five minutes.

Which means we need to assemble a team, when it comes time to do our first dungeon, the mighty Blackfathom Deeps. Into the steamroom, greasy and eager…

In life, I'm afraid of deep water, so having to swim your way into an ancient ruin packed with sea monsters gives me the genuine creeps. What's worse is that, out of a party of five I'm

with, one chap seems determined to do the dungeon in minimalist fashion. That is, not healing, not fighting, but screaming out LOL! LOL! :) during every goddamned fight! Another says nothing throughout the entire dungeon except to intimate we are not the bravest of chaps when we run, screaming, from a bad pull of elite monsters. The other is a high level fighter, who is actually terribly competent and fun to play with. Some people say that you shouldn't rely on higher level characters to get you out of tough spots. To these people, I say: you're clearly not as chicken as I. Believe me, when you're fighting a three-headed hydra knocking off half your hit points with each shot you'd want a big brother too. After much gibbering from myself, BFD is conquered, quests are turned in and I'm ready to finish up with Elf Land. I've learned two things from the Ponce Zone. The first is to be very careful when teaming with strangers. The second is that I love dungeons. It's where the good loot is.

Sadly, I'll forget that first lesson…

Next month *– Three dungeons and serious child endangerment.*

Almost as poncey as Dr Tachyon...

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City Software www.citysoftware.com.au	3/222 Latrobe St, Melbourne VIC PH: 03 9250 6900; Shop 7 & 8, 111 Pacific Hwy. North Sydney NSW 2060	PC, PS2, DS, Xbox, Xbox 360, PSP, Gamecube, GBA
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Dick Smith Electronics / Dick Smith Powerhouse www.dse.com.au	http://dse.findnearest.com.au/	PC, PS2, DS, Xbox, Xbox 360, PSP, Gamecube, Gameboy, GBA.
DVD Crave www.dvdcrave.com.au	Shop 1/471 Payneham Road, Felixstow SA. Ph: 08 8365 5231	PC, PS2, DS, Xbox, Xbox 360, PSP, Gamecube, GBA,
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Gamehead www.gamehead.com.au	Online Retailer Ph: 1800 008 525	PC, PS2, DS, Xbox, Xbox 360, PSP, Gamecube, Gameboy, GBA,
Games Warehouse www.gameswarehouse.com.au	Online Retailer Ph: 02 9648 5656	PC, PS2, DS, Xbox, Xbox 360, PSP, Gamecube, GBA, Mac,
Games Wizards www.gameswizards.com	22 Stores located in NSW, VIC & ACT. Ph 1300 131 670 for your nearest store.	PC, PS2, DS, Xbox, Xbox 360, PSP, Gamecube, GBA, Mac
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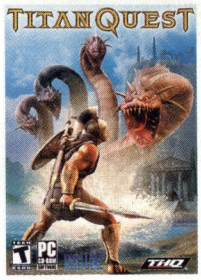

PC
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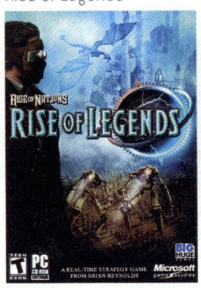

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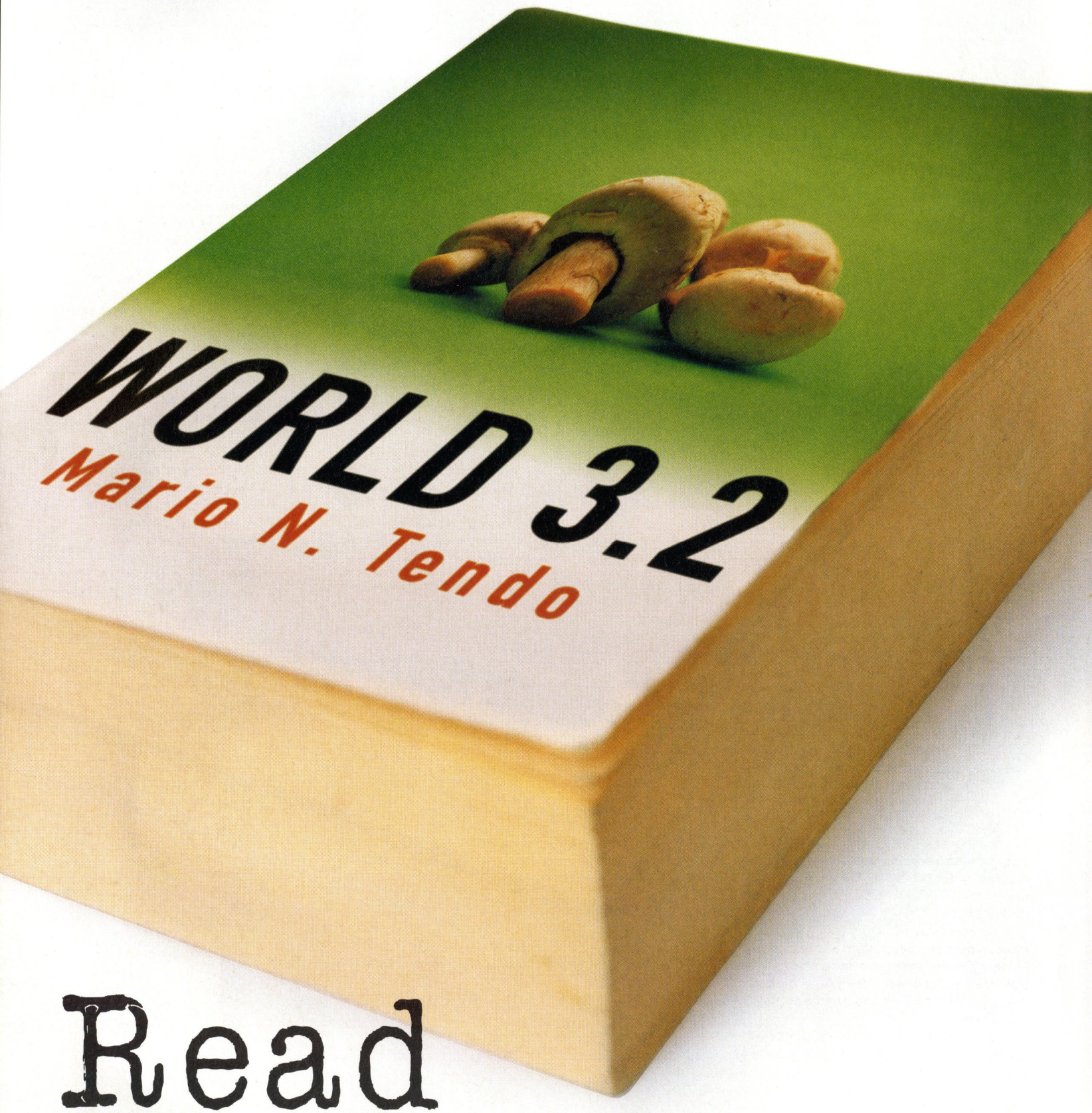


Read All About It!

Novels Inspired By Your Favourite Games by Erin Marcon

What do 'Perfect Dark,' 'Warcraft' and 'Resident Evil' have in common? Answer: Each can be found at your local bookstore. Novels inspired by blockbuster games are being released with increasing frequency and fanfare. Richard A. Knaak (author of 'Warcraft: The Sundering'), S.D. Perry ('Resident Evil: Zero Hour') and Greg Rucka ('Perfect Dark: Initial Vector') were kind enough to share their thoughts on this emerging phenomenon.

The creation of a licensed novel is a collaborative process, with developers often overseeing the written narrative in order to ensure consistency with the established lore of the game. Far from regarding the developer's input as an unwelcome intrusion, Knaak has fond memories of his 'Warcraft' experience, describing it as "...definitely a team effort. I was in constant contact with Blizzard, especially Chris Metzen, Vice President of Creative Development and a principal figure in Warcraft. We discussed every chapter to make certain that it was as Blizzard desired it."

Similarly, Rucka worked closely with Microsoft during the gestation of his 'Perfect Dark' novel. "Everyone involved in this was just tremendous," he says.

"Eric Trautman, who edited the book along with Eric Raab... Eric Trautman and I got along like a house of fire. ...It was very exciting, very rewarding, creatively."

Positive working relationships notwithstanding, is it unduly burdensome to write within the boundaries of an established mythology? Not according to Knaak. "I love playing in other people's worlds as much as my own."

Rucka is another convert, suggesting that "...there are certain benefits in that because if you get the right audience, they know all the touchstones. ...You're writing, for the most part, for an audience that knows the world from the word go. You don't have to worry about holding hands."

Given the acknowledgement that a significant portion of the readership will be purchasing these novels as a result of their experience with the corresponding game, is it important for an author to have 'hands-on' time with that game? "Depends on the videogame," Perry says.

"For Resident Evil, yeah, absolutely. For every game novelization I've done, I played the game multiple times... for the first one, the original, I played it so many times that I could get through it running, like in just over an hour... I actually videotaped a couple of the later games, so I could find stuff I needed quickly... I think that playing the game, getting the feel for the characters and the story, for the integrity of it, is vital to writing it well."

Of course, the writing of the novel and the development of a game often occur concurrently and in these circumstances, the author must extrapolate from pre-production materials and/or incomplete code. "I didn't have an opportunity to play the game," Rucka says.

"I saw some development material but I remember calling up Trautman and saying does Jo have a signature move in the game? And he paused and he said, well, let me send you these graphics and then he said... the duck and roll is a big move in the game. I said, okay, then she's going to be ducking and rolling... and that's in there for people who have played the game."

Knaak is firm in his belief that 'hands-on' time with a game is an important research tool. However, he remains equally cognisant of the differing demands of the two mediums, stating that "...the writer has to go to the novel aware that he is writing a story, not a segment of the game."

Perhaps the principal distinction between the two forms is that gaming is the more demonstrably interactive experience, at least in terms of determining the outcome of the narrative. How do authors seek to engage an audience that may be more accustomed to controlling the action? "I tried to keep it moving as fast as I could," Rucka says laughing.

He then identifies the foundation of his approach. "I'm not one of those people who believes that video game players and devotees of first-person shooters are therefore one, idiots, two, amoral and three, illiterate. I don't assume that, ever. I always try to write with an eye towards the fact that the audience is smarter than I am. ...I've never learned how to phone it in. They told me to write a novel and I saw no reason why it couldn't be a novel as opposed to a bunch of action sequences strung together in narrative.

Knaak specifies a number of techniques for capturing (and holding) the reader's attention. "I try to keep the action flowing as best as possible and, whenever able, switch from one essential character to another," he says.

"No story is just about one character; there are always others involved and that must show. It keeps the situations fresher. Also, I tend to like leaving each chapter with something of a cliff-hanger or some situation that will make the reader move on to the next one in order to find out how it is resolved. Of course, sometimes they have to wait until the chapter after that!"

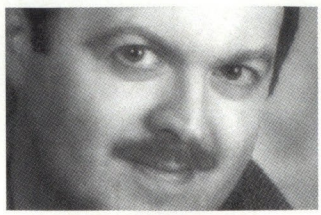
What other challenges are specific to writing videogame novels? Perry regards the accurate portrayal of the environment and ambience of the game as paramount to the credibility of her writing. "For me," she says, "it was getting specific details right. I'd be writing about a character running down a hall... and I'd have to go cue up the game ...so I'd be able to describe it correctly. I can get quite nitpicky about those things..."

Knaak seeks to strike a balance between combat and characterisation, stating that "...you cannot simply write about all the fighting. That would please some but hardly most readers. ...Yet, you need to give the readers the elements that made the game popular in the first place. The key to success is balancing the character and action elements just right."

Do these books represent a genuine exploration and expansion of gaming mythology, or are they cynical cash-ins? There can be no doubt that these novels are designed to promote brand awareness and provide additional revenue. However, Rucka believes that any novel has the capacity to be art. His 'Perfect Dark' work is praiseworthy for its pacing and bold characterisation while Perry's 'Resident Evil' style is fluid and atmospheric. Knaak's 'Warcraft' prose, while sometimes hackneyed and repetitive, comes to life when he describes battle scenes and magical effects.

In short, there is no reason to dismiss these novels purely on the basis of their licensed origins.

We would like to thank Richard A. Knaak, S.D. Perry and Greg Rucka for participating in this discussion.



Introducing Richard A. Knaak - Author of Warcraft: The Sundering

Richard A. Knaak established his name in the fantasy field by authoring 'Dragonlance' and 'Dragonrealm' novels, the latter being a series of his own creation. His association with Blizzard Entertainment dates back to the 2001 publication of his first Warcraft novel, 'Day of the Dragon' and he has since been a regular contributor of novels to the Warcraft and Diablo lines.

Knaak is a long time follower of fantasy games and holds the Blizzard titles in high regard, stating that "their storylines and animation are the best I've come across. It makes it very easy to enter and become one of the characters. That made writing a novel set in such a world something I could hardly refuse."

Knaak is currently working on a new trilogy of 'Diablo' novels.

12 Legendary Games
AND THE NOVELS THEY INSPIRED

Introducing S.D. Perry - Author of Resident Evil: Zero Hour

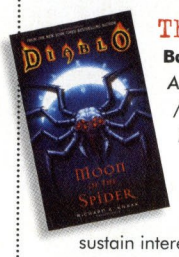
Over the past decade, Stephani Danelle Perry has built a reputation as a licensed novel specialist, authoring titles based on 'Timecop,' 'Virus' and 'Star Trek: Deep Space Nine.' Perry also produced a novel inspired by the cult hit 'Xena: Warrior Princess' under the pseudonym 'Stella Howard.'

Perry is the daughter of veteran sci-fi author Steve Perry, and it is through her father that she entered the world of 'Resident Evil.' "Marco Palmieri, an editor from Pocket Books, was looking for a writer to novelise the videogame... and he called my father, Steve Perry, to see if he was interested. My father was busy on another project, I think, but he knew I'd been playing the videogame, so he gave Marco my number. Marco called, we talked, I accepted."

Introducing Greg Rucka - Author of Perfect Dark: Initial Vector

Greg Rucka is a prolific and successful author based in Portland, Oregon. His rise to prominence commenced in 1996 with the publication of 'Keeper,' the first in a series of novels featuring bodyguard 'Atticus Kodiak.' In the comic book field, he is perhaps best known for his award winning run on the crime series, 'Gotham Central.' His signature creation, spy thriller 'Queen and Country,' is the subject of both novels and comics.

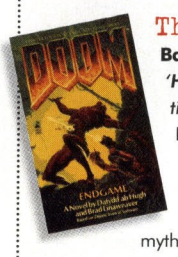
During negotiations to engage Greg Rucka as the author of 'Initial Vector,' Microsoft couldn't, due to non-disclosure arrangements, identify the game in question. They could only reveal that they had approached Rucka due to his penchant for spy fiction and strong female characters. Much to the astonishment of Microsoft's representative, Rucka immediately asked, "Is it Joanna Dark?"



The Diablo Library

Back Catalogue: ***'Legacy of Blood'*** *by Richard A. Knaak /* ***'Demonsbane'*** *by Robert B. Marks /* ***'The Black Road'*** *by Mel Odom /* ***'The Kingdom of Shadow'*** *by Richard A. Knaak /* ***'Moon of the Spider'*** *by Richard A. Knaak*

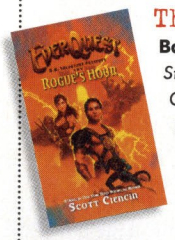
Did you know? One of the functions of the recently released 'Moon of the Spider' is to sustain interest in Diablo as fans endure the agonising wait (five years and counting) for a potential third game in the series.



The Doom Library

Back Catalogue: ***'Knee Deep in the Dead'*** */* ***'Hell on Earth'*** */* ***'Infernal Sky'*** */* ***'Endgame'*** *(all titles by Dafydd ab Hugh and Brad Linaweaver)*

Did you know? In addition to their collaborative work Dafydd ab Hugh and Brad Linaweaver have also pursued solo assignments, producing novels based on the 'Star Trek' and 'Sliders' mythologies respectively.



The EverQuest Library

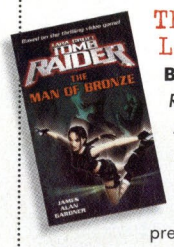
Back Catalogue: ***'The Ocean of Tears'*** *by Stewart Wieck /* ***'The Rogue's Hour'*** *by Scott Ciencin*

Did you know? Thomas Reid, the veteran author of numerous 'Forgotten Realms' novels and game supplements, has been commissioned to write a third EverQuest novel, 'Truth and Steel.'

The Halo Library

Back Catalogue: ***'The Fall of Reach'*** *by Eric Nylund /* ***'The Flood'*** *by William C. Dietz /* ***'First Strike'*** *by Eric Nylund*

Did you know? Bungie confirmed in February 2006 that they have held discussions with Eric Nylund on the possibility of creating a new 'Halo' novel for publication in the 'near to mid future.' Stay tuned.



The Lara Croft: Tomb Raider Library

Back Catalogue: ***'Amulet of Power'*** *by Michael Resnick /* ***'The Lost Cult'*** *by E.E. Knight /* ***'The Man of Bronze'*** *by James Alan Gardner /*

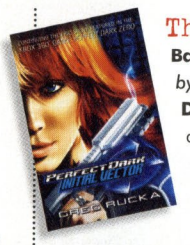
Did you know? The author of the first Tomb Raider novel, Michael Resnick, is a five time winner of the Hugo Award, one of the most prestigious honours in the science fiction field.

The Myst Library

Back Catalogue: ***'The Book of Atrus'*** *by Rand Miller, Robyn Miller and David Wingrove /* ***'The Book of Ti'Ana'*** *by Rand Miller and David Wingrove /* ***'The Book of D'Ni'*** *by Rand Miller and David Wingrove*

Did you know? In an interview with BBC News Online, Myst co-creator Rand Miller stated that the games revealed only a 'small part' of the storyline and that the novels were intended to 'explain the back story.'

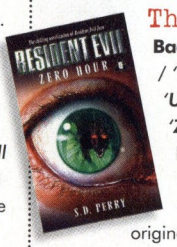
'Perfect Dark: Initial Vector' was published by Tor Books. 'Resident Evil: Zero Hour' and 'Warcraft: War of the Ancients Book Three - The Sundering' were published by Pocket Star Books (a division of Simon & Schuster).



The Perfect Dark Library

Back Catalogue: ***'Perfect Dark: Initial Vector'*** *by Greg Rucka*

Did you know? 'Initial Vector' is the first book in a projected trilogy of 'Perfect Dark' novels. Greg Rucka recently commenced work on the second of Joanna Dark's literary adventures.



The Resident Evil Library

Back Catalogue: ***'The Umbrella Conspiracy'*** */* ***'Caliban Cove'*** */* ***'City of the Dead'*** */* ***'Underworld'*** */* ***'Nemesis'*** */* ***'Code: Veronica'*** */* ***'Zero Hour'*** *(all titles by S.D. Perry)*

Did you know? Five of the seven novels are direct adaptations of the console classics whilst 'Caliban Cove,' and 'Underworld,' present original scenarios set within the Resident Evil universe.

The Splinter Cell Library

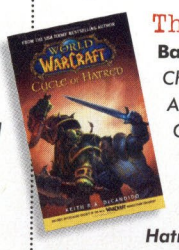
Back Catalogue: ***'Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell'*** */* ***'Operation Barracuda'*** *(both titles by David Michaels)*

Did you know? Raymond Benson (or David Michaels as he is known to Splinter Cell readers) served as a writer and composer for the PC hit 'Ultima VII: The Black Gate.'

The StarCraft Library

Back Catalogue: ***'Uprising'*** *by Micky Neilson /* ***'Liberty's Crusade'*** *by Jeff Grubb /* ***'Shadow of the Xel'Naga'*** *by Gabriel Mesta /* ***'Speed of Darkness'*** *by Tracy Hickman /* ***'Queen of Blades'*** *by Aaron Rosenberg*

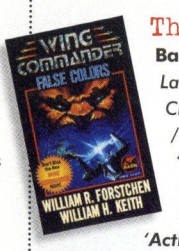
Did you know? The next novel due for release,' 'Nova' by Keith R.A. DeCandido, is to be based on the much delayed third-person console title 'StarCraft: Ghost.'



The Warcraft Library

Back Catalogue: ***'Of Blood and Honour'*** *by Chris Metzen /* ***'Day of the Dragon'*** *by Richard A. Knaak /* ***'Lord of the Clans'*** *by Christie Golden /* ***'The Last Guardian'*** *by Jeff Grub /* ***'The Well of Eternity'*** *by Richard A. Knaak /* ***'The Demon Soul'*** *by Richard A. Knaak /* ***'The Sundering'*** *by Richard A. Knaak /* ***'Cycle of Hatred'*** *by Keith R.A. DeCandido*

Did you know? In an interview with popular fan-site Blizzplanet.com, 'Lord of the Clans' author Christie Golden described herself as a 'World of Warcraft' 'junkie.'



The Wing Commander Library

Back Catalogue: ***'Freedom Flight'*** *by Mercedes Lackey and Ellen Guon /* ***'End Run'*** *by Christopher Stasheff and William R. Forstchen /* ***'Fleet Action'*** *by William R. Forstchen /* ***'Heart of the Tiger'*** *by William R. Forstchen and Andrew Keith /* ***'The Price of Freedom'*** *by William R. Forstchen and Ben Ohlander /* ***'Action Stations'*** *by William R. Forstchen /* ***'False Colors'*** *by William R. Forstchen and William H. Keith Jr.*

Did you know? The co-author of the first 'Wing Commander' novel, Mercedes Lackey, is one of the most prolific and successful fantasy authors of the past twenty years.

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DRAGON

Slaying Monsters for Fun & Profit

by Mikolai

There's a law in Japan: it states Dragon Quest games can only be released on Sundays and public holidays. Introduced by the Japanese parliament in 1988, the law was enacted following the near rioting that greeted the release of Dragon Quest III. As legend has it, the Japanese economy all but ground to a halt as the populace went crazy for monster slaying and levelling up. Salarymen called in sick, lines outside stores caused traffic chaos and school children were mugged for their copies. Even in a country renowned for its obsessive nature, Dragon Quest's ability to unhinge the public terrified the government and the infamous Dragon Quest law was hastily passed.

Despite the traffic stopping, economy ruining, child mugging reputation the series enjoys in Japan; it's taken 20 years for Dragon Quest to make the leap across the ocean - Dragon Quest VIII: Journey of the Cursed King being the first game to see release in Australia. We figured that's as good an excuse as any to look back on the series and see exactly what we've missed out on.

CASTING SPELLS AND KICKING ASS

Until the launch of Dragon Quest, RPGs simply didn't figure in Japanese culture. The complex, number crunching PC titles that dominated the west had failed to make a mark and the pen and paper tradition of D&D didn't exist. Yuji Horii, the man behind Dragon Quest, changed all that.

Recruited by Enix in the early 80s following a programming contest, Horii set to work tailoring the western RPG for a Japanese audience. He brought in acclaimed Dragon Ball artist Akira Toriyama to help design characters and outsourced the musical score to Koichi Sugiyama. The finished result was released in May 1986 on Nintendo's Famicom (N.E.S.) and MSX disc system. Not only was it the first console RPG ever released (beating Phantasy Star and Final Fantasy by a year), it single-handedly sold the genre to the Japanese public.

Although hopelessly basic by today's standards, the first Dragon Quest game set the template for virtually every console RPG that would follow. The story of a young boy who sets out to defeat an evil Dragonlord and rescue a kidnapped princess, Dragon Quest utilised a simplified menu system, turn based combat (fight, run, magic, item, defend), and a selection of weapons and items for the player to carry. It introduced mini quests and had the player travelling from town to town as a means of advancing the storyline. The series' official mascot, the slime, also made its first appearance in this game.

Dragon Quest sold over 1.5 million copies in Japan and a sequel was promptly commissioned. Released a year later in 1987, Dragon Quest II was a huge step up in both complexity and length. Firstly, it replaced the lone hero featured in the original game with three party members that the player could assign classes to. The game also introduced vehicles for your party to travel in and the first ever 'bait-n-switch' final boss.

While the first two incarnations sold millions and made RPGs a popular genre in Japan, it was the release of Dragon Quest III that saw the series become a genuine pop cultural phenomenon. Building on the series' traditional mechanics, Dragon Quest III offered a huge world map to explore, the most advanced character development and class system around, several different modes of transport and a truly epic quest.

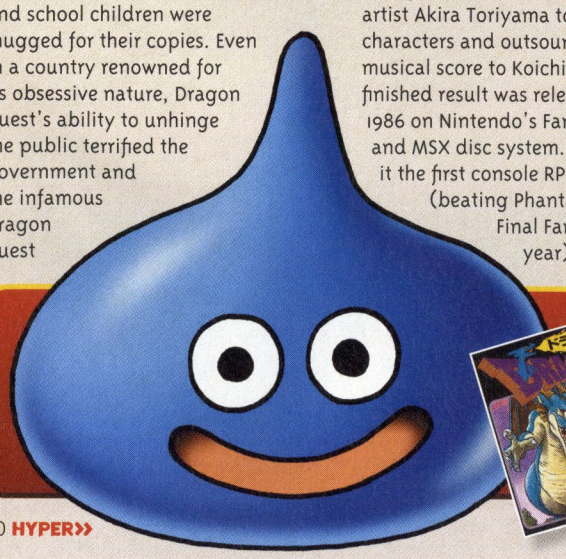
The game sold over 3.8 million copies in Japan alone and brought the country to a virtual standstill. Following its release, 'DraQue' became a byword for games in Japan and 'Hoimi', the healing spell used in the game, became a part of everyday language. A nice sideline in cosplay was also spawned...

GO WEST

Although Sega's Phantasy Star has the distinction of being the first console RPG released in the west (December 1989 fact fans), Nintendo and its N.E.S. controlled approximately 90% of the U.S. videogame market at the time. Consequently, Enix's renamed and revamped Dragon Warrior would receive all the media attention and accolades when it was (finally) released in 1990.

Despite the four-year gap between the game's Japanese release and its conversion to the west, Dragon Warrior was well received in the U.S. The first RPG to be released for Nintendo's Entertainment System, the game was initially given away free with subscriptions to Nintendo Power magazine. All up, it shifted a very respectable 500,000 units.

The name change was prompted due to U.S. copyright issues but the notoriously conservative Nintendo of America also implemented several other changes; most notably, the removal of all religious references and graphics in the game and the toning down of the language. Despite these changes, the localisation effort wasn't all bad and the U.S. release at least benefited



from improved graphics and a battery back-up system.

A short-lived Dragon Warrior anime (imported from Japan) ran on U.S. television around this same time and for a brief period, the Dragon Warrior name enjoyed crossover appeal. Unfortunately, by the time subsequent games found their way to the U.S.: Dragon Warrior II (1990), III (1991) and IV (1992), the N.E.S. was at the end of its lifespan and the games failed to sell as anticipated (only 80,000 copies of IV were shifted).

Spurned by these disappointing sales results, Enix closed its U.S. office just as they were gearing up to bring Dragon Warriors V to the Super Nintendo. It would be a full eight years and three hardware generations before a new Dragon Quest game would be released in the U.S. - Dragon Quest VII for the Playstation in 2000.

MEANWHILE, BACK IN JAPAN

Dragon Quest IV was released in Japan in 1990. The last Dragon Quest game to be released for Nintendo's aging Famicom system, it introduced a new story arc known as the 'Heaven Trilogy'. One of the largest Famicom games released; Dragon Quest IV was spread over five chapters and had the player taking control of different characters in each respective chapter (a General, princess, merchant, and twin sisters).

The final chapter then banded everyone together for the inevitable showdown with evil.

As epic as the 8bit titles were, the series' first outing on Nintendo's Super Famicom was something else entirely.

Spanning three generations (hello Phantasy Star 3), Dragon Quest V enabled you to charm and add monsters to your party, inherit a kingdom, choose who you married at the end of each epoch and provided additional post game content for those who finished the standard quest. The game's storyline was also a nice departure from the usual nonsense about kidnapped princesses and vanquishing evil - the player didn't adopt the role of hero but rather a prophet charged with guiding said hero to his destiny.

Released in 1995 for the Super Famicom, Dragon Quest VI completed the Heaven trilogy. In this instalment, the hero had to travel between reality and the land of dreams. Offering the most advanced incarnation of the class system so far, Dragon Quest VI was another suitably epic title that never saw release in the west.

It would take Enix five years to produce a follow up to Dragon Quest VI and by that time, the videogame landscape had fundamentally changed. Nintendo's decision to use cartridges for its N64 resulted in several prominent developers jumping ship to Sony's PlayStation; infamously, this included Enix and Square - lured away by the huge storage capacity of CDs.

Having decided to go with Sony, Enix spent the second half of the 90s perfecting Dragon Quest VII. Finally released in 2000, the game remains one of the largest and longest console RPGs ever released.

Clocking in at over 100 hours, it follows a fisherman's son on a quest to not only reconstruct the world, but resurrect God himself. Featuring 2D characters set against a 3D world, dozens of cities to explore, over 54 different characters and monster classes and the ability to construct your own town, Dragon Quest VII was epic in every sense. It was also the first Dragon Quest game in nearly a decade to be released outside of Japan — 2001 in the U.S.

WELCOME TO PAL

In keeping with tradition, it would be another 5 years before Dragon Quest VIII: Journey of the Cursed King would be released — this time under the merged Square-Enix banner. The first Dragon Quest game to receive an international release, it brings the series full circle and sees it taking its place alongside Final Fantasy and Phantasy Star once more. Just in time for a new generation of monsters slaying and levelling up. <<

MAIL HYPER!

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A STREAM OF WII JOKES

Hi guys,

Me and my mates from Uni were meant to be working on an assignment which was due the next day when we somehow got onto the topic of the Nintendo Wii. Unfortunately instead of doing our work we spent all our time making up Wii jokes. Knowing your sense of humor we thought you might appreciate what we came up with.

TOP 10 INTERESTING FACTS ABOUT Wii

1. Only blokes can have a Wii standing up.
2. If you take a Wii in the ocean it keeps you warm.
3. Multiplayer Wii is both dangerous and disgusting.
4. Playing with your Wii all day long is bad for your health.
5. Nintendo lets you control your Wii with a controller, however Dual Shock Wii is quite painful
6. Wii comes in two colours clear and yellow however there has been rumor of a few red ones.
7. If you dream about Wii you might wet the bed.
8. 9 in 10 people who like the look of Wii also like apple juice.
9. If you hold on to your Wii for too long it may explode.
10. There is lots of pressure to release Wii early. However once released there should be a steady flow of Wii into Australia.

TOP 10 Wii SAYINGS

1. I don't think i can hold on until the end of the year for a Wii.
2. I spent Friday night on the Wii.
3. I can't wait for the Wii to come out.
4. I'll be back in a minute I need to take a Nintendo.
5. I hope my Wii isn't too slow. I want to play games with it.
6. Does Wii come in a box or a bottle?
7. I like the look of Wii, it has a clear future.
8. I'm going to splash out on a Wii.
9. I wish I had the first Wii in Australia.

THE NEW MARKETING CAMPAIGN FOR Wii

Theme song: Wii will Wii will rock you
Slogan: "Immerse yourself in Wii. With Wii, ur-ine the game."
Characters: Mario and Luwiigi

JOKES ABOUT Wii

Q: Why will Nintendo fail the battle of the consoles?
A: Because Wii is a piece of piss

This little piggy went to market,
this little piggy stayed home,
this little piggy bought a Nintendo,
and went wii wii wii wii wii all the way home

THE FUTURE OF Wii

News is that Nintendo may release a portable Wii. This would mean you could take a Wii in your pocket. Hell, you could take a Wii anywhere you wanted too.

Cheers
Nick Cox

Thanks Nick, we're well and truly saturated now.

TEH EVIL BOX

Hey hyper peoples, first up brilliant mag love it.

Now to move onto the real query, I've had my xbox for a few months and just the other night i started it with no disk (cause i was on the net), not the first time i've done this and it was sitting on what i call "the green screen" an after a while i was starting to hear voices, now i was pretty sure i wasn't imagining them (no psychological disorders here, that i'm aware of anyway).

I managed to track this down to the big black behemoth attached to the tv, sending out bursts of random unintelligible alien like gibberish to the speakers, maybe it is alien, maybe it's secret area 51 technology or perhaps they have a tractor beam and they've caught a ufo and the amalgamation of intergalactic and earth technology resulted in a mutated circuitry that'll link with other xbox's and take over the world and the sounds emanating from it is the evil AI responsible for what might one day happen.

Anyway getting back to a little reality, my question is, is this all a plot by microsoft so if you fall asleep in front of good ol goliath you get these messages beamed into the subconscious compelling you to go buy microsoft products and not to spell microsoft uncapitalized, for a company so powerful they can apparently manipulate spell checkers, surely altering brain wave patterns wouldn't be beyond their mighty powers? Don't get me wrong though, i like the xbox as i do the ps2 and gcn which i own as well and each is good in their own way, but the xbox is the only one that seems to produce this phenomenon and how do i know it's not subconscious manipulation thats the cause of me liking it especially given i have fallen asleep in front of it while on that screen. Try listening yourselves, it's more noticeable on some tv's then others, sorry if this is a little on the long side, but it really is there as is the truth and the people need to know.

David

P.S Maybe I watch to much of the outer limits.

You're close David, but the actual truth is far more insidious (and crazy). It's actually a conspiracy perpetrated by Jack Thompson, internationally renowned crazy person and player hater (literally). He's using his evil lawyer powers to beam satanic messages into Xbox units world wide in the hope that he can convince people that Microsoft are in league with the devil, eat babies and have sex with pigs so that one day he can lead a Crusade to the holy land of Walmart and burn consoles. Yeah, that's what it is.

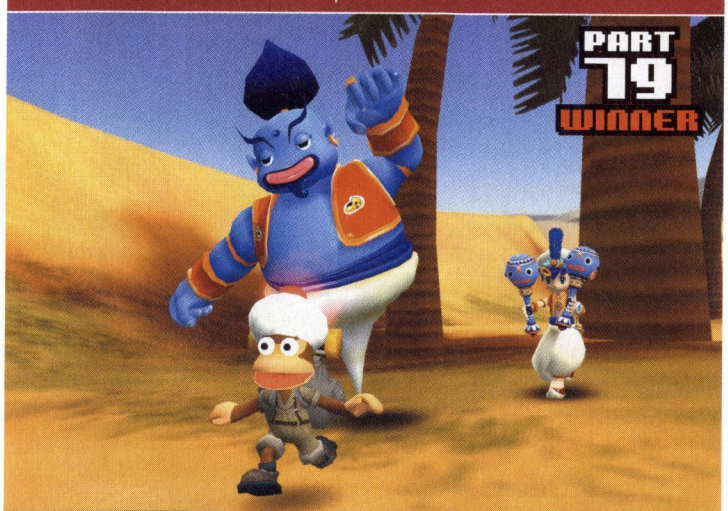
OOOOOKKKAAAAAYYYY

I know that the Japanese have some bizarre ideas for videogames and anime cartoons, but don't knock it because I am sure that these people are mature adults that are trying to express their sexuality in a free and creative way.

Last year you had a look at fan-service in anime and even if my fantasies may not involve Hendi or School-girls in uniform (yes, Japan has something for the girls in school uniform, even though many including me think that they might be too young for that sort of stuff), I would like to talk about something

CAPTION THIS!

Clint Mullins kept things nice and simple, but also spoke the truth...



"Come on... who wouldn't wish for a monkey?"

called quicksand in videogames.

"Quicksand? WTF???? Why quicksand?" You might say.

Like I'm trying to say about the Japanese, they are expressing their sexuality in a free and creative way.

We all have our strange fantasies (a.k.a. fetishes), and for me I always love it when quicksand is portrayed in a creative way in a videogame.

They may not be in a sexy way but the thought of snowboarding over quicksand (Snowboard Kids (N64)) Playing a minigame where you had to collect as many cash without being sucked into the middle of a quicksand pit. (Mario Party 2 (N64)) Trying to navigate through the desert and discovering that I need to deliberately sink myself into quicksand in order to go further into the level and fight harder monsters and eventually get to the boss at the end of the dungeon. (Final Fantasy Crystal Chronicles (NGC)) One on one fight in a pit of quicksand (Soul Calibur 2)

It just makes my heart pump faster at every moment when there is quicksand because you never know if it is going to be dangerous or safe to walk in. (Mario 64 (You know which system it was on)

Anyway I would like to show you guys this jaw dropping artwork from Shax. (See attachment!!!!)

He has made lots of artwork based on Princess Peach in peril. This is a quicksand peril he has made with Peach in her bikini. You can find his artwork in *http://ayvuir-blue.deviantart.com/gallery/*

There is also a website I would like to mention called the qslo.org forum. *www.qslo.org.* QSLO stands for Quicksand Library Online.

I have some stories there based on characters from Videogames finding themselves in deadly quicksand. You can find them in the story Archive section. (Note that some of my stories are aimed for a mature audience.)

[cut for length - Ed]

From TBone Tony

(Attached image not shown due to copyright legality)

Tony, you've though way too long and hard about this.

PRICEY PASSION

The price of games has always been one of gamers' pet peeves. It's only natural that we would complain about such a practical obstacle to our chosen passion. But speaking as a struggling student/professional bludger, I have come to the realisation that games actually aren't that expensive. It seems to me that people are just looking at things the wrong way.

It's all too easy to look at Xbox 360 games being $120 and say 'What a rip-off!', and generally speaking you'd be correct. But it is rather silly to be taking new releases for the latest console as indicative of high prices. Almost six years ago, early PS2 games were $120, and when inflation is considered we have far more reasonable prices now.

New consoles, launch titles and top-end PC games are always going to be expensive. In fact, I think it is remarkable that the typical top price for non-launch titles has remained at $100 for so long. Though why are people so concerned about these prices when there are thousands of older games readily available for much less? The only reason games need to be expensive is if you simply must have them brand new.

Think about it. A new game will typically sell for under $50 just a few months after its release. Give it a year or two, and there are heaps of PC titles that will be available for under $20. Beyond that, there are plenty of good titles in the bargain bin for lease than a measly $10. As long as you know how to sort the wheat from the chaff, there are great bargains to be found.

The advantages to this are numerous. There are plenty of decent, but not classic games that will still give you many hours of enjoyment for next to nothing. Though there are also true classics like Deus Ex, Myst and Quake III Arena available for single digits. Sure, many people will have these games already, but I'm sure everyone could find some titles missing from their collection.

I've had a spending spree recently and found heaps of PC and console games dirt cheap, and they're not all re-packaged or pre-owned either. I found Warlords Battlecry III for $19.95 still in the original box with shrink-wrap, and there are hundreds of hours of potential gameplay in that little Aussie Warcraft that could. Plus there are truckloads of good pre-owned console games in as-new condition for peanuts.

I could rant on about the advantages of getting games with their expansion packs and patches all included, but I think you get the point. Games are not really expensive. In how many other hobbies can you get tens of hours of enjoyment for the cost of your loose change? I'm having no end of fun steadily accumulating all the great PC, Gamecube and Xbox titles of the past, and if I ever get all of those the next generation of systems and titles will all be quite affordable by that time.

I've hardly touched a new release in the last couple of years. The most expensive game I got was the Resident Evil 4 Collector's edition, and I even found that on special for $85. Ironically, the most expensive games I buy nowadays are handheld. It's remarkably difficult to find DS titles for under $70, but I consider it money well spent. That's my two cents worth. Kind regards,

Ian Casey

Well said Ian – it's easy to get miffed at the prices of games but bargain hunting and wise purchasing of new titles mean you can easily get great value for money.

[above] Shiggy - one of the great showmen of our time... this is why we go to E3

WII WOES

I hope you guys are excited about the new Nintendo home console as I am. I mean not only have they addressed the things that held the Gamecube back like online play, DVD playback, and looking lush there's the exciting new controller. However despite all the positives there is something that concerns me, the name. Wii ???? I know it's only a minor thing and a fanboy like me shouldn't be phased by it but Nintendo always have cool codenames for their consoles and then make the official name either bland or weak. I mean how much cooler would it be going to purchase a Revolution, they could have even played on that ol saying "the revolution wont be televised" for the advertising and marketing. Sure it's not a perfect name but Wii is a hell of a lot further from perfect. Firstly I know a name is just a label with meaning that is input by us to an extent, like that quote about whether a rose would smell just as sweet if it went by any other name, but to paraphrase the Simpsons, if roses were called crapweed or stenchblossoms would chicks still swoon when they get bunch of that?

Sadly though Nintendo have lost their way when it comes to naming consoles ever since the ol Super Nintendo. That was truly their peak of console naming not just cuz it was like the NES but better on every level and the name emphasised that, it said I'm SUPER thanks for asking! And then the good times were set to continue with the Ultra 64 but then legal wrangling meant that became the much more bland and harmless Nintendo 64. And of course there was the Gamecube not a bad name really but not very inspiring either.

Sega might not have been the most successful console maker historically but they sure could put an interesting label on one. Dreamcast, Saturn, Megadrive they certainly inspire the imagination. Even Sony had to acquire the trademark Playstation from Yamaha or Kawasaki and look where that to an extent has got them.

Basically what I'm getting at here is even though it's how much fun the games are to play that matters most, a console's name should be one that reflects the best of what it has to offer, it should be so cool you want everyone in the school yard to know you are the proud owner of one, and the Wii..... Well it's lucky that Nintendo make the games that consistently part people (me included) from their hard earned ends cuz they'd be screwed if they relyed on name alone to sell consoles.

Nintendo Fanboy
#6669453457349807

Yeah, the name does suck a bit but Wilks couldn't stop raving about the machine after coming back from E3 and can even use the name in a sentence without sniggering like the immature git he is.

While we're with you on Sega's slightly more interesting naming scheme, don't forget they too had one of the coolest prototype names of all time – the Katana. How sweet would that have been?

LIFESTYLIN'

Gaming in the Bizarre-o-world

If there's one thing that really annoys us about this industry, it's the "lifestyle" product shot, and 2006 has seen a bumper crop. Nintendo have refused to send out screenshots of their Wii games without annoying children gurning all over the screen, while anything that may be bought by a wider audience has been sexified, kidified or tamilified. While we, the enthusiast gamers, are certainly not the target of these campaigns, they're embarrassing nonetheless, and definitely border on patronising. Here are some of the worst we've seen over the last few months...

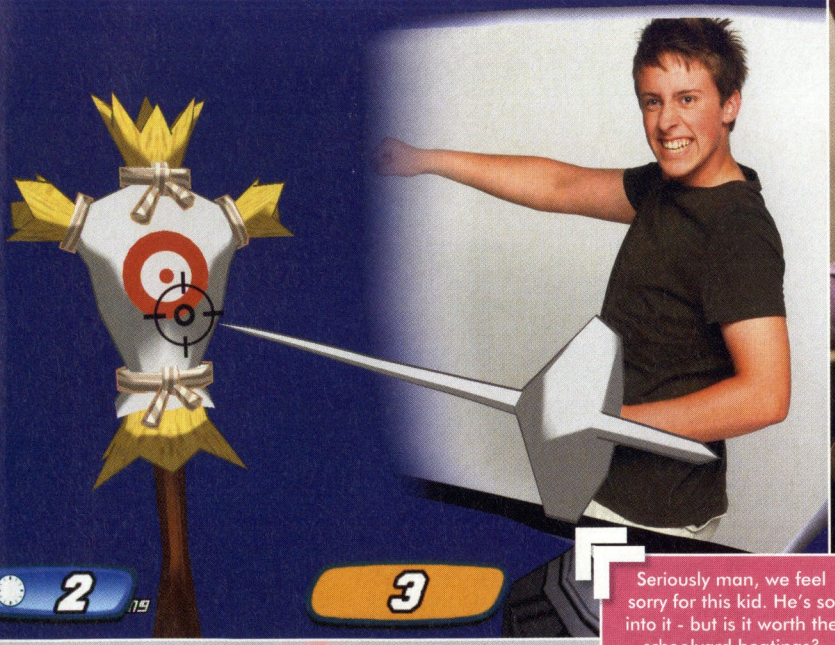
While blue shirt strives to impress with his Barry Manilow impersonations, Fatty tries to sate his hunger

Dad is the winner of the recently announced Wii game, "Upskirt Adventures"

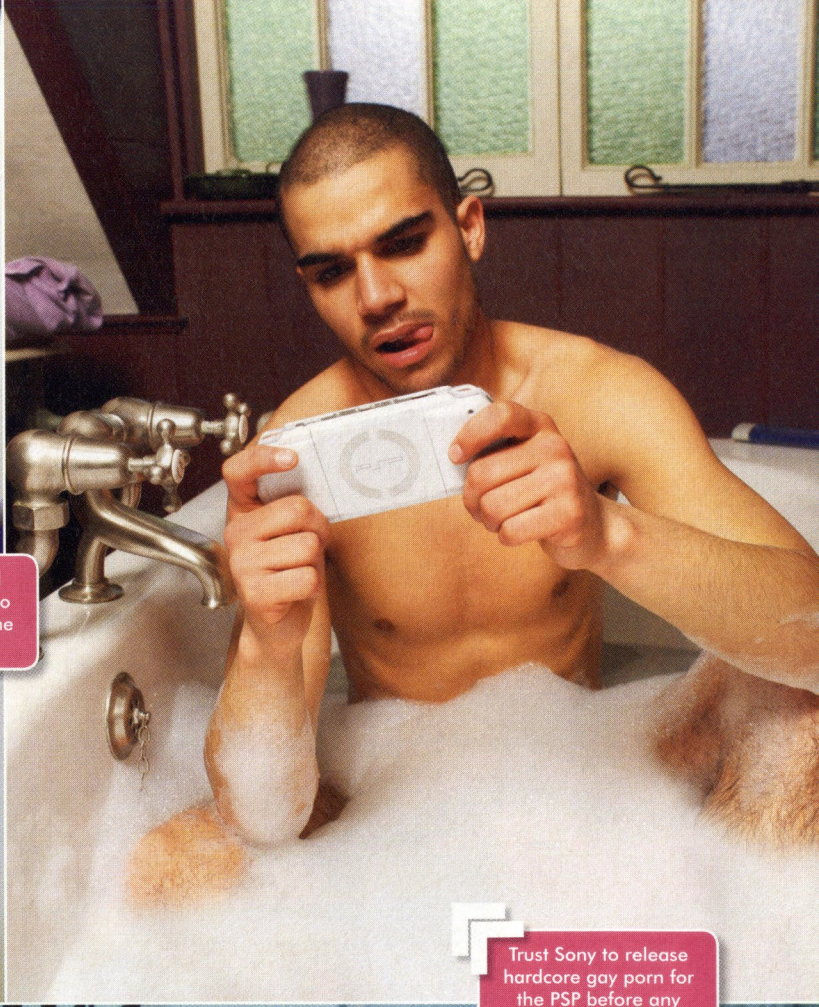
Bean bags are as close as these guys are ever going to get to having a girl in the sack

We don't need to punch them in the sack - they're doing it themselves

The DS Lite touch screen is the perfect place to cut up a line of coke



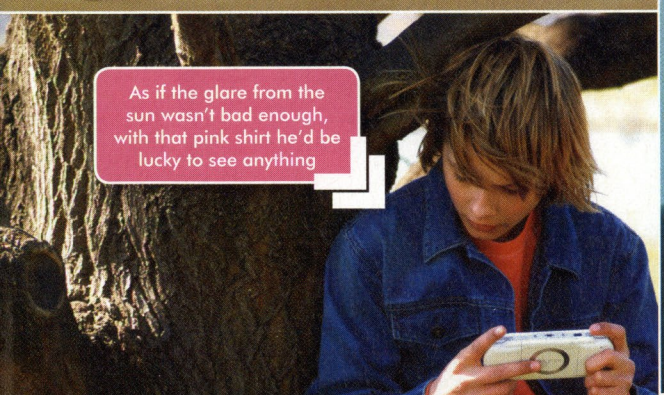
Seriously man, we feel sorry for this kid. He's so into it - but is it worth the schoolyard beatings?



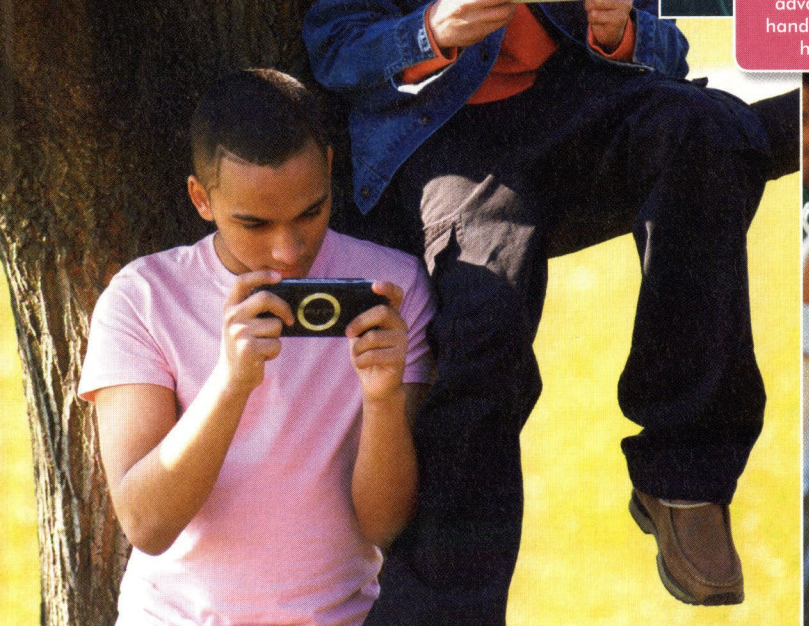
Trust Sony to release hardcore gay porn for the PSP before any good games

Sony must have been chasing the dragon to come up with this complete fabrication

We blame the entire nation of France for this abomination. You're all going to rot in hell



As if the glare from the sun wasn't bad enough, with that pink shirt he'd be lucky to see anything



My eating disorder is so advanced I need both hands to hold this oh so heavy controller

The Official Australian Games Chart

Compiled by GfK in association with the IEAA

TOP 10 PlayStation 2 Games Over $50

W/E 4th June 2006 RETAIL SALES

1	▲	FIFA 2006 World Cup	Sports
2	▼	Buzz: The Big Quiz Bundle	Family
3	▲	SingStar Rocks! Bundle	All Other
4	▲	Buzz: The Big Quiz (SW only)	Family
5	▲	Eyetoy: Play 3 Pack	Compilation
6	▼	50 Cent Bulletproof	Action
7	✪	Hitman Blood Money	Action
8	◆	V8 Supercars 3	Racing
9	▼	NFS: Most Wanted	Racing
10	▼	X-Men 3 The Official Game	Adventure

TOP 10 Nintendo DS Games Over $40

W/E 4th June 2006 RETAIL SALES

1	◆	Metroid Prime Hunters	Action
2	▲	Mario Kart	Racing
3	▲	Nintendogs Dachschund	Simulator
4	◆	Nintendogs Lab & Friends	Simulator
5	▲	Nintendogs Chihuahua	Simulator
6	▼	Hasbro 4 Game Fun Pack	Family
7	▲	Animal Crossing Wild World	Strategy
8	▼	Shrek Slam & Madagascar	Compilation
9	▲	Super Mario 64	Adventure
10	▼	Ice Age 2 The Meltdown	Action

TOP 10 Game Cube Games Over $50

W/E 4th June 2006 RETAIL SALES

1	◆	Mario Smash Football	Sports
2	◆	Pokémon XD: Gale Darkness	RPG
3	◆	FIFA 2006 World Cup	Sports
4	▲	Paper Mario 1000 Year Door	Adventure
5	▲	Ice Age 2 The Meltdown	Action
6	▲	Pokémon Colosseum	RPG
7	▼	Mario Party 6	Family
8	✪	Dancing Stage Mario Mix	All Other
9	▲	NFS: Most Wanted	Racing
10	▲	Starfox Assault	Adventure

TOP 10 Xbox Games Over $50

W/E 4th June 2006 RETAIL SALES

1	▲	FIFA 2006 World Cup	Sports
2	◆	50 Cent Bulletproof	Action
3	▼	NFS: Most Wanted	Racing
4	✪	Hitman Blood Money	Action
5	▲	X-Men 3 The Official Game	Adventure
6	▼	Black	Action
7	▼	Ice Age 2 The Meltdown	Action
8	▼	V8 Supercars 3	Racing
9	▼	FIFA 2006	Sports
10	▲	Rugby 2006	Sports

TOP 10 PC Games Over $20

W/E 4th June 2006 RETAIL SALES

1	◆	The Sims 2: Open Business	Strategy
2	◆	The Sims 2: Family Fun Stuff	Strategy
3	◆	World Of WarCraft	RPG
4	▲	The Sims 2: Nightlife	Strategy
5	▼	The Sims 2	Strategy
6	◆	Elder Scrolls IV Oblivion	RPG
7	▲	The Sims Deluxe	Strategy
8	◆	The Sims 2: University	Strategy
9	▲	Age Of Empires III	Strategy
10	▲	Bratz Rock Angelz	Adventure

TOP 10 Xbox 360 Games Over $50

W/E 4th June 2006 RETAIL SALES

1	✪	Hitman Blood Money	Action
2	▲	Table Tennis	Sports
3	▼	FIFA 2006 World Cup	Sports
4	▼	Elder Scrolls IV Oblivion	RPG
5	◆	Project Gotham Racing 3	Racing
6	▼	Call Of Duty 2	Action
7	▲	Ghost Recon 3 Advanced	Action
8	▼	Fight Night Round 3	Sports
9	◆	NFS: Most Wanted	Racing
10	▼	Tony Hawk USA Waste+Gun	Compilation

TOP 10 All Format Games Over $50

W/E 4th June 2006 RETAIL SALES

1	▲	FIFA 2006 World Cup	PlayStation 2
2	◆	Buzz: The Big Quiz Bundle	PlayStation 2
3	▼	Metroid Prime Hunters	Nintendo DS
4	▲	SingStar Rocks! Bundle	PlayStation 2
5	▲	Buzz: The Big Quiz (SW only)	PlayStation 2
6	✪	Eyetoy: Play 3 Pack	PlayStation 2
7	▼	50 Cent Bulletproof	PlayStation 2
8	◆	The Sims 2: Open Business	PC/MAC
9	✪	Hitman Blood Money	PlayStation 2
10	▲	Mario Kart	Nintendo DS

TOP 10 PlayStation Portable Games Over $40

W/E 4th June 2006 RETAIL SALES

1	▲	Daxter	Adventure
2	▼	GTA: Liberty Cities	Adventure
3	▲	FIFA 2006 World Cup	Sports
4	▼	FIFA 2006	Sports
5	▲	Lemmings	Strategy
6	◆	Burnout Legends	Racing
7	▼	NBA Live 2006	Sports
8	▲	Untold Legends	RPG
9	▲	WWE Smackdown vs Raw 06	Sports
10	▲	Pacman World 3	Action

✪ New Entry
◆ Non Mover
▲ Up from last week
▼ Down from last week

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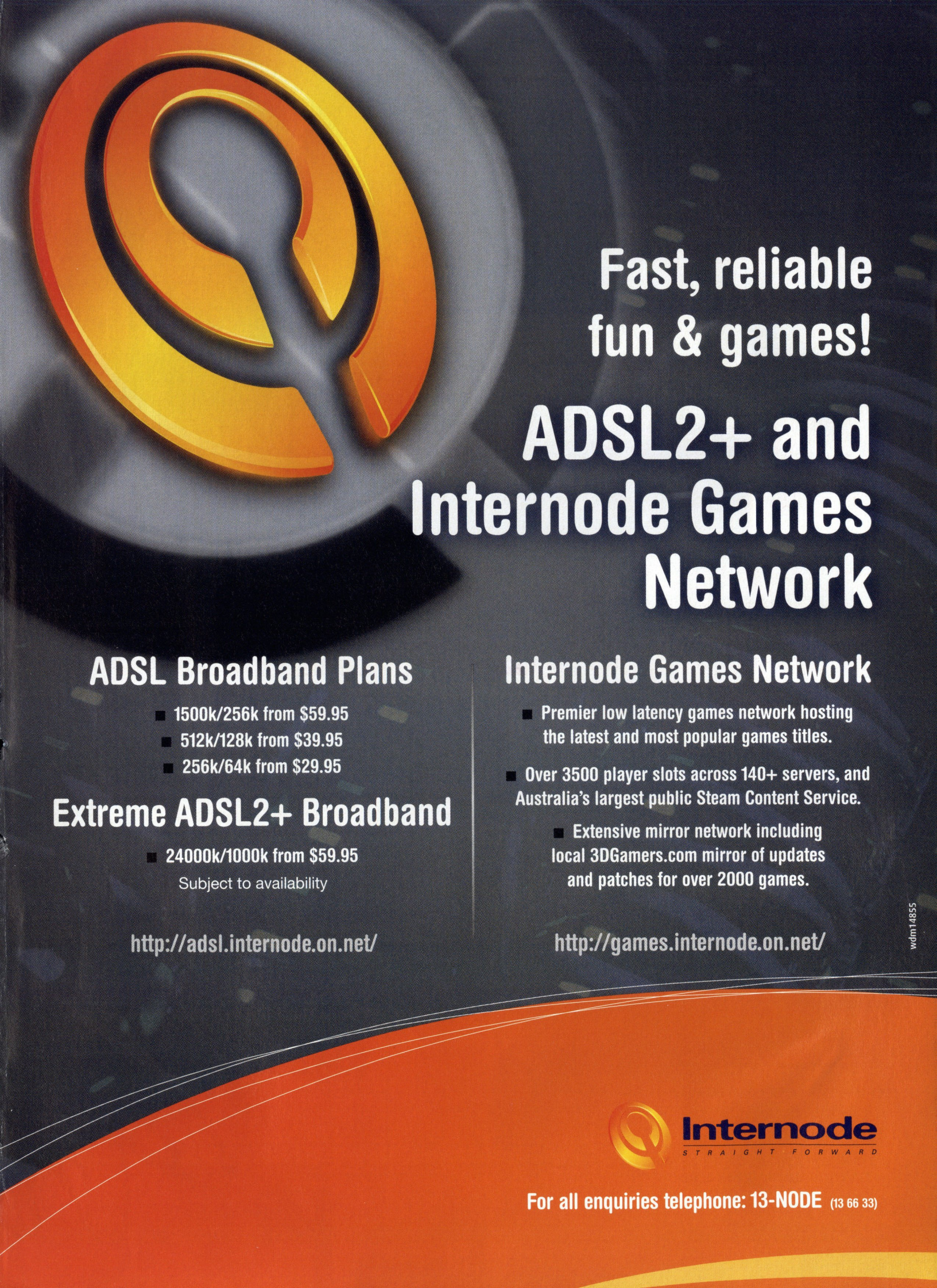
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Okami

Traditional Japanese art, a celestial brush and a wolf-embodied sun god. We review Clover Studios' incredible new game...

PLUS: We interview the Forza Motorsport 2 dev team, talk to Peter Moore about the future of Xbox 360 and take a detailed look at Dark Messiah of Might & Magic.

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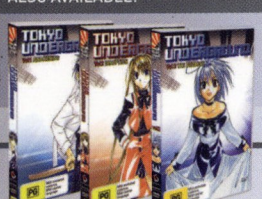

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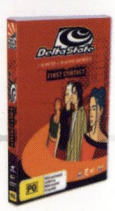

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