

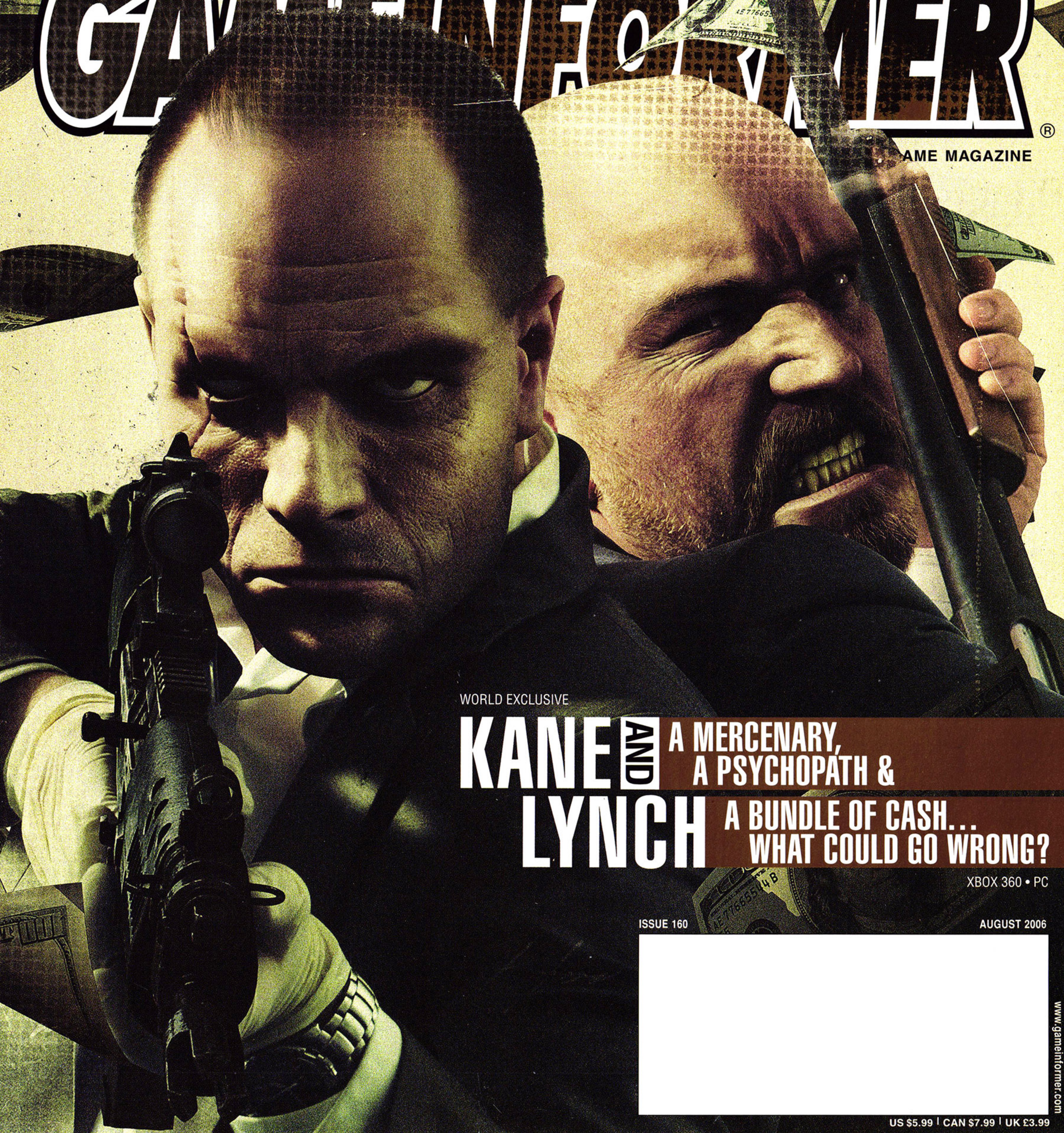
TUROK The Dinosaur Hunter Returns

INSIDE THE ESRB RATINGS GAME: IS THE SYSTEM WORKING?
ESRB President Patricia Vance Answers The Critics, Congress, And Game Developers



GAMING FOR MER

GAME MAGAZINE



WORLD EXCLUSIVE

KANE AND LYNCH A MERCENARY, A PSYCHOPATH & A BUNDLE OF CASH... WHAT COULD GO WRONG?

XBOX 360 • PC

ISSUE 160

AUGUST 2006



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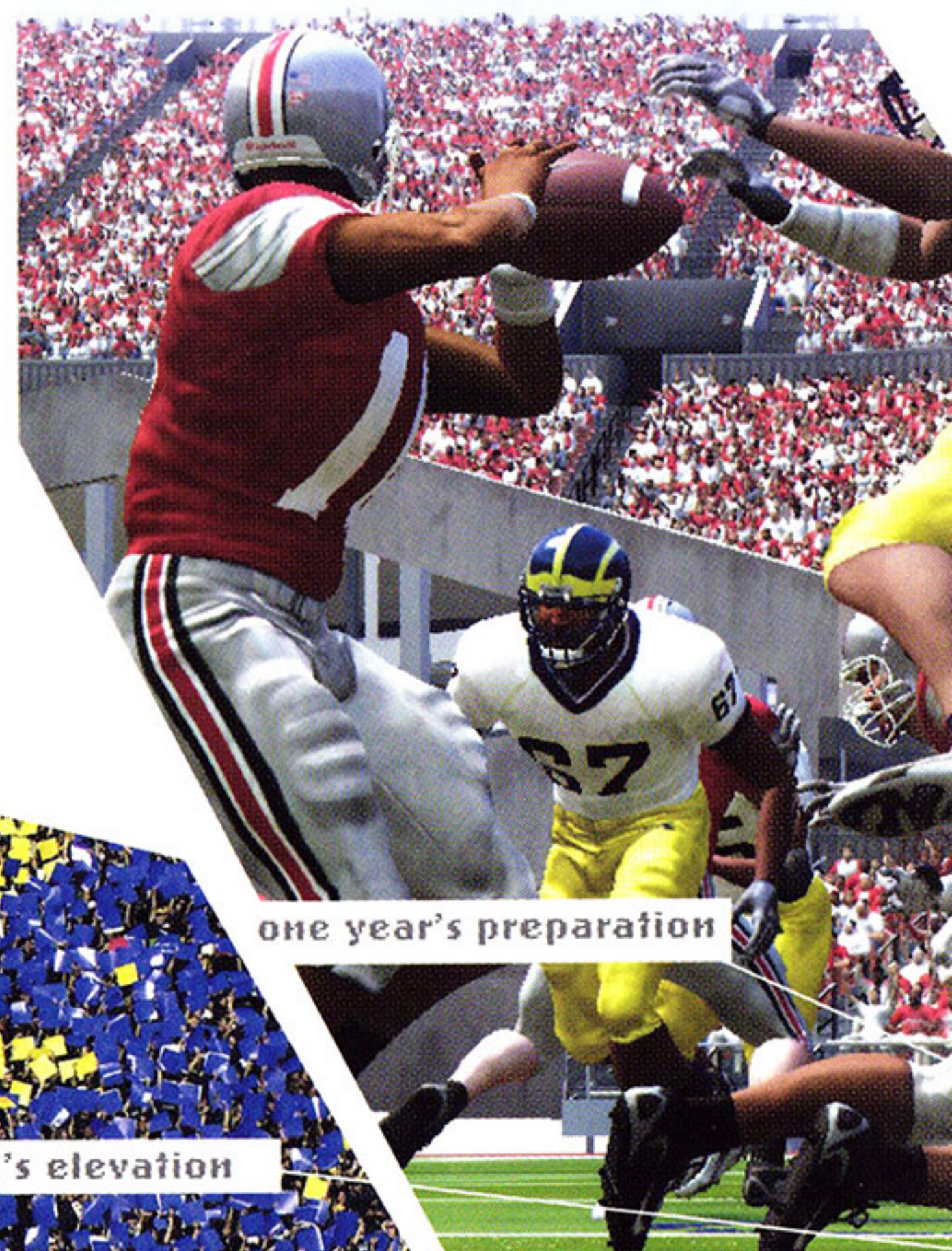
INTERNET CONNECTION required for online play. PlayStation®2 online play requires Internet Connection and Memory Card (8MB) for PlayStation 2 (each sold separately). Online play may not be available on all platforms. See product pack for details.

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the pit and the pendulum

In the fourth quarter of the 2006 Rose Bowl, with a 5-point lead and 2:13 left in the game, USC coach Pete Carroll had momentum on his side. The Texas defense hadn't been able to stop the USC offensive machine all night. So USC went for a first down on fourth-and-two. Watching the game at home, EA producer Jeff Luhr knew that everything hinged on this play.

Sometimes the pendulum doesn't have to swing far to turn a game's momentum 180 degrees: Texas held the line, stopping USC's off-tackle run just two inches short of the first-down marker, and the Texas offense stormed down the field to score and win the national championship. Starting with Texas' stunning Rose Bowl turnaround, Luhr and the NCAA Football 07 team spent the next five months analyzing the history and science of momentum swings and writing them into the game, making sure that gamers will be able to pick up on mid-game momentum swings and use them to their team's advantage. "Emotion is a huge factor in college football," says Luhr. "When the momentum starts going your way in this year's game, you'll feel it - your crowd gets louder, your hits get harder, and your whole team plays better."



one year's preparation



one school's elevation



one week's concentration

reverse engineers

Getting the details right about big-time college football takes big-time homework. EA producer Anthony White and his team prepared for the season pretty much the same way a college coaching staff does - sitting in front of game films with pads of graph paper and reverse-engineering the playbooks of the teams they are studying.

The difference: Instead of 10 opponents, the NCAA Football 07 team put together the playbooks of each of the 119 teams in Division I-A. For this year's title, White's team watched more than 500 games, rewinding each new play, diagramming it, and coding it into the game. That includes some of college ball's trickiest formations and plays: the University of Nevada's hybrid "pistol" offense, the Oregon Ducks' triple option pass out of the shotgun formation, and New Mexico State's unforgettable double-cross handoff reverse on a kickoff return against Cal. "We're college football junkies," White says. "Even though it's research, it doesn't feel like work."



PLATFORM SPECIFICATIONS



TITLE

NCAA 07 FOOTBALL



FACTOID: Late-night pizzas eaten: 4,160

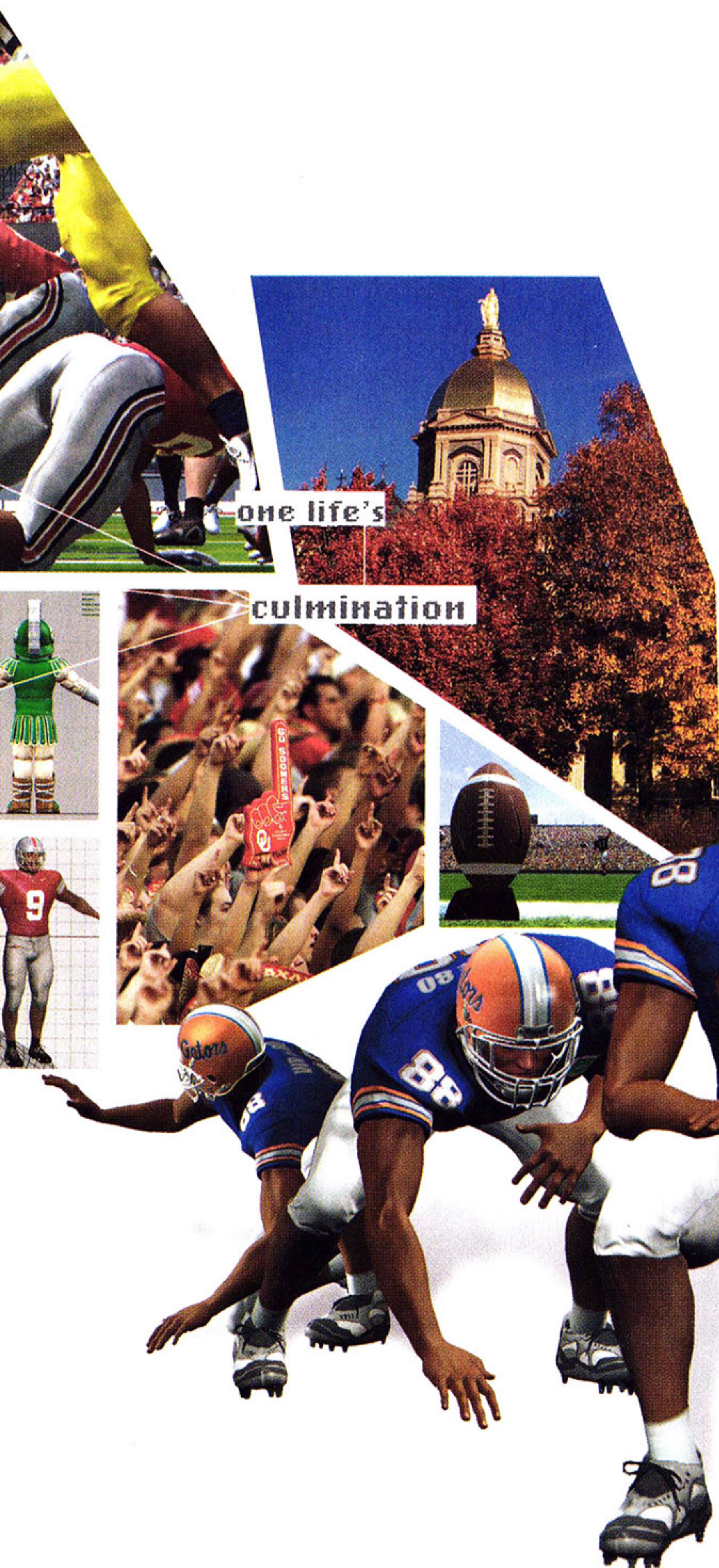
INFORMATION
www.ncaafootball07.com

DEVELOPMENT START	DATE OF RELEASE
06 20 05	07 18 06

the stadium that bites

Traditions run strong among rabid college football fans, and the members of the NCAA Football 07 development team at EA's Tiburon studio are no exception. During bowl week, assistant producer Jeff Ecker, a Penn State grad, celebrated his resurgent alma mater's Orange Bowl victory over Florida State by running around the office, singing "Roar Lions Roar!" to every Seminole fan he could find. In fact, Ecker cherished his rollicking Saturdays at PSU's Beaver Stadium so much that he helped create the EA SPORTS Smart Fan technology that shows crazed college fans in the game's Living Stadium environment expressing their individual reactions to each play.

Meanwhile, Florida grad Tom Vuong, an associate producer, was supporting his school by pushing hard to get an important new feature into the game: the Gator Chomp. During NCAA 07 games at "The Swamp," the Gators' home stadium, the student section will periodically erupt into a mass of arms snapping open and shut. Good luck concentrating on that corner blitz in the middle of that.



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- OFFICIAL XBOX MAGAZINE

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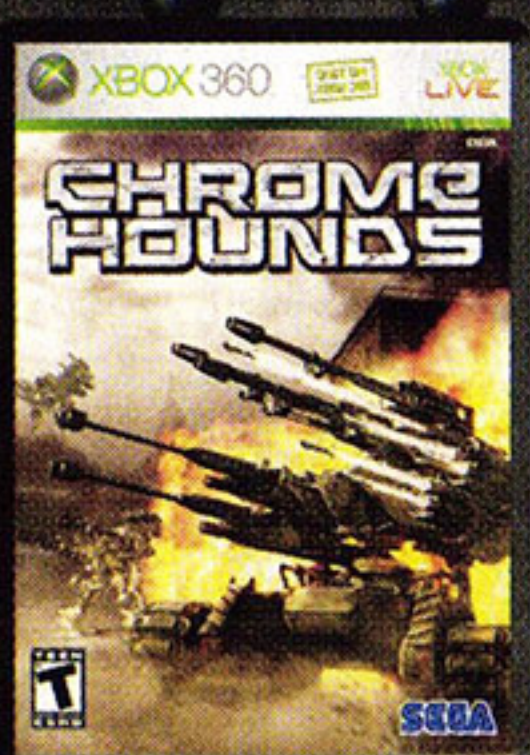


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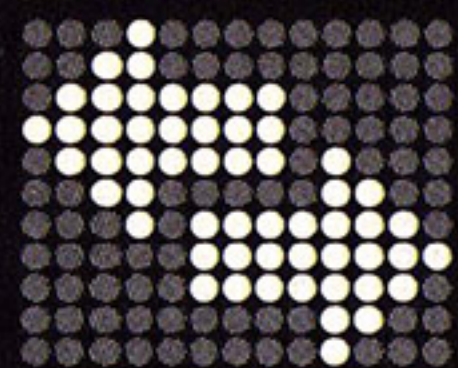




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Game Informer took a trip across the Atlantic to visit Danish studio IO Interactive, creator of the Hitman series, and got the exclusive first look at its next project: Kane & Lynch. With a focus on co-op play and the interesting dynamic between the two antiheroes it casts as protagonists, Kane & Lynch looks like a unique and exciting take on third-person action for the Xbox 360 and PC.

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THE RATINGS GAME

The Entertainment Software Rating Board's system of content rating has been a hot topic lately, and so we talked to ESRB president Patricia Vance as well as both industry insiders and critics to get an inside look at the state of video game ratings.



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TUROK

Gaming's baddest dinosaur hunter is being reincarnated on next-gen consoles courtesy of Propaganda Games. We show you how being dropped onto a hostile planet full of dinosaurs and more can be a great time.

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STAFF

People Who Actually Get Paid To Play Video Games



MY MOMENT IN THE FOURTH DIMENSION

ANDY McNAMARA
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

By the time you read this, E3 will be a distant memory to most. However, I still wake up in a cold sweat thinking about what can be done with both Nintendo and Sony's motion sensing technology.

The Monday before the show Nintendo was nice enough to let me visit its booth to get in a round of Wii games before the onslaught of press events and the craziness that is the show itself.

Getting accustomed to the Wii controller isn't as easy as some might have you believe. For some games, like Warioware, it's as simple as you would imagine. The controller does exactly what you want it to do. In others, like Zelda or Metroid, it takes a decent amount of practice to get the remote to point where you want it to point without over-compensating or becoming disoriented from a jerky transition from one side of the screen to the other. It's a skill, which is a good thing. Games have always been about skill.

There was one thing that kept crawling into my consciousness, however. Why does movement have to be so difficult? Sure pointing and shooting is a breeze, but moving in a first-person shooter simply wasn't as easy as it is with a mouse and keyboard. To me, at least.

Then the moment hit me. In Metroid 3: Corruption you have to paint a handle with the cursor, click a button to grab it, and then literally pull the handle out, twist it, and push it back into place in what I like to call gaming's fourth dimension. Its effect on me was astounding. It just felt good, and made me feel a sense of immersion in a game that I haven't felt in a long while. I can literally grab objects in a game and move them. Brilliant.

I was so excited about the possibilities that later that day I found myself standing in front of some of my favorite Sony developers, begging them to put the technology into a standard controller. Because I wanted the familiarity of the controller combined with the awesome immersion that I felt when I moved an object in Metroid. This was before the Sony press conference, and they all just stood there, stared at me, and nodded.

Little did I know, Sony was already on the case. Sure, the only application Sony showed was basic flight control for Warhawk, but the possibilities are there. You can simply push a button on your controller, pull and twist to accomplish the same sensation I adored in Metroid 3, all the while enjoying the familiarity of the classic controller.

Some say Sony ripped Nintendo off. Maybe. Maybe not. We most likely will never know. I don't know and I don't care. I'm just happy to see this technology changing games for the better. Maybe in a year I'll be bored with the gimmick, but for now I couldn't be more excited about the possibilities for both the PS3 and Wii. I wouldn't be surprised to see Microsoft bring out its own version in the near future. I've seen the fourth dimension, and its future is bright.

Cheers,

Andy >> andy@gameinformer.com

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Multiple gameplay innovations from the developer that brought you Bullet Time, including Deathwalk (duyng is no longer annoying...it's fun!) & Spiritwalk (leave your body blowing and solve mind puzzles) to explore, ambush, and solve mind puzzles.

Now he's about to return the favor.

Living weapons, a faithful sidekick, vehicles, giant environments, jaw-dropping memorable moments, a story of redemption and destiny, and a 3-hour epic soundtrack by Jeremy Soule (Oblivion, Guild Wars). The FPS of the year is here.

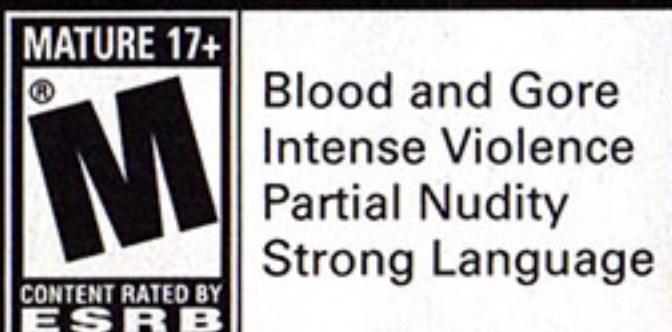
Imagine a place where gravity isn't always flipped, and even wrap around, small planetoids? Imagine walking on walls and ceilings? Can you handle this new challenge?

PREY

"Prey looks like one of the best first-person shooters of the year in both graphics and gameplay." - IGN

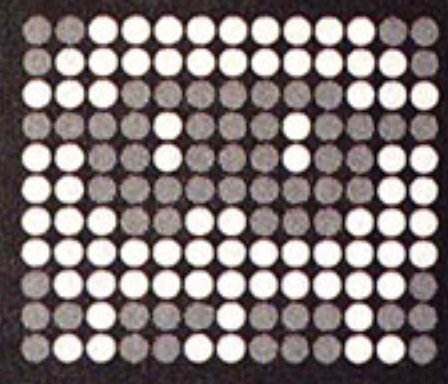
"Absolutely incredible to look at, packed with scintillating effects." - Play

"Doom 3" hiked the bar. Prey may transform the bar altogether." - 1UP



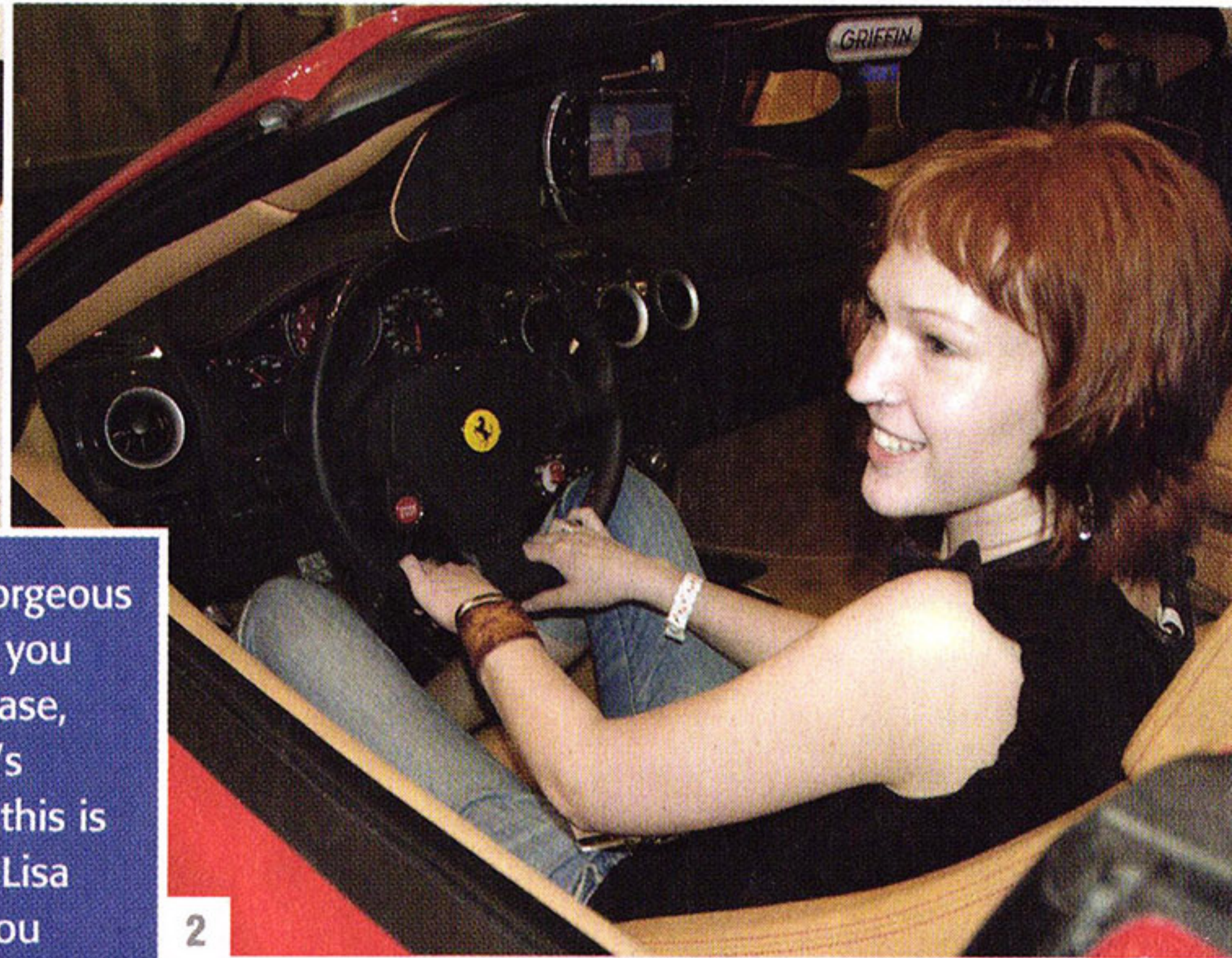
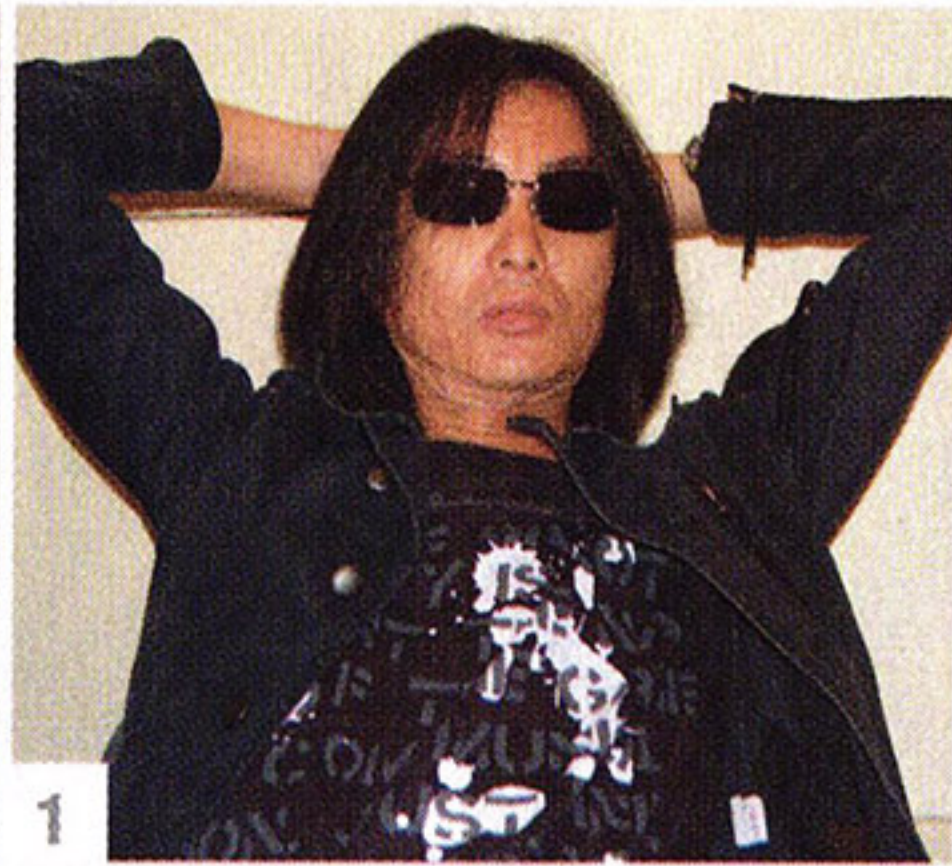
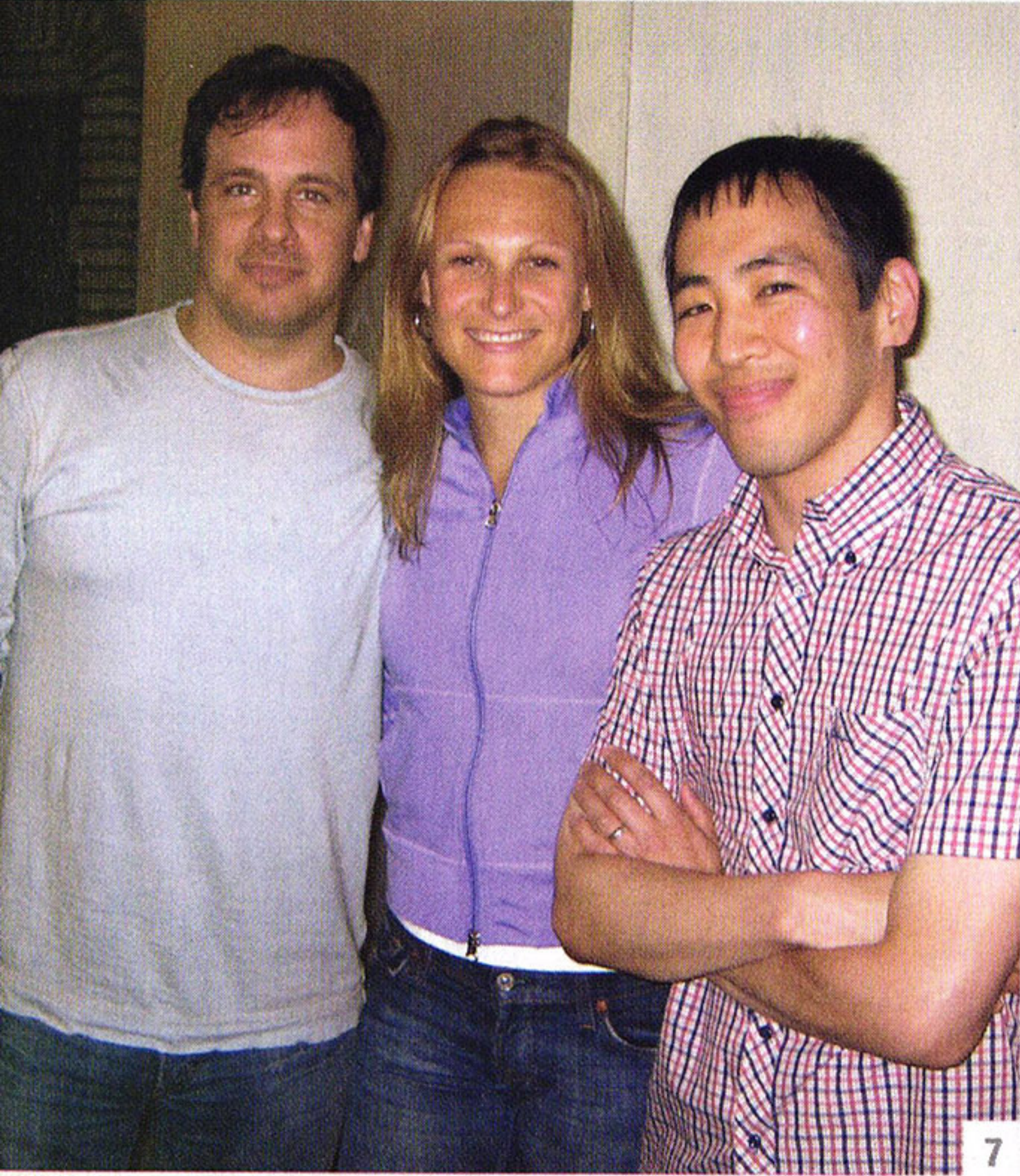
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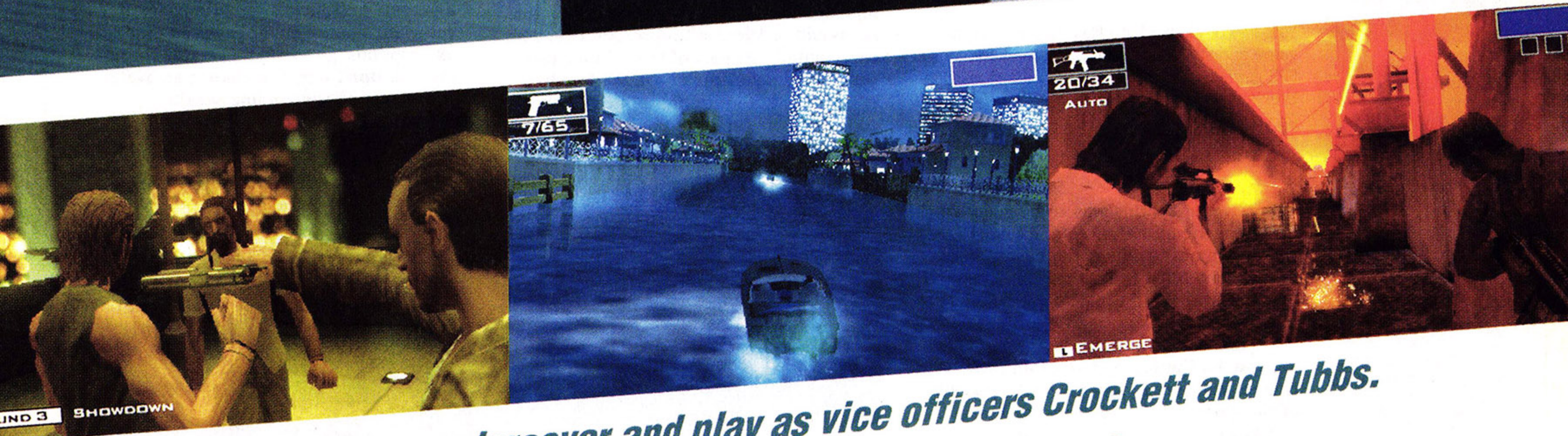


1 When you make the most gorgeous fighting games on the market, you can sit any way you damn please, as proven here by Team Ninja's Tomonobu Itagaki 2 Although this is news to some of our readers, Lisa is rich and drives a Ferrari. If you email her, she'll probably buy you an Xbox 360 3 Bender Helper's Alex Brewer, Paris Hilton, and BH's Adam Fenton, seen here saying bad things about Lindsay Lohan at the press event for Paris's Diamond Quest mobile game 4 Patrice Desilets, Jade Raymond, Michael Beadle, and Claude Langlais hang with the man GI readers voted our Most Huggable Editor of 2005: Matt Miller 5 Oh Nintendo fans, y'all are so damn nuts and we love you for it 6 The Voodoo PC gang – Alex Josef, James Little, and Rahul Sood – hangs with Lisa and Jeremy at the annual eFocus party in L.A 7 EA's David Littman and Jen Riley come to the State of Hockey to give us the scoop on NHL 07



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DEARGI

The Readers Strike Back

GI COMMUNITY

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

THE QUESTION:
Is \$600 too much to pay for the PlayStation 3?

■ Resistance: Fall of Man



No. Its too early to judge. Sony showed a few titles, but they're known for a great library of games, so if enough great games are made available, then the 600 smackers is worth it for some superb titles.

DanteBunny

For more casual gamers like me (who are just looking for more games to play), the price tag is a major turn off when you have two other big systems out there for hundreds of dollars less.

Bueller911

A gaming PC could cost up to \$2,000, with upgrades. A PS3 promises a minimum of five years of games that only get more graphically advanced. Is the software of the PS3 worth \$600? That is the bigger question.

Tephra21

So far I've seen little difference between the Xbox 360 and PS3 graphically. Therefore I'm going to skip the Blu-ray and grab a Wii with my 360.

Miyamotofreak

■ Made of dough



I think that the \$600 price tag is fine for what the specs of the PS3 are supposed to do. I just don't think that everyone is going to ante up the dough unless more info on release games comes out.

Shadowwain

Many argue that it's too early to judge. If it's early enough to release a \$600 price point, then it's early enough to prove why it's worth the dough.

FinalFatality-Ryan

I think it is too much, especially with what Microsoft and Nintendo are selling their consoles for. It really is a huge difference between them, and I think that Sony is hurting itself by giving a reason to people to look elsewhere for consoles.

jgtc_lover

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

TOASTY!

Your Sacred Cow BBQ was amazing. Two of my favorite games, Katamari Damacy and Resident Evil 2 were in your roast and I can't say I don't agree. However, I must say the part I enjoyed the most was your roast on Halo. Overall though, I'm just glad you all had the balls to print the article. I hope this will be an annual feature in the magazine.

Margaret Keddie
Buffalo, NY

Do you really have to focus in on everything bad about well-liked franchises? I agree, about half of the games on the list are bad, such as GTA 3. But Ocarina of Time? Super Mario? FF VII? No way! Gameplay is all that matters, and in my arrogant opinion, little things like what you mentioned should be pushed aside. Please, try not to infuriate all us gamers like that again. It's just not worth it.

Tim Vozzo
via msn.com

You are complete idiots! Halo was an awesome game and still is! It set the benchmark for console FPS games and was the best shooter since Half-Life! You should take your magazine and shove it up your butt!

Cullen Taylor
via yahoo.com

■ **Yeah, we knew this was coming, so let's just clear the air here: We don't hate a single one of the games lambasted in the Sacred Cow BBQ. The article was intended to be a satire, kind of like a celebrity roast – but with less Dean Martin. If you love Final Fantasy VII, we weren't insulting you. Furthermore, if you think GTA 3 is crap, we weren't agreeing with you. All of the games in the BBQ are awesome, and have made lasting impressions on the industry as a whole. However, the fact that they are classics has led people to elevate them to a kind of digital sainthood, which apparently makes them impervious to the same barbed criticisms that tear lesser games to shreds. Did we exaggerate the faults in these classics? You bet we did. By all means you should play these games, love them, and respect them. But don't fool yourself into thinking that they are beyond all reproach – that just makes you a ranting fanboy whose lack of perspective serves to amuse real gamers.**

CHEAT THE SYSTEM

Okay, so I'm hopelessly addicted to Xbox 360 Achievements. I'm also a bit of a purist gamer who doesn't believe in using cheat codes (unless you've beaten the game and you just want to explore the content). Herein lies my concern: When a poseur uses cheat codes to fly through a game like GRAW, will said gamer still rack up all of the Gamer Points that the rest of us earn legitimately?

Tyler Whitely
Sherwood, Oregon

■ **Yes, and it's one of the kinks in the system that could use some ironing out. Even though Achievements are**

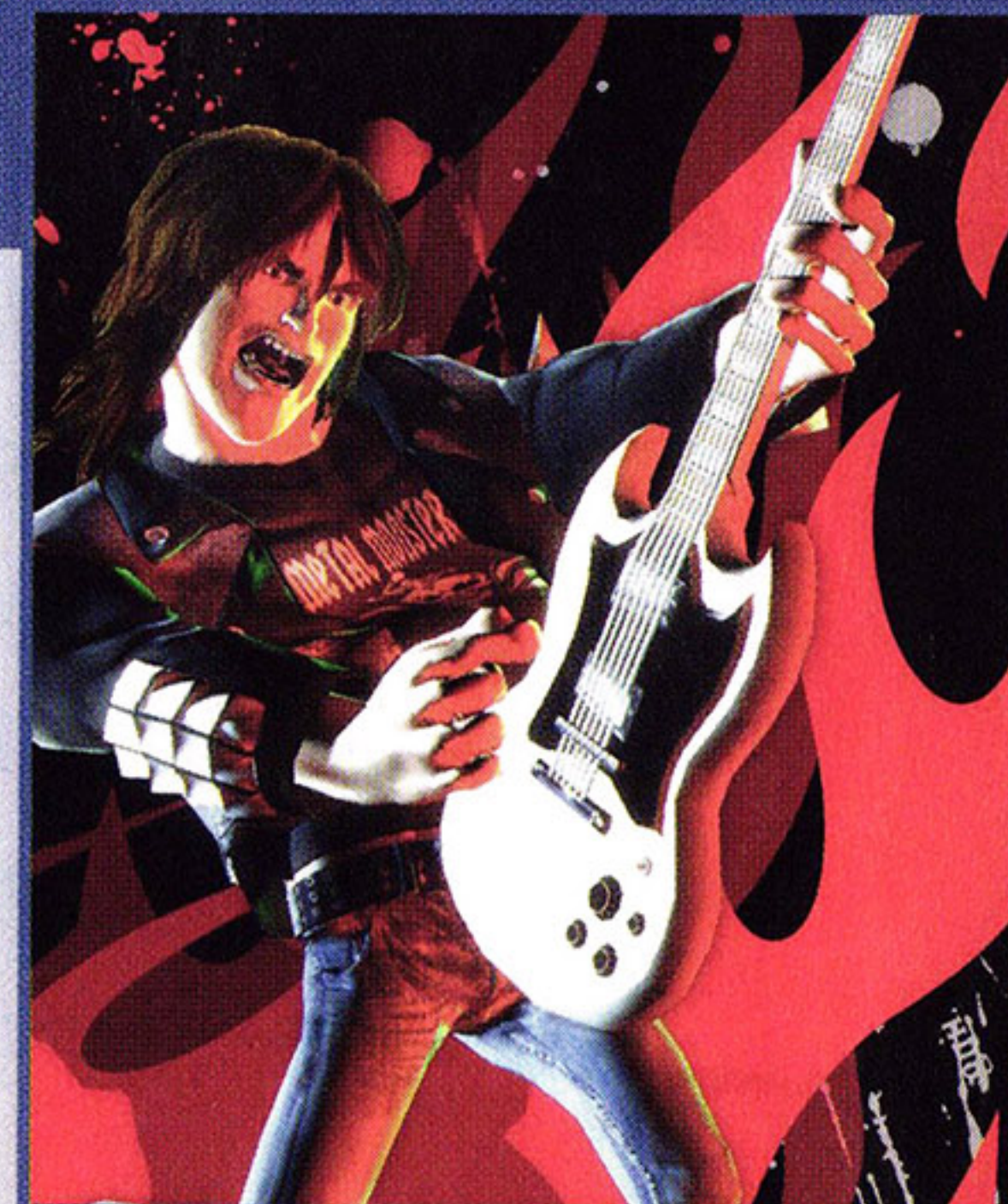
becoming the standard currency of online bragging rights, obtaining them has never been quite uniform across all games. While some are easier to cheese than others (like simulating 30 seasons of Madden), the availability of cheats adds another level of injustice to the process. We discussed the issue with a Microsoft representative, who commented, "As part of the creative process, game developers have the freedom to decide whether or not to include cheat codes in their games, and ultimately gamers

MORE THAN A FEELING

Having just recently purchased my very own copy of Guitar Hero, I must say that I am impressed. However, you forgot to mention something in your review: the short-term physical side effects. After finishing a session, I looked away from the screen to find my vision had been temporarily distorted. Every time I stared at something, it would either move upwards, away from me, or both. Needless to say, I am intrigued by this bizarre phenomenon. Why does it happen?

Aaron Levine
via email

■ **Since we all recently graduated from Legitimate Hank's School of Optometry and Bartending, we are totally qualified to comment on this problem. It is caused by a musically-transmitted disease known as Skynyrduus Erectus, commonly known as Rocking Too Hard. While it begins as a vision anomaly, in the advanced stages it can lead to world tours, doting groupies, and involuntary guitar solos. Known musicians afflicted include the Rolling Stones and most of the Ramones. Other performers, like Limp Bizkit, have been trying to contract the disease for years with little success. There is no known cure, though cowbell has proven to be an effective treatment.**



have the freedom to decide whether or not they want to use them." So in the end, what does the cheating earn? Gamer Points. What are Gamer Points redeemable for? Nothing. So, if you take the moral high ground, you can look at your Achievements and swell with pride because you earned them. The people who cheat GRAW six ways from Sunday will know they're just lamers with a pile of useless points.

UNFAIR ASSESSMENT

I was reading your previews from E3, and it occurred to me that you should give a preview score for each game. It wouldn't be final or anything, but you could explain why you like or dislike the game, and what the developers could do to improve before release.

Donte Robinson
via aol.com

■ **But if they did that, wouldn't the goopy filling just leak out the other side? Oh, sorry, but we decided to respond to this letter before we actually read it. That's not really fair of us, is it? After all, we can't really judge or respond to anything based on incomplete knowledge. In our previews, we do our best to highlight a game's features and voice any pressing concerns (as well as show sweet screenshots), but a score that isn't rooted in thorough experience with a game is ultimately flawed and presents a skewed perspective to our readers. If you want slanted opinions based on blind assumptions, go to online gaming forums instead. Don't forget to choose an avatar from some obscure anime series!**

WRONG KONG

I was looking at your Game Over page in the June issue, and I noticed that you guys made a big error. In the second Donkey Kong game, you can't play as Donkey Kong Jr. — you only play as Dixie Kong or Diddy Kong. So either the answers on the bottom are a typo, or you guys need to go play some old-school games.

Brandon B.
via hotmail.com

■ **Wait a second. Are you trying to say that the second Donkey Kong game, entitled Donkey Kong Junior, starred Diddy and Dixie Kong but not Donkey Kong Jr.? Oh, you must mean the second Donkey Kong Country game, which released 13 years later. You do raise an interesting point though, Brandon: Are games from the mid-'90s beginning to qualify as old-school these days? Each step we take toward the future of gaming puts more and more games behind us; can the term "old-school" apply to any title that is a certain number of years old? If so, in time we'll just find ourselves with an umbrella phrase that doesn't point to any specific point in the gaming continuum. Should we start breaking up our past into discrete chunks, like the Mariozoic age or the Chun-lithic period? We don't have all the answers, but one thing is certain: Prehistoric eras named after video game characters are pure comedic gold.**

WTS [BRAIN] X1

Thanks for your "At What Price Power" article (issue 158) about power leveling in WoW. I have a friend who bought 200 gold and power leveled to 20, and he doesn't know what any abbreviations for instances are, much less how to correctly loot within a party — among other crippling knowledge deficits. Power leveling and gold buying ruins the game not only for you but also for others. You're isolating yourself from the majority of the community, because no serious player will want to group with you if they know you were power leveled, and if you support the people that sell gold for money, then that only gives them more incentive to keep doing it.

Ben Parisi
Scotch Plains, NJ

■ **There are many players out in the MMO communities who think that their financial transactions have no effect on the players around them. After all, why should someone else care if you spend your own money to get to level 40 or buy that purple sword? Ben's letter does an excellent job illustrating a few of the many reasons these things are just bad ideas. Even if you ignore the fact that it violates the End User License Agreement and puts your account in danger of being permanently banned, you've still got to contend with the notion that you're supporting an in-game world where the person with the biggest real-life wallet has the advantage. Is it fair for someone who plays by rules to lose in PvP because some hotshot noob spent his paycheck on a Krol Blade? And if you think that supporting gold farmers doesn't have any tangible effect, a few hours of trying to get anything done at Tyr's Hand should make it clear. Those Scarlet Brotherhood chumps must have the approximate life expectancy of a runt mosquito with tuberculosis.**

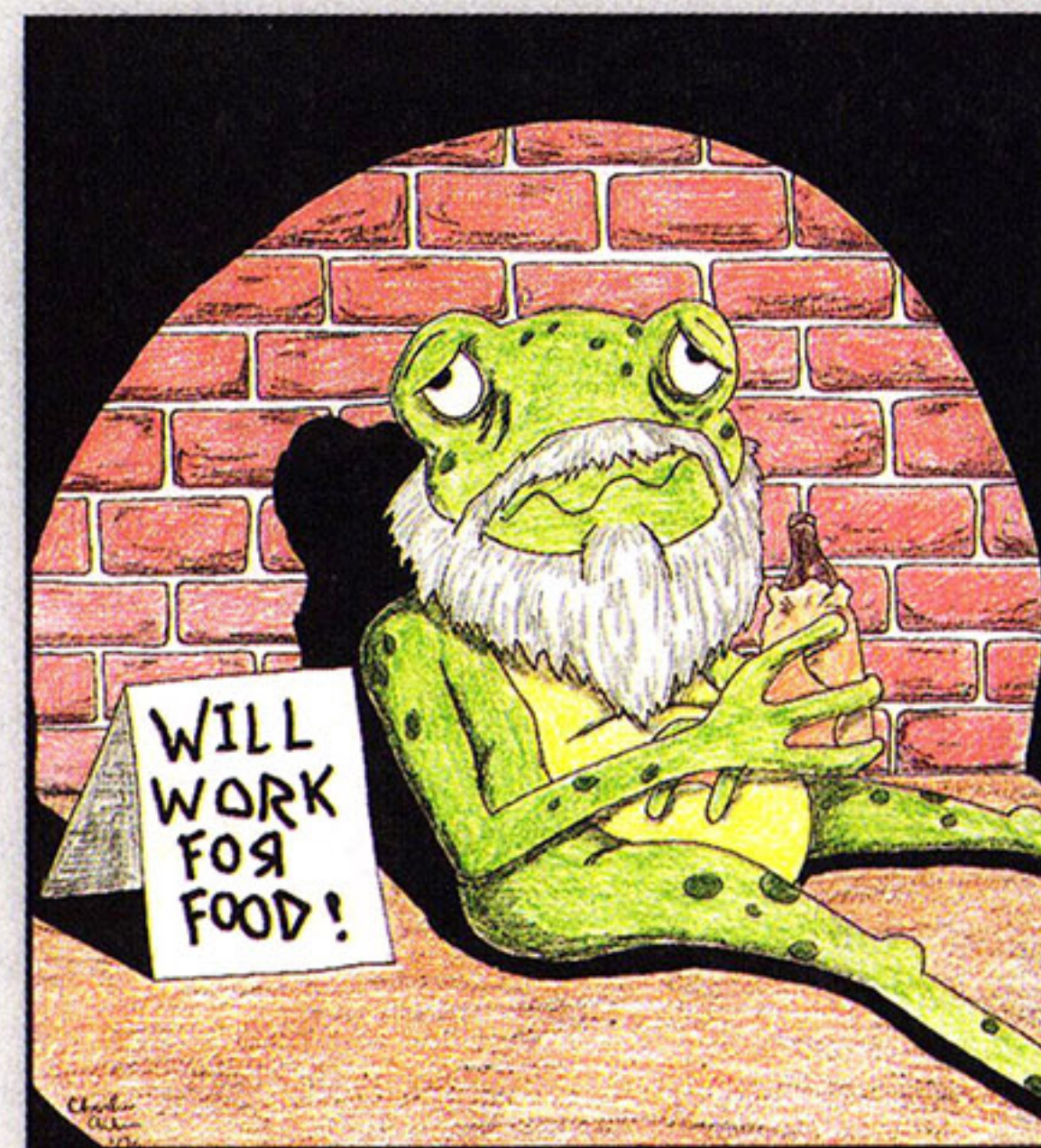
ENVELOPE ART

AUGUST WINNER!

TIN SALAMUNIC
If you see this and start singing "Castle on a Cloud," please punch yourself and save everyone else the trouble

Enter the Game Informer Envelope Art Contest. All you need to do is draw, paint, scratch, spit, or carve the best damn envelope art you can think of and send it to us. Please include your name, phone number, and return address on the back of the envelope. If you're the monthly winner, we'll feature your work in GI and you'll receive a video game prize from the Game Informer vault.

Send to:
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Envelope Art Contest
724 1st St. N., 4th Floor
Mpls, MN 55401

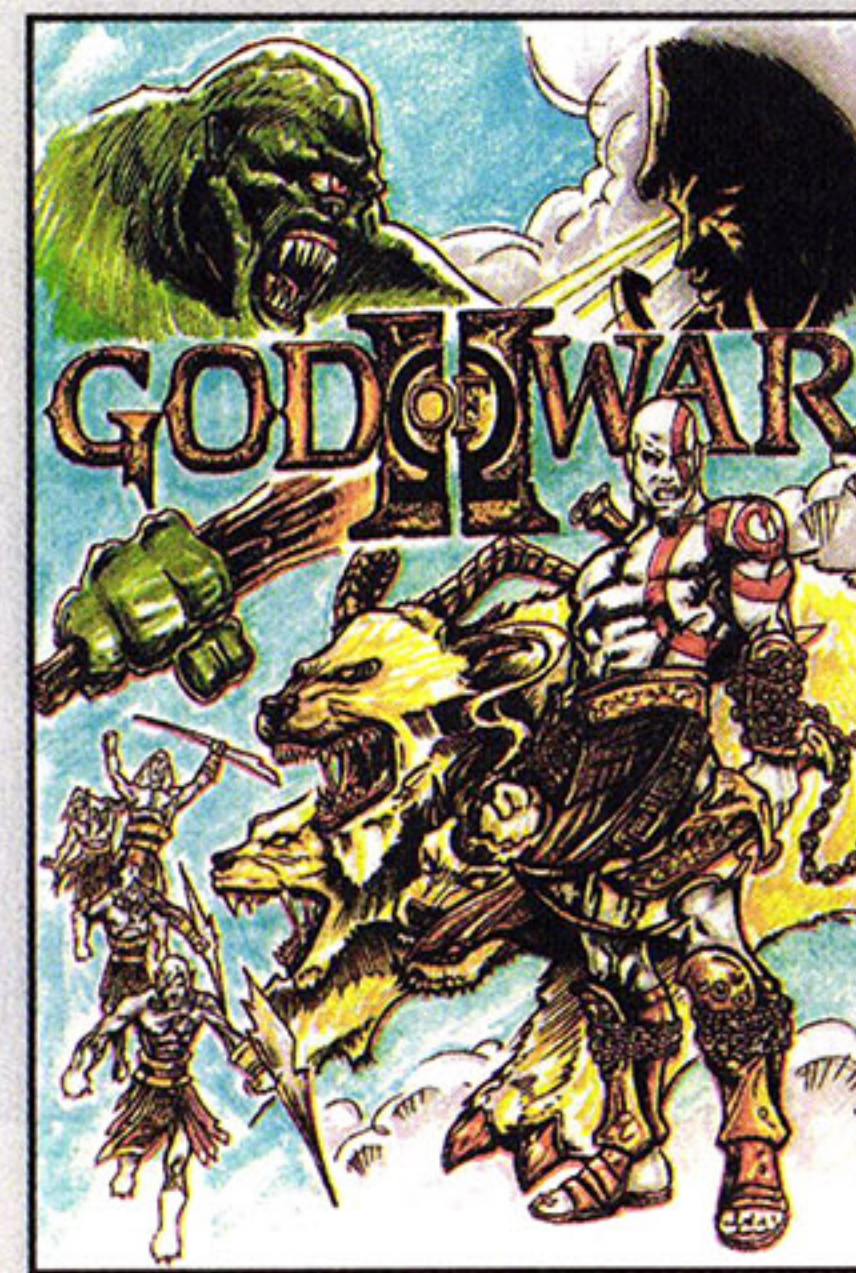


CHARLES ATKINS

Why did Frogger cross the road? To drink a bottle of beard tonic, apparently

KEVIN X. SUAREZ

That's right, Wolverine. Just pretend the robots are all Brett Ratner and then let it all out



KARL JOHNSON

"My dog has horns, three heads, and feasts on the undying souls of the damned. His name is Mr. Mittensworth"



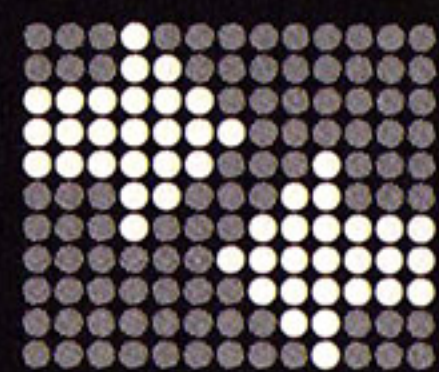
KATHRYN GARCIA

Sorry, Kameo. Acting all sassy won't change the fact that people care more about anthropomorphic pinatas than you



MICHAEL BORNE

Mufasa would totally win in a fight against that prancy wolf in Okami



news

INSIDE INDUSTRY MINDS

GAME INFORMER QUIZZES DEVELOPERS

There's always a lot of talk coming out of E3 about what was (and sometimes wasn't) seen and played. We do it, you do it, and it's sure as hell all over the Internet. But what about the opinions of those who are going to actually shape the games we play in the coming months? What do the developers think? Game Informer recently polled some developers to get their quick (and anonymous) take on some questions that are on everyone's mind. Although it's only a small sampling, we found some interesting answers that serve as a snapshot of the industry as we transition to the next-generation systems and possibly a shift in power as Microsoft and Nintendo look poised to gain ground on current-gen leader Sony.



Wii

Nintendo has had a historically hard time with third-party developers, and for the second console generation running is promising a better effort on this front. The politics of the situation, however, thankfully aren't dampening developers' enthusiasm for the Wii – which is a great initial sign for the system. There are some fears that in a multi-platform world, a console as unique as the Wii would be forgotten as developers and publishers look for the path of least resistance, but the good majority of those we contacted said they were making a Wii title.

Among those who responded, most didn't see Nintendo being able to grab second place among Microsoft and Nintendo, although a couple thought that Nintendo had a shot at selling more units than all of its competition. One person thought it could be number one in Japan, but only wind up third in the West because they didn't think gamers in North America and Europe were "as keen on the more child-oriented products." Still, the majority is excited about the system. One developer even expressed enthusiasm despite the fact that they didn't even have a Wii title planned yet.

Are you excited for the Wii?

Yes **77%**

No **23%**

If you port your game to the Wii, how hard is it going to be to adapt your title to that system?

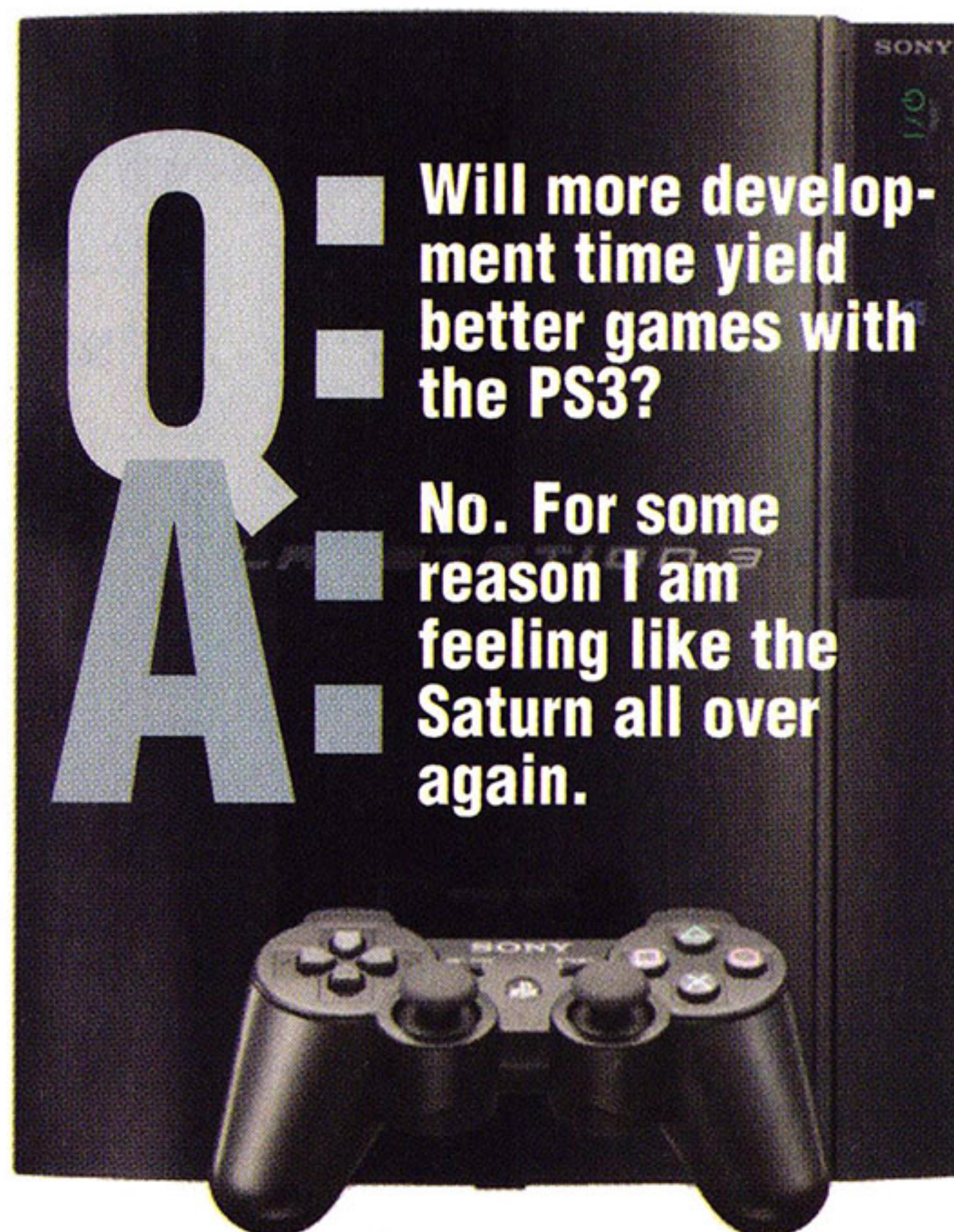
Hard **67%**

Not so bad **33%**

Easy **0%**

PLAYSTATION 3

The public is still in sticker shock over both of the system's high price points (\$499 or \$599 – take your pick), and developers are too. However, contradicting some of the horror stories on the 'net, the good majority of those we surveyed didn't think developing for the PlayStation 3 so far was a problem. Even better, most think that they will be able to make use of all of the system's seven SPEs – a design feature that supposedly sets the PS3 apart from the Xbox 360 and makes it more powerful. However, the general consensus we got from those we polled was that hardware wasn't as important as the games themselves and the creative decisions that have to be made to shape them in the first place. Putting to bed the notion that platform specs make the game, one person said to us, "The hardware should not define the creative direction of the game." And what about Blu-ray? A developer opined that including a Blu-ray player in the PS3 might not help the sales of the system, contrary to what Sony may think. Recalling failed formats like the Mini-Disc and UMD movies, the developer sarcastically queried, "How many successful proprietary formats has Sony produced?"



Q Will more development time yield better games with the PS3?

A No. For some reason I am feeling like the Saturn all over again.

Is the PS3 too expensive?

Yes **63%**

No **37%**

How would you rate the PS3 dev kits at this point?

Good **20%**

Bad **20%**

Average **60%**

Do the Nintendo DS's dual screens make you more interested in developing for it?

Yes **38%** No **62%**

HANDHELDS

Given how similar titles are on the PS2 and PSP, we were more interested to get developers' take on the Nintendo DS – a system that has opened up a huge lead in Japan over the PSP, and has pretty much lived up to the promises made by its manufacturer. Despite this success, and the fact that a few respondents really liked the system for its touch screen, the dual screens that give the DS its name didn't make the developers any more excited about it. Interestingly, some of them may have to overcome their indifference, as over half of those surveyed have said their companies are making DS titles.



Which system are you more excited to develop for?

- Xbox 360 **37%**
- PS3 **16%**
- Wii **32%**
- PC **5%**
- Nintendo DS **5%**
- PSP **5%**

XBOX 360

It's hard to depict an honest match-up between the PS3 and Xbox 360 at this point, because the former isn't even out yet, but hey – that's not Microsoft's problem. What is crystal clear, however, is that whatever the sales numbers, the Xbox brand has made up a lot of ground in the minds of both the developers and the public. Being first to market was the right (and arguably only) choice for Microsoft, and companies aren't hesitating to take advantage of the 360's installed base. All of our respondents are currently making titles for the 360, and many listed it as a system they were definitely excited about.

[Microsoft] has made a great showing. I think people underestimate how much Microsoft had to do.

PC

Q: Does the success of consoles mean the end for the PC market?

A: Not as long as World of Warcraft is out there. I don't think we will ever see the PC market die.

While there cannot be an answer yet to who will win the console war, the developers we polled generally took an altogether non-antagonistic approach to the question. As gamers – as well as businesspeople – they simply felt that the more great titles the public has for any system the better. Said one developer, "As a true gamer I don't get caught up in the bandwagon wars. I plan to own any system that comes out. As a developer I will support the system that I feel gives my company the best chance to succeed."

Another warned: "Betting on one outcome or another at this point would be straight-up gambling."

DATA FILE

More News You Can Use

PHOENIX WRIGHT'S NEW MOTION

Capcom is taking on more cases, announcing a new installment of its Gyakuten Saiban lawyer series (known over here as Phoenix Wright) for the Nintendo DS. This new game will take place seven years after the first and feature new characters. The second Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney game, sub-titled And Justice For All, appears in America early next year.

LARA'S FACE-LIFT

To commemorate the 10th anniversary of her first adventure, Eidos is releasing a new edition of Tomb Raider, which originally appeared on the PSone. Although the company is not revealing a lot of details on the project, it has said that Crystal Dynamics is working on the title, presumably to put some polish on it before it hits the PS2, PC, and PSP.



MORE UNREAL FOR MIDWAY

Midway is continuing its Epic partnership, expanding it to include the re-release of select Unreal titles. The first product from this deal is Unreal Anthology, which includes Unreal (and the Return to Na Pali expansion), Unreal II: The Awakening, Unreal Tournament (GoTY Edition), and Unreal Tournament 2004 (Editor's Choice Edition). This PC collection will be available in the fall for \$29.95.



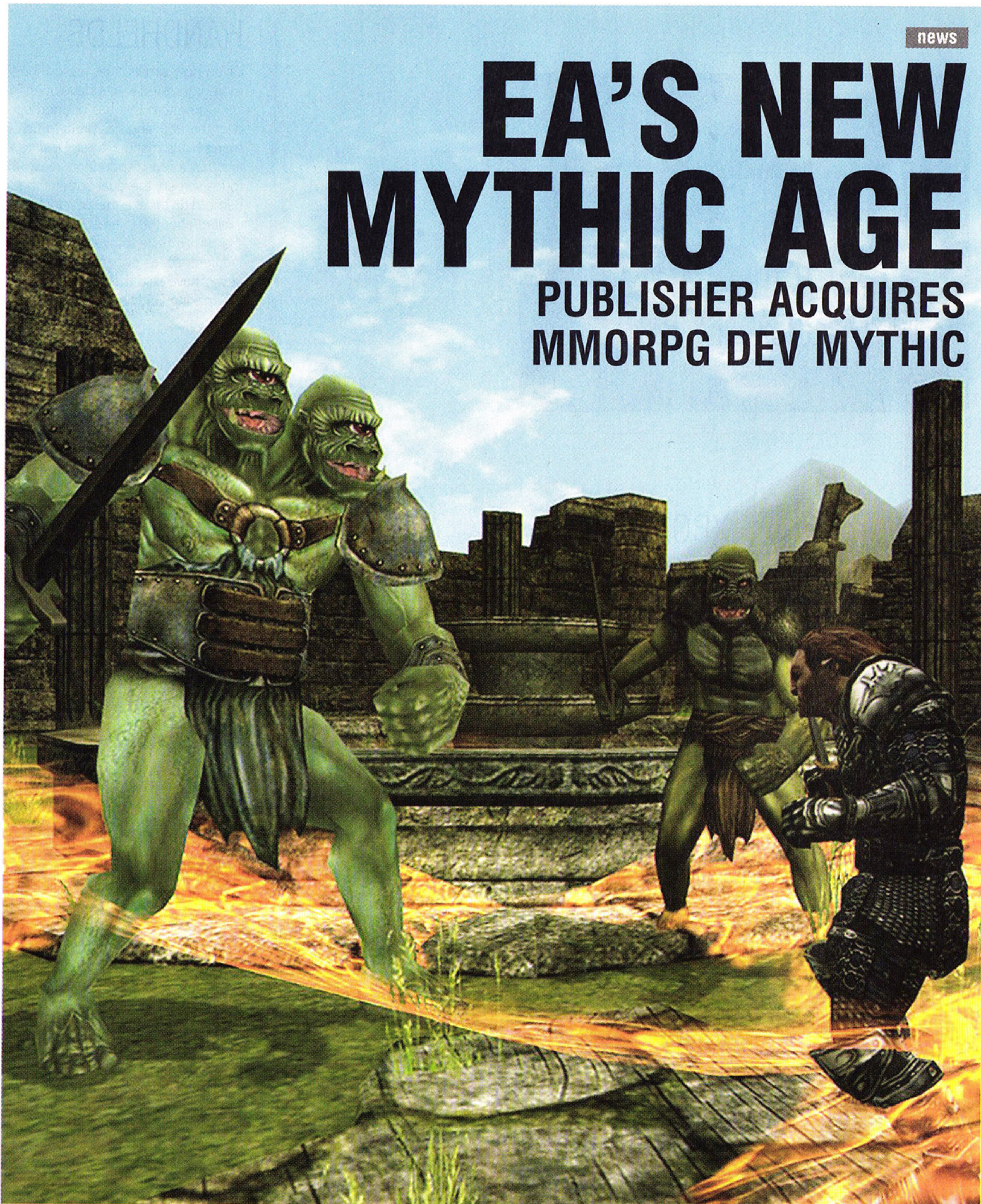
BASEBALL ON DECK FOR THE Wii

After coming back to the GameCube this year, 2K Sports is looking to keep the Nintendo love going on Wii. Take-Two (which owns 2K) CEO and president Paul Eibeler recently mentioned that 2K was looking to support the system – even mentioning baseball by name. But Eibeler said the move likely wouldn't happen until "late '07, '08."



NCSOFT LAYOFFS

MMORPG developer NCsoft (City of Heroes/Villains) confirmed a large-scale layoff of employees from its Austin office. Seventy of the developer's 300 staff were let go in what the company itself says is due to the slowing of product from NCsoft in the coming year.



news

EA'S NEW MYTHIC AGE

PUBLISHER ACQUIRES MMORPG DEV MYTHIC

In this post-World of Warcraft climate, publishers across the globe are very aware of just how much money can be made if they hitch their wagon to the right MMORPG. Electronic Arts is doing what it can, and has acquired Dark Age of Camelot developer Mythic Entertainment, immediately re-dubbing it EA Mythic. This deal instantly provides a publisher for Mythic's Warhammer Online: Age of Reckoning. The MMORPG PC game was previously without a publisher, and is on track to release next year.

At E3, Age of Reckoning was also running on the Xbox 360, although no official announcement has been made about the game on that platform yet. Still, EA wants to expand the nascent MMORPG console market, and has openly attested to this fact. Mythic CEO Mark Jacobs told Game Informer that no matter what EA's plans, the publisher is going to help Mythic get there. "We're going to look at consoles. They already

have teams solving problems that we would have to solve, so we're going to be able to draw on so many resources."

The publisher also wants Mythic to tackle EA's own intellectual properties, as well as continuing the developer's previous franchises. Whether faced with continuing Dark Age of Camelot or being placed on an EA franchise, Jacobs says, "It doesn't matter to me. All I care about is that the next game has to be a better game than the one before it, and EA gives us that opportunity. That's an opportunity we wouldn't have had on our own."

Jacobs also reassured us that despite this deal, everything at Mythic is staying the same. The company will remain in Virginia, and there will be no layoffs. Also, gamers' Dark Age accounts, as well as its subscription rates, will remain unchanged.

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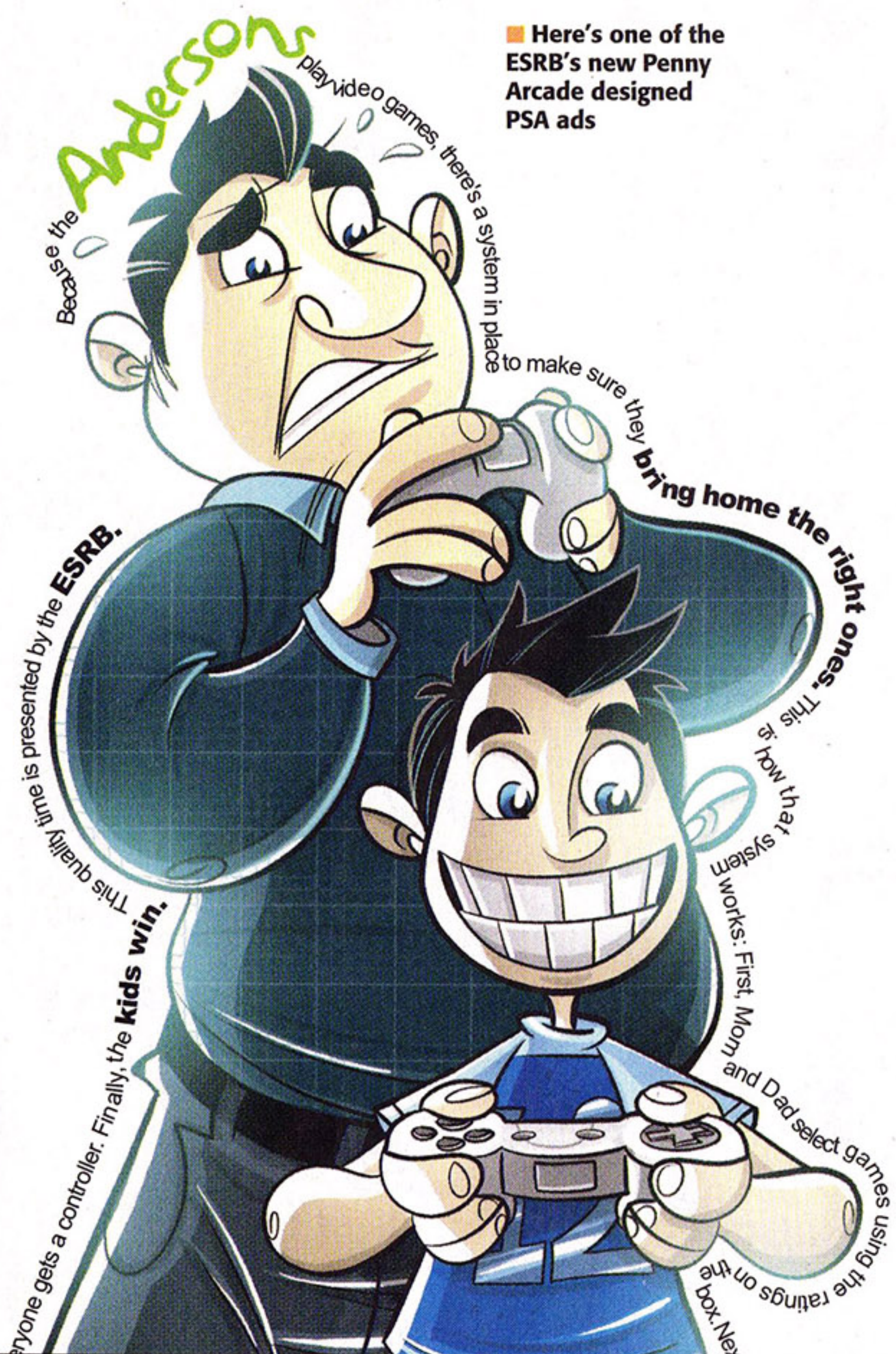
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THE RATINGS GAME

GAME INFORMER EXAMINES THE CONTROVERSY OVER THE ESRB

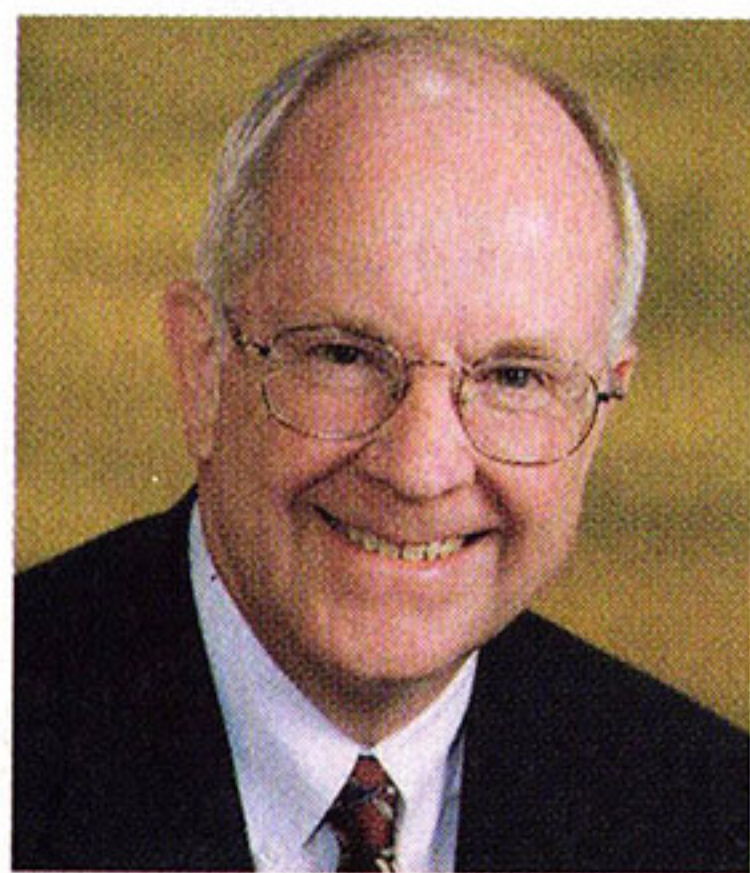
Ever since the inception of gaming, controversy over explicit and violent content has dogged the industry. Early titles like *Death Race* and *Custer's Revenge* showed that even crude, pixelated graphics could scandalize the public. As technology improved and in-game visuals became even more life-like, protest from crusading politicians and outraged parents continued to grow. In 1994, following a series of Congressional hearings regarding the brutal *Mortal Kombat* series, the video game industry took action to appease its critics, forming the Entertainment Software Rating Board to give parents guidelines on what games were appropriate for their children.

Largely, the ESRB has been a tremendous success. Although technically a "voluntary" system, its rules and ratings are widely accepted in the industry, with over 1,000 titles being rated annually. Most major retailers require games to carry ESRB ratings, as do the major console makers. However, the ESRB has recently been the subject of widespread criticism from both watchdog groups and within the industry itself. Not surprisingly, the criticism is contradictory. While some feel that gaming content has gone beyond the pale with a new generation of Mature-rated, ultra-

violent titles, others complain that video games have to play under a stricter set of rules than mediums like film. To make matters worse, a handful of scandals over the past year have called into question the reliability and integrity of the ratings system as whole. It's little wonder that ESRB president Patricia Vance wearily observed that "people that work at the ESRB have the most thankless jobs in the industry" in a recent conversation with *Game Informer*. In the next few pages, we hope to shed a little light on both the recent controversies and just what goes into the process of rating video games.

Gaming Under Fire

June 14th marked a contentious end to a troubled 12 months for the video game ratings system. A little over a year to the date that a sex minigame nicknamed "Hot Coffee" was discovered in the PC and PS2 versions of *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, the talk in Washington centered around a hearing of the House Subcommittee on Commerce, Trade, and Consumer Protection. The hearings were largely focused on the fallout of the Federal Trade Commission's June 8th settlement with Take-Two Interactive regarding the Hot Coffee incident.



Dr. David Walsh of the National Institute on Media and the Family

Although representatives from the FTC and the ESRB were both on hand to defend the ways in which

they dealt with the Hot Coffee incident, the congressmen had little patience for their testimony, and had harsh words for both organizations' handling of the matter.

Representative Joe Barton (R-TX) railed against the FTC as being slow to act on the matter and also commented that he was "fed up with games like *Grand Theft Auto* being marketed under false pretenses." Another Representative cited frustration that the FTC settlement with Take-Two (or "consent decree") levied no fines against the makers of *GTA*. "I would like to have thought that [Take-Two and Rockstar] would have been able to be fined for millions of dollars for the trash they put out across the country," commented Fred Upton (R-MI).

Grand Theft Auto wasn't the only title to run afoul of the rating system in the past months. In May, Bethesda Softworks' popular role-playing game *Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* (also published by Take-Two) was re-categorized from a Teen rating to Mature by the ESRB in May. The reasons given were twofold, the main cause being (according to the ESRB) a graphic level of violence that they felt was under-reported in the ratings submission by Bethesda. Also, modders had found an art file in the game's code that could be used by players to create a nude character model.

Bethesda, in an official statement, dis-

puted these claims, saying: "Bethesda didn't create a game with nudity and does not intend that nudity appear in *Oblivion*. There is no nude female character in a section of the game that can be 'unlocked.' Bethesda can not control tampering with *Oblivion* by third parties. Bethesda is taking steps to ensure that modders can not continue to hack into *Oblivion's* art archives to create partially nude figures." Continuing, the statement read, "With regard to violence, Bethesda advised the ESRB during the ratings process that violence and blood effects were 'frequent' in the game – checking the



A photo from the recent House hearings on games

box on the form that is the maximum warning. We further advised that the game contained occasional torture, vulgar acts, and gore. We gave accurate answers and descriptions about the type and frequency of violence that appears in the game. We submitted a 60-page document listing the explicit

language, acts, and scenes in the game. *Oblivion* packaging already contains warnings for 'Violence' and 'Blood and Gore.'"

All this took place against a background of ongoing legislation in several states. In the last two months alone, states like Minnesota, Louisiana, and Oklahoma passed laws that sought restrict the sales of violent games to minors, and in some cases (like the Minnesota law) even levy fines against minors that attempt to rent or purchase such titles.



■ Bethesda Softworks' *Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*'s ESRB rating was changed from a T to an M after the raters found graphic violence and a topless character mod

“Bethesda didn’t create a game with nudity and does not intend that nudity appear in *Oblivion*.”

Where Do We Go From Here?

This ongoing controversy raises several questions. Is the video game rating system broken? Does this ongoing outcry about adult content in video games threaten the financial future, or worse, the creativity of this still-growing art form? Is the ESRB doing enough to protect younger audiences from inappropriate content? Are games rated too strictly or not strictly enough? As you might imagine, the answers to these questions vary depending on who you talk to.

Dr. David Walsh, the founder and president of the National Institute on Media and the Family, has been a longtime critic of violent games and the ESRB. Thankfully, unlike infamous anti-game crusader Jack Thompson, he comes off as fair-minded and rational during the course of our conversation.

“I think that the Hot Coffee thing certainly pointed out some of the weaknesses in the system,” comments Dr. Walsh on a day he testified in the hearings in Washington. “I don’t know that it’s fair to trash the entire system based on that case.” However, that’s not to say that Walsh doesn’t have serious concerns with the ratings process itself.

“I think that the [ratings] structure that has been set up will

always lend itself to skepticism, because of the inherent conflict of interest,” observes Walsh. “Of course, that’s what some of the Congressmen went after.... What they were able to point out is that the board is all industry representatives. The funding is from within the industry. It’s set up that way in movies and television as well. It’s set up as the fox guarding the chicken coop. So whenever it’s set up like that with no external validation, whenever you get a question they’re always going to lead to suspicion. We wouldn’t trust General Motors’ evaluation of their own cars.”

He also finds major fault in the way that the Hot Coffee incident was handled, and even raises concerns that the ESRB helped to cover-up the illicit content when it found out about the news. [For ESRB President Patricia Vance’s response to this accusation, turn to our interview on page 19.]

LEARN MORE:

Here’s a few Internet sites that provide more information on some of the subjects discussed in this article:

The Entertainment Software Ratings Board
www.esrb.org

The National Institute on Media and the Family
www.mediafamily.org

The Entertainment Software Association
www.theesa.com

Dennis McCauley’s GamePolitics.Com
www.gamepolitics.com

“I think that both the ESRB and Take-Two made a big mistake by not immediately coming clean, explaining what happened, and dealing with it.... It’s the old Washington axiom, the cover-up is always worse than the crime,” comments Walsh. “I called [ESRB President] Pat Vance before we did that, and [she] knew about the controversy three weeks before they said anything.... I’m not making any accusations against her integrity.... But, it

sure had the appearance of complicity in a cover-up... [If] they would have dealt with it up-front, I don’t think it would have been nearly as damaging as it has been. The fact of the delay, and Take-Two’s constant denials, for two and a half weeks afterwards, it just made the problem worse.”

Whatever the veracity of these claims, it should be pointed out that once the ESRB did act, the disciplinary action was extremely decisive. By re-labeling *San Andreas* as Adults Only, the ESRB essentially forced Take-Two to take back large numbers of copies already in the retail channel, create an entirely new version of the game (minus the Hot Coffee content), and restock the new version in retailers, who had refused to carry the newly AO product. In the end, this cost Take-Two a reported \$24.5 million, a number large enough to likely ensure that this type of violation will not be a problem in the future.

In fact, some in the industry wonder if the ESRB should have more staunchly defended Take-Two. The content had been locked out by the developers and could only be accessed by using a PC mod or (on the PS2) a third-party code “compiler” device like the Max Action Replay. These devices violate the End User License Agreement (a disclaimer that forbids players to tamper with the game in any way) appears in every piece of software sold.

Vivendi producer Pete Wanat, currently working on *Scarface: The World Is Yours*, questions whether the correct decision was made. “It says right in the [end user agreement] when you read it: ‘If you go and

mess with this code, you don’t have legal permission to do so.’ Don’t get me wrong: if you can put in a cheat code in on the PC or the PS2 or the Xbox and get that content, that’s a major f---up. But when you lock it out and the only way you can access it is to [tinker] with the code and break the end user licensing agreement, that is the biggest embarrassment we’ve had as an industry.... Instead of rallying around Take-Two, people ran away from that. Instead of saying ‘You’re right, you did lock out that content and the only way people accessed it was by breaking the user license agreement to mess with your code.’”

This might seem like an overreaction at first glance. However, keep in mind that the Hot Coffee decision, coupled with the *Oblivion* incident where fans had applied buried topless art files to character models by modding the game (a charge that Bethesda disputes, saying that the “topless” mod does not use Bethesda-created topless graphics), has the potential to open up the industry to all types of criticism based on player-created content. This could be a veritable Pandora’s Box for the industry, especially given the fact that most critics of the medium are not well-versed in how games are built.

These controversies raise the question: How are video games rated and what went wrong in the cases of *San Andreas* and *Oblivion*?

Basically, each game undergoes the same process. Publishers must submit a lengthy questionnaire, in which the game’s content is detailed in a number of differ-

ent areas, including language, violence, and depictions of sexuality. On the form (which the ESRB does not make public), the publisher describes both the frequency and intensity of the content in each applicable category. Sometimes, this will include highlighted dialogue scripts or even the

conducted by the firm Peter D. Hart Research Associates, over 94 percent of parents said they found the ESRB ratings "very helpful" (72 percent) or "somewhat helpful" (22 percent). In addition, 91 percent were confident that the rating accurately describe a game's content. Even Dr. Walsh himself

gone unnoticed by Wanat. "If we tried to do the same amount of nudity you find in your average R-rated movie, that would instantly make most games into Adults Only," comments Wanat. "We tend, in the game industry, to consider hardcore violence Mature and consider anything with nudity or sexual content closer to AO." Still, Wanat feels this is at least partially the fault of the development community, "The single biggest reason is that games to this day are still seen as something kids play – despite all the evidence showing that the majority of gamers are over 20.... It's also because when we say games are getting 'mature,' basically it means we're cursing in it. Or having some hardcore violence with some blood spurts. We're not talking about mature in the way that HBO does maturity. We're not mature in a smart sense; we're mature in a sophomoric sense."

At the end of the day, the industry and its critics might never come to a consensus with how its ratings should be administered. However, all sides have ideas and plans on how to improve the process. Walsh has long championed the idea of a universal rating system for all media, to end what he calls the current "alphabet soup" of game, movie, and television

ratings. When speaking with him, Walsh felt that games and television ought to adopt film's MPAA ratings, because the designa-

tions like R and PG are "so much better known." Although Patricia Vance and the Entertainment Software Association's Doug Lowenstein agree that this might be a good idea in principle, making three large industries work together might be very difficult in practice. They are even less receptive to his idea of an independent parents group that would sample and inspect the ESRB ratings, to ensure that industry commercial interests don't play a part. Vance scoffs at the implication, saying, "Our raters are independent; they come in on a part-time basis, for two-to-three hours every two weeks. That was established from the beginning as a fundamental way to have an independent voice in the system."

For its part, the ESRB is taking steps to make what it feels are the appropriate changes in its enforcement system. During the recent hearings on Capital Hill, it released a document detailing new rules and fines that were put in place effective this July. Companies that fail to properly report either playable or "locked out" content can now face fines of up to \$1 million, and egregious offenders can even face suspension of ratings services and pulling of advertisements. In addition, the ESRB is starting a new "Commitment to Parents" program which seeks to "enhance compliance with store policies regarding the sale of Mature-rated games and educate consumers about ESRB video game ratings." The organization has also partnered with the popular online comic Penny Arcade to produce a series of public service announcements aimed at gamers.

While it's unlikely that the controversy over edgy and violent games will simply fade away, the ESRB remains the industry's best tool to help appease its critics and curb possible government intervention. Even David Walsh sees self-regulation as the best solution. And, as Wanat puts it, "The government has enough f--- problems, they don't need to be worried about rating video games, so thank God for the ESRB."

■ Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion



full lyrics to every licensed song on the soundtrack. In addition to this, a videotape of the most extreme content must be provided. Depending on the type of game, this video can vary from a few minutes in the case of a puzzle game to over two hours, in the case of a longer, action-oriented title. The ratings are decided on by independent raters, who are recruited from the community and employed on a part-time basis by the ESRB. This is to ensure that the raters have no ties to the game industry and represent a wide variety of viewpoints and values.

Of course, this system does depend on the publishers being truthful and giving an accurate representation of their games. In the case of San Andreas, it's clear that the publishers underestimated the possibility that fans would be able to access some explicit content that was "locked out" by the developers. In the case of Oblivion, Bethesda's alleged under-reporting of the amount of violence and gore in the game could also skew the system.

Some question just how accurate the ratings are. David Walsh comments, "I think that there has been slippage.... It's the ratings that become controversial that – pretty consistently – if parents were doing the ratings, they'd rate it more strictly. If you look at the ESRB criteria for AO, it's puzzling as to why Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas – even without the Hot Coffee – did not get an AO rating. And, of course, everybody knows why it didn't get an AO rating."

When we asked him why he felt that the game wasn't rated as AO, he answers simply, "It's commercial."

However, according to a recent study

admits that "of the [media ratings systems], the ESRB has the most integrity. That being said, there are still problems."

Walsh also feels that the industry is too secretive about its ratings standards, citing what he feels is a "black box" around the process. Although when we talked to Patricia Vance of the ESRB, she refused to reveal the actual ratings submission packet ("It's not a public document," she replied). She does point to the organization's website, which gives detailed descriptions of each rating designation and the various content descriptors that go along with them. In terms of how these ratings guidelines are communicated to the industry, Wanat feels that the ESRB has been clear.

"I have never, ever taken any sort of exception with their guidelines, and that's not me trying to be a kiss-ass to the ESRB," said Wanat. "Use your head about it! If you had a younger kid playing the game that was related to you, would you let them play the game? Their guidelines are pretty solid."

Despite all the controversy surrounding Hot Coffee, one of the most striking things about the video game industry is just how prudish it is compared to other major media when it comes to sex. While games grow more violent and bloody by the year, the ESRB ratings actually treat sex more strictly than either movies or cable television, a fact that has not



■ When it was discovered that Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas contained a hidden sex scene, it caused a national uproar, the reverberations of which are still being felt throughout the industry



This is it, she's inviting you in for coffee! Gird your loins for love...

How did the hearings in Congress go for you? Did you feel you were treated fairly?

Well, I don't think that we had a very receptive audience with the people who actually attended the hearing. I don't think they were actually listening to my answers, nor were they, frankly, listening to my testimony, which is unfortunate. I do believe it was unfair.

How much of that reception was a result of Hot Coffee? How damaging was that controversy to the ESRB?

There's no question that Hot Coffee had a negative impact on the industry and the self-regulatory system. On the other hand, I think the response that occurred from us was swift and decisive. The actions that we required of Take-Two at the time were praised by people in Washington as a great example of self-regulation.

We spoke with David Walsh, and he claimed that you knew about the Hot Coffee mod three weeks before it went public, and did nothing. In his mind, this was tantamount to a cover-up. Is that true?

David Walsh, all he had to do was determine whether or not the content existed on the disc. What we had to determine was the ramifications of actually going after a company or a product that had been modified. There were serious ramifications throughout the whole enforcement system and the self-regulatory system. It was the first time we actually took action with respect to a modification of a product. So that was a precedent-setting event for us. It involved policy changes and determining all the corrective actions that were necessary. ... We had to determine what consequences there were and what other changes we had to make to the regulatory system. We had also to determine how consumers would be protected, what the publisher was going to do to correct the situation. We did that in 30 days. It took the FTC a year to investigate Grand Theft Auto.

Do you feel that there was a lack of understanding about how games are made from both the politicians and the media regarding Hot Coffee? Most of the reports made it sound like this was easily, regularly accessible content. You needed to have a third-party device to even access the Hot Coffee on the PS2.

There were a lot of unfortunate parts of the way the press portrayed Hot Coffee. The first being that, until the GameShark and Action Replay devices featured the Hot Coffee code, it was only available to a small portion of the consumer base, who had the PC version of the game. Even then you had to go out and download the patch in order to access it. Of course, the press didn't pick up on the nuances of that. ... The other ironic part of the whole thing is that Grand Theft Auto, this is a game that was rated Mature for 17 and older, with five different content descriptors including strong sexual content, intense violence, blood and gore, strong language, and use of drugs. This is a game that was not rated appropriate for children – if your child was playing it, that's not any fault of ours in terms of inappropriate labeling.

Another game that was re-categorized was Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion. Bethesda took exception with the idea that they hadn't filled out their content forms correctly. What



INTERVIEW
**PATRICIA
VANCE**

PRESIDENT, ENTERTAINMENT SOFTWARE RATING BOARD

No question about it – our ratings are more conservative than movies and television.

went wrong in the process of rating Oblivion?

The main problem with that submission is that they underestimated the blood and gore. There is a section of the game that included fairly intense depictions of hanging corpses that are castrated and eaten and mutilated; there's an underlying storyline with respect to castration. None of that was disclosed. It's at the end of the Dark Brotherhood quest-line, which is really where the problems are. So that was first and foremost the reason for changing the rating to an M. The second reason resulted from the fact that Bethesda left a nude, topless skin in the art archive of the code of the product. Of course, when the product was released, the modder got in the file and – lo and behold – you could play with one of the characters topless throughout the whole game. We've made our policies very clear since Hot Coffee last summer, that you can't leave those type of art files in the game.

We spoke to a producer in the industry, and he felt that you should have defended Hot Coffee because Rockstar had locked the content out and accessing it through third-party devices or mods violates the End

User License Agreement. He wondered if you should've taken a harder line, but hadn't because of the publicity.

Boy, that's a loaded question. ... First off, none of our actions have ever been done because of publicity. We test products after they ship. We are oftentimes notified of content from a variety of different sources that may or may not have been disclosed to us that we oftentimes investigate. Our enforcement system has been around for a long time and we've always had a violation in our enforcement system for failure to disclose pertinent content. ... We also made a statement that made it clear that the industry was at too great a risk if they left code in the game that could realistically be found by a modder that could undermine the accuracy of a rating. I don't think that we as an industry can afford that anymore, so we made the changes in the policy last year, with full board approval, by the way. None of the actions we take or changes we make to our system are done, the increase in fines, for example, are done without the approval of the publishing community. ... We are clearly aware of the fact that user license agreements are broken by modders, but that's not our responsibility to enforce, that's really the game publishers responsibility if they choose to do so.

Sometimes it seems that video games are held to a stricter standard than movies. For example, the Lord of the Rings movies got PG-13 ratings, the equivalent of your Teen rating, and feature content as graphic as Oblivion, which got an M rating.

No question about it – our ratings are more conservative than movies and television. Yet, we're not at a point where we can be comfortable to make them more lenient. One of the things we do every year is we go out and test our ratings assignments with parents. We find that the way we assign our ratings is very in line with mainstream American tastes. I don't think we're in a position to adjust that at all based on that research.

Do you feel there is any credence to David Walsh's comments that your ratings aren't strict enough, that when they talk with parents, they find parents would rate games more strictly.

That's not based on consumer feedback – that's based on David Walsh's personal opinion. If you look at their ratings – they've

rated maybe 30 or 40 games – if you look at their ratings versus our ratings, you'll see very significant agreement with his ratings and our ratings. Sometimes we're a little more strict, sometimes he's a little more strict, but when you really come down to it, you're splitting hairs. The fact is that we take an M rating very seriously – it's for 17 and older, just the same as an R rating in movies. If you choose as a parent to bring that game home to your kids, that's your choice as a parent, but we've rated it for 17 and older.

Do you expect the debate over ratings to be this contentious in the near term?

I think most of the people that do get up and criticize our industry and regulatory system in public have typically never played a game. They don't appreciate the nuances. They don't even appreciate the nuances of a game like Grand Theft Auto, which is a very popular game, but they have no clue why anybody would want to play it. I think that's a very difficult environment for us to be effective in politically.

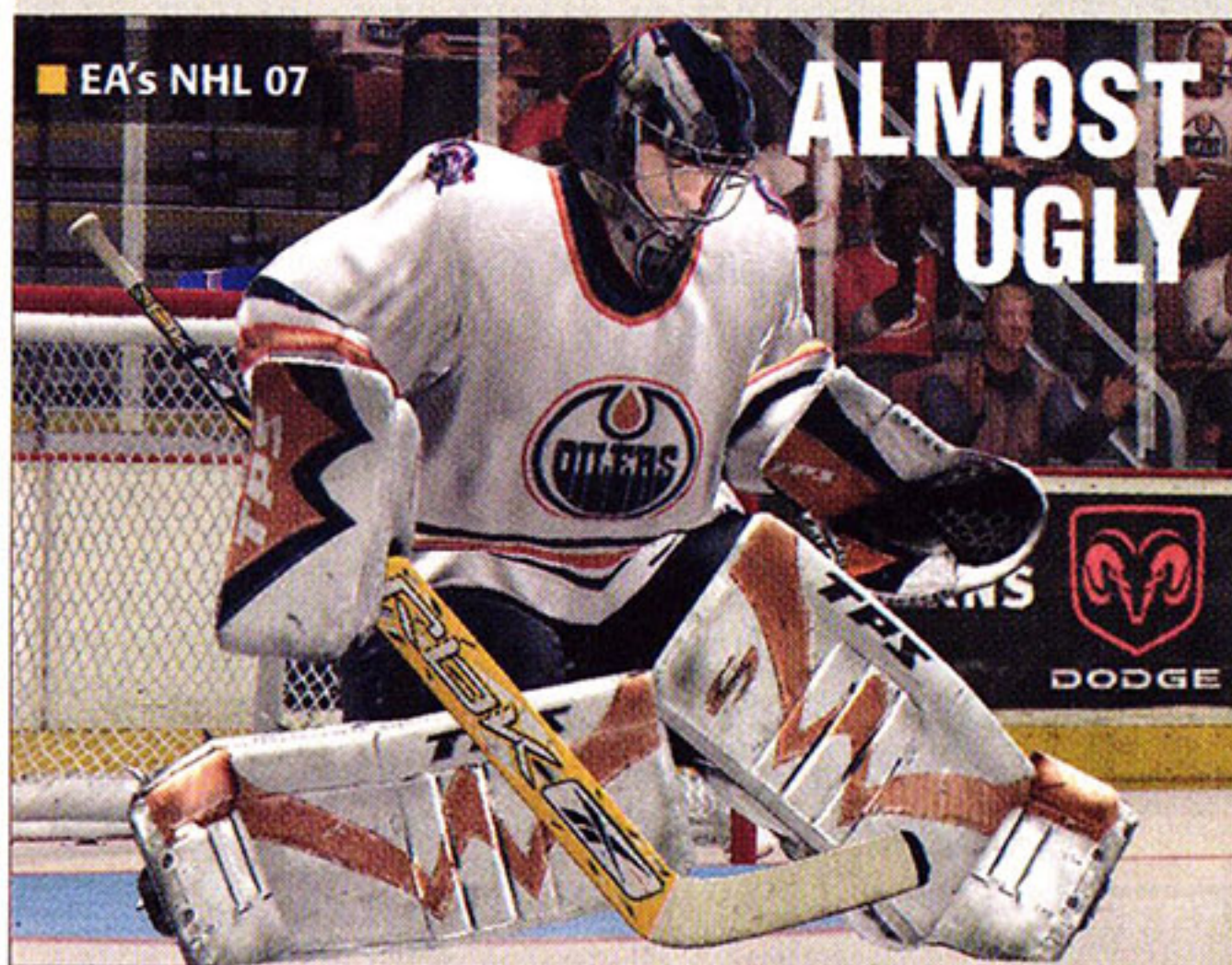
THE GOOD, THE BAD, THE UGLY

When You Want Your News Categorized With A Sarcastic Editorial Spin



GOOD

Sony is putting vending machines in malls where passers-by can buy everything from a PSP to digital cameras or games. We wonder if people will try to rock the machine back and forth if their PSP gets wedged against the glass.



ALMOST UGLY

Unlike some other sports, NHL video games will remain non-exclusive. The league and the Players Association announced continuing deals with EA and 2K Sports, but it almost wasn't to be. Although EA won't comment on the specifics of the deal, rumors are that the company went after the exclusive Players Association rights hoping to freeze out 2K Sports or to make them release a game without the real players. Luckily that didn't happen, and both titles are fully licensed.



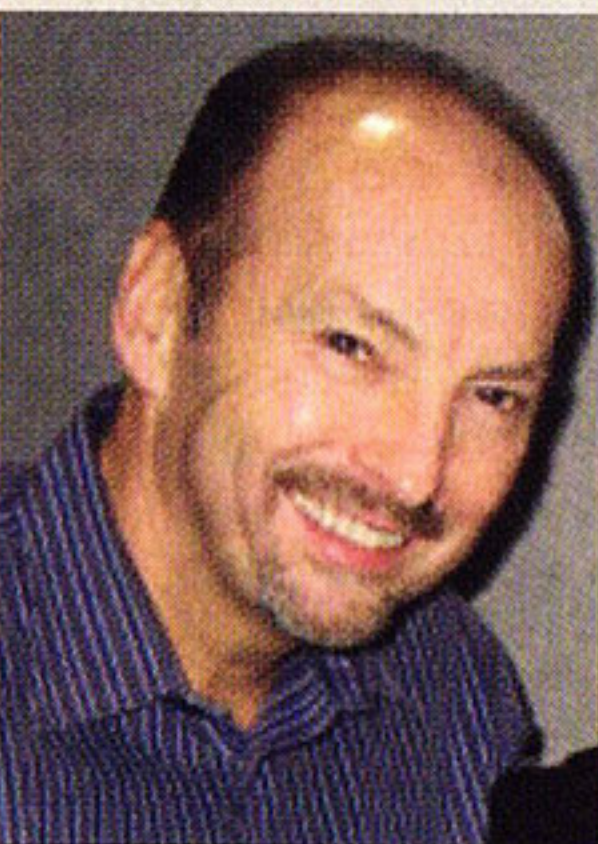
GOOD

In its first two days on the North American market, the Nintendo DS Lite sold a whopping 136,600 units. The handheld is so hot that a huge shipment bound for the UK launch was stolen in Asia.



BAD

There's been a lot of bad press for Sony post-E3. The company's first Blu-ray player has been pushed back until late October, the PS3's power supply will likely be external and as big as the Xbox 360's, and creator Ken Kutaragi and co. are running around yelling to anyone who'll listen that the PS3 is a computer, not a video game machine! Kutaragi's not worried, though, because he's promised to sell over 100 million PS3's over the next several years!



UGLY

Microsoft's Peter Moore caused mass panic by saying, "Nobody is concerned anymore about backwards compatibility. We under-promised and over-delivered on that." Later on he would make his own statement backwards compatible by assuring gamers that Microsoft wasn't giving up on adapting original Xbox games. Recently, a new round of over 20 games were

added to the backwards compatibility list, proving that Microsoft's "over-delivery" on the issue is far from done.

BAD

A video game addiction center in Amsterdam has further confused the issue of video game addiction. By director Keith Bakker's own admission, many of the outpatient youths in the program already have drug problems – bringing up the question of exactly where the problems started for these kids.

news

NINTENDO TALKS PRICING VIRTUAL CONSOLE TAKING SHAPE

As much as we learned about Nintendo's Wii console at E3, the system's Virtual Console component remains a mystery. This feature allows for play of older Nintendo and third-party titles (so far Sega and Hudson are the only announced partners) on the Wii. Recently, however, Nintendo president Satoru Iwata declared that downloadable games for the system will range from 500 to 1,000 Yen, which equates to about \$4.25 to \$8.75.

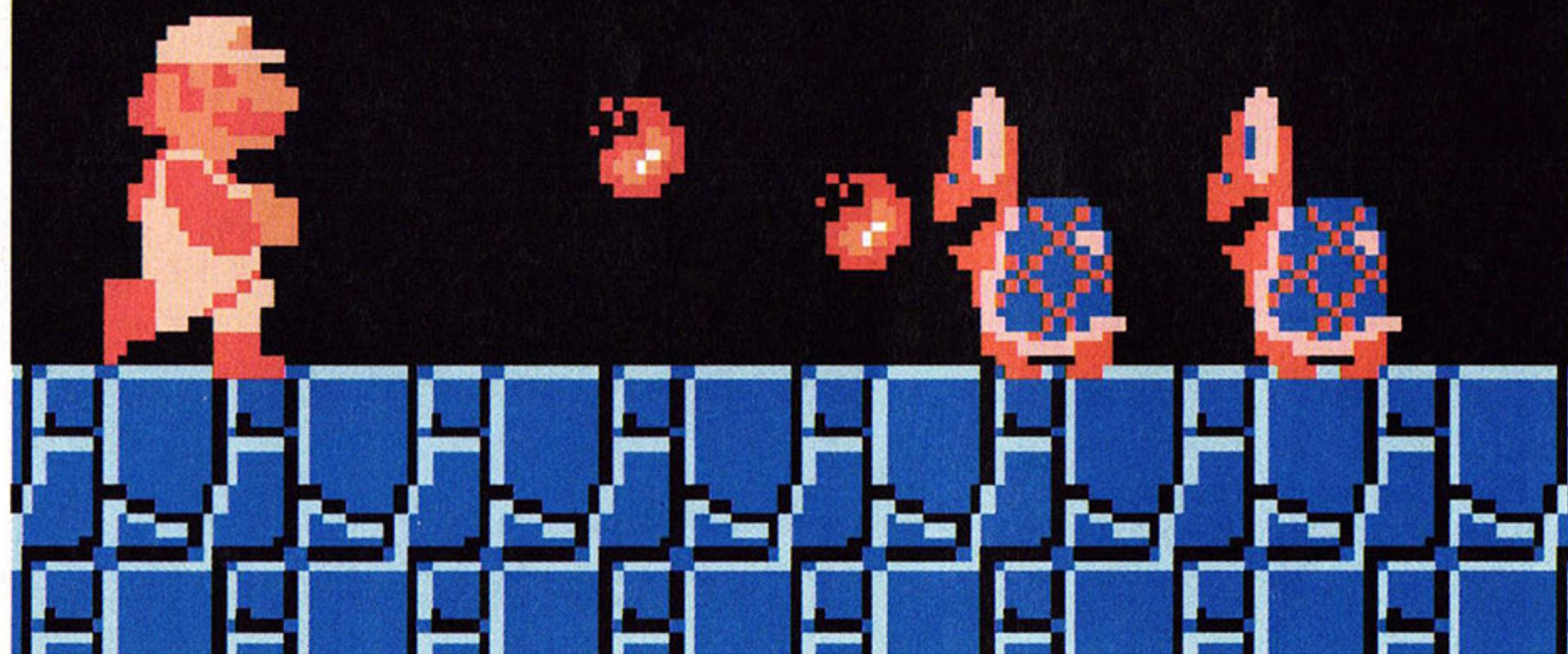
But perhaps there are even more surprises yet in store from the console. Patents filed by the company have been discovered, including an instant messenger service which would come with a user profile which would track any number of stats and info. In Japan, meanwhile, three new trademarks have been registered: WiiPointer, WiiCulture, and !!M, which is Wii mirrored and upside down.

GI OPINION



Nintendo has proven merciless when pricing this round of con-

soles – the hardware will be cheap and old games will be a great deal. That is, if there's an option to try before I buy. I can't guarantee that my nostalgic warm fuzzies about Tiny Toon Adventures on NES will actually make me happy after dropping \$6.99 to play it for the rest of eternity, and regretted purchases like that could sour people on the impulse buying habits this service needs to be successful.—LISA



news

GATES LEAVING IN 2008



CONCENTRATES ON CHARITY WORK

Microsoft honcho and world's richest man Bill Gates has left his position as chief software architect, and plans to phase out his chairman duties over the next two years. By June of 2008, Gates will have left the company he co-founded with Paul Allen to pursue his global charity efforts via the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. "Just as Microsoft has taken off in ways I never expected," explained Gates, "so has the work for the foundation." The foundation focuses on education and health issues.

Microsoft's chief technical officer Ray Ozzie will assume Gates' chief software architect role, and will work with Gates on the transition. Even before the announcement, the company was battling the falling price of its stock, the rise of Google, and numerous delays to the release of its Windows Vista operating system.

"...crazy anime-style cutscenes...[make] this game a must for robo-maniacs everywhere."

—Newtype USA

Super Robot Taisen Original Generation



EXCELLEN: Come, come. I'm doing it, right?

Detailed combat system, with support techniques and weapon swapping!



LUNE: This will end you!

Rack up kills and improve skills to transform rookie pilots into aces!

ELZAM: Now, choose between life and death... whichever you like!

2 story arcs, dozens of customizable mecha and 50+ hours of strategy RPG goodness!



TEEN
T
Alcohol Reference Language
Mild Fantasy Violence
Suggestive Themes
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

GAME BOY ADVANCE

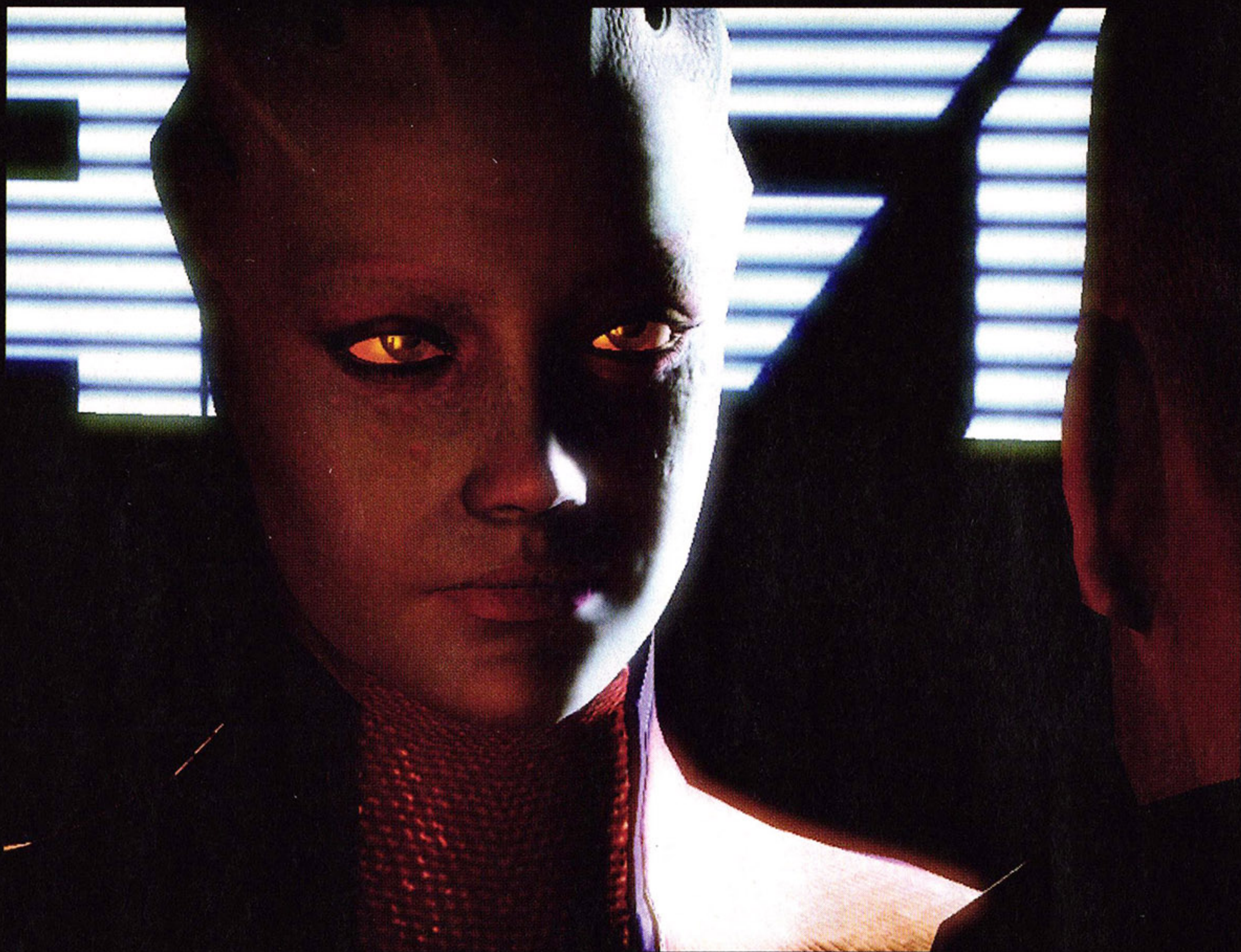
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MASS EFFECT

THE EVOLUTION OF A FACE:

Bringing Characters to Life in Mass Effect

Last month we declared Mass Effect to be one of the top five most exciting projects we saw at E3 this year. A huge part of that claim came out of the demo that showed off the remarkable facial animation and conversation dynamic that BioWare's new game is capable of. This month, we quizzed project director Casey Hudson about the techniques and challenges of this new mechanic, and came out with a remarkably in-depth look at the making of a character's likeness in the RPG giant's latest opus.



What is Mass Effect doing differently than other games (including previous BioWare titles) in terms of the appearance and animation of characters?

Some key areas that we've developed are sophisticated facial animation systems, including wrinkles that not only create a sense of fleshy realism in our characters, but also are extremely important in achieving intense (or very subtle) expressions. And the fact that the characters are responding in real-time to what you're doing, it's very satisfying for the player to see the result of different choices. Now, flirting, insulting, or threatening another character will have radically different results, where you can really see the impact you're having on that person through your actions.

Can you explain the full process of getting a character's likeness into a scene from start to finish?

We'll start by creating a unique face for the character in our face editor. The face editor draws upon a variety of data, blending real human faces with artist-created features to allow the generation of almost anyone you can imagine. We'll then choose a costume or armor for the character to complete the basic model that will be used. The armor will also incorporate information from 3D scans of real people, but is created by artists who design and model each outfit to an extreme level of detail. The art, programming, tools, and animation that go into this process are very extensive, but the overall result is that we're able to easily create characters and bring them to life in a way that makes your actions that much more impactful on the story.

How much motion capture is being done for the game, and how important is motion capture to the game you're trying to create?

A lot of motion-captured animation will go into the game, in addition to the hand-animation that goes into characters such as monsters and aliens. In fact, each character in Mass Effect is a composition of four different kinds of scans or captures of real people. We do 3D body scans of an actual person as a basis for the costumes and clothing, and a different person is scanned for the head and face shape. The motions of the

character are captured from performances by a third person, and an actor is recorded for the vocal performance of the character.

Does the immediacy of reaction offered by the conversations make for a big challenge in blending together different emotional facial animations? It would seem like characters might have to change from happy to sad in the matter of an instant.

Yes, that's definitely part of the challenge. Real people not only go through different expressions quite quickly, but there are subtleties in those expressions and eye movements that are required to make characters seem natural. We've developed an extensive set of tools and technologies that allow our animators and designers to capture the intended emotional performance while managing the countless subtleties that make these characters seem human (or alien!).

How do you get lifelike emotional qualities from an alien face physiology that people have never seen before? Are aliens more or less challenging to make believable than humans?

It really starts with the concept for our aliens. We apply a few rules to ensure that they have the anatomy required for them to achieve a performance that we can identify with, such as having pupils on the eyes so we can perceive eye movements, or having mouths that would be able to make the shapes required for human language and expression. This is actually one of the ways that the interactive medium is pulling far ahead of movies and TV: alien characters don't have the requirement of being a costume or mask that an actor can physically fit inside. So now that we're able to achieve lifelike humans, we can apply those same techniques to aliens and bring them to life in an equally compelling way – despite the fact that they may be truly alien in their physiology.

Many developers speak about the extreme difficulty of getting eyes to appear lifelike and compelling. Is this a notable challenge in Mass Effect, or do you feel like the team has a good solution to the dilemma?

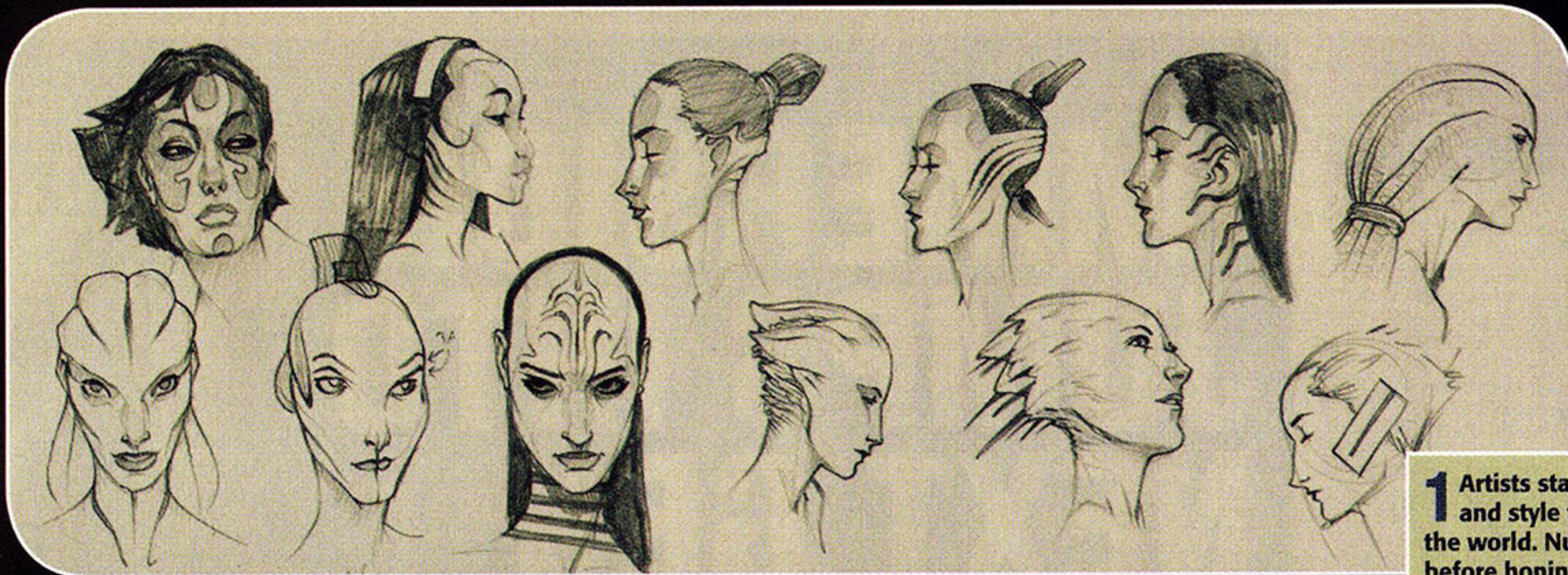
Lifelike eye movement is most definitely a challenge, but I think this is one of the areas where our team has really done an incredible job. Not only have they been able to capture the ambient feeling of life in the characters' eyes, but the team has developed a system that allows writers and designers to use the eyes to convey different emotions in incredible synchronization with the dialogue so that you naturally start looking deep into their eyes to understand what they're saying.

Does a customized, unique main character present special challenges when it comes to animating them for their in-game interactions?

What I can say is that you'll be able to create your own Commander Shepard to not only look exactly how you want him or her to look, but you'll also be able to shape your character's past which leads up to the beginning of the game. Normally it would be extremely difficult to allow these extremes in character customization. However, since we already do that to incorporate the variety of different humans and aliens you'll meet in Mass Effect, we naturally have the capability of showing your highly customized character interacting with the environment and other characters.

BioWare rightfully prides itself on offering some of the best stories in interactive entertainment. How do the facial animation techniques we've been talking about contribute to continuing that legacy?

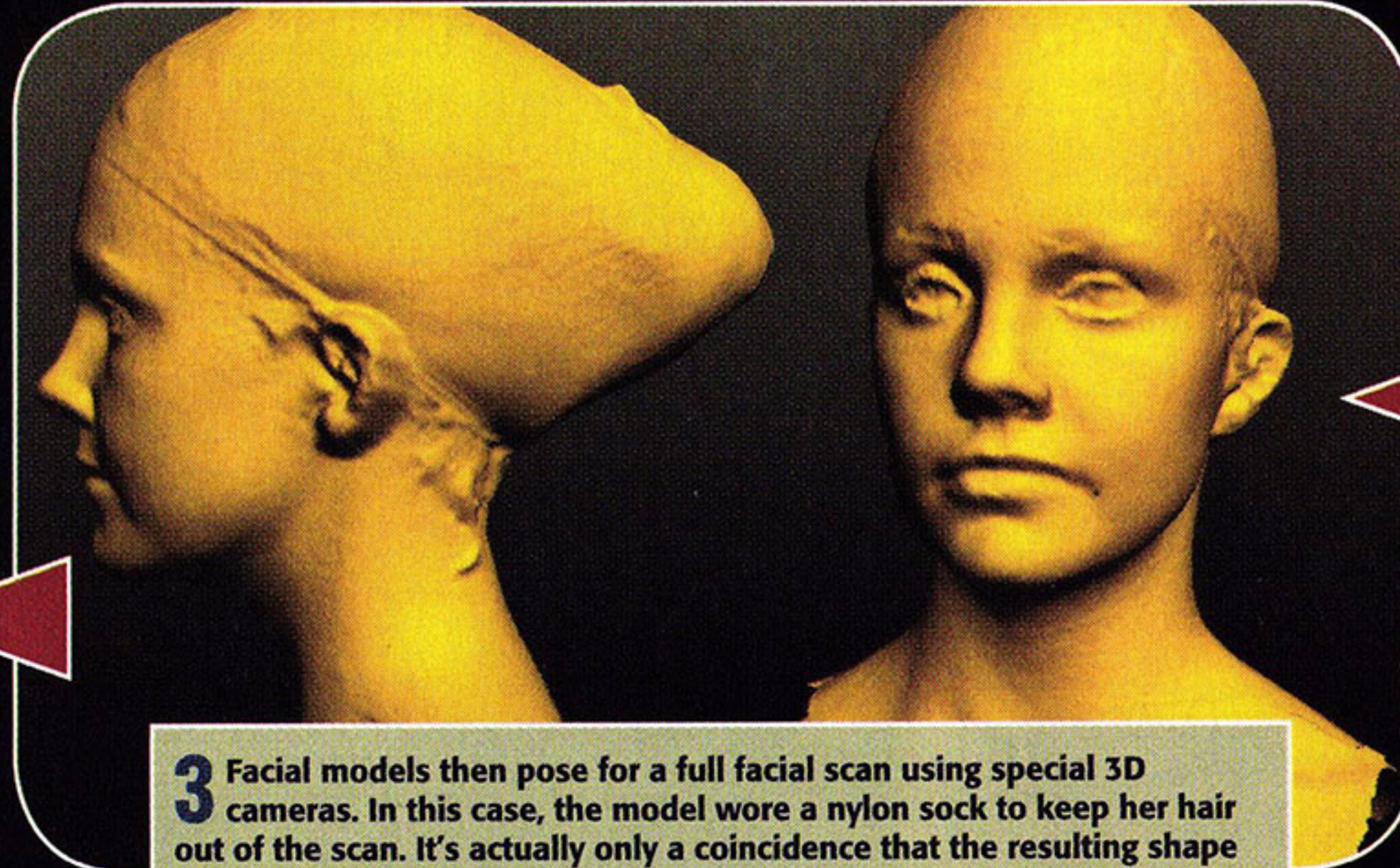
As we constantly strive to tell better interactive stories, we're realizing that one of the final frontiers is the realism of our characters and their ability to convey real emotion. That's why with Mass Effect, we're building an unprecedented level of detail and expressiveness into our characters. Their extremely detailed facial expressions and lifelike movements combine with our new conversation system to allow you to interact with characters in a more visceral way than ever before. The result is that as a player you'll experience something unlike anything you've played before – where you're watching an extremely compelling science fiction movie, but you're in control of everything that happens!



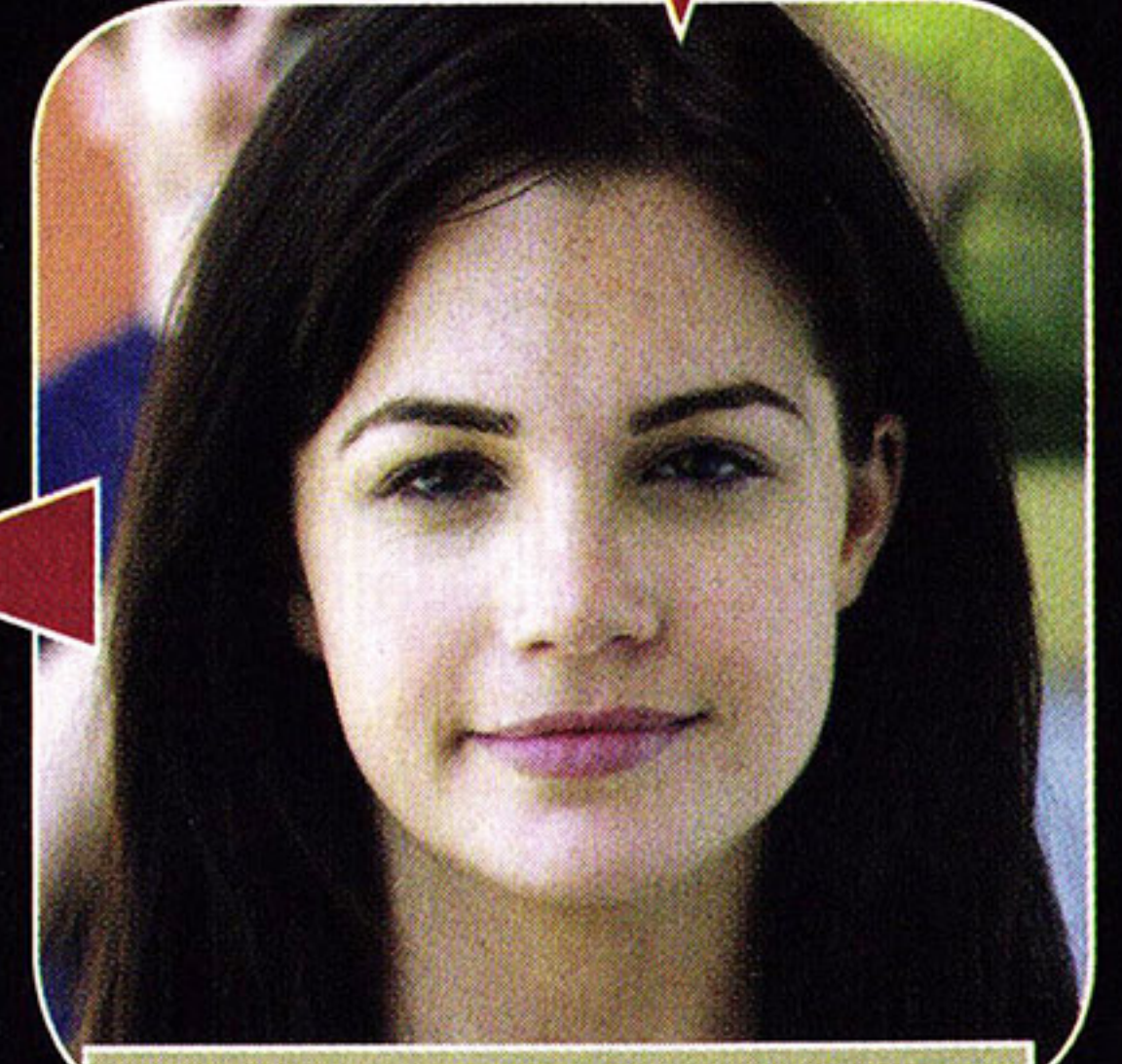
1 Artists start by trying to envision a look and style to set the character apart within the world. Numerous designs are common before honing in on a final concept



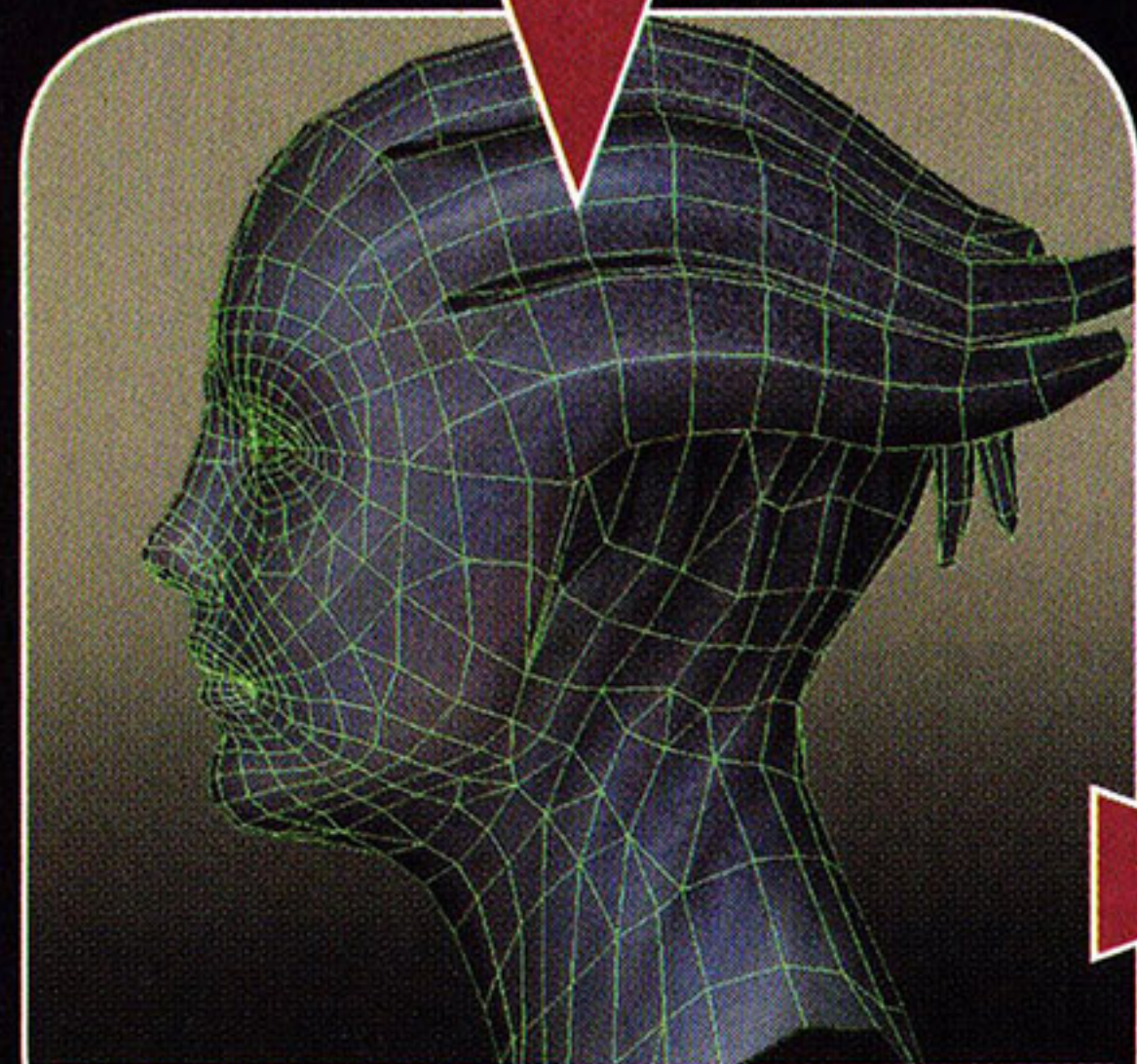
4 From the scan, artists can begin to sculpt the actual head structure, finalizing the overall shape and contours of the character and adding details like pores and wrinkles



3 Facial models then pose for a full facial scan using special 3D cameras. In this case, the model wore a nylon sock to keep her hair out of the scan. It's actually only a coincidence that the resulting shape mirrors the alien's elongated head



2 Every character starts out modeled after a real person, even if that image will eventually be drastically altered to create the desired character



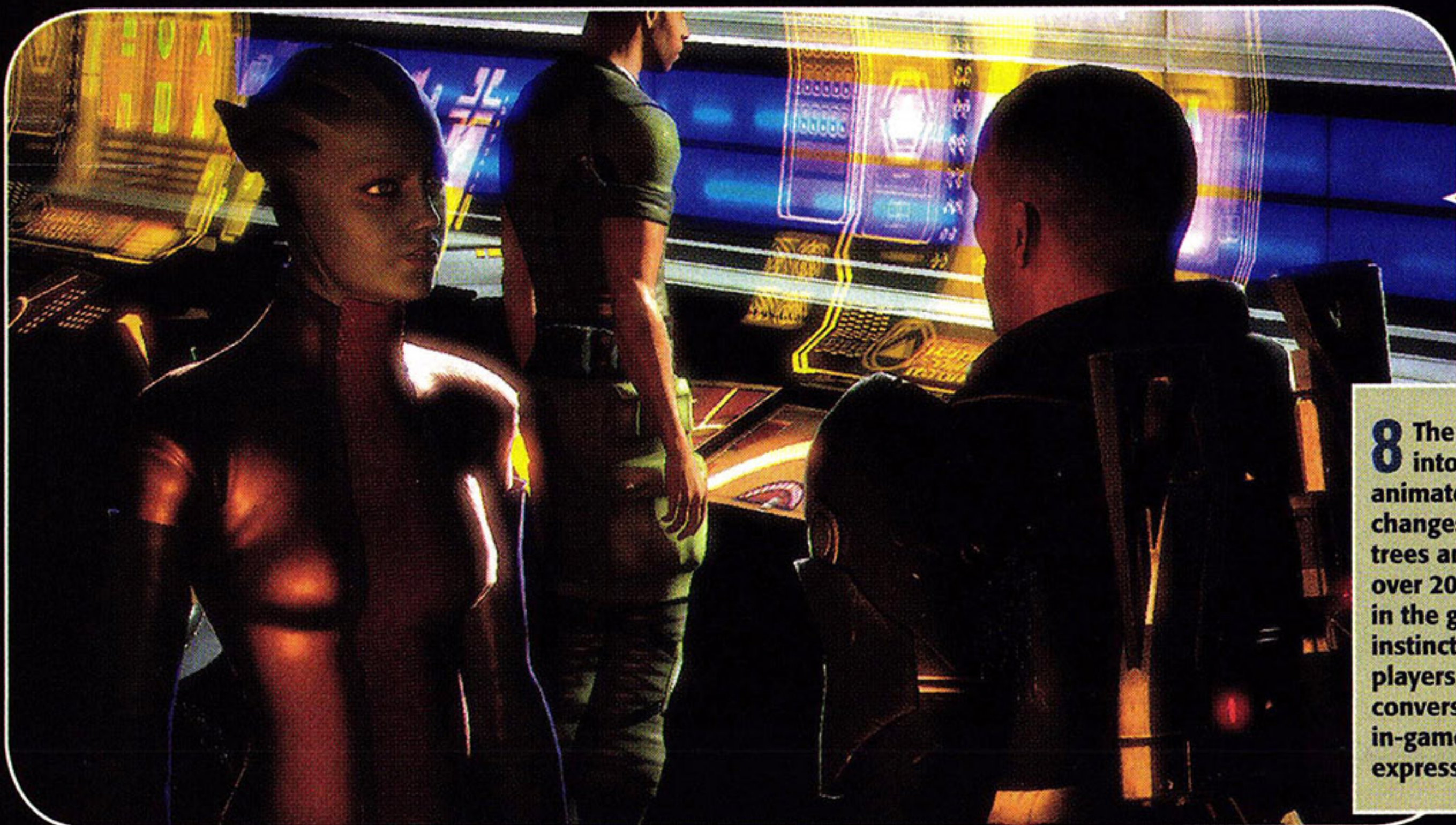
5 The high-res sculpt is made into a lower-res version that can run in the game, reducing the number of polygons significantly



6 The low-res in-game mesh then has normal mapping and color mapping overlaid on top of it, as well as various shaders to dictate how light interacts with the skin



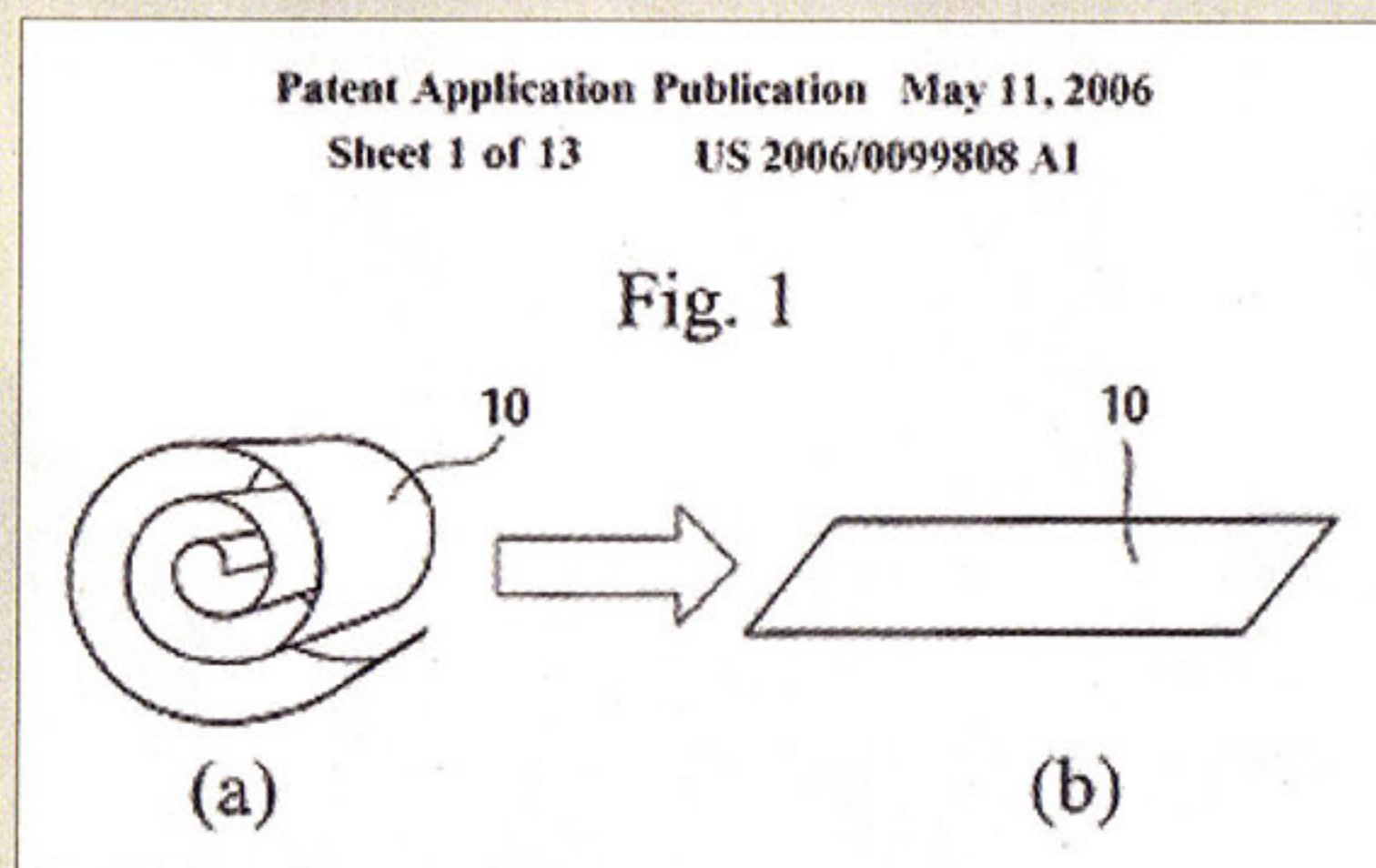
7 With the design complete, animators can begin to manipulate the image to allow rapid and dramatic changes in expression



8 The completed character is dropped into the game world, where animators and artists continue to make changes as voice work and conversation trees are implemented throughout the over 20,000 lines of recorded dialogue in the game. With Mass Effect's new instinctual conversation mechanic, players will be able to engage in real conversations and arguments with in-game characters, as they watch their expressions shift and change in real time

LOOSE TALK

Hot Gaming Gossip



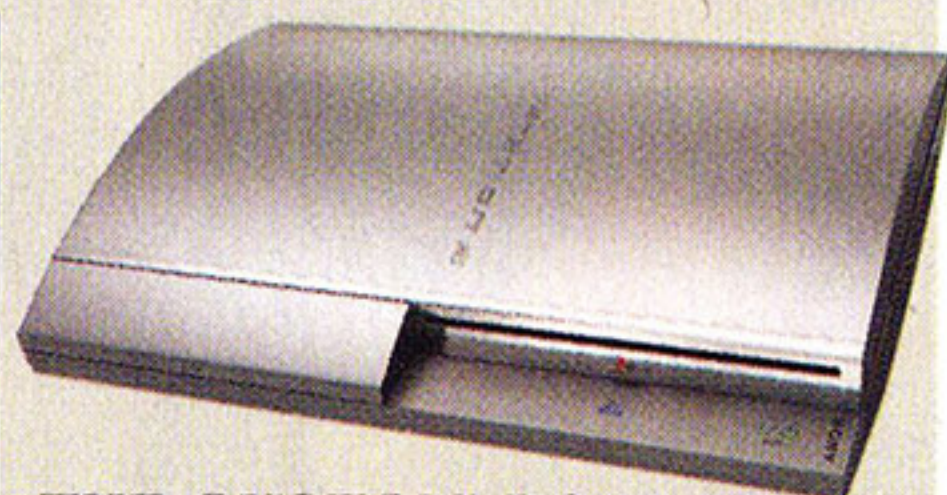
SONY GOES SOFT?

Sony has filed a patent for technology that would allow for phones or handheld game systems made from a flexible polymer to be rolled or folded up into a compact shape. In order to reshape and harden a device (which would take milliseconds), a small electronic current would have to pass through the unit, which would be filled with a special gel. The patent hints that if used in a controller, this tech would allow for the controller to change its shape or hardness depending on what's happening onscreen.



PSP PRICE DROP?

After having picked up steam in this country over last Christmas, it's perfunctory to start talking about a price drop for Sony's PSP. This is just the thing that Sony would slip in to sweeten the pot this holiday season, or perhaps as far away as next E3. A redesign for the system has been talked about for a while now, but we've heard nothing new on that front.

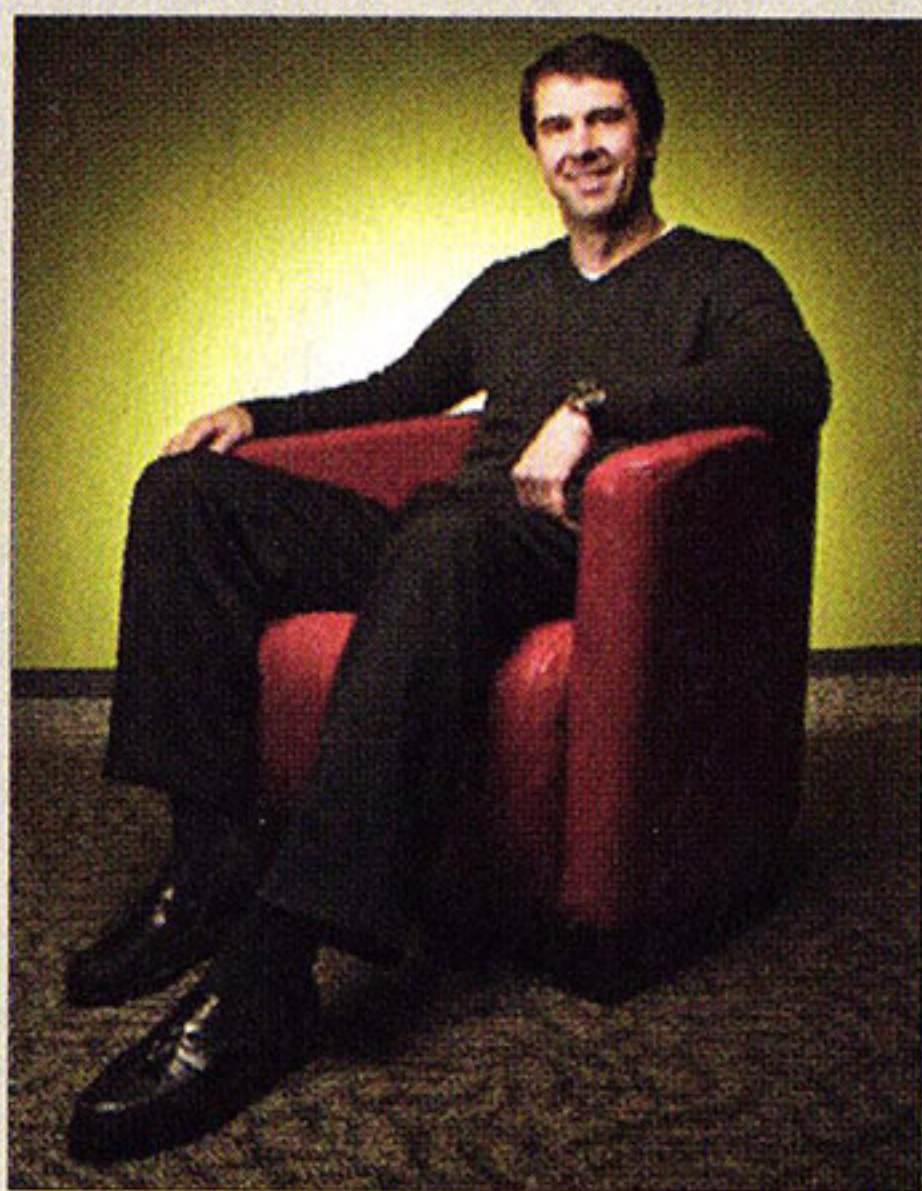


THE CUSTOM PS3

For those of you who don't like the new habit of console makers releasing have and have-not versions of systems at different price points, it seems there's no turning back. Not only is the PS3 following the Xbox 360 model, but Sony's Ken Kutaragi has recently hinted that the PS3 could become PC-like in the fact that you could get yours customized and built to order.

MICROSOFT'S HANDHELD

There are building rumors that Microsoft is working on a portable music/video player with an accompanying service to compete with Apple's iPod and iTunes. Robbie Bach, who formerly was chief Xbox officer, heads the internal division working on the device. Speculation is rife that this player would be integrated into Microsoft's Xbox Live Anywhere program and have some gaming capabilities, but there is no hard proof at this time.



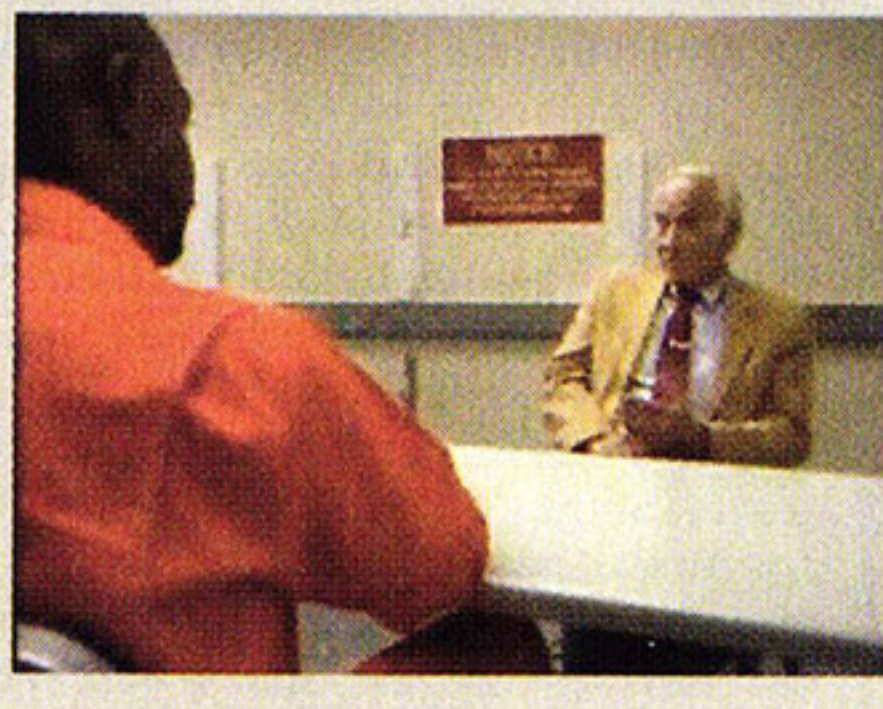
Got some insider info? Email us at loosetalk@gameinformer.com and we'll be all ears.

NAME THAT GAME

Test Your Sight

We talk all the time about games becoming more real, but it didn't get much more real than this month's title. This EA PC adventure game would actually call you on your phone, send you faxes and emails, or send you Instant Messenger messages among other devices as part of its ongoing mystery. Unfortunately, the game didn't fare well commercially, and was even temporarily suspended, as getting calls from strangers was just too freaky in the aftermath of 9/11. However, its episodic content and real-world interaction are concepts that are no less popular today.

(Answer on page 28)



news

IMMERSION
JUMPS INTO
NEXT GEN

RUMBLE TECHNOLOGY TAKES LEAP FORWARD



■ Sony's PS3 controller will likely not include Immersion's next-gen rumble technology

Rumble technology in controllers has become a staple of gaming, and the company behind it – Immersion – has just unveiled how it plans to evolve this feature in the future.

Dubbed TouchSense, this vibration technology offers much more variety to your rumble experience. It can be as subtle as the light, springy sensation of a tennis racket hitting a tennis ball, or hard and crisp such as experiencing the staccato vibrations of a machine gun. Another example Immersion used to illustrate TouchSense's capabilities was the quickly changing sensations of a lightsaber turning on. It would initially surge, then instantly change to a subtle hum once the blade is extended. Your controller would then jolt when the lightsaber hit something. TouchSense technology would also allow for simultaneous rumble effects such as being able to feel both a bumpy road and the pop of a manual transmission as you shift gears in a car.

Implementing this technology would take up less space and weight than current rumble technology, and in some cases would even cost less. Immersion CEO Vic Viegas told Game Informer that the company is currently showing the technology to developers, and hopes to shortly work with the console manufacturers and third-party controller makers in turn later on. "We could have this in the marketplace very quickly. We're just now showing the capability and the value of high-fidelity vibration as well as an advance set of tools that would help developers."

It is necessary for Immersion to work with the console makers to implement TouchSense. Immersion needs technical support directly from the console makers in order to make the technology work with the platforms. This is where Immersion's legal entanglements with Sony come in. The two companies have engaged in lawsuits and appeals over the years regarding Immersion's legal claim that Sony infringed on its patents. If

Sony loses its current appeal (the verdict of which is expected to occur at the end of the year), it may have to stop producing both the PSone and PS2, or make continuing settlement payments to Immersion, including a \$91 million judgement which a lower court judge has made against Sony. Game Informer talked to a Sony representative on the matter, but they couldn't comment officially on the pending litigation.

This legal bad blood between Sony and Immersion is widely believed to be the reason why Sony is not putting rumble technology of any kind in its PlayStation 3 controller. Although after E3, Sony said that the feature was taken out because it is not compatible with the controller's motion sensing capabilities, Viegas told us that although he's "not about to second guess [Sony's] engineers," he told us that having rumble and motion-sensing technology is indeed possible. For Sony's part, the spokesperson we talked to agreed that the PS3 controller's lack of rumble was not a technical issue. Even though the two features weren't mutually exclusive, they told us the move away from vibration technology by the PS3 was considered an "evolution" towards its motion-sensing technology.

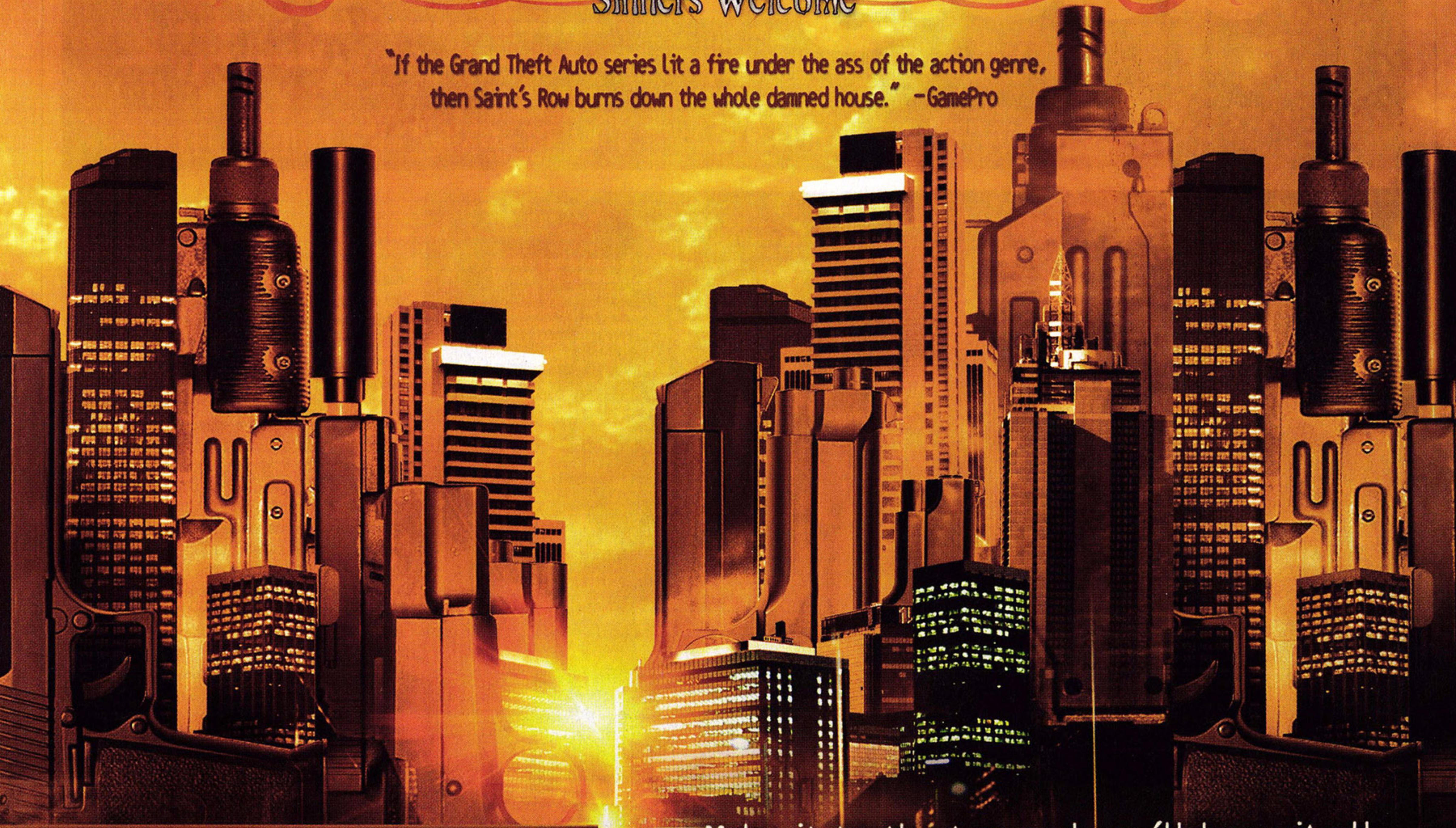
Overall, Viegas is hopeful, but not optimistic at this moment, that the two companies will work together in the future to bring rumble back to the PS3. "We're ready to resolve this. That's what's best for the industry. Our goal is not to have next-generation graphics and sound and then no force feedback at all."

Immersion has also sued Microsoft for patent infringement, but the Xbox maker has already settled and is currently a licensee of Immersion and has stock in the company. Nintendo, meanwhile, is not a partner with Immersion. Although it is likely that TouchSense will become enabled in a future version of the Xbox 360 controller, no timetable for its debut is imminent.

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and a bunch of people who want to kill you.

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SAINTS ROW

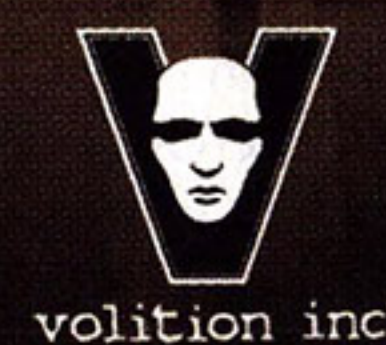
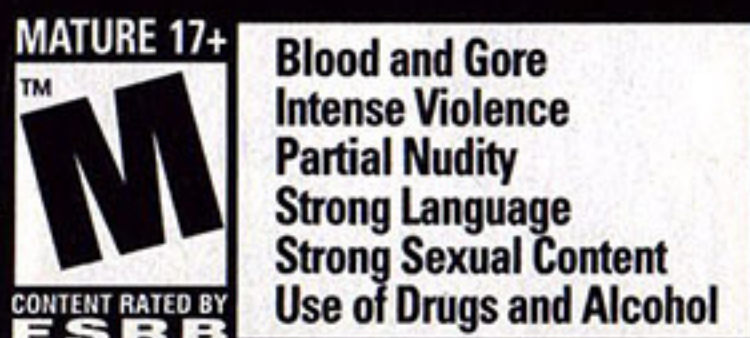
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3rd Street
POPULATION: TBD



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Challenge other players online through Xbox Live.



www.saintsrow.com



www.thq.com

the top 10 design trends

Developers, especially the most ambitious of the lot, have left a series of design innovations and gameplay trends in their wake. Each was tried, imitated, and used to death with one simple goal: doing gameplay or storytelling just plain better. With the extra power of next generation consoles waxing before us, what are the next trends that gaming's mad scientists are playing with right now, and which ones will be around for the long term? Here's a list of features, ideas, and methods that we've been hearing a lot about. Some of them have already made a big-release debut, and others are getting their kinks worked out by a number of upcoming releases.

IDEAS HITTING NOW THAT WILL SHAPE OUR GAMES IN THE FUTURE

1



■ Combining intuitive motions with "normal" controls proved to be a blast at this year's E3 with *Metroid*, *WarHawk*, and *Zelda* franchises each showing off new ideas

motion sensing

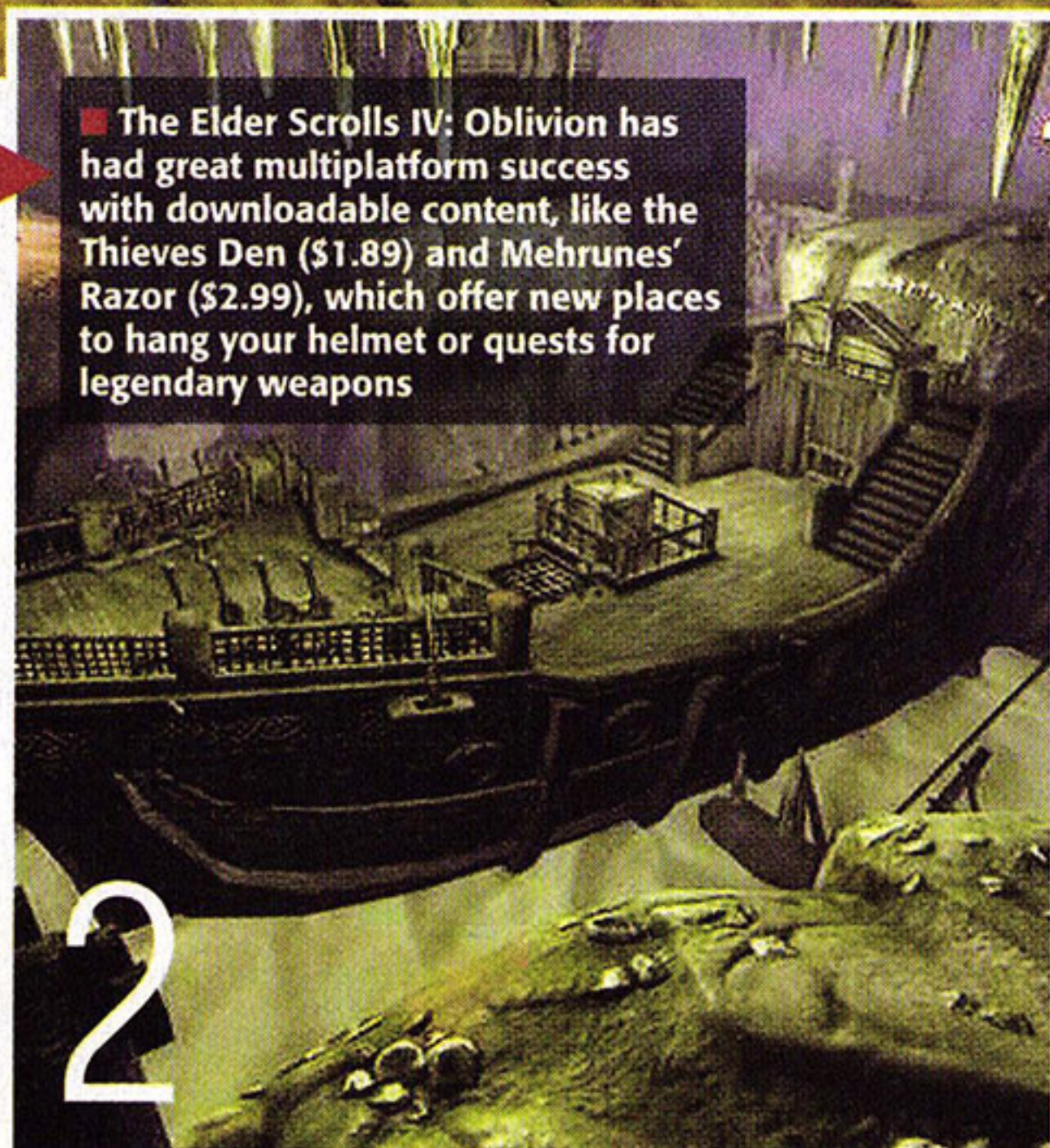
Sony kind of kicked Nintendo in the jimmy during this year's E3 press conference by announcing PS3's motion-sensing controller. While the idea of gestures dictating onscreen action isn't necessarily new (anyone else remember the U-Force?), it's the actions being done that are changing games to come. Twisting doorknobs, pulling magnetically sealed canisters, and banking a spaceship are movements that add one more layer of realism and interactivity to games. They can switch up the flow of gameplay or free up space on a controller for other options, but none of these giant leaps have happened before now. Why? Because motion sensing included from the get-go as an option (as in the PS3) or the whole point of the new system (for Nintendo's Wii) is crucial to getting these choices into the hands of developers before they even start testing builds. This isn't rocket science, people, but moving in a new way is already making a statement on two-thirds of the next generation — does anyone else want to start a betting pool about how long it will be before Microsoft follows suit?

■ Pandemic's upcoming *Mercenaries 2: World In Flames* lets a buddy jump into any mission at any time

microtransactions

Debate the value and bemoan the possibility of getting milked by unscrupulous publishers shipping "incomplete" games all you want, but just try to deny that microtransactions and mini content additions aren't a big movement in development. You'll fail. Giving creators the ability to add features or items that might not have been ready or just keeping the fan base excited about a game are undeniable advantages to digital distribution. And, players can expect to reap the rewards as broadband and online services continue to drop in price. Microtransactions can give already spendy games longer legs, and that's good for all players willing to make the investment.

■ The *Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* has had great multiplatform success with downloadable content, like the *Thieves Den* (\$1.89) and *Mehrunes' Razor* (\$2.99), which offer new places to hang your helmet or quests for legendary weapons

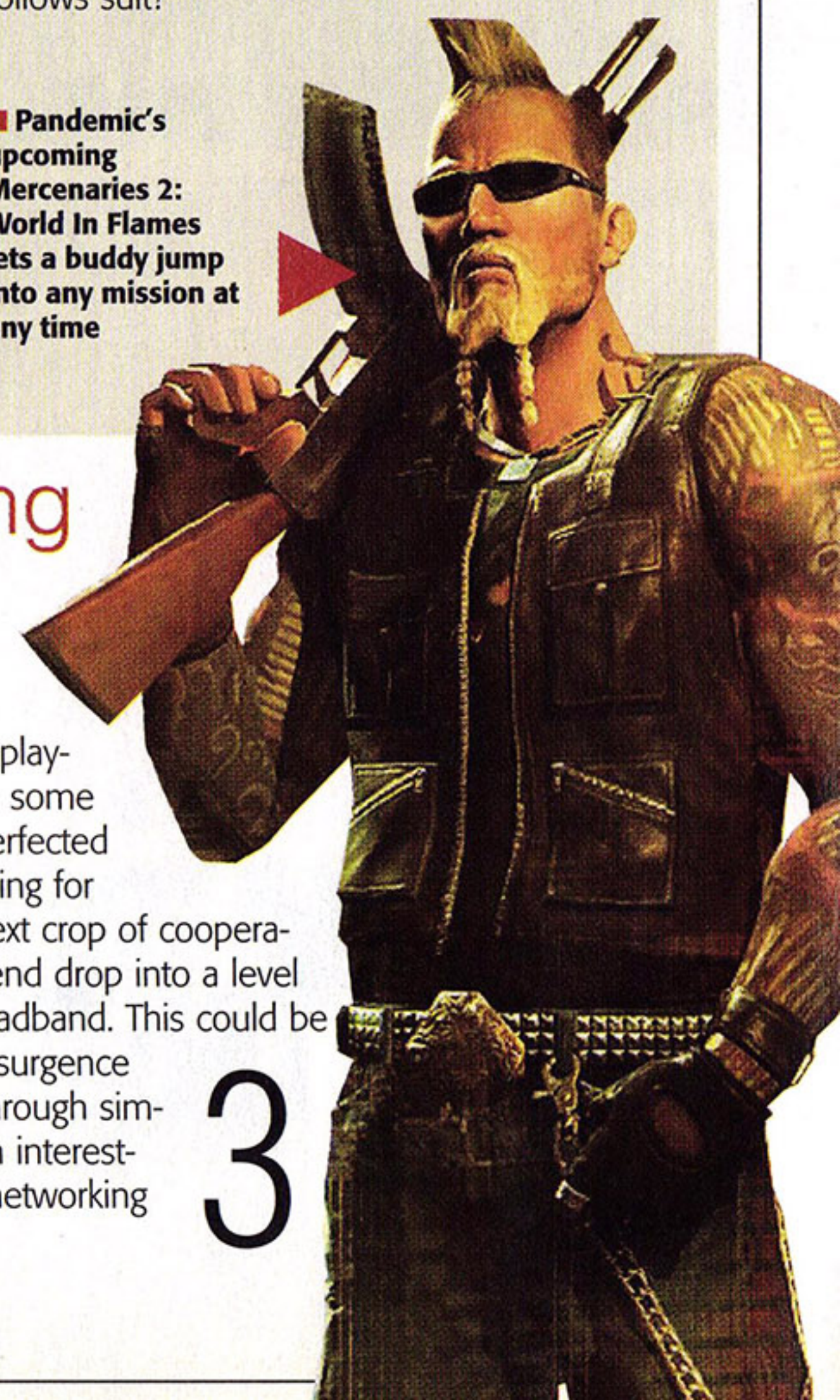


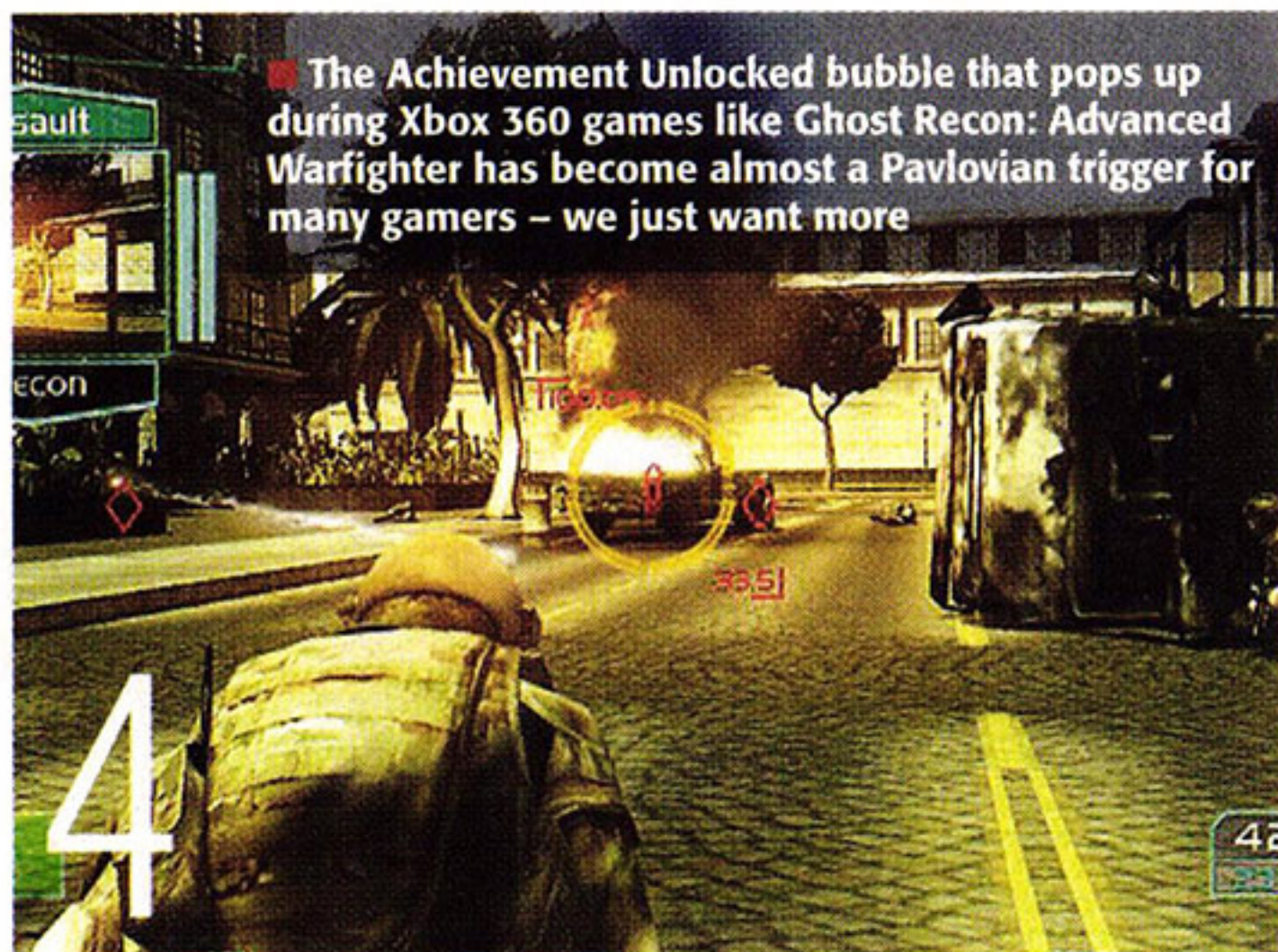
2

social gaming

No one is abandoning the real world for a permanent address in cyberspace...and yet, we all want to know which of our friends are online, what they're playing, and if they want to go farm some epics in Zul'Gurub. Xbox Live perfected friend lists and good matchmaking for the console masses, and the next crop of cooperative games consistently let a friend drop into a level already in progress, all over broadband. This could be the death of split-screen, the resurgence of arcade-feeling competition through simpler downloadable titles, and an interesting new flavor of online social networking all rolled into one.

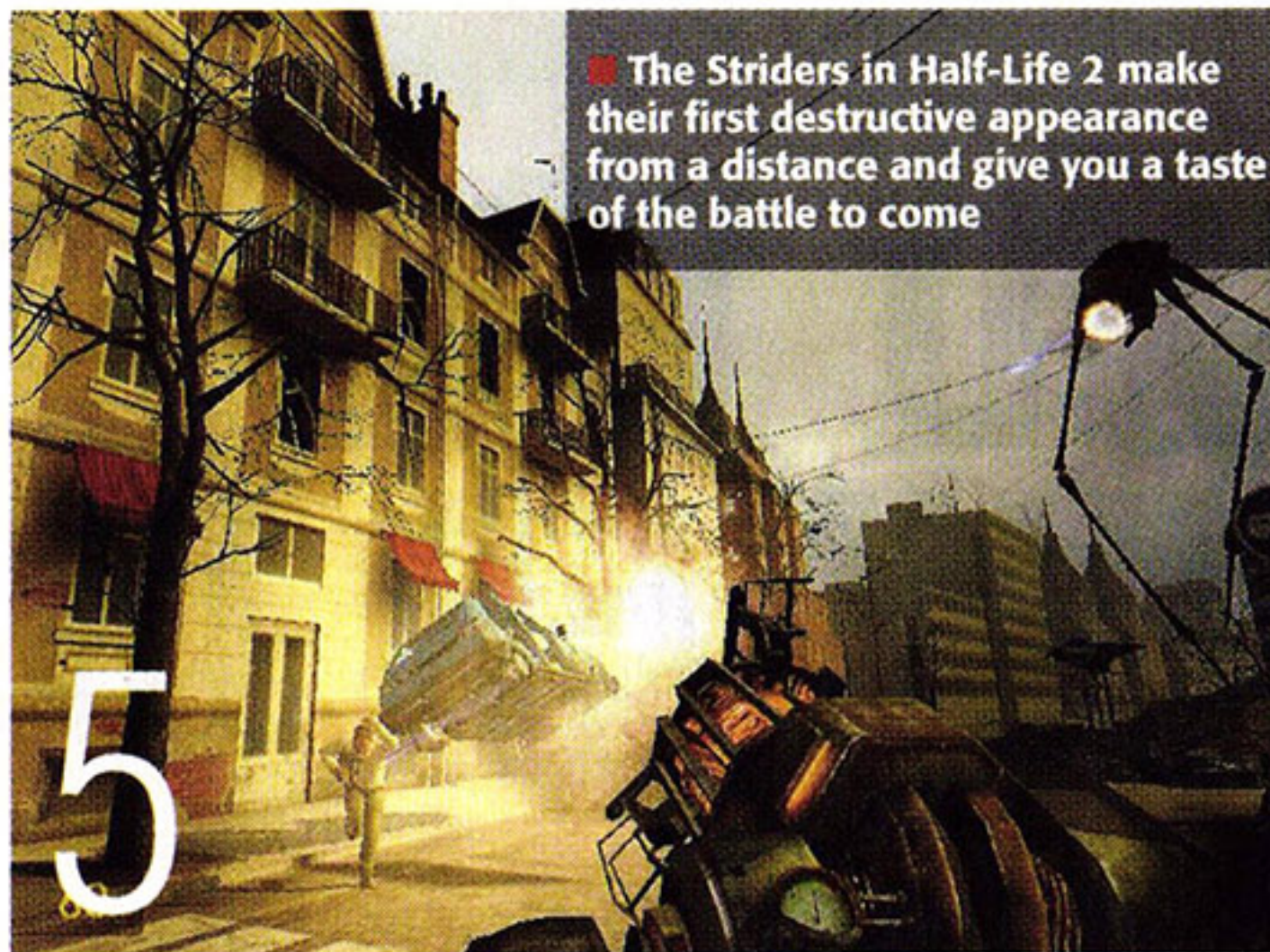
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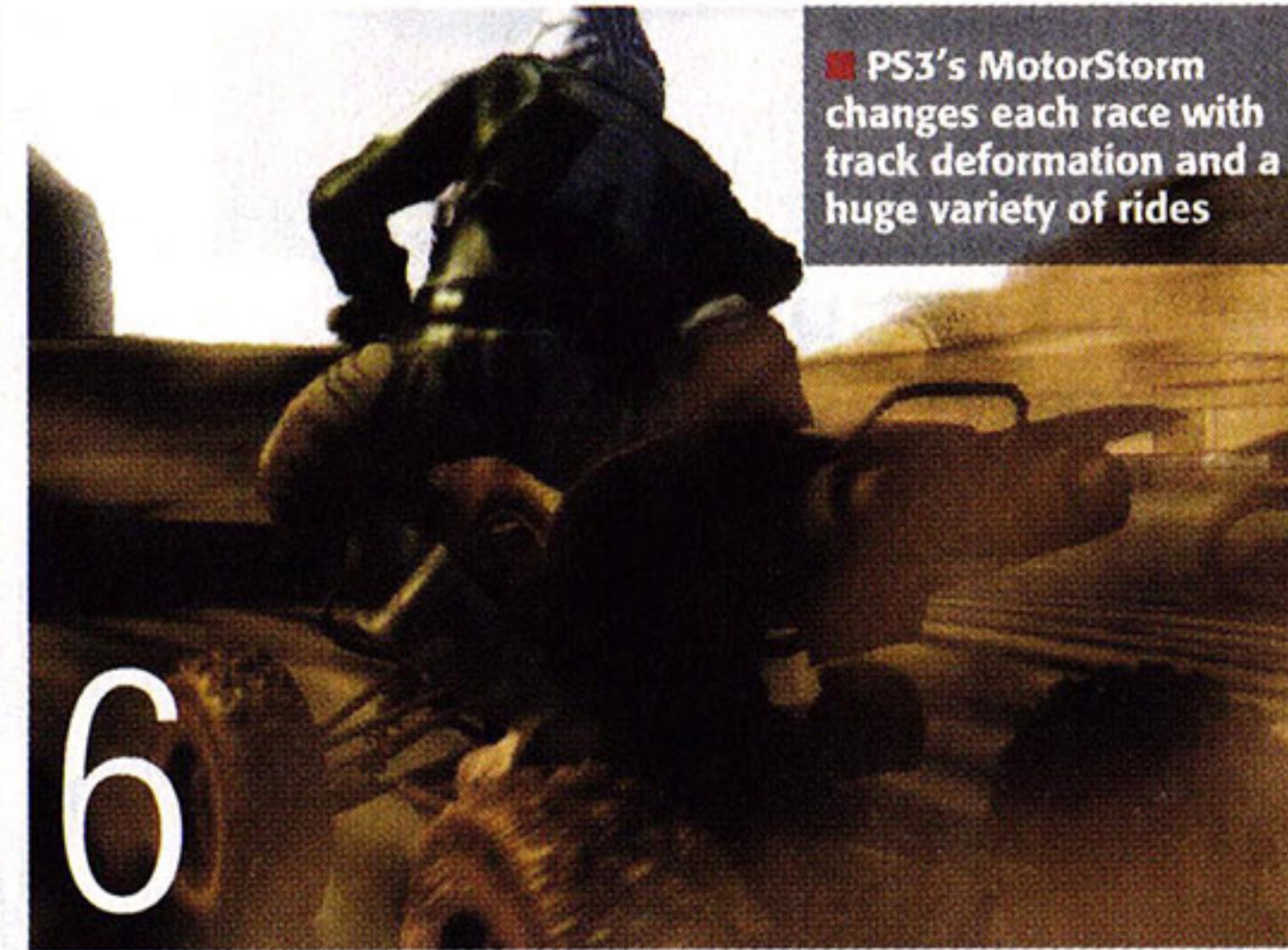
4 instant gratification

From World of Warcraft to Xbox Live and every game we've seen described as "accessible to non-gamers," the idea of making games and experiences that aren't masochistic bouts of incredible difficulty is a popular one. As gaming gets bigger, the hardcore market that remembers grueling action games of yesteryear (and remembers that frustration with a smile) is getting smaller. So, here we head into a world of games that are easy to pick up, satisfying to keep playing, and memorable after the fact by offering constant rewards like Achievement Points or speedy acquisition of new skills.



5 micro events

Taking the name micro events from the degree it interrupts players (just a little) instead of how important or impressive the event is, these peripheral moments are scattered more and more liberally into all kinds of games. Letting players retain control (and oftentimes having them continue fighting) while the camera pans a bit to the right, forcing players to look as a building three blocks away is crushed by a large enemy, is just one example of how developers can show big things in a short time. Micro events add more to the sense of urgency and scale than almost any other new idea in gaming presentation.



6 physics as gameplay

Maybe box puzzles were a precursor to these current games' plans, but new hardware lets the idea of real physics become so much more. Half-Life 2 let shooter fans avoid the bullets almost entirely by having intuitive, reality-based environmental interaction rule the field of battle; and racing games like MotorStorm change their genre by having tracks that deform as the races progress. Having gameplay options that mimic real-world rules lets players try more intuitive and creative solutions to in-game problems, but also requires more ambition from the development teams.

“...here we head into a world of games that are easy to pick up, satisfying to keep playing, and memorable after the fact...”

7 multiplicity

Having "more" can open up a lot of opportunities – maybe extra dynamic lighting effects or higher-resolution textures, or perhaps some extra songs for the soundtrack and added players in online matches. But having more for many designers seems to translate best to one feature: the number of characters onscreen. Between Dead Rising's money shot with the main character perched on a truck in a sea of zombies and hints in Final Fantasy Versus XIII's trailer showing at swarms of enemies falling before one badass hero, the trend is clear. In fact, we honestly can't count the number of times someone has said to us, "with next generation hardware, we're getting X-number-of-enemies onscreen at once." Consider the trend established.

8 episodic content

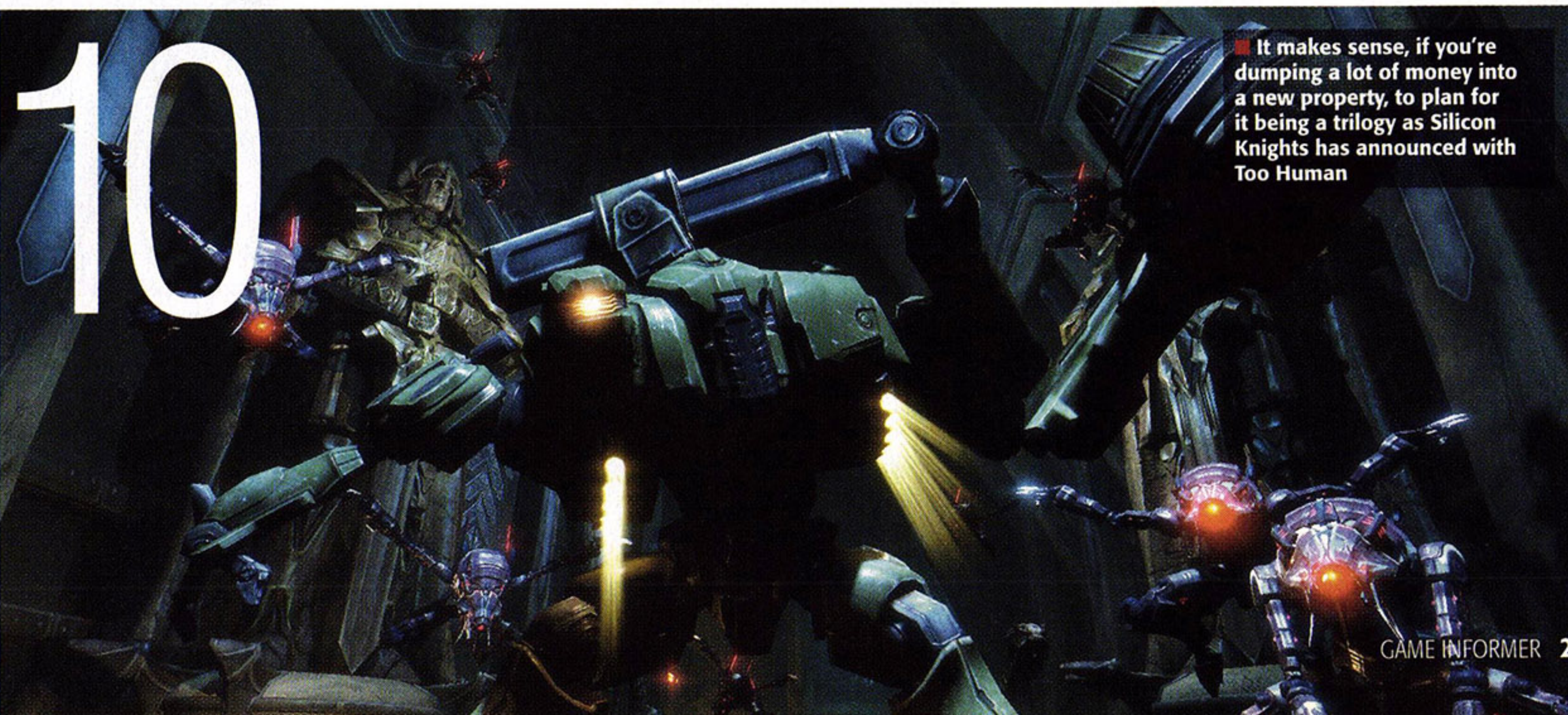
It seems a waste to spend all of that cash building a universe, a cast of characters in harrowing and compelling situations, and gameplay that ties it all together in satisfying little bundles, only to have it end with just one release. But you could also skip the "full" game and distribute from the start in episodes. Like network TV, gamers could come to expect a new compact experience at regular intervals. Doling out content piece by piece is an interesting new way to keep players hooked, but it's also a potentially smart way to do business. Shorter games cost less for consumers, perhaps making them more likely to take chances on an unfamiliar franchise or genre. Finally, a way to get people to just give something a try and shake up the market a bit!

9 no HUD

The road to an easy, clean, and still informative interface is a long one that many games are walking right now. Condemned: Criminal Origins had the main character opening up his gun and announcing how many rounds were left instead of plunking a digital counter in the corner. The upcoming Alone in the Dark handles inventory by showing what is held in the pockets of your jacket – no storage boxes or obtuse menus sorting equipment from potions and quest items. It's still not quite a fully achieved ideal for all genres, but developers are getting creative about relaying a character's status, and as long as it still lets us know what's up, we're all for it.

10 epic trilogies

Oh no, wait. Let us guess. Players star as a noble but somewhat underpowered or unlikely hero tasked with saving the galaxy on a journey of justice and self-discovery that will take place – wait for it! – over the course of an epic trilogy. Without being too snarky, we're all for the big ideas of games so awesome that one mere entry cannot contain them, but it's an unfortunate fluke of timing that all of these great multi-part sagas seem to have been announced around the same time. Think Too Human, Mass Effect, and Assassin's Creed for examples to keep an eye on.



TOP FIVES

Favorites From Industry Pros And GI Readers

DEVELOPER
RAPHAËL COLANTONIO
 CEO and Creative Director
 Arkane Studios (Dark Messiah of Might & Magic)

READER
AMBER HIPPLE
 Forth Worth, TX



- | | |
|--------------------------|---|
| 1 Thief – PC | 1 Ecco the Dolphin – Dreamcast |
| 2 Ultima Underworld – PC | 2 Eric the Unready – PC |
| 3 Ultima 7 – PC | 3 Paperboy – NES |
| 4 Fallout – PC | 4 Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance II – PS2 |
| 5 Deus Ex – PC | 5 Paper Mario – N64 |

Send Top Fives and a photo of yourself to:

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 email: topfive@gameinformer.com
 (attach digital picture)

TOP TEN

Lists...Everybody Loves Lists...

Top Ten Things To Do During The Summer Gaming Drought

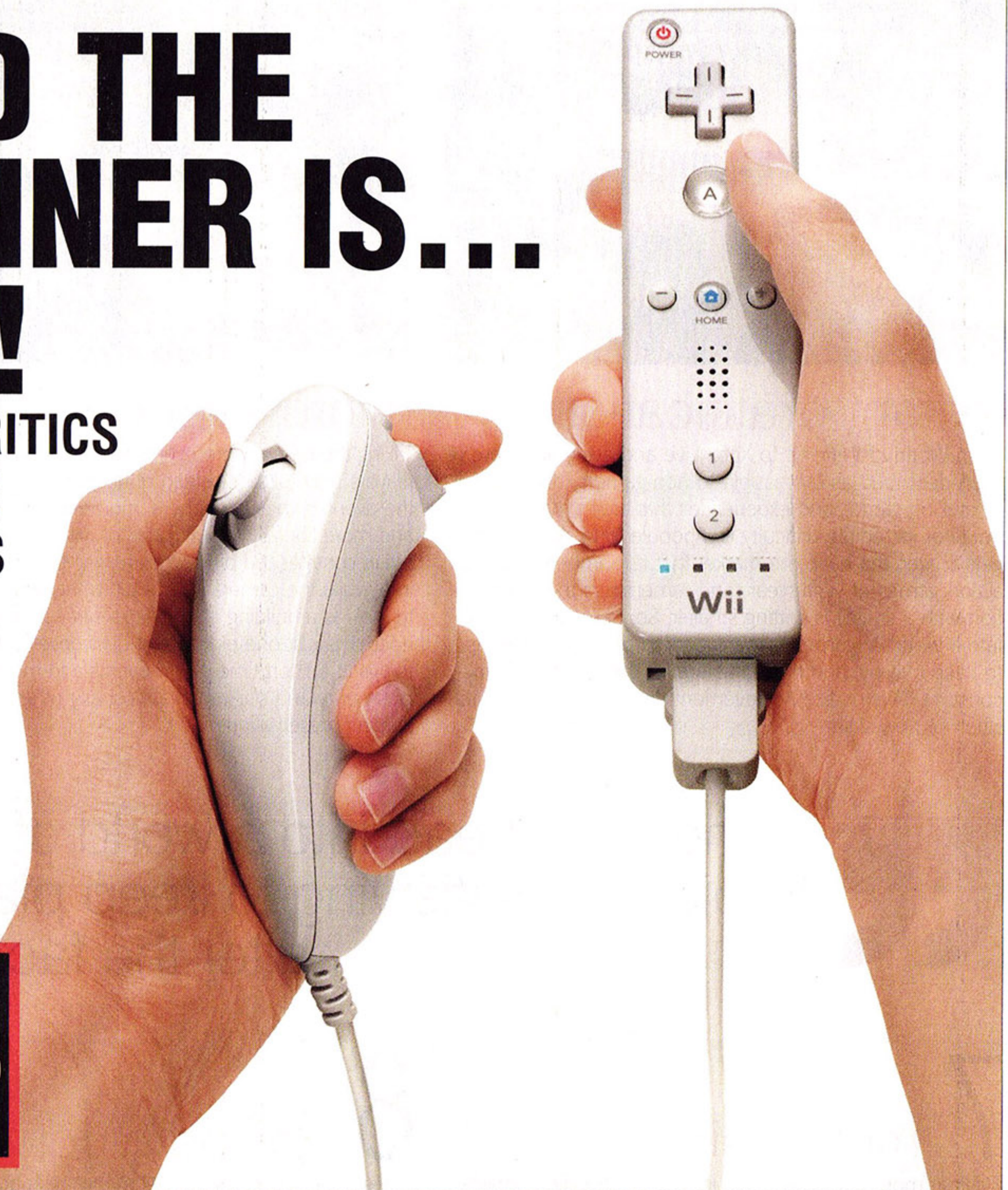
- 10 Take your PSP swimming – sparks let you know it's working
- 9 Go see a summer blockbuster movie, then play its relatively terrible to mediocre game
- 8 Get a summer job, and have all your paychecks sent directly to Sony's PS3 preorder department
- 7 Dig a big hole in the ground. Throw in your N-Gage
- 6 Coat your DS touch screen in suntan oil for its sensitive skin
- 5 Convince a summer music tour manager that your expert Guitar Hero skills have earned you a spot on the show, and don't take no for an answer
- 4 Have one last summer fling with your PS2, then dump it – over the phone
- 3 Reassure your 360 that you love it and it will always be special to you, even when a younger console joins the family and takes up all of your time later this year
- 2 Practice your Wii Sports skills by going out and actually exercising – nah, just kidding
- 1 Dream fondly of the cold, dark, lonely, and game-filled days of winter

Name That Game Answer: Majestic

news

AND THE WINNER IS... Wii!

GAME CRITICS DECLARE E3 BESTS



GAME CRITICS AWARDS: BEST OF E3 2006

Best of Show
Wii

Best Original Game
Spore

Best Hardware/Peripheral
Wii

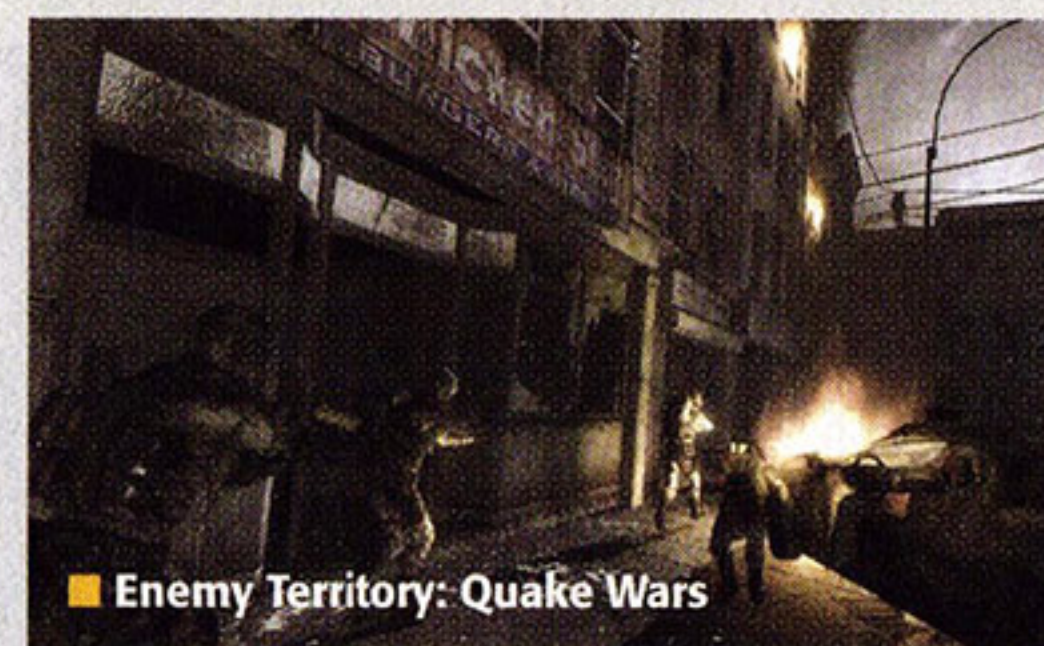
Best Console Game
Gears of War

Best PC Game
Spore

Best Handheld Game
The Legend of Zelda: Phantom Hourglass

Best Action Game
Gears of War

Best Action/Adventure Game
Assassin's Creed



Best Role Playing Game
Mass Effect

Best Racing Game
Excite Truck

Best Simulation Game
Spore

Best Sports Game
Wii Sports

Best Fighting Game
Heavenly Sword

Best Strategy Game
Supreme Commander

Best Puzzle/Trivia/Parlor Game
Guitar Hero II

Best Online Multiplayer
Enemy Territory: Quake Wars

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—Nintendo Power

"Anime-inspired mech battles are go!"
—GameSpot



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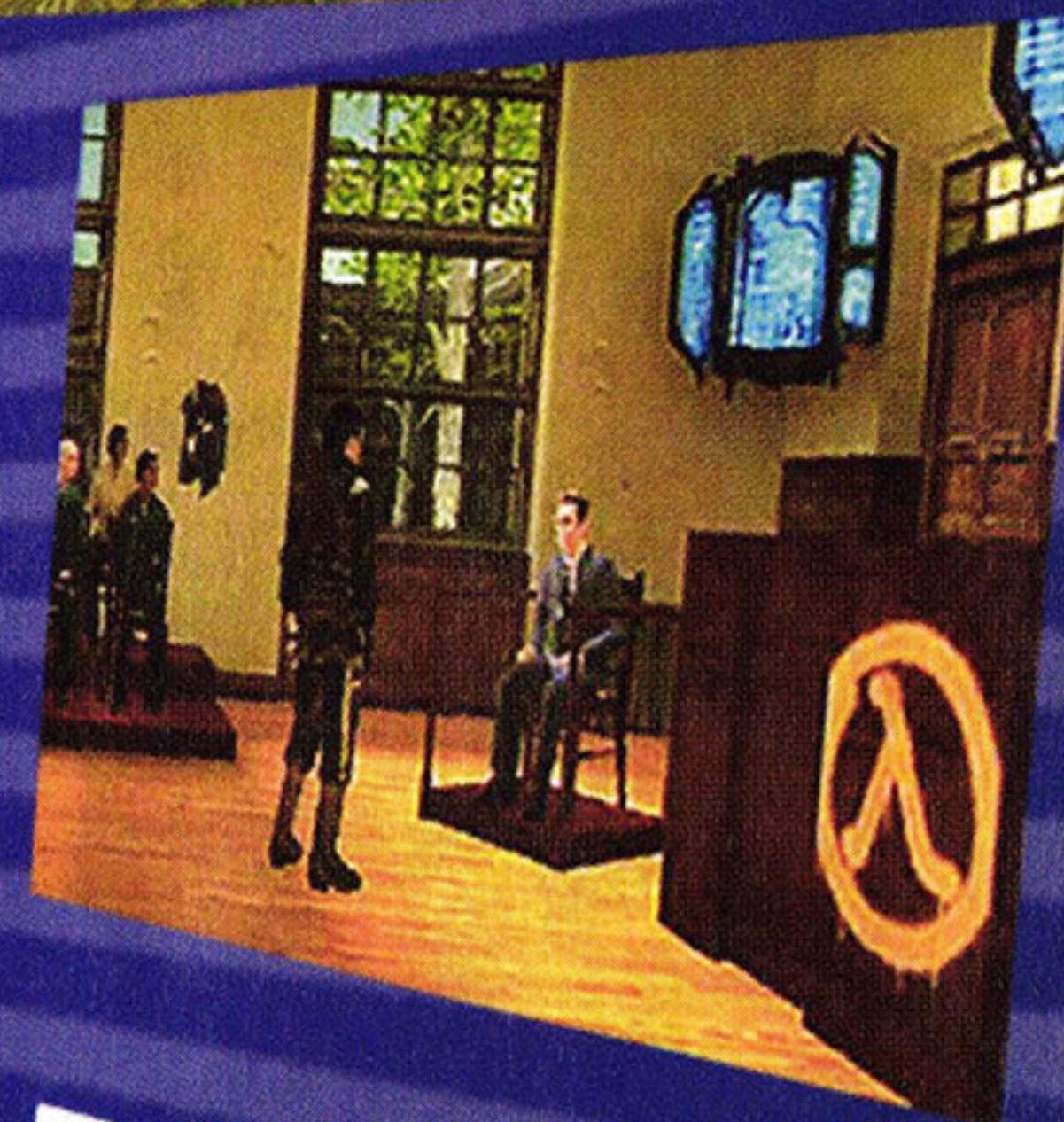
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MACHINIMA



■ Here's a created character from *The Sims 2*, and maybe the next online movie star

It turns out that calling "Action" through TeamSpeak, having never met the actors under your command, and recording it all live in a game can actually be a good way to make a movie. The method of creating movies within a real-time, 3D virtual environment is called machinima (pronounced mu-sheen-eh-mah) and as you've probably already heard, the environment of choice is our favorite games. So who says that making a sitcom has to be so expensive or that digital animation requires months of eyestrain and vertex tweaking to get a walk cycle just right? Sure, there are production values that you gain by doing it the expensive way, but when games are approaching photo-realism, why not just use the tools that they provide to say what you want to, and do it for cheap?

Creative and thrifty folks first realized the easy real-time recording possibilities when Quake came out in 1996. These Quake movies were the first machinima pieces that fit our modern definition, and some remain as fond memories for many devotees. While the rest fell to the wayside, the reasons for using an in-game engine for quick and (potentially) inexpensive movie creation remain

strong plusses for the medium.

When it comes to a commercial success that highlights just how far ingenuity, quality writing, and a TV recording card can take a team, look no further than the best-known machinima series: *Red Vs. Blue*. Started in 2003 by a group calling themselves Rooster Teeth, Jason Saldaña (who voices Tucker) says that when they first thought about recording in Halo, "We thought that we were like geniuses, like no one has ever done this." He and the team acknowledge that *RvB* wasn't a seminal moment in motion-picture evolution, but their regularly released series (that finished its fourth series in April and continues to sell an impressive number of DVDs) is groundbreaking for its sheer popularity. They're a funny group and could easily have chosen a more mainstream format. When asked why they use machinima, Saldaña says, "Just time. If we had done traditional animation, I don't know how long that would have taken. This way, we can do five minutes of animation in about 25 or 30 hours. Traditional animation would have taken like a month. With live action, there's a lot of time and expense there. This is a cheap and fairly easy way to make funny little movies."

Essentially, Rooster Teeth's process hasn't changed since they started



■ Screens from some great machinima (starting in the upper left): *Anna*, *Person2184*, *Red Vs. Blue*, and *A Few Good G-Men*

RvB. In fact, both small and large projects go through a similar production pipeline. A detailed script is the basis for lists of props and sets that need to be made (if any), and what shots are needed (in larger projects). Shooting is done in real time and with people controlling each of the characters onscreen. Another popular method for solo creators is to control one character themselves and write movement scripts for the actions and behaviors of the other actors. This step, and importing any modified or created assets, are important factors when selecting which game engine to use.

Paul Marino, executive director of the Academy of Machinima Arts and Sciences, suggests a few different choices for how in-depth someone wants to go. "The Movies [by Lionhead Studios] is essentially a machinima tool out of the box." For more control and a handy character creator, *The Sims 2* is a good choice. Those who want to make entirely new worlds, scripted characters, and lots of imported props could look towards the mod-friendly tools in *Unreal Tournament 2004*.

Marino points to the impressionistic and dire future portrayed in *The Photographer* (created by Freidrich Kirschner) as an example so divergent from its Unreal roots that it's hard to pinpoint what game the piece was

made in. "What I would like to see is more created assets, something to give [the piece] a more personal look than the thousands of other videos that look the same." While there's a lot on the Internet that looks the same as everything else (entire websites are devoted to World of Warcraft videos, for example, that change no in-game assets), the styles of entertainment that people are choosing are very diverse. This Spartan Life is a *Late Night*-styled variety show that recently got play some in Congressional offices because of a public service piece on the issue of Internet neutrality. A French teen used *The Movies* to document last summer's riots in Paris' suburbs. Star Wars Galaxies fans have used the MMO's large database of dancing animations to make music videos.

When asked what is the biggest asset of machinima over traditional animation, live action, or 3D, Marino responds immediately. "The flexibility to tell your story in your own way." These videos aren't all the next *Citizen Kane* or eye-opening documentary, but people have a readily accessible, cheap, and fast way to tell their stories. All that you need is a computer for editing, \$60 for the game of your choice, and something to say. This isn't really about games, it's about stories.

BECOME A FANBOY

The Sites To Answer Your Questions, The Clips To Provide Inspiration, The Tools To Get The Job Done, And A Word Of Caution

RESOURCES:

Machinima.com

www.machinima.com
The central resource for tutorials, forums, and hosted videos

The Academy of Machinima Arts and Sciences

www.machinima.org
The Academy's main page for announcing festivals, news, and the organization's progress on community issues

MachiniMag

www.machinimag.com
A digitally distributed magazine on the creation and community

MUST-SEE:

Red Vs. Blue

rvb.roosterteeth.com
Perhaps the best-known machinima series; funny dudes aping on military culture with the Halo engine

Deviation

hardlightfilms.com/deviation
An official selection at the 2006 Tribeca Film Festival that wrestles with a military man's choice to keep following orders

Person2184

www.person2184.com
The first two parts of this trilogy include the haunting episode *The Photographer*, a great example of what's possible if you create a lot of original assets

Anna

www.fountainheadent.com
Fountainhead has a lot of projects (working with id on their mobile games being one), but this *Anna* short uses their proprietary machinima tools and won acclaim for technical achievement

A Few Good G-Men

www.nailbiter.net
Look for this video on Machinima.com. It's worth the hunt to see *A Few Good Men* mashed up with *Half-Life 2*

Switcher: Deity and Atkins

www.craftingworlds.com
World of Warcraft meets Apple's Switch ad campaign meets forum catchphrase motherload

GAME ENGINES TO TRY

(Listed Roughly In Order Of Increasing Difficulty):

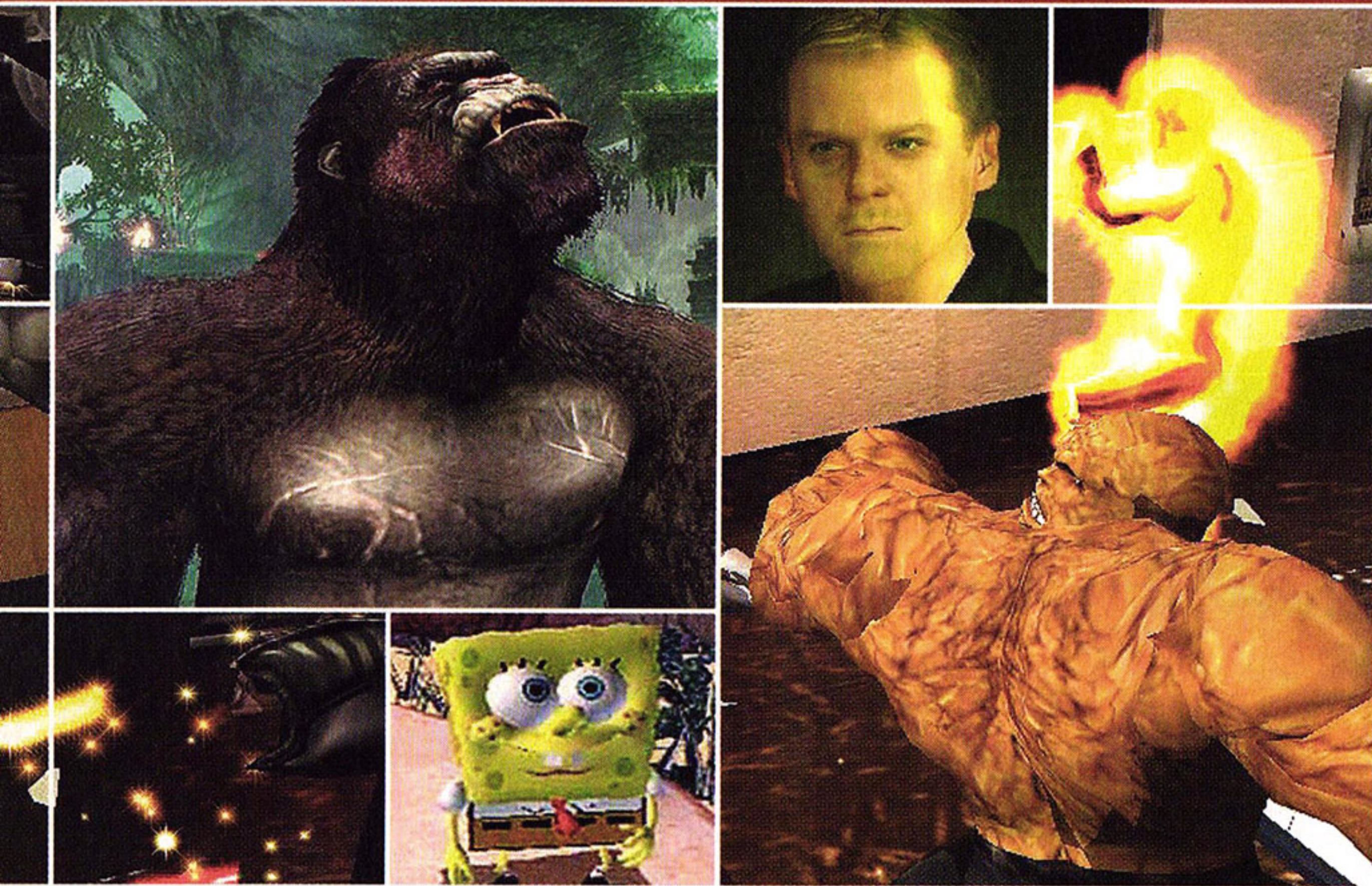
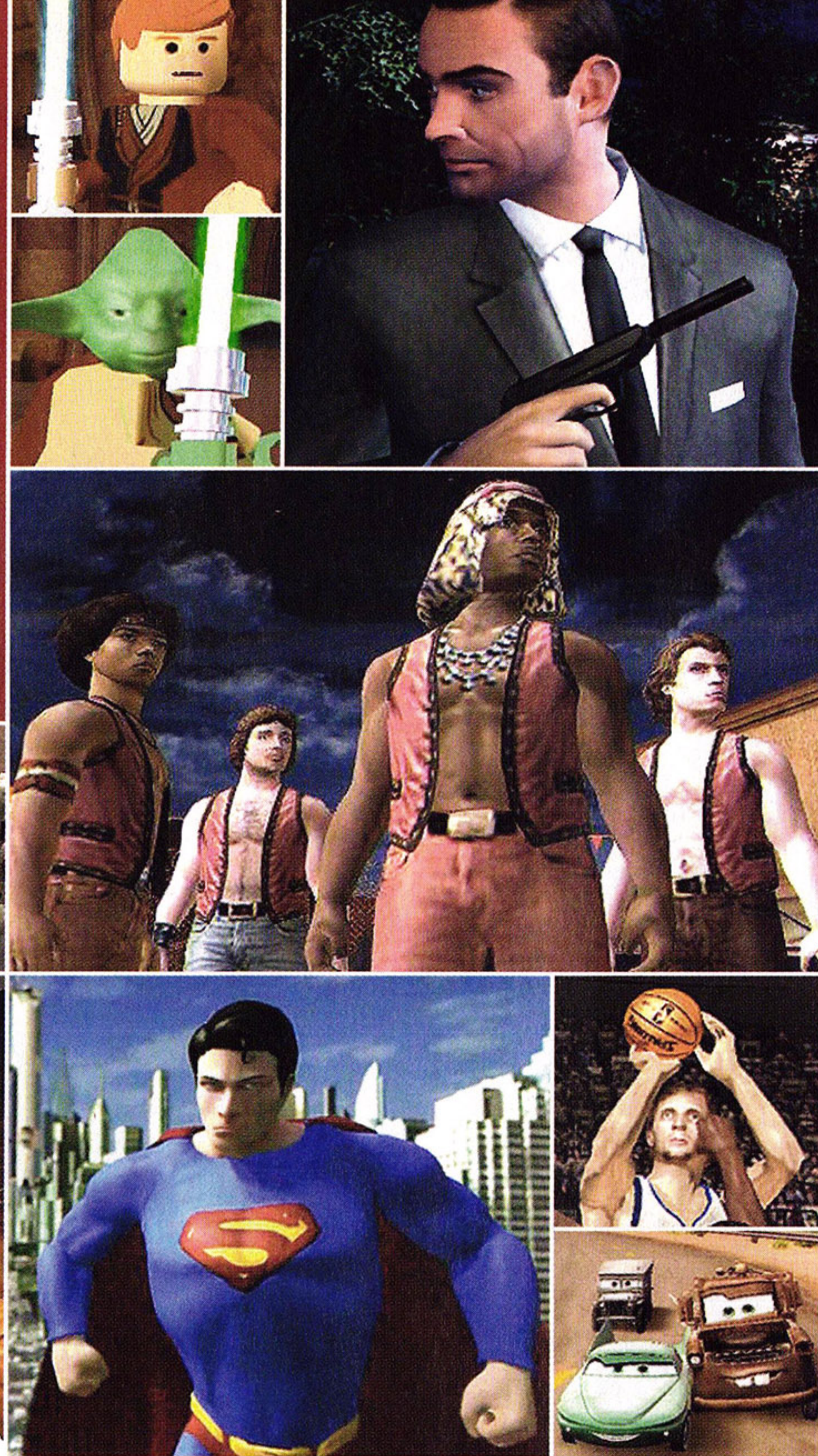
- The Movies
- The Sims 2
- Unreal Tournament 2004
- Half-Life 2
- Doom 3

DON'T SCREW YOURSELF:

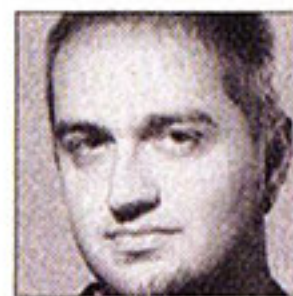
In a quirky twist of intellectual property defense and marketing desires butting heads, making machinima is technically a violation of most End User License Agreements. The Academy of Machinima Arts and Sciences is continuing to work towards a resolution with publishers and developers, and right now an unofficial truce allows users to make movies and distribute them, as long as no one is making money from the downloads.



ARE LICENSED GAMES GOOD FOR THE INDUSTRY?



The video game industry is faced with a plethora of difficult questions and many ways to look at them. In Game Informer's debate section, we will attempt to analyze these scenarios from different angles. Like a typical debate club, our editors have been assigned to defend a position whether it agrees with their personal views or not. In this edition, we tackle the contentious issue of licensed video games.



PRO

LICENSED GAMES ARE THE UNOFFICIAL SCAPEGOAT

of the gaming industry. If you tell people that you hate licensed games, chances are that they'll agree with you. Sure, I love original non-licensed titles as much as the next gamer, but recognize the positive role licensing plays in the gaming world. Companies such as THQ make a lot of money by developing games based on properties like Pixar movies, Bratz, and Nicktoons, which allows them to finance riskier original titles like Supreme Commander. But there are far more benefits to licensed games than simply funding original products. Who didn't dream as a kid of swinging through the city as Spider-Man, having a lightsaber duel, or battling the forces of Mordor? These are all experiences that we gamers can now have, in titles that allow us to revisit worlds we've already come to know, understand, and love. Licensed games are everywhere because they offer the players the experiences that they want to have, be it shredding as Tony Hawk or escaping prison as Richard B. Riddick. Most sports games are technically licensed titles, and seemingly original franchises like Splinter Cell are tagged with the Tom Clancy name. Licensed games are such a major part of the industry that it probably couldn't survive without them, and they've brought us some of gaming's finest moments. So don't hate on licensed games — chances are you're playing them now, and loving it. —JEREMY



CON

IF I HAVE TO PLAY ONE MORE KNOCK-OFF GAME

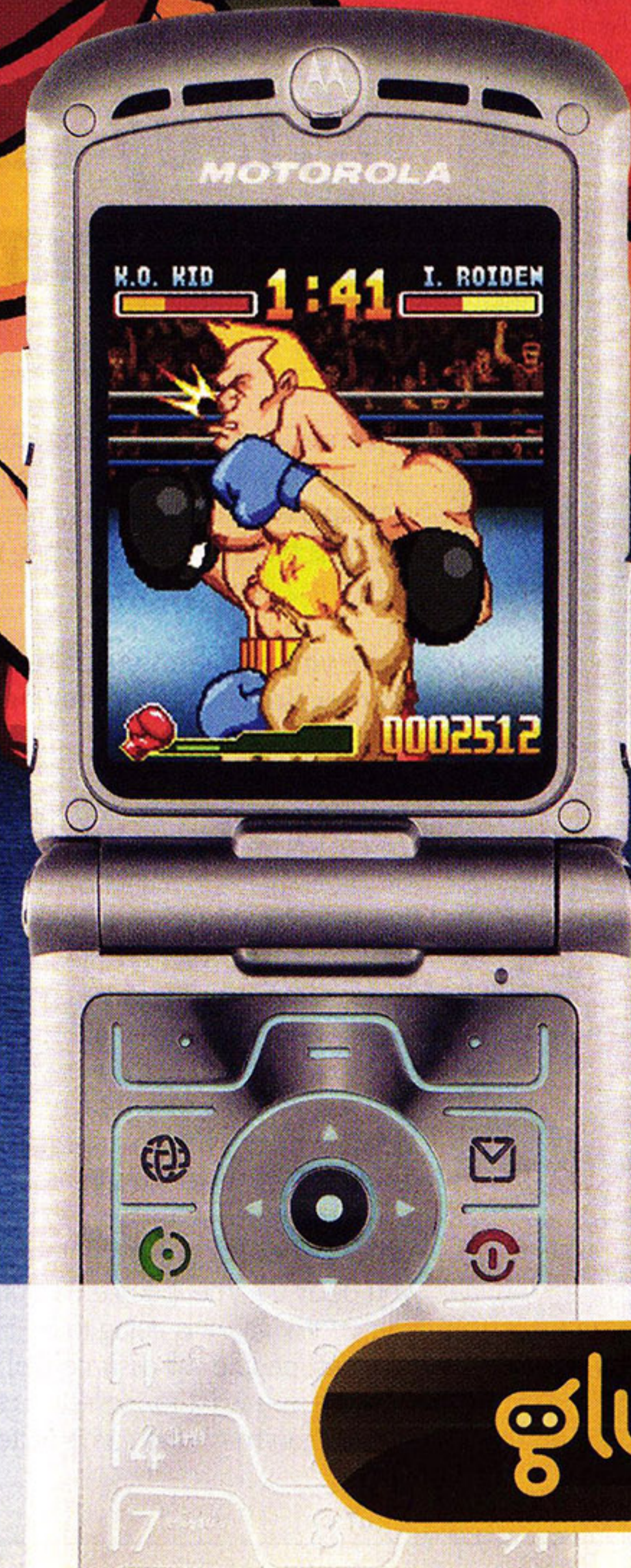
based on a character whose only saving grace is being in some popular entertainment, my controller is going through the wall. There's just something about working on licensed product that seems to suck all of the creativity and life out of a project. How is it that the word "licensed" seems to invariably translate to "boring collect-a-thon platformer" more often than not? The problem may crop up in management being more worried about delicately sculpting every crease in Morgan Freeman's craggy face, with contracts necessitating safe (read: boring and retreaded) design, or with developers being creatively hamstrung by an established fictional world that already has a complex set of rules. One way or the other, the end result is the same: uninspired games that do nothing to push the envelope technically, artistically, or creatively. These mediocre efforts do no good for any aspect of the industry. Consumers get \$50 coasters, publishers use up money that could be used to finance truly interesting products, and developers get burnt out working on the same lame-ass concepts over and over. I'm more than willing to concede the existence of a few genuinely good licensed games like *The Battle for Middle-earth II* and *X-Men Legends*, but those are the exception, not the rule. Saying that they prove that licensed product is a good thing is like arguing that the majority of anime is avant-garde, cutting edge art because *Cowboy Bebop* is a fantastic show. —ADAM



**ALL DRESSED UP
AND NO ONE TO K.O.**

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CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

1989 ▼ Early Days

Hall gets his start at one of the most famous publishers of the early days of PC gaming, Broderbund Software. While at the company, Hall works as an engineer at the company's educational and children's software division for titles like The Treehouse for Macintosh.

1992 ▼ Continuing Education

Hall parlays his experience in the educational software field into a job at the Edmark Corporation, where he managed the company's multimedia department.

1994 ▼ Founding Father

Along with a staff of only three, Hall founds the company that would allow him to make his mark in video games, Monolith Productions. Monolith's early projects include work for Microsoft, where it created sample games for the company's original Direct X software.

2000 ▼ Spy Action



Monolith makes waves with a new IP starring a comely super-agent in No One Lives Forever, a PC release that took a satirical look at James Bond style action. The game is a hit, spawning console ports and a sequel.

2001 ▼ Super Showdown

Getting some experience with Hollywood properties, Monolith makes Alien Vs. Predator 2, a solid and gripping FPS based on the 20th Century Fox film franchises.

2003 ▼ Back To The Future



Monolith creates another unique movie-based game, Tron 2.0, a gorgeous shooter that re-imagines the world of the movie Tron for the 21st Century.

2004 ▼ The Dubya-Bee



Feeling that Monolith was already self-sufficient, and looking for new challenges, Hall takes a position as senior vice president of Warner Bros. Interactive. Monolith also becomes a wholly owned subsidiary of Warner.

JASON HALL

SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT, WARNER BROS. INTERACTIVE ENTERTAINMENT

>> Starting with the purchase of developer Monolith in 2004, media conglomerate Warner Bros. has been getting serious about games. Ex-Monolith head Jason Hall has been at the forefront of these efforts. We spoke with Hall about the company's future in the game market.<<<

Hollywood and games have had a very checkered past. What has Hollywood been doing wrong and how can they change it?

Thematically, there are two things. One is, large media companies viewed the video game space as ancillary to their core businesses, as opposed to viewing it as its own business with its own needs. It was much more about taking their properties and content and expressing it in the games space in the way they wanted, which just doesn't work. Beyond that, there was a cultural clash that would not be acknowledged.... In Hollywood, everything revolves around cults of personalities. [There's] no such thing in the games. If you ask most people, "Have you heard of Super Mario?" They'll say, "Yeah." But if you ask them who is the person that came up with it, they won't know. Only game industry diehards know who that is, so typically it revolves around the developers and publishers as icons and not the individual people. In Hollywood, it's not like that. You'll go see a Halle Berry movie whether it's Warner Bros., Universal, or an independent movie. Well, when you have a

the video game industry handles that culturally from a PR perspective is entirely different from the way Hollywood does it.

Some of your big franchises like Superman and Harry Potter are at EA right now. Will you eventually bring those back into the Warner Bros. fold?

Well, we certainly look at the performance of each one of these titles and our partner that's making them, and if we're not seeing the things we want to see, then sure.

Tying into that, a while back you made some noise with a new policy for Warner Bros. that would make developers working on your properties accountable for review scores, and increase their licensing fees if the scores were low. Was the controversy over that blown out of proportion?

I don't know if it was blown out of proportion because I think they can't believe that someone

In the case of Riddick, which was a great game, I'd be totally satisfied with the performance of the publisher and developer. No matter how bad the movie was it could not drag the game's quality down. We've done all kinds of tests and research on review score aggregates. There are no anomalies.

How much focus are you putting on developing original game IPs? Or, are you primarily focused on leveraging existing WB or DC properties in video games?

Well, I'll tell you this: the main competency of Warner Bros. itself is developing original IP. So, you have to assume that it's going to leverage that competency into the game space. So it's not all about taking one property from another medium and bringing it over. It's very important that we create new IP that's native to the game space. That's completely in-line with what the studio does. It makes original television programs; it makes original movies; it makes original comic book characters; and we'll make original content for games.

...they can't believe that someone was going to hold them accountable for what they promised...

large media company coming into the games space with that mentality, it doesn't lend itself well to the right kind of relationships and the right kind of best business practices when working with, effectively, a different culture.

Have you met with much resistance within Warner Bros., or have they been receptive to your ideas and plans?

When I came here, it was pretty clear that the studio was quite dedicated to becoming successful. If you look at where they placed me in the management structure, there's not a whole lot above me to interfere with the decision-making process. Which is a big deal, because I wind up interfacing directly with the division heads for theatrical and television. They need to know how the game industry functions.

Here's a classic example. If you have a movie, and you announce that the movie is going to be delayed, the way the market reacts to that is they assume the movie must be bad. It's a very negative thing, because you're trying to patch it up. In the video game space, that's not the same thing. When you delay a game, people do not assume that that means the game is going to be bad. In fact, a lot of times, people will assume that you're delaying it because you want to make the game better and you actually can make the game better.... So the way

was going to hold them accountable for what they promised.... When you have a high-profile property it can create a scenario where it is actually economically beneficial to put out a bad product. If you were working on your own, original title, the only thing that's going to sell the game is the fact that the game is good. Guess what? You're going to spend all your money to make the game good. Now, if you have a Harry Potter or something like that and people are going to buy it regardless, why should they spend another million dollars? It doesn't make sense. So licenses set themselves up for a disadvantage right out of the gate because of that. We had to come up with a formula for that scenario that would negate that particular distraction. The fact of the matter is that it hasn't hindered our licensing business at all.

To play devil's advocate, what about the reverse situation? Sometimes a game can suffer because if a movie isn't of a certain quality. Are there any clauses for the developer if the movie underperforms?

Well, you have to understand that we're not measuring sales. Our quality standard isn't about sales. It's not an equal conversation for them to talk about sales from a movie. We're talking about perceived quality and use of the brand. Whether a movie is a hit or not doesn't have any effect on the game score.

Will this work the other way? Will you be taking original game properties into other media? We've heard there is a movie based on the game Condemned in the works.

Yes. It's not called "Condemned," but there is a film being developed from that same source material. So you could think of them as cousins. But the game is native to its own medium and tells its story, and the film, which is in development, will tell its own story that is best suited for movie storytelling. If you've played Condemned, you haven't seen the movie – not even close. But, if you like Condemned conceptually, you'll like the movie conceptually.

Where do you see Warner Bros. Interactive in five years?

I would like to see them working on Justice League Heroes 3, because Justice League Heroes 1 & 2 were such tremendous successes and finally did DC Comics right. [Laughs] Beyond that, I would like to see them in the driver's chair, media companies like Warner Bros. in the driver's chair. Because, frankly, they're used to taking chances on original IP. I think they're going to be more predisposed to creating new types of gameplay experiences and new types of stories to tell than native video game companies currently are willing to do.



REINVENTING WARNER BROS.

■ Warner Bros.'s Jason Hall brings his years of game experience to the company's stable of high-profile movie and comic licenses



pc

L1970HR

Manufacturer: LG Electronics **Website:** www.lgusa.com **List Price:** \$419.99

Although the native resolution on this 19-inch monitor tops out at 1280x1024, the two-millisecond refresh time makes everything sharp and crystal clear, highlighting deep blacks and great colors.

pc

FP202W

Manufacturer: BenQ **Website:** www.benq.us **List Price:** \$399

BenQ's 20-inch LCD designed for gamers has nice features like DVI and VGA inputs, which lets you switch between (for example) a PC and a 360 with ease. (This one does have a higher resolution than most similar monitors, too.)

home entertainment

HTS-GS1 XBOX 360 SURROUND SOUND SYSTEM

(Shown with 360, not included)

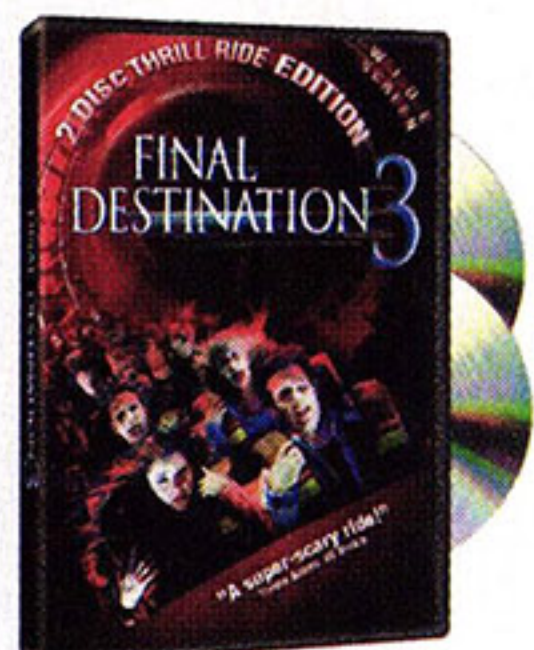
Manufacturer: Pioneer Electronics
Website: www.pioneerelectronics.com
List Price: \$499

Pioneer's foray into 360-themed hardware starts with this very solid, if a smidgen predictable, 5.1 surround sound set. The biggest features are in the style department, with colors and general shapes to match Microsoft's curvaceous design and a remote complete with Xbox buttons to run the console's media options.



dvd

SUMMER DVD TIME



FINAL DESTINATION 3

Manufacturer: New Line Home Video
Website: www.fd3movie.com
List Price: \$29.98

Besides good, old-fashioned, elaborate death sequences, this DVD lets viewers decide the fate of characters with interactive story options. It's like *Choose Your Own Adventure* with more gore!



DR. WHO SEASON ONE

Manufacturer: BBC Video
Website: www.bbcamericashop.com
List Price: \$99.95

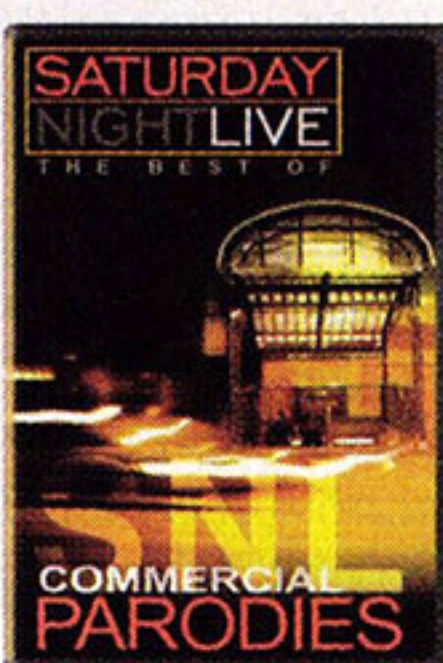
Thank the divinity of your choice that the good doctor is back in action. This collection of the first season (shown stateside on the Sci-Fi channel) offers up all of the episodes along with five hours of making of, interviews, and behind the scenes footage.



V FOR VENDETTA

Manufacturer: Warner Home Video
Website: www.vforvendetta.warnerbros.com
List Price: \$34.98 (Two-Disc Special Edition), \$28.98 (One-Disc Full or Widescreen)

The two-disc special edition offers a variety of standard-sounding extras, but the idea of delving into this movie's interesting look sounds like a good one. Check for this one in stores on August 1st.



SATURDAY NIGHT LIVE: THE BEST OF COMMERCIAL PARODIES

Manufacturer: Universal Studios
Website: www.homevideo.universalstudios.com
List Price: \$19.98

SNL has always had great fake ads for products hatched in the bowels of free market hell, and this collection is a great starting point for some of the classic spots.

etc

MONOPOLY: NINTENDO COLLECTOR'S EDITION

Manufacturer: USAopoly
Website: www.usaopoly.com **List Price:** \$35.95

Specialized versions of the classic Monopoly board game are nothing new, but this sweet Nintendo set had the whole office mashing on the "Pre-order" button. The specifics are still getting hashed out, but the player tokens will probably be a NES controller, Mario's hat, Donkey Kong's barrel, and Link's metal boots and shield. Every inch of the game is covered in Nintendo references, so don't be surprised if Community Chest now reveals that your princess is in another castle.

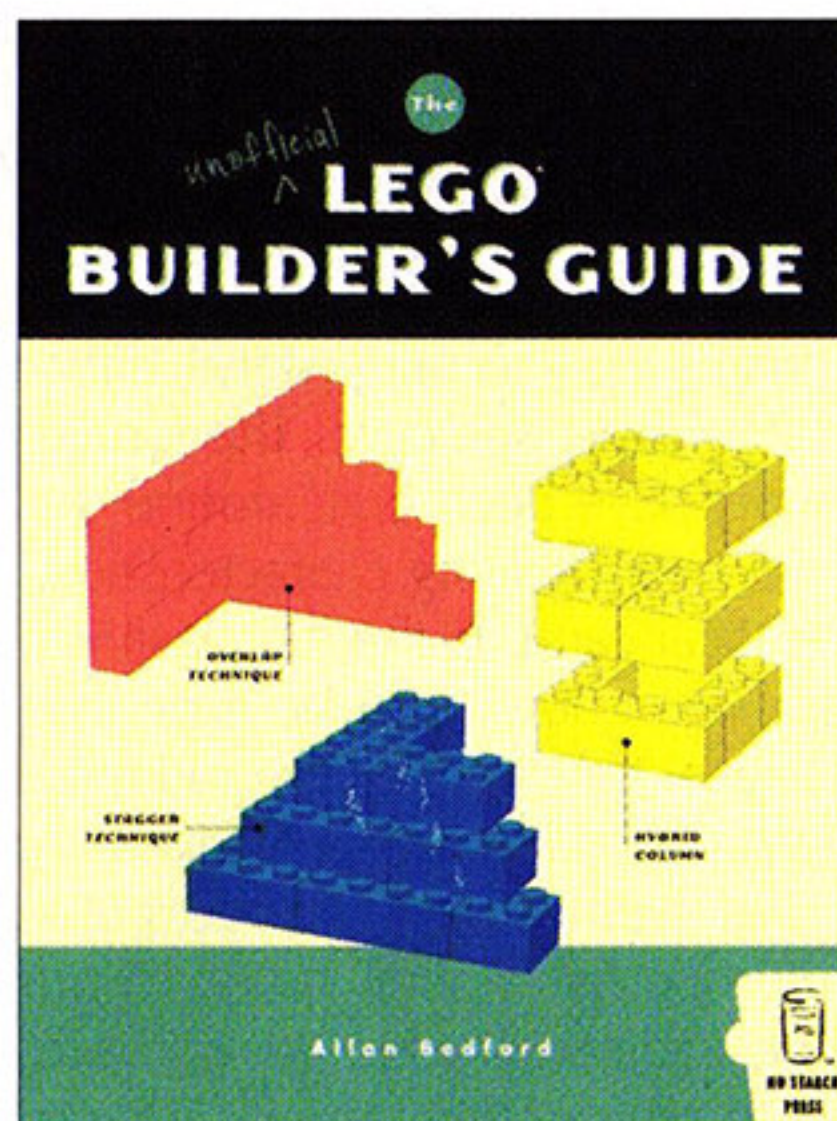


etc

THE UNOFFICIAL LEGO BUILDER'S GUIDE

Manufacturer: No Starch Press
Website: www.nostarch.com
List Price: \$24.95

With art direction that calls to mind a Boy Scout's manual from the '50s, and a dead serious tone about standardizing the verbiage used to describe Lego shapes, this guide by Allan Bedford is too damn sweet to pass up. There are super cool designs inside as well as a method to teach the fundamentals so you can start making your own mad hatter creations.



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CAST
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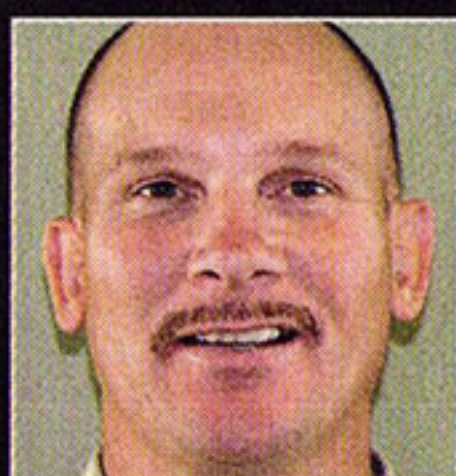
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CASUAL GAMES

ARE SERIOUS BUSINESS



BY MARK COTTAM,
CEO, MUMBOJUMBO

Over the past five years a slow but steady swell has been building within the industry. Overnight, it seems that everyone is talking about an exciting new game category: casual gaming. Those of us who have been involved since the beginning are not surprised by the growth, popularity, or excitement swirling around casual gaming. But for many, the category seems completely new, totally unanticipated, and mysterious in almost every possible way. Giving rise to the growing excitement is the belief that, suddenly, everyone wants to be a casual gamer! And, it's not just those playing the games; it's also the larger game publishers.

Despite the recent emergence of casual gaming, the category is really not that new. The history of casual gaming can be traced back to the early days of the personal computer and the early gaming devices. Simple and addictive games like Tetris and Pong captivated the early computer user and gave way to an entire industry that has spawned massive entertainment companies. During the early days of video gaming, the popularity of casual games grew, but quickly became overshadowed by the more hardcore categories. Fast forward to 2006, and now the make-up of the video games industry has changed dramatically. Early adopters have aged, and with the expansion of the Internet and gaming devices, the interest for casual games has re-emerged as one of the driving forces of the games industry. Even if you haven't heard of the term "casual game," you've probably heard of some of the titles (or even played them) including: Luxor, Collapse! and BeJeweled.

The make-up of the casual gamer is the most misquoted and least understood aspect of the category. Ask this question of most people and they will tell you that the casual gamer is a 35 to 45

year old female with a loyalty (addiction) to one or two key games who looks to casual gaming as a key source of entertainment. While that is a significant part of the market, it is not the entire market. The market is male and female, ages eight to 108 and the demographics and reach are broadening, not narrowing, as the market grows.

A significant part of our business at MumboJumbo comes from the retail channel which gives us a unique look at the makeup of the casual gamer. Everyday we receive mail from our customers, many of the letters start out with a first sentence along the order of "I am 55 years old and bought your game and loved it. I've been playing it nonstop but would like to try something new. I do not own the Internet (as if it's some material object that could be owned) so I'm wondering if you could tell me how I can get your other games." Clearly this is someone new to casual games – and gaming in general.

Casual games have mass appeal and staying power, and most often are not built on existing brands. That's not to say that a casual game cannot become a brand. Clearly, certain titles within our space have become established brands. A casual game is built upon a simple gameplay mechanic that is easy to understand, difficult to master, and highly addictive. The top games in the category have been built around these principles. Another defining characteristic of a successful casual game is the long-lasting appeal of the game. For a new user, the experience of playing Collapse! for the first time today is the same as it was for the user who picked it up four years ago. The average retail product published by MumboJumbo has a shelf life of 15 months (where more traditional video games have a shelf life of three to six months), and it's not uncommon for a true brand to sell for 24 to 36 months without being refreshed. In the download market,

It's an

exciting

time to be

a publisher

or fan of

casual

games.

the top games continue to be played and purchased up to two years after launch, despite the increasing flow of new products. But, not so fast! Before you run out and start creating a casual game, it's not that easy to get it right.

At the heart of casual gaming you will find the basic gameplay mechanics that everyone can enjoy; from matching like colors and shapes to eliminating sets of like objects; from memorization skills to frenzied clicking and block building, it all plays out in casual games. Add to it gender neutral game themes and non-offensive content and you can see why casual games are starting to appear on almost every major device.

It's an exciting time to be a publisher or fan of casual games. With new platforms like the Nintendo Wii looking to expand the definition of what a "gamer" is and the growing popularity of Xbox Live Arcade, the category will continue to grow exponentially. What used to be referred to as the "puzzle game category" has been reborn as casual games and is coming to a console you probably own – sooner than you think. It's cool to be casual and I'm excited to be a part of it. ■■■

Mark Cottam is the CEO of MumboJumbo, a leading developer of games for online distribution and the preferred publisher of premium casual games for the retail channel. Send emails to mcottam@mumbojumbo.com. For more information on MumboJumbo, visit the company's website at www.mumbojumbo.com.

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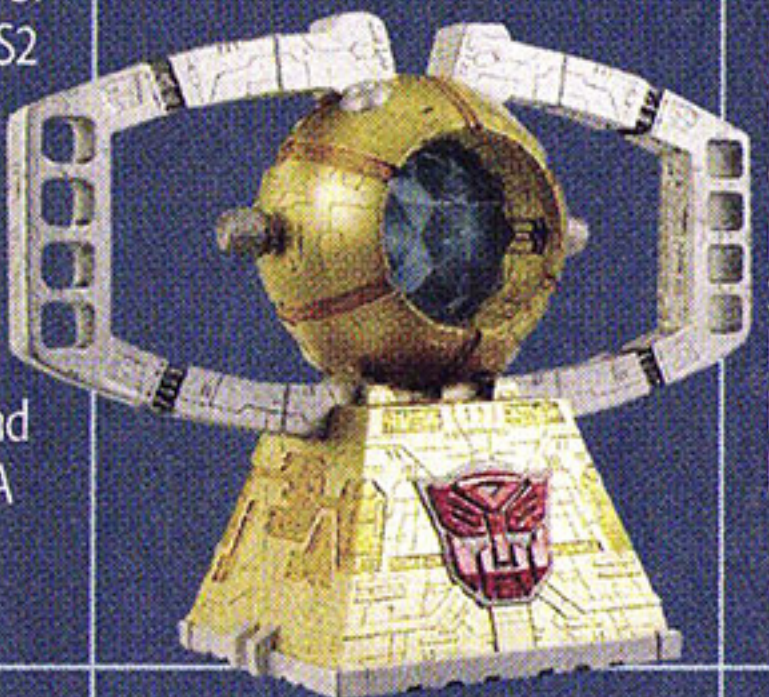
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Xenosaga Episode III: Also Sprach Zarathustra



01

- NEW RELEASES**
- FlatOut 2 – PS
 - Guilty Gear: Judgment – PSP
 - King of Fighters 2006 – PS2
 - Point Blank – DS
 - Super Monkey Ball Adventure – PS2, GC, PSP
 - Train Master – PC
 - Veggie Tales: Larry Boy and the Bad Apple – PS2, GBA

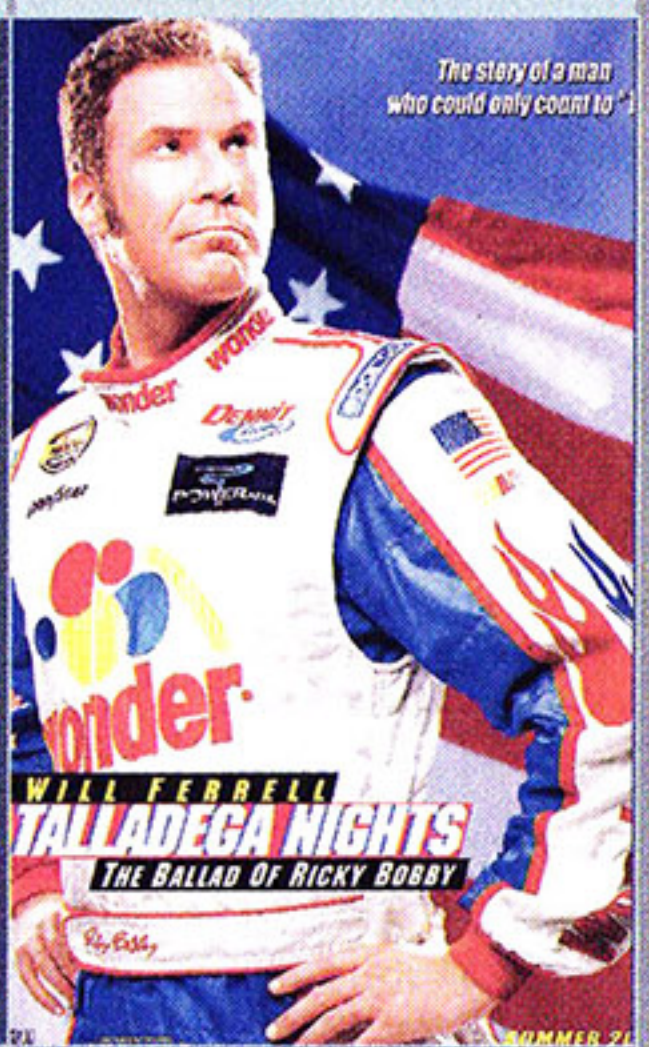


02

AUTOBOT MATRIX OF LEADERSHIP
The sight of this Transformers item led to Miller breaking his incredible eight-year streak of not taking a dump in his pants. Retailing for roughly \$160, this wondrous item will likely be gone before you know it as only 1,000 are being manufactured

03

Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby spreads doughy white goodness to theaters today. Wait...you thought we were talking about Wonder Bread



04



Dead Rising – 360

08

- NEW RELEASES**
- Brave: The Search for Spirit Dancer – PS2
 - Dead Rising – 360
 - UFO Extra Terrestrials – PC

09

CROSS PLATFORM SUMMIT (9-10)
The name says it all. This is the first summit that discusses ways to spread content across all platforms, be it video games, cell phones, or cable TV. This important conference will be held at the Bel Age Hotel in West Hollywood

10



12

MARVEL ZOMBIES TRADE
More authors need to explore a thought process that begins with "What if zombies..." In this hardcover collected trade, the entire Marvel universe has been zombified. Look for it at your local comic retailer today!

Ninety-Nine Nights – 360



15

- NEW RELEASES**
- Alex Rider: Stormbreaker – DS, GBA
 - Backyard Baseball 2007 – GC
 - Cheetah Girls – GBA
 - Deep Labyrinth – DS
 - Harvest Moon DS – DS
 - Ninety-Nine Nights – 360
 - Phil of the Future – GBA
 - The Suite Life of Jack and Cody: Tipton Trouble – DS, GBA



Deep Labyrinth – DS

18

Snakes on a Plane sprays the attergoers with venom today. We could make a joke, but you don't really kid around with something as serious as snakes on a plane



Madden NFL 07 – 360, PS2, Xbox, GC, PSP, DS, GBA, PC

22

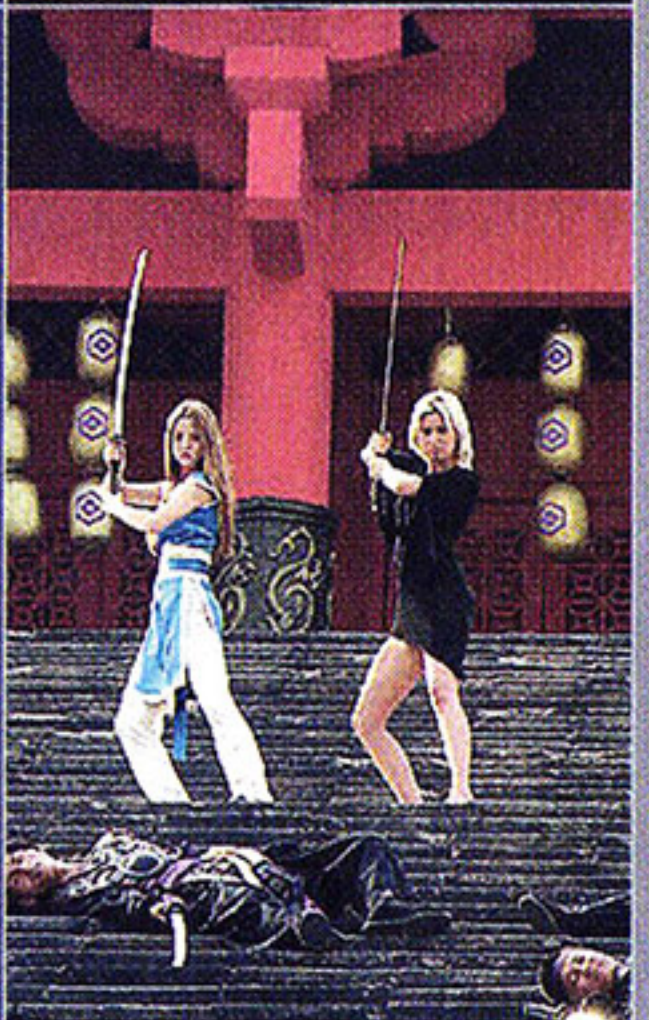
- NEW RELEASES**
- Final Fantasy VII: Dirge of Cerberus – PS2
 - Ford Street Racing – PS2
 - Madden NFL 07 – 360, PS2, Xbox, GC, PSP, DS, GBA, PC
 - One Piece Grand Adventure – PS2
 - World Tour Golf – PS2, Xbox



Final Fantasy VII: Dirge of Cerberus – PS2

25

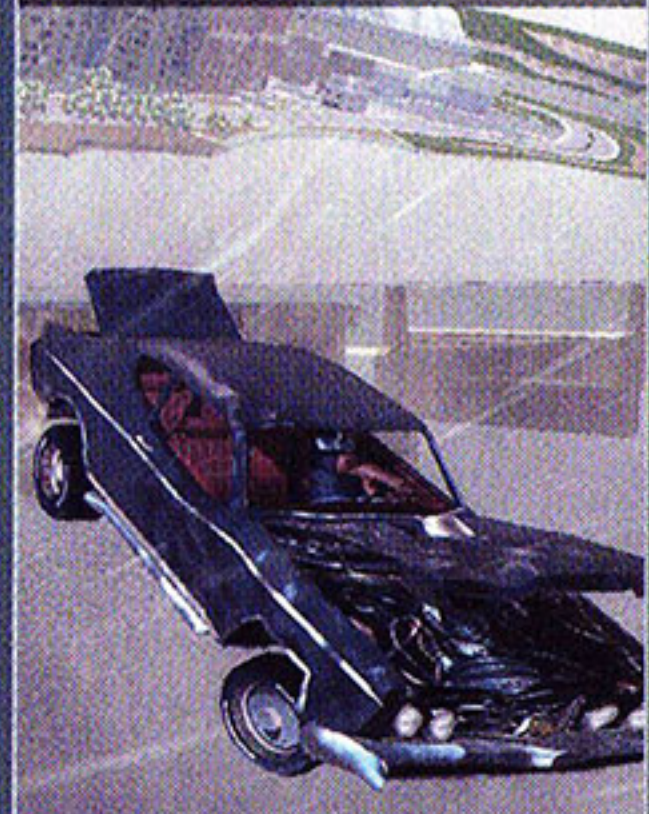
Dead or Alive bounces onto the silver screen today, which promises to make the plot of the games look as deep and complex as *The Maltese Falcon*...or maybe *Sesame Street*



27

Saint's Row – 360

ECGXPO 06 (26-27)
When's the last time you entered a Killer Instinct arcade tournament? If you are in Reading, PA on August 26 and 27, the low sum of 15 smackers a day will grant you access to an expo that specializes in some of the strangest tournaments to date. Anyone up for Bust-a-Move 3000 on GameCube? Hello?



29

- NEW RELEASES**
- 50 Cent: Bulletproof – PSP
 - Bomberman: Act Zero – 360
 - Dance Factory – PS2
 - Disgaea 2 – PS2
 - Enchanted Arms – 360
 - The Fast and the Furious – PS2, PSP
 - Rule of Rose – PS2
 - Saint's Row – 360
 - Star Fox Command – DS
 - Xenosaga Episode III: Also Sprach Zarathustra – PS2



31

august

OVER G FIGHTERS™



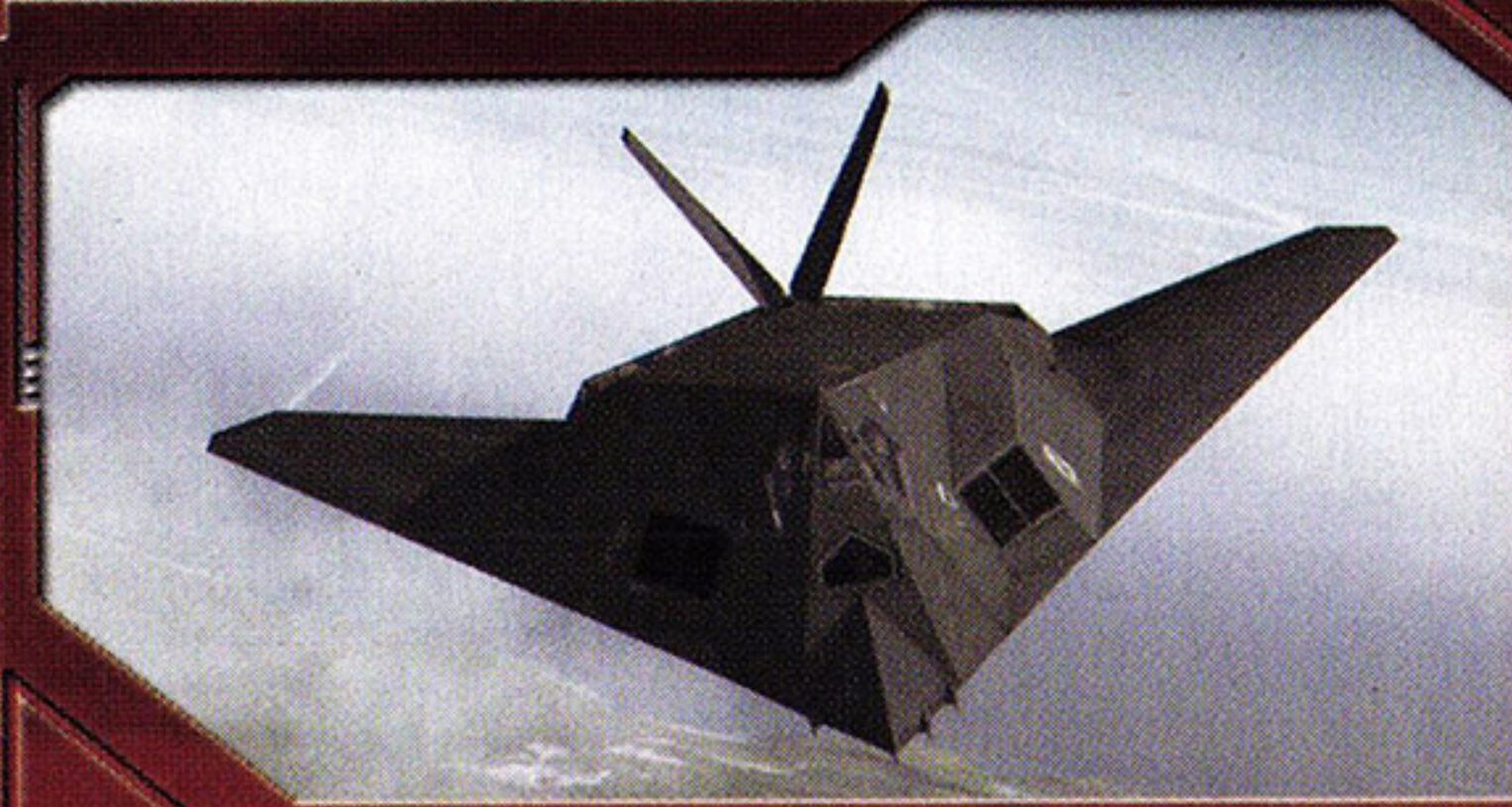
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KANE & LYNCH

Twisted Pair

UNLIMITED ENABLED

XBOX 360 | PC

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE OR PC ONLINE)

> **PUBLISHER** EIDOS

> **DEVELOPER** IO INTERACTIVE

> **RELEASE** SPRING 2007



On a prison bus delivering him to his execution, Kane has come to terms with the fact that he is going to die. Despite the evil deeds and betrayals that punctuate his life, there is some solemn comfort in the knowledge that things can't get any worse...or so he thinks. "Get down, now!" warns a voice next to Kane, and then the world erupts into chaos as the transport is rammed by an oncoming semi truck. On the asphalt and surrounded by gunfire and explosions, he is helped to his feet by Lynch, a psychopath and fellow prisoner gripping Kane's arm with one hand and a shotgun with the other. One look into the man's darting eyes is enough for Kane to know that he's no

savior, and this isn't a rescue – it's a kidnapping. Then, as Lynch hums a gleeful tune while killing advancing waves of law enforcement, Kane realizes he would have been better off on that bus.

When people hear the phrase "buddy movie," images of wacky hijinks starring Eddie Murphy or Mel Gibson will undoubtedly come to mind. But if one looks past the comedy into the character dynamics, these films are ultimately about conflicting personalities forced together by circumstance. This notion of a fragile, necessary alliance is the core principle behind Kane & Lynch, the new third-person action title from IO Interactive. Starring the calculating Kane and reckless Lynch, the game will follow these unlikely



partners as they work together toward a common goal. However, *Kane & Lynch* is no *Lethal Weapon*; convicted killers aren't exactly fonts of comedy, so the game will instead rely on the tenuous partnership between the two criminals to drive the story and the gameplay forward. Every aspect of *Kane & Lynch* – single player, co-op, and multiplayer – focuses on their grudging acceptance of the fact that they need to cooperate.

Of course, for players to understand the many potential problems in this match-up, it helps to know the circumstances that push the two unsavory men together. If they were just two nice guys looking for a lost cat, there wouldn't be much intrigue. "Things are just a lot more volatile if you

have two unstable characters instead of one stable and one unstable or – God forbid – two stable ones," laughs game director Jens-Peter Kurup. In fact, the word "unstable" is a gross understatement when used to describe Lynch in particular. Before his incarceration, he lived a normal life in Detroit until he began to experience mysterious blackouts. As they grew more severe and nightmarish, he began to heavily medicate himself to keep the episodes at bay. Though this was somewhat successful at first, he arrived home one day to find his wife murdered...and he wasn't entirely sure that he didn't do it. By the time Kane meets Lynch, the episodes have become so severe and violent that the man is essentially a sedated psychopath – the pills in his pocket the only thing keeping him from becoming a rampaging animal.

Kane is more complicated, but no less dangerous. Prior to death row, Kane's brutal pragmatism and skills in negotiation earned him a place in

an international mercenary organization known as The Seven. However, something went wrong with a heist, and it seems that Kane betrayed his employers and escaped with the loot. This scenario is exactly what prompts the prison bus kidnapping described previously; some of The Seven survived, and they want Kane to answer for his actions – but not before he pays them back. The Seven offer a deal to both of the doomed men: They have two weeks to locate and return the stolen loot. For Kane, success means that he will still be executed for his treason, but his wife and daughter will be allowed to live. At that point Lynch's deal will come to fruition, as he has been promised Kane's position in The Seven...but only if the whole thing goes off without a hitch. "Two guys who are very different with the same task, but separate objectives," clarifies Kurup. "Kane's a professional, Lynch is a thug. Kane stays cool, Lynch is losing it. They're trying to fix their lives, and they're really doing a very bad job of it."

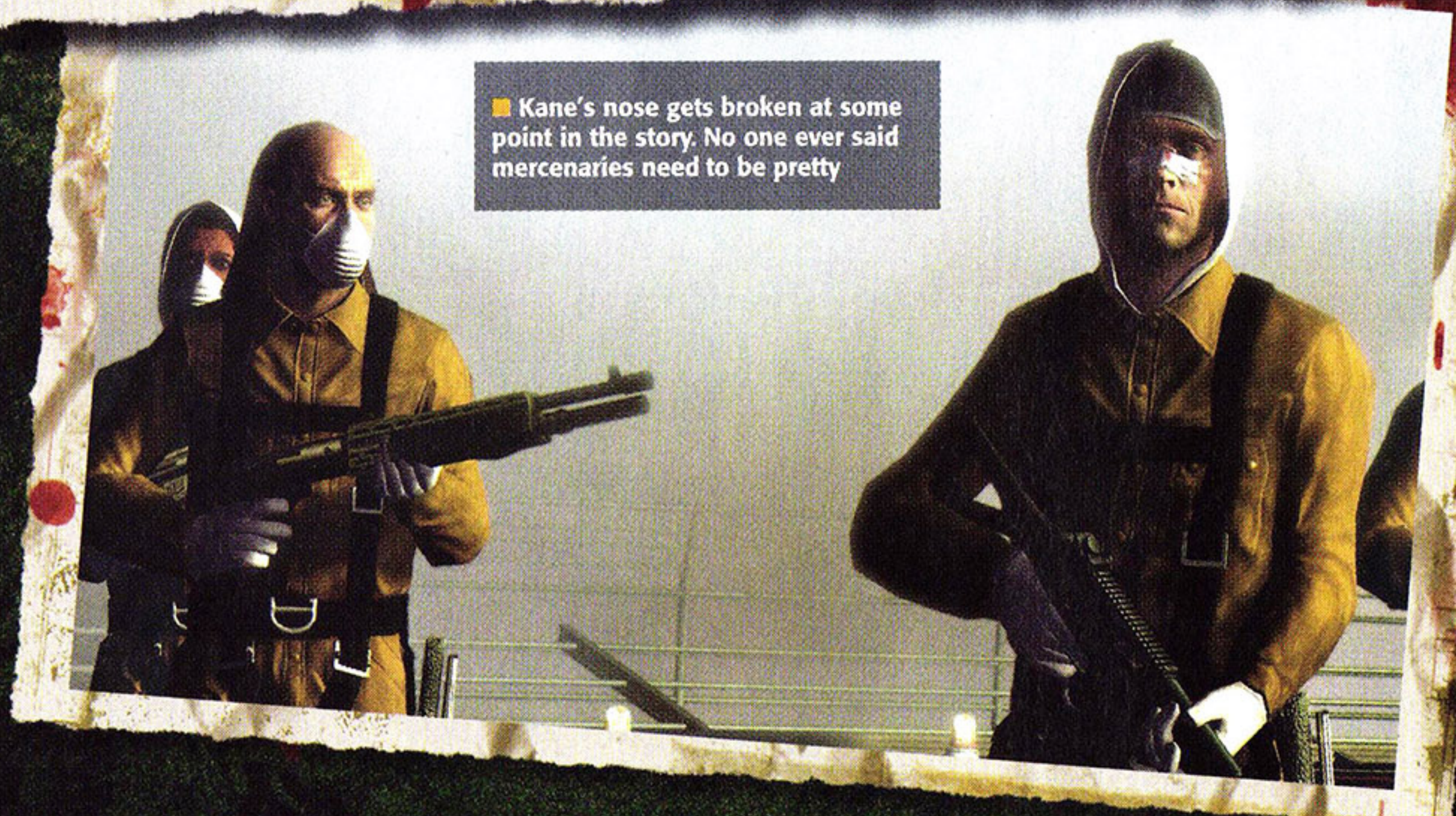
For gamers familiar with IO's work on the *Hitman* franchise, it should be no surprise that the developer has selected a pair of flawed individuals



■ In character art, Kane's right eye looks messed up. Could this be some kind of payback?

for the game's starring roles. However, as a contrast to Hitman's austere assassin Agent 47, Kane and Lynch aren't quite heartless. "They're much more believable than Agent 47, who is very difficult to do stories for because he's inhuman," Kurup admits. "He can't really evolve, but if you have people you can push, you can get somewhere. Whatever Kane and Lynch do, they do because they have to. It's not their jobs, it's how their lives unfold." Plus, it is difficult to deny that there is a certain kind of appeal to the modern anti-hero, giving gamers a chance to vicariously explore a darker side of humanity.

A focus on anti-heroic personalities is where the similarities between Hitman and Kane & Lynch end, however. In fact, this new project actually has much more in common with IO's critically acclaimed 2003 release Freedom Fighters. In that title, players assumed the role of a brave patriot as he fought alongside a group of allies to retake New York City from the Soviets. Though the characters' ultimate goal in Kane & Lynch may not be so noble, many of the mechanics players will use to achieve it will be quite familiar, right down to the control scheme. "We really didn't want to stray too far from the Freedom Fighters controls because there was so much praise for them working well and being intuitive," reveals producer Hugh Grimley. Specifically, this refers to the way that the player will be able to coordinate efforts with a small group



■ Kane's nose gets broken at some point in the story. No one ever said mercenaries need to be pretty


of improvised allies.

In addition to being saddled with his watchdog Lynch, Kane will also be responsible for a crew of assorted ragtag mercenaries as he tries to reclaim the lost fortune. "I'm very cautious not to call it a squad, because the word 'squad' implies military, and these guys aren't soldiers," Kurup explains. "They don't heed anyone but themselves. They'll obey you, but only because they like the money you can get them, as well as other favors." Issuing commands with the face buttons in real-time, players can order their crew to attack, move to a specified position, or to take cues from Kane's behavior and mimic it – which also doubles as a follow command. In practice, these on-the-fly orders will allow players to effectively control a variety of

situations without ever having to leave the action themselves.

For instance, in one level Kane and Lynch have the task of breaking into a Tokyo office building. It's an assassination/retrieval mission, and Kane has recruited two additional grunts to help out. As you rappel down from the roof in control of Kane, you issue the mimic command to get your three allies to follow. Then, once you break through a window into the crowded boardroom, all hell breaks loose. In the firefight that ensues, there's no time to be wading through menus or maps to position your crew, so the aiming reticle also acts as a kind of pointer. Just set it where you want your troops to go, hit the move button, and then just keep shooting.

■ Players will have control over the camera, though it will often rotate to give them a more cinematic perspective



Sending your whole force to the same location isn't usually the best move, though, so it will be important to issue commands individually. "Basic crew AI is based on fire, movement, and flanking," Grimley tells us. "You can use one unit to draw their fire, and another to creep up on their position and flank them." After crashing into the boardroom, the player can flank the enemies and clear them out in a matter of seconds by quickly sending a goon to either side of the area, then advancing with Lynch, gunning down foes during the whole process. While strategic positioning will be crucial, the team doesn't want to make a game bogged down in tactics like *Full Spectrum Warrior*; it's a fast-paced action game, first and foremost. "It's a very raw shooter. Big guns in international cities. Lots of blood and smoke," details Kurup.

While providing a steady flow of action, each mission will offer small moments of respite to recuperate and reorganize before the next assault. Once you've cleared the boardroom, it takes a minute or two for the building's other guards to breach the door and try to take you down. It's during these breathers that you'll want to switch weapons for the next segment. However, since IO wants to do a game with no menu screens at all (in sharp contrast to the *Hitman* series),



■ The crew that Kane and Lynch have for this mission is one of the best in the game. There are only two of them, but they're smart and efficient



■ The movie *Heat* has served as an inspiration to IO in terms of gameplay and visual style



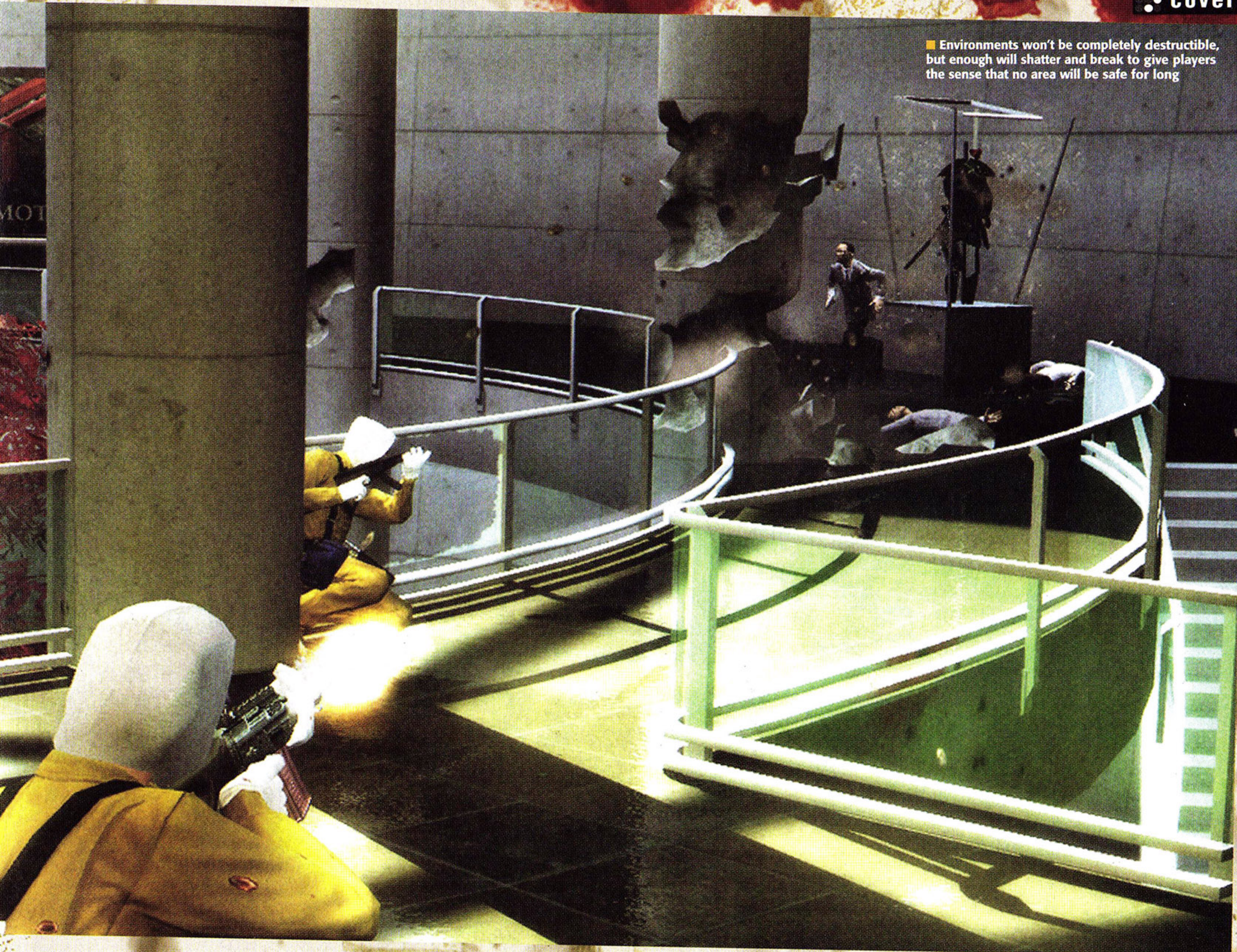
■ The cover mechanic won't require any special button presses. The game will sense when you're behind cover and adjust your position and firing style accordingly



the idea of working together even finds its way into how you arm yourself. In addition to aiding you in combat, your allies essentially act as a mobile inventory. Kane can only carry a few weapons at a time, but at any point he'll be able to go to his companions and trade out with them. So, if you think you'll need a sniper rifle later, but don't want it for a close-quarters firefight, give it to one of your cronies and make sure he stays alive until you need it back. "It frees up the game design because we don't have to worry about having stashes all over a level," Kurup admits. "You just start out with enough stuff."

By issuing orders for concerted assaults and sharing weapons, Kane & Lynch is stressing cooperation, but there are situations where the game needs to emphasize the fact that your characters don't really enjoy working together — especially where Lynch is concerned. The assault in the boardroom, as described, appears to be a

■ Environments won't be completely destructible, but enough will shatter and break to give players the sense that no area will be safe for long



successful operation. In reality, the situation may not be so clean considering the fact that every act of violence Lynch commits brings him one step closer to a murderous frenzy that his medication can't contain.

While in his berserk state, Lynch will often forsake his favorite shotgun in favor of his bare hands, repeatedly bashing skulls into the ground and relying on his brute strength. These episodes don't just happen in an instant; players will be able to tell when one is coming by paying attention to Lynch's mannerisms. If he is standing normally and responding to commands, he's fine. On the other hand, if he's swaying, humming, and not immediately carrying out orders, then you know to be prepared. While you're laying down suppressing fire or securing an area, he might just rush forward into a guarded room, or kill a sentry as you're trying to sneak by. In general, he becomes a loose cannon that can muck up the works when precision is required.

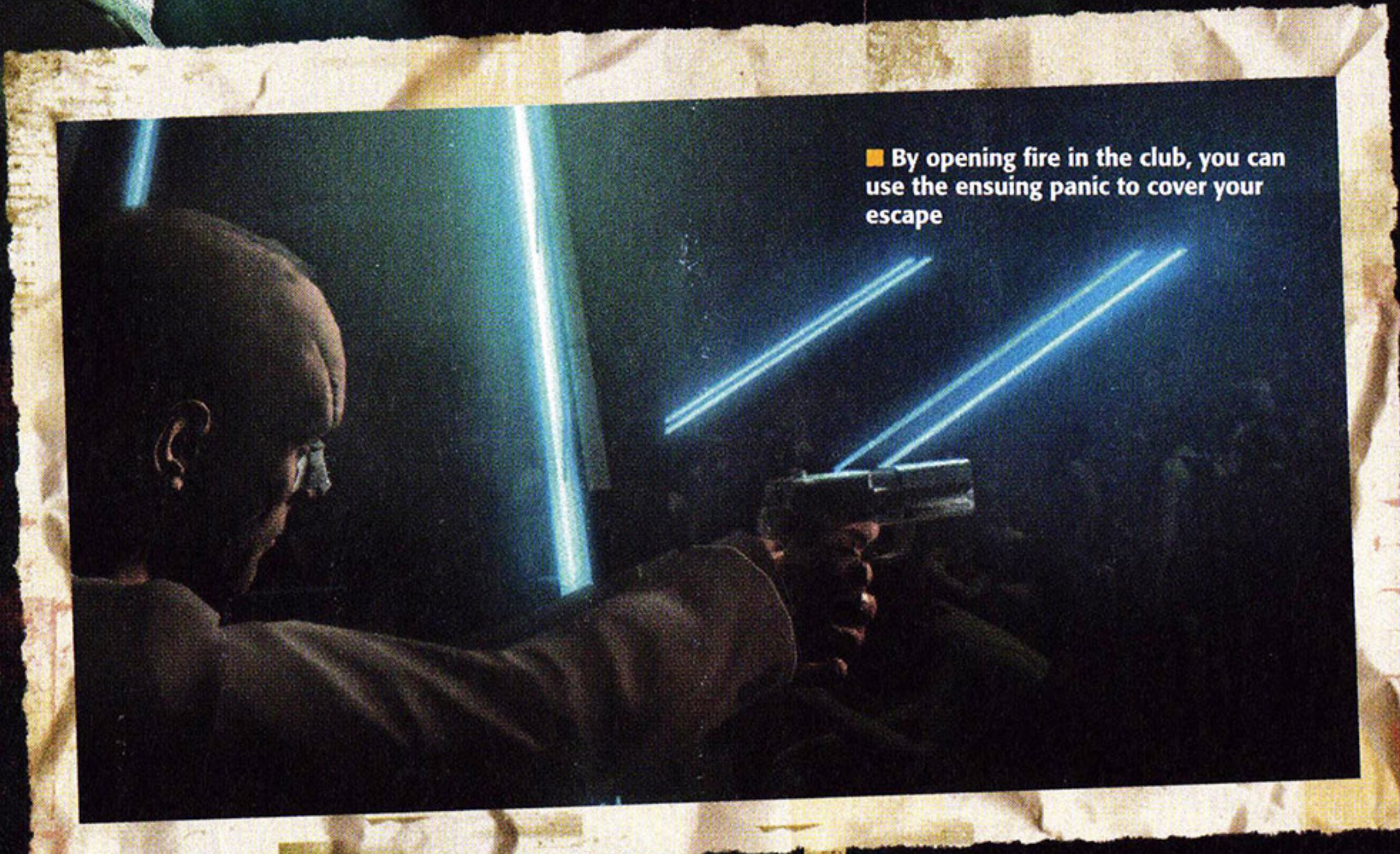
"He's a medicated psychopath," reiterates Kurup.

"If he's in his state, he may attack without orders. You might have to give him an order a few times before he does it. He probably won't want to give you his shotgun." This sort of temperament may coincide with Lynch's character, but an erratic and uncontrollable teammate has the potential to be incredibly frustrating for players – a fact that has not escaped the development team. As a solution, IO will implement a system so players will be able to manually bring Lynch back to reality if the moment is particularly bad for him to go nuts. The idea is for the episodes to happen often enough to convey Lynch's instability while keeping the mechanic from becoming intrusive. "We don't want him to do it in the middle of important events," says Kurup, "but in the calmer areas, he can flake."

Because Lynch is a huge liability, there's only one way to ensure that players can trust him: put him in the hands of a friend. Working together is an important theme in Kane & Lynch, so the game will feature a fully integrated split-screen co-op mode

that can be activated at the beginning of any level. Lynch is slightly stronger and slower than Kane (not to mention the whole crazy thing), but overall the core game is the same whether you choose to play solo or co-op. The differences between the two characters are not so pronounced as to change your tactics – kind of like the Ken versus Ryu situation in the original Street Fighter II. Plus, despite a few instances where Kane and Lynch are separated, the levels will remain practically identical. "There are only a few scenarios in the game where we make a co-op version and a single-player version, but we're not trying to make it two separate experiences," comments Kurup.

That isn't to say that co-op isn't receiving any special attention. On the contrary, rather than make two separate campaigns, the team is ensuring that the whole game will be conducive to both styles of play while delivering very similar gameplay. Pieces of paper with the phrase "Remember co-op!" are posted on cubicles throughout IO's studio as



The Fourth Wall

To make Kane & Lynch as immersive and cinematic as possible, the team at IO has decided to steer clear of lengthy mission briefing screens, menus, or other interruptions that take the player out of the experience. As a result, the complicated histories of both Kane and Lynch are revealed in ways that feel more natural in the context of the story. The bickering and banter between the two main characters will give reminders as to what the current objective is, as well as clues and insight into the events of their troubled past. Cutscenes will also provide hints, but they are mainly centered around the situation at hand rather than what happened years ago. The main vehicle for delivering the backstory comes in the form of near-death experiences. When your character is injured and near death, he will be immobilized as he waits for an adrenaline shot from an ally. During this incapacitation, players will hear audio flashbacks highlighting important experiences from the past, including how Kane got involved with The Seven and how he became estranged from his family. These sequences don't exactly provide incentive to take damage and die, but they represent an intriguing method of utilizing storytelling opportunities.

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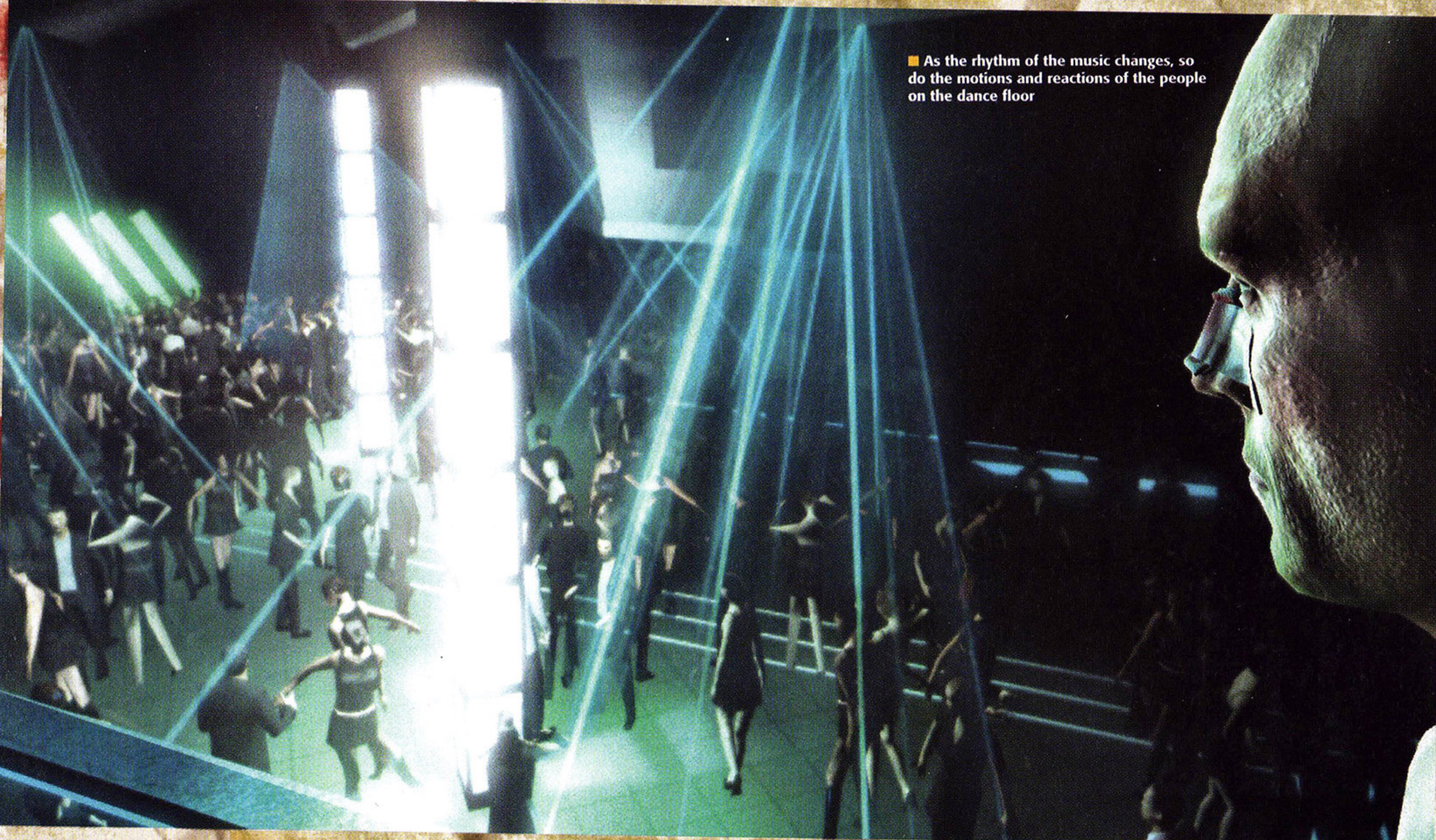
a physical reminder of this goal, but the game's checkpoint system is the best representation of this philosophy in practice.

Very often in co-op action games, there is a tendency for one player to spearhead an assault while the second plays back-up. This presents a sort of catch-up mechanic, where both players are never really moving and attacking together. Though this method is organized and increases your odds of survival, it also makes players very conscious of the fact that they are exploiting a system within a game. To counter this feeling, as well as foster a sense of cooperation, Kane & Lynch will use a different approach. "We don't have catch-ups like Halo – we have waypoints," Kurup asserts. "It's the only thing we can do to keep the experiences close to each other." These waypoints are essentially pockets of action where players are faced with challenges together, not just when one player steps over an invisible line. Rather than have a constant flow of cannon fodder charging at you, the major combat scenes are broken into discrete bursts that force players to move and fight together to survive. In that way, a level can be viewed as a series of critical encounters rather than a non-stop dash to the finish.

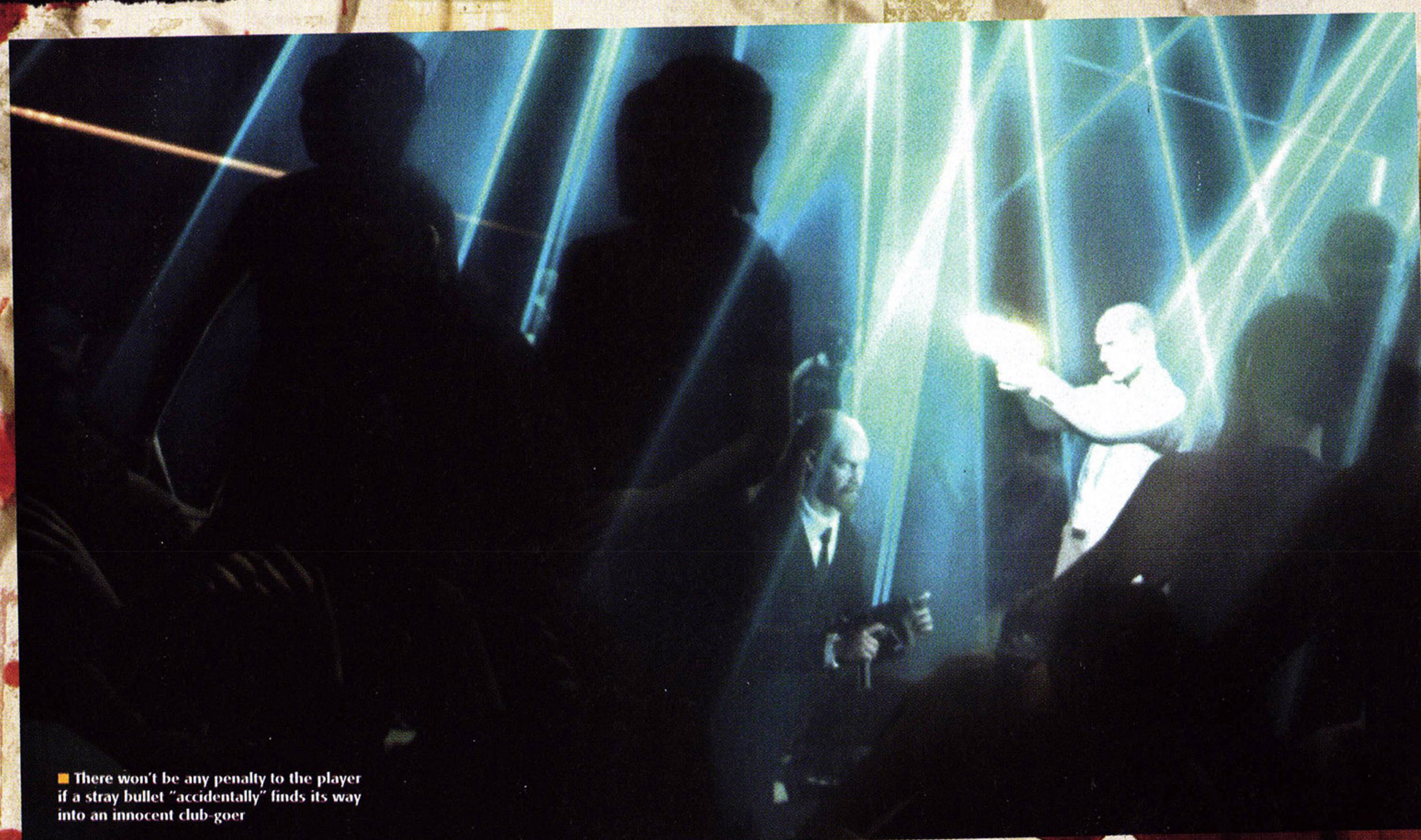
Even in light of the game's reluctant leading duo and its spirit of cooperation, Kane & Lynch isn't entirely a two-man show; the co-op mode will hinge just as much on managing your crew of hired hands as your

ability to work together. In single player, Kane has control of Lynch, as well as any goons they have with them (there can be as many as 12). In co-op, each player starts out with command of half of the troops, though it is possible for players to intentionally reassign some men to their partner. For example, if you run into a choke point like a bridge, you wouldn't want to take your whole force across only to have them shot at the bottleneck. In this scenario, one player would assign all mercenaries to the other (by issuing the "move" command while targeting the other character), then advance to the other side of the bridge to remove the threat and make it safe for everyone to cross.

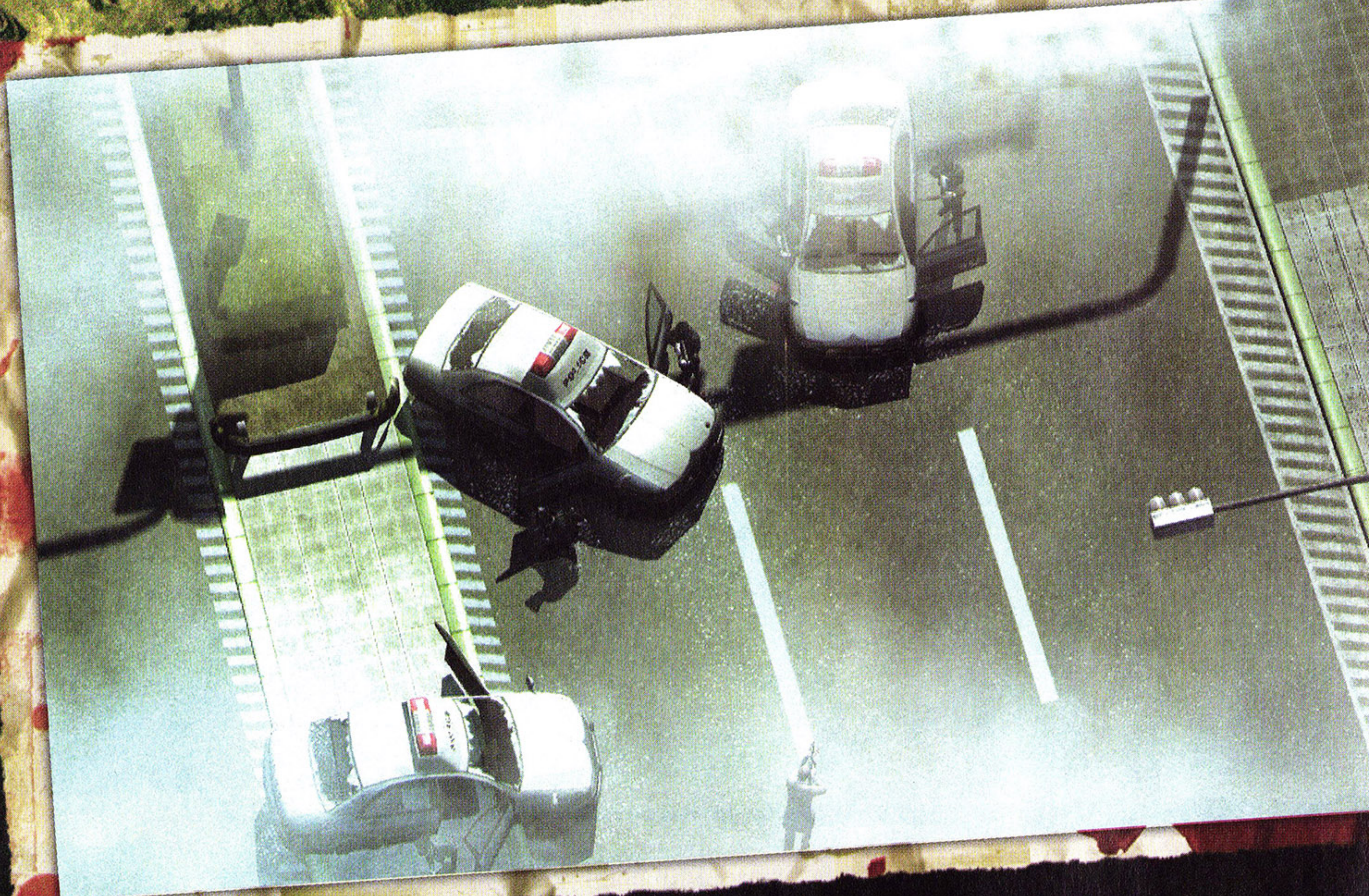
It is this consideration for your crew that ultimately makes Kane & Lynch a different breed of third-person action game. They aren't just generic tagalong bullet shields; you'll need them to maintain the upper hand. Even so, any gamer can tell you that babysitting inept allies who constantly grenade themselves isn't exactly fun, which is why the team at IO is taking careful steps to make sure that your crew is an asset, not a problem. "They're all pretty good at keeping themselves alive," Grimley assures us. "There is a whole system that determines how smart they are, which kind of close combat they use, how skilled they are, how faithful they are, how they react to fear. Some of the guys are very good under pressure, others get stuck." This also means that as players progress through the game, they will notice a marked increase in the effectiveness of their allies, since Kane is slowly gaining notoriety and earns the clout to recruit better assistance. But even in the early levels, your makeshift army is fully capable of tactical moves like flanking and drawing fire, so you'll never be left high and dry with a handful of cowards.



■ As the rhythm of the music changes, so do the motions and reactions of the people on the dance floor



■ There won't be any penalty to the player if a stray bullet "accidentally" finds its way into an innocent club-goer

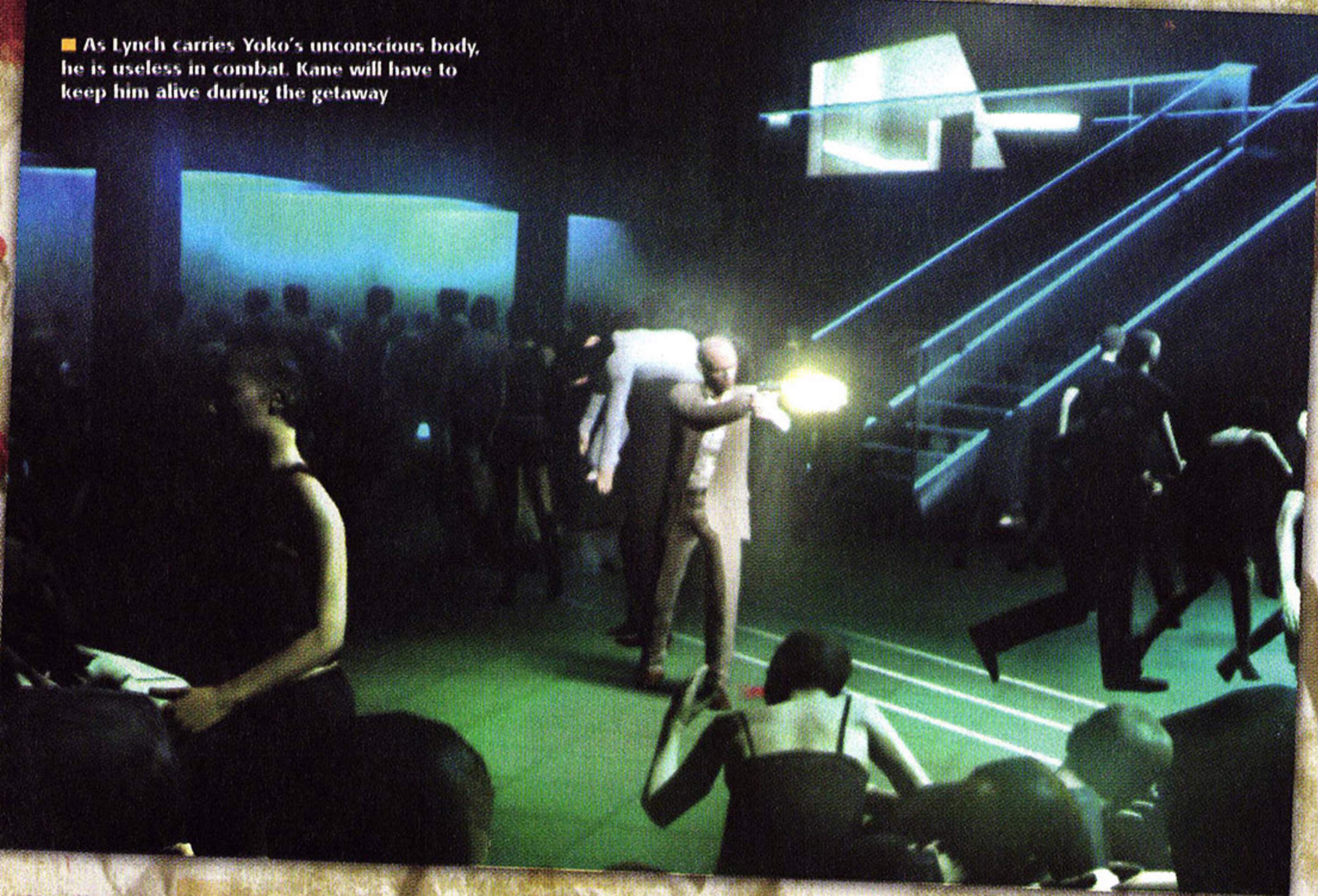


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The majority of Kane & Lynch's gameplay will center around the crew mechanics, but there are also missions where the two titular criminals take care of business themselves. In one stage, the duo walks into a crowded nightclub with the intention of kidnapping the proprietor, Yoko. In addition to being a visually stunning area (fully populated with hundreds of patrons moving in time with the music), the nightclub also demonstrates the fact that gameplay in Kane & Lynch will not constantly be focused on group firepower. This level is more subdued, relying on the ambience of the flashing lights and thumping bass to establish the anticipation. The goal is to move through the club and get upstairs without being noticed by security, but it isn't quite stealth-based, since you won't be crouching and ducking behind pillars. It's more like hiding in plain sight in the middle of a crowd.

"This is about as far away from the Freedom Fighters formula we get," Kurup asserts. "Whenever we talk about sneak or stealth at IO, it takes on a meaning that is linked to Hitman. It isn't in this game." Of course, an entire level of just walking from place to place doesn't really get the blood pumping, and it doesn't take long before things get difficult for Kane and Lynch.

■ As Lynch carries Yoko's unconscious body, he is useless in combat. Kane will have to keep him alive during the getaway



After making it to Yoko's room, Lynch loses it and punches the woman out (he ran out of his pills), forcing the two of them to find a way out of the club with an unconscious body. This is not an easy task to complete unnoticed, and eventually culminates in a disastrous shootout on the dance floor.

Throughout the course of the game's estimated 12-hour length, players will experience a variety of scenarios like these aimed at keeping the campaign fresh and unpredictable as Kane and Lynch try to become slightly less reprehensible people. In the end, only the player will be able to decide if they succeed. But once the adventure is done, there is still one avenue you can explore with Kane & Lynch: multiplayer. Most of the details on this mode are still locked down by IO, but we did learn a few tantalizing clues as to what we can expect. The team promises that online matches will be unlike anything else attempted before, integrating several of the game's main themes into short three or four minute matches. Supporting up to eight players, the game will initially ship with four multiplayer maps, though more will eventually be made avail-

able for purchase online for PC or through Xbox Live Marketplace. There's even a chance you'll be able to get these maps from Sony's next-gen online service, since the possibility of Kane & Lynch hitting the PlayStation 3 hasn't been ruled out. As an Eidos representative cryptically stated, the game is "Xbox 360 and PC for sure, with more to follow."

Regardless of which consoles Kane and Lynch land on next year, gamers can look forward to a gritty and stylized look at two mismatched partners – like *The Odd Couple* with fewer laughs and more murder. "Unless you go in the direction of comedy – if you're doing *48 Hours* – then you can have good guys," Kurup jokes. "Otherwise, it's more interesting to explore the dark areas. If Kane were to be a fugitive cop, I'm pretty sure I know what he would do throughout the whole game. As it is, I really don't know

what Kane and Lynch are capable of." Neither do we, but between one's calculated anger and the other's beastly fury, we can't wait to explore the possibilities. ■■■



■ Kane and Lynch are skilled at using sniper rifles, shotguns, and rocket launchers, as well your everyday machine gun

TUROK

It's a franchise that's seen more than its share of ups and downs. Many gamers recall the raw excitement of high caliber weaponry and fearsome prehistoric beasts. Those same players might also wish to forget some of the entries in the series – titles that failed to live up to the potential of the idea. But if the young and ambitious crew at Propaganda Studios has anything to say about it, they're ready to do more than just meet the potential presented by Turok. They want to set a new high bar. From only four startup members, the studio has ballooned out to over one hundred employees. Now they inhabit multiple floors of this building that overlooks the Vancouver skyline and the distant edges of the Pacific Ocean. From here, they want to chart out the future of gaming's dinosaur hunter – to establish a new vision for the character yet remain true to the heritage from which it emerged. During our visit, it was a chance to see into the minds of a team of developers as they contemplate the future and figure out what gamers will want over a year from now, when the game releases. It was an opportunity to see a new developer with ambitions to shoot straight to the top with a triple-A title. But, more than anything, our day at Propaganda let us see how Turok might finally be emerging from the fog, better than ever, and heading forward into a new generation of gaming.

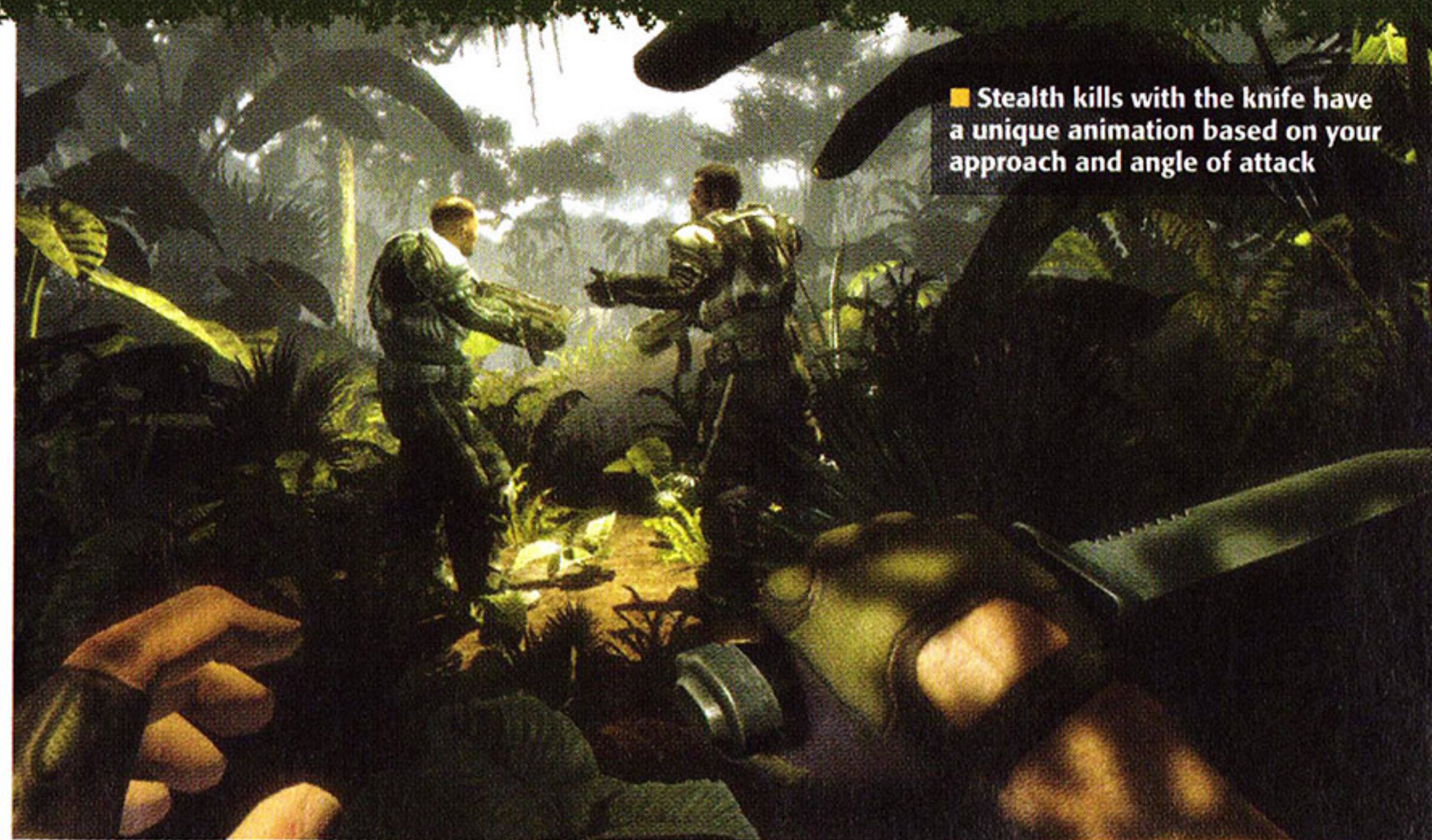


PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360
> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (MULTIPLAYER TBD)
> **PUBLISHER** BUENA VISTA GAMES
> **DEVELOPER** PROPAGANDA GAMES
> **RELEASE** FALL 2007

HEART OF DARKNESS



■ Every dinosaur type has their own unique AI. Raptors will use swarming techniques to surround and take down their prey



■ Stealth kills with the knife have a unique animation based on your approach and angle of attack

"We're all big fans of the original Turok games, but like a lot of gamers we were disappointed by the more recent titles and we wanted this game to get back to the things that made the first games so great," we're told by Josh Holmes, general manager of the fledgling studio. "In crafting our concept, we tried to capture the spirit of both the original comic book series and the N64 games while breathing new life into the franchise." They knew the game had to be a first person shooter. For a time, the team had brainstormed of branching out into some variation of third person gameplay, but it became clear very quickly that only an FPS would do. Next, the character had to be a Native American named Turok. And finally, there had to be lots and lots of dinosaurs. Using these basic cornerstones that players expect from any Turok game, the team began to craft a new take on the basic premise. Joseph Turok is a former black ops soldier, a toughened and haunted warrior in a gritty future where machine guns and rocket launchers still rule the battlefield, rather than the sleek laser pistols of some sci-fi worlds. After some time away from the service, Turok is brought back in with a single purpose: to aid in the hunt for his old mentor and

"The game experience is about surviving the nightmare of your surroundings while coming to terms with your own internal demons."

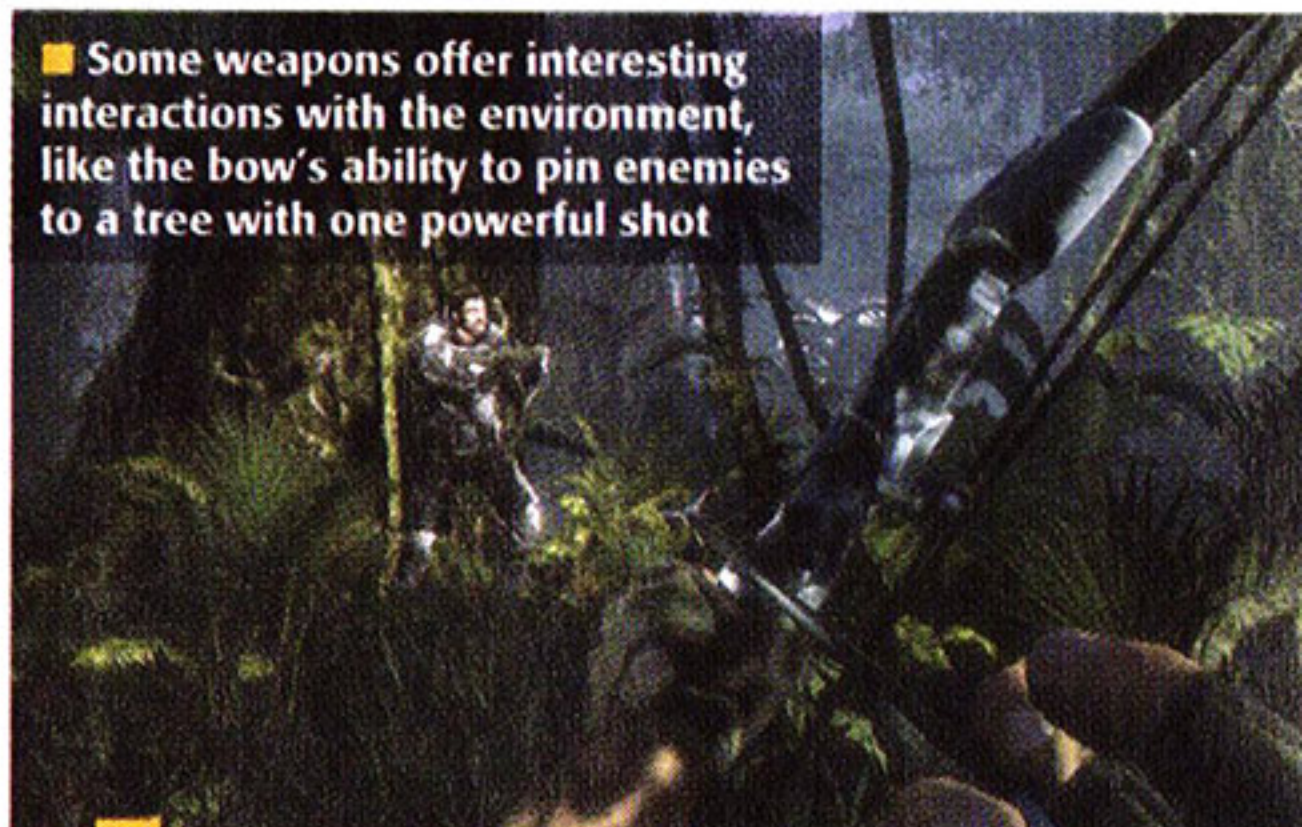
commander, Roland Kane. Joining the specially trained Whiskey Company, Turok is sent deep into space to a strange planet where Kane is rumored to have set up base. Arrival does not go as planned. The ship is shot down, Whiskey Company is scattered, and Joseph Turok rapidly learns that the planet is populated by far more deadly foes than his old teammates. In the adventure that unfolds, high action, taut suspense, and sudden horror are carefully balanced to terrify and excite players. "The game experience is about surviving the nightmare of your surroundings while coming to terms with your own internal demons," Holmes says. "These themes are reflected in the look of the game."

While Holmes admits to modeling Whiskey Company after famous cinematic adventurers like those of the *Dirty Dozen*

or the space marine squad in *Aliens*, the single player experience will be exactly that – single. While teammates will fight and protect you, this is the story of Turok the soldier. He's not in command, so players won't be giving orders. Instead, you'll have to choose your own path through the game. A big part of gameplay involves observation and knowing when to pull out the big guns and when to keep quiet. "We're certainly creating an action-oriented gameplay experience. With that in mind, we have a full suite of weapons that deliver the sort of excessive firepower that has long been the hallmark of the Turok series," Holmes relays to us. "At the same time, we are creating strategic gameplay opportunities and choices within each battle set-up. Players are able to approach a battle

in different ways depending on their particular style of play, and stealth is one such option available to the player. However, our vision of stealth is much more fast-paced and action-oriented than other dedicated stealth games." In keeping with tradition, Turok will use a bow and arrow to silently strike his opponents, even pinning them to trees with a carefully aimed shot. Likewise, knife kills will be essential when gunfire simply isn't a viable option. Of course, at other times, nothing will do but to go in guns blazing. And what a selection there will be to choose from.

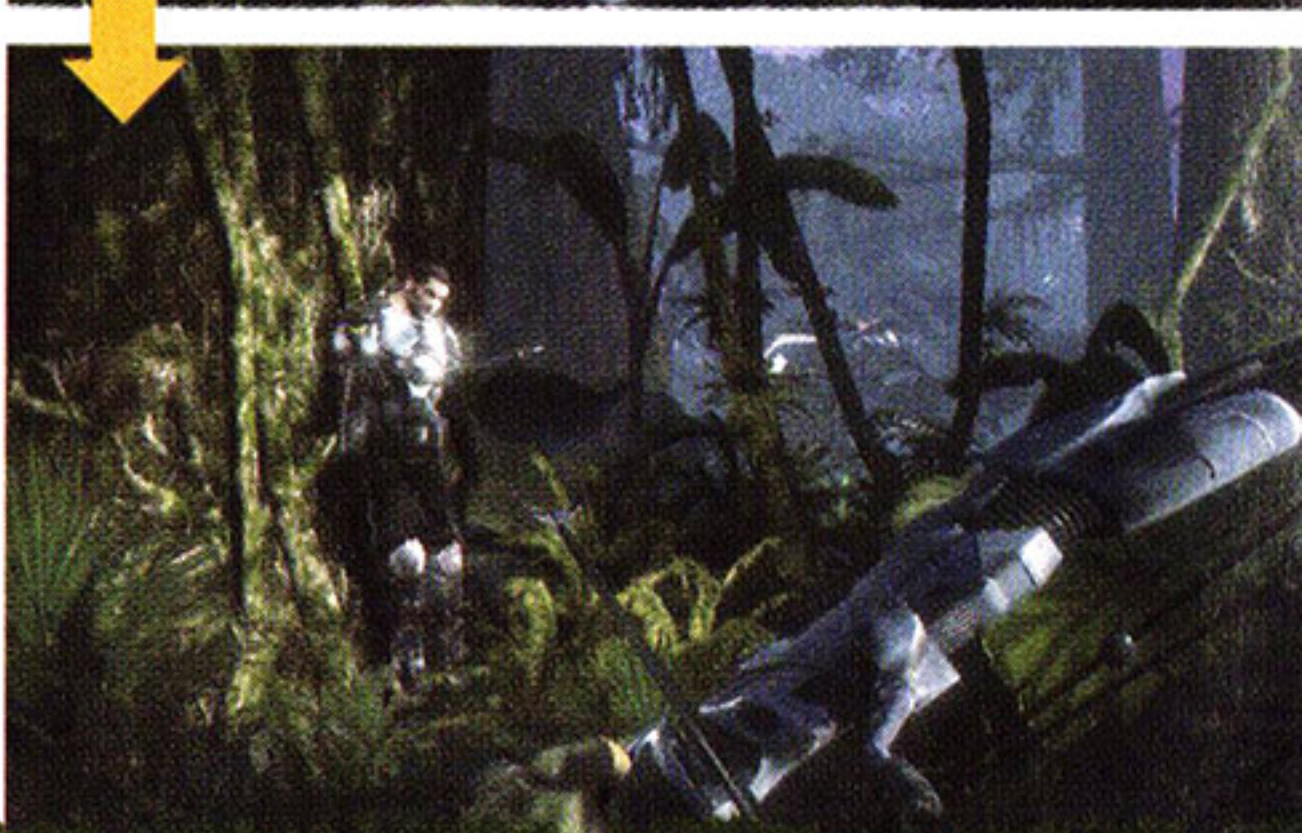
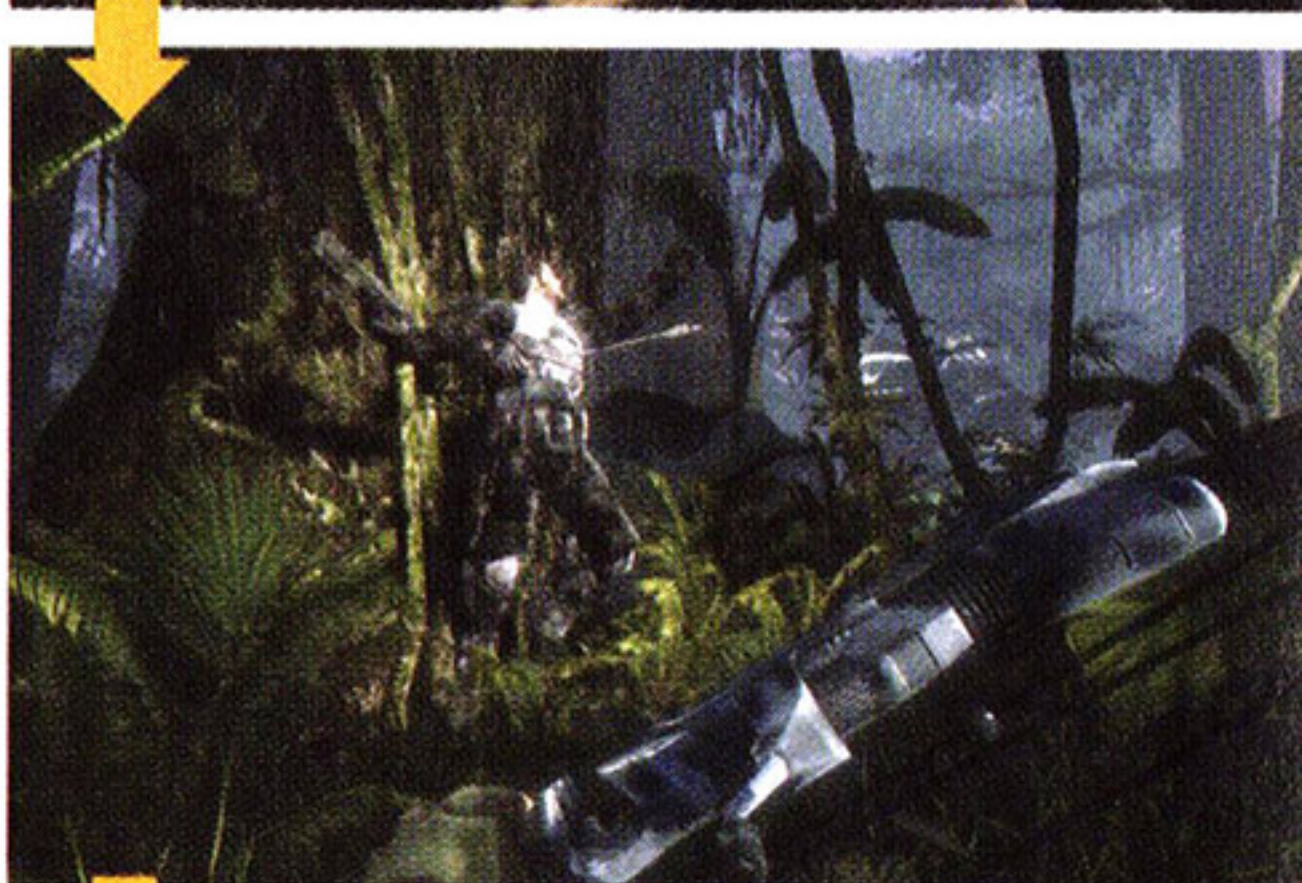
Every weapon in the game has both a primary and secondary fire. Plus, most small arms can be dual-wielded for added flexibility. A basic SMG can switch into a silenced mode. The flamethrower doubles as a napalm grenade launcher. Your mini-gun can be thrown to the ground and



■ Some weapons offer interesting interactions with the environment, like the bow's ability to pin enemies to a tree with one powerful shot



■ The napalm grenade is exactly what you think and hope it will be



deployed as an AI controlled turret. There's an RPG, a sniper rifle, a triple barreled shotgun, and even a strange robotic variation on the tazer. Each weapon is designed for simplicity and intense destructive capability. There's even an automatic fire shotgun with a secondary flare gun option.

What use can a flare gun be? It's this element of gameplay that is perhaps the most exciting and compelling addition. As the screens that fill these pages attest, dinosaurs are an ever present threat to everyone on the battlefield. Blissfully unaware of who or what they eat or trample, the prehistoric beasts are easy to distract and use to your advantage. "Creatures in the game are designed to be intelligent predatory animals; as such they are driven by instinct and will often go after the nearest threat or food source," Holmes explains. "The player can take advantage of this, luring creatures to attack other enemies, turning them into a highly effective weapon. A big part of the game experience is learning the individual characteristics of different creatures and how best to manipulate their natural behavioral tendencies. This provides an awesome 'sandbox' element to the gameplay."

The luring mechanic allowed by a bright flare or sudden noise is the perfect chance to turn a hungry creature away from you and towards a crowd of enemy humans. Now consider that there are sticky flares that attach to any object or person they hit, and you can begin to realize the possibilities. While the flare is a particularly fun option, almost any weapon can be utilized this way. Lodge a few bullets in the hindquarters of a T-Rex, and he'll surely turn around and go for that crowd of soldiers. Cause an explosion across the clearing, and that raptor pack will certainly go investigate.

In fact, every creature in the game will have its own unique AI system to govern its actions. Raptors work in packs to surround and defeat you, or defend their precious nests. More advanced spitting raptors expel a sticky goo to ensnare you. Once you have been entrapped, the AI of the other spitting raptors will actually speed up their attacks as they go in for the kill. The mammoth mauler dinosaurs are a halfway point between the raptors and the larger T-Rexes. Maulers move with furious powerful motions, flinging men aside with their powerful jaws. All of these carnivores of the jungle are modeled to be more than the Jurassic Park rip-offs we've come to expect. Instead, the team has ingrained a frantic, scrambling mentality to relay their endless hunger. Think of the desperate, sketchy run of the zombies in *28 Days Later*, or the seething fervor of Resident Evil 4's townspeople, and you'll have an idea of what to expect from Turok's reptilian foes. Make a mistake during a fight, and you risk getting mauled by one of these frightening creatures. For a brief moment, the camera will pan back to third person

■ It wouldn't be Turok without awesome weapons



■ While the dinosaurs are certainly amazing, your real enemies are the soldiers of Roland Kane



and you'll watch as a raptor goes for your throat. Only a savage assault with your knife might convince it to withdraw, or kill it outright. "We wanted close encounters with the dinosaurs and other creatures in the game to be scary on a 'soil-your-pants' level," Holmes tells us, only half-joking. "When some of the creatures in our game attack you, they are able to knock you down and begin gnawing on you, prompting a life and death struggle to break free. Being mauled by a raptor is like having a 400-pound reptilian pit bull going for your throat." Beyond the land dinos, other natural dangers await. Pteranodons roam the sky, swooping down to strike at you. Giant bugs wander the planet, in many cases as scared of light as the dinosaurs are quick to seek it out. Man-killing plants lie in wait along your path. Plus, massive brachiosaurs and other herbivores can be equally

useful in creating distractions, luring away carnivores, or for use as cover. Manage to get two competing species into the same space as each other, and they'll almost certainly fight for the territory.

While the simple-minded creature AI should offer no end of fun, the human AI is sophisticated and deliberate. "With the humans, we are creating an intelligent goal-oriented system that makes use of complex squad tactics and a robust cover system," Holmes explains. Enemy soldiers will advance and surround you, all the while using cover to stay hidden. Individual human enemies will communicate with their companions. Taking out their leader has the potential to disorient and slow down their attack. These are AI fundamentals that most gamers have seen before, but rarely implemented with a skill that relays this level of constant urgency and

action. The firefights we witnessed were fast and bloody, made all the more insane thanks to the frequent interruption of starving dinosaurs that attack anyone foolish enough not to retreat.

As these battles play out, it would be easy to forget something you're not seeing — a regular HUD. Opting for a popular approach these days, the Turok team is aiming to eliminate as much of the heads-up display as possible. Your recharging health isn't a meter, but is simply communicated to players through an ever increasing blur in the periphery of the screen, until a blood haze overwhelms you into a game over. It's indicative of an overall strategy to constantly involve the player in the game, not in the abstractions of menus or meters. Even the front-end opening of the game doesn't play out like a traditional menu. Constantly changing cinematic back-

■ "The single-player game includes a fair amount of vehicle play, offering both driving and rail shooting opportunities," Josh Holmes tells us. In our time at the studio, we saw three varieties of vehicles; the Jeep pictured here, a smaller ATV, and the multipedal tank that you can spy in the background of the opening pages of this article. Whatever you drive, you'll be able to jump in the driver's seat in both single and multiplayer

■ In the game, being mauled by a raptor is a moment of pure terror, just as it should be

grounds mesh with the branching menus to create a feeling not unlike your favorite DVD openers. "The goal for the front end is to create a completely immersive cinematic experience that reflects the storyline and emotional tone of the game," Holmes relays. "So from the first moment you boot the game up, you are thrust into the world and story of Turok, and from that point on the front end evolves in tandem to your progress through the game."

We were overjoyed to find that these menus lead to more than a single-player

story. A huge focus is being placed on bringing the same dark and dangerous sensibilities to several multiplayer modes within the game. First up was the best surprise – the announcement that Turok will include online cooperative play, for well more than two players, even though the exact number hasn't yet been nailed down. Because of the solitary nature of Turok's story, the main campaign won't include co-op, but separate objective-based scenarios are being crafted specifically to allow dinosaur-hunting action with

your buddies. Alternately, competitive multiplayer is getting the full treatment as well. In addition to all the basic variations on deathmatch, team deathmatch, and capture the flag, more objective-based games will encourage careful teamwork and planning. As an example, you might be tasked with infiltrating an enemy base, a goal that can be satisfied by hacking into the computers or by the less subtle approach of tracking down some explosives to blow the door. But what if the explosives were only to be found at your less than friendly neighborhood raptor nest? As it turns out, all the multiplayer modes will be invaded by the same ravenous creatures that fill the single player game. The standard CTF variant gets a lot more interesting when a

wandering T-Rex joins the party. Dinosaurs will never fight for one side or another. In any given map, they'll randomly show up, often in different places each time, adding chaos to a conflict that is already likely to be filled with explosions and gunfire.

Whether in single or multiplayer, it almost seems at times that Turok himself takes a backseat to a more important character – the world of the game. Turok was once called revolutionary because it was the first game to present distance fog and use it in a way that became part of gameplay, as dinosaurs would emerge from the gray mists in a terrifying blood rush. These days, distance fog is far from innovative – it's a game killer. Instead, the heavily modded version of Unreal Engine 3 that the new



■ One of the most original and fun aspects of gameplay is the ability to lure creatures into taking out your enemies for you

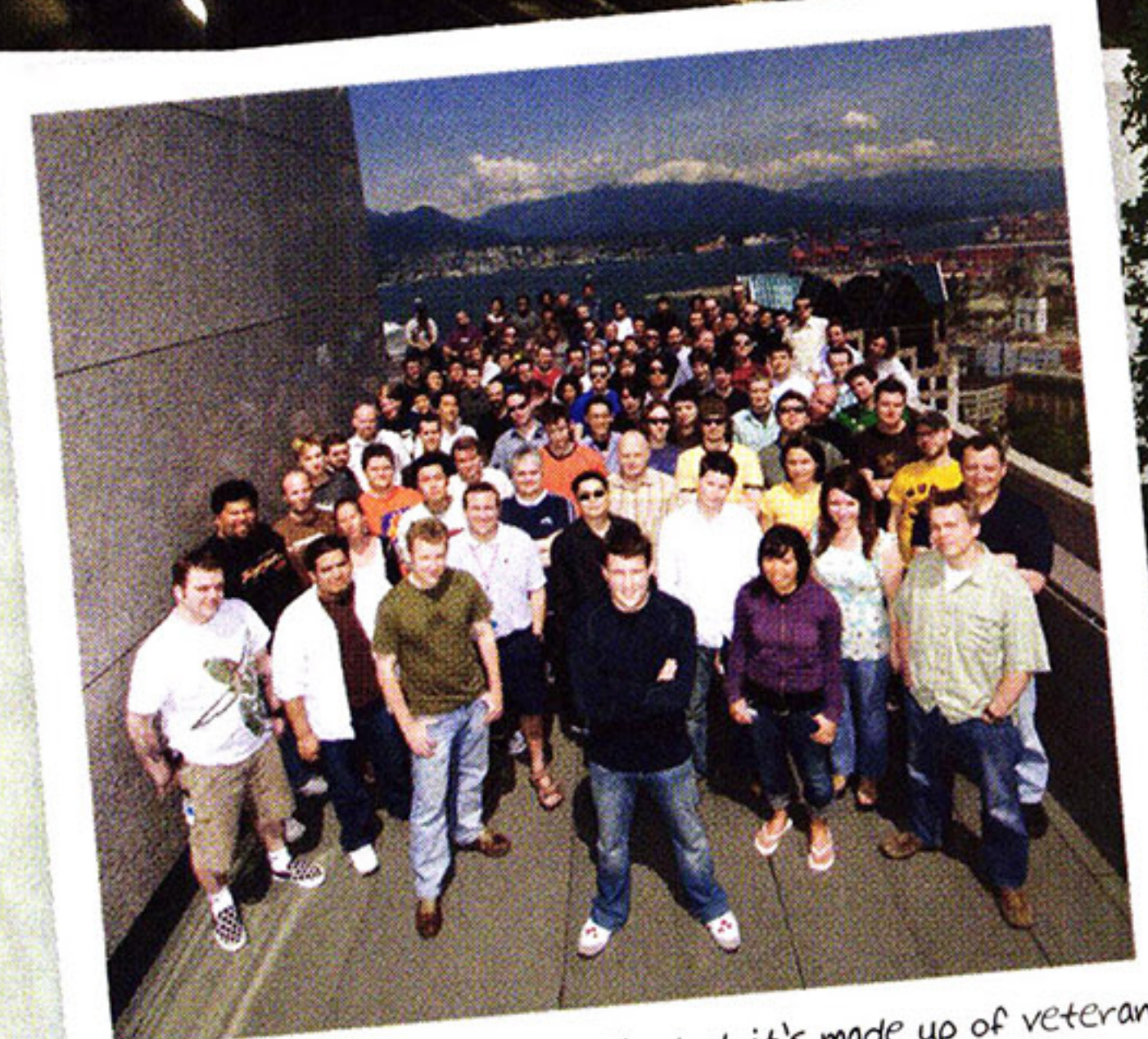


Turok game uses allows the designers to create the same tension through careful use of light and shadows to create limited visibility. Plants and rock shapes in the environment are crafted to look like shadowy dinosaur heads and claws. Just when you convince yourself to relax, one of these still shapes will strike out and reveal itself as a stalking hunter-killer. Jungles, caves, and swamps dot the landscape. Everything is huge, dense, wet, alive, and diseased – a nightmarish twist on the beauty of a rain forest. The inhabiting humans have carved out massive bunkers, designed not just to halt a human assault but to hold back the encroaching forests and massive native creatures. And the entire game is supported by an incredible array of jungle

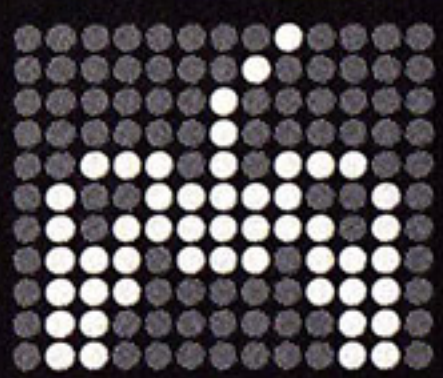
sounds and silences – moments of aural terror punctuated by animal roars and screaming weapon fire. The tribal-meets-modern music of the game is totally adaptive – layers and layers of melodies and harmonies weave in and out of the score in response to the onscreen action, subtly setting the mood that the designers are shooting for.

While it took us a full day at Propaganda's new offices to glean all this info, it was at an end of the day design meeting that we learned the most telling and promising feature of the game. As we listened to the designers debating, team members constantly seemed to return to one point – what do players want? As the team flowed from discussing a newly

added boss fight to the structure of an underground level to what weapons should be available near the end of the game, we repeatedly heard different team leads pipe up with the question of how best to provide a fun experience. As the debut game for a brand new developer, this new face of Turok will surely have plenty of doubts to overcome before receiving the critical praise it is striving for. But while there's well over a year before we'll know whether Propaganda Studios has all the right answers to return Turok to its former glory, one thing is clear: they seem to be asking the right questions. ■ ■ ■

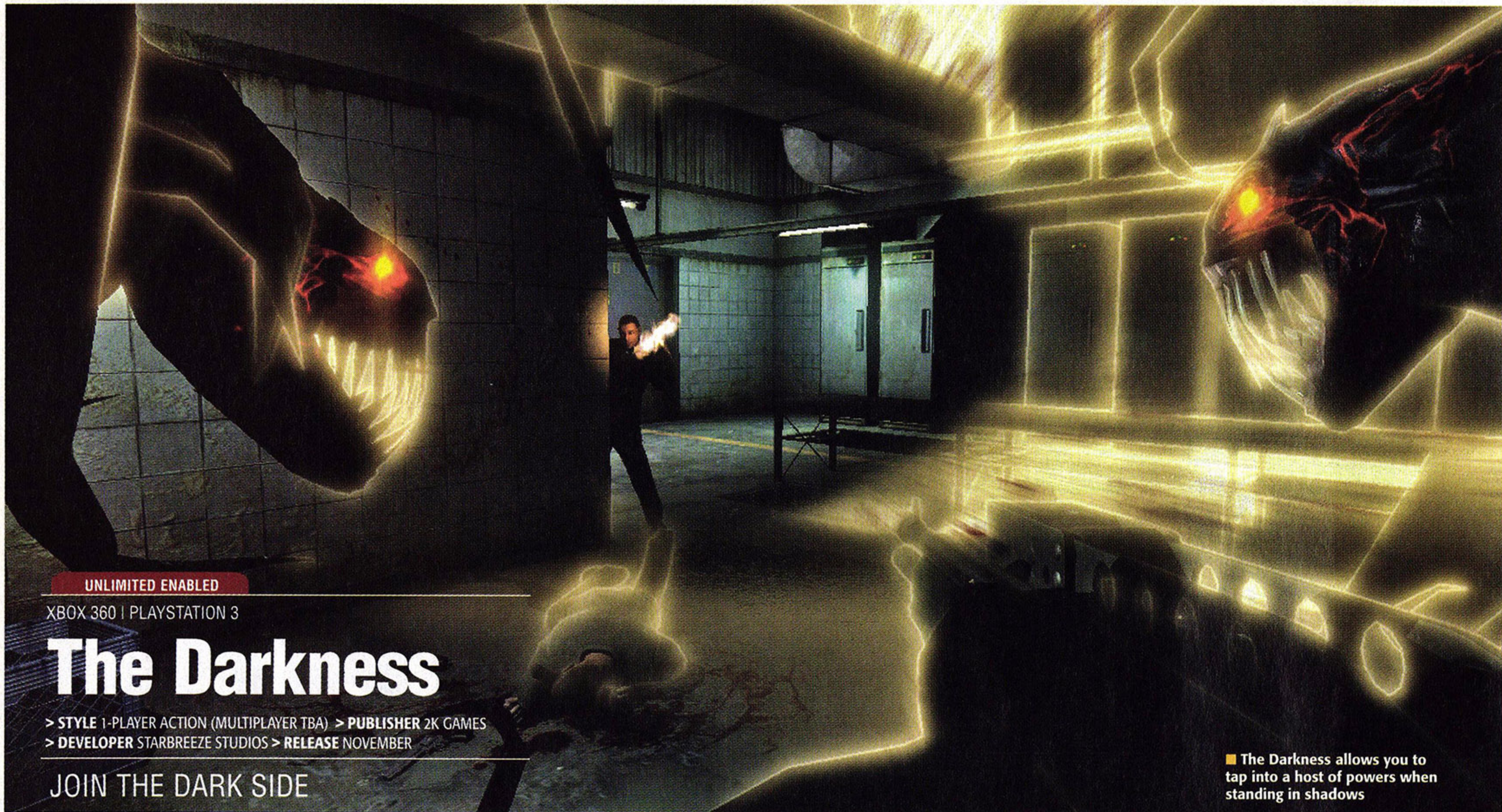


Propaganda may be a new studio, but it's made up of veteran game makers from franchises like Splinter Cell, Metroid Prime, Def Jam, Need for Speed, and Prince of Persia



PREVIEWS

A Glimpse Into The Future Of Gaming



UNLIMITED ENABLED

XBOX 360 | PLAYSTATION 3

The Darkness

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (MULTIPLAYER TBA) > PUBLISHER 2K GAMES
> DEVELOPER STARBREEZE STUDIOS > RELEASE NOVEMBER

JOIN THE DARK SIDE

■ The Darkness allows you to tap into a host of powers when standing in shadows

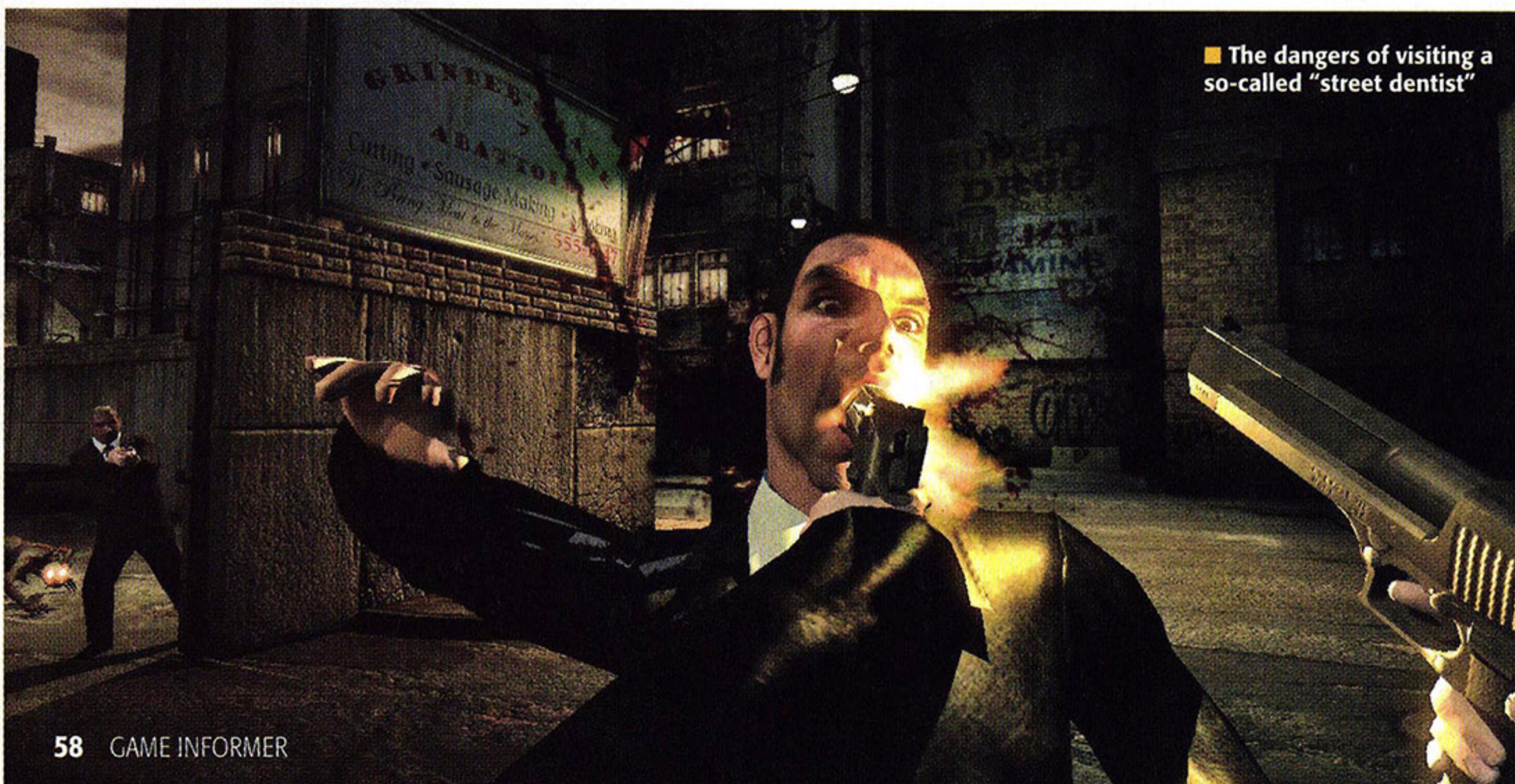
Starbreeze Studios, the development team behind the critically acclaimed *The Chronicles of Riddick: Escape from Butcher Bay*, is hard at work on another title that should appease fans of that game. While *The Darkness* is a separate franchise based on the Top Cow comic series, the game is based on a next-gen version of the Riddick engine; and, like that game, is a first-person shooter heavy on story and unique gameplay elements. As Jackie Estacado, a mafia hitman possessed by an ancient demonic force, players will be able to tap into many abilities beyond those of your average shooter hero.

"Even if *The Darkness* is at its core an FPS, Darkness powers are key," explains lead designer Jens Andersson. "Whenever you find a patch of darkness, or create one by taking out the lights around you, you can go into that

area and press a button to draw power. This protects you and gives you the ability use these spectacular powers, where you can send out tentacles along walls or ceilings, pick up these huge objects to smash your enemies with, or even implode a whole room with people and furniture alike. Another thing we brought over from the comic is the Darklings. These small, mischievous creatures will accompany Jackie. The player can find them in the bodies of really evil people and they are scattered throughout the game for the player to collect. Once found, each specific darkling can be summoned from patches of dark, and they will help Jackie with the means of their disposal, be it a golf club, hammer, or an industrial jackhammer. The game won't force the player to use them, but they will be very effective in certain situations. And they are extremely funny to watch!"

Of course, just because you have supernatural abilities doesn't mean that you won't be relying heavily on your guns. "Since Jackie is a hitman shooting bad guys in New York, we decided against continuing developing the first-person melee fighting from *Riddick*," says Andersson. "But when we had *Darkness* up and running we felt that we really missed those intense first-person moments. Our solution to that was to implement a context-sensitive special attack system that kicks in when you are really close to an enemy. Instead of firing his guns, Jackie will grab hold of an enemy and finish him off."

With special powers and an arsenal of conventional weapons at your disposal, we have no doubt that *The Darkness* will deliver on the action side. But Starbreeze has a few more features in store that should differentiate *The Darkness* from the rest of the shooters on the way. Check out the sidebars for more. ■ ■ ■



■ The dangers of visiting a so-called "street dentist"

TELLING THE STORY

The Chronicles of Riddick was a very story-driven game with a lot of character interaction, and *The Darkness* is taking this to the next level with more people to talk to and a less linear story progression. The characters you'll encounter should seem more lifelike as well, thanks to a procedure that Starbreeze calls Vo-Cap.

"Vo-Cap is the simultaneous capture of the voice, the facial animation, and the body animation of an actor," says art director Jens Matthies. "We did this for every line of dialogue we recorded for the game, allowing us to reproduce the full personality the actor created for their role in-game. The result makes each character in the game appear much more realistic and much more personal since different actors will move and gesture in different ways."



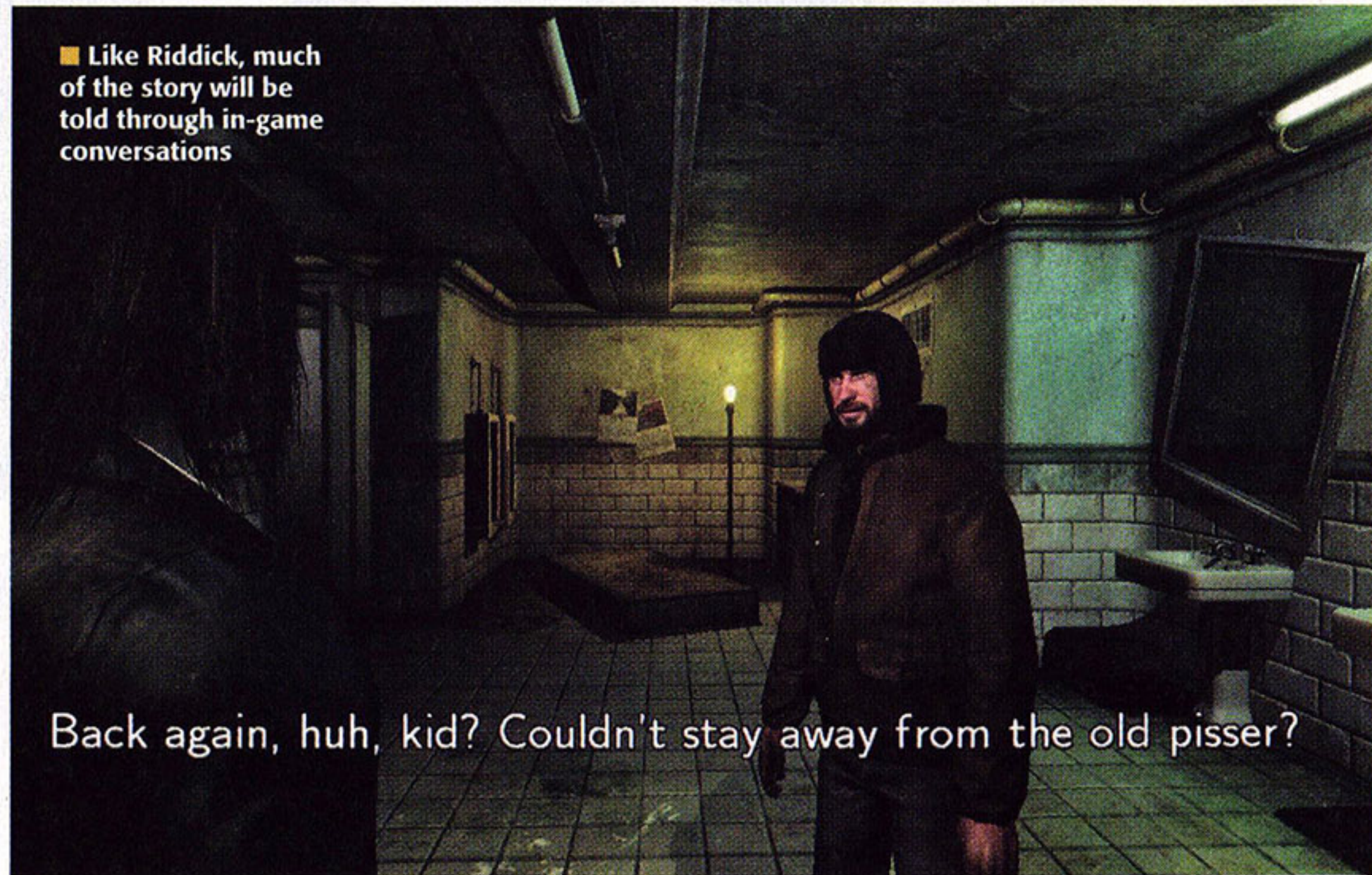
■ Ah, just like home



■ "My favorite food: face!"



■ Darklings can be summoned to help you, and they're both vicious and hilarious



■ Like Riddick, much of the story will be told through in-game conversations

Back again, huh, kid? Couldn't stay away from the old pisser?



TUNE IN

Another fun little feature in the Darkness is something that art director Jens Matthies calls Darkness TV, which adds atmosphere to the game's world. "Just like in real life, if you enter someone's apartment there ought to be a TV, and it should have channels and work as a real TV," he explains. "We might utilize it to give game-specific information to the player, but its main purpose is simply to breathe life into the game. Also, it is always nice to have the option of taking a break from the action and watching a classic."



UNLIMITED ENABLED

XBOX 360

NHL 07

> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER SPORTS (2-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE OR PS2 ONLINE) > **PUBLISHER** EA SPORTS
 > **DEVELOPER** EA CANADA > **RELEASE** FALL

CARRYING A BIG STICK

It's awesome that a year ago hockey fans had nothing at all to celebrate, and now hockey is back and better than ever.

The new rule changes are a resounding success, opening up play without victimizing goalies. Video game hockey is also going through its own set of changes, not the least of which is the move to the next-generation. But unlike other sports that have fared badly their first time on the Xbox 360, NHL 07 is already looking to be more than just a token offering. The development team has made wholesale changes to the franchise that aren't just fixes of past problems, but are instead clear leaps forward for the video game sport as a whole.

In order to replicate how a player handles a hockey stick in real life, the Xbox 360 NHL 07 maps a number of controls to the right analog stick. No longer are dekes automatic set pieces. Instead, you have the freedom to move the twig to your liking and create your own bit of magic. Since both sticks are totally analog, you can easily transition between skating speeds with the left analog or determine how powerful you want your shot to be. Flick the right analog forward for a quick wrist shot or draw it back for a blast from the blue line. You can even use this new control

system to pull off fake shots, shield the puck from defenders, or pop someone with a big check.

In our hands-on time with the next-gen version of the game, the increased freedom and fluidity took a little while to get used to, but we soon took advantage of it. In fact, we never touched a face button the whole time, which made our play and decision-making faster, as you don't have to reposition your thumbs across the controller or worry about getting your buttons mixed up. Other functions like passes, hooks, poke checks, and backwards skating (or strafing on offense) are controlled by the bumper buttons and triggers. You can revert to the classic controls, but after playing this new way you won't want to.

By itself, the evolution of the right analog is a single step forward. But when combined with the game's all-new animation, physics, and AI systems, this doesn't feel like any hockey title you've played before. Now the puck moves independently of players and their sticks, meaning that putting the puck into open space (like a through pass in soccer) or having it bobble off your stick are more likely to happen in the game like they do in real life. The puck no longer magneti-



CONFIDENCE IS THE KEY

NHL 07 has added significantly to its Dynasty mode, including both one- and two-way contracts. Veterans sent down to the minors will now have to clear waivers first. In fact, how you handle your players is very important since each has a confidence rating. Young guys increase their rating by accruing time on a line and simply playing. Vets, meanwhile, need the team to be successful or else they won't play, and will demand a trade in order to fuel their Stanley Cup dreams. An extra layer of complexity is added by the fact that you can change players' roles with a team. You can ask a normally defensive-minded defenseman to take a more offensive role or have a playmaker act as a power forward in front of the net. Of course, changing player roles to suit your strategy could result in their ratings taking a hit as they adjust to their new roles. Or they could even resent you for it....

cally sticks to your blade, and players don't slide into pre-determined positions. Naturally, with pucks now going any which way, this makes things harder for goalies. However, EA has also raised their level of play, offering numerous secondary moves and giving them the smarts to track not only where the puck is, but also where it's going to be.

While other sports games have been

searching for and implementing new ideas in order to beat the year-to-year vicious cycle, hockey has been one sport that has more or less stuck by its arcade leanings. NHL 07 represents an attempt to move video game hockey from being a simplistic likeness of the sport to an actual simulation of the real deal. ■ ■ ■



■ Goalies will be imbued with more awareness of where the puck is, enabling them to readjust themselves to its unpredictable movement



■ Moves like protecting the puck are now mapped to the right analog stick. Moving from this position to a deke or a shot is effortless. On wrist shots, your stick will actually bend



UNLIMITED ENABLED

PLAYSTATION 2

Valkyrie Profile 2: Silmeria

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ROLE-PLAYING GAME > PUBLISHER SQUARE ENIX > DEVELOPER TRI-ACE > RELEASE SEPTEMBER

NORSE GODDESSES DO IT FOR ETERNITY

It isn't often that a series gets a second chance. The gaming graveyard is full of would-be heroes that failed to make an impact on the first try (Here lies Azurik, Voodoo Vince, and anyone from Brute Force). Thankfully, Square Enix and developer Tri-Ace haven't given up on Valkyrie Profile. Between a PSP re-release (see page 90 for the review) and this gorgeous new sequel on the PS2, 2006 will be remembered as the year that gave the series a new lease on life.

Even though it seemed like Valkyrie Profile was destined to fade away, the team at Tri-Ace never had any intention of letting it fall into obscurity. "Since there were a lot of unanswered questions in Valkyrie Profile, we always imagined creating a sequel," reveals producer Yoshinori Yamagishi. "However, we were caught up in production for Star Ocean: Till the End of Time and Radiata Stories, so Valkyrie Profile: Silmeria was placed on the back burner. With those titles finished, we were able to go back and pick up where we left off."

Both Valkyrie Profile stories are made to stand alone, but if you're familiar with the first game, you'll notice some interesting changes in Silmeria. First of all, where Lenneth was concerned with harvesting the souls of others, Silmeria is focused on liberating her own imprisoned soul. Of course, she can't accomplish this herself, so she enlists other warriors to help her along the way. "Significant numbers of einherjar will be involved besides main characters who directly affect the story," Yamagishi tells us. "Therefore, there are going to be a lot more characters in this title than in the last one."

In what might be a relief to those who found the original game limiting, as you explore the world and gain allies you won't be restricted by a set number of periods. This means that you can take your time to

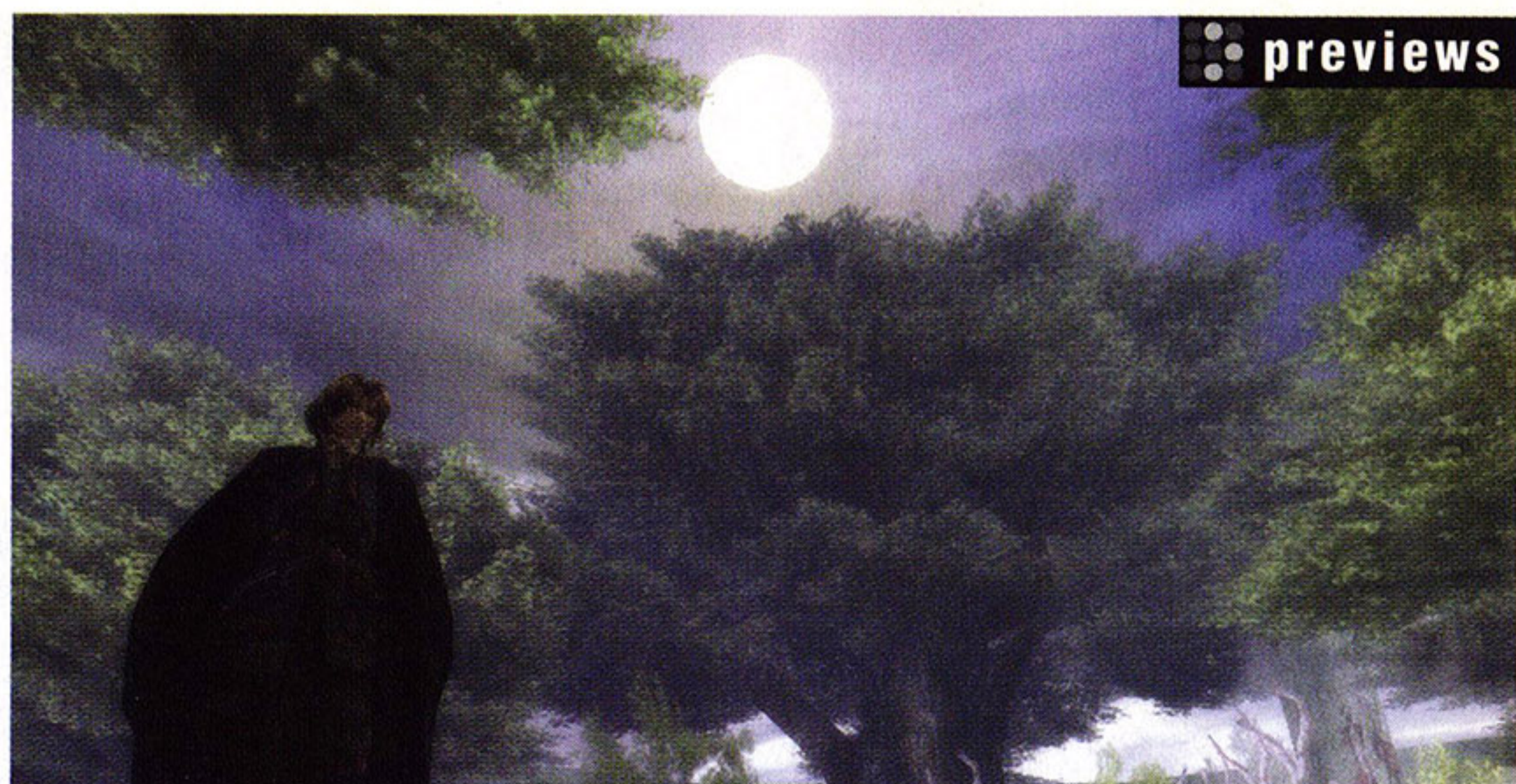
develop your characters and see the world without feeling pressured to optimize every second you play. However, even though the general structure has changed, much of the game's battle system remains the same. Characters' attacks are still mapped to the face buttons, and you'll still be trying to chain together tons of hits, but there is a new element of depth.

"The Advanced Tactical Combination System lets you move around and position your characters better in the 3D battlefield," says Yamagishi. "Players can enjoy strategic battles by getting in the back and the sides of the enemies to swiftly attack the enemies and effectively capture items from them." Hopefully these expanded options will soften some of the repetitiveness found in the previous game's combat.

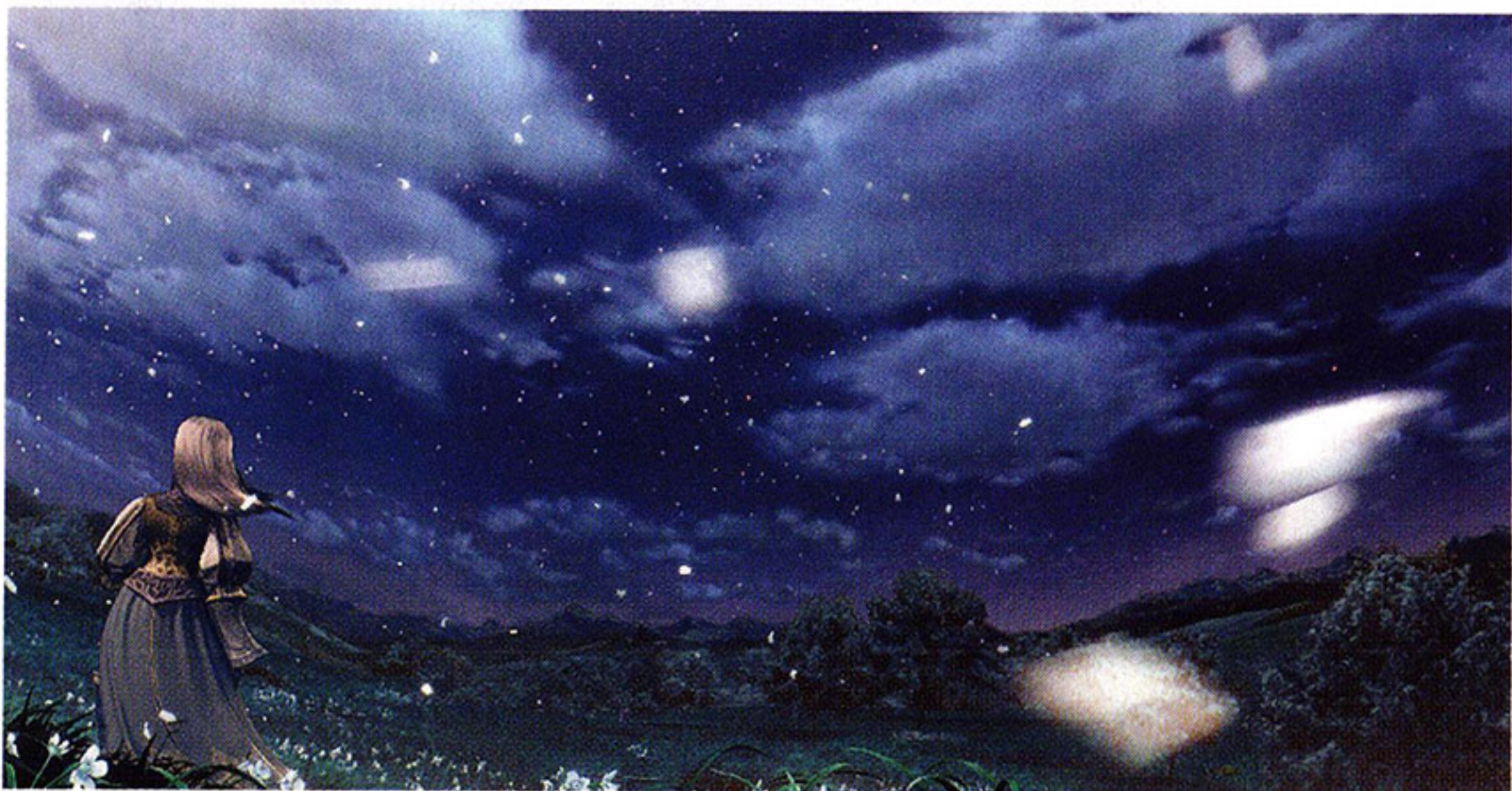
If you're as excited as we are about this much-deserved follow-up, you'll also be happy to learn that you don't have long to wait. Valkyrie Profile 2: Silmeria is set to release in September, which should give you just enough time to play through Valkyrie Profile: Lenneth a couple of times before you check out which direction this divine series is heading for the future. ■ ■ ■

VALKYRIES IN A POD

So, if Silmeria is a Valkyrie, what's going on with the protagonist from the first game, Lenneth? Or their sister Hrist? It helps to think of the position of Valkyrie like a job that only one of the three candidates can hold at a time. "There are three Valkyries—the first daughter Hrist, the second Lenneth, and the youngest Silmeria," explains Yamagishi. "No more than one Valkyrie is allowed in Midgard. While one of them is active as a Valkyrie, the other two are reincarnated as human beings. It's Odin, the chief god, who controls which one is the active Valkyrie and which ones to be reincarnated." This means that even though Valkyrie Profile: Silmeria is a prequel, appearances of Lenneth and Hrist are also entirely possible.



■ The battle system, while much prettier than the PSone predecessor, has the same combo-focused team action



■ A new kind of combined arms will be the key to victory

UNLIMITED ENABLED

PC

Battlefield 2142

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 64-PLAYER VIA INTERNET OR LAN)
> PUBLISHER ELECTRONIC ARTS > DEVELOPER DIGITAL ILLUSIONS CE > RELEASE FALL

EXPANSIONIST WARFARE

Few series have seen the kind of enduring success that Battlefield has enjoyed. Year in and year out, every installment in the franchise has done very well both critically and sales-wise (with the possible exception of Battlefield Vietnam). This fall will see the release of the fifth title in the series, and so we tracked down Jamil Dawsari, the game's producer at DICE, to let us in on why Battlefield 2142 will be the best Battlefield yet.

The integration of futuristic technology into the

traditional loadout available to players is 2142's biggest and most ambitious feature. "Some of the vehicles are archetypes of what you might see today: tank, APC, or fast attack vehicle, which are mixed with new vehicle types like gunships, assault pods, and Battlewalkers. The weapons and equip-

ment follow the same formula with assault rifles and light machineguns available alongside active camo and gun drones," says Dawsari. Exploring strategies that simply weren't possible with the technology present in Battlefield 2 will undoubtedly be one of this title's major draws, but finding new ways to blow up the guy between you and the flag is satisfying in and of itself. Dawsari notes, "One of my favorites is the assault rifle rocket. In standard mode, it fires a rifle rocket in a ballistic arc which detonates on contact. However, if you go to zoomed mode, the range indicator automatically sets the rocket detonation at whatever range you are viewing, and you can then increase or decrease the range with a flick of the

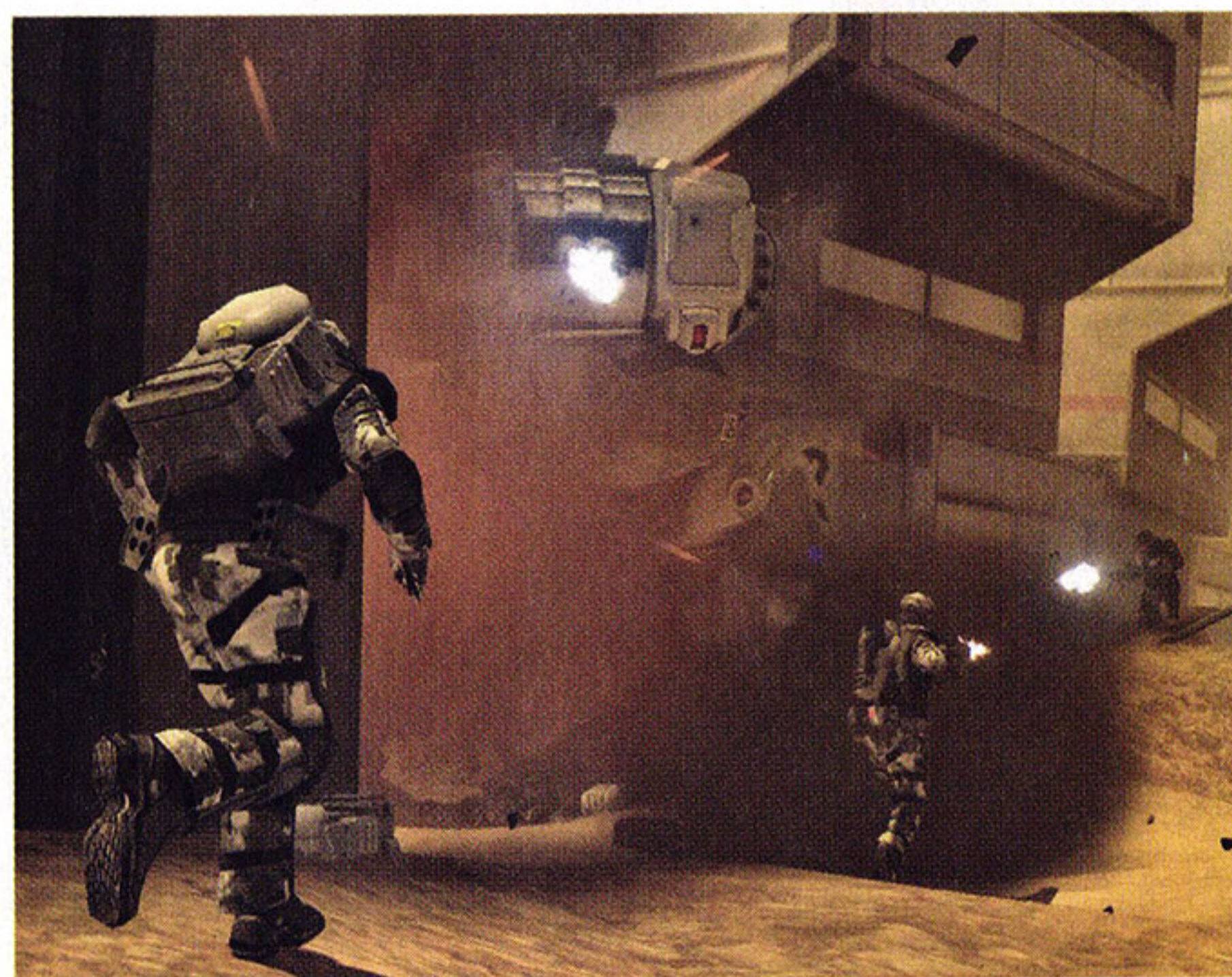
mouse-wheel. Fire it, and when the rifle rocket gets to the preset range, it explodes. It's perfect for taking out infantry who are hiding behind cover."

However, doing all of the same things (albeit with new toys) that we've been doing for years isn't good enough for the team behind Battlefield 2142. A fully-functional new gametype called Titan Mode will be included, and it sounds cool enough that people might actually play this instead of the standard Conquest mode for once. Dawsari explains it far

better than we could, so take it from him: "The beauty of Titan Mode is the objective is so easy to understand – blow up the other team's Titan. How you do it is pure Battlefield, as you're not locked into one way to win. You can choose to assault the Titan in order to blow it up from the inside or you can fight the

ground battle and control all of the missile silos which can also destroy the Titan. If you're patient enough (and the other team is obliging enough) you can even pound the Titan into submission with tanks, Battlewalkers, and gunships." Sounds good to us.

After a brief time with Battlefield 2142 at E3, we were afraid that it was going to be more akin to Battlefield Vietnam than Battlefield 2 in terms of new features and gameplay. After speaking with Dawsari and hearing further reassurances that the frontend of the game (a long-running problem with the series) will be streamlined and the outstanding squad system expanded even further, however, our excitement for Battlefield 2142 has rocketed skyward. ■ ■ ■

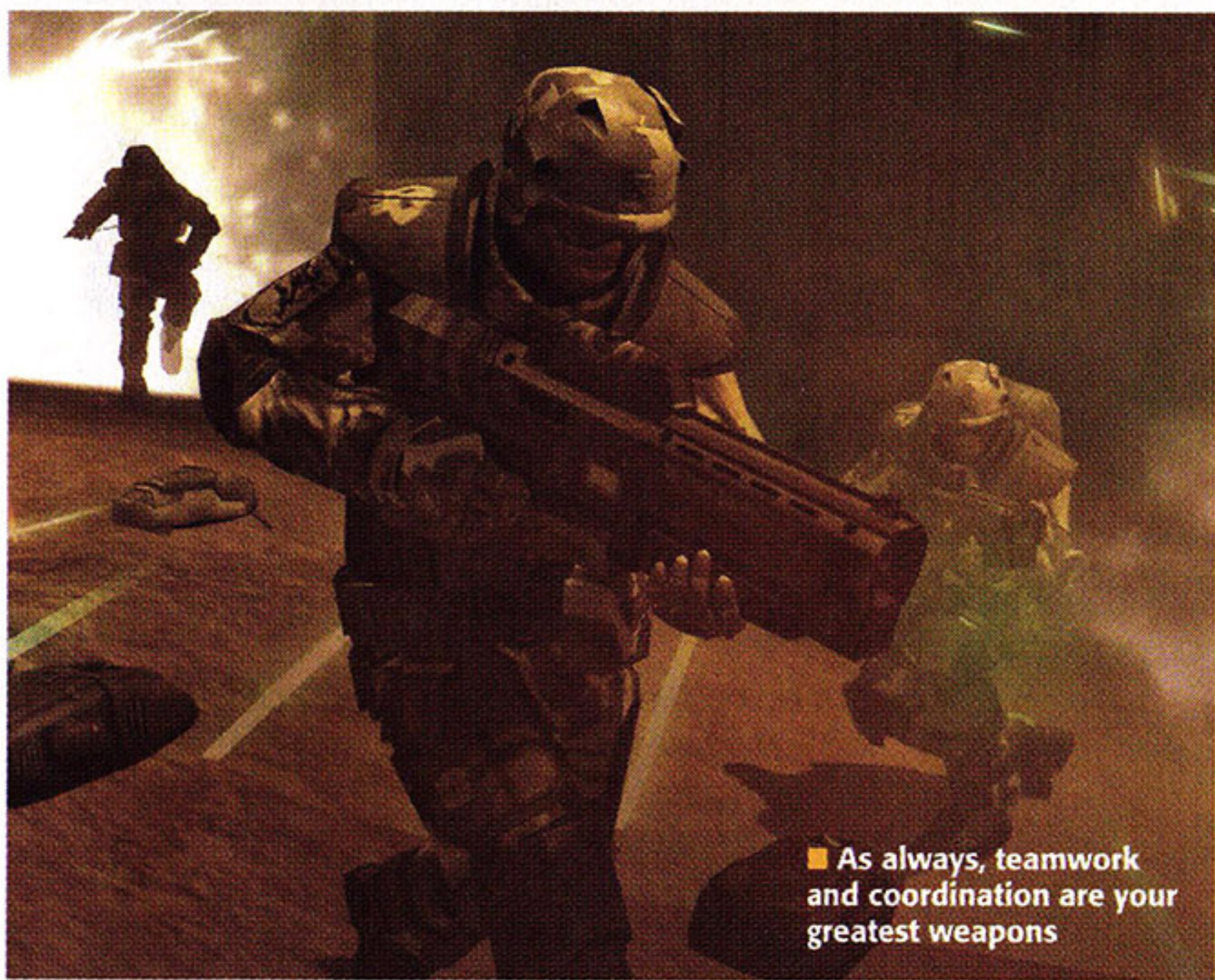




■ Seeing through the chaos of battle isn't easy



■ Though they all look very sci-fi, many of the vehicles perform familiar roles



■ As always, teamwork and coordination are your greatest weapons





PLAYSTATION 3

MotorStorm

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER RACING (UP TO 16-PLAYER VIA PS3 ONLINE) > **PUBLISHER** SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT AMERICA > **DEVELOPER** EVOLUTION STUDIOS > **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 17

ASPHALT IS FOR SUCKERS

In the high-stakes game of console racing titles, the axiom has often been to make it prettier, make it online, and give us damage. But we have pretty, online, and destructive, so where does the genre go next? If Evolution Studios' MotorStorm does what it wants to, the future is a no-compromises approach to track design and physics in unexpected places.

One lynchpin of MotorStorm's plan is a wide variety of vehicles – the expected seven different types include buggies, motorbikes, pickups, and monstrous big rigs. Other racing titles have done this, but they've generally let all of the rides co-exist by making them each drive similarly. This is certainly a good, viable design decision. But MotorStorm isn't taking the same path. Instead, the tracks (that right now support 20 offline racers or 16 online) have a number of different paths built into each course. The buggies and bikes can take to the high road, letting the bigger cars and trucks duke it out on the canyon floor. These path decisions will become more important with each lap, thanks mostly to MotorStorm's other big feature: track deformation.

The demo course at E3 was set in Utah's Monument Valley, a twisty series of craggy ravines and wider flats. When the heavier-weight vehicles slide around a corner, jerk sideways to hit another racer, or slam on the brakes to avoid a crash, they leave big ruts in the track surface. These changes are persistent through the entire race, and as



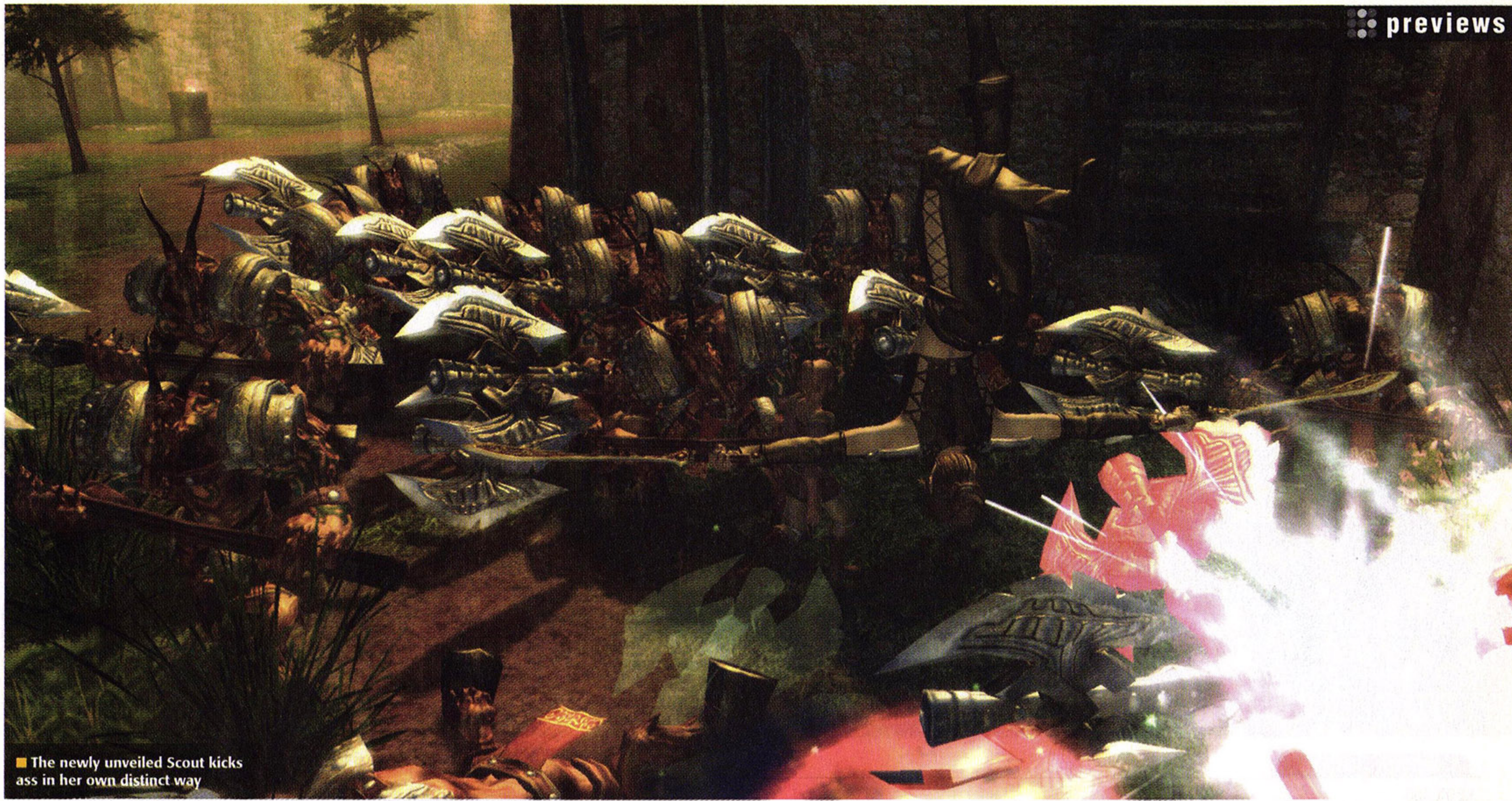
■ Nearly every part of each vehicle is fully modeled, including the springs. Next gen rules



■ Dust and mud accumulate as the race goes on, but it's largely cosmetic. Damage, on the other hand...

each lap becomes more and more harried, the uneven surfaces will wreck more and more of the lighter rides. A ballsy racer with one of the more agile vehicles can take to the high roads mentioned before, but instead of cleaved terrain, they're going to be navigating jumps and gaps that require nerve-wracking precision.

It'll be an interesting experiment to see the results of when MotorStorm releases with the PlayStation 3. Which vehicles will be the most popular? Will the variety of choices in both path and vehicle feel like creative freedom, or will they thin the crowd out? While the game encourages aggression and flat-out speed, will it shake out to be more of an arcade or technical racer? There aren't any really wrong answers to these questions, but the systems in place leave MotorStorm in a position to really do something different in the racing space, come mud or high water. ■ ■ ■



■ The newly unveiled Scout kicks ass in her own distinct way

PLAYSTATION 3

Untold Legends: Dark Kingdom

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION/RPG (UP TO 4-PLAYER VIA PS3 ONLINE) > **PUBLISHER** SONY ONLINE ENTERTAINMENT > **DEVELOPER** SONY ONLINE ENTERTAINMENT > **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 17

THE DARKEST HOUR

Up to this point, the Untold Legends franchise hasn't been particularly dark in tone, preferring a more upbeat style of heroic fantasy. That's going to change with Dark Kingdom when it launches with the PlayStation 3. Black necromancy, shocking betrayal, and the systematic torture of an entire kingdom's populace are some of the many evils players will be tasked with fighting. It is therefore fortunate that the heroes that players control – elite special-forces types who back up their formidable combat prowess with impressive magical powers – will be the kind of juggernauts that take on entire armies and win.

Dark Kingdom really couldn't be a more apt title for this game. The king, because of a little delving into dark magical arts,

has abandoned any pretense of trying to rule his subjects with justice and wisdom. The creation of a new, cruel army fueled by evil power to replace the noble soldiers of the past is just the first step. Accusing whole towns of treason and hauling the people off to be tortured to death so that their screams can power the king's twisted magics isn't even the furthest extent of the atrocities committed by the mad ruler. This is no complex tale with subtle moral quandaries. There are some very bad people doing very bad things, and nothing short of catastrophic violence can stop them.

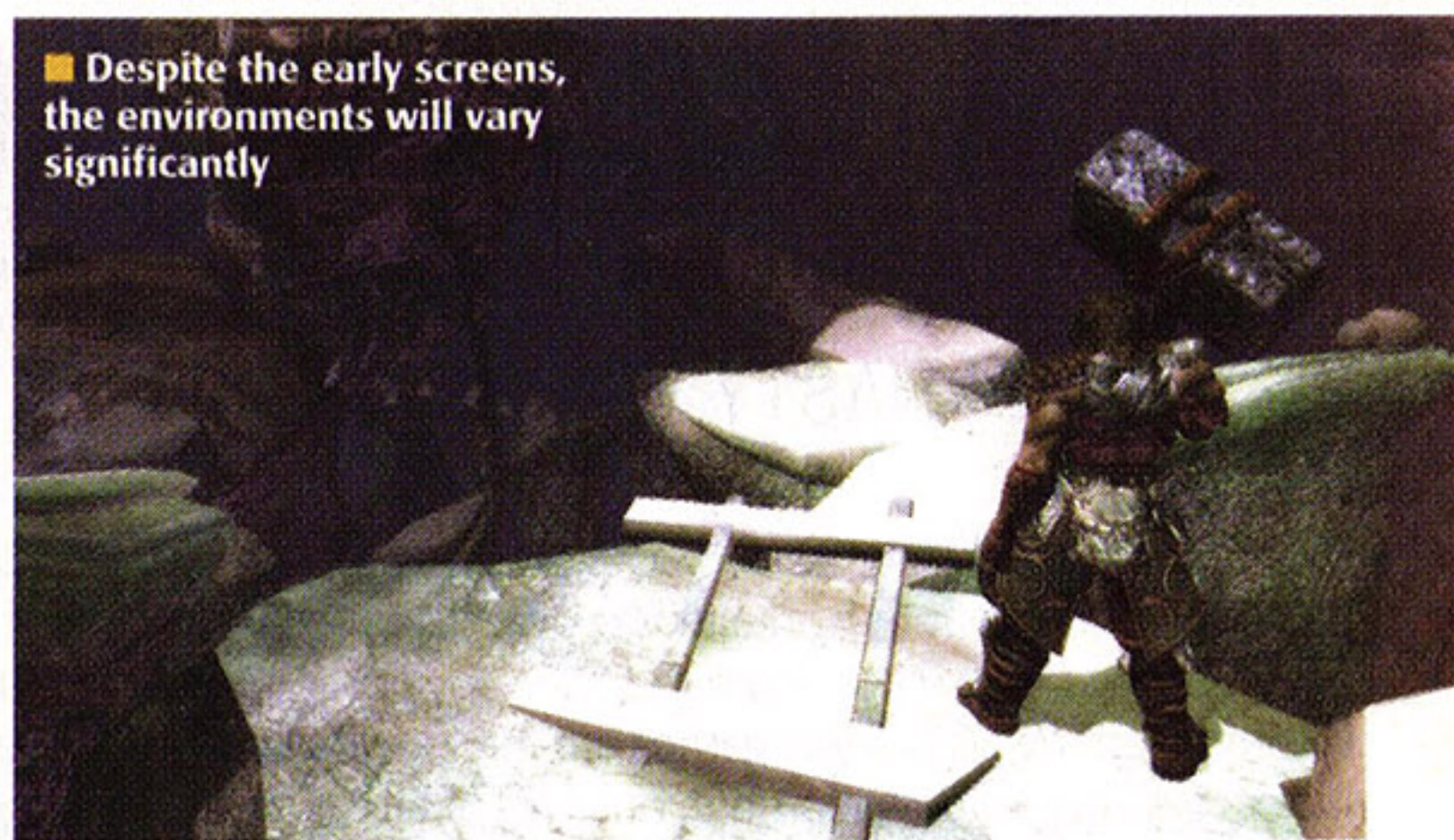
We've already seen the newly redesigned Warrior (and crushed a few hordes of enemies with him ourselves at E3), and now Sony Online is ready to show the second

playable character: the Scout. Not to be confused with the crossbow-wielding little girl from Untold Legends: The Warrior's Code, Dark Kingdom's Scout is a highly trained killing machine out for blood. In the traditional style of action heroines, she favors speed and acrobatics over brute force. As you can see from these screens, though, a lack of bulging biceps does nothing to prevent her combat style from being plenty impressive.

A smooth-playing demo and vastly improved graphics from previous showings have done much to restore our faith in Dark Kingdom's potential, and these recent revelations about the story are more than enough to keep us feeling positive about

the game. We've also had full four-player online co-op recently confirmed, as well as the capability to play through the game with a friend on a single machine – not to mention some additional versus and arena modes for a more competitive gametype. Furthermore, SOE is considering adding new playable characters and additional chapters to the quest as downloadable add-ons after the game ships. However mediocre Dark Kingdom initially looked, it's shaping up to be a pretty safe bet for PS3 launch day. ■ ■ ■

■ Despite the early screens, the environments will vary significantly



■ Using throws is sometimes more effective than just bashing fools – if you're clever enough to take advantage of the environment



■ Why hack or slash when you can fry everything with lightning strikes?



UNLIMITED ENABLED

XBOX 360

Ninety-Nine Nights

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION > PUBLISHER MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS > DEVELOPER Q ENTERTAINMENT/PHANTAGRAM > RELEASE AUGUST 15

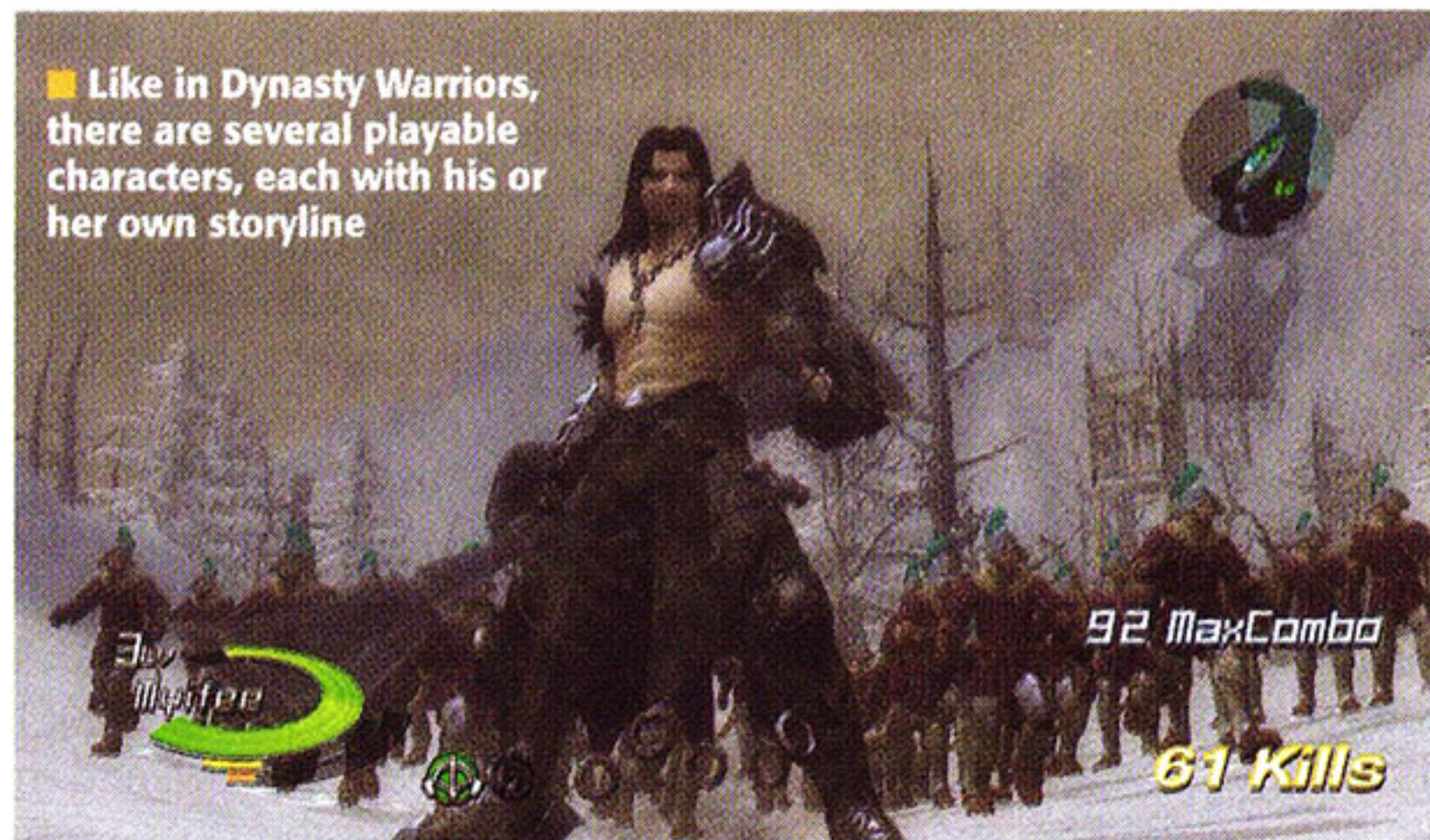
BEYOND DYNASTY WARRIORS

It's no secret that the Xbox 360 is struggling in Japan, and Microsoft is counting on a few key pieces of Japanese-developed software to turn the tide. Obviously, the forthcoming Mistwalker games are the crown jewels in Microsoft's Eastern development, but a lot of attention has also been placed on Ninety-Nine Nights, the collaboration between Japan's Q Entertainment and Korea's Phantagram. Also referred to as N3, Ninety-Nine Nights is coming to the U.S. this summer after having already been released in Japan. But is it worth the attention of gamers Stateside? We imported a Japanese 360 (hey, every sale counts) and a copy of the game to find out. At first glance, N3 appears to be little more than a

prettier version of Dynasty Warriors, the top franchise in the mindless hack 'n slash genre. Indeed, the backbone of N3 is slicing through hordes of enemies and chalking up huge combos and kill



■ Killing masses of enemies is the essence of the game



■ Like in Dynasty Warriors, there are several playable characters, each with his or her own storyline

tallies. However, several minor differences set N3 apart from the Warriors games, and they add up to a title that has its own unique identity. Thanks to the next-gen power of the 360, N3 can display far more enemies than the Dynasty Warriors games, and the infamous fogging and draw distance problems of those games are gone. It may not sound like a big distinction, but N3 can display hundreds of characters at once, as opposed to dozens. It's hard not to feel pretty awesome when you pull off a 2,000-hit combo, killing hundreds of enemies in a single string of attacks.

Although button-mashing through combat is certainly an option, N3 also sports a deeper combat engine than Dynasty Warriors. With two attack buttons, guard, jump, dash, and special attack keys, N3 allows more thought than you might expect in its combat. Well-planned combos look great as well, thanks to some nice visual effects and acrobatic moves. It's not as visceral or deep as God of War's combat, but definitely a step above what we expected.

With minimal RPG-like leveling and items, several different campaigns, and some surprising challenge, N3 honestly surprised us. Is it a big revolution or even the solution to Microsoft's Japan problem? No, not by a long shot. But it is a gratifying little action title, one that makes the player feel good for pulling off some wicked-looking combos that take out huge swarms of enemies. It may not be the next triple-A 360 game, but Ninety-Nine Nights should please both Japanophiles and casual gamers looking for an easy-to-grasp action title. While it hasn't made much of an impact in Japan, we wouldn't be surprised if N3 becomes a sleeper hit here. ■ ■ ■



■ Remember, kids: Only you can prevent mystical forest fires

■ Any character you resurrect will also die if you are killed



XBOX 360 | PC

Shadowrun

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 16-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE OR PC ONLINE)
 > **PUBLISHER** MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS > **DEVELOPER** FASA STUDIO > **RELEASE** 2007

DECISIONS, DECISIONS

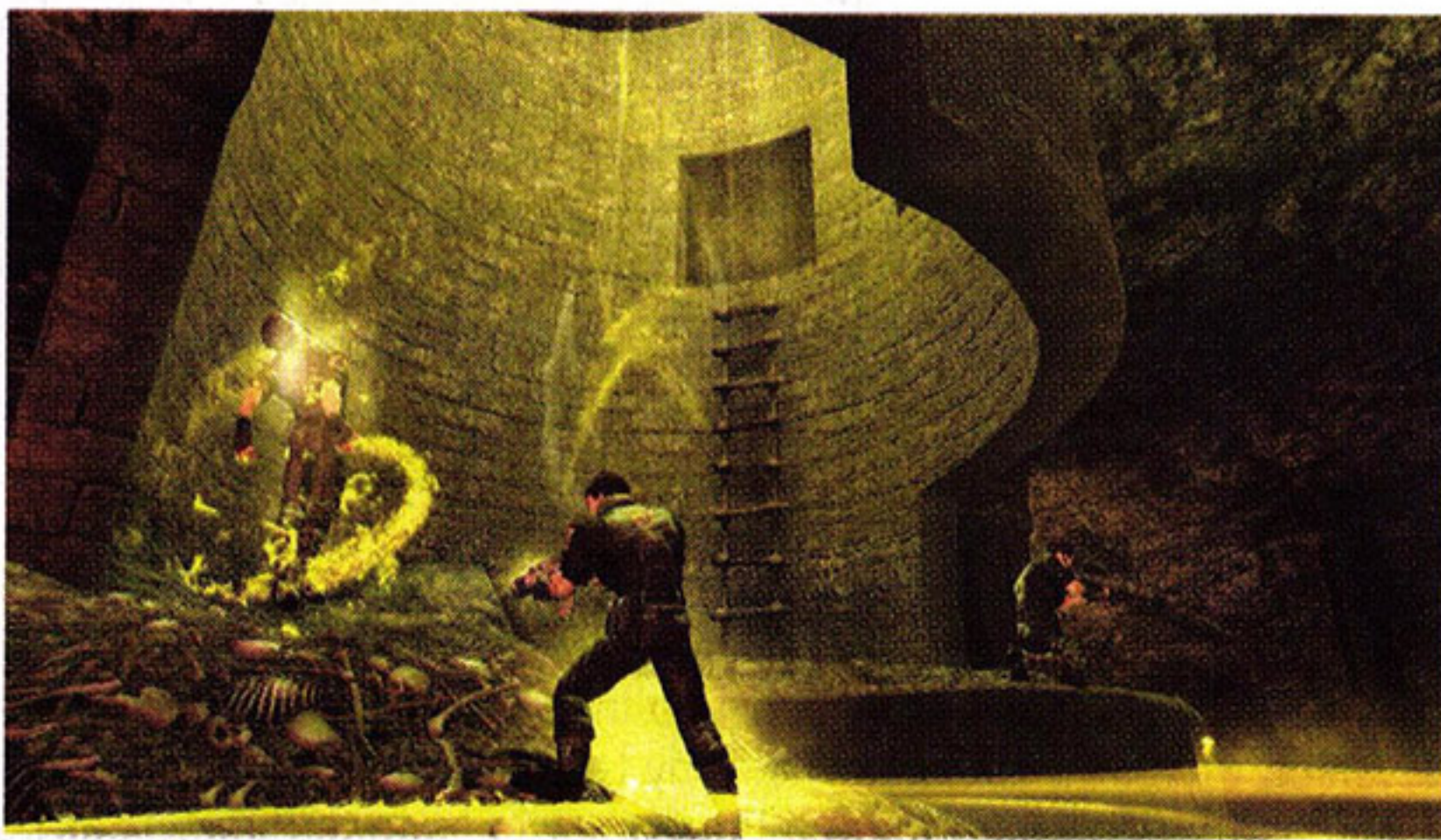
For months and months leading up to E3, rumors were flying through the gaming community that a new Shadowrun game would be unveiled at the show, and those rumors turned out to be completely true. At Microsoft's press conference, the company unveiled the new game in the long-dormant franchise to spotlight Live Anywhere, the new extension of Xbox Live that will link 360 and PC players together. One of the first games to allow console and PC gamers to play together, Microsoft wants to let players choose for themselves which platform they prefer to play on.

Because Shadowrun is based on a respected pen and paper role-playing game, the content of the title surprised some. The new Shadowrun game is clearly patterned after the mega-popular Counter-Strike: a primarily online game with up to 16 players, a round format with upgrades between, and two very distinct teams. Although old school fans of the franchise are enraged by this direction, FASA Studio has stated that Microsoft sees Shadowrun as a franchise that can be taken in many directions, and an RPG under the same banner certainly isn't out of the question.

Those gamers who aren't too clouded with rage will be able to choose one of two sides in Shadowrun's world of magic and technology. The first is the RNA, a mega-cor-



poration that seeks to restore order to a world thrown into chaos by the sudden return of magic to the planet after a 5,000-year absence. The second is the Lineage, which fights to keep magic wild and unfettered by human constraints. Obviously, the two teams will play quite differently, with the RNA able to upgrade themselves with new technology, while the Lineage can gain new mystical abilities. On display at E3

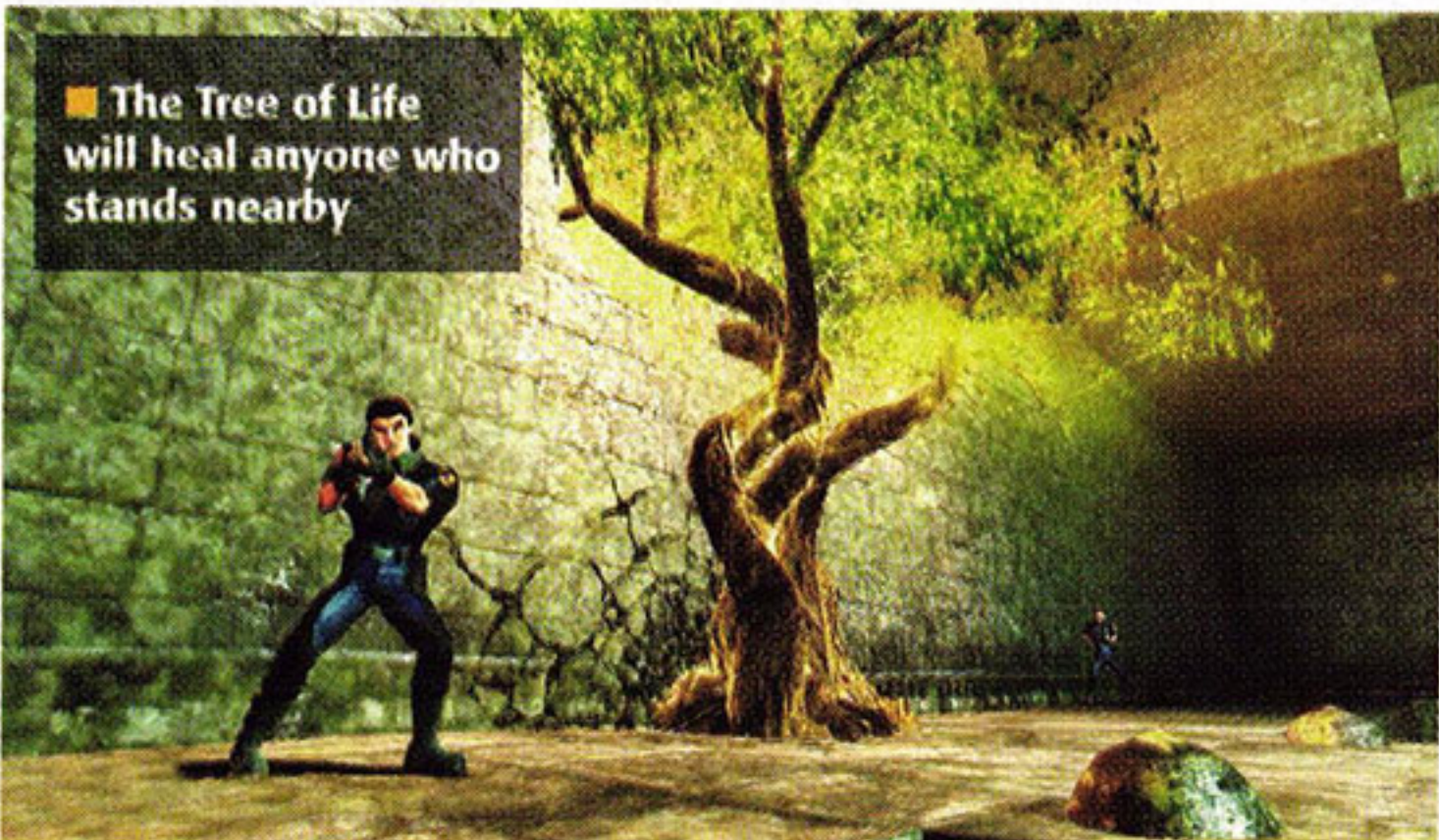


were the tech ability of the glider, which allows for limited flight; and the teleport ability, which lets a character suddenly jump several meters in any direction. There will be a host of other skills for each team, including the ability to see through walls, resurrect dead characters, plant a healing "Tree of Life," and many more. There will also be distinct races like elves and humans, so play-

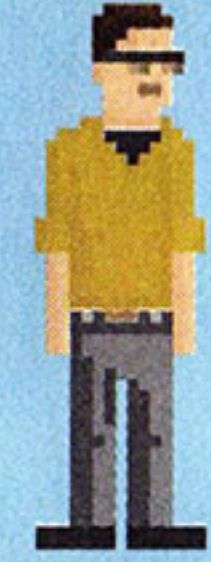
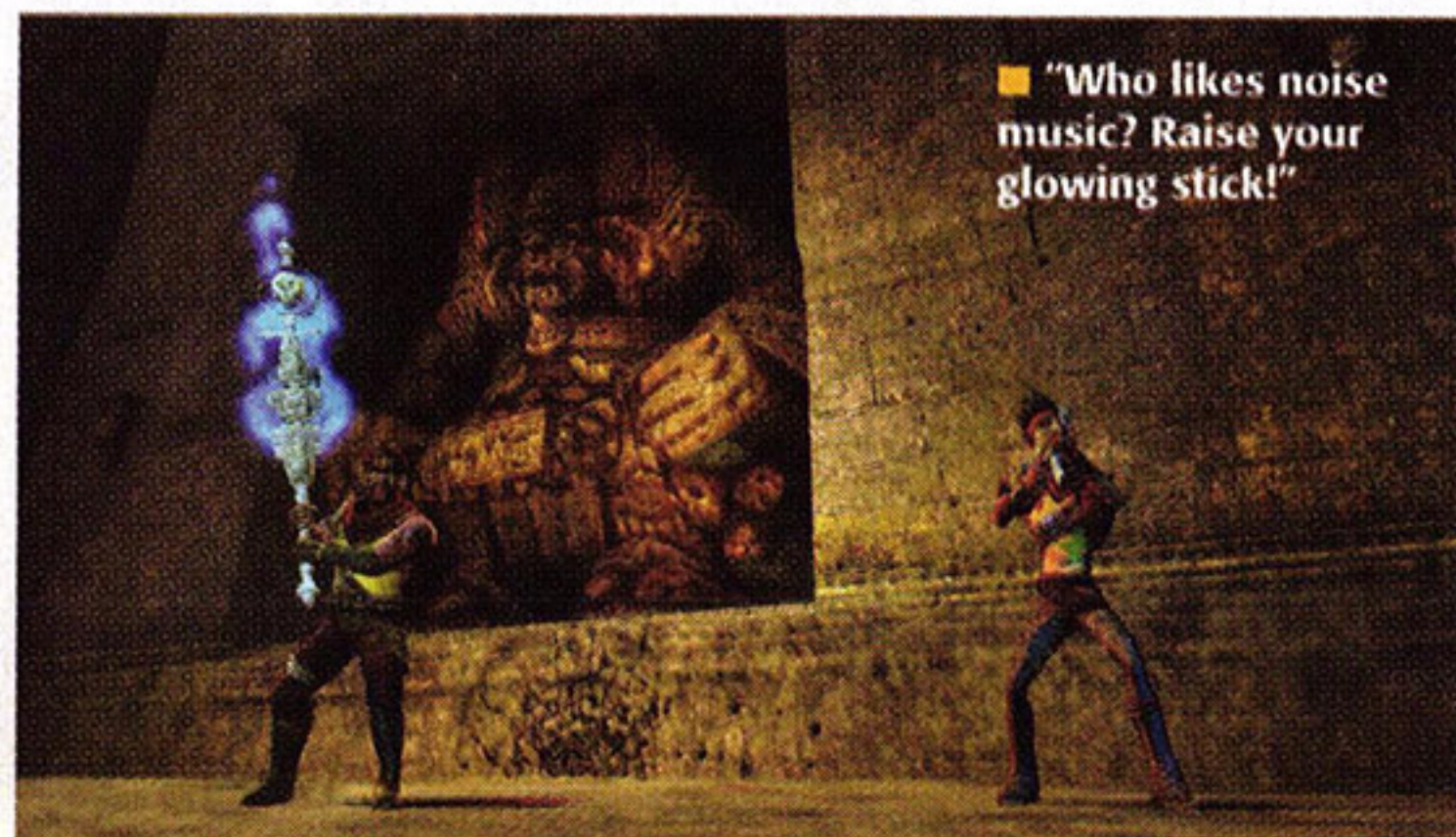
ers will definitely have a lot of choices to make when they pick up this game.

Shadowrun is still a ways off, so FASA Studio has a lot of time to continue polishing this title until it shines. Balancing cross-platform play sounds tricky, but a PC vs. 360 match was on display at E3, and things seemed to be going smoothly. With a lot of interesting concepts at play and two consoles to choose from, Shadowrun looks like it will catch the eye of many gamers. We will certainly follow up on this one when we know more. ■ ■ ■

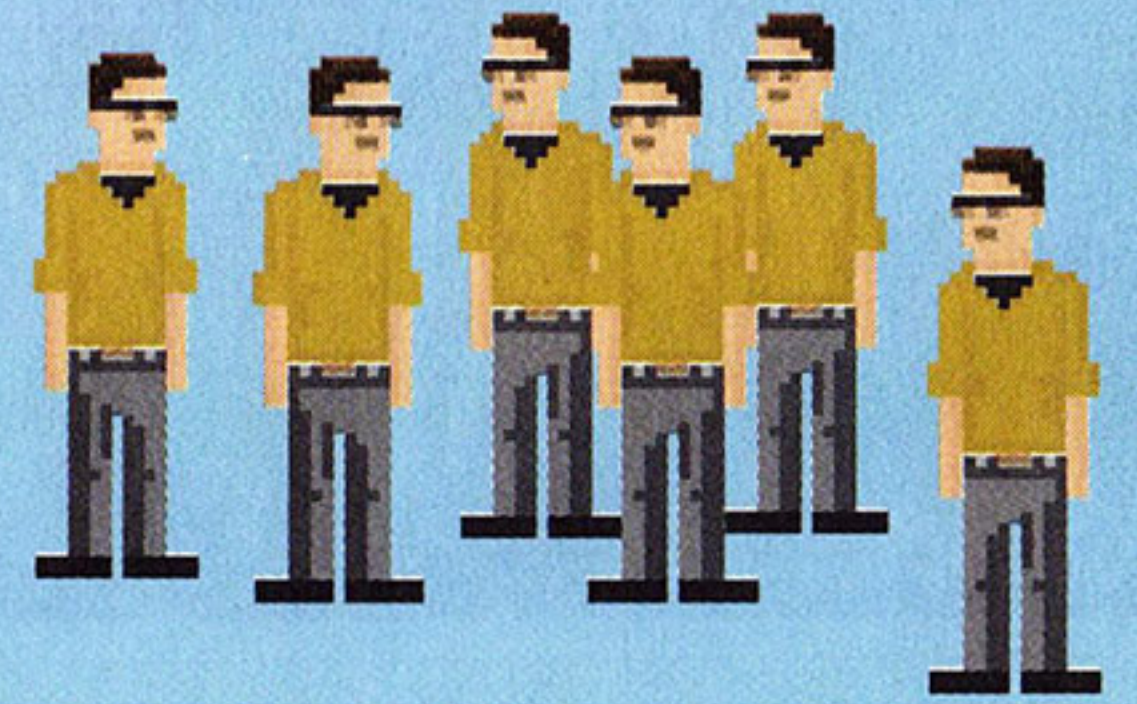
■ The Tree of Life will heal anyone who stands nearby



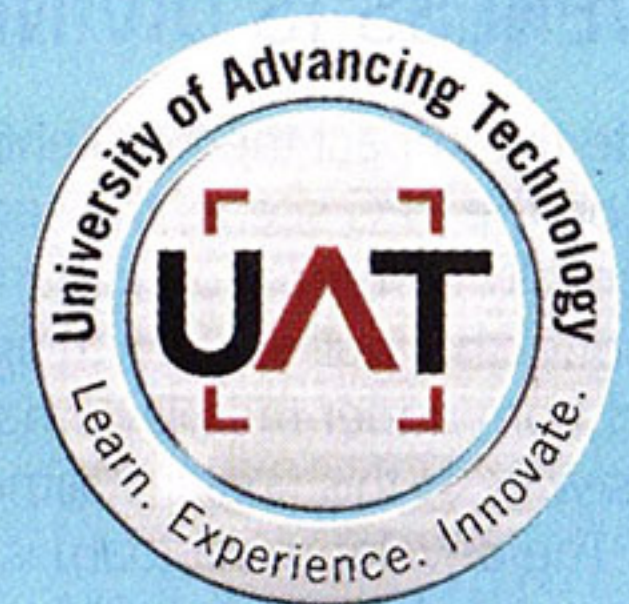
■ "Who likes noise music? Raise your glowing stick!"



{geek}



{clustergeeking}

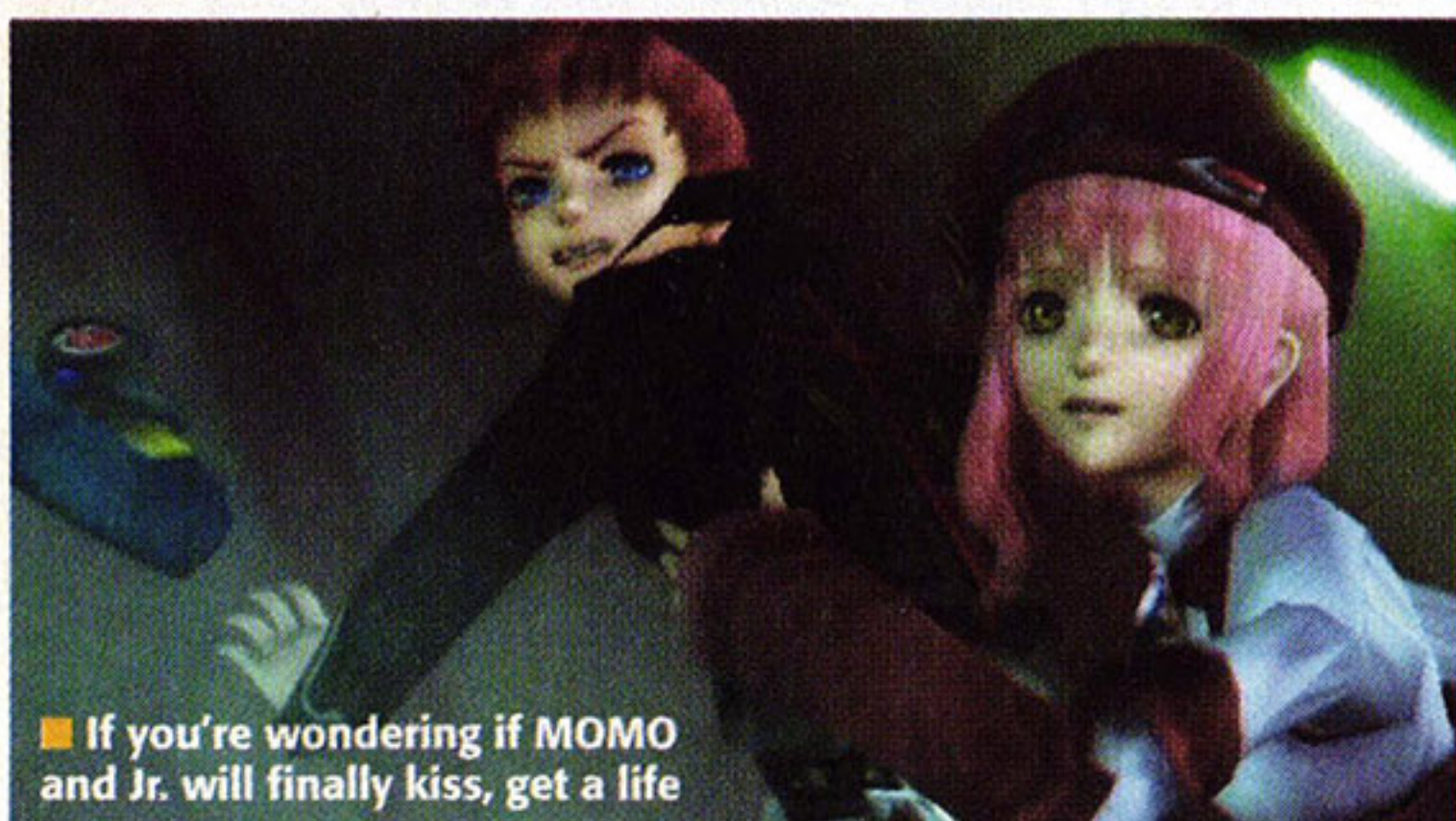
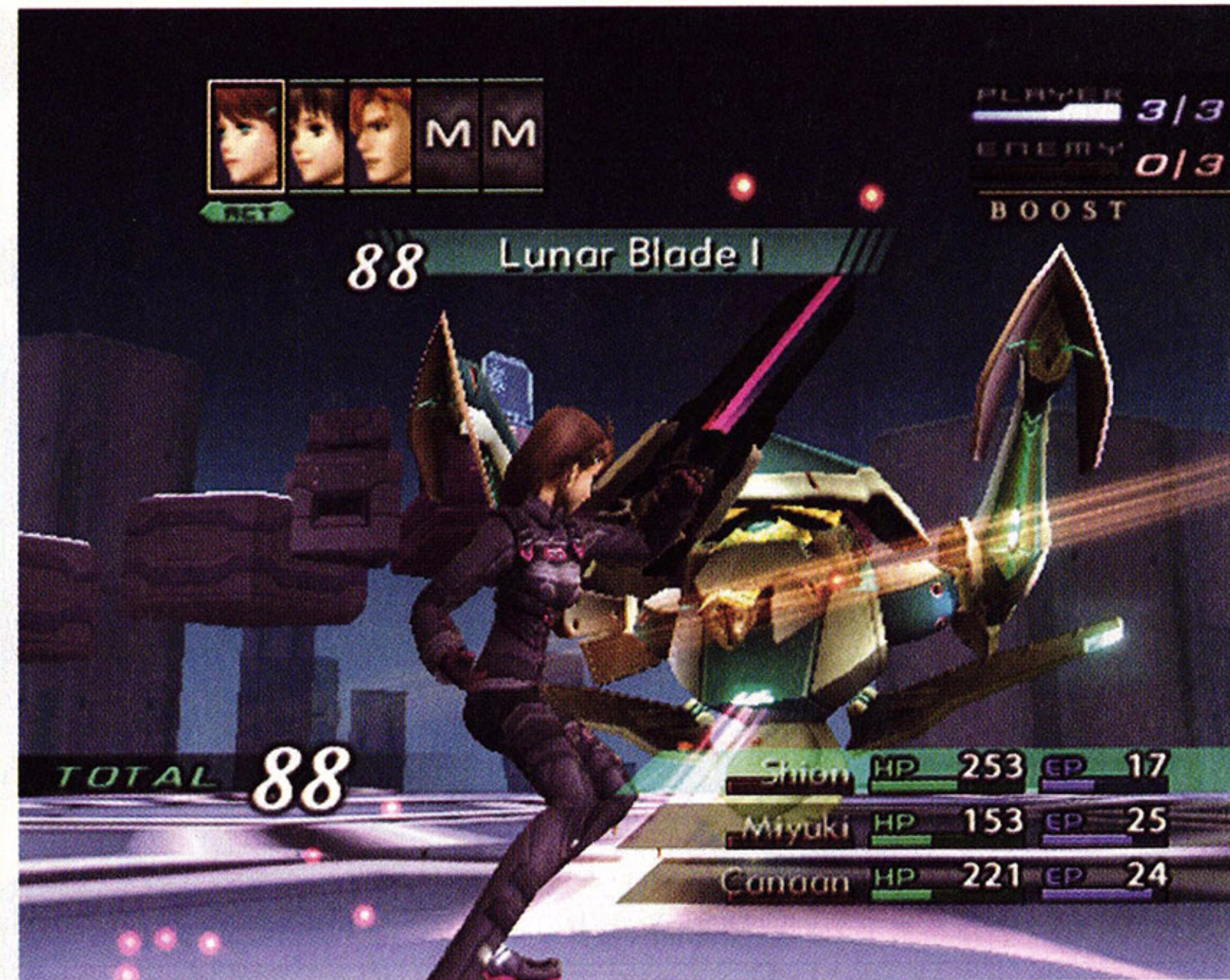


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■ If you're wondering if MOMO and Jr. will finally kiss, get a life



■ The character Abel looks suspiciously like Fei from Xenogears



■ This might be some kind of "philosophy cannon" or something

PLAYSTATION 2

Xenosaga Episode III: Also Sprach Zarathustra

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ROLE-PLAYING GAME > PUBLISHER NAMCO BANDAI > DEVELOPER MONOLITH SOFT > RELEASE NOVEMBER

FORGIVENESS IS DIVINE

Despite the impact the first Xenosaga had on the RPG scene, the series is essentially on probation right now. A sequel that pulled everything awesome out from under the player has left many gamers wary of this final installment in the trilogy. The development team is fully aware of these apprehensions, and from a lengthy hands-on session with the game, we can tell that Monolith Soft is trying to set things right and send the series off in style.

The story picks up one year after Episode II, with Shion now working for an organization called Scientia after quitting her job at Vector. However, she manages to get wrapped up in her old work when Allan invites her back to witness the fruits of the Zohar project: the finished robot Omega and a next-generation KOS-MOS designated T-elos. The pacing of the plot seems very much along the same lines as the previous iterations (read: deliberate and dialogue-heavy), but the combat system has undergone

drastic changes to recapture the fun of the first game.

Once again, characters have access to unique tech attacks as opposed to the restricted zone attacks from Episode II. Instead of using Action Points, these moves now draw from the same pool as magic (Ether Points). Additionally, some particularly powerful attacks even require a drain on the communal boost gauge to execute,

though the kills with those pay off with 1.5 times the experience points. These options bring back an element of strategy to the battles, especially since each enemy (as well as your characters) has a Break Gauge which, when filled by sustaining damage, will paralyze the character for a couple of rounds. Battles with E.S. units still play a key role as well, though they are still separate from the on-foot segments (but Jin's new

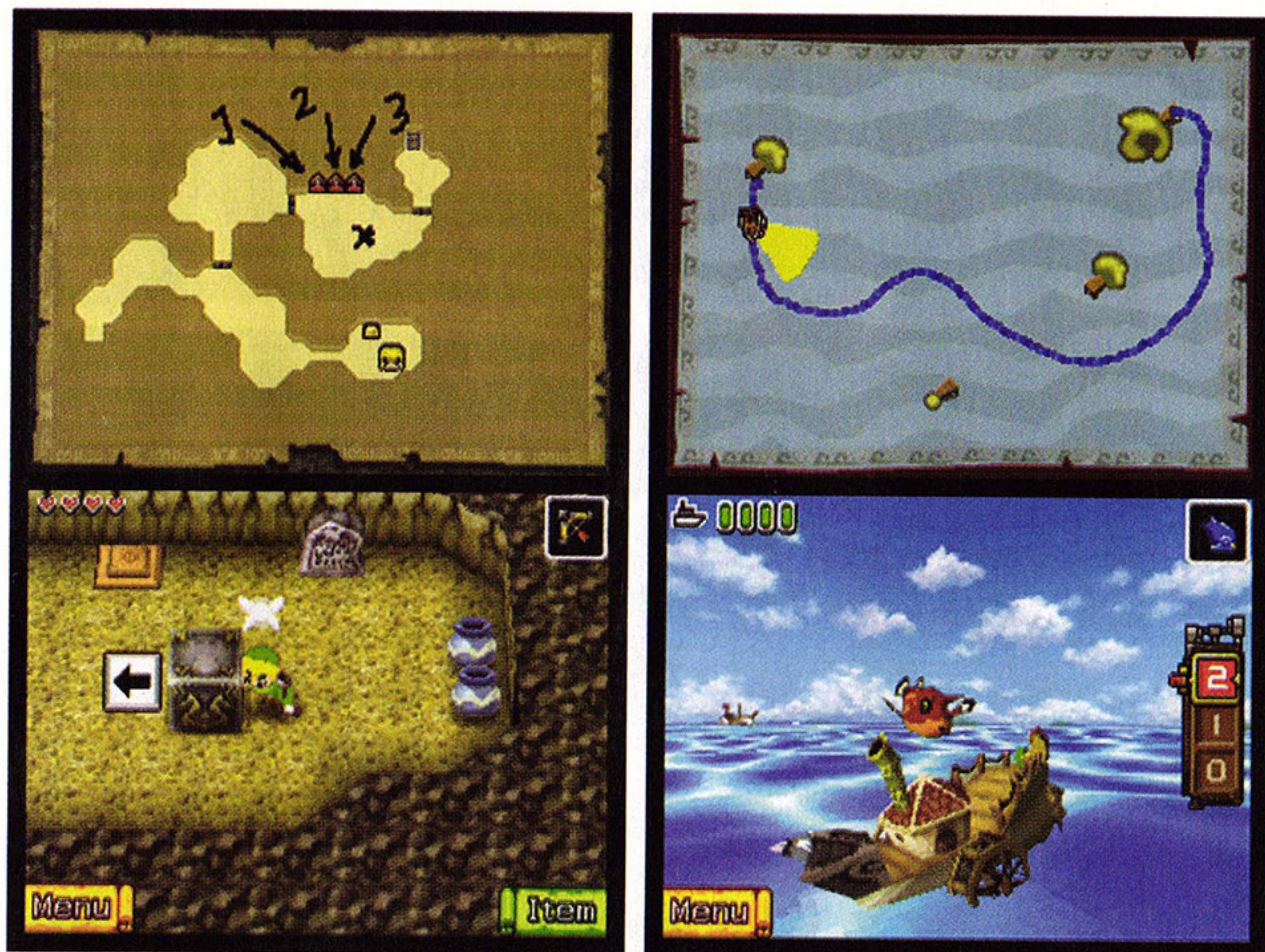
sword-wielding E.S. is definitely sweet).

Overall, Episode III feels like a step in the right direction. The systems aren't as deep as they were the first time around, but they certainly aren't as painful as they were in the second outing. Fans of the franchise can look toward the future with optimism. We can all hope that Episode III will finally answer the series' big questions. ■ ■ ■

LOOK IT UP

Since *Xenosaga* is known for its many characters, themes, and allusions, it was strange that Episode II removed the in-game encyclopedia, leaving players in the dark about past key events. Fortunately, the database returns in this entry, and is a comprehensive source of information for everything in the *Xenosaga* universe. Wondering what the Immigrant Fleet is up to? Forget who Febronius was? Just open up the menu and you'll have all the info you need at your fingertips.





NINTENDO DS

The Legend of Zelda: Phantom Hourglass

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION/RPG > PUBLISHER NINTENDO > DEVELOPER NINTENDO > RELEASE FALL

BRAVE NEW WORLD

The final moments in *The Wind Waker* can best be summed up with a gasp. With Zelda's life hanging in the balance, Link's innocence disappeared in a fiery flash when he applied a razor-sharp kiss to Ganon's brow. He may have Bambi-sized eyes and a smile that is infectious, but through this violent act, it became quite apparent that this happy-go-lucky youth has a dark side. A dark side that would scare Anakin Skywalker. We're hoping that the story in *Phantom Hourglass*, which picks up just months after Ganon's brutal demise, probes further into this facet of this legendary character.

With peace returning to the kingdom, Link's watchful eye is no longer needed. The young Hyrulian and his seafaring friend Tetra cast their life to the wind and the hope of discovering new worlds within the vast ocean. Their first discovery comes quickly, but with it a costly price. Within a dense fog, they spy a ship adrift. Against Link's advice, Tetra boards the vessel and is ambushed. Valiant as ever, Link attempts a rescue, but is quickly knocked overboard. Proving to be his most formidable foe yet, the ocean pulls him under into the cold and unforgiving darkness. Death is certain. Somehow, however, Link awakens on foreign sands to the twinkle of a fairy's voice. He must now explore the unknown to find his friend and

a way home.

This sequel embodies the colorful cartoon-like visuals of its predecessor, but like Link, finds itself well off course when it comes to gameplay. Most of the game utilizes stylus control. Sweeping motions perform sword swings, tapping makes Link move, and drawing handles the path for the boomerang. Oceanic exploration is also managed in this way. Simply draw the route you would like to take, or slide the stylus to aim the cannon, and tap the screen to fire it. As you can see from the screenshots, you can also mark notes on the maps to help in your dungeon spelunking.

From the hands-on time we had with this newfangled Zelda adventure, we found that it controlled admirably and blended nicely with the established conventions of the series. Of course, one big question still needs to be answered. What is the Phantom Hourglass? And how does it tie into Link's quest? ■ ■ ■

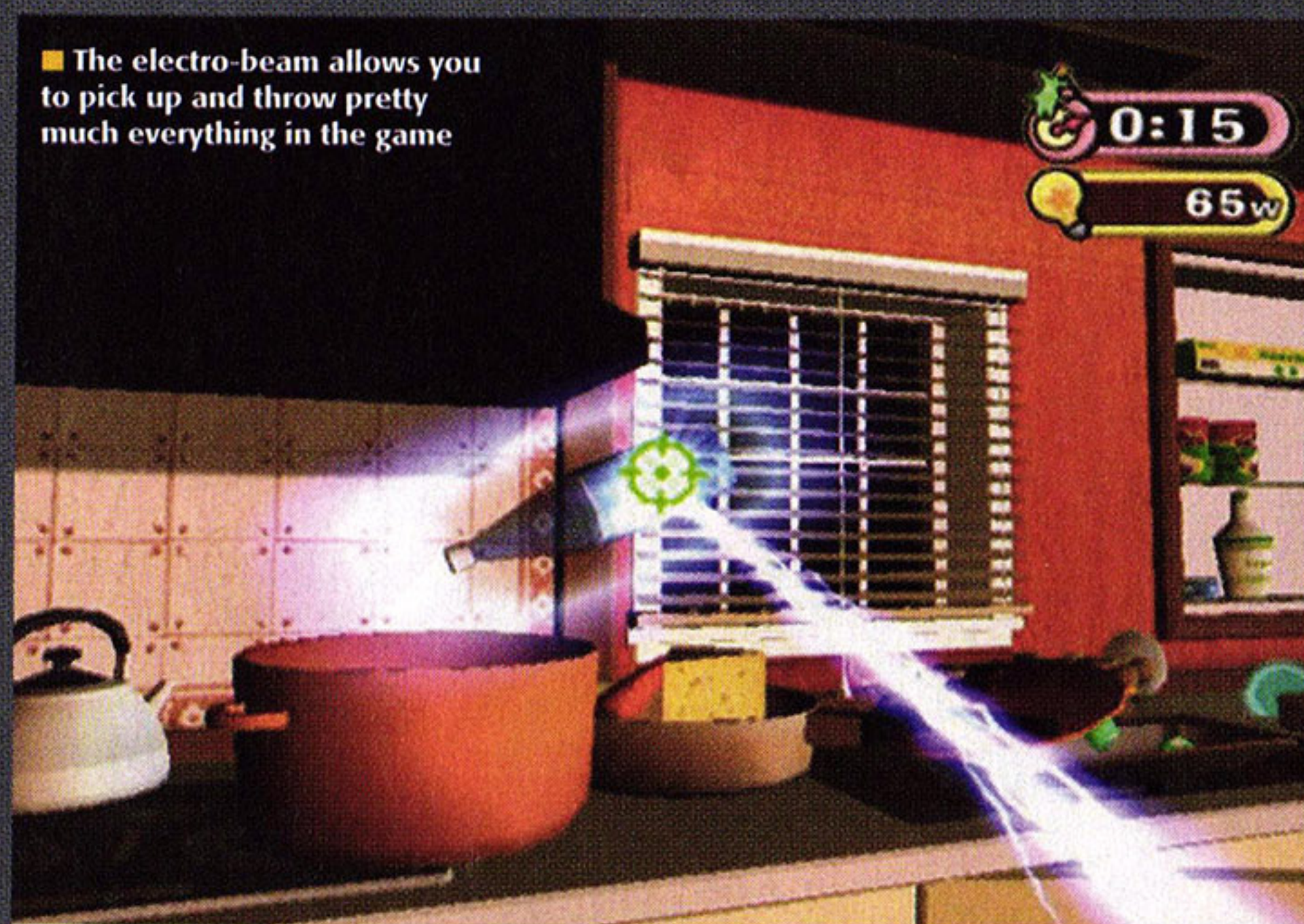


Wii

Elebits

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (MULTIPLAYER TBA) > PUBLISHER KONAMI > DEVELOPER KONAMI > RELEASE FALL

HIDE AND SEEK AND ZAP



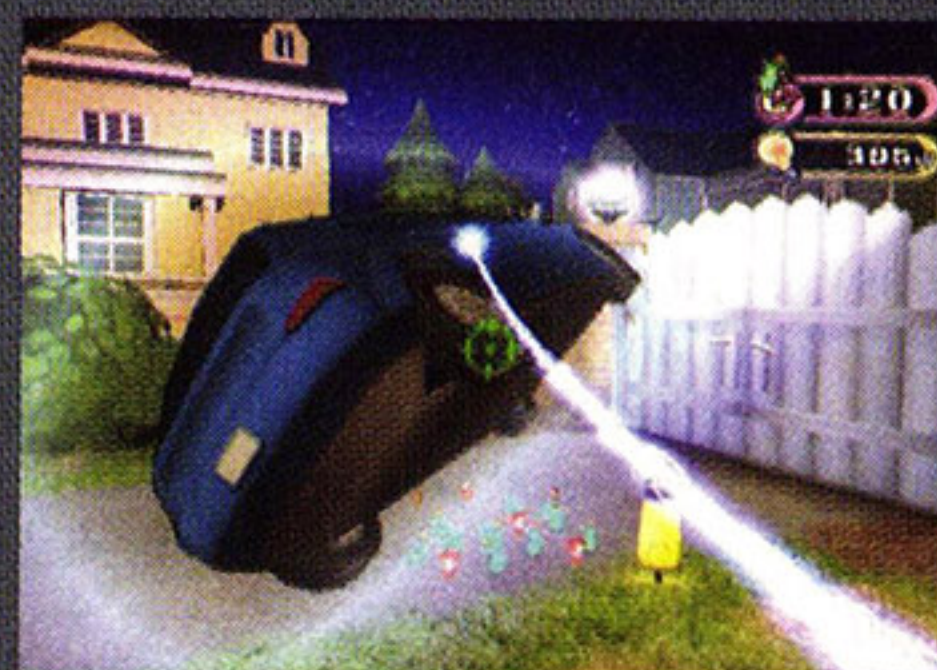
■ The electro-beam allows you to pick up and throw pretty much everything in the game

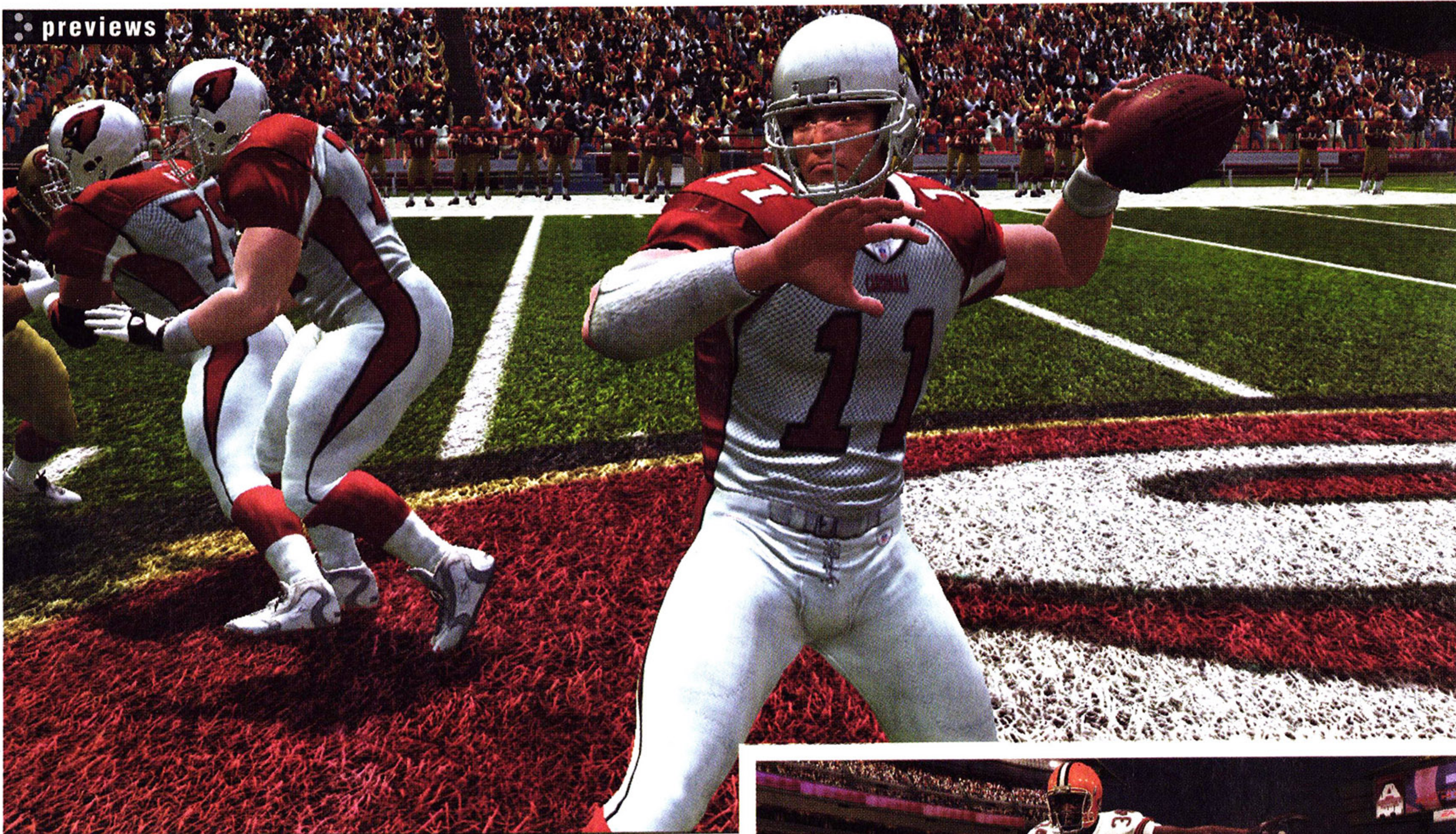
Cute, colorful creatures being harvested as a power source might sound like a plot-gone-wrong from *The Smurfs*, but it's actually the premise of Konami's first contribution to the Wii: *Elebits*. This family-friendly title is sort of like a digital scavenger hunt, allowing players to manipulate the environment to uncover and collect the cuddly little buggers, all while making intuitive use of the Wii controllers.

You see, *Elebits* serve as the source of power for the entire world, but they've sort of rebelled and gone into hiding all over the place. By gathering them up with a zapper device, you can set things right again. The zapper is good for more than just capturing, though – it allows you to turn over, shove, and pull just about any object in the game. By pointing the remote at the screen and holding the A button, a blue beam darts out and surrounds your target. From there,

you can twist your wrist to rotate the object, or simply give the remote a flick to send it across the room. While this sounds reasonable enough for items like pots and pans, eventually the zapper will get strong enough to lift entire houses.

So, what's the point of all this searching? The *Elebits* love to hide, and they will be huddled in, underneath, and around all kinds of things. They might be hiding under a bowl, in the freezer, or even the microwave. By moving around the environment (using the analog stick on the nunchuck controller) and thoroughly turning every room upside-down, players will be able to collect enough *Elebits* to notice visible changes in the world. It may not sound incredibly deep or complex, but *Elebits* captures a sense of discovery and simple fun that seems to align perfectly with Nintendo's goal of launching Wii with a selection of accessible software for gamers young and old. ■ ■ ■





PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360 | Wii | PLAYSTATION 2 | XBOX | GAMECUBE | PC

Madden NFL 07

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER SPORTS (XBOX 360), 1 TO 8-PLAYER (PS2), 1 TO 4-PLAYER (XBOX, GC) (2-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE OR PS2 ONLINE), (PS3 AND WII TBA) > **PUBLISHER** EA SPORTS > **DEVELOPER** EA TIBURON > **RELEASE** AUGUST 22 (NOVEMBER 17 FOR PS3, WII TBA)

THE THREE-WAY THREAT

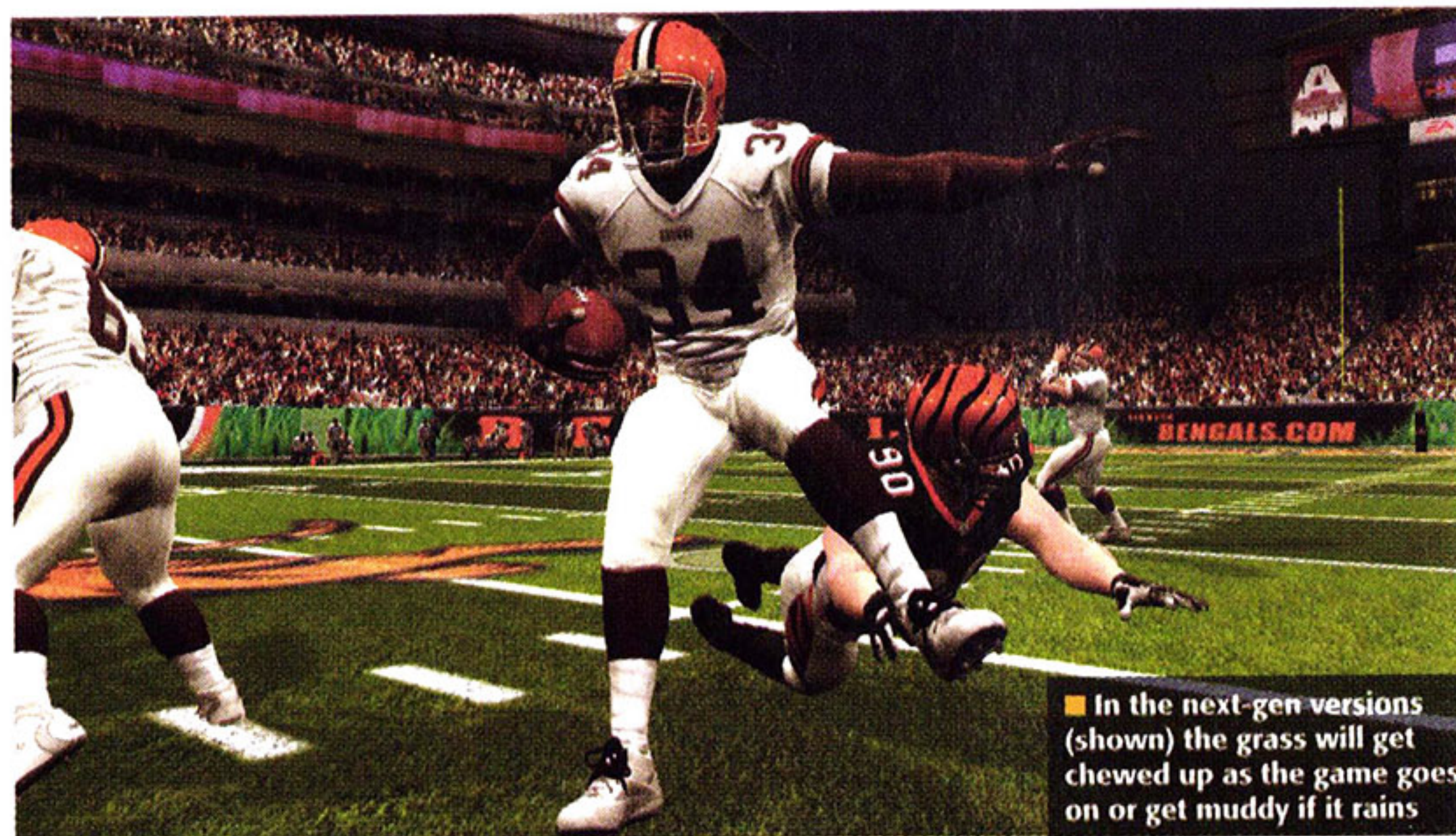
No longer a rookie on the Xbox 360, Madden fans everywhere will be glad to know that developer Tiburon is back to its usual habit of piling on new reasons to keep playing. At E3, gamers were disappointed to find out that the current-gen Maddens would be the only ones to enjoy the new, re-vamped NFL Superstar mode. However, EA has thankfully stepped up and recently announced that the mode would also be included in the Xbox 360 edition of the game (albeit with some differences). But football isn't a game played on paper, and Tiburon knows that.

Along with general tweaks to improve the game as a whole, all of this year's console titles (including both generations) are concentrating on the ground game. The Run to Daylight feature allows you to control lead blockers to a surprisingly fun effect. This includes being able to take a wide receiver and bring him across to the play to lay down a devastating crack-back block on an unsuspecting linebacker. Apart from this gameplay feature, the developer has increased the usefulness of the right analog. Not only can Run to Daylight moves (such as cut blocks) be initiated by the right analog, but running back moves will be different depending on the player involved.

Pushing up on the stick while controlling a light, shifty back will prompt a different move versus doing so with a power back, who will bowl people over. With this added emphasis on the right analog, we hope that the stick will be more responsive than in previous years.

Of course, the Wii's two motion-sensing controllers make for an entirely different experience. You juke by moving the nunchuck controller left or right, while doing the same with the remote controller performs a stiff arm. Passing and hiking the ball (as well as kicking) are also done by making appropriate motions with the controllers. Although moving your arms to juke and throw stiff arms isn't necessarily intuitive, Wii fans of Madden can take comfort in the fact that the game itself looks and moves just like what you are used to on current gen, so it's not like the on-the-field action has been lessened.

An all-together different game-time experience awaits you in NFL Superstar Hall of Fame mode. This does away with the menu-driven career of your created character, and instead puts you directly in the shoes of your player. Unlike last year, playing games in this mode is not exactly like the normal game. You'll see the action



from a special camera angle, and you will only be responsible for controlling your character. Apart from physically moving your player, more importantly, you'll be able to spread your influence to the team as a whole. Before each drive you'll choose a role. For instance, you can choose to be a possession receiver. This will not only affect your stats, but will change the kind of routes you run. A Burner, meanwhile, will get more vertical plays called his way. Gain enough influence during your career and you'll not only change the way your team plays the game, but it'll earn you an induction into the Hall of Fame. The differences between the current- and next-gen versions of this mode are that only the current-gen edi-

tion of the mode will contain the apartment hub and peripheral activities like starring in movies. Also, Owners Mode remains current gen only.

As much as we've come to expect a new Madden every year, now more than ever EA is giving us distinct ways to enjoy the franchise. You just might have to try them all. ■ ■ ■

MADDEN NFL 07 FreeMotion™ Controls

Running Controls

JUKE
Flick nunchaku left or right.

STIFF ARM
Flick remote controller left or right.

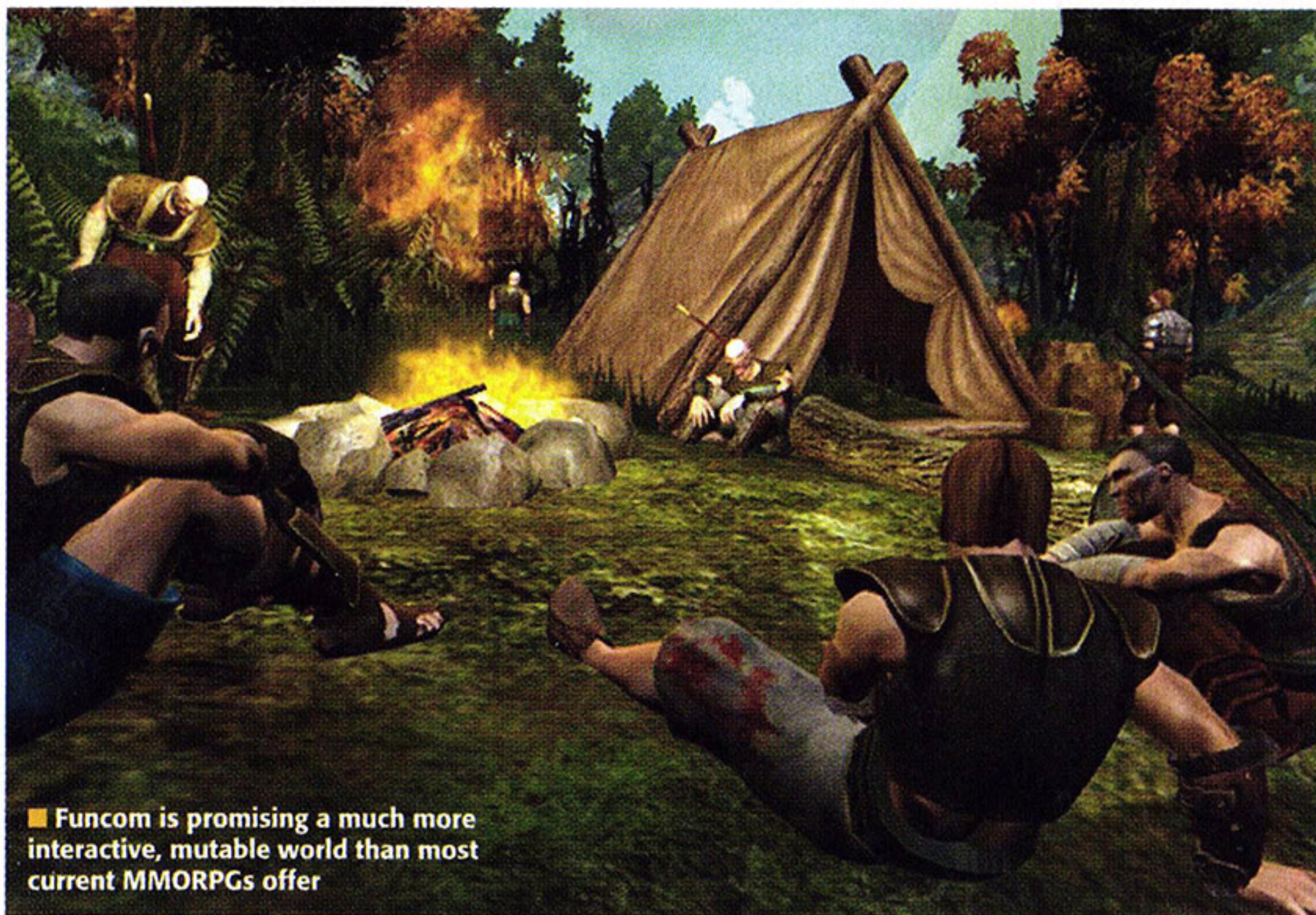
Press **Z** to sprint.

Press **C** to cover ball.

Press **B** to dive.

Press **A** to spin.

Game Paused: Press **A** to continue



■ Funcom is promising a much more interactive, mutable world than most current MMORPGs offer

PC

Age of Conan: Hyborian Adventures

> **STYLE** MASSIVELY MULTIPLAYER ONLINE ROLE-PLAYING GAME > **PUBLISHER** FUNCOM > **DEVELOPER** FUNCOM
> **RELEASE** WINTER

BRUTALITY AT ITS FINEST

Robert E. Howard's multi-talented barbarian-turned-king is one of the most easily-recognized American fantasy characters ever, and now Conan's dark, gritty kingdom is being faithfully brought to life by Anarchy Online creator Funcom – and Age of Conan's design is like nothing we've seen before.

The first 10 to 15 hours of a new character's life will be a single-player RPG experience, detailing the player's rise from galley slave to independent adventurer. Upon completion of this early storyline and starting to customize your avatar's skillset through the free-form character progression, the game becomes massively multiplayer, thrusting players into an online version of Conan's kingdom.

As with most upcoming MMOs, Age of Conan will feature extensive PvE and PvP content. While the combat will be direct and visceral (there are six different directions to attack from, and chaining those together

in certain sequences will produce special moves), large-scale battles are a big part of the design. Formations of both players and NPCs will be a major part of combat, and Funcom is planning on having physical and magical area-of-effect attacks be fairly prevalent – which will no doubt go a long way toward making players feel truly heroic.

Player-controllable siege engines will also help crank up the scale of encounters beyond what we expect of an MMORPG. Full-scale warfare between player-created and operated towns will be possible, and hostile NPCs will even build up their own cities and send out raiding parties. Of course, if you flatten their outpost, you won't have to worry about being attacked for a while.

Funcom is attempting an awful lot with Age of Conan, but if the company manages to pull off this ambitious design, this could stand out among the crowded next wave of MMORPGs. ■ ■ ■



■ Though the game sticks very closely to the original Conan fiction, there are plenty of gaps that the designers can fill with cool stuff

PC

CivCity: Rome

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER SIMULATION > **PUBLISHER** 2K GAMES > **DEVELOPER** FIREFLY STUDIOS/FIRAXIS GAMES
> **RELEASE** JULY 24

CIV, NOT SIM



■ A well-built, self-sustaining city is a work of art

It's been almost three years since EA's last SimCity release, and rival 2K Games is filling in the void with this joint project from Firefly Studios (Stronghold) and Firaxis Games (Civilization). CivCity: Rome puts gamers in charge of urban planning for the greatest of ancient metropolises, and incorporates several concepts from the long-running Civilization series into the traditional city-simulation framework – with a fantastically easy, intuitive interface to smooth out the experience.

As is customary, your goal is to develop your city into the best, most self-sustaining hive of humanity you possibly can. Finding the optimal configuration of commercial, residential, and industrial structures to encourage the citizenry to be productive and stay out of trouble is your main task. Technology advances can unlock new types of buildings that can more effectively grease

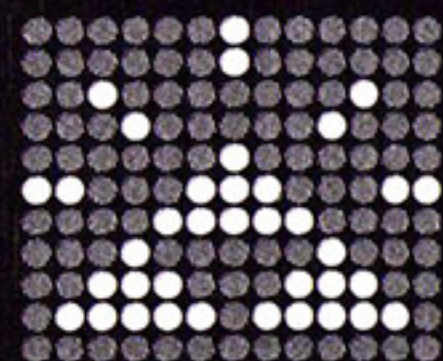
the wheels of society, and dumping a ton of resources into building a Great Wonder will offer citywide benefits.

Unlike similar titles, CivCity: Rome's populace is more than a faceless, anonymous mass of people. Every citizen has a name and story, and you'll be able to zoom all the way down to street level to see the rise and fall of individual fortunes. Whole families will also be doing their best to climb the social ladder for your voyeuristic pleasure. After your city reaches a certain point, you'll even be able to expand your dominion beyond a single municipality through military force (though any foreign combats will happen offscreen).

Firefly and Firaxis aren't holding back anything for this monster of a game, and we'll be able to pass a final verdict on to you soon, provided the title's imminent release date doesn't slip. ■ ■ ■



■ A series of missions will give purpose to your city's growth



PHOTOPHILE

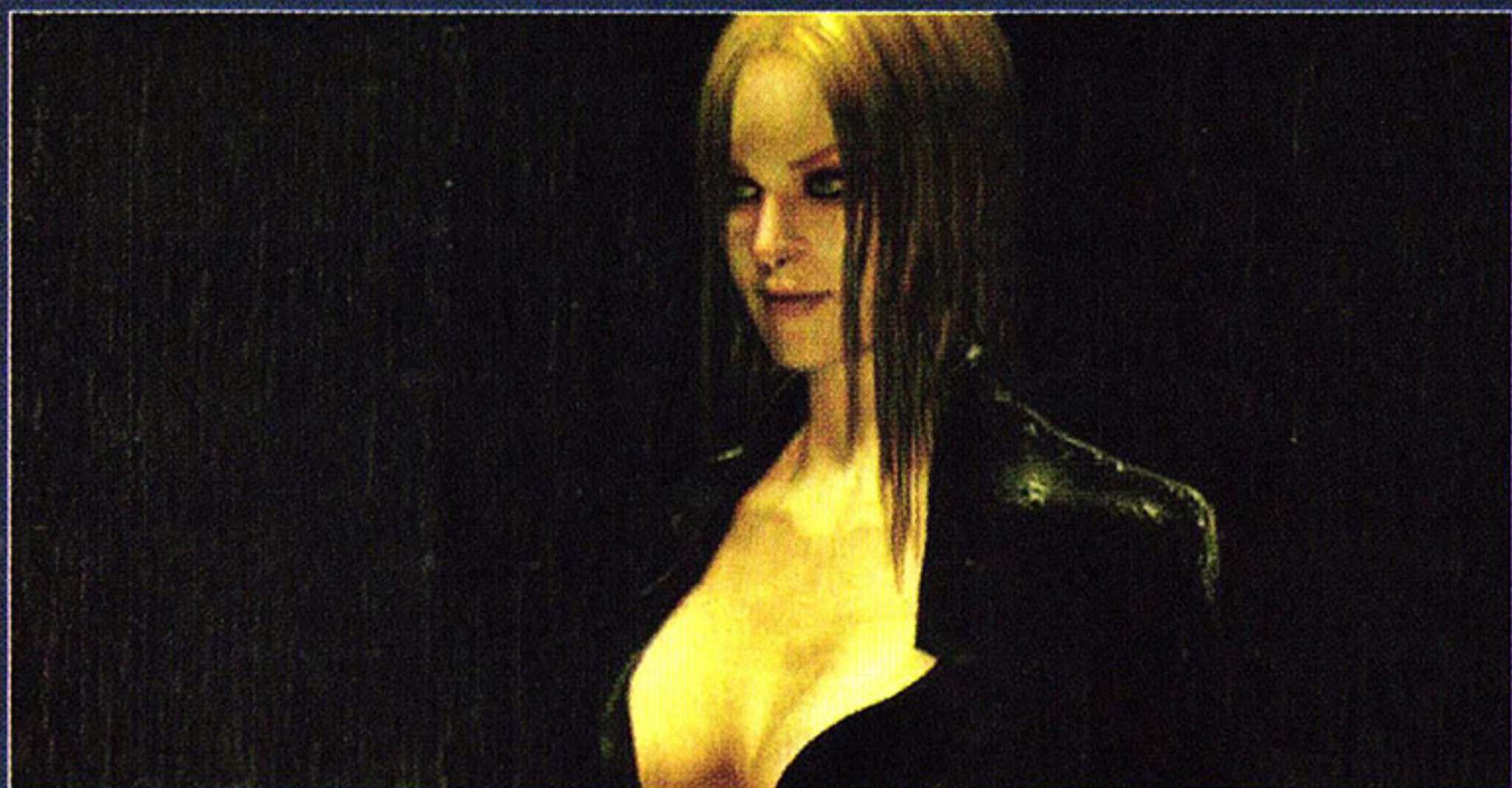
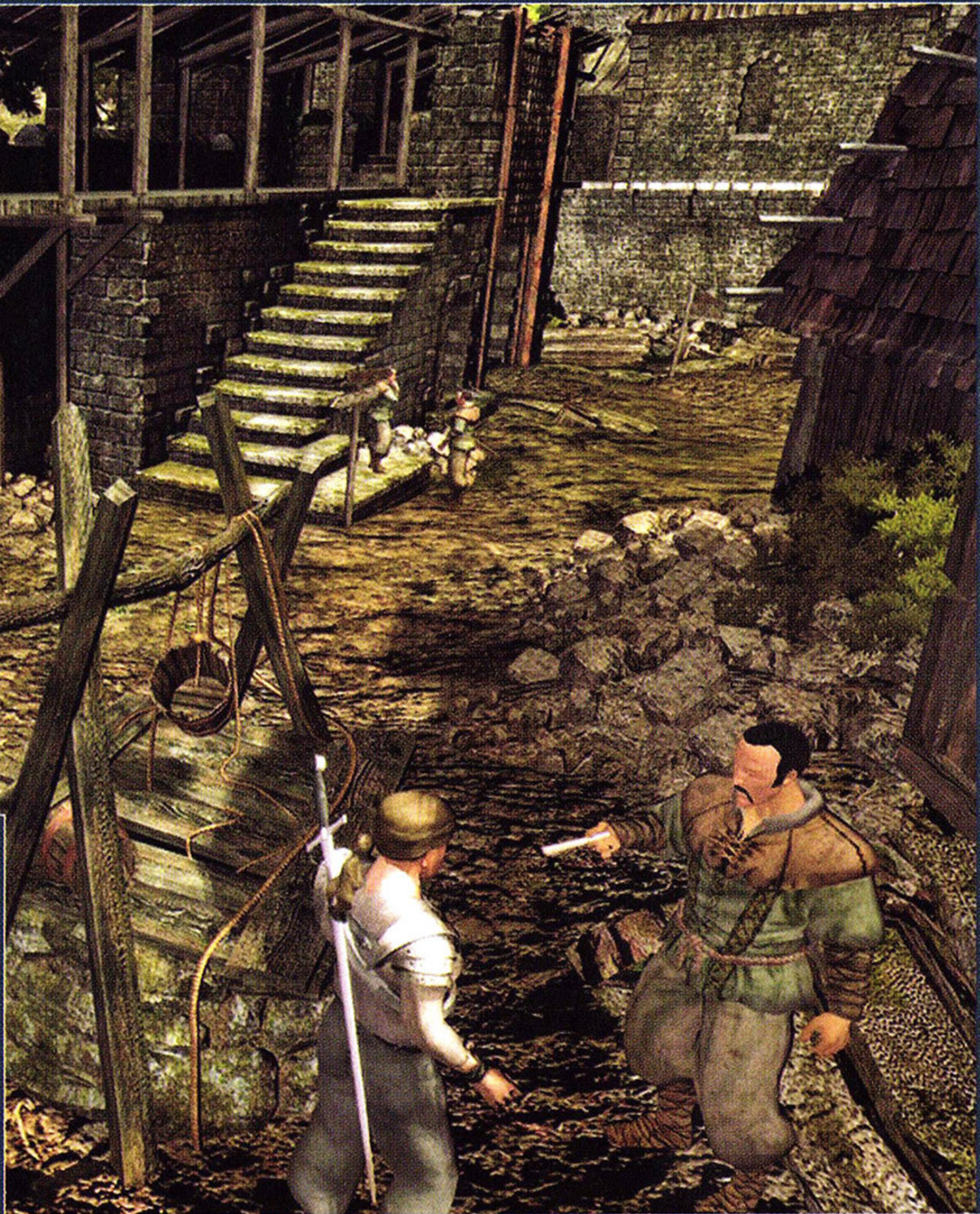
Mini Previews With Big Pictures



PC

Gothic 3

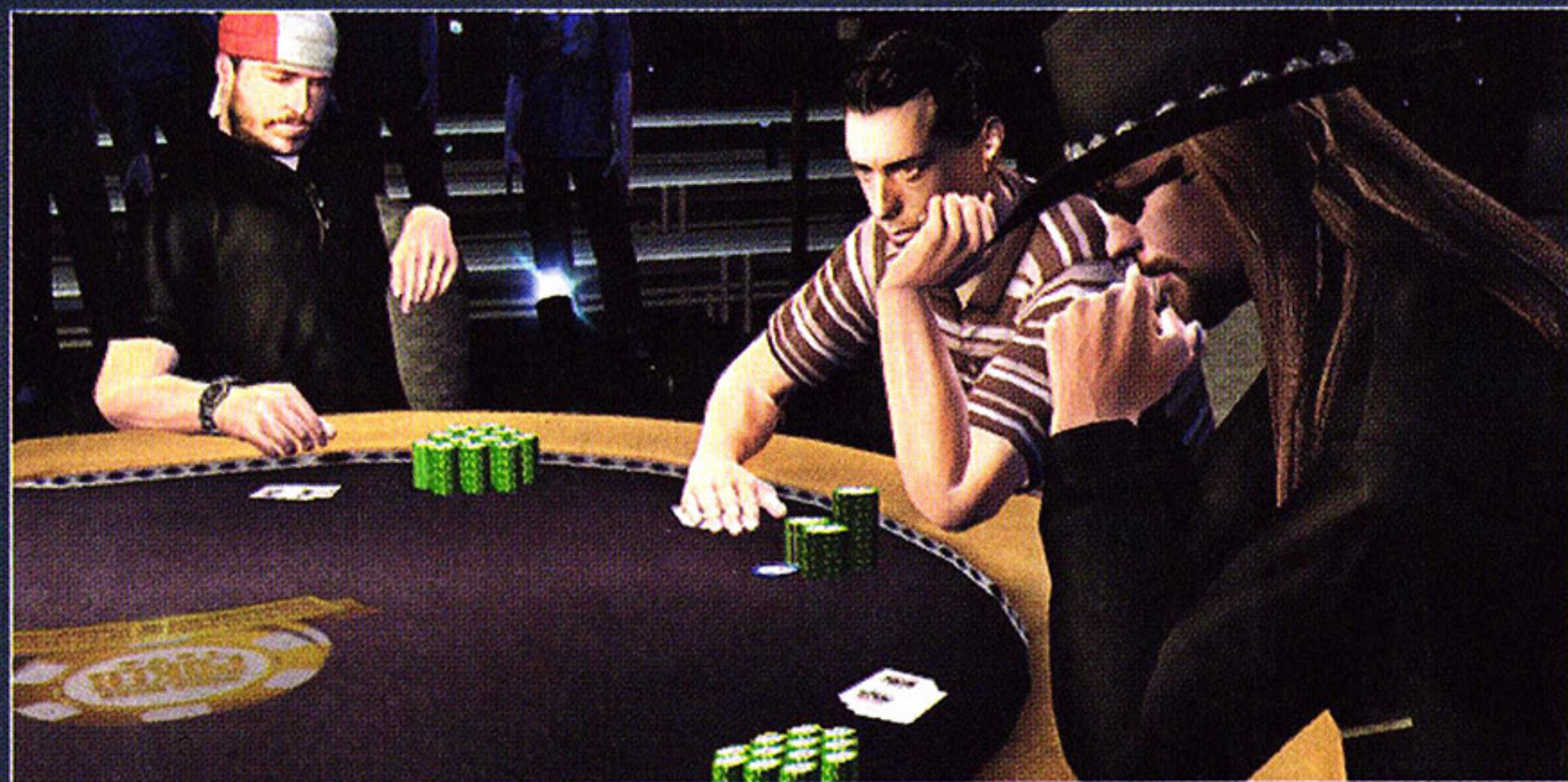
The next chapter in this well-respected role-playing series will be coming to the States this fall courtesy of Aspyr, and it should end up being one of the rare full-blown RPGs the PC gets these days. An enormous hand-crafted world to explore and an open character development system (there are no classes, only skills to improve) are only a few of the many freedoms offered by Gothic 3. Rather than just having quests to resolve, this title will offer scenarios that let the player determine what happens. If a town is under siege, you're free to join in on the looting and pillaging – which will of course result in the lack of much else to do there later on, since the world is persistent. The outstanding presentation that we expect out of a top-flight PC game is just the icing on Gothic 3's meaty gameplay.



XBOX 360 | PLAYSTATION 3

Vampire's Rain

One of the more mysterious trailers released on Xbox Live during Microsoft's E3 media blitz was for an obscure survival horror game called Rain. Other info on the title was scarce, perhaps because the rest of the world knew this title as Vampire's Rain, which is being developed by Artoon and published by AQ Interactive. Scheduled for a Japanese release at the end of the year, Vampire's Rain is a horror story set in an open-world version of L.A. that is terrorized by vampires. However, the bloodsuckers are weakened by rainfall, so the rare L.A. storms will be your safest time to head outside. This little tidbit of info isn't much, but it definitely leaves us wanting more than the vague E3 teaser showed us.



XBOX 360 | PLAYSTATION 2 | PC | PSP

World Series of Poker: Tournament of Champions

Ah poker, who hasn't gotten hooked on the craze? Of course, the last time we played, we lost pretty much everything, so now we live in an abandoned Popeye's Chicken restaurant and dance for nickels in front of the craft store. If only we had World Series of Poker: Tournament of Champions before that fateful hand. This new poker title coming from Activision Value in September puts you in the role of a rookie trying to earn your way to the invitation-only Tournament, with a little help from real-life pro Chris "Jesus" Ferguson. In the game, you'll face off against other real pros, and the Xbox 360 version will even take advantage of the newly-unveiled 360 camera, letting you put your face in the game and see other online player's faces in real time to read their tells. Not that we'd actually let anyone see where we live now. The rats...err, our roommates...like their privacy.



NINTENDO DS

Mario vs. Donkey Kong 2: March of the Minis

The GBA's Mario vs. Donkey Kong was an interesting little puzzler, and the franchise is scheduled to return this September on the DS. But this time around, there are a few changes. It's no longer up to Mario to save the Mini Marios – this time they're the stars. Players will guide them through stages with the stylus, like a touch-enabled version of Lemmings. Gamers will also be able to create their own maps and share them via Wi-Fi, and access player rankings and bonuses. What's more, March of the Minis will see the return of Pauline, the woman that Mario rescued in the original Donkey Kong. Finally, a break for Peach!



PC

Star Wars: Empire at War: Forces of Corruption

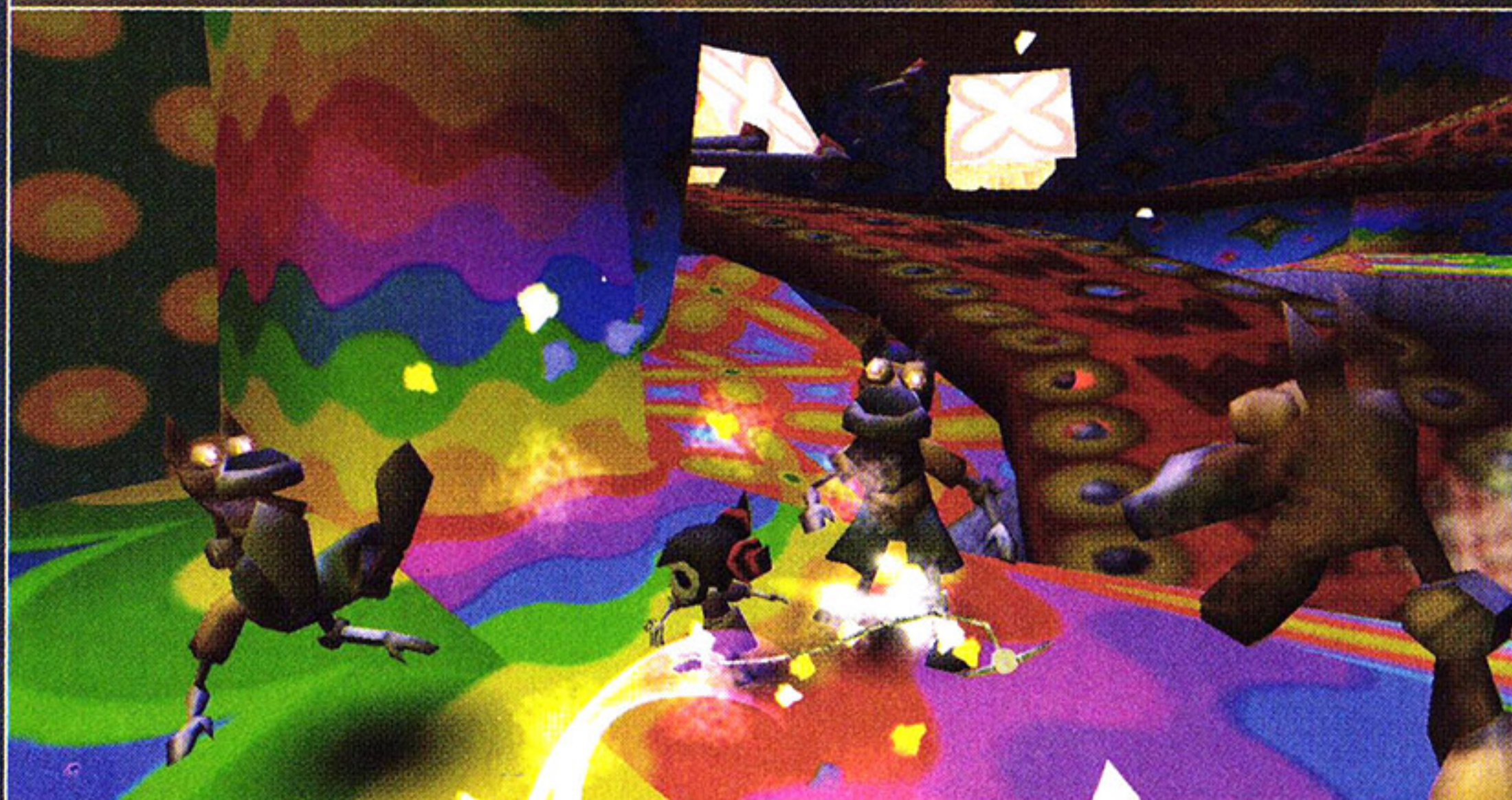
Empire at War was a worthy addition to the Star Wars video game fold back in February, and now developer Petroglyph is hard at work on the first expansion, due out this fall. Forces of Corruption is aptly named; the bulk of the new content revolves around a third faction that is comprised primarily of scum and villains. A host of brand-new tactics are available to these shady characters, from bribery and sabotage to vastly more effective hit-and-run maneuvers. This isn't to say that the Empire and Rebellion don't get some new toys to play with – Luke and Yoda will slice many a stormtrooper with crazy lightsaber tricks, and Super Star Destroyers like Vader's flagship *Executor* will be a one-ship navy.



GAME BOY ADVANCE

Final Fantasy VI

If you can follow the Final Fantasy series' arcane numbering system, you may be some kind of savant. This GBA edition of Final Fantasy VI was released in the U.S. as Final Fantasy III for the Super Nintendo, but now is reclaiming its original spot in the series, as well as some new additions. Updated graphics and sound will be the start of the tweaks this title receives, which many players will remember as being the story of the magic-user Terra. Of course, it's just as likely that you remember this title for Kefka, one of the most diabolical villains in the series. He may not be Sephiroth, but he's still quite the jerk.



PSP

Death, Jr. 2: Root of Evil

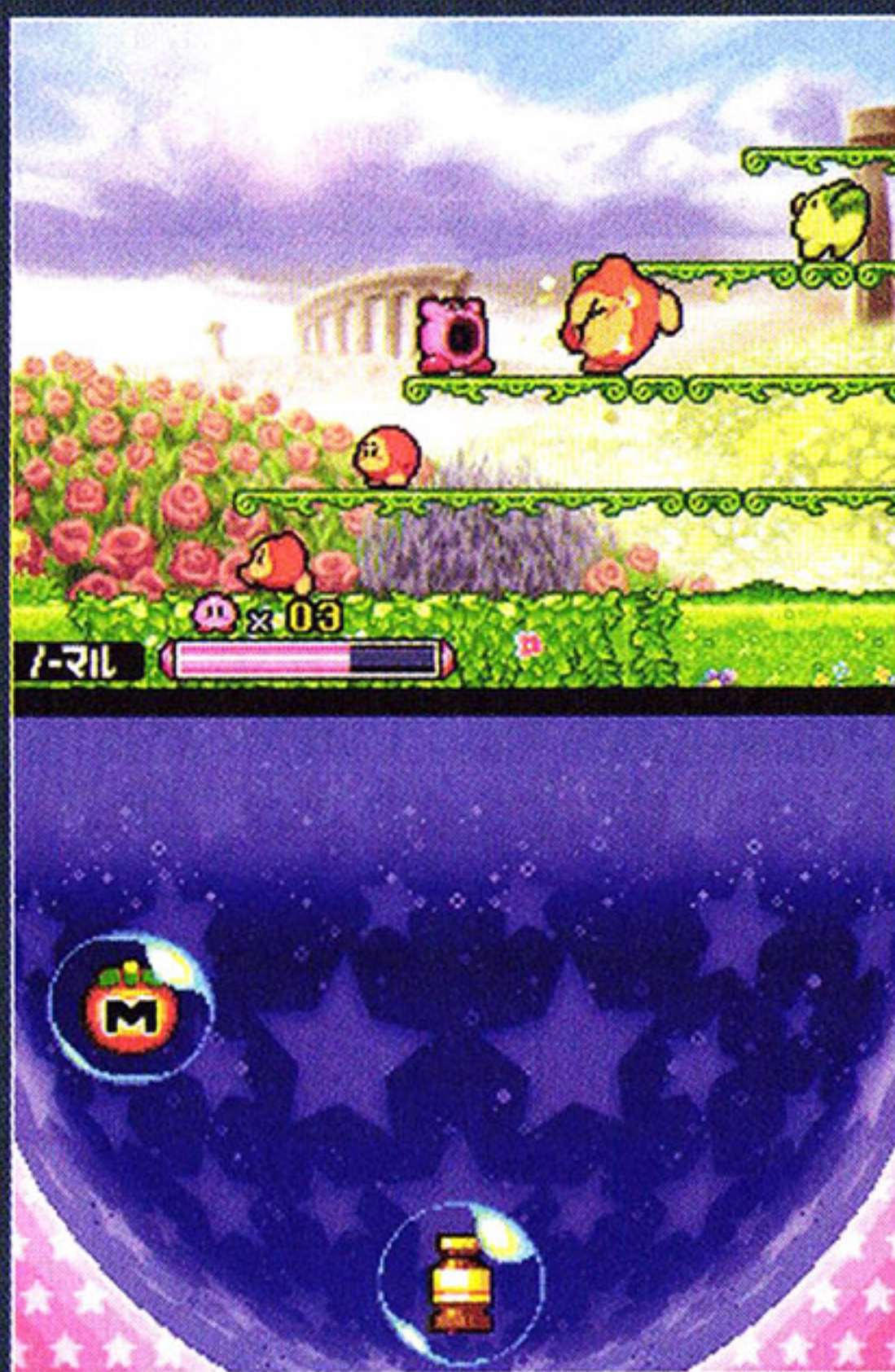
The first Death, Jr. game on PSP was long on fun, but a little short in the gameplay department. It looks like Konami and Foundation 9 heard our pleas for more of the gang and less of the clunky camera when they were making plans for a new outing. Featuring wireless cooperative play (one runs DJ and the other handles Pandora), players will jump and hack their way through some seriously nefarious environments – an evil waffle house and "the most disturbing mall ever rendered in a video game" both sound like highlights to us. That one mall in *Condemned* was pretty unnerving, and if this is even crazier...well, our PSPs might melt from fright later this fall when the game is due.



NINTENDO DS

Kirby DS [tentative title]

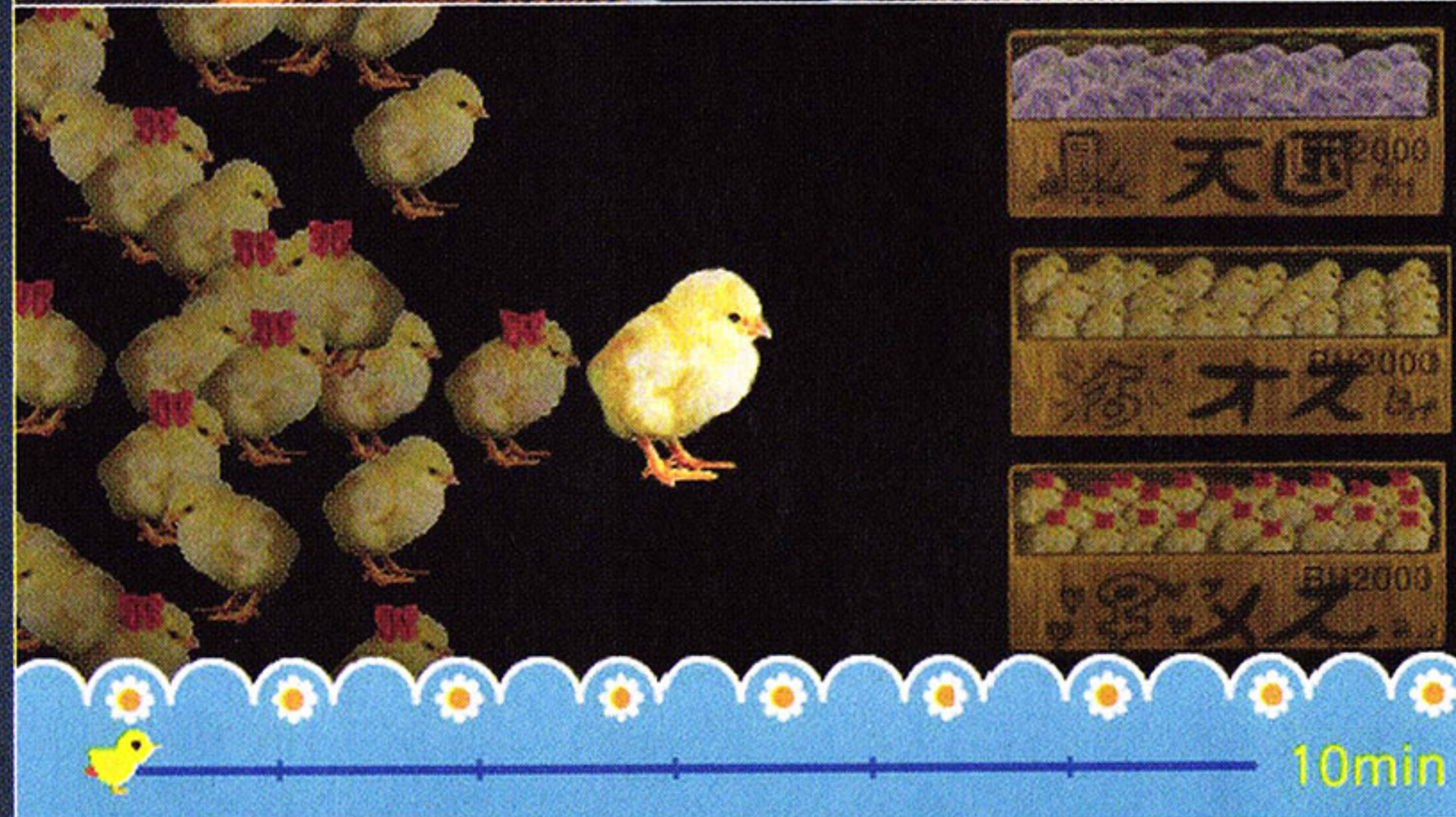
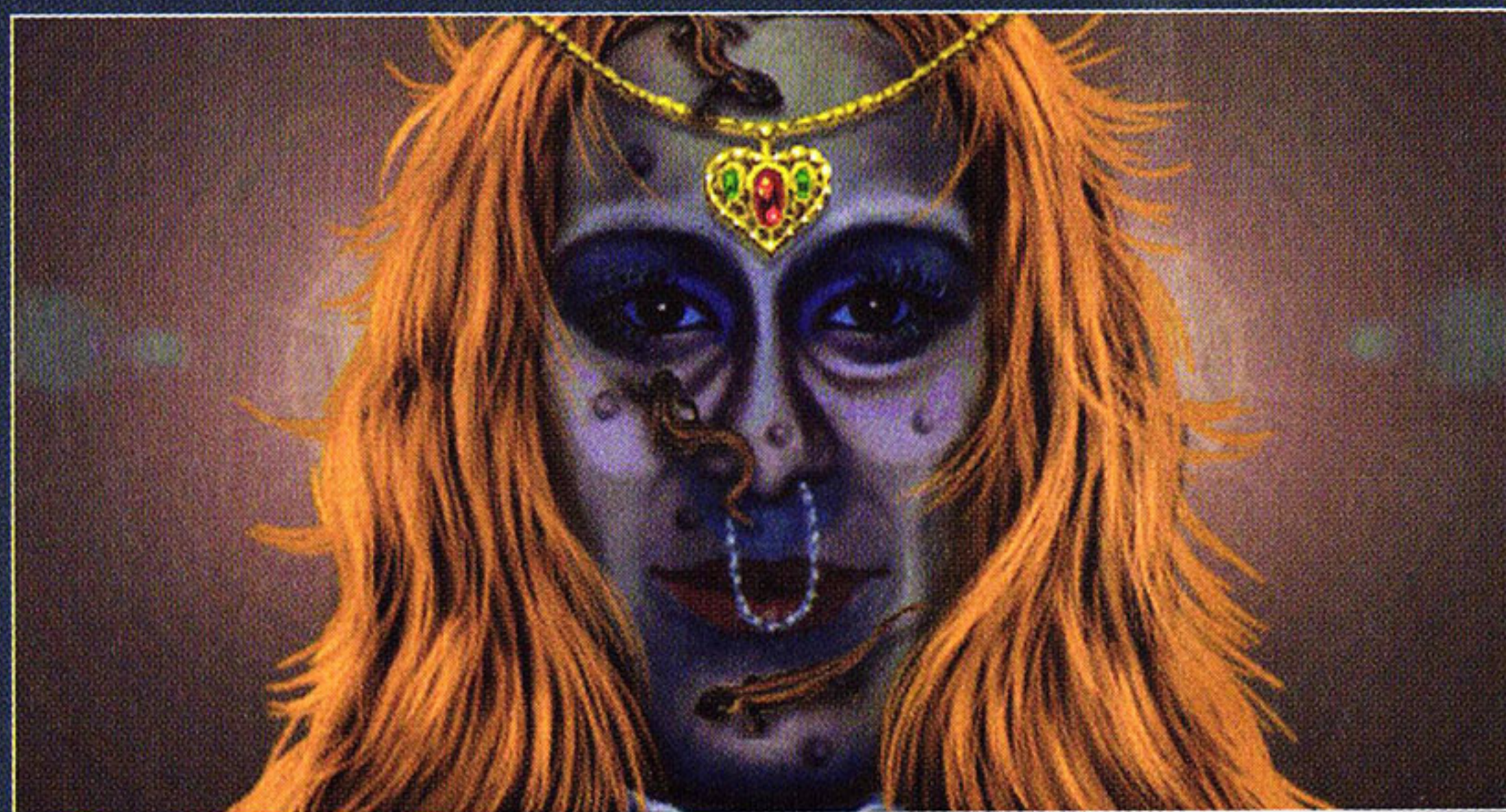
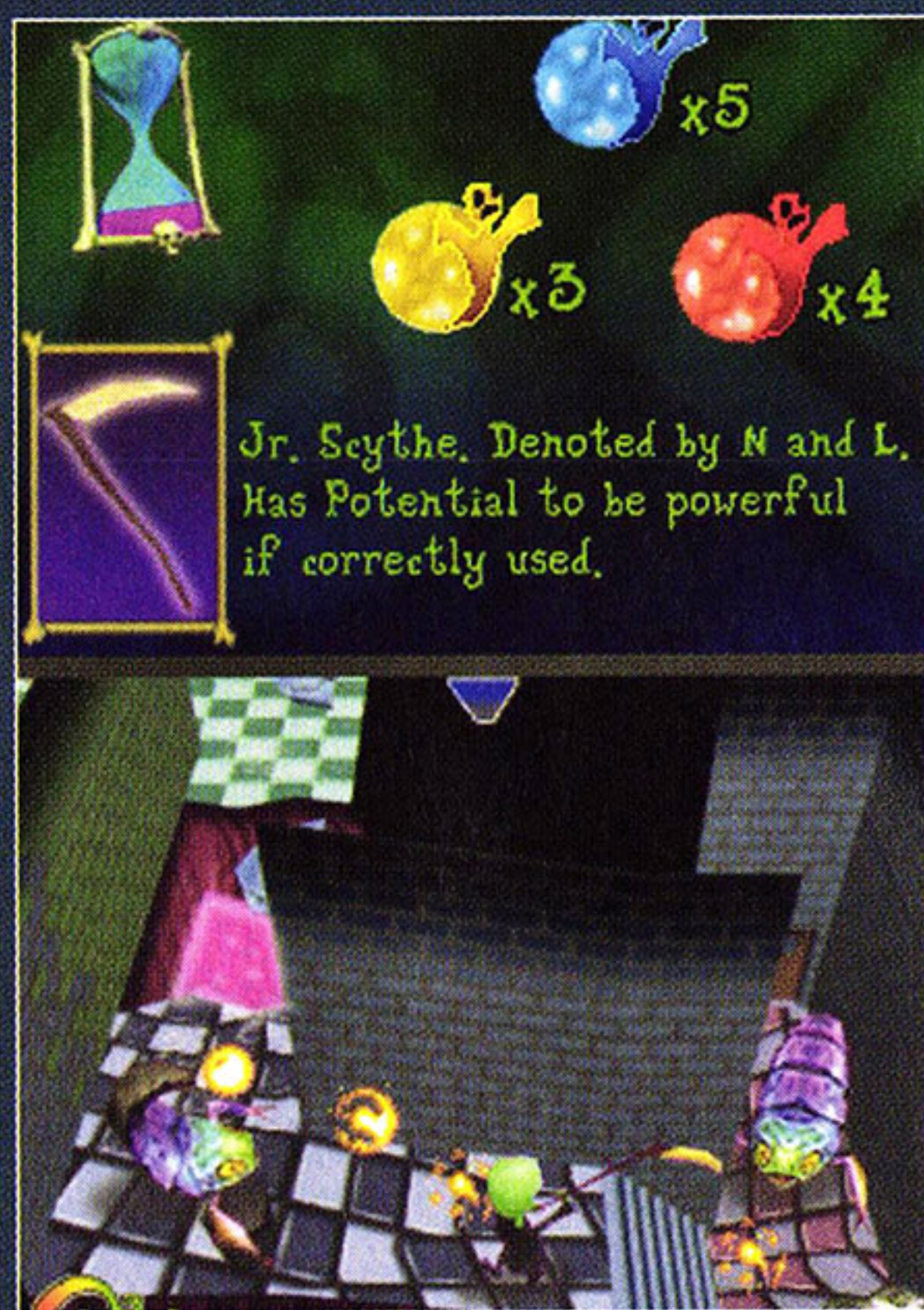
Kirby: Canvas Curse was, for many of us, the first game that truly showed the potential the DS had for handling more traditional game types enhanced with touch-sensitive controls. Accordingly, we're a bit mixed on HAL and Nintendo's decision to take the next Kirby DS game back to a more traditional d-pad control scheme. However, there are still some interesting touch-screen functions implemented in the title. The bottom screen now displays the various items and power-ups that Kirby has swallowed, allowing you to choose them with a touch, or even combine them into new items. For example, you could combine two weapons into a new weapon, or take two smaller health power-ups and meld them into one giant boost of energy. As always, the graphics are crisp and colorful, and we all know how well HAL knows the 2D platformer. Hopefully, Nintendo will reveal the game's official title and release date soon.



NINTENDO DS

Death Jr. and the Science Fair of Doom

Our science fairs of paper mache volcanoes and electricity-producing spuds quiver with respect for the Death Jr. kids' – unleashing Moloch, the ultimate abomination. The premise sounds like a great middle ground between *Addam's Family*, *Invader Zim*, and *Grim Adventures of Bill and Mandy*, which is an ideal sweet spot for morbid grade school humor. Gameplay sounds like a very traditional action/platform affair, but we all know that skilled level design and a charming universe can go a long way. We'll know for sure the fate of the Science Fair by this fall. Oh, and players of the first PSP release who were bummed that they couldn't take control of the game's awesome supporting cast should take note: both DJ and Pandora are playable in Science Fair. Yeah!



PSP

WTF

When the premise of a game has the player being assigned random work by a capricious Job Demon, you know you're in for something special. In the spirit of the *WarioWare* titles, *WTF* ("work time fun." Seriously.) will dish out an array of more than 40 bizarre minigames. Players will chop wood, play baseball, and sort chickens in order to amass money. For those of you unfamiliar with consumerism, money is used to buy things, and the items up for purchase in *WTF* actually have surprising real-life applications. You can buy a clock that displays on your PSP, or a pair of wacky cartoon eyes you can hold up to your face. These toys might be fun, but the real thrill of the game should come from its ad-hoc multiplayer options. Look for it later this September courtesy of publisher D3.



NINTENDO DS

Hotel Dusk: Room 215

Holding your DS like a book, solve a gritty mystery involving a hotel room that grants wishes? Um, okay. This DS adventure title, due out by the end of the year from developer Ching and publisher Nintendo, promises puzzles along the lines of the team's earlier outing: Trace Memory. While that game had some wickedly clever problems to solve, it was short on storytelling finesse. Let's hope the team's follow up, which looks to have a nice hardboiled art style, bridges the gap more successfully.



NINTENDO DS

Panzer Tactics DS

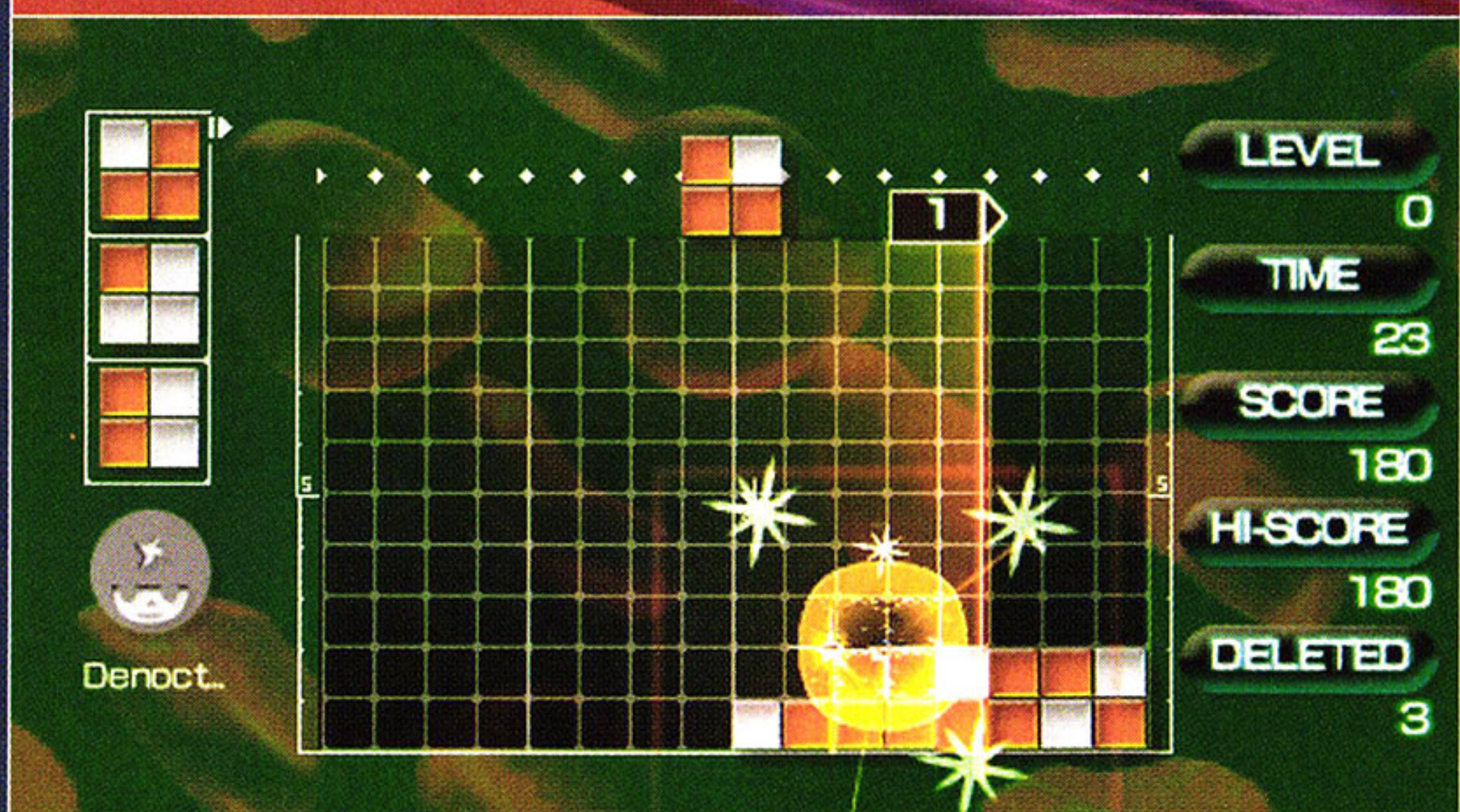
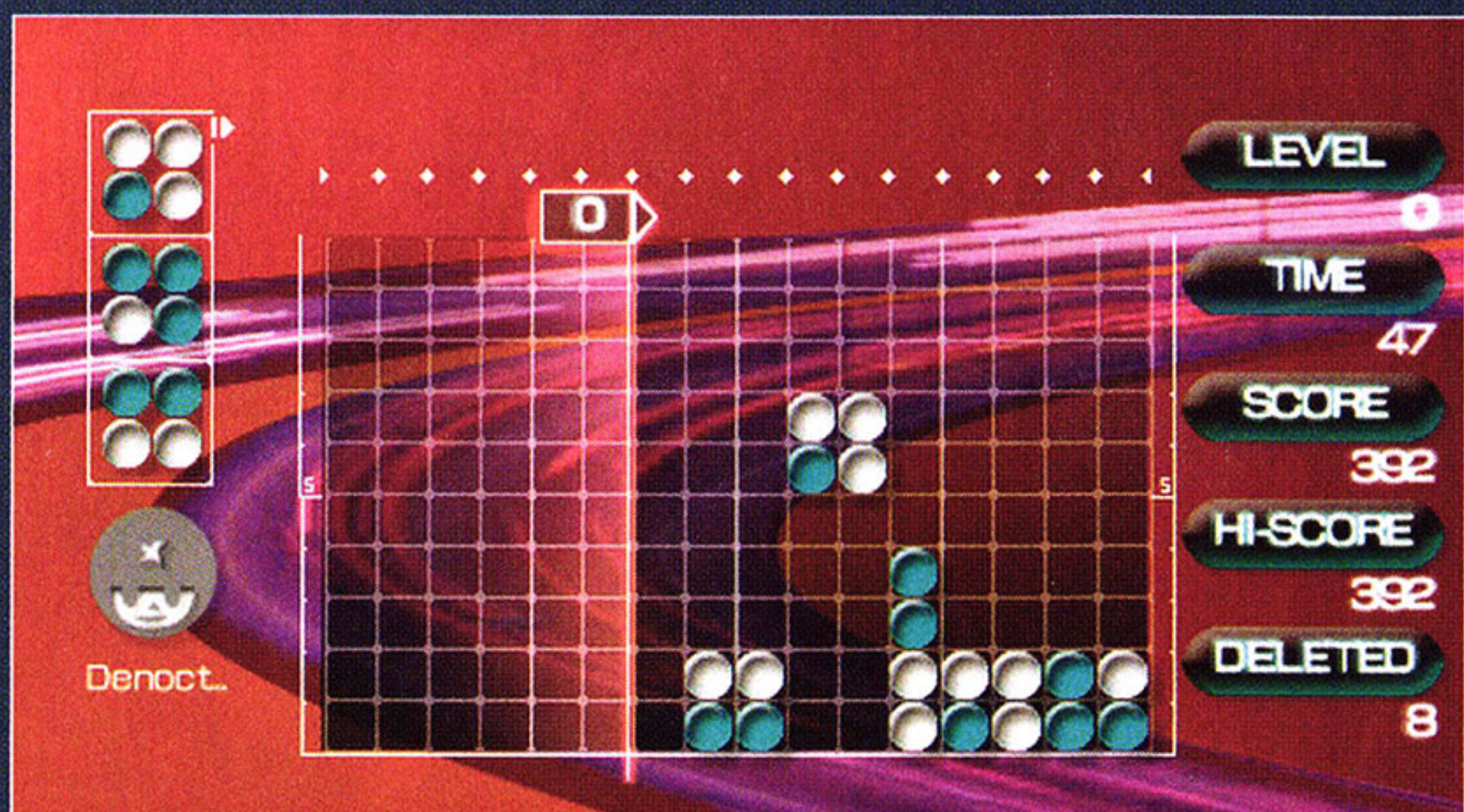
German publisher CDV is breaking away from its PC real-time World War II strategy roots...with this turn-based World War II strategy title for the DS. That's okay, though, because as Advance Wars has taught us, there are few genres better suited for a handheld. Panzer Tactics DS looks like the real deal, with everything an armchair general could want to keep its hex-grid combat interesting for a long time to come. With weather effects that impact gameplay, historical and fictional campaigns, and the biggest draw of them all – wireless play over the Internet – Panzer Tactics will give DS owners something different from the system's usual cartoony fare when it comes out this fall.



NINTENDO DS

Dragon Quest Heroes: Rocket Slime

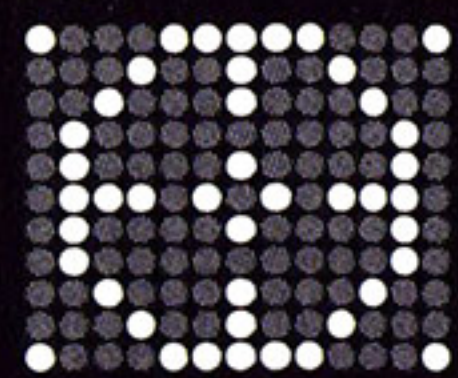
The smiling Slimes from the Dragon Quest series are some of the most beloved enemy characters in gaming, and now American gamers will be able to play as one of these cute little blobs in Dragon Quest Heroes: Rocket Slime. Actually the second game in the Japanese Slime Mori Mori series, Rocket Slime is a cute, Zelda-inspired adventure game for all ages. Your primary offense is a ram released by stretching your Slime and releasing him like a slingshot, sending him barreling into enemies. You'll also get into tank battles that are displayed on the top screen, with the interior of the vehicle displayed on the bottom. You'll rush around the tank, finding things to load into the cannon and fire at your enemy. Rocket Slime sounds silly – and it is – but is one of those games that is so charming that we're confident that DS owners will consider this a welcome addition to the library.



PSP

Lumines II

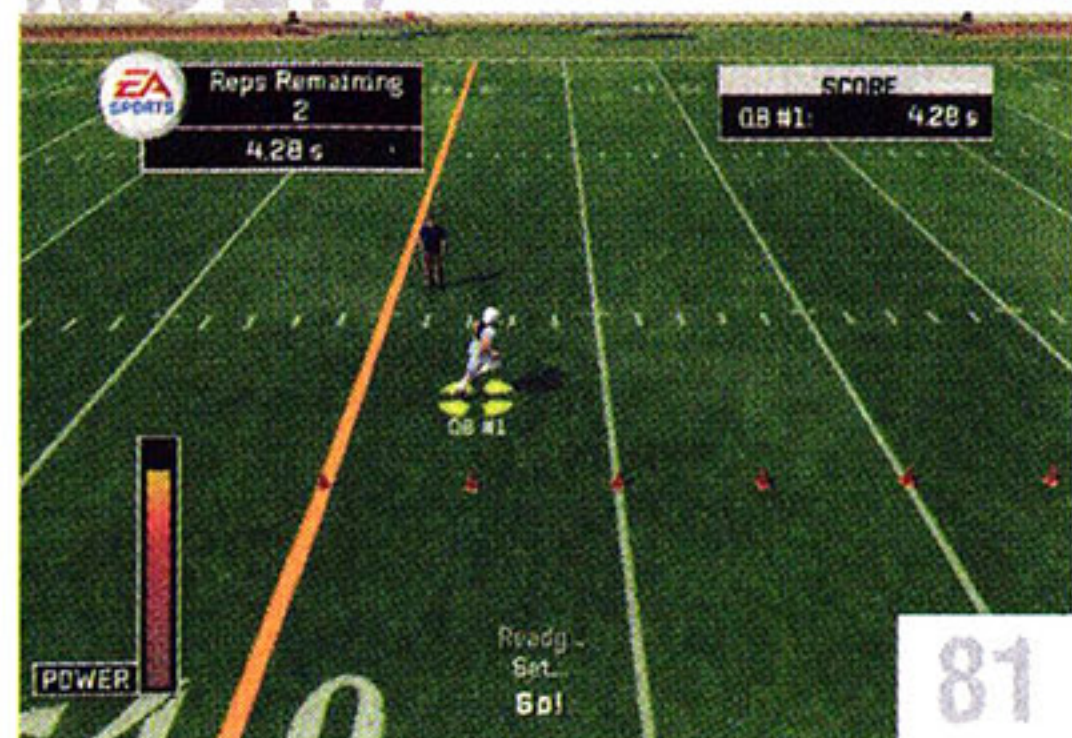
Last month, we passed on word that Lumines would be making its way to Xbox Live Arcade. Meanwhile, the true sequel to the PSP launch hit will once again be gracing Sony's little handheld, with a feature set that looks nearly identical to the original. Basically, unless Buena Vista is holding back some big surprises, Lumines II appears to be a direct follow-up with little or no change to the basic gameplay and modes. What has changed (and what addicted players will scramble for) is an entirely new batch of skins and songs to puzzle your way through. While no artists have been officially announced, it sounds as if this time we'll have background music videos for some of the tracks in addition to the trance-inducing color palettes of the first game. Expect to pop the UMD into your PSP sometime this fall.



REVIEWS

We Play The Crap So You Don't Have To

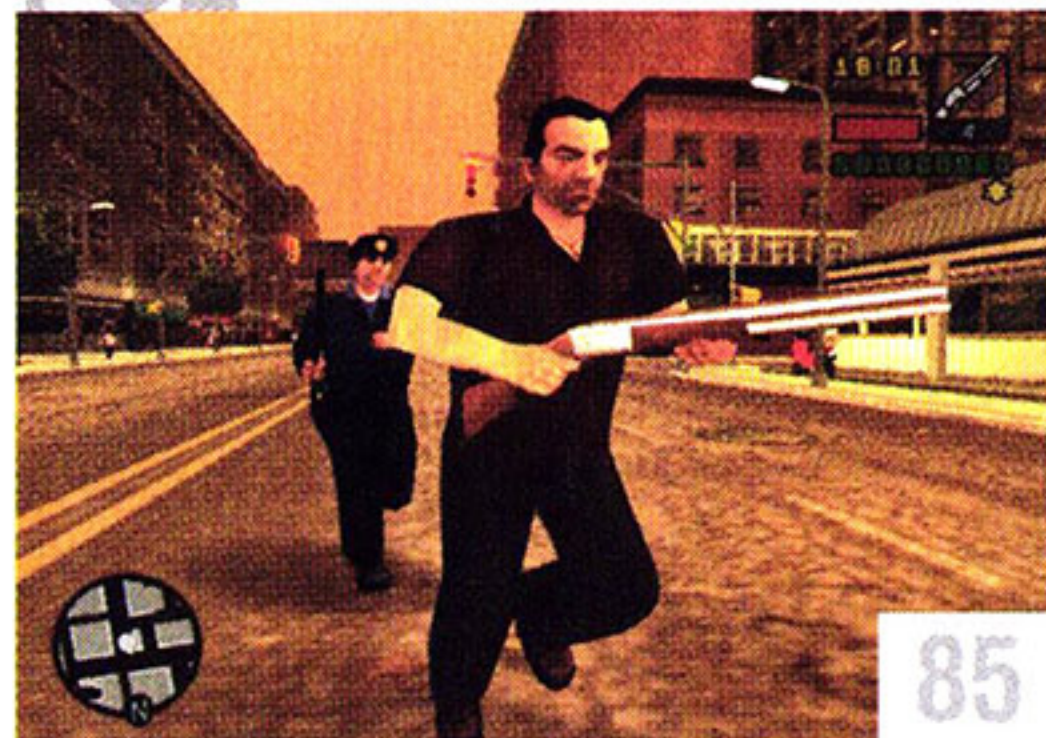
MULTI



NCAA Football 07

81

PS2



Grand Theft Auto: Liberty City Stories

85

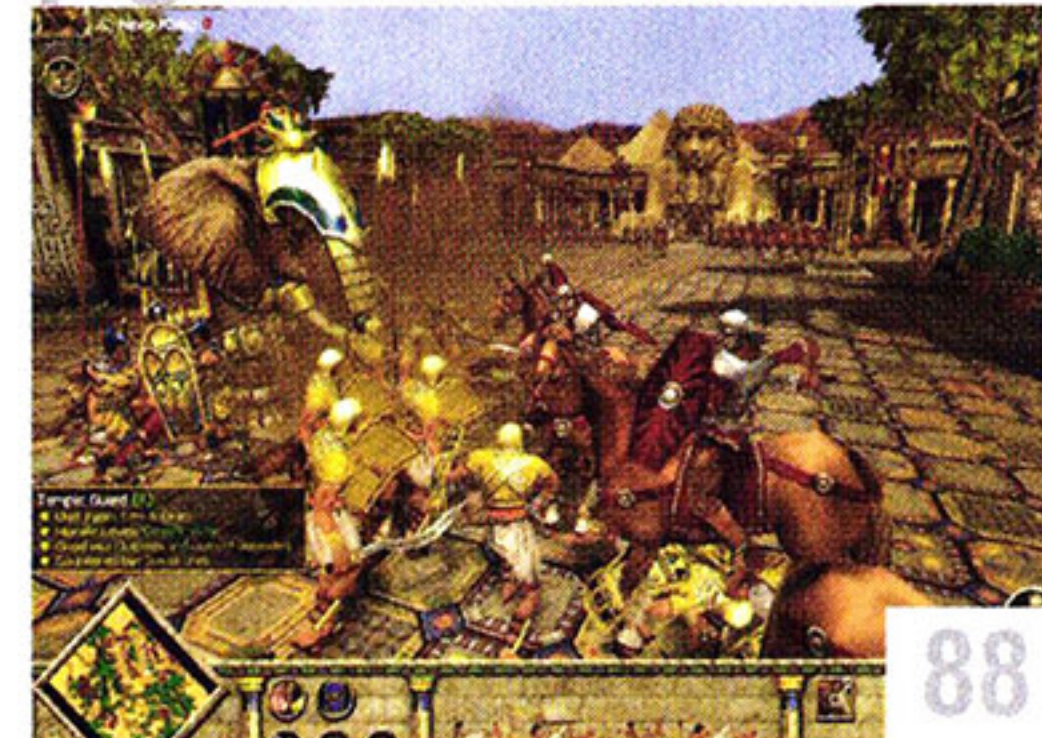
XBOX 360



The Lord of the Rings: The Battle for Middle-earth II

86

PC

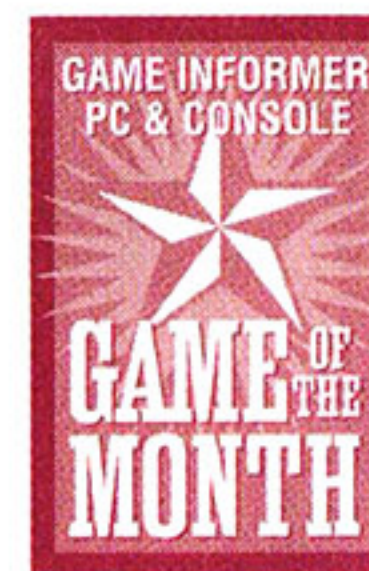


Rise & Fall: Civilizations at War

88



80



Prey

Fraught with development problems, Prey has been in the works in one form or another for roughly ten years. Finally, it has come to life thanks to Human Head Studios, and it's definitely worth every day of the wait. A smart, creepy, and gripping first-person adventure, Prey places gamers on board a living spaceship with its own set of rules, like a very flexible concept of gravity and portals that instantly transport you from one place to another. We've all played sci-fi shooters before, but you've never seen a world this brilliantly unique and incredible until you step into the world of Prey.

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

THE SCORING SYSTEM

- 10** Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.
- 9** Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.
- 8** Very Good. Innovative, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.
- 7** Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.
- 6** Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.
- 5** Passable. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.
- 4** Bad. While some things may work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions to varying degrees or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
- 3** Painful. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
- 2** Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
- 1** The Infernal Vortex of Eternal Pain and Damnation. The vortex from which eternal pain and damnation infernally arise. Yeah.

- > **Concept:** What new ideas the game brings to the table and how well old ideas are presented.
- > **Graphics:** How good a game looks, taking into account any flaws such as bad collision or pop-up.
- > **Sound:** Does the game's music and sound effects get you involved or do they make you resolve to always play with the volume down?
- > **Playability:** Basically, the controller to human interface. The less you think about the hunk of plastic in your hands, the better the playability.
- > **Entertainment:** Flat out, just how fun the game is to play. The most important factor in rating a game.
- > **Replay Value**

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

PSP



90

Astonishia Story

DS



92

Big Brain Academy



90



Valkyrie Profile: Lenneth

Square Enix has smartly re-released Valkyrie Profile (now subtitled Lenneth) on Sony's PSP with grand results. The story unfolds like the company's other great RPGs, and the combo-based battle system with a huge cast of secondary characters keeps fights entertaining, but simple at the same time. Depth and extended replay options come from customizing warriors before sending them to Valhalla and choosing exactly how you want to spend your time before the end of the world. It's a great summer entry to the PSP's library, and for more info, check out our review on page 90.

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pg. 88

the edge

When All Games Aren't Created Equal
This is where GI breaks down multi-platform games. So whenever you see this logo, there is important multi-system information regarding that product.

	Content suitable for persons ages 3 and older.		Content suitable for persons 17 ages and older.
	Content suitable for persons ages 6 and older.		Content suitable only for adults.
	Content suitable for persons ages 10 and older.		Product is awaiting final rating.
	Content suitable for persons ages 13 and older.		

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

- \$0.37** – Your bank balance after all of the games and hardware you buy this holiday season. Not even enough for a stamp
- 1080i** – A resolution specification used for HDTV. 1080i stands for resolution of 1920x1080 pixels. The “i” means that the video is being interlaced
- 480p** – Progressive scanning, this option (“p”= progressive), creates a picture signal with double the scan lines of a conventional interlaced picture, 480i (i = interlaced), to create a noticeably sharper image. The 480p image offers higher picture resolution and eliminates virtually all motion artifacts in a 640x480 pixel resolution setting
- 720p** – A resolution specification used for HDTV. 720p stands for resolution of 1280x720 pixels. The “p” means that the video is in progressive format
- action** – A term we use for games like Devil May Cry and Viewtiful Joe
- ad hoc** – A type of wireless connection that connects you with other players in your immediate vicinity
- adventure** – A term we use for games like Myst and Escape From Monkey Island
- AI** – Artificial Intelligence. Usually used to refer to how well the computer reacts to a human opponent
- bloom** – An effect that simulates the soft, blurred glow of bright light reflecting off of surfaces
- board** – A term we use for games like Jeopardy! and Mario Party
- cel shading** – A technique used to create 3D rendered objects that resemble hand-drawn animation cels
- E3** – Electronic Entertainment Expo. The world's largest convention for video games
- fighting** – A term we use for games like Mortal Kombat and Dead or Alive
- first-party** – A game made by a console manufacturer's internal development teams exclusively for its own system
- FMV** – Full Motion Video. Usually refers to an animated CG cutscene
- FPS** – Frames Per Second. How many animation frames happen in one second. Also used to denote First-Person Shooters like Halo, Doom, and Call of Duty
- framerate** – The frames of animation used to create the illusion of movement
- frontend** – A game's menus and options
- GBA** – Game Boy Advance
- GC** – GameCube
- HDTV** – High Definition Television
- infrastructure** – A type of wireless connection that uses the Internet to connect with other players over long distances
- isometric** – Three-quarters top down view, like StarCraft or Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance
- ISP** – Internet Service Provider. The company that provides you with access to the Internet
- jaggies** – Graphical lines that are jagged when they should be straight
- LAN** – Local Area Network. Connecting computers or consoles together within a small space to allow communication between them. Provides fast, simultaneous gameplay
- MMO** – Massively Multiplayer Online. Usually applied to role-playing titles, we use this term for games with persistent, multi-user online worlds like EverQuest and World of Warcraft
- motion blur** – Phantom frames follow an object to give the impression of realistic speed
- normal mapping** – A graphical technique in which a hi-res skin containing 3D information, revealed by light reflecting off the surface, is wrapped around a low-res model
- NPC** – Non-Player Character. Those people and creatures you see wandering around in games that are not being controlled by actual humans
- particle effects** – Things like smoke or sparks created in real-time
- platform** – A term we use for games like Super Mario and Crash Bandicoot
- pop-up** – When objects onscreen suddenly appear, typically due to poor draw distance
- PS2** – Sony PlayStation 2
- puzzle** – A term we use for games like Tetris and Puyo Pop
- racing** – A term we use for games like Gran Turismo and Mario Kart
- RPG** – Role-Playing Game. A game that involves character improvement through collecting and spending points. A term we use for games like Final Fantasy and Xenosaga
- shooter** – A term we use for games like Ikaruga and Gradius
- sports** – A term we use for games like Madden NFL
- strategy** – A term we use for games like La Pucelle and Front Mission
- third-party** – Something made for a console by a company other than the console manufacturer



XBOX 360 | PC

Prey

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE OR SYSTEM LINK, PC INTERNET OR LAN) > **PUBLISHER** 2K GAMES
 > **DEVELOPER** 3D REALMS/HUMAN HEAD STUDIOS/VENOM GAMES
 > **RELEASE** JULY 10 > **ESRB** M

GAME INFORMER
PC & CONSOLE
GAME OF THE MONTH

A HERO'S JOURNEY

Prey from 3D Realms, Human Head, and Venom Games is far more than just another shooter. This game has more new ideas than any other FPS I've played in years, and they are combined seamlessly into one of the most brilliant gaming experiences in the genre.

Prey is the story of Tommy, a restless young man eager to leave the Cherokee reservation that has always been his home. His wish comes true when an alien ship called the Sphere abducts him and the two people closest to him: his grandfather and his girlfriend Jen. Escaping the clutches of the aliens, he sets off to rescue his loved ones and get home. But things don't exactly go according to plan.

The Sphere is a living world, one filled with horrible creatures and its own laws of physics. Portals in the Sphere can instantly transport Tommy from one area to another, and gravity is constantly being toyed with. Some surfaces allow you to walk on walls and ceilings, and some rooms let you reorient gravity to change which direction is down. The experience also awakens within Tommy dormant spiritual abilities, which are tied to the heritage he's always rejected. These powers are Spirit Walk, which lets him leave his body and pass through objects that his physical body can't, and Death Walk, which allows him to battle back to the world of the living by fighting off the dishonored dead in a shooting gallery-like minigame.

The portals, gravity, and Spirit Walk are involved in practically every puzzle in the game — the player has to constantly figure out how to use the Sphere's rules and Tommy's unique skills to proceed,

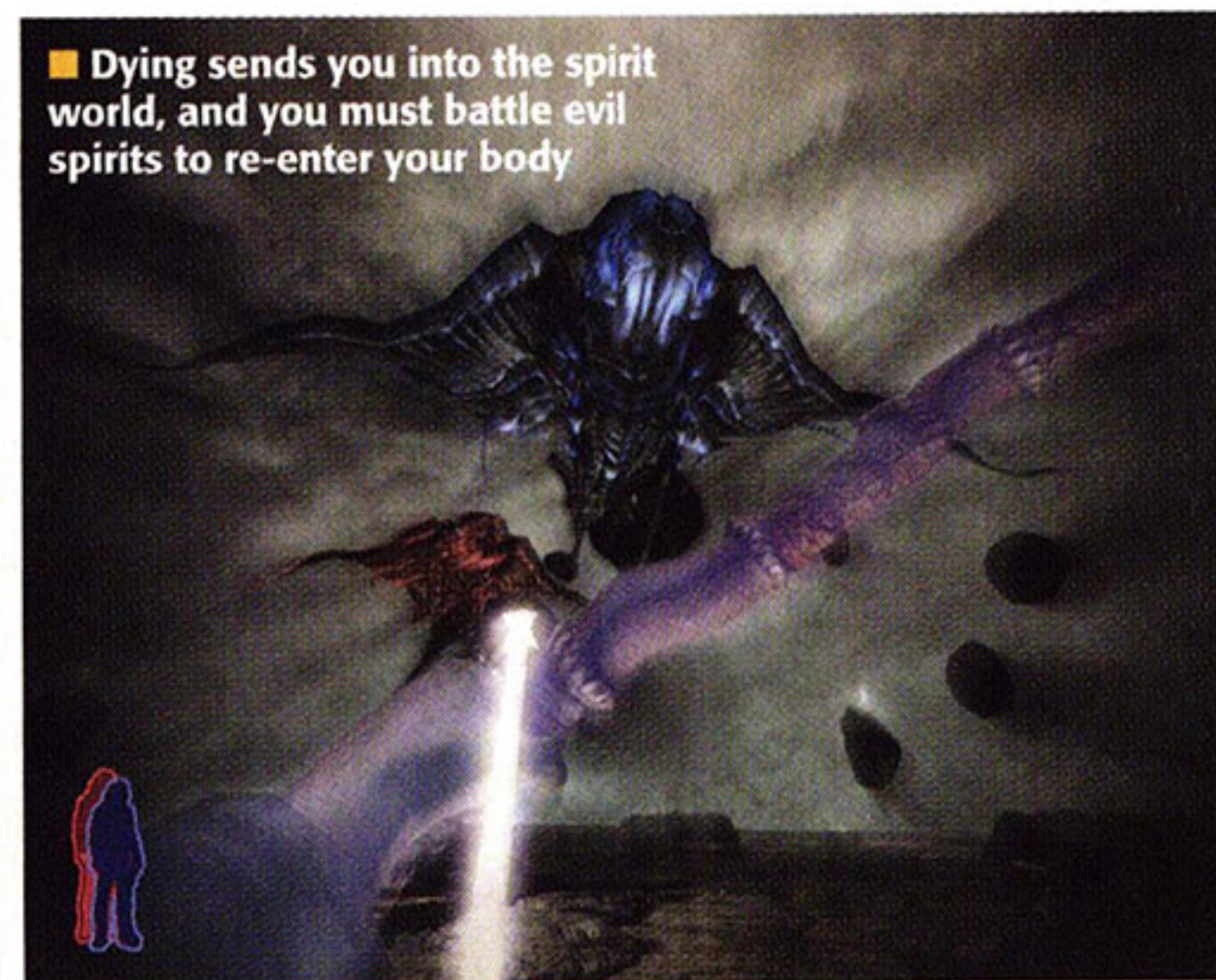
and none of the problem-solving elements ever feel forced or arbitrary. Just like it presumably would be for a real person on a spaceship, forward momentum is its own challenge. By basing everything around these unique aspects, 3D Realms and Human Head have crafted some of the most twisted, amazing levels around, and these brain-teasing sections share equal time with the combat. In that regard, Prey has far more in common with first-person adventures like *The Chronicles of Riddick: Escape from Butcher Bay* than more straight-up shooters like *Halo 2*. That's not to say there isn't frantic combat — Prey has a roster of truly unique weapons and compelling locations in which to use them. Fighting in antigravity rooms and on the surface of small planetoids are both experiences as intense as they are far removed from the FPS norm, and they really shine in the otherwise slightly bare-bones multiplayer.

As much as I admire the actual gameplay and

design, what I loved most about Prey is the storytelling. It is not just the story of a man battling aliens, it is more deeply about a man discovering his heritage and accepting who he truly is. Tommy's growth over the course of the game is obviously influenced by the writings of Joseph Campbell, and he grows from someone who rejects his true self to fully embracing it. While the plot appears to be on a fairly standard track until late in the game, there is an event that occurs that changes everything, including Tommy's goals and character. This moment hit me on a real emotional level, haunting me after I finished the game, and was every bit as difficult the second time around. Despite all its innovations, this is the real achievement of Prey. Human Head and 3D Realms have created a world so real and expertly crafted that it has the ability to affect you in a way that few other games can. Prey is a masterpiece that simply should not be missed. —**JEREMY**



■ Prey is filled with inventive areas like this one, which is an entire planet squeezed into a small box



■ Dying sends you into the spirit world, and you must battle evil spirits to re-enter your body

BOTTOM LINE **9.5**

> **Concept:** Trapped on a living alien spaceship with its own rules, a Native American man tries to save his loved ones and discovers who he truly is

> **Graphics:** Gorgeously creepy on a high-end PC, and nearly as impressive on 360

> **Sound:** The soundtrack perfectly complements the mood. Extra points for the best use of "Don't Fear the Reaper" ever

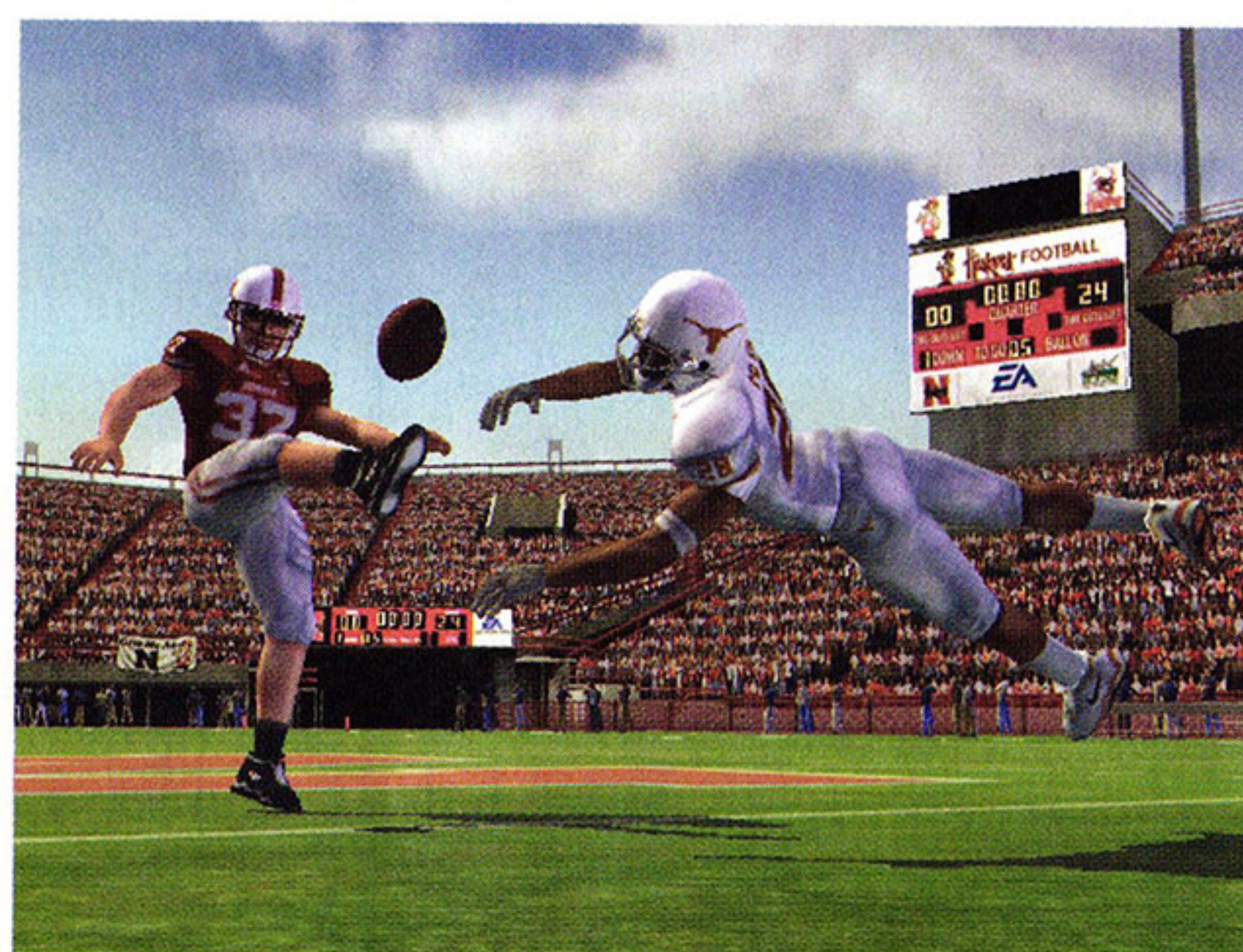
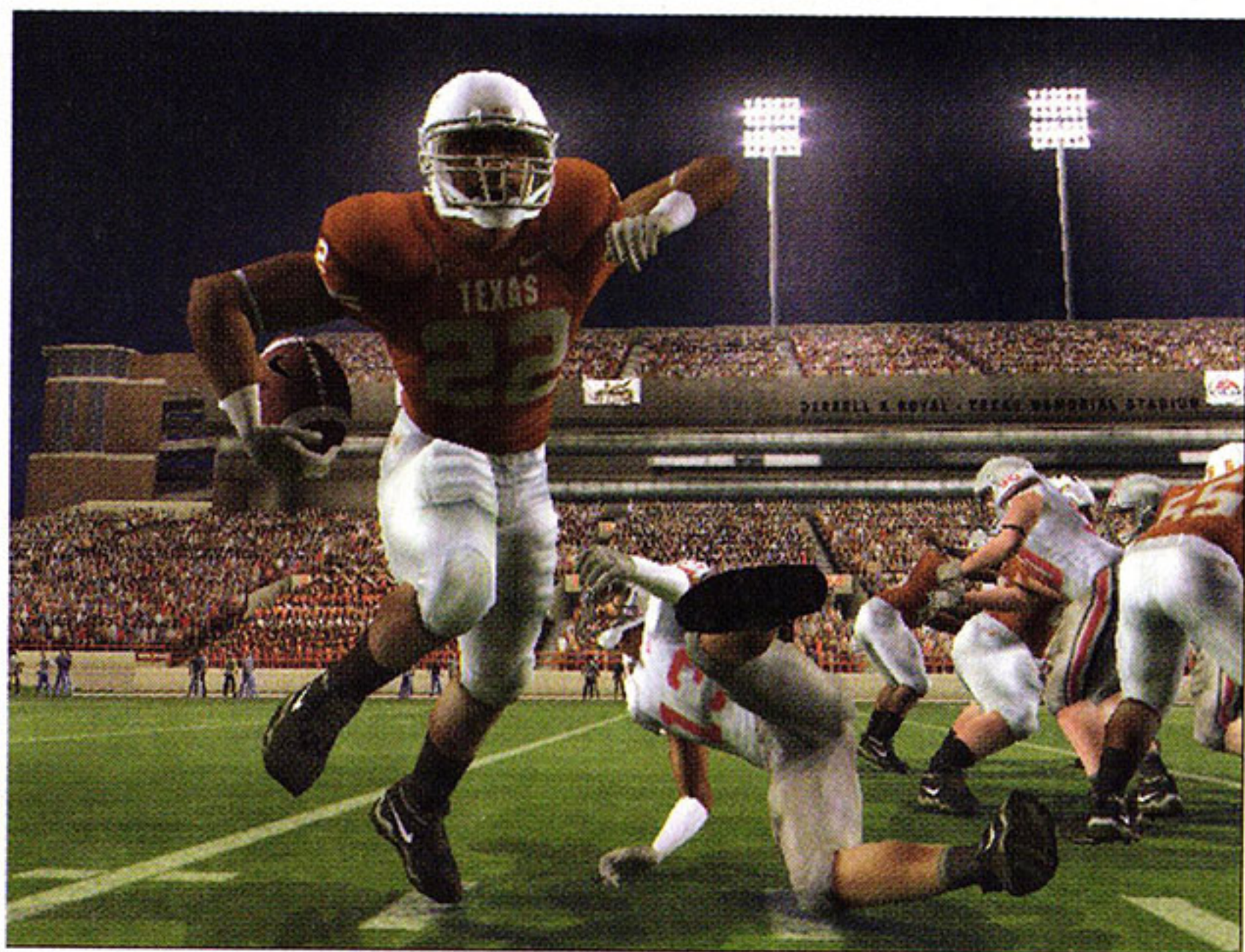
> **Playability:** On either PC or 360, Prey is about as smooth as shooters get

> **Entertainment:** A great story, new ideas, and solid action collide into a shooter that no one should miss

> **Replay Value:** High

Second Opinion 9

Usually you need to go through a few clips before an FPS gets its hooks in you, but Prey pulls it off before a single round is fired. Setting the scene with a thoroughly disturbing intro, Prey starts strong and keeps the thrills coming as you stalk through an alien ship looking for answers. Incidentally, most answers can be found by pulling the trigger on any of the game's oddly organic guns, and Prey's imaginative portal and gravity systems keep you on your toes every second. However, despite its solid enemy AI and intense anti-gravity firefights, the action never quite ascends to challenging heights because Tommy can endlessly resurrect without consequence. Where's the sense of accomplishment if you're indestructible? Multiplayer alleviates that issue a bit, with clever maps that force players to take advantage of the mechanics to earn some satisfying and hilarious kills (watching chumps "fall up" to the ceiling never gets old). It may not be the most hardcore shooter out there, but Prey is a haunting, atmospheric adventure that's full of surprises from beginning to end. —**JOE**



PLAYSTATION 2 | XBOX

NCAA Football 07

> **STYLE** 1 TO 8-PLAYER SPORTS (PS2), 1-2 PLAYER (XBOX) (2-PLAYER VIA PS2 ONLINE OR XBOX LIVE) > **PUBLISHER** EA SPORTS > **DEVELOPER** EA TIBURON > **RELEASE** JULY 18 > **ESRB** E

WHO NEEDS TO GRADUATE?

There aren't very many people who can graduate college in a timely four years, so I wouldn't feel bad if you aren't in the club. Hell, some people prefer it that way. Why get one major when you can get two? And who doesn't

want to keep getting a fat quarterly check from your parents for "books"? This year's NCAA proves that there's no shame sticking around the current-gen campus, as this iteration is better than the next-gen version. Unfortunately, the cafeteria food hasn't improved one iota.

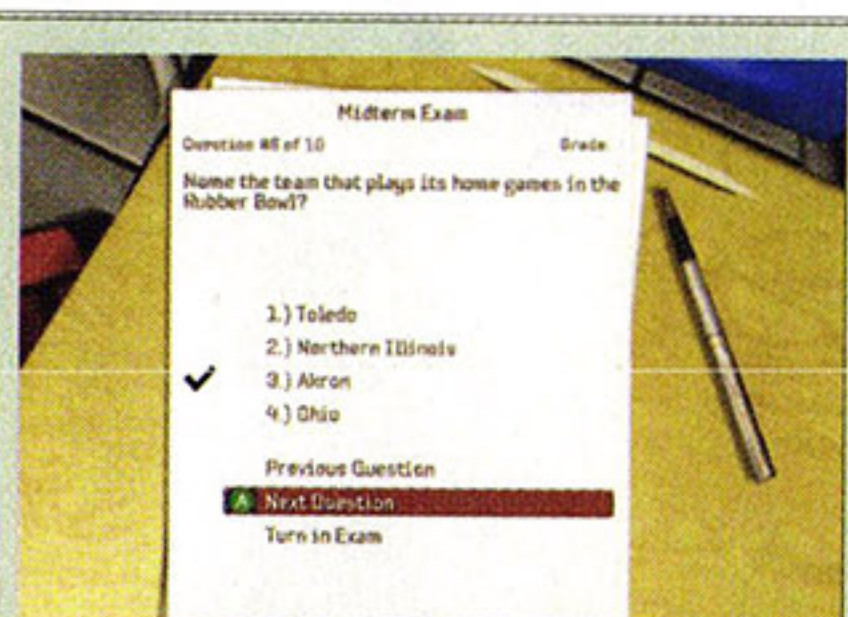
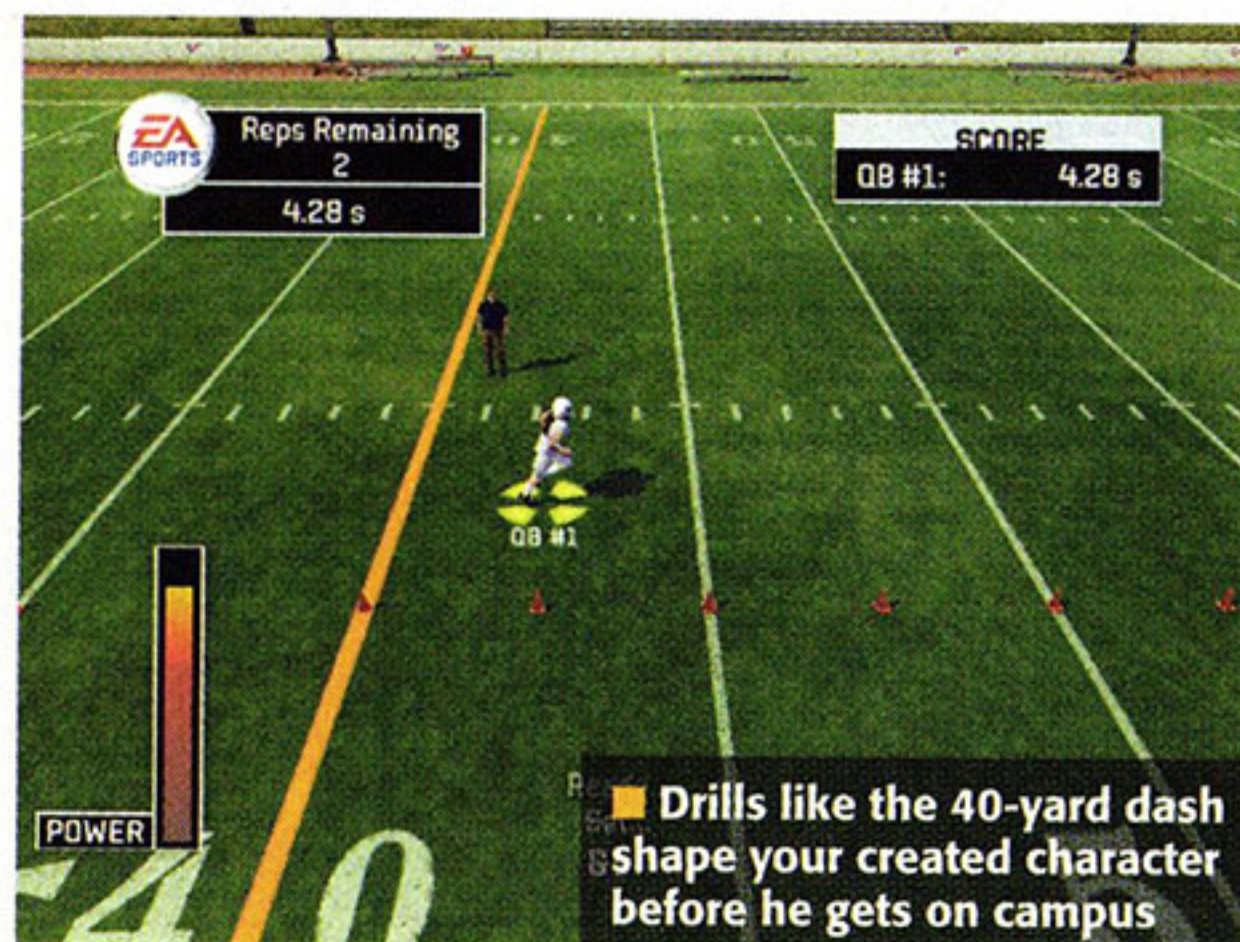
Last year, the game added in-season recruiting to Dynasty mode to keep you busy from week to week, but now the focus is on you. The student-athlete structure has you studying between practices and parties, and even requires that you declare a major and take tests. Don't worry, you can still have somebody smarter take them for you. There's not much to it and it gets boring, but at least it's a way to earn some development points for your created player. Unfortunately, it supplants the Race for the Heisman mode, but strangely enough this NCAA title still has some drama in it.

The new special teams camera sounds silly, but it's actually kind of cool. When you're receiving punts you get that nervous feeling as you see guys bearing down on you at full speed out of the corner of your eye. I've also become a fan of the impact camera, which zooms in on players during key moments. This year it not only focuses on the hits, but it also shows the big passes as well. I wasn't a huge fan of the camera before because I thought it distracted from the flow of play, but I've gotten used to it. In fact, I think that it's perfect for those dramatic passes, creating a slow-mo effect like some kind of NFL Films highlight reel.

Is he going to catch it? Will it be an interception? I found myself holding my breath every time it switched to that view.

Another aspect that has surprised me is the Momentum meter. It's just a simple gauge that flares up when something big happens (including some Bud Bowl-esque helmets smashing together), but between that and the roaring crowd during a rivalry game, you can feel the pressure. I also liked how it was subtle enough that it didn't overtly influence the game. I'm not saying that there's no catch-up AI in this game, but at least you can still score and make plays even if the meter is not on your side.

In reality the changes to this year's game are few. In fact, I'm disappointed that a number of annoyances from the last NCAA still linger, such as the strange body positioning of wide receivers, the unresponsiveness of the Hit Stick, and the fact that this game chugs at times (a problem that's been around for years). But the big-time college football moments that it does deliver are worth it — and you won't find them on that new-fangled next-gen console, either. I guess that proves that sticking around campus another year can't hurt. —KATO



During the week, you can choose between studying, hiring a tutor, practicing, or partying each night. You must balance your football, academic, and social life to earn the moniker of Campus Legend. Practicing, of course, takes you to the field, while you can hire a tutor if your grades drop. Meanwhile, by studying you get answers to questions that will be on your mid-term and final tests. No, you can't major in gun cleaning. Here's a sample of some of the exam questions:

SPORTS GEOGRAPHY MAJOR

SMU is located in which Texas City?

1. San Antonio
2. Waco
3. Houston
4. Dallas

PSYCHOLOGY MAJOR

What is the term for the ability to respond differently to various types of stimuli?

1. Stimulus generalization
2. Vicarious classical conditioning
3. Stimulus discrimination
4. Classical conditioning

BOTTOM LINE 8.25

> **Concept:** The current-gen franchise slows down as the next generation appears

> **Graphics:** There don't seem to be many improvements in this area

> **Sound:** I still love the raucous crowd during rivalry games — it can't be topped

> **Playability:** As with the graphics, I find that there have been few improvements made

> **Entertainment:** The game gives just enough of a college try to get the job done

> **Replay Value:** Moderately High

Second Opinion 8.25

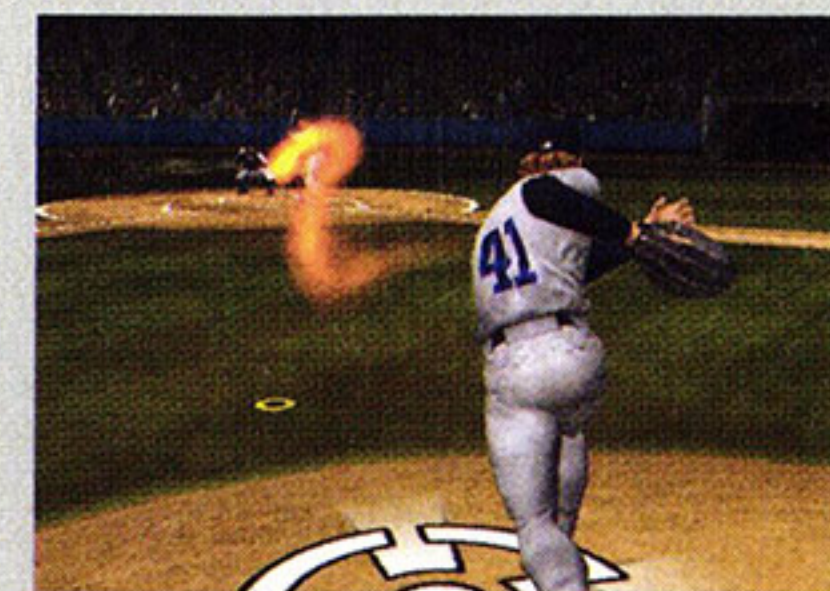
My arm is a veritable cannon, I can run the 40 in 4.63 seconds, but more importantly, I can tell you that electrons are negatively charged particles in an atom. Who wants to play a silly game like football when there's homework to be done! In this year's game, players also double as students. That's right, you'll have to select a major at the beginning of the year, study after practice, then apply your knowledge in exams that will affect your player's growth. Call it a hunch, but I really don't think that gamers want to be reminded of school while smashing heads into the dirt. Thankfully, not all of the new content in this year's game requires a functioning brain. The spring drills are more diverse, and most of the play books have been retooled with much needed formation changes. The new camerawork is also outstanding. Zoom cams amplify the big hits, and slow motion perfectly captures the plays that change the flow of a game. As always, NCAA is one hell of a play, but this "play football, get smarter" gimmick really has to go. —REINER

MULTI QUICKIES

PLAYSTATION 2 | XBOX

MLB SlugFest 2006

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER SPORTS
> **PUBLISHER** MIDWAY
> **DEVELOPER** MIDWAY
> **RELEASE** JUNE 6 > **ESRB** E10+



BOTTOM LINE 5

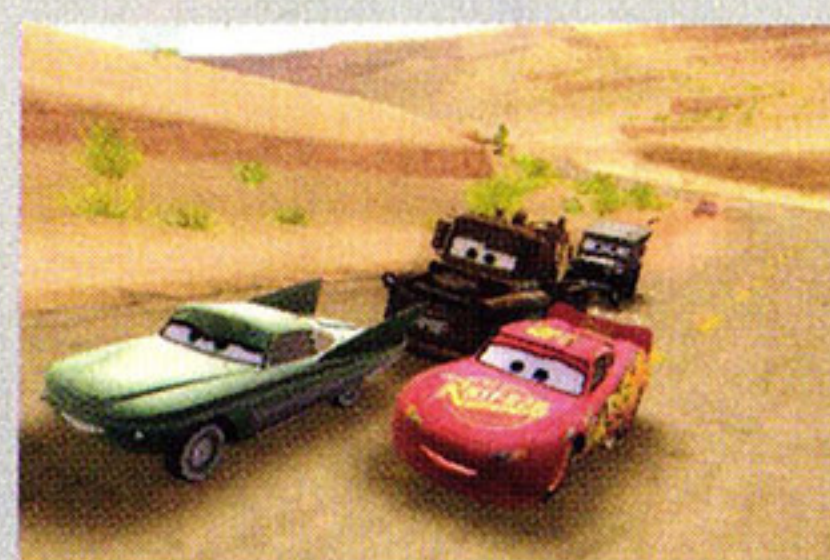
The Kansas City Royals play better ball than MLB SlugFest 2006.

Heck, I'll even go as far to say that the 1899 Cleveland Spiders, who posted a miserable 20 wins and 134 losses for the season, could put together a more enjoyable nine innings of baseball. Destined for the minors, the gameplay mechanics haven't changed in the slightest since SlugFest Loaded, which coincidentally was too much like SlugFest 2004. Don't get me wrong, striking out Pujols with a curveball that breaks 10 feet is certainly amusing, but the majority of play feels sloppy and old. Fielding is particularly bad and almost seems to be designed as a showcase of errors. This series has great potential, but with each new season, it continues to degrade in quality. —REINER

PLAYSTATION 2 | XBOX | GAMECUBE

Cars

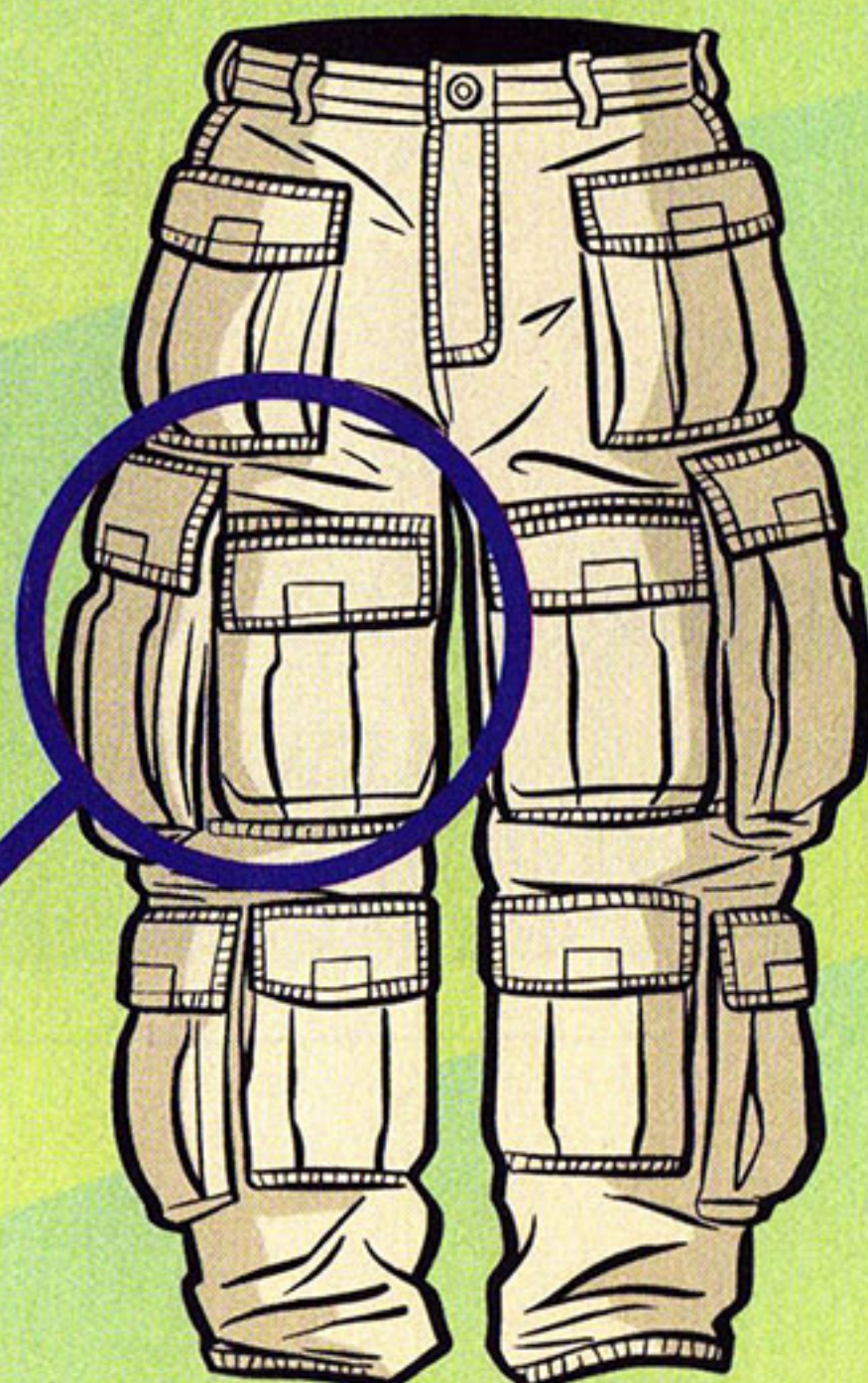
> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER RACING
> **PUBLISHER** THQ
> **DEVELOPER** RAINBOW STUDIOS
> **RELEASE** JUNE 6 > **ESRB** E



BOTTOM LINE 7

I know what you're thinking. These Pixar movie-based games don't exactly have a

fantastic track record. But Cars is a step in the right direction. Merging arcade-style racing with a touch of open world wandering, the simplistic driving gameplay of Cars isn't going to amaze any racing veterans. But great voice work, decent visuals, lots of varied races and minigames, and the likeable cast of characters from the movie all serve to counter the perception that a licensed title like this must necessarily suck. The story mode even wisely includes two versions — a full playthrough or a shortened version for "younger drivers." This certainly shouldn't beat out Burnout or Need for Speed for your racing dollars, but it might if you're shopping for the family. —MILLER



***Ultra
Comfortable Cargo Mover!***

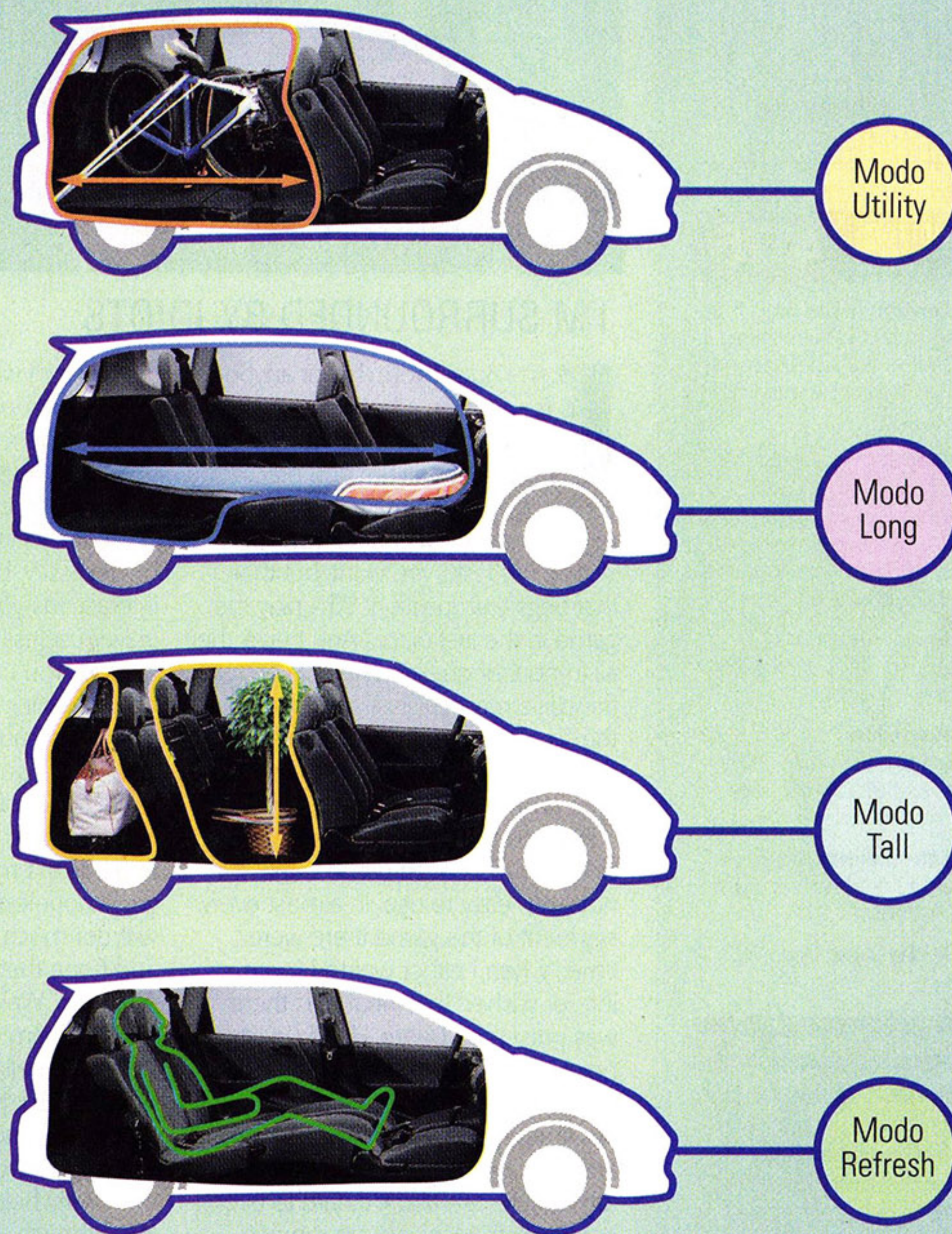


Step aside, cargo pants! Your rule as the ultimate mix of comfort, style and utility is over! The all-new Fit has dethroned you! Behold the five-door, five-passenger Fit with 60/40 split second-row Magic Seat®!

Cargo pants offer one mode of transport: Big Pocket Mode. The Fit offers four different seating and cargo-carrying modes! Utility Mode! Long Mode! Tall Mode! Refresh Mode! 36 cargo configurations in all! Ha!

Utility Mode: For big, bulky, boxy objects!
Long Mode: For oblong, 7-foot things!
Tall Mode: For 4-foot trees and exotic pets!
Refresh Mode: For lounging and slacking!
So long, cargo pants! You had a good run!

The Fit is Go!

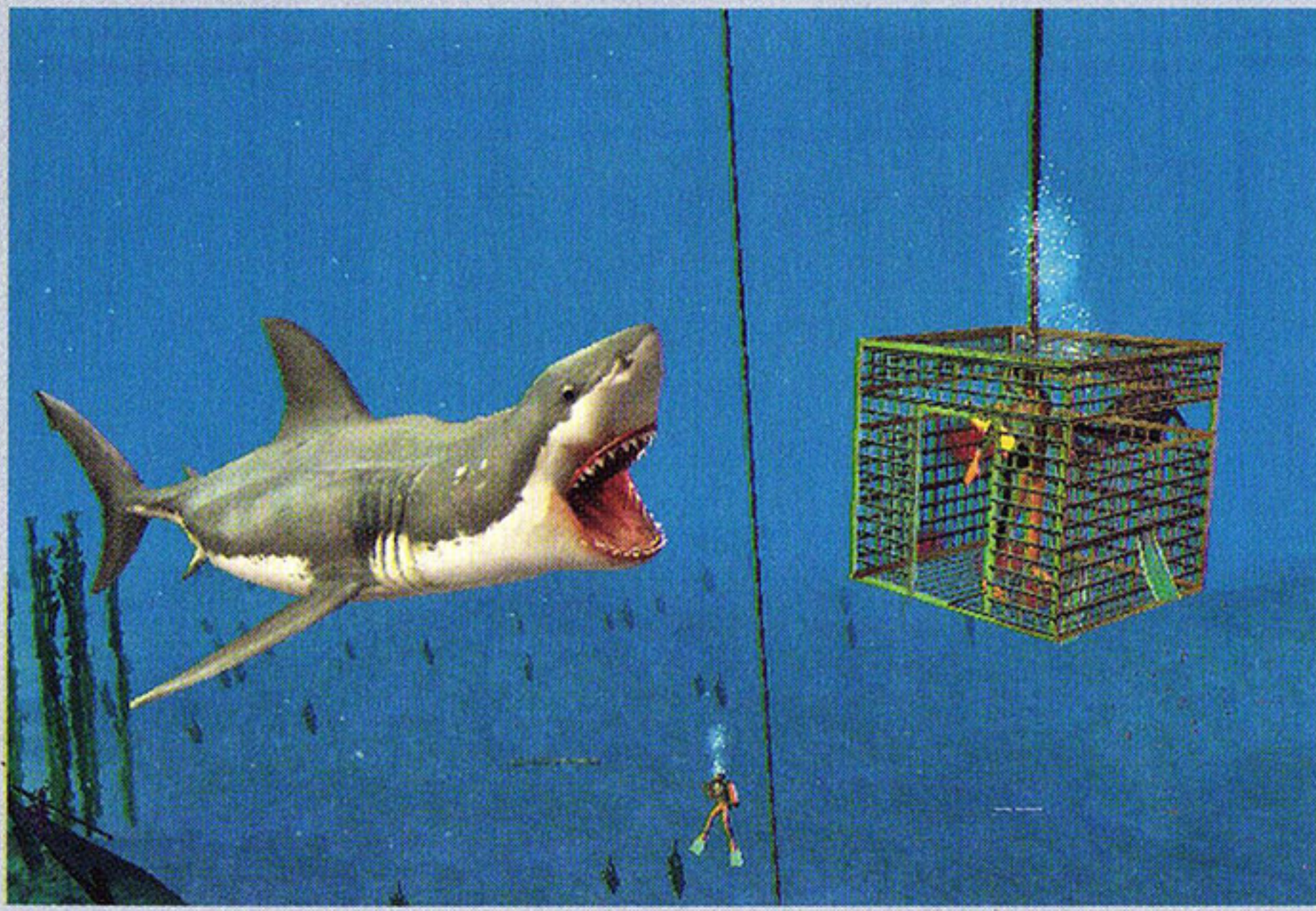


Fit

New from Honda Five doors! 90 cubic feet of passenger room! 41 cubic feet of cargo space! The Fit is sheet metal molded in the shape of tomorrow! Hello, safety! Fit comes loaded with standard front, side and side curtain airbags! Hyper-efficient, cargo-haulin' 1.5-liter VTEC® engine! Lugs but doesn't chug! (38 mpg* on the highway!) Let's ride!



fit.honda.com



PLAYSTATION 2 | XBOX

Jaws Unleashed

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** MAJESCO > **DEVELOPER** APPALOOSA INTERACTIVE
> **RELEASE** MAY 23 > **ESRB** M

TERROR FROM THE DEEP

Well, this is not a boat accident. It wasn't any propeller. It wasn't any coral reef. And it wasn't Jack the Ripper. It was a shark. It was a shark that somehow developed the mental capacity to use key cards. It was a shark that has a taste for clown fish. It was a shark that can hurl explosive barrels high into the air with the pinpoint accuracy of Nolan Ryan. It was a shark that collects license plates. It was a shark that can easily be killed by a dozen piranha.

License plates?! Are you kidding me? In my one chance to slip behind the cold black eyes of cinema's most ruthless killer, I find myself using key cards to open doors, throwing torpedoes at oil platforms, and collecting freaking license plates.

This game reaches a new level of video game absurdity, going well out of its way to make a complete mockery of the license it's based on. At the same time, however, if there's one thing that this game does well, it's turning the seas red with blood. Jaws eats everything... seals, submarines, turtles, power generators... everything. He especially has a taste for warm-blooded humans, who scream hysterically and splash about like playful dolphins before being torn in two or reduced to a red liquid smear. In one level, Jaws even goes on a rampage in a theme park much like Sea World. This amazing beast somehow finds a way to infiltrate the killer whale show, where a miserably executed yet hilarious boss battle ensues. The mechanics that are in place make it easy to nibble on people, but every action outside of this will make you want to shoot a harpoon into your brain.

After this miserable showing, the only waters that Jaws will be patrolling are those of the great video game toilet. On the bright side, aquatic chum Aquaman now has some company. —**REINER**



Shamu's final performance scarred hundreds of children forever

BOTTOM LINE 4.75

> **Concept:** The developer treats Jaws more like a human being than an unstoppable underwater force. Maybe in the sequel he'll wear pants!

> **Graphics:** Like a corpse that has been floating at sea for weeks, this game is downright butt ugly. The cutscenes could very well be the worst to ever be included in a game

> **Sound:** The sound of people screaming underwater is strangely amusing

> **Playability:** Jaws controls like a tank that is somehow drunk. He eats plenty, but also loves running into walls

> **Entertainment:** Amusing in that "I can't believe how bad it is" sort of way

> **Replay Value:** Moderately Low

Second Opinion 5.75

My love of the Jaws franchise and anything involving killer sharks is a bit unhealthy—I love the original film and the decent second movie. I enjoy the brainless *Jaws 3*, and freely admit that I like the Jaws NES game. Hell, I even like the monumentally stupid *Jaws: The Revenge* and its roaring shark. So naturally I had at least some fun with *Jaws Unleashed*, which allows me to let fly my own brand of aquatic terror. But that doesn't make it a good game—far from it, in fact. Ugly, unpolished, and flat out stupid (Powering up a shark? Seriously?), *Jaws Unleashed* is undeniably crappy. But despite its overall reek of chum, it is good for a few laughs as you chomp swimmers to death and eat dolphins, which makes it far better than many other terrible games. —**JEREMY**

PLAYSTATION 2 | XBOX | PC

NFL Head Coach

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER SIMULATION (2-PLAYER VIA PS2 ONLINE, XBOX LIVE, OR PC ONLINE) > **PUBLISHER** EA SPORTS
> **DEVELOPER** EA TIBURON > **RELEASE** JUNE 20 > **ESRB** E



BOTTOM LINE 6.75

> **Concept:** Put in a lot of hard work and hope your players don't screw it all up

> **Graphics:** Based off of last year's Madden and not this year's

> **Sound:** About as unobtrusive as Angels of Light

> **Playability:** Even though this is a glorified menu surfer, I'm disappointed that doing it isn't as easy as it should be

> **Entertainment:** You may think you can coach in the NFL, but this game may make you rethink whether you want to

> **Replay Value:** Moderately High

Second Opinion 6.5

My knowledge of NFL coaches boils down to this: They throw tantrums on the sidelines, swear profusely into headsets, and angrily slam clipboards against their legs. I was hoping that the intensity that these old farts show on the field every Sunday would translate into this game. As I soon learned, however, NFL coaches apparently spend most of their time sitting at desks, mulling over rosters and salaries, and trying to please the bosses whenever they stop by. In terms of inducing mental comas, this game gives data entry a run for its money. When you don't have your butt glued to a comfy leather chair, you are usually doing the least you can to help your team. Player interaction is limited to a few canned responses that never seem to get across the point you want. Due to a miserably formatted menu system, changing up plays is an unnecessary chore. In short, if you always wanted to know what office life was like, and you don't actually enjoy playing your football games, by all means, don the Fedora. —**REINER**

I'M SURROUNDED BY IDIOTS

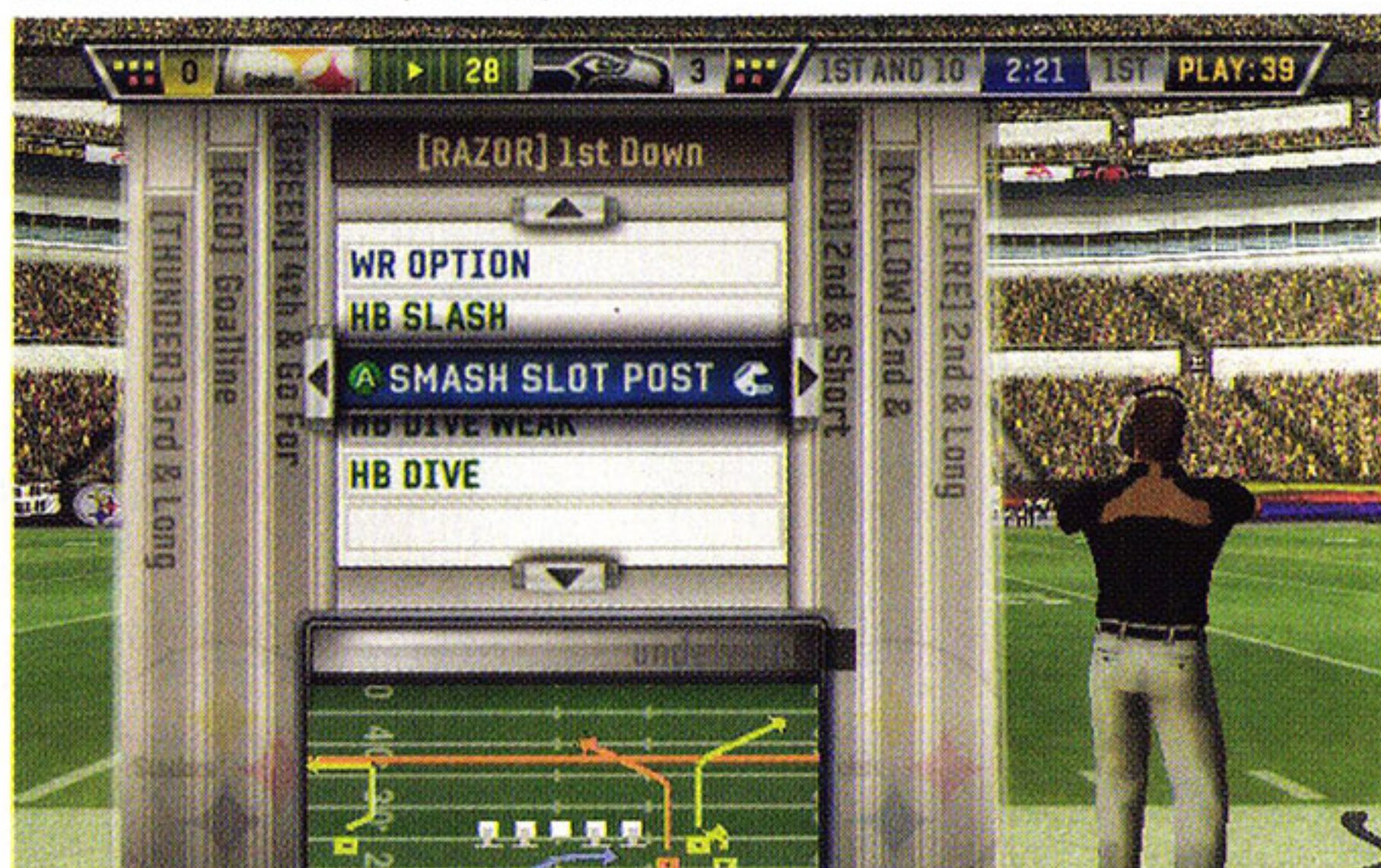
I don't know if you, me, or anybody is ready to be a head coach. If you can survive the marathon of roster tweaking, meetings, and practices, 10 hours later you may get to the regular season. Of course, you can skip all the tasks you want, but then that begs the question: Why play the game in the first place? And that is the all-important question here. Even for franchise masochists like myself, and the six other people in the world who are going to enjoy this, this game tests your patience from the get-go.

Perhaps the most frustrating aspect of this menu-driven game is that it's not even easy to use. In almost every segment of the game there were times when I either wanted more info or wished that what was there was presented better. Head Coach not only uses a different system from Madden for pre-snap commands, but it also gives you fewer options and less info. Hot routes take way too long to call, and it's hard to even know which receivers are running which routes anyway. This is a problem whenever you try to audible someone's route or try to tell your QB

the order in which to read through his receivers on a pass play.

I think the reason this game hasn't turned out well is that real life is simply too complex to replicate. The conversation system is simple by necessity, but this makes many interactions you have with a coach or player useless and lacking in proper context. You can try to coach them out of making mistakes, but the results are muddled and inconclusive. I guess this game replicates the real life difficulty of trying to coach fallible humans from making mistakes, but that doesn't make things fun. Instead you'll hopelessly troll the sidelines, without much coordinator feedback, and hope that your players don't screw up. Well, they will.

Kids dream of growing up and being football players, not football coaches. But the vast majority of us must spend life passively on the sidelines, yelling at our TV instead of actively helping our team win. Even though you're the coach in this game, you're still little more than a bystander. —**KATO**



PS2 QUICKIES

UNLIMITED ENABLED

PLAYSTATION 2

Pirates of the Caribbean: The Legend of Jack Sparrow

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION
> **PUBLISHER** BETHESDA SOFTWORKS
> **DEVELOPER** SEVEN STUDIOS
> **RELEASE** JUNE 27 > **ESRB** T



BOTTOM LINE 5.75 I didn't know there was swashbuckling in Middle-earth. Pirates of the Caribbean wants to embody the fiery hack 'n slash melee of Electronic Arts' Lord of the Rings series to such a degree that I'm surprised Frodo isn't strapped to Captain Jack Sparrow's back. Jamming on buttons to poke holes into greedy pirates may sound like a great way to spend an afternoon, but not when the game beats you bloody with mechanics that are so problematic that you wonder if Cap'n Jack slammed a keg while the stage was loading. The story stinks of the gunk behind a pirate's eye patch, and the mission objectives are not even sophisticated enough to walk the plank. The only thing that this game does right is not inflict an ancient curse on the player. At least I hope it doesn't.—**REINER**

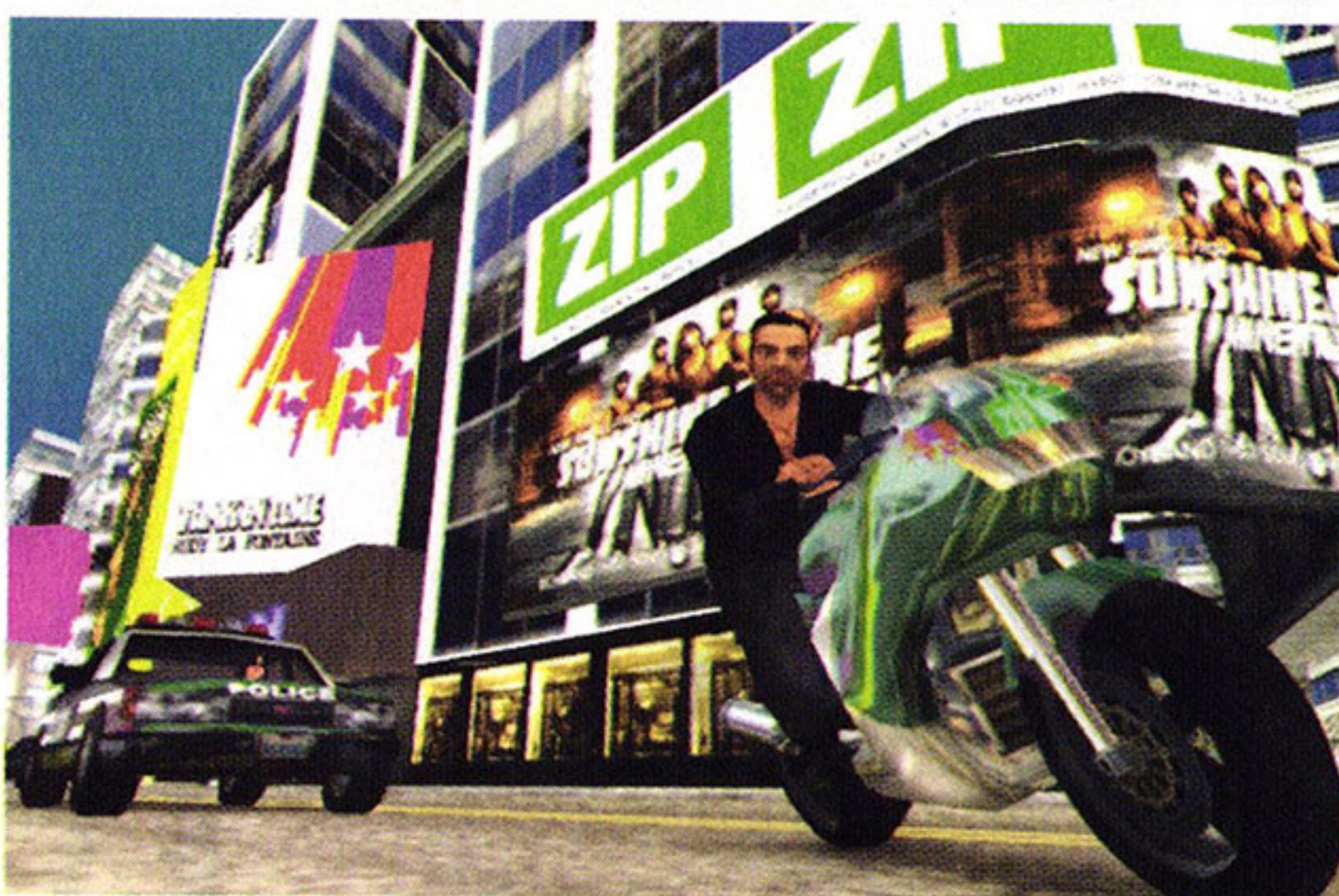
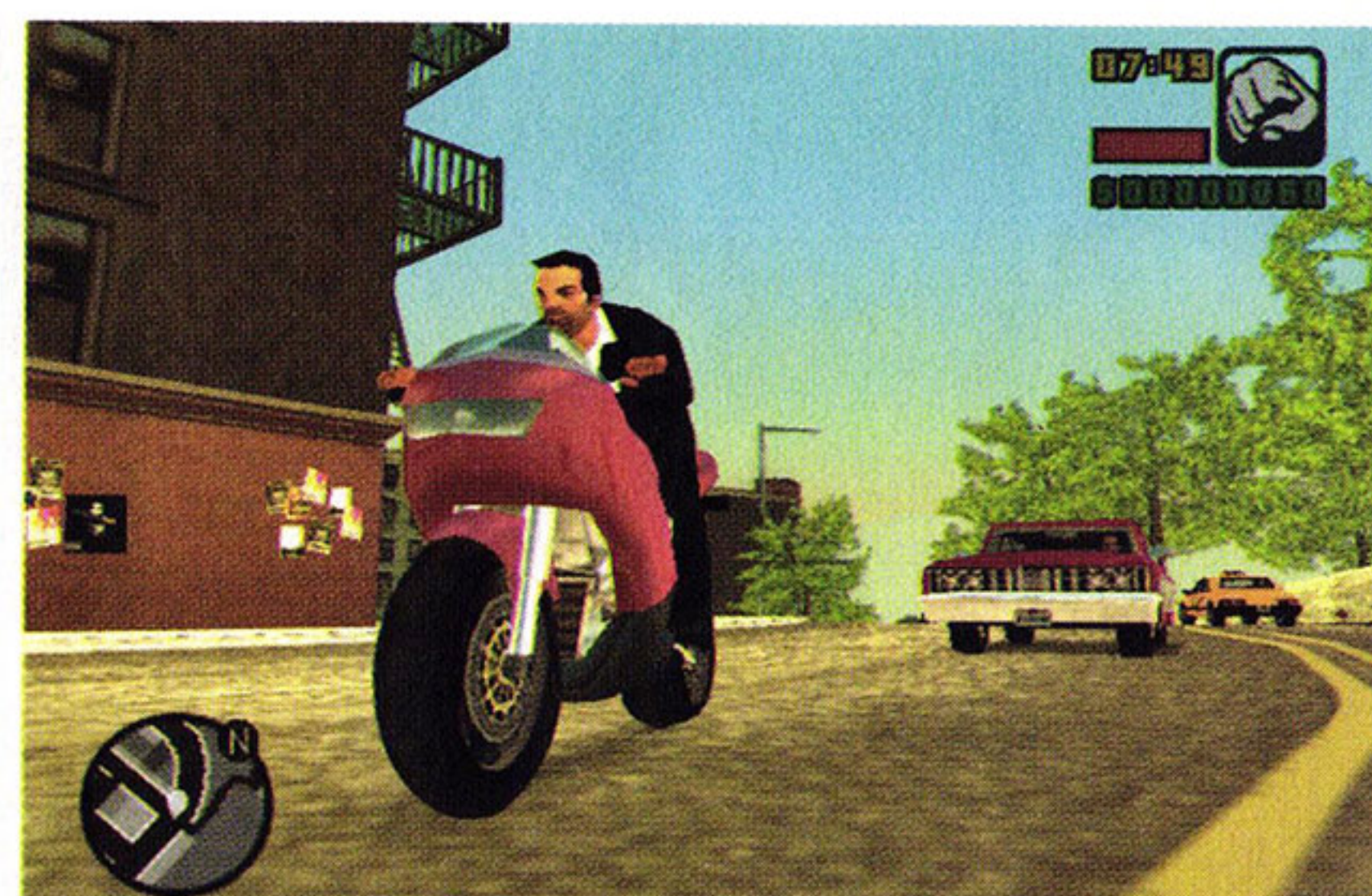
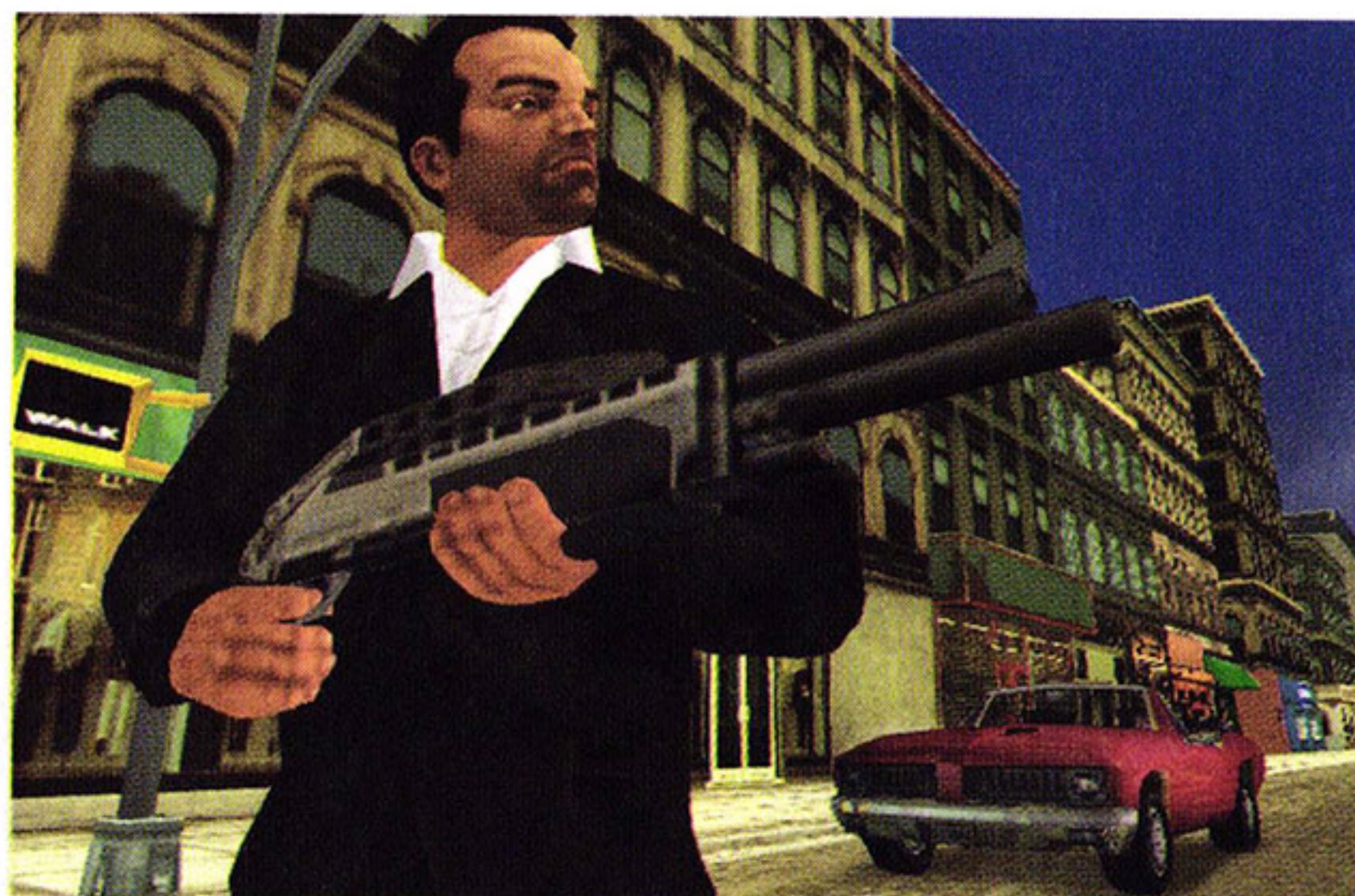
PLAYSTATION 2

Micro Machines V4

> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER RACING
> **PUBLISHER** CODEMASTERS
> **DEVELOPER** SUPERSONIC SOFTWARE
> **RELEASE** JUNE 27 > **ESRB** E



BOTTOM LINE 7.5 Thank god the good folks at Supersonic Software didn't opt to make Micro Machines into some sort of macho 3D racer. Instead, they focus on our childhood memories of the diminutive automobiles: racing tiny cars in real-world inspired isometric environments laden with power-ups and obstacles. As always, the control eschews any sort of physics for simple, turn-on-a-pivot skidding like the old school Genesis and SNES games. The graphics aren't much either, but the tracks are well designed and there's a genuine sense of fun here. I also like the unique Battle mode, in which you score points based on gaining leads for short periods of time—not to mention the strange option that allows you to play four-player simultaneously on two controllers (two players sharing one controller each).—**MATT**



BOTTOM LINE 8.75

> **Concept:** A port of the great PSP title, minus the multiplayer
> **Graphics:** Looks good, but perhaps a bit off the standard set by San Andreas and the PSP version

> **Sound:** No one does soundtracks better than Rockstar, and this is no exception

> **Playability:** Works great, it's nice to be able to play this with the Dual Shock instead of the PSP's analog nub

> **Entertainment:** A great game any way you slice it, but I'm disappointed that the multiplayer was removed

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion 8

This is the first time a Grand Theft Auto game hasn't completely blown me away. Perhaps I've gotten a little spoiled with each major console release taking huge leaps forward from its predecessors. Admittedly, this is a port of a PSP title, but somehow I expected a little more out of a move to the larger PS2 cousin. If anything, the bigger screen makes the low graphic fidelity more noticeable. I also found the missions this time around to have less variety than I've come to expect from the franchise, and difficulty balancing throughout the title is uneven at best. Even so, the basic gameplay mechanic is still immensely fun, and the core idea of the series remains untouched—that is, it's fun to be abrasive, violent, anti-social, and downright criminal, especially when you can do it all without actually hurting a soul.—**MILLER**

PLAYSTATION 2

Grand Theft Auto: Liberty City Stories

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION/RACING > **PUBLISHER** ROCKSTAR GAMES > **DEVELOPER** ROCKSTAR LEEDS > **RELEASE** JUNE 6 > **ESRB** M

SUPER-SIZED ACTION

I love Grand Theft Auto, and last year's PSP hit Liberty City Stories was a fine addition to the GTA canon. While it was easily the best PSP title to date at the time it was released, it also managed to prove a couple of important things. One, it showed that not only could the PSP handle a huge, open-world game that held its own with the console versions, it could also implement a fun and engaging multiplayer component to the mix. Two, it demonstrated that, although we've come to expect new worlds and characters from each new GTA, that there is plenty of fun left in some of the time periods and locales from past games.

Of course, there are a whole lot more GTA fans than there are PSP owners in the world, so I guess we shouldn't be surprised that the game has now found its way to the system that made the series a household name. For me, this is both good news and bad news. It's certainly great for the millions that will now be able to play a truly great game without spending \$200 on a plush

new handheld. However, I'm also a little disappointed that this PS2 port doesn't add anything new to the game, and actually lacks the multiplayer features of the PSP Liberty City Stories.

For those of you who haven't already played it, here's what's in



store: classic GTA III style action, fleshed out with the improved controls and expanded selection of vehicles from Vice City and San Andreas. Tooling around Liberty City is a whole new experience by boat or motorcycle, and the San Andreas targeting system, while not perfect, is leagues better than the one featured in GTA III.

The story itself revolves around Toni Cipriani, an ex-con who finds himself back in Liberty City after being in hiding for killing a rival mafioso. On

your way back up the ladder of crime, you'll meet a host of characters both old and new, and a plot that has all the backstabbing, double-crossing, and executions you've come to expect from a GTA epic. You'll also find the series' trademark rude humor, most notably in the form of perverse nightclub owner J.D. O'Toole and Toni's murderous mother.

Basically, if you've not played Liberty City Stories and love the series, proceed directly to your store and pick up a copy. Still, there's part of me that feels a little underwhelmed by this port. For one, I actually think the handheld version looks better, with shinier reflections on the vehicles and crisper textures, which is at least partially a testament to how good the PSP's screen is. Also, the lack of multiplayer is a real letdown, especially for those of us hoping that the leap to the PS2 would actually allow Rockstar to expand the online functionality. It's odd, I never thought I'd see the day when a handheld version of a title eclipses the console, but these are brave new times we live in.—**MATT**



BOTTOM LINE **8**

- > **Concept:** Attempt to turn a futile battle (PC RTS vs. Console RTS) into an experience that is worth playing
- > **Graphics:** The shadow textures are uglier than a boiled orc
- > **Sound:** Typical RTS fare elevated only by the already amazing movie score
- > **Playability:** There are problems here and there, but it's a relatively comfortable experience
- > **Entertainment:** The game's core value of massive battles remains intact despite the inevitable hiccups
- > **Replay Value:** Moderately High

Second Opinion **8**

It should come as no surprise to anyone that *The Battle for Middle-earth II* is not as good on console as it is on PC. However, the game is remarkable for the fact that the brand-new control scheme, crafted specifically for the 360 pad, is actually pretty darn good. Ordering masses of troops around and building bases is far easier than I had ever thought they could be. After getting over the initial learning curve there are only a couple of sticking points; trying to activate hero and unit powers remains forever irritating. It certainly helps that the design of *BFME II* lends itself to big messy battles rather than the precise, razor-sharp matches you see in a game like *Warcraft III* – micro-level control is still lacking, despite the new interface. Fully-featured rankings and smooth play make jumping on Live a great time in itself, not to mention a far more rewarding experience than the mediocre single-player, especially with the War of the Ring mode gone from this version. I never thought I'd see a bona fide enjoyable RTS on console, but I'm glad that EALA has proven me wrong. —ADAM

UNLIMITED ENABLED

XBOX 360

The Lord of the Rings: The Battle for Middle-earth II

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER STRATEGY (UP TO 4-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE) > **PUBLISHER** ELECTRONIC ARTS > **DEVELOPER** EALA
> **RELEASE** JULY 5 > **ESRB** T



CHOOSING YOUR BATTLES WISELY

In Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, there are lots of battles that are seemingly not winnable. But (spoiler alert!), the good guys – of course – win in the end. This port of the PC edition of *Battle for Middle-earth II* is a case where the battle is lost but the war is won. There is no doubt that the PC edition is the one to play if you want the superior experience. That is true in every facet of the game. But if discretion is the better part of valor, as they say, then the developers have chosen wisely. Because instead of trying to do the impossible by going up against the sheer physical accessibility and depth of the mouse and keyboard setup, what this game sacrifices in control here and there is made up by the end result.

At a minimum, you can do all you can do in the PC version, it's just that some controls may take an extra step or two. For instance, it's better to try and highlight a single builder unit via the two-step menu, because the onscreen cursor isn't as precise as a mouse in picking up a single unit. Other vagaries may not bother you depending on how you play. I, for one, like to use click-and-drag commands to highlight large groups of guys on the PC. In this version, however, although you can click-and-drag, it's simply better to use a different method. The one area that it can't duplicate is hot keys. I found the unit bookmark system that's in place to be more hassle than it was worth, and in the end I gave up trying to micromanage my groupings and instead relied heavily on the game's pre-scripted line-forming feature. In the end, on any platform this series is about throwing masses of guys at the problem and there's not much strategy beyond your normal rock-

beats-scissors unit rules. Because of the ineffectual bookmark system and the propensity to throw large masses of guys at any given problem, I found that I had to be more conscientious about using my hero and Ring powers – which are definitely worth checking out.

Thankfully, this title doesn't stand or fall on its control scheme. Its core value of large-scaled action is very prominent (as are the very cool fortress-building features), and overall it both succeeds and suffers on more or less the same merits as the PC edition. This is a pretty straightforward RTS with the usual unit AI/path-finding problems. You'll have to keep a close eye on AI-controlled ally units, and as much as the game is about action, it does suffer from pauses. The enemy AI doesn't come after you, instead waiting for you to trigger the next event. More than a few times this allowed me to regroup my

forces when it could have gone in for the win, but if merciless action is what you're looking for, you can surely find it in this game's full-fledged online mode.

Taking into account the uphill battle this title had to fight, it comes out much the same as the PC edition (minus the Risk-like War of the Ring mode) – which is not a bad thing to say. In fact, I think it's a perfect segue for console players before they graduate to the PC big leagues. —KATO



By pushing the right trigger, the map in the lower-left hand corner will expand into a radial menu



XBOX 360

Chromehounds

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 12-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE) > **PUBLISHER** SEGA
> **DEVELOPER** FROM SOFTWARE > **RELEASE** JULY 11 > **ESRB** T

BREAKING THE MECH MOLD

“**C**ommander, this is Bravo 42. There is blue bipedal scout guarding the COMBA at B-4. Is this a hostile or friendly? What’s that? You think it’s one of ours? You want me to flash my lights at it?” This conversation may seem a bit unusual, but you’d be surprised how often dialogue like this is exchanged during Chromehounds’ online wars. You see, none of the mechs on the battlefield are highlighted as teammates or adversaries. Only the commander of the squad can tell you if you should launch an attack or go about your way. I understand how not highlighting targets with an icon or team color brings about a level of realism and a layer of unique strategy, but more than anything it fries your nerves.

The entire experience is a departure from what you’ve come to expect from games.

From pistons pounding in an engine to sparks jetting from a malfunctioning gear, the artists at From Software have included the finest of details in each mech. For this, I would have loved to play the game from the third-person perspective, but in another strange twist, a targeting reticule is not provided in front of your mech. Again...realism? Instead, players must look to a minuscule picture-in-picture display targeting purposes – which I found to be nearly unusable. Thus, I was forced to use first-person.

A fair amount of stress comes with piloting these war machines, but I did eventually adjust to the game’s illogical designs and found myself logging

unhealthy amounts of time to earn enough cash to upgrade my mech. From Software has always delivered vast amounts of vehicular customization in its Armored Core series, and Chromehounds will have you laboring for hours over your creations as well. The single player experience is basically just a boot camp tutorial for online. However, performing well in the mini-campaigns for each of the six mech classes rewards players with extraordinary parts and weapons.

In turn, the more time you spend, the more reliable of an ally you will be online. Rather than just dropping players into random ranked matches, Chromehounds’ online game is



■ Those with deep pockets can turn to Xbox Live’s Marketplace to buy new weapons and patterns

much like the board game Risk, where enemy zones in a persistent online world must be captured and held. If you have a savvy commander at the helm, this experience can be amazing. More so than most Xbox Live games, this one really stresses the importance of building a team that sticks together week in and week out. If the resistance is great, it will take weeks, if not months, to conquer the map in the Neroimus War.

Chromehounds wields tons of firepower online, but its gameplay gears are rusty. On this note, I can only recommend this title to people that know that they’ll have reliable friends around them. —REINER

BOTTOM LINE 7

> **Concept:** An online mech game that makes you appreciate the little things in design for all the wrong reasons

> **Graphics:** Explosions produce wondrous spectacles, but vehicles disappear seconds after detonating. The environments are also blocky, but I do love how the mechs mow down trees

> **Sound:** Decent effects, but most of the sound produced is of your commander barking orders and your teammates asking if they can open fire

> **Playability:** Controls are simple yet entirely functional. The six mech classes are balanced nicely and make players approach the game differently

> **Entertainment:** With a good team, online can be a blast. With anything else, misery ensues

> **Replay Value:** High

Second Opinion 7.5

Some titles have so many bizarre quirks and catches that it feels like the game is kicking you in the face, daring you to muscle through its eccentricities to find the fun underneath. Chromehounds is just such a game. There is a decent, straightforward mech combat game at its core, but you almost have to work to find it, as it’s masked by an obtuse story, sloppy menus, barebones controls, and confusing online implementation. Building your own robotic death machine is always a good time, as is blowing up someone else’s. There are splashes of MechAssault in Chromehounds, a bit of Steel Battalion: Line of Contact, and even a hint of the obscure PC title Savage: The Battle for Newerth. If that mix sounds appealing to you, then you’ll dig Chromehounds, provided you can overlook the multitude of oddities that will scare others away. —JEREMY

XBOX 360

NCAA Football 07

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER SPORTS (2-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE) > **PUBLISHER** EA SPORTS
> **DEVELOPER** EA TIBURON > **RELEASE** JULY 18 > **ESRB** E

THE NEW RECRUIT

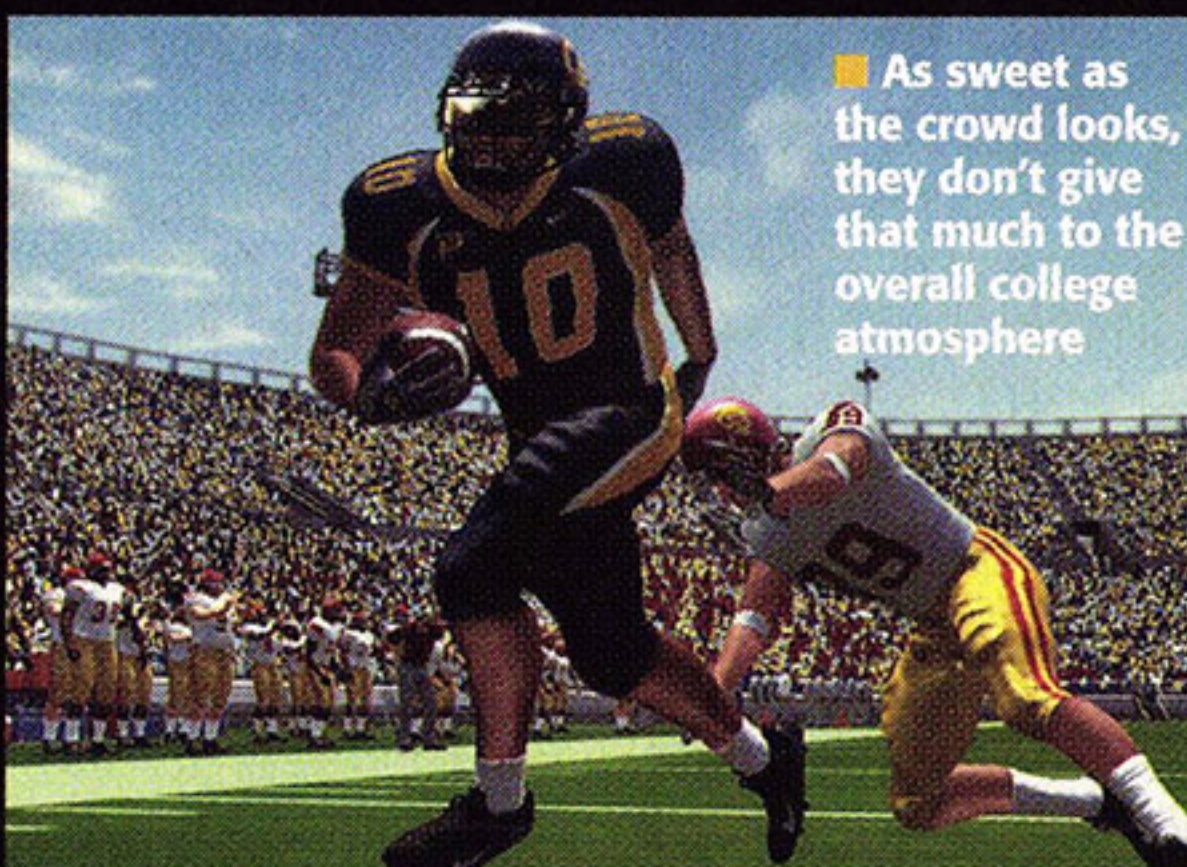


BOTTOM LINE 7.75

When I first turned this game on, it appeared that this NCAA title was having a better debut on the 360 than Madden NFL did last November. After spending time with this game, however, it ends up on the same disappointing boat – despite having Dynasty options such as recruiting. Oddly enough, the one glaring thing missing is something that shouldn’t be a problem – atmosphere.

Getting the game right isn’t simply a matter of transferring a feature set. While playing, this title just feels off. For instance, both wide receivers and defensive backs have a tendency to be painfully unaware of the ball at times. Add in the fact that there is no Precision Passing for the receivers to react to, and sometimes it’s like they are out there just running routes like robots. Furthermore, player movements could be better. Often running backs lack the cutback ability for changes of direction. The only bonus here is that although there are times when you feel like you’ve ceded total control over your player, the game does contain sweet sequences where your guy will jump over a prone body during a play. Luckily some of the blown safety coverages of Madden 360 have been fixed, so the football is better overall.

My main problem with this game is that, despite the work put into the sweet crowds and the new Momentum Meter, there is a curious lack of atmosphere. The camera shake during rivalry games is gone, as are the fluctuations in player performances and the broken audibles during heated contests. In other words, the series (at least on the 360) is back to being Madden’s waterboy. I dig the Tug of War minigame, but otherwise the thrills of this title won’t last the summer. —KATO



■ As sweet as the crowd looks, they don’t give that much to the overall college atmosphere

> **Concept:** Not as stripped down as Madden 06 for the system, but it’s not much better

> **Graphics:** The crowds are done well, but the cutaway sequences don’t wow you

> **Sound:** I miss the decibel-raising crowd of the current-gen version

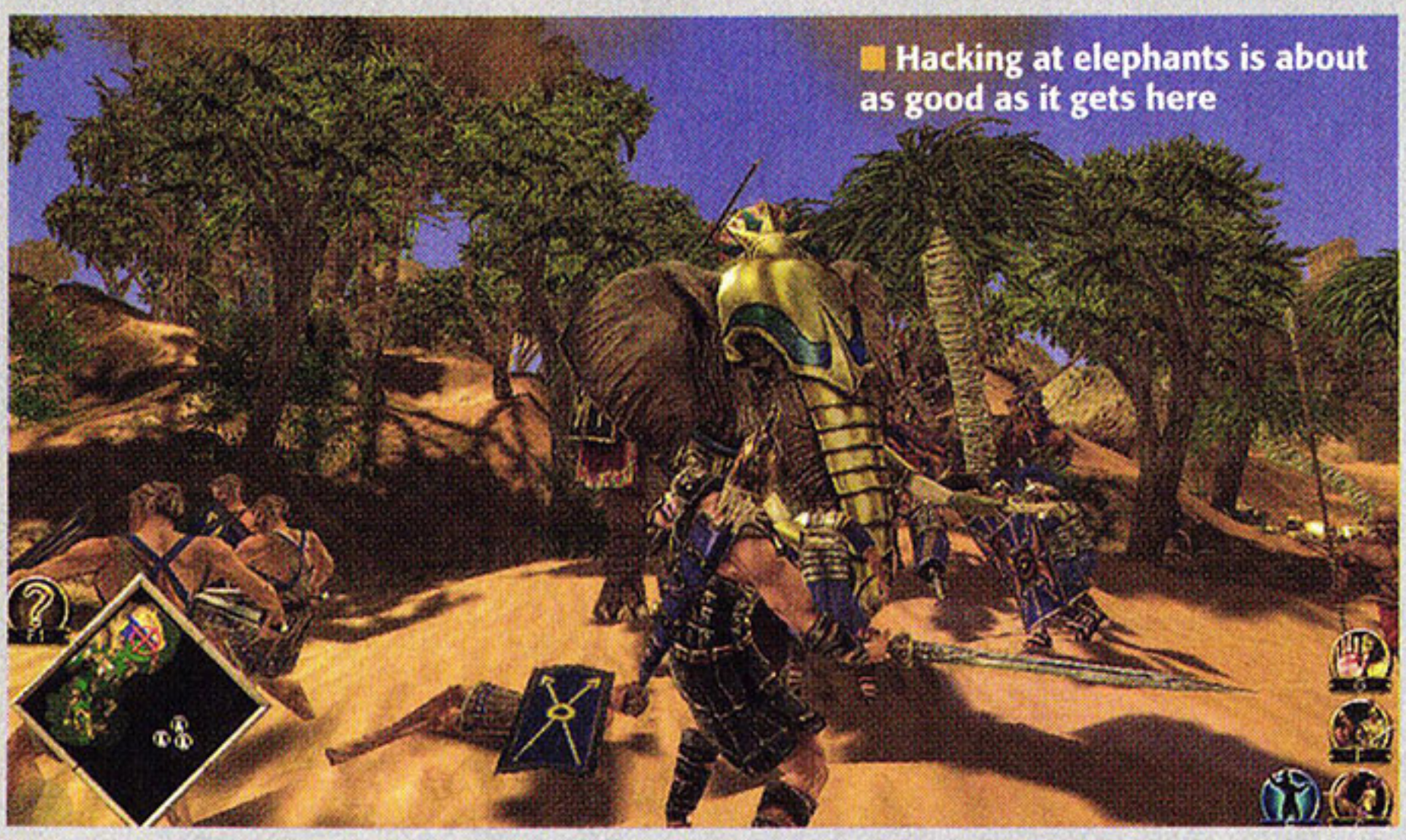
> **Playability:** I’m disappointed that there’s no Precision Passing and players’ movements can get a little wonky

> **Entertainment:** I’ll still take the current-gen NCAA for my college thrills

> **Replay Value:** Moderately High

Second Opinion 7.5

Knowledge is power? Nay, I say! Electronic Arts’ attempt to transform the boisterous college football crowd into monocle-wearing highbrow snobs doesn’t extend to the Xbox 360 version. This edition is all about football. With that said, fans that have played the NCAA titles year in and year out will likely feel like they are revisiting the past. Many of the innovations that have been introduced in the current-gen games over the last few years are noticeably absent in this version. For instance, I hate not having the nerve-frying camera shake during rivalry games. This game’s biggest offenses, however, stem from AI and collision problems. Defensive ends and receivers often double as brain-dead zombies, and you’ll even see phantom tackles by players that don’t come close to touching the ball carrier. Unlike the current gen version, this game has the right focus. The play just isn’t as tight as it needs to be. —REINER



■ Hacking at elephants is about as good as it gets here

PC

Rise & Fall: Civilizations At War

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER STRATEGY (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA INTERNET OR LAN) > **PUBLISHER** MIDWAY
> **DEVELOPER** STAINLESS STEEL STUDIOS/MIDWAY > **RELEASE** JUNE 13 > **ESRB** T

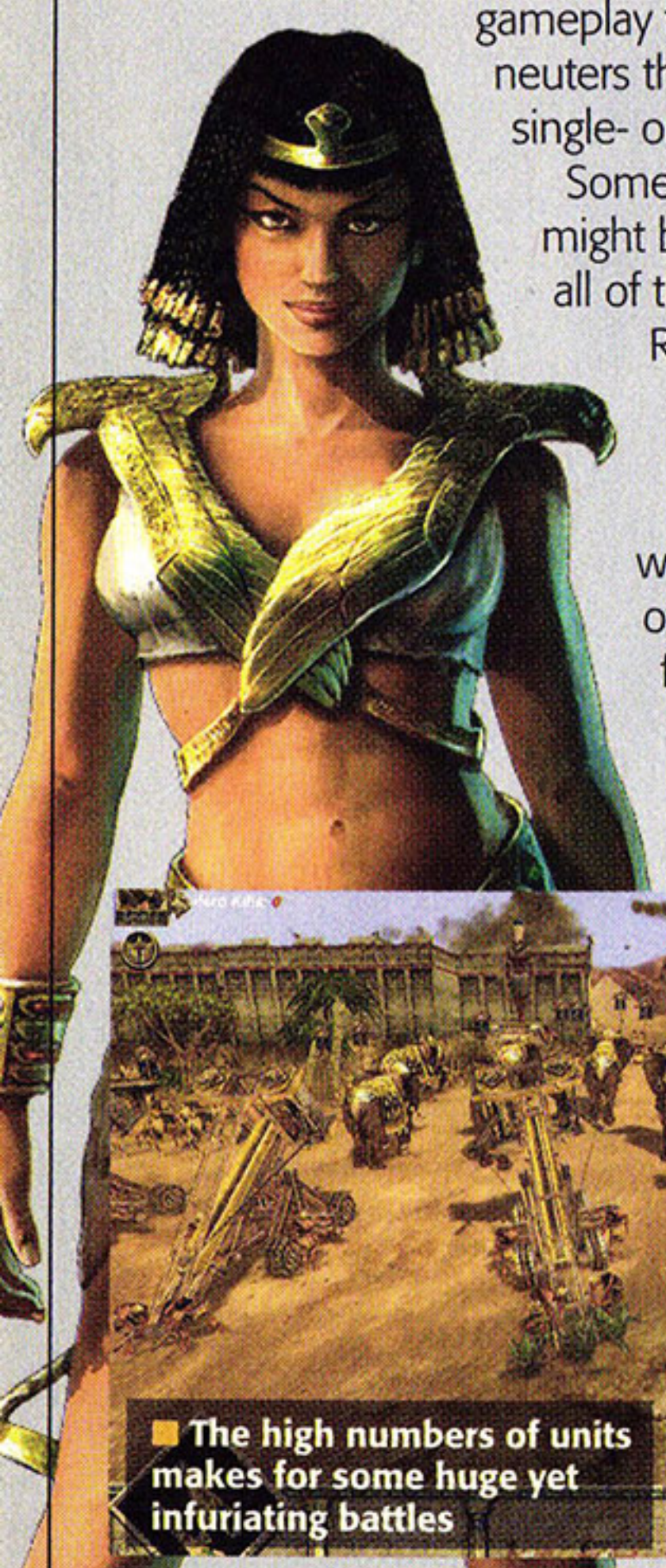
THE ANCIENT ART OF IRRITATION

That's it. I'm sick and tired of new games coming out that can't get the basic execution of a popular genre right. It's frankly unacceptable that Rise & Fall can't offer smooth RTS control on a mouse and keyboard. When I send my archers to the walls to defend a city that's under siege, it is intolerable for them to walk through the gate – opening it to enemy forces – due to poor pathfinding. These problems were solved years ago, and as a gamer I'm simply not willing to put up with them any more.

This isn't to say that Rise & Fall is completely without worth. The naval combat is fairly entertaining, with varied options like ramming and boarding to give the crafty player an edge. Eye candies like ragdoll soldiers lend a certain awesomeness to things like catapults and war elephants. Controlling your hero directly, action game style, is a neat gimmick even though it's poor in execution. Even taken all together, though, these things are nowhere near enough to balance the game's poor

gameplay foundation, which neuters the enjoyment of any single- or multiplayer match.

Somebody somewhere might be willing to deal with all of the irritations that Rise & Fall continually slings at players, but I cannot recommend this game to anyone with the overabundance of very similar, actually fun games on the market. —ADAM



■ The high numbers of units makes for some huge yet infuriating battles

BOTTOM LINE **5**

> **Concept:** Shoehorn a shoddy action mode into a mediocre ancient warfare RTS

> **Graphics:** Provided you have some sort of \$3,000 machine this looks pretty good – but slowdown really takes a toll on lesser machines

> **Sound:** Context-sensitive music is cool, though the voiceovers in the story cutscenes are laughable

> **Playability:** For a genre as established as RTS, an interface this plagued with issues is simply unacceptable

> **Entertainment:** Do yourself a favor and pick up any of the dozens of better games on the market

> **Replay Value:** Moderately Low

Second Opinion **5.5**

This just in from the "Not Surprising" Department: combining a mediocre RTS with some poor third-person hack 'n slash action equals one pretty crappy game. Unfortunately, throwing a bunch of half-baked concepts together doesn't transcend the sum of the parts into something interesting, it merely creates an unfocused mess. Rise & Fall does have some solid ideas at play, but practically everything seems to be going in the wrong direction. The RTS building aspect requires too much hands-on attention, while the combat is too tactically simple. The third-person action bits are more fun than the RTS segments, but so barebones that it would have seemed dated five years ago. I guess this is one combination that just didn't work out. But I'm sure this big bowl of Necco wafers and maple syrup is a great idea! —JEREMY

PC

Half-Life 2: Episode One

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** VALVE > **DEVELOPER** VALVE > **RELEASE** MAY 31 > **ESRB** M



■ Valve is still at the top of the field in making nuanced characters

HEALTH 100 **SUIT** 200

BOTTOM LINE **8.75**

NEXT TIME, DR. FREEMAN

The first episodic content release from Valve delivers just about exactly what I expected from it: more Half-Life 2. Though not a single neuron in my brain was blown away by the awesomeness that I've come to expect from the studio, Valve's commitment to near-perfect execution is apparent every step of the way through this adventure. The puzzles make great use of the Source engine's capabilities, the characters are honest-to-goodness believable, and the combat is still par for the course.

Picking up exactly where Half-Life 2 left off, Episode One does an excellent job of exploring what happens on Earth when the Combine's power is broken...as well as tease players with some more insight into the mysterious G-Man. Every challenge players are faced with has been hand-crafted to be much more than another run-and-gun set of enemies to burn through. From physics puzzles to figuring out a trick that allows you to overcome horrendous odds,

the encounters in this title are nothing if not fresh and new.

However, this very quality is my biggest issue with the game. Sometimes the obstacles come off as just a little bit too gimmicky and contrived. You're nearly always forced into finding a specific solution to the problem – I never really felt like I was being creative in overcoming a challenge so much as digging around until I found the pre-determined answer. And what's so wrong about once in a while giving players a bunch of enemies to fight with no goofy variables to the encounter, anyway?

Beyond the vague irritation at feeling like I didn't have any freedom (and to be fair, nobody has ever confused the Half-Life franchise with being anything but linear), Episode One is an entertaining new chapter in the Half-Life story. Do yourself a favor and finish the game, though, because the trailer for Episode Two that you unlock is almost more thrilling than Episode One itself. —ADAM

> **Concept:** Continue the story of the enigmatic Dr. Freeman and his fight against the Combine

> **Graphics:** Some optimizations and tweaks to the Source engine have kept Half-Life 2 looking mighty fine

> **Sound:** There aren't many games that sport top-notch voiceovers, but this is one

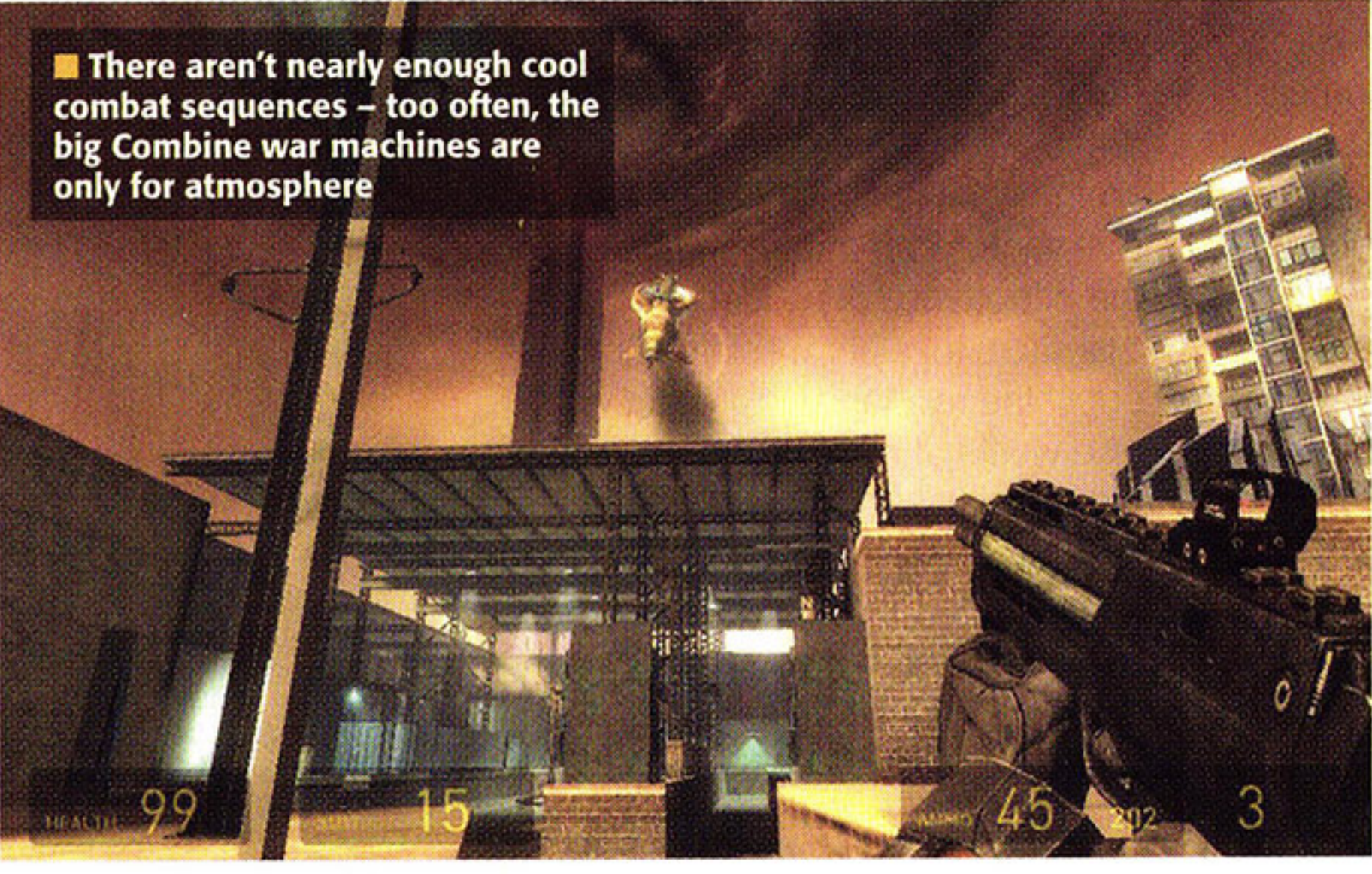
> **Playability:** No new weapons? Sigh. Good thing the puzzles are brilliantly executed

> **Entertainment:** It may only last for four to six hours, but those are some darn good hours

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion **7.5**

I have seen expansion packs with less content than this episode, so Valve does deserve some credit for putting in at least a decent amount of content for your 20 dollars. All told, the episode is about five hours long. I could live with its duration if the gameplay ever developed into something above routine. Certainly the story, of which I am a huge fan, takes some steps forward, but the gameplay with Alyx at your side is average at best. As your sidekick she seems to have unlimited ammo and health, and will deal with most of the bad-dies, leaving you to...well...watch. Even worse, right near the end of the episode there is an event that has you shuttling people through the same game environment over and over. Can you say artificially inflated playtime? Episode One is fun if you are a fan, but this game should have been so much more. —ANDY



■ There aren't nearly enough cool combat sequences – too often, the big Combine war machines are only for atmosphere

HEALTH 99 **SUIT** 15 **AMMO** 45 **WEAPON** 3

BOTTOM LINE **8.25**

- > **Concept:** Like Diablo, but prettier
- > **Graphics:** Easily the best-looking action/RPG around. Watching the carnage is almost as much fun as causing it
- > **Sound:** Heroic themes and bronze crashing against iron. What did you expect?
- > **Playability:** Point. Click. Anyone with a functioning mouse hand will have no trouble
- > **Entertainment:** There may not be much new ground broken here, but this is filling up an experience bar with style
- > **Replay Value:** Moderately High



■ Boss encounters are fantastic



■ Each specialization in weapons, magic, or a combination thereof yields very different fighting styles

PC

Titan Quest

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION/RPG (UP TO 6-PLAYER VIA INTERNET OR LAN) > **PUBLISHER** THQ > **DEVELOPER** IRON LORE STUDIOS > **RELEASE** JUNE 26 > **ESRB** T

GODS ARE WUSSES

Don't let the ancient mythology-based setting fool you: Titan Quest is as close to a direct plagiarism of Diablo II as the industry has seen in some time. On some level, I'm somewhat tickled by the fact that the game nakedly rips so much of its design from that classic – from the items to the interface, the two are incredibly similar. On another, I have a hard time thinking of the label of "Diablo II clone" as being particularly derogatory. And at the end of the day, leveling up and getting cool loot is an inherently enjoyable activity.

Merely adhering to the action/RPG loot-fest template that makes these titles so addictive isn't enough to guarantee a good game, though. Titan Quest sports enough polish (not to mention an absolutely fantastic graphics

engine) to make the grinding fun. It definitely has the occasional frustratingly rough edge, like the odd targeting miscue or pathfinding bug, but they're nowhere near frequent enough to hamper the entertainment much.

The combat and character advancement systems are deep enough to keep players at the keyboard for a good long time. Not pigeon-holing heroes into classes allows for a huge variety of options in how you build your avatar, all with different styles of fighting.

And like many successful action/RPGs before it, Titan Quest does a great job of making players feel like true badasses as they single-handedly clear out dozens of monsters with a host of flashy special

attacks. There are no finely tuned group-dependent encounters here, just good old-fashioned monster slaughter. And it feels good.

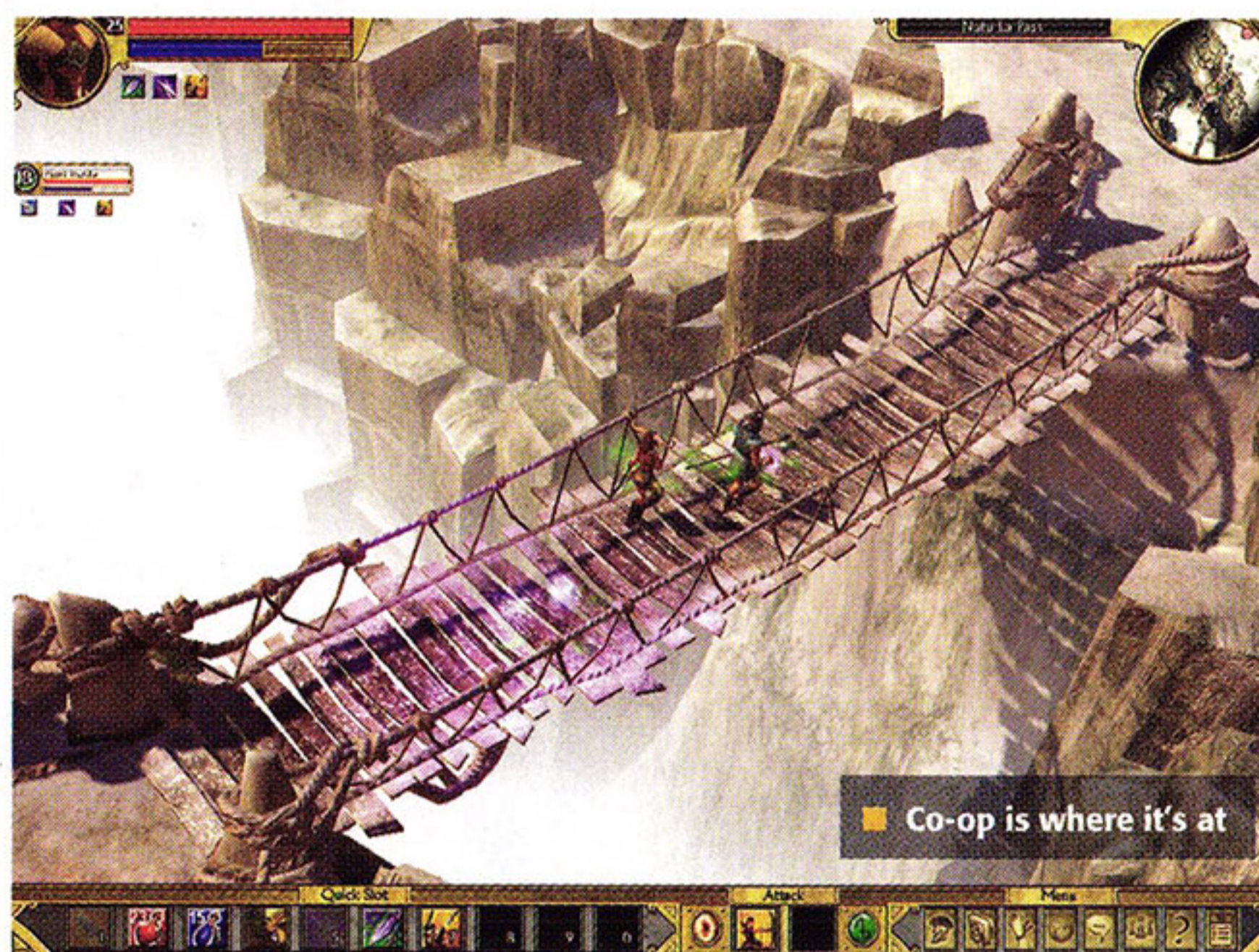
Titan Quest also deserves praise for the fact that the game never interposes boring roadblocks between the action and...well, more action. Getting back to town to sell off excess equipment takes under a minute if you're in a hurry. Allocating stat points is simple enough that you don't have to spend half an hour trying to figure out what's best, while complex enough to offer viable choices. There really is never a dull moment.

If there's a major flaw in Titan Quest, it's that the game feels almost too familiar. If you're already burnt out on the kill-loot-repeat philosophy of action/RPGs, there's nothing here that will make you change your mind. Failing a rejection of the entire mindset that Titan Quest caters to, however, many good times can be easily found in this land of mythological wonder and fat loots. —**ADAM**

“Just good old-fashioned monster slaughter. And it feels good.”



■ Ragdoll physics ensure hilarious aftereffects to things like lightning strikes



■ Co-op is where it's at

Second Opinion 8

I'm going to be frank here – I love loot. Even though I've been collecting it for years, I just can't get enough of the stuff, regardless of phatness. Titan Quest provides a major fix through a time-tested formula: kill stuff, get more awesome, kill stronger stuff. So why is it still so much fun? Because it takes the familiar and turns it into an addictive climb up the ladder to godhood. Well-made skill trees in a decent variety of classes (not only your standard warrior, mage, or archer) give you plenty of options in battle, and the mythical setting provides opportunities to square off against some pretty cool enemies (though apparently satyrs were the goblins of ancient Greece). Of course, Titan Quest isn't exactly pushing the boundaries of action/RPG genre, but it looks good, controls well, and taps into that "I'm just going to play a little bit longer" mentality that can have you up to your knees in blues and purples and still leave you wanting more. —**JOE**

PSP

Valkyrie Profile: Lenneth

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ROLE-PLAYING GAME > PUBLISHER SQUARE ENIX > DEVELOPER TRI-ACE > RELEASE JULY 18 > ESRB T



NIBELUNG VALESTI!

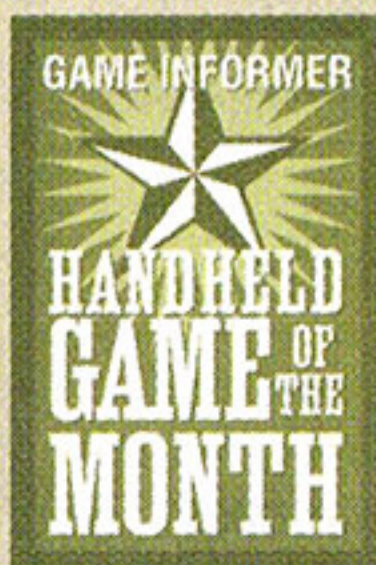
Among diehard RPG fans, Valkyrie Profile is legendary. Those who manage to procure a copy of the PSone version will swear by its haunting story, unconventional gameplay, and memorable characters. Thankfully, with this nearly identical handheld release, you won't need to sell your soul in an online auction to see what the big deal is. After only a few hours of playing Valkyrie Profile: Lenneth, it is apparent that the game deserves its cult-hit status – but just as clear are the elements that kept it from mainstream popularity in the first place.

If you're looking for a complex and involved RPG experience, Lenneth certainly delivers in spades. Every character you collect has an array of skills and stats that you gradually tweak and increase to make them better suited for their roles as ethereal soldiers. Practically every choice you make has repercussions, from what abilities you teach them to when you send them up to the celestial war in Asgard. Even though I love having these options, every now and then I couldn't shake the feeling that I wasn't doing things the "right way." Don't expect the game to throw you any safety nets; with just a few button

presses, you could unwittingly blow your chance at the best ending.

I don't mean to give the impression that Lenneth has you constantly walking on eggshells. You are faced with some tough decisions, but most of the game is a highly addictive mixture of story, combat, and dungeon exploration. Despite its seemingly simple appearance, the battle system is a balance of strategy and timing that, when used correctly, triggers a chain of satisfying special attacks. These flashy moves tend to get old and overlong, but there is some relief since your main party is changing often. After all, every time some awesome warrior bites it on earth, that's one more character added to your heavenly ranks. Their death is your gain!

If you've been waiting for years to get your hands on this Tri-Ace classic, Valkyrie Profile: Lenneth will not disappoint. The regimented pacing and layers of detail could prove too much for casual RPG fans, but if you think this is what you're looking for, you're probably right. —**JOE**



BOTTOM LINE 8

> **Concept:** Norse gods, dead warriors, and a rare RPG reborn

> **Graphics:** Sharpened visuals and amazing new rendered cutscenes make for an exceptional restoration of a PSone favorite

> **Sound:** The music is excellent, but the voicework (though frequent) is the opposite of excellent: bogus

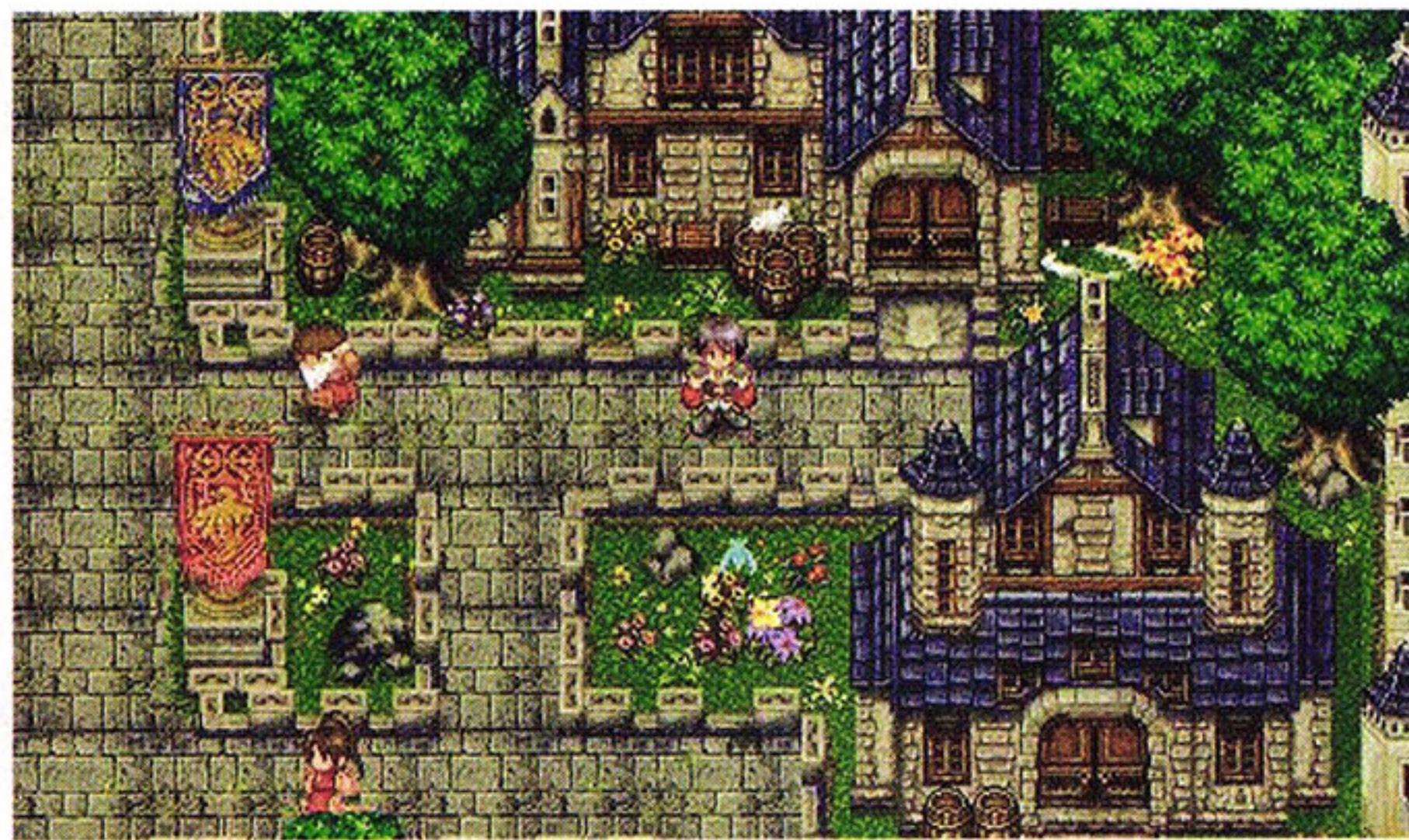
> **Playability:** Taking some time to figure out the various menus, points, and systems will make all the difference

> **Entertainment:** The sparse save opportunities necessitate longer sessions, but they're worth it

> **Replay Value:** High

Second Opinion 8.5

Hoity toity collectors be damned – I'm glad that Valkyrie Profile is getting a smoking re-release. The game, with its mix of both elegantly simple and maddeningly complex systems, deserves to be played by the masses. Sure, there are iffy features in this package. Personally, I think keeping the save points of old is bunk. This is a portable game and I should be able to save where my schedule requires it. But you can work around this fault and come out the other end with a combat system that's consistently fun, a story that's just involving enough, sweet cutscenes, and generally good voice acting. It's a great mix of pick-up-and-play action and in-depth storytelling that, for me at least, more than holds its own in the current RPG market. —**LISA**



PSP

Astonishia Story

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ROLE-PLAYING GAME > PUBLISHER UBISOFT > DEVELOPER SONNORI > RELEASE JUNE 27 > ESRB E 10+

THE POINT IS BELABORED

We get it already – someone out there thinks that RPGs are too hard, too obtuse, and too unfriendly for normal casual gamers to latch onto. That's an argument for another day. What's bothering me right now is that Astonishia Story professes a desire to fill that gap and instead liberally uses all of the ideas that make RPGs hard, obtuse, and unfriendly. Its worst sin? Man, this game is boring.

There's nothing outright broken in this imported Korean RPG, but there's nothing compelling either. Graphics are detailed and colorful... and display exactly what every other medieval-tinged fantasy setting has lain out for decades. Dialogue and characters are hot swappable bags of bland clichés. I guess they get the job done, but only in that lowest common denominator of protagonist archetypes kind of way. It doesn't help any that the job at hand is, apparently, aimless wandering punctuated by frequent battles against scores of identical enemies.

I don't envy the high and noble goal to make an accessible strategy/RPG. Strategy-lite has rarely been done well – something that would manage to be fun, satisfying, and still easy to understand. But this game is exactly none of those things. The "strategy" is little more than a grid-based movement system. Within those bounds, all you'll do is try to not die and select the same attack over... and over... and, you get the idea.

It's the same gripes gamers always have, but I'm sick of these exercises that feel more like rat and feeder bar experiments. How long, really, will I just select "attack" and call it a game? I wouldn't pawn off this boring dreck to even the most annoying neighbor kid. —**LISA**

BOTTOM LINE 4.25

> **Concept:** Generic strategy-lite RPG action

> **Graphics:** While nothing in the game has a terribly imaginative design, many of the characters, areas, and enemies are nicely detailed

> **Sound:** I'll give \$15 to anyone who doesn't turn it down in an hour – this is miserable

> **Playability:** On one hand, the combat system and navigation are really easy to use... on the other, they're super boring

> **Entertainment:** For anyone who doesn't want to think too much, there's this lobotomy on a disc

> **Replay Value:** Low

Second Opinion 4.5

Astonishia Story touts itself as an easy-to-understand adventure that will get casual gamers to enjoy RPGs. It's lying. Trying to get into RPGs with this game is like trying to learn Mozart on one of those six-key Fischer-Price Piano/Xylophone combos. Any decent role-playing title stays miles away from the simplistic trash this game crutches on, like mandatory errands, throwaway characters, and undirected wandering. Though it technically functions as a game, it actively impedes fun at every turn. I guess that's what happens when you set your bar so low that you're guaranteed to hit the mark. Bullseye, Astonishia Story! Have a sticker! —**JOE**



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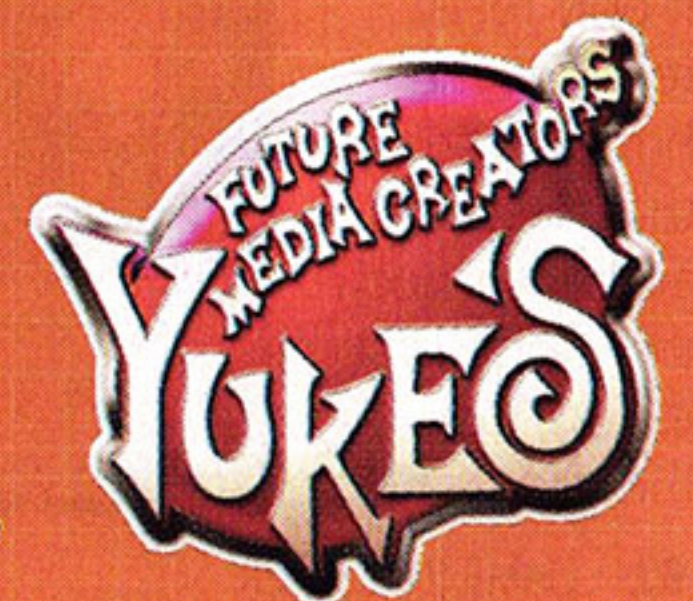
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GAME BOY ADVANCE

Summon Night: Swordcraft Story

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ROLE-PLAYING GAME (2-PLAYER VIA LINK CABLE)
> **PUBLISHER** ATLUS > **DEVELOPER** FLIGHT PLAN > **RELEASE** JULY 18
> **ESRB** E10+

I MISS CRONO

As a 2D RPG that follows in the footsteps of the classics, Summon Night isn't exactly full of surprises. You wake up late on the morning of a big event, eager to follow in the footsteps of your (mysteriously vanished) father. Fortunately, the game's predictability is balanced out by its execution and funny dialogue, resulting in a charming but repetitive handheld adventure.

After choosing between a male or female character, you start as an apprentice Craftknight – basically an artisan warrior – who spends hours repeatedly going to the same dungeon to fight and gather materials. Combat plays out in on a linear 2D plane, and though it's a little sluggish, switching among weapons and spells on the fly works pretty well. It's decent fun, but Summon Night's real draw is the great exchanges between the character and his/her Guardian Beast. Mine was constantly looking for an excuse to "go on a rampage," and Miller's just wanted to make out with him all the time.

Unfortunately, a few good conversations can't totally redeem a largely un inventive formula – especially if you don't have a taste for its particular brand of quirkiness. Summon Night wants

to be Chrono Trigger, but it only really reminds me how awesome that classic is, and how much this game isn't it. Frog for the win.—**JOE**



BOTTOM LINE 7

> **Concept:** Add some alchemy-like stuff to an old-school RPG

> **Graphics:** Some of the character designs are cool, but otherwise there's nothing remarkable

> **Sound:** Since you spend the majority of the game in about three areas, it gets old really fast

> **Playability:** Tends to be a bit unresponsive in battle, especially when it seems to matter most

> **Entertainment:** Good for some laughs, but not actually very fun to play

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion 7

Summon Night has a charming and genuinely amusing feel to it, supported by a cast of innocuous but funny characters in the best tradition of old school RPGs. The 2D combat has its problems, but at least offers more than the option to select attack from a menu for hour after hour. With that said, I could certainly do with less backtracking and more variety to the game world – a place that has you moving through one single large dungeon for much of the game. Cuteness can only carry this title so far before the slow moving plot threatens to smother it.—**MILLER**

HANDHELD QUICKIES

NINTENDO DS

Point Blank DS

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION
> **PUBLISHER** NAMCO BANDAI
> **DEVELOPER** NAMCO BANDAI
> **RELEASE** JUNE 13 > **ESRB** E



BOTTOM LINE 4.5

Do you enjoy poking roadkill with a stick? How about pointing at those who are different?

If so, you may enjoy Point Blank DS, a thuddingly stupid collection of 40 or so shooting gallery minigames devoted to jabbing your DS screen at various different targets. Most of the minigames are basically the same, the sound effects will annoy the hell out of everyone except experimental musician Steven Stapleton, and you can play through all of the various modes in under an hour. Even if you have fun with Point Blank, you'll forget it existed minutes later.—**JEREMY**

NINTENDO DS

Magnetica

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER PUZZLE
> **PUBLISHER** NINTENDO
> **DEVELOPER** MITCHELL COPORATION
> **RELEASE** JUNE 6 > **ESRB** E



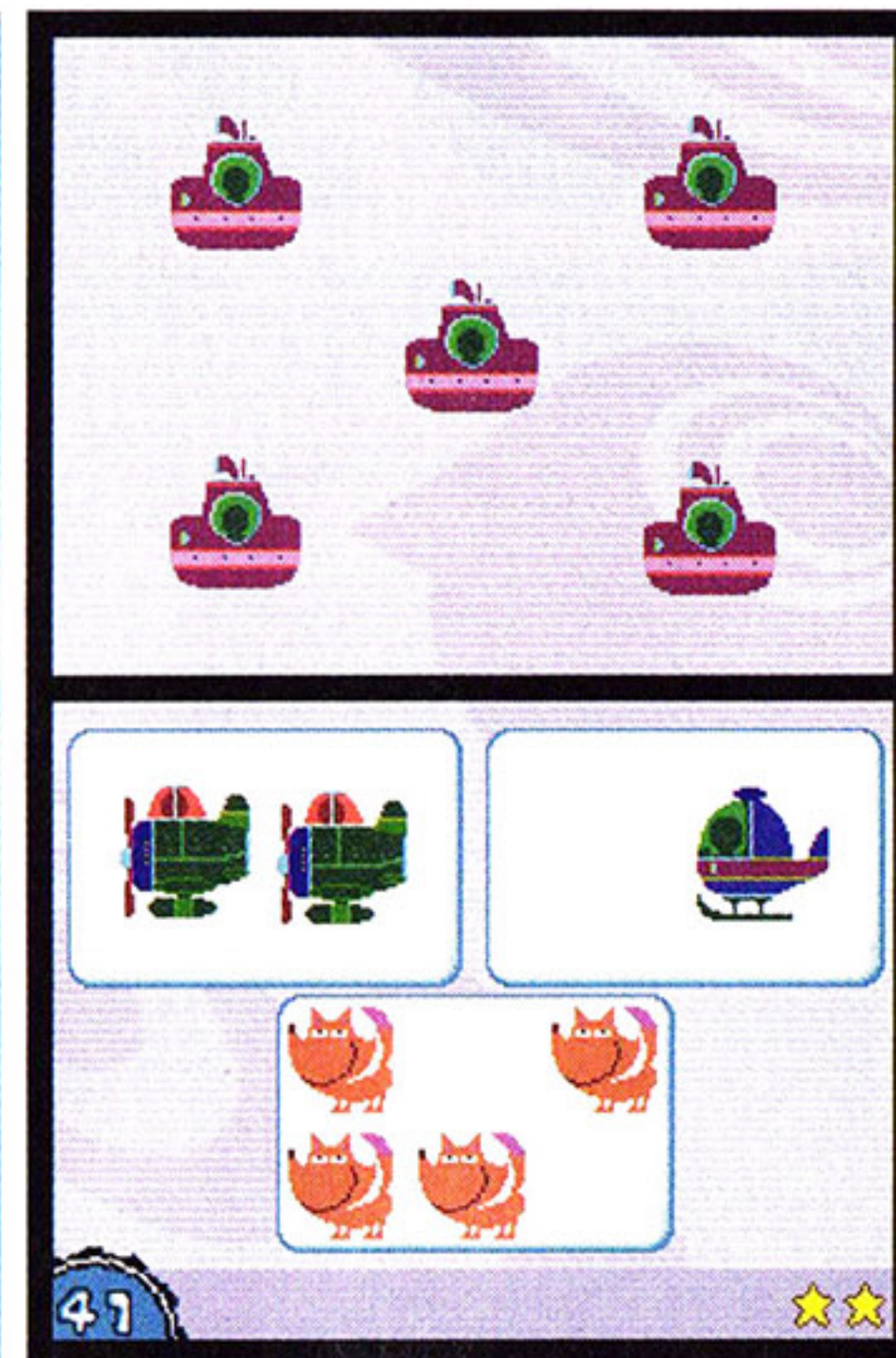
BOTTOM LINE 7.25

This DS reshaw of the familiar Zuma/Puzz Loop concept plays just like its predecessors, albeit with a stylus with which you fling the balls to their like-colored companions. Challenge, quest, and puzzle modes each offer their own interesting twist on the equation. This is a simple concept you must have certainly seen before, but it's just as fun on the touch screen as it is with a more conventional scheme.—**MILLER**

NINTENDO DS

Big Brain Academy

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER PUZZLE (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA WIRELESS) > **PUBLISHER** NINTENDO
> **DEVELOPER** NINTENDO > **RELEASE** JUNE 5 > **ESRB** E

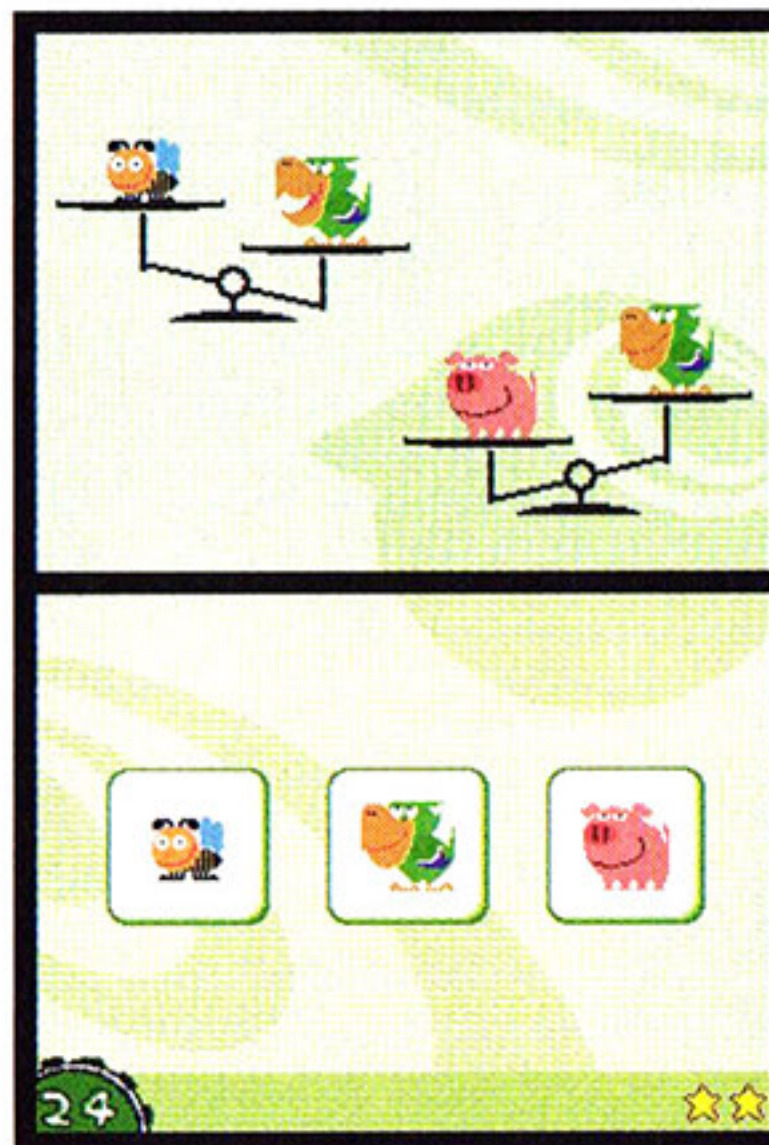


GET SMART

The second in a genre of "brain training" games that have become a huge sensation in Japan, Nintendo is finally bringing Big Brain Academy to our shores. Like Brain Age, this title aims to both measure and improve your mental acuity through a series of challenges that test your mathematical, analytical, and memory skills. Predictably, it improves on its predecessor in some regards, while somehow sacrificing some of the addictive qualities that made Brain Age so compelling.

On the plus side, there is a greater variety of puzzles and types of puzzles. Some of these are as (deceptively) simple as counting blocks, while others involve using the stylus to complete connect-the-dot pictures or drawing lines to move a falling character towards a goal at the bottom of the screen. As before, it's surprisingly fun, and I particularly like the aforementioned connect-the-dots challenges' use of the stylus.

That being said, there are a few things that seem lacking in comparison to Brain Age. For one, Academy lets you test yourself as many times a day as you'd like. I prefer the way Brain Age limits you to once per day, as that seemed to keep me more conscious of both playing for a brief period each day and also practicing frequently. In Academy, you'll be way more prone to playing for an extended period, then to not pick it up for days at a time. Also, I miss the Stroop tests, which used the DS microphone to great effect in Brain Age. Most importantly, this



lacks Brain Age's interactive Sudoku puzzles, which for me provided that game with replay value long after I'd grown tired of testing myself. Still, this is fun and, for those of us still in the thrall of this new type of game, provides enough new content to hold us over until the next version of Brain Age.—**MATT**

BOTTOM LINE 7.75

> **Concept:** Another brain-teasing puzzle game for Nintendo's new Touch Generations line

> **Graphics:** Loveably wacky character designs spice up the minimal presentation

> **Sound:** Repetitive and a little lacking during some parts, but a handful of these tunes have been stuck in my head for days

> **Playability:** The touch screen works well as always, but there's no handwriting or voice recognition

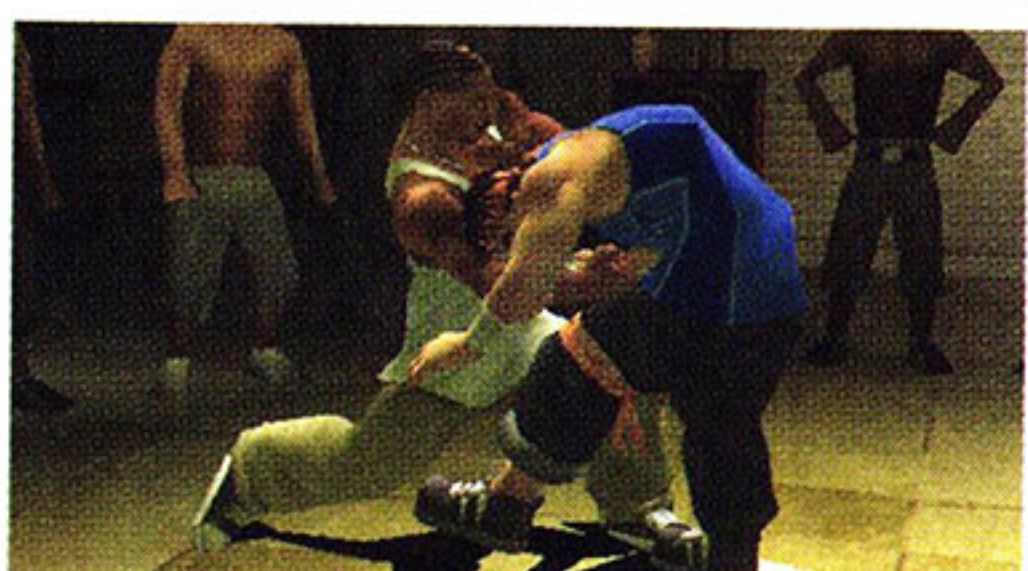
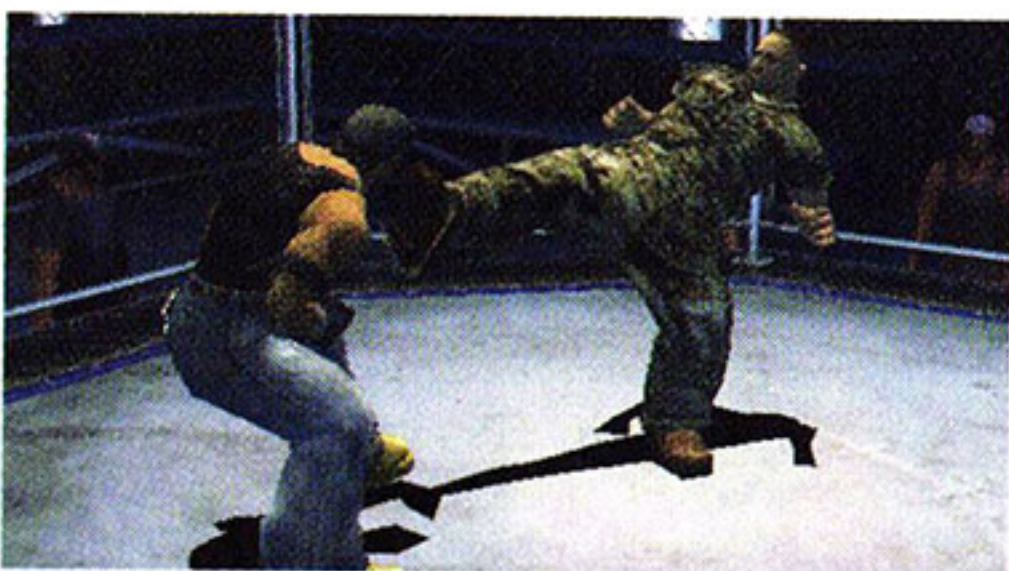
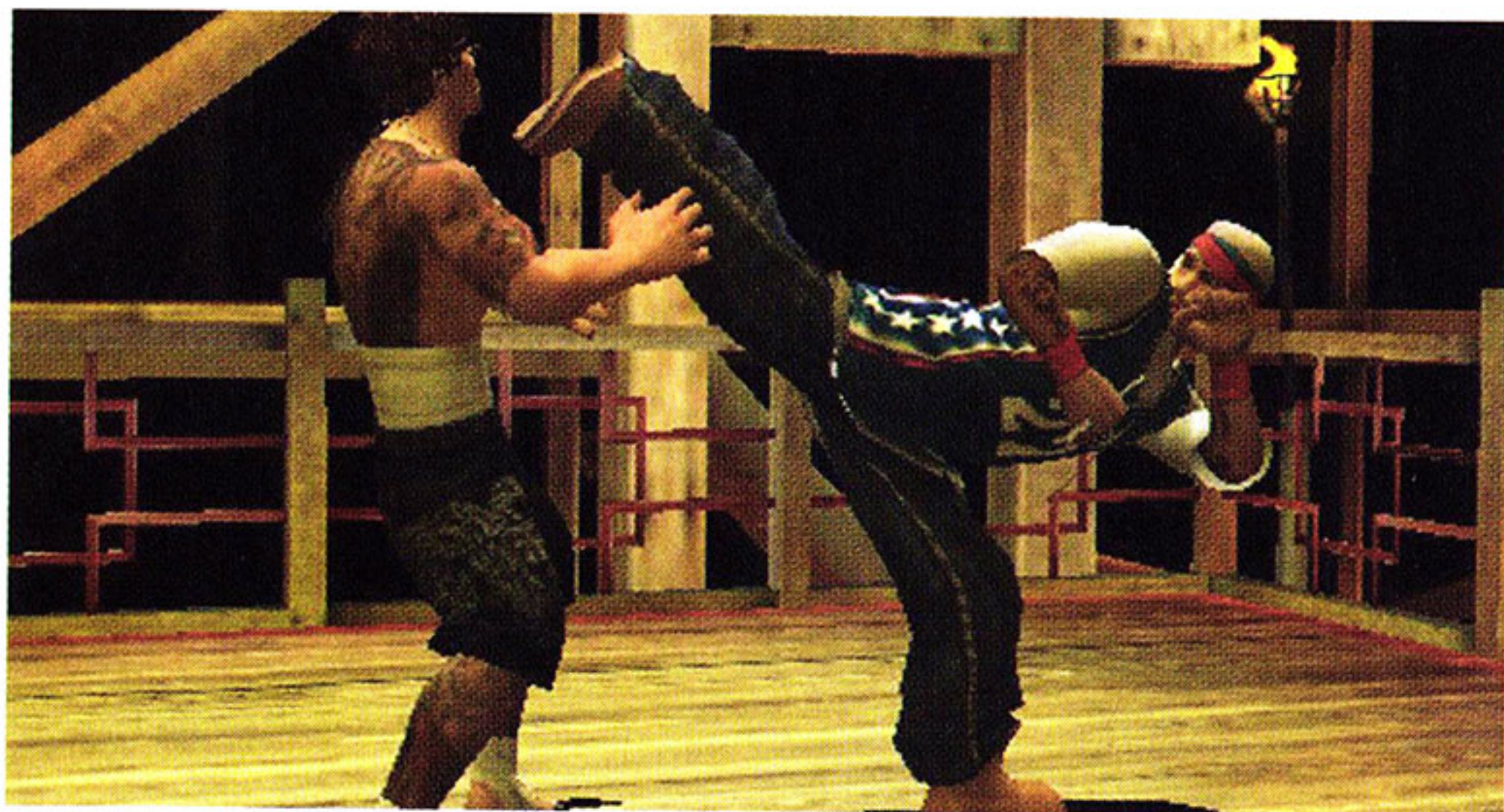
> **Entertainment:** It's more varied, but somehow I was more addicted to Brain Age

> **Replay Value:** High

Second Opinion 7.75

Teachers and parents have probably been telling you to "apply yourself" for years, but now you finally just might do it. I found Big Brain's collection of mind games to be quite addictive over both short and long gameplay periods. And if you think that using the practice mode is for wussies, it's very useful for sharpening your mind in areas you aren't good at. The game spurred the competitive aspect of my brain as much as it probed my smarts. Part of this is because after each test, you're told which occupation in life you'd best be suited for. So if you keep taking the tests and are told you're destined to spend life as a patent attorney, don't take second best for an answer. Keep practicing and improve your lot in life.—**KATO**

BOTTOM LINE **8**



PSP

Def Jam Fight For NY: The Takeover

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER FIGHTING (2-PLAYER VIA AD-HOC) > **PUBLISHER** ELECTRONIC ARTS
> **DEVELOPER** EA CANADA/AKI CORPORATION > **RELEASE** JULY 11 > **ESRB** M

PSP THE HARD WAY

While it would be easy to write this series off as a crass marketing opportunity for Def Jam, the fact is that it has become one of the best brawlers on the market, and in many ways has eclipsed some of the WWE titles that obviously inspired it. Along with great gameplay, the franchise also made a good use of its license, incorporating hot new hip-hop tracks alongside legendary rap characters like Slick Rick and Flavor Flav.

This PSP version, as its name suggests, is largely based on Fight for NY, the last console Def Jam title, and sticks very closely to that game's blueprint. In some ways, this is a good thing, as the graphics and gameplay are finely honed and in many ways even better than those of its predecessors. You can still learn new moves and fighting styles, and there is a useful reversal move that adds some timing and

strategy to the mix. Also, you can now pull some "dirty moves," like throwing sand in your opponent's face to stun them. Even better are the new animation sequences that begin matches, getting you right into the action. Honestly, it plays and looks every bit like a console title, although I'm not fond of the action on the PSP's shoulder buttons, which feel stiff and mechanical in comparison to the PS2's.

While it certainly maintains the good things about the original, the fact that so much of this material is recycled does minimize the impact this title might have had (although the changes in the career mode are welcome). By now, some of the old songs feel pretty outdated (Shawna? Stuff from Method Man's ill-fated *Tical 0* album? No thanks!), as do the clothes and other unlockables. Hip-hop moves fast, and Def Jam seems to have lost its cutting-edge appeal. —**MATT**

> **Concept:** An updated PSP version of the successful console hit

> **Graphics:** Looks great; better than the console version in some respects

> **Sound:** The soundtrack features a lot of repeated tracks from past games, so it feels a bit dated

> **Playability:** The basic control scheme still works great, but I don't like having to rely so much on the clunky PSP shoulder buttons

> **Entertainment:** This is easily one of the best PSP fighters, but if you've exhausted the console versions, there's not a lot that's new here

> **Replay Value:** High

Second Opinion **8.5**

The core of Fight for NY's brand of face-punching action is well suited to portable gaming, so it's no surprise that this port turned out so well. While the PSP version sticks closely to the console version with few concessions, there are even a few added features that made it feel fresh for me, even though I played the hell out of it on the Xbox. The crew aspect was fun, and I liked the new moves, but it would have been nice to get some more new tunes, clothes, and bling. 'Cause, you know, sometimes between rounds of kicking ass, you like to make yourself feel pretty. —**JEREMY**

HANDHELD QUICKIES

PSP

Blade Dancer

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ROLE-PLAYING GAME (UP TO 4-PLAYER VIA AD-HOC)
> **PUBLISHER** NIS AMERICA
> **DEVELOPER** SCE WWS JAPAN STUDIO
> **RELEASE** JULY 18 > **ESRB** E10+



BOTTOM LINE **5.5**

It's appropriate that one of the frequent loading screens that fill the mind numbing hours of Blade Dancer has your cute monkey-like sidekick creature blissfully snoring away in the corner. The neverending flow of mediocrity in this Japanese-style RPG might have been bearable with the right pacing. Unluckily for those who might inadvertently fall into the trap of playing it, forward progression could best be compared to the growth of mold on a cold french fry. At its best, Blade Dancer offers familiarity, along with a half-hearted attempt at multiplayer. If that's enough for you, then it's time to raise your standards. —**MILLER**

PSP

Race Driver 2006

> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER RACING (UP TO 12-PLAYER VIA AD-HOC)
> **PUBLISHER** CODEMASTERS
> **DEVELOPER** CODEMASTERS
> **RELEASE** JUNE 6 > **ESRB** T



BOTTOM LINE **8.5**

Although this game is basically a port of the TOCA Race Driver 2 title from 2004, and is hampered by that console title's linear career path, there's no denying that this game hits the sweet spot of both quality and quantity. Not only is the number of race types amazing, but the feel is spot on, showing off Codemasters' skill at giving you sim-racing without the frustration. Added bonuses are a PSP-only Trans World Cup mode that gives you bite-sized racing challenges and 12-player Ad-Hoc play (including 4-player races with a single UMD). This game may indeed serve all your racing needs. —**KATO**

PSP

Juiced Eliminator

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER RACING (UP TO 6-PLAYER VIA AD-HOC)
> **PUBLISHER** THQ
> **DEVELOPER** JUICE GAMES
> **RELEASE** JUNE 30 > **ESRB** T



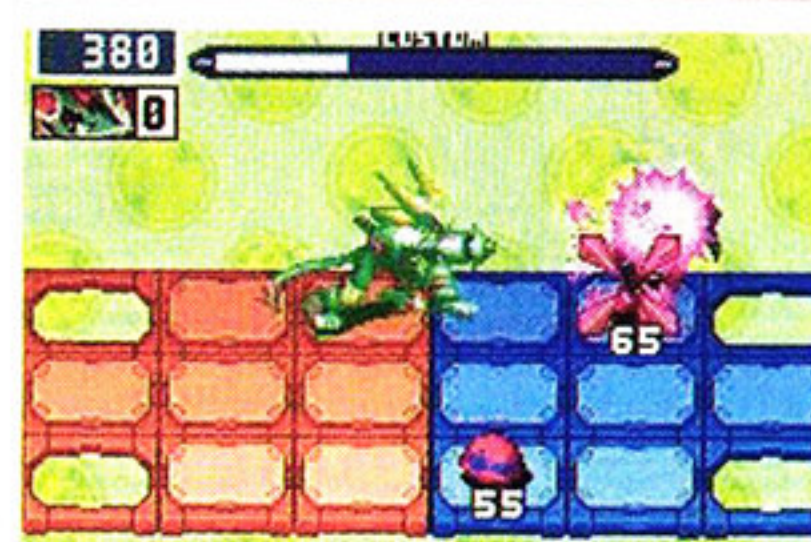
BOTTOM LINE **7.75**

Like the console version before it, this Juiced offers up some intriguing peripheral features — such as online racing teams, pink slip racing, or getting cell phone challenges from rivals — but the action on the streets isn't as hot as I would like. Although the career progression is easier than in the console Juiced, you're still going to run into repetitive tracks and long stretches before your car jumps to its next level. The result is a game that is segmented well for easy pick-up-and-play sessions, but which is not necessarily more fun because of it. —**KATO**

GAME BOY ADVANCE

Mega Man Battle Network 6: Cybeast Gregar/Cybeast Falzar

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ROLE-PLAYING GAME
> **PUBLISHER** CAPCOM
> **DEVELOPER** CAPCOM
> **RELEASE** JUNE 13 > **ESRB** E



BOTTOM LINE **6.5**

Surprise! Capcom is blowing out the Battle Network series with innovative concepts and a brand-new battle system! Oh, nevermind. Who am I kidding? Battle Network 6 is just like BN 5, BN 4, BN 3...you get the idea. This isn't a terrible thing — the core battle and RPG systems of the game are as fun as ever — but this series has reached a Dynasty Warriors-esque level of stagnation. Fans will no doubt enjoy it, but if you never got into the series there's no reason to start now. —**ADAM**

GAME BOY ADVANCE

Super Robot Taisen: Original Generation

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER STRATEGY
> **PUBLISHER** ATLUS
> **DEVELOPER** BANPRESTO
> **RELEASE** JULY 25 > **ESRB** T



BOTTOM LINE **7.5**

The grid-based strategy gameplay of this badly titled game is actually totally solid, enriched by the ability to endlessly upgrade your mechs and other vehicles, as well as the pilots that sit in the cockpits. Anime fans will no doubt recognize nearly constant nods to other mech properties throughout the two huge character stories on this one cartridge, totalling over 70 missions when all is said and done. The game may actually be a little text heavy at times, and the early hours are a tad simplistic, but overall this was a pleasant surprise. —**MILLER**



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TOUCH SCREEN



WI-FI



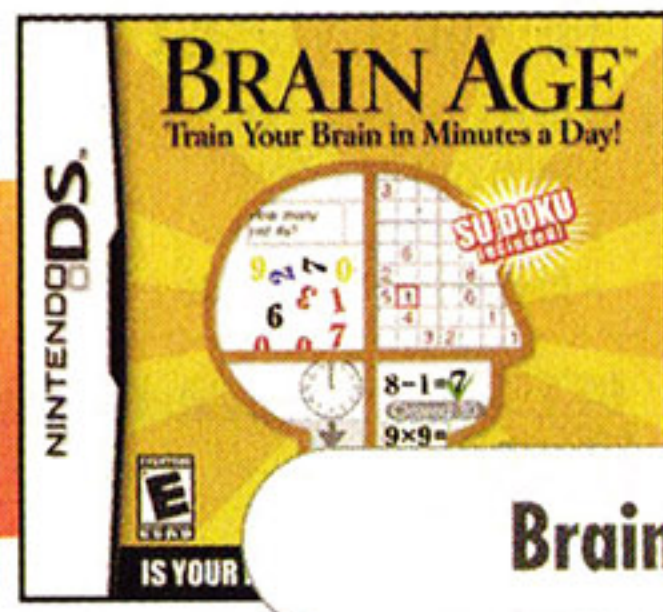
DUAL SCREEN



MICROPHONE



Tetris DS



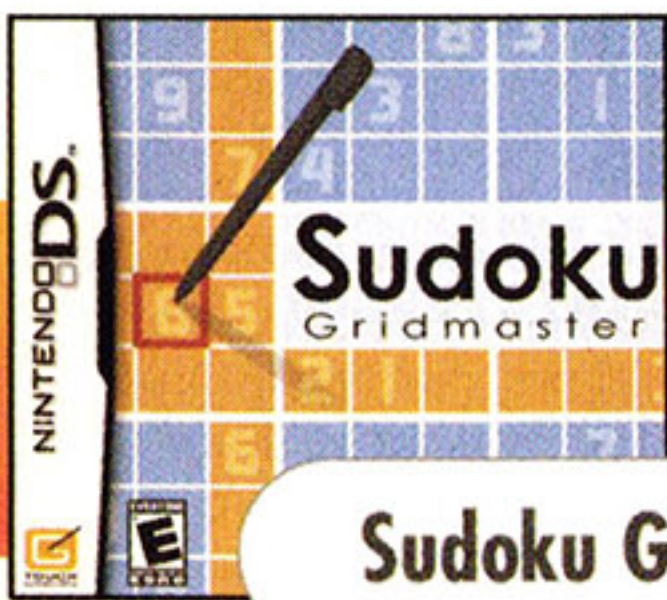
Brain Age



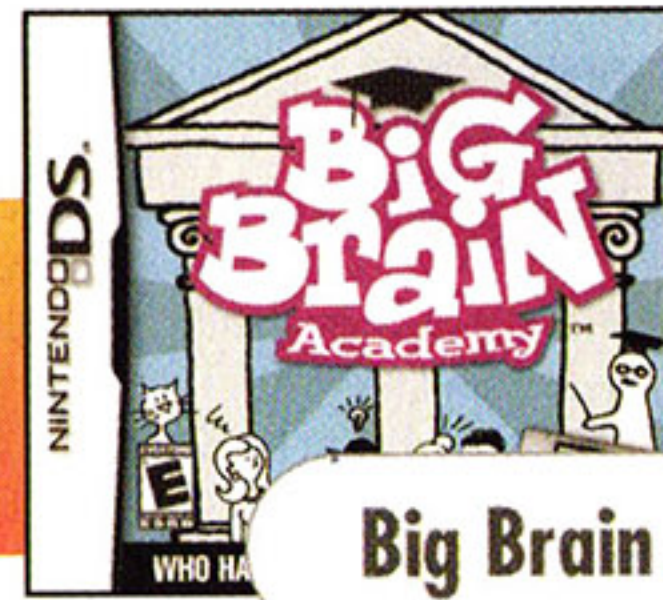
New Super Mario Bros.



Metroid Prime Hunters



Sudoku Gridmaster



Big Brain Academy



X-Men: The Official Game



DS Lite Play Kit

GameStop™

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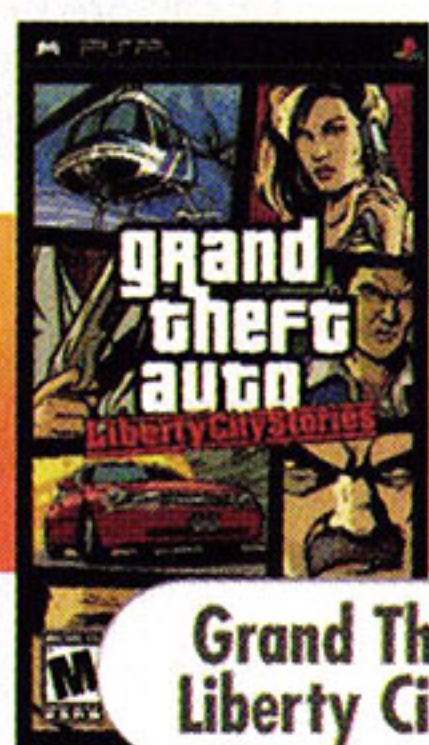


POWER UP & GO

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Daxter



Grand Theft Auto: Liberty City Stories



MLB 06



Field Commander



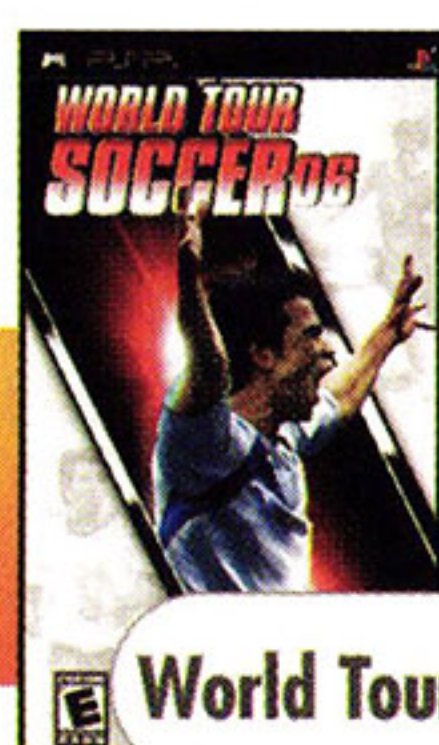
Pursuit Force



Lemmings



Monster Hunter Freedom



World Tour Soccer 06



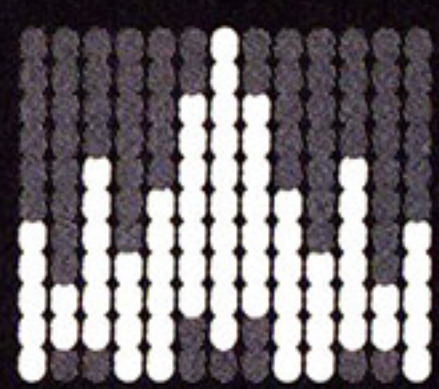
Aluminum Case



PSP Leather Case

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CHARTS

An In-Depth Listing Of The Best Selling Games

TOP 20

Listings Based Upon NPD Data For April 2006 Based On Units Sold

1 NEW SUPER MARIO BROS. (DS)



In the top spot again is another EA sports title...wait, what? MARIO? How you doing, man? Haven't seen you around here in a while! Welcome back! How was your trip? What did you do? Ah, soccer, golf, kart racing - gotcha. Sounds fun. Did you bring us back anything? You did! What is it? Oh, a Wall Drug keychain. Thanks a lot, cheapskate.

2 KINGDOM HEARTS II (PS2)



Without a doubt, the best characters in the Kingdom Hearts games are Hannibal, B.A. Baracus, Murdock, and Faceman. Or maybe they were in The A-Team. We always get those confused. They had such a sweet van! Oh, this game is cool too, even those it doesn't involve vets on the run for a crime that they didn't commit. Fool!

3 BRAIN AGE: TRAIN YOUR BRAIN IN MINUTES A DAY (DS)



Pop Quiz. Do you think *A Knight's Tale* is a good movie? Have you ever gone to a "secrets of business success" seminar? Do you think of Funyuns as a vegetable? Do you consider the Pussycat Dolls to be musicians? If you answered yes to any of these questions, rush out and buy this game.

4 GOD OF WAR (PS2)



God of War has gone from a respectable seller to an outright smash since its price drop to 20 bucks, so now's the time for Sony to start milkin' it! Slap Kratos' friendly face on any old product, and it will sell. Here's an example: Kratos' brand marshmallows, God of S'mores. Awww yeah.

5 THE ELDER SCROLLS IV: OBLIVION (360)

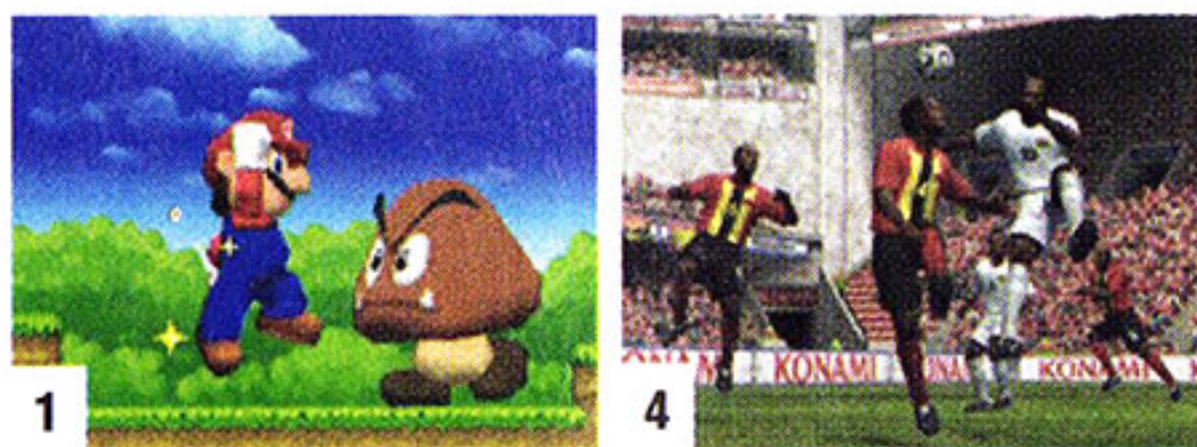


Okay, it's official. Oblivion has sold so many copies that it's not just D&D nerds buying it. People with lives must be getting it, too. Or at least, they used to have lives, but now they're part of the dreaded world of *fantasy role-playing*. Complimentary George R. R. Martin books will be sent to each one. Welcome to the fold, brothers and sisters.

Rank	Title	L. Mo.	System	Score	Release	Price
1	New Super Mario Bros.	N/A	DS	9.25	05-06	\$34
2	Kingdom Hearts II	1	PS2	9	05-06	\$49
3	Brain Age: Train Your Brain In Minutes A Day	14	DS	8.25	04-06	\$20
4	God Of War	5	PS2	10	03-05	\$20
5	The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion	3	360	9.5	03-06	\$60
6	Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter	2	360	9.5	03-06	\$60
7	MLB '06: The Show	6	PS2	7.5	03-06	\$40
8	Guitar Hero	N/A	PS2	9	12-05	\$70
9	Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas	15	PS2	10	10-04	\$20
10	Kingdom Hearts	17	PS2	9.5	09-02	\$20
11	X-Men: The Official Game	N/A	PS2	4	05-06	\$40
12	Over The Hedge	N/A	PS2	N/A	05-06	\$40
13	Fight Night Round 3	19	360	9	02-06	\$60
14	2006 FIFA World Cup	N/A	PS2	8.5	04-06	\$30
15	The Godfather: The Game	4	PS2	7.5	03-06	\$40
16	Gran Turismo 4	N/A	PS2	9.25	02-05	\$20
17	Battlefield 2: Modern Combat	10	360	7.75	04-06	\$59
18	Midnight Club 3: DUB Edition Remix	N/A	PS2	9	03-06	\$20
19	Major League Baseball 2K6	7	PS2	8.5	04-06	\$39
20	Major League Baseball 2K6	8	360	7	04-06	\$60

TOP 10 JAPAN

Rank	Title	System
1	New Super Mario Bros.	DS
2	Hissou Pachislot Kouryoku Series Vol. 5	PS2
3	DS Training for Adults: Work Your Brain 2	DS
4	Winning Eleven 10	PS2
5	DS Training for Adults: Work Your Brain	DS
6	Animal Crossing: Wild World	DS
7	Eigo Tsuke	DS
8	Tetris DS	DS
9	Mario Kart DS	DS
10	Pokémon Ranger: Diamond-Pearl	DS



TOP 10 GI

Rank	Title	L. Mo.	System
1	Prey	N/A	Multi
2	Half-Life 2: Episode 1	N/A	PC
3	New Super Mario Bros.	1	DS
4	Grand Theft Auto: Liberty City Stories	N/A	PS2
5	Titan Quest	N/A	PC
6	Valkyrie Profile: Lenneth	N/A	PSP
7	Rise of Nations: Rise of Legends	3	PC
8	The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion	2	360
9	Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter	5	360
10	Table Tennis	8	360



The Staff's Favorite Picks

TOP 10 PC

Rank	Title	L. Mo.	Price
1	Guild Wars: Factions	1	\$50
2	The Sims 2: Family Fun Stuff	2	\$19
3	World of Warcraft	4	\$45
4	The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion	3	\$49
5	The Sims 2: Open for Business	6	\$35
6	The Sims 2	7	\$34
7	Rise of Nations: Rise of Legends	N/A	\$47
8	Star Wars: Empire at War	8	\$29
9	Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter	N/A	\$29
10	Battlefield 2	10	\$45



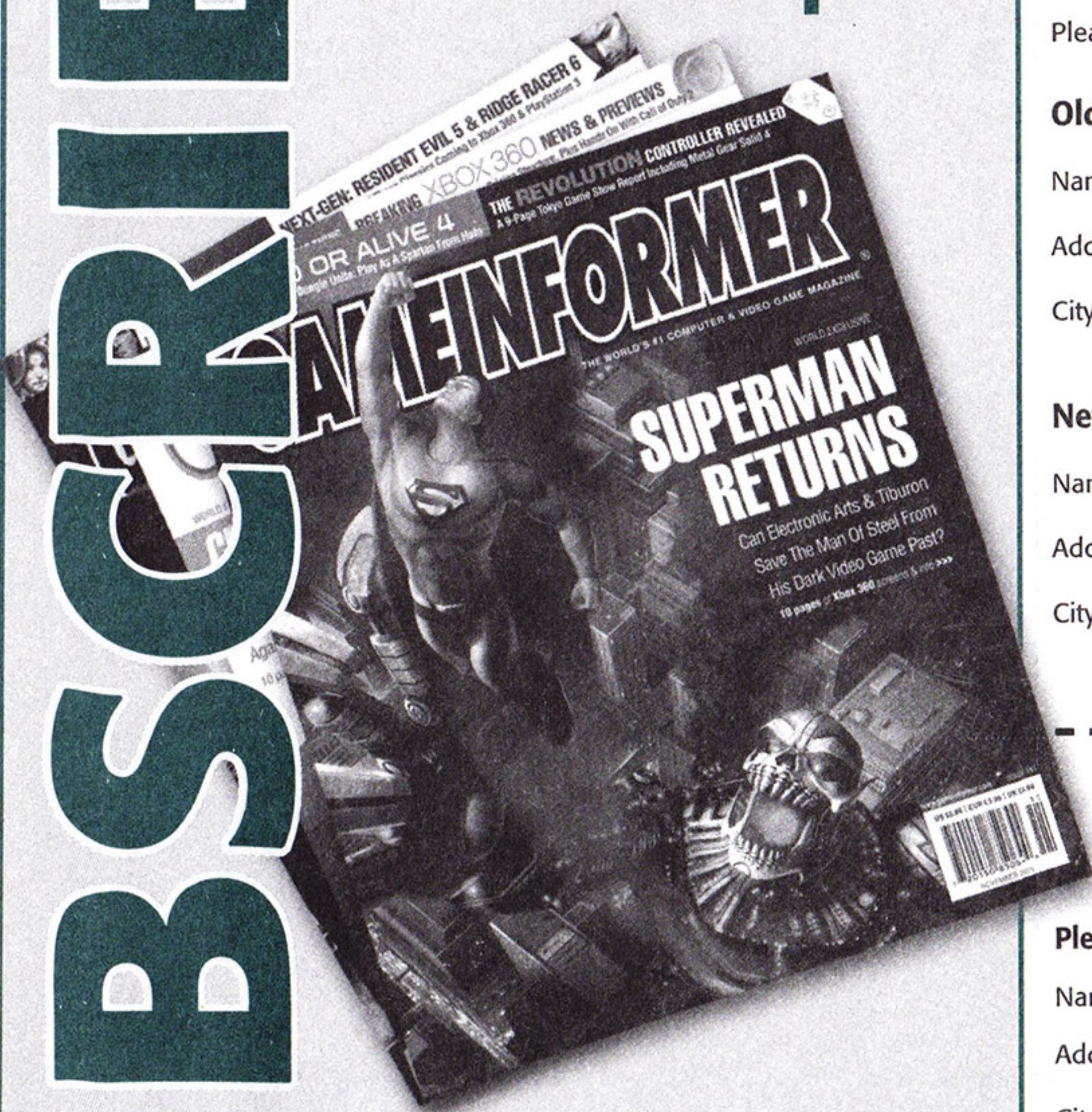
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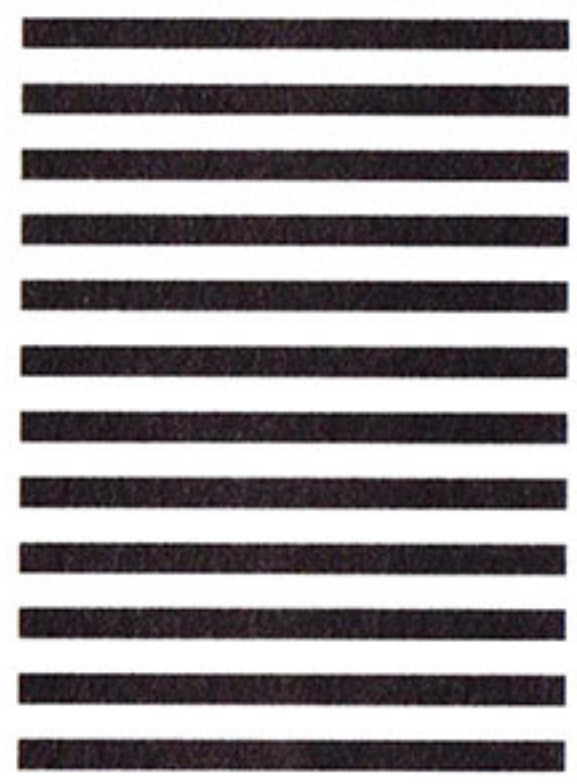
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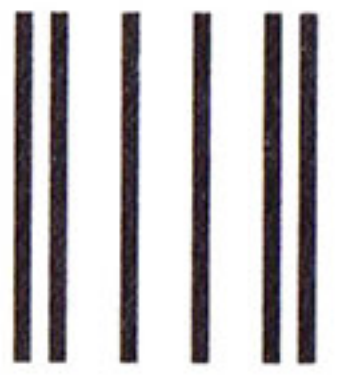
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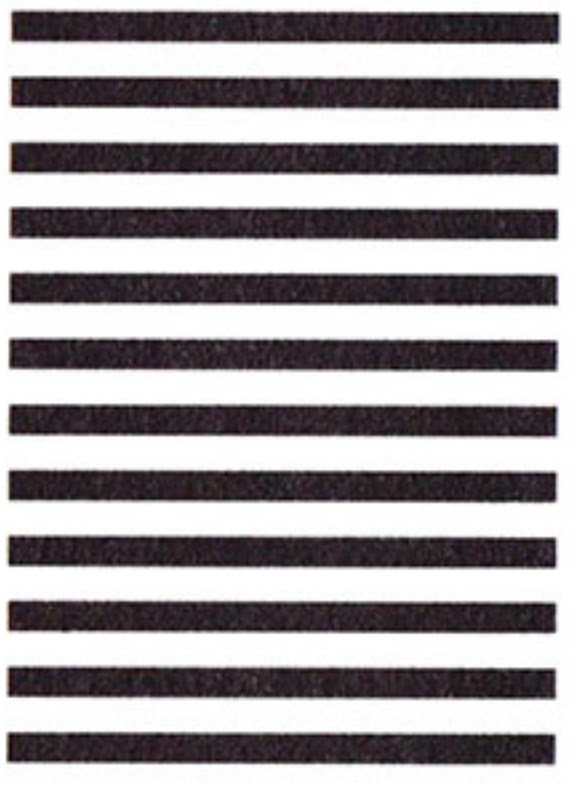
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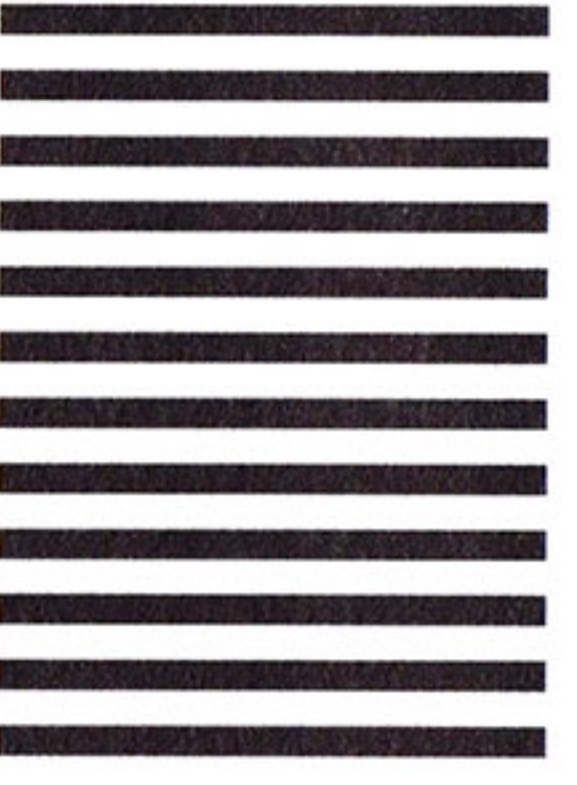
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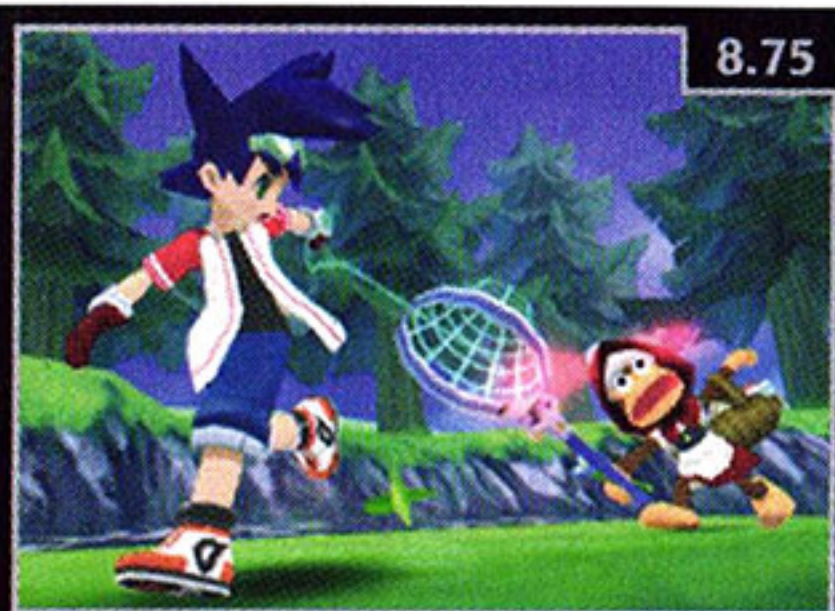
REVIEWS ARCHIVE

The Really Ugly Page Where You Can See Lots Of Old Review Scores

XBOX 360

2006 FIFA World Cup	8.5	Jun-06
Amped 3	8.5	Dec-05
Battlefield 2: Modern Combat	7.75	Jun-06
Blazing Angels: Squadrons of WWII	7.5	May-06
Burnout Revenge	9.5	Apr-06
Call of Duty 2	9.75	Dec-05
Condemned: Criminal Origins	8.75	Dec-05
Da Vinci Code, The	6	Jul-06
Dead or Alive 4	9	Mar-06
Dynasty Warriors 5: Empires	6	May-06
Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion, The	9.5	May-06
Far Cry Instincts: Predator	8.75	Jun-06
FIFA 06	8.25	Dec-05
Fight Night Round 3	9	Mar-06
Final Fantasy XI	7.25	Jun-06
Full Auto	7.5	Mar-06
Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter	9.5	Apr-06
Gun	8.75	Dec-05
Hitman: Blood Money	7.75	Jul-06
Kameo: Elements of Power	7.5	Jan-06
Madden NFL 06	7.75	Jan-06
Major League Baseball 2K6	7	Jun-06
Moto GP '06	8.75	Jul-06
NBA 2K6	8.5	Jan-06
NBA Live 06	6.75	Dec-05
Need for Speed: Most Wanted	9	Jan-06
NHL 2K6	8.5	Jan-06
Outfit, The	7.75	Apr-06
Perfect Dark Zero	7	Jan-06
Peter Jackson's King Kong	8.5	Jan-06
Project Gotham Racing 3	8.5	Jan-06
Quake 4	7.75	Jan-06
Ridge Racer 6	7.5	Jan-06
Rumble Roses XX	5.75	May-06
Table Tennis	8	Jul-06
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 06	8.5	Jan-06
Tomb Raider: Legend	8.75	May-06
Tony Hawk's American Wasteland	8.25	Dec-05
Top Spin 2	8.5	May-06
X-Men: The Official Game	4	Jul-06

PLAYSTATION 2



Ape Escape 3 - PS2 - Feb-06

24: The Game	7.5	Apr-06
25 to Life	5.75	Mar-06
2006 FIFA World Cup	8.5	Jun-06
50 Cent: Bulletproof	6	Feb-06
Ace Combat Zero: The Belkan War	8.5	May-06
Aeon Flux	7.25	Jan-06
America's Army: Rise of a Soldier	6.5	Feb-06
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Blitz: The League	7.75	Nov-05
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Capcom Classic Collection	8.5	Nov-05
Castlevania: Curse of Darkness	7.5	Nov-05
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Chronicles of Namia: The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe, The	6.5	Dec-05
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X-Men Legends II: Rise of Apocalypse	9	Nov-05
X-Men: The Official Game	4	Jul-06

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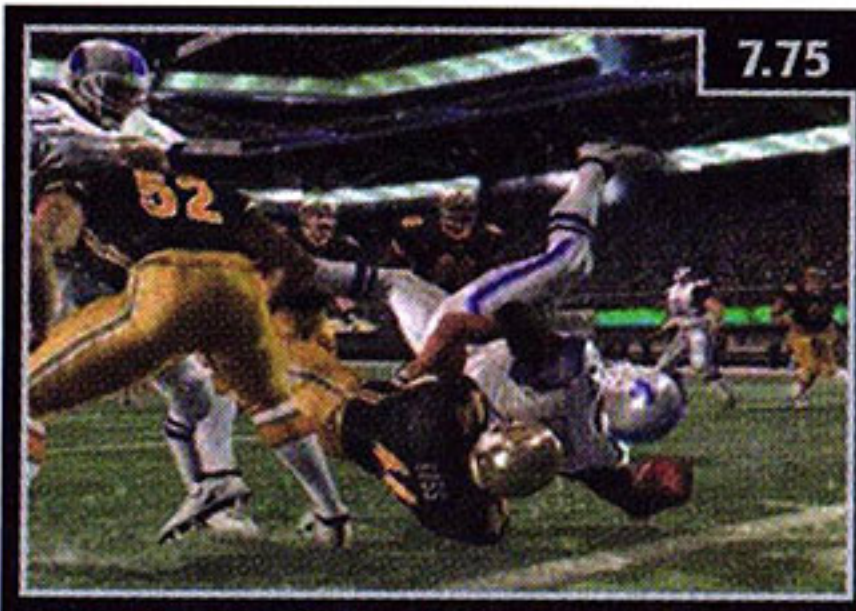


Odama - GC - May-06

2006 FIFA World Cup	8.5	Jun-06
Call of Duty 2: Big Red One	7.25	Jan-06
Chibi-Robo	5	Feb-06
Chicken Little	7	Nov-05
Chronicles of Namia: The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe, The	6.5	Dec-05
Dance Dance Revolution Mario Mix	5.25	Jan-06
FIFA Street 2	6	Apr-06
Fire Emblem: Path of Radiance	9	Nov-05
From Russia With Love	7.75	Dec-05
Gun	8.75	Dec-05
Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire	6.5	Dec-05
Karaoke Revolution Party	8.5	Dec-05

Mario Party 7	5	Dec-05
Mega Man X Collection	8	Feb-06
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Tiger Woods PGA Tour 06	8.25	Nov-05
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True Crime: New York City	8.75	Jan-06
Ultimate Spider-Man	8	Nov-05
Viewtiful Joe: Red Hot Rumble	7	Dec-05
Wallace & Gromit: Curse of the Were-Rabbit	7	Nov-05
X-Men Legends II: Rise of Apocalypse	9	Nov-05
X-Men: The Official Game	4	Jul-06

XBOX



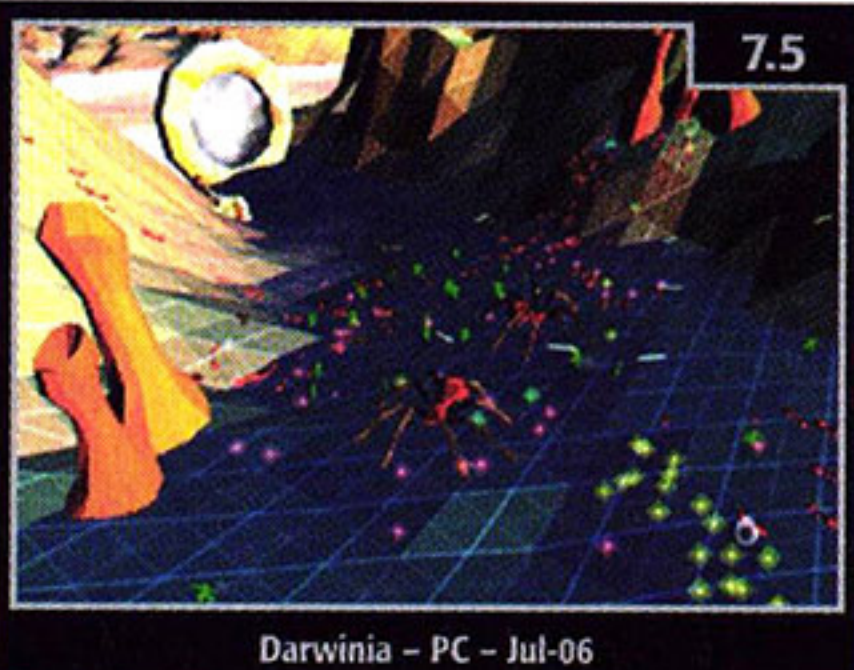
Blitz: The League - Xbox - Nov-05

25 to Life	5.75	Mar-06
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Brothers in Arms: Earned in Blood	8	Nov-05
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Castlevania: Curse of Darkness	7.5	Nov-05
Chicken Little	7	Nov-05
Chronicles of Namia: The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe, The	6.5	Dec-05
Cold War	6	Dec-05
College Hoops 2K6	8	Jan-06
Commandos: Strike Force	5.5	Jun-06
Conflict: Global Terror	6.75	Nov-05
Da Vinci Code, The	6	Jul-06
Doom 3: Resurrection of Evil	8.5	Jan-06
Dreamfall: The Longest Journey	8	Jun-06
Driver: Parallel Lines	6.75	May-06
Fable: The Lost Chapters	8.75	Jan-06
Far Cry Instincts	8.75	Nov-05
FIFA Street 2	6	Apr-06
Fight Night Round 3	9	Mar-06
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Serious Sam II	7.75	Nov-05
Shadow the Hedgehog	4	Jan-06
Shattered Union	4	Jan-06
Sims 2, The	7.75	Nov-05
Sniper Elite	7.5	Nov-05
Sonic Riders	5	Apr-06

SSX On Tour	8	Nov-05
Star Wars: Battlefront II	8.5	Dec-05
Stubb's the Zombie in "Rebel Without A Pulse"	8	Dec-05
Taito Legends	8.5	Jan-06
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 06	8.25	Nov-05
Tomb Raider: Legend	8.75	May-06
Tony Hawk's American Wasteland	8.25	Dec-05
Torino 2006	4.25	Apr-06
Total Overdose	6.25	Jan-06
True Crime: New York City	8.75	Jan-06
Ultimate Spider-Man	8	Nov-05
Urban Chaos: Riot Response	7.75	Jul-06
Wallace & Gromit: Curse of the Were-Rabbit	7	Nov-05
WarPath	7.25	May-06
Warriors, The	8.25	Nov-05
Winback 2: Project Poseidon	4	Jun-06
Winning Eleven 9	8.5	Feb-06
Without Warning	6.5	Nov-05
X-Men Legends II: Rise of Apocalypse	9	Nov-05
X-Men: The Official Game	4	Jul-06

PC

Age of Empires III	8.25	Dec-05
AutoAssault	7	Jun-06
Battlefield 2: Special Forces	9	Feb-06
Black & White 2	8.5	Nov-05
Call of Duty 2	9.75	Dec-05
City of Villains	8.75	Jan-06
Cold War	6	Dec-05
Commandos: Strike Force	5.5	Jun-06
Darwinia	7.5	Jul-06
Dreamfall: The Longest Journey	8	Jun-06
Dungeons & Dragons: Dragonshard	8	Nov-05
Dungeons & Dragons: Online: Stormreach	8	May-06
Earth 2160	7	Feb-06
Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion, The	9.5	May-06
F.E.A.R.	9	Nov-05
Full Spectrum Warrior: Ten Hammers	7.25	Apr-06
Galactic Civilizations II: Dread Lords	8	Apr-06
Heroes of Might & Magic V	8.25	Jul-06
Hitman: Blood Money	7.75	Jun-06
Lord of the Rings: The Battle for Middle-earth II, The	8.5	Apr-06
Marc Ecko's Getting Up: Contents Under Pressure	7.25	Apr-06
Movies, The	8.75	Dec-05
Myst V: End of Ages	7.75	Oct-05
Paradise	5.25	Jul-06
Quake IV	8.75	Nov-05

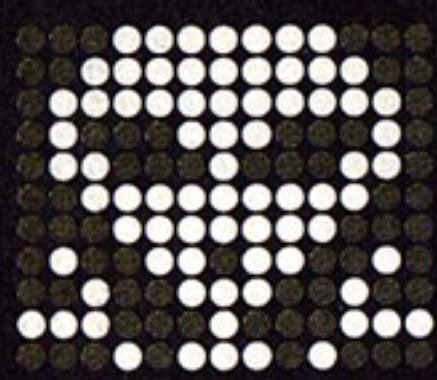


Darwinia - PC - Jul-06

Rise of Nations: Rise of Legends	9.5	Jul-06
Serious Sam II	7.75	Nov-05
Shattered Union	4	Jan-06
Sid Meier's Civilization IV	9.5	Jan-06
Sims 2: Nightlife, The	7	Oct-05
Sims 2: Open for Business, The	7	Apr-06
SIN Episodes: Emergence	7.75	Jul-06
Star Wars: Empire at War	8.25	Mar-06
Taito Legends	8.5	Jan-06
Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War - Winter Assault	8	Oct-05
WarPath	7.25	May-06

NINTENDO DS

Age of Empires: The Age of Kings	8	Mar-06
Animal Crossing: Wild World	8.75	Dec-05
Battles of Prince of Persia	8.5	Feb-06
Brain Age	8.25	Jun-06
Castlevania: Dawn of Sorrow	9.25	Nov-05
Dig Dug: Digging Strike	6.75	Dec-05
Electroplankton	7	Feb-06
Guilty Gear: Dust Strikers	6	May-06
Lost in Blue	7	Oct-05
Lost Magic	6	Jun-06
Lunar: Dragon Song	4.75	Nov-05
Madden NFL 06	5	Nov-05
Mario & Luigi: Partners in Time	8.25	Dec-05
Mario Kart DS	8.5	Dec-05
Mega Man Battle Network 5: Double Team	7.75	Nov-05
Metroid Prime: Hunters	8.5	May-06
Metroid Prime Pinball	8	Nov-05
New Super Mario Bros.	9.25	Jul-06
Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney	7.75	Oct-05
Pokémon Trozei	8.25	Mar-06
Resident Evil: Deadly Silence	7.75	Mar-06
Rub Rabbits!, The	7.5	Apr-06
Sims 2, The	6.75	Feb-06
Snowboard Kids DS	6	Jan-06
Sonic Rush		



Titan Quest

Building A Hero



By lead gameplay designer Arthur Bruno

DON'T HOLD ON TO GOLD

It seems many people have a natural tendency to hoard gold, saving up in hopes of buying the ultimate item. However, the best items come at a premium and while you're saving up for them, much of your equipment may start to become underpowered. Unless you're playing at the highest levels, it is unlikely you're going to hang on to any item you buy for more than five to 10 levels. It is also generally more advantageous to have five average quality items than one above-average and four below-average quality items.

USE YOUR RELICS

Like gold, it is easy to get caught up saving relics, always feeling like your best relic is too good to waste on your current equipment or the equipment is too good to put anything less than the ultimate relic on it. The important thing to remember is that the relics you collect in Normal difficulty will be inferior to the relics you'll see in Epic, which in turn are weaker than those found in Legendary. Relics are there to help your character power through the game, so use your relics but also use your judgment. If you have an item you know you'll be replacing soon, slap one of your weaker relics on it. If you

find a great item, don't be afraid to put a good relic on it; you may end up replacing it again quickly, but it's better to at least get some use out of your relics than to save them until they become obsolete.

RAISING YOUR SKILL MASTERY

Players that are new to Titan Quest often assume that the fastest route to achieving real ultimate power is to invest every skill point in maxing out their mastery so they can unlock the highest level skills as soon as possible. There are a few specialized builds where this can work, but it is generally not a good idea. Most of the high-level skills are designed to complement your character once you've powered up the early skills and mid-level modifiers. They often have use restrictions like long recharge time or high energy cost. Most high-level skills also fall into these categories: devastating attacks like Eruption with high energy costs and recharge times that make them impractical as a primary attack, buffs or pets like the Sylvan Nymph that won't really reach their true potential until you've invested in lower-level synergistic



skills like Heart of Oak, or powerful modifiers such as Torrent that aren't worth unlocking until you've powered up their base skill. The other reason this approach does not usually pay off is that you're forced to play through many levels without effective skills. This means progress is going to be slower and unnecessarily difficult. This would only pay off if it allowed you to avoid spending points in early skills you weren't going to use later on, but that probably won't be the case. Your low-level skills are the foundation that much of your power as a high-level character is going to be built upon. The best approach, at least until you really know what you're doing, is to balance your skill points between incrementing early skills and raising your mastery level to unlock the next tier of skills and modifiers.

WHEN TO GET SKILL MODIFIERS

With some skills it is more advantageous to get the modifier after a certain point rather than continuing to level the base skill. I'll approach this topic by talking about damage-dealing skills, but it can be applied to other types as well. Probably the most important thing to consider in this regard is damage vs. energy cost. If you're killing most enemies in one shot, then adding additional points may just be the

increasing energy cost for damage you don't really need yet. Once you've established some respectable damage on the base skill, it may be time to start leveling your mastery so you can unlock the skill's modifiers. Some skills have modifiers that increase the damage of the base skill by a percentage for little or no additional energy cost. Other modifiers add effects to their base skills such as causing them to fire additional projectiles, but these usually come with a noticeable energy cost. So, rather than focusing on maxing out base skills, it is usually advantageous to go for the modifiers after a certain point. Conversely, it is usually not advantageous to neglect the base skill and max out modifiers since a percent increase of a low number won't amount to much, and firing five projectiles that do very little damage for a greatly increased energy cost isn't a very good pay-off either.

CREATING A BALANCED CHARACTER

One thing to keep in mind while choosing your second mastery is how it will affect the balance of your character at high levels. Players often like to customize their characters in a way that will maximize some aspect of gameplay, such as damage-dealing, defense, or healing/support. This can be fun and satisfying, but it does come with the downside that you're making a character with a potentially extreme balance such as a spell-caster that is very fragile but dishes out incredible damage or a warrior that is nearly invincible but can't kill enemies very quickly. These types of characters can be very successful in multiplayer since they excel at one role and can group with other characters that complement them. However, they can also become frustrating to play, especially in single-player where you don't have an ally to round you out. You can get away with a lot in Normal difficulty, but if you plan on progressing through Epic and Legendary, be prepared to face the challenges presented by your character's shortcomings. So, consider in the early stages of character development what type of gameplay you're creating for yourself. Specialized characters can be a lot of fun to play because of the interesting contrast between their areas of extreme effectiveness and the challenges presented by their weaknesses. However, a well-balanced character that is invested with both offensive and defensive capabilities will often prove the most effective overall.



Mod World

UNREAL TOURNAMENT 2004
CARBALL 2.6
<http://www.carball.net>



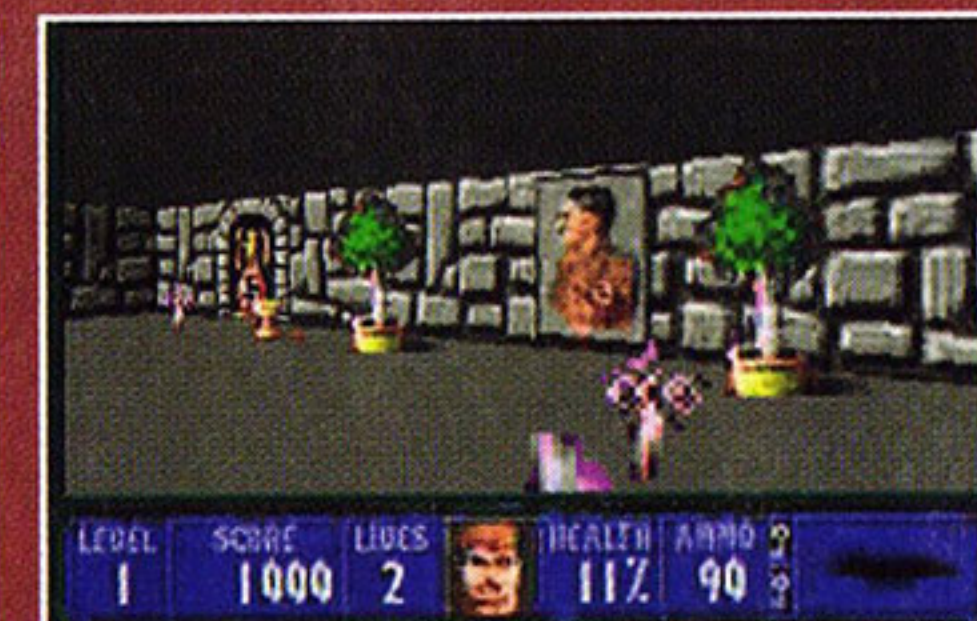
The newest and most polished version of CarBall has recently been released, and it's definitely worth a look. The mod is more or less combat polo with cars; each team is trying to use their rides to push the ball into the opposing goal. A selection of cool special tricks makes the actual gameplay much more varied than you'd think, since many of them



can be combined. Mastering the use of Spin Jumps, Scoop Shots, Jump Boosts, and more will take some time, and knowing how and when to use them to best facilitate victory is even more complex. Even better, the mod has an active community and tournament scene, so getting into some games should be relatively easy. CarBall also has a dedicated development team that continually works on fixing bugs and adding functionality, and even plans on moving the mod over to the UT 2007 engine when that becomes available.

WOLFENSTEIN 3D
ENCRAPMENT

<http://mods.moddb.com/3625/encrapment/>



This is so bizarre that you have to check it out. The goal of this mod says it all: make Wolfenstein 3D look worse. Everything in the game, from the system fonts to the wall textures, has been "encrapped." Did you ever wonder what a 14-year-old game would look like after being run through the wringer of some really horrific .jpg compression routines? Now you can see it in all of its muddled glory!



UNLIMITED ENABLED

Live Arcade Spotlight

Small Arms

Now this should be fun. Small Arms is a totally original new game being targeted for an August release on Marketplace. Up to four players can hop into a level together and brawl to their heart's content in a frantic, non-stop fragfest. What distinguishes the game from a title like Super Smash



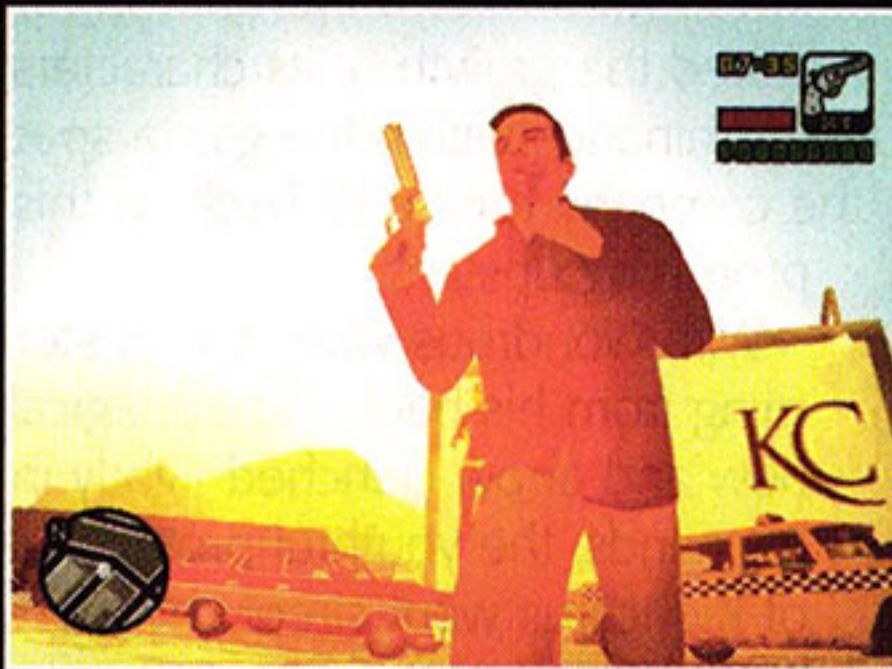
Bros. is its focus on arcade-style shooting – players can aim their weapons in a full 360 degrees as they jump from platform to platform. While characters like cyborg tabby cats and mutant chimney sweeps have us pretty excited, we're going to put our bets on the assassin truffle pig to win the day. In addition to brawling across Xbox Live, there's also a story mode that pits gamers against AI-driven foes and mammoth boss battles. Plans are also already underway to have additional characters and levels that players can download later to expand the game as the months pass. Gastronom Studios makes the game, a gigantic development house that has blossomed into a full four employees. Get out there and support your small developers!



Code of the Month



Grand Theft Auto: Liberty City Stories



It's Grand Theft Auto! That's right, folks. With the release of yet another GTA game, you can once again look forward to completely ignoring the missions and storyline for an afternoon as you try out the wealth of ridiculous cheat codes that fill the game. All of the following codes should be entered during gameplay, without pausing.

Aggressive Drivers – □ (x2), R1, × (x2), L1, ○ (x2)

Bobble Head World – Down, Down, Down, ○ (x2), ×, L1, R1

Car Hop – L1, Up, Left, R1, △, ○, Down, ×

Destroy All Cars – L1 (x2), Left, L1 (x2), Right, ×, □

Faster Gameplay – R1 (x2), L1, R1 (x2), L1, Down, ×

Get \$250,000 – L1, R1, △, L1, R1, ○, L1, R1

Increase Wanted Level – L1, R1, □, L1,

R1, △, L1, R1

Pedestrians Attack You – L1 (x2), R1, L1 (x2), R1, Up, △

Pedestrian Riot – L1 (x2), R1, L1 (x2), R1, Left, □

Restore Armor – L1, R1, ○, L1, R1, ×, L1, R1

Restore Health – L1, R1, ×, L1, R1, □, L1, R1

Slower Gameplay – R1, △, ×, R1, □, ○, Left, Right

Spawn Rhino – L1 (x2), Left, L1 (x2), Right, △, ○

Wanted Level Never Appears – L1 (x2), Triangle, R1 (x2), ×, □, ○

Weapon Set 1 – Up, □ (x2), Down, Left, □ (x2), Right

Weapon Set 2 – Up, ○ (x2), Down, Left, ○ (x2), Right

Weapon Set 3 – Up, × (x2), Down, Left, × (x2), Right

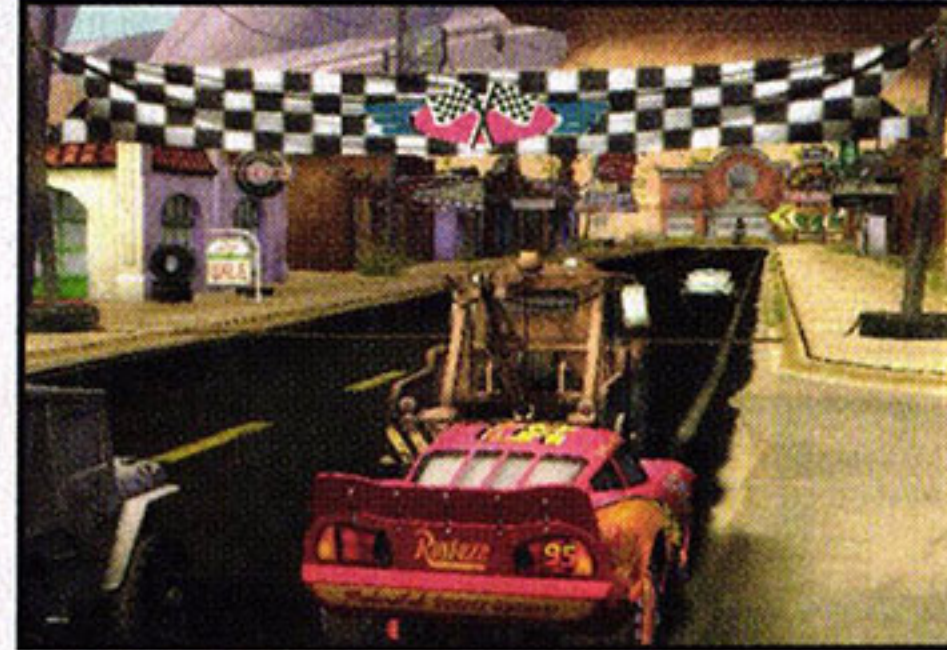
Patrick Flanagan
Boston, MA

Attention All Cheaters!

Cheat codes, by their very nature, are in many cases buggier than Virginia in August. So, unless you don't mind re-doing those 70 hours you put into the latest game, do yourself a favor and back up your save before using any codes.

On a lighter note, you can send your codes to secretaccess@gameinformer.com for a chance to be featured here and win a very special prize!

MULTI-SYSTEM



Cars

> PLAYSTATION 2, XBOX, GAMECUBE

Go to the Options menu, then select the Cheat Codes page to input the following codes

All Cars – YAYCARS

All Character Skins – R4MONE

Fast Start – IMSPEED

Infinite Boost – VROOOOM

Unlocks All Tracks and Mini Games – MATTL66

Unlocks Art – CONC3PT

Unlocks Movie Clips – WATCHIT



Urban Chaos: Riot Response

> PLAYSTATION 2, XBOX

On PS2, at the main menu, press Up (x2), Down (x2), ○, Down, Up, ○. On Xbox, at the main menu press Up (x2), Down (x2), Y, Down, Up, Y. In both cases, this will take you to the cheat entry screen. From here, make sure to input the codes with no spaces and in upper case letters, as shown.

Bullets Set Fire To Enemies – BURNINGBULLET

Disco Mode – DANCINGFEET

Headless Characters – KEEPYOURHEAD

Squeaky Voices – WHATWASTHAT

Terror Mode – BURNERSREVENGE

Unlock All Levels and Emergencies – KEYTOTHECITY

Unlock Assault Rifle With Infinite Shells – ULTIMATEPOWER

Unlock Enhanced Stun Gun – FRYINGTIME

Unlock Mini-Gun – MINIFUN

Unlock Pistol Mk. 4 – ZEROTOLERANCE

Unlock Thermal Mk. 2 – ISEYOU

"GI Droid"

(location unknown – last seen standing uncomfortably close to you in the elevator)

ONE OF THE TOP FIVE GAME-DEGREE PROGRAMS

– Electronic Gaming Monthly



Student Artwork
Francisco Cruz

FULL SAIL

Real World Education

School of
Game Development

School of
Computer Animation

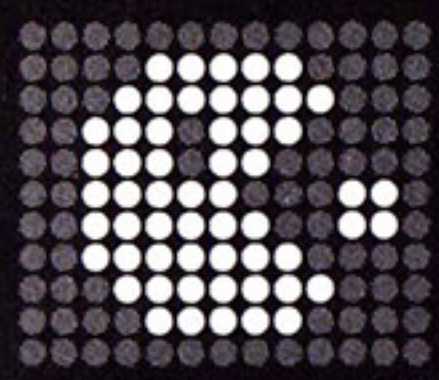
800.226.7625

fullsail.com

GET STARTED

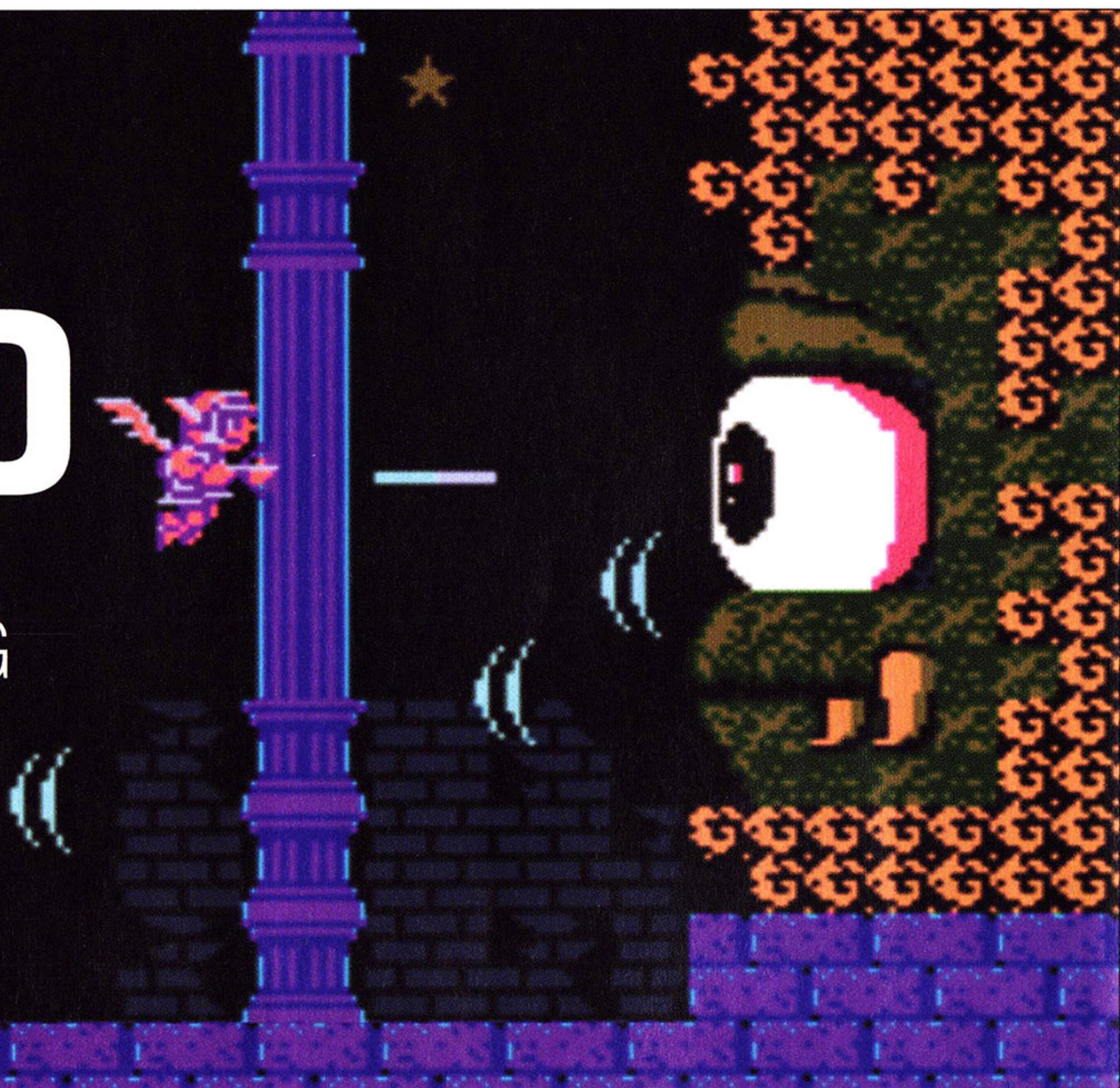
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Winter Park, FL 32792

Financial aid available to those who qualify
Career development assistance
Accredited College, ACCSCT



WINGS OF GOLD

CELEBRATING THE BRILLIANCE & SURPRISING DISAPPEARANCE OF NINTENDO'S KID ICARUS



One of the most frightening revelations that any gamer can make is looking back through the history of video games and counting how many franchises that debuted on the Nintendo Entertainment System are still alive, well, and perhaps even heralded as leaders in their given genres. Amazingly, after nearly 20 years, we are still seeing people line up in front of stores within the wee hours of the morning just to get their hands on the latest from The Legend of Zelda, Dragon Quest, Final Fantasy, Metroid, Metal Gear, and of course, Super Mario Bros.

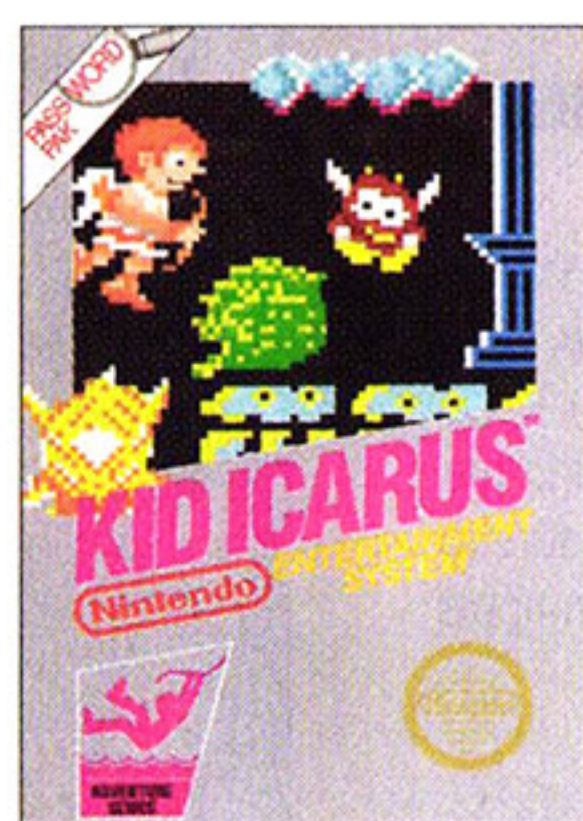
These legendary games have withstood the test of time and shaped the face of gaming in the process. As you may have noticed during your reflective stroll down memory lane, there is another title within the

NES library that should be held in the same veneration as these golden oldies. Dare we say that there are people out there who strongly believe that this title was the pinnacle

of action on the NES. So where is this fabled and highly touted game?

Whether it flew too close to the sun or simply fell through the cracks of time, the Nintendo-developed and published title Kid Icarus appeared to be on its way to a very bright future,

but ended up becoming nothing more than an eight-bit memory.



Nintendo has always nurtured the growth of its characters, assuring their continued dominance within the game space, but for some reason, the company turned its back on this promising upstart.

With wondrous white wings stemming from his back and a magical bow and arrow clenched tightly in his hands, the youthful protagonist of Kid Icarus went simply by the name Pit. He may seem like an odd mismatching of Greek mythology's Icarus and Roman mythology's Cupid, but make no mistake, this isn't a story of a boy donning wings of feather and wax to take to the skies, nor is it a game of turning the cold-hearted and misguided into passionate lovers. Rather, this



■ Pit made an appearance on the Saturday morning cartoon *Captain N*. An eggplant wizard was also featured as henchman for *Mother Brain*



■ The eggplant wizards turn Pit into a walking eggplant. When this happens, Pit must visit the hospital to remove the curse



■ Kid Icarus was one of the first games to feature multiple endings.



■ Upon completing the game, players can go back and play again with additional powers



■ Hearts can be exchanged for much needed items, such as a feather that will make Pit float after slipping off of ledges



■ Your eyes are not playing tricks on you. Angel Land is infested with Metroids

game explores the darkest hour of Angel Land, a place where gods and mortals coexist under the rule of the goddess of light Palutena and the goddess of darkness Medusa.

Palutena nurtures human growth, whereas Medusa's hatred for them grows with each passing day. As the tension between the two opposing sides festers and boils, Medusa lashes out against the mortals, turning their flesh into cold, hard stone. Looking to the evil within her sister's blood, Palutena steals away Medusa's beauty. Disfigured and fit to only cower in the darkest of corners, Medusa is banished to the Underworld. Peace may have returned to the land, but this exile proves to be a grievous misstep as Medusa rallies the monsters of the Underworld into waging war against the people of the sun. The forces of darkness wash over the land like a disease. With defeat just moments away, Palutena sends one last plea of desperation to one of her personal guards that is trapped in the Underworld. The fate of the world rests in Pit's hands.

This, of course, is where the player intervenes. The ascent to the world of light is a treacherous one, brimming with narrow moving platforms, swarms of dive-bombing enemies, and breath-stealing vertical leaps of faith. Seeing Mario fall to his death is certainly disappointing, but watching a character with wings plummet into the deep abyss just doesn't seem fair. For most of the game, Pit's wings are not functional. In turn, he must rely on his steady feet to navigate the Underworld's surroundings, and his quick fingers to fend off the beasts that occupy them. It's not until later in the game that life returns to his wings. If the player obtains an item called the Angel Feather, and then happens to fall off of a ledge, the wings will flutter to life and grant Pit a few seconds to float to safety. Only when the Wings of the Pegasus are secured can Pit spread his wings and take to full flight. Unfortunately, this only happens within the last stage of the game, which showcases a dramatic shift in gameplay, sharing more similarities to the shooter genre and games like *Gradius*. Up until this point, the player becomes accustomed to falling great lengths.

While establishing itself as a unique action game, *Kid Icarus* also shares many similarities in design to another hit Nintendo title. In the third stage of the game, Pit encounters a new enemy that looks a lot like a flying jellyfish. Fans of Samus Aran's exploits will be quick



to point out that this is in fact a *Metroid*. As it turns out, legendary Game Boy creator and game designer Gunpei Yokoi worked on both projects. The *Metroid* is an intentional nod to his other universe. Most of the connections to *Metroid* are not as glaring, but you can definitely see Yokoi's handiwork throughout the entire game, whether it's within the battle against Medusa, which is almost identical in design to the Mother Brain fight, or the strive for longevity in including multiple endings, unlockable powers, and secrets galore.

In the years that followed this release, Pit has only been in the spotlight in one semi-decent Game Boy spin-off adventure called *Kid Icarus: Of Myths and Monsters*. In the years that have followed, Pit has made cameos in the least likely of places, whether it's in a celebration in the NES *Tetris*, molded in plastic in *Super Smash Bros.*, or as sidekick in the video game cartoon *Captain N*. In a way, he's become the ghost of gaming past. He continually haunts us, but can only point to yesterday.

Come next year, Pit will once again make his presence known, but this time in a more defining role. The young chap has been enlisted as a new recruit in *Super Smash Bros. Brawl* for Wii. In the time he's been away, it would appear that Pit has aged a few years, but his wings still haven't matured. His familiar bow and arrow are present, but most of his movements appear to be created specifically for this game. Or have they? The resurrection of this character has led to gossip within the video game community that Nintendo may in fact be bringing *Kid Icarus* back for the sequel that we've been waiting nearly 20 years for. In fact, we asked Nintendo's general manager of software development Takahashi Tezuka whether the *Kid Icarus* franchise would be making a comeback, and he left the door open to the possibility. "I haven't heard anything about it, so I don't know," commented Tezuka. "But if there's demand for it and people are excited about *Kid Icarus*, I might have to talk to some developers."

As rumors swirl and anticipation rises, we can only sit and wonder. Is *Kid Icarus* better left as a fond memory, or should it be given the chance to stand side-by-side with *Metroid*, *Super Mario Bros.*, and *The Legend of Zelda*? ■ ■ ■



■ This Japanese poster shows off artwork of all the enemies in the game



■ Japanese cover art

GREATEST GAME OF ALL TIME

by: Joe Lee



XENOSAGA EPISODE I: DER WILLE ZUR MACHT

> **FORMAT** PLAYSTATION 2
> **PUBLISHER** NAMCO

For quite a long while, I felt nothing could top the eminence and perfection of *Final Fantasy VII*. That game, at first, seemed to be the pinnacle of all gaming. But, two years ago, a different game came into my grasp, and from that first moment when I popped it into my PlayStation 2, I fell in love. My friends, that game was *Xenosaga Episode I: Der Wille zur Macht*.

There are many reasons that *Xenosaga* is such an amazing game: fantastic graphics, mind-blowing audio, in-depth characters, and an overall fun battle system. But what really throws you in is the remarkable story line. When you actually think about it, *Xenosaga* has the great story of a *Final Fantasy* game, while being placed in a futuristic space setting. The story truly reveals itself as an adult screenplay, but not in terms of violence and sexuality; *Xenosaga* deals with ethics, politics, and religion. It simply is the type of story that keeps you guessing, and while the game leaves you with many questions, it certainly is a wonderful journey to embark on.

What really bugs me, though, is the fact that some people turn this game away because of its lengthy cutscenes. Well, what about *Metal Gear Solid*? That has long cutscenes and everyone loves that (me included, but that's beside the point)! People, hear me out! You must commit yourselves to *Xenosaga Episode I: Der Wille zur Macht*, because it is the pinnacle of the RPG genre, and also of gaming in general.



THIS MONTH IN GAMING HISTORY

In the mid-90s, the world exhibited what we like to call the Lawnmower Man Syndrome, the desire to transport our souls into a virtual reality. Nintendo bought into this concept with the eye-destroying gizmo the Virtual Boy. Released on August 14, 1995, the Virtual Boy and its heinous black and red 3D graphics became Nintendo's biggest failure to date. The system didn't last a year, and reportedly sold approximately 770,000 units worldwide.



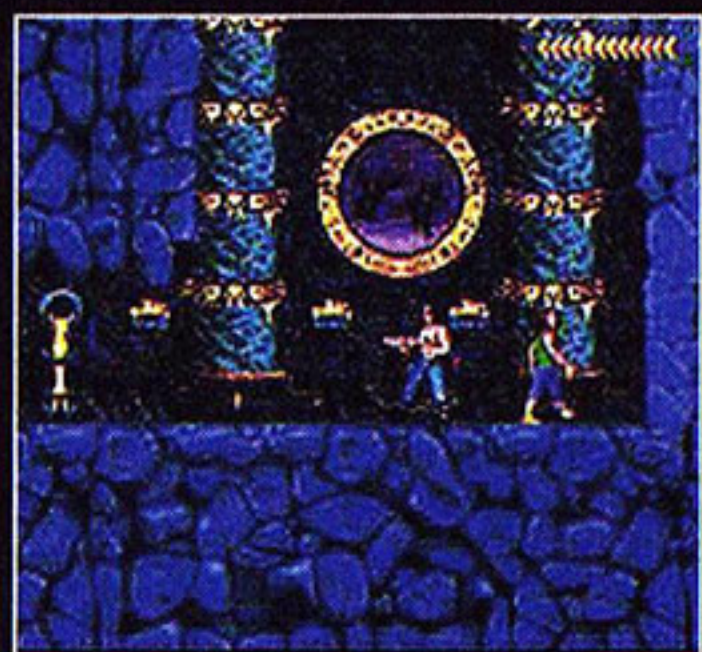


SNES

BLACKTHORNE

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION > PUBLISHER INTERPLAY > DEVELOPER BLIZZARD > RELEASE 1994

Believe it or not, Blizzard really did once make games other than their mega-franchises like Warcraft and Diablo. No really, it's true! One of the best was the 2D platformer called Blackthorne. Adopting the role of a deposed alien prince who has lived out his young life on Earth, Kyle Blackthorne returns to his homeland to claim the throne by right of a shotgun to the face of his enemies. While primitive in form, many of the Blizzard hallmarks are present in full force – an involved story, evocative music, and a unique art style. Combat is deeper than most games that this title was contemporary with – dodging and timing your shots is key to victory. Beyond that, the platforming and puzzles are most similar to the original Prince of Persia games. An intense precision is required as you move about the world, and one misstep or bad jump can mean a level restart. It's a stiff and unwieldy control scheme, and the biggest thing that ages what is otherwise still a great adventure.



PC

MAJESTY

> STYLE 1-PLAYER STRATEGY > PUBLISHER MICROPROSE > DEVELOPER CYBERLORE STUDIOS > RELEASE 2000

Games that totally break the mold of established convention are few and far between, and should be treasured as such. Majesty is one of these rare titles; by not allowing players any direct control over their heroes, Majesty's flavor of real-time strategy is uniquely seasoned by a heaping dose of The Sims-style motivations, as well as the need to build a self-sustaining Stronghold-like economy. Accomplishing your goals requires keeping your heroes on task by offering bounties on monsters and discouraging them from less useful pursuits – building a tavern next to your Rogues Guild will net you a bunch of drunken louts who can't be bothered to get up and save the town from marauding trolls. Though Majesty is prevented from reaching true greatness by the twin afflictions of an awfully short single-player campaign and a slew of balance issues, it is nonetheless fun in an innovative sort of way, and well worth checking out if nonstandard design is of interest to you.



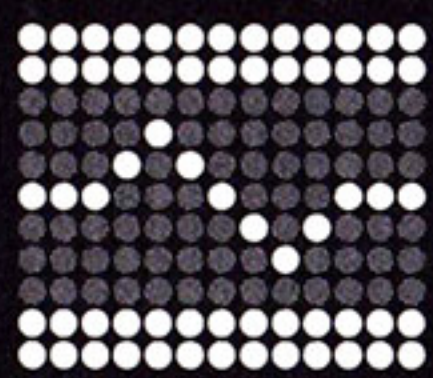
SNES

SIMANT

> STYLE 1-PLAYER SIMULATION > PUBLISHER IMAGINEER > DEVELOPER MAXIS > RELEASE 1993

If you've ever tried explaining any of Maxis' titles to a non-gamer, you know that it's difficult to convey exactly what is so addictive about the developer's imaginative simulations. SimAnt is no exception – it's basically a digital antfarm, except a little bit uglier. But once you take control of the yellow ant and shape the direction of your colony, it's easy to watch these little insects march away with hours of your life. You are responsible for the well-being of a growing nest, and regulating the kinds of ants that hatch (workers, breeders, or soldiers). At first you focus on gathering food, but as the threat of the opposing red ant colony grows, the game takes on an RTS-like form as you lead your troops across the lawn to squash your foes. The interface works best when used with the SNES mouse, but if you aren't one of the four people who bought it, the d-pad works fine. It may not be as ambitious as SimEarth or as accessible as The Sims, but SimAnt still deserves its place in Maxis' classic line-up. Plus, unlike ant farms, you can make the ants fight whenever you want to. Stupid real-life pacifist insects.

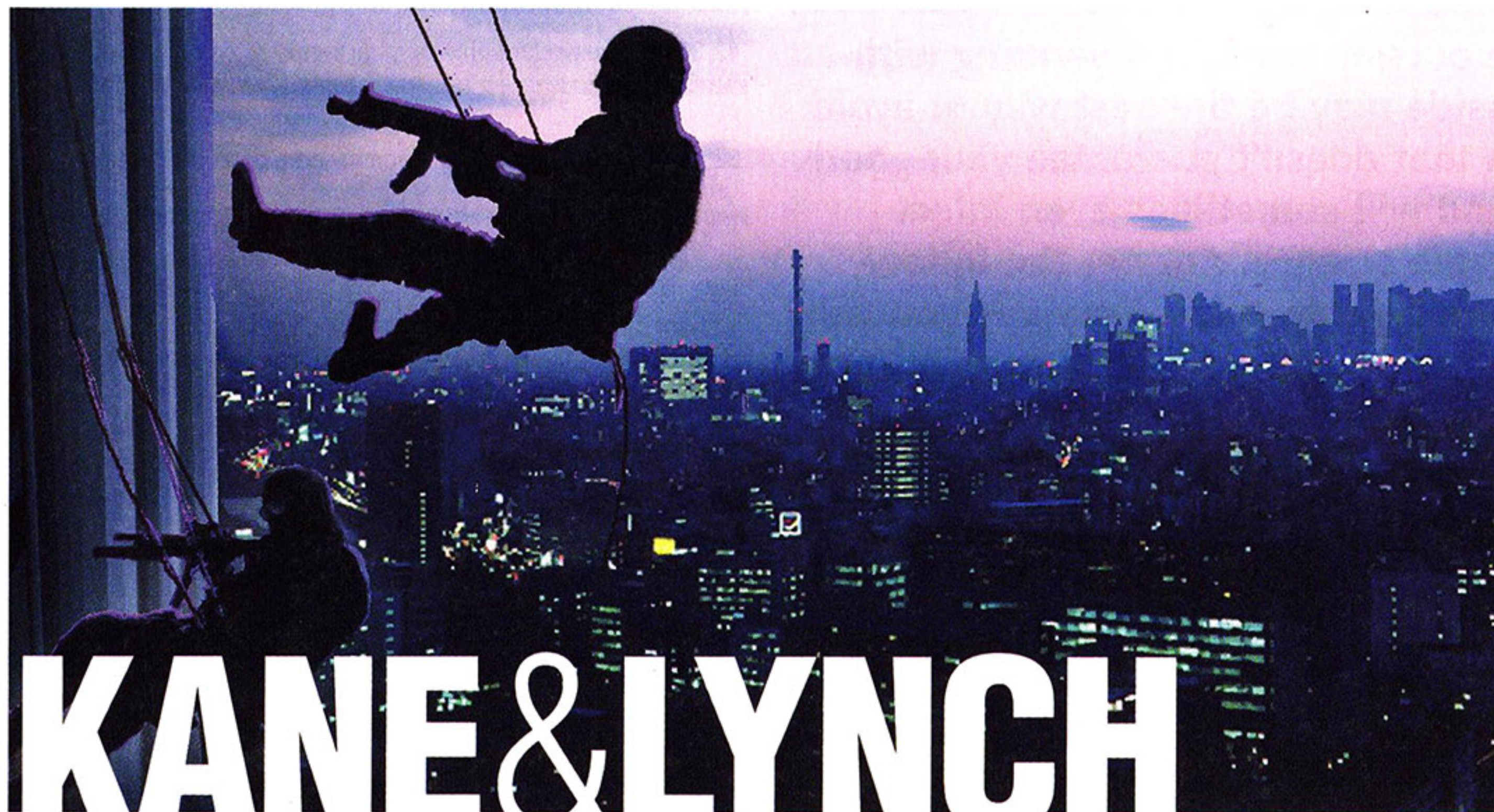




ONLINE

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UNLIMITED LAUNCH: JULY 14



KANE & LYNCH

This month we blew the doors off the newest game from IO Interactive and Eidos. Kane & Lynch puts players in the roles of two death row inmates trying to set their lives right by pulling off the heist of a lifetime. Confused? Check out our full cover story, then go online and read our conversation with Janos Flösser, managing director of IO Interactive for his thoughts on the new project.



Turok

Propaganda Games may be a new studio, but you certainly wouldn't guess it from a look at its new take on the Turok license. After you check out our six pages of coverage on the game, hop over to Game Informer Online's Unlimited section to check out the full interview we had with Josh Holmes, studio general manager at Propaganda and top dog on the dinosaur hunter's new game.



Mass Effect

So you've read our piece on the facial creation and animation techniques that the fine folks over at BioWare are using, but now you want to see how it all actually works? Hop online and check out some brand new video content that shows off the final product in action, and witness the subtle and remarkably lifelike emotions that appear on the characters of what will surely be one of the RPG hits of next year.

ESRB

Anyone paying any attention to the gaming industry in the last year knows how complicated and debated the issue of game ratings has become. This month, to further probe into the issue, we spoke with both Patricia Vance (President of the ESRB), and David Walsh (President and Founder of the National Institute On Media and The Family). Check out the unabridged conversations this month in Unlimited.



The Darkness

Those who were lucky enough to play 2004's Riddick game know that there's very good reason to be excited about Starbreeze's next title, The Darkness. We spoke with several members of the Starbreeze team for this month's Unlimited – learn more about this highly anticipated game in our complete interviews.



ALSO THIS MONTH ONLINE:

Game Informer Online visits Electronic Arts for Studio Showcase '06 for the latest on Madden, Crysis, and Battlefield 2142. Also, ComicCon kicks off on July 20th in San Diego, and Game Informer Online will have full coverage of the event as it happens.



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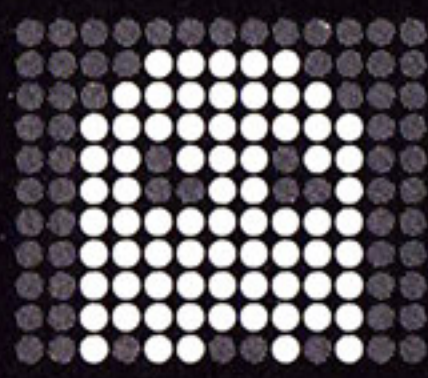
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(5) 1ST PRIZES HAND-PAINTED 360 FACEPLATES



(5) 2ND PRIZES 360 FACEPLATE STICKERS

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GAMEOVER

Let's Go For A Burger...Ha Ha Ha!

VIDEO GAME TRIVIA

Don't let the nice weather trick you – the outside world is swarming with germs and diseases. Staying locked up inside may be the best way to avoid the world's airborne pathogens, but even that doesn't guarantee your good health. Games are contagious in a way, and will sometimes even infect players with terrible illnesses. It's just simple science. Answer the following trivia questions to determine which video game-related malady you will contract this summer.

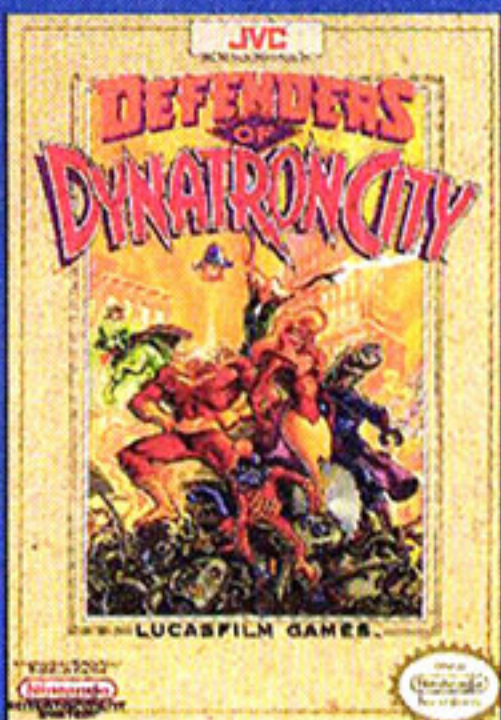
1 Madden may dominate the consoles, but what football simulation from Dynamix ruled DOS in the '90s?

- A. Front Page Sports Football
- B. Football Fury
- C. Football Mogul
- D. Playmaker Football

2 Which of the following systems has never seen an incarnation of Broderbund's classic Lode Runner series?

- A. Apple II
- B. Nintendo 64
- C. Sega Master System
- D. Game Boy

3 LucasArts' Defenders of Dynatron City for the NES may not have been great, but at least it had a memorable cast. Which of these bizarre superheroes was actually a playable character in the game?



- A. Mssr. Muscledude
- B. Miss Megawatt
- C. Sir Smashalot
- D. Johnny Bazookatone

4 Think you know your Metal Gear? The oft-forgotten Metal Gear Solid for Game Boy Color set Snake up against a nuclear-equipped walking battle tank called Metal Gear...

- A. KODOQUE
- B. GANDER
- C. Mk. II
- D. BABEL

5 Adventure games are infamous for their boundless inventory potential, but Freddy Pharkas Frontier Pharmacist took it to a whole new level. Which of the following items was NOT something you could keep in your bottomless pockets?



- A. Horse plop
- B. Playground ladder
- C. Sharpened silver ear
- D. Whiskey-on-a-stick

6 Krazy Ivan was an early PSone game that centered around...

- A. Airplanes
- B. Puzzles
- C. Rocky IV
- D. Robots

7 The 3DO console was not a huge success, but that didn't stop them from producing it. Which one of these third-party companies did NOT manufacture the system?

- A. Sharp
- B. Panasonic
- C. Goldstar
- D. Sanyo



8 If you punch a robot, does it not bleed? Probably not, so punch away! This screen is taken from which of the following robo-related fighting games?

- A. Rise of the Robots
- B. Custom Robo
- C. Tech Romancer
- D. One Must Fall: 2097



9 True or False: In Legacy of Kain: Defiance, the player can control both Kain and Raziel.

- A. True
- B. False

10 In Starcraft, what type of unit was the hero Tassadar?

- A. Zealot
- B. Archon
- C. Dark Templar
- D. Templar



BREAKDOWN

42.86% expressed roughly as a fraction is 3/7

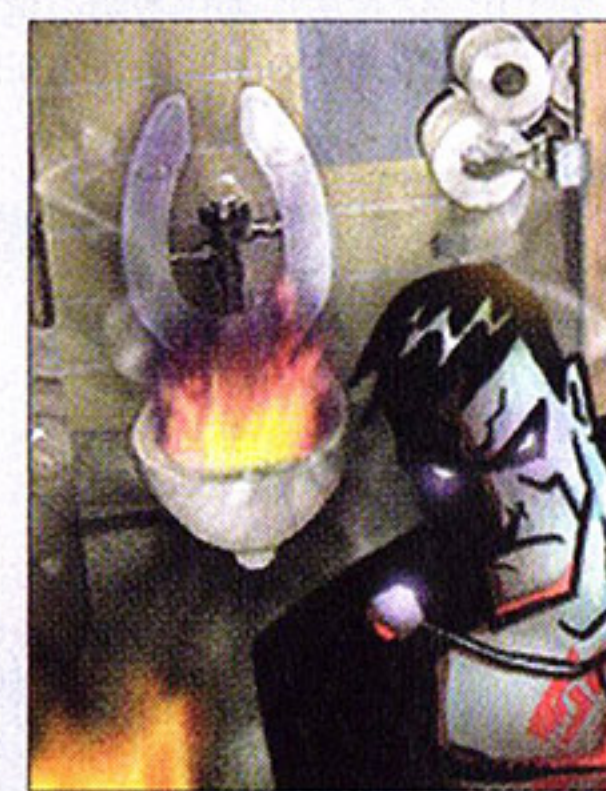
32% of Japanese DS owners purchased a copy of Animal Crossing: Wild World

89% of children's video game purchases and rentals are done with the involvement of parents, according to the ESA

100% The amount of calories contained in the DS Lite when compared to the regular DS. Don't be fooled!

500,000,000 games of Halo 2 have been played on Xbox Live since launch, according to developer Bungie. That's half a billion full games, not just individual player sessions

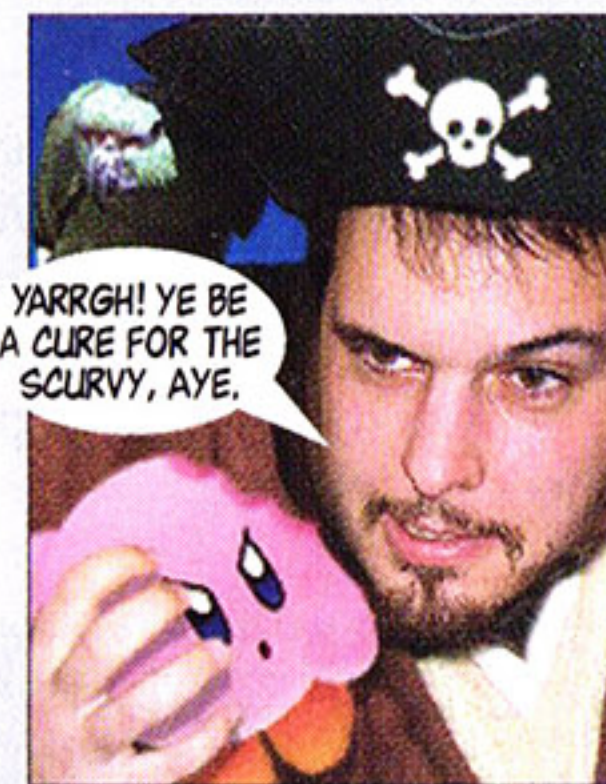
★ Trivia Score & Rank ★



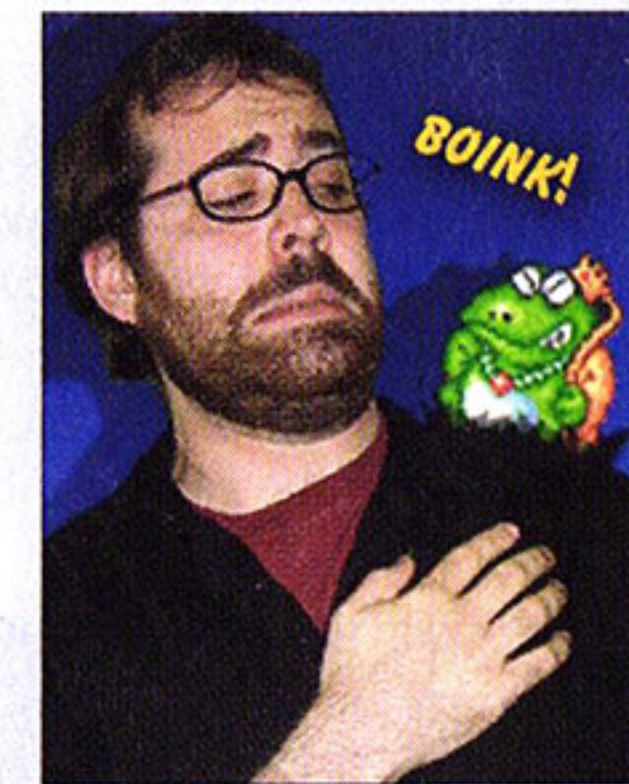
0-1:
Drakerhea



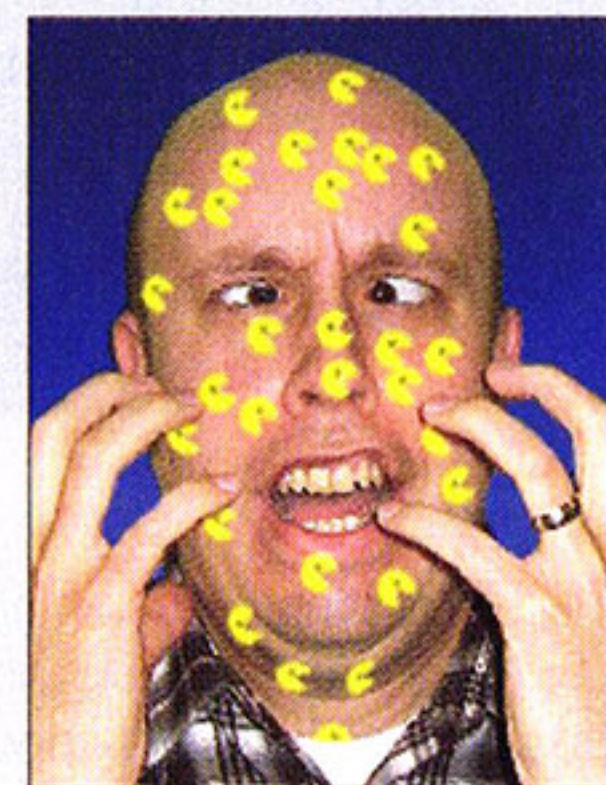
2-3:
Bandicootism



4-5:
Kirby Scurvy



6-7:
Warts



8-9:
Pac-Pox



10:
Sephylis

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WHAT DO YOU SEE?
CHILDREN?
A PLAYGROUND?
A PARK?

I SEE
MY COMMUNITY
MY COUNTRY
MY FUTURE
AND IT'S ALL WORTH FIGHTING FOR.

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