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GameSpot 9.5 out of 10

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Language
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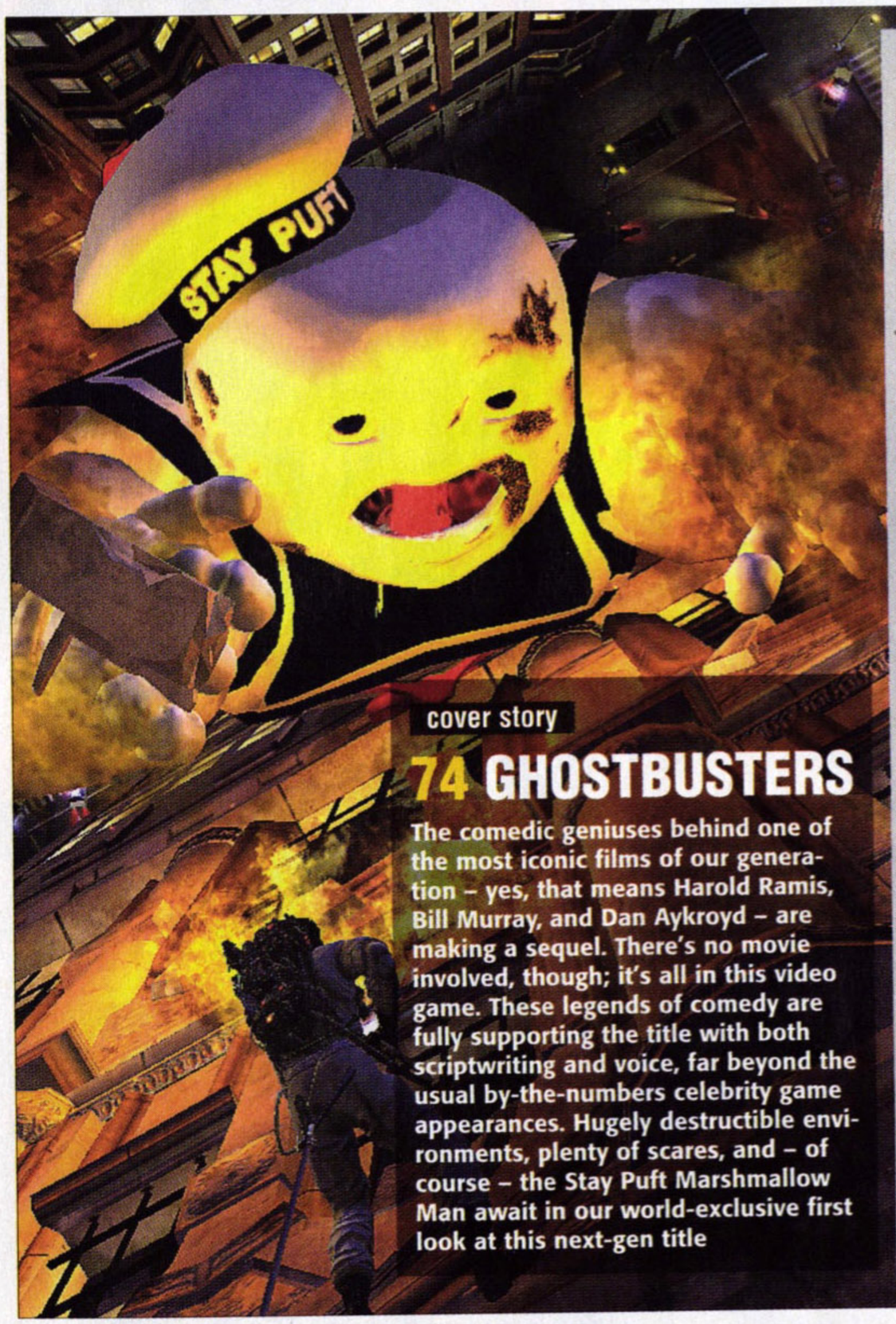


cover story

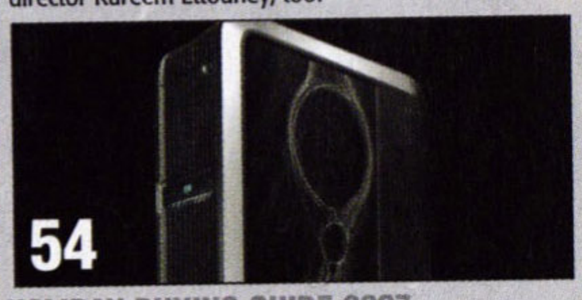
74 GHOSTBUSTERS

The comedic geniuses behind one of the most iconic films of our generation – yes, that means Harold Ramis, Bill Murray, and Dan Aykroyd – are making a sequel. There's no movie involved, though; it's all in this video game. These legends of comedy are fully supporting the title with both scriptwriting and voice, far beyond the usual by-the-numbers celebrity game appearances. Hugely destructible environments, plenty of scares, and – of course – the Stay Puft Marshmallow Man await in our world-exclusive first look at this next-gen title

features

THE ART OF LITTLEBIGPLANET

We dug up some fantastic art by the team behind red-hot PS3 exclusive LittleBigPlanet, and you've simply got to see these quirky masterpieces. While you're over there, browse through our exclusive interview with art director Kareem Ettouney, too!



HOLIDAY BUYING GUIDE 2007

We've got pages and pages of awesome action figures and electronics, of course, but what do you buy that oddball bike messenger friend who can't tell Samus from Master Chief but loves Quentin Tarantino? We answer that, too, in this year's Holiday Buying Guide.

SUPER SMASH BROS. BRAWL

We go hands-on with Nintendo's forthcoming brawler and deliver extensive high definition screens and impressions directly to you. Of course, we report on all of the heroes, zeroes, and hedgehogs on the roster as well.

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Jim liked Sara. Sara liked Jim. Jim was saying all the right things and if he kept it up, it was turning out to be one _____ night indeed.

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promising

darn good

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STAFF

People Who Actually Get Paid To Play Video Games

TAKE A CHANCE

ANDY McNAMARA
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

While the older readers of Game Informer may find the Swedish super group ABBA's famous chorus repeating in their heads from my ever-so-intriguing headline, bringing up ABBA was certainly never something I wanted to do in this magazine, nor plan to ever do again. But those three words – take a chance – are sometimes forgotten in the world of video games by both developers and consumers alike. The three words actually just stand in for one: change.

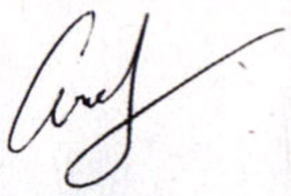
Developers and publishers are generally afraid to do it in fear that they may kill the goose that lays the golden eggs, and consumers are afraid because far too often trying something new or different leads to a less than stellar experience. I'm guilty of this myself, and I work at a magazine where games flow like "boos" at a Lindsay Lohan movie (or perhaps I should have said "booze" at a Lindsay Lohan party, but I guess either works).

The point is, it is easy to fall into a rut and play nothing but first-person shooter after first-person shooter. But games have so much more to offer. Not everyone may understand or want to play an RPG, but there are few games like BioWare's upcoming Mass Effect. If there ever was a time to take a chance on something new, Mass Effect is most definitely it (I know the old school RPGers out there already have this game at the top of their wish list).

Take Assassin's Creed, for example. This is a game that takes place in the Middle East. Not some sci-fi future or World War II, but the Middle East. The subject certainly isn't a common one in the world of video games, but kudos to Ubisoft for trying something different, and gamers shouldn't be afraid to go out on a limb and try something new themselves.

I know I'm going to practice what I preach. Between my Guitar Hero III, Rock Band, Call of Duty 4, Assassin's Creed, and Mass Effect marathons, I plan to throw in a little NHL 2008. It's been years since I seriously played a sports game, but I figure what the hell – change is good.

Cheers,



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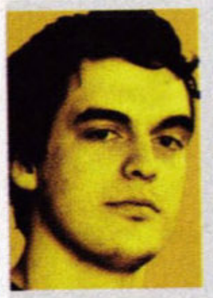

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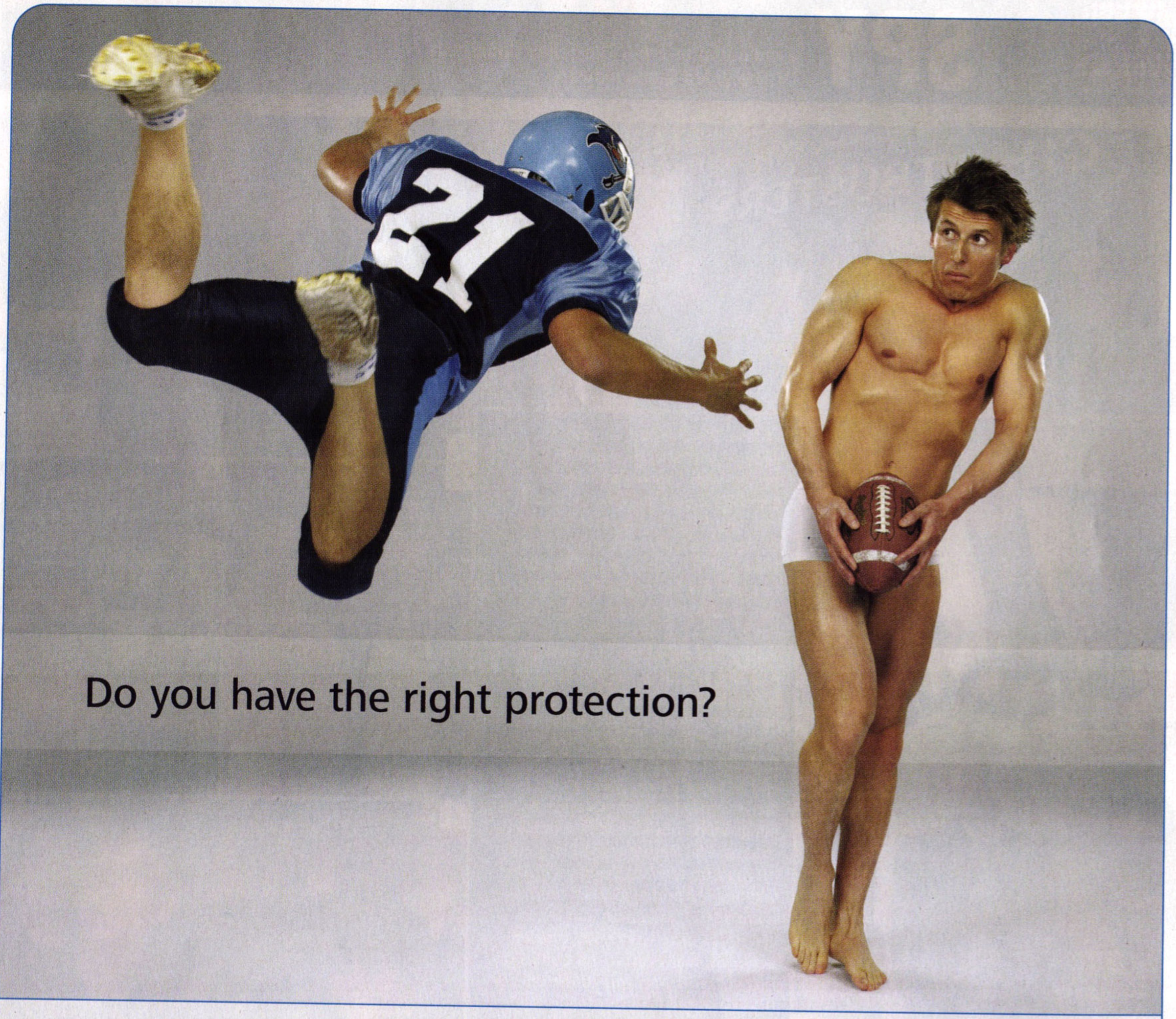

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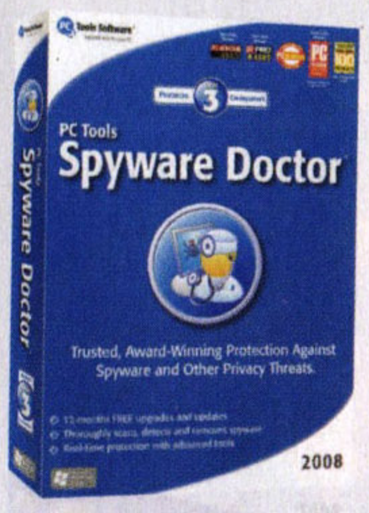

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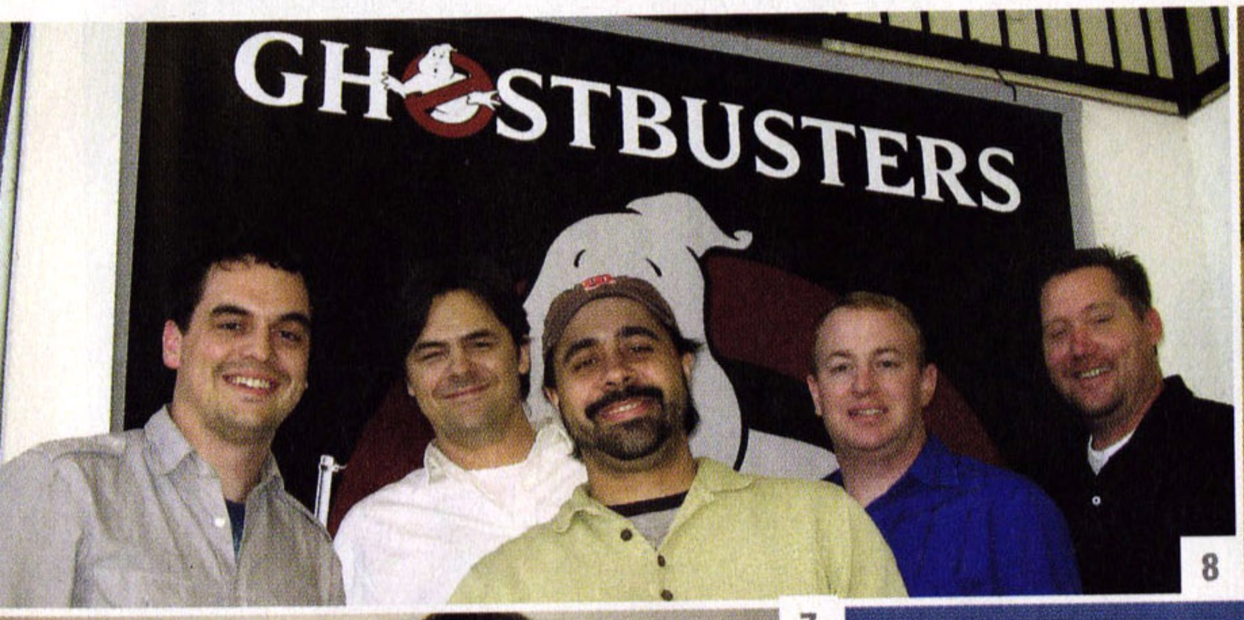
GISPY

Candid Photos From The Seedy Underbelly Of The Video Game Industry



8

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1 Sssh! It's a secret! Camelot's Hiroyuki and Shugo Takahashi dish the dirt with Capcom's Hironobu Takeshita **2** Billy hangs with Sega's Toshihiro Nagoshi, the man behind the Monkey Ball series and Yakuza **3** Jawohl! VU Games' Eric Reynolds gets into the true spirit of Octoberfest with a comely German maiden **4** Bill Gates was on-hand in Seattle for the Halo 3 launch, where he shook hands with the first lucky fan in line for the record-breaking title. Sanjaya from American Idol will do anything to get his picture taken these days! **5** Matt, Highwater Group's Matt Schlosberg, and Majesco's Pete Rosky make a lucrative heist in Reiner's office **6** Bertz hangs with Sony's head of worldwide studios, Phil Harrison and PlayStation PR maestro Mariam Sughayer **7** After winning a World in Conflict tournament at TGS, journalist Tom Byron claims his prize – a $1,000 omelet! Seriously, that's caviar and truffles on that sucker **8** Who you gonna call? Bryan and the Ghostbusters posse! From left to right: Drew Haworth (Terminal Reality), Ben Borth (Sierra), Brendan Goss (Terminal Reality), and John Melchior (Sierra)

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Wii™

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DEAR GI

The Readers Strike Back

GI COMMUNITY

THE QUESTION:
Almost one year after its release, are you still playing the Wii?

Yes, the ingenuity and the entertainment the system provides makes me come back. And if a video game system can make me enjoy/play a DragonBall Z game, I think I'll continue to play with the system

dragonballjoseph

Nintendo still needs a great game that is exclusive to the Wii. Nintendo needs to find hard-hitting titles, whether it involves the timeless Mario, Samus, or new characters altogether. They need titles people will want to look forward to.

Artemis_Galant

I've been playing a variety of Virtual Console games on a sporadic basis since I finished Metroid Prime 3. But at the moment, I'm simply counting the days until Mario arrives.

PheonixDav

Are you kidding? I play my Wii more than any other system. Virtual Console, GameCube games, Metroid Prime 3, Everybody Votes. I freaking love my Wii.

Halbred

I only got my Wii for Zelda, Metroid, and Smash Bros, but now that I have it I barely play it. I still use the Internet channel a lot, but I'm going to have to see some more online games before I actually start playing.

miknight71

I sold mine after realizing that I didn't fit into its main target demographic: the casual player. And two or three games coming out that do cater to the hardcore didn't justify my $250 investment collecting dust.

shatterediamonds

Of course I'm still playing the Wii, and I'll only be playing it more with all the games coming out in the next few months.

Anyone dumb enough to sell their Wii will likely be buying another one in the near future as they curse their shortsightedness.

ResidentHazard

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

SILENT BUT ARTSY

The Silent Hill series is as much of an obsession as it is an inspiration for me, so I would like to dedicate this mural to all of the people who have worked to bring those games to life. I got tired of having a tiny Silent Hill 4 poster, so I decided to cover my wall with a mural inspired by the series – my version of "the room."

Jose Munoz
Phoenix, AZ

■ That's some impressive work, Jose. Not many people can say they have a living room with an atmosphere more chilling than a dip in Toluca Lake. Then again, not many people would want to – but we're betting there is a contingent of Silent Hill fans out there who are very jealous right now.

FANS AND FANATICS

I'm sick and tired of all these people who say they're fans of something, but really have no idea what they are talking about. I'm sorry, but you cannot call yourself a fan unless you actually know what's going on behind the scenes. A perfect example is Metal Gear Solid. I have friends (so-called "fans") who just describe Volgin from Metal Gear Solid 3 as "the guy with the electric arms." If you like the game so much, maybe you should take the time to learn the characters' names and what's going on.

Jason Wojnar
via hotmail.com

■ Let's say that you consider yourself a fan of something non-game related, like ham sandwiches. Imagine that you start a conversation about them at a social function, but the person you are talking to just happens to be the Midwest's leading ham sandwich expert. He haughtily declares that your love of ham sandwiches could never be as deep and abiding as his, and because you cannot discuss the finer points of hickory-smoked versus honey-glazed, you have no business calling yourself a fan. Does some high-falootin' snob have a right to tell you that you lack sufficient knowledge to like a sandwich? Of course not, and the same rule applies to gaming. Just because your friends can't tell you the year in which The Philosophers officially became The Patriots or the identity of Ocelot's mother doesn't mean they can't enjoy Metal Gear Solid 3. People play games for different reasons and appreciate them on different levels.

THE PRICE OF ROCK

I just read issue 175, and I noticed that you said the Rock Band Bundle (the game, guitar, drum set, and microphone) would cost $200. I thought there was recently a price drop to $170 – which one is it?

Ryan Weiss
Miami Fl

■ The bundle will cost $170. We always print the most accurate information we have as of press time, but occasionally things change by the time the magazine arrives on your doorstep, and that's what happened with the Rock Band pricing announcement. But why settle for just knowing the cost? Turn to page 26 for our practical guide to Rock Band, and check back next month for the comprehensive review.

...OR IS IT?

I really enjoyed the review of The Orange Box and how it was compared to a Thanksgiving feast. However, where do you get the idea that Portal is the apple pie? Portal is obviously the cake!

Parker Beck
via hotmail.com

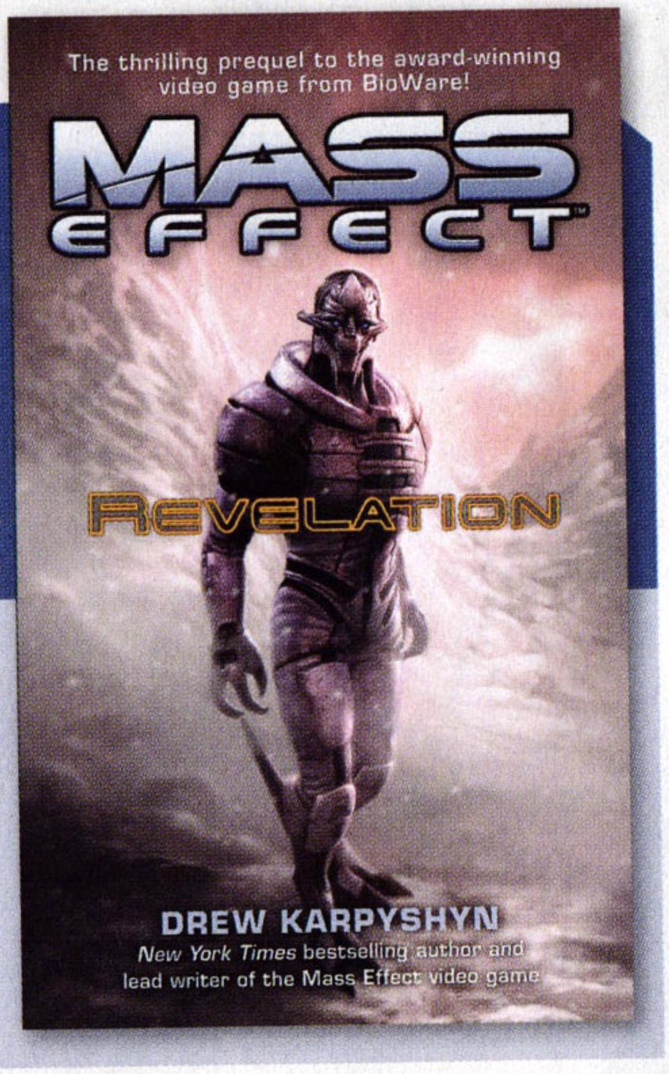
■ The cake is a lie.

MASS ANTICIPATION

I happened to be searching around at my local bookstore and I stumbled on a book called *Mass Effect: Revelation*. Since I'm anxiously awaiting the game's release, I purchased the book and immediately got wrapped up in it. I just love the concept of getting a sneak peek at the game's world before I get my hands on it. Have you guys read it yet?

Matt Schaffer
Via gmail.com

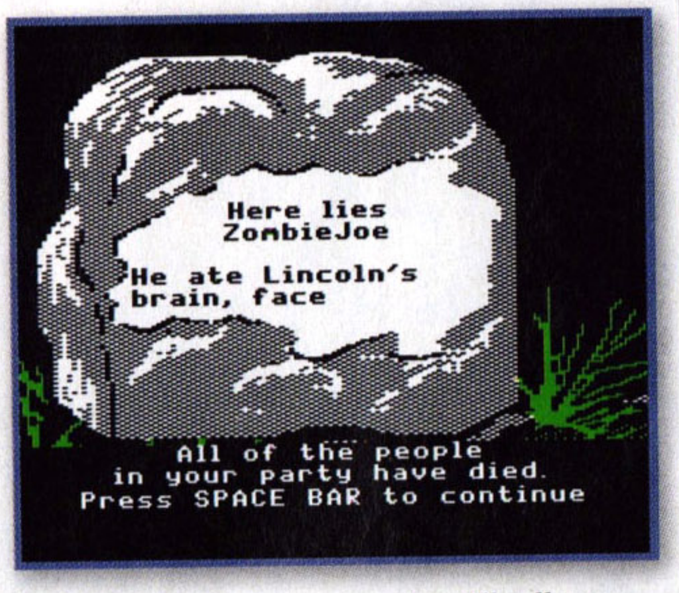
■ Yep, a few of us have also read and enjoyed *Mass Effect: Revelation*. You're right – there is something cool about knowing the backstory of a game before it starts. On that front, *Revelation* does a good job of introducing the key races, organizations, and technology present in the game. As far as sci-fi literature goes, *Revelation* is no *Ender's Game* (which could be a plus, since Bean is such a wiener), but it's definitely worth the read if you want a deeper understanding of the Mass Effect universe.



HOW THE WEST WAS BRAINS

Some of my friends and I were reminiscing about games we used to play in elementary school, and we came across the classic Oregon Trail. We thought it would be funny if, instead of cholera, you could contract the T-Virus – and one of the greatest game ideas was born: Zombie Oregon Trail! You would play a pioneer-turned-zombie, shambling through America's past, feasting on historical figures. Does this game have a shot?

Danny Gray
via yahoo.com



■ There are some people who will tell you that haphazardly adding zombies to any game does not necessarily improve it. Those people are idiots. The educational possibilities of Zombie Oregon Trail are numerous: Save the Donner Party from cannibalism by getting to them first, or stop Lincoln from attending Ford's Theater...by any means necessary. Best of all, zombies can't drown, so you can just ford every river crossing you come across. No more caulking the wagon for you!

Send your comments to Game Informer. Snail Mail: Game Informer Magazine • Attn: Dear GI • 724 North First St., 4th Floor • Minneapolis, MN 55401 Email: deargi@gameinformer.com

A NEW CHAPTER
UNFOLDS...

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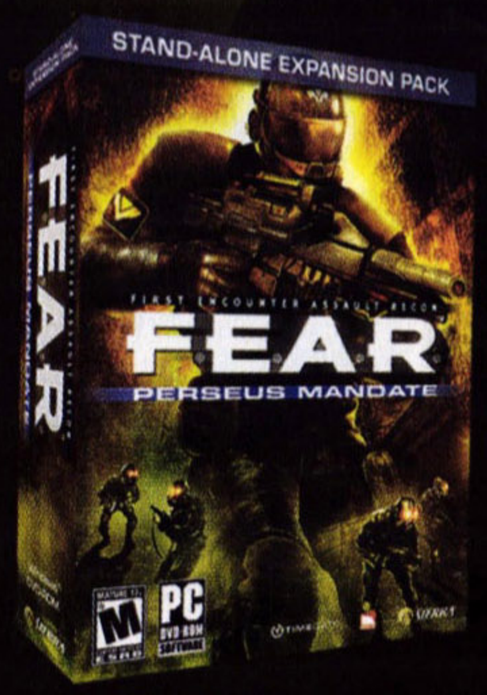

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DAY 1 STUDIOS

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HALO RULES/SUCKS!

I just read your review of Halo 3, and I am so angry. Come on, a 9.75? I bought it at the midnight release – it is a 10 out of 10, maybe even more. I played both BioShock and Zelda, and they are definitely not better than Halo 3. Not even close. What is wrong with you? Halo 3 is the perfect game!

Jack Berry
via email

Are you kidding me? A 9.75 for Halo 3! It has one of the best online systems around, four-player co-op, and a killer story…and you gave it a 9.75. Words cannot describe how idiotic this rating was. Because of Bryan's inability to recognize a good game if it opened the disc tray itself and climbed in, I will no longer be subscribing to your magazine.

Anonymous
via gmail

From the writers who brought you a sci-fi story more derivative than Star Trek novels 379-383 comes a new incoherency: Halo 3. While some gamers may think the story in Halo 3 is well-written, it really continues the decline for the series. What makes the original Halo a better game than either sequel is the simple story; you can't really screw it up. Now these squidmen from outer space are all speaking like James Earl Jones reading Shakespeare for some reason. And what's up with the Bruce Hornsby-like soundtrack? Lame. By the way, wasn't BioShock awesome?

Christian Buttner
via hotmail.com

Why the hell did you give Halo 3 Game of the Month?! The story was fun for the first three levels, then it just got repetitive. Fight the Flood, fight a Brute, fight a Scarab, and fight the Flood…over and over again. Then you have the terrible final levels, the Arbiter shooting at random dead people, and a ridiculously easy last boss. I would rather play Vampire Rain than this piece of crap. I traded it in as soon as I beat it and used the money to buy The Family Guy game – which is by far the better of the two.

Jake Smith
via yahoo.com

■ **There are some people who look at review scores to help with purchasing decisions, and others who use them to reinforce an existing opinion. Neither of those options is as fun as arguing about a score, though! When a game as big as Halo 3 comes out, there are bound to be a lot of expectations surrounding it – and a lot of different reactions. Whether you think Bungie's latest effort deserves an extra quarter point or should be reviled as a failure, remember that any game review is ultimately just an opinion. Sometimes people will agree and sometimes they won't, but we'll always do our best to deliver relevant information and insight to make a review as useful as possible. If you're thinking about buying a particular game or just looking for something to complain about, we're there for you.**

CORRECTIONS

In issue 174 we mistakenly identified the artist of the Dead Space comic book as Bruce Templesmith. The illustrator's name is Ben Templesmith. We apologize for the oversight.

READER ART

DECEMBER WINNER!

WILLIAM MANG
Stainless steel might not be the best battle armor, but it sure makes this seven-foot sculpture look pretty sweet

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

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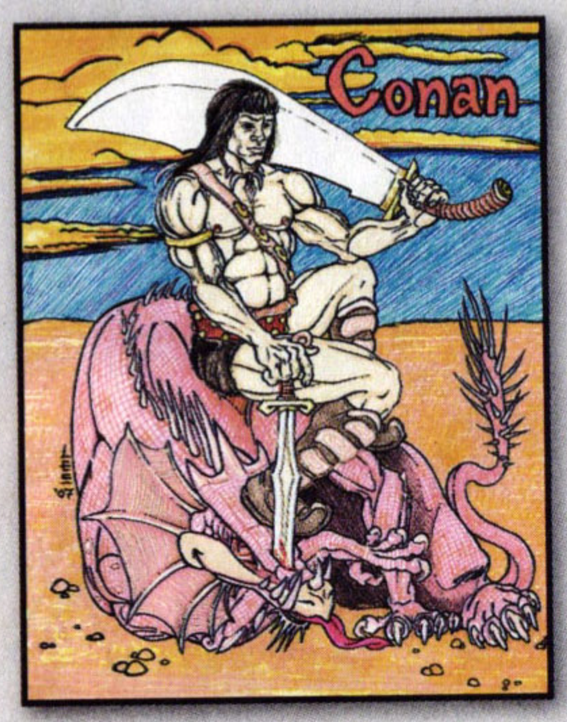
Reader Art Contest
724 1st St. N.,
4th Floor
Mpls, MN 55401

ELLEN RILEY-WINTERS
Pff! No one that small could ever defeat anything that big!

TYLER MASK
"Let us all sing a rousing chorus of the Doom Song!"

ANDREI VASSILIEU
Cammy waits patiently to hear back about her audition for Street Fighter IV



LYVAN H. (LEE)
This looks a lot like the portraits Miller tried to have taken at Sears. He was escorted off the premises

DARRELL O'RILEY
Why would you go to all the trouble to get custom Mjolnir armor, but then try to wear the Legendary Edition helmet?

ROBIN BEAUREGARD
Abe: keeping the Oddworld dream alive

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PLAYSTATION 3

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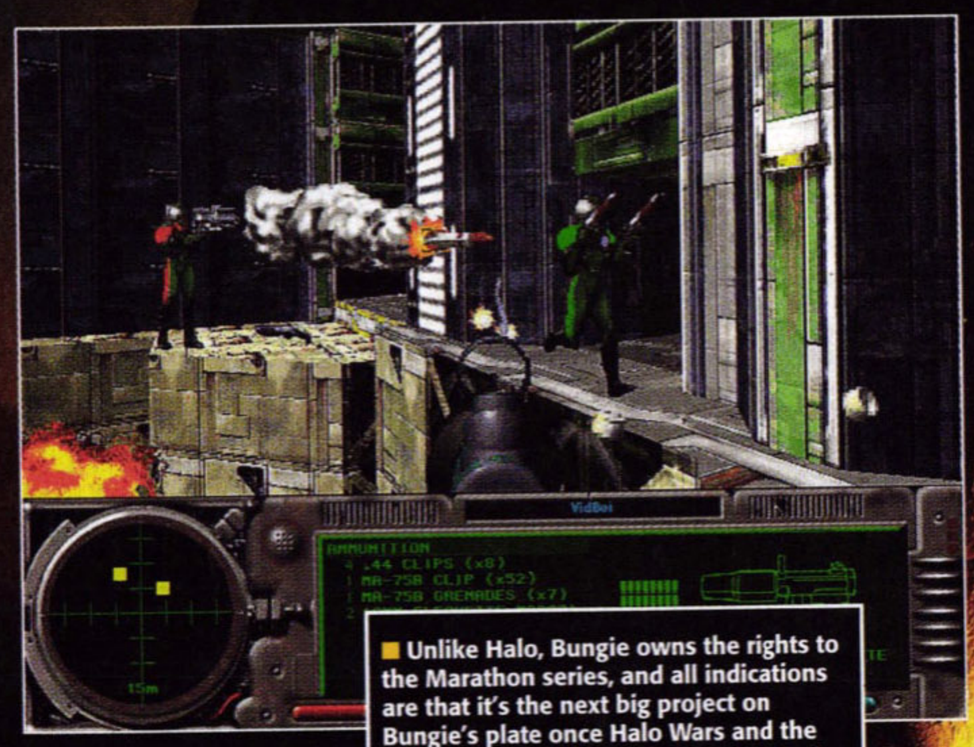
news

BUNGIE LEAVES MICROSOFT

BOTH BUNGIE & BIZARRE CREATIONS LEAVE THE MOTHERSHIP



■ Unlike Halo, Bungie owns the rights to the Marathon series, and all indications are that it's the next big project on Bungie's plate once Halo Wars and the Peter Jackson Halo project are finished

The partnership between Halo developer Bungie and publisher Microsoft has been an extremely lucrative one – record-breaking even. So why is the relationship between the two changing? For the same reasons that always tie publishers and developers together – money and independence.

On the face of it, it seems like little will change between the two. Although Bungie is now a privately held company – Microsoft now owns a minority interest in Bungie instead of the studio being wholly owned by Microsoft – the two have promised to continue their publishing partnership. In a statement, Harold Ryan, studio head for Bungie said, "We will continue to develop with our primary focus on Microsoft platforms." Already on the docket are the Ensemble Studios-developed Halo Wars RTS and the unnamed Halo project with director Peter Jackson.

A Separation Of Powers

If nothing's going to change, then why change at all? Game Informer talked to representatives from both Microsoft and Bungie, as well as a few people involved in the industry, and although the relationship between the pair will likely remain strong, it's clear that Bungie only stands to make more money on its own. "We're going to get better profit sharing because now we're a publisher," explains Bungie content manager Frank O'Connor. "Eventually we're going to own our own IP [Microsoft owns the Halo IP – ed.], so in a world where we make the next big thing, we'll do better."

One developer not at Bungie, but with extensive experience at Microsoft who asked not to be identified, said that Microsoft is a "very generous publisher," but suspects that some top talent at Bungie wanted to leave if Microsoft didn't grant independence. Rather than face the "tattered remains of the studio left behind," our anonymous developer theorized Microsoft had little choice but to grant Bungie's wish. "If you're going to lose the top 50 percent of Bungie anyway, you're pretty much screwed."

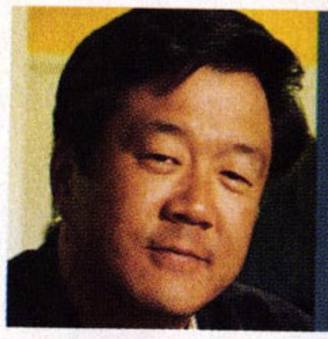
For his part, O'Connor denies rumors that this split has anything "to do with Bungie being tired of working on one project [Halo]. People are reading a lot more into that than they should." O'Connor also did not shut the door on the company revisiting Halo in the future.

Now that Bungie is free from Microsoft, the battle is not yet over. Even successful developers like Bungie have to face the inherent risks associated with making a video game. "The only downside for Bungie," offers Billy Pidgeon, games industry analyst for market research company IDC, "is that they are now responsible for their overhead, which could be considerable." Pidgeon believes that Bungie's risk in a flop project would be mitigated if they were still a part of Microsoft. "But then again," he says, "the freedom is considerable. I can see why they did it."

Finishing The Fight

In our conversations with both Microsoft and Bungie, there appears to be a clear delineation between what Bungie has already promised Microsoft – which is its involvement with the Ensemble-developed Halo Wars and Peter Jackson's Halo project – and any games Bungie will create after those two are finished. The latter represents a wide-open future for the developer where it is free to create games and sell them to the highest bidder.

It seems unlikely we will ever see a Bungie title on PlayStation 3 or Wii, but definitely not impossible. When we asked Shane Kim, corporate vice president of Microsoft Game Studios, whether or not Microsoft had the right of first refusal to future Bungie games, he would neither clarify nor discuss the pair's relationship beyond Halo Wars and the Peter Jackson project. Could we see a Bungie title on another platform? "We don't intend to see that happen," he declared.



> **WE DON'T INTEND TO SEE THAT HAPPEN.**
> – Microsoft corporate vice president Shane Kim on whether future Bungie games would appear on other systems

"Our intention is to work with Bungie a long time."

However, it's clear that the developer is keeping its options open, and despite what O'Connor has told us, we continually hear that at least a portion of the company wants to move past Halo. "Anything's possible," says O'Connor when we ask him whether the company would develop a title for another system. "We play our DSs and PSPs and listen to our iPods, but right now we've only announced two projects, and both of those are on 360. I can say we're not working on Halo DS [laughs]!"

Property Issues

When Bungie's O'Connor talks about the company seeing more profit sharing, it's no coincidence that he mentions IP – intellectual property – in the next sentence. The topic of developers owning the IP they've created (the characters, locations, stories – you name it) is a hot one, since it's one of the ways that studios can become more self-sufficient and prevent publishers from gaining the upper-hand in the sometimes ugly relationship between the two sides.

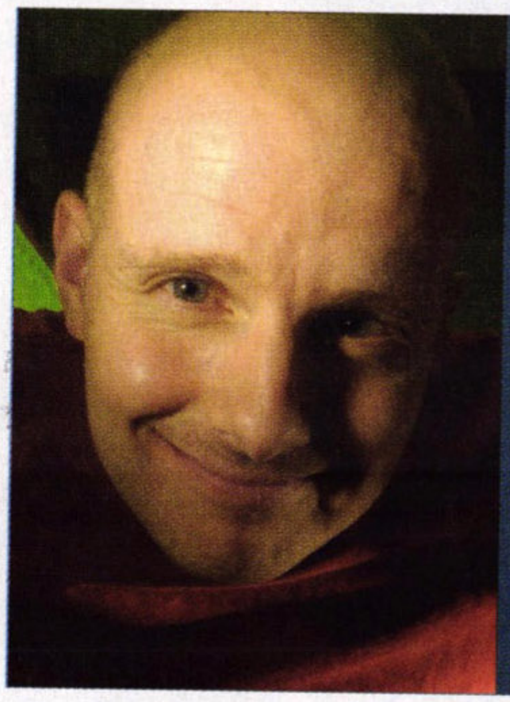
Publishers often own the rights to a developer's IP as a cost of doing business – like Microsoft does with Halo. During the beginning of the development process, it's the publisher who typically risks the money for the project, and owning the IP is one of the ways they try and make money to recoup those costs. Unfortunately, if the developer does not own the IP and big money is made off of the game, it's the publisher and not the developer in the driver's seat.

For instance, the original developers of Medal of Honor: Allied Assault – the people who would later form Infinity Ward – were not the ones who called the shots for the franchise, which is one of the reasons they left EA to form Infinity Ward and create Call of Duty for Activision. Ironically, Activision handed that series to in-house studio Treyarch for Call of Duty 3 – another example for Infinity Ward of a publisher retaining the rights to a brand a developer created. Will we see developers like Infinity Ward do what Bungie has done and try to step out and own the IPs they have created? Many would like to, but the reality is that few have the power and money to do so. Luckily for Bungie, this move helps it write its own ticket, and interestingly enough, the next rumored unannounced project for the company is Marathon – an IP that it owns.

Best Friends Forever

Microsoft seemingly has little to gain from the change in its relationship to Bungie, despite the talk of its evolution and strengthening. Although it appears that Microsoft was backed into a corner, and that appeasing the developer is better than antagonizing them, there is a strong force that could keep the two closer than any contract the corporate lawyers could draw up.

"The motivation of the people is more important than owning the Bungie brand and label," believes Randy Pitchford, president and CEO of Gearbox Software. As an independent developer with his own hit property to nurture, Brothers in Arms, Pitchford thinks that Microsoft is doing the right thing by letting Bungie spread its wings – a situation that he believes will only reap benefits for everyone. "It's almost in reverse of what a typical corporation begs for. The larger corporation begs for more control and ownership, and here's an example where the largest software company in the world has released some control and ownership for something they probably believe is of a benefit to them…the passion of the creators and the long-range value of having good partners and people that are going to be creating things motivated to do so for your benefit. If you prevent that or destroy or block that, then you're going to find that they are going to find other things to do."



> **WE'RE GOING TO GET BETTER PROFIT SHARING BECAUSE NOW WE'RE A PUBLISHER.**
> – Bungie content manager Frank O'Connor

The Future Of Halo

What will become of the Halo property in the hands of Microsoft now that Bungie will likely concentrate on projects in other directions? That is the great unknown that must concern Halo fans regarding this announcement. Although the culture and fundamentals of the series are surely understood by Microsoft and whatever future developer will work on the series, different developers will likely have different gameplay philosophies, technology, and priorities than Bungie that could change the franchise for better or for worse.

The anonymous developer we talked to at Microsoft believes that Bungie will have "almost zero" involvement with future Halo projects, and that this move could harm both companies. While Microsoft could see its premier brand devalued in the hands of someone else, Bungie risks undervaluing what Microsoft brings to the table. One instance the developer mentioned was in the area of technical assistance afforded to in-house studios. "[Bungie is] going to go to the Xbox team and go, 'We're working on new game X, and we'd like you to make these changes to your console.' And [Microsoft is] going to say, 'Why should we listen to you?' just like they say to everybody else [laughs]. It won't be that harsh because [Bungie] has some cred, obviously, but there are going to be some challenges that I don't know that they are prepared for."

It seems clear that nobody is really prepared for what may come of this development – not Halo fans nor the industry itself – something even Microsoft's Shane Kim acknowledges may not be known for "two or three or four or five years from now."

But Gearbox's Pitchford revels in the uncertainty because at a minimum, Microsoft and Bungie's split points to new possibilities for developers everywhere. "The reality of what's possible is that there are no rules. It's about where the value is and where the folks who have that value are able to negotiate and discuss what should and could happen. It's nice to have this example there, because it just creates more options for people."

MICROSOFT'S CAR TROUBLE

Bungie leaving Microsoft isn't the only studio news for the publisher, as Project Gotham Racing creators Bizarre Creations have also left the company. The developer has opted to become a wholly owned subsidiary of Activision.

Unlike Bungie, Bizarre Creations was not owned by Microsoft, but the developer's contractual obligations with Microsoft were up, so Bizarre was free to make whatever moves it saw fit. However, Microsoft owns the IP for Project Gotham Racing, and it has said it will continue the series in the future.

Ironically, while Bungie left Microsoft for its independence, Bizarre's choice tells of a different side, a more typical example – of a studio who joins a larger publisher to mitigate the risks of being an independent developer. "Of course there are some major advantages of being an indie," says Ben Ward, Bizarre Creations' community and web lead, "but there are also some problems. These problems and risks were being magnified as we took on gradually more ambitious projects, along with the added production costs that next-gen brings."

Even though Activision has a history of licensed-based, multi-platform titles, Ward told us that the future is Bizarre's to create however it sees fit. "Plans are still being drawn up, so we'll see. It's nice to have both options open to us, though, and we'll certainly be making the absolute most of whatever we decide to tackle next. Stay tuned!"

The Lines Are Drawn...

Three years ago, Queen Elincia of Crimea won the war against the Mad King Ashnard of Daein, but the Crimean knights, led by Geoffrey, must quell unrest within Crimea's own borders. Ike and the Greil Mercenaries, meanwhile, find themselves facing an old threat.

The laguz tribes unite to seek justice for a crime long unpunished. They are led by Skrimir, an untested general and heir to the throne of Gallia. Can he tame his thirst for battle long enough to see his troops to victory and peace, or will his rage lead all nations to the brink of ruin?

Dheginsea, king of Goldoa, warns that the chaos of war may threaten the land's covenant with an ancient god. He struggles to hold his nation to its pledge of neutrality even as the events surrounding him lead the world to the brink of ruin.

Tibarn and Naesala put aside their differences to lead their clans to war. The raven king, however, carries a secret burden that may cause their alliance to crumble--and seal the fate of their cause.

EVERYONE 10+
T
E
10+
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
Fantasy Violence
Mild Language

Wii™

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Marado

Daein

Sella

Nebula

Nox

Desert of D

With King Ashnard's death, Daein fell under the harsh rule of the Begnion Empire. Years later, Micaiah, Sothe, and the Dawn Brigade have taken up the struggle to liberate Daein. They pin their hopes on newfound Prince Pelleas, but can this mysterious youth rally Daein to rise up against her tyrants?

...But Every Story has Two Sides.

Seliora

Gaddos

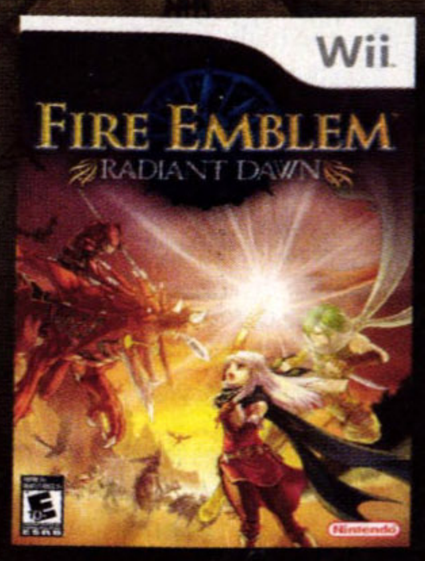
Persis

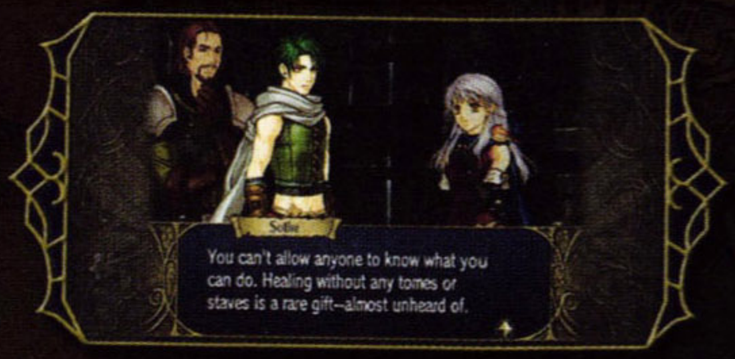
Tanas

Begnion's senators now rule Daein. They have given their military commanders free rein, all the while hiding their actions from the Apostle Sanaki. Beset by turmoil at home and abroad, Sanaki seems fated to be her nation's last apostle. Is Zelgius's sword enough to help her save all she holds dear?

Two Sides to Every War.

In a war fueled by chaos, who can say what is right and wrong? In a Fire Emblem first, you will play both sides of the war and judge for yourself. Fire Emblem: Radiant Dawn introduces a host of new features that make it a snap to pick up and a challenge to beat.





Everything You Wanted To Know About ROCK BAND But Didn't Know To Ask

This month, we finally got a chance to play the final version of Rock Band. We weren't able to fully review the game, but we did take the game home and run it through its paces. We've gathered the following info to help you decide if Rock Band is worth the big investment for your holiday dollar. After a frantic weekend of drumming, singing, and strumming, we were pretty blown away, even if we do have a few small complaints. We'll have an in-depth review next month – in the meantime, we're passing our expertise on to you.

The Big Breakdown:

27 is how many minutes passed before a pissed off downstairs neighbor came to complain about the noise.

34 minutes is how long it took one of us to unpack and put together the full set of instruments the very first time we took them out of the box.

4:50am is how late we stayed up the first night we had the full game.

6 is how many songs we noticed on the song list that are also on Guitar Hero 3. A seventh is also on Guitar Hero Encore: Rocks the 80s.

N/A How long before one of our girlfriends asked us to turn it down. Instead, they wanted to come play the game. Our girlfriends rock.

5 songs – that's about when our leg started to hurt from drumming when we first tried. It got better when we started tapping and not stomping. Learn from our mistakes.

1 drum kit didn't work properly when we received it – one of the pads wouldn't register. The other kits we received worked great.

41 venues are available to play in throughout the game – that's a lot.

4 is the number of times we Peter Moored it up and hit the 360 Guide button with a drumstick, pausing the game.

58 songs are in the game, almost all of which are the original recordings

13 of those 58 songs are bonus tracks played by lesser-known bands. Many of these are actually bands with Harmonix team members.

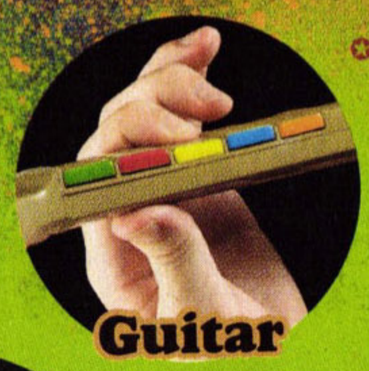
3,058 notes are in the final and most difficult guitar song of the game.

The Big Changes:

There are some big ways in which Rock Band steps away from formulas established by Guitar Hero. We thought we'd fill you in on the most significant changes, omitting the more obvious elements that are completely new, like the drums.

- The calibration tool for HDTV lag is way simpler. While a manual tool lets you do it yourself, one simple question that asks what type of TV you have (LCD, Plasma, etc.) solves most of the problems.
- One huge change for guitar and bass is the fact that overdrive (used to be star power) can be recharged in the midst of deployment.
- The number of stars you've gotten on a song is shown in real time, letting you see how you're progressing. In addition to stars, you'll acquire fans during the big band world tour mode. On low difficulty settings, your maximum number of fans will cap out pretty low – increase the challenge to get more.
- Number of stars, fans, and progress in specific cities are the primary tools that unlock new cities, songs, and venues. You'll also unlock things like roadies and tour buses as you continue.
- Players can change up the difficulty on any instrument at any time throughout the world tour.
- The game tutorials are hosted by real honest-to-goodness musicians. Even if you think you're pretty hot stuff, you should check them out.

The Big Tips:



Guitar

- Take advantage of those high frets on tough solos. Finger-tap your way through the toughest fast passages without strumming – it also makes you feel pretty awesome.
- Since energy continues to build up after you deploy into overdrive, try to tip up at a time in the song that will let you create one long chained combo at x8.

Bass

- You may have the luxury of watching the other players more carefully – wait until the moment they deploy overdrive to tip up for a unison bonus.
- Sure, the bass usually has fewer notes, but each one can end up counting for more. Maintaining long streaks is essential for high scores – once you pass x4 you'll head into a special bass groove for even higher multipliers.

Singing

- If you think you're pretty awesome, start a playthrough where you sing and play an instrument. We'll talk after you've beaten Expert (on both) with that approach. Then we might concede your awesomeness.

Drums

- The red pad and the kick pedal are way more important to nail than the other colored pads. Keep that in mind as you learn those harder rhythm parts.
- We spent the first hour banging those pads like there was no tomorrow – bad idea. Light, quick taps are the way to go for accuracy and precision.

The cowbell isn't loud enough? Clearly, you haven't gone out and purchased a real cowbell to supplement your Rock Band instruments. You should get on that.

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DATA FILE

More News You Can Use

SWEET SAMBA FOR Wii

Dreamcast's cult music game Samba de Amigo is coming to the Wii from Sega and famed developer Gearbox (Borderlands). The title will not utilize the maracas controllers required of the Dreamcast version, but naturally will use the Wii remote and nunchuk instead when it releases this spring.

JERICHO SAYS NO

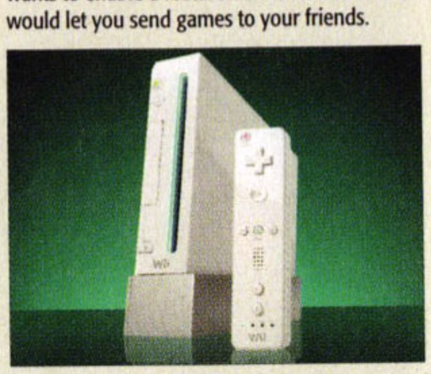
Codemasters and Clive Barker have stood tall in the face of the notoriously tough German ratings board. The pair have decided not to edit the console versions of Jericho per the board's recommendation, and will therefore not be releasing console versions of the game in the country. Then again, given how bad the title is, maybe Clive's artistic integrity is something that shouldn't be left intact.

NETFLIX CONSIDERS CONSOLES

Movie rental service Netflix says it's considering how to deliver high-def HD-DVD and Blu-ray movies via the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3. The company has already started offering movie downloads via your computer.

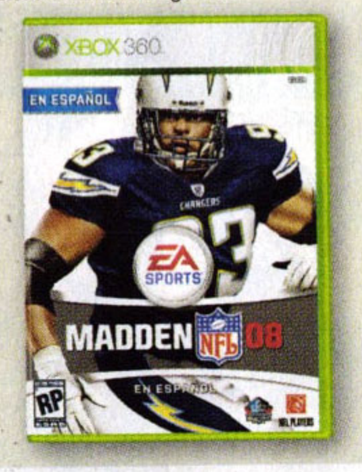
Wii PRICE CUT MOOT

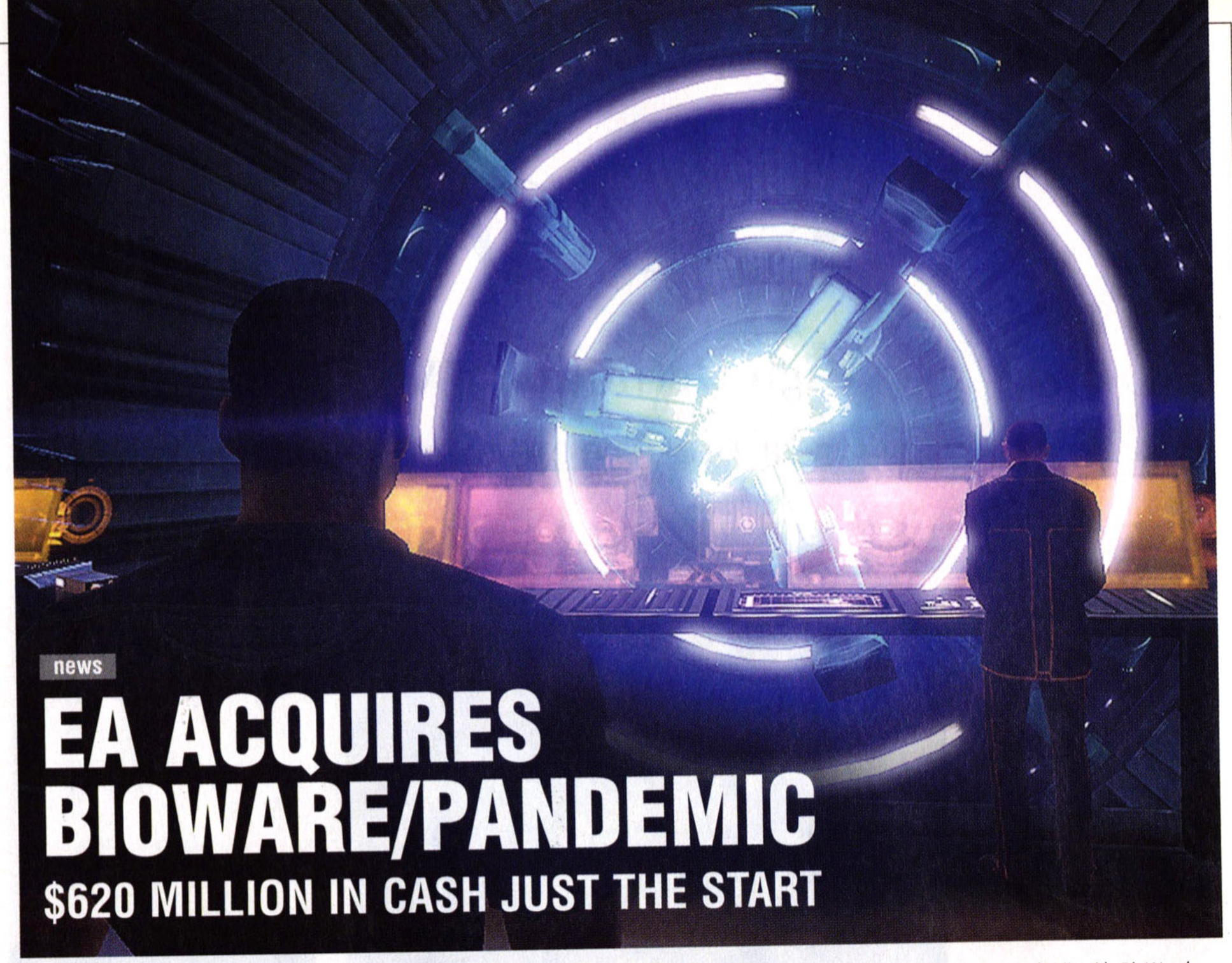
Nintendo President Satoru Iwata has denied wishful rumors of a Wii price cut. In other Wii news, CNN Money reports that the company wants to enable a feature on the console which would let you send games to your friends.



MADDEN IN SPANISH

EA Sports is releasing Madden NFL 08 en Español, which features exclusive Spanish language content including play-by-play, color commentary, and music for the PS2 and Xbox 360 this December. EA says it is considering releasing other stand-alone Spanish language versions of some of its games.





news

EA ACQUIRES BIOWARE/PANDEMIC

$620 MILLION IN CASH JUST THE START

Just as industry giants Microsoft and Bungie are pulling apart, another pair – well, trio actually – is coming together in a big way. The world's biggest third-party publisher, Electronic Arts, has acquired one of the world's most well-known and respected development pairs, BioWare/Pandemic. The deal was sealed for over $800 million, including $620 million in cash, and it will become official in January pending approval.

Two years ago, BioWare (Mass Effect) and Pandemic (Mercenaries 2) merged with the help of venture capital firm Elevation Partners. Elevation Partners featured U2 singer Bono, but more importantly, former EA president John Riccitiello, who sat on Elevation's board. After the deal with BioWare/Pandemic went through, Riccitiello returned to EA, becoming the publisher's CEO – a position he held with BioWare/Pandemic through Elevation Partners. No doubt, Riccitiello is a key cog in EA acquiring BioWare/Pandemic. The leadership of both developers agrees Riccitiello sold them on the creative benefits and freedom of working with EA – something that the publisher is not known for.

Both BioWare and Pandemic say that their respective leadership and studio structure will remain intact – including their names – although both will be a part of EA Games. Microsoft's publishing of Mass Effect (shown) will also remain untouched, although this acquisition certainly opens the door for EA publishing subsequent Mass Effect titles – which it will likely handle. With this deal, EA becomes the owner of Jade Empire, Mass Effect, and Dragon Age, among others, as well as Pandemic's Mercenaries, Saboteur, and Full Spectrum Warrior properties. Past titles/agreements such as BioWare's Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic and Pandemic's Destroy All Humans will remain under their respective partnerships.

Owning the cream-of-the-third-party-crop is a reward in and of itself, but EA has specific plans for BioWare/Pandemic. During a conference call, EA CFO Warren Jenson explained, "We are currently underrepresented in key genres – RPG, action, and adventure. In calendar year 2006 these genres represented 36 percent of the North America segment and we estimate 29 percent in Europe. With Pandemic and BioWare we now how have the potential to move into a strong competitive position in these genres as we expect to bring 10 franchises to market in the next few years – six of which are wholly owned."

> **"WE CAN'T LET THE FANS DOWN, AND WE'RE NOT GOING TO."**
> – BioWare co-founder Dr. Ray Muzyka

Riccitiello himself also specifically mentioned BioWare's MMO that it is developing in its Austin, Texas studio as an opportunity for EA's "further expansion into the MMO space." There has been talk that this MMO is Star Wars/KOTOR related, and the recent announcement of a BioWare/LucasArts project seems to confirm this. Riccitiello also says that both BioWare and Pandemic are working on titles for the Nintendo DS and Wii, with BioWare's Sonic RPG for the DS presumably being one of them.

Right now, everyone is saying and promising the right things, but it cannot be ignored that gamers are worried about the consequences of this deal. If one of the most powerful independent developers can be bought, what does the future hold for other independents? EA will surely benefit from the sharing of technology amongst its studios that this deal will bring, but how much creative freedom will BioWare and Pandemic get from a company that is reputed to have a shareholders-first-gamers-second attitude? Years ago, both Origin Systems and Westwood were creative studios that were acquired by EA only to see that creativity die on the vine.

On the other hand, EA-acquired studios such as Criterion (Burnout) and Digital Illusions CE (Battlefield) have seemed to retain their independence and vision, and the world will be watching to see if BioWare and Pandemic can do the same. This is something that BioWare co-founder Ray Muzyka promises will not be lost. "One of our core values – quality of workplace, quality of product, and entrepreneurship – those are important to us, and they're in the context of a couple of things. One of them is integrity and one of them is humility. We know at BioWare that we're only as good as our next game. We can't let the fans down, and we're not going to."

For more on this, head over to our Connect Interview section which features BioWare president and CEO, respectively, Drs. Greg Zeschuk and Ray Muzyka, on page 48.

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the top 10 dying videogame trends

We're not making any judgments here – we're just calling it the way we see it. There are all sorts of familiar conventions a lot of us grew up with, but many of them have begun to fade over time. While some of these still show up occasionally, others look like they're going to die out entirely pretty soon. Say your goodbyes now while you still can.

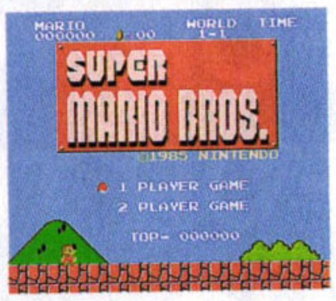
1 System Exclusives

There was a day not so long ago when buying a console was as easy as picking your favorite franchise and finding out which system it played on. Admittedly, there are still some major first-party games that are pulling in the crowds, but the all important third-party publishers are increasingly uninterested in settling for sales on only one system. Why tap only one segment of the gaming population when a little added expense can create ports that tap them all? Microsoft, Sony, and Nintendo all continue to work hard to "convince" their partners to deliver exclusive games. Unfortunately for them, those tactics are proving less and less successful.

2 High Difficulty

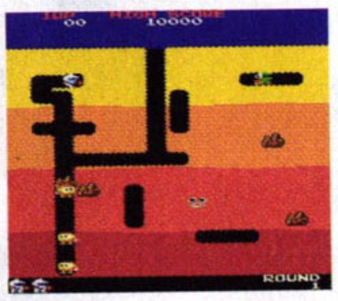
Plenty of games still deliver hardcore thrills that'll send you cursing to the last checkpoint. However, by and large, publishers and developers alike are opting for that all-important "accessible" word in the products that reach the public. While not everyone likes it, it's hard to blame them. More and more new gamers are entering the fold every year if statistics are to be believed. With them comes a need to cater to a wider array of skill levels, and that means games that are less challenging than they were 10 years ago.

3 Points



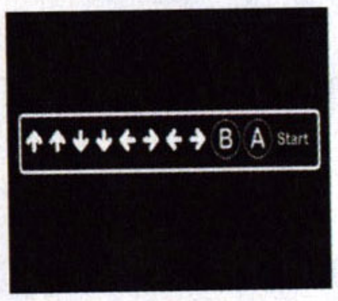
It's funny to think how big a part of the gaming landscape these used to be, since very few of the mainstream games in the last year include them at all. In their day, points were often the only measure of skill that let you broadcast your gaming ability to the world. Even in arcades, few games had true simultaneous multiplayer, so if you were looking for competition, fighting for the highest score was the only way to go, so you could show your initials to the world. The mysterious, omnipresent "AAA" must be the best gamer in the universe.

4 Extra Lives



Here's a concept that has all but disappeared in everything except throwback games out to emulate an older style. Before save games or even password-based continue systems, it was only your "extra mans" that staved off a return to the title screen. These days, developers would have a lot of pissed off gamers if a finite number of lives sent them reeling back to the beginning of that 20-hour epic. The days of scouring the level for that one-up are all but gone.

5 Cheat Codes



Take a look through your recent back issues of this magazine, and take stock of the cheat codes we print each month. As a general rule, the majority fall into one of three categories: open world playground games, kid-targeted releases, and sports titles. And even these are becoming less and less common. Other games tend not to include them at all. Developers are still implementing tons of cool secrets in their games, but many are eliminating cheats that effectively break the games they've worked so hard to balance. Hmm. Funny, that.

6 Save Points

Maybe there are some dissenters out there, but to these we say good riddance. For years, gamers were slaves to these flashing points of light or spinning, blinking signs – forced to keep playing until we found one so we wouldn't lose the last hour of work. Checkpoints and auto-saving have largely abolished the practice in all but a few game styles – most notably RPGs. While we're on the subject, what's with the idea of "Continue Without Saving?" Who does that?

7 Genres

If you've ever glanced at the style bullets in front of our articles, you'll notice we apply some pretty loose terminology to most game styles, and for good reason. Large scale triple-A games are rapidly expanding beyond the realms of easily classified genres. Sure, BioShock is first-person, but is it purely a shooter? And all you Madden players out there – you know that Superstar mode you like so much? Yeah, that's pretty much an RPG stuffed into your sports game. More complex games mean more complicated classifications.

8 Arcade Ports

Younger game players may not recall the exciting experience in the '80s and early '90s of stepping into one of those old arcades to see the wildly advanced graphics and sound that your home systems could never match. Now, home consoles are so sophisticated, most arcade releases just can't keep pace – there's just not enough time and money behind the games to let them compete. It's a sad cycle that has all but banished traditional arcades in the U.S. No arcades – no arcade ports. It's as simple as that.

9 Complex HUDs

Seventeen health meters, four different ammo counters, a giant map, and a text scroll do not make for a better game. It was a tough lesson for the industry to learn, but more and more developers are embracing the idea of simple heads-up displays that reveal only the most relevant info. By abolishing excess clutter, developers are communicating with players through indirect ways that mesh with the world of the game and its character. That is to say, game developers are some pretty darn smart and creative people.

10 Split Screen

For years, the only way to get down with some serious multiplayer was by huddling around that tiny TV in your buddy's college dorm room. What? We know we weren't the only ones. With the advent of great online systems, more people are keeping their screens to themselves and playing through that crazy series of tubes. Even so, we cheer the games that have kept the feature alive. There's just something about smacking your friend on the back of the head so you can shoot his character onscreen – you can't do that online.

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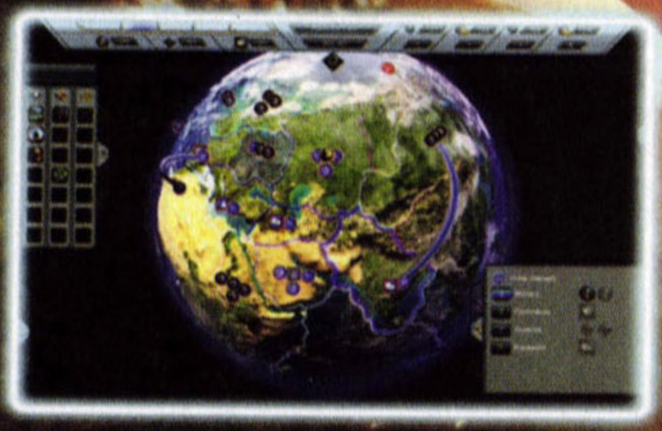

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news

THE USER EXPERIENCE

LOOKING AT THE WAY YOU PLAY

The moments most treasured by gamers are usually those filled with intense action or shocking story revelations. However, most triple-A titles have an array of features at work under the surface to allow these extraordinary experiences to be delivered. These front-end options may not be as memorable as awesome weapons or cool characters, but they can remove barriers and let users interact with games as intuitively as possible. This month GI looks at three aspects of pure usability that help facilitate seamless gameplay, and examines why every title doesn't include them.

CUSTOM CONTROLS

At some point or another, every gamer has wanted to change something about a game's button layout. It could be as simple as flipping the confirm and cancel buttons, or as complicated as giving the entire control scheme an overhaul. While most PC games have been including this option for years, it is surprisingly rare among console titles. Robin Walker, designer and co-creator of Team Fortress, explains why he considers it important for players to have the freedom to customize their controls: "First, there are a growing number of disabled gamers who require the ability to highly customize their controls to be able to play at all. Second, players enter our game with a history of playing other games, and we want to provide as smooth an entry for them as possible." This reasoning seems so sound that it's hard to imagine why the feature isn't included in every game. However, according to Walker, it may not always be easy. "It depends on your engine architecture," he tells us. "Our engine has been built with an interface between the control system and the game inputs, so allowing the player to customize the controls is an easy feature to include." Ultimately, the majority of players will use a game's default configurations anyway, but the ability to change the setup is invaluable for those who need it.

MULTIPLE SAVE FILES

If you've ever wanted to go back and replay your favorite part of a game, you know how nice it is to have multiple save files to load up. However, some of the biggest titles of this generation (like Gears of War and Resistance: Fall of Man) limit the number of saves per profile. Others, like The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion, allow players to create as many saves as their hard drives will allow. So why do some games still limit players to a handful of save slots? "The answer to this lies in the origins of console games," says Todd Howard, executive producer of Bethesda's Fallout 3. In the days of the NES, most games had limited storage or even had you writing down passwords. Because of these origins, Howard says, "There isn't an expectation that the player will be able to save whenever they want. Players are used to *not* saving their games now. They expect you to save it for them, at the right times. Now take the PC side, which has not had storage or memory issues historically, and you get the 'save anytime' culture. Now that many traditionally PC developers, like [Bethesda], are doing more on consoles, we keep that mentality. As a player, I'm happy to see more games use the autosave in addition to save anywhere mentality. It's best to have both."

SUBTITLES

In addition to being useful for hearing-impaired gamers, subtitles can help you to catch every last bit of important dialogue. Even so, this is far from a standard option in current games. We talked to Patrice Desilets, creative director of Assassin's Creed, about why gamers aren't always able to read along with the action. "Subtitles are important, and I personally wanted them in [Assassin's Creed]," he reveals. "But, because of time, to include some features others might have to get cut. For example, we are fully localized into six languages." In other words, the absence of a particular feature in any game isn't necessarily a question of negligence; sometimes it just comes down to priorities. In an ideal world, every game would allow players to adjust every aspect of the interface to their liking; sometimes the business reality of the industry can just keep some of the little touches from being applied. "My personal goal is to include as many usability options in action/adventure games as you see in a sports title," Desilets continues. "Replay cameras, AI options…but in action/adventure titles, those things are often done at the end of the development cycle. Those things are important, but it is also important to ship on time."

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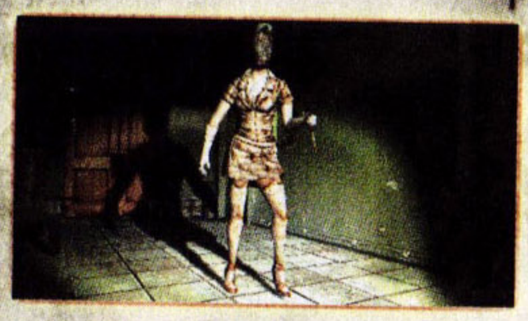

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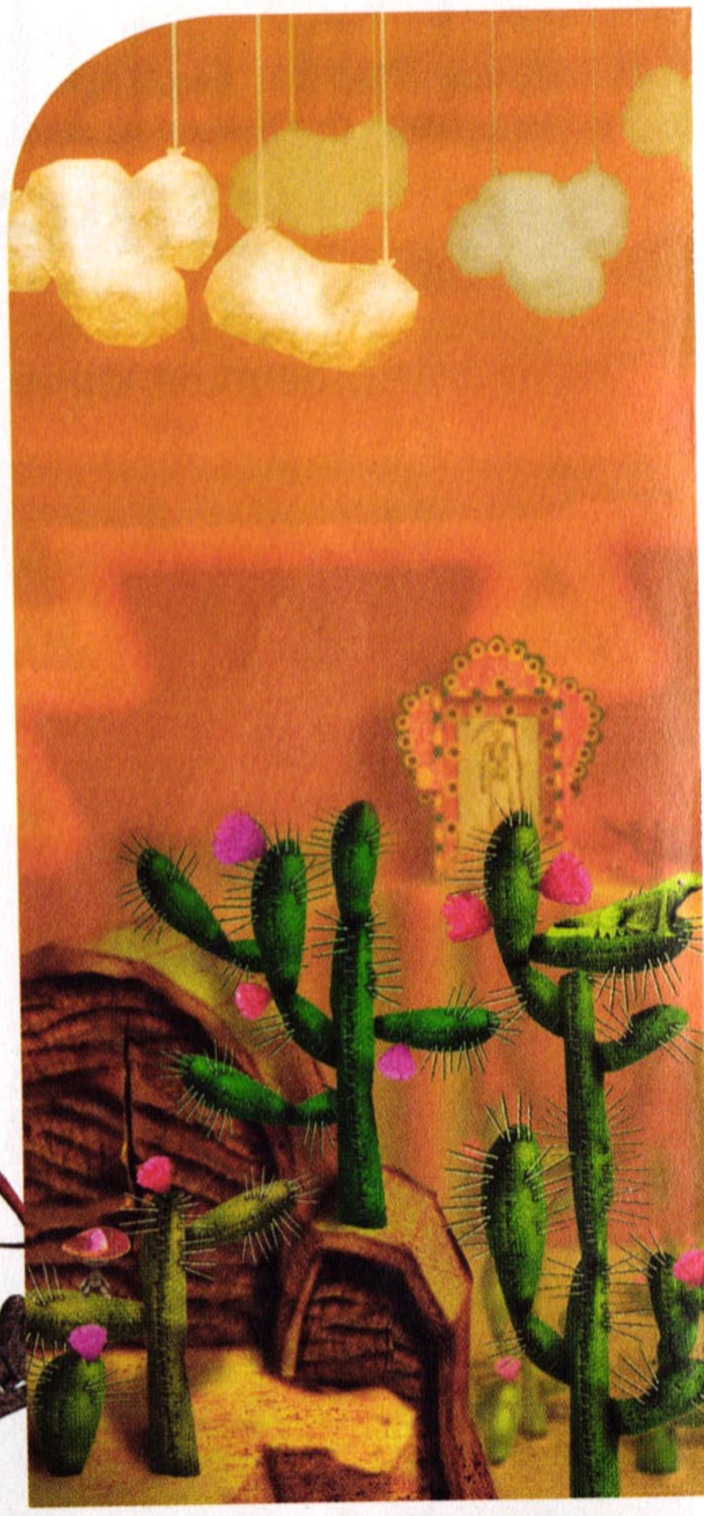
THE ART OF LittleBigPlanet

While there hasn't been a lot of new info on LittleBigPlanet since this year's E3, we were lucky enough this month to sit down and chat with Kareem Ettouney, art director at Media Molecule. He talked to us about the challenges of creating art that would be reshaped by gamers, the original inspiration for the stunning visual style, and why gamers are drawn to the simplicity of LittleBigPlanet. To read the full interview, make sure and check out this month's online Unlimited section.



What was the inspiration for the Little Big Planet art style?

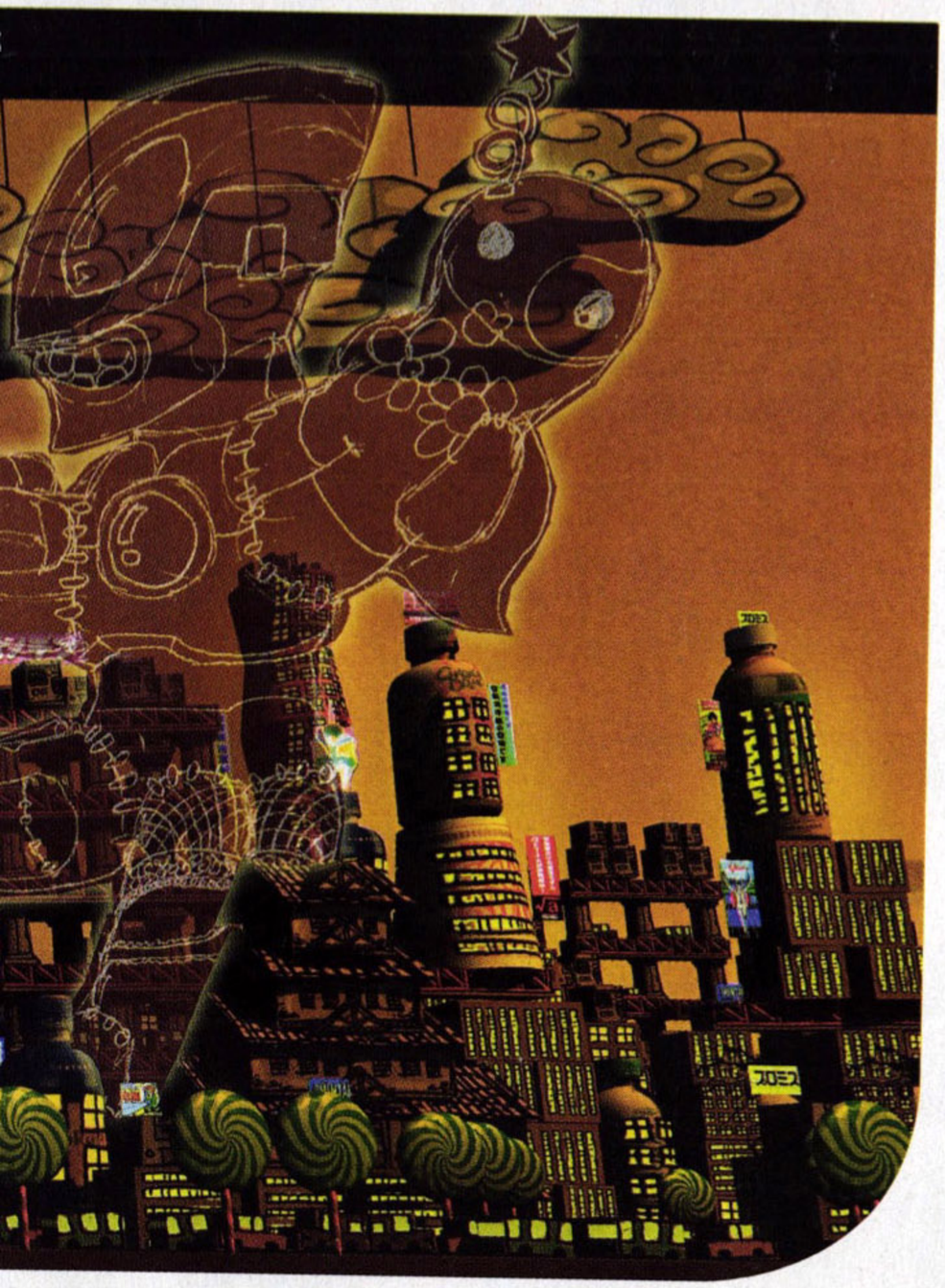
One of the things that we were really big on in coming up with the style for LittleBigPlanet was not to go the route of simply going with the cool looks that we like. We wanted the style to emerge from the game and become an integral part of the experience. It's an empowering game that gets players to create what they want, so how could you do a style that is versatile enough and has such a flexible range to its visuals, but also still have a cohesive feel? We discovered that the handmade look is the look of the people. People, being creative in their own sheds or gardens, wouldn't go do some Renaissance architecture. They would go and get some leftover materials from here and some boxes from there and glue it together and do something creative. So the handmade cloth world is the look that celebrates people's imaginations, and it's quite a versatile look that copes well with the user-created content.

Were there particular visual influences on the art style in anything from traditional art to movies, TV, animation, or other mediums?

Yes. There were many. We were inspired a lot by puppet theater. We really were looking outside of games to get our inspiration. We really wanted this game to extend beyond the visual range of games. So we were looking at things with a very open mind. We were looking all over the place, finding the inspirations that were all around us.

Are there special challenges to creating art that is largely going to be rearranged, flipped, layered, and changed by the gamers who will be playing the game?

Man, this has got to be the hardest challenge ever. The thing is, what is good art? When you see something and it makes you think, "That looks really cool"? It's because of the composition, the vision, the fixed lighting. You compose. But when you say, "Make me a



good style, but you can't compose, and you can't lay it out. Instead, it has to be very malleable, and very flexible. It has to look cool in all possible variations." A great analogy is LEGO. You give people the building blocks, and you give them some demos, some examples to build things like castles or cool cars – they can stick to that and start building, or they can start making their own combinations. But because the building blocks are so well designed, there is always an overriding LEGO style. So, we started applying that same idea to our world. And by following that arrangement, even though you have a lot of freedom, you still have a cohesive umbrella that binds everything together. In order to compliment freedom, you have to have things that are fixed.

People have been very attracted to the look of the game – some combination of cuteness, movement, and quirkiness not present in many titles. Was this a quantified goal in the original design of the game?

Totally. One of the things we all share in our vision is that we never like to show off technology for the sake of it. We don't want people to go, "Check these normal maps – they're wicked!" We always want to serve the vision. If the vision is handmade, then we'd be really flattered if someone said. "Look at that cardboard creation and how cool it looks." In order to do that, we have to have a very clear vision. We also didn't want it to be cute. We wanted it to be approachable. And they are two different things. You've got the little character jumping around, and he is quite cute, but then you have things from all over the world. You can have eyes on a football. You can have a cardboard box with skateboard legs. And it starts looking a little mad, and it could be dark, even. It's almost experimental in its potential. From the mechy, army type textures, to the very delicate, sophisticated fabric textiles from all over the world. Combining all of that together gives you quite an interesting look.

We've spoken with previous art directors in both Japan and North America – do you feel there is anything that characterizes game art in Europe or in individual parts of Europe?

I don't believe, especially nowadays with the amount of connectivity in the world, there is any such thing anymore as European art, or Asian art, or American art. Because we all have the Internet, we all have the same books, the same movies that we like. Five hundred years ago, in order to see Michelangelo, you had to get on your horse and go to Italy and see the Sistine Chapel. But now you can just type it in Google and see what you want. So, no, I think art is art everywhere. We all plug in and love the same things.

What will make LittleBigPlanet an artistic success in your mind?

Seeing people's creations looking cool.

TEEN
T
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Language
Violence

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They blame you for a global threat.
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syphon filter
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LOOSE TALK

Hot Gaming Gossip

ROCKSTAR'S BAD MOJO

Developer Rockstar has always been known as a maverick in the industry, both in a good and bad way, and the creative talent at the top isn't shy about running the ship the way it wants. Cripes, they put out a table tennis game! Anyway, Loose Talk has heard that to dispel the bad vibes in the developer's New York headquarters a witch doctor was brought in and swung beads around and blew smoke in employees' faces.

■ 2K's Pavlik, left

2K SPORTS BOXING GAME: ROUND 1

American-born middleweight champion of the world Kelly "The Ghost" Pavlik recently let slip that 2K Sports has licensed him for inclusion in an upcoming boxing title. 2K reps would neither confirm nor deny the rumor, but since it's come from Pavlik himself, it's hard to see it as anything but legit. Besides, we're not going to call the middleweight champion a liar to his face or in print!

BETHESDA GEARING UP FOR MMO

ZeniMax Media just received $300 million in investment from an equity partner; the importance being that developer Bethesda (Elder Scrolls & Fallout) is a wholly owned subsidiary of ZeniMax. Two particular things this money is ear-marked for are acquisitions and the development of multiple MMOs by ZeniMax. We hope this points to an Elder Scrolls MMO, but Bethesda isn't officially talking just yet. A Bethesda representative told us, "ZeniMax Online Studios hasn't announced what they are working on." Too bad for Ben. We just killed him as a sacrificial offering.

SEGA'S FEARS

Everyone's wondering what will happen to games like BioWare's Sonic RPG with Sega now that the developer is signed to EA. While the contract BioWare signed with Sega will be honored and the game delivered, we've heard some concern from Sega's side regarding the game now that the developer is property of a rival publisher. And this is not all the company is worried about. Bizarre Creations' The Club (shown) for Sega is also contractually due even though Activision just bought that studio. Here's hoping that Sega's fears of half-hearted work are unfounded.

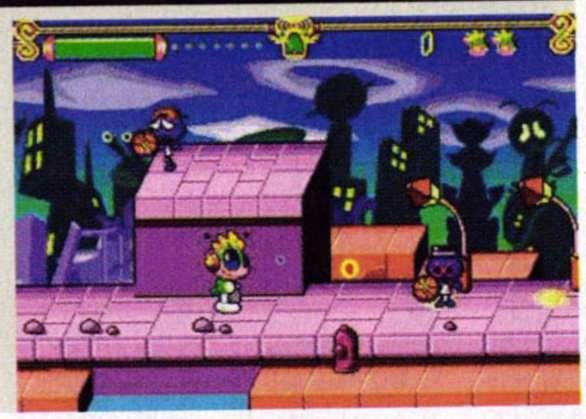
Got some insider info? Email us at loosetalk@gameinformer.com and we'll be all ears.

NAME THAT GAME

Test Your Sight

Music games are all the rage nowadays, and although this game's music was an integral part of the experience, it was actually a side-scrolling platformer on the Sega Genesis 32X. It takes place in the land of Rhythma, and you play as a grasshopper and his friend Katy through the game's seven stages. The title features different styles of music like rock, rap, and funk, and the soundtrack changes tempo depending on how well you are doing.

(Answer on page 44)



news

LESS IS MORE

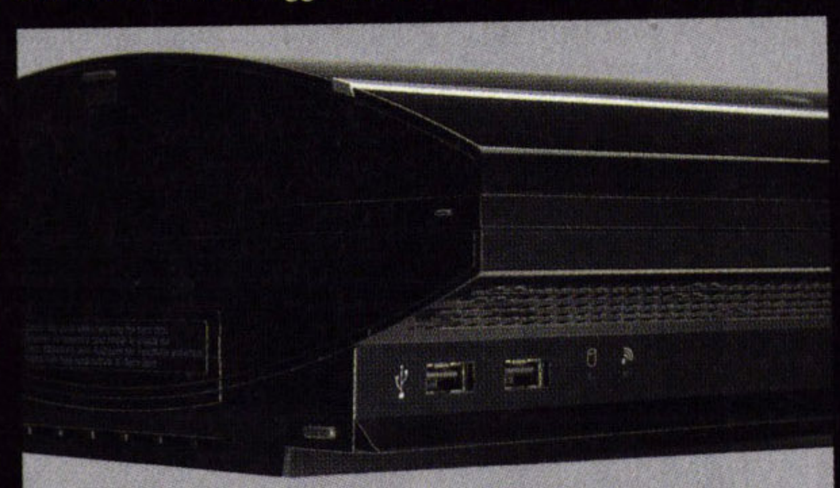
BOTH 360/PS3 GET NEW PRICES/SKUS

It's not customary for Europe to get something before North America does, but that's exactly what happened when Sony released a $399, 40GB version of the PS3 on the continent before it hit our shores in early November. Also announced was a price drop for the 80GB PS3, which is down to $499.

Although the new $399 unit represents a reasonably priced edition of the PS3, the price doesn't come without its sacrifices. While the unit still contains a Blu-ray drive, built-in wireless, and a hard drive, absent from the unit are backwards compatibility, two of the units' four USB ports, and the SD, Memory Stick, and compact flash ports.

Game Informer talked to Peter Dille, Sony's senior vice president of marketing about the new PS3, which he told us was planned before E3. "[The $399 PS3 is] a model that gets us down to a price point that we've targeted for some time." Although Dille declined to offer a specific number, he said Sony expects a "significant uptake" in sales, noting that after one week of sales in Europe, the 40GB unit created a 175 percent increase in PS3 sales.

Despite all the price and SKU jockeying that Sony has been doing in an effort to spur sales and find a price point that consumers are comfortable with, Dille doesn't believe that consumers are confused over the different PS3 versions and the dropping of console features between the 40GB and 80GB editions. "From our perspective, getting the PS3 cost-reduced down to $399 was more important than maintaining every ounce of backwards compatibility, and our research suggests that consumers understand that."



NEW PlayStation 3 (40GB)

IN:

- $399 price point
- Free Spider-Man 3 Blu-ray movie

OUT:

- Backwards compatibility
- USB Ports down to two from four (shown)
- SD/Memory Stick/Compact Flash ports

NEW PlayStation 3 (80GB)

- New $499 price point (down from $599)
- PlayStation 3 (60GB/$499): May be available at retailers, but is no longer being manufactured
- PlayStation 3 (20GB/$499): No longer being manufactured

THE NEW XBOX 360 ARCADE SYSTEM

With little fanfare, Microsoft has started selling the Xbox 360 Arcade system for $279 as a replacement for the similarly priced core system. The Arcade system comes with a wireless controller, HDMI output, five pre-loaded Xbox Live Arcade demos like Pac-Man Championship Edition and Uno, and a 256MB memory card. The platform does not feature a hard drive, and a headset and network cable are sold separately.

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PLAYSTATION 3
Does not include online play

XBOX 360® LIVE™

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games

CAPCOM SHOWS ITS CARDS

Wii NABS MONSTER HUNTER & OKAMI

Capcom recently held an event in London and showed off some of its upcoming plans, which highlighted a new series to go along with some fan favorites. The company also is juggling things up a bit by bringing games and series such as Lost Planet (PS3), Monster Hunter (Wii), and Okami (Wii) to new platforms, as well as debuting Super Street Fighter II Turbo HD Remix to Xbox Live Arcade.

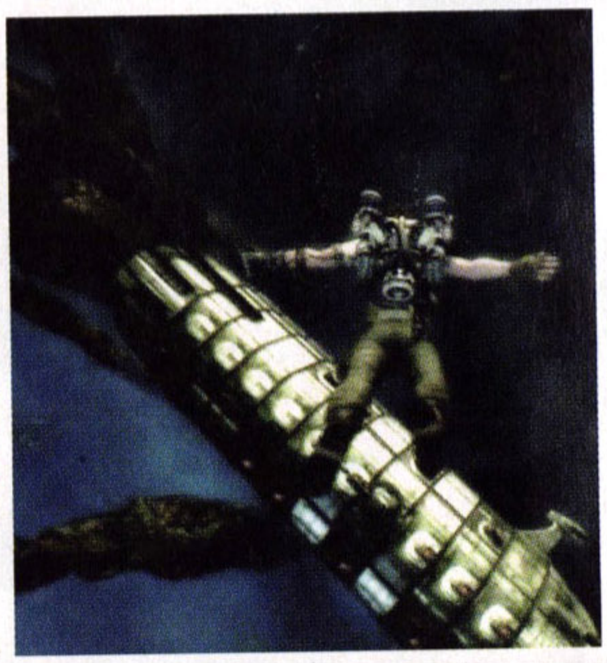
For a first look at Capcom's Bionic Commando check out page 92 or turn to 126 for We Love Golf!

LOST PLANET (PS3)

This "early 2008" title features all of 360 downloadable content and PC extras, including the additional characters.

OKAMI (Wii)

Moving Okami's flowing calligraphy brush gameplay to the Wii is a natural fit, and gamers should expect this title in 2008. If you missed it the first time, this is the perfect opportunity to play one of 2006's best games.

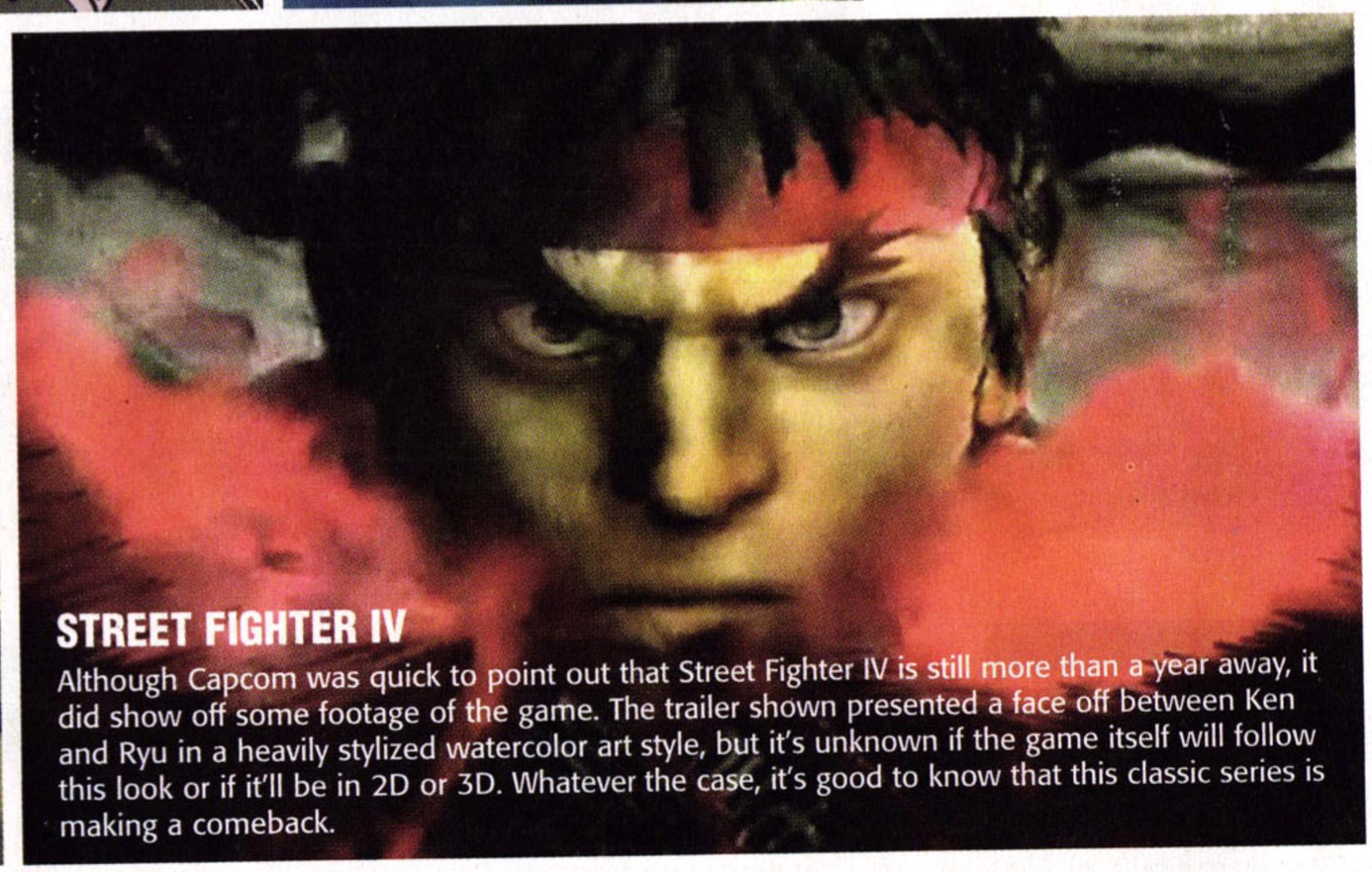


DARK VOID

American developer Airtight Games (featuring team members from Crimson Skies) is behind Dark Void, and the game draws from that heritage in presenting both aerial and land-based combat. With his jet pack, the hero also merges the two in this third-person action title. Dark Void's story tells of the return of The Watchers, an alien race that created and lorded over humanity until they were banished. The game is scheduled for 2008, although no specific platforms have been announced.

ACE ATTORNEY APOLLO JUSTICE

Now that the Phoenix Wright trilogy is through, Capcom is keeping the courtroom drama flowing with a new character, Apollo Justice, as he and his magician sidekick Trucy take on rock star (literally) prosecutor Klavier Gavin.



STREET FIGHTER IV

Although Capcom was quick to point out that Street Fighter IV is still more than a year away, it did show off some footage of the game. The trailer shown presented a face off between Ken and Ryu in a heavily stylized watercolor art style, but it's unknown if the game itself will follow this look or if it'll be in 2D or 3D. Whatever the case, it's good to know that this classic series is making a comeback.

SIGNAL LOST

SIGNAL LOST

SIGNAL LOST

SIGNAL LOST

SIGNAL LOST

SIGNAL LOST

SIGNAL LOST

S.O.S.

S.O.S.

S.O.S.

S.O.S.

S.O.S.

"DILEMMA" DOESN'T BEGIN TO DESCRIBE IT.

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MATURE 17+

M

Blood
Partial Nudity
Sexual Themes
Violence

ESRB CONTENT RATING www.esrb.org

Microsoft game studios

BIOWARE CORP

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MATURE 17+
M
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
Blood and Gore
Intense Violence
Sexual Themes
Strong Language

XBOX 360 LIVE

Games for Windows

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PLAYSTATION 3

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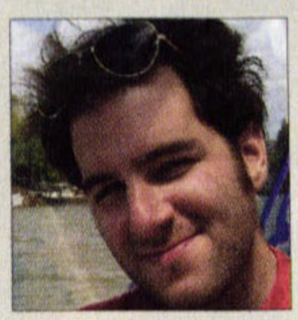
TOP FIVES

Favorites From Industry Pros And GI Readers



DEVELOPER
SCOTT BALABAN
Partner, Gameblend Studios (WordJong)

1 Advance Wars – GBA
2 GoldenEye 007 – N64
3 Mario Kart DS – DS
4 The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time – N64
5 Street Fighter II – Arcade

READER
ERIK RODRIGUEZ
Norfolk, Virginia (aboard the USS Normandy)

1 Final Fantasy VII – PSone
2 God of War – PS2
3 Metal Gear Solid – PSone
4 Conker's Bad Fur Day – N64
5 Grand Theft Auto III – PS2

Send Top Fives and a photo of yourself to:

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

TOP TEN

Lists...Everybody Loves Lists...

Top Ten Forgotten Tenets of the Assassin's Creed

10 Learn to swim
9 Pushing lunatics into market stalls is hilarious
8 Always inspect rooftops for structural integrity
7 The phrase "please, sir, I need some money" really means "stab me in the neck"
6 Get immunized against hay-borne pathogens
5 Your ring fingers are valuable. Keep them at all costs
4 Swords, knives, and daggers should not be worn conspicuously over one's clothing
3 Try to have descendants who have a shot at scoring with Kristen Bell
2 Flags are important historical markers. Under no circumstance should you move or collect them
1 It's okay to kill people who overemphasize the "ass" in "assassin"

Name That Game Answer: Tempo

news

NINTENDO'S ONLINE NEEDS

SUPER SMASH BROS. BRAWL TO JUMPSTART ONLINE?

At this year's E3, Nintendo of America president Reggie Fils-Aime inadvertently shone the spotlight on the company's continuing trouble in the online space. Answering his own query about whether or not Nintendo had "gotten serious" about online, Fils-Aime said: "What if we already did and you just didn't notice." Getting gamers to see the Wii as a viable online machine has been difficult, indeed.

Nintendo has made a very good effort to support the Wii's Virtual Console service, which has seen 7.8 million downloads by the company's own recent estimation. However, offering old titles for download is only one component of a console's online strategy. Where we've seen the system struggle is in offering online multiplayer play through either first- or third-party titles.

While it's good to see Nintendo games such as Super Smash Bros. Brawl and Mario Kart Wii contain competitive online multiplayer, when it comes to third-party offerings, it's a mixed bag. Although games like Guitar Hero III and MX vs. ATV: Untamed allow online play for the Wii, others such as Tony Hawk's Proving Ground or LEGO Star Wars The Complete Saga offer no such option – even while allowing online play on the other next-gen systems. But perhaps the one aspect which does the most harm to Nintendo's online claims is the fact that the Wii is simply missing a number of online multiplayer opportunities because games such as Rock Band, Call of Duty 4, and Fracture – to name but a few – don't even appear on the console.

As always when it comes to Nintendo, garnering good third-party support is the key. Until the Wii cultivates better products from its partners, the system's online strategy will continue to go unnoticed.

Super Smash Bros. Brawl

LEGO Star Wars: The Complete Saga

Donkey Kong Barrell Blast

RECENT/UPCOMING Wii GAMES WITH & WITHOUT ONLINE PLAY

	Wii Online Play?	Online Play On Other Systems?
NBA Live 08	Y	Y
Guitar Hero III	Y	Y
Donkey Kong Barrel Blast	N	N/A
FIFA Soccer 08	Y	Y
Table Tennis	N	Y
Tony Hawk's Proving Ground	N	Y
Battalion Wars 2	Y	N/A
LEGO Star Wars: The Complete Saga	N	Y
Medal of Honor Heroes 2	Y	N/A
Need for Speed Pro Street	N	Y
WWE Smackdown vs Raw 2008	N	Y
Nights: Journey of Dreams	Y*	N/A
Mario & Sonic at the Olympic Games	N	N/A
Super Smash Bros. Brawl	Y	N/A
Super Swing Golf Season 2	N	N/A
MX vs. ATV: Untamed	Y	Y
Mario Kart Wii	Y	N/A
Samurai Warriors Katana	N	N/A

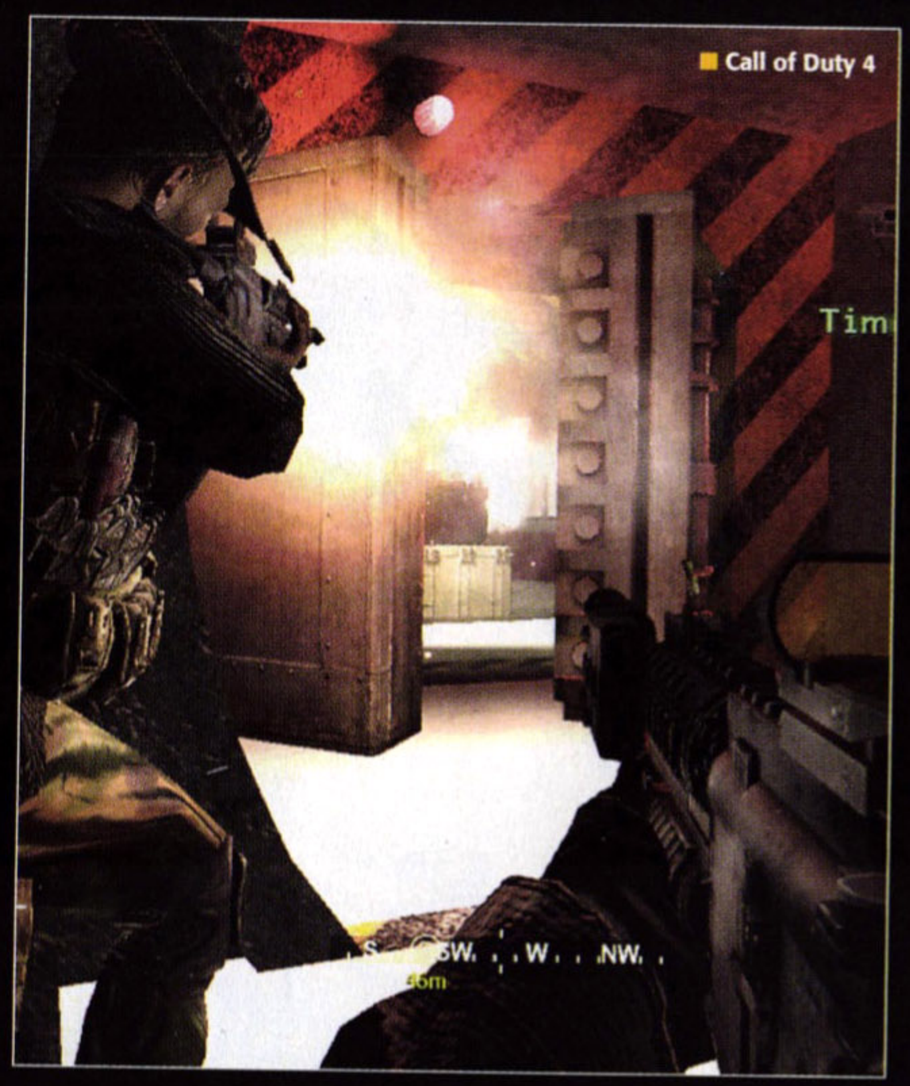
List of Wii games is not complete, and constitutes those that have a viable multiplayer experience. Third-party titles listed N/A denote Wii exclusives.

**Online play constitutes only the sharing of virtual pets*

Where The Grass Is Greener?

Here's a list of just some of the third-party titles with online multiplayer that will not appear on the Wii.

- Battlefield: Bad Company
- Borderlands
- Burnout Paradise
- Call of Duty 4
- End War
- Fracture
- Grand Theft Auto IV
- Prototype
- Rock Band



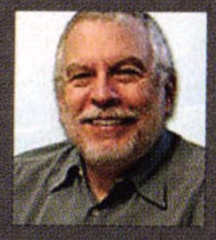
THE GOOD, THE BAD, THE UGLY

When You Want Your News Categorized With A Sarcastic Editorial Spin

QUOTE

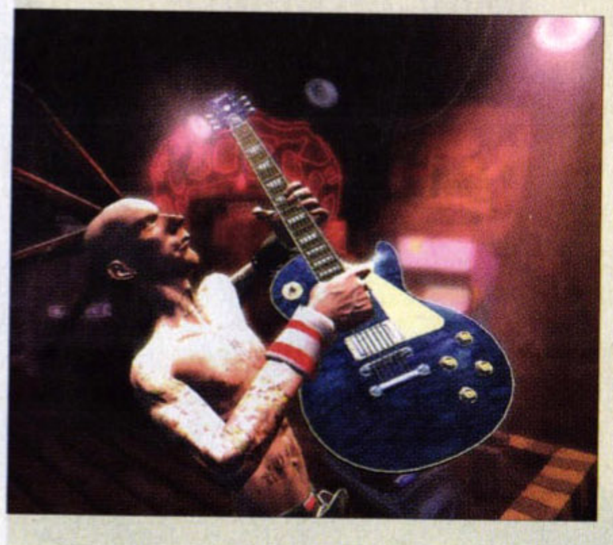
"Video games today are a race to the bottom. They are pure, unadulterated trash and I'm sad for that."

– video game godfather Nolen Bushnell



BAD

Japanese newspaper Nikkei Business Daily has reported that some third-party developers in that country are cooling on the Wii, stating that they feel that the system has been good for Nintendo but not as lucrative for others. Said one anonymous president of a developer, "The Wii is like the Billy's Boot Camp weight-loss program on DVD. People bought it out of curiosity, and it's likely a lot of them haven't used it."



GOOD?

A couple of months ago we reviewed Guitar Hero 3, and had some concerns about the lack of a simple cooperative quickplay option. Whether they listened to us or some other complainers, the kind folks at Neversoft have added a downloadable patch that fixes the problem. Unfortunately, folks without online are still out of luck since they have no way to get the patch.

UGLY

Delayed: Brothers in Arms: Hell's Highway, Mercenaries 2: World in Flames, the PS3 version of Unreal Tournament 3, and a whole slate of THQ titles (Destroy All Humans!: Path of the Furon, De Blob, and Frontlines: Fuel of War). Also being put on hiatus is Army of Two – but not before it was sent to the press for review. EA was nervous enough about the early comments about the review build that it decided to delay it.

GOOD

Movie industry executives have blamed the release of Halo 3 for prompting the worst movie box office totals for an October week since 1999. Halo 3 made $170 million its first day on sale compared to Hollywood's $80 million for Halo 3's release weekend.

'A DIFFERENT BREED'

GAME INFORMER

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MATURE 17+

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Blood
Drug Reference
Intense Violence
Strong Language

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PLAYSTATION 3

Games for Windows LIVE

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IN-STORES NOVEMBER 2007

Photo: Don Hammond

NEW ERA FOR BIOWARE

Drs. Greg Zeschuk and Ray Muzyka look towards the future as BioWare becomes part of Electronic Arts

GREG ZESCHUK & RAY MUZYKA

PRESIDENT AND CEO, BIOWARE

>> We already know BioWare is one of the world's greatest developers, but thanks to a recent acquisition they are part of the world's biggest publisher, EA. What does this mean for the future? We spoke to the company's founders to find out. <<

The announcement that you'd be acquired by EA took the industry by surprise, especially since you had merged with Pandemic and Elevation Partners a couple years ago. Many saw that as the new model for developers in the industry. Do you think that it was a failed experiment?

RAY: It was an incredibly successful model in that we created some real value and Electronic Arts saw the value that BioWare and Pandemic have – the great people and the great products. We're thrilled by their interest and the partnership they are offering to them. We see the opportunities that are coming to us through the partnership; the integration of our great development teams with EA's marketing support and research, resources, distribution, and sales. Really it's that integration that's going to allow us to make even better games in the future, and Pandemic as well.

In terms of creative freedom, do you have any guarantees in that respect from EA?

RAY: We're really well aligned with Frank Gibeau, who is the president of EA Games, and John [Riccitiello] in terms of the vision they express and the vision that we express. The passion that Frank has for the kind of games we make is evident. He's played a lot of our games; he's a big fan. We've learned a lot in the time in the time we spent with him. He asks great questions, and I think our games will be better as a result of that.

Will you be maintaining the BioWare name? Or will you become "EA Edmonton?"

RAY: EA has made it clear that it's their intention to preserve and foster the identity of BioWare within the EA Games label. It means something to consumers and it means something to our fans. Our development teams take a lot of pride in it.

"We find it really compelling, the new vision for EA and how it's aligned with our corporate values."

How much did this deal depend on John Riccitiello going back to EA?

RAY: John Riccitiello is a big part of that. We know him really well, we worked with him really well as our CEO at BioWare/Pandemic, and now that he's at the helm of EA we find it really compelling, the new vision for EA and how it's aligned with our corporate values. We want quality in the workplace, quality in our products. We're always trying to make our next project better than our last. Our mission statement is to deliver the best story-driven games in the world, and we think we can fulfill that – and even do better at it – working with EA.

Will your studios continue to operate in Edmonton and Austin, or are there structural changes that are going to happen?

GREG: In large part, it's great because it is business as usual, but with a twist. The twist being, as Ray said, better support integration into the whole chain of marketing and sales. We're still at BioWare making the games…the exciting part is the fact that we can get a broader reach, that we can access resources within the EA family.

Are you concerned about fan reaction? A lot of fans take a dim view of their favorite independent developer becoming a part of a company that's seen as a more of a monolithic corporation.

GREG: The games will speak for themselves…. We can say all we want, but we're going to prove it by making great games that fans love.

You've just released Mass Effect. What are you most satisfied with in the game and what do you wish you had more time to work on?

RAY: There are a couple of things that really stood out. One was the really compelling digital actors and the emotion that they convey when you're interacting with them. They feel really credible. The second thing that was really exciting for me was the traveling the galaxy thing – having your own starship and traveling to all these uncharted worlds.

GREG: To add a little color to one of Ray's answers about the characters, it's funny; I was actually watching an old animated CG TV show from about five years ago. I was completely blown away, because the Mass Effect stuff is miles ahead of it.

One thing that Mass Effect does really well, through the interactive script, is making you feel like you have a real stake in what's going on. Do you plan to carry over Mass Effect's dialogue system to other franchises? What could be improved in the future?

RAY: We would look at Mass Effect as another foundation for BioWare to continue to build on and improve. We have some other projects that are unannounced that are using that [dialogue] system and even enhancing it in other ways. We have some really cool ideas we haven't announced yet. It's just so natural – it feels like you're having a conversation with another person. It doesn't feel like you're playing a game. You're the director and the actor within the interactive experience.

Could you talk about some of those new ideas you have for the conversation system?

GREG: Not in specific. But there's always things when you finish a game where you wish you could have added this or added that. But we've also spoken to the fact that Mass Effect is going to be a trilogy, so we'll have interesting advances from what we did in the first one…. In a game like Dragon Age we're doing things a little differently than we are in Mass Effect. It's really down to the game itself and what you want the user experience to be.

(Continued on page 50)

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

Beginnings
1995

Zeschuk and Muzyka, along with fellow medical student Augustine Yip, co-found BioWare, one of the first companies that would put Canada on the map as a powerhouse in the gaming industry. At first, they work between shifts at local hospitals

First Strike
1996

BioWare, working with developer Pyrotek, releases Shattered Steel, a sci-fi shooter featuring giant mechs called Planet Runners. This promising first effort is a minor hit and eventually sells over 200,000 copies

Making Magic
1998

As longtime RPG fans, "The Doctors"and BioWare begin making D&D-themed titles, including Baldur's Gate, a series which would put the company on the map among PC fans worldwide

Going Console
2000

BioWare releases its first ever console game, MDK 2: Armageddon, which comes out for PC and Sega's ill-fated Dreamcast console. It would later be ported to PS2

The Next Epic
2002

BioWare delivers another epic action/RPG within the D&D universe, the much-lauded Neverwinter Nights

Using The Force
2003

BioWare enters another legendary universe with the amazing Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic. Many Star Wars fans still feel that this game was superior to any of the prequel trilogy films

To The East
2005

Using an original universe based on Eastern mythology, the company crafts the excellent Jade Empire. Although not as popular as KOTOR, the game garners strong reviews

A Merger
2005

BioWare merges with Pandemic in a deal worth $300 million. The deal is funded by private equity firm Elevation Partners, and is overseen by former EA exec John Riccitiello

Surprise!
2007

In a move that shocks the industry, BioWare/Pandemic announces that it has been acquired by mega-publisher EA in a deal reportedly worth more than $875 million

GREG ZESCHUK & RAY MUZYKA CONTINUED...

(from page 49)

"We would look at Mass Effect as another foundation for BioWare to continue to build on and improve."

How hard is it becoming to balance the need for action with the need for storytelling?

GREG: That's always a tricky balance. What we've been trying to do more of is create a concise story that runs down the center of the game and gives the player a lot of options around it. If they want to experience more or less of it, they can. We're also trying to make the story parts of the game fun and interesting. It's to the point where we've had experiences where we've shown non-gamers Mass Effect and they watched it and were enthralled.

RAY: What we do at BioWare is focus on what we call a "chain of activities." We have these pillars of gameplay, and the characters and story are one of those pillars. You have people that are really believable in an immersive setting and a story that really pulls you along. The other part is exploration and the customization and progression of your party and characters. And also combat that is visceral and fun. The player should be moving back and forth between these activities. You let them do what they want when they want to do it.

Have you played BioShock? It's interesting, because both BioShock and Mass Effect have great storytelling, but in almost completely opposite approaches. BioShock almost totally does away with cutscenes while Mass Effect makes them a core part of the gameplay.

GREG: It's interesting that the technology is now at a place where we can tell great stories and tell them in different ways. Like you said, ours are fairly explicit – it's there for you to watch and enjoy. Theirs are implicit, the little tape recorders you find and stuff like that.... But it's great to have storytelling come to the front, because that's where it starts elevating games to the art form level.

RAY: It's really a thrill to meet developers that are my idols in the industry. Ken and the guys at Irrational are some of those guys. For us, it's exciting to know that there's more than one way to tell a great story. The results are measured in the same way – if you make the player feel. That's how we measure success.

Mass Effect ends in a very interesting predicament. Will the next game pick up right from that point and will it utilize the player's save file from the first one? You've invested so much time in building that character.

GREG: That's one of the tricky things about doing a trilogy. How do you make it fit together? I can be definitive in saying that we are definitely going to use the save file that the original created. But beyond that we're still in the process of how we're going to start it. In terms of the story we're trying to tell, you have to have each installment feel like you've accomplished something significant. You can't feel like you're in the middle act and nothing's really resolved. You want each act to have you do something cool; it's got to start right and end right. The other thing to think about is [that] in between the installments we're doing some post-release content that will be interesting to folks.

What's the plan for rolling out downloadable content? Will you use the planets on the map that didn't have any action on them as outlets for new content?

RAY: We have a variety of ideas that we're trying to flesh out. We're waiting to get the feedback from the fans and understand what thing they find the most compelling.... I think our general premise on it is that you have a starship and you get to explore some cool new areas and another planet appears – maybe one that didn't have stuff on it before, now you realize that there's some alien ruins there or there's an invading fleet coming in. Ideas like that – you take it a little bit further and deliver a new questing area for people. That's one idea, but there are other ideas, too.

You've also got Dragon Age in the works, which you've referred to as the spiritual successor to Baldur's Gate. Does Dragon Age replace Baldur's for you in a sense?

GREG: No, for us this is more our unique creation. For years, we worked on some of the really classic role-playing [series]. This is a culmination of the things we learned. It's crafted in the way that we feel fits well with current audiences. For us, it's exciting because we get a chance to reacquaint ourselves with something we love, but at the same time bring it up to date with where the state of the art is.

How is Dragon Age going to compare with Oblivion, which is the state of the art right now for a fantasy RPG experience?

RAY: We were just talking about that. The guys at Bethesda set a high benchmark that we respect very much. We're big fans of their stuff. The thing we were talking about was that we were excited because we were having so much fun playing Dragon Age and at the end we said, "This totally holds up, and it raises the bar." In a friendly gesture back to our friends at Bethesda, we think it will raise the bar even further in how great fantasy/RPGs can be.

You've also announced that you're working on a MMO project at your Austin studio. What were the things that, when you were coming up with the project, that you said, "Here's something we can do different or better in this genre"?

GREG: We've both played our fair share of MMOs, so that's our starting point. I think we've always found that we've been partially engaged, but not fully engaged. There's times when we're addicted for three or four months, and we have a bunch of funny stories about how we started playing WOW together. We both said we were only going to play at certain times together, and we both caught each other secretly playing independently. [Laughs]

RAY: We certainly like the games, but the staying power hasn't been as strong. They totally enthrall a certain set of people, but we thought about how to make it an experience where you didn't have to have a massive investment of time. It's almost like having another job, so it's hard to come home from work and then have another job where you go on raids and spend the next five hours organizing 40 people to kill a monster. I think a lot of it has to do with providing options for how you play and accessibility. Make it easy to pick up and play and have fun, but it's all linked together. On a very high level, that's what we're thinking about.

You brought up the Sonic RPG. That's a project that took a lot of people by surprise. Did you approach Sega or did they approach you?

RAY: It was both. We were talking to [Sega president] Simon [Jeffrey], who we'd worked with at LucasArts. I was talking about what a fan of Sonic I was. I still have the Genesis hooked up to my TV and I play Sonic 1 and 2. I even play Sonic Spinball [Laughs]. I'm not embarrassed to admit it.... We saw it as an IP that was a great opportunity to take a character that was well known and loved and inject something new and innovative into the mix. We said, "Wouldn't it be cool to take Sonic and make it into an RPG but still have the same elements of speed and the things you associated with Sonic, but you'll have a cool progression system?" We want to show that he's a great character.

How's the experience of developing for the DS been so far?

GREG: It's been really fun. The team is built out of some BioWare veterans and also some new folks, so it's a great combination. The biggest thing is how fast stuff happens, and not just because it's a Sonic game. The amount of time it takes to build features on a next-gen system is considerable. There's a lot of complexity. On a handheld system it's like – bam! – it's up and running.

Has that made you think about doing more small-scale projects, whether they are for a handheld or something like Xbox Live Arcade?

GREG: We definitely think about that stuff. It's an interesting opportunity for folks to explore new ideas.... We've taken that step on the handheld side and have considered stuff on Xbox Live and Sony Home. But we haven't done our Geometry Wars yet. It's funny how that has gotten to be a big thing, which is pretty cool.

You haven't done any games for PS3. Do you have interest in working on that platform?

RAY: Yes.

Okay.

RAY: [Laughs] We're looking at all the systems.

GREG: From now on, it's only one-word answers to everything.

Well, it will be easy to transcribe.

RAY: We're big fans of the 360, and obviously we're devoted to supporting that. We're also exploring other platforms with other games we're working on that we haven't yet announced.

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M
Blood and Gore
Intense Violence
Language
ESRB CONTENT RATING www.esrb.org

XBOX 360 LIVE

PLAYSTATION 3

Touchstone

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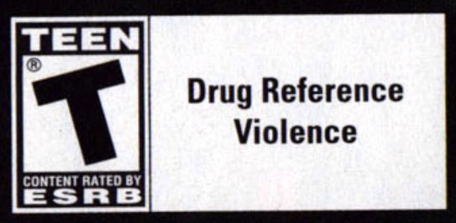
ORCHESTRATE THE PERFECT OP.

22:01 Eliminate soldiers near ambassador.
22:02 Suppress fire on left building.
22:03 Cover northwest corner for extraction.

22:01 Eliminate enemy on balcony.
22:02 Provide covering fire.
22:03 Move in to extract ambassador.

www.socomtacticalstrike.com
www.us.playstation.com/psp
www.seal.navy.mil



Drug Reference
Violence

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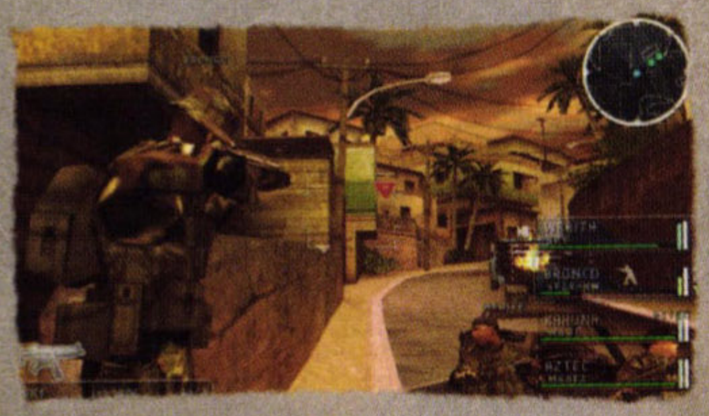

True combat simulation, where tactics determine the outcome of each encounter.

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22:01 Engage enemy soldiers.
22:02 Eliminate all enemy threats.
22:03 Cover team's extraction.

22:01 Fire grenade at machine gunner.
22:02 Move to secure ambassador.
22:03 Escort ambassador to rendezvous point.

GI 2007 HOLIDAY Buying Guide

We'll admit it, we haven't been good this year. Even though we're not expecting much from Santa, it doesn't mean we don't expect our faithful readers to buy us loads of cool stuff. You might also want to pick up a few things for your friends, neighbors, and loved ones, so we're here to help. We've searched the far corners of the Earth (and the Internet!) for cool ideas for everyone on your list. Behold, our 2007 Holiday Buying Guide.

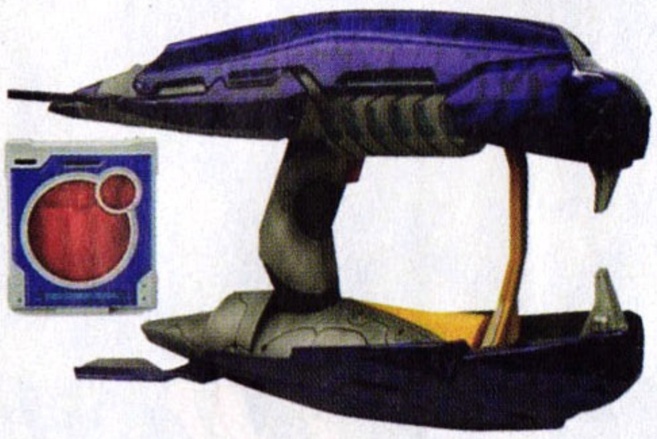
Sci-Fi Nerds

For Those Who Dream of Making Out With Cylons Instead Of Real People

Halo ActionClix Scarab

ActionClix takes all the exciting mechanics of a Halo match like weapon swaps, respawning, and vehicle combat, then combines them with the deep strategy of a Clix game. Still, the crowning piece of the whole set is the 17" x 22" Scarab that towers over the rest of your game pieces. Even if you don't play ActionClix, this piece makes a great statue for Halo fans.

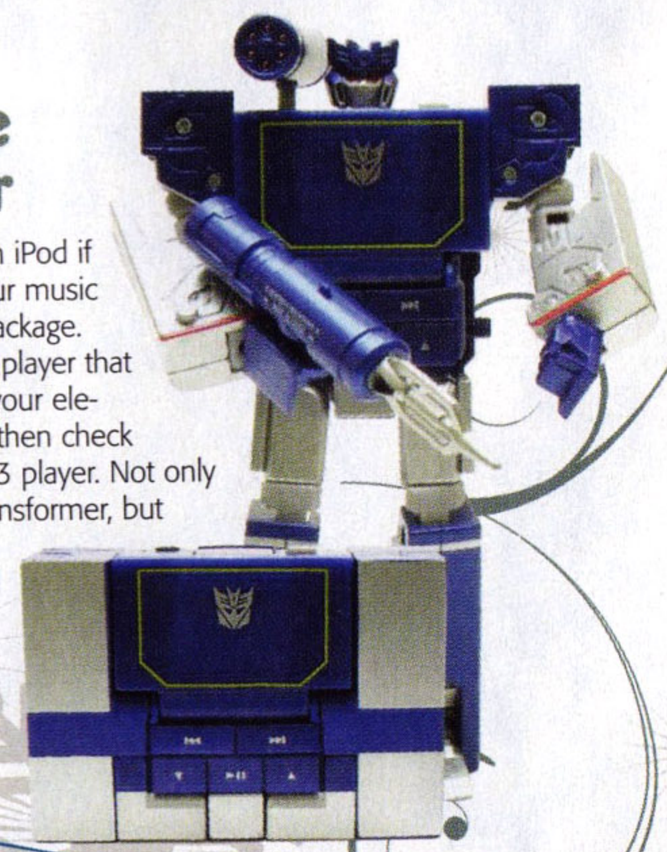
$10.99 (Booster), $249.99 (Scarab)
www.wizkidsgames.com/halo



Halo 3 Covenant Weapons

Quit screwing around with that plasma rifle you made out of cardboard and crayons and check out these awesome weapon replicas from Jasman Toys. Made out of real metal and plastic, they make sounds, light up, and even vibrate with recoil. Plus, the heat exhaust flanges will pop open when the guns overload. About the only thing they don't do is shoot real blasts of energy, but that's probably good for pets and siblings everywhere.

$119.99 (Plasma Rifle), $79.99 (Plasma Pistol) • www.jasmantoys.com



Soundwave MP3 player

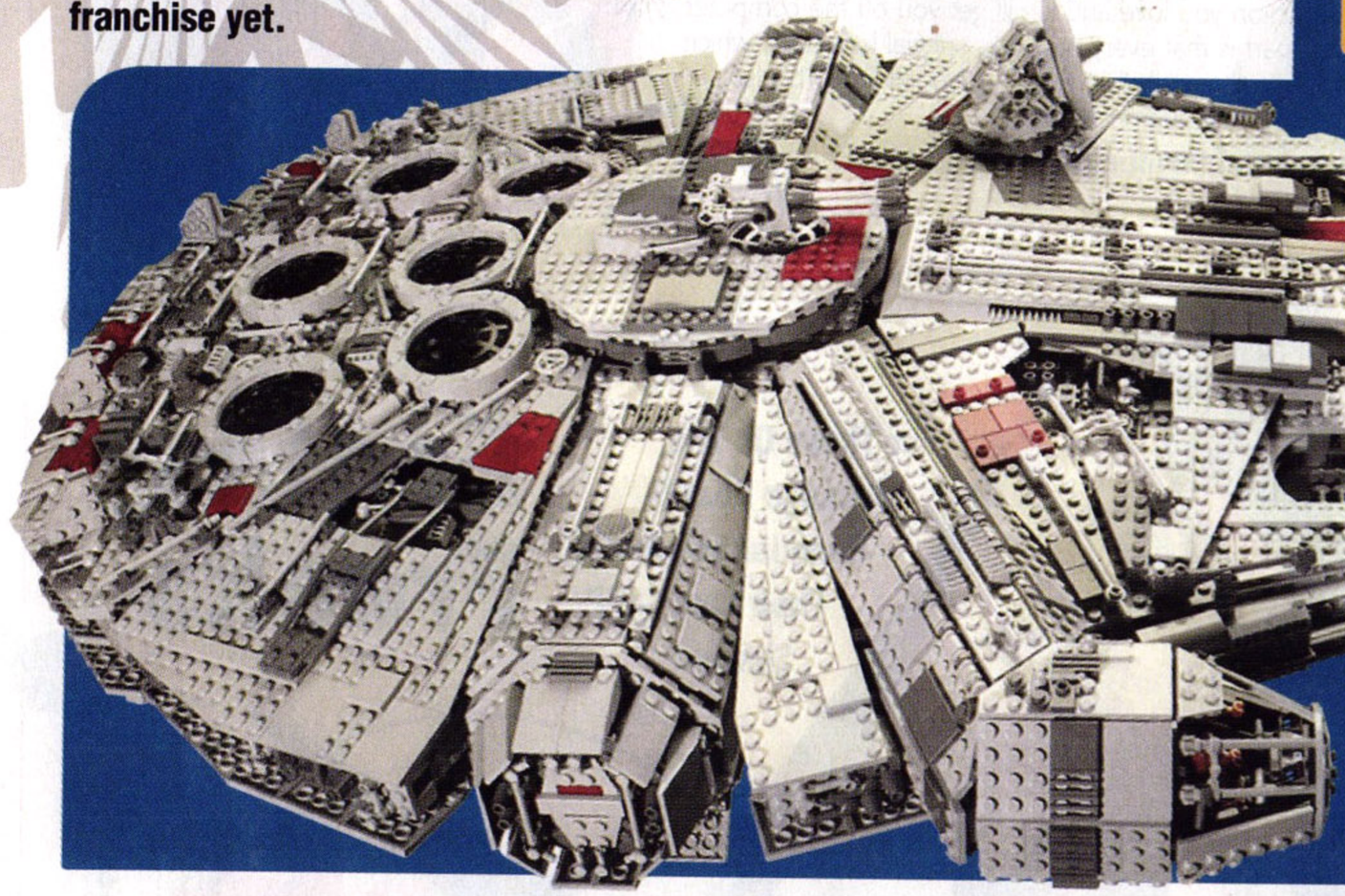
Sure, you can just get an iPod if you want to listen to your music in a sleek, convenient package. But if you want a music player that would have impressed your elementary school friends, then check out this Soundwave MP3 player. Not only is it a fully functional Transformer, but Soundwave's cassette door opens up to reveal a Mini SD card reader (Card not included).

$94.99 • www.big-badtoystore.com

Star Wars Madness

Being a sci-fi nut and not liking Star Wars is practically blasphemy. Star Wars *is* sci-fi, so check out all these Star Wars goodies out just in time for the holidays. After all, you probably haven't spent enough money on this franchise yet.

LEGO Ultimate Collector's Millennium Falcon



We'd like to apologize to the wallets of every reader who sees this. When two worlds unite to produce the largest LEGO set ever for sale – featuring a retractable boarding ramp, a removable cockpit, and rotating guns – you are just not going to be able to resist buying it. This monster measures in at 33.1"x 22.2" x 8.3," is made out of more than 5,000 pieces, and takes approximately 15 hours to construct. You might go hungry for a while, but think about how much joy this set will bring.

$499.99 • www.lego.com

Star Wars Ecko Hoodies

The weather's getting cold again, and it's time to start wearing some warmer clothes. Since sci-fi fans aren't generally known for their fashion sense, Mark Ecko is here to help. His new Star Wars-themed fashion line will let fans show off their geeky pride and look good at the same time. Our favorites are the Boba Fett and Set For Stun hoodies.

$98.00 • www.shopecko.com

PSP Star Wars Pack

Sony's redesigned, slimmer PSP now comes in white with a limited-edition Darth Vader silkscreen on the back. With the PSP's new video out capabilities, Star Wars fans will be able to enjoy their favorite games, movies, and music in the comfort of their full home set-up. And since the system also comes bundled with a copy of Star Wars Battlefront: Renegade Squadron, they won't have to worry about getting their Star Wars fix while on the go.

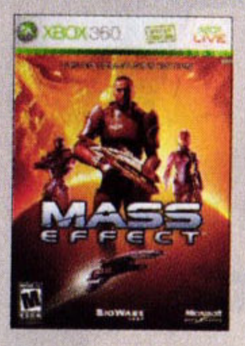
$199.99 • www.us.playstation.com/psp

Star Wars: Elite Forces of the Republic Figures

Is your clone army starting to run a little thin? It's time to call in some reinforcements to hold the lines. This14-figure set includes Mandalorians, Clone Troopers, and members of the Omega Squad. Collect them all in this specially priced two-box set exclusively at Entertainment Earth.

$66.99 • www.entertainmentearth.com

TOP GAMES



Mass Effect – Xbox 360 – $69.99

Halo 3 Legendary Edition – Xbox 360 – $129.99

Metroid Prime 3: Corruption – Wii – $49.99

MEDIA

Battlestar Galactica: Razor (Unrated Extended Edition) – $26.98

Blade Runner (Five-Disc Ultimate Collector's Edition) – $78.92

StarGate SG-1: The Complete Series – $329.98

Robocop 20th Anniversary Blu-ray – $39.98

TOP GAMES

Blue Dragon – Xbox 360 – $59.99

The Legend of Zelda: Phantom Hourglass – DS – $34.99

Neverwinter Nights 2: The Mask of the Betrayer – PC – $29.99

World of Warcraft TCG Fires of Outland Booster Box

Weaning yourself off an addictive substance like WoW can be a challenge without assistance. Might we suggest the WoW TCG? This third set in the World of Warcraft Trading Card Game has all the Warcraft action you love and it will get you off the computer. And the best part is that every pack has special loot cards which help your online character. Oh, who are we kidding? This isn't weaning. This is drug augmentation.

$95.99 • entertainment.upperdeck.com/wow

Mage's Corner

All right Pott Heads, you've got a couple of great ways to get your Hogwartz on. Whether you're shopping for a bookworm or movie buff, these great Harry Potter gift sets are perfect for the Pottophile in your life.

Harry Potter Hardcover Boxed Set – $195.00, Harry Potter: First Five Years Blu-ray or HD DVD Suitcase – $149.99

True Swords 300 Movie Replicas

How often do you find yourself in a position where a full-sized replica shield from the movie *300* would be handy? All the time. True Swords, the guys who brought us the sweet Final Fantasy and Zelda replicas, also have a selection of movie weapons including these *300* swords, shields, and masks. You also might want to check out their Legend of Zelda Hylian Shield.

$49.99 (Swords), $59.99 (Shields)
www.trueswords.com

Final Fantasy VII Advent Children Series II Figures

Will people ever get tired of buying FF VII figures? We hope not, because then we'd stop getting cool toys like this second set of Play Arts Advent Children figures. Coming stateside this December, this set features Kadaj, Yuffie, and Reno. Each figure stands approximately 8 1/2" tall, comes with its own display base, and has at least 20 points of articulation.

$24.99 (each) • www.square-enix.com/

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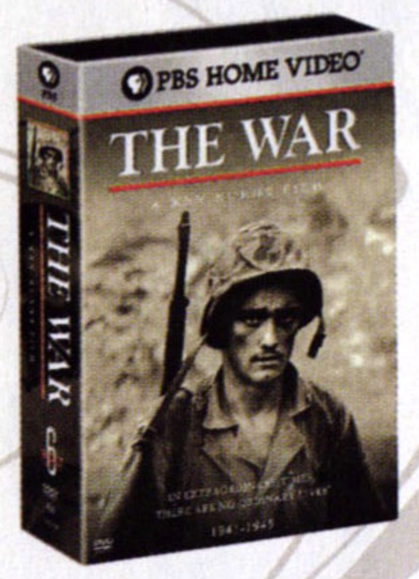
War Heroes

For Those Who Own Night Vision Goggles And Wears Camo Pants To Weddings



Ken Burns' The War

Respected documentarian Ken Burns, well-known for his use of still photography, has released his latest opus in this 6-DVD set. In *The War*, Burns explores the stories and experiences of Americans across four different towns during World War II. The inspiring and heartfelt portraits of their lives are reason enough to watch.

$129.99 • www.shoppbs.org

Turtle Beach AK-R8 Headset

Serious gaming warriors know that nothing can really compare to a real 5.1 speaker setup, but Turtle Beach's AK-R8 headphones come fairly close. With eight speakers and dual sub woofers, these headphones provide a true 5.1 experience that is great for gamers constantly on the go, so you can concentrate on fighting your virtual foes instead of your speaker wires. It doesn't hurt that the AK-R8 also provides a clear audio signal and feels comfortable.

$149.99 • www.turtlebeach.com

Logitech G15 Keyboard

The second version of Logitech's more-than-capable keyboard comes in a smaller, sleeker package, but lacks nothing from its previous iteration. The keys feel great for gaming, macros are easy to program, and the board has three different brightness settings. A great tool for fraggers everywhere.

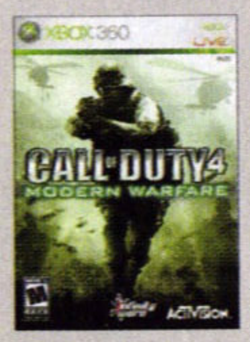
$99.99 • www.logitech.com

HP Blackbird 002 Gaming PC

Want a monster machine with an evil, sexy look and tons of horsepower that you can use to kill someone by dropping it on their unsuspecting head? The Blackbird has the magic of Voodoo PC under its hood and comes with a specially designed liquid cooling system, toolless entry, and futuristic cast aluminum chassis. Our model also had dual NVIDIA GeForce 8800 Ultra graphics cards and a 3.0GHz Intel Extreme Quad-Core processor.

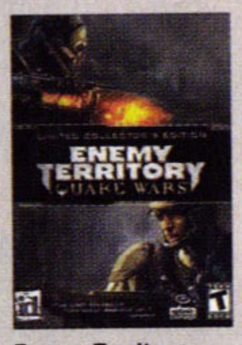
Starting at $3,490.00 (Our model $5,500.00) • www.hp.com/blackbird

TOP GAMES



Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare – PS3, Xbox 360, PC – $59.99

World in Conflict – Xbox 360, PC – $49.99



Enemy Territory: Quake Wars Limited Collectors Edition – PC – $59.99

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Action Junkies

For People Who Have Well-Formed Opinions About Who Made The Best Bond

Altaïr From Assassin's Creed Figures

If you are interested in having a small army of assassins in your house this year, you're in luck. Not only will the collector's edition of the game come with a figure, but you can buy two figures separately as well. The First 4 Figure is a 12" PVC sculpt, and is the one that you'll have to keep the cat from knocking over. The NECA figure is 7" with a retractable blade, and the one that you'll have to stop your little brother from stealing.

$12.99 (NECA), $53.99 (First4Figures) • www.bigbadtoystore.com

All Posters Gaming Posters

Look around. You ought to be ashamed of your apartment. Your walls are naked. And you let your mother see that! Whether you are looking for movie posters, going for a video game theme, or just want something funny, All Posters has got your walls covered. Now get out there and start decorating. Your walls have been shamed for too long.

Varied Pricing ($8.99 – $19.99)
www.allposters.com

Grindhouse Messenger Bag

Did you go buy *Planet Terror* and *Death Proof* like we told you to last month? If not, slap yourself and go do it. While you're out, you can pick up this wicked Grindhouse messenger bag, a perfect gift for your friend, colleague, or grandma. Wicked Cool Stuff also has a range of other swag on its site with licenses from Marvel Comics to Mountain Dew.

$29.95 • www.wickedcoolstuff.com

Music

For Those Who Talk A Lot About Revolution, But Failed History

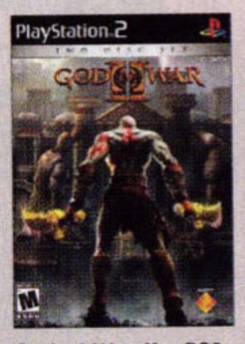
iPod Touch

Do you know someone who wants the great features of the iPhone, but you don't want to have to actually talk to them on the phone? Sounds like you should get the the iPod Touch. With a crystal clear 3.5" display for videos and music, Wi-Fi web browsing, and a unique multi-touch interface, your friend will thank you for the gift. Thankfully, they still won't have a way to call you when they need help moving.

$299.99 (8GB), $399.99 (16GB)
www.apple.com

TOP GAMES

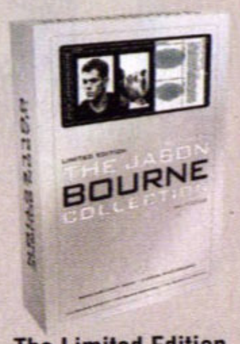
Assassin's Creed Limited Collector's Edition – PS3, Xbox 360 – $69.99



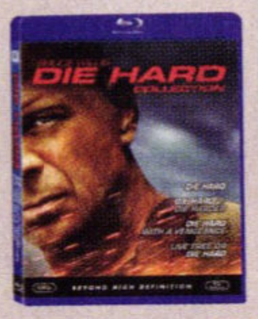
God of War II – PS2 – $39.99

Syphon Filter: Logan's Shadow – PSP – $39.99

MEDIA



The Limited Edition Jason Bourne Collection HD DVD – $99.98



Die Hard Collection Blu-ray – $129.98

James Bond Collector's Edition – $239.98

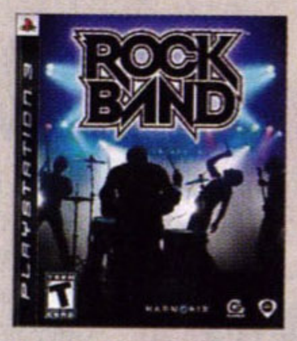
MEDIA

The Hives – The Black And White Album – $10.99

Wu Tang Clan – 8 Diagrams – $13.99

TOP GAMES

Guitar Hero III: Legends of Rock – PS3, Xbox 360, Wii, PS2 – $59.99



Rock Band – PS3, Xbox 360, PS2 – $59.99

Singstar '80s or **Singstar Pop** – PS2 – $29.99

Art Guitar Controller

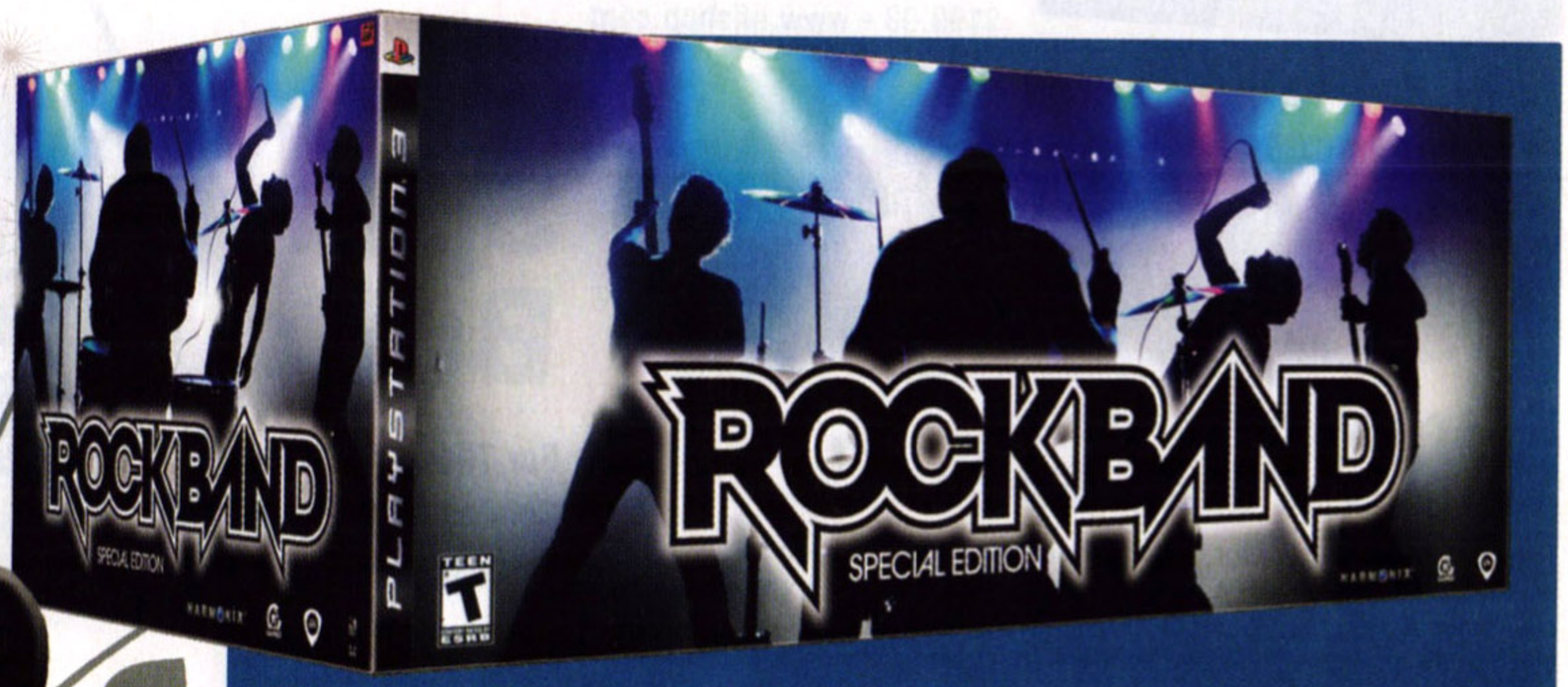
The Art Guitar for the PS2 is the closest you can get to playing a real guitar because, well, it *is* a real guitar. These limited edition AG Riffmaster guitars have been gutted and fitted with Guitar Hero controller parts. Quantities are limited, but the art for each guitar will feature at least 12 different bands with multiple designs for each including Kiss, Lynyrd Skynyrd, and Pantera. If you really get the fog machine going, your fans might actually think you can play guitar.

$399.99 • www.artguitar.com

Metalocalypse Season One

Adult Swim's show about the biggest, heaviest, most brutal heavy metal band in the world is finally out on DVD. Whether they're releasing hordes of murderous kittens, doing stand-up comedy, or being monitored by a government organization out to destroy them, the life of a metal star is always exciting. You might not know what will happen next, but you do know it will be hilarious.

$29.98 • www.adultswim.com/shows/metal



Rock Band Bundle

Unless you hate musical experiences or are in a coma, there is no reason for you not to be excited about Rock Band. This set comes packed with one guitar, a microphone, a drum kit, and the Rock Band game disc. And since you can make friends and meet your bandmates while playing online, you'll have a couch or two to sleep on when your mom kicks you out of the garage.

$169.99 • www.rockband.com

GAME SOUNDTRACKS

Halo 3 (2-CD Set) – $15.98

Guitar Hero III – $13.98

Ten Years of Resident Evil: The Official Soundtrack – $15.98

God of War II – $12.98

Mitchell & Ness Throwback Jerseys

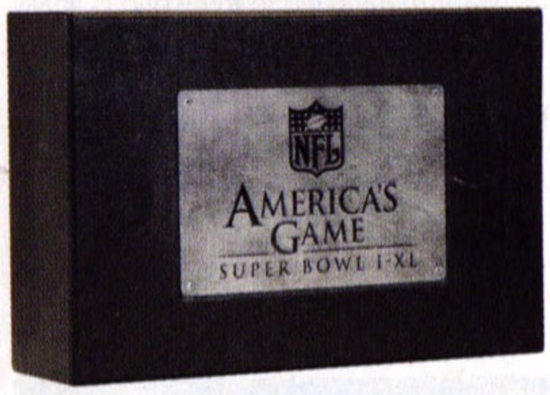
Pioneers in sportswear fashion, Mitchell & Ness has been around for over a century. Providing quality stitching made from superior materials, it's no wonder that the company is so widely respected. We especially like their selection of officially licensed NBA, NHL, NFL, and MLB Throwback Jerseys. You'll be able to feel what we're talking about when you try one of these on for yourself.

$250.00 – $300.00
www.mitchellandness.com

Sirius Stiletto 2

Whether you want to listen to the game while you're tailgating or your favorite music while you fish, the Stiletto 2 lets you access satellite radio from almost anywhere. Sirius' newest version also includes some cool new features like a Love button that lets you store whatever song you're listening to, plus a host of other recording options that let you capture over a hundred hours of pre-scheduled programming. How did the world ever function before satellites?

$349.99 • www.sirius.com



NFL America's Game Collector's Set

There is a reason that football is the most-watched program every year. Football is America's sport. Narrated by award-winning actors like Gene Hackman, Laurence Fishburne, and Bruce Willis, this 40-disc collector's set is packed with archival footage, interviews, and collectable booklets covering each of the Super Bowl-winning teams.

$199.98 • www.nflshop.com

GAMEINFORMER

Board Pusher Design Your Own Skate Deck

Tired of going through your cousin's roommate's friend to find someone who knows how to make a custom skateboard? Board Pusher is an easy, consumer-friendly way to get that customized deck that looks just the way you want it to. Board Pusher's decks are sturdy and lightweight and come in six different shapes. Plus, if you're too lazy to add your own images and text, they've got a decent selection of pre-made boards to choose from.

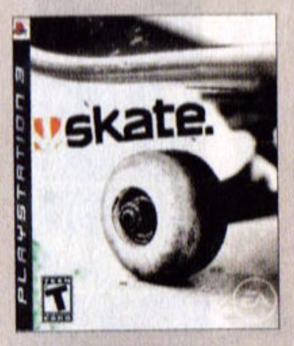
Varies On Board Shape ($49.99 – $59.99)
www.boardpusher.com

Sports Buffs

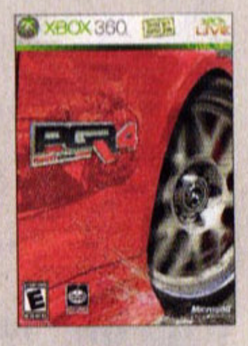
For Those Who Spend Sunday On The Couch In Their Underwear

TOP GAMES

NHL 08 – PS3, Xbox 360, PS2 – $59.99



Skate – PS3, Xbox 360, – $59.99



Project Gotham Racing 4 – Xbox 360 – $59.99

Fanatec Porsche 911 Steering Wheel

Always thought about buying a Porsche, but been too worried about driving like a maniac and wrecking it? Well, why not get the crazy driving out of your system with this authentic 911 steering wheel for the PS3 and PC. A latency-free wireless USB signal, three force feedback motors, and wireless pedals all help to deliver an authentic experience. Good luck finding an excuse to not buy a real Porsche now.

$350.00 • www.fanatec.de

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Games for Windows LIVE

XBOX 360 LIVE

Retroholics

For Those Who Wear Doctor Mario Pajamas To Bed

iPod Classic

Remember the good old days when you had to carry that huge box of tapes in your car? And wasn't it great how you had to keep fast-forwarding to get to whatever song you wanted? Admit it, those days sucked. With the storage size of the iPod you can just bring your entire music collection while keeping the classic look you've grown comfortable with.

$249.99 (80 GB), $349.99 (160 GB)
www.apple.com

Dream Authentic Katana Arcade Cabinet

Dream Authentic may have some of the best arcade cabinets we've seen so far. The Katana is especially designed to accommodate those with less space. The systems comes preloaded with 200 arcade classics, but the system also plays newer PC titles, DVDs, and can be hooked up to your favorite console systems. The games will look and sound great on this 17" LCD flat screen monitor, and two speaker sound system with subwoofer.

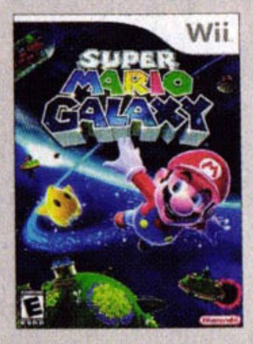
$2,495.00 •www.dreamauthentics.com

Xbox 360 Arcade

Do you have friends who are into games, but only play a few every year? Do they love the idea of Live Arcade, but don't care about the hard drive? Maybe the Xbox 360 Arcade is right for them. This system is set to replace the core system this holiday, and comes packed with an extra large 256MB memory card and five free demos of Xbox Live Arcade games: Pac-Man Championship Edition, Uno, Luxor 2, Boom Boom Rocket, and Feeding Frenzy.

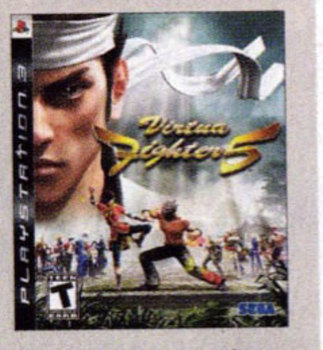
$279.99 • www.xbox.com

TOP GAMES



Super Mario Galaxy – Wii – $49.99

Contra 4 – DS – $29.99



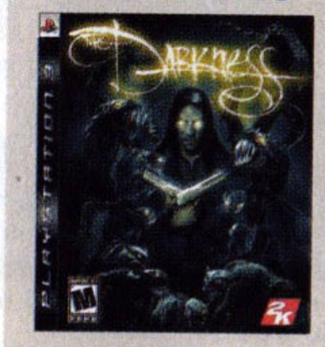
Virtua Fighter 5 – PS3, Xbox 360 – $59.99

Hori Arcade Fighting Sticks

Sick of your friend giving you the oldest excuse in the book? "It's the controller! It's not doing what I want it to!" Maybe it's time to help them upgrade to a better fighting stick. Hori makes some pretty good models for the PS3 and Xbox 360. The PS3 version comes with three different turbo settings, while the 360 stick comes with a limited edition Virtua Fighter 5 theme.

$49.99 (PS3), $59.99 (Xbox 360)
www.hori.jp/us

TOP GAMES



The Darkness – PS3, Xbox 360 – $59.99

Spider-Man 3 – PS3, Xbox 360 – $29.99

Marvel Trading Card Game – PSP, DS – $29.99

MEDIA

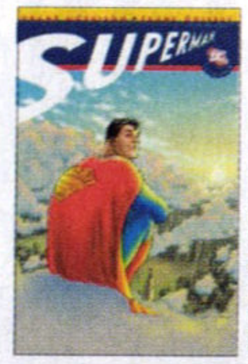
300 – $39.99 (HD DVD) $34.99 (Blu-ray)

Heroes Season One HD DVD – $99.98

The Fountain – $39.99 (HD DVD) $34.99 (Blu-ray)

The Invincible Iron Man – $14.98

COMIC TRADES



All Star Superman Vol. 1 Hardcover – $19.99

Civil War Paperbacks – $14.99 – $24.99

Fables: 1001 Nights of Snowfall Hardcover – $19.99

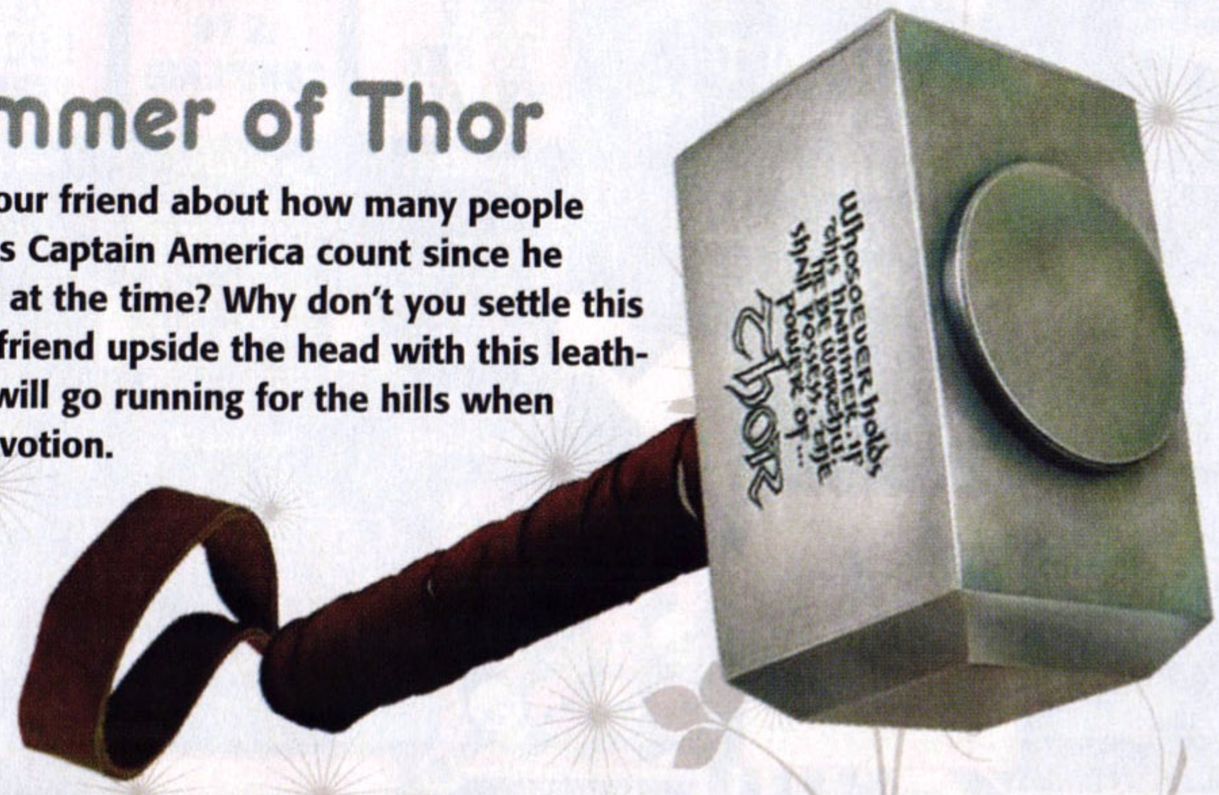
Old Boy Volumes 1-8 – $12.95 (each)

The Complete Peanuts 1963 – 1966 Hardcover Box Set – $49.95

Mjolnir - The Hammer of Thor

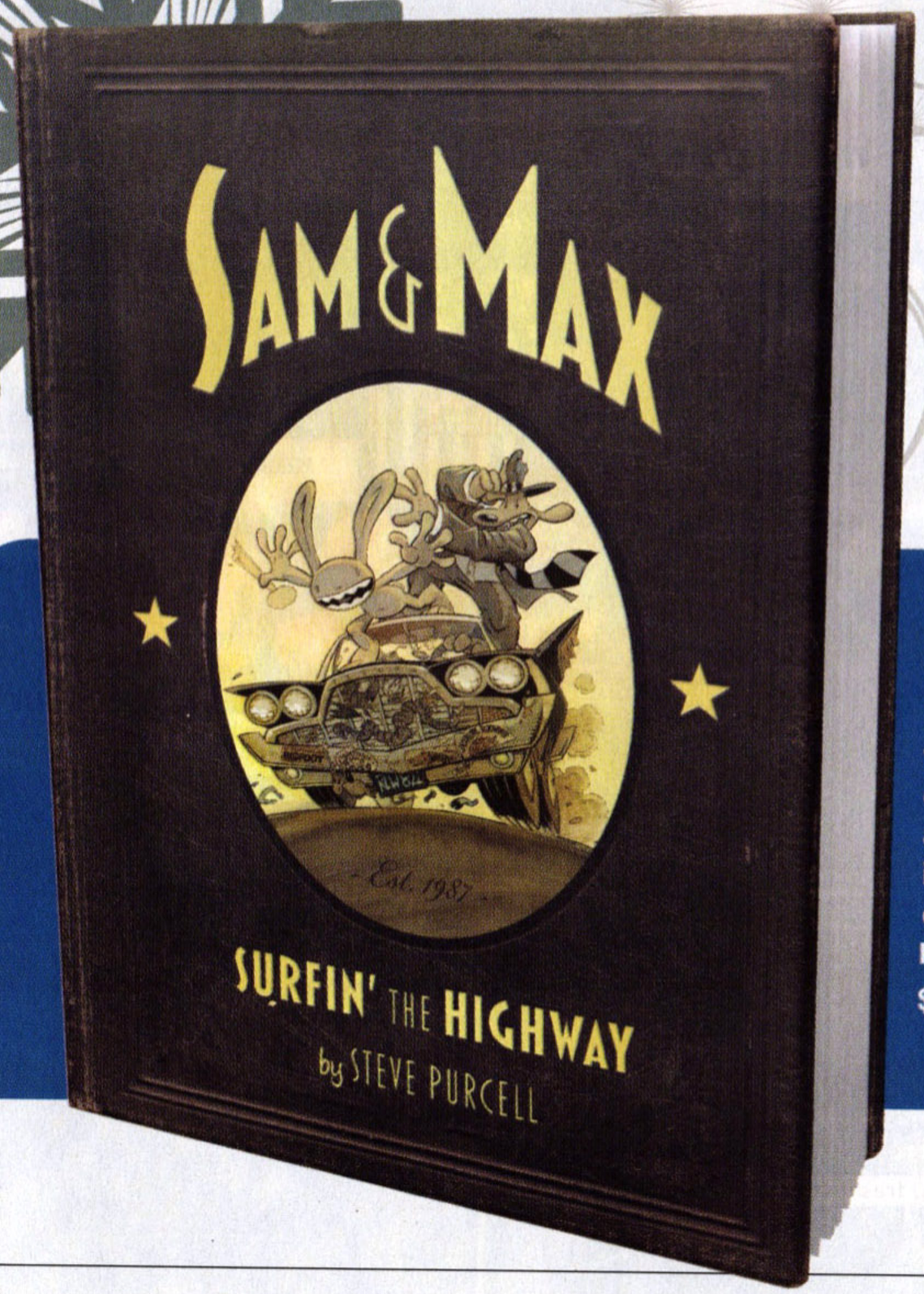
Do you keep having that argument with your friend about how many people have been able to lift Thor's hammer. Does Captain America count since he was actually calling himself "The Captain" at the time? Why don't you settle this argument once and for all by hitting your friend upside the head with this leather-wrapped 18" x 8" replica. Your friends will go running for the hills when they see the true strength of your geek devotion.

$349.99 • www.diamondcomics.com



Comic Geeks

For Those Who Think Radiation Gives You Super Strength, Not Cancer



Sam & Max Collection

Sam & Max may be splitting sides and skulls on PC nowadays, but you may not know that they started off doing the same thing in comic books. This 200-page book collects a lot of that early work, and includes some nice new content like several full-color paintings, an author's note, a couple of new comics not found in the original collection, and promotional ads for the first Sam & Max Freelance Police from 1987.

$19.99 • www.telltalegames.com

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www.jamster.com

THEMES

theme4271

theme4272 theme4273 theme4274 theme4275 theme4276 theme4277 theme4278 theme4279

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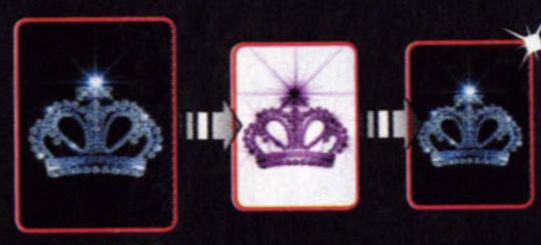
SCREENSAVERS

move7321

move7322



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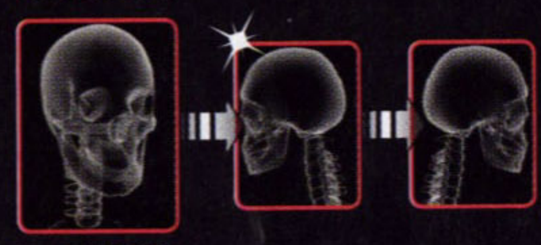

move7324

move7325

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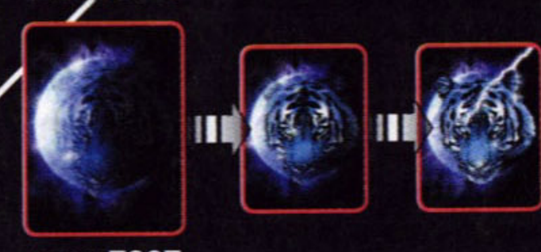

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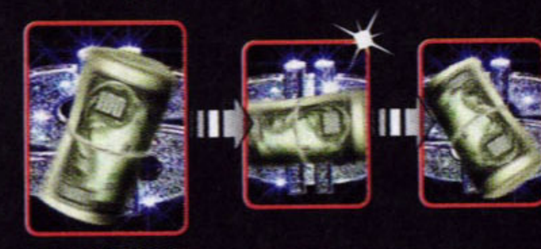

move7328

move7329

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WALLPAPERS

wall4842

wall4843 wall4844 wall4845 wall4846 wall4847 wall4848

wall4849 wall4850 wall4851 wall4852 wall4853 wall4854

wall4855

wall4856

wall4857 wall4858 wall4859 wall4860 wall4861

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wall4875 wall4876

wall4877

wall4878

wall4879

wall4880

wall4881

wall4882 wall4883 wall4884

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REALTONES

Crank That - Soulja Boy Tell .em	true 9065	Until The End Of Time - Justin Timberlake	true 9074
Kiss Kiss - Chris Brown Feat T-Pain	true 9066	Stronger - Kanye West	true 9075
Shawty Is Da (10) - The Dream	true 9067	I Get Money - 50 Cent	true 9076
Duffle Bag Boy - Playaz Circle	true 9068	My Drink n' My 2 Step - Cassidy	true 9077
I'm So Hood - DJ Khaled Feat T Pain	true 9069	Wadsyaname - Nelly	true 9078
Good Life - Kanye West	true 9070	Gimme More - Britney Spears	true 9079
No One - Alicia Keys	true 9071	A Bay Bay - Hurricane Chris	true 9080
Soulja Girl - Soulja Boy Tell .em	true 9072	When You're Gone - Avril Lavigne	true 9081
Pop Bottles - Birdman	true 9073	Bartender - T-Pain	true 9082
Halloween Theme 2007 - Halloween	true 9083		
Sweetest Girl (Dollar Bill) - Wyclef Feat Akon	true 9084		
White Girl - USDA	true 9085		
The Way I Are - Timbaland	true 9086		
Let It Go - Keyshia Cole	true 9087		
Sorry, Blame it on Me - Akon	true 9088		
Bubbly - Colbie Caillat	true 9089		
Changes - 2Pac	true 9090		
Apologize - Timbaland	true 9091		

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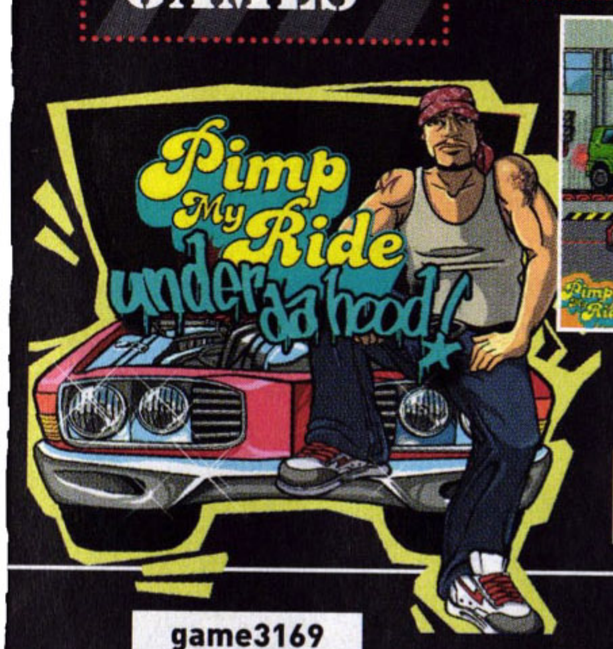
GAMES**

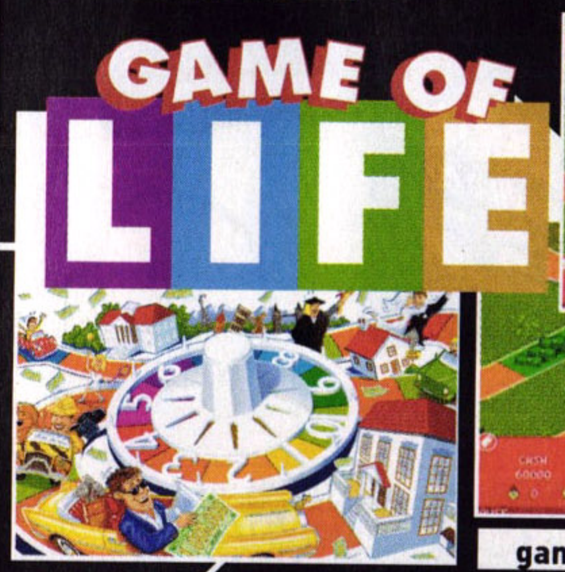
** not available for Verizon Wireless & Virgin Mobile customers



game3169

game3170

game3171



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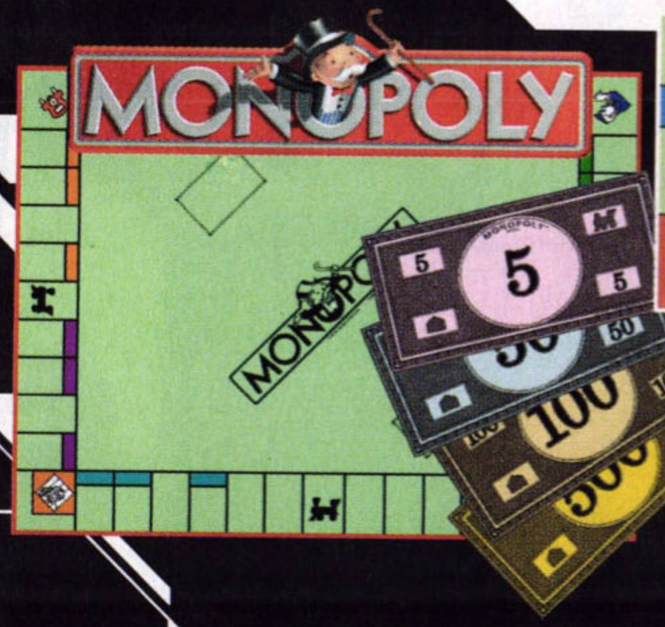

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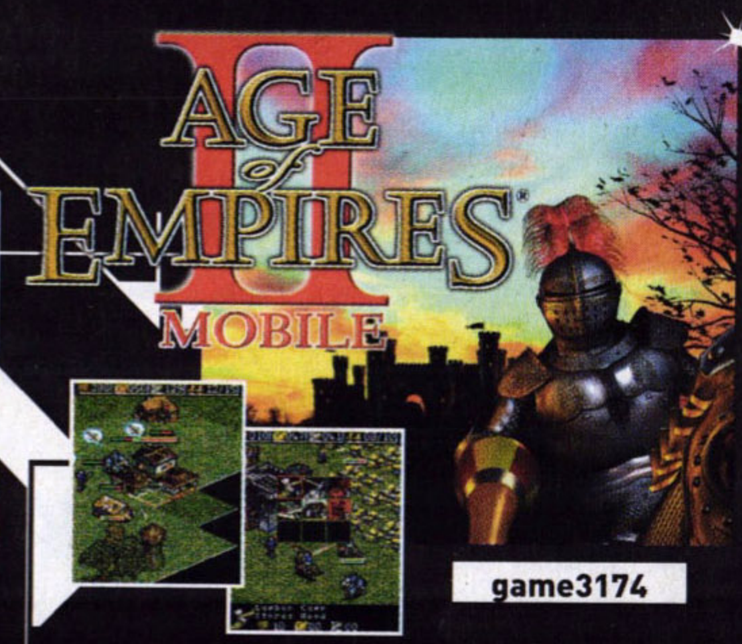

game3174

GAMES**

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game3175

game3176

game3177

game3178

game3179

game3180

game3181

game3182

game3183

game3184

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1. Go to: Main Menu → Messages
2. Select: Message Center → Create Message
3. Text Orderword: wall4846
4. To Number Below: 75555

HOW TO DOWNLOAD

5. Go To Inbox: Message Center → Browser Msgs 1/1
6. Select Link: Browser Msg Inbox → 1) Jamster! WALLPAPER
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Tykes

For Those In Their Preteen Years, Physically Or Mentally

PicoZ Sky Challenger Set

These are RC helicopters armed with lasers. Do we need to say more? These sturdy foam copters (two per set) weigh only 11 grams, but actually fly with a range of about 30 feet, and will disable each other's engines with their built-in infrared lasers. Here's the important part again: RC helicopters with lasers!

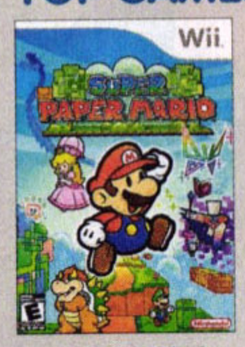
$79.95 • www.firebox.com

EveryTshirt Video Game Tees

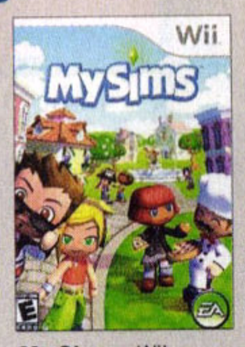
EveryTshirt has a lot of cool kid-friendly shirts available on its site, from '80s retro tees to some stylish Disney shirts. Of course, the ones we dig are the ones with video game themes. These officially licensed tees are made out of 100% cotton and come in several different sizes, so you will probably be able to find one that fits you, too.

$18.99 • www.everytshirt.com

TOP GAMES

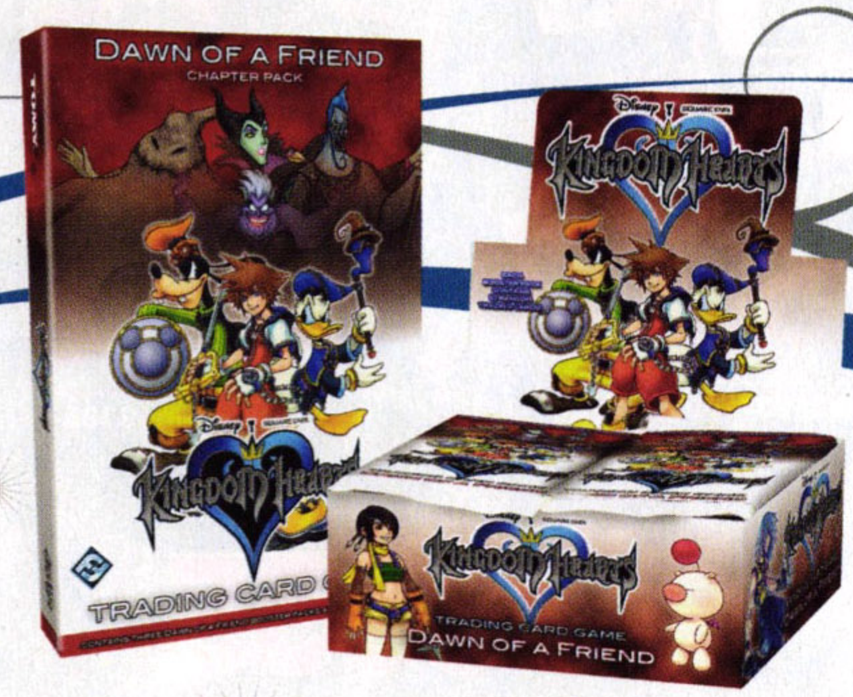


Super Paper Mario – Wii – $49.99



My Sims – Wii – $49.99

LEGO Star Wars: The Complete Saga – PS3, Xbox 360, Wii – $49.99



Kingdom Hearts TCG

Here's something you can give your nephew and actually not dread having to play it with him. Easy to pick up, but packed with some deeper strategy, Fantasy Flight Games' Kingdom Hearts Trading Card Game will have players fighting the Heartless while traveling to different worlds from the hit series. It's got to be better than that Match the Annoying Animal Sounds game you got him last year.

$11.99 (Starter Deck), $3.99 (Booster Packs)
www.fantasyflightgames.com

Final Fantasy Chocobo Plush

Those crazy Chocobos have gotten into the grandma's wardrobe and started playing dress-up again. Just in time for the holidays Square Enix is releasing Santa, Black Mage, and White Mage plush toys of its popular Final Fantasy mascot. They make a great gift for anyone who loves cute stuff, but you'll only find these on Square Enix's online store.

$19.99 • www.square-enix.com

navy.com/eod

do you have what it takes?

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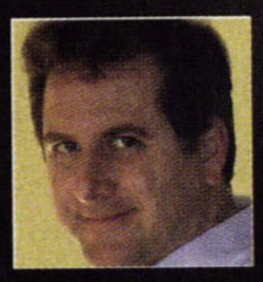
BANKING ON TALENT

DOES THE GAME INDUSTRY REALLY CARE ABOUT TALENT?



BY CRAIG ALLEN,
CEO, SPARK UNLIMITED

Almost everyone says they do. Some even mean it! But the fact is that caring about development talent really hasn't been part of our industry's business equation for quite some time. This is because when taking a portfolio approach, as most current publishers do, it's built into expectations that some titles will fail, some will break even, and a few hits will pay for the whole program. So if a developer goes out of business – or can't deliver a good title – it's all a part of the master plan.

It's a simplification, but as a napkin math example, figure Publisher X will release a slate of ten titles for the year. Each of their games will cost one million dollars, creating a total production budget of $10M. Let's say their marketing budget is 25 percent of their production costs ($2.5M) and let's add another ballpark $10M for licensing and other related business expenses (manufacturing, distribution, taxes, etc).

With $22.5M in total investment, if just one game out of the ten is a hit (selling one million units at a $59 price point), the whole program becomes a profitable venture. Any other title's success just adds to the riches – and Publisher X has nine other essentially "free" shots at the market to strike new gold.

From this perspective, it doesn't really matter who's making the games as long as enough shots are taken at the target. Odds are that something is going to hit. This isn't to say that there's no consideration given to seeking the best available talent for such projects. There are many companies, teams, and a few individuals that have the ability to get projects off the ground through their track records and involvement. However, from a strategic business point of view, a proven developer is not required for green-lighting a project.

However, with our industry's continually rising costs of production – and relatively flat corresponding revenue targets – this model has broken down. As a result, new phrases are creeping into the corporate boardroom such as "what's the MetaCritic score of the developer?"

In other words, the idea of working with talent that has the ability to dependably deliver high-performing game titles is finally starting to matter to a publisher's bottom line. By illustration, let's go back to our simple math napkin but with more current industry production numbers.

In today's world, Publisher X's same ten title slate would require roughly $100M (using a conservative $10M cost per game). Adding the same 25 percent for marketing ($25M) and factoring into the mix another $10M for other costs, we find that getting our ten titles to the retail counter carries a hefty price tag of $135M. At such prices, one hit title (using the same million unit sales target at $59) no longer puts Publisher X in the black.

For the first time, a publisher's hit ratio (how many of their titles succeed) is what matters to their bottom line. Because of this, we're entering a new era that recognizes the value bankable talent can bring to business. Bankable talent does not necessarily mean talented people. People can be very talented but not bankable. Bankable means they are drivers of value to a business. In other words, how much they cost versus their involvement in a project guaranteeing a higher return on investment. Bankable talent makes business less risky.

Further, the greater the consistent business success bankable talent brings to the table, the more they're worth to the business that needs them. Big salaries are supported by proven results. Importantly, those baseline results help investors feel better about taking other kinds of risks as part of the game plan.

As costs have gone up, many publishing groups have responded by retreating from creative risk; relentlessly pushing product lines filled with sequels and license-based games, believing this provides a baseline of predictable success. In such a context, the process of game creation is reduced to a frustrating and costly experience that gets in the way of selling the next Box to Wal-Mart.

Breaking this trend will require a movement toward embracing the idea that bankable talent is not just a point of industry business, but an opportunity to showcase and celebrate the drivers of entertainment not only to game fans but to the general public as well. Even people who don't go to the movies, listen to music, or read books recognize the value Steven Spielberg, Madonna, and Stephen King bring to their respective marketplaces. With but a few exceptions, our industry has not celebrated our talent in a manner that makes great individuals and teams meaningful icons to general consumers (not just hardcore enthusiasts).

> **"...we're entering a new era that recognizes the value bankable talent can bring to business."**

As the pressures of a hit-driven marketplace where every title matters continues to grow, I believe the most successful publishers in the near future will be the ones that value and celebrate the rewards bankable talent can bring to their business. Such publishers will need to draw a clear line between the creative business of making a game (which developers such as Spark are responsible to deliver) and the important business of making the public aware of a game (which should be a publisher's primary focus). They'll need to understand that supporting the visibility of the developer will benefit their business goals by bringing an identity to their titles that goes beyond the logo on the box. The greater the perceived value through usage of bankable talent, the less money that needs be spent finding and educating an audience on why a title will be great.

Our industry was forged out of the passion and innovation of visionary individuals, talented teams, and entrepreneurial companies. I hope the silver lining of higher production costs is that it will force investors to once again recognize and empower the kind of people and groups that consistently create and deliver real entertainment for people who love games. The final result will be more original and great games for all of us to experience.

And you can take that to the bank. ■■■

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

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

THE EPIC FIGHTING TITLE TAKES ON A NEW DIMENSION

Soulcalibur Legends, a 3rd person action adventure, exclusively for the Wii console, follows the exploits of Siegfried and other Soulcalibur favorites. Fight in a new adventure set between the events of Soul Blade and the original Soulcalibur game. The Wii Remote™ and Nunchuk are your weapons of choice as you perform your attacks using orchestrated slashes and movements and fight like never before.

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PLAY IN SINGLE AND MULTIPLAYER MODES

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Suggestive Themes
Violence
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Wii™

BANDAI NAMCO Games™

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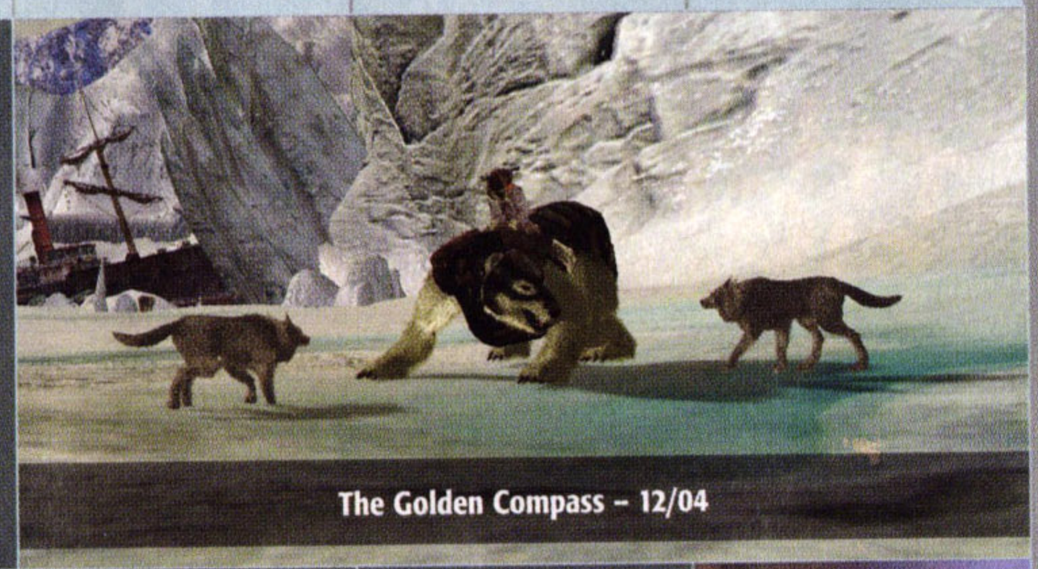
december


The Golden Compass – 12/04

The Golden Compass – 12/04

04-05

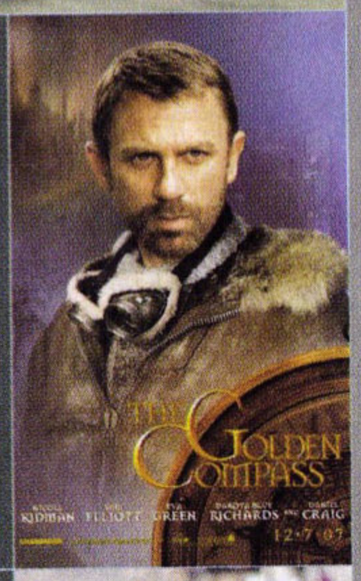
NEW RELEASES
- Alvin & the Chipmunks – Wii, PS2, DS
- American Girl – DS
- *Battlestar Galactica: Season 1* – HD-DVD
- *Battlestar Galactica: Razor* – HD-DVD, DVD
- Blazing Angels 2: Secret Missions – PS3
- Cranium Kabooki – Wii
- Diary Girl – DS
- The Golden Compass – PS3, 360, Wii, PS2, PSP, DS
- Nitrobike – Wii
- *Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End* – Blu-ray, DVD
- Samurai Warriors: Katana – Wii
- Super Swing Golf 2 – Wii
- Timeshift – PS3

06

AMAZING SPIDER-MAN
Taking a cue from DC Comics' weekly series' *52* and *Countdown*, Marvel is now making Amazing Spider-Man a nearly weekly venture. Starting with issue number 546, *Amazing Spider-Man* will now be released three times a month. This issue is doubled-sized, and includes backup stories on new characters being introduced into the Spidey continuity.

07

The new James Bond movie, *The Golden Compass*, hits theaters today. In this film, Daniel Craig must stop an armored bear/cyber terrorist from launching missiles, or something. The Bond girl (named Lyra) is a little younger than usual, but her truth-o-meter rocks!

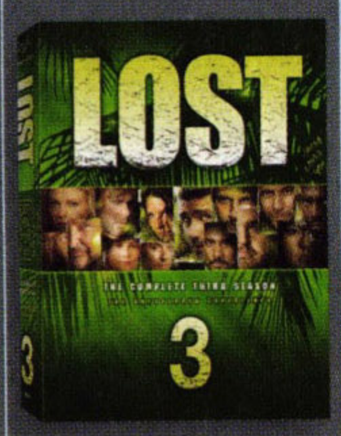


Orange Box – 12/11

11

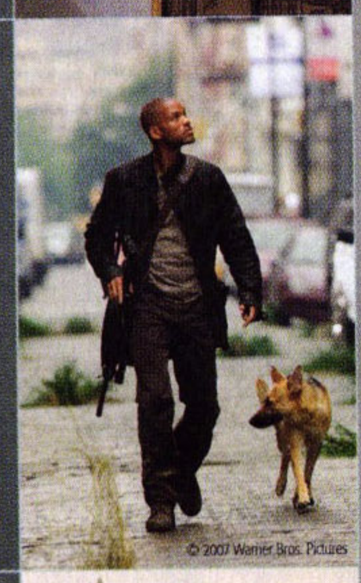
NEW RELEASES
- *Harry Potter Years 1-5* – Blu-ray, HD-DVD
- *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* – Blu-ray, HD-DVD
- *Lost: Season 3* – Blu-ray, DVD
- Madden NFL 08 Espanol – 360, PS2
- The Orange Box – PS3

12



14

I Am Legend makes its theatrical debut today. This movie looks stupid! Who could believe that Will Smith would be the last man on Earth? Especially since DJ Jazzy Jeff would kick his sorry ass in a heartbeat.



MX vs. ATV: Untamed – 12/18

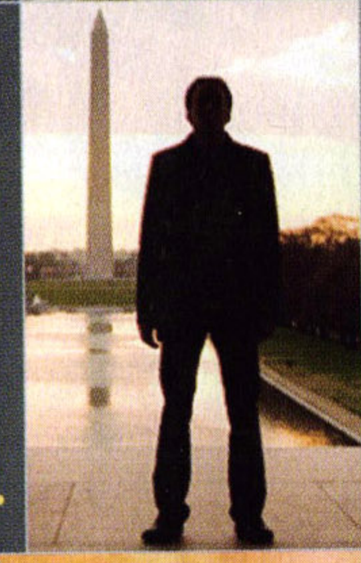
18

NEW RELEASES
- *Blade Runner: The Final Cut* – Blu-ray, HD-DVD, DVD
- MX vs. ATV: Untamed – PS3, 360, Wii, PS2
- NCAA March Madness 08 – PS3, 360, PS2
- Rock Band – PS2
- *The Simpsons Movie* – Blu-ray

Rock Band – 12/18

21

Nic Cage is back in *National Treasure: Book of Secrets*. This movie asserts that there is a presidential book filled with national secrets. We've seen this book; it's a pop-up with pictures of Abraham Lincoln riding dragons and fighting General Zod. This should be a pretty good movie.



25

The perfect Christmas gift, *Aliens Vs. Predator: Requiem* splatters its way across theaters today. Spoiler alert: The predator will cloak, and the aliens will bite things with their second-head-thingy. Man, a second-head-thingy would really come in handy when eating lobster.

26

NEW RELEASES
- Homie Rollerz – DS

27

ULTIMATE EXPLOSION
This month, Marvel is releasing two highly anticipated sequels. First up is *The Ultimates 3*, handled by Jeph Loeb (*Batman: The Long Halloween, Heroes*), and Joe Madureira (Darksiders). The second must-have title is Ultimate Iron Man II. We can't wait to see what direction Orson Scott Card takes this story in.

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

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The "Real" Ghostbusters

UNLIMITED ENABLED

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360 | PC
> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (MULTIPLAYER TBA)
> **PUBLISHER** SIERRA ENTERTAINMENT
> **DEVELOPER** TERMINAL REALITY
> **RELEASE** OCTOBER 2008

Back in January of this year, a series of videos appeared on YouTube showcasing a prototype of a Ghostbuters game running on Xbox 360. The Internet went ablaze as fans rallied around the possibility of blasting ghosts on next-gen systems.

Shortly thereafter, Slovenian developer ZootFly confirmed that it was working on the game, but they had reached a slight "snag" in securing the rights to the series. An online petition surfaced with nearly 5,000 signatures pleading with Sony Pictures to grant the license to no avail. It seemed the project was dead on arrival. In the following weeks, however, Dan Aykroyd rekindled the excitement by indicating that he would be involved in a Ghostbusters game. Would this be the push that finally convinced some mystery publisher to step forward? Nope. As the months flew by with no official announcement, rumor mongering and speculation turned elsewhere.

Little did the gaming community know, the official Ghostbusters game was already well into development long before any videos started showing up. The team behind it brings comedy experience from The Simpsons: Hit & Run and horror know-how from F.E.A.R., a publisher known for quality games like The Chronicles of Riddick: Escape from Butcher Bay and The Incredible Hulk: Ultimate Destruction, and a developer with a groundbreaking new engine capable of slick visuals and untold amounts of destruction physics. But the most exciting piece of the puzzle is the involvement of all four Ghostbusters: Dan Aykroyd, Harold Ramis, Bill Murray, and Ernie Hudson. This isn't just an afternoon of voiceover sessions; Aykroyd and Ramis (the writers of the original films) are penning the entire script and actively participating in the game's development. Bustin' never felt so good.

■ Ecto-1 (below) will not be drivable, but will still somehow mysteriously be involved in gameplay

Last spring, a crucial moment in Ghostbusters history went down. Sony Pictures agreed to meet with Sierra Entertainment and developer Terminal Reality in order to see a gameplay demo and discuss the possibility of granting the rights to one of their most notoriously hard-to-get properties. "We've been searching for the right partner to relaunch a Ghostbusters video game for years," says Sony Pictures consumer products VP Mark Caplan. "We wanted to make sure we found a game engine and developer who had what it takes to make a great game."

Sierra had been circling Ghostbusters long before approaching Sony. In a similar approach to last year's hit, Scarface: The World is Yours, Sierra was looking to resurrect a classic franchise. "At Sierra there are a couple of us that have been talking about [a Ghostbusters game] for years, but we wanted the tech to be better than the special effects from the 1984 movie," says executive producer John Melchior. The launch of Xbox 360 in late 2005 and impending release of PlayStation 3 satisfied the need for horse-power, but after almost 20 years, did anyone still care about the Ghostbusters? Sierra dug into the data.

"We did a lot of market research about old film titles and this thing scored number one above things like Godfather," Melchior remembers. "Nobody dislikes Ghostbusters. Some people might love it. Some people might like it. But nobody says 'I hate it.'" Sierra also found that the Ghostbusters logo is the second most recognized in the world – the first being Coca-Cola. Upon first reaching out to Sony Pictures, Sierra ran into an exacting list of standards to meet before they had any chance of securing the rights, so they set out to find the right developer.

Terminal Reality was on the road to promote Infernal, a next-gen version of their proprietary engine, and eventually crossed paths with Sierra. "After seeing the tech demo that we presented, Sierra came back and said 'Hey, how would you guys feel about working on the Ghostbusters property?'" Terminal Reality development director Brendan Goss says. "We [had] to be involved in this. It's just a huge thing." The two companies joined up and crafted a demo that blew Sony away. Then the real work began.

Instead of rehashing the movie plots that everyone knows backwards and forwards, the Ghostbusters game will follow an all-new storyline set in 1991 – two years after the last movie. And with original creators Dan Aykroyd and Harold Ramis writing the script, this is as close as it gets to an actual *Ghostbusters 3*. In fact, discussions are currently in progress as to whether to make that the official title.

At the start of *Ghostbusters 2*, the Busters were barely scraping by. Despised by the citizens of New York, they faced a load of lawsuits and were forced to perform song and dance routines at children's birthday parties. As the new story begins, however, the city has embraced them for halting the resurrection of Vigo, the scourge of Carpathia. Business is going so well, in fact, that the Ghostbusters want to start franchising so they can cut down on the 60-hour work weeks. But in

Continued on page 78 >>

At one point in the game, New York's Central Park transforms into one giant cemetery

A fully realized semi-stable manifestation

Your psychiatrist (played by Brian Doyle Murray) is never going to believe this

■ The developers are using an overheat mechanic and automatic healing rather than ammo and health pickups

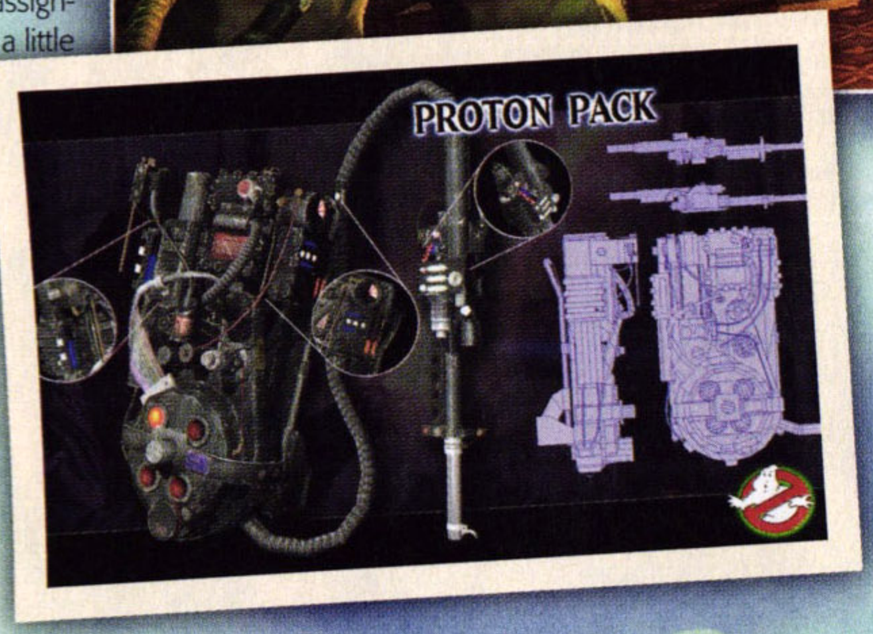
Continued from page 76

order to realize their dreams of relaxation, they have to earn a franchise license from the city. Before granting their request, the new mayor institutes a paranormal oversight commission to see how they do business. The man in charge has the power to grant the franchise or deny it. Unfortunately for the Ghostbusters, this man is former EPA agent Walter Peck (actor William Atherton will be returning to the role). "They are constantly under him throughout the game having to deal with his bureaucratic constraints," Terminal Reality creative director Drew Haworth says.

Players will take on the role of a new recruit hired as an "experimental weapons technician," which basically means they'll be a guinea pig for all of Ray and Egon's new inventions. Shortly after you're hired, an ancient evil envelops the city, causing a massive surge in ghost activity. The Ghostbusters must get to the bottom of what's going on before the city is literally torn apart.

This spirit surge not only prompts a wave of entirely new ghosts, but a few old rivals as well. The first assignment is to go to a certain ballroom and deal with a little green blob of ectoplasm. Upon his release from the Ghostbusters' containment grid, Slimer makes a beeline for the place with the best buffet in town, The Sedgwick Hotel. Just like the original movie, this is the first chance you'll get to test your hi-tech equipment.

The game uses a third-person camera angle similar to Resident Evil 4, placing a particular focus on the intricately detailed proton pack. The various lights and glowing bars on the back will serve as your HUD, displaying information like health, weapon charge, and the amount of "slam" you have left (we'll get to that in a moment).



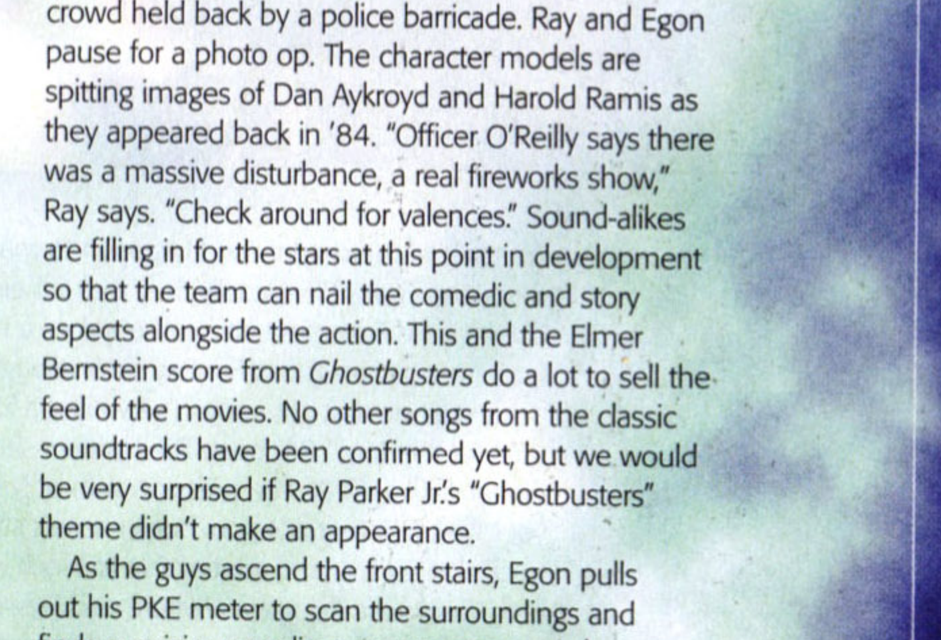
As we wandered through the halls in our hands-on demo of the Xbox 360 version, the only sound we could hear was the sweet hum of the proton pack and the chatter of Egon and Ray over the radio explaining that they were stuck in an elevator. But soon, noises of gulping, slurping, and burping came into earshot, and as we rounded a corner we spotted Slimer chowing down on the contents of a room service cart. Instinctually, we lot loose a stream of proton energy, but Slimer phased through a nearby wall before we could get him. A line of familiar black char remained on the blast spot.

The next area opened up into the expansive famous ballroom, intricately detailed from the brightly lit chandelier down to individual table settings. But with Slimer chucking turkey legs and charging at us, we didn't have much time to admire the surroundings. We tried our best to track the speedy green ghost, but some paintings, tables, and wine racks may have received some collateral damage. At one point, Slimer zipped around the chandelier and our proton beam sent it crashing to the floor, significantly dimming the room.

Taking advantage of our momentary distraction, Slimer charged at us head on and covered us in green goop. It was time to change tactics. As Slimer hid behind a bar, we started blasting it and clicked the left trigger to send a surging ball of energy down the beam. The bar exploded into bits and pieces. With the ghost significantly damaged we unleashed the wrangling beam, slamming him into all manner of destructible objects with the right stick. This push and pull mechanic has a distinct fishing feel, a goal Terminal Reality is purposely trying to achieve. A quick tap of the d-pad deploys the trap, and it isn't long before we manage to force Slimer in. Ray congratulated us over the air and Egon offered a reminder that was perhaps a bit too late. "I almost forgot. We promised the manager we'd be very careful in the ballroom this time. It's already set up for a bar mitzvah in half an hour."

Players won't have to worry about keeping things nice, however. All damage is converted into one big bill that goes directly to the city's insurance company. You are

■ Multiplayer is still under construction, though nothing has been confirmed yet



working for a government branch, after all. Not only do you earn bonuses for higher tallies, you also get the pleasure of infuriating Peck. "If Peck didn't have enough hate for you already, wait till he gets $35 million worth of bills," Melchior jokes.

The massive amount of destruction players will leave in their wake is a key component of the new Infernal engine. President of Terminal Reality and engine mastermind Mark Randel has been working on Infernal for seven years, with the last three devoted to the next-gen elements featured in Ghostbusters. "We feel that we can do a better job in-house than we can by licensing other products," Randel says. "If we license a physics engine, and there are really competent physics engines out there, but we'd be just like other games. We want to push the envelope and invent new things and do more. The only way to do that is to write our own."

Randel drops hundreds of boxes, ragdoll bodies, and even a few cars into a variety of demo environments. Everything tumbles and flops over with no hit to the framerate. The bodies land in all manner of twisted macabre positions in a library reading room full of desks with absolutely none of the twitching seen in recent games like BioShock and Halo 3. When the cars drop in from the ceiling they crush the desks to splinters. Randel is particularly proud of Infernal's ability to accurately simulate weight variations, a physics conundrum he says is one of the most difficult to solve. He estimates that the engine will be able to simulate 1,000 objects at any given time while still running everything else like lighting, self shadowing, and slick character models.

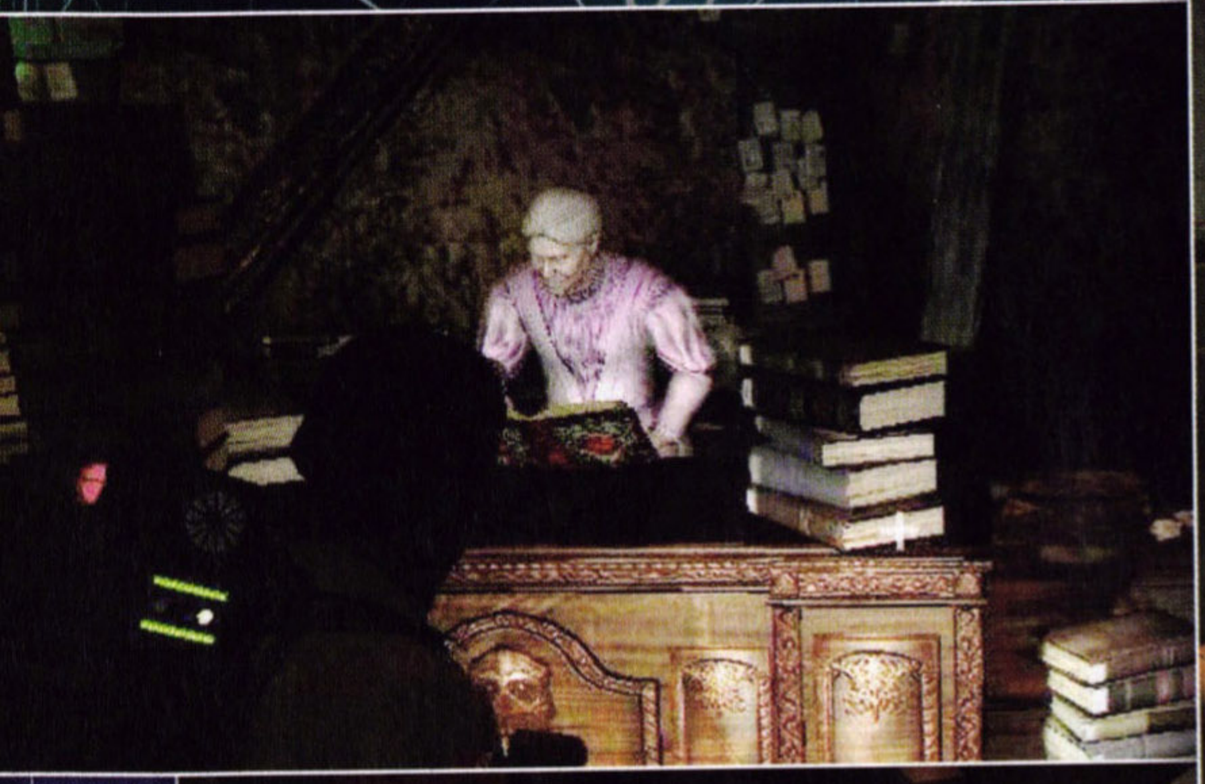
The entire engine demo is running on a PlayStation 3 to show that the system poses no hurdles to the developer. "We've have a really good time on the PS3 because we wrote our engine for the PS2, which is a low level system," Randel says. "Then we moved up to the PC and Xbox so people who have gone from PC land and Xbox land to the PS3 are having a really hard time. For us, we're having fun, because we've had access to all the parallel processing and all of the goodies right away."

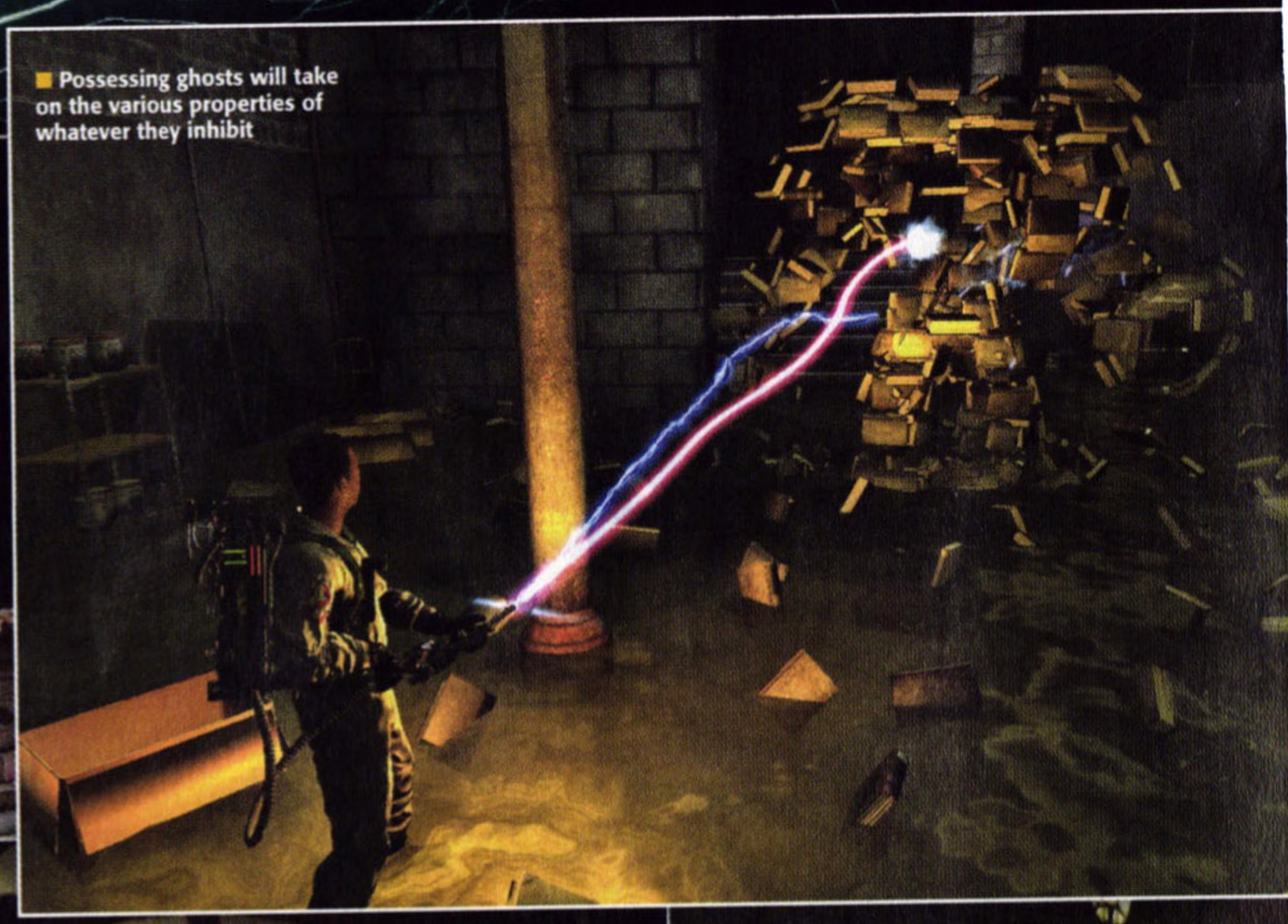
He hands the controller over and allows us to wreak havoc on the reading room. Here we experiment with an intriguing new weapon called the slime gun. You basically shoot a long rope of green goop towards an object and then fire the remaining end at something else. What looks like a snot trail pulls the two objects towards each other, or, in the case of a wall or ceiling, the rope will draw the smaller object towards the anchored one. It wasn't long before we were sticking guys to the ceiling or shooting the gun at a wall behind a desk and having them smash through. We were even able to string a car up to the ceiling after using several tethers. In battles, you'll be able to tether ghosts to a wall to make them easier to shoot or even create a giant web of slime to snag several at the same time. We can't imagine what kind of puzzle opportunities this thing will provide.

So far we've only seen solo action, but the Ghostbusters have always been about teamwork. The team showed us a level set in the very same library from the opening scene of the first Ghostbusters movie. You emerge from the Ecto-1 to a riled up crowd held back by a police barricade. Ray and Egon pause for a photo op. The character models are spitting images of Dan Aykroyd and Harold Ramis as they appeared back in '84. "Officer O'Reilly says there was a massive disturbance, a real fireworks show," Ray says. "Check around for valences." Sound-alikes are filling in for the stars at this point in development so that the team can nail the comedic and story aspects alongside the action. This and the Elmer Bernstein score from *Ghostbusters* do a lot to sell the feel of the movies. No other songs from the classic soundtracks have been confirmed yet, but we would be very surprised if Ray Parker Jr.'s "Ghostbusters" theme didn't make an appearance.

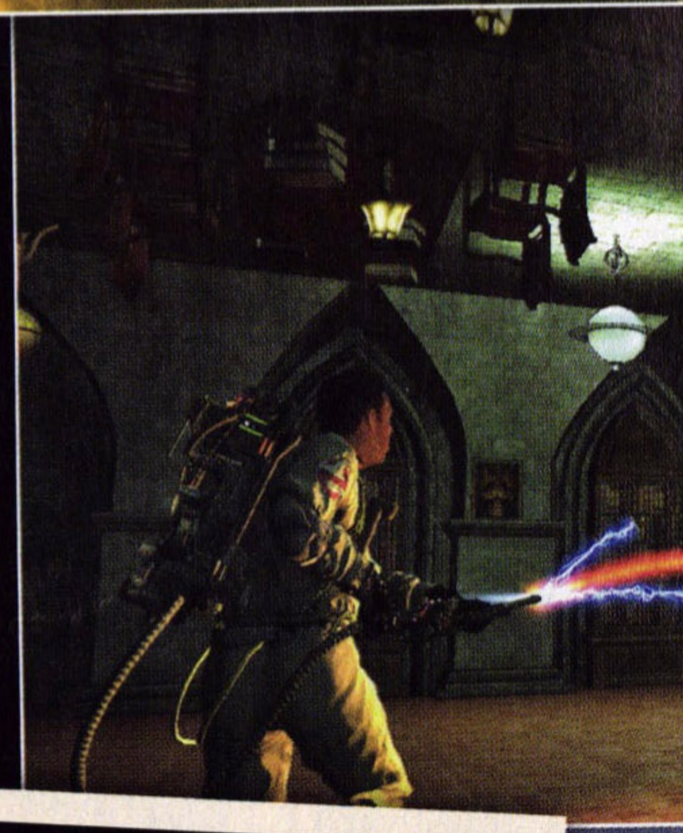
As the guys ascend the front stairs, Egon pulls out his PKE meter to scan the surroundings and finds suspicious readings next to some nearby statues. All of a sudden, the statues shatter and two ghosts come flying out. Ray and Egon throw out traps and help with ghost wrangling and soon the situation is under control. AI teammates will perform actions like these automatically without any sort of squad interface.

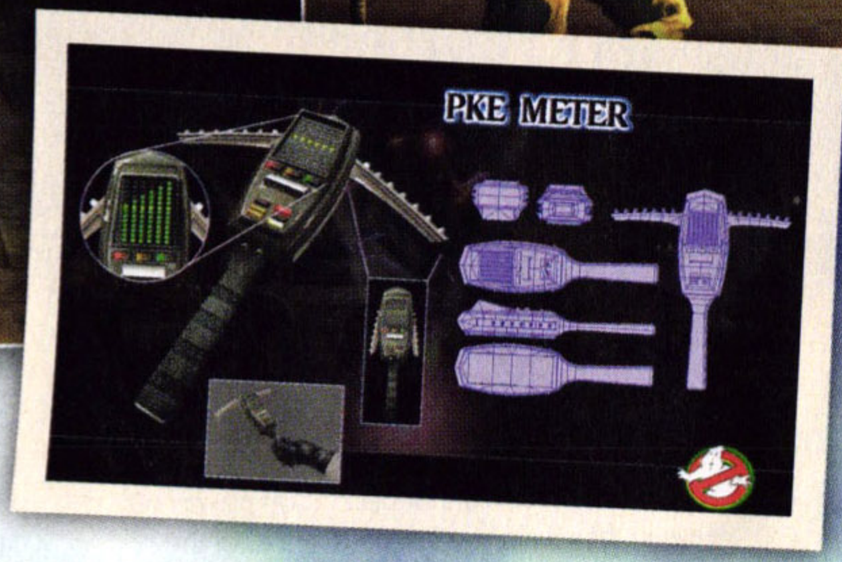
The Ghostbusters wind through several rooms catching ghosts and following the ectoplasmic trail. "I've never seen readings like this before," Egon says.





■ Possessing ghosts will take on the various properties of whatever they inhibit





"They're off the charts…and I happen to make very good charts." Eventually they make their way down to the basement and come across a familiar face: the librarian ghost. For Ray she's always been the one that got away. "I've waited a long time for this one," Ray says. The librarian shushes him and flies off. As you press on with only your flashlight to guide you, book shelves start to crashing down and rotating out to block your path. Books are flying everywhere and Dewey Decimal cards start shooting out of their drawers. Invisible ghosts called animators possess some of the flying books to form humanoid enemies. To defeat them you'll have to use the wrangling beam to rip off their shields and use a new weapon called the electron beam.

The polar opposite of the proton beam, this blue arc of light freezes ghosts in their tracks and its shotgun-like secondary fire shatters them to pieces. While this is an effective strategy for certain enemies, it's not wise to use it on every ghost. Players only earn money for purchasing upgrades by trapping. "We're working on a style system where you get bonuses if you can slam dunk into the trap or do a three-hit slam," Haworth says. "You get flash points and more money." Speaking of extras, miniature collectibles like Stay Puft Marshmallow Men and Ecto-1s are scattered throughout every stage to unlock achievements, interviews with the actors, and the like.

After getting past a few columns of symmetrically stacked books, you meet up with Ray, who has just fallen out of an air vent. "Someone you've been wanting to meet again is here," Egon squawks over the radio. "Keep her there. We're on our way," Ray replies excitedly. We track Egon to small room that at first appears to be a dead end. We pull out our own PKE meter to scan the room. This device serves as a way to discern where to go next, and can also be used to scan enemies and gain information on them. The PKE's little mechanical arms rise up near one of the bookshelves. "Hey, check this out. I feel a breeze," Ray says as he inspects the suspicious area. The shelf slides aside abruptly, revealing a dank staircase. "Aw cool, a secret passage," Ray says. "These are great!"

"Everybody knows that comedy's very hard in games," says Melchior, who previously worked on games in The Simpsons franchise. "The reason that Hit & Run worked so much better than Road Rage is we leaned on the talent. We went to the writers and Matt Groening and Gracie Films and we said 'We really want to make this a virtual episode, and we want you to take the helm." The

■ The chilling effect of the electron beam

team is taking a similar approach this time around, relying on Aykroyd and Ramis for the bulk of the comedy and making it work in a gameplay setting.

"I think that's one of the biggest reasons that you play as the new recruit because it's important to them that those guys' interaction with each other is so flawless and so conversational that we couldn't screw up that timing," Melchior says. "If you were playing as Ray and [you had to] hit X to talk to Egon, you're chunking up the dialogue. We want you to play the game but feel like you're watching the movie."

Mixing these laughs with scares is a key component of Ghostbusters. "There's something we always say: it's got to be fun, funny, or scary," says lead level designer Andy Dumbroski, who knows a thing or two about horror. Before joining Terminal Reality, he worked at Monolith, the developer of F.E.A.R. "With most of the environments you've seen we try to create questions in the player's mind. You go through and there are what we call 'points of possibility,'" Dumbrowski says. In any average hallway, for example, ghosts could smash through a window, pop out from behind a vending machine, or come down from the ceiling. It's this uncertainty that creates tension in the player. "One of the cool things here that we can do that, for example, F.E.A.R. didn't do is accentuate tension with humor, which just wasn't appropriate in certain kinds of games. But it is appropriate here to just throw a joke out. It's nice to have a little more flexibility."

As we enter the creepy secret passage, it seems brimming with these so-called possibilities. A glowing red book floats over a podium up ahead. "Whoa, look at that. A Gozerian codex," Ray says as he zips over to take a closer look. Egon yells after him, "Ray, I'm not entirely convinced that this is the best way to…"

"Wait, this might be a trap," Ray mutters just before the book snaps shut and floats away. "That's using your head, Ray," Egon says. Faced with no other choice, we follow the book. It leads us to an area with dozens of books floating in shallow water. As we start to wade through, all of the books join together to form a huge golem. One swipe from this thing and it's lights out. But if you do happen to bite it when there are other Ghostbusters around, they will run over and revive you. Your teammates will also revive each other, so you don't have to worry about putting yourself in the line of fire a la Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter. However, there will be plenty of times when you'll be separated from your buddies, so don't get too accustomed to them bailing you out.

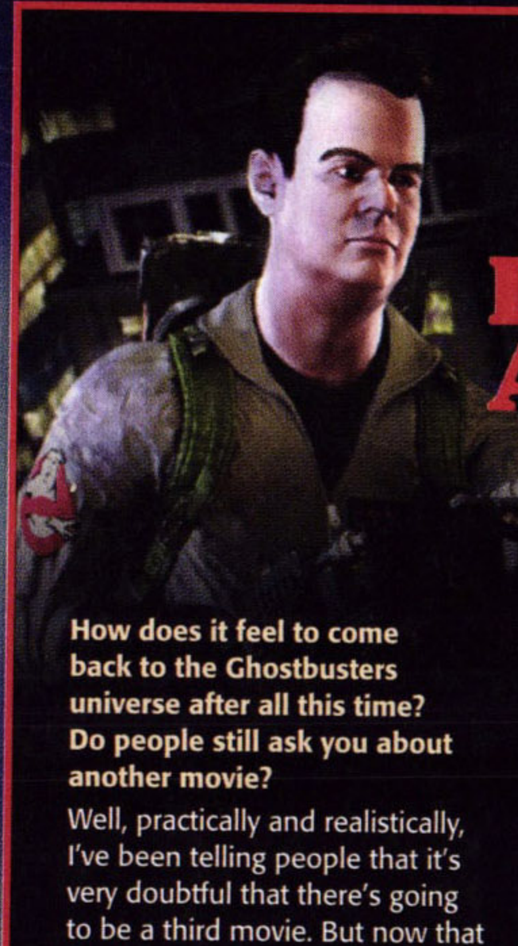
We eventually take out the golem, and move on to the librarian's chamber where she's calmly reading the Gozerian codex. "That book she's reading, it's not Dianetics. It's emitting an enormous amount of energy," Egon cautions. "That's your cue, killer. Go get 'em," Ray says. Yes, they want you to steal a book from a ghost that, up until now, has been perfectly harmless. After a moment of hesitation, we snatch the book and back up quickly. She looks up and simply fades away.

"She took that better than I expected," Egon says.

"It makes perfect sense. All of her energy's tied to the book," Ray surmises. "Now that we have it she's released. She's gone."

"I'm not entirely sure about that, Ray."

"Oh no," Ray says as the librarian reappears



Dan Aykroyd

On The Return To Ghostbusters

How does it feel to come back to the Ghostbusters universe after all this time? Do people still ask you about another movie?

Well, practically and realistically, I've been telling people that it's very doubtful that there's going to be a third movie. But now that I've seen the work on the video game, I've watched it progress, my rap now to people is 'This is essentially the third movie.' And it's better than the third movie because it lasts longer, there's more development of the characters. The guys have done a great job putting story layers in there that I can begin to embellish and work with. And I tell people this, "If you have an appetite for the third movie, then the video game is it." And I really do believe that at this point from having seen what they've done there.

What drew you into the project initially?

Well, it was just the idea of having a game based upon the characters and the premise. And then when we started to see the first renderings of how they were going to do it, what excited me was the look directly references the first movie. It almost has a classic kind of feel to it, which really works in terms of an animated and computer-generated piece of entertainment.

Is it strange seeing a version of yourself from 20 years ago running around in the game?

I like that because they were able to lose all of the weight I haven't been able to in the video game. I think it's what people remember. It's what people are watching today, that first and second movie. So it's better that we harken back to those original characters than try to depict the way Harold and I look today or the way we are today.

You and Harold Ramis wrote the first two movie scripts together. We imagine it's quite exciting to work with him on this new game script.

Yes, he's by far my favorite collaborator. He's very intelligent, and, of course, does not believe in ghosts or the paranormal or supernatural in any way, shape, or form. So it's fun to work with him because he's a complete skeptic. I am a believer and he is a skeptic so the two of us make a great team.

How did you decide on the 1991 time period and where do you think the characters are at this point?

It was obvious if we are going with the premise that this is the third story it would have to advance in time somewhat. And I think the characters run a more successful business. It's accepted as matter of fact in the world that this is a company that exists and you call when there's trouble from the supernatural realm. These characters are now older, more experienced, perhaps a little more jaded, more tough, with maybe not as compassionate a view of the spirits that they used to have. You have to balance the extermination view with the compassion view so that will be a whole attitude that wasn't there in the first two movies.

Will you be able to record your voiceover sessions alongside other members of the principle cast?

I hope we'll be able to work together and do some group work in the studio. I'll probably end up working with Harold and maybe Annie Potts and Bill Atherton. I don't know whether I'll do my sessions with [Bill] Murray or he'll do them with me. That would be the dream because we'd get to go back to something that we both enjoyed working on in its original sense. But I'll do the job however they present it to me and it's going to be great.

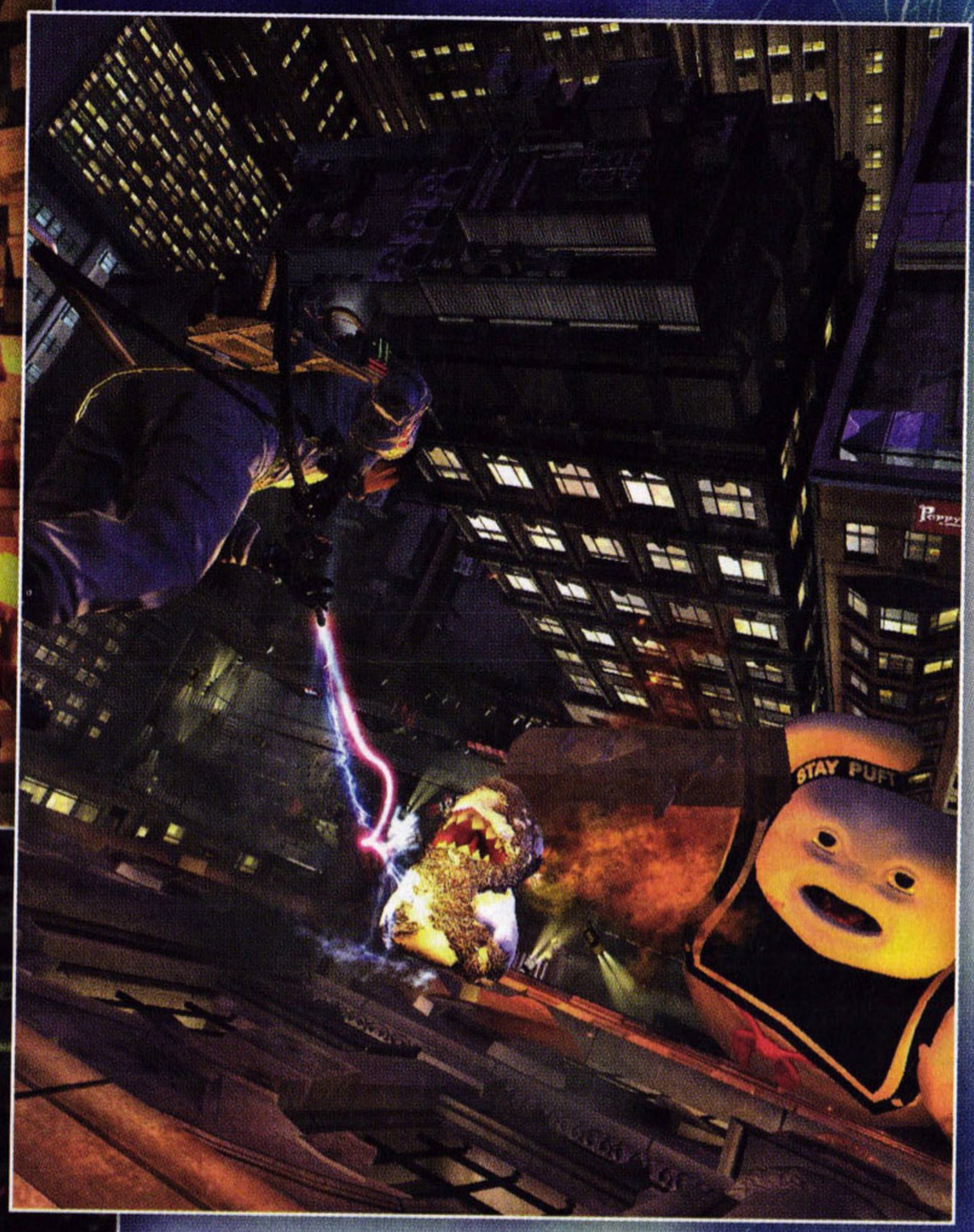
in the spooky form that she used to scare the Ghostbusters all of those years ago. This time, however, they have proton packs. The librarian shields herself with a sphere of books. As you blast away, she sends books after you that fly like bats. It takes a whole lot of wrangling from all three Ghostbusters, but in the end they're able to position her over the trap and take care of business.

After any hard day of work, it's nice to have a place to hang up your jumpsuit. The Ghostbusters' old converted firehouse serves as a hub where you can chat it up with Janine the secretary (Annie Potts has agreed to do the voice work), peek in on Egon's latest inventions, see Ray fiddling with Ecto-1's engine, perform scientific experiments, or check out trophies you've earned from missions. "But most importantly, you'll be able to go down the fire pole," says Red Fly's Jeff Mills, developer of the Wii and PS2 versions of the game (see sidebar). Unlike the Ghostbusters first few months in business, however, it won't be long before you've got another client to help.

In the final part of our demo, we found ourselves dangling over the edge of a skyscraper with Ray and Egon holding the rope on the roof. If we're the worm on a hook, Stay Puft Marshmallow Man is the fish. "He looks upset to me. I think he

■ Traffic passes below and a crowd of onlookers will scatter if they think Stay Puft is coming down

■ Terminal Reality is still working on an appropriate consequence/awesome effect for crossing the streams



remembers us," Egon says. "Oh boy, he sure does. Fire him up, kiddo," Ray replies. While Stay Puft begins to scale the side of the building, a helicopter putters into view. The fluffy white monster crushes it and tosses it at you. "The pilot got out just in time," Egon notices (the team is shooting for a T rating, after all). Stay Puft sends out swarms of evil marshmallow minis. Once you connect with the proton beam, gravity takes hold of these minions and they fall and bounce realistically off of their maker's face. As Marshmallow Man gets zapped in the face, it leaves toasty black scarring…and makes him incredibly angry. "This doesn't hurt him at all," Dumbroski says as he torments the boss. "I just think it's fun to do." The only way to damage Stay Puft is to wait for him to send out a flaming marshmallow mini and blast it back at him. After enough damage, Stay Puft falls dozens of stories and splats marshmallow gunk across several city blocks.

Though this boss battle was epic in scale, it's apparently only the beginning. "I don't want to get into the full story because of Dan and Harold, but you're going to like the way it ties together," Melchior says. "They did a really good job with the story and who the big boss is – like Stay Puft is early in the game." If the Stay Puft Marshmallow Man is low on the totem pole, we can't wait to see who's on top. ■■■

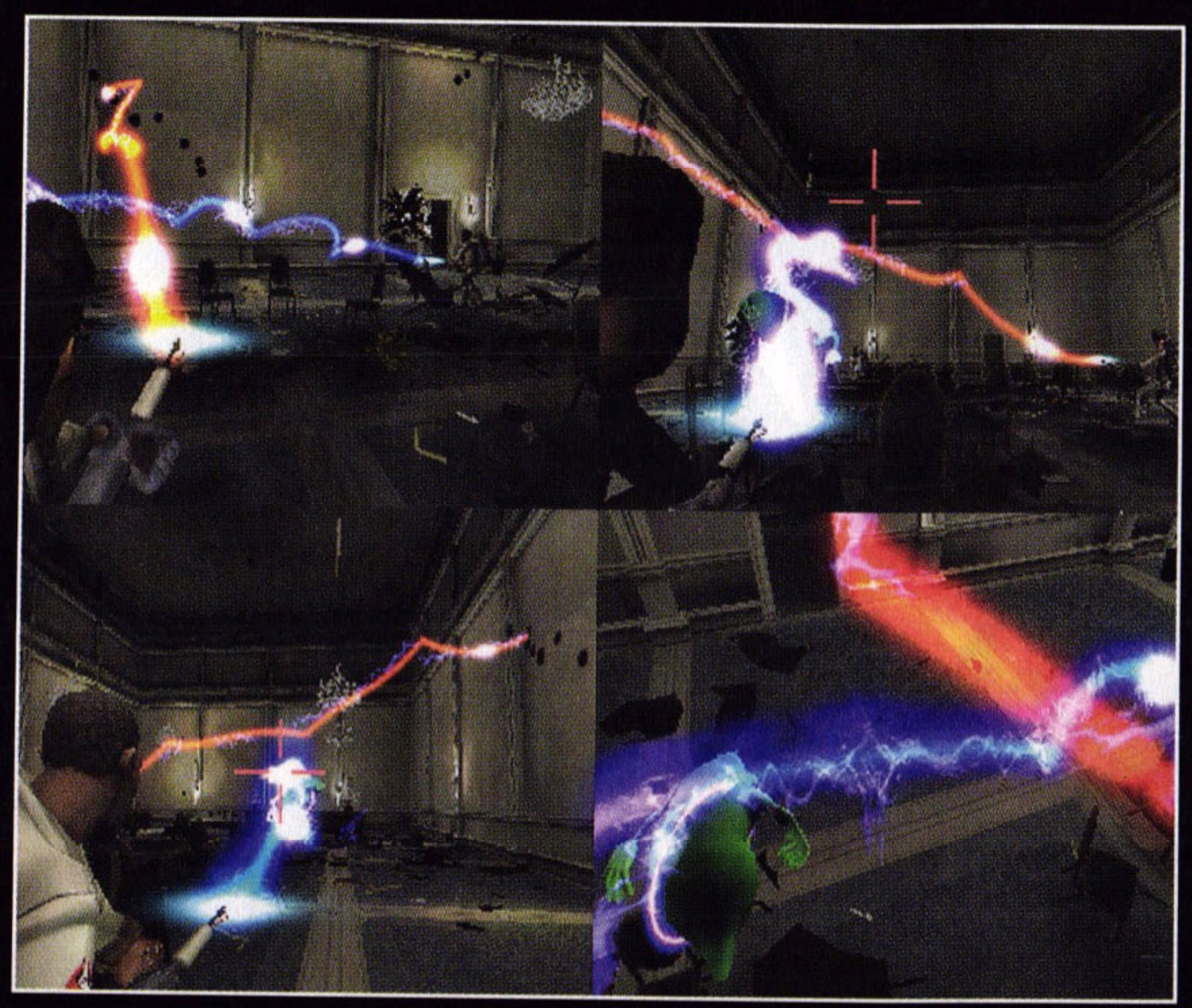
Check this month's Unlimited for the full interview with Dan Aykroyd and a retrospective of the Ghostbusters' gaming history.

Wii | PLAYSTATION 2

Ghostbusters

> STYLE 1 TO 4-PLAYER ACTION (Wii), 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION (PS2)
> PUBLISHER SIERRA ENTERTAINMENT **> DEVELOPER** RED FLY STUDIO **> RELEASE** OCTOBER 2008

BUSTIN' WITH BUDDIES



Wii and PlayStation 2 owners will also be able to get in on the fun next Halloween with a cartoon-styled version of Ghostbusters. "The storyline from the next-gen version will be carried out in its entirety in our game, but our primary focus is on multiplayer," says Red Fly's Jeff Mills. "So we'll reproduce everything that you do in the game, but then we'll repurposed the maps for various multiplayer things and introduce new maps for multiplayer scenarios as well."

The entire single-player campaign can be tackled by up to four players via splitscreen co-op or a Halo 3 style competitive mode. But the largest difference from the Xbox 360 and PS3 versions is found in the adversarial modes where players battle it out in a ghosts versus Ghostbusters free for all. Ghosts will be able to phase through certain points in the walls, floors, and ceiling. And many, like Slimer, have the ability to fly. Ghosts can also sneak up behind players and scare them, temporarily reducing their max health. Busters are equipped with a standard array of proton packs and traps and each one has a different special ability. Ray, for example, will be able to spot where ghosts are going to come through the wall. ■■■

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EVERYONE 10+
T
E
10+
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Alcohol Reference
Animated Blood
Crude Humor
Fantasy Violence
Language

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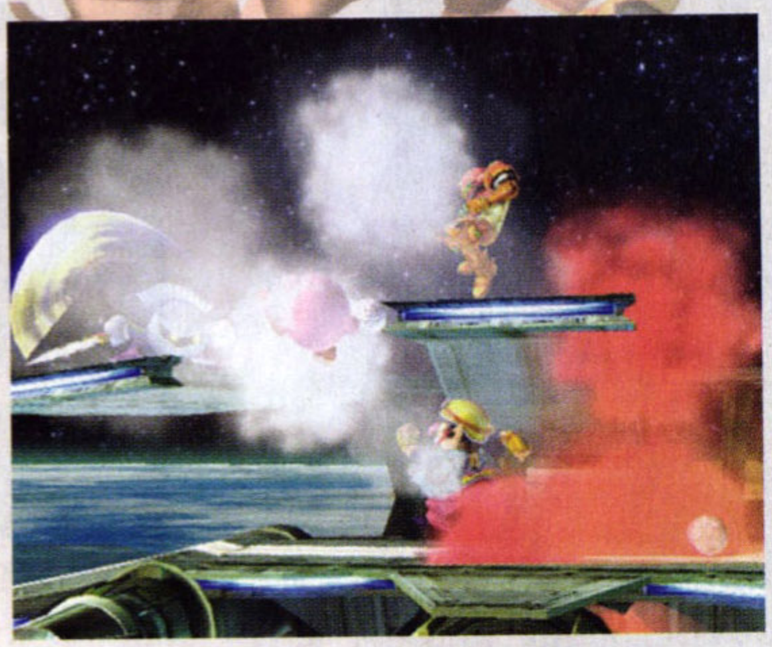
SUPER SMASH BROS. BRAWL

Wii

> STYLE 1 TO 4-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 4-PLAYER VIA Wii CONNECT 24)
> PUBLISHER NINTENDO
> DEVELOPER NINTENDO **> RELEASE** FEBRUARY 10



As you can see, Bowser is a total wuss

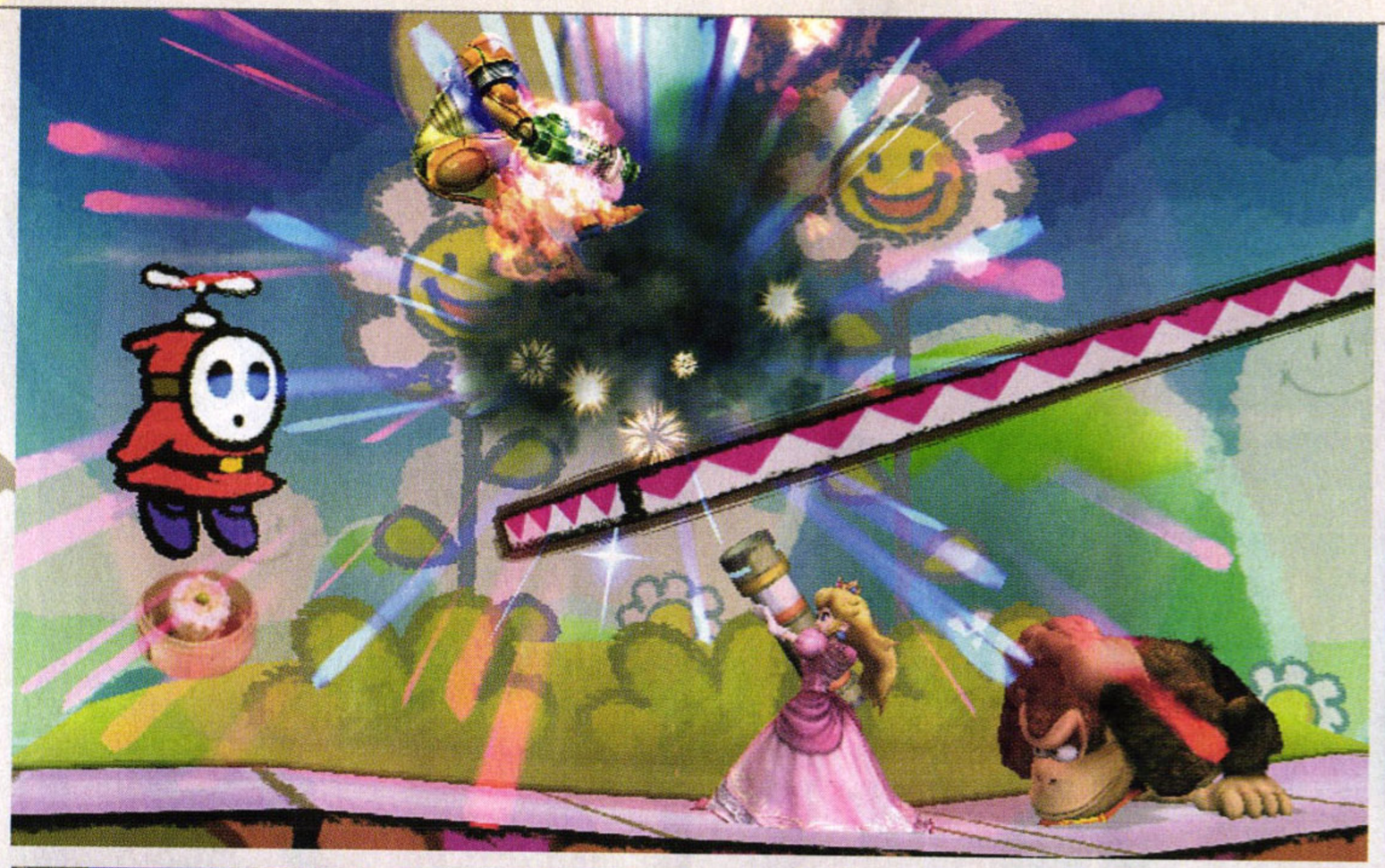
After spending a few minutes playing Super Smash Bros. Brawl recently, we wanted to pack up and go home. Of course, we wanted to take the game with us. As nice as it was for Nintendo to set up couches and make the demo area as comfortable as possible, Smash Bros. games have always been about gathering with friends, talking trash, and beating the virtual snot out of one another.

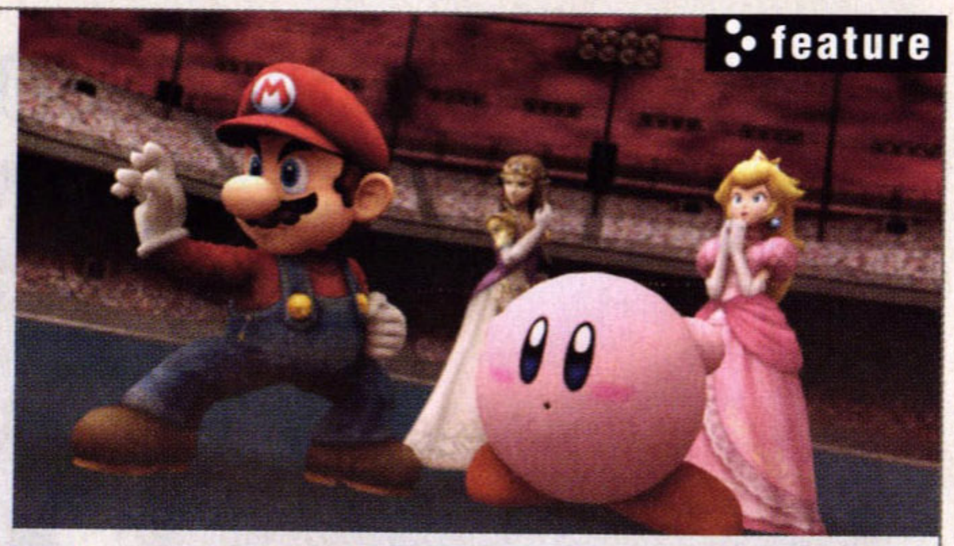
Nintendo has adopted some new brothers with Brawl, including Konami's Solid Snake and Mario's former arch-nemesis, Sonic the Hedgehog. Peanut-popping Diddy Kong makes his debut, as does Kid Icarus' sharpshooter Pit and Mother 3's psionically enhanced Lucas. It's easy to lose track of this ever-expanding family – check out our profiles on page 88 for more info.

One of the biggest changes to the game is the introduction of Final Smashes. Floating Smash. Bros. logos occasionally drift through stages, and the player who breaks it open piñata style is rewarded with an ultimate attack that sends foes flying in spectacular ways. Each character's Final Smash is different, reflecting their personalities. Donkey Kong whips out his bongos and pounds out a beat, damaging anyone foolish enough to get within listening range. Sonic transforms into Super Sonic, zipping around the screen like a comet. As cool as the other Final Smashes are, Samus' is definitely the most interesting. After knocking foes asunder with a near screen-filling charge beam, she sheds her armor, becoming Zero Suit Samus – like Zelda's transformation to Sheik, only players are going to have to earn their alter ego.

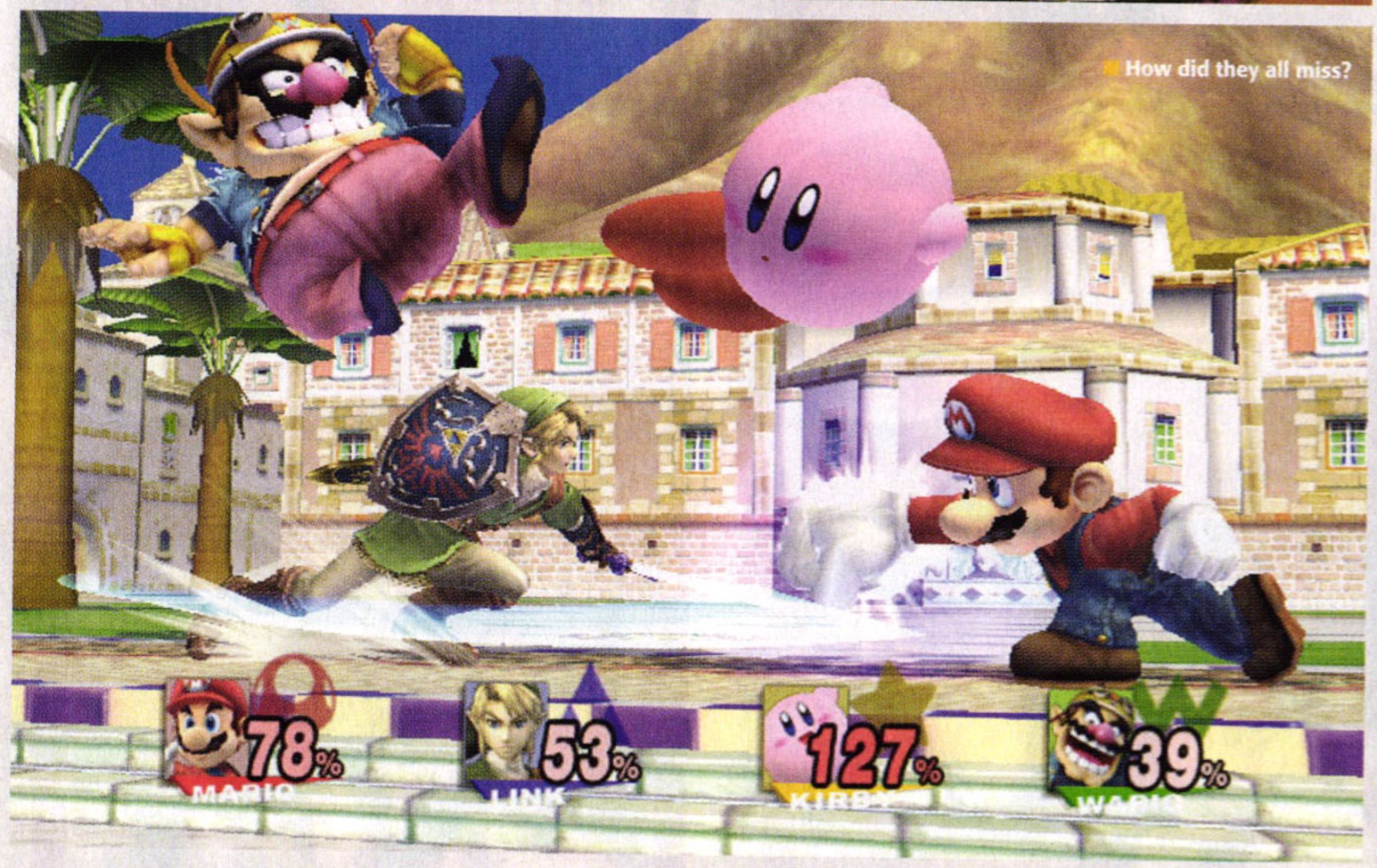
Battles are fought in a dizzying variety of locations, and each one has its own little gimmick. Delfino Plaza has players rumbling on a moving platform that swoops and swings its way through Super

Five minutes later, there wasn't even enough left to make a positive ID on the peel

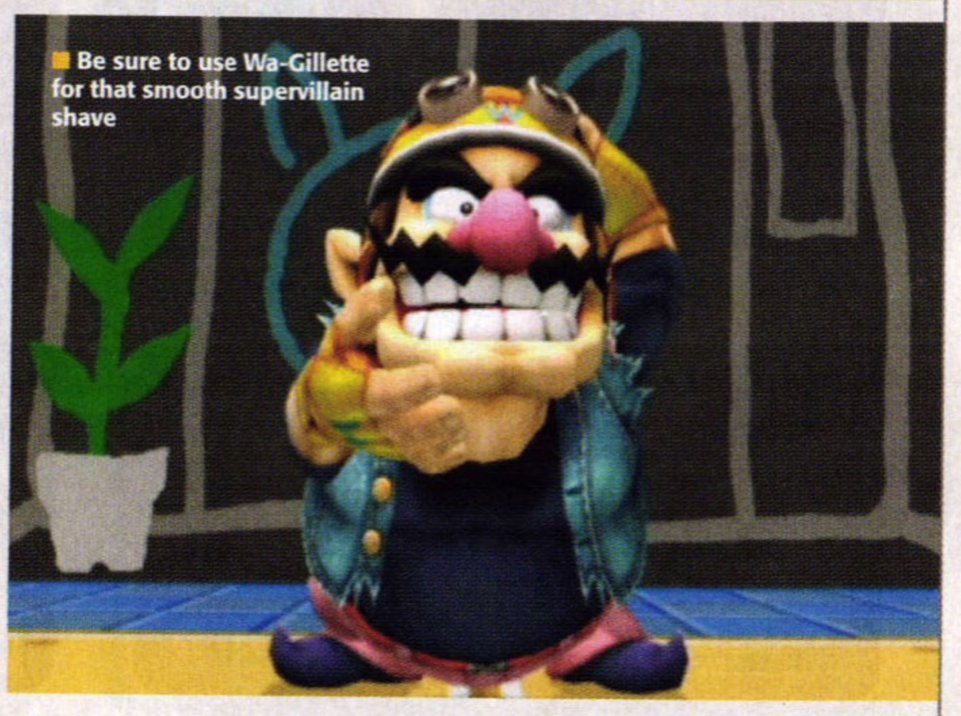




■ Spoiler Alert: Metal Gear Solid 4 reveals Snake is the son of Mario and some kind of future space-Yoshi



■ How did they all miss?



■ Be sure to use Wa-Gillette for that smooth supervillain shave

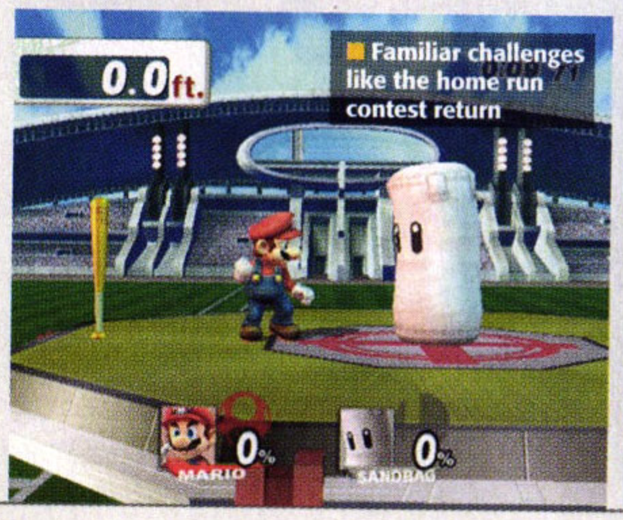
Mario Sunshine's familiar vistas. An Animal Crossing level uses the Wii's internal clock to change the level's look – and even includes a K.K. Slider concert if you're there at the right moment. One level takes place in the DS' Pictochat window, with platforms and hazards that get sketched into being right before your eyes.

Players will be able to control Super Smash Bros. Brawl through a variety of control schemes, including the Wii's remote, Nunchuk, Classic Controller, and GameCube controller. Double-tapping the d-pad on the remote to dash worked fine, but having to press B to block and – to grab was trickier. The Classic Controller was closer to the GameCube's familiar setup, but the smaller Z buttons made it difficult to throw items (and opponents) on the fly. Players will be able to map their own button setups for each control method and save them to individual profiles, so the remote could be a contender with the right tweaking.

Notable new items include the Pitfall Trap (fresh from Animal Crossing) that stuns opponents or creates holes in platforms, depending upon placement. The Smart Bomb is a powerful new explosive that damages and temporarily incapacitates its victims. Pokéballs are back with Brawl's Assist Trophies taking the concept further. Like Pokéballs, Assist Trophies send out random characters to help players fight. The trophies draw from Nintendo's vast library of characters and games, so you might find yourself temporarily fighting alongside Punch-Out's Little Mac or have SimCity's Mr. Wright instantly erect a skyscraper beneath your victim.

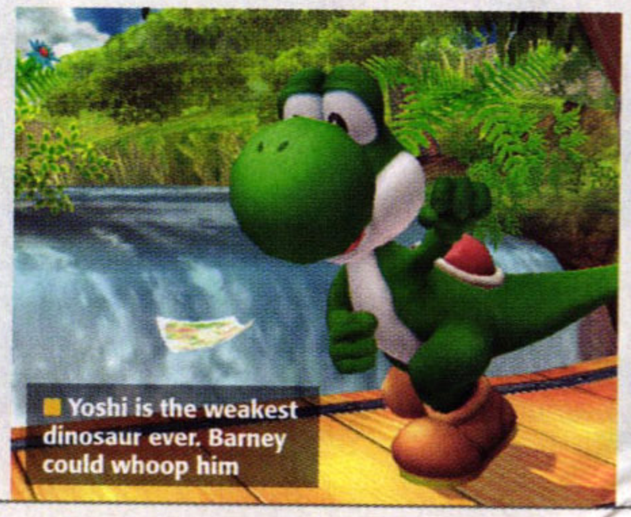
Smash fans looking for a completely overhauled game will probably be among the few players disappointed by Brawl. The game looks great and plays beautifully, and the Final Smashes keep the action more frantic than ever. When February 10 rolls around, this is one fight you're not going to want to miss. ■■■

***Turn the page for news on all the announced characters and their origins.*



■ Familiar challenges like the home run contest return

■ Mario and Sonic: A can't-miss combination



■ Yoshi is the weakest dinosaur ever. Barney could whoop him

■ The Metal Gear stage is just a little cooler than the Mushroom Kingdom

BROTHER FROM SOME OTHER MOTHERS

Smash is bigger than ever, with a slew of new fighters entering the fighting family

Pit

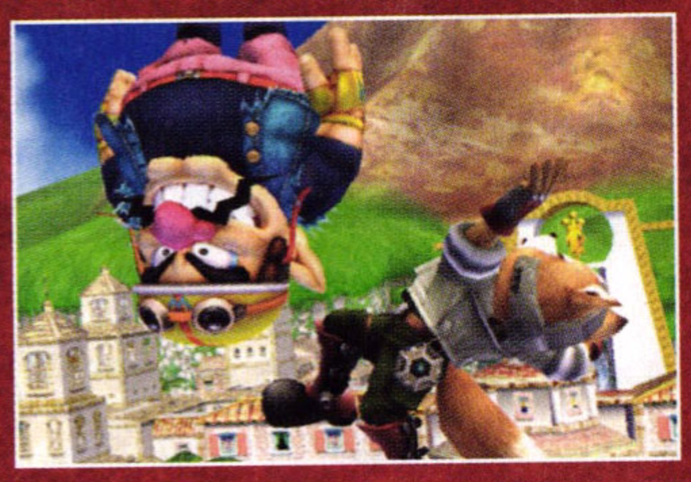
From: Kid Icarus (1987) (1986 JP)

A mere trophy no longer, Pit enters the battle with his bow and blades. His light arrows can be steered in midair, letting him pester foes from afar. His wings also let him hover for short periods of time.

Wario

From: Super Mario Land 2: 6 Golden Coins (1992)

Mario's greed-fueled nemesis finally makes his Smash debut, though his stomach is a bit unsettled. Watch out for his flatulence – it's not silent, but it's certainly deadly.



Ike

From: Fire Emblem: Path of Radiance (2005)

Ike's taken a breather from his usual adventuring, bringing enough sword for everyone. His charge attack takes a while to pull off, but the flaming maelstrom it produces is well worth the effort.

Pokémon Trainer

From: Pokémon Red/Blue (1998) (1996 JP)

This challenger is above getting his hands dirty, letting his adorable minions do the fighting. He stands safely on the sidelines, controlling Squirtle, Ivysaur, and Charizard during the matches.

Diddy Kong

From: Donkey Kong Country (1994)

Donkey Kong's little buddy is as spry as ever, cartwheeling and leaping through stages and blasting opponents with his Peanut Pop Gun. If he's not careful he'll get tossed around like Pichu, though.

Zero Suit Samus

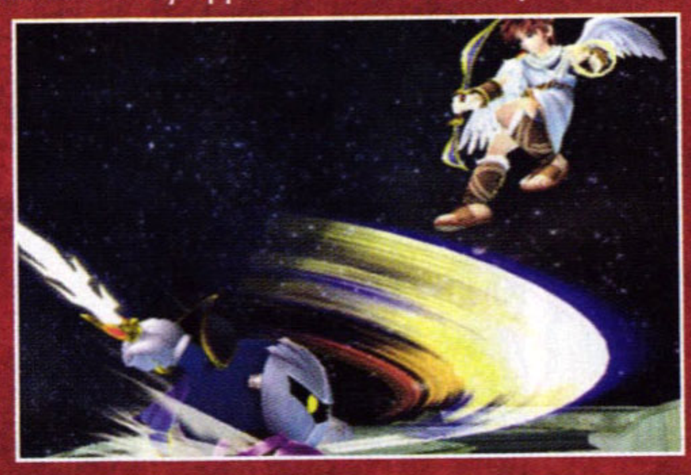
From: Metroid: Zero Mission (2004)

Even out of her suit, Samus is no pushover. Without the bulky armor, she's faster than ever. Her Paralyzer lets her deal damage at a distance and can be transformed into an energy whip for closer encounters.

Meta Knight

From: Kirby's Adventure (1993)

Meta Knight breaks fighting-game conventions by being large and quick. His blades are as distracting as they are sharp, and his rising and falling attacks makes him a worthy opponent – or a solid ally.



Snake

From: Metal Gear (1987)

Get back in the box! Snake brings his deadly stealth attacks and powerful weapons to the Smash Bros. universe – perfect for wiping the smiles off all those Pikachu players out there.

Lucas

From: Mother 3 (2006 JP)

While he's not as outgoing as the legendary Ness, Lucas could be a favorite pick for fans of psychic kids. Since he's just a little guy, he lets the power of his mind do most of the work.

Sonic

From: Sonic the Hedgehog (1991)

Finally, the spiny-backed speedster will be able to slap the crumbs out of Mario's mustache! Sonic can spin-dash his way through enemies, and his trademark speed and agility is in full force. Don't fall off those platforms, though.

King Dedede

From: Kirby's Dream Land (1992)

Kirby's nemesis is finally playable in Brawl after being cut from Super Smash Bros. and only appearing as a trophy in Melee. The penguin monarch brings a mechanized hammer and his Waddle Dee minions into battle in Brawl.

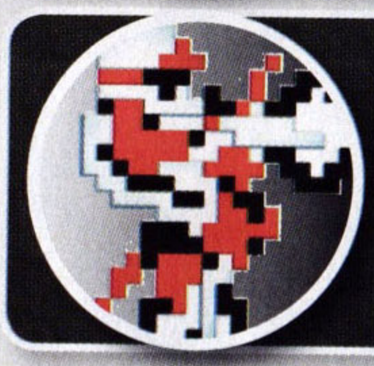
••FRIENDS OF THE FAMILY••

While they won't be playable, these favorites are happy to help as Assist Trophies

Little Mac

From: Mike Tyson's Punch-Out!! (1987)

He may be small, but don't throw in the towel just yet. As an Assist Trophy, Little Mac rushes into the ring and lets loose a combo that opponents won't soon forget. TKO!



Excitebike

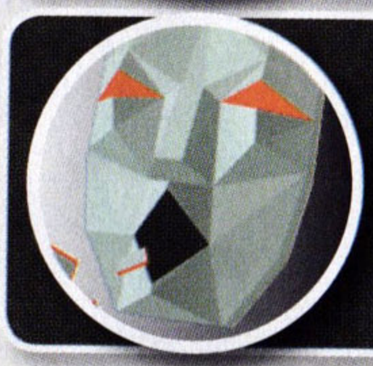
Excitebike (1985) (1984 JP)

These speed demons don't brake for anyone. Unleash this trophy and a racetrack-sized dose of pixilated motocrossers will scream across the stage, making speed bumps of your rivals.

Mr. Resetti

From: Animal Crossing (2002) (2001 JP)

The notorious windbag is back, and he's been building up a head of steam since we last saw him. When he shows up, you might regret inviting him into battle – he'll drone on for minutes, obscuring the action and boring just about everyone.



Andross

From: Star Fox (1993)

Before he got a monkey makeover, Andross was just another terrifying geometric face in the crowd. Let's hope your foes like dodging polygons.

Devil

From: Devil World (1984)

This obscure fellow is from a Miyamoto game that never made it stateside. Once he pops up, he can potentially ruin everyone's day – even his host. Devil points at the screen and scrolls it in random directions. Better keep up or you're out of the game!

FAMILY REUNION

After recuperating from their Melee battles, Nintendo's finest are back for more action

Mario
From: Donkey Kong (1981)

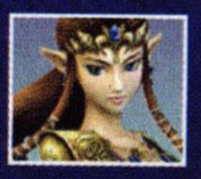
Link
From: The Legend of Zelda (1986)

Kirby
From: Kirby's Dream Land (1992)

Pikachu
From: Pokémon Red/Blue (1998) (1996 JP)

Fox
From: Star Fox (1993)

Samus
From: Metroid (1987) (1986 JP)



Zelda
From: The Legend of Zelda (1986)

Bowser
From: Super Mario Bros. (1985)

Donkey Kong
From: Donkey Kong (1981)

Yoshi
From: Super Mario World (1991)

Peach
From: Super Mario Bros. (1985)

Ice Climbers
From: Ice Climbers (1985)

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TEEN
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CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Blood
Language
Violence

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PLAYSTATION 3

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PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360 | PC

Bionic Commando

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** CAPCOM > **DEVELOPER** GRIN > **RELEASE** TBA

A BIONIC RESURRECTION

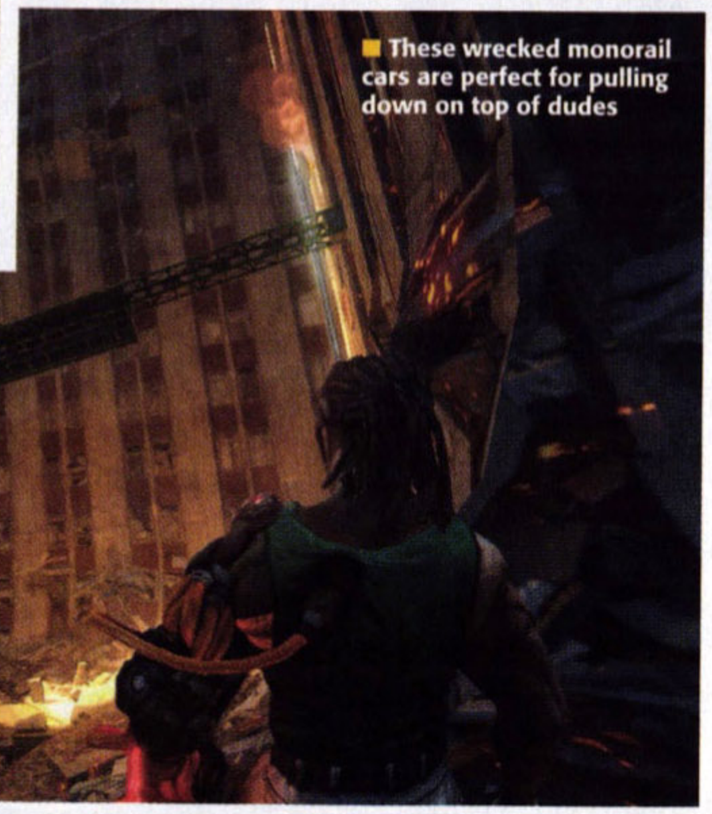
After almost 20 years, Bionic Commando is finally making a comeback. The original NES version has remained a cult hit after all of these years (see sidebar) and Capcom is giving the series a full next-gen makeover. The game takes place 10 years after the original story, with our hero Nathan Spencer (voiced by Faith No More's Mike Patton, who did voices for The Darkness) falsely imprisoned for the assassinations of top government officials. On the very day he is to be executed, an enemy force called the Imperials (the "Badds" from the original game) drops a devastating bomb on Ascension City that triggers a massive earthquake that kills almost the entire population. Imperial forces move in and set up an impenetrable anti-aircraft defense, and the government has no choice but to deploy Nathan in exchange for a complete dismissal of the charges.

While Nathan's hair may have changed from a red buzz cut to dark, flowing dreadlocks, he still wears his trademark green threads and, of course, utilizes his bionic arm to maneuver through the ruins and pummel bad guys. Swinging looks to resemble the recent Spider-Man games, except Nathan is free to shoot enemies while he's zipping through the environment. The arm's offensive capabilities include crushing melee attacks, boulder tossing, and the ability to yank down rubble on unsuspecting soldiers. But these moves are only scratching the surface. The arm will gain various upgrades throughout the game that will make it even more powerful.

Swedish developer Grin, known for its work on the PC versions of GRAW 1 and 2, is working with Capcom to ensure the classic franchise is done right. This also marks the first time a non-Japanese producer, the U.S.-born Ben Judd, has worked on a project out of Capcom Japan. Judd remembers

■ **The opening city level features impressive amounts of verticality**

■ Boss battles look to rival Lost Planet: Extreme Condition in scale

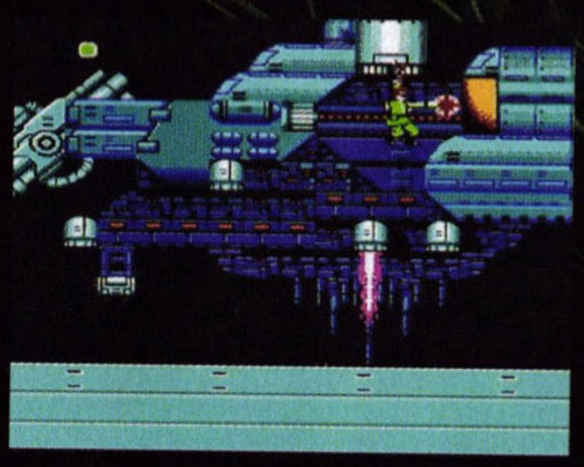


■ These wrecked monorail cars are perfect for pulling down on top of dudes

countless times when he would attend press events and reporters would repeatedly ask when another Bionic Commando would be coming. "It just clicked with me, because I loved that title. I was just like, 'Yeah, why aren't we remaking that?,'" Judd says. "So I initially threw the idea over to [Keiji Inafune, Capcom's head of R&D and online business], who said, 'No, it isn't going to work. It's a title that nobody knows about in Japan.'" After much prodding, Judd was able to convince Inafune about the strength of the property, who, in turn, was able to win over the rest of the Capcom executives.

"It was originally going to be a PSP game. It was going to be a 2D, internally produced PSP game. I know that's going to make some people say, 'Oh, you should have done that!'", Judd says. "Ultimately, Inafune-san said, 'You know what? This is kind of a waste for us just to make it 2D. We need to do this the right way, and we need to do this all the way.'"

It will most likely be a long time before we know for sure if Nathan Spencer's return lives up to fans' memories and newcomers' expectations as the game currently has no estimated release date. But the thought of swinging around on a bionic arm again sure has us excited. ■ ■ ■



A PLATFORMING CLASSIC

The original Bionic Commando appeared on everything from the arcade to the Commodore 64 to the [illegible], but the 1988 release on the Nintendo Entertainment System is most fondly remembered. Instead of utilizing jumps like most platforming games of the day, main character Radd/Ladd Spencer could swing around levels with an innovative bionic arm. He was tasked with rescuing his friend Super Joe from the clutches of Badd and could choose among several different paths to accomplish his mission. In Japan, the game was titled Top Secret: Hitler's Revival and players battled waves of Nazis in order to destroy a resurrected Hitler. While all traces of Nazi presence were removed for the U.S. release, the final boss, Master-D, looks identical to the fascist dictator, that is, until his head famously explodes. Gamers looking to revisit the franchise can find the arcade version on Capcom Classics Collection for PS2, Xbox, and PSP or try out the NES release on Capcom Classics Mini Mix for GBA.

MATURE 17+
M
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
Blood and Gore
Intense Violence
Partial Nudity
Sexual Themes

PC DVD-ROM SOFTWARE

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Saboteur

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION **> PUBLISHER** ELECTRONIC ARTS **> DEVELOPER** PANDEMIC **> RELEASE** 2008

VIVE LA RESISTANCE!

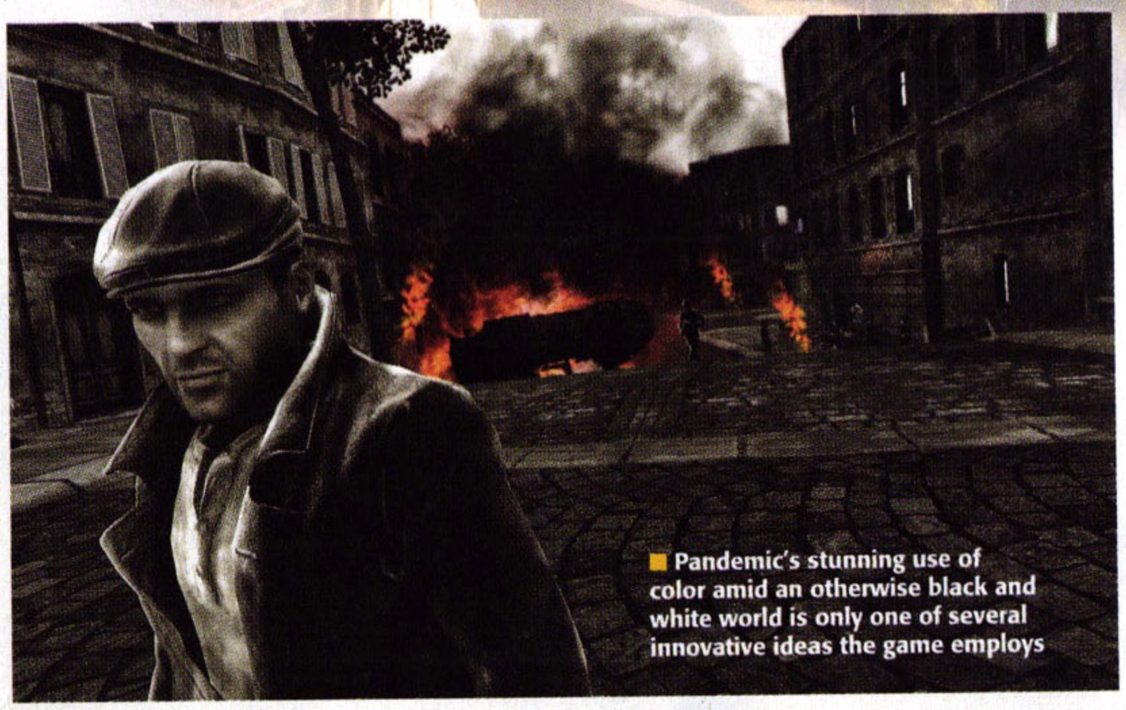
It's been a few months since we've heard anything about Pandemic's exciting variation on the World War II era, so we checked in with the team to see how the project is coming. Of course, this month's big news from Pandemic was its acquisition by Electronic Arts, which nails down who will be publishing this title, not to mention the studio's future projects. The team seemed genuinely pleased about the recent changes, most of all because the extensive resources of EA should allow them to continue development on Saboteur in exactly the direction they hope.

Saboteur tells the tale of Sean Devlin, an Irish race car driver in the '40s, who is based loosely on a real character from the time. He's brash, stubborn, and reckless in everything from his car racing to his interactions with the opposite sex. It's at least some of these tendencies that get him in trouble with a couple of Nazi car racers who run in the same circles, and it's not long before Sean finds himself embroiled in the French Resistance.

The gameplay that ensues is a melding of platforming, stealth, shooting, and open world exploration. However, despite Sean's background, the game really doesn't have a central racing component. While cars and other vehicles play a part, they'll mostly be used to get Sean where he needs to go, which may end up being some pretty far-flung locations. The game depicts a huge area of the French countryside including, among other things, the entirety of Paris. Sean's missions of sabotage will take him throughout this vast sweep of land, wandering freely through a totally open world. He'll drive through the streets and take to the rooftops, clamber over chimneys and slide down clotheslines.

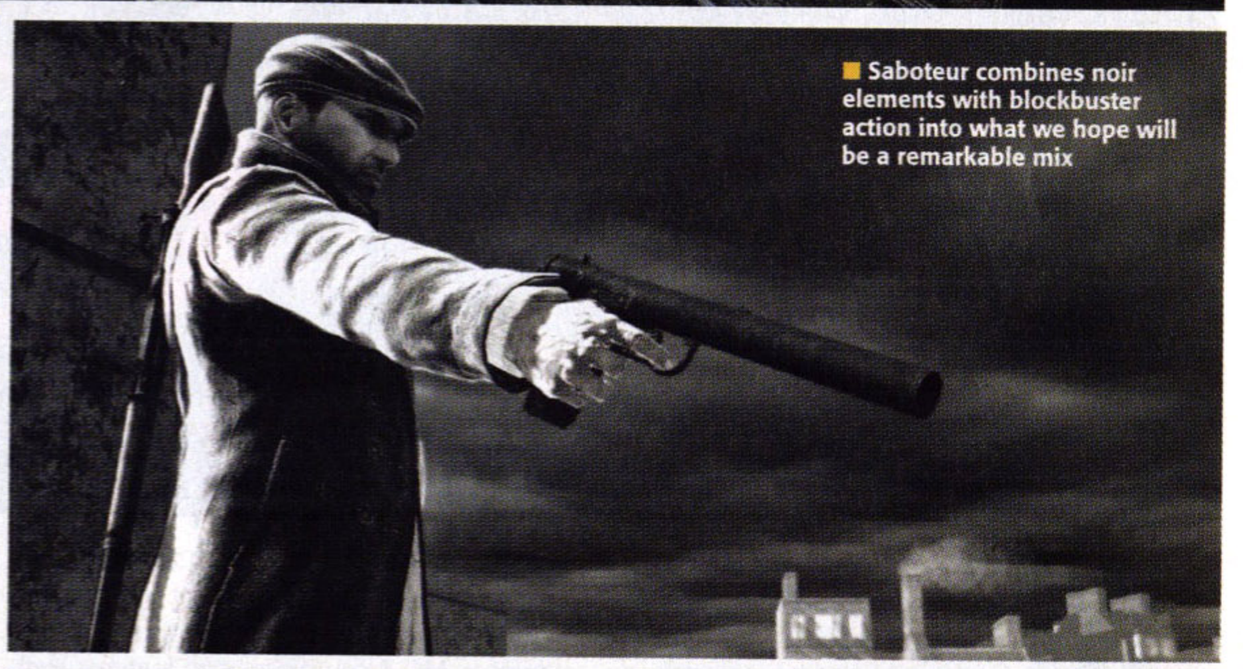
As the screens here demonstrate, one of the coolest features of the game is how Sean's actions will turn the world from black and white into color as he inspires the people and energizes them with his acts of defiance. Commonly, the tasks that help to enliven the surrounding area involve taking out Nazi installations and running like hell. The team sums up their mission style succinctly: Quiet in, loud out. Through disguises, stolen papers, and plain, old-fashioned sneaking, Sean will make his way into a secure location. Act suspiciously, and the guards will react accordingly, raising the alarm and calling for reinforcements. A more carefully planned entry means Sean won't have to deal with the backlash until after he blows up that supply train he is after. The ensuing insanity is a running gunfight as Sean battles back while retreating along any path he can find to safety.

A wealth of other exciting details have us stoked about Pandemic's title, not the least of which are their plans to integrate period jazz music into their musical score for the game. Sean Devlin sounds like the kind of hero everybody should have fun with, and Pandemic's enthusiasm for exploring World War II from an alternate perspective is refreshing. Being as excited as we are, the only thing we're not into is how long we have to wait; it doesn't sound like we'll be sabotaging anything until well into 2008. ■■■

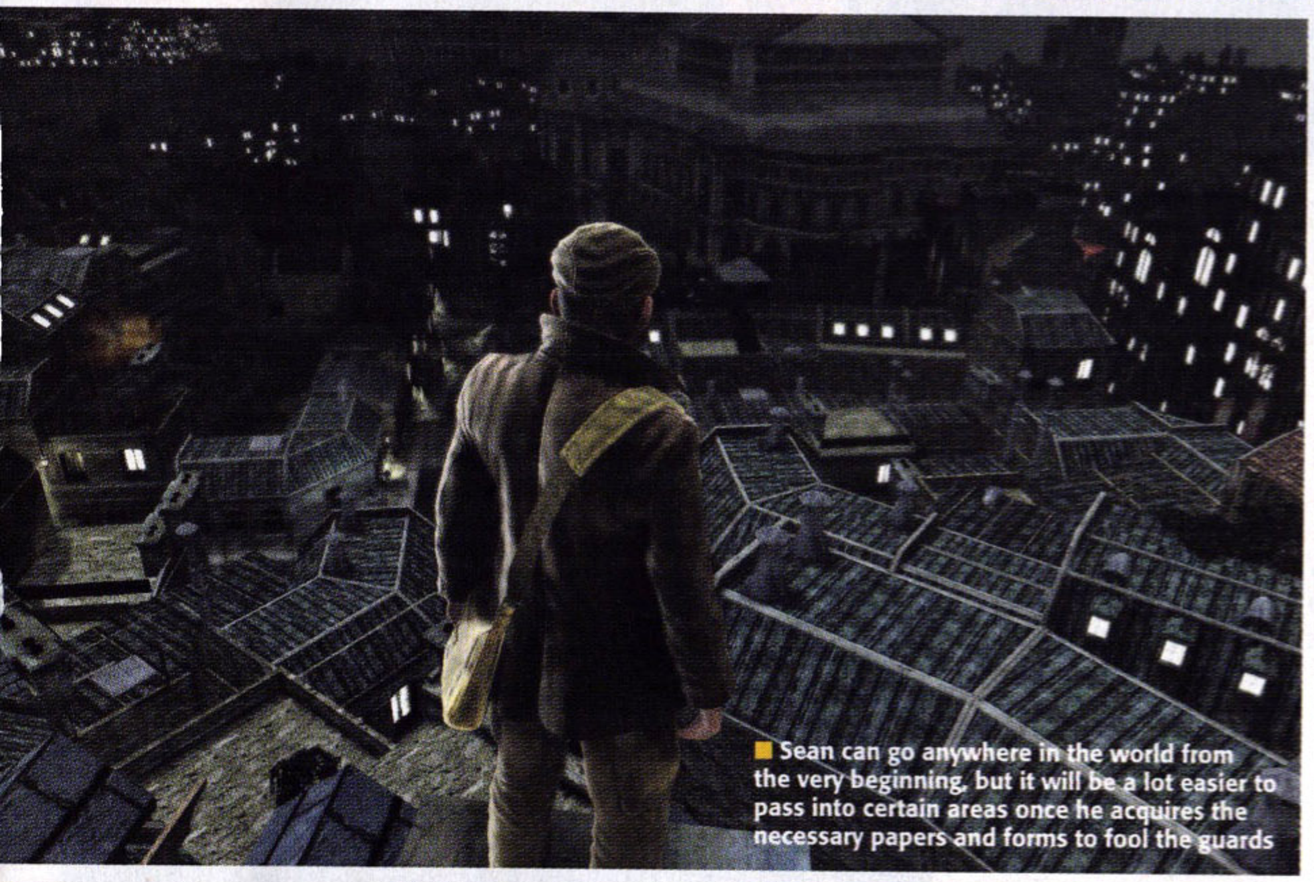


■ Pandemic's stunning use of color amid an otherwise black and white world is only one of several innovative ideas the game employs

■ Platforming and clambering is a primary form of locomotion through the game world



■ Saboteur combines noir elements with blockbuster action into what we hope will be a remarkable mix

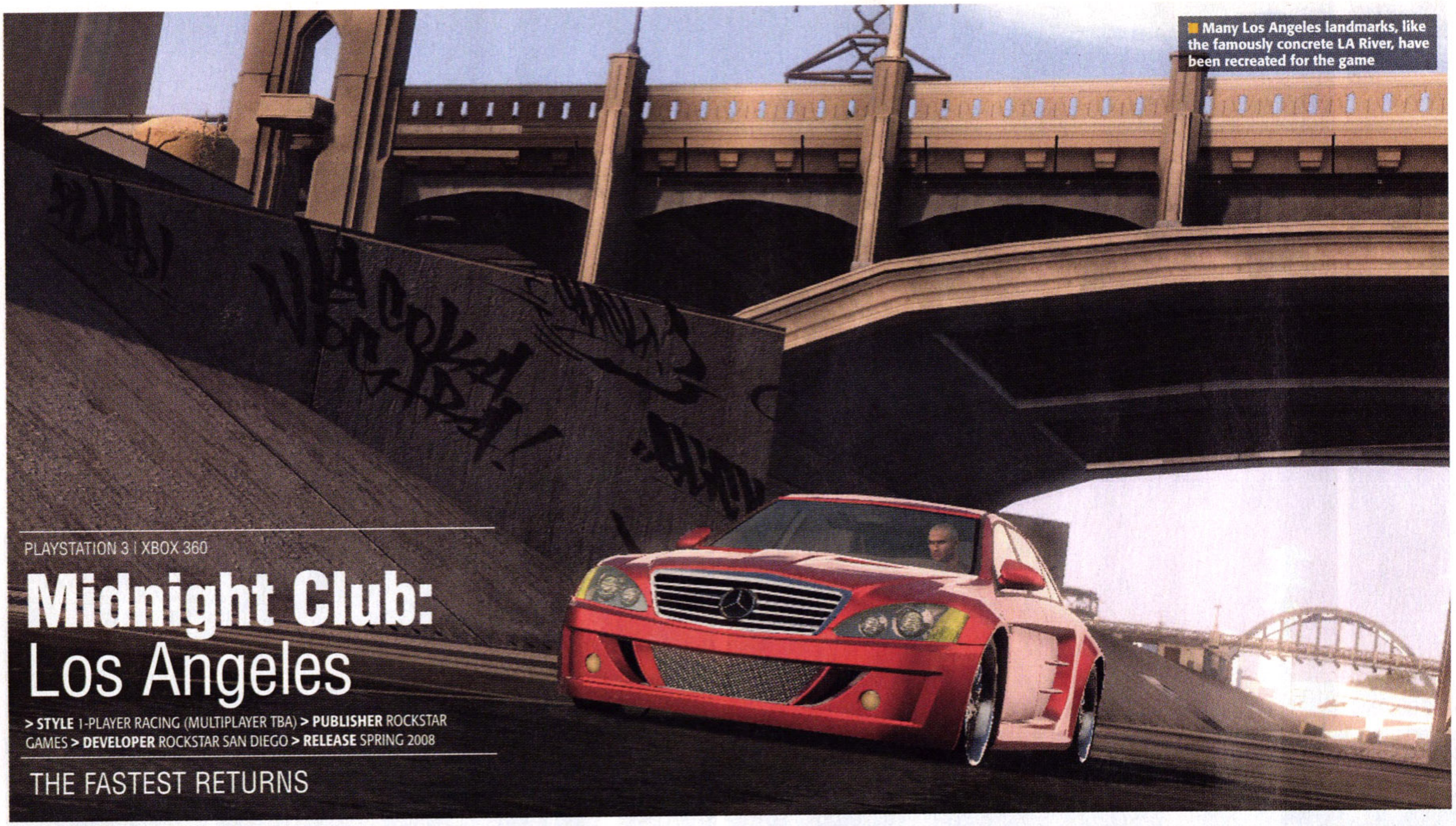


■ Sean can go anywhere in the world from the very beginning, but it will be a lot easier to pass into certain areas once he acquires the necessary papers and forms to fool the guards

■ As the citizenry is freed from Nazi tyranny, they will aid you with supplies, car deliveries, and will even step in to fight by your side

■ Stealth is a big part of the game – right until you cause some massive explosion

■ Openly wielding a gun will make you appear as a danger to the guards – keep your weapon hidden to lower their suspicion



Many Los Angeles landmarks, like the famously concrete LA River, have been recreated for the game

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360

Midnight Club: Los Angeles

> STYLE 1-PLAYER RACING (MULTIPLAYER TBA) **> PUBLISHER** ROCKSTAR GAMES **> DEVELOPER** ROCKSTAR SAN DIEGO **> RELEASE** SPRING 2008

THE FASTEST RETURNS

Many companies have tried their hand at the street racer. Some have succeeded, some have failed, but none have done it better than the team at Rockstar San Diego. Through three stellar Midnight Club sequels, they've delivered a heady mix of open-world racing, insane speeds, and (in MC 3) some of the best car customization options we've ever seen.

So it's no surprise that we're excited for the first next-gen entry in the series, Midnight Club: Los Angeles. As opposed to the last edition, which featured digital interpretations of San Diego, Atlanta, and Tokyo, this time the team is focused on doing its best to create one massive urban area. That megalopolis is Los Angeles, which Rockstar sees as "the spiritual home of the automobile." This focus has allowed for a new level of detail that, even at this stage, is quite striking. The city – while not an accurate representation of LA – attempts to capture the flavor of the city without all the tight corners and bottleneck traffic that would detract from the racing experience. All told, the area of this adapted City of Angels is as large as all three of the areas in MC 3 combined, and features such familiar LA landmarks as the Staples Center, The House of Blues, and the Laugh Factory.

Although the entire city is open to you from the outset, you'll have to unlock events, cars, and customization options with "Reputation," which serves as the game's currency. Unlike past games, this means you can have access to everything MC: LA has to offer without actually winning every event, as Reputation is awarded not just for coming in first. For example, you might get 150 points for winning an easy race, but 300 for finishing third in a difficult event. In this way, the team hopes that more people will get to see more of the experience, without having to compromise the difficulty of the higher-end events.

Although Rockstar wouldn't confirm exact numbers, expect more cars and more ways to customize them than ever before. We did get a chance to see at least two hot rides – the Mustang 1969 Boss 302 and the much-coveted Lamborghini Gallardo – and were pleased to see that, despite all the graphical horsepower being given to creating a detailed cityscape, the cars in this game are absolutely gorgeous. In fact, Rockstar claims that most top 100,000 polygons, mainly due to the fact that the interiors are now fully rendered. More impressively, they're fully customizable, so if you've always wanted red stitching on your leathers seats, you'll be able to do it in the game.

So, while there's much we don't know about Midnight Club: Los Angeles (Rockstar would only hint at "very ambitious" plans for online play), this much we do know: It's still the fastest-looking racer on the market. Rockstar San Diego has always excelled at this, and this time the effect is only enhanced by some very cool new side-of-car views used during turbos. Even though GTA gets the accolades, this has always been the Rockstar series that features the most polished gameplay, and it looks like this new edition will continue that tradition in fine style. ■■■

The interiors are fully modeled and customizable

It's so accurate, it's even got real smog effects!

Expect bevy of new and classic cars and motorcycles

As always, the entire city is one open environment

Despite the size and detail of the city, the cars are insanely detailed

For the first time there's a playable cockpit view

New camera angles add to the sense of speed

FIGHT THE ADDICTION

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MATURE 17+
M
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Blood
Intense Violence
Strong Language
Use of Drugs

PLAYSTATION 3

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MANTEL

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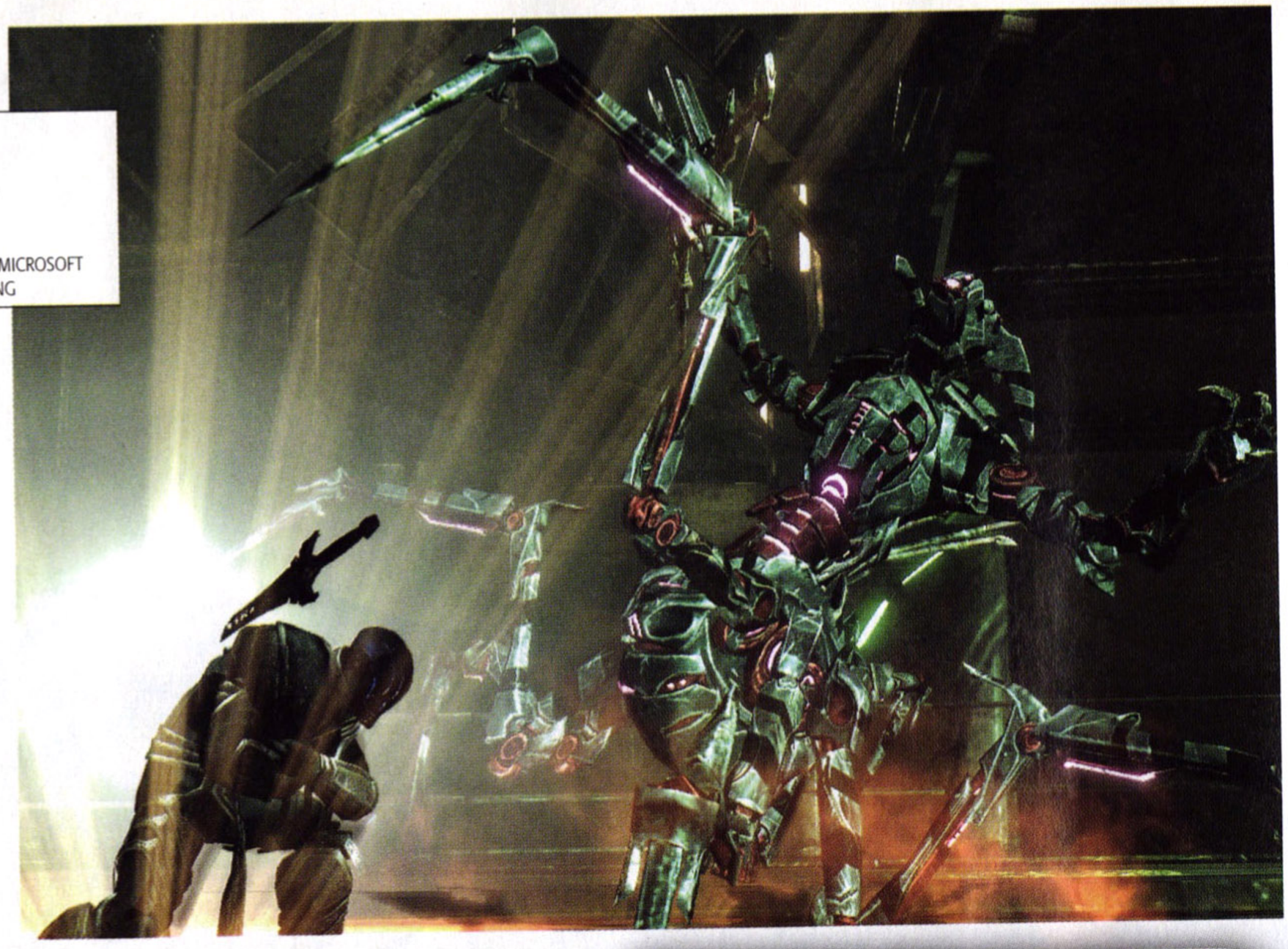
Too Human

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION/RPG (MULTIPLAYER TBA) **> PUBLISHER** MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS **> DEVELOPER** SILICON KNIGHTS **> RELEASE** SPRING

THE HUMAN CONDITION

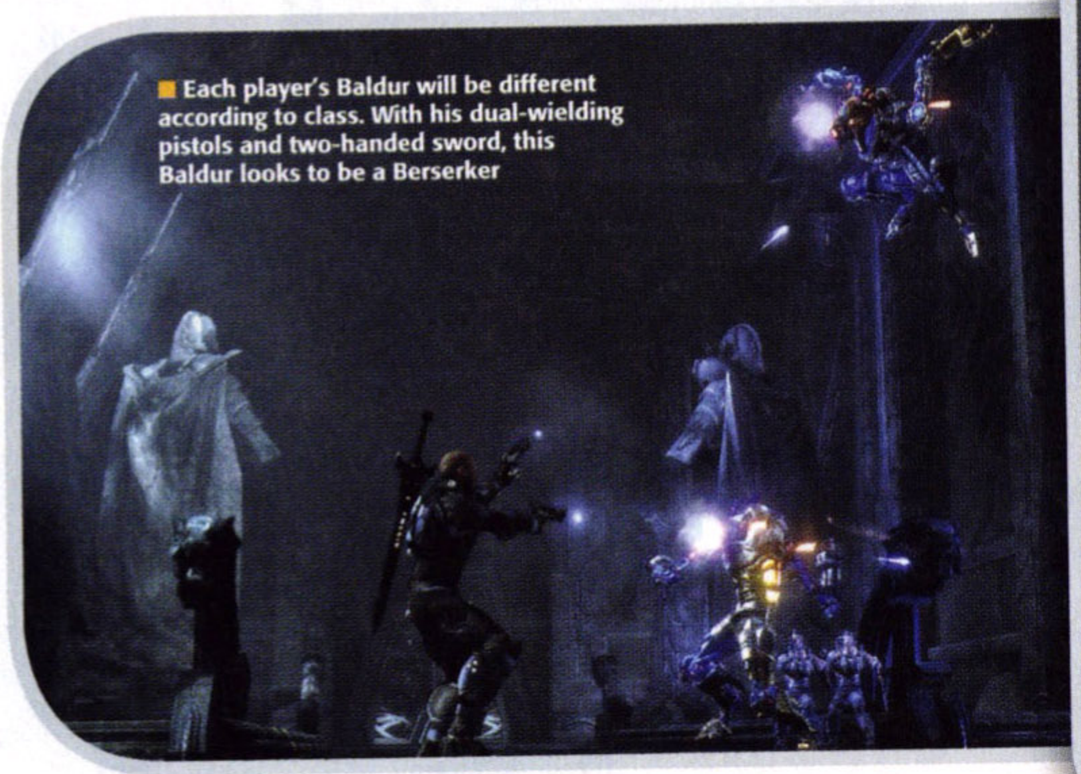
"I think now Too Human is by far the most misunderstood game in the industry," says Denis Dyack, president of developer Silicon Knights. This isn't an accident, however. Because of the game's poor showing at E3 in 2006 – a situation which was caused in part because the company was busy switching the game over to its own engine from Unreal Engine 3 (see issue 175, page 50). This perception was also fostered because the game's 2006 demo just focused on Too Human's simple, all right-analog point-and-shoot combat system. Now, however, the developer is ready to talk about the game's other aspects, and prove that appearances can be deceiving.

"Rather than being an action game with light RPG elements," explains Dyack, "we're actually a pure fusion of very deep RPG and action." Mentioning the epic loot sets, customization, and skill trees of a series such as Diablo, Dyack continues to point out how Too Human is far from simply a Devil May Cry or God of War clone.



MAD LOOT

Fallen enemies will drop all sorts of goodies (varying in rarity, of course) with which you can transform your character. Dyack and Silicon Knights won't elaborate on their multiplayer plans other than to say that the game will contain a co-op feature that mirrors the single-player campaign. Better yet, the loot you find can be shared between players.



■ Each player's Baldur will be different according to class. With his dual-wielding pistols and two-handed sword, this Baldur looks to be a Berserker

CLASS WARFARE

Players can assign one of five character classes to their hero Baldur, each one has what Dyack describes as a "traditional," albeit in-depth progression and skill tree.

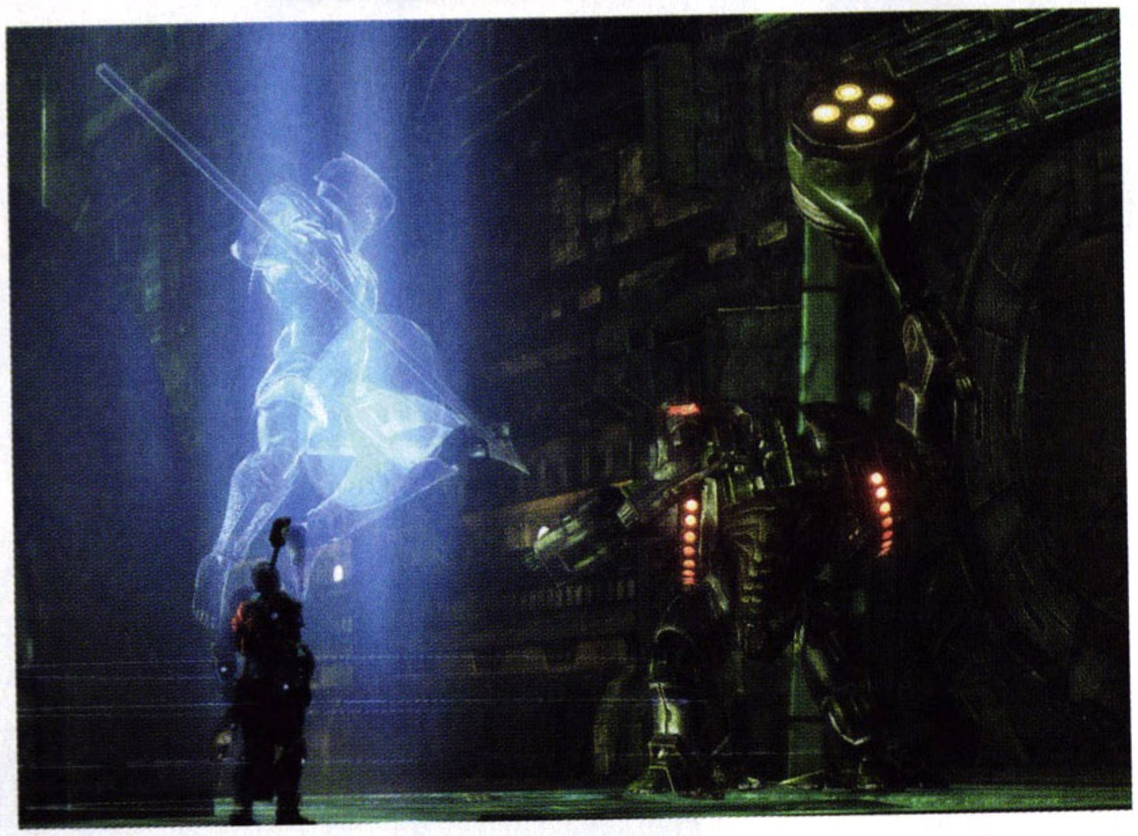
Champion: Performs powerful critical strikes, but the Champion also excels at mid-air and anti-gravity combat, including the ability to juggle enemies.

Berserker: Berserkers can dual-wield weapons for big damage and specialize in melee combat.

Defender: The tank of the classes, the Defender draws aggro from enemies and in certain combat situations is impervious to knockdowns.

Commando: This is for those that like ranged weapons, including grenades and large-area effect explosives

Bio-Mechanic: The healer with a difference. Instead of being a back-row pacifist as in most games, Too Human's Bio-Mechanic only gains healer power by killing. "We came up with this concept a long time ago," says Dyack, "and it's all just fallen together. It's like, 'Wow, you have to fight. That is awesome!'"



■ Silicon Knights is readying a demo for Xbox Live sometime in the future

ARMOR

Armor is based on class. The Berserker armor, for instance, can confer either individual or group benefits such as faster movement vs. whole-party advantages.

WEAPONS

Some enemies will drop straight weapons, while others give you blueprints. These must be taken back to the hub world and paid for and manufactured before you can get them. Weapons are divided into two categories: Range and Melee. Beyond that, of course, each individual weapon comes with its own stats, can accommodate power-boosting Runes, and more.

Melee: Melee weapons are further classified as swords, hammers, and pole arms. Each of these come in one-handed, two-handed, and dual-wield varieties.

Range: Pistols, rifles, and cannons. These break down into mass drivers (which fire mass particles), lasers (the longer you hold the beam on your target the more damage you do. Better for large, single enemies rather than many, weaker ones), and hybrid weapons (produce status effects and area damage, but have a slow rate of fire).

THE STORY SO FAR...

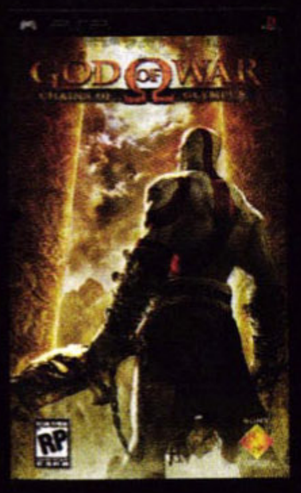
Humanity is under attack from sentient machines that humans created long ago. You are a cybernetically enhanced god named Baldur protecting humanity, but are considered "too human" because you don't have enough enhancements and are clinging to your humanity. The story draws on Norse mythology, and it's telling a tale whose elements and setting have been lost to time and solely survived as myth – one, however, that was very real and which you're experiencing first-hand now. Opines Dyack, "Using mythology for a base is fantastic, because mythology survives because the stories are good and the stories keep being retold. They immediately resonate with all people."

■ Baldur's status as a god in the game stems from its roots in Norse mythology

Dyack tells us that work has already begun on the other two games in the Too Human trilogy, and when we ask him whether he thinks that fans will find that this parallel development process causes future Too Humans to become graphically dated upon release á la Halo 3, he assures us Silicon Knights is doing everything it can. "Certainly we'll take the improvements we can get, but Silicon Knights is focused on content. I think our technology is extremely strong, and I think I've seen some stuff in Too Human that I haven't seen anywhere else, so I'm pretty excited by that. I do think that there will probably be improvements. Whether we can satisfy everyone out there is unlikely."

But for now, Dyack is focusing on the present – one which he feels has been a long time coming. "We're on the same path we always were since we started to make the game. I think for the first time, people can see Too Human for what it is." ■ ■ ■

The family you want to spend time with this holiday season.



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PlayStation Portable

PLAYSTATION 3

Gran Turismo 5 Prologue

> STYLE 1 OR 2-PLAYER RACING (ONLINE TBA) **> PUBLISHER** SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT
> DEVELOPER POLYPHONY DIGITAL **> RELEASE** DECEMBER 13

ENGINES PRIMED

We've all seen car games come and go with sweet-looking cars and locations, and with the competition stronger than ever, the Gran Turismo series is going to have to seriously impress if it wants to stay in the pole position. While the next full Gran Turismo isn't expected by Sony's own admission until sometime in 2008 (later rather than sooner – bank on it – *Ed.*), GT 5 Prologue shows a franchise that is serious about its conversion into the next generation.

The game's main hub, dubbed My Page, tells us a few new things about Prologue, and by extension GT 5. Here you can set up your own car wallpaper as well as peruse a calendar of race events and a map denoting where your GT friends are – including time and weather conditions. Of course, from here you can drop into races, and the game features over 40 cars and 5 tracks. So far we've seen action at Suzuka, Fuji Speedway, and the legendary Daytona super speedway. All of these tracks will feature different layouts, including a road course for Daytona. Polyphony says that there will be no paid downloadable cars or courses for Prologue.

■ In-game GT 5 Prologue will run at 60 frames per second and in 1080p

The My Page section also features the game's photo album and a new addition, GT TV. Not only will you be able to view replays from here, but GT TV also acts as a video player featuring real-life footage. While this will include video direct from manufacturers, Polyphony and its creator Kazunori Yamauchi hope to make it a window into racing and all its various forms and circuits from around the world. While the licensing logistics have us believing that it's unlikely we'll be watching races to our heart's content, the developer clearly sees this as an avenue to expose gamers to footage of some kind of global racing. GT TV will be connected to the PlayStation Network, but it's unclear at this point if you will be able to share replays. Likewise, the My Page hub shows an icon for PS3's social network Home, but it's unclear if this is just a gateway to/from the service and exactly what Home features will work with the game.

More important than the hub, however, is the racing itself. AI is a big priority this time, and with 15 other racers out on the track, Polyphony is promising less robotic AI racers. They'll be more mindful of where their competitors are out on the track, and they'll try to block you and anticipate your passes. The developer hopes to have 16-player online races, but recently Yamauchi himself admitted that it may be scaled down to a dozen for maximum playability. ■■■

■ Real-life footage will appear on GT TV as well as in the car dealership area when you're buying cars

THE PRICE IS RIGHT?

We have to apologize for a bit of erroneous information previously reported regarding the price of Gran Turismo 5 Prologue. The game will not be free, although a demo over PlayStation Network will be. Prologue will debut on December 13 in both download and retail forms, but at press time, an exact U.S. date and price couldn't be confirmed by Sony officials in America. In Japan, the retail Blu-ray disc is 4,980 yen ($43) while the download is 4,500 ($39).

PLAYSTATION 3

White Knight Chronicles

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ROLE-PLAYING GAME **> PUBLISHER** SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT **> DEVELOPER** LEVEL 5 **> RELEASE** 2008

SIR HUGE

It has been a good year for Level 5. Between Rogue Galaxy, Jeanne D'Arc, and the upcoming Professor Layton, it's amazing the developer has had time to work on anything else. However, the studio's next game is one of Sony's biggest upcoming first-party titles, White Knight Chronicles. The PlayStation 2 was the last-gen system to own for RPG fans, and it appears that White Knight is the PlayStation 3's first big step toward retaining that fanbase.

At the beginning of the game, players will have a chance to create their own persona to embark on the adventure, but that character isn't actually the main protagonist. The idea is to make players feel like they are a part of the journey, but as an observer rather than the star. That role is filled by Lenard, a young man with a gauntlet and dagger that allows him to transform into gigantic armored warrior. In this form, Lenard can fight the several building-sized abominations you run into. Other party members (and the primary villain) will eventually be able to transform as well.

Not all battles will be clashes between titanic beasts;

■ You will customize your own character to accompany Lenard

most encounters will be with a variety of regular monsters, against whom you will utilize the game's intriguing palette-based combat. A palette is a string of specific moves that you can configure and customize. You initiate and progress through the combo by timing your presses of the attack button. Each move in the sequence can have a different effect, so one attack might launch a foe into the air, and the next will send it crashing to the ground. As you unlock more moves, you can experiment with the combinations that work best since you can cycle through three palettes in a fight.

We had some hands-on time with White Knight Chronicles at the Tokyo Game Show, and the combat system definitely has the potential to be involved and addicting. The version that was playable in Sony's booth did feel a little clunky, especially in terms of movement and collision. However, it also seemed as though the primary focus of the demo was to illustrate the combat as opposed to other mechanics. We'll just have to wait until development is further along to see how everything comes together. ■■■

■ Some monsters are just too big to hurt normally. That's when you'll transform into the White Knight

©2007 American Honda Motor Co., Inc.
EX model shown.

While the feature was scrapped in the first game, girls are now an option right beside a male main character. The customization tools are extremely flexible

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360

Saints Row 2

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION **> PUBLISHER** THQ **> DEVELOPER** VOLITION
> RELEASE 2008

We're eager to try out the gun aiming, one of the best features in the first installment

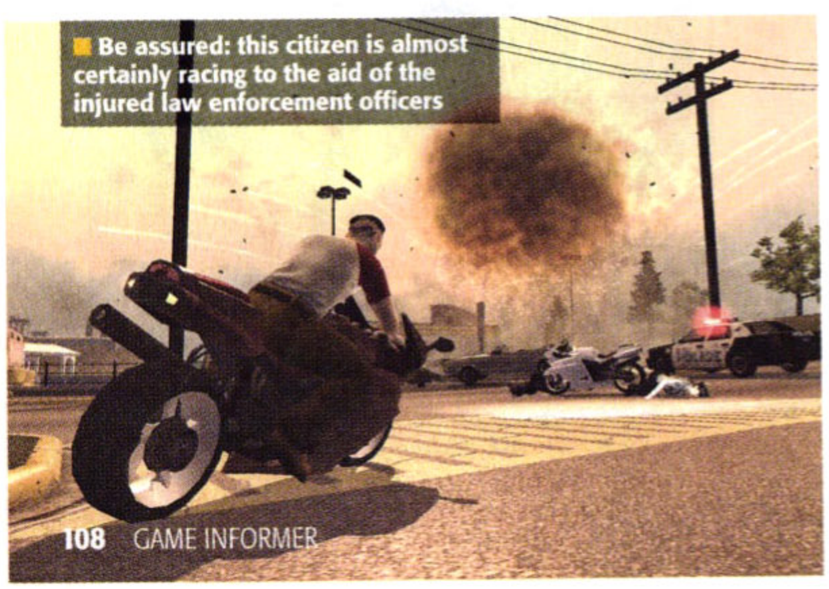
UPPING THE ANTE

With its similarities to another huge open world street crime game, it would be easy to dismiss this series as an also-ran. However, the first game in the series delivered several exciting features that differentiated it from the pack in everything from its flexible combat mechanic to the hilarious activities available throughout the city, like throwing yourself in front of cars for insurance money. If our early impressions are accurate, the sequel is looking to expand the insanity even further with deeper customization, wilder situations, and a darker, more compelling storyline.

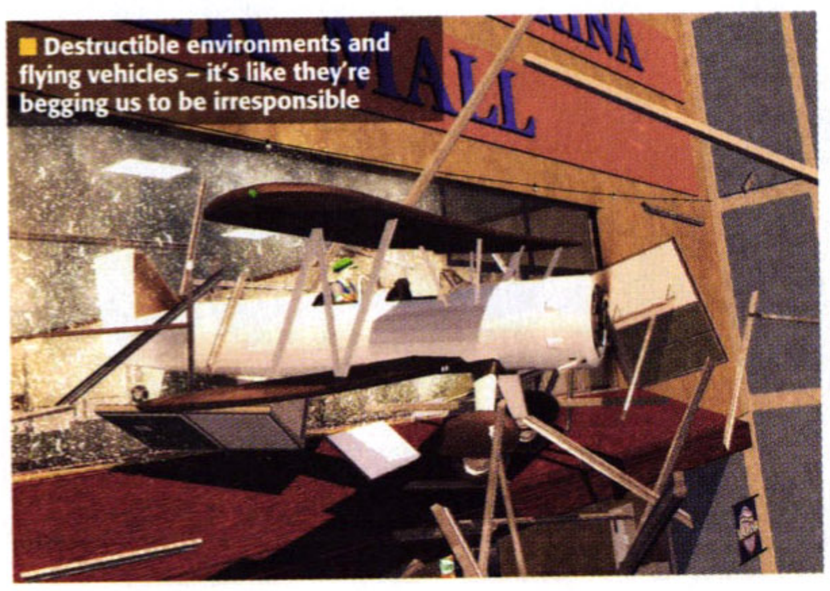
Surprisingly, Saints Row 2 picks up right where the last game left off. Your main character has been left for dead, and starts back on the road to recovery by striking back at those who conspired against him. As anybody who has played the first game knows, the titular Saints are an integral part of the city of Stillwater. Consequently, the new game takes that original city, dramatically revises its existing layout, and adds on a swath of new areas. This widely expanded cityscape will be traversable in a new range of vehicles as well. Most of the first game's rides were fun but familiar. This time, motorcycles and monster trucks should add some spice to the road rage. Boats can now tear through the water, while planes and helicopters promise no end to the destructive mayhem.

The original game prided itself on customization tools, and this new installment of the franchise is no different. If anything, the ability to make the game your own is much more of a focus, starting with your own character (which can be female this time around). From dressing like a complete fool to creating some freak of nature, anything is an option. New weapons like the satchel charge can deliver that classic moment of arming a car before your victim gets in, only to remotely detonate once he arrives. A new rocket launcher can be aimed after firing – imagine the possibilities. Finally, the laugh-inducing activities return, albeit with some new variations. Consider for a moment the beauty of surfing the top of speeding cars, or perhaps a marksmanship test built around nailing the most crotch shots on passerby. Silly, perhaps – but almost certainly amusing. And we can only assume the laughs will be amplified by the inclusion of both competitive and cooperative online play with friends.

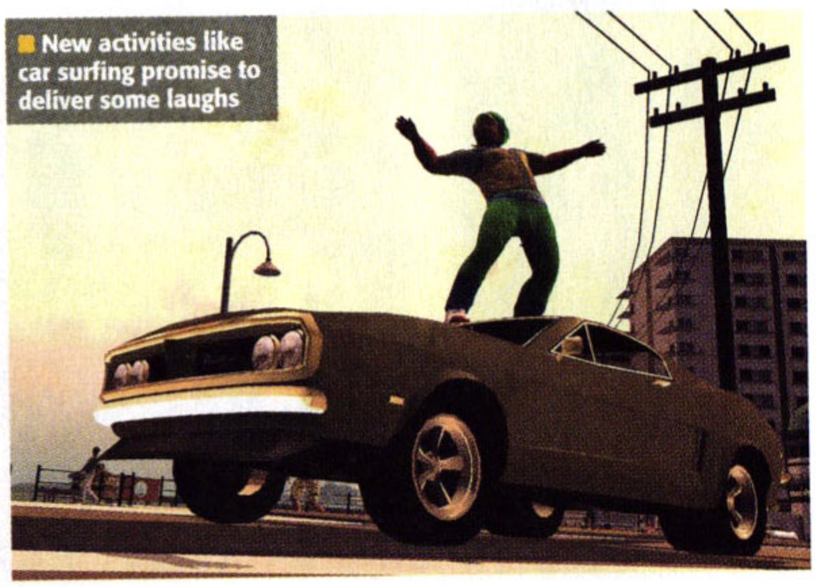
Even with the focus on more outlandish stunts and situations, the story of Saints Row 2 promises to be darker than the original. After all, they did try to assassinate you at the end of the last one. Somehow it doesn't seem like the world of Saints Row embraces the idea of turning the other cheek, so revenge is most likely the dish on the menu. With its over-the-top gameplay, online multiplayer, and expanded game world, the game has all the ingredients to help set it apart in an otherwise too-familiar genre. We can't help but be excited about the potential results. ■ ■ ■



Be assured: this citizen is almost certainly racing to the aid of the injured law enforcement officers



Destructible environments and flying vehicles – it's like they're begging us to be irresponsible



New activities like car surfing promise to deliver some laughs

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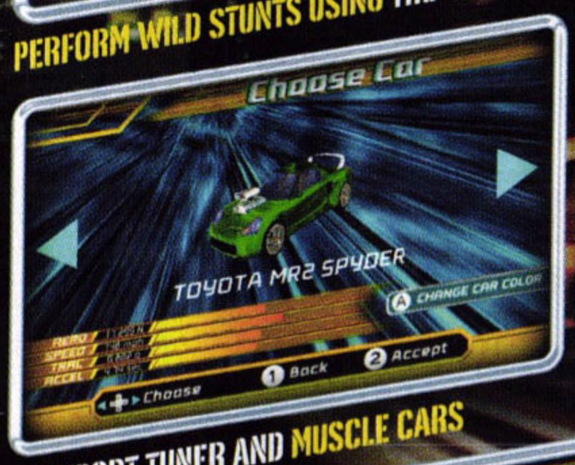

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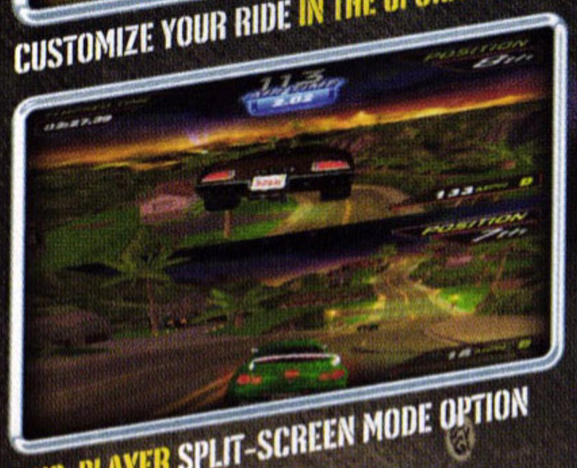

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Anatomical fact: The human body is 105 percent pressurized blood

XBOX 360

Ninja Gaiden II

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION **> PUBLISHER** MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS **> DEVELOPER** TEAM NINJA **> RELEASE** 2008

OPEN THE BLOODGATES

Ryu Hayabusa isn't your average strike-from-the-shadows ninja. When he passes, it isn't like the wind on the leaves…he's more like a freight train through a market square. This blade-swinging, rampaging warrior is no longer confined to remakes of 2004's Ninja Gaiden; Team Ninja is finally bringing its signature hero into a new Xbox 360-exclusive sequel.

Ninja Gaiden is commonly cited as one of the most punishing and difficult games of the last generation, and Team Ninja has no desire to lose that reputation. The combat will be faster and smoother than before, and will continue to require fast reflexes and quick thinking. At the same time, there is also a push to make the game more accessible to a wider variety of gamers. This may seem contradictory, but the team is making some adjustments to the gameplay that will make both goals attainable.

First of all, Ryu will now have a recharging health meter that can regenerate some (but not all) of his lost life. Not only does this make players less dependent on health potions, it also keeps them in the action since they no longer need to pause to use an item from the menu screen. Along similar lines, you will also be able to switch weapons on the fly, much like Devil May Cry 3. With the press of a button you can cycle to classics like dual katanas, plus two new weapons: the claws and the scythe. For all you Ninja Dogs, don't worry; these changes are built into the core mechanics, so you don't have to worry about wearing embarrassing pink ribbons to take advantage of them.

Ninja Gaiden II is also receiving some graphical improvements. While the version we saw at the Tokyo Game Show certainly looked good, it wasn't leaps and bounds beyond its predecessor. Keep in mind, however, that the original was ahead of almost every other game of its time in terms of visual quality.

With weapons like this, it's no surprise that players will see plenty of severed body parts

Ryu will once again be faced with regular and supernatural foes

In addition to the claws, this weapon also includes bladed shoes

The noticeable changes include considerably more blood pumping out of wounds like geysers, as well as some cool cinematic cuts to showcase some of Ryu's stylish killing blows.

It also seems like the remakes stop here; since Ninja Gaiden II is being published by Microsoft Game Studios rather than Tecmo, PS3 owners probably won't be seeing a version of it anytime soon. The game will be hitting your Xbox 360 in 2008, and according to Team Ninja, "sooner than players might expect." ■■■

Can you sell ninja meat? If so, Ryu is a rich man

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PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360

Devil May Cry 4

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** CAPCOM > **DEVELOPER** CAPCOM > **RELEASE** FEBRUARY

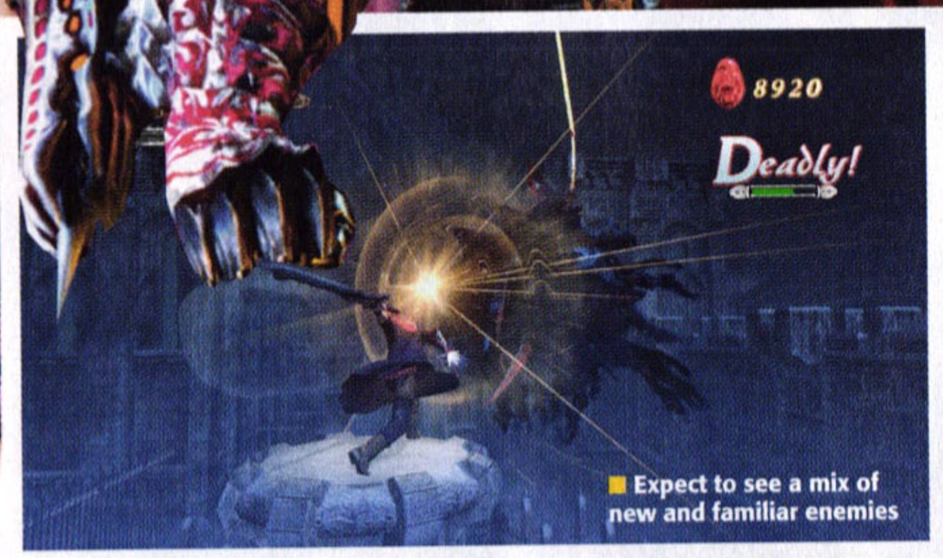
PARTY TIME FOR DANTE

After all of that talk about Nero being the new main playable character of Devil May Cry 4, Capcom has finally revealed that former series protagonist Dante will play a much larger role than initially thought. In fact, the player's control will switch over to Dante about halfway through the game and remain with the son of Sparda until the final boss is defeated.

How the plot will account for this change in perspective is still a mystery, but it's a given that Nero and Dante will join forces to fight some devils. They don't start out as buddies, though; the tutorial sequence teaches you the basics as Nero while he fights against Dante, all the while trying to conceal his demonic arm. Of course, Dante has some surprises of his own; at a recent Capcom event in London, the team revealed an arsenal of special weapons that players will be able to use once Dante becomes playable.

Gamers got the first look at the new gauntlets (called Gilgamesh) last month, but there are even cooler toys at your disposal. A weapon named Lucifer allows Dante to strategically position several floating energy darts around an environment, then send them shooting off with the drop of a rose. You can also wield the legendary Pandora's Box. The mythical item initially appears to just be a briefcase, but it can transform into a variety of heavy weapons like a chain gun and a laser turret.

These new pieces of equipment look like they'll help players fill DMC 4 with the stylish action the series is known for. The only question we have at this point is how the game will pass the baton between the two heroes. If you spend the first half of the game powering up Nero and his unique abilities, will you need to start from scratch as Dante? We won't know the answer until Devil May Cry 4 hits shelves on its newly announced February release date. ■■■

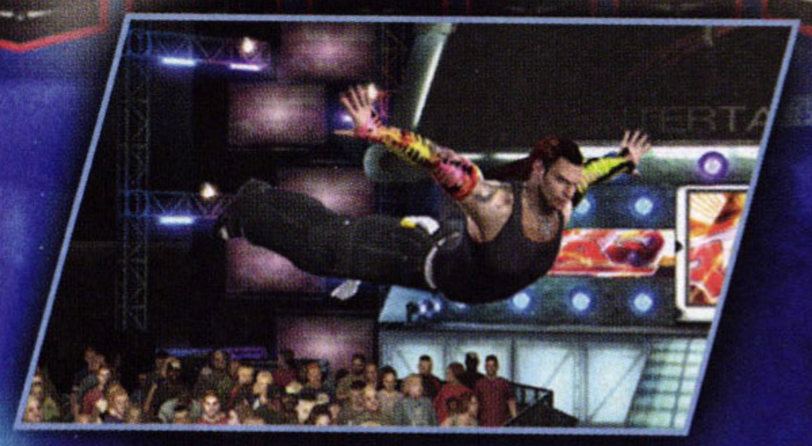


■ Expect to see a mix of new and familiar enemies

■ Revving up Nero's sword will give him a few super-charged swings

■ "This costume party sucks! I'm outta here!"

■ Gilgamesh is the name of Dante's flashy new gauntlets



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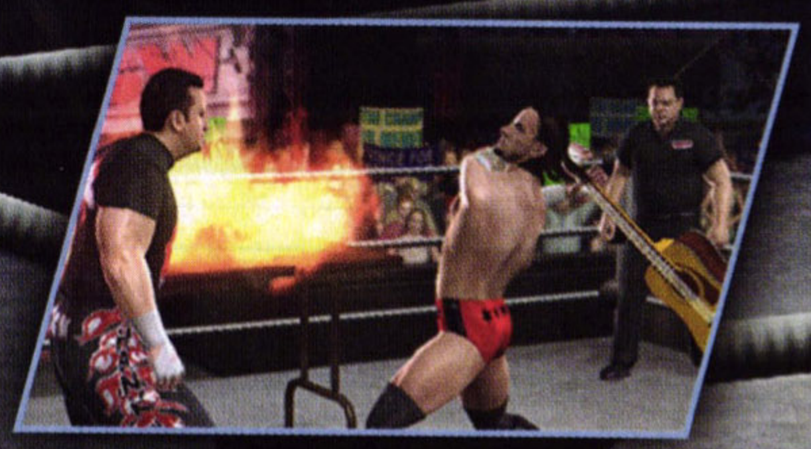

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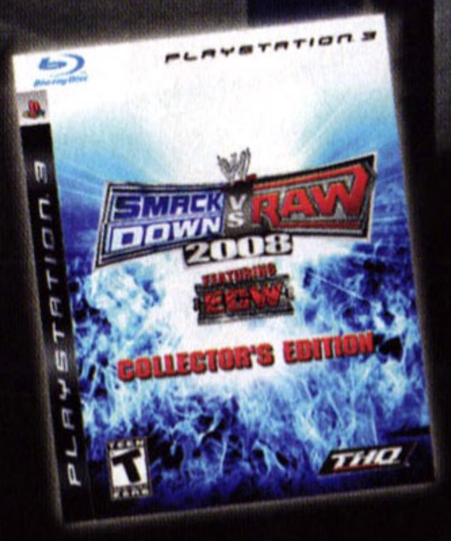

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Star Ocean: The First Departure

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ROLE-PLAYING GAME **> PUBLISHER** SQUARE ENIX **> DEVELOPER** SQUARE ENIX **> RELEASE** 2008

REACH FOR THE STARS

Long before KOS-MOS, there was another blue-haired space RPG hero named Ratix. North American gamers might not know him, since the original Star Ocean never saw a release on our shores, but hopefully that will change once Square Enix releases Star Ocean: The First Departure.

Revealed at the Square Enix party last spring, First Departure is a remake of the first Star Ocean title. The story outlines the journey of Ratix Farrence, a young man who starts in a rural, disease-stricken town and ends up traveling between planets on a quest to save the galaxy. The basic plot remains the same as the original, but First Departure will see enough improvements in other areas that it will play like a different game. Since it was the first in a series, Star Ocean's mechanics became more refined in its sequel, The Second Story. To integrate those advances, First Departure will be updated using a game engine based on that of Second Story. The battle system will still be real-time, with an emphasis on balancing regular attacks with special skills.

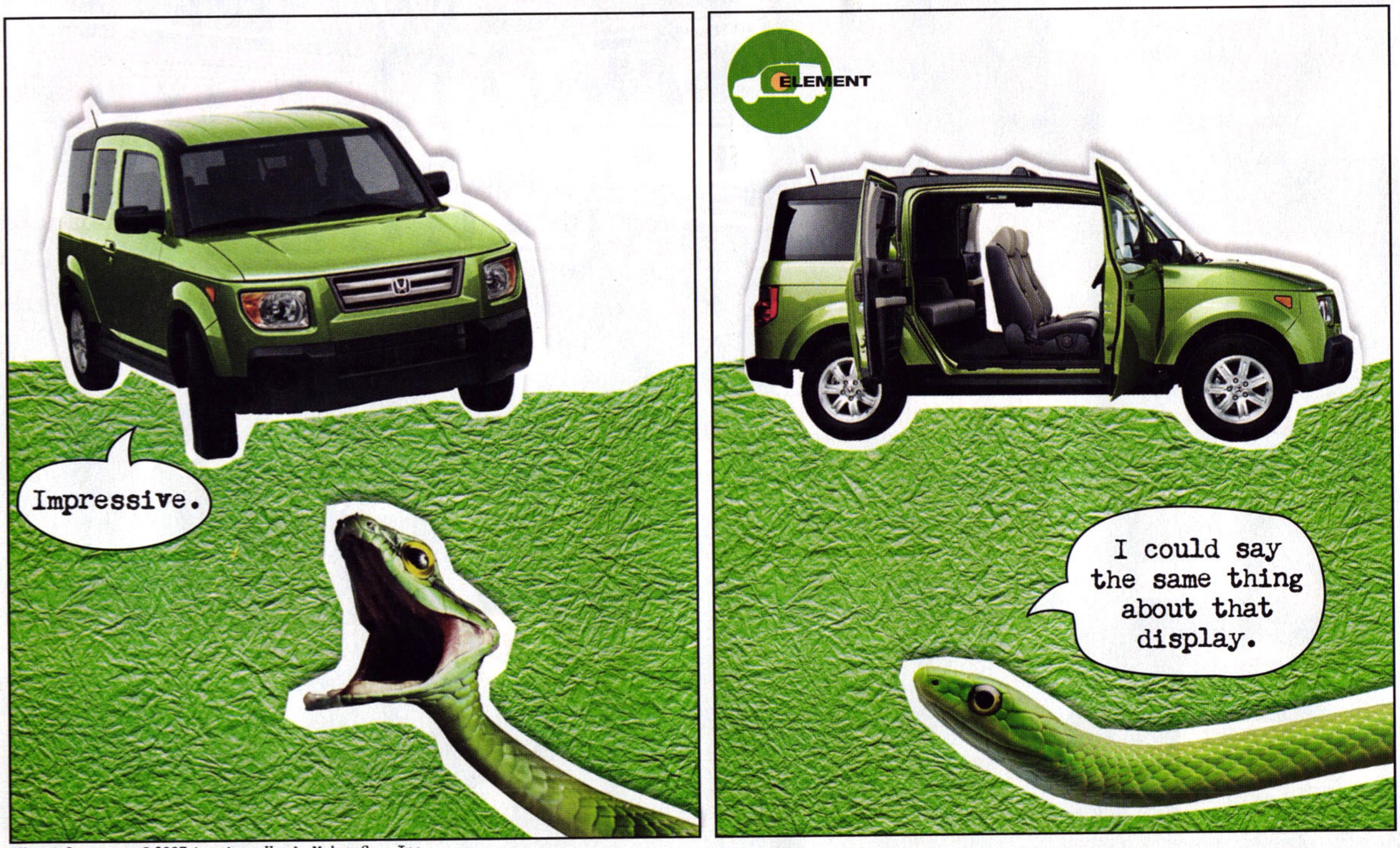
The PSP still has a lot of untapped potential when it comes to role-playing games, but it isn't often that gamers get a chance to experience a classic for the first time. Star Ocean: The First Departure might be the perfect way to keep yourself busy while you wait for any concrete info news on Star Ocean 4. ■■■

■ New cutscenes are just one of First Departure's improvements

■ Ratix and his companions fight in real-time on 3D battlefields

SECOND EVOLUTION

Along the same lines as First Departure, Star Ocean: The Second Evolution is a remake of Star Ocean: The Second Story. In this case, the original game was actually released in the U.S. on the PSone in 1999, but it will still have enhancements. Using the same engine as First Departure, Second Evolution will also include new dialogue, cutscenes, and playable characters.



EX model shown. ©2007 American Honda Motor Co., Inc.

Battle of Argus is a re-imagined version of the PS2 Rygar, but with some new features

Points kind of start to lose meaning when you hit the 28 million mark

Wii

Rygar: The Battle of Argus

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION **> PUBLISHER** TECMO **> DEVELOPER** TECMO **> RELEASE** 2008

WITH YOUR SHIELD OR ON IT

Remember back in 2002 when Tecmo brought Rygar back from the 8-bit abyss? Well, it's happening again. The newest entry in the series, Battle of Argus, was initially thought to be a brand new game, but we now know that it is another attempt to start from square one by re-imagining the events of the PS2 game.

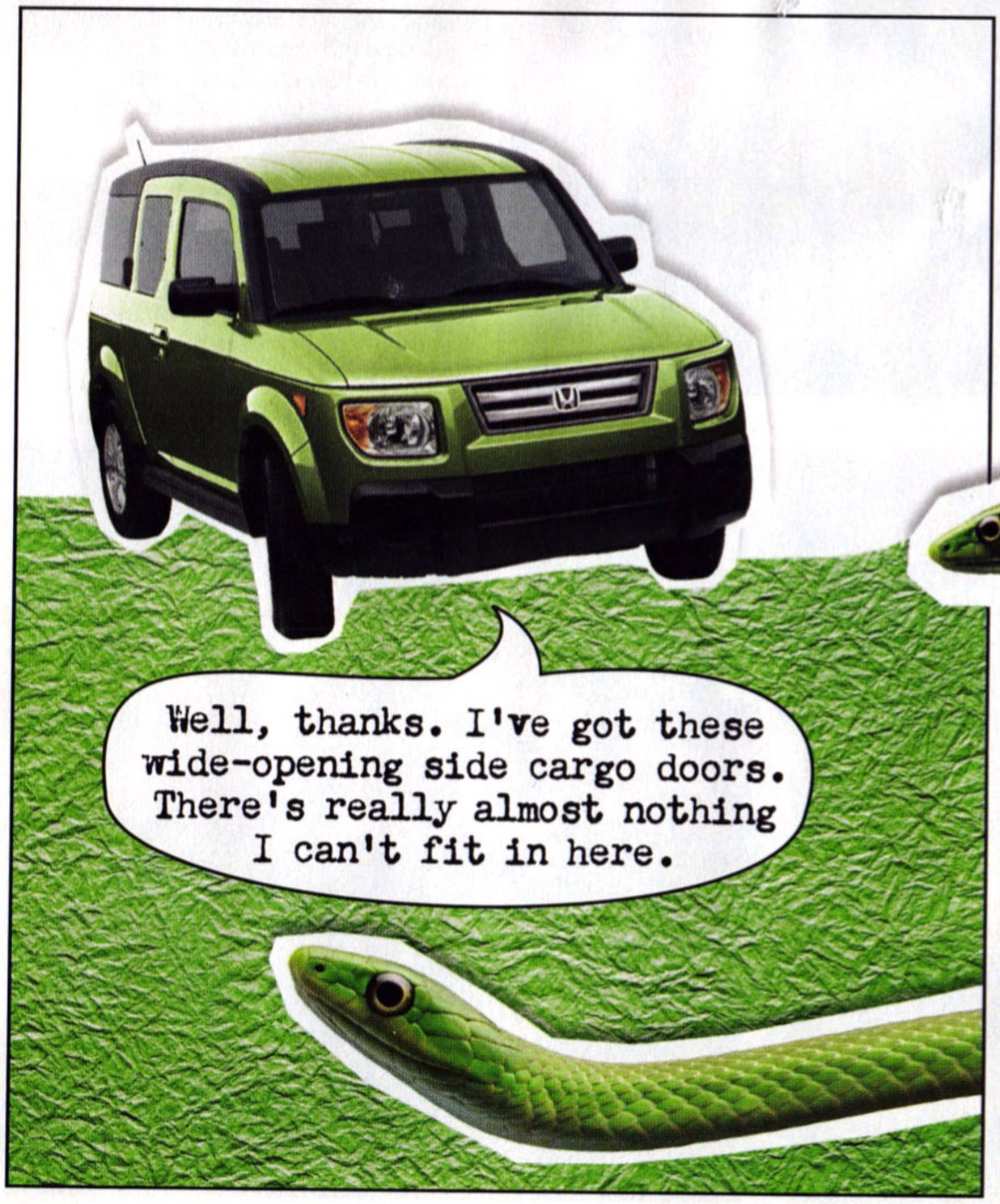
In order to survive in a post-God of War market, this reappearance of Rygar will need to sport some pretty sleek improvements in order to keep up with the modern competition. This must have occurred to the development team too, since Battle of Argus will have a handful of features not found in the original. Because it is a Wii exclusive, it will naturally utilize motion-sensing controls, letting players swing the Wii remote to control Rygar's hallmark Diskarmor. You'll fight a variety of mythical beasts, as well as go up against some titantic bosses.

Six years is a long time in the gaming industry, but the PS2 Rygar was one of the pioneers of the action genre as we know it. Hopefully the revamped control scheme in Battle of Argus will provide a fresh way to experience the content and breath new life into this familiar adventure. ■■■

The Wii's motion controls will be used to throw Rygar's Diskarmor

THE EVOLVING RYGAR

In addition to gameplay changes, there is obvious aesthetic shift in Battle of Argus. Rygar has once again been redesigned, and is now a spikey-haired, goatee-havin' hero with attitude. Definitely a sharp contrast to his He-Mannish beginnings.



PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360| Wii | PLAYSTATION 2

MX vs. ATV Untamed

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER RACING (UP TO 12-PLAYER VIA PLAYSTATION NETWORK OR XBOX LIVE, UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA WiiCONNECT24, UP TO 6-PLAYER VIA PLAYSTATION 2 ONLINE) > **PUBLISHER** RAINBOW STUDIOS (PS3, 360)/ INCINERATOR STUDIOS (Wii, PS2)
> **DEVELOPER** REMEDY > **RELEASE** DECEMBER 18

ALREADY HIT THE HOLESHOT

Quite honestly, we didn't know what to expect when early playable copies of MX vs. ATV Untamed came across our desk this month. We played the game briefly at E3, and while we immediately understood the advantages of the new career structure, we didn't race through enough of the game itself to be able to say much. Now, however, it's readily apparent to us that followers of Rainbow Studios' rhythm racing won't be disappointed in what Untamed brings to the table.

This game's career structure is open in that for most of your time playing the game you can pick and choose which of the eight racing series you want to participate in. Of course, at the end you're going to have to run the gauntlet and participate in a string of all eight disciplines. So, if you're like us and your Supercross skills are lacking, you can run, but you cannot hide.

Whatever path you choose, you have to check out the new race types, Endurocross and Opencross. Endurocross is like Supercross, but it takes twice the skill to maintain your rhythm and speed because the track is littered with rocks, logs, and tires. Our favorite Endurocross environment setup is when the crests of jumps have giant monster truck tires on them (shown above), meaning that you have to make sure and pull up your front wheel before you get to the top. This can pop you up straight into the air like a bunny hop. Sometimes the track is filled completely with rocks, leaving you no space to carefully pick your way clear.

Opencross is still based on a track, but Rainbow has done an awesome job at making this event more than just another outdoor race. At times requiring more technical racing than your average track and filled with variety, Opencross races quickly became an Untamed discipline we looked forward to simply because we didn't know what to expect. In general, we were impressed with the length of the game's tracks and its sheer speed – which is evident even on something as compact as a Supercross track.

The MX series may not have a single car on concrete, but racing fans would do well to take a look at Untamed if they think they've got the chops to call themselves "racers." ■■■

RACING A DIFFERENT LINE

Graphics aren't the only thing that makes the Wii and PS2 versions of Untamed similar. Both have a different career format than the next-gen editions, and while they include Opencross racing (albeit the tracks aren't as good as next-gen), Endurocross is missing. However, these editions have some of their own tricks, including Jump the Gap, Ski Jump, and Hill Climb events. Moreover, the Wii version uses its motion-sensing wiles to give you pre-loading and tricks Wii-style.

■ Even when you're racing in one event type, like Opencross, you'll still race different vehicles like these spider-like sand rails, which have a wider base than your normal buggy and have crazy suspension action

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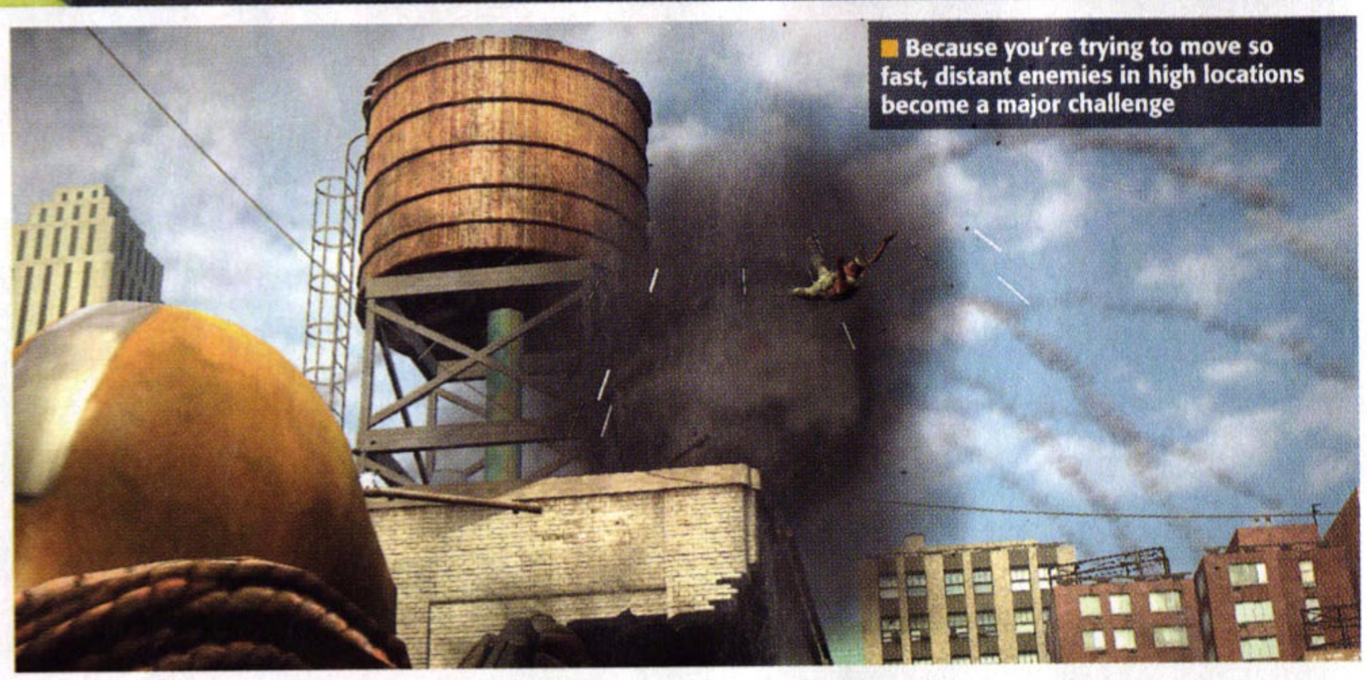
Games for Windows



Because you're trying to move so fast, distant enemies in high locations become a major challenge

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360 | PC

The Club

> STYLE 1 TO 4-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE) **> PUBLISHER** SEGA
> DEVELOPER BIZARRE CREATIONS **> RELEASE** FEBRUARY 2008

SHOOT FIRST, DON'T ASK QUESTIONS LATER

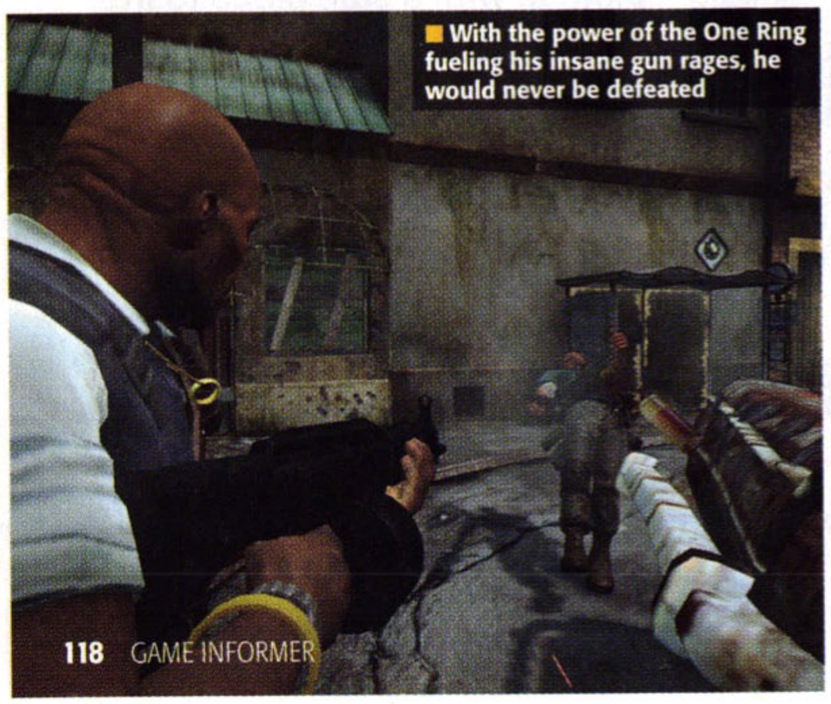
Bizarre Creations may be best known for their racing series Project Gotham Racing. The Club represents a pretty massive departure from that successful series in several ways, but stays closer to its racing roots than you might imagine from a quick glance at these explosive screens. This month, we joined up and played through several levels of this adrenaline-fueled fragfest to find a strange melding of shooter and racing that kept our hearts beating fast for the duration.

The relatively simple premise of The Club has a number of characters recruited to join a high stakes game of kill or be killed for the entertainment of some folks with way too much money and time on their hands. Each of the eight characters has their own backstory and secrets. When you choose one of them, you'll see an array of stats, like speed and stamina, that give you some options on the play style you're aiming for. To hear the developers talk about it, these characters are not unlike cars in one of their racing titles.

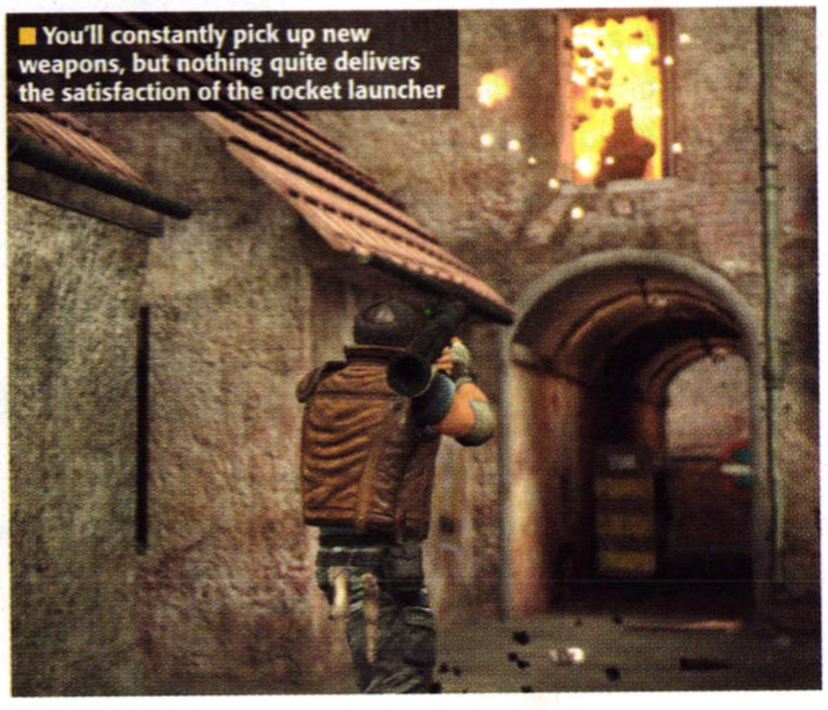
If the characters are vehicles, then the eight sprawling levels are most certainly the tracks they'll run on. From a broken down steel factory, to the canals of Venice, to an abandoned manor house, the twisting and turning paths of these locales offer a fast-paced action run from beginning to end. Unlike more conventional action games, The Club further extends the racing metaphor by having you choose different events each time you enter one of these large arenas. Most of these are time-dependent runs that encourage maximum damage at high speed. Sprints demand a desperate run to keep your multiplier up (it increases for each kill) while you make your way to an exit with a target score in mind. Time attack goes so far as to have you run laps through the level, grabbing time in the form of pick-ups and kills. A siege places the player in a static location somewhere in the level with the objective to defend it until time runs out. All of these modes are short, brutal, challenging, and desperately fast.

The gameplay is straightforward and solid, with a strong aiming mechanic, lots of weapons, and a sprint button you'll be holding down more often than not. The constant shooting and need to rush on to the next location before your multiplier bleeds out is certainly a rush, even if it doesn't leave a lot of room for any story or complexity beyond twitch firing. For action enthusiasts, however, the necessary speed in both movement and aiming is quite unique.

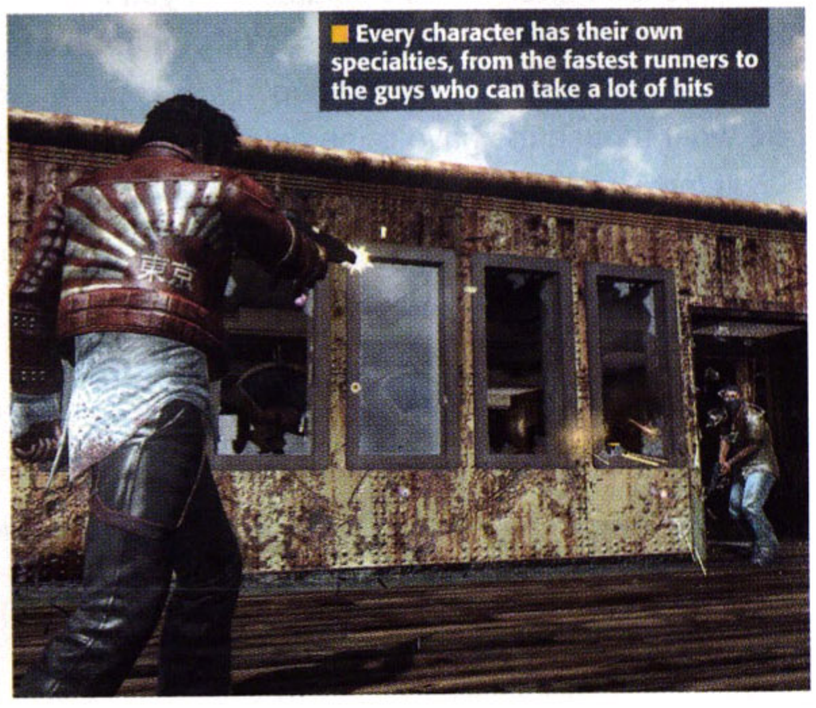
Of course, with this premise, it shouldn't surprise anyone to learn that a huge focus is being placed on the online multiplayer component of the game. Through a host of modes, you can compete online to take your place on the leaderboards. The strange mix of speed and battle should make for some challenging competition with a different flavor from most of the online shooters in recent months. You shouldn't have to long to wait before you can join up and find out for yourself if the vibe is right – The Club should be open to members early next year. ■■■



With the power of the One Ring fueling his insane gun rages, he would never be defeated



You'll constantly pick up new weapons, but nothing quite delivers the satisfaction of the rocket launcher



Every character has their own specialties, from the fastest runners to the guys who can take a lot of hits

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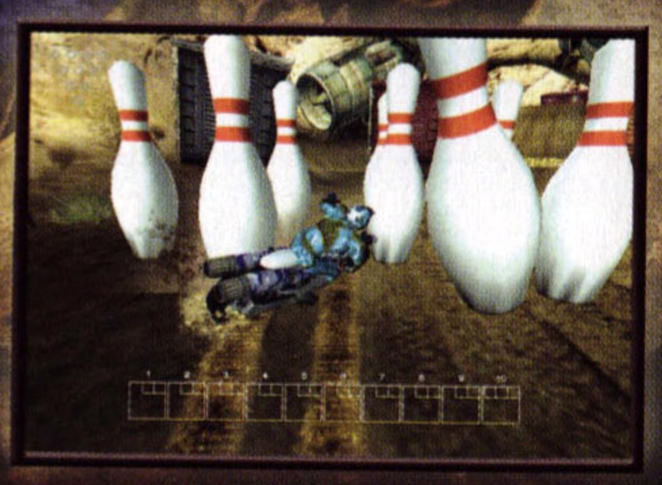

Nitrobike™ bowling – wipeouts encouraged!

COMING SOON

EVERYONE 10+
E 10+
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Mild Suggestive Themes
Violence

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Wii™

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PSP

Crisis Core: Final Fantasy VII

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION **> PUBLISHER** SQUARE ENIX **> DEVELOPER** SQUARE ENIX **> RELEASE** 2008

ZACK IS THE NEW CLOUD

If you think you know what happened in Nibelheim the night Sephiroth decided he was the chosen one, you've got another thing coming. The original Final Fantasy VII only tells part of the story, and Crisis Core fills in the gaps by following SOLDIER 1st Class Zack Fair through the events leading to the massacre.

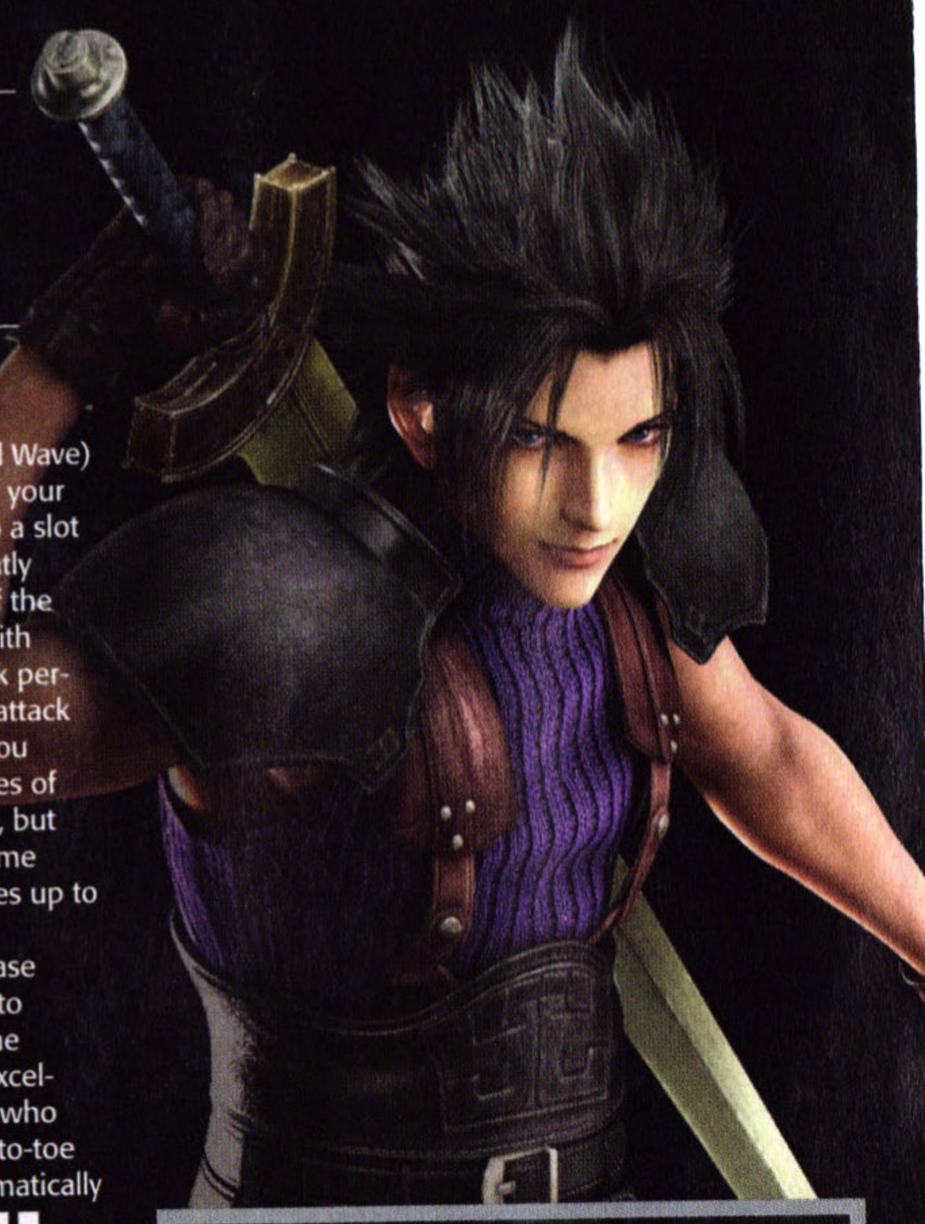
As with other facets of the Compilation of Final Fantasy VII (like Dirge of Cerberus and *Advent Children*), Crisis Core does not follow in the RPG footsteps of its source material. It's a hack n' slash action game, and we got our hands on the already-released Japanese version and dove back into the FF VII mythology.

The first thing you'll notice is that Crisis Core is gorgeous; with cutscenes on par with *Advent Children* and in-game graphics that surpass many PS2 titles, it's an impressive game to behold. The gameplay itself doesn't dazzle to the same extreme, but it is still entertaining, especially since it has a few Final Fantasy-specific twists on the genre that liven up the action.

In battle Zack will be able to use several different kinds of attacks. The simplest is just swinging his sword (though he doesn't wield the enormous Buster Sword from the outset), but he can also cast magic and use special commands by using the proper kinds of materia. Using the L and R triggers, you'll scroll through your slotted materia (as well as the basic attack and item commands) in the lower-right corner of the screen. Magic attacks drain your MP bar, and special commands (like a dragoon's jump) drain an AP gauge instead. Using these abilities, you'll fight hordes of familiar enemies ranging from Wutai ninjas to hulking behemoths.

The biggest wild card in the combat system is the DMW (Digital Mind Wave) mechanic, which leaves some of your biggest attacks to luck. Similar to a slot machine, three reels are constantly spinning in the upper-left part of the screen. When all three line up with the same character's image, Zack performs a limit break or summon attack that hits for tons of damage. If you are performing well, your chances of hitting the jackpot are improved, but it still seems strange that the game leaves your most powerful moves up to pure chance.

There still isn't a firm U.S. release date, but FF VII fans can expect to see this spin-off hitting sometime next year. This is undoubtedly excellent news for the many gamers who want another chance to go toe-to-toe against Sephiroth without automatically Omnislashing him to death. ■■■



■ Though he has the Buster Sword, Angeal doesn't usually use it

THE MAN IN RED

One of the most important characters in Crisis Core is a SOLDIER named Genesis, but this isn't his first appearance. If you are masochistic enough to play through Dirge of Cerberus and collect three specific items, the game rewards you with an additional cutscene in which Genesis appears and carries away the body of Weiss, who he refers to as "brother." Crisis Core sheds more light on Genesis' origins and where he was during the events of FF VII.

■ The story explains how Aeris and Zack first met

■ What is it with Final Fantasy and dudes with one wing?

PSP

Dissidia: Final Fantasy

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER FIGHTING (MULTIPLAYER TBA) > **PUBLISHER** SQUARE ENIX > **DEVELOPER** SQUARE ENIX
> **RELEASE** TBA

READY TO RUMBLE

Who would win in a fight: Zidane or Sephiroth? Okay, that was an easy one, but soon Dissidia: Final Fantasy will allow you to set up more challenging bouts between your favorite Final Fantasy heroes and villains. As a way to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the franchise, Dissidia is a battle royale including some of the most popular characters in the series' history.

If the idea of Final Fantasy mixed with fighting games immediately triggers nightmares related to Ehrgeiz, you can rest easy. The gameplay footage indicates that Dissidia is focused on fast, fun battles instead of Ehrgeiz's slow, stupid ones. Characters like Kuja, Garland, and the Warrior of Light will unleash flurries of attacks (complete with gorgeous particle effects) from anywhere in the environment. The ability to scale walls and clash in mid-air looks like it will infuse the combat with the over-the-top sensibilities of *Advent Children*.

In order to know the complete story, you will have to play through Dissidia with each of the available characters and explore their unique ability advancement. For instance, Kuja can enter his Trance state, and we wouldn't be surprised if a limit break or two made an appearance. Square Enix will probably be unveiling more combatants in the coming months, and we'll be sure to let you know if your favorite makes the cut…unless your favorite is Edward. Sorry to break it to you, but spoony bards are not excellent fighters. ■■■

■ When you activate the Aeris limit break, Zack heals and briefly becomes invulnerable

■ The action-based combat is a matter of balancing attacks with defense

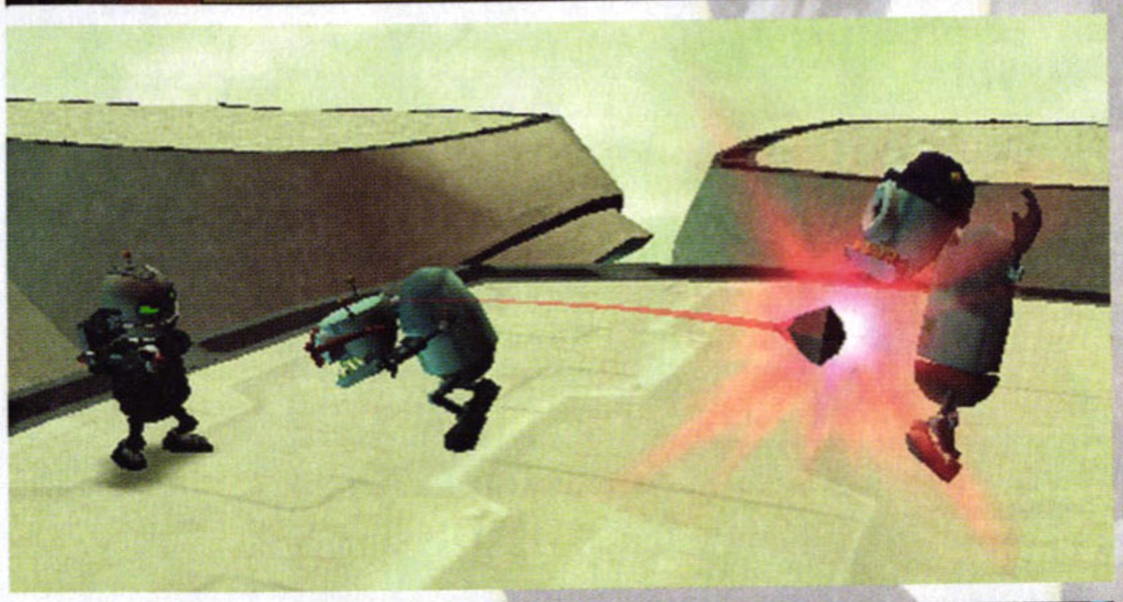
■ Classic monsters have been redesigned for the 3D combat

■ Even though Cloud is just a grunt, he's still pretty cool

■ Characters level up as they fight, growing stronger and unlocking new abilities

Clank's favorite stealth attack: the ear kick

Quark's tales of battle may contain a note of embellishment...or ten



PSP

Secret Agent Clank

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION **> PUBLISHER** SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT **> DEVELOPER** HIGH IMPACT GAMES
> RELEASE 2008

THE MAN WITH THE ALLOY CHASSIS

Developer High Impact Games is back after its successful run on Ratchet & Clank: Size Matters to make an entirely Clank-focused adventure. Taking place after Size Matters and before Ratchet & Clank Future, this latest iteration finds our furry hero wrongly locked up for crimes he didn't commit. His mechanical sidekick decides to don his secret agent persona previously seen in Up Your Arsenal and sets out to clear his friend's good name.

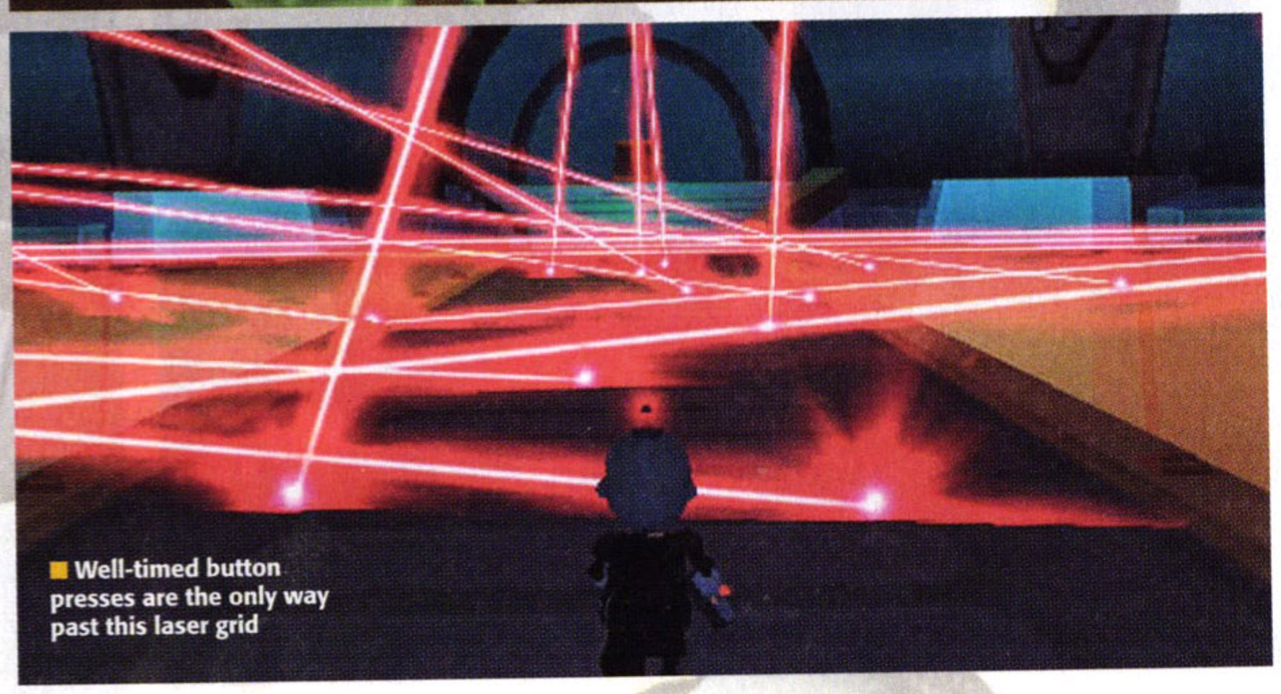
"When ideas were being proposed for a new Ratchet and Clank PSP game we saw a lot of potential in the Agent Clank character," writer Oliver Wade says. "Having a secret agent for the main character allows for a lot of cool gadgets, weapons, and gameplay." Gadgets in Clank's stash include cufflink mini-bombs and a "Tie-A-Rang" that can be tossed at enemies or used to chop suspension ropes and clear out blocked passages.

As part of his new sneaky identity, Clank will use timed button press sequences to slide past traps and alarms. In one scene we saw him backflip, limbo, and breakdance through a particularly intricate laser grid. These sequences will also be implemented in stealth takedowns. "A button combo will display on screen and [if you] get the timing right Clank unleashes a combo of kung-fu moves," environmental artist Dallas Robinson says. "It's better than the Vulcan deathgrip! Clank can also use timing to shake his groove thing on the dance floor to impress the ladies."

Every secret agent needs a sweet ride, and Clank comes fully prepared. He'll use an amphibious hovercraft to chase down goons on land and sea, ride a snowboard down snowy slopes, and take to the skies as Giant Clank with an all-new super-weapon at his disposal.

But just because Clank's on the marquee doesn't mean he'll be going it alone; both Ratchet and Captain Quark have been confirmed as playable characters. "Each character brings with them a unique style of gameplay, tailored to their personality," designer Ken Strickland says. "Ratchet's desperate bid for survival in the galaxy's worst gulag plays like the Ratchet games of old, with an emphasis on nonstop weapon-based combat. Clank's search for the truth is more cerebral, organized around stealth, quiet takedowns, and creative gadget gameplay. If I had to pick a favorite, though, it'd be the Qwark segments, as they're from Qwark's unique * cough * perspective. Listening to Qwark talk trash as he fights is worth the price of admission alone."

Secret Agent Clank is slated for a vague 2008 release date as of now, but Ratchet & Clank Future should more than scratch that itch until then. ■■■



Well-timed button presses are the only way past this laser grid

New cufflink bombs bring an element of sophistication to the standard explosion

■ Germany, home to BMW, takes down the Chrysler building. But the joke is on them – Chrysler is based in Michigan

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360 | PC

Turning Point: Fall of Liberty

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (MULTIPLAYER TBA) **> PUBLISHER** CODEMASTERS **> DEVELOPER** SPARK UNLIMITED **> RELEASE** SPRING 2008

WHEN NAZIS ATTACK

Another damn World War II game, you say? Not quite. Turning Point takes place in an alternate reality where Winston Churchill was killed by a cab before World War II, Japan never attacked Pearl Harbor, and the U.S. chose an isolationist policy rather than engaging in the war against Hitler's Nazi war machine. As a result, the Germans swiftly conquered the continents of Europe and Russia, and America winds up the next target for the failed landscape artist's fiendish plans for global conquest. Turing Point picks up the plot in the year 1953, just as the Nazis start their invasion in New York City.

Construction worker Dan Carson may just be an average Joe, but when he sees the Nazi blimps infiltrate American airspace, he trades in his nail gun for a machine gun and joins the resistance. The fight for freedom will change in locale as the resistance gains strength. By the end of the war, you will have repelled waves of Fallschirmjägers in Manhattan, Washington D.C., and London.

Thankfully, gamers won't be subjected to the same boring weapon selections featured in every other World War II game under the sun. Spark did some research and unearthed info on several Nazi prototype weapons that were never mass-produced. Among the new instruments of death joining the fray are multi-barreled rocket launchers, an MP50, and a gun code-named Vampir that uses infrared

technology so you can spot enemies in the dark. Carson can also take down his rivals in hand-to-hand combat using one of the 40 grappling counters available in the game.

Spark has implemented a dynamic AI system that will adjust to your gameplay style. For instance, if you go in guns blazing, the Nazis will try to flank and surround you. If you hang back, they will try to flush you out with grenades.

Though the game was originally designed with the intention of offering open-world gameplay, it has been scaled back to offer a more traditional, linear experience that focuses more on fun than on innovation. "We're not trying to compete with BioShock and Halo," says producer Dean Martinetti. Gamers will find out in early 2008 if Turning Point can achieve its objective. ■■■

■ Resistance Fighters will find a variety of Nazi prototype weapons on the battlefield

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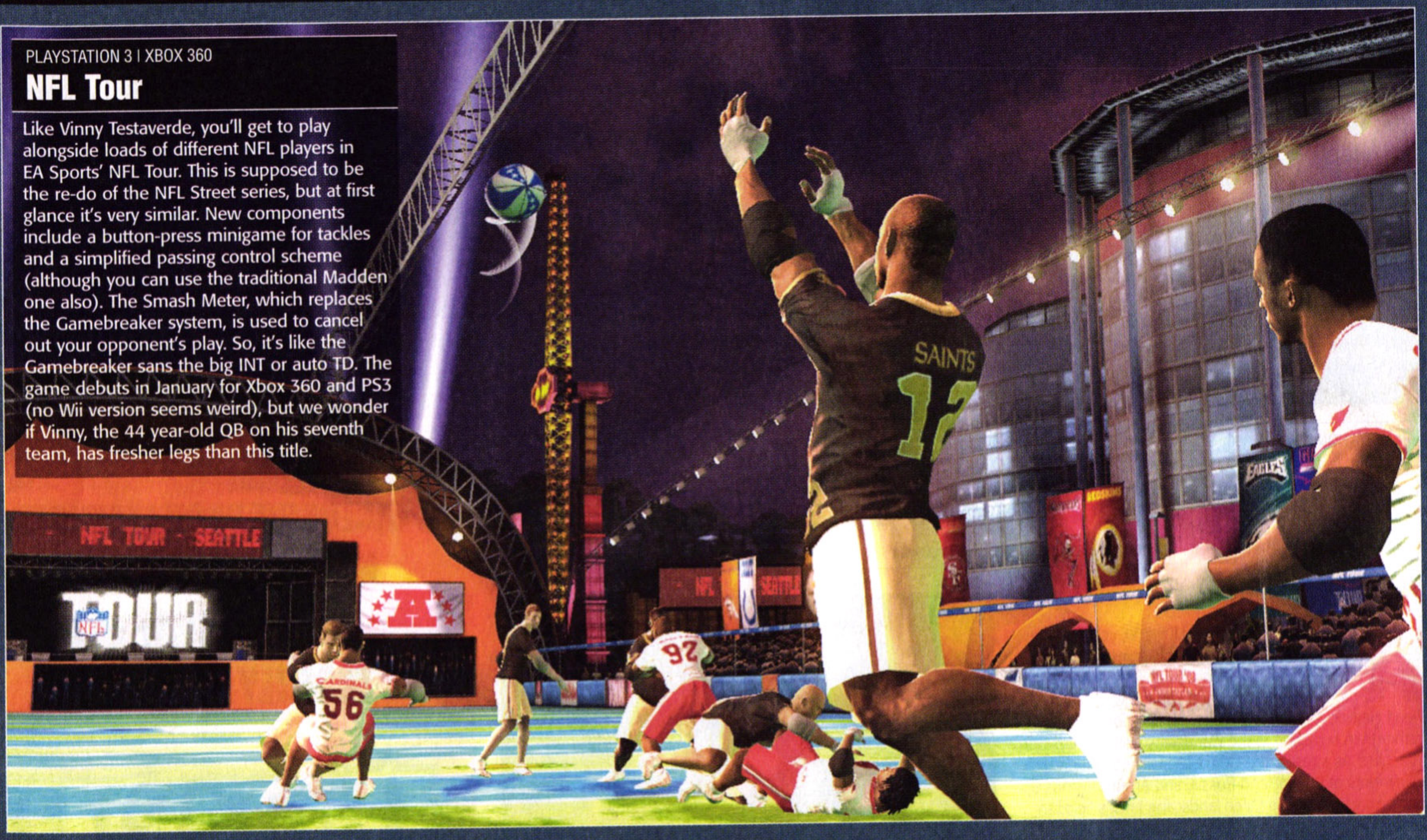
PHOTOPHILE

Mini Previews With Big Pictures

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360

NFL Tour

Like Vinny Testaverde, you'll get to play alongside loads of different NFL players in EA Sports' NFL Tour. This is supposed to be the re-do of the NFL Street series, but at first glance it's very similar. New components include a button-press minigame for tackles and a simplified passing control scheme (although you can use the traditional Madden one also). The Smash Meter, which replaces the Gamebreaker system, is used to cancel out your opponent's play. So, it's like the Gamebreaker sans the big INT or auto TD. The game debuts in January for Xbox 360 and PS3 (no Wii version seems weird), but we wonder if Vinny, the 44 year-old QB on his seventh team, has fresher legs than this title.



NINTENDO DS

Metal Slug 7

OMG! SNK is actually making something new amidst barfing out collections of old arcade games. In fact, this is the first game in the core Metal Slug series to debut outside of the arcades. The latest chapter features a male and a female in the lead roles (we're guessing two-player co-op via wireless), and versatile tank combat has already been seen in action. No word yet on when Metal Slug 7 will be coming out in Japan or North America, but general speculation hints at mid-2008. The battle for "Scrap Island" awaits!

NINTENDO DS

Dragon Quest IV

Square Enix seems determined to make U.S. gamers care about Dragon Quest. The franchise may not carry the same weight as Final Fantasy, but it can still be a great source of old-school nostalgia. The latest example is a DS remake of Dragon Quest IV (originally released as Dragon Warrior IV for NES). Using a graphical style similar to the PSone's DQ VII, this version retells the individual adventures of several heroes and how they come together to defeat a poor old blind man…just kidding! They're actually fighting a world-threatening evil. DQ IV is scheduled to hit Japan this year, but no official announcement has been made about a U.S. release.

NINTENDO DS

Kingdom Hearts: 358/2 Days

This DS branch of the new Kingdom Hearts titles is expected to come out before the PSP release. Directed by Tetsuya Nomura and developed by H.A.N.D., 358/2 Days focuses on Roxas' time with Organization XIII while Sora takes a year-long nap between Chain of Memories and Kingdom Hearts II. A four-player multiplayer mode will be included, allowing players to pick among any of the Organization XIII members. Modes include competitive and cooperative play, but it is still unclear whether this will be online or local. By the way, when you're talking about this game with your buddies, pronounce it "three five eight over two days" or risk complete humiliation.

PSP

Kingdom Hearts: Birth By Sleep

Anyone who's made it to the final movie in Kingdom Hearts II (or watched the extended Japan-only Final Mix+ video) will be familiar with the three armored keyblade wielders who star in Birth By Sleep. Players will control all of these characters at different times throughout the story, which takes place before the original Kingdom Hearts. Tetsuya Nomura will also be directing this title and it will be developed by the team that created the PS2 remake of Chain of Memories (again, Japan-only). Speaking of CoM, Birth by Sleep will use an advanced version of the card deck combat system. Both games have no announced release date, but Birth by Sleep is expected to release after the DS title.

PLAYSTATION 3

Aqua [working title]

In the tradition of Afrika, Sony has released yet another vague nature game trailer, complete with no release date or indication as to whether it will come out on PSN or hit retail shelves. Fortunately, we can look into the past for answers. Developer Artdink's PSone game, Aquanaut's Holiday, appears to be a direct prequel. Here players navigated a submarine around the ocean checking out shipwrecks, listening to new age music, and building a coral reef for fish to play in. Aqua looks to follow this chilled out vibe with impressive production values and (hopefully) less pop up than its predecessor.

Wii

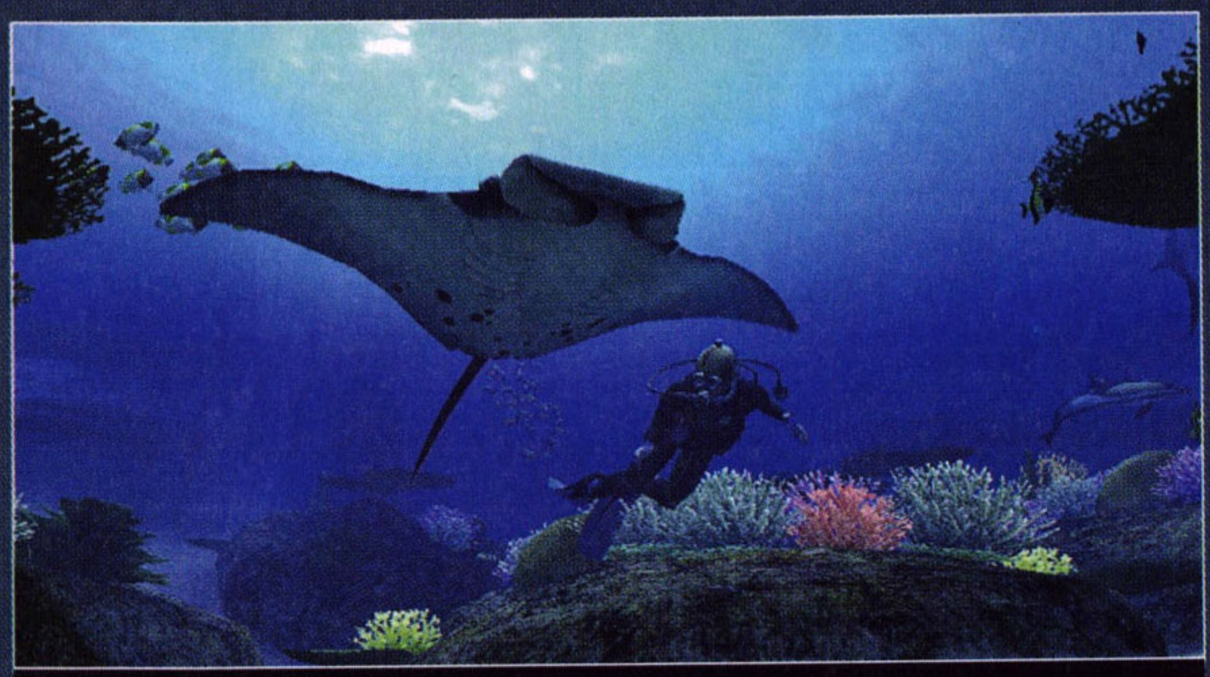
Furu Furu Park

Not many people know this but Wiis actually draw their nourishment from quirky Japanese minigame titles. In case your Wii hasn't been fed in a while, Majesco is here to offer up Furu Furu Park, which should be out before the end of the year. The title includes 30 different minigames. A few we played include a hammer throw game where you spin the Wii remote as fast as you can to launch a human hammer across a field, a game where you make some Dragonflies dizzy then flick them off the screen, and a shortened version of Bubble Bobble. You will be able to play against a friend in up to three different multiplayer types including a Love Challenge where you'll test your compatibility.

Wii

We Love Golf!

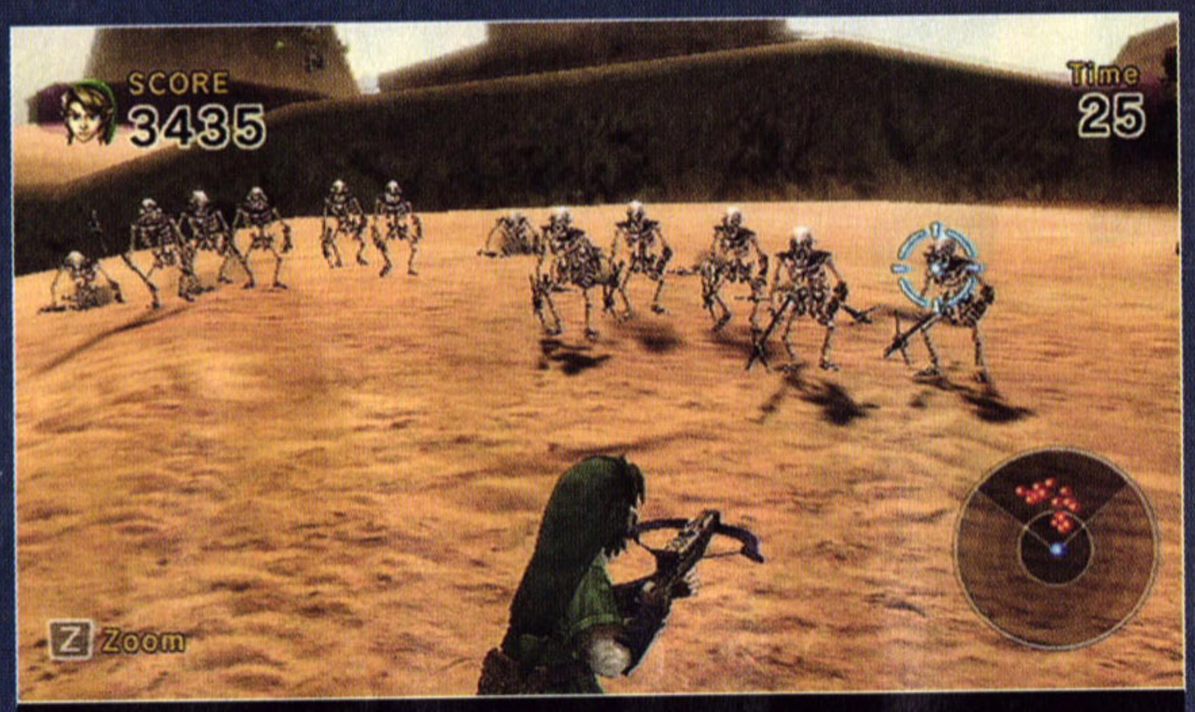
We're going to go ahead and give Capcom credit for resisting the urge to spell "We" with two "i"s. They've also signed up Hot Shots Golf and Mario Golf developer Camelot, so expect loads of cute (one of the few graphical styles that works on the Wii). The main control mechanic works like this: hold down the A button, pull back the remote, swing forward, and release the button at just the right time (according to the onscreen swing meter). Expect plenty of unlockables, minigames, and sparkly drives when We Love Golf hits in 2008.



Wii

Endless Ocean

Continuing the underwater exploration non-game genre, developer Arika casts players in the role of a scuba diver who rides around in a boat befriending all of the fish in the sea. It's true! Once you pet a fish, using the Wii Remote (natch), it will be cataloged in your encyclopedia. You can also then summon it to your personal aquarium for frolicking purposes. While Nintendo originally planned to release Endless Ocean in October, it has since been pushed back to Q1 2008. A tropical vacation game during the dead of winter? Sounds like a smart plan to us.



Wii

Link's Crossbow Training

Like a champagne bottle smashing against the side of a boat, Nintendo is launching its Zapper peripheral in style. When you rip open your Zapper box, you'll find a new Zelda game along with the piece of plastic shaped like a gun. This isn't a full-blown adventure, but it does offer 27 stages of fast-paced shooting gallery action. A number of these stages are dedicated to stationary shooting, while others allow for freedom of movement with the nunchuk's analog stick. Link will battle through enemy bases, and will also have to escort a wagon. Nintendo plans to release this game on November 19, with strong support coming in the future from Medal of Honor Airborne 2, Resident Evil: The Umbrella Chronicles, and Ghost Squad.

NINTENDO DS

Advance Wars: Days of Ruin

The happy-go-lucky COs and playful tone of Advance Wars past have given way to a grittier setting in Nintendo's upcoming new installment of the series. With a meteorite having killed most of the planet's population and the world in shambles, Days of Ruin has a decidedly more realistic bent (and will likely get a T rating from the ESRB). Gameplay has been streamlined; dual-screen battles, overbearing tag powers, and other fanciful additions from the first DS game have been stripped out, leaving only the sleek turn-based strategy gameplay center. A few new units, notably the flare (useful for rolling back the fog of war) and the motorbike (speedy base-capturing squads) will make an appearance as well when this comes out early next year.

THE END IS NEAR.
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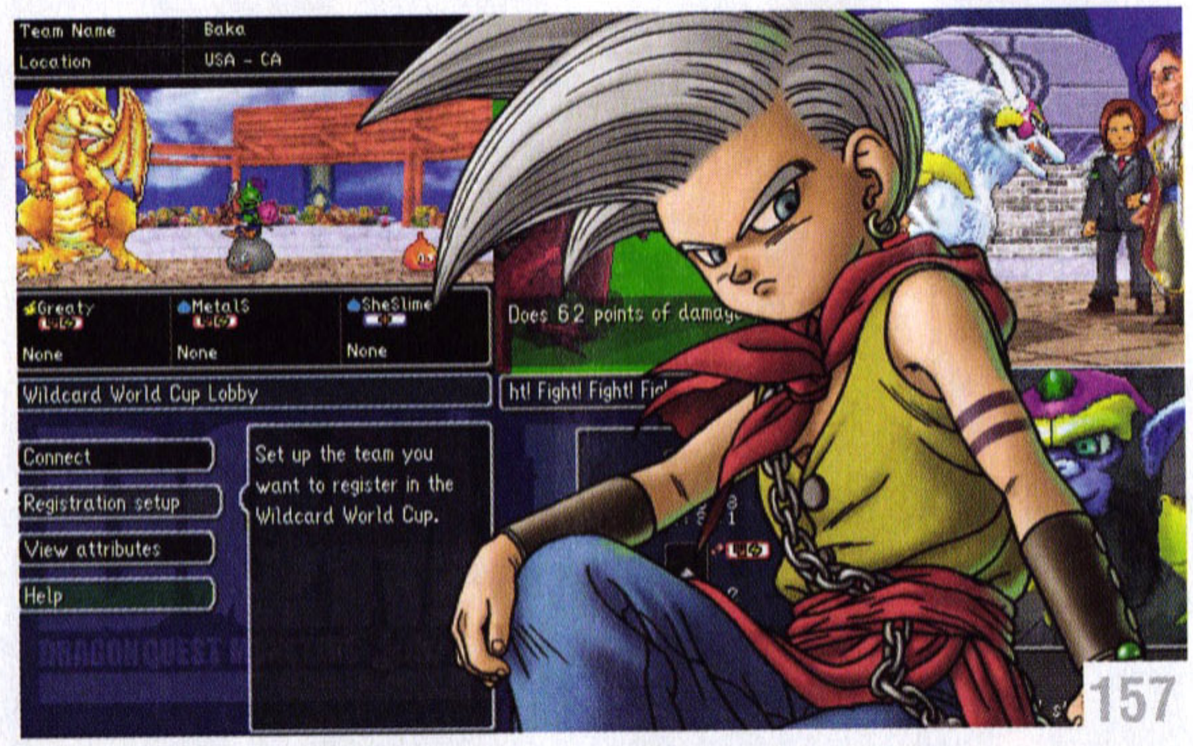

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GAME INFORMER GAME OF THE MONTH

Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare

Infinity Ward has done it again. The team that dragged World War II shooters into the limelight has made its modern combat debut, and Call of Duty 4 instantly jumps to the head of the pack with its unbelievable polish and brilliant gameplay. One of the best single-player FPS campaigns to date is only part of the genius here – the multiplayer offering will keep you coming back with an addictive upgrade system layered on top of some of the best online shooting available. Call of Duty 4 is a triumph, and you owe it to yourself to check it out firsthand.

GAME INFORMER HANDHELD GAME OF THE MONTH

Dragon Quest Monsters: Joker

How could anyone not adore the perky, vacant grin of a slime? Dragon Quest Monsters: Joker gives gamers a chance to amass a stable of these cute, iconic creatures and many others from the Dragon Quest universe. Beautiful 3D visuals, fun role-playing elements, and addictive gameplay make this one of the best monster collection games around. Now get out there and start creating your unstoppable army.

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	Aperture Science Emergency Intelligence Incinerator. Give me back my Companion Cube!

> **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.

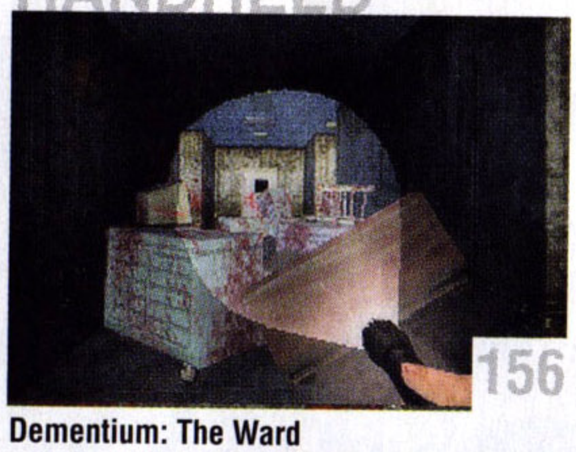
Moderately Low – After finishing it, there's not much reason to give it a second go.

Low – You'll quit playing before you complete the game.

PC

The Witcher

HANDHELD



Dementium: The Ward

GAME INFORMER PC GAME OF THE MONTH

Unreal Tournament 3

Hyperkinetic online fragging is back in style with the release of Unreal Tournament 3. UT has lost none of its speed in the move to Unreal Engine 3, and the new graphical shine works wonders to bring the game into a new era of gaming. The streamlined objective-based Warfare mode is a great replacement for Assault and Onslaught, and a huge selection of new vehicles and maps pushes Unreal Tournament 3 immediately to the forefront of online warfare.

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theedge

When All Games Aren't Created Equal

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

EARLY CHILDHOOD eC	Content suitable for persons ages 3 and older.	MATURE M	Content suitable for persons 17 ages and older.
EVERYONE E	Content suitable for persons ages 6 and older.	ADULTS ONLY AO	Content suitable only for adults.
EVERYONE 10+ E10	Content suitable for persons ages 10 and older.	RATING PENDING RP	Product is awaiting final rating.
TEEN T	Content suitable for persons ages 13 and older.		

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

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

1080p – Currently the best resolution for gaming on an HDTV. In widescreen, 1080p generates an image at resolution of 1920x1080 in progressive format

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 God of War and Devil May Cry

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 refers to how well the computer reacts to human opponents or works with human allies

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

board – A term we use for games like Scene It? and Mario Party

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

CG – Computer Generated. Usually refers to cutscenes that don't use in-game graphics

E3 – Electronic Entertainment Expo. A gaming convention held every year since 1995. It is one of the largest events in the gaming industry

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

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

FPS – First-Person Shooter. Describes games like Halo, Doom, and Call of Duty. Also used to denote the phrase "frames per second," or how many animation frames happen in one second.

framerate – The frames of animation used to generate the appearance of movement

frontend – A game's menus and options

HDTV – High Definition Television

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

IP – Intellectual Property. A single game or franchise encompassing the ideas and characters contained within

isometric – Three-quarters top down view, like Warcraft 3 or Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance

jaggies – Graphical lines that look 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

music – A term we use for games like Guitar Hero and Rock Band

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 Ratchet & Clank

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

PS2 – Sony PlayStation 2

PS3 – Sony's PlayStation 3 console

puzzle – A term we use for games like Tetris and Picross

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

RPG – Role-Playing Game. A term we use to describe games like Final Fantasy and The Elder Scrolls

RTS – Real-Time Strategy. A subgenre of strategy games including titles like StarCraft and Command & Conquer

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

skittles – What Ben calls potato chips…for some reason. We don't know what he calls actual Skittles

sports – A term we use for games like Madden NFL and Top Spin

strategy – A term we use for games like Disgaea and Fire Emblem

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

This is an excellent example of tactical failure

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360 | PC

Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 24-PLAYER VIA PLAYSTATION NETWORK, XBOX LIVE, OR PC INTERNET OR LAN) **> PUBLISHER** ACTIVISION **> DEVELOPER** INFINITY WARD
> RELEASE NOVEMBER 6 **> ESRB** M

GAME INFORMER GAME OF THE MONTH

TOTAL VICTORY

When Call of Duty 4 debuted on our cover six months ago, the feeling around the office was that the game had an excellent shot at Game of the Year honors. After playing through the final build, it's clear in my personal opinion that this is the favorite moving into the last days of 2007. Everything has come together brilliantly, from the nonstop intensity of the offline campaign to the endlessly replayable multiplayer offering. Simply put, Call of Duty 4 is one of the absolute best games to grace any platform to date.

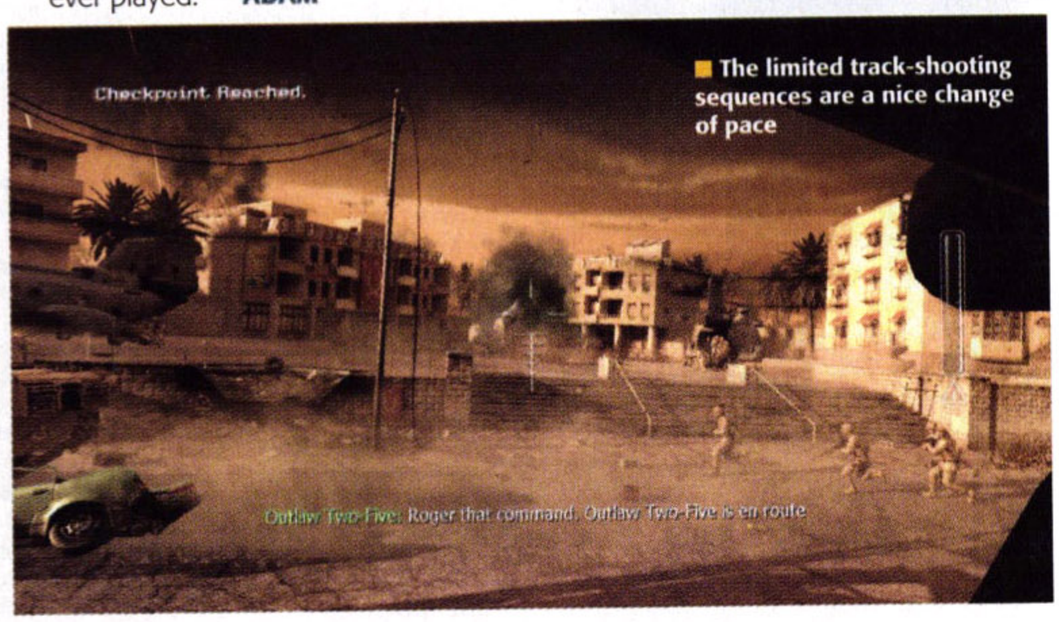
As a member of the elite British S.A.S. or U.S. Marine Force Recon, players are tasked with taking down a brutal Middle Eastern military junta in the single-player game. This short (our playthrough clocked in around six hours) but unrelenting action-packed campaign features a selection of the best combat and cinematic moments in gaming. The nuts and bolts of the gameplay – shooting bad guys – is fantastically entertaining in its own right thanks to the excellent weaponry at players' disposal, clever level design, and AI that doesn't leave you wondering at its incompetence. The addition of bullet penetration gives both offensive and defensive tactical thinking a new level. Sprinkle in a handful of powerful scripted sequences and a moderately thrilling end-of-the-world Clancy-esque plot and I'll take this over Halo's stale corridors and backtracking any day, short length and all.

I can throw all of the superlatives I can think of at the gameplay, but what is it that makes shooting evildoers in Call of Duty 4 any better than in any of the dozens of other action-oriented FPSs around? Ultimately, it comes down to polish. Everything about the game works together as a seamless whole, drawing players into an experience that proves beyond a doubt that the team at Infinity Ward just "gets it." The simple act of firing a weapon is fun, from the smooth aiming to the realistic *pop* in your ears and the feeling of impact as your bullets connect with a hapless enemy or send dust flying off of a structure. Missions deliver near-perfect pacing, keeping the story and the action rolling while maintaining a delicious feeling of tension as you await the next suspenseful urban patrol or deafening explosion. And even on the normal difficulty level, enemies will punish you harshly for choosing a bad tactic or leaving yourself exposed, making tactical approaches nearly as important here as in a game like Rainbow Six.

All of the technical excellence of the gameplay carries over to multiplayer, and the addictive upgrade system and sheer variety of maps and modes makes up for the missing cinematics and pacing of the offline game. While the gametypes in CoD 4 aren't anything you haven't seen before, the skill with which they're implemented and the maps on which they're played have no equal. From the Quake-style "old school" modifier to the more Counter-Strike inspired "hardcore" setting, from simple team deathmatch to the more involved Search and Destroy matches, nearly everyone's FPS palate should be satisfied. With the plethora of unlockables from scopes to special abilities, each round – while as straight-up fun as any online shooter to date – brings both a sense of accomplishment and an ache to play one more. This is easily the best fusion of RPG-style persistent progression and action-oriented FPS gameplay around.

Start to finish, online or off, Call of Duty 4 is solid gold. Some might decry the single-player's short length or that it's more of the same, but its amazing quality and the Arcade mode (which lets you compete for points and skill rankings after you've beaten the game, á la Halo's Metagame) more than make up for it. Infinity Ward has delivered on every front, and there is no question in my mind that this is the best action shooter that I have ever played.—**ADAM**

Multiplayer levels have a strong vertical element



The limited track-shooting sequences are a nice change of pace

BOTTOM LINE 10

> Concept: Bring Call of Duty's cinematic aesthetics and refined gameplay to the modern warfare genre

> Graphics: One of the best-looking games to date – and it runs at 60 frames per second throughout

> Sound: The contextual battle chatter is great, and the brilliant score and raw noises of battle form an excellent backdrop

> Playability: No shooter plays better on a gamepad. Not even Halo

> Entertainment: Game of the Year? Possibly

> Replay Value: High

Second Opinion 10

During my tour of modern warfare, I worked in close quarters with a Special Forces group that executed missions with the calculation and deliberation of cold-blooded killers. I flew in an AC-130 and laughed as I smoked the pathetic ground troops scrambling for their lives. I also executed one of the most gripping sniper sequences in video game history in a mission that had me infiltrating a heavily guarded Russian position, taking out a target at 900 meters, and scrambling to get to the extraction point while the Ruskies moved in for the kill. Along the way there was scarcely a dull moment. From the shock and awe scripted sequences to the airtight gameplay, COD 4 is a brilliant example of a first person shooter flirting with perfection. Even the training level is good enough to warrant a replay. If that's not monumental praise, I don't know what is. Top it off with a deep and addictive multiplayer mode that features a wealth of variety and you have the shooter of the year.—**BERTZ**

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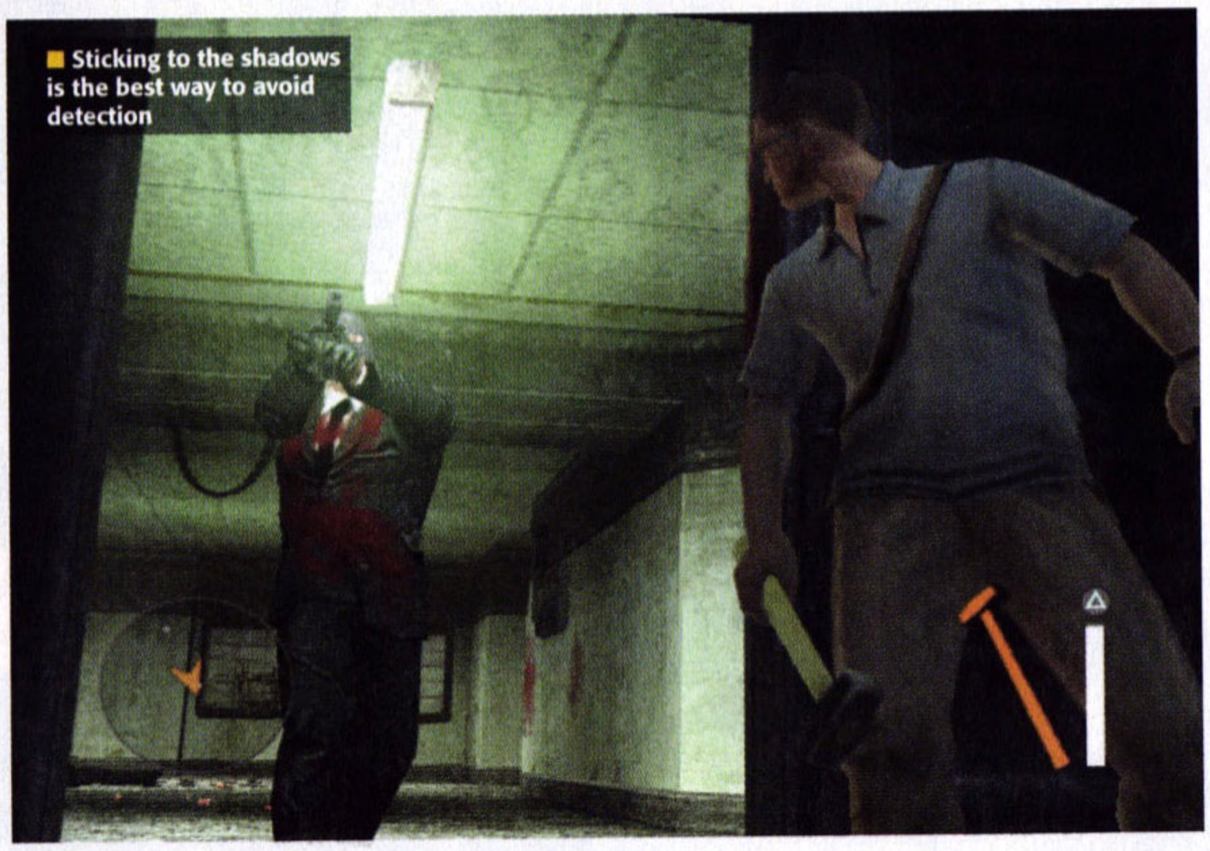

Sticking to the shadows is the best way to avoid detection

"Big Boss Man!? What door is Ted Dibiase hiding behind?"

Wii | PLAYSTATION 2 | PSP

Manhunt 2

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION **> PUBLISHER** ROCKSTAR GAMES **> DEVELOPER** ROCKSTAR LONDON **> RELEASE** OCTOBER 29 **> ESRB** M

THROUGH THE PAST, DARKLY

While I question whether a work of art as unique and brilliant as Manhunt really demanded a sequel, I've been curious to see what Rockstar had in store for us with Manhunt 2, even more so after the game was delayed and re-cut after it received the dreaded "Adults Only" rating from the ESRB. If you're worried that this altered, now M-rated version of the game has somehow adulterated the explicit violence that is Manhunt's calling card, rest easy. Manhunt 2 is every bit as grim and brutal as the first. Unfortunately, it's not nearly as gripping, and, more worryingly, I'm not sure if it still has anything to say about gaming's culture of violence.

For better or worse, this version of Manhunt is much more story-driven. Where the first one was a primal game of survival, this time we follow the saga of Daniel Lamb, a neuroscientist who allowed himself to be a test subject in an experimental research study. The result was that Daniel lost his family, his career, his memory, and almost all his sanity. After happenstance allows him and fellow inmate Leo to escape from an insane asylum, they go on a mission to unravel their tangled past.

For the most part, it's an interesting story, but it doesn't pack the queasy punch that the first did. Whereas Manhunt thrust you into the role of a cold-blooded killer, Daniel is essentially a good man forced into violence by circumstances – in other words, like most other video game characters. While there are some brilliant moments, particularly the last level where Daniel quite literally lays his demons to rest, the sum effect is one of a much more conventional gaming experience. It doesn't help that the plot "twist" revealed at the end is copied wholesale from a well-known movie. Despite my misgivings, the writing, as is typical of Rockstar's games, is top-notch, and Daniel and the rest of the characters do come off the screen as very real and human. It's a testament to this quality that I was really driven to see the tale out to its end.

Getting there is another matter, as the gameplay oscillates between brilliant and frustrating on a minute-by-minute basis. You can definitely see some improvements, like the cool environmental executions, which let you use found objects like

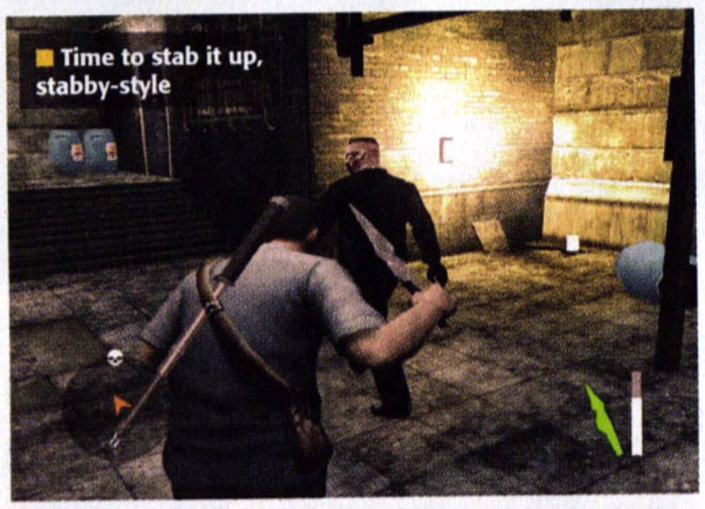
toilets, gas cans, and phones in certain instances. It's generally a little less linear as well, allowing you more ways to progress through a level. However, all this can't disguise the fact that this is a five-year-old game design. The enemy AI and control are both wildly erratic, and I'll never understand Rockstar's stubborn resistance to giving players camera control on the right analog stick. Waiting for the right moment to make your vicious strike is still engaging, but the years since the release of Manhunt have made us used to gameplay that's light-years more polished and hassle free than what's in Manhunt 2. In addition, I think guns were introduced too early in the game and are far too prevalent, making this feel less like a stealth game than an extremely gory action flick.

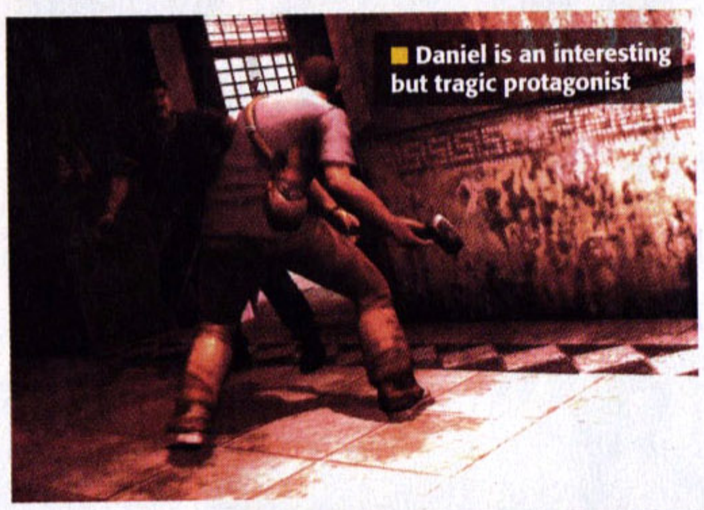
For those of us that loved the original, Manhunt 2 is a trip that's worth taking, even if it's not nearly as memorable or enjoyable. While I applaud the series for it's uncompromising take on morality and violence, it's hard not to notice that recent titles like Mass Effect and BioShock have covered similar territory in a more mature – and much more enjoyable – fashion.—**MATT**

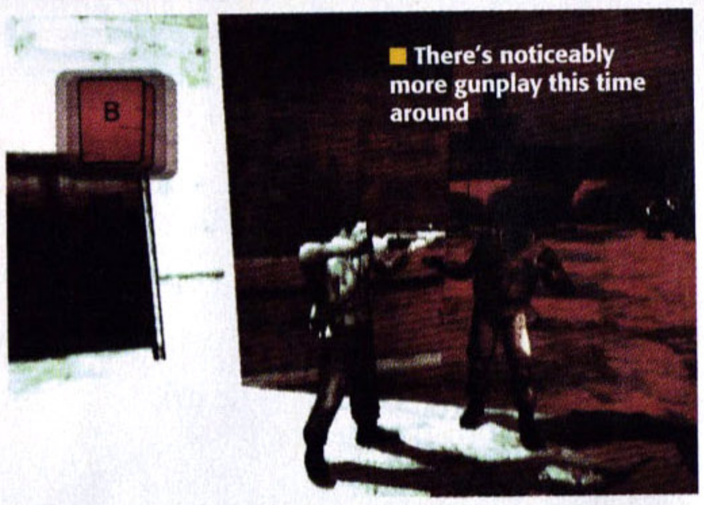
theedge

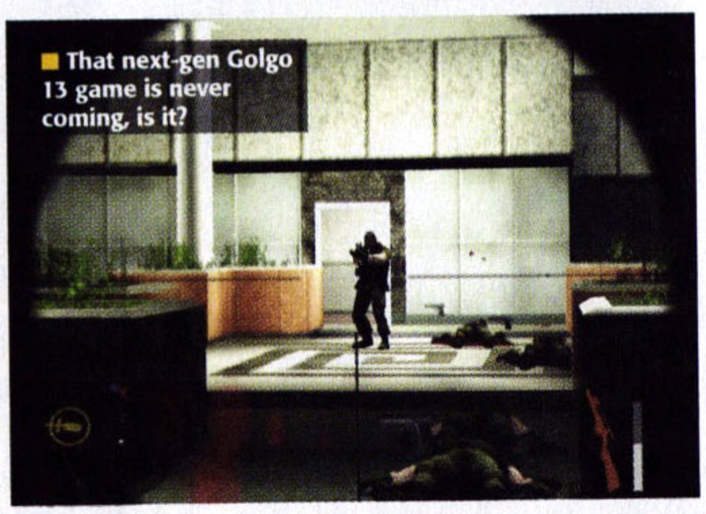
When All Games Aren't Created Equal

While the PS2 version delivers control exactly like you'd expect, the Wii version puts you even deeper into the madness with macabre motion controls for stabbing, choking, and various other violent activities. While it's a bit gimmicky, they do work well and don't – unlike some Wii ports – make the game any less playable. For Wii owners looking for an adult-oriented, gritty title, Manhunt 2 will be one of the only options this fall, and is well worth checking out.


Time to stab it up, stabby-style


Daniel is an interesting but tragic protagonist


There's noticeably more gunplay this time around


That next-gen Golgo 13 game is never coming, is it?

BOTTOM LINE 7.75

> Concept: The year's controversial game finally gets released as an M-rated title, still uncompromisingly grim and violent

> Graphics: It's very nice looking for what's essentially a last-gen game, and makes good use of various grainy "videotape" filters

> Sound: A minimal eerie soundtrack and strong voice-acting can't quite make up for the loss of Brian Cox

> Playability: Here's where things get a bit grisly: Manhunt 2's wonky controls and camera can be an absolute chore to play at times

> Entertainment: There's still something darkly compelling about this title

> Replay Value: Low

Second Opinion 6.75

Forget the rhetoric deriding Manhunt 2 for its ultraviolent tendencies. While the game offers a gruesome experience, it's scarcely more bloodthirsty than the horror movies playing at your local Cineplex or games already sitting on store shelves. The star of the game is unquestionably the lurid world Rockstar creates. The eerie, psychosomatic mood this game creates with its level design, enemies, and gruesome death sequences ranks up there with the likes of The Suffering and the original Manhunt. Following this unraveling scientist as he stabs and shoots his way out of an institutionalization and roams seedy environments in search of his broken memories can be a riveting experience. Doing it with the broken camera, simplistic combat, and rigid animation system this game offers, however, nearly suffocates Manhunt 2. It's a shame Rockstar didn't take this chance to polish the sequel with the effort it deserved.—**BERTZ**

HUMAN HISTORY JUST GOT
A LITTLE LESS HUMAN.

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360

Tony Hawk's Proving Ground

> STYLE 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION/SPORTS (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA PLAYSTATION NETWORK OR XBOX LIVE) **> PUBLISHER** ACTIVISION **> DEVELOPER** NEVERSOFT **> RELEASE** OCTOBER 16 **> ESRB** T

SHAKY GROUND

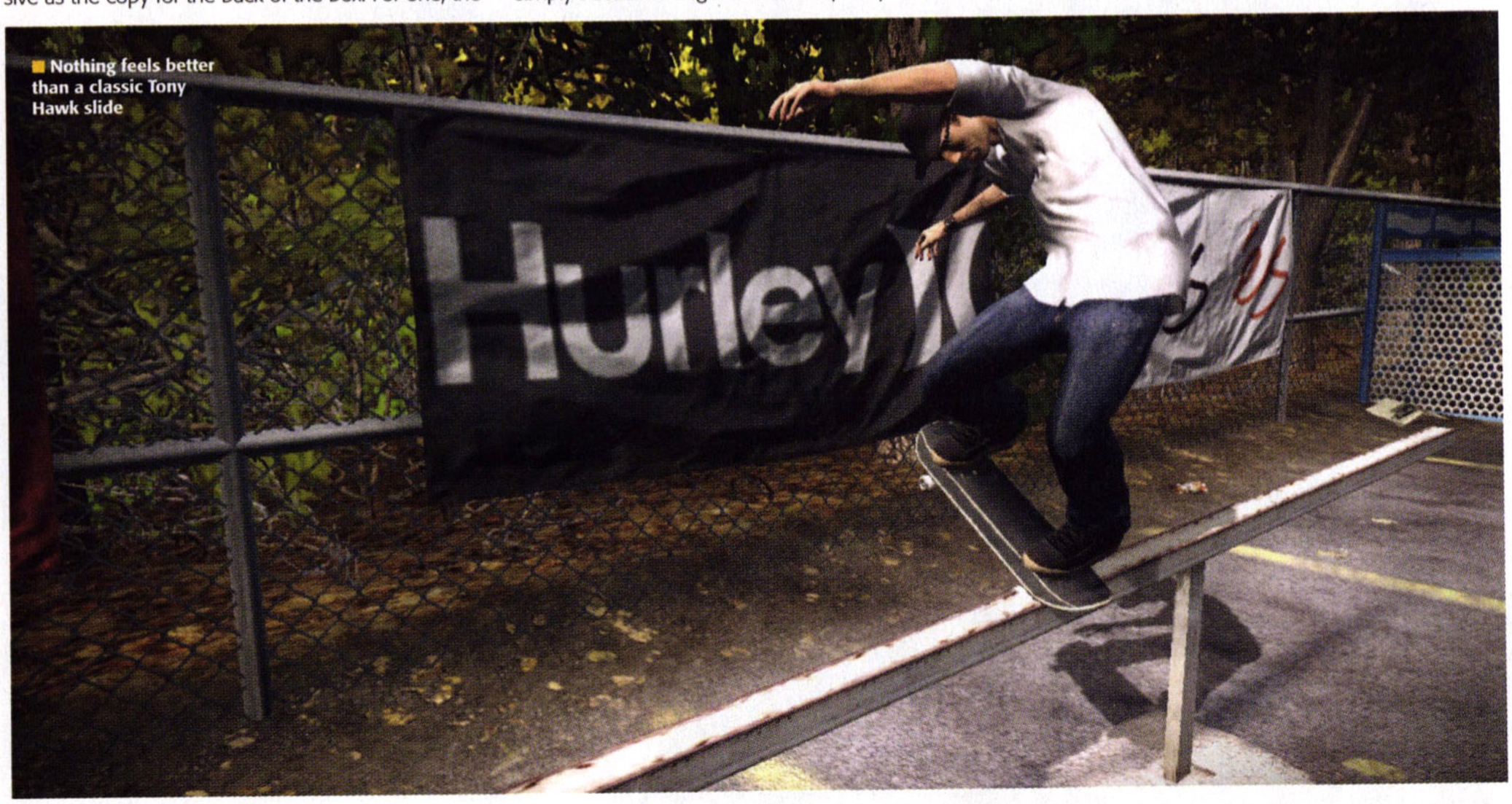
Since the series' inception, the Tony Hawk games have had at their core one of the most impressive game designs. It's the perfect storm of simple gameplay, complex combos, and death-defying feats. While no one can deny Tony Hawk's brilliant gameplay mechanic, the picture that Neversoft paints with this brush changes from year to year, and sometimes even a great artist can trip up and draw something boring and repetitive, as I feel Neversoft has done with Proving Ground.

On a fact sheet, the amount of work Neversoft put into Proving Ground is impressive. Three seamless cities, a full-featured video editor, a customizable skate lounge, three story paths that unlock new control mechanics, the ability to hop easily from single-player to multiplayer, classic modes, and a new Hawk-man minigame is a massive list that would tempt just about any Tony Hawk fan.

Sadly, the implementation isn't nearly as impressive as the copy for the back of the box. For one, the three story arcs (Career, Rigger, and Hardcore) while unique in their own ways, focus entirely on their singular fact sheet talking point. In the Career Mode, you follow various stories that unlock the original Nail The Trick from Project 8, and two new "Nail The" maneuvers in the form of manuals and grabs. While you may get a chance to do some other bits and pieces, mostly you find yourself just moving between the game's three areas – Baltimore, Phildelphia, and Washington D.C. – doing "Nail The" tricks over and over.

The same can be said for the other two disciplines. The Hardcore story beats the Aggro Kick (the game's one great gameplay addition, I might add) into the ground before it unlocks the ability to knock people over and carve bowls with an uninspired press of a button. The Rigger storyline, which should be awesome because it lets you modify the world with a variety of props, ultimately falls short simply because the game editor is poorly executed. In fact, many times when I was required to set up cameras or other skate pieces, I found myself battling with the editor rather than playing the game to defeat challenges, which had me wondering if I was playing Tony Hawk's Amateur Photography Studio instead of the skating game I had spinning in my game console.

Even with all these problems, Tony Hawk's Proving Ground is still fun to play if you love the core control mechanic that has been carrying this series for nine iterations. It is simply the best skating mechanic out there (with all due respect to Skate's innovative control scheme). The addition of the new Aggro Kick, which lets you build up speed with timed button presses, is pure genius. Having the ability to smoothly go online and enjoy multiplayer is absolutely fantastic, but the single-player experience is more chore than score, and brings down the whole experience because of its uninspired design.—**ANDY**



■ Nothing feels better than a classic Tony Hawk slide

BOTTOM LINE 7.75

> Concept: Add more features and new challenges to the classic Tony Hawk formula

> Graphics: Proving Ground's real world vibe makes for a believable, yet slightly boring, world

> Sound: The soundtrack this time around is strong, but perhaps the least inspired in the series

> Playability: The core skating mechanic is still genius, with an assortment of both good and bad additions

> Entertainment: The single-player game, while deep, is fairly repetitive in this release, but the multiplayer is fantastic

> Replay Value: Moderately High

Second Opinion 8.25

Tony Hawk has always been a staple in my holiday gaming, but with each passing year, I find myself dedicating less time to the series' new release. The gameplay has always been solid, but the level designs, career path, and overall vibe of the game have been very hit or miss. Proving Ground nails nearly everything it attempts, making it the most enjoyable Hawk in years, and a game that I will play religiously for months on end. The levels are filled with amazing lines, and the career goals actually require a great deal of skill to complete. By now you'd think the series was tapped for new skating moves, but the Aggro Kick, a way to gain more speed, is already a part of my routine for building huge lines. The silky smooth framerate and gorgeous animations are also welcome additions. The rigger challenges, carving goals, and abysmal story deserve to be kicked to the curb, but if you enjoy playing Tony Hawk with the intent of furthering your skills and raising point totals, this is the place to hang your board and wheels.—**REINER**

"...easily the PlayStation 3 (system)'s premiere, must-have title."

-Game Informer

"...a highly playable action game that will satisfy even the most demanding FPS junkies."

-GamePro

"5 out of 5"
-G4

"9.5 out of 10"
-Game Informer

INSOMNIAC

MATURE 17+
M
Blood and Gore
Intense Violence
Strong Language
ESRB CONTENT RATING www.esrb.org
Game Experience May Change During Online Play.

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R F O M . C O M

RESISTANCE
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Welcome to Earth, circa 1951. The Chimera, a horrific species of unknown origin, have overrun Russia and most of Europe. And now they're threatening the entire planet. Armed with an arsenal of unique and deadly weapons, you and your fellow soldiers represent humanity's last hope.

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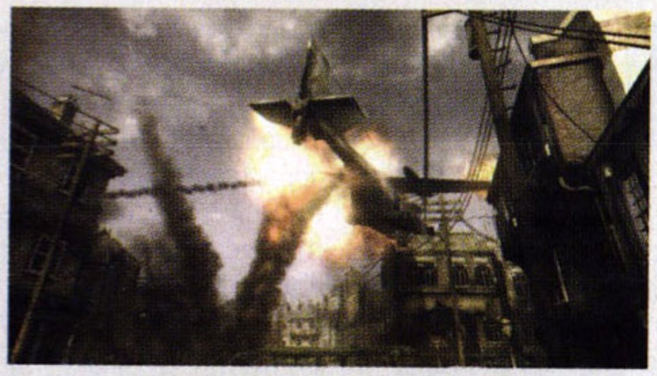

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PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360 | PC

Clive Barker's Jericho

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION **> PUBLISHER** CODEMASTERS **> DEVELOPER** MERCURYSTEAM **> RELEASE** OCTOBER 23 **> ESRB** M

FIENDISHLY UNDERWHELMING

Maybe Clive Barker should worry more about making good games before he takes Roger Ebert to task about whether video games are an art form. It doesn't take an overweight film critic to give Jericho two thumbs down.

Jericho's plot is classic B-move fare, with inane exposition and clichéd dialogue worthy of *MST3K* razzing. It turns out God dabbled in creation before he unveiled mankind, but didn't like His handywork. The Firstborn was too grotesquely powerful, so God banished it to the abyss and created the much more acceptable human race. This didn't sit well with the fledgling being, and it's been attempting to destroy Earth ever since. Your task as a special forces "warrior magician" is to stop God's original mistake once and for all using your occult powers and an arsenal of modern weaponry.

Though it's hyped as a squad-based shooter, Jericho doesn't offer tactical gameplay in the traditional sense. You can command your squad of paranormal troopers to move forward or hang back, but either way will likely end with half of your team incapacitated due to their inferior fighting skills. You can, however, switch between the squad members to use their special abilities, which range from standard magic fare like telekinesis to much more appealing skills, like the ability to guide a bullet through multiple enemies. But when you're not in command of a squad member, don't expect them to survive a skirmish. The majority of battles revolve just as much around reviving hopeless teammates as they do fighting the fiendish ghouls vying for your soul.

If broken gameplay mechanics and community college acting didn't weigh down the game, it might actually be worthwhile. Each environment features a macabre twist on a historical period, and they rival Painkiller in their haunting heavy metal video backdrop appearance. Unfortunately, the creepy locales and ultraviolent action don't translate into a frightening experience. And isn't that where Clive Barker is supposed to shine?—**BERTZ**

BOTTOM LINE 6

> Concept: Clive Barker mixes a horrific plot with some poorly implemented squad mechanics to create the latest lackluster shooter

> Graphics: The amazing Painkiller-meets-Gears of War environments are the highlight of the game

> Sound: I've heard better voice acting on cable access cartoons. Seriously, is SAG already on strike?

> Playability: The gunplay responds well, but characters unleash paranormal abilities too slowly, and switching amongst your squad mates can be disorienting

> Entertainment: Your war-challenged team will constantly test your patience with its inability to stay alive in the face of evil

> Replay Value: Moderately Low

Second Opinion 6.5

I'm only one man, so how am I supposed to keep six characters alive? One of Jericho's greatest features – the ability to swap between and use your different team members powers – turns out to be the game's biggest fault since your squad is constantly dying. For a tactical shooter Jericho doesn't require much finesse. Most of the enemies just barrel towards you, and since your teammates tend to stand in the middle of a room while they fire, you spend most of your time frantically healing them while trying to not get overwhelmed. The script is about as good as an old WB show, but that's actually what I started to like about it. Maybe we can get a sequel because I think there are some cool shooter ideas hidden under bigger mistakes.—**BEN**

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360

Sega Rally Revo

> STYLE 1 OR 2-PLAYER RACING (UP TO 6-PLAYER VIA PLAYSTATION NETWORK OR XBOX LIVE) **> PUBLISHER** SEGA **> DEVELOPER** SEGA RACING STUDIO **> RELEASE** OCTOBER 9 **> ESRB** E

IF ONLY I COULD DRIVE OFF A CLIFF

And they say that NASCAR is boring. This game not only goes in circles, it also has been spinning its wheels in place in the mud, going nowhere…for years. Anyone who tells you that arcades are dead need look no further to find that their spirit – for what it's worth – is alive and well in Sega Rally Revo.

I took one look at the track map during my first race and cringed. It was short and round – two features that don't go well together when you talk about rally racing. But you know what? I actually enjoyed the game's tracks since they were conducive to the one thing that Revo does well, and that is arcade rally racing predicated on sliding through quick turns. The fun doesn't last long, however, as the tracks never change. I also have a limited tolerance for Revo's arcade style of racing (where your car merely swivels on a stationary pivot point), as it robs you of control. Sliding is fun, but so is the feeling of being able to go screaming into a corner and having enough control to finesse and manipulate the car to your bidding. That is not found here. Anyone who thinks that this game's style of racing is what makes its rally thrills possible is mistaken. Go play a Colin McRae game and then tell me what your heart rate is.

While some may argue that Sega Rally fits their bill for arcade racing, I don't think there's any forgiving this game for how shallow it is. Apart from unlocking tracks, cars, and paint schemes, it simply offers very little else. After playing Project Gotham Racing 4 and being exposed to just how well a racing title can bring players along for the ride, Sega Rally Revo feels like mud in the eye.—**KATO**

BOTTOM LINE 6.5

> Concept: An arcade rally title for people who don't expect things from their video games

> Graphics: The mud effects look great, but they don't splatter on your car or windshield

> Sound: A co-pilot shouts directions, but it's not nearly as involved as a real rally title, and can be ignored without detriment if you choose

> Playability: The game's cars – which all feel the same, swivel on a pivot in this arcade-style racing title

> Entertainment: The thrills are there, but they're short lived

> Replay Value: Moderately Low

Second Opinion 6.75

It's very hard for me to see the purpose of Sega Rally. As a shallow, arcade-style rally title I just don't see whom this is supposed to appeal to. If you want all-out thrills, I'd go for Juiced 2. If you want real, authentic rally, Dirt is your game. If you want the best of all worlds, the excellent PGR 4 is there for you. Aside from the stellar graphics, Sega Rally really doesn't do anything well enough to recommend a purchase. The career mode is shallow. The customization options are slight. The handling is slippery and unduly loose feeling. And, even though it's technically a "rally" title, the tracks are very simple and essentially walled on both sides. It's just not enough.—**MATT**

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360

Need for Speed ProStreet

> STYLE 1 OR 2-PLAYER RACING (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA PLAYSTATION NETWORK OR XBOX LIVE) **> PUBLISHER** ELECTRONIC ARTS
> DEVELOPER EA CANADA **> RELEASE** NOVEMBER 13 **> ESRB** E

PULLING A FAST ONE

Mechanics and the motor oil companies recommend you change your oil every couple thousand miles, and promise horrible things if you don't do what they say. Well, it seems that EA demands that the Need for Speed series get its own clean flush just as often. This is the third next-generation NFS title in three straight years, and regardless if we'll ever see the Carbon or Most Wanted imprints again, I don't wonder if EA – like the powerful, secret motor oil lobby – isn't trying to trick me into spending my cash needlessly.

I've talked to various EA team members about this title on a few occasions, and I have no doubt that they wanted to go in this direction for perfectly sound reasons. The worldwide locations, the sharing of car set-ups, and the more sim-style of racing are the paramount game features. What bothers me is that when you add these elements together, you're not necessarily getting a better product. The global locations and their tracks are nothing special (especially the overused Laguna Seca and Nurburgring), and the sim-racing – while decent – is not something that EA just invented. The one part of this game where I had fun was the speed challenges. These test the limits of your skill and nerves as you tear down country roads with little margin of error. Of course, they're not as good as Carbon's Canyon runs, but there's no point pining for those now, is there?

The game's races are grouped into race days, which contain different kinds of events (like drag, drift, time trial, etc.) that require different kinds of cars. The race days are a good idea because they require you to repair your car between races (even if the damage itself is meted out inconsistently), make you master your different rides, and provide atmosphere. With that said, all of this could be done in any of the previous Need for Speeds. In other words, EA has come up with some good ideas and instead of pairing them with the other good ideas they've already come up with in Carbon, for instance, it paired them with stale and predictable ones. Why did they think that the rug needed to be pulled out from under Carbon just so we could go race in some non-descript Tokyo dock location or by-the-numbers track in Europe?

The one undoubtedly cool thing that ProStreet brings to the table is its online play (except on Wii), where you can create your own race days and invite friends to compete in them. The race day will keep a persistent leaderboard of everyone's progress, so you can always go back and knock off your buddy.

How often do I change my motor oil, you ask? Whenever I damn well feel like it.—**KATO**

■ **Your cars can have multiple blueprints, which are different setups that include whatever customizations you've bought or tuning you've done. When you buy a car you can set the default blueprint according to race type (like drift, drag, etc.). This default setting can be changed at any time, so you can turn your grip car into your speed challenge ride**

WHAT A DRAG

HERE'S HOW YOU CAN NAIL THOSE QUARTER- AND HALF-MILE DRAG RACES

1. HEAT YOUR TIRES

By heating up your tires in a controlled manner you'll actually increase their traction. The goal here is to spike the tachometer into the designated green area. This area will move down the tachometer every time you hit it, so the end effect is you revving your engine by alternately stabbing and releasing the gas trigger.

2. GETTING THE JUMP

The more traction you've built up in your tires, the larger and farther up the RPM scale your green area becomes. Before the drag girl drops her hand to start the race, you're going to want to hold your tachometer in this green range. As soon as she starts the race, simultaneously gun the throttle *and* shift up on the right analog for the perfect start.

3. SHIFT_WIN

Shifting up through the gears effectively can win or lose you the race. The optimal time to shift is right before the tach starts to redline. You can use nitrous if you have it, but make sure you're ready for the spike in RPMs it creates. Also, in the upper-right-hand corner of the screen you'll see what percentage of the drag you've completed. Make sure you don't shift into fifth gear with only seconds to go, for instance, because your car's speed will pause while the transmission shifts. Here it's better to redline momentarily instead.

BOTTOM LINE 7.5

> Concept: Change up the whole Need for Speed concept... again. Don't ask me what for

> Graphics: Not bad. The fanfare at the tracks is cool, but there's graphical pop-up during races

> Sound: The MCs/announcers are annoying but well done, if that makes sense

> Playability: It's more sim-racing than NFS fans are used to, and straddles the fence like Project Gotham

> Entertainment: The good parts of this game could have been achieved without a major overhaul of the franchise

> Replay Value: Moderately High

Second Opinion 7

Ever since Underground came out of nowhere and amazed me with its open-world racing and addictive customization, I have been a devout fan of the Need For Speed series. Sure, there have been some minor slip-ups over the years that have followed, but overall the games have still been fun to play, which leaves me scratching my head as to why EA would give this year's Need for Speed such an extreme makeover. Pro Street removes just about everything I loved about the series, and confines the game to tracks, which wouldn't be a complete disaster if 10 other games didn't do it better (namely Project Gotham Racing 4). Not only does the track-based racing highlight the game's less-than-stellar car physics, it makes the game's attempt at a story feel all the more disjointed and uninspired. ProStreet does have some impressive graphics, but its gameplay is about as vanilla as they come.—**ANDY**

THE NINTENDO DIFFERENCE

BOTTOM LINE 7

> FORMAT Wii
> STYLE 1 OR 2-PLAYER RACING

Wii WHEELS

Apart from looking like an ugly baby conceived in the back of a broken-down El Camino by a couple of illiterates, tilting the Wii remote translates to your car surprisingly well. There is no online play, however, and I didn't like the feel of the brakes because they didn't offer nearly enough subtlety for the courses. The control setup also made it too easy to accidentally hit the nitrous.

■ Soldiers' bodies will convulse as you pump them full of lead

XBOX 360 | PC

TimeShift

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 16-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE OR INTERNET) **> PUBLISHER** SIERRA
> DEVELOPER SABER INTERACTIVE **> RELEASE** OCTOBER 30 **> ESRB** M

A WRINKLE IN TIME

After years of painful fits and restarts, TimeShift's release has finally shifted to the present. Sierra's world-weary shooter stars the "suit guy," a scientist in a badass time-altering suit who travels to an alternate universe to stop an insane colleague from force-feeding his ideology to the general populace. TimeShift rips several pages out of the Half-Life 2 playbook – scripted in-game events, side character NPC dialogue that colors the setting, and propaganda speech blaring over urban centers all come together to create a vaguely familiar dystopian world. But the similarities end here; the game assaults players with senseless cutscenes during loading sequences that fail to flesh out the rest of story in a cohesive way.

Once you jump into the action, TimeShift showcases its unique characteristics. You can pause time to disarm enemies, place grenades in their pockets, or relocate to confuse them. By fast-forwarding time you can quickly dispatch opponents, and reversing time can get yourself out of a jam, like that inconveniently placed sticky grenade attached to your torso. Admiring your handiwork during time alteration is one of the game's highlights; soldiers' bodies will convulse as you riddle them with bullets, and slow-motion grenade explosions create frenzied destruction sequences that never get old.

Since your character has such an advantage over the average grunt, Saber Interactive upgraded the enemy AI so they can stay in the fight. The cunning AI is reminiscent of F.E.A.R. in that these mercs will hunt you down if you hide to recover health and rearm. They will stick to cover, flank, counter-attack, and pursue depending on the battle situation. I even had a particularly savvy enemy throw a grenade down a sewer hole where I was hiding.

The arsenal used to dispatch these smart soldiers has some definite standouts. While the standard rifle is handicapped due to its much-too-large reticle, most players will gravitate towards two particular guns. The TimeShift shotgun isn't a dumbed down weapon like you'll find in Halo 3 – this bad boy splatters organs with the best of them. The crossbow is another favorite – it fires projectiles that explode upon impact. Land enough of these in your enemies during a time freeze and watch it rain limbs and torsos when you unpause the action.

While exploring your time-altering gifts will keep your attention for several levels, halfway through the game you'll start to feel déjà vu as you move through the clichéd warehouses and engineering plants. To make matters worse, the simplistic environmental puzzles feel recycled from past titles. TimeShift also isn't above the occasional laggy sequence or game freeze.

On the multiplayer side, the gameplay centers on owning the battlefield through the use of well-placed time-altering grenades. When players are launching these at each other the game feels very disorienting, but they can bail savvy players out of sticky situations. In the end, the discombobulating action and lack of unlockables and a ranking system keep TimeShift from competing with big multiplayer titles.

While it may not approach the craftsmanship or innovation of a Half-Life 2, TimeShift introduces enough interesting elements to its derivative gameplay to make this game worth a look.—**BERTZ**

■ The enemy AI is nothing to scoff at

■ When you see a mech, it's best to keep away

BOTTOM LINE 7.75

> Concept: Alter time to taunt, confuse, and ultimately destroy your enemies

> Graphics: The backdrop is your classic war-torn dystopian world

> Sound: The terrible '80s action flick soundtrack should be replaced by your own music

> Playability: Great weapons and smooth controls, but the main gun has a poorly-designed reticle

> Entertainment: Using time against your foes never gets old. Neither do their explosive demises

> Replay Value: Moderately High

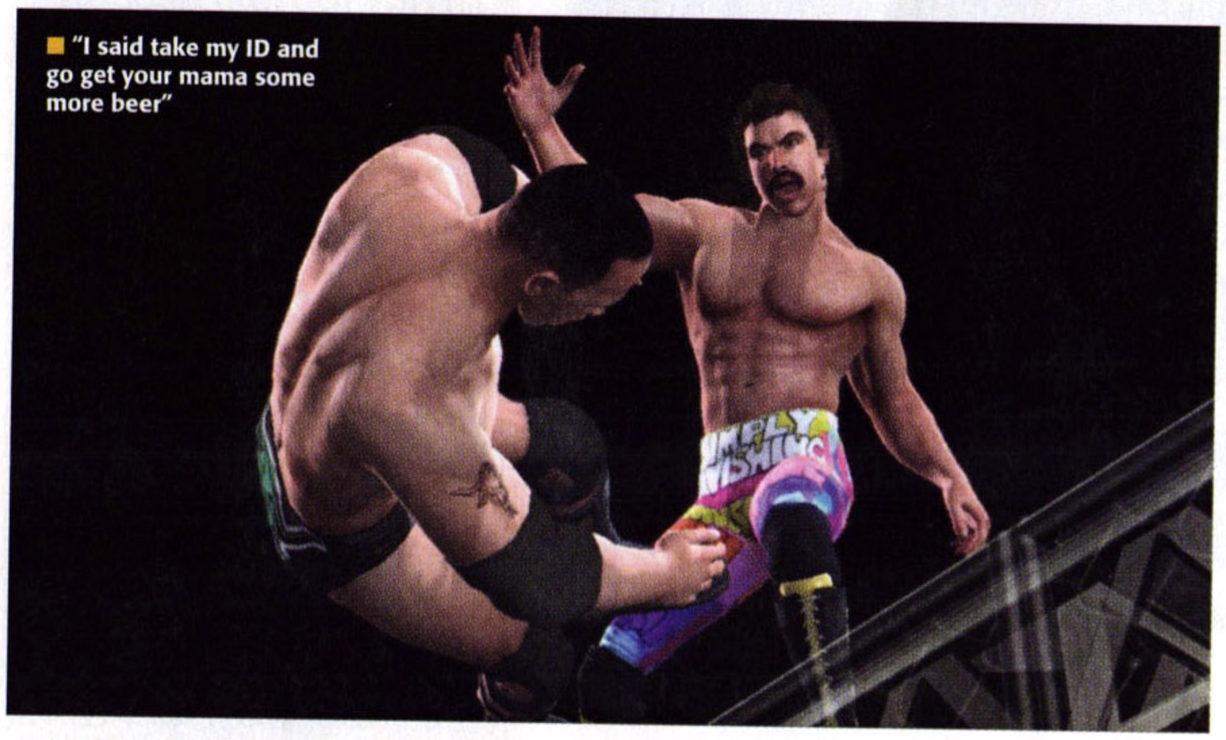
Second Opinion 7.75

Whether it's a rocket launcher to the face or a sticky grenade to the rear, I've always enjoyed making a mockery of enemies in FPS games. This is what TimeShift is all about. By stopping time, you can run over to a frozen foe and steal his firearm right from his hands. When time resumes, he'll stand there confused, and if you are truly lucky, will curl up on the floor and plead for mercy. These powers are brutally effective and are a blast to use. The gunplay is a bit weak, but the enemy AI is combat savvy and never holds anything back. Overall, players are treated to a long and enjoyable ride that is injected with variety (time puzzles, rail shooting, etc.) at just the right times. As for multiplayer? Let's just call it a spastic mess and never mention it again. So, if you are in the market for a solid single-player FPS and love embarrassing people, Timeshift is well worth a look.—**REINER**

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360

WWE SmackDown! vs. Raw 2008

> STYLE 1 TO 4-PLAYER FIGHTING (UP TO 4-PLAYER VIA PLAYSTATION ONLINE OR XBOX LIVE) **> PUBLISHER** THQ **> DEVELOPER** YUKE'S MEDIA CREATIONS
> RELEASE NOVEMBER 13 **> ESRB** T



"I said take my ID and go get your mama some more beer"

BOTTOM LINE 8

> Concept: Crank out another great wrestling title, but don't worry about the balancing

> Graphics: The crowd looks a little cleaner than last year's, but otherwise the visuals haven't changed noticeably

> Sound: Not only are the announcers annoying, they are super repetitive

> Playability: The controls obey you most of the time, but every now and then they want to argue

> Entertainment: Great for wrestling and fighting fans, but little for everyone else

> Replay Value: Moderately High

UNCHALLENGED CHAMP

SmackDown! vs. Raw is sort of like a lazy superstar. Sure, it still has some moves and it can still put on a good show, but it's been the only brawler in the ring for so long that it's not worried about being the most well-rounded fighter it can be. Case in point, the eight new fighting styles for each wrestler in the game are a nice addition that provide some great diversity in the characters, but they destroy the game's balance.

Many of the Superstyle moves that come with each fighting style will do things like make your fighter immune to strikes and automatically reverse grapples. They are a lot of fun to play around with and make you feel like a monster tough guy, but they also prove that not all wrestlers are created equal. Some fighting styles are clearly superior and create an uneven playing field at times.

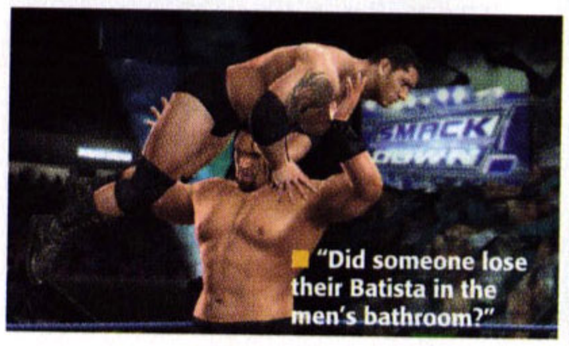
Another big change to this version is the combination of General Manager and Career Mode into 24/7 Mode. In this mode, you'll take your favorite wrestler or created character to the top of the superstar list and become a legend. Aside from your weekly obligations to either the SmackDown or Raw shows (oddly, ECW fighters can't participate in 24/7 mode), you'll be able to participate in a host of activities to better your brawler.

Filling your calendar with physical exercises will improve your wrestler's performance stats, while skill training improves abilities like pain management or handling yourself in front of a camera. Special events like trophy dates and movie promotions will improve your reputation. Amidst all this you will have to watch your fighter's health – make sure he's getting enough rest – otherwise he'll be more likely to get injured. Of course, you can do all of this as the GM too, and not have to worry about the actual wrestling, or you can simulate all the training stuff and just focus on getting your hands dirty with the main events. The beauty of the game is that you can play however you want.

I just wish I enjoyed myself in the ring as much as I enjoyed being out of it. For every moment where you do a really awesome move that devastates your opponent there are also times when you feel that the controls are not responding exactly as you would like or you do a different grapple then you intended. Newcomers should probably know that the game doesn't ease you in with any kind of training either. While it is really cool that it keeps track of your injuries when you go into the ring, it would be nice if there was a way to take time off so your fighter could heal before getting strung up on the mat again. Also, the load times are a little too long for how frequent they are. But I don't want it to sound like I'm complaining too much about SvR because it still has enough sweaty man-fun to make it worth checking out. Even the one-sided bouts in this game are fun, so if THQ takes care of the few problems this series has, there is no reason it can't remain the champ after some new challengers step into the ring next year.—**BEN**

Second Opinion 8

As I chased my opponent with a flaming barbed wire 2x4, I realized that not even Jason Voorhees has ever wielded such a terrifying weapon. With the full integration of ECW's Extreme Rules, this year's game caters to the bloodthirsty wrestling fanatic. You can slam opponents through flaming tables, smash guitars over their heads, and basically do whatever it takes to turn their bodies into a mangled mess. The ECW content lives up to the quality of the old show, and is a nice change from the standard wrestling package. Unfortunately, I don't think the gameplay is as strong as last year's game. The new free run and struggle submissions are great, but the enhancements made to the fighting styles throw off the balance of the game – especially when you can activate a power that either makes you invincible or counters your foe's every move. You are basically throwing skill out the window for cheats. The career mode content is deeper than ever, and I love the legend-heavy roster, but in the ring, the game has lost some of its hard-hitting excitement.—**REINER**



"Did someone lose their Batista in the men's bathroom?"

"Are you sure this will improve our stamina with the ladies?"

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EX model shown.

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360 | PC

BlackSite: Area 51

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 10-PLAYER VIA PLAYSTATION NETWORK, XBOX LIVE, OR PC INTERNET OR LAN) **> PUBLISHER** MIDWAY
> DEVELOPER MIDWAY **> RELEASE** NOVEMBER 5 **> ESRB** T

RIDING RAILS AGAIN

The Area 51 series came to life in the mid-'90s when on-rails light gun arcade shooters were still marketable. Players joined a military assault team and battled an alien force intent on taking over the Area 51 installation. Twelve years have passed since then, and the series has proven that it can handle full-fledged FPS gameplay with its 2005 entry. So it's sad that, in some ways, this sequel feels like a small step back. BlackSite has all the looks and moves of a modern day first-person shooter, but it feels like it's just going through the motions. Like the on-rails style this series was born from, BlackSite fails to forge its own path in the field of modern day shooters.

The game borrows from a lot of other FPS titles and feels very uninspired. The story about a government-run secret soldier program gone wrong never really drew me in, and the cookie cutter military grunts grated on my nerves a bit. Vehicles have Halo-style control, and though they feel floaty, they're also still fun to drive around. The squad commands, on the other hand, feel worthless and underdeveloped. They are so unnecessary that you may even forget you have them until you need your team to open a door.

The game's AI makes some pretty boneheaded maneuvers, too. Your companions will throw grenades at dead bodies long after they've hit the ground, and enemies will sometimes run right past you on their way to take cover. Even the multiplayer options are pretty standard, with only eight maps and four modes. One of these, called Abduction, is pretty fun – though it's similar to Halo 3's Infection where human players respawn as reborn creatures.

Even with all these annoying issues, the nuts and bolts of BlackSite's action is solid. The controls and overall level design are good, and some of the enemy character designs look great. And even though the game is constantly hiccupping with loads, there are a lot of cool environmental destruction effects. These lead to some great action moments like walking through the middle of a small desert town as the liquor store in front of you implodes and a giant worm uncurls skyward from the debris. All in all, I can see FPS fans having fun with BlackSite since it provides all the standard FPS rollercoaster thrills, but most of us have been up and down those hills a few too many times.—**BEN**

■ Some of the cooler looking enemies in the game. These ladies will actually pop out of their metal husks and crawl across the floor to get to you before they die

BOTTOM LINE 7.5

> Concept: An FPS that is just as superficial as the stereotypical military grunts who are in it

> Graphics: Off and on. At some point it looks great, in other it looks like they forgot to do some texture work

> Sound: An okay score, and the voice work is pretty good even if it is too over the top

> Playability: The controls work fine, and the game doesn't seem to be missing anything important

> Entertainment: Like vanilla ice cream. It's still ice cream, but sometimes you want more flavor

> Replay Value: Moderate

Second Opinion 7.25

It may not wow on the same level as Call of Duty, but BlackSite is a well-executed, by-the-books shooter with some memorable scripted moments, solid gun mechanics, and an epic soundtrack that keeps the tension high. The action fails to compete with the gold tier games mostly due to the sketchy enemy AI, which will have you wondering how low the minimum requirements are to join an elite, super secret infantry unit. BlackSite's infantile squad command system also isn't integral enough to the action to justify its implementation (I can open my own doors, thank you very much). If you're itching to take out some aliens, you could do worse than visit BlackSite, but don't expect greatness.—**BERTZ**

MULTI QUICKIES

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360 | Wii

LEGO Star Wars: The Complete Saga

> STYLE 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION (2-PLAYER VIA PLAYSTATION NETWORK OR XBOX LIVE)
> PUBLISHER LUCASARTS
> DEVELOPER TRAVELLER'S TALES
> RELEASE NOVEMBER 6 **> ESRB** E10+

BOTTOM LINE 7.5

Hey everybody! The entire LEGO Star Wars saga has been crammed into one disc with two-player online co-op (not on Wii), a few new characters (Indiana Jones! Zam Wessell!), some bonus levels (mostly bounty hunter missions), new hi-res graphics on the original trilogy, an easier Podrace, retrofitted LSW 2 mechanics on LSW 1 episodes, and instant access to the first level of every episode. Despite all of these cool minor additions, the core gameplay feels mostly like one big retread. With all of the great new games coming out this holiday, it's hard to justify replaying this series. For diehard fans, however, this is the definitive LEGO Star Wars game.—**BRYAN**

theedge

When All Games Aren't Created Equal

The Edge goes to the PS3 and 360 versions due to Wii Star Wars' worse graphics, waggly control scheme, and, most of all, no online play. Plus, it costs just as much as the fully featured versions ($49.99).

XBOX 360 | Wii | PLAYSTATION 2

Looney Tunes: ACME Arsenal

> STYLE 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION (2-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE) **> PUBLISHER** WARNER BROTHERS INTERACTIVE **> DEVELOPER** RED TRIBE
> RELEASE OCTOBER 9 **> ESRB** E10+

BOTTOM LINE 1.75

Next to sharing screen time with Michael Jordan, this game has to be the low point in Bugs Bunny's career. Void of both humor and fun, ACME Arsenal is a sizeable disaster that doesn't feel like it belongs in the Looney Tunes universe. With combat mechanics that feel diseased and platforming challenges that are never once thrilling, ACME Arsenal is a welcome addition to the year's worst list, and a game that will surely ruin Christmas for children with parents that buy games solely based on the license. — **REINER**

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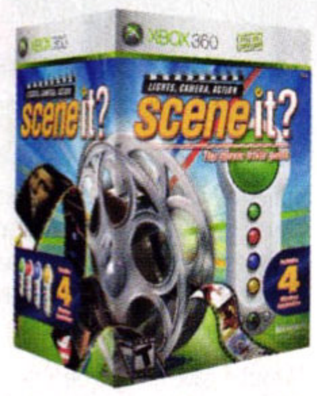

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TEEN
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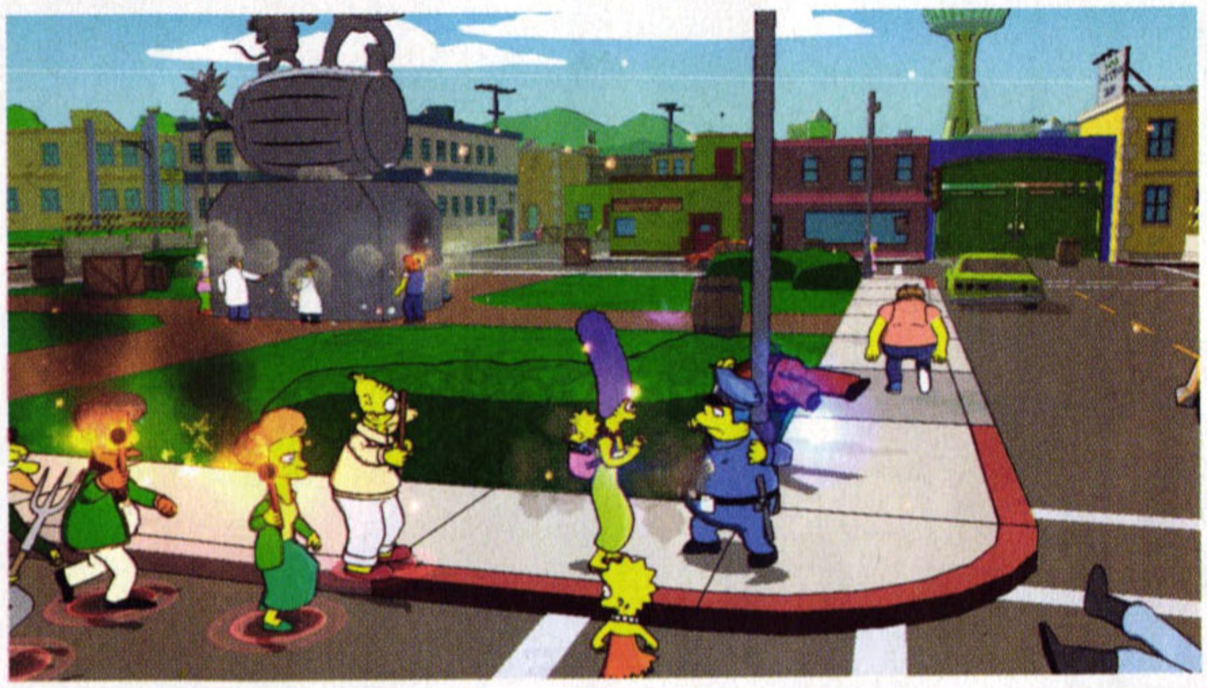


PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360 | Wii | PLAYSTATION 2

The Simpsons Game

> STYLE 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION/PLATFORM **> PUBLISHER** ELECTRONIC ARTS **> DEVELOPER** EA REDWOOD SHORES **> RELEASE** OCTOBER 30 **> ESRB** T

Lisa's Hand of Buddha can flick enemies and grab objects

BOTTOM LINE 7.25

> Concept: Have the Simpsons do what they do best: parody

> Graphics: Springfield and its denizens look remarkably similar to their TV counterparts

> Sound: All of the major voice talent is present, along with great cameos from the likes of Matt Groening and Will Wright

> Playability: Your ability to explore Springfield is hampered by one of the worst cameras I've seen in recent years

> Entertainment: The writing is good for a laugh, but there's nothing funny about the repetitive gameplay

> Replay Value: Moderate

TODD SMELLS

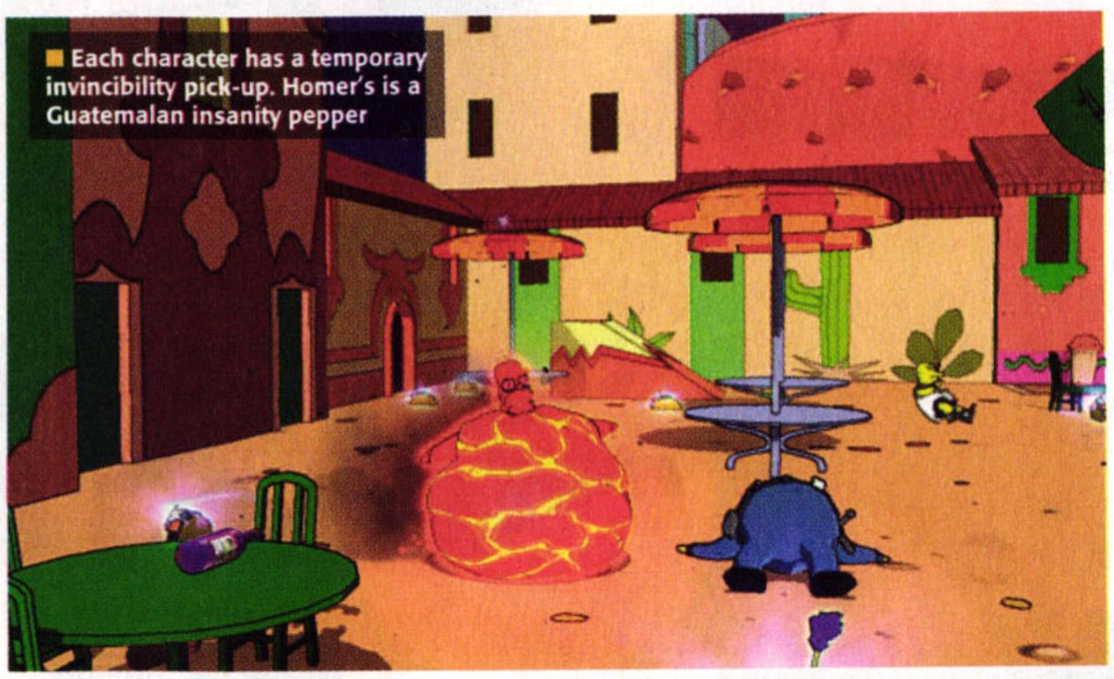
Like many Simpsons fans out there, I was hoping that this would be the title to turn it around for America's favorite animated family in the video game arena. With two-player co-op and a focus on the humor that has made the show a primetime staple since 1989, The Simpsons Game has everything a fan could want... but not everything it needs to be a fun, interesting game.

The biggest problem is illustrated through one of the game's funniest features: the cliché. As you jump and punch your way through each mission, you will encounter hackneyed video game traditions like giant saw blades and pressure pads. Then the Comic Book Guy pops up and calls attention to the blatant unoriginality of these devices ("Ah, the crate. As seen in everything."). While this almost always gets a laugh, pointing out clichés doesn't make them any more fun to play.

The development team clearly knew that basic switch puzzles and time trials are tiresome, yet the player is forced to endure them. Even though the goals themselves are sometimes funny, the generic combat and platforming rarely make them fun to complete. There are also dozens of stupid collectibles like coupons and bottlecaps scattered throughout the world. Trust me, they are not worth picking up.

I know that I'm not making the game sound great – it isn't – but the important distinction here is unlike most mediocre platformers, you are actually rewarded for bullying through the levels. The comedy is so pervasive and well done that it still makes you want to keep going just to hear a good one-liner or see the next hilarious parody. I've never seen a licensed property that captures the essence of it source material so well; it sometimes feels like you are playing an episode of the show (albeit with poor cinematography).

For all of its self-referential humor and nods to gaming classics (there are brief segments mimicking the likes of Frogger, Space Invaders, and Wolfenstein 3D), the process of actually playing The Simpsons Game is unfortunately average. The chuckles along the way make it worth the trouble for fans, but if you don't know Arman Tamzarian from Disco Stu, most of the game's redeeming elements will fall on deaf, bored ears.—**JOE**


Each character has a temporary invincibility pick-up. Homer's is a Guatemalan insanity pepper

HEARD AROUND TOWN

Springfieldians are a chatty bunch. As you stroll through the town on your way to mission markers, be sure to take a few minutes to interact with the characters walking the streets. Here is a small sampling of the amusing quotes you'll hear from some familiar faces.

"Mother gave me this tie. I'm...not fond of it." – **Principal Skinner**

"My stomach is full of haggis and beer. I need to go puke in some hay." – **Groundskeeper Willie**

"I tried to take my own life after they cancelled *Futurama*." – **Squeaky Voiced Teen**

"Wanna know why the sky's blue? 'Cuz it sucks!" – **Nelson**

"I get so wrapped up in robbing, I forget how much I love murdering." – **Snake**

"Jesus potty-trained the dinosaurs." – **Todd Flanders**

"I drank blue juice from under the sink." – **Ralph Wiggum**

Occasional retro throwbacks are peppered throughout the game

Second Opinion 7

When you're reveling in The Simpsons' self-referential humor, cavalcade of cast favorites, sight gags, and the hilarious script, you'll find that you're really laughing at yourself. This game breaks down the fourth wall between itself and the player, but only to expose its simple, repetitive, and weak gameplay. This game realizes it's a cliché to ask you to find 75 Duff beer bottle caps, but there's not a shred of humor to be found when you actually have to perform that task. I like the gameplay homage to classics such as Missile Command, but the execution of these stages is off. Also, apart from Bart, the characters aren't as cool to play. Is it funny? Yes. But so is watching the re-runs of the show. Unfortunately, passive TV-watching participation is more fun than playing the game itself.—**KATO**

Adding hilariously implausible Whoa pieces to your rides makes them more interesting

XBOX 360 | Wii | PLAYSTATION 2

Thrillville: Off the Rails

> STYLE 1 TO 4-PLAYER ACTION/SIMULATION **> PUBLISHER** LUCASARTS **> DEVELOPER** FRONTIER
> RELEASE OCTOBER 16 **> ESRB** E10+

STEP RIGHT UP

It's a scientific fact: As people grow older, their capacity to enjoy carnivals diminishes. Instead of staring wide-eyed at balloon stands and tilt-a-whirls, we start to notice creepy carnies and rigged games. LucasArts' Thrillville series tries to recapture the youthful wonder of an amusement park by overwhelming you with an onslaught of possible activities. However, any gamer who has outgrown Velcro shoes will notice the shallowness behind the illusion.

If you've played a theme park sim before (specifically Roller Coaster Tycoon), you'll find many elements of Off the Rails pleasantly familiar. Almost all of the management-related complexities have been stripped away, replaced by a series of simplistic genre-spanning minigames that allow players to experience a lot of variety without much depth. The bare-bones FPS, racing, and puzzle games are well suited for competitive party play, but not much else.

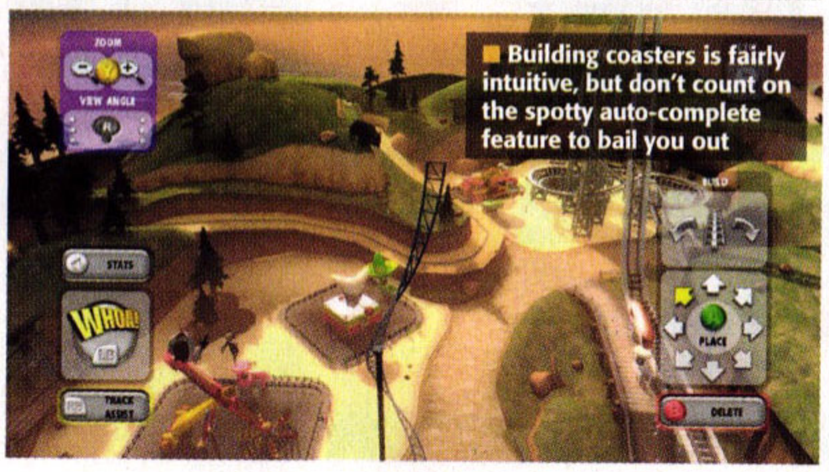
Just because Thrillville isn't the most engrossing game around doesn't mean you should write it off completely. I think the younger audience especially will appreciate the sheer volume of possible activities, and it is accessible enough that gamers of all skill levels can compete on a fairly even field. Even if you're playing solo, some of the missions are pure gems. My favorite was trying to rid my park of robots by short-circuiting their programming with romantic advances, then building destined-to-crash-coasters for them to ride.

Like last year's Thrillville, Off the Rails, requires some research on the part of the player to discover which things are fun (designing faulty rides) and which are a waste of time (talking to guests). Unfortunately, even the content that survives the cull isn't enough to make the whole experience more than a diversion.—**JOE**

theedge

When All Games Aren't Created Equal

Off the Rails for Wii has a noticeable leg up on the other console versions of the game. The motion-sensing twist adds some spice to what would otherwise be lethargic button-pressing minigames.



Building coasters is fairly intuitive, but don't count on the spotty auto-complete feature to bail you out

BOTTOM LINE 7

> Concept: Be the kingpin of an amusement park empire by building rides and working the crowd

> Graphics: It only looks as pretty as it needs to, which isn't very pretty

> Sound: Inoffensive, sterile music is constantly pumping in the background, just like a real amusement park

> Playability: With so many different minigames, the controls are hit and miss depending on the one you're playing

> Entertainment: Fun in short bursts, but it's more about quantity than quality

> Replay Value: Moderately High

Second Opinion 7.25

If you don't read *Tiger Beat* on a monthly basis, or run home from school to watch *Drake & Josh*, there's a good chance that you don't fall into Thrillville's target demographic. Sure, there's a number of fun minigames that everyone can enjoy, and the park management is fairly deep, but the overall tone, soundtrack, and character customization all skew toward the teenie-boppers of the world. If you fall into this crowd, the coaster building is very rewarding. Construction is easy, and the pieces available allow for some daring designs. Like the last game, it's a crapshoot when it comes to the quality of the minigames. Some are great, others you'd swear you saw on a Myspace banner ad. Regardless, there's a ton of game here, and most of it is worthy of your time (just don't pass on doing your English homework to play it).—**REINER**

Wii

Mario and Sonic at the Olympic Games

> STYLE 1 TO 4-PLAYER SPORTS **> PUBLISHER** SEGA **> DEVELOPER** SEGA **> RELEASE** NOVEMBER 20 **> ESRB** E

Sadly, Mario's signature triple jump is MIA

DISQUALIFIED

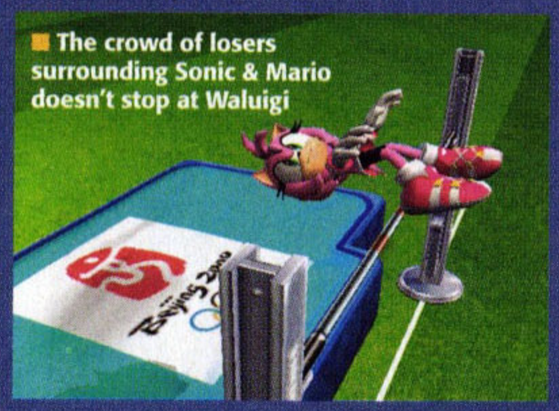
The Olympic Games are a celebration of the pinnacle of human achievement, a toast to the perfection of one's art form whether that be hammer-throwing or gymnastics. Why is it that this always translates to "a crappy string of half-baked minigames" in video games? This game had the chance to go in a different direction on the Wii and do something interesting with the Olympics, but unfortunately merely substitutes remote-shaking for button-mashing rather than offering genuinely fun activities.

On the plus side, the controls work fine and the suite of events is extensive. However, that's not nearly enough to salvage Sonic & Mario's unoriginal design. Ultimately, what do you care if the game detects a jump motion properly when the entirety of the long jump event is one tiny little timing challenge? None of the games get any deeper than rudimentary controller-shaking with a few timed button presses mixed in. Doing drum rolls on the NES Power Pad was deeper and more satisfying.

Beyond the games themselves being shallow and boring, the presentation

actually makes things worse. Mario and pals look sharp enough, but forcing me to skip through two replays (plus a drawn-out "award ceremony" that's nothing more than the top three finishers posing) per event on top of frequent loads? Non-interactive cutscenes and menu navigation take up more than twice the time you spend actually playing the game, and that's entirely unacceptable.

Crossover spinoffs can be cool. Aliens vs. Predator was a silly (but totally awesome) idea. Aside from the horrid gameplay, I dearly hope that nobody has ever said, "Man! I wish I could see Dr. Eggman face off against Luigi in the triple jump! That would be *sweet*!" If your priorities are that out of whack, you deserve to play this stinker.—**ADAM**


The crowd of losers surrounding Sonic & Mario doesn't stop at Waluigi

BOTTOM LINE 4

> Concept: String together a bunch of crappy minigames with a poor excuse for a career mode

> Graphics: Yep, those sure are some bright primary colors

> Sound: Sadly, no Knuckles the Echidna raps made the cut

> Playability: The remote's motion recognition isn't quite as bad as in some other games, but neither is it particularly great

> Entertainment: There's more gameplay in the random, strategy-free chaos of Mario Party

> Replay Value: Low

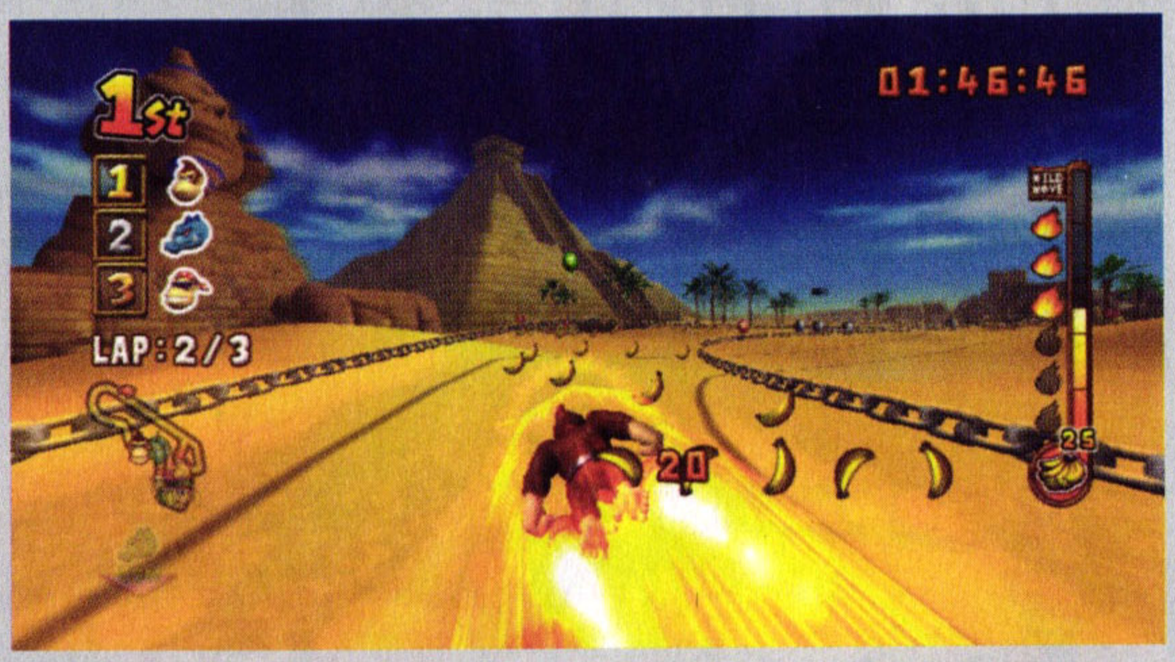
Second Opinion 5

Athletes, pack your bags and go home. The Olympics are officially ruined. Mario, Sonic, and their entourage of clingers-on have defiled this noble sporting event with a series of shallow minigames devoid of skill, strategy, and fun. If you need to train monkeys to frantically shake the Wii controllers around for some kind of experiment, only then should you consider picking this game up. Most humans are too high-functioning to enjoy the simplistic gameplay and presentation in this barrage of throwaway, quick-play events. The only good idea in the whole mess is the ability to import your Mii, allowing you to personally make Shadow the Hedgehog taste bitter, embarrassing defeat. Again.—**JOE**

Wii

Donkey Kong Barrel Blast

> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER RACING > **PUBLISHER** NINTENDO > **DEVELOPER** PAON > **RELEASE** OCTOBER 8 > **ESRB** E



DK MOVING DANGEROUSLY CLOSE TO BLACK SHEEP TERRITORY

Everyone who bought Donkey Konga back in the GameCube days was pretty much forced to buy the sequel and Donkey Kong Jungle Beat simply to justify the purchase of their bongo peripherals. I'm happy to say that there is no such obligation with Barrel Blast. Even though the Wii has plenty of GameCube controller jacks, Nintendo has decided not to allow the option of playing with your old bongos. It's really a shame because, believe it or not, the bongos would actually tighten up the controls.

To get moving, players must drum the remote and nunchuk rapidly to accelerate to max speed. Steering involves waggling your right or left hand, and jumping is accomplished by raising both hands at the same time. The controls are just as disastrous as they sound. Your commands feel more like suggestions, and this is just unacceptable in a racing game – even an arcadey one. For example, every time I wanted to accelerate the game thought I was trying to jump so I'd be floating through the air while my opponents zipped past. Also, the sense of speed in this thing is just non-existent.

The key to victory in Barrel Blast is the collection of hundreds of bananas scattered throughout the tracks. These are spent on boosts that can be extended by smashing constantly respawning barrels scattered throughout tracks. You can also toss barrels and flaming bananas at competitors, steal their bananas with a tornado, or sic a baby vulture on them. Since the tracks are always railed in and you automatically coast forward, balancing attacks and boosts is the only real skill players really need to work on. That and scoping out barrel cannons and mine cart shortcuts.

Locations range from the beach to volcanoes to outer space, but it won't be very long at all before you start seeing repeats. A separate challenge mode adds a little variety, but it's nothing special. And the lack of online racing and leaderboards makes this game even more useless. If you want arcade racing on the Wii, dust off your copy of Excite Truck or just wait it out for Mario Kart.—**BRYAN**

BOTTOM LINE 5

> **Concept:** Base a game around the DK bongos...and then take out bongo compatibility

> **Graphics:** Yet another member of the "used to be GameCube" club. And Candy Kong is utterly revolting

> **Sound:** It sounds like someone's roofing in the palm of your hand. For the love of god, turn off the Wii remote speaker!

> **Playability:** Worst idea for a racing control scheme in history

> **Entertainment:** If you're about to fight somebody, this is a great way to anger yourself up

> **Replay Value:** Moderately Low

Second Opinion 4.75

When I first saw Barrel Blast I thought it looked like a cancelled GameCube Mario Kart clone that would have used the bongos. Turns out that it's actually true. If you think that Nintendo has scrapped the bottom of the banana barrel for this game's concept, then let me tell you that it actually plays worse than it sounds. The controls, which have you drumming the Wii remote, are too touchy, and the game has so few tracks that you will be racing the same ones in reverse within an hour. I've also experienced better speed when I'm out driving with my grandma. No matter how eager you are for Mario Kart, avoid Barrel Blast because it won't make the wait any easier.—**BEN**

Wii

Fire Emblem: Radiant Dawn

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER STRATEGY/RPG > **PUBLISHER** NINTENDO > **DEVELOPER** INTELLIGENT SYSTEMS
> **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 5 > **ESRB** E10+

■ High challenge has always been a hallmark of Fire Emblem – this game is no exception

NOT SO RADIANT

Fire Emblem has an enthusiastic following, but it's hard to recommend this installment to even that excited crowd. With numerous strong strategy games on the market, the latest Fire Emblem feels like it's behind the times in any number of arenas, from visuals to gameplay options. Its unforgiving difficulty may please veteran players, but makes the title almost impenetrable to new recruits. Meanwhile, its core mechanics are beginning to feel a little stale during a year where so many games are innovating. While not fundamentally broken, I found this entry in the otherwise venerable series just didn't hold up to careful scrutiny.

This particular title originally released in Japan on the GameCube. In the interim, little effort has gone into crafting a game that belongs on the Wii – very few upgrades distinguish it from the graphical quality you'd see on that earlier system.

A few changes have been made to the core gameplay. Recognizing that most players would do a restart anytime one of their characters died, Intelligent Systems has yanked that choice away so that character death usually means an instant game over – I'm personally not a fan of this approach. One of the other major changes may very well appear sacrilegious to hardcore players, but I felt it was a good addition. Battle saves offer the chance to save in the middle of a battle at almost any time – a small allowance that can save you from some frustration if used liberally – although I can't say I'm a fan of having to second guess when it's safe to resave my one battle slot.

The game occasionally delivers on its promise – the straightforward approach to strategy encourages careful observation of your units and their abilities, and just like in the earlier releases, there's a joy to overcoming seemingly overwhelming odds to reach victory. This may enthuse some of you out there, but I'd try before I buy this time around.—**MILLER**

BOTTOM LINE 7

> **Concept:** The long-running strategy affair delivers one of its less impressive entries

> **Graphics:** Some of the animated cutscenes are nice to look at, but the rest of the game is uninspired GameCube visuals

> **Sound:** I'm letting the old axiom guide me here: If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all

> **Playability:** A blazingly high learning curve comes not really from genuine complexity, but from absurdly difficult scenarios

> **Entertainment:** Like a brick wall – only the hardest of the hardcore heads can bash through to the enjoyment

> **Replay Value:** Moderately Low

Second Opinion 5.5

There are a lot of video game moments I would like to relive, but not one of the battles from Radiant Dawn would make that list. Unfortunately, you end up replaying them all a lot due to the fact that you lose characters in ways that you can't strategize around. Not only does this make you feel cheated every time you end up looking at a "Game Over" screen, but it makes it all but impossible to level up a balanced party. Radiant Dawn makes you feel like you're experimenting to succeed rather than plotting it out. I know that the Fire Emblem games generally fare better than this, but Radiant Dawn's attack options are fairly limited, it has weak GameCube graphics, and a bland, poorly told story. Fire Emblem fans deserves better than this.—**BEN**

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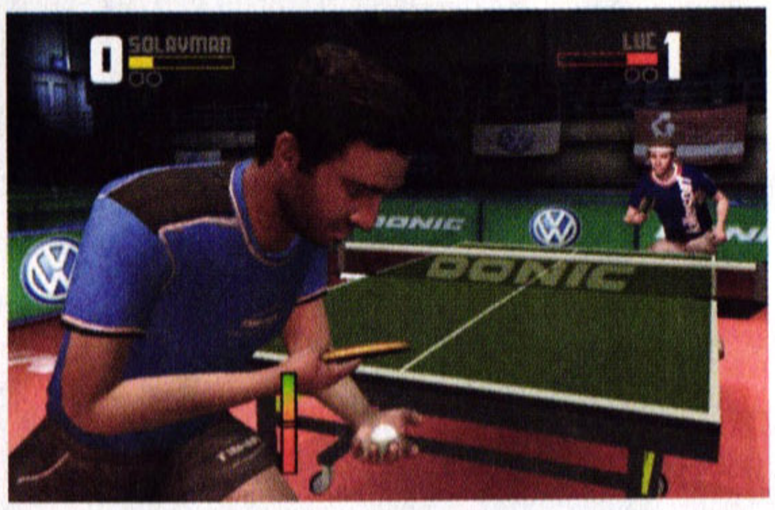


Wii

Table Tennis

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** ROCKSTAR GAMES
> **DEVELOPER** ROCKSTAR SAN DIEGO/ROCKSTAR LEEDS
> **RELEASE** OCTOBER 23 > **ESRB** E

GOOD ENOUGH?

Although opinions on the game varied wildly, I was in the camp of people that thought Rockstar's Table Tennis was a fun diversion during the early days of the Xbox 360. It looked great, and the gameplay was tight and fun. Sadly, what could have been a great game settled for merely good enough due to a tremendous lack of depth. No career mode, no minigames, nada. That didn't stop it from being fun, especially online, but it did seem like a half-measure.

Now, Table Tennis is popping up on Wii, and looking a bit worse for the wear. While it looks good for a Wii game (I'm already getting sick of saying that), it can't hold a candle to the stellar-looking 360 version. What's worse is the fact that – despite the fact that this seemed like a "no-brainer" for Wii – I feel like the controls have taken a significant step back as well. The standard mode automatically controls you body motion, while you swing the remote to swing your paddle. Unfortunately, it doesn't really take timing of your shot into account or whether you hit a forehand or backhand, so you can essentially just make slight jabs at any time after your opponent hits the ball and usually make a decent return. The game doesn't sense top- or backspin on your swing, forcing you to dictate spin with the d-pad, which diminishing what should have been an intuitive control scheme on the Wii. I like the Sharpshooter control mode the best, as it allows you to use the nunchuk to position shots accurately, but the Control Freak setting (which assigns body movement to the nunchuk analog) is just a mess.

While it's still a passably good time, it's not even close to the fast and precise feel that this title achieved on the 360. Perhaps if more features had been added, the deal would have evened out. Sadly, that's not the case – it's still the same old tired Tournament mode, and now there's not even the ability to take it online.—**MATT**

BOTTOM LINE 6

> **Concept:** A Wii port of the fun, but slight Xbox 360 ping-pong title

> **Graphics:** The move to the Wii has definitely dimmed one of the game's previous strengths – the gorgeous character models and environment graphics

> **Sound:** There's precious little music here, but some of the voiceovers (especially from the snooty Frenchmen) are priceless

> **Playability:** Does it work? Yes. Does it work better? No

> **Entertainment:** It's fine for what it is, but still

> **Replay Value:** Moderately Low

Second Opinion 6

Although all of Table Tennis' control schemes have their merit, it's unfortunately telling that of these three, none embody the perfect option. That would be nice, wouldn't it? In other words, this game isn't near the perfect fit you'd think it would be for this system. And why hasn't the scant career mode been improved? Rockstar seems to be more adept with piano wire in its hands than a ping-pong paddle.—**KATO**

Wii QUICKIES

Wii

EA Playground

> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER ACTION
> **PUBLISHER** ELECTRONIC ARTS
> **DEVELOPER** EA CANADA
> **RELEASE** OCTOBER 22 > **ESRB** E

BOTTOM LINE 7

Unlike Bully, this Playground holds no PG-13 shenanigans, rather an assortment of wholesome, mildly entertaining minigames. Considering how young this game's target demographic is, it seems fairly well done. As you walk around talking to various kids, earning collectible "stickers" for competing in events like paper plane races, slot cars, "wall ball" (a variation of handball), and Kicks, an entertaining soccer/volleyball hybrid. It's all decently fun, and the Wii controls are utilized to good effect. But, you know, there's only so long something like this is going to hold my attention. If you're of an advanced age like myself, say over 10, this is probably going to seem a bit dull. Still, I wouldn't be surprised if younger gamers will be exploring EA Playground until they've gotten every last digital sticker added to their collection.—**MATT**

Wii

Godzilla: Unleashed

> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER ACTION
> **PUBLISHER** ATARI
> **DEVELOPER** PIPEWORKS SOFTWARE
> **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 13 > **ESRB** E10+

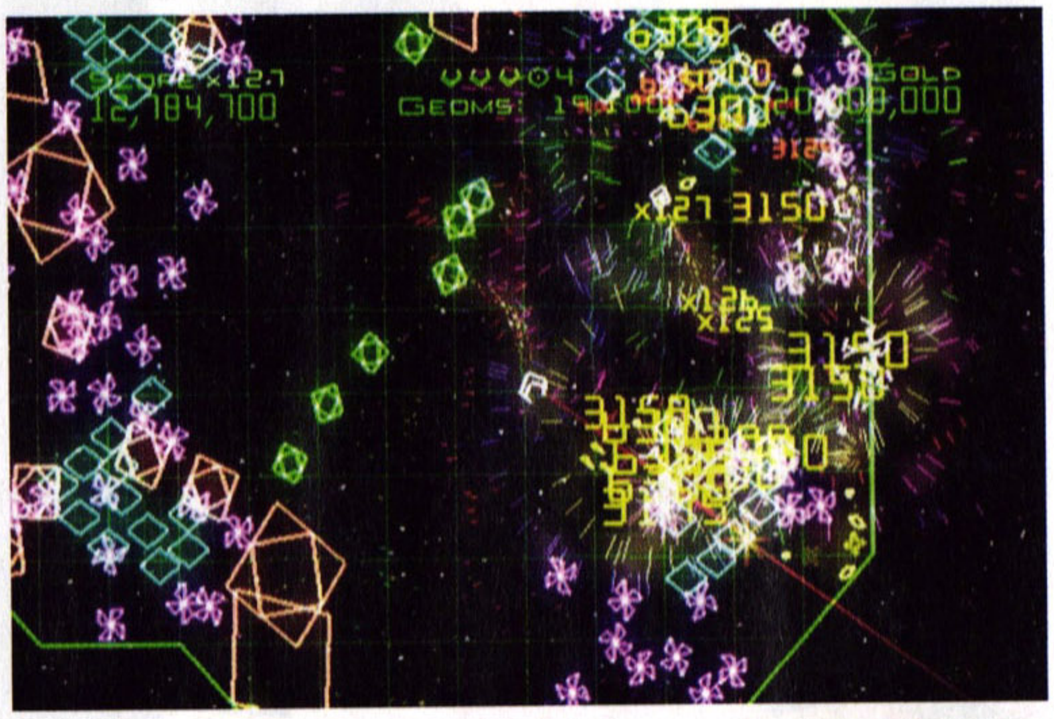
BOTTOM LINE 4

Only extremely serious Godzilla nerds should even think about playing this, and the reason I'm even saying that is for the loads of unlockables and the Japanese dialogue option. The story is an unintelligible mess of crude static drawings. The motion controls are complete slop. Hit detection is about one in every five. The camera will drive you insane. Almost every level is about punching crystal towers or attacking a repetitive rotation of monsters. Even multiplayer will have you quitting before the match is over.—**BRYAN**

Wii

Geometry Wars Galaxies

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** SIERRA > **DEVELOPER** KUJU ENTERTAINMENT/BIZARRE CREATIONS > **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 13 > **ESRB** E



RETURN OF THE BLOODY EYES

Unlike previous iterations in this series, this entry isn't limited to just one level. Players can now venture into 64 different stages, all offering new challenges, scoring goals, and of course, endless waves of enemies. Rather than just relying on one skill, some of the stages force you to think and act differently. You'll come across enemies that explode into a handful of smaller ships, hazards like moving barriers and rotating grids, as well as mine fields that can detonate huge swarms of enemies.

All of these stages fit perfectly into the series' established canon, and add countless hours of amazing gameplay to the experience. The thrill of earning medals and getting the top score on the Wii's leaderboards is as strong as ever. You'll also be playing to gain valuable experience for a new helper drone that accompanies you in battle, and as I found, will become your best friend seeing how often it saves your butt.

I didn't think the game would control well with the remote and nunchuk, but after many hours of practice (it's like learning how to ride a bike), I managed to hold my own, and get some gold medals with it. It did break my style of play, however. Like many of you, I like to kick back and lounge while I play. With the remote, you don't get this luxury. You have to keep your arms steady, and unlike most other games, one second of lost connection between the controller and game can spell game over. If you foresee this being a problem, or prefer thumb movement over wrist, you can always pick up the classic controller, which works beautifully.

Multiplayer modes (both competitive and cooperative) abound and are a blast, and Kuju even threw in Retro Evolved (the Xbox Live Arcade game) for good measure. Like Tetris, Galaxies' gameplay is so unbelievably fun that you can't put it down.—**REINER**

When you use the remote and nunchuk, a red line appears to show you which way you are aiming

BOTTOM LINE 9

> **Concept:** Like giving a drug addict a lifetime's supply for his or her fix

> **Graphics:** It's amazing how simple colored lines can look so stunning and vibrant.

> **Sound:** The new score from the same composer of Retro Evolved gets your blood pumping and is a perfect fit for the frenzied action

> **Playability:** It works surprisingly well with the Wii's motion sensing, but fans of the old games may want to use the classic controller

> **Entertainment:** This amazing game can literally be played forever...or until you die

> **Replay Value:** High

Second Opinion 8.5

Pure, simple, beautiful game design can go a long way. Galaxies manages to hold on to the core shooting experience that has made it so popular, but adds the one thing Geometry Wars has always lacked: forward progression. With dozens of unique and increasingly challenging stages, and the ability to level up battle drones, the game is more than a match for many other retail releases on the market. It successfully delivers a fun experience for any level of player commitment or skill – no small feat. Multiplayer is a blast, both cooperatively and in more adversarial modes. I never did warm up to the Wii motion control, but a classic controller can solve that problem. The worst thing I can say about the game is how much my eyes ache after all those brightly colored explosions. We all have to suffer for our art.—**MILLER**

Players can now launch tornados that are controlled by tilting the controller

PLAYSTATION 3

Ratchet & Clank Future: Tools of Destruction

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION/PLATFORM **> PUBLISHER** SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT
> DEVELOPER INSOMNIAC GAMES **> RELEASE** OCTOBER 30 **> ESRB** E 10+

Clank hates it when you stare at his "weird eye." Seriously, stop it

FEELS LIKE THE FIRST TIME (AGAIN)

Game journalists have been beating the drum for next-gen innovation for the past few years. You know how we always say that it's not enough to make a prettier version of a last-generation title – that you really need to offer us something that wasn't possible five years ago? Well, leave it to Insomniac to make me a liar. Because, in all reality, Ratchet & Clank Future: Tools of Destruction sticks extremely close to the formula that made the series one of the PS2's best. There's not much here I haven't seen before. But I don't care, and neither will you, because this is an adventure packed to the brim with vivid characters, amazing gameplay, and heartfelt humor. In a way, it's the ultimate in video game comfort food – a familiar old favorite for those times when you're hungry for nothing but an expertly crafted good time.

Unsurprisingly, this title takes our heroes around the galaxies to a variety of different planets in search of a deadly device that, in the hands of Lombox-hating arch villain Emperor Percival Tachyon, threatens the very fabric of the universe itself. As the adventure proceeds, you'll learn some of the interesting history behind Ratchet's origins and the fate of the Lombox race.

What is surprising is just how beautiful each world looks. The PS3 is a powerful system, and this is one of the first games that really shows it off. There's an incredible amount of detail packed in the environment: cars floating by in the far background, fantastical flying creatures, huge dinosaurs, and lush foliage. After so many bleak, gray FPSs, it's a joy to step into these colorful worlds, and even more of a joy to blow them to bits with the game's awe-inspiring particle and explosive effects. In particular, some of the space shooter sequences are jaw droppingly gorgeous.

Most important, of course, is the gameplay, and Tools of Destruction does not disappoint in this department. From magnetic nets to disco bombs, this is the most diverse set of armaments we've seen in an R&C game. It's also the best balanced; one thing I appreciated was how the enemies (especially in the more challenging final third of the game) force you to make use of your entire set of destructive gadgets. In the past, I would tend to rely on three or four standby weapons; this time I was forced to dig deep into my bag of tricks. Of course, all the weapons can be improved both by leveling up and by purchasing upgrades in a new enhancement system, a hexagonal grid that's even deeper than the character power-up system so rightly lauded in BioShock.

While there's much to praise here, there are signs that the developers of this beloved series might not exactly have many new ideas for the future. A vast majority of this game is straight out of the last trilogy: running and gunning, rail sliding, and platforming. Again, this is all extremely well done, but it's not the drastic step forward some might have been hoping for.

The new ideas that are here are a mixed bag. The Clank solo missions, a highlight of past titles, are oddly dull. They are essentially the old Lemmings-style levels with new companions ("Zonis"), and are a bit of a letdown compared to the awesome spherical levels of old. The use of the Sixaxis is novel, and works better than in any other game to date, particularly in the cool new hacking minigames. I could take it or leave it for the skydiving and flying sequences, but it's hardly a detriment, which is more than you can say for Lair.

In sum, Tools of Destruction proves that there's a lot of life left in the platformer. It succeeds simply by delivering gameplay that's perfectly executed along with a story that lovingly advances the saga of characters I've known and loved for years. Could it have done more to push the envelope? Sure, but that's not what I'll think of when I remember playing this game. I'm just going to remember all the fun I had – and that's the point, isn't it?—**MATT**

Most of the enemies you face are piloted by fish. You can only imagine what it feels like to die at their hands...er...fins

BOTTOM LINE 9.25

> Concept: Take the tried and true Ratchet & Clank formula and use the PS3's power to shoot the production values through the roof

> Graphics: In its own colorful way, this is as impressive as BioShock or Gears of War. The cutscenes really do resemble an animated CG movie

> Sound: As always, the hilarious voiceovers are top-notch, as is the rousing score

> Playability: The Clank levels are a bit lackluster, but the core platforming and shooting is better than it's ever been

> Entertainment: While not doing much in terms of innovation, this is as much pure fun as you'll have this fall playing a video game

> Replay Value: Moderate

Second Opinion 9.25

What course of action is more compelling than stopping an alien scourge from conquering the universe? For Ratchet, it's learning about who he is, where he came from, and what happened to his people. As he searches for these answers, developer Insomniac Games is also using this game as a means to identify with the past. Tools of Destruction brings this series back to its roots, where frenzied firefights, sidesplitting humor, and edge-of-your-seat platforming are melded beautifully. The game may follow a familiar path, but it doesn't feel like a rehash. A high level of creativity has been applied to the assortment of weapons (which are the series' best), and also to creating exciting new challenges for the classic gadgets. The game also makes nice use of the tilt functionality of the controller, and Star Fox fans will likely tear up when they see the gorgeously detailed flight segments. The bolts do come a bit loose within the underwhelming Clank levels, and the conclusion to the story will certainly get mixed reactions. It's not the series' pinnacle, but it's still a must-play.—**REINER**

PLAYSTATION 3

Folklore

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION/RPG **> PUBLISHER** SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT **> DEVELOPER** GAME REPUBLIC **> RELEASE** OCTOBER 9 **> ESRB** T

SLOW AND STEADY

When you play a lot of video games, it's easy to complain that nobody is making anything different. You can't level this criticism at Folklore, which tries its best to offer something you haven't seen before in everything from its combat system to its story and game world. Providing these unique experiences is the best part of a game that is otherwise just a little too slow, confusing, and unexciting for its own good.

Folklore is a story told in two parts. At the beginning of each chapter, you get to choose one of two characters: Ellen, a confused young girl looking for answers about her past, and Keats, a reporter for an occult magazine. Playing through with each reveals a part of the story. Simple, right? The problem emerges that if you play too far with one character, you end up confused about what's going on. Constantly switch off between the two, and you end up repeating level playthroughs that are almost identical. This storytelling approach is cool in concept, but frustrating in execution.

Luckily, the game world itself is pretty engrossing. As you investigate the mystery hiding in a broken down Irish village, both characters journey into the realms beyond life – strange and visually breathtaking lands where they can learn from those who have already passed on into death. From an undersea kingdom to a battlefield of eternal war, these locations are gorgeously realized. The creatures that inhabit these branches of the Netherworld are equally exciting – especially since every monster you fight becomes a summonable attack once you defeat it.

The mystery is bolstered by some excellent atmospheric music, but the elaborate story isn't always clearly presented, and it's not long before you really find yourself wondering what's going on – and not in the good way. Add to that the slow pace at which both the gameplay and the story move, and Folklore just doesn't work for me, despite its refreshing premise.—**MILLER**

BOTTOM LINE 7.25

> Concept: Travel through the mysterious Netherworld and fight monsters with an ever-growing stable of your own creatures

> Graphics: Certainly not the most astounding visuals from a technical perspective, but the art design is amazing

> Sound: A standout musical score really establishes the world of the game

> Playability: Controls are simple enough, but a number of stiff and unresponsive animations make the action feel clunky

> Entertainment: Intriguing game world aside, Folklore's convoluted plot and lackluster action is hard to warm up to

> Replay Value: Moderately Low

Second Opinion 7

Folklore would be much better off in some alternate dimension where games could just be stylish and pretty without having to worry about being fun. The splendid fantasy visuals and atmospheric score set a tone of both wonder and dread, but the gameplay is a tiresome routine. You capture monsters' souls, perform specific tasks to power them up, beat a boss, then move on to the next level and do it all over again. More variety with your captured foes' moves could have opened this game up a lot, and the two playable characters can't even ease the tedium; they battle through the same stages and fight many of the same monsters. Folklore's gorgeous, dream-like landscapes and intriguing plot twists recover some lost ground, but the game still requires you to make several concessions in order to enjoy what it has to offer.—**JOE**

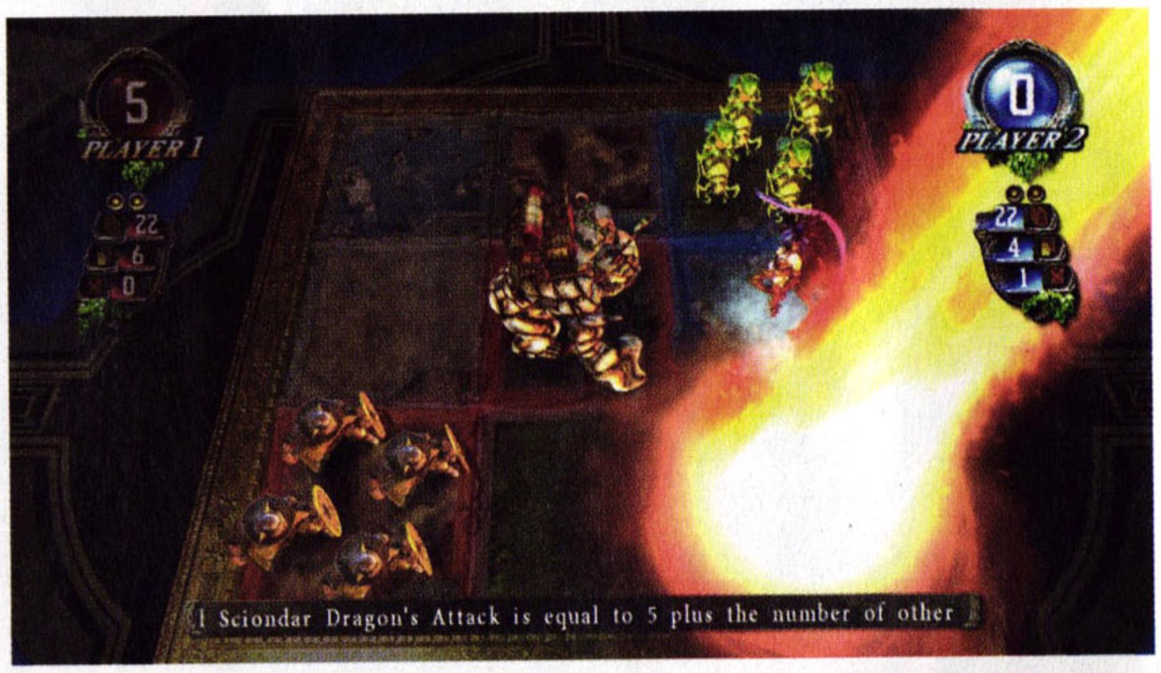
■ You can share dungeons of your own creation online, but the feature is fairly limited in scope

UNLIMITED ENABLED

PLAYSTATION 3

Eye of Judgment

> STYLE 1 OR 2-PLAYER STRATEGY/BOARD (2-PLAYER VIA PLAYSTATION NETWORK) **> PUBLISHER** SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT **> DEVELOPER** SONY JAPAN STUDIO **> RELEASE** OCTOBER 23 **> ESRB** T



INNOVATION MEETS ADDICTION

In the dark corners of your game room, I'm sure a lonely box sits filled to the brim with lightguns, turbo-enhanced controllers, and other forgotten video game relics. This is the tragic life of the video game peripheral. Most end up being short-lived gimmicks, or devices that publishers are reluctant to create new software for. In recent years, both Sony and Microsoft have been trying to find ways to incorporate a camera into your video game playing. Outside of using one of these devices to create a character in your exact likeness, the camera's best chance of becoming a fixture in your daily gaming rests with Eye of Judgment.

If you've played the video game adaptations of Magic: The Gathering, Yu-Gi-Oh, and Marvel Vs., you know that something is missing. The collection aspect just isn't there. You never get to experience the thrill of opening up a booster to find an ultra rare card. Eye of Judgment changes all of that by mixing the best of both worlds. It's simultaneously a collectable card game and a relatively full-featured video game with computer opponents, online play, and exciting animated battles.

Scanning a card with the PlayStation Eye creates a virtual version of that card onscreen – one that moves and acts like any video game character. It's quite the thrill to see your monsters come to life in such vibrant detail and attack other beasts. The strategy elements are just as strong as those in any of the great card games on the market, but this game stands out from the crowd with its unique design. The game takes place on a 3 x 3 board, and victory is only achieved when a player secures five spaces. This comes from tapping mana to summon monsters, casting spells, changing the elemental type of the square, or sacrificing a unit of your own to cripple your opponent. From the second you start, the battles prove to be both intense and wildly amusing. On top of the exciting strategizing, players need not worry about stat tracking. The game handles everything for you – right down to the amount of mana you have available to tap and the number of hit points of each unit.

Eye of Judgment is comprised of 110 different cards, but the starter deck (which comes with the game) consists of just 30 of these. Additional booster packs can be purchased at retail, and Sony is committed to releasing expansion packs for years to come – pending the game's popularity, of course.

I'm a big fan of collectable card games, but Eye of Judgment is probably the most fun I've had with one since Magic: The Gathering. It's easy to get into, the games go quickly, and seeing your powerful monsters come to life onscreen to crush a foe is a dream come true for CCG fans. Let's hope this inspires the other card manufacturers to tap the PlayStation Eye for similarly great experiences.—**REINER**

BOTTOM LINE 8

> Concept: A new take on collectable card games. The games move quickly, the strategy is deep, and it sure is cool to see your monsters onscreen

> Graphics: There's a bit of a lag between animations, but the detailed creatures pop off of the screen

> Sound: The rocking soundtrack really doesn't fit the fantasy setting, and the announcer sounds like someone with a high voice trying to do a low one

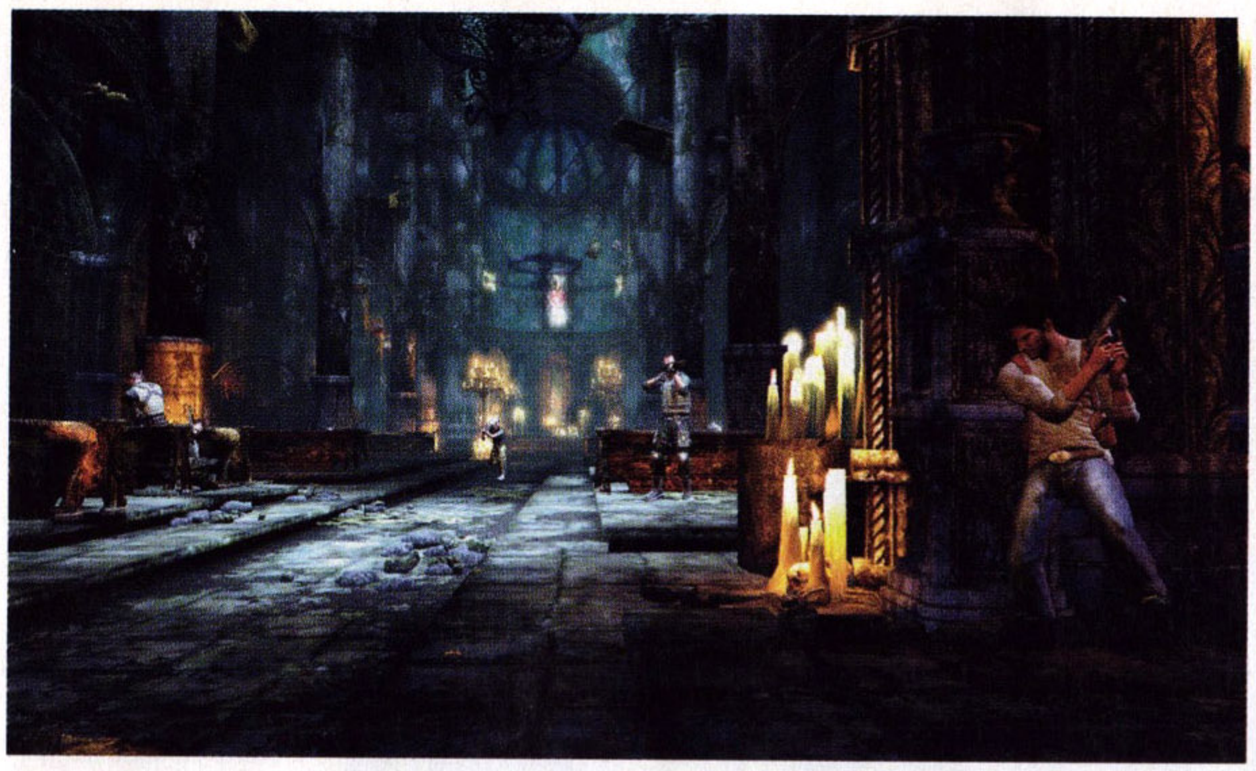
> Playability: For how small the game board is, it's surprising how much strategy players must factor in. Elements, blocking directions, and mana conservation all must be monitored

> Entertainment: It's collectable, fun, and looks great. This could be the future of card games moving forward

> Replay Value: High

Second Opinion 8

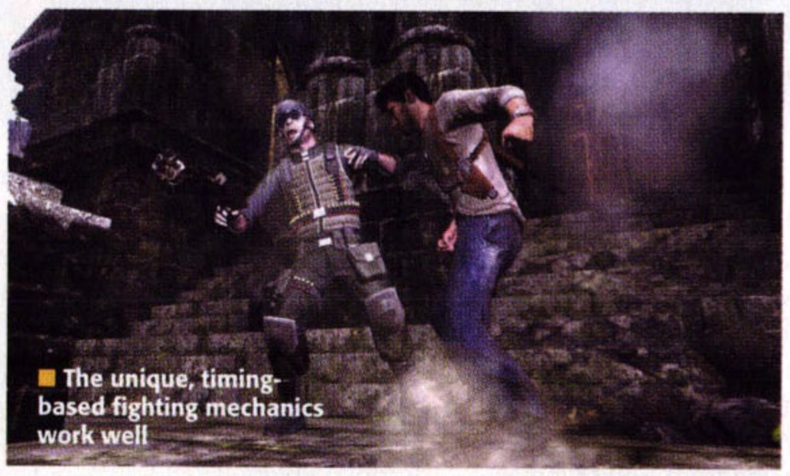
It's quite a feat. They've managed to take collectable card gaming, a hobby that is traditionally too complicated and slow for the average human being, and make it accessible. Even more remarkably, they haven't lowered the bar in quality to do so. Eye of Judgment is a full-featured CCG, with some challenging strategic elements to keep players coming back for more. More importantly, it takes the tedium out of the traditional tabletop card game by handling all the rulekeeping under the hood – subtracting hit points, keeping track of status, and knowing exactly how each card works – the computer does it all, leaving you to focus on tactics and fun. Minus the incredibly tedious tutorial, this merger of card and video gaming is a surprising success.—**MILLER**



PLAYSTATION 3

Uncharted: Drake's Fortune

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION **> PUBLISHER** SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT **> DEVELOPER** NAUGHTY DOG
> RELEASE NOVEMBER 20 **> ESRB** T



The unique, timing-based fighting mechanics work well

PASS THE POPCORN

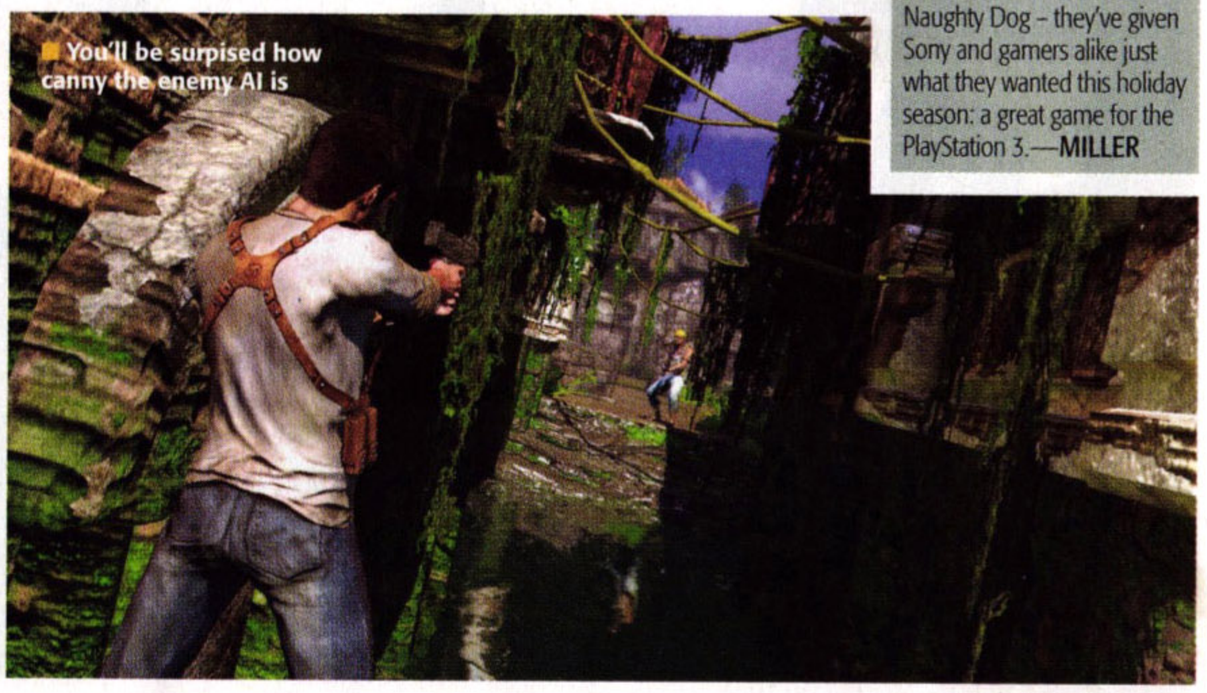
There's no ignoring it – this game has a formula and sticks very carefully to it throughout the surprisingly long adventure. That formula is: Tomb Raider + Prince of Persia + Indiana Jones + a ton of guns. For me, that math works out just fine, in large part due to the extremely compelling and excellently paced story that the gameplay is built around. Drake, who makes his living chasing down rare artifacts, is a classic action movie hero, quick with his wits and a gun, with a sly sense of humor. Basically, imagine if Indiana Jones shopped at the Gap, and you're most of the way home. He also happens to be a descendant of the legendary Sir Francis Drake, and while searching for his coffin, Drake uncovers evidence that Sir Francis not only lived much longer than historians thought, but also may have discovered El Dorado, the famous lost city of gold. By his side for (most) of the adventure are Elena, his love interest and spunky TV documentarian, and Sully, his shady treasure-hunting mentor of questionable morals.

Okay, that's probably not Oscar material, but in the context of the game it works exactly as a story should: It keeps things moving and keeps the player invested in the action happening onscreen. The developers also throw in a number of well-timed double-crosses, cliffhangers, and left-field plot twists that keep ratcheting up the tension until the thrilling conclusion. It also doesn't hurt that this game is among the most gorgeous video games I've ever seen. From lush jungles to decaying underground caverns, Uncharted takes you around the world in almost photorealistic style, making part of the excitement of reaching a new level the anticipation of just how beautiful it will look. The facial animations during the cutscenes are also notable in how they make the plot come alive; in my estimation this is some of the best work in that department I've ever seen (and that includes BioWare's recent masterpiece Mass Effect). I know some people might say this makes me a "graphics whore." Well, put me up in some red pumps and leather miniskirt, because this game is amazing to look at.

The gameplay matches the story's jaunty pace, delivering tense gun battles interspersed with some (fairly light) puzzle solving, hand-to-hand combat, and challenging platforming. The combat is generally well done; gun targeting works a bit like Gears of War, using the R1 button for the aim look and placing a big emphasis on taking and advancing to cover positions. Of course, you can man up and box it out with a timed-button press combat mechanic, which affords you bigger ammo drops from enemies. While it's definitely not a Tom Clancy style sim, you'll be surprised at just how satisfying and challenging the enemy AI is. These guys can move, taking cover and making wicked evasive moves. The platforming is equally well done, streamlining the work that Ubisoft has done with Prince of Persia and adding a level of amazingly fluid animations. The only missteps are the game's brief attempts at variety – while I was excited to jump on a jet ski in the middle of a tropical jungle, the controls and pacing of those segments seemed off compared to the rest of the package.

Uncharted isn't destined to be a classic; I don't think there are enough new ideas here to put it in the genius category. However, this is game that is very sure of its identity and does the things that it set out to do very well. It's a fun, fast, and memorable thrill ride, and perhaps the closest video games have come yet to approximating the experience of an interactive summer blockbuster.—**MATT**

The platforming is remarkably fluid



You'll be surpised how canny the enemy AI is

BOTTOM LINE 8.75

> Concept: A wild, rollicking adventure that combines Tomb Raider and Prince of Persia with some blazing gunplay and grand storytelling

> Graphics: From the texturing to the facial animations, this is one of the best-looking games I've ever seen, the equal of anything on the console market today

> Sound: The voice acting is motion picture quality, and the excellent score by *Firefly* composer Greg Edmonson expertly balances an old-fashioned touch with a contemporary feel

> Playability: Sometimes the detailed animation gets in the way of clean movement, but I found the control on the whole to be very good

> Entertainment: It's not the most innovative game on the block, but Uncharted succeeds in being a fully interactive summertime "popcorn movie" experience

> Replay Value: Moderately Low

Second Opinion 9

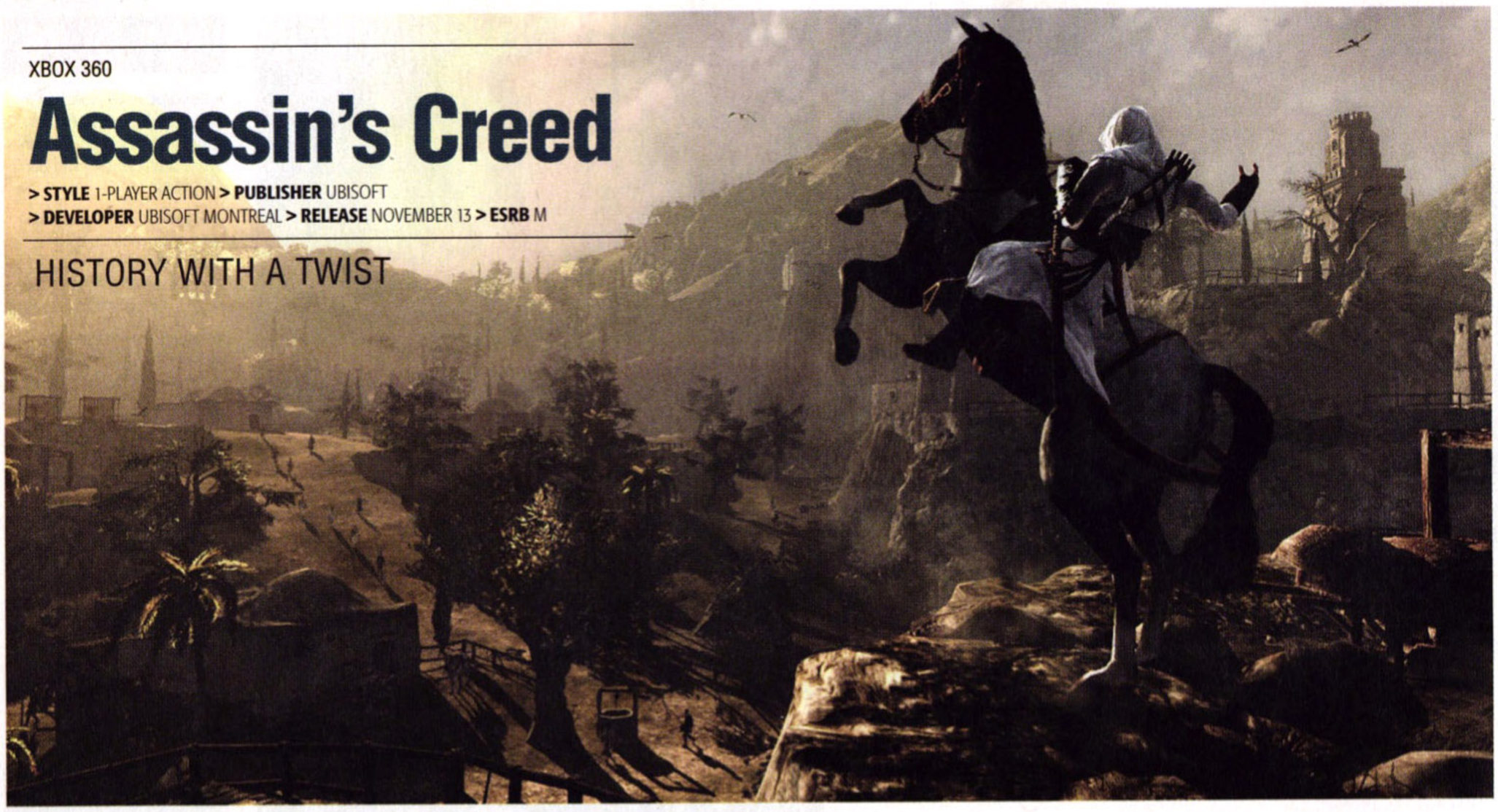
Uncharted is a pulp adventure with all the ingredients – a cinematic-driven story that melds with gameplay so seamlessly you'd swear you're playing through the next Hollywood blockbuster. It's also one of the prettiest games ever produced in everything from its breath-taking backgrounds to its insanely complex character animation. It's a beauty that is only enhanced by great sound effects and stellar voice acting interwoven with a thrilling, emotionally charged musical score. Both combat and platforming are consistently solid and exciting, with occasional stumbles due to iffy controls or unclear platforming paths. The story helps to overcome these frustrations, perfectly paced as it is, with new dramatic beats that constantly change up the rhythm of play. Even if everything from the action to the plot itself never strays far from convention, it's hard to complain when the content is this fun and familiar. Kudos to Naughty Dog – they've given Sony and gamers alike just what they wanted this holiday season: a great game for the PlayStation 3.—**MILLER**

XBOX 360

Assassin's Creed

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** UBISOFT
> **DEVELOPER** UBISOFT MONTREAL > **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 13 > **ESRB** M

HISTORY WITH A TWIST



Assassin's Creed is the type of game that comes along only rarely – a title that innovates in so many areas it helps to set a new bar in various aspects of gameplay, storytelling, visuals, and controls. Simultaneously, it's an imperfect game in which the small flaws that mar its sheen are all the more noticeable because so much of the rest of the game shines so brightly. Deep, engaging, and surprising from beginning to end, Assassin's Creed's merits will be debated for a long time. However, as a brave attempt at delivering something unique and audacious, it excels.

The surprises start right off the bat, when you power on the game and spend several minutes second-guessing if they put the right disc in your case. Many of you will have already heard about this opening twist, but if not, I won't be the one to ruin it for you. Suffice to say, the context in which you find yourself a medieval assassin is more complex than it appears.

Once the real action gets going, you'll wander a huge open world – three massive cities and the connecting countryside. It's a strange mix of meticulous historical recreation and totally open level design. Climbing and leaping can get you to almost any place in the world – usually by any number of different paths. Hero Altaïr is as much ninja as medieval warrior as he goes about the grim business of hunting down evil men who are oppressing the people of the Holy Land. Rarely has a character without superpowers or magic been quite so powerful and exciting to vicariously inhabit, whether he's perching on a high tower of the Acre Cathedral or countering the blows of a Templar knight.

With its intuitive puppeteering button scheme, there's a fundamental shift in play control at work. Where most games are primarily concerned with the question "Where do you want to go?", Assassin's Creed puts equal weight on "How do you want to get there?". By designating all actions as high or low profile, movement becomes less about individual button presses and more about situational observation. Further, each face button is like a part of the body that changes contextually to match the situation. In a fight, your open hand button might grab a foe, but when running along rooftops the same button will reach for a distant ledge. While seemingly a minor variation on a familiar theme, this approach to control is one of the game's greatest triumphs.

Through a long and complex narrative, you'll repeatedly play through what might be loosely called levels. This gameplay arc is split into several components. The first involves the journey to and exploration of a location, followed by an investigation of the target. With the knowledge gleaned, you'll finally make the hazardous approach to your well-protected victim to complete the murderous deed, before sprinting away to safety. While this design is a lot of fun, it eventually feels mildly repetitive – particularly the investigations. More variety in these activities would have been welcome.

When you're ready for a break from the story, a huge number of collectibles are scattered through the game – over 400 hard-to-find pick-ups and 60 secondary assassinations. It's a great addition only marred by the fact that none of these collectibles ever yield any genuine reward beyond Gamer Points and Achievements.

If only to experience the unique world and amazing movement and combat, gamers owe it to themselves to try Ubisoft's big holiday release. Its stunning visual style, high concept story, and wildly open level design are like nothing else, even if too much repetition begins to frustrate in the later hours. It's a game people will still be talking about five years from now. Come to think of it, they may have a lot more to talk about by then.—**MILLER**

Due to circumstances beyond our control, we were unable to review the PS3 version of the game this month. We will examine it, and if significant changes are present, we will include a new review in a future issue. Otherwise, accept this as our definitive review.

BOTTOM LINE 9.5

> **Concept:** Journey across the medieval Holy Land as a death-dealing assassin in one of the most innovative game releases in recent years

> **Graphics:** Remarkable visuals transport you to the past and immerse you in the action

> **Sound:** From music to voice work to ambient sound effects, the aural component only deepens the involvement

> **Playability:** An entirely new approach to controls is a tremendous success – as intuitive as it is functional

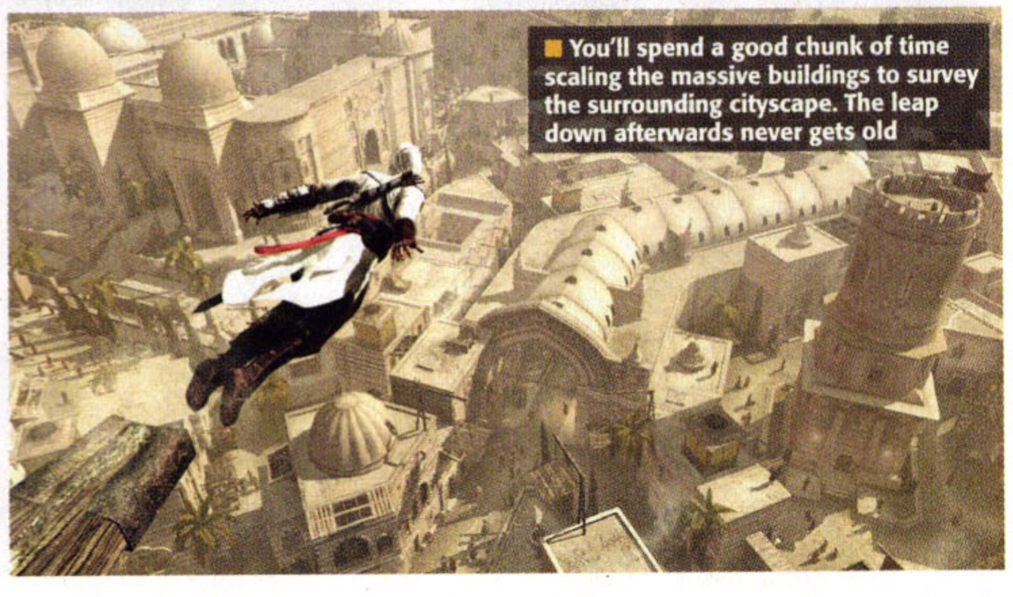
> **Entertainment:** A lengthy game with lots of surprises. Too much repetition is the only flaw in what is otherwise a must-play experience

> **Replay Value:** High

Second Opinion 9.5

Taking a life is not a task to be accepted lightly. While some games trivialize the act, none infuse it with haunting gravity more elegantly than Assassin's Creed. As you guide Altaïr through his missions, the game transforms you into an angel of death; the puppeteering control scheme and cinematic camera makes every kill feel significant, and every leap of faith a triumph. The gameplay can instantly transform from careful, measured movement to a heart-pounding escape with a dozen city guards on your trail. The chase is enhanced by the seamless integration of free-running, which has you traversing towering spires and residential districts in exhilarating ways you have to see to believe. With its excellent mechanics and surprising story, the only area where Assassin's Creed leaves itself vulnerable is in the variety of environments and investigation missions. The crowds and architecture provide endless opportunities for experimentation, however, so there are always ways to stay entertained. Death is an inevitable part of life, so make sure you cross Assassin's Creed off of your to-do list before your time comes. Sooner would be better than later.—**JOE**

Weapons and abilities increase throughout the game, offering ever more options for combat and movement



You'll spend a good chunk of time scaling the massive buildings to survey the surrounding cityscape. The leap down afterwards never gets old

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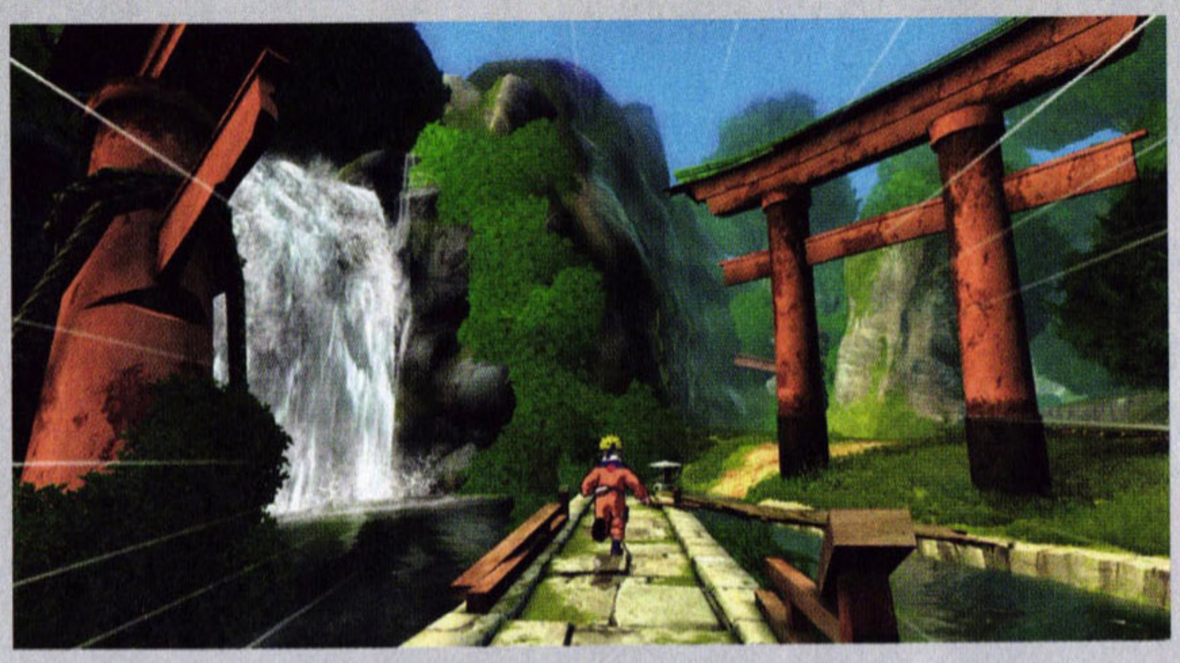


XBOX 360

Naruto: Rise of a Ninja

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION **> PUBLISHER** UBISOFT **> DEVELOPER** UBISOFT MONTREAL **> RELEASE** OCTOBER 30
> ESRB T

BELIEVE IT

If you only play one anime ninja open world action fighting game with RPG overtones this year, play Rise of a Ninja. It's just that good. Kidding aside, it has to be said that this game tries its hand at a number of game mechanics – a formula that can often be disastrous, as no one thing ends up being any good. Throw in the fact that this is one of those anime properties that people almost expect to be sub-par in the gameplay category, and it'd be easy to write this off for any but the most hardcore fans. Despite this, or perhaps because of it, Rise of a Ninja bucks all of these expectations and emerges as a quality game in its own right, worth a look even for those born without the anime fetish gene.

Ubisoft Montreal has done a remarkable job of examining this franchise and pulling out ideas that will capitalize on its strengths. A shortened but disjointed version of the first several dozen episodes of the show is represented, so no foreknowledge is entirely necessary. As the fledgling but ambitious young ninja Naruto, you'll wander freely through his home of Leaf Village and its environs, leaping between rooftops, running up building walls, and sprinting down forested paths. The action is fast and fun, and new movement styles like double jumps and wall climbing unlock throughout the game, opening up paths and secrets you couldn't previously access. Like an RPG, you'll encounter random encounters and major boss fights, but the traditional menu-driven combat is replaced by a simple one-versus-one fighting system. There are too few enemy types, and the combat gets easily exploitable after a while, but the battles never fall so far to be outright boring.

Rise of a Ninja also boasts dozens of collectibles, a clever approach to ninja magic "jutsus," and a wide range of simple minigames and side missions. Last but not least, the game looks phenomenal. Vivid colors blanket the backgrounds and characters alike, and the detail work, from waving grass to rippling waterfalls, is remarkable. While the plot and humor at play here rarely reaches for anything beyond immature power fantasy, the gameplay package is far more than you (or I) would have expected.—**MILLER**

The fighting system is relatively simple, but fast and fun

BOTTOM LINE 8

> Concept: Explore with the anime hero through a vibrant and surprisingly large world in the best Naruto game ever

> Graphics: Bright, colorful, and detailed – this is no kiddie stuff

> Sound: Like the source material, music, sound effects, and dialogue are a mix of quality and silliness

> Playability: Easy to pick up, the game introduces new concepts slowly, and most of the mechanics are a lot of fun

> Entertainment: Even those who've never heard of this little orange guy will have fun, while Naruto fans should definitely not miss this

> Replay Value: Moderate

Second Opinion 7

For all of the turgid dialogue and anime clichés that plague Rise of a Ninja courtesy of its source materral, Ubisoft Montreal has managed to create a decent game here. The mix of open-world exploration with fighting game-style battles and RPG-like character development works well and keeps things interesting. The rewards for unearthing every side mission and hidden item keep the momentum rolling throughout the story, and the level of polish is much higher than we've come to expect from a licensed game. Even so, there are enough issues with the oddly balanced mechanics of the core fighting mode to keep the game from being worth non-fans' time. If you had given me a Voltron game this good 15 years ago, I'd be singing its praises to this day – and my older brothers would still be shaking their heads at me. Rise of a Ninja should be viewed the same way.—**ADAM**

XBOX 360

Tomb Raider Anniversary

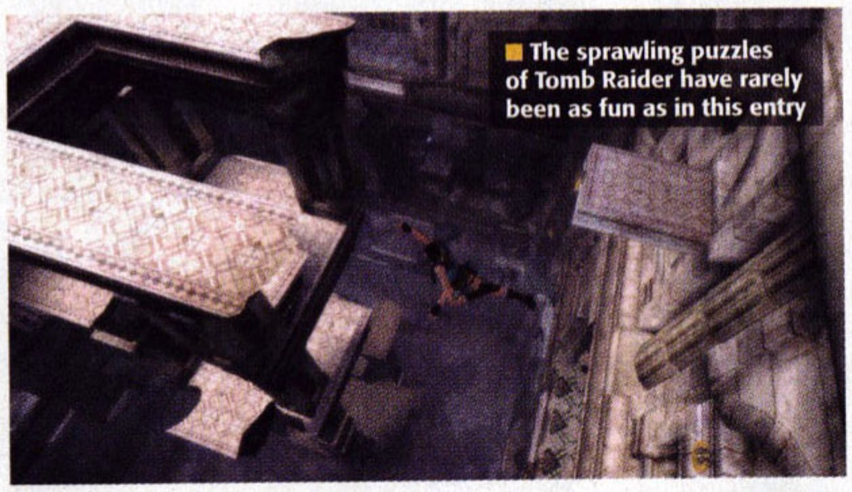
> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION/PLATFORM **> PUBLISHER** EIDOS **> DEVELOPER** CRYSTAL DYNAMICS/BUZZ MONKEY
> RELEASE OCTOBER 24 **> ESRB** T

UPDATED CLASSIC

Genres can evolve pretty quickly in the gaming world. Recent months have seen some remarkable advances in traditional 3D platforming. It's to the credit of the developers that this direct port of Tomb Raider Anniversary holds up so well even compared against these newer games. After all, let's give credit where credit is due – it's unlikely recent platformers would be so great without the early influence of the game this is based on, the original Tomb Raider. Even so, Anniversary on 360 doesn't shine quite so bright this time as it did only a few months ago on PS2. This is partly because several excellent games have recently raised the bar, but it's also because this isn't the finest game port ever released.

As I looked forward to the release of this title for the 360, I think I had deluded myself into believing a few more changes might have been made. Admittedly, an excellent graphical overhaul has the textures and characters themselves looking quite fine. But the camera still feels twitchy and unhelpful, moving too fast at some moments and obscuring important locations at others. I also found that many of the enemy beasts scattered through the world seemed hopelessly mindless or poorly pathed – I noticed more than one instance where a wolf would catch on some rock outcropping and be unable to move past to attack.

These are really minor quibbles with what is otherwise a remarkable release. Tapping into the sense of isolation and level flow of the original game, Crystal Dynamics has completely overhauled the individual puzzles and encounters to match more modern expectations. The elegant and simple mind-benders that result are nostalgic and new at the same time. I'd love to see the team attempt this same loving approach to the other early Tomb Raider games, just as I'd beg other developers to use this as a model for how to remake a game with style and panache.—**MILLER**


The sprawling puzzles of Tomb Raider have rarely been as fun as in this entry

BOTTOM LINE 8.25

> Concept: Return to Lara's original adventure, redesigned for more current gamers

> Graphics: A nice graphical overhaul, but I occasionally noticed some unseemly frame stutters

> Sound: Music breaks the silence only occasionally – to great effect

> Playability: Strong controls are easy to grasp, abandoning the grid-based frustration of the original game

> Entertainment: A decent 360 port of an excellent game, this is a good reminder of why Lara became popular in the first place

> Replay Value: Moderate

Second Opinion 8.25

Everyone can remember playing the original Tomb Raider. It was a time of great discovery, and also a time when we wanted to destroy our controllers whenever Lara would miss a jump by a fraction of an inch. Tomb Raider Anniversary brings us back to this historic day in gaming, only without any of the frustration. Fans will certainly be familiar with the settings, but the gameplay has been completely retooled with new moves and challenges that showcase outstanding acrobatic stunts, and puzzles that would make Indiana Jones sit back and think before acting. If you played Tomb Raider Legend, you'll have a leg up on the new gameplay, as it uses the same mechanics, but by no means should this game just be viewed as a nostalgic re-release. It has enough exciting new content to wow everyone, and it looks a grade better than the previously released PS2 version.—**REINER**

XBOX 360

Beautiful Katamari

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 4-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE) > **PUBLISHER** NAMCO BANDAI > **DEVELOPER** NAMCO BANDAI
> **RELEASE** OCTOBER 15 > **ESRB** E

ROLLING DOWNHILL

The King of All Cosmos has once again found a way to destroy the universe. This time, he does it during a friendly game of tennis. With his competitive spirit getting the best of him, he lets loose a mighty power serve that tears a hole in the fabric of the universe. All of the planets and stars are immediately sucked into this void, leaving nothing but an ominous black smear in sky. Rather than trying to find a way to reverse what he has done, the King calls upon you, the Prince, to hastily build a new universe. As amusing as this premise is, it pains me to say that this series' wild originality and surreal charm have also been sucked into this black hole.

Like all of the other Katamari games, players are tasked with rolling a seemingly innocent ball around highly cluttered earthen environments. If this ball comes into contact with something small enough, that item will become a part of the ball. Grab enough random stuff and the ball will grow in size, allowing for larger items to be consumed. You'll begin the game by rolling up small things like coins, pins, and soda cans, but the ball will eventually grow so large that you can grab skyscrapers, mountains, and entire continents. If you've played a Katamari game before, you should be familiar with this progression. This somewhat repetitive path has remained exciting largely through the series' creative level designs. This is where Beautiful Katamari stumbles the most. Its environments are ordinary and lifeless, and don't showcase the colorful variety exhibited in games past. I did enjoy being challenged to only roll up items that generate heat (cold ones lower you overall temperature), but most of the objectives center around aimless rolling. This installment is also void of the wacky human-based story, and the King of All Cosmos seems to be bored and doesn't have the witty one-liners you know him for.

Beautiful Katamari does make baby steps forward in its multiplayer support. Players can now jump online to compete in four-player versus matches. As you race to collect as many objects as you can, a jolt to a player's ball can send their hard work spilling across a level. The maps are simple in design, and the battles are usually nice and intimate. This leads to the competitions being rowdy right down to the wire. The game also hooks you with its unique collecting-based leaderboards. Even the online lobby can deliver some laughs. Here, you can play an impromptu game of rainbow soccer or emote to your hearts content. Namco also is pledging strong support for downloadable content from day one of release.

The game's title screams of beauty, but in truth, with the single player experience not being up to spec, this is the ugly duckling of the Katamari series. It just doesn't have that wow factor going for it like the previous entries did. It's a decent game, but fans have seen far better.—**REINER**

BOTTOM LINE 7.25

> **Concept:** It feels like the first game in the series, mostly because the level designs are not as inventive, the critical path is shorter, and the humor isn't as prominent

> **Graphics:** The artistic direction (blocky characters, simple shading) is identical, but the 360 is tapped to produce more items onscreen and a greater draw distance

> **Sound:** The delightful and mystifying soundtrack is loaded with hits you'll want to throw on your iPod

> **Playability:** Just roll the ball over as many objects as possible before time expires

> **Entertainment:** The focus was clearly on multiplayer. Fans will likely be disappointed by the mundane single-player experience

> **Replay Value:** Moderately High

Second Opinion 7.25

First off, this is the best Katamari has ever looked, and the lack of mid-level loads is most welcome. However, Beautiful Katamari lacks that certain spark of originality in level design and objective variety. I really miss the crazy cutscenes that would pull the story along. The critical path is surprisingly short, and it stinks that Namco is making people download extra levels that should be in the main game in the first place. Multiplayer is nothing special, but I really like the online leaderboards for every single-player level. While BK disappoints on innovation, it's still got that addictive rolling mechanic… and my new favorite Katamari tune, "Guru Guru Gravity."—**BRYAN**

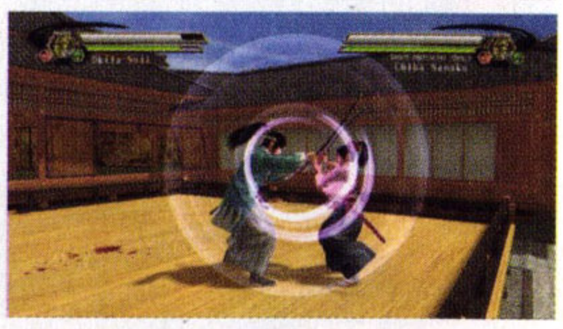
XBOX 360 QUICKIES

XBOX 360

Kengo: Legend of the 9

BOTTOM LINE 2

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** MAJESCO > **DEVELOPER** GENKI
> **RELEASE** SEPTEMBER 11 > **ESRB** M



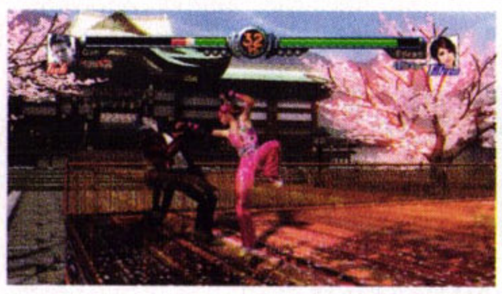
If Miyamoto Musashi had known that his legend could inspire this wreck of a game, he would have committed ritual suicide immediately, sparing the world the torment of playing it. Every single aspect of Kengo: Legend of the 9 has been stained by failure: the lifeless swordplay, the horrendously broken (yet needlessly complicated) controls, and the laughable stories that have been artlessly applied to nine historical samurai. Bad games are sometimes described as "trash," but even that doesn't seem vile enough for this grievous affront. Kengo is a tall glass of garbage water – the viscous, beige fluid that collects at the bottom of trash bins...the refuse of waste.—**JOE**

XBOX 360

Virtua Fighter 5

BOTTOM LINE 9

> **STYLE** 1 TO 2-PLAYER FIGHTING (2-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE) > **PUBLISHER** SEGA OF AMERICA
> **DEVELOPER** SEGA AM-2 > **RELEASE** OCTOBER 30 > **ESRB** T



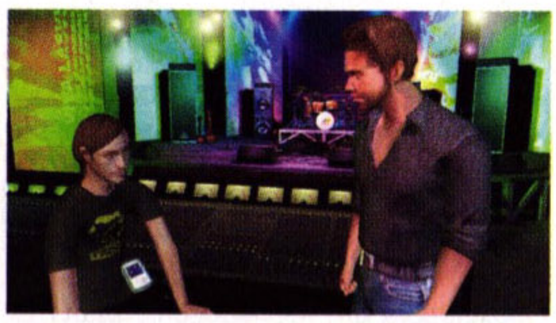
The Virtua Fighter formula hasn't changed much in years, and why should it? It is, in my humble opinion, the greatest 3D fighting series ever made. Not only does this Xbox 360 edition of Virtua Fighter 5 have the online multiplayer support that was sadly missing from the PlayStation 3 iteration released earlier this year, it also features the latest arcade code, so it is the most balanced home edition you can play. Plus, if you have a Memory Unit, you can bring your customized characters to your friend's house to show off all your hard-earned items from Quest mode. With plenty to do both online and off, Virtua Fighter 5 for the Xbox 360 is a must-have for any fighting aficionado.—**ANDY**

XBOX 360

CSI: Hard Evidence

BOTTOM LINE 4

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ADVENTURE > **PUBLISHER** UBISOFT > **DEVELOPER** TELLTALE GAMES
> **RELEASE** SEPTEMBER 18 > **ESRB** M



My dreams of becoming a modern day Sherlock Holmes have been squashed. Never once in Hard Evidence did I feel like I was participating in a murder investigation. All of the guesswork is handled for you, and there is no margin for error. Every question you ask in an interrogation leads to the correct answer, and every piece of evidence you secure at a crime scene is relevant to the case. You just have to go through the motions to piece the cases together. Most of the cases are laughably predictable, and don't harness the intrigue or razor-sharp writing from the *CSI* show. By no means do I recommend that you play this over any other game (except Two Worlds), but if you can make it through six or seven hours of woefully uninteresting content, you will net an easy 1,000 Achievement Points. It pays out nicely, but it'll kill you a little bit in the process.—**REINER**

■ The new Necris vehicles are excitingly unconventional

■ Free-for-all deathmatches are always fun, if a bit chaotic

PC

Unreal Tournament 3

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 32-PLAYER VIA INTERNET OR LAN) **> PUBLISHER** MIDWAY
> DEVELOPER EPIC GAMES **> RELEASE** NOVEMBER 20 **> ESRB** M

WARFARE IS THE NEW ONSLAUGHT

Like Unreal Tournament 2004 before it, there's an almost overwhelming amount of content packed into Unreal Tournament 3. Dozens of maps, mutators, and several excellent modes are available out of the box for your fragging pleasure, and the action is as fast and tight as fans expect out of this lauded franchise. Front-end depth in terms of unlockables, stat-tracking, and social features may be lacking compared to other modern games like Halo 3 or Call of Duty 4, but the brilliant gameplay is a showstopper on its own.

If you've played UT before, you'll immediately feel at home in UT 3. The weapons behave exactly the same as ever (and yes, the Biorifle still sucks). The maps have the signature insane variety, with some straightforward traditional-style layouts and an equal number of crazily complicated sci-fi settings. Vehicles return in a big way as well, with UT staples like the Goliath now squaring off against weird Necris tentacle-sporting contraptions. And, of course, the action is as supercharged and entertaining as always.

Outside of the additional maps and vehicles, two things make UT 3 stand out from both its predecessors and its competitors. First, the hoverboard is a great addition that keeps infantry competitive on vehicle-heavy maps. You'll never be stuck trucking endlessly across massive battlefields to get to the fighting with access to one of these babies, though they're useless in combat due to the intentionally floaty controls and extreme vulnerability they inflict on their users. Additionally, the hoverboard gives flag and orb carriers (which allow instantaneous node capture) delicious new options for accomplishing their goals.

Second, the Warfare mode is a great replacement for both Onslaught and Assault (neither of which appear in this release). Depending on which map you're playing, Warfare uses a different combination of node control and terrain mutability to create a unique playing field. One match might find you trying to control a node that drops a bridge to allow your tank access to the enemy power core, while another has players vying for possession of a node that enables construction of the dominating Leviathan super-vehicle. If objective-based FPS is your preference, Warfare is as good as any gametype on the market today.

The only gripes I can level at UT 3 are outside of the actual gameplay. The frontend is relatively bare, with a simple friends list taking the place of much better-developed concepts of parties and clans in other modern online shooters. Similarly, stat-tracking and character progression are missing here; I pined for Call of Duty 4's leveling system during the brief interludes between matches. At least built-in voicechat (why are there still multiplayer PC games without this?) makes in-game communication possible.

These minor issues are easily forgotten when you're in the middle of one of UT 3's massively entertaining frenetic battles, though. The game excels at everything from simple deathmatching to complex objective-driven campaigns. Well, the single-player mode is still nothing more than bot matches with some thin story laid over it, but who plays UT offline anyway?—**ADAM**

■ There's little more frustrating than playing against someone who's annoyingly good at shock combos

BOTTOM LINE 9

> Concept: Pwn newbs all day long in the fastest online shooter around

> Graphics: Everything looks fantastic, and convincing the framerate to keep up with the fragging isn't tough on any decent machine

> Sound: Multi-kill! Rocket scientist! Killing spree! You know you love the UT announcer

> Playability: Stupidly, you can't map the dash to a different function – it's only activated by double-tapping a movement key. Other than that, smooth as butter

> Entertainment: Sci-fi FPS multiplayer isn't done better anywhere else

> Replay Value: High

Second Opinion 8.75

Unreal Tournament 3 delivers more of the patented extreme-core fragging that faithful fans have come to expect. The new edition scores on many fronts, with some of the best multiplayer maps of the year, amazing new vehicles like the Scavenger and Viper, and a familiar-but-fantastic arsenal of weapons from UT's storied past. The placeholder single-player campaign is nothing to get excited about, but anyone buying UT for this mode should probably check into a psych ward. The only qualms I have with this frenetic and addictive game are the limited multiplayer mode selections and the lack of perks. Where are the leveling system and unlockables that reflect my battlefield achievements? When heavy hitters like Battlefield, Call of Duty, Halo, and Rainbow Six all offer these benefits, it shouldn't be missing in a game entirely focused on multiplayer.—**BERTZ**

PC

The Witcher

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION/RPG **> PUBLISHER** ATARI **> DEVELOPER** CD PROJEKT **> RELEASE** OCTOBER 30 **> ESRB** M

BOTTOM LINE **8**

> Concept: Polish author Andrezej Sapkowski's fantasy world is yours to explore, but you don't need to be familiar with his work to have a good time

> Graphics: Environments and combat animations look excellent, but it's a pity that so many character models are recycled

> Sound: You will notice music and voices coming out of your speaker, but they won't make much of an impression beyond that

> Playability: Letting the player choose between two non-broken camera modes is a good idea, and the combat is fluid and fun

> Entertainment: Ultimately follows the "do some quests, progress to the next area" formula, but has enough engaging content to feel fresh

> Replay Value: Moderately High

WITCH THEIR FACES OFF

You don't see "witch" used as a verb often enough, especially considering the sweet array of abilities and responsibilities witching apparently encompasses. Hunting monsters, using magic, and investigating shady characters are all part of a Witcher's mandate. Fortunately, these duties have vast video game potential, and developer CD Projekt has done a wonderful job turning them into a compelling action/RPG with some pleasant twists.

Geralt of Rivia (the titular Witcher) is an exemplar of high fantasy heroism; he has a grim, unflappable demeanor and carries four weapons at a time. Players will get a chance to use both of those traits extensively, since the gameplay mainly revolves around combat and interacting with beleaguered citizens. Of these elements, combat is by far the most interesting. The decision to go with a timing-based battle system makes the enemy encounters strategic yet action-focused. It continues to open up as you invest talent points into your base stats, magic, and swordsmanship. The quests that inspire you to go out fighting monsters aren't groundbreaking ("Collect five of these brains…"), but at least the hunt and the kill are thrilling.

The Witcher's traditional structure is a bit of a weak spot, but it falters more in its overwrought attempts to convince you that you're in an unconventional fantasy world. You are supposed to feel that Geralt is burdened with decisions that are morally ambiguous, like whether to defend his employer's medicine crates or let elves take them to treat their ill. It's nice to get away from the standard good versus evil mechanic, but The Witcher's method often forces you to select the lesser of two evils; it feels like nothing you choose matters since you can't effect any kind of desirable outcome. Players should be rewarded in some way for their choices, not given a lesson on the inevitability of failure.

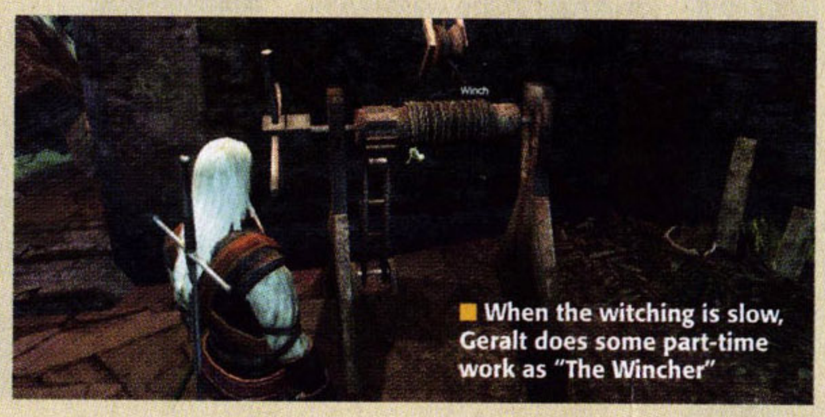
Complaints aside, a much larger portion of your time with this title will be spent enjoying the combat, story, and side tasks than making doomed decisions. The satisfaction of leveling up, expanding your abilities, and unraveling the mystery is enough for The Witcher to pick itself up when it stumbles.—**JOE**

Second Opinion 8.25

Beyond the obvious plethora of jokes enabled by using "witch" as a verb (crooning to Joe that Geralt has been "witching me softly with his words" is a one-stop ticket to hilarity), The Witcher offers plenty of good times. Geralt's stylish swordplay lends a beauty and grace to the combat system that helps to hide its lack of depth, and the vastly customizable leveling system is a joy to dig into. The real draw of The Witcher, though, is in exploring the detailed world and the enthralling fairy tales told within. The story doesn't always hit its mark of skewering players upon a double-edged moral sword, but it succeeds in creating an interesting world far more often than it fails. Role-players, much moreso than hack n' slash fans, will find much to enjoy here.—**ADAM**

HELLO, LADIES

Geralt likes trophies, and I'm not just talking about mounted monster heads. Every time he sleeps with a woman, a card with her picture is added to your journal. Don't worry, it's not as pervy as it sounds. The circumstances under which Geralt usually gets busy are so (unintentionally) ludicrous and unsexy that they become comedic gold.



■ When the witching is slow, Geralt does some part-time work as "The Wincher"

PC QUICKIES

PC

BOTTOM LINE **6.75**

Painkiller: Overdose

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 16-PLAYER VIA INTERNET OR LAN) **> PUBLISHER** DREAMCATCHER INTERACTIVE **> DEVELOPER** MINDWARE **> RELEASE** OCTOBER 23 **> ESRB** M

This is the kind of FPS I would have loved in junior high, because all I wanted to do back then was run toward things while I shot them. Everything, and I mean everything, from the ammo pick-ups littering the ground, to the lack of weapon reloading, to the super speed in which your character moves, to the silly side comments he's always making, to the general lack of story, and even the random level themes make this feel like a freeware game I would have stayed after school to play in the computer lab. Unfortunately, I've aged and so have my tastes. Surely, there is a group out there who will find this game – with its brutal challenge and simple premise of locking you in a room and continually throwing dudes at you – charming, but I think their numbers might be growing thin.—**BEN**

PC

BOTTOM LINE **8**

Age of Empires III: The Asian Dynasties

> STYLE 1-PLAYER STRATEGY (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA INTERNET OR LAN) **> PUBLISHER** MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS **> DEVELOPER** BIG HUGE GAMES/ENSEMBLE STUDIOS **> RELEASE** OCTOBER 23 **> ESRB** T

The Asian Dynasties adds to Age of Empire III's already deep strategy gameplay with three new playable nations, unique military units, and the reintroduction of wonders.

The stars of the expansion pack are undoubtedly the new military factions; walking onto the battlefield with ninjas, samurai, and stamped-ing elephants is much more exciting than marching out the boring, Euro-centric armies of the original title. The Asian Dynasties features three short and sweet mini-campaigns focused on events in Japan, China, and India, but the multiplayer is where you can truly test your mettle. Be sure to check out the new King of the Hill mode, which has you vying for control of the same castle everyone else must occupy to win.—**BERTZ**

PC

BOTTOM LINE **8.5**

Supreme Commander: Forged Alliance

> STYLE 1-PLAYER STRATEGY (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA INTERNET OR LAN) **> PUBLISHER** THQ **> DEVELOPER** GAS POWERED GAMES **> RELEASE** NOVEMBER 6 **> ESRB** E10+

This first expansion to Supreme Commander is an excellent add-on to an already outstanding game. The UI has been completely overhauled to great effect, and no longer takes up half the screen with useless menus. Each of the original three factions has received a handful of new units, which along with the brand-new alien race remedies the disappointing homogeneity of the base game nicely. The lengthy single-player campaign is a reasonably entertaining romp as well. Overall, while one could argue that Forged Alliance is simply more of the same, the subtle changes in balance and additional content in this standalone expansion make it well worth any strategy fan's time.—**ADAM**

The seasons are different from map to map, which can limit your food supply

PC

The Settlers: Rise of an Empire

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER SIMULATION/STRATEGY (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA INTERNET OR LAN) > **PUBLISHER** UBISOFT
> **DEVELOPER** BLUE BYTE > **RELEASE** SEPTEMBER 25 > **ESRB** E10+

CLEARING THE BAR

This combo of real-time strategy and economic simulation is like a freshman-level survey course of both genres. The many gameplay concepts work perfectly fine, and the game never gets in its own way like so many strategy titles do. At the same time, though, the depth needed to give a game of this style any kind of legs beyond the initial playthrough is completely missing.

At first glance, all the pieces to make a compelling strategic simulation are present. Players advance through a tiered tech tree, producing new goods and military types as their settlement grows. Building woodcutters' huts starts your economy flowing, as that wood is turned into buildings for farmers, bakers, stonemasons, and the like. Later on, you'll use that wood to build brooms to keep your city clean and palisades to protect against enemies, as well as selling it off to generate the cash needed to fund military endeavors. Other resources – iron, sheep, cows, grain, etc. – are used in similar fashion.

Ultimately, though, Settlers never forces players to make the tough decisions that are the meat of any strategy game. Without fail, you'll follow a roughly similar build order that culminates in building the same (pitifully limited) military units to overrun carbon-copy territory defenses every time. You never have to choose between feeding your people and growing your military – once your economy is running, it functions on autopilot with nearly no tweaking necessary. The game just never evolves past its basic formula.

Still, the different aspects of gameplay flow together smoothly and the campaign at least throws enough varied challenges to make it moderately entertaining. Translating the strategies in your head into onscreen results is effortless due to the expertly designed interface. However, the bare-bones RTS combat and a less-than-thrilling multiplayer offering don't do anything to make Settlers any greater than the sum of its parts.—**ADAM**

BOTTOM LINE 7

> **Concept:** Mash some real-time strategy into a medieval city-building simulation

> **Graphics:** Sharp and detailed models along with gorgeous settings make for some nice visuals

> **Sound:** The limited voice work won't make you wince, but that's about as far as it goes

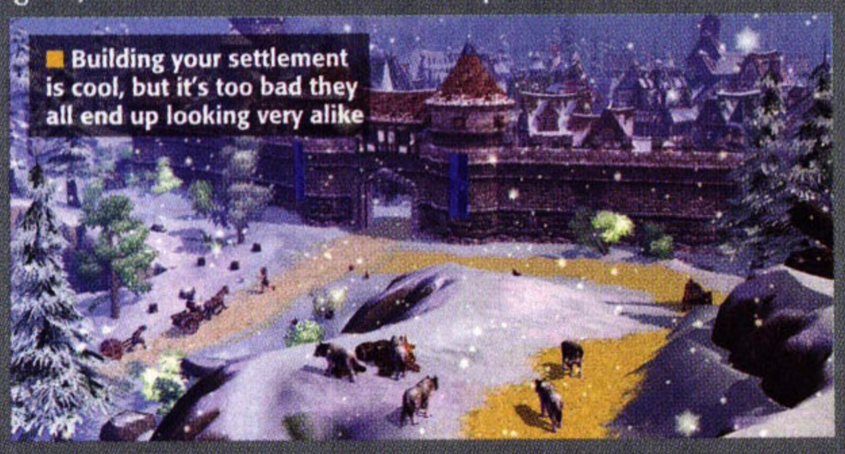
> **Playability:** A well-organized interface makes dealing with the myriad facets of gameplay a breeze

> **Entertainment:** There are many better examples of everything this tries to do, but on the whole it's a decent enough time

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion 6.5

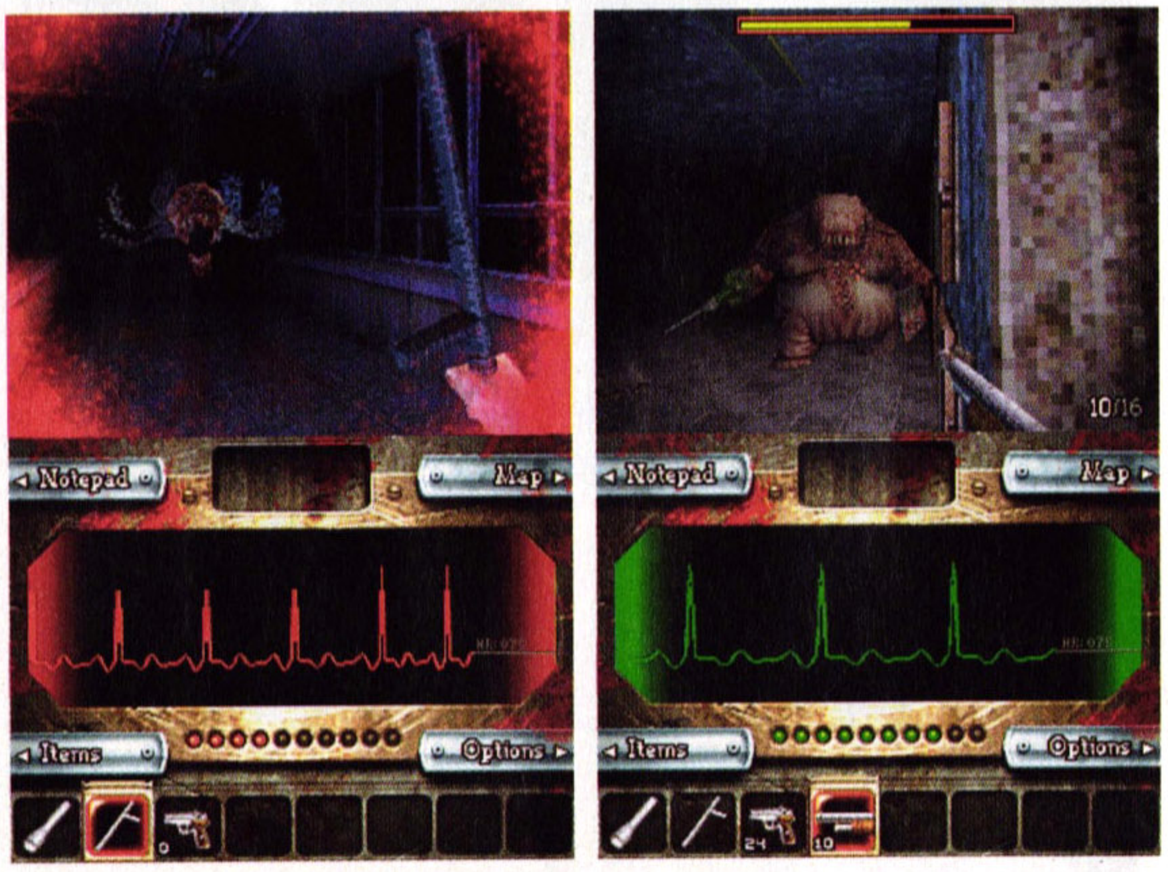
It's not that Settlers is a bad game. The colorful, gorgeous world is full of life, and watching your small town grow can be a rewarding experience. The problem comes down to the sum of its parts. The simplistic gameplay – from the breezy campaign missions to the nearly automated resource gathering – offer little to impress genre veterans. Add the uninspired combat and you have the final ingredient in a recipe for mediocrity. Why settle for Settlers when there are so many better sim/strategy experiences to be had out there?—**BERTZ**


Building your settlement is cool, but it's too bad they all end up looking very alike

NINTENDO DS

Dementium: The Ward

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** GAMECOCK > **DEVELOPER** RENEGADE KID > **RELEASE** OCTOBER 31
> **ESRB** M



DRIVING YOU MAD...NOT IN A GOOD WAY

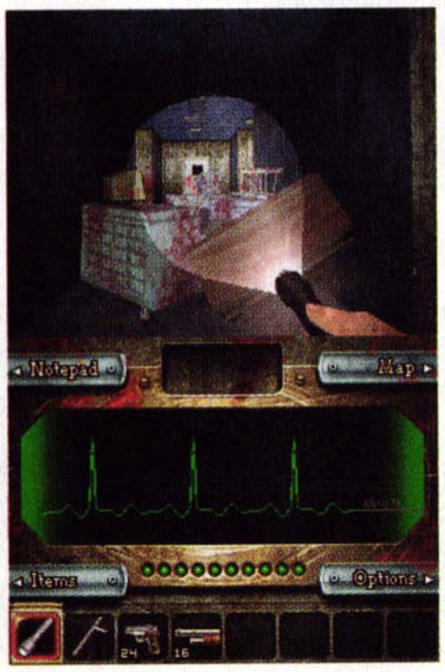
Dementium: The Ward begins with your character strapped into a wheelchair and tossed into a padded room, which is fitting, because this game will drive you completely nuts. It's not frightening or disturbing. It's just extremely frustrating.

Most of the game is shrouded in pitch-black darkness. Just like Doom 3, you have to choose between seeing the environment or holding a weapon. Even if you spot an enemy way down the hall, you have to run right up next to it to be able to shoot it. This simultaneously eliminates the possibility of surprise attacks and weakens the point of using projectile weapons at all. Even later in the game when the lights are on, backpedaling and shooting is the prime strategy here.

Enemies range from humanoid to skittering worms to flying heads – all with obvious patterns. See an air vent? Molluscas are probably going to pour out of it. How about one of the hundreds of closets in the ward? Most likely a chest maw is waiting inside. Speaking of repeated environments, endless clinical hallways, upturned chairs, and filing cabinets will haunt your dreams.

Even so, Dementium isn't that bad...that is, until you die for the first time. The only option is to return to the very beginning of the chapter. This means that every key must be recollected, every note must be scrawled down again (you might as well use a real pen and paper), and every puzzle must be resolved – anything you've spent the last half hour (or more) doing gets wiped away in an instant. I'm sure Renegade Kid thought this would be considered "hardcore," but it's just annoying. And if I had more space I'd really go after the horrible map system.

Dementium could have turned out slightly above average if the developer would have made some simple, key design decisions differently. As it is, the content just isn't compelling enough to warrant the dedication necessary to make it all the way through this asylum.—**BRYAN**



BOTTOM LINE 5.75

> **Concept:** Mix Silent Hill's horror with Metroid Prime: Hunters' controls

> **Graphics:** Not bad for DS. Not good by any other standard

> **Sound:** Creepy, well-done music and voice effects. Thank God you can turn off the heartbeat noise

> **Playability:** Bracing half the DS on the side of a desk lessens hand cramps, but doesn't eliminate them

> **Entertainment:** What could have been a decent portable experience is killed by frustrating checkpoints and repetitive environments and gameplay

> **Replay Value:** Moderately Low

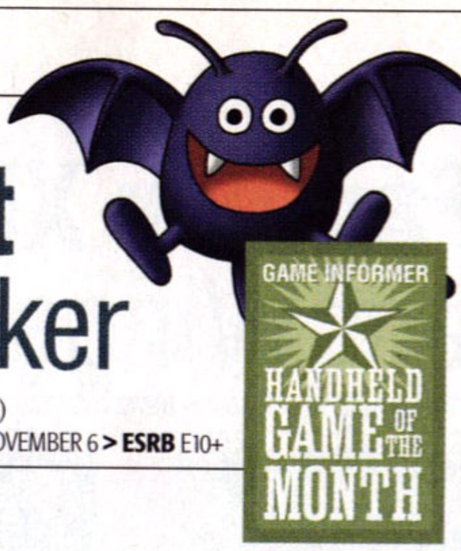
Second Opinion 5.75

As a general rule, horror games shouldn't make you roll with laughter. As much as I wanted to be frightened by Dementium's blood-stained floors and dark corridors, I just couldn't take the enemies or story seriously. Is that zombie skipping? The game's FPS mechanics are nicely designed, but having to restart chapters upon death is just a cruel thing to do to gamers in this day and age. The worst part of the game is the electric saw. This should be the choice weapon, but it emits a high pitch sound like a dentist's drill cutting into a tooth. The tech is sound, but the content comes across more like a parody.—**REINER**

NINTENDO DS

Dragon Quest Monsters: Joker

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ROLE-PLAYING GAME (2-PLAYER VIA WIRELESS)
> **PUBLISHER** SQUARE ENIX > **DEVELOPER** TOSE > **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 6 > **ESRB** E10+

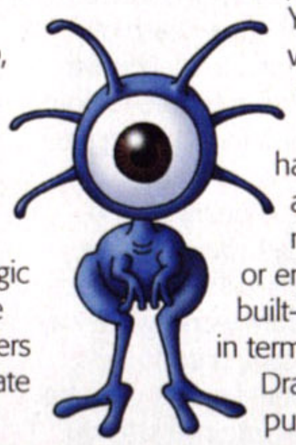


DOING IT MONSTER STYLE

If the phrase "level grinding" makes you wince, then Dragon Quest Monsters: Joker isn't for you. As a creature collection title, pretty much every aspect of the gameplay revolves around gathering, strengthening, and battling monsters. However, if you're the type of gamer who can't wait to gain that next level or skill point, this could be your excuse to put down your Pikachu and get a new addiction.

Joker has a lot of things going for it, but the standout is how it makes a clear effort to make the experience as painless and annoyance-free as possible. For instance, all enemies are visible on the overworld map, so you can usually avoid unwanted battles. When you do initiate combat, you'll fight with a party of three creatures at once. This opens up a number of strategic possibilities – especially since monsters have different powers depending on how you allocate their skill points. Best of all, it doesn't take long to feel like you're making progress with your monsters. Once you raise them to level 10, they can be synthesized into stronger ones, allowing you to customize and upgrade your team frequently.

It may make the leveling process more user-friendly, but Joker can't do much to offset the tedium associated with constant battles. Even with a smooth combat system, the game loses momentum after a few hours; apart from monster synthesis, there really isn't much to do beyond the grind. Plus, it lacks any real online battles or trading. You can only fight one-on-one via local wireless and connect to the Internet for leaderboards.



As nice as it would be to have more online options, their absence doesn't make the core mechanics any less satisfying or entertaining. It may not have the built-in fanbase of Pokémon, but in terms of gameplay and visuals, Dragon Quest Monsters: Joker puts up a good fight.—**JOE**

BOTTOM LINE 8

> **Concept:** Adorable/fearsome DQ beasts under your control

> **Graphics:** The cel-shading transitions exceptionally well to handheld

> **Sound:** A cut above your average RPG background music

> **Playability:** If you like to give your monsters foul names, be warned: the profanity filter here is unusually stringent

> **Entertainment:** The turn-based team battles add strategy to encounters beyond the usual

> **Replay Value:** Moderately High

Second Opinion 8.25

Joker continues the winning streak of Dragon Quest Heroes: Rocket Slime. Though it may rank slightly lower than the previous DQ spinoff, Monsters puts a fun and addictive new sping on monster collecting. The slick cel shading, smooth interface and battle system, and lack of random encounters makes what is essentially a non-stop level grind quite charming. The bare-bones story and lack of true online battles and monster trading or Pokémon-style side activities prevents Joker from taking down the reigning Poké-champ, but fans of Rocket Slime and Pokémon games should take a look.—**BRYAN**

NINTENDO DS QUICKIES

NINTENDO DS

Turn It Around

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (2-PLAYER VIA WIRELESS)
> **PUBLISHER** MAJESCO > **DEVELOPER** 505 GAMES
> **RELEASE** AUGUST 27 > **ESRB** E

BOTTOM LINE 4

It's too bad that this is a mini review, because the perfect headline for this game would have been "Turn It Off". This game's 24 minigames will have you driving golf balls, reeling in fish, and leading a drunk man through a crowded alley, but here's the entire premise of the game: a small turntable fills the bottom touch screen and you turn it to complete certain challenges. If that description hasn't bored you enough to skip to the next review, let me add that most of the games also have traditional controls that usually work better. Here's a tip, kids: You can play a better game at home with just a pen. Here's how: start drawing circles on a sheet of paper. Yeah! You did it! Now your mom has something to put on the fridge. Stay in school.—**BEN**

NINTENDO DS

Cooking Mama 2: Dinner With Friends

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 4-PLAYER VIA WIRELESS) > **PUBLISHER** MAJESCO
> **DEVELOPER** OFFICE CREATE
> **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 13 > **ESRB** E

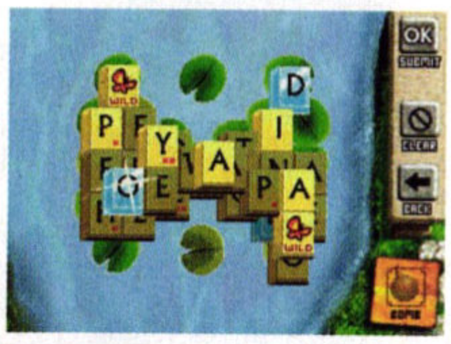
BOTTOM LINE 7

This Cooking Mama sequel comes out slightly overdone with some tasty new sauce on top. Most of the minigames are unchanged, with a few new ones (i.e. using a blender) sprinkled in. A new mode has players cooking for "friends" in a challenging non-stop barrage of preparation. New unlockables include kitchens and outfits for Mama – nothing super awesome, but it's nice to have a reason to go for more gold ratings. Multiplayer is pretty bare bones, but at least you only need one cart. This is worth a look for Cooking Mama noobs, but veterans might find it a little stale.—**BRYAN**

NINTENDO DS

WordJong

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER PUZZLE (2-PLAYER VIA WIRELESS OR NINTENDO WI-FI CONNECTION)
> **PUBLISHER** DESTINEER
> **DEVELOPER** MAGELLAN INTERACTIVE/ GAMEBLEND STUDIOS
> **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 12 > **ESRB** E



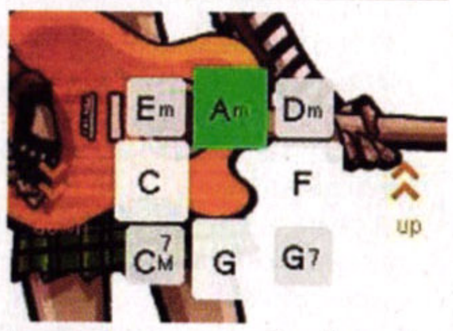
BOTTOM LINE 8

WordJong plays like Upwords in reverse. Assembling Scrabble words with letters uncovers more letters. It's a very addictive puzzler that rewards you for strategy as well as your vocabulary. Since you can undue your letter choices at any time, you can devise ways to get the maximum points out of your tiles. I wish Battle mode wasn't as repetitive and there were more bonus tiles to mix things up both in single- and multiplayer. Weird fact: The game's 100,000+ word dictionary includes "poot," but not "whores" or "quone."—**KATO**

NINTENDO DS

Jam Sessions

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER SIMULATION
> **PUBLISHER** UBISOFT
> **DEVELOPER** PLATO
> **RELEASE** SEPTEMBER 11 > **ESRB** E



BOTTOM LINE 6

Jam Sessions is a really neat idea. It's basically a virtual guitar, which allows you to "strum" with the stylus on the touch screen, while voicing various chords with the d-pad and shoulder buttons. With enough time, you'll be able to have a genuine campfire sing-along to the provided chord changes of some famous tunes, including songs by Nirvana, Bob Dylan, and Coldplay. However, it takes more than just a neat idea to be a truly compelling piece of software. With no scoring system, backing music and vocals, or career mode, this isn't really a game in any sense. And, honestly, strumming and singing to yourself gets old after about 15 minutes. Stick to Guitar Hero.—**MATT**

NINTENDO DS

Prism: Light the Way

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER PUZZLE (2-PLAYER VIA WIRELESS) > **PUBLISHER** EIDOS INTERACTIVE
> **DEVELOPER** GAMESAUCE/MORPHEME
> **RELEASE** OCTOBER 16 > **ESRB** E

BOTTOM LINE 7.5

Prism's design screams of simplicity, but from all of the bouts of uncontrollable weeping that it brings, it's safer to say that it's more akin to rocket science. This game is a test of logic, pushing players to figure out how to channel beams of light to specific targets. You may find yourself staring at a board, searching hastily for an answer for 20 minutes, but once you solve a puzzle, you'll likely run up a large set of stairs and celebrate like Rocky. You can also invite a friend for amusing co-op and verses modes, both requiring just one cartridge. If you enjoy having your brain put to test, this puzzler will be a welcome addition to your library.—**REINER**

NINTENDO DS

Final Fantasy XII: Revenant Wings

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER STRATEGY > **PUBLISHER** SQUARE ENIX > **DEVELOPER** SQUARE ENIX > **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 20 > **ESRB** E10+

UP, UP, AND AWAY

I was never a big fan of Penelo. In fact, I think she's still at level 12 on my FF XII save. Even so, it's good to jump back into Ivalice with her and Vaan to see how the world has changed in the year since the events of the original game. Revenant Wings takes Vaan, Penelo, and company (now full-fledged sky pirates) through a series of strategic battles on a floating continent high above Ivalice.

The words "handheld" and "real-time strategy" may sound like an ill omen given previous attempts on the DS (like Heroes of Mana and Lost Magic), but Revenant Wings is finally starting to get it right. The absence of resource gathering or base building means that your attention is constantly focused on your troops and their battles. The units' strengths and weaknesses are based on a simple rock-paper-scissors relationship, and the inclusion of (simplified) gambits and quickenings adds some strategy without becoming too complicated. My favorite feature is how each of your basic units is tied to a particular party leader, which is a functional (but not perfect) solution for selecting preset groups.

Revenant Wings is clearly on the right conceptual path, but there are some big problems with the interface that keep things from working the way they should. Selecting specific units, especially when your army is grouped together, is an absolute mess. If you do manage to highlight them, they might never get where they're going thanks to pathfinding that gets way too hung up on friendly units. You will largely be moving your dudes as groups, though, so this isn't as problematic as it could be.

The story, while interesting enough to fuel the battles, definitely feels like a pretty cheap excuse to revisit the characters, particularly with a few hamfisted cameos. Ba'Gamnan?! Did anyone even like him in the first place? Then again, characters like Tomaj serve to open up the game's non-combat tasks, like a cool weapon crafting system.

It's easy to say that the Final Fantasy name has lost some of its steam with various spin-offs and side stories. Even though Revenant Wings isn't an outstanding title, it still manages to do something remarkable: It's a playable and fun handheld RTS – and probably the first of its kind.—**JOE**

BOTTOM LINE 7.5

> **Concept:** Continue the story of Vaan and the Lowtown crew in a handheld real-time strategy adventure

> **Graphics:** Sprites in battle can be too small to identify clearly, but the CG cutscenes are second to none on the DS

> **Sound:** Plenty of great, familiar tracks from Final Fantasy XII

> **Playability:** At points the characters follow orders surprisingly well, and other times they stumble around in circles tripping over each other

> **Entertainment:** Lots of additional mechanics flesh out the experience and make it more than endlessly attacking bad guys

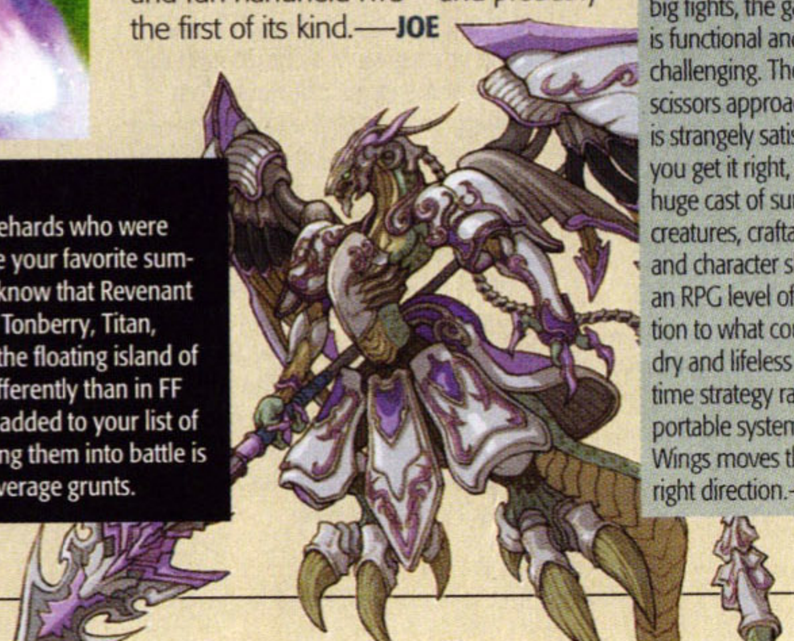
> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion 8

The more I played this new adventure with Vaan and friends, the more I warmed up to it. The dreadful early hours blossom out into an engaging, albeit relatively simple strategy affair as the game moves forward. Square Enix works its cutscene magic and manages to produce some of the best cinematic work yet seen on the DS. The story is a suitably epic follow-up to its source material, and the dialogue only adds to the quality. Despite some significant pathing problems and the inability to distinguish individual characters during big fights, the gameplay itself is functional and, eventually, challenging. The paper-rock-scissors approach to battle is strangely satisfying when you get it right, while the huge cast of summonable creatures, craftable weapons, and character skill sets give an RPG level of customization to what could have been dry and lifeless tactics. Real-time strategy rarely works on portable systems; Revenant Wings moves things in the right direction.—**MILLER**

SPECIAL GUEST STARS

If you are among the Final Fantasy diehards who were disappointed that FF XII didn't include your favorite summoned monsters, you'll be happy to know that Revenant Wings makes amends. Creatures like Tonberry, Titan, and Bahamut make appearances on the floating island of Lemurés. Since summoning works differently than in FF XII, these powerful creatures are just added to your list of available units, though the cost to bring them into battle is understandably higher than that of average grunts.



PSP

SWAT: Target Liberty

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 4-PLAYER VIA AD HOC) > **PUBLISHER** SIERRA
> **DEVELOPER** 3G STUDIOS > **RELEASE** OCTOBER 16 > **ESRB** T

TARGET: BARGAIN BIN

The revolutionary Patrick Henry once said, "give me liberty or give me death." Rest assured he wasn't referring to the lackluster SWAT: Target Liberty; surely he would rather choose death.

Target Liberty's story, penned by a writer from the hit TV series *The Shield*, follows a Korean gang war in New York. Most underground organizations conduct their business out of the public spotlight, but these ingenious criminals prefer to get down at New York's premier sightseeing attractions, like Central Park and Grand Central Station. You can imagine where the plot goes from here.

Cheap story aside, the fundamental problem with Target Liberty is combat. The isometric camera perspective fails to give you a pervasive view of the environment; enemies will often engage you before they are even in sight. This makes you want to move quickly through the environments so you can get a bead on the attacker, but the game also expects you to act tactically. Once you engage in a firefight, the poor aiming mechanics won't do you any favors in subduing the hostiles. Your squad command system works well enough, but don't expect your team to surprise anyone on the other side of that door – grandmothers knit socks faster than they breach doors and discharge flashbangs.

Target Liberty also brings the series' highly touted AI to a new low. Citizens stroll through firefights as if flying bullets are an everyday reality, and the enemies display the smarts of your average *Cops* arrestee.

Target Liberty should receive a citation for roughing up the prestigious SWAT franchise. We can only hope the next effort more closely resembles its fantastic predecessors.—**BERTZ**

BOTTOM LINE 5

> **Concept:** Shackle the classic SWAT series with broken gameplay

> **Graphics:** Isometric cameras only offer so much

> **Sound:** The elevator muzak used for the training sessions says it all

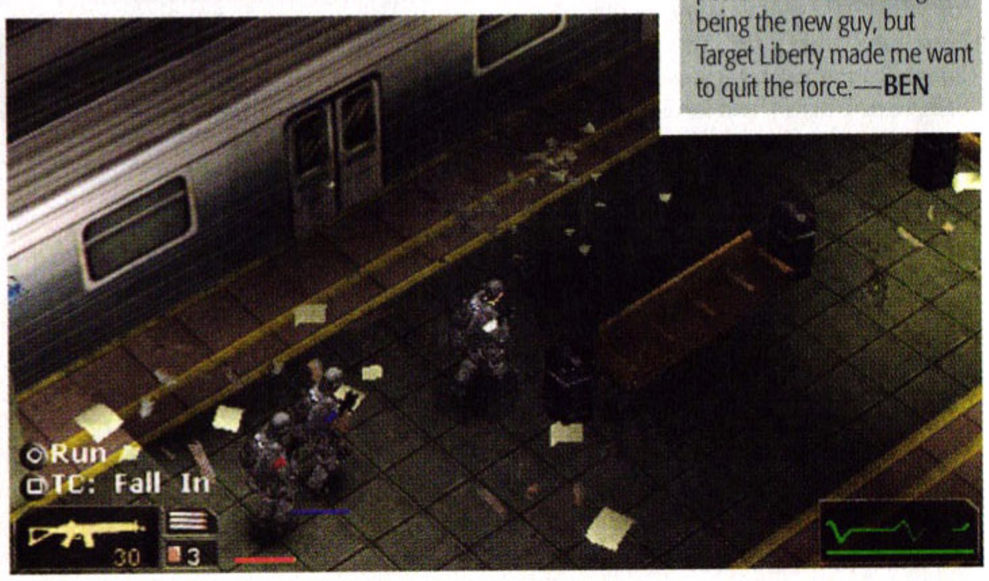
> **Playability:** Sporadic targeting and sluggish movement keep this game grounded

> **Entertainment:** Snail-paced tactics take the fun out of rounding up baddies

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion 5

I feel like the new kid on the SWAT team. I fumble with my moves, take things a little too slow, and civilians show me no respect. But it's not my fault; I think I'd be a great SWAT leader. The game's targeting system and command menu are just too clunky to be useful, the camera view is so bad that sometimes enemies don't appear until they're standing just a few feet away, and the AI is stupid. And when I say stupid, I mean civilians stand in the middle of a room during shootouts, terrorists casually stroll towards you to take cover, and your teammates blindly walk through your gunfire to take up a position. I know it's tough being the new guy, but Target Liberty made me want to quit the force.—**BEN**



PSP

Silent Hill Origins

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION **> PUBLISHER** KONAMI **> DEVELOPER** CLIMAX ENTERTAINMENT **> RELEASE** NOVEMBER 6 **> ESRB** M

ROUTINE DELIVERY

BOTTOM LINE 7.75

Much like how innocent passersby wander into the foggy abyss that is Silent Hill never to return, fans of the series tend to stay devoted to these games because of their consistently disturbing thrills. But the warning lights are up now, Silent Hill has been spinning its wheels for too long, and it's becoming harder for fans to stay lost in the fog.

Silent Hill has long been one of the most oppressively atmospheric franchises out there, and this is still true. You can almost feel the game's hot breath on your neck as you watch its film grain effects or listen to the classic moody music. Every enemy looks like some kind of deformed human/beast hybrid stuffed into a cellophane wrapper and beaten with every splinter of God's ugly stick. Like cockroaches they infect every area, only instead of scattering when they see your light, they lunge at you with a wail. Fans of the series know exactly what I'm talking about, and they'll be happy to know that the Silent Hill routine has been faithfully delivered to this portable package.

But that's the problem – Origins doesn't do much that isn't routinely delivered elsewhere. The new lock-on system is nice, but it doesn't fix the stale combat that has been around since the PSone. Origin's does have some fun puzzles, but it's still too easy to miss an important item if you're not used to searching every corner of every room. You could easily find yourself backtracking through areas to find one missing puzzle piece. The camera is still a little too random making it easy to get lost unless you check your map every time you enter a room, and I'm tired of wandering mazy halls trying every lock just to figure out where I have to go next.

This game will interest people who are into the series, especially with its story that unravels new details about the Silent Hill mythos. The bits about protagonist, truck driver Travis Grady, uncovering about his mysterious past are nice, and fan's will get a kick out of his run-ins with series mainstays like the creepy young Alessa and nurse Lisa Garland: Unfortunately, the game has fallen into something like a rut in most other areas and less fanatical gamers won't be as forgiving of its faults.—**BEN**

> Concept: Take one of Japan's most mentally scarring series and transition it flawlessly to handheld

> Graphics: The filth-covered world of Silent Hill does the PSP proud

> Sound: The music is one of the features that stands out most in the game; it's wonderfully haunting

> Playability: Some tired controls and jumpy camera diminish the experience a little

> Entertainment: Production values look pretty high, and it offers a good fright, but not an original one

> Replay Value: Moderately Low

Second Opinion 7

The Silent Hill series has been relying on the same type of scares for years now, and Origins is no exception. The game features the basic Silent Hill concoction of lackluster combat, environmental puzzles, a spooky soundtrack, creepy disfigured baddies, and about 100 fog machines set to high. You will spend more time navigating between the normal environment and the blood-stained nightmare world, but little else has changed. Fans of the series should check Origins out for the explanation of what exactly happened to Alessa Gillespie and why the sleepy town has been pervaded by demonic figures ever since. But outside this history tale and the noticeably sharp graphics, little else stands out in this PSP exclusive.—**BERTZ**

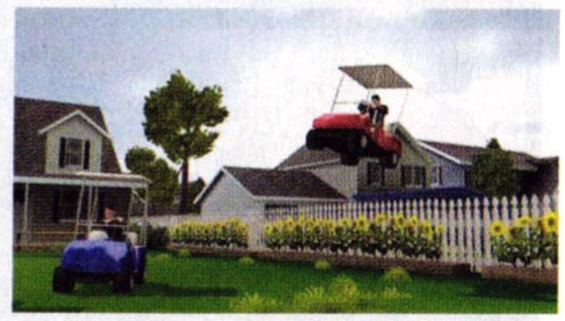
PSP QUICKIES

PSP

Jackass: The Game

BOTTOM LINE 6.25

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 4-PLAYER VIA AD HOC OR INFRASTRUCTURE) **> PUBLISHER** RED MILE ENTERTAINMENT **> DEVELOPER** SIDHE INTERACTIVE **> RELEASE** OCTOBER 9 **> ESRB** M



There may come a time in your life where you say, "I really wish I could shoot paintballs at a dwarf who was jumping on a trampoline," or "I wouldn't mind doing some aerial acrobatics off a skyscraper into a vat of Elephant poo," or "Why can't I play golf with live grenades?" If so, but you've never had the chutzpah to actually do any of those things (wuss), then Jackass might be your best masochistic outlet. Jackass is basically a collection of 35 stunts or minigames. Some are timed button press challenges and shooting games, but usually they are some variation of a downhill kart race. Like older Tony Hawk's, each race comes with a list of objectives. However, unlike the Tony Hawk's, Jackass lacks exploration and depth. The video editor is kind of a cool extra, but it's done way better elsewhere. Too bad the controls are as painful as most of the stunts you perform otherwise this might have been a decent handheld distraction. Jackass isn't a finely tuned or sophisticated form of entertainment; it's the kind of stupid enjoyment college freshmen have when they're drunk, and while you don't need to be drunk to have fun with this game...it might help.—**BEN**

PSP

Metal Gear Solid: Portable Ops Plus

BOTTOM LINE 7.75

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 6-PLAYER VIA AD-HOC OR INFRASTRUCTURE) **> PUBLISHER** KONAMI **> DEVELOPER** KOJIMA PRODUCTIONS **> RELEASE** NOVEMBER 13 **> ESRB** T

As an expansion pack, it's not surprising that Portable Ops Plus adds new weapons, characters, and modes to the first game's tactical espionage action. What makes this an unusual expansion is that it removes a few things that made the original fun. You don't start with Big Boss as a playable character (he needs to be unlocked or imported from your original save), your technical and medical units are all but useless now, and the Infinity Mode missions utilize most of the same levels from the base game. Added maps and online features make the multiplayer aspect of the game noticeably improved, but if you're more into single-player sneaking, approach this one with caution.—**JOE**

PSP

SOCOM: U.S. Navy SEALs Tactical Strike

BOTTOM LINE 8

> STYLE 1-PLAYER STRATEGY (UP TO 4-PLAYER VIA AD HOC OR INFRASTRUCTURE) **> PUBLISHER** SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT **> DEVELOPER** SLANT SIX GAMES **> RELEASE** NOVEMBER 6 **> ESRB** T

What's this? A SOCOM game I enjoyed playing? It really is Christmas. Tactical Strike shifts SOCOM's focus to purely strategic gameplay and reminds me a bit of the Full Spectrum Warrior titles. You don't manually aim the weapons, but you queue up actions to have your team to set up firing positions, flank the enemy, or throw a hail of grenades to flush them out of hiding. The camera creates some movement problems, and enemies still do stupid SOCOM things, but it doesn't interfere too much because of all of the great tactical situations you get to tackle. The focus on strategy turns SOCOM's usual slow pace into a tense, carefully plotted game of cat and mouse. This is the first SOCOM in a while that I've felt comfortable recommending to anyone.—**BEN**

CHARTS

An In-Depth Listing Of The Best Selling Games

TOP 20

Listings Based Upon NPD Data For September 2007 Based On Units Sold

Rank	Title	L. Mo.	System	Score	Release
1	Halo 3	N/A	360	9.75	09-07
2	Wii Play w/Remote	5	Wii	7	02-07
3	The Legend of Zelda: Phantom Hourglass	N/A	DS	9.5	09-07
4	Madden NFL 08	2	PS2	8	08-07
5	Skate	N/A	360	8.75	09-07
6	Madden NFL 08	1	360	8	08-07
7	Metroid Prime 3: Corruption	6	Wii	9.5	08-07
8	BioShock	3	360	10	08-07
9	Brain Age 2: More Training in Minutes a Day	13	DS	8.25	08-07
10	Heavenly Sword	N/A	PS3	8.75	09-07
11	Medal of Honor Airborne	N/A	360	7.25	09-07
12	Stranglehold	N/A	360	7.25	09-07
13	Mario Party 8	9	Wii	7.25	05-07
14	Guitar Hero II w/Guitar	8	PS2	9	11-06
15	Carnival Games	N/A	Wii	5.5	08-07
16	My Sims	N/A	DS	N/A	09-07
17	Pokémon Diamond	15	DS	8.25	08-07
18	My Sims	N/A	Wii	8	09-07
19	NBA 2K8	N/A	360	8.25	09-07
20	High School Musical: Makin' the Cut	16	DS	N/A	08-07

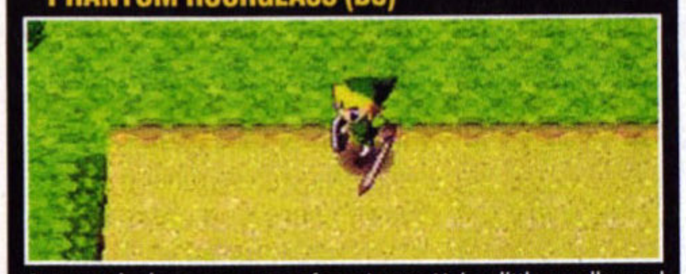
1 HALO 3 (360)

Video games have desires just like you, and this year Charts is participating in the charitable Game A Wish Foundation for over-privileged games. Please send us your charitable donations and help make this holiday a special time for video games everywhere. Our first needy game is Halo 3, whose wish list is simple: He says he is running low on shotguns and sniper rifles, but what he would really like the most is a sensical story.

2 Wii PLAY (Wii)

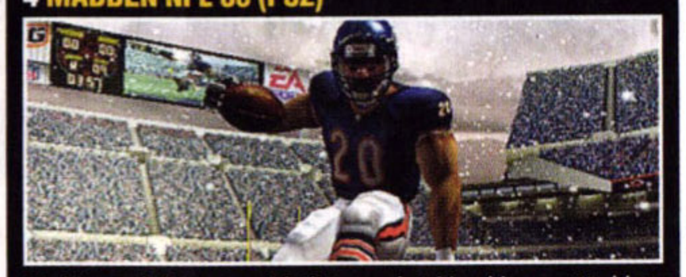
Our next applicant wasn't actually considered a game by some of the judges, but we felt bad for him and decided to let him into the program anyway. This is what he told us he wanted most: "I would like for people, around the world, to come together and stop buying my game. Seriously people, it's getting ridiculous. Stop buying it." Okay, we'll admit that this isn't really his wish, it's ours, but c'mon. An extra Wii remote is like $20 cheaper.

3 THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: PHANTOM HOURGLASS (DS)



Our next lucky game comes from Japan. He's a little smaller and handles himself differently, but he has a big heart. We sat down with him and asked him what he would like this year, but all the would say was, "Heyaa!" We assume he could use some new clothes that don't smell like fish (already has a lot of green).

4 MADDEN NFL 08 (PS2)



Madden only has one wish this year, but it's a big one. Madden would like All-Pro Football's head to mount and display on his mantle. We don't know if anyone has an extra one of these heads lying around, but if you do, it would make Madden's year. The big guy could really use some cheering up; at one point he actually broke down into tears and started to whine about how "competition is hard."

5 SKATE (360)

We didn't have time to actually meet with the final recipient, but we figure he's a skater, so we sent some interns off to research what were the hottest skating gifts this year. The list they came up with is pretty good: new blades for his skates, a frilly outfit with lots of glittery sequins, and a Zamboni machine to help smooth out the ice. We don't really care enough to pay attention, but we're sure any of those great gifts can't miss.

TOP 10 JAPAN

Rank	Title	System
1	Nishimura Kyotarou Suspense Detective Series: Deadly Intent	DS
2	Dragon Ball Z: Sparking Meteor	PS2
3	Gundam Battle Chronicle	PSP
4	Pokémon Mysterious Dungeon: Time Expedition Party	DS
5	Arcana Heart	PS2
6	Pokémon Mysterious Dungeon: Shadow Expedition Party	DS
7	Lair	PS3
8	Archaic Sealed Heart	DS
9	Kanji Test 2	DS
10	Flash Focus: Vision Training in Minutes a Day	DS

4

5

TOP 10 GI

Rank	Title	L. Mo.	System
1	Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare	N/A	multi
2	Assassin's Creed	N/A	360
3	Halo 3	1	360
4	The Orange Box	2	multi
5	Mass Effect	3	360
6	Ratchet & Clank Future: Tools of Destruction	N/A	PS3
7	Geometry Wars: Galaxies	N/A	Wii
8	Unreal Tournament 3	N/A	PC
9	BioShock	6	360
10	Uncharted: Drake's Fortune	N/A	PS3

1

6

The Staff's Favorite Picks

TOP 10 PC

Rank	Title	L. Mo.	Price
1	The Sims 2: Bon Voyage	N/A	$29
2	World Of Warcraft	2	$20
3	World Of Warcraft: The Burning Crusade	3	$37
4	World In Conflict	N/A	$49
5	BioShock	1	$48
6	Medal Of Honor Airborne	N/A	$47
7	Sim City 4 Deluxe	5	$19
8	Medieval II: Total War Kingdoms	N/A	$29
9	Paws & Claws Pet School	9	$15
10	Age Of Empires III	8	$30

4

8

Based On Monthly Units Sold

Source: The NPD Group/NPD Funworld®/TRSTS® • David Riley 516-625-2277

REVIEWSARCHIVE

PLAYSTATION 3

All-Pro Football 2K8	8	Aug-07
Bigs, The	7.5	Jul-07
Conan	7	Nov-07
Darkness, The	8.75	Aug-07
Dirt	8	Nov-07
Dynasty Warriors: Gundam	5	Oct-07
Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer	5	Aug-07
FIFA 08	7.75	Oct-07
Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter 2	8.5	Oct-07
Guitar Hero III: Legends of Rock	8.75	Oct-07
Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix	6.5	Aug-07
Heavenly Sword	8.75	Oct-07
Juiced 2: Hot Import Nights	8.25	Nov-07
Madden NFL 08	8	Sep-07
MLB: The Show	7.5	Jul-07
NBA 08	7	Nov-07
NBA 2K8	8.25	Nov-07
NBA Live 08	7.5	Nov-07
NCAA Football 08	8	Aug-07
NHL 08	8.5	Oct-07
NHL 2K8	7.75	Oct-07
Ninja Gaiden Sigma	9	Jul-07
Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End	6	Jul-07
Rainbow Six Vegas	9	Aug-07
Skate	8.75	Oct-07
Spider-Man 3	8	Jul-07
Stuntman Ignition	8.5	Oct-07
Surf's Up	6.5	Aug-07
Warhawk	8.25	Oct-07

XBOX 360

Ace Combat 6: Fires of Liberation	8.75	Nov-07
All-Pro Football 2K8	8	Aug-07
Bigs, The	7.5	Jul-07
BioShock	10	Sep-07
Blazing Angels 2: Secret Missions of WWII	7.5	Nov-07
Blue Dragon	9	Sep-07
Call of Juarez	7.25	Jul-07
Command & Conquer 3: Tiberium Wars	8.5	Jun-07
Conan	7	Nov-07
Crash of the Titans	7.25	Nov-07
Darkness, The	8.75	Aug-07
Dirt	8	Aug-07
Dynasty Warriors: Gundam	5	Oct-07
Eternal Sonata	8.25	Sep-07
Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer	5	Aug-07

Halo 3 – Xbox 360 – Nov 07

Fatal Inertia	7.5	Oct-07
FIFA 08	7.75	Oct-07
FlatOut Ultimate Carnage	7.5	Nov-07
Forza Motorsport 2	8.25	Jul-07
Guitar Hero III: Legends of Rock	8.75	Oct-07
Halo 3	9.75	Nov-07
Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix	6.5	Aug-07
Hour of Victory	2.5	Sep-07
Juiced 2: Hot Import Nights	8.25	Nov-07
Madden NFL 08	8	Sep-07
Mass Effect	9.75	Nov-07
Medal of Honor Airborne	7.25	Oct-07
Monster Madness: Battle for Suburbia	7.5	Jun-07
NASCAR 08	7.75	Sep-07
NBA 2K8	8.25	Nov-07
NBA Live 08	7.5	Nov-07
NCAA Football 08	8	Aug-07
NHL 08	8.5	Oct-07
NHL 2K8	7.75	Oct-07
Orange Box, The	9.75	Nov-07
Overlord	7.5	Aug-07
Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End	6	Jul-07
Project Gotham Racing 4	8.75	Nov-07
Project Sylpheed	7.75	Sep-07
Ratatouille	6.75	Sep-07
Rayman Raving Rabbids	7.25	Jun-07
Shadowrun	6.5	Aug-07
Shrek the Third	5.25	Aug-07
Skate	8.75	Oct-07
Spider-Man 3	8	Jul-07
Spider-Man: Friend or Foe	4.5	Nov-07
Stranglehold	7.25	Oct-07
Stuntman Ignition	8.5	Oct-07
Surf's Up	6.5	Aug-07
Tenchu Z	6.5	Aug-07
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 08	9	Sep-07
Transformers	7.25	Sep-07
Two Worlds	4	Nov-07
Vampire Rain	3	Sep-07
Warriors Orochi	5.75	Oct-07
Wartech: Senko No Rondi	3.75	Sep-07

Wii

Alien Syndrome	6.25	Oct-07
Big Brain Academy	7.5	Aug-07
Boogie	7.75	Oct-07
Carnival Games	5.5	Nov-07
Crash of the Titans	7.25	Nov-07
Dewy's Adventure	7	Oct-07
Guilty Gear XX Accent Core	7.75	Oct-07
Guitar Hero III: Legends of Rock	8.75	Oct-07
Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix	6.5	Aug-07
Heatseeker	7.5	Jun-07
Legend of Spyro: The Eternal Night, The	6.25	Nov-07
Madden NFL 08	7.5	Oct-07
Mario Party 8	7.25	Jul-07
Mario Strikers Charged	7.25	Sep-07
Medal of Honor: Vanguard	4	May-07
Mercury Meltdown	6.5	Jul-07
Metroid Prime 3: Corruption	9.5	Oct-07
Mortal Kombat: Armageddon	7.5	Jun-07
My Sims	8	Oct-07
Pokémon Battle Revolution	5.75	Sep-07
Prince of Persia: Rival Swords	8.5	May-07
Ratatouille	5.5	Sep-07
Resident Evil 4	9.5	Jul-07
Shrek the Third	5.25	Aug-07
Sims 2: Castaway, The	7.25	Nov-07
Spider-Man 3	6.5	Jul-07
Spider-Man: Friend or Foe	4.5	Nov-07
Super Paper Mario	9.5	Jun-07
Surf's Up	6.5	Aug-07
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 07	6.5	May-07
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 2008	7	Oct-07
TMNT	7.5	May-07
Transformers	7.25	Sep-07
Victorious Boxwers: Revolution	6.75	Nov-07
Wing Island	5	May-07
Zack & Wiki: Quest For Barbaros' Treasure	8.25	Nov-07

PLAYSTATION 2

.hack//G.U. Vol.2: Reminisce	5.75	Jul-07
Atelier Iris 3: Grand Phantasm	6.5	Jun-07
Crash of the Titans	7.25	Nov-07
Dawn of Mana	7	May-07
Grand Theft Auto: Vice City Stories	7.75	May-07
GrimGrimoire	7.75	Aug-07
Guilty Gear XX Accent Core	7.75	Oct-07
Guitar Hero Encore: Rocks the '80s	8.25	Aug-07
Guitar Hero III: Legends of Rock	8.75	Oct-07
Hot Shots Tennis	8.25	Jul-07
Lair	7.25	Sep-07
Legend of Spyro: The Eternal Night, The	6.25	Nov-07
Madden NFL 08	8	Sep-07
Medal of Honor: Vanguard	6	May-07
Meet the Robinsons	7	May-07
NASCAR 08	7.75	Sep-07
Odin Sphere	8.5	Jul-07
Ratatouille	5.5	Sep-07
Raw Danger	4.5	Jun-07
Shin Megami Tensei: Persona 3	8.5	Aug-07
Shrek the Third	5.25	Aug-07
Singstar Pop	8	May-07
Soul Nomad & The World Eaters	7.75	Oct-07
Spider-Man: Friend or Foe	4.5	Nov-07
Stuntman Ignition	8.5	Oct-07
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 08	9	Sep-07
TMNT	7.5	May-07
Tomb Raider Anniversary	8.5	Jul-07
Tony Hawk's Downhill Jam	4	Jul-07
Transformers	7.25	Sep-07
Warriors Orochi	5.75	Oct-07
Wild Arms 5	6.5	Oct-07

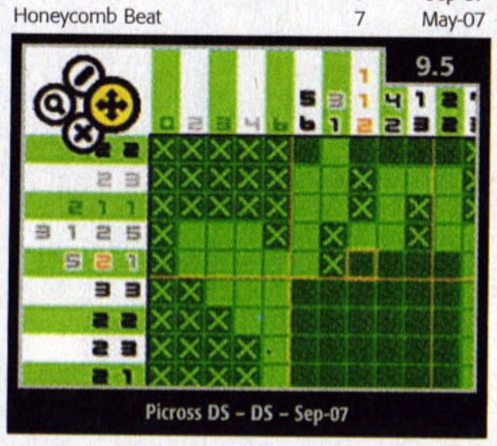
PC

Neverwinter Nights 2: Mask of the Betrayer – PC – Nov-07

Blazing Angels 2: Secret Missions of WWII	7.5	Nov-07
Command & Conquer 3: Tiberium Wars	8.5	May-07
Company of Heroes: Opposing Fronts	8.25	Nov-07
Enemy Territories: Quake Wars	8.5	Nov-07
Halo 2	8	Aug-07
Infernal	4	Jun-07
Lord of the Rings Online: Shadows of Angmar, The	8.5	Jul-07
Medal of Honor Airborne	7.25	Oct-07
Medieval II: Total War Kingdoms	9	Nov-07
Neverwinter Nights 2: Mask of the Betrayer	9	Nov-07
Orange Box, The	9.75	Nov-07
S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl	8.25	May-07
Shadowrun	6.5	Aug-07
Sid Meier's Civilization IV: Beyond the Sword	9.5	Sep-07
Silverfall	6	May-07
Surf's Up	6.5	Aug-07
Titan Quest: Immortal Throne	8	May-07
Two Worlds	4	Nov-07
World in Conflict	9.25	Oct-07

NINTENDO DS

Brain Age 2: More Training in Minutes a Day	8.25	Sep-07
Brothers in Arms DS	6.75	Sep-07
Cake Mania	6.5	May-07
Cookie & Cream	7	Aug-07
Death Jr. and the Science Fair of Doom	7	Jun-07
Diner Dash	7.25	Jun-07
DK: Jungle Climer	5.75	Nov-07
Drawn to Life	7	Oct-07
Dynasty Warriors DS: Fighter's Battle	6.5	Jul-07
Etrian Odyssey	6	Jun-07
Final Fantasy Fables: Chocobo Tales	6.5	May-07
Front Mission 1st	7	Nov-07
Heroes of Mana	5	Sep-07
Honeycomb Beat	7	May-07

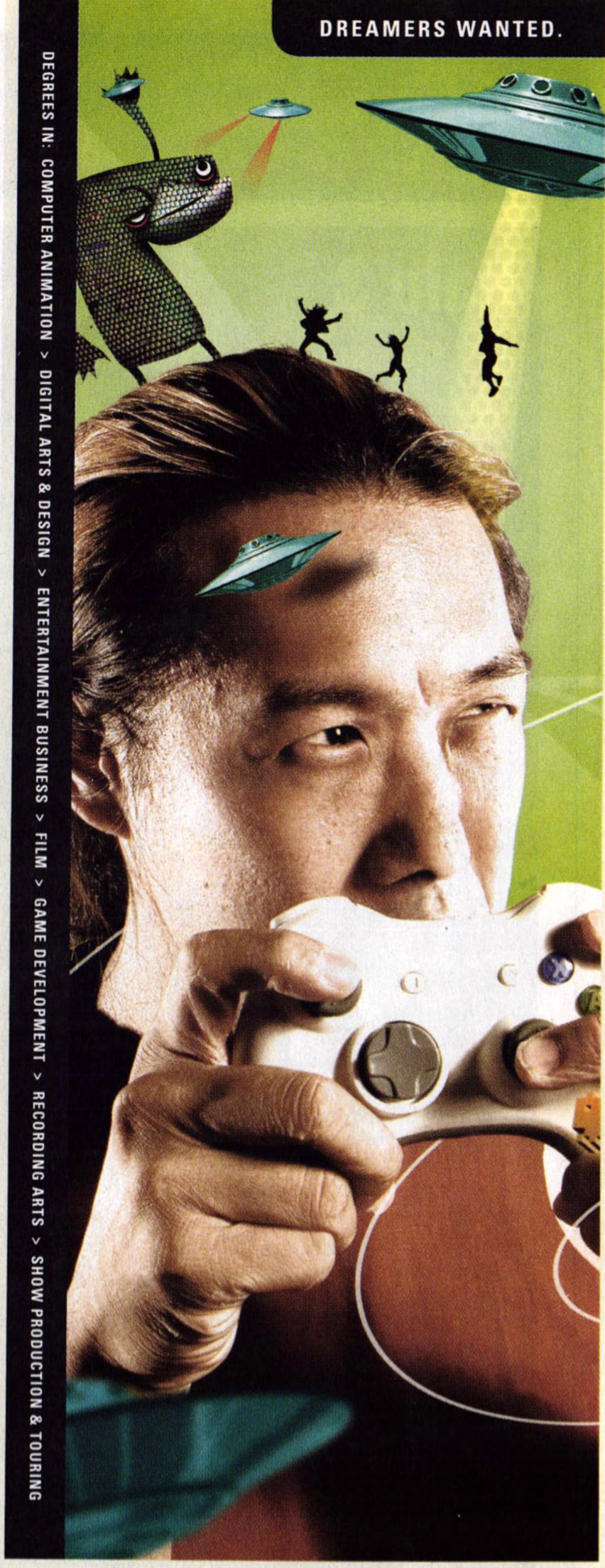


Picross DS – DS – Sep-07

Konami Classics Series: Arcade Hits	7.75	May-07
Legend of Zelda: Phantom Hourglass, The	9.5	Oct-07
Lost In Blue 2	6.5	May-07
Luminous Arc	6	Sep-07
Mega Man ZX Advent	8	Nov-07
Meteos: Disney Magic	7.75	May-07
New York Times Crosswords	8.25	Aug-07
Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney Trials & Tribulations	8.25	Nov-07
Picross DS	9.5	Sep-07
Planet Puzzle League	8.25	Aug-07
Pokémon Diamond/Pearl	8.25	Jun-07
Puzzle Quest: Challenge of the Warlords	8.25	May-07
Rune Factory: A Fantasy Harvest Moon	5.75	Oct-07
SimCity DS	8.25	Aug-07
SNK vs. Capcom Card Fighters DS	6.5	Jul-07
Sonic Rush Adventure	7.25	Nov-07
Time Ace	6.75	Jun-07
Touch the Dead	7	Jun-07
Wario: Master of Disguise	7.25	May-07
Worms Open Warfare 2	7.5	Oct-07

PSP

Aedis Eclipse: Generation of Chaos	6	Jun-07
After Burner: Black Falcon	7	May-07
Brave Story: New Traveler	7.25	Sep-07
Brooktown High	6.75	Jun-07
Call of Duty: Roads to Victory	6	May-07
Castlevania: The Dracula X Chronicles	7	Oct-07
Coded Arms: Contagion	6.75	May-07
Crazy Taxi: Fare Wars	5.75	Nov-07
Cube	5.5	Jun-07
Dead Head Fred	6	Sep-07
Disgaea: Afternoon of Darkness	9	Nov-07
Dragoneer's Aria	5.75	Oct-07
Driver '76	5	Jul-07
Dungeon Maker: Hunting Ground	6	Aug-07
Dungeons and Dragons: Tactics	6	Aug-07
Final Fantasy II: Anniversary Edition	6	Aug-07
Final Fantasy: Anniversary Edition	7.5	Jul-07
Final Fantasy Tactics: The War of the Lions	9.5	Nov-07
Full Auto 2	7.25	May-07
Hot PXL	6	Oct-07
Innocent Life: A Futuristic Harvest Moon	7.25	Jul-07
Jeanne D'Arc	8.5	Sep-07
M.A.C.H.	6.5	May-07
Marvel Trading Card Game	7.5	May-07
Monster Hunter Freedom 2	7	Sep-07
Naruto: Ultimate Ninja Heroes	6.75	Oct-07
PaRappa the Rapper	8	Jul-07
Puzzle Quest: Challenge of the Warlords	8.25	May-07
Smash Court Tennis 3	8.5	Sep-07
Star Wars Battlefront: Renegade Squadron	7	Nov-07
Syphon Filter: Logan's Shadow	8.75	Nov-07
Tales of the World	7	Aug-07
Zendoku	6	Jun-07



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Halo 3

GI's Search for the Skulls

Finding all the skulls in Halo 3 can be nearly impossible unless you already know exactly where to look. Well, we're here to help. Finding the skulls not only opens up new modes for the metagame and gets you Achievements, it will also net you the coveted Hayabusa armor from Ninja Gaiden. To find a skull you must be playing on at least normal difficulty and have started the level from the very beginning, not one of the mid-level checkpoints.

GOLD SKULLS

Level: Sierra 117
Skull: Iron
Effect: If you die, you start the level over
Location: Once you reach the dam, it's on a walkway on the building behind the one where you rescue Johnson. Jump on some pipes to the far right and onto the walkway overhead, then follow that around the bend to the very end where you will find the skull.

Level: Crow's Nest
Skull: Black Eye
Effect: You must perform melee attacks to recharge your shields
Location: At the start of the level turn around and go up the stairs. Jump up on the platform and then onto the pipes overhead. Follow these and they will lead you to the skull.

Level: Tsavo Highway
Skull: Tough Luck
Effect: Enemies fight a little bit harder
Location: After you come out of the first tunnel where you shut down the shield you will see a large pipe running alongside the highway. Jump onto the pipe and make your way along it, jumping over the fence. As soon as you jump over the fence, turn left and fall down to the platform below. Walk forward and off to your left you will see a rock jutting out from the cliff that contains the skull.

Level: The Storm
Skull: Catch
Effect: Enemies use and drop more grenades
Location: When you come to that first open area with the Wraiths, kill every thing but the Wraiths (when you kill them the skull disappears). The skull is on the little building on the far side of the field from where you entered. Getting it can be challenging. Either use grenades to help boost your jump or stack a bunch of Ghosts and Warthogs on top of each other to get to the top of the building. If you didn't kill the Wraith the skull should be up there.

Level: Floodgate
Skull: Fog
Effect: No radar
Location: At the start of the level as you are heading up the ramp, just before you encounter the Flood, look up and to the right. On top of one of the buildings you will see a Flood appear then jump out of sight. He is holding the skull. If you shoot him before he escapes he will drop the skull. It may take a few tries to get him to drop the skull to a place you can reach, so just reload the last checkpoint if he gets away.

Level: The Ark
Skull: Famine
Effect: Enemy weapons supply you with less ammo
Location: After the wrecked Phantom, stay to the right when the path branches and kill the two grunts in Ghosts. You need to get onto the bridge above you. To do that follow the bend around the huge rock and drive up it with a Ghost, then use it as a ramp to drive over to the bridge. The skull is on the top of the last beam at the end of the bridge. Either grenade jump, stack a couple of Ghosts on top of each other, or jump off of a co-op friend and the skull will be yours.

Level: The Covenant
Skull: Thunderstorm
Effect: All enemies start off as a higher rank
Location: When you first get the Hornet, fly over to the second tower – the one that the Arbiter disabled – and you will see the skull at the top of the balcony.

Level: Cortana
Skull: Tilt
Effect: Enemies have better armor
Location: In the second large room where you fight the Flood, kill all the Flood then look to the left side of the room. Jump onto the small purple platform in between the two archways. To your left and up are some mushroom-like platforms. Jump up them then turn around and jump onto the beam-like rock across the way. The skull will be up there surrounded by blood.

Level: Halo
Skull: Mythic
Effect: Enemies have twice as much health
Location: At the beginning of the level when you first enter the tunnel, follow the right side of the wall and it will lead you down a small path. At the end is the skull.

SILVER SKULLS

Level: Sierra 117
Skull: Blind
Effect: Your HUD and gun disappear
Location: At the start of the level, after the Phantom drops off enemies go straight until you come to the cliff. Look down the cliff face and to the right and you will see a rock jutting out from the side. At the end of that rock is the skull.

Level: Crow's Nest
Skull: Grunt Birthday Party
Effect: Grunts head's explode with confetti
Location: When you are crawling through the sewer with the drones flying by, before you fall down the first pipe look down the edge. You will see an area under the walkway you are on. Carefully jump over the edge and fall back into that area. Follow the space back and you will find the skull.

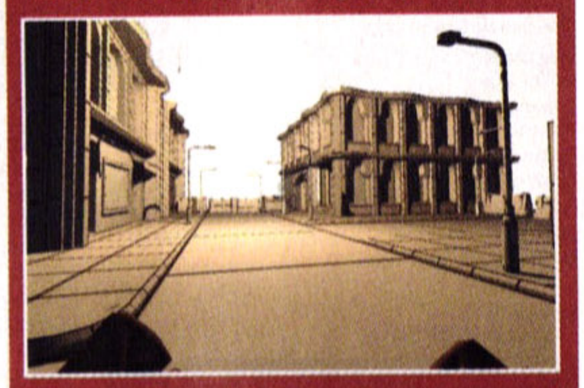
Level: The Ark
Skull: Cowbell
Effect: Explosions are stronger
Location: After the battle where you destroy the Scarab go into the building in the middle of the field and grab the Grav Lift equipment. Continue on with the level. After you fight some Covenant in the room with the exploding boxes, you will start down a ramped hallway. Halfway down the spiraling hall you will see some platforms overhead that you can use the Grav Lift to launch up to. On the highest platform is the skull.

Level: The Covenant
Skull: IWHBYD
Effect: Opens up new dialogue in the game
Location: After you have killed Truth, run back across the walkway and kill all the Flood. After that is done you will have to jump through the holographic Halo rings in a specific order. The order is: 4654534 where the first ring is near where you originally started from and seven is closer to where Truth was. If you have done this correctly, the rings will start to light up and the skull will appear at the end near Truth.

Mod World

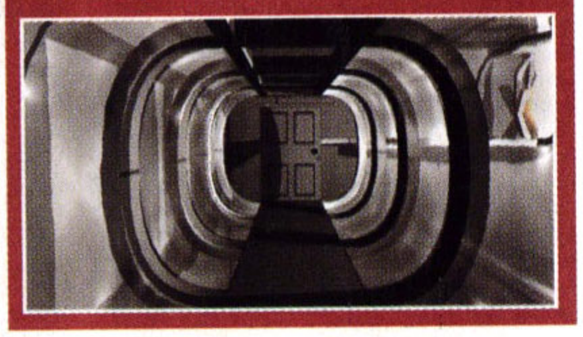
MIND
http://www.neuro-lab.net/mind/home.html

What comes to mind when someone mentions Doom 3 mods? Duct tape, perhaps, or Hello Kitty flashlights? The ambitious mod team at Neuro-Lab has something entirely different in mind. This total conversion focuses on puzzle solving and platform navigation in a surreal landscape, tasking players with using their minds to survive the twisting story.



While the game is still in internal alpha, we don't mind bringing you this early look at what could be a very entertaining download. The team plans for the ten levels to have multiple paths to victory, though combat is very deemphasized in Mind. Players only have three weapons, and they are really for solving puzzles much more than fighting. Your fists can break glass panes, for instance, while telekinesis has obvious uses and flare grenades will serve some other purpose.

Keep in mind that this mod is still in a very early larval state, and it may not pan out to be anything. Still, the intriguing visuals and first-person puzzle-based gameplay were enough to get us excited for it. In our minds, any mod that attempts to push new types of gameplay or simply function as a testing ground for new ideas is a good thing.



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 prize!

MULTI-SYSTEM

Spider-Man Friend or Foe

> **XBOX 360, Wii, PSP**

While standing in the Helicarrier between levels use the d-pad to enter these codes.

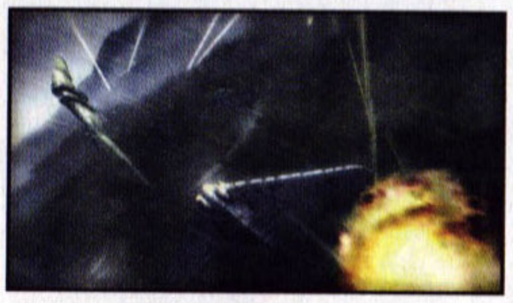
Get 5,000 Tokens – Up, Up, Down, Down, Left, Right

Unlock Green Goblin – Left, Down, Right, Right, Down, Left

Unlock Sandman – Right, Right, Right, Up, Down, Left

Unlock Venom – Left, Left, Right, Up, Down, Down

XBOX 360



Blazing Angels 2: Secret Missions of WWII

While playing a mission, pause the game and enter these codes.

Deal More Damage – LT (hold), LB, LB, RB, RT (hold), RB, RB, LB

God Mode – LT (hold), X, Y, Y, X, RT (hold), Y, X, X, Y.

While in the Main Menu enter this code.

Unlock all Planes & Missions – RT (hold), LT (hold), X, LB, RB, Y, Y, RB, LB, X

NINTENDO DS

Jam Sessions

While in the Free Play menu enter this code.

Unlock Three New Songs – Up, Up, Down, Down, Left, Right, Left, Right

"GI Droid"
(location unknown – last seen backing over grandma with a reindeer)

Code of the Month

PS3 Xbox

Stuntman: Ignition

Go to Extras in the Main Menu then select Passwords and enter these codes.

All Cheats – kungfupete
All Construction Items Unlocked – nobleman
Ice Wheels – iceage
New Props in Stunt Creator Mode – coolprop
Slow-Mo/Thrill Cam – hollywood
Unlock New Camera Effects – gfxmodes
Unlock Nitro Addiction – theduke
Unlock The MVC Spartan – fastride
Unlock Touchable Cheat – imtarex
Unlock Vision Switcher – wearefrozen

Steve Davis
New Jersey, NJ

Downloadable Spotlight

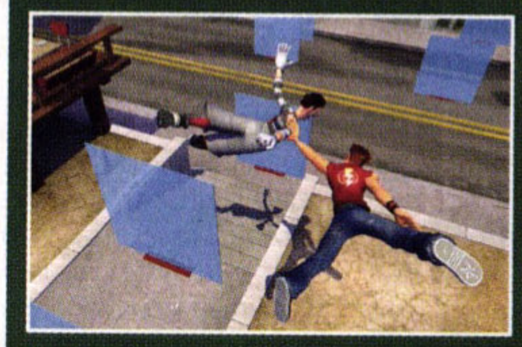
XBOX 360

Pirates vs. Ninjas Dodgeball

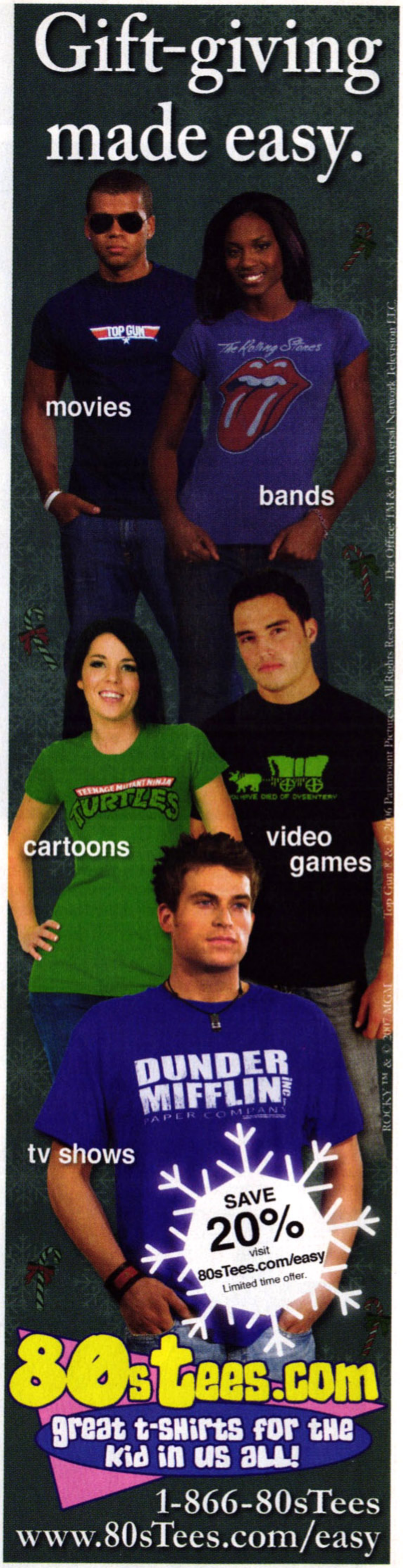
If the title made you think this game was only about pirates and ninjas, you'd be wrong! Equally important are the zombie and robot teams you'll play in this raucous approach to the classic schoolyard game. A fifth team remains unannounced. Developer Blazing Lizard is hoping no one will take offense at the liberties they've taken with the game – you'll be free to roam throughout the court (rather than be restricted to one side) as you attempt to peg the opposite team in one of the six 900-square meter arenas. Characters are also equipped with special combat moves to further excite the process. Dodgeball can be tackled by as many as four players offline or eight players over Xbox Live, and there's even a four-player co-op mode. We're always excited to see smaller developers experimenting with crazy new franchises – we're pretty sure this qualifies. Look for it sometime early next year.

PLAYSTATION 3

Pain



PlayStation Network is rapidly gaining speed as a competitive force against 360's Live Arcade, and Idol Minds' Pain is a clear example why. At its core, Pain is all about putting some poor schmuck into a giant slingshot and firing him off into a huge physics simulation – the end goal usually being to cause as much destruction and mayhem as possible. Nine different single-player modes include curiosities like Spank the Monkey and Mime Toss, while games like HORSE can be played online with others. Crazy ragdolling and the ability to watch full replays of your antics rounds out the insanity. For our part, we're always enthusiastic about a venue for smaller games like this to get a little time in the sun, and Pain looks like it should deliver some pretty big laughs when it releases this holiday season.



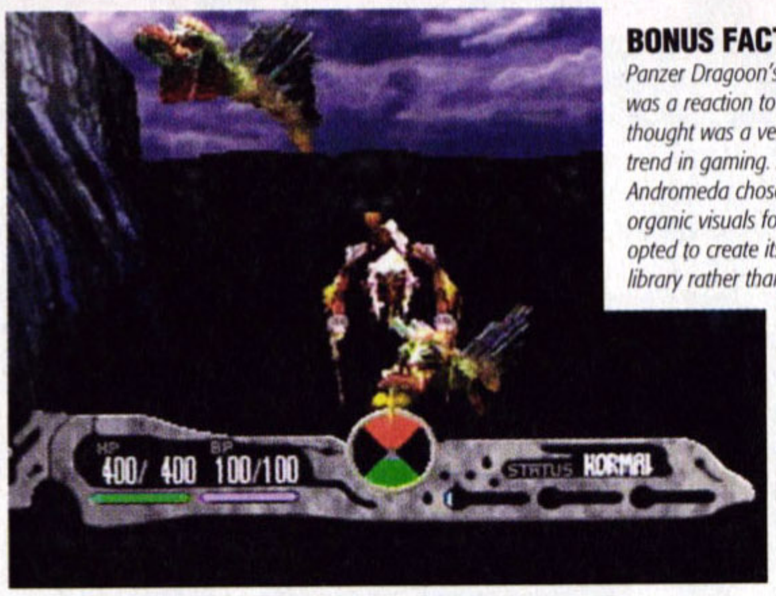
PANZER DRAGOON SAGA

THE SAD TALE OF THE SATURN'S LAST GREAT GAME

1998. It was a year like few others. It saw legendary game releases like Metal Gear Solid, The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time, Resident Evil 2, StarCraft, Half-Life, Gran Turismo, and Pokémon Red and Blue, to name just a few. But there was one game that received high critical acclaim, yet was experienced by a disproportionate few. Panzer Dragoon Saga was an RPG based off an established shooter franchise. Free of the tired "amnesiac saves humanity" plotline that still plagues modern RPGs, Saga's dusty post-apocalyptic world and exotic visuals were a fresh spin on the genre. With the game's 10-year anniversary soon approaching, what would be a better time to look back on one of the greatest games ever crafted by human hands?

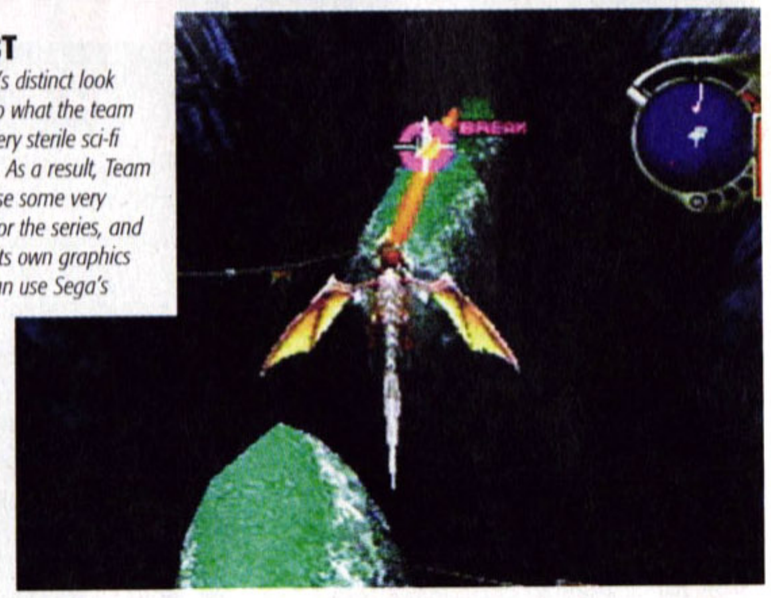
The Series

The original Panzer Dragoon launched in May of 1995 alongside Sega's Saturn system. It was the first title developed by Sega's internal development team called Team Andromeda, so named because Sega, in its quirky eccentricity, had asked its teams to name themselves after constellations that began with an "A." Originally, the team was only around 15 people, but it grew in size and eventually split to start development on two separate games. The first would be a direct sequel called Panzer Dragoon Zwei, which hit store shelves in 1996 to some moderate success. The second was a spinoff RPG that would explore the series' universe more fully, and would eventually be called Panzer Dragoon Saga.



BONUS FACT

Panzer Dragoon's distinct look was a reaction to what the team thought was a very sterile sci-fi trend in gaming. As a result, Team Andromeda chose some very organic visuals for the series, and opted to create its own graphics library rather than use Sega's



BONUS FACT

Panzer Dragoon Saga took twice the number of people as the previous entry in the series (Zwei), and twice as long to finish development

■ **The opening cinematic for Saga is about 10 minutes long, which was especially impressive at the time**

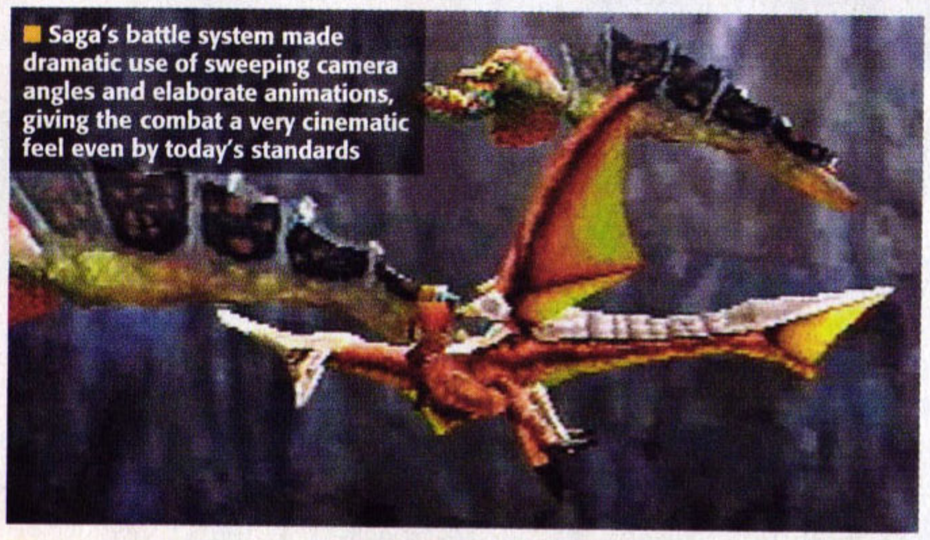
The Story

Saga delved further into the Panzer Dragoon fiction than either of the games before it. The somewhat bleak world of Panzer Dragoon saw its inhabitants fighting over ancient artifacts left over from an extinct civilization simply referred to as the "Ancients." Some of these artifacts were dark obelisk-like Towers – scattered across the world by the Ancients in order to control the environment and limit the human population. Some faction of their society wanted these Towers destroyed and created Dragons – mutated biological weapons – thereby starting a war that eventually annihilated their society.

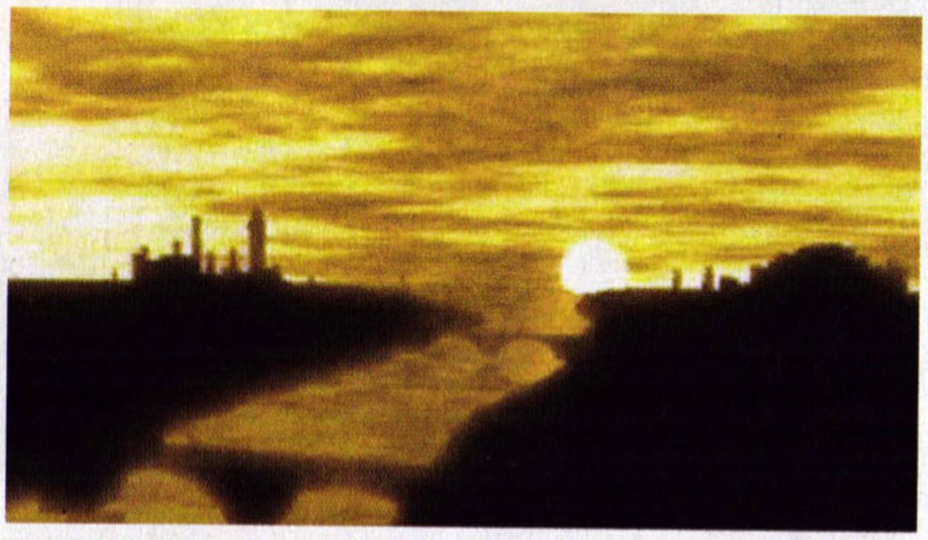
Players control a character named Edge, an imperial soldier who lived thousands of years after the Ancients. During an excavation disaster, Edge finds a cryogenically frozen woman named Azel who seems to have some ties to the Ancients. Edge quickly falls in line with a Dragon, which thrusts him into the battle against the Towers: a war that outlived its wagers. Edge must then struggle to unravel the secrets of the mysterious woman Azel and make some weighty decisions that will change the face of the planet.

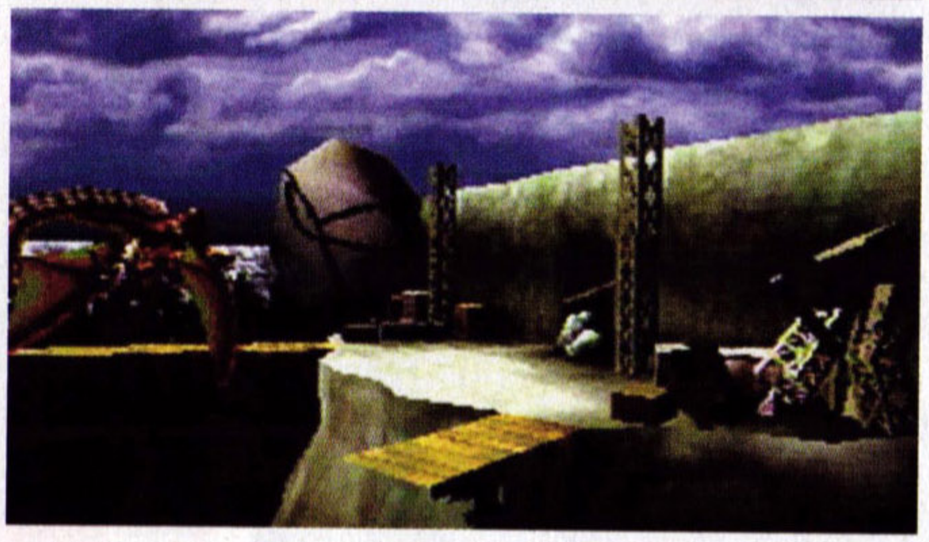
BONUS FACT

Sega of America made a few slight changes while localizing Saga for the U.S., tightening up the game's vague spiritual finale and delivering a more focused ending



■ Saga's battle system made dramatic use of sweeping camera angles and elaborate animations, giving the combat a very cinematic feel even by today's standards





The Game

Team Andromeda originally imagined a battle system where players would either chase or fight enemies for aerial space. This system was very original at the time, and the team tried to work in ways to incorporate this fight for space into a real-time battle system. In the end, what we got was a unique take on some RPG basics. Players had three active battle gauges that allowed them to attack or save up and combine them for stronger attacks. In addition, players would be able to fly around their opponents for better or safer attack positions. What made the system truly deep was the player's ability to morph their dragon's physical attributes in the middle of battle, creating literally hundreds of different hybrid Dragon forms to match their play style.

BONUS FACT

One of the developers from the first game had an interest in languages, and helped create a unique language for the series. Panzerese is an odd mix of ancient Greek, Latin, and Russian, and is the special language used in all the games' cutscenes

The Difficulties

While the team had a lot of creative freedom to pursue its vision, achieving its goals and working around the technical limitation of the Sega Saturn system were considerable challenges. Urban legend has it that team members were so worried that they might be cursed due to development hassles that they visited a Japanese shrine to be purified. The truth was Team Andromeda still had some trying times ahead of them.

Two members of the development team died before Saga saw release: one from a motorcycle accident, and another who committed suicide due to a variety of stress-related issues. Given the dark undertones of Saga's story and its moody environments, it's not hard to imagine that the tragedies that befell Team Andromeda had some kind impact on the formation of its game.

■ Here you can see the three action gauges that fill up in the bottom right, and in the center you can see the radar that tracks your location and shows you the safe zones

BONUS FACT

It's rumored that Sega no longer has copies of the game's original code, making a re-release of the game very unlikely. In fact, the re-release of the original Panzer Dragoon found on Panzer Dragoon Orta for Xbox was actually a copy of the PC version because the Saturn version's architecture would have been too much work to port.

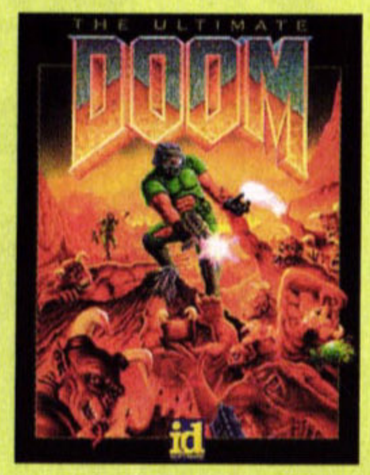
The End?

While expectations for the game were rather high in Japan, and the Panzer Dragoon brand seemed ready to explode with popularity when Saga's development first started, by the time the game actually released in 1998, the Saturn was all but a dead system in the U.S. Critically, the game was a smash hit, lauded as one of the year's best, and generally considered the Saturn's finest title. But despite glowing reviews across the board, Saga was destined to fail.

Sega had moved on – shifted its focus to developing its next console, the Dreamcast, and wasn't willing to risk any more money on a system that had already lost so much. Therefore, less than 20,000 retail copies of Panzer Dragoon Saga were even made, making it a very rare title and a prize for collectors. Still, it's the general gaming population that has missed out, and it doesn't look like we'll see a sequel anytime soon. Team Andromeda disbanded not long after Saga's release. However, certain members of the old team have expressed a desire to make another Panzer Dragoon someday, and for Panzer Dragoon fans across the world that's a little hope to live on. ■ ■ ■

This Month In Gaming History

On December 10, 1993 a relatively unknown developer called id Software released a small titled called Doom on an unsuspecting populace. Doom pioneered first-person shooting and network multiplayer gaming. Originally, the game was uploaded to an FTP at the University of Wisconsin-Madison where people could download it as a freeware game. Within two years, an estimated 10 million people had downloaded the software, and in late 1995 it was reportedly installed on more computers than Microsoft's operating system Windows 95.

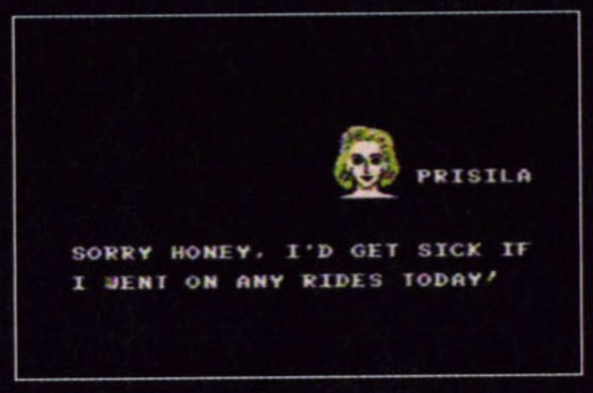


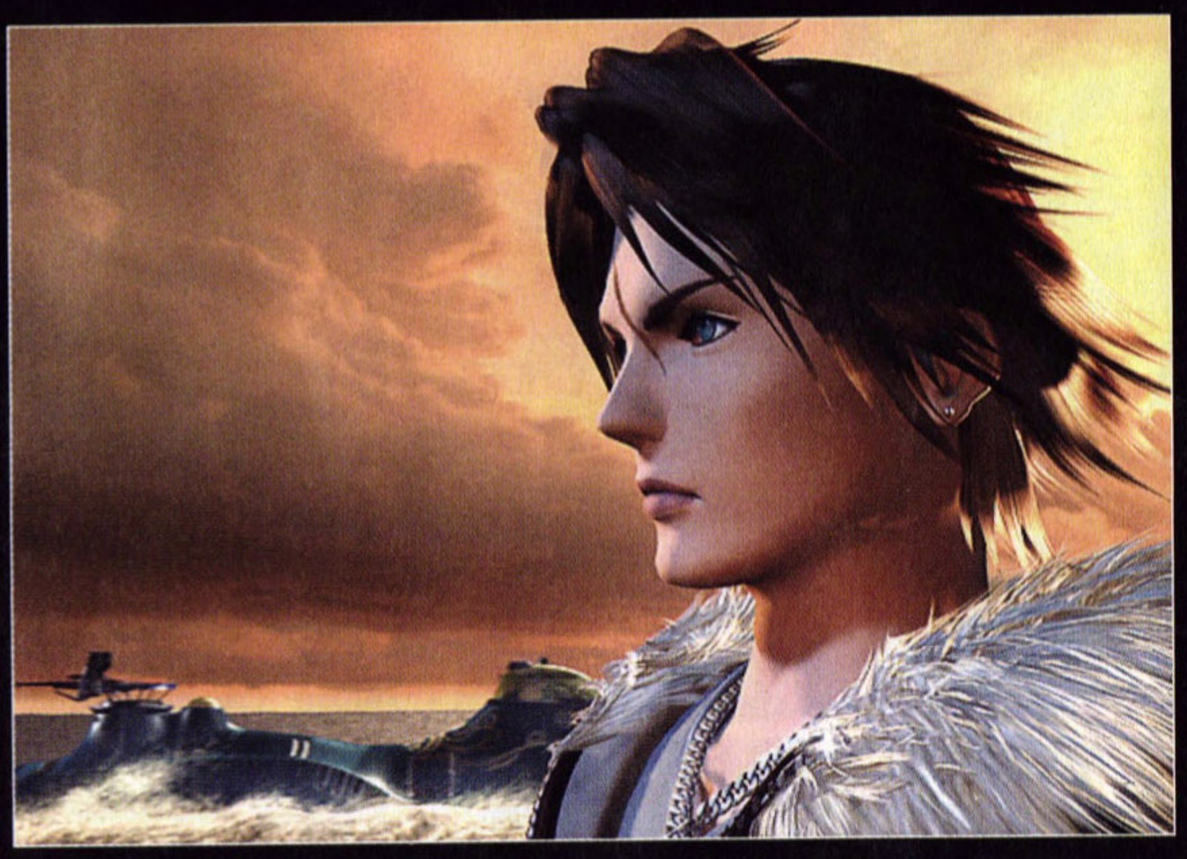
NES

WALL STREET KID

> STYLE 1-PLAYER SIMULATION **> PUBLISHER** SOFEL **> DEVELOPER** SOFEL **> RELEASE** 1990

Wall Street Kid was probably something parents bought their kids hoping they could actually learn something from playing video games. After the initial birthday party disappointment wore off, we imagine kids eventually warmed up to the funny dialogue and addicting nature of money-making. Most of the game takes place in your office where you can read the newspaper, trade stocks on your computer, or punch the clock to call it a day. Over the summer of 1990, players must purchase a house, a yacht, and eventually a castle to win Uncle Benedict's billions. You also have to marry the gold-digging Prisila and shower her with lavish gifts all while keeping in shape. If she leaves you or you get too flabby it's game over, but the spending and exercise requirements aren't too strict. The bland presentation and numbers-based point-and-click gameplay may turn off some, but it would be interesting to see a modern resurrection of the Kid on DS.



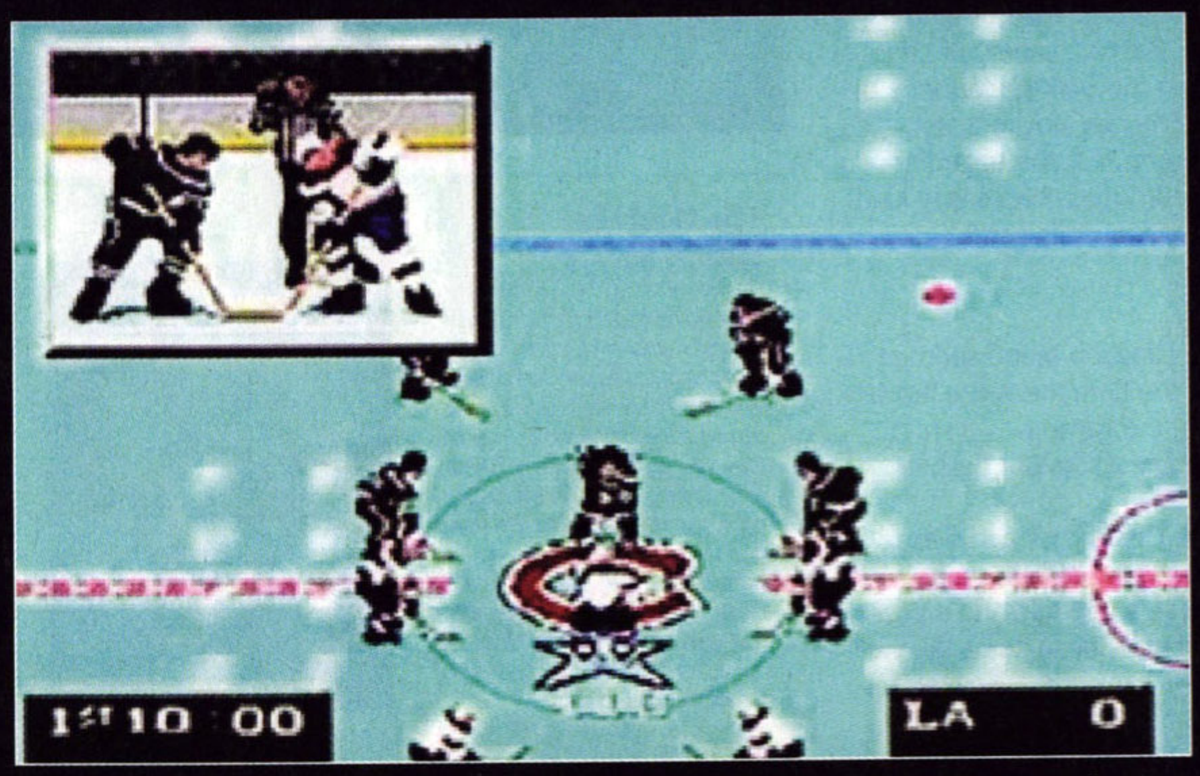


PSONE

FINAL FANTASY VIII

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ROLE-PLAYING GAME **> PUBLISHER** SQUARESOFT **> DEVELOPER** SQUARESOFT **> RELEASE** 1999

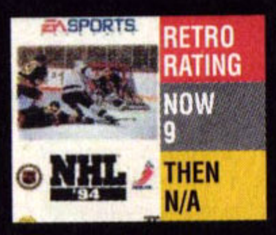
Final Fantasy VIII is by far the most put-upon installment of the biggest RPG series in America. In this case, the haters are wrong. The opening movie is one of the best in gaming history, and the introductory hours in Balamb Garden and the SeeD test do an excellent job setting the tone of the adventure. The story is ultimately about Squall and Rinoa hooking up, with incidental world-ending time compression thrown in to complicate the romance. A big change for the series is the mechanic of drawing magic from foes and stocking it like an item (not as learned spells). The magic can then be junctioned to characters to augment their statistics, which is much more beneficial in the long run than a one-off cast. In fact, when done properly, players won't have to rely so much on the spectacular (but lengthy) Guardian Force summons. Final Fantasy VIII may not be an exemplar of what it means to be a part of the Final Fantasy canon, but it's a great role-playing game regardless – despite Zell and Selphie.



SEGA GENESIS

NHL '94

> STYLE 1 TO 4-PLAYER SPORTS **> PUBLISHER** ELECTRONIC ARTS **> DEVELOPER** HIGH SCORE PRODUCTIONS **> RELEASE** 1993



Fans may have balked when NHL '94 ditched the blood and fighting, but in many ways this is the ultimate hockey game from the 16-bit generation. Though it didn't feature a full-fledged season mode, the game's battery pack allowed you to save line edits, and the gamer profile kept records of your best performances. On the ice, the addition of one-timers and four-way play – which allowed you to lace up the skates with three other friends – brought teamwork to the forefront and solidified this game's status as a dorm room staple. Though the action feels sluggish compared to modern day hockey games, the nostalgia of recalling all the money plays and skating with long lost teams like "The Whale" and the Nordiques keeps this title amongst the top sports games of all time.

*Score given to the game when it first appeared in Game Informer. Final Fantasy VIII (GI #77 09/99)

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UNLIMITED LAUNCH: NOV. 16

Bask in '80s nostalgia as you check out more concept art and screenshots of the new Ghostbusters game.

Raymond Stantz Unplugged

Bryan sits down with Blues Brother and ectoplasm expert Dan Aykroyd to discuss bringing Ghostbusters to video games.

Eye of Judgment

Judgment players will love this printable checklist of every single Eye of Judgment card available upon the game's launch.

Turning Point: Fall of Liberty

Check out concept art and extra screenshots of Codemasters' alternate reality World War II shooter.

LittleBigPlanet

Read our full interview with Media Molecule's Kareem Ettouney about the art of the PlayStation's promising platformer.

Buy Cool Stuff

Who needs Google when Game Informer provides you with hard links to every product in our Holiday Buying Guide? Don't say we never gave you anything.

ALSO ONLINE THIS MONTH:

Keep up to date with the latest blockbuster reviews during the busy holiday season.

Grand Prize
1 Winner

> A Copy of World in Conflict™ for PC

> An Official *World in Conflict* Soviet Track Jacket

> *World in Conflict* t-shirt

Second Prize
4 Winners

> A Copy of *World in Conflict* for PC

> *World in Conflict* t-shirt

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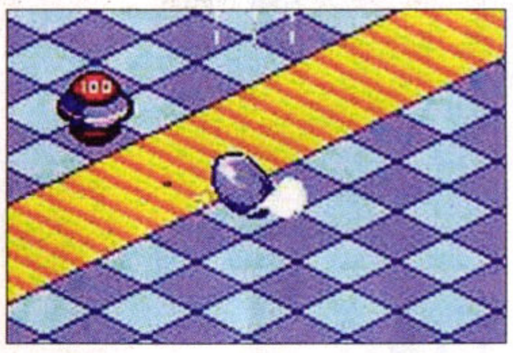
VIDEO GAME TRIVIA

This holiday, it's important to remember those less fortunate than us. In video game terms, that means the people who aren't getting to play all those awesome games showing up on store shelves these last couple months. In fact, did you know in some parts of the world people have created knock-off consoles to hoodwink foreign consumers. Complete this quiz to find out which crappy knockoff you might have purchased in a different life.

1 If the letters we get are any indication, you all really have a thing for the little blue hedgehog. Any idea which one of these was a real Sonic game?

A. Sonic and Amy
B. Sonic in Space
C. Sonic Labyrinth
D. Sonic and His Little Blue Friend

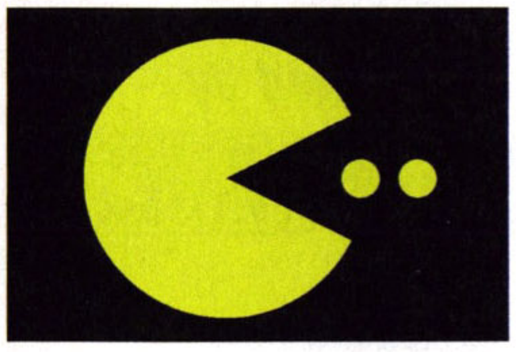


2 If you don't already own it, then good luck tracking down a copy of Panzer Dragoon Saga without selling a kidney. What was the name of the young hero dragon rider in that role-playing classic? (If you get this wrong, you didn't read this issue thoroughly.)

A. Blade
B. Edge
C. Cloud
D. Bela Lugosi

3 Pac-Man sure must have done something to piss those ghosts off. You ever think about that? I mean, I bet there's a story there. Anyway, everybody knows what color Pinky was, but what about Blinky?

A. Red
B. Orange
C. Green
D. Yellow



4 There sure have been a lot of Star Trek games. Do you remember what ship you commanded in the classic PlayStation game Star Trek Online?

A. The Enterprise.
B. Trick Question – Star Trek Online hasn't come out yet
C. Trick Question – Star Trek Online never came out on the PlayStation
D. B and C

5 In their heyday, you could hardly enter a game store without having some new 1v1 fighting game shoved in your face. Which of these 2D fighters could never have been shoved into your face, primarily due to it not existing?

A. WeaponLord
B. Doomsday Warrior
C. Double Dragon V: The Shadow Falls
D. Blade War

6 Last month, we told you about Tim Schafer's sweet new game, and we even mentioned some stuff about his previous work. Presuming you read that, you ought to know which of these doesn't belong.

A. Day of the Tentacle
B. Full Throttle
C. Leisure Suit Larry in the Land of the Lounge Lizards
D. Grim Fandango

7 Crazy Taxi showed up for the first time in arcades, but on what home console could you first play it in the comfort of your own home?

A. Sony PlayStation
B. Sega Dreamcast
C. Microsoft Xbox
D. Never gonna happen – you'd have to buy an arcade cabinet

8 Dungeons & Dragons had a profound effect on video games from the earliest years. There have also been a lot of games using the license. Which one of these was not a subtitle to a D&D branded video game?

A. Eye of the Beholder
B. Curse of the Azure Bonds
C. Death Knights of Krynn
D. Keep on the Borderlands

9 What was the avian-related name of the bad guys in the original Contra game?

A. Eagle Strike
B. Red Falcon
C. Hawk Fire
D. Big Bird

10 While we're on the subject, we've all beaten Contra with 30 lives, but can you look us in the eye and say you really took that sucker down with only three lives?

A. Yes (If you're lying, we'll know)
B. No

BREAKDOWN

25% is how much Ubisoft's second quarter sales were up this year

10,000 The number of game copying devices and mod chips that Nintendo seized during a recent raid in Hong Kong. We're totally imagining Miyamoto busting through the window with his SMG in hand before wasting some pirating software engineers. Yeah

18,000 people attended the recent E for All video game expo, according to the organizers, IDG World Expo

$580 million is the current accepted estimate on how much money consumers will spend in 2007 on downloadable content for their home consoles

1 is the loneliest number that you'll ever do

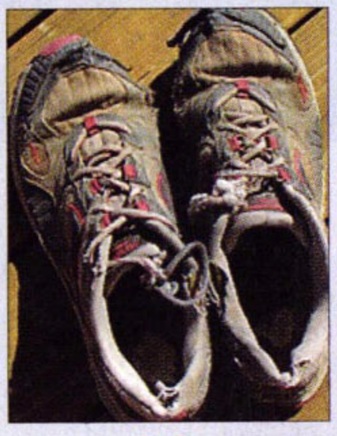
★ Trivia Score & Rank ★

0-1:
The Nintendo Half-Screen

2-3:
The PlayStation Invisible

4-5:
Sega Apprentice System

6-7:
Microsoft Y-Box



8-9:
My Old Shoes

10:
Nokia N-Gage

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Video Game Trivia Answers: 1. C 2. B 3. A 4. D 5. D 6. C 7. B 8. D 9. B 10. A or B

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Mind by Masi.
Body by milk.

My hero? Think hard.
It's milk. Some studies suggest
teens who choose it instead
of sugary drinks tend to
be leaner, plus the protein
helps build muscle.
So grab a glass. Then you can
change the future, too.

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