GAMEINFORMER

THE WORLD'S #1 COMPUTER & VIDEO GAME MAGAZINE

WORLD EXCLUSIVE

TIBERIUM

Command & Conquer Evolves

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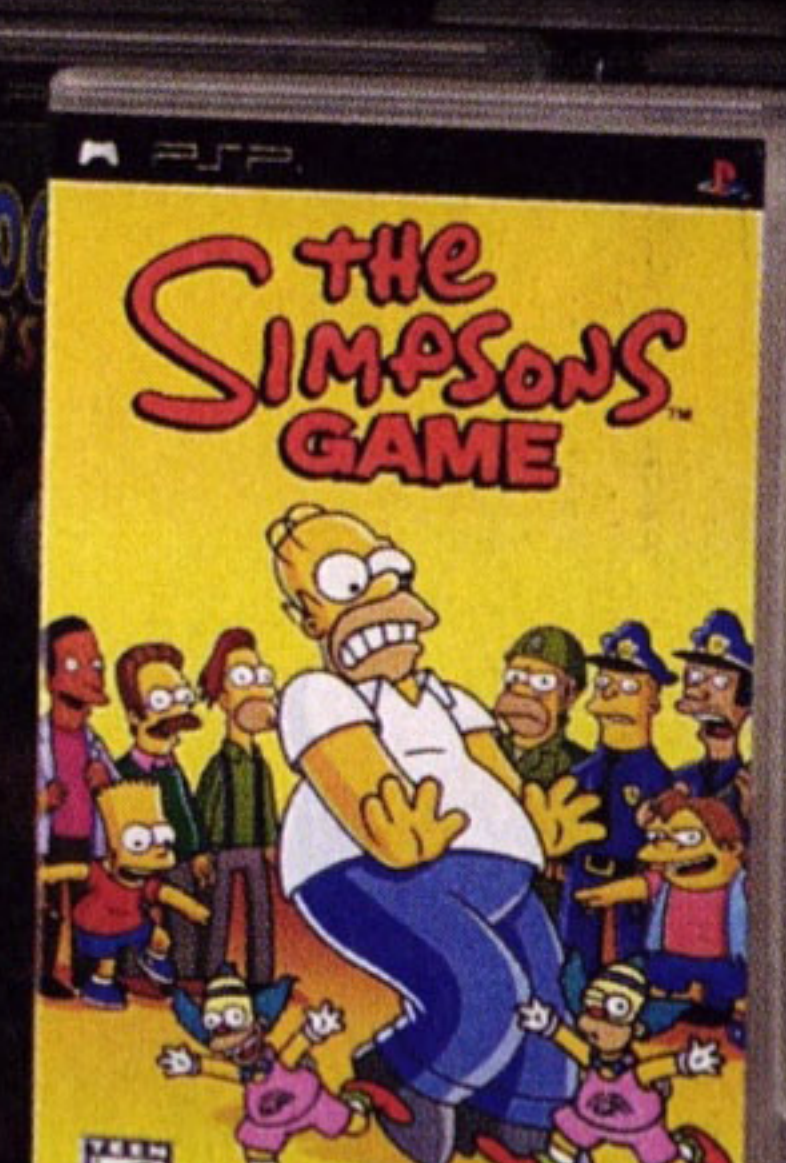The family you want to spend time with this holiday season.

Coming
Spring '08
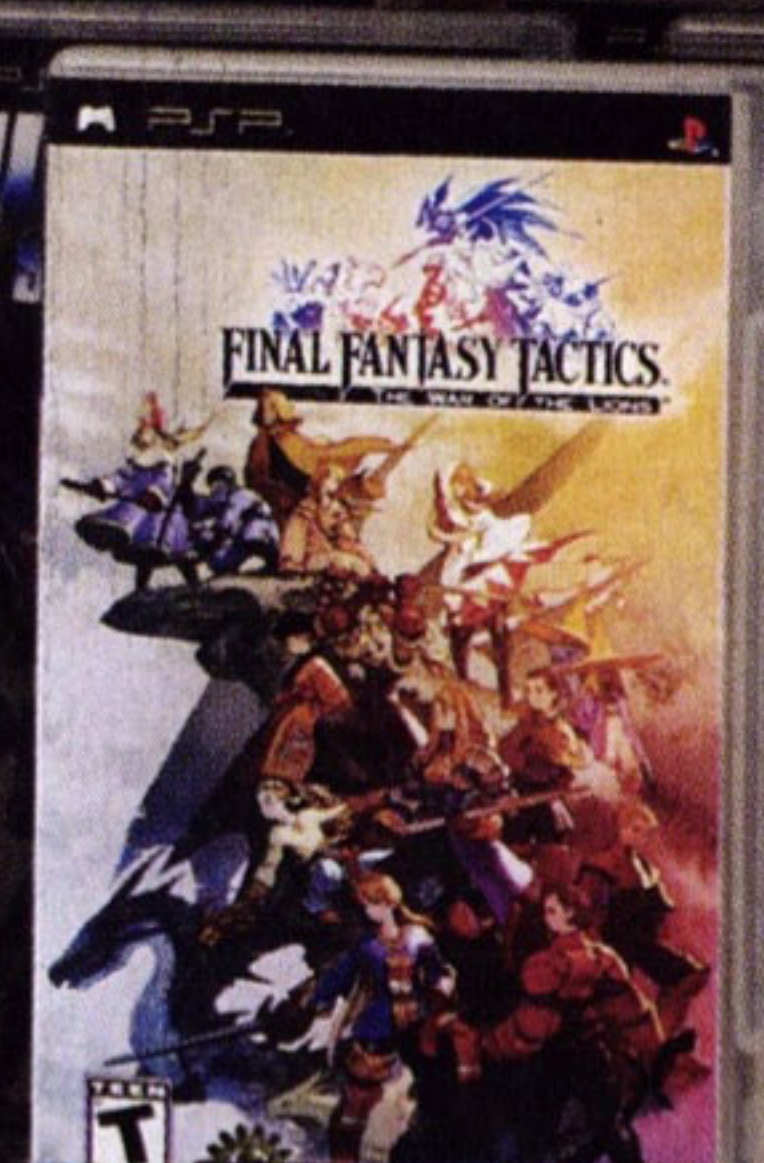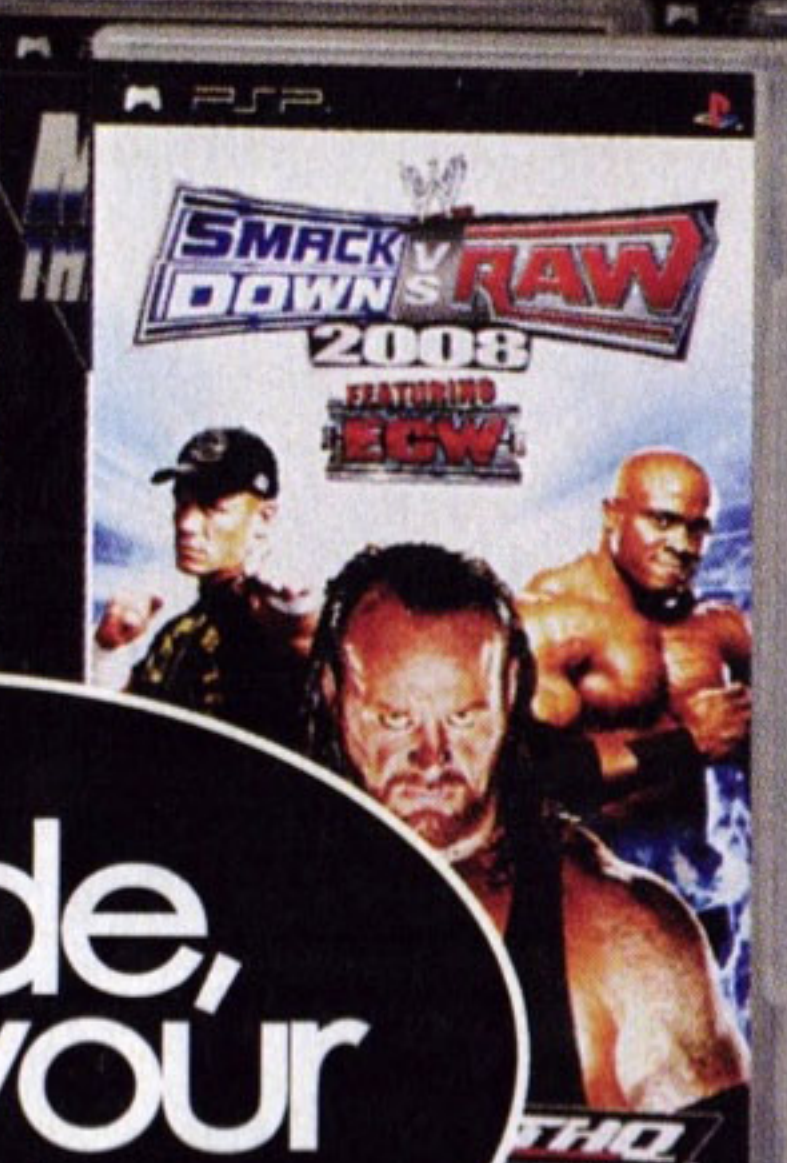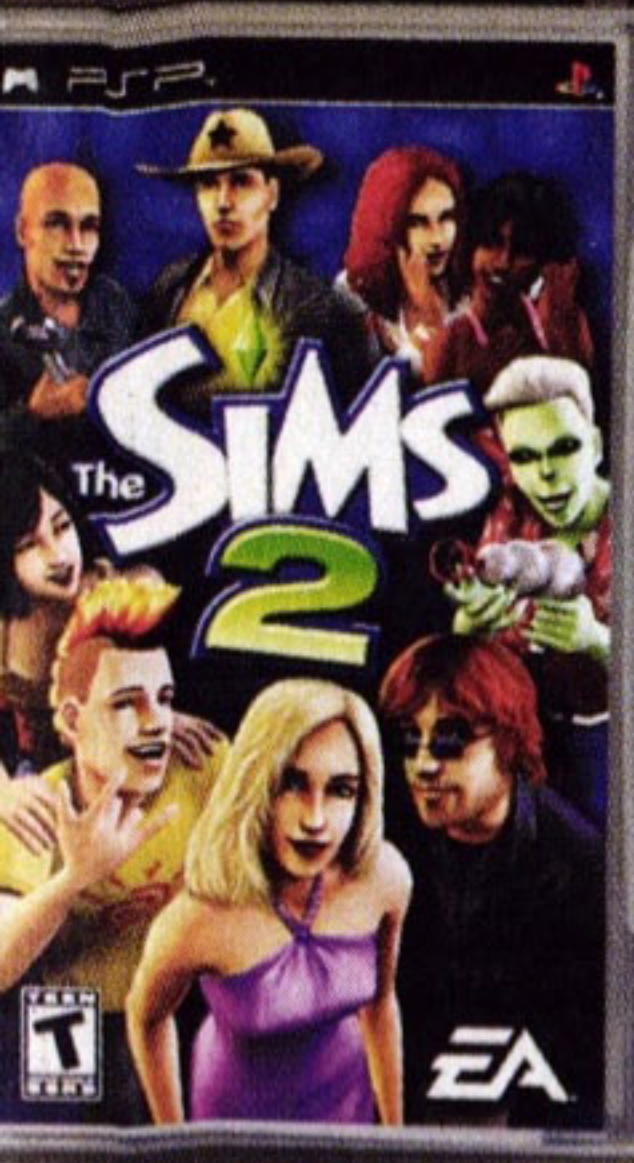
MARGARET

CREATOR, FOUNDER,
HEAD BOHEMIAN OF MARGARETOPIA

STEVE

THE GREAT LEADER
OF THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF STEVE

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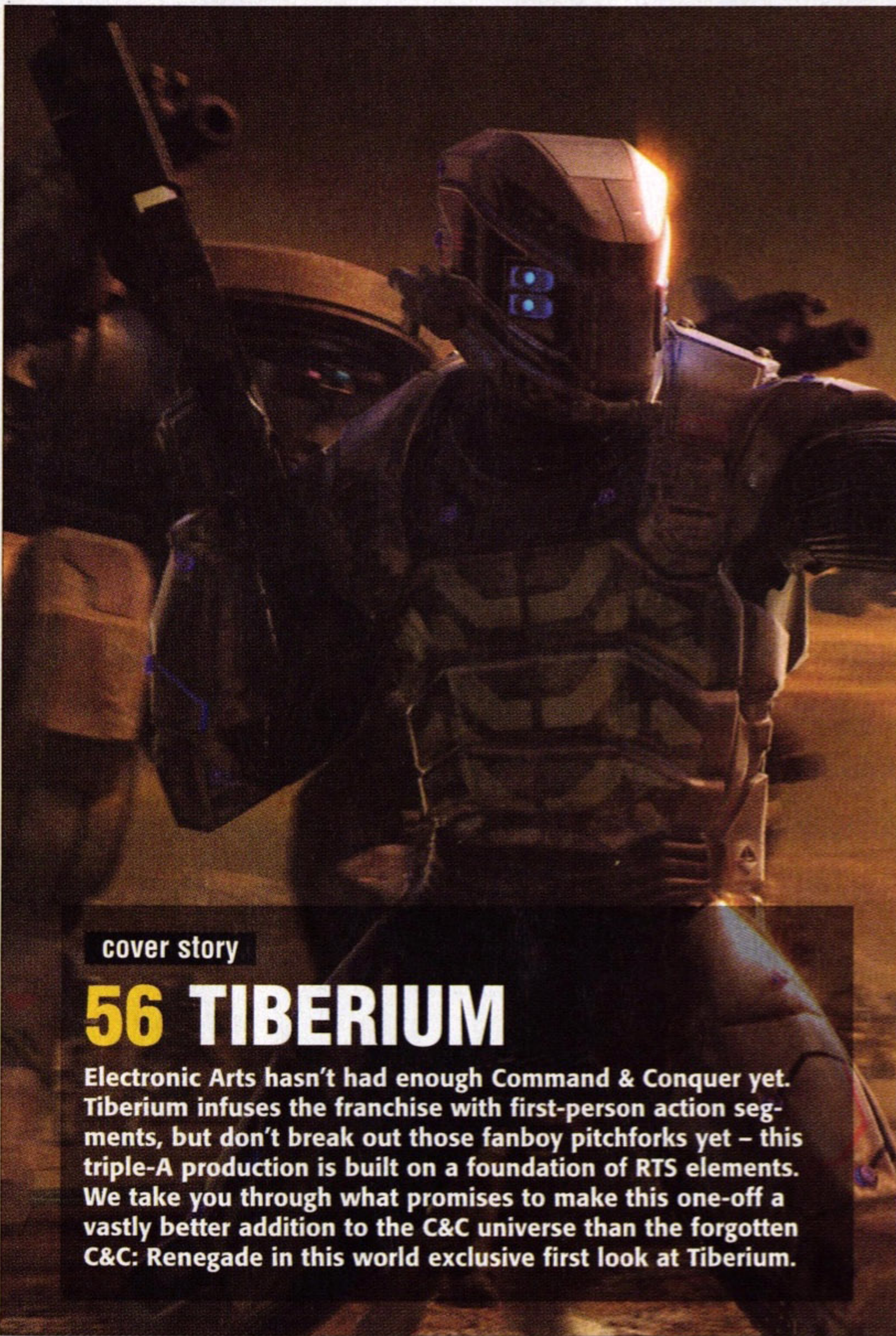
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WREAKING HAVOK
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There was some sweet gaming to be had over the last year. Take a look back at 2007's cream of the crop, both to reminisce on awesome experiences and to find any diamonds in the rough you may have missed.

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WHAT A YEAR IT WAS

ANDY McNAMARA
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

It is weird when you think about it. The year that was 2007 could arguably be the best year for video game software to date. Yet we are still early in the expected life spans of each of the respective systems, leaving me excited about the upcoming year and beyond. I know I can think of at least 20 titles off the top of my head that I can't wait to play (I'm looking at you, Spore), but for now I'd like to concentrate on the people that I think made 2007 so spectacular: the game developers.

Try to think of a year where so many developers delivered such a wide variety of innovative and highly entertaining product. The triumphs of BioShock's story and breathtaking setting are the stuff of legend. Ken Levine and the crew at 2K Boston nailed it. And they weren't alone. The eye-popping graphics and pulse-pounding gameplay that Infinity Ward crafted for Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare has set a bar that other developers will be chasing for years to come.

These new benchmarks in game creation aren't just coming from isolated teams, either. The entire game development community from A to Z has made huge strides as they master the new tools at their disposal. Who could have imagined that the story presentation of Mass Effect or the theater mode in Halo 3 were even possible a year ago, much less had the foresight and creativity to get these amazing pieces of software out this early in a generation of consoles? Not many, but don't think these will be the last innovations we will see (especially from developers as talented as BioWare and Bungie).

I will remember 2007 as the year that developers finally started to shine as master storytellers rather than just game makers, and for this I thank developers everywhere.

To read more about the games that made 2007 so special, turn to our Top 50 (pg. 32), but to truly enjoy the amazing body of work that developers everywhere created just for us, you really have to get out there and play them.

Cheers,

Andy >> *andy@gameinformer.com*
Handle: The Game Hombre **Expertise:** RPGs, Action/Platform, Driving, First-Person Shooters **Interests:** *Dexter* (Season 2 Is Amazing), *30 Rock*, Score Hero, Rereading *A Song Of Ice And Fire* (George R.R. Martin's Epic Is Even Better The Second Time) **Dislikes:** The Writers' Strike Screwing Up Way Too Much Good TV, iPod Commercials That Ruin Perfectly Good Songs, Singing Animals **Current Favorite Games:** Call Of Duty 4: Modern Warfare, Assassin's Creed, Mass Effect, Super Mario Galaxy, Guitar Hero III: Legends Of Rock, Portal, Picross DS, Rock Band, World Of Warcraft, Hellgate: London

Reiner >> *reiner@gameinformer.com*
Handle: The Raging Gamer **Expertise:** RPGs, Action, First-Person Shooters, Strategy, Sports, Fighting **Interests:** Call Of Duty 4's Multiplayer (What's More Important: Sleep Or Reaching Level 55?), Xbox 360's Live Turns Five Controller (The New Plastic Rocks), *Torchwood*, Reliving Mass Effect For A Second Time, 2K Boston's Next Project (OMG!!!) **Dislikes:** Xbox Live's Movie Downloads, Achievement Farming In Online Matches (Play The Game The Way You Are Supposed To!) **Current Favorite Games:** Call Of Duty 4: Modern Warfare, Mass Effect, Assassin's Creed, Super Mario Galaxy, Halo 3, Resident Evil: The Umbrella Chronicles

Matt >> *matt@gameinformer.com*
Handle: The Original Gamer **Expertise:** First-Person Shooters, Action/Platform, Action/Adventure, Action/Sports **Interests:** Robert Wyatt – *Comicopera*, Rereading *The Golden Compass* So I Can Be A Nitpicky Fanboy When The Movie Comes Out, People That Are Obsessed With Numerical Scores And Don't Actually Read Reviews, Chantix (Miracle Drug) **Dislikes:** The TV Writers' Strike (My World Is Crumbling), My Unhealthy Diet **Current Favorite Games:** Super Mario Galaxy, Uncharted: Drake's Fortune, Contra 4, Rock Band

Kato >> *kato@gameinformer.com*
Handle: The Game Katana **Expertise:** Sports, Racing, Action/Adventure, Action/Platform **Interests:** *The Darjeeling Limited*, *Daughters And Suns* By The Owls, *Fight Back With David Horowitz*, *Frank* By Amy Winehouse, Completing The Final Stage Of Ninja Warrior (And Boy Are My Arms Tired) **Dislikes:** Oasis' Want For A Drummer With An Imagination (Staccato Drum Lines Get Boring Song After Song. Bring Back Whitey!), Clearing Brush At My Ranch In Crawford, Texas **Current Favorite Games:** Mass Effect, Stuntman: Ignition, Skate, SimCity Societies

Adam >> *adam@gameinformer.com*
Handle: The Alpha Gamer **Expertise:** RPGs, Strategy, First-Person Shooters, Fighting **Interests:** *MI:5* Season 6, Re-reading *A Song Of Ice And Fire* And *Sandman*, The First Snow Of The Year, Re-discovering Final Fantasy XII (PS3 Upscaling FTW) **Dislikes:** My Dead WoW Server (Low Pop FTL), *Shadowdance* By Robert Bailey, People Who Expect Me To Wear Pants In My Own House, Slowdown In War Of The Lions (It's A PSone Game, C'mon!) **Current Favorite Games:** World Of Warcraft, Crysis, Hellgate: London, Tabula Rasa, Warhammer 40,000 Squad Command, Rock Band, Universe At War

Joe >> *joe@gameinformer.com*
Handle: The Real American Gamer **Expertise:** RPGs, Adventure, Action, Strategy, Puzzle **Interests:** Watching The Friday The 13th Series Start To Finish (Why Did Jason Go To Manhattan?), Tricking Ben Into Watching *BloodRayne 2* (Chump!), *The Host*, Watching Fans Of Stupid Shows Suffer (Thank You, Writers' Strike!) **Dislikes:** The Fact *Dexter* Only Airs Once Per Week, Luis The Oft-Forgotten Gamer (Worst Co-worker Ever!), Restaurants With "Tugg" In Their Names **Current Favorite Games:** Mass Effect, Assassin's Creed, SimCity Societies, Guitar Hero III: Legends Of Rock, Tony Hawk's Proving Ground

Miller >> *miller@gameinformer.com*
Handle: The Once And Future Gamer **Expertise:** RPGs, Action/Adventure, Platform, First-Person Shooters, Music, Puzzle **Interests:** *Beowulf* (Movie, Not Game – Never The Game), The X-Men Comics Getting Back On Track, Apple Cider Cheese Fudge In The Autumn, Killing Off Joe's Character – And Him Liking It **Dislikes:** The Writers' Strike (Joe, You're As Pissed Off As The Rest Of Us), When My DVR Fills Up, People Who Spend More Time Complaining About Games Than Playing Them **Current Favorite Games:** Mass Effect, Rock Band, Super Mario Galaxy, Half-Life 2, Portal, Halo 3, Uncharted: Drake's Fortune, Assassin's Creed

Bertz >> *mattbertz@gameinformer.com*
Handle: Lord Gamington III **Expertise:** First-Person Shooters, Sports, Action, RPGs, Strategy **Interests:** *No Country For Old Men* (Coen Brothers Are Back!), Bar None NYC Vikings Crew, 99 Miles To Philly (Best Cheesesteak In NYC), *The Wire* Season 5, GLaDOS **Dislikes:** GroinGate 2007 (Can Gaborik Ever Stay Healthy?), Pitchfork's Reviews Of Reissues And Greatest Hits Albums, Crysis Crippling My Inferior-Yet-Powerful PC **Current Favorite Games:** Portal, Call Of Duty 4: Modern Warfare, Assassin's Creed, Mass Effect, Crysis, Guitar Hero III: Legends Of Rock

Ben >> *ben@gameinformer.com*
Handle: Your Friendly Neighborhood Gamer **Expertise:** Action/Adventure, Action/RPGs, Platform, Survival Horror, First-Person Shooters **Interests:** *Under The Blacklight* By Rilo Kiley, *Night Watch* And Even Better *Day Watch*, Uwe Boll's Newest Epic – *Postal* (I Hear It's Going To Be Awesome…Wait A Minute, Who Told Me That?) **Dislikes:** Getting Duped Into Watching *BloodRayne 2* (Why Did I Ever Trust Joe?), Captain America's New Costume **Current Favorite Games:** Call Of Duty 4: Modern Warfare, The Legend Of Zelda: Phantom Hourglass, Mass Effect, Ratchet & Clank Future: Tools Of Destruction, Frontlines: Fuel Of War

Bryan >> *bryan@gameinformer.com*
Handle: The Gamer's Advocate **Expertise:** Action/Adventure, RPGs, Survival Horror, First-Person Shooters, Rhythm **Interests:** Letting The Flood Of Rock Band DLC Wash Over Me, The Great Guitar Marathon (Sorry, Vore Family), Finally Starting *Battlestar Galactica* When It Hits HD DVD **Dislikes:** Joe's Glossing Over The Fact That He Himself Watched *BloodRayne 2* (I Was There, Unfortunately), Being Paralyzed In The Decision As To What Awesome Game To Play Next **Current Favorite Games:** Contra 4, Call Of Duty 4: Modern Warfare, Guitar Hero III: Legends Of Rock, Rock Band, Apollo Justice: Ace Attorney

1 Ten hut! Infinity Ward's Todd Alderman is ready for war on the digital battlefield **2** Billy hangs with the Capcom Crew (that's what they call themselves! It's like a gang) **3** We like to call them the "silent heroes" of Game Informer; others refer to them as "the people that pay the rent." GI's ad team hangs at Nite to Unite in San Francisco, from left to right: Damon Watson, Suzanne Lang, Janey Stringer, and Amy "Blog It Out" Arnold **4** Matt Bertz takes in a sumo match in Tokyo with video game analyst Michael Pachter **5** Coslough Harrison of Knoxville, TN, winner of the Game Informer/Jeep sweepstakes, poses with his autographed Tony Hawk skateboard deck **6** Big Boi of Outkast, seen here with a southernplayalistic adillacspecialeditionhalo3xbox360 **7** It's Billy Time! GI's man on the scene, seen here with Tecmo's John Inada and Yoshimi Yasuda **8** Miller, Kato, Sandbox Strategy's Jay Fitzloff, and GI fan Matt Putnam have a "Lord of the Flies" moment in the GI bullpen

NEW THINGS ARE SCARY

Why are all the games on the cover of Game Informer always a year or more from release? It makes no sense. Take Brütal Legend, for example. The game isn't expected until late 2008, and you're talking about it in the fall of 2007! Wouldn't it be more beneficial to feature titles that are closer to release and have less chance of changing radically?

Justin Voels
Via gmail.com

■ **When it comes** to the cover of Game Informer, we prefer to chase down exclusive first looks at never-before-seen titles. If you want information on games that have already been announced, we have a Previews section packed with details and screens on upcoming titles. But if you want to learn about a brand new game, the cover stories pull back the curtain on the titles that we think will be big a little further down the road. It's like getting a glance at the future of gaming. Sure, some things may change between the game's announcement and its release, but that's part of the excitement. In the early stages of development, a game has a ton of potential and plenty of time for developers to harness it – and we get you in on the ground floor.

QUALITY CONTROL

The Wii is garbage. That is the opinion of some people, but it also seems to be Game Informer's opinion. As of issue 173, the average rating you have given Wii games is a 7.1, whereas the average score of PS3 games is 7.8. So, despite how much positive lip service you give the Wii in your pages, your reviews show your true feelings on the matter.

Chris McGrath
via mail

■ **Averages are only numbers, not feelings.** Hypothetically, let's say that console A has 50 games available, half of which score perfect 10s, and the other half get lousy 5s. That comes out to an average score of 7.5. On the other hand, console B also has 50 games, but each one of them scores an 8. The average score of console B's library is higher – but wouldn't you rather own a console with 25 nearly flawless games? The point is that aggregate review scores don't accurately represent the breadth of quality games a system has to offer, nor do they take into account a console's non-

software related advantages. When utilized properly, the Wii's features offer innovative and entertaining gameplay that you can't get anywhere else. Just because we don't like the (more numerous) games that fail to do this isn't proof of an anti-Nintendo bias.

MR. MALAPROP

My friend showed me a video online called "Haloid" that depicts Samus Aran fighting Master Chief while he takes out various Covenant. At the end, the maker of the video (Monty Oum) reveals that Master Chief is actually a woman, like Samus. I heard Mr. Oum got an angry letter from Bungie because his Master Chief is a female. So, my question is: Is Bungie shogunist?

David Novak
via yahoo.com

■ **We're not quite sure how to answer that.** Bungie is a privately-held company, and though it does have executive leadership, it is not (to the best of our knowledge) governed by a shogun. Does that help?

DELAYED BLAST

I am really disappointed that Super Smash Bros. Brawl got pushed back to February. I pre-ordered it in July, so you can only imagine how hard it was to wait just until December. Waiting until February is ridiculous! I was looking at screenshots of it online, and it looks finished to me. Do you know why Nintendo delayed it, or will we the gamers just have to keep guessing? I hope Nintendo knows how mad it made Smash Bros. fans!

Matt Botti
via email

I am very disappointed with Rockstar Games and its delay of GTA 4 until next year. The least Rockstar could do for its fans who are feeling betrayed is release a new trailer – or better yet, a demo. But it seems like they lost all love for their loyal customers, since they haven't even revealed any new information or screenshots. I guess we'll just be dissatisfied until the game comes out, whenever that is.

Brandon Burford
via email

■ **The delay of two of this year's most-anticipated titles is a big deal,** and lots of gamers are upset. One thing to understand, though, is that companies don't delay games just to stick it to legions of paying fans. Sometimes timing issues are a concern, but usually it's because a game simply needs more time to get polished before it plays the way it needs to. The initial announcements may have been frustrating, but both games will probably be better because of the delay. Thankfully, this holiday season has plenty of awesome stuff to play while you wait for Brawl and GTA 4.

SHADES OF RED

Last week my friend and I were doing a system link over at his house and we were plugging in my 360. I hadn't put in the video/audio cord yet, but he turned it on, giving me the red rings of death. He turned it off, I plugged in the video, and it has worked fine ever since. My thought is, maybe this whole red rings of death is a misunderstanding on a massive scale.

Teddy M.
via verizon.net

■ **The red rings are not a misunderstanding,** and we have the bricked units to prove it. What you experienced – four flashing red lights – is actually what we call the "Fake-Out Red Ring." Any Xbox 360 will display those lights if the AV cable is not properly plugged in. Once you get everything hooked up, you can keep playing worry-free. The real Red Ring of Death is three flashing red lights (with the upper-right quadrant unlit), which indicates the dreaded hardware failure. But wait, there's more! One flashing red light is another kind of hardware failure, and two flashing red lights means that the 360 is overheating. It all boils down to this: If you see one or three red lights, your 360 will probably have to embark on Microsoft's biggest first-party project: Super Repair Center Adventure.

■ **Red Ring of Death**

■ **Fake-Out Red Ring**

EVERYTHING IS FINE

After reading your feature "Talkin' 'bout a Revolution" in issue 175, I have one important question: Do we really want to go there? By "there," I mean left versus right politics. In the article Ian Bogost describes conversations with Microsoft as though he is a revolutionary and they just want to play it safe. I wonder if it occurs to him that a large corporation cannot afford to partner itself with extreme leftist politics. Games vilifying airport security and KFC might sell to angry hippies, but not to the rest of us. No matter how deep you try to bury it or label it "social consciousness," it's still just re-programming. Games should contain values that we all agree on: Capitalism is good, competition is healthy, and sometimes you have to shoot the bad guy in the head.

Ron McIntyre
Castle Shannon, PA

■ Whoa, whoa, whoa. First of all, games that explore social issues are not necessarily trying to dupe suckers into swallowing an insidious political agenda. Secondly, claiming that all games should strive to be nothing more than mindless sci-fi shooters is akin to saying that all movies should be remakes of *Starship Troopers*. In fact, as a form of interactive media, games are uniquely equipped to let players explore consequences from multiple angles. To some degree, these "serious games" will bear the ideologies of their creators, but there is nothing preventing all shades of the political spectrum from being represented. Commercial video games' primary purpose is to be entertaining, but to assume that they are capable of nothing more sells the medium – and gamers – short.

GAMING ON THE CLOCK

The large electronics retailer I worked for (until recently) put up a demo of Guitar Hero III at the front of our store on a very nice 71-inch HDTV. This of course taunted me to play on my breaks, which stretched to my lunches, and I eventually found myself sneaking over to play while on the clock. I got caught and was relieved of the burden of my employment. My question for you is: Since your job revolves around playing games, has anyone on staff ever gotten in trouble for playing a game a little *too* much?

Sebastien Rodriguez
Via aol.com

■ Nope. As a matter of fact, we get in trouble for not playing games *enough*. That's what happened to Luis (Handle: The Oft-Forgotten Gamer). He would take bathroom breaks, use his paycheck to buy things other than games, and he didn't even have thick button-pressing calluses on the tips his fingers. Ultimately, his lack of dedication led to this phone conversation:

LUIS: Hello?

REINER: Luis, what game are you playing right now?

LUIS: It's three in the morning!

REINER: ...So, World of Warcraft, then?

LUIS: No. I was asleep. I'm tired!

REINER: Did you say "I'm fired"? Because if you did, you're so right.

READER ART

WINNER!
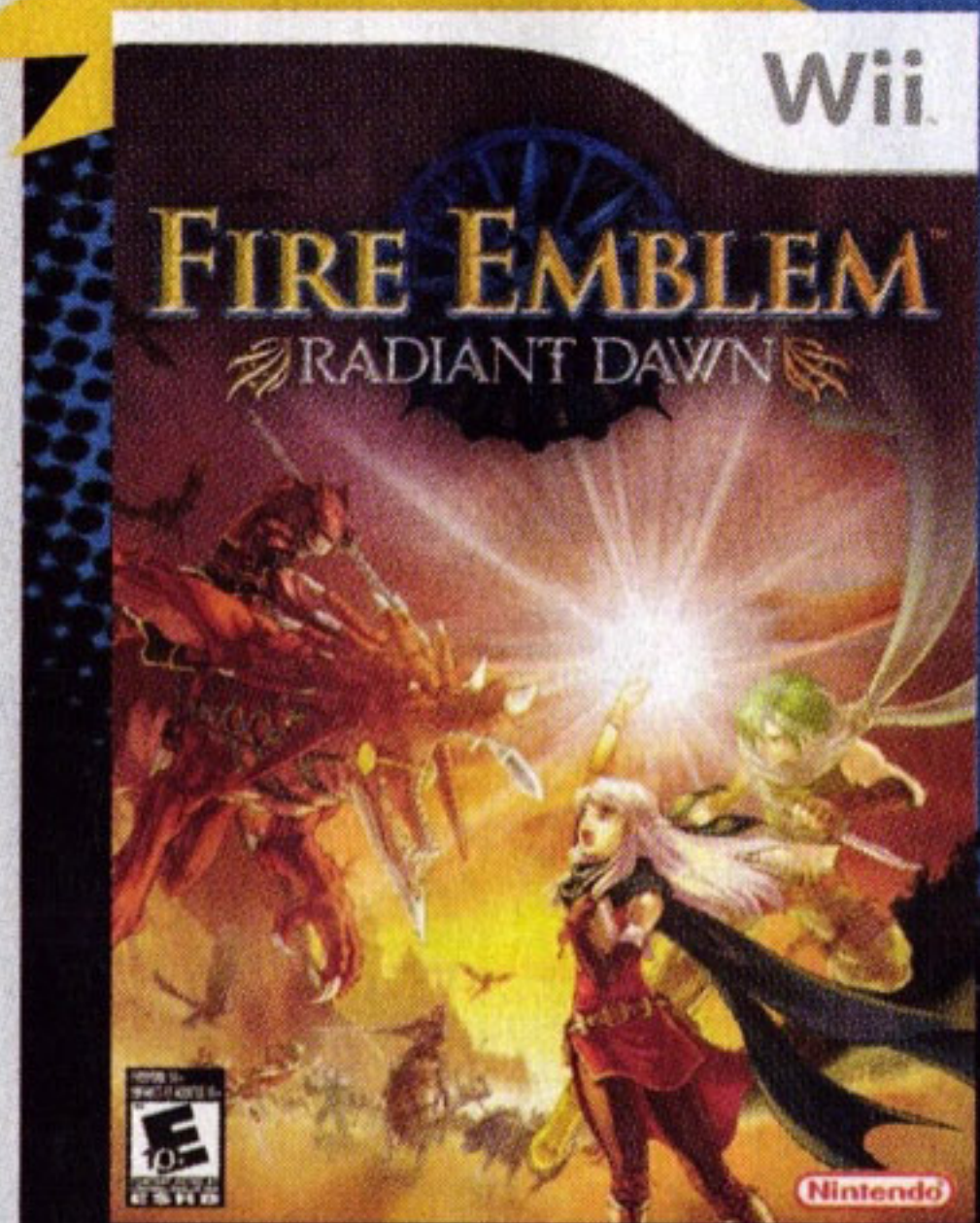
This month's winner receives a copy of Fire Emblem: Radiant Dawn, release date – Nov. 5th on Wii. The best-selling strategy title makes its Wii debut. Shape your army and guide them wisely through battle.

EVERYONE 10+
ESRB
Fantasy Violence
Mild Language

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JAMES GARDINER
Optimus Prime's default setting is "totally awesome." Also, his default setting is his only setting

CHRISTY SHANLEY
This CD doesn't really exist, but we're buying the imaginary version in our heads right now. We've also pretend-purchased "Alien Hominid sings Tom Waits"

DEZZ HUGHES
This fight started when Wolverine hit on Dante, mistaking him for a woman
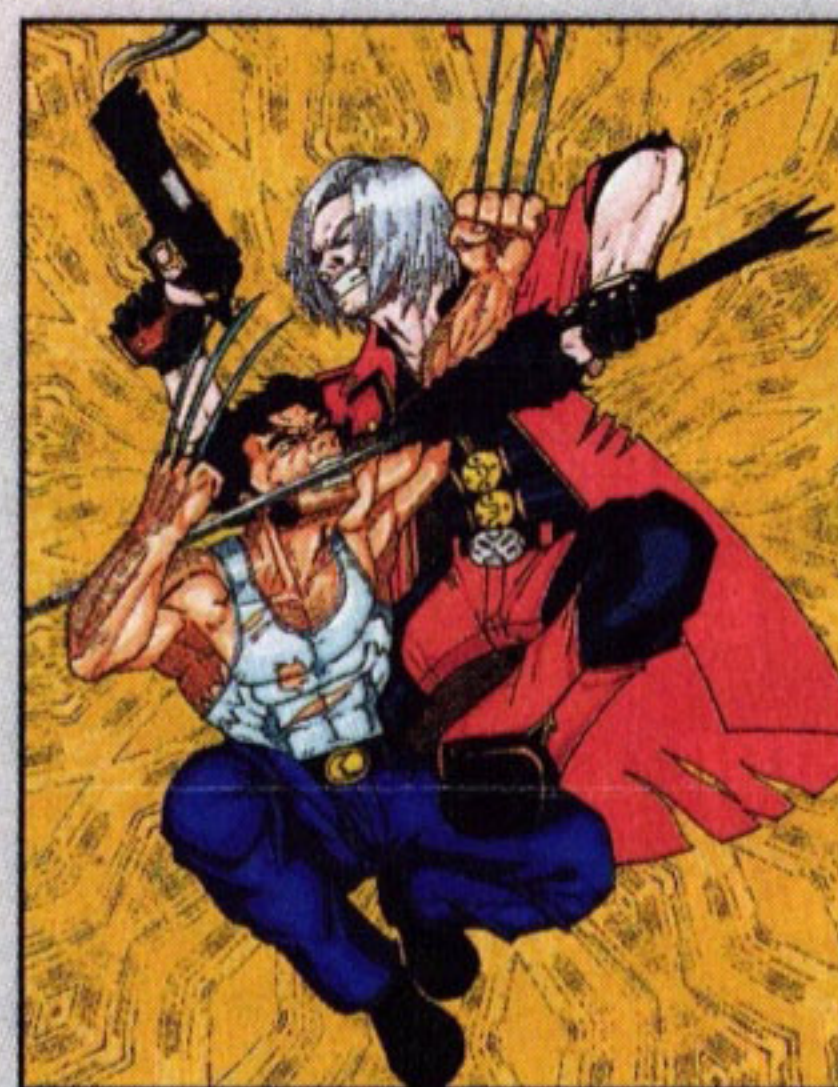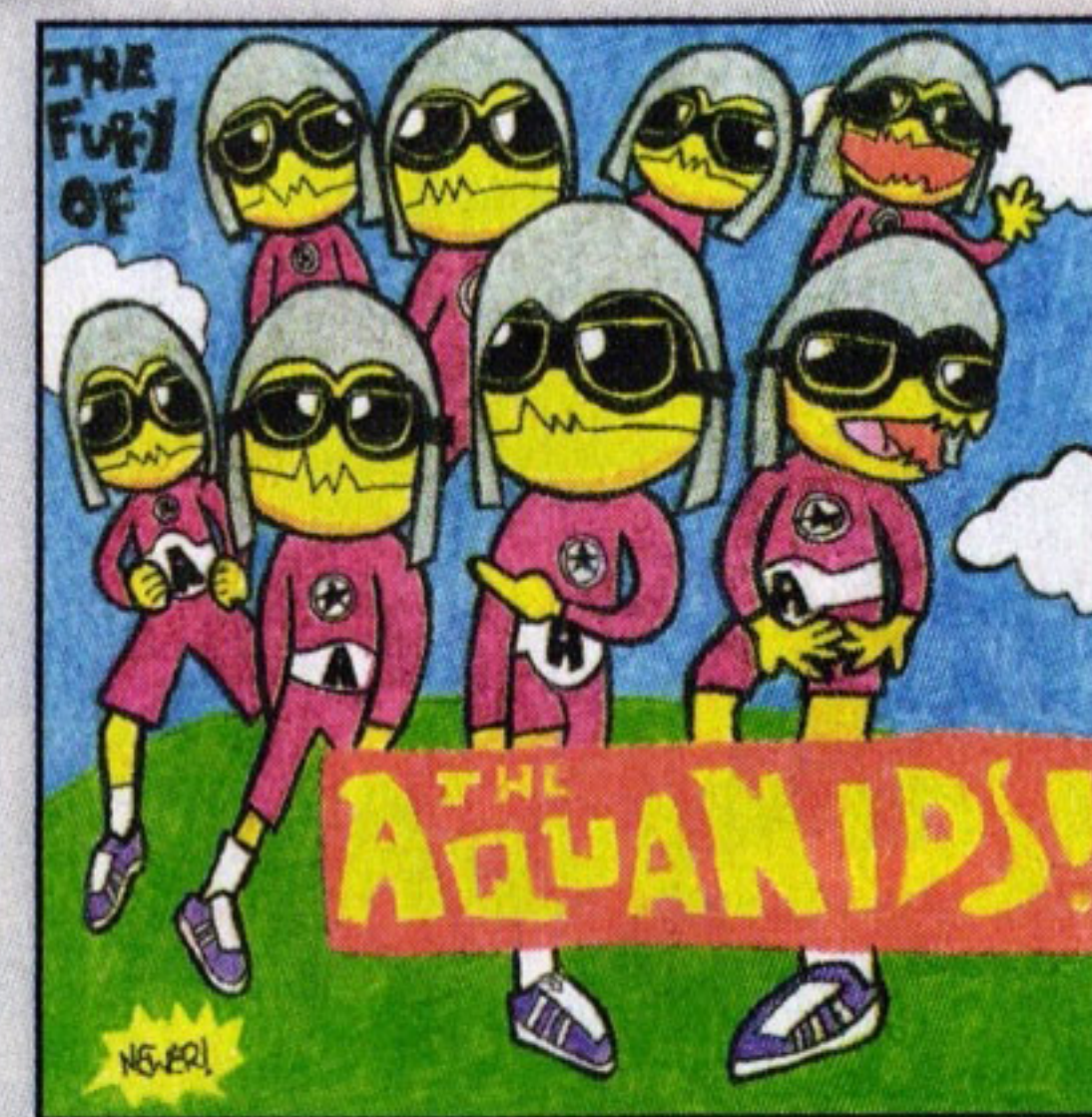
TYLER MILLER
Bring the rock, Big Daddy

JAMES RAFAEL
Bloody massacres just seem to follow Kratos wherever he goes. The route from his house to the grocery store is paved with tragedy

OMAR TORRES
"OMG master sword iz hax lol!"
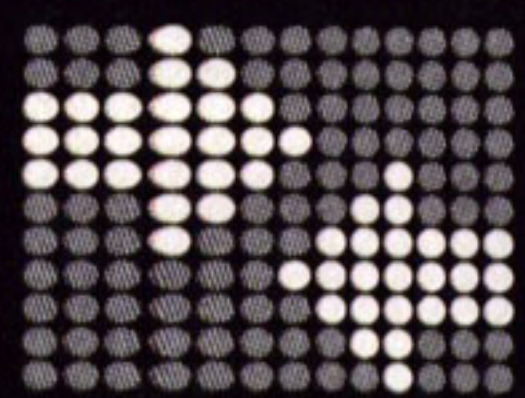
news

MANHUNT 2 MOD FUROR

MORE HOT COFFEE FOR ROCKSTAR/ESRB

> "I don't think there is much the ESRB can do to stop games from being modified. I don't think the ESRB should be held responsible."
>
> – ESRB president Patricia Vance
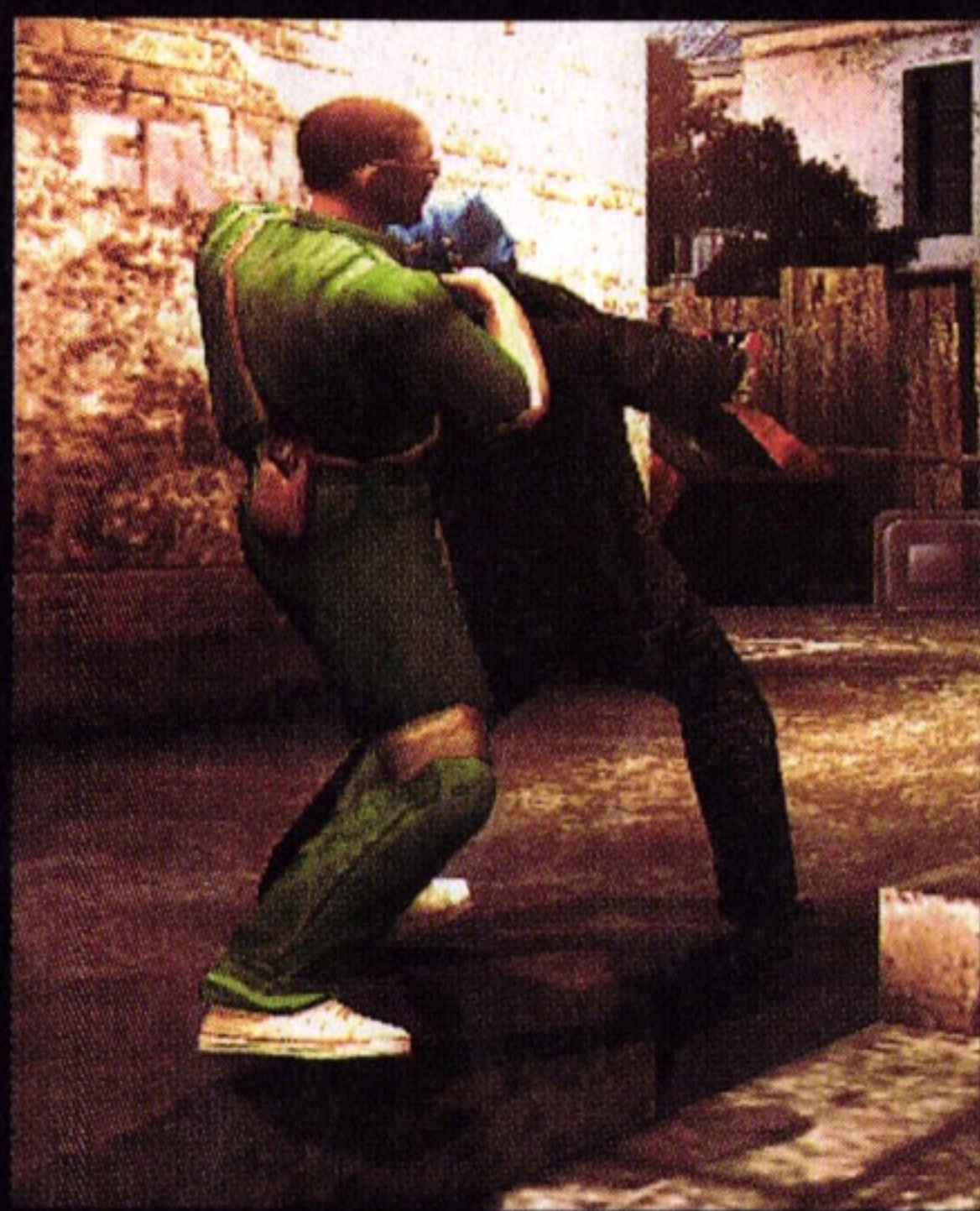
Another Rockstar game, another content controversy with the ESRB. Rockstar thought it was out of the woods when it changed the content of Manhunt 2 in order to tone down its ESRB rating from an AO for Adults Only to Mature, but the game has come under high scrutiny, bringing with it memories of Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas' Hot Coffee scandal.

Hackers using both hardware and software programs have managed to display the AO content that was hidden from Manhunt 2 (on the PS2 and PSP) when Rockstar changed the game and resubmitted it to the industry ratings board earlier this year. By obscuring some of the more violent moments in the game via special effects and video filters, (check out our review from last issue, page 132) the publisher managed to garner an M rating, thereby avoiding the retail kiss of death that is the AO label.

Unlike in the Hot Coffee incident, however, the ESRB is standing by Rockstar, upholding the M rating despite the revealed AO content, and it is not holding Rockstar responsible. "We have investigated the matter," read an ESRB statement, "and concluded that unauthorized versions of the game have been released on the Internet along with instructions on how to modify the code to remove the special effects." Regardless of the M rating, retailer Target has refused to carry the game.

ESRB president Patricia Vance has been front and center, explaining why it is standing by its M rating for Manhunt 2 and how this situation differs from Hot Coffee – where the ESRB made Rockstar remove and replace retail copies of San Andreas. In all, Hot Coffee cost Rockstar's parent company Take-Two over $50 million.

The ESRB makes the distinction that in Manhunt 2 it's not just a matter of unlocking content like in Hot Coffee. You have to change the game's code and download and use unauthorized hardware and software programs that circumvent hardware security controls. The end result is an altering of the game's violence-obscuring special effects that Patricia Vance says were "programmed to be part of the game." Hot Coffee, on the other hand, was accessing pre-existing AO content via an inputted code with more conventional and legal hardware like the Action Max Replay device.

More importantly, the ESRB simply doesn't think the new, revamped game is AO even with these hacks that remove the effects. "We do not believe these modifications fully restore the product to the version that originally received an AO rating," reads the ratings board's official statement on the matter.

Furthermore, the ESRB says that the content was disclosed and not hidden when the game was re-rated, unlike the surprising situation that the ESRB found itself in during Hot Coffee. Back then Rockstar lied. At first they claimed that the Hot Coffee code was a user mod that altered the game's original source code, when in fact it was material that already existed within the game.

Interestingly, at the time of Hot Coffee, ESRB's Patricia Vance told Game Informer that it would not retool the way it reviewed video games, and the distinctions it makes between Manhunt 2 and Hot Coffee are heartening in that it indicates that the ESRB is not interested in holding publishers responsible for user-created mods which break the user agreement – a distinction that some like Jack Thompson are not sympathetic to. "I don't think there is much the ESRB can do to stop games from being modified," says Vance. "I don't think the ESRB should be held responsible."

HOT COFFEE LAWSUIT SETTLED

Rockstar's parent company Take-Two has announced that it is proposing a settlement (pending court approval) to compensate those people offended by the Hot Coffee mod. Under the settlement, those who own the original version of San Andreas can swap it out for the revised edition, and those with proof of purchase are eligible for a $35 rebate. If approved by the court, this deal would exonerate them from any future lawsuits. This settlement should cost Take-Two around $3 million.

DOWN FOR THE COUNT
EA CLOSES FIGHT NIGHT STUDIO
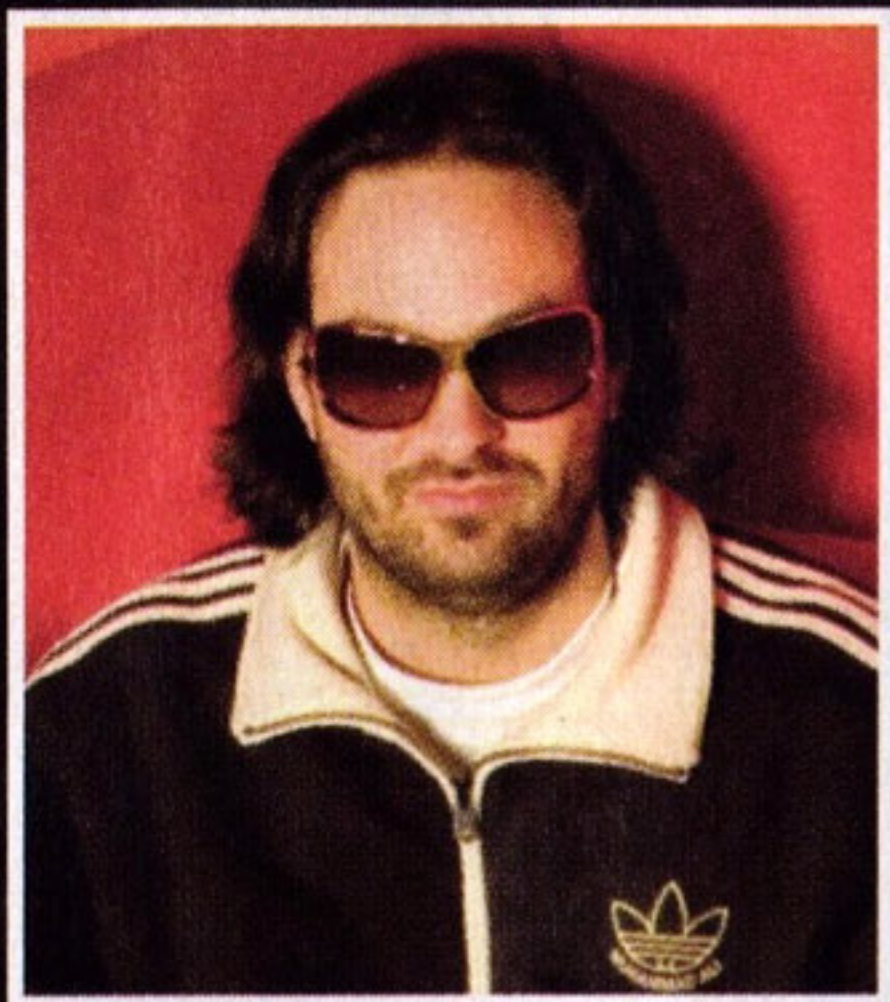
■ The future of EA Chicago general manager and Fight Night executive producer Kudo Tsunoda remains unknown

When Electronic Arts opened its Chicago studio in 2004, it was seen as a mandate for new, exciting gaming experiences. The company was fresh off its highly regarded revival of the Knockout Kings boxing franchise with Fight Night 2004, and it appointed the game's mastermind Kudo Tsunoda as the studio's general manager. EA was also pleased enough with the franchise that it purchased developer NuFX – which had helped on Fight Night – to create EA Chicago. Three years and three releases later however, EA has decided to pull the plug on the studio.

EA isn't being shy about the reasons – the publisher felt that not only did the studio not perform financially, but that the light at the end of the tunnel wasn't getting closer any time soon. In an internal memo EA Games president Frank Gibeau plainly states, "We're willing to take risks,

make long-term investments, and to support teams and individuals between launches. But each team is responsible for staying on a reasonable path to profitability. Unfortunately, EA Chicago hasn't been able to meet that standard."

In an interview with Game Informer Online, EA's vice president of corporate communications Jeff Brown pointed out that the poor sales of Def Jam: Icon didn't help EA Chicago's cause. "That game, for whatever it's worth, didn't sell as well as we hoped."

Earlier this summer, EA reorganized into four labels: EA Sports, EA Games, EA Casual Entertainment, and The Sims. EA Chicago fell under the EA Games banner, and one of the reorganization's stated purposes was for increased efficiency – something Gibeau felt that the developer was not achieving. "The location has grown dramatically in the past three years while the number of

employees has grown from 49 in 2004 to 146 people currently in the new facility in downtown Chicago. As it stands, EA Chicago has no expectation of hitting our profitability targets until [fiscal year] 2011 or later."

Apart from Def Jam's lack of sales, perhaps there were signs of EA Chicago's demise. Early this summer we heard from a source that general manager Kudo Tsunoda was no longer handling Fight Night, but rather the next EA Marvel fighting title – Fight Night had been handed to EA Vancouver. We thought it unusual at the time, given that Fight Night was what put the studio on the map. EA is not currently elaborating about what's going to happen to either the Def Jam or Marvel franchises, nor a third fighting IP which was under wraps at the time of the studio's demise.

As for the high-profile Tsunoda – who made a splash not only with his games, but with his big personality and appearance at

E3 2005 wearing giant boxing gloves – EA's Brown states that he's "considered one of the best game developers in EA, if not in the industry, and Kudo's going to have plenty of job offers at EA." EA says that "many" of the studio's employees will be offered jobs at other EA locations.

With its past history of license-heavy titles, the public perception of EA is that the company is averse to taking risks. Although Def Jam was certainly a license, its music-centric fighting mechanic was the kind of twist we've come to expect from Tsunoda and EA Chicago. The fear now is that with EA's focus on profitability, we'll see less such experimentation. With delays to a number of games, from Spore to Army of Two to Warhammer Online, it bears watching what effect if any EA's stated philosophies under its new reorganization have on other studios in the publisher's stable.

news

id FORMS MOBILE/ HANDHELD DIVISION

CARMACK LOOKING AT Wii AS WELL?

John Carmack made news when he announced he was moving into mobile games development with Orcs & Elves, and now he's proving that it's no passing fad. Developer id Software has announced that it is starting up id Mobile in conjunction with Fountainhead Entertainment, which helped develop both Orcs & Elves and Doom RPG. Id Mobile is currently working on Wolfenstein 3D, Quake, and sequels to Doom RPG and Orcs & Elves for mobile phones. John Carmack and Katherine Anna Kang, id Mobile's president, talked with us about this new division and its plans for the future – including expanding development to the Nintendo DS and PSP. You can also check out our review of Orcs & Elves for the DS on page 102.

With Fountainhead being absorbed by id, what's the division of labor going to be like at id Mobile?

CARMACK: The gameplay concepts and ideas would usually be a joint effort between Anna and me. Then I would usually go and spend some relatively small amount of time, like a week or so, involved in technical decisions on the platform, like writing the core 3D engine. The remaining six months of work would all be done by the Fountainhead team. That rough division is probably going to carry over into id Mobile. What is changing is that as part of id Software, there's a little bit more clout and cache going on. We're hoping to be able to attract some better people to mobile development, because that's been a problem over the past couple years. We're hoping that gets better as an actual division of id Software.

Do you have a permanent publishing partner set up?

CARMACK: It's game per game. At id Software we generally have the clout to get pretty favorable terms on all our contacts. We never get any lock-in arrangements on things like that. We think EA's doing pretty good…but we certainly evaluate that anew with every title. The current titles we're discussing for id Mobile have not been signed yet. Best case: We have four releases under the id Mobile line next year – probably two of them developed in-house and two of them developed by partner companies.

> **I still got all these other ideas for things that I think are worth trying**
> — John Carmack

You've mentioned in the past about how small budgets make mobile games attractive to make. If id Mobile does DS or PSP titles, are you willing to spend more money?

KANG: I think that one of things that was very unique with Orcs & Elves was that it is still an unknown IP. With games like Doom or Wolfenstein or Quake, it definitely has a following, so that's the type of thing where id Mobile would go a little bit further and make more of a commitment and more of a risk. But I believe that when we're coming with new IPs from the ground up – smaller ones from the mobile – it is the kind of give and take where it's questionable whether the audience is there to support the extra development cost.

CARMACK: When you look at the larger sizes, especially on the PSP where you got a gig you could end up spending on a game, you could easily spend five or ten million dollars. Almost no PSP games maximize their media usage like the way you would if it was a top-tier console. But, still, just filling up that media costs a good chunk of money, and if we look at the state of what we've done in mobile, right now it's a great success. But if we had spent five times as much money, the games would have been a lot cooler, but we would have been losing money and closing doors on the division. It's

nice to always say, "We always do the best thing possible," but it's always within the resource constraints available to you.

So will your games start on mobile and use the larger handhelds for known quantities?

CARMACK: That's what we're trying with Orcs & Elves. There are lots of people that have a favorable impression of it, and we're moving it up to the DS. If it's a good success on there, I think a lot of people will take some interesting data points on that: that this kind of upward-mobility strategy might be possible.

Will this movement continue all the way up to Xbox Live or PS Network or even a home console?

CARMACK: If it does well on the DS, we want to pursue a Wii title with it. There's the obvious connection of waving a magic wand around that could fit in well there, and it's still one step below the massive media budgets of the 360/PS3/PC triad up there.

Does id Mobile have an idea of what kind of mix it wants between new IP and bumping up existing franchises to different platforms?

CARMACK: It looks like we're setting this precedent of sort of hopping back and forth between exploiting an existing IP and then trying something new. Wolfenstein is under development right now, but it's likely the next mobile title after that will be a novel IP. In fact, we're not talking about where we're going after that, but there's a good chance that it probably won't be the same style of 3D turn-based stuff we've been doing everything out of. I still got all these other ideas for things that I think are worth trying there.
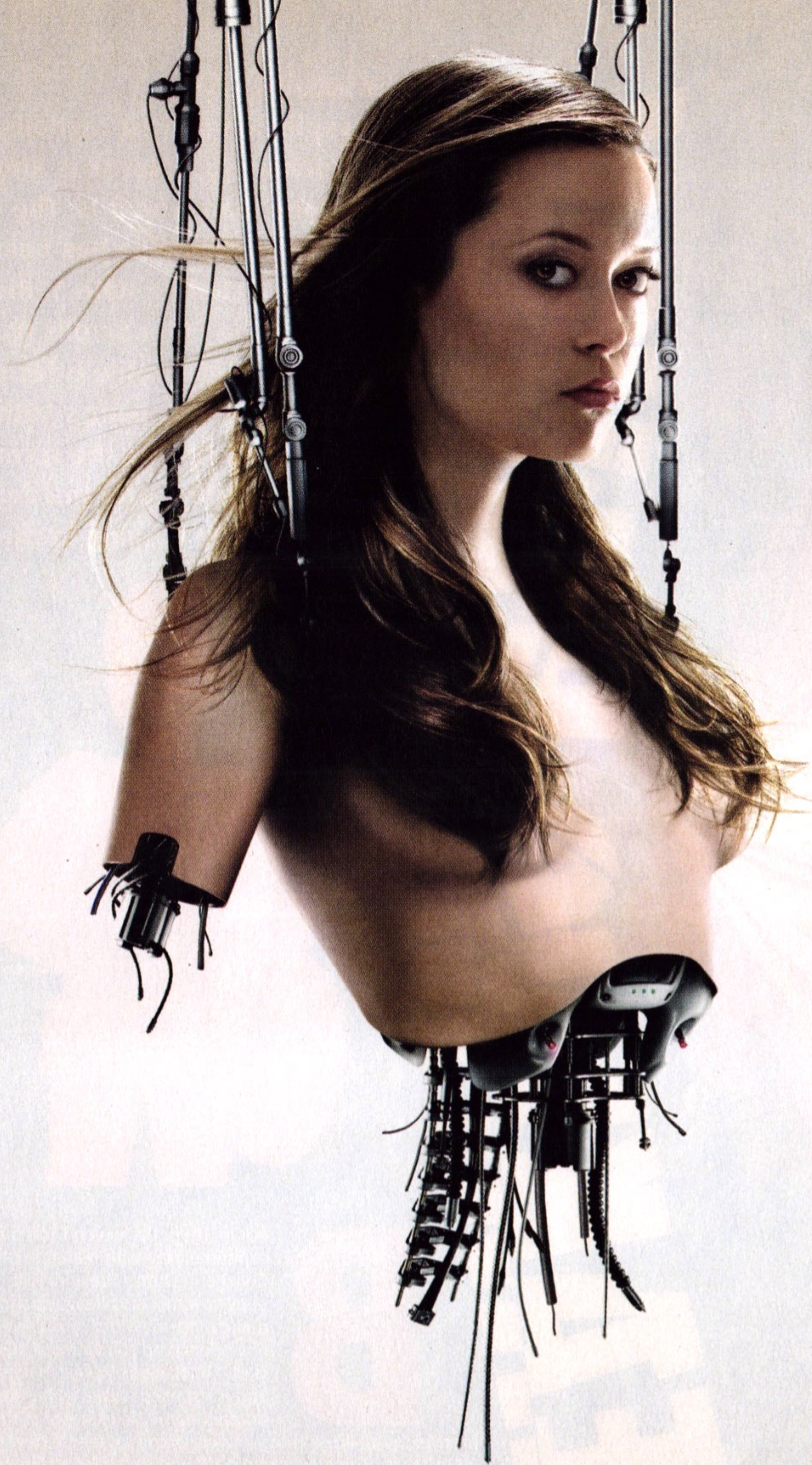
TERMINATOR
THE SARAH CONNOR CHRONICLES

TWO NIGHT PREMIERE
SUN | **MON**
1·13 | **1·14** **FOX**

WREAKING HAVOK

Rocket explosions, flying ragdolls, shattering crates, telekinesis – Havok is known more for what it does than who it is. The company's middleware physics engine has been used in over 150 games including Halo 3, BioShock, Assassin's Creed, and The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion, with many more high-profile titles on the way. On the eve of the company's 10th anniversary, Havok execs discuss the recent purchase by Intel, leadership after the departure of its founders, and looking to the future of physics.

Back in 1998, Dr. Steven Collins and Hugh Reynolds were experimenting with real-time physics simulations at Trinity College in Dublin, Ireland. With a group of less than 10 people, a mix of colleagues and students, the duo started to make a business out of it. Dave Gargan, one of the original engineers who still works at Havok, remembers the rough start. "Telekinesys Research was the original company name and it's spelled with a 'y' because we couldn't afford the domain name 'Telekinesis' at the time," Gargan says. "We pretty soon realized that we were going to need a new name, especially after a trip to Japan. The guys came back and said, 'The attempts of people to try and even understand the word Telekinesys let alone pronounce it was just impossible.' We needed something a lot shorter and snappier."

They eventually settled on Havok and adopted the commonly recognized buzz saw logo. The team always had an eye on the games industry as a possible application, but it was the constantly increasing CPU speeds and impending release of the new PlayStation 2 and Xbox that made the jump too enticing to pass up. But the several years it took to get the engine up and running were not the easiest. "We actually had one office where the boiler used to leak fumes into the main room and we had to tape up all of the doors and windows, which wasn't really a good idea, in retrospect," Gargan recalls.

By the time the 2000 Game Developers' Conference rolled around, Havok 1.0 was ready to show. Collins and Reynolds were so excited to debut the engine that they brought the entire company, around 14 people at the time, from Dublin to San Francisco. "The product at the time was really unwieldy," Gargan says. "It did rigid body simulation, fluid simulation, cloth simulation, soft body simulation, absolutely everything you could name. And it did a lot of it badly." Nonetheless, it was an impressive display at the time and started to get the company's name out there.

Havok's early games consisted mostly of educational PC titles tied to properties like Tonka trucks and SpongeBob SquarePants. Over the years Havok moved into racing properties, but it was the action games that pushed the engine into the spotlight. "Producers looked at the value ragdolls added to killing somebody when you were in that genre and it really was quite satisfying to see these guys fly across, slam into signs, and flop down the other side," Gargan says. "So ragdoll started to become really popular and really important for us."

Late 2003 through 2004 was when things really took off. Havok CEO David O'Meara says a lot of the momentum started around Max Payne 2: The Fall of Max Payne. "It wasn't that [Max Payne 2] did any particular thing that was different, but its use of physics was very professionally done," O'Meara says. "It had a lot of impact on other development studios."

Gargan points to telekinetic thriller Psi-Ops: The Mindgate Conspiracy as one of his all-time favorites. "There were a lot of subtleties in that game that were way ahead of their time," Gargan says. "Personally, I thought that was a great little achievement. It deserved to do so much better."

But the big difference makers wouldn't come until the end of 2004. Halo 2 and Half-Life 2, the biggest games of the year, both licensed Havok. "[Half-Life 2] was a critical moment I think for physics more so than Havok," says O'Meara. This hesitation to champion Havok as what made the Gravity Gun possible is understandable. Valve actually built its physics system around Ipion's libraries, a German middleware company purchased by Havok in 2000. However, Halo 2 used Havok in full force and certainly sealed the deal for a lot of developers. "You literally couldn't have a game without physics after Halo 2," says O'Meara.

It's not just games that are using physics simulations. Visual effects studios are also turning to Havok for use in films. The Moving Picture Company has used Havok for effects in movies like Troy and Kingdom of Heaven, and was nominated for an Academy Award for its work on Poseidon. But perhaps the most well-known scene using Havok is the "Burly Brawl" from The Matrix: Reloaded, ESC Entertainment's famous scene depicting Neo versus hundreds of Agent Smiths.

Despite the wave of success over the last several years, both Steven Collins and Hugh Reynolds have left the company they created. Collins returned to Trinity College to lecture and further his research, and Reynolds works as a technical advisor in Kerry, Ireland. "They still have great pride in the company," O'Meara says. "When I came in 2002, it was really a logical time to hand over the baton. They had the vision for the founding of the company and what was needed by 2002 was someone who was going to execute on that vision and provide the business model and continue that." O'Meara brought in a new management team with business experience ranging from pharmaceuticals to fertilizer.

As Havok started appearing in more and more games, buyers began to circle. Intel purchased Havok in September to the tune of $110 million. "Havok is a proven leader in physics technology for gaming and digital content, and will become a key element of Intel's visual computing and graphics efforts," reads a statement from Intel to Game Informer. O'Meara says the purchase allows

Havok to broaden their market focus, particularly in Asian markets. This also eased fears that Havok would go down the road of Criterion's Renderware. When EA purchased this highly popular engine, many developers were forced to find another engine for games in progress or create their own. "A lot of other publishers were very concerned about that, and I gave commitments to them that we would never do that," O'Meara says. Since Intel has no direct ties to publishers or platforms, O'Meara says that publishers' minds are eased. "Our customers are unbelievably happy that they are now assured that there is no restriction on the market."

There's little debate, however, that Havok and many other physics systems are less than perfect at times. Any gamer who has played an action game in the last decade has seen some strange ragdoll deaths, twitching corpses, and awkwardly behaving objects. "Sometimes when lots of stuff is going on people decide to pull the slider on plausibility and they make tradeoffs," Gargan says. "For instance, maybe it's better to render that frame on time than it is to make that body piece react realistically."

"I'm not going to mention names, but when I play certain games I see ragdolls [that] I'm not happy with," says O'Meara. "But, at the end of the day, Havok has to make it easier for our customers to use our infrastructure."

Part of that drive includes Havok's Animation and Behavior software. "A lot of early ragdolls looked like heaps of bones tied together," Gargan says. "It doesn't give a very compelling effect. You need to blend animation with that ragdoll simulation as well and use the physics as an input into the entire animation system to make it look good." Of course, developers can blend in their own animations – like an enemy clutching his neck and falling to his knees after getting shot – but they can choose to utilize the animation software if they'd like to focus elsewhere.

Advancing character performance is only a fraction of what Havok has planned for the future. "I think the next wave we'll start to see is a continuum where the number of [destructible] objects increases again and we start to do different types of simulation," says Gargan. "Things like fluid simulation, cloth simulation, rope simulation, hair simulation, smoke. All of those sorts of effects will become more and more important as processing power increases." ■ ■ ■

BioShock

> Havok has always had the best support, features, and performance of any physics middleware on the market, so it was our natural choice.
> – Chris Kline, lead programmer

Guitar Hero III: Legends of Rock

> Havok allows our characters to have physics-driven animation on their hair and accessories. It's a small detail, but these secondary animations add an extra layer of life to the characters.
> – Scott Pease, director of development

Halo 2

> For Halo 2 we wanted to create environments with dynamic objects that could interact with our vehicles and characters, and the Halo 1 physics engine couldn't scale well to support this so we decided to license Havok.
> – Eamon McKenzie, physics engineer

UNLIMITED ENABLED

David Walsh
Halo Hero

Game Informer scours the leaderboards in search of the top gamers to find the best of the best, uncovering the person behind the handle, and learning his or her strategies. So if you get a pesky message over Xbox Live or PlayStation Network from GameInformerMag, please don't delete it. You could be the next featured gamer.

■ Final Boss from left to right: Michael "Strong-Side" Cavanaugh, Dan "Ogre1" Ryan, Dave "Walshy" Walsh, and Tom "Ogre2" Ryan

MLG Handle:
Walshy

Age:
23

Hometown:
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Rival Teams:
Carbon, Str8 Rippin

Favorite Weapon:
Battle Rifle

Favorite Map:
The Pit

Accomplishments:
As part of team Final Boss, David Walsh earned Major League Gaming's national title for Halo 2 four versus four in 2004, 2005, and 2007. Final Boss also signed a three-year exclusivity contract with MLG in 2006 for a total of $1 million. Interested parties can catch future televised tournaments on G4.

Origin of skills:
"I've always just been a gamer, period," Walsh says. He used to play marathon sessions of Halo on weekends with his buddies after wrestling tournaments. One day they caught wind of a national Halo tournament in Nashville, TN, and they all went down to test their mettle. "Individually, I ended up placing like fifth out of 300 people," Walsh remembers. "I hadn't really played with very good people before. I just always played with my friends and didn't take it too seriously. When we did that I was like, 'Man, I wonder if I can make more money at this.'"

The Move to Halo 3:
Even though MLG is still focused on Halo 2 tournaments, it doesn't mean Walsh is holding off on the latest sequel. "The funny thing about [a recent exhibition victory in Toronto, Canada] is that our team, three out of four of us, didn't play a single game of Halo 2 between Vegas [the national championship] and Toronto," Walsh says. "We're ready to move on. We've been playing Halo 2 for a few years now."

Life Outside of Halo:
Walsh co-owns a clothing company called Kiaeneto (pronounced "kuh-net-o") with a friend from high school. "We wanted a clothing company

for gamers," Walsh says. "The actual clothes don't really show anything about gaming. It's just cool designs and kind of represents that gaming is mainstream nowadays."

The Key to Victory:
"When you go in to practice, have some sort of objective you really want to accomplish while you're gaming," Walsh says. "Don't just go in like 'All right, well I'm going to play for a few hours and get better.' Try to focus on figuring out what you're doing wrong, and what you can do to fix it."

Other Games:
"I'm really impressed by Nintendo lately," Walsh says. He's currently playing games like Advance Wars: Dual Strike, The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess, and Wii Sports.

Practice Time:
"Right when Halo 3 came out, there were days when I played 10 or 12 hours even though a tournament wasn't coming up," Walsh says. When there is a competition up ahead he devotes around 40 hours a week. Otherwise, it's around five hours.

What Should be in Halo 4?
"I would like more smaller arena maps because there are plenty of big ones for your vehicles and for people to just run around and have fun on, but when it comes down to tournament competitive play, [smaller maps] are some of the best maps because they're the most balanced," Walsh says. "They're a lot of close-ranged combat and a lot of serious players are going to love those maps."

■ Check out Walsh's clothing company at www.kiaeneto.com

■ Watch a video of Walshy in action in this month's Unlimited

games
GUNS OF THE PATRIOTS SILENCED
MGS 4 SEES DELAY

The world was excited when playable code of Konami's Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots was shown off at this year's Tokyo Game Show, but the PS3 game is actually further from release than our hands-on time suggests. The publisher/developer has just delayed the game into the "second quarter of calendar year 2008," according to a statement from the company.

This is not the only change for the game. A simultaneous worldwide release was originally planned, but now the release dates have all been fragmented, with Japan receiving the game first early next year.

"Konami has decided to delay the title's release in order to make further improvements to the quality of the game and provide even greater enjoyment for more customers worldwide", reads the company's press release.

THE GOOD, THE BAD, THE UGLY
When You Want Your News Categorized With A Sarcastic Editorial Spin
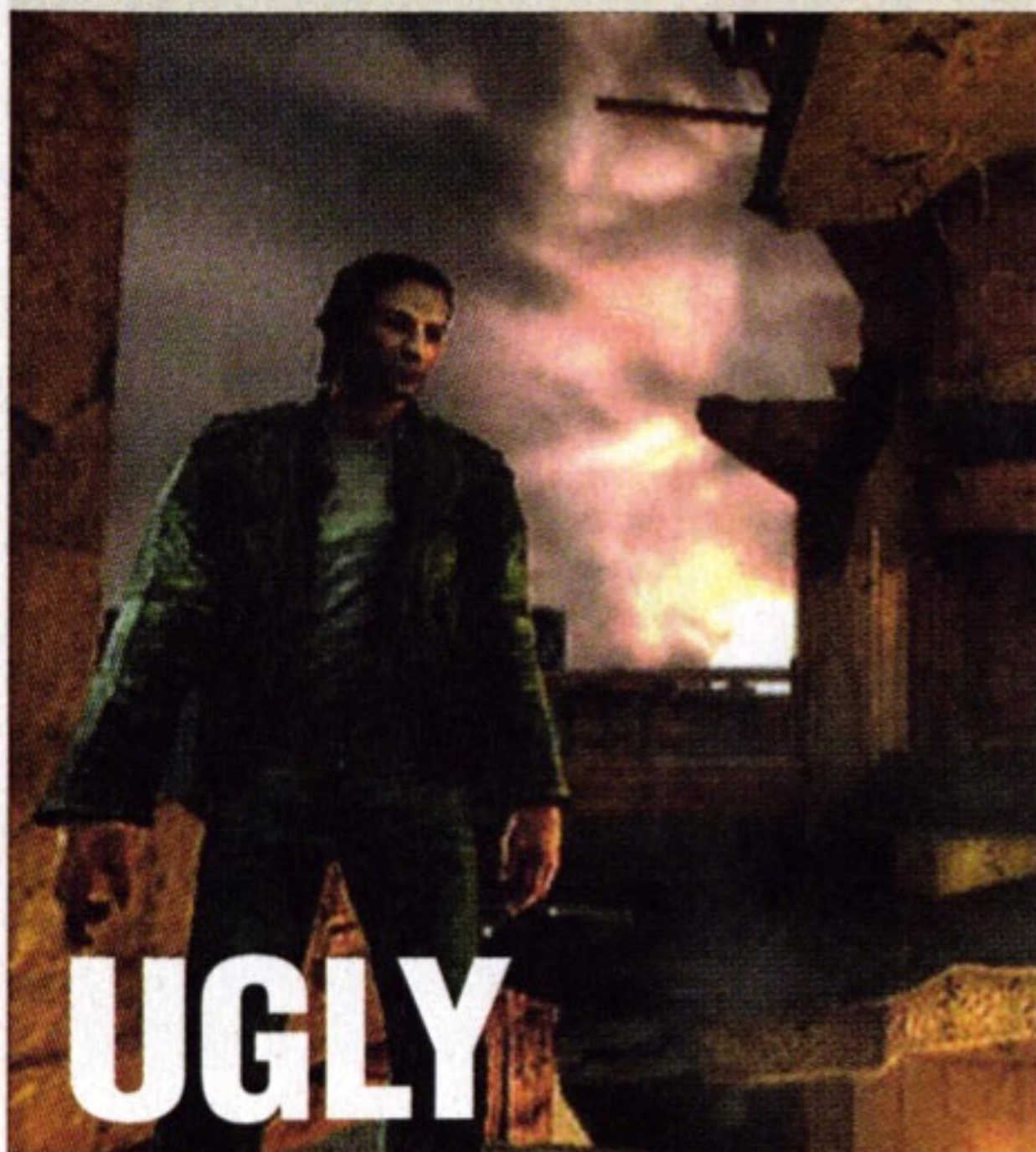
UGLY

Atari is in a brand new kind of trouble after years of selling off licenses and studios. Its CEO has resigned, the company might lose its last valuable property – Dragon Ball Z – and Atari has suspended game development simply to save money. But the company warns that simply publishing titles might not be enough. "We cannot guarantee the completion of these actions or that such actions will generate sufficient resources to fully address the uncertainties of our financial position." We predict that publishing alone won't do it for Atari. After all, who wants to be saddled with that name on their box?

One title we hope survives is Alone in the Dark (shown), which has just been announced for PlayStation 2 and Wii, augmenting its 360, PS3, and PC versions.
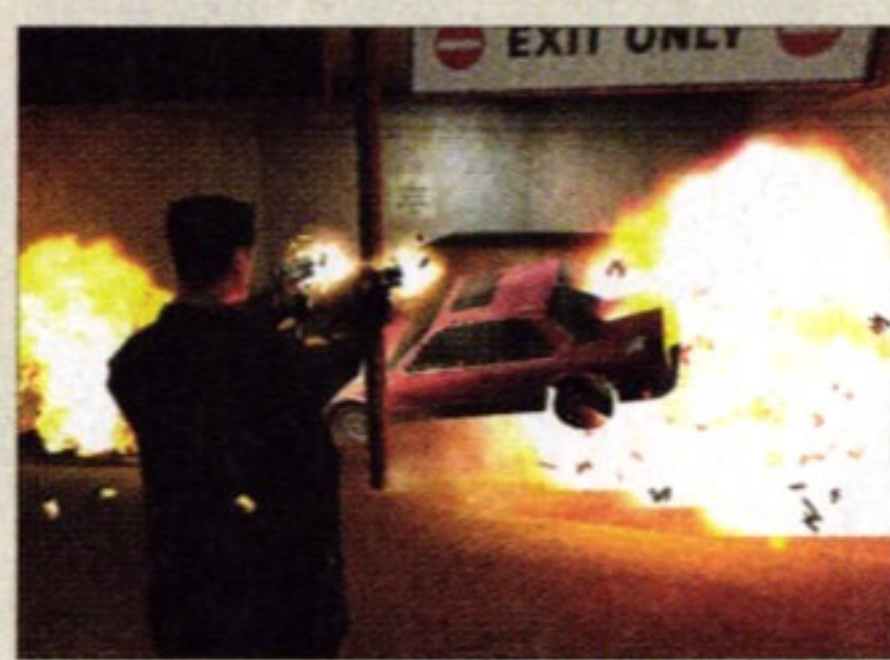
GOOD

Variety reports that Mark Wahlberg has signed onto the Max Payne film based on Rockstar's hit noir cop game. Movies based on video games often stink, but since we all know Wahlberg's got the acting chops and then some, this one might actually have a chance at being good.

GOOD

Harmonix is making your iPod rock with Phase, a downloadable game ($5 at the iTunes store) for your iPod that offers timing-based gameplay to any song on your iPod. Don't play Phase on Miller's iPod, though; he only wants to play through the *Rent* soundtrack.
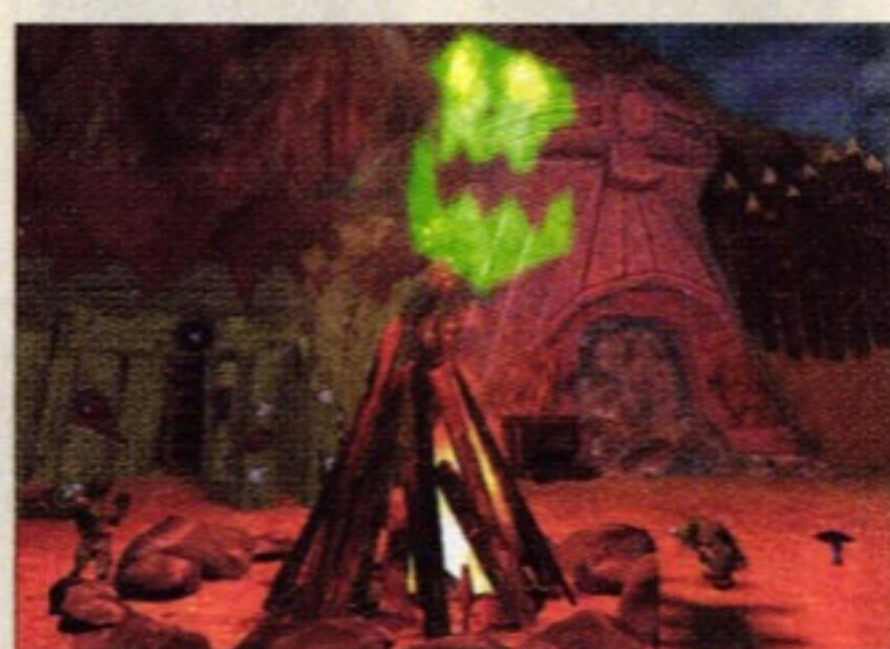
BAD

EA can't get away from the delay bug. Last month it was Army of Two, this month it's Warhammer Online: Age of Reckoning. The game is expected in summer or fall. EA CEO John Riccitiello said, "We're going to give it a little bit more time, a little bit more work, and we think we'll have a little bit more of a hit on our hands."

■ Ace Combat 6: 360 Savior
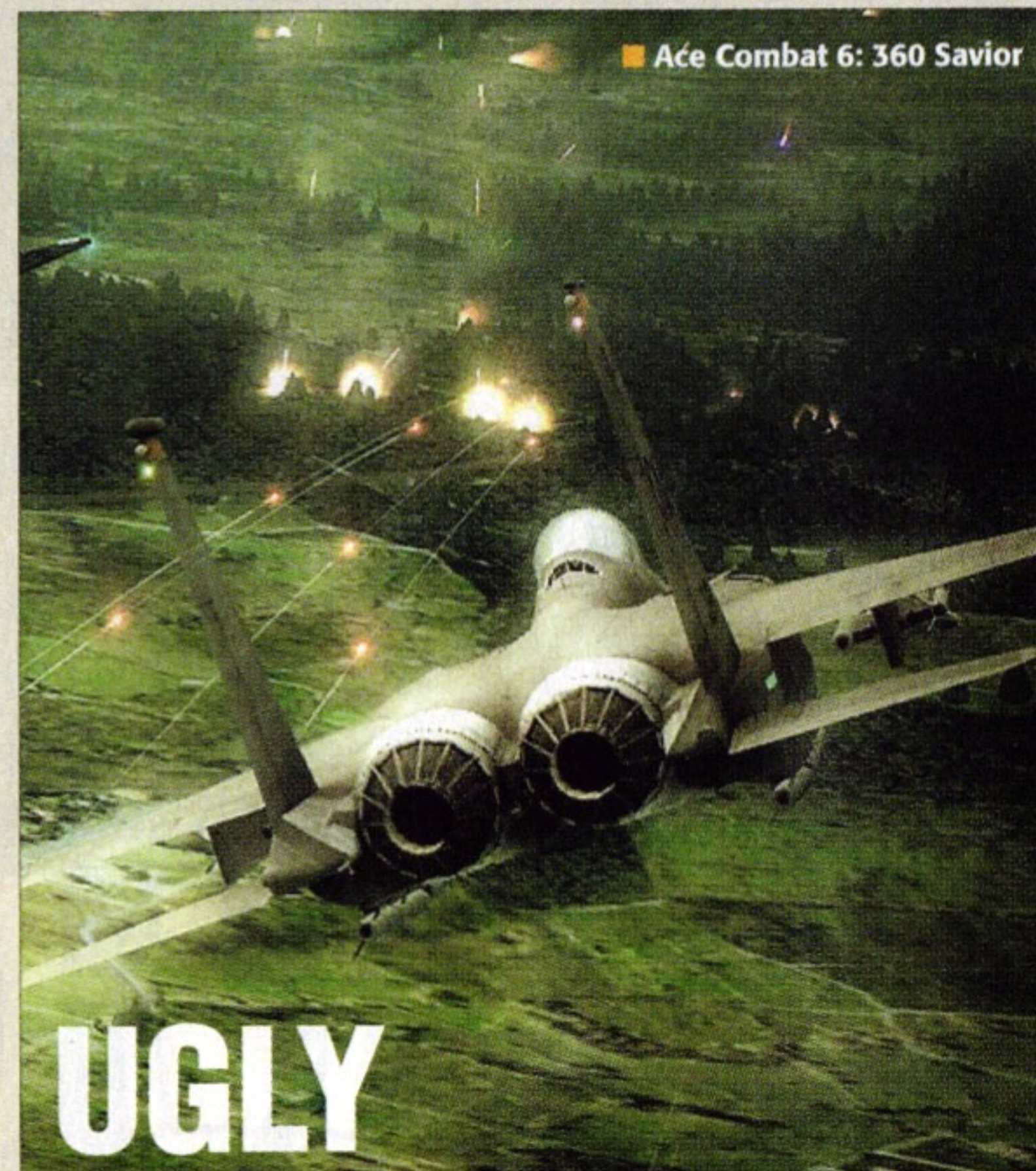
UGLY

Nothing is as miserable as the Xbox 360's failure in Japan...until now. For one week in the beginning of November, the 360 actually sold more units in the country than the PS3. The sales jump is attributed to the release of Ace Combat 6 on the 360, which charted in second place for the week. Luckily, the next week the PS3 recovered in Japan by tripling its sales thanks to its new price.
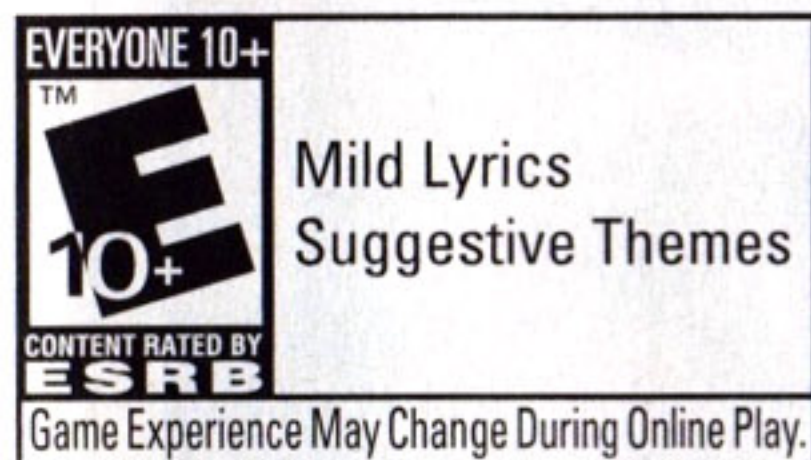
LOOSE TALK
Hot Gaming Gossip

■ Silicon Knights' Too Human hasn't been the only title to have trouble with Epic's Unreal Engine 3

MORE EPIC COMPLAINTS

In issue 175 (page 50) we detailed the back-and-forth lawsuits between Epic and Silicon Knights regarding Epic's alleged lack of support of its Unreal Engine 3. We've heard that Silicon Knights isn't the only developer recently to have problems with Epic. One developer, who didn't want to be revealed, told Game Informer that it had to push back the release of its Unreal Engine 3-powered title because Epic was late in getting them the engine – something that Silicon Knights has alleged in its lawsuit. These developments bear watching because if Epic is at fault here, we could see a lot of unhappy developers banging down the company's door.

NINTENDO'S NEXT CONSOLE

While Microsoft is enjoying its first console dominance with the 360 and Sony's assuming the PS3 will be around for a decade, Loose Talk has heard that Nintendo is once again planning something entirely different. Industry insiders have told us that Nintendo is considering being the first console manufacturer to have its next system out. Although it's unlikely this will happen tomorrow, for instance, we have no doubt that Nintendo will want to capitalize on the success of the Wii and keep the ball rolling as strongly as possible. The real question will be whether Nintendo can make enough of the damn things.

NEW DS ON HORIZON?

Pacific Crest Securities analyst Evan Wilson says that Nintendo has already finished work on a new version of the DS handheld. In an investor's note he claims that his contacts "indicate that a refreshed DS is complete." Wilson describes the new DS as thinner with larger screens and "built-in storage" (memory?). The unit will do away with the GBA cart slot to make it thinner. Wilson says that he doesn't expect the new DS to come out until sales of the current unit slow down – which doesn't seem to be happening anytime soon.

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

NAME THAT GAME
Test Your Sight

Now, we can't give you too many clues about this month's game, as that would totally give away the answer. However, if your memory is good enough you should be able to pick this one out by looking at it. Although it was never released in arcades back in the day, it was featured in a film and it has been recently back-engineered as a real game according to its appearance in the movie and is available for download.

(Answer on page 28)
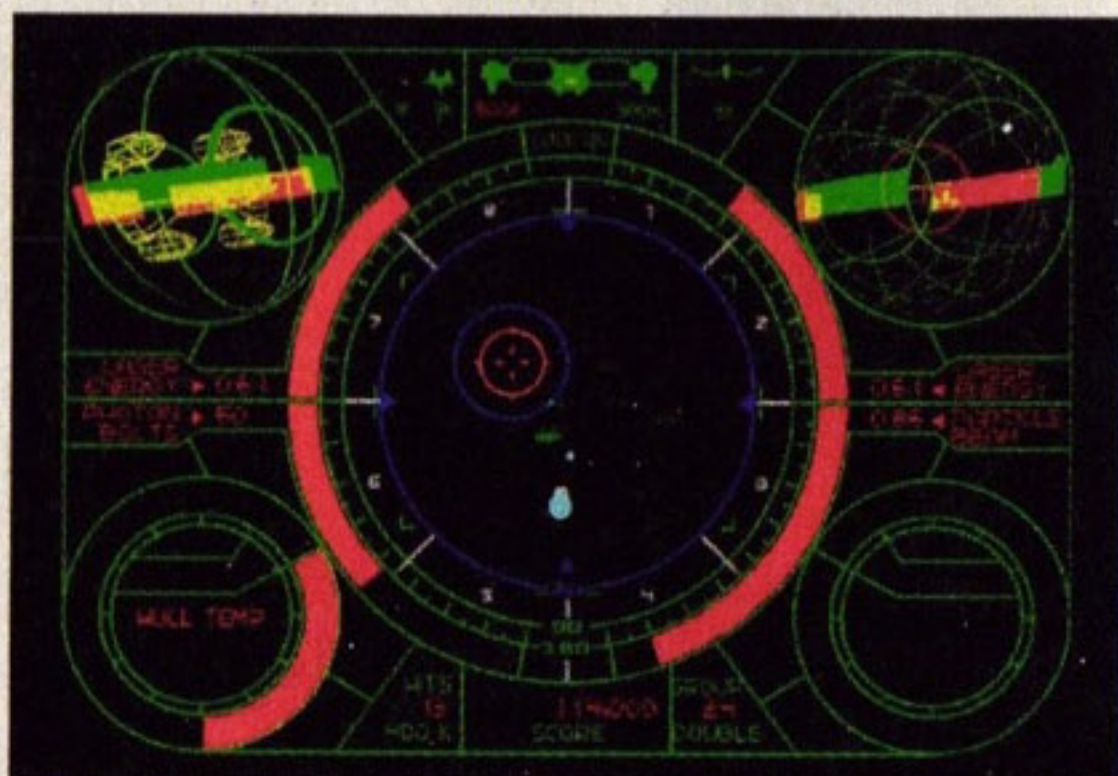
XBOX LIVE IS FIVE
STARTS XBOX DOWNLOAD PROGRAM

Microsoft is celebrating the five-year anniversary of Xbox Live in style: it's throwing out some goodies to loyal users who've been there since the beginning. Available to everyone on the service are four original Xbox games: Halo, Fable, Psychonauts, and Crimson Skies: High Road to Revenge. Not only is it good to see cult classics such as Psychonauts get more exposure than when it released, but these titles are full downloads from Xbox Live Marketplace (for 1,200 points [$15]), and Microsoft says there are just the beginning of a program called Xbox Originals. The only drawback here is that Microsoft admits that some of the games may have minor translation problems, such as an occasional flicker at the top of the screen during Crimson Skies. Features may also be missing from some titles.

In celebration of the anniversary, Microsoft also gave all Live users the board game Carcassonne for free, and Live members that have been with the service since it started received a deposit of 500 Microsoft points.

■ Psychonauts

■ Carcassonne

■ Crimson Skies
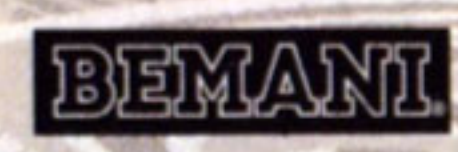
BUILDING UP TO SOMETHING

LEGO AND ITS GROWING ROLE IN GAMING

People usually outgrow their toys. Barbie dolls and action figures are designed to occupy a specific space in our childhood development, and eventually we move on to the next big thing. While most of these toys will end up forgotten in a closet, only one seems resistant to this erosion of interest: LEGOs. Regardless of age or gender, playing with LEGOs is a rite of passage. Furthermore, once you've experienced the boundless possibilities of the little interlocking bricks, you're probably a fan for life.

> THERE IS SOMETHING VERY INHERENTLY INSTINCTIVE ABOUT THE LEGO BRICK AS A MEDIUM FOR CREATIVE EXPRESSION.
>
> — Michael McNally

If you grew up with the original Nintendo Entertainment System in the '80s, odds are good that you also have fond memories of various space and pirate-themed LEGO sets. The two pastimes may have been separate activities back then, but today we are in the midst of a convergence of video games and the classic toy brand – one that capitalizes on nostalgia as well as the desire for innovative gaming experiences.

At first, it may not seem like a natural fit to meld these two particular forms of entertainment. After all, LEGO embodies the tactile act of creation, while gaming focuses on virtual, intangible worlds. However, given the familiarity and accessibility of LEGO pieces, these gaps are easier to bridge than one might expect. "There is something very inherently instinctive about the LEGO brick as a medium for creative expression," observes Michael McNally, director of LEGO brand relations. "It may have something to do with the very simple idea that you can combine the bricks in millions of ways to create what you imagine. That lends a universal access and ability to anyone who gives it try."

The principles that guide the way people play with LEGOs today are the same ones that company was built on over 70 years ago. In 1934, founder Ole Kirk Christiansen combined the first two letters of each word in the Danish phrase "Leg godt," or "Play well." Christiansen was allegedly unaware that "lego" can also be interpreted as "I assemble" in Latin. There have been many significant steps for the toy line since this inception (like the introduction of the smiling minifigure in 1978), but the move to other entertainment media represents an important shift in the way people perceive and interact with LEGO as a whole.

To play with LEGOs no longer simply means spreading them out on the floor and sifting around for specific pieces. "Technology and digital media opens an exciting world of possibility for LEGO," acknowledges McNally. It is important that any game carrying the LEGO brand name exemplifies the same underlying principles that make the toys so enjoyable. "Through exploring creativity and expression through LEGO play, kids are having fun and don't even realize that they're developing problem-solving, skills, a sense of curiosity, and building self-esteem through the challenge of accomplishment," McNally states. "We believe that this is why when you scratch beneath the surface of many creative and successful personalities, you may uncover a
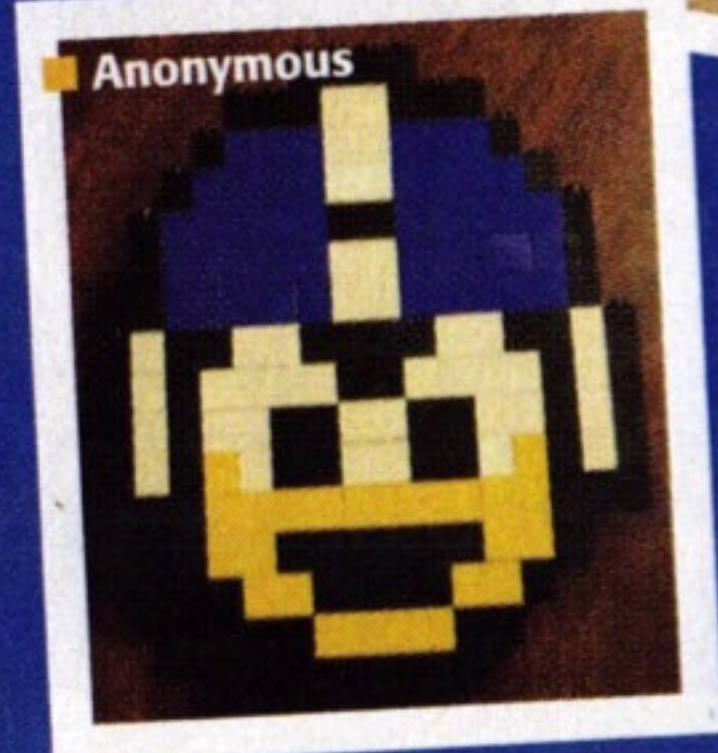
former or current LEGO enthusiast."

There is an assortment of games, puzzles, and activities that foster these goals on the company's website, but LEGO's most significant move into the digital space arose through a partnership with LucasArts and Traveller's Tales for the LEGO Star Wars game. The original title was one of the biggest surprise hits of 2005, bolstered by the theatrical release *Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith*.

The formula behind the success of LEGO Star Wars, in retrospect, isn't difficult to fathom. The gameplay is simple and accessible, allowing gamers of all ages and skill levels to experience it. Plus, the emphasis on co-op play means that any two of these diverse gamers can enjoy playing together, and will likely find some common ground in the iconic source material. "LEGO Star Wars was our first licensed property," McNally tells us. "What's so awesome is that the combined power of Star Wars and LEGO has the ability to engage kids and adults alike. It's truly a unique formula among all toys."

Through LEGO's continued partnership

with developer Traveller's Tales, there are two more licenses in the works (Batman and Indiana Jones), plus an MMO from developer NetDevil. While those are the only currently announced titles in production, the stable of franchises LEGO has to work with could result in even more projects in the future; LEGO games based on *SpongeBob SquarePants*, *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, and especially Harry Potter have plenty of potential.

Don't get lost in your dreams of running around a LEGO Hogwarts just yet, though. The positive reception of LEGO Star Wars has inspired the company to go forward with more video game plans, but LEGO is still taking measured steps in how it approaches the gaming market. "The key for us is in maintaining the right balance of physical and virtual, as we never want to abandon what we're universally known for by replacing it with something completely virtual," observes McNally. "The video games, while a great way to immerse in a completely digital expression of the LEGO world, absolutely inspire players to

crack open the bin and start building in the real world."

LEGO bricks have already proven they can make the transition over to gaming, but is it a two-way street? Could we see our favorite game franchises get their own LEGO lines in the future? "We are always evaluating new licenses and themes to bring to life in LEGO bricks," admits McNally. "Vehicles are great, and anything structural, so we are always looking for properties that have global appeal, great stories, strong and iconic vehicles that also represent great play value." Judging by those criteria, the video game industry is full of likely candidates. For the moment, however, the company's gaming ambitions are centered on the three announced projects.

"You never know where the success of these titles could take us," says McNally. "We're exploring other kinds of gaming based more on the LEGO brand and classic themes, and it's showing signs of strong success. Right now, I can tell you we're looking forward to the upcoming game launches, and anticipate there will be more LEGO excitement in gaming to come." ■ ■ ■

KNOW YOUR LEGO

- A column of 40 billion stacked LEGO bricks would reach the moon
- On average, there are 62 LEGO bricks for every person on earth
- Approximately seven LEGO sets are sold every second
- Two million LEGO pieces per hour are manufactured in Billund, Denmark
- There are 915 million different ways to combine six eight-stud LEGO bricks
- All LEGO pieces made since 1958 are fully compatible regardless of where or when they were manufactured

MORE TO COME

Given the outstanding success of the LEGO Star Wars games, it is not surprising that gamers can expect to see more characters brought to life in blocks. Here's a quick look at the three upcoming LEGO video games that have been announced.
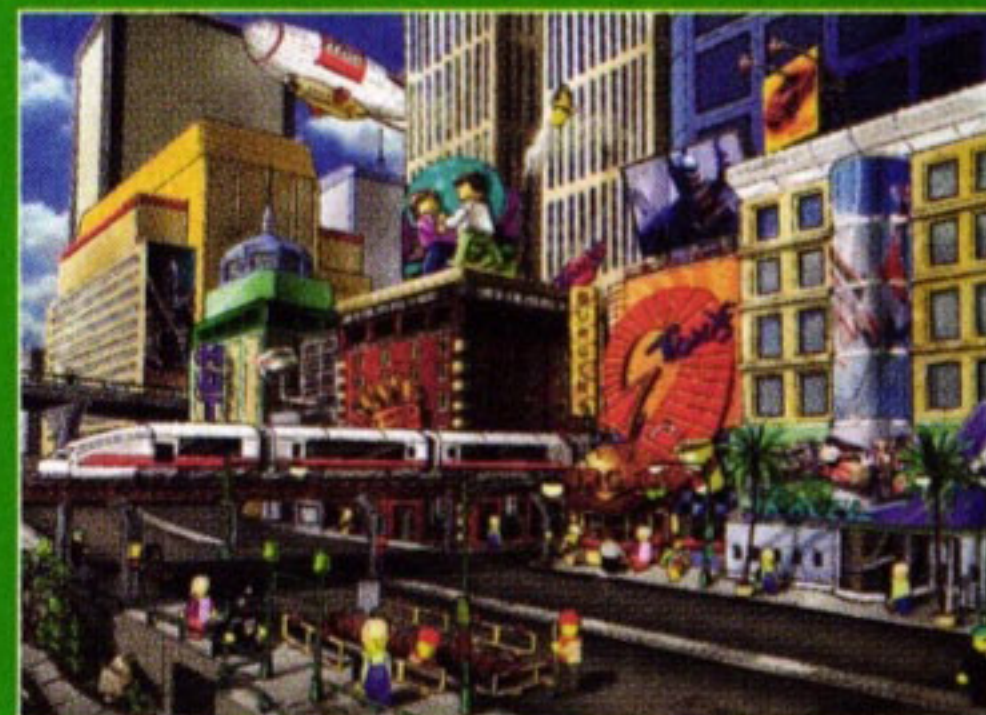
LEGO UNIVERSE

A massively multiplayer game from developer NetDevil, LEGO Universe will emphasize social interaction, community, and customization. Exactly how the game will be structured is unknown, but given its kid-friendly nature, there probably won't be any 40-man raids on ancient fire demons. Expect LEGO Universe to hit shelves in late 2008 or early 2009.

LEGO BATMAN

This spring gamers will already be able to get their hands on the next LEGO game from developer Traveller's Tales. Instead of using one particular era of Batman's history, the LEGO designs draw inspiration from the whole timeline, from the Tim Burton-style Batmobile to Robin's old-school costume. Of course, you'll be able take down foes like the Joker and Riddler alone or with a buddy.
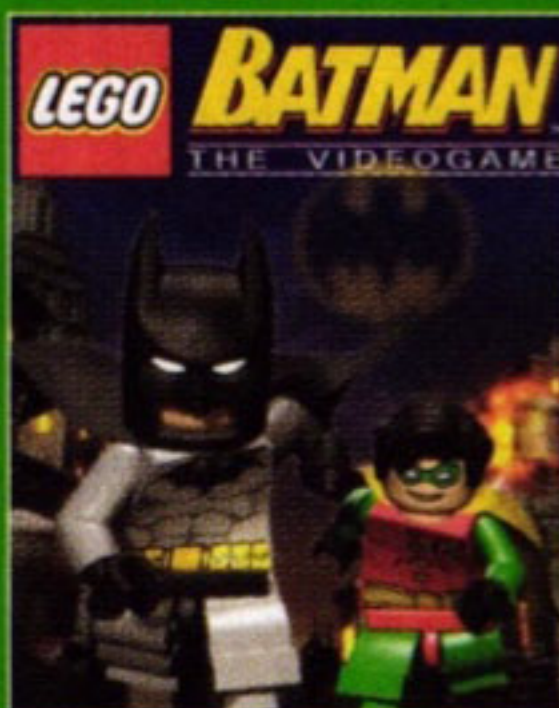
LEGO INDIANA JONES

Traveller's Tales' partnership with LucasArts continues in this adaptation of the iconic whip-swinging, fedora-wearing archaeologist. The game, currently scheduled for summer 2008, focuses on the events of the original trilogy rather than the upcoming movie. It will feature the same drop-in co-op as the developer's other LEGO titles, so you can make your friend be Short Round while you control Indy.

news

MOBILE HOME
VOLLEE SEEKS TO BRING REAL GAMES TO YOUR PHONE

Despite the big money being made in mobile gaming and the high-profile involvement of developers such as John Carmack, the mobile gaming experience has yet to really hit the big time. This is in part simply because the gaming experience has been limited by several factors as it gets shrunk down to your phone. New company Vollee wants to jumpstart mobile gaming by bringing console and PC games to your phone. Not ports, but full-fledged titles adapted to your 3G handset. The company has just announced partnerships with publishers Activision, Codemasters, and Encore Software to bring as-yet-unannounced titles to your phone.

We talked to Vollee president and CEO Martin Dunsby about his company's interesting new initiative.

Tell us about the process by which Vollee streams games onto 3G phones.
We're taking a shrink-wrapped, untouched console game from a top-tier publishers [and] we're running them in a data center. We're taking the sound and video output of the game, modifying and adapting it to mobile – without having to touch the source code – and then we stream the video and sound down to the handset. You get the best of both worlds. You get the full richness of the PC experience and all that means in terms of physics, AI, 3D graphics, depth of the gameplay, the different characters/cars you can use – all of the investment the original developers put into the game. And you also get mobility. Because we're streaming the video down instead of actually downloading the game, it becomes much easier to port this across many, many handsets. When you ask, 'How are you getting the games to run on the handsets?' We're really not, the games are running on a PC, which is what they were developed for.

A big problem for the advancement of mobile gaming is making the controls useful and intuitive on a phone. How is your streaming process addressing this issue?
We have a set of standards we use. Pretty much all 3G handsets have a d-pad, a couple of soft keys…. We map the keys in the games to keys on the phone. We have an intelligent robot we use that acts on behalf of the player in the game. For example, if it's a PC game you gotta click through a bunch of screens, we have a robot who will act on the behalf of the player to click through those screens for them on the server. On a driving game we'll default the car to automatic transmission. On some games we put in a cruise control. There are some compromises we make to make it easier for the player. In a flight sim you might not be able to set the flaps or the frequency of the radio, but from a flying perspective, the control stick and throttle, etc. are pretty much what you need.

Are you being selective about what kinds of games you'll be handling?
Absolutely. We work closely with our publisher partners on that. Obviously they are the experts on the essence in their games. We work closely with them to identify games that have the right attributes to come across well. One of the things about the game market is it's clear when something's fantastic and it's clear when something sucks, but there's a huge chunk in the middle…. So we're just starting to learn now what kind of gameplay attributes make games transfer well into mobile.

When people think of mobile games they think of bite-sized experiences. Do people want bigger experiences than this?
We think that people in general will gravitate to a richer experience. Just because you're playing for 10 minutes doesn't necessarily mean you want 2D graphics and no story line and no depth to the gameplay. You still want an attractive game and an opponent that doesn't just stand there and wait to get shot. We think that there's an appetite for a better game experience.

Because of this streaming approach we're taking, and your game is actually running in a data center connected to a network backbone, online games become possible on mobile where they haven't before. This is the big opportunity to change how people play games, because right now for most MMOs, and even most Xbox Live and Sony live titles, you don't have a mobile option. Your only choice to participate in that community, to be online, message people, and to play is when you're sitting on a broadbrand connection. You're usually in your home, you're usually in front of a TV or a high-end PC. If you happen to be stuck in traffic when your guild meeting is going on or you've got 10 minutes and you want to see your mates' Halo fight and you can't do that because you're not in front of a PC, we believe that because we're online all the time, that there will be new modes of gameplay and new demand for online access to these kinds of next-generation games. That's part of what the Vollee service will enable you to do, is maintain access to that world not necessarily to go on some full-fledged raid from the mobile phone, but be part of a meeting, check in to see what's go on, buy stuff that you need…as your character online, but still while you're in the middle of your real life.

> "Just because you're playing for ten minutes doesn't necessarily mean you want 2D graphics and no story line and no depth to the gameplay.
>
> – Vollee president and CEO Martin Dunsby

THE ART OF
STAR TREK
ONLINE

UNLIMITED ENABLED

This month, we have an exciting exclusive to share revealing some of the first glimpses of Perpetual Entertainment's huge new Star Trek MMO. For Trek fans, the game will be doubly exciting, as it is not only one of the only major Star Trek projects in years, it's also moving into the future of the Trek mythos. We talked with art director Greg Faillace and lead concept artist Ryan Dening about the challenges of taking one of the world's best-selling fictional franchises into a new era.

IOWA

SACAGAWEA

EDISON
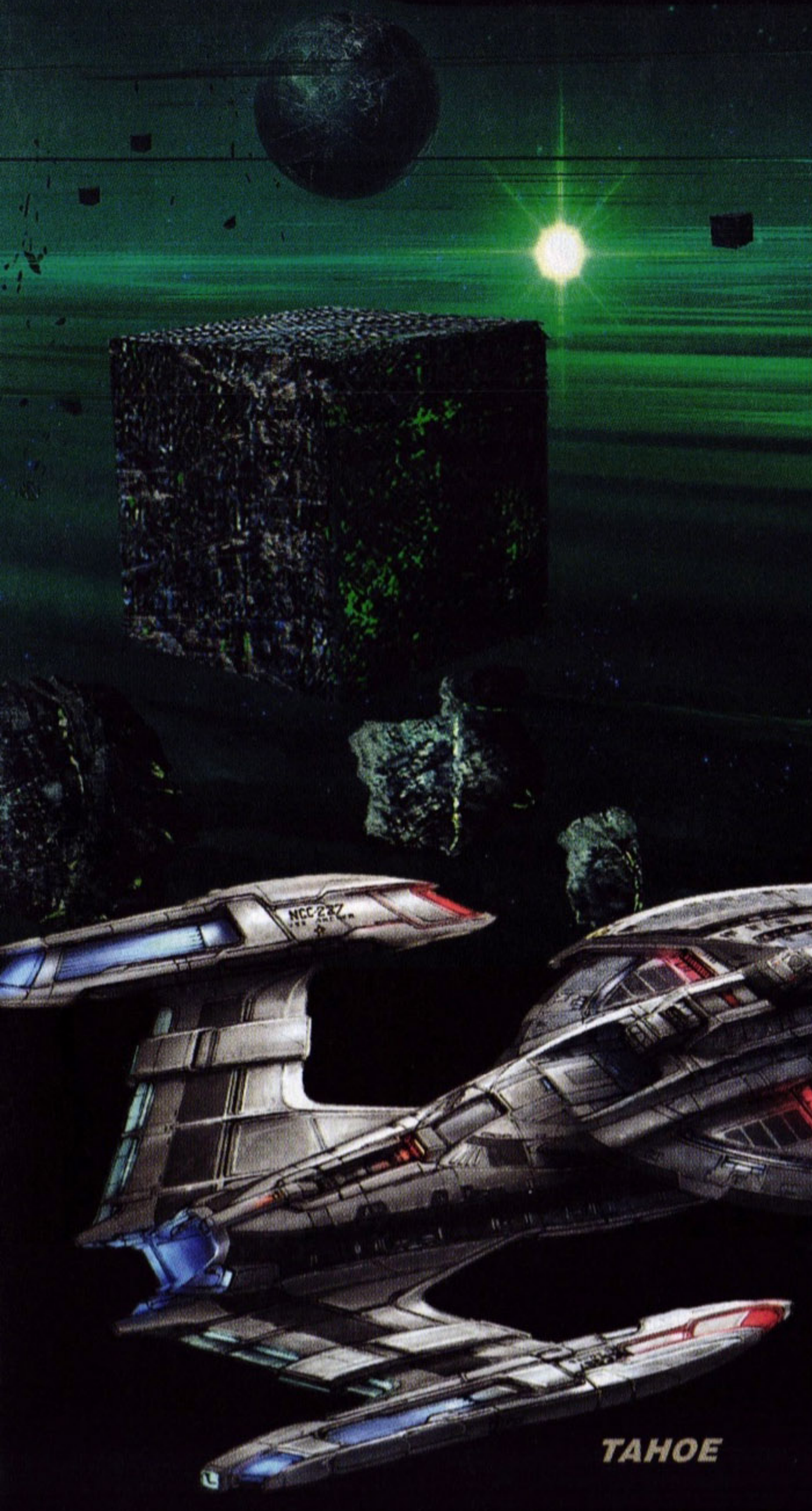
For a lot of our readers, this may be the first time they've heard about Star Trek Online. Can you give us a brief summary of the game and when it is set in the Star Trek mythos?

Faillace: Sure thing. The game takes place a few decades after the movie *Nemesis*. After years of peace and newly formed alliances with old foes, a number of new (and not-so-new) threats have suddenly emerged to threaten the galaxy. You start out as a Starfleet cadet, adventuring into the expanse of the universe, confronting the challenges and fighting back the chaos. You'll be exploring new worlds and cultures that have never been seen as well as experiencing familiar people and places from the shows and films.

Each of the Star Trek TV series and movies had their own unique visual style that set it apart. How would you characterize the visual style of Star Trek Online?

Faillace: I would say the visual style captures the vast dynamic range that is the Star Trek universe, while remaining consistent in the execution. In this universe you'll discover a range of environments that are unique such as the inside of an abandoned Romulan facility, a peaceful pre-warp colony at the edge of the galaxy, and a new look for Starfleet that's a bit more aggressive but still familiar at its core.

As conceptual artists, is there one particular thing within the mythos that your team has been excited about moving forward into a new era?

Dening: Oh man, all of it is exciting! It's been really fun to re-visit old characters like the Gorn and Mugato – taking the man out of the rubber costume – it lets us approach them in a fresh way. Creating new locations and aliens is exciting because we don't

have the constraints they had when making the shows – we're not dependent on make-up or plywood to seek out new life in strange new worlds. Being set in the future gives us freedom within the fiction to add new ideas and progress the evolution of the show's design. For me, personally, the ships are the most exciting. I mean, heck – "Hey Ryan, we need a design for the next Enterprise" – are you kidding me!?

What interaction have you had with the TV and movie designers from earlier Trek projects? Are any of them involved in helping to craft the look of Star Trek Online?

Faillace: Initially we worked with a number of people like Mike Okuda, John Eaves, and Andrew Probert – helping explore some interface design, interior sets, and ship designs. John Eaves has helped out quite a bit over this past year with his extensive knowledge of Star Trek and experience with the design decisions that shaped the franchise. On STO, John has designed many Starfleet and alien ships along with helping define our style for Starfleet interiors.

Many game creators have a clean slate when designing concepts for a game. Your team has a wealth of background images to start from. Does that make the art concept phase more or less complicated?

Dening: As a fan myself, reconciling Star Trek with the needs of MMO game design can be complicated at times. As a result, we generate concepts and ideas that we haven't really seen in Star Trek canon (character upgrades, for example). The concept team is rising to the challenge – putting out super-awesome designs that enrich the franchise. I think fans will really love what we're doing.

Has production of the new Kirk-era movie affected production of your MMO? Have you been asked to change or omit anything?

Faillace: Nope, they've been supportive of what were creating – it really hasn't affected us at all.

TAHOE

50

Games of 2007

One should always be careful about throwing around phrases like "the best year of gaming ever," but 2007 had enough amazing offerings and events to put it in the running for that lofty title. With blockbuster titles on every system, this year saw some outstanding games help Sony, Microsoft, and Nintendo jockey for position in the ongoing console war. Handheld gaming solidified its hold on hardcore and casual gamers alike, and the PC continued its steady march with an array of exceptional shooters and strategy titles.

In the pages that follow, we make our picks for the best – and the worst – the year had to offer. Of course, the good outweighs the bad; whether you own a single console or the entire spectrum, there's no questioning that 2007 was a great time to be a gamer.
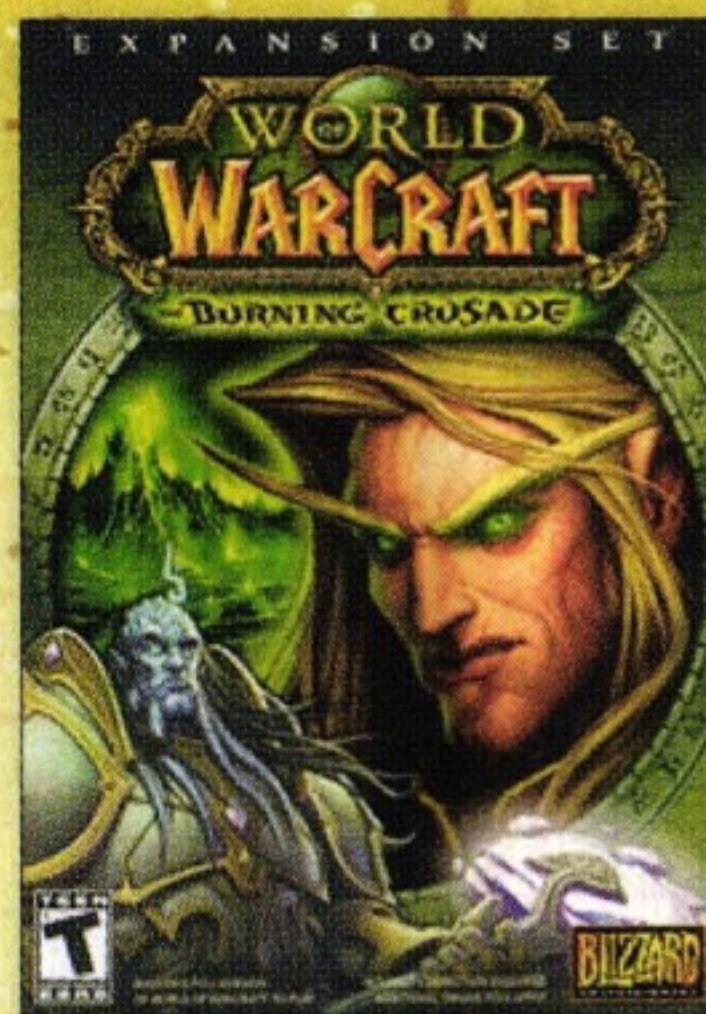
WORLD OF WARCRAFT: THE BURNING CRUSADE

System: PC • **Release:** January 16

The biggest PC release of 2007 happened right at the beginning of the year, as World of Warcraft players gained 10 new levels and a continent to explore. A full suite of new toys for every class and specialization, several additional zones, and more than a dozen dungeons have the massive WoW population still going strong. Fast-forward nearly a year after its release, and the game is still massively entertaining; Warlocks are still overpowered, and the Horde has its fair share of scantily clad elf chicks dancing on mailboxes.

ROGUE GALAXY

System: PlayStation 2 • **Release:** January 30

Rogue Galaxy shows Level 5 honing its RPG skills in mixing real-time action elements with well-crafted character development. Unlike Final Fantasy XII's License Board, Rogue's Revelation Flow chart encourages exploration as you level up your characters, and it's fun, absorbing, and never boring. With many of these driving philosophies sure to be included in the upcoming PS3 title White Knight Chronicles, Rogue Galaxy is a game that will inspire Level 5's future as much as it remains a part of a past generation.

RATCHET & CLANK: SIZE MATTERS

System: PSP • **Release:** February 13

Console action games, especially those that rely on high production values and finely tuned control schemes, traditionally suffer when they are ported to a handheld. Leave it to Ratchet & Clank, one of gaming's most consistent franchises, to beat the odds. Amazingly, Size Matters stands up to any of its console predecessors, offering all the variety, weapons, and fun we've come to expect from this series. Kudos to rookie developer High Impact Studios for hitting a homerun in its first at-bat.

Crackdown

System: Xbox 360 • **Release:** February 20

For centuries, people thought that peanut butter and jelly were the perfect companions. Crackdown shows us that the correct answer is actually superhuman strength and rocket launchers. Scaling skyscrapers, raining down fiery death, and teaming up with a friend for cooperative police work is what this amazing game is all about. Crackdown broke new ground for open world games, and remains one of Xbox 360's most unique experiences.

SUPREME COMMANDER

System: PC • **Release** February 20

How big do you like your armies? 200 units? 300? Whatever, Nancy, go play Supreme Commander and come talk to us. The sheer scale of the RTS battles here, along with a UI that makes commanding your unstoppable war machine a reasonable task, secure Supreme Commander's place in history. Still need convincing? You can nuke entire continents! For bonus galaxy-spanning fun, pick up the recent Forged Alliance expansion as well for its even better interface and rebalanced units.

Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter 2

System: PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, PC • **Release** March 6

Who says the French are soft on terror? Ubisoft certainly did its share in 2007, releasing this outstanding squad shooter to both next-gen consoles and PC. A streamlined UI for controlling squadmates, the evolved Cross-Com system that allows further tactical options, and a brand new techno-thriller plotline make GRAW 2 a must-play for anyone with a lick of interest in military action. As if that weren't enough, the multiplayer is top-notch as well, meaning that SOCOM players really don't have any excuses any more.

God of War II

System: PlayStation 2 • **Release:** March 13

Kratos never disappoints. His second adventure is bigger and even more brutal than his first, with more boss battles, more weapons, and more over-the-top combat. The Ghost of Sparta sets his sights even higher in the Olympian pantheon, exacting revenge on Zeus himself by battling through a variety of new mythological creatures and locations. We won't spoil the ending, but let's just say the first five minutes God of War III are going to be pretty awesome.

Top 10 Heroes of 2007

1

MARIO [SUPER PAPER MARIO, MARIO GALAXY]

Even though Mario may not have much to say outside of "woo hoo," he managed to dominate in both the RPG and platforming realms this year. Whether it's outsmarting nerdy reptiles or performing some mind-bending gravity maneuvers, Mario proves that you really can teach an old plumber new tricks.

2

ALTAIR [ASSASSIN'S CREED]

Altaïr's uncanny acrobatics and effortless way of killing make Hitman's Agent 47 look like he's wearing training pants. Plus, you have to have some kind of balls to fall hundreds of feet into a pile of hay. By the way, if you see a guy sneaking around in a white hoodie, watch your kidneys. We hear that's a favorite stabbing spot.

3

COMMANDER SHEPARD [MASS EFFECT]

Shepard is kind of a difficult character to describe, primarily because players decide everything from the character's appearance to his or her personality and past. The best thing is that you can be a son of a bitch or a relatively nice person, and both attitudes are still way cooler than any of us could hope to be in real life.
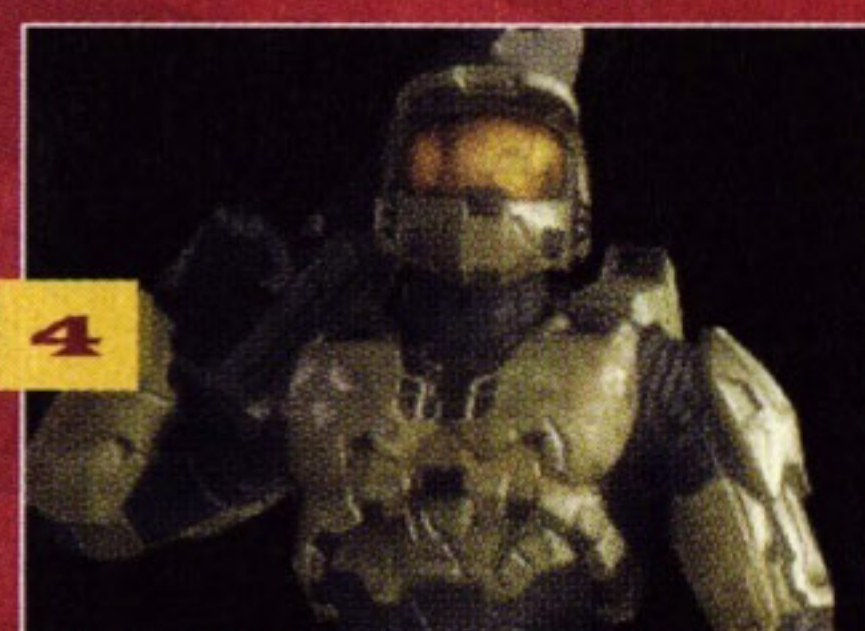
4

MASTER CHIEF [HALO 3]

Old fishbowl head is about as likely to let gamers see his face as he is to respond to Cortana's untamed advances, but somehow Master Chief is still one of the most recognizable characters in gaming. Whether he's single-handedly bringing down Scarabs or mowing down waves of Covenant and Flood, Chief always handles things with smooth efficiency.

5

CAPTAIN PRICE [CALL OF DUTY 4]

If we gave out a Moustache of the Year award, Price would win hands down. A British soldier whose badassery knows no bounds – including time (he also fought in WWII) – he's possibly the first video game leader that you feel inspired to follow rather than obligated. We won't spoil his many awesome exploits here – just be glad he's on your side.
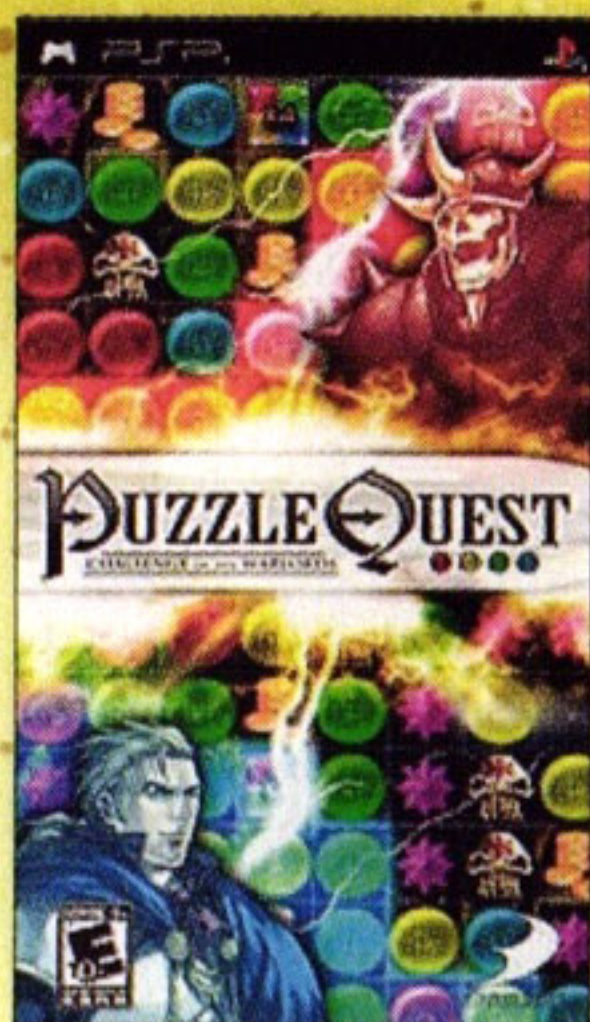
PUZZLE QUEST: CHALLENGE OF THE WARLORDS

System: Xbox 360,Wii, PlayStation 2, PC, Nintendo DS, PSP • **Release:** March 20

If Puzzle Quest was simply an addictive color-matching puzzler in the Bejeweled vein like we've played countless times before, it would still be fun. However, Puzzle Quest's triumph is its merging of RPG elements within this format with matching orbs granting you elemental mana, XP, money, and damage gems for use in battle. Add in earnable character power ups, mounts, and weapons, and Puzzle Quest is an example where the gems, genres, and stars align.
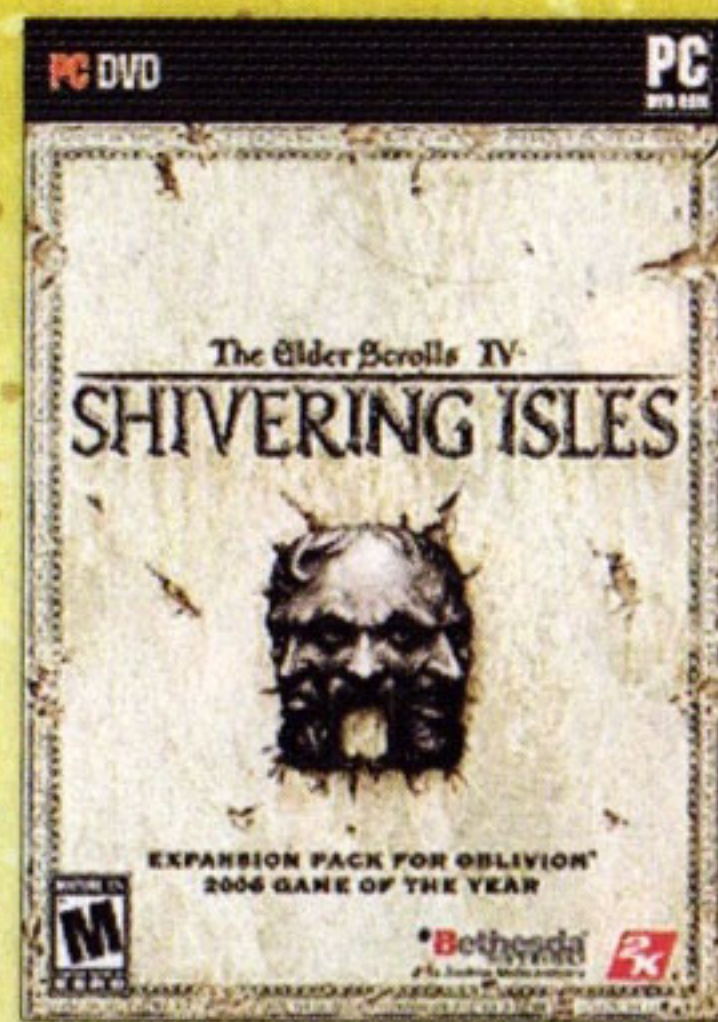
THE ELDER SCROLLS IV: SHIVERING ISLES

System: PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, PC • **Release:** March 26

If only every RPG offered expanded content like this amazing addition to the Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion experience. The Shivering Isles opens a deep and varied new dimension shaded by mania and dementia for heroes to explore. Its amazing array of quests found gamers performing tasks like leading an inquisition and torturing helpless dungeon crawlers, and the hilarious mutterings of Prince Sheogorath was some of the best writing of the year. The Shivering Isles is a must-buy for anyone who logged heavy hours into Oblivion.
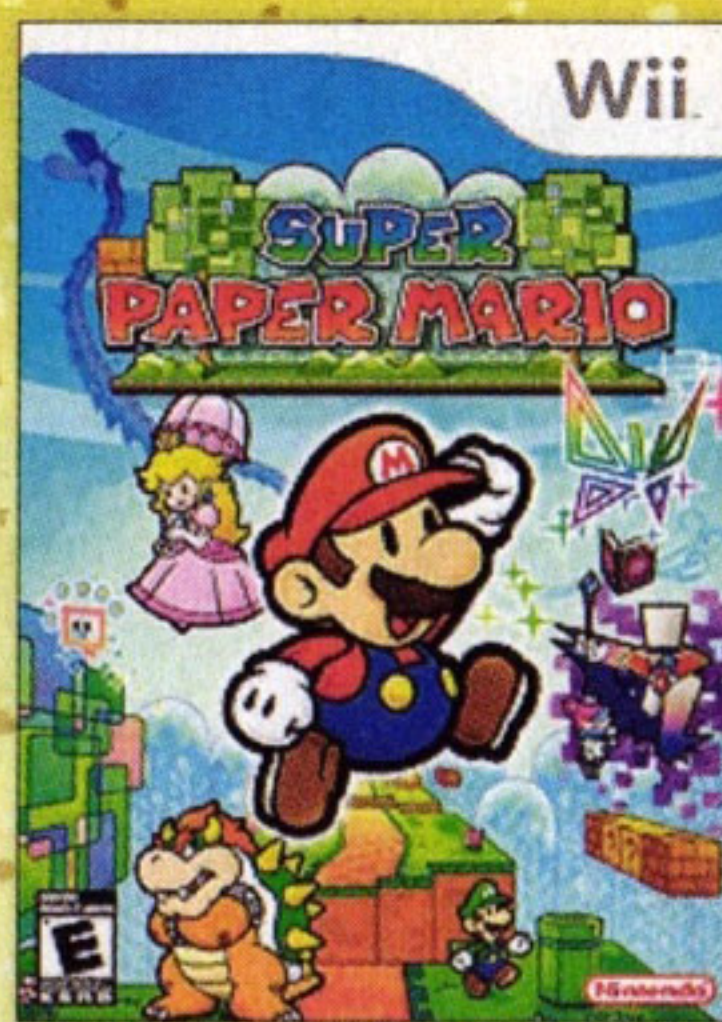
SUPER PAPER MARIO

System: Wii • **Release:** April 9

While it's going to go down as only the second-best Mario platformer of the year, that in no means diminishes the accomplishments of Super Paper Mario. Sporting an amusing, retro graphical look, the game offers gamers a wildly humorous adventure with a surprisingly touching love story. While we'll all remember some of the game's funniest moments, the real hook is the amazing level designs, which meld 2D and 3D platforming worlds in a most ingenious fashion. It's truly one of the year's most memorable games.
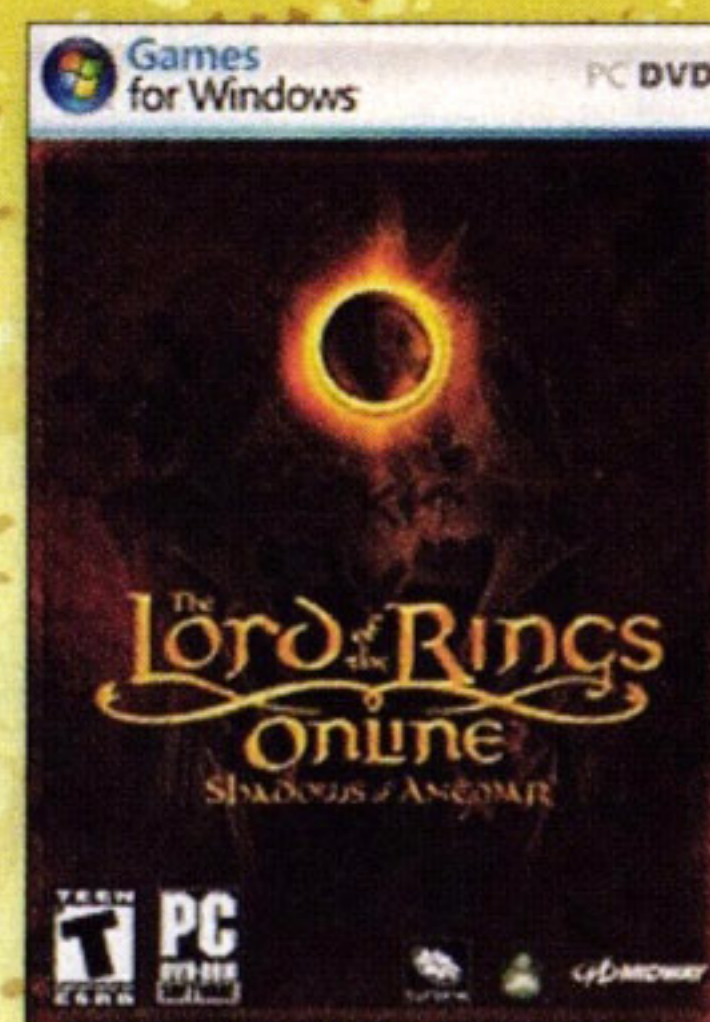
THE LORD OF THE RINGS ONLINE: SHADOWS OF ANGMAR

System: PC • **Release:** April 24

The series that made elves and orcs fantasy gaming mainstays finally gets its own MMORPG treatment. Bringing the vastness of Middle-earth is no small task, but LOTRO imbues the world with appropriately epic content. The hundreds of quests never get old thanks to a clever talent system and combat that immediately draws you in. It's a little light on the PvP side of things, but Lord of the Rings Online is one of the best massively mulitplayer titles to hit the industry since WoW.

ODIN SPHERE

System: PlayStation 2
Release: May 22

If you think the time has passed for side-scrolling 2D games, you haven't played Odin Sphere. Structured like a storybook, each chapter focuses on a different character, giving players the opportunity to witness events from various perspectives. The combat has a distinctly old-school flavor, but the beautiful visual style and striking character design are unlike anything you've seen before. It's not often you see games take chances like Odin Sphere, and even rarer that it pays off so well.

With over 300 intricately detailed cars that gracefully slide around turns and can be customized to the max, Forza Motorsport 2 is easily the best simulator on the market. The online auctions, extensive community options, and feeling that every race or circuit that you complete will bring you a new set of wheels is something racing fans have been craving since the last Gran Turismo.
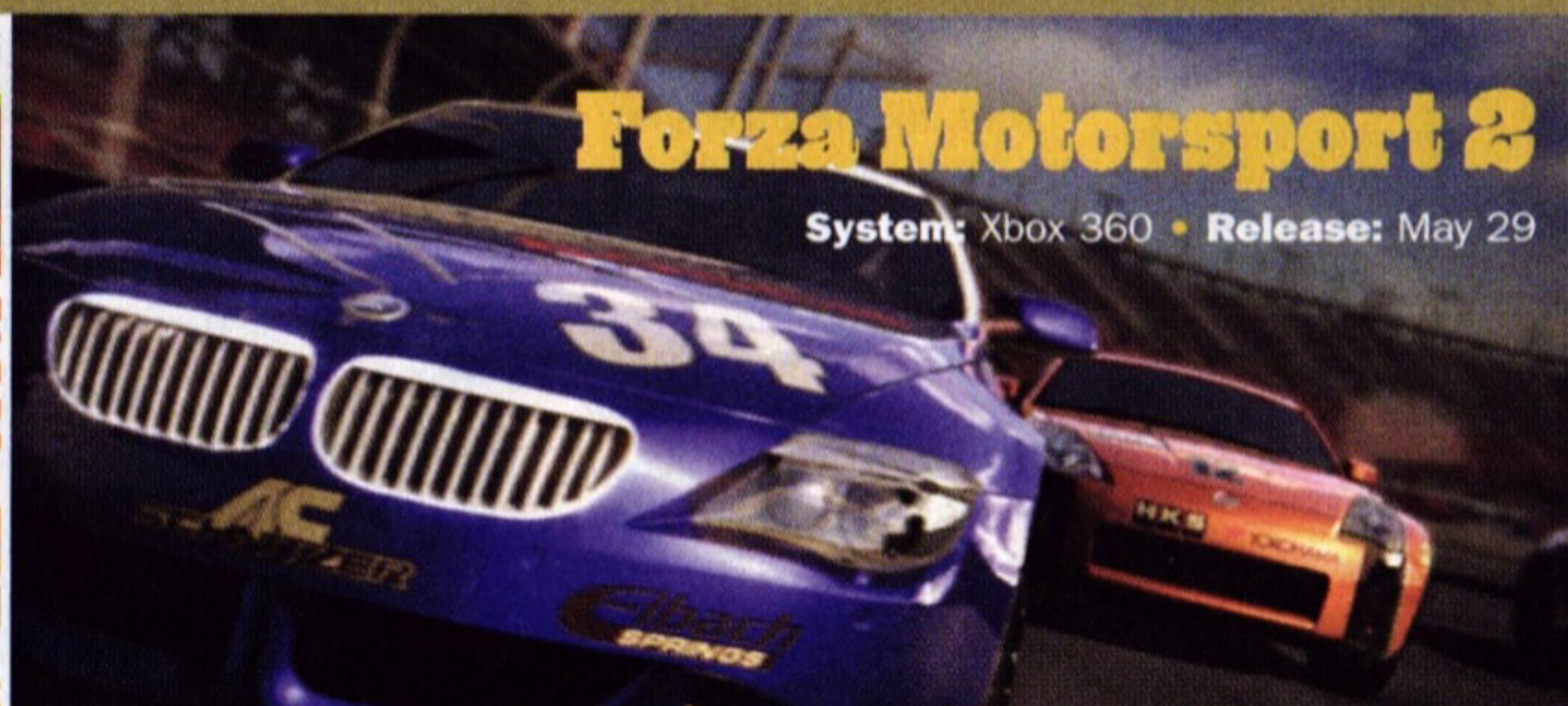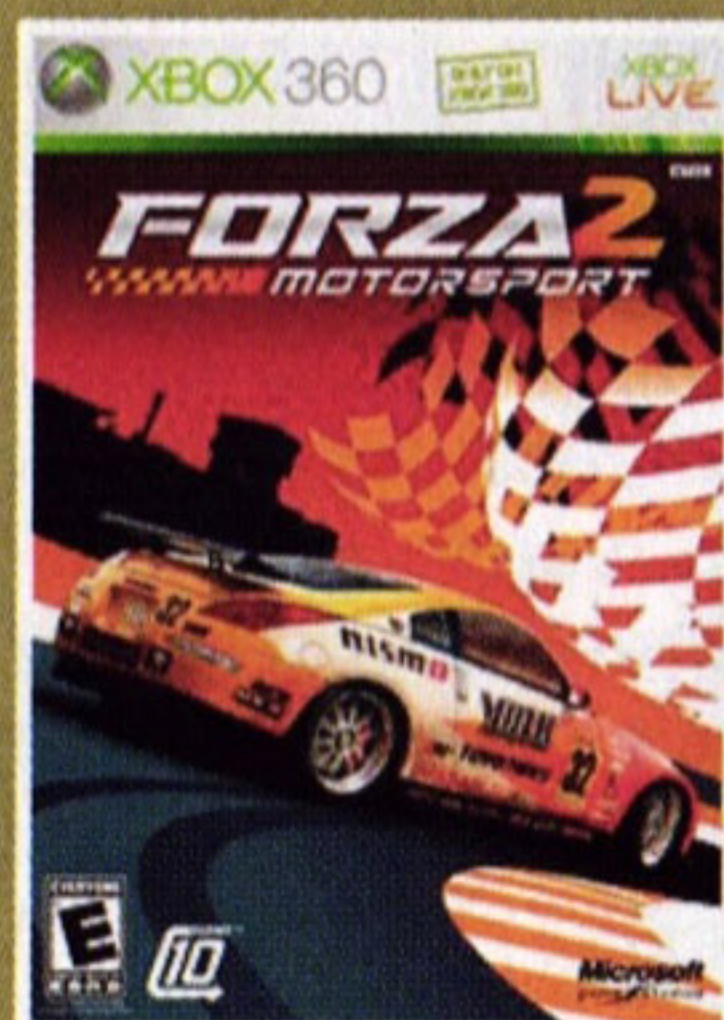
Forza Motorsport 2

System: Xbox 360 • **Release:** May 29

6 NARIKO [HEAVENLY SWORD]

This fiery-haired vixen adds a little sexy to the death and dismemberment genre popularized by Kratos. Nariko's stern resolve, ridiculously painful-looking attacks, and willingness to do whatever it takes for the livelihood of her people is brought to life with a stunning performance by Anna Torv.
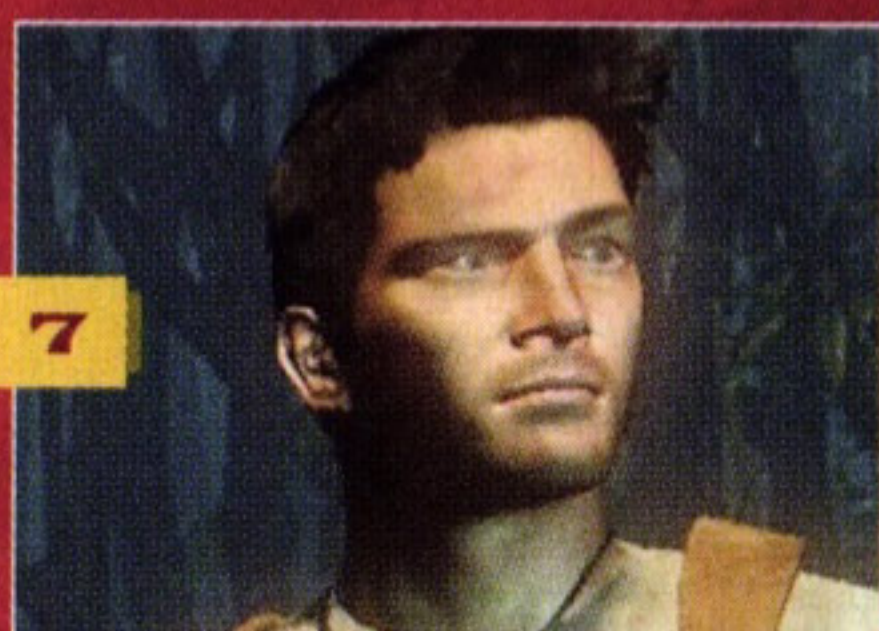
7 DRAKE [UNCHARTED: DRAKE'S FORTUNE]

While most of the heroes on this list kick ass, Drake stands apart as an everyman, Indiana Jones type of guy. He's not a professionally trained special ops member or a guy with an ancient blade of power, but somehow when he gets pinned down by a hail of bullets and grenades he always manages to come out on top.

8 THE AGENTS [CRACKDOWN]

Who's faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive, and able to leap tall buildings in a single bound? The Agents, that's who! Well, maybe the speed thing isn't true, but they're still really fast. These characters are some of the most fun non-superhero superheroes to play in video games.

9 GERALT [THE WITCHER]

The world of The Witcher is one where the heroes are heavy metal and the women are easy. Seriously, Geralt could bring one of these ladies a saltine and they'd be ready to go. Combine this with his preparedness for any type of scuffle (steel swords for people, silver swords for werewolves, etc.) and this guy proves that you can mix business and pleasure.

10 STORM ONE [EARTH DEFENSE FORCE]

Storm One is not necessarily a tough guy. In fact, he looks just as dorky as the rest of the disposable Earth Defense Force. But while other soldiers get eaten by giant spiders like chumps, old Stormy manages to persevere through endless hordes of ludicrously oversized insects and robots to save humanity.
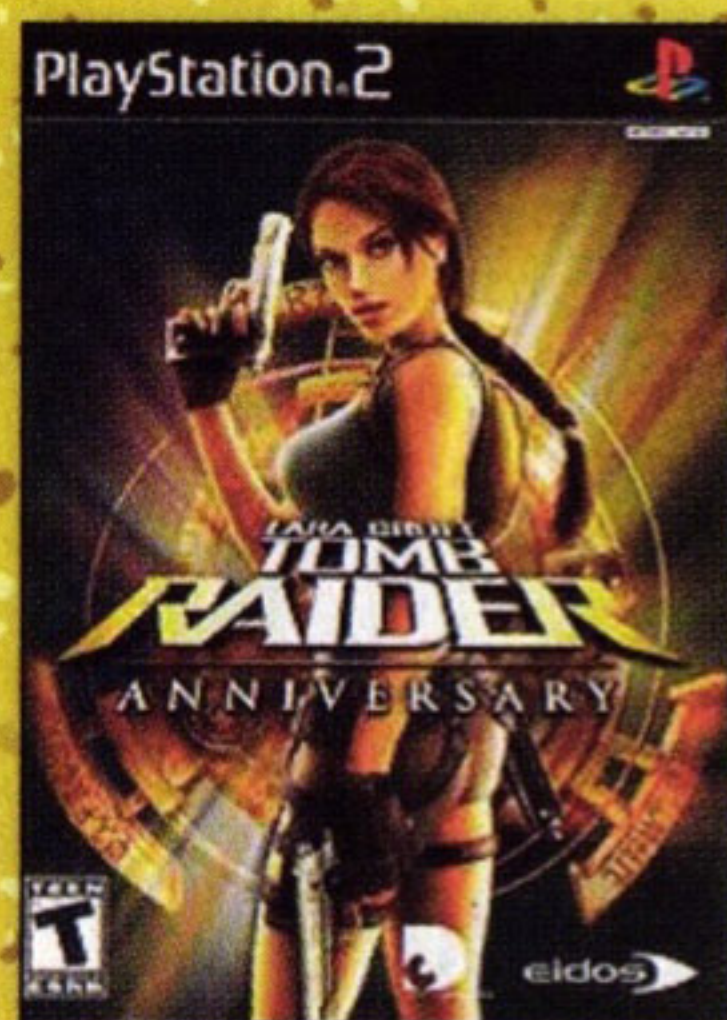
Tomb Raider Anniversary

System: Xbox 360, Wii, PlayStation 2, PSP
Release: June 5

There are plenty of characters vying for the platforming throne these days, but Lara still hangs with the best of them, even in a game that was designed 10 years ago. Taking the template set by the original Tomb Raider those many years earlier, Crystal Dynamics crafted a masterpiece of adventure puzzle fun with Anniversary by updating graphics and puzzles while leaving familiar locations and encounters intact. The result is a startling mix of nostalgia and excitement that appeals to new and old players alike.
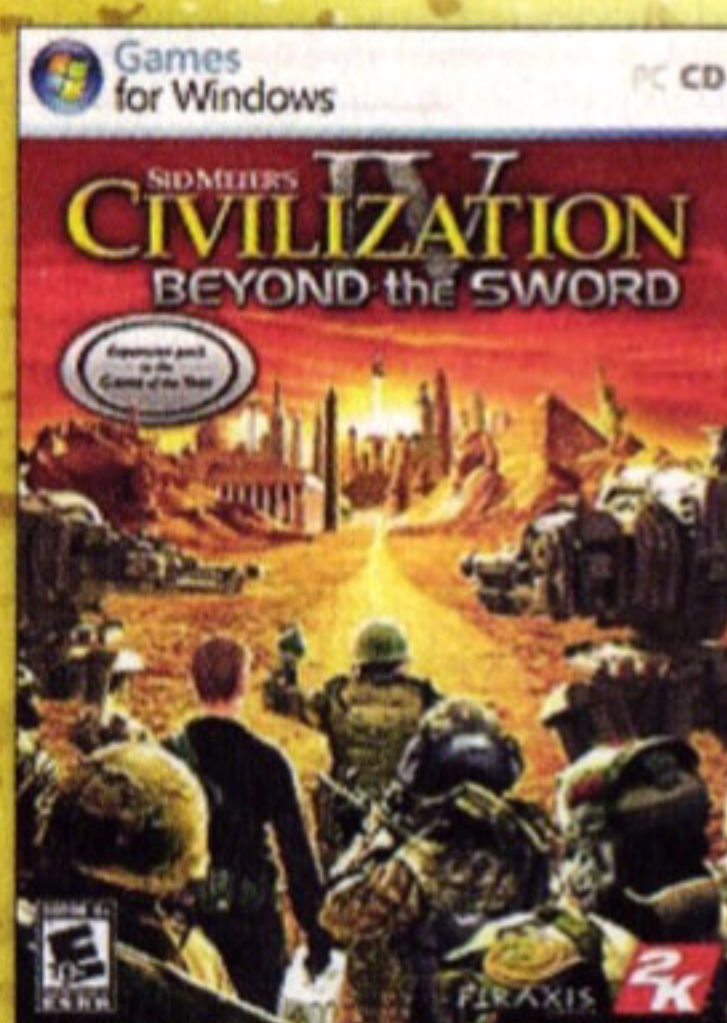
Civilization IV: Beyond the Sword

System: PC
Release July 24

You can't ask for more out of an expansion than what you get here. Beyond the Sword packs in a multitude of new civilizations, technology, Wonders, diplomatic options, and crazy scenarios and mods into a single box. Civilization IV was already an amazing, endlessly replayable turn-based world domination sim, but this expansion cranks up the awesome even farther. You may not know what the Shwedagon Paya is now, but trust us – it's key to conquering the globe.

The Darkness

System: PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
Release: June 25
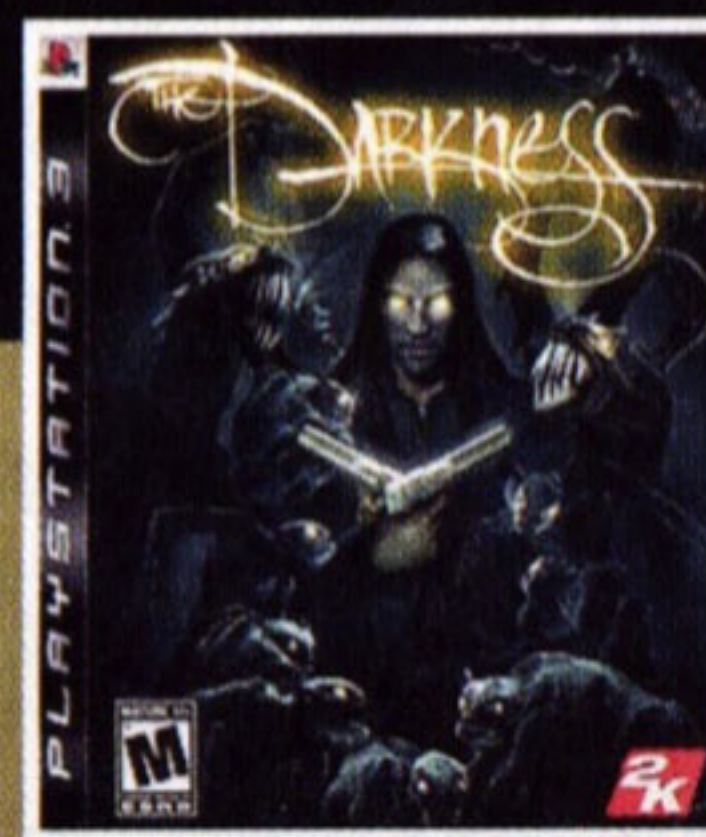
The worst consequence of most people's 21st birthdays is a little barf in the shrubs; Jackie Estacado gets possessed by an evil force that leads to one hell of a week. Full of shocking moments, great characters, extremely satisfying powers, fantastic voice work, and one of the freakiest environments in video games, The Darkness delivers an experience you won't soon forget. By the end of the game you'll feel like an unstoppable killing machine. When is that ever a bad thing?

ESRB Breakdown	
E10+	6
E	8
T	22
M	14

Originality	
Existing Franchises	23
New IP	16
Expansions	5
Licensed	2
Annual Sports	2
Remakes	1
The Orange Box	1

Monthly Breakdown	
January	2
February	3
March	4
April	2
May	2
June	2
July	2
August	7
September	5
October	11
November	10
December	0

(Release counts are calculated using the first appearance of a game on any platform)

➡ Top 10 Moments of 2007 ⬅

1 Entering Andrew Ryan's Office [BioShock]

We just couldn't bear to ruin this moment for those who haven't experienced it yet, but we will say that events surrounding your encounter with Ryan are quite revealing. Afterwards, you'll look back at the entire game with a slightly different perspective. This is a moment gamers will be talking about for years.

2 The Last Three Hours [Mass Effect]

Humanity… no the galaxy… no the entire universe faces cataclysmic disaster. How are you going to save it? BioWare understands storytelling like few others, but the developer outdid itself with Mass Effect's epic climax. Good luck pulling your sweaty palms away from that controller during the game's twilight hours.

3 Shock and Awe [Call of Duty 4]

Even the early levels of CoD are as intense as most game's finales, but Shock and Awe ends with one of the most graphically impressive bangs in the whole game. The aftermath is also a great example of emotionally charged storytelling. Infinity Ward showed us horrors we've never experienced in a first-person shooter before.

4 Farewell, Companion Cube [Portal]

Your faithful, silent companion was only at your side for a matter of minutes, but when GLaDOS informs you that the cube must be disposed of, you hesitate. Just the thought of what you have to do evokes a torrent of conflicting emotions. This moment alone speaks to the artfulness of the Portal's writing and the simplicity of the game's execution.

5 The Moment of the Kill [Assassin's Creed]

For years, death has been a spectacle in which games have been constantly trumping each other with bigger, flashier displays. Then came Assassin's Creed. From the slow hunter's stalk to the intimacy of the fatal moment (including the surreal conversation with the dead afterwards), Ubisoft Montreal has given some weight back to the act of taking a life.
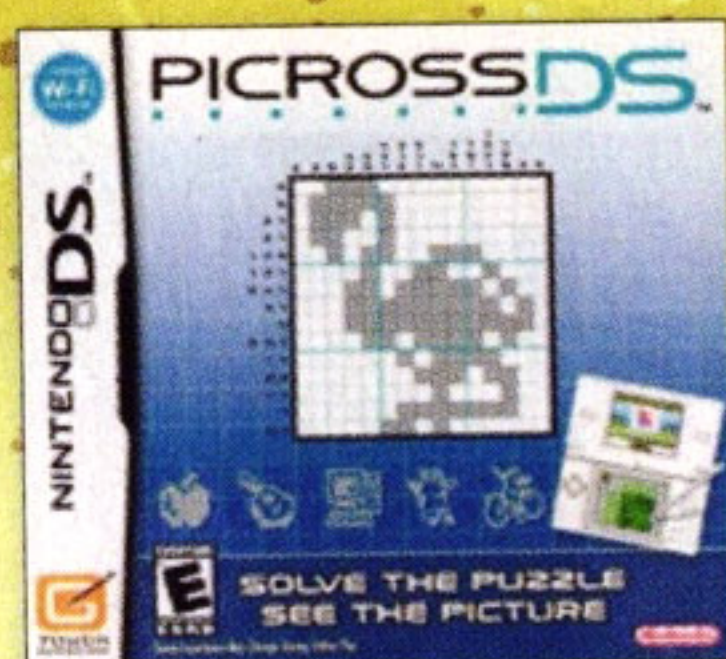
PICROSS DS

System: Nintendo DS • **Release:** July 30

It's a little bit Sudoku. It's a little bit "Paint by Numbers." It's more than a little bit addictive. Mario Picross was a lost classic of the original monochrome Game Boy, and we're surprised it's taken Nintendo this long to revive this excellent puzzle series. Perhaps it's for the best, because the DS definitely allows for improved functionality via the touch screen. If filling out dots on a grid sounds boring to you, it's only because you haven't played Picross. At $20, there's no reason you shouldn't fix that problem.
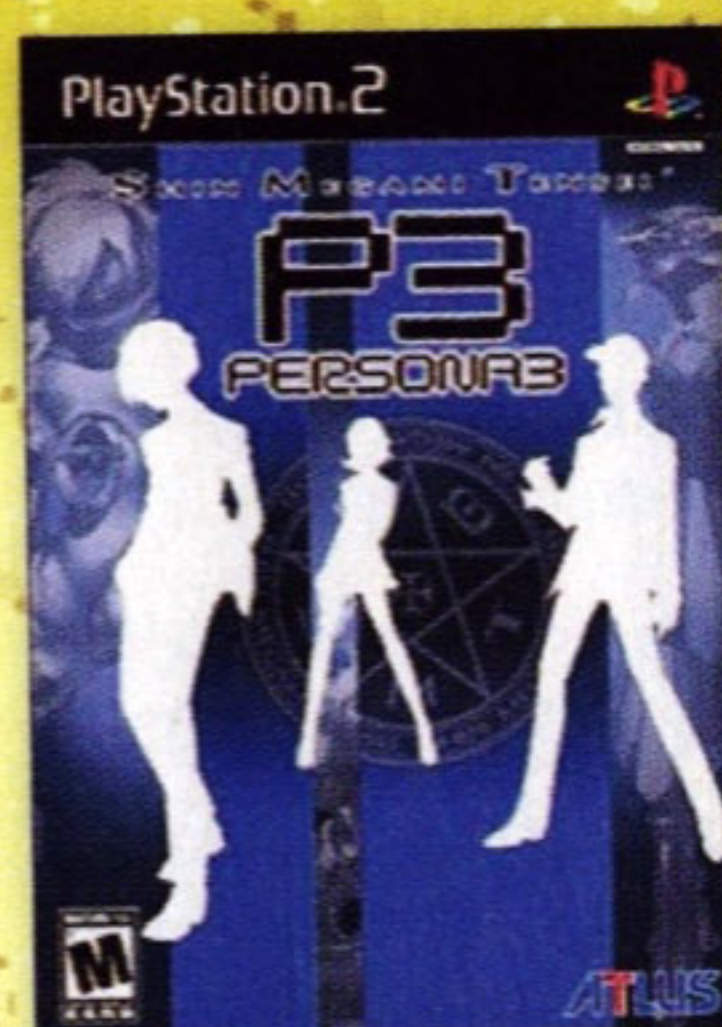
SHIN MEGAMI TENSEI: PERSONA 3

System: PlayStation 2 • **Release:** August 14

Persona 3 marks the return of a classic role-playing series, and it comes back onto the scene in style. This title integrates dark themes and deftly moves back and forth between extremes, delivering a uniquely disturbing adventure. Social interactions during the day augment your abilities at night when you summon your Persona (monsters born from the psyche) to fight through a demonic tower. Persona 3 is filled with shocking imagery you can't shake, and addictive gameplay that keeps you coming back for more.

BioShock

System: Xbox 360, PC
Release: August 21

What begins as a plane crash over the mid-Atlantic quickly transforms into a chilling fight for survival in Rapture. The ruined underwater objectivist utopia is simultaneously beautiful and violent, forcing you to alter your genetic code in order to take on the supernatural abilities necessary to fight Andrew Ryan and his army of splicers. With danger lurking around every corner (usually in the form of hulking Big Daddies), this game mixes the horror, adventure, and first-person shooter genres while putting a new spin on twisted storytelling and intense gameplay. There were many excellent titles released in 2007, but even among such juggernauts, BioShock stands out as the Game of the Year.

GAME INFORMER
Game of the Year 2007
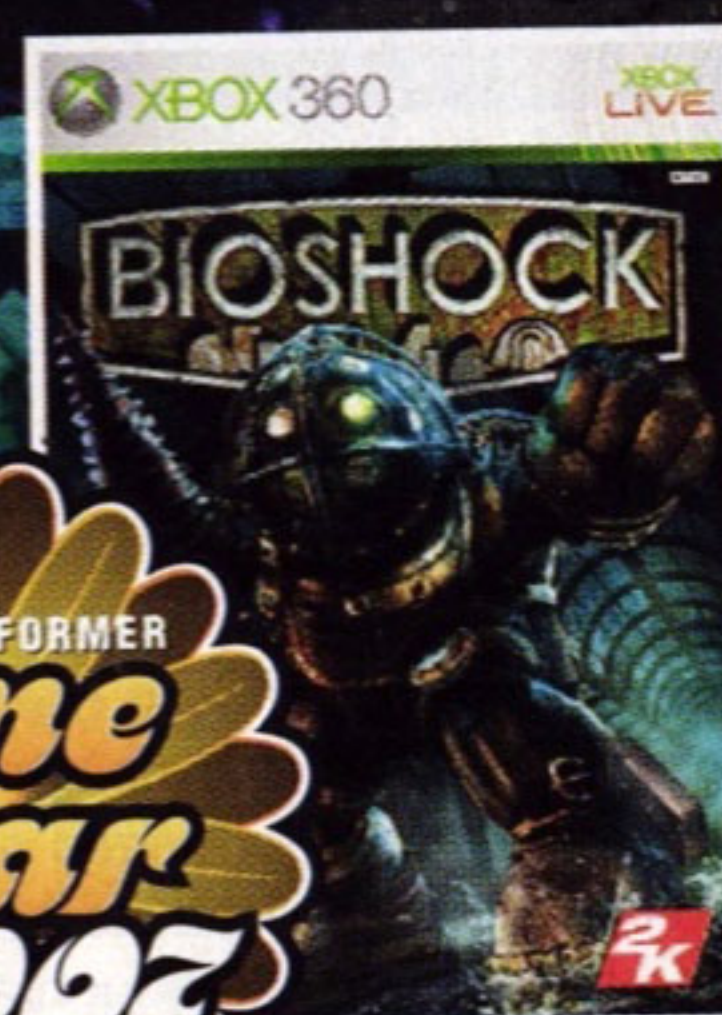
6 — THE BREAK UP [THE DARKNESS]

You already hated Mafia Don Paulie Franchetti and crooked Police Captain Eddie Shrote. You weren't particularly fond of the demon that'd possessed you either, but after the vicious display you were forced to watch in an abandoned orphanage, you knew you had to use one monster to kill the other two. And you hoped it was painful.
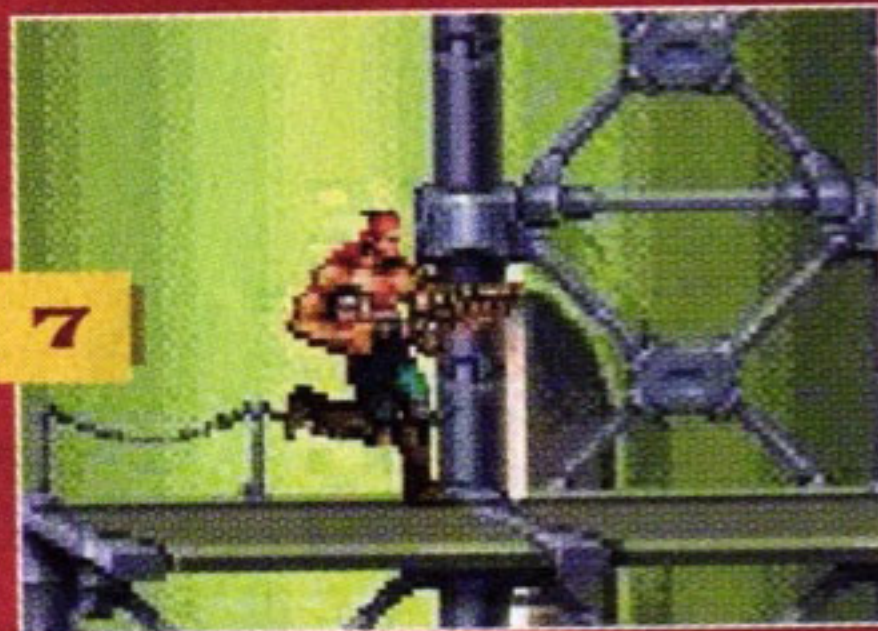
7 — THE RIDE [CONTRA 4]

Tough your way through the newest Contra to the halfway point and you'll experience the game's most high-rising moment. To call it a nitro-fueled rocket ride would do a disservice to the intense level of action this game delivers. Konami has taken handheld action into the stratosphere.

8 — GETTING THE BAND TOGETHER [ROCK BAND]

What's better than playing the best drum game to date in the comfort of your living room? Getting two guitarists and a singer to join you and rocking a world tour, that's what. That feeling of being a part of something bigger is an awesome experience, and this year's loudest party game simulates it perfectly.
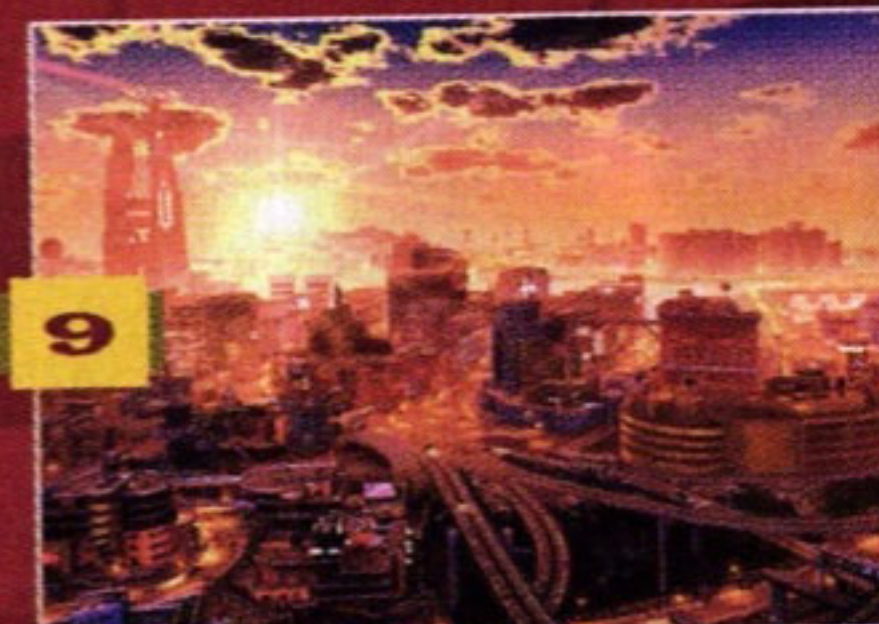
9 — CLIMBING THE TOWER [CRACKDOWN]

Jumping across the city roofs in Crackdown like some kind of Batman hopped out on Gummiberry Juice was pretty thrilling alone, but nowhere was this superhero platforming exemplified better then when you climb to the city's tallest point: the Agency HQ. Have you tried plummeting from the top into the small pool of water at its base yet?
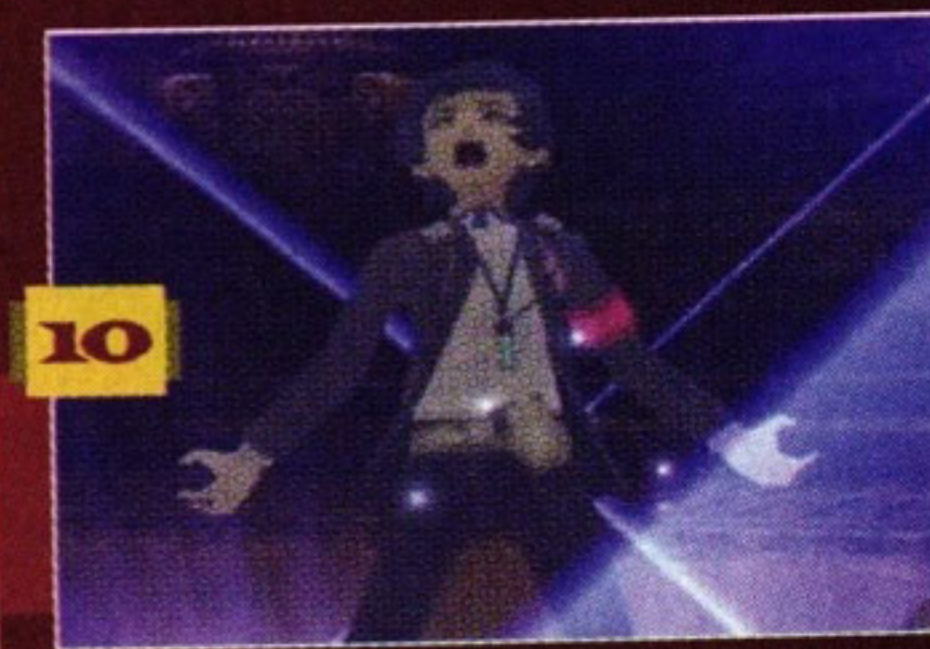
10 — FIRST APPEARANCE OF ORPHEUS [PERSONA 3]

In order to fight the shadows that inhabit the hidden Dark Hour, your character must summon forth his persona by putting a gun to his own head. With the pull of a trigger and the shatter of glass, Orpheus is summoned forth. But the best part is when Orpheus's body rips itself apart and an even more terrible beast emerges.

Blue Dragon

System: Xbox 360
Release: August 28

A fantastic mixture of classic role-playing traditions, Blue Dragon weaves together familiar elements in a way that feels fresh. The charismatic young Shu and his friends take on tons of monsters in a vibrant and beautiful fantasy world. The addictive job system has players juggling classes and abilities, eager to discover what is possible through the countless combinations. This is the first title from Final Fantasy creator Hironobu Sakaguchi's Mistwalker studio, and it looks like the master hasn't lost his touch.
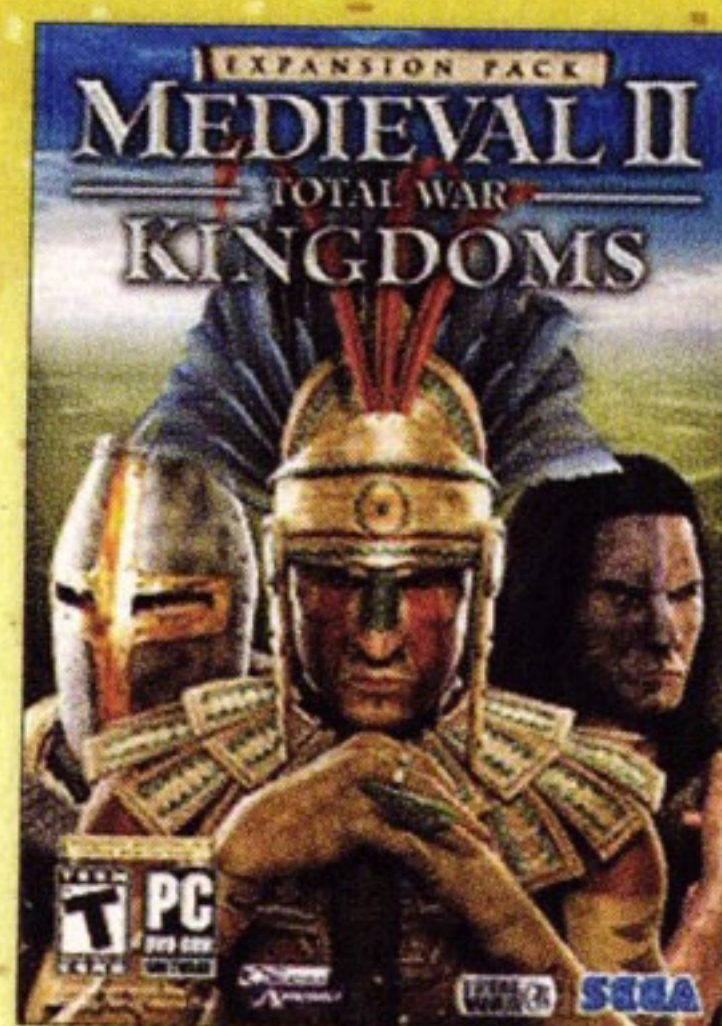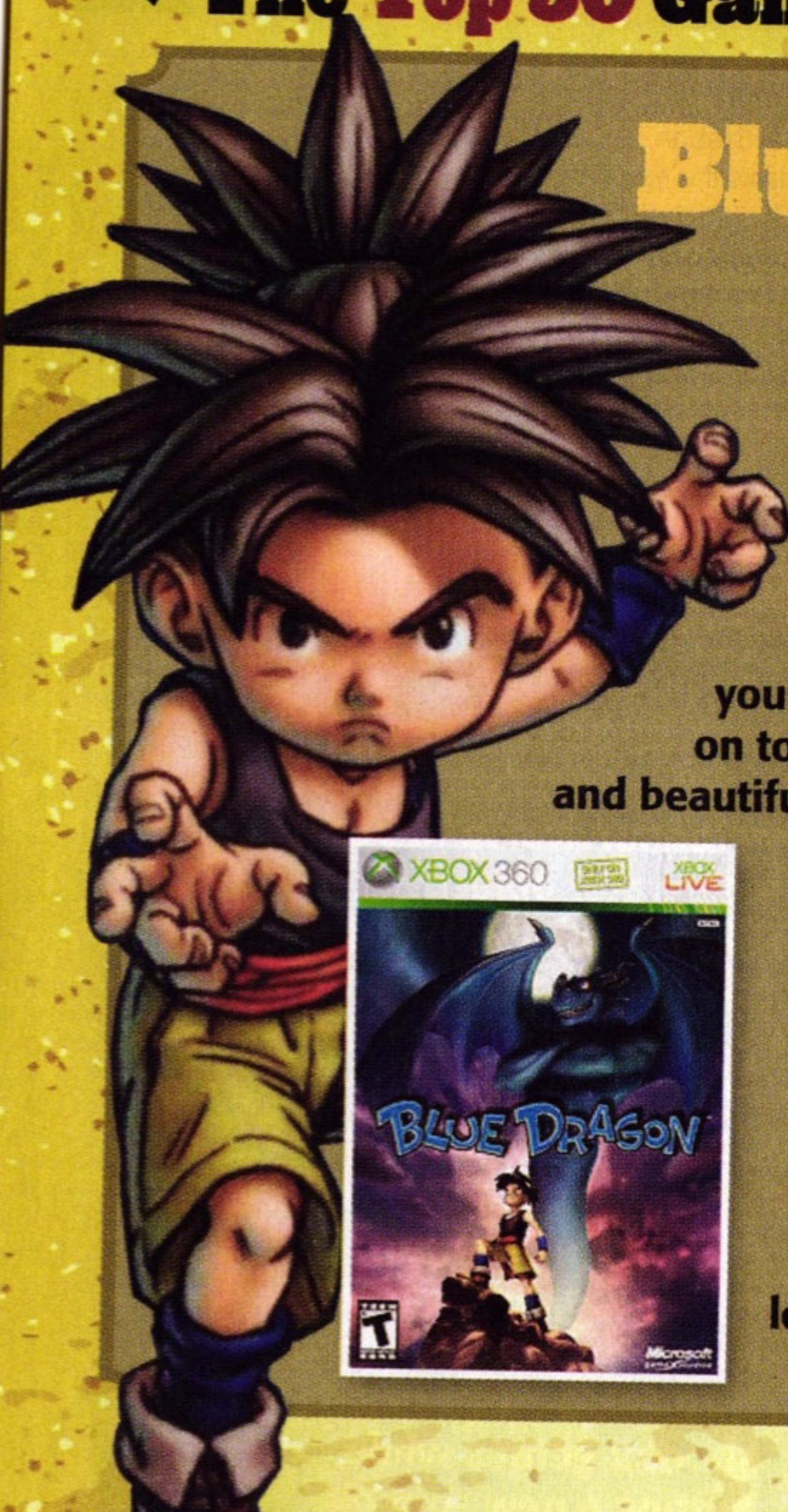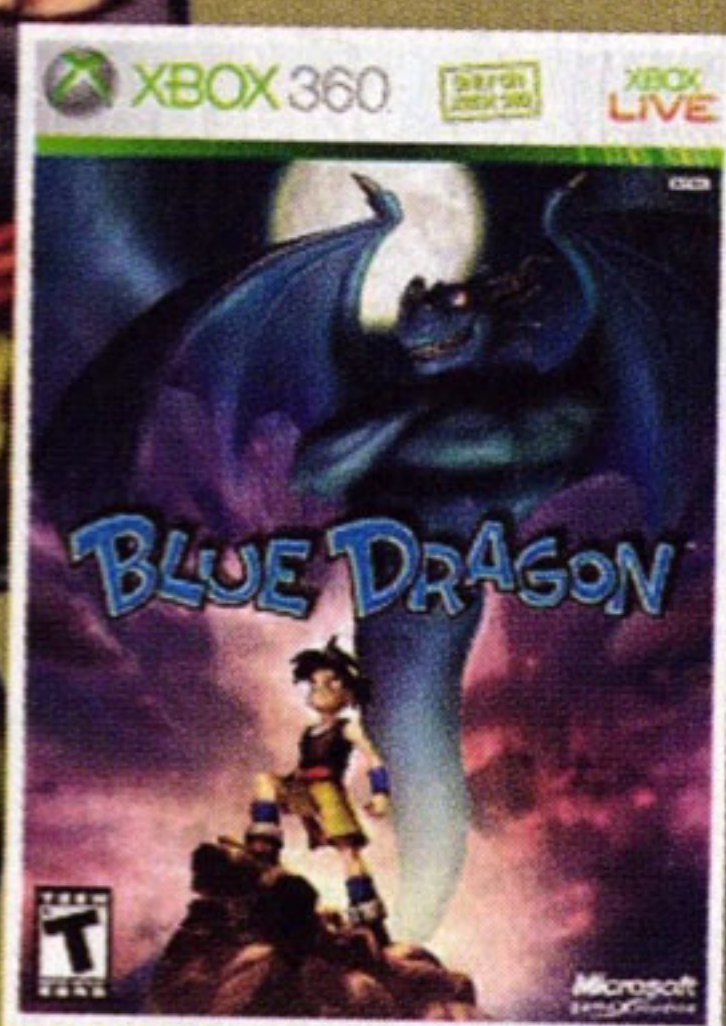
Medieval II Total War: Kingdoms

System: PC
Release: August 28
Most strategy expansion packs offer a few new playable civilizations and units, then call it a day. Medieval II Total War: Kingdoms gives you the motherload – four entirely new gaming experiences, each with its own rules of engagement. Also, you can now tackle a campaign with a friend. Eighty hours of new content for an already great game places Kingdoms on the short list for the desert island game of choice for turn-based strategy fans.
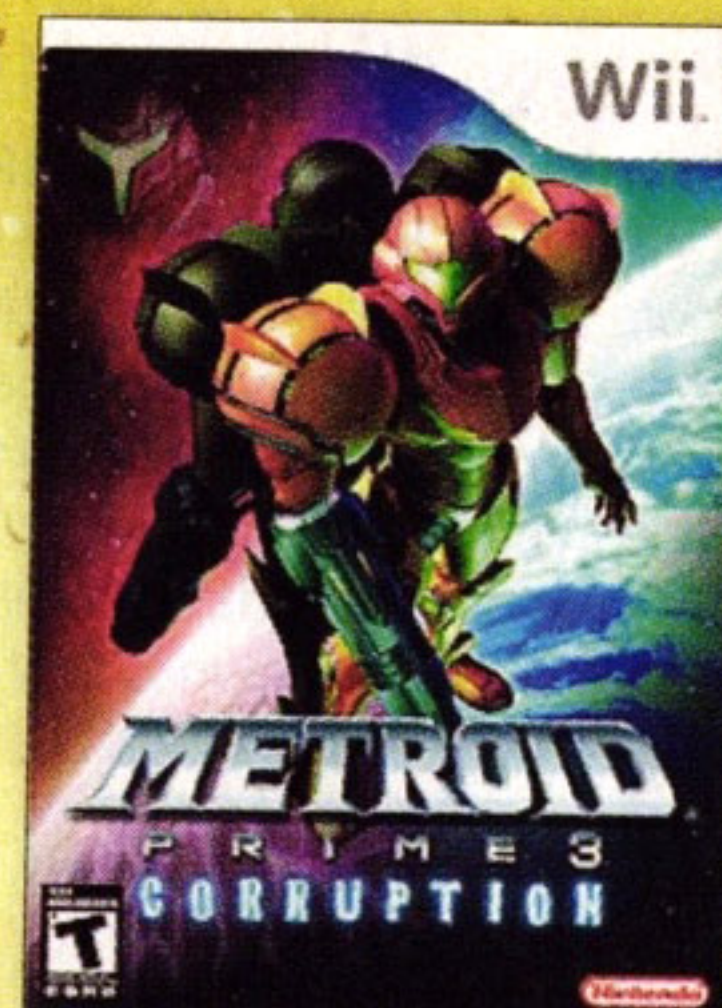
Metroid Prime 3: Corruption

System: Wii
Release: August 28
Nobody can get the Wii's unique motion controls to work as well as the Big N itself, and Metroid Prime 3 is just further proof of that. Despite the game's sorry story, Prime 3 provides one gorgeous adventure. We never got tired of getting lost wandering through the game's diverse alien environments. Add in the great FPS action with classic puzzles and power ups, and you have a wonderful way to end the Prime trilogy.
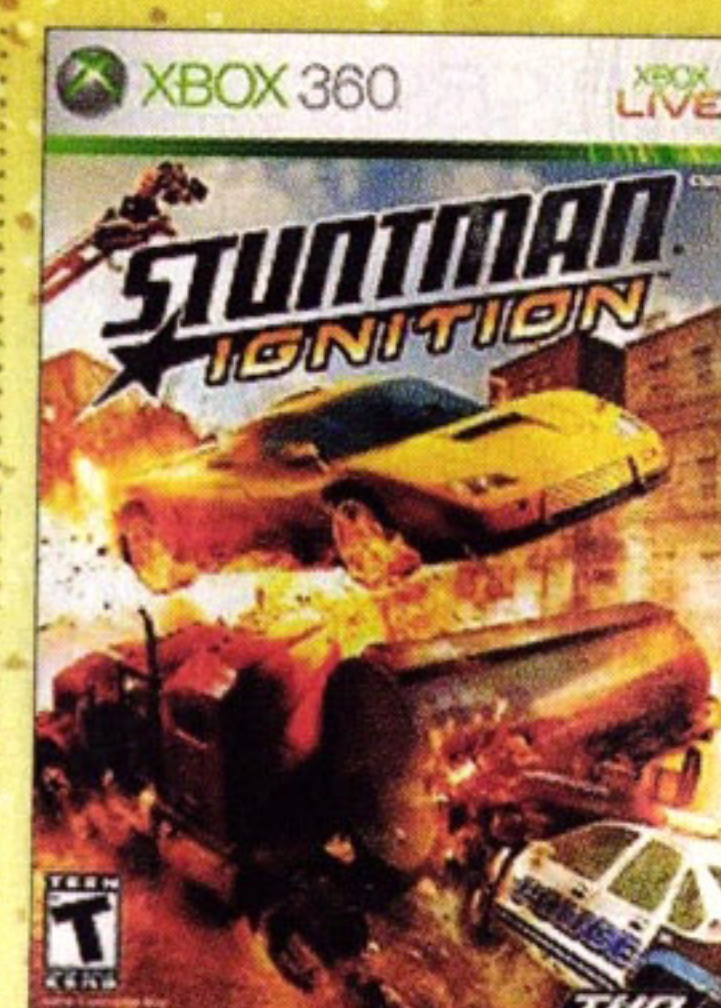
Stuntman: Ignition

System: PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, PlayStation 2
Release: August 28
Paradigm's over-the-top precision driving title has more exciting moments than this blurb can ever hope to contain. Here are just a few examples: ramp your car into a helicopter, douse your flaming vehicle in a car wash, jump a moving train, barrel roll over a bridge, outrun an avalanche, shoot rockets into enemy jeeps – it's just nonstop awesome. The difficulty feels like a satisfying hardcore challenge, but never ventures into insurmountable territory.
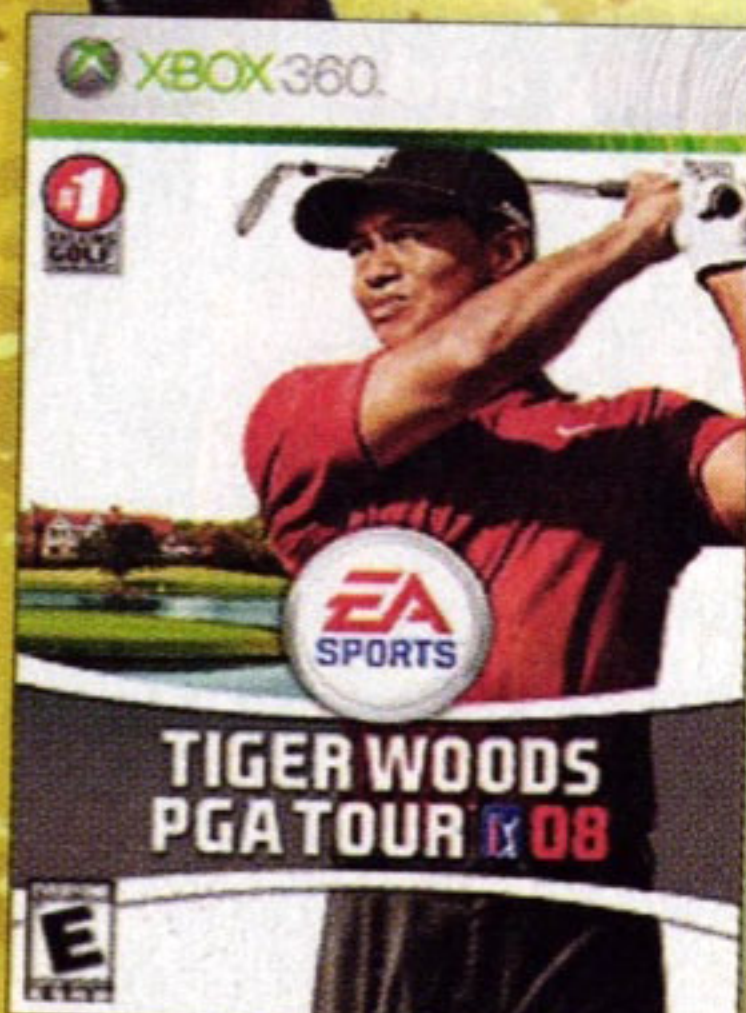
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 08

System: PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, PC
Release: August 28
It's difficult to innovate in the sports genre, but Tiger 08 proves it's not impossible. While traditionalists laud the return of the three-click swing and the game's better-organized career mode, the real action is on the Internet, with the game's amazingly versatile "YouTube" style ability to post your highlights and create new challenges. It's quite simply one of the best new online modes we've seen in years. Even better, it's built on some of the best core gameplay in sports gaming.
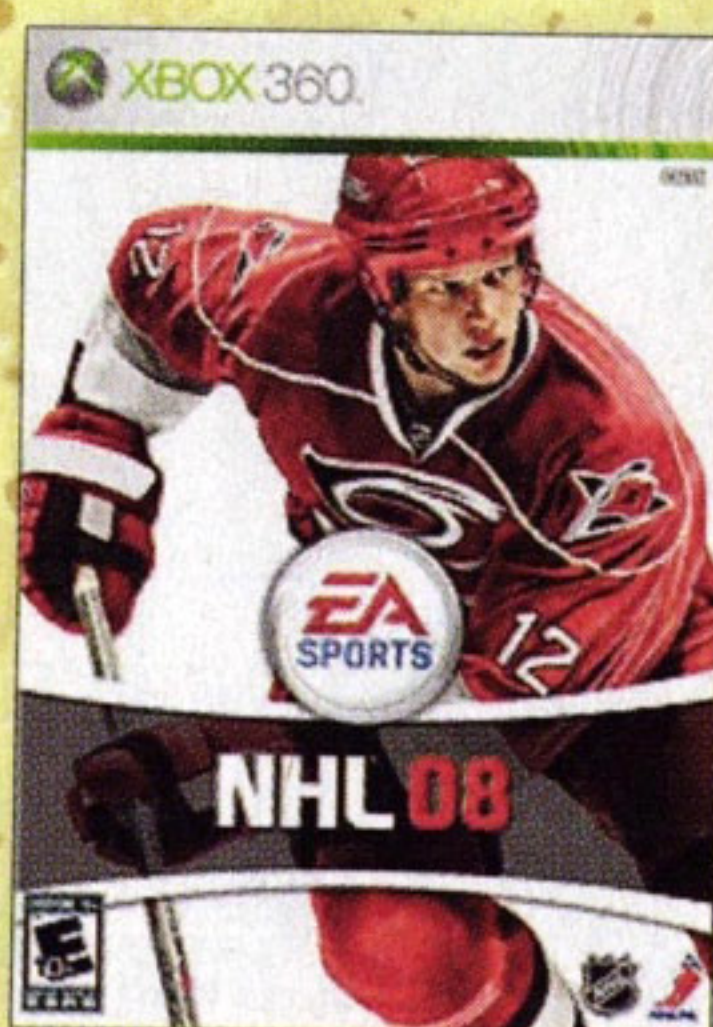
NHL 08

System: PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
Release: September 11
Held in the same breath as hallowed NHLPA 93, this year's game is a return to the glory days of video game hockey. Its success lies mostly in its ability to hone in on the realism of the sport. The dynamic AI and lively goalies push players to think like real players, rather than just checking everyone in sight. The breakthrough stick controls also grants players the ability to slide through the defense like Alex Ovechkin. NHL 08 is the shot of life hockey needed and one of the best sports games in years.

Top 10 Villains of 2007

1

Big Daddies [BioShock]
They don't have any elaborate plan to destroy you or take over the world, but few things in video games can stop you in your tracks like the sound of a Big Daddy. Each one is a boss fight waiting to happen, and they only become more terrifying when you discover how they are made – and why the Little Sisters adore them.

2

Saren [Mass Effect]
This corrupt and ruthless Turian is everything you could want in a villain. He plays both sides of the conflict, pursuing his own hidden agenda and acting on pivotal knowledge only he possesses. Given his tie to the elite Spectre organization, it's also no surprise that he can really mess you up.

3

GLaDOS [Portal]
The malevolent AI in charge of Aperture Science seems to have gone a little stir crazy. GLaDOS is deceptive, sarcastic, and she casually slaughters people for the ambiguous benefit of science. On the other hand, she has a lovely singing voice and can bake a mean cake. Oh, she also really enjoys venting poisonous neurotoxins.

4

"Through the Fire and the Flames" [Guitar Hero III]
Some villains make you cower in fear, but this one will make you laugh. Not because it's funny, but because you can't do much but shake your head in disbelief when you see the superhuman shredding required to play this DragonForce song for more than a few seconds.
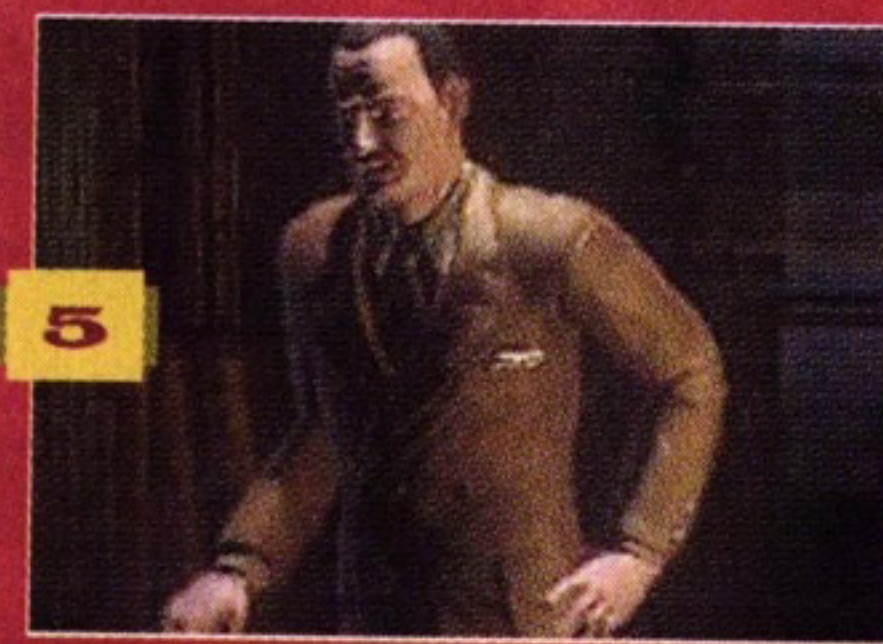
5

Andrew Ryan [BioShock]
Look out for number one, right? Andrew Ryan built a paradise glorifying the individual, and governs it with an iron fist after its collapse. His methods and morality are highly suspect, but it's hard to hate a guy who bucks the system and chases a dream…unless he sees you as a threat to his crumbling empire.
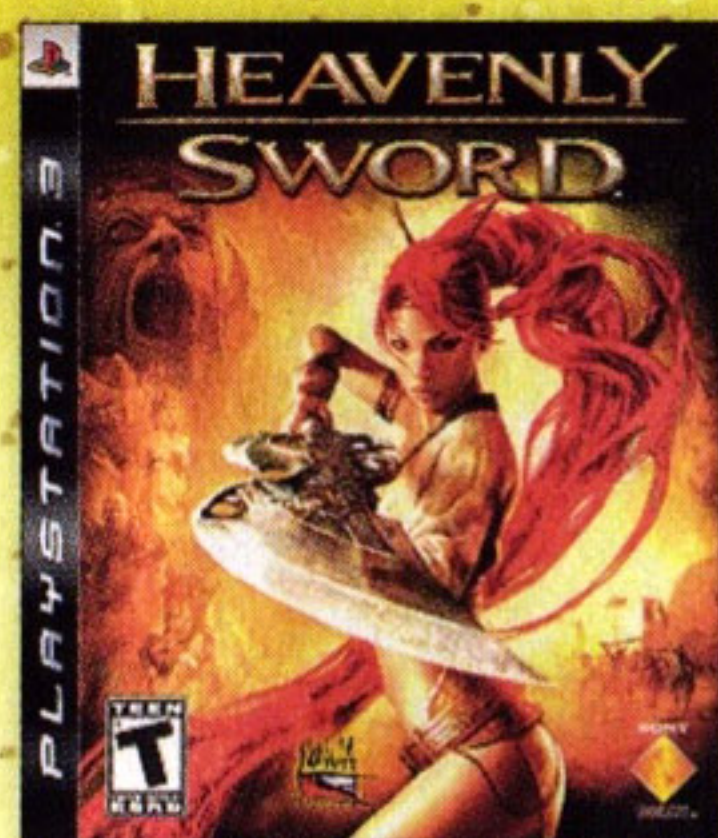
HEAVENLY SWORD

System: PlayStation 3
Release: September 13

Heavenly Sword is a compact-yet-complete experience with a captivating cinematic flair, and is one of the must-play titles on the PS3. Amazing motion and facial capturing breathe life into the characters, and the gameplay integrates a strategic element into traditional button-press combos. The sniping sequences change up the pace, giving you an up-close view as you gently guide arrows right into your foes. We're already looking forward to a sequel.
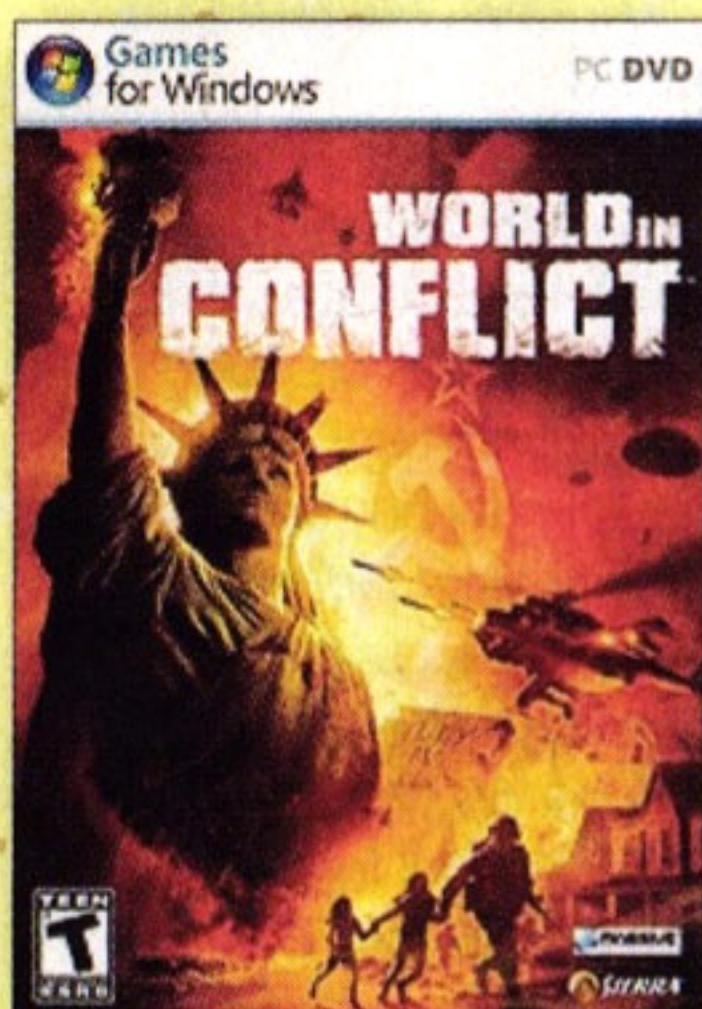
WORLD IN CONFLICT

System: PC • **Release:** September 18

The Cold War has boiled over into open conflict, and the country needs you to bring a devastating combination of infantry, tanks, air power, and indirect fire support against the Red Army. World in Conflict's amazing visuals and super-smooth control scheme push this tactical RTS well ahead of the pack, and excellent multiplayer support extends its legs beyond the considerable length of the single-player campaign. Keep your eyes peeled for the 360 conversion, which should be available next year.
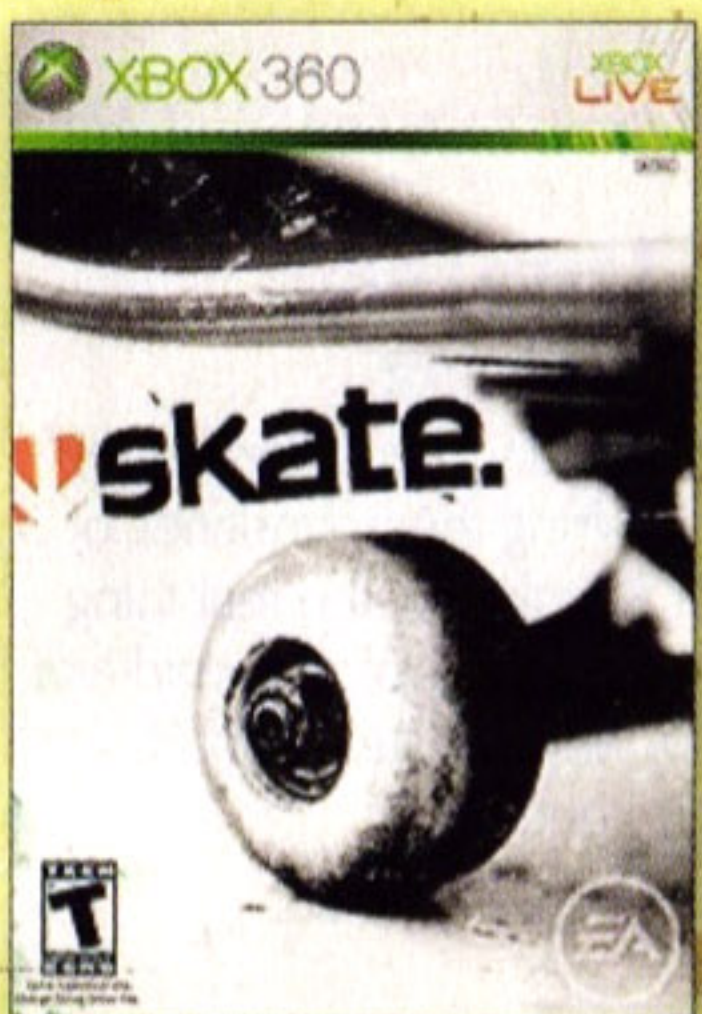
SKATE

System: PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
Release: September 25

Entering a market where Tony Hawk has had a monopoly for nearly a decade isn't an easy feat, but EA managed to one-up the 900 master by creating the most realistic skating game to date. This is expressed through the inventive controls and also in the challenges, which range from beautifully designed competitions to bone-breaking feats. You won't be chaining together million point tricks or destroying cities like you do in Hawk, but you will appreciate your tricks more than you ever have in any other skating game.
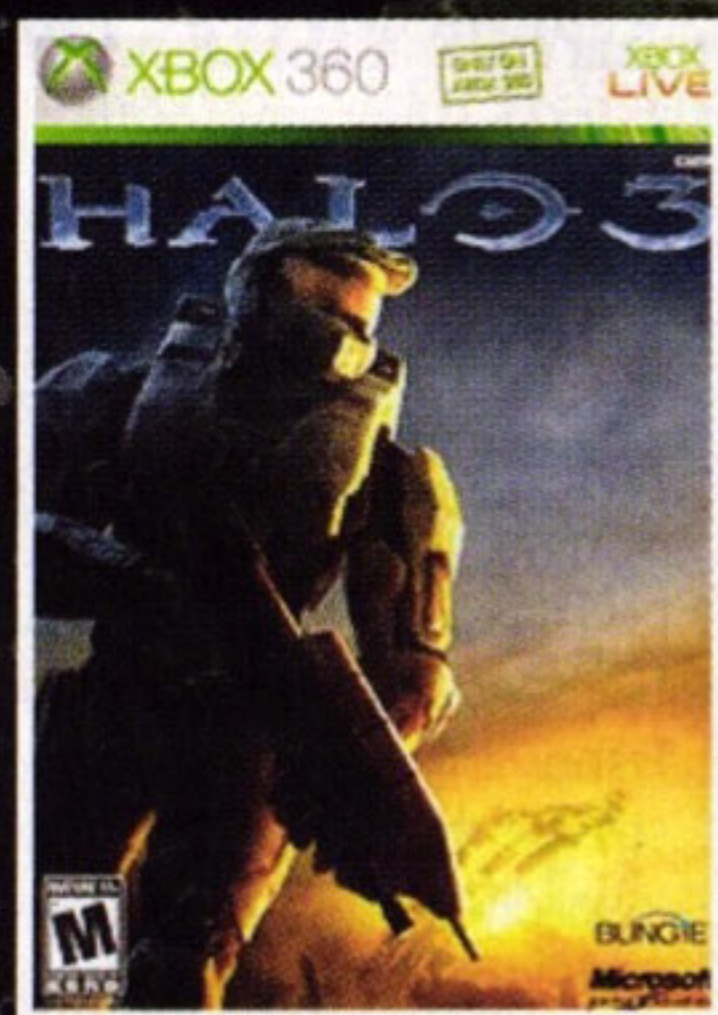
Halo 3

System: Xbox 360 • **Release:** September 25

Halo 3 took over all media for weeks surrounding its release, and with good reason. While the campaign has a few missed opportunities, it's tough to deny the thrill of taking it on with three friends online. Bungie's further tightening of the console FPS is clearly evident, and exciting new weapons and vehicles push the franchise in a great direction. Add this to the frantic, addicting multiplayer and innovative saved film system, and you've got a game that will keep fans busy until Marath… * cough * Halo 4.
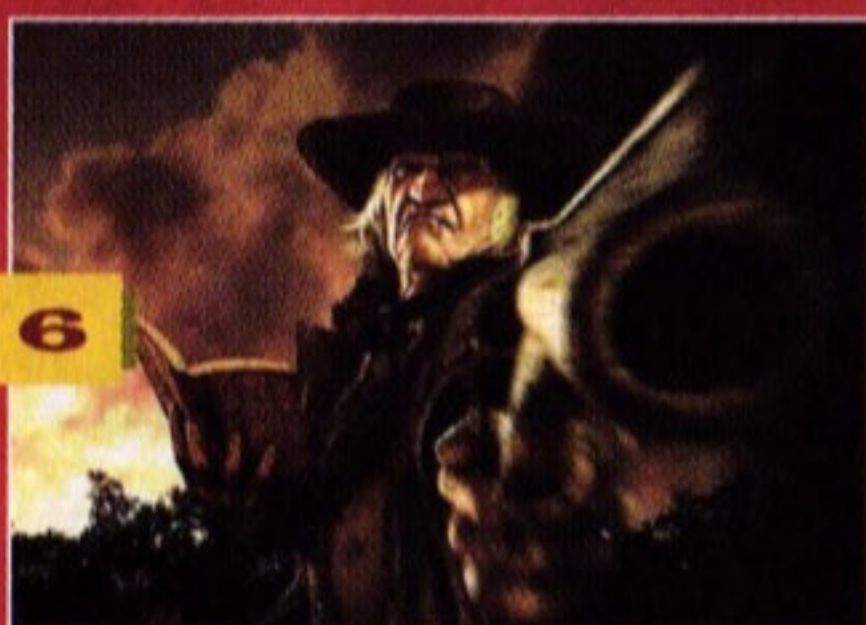
6

REVEREND RAY [CALL OF JUAREZ]

A grim cowboy who sees himself as God's instrument of vengeance, Reverend Ray hunts down Billy Candle with ruthless determination. Billy is technically the hero of Call of Juarez, but we were definitely pulling for this hombre. Maybe that was just because he reminds us of the Saint of Killers from *Preacher*. Either way, Reverend Ray is awesome.
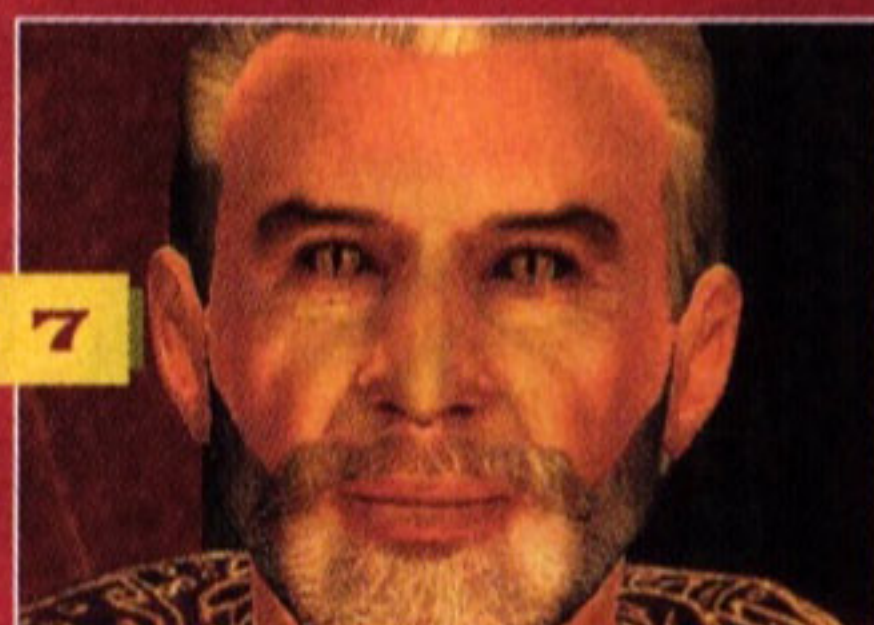
7

SHEOGORATH [ELDER SCROLLS IV: SHIVERING ISLES]

This guy is screwed up. As the Daedric prince of madness, Sheogorath delights in driving mortals insane, often through the use of powerful but bizarre magical artifacts. Even though his quests don't fall on the ethical side of things, it's all worth it to hear his delighted and manic Scottish accent.

8

THE DARKNESS [THE DARKNESS]

Power comes at a price, a lesson Jackie Estacado learns the hard way when he accepts this evil presence into his body. The Darkness makes Jackie perform (and witness) terrifying acts of brutality, all in the interest of self-preservation. It tells players to give in to their violent urges, and given how fun its powers are to use, it is all too easy to listen.

9

GODOT [PHOENIX WRIGHT: TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS]

Phoenix Wright is normally surrounded by dimwits, but occasionally he encounters a worthy opponent. The enigmatic Godot knows all of Phoenix's tactics in the courtroom, and claims to have come back from the dead to face him. When you find out what's beneath the visor, Godot becomes even cooler.

10

YOUR COMPUTER [YOUR DESK]

It can't play Crysis.
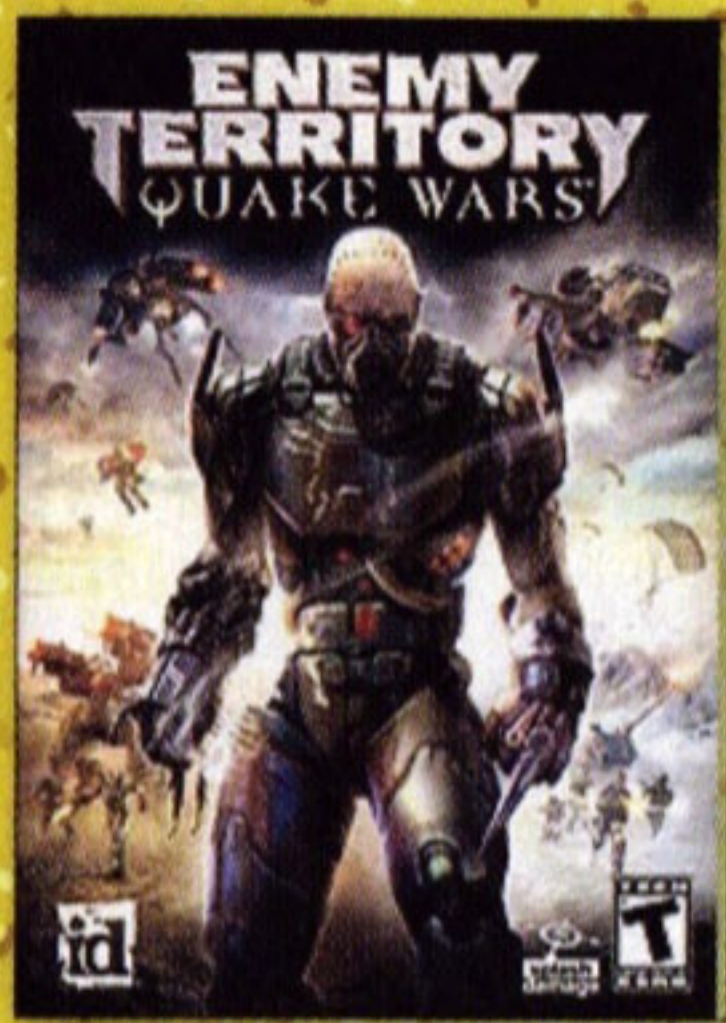
Enemy Territory: Quake Wars

System: PC
Release: October 2
Had enough Battlefield? Of course you haven't. Still, Quake Wars is more than worth a look – the strategy goes deeper here than in DICE's lauded franchise, and no other title handles near-future multiplayer warfare nearly as well. Coordinating and defending against assaults between vehicles, artillery, and the different types of infantry in Quake Wars is one of the most engaging experiences to be found on PC. Don't get discouraged when you have to spend a month losing before the larger strategy behind the action reveals itself to you.

The Legend of Zelda: Phantom Hourglass

System: Nintendo DS
Release: October 2
No matter where Zelda ends up, it always manages to be the game that introduces new types of gameplay or ways to use the system. Phantom Hourglass taps into the DS to deliver some of the series' best puzzles, such as having to draw a path through a storm or blowing into the microphone to produce wind. The all touch-controls handle Link's combat needs with ease, and also enhance his trusty old weapons. Now, the only thing Nintendo needs to do is find this guy a tailor. The green pajamas have to go.
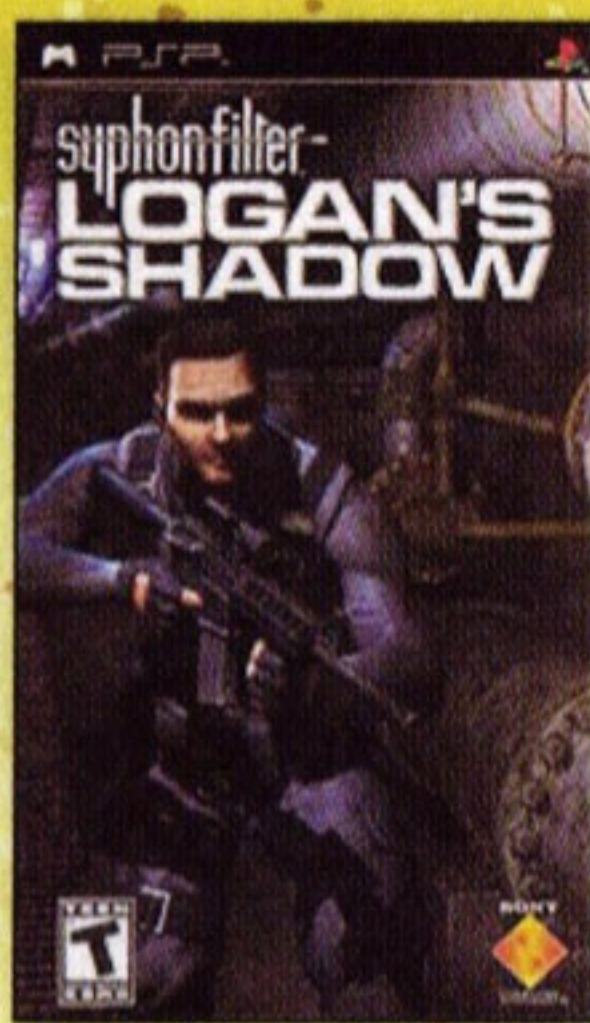
Syphon Filter: Logan's Shadow

System: PSP
Release: October 2
Gabe Logan's new career as a handheld specialist is treating the aging super spy quite well. While he might not be running with the big dogs like Solid Snake and Sam Fisher anymore, he shows that he's still got the stuff in Logan's Shadow, a solidly made sequel to last year's excellent Dark Mirror. Packed with globetrotting adventure, clever new features, and some of the best shooting action you'll see on the PSP, it's a no-brainer that this list should hold a spot for Sony's special ops veteran.

Project Gotham Racing 4

System: Xbox 360
Release: October 2
Let's be clear: This newest Project Gotham Racing title isn't just the debut of Geometry Wars: Waves. It's the debut of a revamped career progression system that helps elevate this PGR above its predecessors and other racers. The leaderboard system and the way your career and kudos are tied to the PGR shop pushes you forward while the g-forces from your car's acceleration throw you back in your seat.
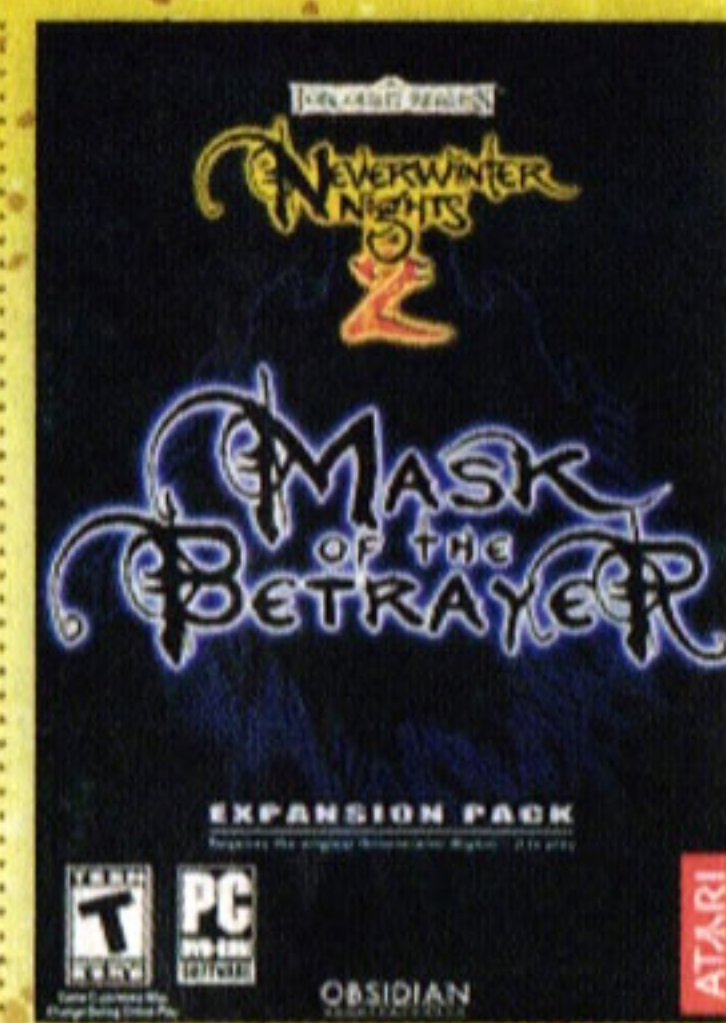
Neverwinter Nights 2: Mask of the Betrayer

System: PC
Release: October 9
Do you have any idea what a party of 25th level Dungeons & Dragons characters is capable of? Master Chief? Disintegrate. Link? Disintegrate. Pretty-boy adventurer Drake? Disintegrate. We're going to level with you – Disintegrate is our favorite spell. There's nothing it doesn't work on. Not even the immensely powerful foes in this NWN 2 expansion, which delivers role-playing awesomeness and hilarious epic-level D&D combat in equal doses and warrants a look by anyone with a PC.

The Orange Box

System: PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, PC
Release: October 9 (Xbox 360, PC), December 11 (PS3)
The Orange Box is loaded with so many great games we're surprised the disc didn't split open from failing to contain them all. Turning on our enemies as a traitorous spy in Team Fortress 2, getting hounded by the testy computer GLaDOS in Portal, and running over Hunters in the forests of Half-Life 2: Episode 2 are all some of our fondest memories of the year. Best of all, they are all found under the cellophane of this one orange box.
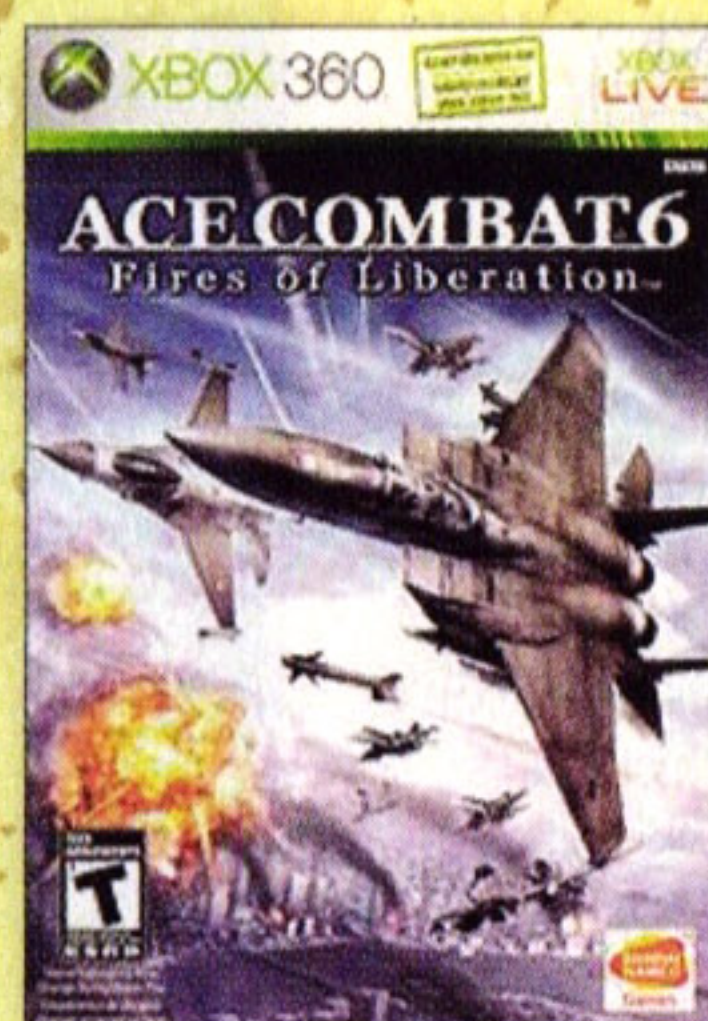
Ace Combat 6: Fires of Liberation

System: Xbox 360 • **Release:** October 23
For long time fans of this flight combat franchise, the next-gen premiere was a dream come true. Pushing the boundaries of photorealistic graphics, Ace Combat 6 looks like the real thing even as it delivers completely ridiculous and explosive mid-air dogfights and explosions. It's just the way we like it – loud, frantic, and exciting from beginning to end.

◆ Top 10 Dorks of 2007 ◆

1 — The MC [Fuzion Frenzy]
Hosting game shows isn't the most prestigious of showbiz positions, but the MC of Fuzion Frenzy is a true pioneer in the field of shame. His wardrobe is courtesy of stumbling through a clown college, and he desperately tries to convince you that you're having fun. Unfortunately, repeatedly shouting "Was that a lot of damage, player two?" isn't very persuasive.

2 — Francis [Super Paper Mario]
This lizard practically defines the term "dork." He freaks out when he sees a hot babe, relies on his computer for social interaction, and has an unhealthy obsession with anime. As if that weren't enough, don't forget his name is Francis.
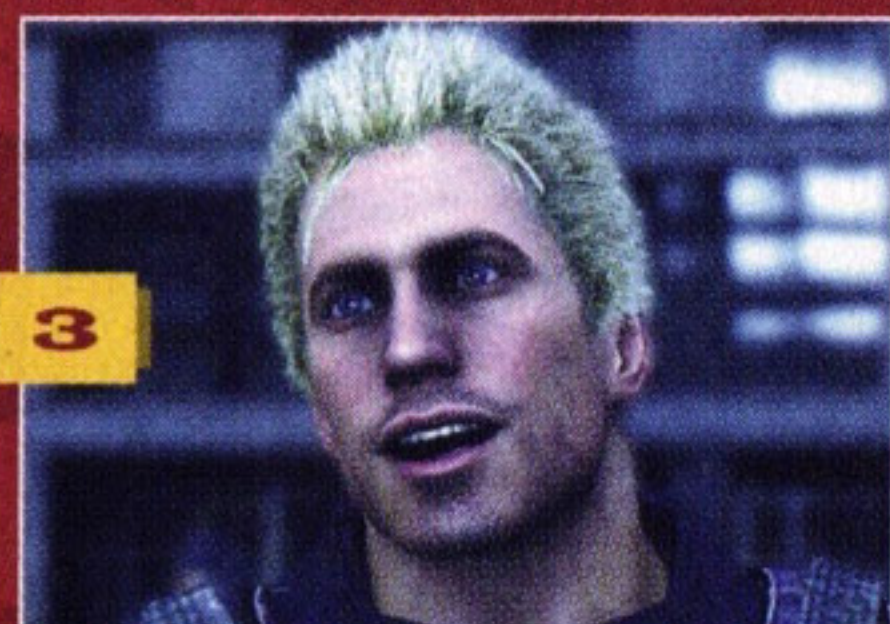
3 — Max Cougar [Bullet Witch]
We're willing to bet that this dude's real name is also Francis. Come on, "Max Cougar"? That's obviously made up. Here's a tip, buddy: when you try to reinvent your identity in college, try to pick a name that doesn't sound like a Mega Man boss. We shudder to think of what this meathead was like before if he considered this an improvement.
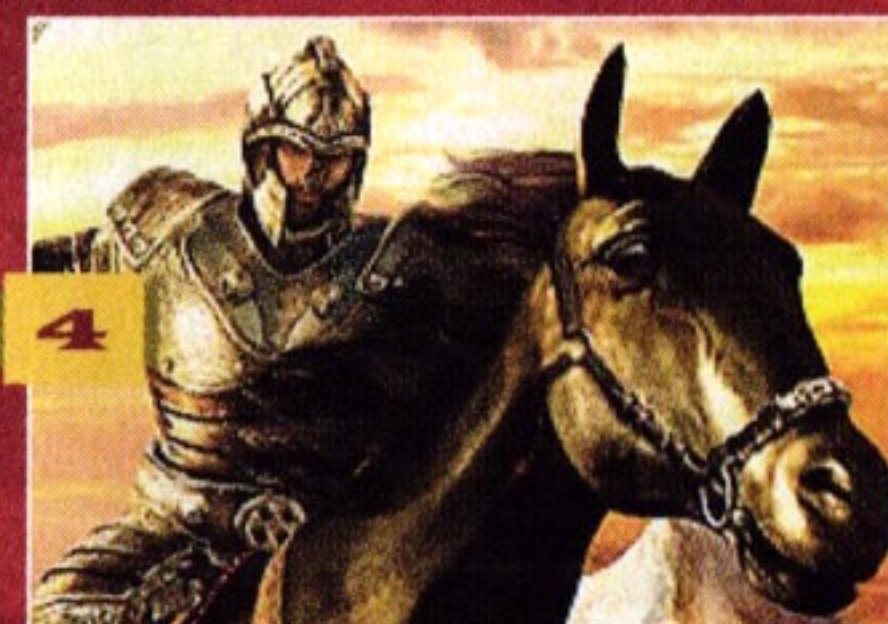
4 — The Hero [Two Worlds]
It doesn't matter how noble your quest is, or what fair maiden you are trying to save; If you go around telling anyone who'll listen that you're hunting for "The Taint," no one will take you seriously. Whenever this toolbox opens his mouth, he makes himself the butt of another joke – not an ideal trait for a hero.
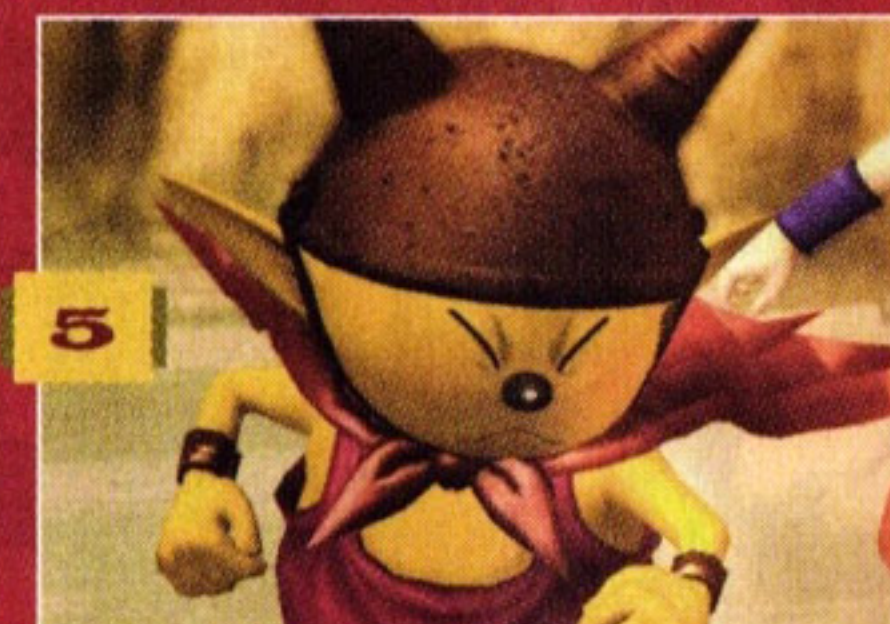
5 — Marumaro [Blue Dragon]
Marumaro needs to chill the hell out. Did it ever occur to him that the reason he's so lonely is that he's always shouting? Doing idiotic dances in public probably isn't helping things, either. He could immediately become at least 30 percent less repugnant if he took off that hat, but there's not much to be done about his crippling personality flaws.
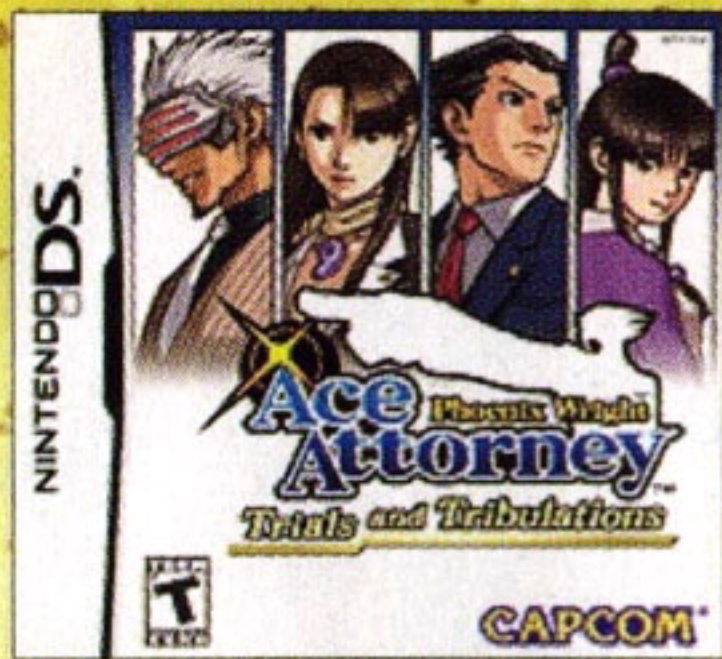
Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney Trials and Tribulations

System: Nintendo DS • **Release:** October 23
While Trials and Tribulations doesn't really introduce any new mechanics to the series, it provides a fitting close to the story of Phoenix Wright and the Fey clan. The new cast is weirder than ever with nut job Dahlia Hawthorn, the coffee-chugging Godot, the mysterious Mask DeMasque, the flamboyant Jean Armstrong, and the always-angry Furio Tigre. Plenty of old favorites return as well, and this new set of intriguing mysteries connects past and present plotlines masterfully.
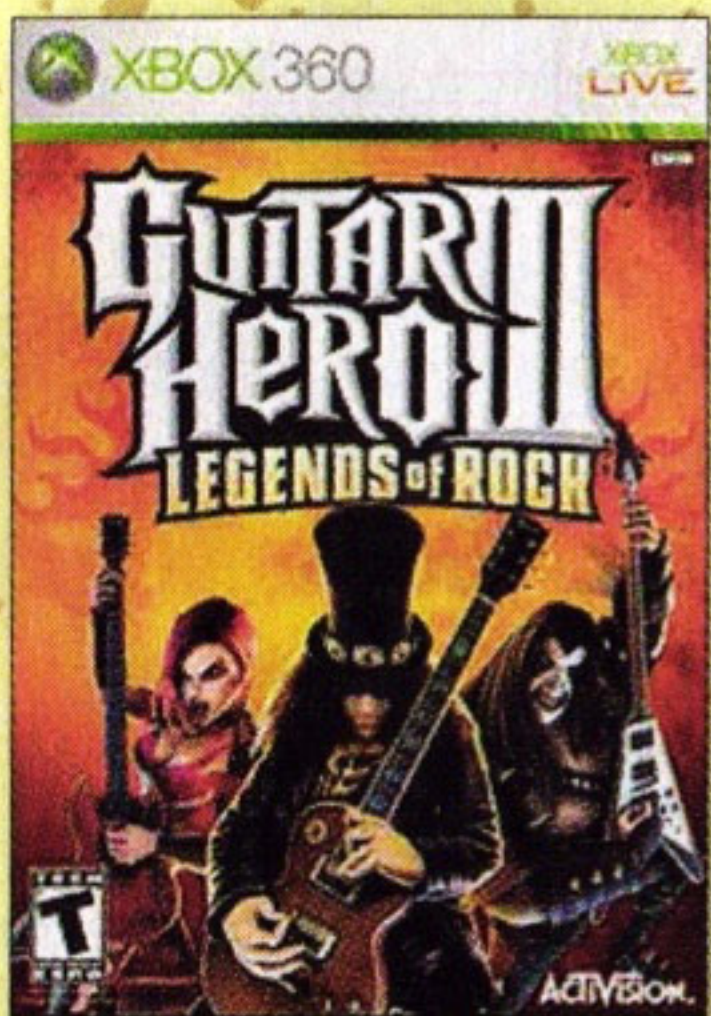
Guitar Hero III: Legends of Rock

System: PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, Wii, PlayStation 2, PC • **Release:** October 28
Neversoft adopted the Guitar Hero brand from the music game masters at Harmonix. As if to prove a point, it comes out swinging with an amazing set list of songs, exciting new boss battle guitar showdowns, and some subtle tweaks to the gameplay that make the franchise feel better than ever before. It may not have drums and singing, but Guitar Hero III sets the new bar for virtual guitar virtuosos.

Ratchet & Clank Future: Tools of Destruction

System: PlayStation 3
Release: October 30
While it might not be the most innovative title on this list, Ratchet & Clank gives PlayStation 3 owners something they sorely needed this year: a long, satisfying, and perfectly crafted gaming experience. The graphics have been upgraded to near Pixar quality, and some cool enhancements to the weapons upgrade system and overall game balancing make it the most accomplished in the series to date.
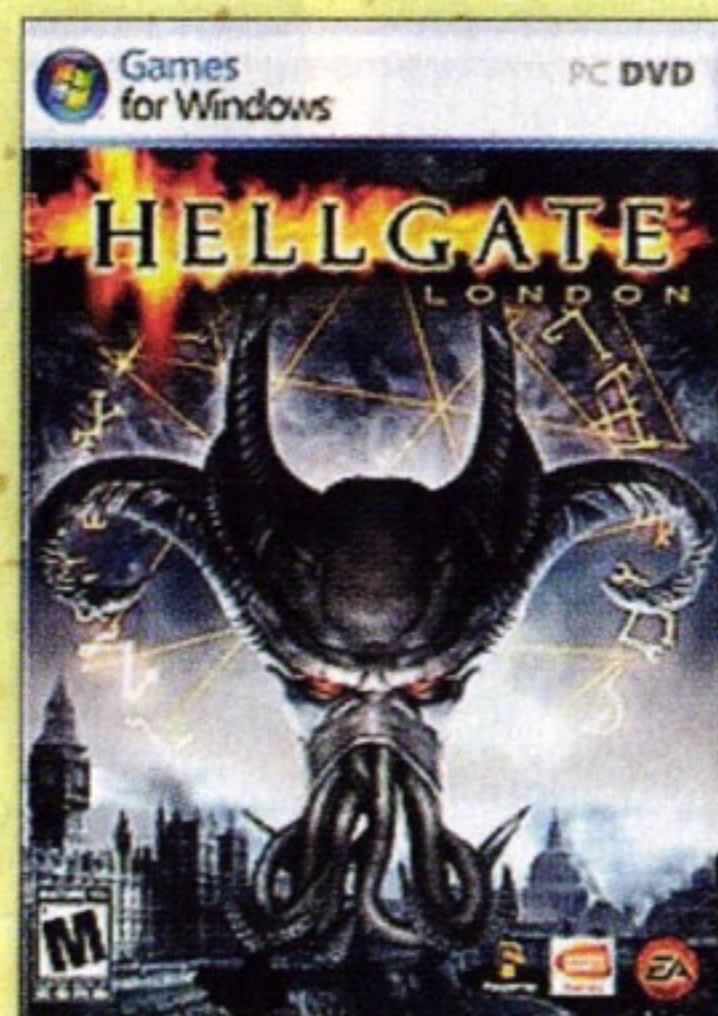
Hellgate: London

System: PC
Release: October 31
Who hasn't wished for Diablo II in 3D? Hellgate: London may not quite reach that illustrious standard, but it comes close enough to have us carving a bloody path through Hell's legions deep into the night. Massive customization options and a lengthy story to play through are great, but the superbly smooth and enjoyable combat is Hellgate's bread and butter. Rocking co-op style in the excellent multiplayer is a fantastic option as well for more social gamers.

Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare

System: PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, PC
Release: November 6
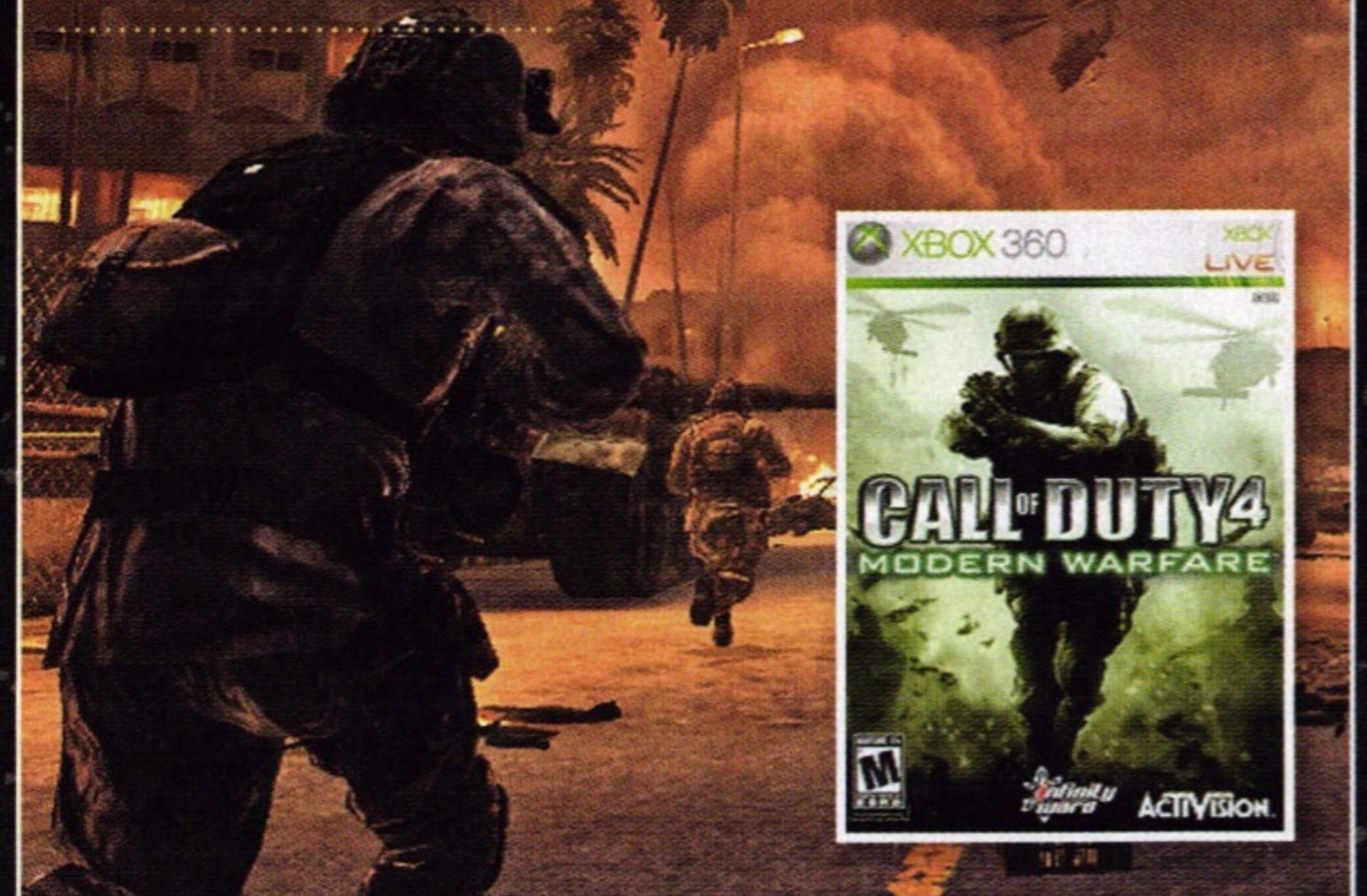
Polish, polish, and more polish – Call of Duty 4 positively sparkles with tightly engineered FPS gameplay. With a single-player campaign that consists of several hours of memorable moments sprinkled between explosive firefights, this is one shooter that nobody should miss. An endlessly addictive multiplayer offering that combines brilliant gameplay with an upgrade system second to none is no less impressive. The best WWII FPS series has now claimed the throne of the modern combat era as well.

6

Captain Rush [Time Crisis 4]

Captain Rush puts the "special" in the phrase "special forces." You need more than a can-do attitude to take down terrorists, but this clod didn't get the memo. He also apparently missed the "Dreadlocks and ponytails are two different hairstyles" and "Goggles don't belong around you're neck. They're for your eyes," memos. Your *eyes!*

7

Joshua Harwell [Raw Danger]

In a game all about natural disasters, the most fun you can have with this idiot waiter is effeminately shouting "Hey!" in a crowded ballroom, then laughing when the doofus gets chewed out by his supervisor. In case you were wondering, no matter how many times you do it, you can't get him fired from the game.

8

Sparrow Wing Jr. [Wing Island]

Okay featherface, let's get this straight: You have wings – which most birds use for flight – and you want to be a pilot. Maybe we're missing something, but why wouldn't you just fly yourself? Oh, right – because then no one would have an excuse to play your terrible Pilotwings rip-off. Yeah, that would be a shame.

9

Billy Dee Williams [Command & Conquer 3]

No! What happened to you, Lando? Just because half the cast of *Battlestar Galactica* signed on for C&C 3 doesn't mean you need to settle. Also, your performance as Redmond Boyle is hammier than a ham sandwich with country ham-style bread. We can only hope that you quipped, "This deal is getting worse all the time" when you read the script.

10

Chatty Vampires [Vampire Rain]

Pretend that you have superhuman strength, heightened senses, and an insatiable thirst for blood. What would you do? Obviously, you would stand around spouting purple prose so strained and thick with effort that it could be an Evanescence song. "I love the night/The night air is heavy and sweet/The rain will eventually stop." Ugh.

Top 10

Developers of 2007

1 Infinity Ward [Last Year: N/A]
It designs games as well as Nintendo. It makes graphics engines as well as Epic. It does multiplayer as well as Bungie. For these reasons and more, Infinity Ward tops our list of developers, and Call of Duty 4 is a testament to its skill.

2 2K Boston [Last Year: N/A]
Ken Levine and Irrational Games finally broke into the mainstream with BioShock, one of the most dramatic games in history. Few will forget Rapture's beauty and terror, or the mature writing that showed us that "adult games" are more than just cursing or violence.

3 Nintendo [Last Year: 1]
It wouldn't be a top developers list without Nintendo. Its track record is legendary, and in 2007 the company proved its credentials, crafting titles like The Legend of Zelda: Phantom Hourglass, Super Paper Mario, and Super Mario Galaxy. Respect the architects.

4 Ubisoft Montreal [Last Year: 4]
Ubisoft Montreal released its greatest game yet in 2007, the visionary Assassin's Creed. Even in a highly competitive year, the game's brilliant design, graphics, and gameplay stand out in the crowd. Once again, UbiSoft gambles on new IP and comes up big.

5 BioWare [Last Year: N/A]
We're used to BioWare delivering breathtaking interactive stories. To our surprise, the epic RPG Mass Effect made previous efforts look like warm-ups. The game's storytelling, and dialogue system didn't exceed current standards – they shattered them.

6 Valve [Last Year: N/A]
So what was Valve up to this year? Not much, just releasing another excellent episodic extension of Half-Life 2, the multiplayer masterpiece Team Fortress 2, the wildly experimental Portal, and perfect console ports of the original Half-Life – all for $60.

7 Bungie [Last Year: N/A]
It's been an amazing year in video games. Want proof? Bungie, the studio that delivered the most anticipated and fastest-selling game in history, is only seventh on this list. In another year, the supremely polished Halo 3's would have been a shoo-in for game of the year.

8 Crytek [Last Year: N/A]
The good news is that Crytek has made the most graphically sophisticated game ever created. The bad news? It's going to make your "super-fast" gaming rig cry. Still, pushing the envelope comes at a price, and Crysis has the gameplay to back up its visual theatrics.

9 Sony Santa Monica [Last Year: N/A]
Most studios would have a hard time following up a game that was as influential as God of War, but Sony Santa Monica stepped up with a sequel that not only matched, but bettered the original. The was how Kratos slayed his most fearsome foe – the dreaded sophomore slump.

10 Blizzard [Last Year: N/A]
The cynics say, "What did Blizzard do this year besides an expansion pack and maintaining WoW?" When your expansion pack is as big as most standalone titles and the online community you support has a bigger population than NYC and L.A. combined, then you can make our list, too. Deal?

Publishers of 2007

1 Microsoft [Last Year: N/A]
Microsoft goes from temporary layoff to permanent payoff as it grabs the number one spot after missing the list last year. And who could argue, with a lineup that includes Halo 3, Mass Effect, Project Gotham 4, Crackdown, and Blue Dragon?

2 Electronic Arts [Last Year: 3]
Delays and a few stinkers made it a less-than-perfect year for EA – which makes this rank all the more impressive. The year saw the company innovate with Skate, Crysis, and Rock Band. It also gave us its best-yet iterations of Tiger Woods and NHL.

3 Nintendo [Last Year: 1]
Getting one great Mario title in a year is enough to make us thank our lucky stars, so what did we do to deserve two?! We don't care, we're just happy. In addition to stellar Wii titles, it provided the DS with standouts Picross DS and The Phantom Hourglass.

4 Activision [Last Year: 5]
It's hard to imagine the Guitar Hero franchise without Harmonix at the helm, but thanks to the folks at Neversoft the series hasn't skipped a beat. Thankfully Infinity Ward was back in command of Call of Duty, because COD 4 is an absolute triumph.

5 Sony [Last Year: N/A]
The PS3 struggled in 2007, but Sony's first-party output is not to blame. Uncharted and Ratchet & Clank Future were stellar, and Sony gave the PSP strong games such as Syphon Filter: Logan's Shadow and Jeanne D'Arc. Even the PS2 got a classic in God of War II.

6 2K Games [Last Year: 8]
Not only did 2K deliver the Game of the Year in BioShock, but its 2K Sports roster was strong, and its PC lineup is growing stronger with titles such as Civilization IV: Beyond the Sword. Power player Shivering Isles dominated on both PC and console.

7 Ubisoft [Last Year: 2]
Ubisoft has had better years, but you wouldn't call a year in which you released Assassin's Creed, Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter 2, and Rayman Raving Rabbids 2 anything other than a strong 12 months. Bonus points for making a Naruto title that's actually…fun?

8 Sierra [Last Year: N/A]
You can bet that Sierra hasn't stopped cashing its WoW checks – and we thank them for The Burning Crusade – but the company is not resting on its laurels. From titles like Geometry Wars: Galaxies to World in Conflict to TimeShift, Sierra is showing diversity.

9 THQ [Last Year: 4]
THQ continues to make inroads into the PC market, and Supreme Commander is a strong franchise for the future. More interesting is its revival of two dead franchises – Stuntman and Juiced. While not huge hits, THQ put in a lot of effort to make them respectable.

10 Midway [Last Year: N/A]
In some ways, Midway had a subpar year, but kudos to the company for striking a couple of important deals. One is with Epic for the Unreal franchise, and the other is partnering with Turbine for Lord of the Rings Online, a rare non-WoW MMO success story.
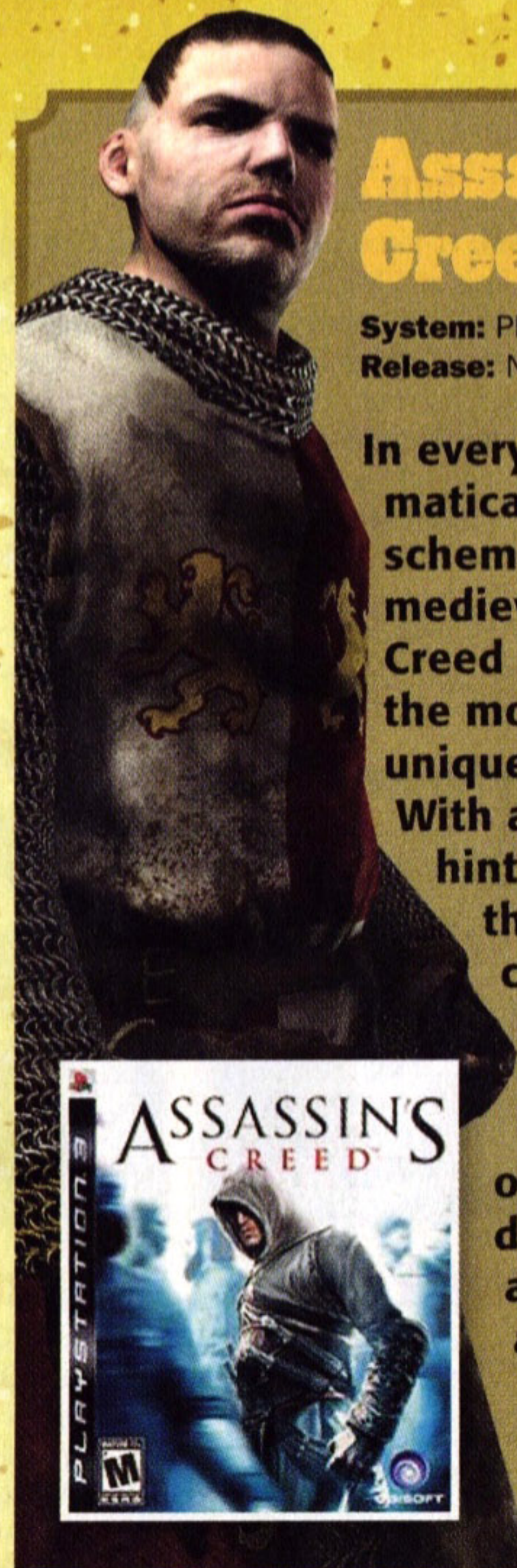
Assassin's Creed

System: PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
Release: November 13

In everything from its dramatically different control scheme to its striking medieval setting, Assassin's Creed stands as one of the most innovative and unique titles of the year. With a complex story that hints at a larger mystery that stretches across centuries, Altaïr's journey to take down the evil men of the Holy Land seems in one way a huge and dramatic open world adventure, and in another like the first act of a much bigger, longer play.
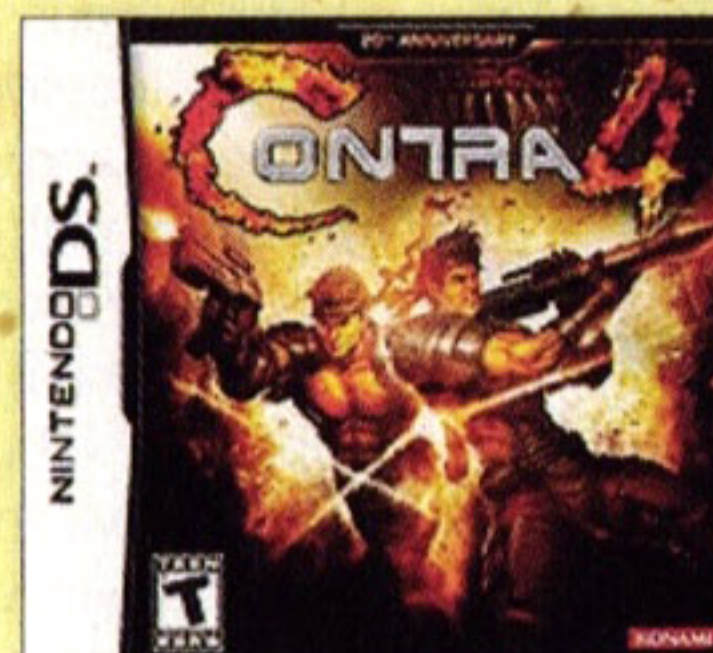
Contra 4

System: Nintendo DS
Release: November 13
Who would have thought that the developer of Barbie and SpongeBob SquarePants GBA titles could have crafted the most ass-kicking Contra game in over a decade? These guys just get it. Take this excerpt from the instruction booklet as an example: "If you know someone with Contra 4, you can celebrate the time-honored tradition of taking all of the good items and advancing the screen too quickly…" This game is hard and it's not afraid to rub your nose in it. Just be glad there are multiple difficulties.

System Exclusives	
Multi	14
PC	11
Xbox 360	7
PlayStation 2	5
Wii	4
Nintendo DS	4
PS3	3
PSP	2

Crysis

System: PC • **Release:** November 13
It may be cheaper to travel forward in time to play Crysis than it is to build a machine capable of bending the game to its will. But no matter, Crytek's 22nd century graphics and amazing sandbox gameplay are worth the price of admission. Few experiences were better this year than assuming the role of a Predator-like Special Forces soldier with a nano-suit stalking helpless foot patrols in the deep jungle with the aid of a cloaking device, super strength, and super speed.
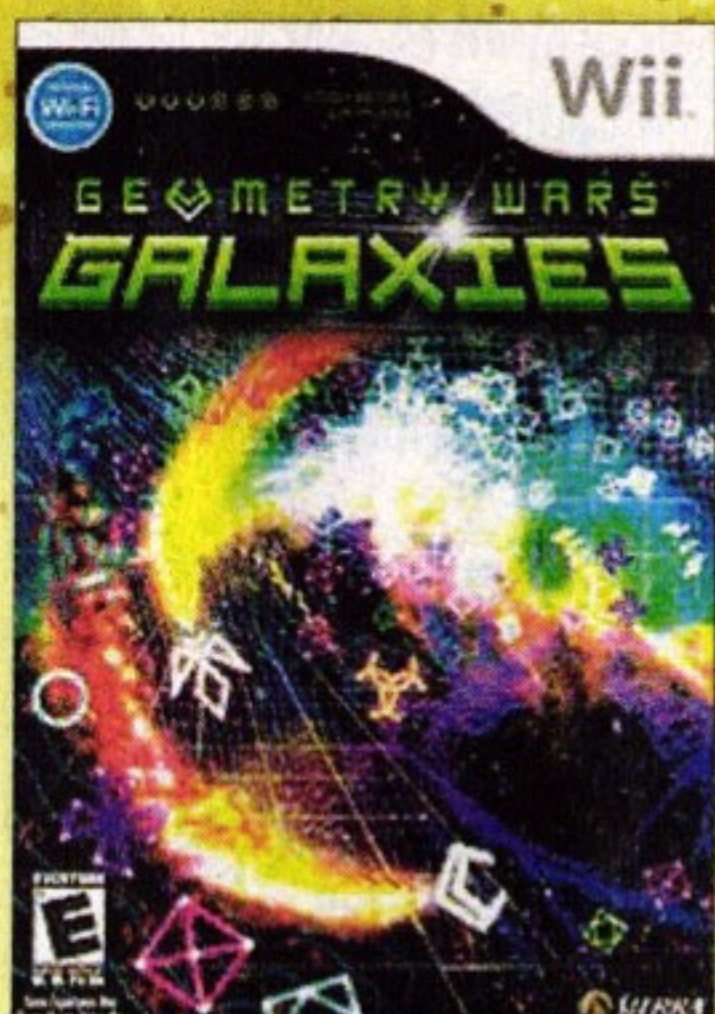
Geometry Wars Galaxies

System: Wii
Release: November 13
Geometry Wars has been hailed since its original release as brilliance masked in simplicity. Galaxies takes that addictive shooter mechanic and all the flashing lights and shapes that come along with it and adds the ability to level up and unlock new, ever more complicated levels. It may be one of the most straightforward games of 2007, but it's also one of the best.
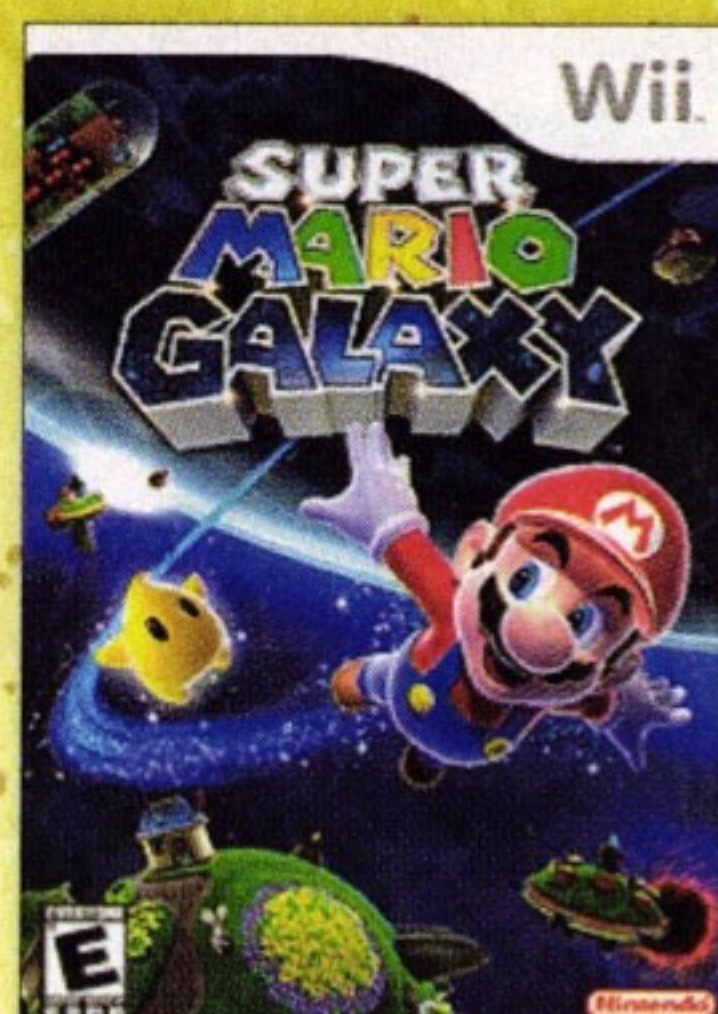
Super Mario Galaxy

System: Wii
Release: November 13
To this day, Mario is the face of video games. Unlike other entertainment icons like Mickey Mouse, whose legacy diminishes more each day, Nintendo keeps making Mario better. Super Mario Galaxy is a remarkable entry into the platforming genre. It clings tightly to its history, yet manages to innovate in ways that you never thought possible. Whether you are bounding across a lava field as ice Mario, or find yourself breaking the laws of gravity, this game's melding of unique challenges and amazing gameplay makes it irresistible.
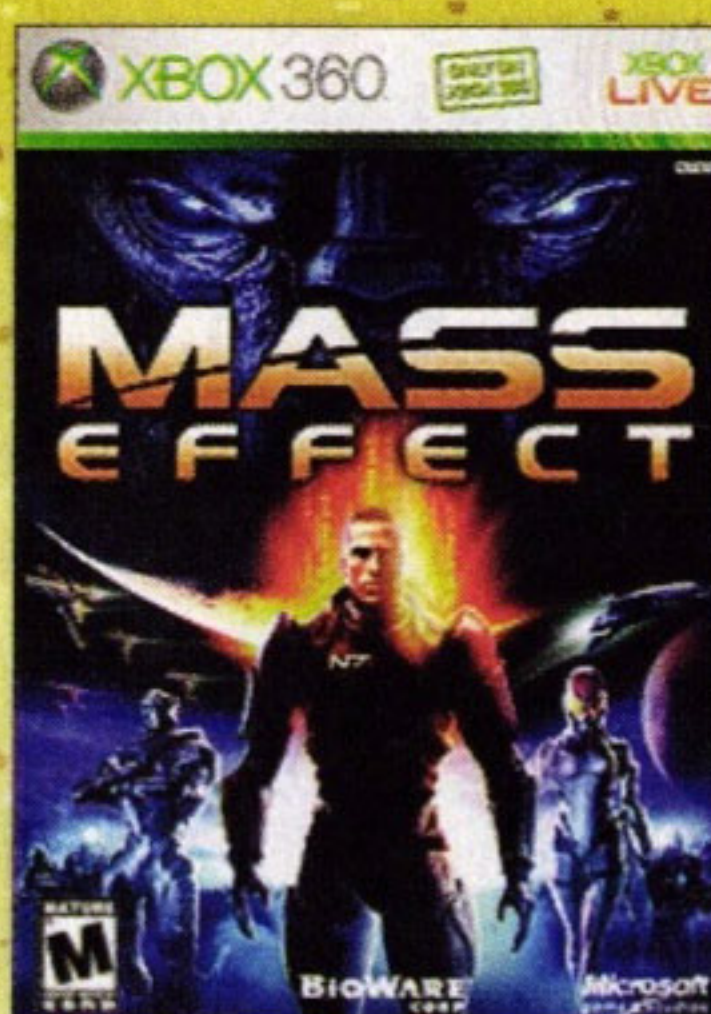
Mass Effect

System: Xbox 360
Release: November 20
There are storytellers, and then there is BioWare. This company has long been recognized as one of video games' most accomplished storytellers, but with Mass Effect, the company is making the art its own. Next to The Lord of the Rings and Star Wars, there are few universes that are as fully developed as Mass Effect's. From the shocking plot twists to the believability of the characters, this is the video game story that will have everyone talking.
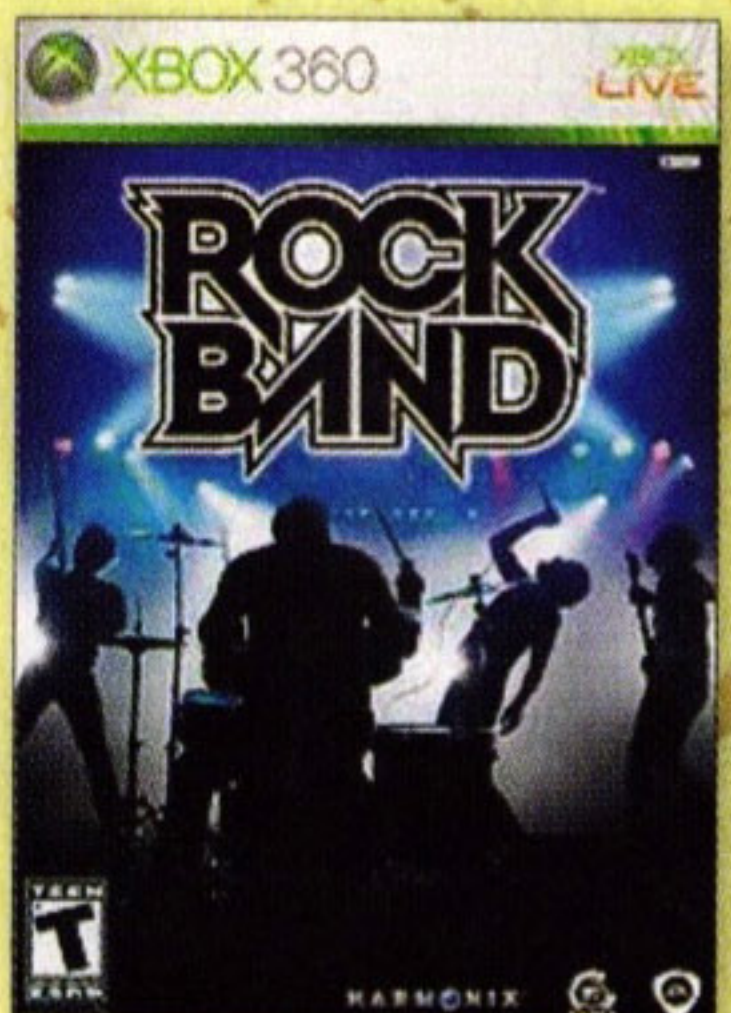
Rock Band

System: PlayStation 3, Xbox 360 • **Release:** November 20
Taking a step back, it's hard to perceive just how immense a project Rock Band really is. Any one instrument from the selection of guitar, bass, drums, and voice has often been enough to justify a whole game release. With Rock Band, you get all four in one neat (but expensive) package. Few video game experiences can match hitting up the great rock songs of history with your friends at your side. Rock Band hits all the right notes and has nearly anyone who tries it scrambling to get back in the game.

Uncharted: Drake's Fortune

System: PlayStation 3
Release: November 20
Leaving the cartoony adventures of Jak & Daxter behind for the time being, Naughty Dog chose a footloose treasure hunter named Nathan Drake as their first hero on the PlayStation 3. Through a positively remarkable audio and visual smorgasbord, Uncharted played like the next great popcorn summer blockbuster, and set new bars in cinematic storytelling.
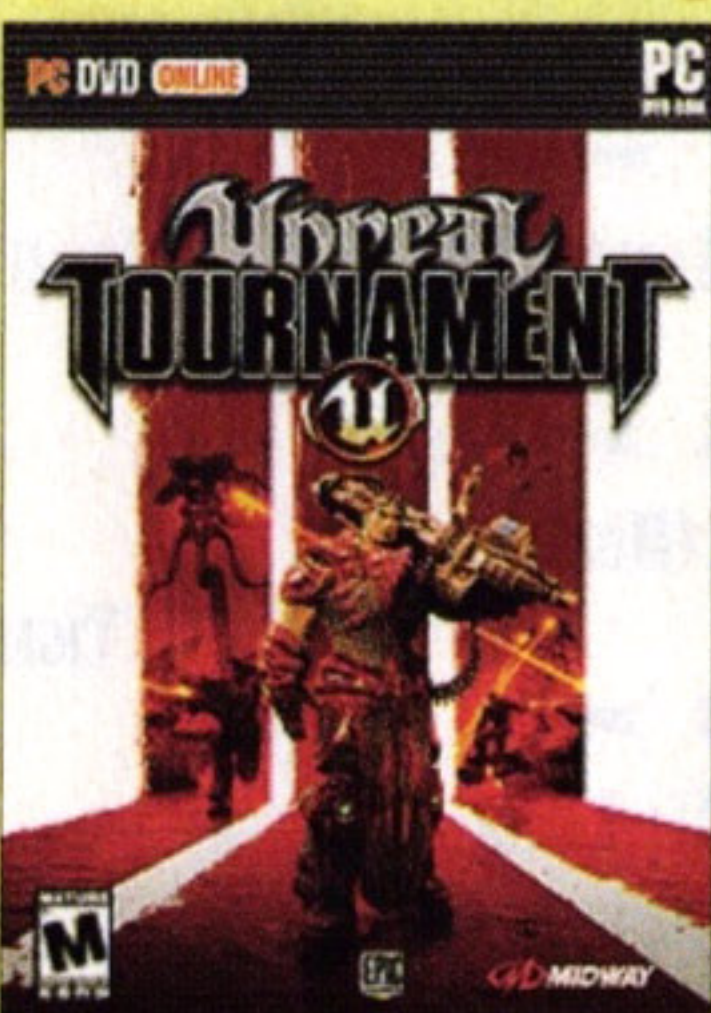
Unreal Tournament 3

System: PC
Release: November 20
One of the heaviest hitters in the PC space returned this year to spectacular results. Sparkly Unreal Engine 3 visuals and a host of new vehicles and maps – not to mention the addition of the peerless Warfare mode – make Unreal Tournament 3 as worthy of your fragging time as anything else. As always, no game moves as lightning-fast or offers as many hilarious voiceovers as UT. Where would YouTube montages be without the classic guttural "Killing Spree!" clip?

Top 10
Worst Games of 2007

1 Fuzion Frenzy 2

Worthless minigame collections are a special breed of terrible game, but Fuzion Frenzy 2 claws its way to the top of that calamitous heap. Every two seconds the MC says "I've never seen a battle this crazy," but he seems to have confused the word "crazy" with "offensively insipid to a degree that modern man cannot measure with currently available technology."

2 Looney Tunes: ACME Arsenal
Looney Tunes has finally evolved! ACME Arsenal removes the wacky humor that has been holding back the likes of Bugs Bunny and Daffy Duck. In its place, players get to see these iconic characters in their natural element: platforming and combat. Way to distill the essence of the license, morons.

3 Two Worlds
A lot of gamers bought Two Worlds with the belief that it was similar to The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion. In a way, it is: Take Oblivion, make it ugly, break the combat, middle school-up the story, and curb-stomp anything that is fun or remotely playable.

4 Kengo: Legend of the 9
Sword fighting is cool. That's the closest Kengo ever comes to anything good. Everything else, from the controls to the plot, is more painful than accidentally sitting on a wakizashi. It takes a special effort to screw up a game this badly, but someone went the extra mile.

5 Hour of Victory
The word "victory" doesn't belong anywhere near this wreck; Hour of Failure doesn't put up a decent fight on any front. The enemies are as smart as the sandbags they should be hiding behind, and it's surprising that none of the numerous glitches manage to make them accidentally shoot you.

6 Vampire Rain
You're part of a strike team sent after a bunch of vampires. You can't fight them, though – that's instant death. Instead, you'll use your high-tech weaponry to shoot padlocks off of gates so you can shimmy across pipes. If you are seen, you run for your life and eventually hit one of the ubiquitous invisible walls. Then you get mauled to death. That's vampire hunting, baby.

7 Chulip
A game about trying to kiss people probably sounded endearing in concept. Somehow, it transformed into controlling a total dingus who sifts through garbage looking for money. If he finds feces instead, he loses life. Kissing still fits in, but there's only one cute girl in town, so he ends up making out with old men and shopkeepers. Hot!

8 Soulcalibur Legends
Soulcalibur Legends barely has enough content to fill a single minigame. The obvious solution is to take what's there and spread it thinly over hours and hours of relentlessly dull and repetitive gameplay. If you're looking to injure yourself, though, the Wii controls can give you a case of tennis elbow.

9 Spider-Man: Friend or Foe
The answer is "foe." At least, it should be. Instead, Spider-Man holds hands and plays Pat-a-cake with a bunch of guys he should be punching in the face. Not that you could recognize them, anyway: the graphics are so bad that the villains look like Troma versions of themselves. Eww.

10 Jenga
Seriously? Jenga's only mechanic — pulling out blocks and putting them on top of a tower — is hopelessly broken here. You'd have better luck playing the real version with your feet…with oven mitts over them. What other totally simple board game concepts can be ruined beyond repair? Maybe next year we'll see Yahtzee 2: Where's the Dice? or Boggle: No Vowels Edition.

The Editors' Top 10 Picks

ANDY

1. BioShock (Multi)
2. Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare (Multi)
3. World of Warcraft: The Burning Crusade (PC)
4. Guitar Hero III: Legends of Rock (Multi)
5. Rock Band (Multi)
6. Mass Effect (Xbox 360)
7. Super Mario Galaxy (Wii)
8. Portal (Multi)
9. Crackdown (Xbox 360)
10. Picross DS (Nintendo DS)
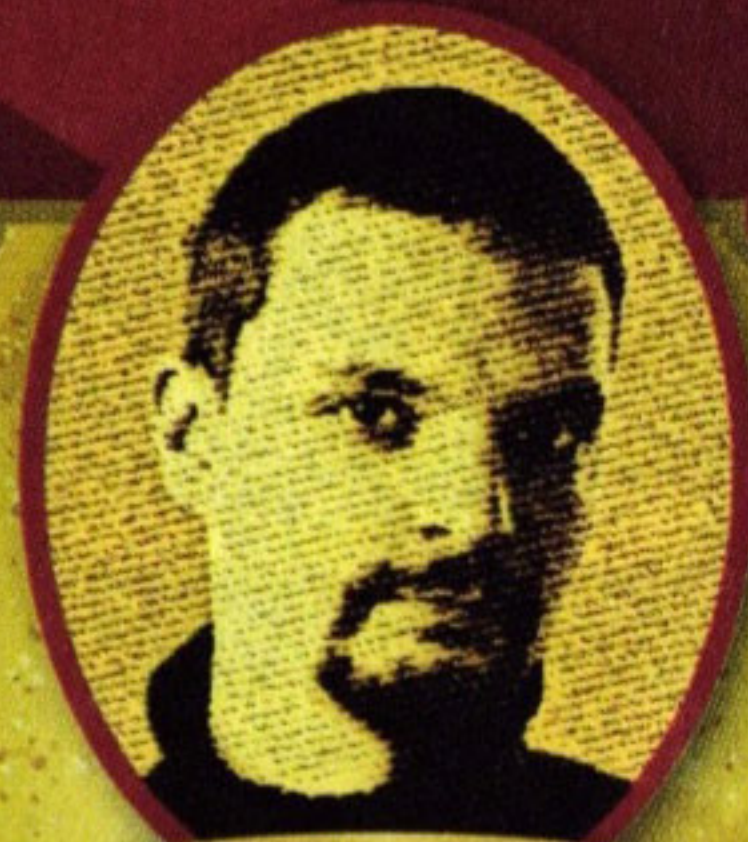
REINER

1. BioShock (Multi)
2. Mass Effect (Xbox 360)
3. Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare (Multi)
4. Super Mario Galaxy (Wii)
5. Assassin's Creed (Multi)
6. God of War II (PS2)
7. The Legend of Zelda: Phantom Hourglass (DS)
8. The Orange Box (Multi)
9. Ratchet & Clank Future: Tools of Destruction (PS3)
10. Geometry Wars: Galaxies (Wii)
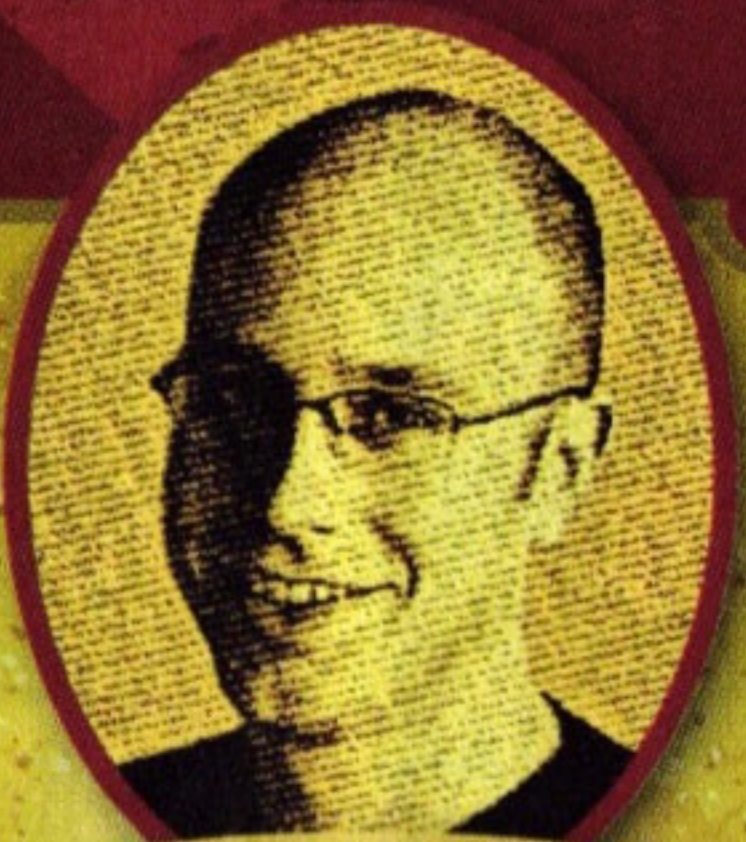
MATT

1. Super Mario Galaxy (Wii)
2. BioShock (Multi)
3. The Orange Box (Multi)
4. Ratchet & Clank Future: Tools of Destruction (PS3)
5. Picross DS (DS)
6. Mass Effect (Xbox 360)
7. Super Paper Mario (Wii)
8. Rock Band (Multi)
9. Guitar Hero III: Legends of Rock (Multi)
10. Uncharted: Drake's Fortune (PS3)
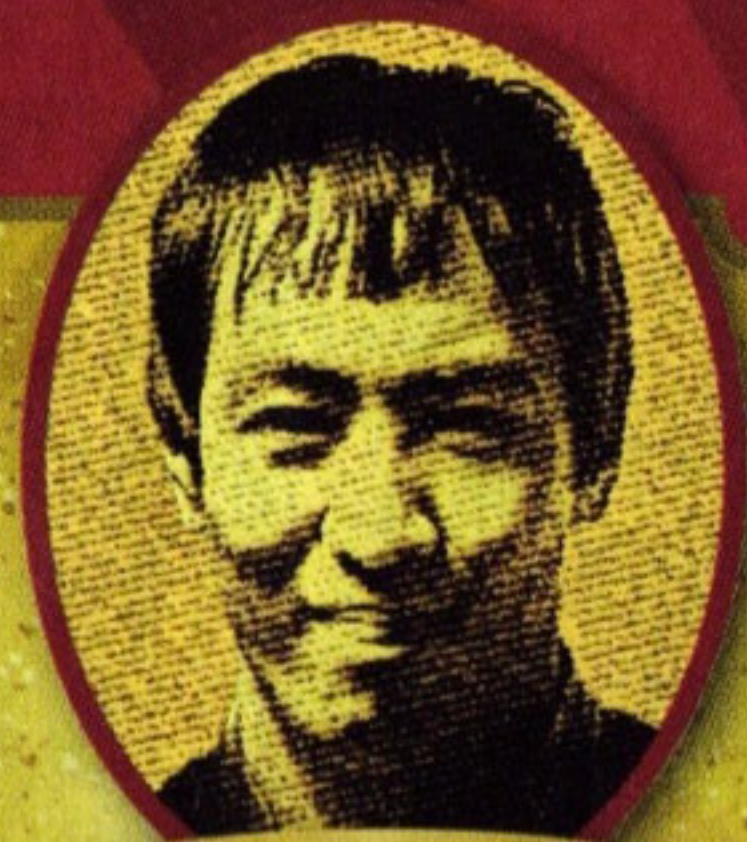
KATO

1. BioShock (Multi)
2. Mass Effect (Xbox 360)
3. Assassin's Creed (Multi)
4. Rogue Galaxy (PS2)
5. Skate (Multi)
6. Guitar Hero III: Legends of Rock (Multi)
7. Project Gotham Racing 4 (Xbox 360)
8. Tiger Woods PGA Tour 2008 (Multi)
9. Picross DS (DS)
10. Jeanne D'Arc (PSP)
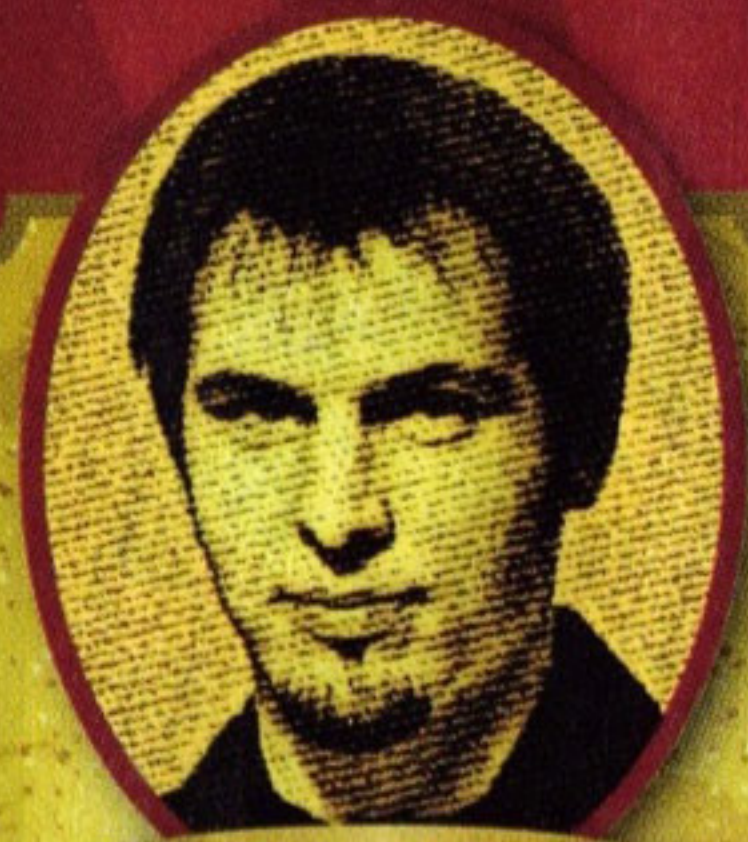
ADAM

1. Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare (Multi)
2. BioShock (Multi)
3. World of Warcraft: The Burning Crusade (PC)
4. Civilization IV: Beyond the Sword (PC)
5. Neverwinter Nights 2: Mask of the Betrayer (PC)
6. The Lord of the Rings Online: Shadows of Angmar (PC)
7. Puzzle Quest: Challenge of the Warlords (Multi)
8. Rock Band (Multi)
9. Unreal Tournament 3 (PC)
10. Supreme Commander (and Forged Alliance) (PC)
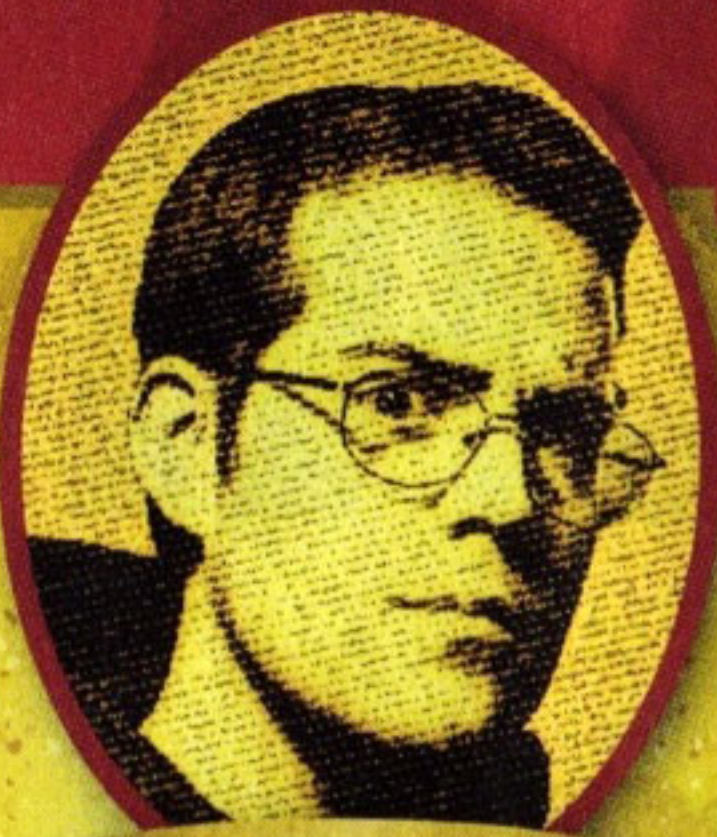
JOE

1. BioShock (Multi)
2. Mass Effect (Xbox 360)
3. Assassin's Creed (Multi)
4. God of War II (PS2)
5. Portal (Multi)
6. Blue Dragon (Xbox 360)
7. Persona 3 (PS2)
8. Odin Sphere (PS2)
9. Heavenly Sword (PS3)
10. Phoenix Wright Ace Attorney: Trials & Tribulations (DS)
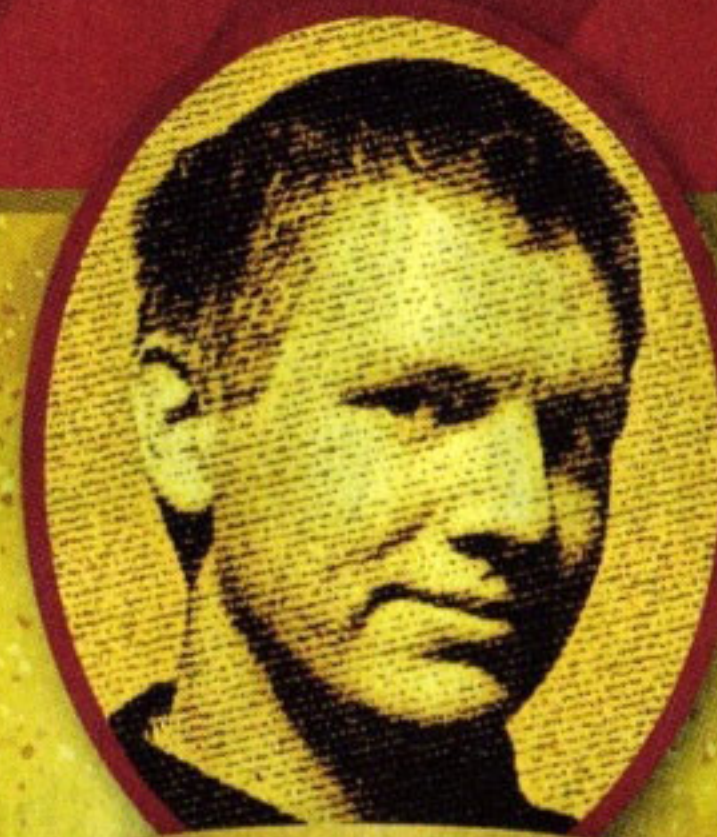
MILLER

1. BioShock (Multi)
2. Mass Effect (Xbox 360)
3. Assassin's Creed (Multi)
4. Super Mario Galaxy (Wii)
5. Rock Band (Multi)
6. Uncharted: Drake's Fortune (PS3)
7. Halo 3 (Xbox 360)
8. The Orange Box (Multi)
9. Guitar Hero III: Legends of Rock (Multi)
10. God of War II (PS2)

BERTZ

1. Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare (Multi)
2. Mass Effect (Xbox 360)
3. BioShock (Multi)
4. Portal (Multi)
5. Assassin's Creed (Multi)
6. The Elder Scrolls IV: Shivering Isles (Multi)
7. Crysis (PC)
8. Rock Band (Multi)
9. Guitar Hero III: Legends of Rock (Multi)
10. Civilization IV: Beyond The Sword (PC)

BEN

1. Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare (Multi)
2. The Orange Box (Multi)
3. Mass Effect (Xbox 360)
4. BioShock (Multi)
5. God of War II (PS2)
6. Halo 3 (Xbox 360)
7. Metroid Prime 3: Corruption (Wii)
8. Super Mario Galaxy (Wii)
9. The Elder Scrolls IV: Shivering Isles (Multi)
10. Ratchet & Clank Future: Tools of Destruction (PS3)
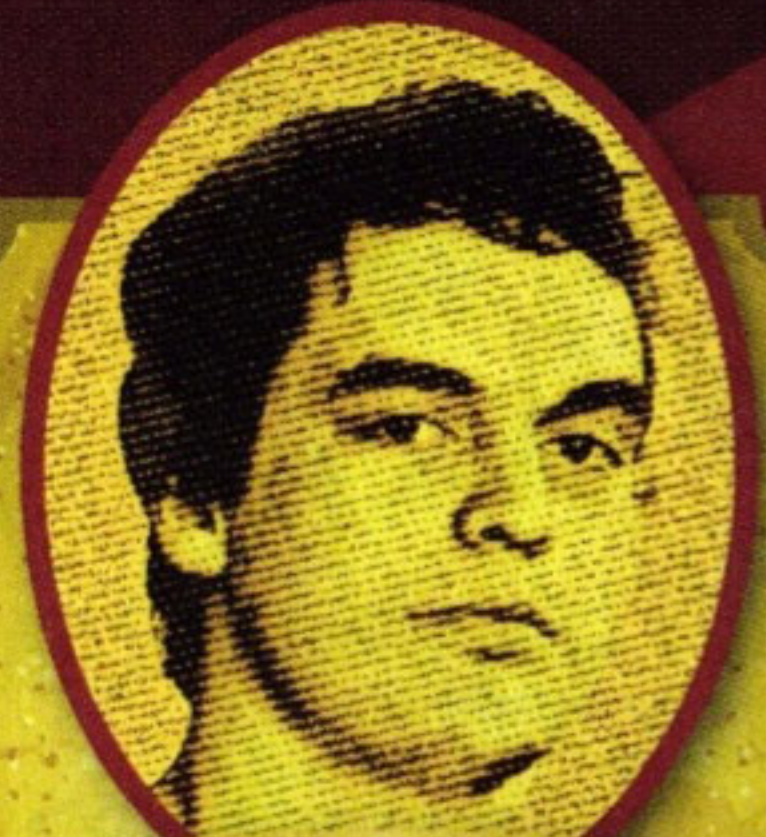
BRYAN

1. Rock Band (Multi)
2. The Orange Box (Multi)
3. BioShock (Multi)
4. Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare (Multi)
5. Contra 4 (DS)
6. Guitar Hero III: Legends of Rock (Multi)
7. Super Paper Mario (Wii)
8. Phoenix Wright Ace Attorney: Trials & Tribulations (DS)
9. Heavenly Sword (PS3)
10. Picross DS (DS)

YANNIS MALLAT

CEO, UBISOFT MONTREAL

>> From Africa to Canada, Yannis Mallat's career has taken him around the globe. Now heading Ubisoft's prestigious Montreal studio, we spoke to him about his vision for the company's future <<

Coming from an extremely varied background that includes development and creative roles, how do you draw on that experience in your current job of overseeing an entire studio?

The whole experience [working] in Africa opened my mind. I saw things that will never leave me, for bad or for good. It's certainly a rich personal experience. When you take that background into the video game industry, the one thing that strikes me is that our biggest "asset" – and I don't like that word – is the talent. It's the people. I think this helps a lot in keeping up the daily operations…. I make sure that every Thursday of every week I don't have any meetings. My schedule is totally free and I go around on the floor and talk to people on the teams, making sure that I understand the burdens of every project and know what's important to the people. That's a key. From agribusiness to rural development in Africa to video game projects, that's the main link.

Today budgets for games are so large, what's the process you go through to make sure that a title is going to be viable? You obviously don't want to spend a lot of time and money on a bad gamble.

That's a good question. We don't want to give away our recipe, but in a nutshell you are always on the right track when you can, as early as possible, make sure that in a very concrete form you have a [standout feature]. That feature that will drive innovation is to be address and worked on from the very beginning of the project. Once you get this "holy grail," in a way things become much easier. You diminish the pressure and risk of failing. Once you have this, all the money you put into the production values are just here to make sure that the crafting of the new ideas will be the right level of quality.

One thing we're seeing more of today is games that are announced from the beginning as being part of a multi-part series. Assassin's Creed is like this, Mass Effect for BioWare as well. Why are more companies doing this?

It's mostly because we are sure that we're going to provide good content to the consumers it will pave the way for another experience that is an extension of the first one. Also, in the meantime, it's a way to motivate our creators – we're not aiming for one shot, we're aiming for something big. I think that, if you think about more than one game, you'll make a better game because it forces the team to think more thoroughly. It's a question of scope and depth. [And] potentially, if this turns out to be a financial success, then you can have that success on several other titles.

Ubisoft sometimes moves sequels to other studios, like what you did with Splinter Cell when one was developed in Shanghai, so that you can get sequels out on a timely basis. Do you worry that this will hurt the consistency of the games because they are not made from one team that's totally focused on a franchise? Will you continue this type of work model in the future?

Probably. It's within human nature to pull out the best from yourself, to [take something] and make it "yours." So, you can't totally avoid a team adding its flavor to a project. If you want to come up with something great, you have to let the creators come from their gut. But, at the same time, we are large enough to take care of our brands. We have executive producers and a content division centralized in Paris that makes sure that there is consistency in our brands. For the sake of the consumers, we look for certain things we want in the series and make sure that – across the brand – there are those values within each game. You want to maintain a brand, but at the same time you want the individual team to give their best new ideas. There's a fine balance that can be found.

One series that's very associated with your studio is Prince of Persia. There was a UK magazine that reported a new Prince of Persia, then that was denied. Is that project being worked on or is it taking a back seat to Assassin's Creed?

Well, that's something that we haven't announced yet. But, based on the success of the franchise, I think consumers crave for a new Prince of Persia. This is a living brand, that's all I can say now. [Laughs]

"We have a goal to be the number one studio in the world."

Ubisoft is known for developing new, original IP [intellectual property]. While you do have ongoing and licensed products, you don't rely on that as much. Why is that? Wouldn't it be a better bet financially to have more licensed games?

I think that value lies in the IPs. Challenge lies in the IPs. If we can make sure that, even on a licensed product, we apply the same philosophy in terms of the way we think about the projects in their conception, we can make sure that even a well-established brand can be rejuvenated with risky content decisions. That's for the sake of providing consumers with what they deserve. I know that sounds a little pretentious, but in the end – especially in an overcrowded market – the consumer has so many choices. We compete for leisure time with television, movies, and books, and in order to get a slight portion of this precious time we need to make sure that we have something that matters. We know that people crave new things; they like to play never-seen-before game mechanics or settings. That comes from new IP.

How much do the different Ubisoft studios share technology and ideas? How do you coordinate that?

It's happening a lot, and it's never been at this level in the past, probably because of the massive investment Ubisoft made during the transition of the consoles. In Montreal, I'm using several engines that have been developed by other studios, including the technology behind Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter. The pipelines we are building in Montreal are being used by other studios. That's the stuff that you see at a high level when you look at it. But, also, at a lower level, a lot of communication is going on between studios and people that do the same job. We thought at the beginning that the studio structure would actually hurt in terms of sharing, but we discovered that wasn't true at all.

What are your goals for Ubisoft Montreal over the next five years?

We have a goal to be the number one studio in the world. That said, I want to add to that the fact that being the number one studio in the world translates into making sure that our developers become the best in the world. That's the meaning of it to me. We want to give our creators the tools and the means to let them be the best. And if we achieve that, we'll be the best studio in the world.

AIMING HIGH

pc

PNY XLR8 GEFORCE 8800 GT

VERY GOOD ●●●●●●●●○

If your puny video card can't handle Crysis and you don't have $500 to drop on a new video card, say hello to the XLR8 GeForce 8800 GT. This video card boasts 112 stream processors, 512MB of onboard RAM, and a 256-bit memory interface – which is nearly as much power as the flagship GeForce 8800 GTX. Best of all, it's half the price of the GTX, which is cheap enough that you shouldn't have to sell another one of your brother's kidneys to afford it.

$249.99 • www.pny.com

GAME INFORMER EDITORS' CHOICE

etc.

DUST-OFF QUIVER

OK ●●●●●●○○○○

Keyboards, mice, controllers, headsets, MP3 players, cell phones, and DVDs – how's a traveling gamer supposed to manage all that equipment? Dust-Off (yeah, the canned air) has a solution for you. The Quiver is specifically designed to manage and store all the gear you might want to take to your next LAN event. We like the sturdy material it's made from, and it should help gamers stay organized, but it's not very stylish.

$69.99 • www.dustoffzone.com

tech

LOGITECH G51 SURROUND SOUND SYSTEM

GOOD ●●●●●●●○○○

One of the G51's biggest selling points is its Matrix mode, which takes normal 2-channel stereo sources and upscales them to 5.1 audio. We tested the G51 and found that it delivers uniform and crisp surround sound. The bass may lack the power you'd get from more expensive setups, but for the price, the G51 is a solid option for gamers who haven't yet made the jump to surround sound.

$199.99 • www.logitech.com

pc

RAZER LACHESIS

GOOD ●●●●●●●●○○

The Lachesis is basically an upgraded version of Razer's capable DeathAdder. The nice addition here is the easy-to-access dpi buttons that allow you to adjust sensitivity on the fly – a feature you'll want since the Lachesis has a ridiculous max dpi of 4000, the highest we've seen so far. Otherwise, the mouse is comfortable, moves smoothly, and has 32KB of onboard memory to store five different profiles. The Lachesis is also fairly lightweight, but it lacks swappable weights, so gamers accustomed to a heftier piece of hardware might have trouble adjusting.

$79.99 • www.razerzone.com

DC DIRECT ILLIDAN STORMRAGE DELUXE COLLECTORS FIGURE

We'll let you in on a little consumer secret: If you buy a lot of toys from a particular toy line, companies tend to make more toys in that line. Well, you must have liked the World of Warcraft figures, because we're set to see more of them throughout 2008. Next up on the list is the Lord of Outland, who stands 6.5" tall and has a wingspan of 11". Don't thank us; thank yourselves.

$24.99 • www.dccomics.com/dcdirect
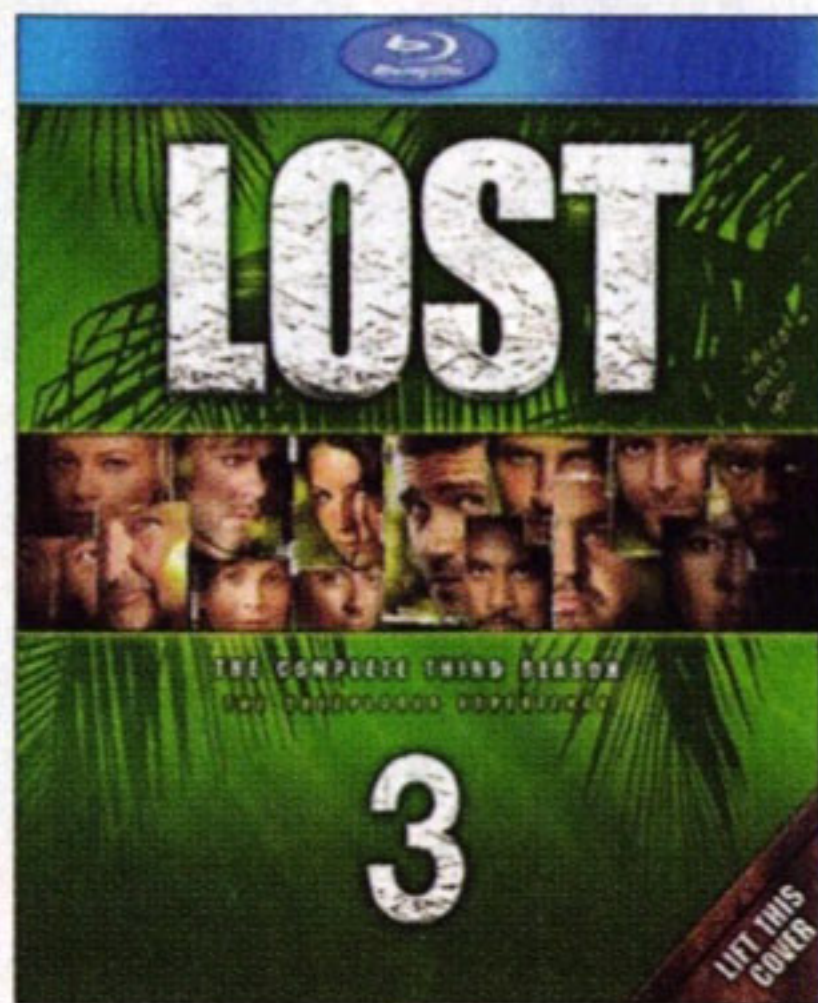
LOST SEASON 3

With the writers' strike destroying our lives, who knows when we will ever see the next season of *Lost*. Season three just hit Blu-ray and DVD, and the bonus content about season four might be the only new *Lost* content to comfort fans for a while. Then again, you might also be interested in our Hurley and Sawyer secret agent fan fiction.

$66.95 (Blu-ray), $38.99 (DVD)
www.amazon.com
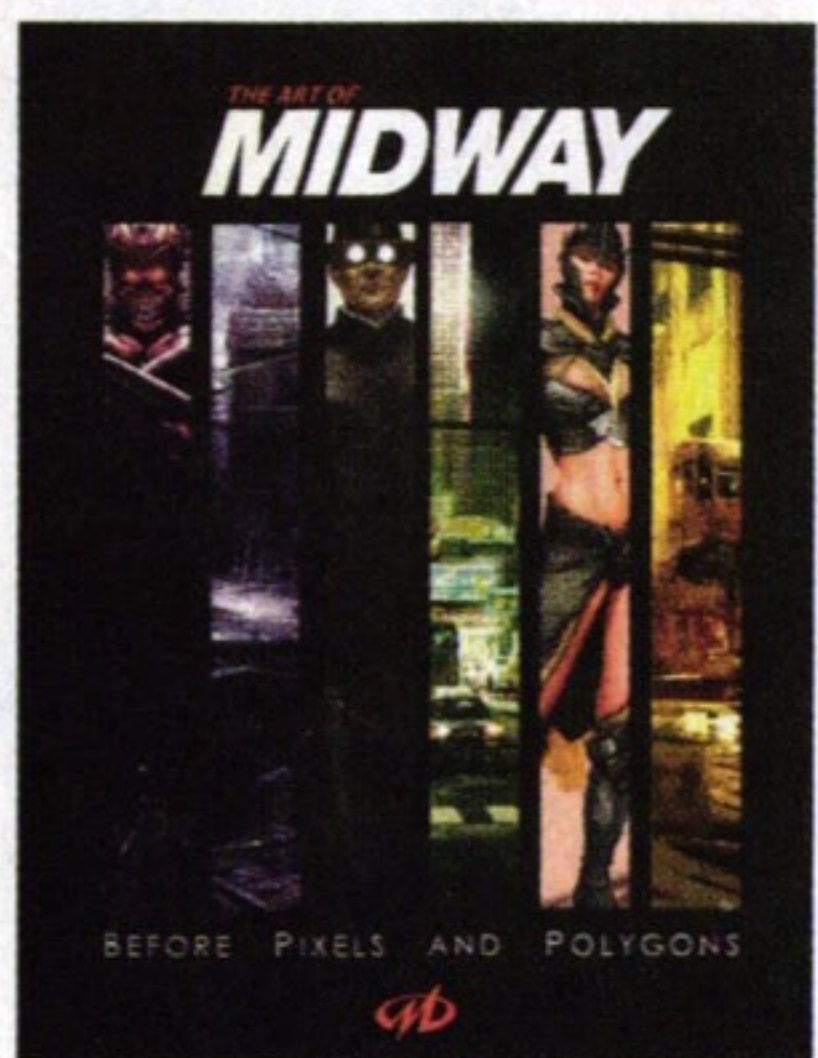
THE ART OF MIDWAY: BEFORE PIXELS AND POLYGONS

Players never get to experience some of the elements that go into creating a game. This perfect coffee table book gives us a rare glimpse at all the time and effort that goes into giving games their unique look. Inside are more than 200 environmental and concept images from popular Midway games like Mortal Kombat, Psi-Ops, and The Suffering. The artwork section for Stranglehold is especially noteworthy.

$24.95 • www.designstudiopress.com

TRANSFORMERS OMEGA SUPREME STATUE

Does your house need more really expensive, extremely cool geek memorabilia? Consider this Omega Supreme statue. One of the oldest and largest Autobots, Omega is such a BAMF that he can shatter mountains and could probably make the Hulk cry. This 12-inch Art Asylum statue captures all of Omega's awe-inspiring majesty, and would look great on the mantle next to your aunt's embroidery.

$198.99 • www.entertainmentearth.com

COMPANION CUBE

Assume the proper party escort submission position, because you don't want to miss your victory party. Your best friend, the Weighted Companion Cube, has survived the Aperture Science Emergency Intelligence Incinerator and is waiting for you at the party. May we remind you that this silent but faithful plush companion will never try to stab you, and it is guaranteed to bring you luck. He's not even mad that you tried to murder him. Hurry, he's saving you a piece of cake.

$29.95 • store.valvesoftware.com
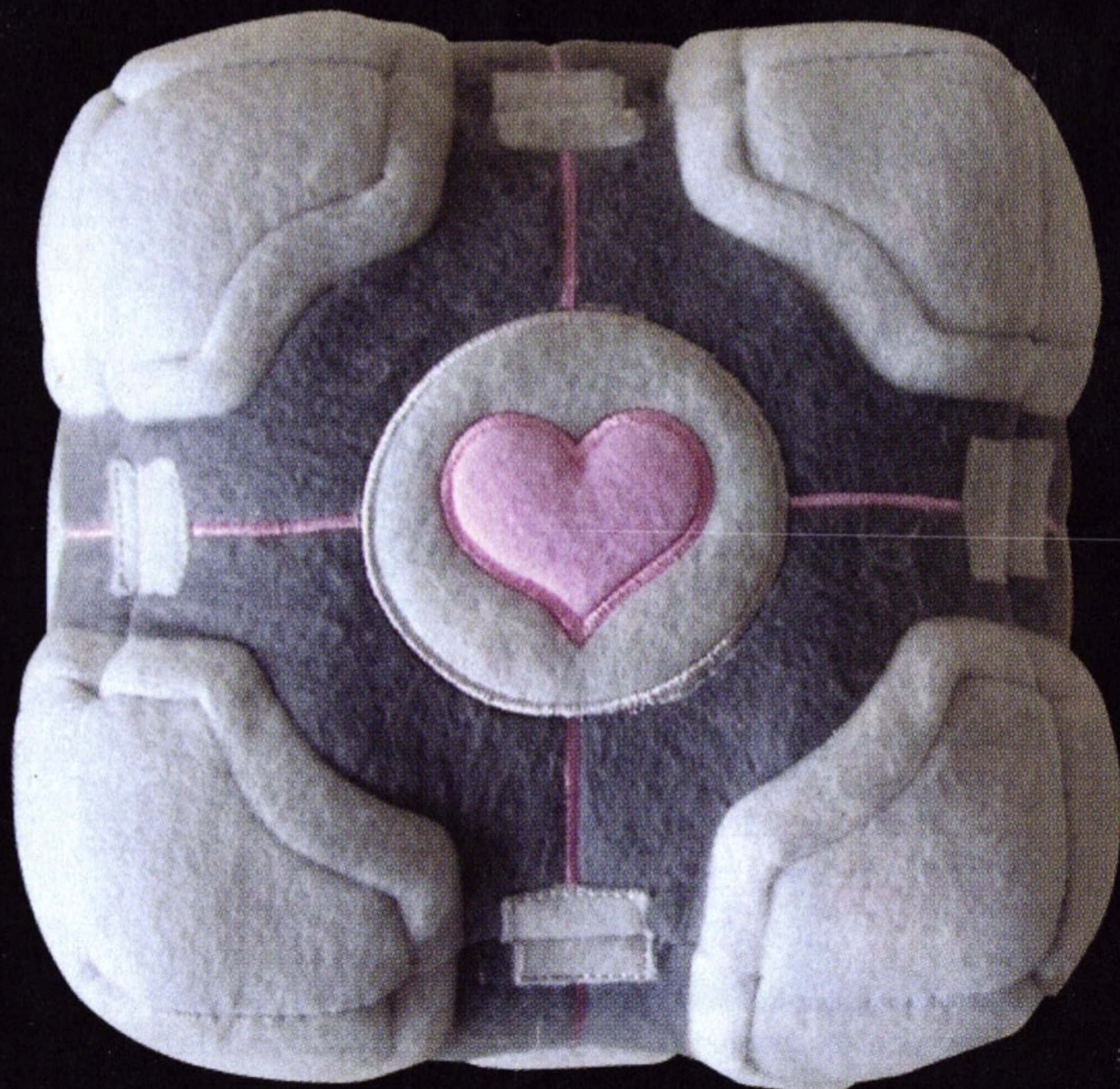
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SMALL IS BEAUTIFUL

THE WORLD OF XBOX LIVE ARCADE DEVELOPMENT

BY GEREMY MUSTARD,
CHAIR ENTERTAINMENT

When we formed Chair Entertainment in 2005, we hadn't quite settled on a business strategy. We knew we had a lot of ideas and wanted to create memorable entertainment experiences, but we weren't quite sure of the path we would take. While considering a large, multi-year project, we had been observing what Microsoft was doing with Xbox Live Arcade, and since we had some time, decided to test the waters (and keep the team busy!) with an idea we had for a smaller downloadable game. As an exercise, we came up with a list of 100 simple game concepts. After considering the feasibility and marketability of each one, we narrowed the list to what we felt were the 10 most viable concepts. From that list we chose to make Undertow. The process of creating Undertow taught us how great the Xbox Live Arcade is for independent developers and how it can lead to better games for everyone.

The development process for XBLA games is not all that different from making any other game – except it's smaller. The team sizes and budgets are smaller, the schedule is more compact, and the download size of the game is definitely smaller. However, looking back on the development of Undertow, I am amazed at how much work a small team can produce, how far a small budget can be stretched, and how much fun can be crammed into so little space.

When we began Undertow, the maximum size limit was restricted to 50 megabytes. That is not very much space – it is about the same size as just a few minutes of compressed video. While some disagreed with these file size limitations, I think it was a wise move for Microsoft. The small file sizes mean quick downloads, which translates into a better user experience. And a happy customer equals a return customer. Microsoft has done a great job making their marketplace a viable and strong retail outlet, which helps attract studios like Chair to make games for it.

With smaller file sizes game designers are forced to focus on the true essence of a game. What makes it fun? What makes it unique? Why would I want to play this? These are questions that any game design team needs to ask throughout production. When making games for the more casual audience, other questions may include: How fast does the game hook the player? Is it simple to pick up and play? Is it deep enough to play again and again? We found it very helpful to let various types of gamers play the game at different stages of production and watch their reactions. When did they like the game? When were they frustrated? Obviously, the more times developers can iterate a game to reduce frustration and increase enjoyment, the more fun that game will be. The fact that everyone on our team still loves playing Undertow tells me that we may have found that elusive fun factor.

While the team mulled over the intangible questions about what makes a game fun, I had to worry about such things as: How much disk space will that take? Will it load fast enough? How can I make that work? After many years of working with artists, I have discovered that game art assets tend to fill the space allotted. Whether the game is given 40 gigabytes or 50 megabytes, the artists will find a way to make the assets (textures, sounds, music, animations, etc.) just barely fit within whatever space is there. I worked very hard to make Undertow fit within 50 MB. Every time I found a way to make the game smaller, the artists would find a way to increase its size again! By the end of it, they put in 15 custom environments, hundreds of effects, 5.1 surround sound, motion captured cut-scenes with full voiceover, and subtitles in nine languages. That is a whole lot of data! But having artists that push everything to the limit is what helped us cram so many amazing features into just 49 megabytes. That's right – Undertow actually came in under the limit.

Just because a game is small on disc doesn't mean it is small in scope or complexity. In fact, the code complexity can easily rival that of a much larger game. Every game has to go through the same rigorous technical certification process. And 16-player matches still have 16 players sending tons of voice and game data across the internet, regardless of how big the characters are on the screen. With a small team it can be difficult to address unexpected problems without increasing production time. Undertow took a month or two longer to complete, but we ended up with a very polished game that we are proud to call our own.

Because the budget needed to produce Undertow as a downloadable game was smaller than it would be as a retail game, we were able to manage it ourselves without seeking any money from publishers. As a result, Chair fully owns the intellectual property rights for Undertow. This not only gave us the freedom to mold the game into what we wanted, but grants us the ability to expand the property into other areas that make sense.

Our team loves its current state of independence, and we feel it gives us agility and flexibility to innovate, polish, and essentially direct our own future. We hope to continue on a path similar to the one we've taken with Undertow and create more original games that can be enjoyed by many audiences – be that via Xbox Live Arcade and PlayStation Network or other similar services that emerge. ■ ■ ■

> " Just because a game is small on disc doesn't mean it is small in scope or complexity. "

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

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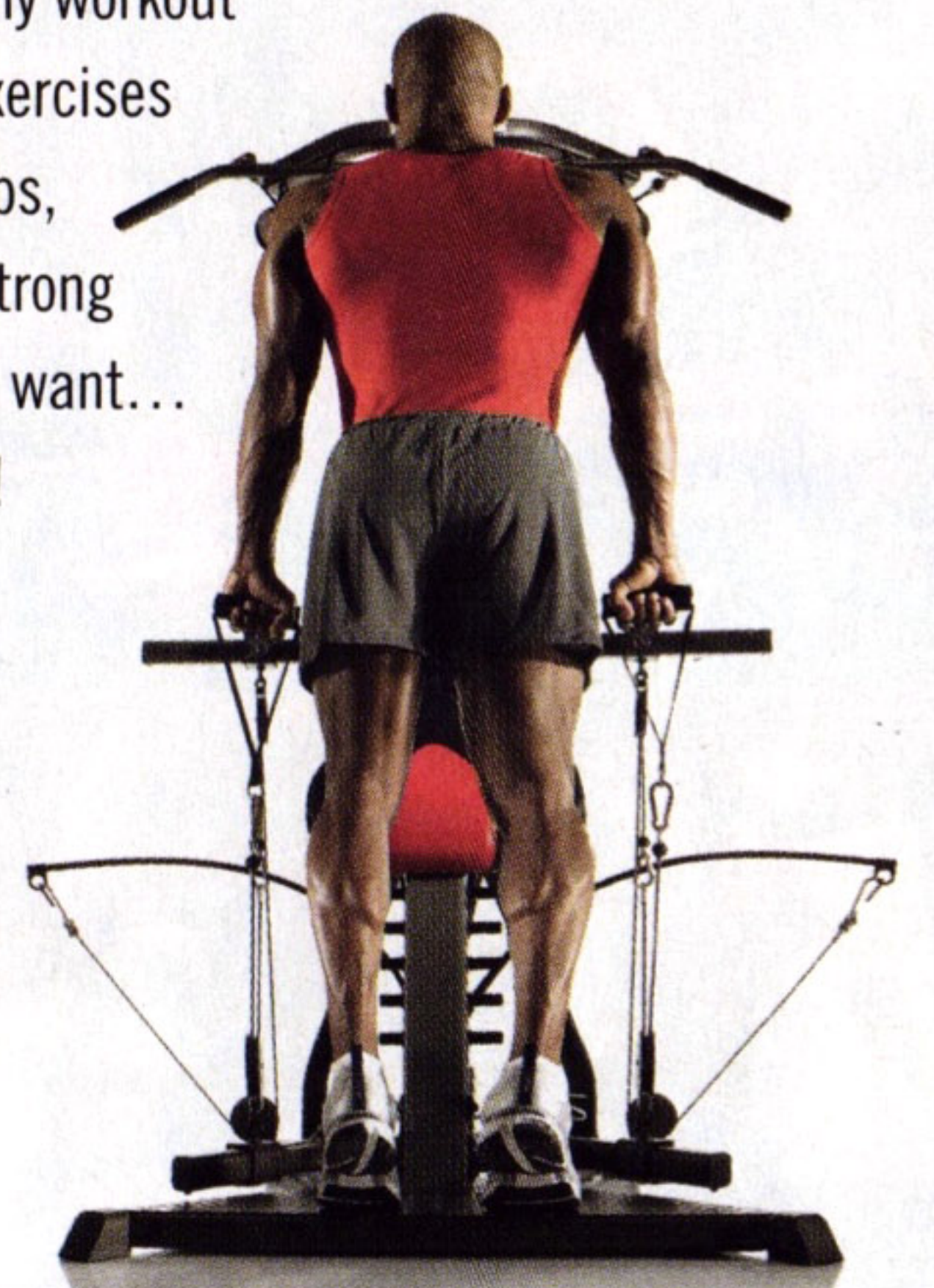
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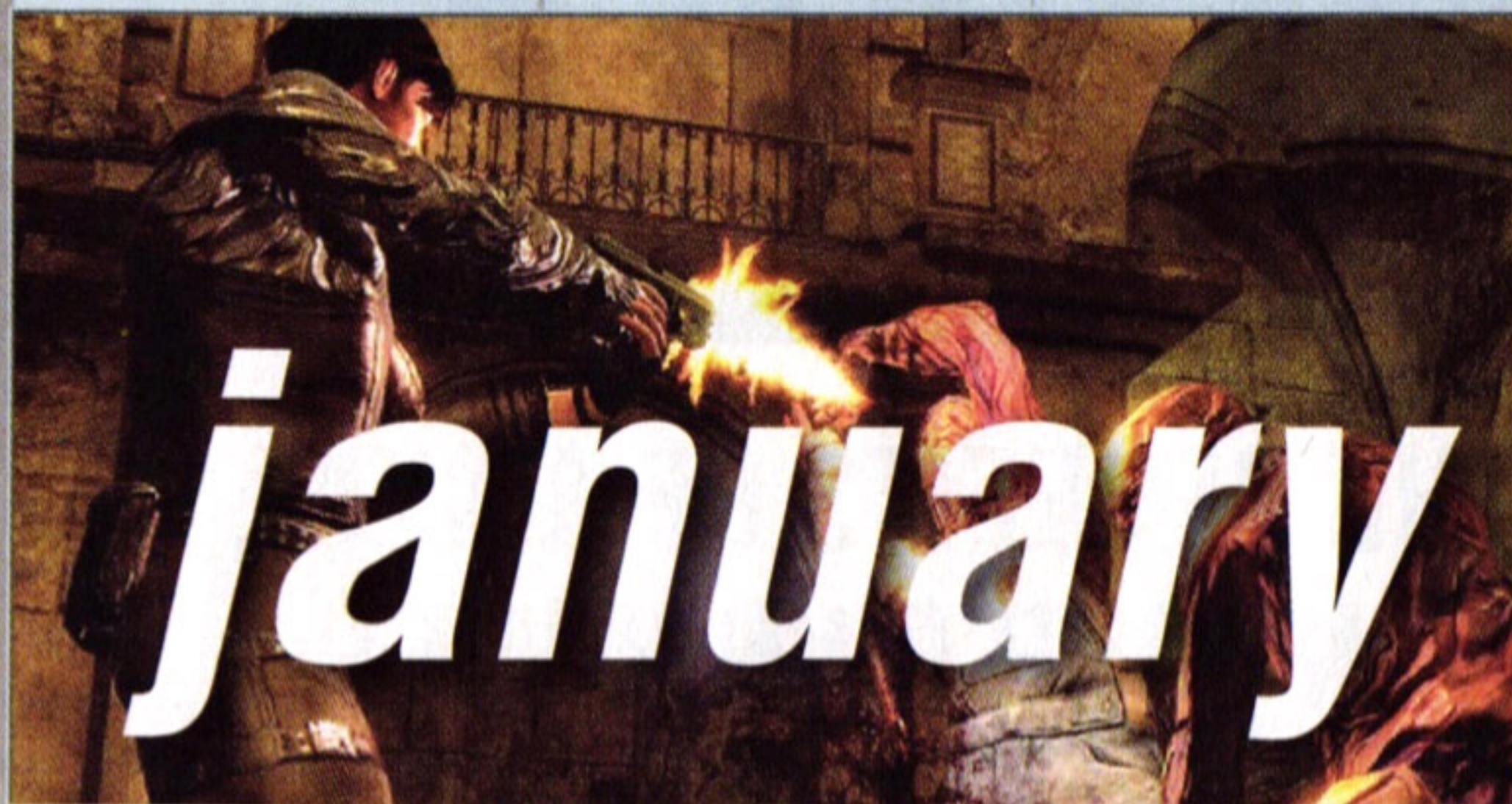
02

CAPTAIN AMERICA RETURNS!
Whoever designed Captain America's new costume would totally be kicked off of *Project Runway!* We hope it isn't just us who see that this new getup has an arrow pointing to the crotch region. You can see how this new Cap fares starting in Captain America #34.

04

FINAL FANTASY VII PLAY ARTS FIGURES
This is the series that everyone has been waiting for. The first series consists of Cloud, Tifa, and the annoying flower girl, Aerith. Tetsuya Nomura has personally overseen the sculpting of these figures, and the result is absolutely stunning.

Sonic Riders: Zero Gravity – 01/08

NEW RELEASES
- Blast Works: Build, Fuse & Destroy – Wii
- Brain Challenge – DS
- Brothers in Arms: Road to Hill 30 – Wii
- Bully: Scholarship Edition – 360
- Cabela's Monster Bass – 360, Wii
- Classic British Motor Racing – Wii
- Dance Dance Revolution: Disney Channel – PS2

08-09
- Go Pets: Vacation Island – DS
- Insecticide – DS
- Jackass: The Game – DS
- Kawasaki Jetski – Wii
- Kingdom Under Fire: Circle of Doom – 360
- Kitty Luv – Wii
- London Taxi: Rush Hour – Wii
- NFL Tour – 360
- Nitrobike – Wii
- Sonic Riders: Zero Gravity – Wii, PS2
- World Championship Cards – PSP

Insecticide – 01/08
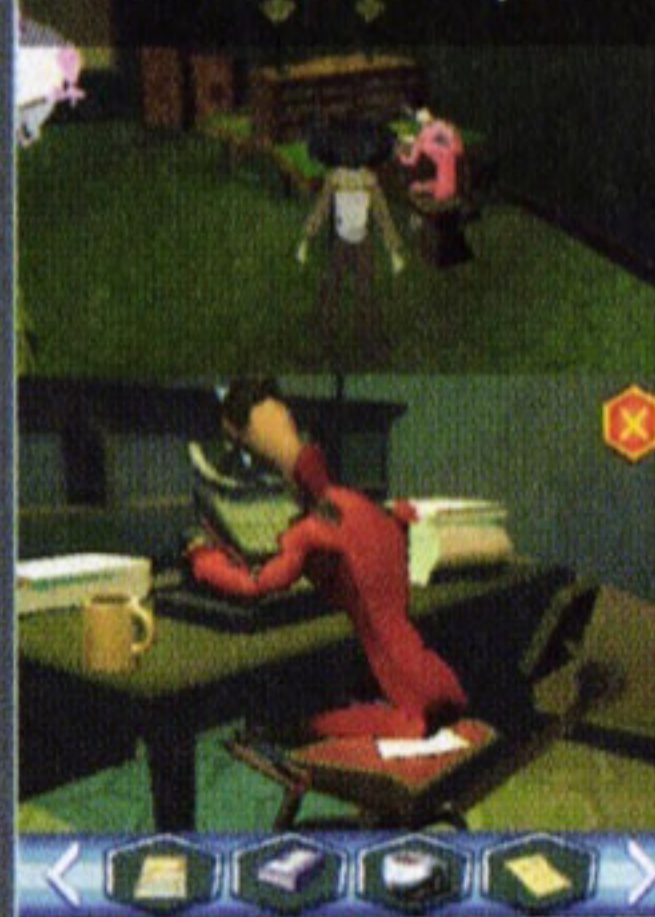
11
Anti-gamer Uwe Boll is back with another theatrical adaptation of a marginal video game. This time, he will attempt to butcher Dungeon Siege with *In the Name of the King.* If this movie is better than his previous efforts, expect its quality to fall between *Tremors 4: The Legend Begins* and *TekWar: The Original Movie.*
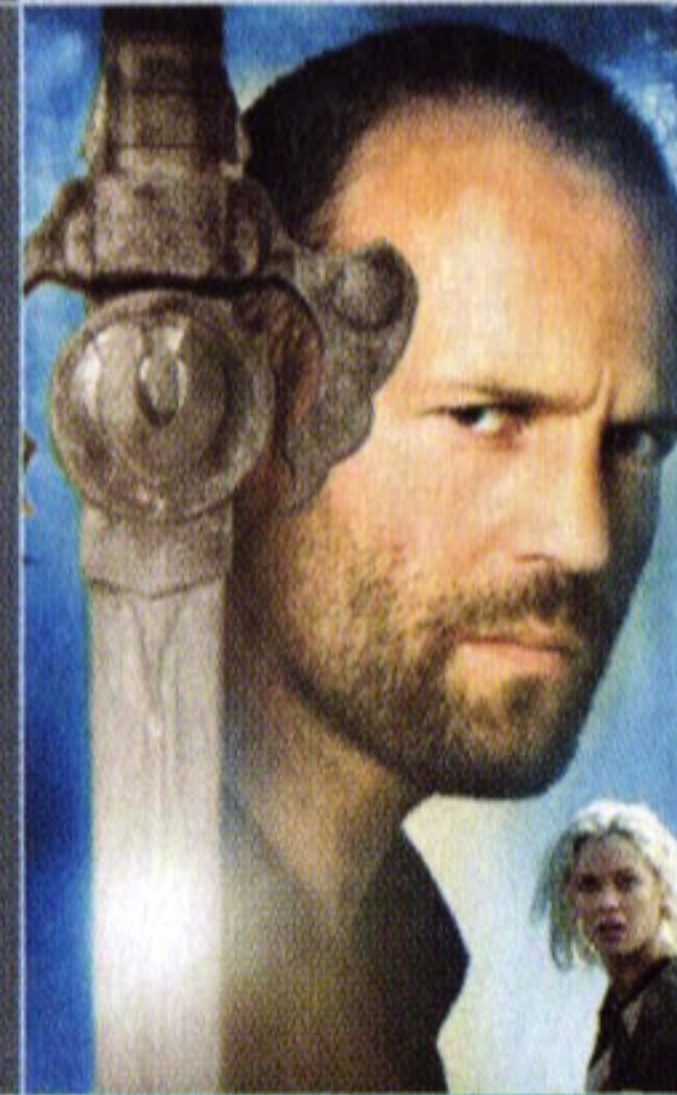
15

NEW RELEASES
- CSI: Hard Evidence – Wii
- CSI: Miami Nights – DS
- Culdcept Saga – 360
- Dark Sector – PS3, 360
- MX vs ATV: Untamed – DS
- Samurai Warriors: Katana – Wii

Dark Sector – 01/15

17

TORONTO INDEPENDENT GAMES CONFERENCE
This educational conference will bring aspiring game designers up to speed on a number of topics, ranging from the history and practice of video game music to a general video game design boot camp.

Culdcept Saga – 01/15

18
The film known as *1-18-08, Cloverfield,* and *Maybe Voltron?,* hits theaters today. Regardless of what this movie is called, it has a big rampaging monster in it, and that's enough for us. Monsters rule! Girls drool!

22

NEW RELEASES
- Burnout: Paradise – PS3, 360
- Endless Ocean – Wii
- Homie Rollerz – DS
- Mario and Sonic at the Olympic Games – DS
- Rygar: The Battle for Argus – Wii
- Turning Point – PS3, 360
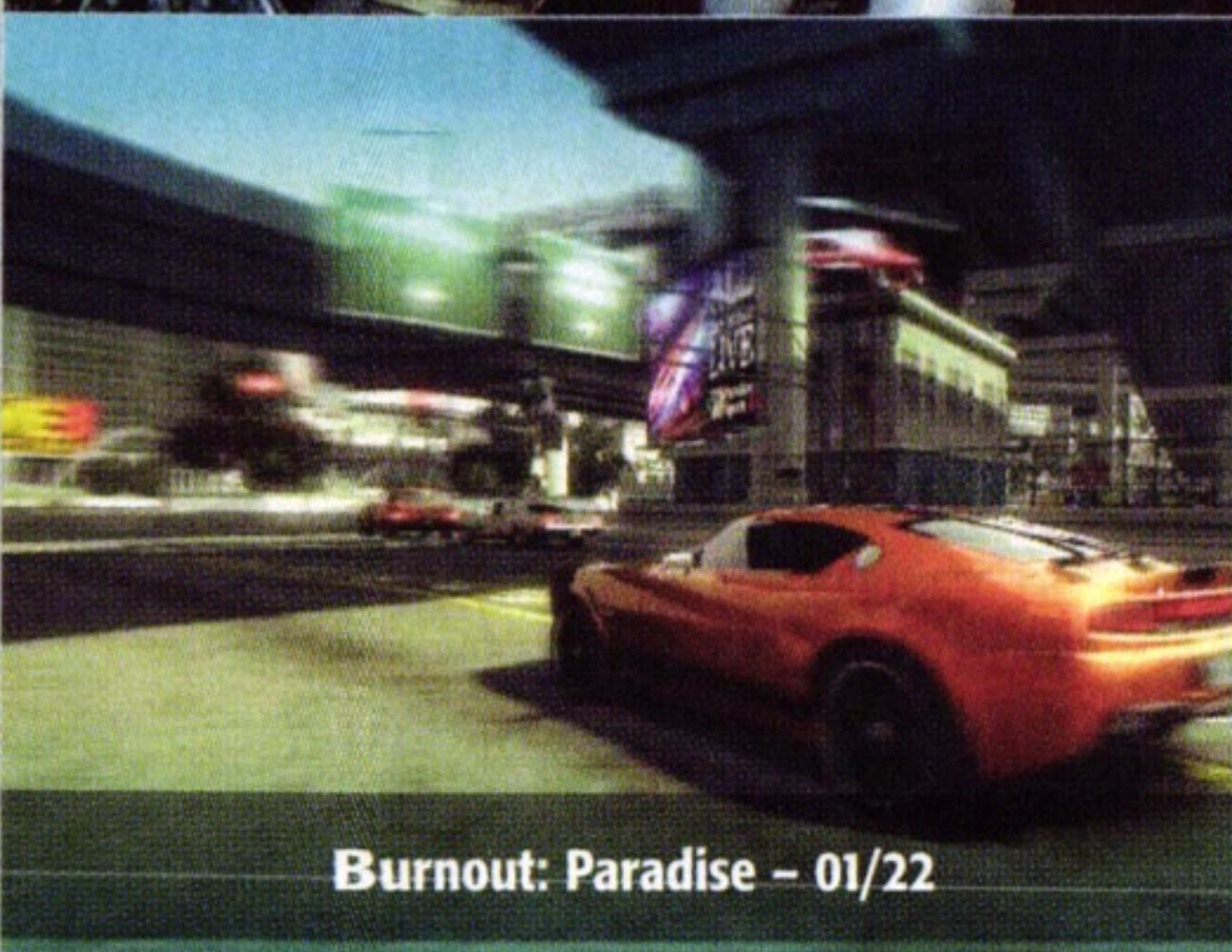
Burnout: Paradise – 01/22

23

STAR WARS: KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC #25
Starting with this issue, Dark Horse Comics is kicking off a yearlong Star Wars event that bridges the stories of the Classic Trilogy with the Knights of the Old Republic era. We are a bit fearful of this one, but Dark Horse hasn't steered us too wrong thus far. We'll give them the benefit of the doubt for the time being.
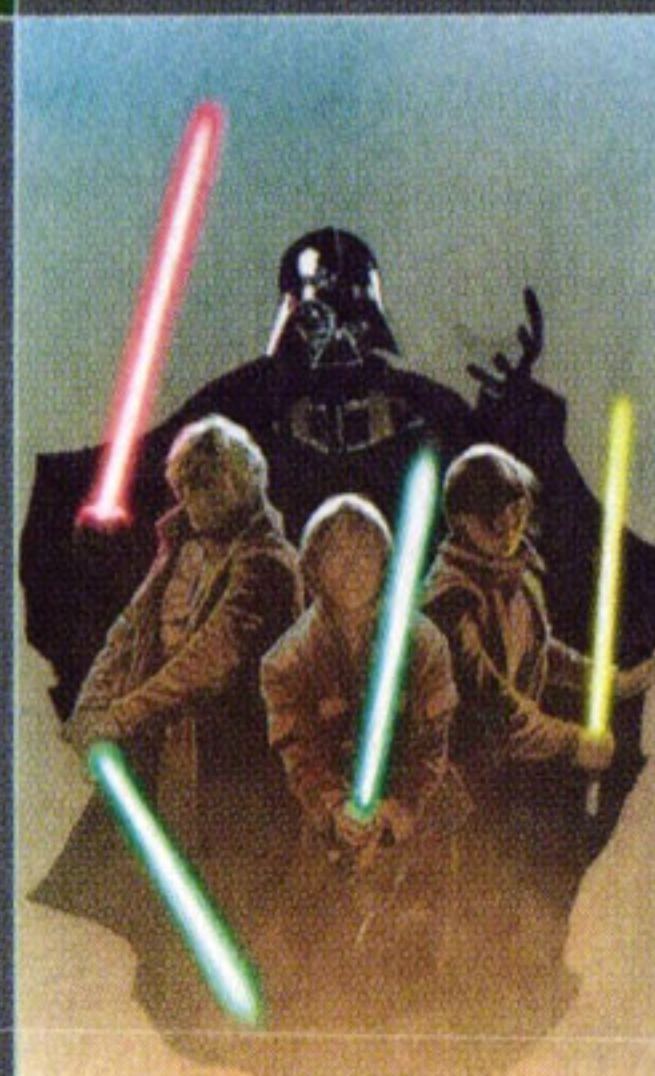
25
Rambo, one of the few movies that sounds better with "-ner" added to the end, makes its triumphant return to the silver screen. If successful, do you think Sly will finally make *Cliffhanger 2: Old Dude on a Cliff?*

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29

BEN REEVES DAY STRIKES BACK!
Justice. Honor. Bananas? These ideals are what Ben Reeves represents. According to Ben himself, there are three steps in celebrating this annual holiday: First, set the 100 meter dash record at your local grade school by running "pretty fast." Next, speak only in the Reevian dialect (basically, it sounds like a combination of Thor and Elmer Fudd). Lastly, drive Adam to work.

30
The PSP game Pursuit Force: Extreme Justice is the only game releasing on the 29th!
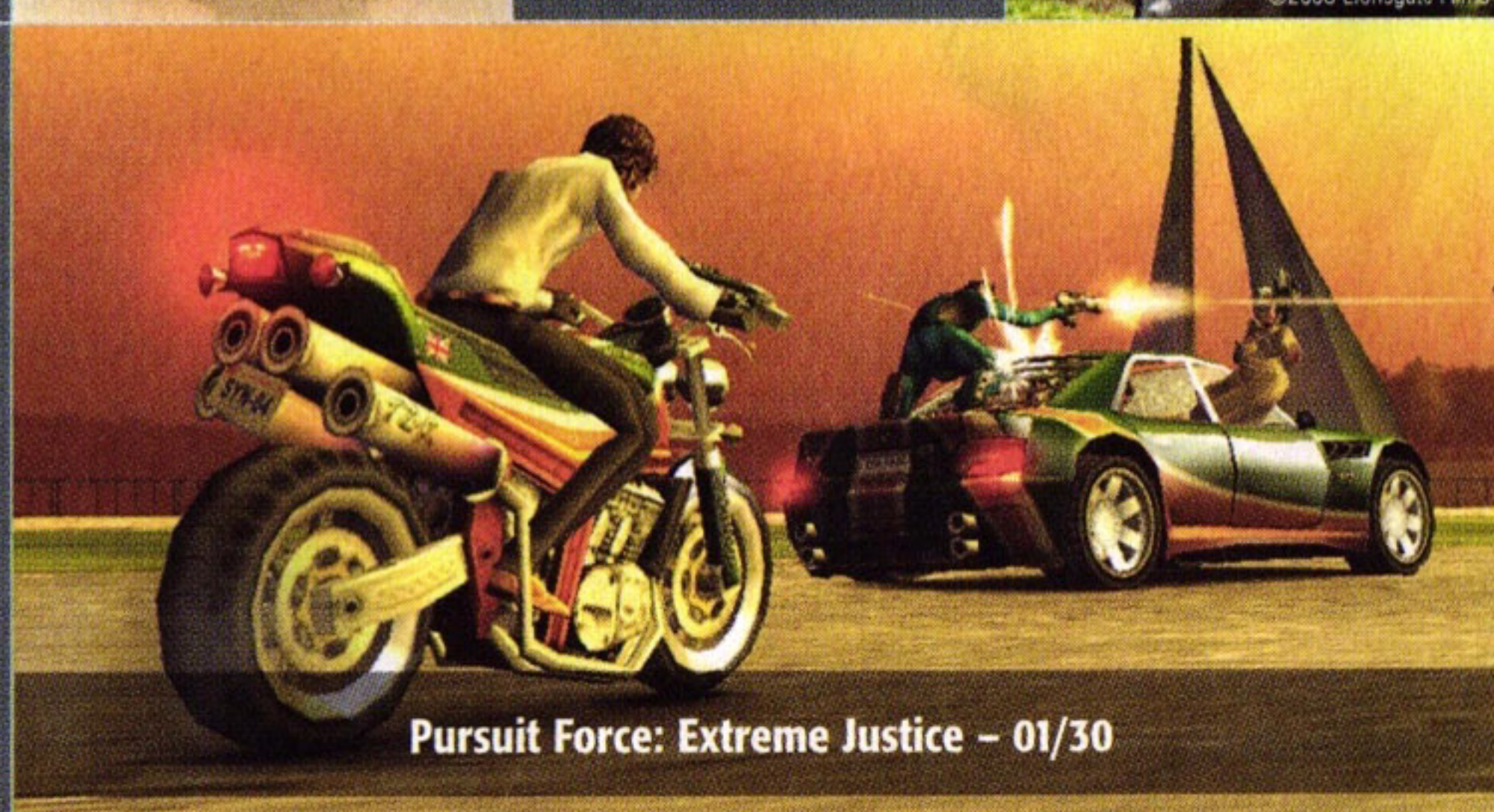
Pursuit Force: Extreme Justice – 01/30

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

THE FIGHT IS FAR FROM OVER

TIBERIUM

It first appeared many decades ago. No one knows where it came from. Back then, we were more curious than anything. But as it spread, as it mutated our green seas and green pastures into lifeless outlands of green crystals, we learned to feel otherwise. Some embraced it as a gift from God, treating it as a path to our ascension. Others learned to fear it after witnessing its destructive powers. Those in power called it a cancer doomed to destroy all life on Earth and eradicate the human population if we didn't act quickly. Their rivals viewed it as a unique, heaven-sent material capable of yielding great inventions. These disagreements tore apart the fabric of our society, bringing suffering, war, and death. But it didn't care; it just kept spreading. And then *they* came -- an alien race uninterested in diplomacy or cooperation; a civilization so dependent on this vague material that in order to sustain their way of life they invade other worlds to harvest it; a race wrestling with addiction to this extraterrestrial mineral, this plague, this lifeless mass that has forever altered the path of mankind. This...Tiberium.

It has been 11 years since the end of the Third Tiberium War. The Global Defense Initiative (GDI) successfully repelled the alien invaders from Earth. But the struggle for survival is far from over. The Brotherhood of Nod, despite the disappearance of their enigmatic leader, Kane, still clings to this cancerous resource like it's a gift from God, and the GDI still fights to contain the spread of Tiberium.

The invading civilization, known as the Scrin, may have departed, but not before they completed building an ominous, opaque tower atop the largest ecological disaster in the planet's history —the Tiberium covering the Mediterranean Sea off the coast of Italy. For 11 years, this impenetrable towering structure has remained under intense surveillance from all sides. While the GDI monitor it for any activity, the followers of Nod treat it as a religious site of the utmost importance, their Mecca. The devout, blinded by their faith, journey to the uninhabitable region, now classified as a red zone unfit for biological life, to wait for some sort of divine revelation.

Shortly after the end of the Third War, a forward battle commander who played a pivotal role in ending the war, Ricardo Vega, grew disillusioned with this constant struggle between the two human factions. He quit the army and traded in his gun for a hammer to rebuild cities ripped apart by wars. But his respite has hardly lasted long. Something is stirring underneath the massive monument left behind by the Scrin. The threat looms large enough that the GDI has convinced Ricardo Vega to reassume his post as a forward battle commander and take on a mission in the area surrounding the Scrin structure. Something is amiss, and mankind's struggle for survival may only be beginning…

ONE UNIVERSE TO RULE THEM ALL

When EA approached Chris Plummer and his EALA development team about creating a new tactical shooter two and a half years ago, it didn't take long for them to gravitate toward the Command & Conquer franchise.
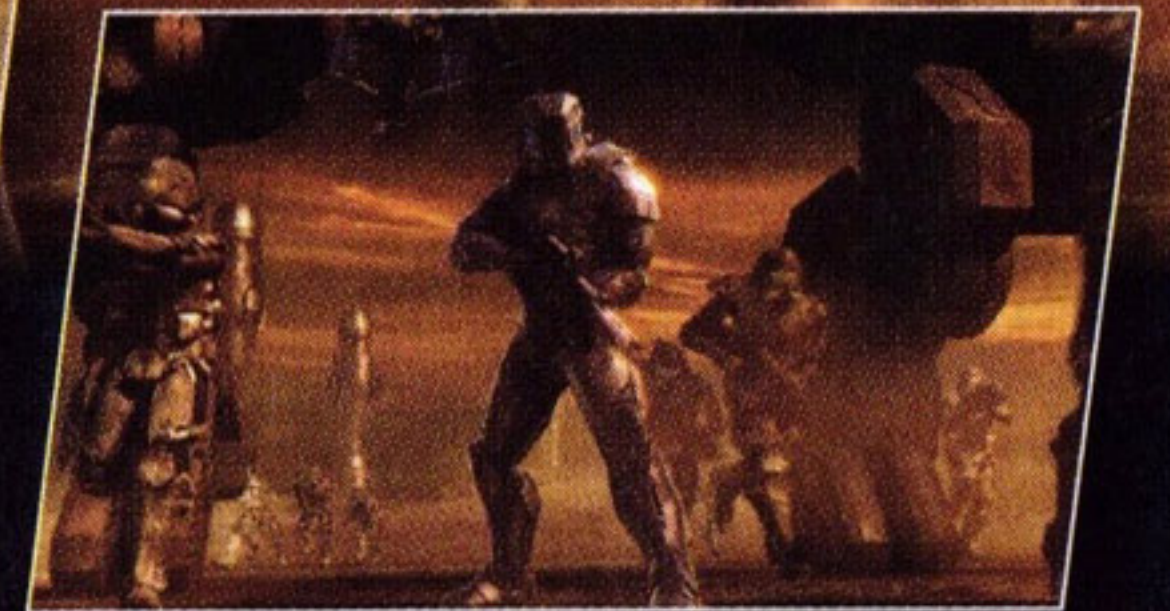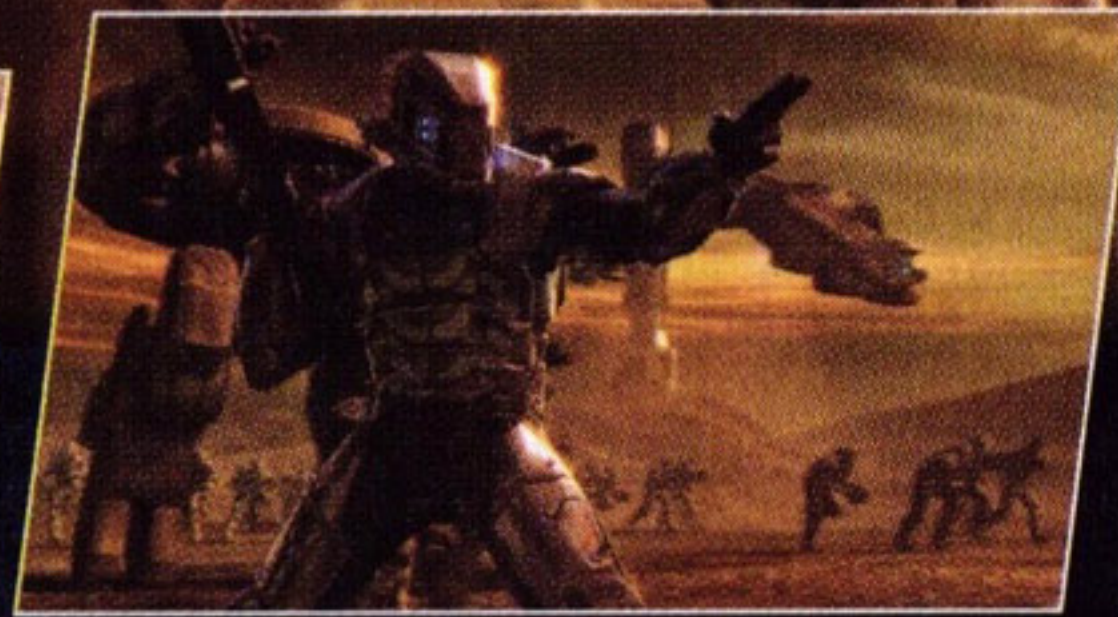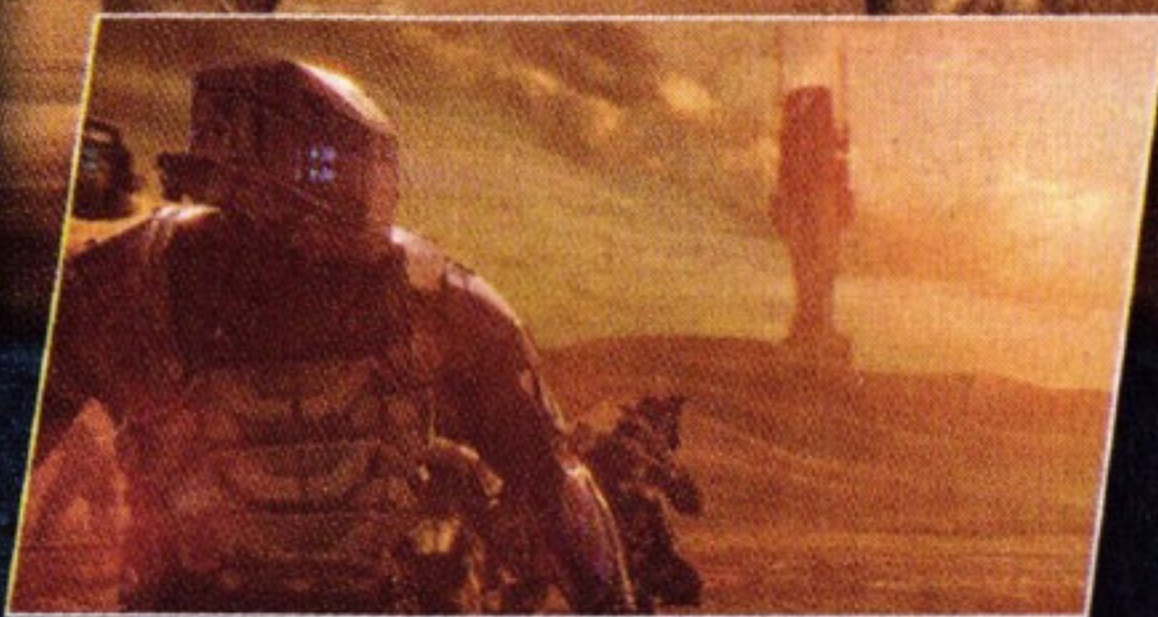
"We're big shooter fans and big sci-fi fans, so that's the place we wanted to start looking." says executive producer Chris Plummer. "Looking at new ideas and existing franchises in the company, the Tiberium universe immediately attracted us because it has such a legacy and heritage and there was some built-in depth there."

That depth springs from a critically acclaimed real-time strategy franchise that has spawned eight games and expansion packs since its debut in 1995. EA had already created a first-person shooter out of the franchise with the 2002 title Command & Conquer: Renegade, but the game failed to retain the trademark strategic gameplay elements of the series and garnered modest reviews and a lukewarm reception.

To help Tiberium break out as a unique game in the Command & Conquer series, EA knew the company needed to dive deeper into the series mythology.

"We're not Star Wars or Lord of the Rings, but we do aspire to be like that, to be a universe worthy of devotion," says Plummer. "We didn't try to rewrite the Tiberium universe, but looked for where the holes were and tried to patch them up."

The patching started with the Command & Conquer team creating a Tiberium "bible," a fictitious artifact from the future written by an archivist who had lived through the Tiberium wars. Not content with merely recapping past game plots, the bible dives so deeply into the C&C world that it even gets into the scientific explanation of Tiberium. EA hired scientists from MIT and Caltech to help the team understand how an extraterrestrial mineral like Tiberium would work as an energy resource, what would make it radioactive, how it could convert other matter into itself, how it would spread, what its life cycle would be like, and how military engineers could weaponize such a material. Why go to such lengths to understand a fictitious material?

"Tiberium is our Force, it's our One Ring to rule

them all, it's our Matrix," says Plummer.

The bible also fleshed out the extensive history of the game's three warring factions: the United Nations-esque Global Defense Initiative (GDI), the overzealous religious faction Brotherhood of Nod, and the Scrin, the mysterious new alien race introduced in Command & Conquer 3: Tiberium Wars.

But mythology is only one aspect to creating a believable universe. It must also have a distinct look and feel. "I want the world to be a place you want to spend time," says Plummer. "My favorite shooters are the ones where the world is a cool place. The gameplay has got to rock, but it also needs to feel like a believable fantasy that holds together with conviction."

To this end, EA hired a Hollywood veteran to hone the look and feel of Tiberium. Art director Steve Burg is no stranger to sci-fi, having worked on conceptual designs and visual effects for storied futuristic fran-
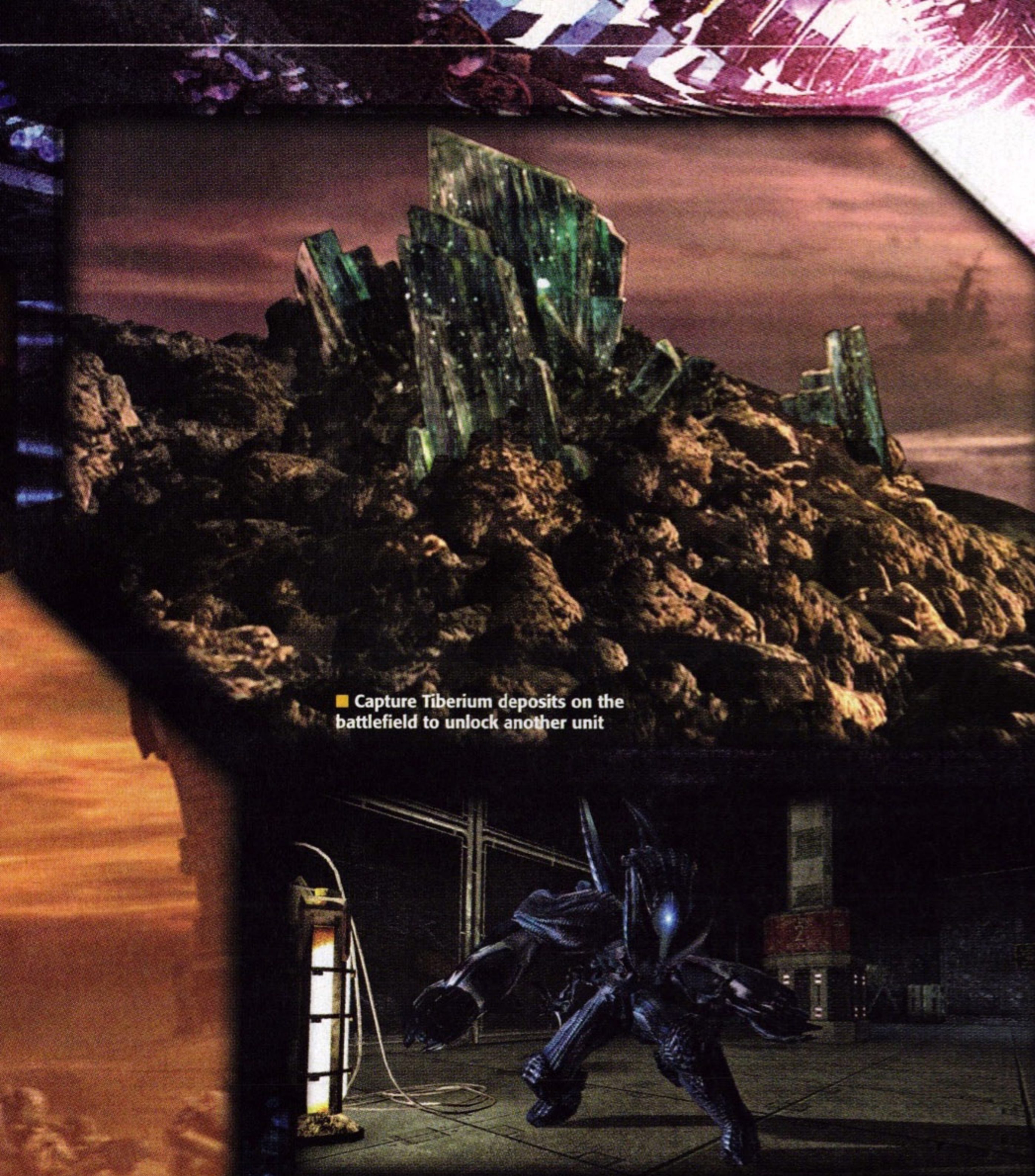
Capture Tiberium deposits on the battlefield to unlock another unit

Soldiers won't last long against turret emplacements. You're better off calling in an Orca or using an orbital slug
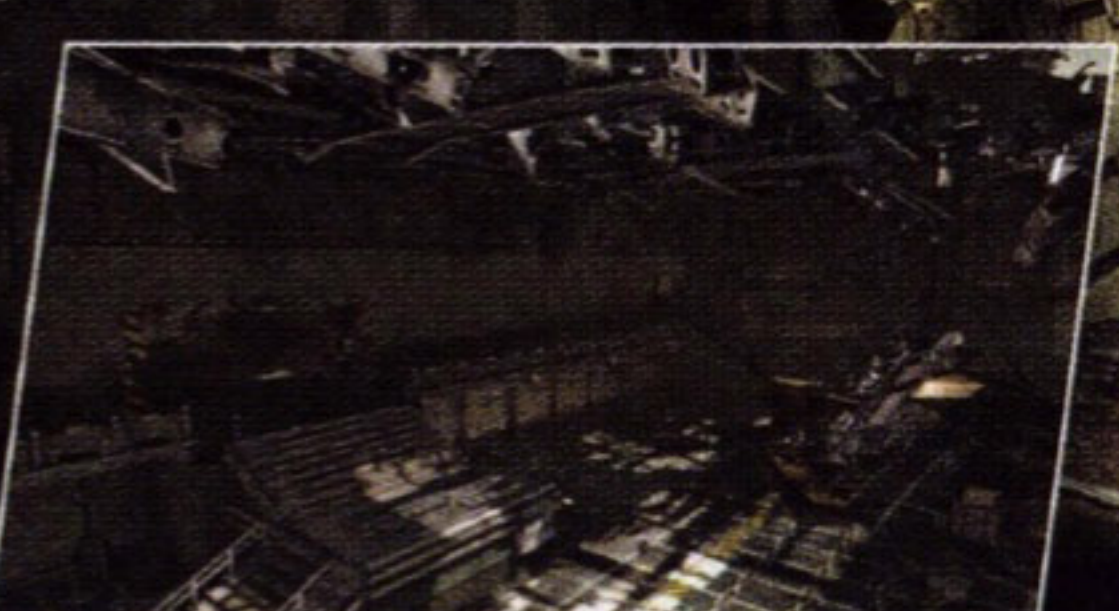
■ The MLS can take out multiple targets in one shot

MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE

Forget collecting weapons from fallen foes and comrades; a forward battle commander doesn't use scraps when it comes to scrapping with his enemies. In Tiberium, Ricardo Vega is armed with the GD-10, a transformative, four-in-one weapon capable of dealing punishment under any circumstance.

MAG RAIL – Consider this your de facto weapon setting. The magnetic rail operates as a standard futuristic assault rifle useful in most battle scenarios.

ENERGY CANNON – No arsenal is complete without a gun capable of dealing a massive blow from a long distance. This pseudo sniper rifle fires a focused energy beam that obliterates most anything it hits. Use too much and it will overheat.

GRENADE LAUNCHER – If you see a group of enemies huddled together, switch to this mode and spray some indirect fire in their direction. This is also the weapon of choice for fighting while using the jump jet, since accuracy isn't paramount.

MLS – The multi-launch system lets you target and lock onto multiple enemies. After painting your targets, pull the trigger and watch the fireworks; the gun unleashes a missile that splinters and takes out each victim with precision.

chises like *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, *Contact*, and *The Matrix*. With so many prominent sci-fi games on the market, finding a distinct visual style is paramount, and Tiberium succeeds by borrowing lightly from the masters and adding its own flair.

RECASTING A CLASSIC

Another challenge facing the development team was one of practicality—how do you combine the tried and true strategic gameplay of the Command & Conquer series with the intense, in-your-face combat of a first-person shooter?

"In the C&C universe you're always viewing the action from the 'presidential' level. You're very much removed so you can orchestrate large battles from 1,000 feet in the air. It's different when you're down there in the midst of the combat."

To demonstrate just how different the approach in Tiberium is, Plummer and creative director/game design director Dan Orzulak boot up the game and jump into a mission. We catch up with the game's protagonist, forward battle commander Ricardo Vega, as he's bound for the largest Tiberium harvesting, refining, and processing facility in the world, which is located near the Scrin tower in the red zone formerly known as the Mediterranean Sea. Securing this facility is imperative for refueling GDI capital ships. The first Rapid Assault and Intercept Deployment (R.A.I.D.) sent in to investigate the plant failed to report back, so Vega is sent in to finish the mission.

We join Vega as he moves solo through the refinement facility. Bodies of the Falcon R.A.I.D. lay bloodied on the ground surrounding the entrance – someone or something got here before the GDI did. Orzulak navigates Vega deftly from cover point to cover point, careful to stay out of the gaze of the Scrin Shrikes patrolling these hallways. The cover system is reminiscent to the one found in Rainbow Six — squeeze the left trigger to enter cover, and let go to resume normal movement. The Scrin enemies ahead are knee-high robots mainly responsible for cleaning up dead bodies after battles, but they also pack a punch of their own with blasters and the ability to self-destruct if you get too close. Orzulak moves around the corner, only to see a Shrike leaping toward him kamikaze-style ready to explode. He quickly activates Vega's energy shield with the left bumper to protect him from the blast. The

shield's power meter takes a hit upon impact, but the meter will refill over time. Orzulak moves Vega back into cover and surveys the room — at least four more Shrikes are ahead. He lines up a shot by leaning out from behind cover, and with the squeeze of the trigger the fight is on.

A group of Shrikes are huddled between cover points, so Vega switches his gun from its mag rail setting to the grenade launcher and wipes them out with one shot. Vega then uses his crafty jump-jet to move quickly to another cover position closer to the rest of the Shrikes. With the push of a button, Vega blasts high in the air, gaining a new perspective on the remaining enemies before landing again near a new cover point. After wiping out the last remaining ankle biters, he moves to the nearby terminal to unlock the airlock so he can move to the drop zone where his R.A.I.D. is scheduled to arrive. The door opens, only to reveal a large, imposing alien and another group of Shrikes. This beast — which looks part Covenant Elite, part Predator, and part Xenomorph — is known as an Archon, the Scrin's heavy warrior class. Vega empties a clip from his mag rail into the Archon, only to see the bullets repel and spray across the room; a force shield protects the Archon. Vega switches his gun to the energy cannon setting, which can unleash an incredibly destructive beam that brings death to most anything in its line of fire. Vega targets the Archon's soft spot and squeezes the trigger — toast. It's time to move out and rendezvous with the squad.

As Orzulak guides Vega into the wind-swept valley, two infantry squads are dropped and a battle immediately begins versus a group of Scrin Sidewinders—air units very capable of defeating infantry units. Orzulak selects the infantry unit in his view by clicking the right bumper and guides them to cover with another click of the bumper. Squad movement is entirely guided by the player. But even with the cover bonus, the moribund infantry is getting torn apart. As the Sidewinders eliminate the outclassed soldiers, Vega switches his gun to yet another setting, the MLS. He aims toward the sky and paints multiple air targets until they are locked on, squeezes the trigger, and watches his heat-seeking missile split into three and take out each Sidewinder. Ah, the joys of technology. The second squad moves up to engage a group of Archons, who have flushed the unit out by throwing energy grenades toward their

Marching your soldiers into the dense fog can be a dangerous proposition

Your Titan mechs are the most imposing offensive tool in your arsenal
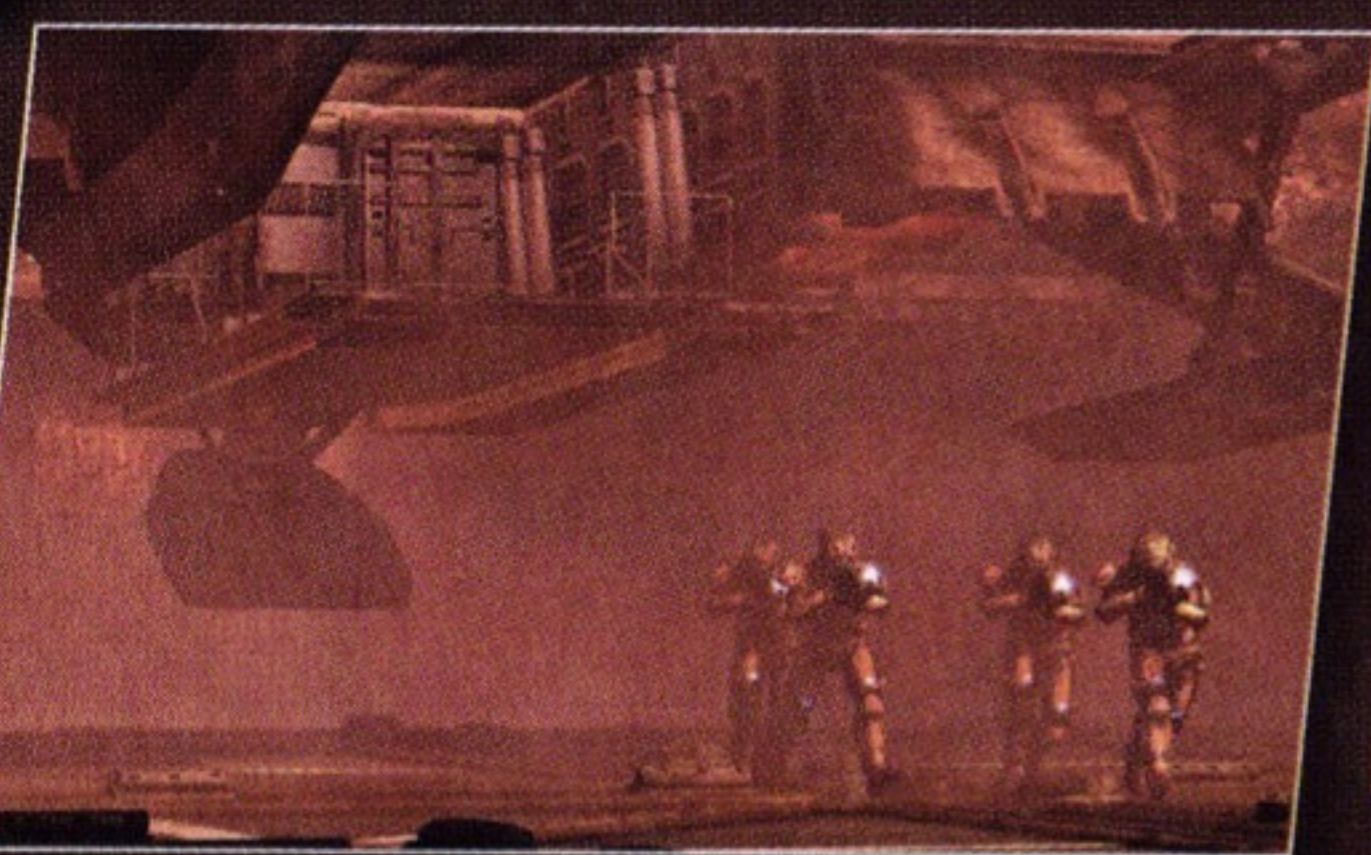
Position your team under cover to give them a fighting chance

Use your Titan as a mobile cover position for your troops when options are scarce

The Orcas rain death from above
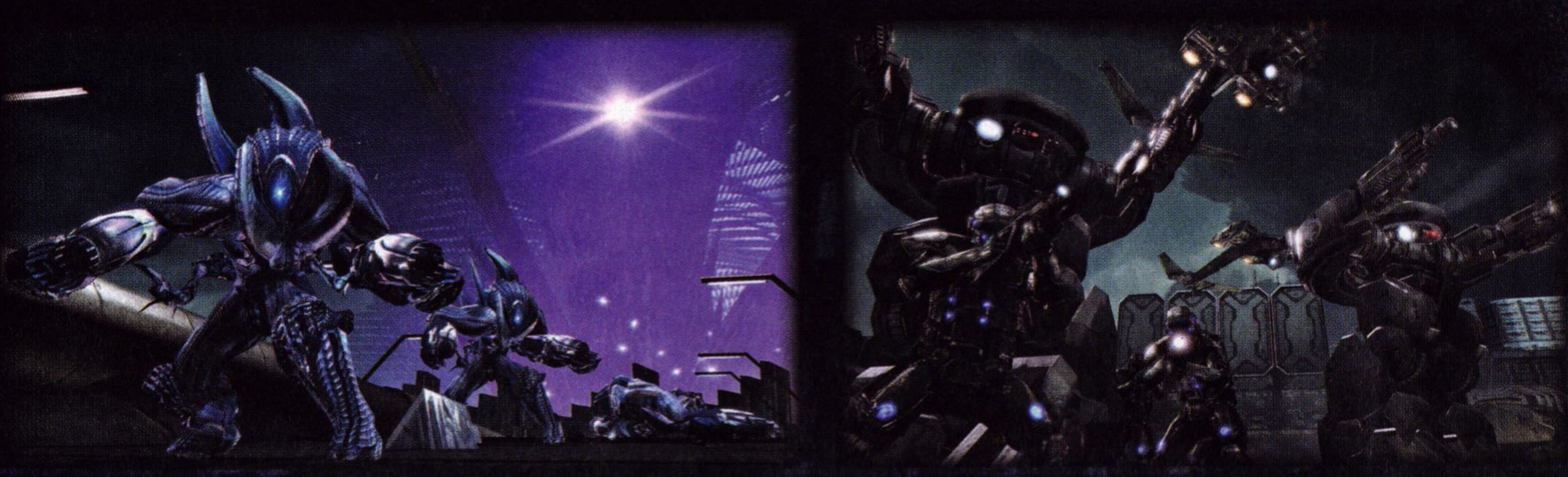
■ The Scrin Archons are the most formidable ground troops your R.A.I.D. will face

FANCY YOURSELF A GENERAL?

Forward battle commanders who master the single-player campaign will be immediately ready for player-versus-player online battles; all of the major gameplay elements of the single-player game apply directly to multiplayer. The sole multiplayer mode operates like Battlefield's famous conquest mode, which tasks you with gaining control of set points on the map—in this case, Tiberium fissures. The Battlefield ticker has been replaced with a timer, and time bonuses and penalties are dependent upon gaining and losing territory, respectively. Capture and hold enough positions on the map and the timer will start to count down against your enemy. If your opponent cannot swing the tide of the battle back into balance, the timer will continue to tick down to zero and victory will be yours. When commanders die, they will respawn at either the drop zone or a Tiberium capture point.

cover. Vega runs alongside his infantry unit to join the fight, which gives them a leadership bonus that increases their fighting skills. In a matter of seconds, Vega and his team dispatch the Archons.

No one likes to lose soldiers in a firefight, but in Tiberium it's not the end-all, be-all — every unit is disposable and can be replaced with units of your choice. If Sidewinders just smoked your infantry, you can call in a missile team more adept at fighting aerial enemies and turn the tide.

After laying waste to the Archons, Vega and his squad move toward a Tiberium deposit. These fissures are the key to the battlefield; each one you control unlocks another squad slot for your use. Vega informs his command of the Tiberium location, and within a matter of seconds, a Tiberium spike comes barreling down into the ground to begin tapping the liquid Tiberium reserves. At this point Vega can choose his new unit and add them to his burgeoning army.

SURGING WITH PURPOSE

Plummer hopes this delicate balance of frantic first-person action and real-time strategy will separate Tiberium from the other tactical shooters on the market.

While Brothers in Arms and Ghost Recon have allowed you to guide one or two squads through a battlefield, nothing has recreated the feeling of being a part of and controlling a large force. As the EALA team found, it's much harder to execute than it seems on paper. In the early stages of developing prototypes (see The Art of Iteration sidebar) the team realized that when you increased the battle size too much, players tend to stay in cover and order issues instead of engaging enemies directly. This wasn't the right balance for an action-oriented tactical shooter, so they scaled back and reiterated until they found the sweet spot.

To keep the action varied, Tiberium will scale each mission differently, as well. Depending on the objective, Vega may be fighting the Scrin solo, issuing commands to two squads in tight quarters, or controlling upwards of six squads or units during a large scale offensive.

When we rejoin Vega, he's moved out of the refinery and into a war-torn city. A familiar face to C&C vets, the fiery Commander Michael McNeil, informs Vega that all of the GDI Tiberium reserves have been depleted, and they believe the stores have been rerouted to this desolate city. Given the circumstances, Vega has a green light to call in the heavier military units to assist during

THE ART OF ITERATION

Since Tiberium is being treated as a new IP by Electronic Arts, the development team was given a much longer development cycle in order to create and test new gameplay ideas. During a visit with *Sims* creator Will Wright, executive producer Chris Plummer was encouraged to test core gameplay elements with simple board games before beginning production on a console. Plummer's team took the suggestion to heart and created several game prototypes, which were shown off to the entire EALA studio in a science fair-like fashion. One of the stars of the prototypes was a board game (see below) that helped the developers find the perfect balance between first-person action and tactical gameplay. The team then developed a low-fidelity version of the game to make sure the squad control and first-person combat worked together harmoniously. The Tiberium team passed the demo to fellow EALA employees and their feedback was used to fine-tune the gameplay.

this mission. In addition to the standard infantry and missile units, Vega now has access to the Titan, an imposing mech that uses ion cannons to dispatch of surrounding enemies, and the Orca, a fast and powerful gunship armed with missiles that excels at taking out ground installations.

Vega starts this battle with four squad slots, but no drop zone. He must secure a DZ on the map if he plans to receive any reinforcements. To start the fight, Orzulak chooses two mechs and two infantry units and begins his forward assault. He commands the units to advance through the rainy, decrepit streets until they encounter Scrin resistance. The street where the initial encounter begins offers no real cover, so Orzulak commands his Titans to take forward positions so the infantry can use them as cover. The R.A.I.D. advances in this fashion through the street and up to a bottleneck where the Scrin forces have control of the area. Here Orzulak calls up his Battle Control Uplink (BCU) to survey the battlefield. From this map, he can issue commands to his troops just like he was right next to the troops, which is handy when you need to split your forces.

Orzulak sees an alley and decides to break away from his R.A.I.D. to flank the enemy position. He successfully moves into an ideal position to eliminate the forces and takes out the unaware enemies who are pinned by the Titan suppressing fire.

After capturing a nearby Tiberium deposit, Orzulak must now make a tactical decision. He can either concentrate all his forces on an assault to capture a drop zone, or he must split his troops and advance while leaving a few units behind to protecting this Tiberium fissure. If the Scrin recapture this area, Vega will lose a squad slot. The soldiers occupying that slot on the battlefield won't automatically disappear, but if they fall in battle you cannot use the slot to call in reinforcements.

These are the kind of tough choices gamers can expect to find throughout the game. "We want the player to play the mission their way," says Plummer. "We want to give them the choice. Are you a turtler or a rusher? You can always keep your forces with you, but it will change the way the encounters play out. In nonlinear areas you're more likely to get counterattacked, flanked, or get hit by two forces

■ It's not until you watch a fully-assembled force march into battle that you get a real sense of how much power you wield

SYMPHONY OF DESTRUCTION

Bringing a battlefield to life is a lot more complicated than just sticking soldiers on the pitch and letting them have at it. To make the Tiberium war feel alive, EALA has invested heavily in state-of-the-art interactive audio/ visual technology unlike anything we've ever seen before. Most games use a canned audio background track that makes it sound like a battle is happening. But audio visionary Erik Kraber, best known for his amazing work on the Medal of Honor series, has put together a new audio system capable of mixing every single shot that's happening on the screen. To keep the player from feeling disoriented, a line of sight system will help focus the audio around Vega's actions and immediate threats.

On the visual side, EALA has created a new atmospheric technology layer that gives the Tiberium action a very realistic feeling. The particle system is so profound it allows explosions and their smoky aftereffects to be affected by other explosions. For instance, missile trails will cut through smoke clouds left from the smoldered remains of fallen buildings or enemies. The technology is also capable of creating heavy fog banks, which can create a feeling of claustrophobia and fear as your R.A.I.D. ventures into the unknown.
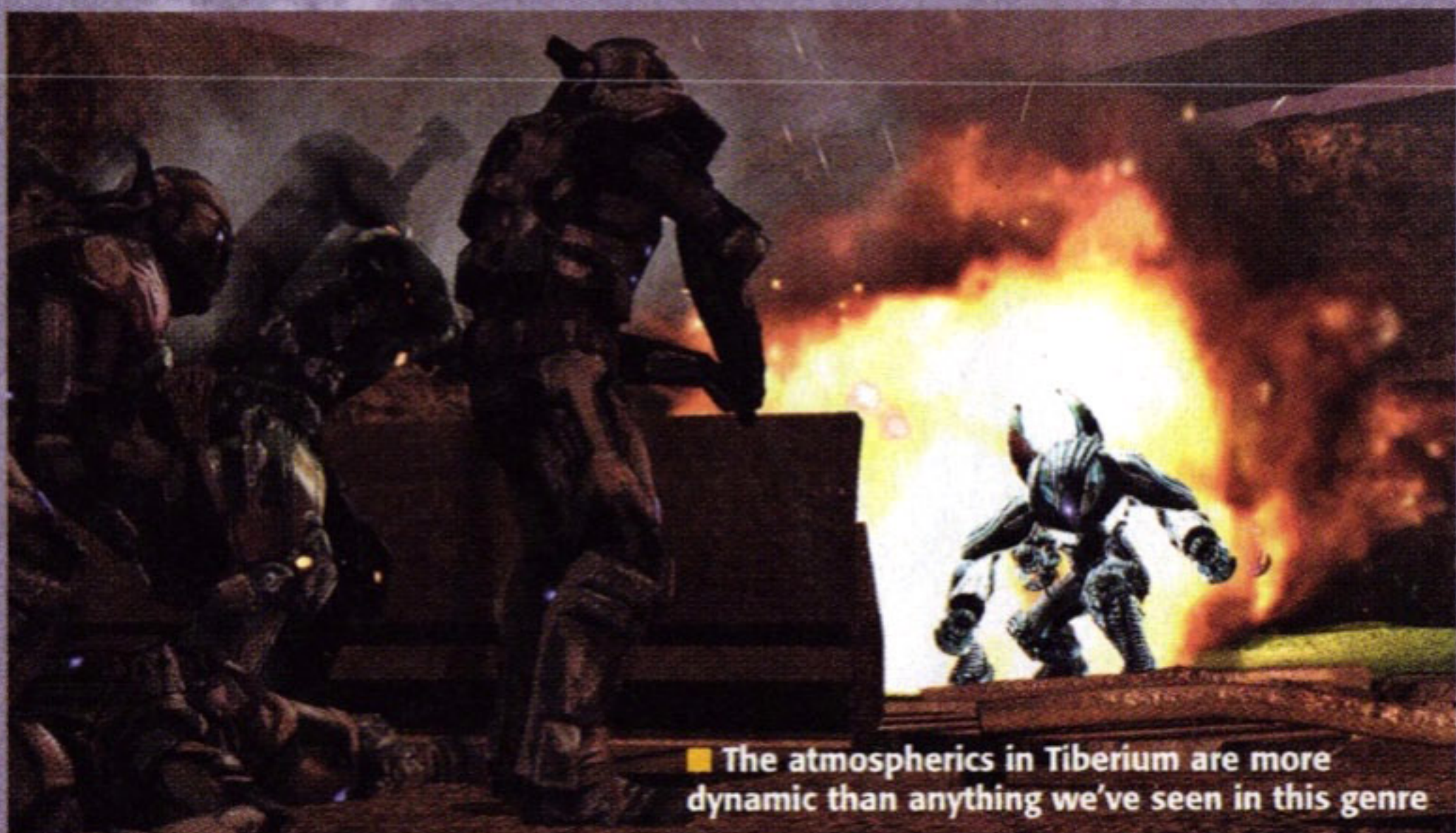
■ The atmospherics in Tiberium are more dynamic than anything we've seen in this genre

■ Something tells us that you'll be visiting that imposing tower in the distance before all is said and done
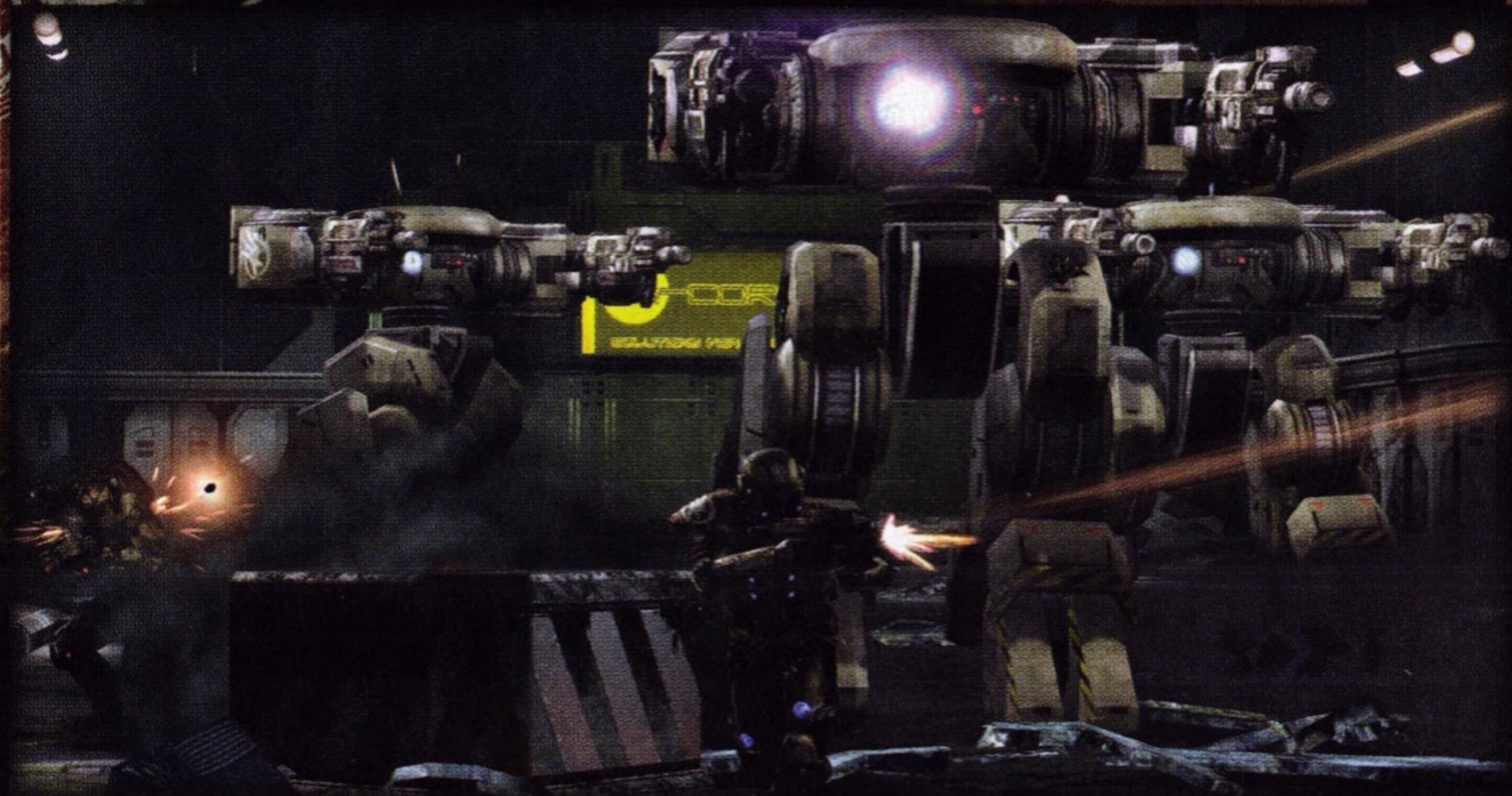
CONTINUED FROM PAGE 63

at once. If you split your forces up you have less firepower, but you'll block the aliens from being able to flank you."

Orzulak decides to bring the thunder on the drop zone, leaving the Tiberium spike unprotected. Upon approaching the clearance that would be ideal for a drop zone, the R.A.I.D. encounters a new problem: a towering Scrin turret that begins unleashing powerful energy balls toward the Titans. Orzulak opts to call in an orbital slug, a special attack that devastates anything in its target zone. The player controls the circumference of the attack, meaning you can either use it for a surgical strike against one specific target or a less accurate area attack that can pepper the many forces within the targeted zone. Once the slug eradicates the turret and Vega's units eliminate the remaining enemies, the drop zone becomes ready for action. Orzulak immediately calls in an Orca, anticipating more ground installations in the areas ahead.

Orzulak's choice to go guns blazing into the DZ proves to be short sighted, as the Scrin begin a counterattack on his forces while another group of Archons moves to attack the Tiberium spike. Orzulak places his squads into a defensive formation and leaves them to protect the DZ — he's going to save the spike by himself. Using the jump-jet to move quickly across the battlefield and back to the spike, Orzulak finds an elevated position perfect for picking off Scrin moving in to assault his precious resource installation.

Vega's tactical decision making has served him well thus far, but the battle is only beginning, and the Scrin tower still looms ominously over the battle pitch. Only time will tell what devious purposes this menacing structure serves, and if Vega has the tactical savvy and accurate shooting to keep our race afloat. ▪ ▪ ▪
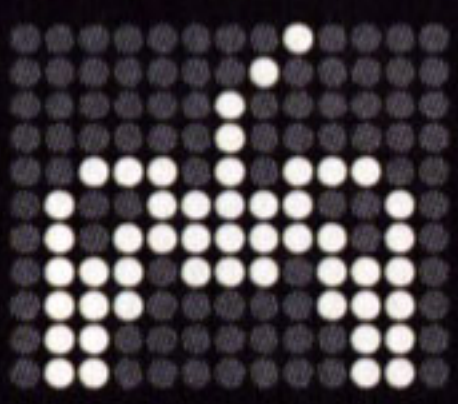
■ Most of the cover in the game is destroyable

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360 | PC

Frontlines: Fuel of War

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 32-PLAYER VIA PLAYSTATION NETWORK, XBOX LIVE, OR PC INTERNET OR LAN)
> **PUBLISHER** KAOS STUDIOS > **DEVELOPER** THQ > **RELEASE** FEBRUARY (XBOX 360, PC), APRIL (PS3)

BATTLE SANDBOX

127M

1 UNNAMED1

Frontlines is a toy box. That is the realization we quickly came to once we got our hands on the game. In Frontlines' bleak near-future story, war has erupted over the world's depleted natural resources. After playing around in the game's large open environments with its 60 vehicles and weapons, we don't care if the world ever invents an alternative fuel source.

Weapons are the highlight of many games, and Frontlines' toys shine like sunfire. Drones are a notable part of the game, and we got to play with plenty of them. We sent RC helicopters over the tops of buildings to perform recon, drove a little buggy under the tracks of a tank to blow it apart, and caused some devastation with a rocket-equipped mini tank.

The life-sized versions of these vehicles are also a joy to drive around. We took a fighter jet for a spin, then wasted several billion dollars of tax-payer money as we bailed out in mid-air, turning the plane into a smoldering heap on the side of a mountain. In multiplayer, more than one player will be able to hop into any of the vehicles and man extra guns or missile turrets.

Frontline's massive 32-player online battles also offer a nice progression system. In each match you can customize your character's role, specializing in ground support, EMP tech, drone tech, or air support. If you don't like your choice you can redeploy and change your setting, but if you stick to a role you will level up, gaining better abilities. If you choose air support, for example, you might start out with a single bomb drop, but eventually be able to command a gunship to rain down continuous fire anywhere on the map.

What impressed us most about the game, however, was the sound design. There are no ambient effects; every explosion and gun pop heard is the result of something going on in-game. What makes this even more impressive is that there are no lulls in the sound of battle; it always sounds like you are in the middle of an all-out war. Not only do all the weapons have a rich, realistic quality to them, but their sound also carries like it would in real life. If you call an air strike down somewhere off in the distance, you will see the explosions a few seconds before you hear their booms.

The single-player levels are like mini open worlds. We got to travel to a mix of different locales such as a desert oil refinery complete with black belching smoke stacks and a mountainside military base fitted with underground missile silos. One of the later levels even had us battling through a Russian metropolis nearly as large as Saints Row. Frontlines is already on our must-play list for 2008. Hopefully, we won't have to wait much longer to get our hands on the final build of this treasure chest of gaming fun. ■ ■ ■
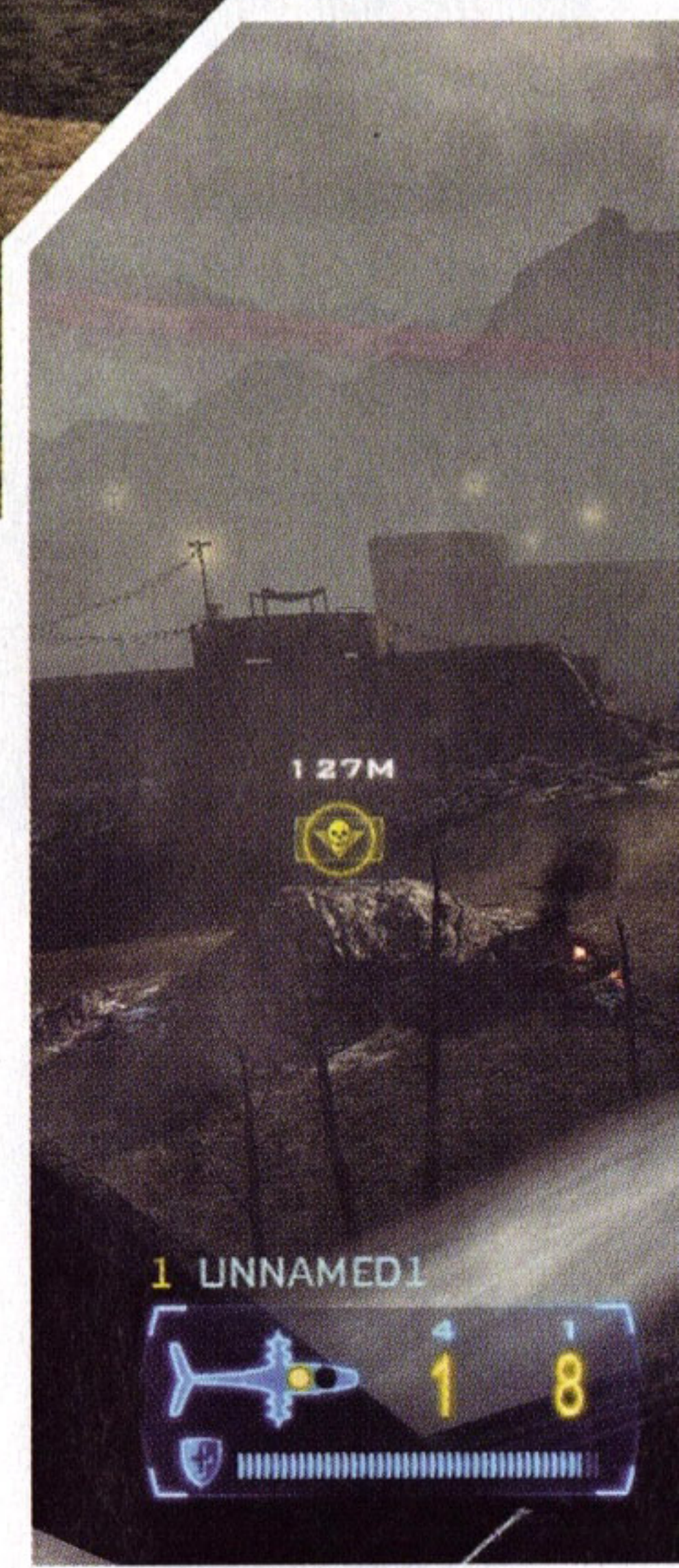
■ Calling in air strikes is just as fun as you'd think
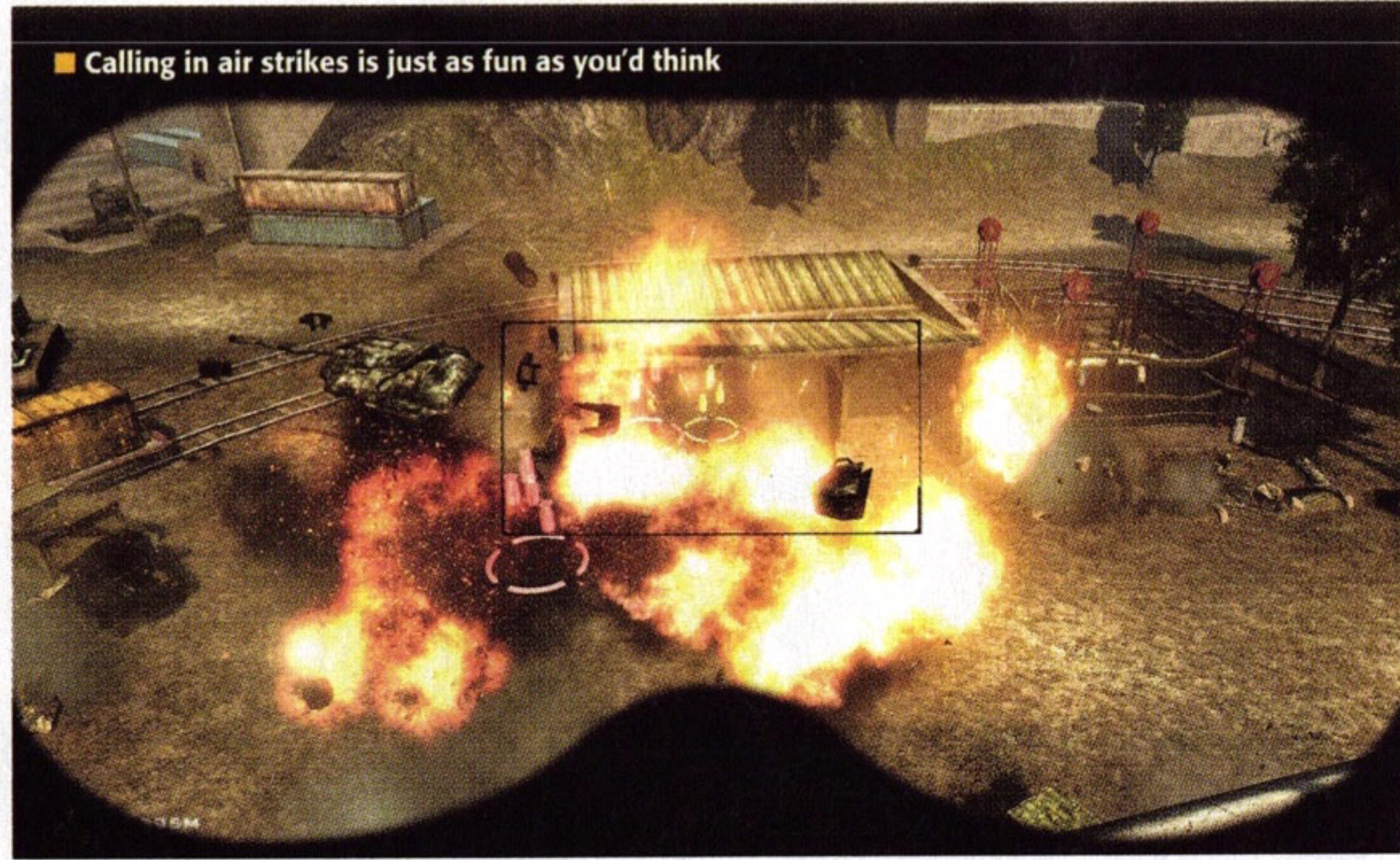
Not only will Frontlines provide 32-player online wars, but it's the only console game to run these big battles on dedicated servers. This means the action should be smooth and lag-free

Stealth copters can retract their weapons, making them impossible to lock onto

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360

The Last Remnant

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

THE NEXT BIG THING

The most influential games in the role-playing genre are tied to Square Enix. Whether it's Final Fantasy, Dragon Quest, or Kingdom Hearts, the publisher/developer has a stable of franchises with legions of loyal fans. Even so, it isn't enough to lean entirely on established series. That's where The Last Remnant comes in: It represents Square Enix's attempt to create a new property to stand alongside the established names.

In order to ensure this new adventure finds its audience, there are a handful of unconventional steps being taken with the development of The Last Remnant. It will release simultaneously in the U.S. and Japan, be multiplatform from day one, and utilize Epic's Unreal Engine 3 – all of which are deviations from standard practice for RPGs. Then again, a different kind of game necessitates a different approach.

Instead of using a traditional, individual-based battle system, The Last Remnant will have conflicts that occur on a larger scale. Players will issue commands to groups rather than individual characters as armies clash on battlefields with up to 70 units. "The player needs to have a grasp of how each union will function in such a large-scale battle," the development team tells us. "For that reason, the battle commands are simple enough for the player to get a hang of immediately." When one union engages another, you will enter commands in a turn-based format, but the kinds of orders vary depending on the context. According to the team: "The abilities of a union are comprised of the abilities of each individual unit in that union, making a unit's abilities a very important factor in battle."

Fighting isn't limited to passively inputting commands, though. Once you've given orders, special situations can arise that require you to respond to onscreen prompts. These sequences keep the player involved in combat on the unit level while still allowing them to keep the big picture in focus.

One of the important factors that influence the battle on both sides is morale. Your choices and those of your foes will affect which side has the most morale, which will in turn affect other available actions. As morale increases, units become more useful during battle. As morale decreases, certain units can even become a burden.

While it's great to know more about how the game will play, most of the plot is still being closely guarded. What exactly are the Remnants, and what makes them so powerful? When asked why people are willing to go to war to control the Remnants, one member of the dev team laughed, "You will have to wait and play the game to find out!" It looks like we won't have the answers we want until late 2008. ■ ■ ■

■ This part looks like it should totally be in slo-mo

■ Rush Sykes is the main character, though he enlists several allies along the way

■ The four-armed creature is a member of the cat-like Sovanni race
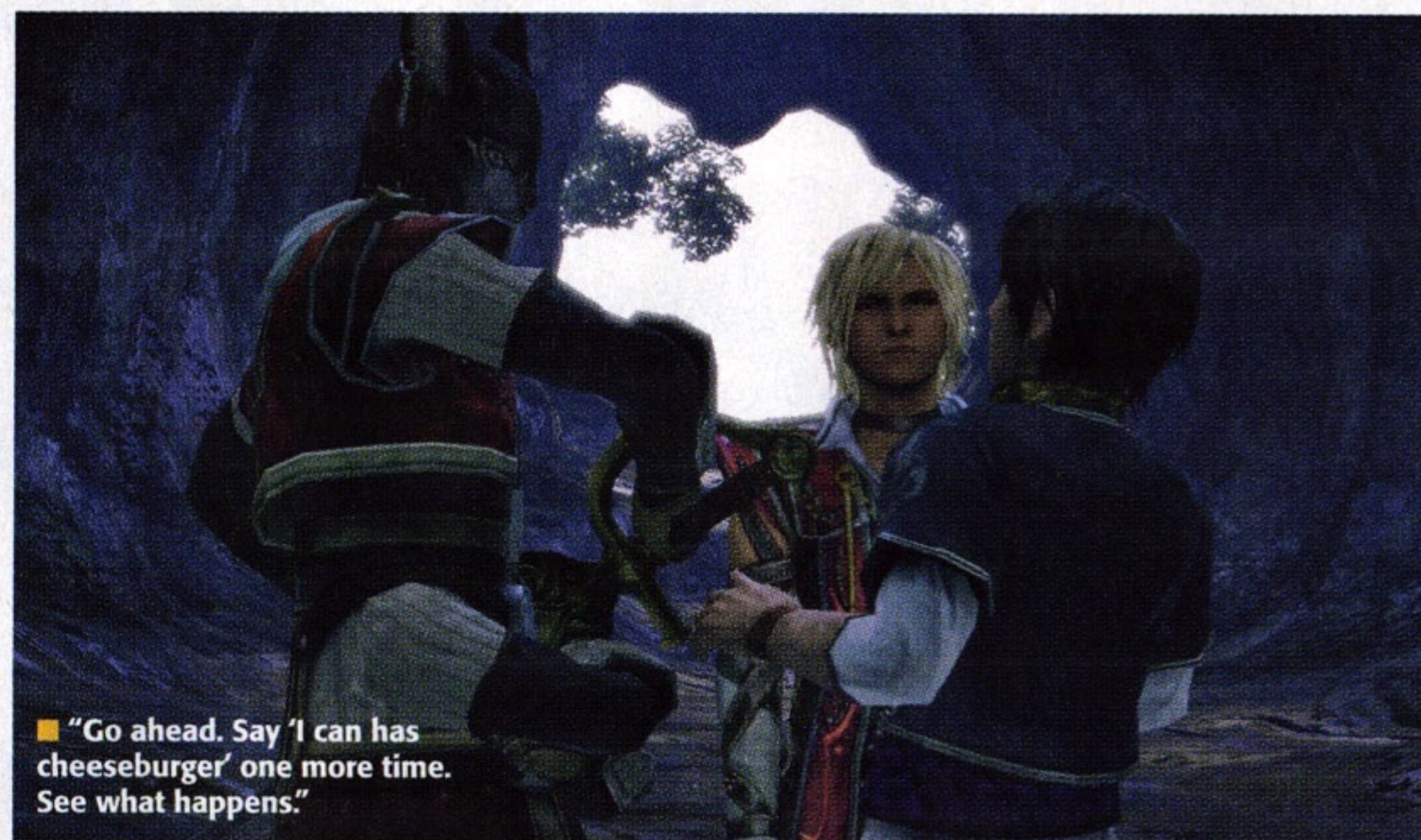
■ "Go ahead. Say 'I can has cheeseburger' one more time. See what happens."

■ Some Remnants, like this sword, are enormous structures. Others are smaller and can be wielded, and some may even be alive

■ David sometimes wears a high-tech headpiece that appears to be tied to his ability to use the cannon Remnant Gae Bolg

Reinforced!

32 CHAIN

Allies   MORALE   Enemies

■ The conditions on the battlefield are constantly in motion
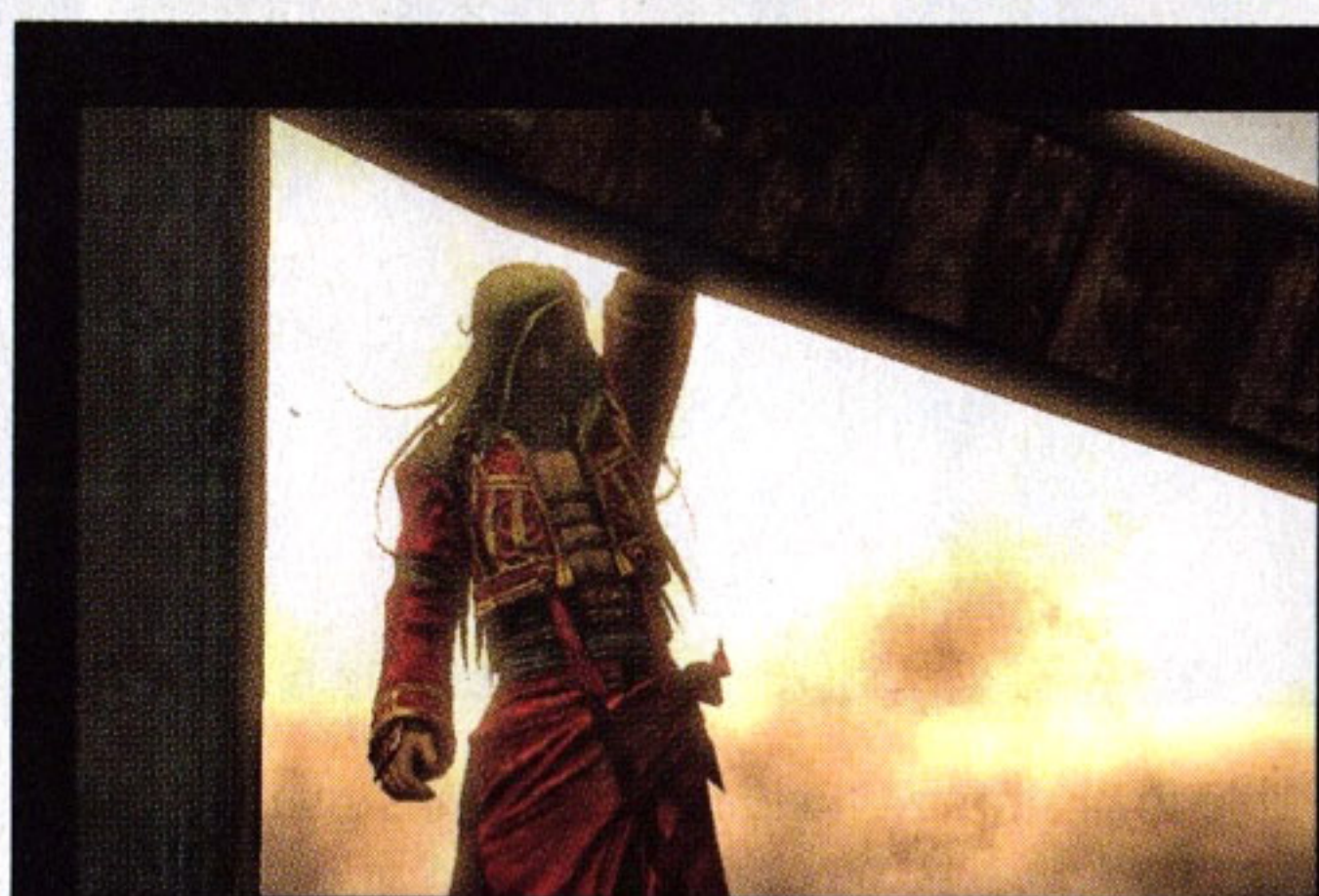
THE DARK FIGURE

The enigmatic character called The Conqueror, who we had previously thought to be a playable character, is actually just a very prominent figure in the story. Players may only get hands-on time with Rush and his companions, but that doesn't make the imposing Conqueror any less cool. He's still ruthlessly hunting down Remnants for some secret purpose, and crushing those who stand in his way. After all, that red cloak was initially white.

■ In the upper-left you can see upcoming actions and plan accordingly

Allies   MORALE   Enemies

ACTION
Dancing Sword
A Headbutt

15 CHAIN

27

34

104 TOTAL DAMAGE
Dead lock
184 TOTAL DAMAGE

ACTIVE UNION
2
HP 519
AP 7   29
Torgal Union

TARGET UNION
4
HP
Homunculus Union

EndWar

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER STRATEGY (UP TO 12-PLAYER VIA PLAYSTATION NETWORK OR XBOX LIVE)
> **PUBLISHER** UBISOFT > **DEVELOPER** UBISOFT SHANGHAI > **RELEASE** MARCH

THE END IS NEAR

■ Voice recognition has been spotty in the past, but creative director Michael de Plater is confident that Ubisoft's advanced voice commands will be problem free. "We're using the best software and optimizing it to hell and back right through development, and we're dedicating plenty of hardware processing to the voice recognition to make sure it's 100 percent."

■ War is always a little easier to deal with when you are with a friend, and to that end, players won't have to tackle the campaign alone. "The easiest way is to think of co-op is like a sports game," says de Plater. "Each army is like a team on the field. If you are playing co-op then you split control of the team."

GLOBAL STAKES

Anyone who dares venture onto the online battlefield will participate in an expansive virtual World War III. Europe and the U.S. will be divided into 40 battlefields, and players will play along these frontlines. At the end of the day, Ubisoft will add up the result for every match played online and whichever side has more wins will push their frontline forward. The Internet is already a battleground, but we look forward to seeing what kind of new conflicts emerge once the game ships.

Strategy games have generally been challenging to pull off on consoles, but Michael de Plater, creative director for EndWar, thinks Ubisoft knows how to get past that problem. "We're not working around it, we're cutting right through. We think that there's loads of great strategy in console games, from the tactics and squad management of Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter to the play calling and team management in Madden to the strategy of Pikmin. Players seem to like using their brains as well as their trigger fingers."

In case you're not familiar with EndWar, its story could easily be ripped out of some future newspaper headlines. America and Europe band together to build a global missile defense system that essentially quells any threat of nuclear warfare. "Unfortunately," explains de Plater, "the nukes have been the only thing keeping superpowers away from each other's throats for 70 years. In less than a decade after the Shield goes up, the world is on fire with the most apocalyptic global war in history."

Players will take control of entire armies. Every platoon will have its own name, history, and call sign. Troops who survive several battles will quickly become veterans who perform better in battle. Not only will players be able to customize their armies with insignia and mottos, but they will have about 300 equipment upgrades to experiment with. Cool tech such as unmanned aerial vehicles, exoskeletons that increase soldiers' carrying capacity, and active camouflage are just some of the tools that should help keep the action exciting.

So far the game has sounded great, and we can't wait to get our hands on it to see if it lives up to de Plater's lofty expectations. "EndWar is the game that the CG intros and cutscenes of other strategy games have made you dream about for the last 10 years." ■ ■ ■

■ Missions will take place all over the world. There will be Special Forces raids on enemy air bases, massive sieges in capitals like Washington, and full scale assaults where forces are airlifted into battle

■ "No way! I can't believe we actually hit one"

■ The game features seven core unit types including light infantry, riflemen, special forces, snipers, heavy cavalry like tanks, and helicopter gunships

ROLE CALL

Michael de Plater helps us break down the differences between the game's three forces.

The Joint Strike Force
"These are the U.S. military's elite, next-generation rapid reaction force based on the Future Combat System. That means they are light, fast, and lethal. From the experience in Iraq the U.S. has also developed the world's most advanced robotic soldier systems to keep real soldiers alive."

The European Enforcer Corps
"Basically they keep the peace by killing everything that threatens it. Because they have evolved from peacekeeping assignments they were armed with really advanced 'non-lethal' weapons such as microwaves, subsonic acoustic weapons, and electronic warfare. Of course, when World War III goes apocalyptic all these 'non-lethal' weapons are turned up to 11 and made very lethal.

The Russian Spetsnaz Alpha Brigades
"They aren't so high tech, but they are the veterans and survivors of the Motherland's ugliest wars over the last 30 years. They've seen things that would make a junkyard dog vomit. Also Russia isn't so worried about rapidly air lifting troops across the globe, so they can make their units heavier."

Once Travis reaches rank 9, you will be able to customize his weapons

Wii

No More Heroes

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** UBISOFT > **DEVELOPER** GRASSHOPPER MANUFACTURE
> **RELEASE** FEBRUARY

TEN LITTLE ASSASSINS

If you have played Killer 7, you know that designer Goichi Suda (also known as Suda51) is capable of creating an experience unlike anything else on the market. Exploring dark themes through means that resembled experimental films more than games, Killer 7 challenged gamers' conceptions of what a video game can be. The next project from Suda's Grasshopper Manufacture, No More Heroes, is poised to be another pleasant departure from the norm, though with a focus on gameplay that many felt Killer 7 lacked.

Players control aspiring assassin Travis Touchdown, a resident of the fictional town of Santa Destroy. In order to climb the ranks, Travis needs to take down 10 other assassins using his favorite weapon: an energy sword. In fact, the prominence of swordplay in No More Heroes is why the game is a Wii exclusive.

"The importance of the beam katana in No More Heroes was one key reason [I chose the Wii]," Suda tells us. "Furthermore, Wada-san [NMH's executive producer] and I predicted that the Wii would be lacking real action games. Therefore, we pushed this project through and began production with no hesitation, figuring that gamers with a Wii would crave a true action game."

While the words "sword" and "Wii" immediately trigger notions of arm-flailing gameplay, Suda deliberately took a different approach to how players direct Travis' actions. The A button slashes the katana and the nunchuk handles movement, though certain moves and sequences will rely on using motion and positioning of the remote.

"I want to recreate the feeling of slashing something using the Wii remote," Suda states. "I was set on creating something that felt natural, direct, and fun to control. The hardest part was the lack of buttons, so it felt like I was making a Super Nintendo title at times, sort of a 'back to basics' feel." This could also explain why several elements of the HUD have a distinctly old-school, pixilated flavor.

Even though you take down your competitors in heated battles, combat is only one element of No More Heroes' gameplay. The only way to

The violence is stylized, but the game's tone is not nearly as grim as in Killer 7

advance the story is by killing assassins, but there are other things to occupy your time. Using open-world structures for players to explore the world surrounding Travis Touchdown, the game encourages you to pick up various missions around the city. "Travis can do some side jobs, such as grass mowing or garbage collection," explains Suda. "Travis has to start at the bottom of the ladder and work his way up."

Those tasks, along with many of the location and character names, might seem a little silly. Don't worry – it's not an accident or an oversight. The game intentionally embraces a more irreverent atmosphere. "The tone of No More Heroes is completely different from Killer 7," clarifies Suda. "It is really lighthearted and even a little bit vulgar."

The bizarre cocktail of violence, style, and off-beat humor makes No More Heroes one of the titles to keep on your radar. Thankfully, you won't have to stay on the lookout very long; you and Travis Touchdown will be slicing things up in February. ■ ■ ■

■ The bar on the right indicates the beam katana's energy level. When it's low, you need to shake the remote up and down to recharge

■ "The game is completely open from the beginning," says Suda. "As you advance through the story, new shops will open, such as a clothing store or a gym where you can train and get stronger."

■ When you aren't fighting, you can roam the city of Santa Destroy and perform side missions
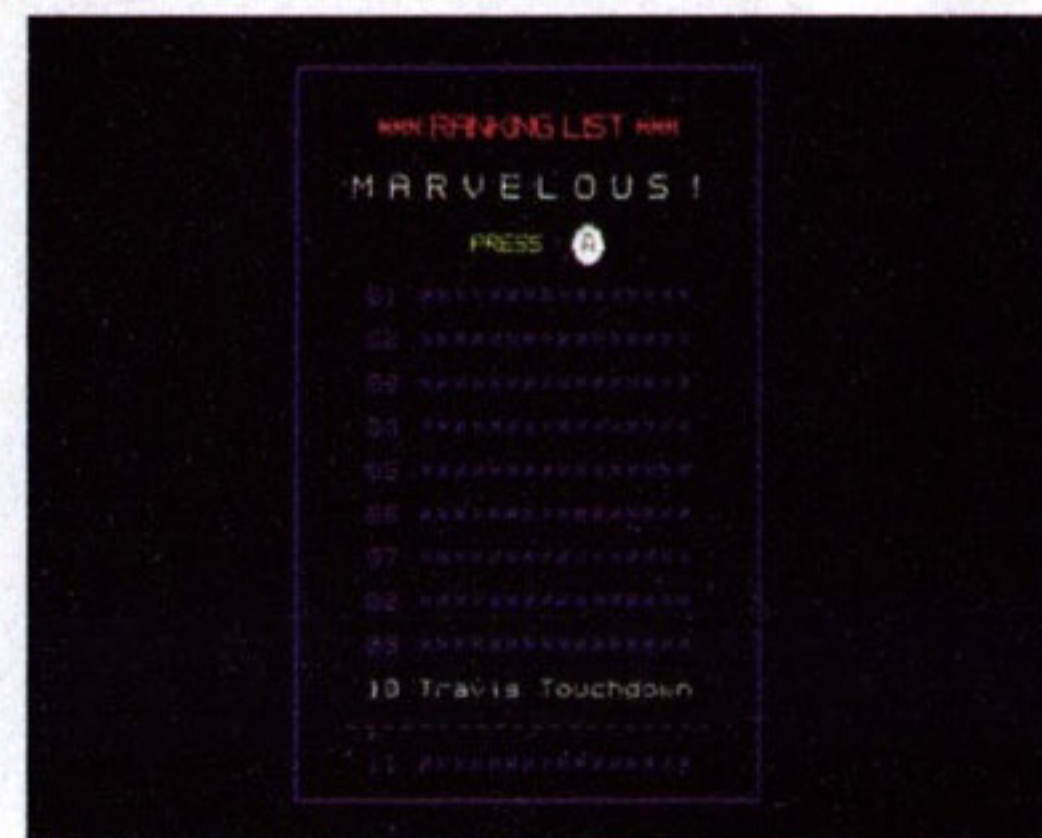
■ Your current assassin ranking is displayed in classic arcade high-score fashion

■ One of the coolest creatures in the game is the Lurker, a fictional combination of a dinosaur and jungle cat. "It looks like an incredibly quick, extremely agile Komodo Dragon," says Holmes. "They are incredibly scary when faced in large packs."

UNLIMITED ENABLED

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360 | PC

Turok

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 16-PLAYER VIA PLAYSTATION NETWORK, XBOX LIVE, PC INTERNET OR LAN)
> **PUBLISHER** TOUCHSTONE > **DEVELOPER** PROPAGANDA GAMES > **RELEASE** FEBRUARY

REBOOT

What's scarier than getting stranded on an alien planet inhabited by cold-blooded predators looking to make you their next meal? That's one of the questions the team at Propaganda Games asked themselves while working on the latest Turok. "We wanted the whole experience to have a nightmarish quality to it," says Josh Holmes, vice president and general manager of Propaganda games, the new development studio in charge of the Turok franchise. It's been a long time since we've seen a Turok worthy of the name, but Propaganda believes it can breathe new life back into the classic license.

One area where fans will immediately notice some changes is in the story. "We have been influenced by films like *Pitch Black*, *Aliens*, and *Predator*," says Holmes. Protagonist Joseph Turok is a member of a futuristic black ops force called Wolf Pack. Turok was dishonorably

■ Not only will the game have full multiplayer options, it will also include four-player co-op

■ You'll face this bad boy a few times, but you won't always be able to kill him

■ The game will be filled with all manner of beasts, from friendly herbivores, to aggressive carnivores and giant insects. Guess what kind this is

discharged, but has been brought back in an advisory role during a mission to hunt down his old squad leader. After crash landing on an alien world, Turok's military mission quickly turns into a battle for survival in a violent climate.

However, Propaganda wants to stay true to what made the early games great. "The weapons have always been a highlight of past Turok games," says Holmes. "We wanted to deliver the same feeling of raw firepower and inventive functions, but still keep them feeling believable." One of the cooler weapons we got to see firsthand was the minigun, which is capable of tearing through enemies with its primary fire alone. Its secondary fire allows it to be deployed as an auto-turret, making it a great choice for setting up defensible positions. Turok also comes equipped with a knife, which he can use to perform stealth kills or fight off any clingy dinos. From what we've seen, Turok looks like a promising title, but we won't know if it all comes together until late February. ■ ■ ■

ECOSYSTEM

The world of Turok will feel a little more alive due to an advanced in-game ecosystem. "Each of the creatures on the planet has its own set of instinctual behaviors that determines how it interacts with the world around it," explains Holmes. "Many of the species on the planet are highly territorial and will protect their hunting grounds and nesting areas from intruders." Best of all, Turok will be able to use this system to his advantage. If he destroys an egg nest, for example, he will draw out the angry mother whom he can lure over to a group of human opponents. If he's feeling particularly nasty, he can even attach sticky bombs to the dinosaur before it gets to the group, then detonate the explosives, taking out several enemies at once.

FRIENDS AREN'T DISPOSABLE.
If your friend is doing drugs or drinking, bring them back.
ABOVETHEINFLUENCE.COM

■ Crashes look better than ever, but perennial favorite Crash mode is nowhere to be found

Burnout Paradise

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER RACING (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA PLAYSTATION NETWORK OR XBOX LIVE) > **PUBLISHER** ELECTRONIC ARTS
> **DEVELOPER** EA CRITERION > **RELEASE** JANUARY 22

TOO OPEN?

We're all for open-world playgrounds, but Paradise has us wondering if that formula is the right choice for the frantic Burnout franchise. That's not to say that the game is in bad shape – far from it. After an extensive hands-on play session of a near-final game build, we noticed loads of cool new ideas that are making this installment bigger than ever before. Simultaneously, the need to wrap everything around the open world concept has left some gaping holes in the otherwise solid gameplay.

The most important element of Burnout is definitely intact – the intense sense of speed and out-of-control action. In particular, the physics modeling of crashes looks phenomenal, from the way cars flip and corkscrew down

the road after a nasty collision to the remarkable metal deformation when slamming into a wall. From the moment you press start, the game throws you into the action, constantly introducing new concepts as you drive through the open urban landscape of Paradise City. Most intersections have events tied to them that can be triggered with a quick button press as you drive through, from standard races to the newly added stunt challenges.

We were more than a little sad to see that Criterion has dropped the traditional Crash mode in favor of a more generic "Showtime" mode in order to fit with the open world idea. Here, players can start a crash at any point on the street, which sends them bouncing down the road
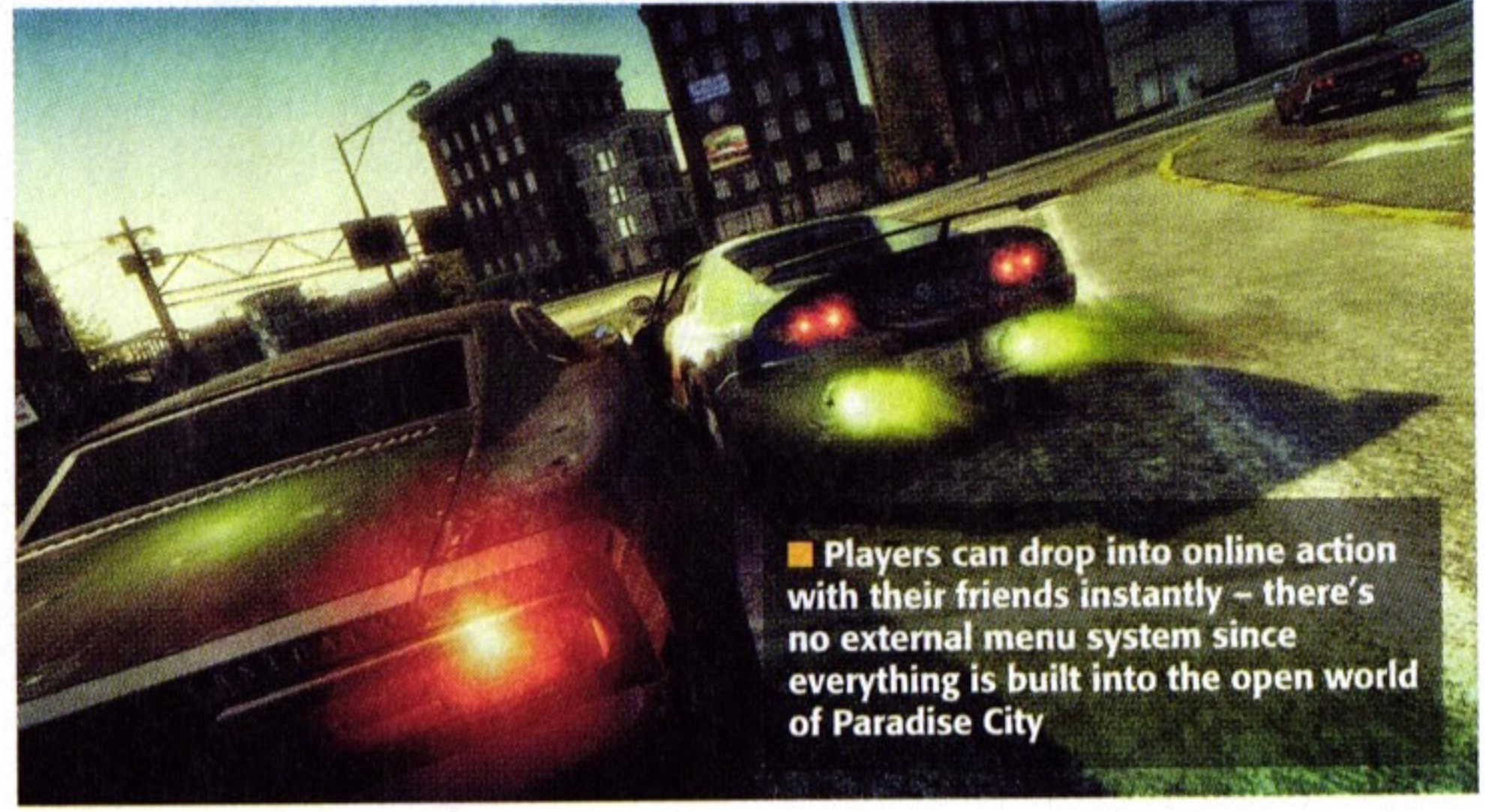
■ Players can drop into online action with their friends instantly – there's no external menu system since everything is built into the open world of Paradise City

trying to hit as many cars as possible. It's a lot of fun, but we miss the specified medal goals of preset events.

Individual races frequently start in the middle of the city and send you zooming off to one of eight far edges of the map. While these races are as explosive as ever, they often mean you'll need to drive all the way back down into the city to find your next big event. Even after you've unlocked an event, there's no way to jump straight to it from anywhere on the map; you'll need to manually drive to the start location. Another strange change to the gameplay formula comes from the lack of specified courses. While it's awesome to be able to pick your own route and shortcuts to a given endpoint, it also means that it's awfully easy to make a wrong turn unless you're keeping your eye on the map – a real challenge when you're so glued to the split second decisions of a Burnout race.

Online play is seamless, as you can join up with friends easily to begin racing in groups. Once you find each other on the big map, you can manually set up competitive races to any point in the city, or cooperate on special Freeburn challenge events that are scattered liberally through the world.

There's a tension of opposites at play in Burnout Paradise, where the great new gameplay of the open world framework seem to have beaten down some of our favorite ideas from earlier installments. Even so, the game looks and plays remarkably well in the brief time we've had with it, so this may be one of those instances where players will need to suck it up and accept some major changes to their favorite racer. ■ ■ ■

■ While some games have you unlock new cars only by winning races, this game adds the option to acquire vehicles by smashing them on the open road

Monsters might find weapons of their own to use against you in battle
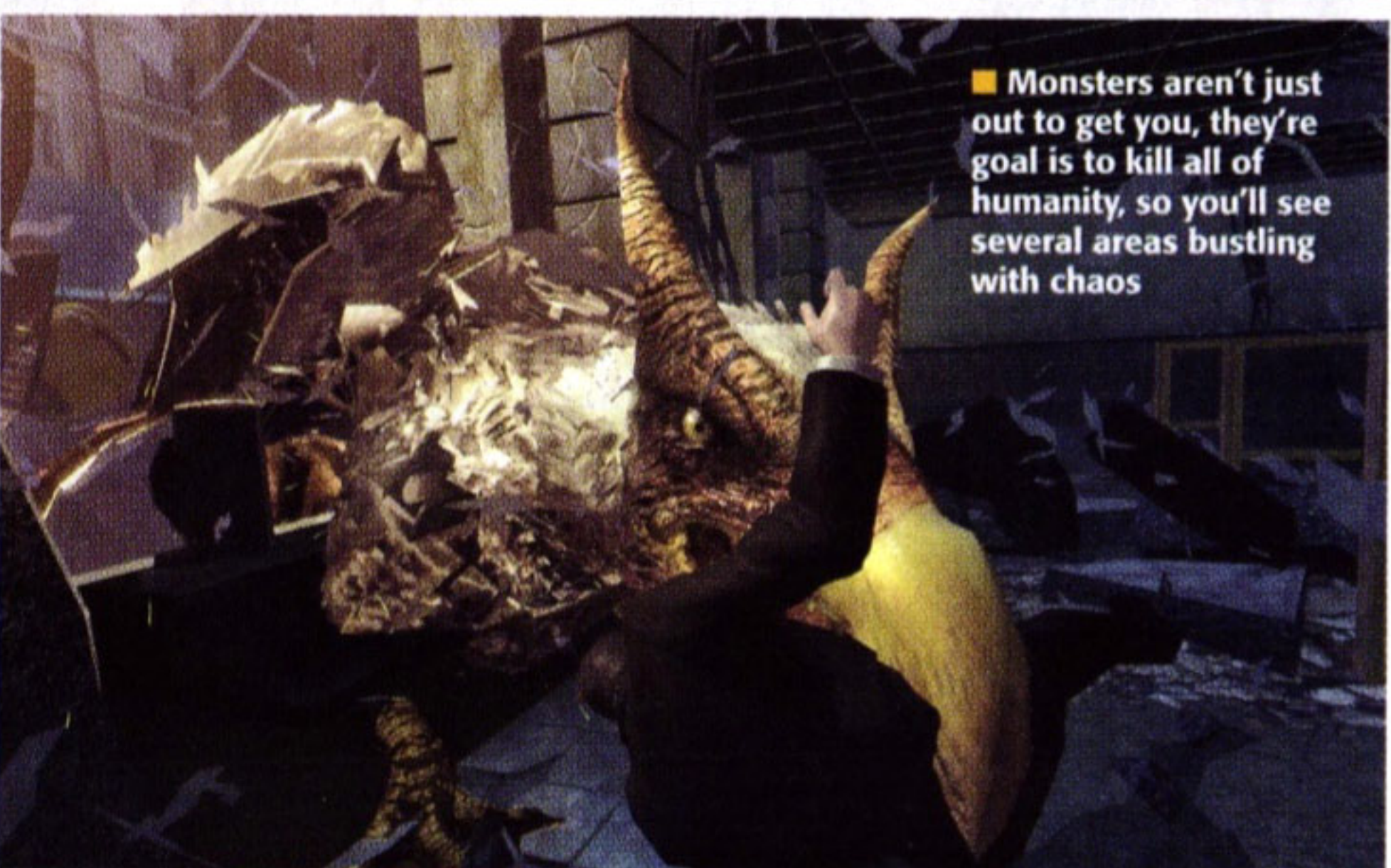
PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360 | PC

Legendary: The Box

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION > PUBLISHER GAMECOCK > DEVELOPER SPARK UNLIMITED > RELEASE SPRING

IT'S THE END OF THE WORLD AGAIN

Manhattan is derelict. The streets split open and the air rumbles. It's midday; the sun should be overhead, but it's blotted out by flocks of mythological griffons. The beasts swoop down from above; snatching cars from the street and biting hapless pedestrians in half with their razor-like beaks. As if the whole world is afraid, the earth quakes, sending skyscrapers to their foundations. It's the end of the world, but this is only the beginning of Legendary: The Box.

Protagonist Charles Deckard isn't your average action hero. For one, he's a thief. His latest job was to lift a mysterious ancient box from a New York art museum. However, once Deckard possessed the box, he found himself oddly compelled to open it. What Deckard doesn't know is that he's just opened Pandora's Box. Out of the ancient relic a red beam of light fires skyward, unleashing hoards of fabled creatures onto an unsuspecting world.

Deckard learns that the plot he's gotten himself mixed up in is far bigger – and more sinister – than he ever would have imagined. It turns out that the organization that originally hired him to steal the box is really a secret cult called the Black Order. The Black Order expected Deckard to open the box, but they didn't expect him to live through the onslaught that followed. Deckard sets off on a quest for answers and revenge against the mysterious society.

Unfortunately, Deckard will have to make his way past waves of werewolves, minotaurs, and other legendary beasts before his journey's done. One of

the more fearsome enemies we've seen so far is the Titan Golem. This terrifying giant emerges from the ground built out of its surrounding environment, which in this case is asphalt and steel girders. Golems are what Spark is calling a Titan class creature – a monster so powerful they won't be defeated through standard methods.

Legendary's enemies will interact with each other and their environment. Werewolves scamper along the walls and ceilings, and they are smart enough to know which objects in the environment they can affect, even going so far as to destroy your cover if you try to hide for too long.
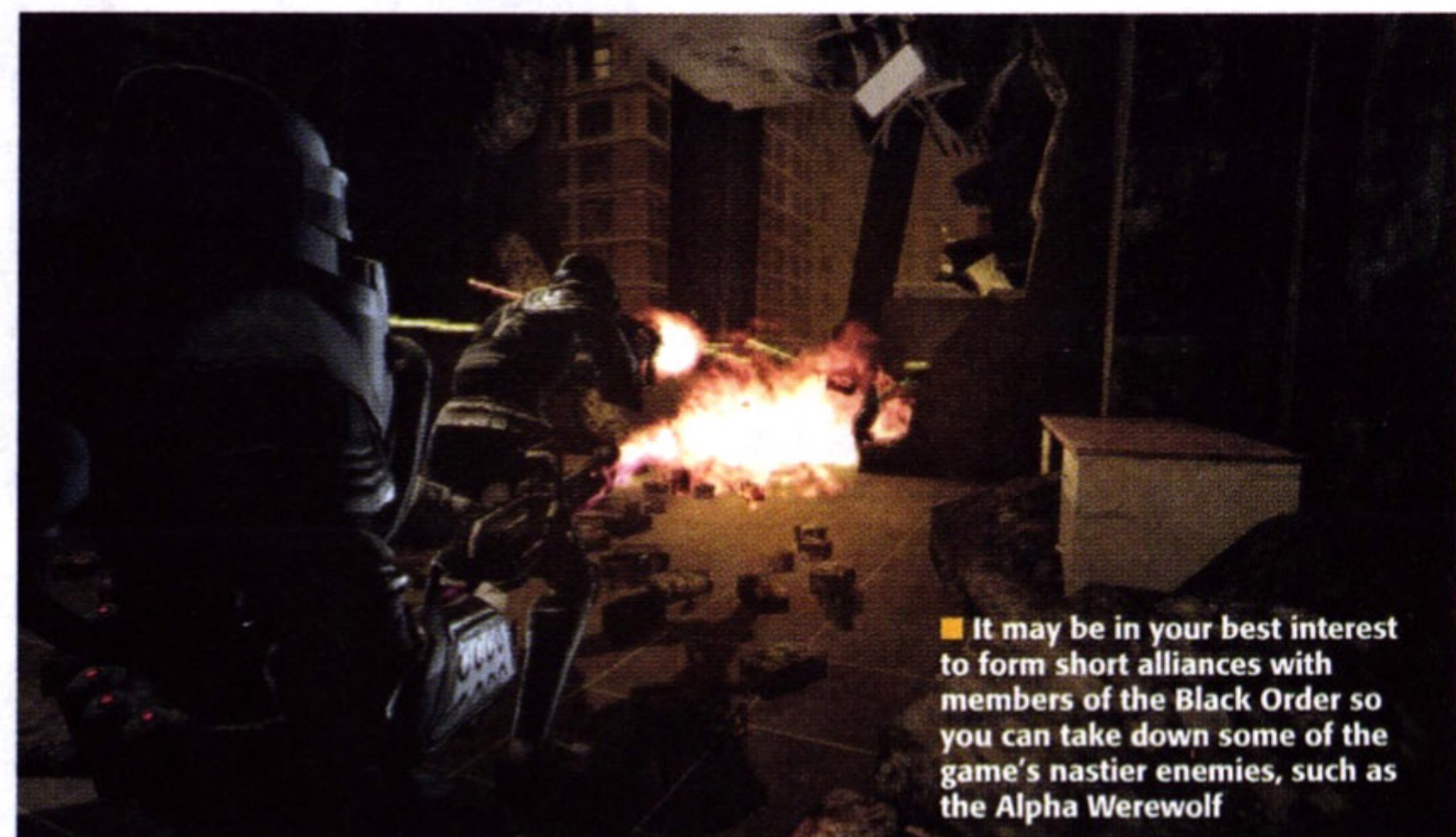
It may be in your best interest to form short alliances with members of the Black Order so you can take down some of the game's nastier enemies, such as the Alpha Werewolf

Monsters aren't just out to get you, they're goal is to kill all of humanity, so you'll see several areas bustling with chaos

Though Legendary is a first-person shooter, Deckard isn't just armed with guns. Opening Pandora's Box left a signet branded onto his hand. This symbol will imbue Deckard with special powers. For example, he will be able to siphon energy from fallen monsters in order to heal himself. Right now multiplayer is something of a mystery, but we've heard promises that it will be far more than just your standard deathmatch. Hopefully we'll get to know what that means soon, because the game is set to release later this spring. ■ ■ ■

GAME INFORMER 77

■ Just push it over. It doesn't look like it could get back up

XBOX 360 | PC

Kingdom Under Fire:
Circle of Doom

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION/RPG (UP TO 4-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE) > **PUBLISHER** MICROSOFT
> **DEVELOPER** BLUESIDE > **RELEASE** JANUARY

SILLY FUN

"Circle of Doom looks very serious, but actually it's quite silly," says Henry Lee, director for Kingdom Under Fire: Circle of Doom, Microsoft's new action/RPG spin-off from its popular strategy series. We chatted with Lee about the game, and he explained why he hopes this title will be about simply having fun.

The lighthearted elements of the game are best exemplified in its magic system. The game is filled with all the standard spells and effects that one would expect from an RPG, but Blueside has really gone out of its way to create some very memorable ways to dish out damage. "We have some weird spells, such as Clapping, where you literally applaud your fellow player who is being pulverized by the enemy," explains Lee. "Then there's Weeping, where tears burst from your eye sockets and damage nearby enemies, and Timber, where you summon a wooden golem. It doesn't fight for you. It just collapses on your enemies. The goal is to give players hilarious ways to enjoy themselves."

This focus on pure fun carries over to the game's enemies as well. One of Circle of Doom's bosses is over 15 meters in diameter, while another will drive players insane with hallucinations that cause them to attack their fellow teammates.

Circle of Doom looks like the kind of game best enjoyed with a buddy, and there is a reason for that. "About 50 to 60 percent of our focus has been on multiplayer," says Lee. In the co-op game, monsters will drop different items, and some new bosses will appear.

Kingdom Under Fire fans might have to wait a little longer for the series' true strategy sequel, but Circle of Doom sounds like a fun way to wait out the time. And it should even be relaxing, as Lee says, "My only goal this time was to make a game that people can play with their buddies…you know, just laughing and having a great time without stress." ■ ■ ■

■ Many of the environments in the game are supposed to be destructible. We can't wait to tear this place up

■ As you can see, Circle of Doom will use some dramatic lighting effects

■ Players can equip any of the weapons to either hand. "One of the most idiotic – or perhaps useful – weapon combinations in the game," says Lee, "is to dual-wield two shields."

NATURALLY ENHANCED

All the equipment in the game can be given some special functions through a system called Enhancements. For example, one of the characters, Regnier, has an axe blade that can be thrown like a boomerang, hitting multiple enemies before it returns. If it is synthesized with a Flight Enhancement it will hover in the air for longer, hitting more enemies and allowing Regnier to continue his attack with a secondary weapon before the axe returns to him. Adding Rampage to the axe, however, will make it fly around Regnier's body, creating a shield of death. Still another option would be to use the Absorption Enhancement, which causes the axe to fly around restoring Regnier's health by draining it from his foes.
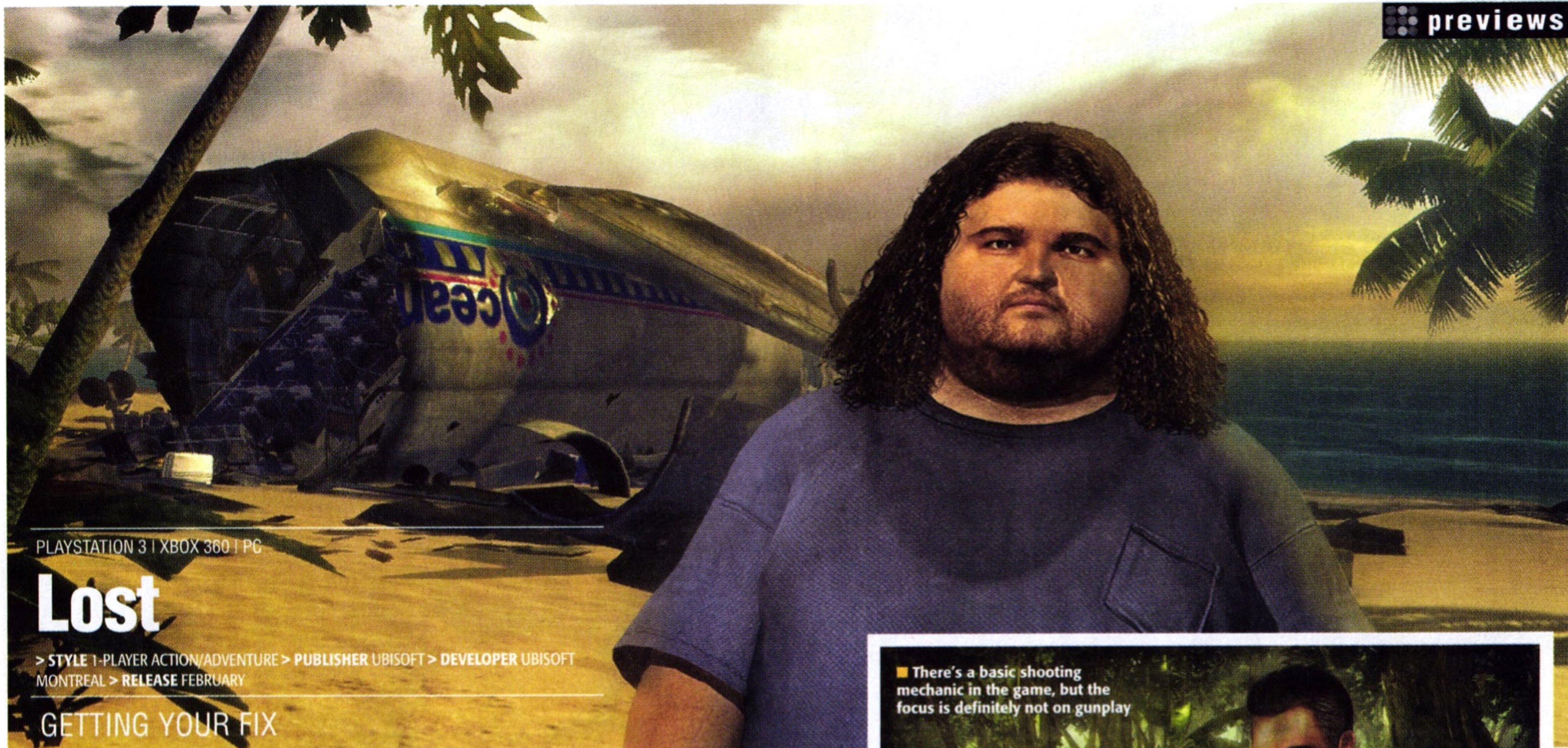
PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360 | PC

Lost

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION/ADVENTURE > **PUBLISHER** UBISOFT > **DEVELOPER** UBISOFT MONTREAL > **RELEASE** FEBRUARY

GETTING YOUR FIX

■ Lots of time will be spent interacting with the main characters from the show, but Elliot will also develop relationships with several new characters
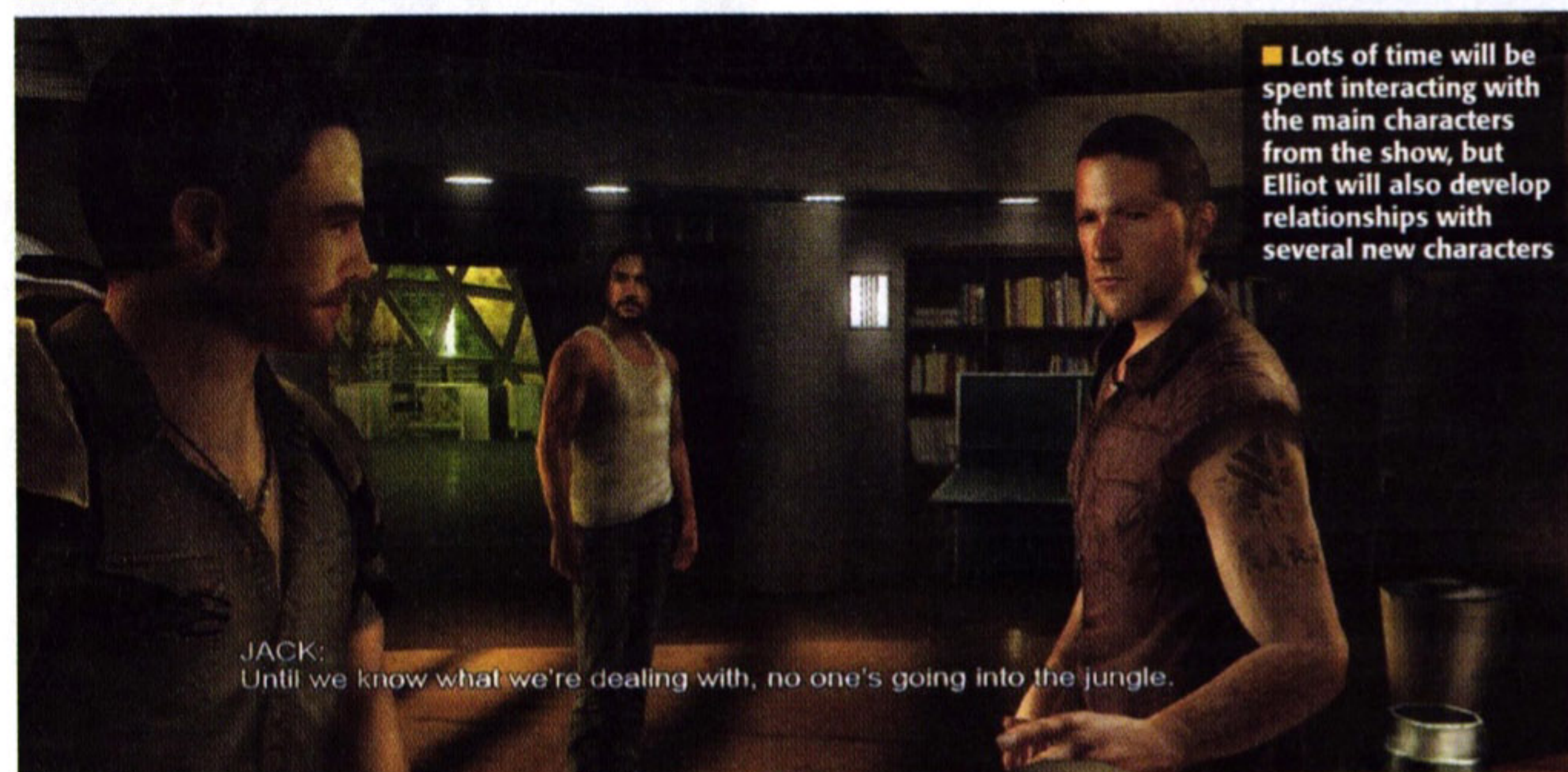
JACK:
Until we know what we're dealing with, no one's going into the jungle.

■ There's a basic shooting mechanic in the game, but the focus is definitely not on gunplay
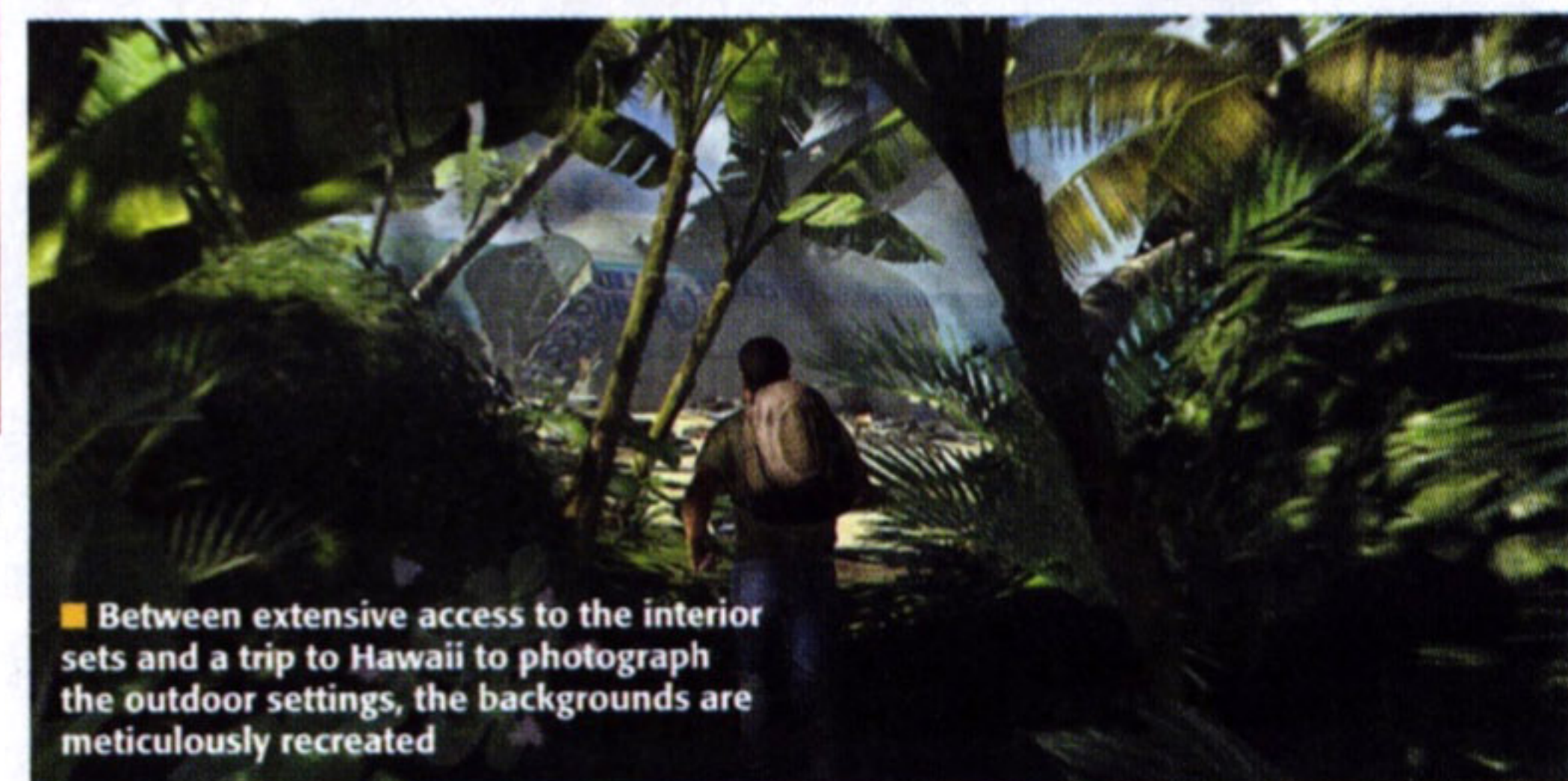
■ Between extensive access to the interior sets and a trip to Hawaii to photograph the outdoor settings, the backgrounds are meticulously recreated

s of this writing, that whole Hollywood writers' strike isn't looking good. Unless the Reconciliation Fairy does her magic sometime soon, you can expect either no *Lost* or a shortened season. On the bright side, the video game of the show seems to be well on track for its February release, so you shouldn't be totally bereft of that mysterious island and its castaways.

Luckily for the folks at Ubisoft, most of the contributions from the show's creators were earlier in the process, so the strike has had only a minor effect on production. We talked with producer Gadi Pollack, who told us more about the main character of the game, the flow of gameplay, and how the game will interconnect with the show.

"We took a reference of Clive Owen," Pollack tells us of the main character. "He's a smart, witty guy. He's something of a war photojournalist." Thus, without being a straight up military character, he's a man with a background in dangerous situations, and is more than capable of dealing with them on the fly.

Up to this point, we'd heard very little about the overall gameplay arc in the game, so Pollack filled us in that point as well. "After speaking with the executives from the show, we understood where the influences of Lost came from – which included the game Myst." Knowing that, the team wanted to tap that exploration and discovery feeling, but also deliver more exciting gameplay that would interest the wider audience of the show. "So we took the moments from the show that we wanted fans to experience, like being chased by the

black smoke monster. You'll have to dodge rocks and trees falling, run across small bridges – it's like a race course."

These exotic gameplay moments are interspersed throughout the larger game, which is split into seven individual episodes – in total, around 10 to 12 hours of gameplay. Each episode pans out like one from the TV show, with its own cliffhangers and dramatic confrontations. In one of the early episodes, right after the plane crash, Elliot plans to head out into the jungle to retrieve some lost information. Show hero Jack blocks the way, and only after you play through one of Elliot's flashbacks does he have the info he needs to lie to Jack and get past. In the woods, he might encounter Locke, who will teach him skills to hide in trees from the various forest threats. Later, he'll navigate the dangers of an island cave in search of the lost items. Generally, the focus seems to be on delivering compelling conversations with show characters, exploring the island's many secrets, and brief exciting moments of action-packed chases, shoot-outs, and revelations.

While many of the main characters have only lent their likenesses and not their voices, the game does include at least a few of the acting mainstays, like Yunjin Kim (Sun), Ian

Cussick (Desmond), and Emilie de Raven (Claire). We've yet to play Lost for ourselves, but we're certainly excited to see how the game can expand the intriguing mystique of the Lost universe. As for the gameplay itself, only time will tell if the ambitious mix of action and exploration will pan out. ■ ■ ■

The new vehicles add a new vector to the carnage

PLAYSTATION 3

Unreal Tournament 3

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 32-PLAYER VIA PLAYSTATION NETWORK) > **PUBLISHER** MIDWAY
> **DEVELOPER** EPIC GAMES > **RELEASE** SPRING

CONSOLE FRAGGING FTW

Vehicle CTF matches crank the speed up even faster

Unreal Tournament 3 recently released on PC to critical acclaim, and after spending some time with an early build of the PlayStation 3 version of the game, we anticipate a similarly warm reception. Like Call of Duty 4 or any number of other titles over the last few years, UT3 is functionally identical on PC and console.

The only differences we noticed in the PS3 version were typical pre-release issues that Epic will hopefully fix before the game hits store shelves. Bot AI in the offline game seemed less aware than their PC cousins, giving us more opportunities to flak shell fools in the back. The framerate could have been a bit more stable as well, but even in this early state it was quite playable.

Our money's on the PS3 experience lagging slightly behind the PC version just due to the Sixaxis' inferior sensitivity relative to a mouse/keyboard setup combined with the super-fast gameplay that Unreal Tournament has always prided itself on. No doubt there will be some 13-year old in Oklahoma who puts the lie to that with a constant stream of flawless shock combos, but most players will likely have a bit more trouble with precision weapons like the sniper rifle, link gun, and shock rifle.

Even with the relative imprecision of a gamepad, Unreal Tournament already feels great and plays fast on PlayStation 3. Hopefully, no more delays are in store for the title, and PS3 owners can get their frag on in early 2008. ■ ■ ■
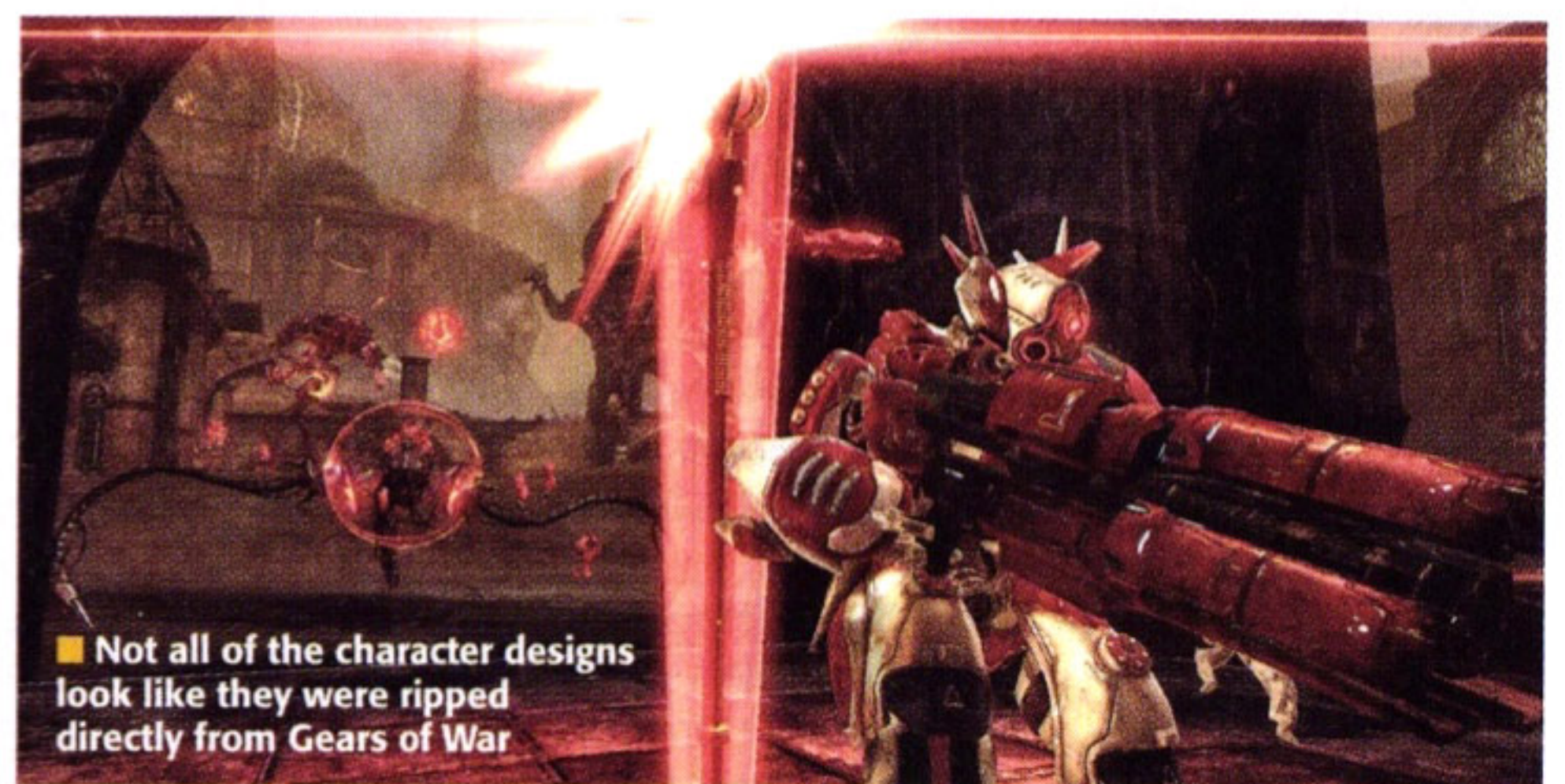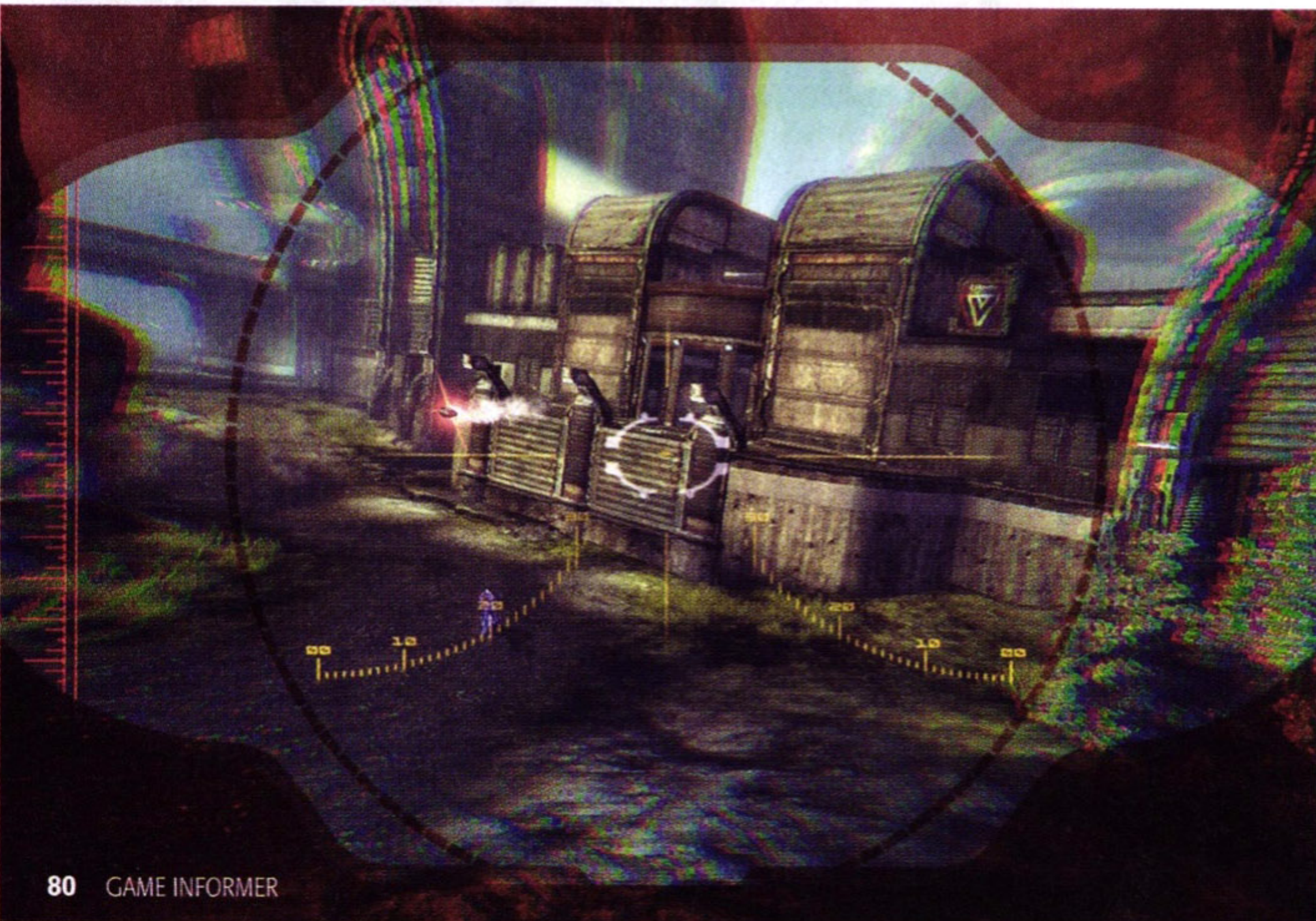
Not all of the character designs look like they were ripped directly from Gears of War
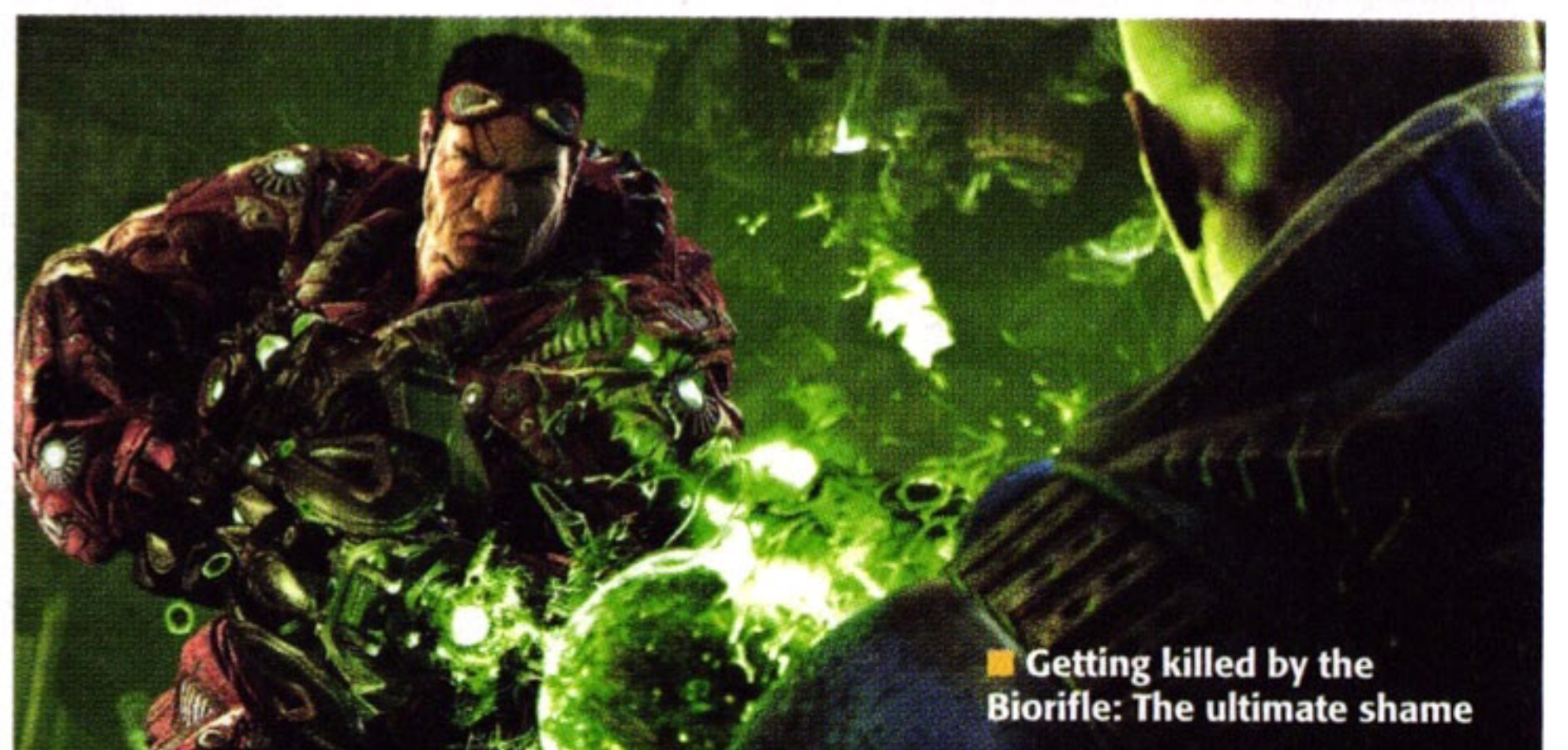
Getting killed by the Biorifle: The ultimate shame

Iron Man doesn't need help causing property damage, but he will have a support crew from Stark Industry constantly on his com providing him with updated information about his ever-changing battlefield
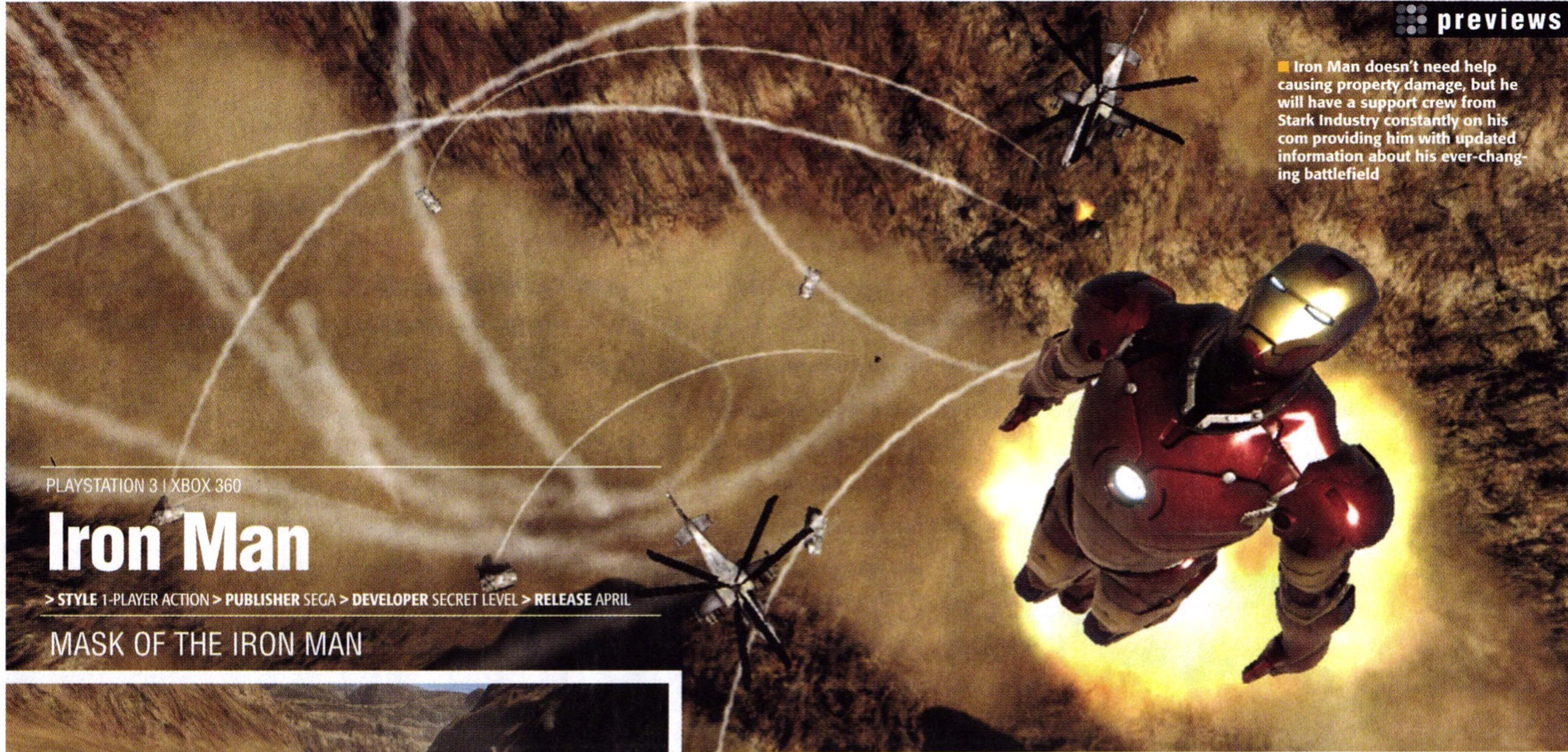
PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360

Iron Man

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** SEGA > **DEVELOPER** SECRET LEVEL > **RELEASE** APRIL

MASK OF THE IRON MAN

"There are some who call me ...Tim."

Sega has a good relationship with the movie team, and are using Industrial Light and Magic's CGI models from the upcoming movie

In a mode called Afterburner, the camera shifts to an RE 4 perspective and takes on a shaky cam effect, which helps intensify the sense of speed

When he has to go, he just goes

There is no doubt that Iron Man is a busy superhero. After the fallout from the events in Marvel Comics blockbuster *Civil War* last winter, it seems like he is everywhere. He's already starring in practically every comic Marvel puts out, and we wouldn't be surprised if he started showing up in DC's Batman books too. And he's not going away anytime soon, since this summer he'll be making his big screen debut alongside Sega's video game adaptation. It's a great time to be an Iron Man fan.

Even for those who aren't familiar with the character, both the game and movie are origin tales and should provide good jumping on points to the character's rich 40-year history. Comic magnate Stan Lee created Iron Man's alter ego, billionaire playboy Tony Stark, in 1963. Lee wanted to create a character loaded with personal demons and character flaws, so he used American entrepreneur Howard Hughes as a model. Stark is an engineering genius and inventor who finds himself struggling with a heart condition. Not content to settle for a pacemaker, he creates a suit of armor to help regulate his health – then, logically, starts fighting evil.

Time is not an inventor's friend. In order to stay on the competitive edge in the ever-evolving world of technology, Tony must constantly tinker with his armor. Sega sees this as an important element of the mythos, and has decided to make it an integral part of the game. Iron Man is already a destructive force capable of ripping turrets off tanks and knock-

ing waves of soldiers down with a single repulsor blast, but players will be able to customize and upgrade their armor further by adding new weapons and defensive measures to Iron Man's already ample arsenal.

However, some of Iron Man's greatest weapons might be his own enemies. Players will be able to take advantage of a series of contextual actions that allow Iron Man to turn his enemy's own attacks against them. In the example we saw, Iron Man wrenched a missile out of the air from its flight path, and then sent it back to the battlement that had launched it.

The team at Sega didn't want to confine old Shell Head to the close quarters of a New York alley or subway, and are designing a lot of large open environments to showcase his aerial abilities. Iron Man is basically a flying human tank, but even so he weaves through enemy fire and past factory smoke stacks at speeds approaching 300 mph. He needs his space.

Sega has a wealth of comic lore to draw from, so the game won't be limited to the movie's plot. Not only does this mean that we will see popular characters from the comics like Jim Rhodes, Jarvis, and Pepper Potts, but we'll also face off against a variety of old comic villains and don some of the more popular Iron Man suits from years gone by. The game is off to a promising start, and if Sega can pull all the pieces together it might end up with a game that can appeal to more than just comic enthusiasts. ■ ■ ■

Wii

Mario Kart Wii [Working Title]

> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER RACING (UP TO 12-PLAYER VIA WIICONNECT24) > **PUBLISHER** NINTENDO
> **DEVELOPER** NINTENDO > **RELEASE** SPRING 2008

A NEW WAY TO SNAKE

It was only a matter of time before Mario Kart skidded its way onto Wii. The arcadey racer has appeared on every Nintendo console since its debut on the SNES (outside of the disastrous Virtual Boy). Those who preferred the dual drivers of Mario Kart: Double Dash are out of luck as the latest iteration returns to solo steering. However, players will be able to ride more than just a bunch of wacky carts this time around. Characters now have custom motorbikes to zip around in. Early trailers hint at a possible trick system as Mario is shown popping a wheelie.

Courses shown so far include such locales as a castle, a speedway with thousands of spectators, a dark old mine, a farm with cows and tractors, and a snowy mountain complete with slaloms and halfpipes. But perhaps the most exciting feature of Mario Kart Wii is the confirmed 12-player online racing. Nintendo has pledged to improve the online experience from Mario Kart DS and specifically hopes to minimize the time needed for matchmaking.

The game will come packaged with a new peripheral called the Wii Wheel. This plastic remote housing looks to emulate the steering wheel included with mediocre Ubisoft launch game GT Pro Series. Perhaps Nintendo can get the wheel controls right, but those who'd rather drive Excite Truck-style are free to do so. While Mario Kart details are scarce now, we're hoping Nintendo will pull back the curtain more after the holiday season dies down. Stay tuned. ■ ■ ■

CURRENT CONFIRMED ROSTER

Mario
Luigi
Wario
Waluigi
Princess Peach
Baby Mario
Baby Luigi
Yoshi
Donkey Kong
Bowser

Just like carts, players will be able to choose from several bike designs

■ Subtle 3D effects pop amongst the traditional 2D art

Klavier
Achtung, baby! Today, we play it my way!

Trucy
...? You aren't going to search through the trash?
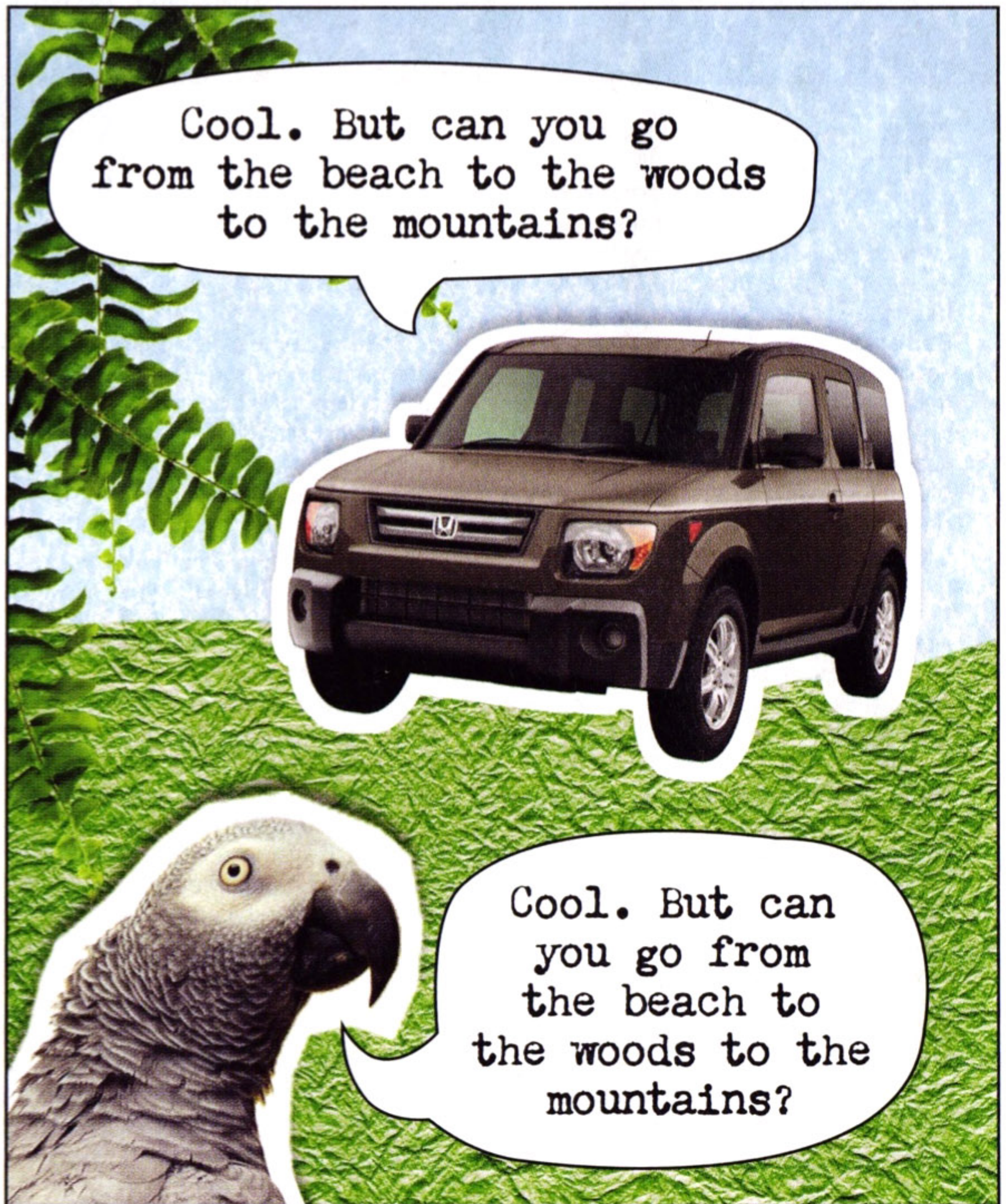
NINTENDO DS

Apollo Justice: Ace Attorney

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** CAPCOM > **DEVELOPER** CAPCOM > **RELEASE** EARLY 2008

A NEW BREED OF JUSTICE

The third and final chapter in the Phoenix Wright trilogy has finally come to a close in North America, but rather than wait until next fall to start up the new series, Capcom is debuting its new lawyer hero in matter of months. Players will take on the role of rookie Apollo Justice in the first Ace Attorney game that isn't just a localized Game Boy Advance port.

Apollo flies by the seat of his pants in the courtroom, similar to previous protagonist Phoenix Wright, whom you now must defend against murder charges. Seven years after the events of Trials and Tribulations, Phoenix has apparently left his lawyering behind to become a scraggly lounge pianist who plays a little poker on the side. It is at one of these poker games that Phoenix is accused of killing a lounge patron. With the help of mentor Kristoph Gavin, magician/assistant Trucy, and scientist Ema Skye (from case five of the first game), Apollo will attempt to exonerate Phoenix and several other defendants for a total of four cases.

Prosecutor Klavier Gavin (Kristophe's younger bro) plays the cunning rival and also fronts a rock band called Gavinners.

In addition to new music and redrawn backgrounds, many DS-specific features await. The fingerprinting minigame is back, along with the 3D item exami-nation from PW: AA. Players can now take molds of footprints and use the touchscreen to hasten the process with a hairdryer. There's also a new "Crime Recreation Mode" where you can piece together the scene of the crime in a stark white Echochrome-esque 3D environment. The Ace Attorney games have needed a dose of fresh gameplay for awhile, and we're very anxious to see if the fourth iteration can deliver. ■ ■ ■
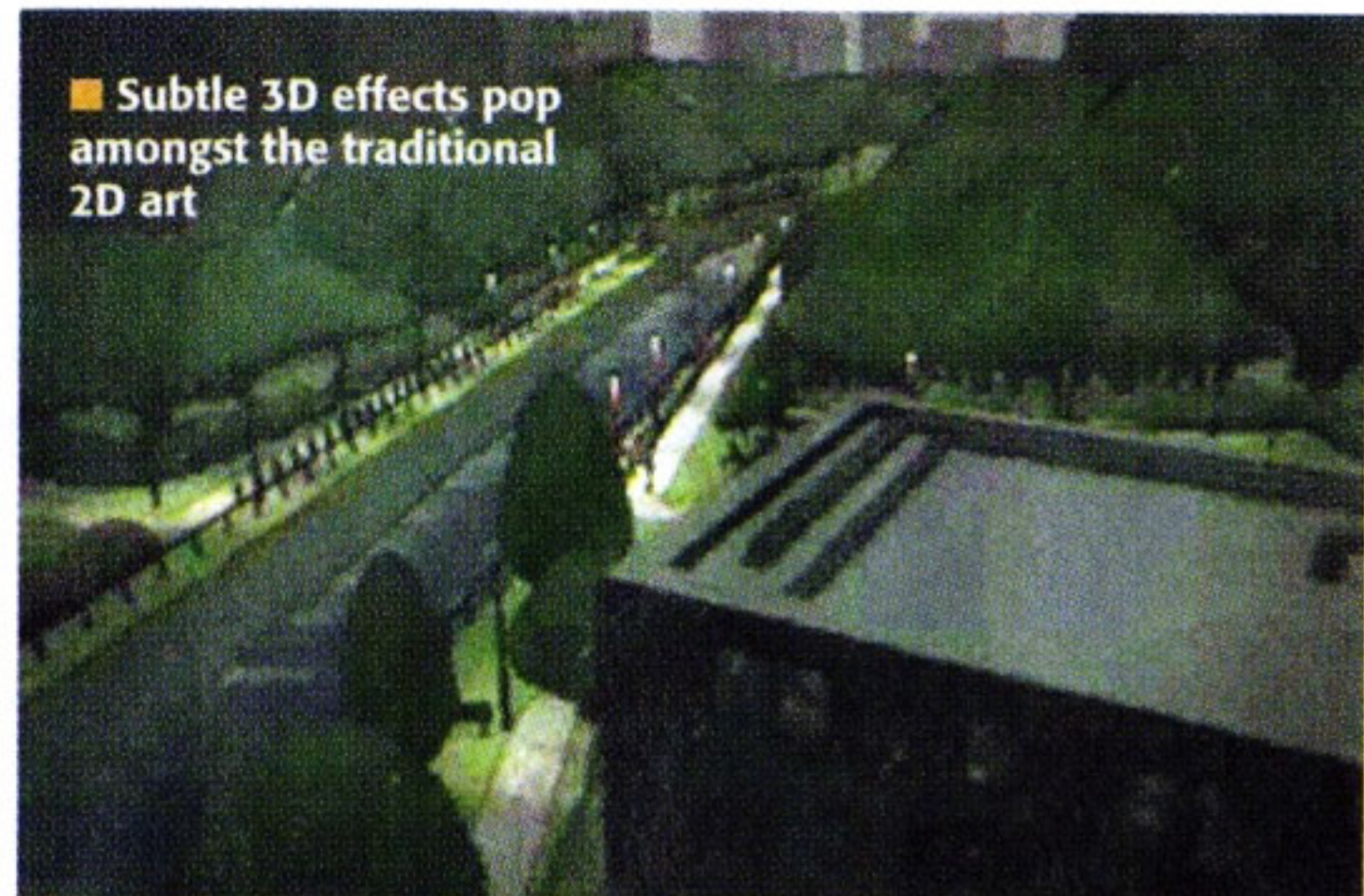
MULTI
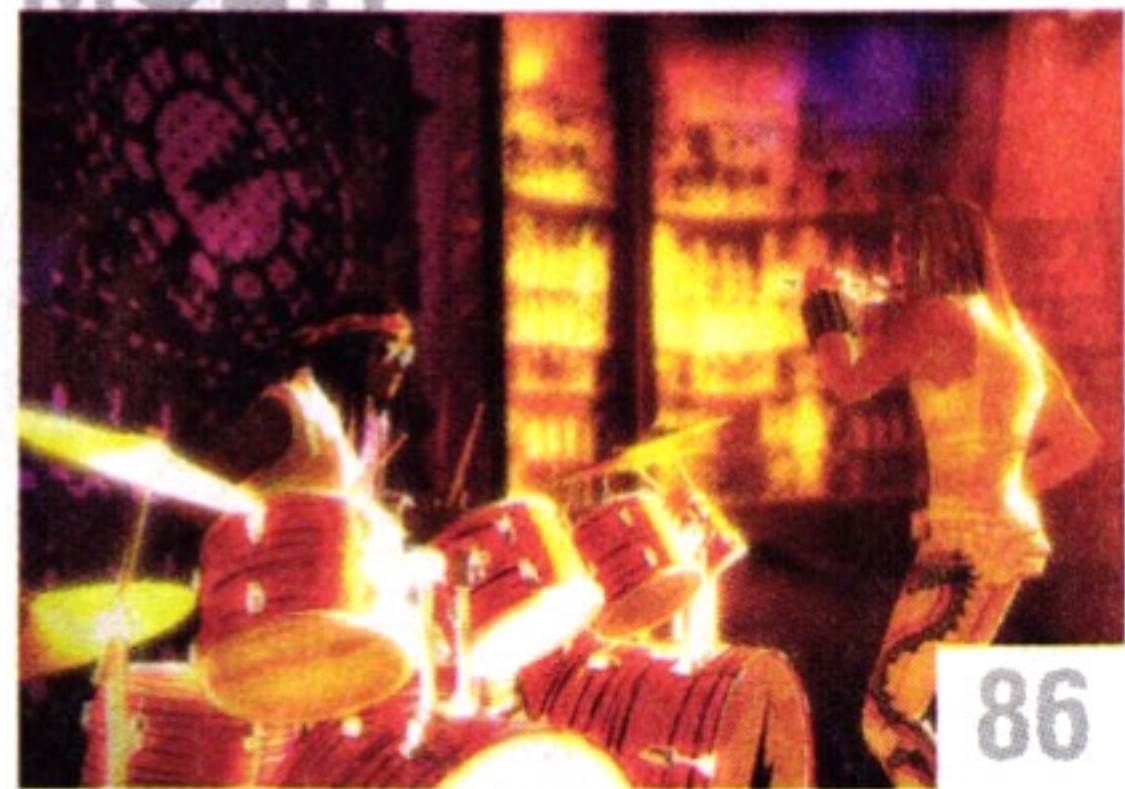
86

Rock Band

PLAYSTATION 3

90

Time Crisis 4

XBOX 360

A	Grace Kelly
B	Natalie Wood
X	Tippi Hedren
Y	Julie London

15,360   18,430

20,217   1,034

90

Scene It? Lights, Camera, Action

Wii

Science & Math

Jane buzzed in!

What is the perimeter of a rectangle that has a length of 8 ft and a width of 6 ft?

| 28. Ft | 48. Ft |
| 24. Ft | 14. Ft |
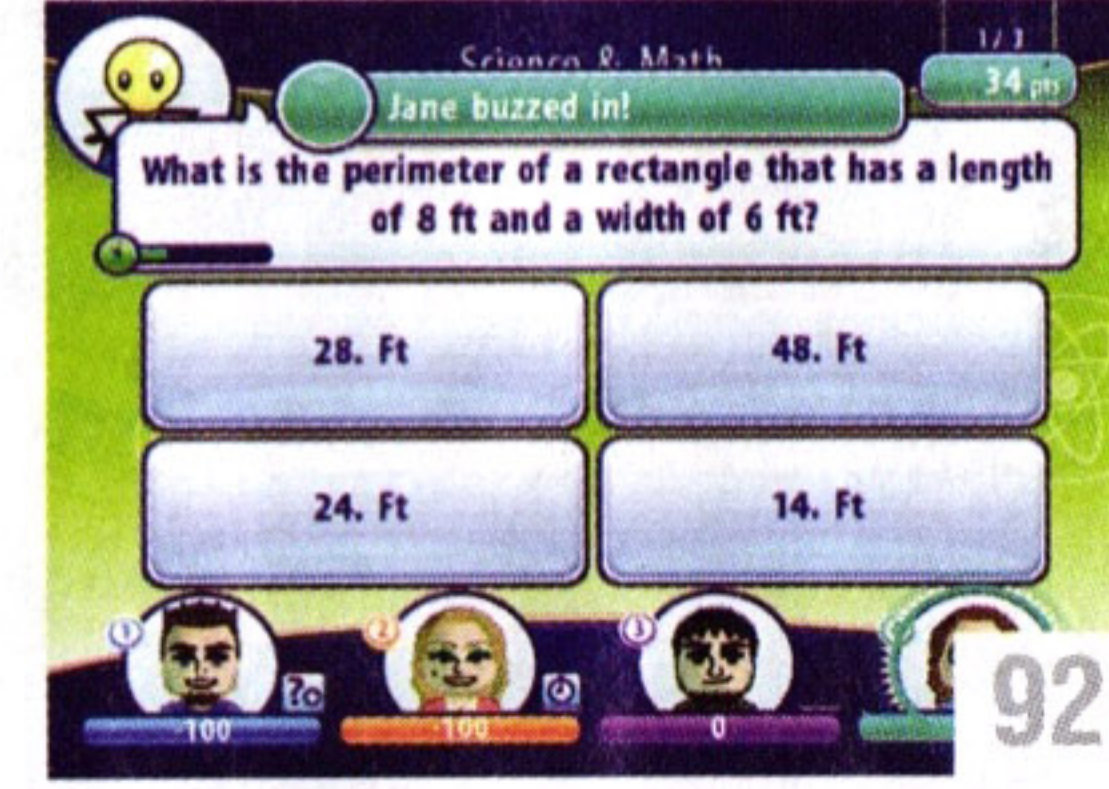
92

Smarty Pants

91

Super Mario Galaxy

GAME INFORMER — GAME OF THE MONTH

While Nintendo uses the name "Mario" on everything from puzzle to soccer games, an honest-to-goodness new Mario platformer is a rare event in the world of video games. Thankfully, Super Mario Galaxy not only lives up to the heritage of the series, it takes platforming in some surprising new directions. If you've been waiting to buy a Wii, now is the time to invest. Super Mario Galaxy is just too good to miss.

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Contra 4

GAME INFORMER — HANDHELD GAME OF THE MONTH
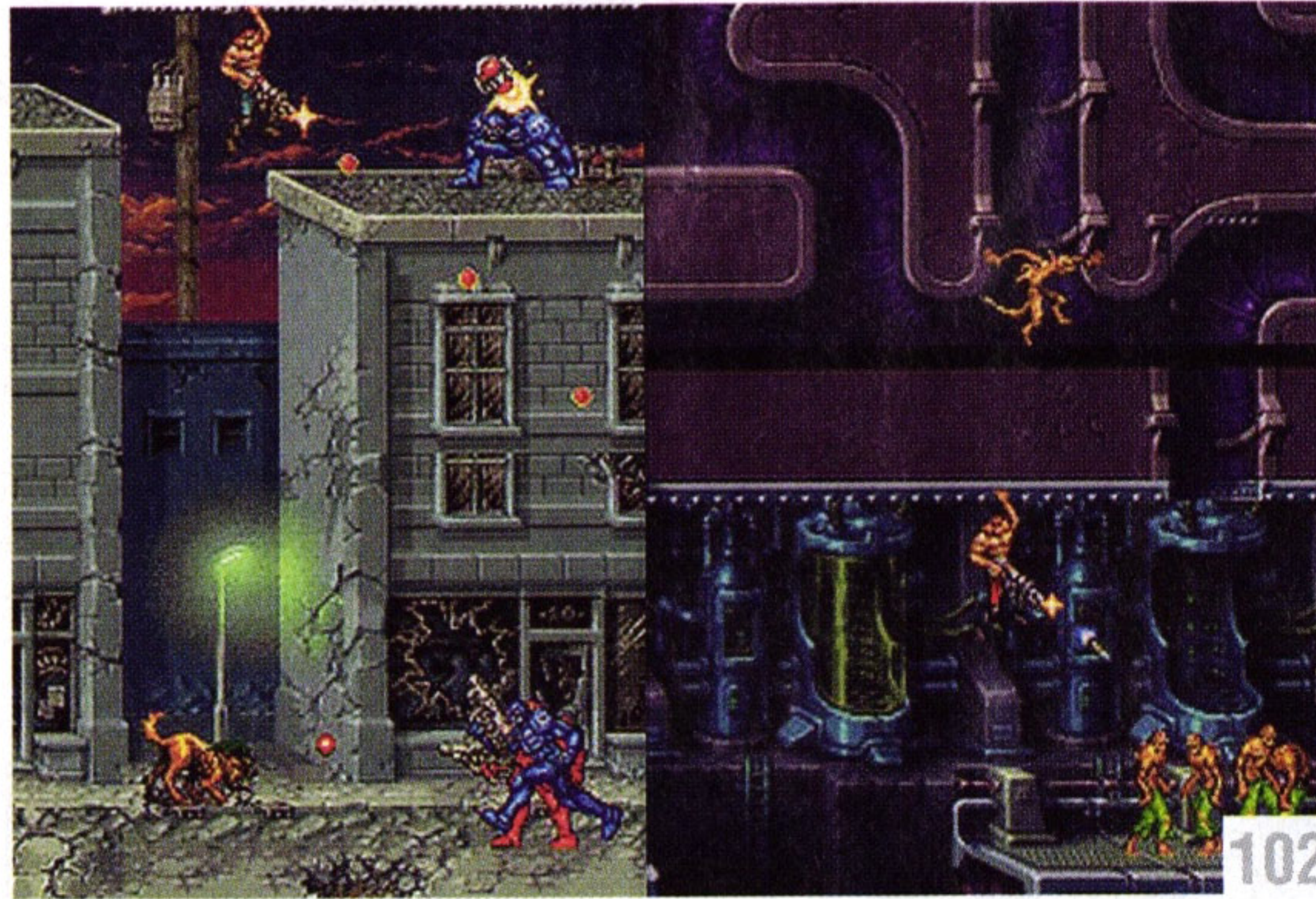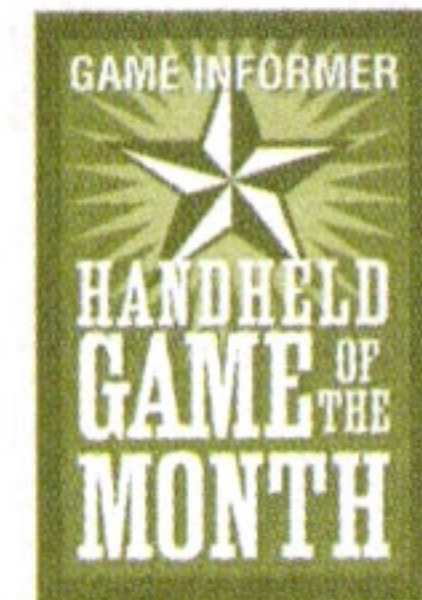
Black Viper, the villain from Operation C, has returned to Galuga Island with plenty of massive bosses, tricky jumps, and more than a few man-faced mutts to guard his new base. Pick up your spread gun and blast through all of the co-op goodness that Contra is known for. Those yearning for a little nostalgia, hardcore challenge, and unbridled action needn't look any further.

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 Failboat. All aboard!

> **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

97

SimCity Societies

HANDHELD

Time: 0
Bonus: 15

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Nanostray 2

REVIEWS INDEX

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GAME INFORMER PC GAME OF THE MONTH
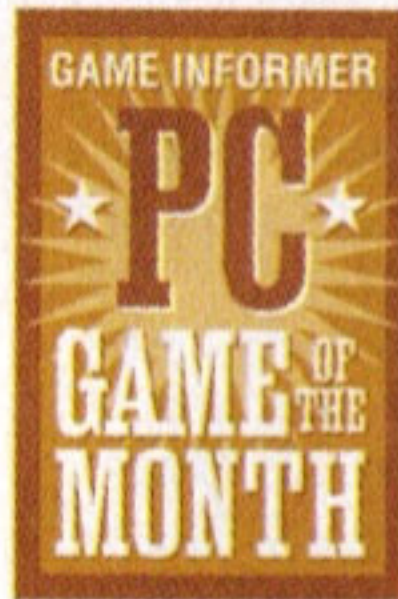
Crysis

Nano-suit enhanced supersoldiers of the future are here to take over your PC. Will you slip through enemy encampments unnoticed, use your arsenal to reduce them to rubble, or draw the baddies out for discreet slaughter in the surrounding wilds? Crysis offers all this and more, including massive tank battles and an alien invasion force. Check our full review on page 96 for the details.

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theedge
When All Games Aren't Created Equal

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

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

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

Luigi – Quit getting lost, idiot

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

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

In its previous releases, Harmonix has delivered many separate and smaller experiences that are combined here. This is the giant combining robot of music games

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360

Rock Band

> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER MUSIC (UP TO 4-PLAYER VIA PLAYSTATION NETWORK OR XBOX LIVE) > **PUBLISHER** MTV GAMES/ELECTRONIC ARTS > **DEVELOPER** HARMONIX > **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 20 > **ESRB** T

BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER

Taken as a whole, Rock Band is the best music game ever made. As a general rule, I make a point to avoid the use of such superlatives when describing any new release, but in this case it's hard to overlook the obvious point. As a culmination of years of build up from the best music game maker in the industry, Harmonix has crammed a positively huge entertainment experience onto one small disc. It's immensely fun and consistently rewarding. Nearly endless replay is bolstered by the promise of a musical catalogue that will have already dramatically expanded by the time you read this. And, played as a group either off or online, almost no game in any genre delivers the same sense of cooperation and immersion. And while all of this is true, taken apart into its disparate components, Rock Band is a game with several small flaws that wise gamers should consider carefully before taking the plunge.

Two distinct things are brand new experiences for Rock Band. The first and more obvious is the drumming system. Complicated and engrossing, the rhythmic gymnastics needed to master this percussion system are many and great. Non-drummers will come out the other end of this game listening to music in a different way – hearing that offbeat kickdrum and applauding complicated drum fills. The only major problem seems almost unavoidable; enthusiastic as you'll be, it's easy to drown out the simulated drum parts with your very real banging of the pads.

The second distinct experience here is the group dynamic. While the Guitar Hero series hinted at this, Rock Band fully embraces the idea by gearing all the songs and the brunt of the new gameplay at people who are playing together.

A lengthy and varied World Tour mode lets you build a band from nothing into the next big thing. Even the moment-to-moment gameplay is geared towards unison playing and cooperation, and each band member can save the performance from disaster by yanking failed instruments back in. It's only disappointing that, as of launch, online play doesn't include the full World Tour.

As any real world band member will tell you, individual parts sometimes have to sacrifice for the band. For all their music game wizardry, Harmonix can't manage to overcome this problem, and the single-player experience suffers for it. Nowhere is this more noticeable than in the guitar gameplay. Even on the highest difficulty, the complexity of the guitar parts just doesn't hold up well, filled as they are with long stretches of two note chords and repeated rhythmic riffs. For this reason, the torch that Harmonix has passed to Neversoft in the form of Guitar Hero is still the place to go for solo shredders. Similarly, some of the vocal parts just aren't exciting.

The music itself is top notch. While I'll leave debating the merits of individual song choices for another time, the track list as a whole is excellent, with choices culled from throughout the decades – almost all of which are the original recordings. Tack on some great bonus songs, many of which star members of the actual development team, and the retail disc is a great start to your Rock Band collection.

Most of the rest is just wrapping paper, but it certainly makes the present look damn good. Character customization and some fun versus modes fill the menu with additional options. Meanwhile, the visuals throw you into a world of music videos with their close-up camera angles and grainy filters. And, as usual, the writing in tutorials, menus, and loading screens has that entertaining sarcastic spin. As a solitary experience, Rock Band is exciting but limited. Play it the way its title suggests, as a band, and this holiday release is hard to beat.——MILLER

If Harmonix is true to their word, hundreds of new songs will be available for download in the coming months and years
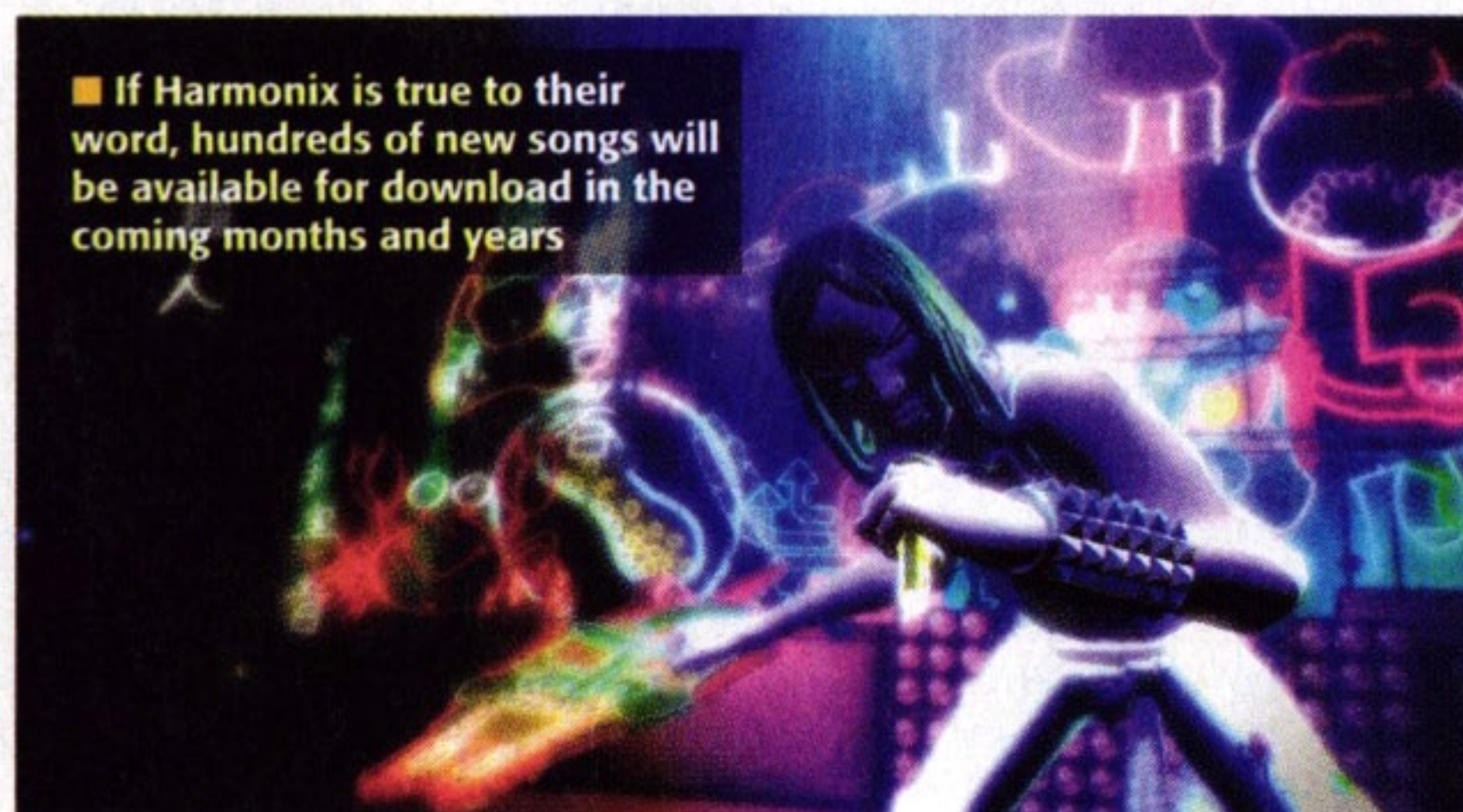
■ This is *not* a game for children

F.E.A.R. Files

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 16-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE) > **PUBLISHER** SIERRA > **DEVELOPER** TIMEGATE STUDIOS/DAY ONE STUDIOS > **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 6 > **ESRB** M

CLONE WARS

The original F.E.A.R. from Monolith Productions was a unique and excellent horror-themed first-person shooter when it came out in 2005, packed full of enough intense close-quarters firefights and shocking scare moments to overcome its bland environments. These two expansions (Extraction Point and The Perseus Mandate), packed together here in a single console release, retain the setting but fail to recapture the magic of the original game. Everything that was lame about F.E.A.R. is amplified in these campaigns, and the good bits are fewer and further between. Still, shooting bad guys and enjoying the flamboyant ragdoll effects after the fact has a certain baseline appeal.

The visceral combat that made F.E.A.R. great can be found here, but the arenas in which you do battle are decidedly worse than in the original. Engagement distances are too high for the way that combat is tuned; go much beyond 20 meters (which F.E.A.R.

Files does constantly) and the fighting loses its gritty edge. And with a bare few exceptions, the enemies you face and the weapons you shoot them with are exactly the same as in the base game. Add in the fact that neither the scares nor the plots pack the same kind of punch, and these expansions are a noticeable downgrade from the first story.

To be fair, Extraction Point is somewhat better than the newer Perseus Mandate, but even so it's too short to be truly noteworthy. There are moments here and there that make the experience decent, but the overall package is lacking. Do yourself a favor and wait for Project Origin rather than picking this up.—**ADAM**

HEY PC PEOPLE, READ THIS
Consider this your warning that The Perseus Mandate (sold individually for PC, since Extraction Point came out last year on Windows) is not worth your dollars. It's easily the weakest of the three F.E.A.R. releases to date, and only the most rabid of fans will get their money's worth out of it.

BOTTOM LINE	6.5

> **Concept:** Put out both F.E.A.R. expansions on a single disc for 360 owners

> **Graphics:** In standard-def, this looks like an Xbox game. In high-def, it looks like a mediocre Xbox 360 game

> **Sound:** It's impossible not to cackle when an enemy shouts "Oh, f—!" in slow motion as a grenade lands at his feet

> **Playability:** It's an FPS on a gamepad. You really need me to tell you any more?

> **Entertainment:** It is glaringly obvious that the original developers behind F.E.A.R. had nothing to do with these expansions

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion 7

While playing F.E.A.R. Files you are continuously burdened with an overwhelming nervous feeling, but it's not terror. It's the feeling of "haven't I been here before?" Not only are these expansions exact retreads of everything great in the original F.E.A.R., it's still all too easy to get lost in the environments, especially since every area looks just like the one before it. The developers must have also thought they were porting these games over to the original Xbox, because I swear these expansions look worse than the original game. Still, even in their by-the-numbers FPS execution, these expansions offer up some good action, and it's cool to finally have both games on the console. Fans might want to check these out, but if you're new to the series, go play the original instead.—**BEN**

■ Remember these guys? Yeah, they still suck to fight

Beowulf

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** UBISOFT > **DEVELOPER** UBISOFT TIWAK > **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 13 > **ESRB** M

PRESS START TO SKIP

Beowulf's opening cinematic delivers an important message. As this sequence brings players into a Danish kingdom rife with magic and monsters, it's nearly impossible to concentrate on the story, as your eyes are drawn to the words "Press Start to Skip." Originally, I found myself thinking it was an odd choice to have this message stay onscreen for the entire cutscene, but after playing the game, I now see it is intended as a warning. Those who enter Beowulf's realm will confront something far worse than Grendel. Those who dare step foot into this cruel world will see unspeakable horrors, and will likely be bludgeoned to death by some of the most wretched gameplay mankind has ever conjured.

As it turns out, Beowulf is one of the most incompetent warriors to ever grace a game. He can't wield a weapon for more than a minute without it breaking in his hands, most of his time is spent babysitting his troops, and his combat animations are fixed once they start – which leads to enemies teeing off on him in those defenseless moments. Suffering defeat in battle is only the beginning of this

legendary character's struggles. Things actually get worse for him. Much worse. Through rhythm minigames that play like Dance Dance Revolution, Beowulf ends up looking like a cracked-out aerobics instructor. The purpose for these oddly placed minigames? To rally the troops into opening doors. Lame.

On the plus side, the game does a decent job of creating large conflicts, and you can feel the weight of each blow through the nicely designed hack n' slash mechanics. Satisfying brutality is also delivered through Beowulf's ability to enter a state of carnal fury. When his rage kicks in, you won't believe how many bones this man can break.

This game also has a nice dark look to it, but its levels can be difficult to read, often leading you down paths that go nowhere. Additionally, the challenges often bring fun tags like "save the virgins," but they usually just add more frustration to the gameplay.

In this day and age, it shouldn't come as a surprise that a game based on a movie fares poorly, but for a character who has survived since 700AD, he deserves better treatment than this.—**REINER**

BOTTOM LINE	5.75

> **Concept:** Another video game adaptation of a silver screen juggernaut that comes up short

> **Graphics:** Nicely animated, but the action becomes difficult to follow as the battles grow in size

> **Sound:** Some surprising comments about Odin's family jewels are thrown around, and Beowulf's chanting mostly brings laughs

> **Playability:** The swords have the durability of balsa wood, and you often have to stop hacking away at enemies to complete a poorly designed rhythm minigame

> **Entertainment:** The 360 version spits out Achievements, but unless you are using it to farm points, this game will only gift you with pain

> **Replay Value:** Low

Second Opinion 5

While I can appreciate and even applaud the desire to try something different with a licensed action game, it's only worth it if the new ideas are fun and functional. Sadly, neither can be said for Beowulf and the dark, muddy game world through which he wanders. The "carnal fury" ability never really pans out into something compelling, but it does mean you'll be listening to Grendel's mother endlessly nagging you to use it, which is plain silly. The rhythm game by which you cheer your troops to victory is too simplistic and contrived to be exciting, and it's more than a little out of place in most situations that it's called for. Blind, dead-end corridors dominate the level design, and the combat system feels clumsy and slow. Beowulf is one of the great epic heroes of literature; this sad chapter in his saga is best forgotten.—**MILLER**

■ "All right! Nice work, team! Now let's try some squats!"

Escape

Huthinson
Ashkanan
Meldal
Parker
Cuthbert
Delran
Standen
Red

Total $7800000
Loot $560000
Rewards $0

Traitor

■ The multiplayer component starts out as co-op, but if a player is greedy, it could turn into a straight-up deathmatch

■ The AI rarely reads a situation correctly

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360

Kane & Lynch: Dead Men

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE OR PLAYSTATION NETWORK) > **PUBLISHER** EIDOS INTERACTIVE
> **DEVELOPER** IO INTERACTIVE > **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 13 > **ESRB** M

A BULLET FOR EACH

Kane and Lynch are two unlikable characters. They murder and maim, experience bouts of uncontrollable rage, and would rather spend their time polishing guns than tending to hygiene. With his family being used as bait, Kane has gone on a rampage, and will do whatever it takes to get them back, even if it means wiping every police officer off of the face of the planet. Lynch, who Kane treats like a spineless puppet, seems to suffer from a split-personality disorder. He's a maniac as is, but when he blacks out and becomes somebody else, even the hostages will die.

Oddly, these scum-of-the-earth personality flaws are their endearing qualities. They make these characters decidedly unique and instantly intriguing. As the player, you want to know more about them – how they got to where they are today, and how they are able to work together. But like a book missing some pages, this story lacks critical information needed to keep players up to speed. As a result, two of the most interesting characters in gaming end up being enigmas.

This game's inability to deliver a cohesive story is one of the biggest disappointments of the year for me, and this deadly duo didn't win me over with their marksmanship, either. The targeting system offers an effective over-the-shoulder, down-the-scope view for precise shooting, but the cover mechanic can be a bit frustrating, as it automatically puts your back to the surface of a nearby object. The weapons also have a satisfying pop to them, and you can feel the bullets tearing through targets, but rather than delivering satisfaction, you mostly end up feeling guilty and ashamed.

This game's real killer is the enemy AI. Given how often your adversaries run into the middle of a firefight or fail to use cover, you'd think that they are all suicidal. It's shocking to see how idiotic and careless they can be. AI problems also hamper the squad controls. There's little chance of a smooth operation when your teammates react to situations like blind bats. On the plus side, the missions do a nice job of exploring the criminal side, and the highly destructible environments make you appreciate the conclusion of

each battle. Despite having some high points, the single-player is riddled with far too many problems.

Kane and Lynch does offer an interesting co-op mode (available only in split-screen), where, if you played single-player, you get to see some of the off-screen developments with Lynch first hand. This is a cool idea for replay (as both give different perspectives), but with two players running through the same environment, the AI struggles even more to comprehend a combat situation, and none of the gaps in the story are filled.

Multiplayer is the only area where this game really clicks. Dubbed Fragile Alliance, Kane & Lynch's online component starts out as a cooperative game with up to eight players working together to secure as much cash as they can. So, if you are knocking over a bank, you'll need to team up to take out the guards, swipe the cash, and clear a path to the extraction point where a van awaits. This is where things get interesting. If you happen to see that one of your fellow bank robbers has more cash than you, you can unload a clip into him, and steal his haul. This backstabbing action will instantly mark you as a traitor to the team. The player that drops a traitor will earn a sizeable reward. Also, the player that you killed

■ The character designs are among gaming's best

will respawn as a vengeful law enforcement agent. With greed and trust constantly tugging at your trigger finger, Kane & Lynch offers a satisfying multiplayer experience that is unlike any other out there. But this game just can't seem to catch a break. You want to spend hours upon hours in this enthralling setting, but the game only offers four maps. As competitive as it is, it grows old very quickly.

There's certainly a lot here to love, and a lot more that you want to love, but most of your time in Kane & Lynch is spent shaking or scratching your head. The problems are just too visible for it to be taken seriously as a gritty thriller.——REINER

■ The missions do a good job of making players feel like a criminal

◄ | Lynch

BOTTOM LINE 7

> **Concept:** A dark tale of two criminals soiled by lackluster gunplay and a plot riddled with holes

> **Graphics:** The character animations are stiff and unnatural, but the environmental destruction will remind you of the lobby scene in *The Matrix*

> **Sound:** The character voices are well established, and it is cool how Kane and Lynch constantly bicker during gameplay

> **Playability:** The mechanics are decent and the guns feel great, but the enemy AI rarely shows any sign of intelligence. It's like shooting fish in a barrel

> **Entertainment:** Single player is a major letdown, but the originality and execution of multiplayer is deserving of a look

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion 7.25

If you look closely at the center of a Kane & Lynch disc you see a hole. This must be where Eidos placed all the missing pieces of this game, because it doesn't feel complete. For starters, the story is fairly sporadic. This aids the narrative at times, helping move the story along in a stylistic way, but often you wonder what's going on. While the main characters are missing their morals, everyone else seems to be missing rational thought and good judgment; enemies fail to take proper cover and do a lot of stupid things. On the plus side, the action is decent, the atmosphere can get pretty intense, and watching the environment splinter and shred apart under the spit of your gun is always entertaining. The Fragile Alliance multiplayer mode is also a tense thrill. Unfortunately, it's also missing something: maps. There are only four and they are all pulled straight out of the campaign. Unless I'm the one missing something, Kane & Lynch fails to live up to its potential.——BEN

PSP

Warhammer 40,000:
Squad Command

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER STRATEGY (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA AD HOC OR INFRASTRUCTURE)
> **PUBLISHER** THQ > **DEVELOPER** REDLYNX > **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 12 > **ESRB** T

WITH BLADE AND BOMB

Warhammer has its origins in tabletop gaming, and this PSP effort harkens back to that very analog form of warfare. Its turn-based tactical squad battles are a pleasure to master, even if they tend to be a bit short and shallow.

Using some combination of scouts, space marines, and usually a vehicle, you'll be tasked with eliminating the forces of chaos from some embattled world or another. The story is wafer-thin, but that's largely irrelevant when you're knee-deep in Squad Command's strategic combats. Managing firing arcs and weapon loadouts while splitting your soldiers' limited action points between moving and firing is a joy.

Thoroughly destructible environments add another vector to gameplay. Hiding behind a wall doesn't do much against a tank or a missile launcher, though using cover effectively will extend your lifespan from "infinitesimal" to "short."

Although the game executes its core concepts well, I'm not entirely convinced that it's deep enough to have the kind of lasting appeal that marks a truly great strategy game. Since units bite the bullet from a mere few shots, a single mistake from either you or the AI can dramatically change the course of a battle – a flaw exacerbated by the turn structure that has all of the forces on one side moving at once. Missions are bite-sized, with most lasting on the order of 15 minutes. While this fits with the handheld philosophy, it also keeps the strategy from developing very far.

Decent online multiplayer gives Squad Command some extra legs, though, and the precision with which the gameplay is executed makes this a standout in a thin PSP strategy market.—**ADAM**

BOTTOM LINE	8

> **Concept:** Bring a much more tabletop-flavored version of Warhammer 40,000 to the PSP

> **Graphics:** It's always nice when a strategy game doesn't use its genre as an excuse to have crappy graphics. The crisp FMV cutscenes are just a bonus

> **Sound:** There's really no reason to not have your PSP on mute

> **Playability:** Some minor camera issues are the only weirdness in the interface

> **Entertainment:** It's not incredibly deep, but this is a well-executed strategy game on a system that doesn't have many

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion	8.5

Squad Command keeps things simple by focusing solely on troop movement and finding good cover. Fortunately, managing your squad to lay carefully planned traps or blow out a nest of enemies with a well-aimed rocket is a rewarding experience. The game also does a nice job of leading you along with a steady stream of new weapons and unit types. My only real complaint is that you can't rotate the battlefield perspective, making it difficult to see exactly where some enemies are located or find whatever is obscuring your shot. Otherwise, this is a great handheld game that should please strategy fans across the board.—**BEN**

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360

MX vs. ATV Untamed

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER RACING (UP TO 12-PLAYER VIA PLAYSTATION NETWORK OR XBOX LIVE) > **PUBLISHER** THQ
> **DEVELOPER** RAINBOW STUDIOS (PS3, XBOX 360), INCINERATOR STUDIOS (WII, PS2) > **RELEASE** DECEMBER 17 > **ESRB** E

OFF-ROAD ADVENTURES

Some gamers may see ATV titles as something their little brothers play on a hand-me-down PS2, but in a year filled with good (and some great) racers, MX vs. ATV Untamed holds its own. What it may lack in revolutionary features it makes up for on the tracks where speed, skill, and surprises are not in short supply.

Developer Rainbow Studios has already perfected its brand of racing, incorporating split-second timing and controlled racing at high speeds, and this has allowed it to hit the ground running here in the next generation. Combine this with how fast this game can feel and the good-looking graphics, and you have a title that has better off-road racing than Dirt (excluding that game's rally portion).

I just wish Rainbow hadn't stopped with good enough. The game's tracks are very well done, but I was disappointed that there were times when Untamed's expansive environments weren't better utilized. I loved Opencross, but hated that the tracks repeated after five races. Supposedly open-ended Waypoint races go in circles(?!) instead of taking off into the wild and having you explore the huge tracts of land already created.

When you do explore the game in Free Ride, you'll only come across many of these same tracks you've already raced. Add in the fact that you often have to re-race tracks in second motos (which are like heats), and it feels like Untamed is more of a slave to convention than it has to be – something that isn't erased by the fact that the X-Cross career structure lets you pick which circuits you want to race.

With such a strong racing foundation at its core, I expect the next Rainbow MX vs. ATV title to even further utilize what it already has in front of it. Untamed is good racing, but it needs to dig deeper within itself to deliver up to its potential.—**KATO**

theedge

When All Games Aren't Created Equal

A slight Edge goes to the PlayStation 3 version over the Xbox 360, only because the loads on Sony's system are definitely quicker.
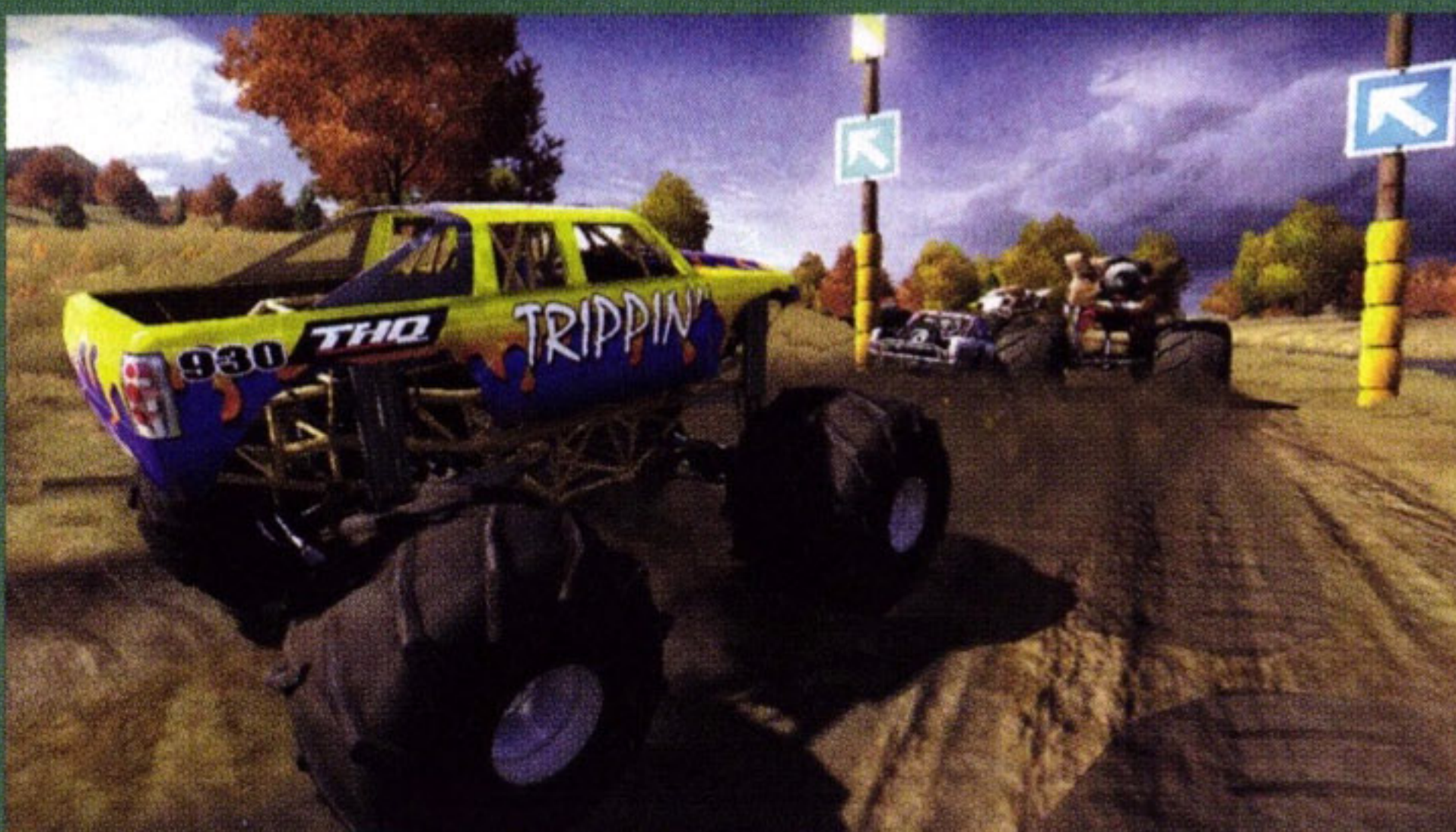
BOTTOM LINE	8

> **Concept:** Slight tweaks in the MX formula yield a good next-gen debut

> **Graphics:** Pretty good looking, even with some fill-in of foreground objects. Not as pretty as Dirt, though

> **Sound:** The sound of angry tattoos. Shouldn't need much explanation

> **Playability:** I'd prefer the pre-load on the right analog, but it takes more skill because it's combined with your steering on the left analog

> **Entertainment:** It's a fun game that ultimately puts limits on its own horizons

> **Replay Value:** Moderately High

Second Opinion	8.25

MX vs. ATV Unleashed continues Rainbow Studios, tradition of producing quality off-road racers. It's not the hottest looking game you'll see this year, but what it lacks in pizzazz it more than makes up in variety, solid control mechanics, and a well-designed career mode. This series has been around forever for a reason – it rarely disappoints. While you could fault Rainbow for not innovating (although there are some new tricks in the online portion), this provides fans exactly what they want. I will say that, in comparison to the recent MotorStorm, some of the track designs feel a bit drab, but chalk that up to its more realistic approach to the sport.—**MATT**

THE GENERATION GAP

BOTTOM LINE	7.5

> **FORMAT** Wii, PLAYSTATION 2
> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER RACING (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA WiiCONNECT24, UP TO 6-PLAYER VIA PLAYSTATION 2 ONLINE)

Looking very similar, both of these versions certainly don't pack the graphical punch as the next-gen versions, and the sense of speed and some of the racing thrills suffer because of it. The Wii version has Wii remote racing, tricking, and pre-loading, and both have some slightly different events, so if you don't have a next-gen console you're still getting some solid racing.

XBOX 360

Scene It? Lights, Camera, Action

> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER BOARD > **PUBLISHER** MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS
> **DEVELOPER** SCREENLIFE GAMES/ WXP > **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 6
> **ESRB** T

FRIENDS REQUIRED

The Scene It DVD board game has done extremely well in its own right, but in the few times I've played it, I always thought the setup was a little cumbersome. You move around a board, read off cards, and answer questions. Only occasionally do you get to mess with the best part – the DVD film clips. With the Xbox 360 edition, there are no more dice rolls or spaces to move – it's all about point totals now. And players spend 100 percent of the time interacting with the screen.

Perhaps the most significant improvement is that the game keeps track of all of the questions you've answered. You'll have to go through over 1,800 of them before you can start pretending that you know what the director of *Staying Alive* is. Despite this, it still doesn't mean you won't get two questions in a row about subjects like *Star Wars*, *Heathers*, or Renée Zellweger.

At first, the three modes – Short Play, Long Play, and Party Play – may seem limited, but the 21 game types guarantee plenty of variety. Players will finish quotes, listen to sound bites, watch clips, guess film titles from sketches, order movies according to release date, unscramble movie title anagrams, and more, over the course of three rounds and the Final Cut (games last 20 to 40 minutes or longer in the never ending Party Play). What's cool is that even if you haven't seen a particular movie, you can still answer plenty of the questions based on the film clip like "What color is the truck in the background?" or "What time are these characters meeting for lunch?"

A nice side effect from playing Scene It is that it makes you want to go back and watch a movie you haven't seen in a long time or even check out an older film you had never heard of before. (*Caveman* is going straight into my Netflix queue, btw). The only things that trip Scene It up is that it's almost twice as expensive as the other editions of the game and, with no online play, you can only really play it occasionally when friends are over and in the mood. Otherwise, this is an excellent party game that anyone can get into.—**BRYAN**

BOTTOM LINE 8.5

> **Concept:** Bring the hit DVD board game to a more interactive medium

> **Graphics:** Nice HD film clips are complemented by Sims-esque movie set people

> **Sound:** The announcer is amusingly insulting until he starts repeating lines

> **Playability:** The four buzzer controllers work flawlessly and allow non-gamers to jump right in

> **Entertainment:** Outwitting your friends and throwing out smack talk is ridiculously fun. It definitely maintains the feel of a board game without all of the pieces to worry about losing.

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion 7

Utilizing film clips, movie posters, sets, and more, Scene It does a good job with its props for this run-of-the-mill trivia game. The controllers themselves are a mixed bag. They feel good, but sometimes hitting that Y button at the bottom costs you crucial time. At least Scene It's production values give it a leg up when compared with EA's bland Smarty Pants. You can move the controller around all you want, but knowledge is power.—**KATO**

XBOX 360

Viva Piñata: Party Animals

> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 4-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE) > **PUBLISHER** MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS > **DEVELOPER** KROME STUDIOS > **RELEASE** OCTOBER 30 > **ESRB** E

BOTTOM LINE 5.5

Most piñatas that attend parties end up leaving in a trash bag, but not before being beaten with a stick and seeing children eat their guts. A similar fate awaits Microsoft's candy-stuffed critters in a game that will surely suck the life out of any party. Like most games of this ilk, players compete for points in a variety of minigames. Most of these feel half-baked, and the more you play, the more they feel too similar to other events. The races, which conclude each tournament, offer smooth controls and track designs loaded with jumps and tight turns, but given how frequently players get power-ups, they end up being more of a crapshoot of who is dealt the best hand. So that makes this game a decent fit for kids who just love jamming on buttons, and a "I wish I could rewind time and do something else" type of play for everyone else.—**REINER**

XBOX 360

Bee Movie Game

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION
> **PUBLISHER** ACTIVISION
> **DEVELOPER** BEENOX STUDIOS
> **RELEASE** OCTOBER 30 > **ESRB** E

BOTTOM LINE 6.5

Whenever Barry B. Benson takes to the skies, good things happen. Whether you are dodging boulder-sized raindrops in slow motion or frantically fluttering your little wings away from an irate human, the flight mechanic is beautifully designed. The challenges are usually quite fun, and the high-flying thrills extend into graphically charged button-pressing sequences where we see Barry weaving through traffic, and my favorite, clinging for dear life on a tennis ball. Unfortunately, as great as Barry is in the air, he spends most of his time taking on vehicle-based tasks, such as driving a taxicab, racing, and repairing cars. The car-based gameplay is absolutely atrocious, and serves little purpose other than to prevent you from taking on another enjoyable flight stage. Bee Movie Game is a gracious flyer, but in the end, you walk away feeling like you've been stung 100 times.—**REINER**

PLAYSTATION 3

Time Crisis 4

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** NAMCO BANDAI > **DEVELOPER** NAMCO BANDAI
> **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 20 > **ESRB** T

IT'S A CRISIS ALRIGHT

I wish I had good news for you, but judging from this game's merits, the rail shooting gun genre should be shot and put in the ground. I really wanted to like Time Crisis 4, but one thing after another piled up in the list of frustrations as I played until I was forced to acknowledge this as one of the worst games I've played in months.

I certainly recognize the charm of having a realistically shaped gun as a controller – we all grew up on this sort of thing. Unfortunately, the problems start right away with the new PS3 Guncon controller. It feels cheap, and the new analog sticks in particular are chintzy and hard to use. Once the game starts, players will be astounded to realize that no-reticle is the standard default approach to gameplay. In fact, only some of the levels even offer you the option to turn it back on.

The newly added first-person shooter game mode is dreadful. A traditional FPS on a normal controller in this day and age would never be released in this poor shape, and the fact that you're using a gun shouldn't have changed that assertion. You'll trudge, slow as a turtle, through horribly linear and uninteresting level designs as enemies pop out to attack utilizing their "please shoot me" AI. The arcade mode levels fare little better, since they feel poorly balanced and stocked with cookie cutter villains, my favorite of which were the ridiculously named secret weapon engineered bug creatures called Terror Bites. Get it?

There seems to be an almost conscious effort to offer positively insulting story premises delivered through some of the worst dialogue ever penned. I'm going to chalk that up as being a byproduct of the genre and call it a wash.

Even ignoring the ludicrous plot, what really matters here should be the shooting mechanic, which just isn't much fun. The strangely designed cover system has you popping up and down like a hyperactive rabbit, so you never really get a full view of the action. And get this: in the cooperative multiplayer, you play in split screen – in letterbox format! What were they thinking? I don't know what else I can tell you to discourage you away from this complete disaster.—**MILLER**

BOTTOM LINE 4.25

> **Concept:** Use the included Guncon controller to blast the baddies in this unexciting sequel to the long running franchise

> **Graphics:** If a normal FPS looked like this, you'd cry foul

> **Sound:** Bang! Bang! Need I say more?

> **Playability:** Much of the game doesn't let you have an onscreen reticle, so I wouldn't exactly call the usability friendly

> **Entertainment:** Slow and unexciting, this is a series in desperate need of an overhaul

> **Replay Value:** Low

Second Opinion 4.5

Time Crisis 4 is the living example of just how far arcade shooters have fallen behind their first-person brethren. The story is on par with the worst of NES games, the level design is craptastic, and the enemy AI borders on clinically dead. The new FPS mode falls flat mostly due to the Wii-like sluggish camera scrolling, and the new Guncon 3 peripheral hardly accommodates left-handed players. To make matters worse, you will often run out of ammo during shootouts, leaving you to fend off enemy advances with a measly pistol. The overall difficulty is schizophrenic, wavering wildly between the easy FPS sections and the tough arcade sequences. If you want to have fun with a gun in your hand, do yourself a favor and play paintball instead of wasting your money on this substandard game.—**BERTZ**

"Bowser, do you really hate me? Or do you see us eventually having a relationship like Chuck and Larry?"

Wii

Super Mario Galaxy

> STYLE 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION/PLATFORM > PUBLISHER NINTENDO > DEVELOPER NINTENDO > RELEASE NOVEMBER 12 > ESRB E

RE-IMAGINING THE PLATFORMER

Like the meteorite that led to the extinction of the dinosaurs, the arrival of a new Super Mario game usually brings about a dramatic change in the video game climate. As history has shown, entire generations of games have drawn heavy inspiration from the revolutionary steps that Mario has made. It's strange to think that a fat Italian plumber could be the face of change for one of the world's largest entertainment mediums, but the proof can still be seen in many of the games we play today. With his arrival on Wii, Mario is once again making a push to alter the landscape of gaming. This time, however, he is not pushing gaming toward the uncharted future. Rather, we see him looking to the past for innovation. In Super Mario Galaxy, Mario brings us back to the golden age of the platformers and shows us that our fond memories were just the primer for an adventure that is truly out of this world.

It turns out that the series' most inventive level designs and most harrowing challenges can only be found in the far reaches of space. While Mario's movements will be familiar to those of you who have played Super Mario 64 and Super Mario Sunshine, the odd composition of the levels makes the experience feel entirely new. A simple jump, which you were hoping would bring you to an easily reachable platform, could end with you standing on the ceiling. Sharing the properties of M.C. Escher's

art, most of the level designs will either mess with your mind with their disorienting architecture or make your stomach turn with their gravity defying gameplay. It almost feels like you are going through astronaut training as you play.

By breaking the laws of physics, Nintendo has been able to create some truly amazing gameplay. You'll find yourself hurtling through space toward a black hole, praying that you can point the Wii remote at the screen with the accuracy needed to latch onto a tiny object. The game even goes into sidescrolling platforming segments, but this time you are not only battling the obstacles; you have to account for four different points of gravity. And sure, you've seen lava and ice worlds before, but have you ever seen both of them united into one?

As in Mario 64, all of the worlds hold multiple Stars. But in this game, you won't find yourself retracing the same steps to reach your goal. Each Star leads you down a unique path, featuring its own challenges and gameplay. This makes for a massive game. There are some repeated goals, but most of the content will make you say, "That was one of the coolest platforming sequences I've ever done."

Galaxy also makes great use of the Wii's motion-sensing controls. While Mario's general movement is handled beautifully on the nunchuk's analog stick, many feats require a shake of the remote or a

steady pointing hand. If you have a second Wii remote, you can also experience one of the coolest and most inventive non-traditional co-op modes in any game. The second player doesn't control a character, but rather a star. This player can pick up collectable items, and can also freeze enemies or projectiles in their tracks, which can be a great aid.

Super Mario Galaxy takes players on a journey unlike any other, but there are parts of it that should have been lost in time. A good portion of the story is pushed off to the side and is completely optional. While it's nice that you rarely have to fuss with the camera, there are times where walls will obstruct your view, or you won't be able to rotate the perspective to see where you are supposed to jump next. And worst of all, for a game that puts such an emphasis on going out of your way to get an extra life, all of your lives are reset when you turn the Wii off.

But I think you'll agree, once that nostalgic music rings out and Mario leaps into the air, all your complaints instantly vanish. This is, in my opinion, the best Mario game since the NES classic, Super Mario Bros. It innovates in a genre that we had thought we had seen everything from, and in doing so delivers some of the most entertaining gameplay to date.—**REINER**

Most of the levels are comprised of stand-alone sections that Mario must fly to

BOTTOM LINE 9.75

> **Concept:** Nintendo has gone back to its past to reinvent the platformer for the next generation. It's both nostalgic and new, and always a blast

> **Graphics:** Similar in detail to Super Mario Sunshine, but with some beautiful effects for water, reflective surfaces, and particles. The game also looks surprisingly good on huge HDTVs

> **Sound:** An amazing score featuring new mixes of Mario's familiar melodies and beautifully composed orchestrated tracks

> **Playability:** Mario's high-flying antics are tailored perfectly for the Wii. Motion-based gameplay is effectively used, but isn't overused. Mario's standard movement also feels right at home on the nunchuk

> **Entertainment:** A huge adventure that just keeps getting better and better the more you play

> **Replay Value:** High

Second Opinion 9.75

A tour de force platformer, Super Mario Galaxy is at once instantly familiar and completely new. In this mammoth adventure (you'll be astonished at just how much there is to do here), all the elements that Nintendo has made a part of the action/platform lexicon are reassembled, re-imagined, and reconfigured into clever and striking levels that make this old genre feel young again. If you thought that all there was to Galaxy was running around on spheres, be prepared. These are quite simply some of the greatest level designs of all time, constantly reversing the laws of gravity and physics to keep you guessing. While some perennial flaws (spotty camera, a complete disinterest in telling a compelling story) remain, for the most part this is a Mario game to stand beside the best of the series – and that's saying something. Remain patient through the slow and sometimes tedious beginning hours and you'll be rewarded with some of the most ingenious and refined gameplay you've ever experienced. They don't make 'em like this anymore, and they never did.—**MATT**

Sally
Spin the wheel to select a category

Fashion

1 / 3

Wii

Smarty Pants

> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER BOARD > **PUBLISHER** ELECTRONIC ARTS > **DEVELOPER** EALA > **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 20
> **ESRB** E

RAISE YOUR HAND

Although EA's made a big point of trying to create content custom-made for the Wii, so far it hasn't paid off. Smarty Pants, a traditional trivia title with some added Wii motion controls, represents its best effort to date. Is it revolutionary? Absolutely not. Will it manage to entertain your whole family this holiday season, no matter what age the participants are? Absolutely.

There's really not much to it. Single-player mode is almost ridiculously simple. Answer questions until the time runs out. Do it again. That's it. It doesn't even save your scores. However, how often do you play Trivial Pursuit by yourself? So, lets turn our attention to the multiplayer, which succeeds at providing a couple of engaging ways for the clan to have a good old time. Friends mode is a competitive battle, where you use the Wii remote to "raise your hand" before your opponent and point to the right answer onscreen. Family mode lets you join forces (for less fighting!) and answer as a team. For total Nintendophiles, you can even use your Mii in-

game, which is a nice touch. There's also some motion control functionality like spinning a question wheel or goofy dance moves to slow down the timer, which I could honestly take or leave.

The questions range from easy to surprisingly tough, covering all the standard bases of arts, entertainment, science, history, people and places, and sports. A few questions have pictorial answers, but other than that it's nothing fancy. You enter your age at the outset, and after a little experimentation, I'm fairly sure that the game tailors some of the pop culture references of questions to be age appropriate.

Smarty Pants is fun. It doesn't pretend to be anything more, nor does it need to. I will say that it's not quite at the addictive level as the much-missed You Don't Know Jack series (it's missing the catty humor), but it's certainly successful in accomplishing its modest goals.—**MATT**
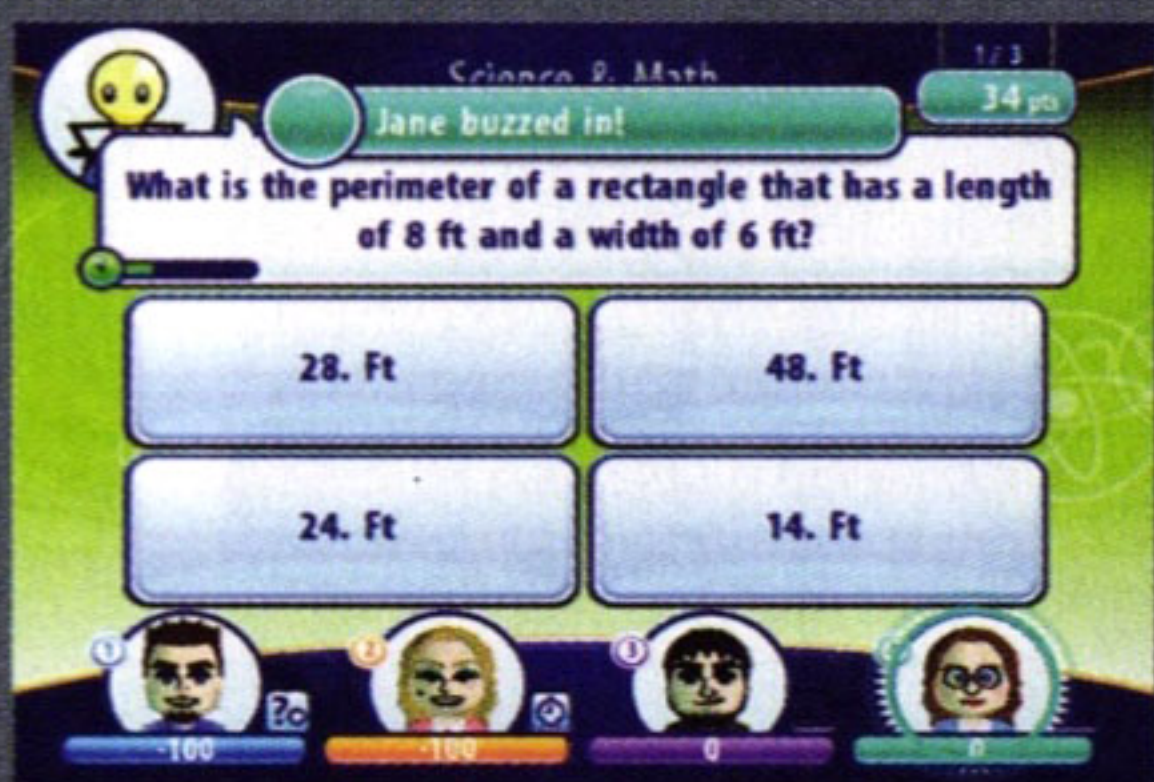
| BOTTOM LINE | 7.5 |

> **Concept:** An engaging trivia game imbued with a few Wii motion-based controls

> **Graphics:** The characters are cute enough, other than that... um...the fonts are very readable!

> **Sound:** The cartoonish music seems to get more jumpy as time runs low

> **Playability:** The motion controls, while minimal, work well, and I really like the "raise your hand" mechanic for buzzing in on questions

> **Entertainment:** If you're looking for a board-game style experience for the whole family on the Wii, you can't go wrong here

> **Replay Value:** High

Second Opinion   6

This quiz game doesn't falsely advertise itself, but the one question you better hope you get right is: "Do I really want to spend $50 on a game of random trivia?" I personally don't think you do. It's not that you can't have fun waving the controllers around with your friends. I just think that something like Rayman Raving Rabbids 2 is a better party option compared to this game, which is about little more than answering questions. Apart from some of the bonus cards you can get, there are a few gimmicky motion controls that can't hide an otherwise shallow title. However, at least the trivia itself is good because it scales appropriately for all ages, with even those focused at younger kids capable of making you look like an ass, Are You Smarter Than a 5th Grader?-style.—**KATO**

Science & Math   1/3
Jane buzzed in!   34%
What is the perimeter of a rectangle that has a length of 8 ft and a width of 6 ft?
28. Ft   48. Ft
24. Ft   14. Ft

Wii

Rayman Raving Rabbids 2

> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** UBISOFT > **DEVELOPER** UBISOFT PARIS > **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 13
> **ESRB** E10+

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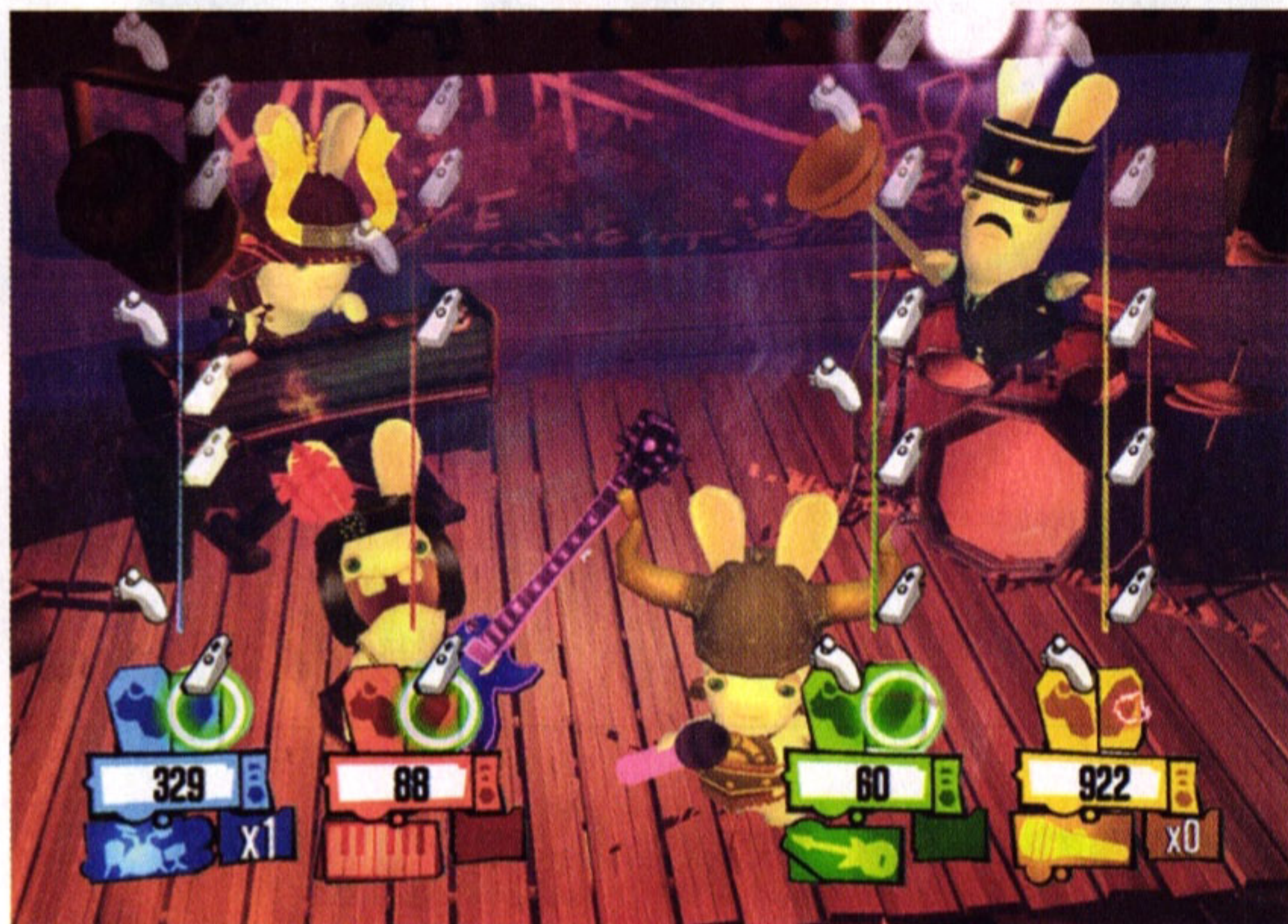
INSANITY, PART TWO

Few teams can so capably package absurdity in a box for you to buy at your local game store as the folks behind Rayman and his maniacal rabbid costars. That fact was made abundantly clear last year when the first Raving Rabbids surprised everyone as one of the standout titles in the Wii's launch. One year later, the same insanity has returned with some notable differences. What has remained is a commitment to wholesale idiocy and randomness, where the laughs come fast and low brow, and yet still manage to entertain without fail.

What's changed is the gameplay structure. Like its predecessor, there are still several dozen mini-games involving bashing, spitting, spilling, farting, or kicking the white-furred crazies. Now, however, every one of the minigames is geared towards four-player multiplayer mayhem. Thus, while alone you could play through and get some laughs, Raving Rabbids 2 can only be fully experienced with a crowd.

The story, such as it is, is even less present than last time around. And that's saying something, given that our plot in the first installment involved repeated days in the rabbid equivalent of arena combat. Now the little devil hares are hellbent on world domination, and Rayman infiltrates the lot to stop the madness. I guess. It

doesn't really matter, honestly, since almost immediately you'll be starting up your first minigame. Most of these are easy to pick up and play for even the most casual players, and the premise of each small event is, without fail, so ludicrous that it should unite families and friends in a shared camaraderie of confusion and delight. Even so, the gameplay that backs up these brief games is pretty simplistic. I realize that's sort of the point, but it limits the fun after the first few hours, when the humor begins to wear a little thin.

Several dozen unlockable outfits can be mixed and matched at your leisure to create the silliest looking avatar imaginable, and the longer arcade shooters from the first game return as brief alternatives to the more frantic minigames. I'm all for random humor and silliness, which Raving Rabbids delivers with aplomb. A little more genuine gameplay, whether in single or multiplayer, and this would move from good and hilarious to great and hilarious.—**MILLER**

| BOTTOM LINE | 7.75 |

> **Concept:** Dive back into the crazy world of the rabbids, now with way more multiplayer mayhem

> **Graphics:** The art style screams funny all by itself, but this isn't the most technically advanced game ever

> **Sound:** From famous songs covered by the rabbids to the random sound effects, the audio experience fits perfectly

> **Playability:** Each game is easy to pick up and understand, but often simplistic

> **Entertainment:** Great fun with friends, but no longer the single player experience it used to be

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion   8

From the extensive arm flailing this game demands, I've lost all feeling in my right elbow. The overly abusive animal cruelty has also brought on a teary-eyed gut ache. Standing as both a comedic masterpiece and the ultimate party game, Rayman Raving Rabbids 2 eclipses the original with its minigame designs and motion-based gameplay. Most party games offer a number of minigame duds, but I didn't find a game here that wasn't fun. The only downer is that the game no longer offers a dedicated single-player mode. Rabbids is definitely worthy of your dollar, especially if you still find yourself playing Wii Sports or are in the market for an easily accessible multiplayer game.—**REINER**

Wii

Resident Evil: The Umbrella Chronicles

> STYLE 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION > PUBLISHER CAPCOM > DEVELOPER CAPCOM > RELEASE NOVEMBER 13 > ESRB M

SHOOT FIRST, ASK LATER

I have to admit to some surprise that this odd concept shaped up into such a fun game. It was hard for me to imagine the idea of distilling the atmosphere and allure of Resident Evil into what amounts to a light gun shooting gallery, particularly after previous attempts like Survivor and Dead Aim were so disastrous. Having now played the finished product, I see the secret lies in embracing the shooter elements and delivering an action-packed thrill ride, while grounding the game in the familiar events and stories that players have encountered for years. Gone are those long, lonely moments of silence and drawn out plots of the original Resident Evil games. In some ways, Umbrella Chronicles is the video game equivalent of a greatest hits album, but one where your favorite musician has had some modern updates to his sound. If that sounds terrible to you, Umbrella Chronicles might not deliver. But give it a chance, and you may warm up to the new vibe.

Each level of Umbrella Chronicles has players adopt familiar characters from earlier games in the franchise before diving into the zombie-infested craziness that were those early adventures. The Wii remote works extremely well, whether you've got it mounted in the new Zapper peripheral or not. Fights are fast and intense, but they carry more depth than is traditionally seen in gun-based rail shooters. As the levels wear on,

the importance of timing your reloads and noticing critical locations to hit on each body becomes even more important. In particular, the boss battles are a blast as truly horrific giant beasts weave in and out of the frame before diving down towards you to strike. Rapid button press dodges and action

commands keep you on your toes, and the level designs are chock full of goodies hidden in lamps, pots, and other paraphernalia, all of which are great fun to shoot to pieces. Meanwhile, the weapons feel solid and powerful, from the head-exploding shotgun blasts to the knife slashes you'll enact with the remote when the flesh-eaters get too close for comfort.

While playing alone will certainly amplify the scares and the challenge, the game is way more fun with a partner at your side; all of the main story is playable by two gunners simultaneously. Some unlockable bonus chapters only offer single-player, but they are great additions nonetheless. Meanwhile, a steady flow of hidden memos and books keep appearing in your archive as you play, offering a rare glimpse at the Resident Evil mythos as a whole interconnected affair.

Finally, not to be overlooked is the excellent graphical presentation. Well-animated enemies react realistically to your shots, while the environments themselves are some of the best I've seen on the Wii to date. This is a surprisingly big and challenging release, and not one to be overlooked as just another simplistic rail shooter. It may not be the next big release in the franchise, but Umbrella Chronicles deserves its place right beside the other games in this venerable series.—MILLER

■ The gunfights are exciting and frantic, communicating the desperate fear of the original games

■ Most of the big name characters from throughout Resident Evil history make an appearance

■ Special unlockable solo missions tell you parts of the story you've never seen before

Wii

Soulcalibur Legends

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** NAMCO BANDAI > **DEVELOPER** NAMCO BANDAI
> **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 20 > **ESRB** T

CAN'T STOP THE CHOP

The biggest mistake you can make with Soulcalibur Legends (apart from buying it) is assuming that there is some strategy to the motion-based gameplay. You can make calculated, deliberate slices with the remote if you want to, but here's the inside scoop: Holding the remote and nunchuk, just move both arms up and down like you're dual-wielding knives and chopping the hell out of some vegetables. Several hours later, you win!

I wish I could say that the tedious gameplay was the only crippling flaw in Soulcalibur Legends, but the entire experience is an onslaught of miserable ideas and even worse execution. You play through the same handful of levels again and again – and I don't just mean recycled textures. Entire layouts (complete with boss fights and poor excuses for puzzles) are repeated. The reward for your perseverance is usually a sequence of text boxes and character portraits outlining the fatuous logic behind your

next attack on a location you've already beaten several times.

Of course, when this much goes wrong at the conceptual level, it is foolishly optimistic to think the game's other components, like the camera and targeting systems, even approach adequate. As you slash through hordes of palette-swapped generic bad guys, you will routinely be hit by rolling boulders you can't see and pierced by arrows from crossbows you can't target. As a matter of fact, it's kind of amazing how every mechanic is on the cutting edge of failure.

Soulcalibur Legends is a trap, luring in gullible gamers with the promise of two-player co-op and a cast of characters from the series. Once you take the bait, the whole rusty contraption snaps shut – and you will carry the scars of playing it for the rest of your life.—**JOE**
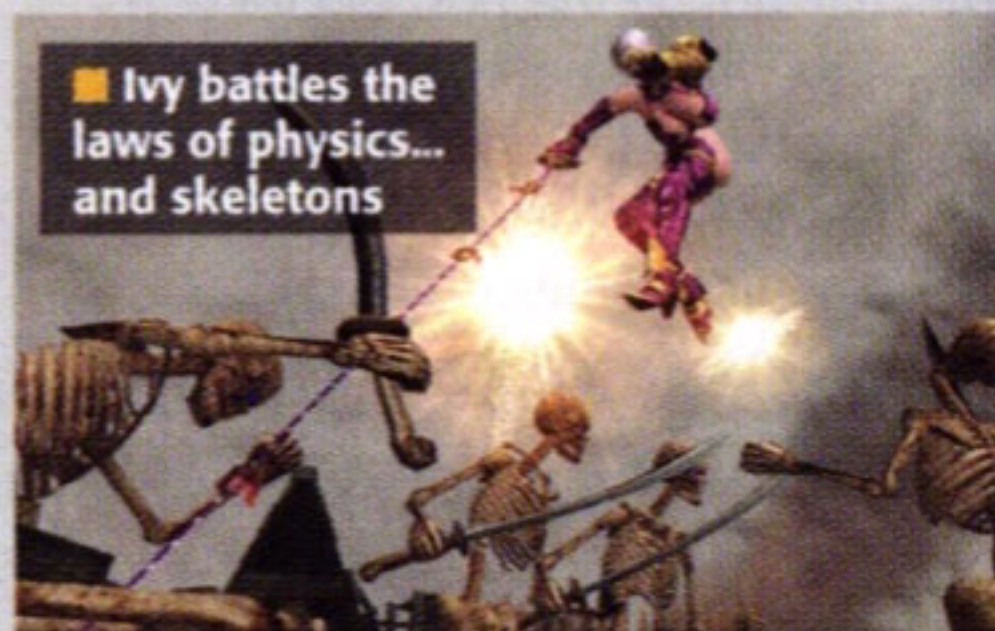
■ Ivy battles the laws of physics... and skeletons

■ "Nightmare" is a good way to describe one of these characters and the game as a whole

BOTTOM LINE 4

> **Concept:** People like Soulcalibur. People like the Wii. This is how you take advantage of those people and betray their trust

> **Graphics:** The action looks okay, but the static art and story exposition are agonizing and ugly

> **Sound:** Hear Siegfried spout inspiring lines like "I don't have time to stop!" and "It's not over yet!"

> **Playability:** I don't think "playing" accurately describes the pointless ways you interact with this disaster

> **Entertainment:** It could be an integral part of a hilarious prank, like pulling the old switcheroo with your friend's copy of Super Mario Galaxy

> **Replay Value:** Moderately Low

Second Opinion 4

Soulcalibur Legends feels like bonus content created for a proper Soulcalibur game that never materialized. Releasing this on its own was a bad idea. It won't take long at all for players to get sick of waggling not one but both arms through the same eight or nine maps killing legions of skeletons and wolves. The brainless story at least gives players the courtesy of being hilariously bad. Your knucklehead friends are known to dispense such pearls of wisdom as "As long as we don't lose, we'll win!" Perhaps the development team worked under the same half-baked philosophy.—**BRYAN**

Wii

Ghost Squad

> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** SEGA > **DEVELOPER** SEGA > **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 20 > **ESRB** T
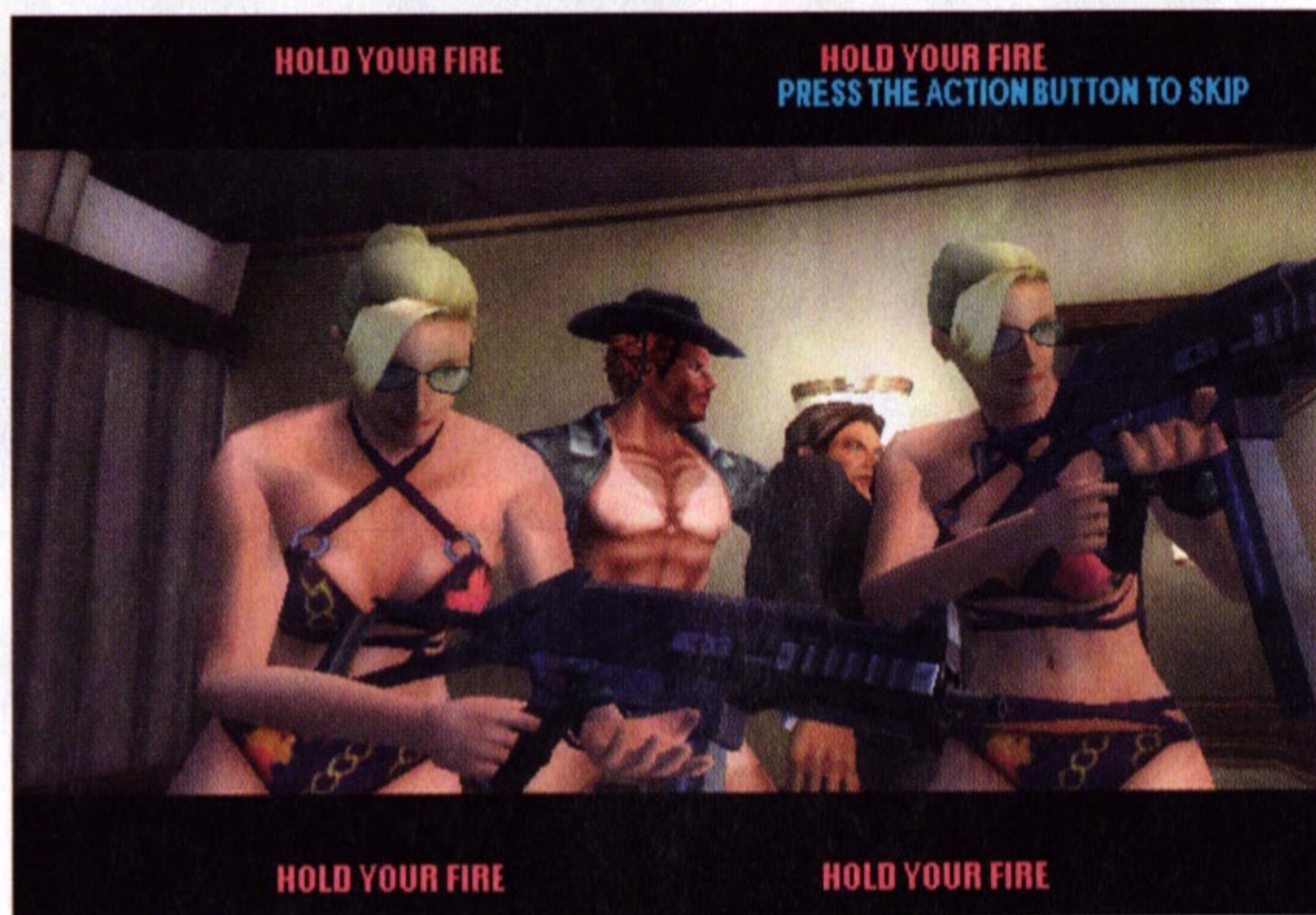
FISH IN A BARREL

Good ol' terrorists. They're always there for the gaming industry, ready to kidnap heads of state while throwing themselves wholesale upon the bullets of elite military units. Ghost Squad dips deeply from this well, providing an entirely unoriginal backstory (with all of the attendant bad English and terrible voiceovers endemic to Japanese writers creating games starring Americans) for its traditional light-gun gameplay. And though this shooting gallery doesn't throw any surprises at players, tight level design and a surprising amount of variety make it a satisfying trip back to the arcades of yore.

Ghost Squad's core gameplay, while limited, is executed well. Using a Wii Zapper or similar peripheral dramatically cuts down on the wavering that the remote is generally prone to, and obviously makes the game feel much more natural. The scripted enemy spawns are paced well and present popcorn challenges to the casual crowd, while still offering opportunities to pick up bonus medals and higher scores for nailing secondary targets or chaining headshots and multi-kills.

The small twists on standard light-gun

action lend Ghost Squad just enough variety and replayability to keep the on-rails shooting interesting. Selecting a fire mode, unlocking new weapons, and choosing between a handful of paths through each of the three levels are minor things, but nonetheless keep the game from being as shallow as many others of its ilk.

Even so, the amount of content is a bit disappointing. Three levels just aren't enough nowadays, despite a handful of variations on each. The fact that they play out exactly the same way every time doesn't help, either. Playing through solo or with a buddy is definitely worth an afternoon, though, regardless of the game's relatively short legs.—**ADAM**

BOTTOM LINE 7

> **Concept:** Bring the arcade light-gun classic to the Wii

> **Graphics:** Not good, even in the small pond of third-party Wii games

> **Sound:** The voiceovers have more ham than an Easter feast

> **Playability:** Good with the Zapper, mediocre without – that little piece of plastic does wonders

> **Entertainment:** Shallow and short it may be, but it's an entertaining shooting gallery nevertheless

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion 6.5

Ghost Squad is a fun arcade shooter, which is why it's a shame that the experience is finished in less than two hours. The Wii Zapper works great, and the game adds subtle twists to its point-and-shoot gameplay to keep the experience fresh. Had Sega invested in 10-12 more levels, this game would have scored much higher, but right now it feels like a demo of a much longer game. If replaying the same three missions with a few minor variables as you move up in difficulty doesn't bother you, then by all means give this game a go. But I prefer my $30 games to last longer than my last $30 steak dinners.—**BERTZ**

Wii
Battalion Wars 2

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER STRATEGY (2-PLAYER VIA NINTENDO WI-FI CONNECTION)
> **PUBLISHER** NINTENDO > **DEVELOPER** KUJU LONDON > **RELEASE** OCTOBER 29 > **ESRB** T

WAR IS CUTE

While the original Battalion Wars may have gotten the series off to a rough start, the sequel moves a few things in the right direction.

The basic interface remains the same, where players can "possess" any grunt, tank, or chopper on the field and issue commands by locking on to targets and pressing A. This works smoothly in small scale battles, but when things get crowded it's easy to accidentally target your own units

or lock onto a grunt when you really need to take down that artillery unit.

All infantry and vehicle units have a standard rock-paper-scissors relationship, which is easy to exploit (sending anti-air troops after helicopters, for instance), but tough to counter. When your army rolls up to a group of enemies, there's no way to just say "Hey, infantry! Get the hell away from those turrets!" You

just have to run away and tell them to follow you or focus your entire assault on the particularly deadly units.

The story is pretty nonsensical for those new to the series, with plenty of warping through centuries of various wars, but veterans will recognize a few familiar faces both on the good side and bad. New sea units pack an especially nasty punch and provide great support for land units. These sections play like a smoother arcadey version of Battlestations: Midway.

Online multiplayer gives players some-

thing to do once they finish off the 20 single-player missions. Versus modes include the attack and defend-flavored Assault and the kill-for-points-based Skirmish. Both options offer decent thrills, but it would be nice to be able to choose your units or battle against a few more players in a match. Co-op allows players to team up against the AI, but the lack of voice chat really hurts any kind of teamwork strategy. In the end, however, not a bad second outing.—**BRYAN**

■ Sorry, but this is not a screen of Warcraft Wii

BOTTOM LINE 7.25

> **Concept:** Add much-needed multiplayer to the Battalion Wars formula

> **Graphics:** Not much has changed since the original GameCube release

> **Sound:** Some CO is always blabbing at you in some ridiculously fake accent

> **Playability:** In large skirmishes it can be tough to target the unit you want

> **Entertainment:** This isn't going to change naysayers' minds, but fans will have plenty to enjoy

> **Replay Value:** Moderately High

Second Opinion 7.25

You have to give Nintendo credit for sticking to its guns. After the first Battalion Wars disappointed, you wouldn't think we'd see the same formula again, but BW 2 delivers the same terrible lock-on system, weak AI, and messy controls as the first. These issues don't completely ruin the experience, and you can still have fun with the game's simple "plow forward and destroy everything" attitude. And I have to give it bonus points for the addition of co-op and versus multiplayer. This entry might be a little more polished, but it still lacks that special Nintendo spice.—**BEN**

Wii QUICKIES

Wii
Endless Ocean

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER SIMULATION (2-PLAYER VIA WIICONNECT24) > **PUBLISHER** NINTENDO
> **DEVELOPER** ARIKA
> **RELEASE** JANUARY 22 > **ESRB** E

BOTTOM LINE 6

Have you ever wanted to be as cool as Aquaman, except without any super powers? You could swim around, make friends with fish, and…well, that's about it. That is exactly what Endless Ocean delivers, giving players a chance to pet all sorts of underwater wildlife and watch them float by. The few other distractions, like taking pictures and filling an aquarium, provide only the barest incentive to keep going. With an excellent soundtrack and a simple concept, Endless Ocean succeeds in its goal of being a relaxing, educational experience. However, it fails miserably when it comes to feeling like a game. It reminds me more of a screensaver – occasionally hypnotic, but never truly entertaining. I'd take the flying toasters over this any day.—**JOE**

Wii
Trauma Center: New Blood

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION
> **PUBLISHER** ATLUS
> **DEVELOPER** ATLUS
> **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 20 > **ESRB** T

BOTTOM LINE 7.5

Trauma Center requires a steady hand and the patience of a saint. Looks like I picked the wrong week to stop taking Diazepam. The title's gameplay is fun and the coordination between the Wii remote and nunchuk enables you to act quickly when it comes to using surgical tools. There is even a co-op function, which can help deflect blame in the inevitable malpractice/wrongful death suit caused by the Wii's occasionally erratic controls. Like Capcom's Ace Attorney series, this game is fun if you don't take it too seriously.—**KATO**

Wii
Medal of Honor Heroes 2

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 32-PLAYER VIA WIICONNECT24)
> **PUBLISHER** ELECTRONIC ARTS
> **DEVELOPER** EA CANADA
> **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 13 > **ESRB** T

BOTTOM LINE 6.75

MOH Heroes 2 is better than its Wii predecessor, Vanguard, largely because its basic controls actually work. Despite achieving playability, the controls are not out of the woods yet; the motions that take your reticle off the screen, like reloading or throwing a grenade, feel disorienting and can throw you off your game in the midst of battle. The gameplay is your cookie cutter WWII remix: wander serpentine dockyards and cities, and clear bunches of Nazis on the way to your mission objective. But at least the game supports multiplayer; though the offerings hardly compete with the big boys, Wii owners finally get a taste of just how addictive these matches can be.—**BERTZ**

Wii
Dancing with the Stars

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER MUSIC
> **PUBLISHER** ACTIVISION > **DEVELOPER** ZOE MODE > **RELEASE** OCTOBER 31 > **ESRB** E

BOTTOM LINE 5.25

Mario Lopez is in this game! If you agree with the exclamation mark at the end of the last sentence, this game is for you. For those of you who would prefer the sardonic delivery that would come with a period there, your instincts are right when they tell you to steer clear. As a pair of onscreen characters twirl their way through a badly covered ballroom dance tune, you may notice that your success or failure has no effect on their actual choreography, though your score will most certainly drop if you fail to wildly swing your arms about with the right timing. Your eyes are not deceiving you. A decent shot at motion-controlled rhythm gameplay aside, this shameless cash-in game of a shameless cash-in TV show is what it is. What is it? Stacy Keibler is in this game!—**MILLER**

Wii
Jenga

> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER PUZZLE
> **PUBLISHER** ATARI
> **DEVELOPER** ATOMIC PLANET
> **RELEASE** DECEMBER 7 > **ESRB** E
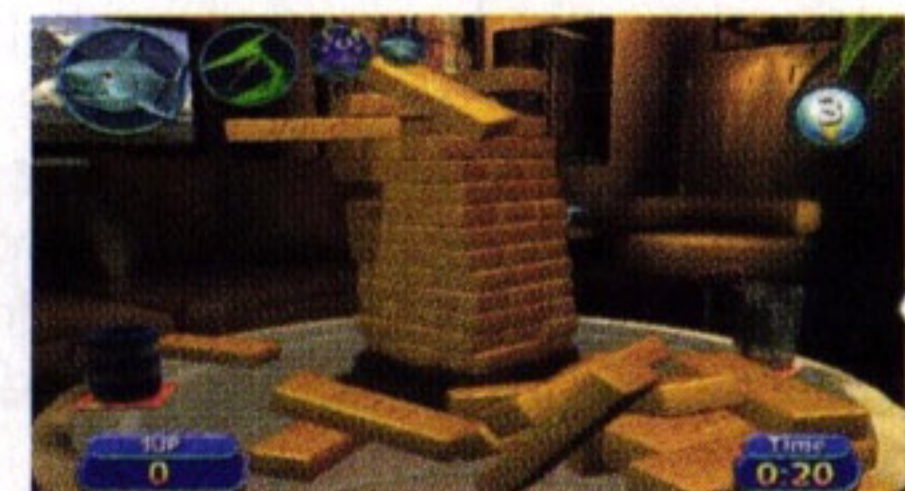
BOTTOM LINE 2

From time to time, a game comes along with one single simple gameplay mechanic at its heart. Eschewing complicated stories, high-end graphics, or more traditional gameplay, it relies on this one device to carry it forward. The game revolves around that one distinct moment, and all the pleasure that can be derived from the game stems entirely from it. In Jenga, that one mechanic barely works. Whatever strange, mirror universe insanity might lead you to play a video game version of Jenga rather than the real thing, you are unlikely to advance past the first few games. This is because pulling blocks from the tower and placing them on the top was never made to function in any reasonable way. It seems, in retrospect, a strange oversight.—**MILLER**

PC

Crysis

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 32-PLAYER VIA ONLINE) > PUBLISHER EA GAMES
> DEVELOPER CRYTEK > RELEASE NOVEMBER 13 > ESRB M

FARCRYSIS

Second Opinion **9**

Considering Crysis has been touted as a breakthrough FPS, it has an awful lot of gameplay similarities to its predecessor Far Cry. The hide-and-go-kill mixture of stealth and brute force is nearly identical but for the addition of nano-suit super-powers. However, that's not really much of a knock – Far Cry rode that mechanic and little else to success. Crysis adds a lot to the mix: much better pacing, more variety to settings and weapons, and the previously noted suit powers. It's great fun to exploit the enemy AI with creative use of your cloaking ability, and clever applica-tion of the strength and speed powers can let you pull of some truly bombastic stunts. Learning to use your suit to its full potential will serve you well in the later levels when the gameplay switches from "get past these guys however you like" to "oh my god we're in the middle of a freakin' war zone here!" With the exception of a horrid hour of badly executed zero-grav-ity in the middle, this is an adventure worth upgrading your machine for.——**ADAM**

Crysis starts its story off the coast of China in the year 2019. A group of scientists have made a groundbreaking discovery on the island Lingshan, only to have the North Korean army move in and take over the operations. The U.S. responds by sending in a highly trained group of Delta Force soldiers armed with nano-suits. Upon reaching the island, a trail of dead and a team of apprehensive scientists suggest that this find may not be of this earth.

This nano-suit is the star feature of the gameplay, as it allows you to use enhanced abilities to supple-ment your battle prowess. The suit has four set-tings, each of which will aid you in different ways by releasing nanobots into your bloodstream to heighten a particular trait. You can use enhanced strength to steady your shot or jump to a higher sight plane, use the cloaking device to stay out of sight or stalk enemies, use enhanced speed to run to safety or rush a group of unsuspecting soldiers, or use the armor setting to create an extra layer of defense. Each setting drains your nano-suit, but it will regenerate when not in use.

Crysis plays much like its predecessor, Far Cry, with sandbox gameplay that lets you tackle missions however you want. On some missions you may choose to sneak past waves of patrols on your way to extracting some intel, while other objectives are better served by eliminating every enemy in the base. My favorite tactic was performing Predator-like cloaked hit-and-runs on my prey, only to disappear into the wilderness and leave the remaining squad feeling con-fused and helpless.

The majority of the game features a variety of riveting lone wolf missions different enough from each other to avoid repetitiveness. The North Korean foes are smart for the

most part, but suffer from the occasional AI glitch when you are shooting them from behind or an elevated position. They are also wearing multiple bulletproof vests judging from the amount of bullets I sank into these guys. But when the game moves away from fighting the DPRK and into the alien structure, it simultaneously moves away from its addictive gameplay. Navigating the zero gravity envi-ronments is confusing, and shooting agile enemies while you are floating through the air proves tricky.

Crysis does nothing to diminish Crytek's reputation of making stellar looking games. From the glassy open seas to the lush vegetation populating the jungle, Crysis sets the high water mark for emergent environments. Better yet, much of the environ-ment can be used to your advantage. When battles go awry, find some thick brush and keep yourself hidden from enemy eyes. When you're fighting a group of enemies, shoot down a nearby tree so it collapses on them.

On the multiplayer side, Crysis is a mixed bag. The Power Struggle mode combines objective-based gameplay with Battlefield-style con-quest to create a fun and deep expe-rience. But the paltry map selection won't impress anyone, and newbs may find the game to have a high

learning curve, as you must purchase new weap-ons after each death and the weapon selection is extremely limited if you aren't racking up kills.

In the end, Crysis offers a similar overall experi-ence to its predecessor. The sandbox gameplay is among the best in the genre, and its lengthy single-player campaign largely makes up for some ques-tionable multiplayer.——**BERTZ**

■ Use your strength boost to hop onto rooftops and surprise enemies

■ Once the aliens arrive, a hellish winter breaks loose

■ "Is crime up? Build a stupid Ferris Wheel. Fact: Thugs are fascinated by circular motion."

PC

Gears of War

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA INTERNET OR LAN) > PUBLISHER MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS
> DEVELOPER PEOPLE CAN FLY/EPIC GAMES > RELEASE NOVEMBER 6 > ESRB M

■ The Brumak fight is better than the General RAAM fight, but that isn't saying much

PC

SimCity Societies

> STYLE 1-PLAYER SIMULATION > PUBLISHER ELECTRONIC ARTS > DEVELOPER TILTED MILL
> RELEASE NOVEMBER 13 > ESRB E10+

SPRAWL FOR ALL

Veterans of the SimCity franchise know the satisfaction that comes from successfully juggling pollution, traffic, and commercial concerns while keeping a watchful eye on financial reports. For other gamers, the complexities of a growing city can be daunting. In a surprising move for the series, SimCity Societies has ditched long-standing conventions like zoning and budgets. Even more surprising, however, is the fact that the game still holds up as an addictive and engaging simulation.

The biggest change is the shift in emphasis from traditional money to cultural currency. Cold, hard cash is still used for erecting structures, but the focus is on the ideals of the community you want to create. This approach does an excellent job of allowing players to craft a unique identity for their cities. Whether you want a religious podunk farm town or a vast authoritarian dystopia, all you need to do is build the appropriate structures to build cultural capital, then spend it on things that cater to those values. It's especially cool to see how your decisions feed off of each other; placing items that encourage the Prosperity trait will eventually unlock better structures in that style, kind of like a societal tech tree.

You'll never find

yourself in a downward spiral in terms of finance; careless planning only results in a town full of loafabouts, criminals, and malcontents. This safety net makes it easy to experiment with what Societies can offer, but it also puts a limitation on how deep you can dig. That's the key issue that keeps Societies from living up to the hallowed SimCity name: It doesn't give you as much incentive to keep playing. New buildings are the main rewards, but without the more complicated diversions of city management, there isn't much challenge in obtaining them.

SimCity Societies is ultimately a step down from its predecessors, but it doesn't fall so far to be considered a blunder. You may not sink as much time into this installment, but the reinvention of the gameplay mechanics results in an inventive array of new problems to solve.—**JOE**
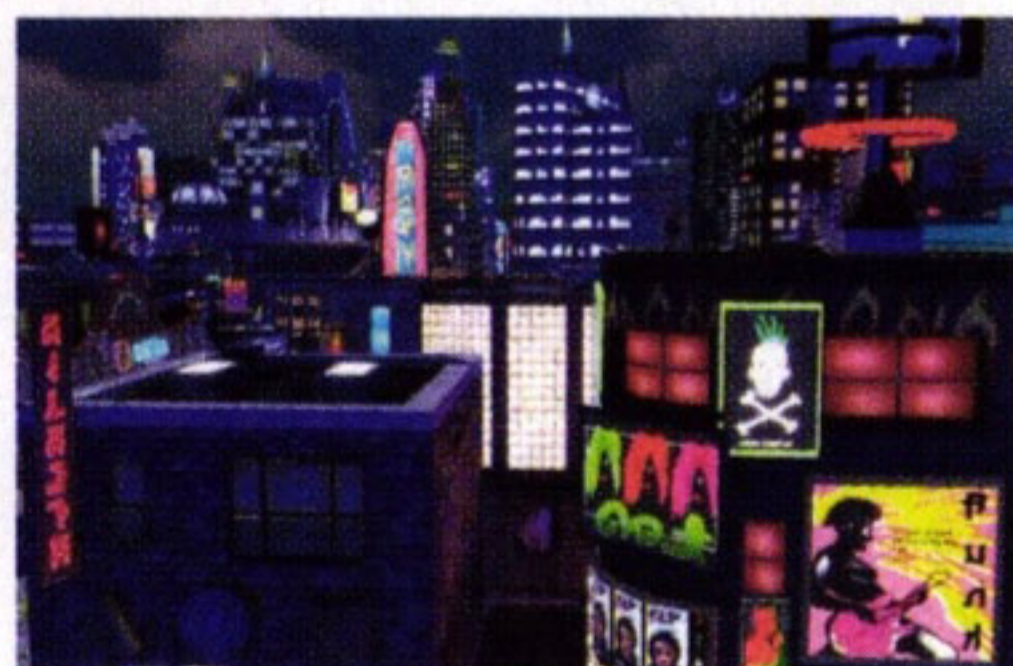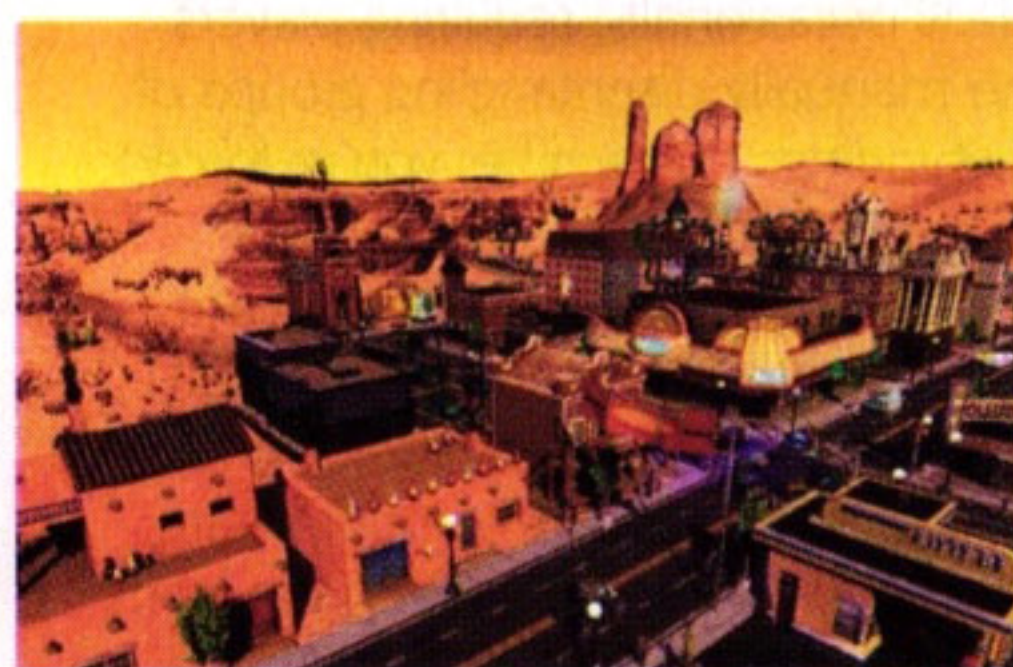
> **BOTTOM LINE** 8

> **Concept:** Redefine what it means to be mayor of SimCity by focusing more on culture than budgets

> **Graphics:** The visual styles of each kind of society are wonderfully distinct and consistent

> **Sound:** You'll be much better off with your own playlist

> **Playability:** The lack of depth comes through strong in the later hours, but makes it easy to learn the ropes quickly

> **Entertainment:** A unique move for the series pays off with lots of fun, but not as much staying power

> **Replay Value:** Moderately High

Second Opinion 6.75

A terrible disaster lays waste to my city, and it's not a meteor storm or an alien attack. It's the gameplay. Societies allows players to build glorious cityscapes and thriving metropolises, but with no real penalty or challenge. All of the careful planning and strategic elements that this series has used as its foundation have been replaced with one poorly implemented thing: social energies. As long as you build enough homes, workplaces, and social hangouts to keep your Sims happy, you have nothing to worry about. Even when I tried to create the crappiest city possible, my finances continued to soar and my denizens were as happy as could be. Without the core gameplay there, this follow-up feels more like a knock-off than the real deal. As a city building simulator it shines, but as a game it lags well behind the series' standards.—**REINER**

$25/HOUR

Gears of War released to critical and commercial success a year ago on the Xbox 360, and Microsoft has now seen fit to release it to the company's redheaded stepchild of a platform. Unlike Halo 2, Gears will actually run under Windows XP, which is a step up, but it's nonetheless clear that the game was developed with consoles in mind. As we've seen from many previous titles making the transition between console and PC, Gears plays noticeably better with the control scheme it was originally designed for. At least you have the option of using a gamepad here.

With the exception of two bonus hours of content preceding the final chapter, Gears on PC is exactly the same as its 360 predecessor – except with a lower framerate and generally worse visuals unless you have a crazy-powerful DirectX 10 rig at your disposal. And while it's not like the new chapter is bad or boring to play through, it is the very definition of "more of the same."

Pounding through Gears' campaign again is entertaining, but Rainbow Six Vegas' cover system makes a mockery of the once-innovative implementation in Gears. The issues surrounding sticking to cover that you didn't intend to and the other idiosyncrasies of Gears' system are exacerbated with mouse/keyboard control, and the slow methodical approach that the game promotes is vastly less smooth in the absence of an analog stick for movement. Again, plugging in a 360 pad fixes these issues, but it sure would have been nice to see some of them ironed out over the last year.

Unless you feel that the (somewhat disappointing) fight against the Brumak or a minor splash of new single-player content is worth $50, the only gamers that should be thinking about purchasing this are 360-impaired PC owners that never got into the fun last year – especially considering the multitude of superior multiplayer options in the PC action sector.—**ADAM**

> **BOTTOM LINE** 8

> **Concept:** Put the Xbox 360 hit on Windows with a bonus chapter

> **Graphics:** Still beautiful, but this will bring your system to its knees

> **Sound:** Also unchanged – the sounds of war are great, but the dialogue will make you cringe

> **Playability:** Believe it or not, Gears works better on a gamepad than a keyboard and mouse

> **Entertainment:** This is an excellent game – that came out a year ago on a system it works better on

> **Replay Value:** Moderately High

Second Opinion 8.75

A year after its original release, Gears of War is still an entertaining game – more so for first-timers than veterans of the 360 iteration. Only hardcore fans should consider re-buying the game for the new Brumak-heavy content, since the other differences are negligible. Even with the keyboard and mouse option, plugging in a gamepad is definitely the way to play; hitting keys to move and take cover just highlights flaws in those mechanics that are easier to overlook with an analog stick. This version is also capable of producing better visuals than those on the 360, but your machine practically needs to be self-aware in order to make that happen. Ultimately, it's pretty simple: you should play Gears of War, and if you can only do that on PC, go for it. Otherwise, go on with your gaming life and hope Microsoft releases the Brumak mission on Xbox Live.—**JOE**

■ Multiplayer is fun, but PC gamers have far better options

PC

Empire Earth III

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER STRATEGY (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA INTERNET OR LAN) > **PUBLISHER** SIERRA > **DEVELOPER** MAD DOC SOFTWARE
> **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 6 > **ESRB** T

■ Out-teching your opponents is a crushing advantage

MARCHING IN PLACE

Empire Earth's gameplay has aped the more-successful Age of Empires series for years, and this latest title is no different at its core. Players advance through the major epochs of human history in this real-time strategy also-ran, progressing from spears and bows to mechs and nukes. It's a cool framework, but Empire Earth III lacks the kind of polish and pizzazz necessary to stand out in the saturated RTS genre.

The most noteworthy change in Empire Earth III is the meta-campaign that has players gradually conquering the world on a turn-based map of the world. As you'd expect, when armies move into hostile or contested territory, the game zooms down to an RTS battle (where you're locked at the technology tier you have on the overmap). Unfortunately, the gameplay on the world map isn't deep enough to be truly engaging. With little more to do than move your handful of armies and balance your production between commerce, imperialism, military, and research, it's easy to lose interest playing against the boneheaded AI.

A dynamic mission system spices

things up somewhat, but not enough to make EE III stand out. From time to time, on either the world map or in the middle of an RTS battle, opportunities for these missions will pop up. Rescuing a native princess from a rival tribe, for instance, could gain you the loyalty of her people. Completing these side-goals is beneficial enough to be worthwhile, and injects some much-needed variety into the game's vanilla strategy. Even so, the nuts and bolts of the gameplay just don't measure up.

Empire Earth III's handful of units per tech tier, problematic unit AI and pathfinding, and lackluster factional differences between the West, East, and Middle East types do little to give RTS players anything they haven't seen before. As cool as the underlying concepts and the meta-campaign are, playing the game itself is fraught with irritations in commanding your armies, and the depth players expect out of a full-priced RTS is lacking. These same problems keep multiplayer from being anything special. Pass on this unless you've exhausted the entertainment value of the last few years' worth of great RTS titles.—**ADAM**
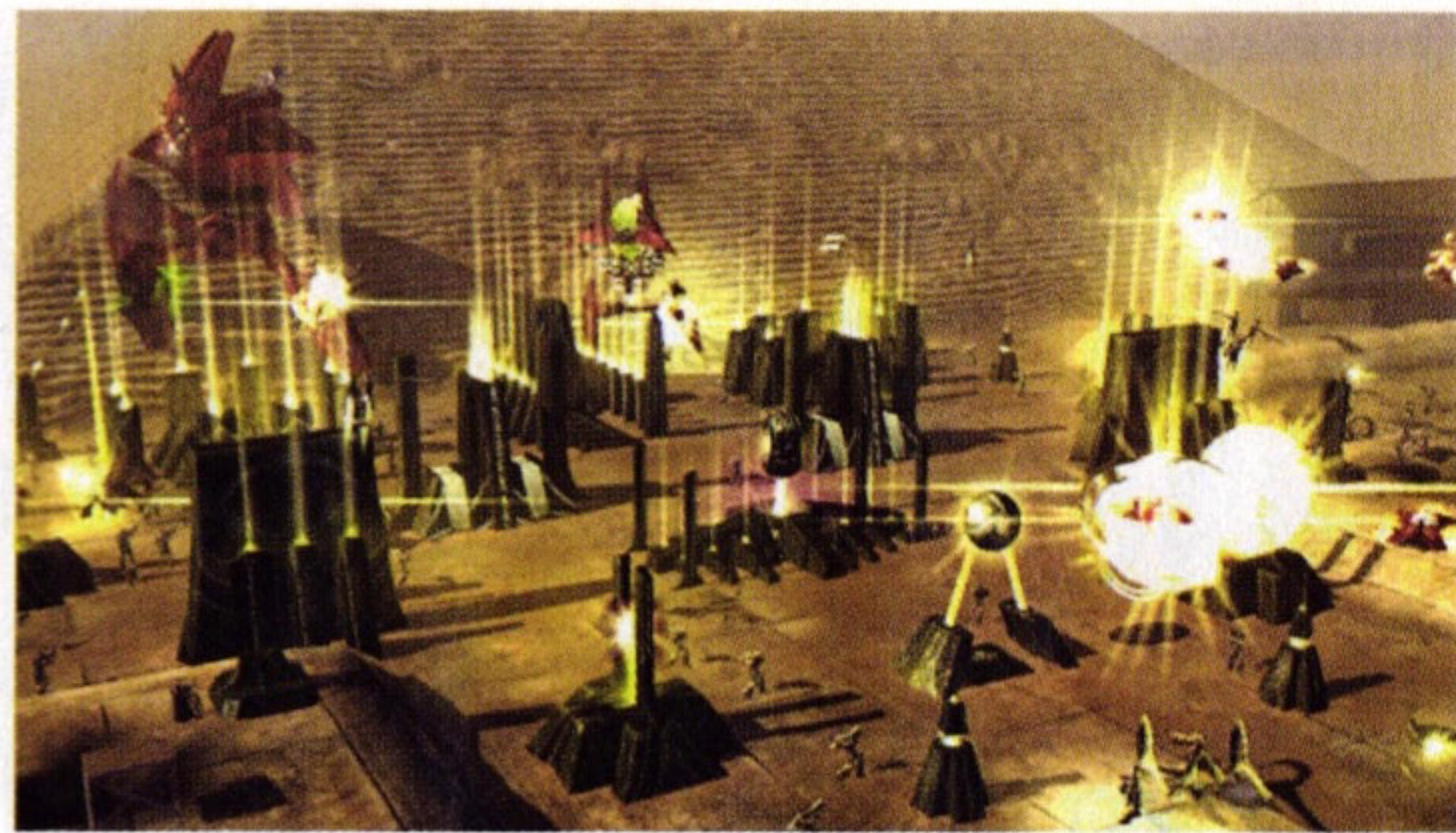
BOTTOM LINE **6.5**

> **Concept:** Update the classic real-time strategy series with a Total War-style meta-campaign

> **Graphics:** Not a bad-looking game, but it runs surprisingly poorly given its average visuals

> **Sound:** How many puns can you handle? The unit voiceovers are all drawn from this style of "humor" for better or worse

> **Playability:** Aside from the constant pathfinding issues, everything works as you'd expect it to

> **Entertainment:** This run-of-the-mill RTS doesn't add much to the genre, but at least it's not broken

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion **6.75**

Empire Earth III impressed me with its addictive World Domination mode, which acts like a clever combination of a Risk-style game board and Age of Empires-style RTS micro-battles that determine who wins the disputed territory at hand. The game is only brought down by sketchy execution and lack of real depth – the meta-campaign diplomacy is hardly on par with that of a game like Total War, and the real-time sequences, while playable, falter with poor unit pathfinding and indifferent AI. The action is also needlessly compromised by the cluttered user interface, which covers most of the screen during battles. Empire Earth III could have used more polish, but as is, misses being promoted to the ranks of its competition.—**BERTZ**

■ Building walls helps against this sort of thing, but convincing your units to correctly path around them is another matter entirely

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PC

Universe at War:
Earth Assault

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER STRATEGY (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA INTERNET OR LAN) > **PUBLISHER** SEGA
> **DEVELOPER** PETROGLYPH > **RELEASE** DECEMBER 4 > **ESRB** T

HUMANS ARE WEAKSAUCE

Universe at War has more in common with StarCraft than with Petroglyph's previous effort, Star Wars: Empire at War. This micro-management heavy real-time strategy title pits three factions of aliens against each other in a war over a devastated Earth, and succeeds far more often than it fails. A few UI blunders are all that hold this back from being a classic.

At first glance, this title has everything a triple-A RTS needs. The factions play very differently, a huge mix of units makes for extremely varied strategic options, and the carnage is fast and furious. Whether you're commanding the Novus' legions of highly mobile robots, the Hierarchy's towering walkers, or the Masari's tree-hugging idealists, building up your forces and conquering the world is a blast. Each side has enough units with their own sets of powers and disadvantages to ensure that players can get quite creative in devising methods of domination. Zerging with air units still feels cheap, but that's nothing new to the RTS genre.

Like Blizzard's RTSs or Command & Conquer, Universe at War requires a hands-on approach to command. Adept focus-firing, forcing enemies into bad unit matchups, resource harassment, and the like will carry the day more often than out-gathering your opponent – especially given the particularly binding population cap.

Unfortunately, the interface trips up grand plans of conquest with annoying regularity. Unit pathfinding fails occasionally, requiring players to waste time manually disentangling groups of units. The keybindings are terrible; you're forced to mouse everything since it's nearly impossible to fire special abilities via keyboard input (try quickly hitting ctrl-H in the thick of battle, I dare you). The inability to queue orders is maddening for RTS vets, and walker hardpoints are incredibly difficult to reliably click when the icons are rotating and occluding each other with the walker's movement.

Despite these issues, playing through the single-player story-driven campaign or fighting a real-time global campaign is fun. Multiplayer is somewhat bare-bones, but the matches themselves are entertaining enough. It's also worth noting that some bugs forced us into mission restarts, but the Universe at War experience is definitely recommended for bored strategy gamers.—**ADAM**

BOTTOM LINE **8.25**

> **Concept:** Fight over the remnants of Earth as one of three unique alien factions

> **Graphics:** One of the better-looking real-time strategy games around. Unit detail and the lighting model are particularly impressive

> **Sound:** Laser beam zaps and constant explosions form a fitting background

> **Playability:** Some bone-headed elements of the UI hold this back from greatness

> **Entertainment:** There are many worse ways to tide yourself over until StarCraft II

> **Replay Value:** Moderately High

Second Opinion **8**

Petroglyph must be sick of playing RTS games with human factions, because its first order of business was to smoke us off the face of the Earth in favor of three alien races. Each of the factions is a blast to control—the Novus overwhelm with sheer numbers and an innovative troop-moving network, the Hierarchy dominates with brute force, and the Masari harness ancient powers for offensive and defensive bonuses. UAW also offers deep customization for sculpting your army. The user interface is very clean, but mastering the nuances of micromanagement takes time; I longed for a troop summary view where I could see which units needed further customization. But none of these minor issues stopped me from having a good time.—**BERTZ**

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■ Boss fights are sweet but infrequent

■ Learn to face, noob

PC

Hellgate: London

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION/RPG (MASSIVELY MULTIPLAYER VIA INTERNET) > **PUBLISHER** ELECTRONIC ARTS/NAMCO BANDAI > **DEVELOPER** FLAGSHIP STUDIOS > **RELEASE** OCTOBER 31 > **ESRB** M

FILL UP THAT XP BAR!

Expectations for this title have been high ever since Flagship Studios was formed with the core of the Diablo team in charge four years ago. Well, get used to hearing about Diablo in relation to Hellgate: London, because few games so closely ape a previous design. Granted, the perspective is no longer isometric, the multiplayer implementation is a leap forward, and the graphics are sharp – but regardless, Hellgate follows Diablo's experience grind template point for point.

With demons in control of the Earth's surface, the last vestiges of humanity's resistance to the infernal invasion have taken refuge in London's underground. As a newbie hero in this world, you'll grow quickly in power while uncovering a mystery that may save mankind from the scourge. In traditional

fashion, gaining levels unlocks new active and passive skills along with stat boosts and better equipment. While this design is one that every gamer should be intimately familiar with, Flagship has done an admirable job of making every skill useful, fun, and scalable as the game progresses. There's nothing worse than outgrowing a favorite spell, and luckily you won't here.

Slaughtering monsters by the dozen is a hell of a lot of fun. Each class has its own style of laying down the law, and they're all a blast. Planting your feet and trading blows with a Templar is no less satisfying than using a Cabalist's explosive magical abilities to exterminate evil wholesale. Combat is fast and smooth, and you never have to rest or wait for anything – nothing ever stands between you and getting more loot and experience.

Continuing the Diablo homage, nearly everything in Hellgate is randomly generated, from the maps you explore to the weapons you equip and the monsters you fight. Unfortunately, the environments prove to be the game's biggest disappointment. The dozen or so tilesets are endlessly recombined into unique levels, but the set pieces quickly become all too familiar.

■ Playing in first-person view is an option, but not a great one

The twentieth time exploring the same ruined building (albeit perhaps on a different side of the street) doesn't exactly hold the same sense of wonder.

Thankfully, the rest of the random content is much better. Equipment is endlessly varied and allows a ton of room to customize your hero's abilities beyond the skill tree. Rare and epic monsters have new abilities and modifiers grafted on and provide unique challenges. And though the quests are pretty basic (collect 14 zombie ears or kill some unique monster), they do give you something to look forward to as you plow through the legions of Hell.

Online play is a big part of Hellgate's appeal, and the infrastructure is in place for non-stop multiplayer action. Structured like Guild Wars or Phantasy Star Online, you'll be able to interact and hook up with other players in non-combat hub zones, but once you get into an adventure area it'll be private to your posse. The game scales quite well for additional heroes, and each of the classes is designed to be able to lend some extra utility in group play. It's not really a true MMO as it lacks much of a persistent world, but as far as co-op monster slaying goes it's top-notch.

What Hellgate does, it does well – few games have core gameplay this strong. However, it doesn't venture far outside of the scope of filling an XP bar or finding that next upgrade. The story isn't much more than a thin excuse to kill demons, and the truly memorable encounters are few and far between. If you like faster-paced combat than you'll find in the rest of the MMO genre, though, this could be a great fit.——**ADAM**

BOTTOM LINE **8.5**

> **Concept:** Apply Diablo-style leveling and loot grinding to a 3D-rendered post-apocalyptic vision of Earth

> **Graphics:** Quite nice, especially the variety with which you can customize your avatar's appearance via equipment

> **Sound:** Voiceovers are good, but the effects grate after a while and the music annoyingly only plays about 15 percent of the time

> **Playability:** The action is fast, interface smooth, and loads short

> **Entertainment:** You won't find better level and loot grinding anywhere, but that's about all this offers

> **Replay Value:** High

WORTH YOUR $10/MONTH?

The ability to play Hellgate online is in itself free, but paying a small monthly subscription fee grants access to some added bells and whistles. The improved social functionality and continuing content drops (new levels, monsters, loot, and perhaps even classes) subscribing gets you will add plenty of entertainment for people who fall in love with the game. The good news is that you're free to play as much of the out-of-the-box game as you like, and pick up the subscription later if more demon-slaying is what you're after.

Second Opinion 8.5

It is easy to see the Diablo pedigree in Hellgate: London, as the game at its core is all about grinding experience and completing quests. Fans of the genre only need to ask themselves one simple question: do you enjoy the fiction and the setting? For myself, I found the world's mix of classic fantasy elements like swords and wizardry with steampunk technology to be a perfect mix. However, the world itself, which is graphically beautiful, often felt stale with predictable settings and limited variety. That said, I really enjoy the combat system and interface. Maneuvering through the world is a breeze and the combat always feels fresh even though you find yourself doing the same combat combinations over and over. Overall, I highly recommend the game, but I did find the subscription model to be a little too much. If you are going to play the game daily, then definitely invest in the extra content, but most will be happy with what you can get out of the box.——**ANDY**

PC

Tabula Rasa

> **STYLE** MASSIVELY MULTIPLAYER ONLINE ROLE-PLAYING GAME > **PUBLISHER** NCSOFT > **DEVELOPER** DESTINATION GAMES
> **RELEASE** OCTOBER 30 > **ESRB** T

TWO STEPS FORWARD, ONE STEP BACK

Ultima creator Richard Garriot and the team at Destination Games have delivered a product that easily stands on its own legs as a breath of fresh air in the massively multiplayer space. Pacing combat more like Unreal than EverQuest while retaining the constant rewards and depth of an MMO is no small task, but Tabula Rasa manages it well. This title won't rock anyone's face off in a post-World of Warcraft world, but it's more than worth a look for players uninterested in or tired of the genre's staid traditions.

The fast-paced gunplay that makes up the core of the Tabula Rasa experience is the game's greatest strength. It's flat-out fun to figure out the best way to attack a situation with the various firearms and abilities at your disposal. Things get vastly deeper at higher levels, but even the early game presents players with fun options. Shotguns allow great mobility and are fantastic for groups of enemies, while pistols pack a surprising punch against single foes and rifles allow a much greater engagement distance. Mix in different damage types (you won't get far using physical damage against the heavily armored Kael, for instance) and the vast diversity of abilities from the various classes and you've got combat as good as any.

Tabula Rasa's other great achievement is in making the gameworld feel alive. With few exceptions, enemies never stand around waiting to be killed – hostile troops land in squads from dropships to assault human positions, and creatures attack players who come too close to their nest. Control points will fall to the malefic Bane if players don't help to defend them against the assault,

leaving that area's quests and NPCs unavailable until the point is retaken. It's rare to feel like you're "grinding" or otherwise fighting enemies just for loot and XP. The vast majority of my playtime was spent exploring, defending, assaulting, or rescuing – battles were just an enjoyable diversion along the way.

A few things keep Tabula Rasa from achieving MMO top billing. Enemy AI sometimes breaks, with monsters failing to fight back for no discernable reason. Targeting seems to bug out for no good reason occasionally, making you re-acquire a locked target mid-battle. Crafting is mostly lame; our experience didn't reveal anything worth spending the skill points on. Breaking up zones into shards (finding your group can be a right pain until you realize they're all in "Wilderness 2" while you're in "Wilderness 5") destroys the continuity of the persistent world. The lack of meaningful PvP is a total head-scratcher, since the control point mechanic and hectic firefights seem so well-suited to fighting other players. Finally, large-scale fights are too chaotic to be engaging; you're often better off just spamming some variety of area-effect attack than trying to make sense of the carnage. Peripheral elements like inventory management, re-specialization, and social tools are all handled reasonably well, though.

Tabula Rasa largely achieves what it sets out to do, and will no doubt be worth the monthly fee for a non-trivial number of gamers. Should you cancel your WoW sub and pick it up? Perhaps not, but blowing away aliens with a laser chaingun sure beats the pants off of farming old content that got stale months ago.—**ADAM**

BOTTOM LINE 8

> **Concept:** Fuse action-packed gunplay with everything you'd expect out of an MMORPG – except for meaningful PvP

> **Graphics:** It doesn't hurt to look at or anything

> **Sound:** Definitely the low point. Who decided that uninspired heavy metal was a good choice for a soundtrack?

> **Playability:** With a few tweaks to the keybindings, controlling your avatar is painless as can be

> **Entertainment:** Endless progression coupled with shooting things leads to good times

> **Replay Value:** Moderately High

Second Opinion 8.25

I am all for some fundamental shifts in MMO design. Too many of the big name releases are satisfied with changing up the setting and leaving the basic gameplay mechanics alone. Not so with Tabula Rasa, which offers a refreshing and fun action sensibility while maintaining enough of the core upgrade concepts and questing ideas that players will recognize. A rich and exciting game world is another big plus, even if the dated visuals sometimes dull the experience. In fact, from the animation to the enemy AI and the unfriendly HUD, the only major complaint I'd level is that it seems like a game that should have come out some time ago. Even so, a good game is a good game, and I'd much rather Tabula Rasa came late to the party than not at all. Some of the new partygoers could learn a thing or two from this one.—**MILLER**

PC

Fury

> **STYLE** MASSIVELY MULTIPLAYER ONLINE ROLE-PLAYING GAME > **PUBLISHER** GAMECOCK
> **DEVELOPER** AURAN STUDIOS > **RELEASE** OCTOBER 16 > **ESRB** T

KTHXBAI

Imagine this: Take World of Warcraft, strip out the unique classes and deep gearing system, make the UI suck, and replace the entire world with a couple of small-group instanced PvP arenas. Congratulations! You now know pretty much everything you need to about Fury. There will undoubtedly be a small cadre of hardcore players who make it their mission in life to dominate the ladders here, but it's a good bet that you should pass this over unless that description already applies to you.

The combat system in Fury looks good on paper. Using weaker attacks builds up charges of one of the four elements, which you can then expend to power stronger abilities. Given the lack of any sort of mana bar, the charge mechanic and liberal use of cooldowns is Fury's balancing factor and it generally works well. The problem is that these elemental powers aren't fun to use.

You see, Fury just doesn't play very well. The game's network performance can't keep up to the breakneck pacing of the combat; even the smallest amounts of latency can change the outcome of a match. The UI is a total albatross, offering both too little and too much feedback to readily make sense of the chaos onscreen. Spell effects are minimal and indistinct, making it nearly impossible to see what other players are trying to do around you. It's just a mess, and it doesn't get any better as you become familiar with the game.

Fury's three modes (capture the flag, team deathmatch, and free-for-all deathmatch) won't be enough to hold the attention of

any but the most laser-focused fans. Likewise, customizing your character from a massive suite of abilities requires an obsession with detail far in excess of the norm, since the majority of your choices involve minor variations of "do damage from range, do damage from up close, burn charges to deal more damage, or heal damage."

PvP diehards and WoW haters might find something of worth in Fury, but I can't recommend it to anyone beyond that small set. Go pick up a cheap copy of any flavor of Guild Wars if you want subscription-free heroic fantasy PvP.—**ADAM**

BOTTOM LINE 5

> **Concept:** Build an entire game around high-fantasy arena PvP battles

> **Graphics:** Using Unreal Engine 3 has saved the visuals from the graphics gulag, but spell effects are lame-o

> **Sound:** There are probably sound effects here. At least it has built-in voicechat

> **Playability:** Spamming a handful of abilities in hectic laggy arenas is gameplay of a sort, I guess

> **Entertainment:** There's nothing here but instanced PvP, and yet still other games do that better while offering much more

> **Replay Value:** Moderately Low

Second Opinion 5.5

Fury comes at you like a crooked politician, putting up the false front that it can give you what those fat-cat MMOs in Washington can't: straight-up PvP. Players will see through these empty promises after spending mere minutes in the arena. There are so many cut corners and ramshackle "solutions" that it feels like Fury is swindling you; the battles are chaotic and unfocused, the skills are numerous and redundant, and there are only three basic game types. When you aren't spamming your skills, you're killing time in a boring hub world – a thinly disguised player lobby. Fury sets its sights low, positioning itself solely within the scope of online-only PvP, and fails to deliver even in that limited undertaking.—**JOE**

NINTENDO DS QUICKIES

NINTENDO DS
Master of Illusion

	BOTTOM LINE	8

> STYLE 1-PLAYER PUZZLE > PUBLISHER NINTENDO > DEVELOPER TENYO
> RELEASE NOVEMBER 26 > ESRB T

You might think the Wii is perfect for parties at your house, but this game and its magic tricks will make you and your DS the center of attention. Master of Illusion not only shows you how to perform tricks of various stripes, but also has practice exercises and performs some of its own magic tricks on you (the game also comes with a specialty deck of cards). Even though the game pulls back the curtain on some fundamental elements of performing magic, it's still fun and even head-scratching at times. The tricks you perform on others with the DS are easy to learn and even had a few members of the GI staff perplexed as to how I pulled them off.—KATO

NINTENDO DS
Nanostray 2

	BOTTOM LINE	7.25

> STYLE 1-PLAYER SHOOTER (2-PLAYER VIA WIRELESS) > PUBLISHER MAJESCO
> DEVELOPER SHIN'EN > RELEASE JANUARY 15 > ESRB E

For a by-the-numbers space shooter, you can't go wrong with the second installment of this DS franchise. While the visuals themselves are plain, the level designs are entertaining and challenging – even if they're also a little uninspired. There's no true variation on the theme in this second game, but the solid shooting is certainly a fun distraction. Using thankfully touch-screen-free controls you'll navigate the short but challenging levels avoiding balls of energy and shooting mutated space monsters – would it surprise you to learn that a screen-filling boss awaits at the end of each level? While formulaic, it's a solid fun couple of hours to play through, and a difficult challenge mode injects added replay. There's even some multiplayer options, even if your buddy doesn't own a copy of the game. Oh, and as a favor to the game, I'm going to pretend I never tried the horrific touch-screen control variation.—MILLER

NINTENDO DS
Orcs & Elves

	BOTTOM LINE	6.75

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ROLE-PLAYING GAME > PUBLISHER ELECTRONIC ARTS
> DEVELOPER ID SOFTWARE > RELEASE NOVEMBER 16 > ESRB T

If you're a dungeon master who longs for the old pen and paper days and first-person, turn-based dungeon crawlers, you may find some nostalgic value in Orcs & Elves. The rest of you will likely be put off by the game's blocky graphics, unimaginative levels, limited weapon selection, clichéd dialogue, tile-based movement, and overall boring gameplay. There is a reason many of the RPG game mechanics this game uses are no longer found in other RPGs – they suck. You may be better off making up your own fantasy game with RPG Maker.—BERTZ

NINTENDO DS
Contra 4

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (2-PLAYER VIA WIRELESS) > PUBLISHER KONAMI > DEVELOPER WAYFORWARD
> RELEASE NOVEMBER 13 > ESRB T

GAME INFORMER
HANDHELD GAME OF THE MONTH

■ Tunnel stages provide a brief dose of 3D

	BOTTOM LINE	9.25

> Concept: Take everything that has made Contra great over the years and mash it into something completely new and awesome

> Graphics: In the style of Contra III, but with twice the horsepower

> Sound: The new tunes retain an element of the classic music while evolving at the same time. Straight-up classic remixes play on hard mode

> Playability: Just as tight as the original NES game

> Entertainment: The perfect blend of punishing difficulty and over-the-top thrills

> Replay Value: Moderately High

NO SHIRTS ALLOWED

Even in my wildest dreams I never believed the world would get a Contra sequel this amazing. The fact that this game is called Contra 4 accurately indicates WayForward's intention to ignore every Contra title that's come out since 1992 and focus solely on perfecting the NES and SNES era cocktail.

Throughout the entire mission to take out Black Viper, players will experience a finely balanced mix of nostalgic references, outrageous set pieces, and ridiculously large bosses with multiple forms. Yes, Bill and Lance are playable. Yes, there are tunnel stages and jet ski runs. Yes, "the code" is in there (in a different way than you think).

Straight out of the gate, the normal difficulty setting will destroy you. So do yourself a favor and start out on easy to check out most of the levels (the game taunts you after you "beat" it on this difficulty). Both DS screens are used well, especially in vertical levels like the waterfall,
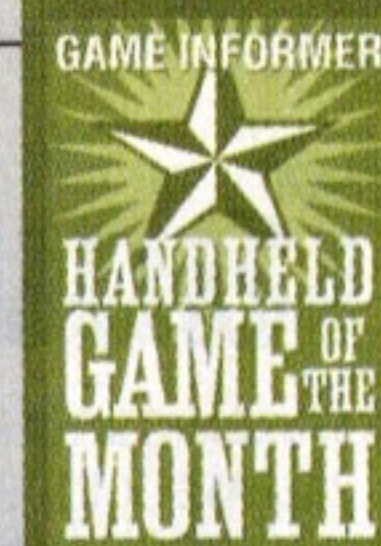
and a new grappling hook accessory ensures that you'll be spending plenty of time in both of them.

Loads of unlockables abound like new characters (Probotectors!), playable versions of NES Contra and Super C, and challenge mode. Here players will take on fun bite-sized missions like hunting down man-faced mutts, fighting bosses with only one life, or running through a stage without any weapons.

The only problems I had with the game are mostly related to the DS itself. The bar of plastic between the screens can screw you up occasionally, and co-op is only possible with two DSs and two game cards. This setup most likely couldn't be avoided, but it still puts up a multiplayer roadblock that wasn't there in the original games.

Despite these minor setbacks, this is both the ultimate Contra experience and one of the best action games in years. Do not let Contra 4 get lost in the holiday rush.—BRYAN

Second Opinion 8.75

Contra has held up for so many years because it delivers pure skill-based, timing-driven gameplay. The seemingly simple series formula is way more difficult to emulate than it might appear, and successfully tapping that formula is one of several ways this new entry is a success. Just the right degree of nostalgia-laden enemies and situations grounds the game in its past. Boss fights are suitably insane and overwhelming. But, perhaps most importantly, the game delivers some new thrills without abandoning the basic concept. Most significant is the addition of a second screen of action, expanding the periphery you need to watch to stay alive. Cooperative play is as solid and smooth as can be, while the multiple difficulties and unlockables offer tons of replay. This is everything a Contra game should be, with a healthy dose of new challenges and surprises. While not for those afraid of a challenge, Contra 4 throws down the gauntlet for the rest of us.—MILLER

LifeSigns: Surgical Unit

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ADVENTURE > **PUBLISHER** DREAMCATCHER > **DEVELOPER** SPIKE > **RELEASE** November 6 > **ESRB** T
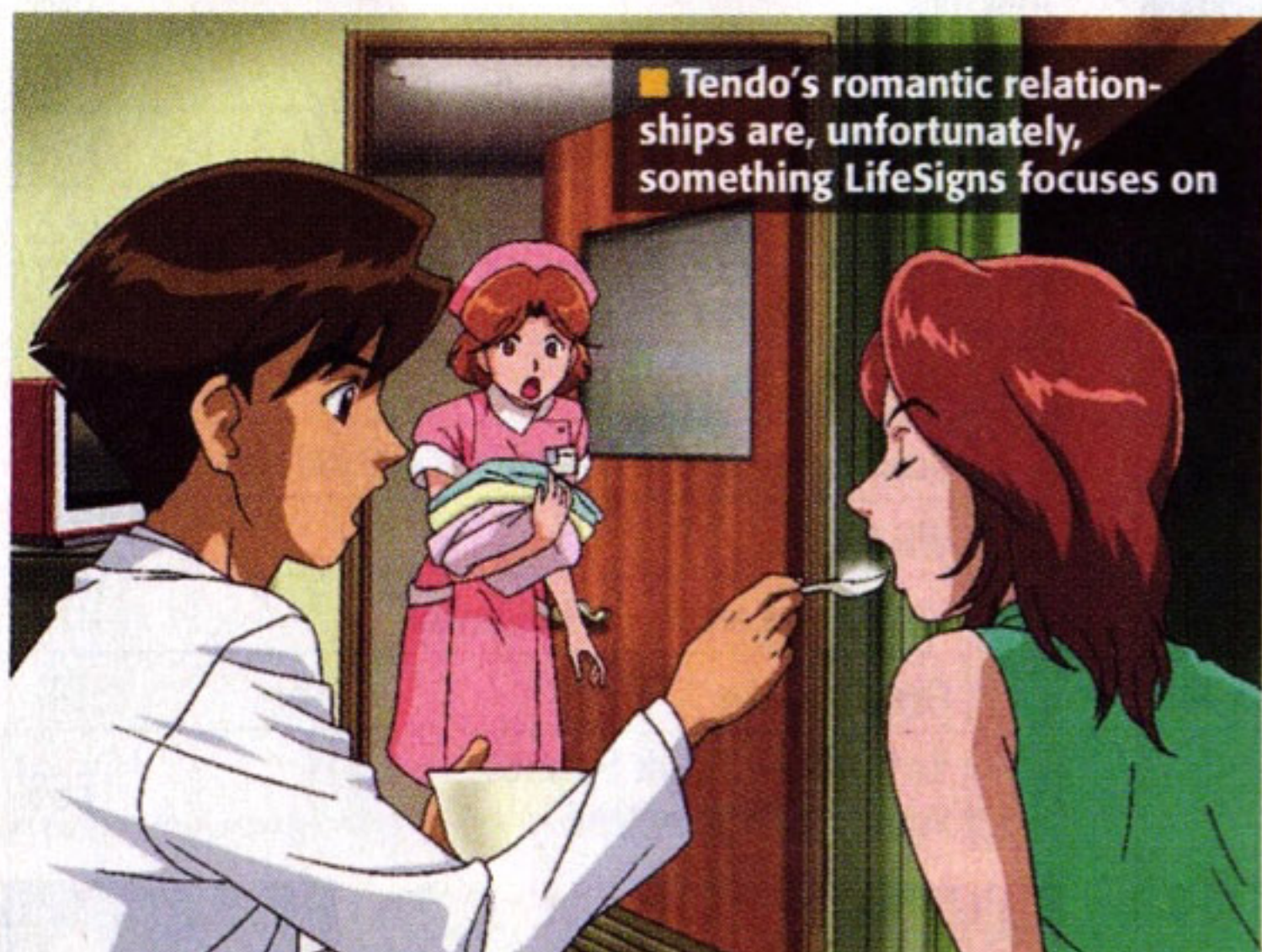
■ Tendo's romantic relationships are, unfortunately, something LifeSigns focuses on

PLAYING DOCTOR

If Phoenix Wright had gone to medical school instead of law school, he could have ended up a lot like LifeSigns' Dr. Tendo. With an emphasis on characters and dialogue (mingled with some surgical sequences), LifeSigns might have been the medical equivalent to Capcom's courtroom drama – if only it had some personality. As it turns out, Dr. Tendo and his dull hijinks make the whole adventure flatline.

As a second year intern (the first year was detailed in a Japan-only release), you are responsible for diagnosing illnesses and handling various operations. Using the touch screen, players examine patients for symptoms, and then perform procedures through a series of minigames. The surgery isn't as challenging as in Trauma Center (the tasks are short and the proper instrument is automatically given to you), but it is definitely the high point of LifeSigns. It's too

bad that the game doesn't make it the centerpiece of the action.

Instead, most of your time is spent talking to people you don't care about. You gallivant around the hospital (and, later, an island village) having long, pointless conversations and getting hit on by just about every female. Eventually someone will randomly get hurt, giving you about 10 minutes of fun gameplay, and then you spend the next hour doing whatever boring crap you were up to before.

All of the time spent reading dialogue would have been better spent if the characters or events were compelling. Owing in large part to dodgy localization, it's difficult to get wrapped up in the drama. When you finally get a patient, the examination and operation are entertaining. Outside of the OR, however, LifeSigns' bedside manner is far from pleasant.—**JOE**
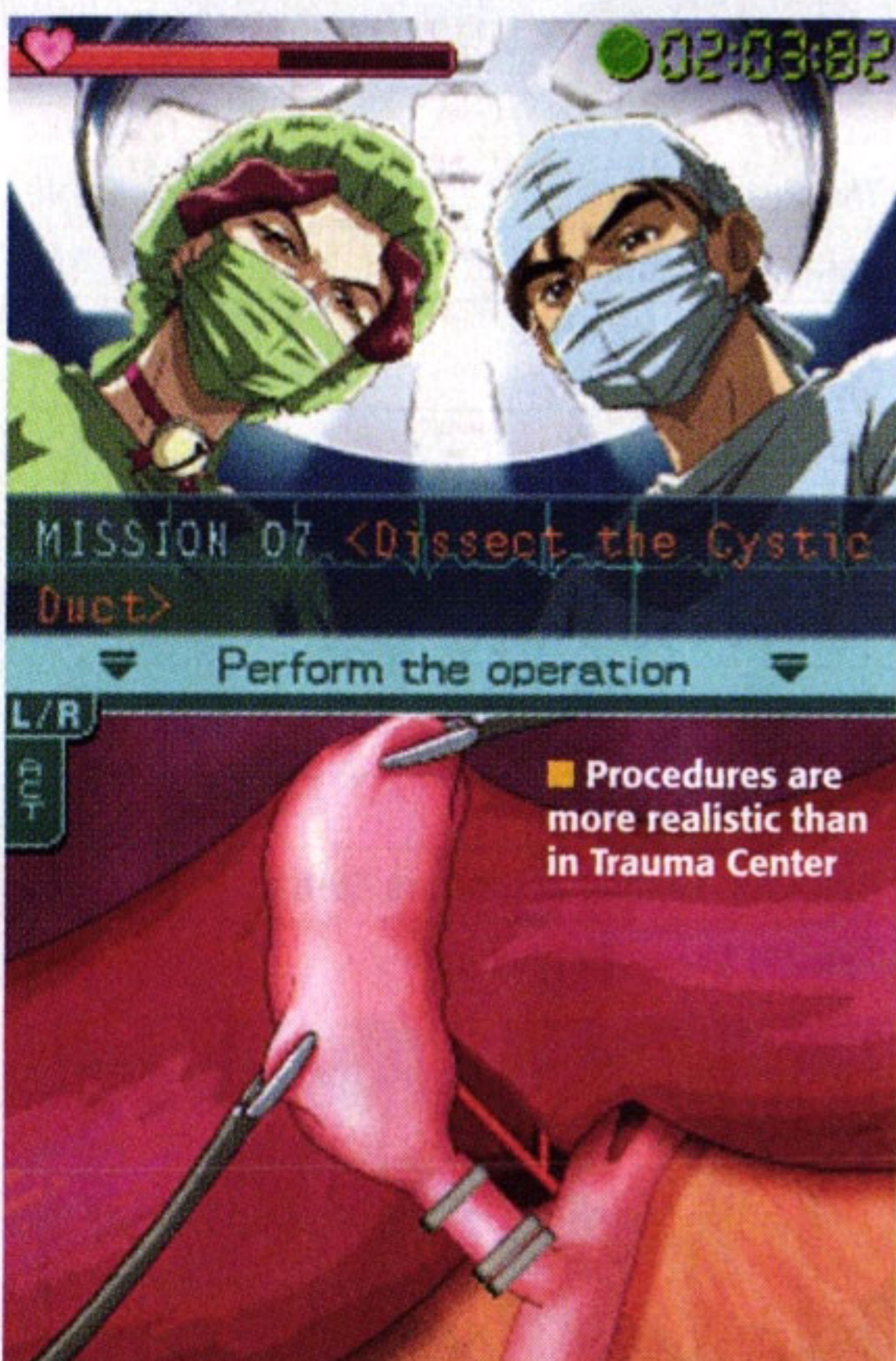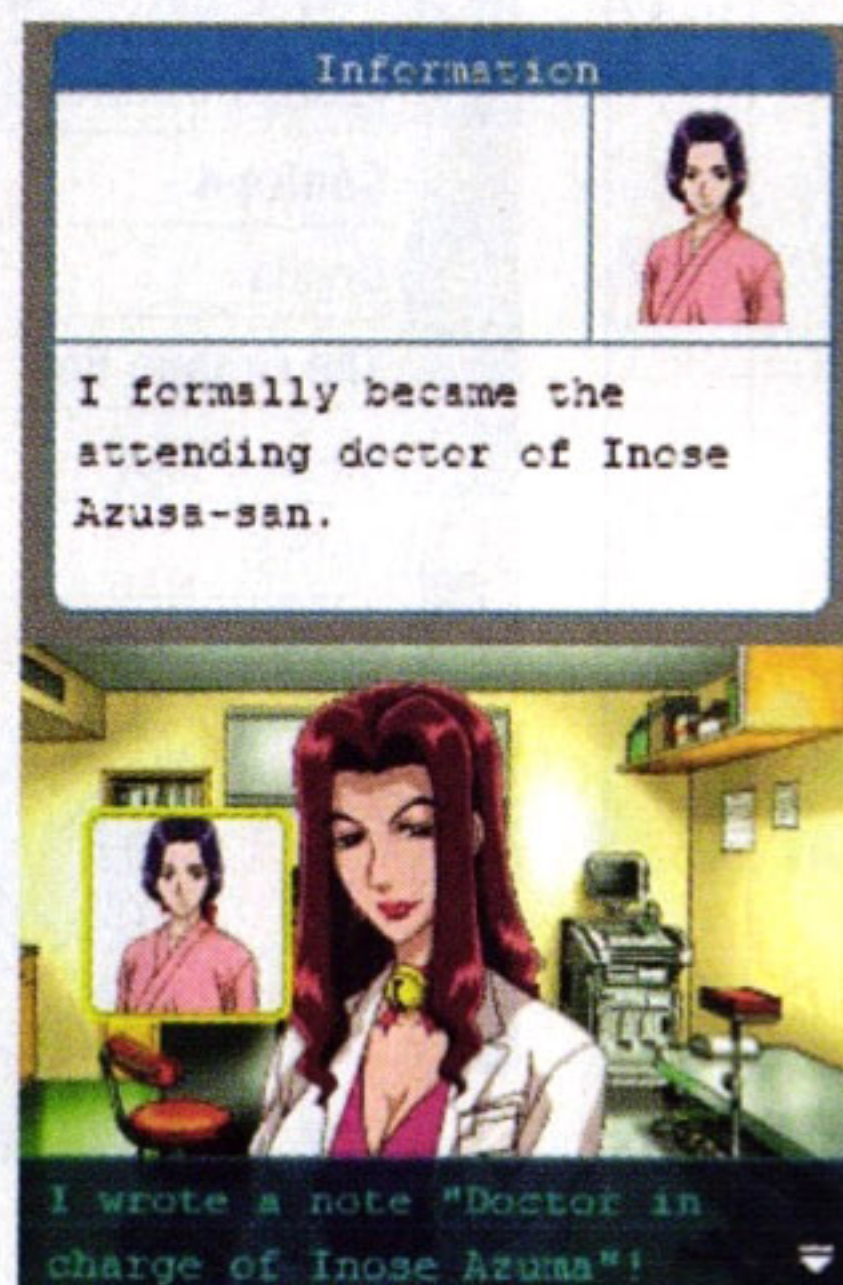
■ Procedures are more realistic than in Trauma Center

■ Operations consist of several minigames linked together

BOTTOM LINE **6**

> **Concept:** An interactive hospital soap opera without any drama or shocking twists

> **Graphics:** These are the most detailed internal organs you'll see on the DS

> **Sound:** A lot of wasted potential. There's no voice, no cool pump-up music, and no sound effects worth mentioning

> **Playability:** Advance text for an hour or two, perform a little surgery, then advance more text

> **Entertainment:** The operations are cool, but the dialogue and characters have little charm

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion **4**

I come to you at the end of a long journey. For many hours, I have slogged through screen after screen of inane and useless dialogue. I have exchanged gossip with medical technicians. I have baked sweet potatoes for nurses. I have walked the seemingly endless corridors of a hospital wherein nothing seems to happen until I find just the right thing to say to one of my fellow doctors or patients in order to progress the story. The simplistic and brief surgery sequences that appear so infrequently are the only short glimpses of true gameplay in this otherwise sordid and sad excuse for a game. Interaction is about more than forward scrolling text. It is the only axiom I bring with me out of this soul-sucking experience. Do not make the same mistake I did. Turn back now.—**MILLER**

TOP 20

Listings Based Upon NPD Data For October 2007 Based On Units Sold

1 HALO 3 (360)

Dear Mr. Informer,
I'm writing to inform you that the Charts staff will be going on a writer's strike. We feel that our creative output is not being respected and we are not being compensated as we should – meaning, "at all." Therefore, all jokes about Halo 3's story being compiled out of the unintelligible scribbles of zoo monkey's coloring books should not be used. Thank you.

2 GUITAR HERO III: LEGENDS OF ROCK (360)

Dear Charts,
We were sorely dismayed to hear about your decision to strike. We feel that we have treated you more than fairly. Remember that coffee maker we put in the staff room as a bonus last year? Besides, there is some new game about superheroes with guitars – or something – that we think would be ripe for spandex humor. We need you.

3 GUITAR HERO III: LEGENDS OF ROCK (WII)

Dear Mr. Informer,
The coffee was a nice gesture, but since you keep us all in the back of a barn without electricity or heat it is basically useless to us. We actually had some great Guitar Hero jokes about diaper-padded neon spandex and licorice-flavored emo wigs, but we won't tell them to you (or show you the prototypes) until we are paid.

4 GUITAR HERO III: LEGENDS OF ROCK (PS2)

Charts,
We have news for you. Turns out we don't need you; you're replaceable. We have a highly advanced network of supercomputers being programmed in the masters of humor with old Tom Arnold and Carrot Top tapes. It will do all the chart's write-ups on superhero guitar games from now on. Good luck finding work again. (That was sarcastic. We don't like you, and aren't wishing luck or rainbows upon you.)

5 THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: PHANTOM HOURGLASS (DS)

[Sarcastic Introduction] The new Zelda is about as bad as a bowl full of kittens, ice cream, and money, so yeah, haha, it's actually really good. [Weird Analogy] The new Legend of Zelda is so good that if it were a child, it would be a radioactive super baby with flaming hair and an awesome tan. [Physical Comedy] Game case falls down some stairs and gets hit in the groin with a football.

Rank	Title	L. Mo.	System	Score	Release
1	Halo 3	1	360	9.75	09-07
2	Guitar Hero III: Legends of Rock w/Guitar	N/A	360	8.75	10-07
3	Guitar Hero III: Legends of Rock w/Guitar	N/A	Wii	8.75	10-07
4	Guitar Hero III: Legends of Rock w/Guitar	N/A	PS2	8.75	10-07
5	The Legend of Zelda: Phantom Hourglass	5	DS	9.5	09-07
6	Wii Play w/Remote	4	Wii	7	02-07
7	The Orange Box	N/A	360	9.75	10-07
8	Guitar Hero III: Legends of Rock	N/A	PS2	8.75	10-07
9	FIFA Soccer 08	N/A	PS2	7.75	10-07
10	Brain Age 2: More Training in Minutes a Day	11	DS	8.25	08-07
11	Madden NFL 08	6	PS2	8	08-07
12	Guitar Hero III: Legends of Rock	N/A	360	8.75	10-07
13	Guitar Hero III: Legends of Rock w/Guitar	N/A	PS3	8.75	10-07
14	FIFA Soccer 08	N/A	360	7.75	10-07
15	Final Fantasy Tactics: The War of the Lions	N/A	PSP	9.5	10-07
16	My Sims	18	DS	8	09-07
17	Mario Party 8	14	Wii	7.25	05-07
18	Drawn to Life	N/A	DS	7	09-07
19	Ratchet and Clank Future: Tools of Destruction	N/A	PS3	9.25	10-07
20	NBA 2K8	N/A	360	8.25	09-07

TOP 10 JAPAN

Rank	Title	System
1	Mario Party DS	DS
2	Dynasty Warriors 6	PS3
3	Super Mario Galaxy	Wii
4	Final Fantasy Tactics A2	DS
5	Dynasty Warriors 5	360
6	Castlevania: The Dracula X Chronicles	PSP
7	Wii Sports	Wii
8	Nishimura Kyotaro Suspense	DS
9	Eye Training	DS
10	Ratchet & Clank Future: Tools of Destruction	PS3

3

8

TOP 10 GI

Rank	Title	L. Mo.	System
1	Super Mario Galaxy	N/A	Wii
2	Rock Band	N/A	multi
3	Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare	1	multi
4	Assassin's Creed	2	multi
5	Contra 4	N/A	DS
6	Crysis	N/A	PC
7	The Orange Box	4	multi
8	Mass Effect	5	360
9	Halo 3	3	360
10	Hellgate: London	N/A	PC

1

5

The Staff's Favorite Picks

TOP 10 PC

Rank	Title	L. Mo.	Price
1	The Orange Box	N/A	$48
2	Hellgate: London	N/A	$49
3	Neverwinter Nights 2: Mask of the Betrayer	N/A	$29
4	World of Warcraft	2	$20
5	World of Warcraft: The Burning Crusade	3	$32
6	The Sims 2 Bon Voyage	1	$30
7	Nancy Drew: Legend of the Crystal Skull	N/A	$20
8	Sim City 4 Deluxe	7	$19
9	Hellgate: London Collectors Edition	N/A	$60
10	Paws & Claws Pet School	9	$15

2

3

Based On Monthly Units Sold

Source: The NPD Group/NPD Funworld®/TRSTS® • David Riley 516-625-2277

REVIEWSARCHIVE

PLAYSTATION 3

Title	Score	Date
All-Pro Football 2K8	8	Aug-07
Assassin's Creed	9.5	Dec-07
BlackSite: Area 51	7.5	Dec-07
Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare	10	Dec-07
Clive Barker's Jericho	6	Dec-07
Conan	7	Nov-07
Darkness, The	8.75	Aug-07
Dirt	8	Nov-07
Dynasty Warriors: Gundam	5	Oct-07
Eye of Judgement	8	Dec-07
Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer	5	Aug-07
FIFA 08	7.75	Oct-07
Folklore	7.25	Dec-07
Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter 2	8.5	Oct-07
Guitar Hero III: Legends of Rock	8.75	Dec-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
Lair	7.25	Sep-07
LEGO Star Wars: The Complete Saga	7.5	Dec-07
Madden NFL 08	8	Sep-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
Need for Speed ProStreet	7.5	Dec-07
NHL 08	8.5	Oct-07
NHL 2K8	7.75	Oct-07
Rainbow Six Vegas	9	Aug-07
Ratchet & Clank Future: Tools of Destruction	9.25	Dec-07
Sega Rally Revo	6.5	Dec-07
Simpsons Game, The	7.25	Dec-07
Skate	8.75	Oct-07
Stuntman Ignition	8.5	Oct-07
Surf's Up	6.5	Aug-07
Tony Hawk's Proving Ground	7.75	Dec-07
Uncharted: Drake's Fortune	8.75	Dec-07
Warhawk	8.25	Oct-07
WWE SmackDown! vs. Raw 2008	8	Dec-07

XBOX 360

Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare - Xbox 360 - Dec-07

Title	Score	Date
Ace Combat 6: Fires of Liberation	8.75	Nov-07
All-Pro Football 2K8	8	Aug-07
Assassin's Creed	9.5	Dec-07
Beautiful Katamari	7.25	Dec-07
BioShock	10	Sep-07
BlackSite: Area 51	7.5	Dec-07
Blazing Angels 2: Secret Missions of WWII	7.5	Nov-07
Blue Dragon	9	Sep-07
Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare	10	Dec-07
Clive Barker's Jericho	6	Dec-07
Conan	7	Nov-07
Crash of the Titans	7.25	Nov-07
CSI: Hard Evidence	4	Dec-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
Fatal Inertia	7.5	Oct-07
FIFA 08	7.75	Oct-07
FlatOut Ultimate Carnage	7.5	Nov-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
Kengo: Lengend of the 9	2	Dec-07
LEGO Star Wars: The Complete Saga	7.5	Dec-07
Looney Tunes: ACME Arsenal	1.75	Dec-07
Madden NFL 08	8	Sep-07
Mass Effect	9.75	Nov-07
Medal of Honor Airborne	7.25	Oct-07
Naruto: Rise of the Ninja	8	Dec-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
Need for Speed ProStreet	7.5	Dec-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
Project Gotham Racing 4	8.75	Dec-07
Project Sylpheed	7.75	Sep-07
Ratatouille	6.75	Sep-07
Sega Rally Revo	6.5	Dec-07
Shadowrun	6.5	Aug-07

Wii

Title	Score	Date
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
Donkey Kong Barrel Blast	5	Dec-07
EA Playground	7	Dec-07
Fire Emblem	7	Dec-07
Geometry Wars Galaxies	9	Dec-07
Godzilla: Unleashed	4	Dec-07
Guilty Gear XX Accent Core	7.75	Dec-07
Guitar Hero III: Legends of Rock	8.75	Oct-07
Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix	6.5	Aug-07
Legend of Spyro: The Eternal Night, The	6.25	Nov-07
LEGO Star Wars: The Complete Saga	7.5	Dec-07
Looney Tunes: ACME Arsenal	1.75	Dec-07
Madden NFL 08	7.5	Oct-07
Mario and Sonic at the Olympic Games	4	Dec-07
Mario Strikers Charged	7.25	Sep-07
Manhunt 2	7.75	Dec-07
Metroid Prime 3: Corruption	9.5	Oct-07
My Sims	8	Oct-07
Need for Speed ProStreet	7	Dec-07
Pokémon Battle Revolution	5.75	Sep-07
Ratatouille	5.5	Sep-07
Shrek the Third	5.25	Aug-07
Simpsons Game, The	7.25	Dec-07
Sims 2: Castaway, The	7.25	Nov-07
Spider-Man: Friend or Foe	4.5	Nov-07
Surf's Up	6.5	Aug-07
Table Tennis	6	Dec-07
Thrillville: Off the Rails	7	Dec-07
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 2008	7	Oct-07
Transformers	7.25	Sep-07
Victorious Boxwers: Revolution	6.75	Nov-07
Zack & Wiki: Quest For Barbaros' Treasure	8.25	Nov-07

PLAYSTATION 2

Title	Score	Date
Crash of the Titans	7.25	Nov-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
Legend of Spyro: The Eternal Night, The	6.25	Nov-07
Looney Tunes: ACME Arsenal	1.75	Dec-07
Madden NFL 08	8	Sep-07
Manhunt 2	7.75	Dec-07
NASCAR 08	7.75	Sep-07
Ratatouille	5.5	Sep-07
Shin Megami Tensei: Persona 3	8.5	Aug-07
Shrek the Third	5.25	Aug-07
Simpsons Game, The	7.25	Dec-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
Thrillville: Off the Rails	7	Dec-07
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 08	9	Sep-07
Transformers	7.25	Sep-07
Warriors Orochi	5.75	Oct-07
Wild Arms 5	6.5	Oct-07

PC

World in Conflict - PC - Oct-07

Title	Score	Date
Ages of Empires III: The Asian Dynasties	8	Dec-07
BlackSite: Area 51	7.5	Dec-07

(continued)

Title	Score	Date
Shrek the Third	5.25	Aug-07
Simpsons Game, The	7.25	Dec-07
Skate	8.75	Oct-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
Thrillville: Off the Rails	7	Dec-07
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 08	9	Sep-07
TimeShift	7.75	Dec-07
Tomb Raider Anniversary	8.25	Dec-07
Tony Hawk's Proving Ground	7.75	Dec-07
Transformers	7.25	Sep-07
Two Worlds	4	Nov-07
Vampire Rain	3	Sep-07
Virtua Fighter 5	9	Sep-07
Warriors Orochi	5.75	Oct-07
Wartech: Senko No Rondi	3.75	Sep-07
WWE SmackDown! vs. Raw 2008	8	Dec-07

(PC continued)

Title	Score	Date
Blazing Angels 2: Secret Missions of WWII	7.5	Nov-07
Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare	10	Dec-07
Clive Barker's Jericho	6	Dec-07
Company of Heroes: Opposing Fronts	8.25	Nov-07
Enemy Territories: Quake Wars	8.5	Nov-07
Halo 2	8	Aug-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
Painkiller: Overdose	6.75	Oct-07
Settlers: Rise of an Empire, The	7	Dec-07
Shadowrun	6.5	Aug-07
Sid Meier's Civilization IV: Beyond the Sword	9.5	Sep-07
Supreme Commander: Forged Alliance	8.5	
Surf's Up	6.5	Aug-07
TimeShift	7.75	Dec-07
Two Worlds	4	Nov-07
Unreal Tournament 3	9	Dec-07
Witcher, The	8	Dec-07
World in Conflict	9.25	Oct-07

NINTENDO DS

Title	Score	Date
Brain Age 2: More Training in Minutes a Day	8.25	Sep-07
Brothers in Arms DS	6.75	Sep-07
Cookie & Cream	7	Aug-07
Cooking Mama 2: Dinner With Friends	7	Dec-07
Dementium: The Ward	5.75	Dec-07
DK: Jungle Climer	5.75	Nov-07
Dragon Quest Monsters: Joker	8	Aug-07
Drawn to Life	7	Oct-07
Dynasty Warriors DS: Fighter's Battle	6.5	Jul-07
Final Fantasy XII: Revenant Wings	7.5	Dec-07
Front Mission 1st	7	Nov-07
Heroes of Mana	5	Sep-07
Jam Sessions	6	Dec-07
Legend of Zelda: Phantom Hourglass, The	9.5	Oct-07
Luminous Arc	6	Sep-07
Mega Man ZX Advent	8	Nov-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
Prism: Light the Way	7.5	Dec-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
Turn It Around	4	Dec-07
World Jong	8	Dec-07
Worms Open Warfare 2	7.5	Oct-07

PSP

8.75

Syphon Filter: Logan's Shadow - PSP - Nov-07

Title	Score	Date
Brave Story: New Traveler	7.25	Sep-07
Castlevania: The Dracula X Chronicles	7	Oct-07
Crazy Taxi: Fare Wars	5.75	Nov-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
Hot PXL	6	Oct-07
Innocent Life: A Futuristic Harvest Moon	7.25	Jul-07
Jackass: The Game	6.25	Dec-07
Jeanne D'Arc	8.5	Sep-07
Manhunt 2	7.75	Dec-07
Metal Gear Solid: Portible Ops Plus	7.75	Dec-07
Monster Hunter Freedom 2	7	Sep-07
Naruto: Ultimate Ninja Heroes	6.75	Oct-07
PaRappa the Rapper	8	Jul-07
Silent Hill Origins	7.75	Dec-07
Smash Court Tennis 3	8.5	Sep-07
SOCOM: U.S. Navy SEALs Tactical Strike	8	Dec-07
Star Wars Battlefront: Renegade Squadron	7	Nov-07
SWAT: Target Liberty	5	Dec-07
Syphon Filter: Logan's Shadow	8.75	Nov-07
Tales of the World	7	Aug-07
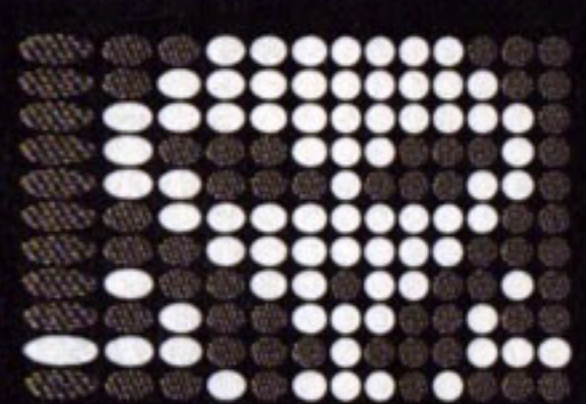
UNLIMITED ENABLED

Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare
Multiplayer Boot Camp

PS3 · Xbox · PC

By Infinity Ward

BASIC MULTIPLAYER TIPS

Use Your Environment
Remember, use your environment as you would in real life since your modern arsenal and the ballistics it packs can punch through a lot of the cover you would normally use. So think twice about what you use for cover and be sure to use hard cover, as high ballistic weapons can shoot through small weak material like wood, plaster, or sheet metal. This also goes for assaulting. See an enemy run up stairs, and know he's hiding in the corner? Try shooting up through the floor to kill him or distract him while your buddy goes up and finishes him.

Customize Your Weapons
You will be able to fully customize your weapon load out to your play style. You can fully customize your primary and secondary weapons. Add attachments such as sights, scopes, hand grips, or grenade launchers. Customize your perks to your liking. If you are a stealthy guy who loves to pull out a silent knife kill whenever possible, customize your perks with UAV Jammer so you don't show up on Enemy UAV Radar, or add a suppressor to your weapon so you don't show up when you fire.

Use Your Support By Staying Alive
If you stay alive long enough to get three-kills, five-kills, and seven-kills without dying then you'll be able to utilize some helpful support from the sky. For example, kill three enemies without dying and call up 30 seconds of UAV Recon (radar) for your entire team. Continue your warpath to five and get the ability to call in an Airstrike anywhere on the map. If you manage seven kills without dying you can radio in Helicopter support, which will fly overhead taking down any enemies it sees, allowing some valuable distraction for you and your squad.

Always Stay Moving And In Cover
Use your ability to sprint to transverse wide open spaces and get from cover to cover. Never stay in one spot too long – especially after a kill – because all enemies will be converging on your spot. Sprint is limited, so use it wisely to get out of a sticky situation.

Explosives Are Your Friends
Taking an M203 or claymore out to the fight with you can make a huge difference in Objective game types. When playing Headquarters, once you've taken over the HQ and are defending, set up claymores around the major doorways to do the work for you while you watch your six. Or put some M203 rounds down range onto an objective to keep enemies from camping on it and capturing it.

TIPS FOR PLAYING OBJECTIVE GAME TYPES

Remember, multiplayer is about a lot more than just taking down enemies. There are a lot of objective game types that require both skill and teamwork to achieve victory.

Headquarters
This game type is all about capturing HQ locations. Nothing else matters or counts to your score so make sure you are constantly keeping the enemy off the HQ and always keeping your guys on it. Don't be afraid to die a little in HQ as your Kill-to-Death ratio means nothing here. Frag Grenades are your best friend while keeping the enemy off the HQ and prevented it from capture, so always put your available frags on the HQ location as you're running to it. This is a great game type to break out your Martyrdom perk, so you can drop a live grenade just before dying each time to keep potential capturers at bay.

Search And Destroy
There are no respawns here, so, unlike HQ, use your lives wisely. There are two sides, attacking and defending, so make sure to play smart depending on what your role is during that round. If you are attacking, be sure to keep a high awareness of your surroundings, where your teammates are, and call out when you see enemy movement. When defending, don't rush it. If time runs out when defending, you automatically win; let the attackers do all the work and make all the mistakes so that you can have the upper hand. Stay back, keep a watchful eye on the targets, and make sure they don't plant. Claymores are perfect for this game type whether attacking or defending; set them up around the target when you plant, or if defending choose the most high traffic area and place them there.

Sabotaged
This tug of war bomb game has you fighting over a single bomb between the team, and much like football, this game type is all about gaining yards. Use your team to your advantage to get the bomb as far away from your target and as close to theirs as possible, that way if you die and drop it, the enemy has that much further to take it and a longer chance for your team to snag it back.

Domination
This game type is all about taking and defending positions on the map. The key here is to not stretch your resources too thin, don't get greedy and try to hold down all three points on the map at once. Your team will be very vulnerable if that's the case, so focus your efforts in fully defending only two points and let the other team waste their time with the last one. It's good to have at least one guy who is the disrupter; allow him to keep them busy at the non-important point so that they aren't constantly attacking the ones you're trying to defend, as it's always better to have two points fully covered than three points partially covered.

COMBINE WORLD TOUR
We know all about what happened in City 17, but how has the rest of the world fared under Combine occupation? The teams behind these Half-Life 2 mods have some ideas.

CITY 7: TORONTO CONFLICT
Half-Life 2
http://torontoconflict.com

Taking place in Toronto – now dubbed City 7 – this single-player conversion has Gordon Freeman stuck in the Canadian metropolis courtesy of a malfunction in the bumbling Dr. Kleiner's teleportation lab. It's not out yet, but we definitely feel that this thesis project from the game design program at George Brown College in Toronto is worth keeping tabs on.
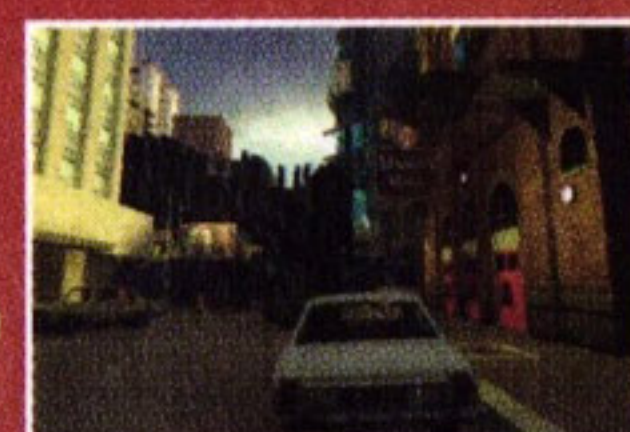
RAVENHOLM
Half-Life 2
http://ravenholm.wz.cz/english.html
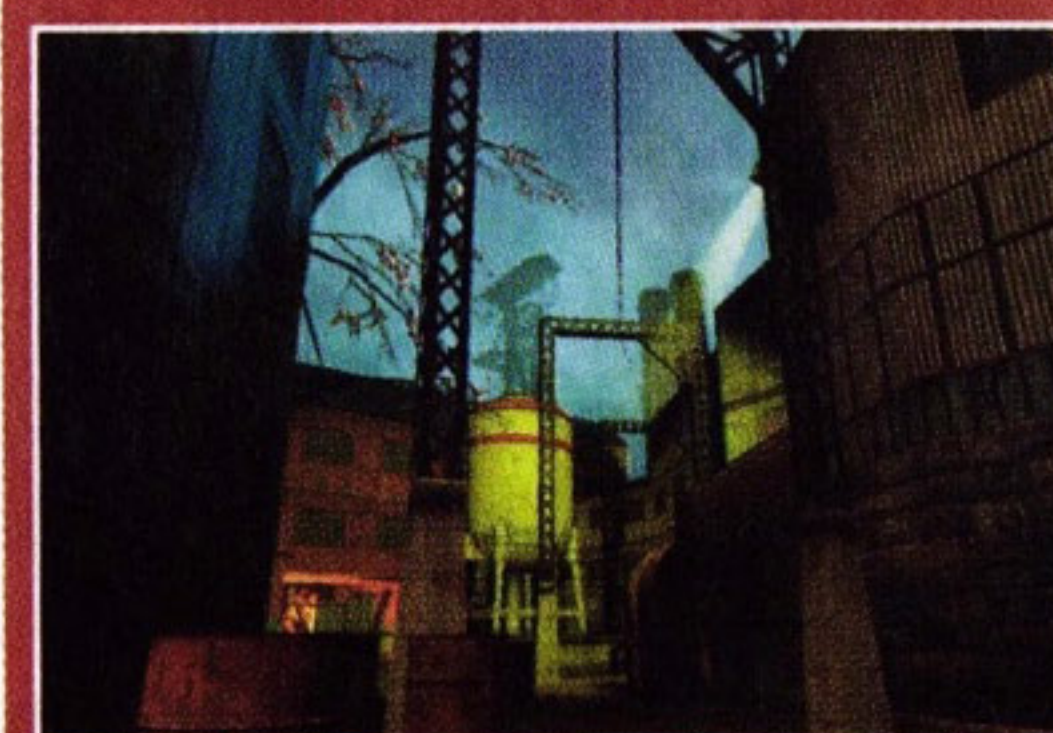
This mod came out some time ago, but its lauded single-player story is worth checking out on the eve of its follow-up's release (see below). Set in the eponymous deserted town, Ravenholm features horror-themed action similar to the Half-Life 2 level it draws inspiration from. You'll have to forgive the Polish authors' English language gaffes, but the gameplay speaks for itself.

EYE OF THE STORM
Half-Life 2
http://eots.half-life2.cz/english.php

Following the resistance fighter who had previously escaped from Ravenholm, Eye of the Storm is set in City 24 during the events of Half-Life 2's main story. This mod – due out sometime in 2008 – will advance the storyline by revealing more of its main character's amnesia-obscured backstory as well as take a look at what the team thinks could be pulling the strings behind the overall Half-Life plot.

MULTI-SYSTEM
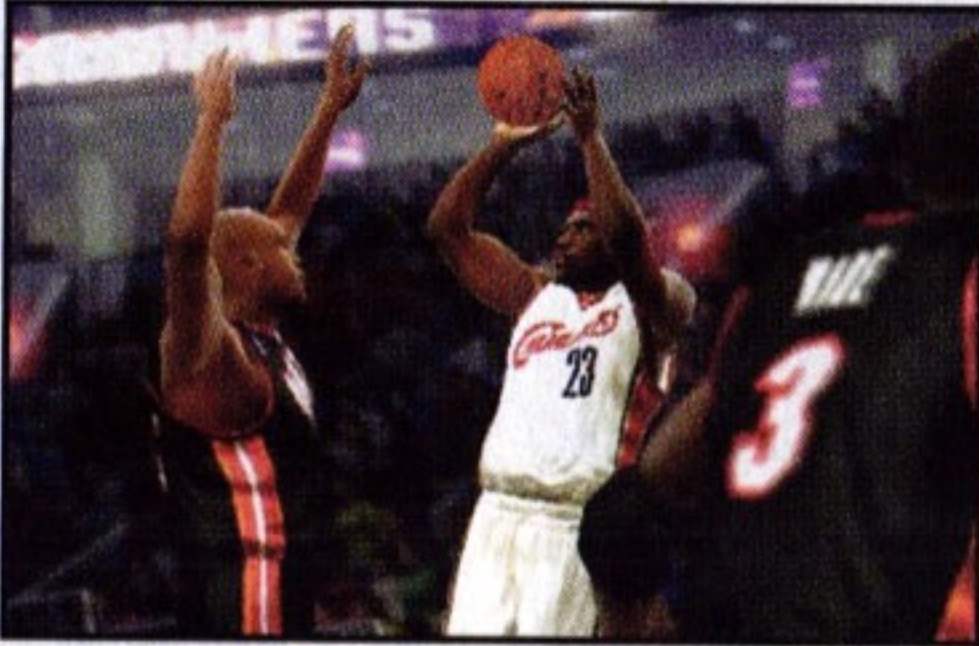
NBA 2K8
> PLAYSTATION 3, XBOX 360, PLAYSTATION 2

Go into the features menu and select the codes section to enter these codes to unlock these new teams.

2K Sports Team – 2ksports
ABA Ball – payrespect
NBA Development Team – nba2k
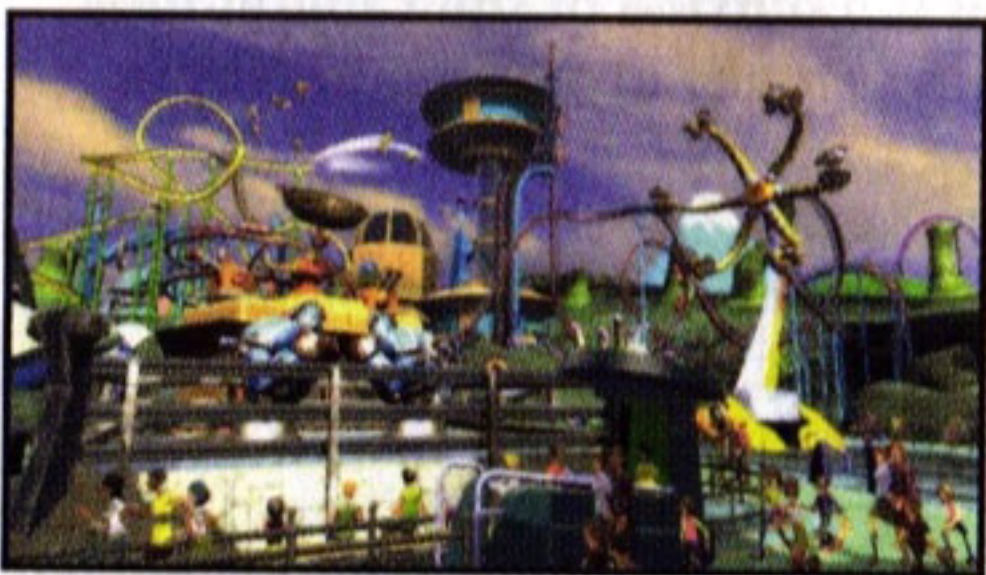**Visual Concepts Team** – vcteam

XBOX 360

Medal of Honor Airborne

While playing the game, enter the code menu command and you will be brought to a screen where you can input the other codes.

Enter Cheat Menu – Hold RB+LB, X, B, Y, A, A
Refill Ammo – B, B, Y, X, A, Y
Refill Health – Y, X, X, Y, A, B

Thrillville: Off The Rails

While in your park, quickly enter the following codes and you will notice the changes right away.

$50,000 – X, B, Y, X, B, Y, A
500 Thrill Points – B, X, Y, B, X, Y, X
Mission Complete – X, B, Y, X, B, Y, B
Unlock All Parks – X, B, Y, X, B, Y, X
Unlock All Rides – X, B, Y, X, B, Y, Y

Code of the Month

The Orange Box – Portal

Some of Portal's tougher puzzles got you stumped? Maybe a few codes can ease that strain on your brain. Insert the following codes any time during gameplay. Note that these codes will disable your ability to gain Achivements and complete the Challenges.

Create Box – Down, B, A, B, Y, Down, B, A, B, Y

Fire Energy Ball – Up, Y, Y, X, X, A, A, B, B, Up
Fire Rocket Projectile – Up, Y, Y, B, B, A, A, X, X, Up
Place Portal Anywhere – Y, A, B, A, B, Y, Y, A, Left, Right
Upgrade Portalgun – X, B, LB, RB, Left, Right, LB, RB, LT, RT

Clay Pottinger
Ben Hur, Texas

Xbox Live Arcade Spotlight

Penny Arcade Adventures:
On the Rain-Slick Precipice of Darkness Episode One
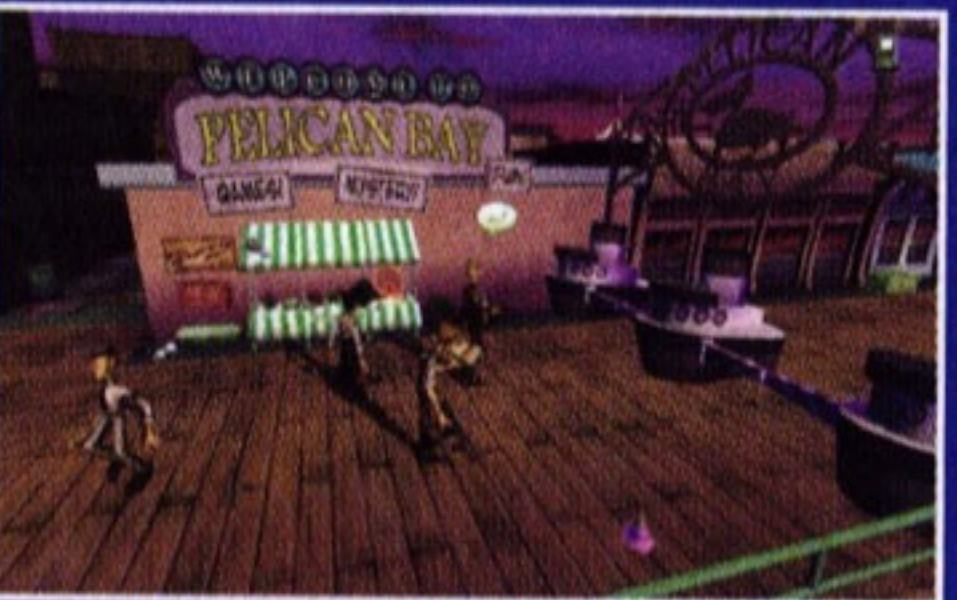
Anyone familiar with the gaming-focused webcomic by Mike Krahulik and Jerry Holkins knows they're in for some good laughs on this one. Stepping from sardonic game industry commentators to the other side of the fence in development, the Holkins-penned script promises to carry the same smart dialogue and clever quips the comic is praised for. Hothead Games is handling the heavy lifting of designing the action/adventure title, which boasts a turn-based combat system and point-and-click style encounters with fan favorite characters. It's hard to beat the team's own description of the setting, which they say is "steampunk meets pulp horror meets H.P. Lovecraft alternate 1920s universe." Players will get to craft their own customized character in the style of the comic that will carry across episodes of the game. Live Arcade should see a download of this first episode in the early part of this year – the first in a larger project that should bring some humor and fun to Live over the coming years.

PLAYSTATION 3

Virtua Fighter 5

Select Virtua Fighter TV then Exhibition Match and at the character selection screen enter this code for a classic Sega Saturn-style mode.

Spectator Mode – Hold L1+R1, ✕

"GI Droid"
(location unknown – last seen peeling the stickers off Rubik's cubes)

PLAYSTATION 2

Legend of Spyro:
A New Beginning

During gameplay, pause the game to enter these codes. A gong will sound when entered correctly.

Infinite Breath – Up, Up, Down, Down, Left, Right, Left, Right, L1, R1, L1, R1, Start
Infinite Health – Up, Up, Down, Down, Left, Right, Left, Right, L1, L1, R1, R1, Start
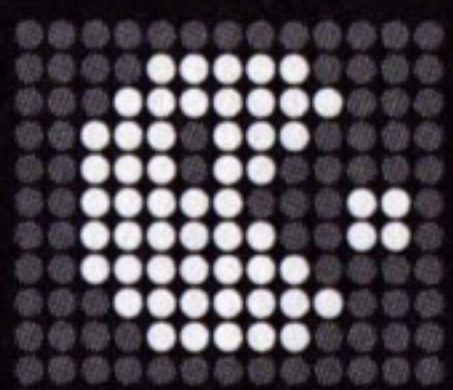
SPACE INVADERS
TAKE-OFFS AND LANDINGS

It may be simplistic by today's standards, but Space Invaders was one of the most influential video games ever created. Released back in 1978, Space Invaders became an immediate success. In Japan, the game was so popular that specialty arcades began to open up featuring nothing but Space Invaders cabinets. The game even caused a national shortage of yen coins. Over the course of its life, Space Invaders generated nearly half a billion dollars in revenue for developer Taito. Even today, it ranks as one of the most profitable games ever made. This month we got a chance to talk with the creator, Tomohiro Nishikado, about how he came up with the idea for the game, if he'll ever wants to make an updated version, and what he thinks about video games today.

What was Space Invaders' genesis? Where did the idea come from?
At the time, Atari's Break Out was very popular in Japan, and I remember getting deeply into the game. Because I was a game creator and had the experience of creating games before, coming up with something that would be above Break Out became my goal. I analyzed what was Break Out's best feature, the sense of achievement players got after completing the stage by breaking all the targets, and decided to create a shooting game that had this element as a central feature – but had more than just rectangular shaped characters as targets.

What were your inspirations during the game's development?
During the creation of the enemies, I tried objects like tanks, combat planes, and battleships, however none of them had the right movement that clicked for me. That was when a magazine caught my eye. It featured an article about how Star Wars was going to be a big hit in the U.S., which gave me the idea of using an alien or outer space theme.
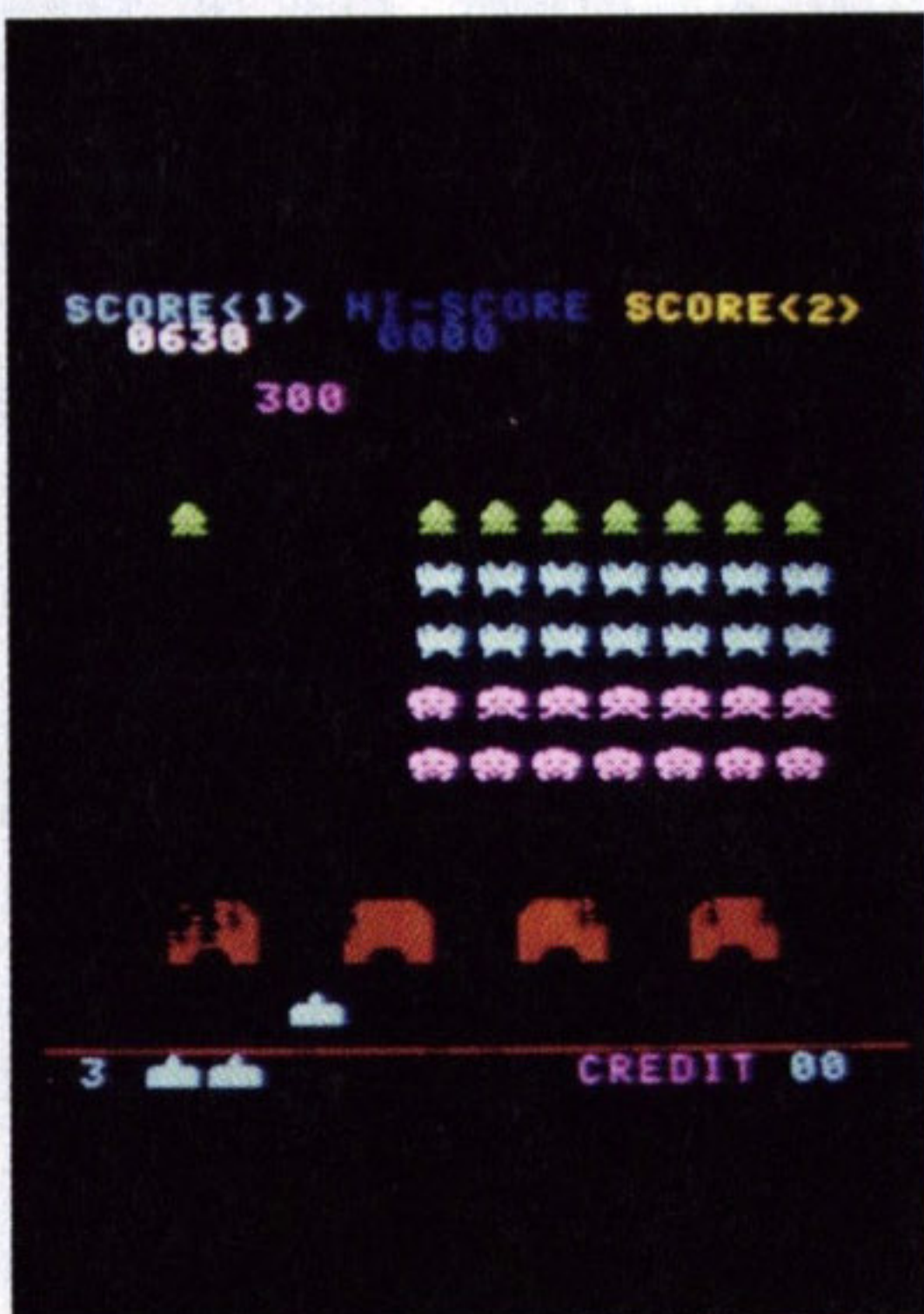
For the character design, I imagined an octopus-shaped alien, like the Martians from English novelist HG Wells' War of the Worlds. With the other characters, I tried to relate them to the octopus, so for them I chose crabs and squid as models.
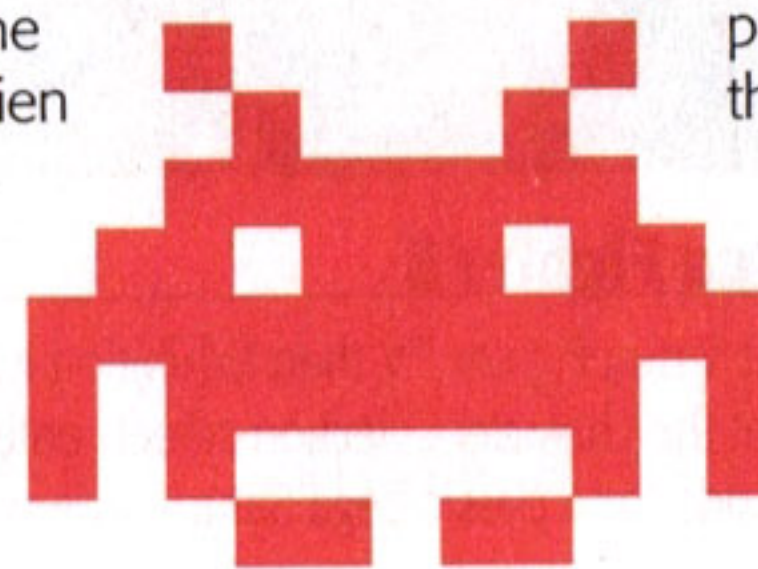
Oddly, the aliens on the outside of the cabinet look nothing like the ones actually in the game. Why is that?
The very early cabinets had this strange human-like monster on the side. I don't know who was responsible for this or why they drew that, but my guess is that this happened because the artist didn't bother to look at the game graphics, and instead drew something based only from the sound of the original title, Space Monsters.

Why was the original title changed from Space Monsters to Space Invaders?
At the time, a song entitled "Monster" was very popular in Japan, and that was where I got the idea. Even though I loved it, because of my boss' order, I was forced to change the title. I was very unhappy about the decision.

How long did it take to finish development? Did anyone else work on it with you?

The total development project took almost a year. Half of that period was used for game development. The other half was used for developing the hardware environment and tools. Because the development tools for microcomputers weren't that rich or powerful enough at that time, we had to create all our own tools. We didn't have many microcomputers in Japan at the time, so we created our own from scratch. That was actually more work than creating the game. The whole development process such as programming and graphics – with the exception of sound – was done solely by me.

Was there anything you wanted to do in Space Invaders, but couldn't because you were limited by the technology?

Originally, I wanted to create a Galaxian kind of game, meaning I wanted to have targets move faster and have more colorful graphics. However, because the processing power of the CP board wasn't strong enough, I couldn't make those wishes a reality.

Do you have any interest going back and adding these elements? Or perhaps creating a new edition similar to the recently released Pac-Man Championship Edition?

I think the original game succeeded because the hardware specs were low, and for this reason I don't have any desire to remake or add any additional content to the game.

One aspect of the game that skilled players took advantage of was that invaders firing missiles from the lowest line on the screen couldn't damage your spacecraft. Was this intentionally included in the game?

It is a kind of a bug, an unintentional result of the way the game was written, and I believe it was triggered by hitting part of the program off guard, so to speak. It wasn't included intentionally.

What was it like to make games back in the '70s? In what ways was the development process different?

Games created before Space Invaders were mainly developed by either one or two developers, who did the project planning as well. Only one graphic designer was needed. Since the graphics were controlled by the hardware and not by the software, a very small number of people were needed.

In my case, I did all the graphic designing, programming, and planning by myself. However these days, as you know, a lot more people are involved in game creation. For example, each project consists of planner, programmer, graphic designer, etc...

The Space Invaders' graphics have become very iconic and have inspired a lot of designers and artists throughout the years. Why do you think those icons resonate so well with people today?

I don't really know, but it might be because the character is made with simple shapes and uses a single color.

Were you surprised when Space Invaders released and it became as popular as it did?

Although we thought the game was good, we didn't expect it to be that huge of a hit. Especially since neither our sales team nor the manufacturer had any idea how to predict these kinds of things at the time. I like to believe that maybe the difficulty of the game provided a new thrilling experience, which appealed to young people of the time, and maybe that had something to do with the game's popularity.

One of your American contemporaries, Nolan Bushnell, has stated that he really doesn't like modern video games. What do you think about this, and how do you feel about games today?

I respect Mr. Bushnell as a pioneer in the game world, and I've met him before. The methods for creating a game have become a lot different from what they used to be. There is now a greater concentration on a games graphical beauty and less focus on the depth of a game's mechanics. Also the fact that games are being created by many people might be part of the reason game creators of the old days feel such discontent. I have similar feelings, and I am very sad that the good part of the game is being sacrificed for complex graphics.

What was your favorite project to work on?

My favorite is actually a game called Speed Race, which I created early on. At the time, almost all games were imported to Japan from America, but this was the first

■ A good example of the odd monsters depicted on the side of the old cabinets, which bear no resemblance to the characters in the game

■ The points a player received from a red ship weren't random. They were actually calculated based on how many shots a player had fired during that wave. To get the maximum of 300 points, players had to shoot the UFO on their 23rd shot

one to be exported to overseas markets. And for this reason, I have more fondness for the game than I do for Space Invaders.

What would be your dream project?

It might be going against the times, but my dream would be to create a simple but fun game with a small team, like how it used to be in the old days.

This Month In Gaming History

On January, 11 2005 Capcom released Resident Evil 4 for the GameCube. The finest entry in the classic survival horror franchise, RE 4 made some dramatic changes to the series' formula, such as a fixed behind-the-shoulder camera and more action-focused gameplay. The game went on to receive multiple game of the year awards, and has sold more than three million units worldwide.

There's no escaping the long arm of the law!

3DO
ROAD RASH

> STYLE 1 OR 2-PLAYER RACING > PUBLISHER ELECTRONIC ARTS > DEVELOPER MONKEY DO > RELEASE 1994

Sometimes racing for first place just isn't enough to make a game compelling. When you're having a bad day, it's much more preferable to send your competitors to the emergency room with a well-placed crowbar to the skull that knocks them off their bike while screaming down the highway at 120 MPH. This remake of the classic Genesis title found genius in this sick scenario. Once you knock a racer to the asphalt, his gang attempts to exact revenge by returning the favor. If you escape their wrath and place high enough, you can use your winnings to purchase new crotch rockets and revel in the amusing full-motion video cut-scenes. The 3DO version of Road Rash may not have paved the way for future racers with innovative mechanics (the controls are passable at best), but it did leave a lasting mark with the first game soundtrack featuring licensed music; the lineup boasts acts like Soundgarden, Paw, and Monster Magnet. Since pummeling racers into the pavement is an ageless act of aggression, it would be great to see a developer (like, say, Burnout creator Criterion) recreate Road Rash for next-gen systems.

RETRO RATING
NOW 7.75
THEN* 8.75
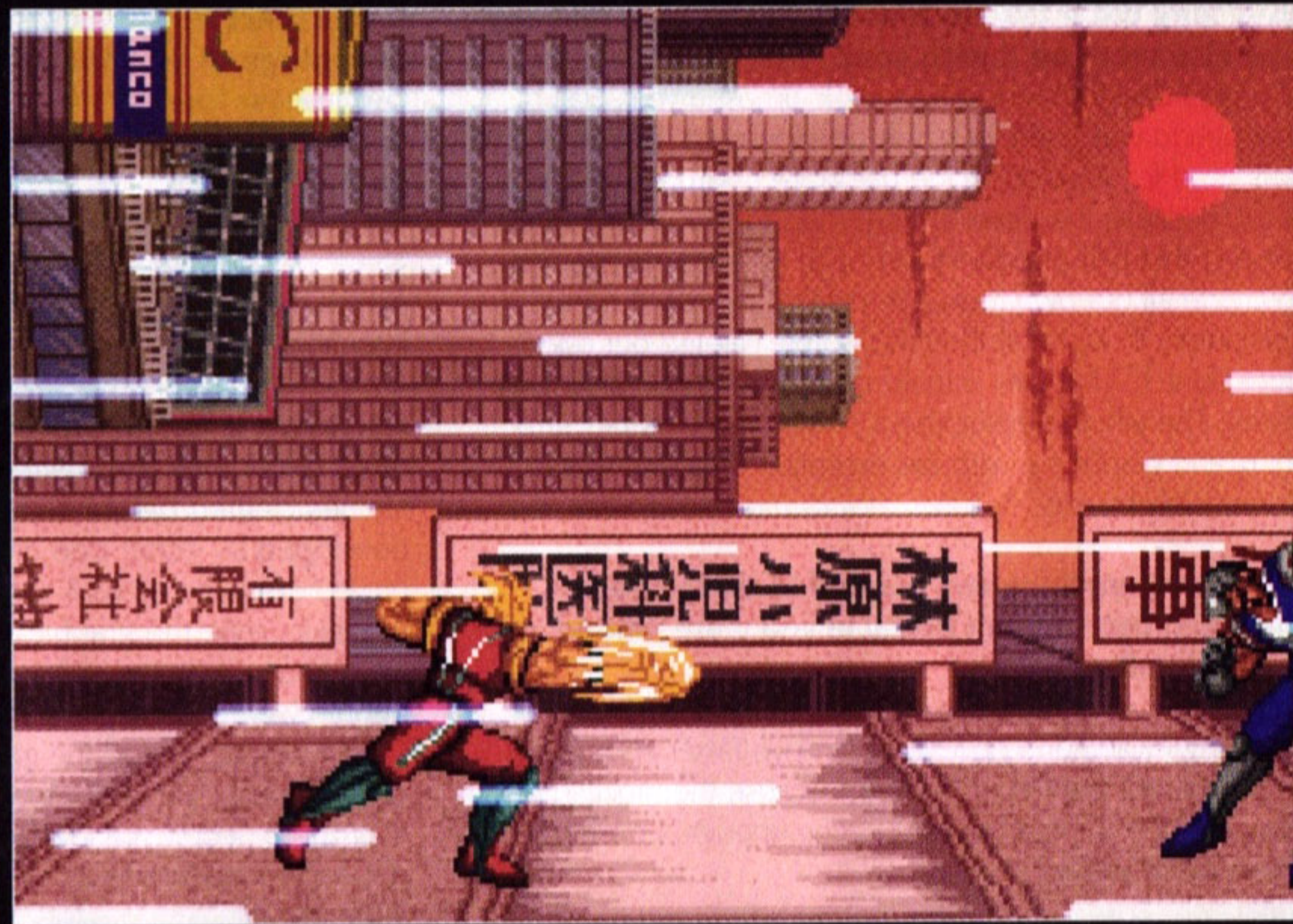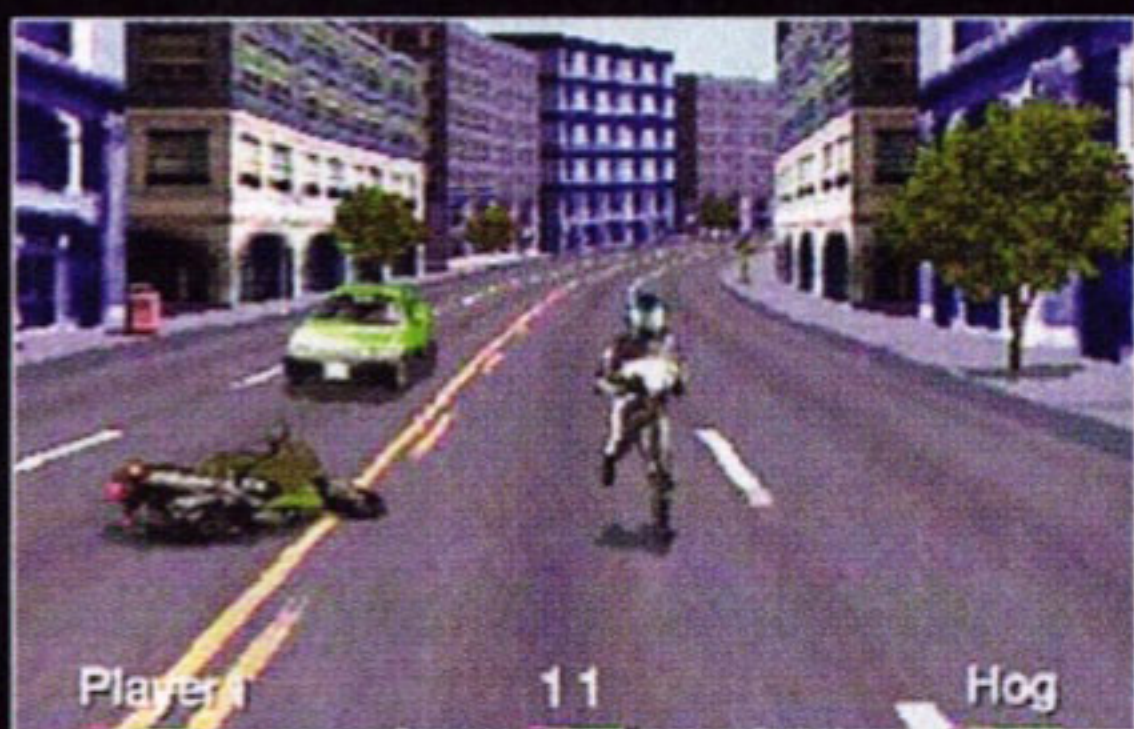
SNES
DOOMSDAY WARRIOR

> STYLE 1 OR 2-PLAYER FIGHTING > PUBLISHER RENOVATION PRODUCTS > DEVELOPER RENOVATION PRODUCTS
> RELEASE 1992

The early '90s were the glory days of the 2D fighter. More accurately, they were the glory days of Street Fighter II, followed by an explosion of crappy imitators. Doomsday Warrior is one of the many also-rans of that era, forcing players to fight through a stable of characters shamelessly lifted from Dragon Ball Z. Fake Goku and his fellow combatants have extremely limited move-sets, with only a couple special moves in addition to basic punches and kicks. There are also throws, but because of the fuzzy hit detection you're more likely to be the throwee than the thrower. The stat system (which lets you allocate points after each fight) is kind of cool until you realize that enemies' powers scale with yours, effectively negating any progress. Also, the "ridiculously cheap final boss" mentality is in full effect. Doomsday Warrior isn't as much of a no-effort cash-in attempt as some 2D fighters, so maybe it deserves some credit. Then again, it still isn't any fun, and just because it sucks in different ways doesn't make it worth playing.

RETRO RATING
NOW 4
THEN N/A

SEGA CD
FINAL FIGHT CD

> STYLE 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION > PUBLISHER SEGA > DEVELOPER SEGA > RELEASE 1993

Desperate for some good content for its new system, Sega got the Final Fight license from Capcom and made a revamped version of the 1989 arcade game. In a major coup over the lacking SNES version, FF CD supported two-player co-op, sweet transitions between levels, a re-inserted Industrial Area stage, and all three playable characters from the arcade game. Sega also restored ladies Poison and Roxy to their rightful place rather than follow Nintendo's lead of transforming them into the lame Sid and Billy. But other than capturing the arcade experience, why play this over, say, the arcade emulation on Capcom Classics Collection? The entire soundtrack has been rerecorded to "CD Quality" with plenty of funky bass, rippin' guitar, and even a few simulated "whoas" thrown in for good measure. Opening and ending cutscenes now feature full voiceovers (hilariously bad, of course) and new animation. And a time attack mode is included with new background art. Brawler fans should definitely try tracking this one down.

RETRO RATING
NOW 8.5
THEN N/A

*Score given to the game when it first appeared in Game Informer. Road Rash (GI# 7 12/94)

UNLIMITED LAUNCH: DEC. 14
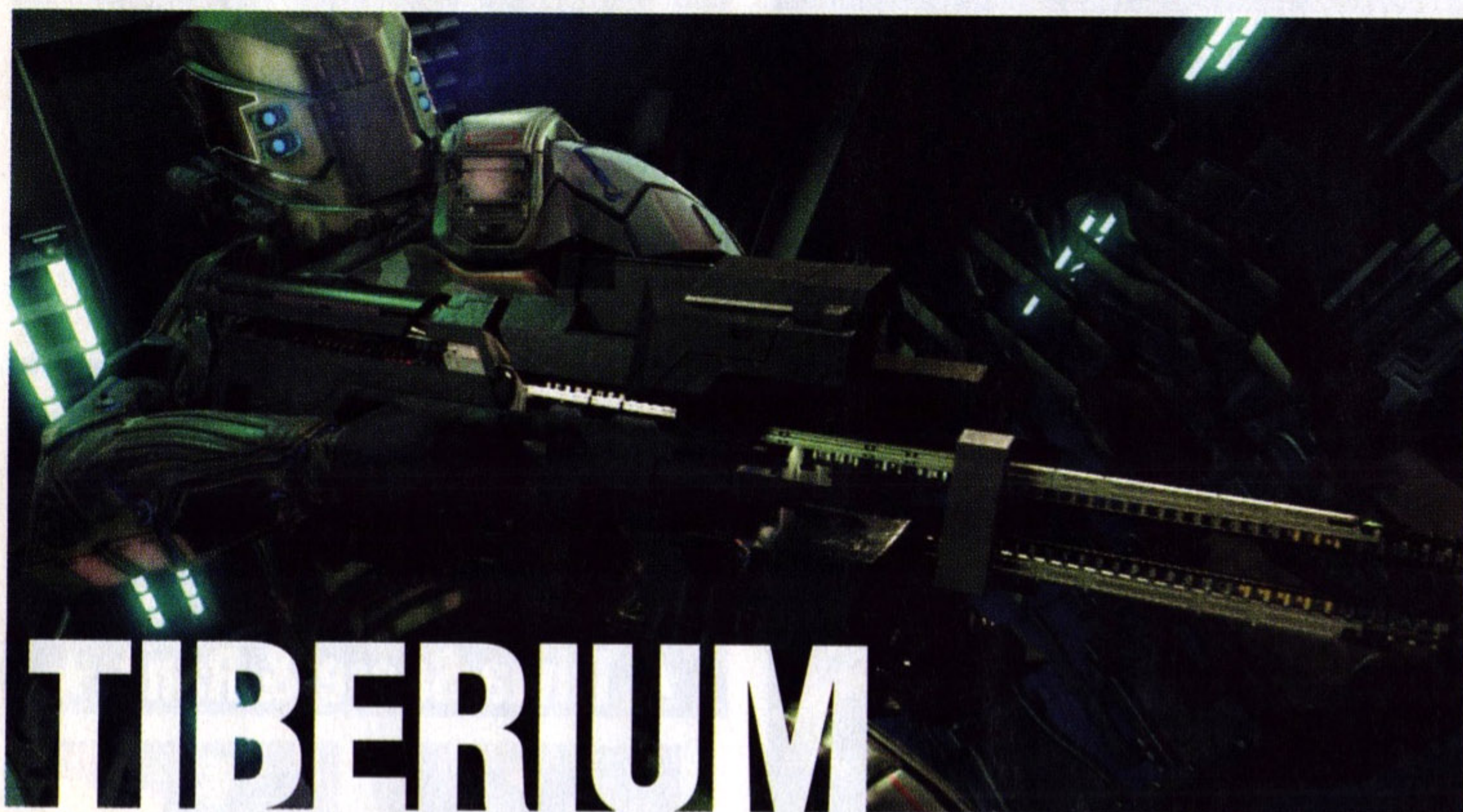
TIBERIUM

We've got a load of extra concept art and screenshots for your enjoyment.

SEE FOR YOURSELF

Check out the trailer for the next chapter in the Command & Conquer saga on our website.

TOP 10 REDUX

Are you pissed that Ben has Dancing With the Stars in his top ten list? Read his rationale, along with the rest of ours, in this extended Editor Top 10 of 2007 edition.

ENDWAR

We sit down with creative director Michael de Plater of Ubisoft Shanghai to talk about the latest Tom Clancy thriller.

TUROK

Gain extra insight into restoring this franchise's credibility by reading our interview with Josh Holmes, vice president and general manager at Propaganda Games.

THE LAST REMNANT

Get a better view of the action on and off the battlefield with this batch of screens from Square Enix's upcoming RPG.

ALSO ONLINE THIS MONTH:

The GI Online Staff turns their gaze to 2008 with a rundown of the games that have us hot and bothered.
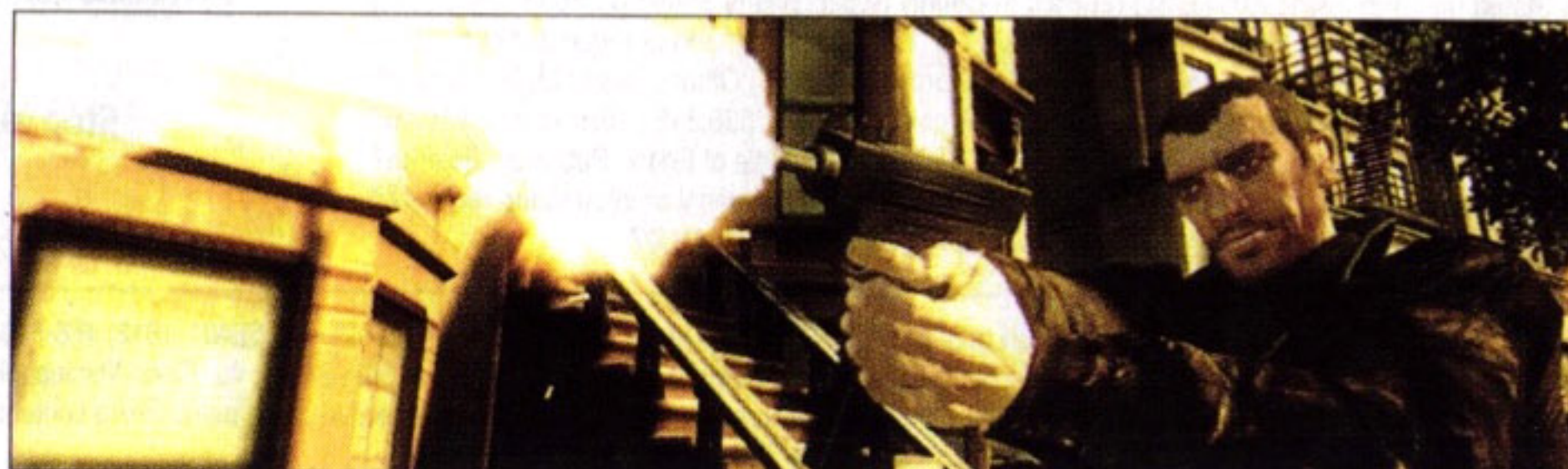
VIDEO GAME TRIVIA

It's the New Year again, and boy do we have some big resolutions. Eat more Doritos while gaming. Find better ways to stay up for all-night gaming sessions. Avoid sunlight. You know, healthy things. But did you know gaming characters often have New Year's resolutions of their own? It's true. Take this quiz and find out which vid star you should emulate this year.

1 How many players could play at once in the original Gunstar Heroes on Genesis?
A. Only one, and it was so lonely
B. Only two, but no one would ever play with me
C. Only four, yet I wanted even more
D. Psh! Trick question. That game never came out for the Genesis

2 You know what's sweet? Slicing people with swords. You can take that to the bank. Do you remember which one of these characters showed up for the first time in Soul Calibur II?
A. Taki
B. Cassandra
C. Xian
D. Nightmare

3 Did you know the main character in Metroid, Samus, is actually a girl? What? You already knew that? Fine, but do you know the name of the alien race that created her armor for her?
A. Chozo
B. Space Pirates
C. Kraid
D. Master Chief, and they're totally married

4 The definition of a hot girl has a lot to do with how she handles zombies. Trust us on this one. Which hottie did you play in Resident Evil 3: Nemesis?
A. Rebecca Chambers
B. Claire Redfield
C. Jill Valentine
D. Ada Wong

5 Long before any geckos started selling insurance, Gex was the gecko with a starring role in his 1996 debut from Crystal Dynamics. Only one man had the comedic force and powerful delivery necessary to play the little green hero. Who was he?
A. Dana Dane
B. Dana Plato
C. Dana Carvey
D. Dana Gould

6 Earthbound is one of those games people are likely to make fun of you for not having played. Alternately, you probably make fun of people who haven't ever played it, and you should know the name of the small town in which you begin the game.
A. Springfield
B. Onett
C. Fourside
D. Threed

7 Poy Poy is a game you probably haven't heard of, but it came out on the first PlayStation in 1997. If only we could remember who published that one, our lives would be complete...
A. Sega
B. Nintendo
C. Capcom
D. Konami

8 Buffy the Vampire Slayer: Chaos Bleeds was a game with a strange subtitle. If you had to guess, around what real season of the TV show was the game set?
A. Season One
B. Season Five
C. Season Seven
D. After the show had ended

9 We don't know about you, but we spent a lot of time in our youth trying to track down the elusive Carmen Sandiego. Which of these was not a real game?
A. Where in Time is Carmen Sandiego?
B. Carmen Sandiego: The Secret of the Stolen Drums
C. Carmen Sandiego Math Detective
D. Where in the Hell is Carmen Sandiego?

10 What's your problem, anyway?
A. No. What's your problem?!
B. There's no need to be aggressive. Let's talk this out.
C. No problem, man. Just chill.
D. Meet me outside in five minutes and I'll show you.

BREAKDOWN

779,145,191 is the total number of Xbox 360 Achievements unlocked by gamers to date, according to Microsoft

$900,000 was raised by the ESA in their recent Nite To Unite Charity Event, which will go towards various causes that support American youth

129% is how much better games with downloadable content sell on Xbox 360, according new research from Electronic Entertainment Design and Research

9.3 million is the current reported subscriber base of World of Warcraft

Sevneight is the new number that we just made up that fits between seven and eight. Pretty sweet, right?

★ Trivia Score & Rank ★

0-1:
Be cooler
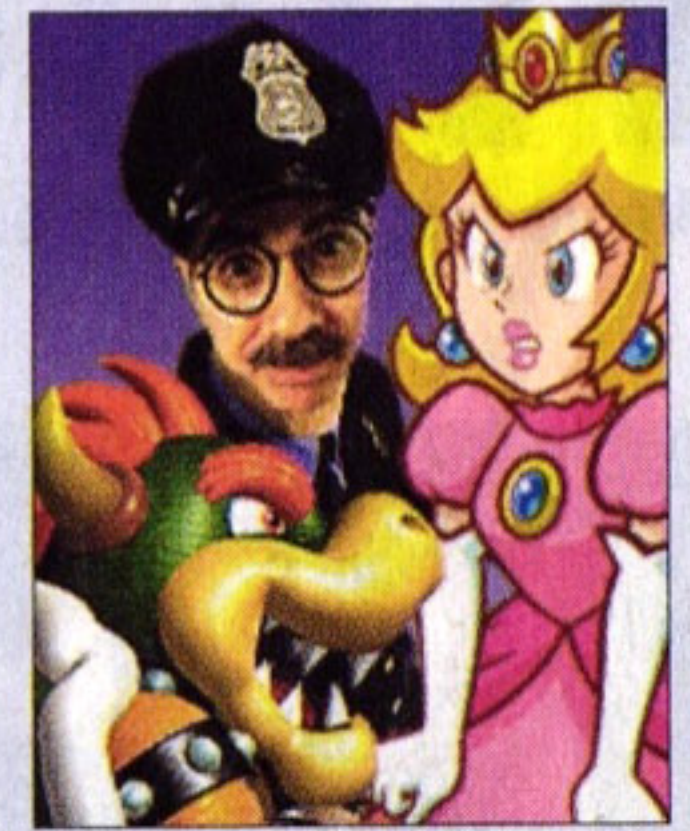
2-3:
Obey restraining order from Peach
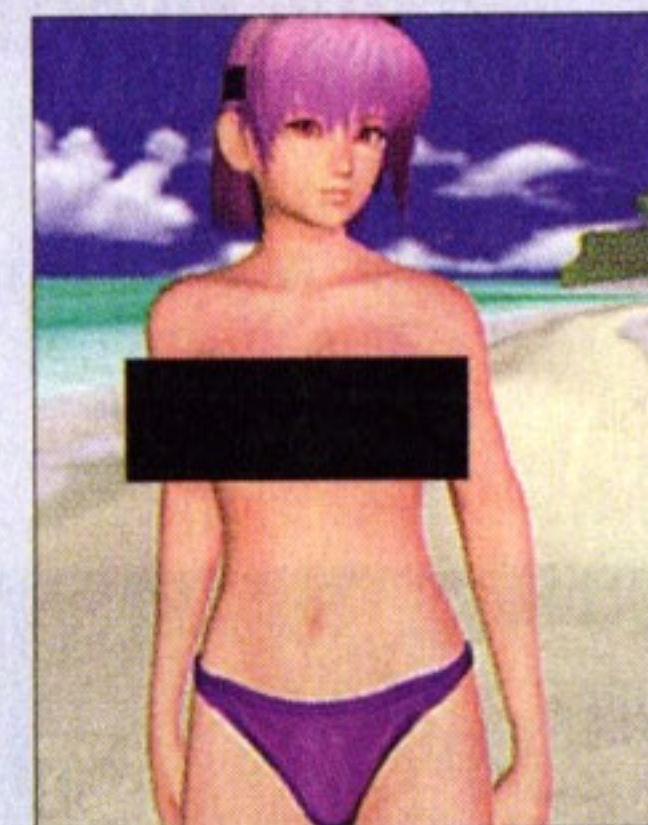
4-5:
Wear clothes
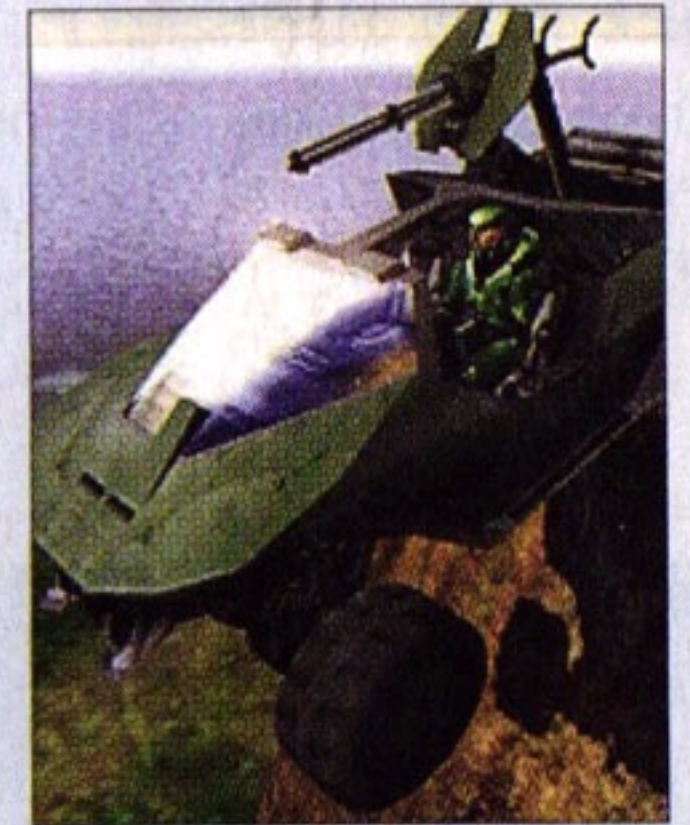
6-7:
Give keys to Arbiter before drinking

8-9:
Stop killing dudes

10:
Find better job

Video Game Trivia Answers: 1. B 2. B 3. A 4. C 5. D 6. B 7. D 8. B 9. D 10. A, B, C, or D