

➔ **MASS EFFECT 2**
EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW BEFORE LAUNCH PG. 42

TRANSFORMERS: WAR FOR CYBERTRON
A SIX-PAGE EXCLUSIVE REVEAL PG. 48



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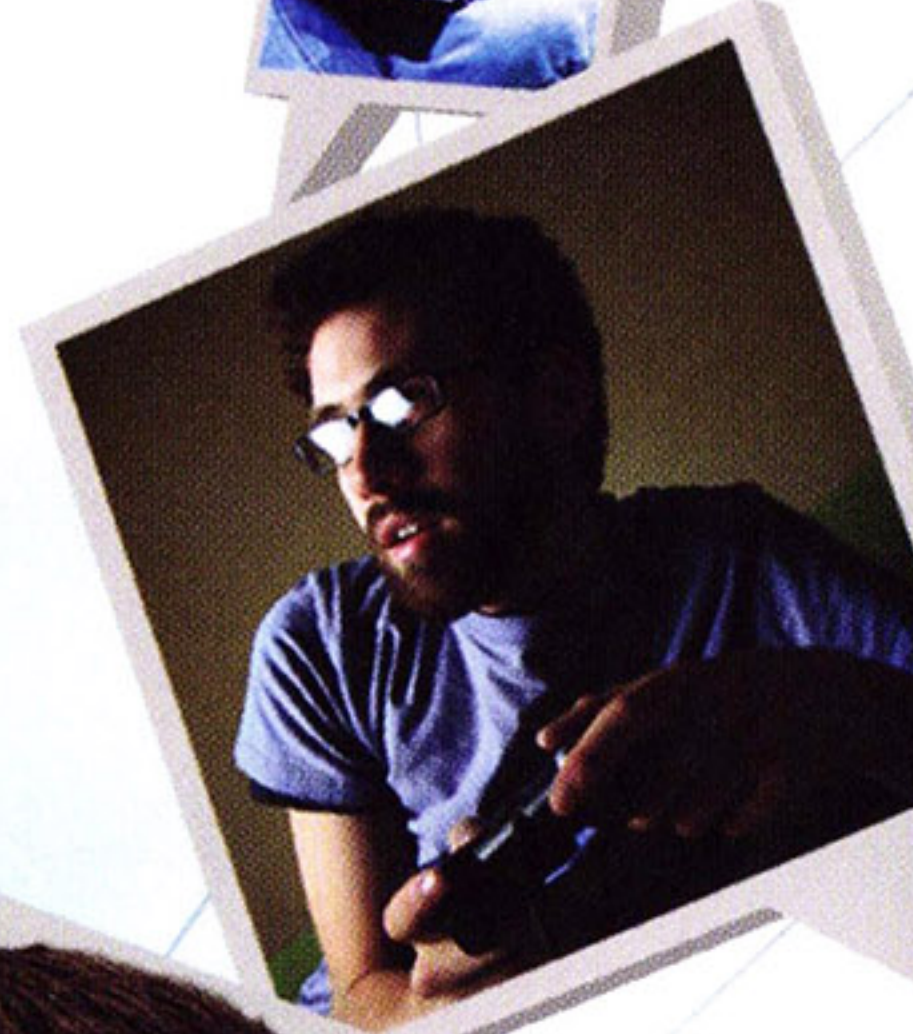
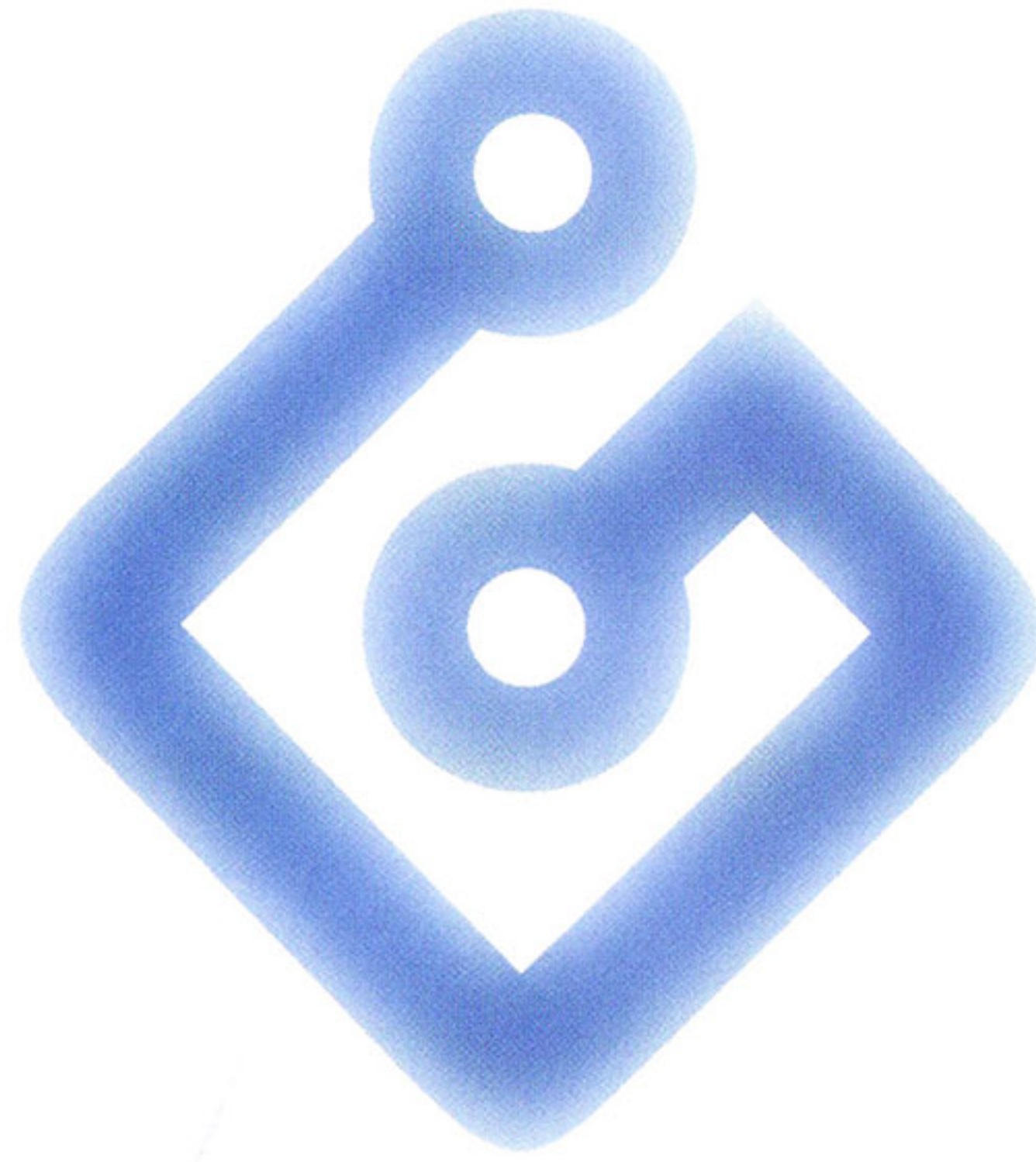
THE WORLD'S #1 VIDEO GAME MAGAZINE



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DEAD SPACE 2

» A **STUNNING** FOLLOW-UP TO THE SURPRISE **HORROR HIT**



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The New Year

2010: The Greatest Gaming Year Of All Time



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

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

Based purely on quality and quantity, two years stand out as the greatest in video game history: 2004 and 2007. The former featured groundbreaking releases like World of Warcraft, Half-Life 2, Halo 2, Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas, Far Cry, and Fable among a sea of amazing games. The latter shattered even that feat with the launches of Crackdown, God of War II, Assassin's Creed, Mass Effect, Halo 3, Uncharted: Drake's Fortune, BioShock, Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare, Super Mario Galaxy, and Rock Band. To keep this paragraph from turning into an endless list, I left off some other amazing titles – further proof of how much these two years stand out in an industry spawned by Pong in 1972.

Pundits and naysayers say the video game industry is in decline based off the sales numbers from 2009. The year, quite frankly, lacked the variety and quantity needed to send gamers into cardiac arrest (though it did have some amazing high notes, which we will explore next month with our 2009 Game of the Year awards). Will the downward trend continue? No chance. This year will put any and all questions to rest with a lineup of games that shall strike down upon the world with great vengeance and furious anger. I can't wait.

Perhaps it is a three-year cycle, or just plain dumb luck, but this year's lineup is going to blow your mind (and assault your pocketbook). We already know a lot of the big names slated to appear in 2010: Final Fantasy XIII, BioShock 2, Gran Turismo 5, Halo: Reach, Crackdown 2, Epic Mickey, God of War III, Crysis 2, Bayonetta, StarCraft 2, Splinter Cell: Conviction, and Red Dead Redemption. In addition, I have seen many other exciting unannounced games on the horizon.

Like our in-depth look at Dead Space 2 this month, we have a great lineup of surprises set for this year's cover stories, many of which are scheduled for a 2010 release. I'll be convicted under the penalty of death if I name drop any of these big announcements, but I know of at least six other games releasing this year that will make your blood boil in anticipation. When all is said and done, 2010 will be the greatest year in video game history. Cheers.

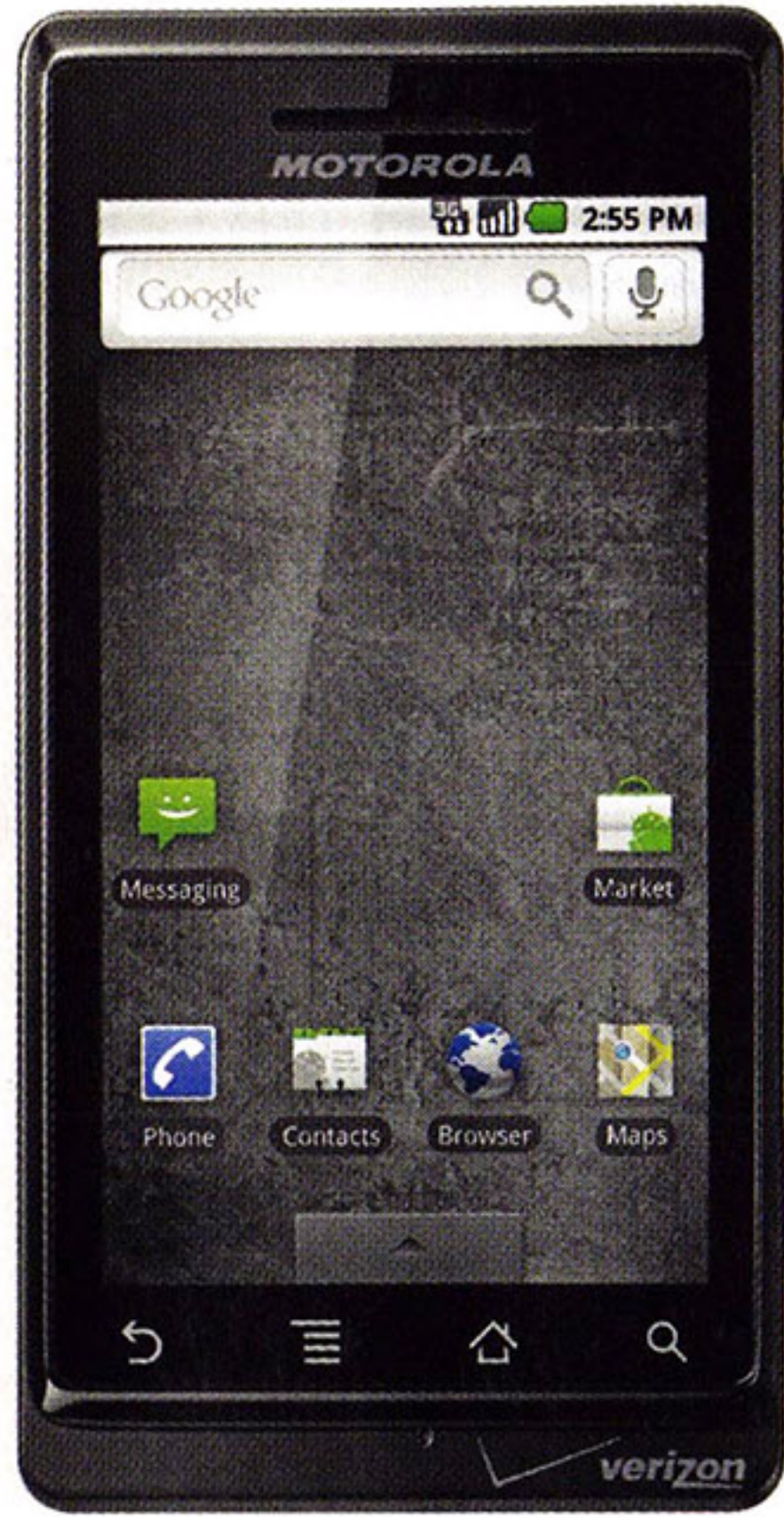
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Dead Space 2

In space, no one can hear you scream. Electronic Arts and Visceral Games are bringing terror home again with a blood-curdling sci-fi sequel
by Joe Juba



cover story



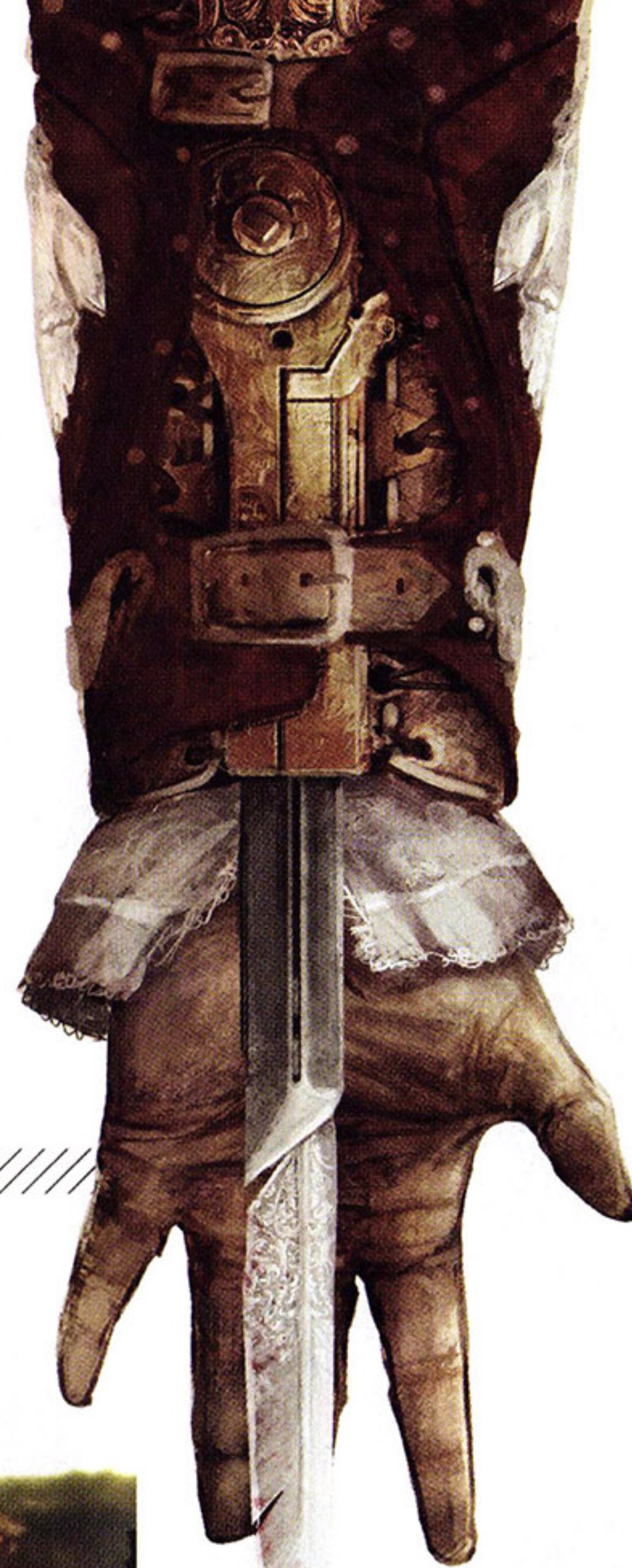
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The enthusiastic response to Borderlands tells us what we already knew: Everyone loves co-op. Join us for a look at the do's and don'ts of co-op gaming

by Meagan VanBurkleo

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God of War III looks great, Red Dead Redemption is doing Westerns right, and Kane & Lynch return for a sequel

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Does Assassin's Creed II fix the issues that many had with the original? Is the Leonardo Da Vinci thing as stupid as it sounds? The word is inside

by Matt Miller

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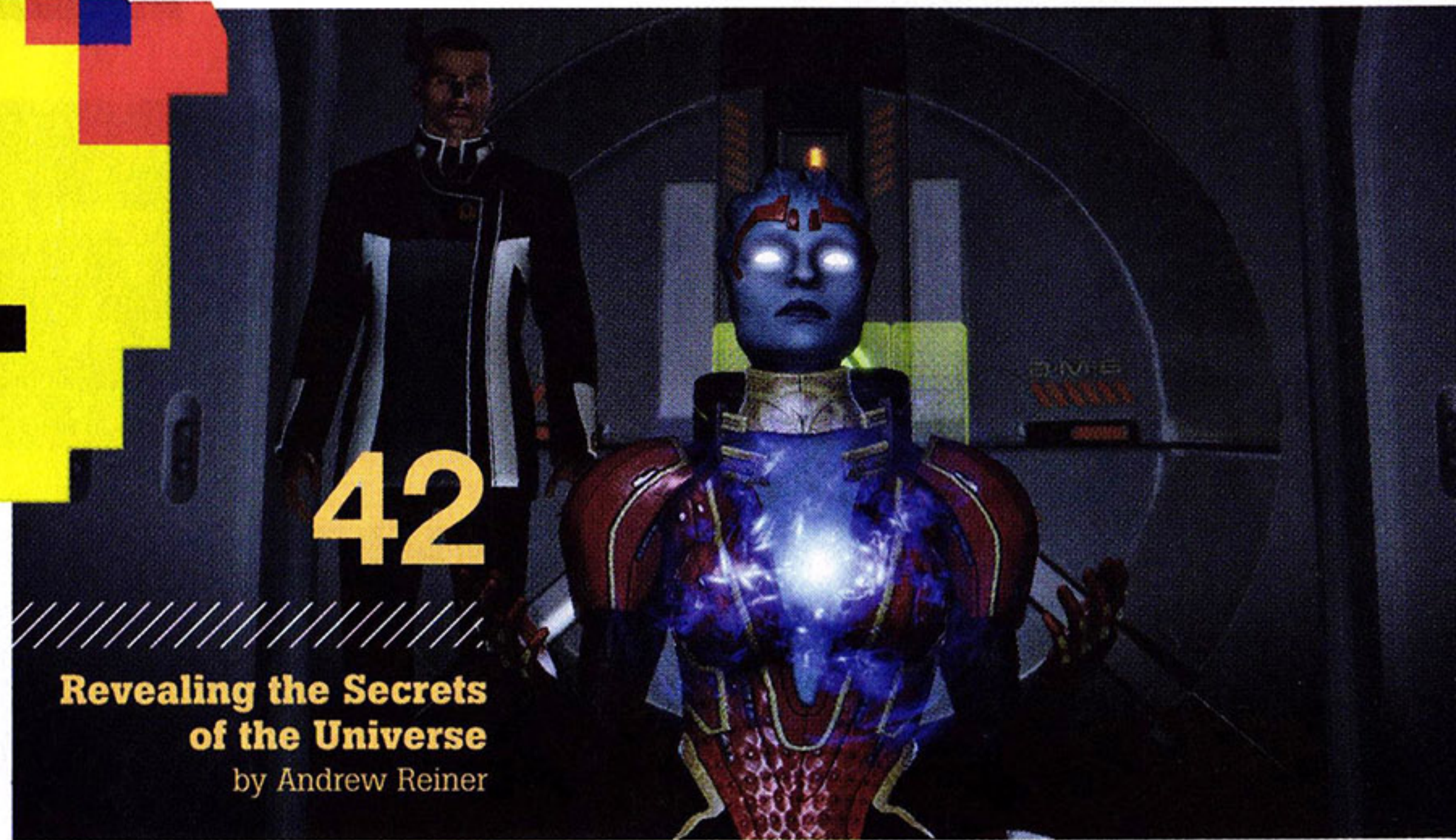
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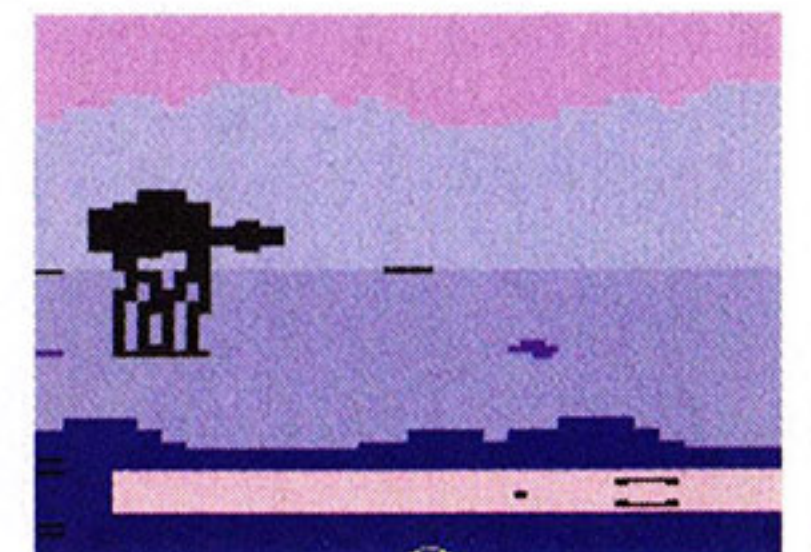


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by Andrew Reiner



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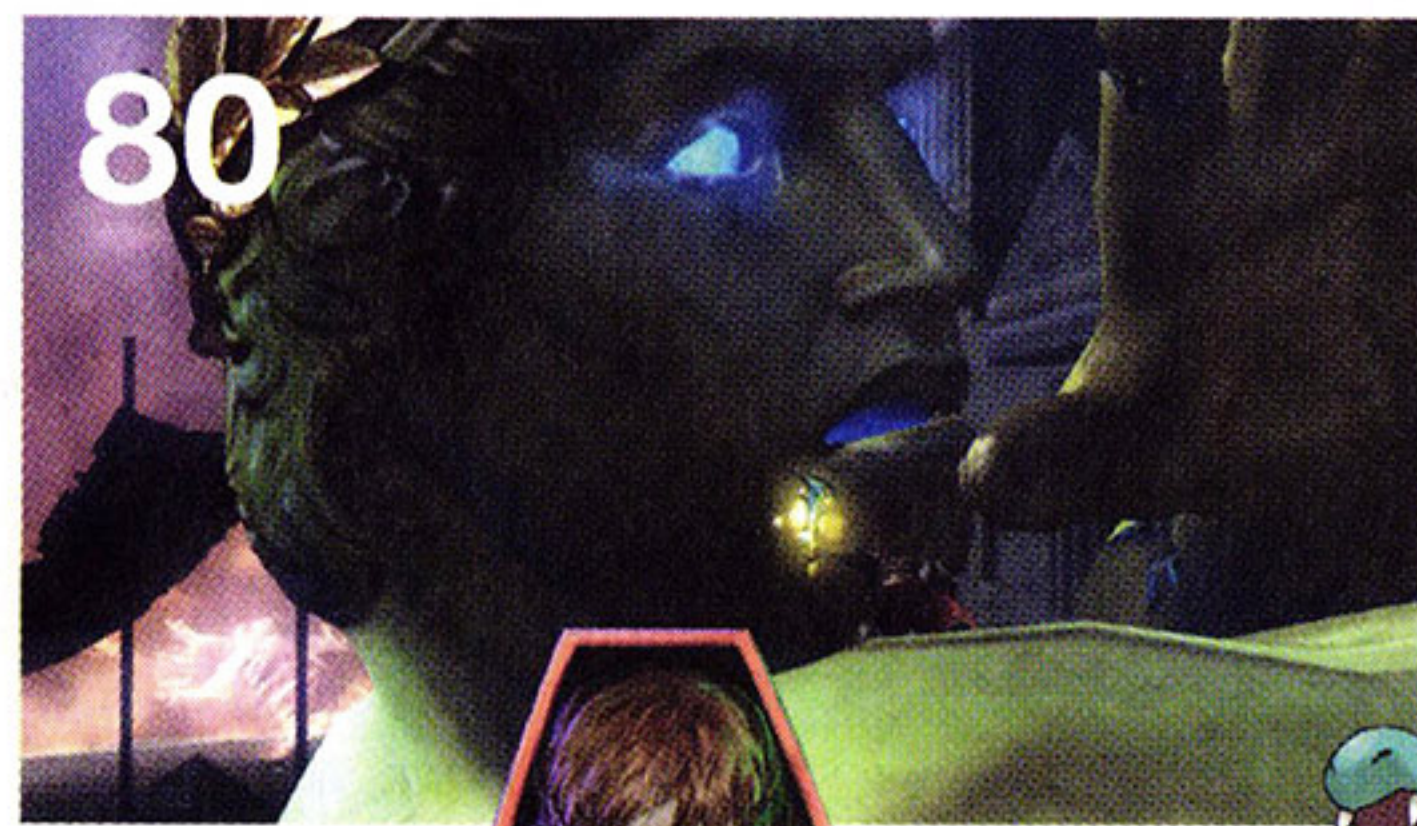
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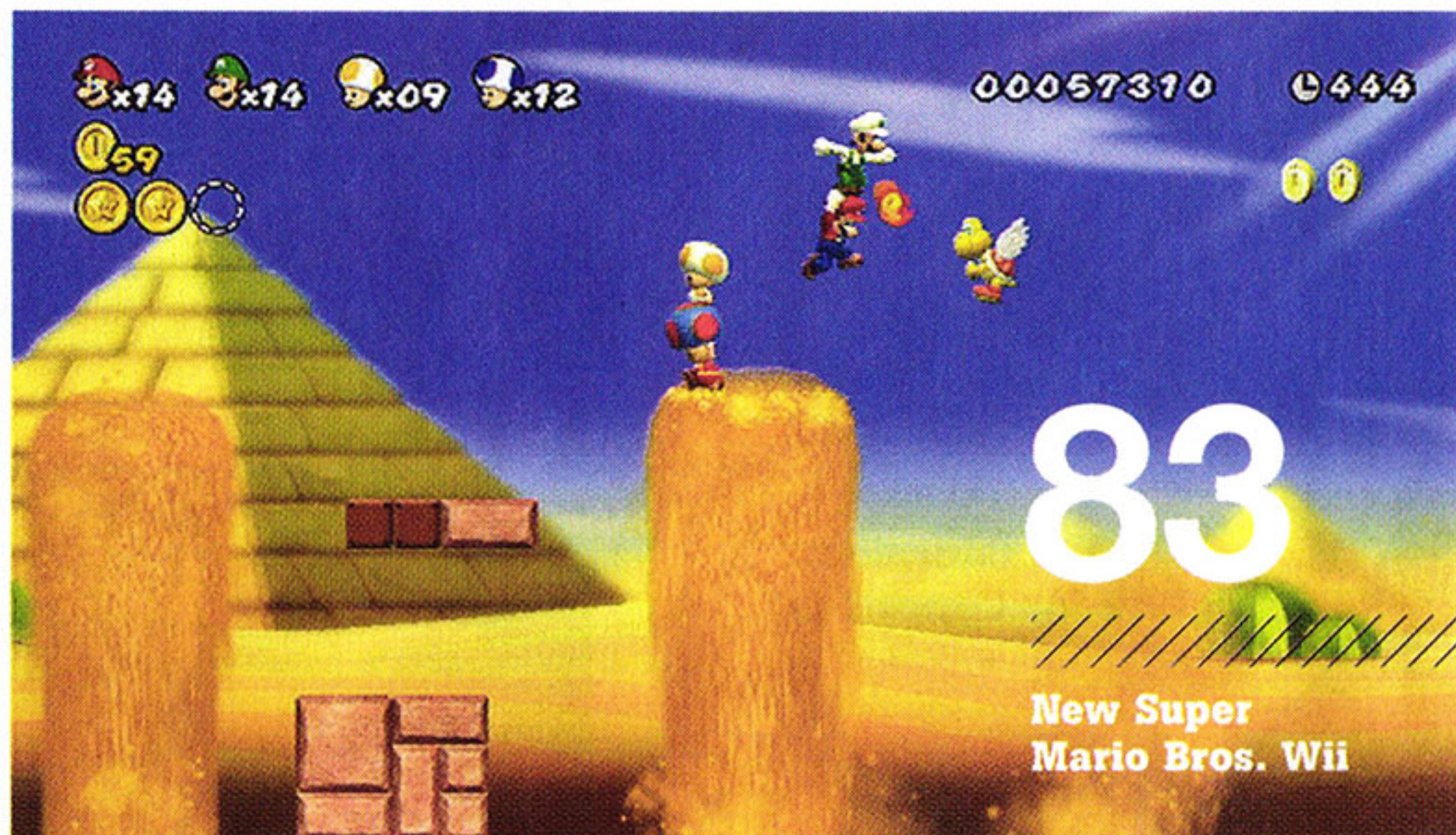
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BAYONETTA

I JUST DROPPED BY TO SAY DIE.

COMING JANUARY 2010



"Best Action Game of E3."
"It's incredible"
-1UP.com

"Bayonetta' redefines OVER THE TOP"
-Game Informer

"My entire face was blown off by maximum awesome"
-IGN

BAYONETTA.COM

XBOX 360

XBOX LIVE



PS3

PlayStation 3

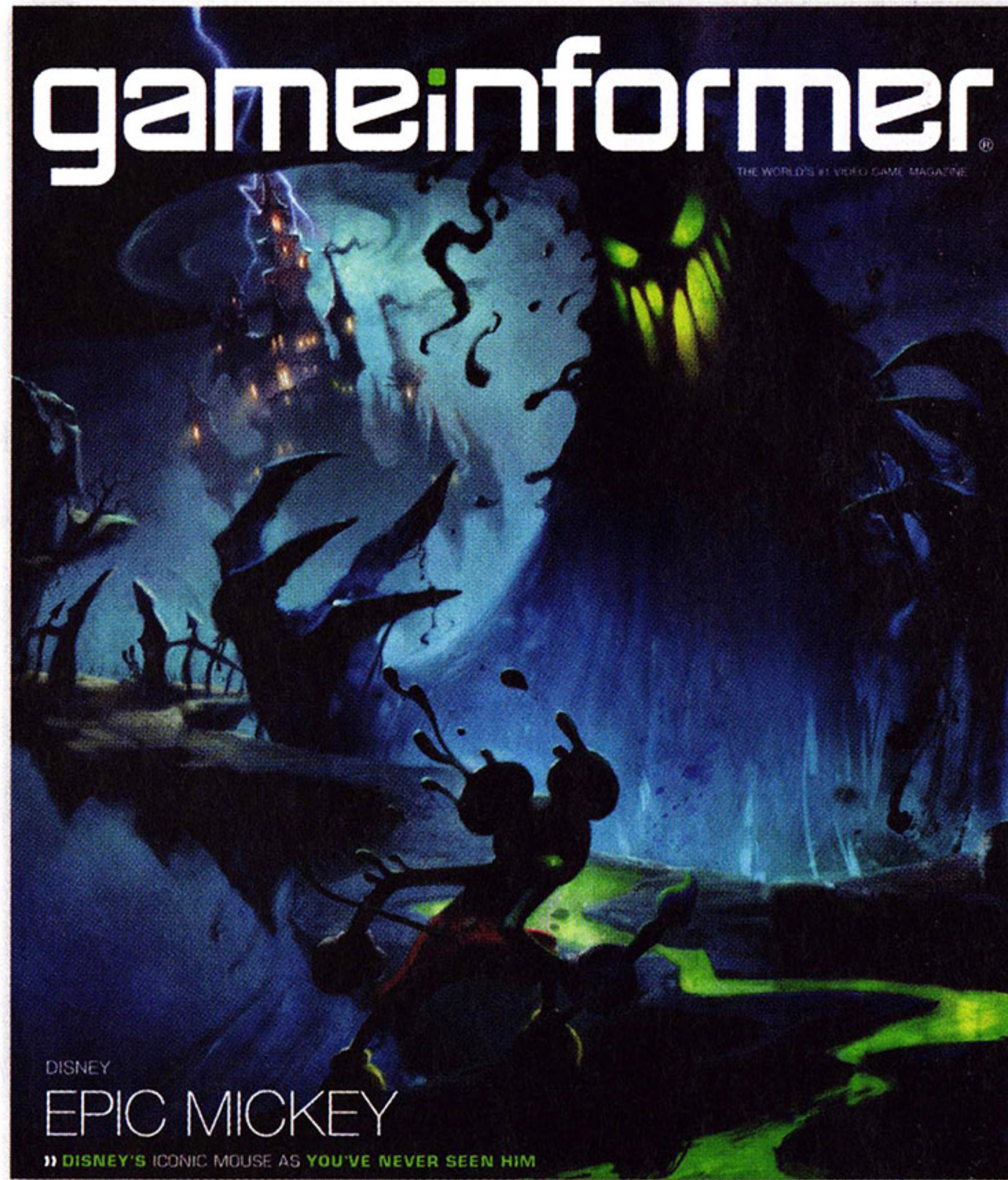


PlayStation Network



Developed by PLATINUMGAMES INC.

SEGA



T

his month in Feedback the community shares its opinions on our redesign, wonders what Luigi is up to, gripes about tiny text, and watches the PSP Go struggle to find an audience.

It's Covered

I have to say, I loved the way you handled the cover in the Epic Mickey issue. Minimal text in the bottom corner, the address sticker was on the back, and a full-page picture unbroken by only the magazine title, not to mention a wrap around cover. Simply beautiful. I hope you do more like that in the future.

Jon Weise
Brandon, MN

That's the plan! We're glad you like the change; as you can see with this month's Dead Space cover, you can expect more awesome wrap-around images (and less clutter) adorning the front and back of the magazine. It looks cool, plus it makes us seem super classy...as long as you overlook the fart jokes inside.

PSP No!

Why in the world did Sony make the PSP Go? There isn't even a way to transfer my UMD games! In addition, the PSP Go is more expensive, so even people who don't have a PSP would buy the 3000 model over the new version. Or they could spend an extra \$50 and get a PS3 instead. Why did Sony do this?

Mendel Groner
Spring Valley, NY

Sony probably believed there was some untapped demographic that would be inter-

ested in the redesigned handheld, but we can't imagine the kind of gamer for whom the PSP Go is a worthwhile product. With download-only titles (sporting no compatibility with previously released UMD games), the system isn't for serious gamers. With a higher price point, it isn't for new PSP adopters. For music and movies, it can't compete with the iPod. All we could come up with is this: If you have a surplus of money and a deficit of common sense, the PSP Go is for you!

Gone But Not Forgotten

First of all, I applaud you all for your moving on to a new format; the road to change can be a scary adventure, but you have traveled it very well. That being said, I was disappointed to learn that you have omitted the staff page with the likes and dislikes of your contributors. I read their comments intently every month to compare favorite games and opinions with the GI staff. I hope that this section was only removed for space concerns in that one issue.

Mark Kuhns
via email

I just noticed that in your past couple of issues your team hasn't been reviewing any retro games anymore. I liked reading your reviews of retro games. Are you guys going to bring those back, or was issue 195 the last time?

Andrew Scaves
Kernersville, NC



Hey! What happened to trivia?! You're bringing it back, right?

Samuel Hackett
Indianapolis, IN

With the magazine redesign, we had to make some tough decisions about which sections would stick around, change, and be cut completely. Many readers will be happy to learn that video game trivia isn't gone forever; the Game Over section will now have a few different rotating features to change things up, so you'll still see an occasional quiz on the final page. Other departments weren't so lucky. Retro reviews are gone (sorry!), and so are the editor bios. However, if you're really that anxious to know what is on the minds of GI staffers, you should head to www.gameinformer.com, where you can check out the editor blogs and get to know the new hires. Don't save Tim for last, though...you're going to want a palate cleanser after reading about that guy. Two words: Sonic fan.

Reader Wisdom

"The Japanese are seriously sadistic when it comes to punishing people who buy their games. This has always been true."

Contact Us

feedback@gameinformer.com

Masters of Disguise

Uhhh...I noticed something disturbing on page 83 of the Crackdown issue. Can you guys please explain to me why Luigi is apparently smelling his finger? Wait, no. On second thought, I don't really want to know.

Pete Gillis
via email

Unfortunately, no one told Luigi that the effects of the Fake Finger Moustache are greatly diminished if you possess an actual moustache. Wearing a hat conspicuously emblazoned with the first letter of your name doesn't help you keep a low profile, either. Alas, we may never see a Mario Bros. stealth game.



For The Horde!

There is one flaw that I've begun to notice in most non-online games: replayability over time. No matter how much you love an RPG or offline shooter, you will eventually do everything three times over and grow bored. This falls under the "fun while it lasted" category: good until it's completely beaten with nothing left to do. Why can't all games feature a Horde or Firefight mode? This would give players something new to do while not making the errors of one-playthrough-wonders like Fallout 3 and Fable 2.

Kevin Bockenstette
via email

A great game that you only need to play through once is still a great game. Developers shouldn't be forced to spend time and resources on modes to indefinitely extend replayability; some games will always take longer to beat than others. If you're the kind of gamer who prefers to invest hundreds of hours into a single title, online co-op and competitive modes are excellent features. But those modes wouldn't be appropriate for every title, and one of the great things about the current state of the gaming industry is the variety of experiences that cater to gamers of all

sorts. While playtime is certainly something to consider when you want to get the most for your money, it isn't a good measure of quality.

Size Matters

What is up with the tiny, blurry fonts this generation? I've had to pull my chair up just a few feet away from my TV just to decipher the text in some games. The subtitles in Batman: Arkham Asylum are particularly bad. Given the option, I always have subtitles turned on in a game; I find it helpful for noisy in-game cutscenes and noisy out-of-game family members. In Batman, I spent half of my time trying to read the text before it disappeared, causing me to miss subtle touches like Joker's little twitches. Eventually, I just gave in and turned subtitles off, but that doesn't really fix the problem, does it?

Tomovi Keoni
Dayton, OH

You're right – you shouldn't have to do that. Given this generation's focus on HD graphics, the problem is that many developers are neglecting gamers with standard-definition televisions. Several games in the last few years – notably Dead Rising and Mass Effect – are incredibly difficult to play without an HDTV because the subtitle and menu text is nearly unreadable. Why all developers don't automatically test their games to avoid this issue is baffling.

Insert Coin

The thing that annoys me more than anything else? Game developers announcing DLC before a game is even released! I understand that they've worked hard on their game and want more of a profit, but announcing DLC before is just stupid. They could put the content on the disc for free when the game releases.

Sahir Rama
Mason, OH



No one likes getting ripped off. Finding DLC for sale on launch day gives the impression that something was held back – that you aren't getting everything to which you are entitled. On the other hand, your \$60 investment only entitles you to one game; it isn't a pass that gives you free access to every piece of content related to your purchase. As long as you are getting a full experience out of the box, there isn't a legitimate cause for complaint. Sure, it's nice to get more for less, but you don't have some inalienable right to receive supplemental material, regardless of when it releases. As long as the core game doesn't suffer, day-one DLC is a great way for a developer to show commitment to the title and make some money in the process.

Issue 199: Most Popular Features:

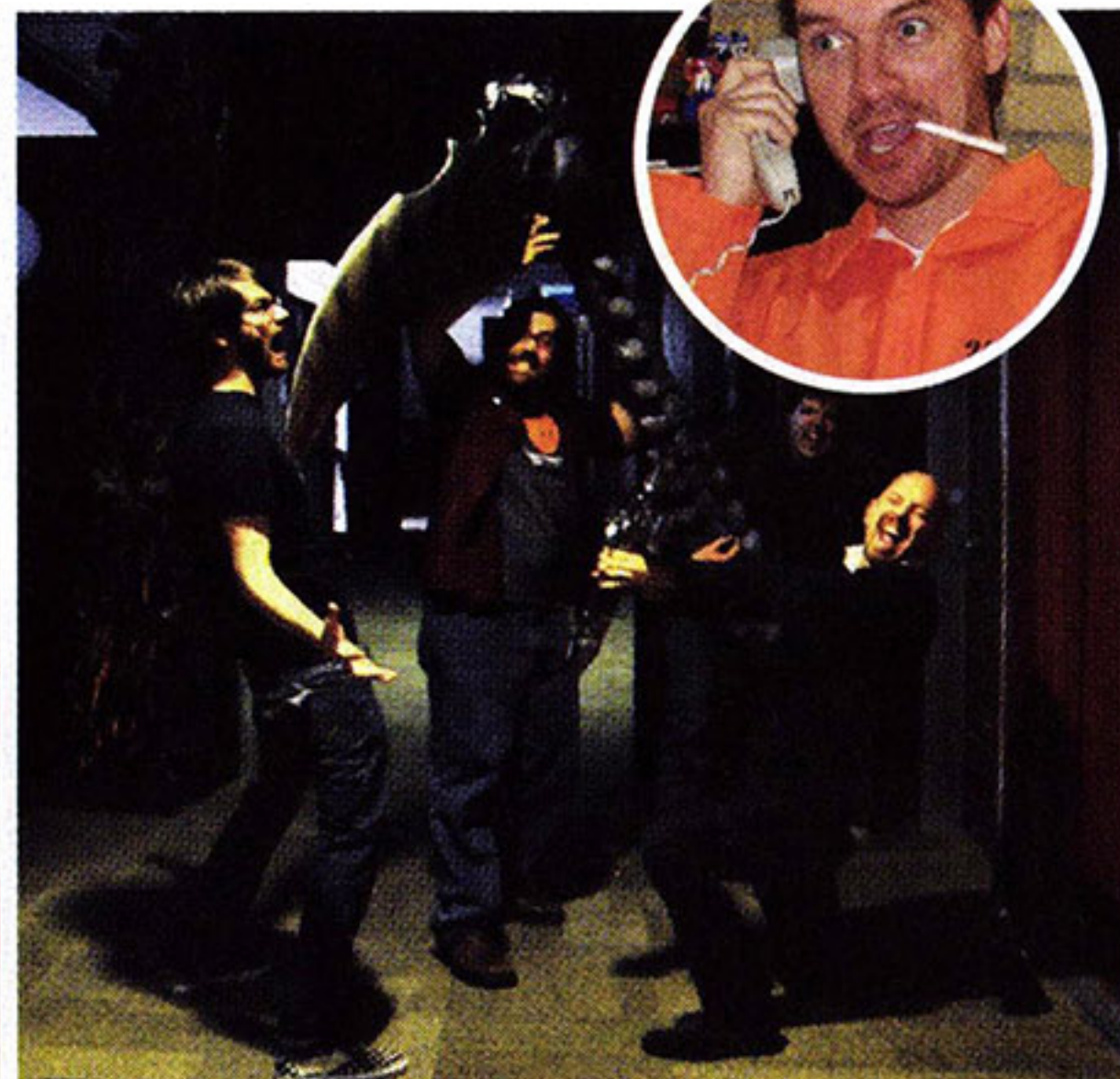
- Hollywood & Video Games, page 24



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Things We Learned

- Readers miss the validation that comes with answering random trivia questions
- Ohio wins State of the Month for the most printed letters in Feedback
- Fans of Modern Warfare 2 think 9.75 is an insulting, terrible score



(Left) In space, no one can see you smile. Good thing GI Spy can breathe in space. Here's a photo of the team behind Dead Space 2 at Visceral Games (Right) Jonathan Knight, executive producer of Dante's Inferno for Visceral Games, shows the GI crew some of the horrors that haunt his dreams (Inset) Ex-Game Informer editor Jay Fitzloff has escaped from the Sandbox Strat asylum and has taken back his old job of yelling at people on the phone

CANDID PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY



GI SPY
continued on page 12

Go Harder

When you review games, what difficulty do you play on? It's pretty clear to me that you are not playing games on the hardest level, and thus are not giving games their true score. The true score of all games should be based on how well they play on the hardest level, because that is when the flaws really shine through brightest.

Ryan Balogh
Austin, Texas

On Your Mind



- Modern Warfare 2: **18%**
- Assassin's Creed II: **17%**
- New Super Mario Bros. Wii: **16%**
- Borderlands: **15%**
- Left 4 Dead 2: **14%**
- Dragon Age: Origins: **13%**
- Saving Money For More Games: **6%**
- Eating, Breathing: **1%**



We'll concede that higher difficulty levels tend to strain a game's mechanics, but the idea of that somehow representing a purer experience is ridiculous. The goal is not to make the flaws shine as brightly as possible; a review is about assessing what works and what doesn't, and how those things affect the overall entertainment value. With that in mind, we usually play on the default difficulty setting for a review, which developers tune and balance to represent the game's core experience. We experiment with every mode to get an idea how things change, though. Higher difficulty levels are great, providing additional replay and challenge, but the odds are deliberately stacked against players in order to tax their skills and patience. That kind of unfair environment shouldn't serve as the basis for a review score.



With Feeling

I'm writing about your interview with David Cage in issue 198. He stated that video games are unable to generate an emotional experience like those present in movies, and I have to disagree. I feel that video games can offer even more of an experience than movies because of the opportunity to fill the shoes of the lead character. RPGs have managed to create stories (and even entire worlds) for players to explore and absorb. It's not limited to RPGs, either. Games come in so many genres now – whether it's the fear of a survival horror title or the adrenaline of a racing game, the beauty of it all is that you're in control. Some franchises have developed such a loyal fanbase that they have become persistent, living, breathing universes. I'd challenge movies to create an emotional experience like that.

Robert Chavez
via email

GI SPY

continued from page 7

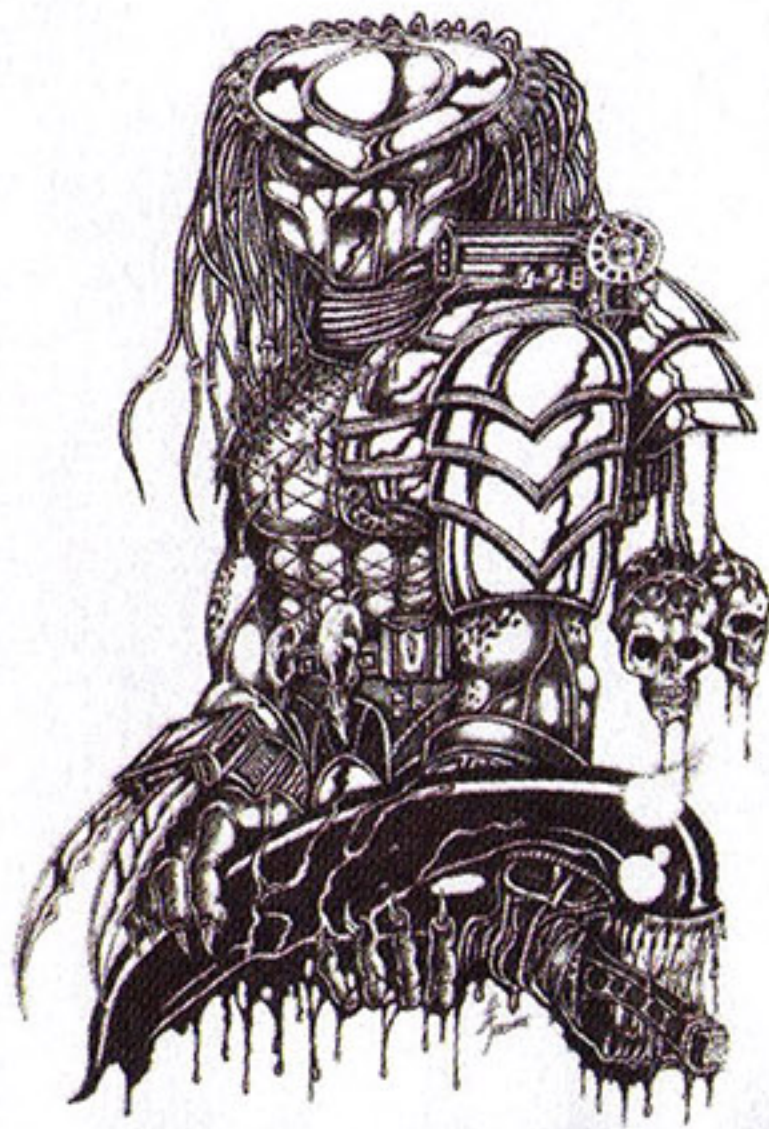
(Left) It's a bunch of classy guys in a limo! Ubisoft's Chris Norris, former GI editor and freelancer Jeremy Zoss, Joe Juba, and LucasArts' Chris Cook and Adam Kahn get gussied up to celebrate Chris Cook's nuptials (Right) Reiner and Tim Turi get the thumbs up from EA's Nick Clifford and Shirley Chu



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



WINNER 1 Ryan Wehnau "There's the kid who said Slayer is the Dashboard Confessional of metal! Get 'im, Eddie!" **2 Jerome Cuevas** For fairer odds, this franchise should probably change to Aliens and King Kong versus Predator **3 Gonzalo Ochoa** Why would anyone fly a helicopter instead of a Banshee? **4 Isaac LaRussa** Kids who wear glasses need to band together and form clubs to boost their self-esteem **5 Sam Chapman** If you're looking for a hat with plenty of storage space, berets can't be beat. Too bad they look so stupid



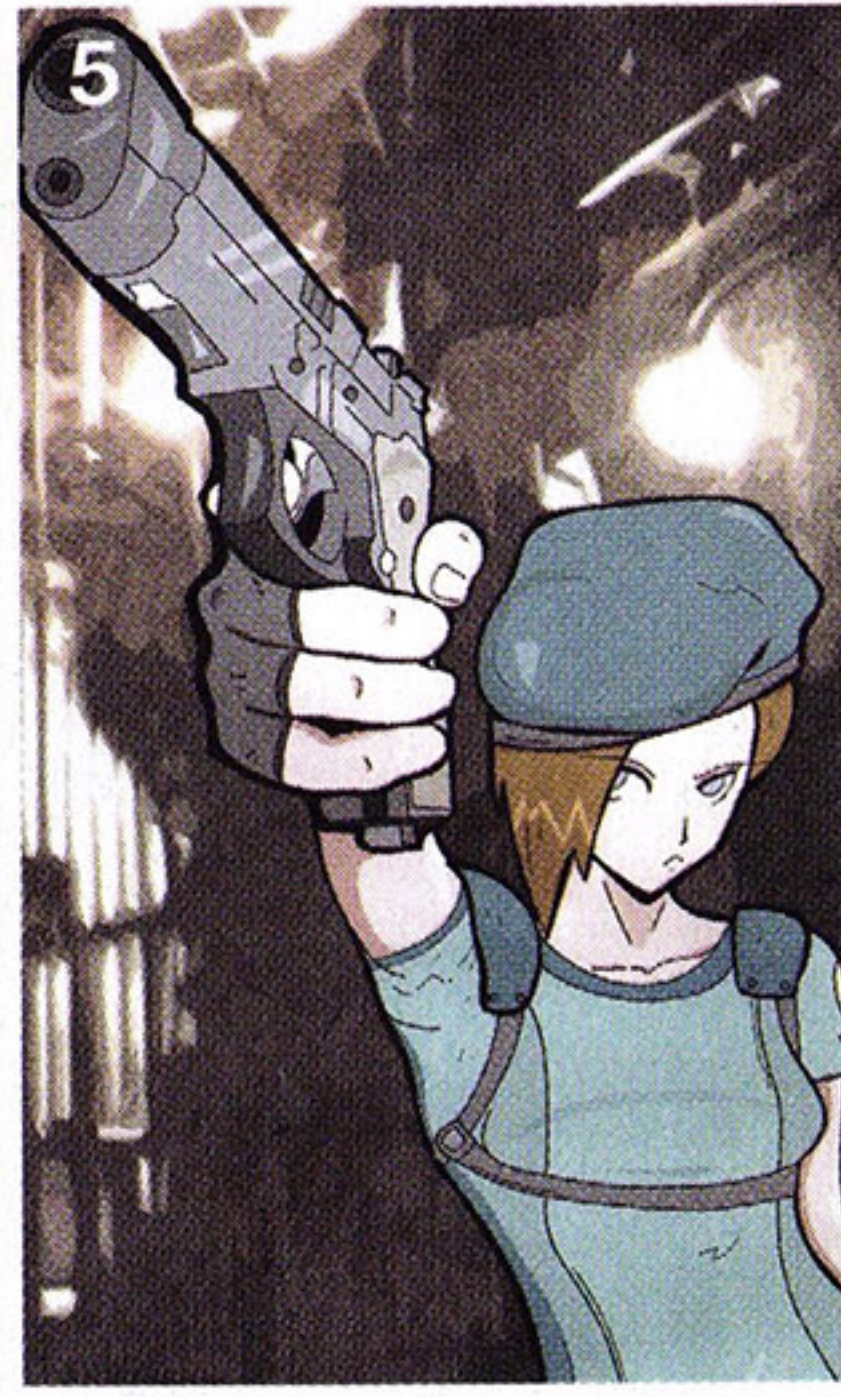
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Send to:

Game Informer
Reader Art Contest
724 1st St. N.,
4th Floor
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(Left) GI's Tim Turi, Dan Ryckert, and Ben Reeves hang out with the World's Greatest Comedian, Norm McDonald. Wait — who's that guy in the middle who looks like a way studier, manly version of Ben?? Why that's his brother, Sam! (Right) Meagan doesn't always come to work dressed as The Silk Spectre. Only on Casual Fridays



Bayonetta

NOTABLES

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One of Bayonetta's over-the-top sequences featuring a guillotine

Action Hero

An Interview With
Platinum Games'
Hideki Kamiya

by Matthew Kato



Hideki Kamiya's portfolio reads like a roll call of great Capcom games – Resident Evil, Resident Evil 2, Resident Evil Zero, Devil May Cry, Viewtiful Joe, Viewtiful Joe 2, and Okami all bear his stamp. Now a key part of independent studio Platinum Games with gaming luminaries Shinji Mikami and Atsushi Inaba, Kamiya is pushing the action genre with Sega's Bayonetta. We talked with Kamiya about where he's been and where he hopes to go next.

How did you get into game development?

I did it in a very Japanese style of how all new graduates go looking around for jobs. I was actually turned down for a job by Sega. I got into Namco, but they accepted me as an artist and not a game designer. I really wanted to be a designer, so I accepted a job from Capcom because that's what they wanted me to do there. From BioHazard [the name of the Resident Evil series in Japan – ed.] I started as a game planner, and then graduated to director, and I've been one ever since. And that was because Shinji Mikami brought me up in that manner. I don't really switch roles as much, but I do jump into projects and help out at times. For example, in BioHazard Zero I helped out in overseeing the project, but that was because there were no BioHazard team members on the team at that point. No one had experience working with BioHazard. With Viewtiful Joe 2, I worked on the story because I wanted to make sure it stayed the same, so I jumped in and helped out on that project by writing the story. But at that time I was the director of Okami.

You went from getting turned down by Sega years ago to coming full circle and working with them for Bayonetta.

It's a little bit strange, but that's the truth. I had a really good time with Bayonetta because I was able to put in some classic Sega things like Space Harrier and Outrun into the game.

Working with Capcom for so many years on so many great titles, what are some of the things you've picked up from working with the likes of Shinji Mikami, for example?

While I've been working with many different companies with many different names, the core team has always been the same – it's always been the core team of Capcom's Production Studio 4 [the internal team headed by Shinji Mikami – ed]. Although it's been called Clover or Seeds or Platinum Games, it's always been the Production Studio 4 style, so I always just feel like I've been working with Production Studio 4. It doesn't matter if [the publisher] is Capcom or Sega, the publisher is always going to be saying things to you that you don't want to hear [laughs].

You've been an integral part of some pretty famous game franchises, from Okami to Viewtiful Joe. What are your thoughts on having to leave those games behind now? For instance, different people are handling the DS title Okamiden.

From a business standpoint, I don't have any rights to the IPs that I've made. They belong to the companies that publish them, and they're a business so they have a right to exploit those IPs as they want. From a creative standpoint, I want the worlds that I create to stay the same, and if they are going to create sequels that maintain that atmosphere and the world that I created, I'm more than happy if people are going to defend that and make games in that style. However, to be completely honest, I'd love to do them myself.

Is there any particular franchise that you'd like to revisit? What kind of ideas would you have for it?

Up until very recently I really felt someday I wanted to make a sequel to Okami, and there were others who wanted me to as well. But then the other day I heard the announcement that someone else would be making a sequel and now I'm just not interested in it anymore. Once someone else touches a world that you yourself created it stops being yours. There is no point in making a sequel when the world doesn't belong to you. Viewtiful Joe is probably all I've got left. That story is incomplete so I'd like to finish it someday. But that would probably be the most difficult one to do [laughs].

At the same time, you have a varied portfolio, and it seems like you don't mind jumping from one game to the next.

It's kind of mixed feelings because the games that I make are like my children, and no parent wants to just keep making kids and kids and kids, and not be able to settle down. They want to see their kids grow up, so it would be a great opportunity to raise some of these kids that I've given birth to. However, things haven't worked out that way. Given a choice, I'd love to be making the next games to these children that I've grown, but I'm also content in making new games because that's the position that I'm put in.

What kind of action game is Bayonetta?

To me Bayonetta is the type of game that taps directly into your brain. It feels like you're controlling the game directly with your thoughts instead of the controller.

Do you think that there have been other action games that have achieved that level of control?

To be honest, I haven't been playing action games other than Bayonetta, so I can't really answer that question well.

Are motion controls something that you think could help the action genre, or are they just a gimmick?

The action genre is really a broad genre when you think about it, so I think it's possible that someone could use one of these new interfaces and build an action game that fits that interface well and makes something interesting. However, with the direction that Bayonetta is going in, I don't really think that these kinds of new interfaces would work out well for the game, and you would need the kind of interface that would jack directly into your skull for it to work out in a game like Bayonetta.

Apart from games, what kind of outside influences affect your work?

In my life I really hate things that are a pain in the butt, so when I make games I want to limit the amount of things that are irritating, and get rid of them in a game design as best as I possibly can.

Like what?

For me, I can find the good points in things that can be irritating as long as they serve game design. For instance, in Onimusha or the original NES version of Castlevania, the controls are really limited. So that limitation becomes part of the gameplay. You can have kind of irritating things, but they have to be in service of the gameplay. They have to make the gameplay more interesting.

Are there other game genres, besides action, that you'd like to explore?

With Bayonetta, I've kind of gotten action gaming out of my system for a little while. I've gotten everything I wanted to get into the game into the game, so I've worked it out of my system and I'd like to try something new next.

What genre or game idea would you like to try and tackle next?

That's a tough one to answer. The game design of Bayonetta is easy to understand and drew lots of attention from gamers and media, even in Japan. But the character design and cutscenes and things may have been a little too edgy to be accepted by everybody. I think that's just the way that I make games, but maybe in the future I should consider dialing it back a little bit so that more people can enjoy them. Maybe that's a little bit vague, but that's what I've had on my mind.



feature

The Evolution of Warcraft

Five years later, what has changed for better or worse?

by Adam Biessener

Fans don't stick around to celebrate a game's five-year anniversary terribly often. It's even more unusual for a title to have an active, vibrant community at that milestone. World of Warcraft isn't any old game, though. We talked to Rob Pardo, Blizzard's vice president of game design (and lead designer on WoW), about the MMO's slow transformation from his original vision to the experience it is today. Fewer differences exist than you might think.

Two things come up over and over again when asking WoW players what they miss about the game's initial release: the huge Hillsbrad wars between Horde and Alliance, and the sense of discovery that came with exploring sprawling locations like Blackrock Mountain. Plenty of counterpoints can be made as well, from the unplayable lag of 200-player battles to quest chains that sent you back into Blackrock Depths several times. Still, there was an undeniable charm to those experiences that has been lost as the game evolved and players became more sophisticated.

Like many longtime WoW players, Pardo has strong memories of the enormous battles that continually raged between Tarren Mill and Southshore. "I don't know if I would say that I miss the whole Southshore experience of PvP, but I miss the idea of it," he reflects. "It probably got more and more broken over time, but it started out as a cool idea and we always wished that we had found ways to engineer that better." The achievement system brought some of that spirit back by giving players a reason to lay siege to enemy cities, but world PvP remains a work in progress. Pardo laments, "We had always hoped that we'd have more fun, sponta-

neous world PvP that mattered."

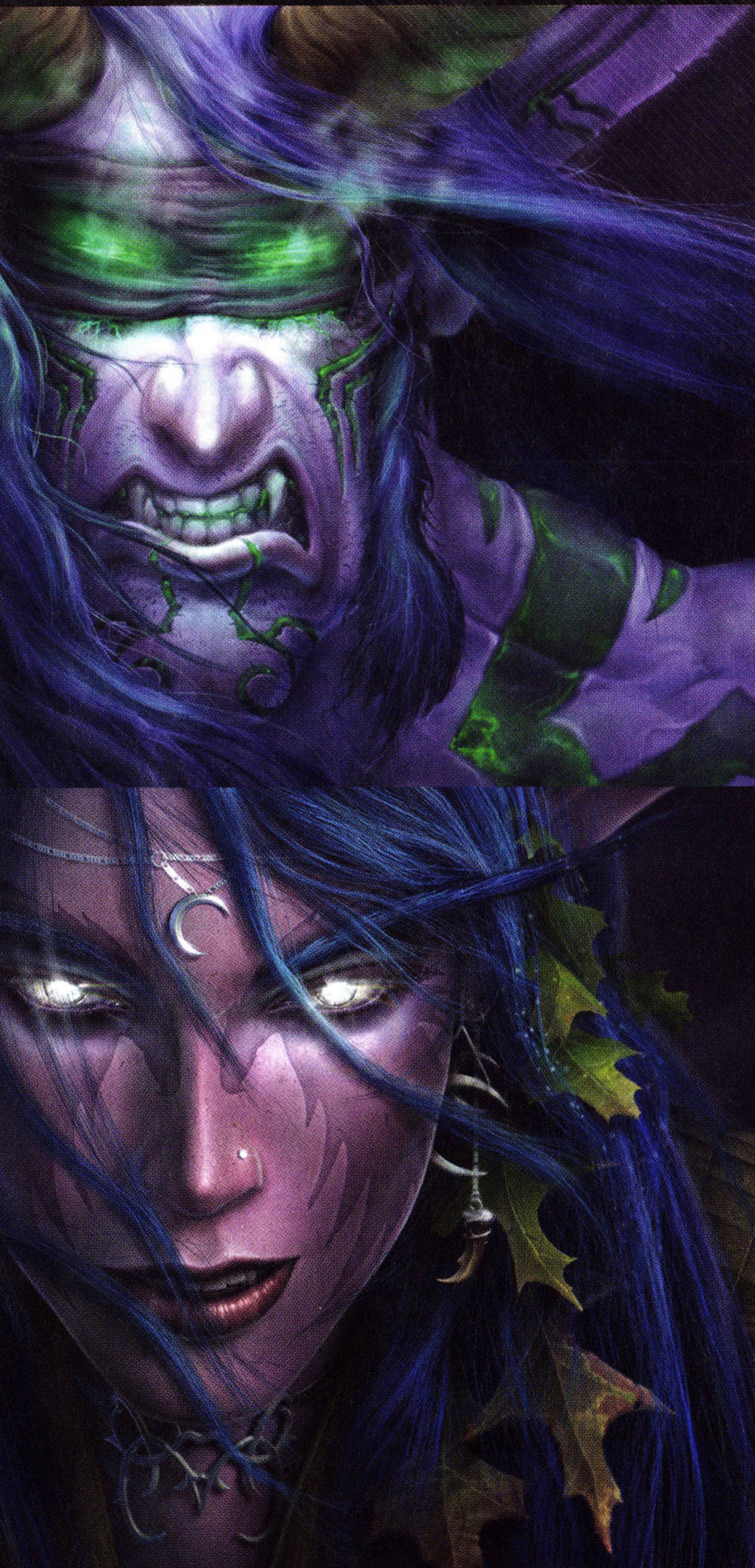
Pardo tells an interesting story when asked about the radical design differences between BRD and modern dungeons like Utgarde Keep. While he was wrapping up Warcraft III, production was running full-bore trying to fill World of Warcraft with content. "The dungeons were mainly being created by the artists and our lore folks. There wasn't a lot of hardcore level design being put against them," he explains. "When I came over full-time and we started shining the spotlight on the dungeons, yeah, I actually had a problem with those types of dungeons."

With the development running long, there was no feasible way to re-engineer places on the scale of BRD or Blackrock Spire and release in any kind of reasonable timeframe. However, Scarlet Monastery's standard architecture allowed the team to easily break down and reform levels. "It offered me an opportunity to change that [sprawling] paradigm, and I had all the artists and level designers change Scarlet Monastery from being a big Blackrock Spire-esque dungeon to being a four-winged dungeon," notes Pardo. "That was the first time we had a winged dungeon in the game and it was so successful in internal tests that we were like, 'We need to start doing this in the future.'"

BRD is often attributed as a Pardo design, while Burning Crusade lead designer Tom Chilton is credited with the streamlined modern approach. That is not the case, according to Pardo. "If I could go back in time, I would have had all the dungeons be more like Scarlet Monastery." ♦

Patch Timeline

- November 2004**
1.1 - Day-one release
Paladins to much-maligned Seal/Judgement system
- December 2004**
1.2 - Maraudon comes out; nobody actually goes there until they need to farm nature-resist gear
- March 2005**
1.3 - Dire Maul opens, while dungeon caps prevent the endless zerging of Stratholme
- April 2005**
1.4 - The honor system goes live, allowing players to briefly pretend that PvP has rewards
- June 2005**
1.5 - Blizzard introduces Battlegrounds, plus dishonorable kills for killing civilian NPCs. Honor system still sucks
- July 2005**
1.6 - Blackwing Lair gives raiders a good Honor system to conquer, sucks despite addition of bonus BG honor
- September 2005**
1.7 - Zul'Gurub signals beginning of shift to smaller, raid sizes. Arathi Basin fails to make honor suck less
- October 2005**
1.8 - Weapon normalization brings normal-closer to balance; Hurricane is no longer 31-point Balance talent (barf)
- January 2006**
1.9 - Opening the gates of Ahn'Qiraj makes for the worst gameplay in WoW to date



Turning Points

The five most important changes to World of Warcraft



Making PvP Worth the Effort

As much fun as you can poke at the terrible initial honor system, you can't fault Blizzard for ignoring player vs. player battles. It took an awfully long time to get there (see timeline), but PvP is at a point where large sections of the game's population enjoy taking part in Arenas, Battlegrounds, and open-world battles. Going from having no reward system whatsoever to a fleshed out endgame progression path may have taken four years, but there are a lot of players whose devotion to WoW PvP lends credence to the strength of its current implementation.



Lowering the Raiding Bar

Engaging in endgame raids at WoW's launch was often a painful process. Wrangling 40 players proved too much for many groups, leaving much of the population with little to do at level cap aside from running the same trivial small-group dungeons ad nauseum. Starting with 20-man dungeon Zul'Gurub in the 1.7 patch, the raid game eventually morphed into its current 10- and 25-player size, with normal and heroic difficulties offering appropriate challenge to different groups. Just as a reminder, before you start typing up angry emails about Blizzard "catering to casuals" and making the game too easy, Algalon and heroic Anub'arak say "hi."



Achievement Unlocked

Microsoft introduced gamers to achievements with the Xbox 360. Turbine popularized them for the MMO genre in Lord of the Rings Online. Blizzard knocked the concept out of the park with World of Warcraft. There's an achievement for everything in WoW, and accruing these badges of honor is a game unto itself.



Paladins for All

You may laugh now, but Horde raiding back in the day was a huge pain due to a lack of Paladins. By recanting its stance on faction-specific classes, Blizzard angered some lore nerds and solved the game's biggest ongoing balance issue. Orc racials may be all right, but blessings were easy mode.



Supporting the Soloists

Yeah, it's an MMO, but some people still want to play it by themselves. Blizzard has made constant changes to the game to support solo players, from adding daily quests to making it easier to level alts. We're convinced that this has kept more people playing than the raiding and PvP changes combined.

December 2006
2.0 - Big revamp of many systems in preparation of Burning Crusade launch. Honor removal sticks due to grind and addition of Arenas

January 2007
The Burning Crusade

May 2007
2.1 - Daily quests are introduced, giving solo players something to do for the first time since hitting level cap

September 2007
2.2 - Voice chat enabled; everyone tries it for a day and goes Ventrilo immediately back to

November 2007
2.3 - Guild banks open, for players and tripling income from stolen accounts

March 2008
2.4 - Sunwell raid instance is last gasp of elitist raid dungeon development. Top-rated guilds somehow continue on

October 2008
3.0 - Achievements ensure that OCD players will never log out again

November 2008
Wrath of the Lich King

April 2009
3.1 - Dual talent specialization finally comes out. Number of tanks and healers available instantly quintuples

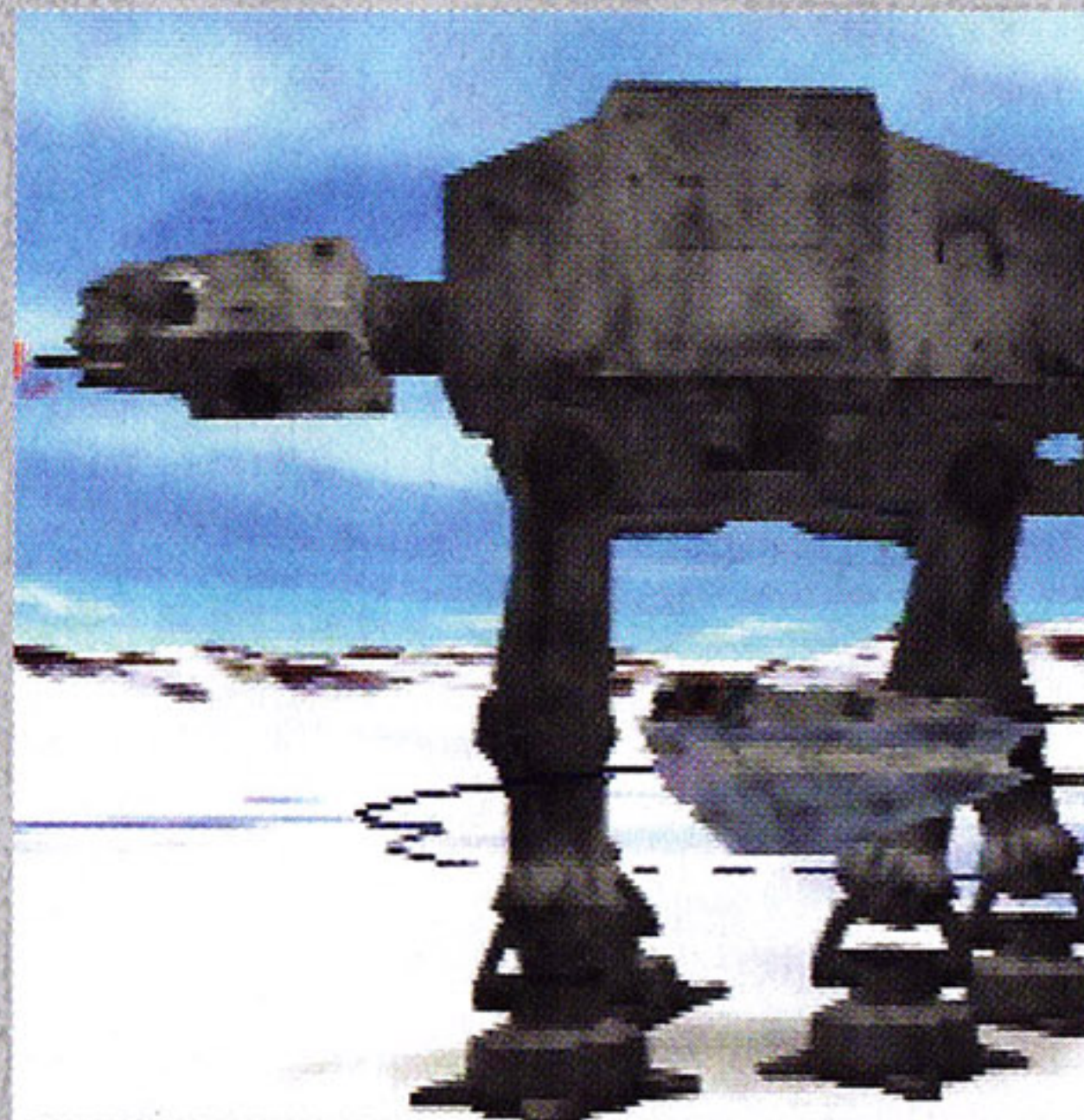
August 2009
3.2 - Druids get new feral models, Blizzard sets new record with four versions of single raid instance

TOP 10 HOTH BATTLES

by Tim Turi

01 Shadows of the Empire – N64

N64's first Hoth battle put the snow-laden strife back on the map. This brilliant interpretation allowed you to gun down Probe Droids and hog-tie AT-ATs with a snowspeeder, and that was all it took to keep gamers hooked. Dash Rendar may have faded to obscurity, but Shadows of the Empire ensured the battle of Hoth would rage forever in the hearts of gamers.



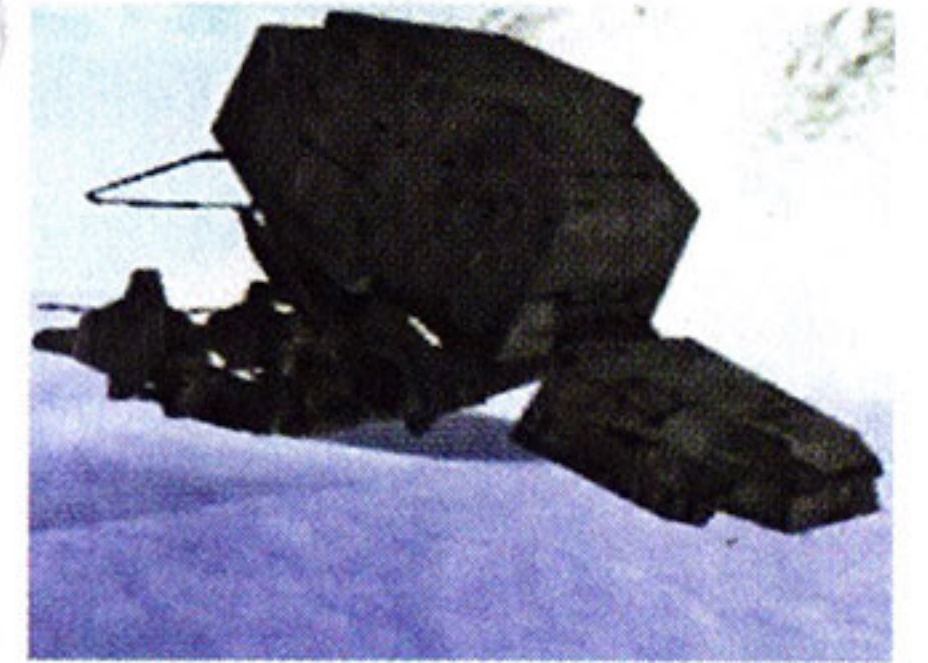
02 Super The Empire Strikes Back – SNES

Not only was the supposedly inhospitable ice planet inexplicably teeming with exploding wildlife like giant wampas, but it also hosted a quasi-3D Hoth battle. Players controlled Luke as he blasted imperial walkers in stunning Mode-7. Skywalker even traversed the interior of an AT-AT to destroy its head. Wasn't the pulse grenade technique easier?



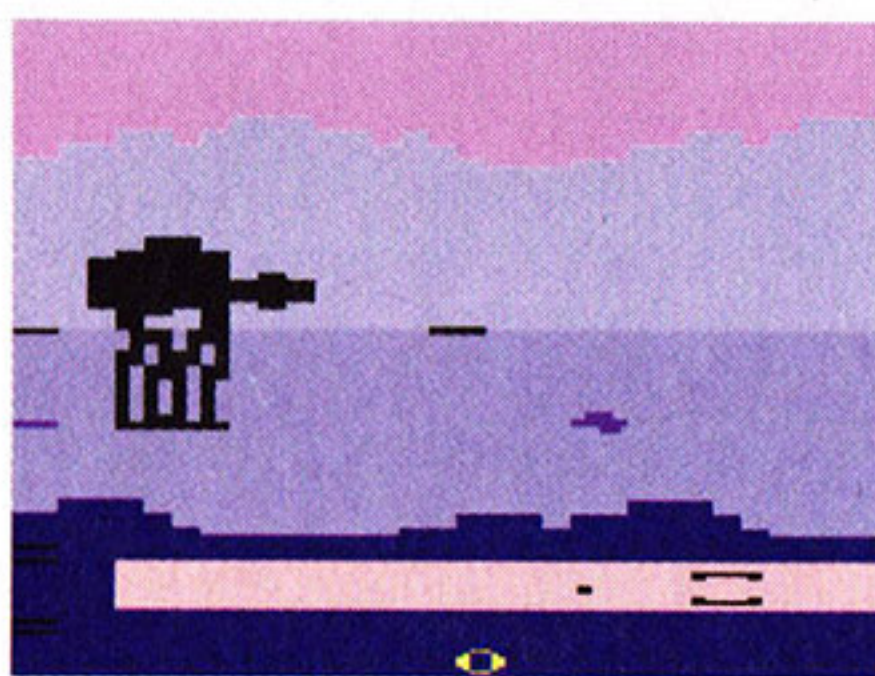
03 Rogue Squadron – N64

Taking the basic mechanics of the snow speeder combat from Shadows of the Empire, this bonus mission upped the graphical ante and came across a whole lot Hothier. With more imperial walkers and ground troopers thrown in the mix, this icy bout felt authentic. Now about that synthesized soundtrack...



04 The Empire Strikes Back Atari – 2600

As far as Hoth battles go, this definitely was one. One snowspeeder was pitted against an endless army of behemoth AT-ATs resembling malformed giraffes that changed colors as they took damage. Pros knew to fire at the one random, flashing pixel on the walker to destroy it in one hit. This game was all Hoth, all the time.



05 Rogue Squadron II: Rogue Leader – GameCube

Hoth's legendary battle was fleshed out into a full mission for the first time in this classic Star Wars flight game. Cinematic cutscenes and an orchestral score heightened the intensity of weaving between AT-AT legs. Throw in the ability to hop into an X-Wing and defend transports from hostile TIE Fighters, and you've got some bona fide Hoth.



06 Star Wars: Battlefront II – Multi

Did you know Darth Vader was on Hoth? In the film his visit was brief, but in Battlefront II you could make the Sith lord ride tauntauns and walk briskly across the whitewashed wasteland. Players were free to experience the glory of Hoth via sky combat or ground warfare. AT-AT piloting and wampa battles made this a Hoth battle for the ages.



07 Star Wars Trilogy – Arcade

From the on-rails shooter segments through the stormtrooper and wampa-packed tunnels of Echo Base to the requisite snowspeeder battles, Star Wars Trilogy offered a polished, streamlined Hoth experience. Using the solitary joystick as both a blaster and the yoke of a snowspeeder made this irresistible arcade cabinet well worth the quarters.



08 LEGO Star Wars: The Original Trilogy – Multi

When an old standby like the Hoth battle begins to get stale, the next logical step is to do it again...with LEGO blocks! This game put your homemade, stop-motion Hoth Battle to shame with Imperial enemies that burst into blocky bits. The trusty snowspeeder tow-cable was even used to drag spherical LEGO bombs into enemies, just like the movies!



09 Star Wars Jedi Knight: Jedi Academy – Multi

Though not technically taking place during the fateful battle, fledgling Jedi Jaden Korr's journey to the ruins of Echo Base deserves a place on our list. The ability to use the lightsaber for slicing and dicing imperials offered a glimpse at how the rebel base may have fared if Luke hadn't blown it and gotten kidnapped by a wampa. Oh, Luke...



10 Rebel Assault – PC

It's no secret that full motion video gameplay died in the early '90s, but it lasted long enough to deliver a Hoth battle in Rebel Assault like no other. Passing the same AT-AT dozens of times somehow managed to remain fun as players blasted away pieces of the walker's armor. Nostalgia has frozen this fight in our memory.



news

EA Descends Into Development Hell

Dozens of
Games
Cancelled

The economy has been tough, and the strain of some missteps is causing Electronic Arts to take extraordinary measures. After a similar gutting less than a year ago, the publisher/developer is making cuts in personnel, studios, and projects.

The company says it will lay off 1,500 employees by April of next year (a reported 17 percent of the payroll), including the closure of "several facilities," according to EA CEO John Riccitiello. EA's second fiscal quarter results saw a decrease in year-over-year revenues, and these layoffs and closures are expected to save the company \$100 million annually.

The closure of Saboteur developer Pandemic Studios highlights company-wide cuts reportedly affecting developers throughout the internal EA system, including Mythic Entertainment (Warhammer Online), EA Tiburon (Madden NFL), EA Black Box (Skate), Visceral Games (Dante's Inferno) and more. Some Pandemic employees will be reassigned along with their franchises to EALA.

As if the body blow to EA's workforce wasn't enough, along with these layoffs comes the termination of "over a dozen" projects that were in the pipeline. "Anything that doesn't measure up to be in a very high profit contributor and unit seller got cut from this point going forward," declared Riccitiello in a conference call. Interestingly, EA took this opportunity to confirm the oft-heard rumor that it is bringing back the Medal of Honor franchise.

Sadly, it was less than a year ago, after the release of the November 2009 NPD retail numbers, that EA performed a similar bloodletting. Mirror's Edge and Need for Speed Underground underperformed and were singled out amid a 10 percent cut in the global workforce, the closure of nine studios, and the canceling of several unannounced projects. » by Matthew Kato

Dante's Inferno developer Visceral Games is one of many EA internal studios that saw layoffs and/or cancelled projects



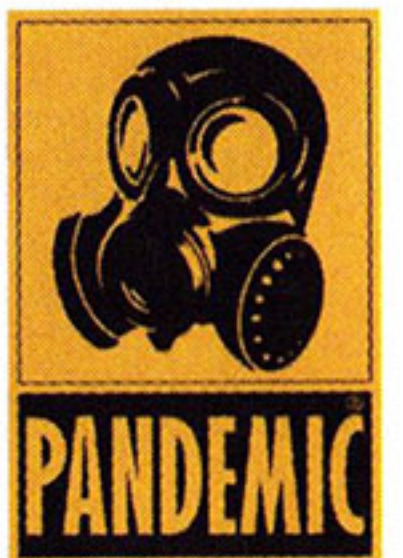
Playfish Comes As Others Go

The same day that Electronic Arts announced it was cutting jobs and undergoing a massive restructuring, it also spent \$275 million to acquire Playfish, a developer of games for social networks like Facebook. Playfish makes a lot of its money off microtransactions, and EA wants to use some of its franchises in the social networking space with Playfish's help.

While it may appear unseemly for EA to announce this acquisition in the face of employee layoffs, EA CFO Eric Brown wasn't shy about it. "It's no coincidence that we simultaneously announced a cost reduction in connection with the acquisition of Playfish, because that represents, in our mind, a very important shift to digital direct."

The Lights Go Out On Pandemic

Just a few years ago Pandemic Studios was flying high, with studios across the globe and a slew of



franchises including Star Wars: Battlefront, Full Spectrum Warrior, Destroy All Humans, and Mercenaries. In 2005 its success attracted RPG developer BioWare, and the two joined to form BioWare/Pandemic, which itself was purchased by EA en masse in 2007.

Now the story of Pandemic Studios has come to an inglorious end, with founders Josh Resnick, Andrew Goldman, and Greg Borrud not even among the employees that EA is keeping. Although it is closing the developer in this latest reorganization, an EA memo regarding the situation says that the Pandemic brand and its franchises will continue.



PixelJunk Shooter
PlayStation Network

The **PixelJunk** franchise continues to blaze new trails on **PlayStation 3**, and **Square Enix** tries two surprising new directions of its own *by Matt Miller*

With each new game, I'm more impressed with the PixelJunk series. Every game developed by Q-Games has its own brand of original gameplay mixed with familiar ideas, and **PixelJunk Shooter** is no exception. I've been eagerly anticipating spending time with the game since I first saw it in action at E3 earlier this year. Shooter places you inside a tiny space rescue ship as you delve deep into the crust of a dangerously unstable mining world to recover a lost dig team. Players must shoot in all directions to take down the local missile-launching wildlife while saving lost miners from certain death with a grappling hook. That alone makes for a simple and fun game, but the addition of water and lava adds something totally new. Liquid has fully modeled physics, and different liquids interact with each other in clever ways. Open up a passage with your cannon, and water can gush down onto a lake of lava, turning it into solid land, which you can then destroy and move past. With each passing level, new interactions, enemies, and weapon types appear. At one point, you dig

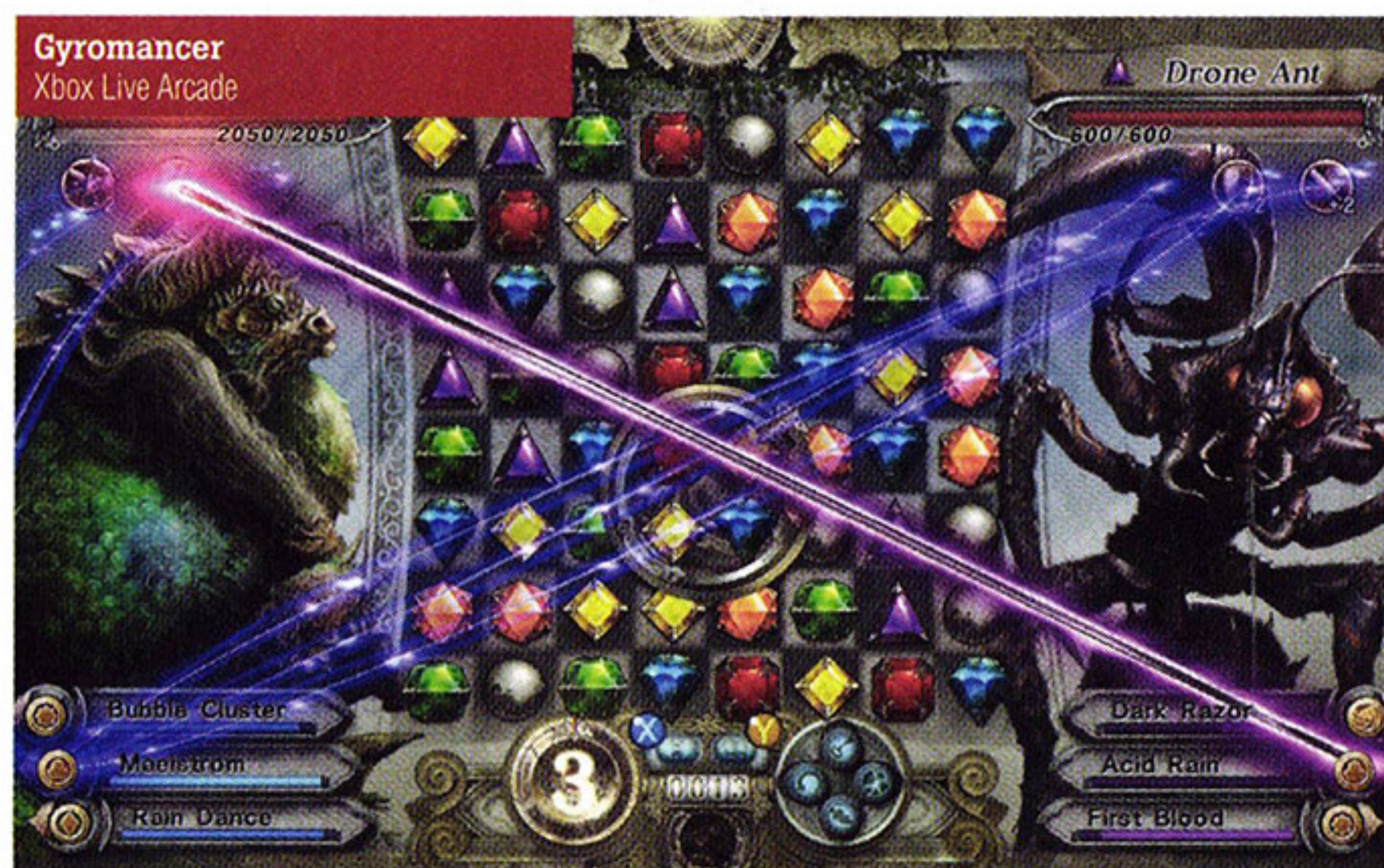
down a layer into a freezing cold region of the planet, and are forced to contend with frozen water, which contributes a new layer of complexity. Splashing through water and zooming past dangerous lava falls as you whisk up desperate evacuees is a unique and dangerously addictive mechanic, particularly since the game supports co-op. I loved the hours I spent with PixelJunk Shooter, which left me reaffirming my faith in this artistic and innovative franchise.

Gyromancer is out on Live Arcade, and it should have the power to draw at least some players away from the glut of major holiday retail releases. The game is exactly what you might expect from a cooperative venture between Square Enix and PopCap – some gorgeous art and a magical fantasy backdrop wrapped around an addictive colored block matching game. This month, I finally dove into the polished and engaging final version of the game. The role-playing leveling and upgrade options deliver the same addictive blend that made Puzzle Quest a hit. Though you can't make your own character, hero Rivel the Mage plays into the game's fiction, and it's hard to complain about adopting

the role of an immortal monster summoner. Lots of enemy types contend with your mage, each with unique abilities and strengths. Navigating the game's many maps is enjoyable, since there are frequently secret treasures and hard-to-reach locations to uncover. As for the fundamental color-matching gameplay, it's just as captivating as any of the Bejeweled clones. Set aside some time to dig in to Gyromancer, and I suspect you'll be well pleased.

Square Enix impressed me with a second title this month, even if it's nothing like the last. **Ø Day Attack on Earth** is sci-fi B-movie meets multi-directional shooter. Giant pod aliens have invaded Earth, and you and your buddies are piloting the only ridiculously overpowered aircraft that can take them down. Hanging over New York, Paris, and Tokyo, the high-flying battles are extremely challenging on higher difficulties. Your hope for survival lies in the continuous upgrade of your vehicle, and with friends who can join you over Xbox Live to fight the invasion cooperatively. Once you've tired of that, eight-player competitive options are also available. I like the massive enemies the game throws at you, and the photo-realistic cities below give a touch of authenticity amid the sci-fi craziness going on above. For a group of friends on a budget, the game should make for a satisfying weekend of fun.

Want more downloadable games info? Read weekly updates on the latest Xbox Live Arcade, PlayStation Network, WiiWare, and PC titles at gameinformer.com/mag



Gyromancer
Xbox Live Arcade



Ø Day Attack on Earth
Xbox Live Arcade

Tomorrow Comes Too Soon?

What is the purpose of the PSP Go?

by Matthew Kato

How many PSP Go units have been sold?

Sony isn't divulging how many PSP Go units have sold since launch, and industry sales trackers NPD have lumped both the PSP Go and the PSP-3000 into one sales figure: 174,600 units sold. That's not a great figure for your first full month on sale when you consider that in the previous month, the PSP-3000 sold 190,400 units all by itself.

Regardless, Sony's Koller told us that the PSP Go was meeting Sony's expectations, whatever the sales numbers are. "Generally speaking," he added, "we're extremely excited about the overall sales and the reception of PSP Go in the market."

The console could still see a spike in sales during the holiday shopping season, but we wouldn't bet on it.

Why is the PSP Go such a niche product in terms of both price and purpose?

"When we first started mapping out the planning for the product, we wanted it to be a premium product," explains Koller. "Tonally, that's important for us." Sony has certainly achieved that. By Koller's own admission, Sony's research shows that only 26 percent of those consumers it talked to wanted a pure digital content device over owning standard physical media. He told us this figure is up greatly from Sony's previous research, but it still doesn't seem to represent a lot of people.

Moreover, the unit's \$250 price tag pushes many impulse buyers out of the market. Koller tells us, however, that price hasn't been a problem. "For that consumer, we haven't heard that pricing is an issue at all. They've been more akin to, 'When is my favorite game coming [for download]?' We've heard a lot of that."

Speaking with Koller, it seems as though Sony feels that the general demographic for the PSP is starting to split and that it needs to service two different groups. With the basic PSP audience getting younger, the PSP Go could capture an older, more tech-savvy demographic.

Why are existing PSP owners being left in the cold, with no way to transfer their UMDs onto the PSP Go?

Sony has said in the past that the reasons are legal and technical. Still, we pressed Koller as to why Sony didn't offer the three free downloadable games that it did to European gamers as a sort of apology, and he explained that Sony of America wanted to offer an expanded program encompassing a larger number and selection of first- and third-party games. However, he said that this wasn't possible, also due to legal and technical reasons, so it was scrapped. "We made every effort to do so.... We wanted a very broad-based program, and we faced a few hurdles in making that happen."

What if I don't want digital downloads... ever?

Koller says that Sony is committed to offering PSP titles both as a UMD and a download "as long as we're in the PSP business." He continued, "We'll have both a digital product and a physical product in the market going forward at all times." It's certainly good that Sony is not freezing out UMD owners, but if the system's launch is any indication, the majority of gamers will likely be more than happy to take Sony up on its offer and continue to buy UMDs for the PSP they already own. The future of games may be digital downloads, but the future might have to wait a little longer.

The PSP Go's download-only approach to games and content may be the way of the future, but early sales and reaction to the platform strongly suggest that gamers' embrace of that future is still a ways off -- at least when it comes to Sony's handheld.

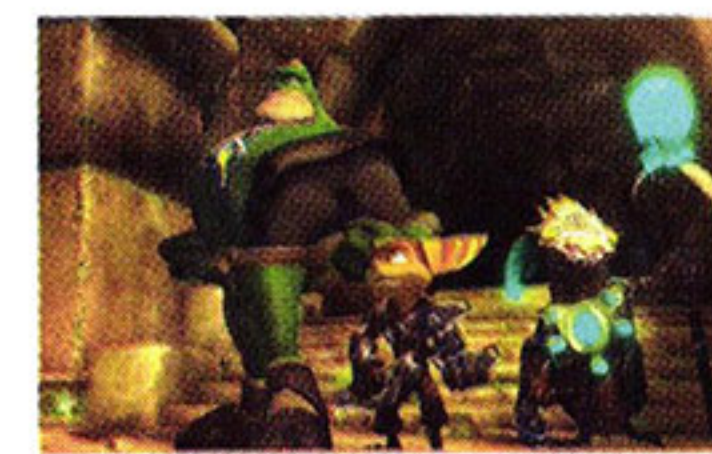
Although official sales numbers are hard to come by, not only has the unit not taken the world by storm, but Sony also admits its focus with the PSP Go is intentionally limited. Furthermore, to many gamers the system's download-only content is simply not attractive enough to warrant its \$250 price tag, which makes the system cost almost \$100 more than the PSP-3000 and only \$50 less than a PS3.

We analyzed the situation and talked with Sony's John Koller to find out exactly what the company had in mind with the PSP Go.



TidBits

Fun Facts About
**Ratchet & Clank:
A Crack in Time**



■ Armin Shimerman contributes the voice of Dr. Nefarious, the arch-nemesis of Captain Qwark. But you might not know that he also played the role of another Quark, specifically the Ferengi bartender on *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*.

■ Nolan North, who plays Nathan Drake in the *Uncharted* series, is also the voice of Sigmund, the robotic junior caretaker of the Great Clock. Another famous game actor, Charles Martinet, the voice of Mario, voices the character Orvus, Clank's father.

■ In the Agorian Arena, gamers can play Captain Qwark's arcade game, *My Blaster Runs Hot*. It's actually the only multiplayer part of *A Crack in Time*, as two players can play co-op.

■ The Krell Canyon level contains 7,355 lines of script.

■ Slices of pizza eaten during development: 12,648.

■ During *Tools of Destruction*, writer TJ Fixman was saddened to find that Captain Qwark could not be animated in a scene due to production constraints, and instead changed it to an image of Qwark on a popsicle stick. In *A Crack in Time*, artists included an easter egg where you can jiggle the joysticks during the end credits to manipulate images of Ratchet and Clank -- both on popsicle sticks.

■ Exactly 4,358 lines of in-game dialogue were written and recorded for the U.S. version of *A Crack in Time*, in addition to over an hour of cinematic dialogue.

■ Developers traveled to nine countries and six states to promote the game.

■ Best fan-sent goods: A cake made to look like Ratchet's head. Close runner-up: The chocolates made in the shape of the currency from the game, bolts.

Oceans Apart

What Our Favorite Games Look Like Overseas

by Ben Reeves

Gamers all over the world enjoy playing games like Uncharted, Left 4 Dead, and Resident Evil, but if you were to walk into a game store in another country you might be surprised by what you saw. Sometimes a game's box art doesn't make it through customs along with the rest of the game. Grab your passport and get ready for a globe-spanning trip as we explore many of the reasons why video game box art looks different in other parts of the world.



Resident Evil

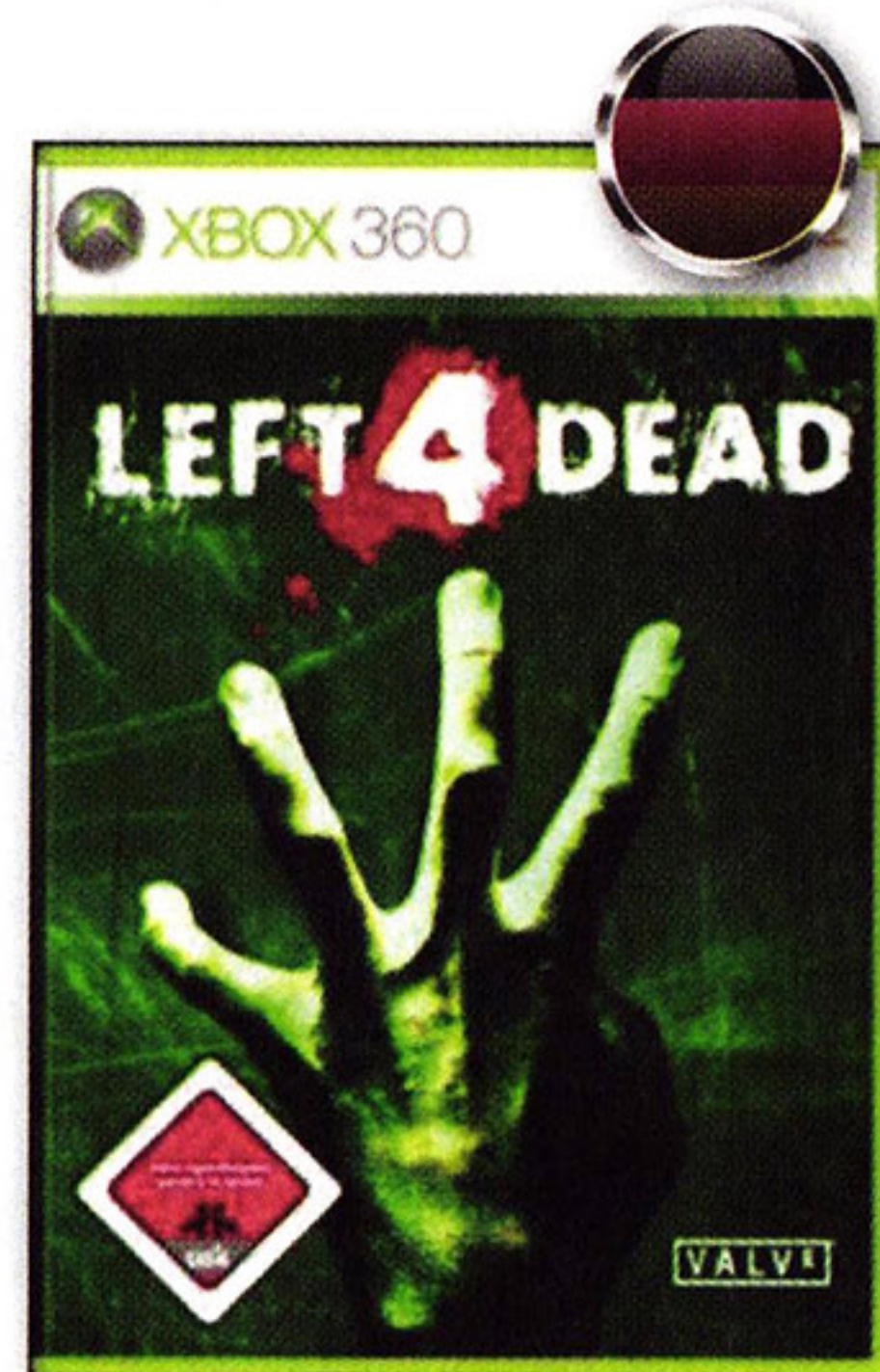
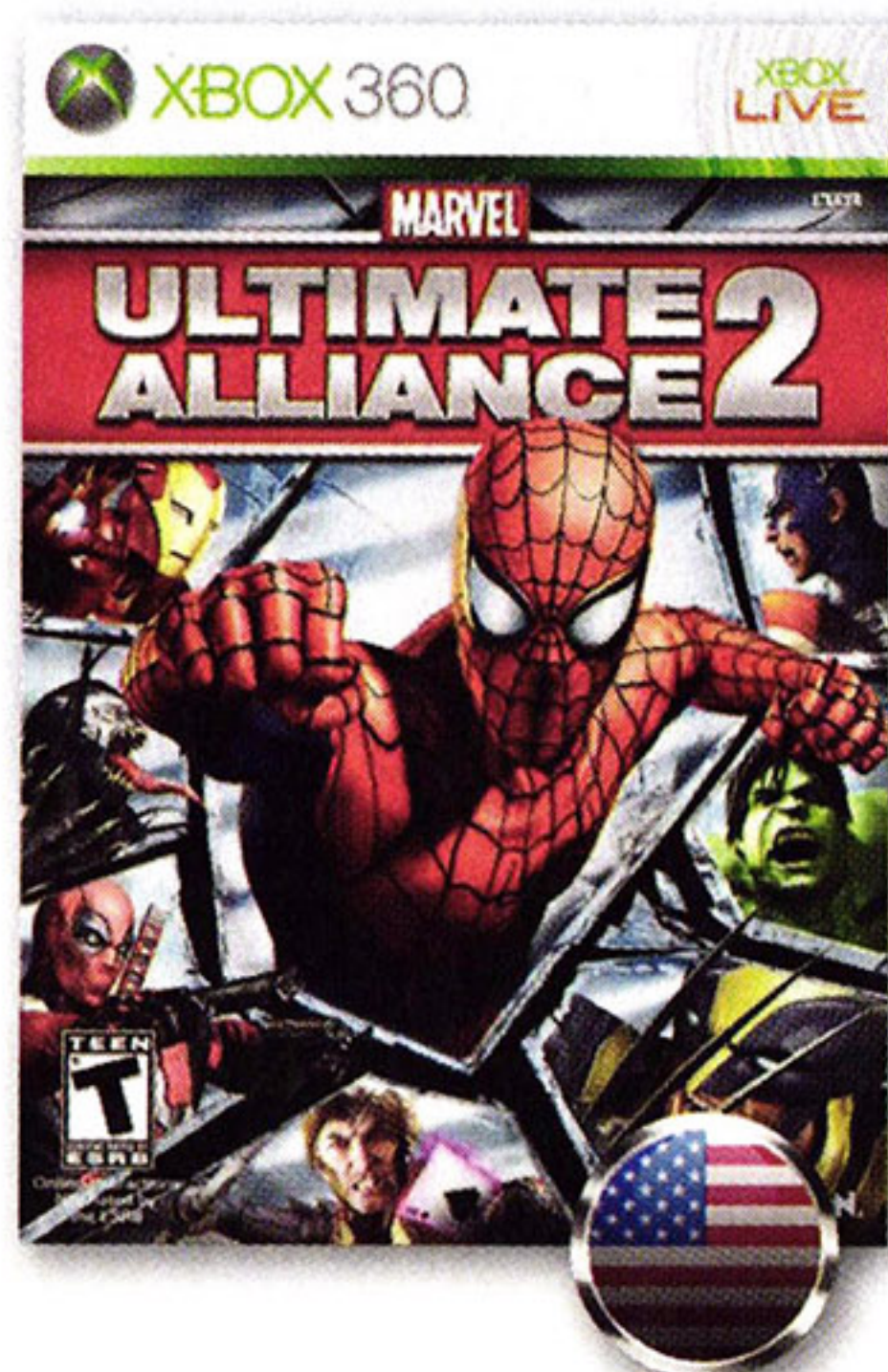
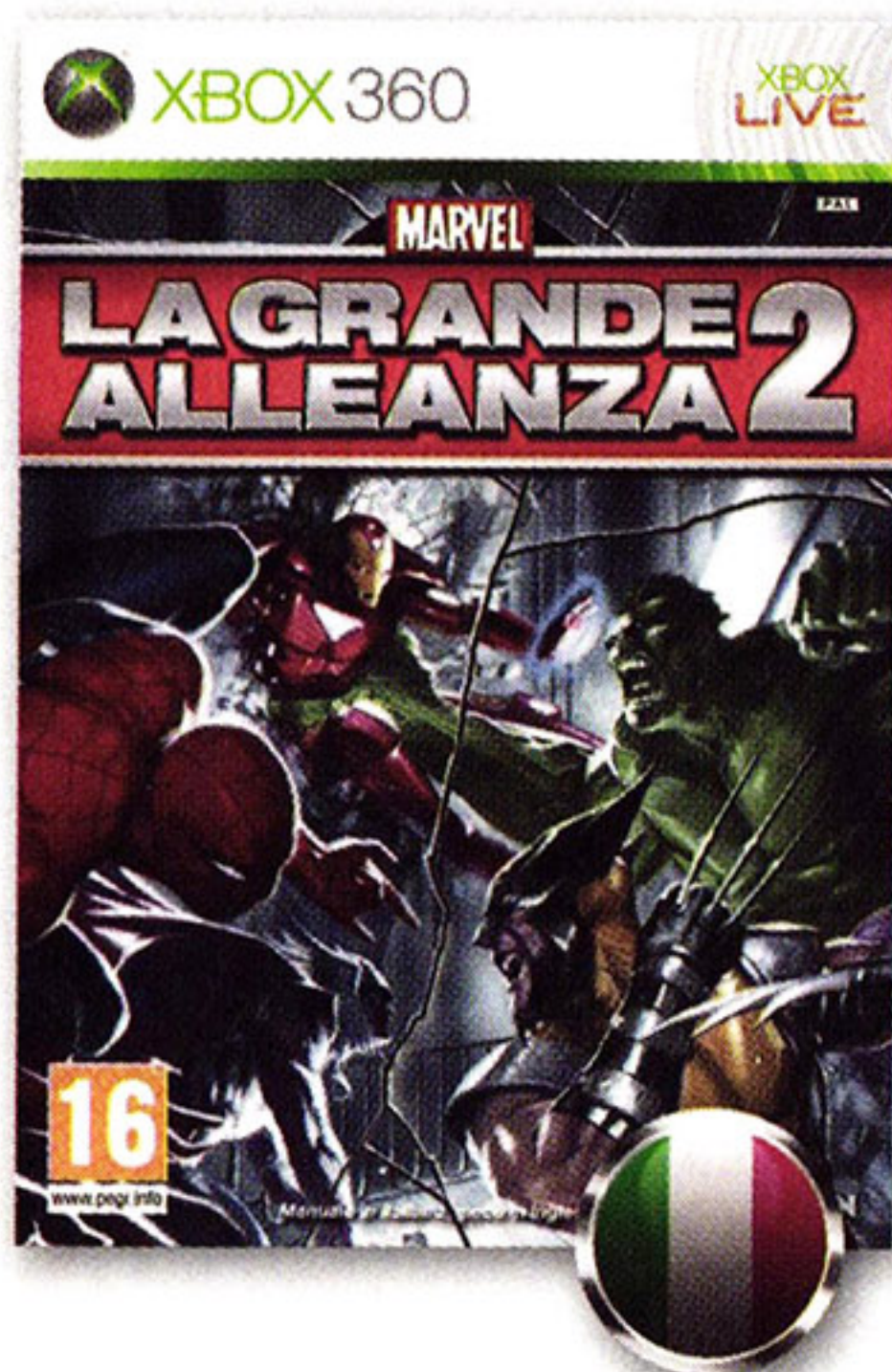
Reason One: Be Culturally Relevant

Like many companies, Capcom has different marketing offices located in all the major countries to which it distributes. Each office focuses on what is important to gamers in that country. "In general, we have found that the North American packaging has traditionally focused more on the characters of the series, where in Europe they put more focus on creating imagery they find to be iconic for the horror genre," says Matt Dahlgren, associate marketing manager and brand lead for Resident Evil 5.

Marvel Ultimate Alliance 2

Reason Two: Know Your Audience

Sometimes a game's cover changes because its publisher wants to focus on specific aspects of the game that it believes will help sales in that region. The first Marvel: Ultimate Alliance sold well in Italy, so when the sequel was nearing its release Activision hired famed Italian artist Gabriele Dell'Otto to do a special cover for the Italian market. "It was important for us to highlight the most popular and famous characters/villains in Italy," says Laura Lombardi, director of marketing for Activision Italy. Captain America isn't very relevant to Italians, so he was removed in favor of Thor, who has greater appeal.



Left 4 Dead

Reason Three: Be Socially Sensitive

Cultural mores and social norms sometimes dictate what appears on the front of a game's case. For example, Germany isn't comfortable with Nazi symbolism appearing anywhere in their games. In the U.S., it's considered improper for characters to be drinking alcohol or smoking on the front cover. Australia, Germany, and Japan are squeamish about dead bodies and gore. Sometimes a change isn't big; sometimes it's as subtle as removing blood or reattaching a missing digit.



Hotel Dusk & Crash Bandicoot 3: Warped

Reason Four: Match A Name Change

Sometimes a cover change is necessary because its name changed during the localization process. One of the most famous name changes is probably Japan's Biohazard, which was changed to Resident Evil when it came to the U.S. because a metal band had already trademarked the name Biohazard. However, name changes can happen for any country. Crash Bandicoot 3: Warped turned into Crash Bandicoot 3: Flying! Globe-Trotting! when it released in Japan, and the Japanese version of Rockstar's Smuggler's Run was retitled Crazy Bumps.



Oddworld

Reason Five: Hide Ugly Characters

In general, western countries are more accepting of unattractive protagonists, while Japan favors cute anime characters. When GT Interactive brought Oddworld: Abe's Oddysee over to Japan, it turned to a young startup company called Softbank. In an attempt to see how Oddworld would appeal to a Japanese market, Softbank's founder, Masayoshi Son, watched his daughters play the game. "It was determined that Abe's Oddysee had a tremendously positive effect on the young girls who tested it," says Oddworld creator Lorne Lanning. "This shaped a lot of the marketing campaign, similar to a campaign for the teen pop music market, which is huge in Japan." The game was packaged in bright colors, its name was changed to Abe-A-Go-Go, and commercials were produced that targeted the young girl's market. Interestingly, none of this seemed to help Abe's sales in Japan.

To see more covers from around the world, go to www.gameinformer.com/mag

Japanese Style

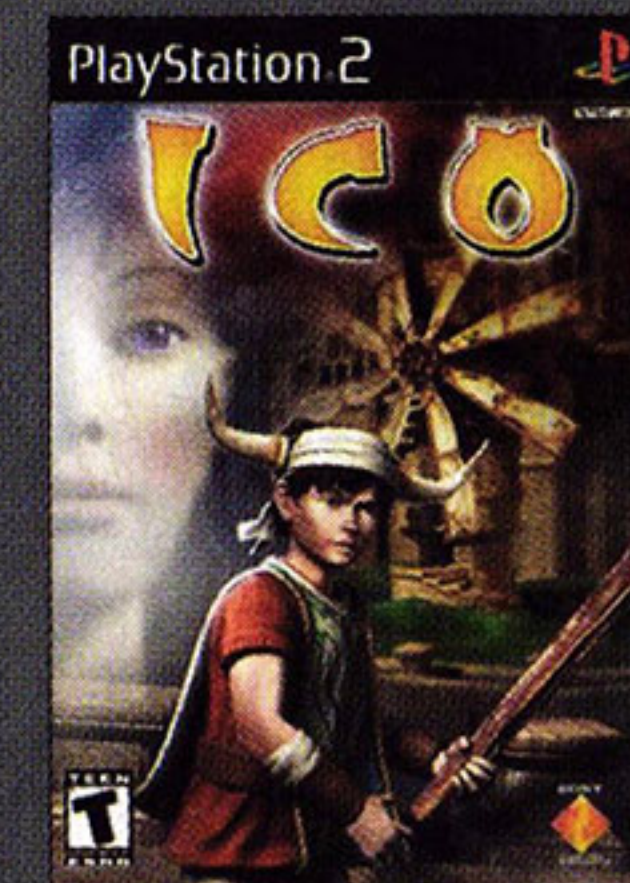
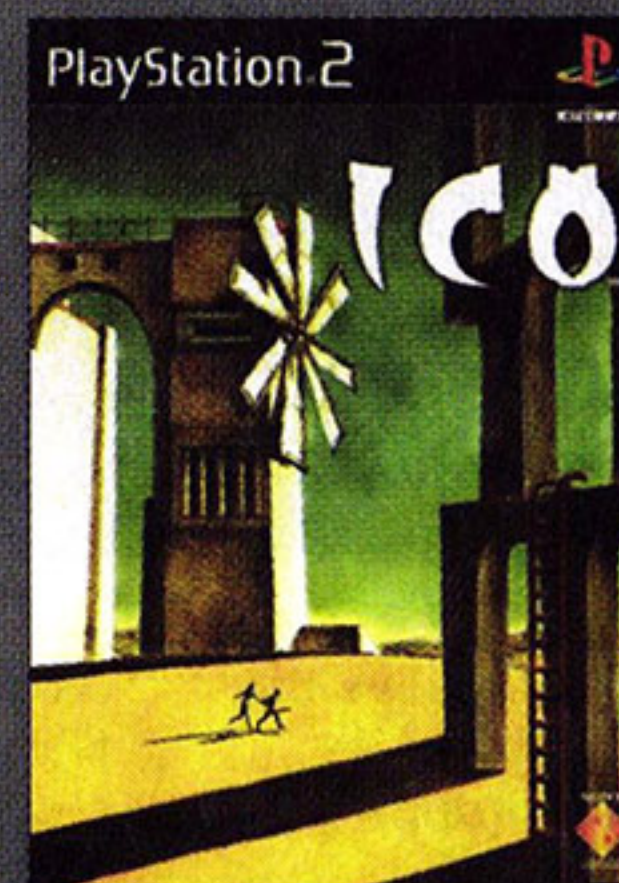
Japan does a lot of things well – food, crime rates, vending machines – but are the country's video game box covers better than those in America? We'll let you decide.



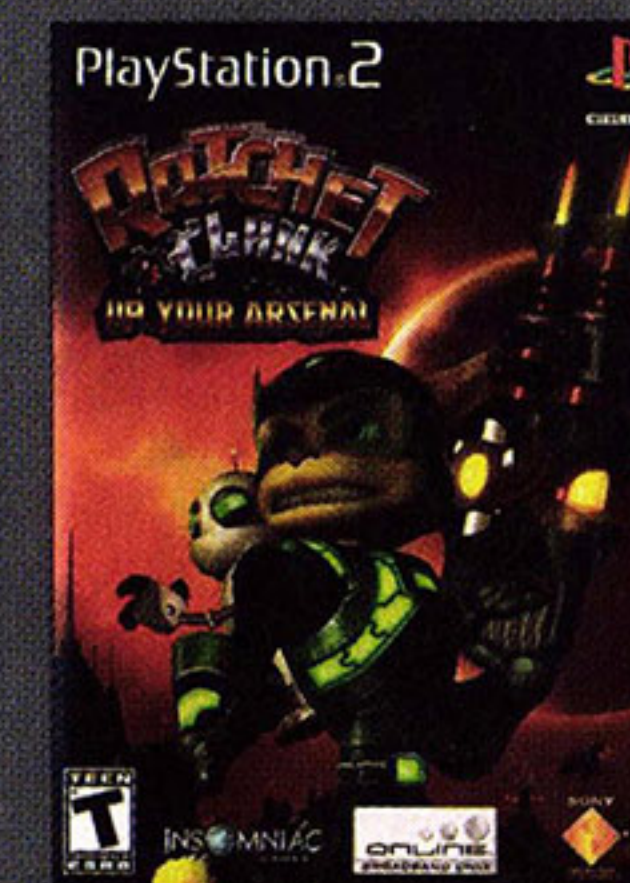
Castlevania: Symphony of the Night



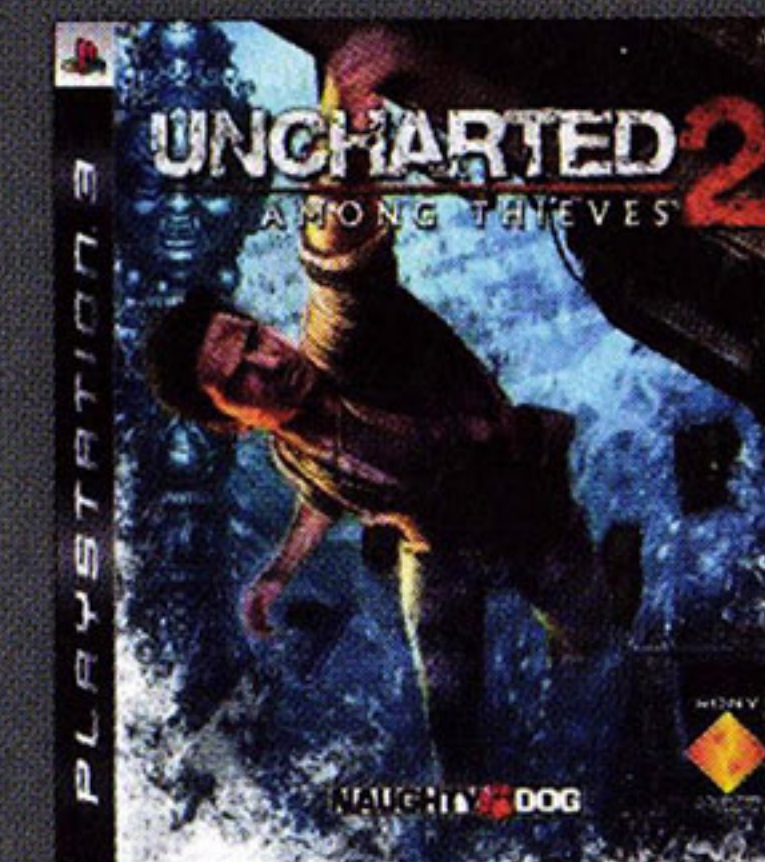
Final Fantasy VI



Ico



Ratchet and Clank: Up Your Arsenal



Uncharted 2

Borderlands

With over 17 million weapon combinations, four-player co-op, and gunplay that rivals the best in gaming, Gearbox Software's *Borderlands* is the sleeper hit of the holiday season. Combining the nonstop loot drops of popular RPGs like *Diablo* with the solid fundamentals of first-person shooters, the unique title captured gamers' imaginations and absorbed them into the wastelands of Pandora. How tricky was it to create this game, and what kind of support will Gearbox give it in the coming year? Gearbox co-founder, president, and CEO Randy Pitchford took the time to answer our burning questions.



How tricky was it to balance the action for four players, especially when they are dropping in and out?

Honestly, it's a big challenge. The whole game itself – co-op is a component of it – is a new challenge for us. It took us a long time to just figure out the formula. I think we spent just three years on the software and all of the tools and things necessary to put these pieces together so that we can balance it.

We built this system kind of like an equalizer on a stereo system that has all of these knobs on it. So we built all of the knobs, and then it took us some time where we tuned the knobs. One thing that is valuable was a group we created at Gearbox shortly after we shipped *Brothers in Arms: Hell's Highway*, which we call the Truth Team. The Truth Team's mission is to get real people, and real gamers, whether they are shopping at GameStop or are from the local colleges, and invite them to the studio and just play the game. We harvest not just the demographic information, but their experience – what they are enjoying and what they are not, and how things are balanced for them so we can produce data that we can trend over time. We look at that and see the actual impact of our decisions on a day-by-day basis. That was really important. The fun-

damentals follow it in *Borderlands*. Not just the fundamentals from a shooting point of view, but also from a loot schedule. Having those fundamentals be scalable, whether you are talking about a guy playing alone or playing with four players, three players, or two players.

Player feedback is very valuable. It's interesting, too. One of the questions is: If you were to review this game, what score would you give it? We could see the trend over time. The numbers go up. We can see when we make decisions and changes when the numbers went down. You know, we have a lot of things we were measuring, not just that one point, but the information that we were doing something wrong was vital to us.

One of the unsung heroes of the game is Claptrap. How did he come around to being included in the game?

We love him. He was actually not in the game. He was this character that was drawn by one of our concept artists, and was kind of this little mascot. He had little drawings of him hanging around, and you'd just sort of see him around Gearbox. Brian Martel, one of the owners of Gearbox and a great, great game maker, loved this thing and said, "We should put that character into the game. This character is cool.

Let's flesh this character out." That evolved, and now there's this guy. The voice of Claptrap just killed it, too. Some of the things he says are really funny. It just brought it all to life. And yeah, we love this guy. We have a life-size one in our lobby now, and there's people looking at getting toys made.

Old Haven is an awesome place for combat, yet you only spend a few missions there. Your time in this zone is done before you know it. Any chance DLC will bring us back there or to other previously played zones?

Yes. With DLC, we focus most of our energy on new content. However, there are some things people love and would like to see done in different ways. So that obviously influences us. Specifically about Old Haven, I don't think you've seen the last of that.

Any chance of the level cap going up with future DLC?

We're working on it. I know that's something that people really want. You asked me earlier how difficult it was to balance everything, and as a customer I don't care – I don't want to hear how difficult things are – I just want what I want. I spend a lot of time making excuses, but we want that, too, and we're investing in that and I would not be surprised if we are able to offer that in the future. But at this point I can't make any promises.

Once you finish the game you get new game plus. Did you originally envision that, or did that come with the understanding that one playthrough wouldn't level up your character to level 50?

It's kind of worked in as a meta-thing. When you first are getting off the bus, Marcus says to you "I'm sure we'll be doing this all over again real soon, right?" From a meta-game you are in this weird kind of temporal loop if you think of it as starting over. We knew we wanted to do that. One of the cool things about *Borderlands* is that the growth is real. The world doesn't scale with you. You scale around the world. When you get more powerful you feel that power. If you had an area that was tough for you, and then you get badass, you can go back through it and own that place. It feels really, really good. You're probably level 35 to 38 when you finish *Borderlands* the first time. And to push everything up for a second time and try to reach that high level

adds to that feeling. I dunno. It's a cool thing we wanted to make sure we covered. In fact, there's a third playthrough where everything is level 50. It's kind of like Heroic mode where everything starts at level 50. It's pretty hardcore. That's the path to the best loot in the game by the way. The best loot can drop off of anything when you do that third playthrough.

What are your favorite weapons in the game?

My two favorite weapons are Steele's Shotgun because of the physics effect and TK's "The Wave" because it's such a wacky concept.

The guns are obviously the star of the game. But your playable characters are also cool. Do you foresee character customization in the future?

Maybe. We know people want that. You know, at the beginning of our development we put some work into unique armor, custom armor, and unique pieces of armor, but as a first-person game, a lot of that value is lost. We move that value into different things like shields, and we added the concept of grenade modifications, class modifications, and artifacts. These are ways we can customize the character that also affect the gameplay. They just don't affect the cosmetics. And even though the cosmetic effect of looking at the picture of your character doesn't have any meaning to the gameplay, it does add meaning to our motions, and I know some people are interested.

I think that's a good lesson for us. There are also tradeoffs in system resources. Every bit of memory we spend on a different picture for a character, whether that's a different piece of armor, a different head, or face choices means memory and performance can't be spent on another aspect of the game. So some other part of the game would have to be weakened then. But maybe that tradeoff is worth it given some of the customer feedback about it. We're going to have to look at that for future games.

Any plans for a locker that players can store their weapons in?

We know that some people are interested in that, and we're working on that. ♦

For Andrew Reiner's complete interview with Randy Pitchford, head to gameinformer.com/mag

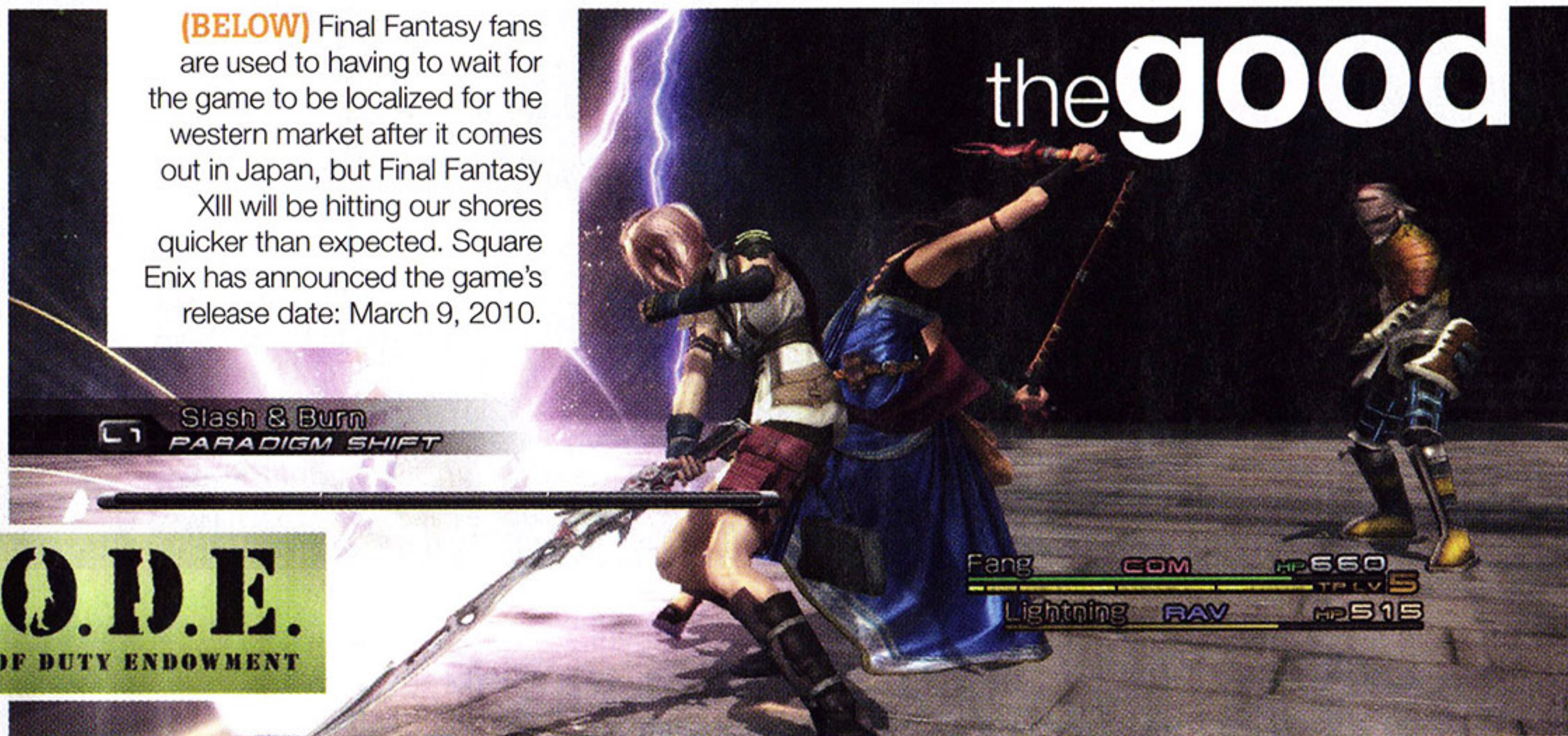
The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

NEWS WITH A SARCASTIC SPIN

(RIGHT) Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2 publisher Activision has set up the Call of Duty Endowment, a non-profit group created to help the widespread problem of unemployment among military veterans. The Endowment, which has made an initial \$1 million commitment, will raise awareness of the issue as well as dole out grant contributions to appropriate organizations.

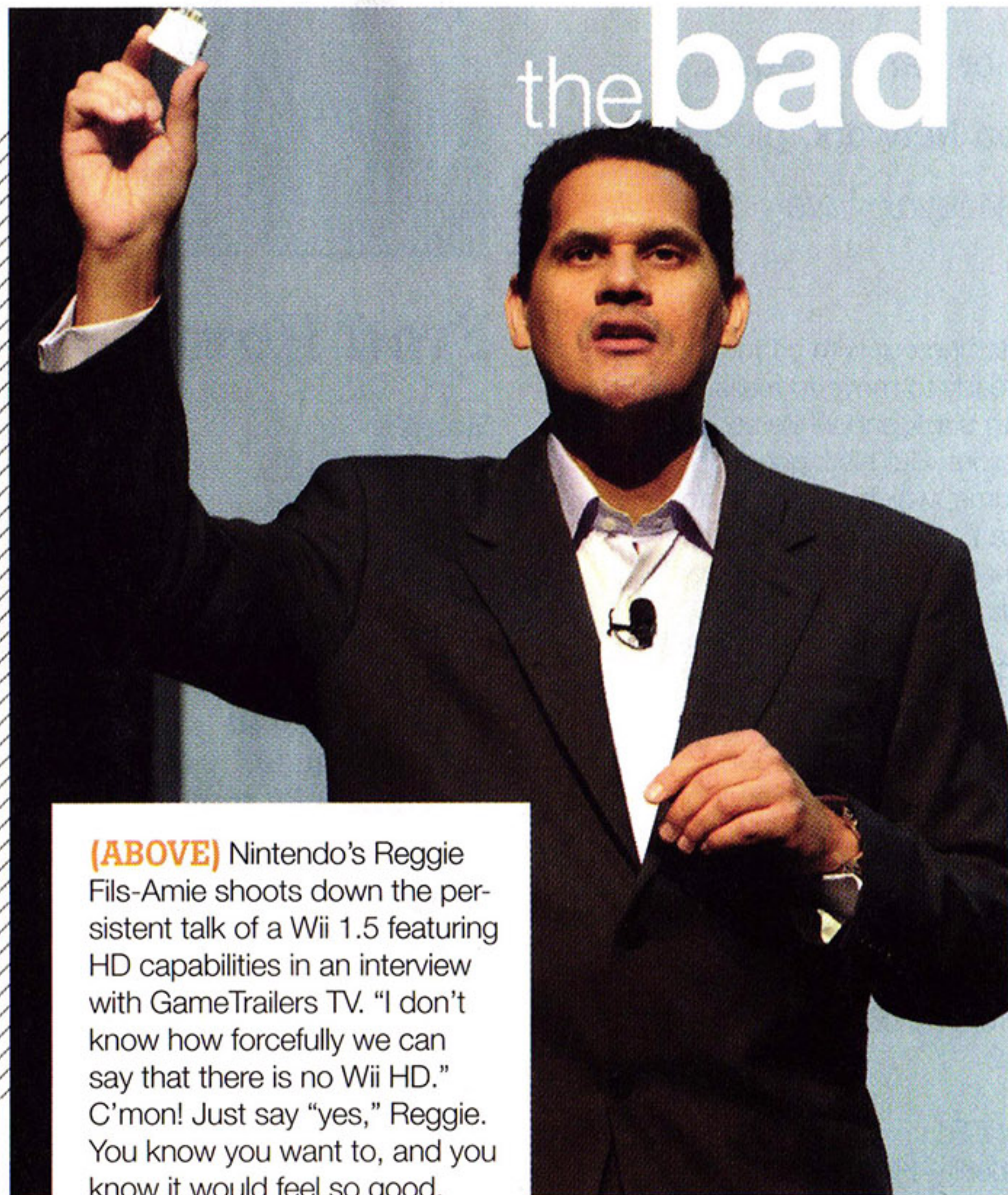
C.O.D.E.
CALL OF DUTY ENDOWMENT

(BELOW) Final Fantasy fans are used to having to wait for the game to be localized for the western market after it comes out in Japan, but Final Fantasy XIII will be hitting our shores quicker than expected. Square Enix has announced the game's release date: March 9, 2010.



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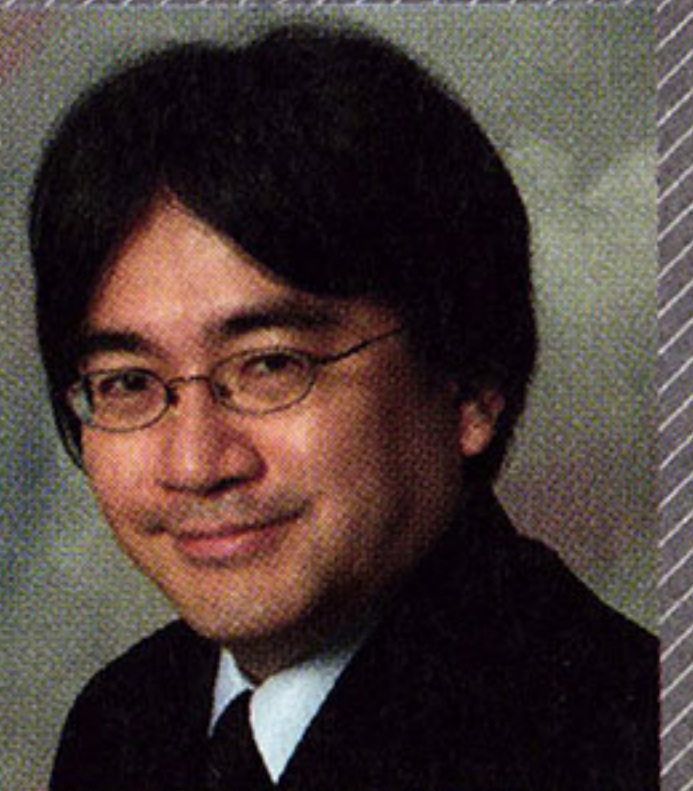
The Wii has stalled. Games of high demand could not be continuously released and the good mood has chilled.



(ABOVE) Nintendo's Reggie Fils-Amie shoots down the persistent talk of a Wii 1.5 featuring HD capabilities in an interview with GameTrailers TV. "I don't know how forcefully we can say that there is no Wii HD." C'mon! Just say "yes," Reggie. You know you want to, and you know it would feel so good.

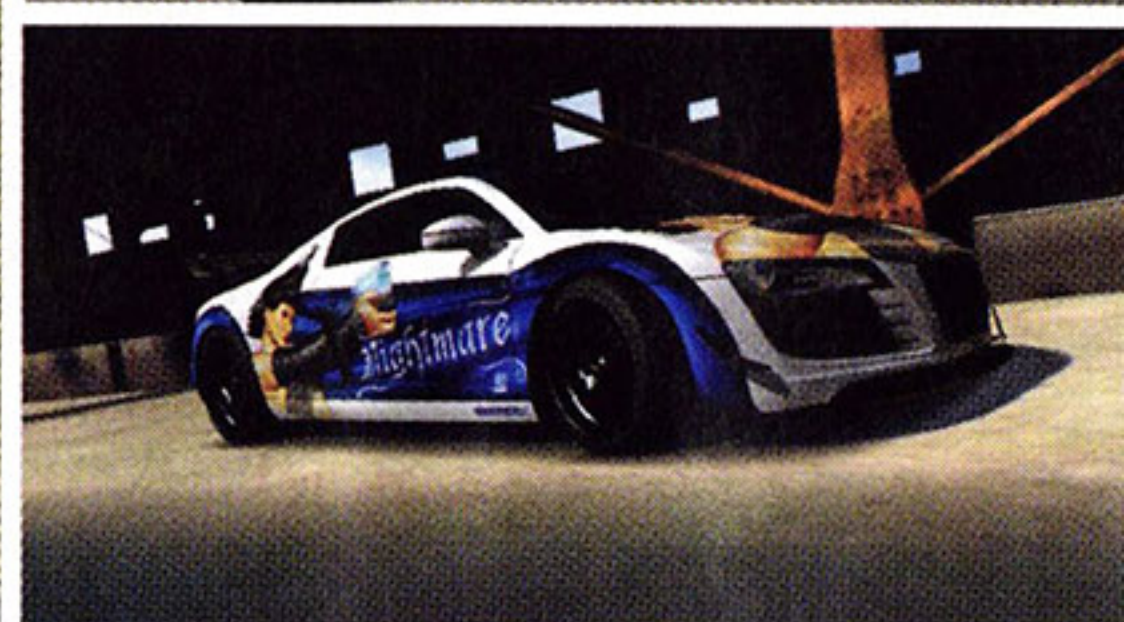


(RIGHT) The legal wrangling between Bethesda Softworks and Interplay over the Fallout franchise continues. Recently, former Fallout rights holder Interplay released some concept art for the Fallout MMORPG it is allegedly working on in order to prove to Bethesda that Interplay isn't in breach of contract (in which case the rights for a Fallout MMORPG would revert to Bethesda). While no one wants to wish for someone else's failure, we're sure there are a lot of people who'd rather Interplay get out of the way so Bethesda could make a Fallout MMORPG itself.



Nintendo's Satoru Iwata on the system's sales decline in native Japan, where the price cut hasn't had a positive effect like in other territories

”



Forza Motorsport 3

Game Informer scours the leaderboards in search of the best of the best to uncover the person behind the handle and learn his or her strategies. If you get a pesky message over Xbox Live or PlayStation Network, please don't delete it. You could be our next featured gamer. *by Bryan Vore*

Accomplishments:

A couple years ago, Fred Howell was a graphic designer working in the Washington D.C. area and one of the top car painters in the Forza 2 community. Now he works at Forza developer Turn 10. It all started back in late 2007. "At the time there were a lot of people on the forums griping about stuff and giving Che [Chou, Turn 10 community manager] a hard time. A friend of mine suggested that we do a car on him." Howell tracked down a photo of Chou online and replicated it on a car. Chou caught wind of it and bought the car from Howell for millions of in-game credits. This opened the lines of communication and soon Howell was in Seattle. "I came out and maybe ten minutes into the interview it was like, 'Well, when can you start?'" Howell recalls. As community moderator, he now designs official car liveries for trailers and marketing, helps streamline the in-game livery editor, and keeps a finger on the pulse of the Forza community.

Origin of Skills:

Howell enjoyed the demo for Forza 2, but before he bought it he went online for more information on the game. "I came upon a thread on a forum that had pictures of cars people created," Howell says. "Somebody had a Clint Eastwood up there and I was like 'That was done in the game? Holy crap!' So I ran out and got it and started immediately with the editor. I think the first thing I did was a Fred Flintstone. It's absolutely horrible now that you go back and look at it."

Design Time:

When he first started out, it took Howell around 30 hours to paint a car. Now he's got it down to around five to eight hours.

Painting Tips:

Howell recommends starting out with cartoon images. When you're ready to move to realistic art, he says to start with black and white so you don't have to match colors. But his biggest tip is visiting the Forza forums, which are filled with helpful experts. In Forza 2, for example, Howell created a popular tutorial car to explain how to make more realistic hair.

Life Outside of Forza:

"I actually got lucky because one of my old college roommates lives out here so we get together and enjoy watching sports and stuff like that," Howell says. "But usually as soon as I get home I'm either painting or playing the game with people from the community."

Other Favorite Games:

Fallout 3, The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion, Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2

Streamlining Forza:

Coming from the community, Howell knew what the painters wanted most and pushed for it. He recalls a time when UI dev team member Shammi Mohamed was watching him paint. "He was scrolling through one of my cars and seeing all of these stars, but he couldn't see where they were actually at on the car," Howell says. "I was like, 'I use those to separate content.' It immediately flashed in his head 'Would you like to have a grouping system?' and I was like 'Yes, that would be amazing.'" Howell also helped push the whiteboard and optional grid overlay so that users could design images on a plain flat surface before putting them on a car, and helped with the storefront so that painters wouldn't have to deal with the auction house or friending everyone who wanted to buy their designs.



Fred Howell

Handle
phREDESIGN

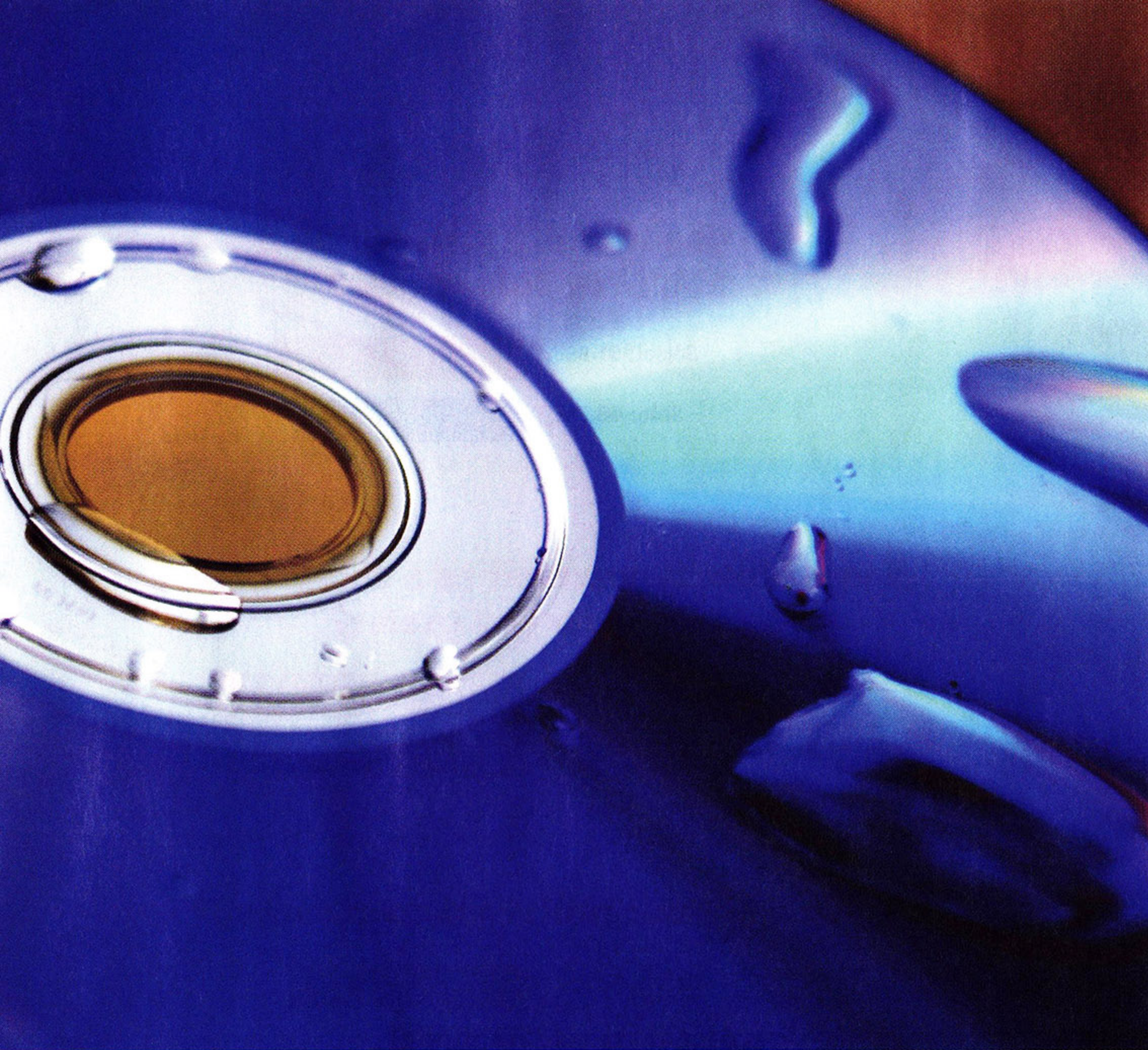
Age
35

Hometown
Seattle, WA

Favorite Design
The "Nightmare" car for the Forza 3 E3 trailer

Hardest skill to learn
Replicating manufacturer logos





loose talk

Additions & Subtractions

There is always a lot going on behind the scenes in the video game industry, and we try and share the rumors and scuttlebutt we hear about your favorite games, developers, and publishers. Loose Talk lets you in on what happens behind closed doors and what might be in store for the future.

Sony Working on the Future

Sony's Blu-ray disc format has become the physical standard for high-definition content, but the company is hard at work on the next jump – a disc capable of holding 6 terabytes (TB) of information similar to the already announced holographic versatile disc. A single terabyte is 1,000GB, and a dual-layered Blu-ray disc can “only” hold 50GB of data.

Apart from sheer amount of data that will be possible on these discs, there will be a crucial security component as well. The uncompressed nature of the information on Sony's disc will make it harder to pirate and distribute information on the disc due to its size.

A New Bully on the Block

In an interview with The Gaming Liberty, Bully composer Shawn Lee revealed that he's been contacted about doing music for a sequel to the Rockstar Vancouver title. “Yes. It looks like I will be doing the soundtrack for Bully 2 in the not so distant future,” he said.

Meanwhile across the Atlantic, Grand Theft Auto developer Rockstar North has started recruiting talent for multiple positions, including a physics programmer with experience over all three current consoles.

EA Trims Back

Electronic Arts announced that it was cutting some future projects due to some disappointing financials (see page 15), but it didn't spell out which games were hitting the chopping block. While we can't shed light on specifically what's getting the axe, Loose Talk has heard that one of the multi-title EA franchises will be trimmed back in this reorganization, with some of its spin-off titles being cancelled. Could it be The Sims? Spore? Need for Speed?

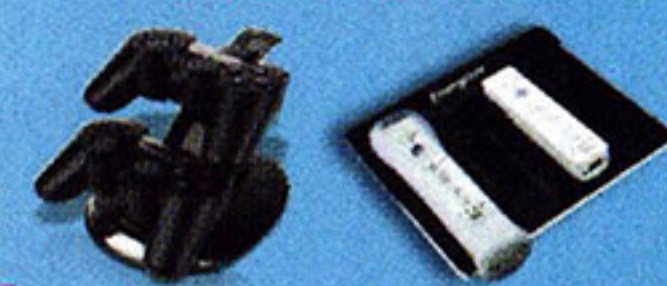
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The Co-op Condition

by Meagan VanBurkleo

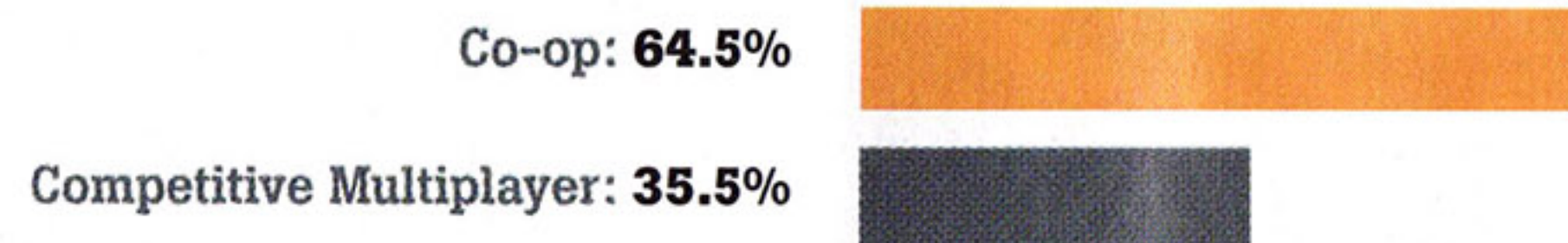
With co-op gaming undergoing a renaissance over the past few years, gamers everywhere are becoming increasingly vocal about what they want to see in future titles. And what they don't. We surveyed nearly 8,000 readers to find out if social or solo gaming is paramount, if split-screen play is DOA, and if gamers would be willing to pay a premium to play traditionally single-player franchises with their buddies.

The Basics

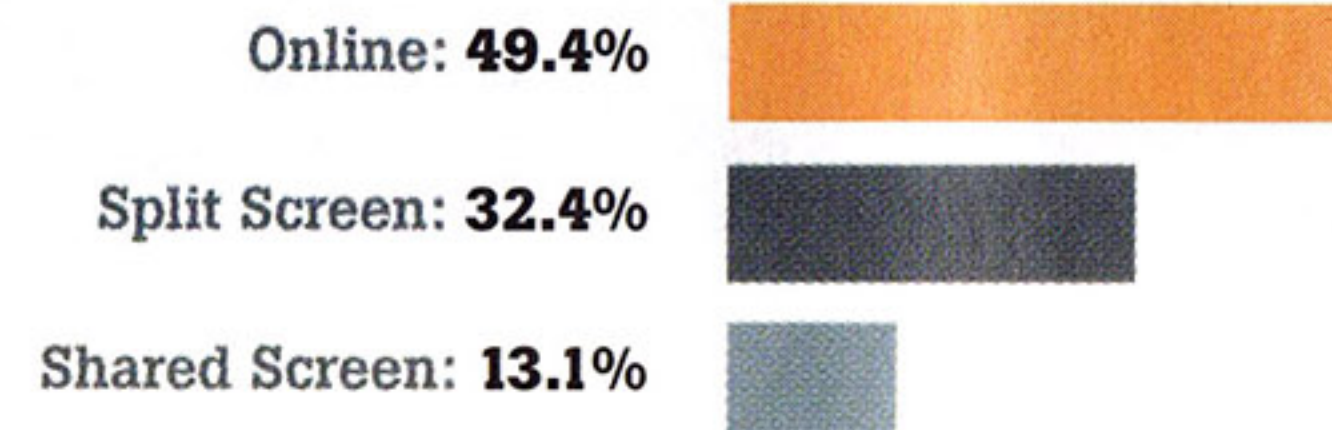
Do you identify yourself as a social or solo gamer?



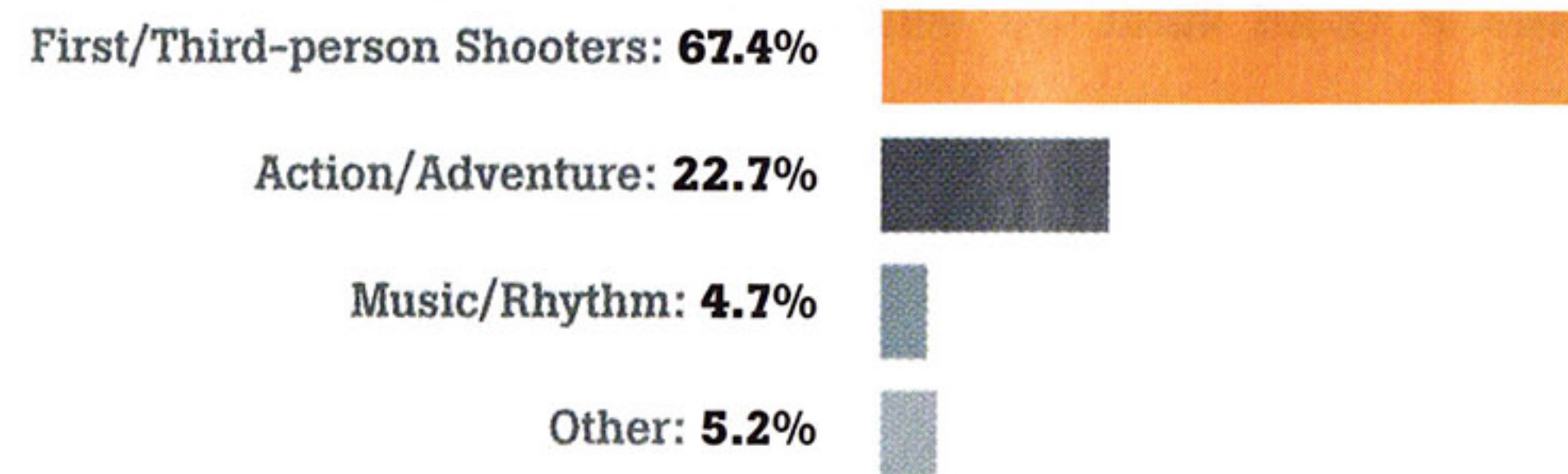
If you identify yourself as a social gamer, which do you prefer?



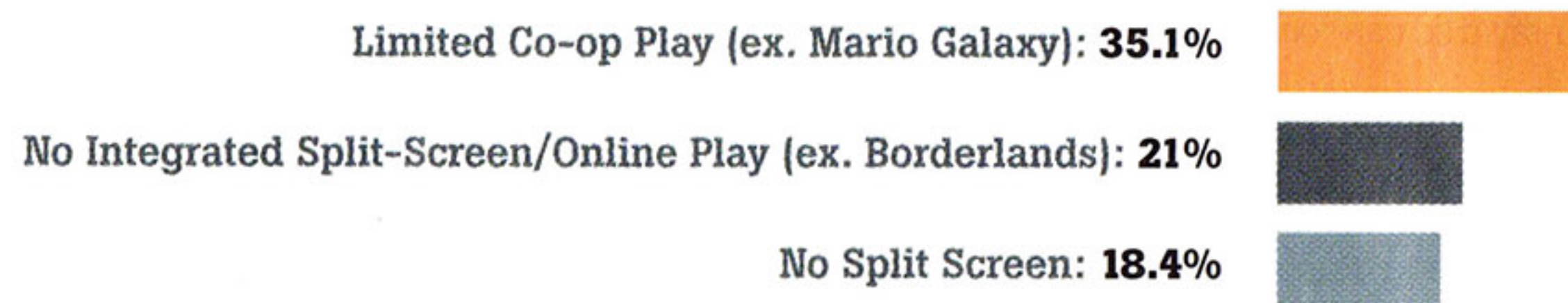
What is your preferred co-op setup?



What's your favorite co-op genre?



What are your biggest co-op qualms?



The Breakdown

51.2%

say they are more likely to purchase a game with co-op. 30.9 percent would even buy a poorly received co-op game or one outside of their genre preference.

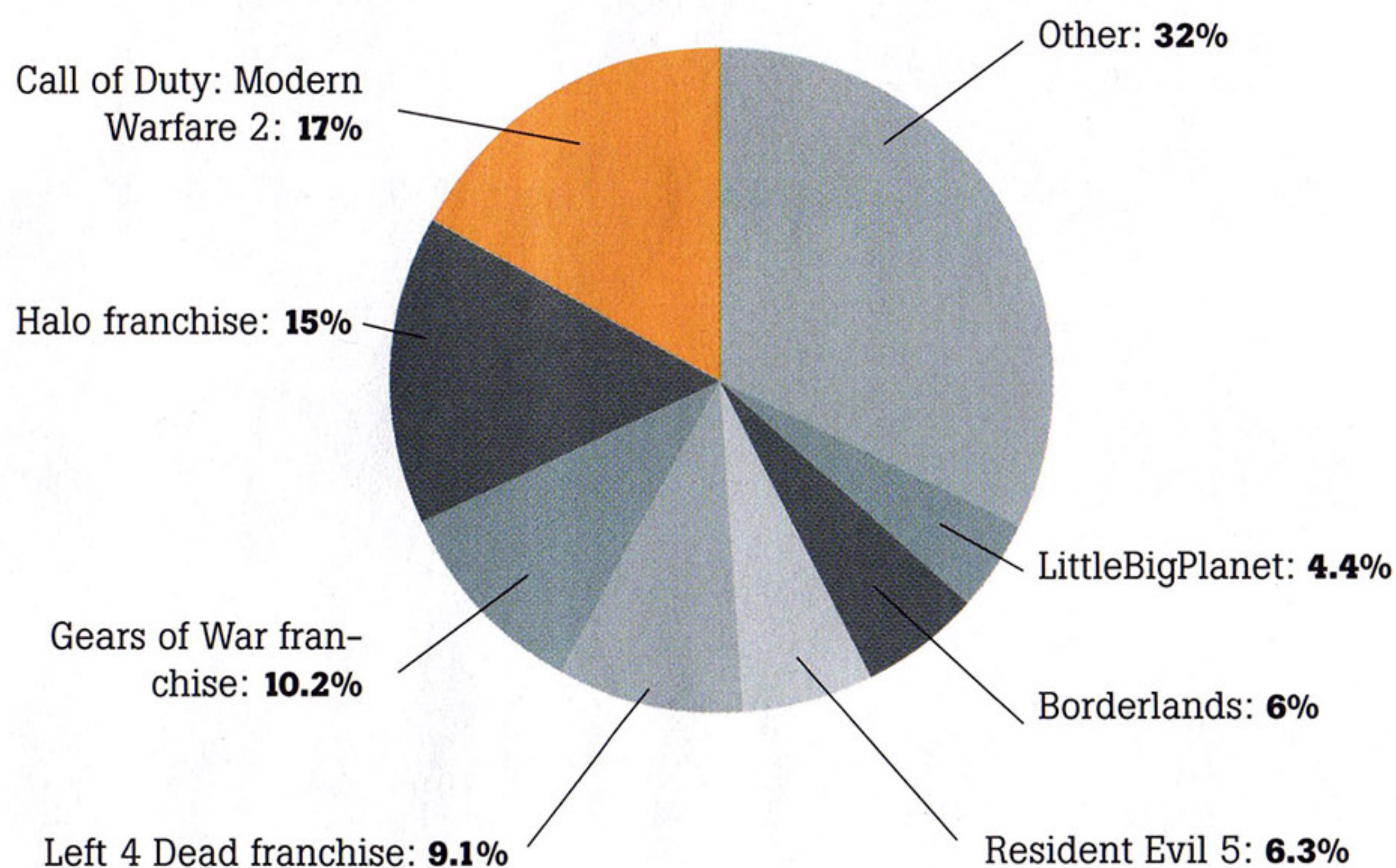
71.2%

want unique co-op characters like Gears of War's Marcus and Dom rather than duplicates.

14.9%

want co-op Grand Theft Auto. When asked what single-player franchises should incorporate co-op, Mass Effect, Assassin's Creed, and Final Fantasy garnered 10 percent.

What is your favorite co-op title?



Are you willing to **pay to play**?

The overwhelming number of participants in our survey (69.2 percent) said no – that co-op is part of a package deal. However, 14.3 percent of respondents said they would shell out an extra \$10 to offset the costs associated with developing co-op. But is this even a good idea?

"We don't really approach products and features this way," explains Erik Johnson, project manager at Valve. "Once you start thinking about how your customers are going to directly cover the costs of developing a specific feature in your game (and one as significant as co-op) then you're probably headed down the wrong track."

Developer Commentary

Key staffers from influential development houses sound off on the current state of co-op affairs.

On What Qualifies As Co-op

"This largely depends on what gamers want out of their experience. I can mention from firsthand experience that pulling off story-based, integrated co-op for the duration of a full-length campaign (seven-plus hours minimum, on average) is a lot of work not only from a level design standpoint, but also from code and writing. You always have to account for the players' locations, ammo balancing, scripted moments, cinematics triggering, etc. Development-wise it is sometimes seen as an easier win to simply have custom scenarios for co-op. However, if you're not careful it can balloon into more work, simply more contained in its own 'bucket.' At the end of the day I'm just happy to play games with others in a non-competitive manner."

Cliff Bleszinski
design director, Epic Games

On Best Co-op Genres

"Shooters definitely lend themselves well to the co-op experience, but personally I think it would be great to see more games getting into this space. The main challenge with co-op is that the players have a constant 360-degree view of the action, thus designing levels becomes much more challenging in terms of delivering a cinematic experience. I think true hardcore survival horror might be tough with co-op. Obviously Resident Evil 5 was a co-op experience, but that was much more focused around exploration/shooting than previous iterations. Personally, I think it would be awesome to see a God of War/Dante's Inferno-style game in full co-op. We had an idea for something like that a few years ago, but since shelved it to focus on Army of Two."

Reid Schneider
executive producer,
Army of Two: The 40th Day

On The Co-op Timeline

"We've always started projects by deciding whether they were a single-player, cooperative, or competitive multiplayer game. In Half-Life 2, the puzzles, vistas, and combat were all designed for one player to feel like they are the most important person in that world. Adding a second person to the game would be technically feasible, but the experience of both players would be less than the sum of their parts because of the original goal. For us, it feels like something that you need to be designing around from day one to get the right kind of experience for whoever your audience is, whether it is single player, two teams playing against each other, or a few friends playing together."

Erik Johnson
project manager, Valve

On The Technical Restrictions of Split-Screen Play

"Obviously, you're asking one console to do twice the work, so there are some trade-offs there. There were times in development where the engineers were like 'Man, we should just cut this.' This is just really difficult.' I made sure we always remembered that we have a lot of customers, like me, that want to play with our friends. We want to sit on the couch and play together, and split screen is a great way to do that. It's just an inconvenience to set up multiple Xboxes and multiple TVs and multiple PlayStation 3s. Supporting split screen is a really big deal. I think the fact that it was so successful is going to want to motivate us to want to look at some new things in the future, too. There might be other tradeoffs we have to make, but thinking we're getting even more players split screen or how to simulate that across a network will be really important things to look at next. Man, I love the fact that it worked out, and that people are appreciating that feature. It wasn't easy."

Randy Pitchford
president and CEO,
Gearbox Software

interview



Marc Whitten sees Xbox Live as a constantly evolving service that aims to connect people through all forms of entertainment

Xbox Live GM Looks Toward the Future of Social Entertainment

A longtime Microsoft employee, **Marc Whitten** has helped guide the Xbox and Xbox 360 since the early days. As general manager of Xbox Live, Whitten is looking toward the future, hoping to push the service further toward being an all-inclusive, online entertainment hub.

You've just launched Facebook, Twitter, Zune video, and Last.fm for Xbox Live. Has it been a struggle to come up with interfaces for these applications that work in Live?

People are sometimes confused when they talk about how the Internet comes into the living room. What you're really trying to solve is what is special about the living room and what features will magnify what people already want to do there. Take Facebook as an example. The part of that which I'm passionate about is photos. Photos are a magical entertainment experience and they are underserved. We take billions of photos and they sit on devices or PCs. I think about how Facebook is used in my house. My wife calls me to the den and we look at pictures of my niece or what our friends are doing on vacation. That does not want to be on a laptop. It wants to be in the living room.

In your Games on Demand service for the 360 titles, you've allowed credit card purchases that use real dollar amounts. Will you allow that for Zune video?

It's Microsoft points right now and those have been very successful for us. Especially at retail – people buy tons of points cards and bring them home. But we continue to think about it. We want to make it as easy as possible for people to have the entertainment experiences they want.

I've never quite understood the point system. You could still sell Live cards at retail in dollar values instead of points. Aren't actual dollars the most simple thing?

Yeah, and I will say that we will continue to focus on making the system simple, without giving you the roadmap.

How successful have the on-demand 360 games been?

We haven't released the sales figures, but it's been a huge success. Digital distribution is one of the phenomenal success stories of this generation of consoles. Look at what started on Xbox Live Arcade with just 10 games at launch. Now, many of my favorite games are there – Geometry Wars 2, Trials HD, or Braid. With the full games, the part that I'm excited about is that there's a ton of amazing content that is there for a while, then disappears. That's the way retail works. There's a limited amount of space. For people buying an Xbox 360 today, it's hard to find Civilization Revolution. But it's an amazing game. Finding ways to make sure that that's there for people is great.

Is it going to expand to include new retail games, or will it continue to focus primarily on catalog titles?

We will continue to experiment with what people want. Retail is an amazing experience in itself, the ability to get your hands on something, to have that collection. Do I think digital distribution will expand? Yes, but we're going to see where it goes.

There seems to be a problem with marketing XBLA games. With retail releases, you're pretty aware when a game is coming out. With XBLA, games just appear with no build-up. It feels chaotic.

I think you're right in some ways. Our goal is to make sure people find this amazing content. The Summer of Arcade – we just did our second – was [about] making it more like the retail side, where we focus on a set of titles that are coming out in a set period. That's been very successful, and people were less surprised when those games came out.... We think a lot about how XBLA games come out. They are a little different than retail. The timelines are much different. But it's a shame every time there is a great game on XBLA and people don't know about it.

I'm a little surprised that there hasn't been a really big MMO on Xbox Live yet. Is that the result of disputes about how to divvy up subscription fees?

It's actually not a dispute, they have to give it all to us. [Laughs] I'm kidding. We're pretty passionate about having great games where communities of people get to play together. We talk to people all the time about those kinds of concepts. I don't know if you want to let it count, but I think of 1 vs. 100 as an MMO. It's thousands of people playing together and you're going to see a lot more of those kinds of games, with a variety of business models.

Sure, 1 vs. 100 is obviously a lot of people, but I'm talking about what we traditionally think of as an MMO like World of Warcraft.

We're really interested and you're going to see all forms of entertainment on the console. You're trying to get a good scoop out of me, but I don't think there's as much of a scoop there as has been rumored. But if we don't have the entertainment you want, I'm not done yet.

When you announced 1 vs. 100, you talked about wanting to do more TV-style games. Are more of these games in development?

I have nothing to announce, but we remain passionate about this space. You're going to see it in lots of different ways – things that look like 1 vs. 100, things that look very different from 1 vs. 100. Look at the stuff we're doing with Sky TV. You pull up your programming guide that looks just like the guide on your

television, except if you had a friend watching Manchester United, you'd see their friend icon on that channel and you could join them.

That Sky thing sounds good. You should do that in the U.S. Do you have anything to announce?

[Laughs] We have a lot of passion for that kind of experience, but I have nothing to announce. Let me tell you how much I had to listen to "Hey, Netflix sounds really good, when can we get it?" My teammates in the U.K. are enjoying the fact that the U.S. guys are annoyed because [Sky is] something they want.

This is more of a cultural issue, but there can be a nastiness in the community on Xbox Live. In random matches, you're going to hear a lot of really ugly slurs and insults being thrown around. Is there anything you can do to alleviate that?

We're actually quite active in policy enforcement. We started Live with the idea of smart matchmaking. How do people of a similar skill get to play together? But smart matchmaking is more than that. The truth is that what you want changes based on the group of people you're with and your mood. You'll see us push toward how smart matchmaking matches me with people like me. If a bunch of guys all want to be in a certain type of experience, fine. Live is bigger than a lot of major cities, and just like cities there are parks and gardens and bars and everything in between. I'd like to get better about telling you that you're walking into a bar and not the zoo.

The real power of Facebook is for the next person that joins Live. One of the biggest problems is who is friend number one? But now I can go up to Facebook and see all of my friends that are already on Xbox. I can at least get started with 30 or 40 friends that are on Live. That's not the only answer. Finding the right friends is one way. Smarter matchmaking is one way. Doing a great job on policy enforcement is one way.

Live has been a core part of both Xbox consoles. I'd assume that it's going to be core to Project Natal. Could you talk about some of the plans that you have for Natal?

I think you said it well. Live is at the core of everything we do. You're going to see us doing the same thing with Project Natal. You saw a little bit in some of the videos we had at E3, I think you can see where we want to go. Natal is going to be a really magical thing, and Natal plus Live is going to be groundbreaking.

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

1979 SPACE CHAMP

After receiving a Sears Video Arcade from his parents, Whitten places 2nd in a Space Invaders tournament, earning himself a \$25 Sears gift certificate

1997 WINDOWS TO THE WORLD

After graduating in computer science from the University of North Texas, Whitten takes a job doing low level programming for Windows 2000 at Microsoft

2000 THE BOX

After Windows 2000 ships, Whitten becomes one of the first employees to join the Xbox program, about a month after the project was greenlighted. Whitten works on integrating the system's hard drive and also on the system's user interface

2000 CUSTOM MUSIC

To prevent the feature from being cut from the system, Whitten works weekends to program the custom soundtracks feature for the original Xbox

2001 GOING LIVE

Whitten joins a team tasked to begin pre-production on Microsoft's Xbox Live gaming service

2003 VERSION 2.0

After a couple of major updates to Xbox Live, which added features like voice messaging, Whitten transfers to the team that was working on the core architecture of the Xbox 360, focusing on the Xbox Guide and how the system will integrate Xbox Live

2004 ACCESSORIZING

Whitten transfers again within the Xbox team, this time working on the accessories and controllers for the Xbox 360, with a focus on delivering high-quality, cordless controllers

2007 BACK ONLINE

Fulfilling his wish to return to Xbox Live, Whitten signs on as GM of Xbox Live and helps successfully navigate a complete overhaul of the Xbox Live dashboard and user interface



Just when it seemed like Motorola was fading into the losing end of the smartphone battle, it releases the Droid on Verizon. Hands-down the most impressive Google-powered phone we've ever seen, this beast of a device is smart, sleek, and cool. Shipping with Android 2.0 and the new Google GPS navigation app, users will revel in the options that come with an open platform. Speaking of apps, the Android Marketplace gives users a refund within 24 hours of a purchase, so you can curb some of the micotransaction regret that comes with devices like this. The sharp touchscreen, a solid-feeling slide out keyboard and killer connectivity options: 3G, Wi-Fi, Bluetooth, and GPS. The phone also has a decent battery (slightly better than the iPhone), which is a rarity in the smartphone world. One of the few negatives we found was the camera seemed to have auto-focus trouble with still shots, however video records just fine. If you're a Gmail user, this is the best choice for you, as Google caters to the things you use most.

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1 | Alienware M15x

VERY GOOD

You'd think that Alienware shrinking their hulking 17-inch gaming laptop down to 15 inches would result in a weaker machine, but our FarCry 2 benchmarks actually saw a performance improvement over the older brother. While this laptop will still crush your knees because of its overall size, it's small enough to take your hi-def gaming anywhere. Our model sported an i7 920 processor, 4GB of RAM and a true 16:9, 1080p display that looked great with the built-in Blu-ray player.

\$1,499.99

www.alienware.com

2 | Tritton AX720

AVERAGE

Everyone and their grandma are making 5.1 headphones these days. Tritton's AX720 model is a solid

entry. Unlike some of its previous efforts, the well-made headset is comfortable to wear and sounds decent. Even after hours of Borderlands co-op with the built-in voice support for Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, and PC, our ears never got sore. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said about the control box, which feels cheap and features no pass-throughs for receivers.

\$129.99

www.trittontech.com

3 | Razer Orochi

VERY GOOD

The Orochi is Razer's answer to the portable wireless mouse. As you'd expect, the mouse is heavy duty, Bluetooth powered, and dressed in black. Smaller than the rest of the Razers, it easily fits into the pocket of a laptop case and comes with a cord to plug in when the batteries die. It's a little baffling that there's no rechargeable battery, but the overall performance is

great. If you're a gamer on the go and willing to drop some cash for hardware, put this on your list.

\$79.99

www.razerzone.com

4 | Hotseat Racer GTX

You're the hardcore driving type, huh? Hotseat Chassis has just the rig for you. The Racer GTX is a full-fledged racing simulator for consoles that comes with everything you need. The metal frame is super strong, and will hold you and the optional 28-inch HD monitor. Enthusiasts will love the adjustable bucket seat and 5.1 surround sound integrated right into the frame. Hotseat also has a ton of options allowing buyers to get everything from a basic seat and frame setup, to the whole package featuring a dedicated PC or console and the best games for the system.

\$1,100.00

www.hotseatinc.com

MEDIA SHELF



TOP GEAR SERIES 11 & 12

The boys from Britain are back and more hilarious than ever. The BBC's popular car show features amazing imagery, hilarious hosts, and, of course, the hottest cars in the history of mankind.

\$29.99

www.bbcamericashop.com

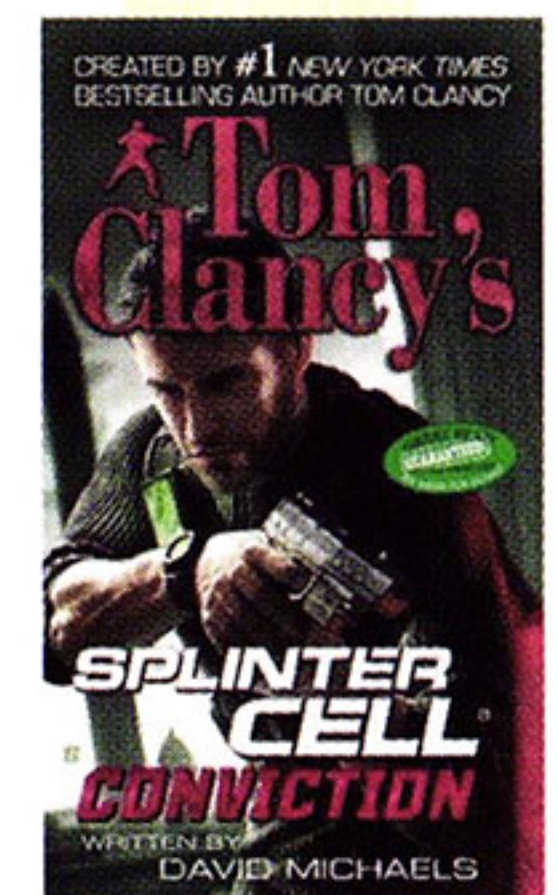


ART OF BRÜTAL LEGEND

Awesome games have awesome art and Brütal Legend is no exception. Check out the evolution of the game, including main character Eddie Riggs, a.k.a. the greatest roadie of all time.

\$50.00

www.insightedititions.com



SPLINTER CELL CONVICTION BY DAVID MICHAELS

What crazy trouble is Sam Fisher in this time? Find out in David Michael's novelization of Ubisoft's favorite rogue spy.

\$9.99

us.penguingroup.com

by Matt Bertz
Content Manager,
Game Informer

A MARKET OF BAD IDEAS

Why quality will always trump media blitzes

Speaking at the Montreal Games Summit this past November, EEDAR director of analytical services Jesse Divnich delivered a shocking message to the audience of game developers, proclaiming big-budget marketing increases gross revenue three times more than good reviews. "You can make the greatest game and it won't even matter," he said. "I know that's discouraging to developers at first, but it's very true."

Nobody's better at reading the tea leaves of the gaming industry than the statistical wunderkinds at EEDAR. The company's insightful number crunching provides invaluable data as it pertains to identifying emerging industry trends. Touting the marketing dollar over high review scores is hardly a new concept; it's no trade secret that critical acclaim doesn't necessarily translate into sales in any entertainment industry. Record store clerks and music critics may worship at the altar of experimental genre hoppers Animal Collective, but mention the band to the average American and they'll likely think it's a Nickelodeon show. Even if an A-list star is attached to your project, all the positive reviews in the world may not help you make money – as Warner Bros. found out earlier this year when Matt Damon vehicle *The Informant!* bombed at the box office. In video games, for every critical-darling-turned-blockbuster like *Borderlands*, there is a sea of underappreciated efforts like *Beyond Good & Evil* and *MadWorld* wallowing in the bargain bin.

The more chilling message EEDAR's study sends is that marketing is more important than quality. Marketing is undeniably integral to informing the target audience about the product; when executed correctly, a sound advertising plan can ignite excitement within the key demographic and drive word of mouth. Maybe throwing millions of dollars into ad campaigns for a half-baked game may see returns in the short run, but adopting this spend-heavy tactic won't necessarily overcome consumers' distrust of a company's products.

One glaring example of marketing losing to quality over the long run is EA's NBA Live series. Upon taking the reins of EA Sports, former Microsoft and Sega executive Peter Moore started a "Made Fresh Daily" media blitzkrieg

for the basketball title built around the new Dynamic DNA feature. EA pulled out all the stops, increasing the game's marketing budget and giving NBA Live a prominent spot during EA's 2008 E3 press conference highlighted by an appearance by NBA Hall of Famer Bill Walton. While Walton waxed philosophical about how EA updating the player tendencies and statistics throughout the season would accurately reflect the slumps and hot streaks of real-world competitions, gamers knew NBA 2K9 was more likely to be a superior game given the quality gap between the competitors over the previous few years. In the end, not even the increased marketing budget could overcome NBA Live's reputation as an inferior basketball sim.

In the face of a global recession and rising development costs, game publishers are already shifting focus away from risky creative endeavors in favor of a heavy reliance on proven commodities like the EA Sports lineup. The cost of restructuring has been bloody, with celebrated developers like Pandemic Studios and Ensemble biting the dust along with sweeping layoffs across the industry. Just a few years ago, Electronic Arts CEO John Riccitiello was touting the company's newfound dedication to growing its portfolio beyond a stable of oversaturated franchises, but a few rough launches of new IP later the company is retreating to the warm embrace of Madden football and Need for Speed. The shift in philosophy is disappointing considering that some of the fresh new franchises developed by EA's internal studios, like *Dead Space* and *Skate*, breathed new life into a company that desperately needed it.

You can't conquer the world (or stay on top) without taking calculated risks, and one company not playing it safe is Sony. While its

console market share plummeted drastically with the botched PlayStation 3 launch, the company deserves credit for cutting many of its internal studios loose on brand new projects. Rather than rehash next-gen versions of its biggest titles, Sony put *Gran Turismo*, *God of War*, and *SOCOM* on

the back burner in favor of a slate of new big budget games like *Resistance*, *Infamous*, and *Uncharted*. The sales of these games were stunted due to the console's slow adoption rate, but with the PS3 sales rebounding after a long overdue price cut (and consumers fed up with the 360's extraordinary failure rate), Sony may be in the best position moving forward. Even while the PlayStation division struggled to achieve profitability, Sony recognized the long-term benefits of a new portfolio of quality games. As pending releases *Heavy Rain* and *The Last Guardian* prove, the company hasn't wavered from its dedication to unique experiences, even in the face of growing deficits. While supporting games like *The Last Guardian* may not positively affect the bottom line, the brand loyalty cannot be measured by statistics. Time will tell, but as panicked publishers scale back development costs in favor of a stable revenue-generating business model, Sony's reputation as a company dedicated to delivering quality is growing and its long-term perspective is starting to look all the more savvy.

Marketing dollars may help you boost sales on the short end, but only quality fuels long burning success stories. *World of Warcraft* is atop or near the top of PC sales every month. Nintendo's venerable *Super Mario Bros.* and *Zelda* franchises dominate sales charts well after the games hit shelves and the marketing budgets dry up. Walk through any PC or electronics store today and you're likely to stumble across a *StarCraft Battle Chest*, a 10-year old game that sells so well the retailers still keep it in stock. It's this dedication to quality that separates the wheat from the chaff, not bloated marketing budgets.

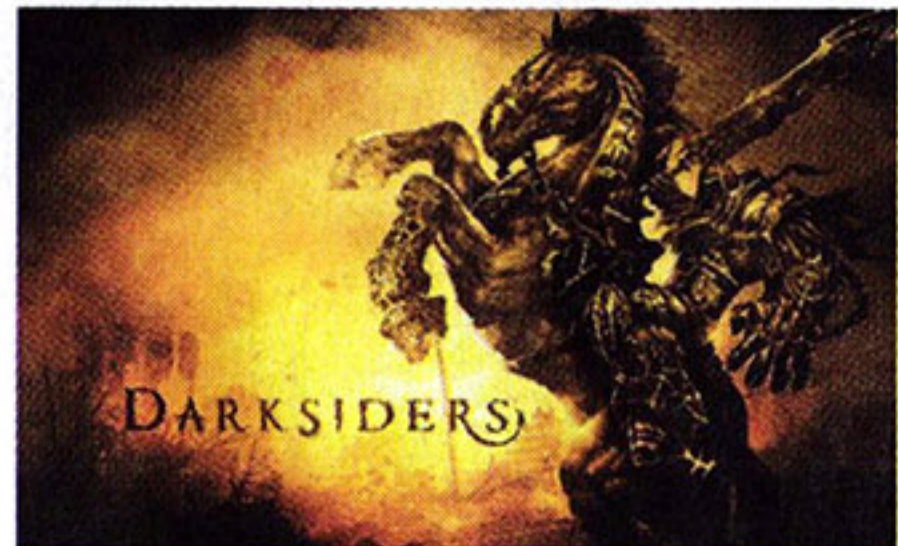
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■ ■ ■
If you work in the industry and would like to share your opinion, contact senior editor Matt Helgeson at matt@gameinformer.com

MAGFEST

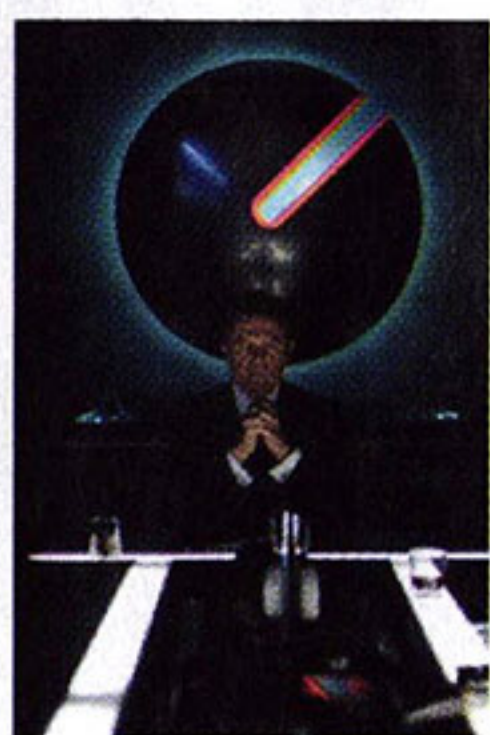
Marvel Comics Opens 2010 With Bloody Event

Norman Osborn is losing his mind. His bid for power has created a war in Asgard, pitting his forces against gods. This story, which will run throughout most of 2010, is said to affect every hero and team in the Marvel Universe. Our guess is that Norman and Spider-Man will hug it out in the end, and Doctor Doom will realize he's a beautiful butterfly that needs not hide underneath a mask.



New Releases

- › Bayonetta (PS3, 360)
- › Darksiders (PS3, 360)
- › Divinity II: Ego Draconis (360, PC)
- › Duke Nukem: Critical Mass (PSP, DS)
- › Jambol! Safari Animal Rescue (DS)
- › Sakura Wars: So Long, My Love (Wii, PS2)
- › Sky Crawlers: Innocent Aces (Wii)



Vampires Have Taken Over the World!

This is what happens when people foolishly bestow trust to someone named Sookie Stackhouse. That dog guy should have trusted his gut and buried that brat in the back of his bar early in season one. Now, in today's theatrical release, *Daybreakers*, vampires are the dominant species, and humanity's role is relegated to being milked like cows for food. This movie looks cool, as it throws an interesting twist on vampire lore, but Sam Neill ruling the world may be a bit of a stretch (like the biggest one ever).



Army of Two: The 40th Day



JAN
2010

01
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MAGfest Kicks Off the New Year

If you're looking to kick off the new year with non-stop gaming, venture to the Hilton Mark Center in Alexandria, VA for MAGfest, a four day video game celebration offering 24-hour game rooms and performances by over a dozen video game cover bands. Head to www.magfest.org for additional details.



05
tue

06
wed

08
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New Releases

- › Army of Two: The 40th Day (PS3, 360)
- › Dance Dance Revolution (PS3, 360)
- › Dark Void (PS3, 360, PC)
- › Lunar: Silver Star Harmony (PSP)
- › Playmobil Knights (DS)
- › Sands of Destruction (DS)
- › The Simpsons: Season 20 (Blu-ray, DVD)
- › Vancouver 2010 (PS3, 360)
- › Zooloretto (Wii)

12
tue

Every Collection Needs a Scourge

World of Warcraft's fifth series of action figures should be hitting store shelves as you read this. This is the smallest set offered, consisting of only three figures: A scourge ghoul, an Alliance hero, and a sexy night elf hunter.

16
sat

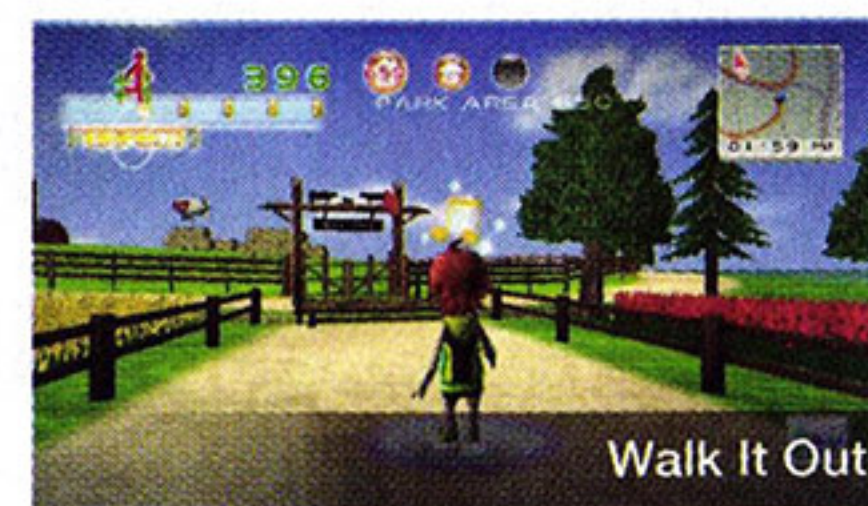


17
sun

Jack is Back

Jack Bauer and the rest of the CTU gang are back for 24's eighth season. Jack has a not-so-secret admirer in Cole Ortiz, director of field operations, played by the dreamy Freddie Prinze Jr. Let's all hope Kim's experimental treatment worked, so we don't ever have to see her again.

19
tue



Walk It Out

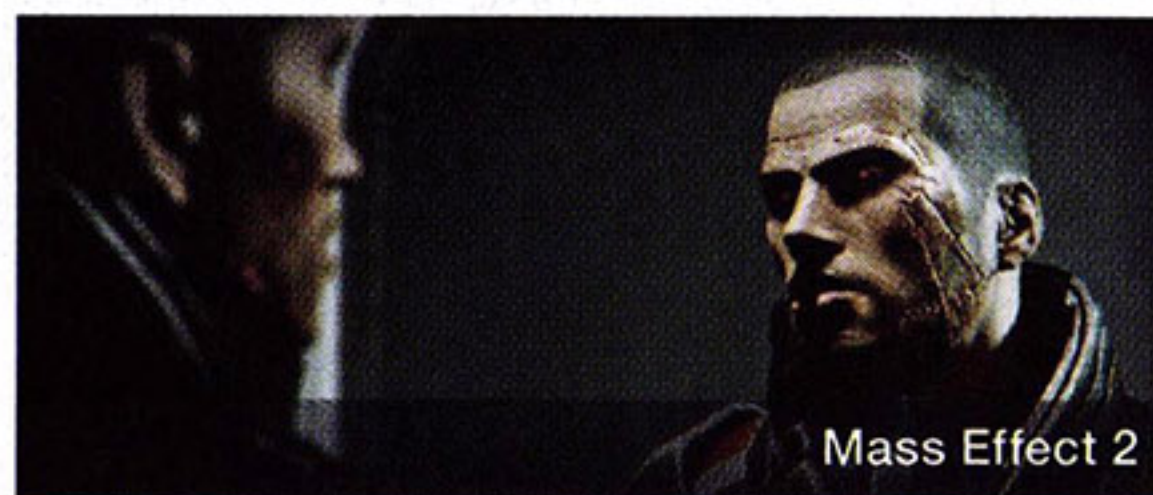
New Releases

Are you having problems getting your children off of the couch? Today's lone release, *Walk It Out*, pushes the player to walk to the beat of 120 music tracks (20 of which are licensed). Compatible with both Konami's Dance Dance Revolution mat, and the Wii Balance Board, this unique product longs to keep the tykes in your family in shape.

22
fri

Angels With Machine Guns

Need we say more? Okay, they also carry hunting knives just like Rambo, and can detach their jaws to make scary Steven Tyler-like faces. If any of this awesome stuff piques your interest, you can see it all on the big screen in today's hot theatrical release, *Legion*.



Mass Effect 2

26
tue

New Releases

- › Braid (PC)
- › Legend of Kay (DS)
- › MAG (PS3)
- › Mass Effect 2 (360, PC)
- › No More Heroes: Desperate Struggle (Wii)
- › Tatsunoko Vs. Capcom: Ultimate All-Stars (Wii)

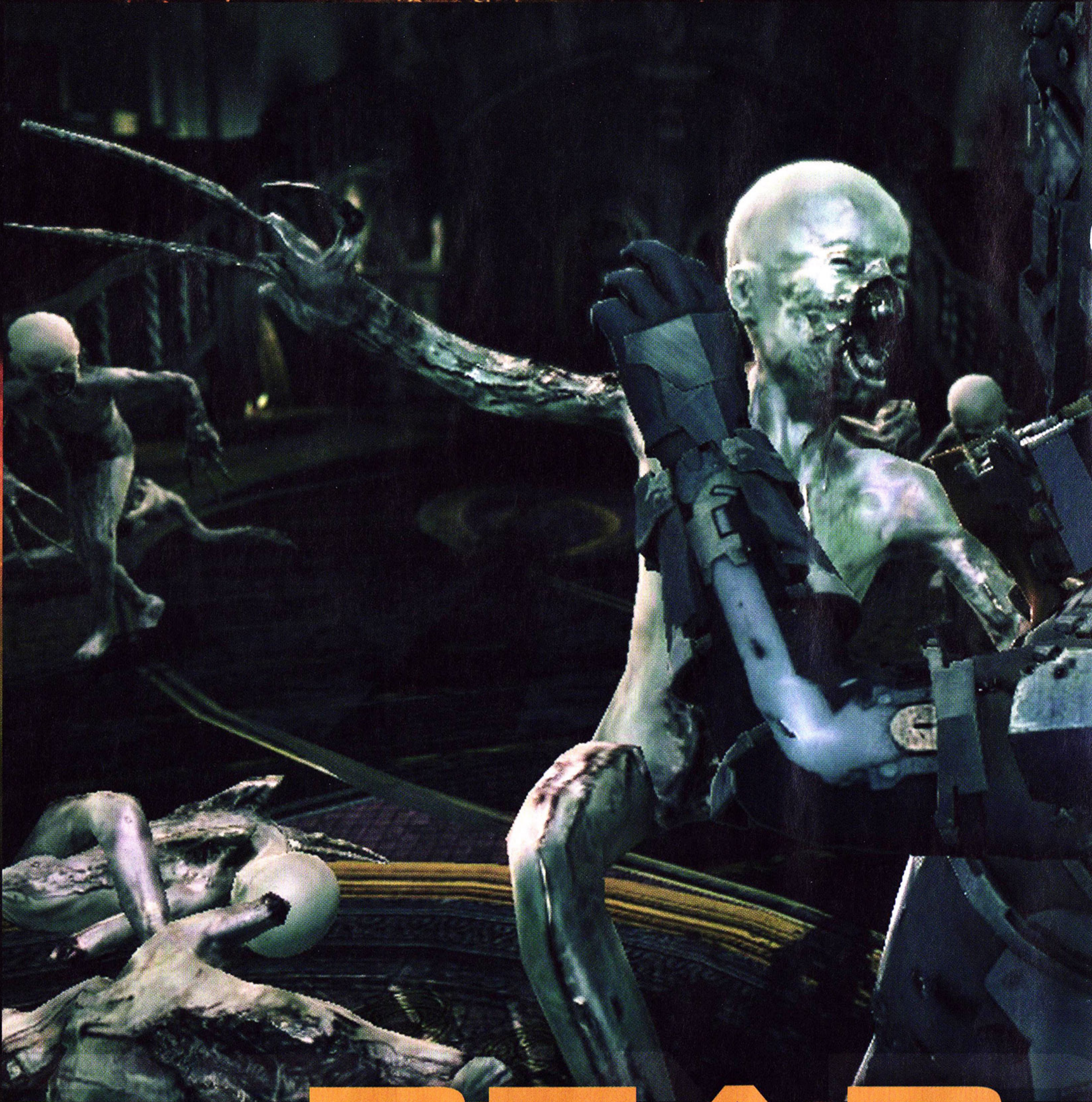


connect 31

Oh, Cammy Cammy!

Standing 10 inches in height, this statue offers not one, but two poses of Street Fighter's leg painter extraordinaire. Unfortunately, it doesn't seem there's much of a discount for two figures on one base, as manufacturer SOTA Toys sells it directly for \$179.98. Regardless, if you have holiday cash burning a hole in your pocket, this is a cool collectible.

Street
Fighter



DEAD



The first time Isaac Clarke encountered the necromorphs, he was in the wrong place at the wrong time. If his one-time girlfriend Nicole hadn't been aboard the unresponsive *USG Ishimura*, Isaac would have never volunteered for the repair mission. Another engineer would have been assigned the task, only to be killed by the evil festering aboard the derelict freighter. But that's not how it happened; Isaac fought through the dark corridors of the *Ishimura*, defeating an alien menace linked to a mysterious artifact called the Marker. He survived the ordeal, but Isaac didn't escape unscathed; his mind was twisted by the Marker, and the harrowing events detailed in the first *Dead Space* continue to haunt him. Even after enduring so much, Isaac's efforts to save humanity are not finished. The beasts he thought were eliminated have resurfaced – not aboard a lonely vessel, but on a highly populated space station – and he is the only person who knows what it takes to kill them. The second time Isaac Clarke encounters the necromorphs, he will be ready.

» **Platform**
PlayStation 3 • Xbox 360

» **Style**
1-Player Action
(Multiplayer TBA)

» **Publisher**
Electronic Arts

» **Developer**
Visceral Games

» **Release**
TBA

by Joe Juba

SPACE 2

FACING THE FRIGHT

Scaring gamers isn't easy. How do you frighten an audience that has triumphed against ravenous mutants and fire-breathing dragons? How can you give the chills to someone who has been staring at pixelated blood and gore since *Mortal Kombat*? How do you work dread under the gamer's skin so thoroughly that the mundane act of opening a door is transformed into a terrifying ordeal?

Dead Space found the answers to these questions. Coming out of Electronic Arts' Redwood Shores studio (now rebranded Visceral Games), the intense shooter set a new standard in survival horror by providing responsive controls, a haunting atmosphere, and strategic dismemberment against a science fiction backdrop. The game won awards, made the yearly best-of lists, and carved its own place in the survival horror genre – even being mentioned by some in the same breath as the venerable *Resident Evil* series. Those are all remarkable accomplishments, but they aren't excuses to stop innovating. The first time around, the team members at Visceral proved that they could bring gamers face-to-face with fear. With *Dead Space 2*, they are taking the concept of terror into uncharted territory.

In film, horror franchises like *Friday the 13th*, *Saw*, and *Nightmare on Elm Street* have found surprising longevity by repeating a simple formula: A murderous psychopath is constantly one step ahead of a series of incidental chumps,

Isaac will now be able to maneuver and fight in zero gravity. You won't just be jumping from point to point



“What we discovered is people were – believe it or not – too scared playing *Dead Space*” Steve Papoutsis – executive producer

most of whom die under grim circumstances. While following a pattern may work for movies, it doesn't work as well for survival horror games. To keep players engaged and afraid from one iteration to the next, developers can't rely on the same tricks that worked the first time around. With that in mind, Visceral is assembling a combination of new mechanics, enemies, weapons, and scare tactics to catch players off-guard. *Dead Space 2* can't just be scary; it needs to be a new breed of scary.

SCARE TACTICS

“What we discovered is people were – believe it or not – too scared playing *Dead Space*,” says executive producer Steve Papoutsis. Leveling such a complaint against a game intended to freak out players may seem silly, but it does raise the question of appropriate pacing. In *Dead Space*, a few things were constant: resources were scarce, enemies were plentiful, and potential danger lurked behind every door. Enduring that unwavering level of intensity can take a toll on the player. “I've had numerous people mention to me that they could only play it for 30 minutes or an hour at a time...they were always on

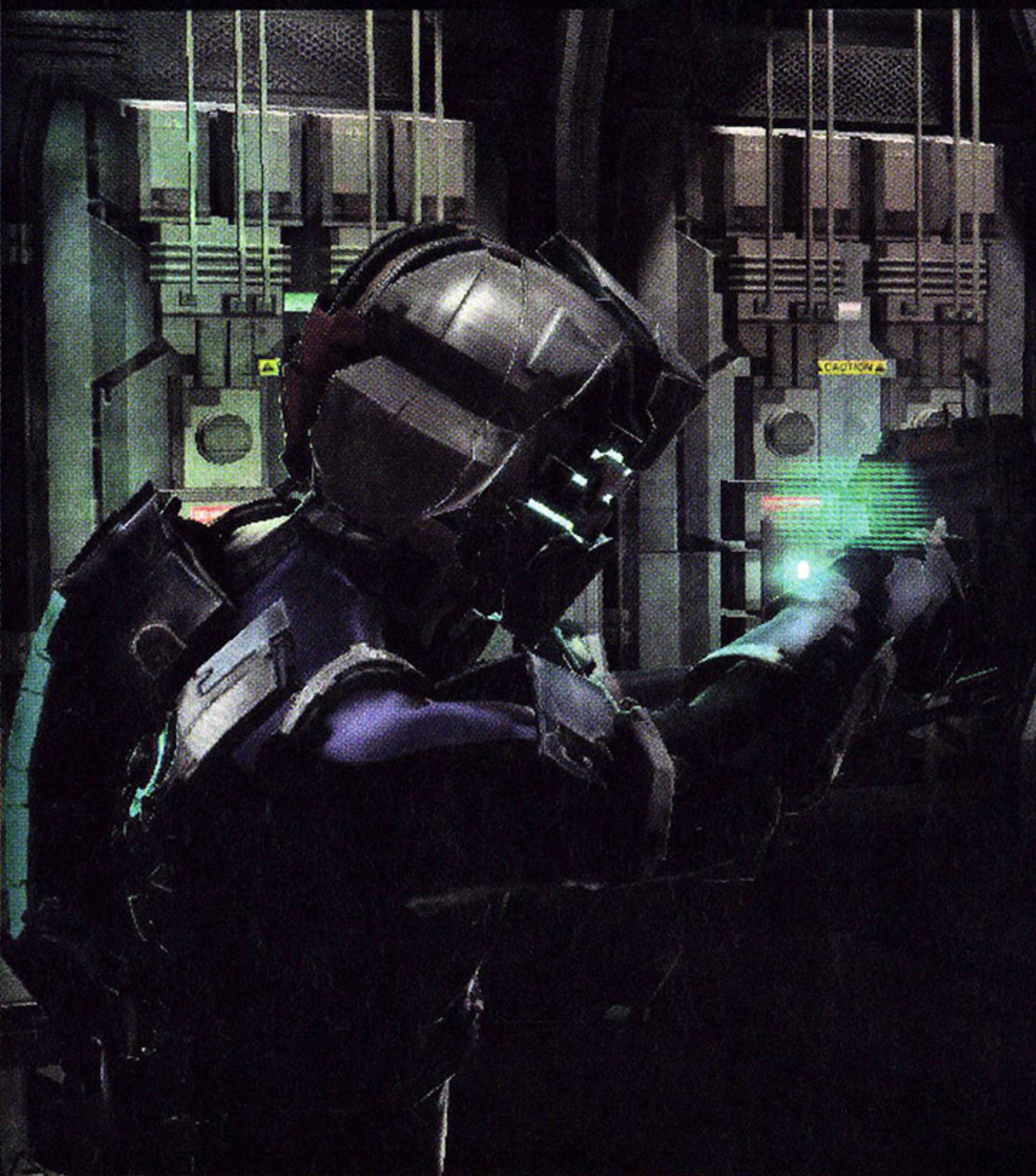
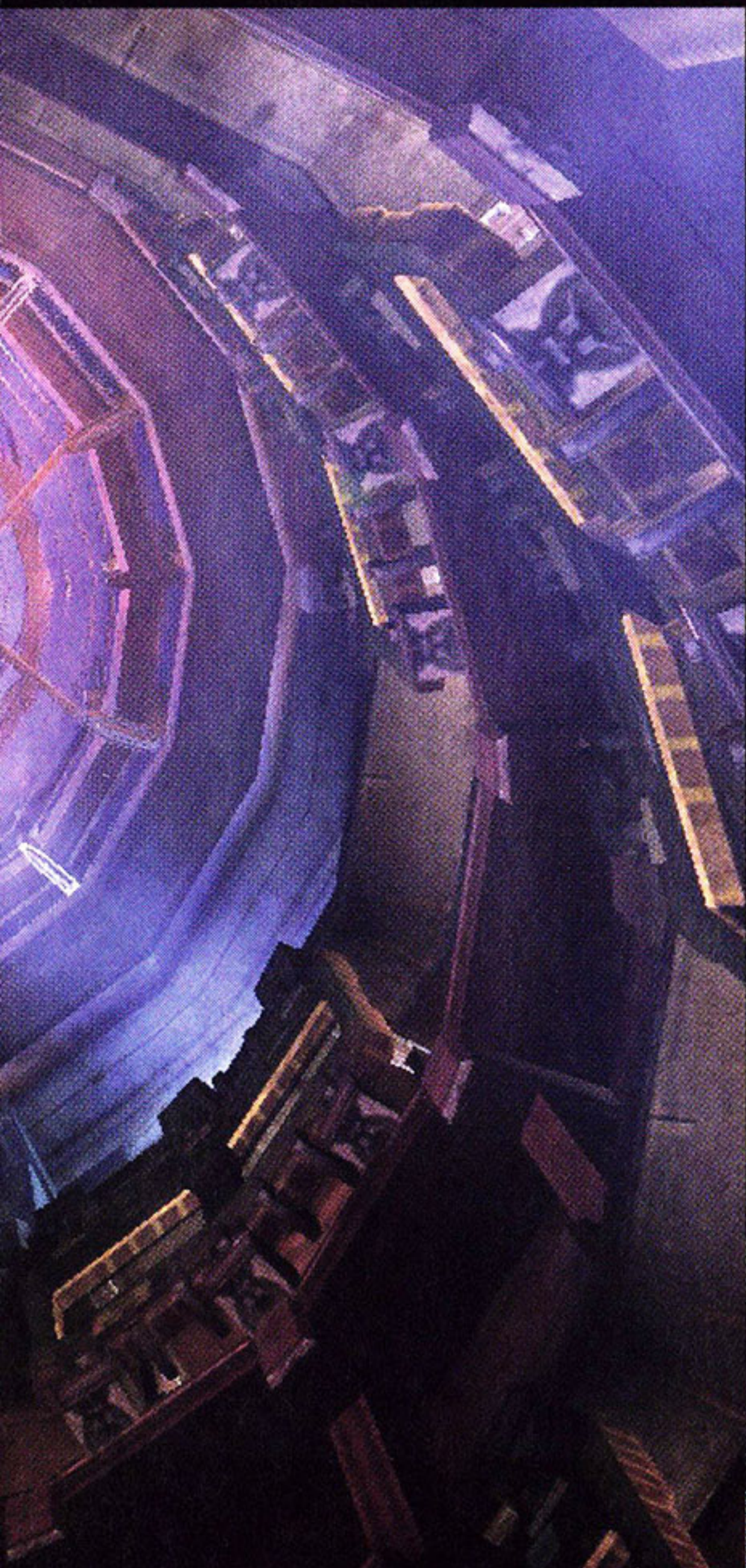
the edge of their seat 100 percent of the time,” continues Papoutsis. “They never felt badass; they never felt like they could just walk into a room and waste guys.”

To address this issue, *Dead Space 2* features deliberate pacing designed to deliver both the high of combat and the relief of breathing room – sometimes within minutes of each other. The team's goal is to vary the intensity by making the action ebb and flow; instead of always feeling like you are barely able to handle an encounter, you will have moments of superiority. Maybe you just stocked up on ammo or found a new gun that decimates a particular type of enemy – during these sequences, Isaac will pose a greater threat to his foes than they do to him, blasting freely and exerting greater control over the battle.

As they venture further from safety, players will find themselves with scarce resources, low health, and unfamiliar surroundings – the style of play that dominated the original *Dead Space*. Instead of extending these sections over most of the game, however, the team wants to punctuate them with epic and memorable moments that act as a kind of tension release. Papoutsis explains: “Every time a player starts a chapter,



continued on page 37



The plasma cutter is still a great option for dismembering foes, though other weapons will be uniquely suited to handle particular enemies and situations



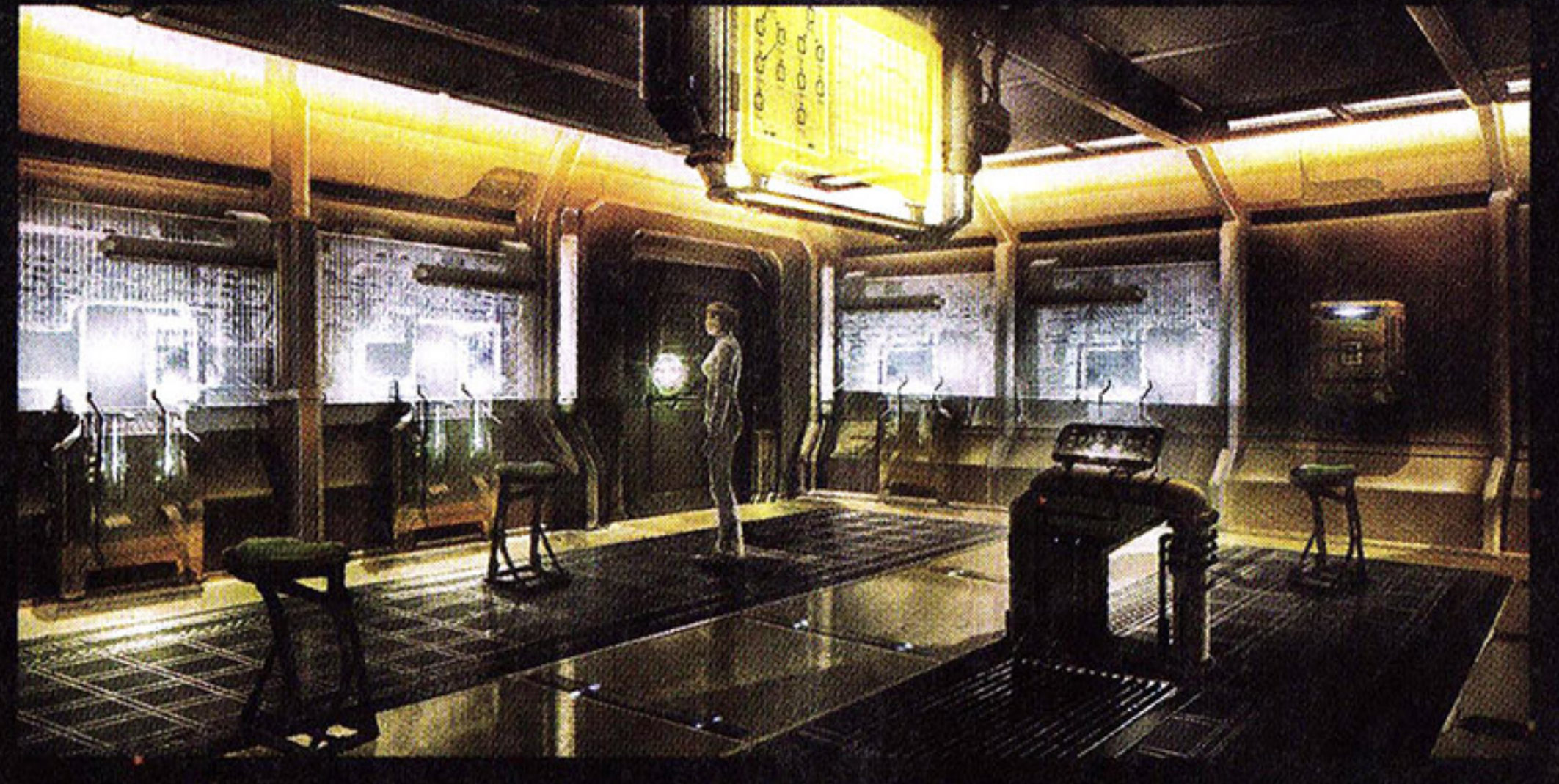
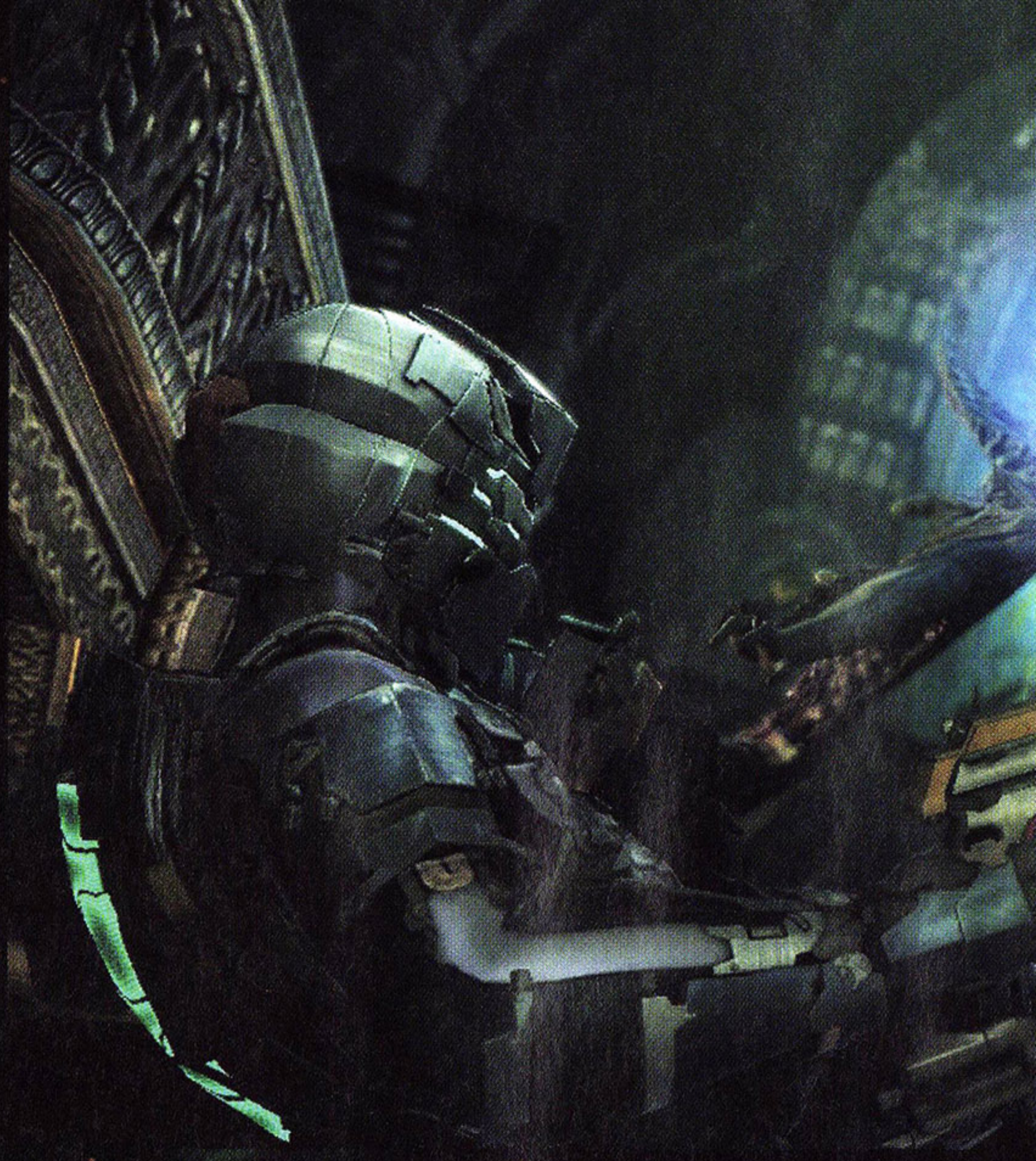
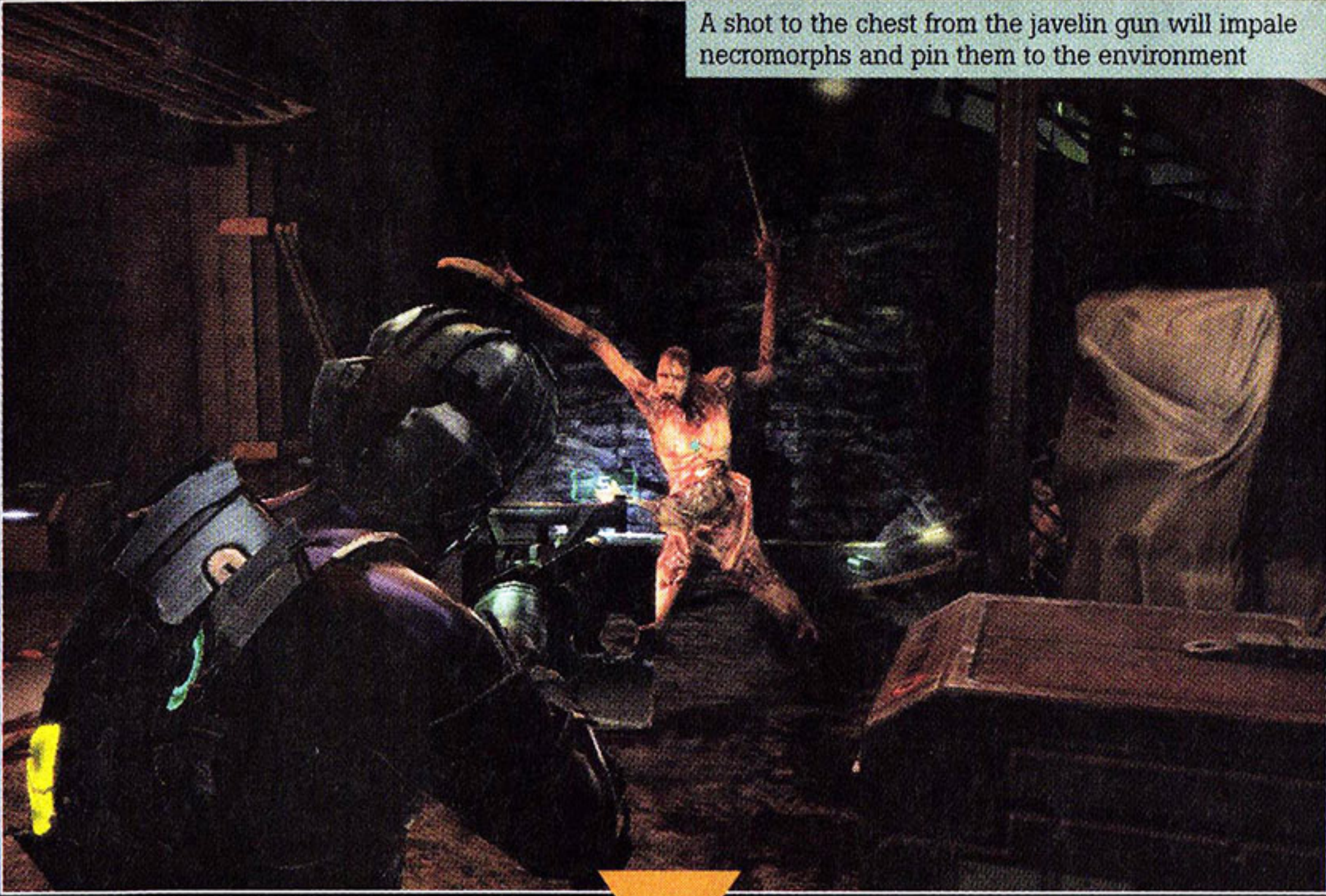
Out of the Dark

The original *Dead Space* wasn't just an exceptional game — it was a signal of shifting philosophies within the structure of Electronic Arts. When *Dead Space* appeared on *Game Informer's* cover in October 2007, EA was notorious for mediocre and iterative titles propped up by licensed properties. At the time, that fact was part of *Dead Space's* mystique; how could a viable survival horror game be in development at a company that had consciously steered clear of M-rated titles?

Electronic Arts, once perceived as an innovation-stifling imperial monolith, has made an effort to reform its image. In the years since *Dead Space's* initial reveal, EA has worked together with some of the industry's most revered developers like Valve and BioWare. The publisher has released risky and creative titles like *Rock Band*, *Mirror's Edge*, and *Brütal Legend*. Amid these valuable additions to EA's portfolio, *Dead Space* stands apart from the crowd; not only was the game an early indicator of things to come, but it came out of an internal EA studio. With over two million units sold worldwide, it is the best-selling wholly owned IP in Electronic Arts' entire catalog.

"It's nice that people have confidence that original ideas can sell," says creative director Wright Bagwell. "To not do what EA did in the past — which was 'The success of this game will be based on the franchise we've licensed' — it's really rallied people throughout the whole company to take more risks."

A shot to the chest from the javelin gun will impale necromorphs and pin them to the environment





This monster can grab and drag Isaac like the last game. However, the team is experimenting with center-screen aiming, which would mean less wrestling with the controls to get the weak spot in your sights

continued from page 34

we want them to feel like 'What are these guys going to do next? What's going to be the big, twisted thing the team throws at me now? Is it going to be a giant sphincter?' Who knows? Maybe it could be. Maybe it's defeating a giant boss from the inside, or surfing a runaway transport tram."

Hardcore survival horror fans needn't worry that these over-the-top sequences will transform the franchise's looming, intense atmosphere into a breezy blockbuster power fantasy. "We're not going away from our horror roots," Papoutsis assures us. "It's about having those peaks and valleys, where a person can come up for air more often. We're just trying to infuse more action on top of what we already had."

SPRAWLING THE NARRATIVE

New and diverse environments are part of the rollercoaster approach to pacing, which places even greater emphasis on the setting for *Dead Space 2* – a densely populated space station called the Sprawl. From a story perspective, the change of venue has a lot to do with Isaac. Three years have passed since the events of the first game, and players join Isaac on the Sprawl as he fights the necromorphs and works to stop a government plot involving the Marker.

A central component of the original *Dead Space*, the Marker is a massive obelisk somehow connected to the necromorph scourge. It permanently twists and contorts the minds of anyone near it, warping their perception of reality into a Lovecraftian nightmare and manipulating them through strange visions. Power groups in the *Dead Space* universe – like the government and the Church of Unitology – see the Marker as a means to help them achieve their goals, with little regard for the consequences. Bringing the Marker onto the *Ishimura* unleashed the necro-

morphs and caused the death of the entire crew. That ship looks tiny compared to the Sprawl.

In contrast to the tight, industrial corridors of the *Ishimura*, the Sprawl is a drastic change of scenery. "This is an organic, haphazardly constructed, long-term place that's built around the remaining shards of one of Saturn's moons – the first planet-crack ever," explains art director Ian Milham. "Like any real city, it's not all built by one person. Some stuff was built up, and some stuff was torn down. There are rich areas, poor areas, corporate areas, government areas, and public areas."

Unlike the mining vessel, the Sprawl was built as a place where people could live their everyday lives. As such, players move through areas that are (or were) a part of those lives – shopping malls, schools, and churches are just some of the facilities you will encounter. "We're trying to make sure that we're building a world where people are, and were, and have been for a long time," says creative director Wright Bagwell. More importantly, they won't all be a series of locked doors and hallways, which presents more possibilities for Isaac's inevitable encounters with the necromorphs. However, this time Isaac won't just be mopping up the mess after everything has gone wrong; he will see the infection spread from the beginning.

"I really want it to be raw and fresh, as opposed to the *Ishimura*, which was kind of festering and old," senior production designer Ben Wanat tells us. Instead of wading through the aftermath of the attack, Isaac is on the Sprawl when the outbreak begins, witnessing the panic and fear while trying to stem the tide. After all, he's handled the necromorphs before. But that raises an important question: What has Isaac been doing for the last three years, and why is he on the Sprawl in the first place?

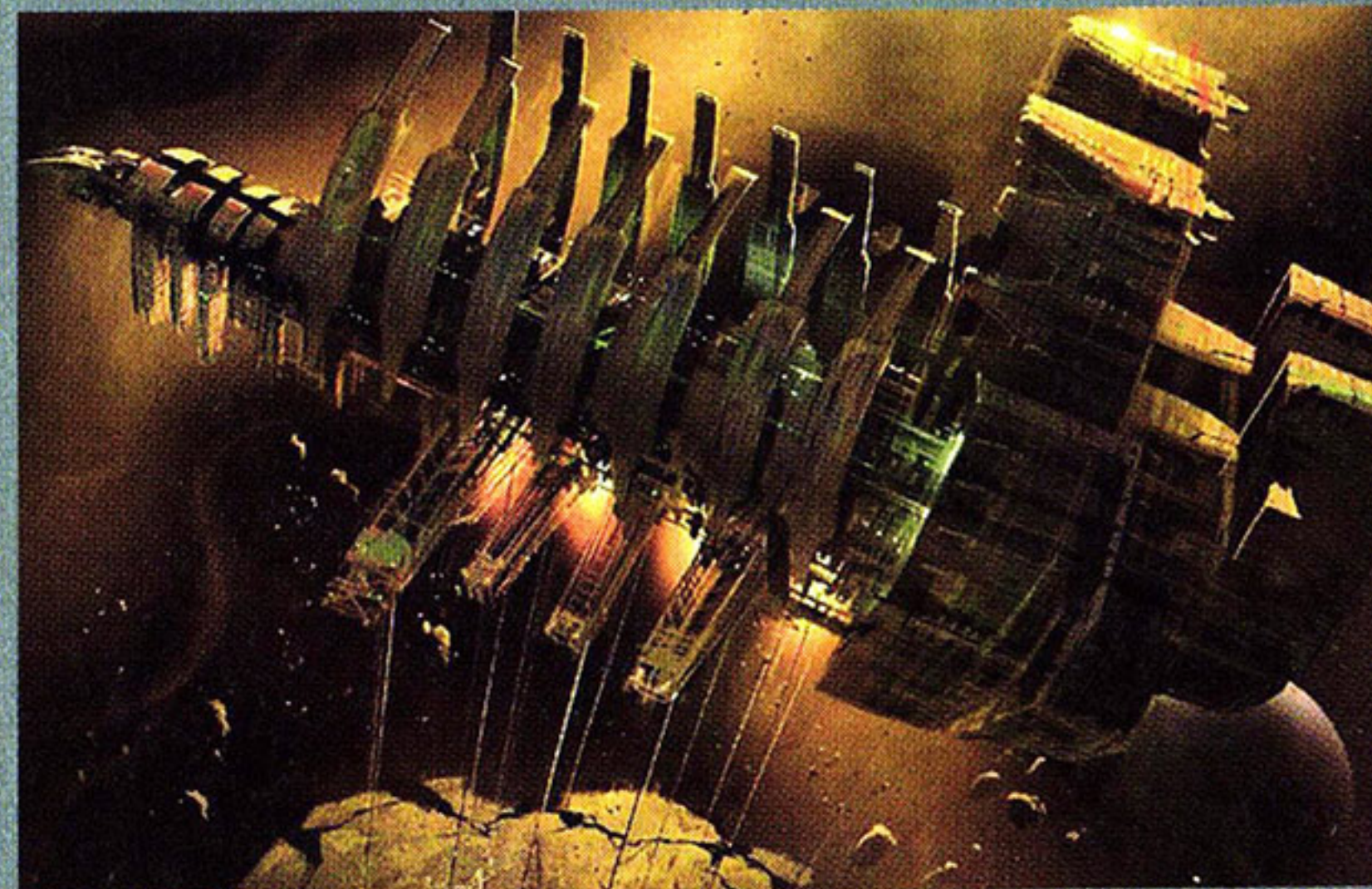
A HERO REIMAGINED

In a sense, *Dead Space 2* introduces Isaac for the first time. Though he was the protagonist of the original *Dead Space*, he never grew into a discernible character; he was shown only briefly without his helmet, and he had no voice apart from grunts and heavy breathing in combat. Isaac was defined by what the people around him said and commanded him to do, exhibiting no opinion or will of his own. Even when he discovered that the love of his life – who he thought was helping him aboard the *Ishimura* – died before he arrived, the most emotion he could muster is putting his face in his palm. Now, Isaac is truly stepping into the spotlight.

"Isaac is going to be more in command," Papoutsis tells us. "He's a little bit more of a veteran, and he's going to have a voice. He's going to relate through dialogue and story, and have more of a take-charge attitude this time around."

Like the character Ripley from *Aliens*, Isaac is an authority on the necromorphs simply by merit of surviving the attack on the *Ishimura*. As the Sprawl is overrun with the creatures, other characters will turn to Isaac for help and advice, elevating him to the role of hero. He will use his expertise to do more than survive this time; Isaac will bring the fight to the necromorphs to save what's left of the Sprawl and put an end to the Marker's threat. "Last time, things were out of his hands," says Papoutsis. "This time, he's going to make a difference."

One problem arises with Isaac being in charge of the resistance efforts: He isn't in his right mind. After spending so much time near the Marker in the original *Dead Space*, Isaac's perception and judgment aren't reliable. Those



Ishimura, Do You Copy?

With *Dead Space 2* set on the Sprawl, fans of the first game are likely wondering what happened to the *Ishimura*, which was left to an uncertain fate. "I can tell you that there is a little model of the *Ishimura* that some people in the Sprawl have on their desks," quips creative director Wright Bagwell. "That's probably all I can say." The team may not be giving out any official confirmation, but we noticed a piece of concept art for a docking area on the Sprawl featuring a ship that looked exactly like the *Ishimura*. Given the team's evasive responses when we asked about the ship's identity, you can safely assume that the *Ishimura* returns in *Dead Space 2* – though what condition the freighter will be in remains a mystery.

afflicted by the Marker's malady don't just get better – their perception remains affected, which means Isaac (and the player) might have difficulty separating reality from hallucination. "We're going to play a lot more with the idea of dementia," says Paul Mathus, the senior development director. "It plays an even bigger role in the story." This could open fascinating new doors when it comes to instilling a sense of terror in players.

Isaac's state of mind could even tie into why he is on the Sprawl in the first place. Exactly what happened in the years between the two games will be revealed in the story, so the team is careful not to spoil anything for fans who enjoy speculation. "There's a lot to tell there. A lot has changed, and there's a lot going on," says Milham. However, Milham did reveal one important fact: The first chapter of *Dead Space 2* takes place in a hospital. It might not mean anything, but it would explain a lot if Isaac is receiving psychiatric treatment at a medical facility for his Marker-induced madness.

UNIFYING COMBAT

Armed with a new attitude and faced with a horde of horribly mutated monsters, Isaac is going to need better gear to get his job done. Strategically dismembering the necromorphs still serves as your basis for approaching combat, but the team is working on an array of

ments of *Dead Space 2* are more interactive, so players can use their telekinesis module to pick up debris and severed limbs to blast toward necromorphs. Thankfully, the telekinesis mechanic is being tuned for smoother integration into combat; instead of slowly snaring and pulling objects, the process is quicker, more precise, and more fluid. In the version we saw, we were reminded of the TK plasmid from *BioShock* as Isaac grabbed a severed blade from the ground and sent it flying toward an oncoming slasher.

MORPHING YOUR ENEMY

"In the first *Dead Space*, it felt like a haunted house, where enemies were waiting in their closets and vents to jump out at you," admits Bagwell. "You always had to be very reactive. So we wanted to create some combat scenarios that allow you to be more proactive and let you strategize a little bit more. We also wanted to make sure the enemies feel really smart and give you a feeling that you're playing a cat-and-mouse game – like you're trying to hunt each other."

One example of this approach is a necromorph the team currently calls the Stalker. We saw Isaac enter a warehouse full of stacked crates, with shadows darting between the rows and odd intermittent chirping sounds in all directions. Around one corner peeked a monster



"Isaac is going to be more in command... He's a little bit more of a veteran, and he's going to have a voice. He's going to relate through dialogue and story, and have more of a take-charge attitude this time around" Steve Papoutsis

new weapons and enemies to put your skills to the test.

In the original *Dead Space*, the plasma cutter was an all-purpose instrument of destruction. It was a great weapon to keep on-hand at all times, even to the point that it discouraged some players from trying out the full arsenal. "Our choice to address that is not to nerf the plasma cutter," Milham emphasizes. "It's to make the other weapons awesome and more specialized. To solve problems in their own ways. We'll never make the plasma cutter worse!"

One of the more specialized weapons Isaac receives is a javelin gun, which adds a new dimension to dismemberment. If you hit a limb with a javelin, it severs just as if you had used the plasma cutter. However, if you land a direct shot in the chest, the javelin sends the necromorph flying backward, pinning it to the wall. This may be enough to kill some of your weaker foes, but you can use this tactic in conjunction with other abilities to take down more powerful creatures as well. While a necromorph is pinned, you may be able to exploit a clear line of sight to its weak point, or you can use the javelin gun's alt-fire mode to torture the monster, electrifying or detonating the embedded javelin and damaging other nearby enemies.

Javelins aren't the only weapons that can impale the beasts of the Sprawl. The environ-

ment that looked like a toothy maw on legs, making noise and looking at Isaac quizzically. Suddenly, another Stalker sneaks up from behind and tears into Isaac while his attention is diverted. It was all a coordinated ruse; the stalkers attack in groups and use their chirping noises to coordinate assaults that rely on deception and misdirection, making them difficult to kill. They move too quickly to shoot normally, and chasing them down is a bad idea (they will just lead you into a group of their cohorts). To counter these new foes, one of Isaac's new weapons can fire proximity mines. It will be up to players to figure out how to lure the intelligent Stalkers into stepping on them.

Outwitting your foes won't always be an option. Maintaining the goal of varied pacing, enemies occasionally swarm you from all angles in massive numbers, forcing you to move and fire furiously just to stay alive. We saw Isaac surrounded by a new enemy type – waist-high necromorphs that were once children – as he explored the Church of Unitology. These creatures, while weak individually, attack in packs that can become a big problem when they are coming from all sides, causing the battle to become a fast-paced fight for position. When the enemies were all defeated, we saw several of them skewered by javelins and dangling from walls and pillars – something that wouldn't

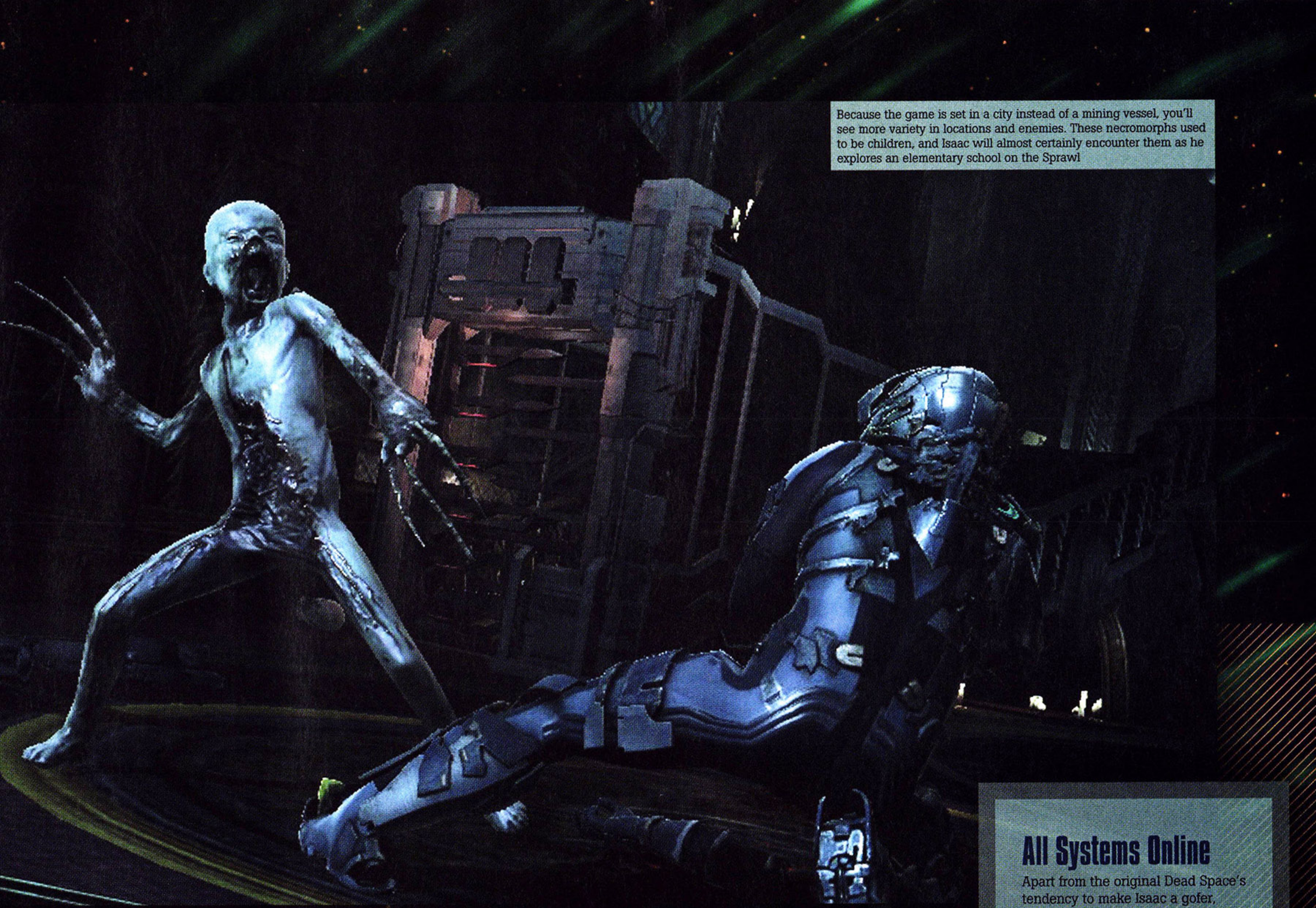
have been possible in the confined corridors of the *Ishimura*.

"The new areas give you more opportunity to run around and be more in charge of the combat and feel like you can strategize instead of just being stuck in a claustrophobic space and having to react," says Bagwell. "We want to offer you spaces where you feel like you can be a little more proactive in combat."

This philosophy has led to refinements in the general control scheme, with which survival horror games have traditionally struggled. The original *Dead Space* proved that it was possible to make a game in the genre where the controls themselves didn't serve as a vehicle to convey helplessness. "Some previous games had this philosophy of 'Hey, these controls will be tension-inducing, because they're crap!'" laughs Papoutsis. "We don't believe in that. We want the player to feel empowered." To that end, Isaac can maneuver, bring up his gun, and aim a little faster than before. That said, he still moves in a manner appropriate to a survival horror game; the *Dead Space* franchise and *Halo* are still worlds apart.

"We're not trying to make you feel like a superhero," explains Bagwell. "We're not going to turn Isaac into a guy who leaps and flies around like

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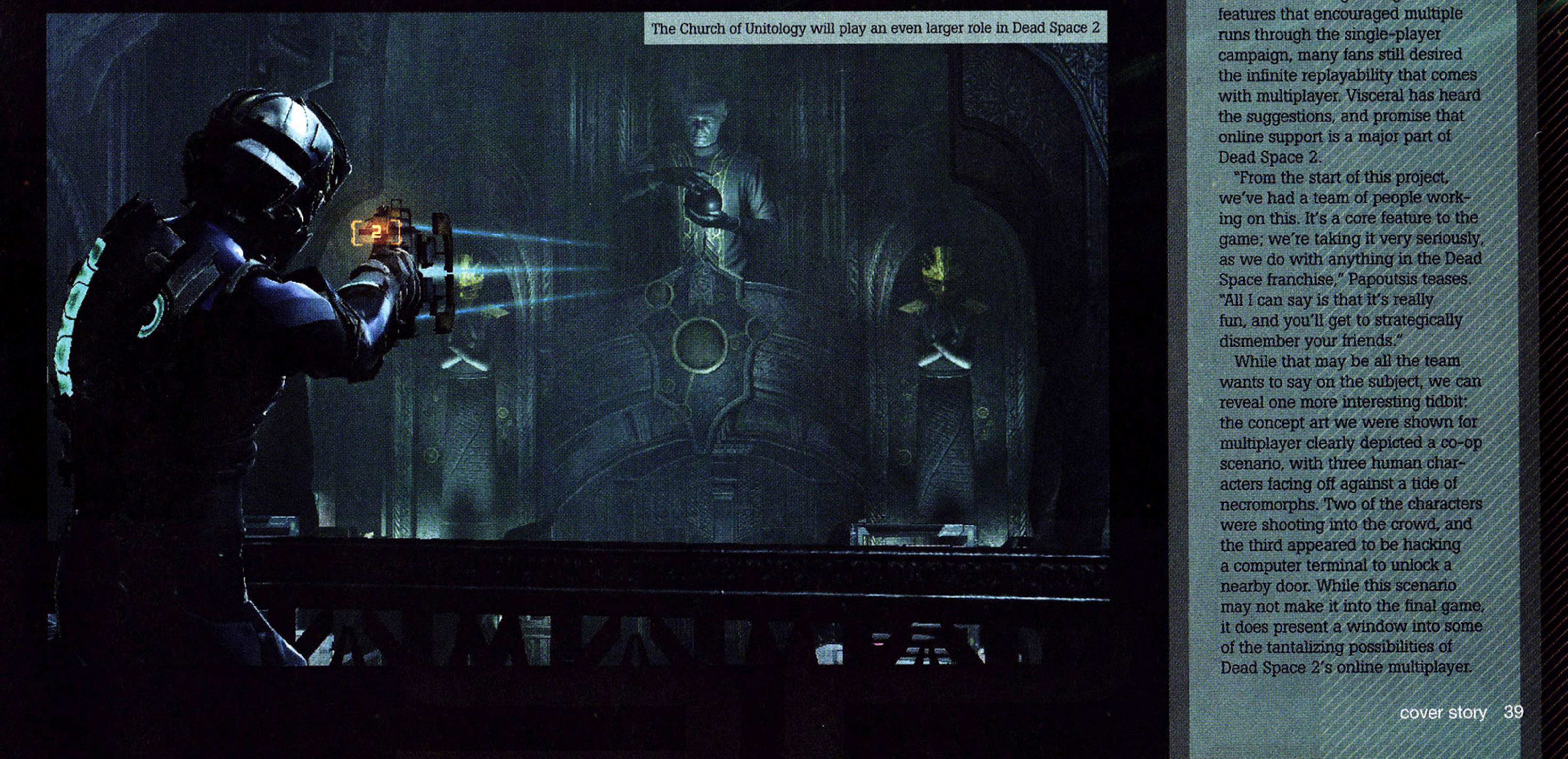
Because the game is set in a city instead of a mining vessel, you'll see more variety in locations and enemies. These necromorphs used to be children, and Isaac will almost certainly encounter them as he explores an elementary school on the Sprawl

All Systems Online

Apart from the original *Dead Space*'s tendency to make Isaac a gofer, the most common complaint from gamers was the lack of an online mode. Even though the game had features that encouraged multiple runs through the single-player campaign, many fans still desired the infinite replayability that comes with multiplayer. Visceral has heard the suggestions, and promise that online support is a major part of *Dead Space 2*.

"From the start of this project, we've had a team of people working on this. It's a core feature to the game; we're taking it very seriously, as we do with anything in the *Dead Space* franchise," Papoutsis teases. "All I can say is that it's really fun, and you'll get to strategically dismember your friends."

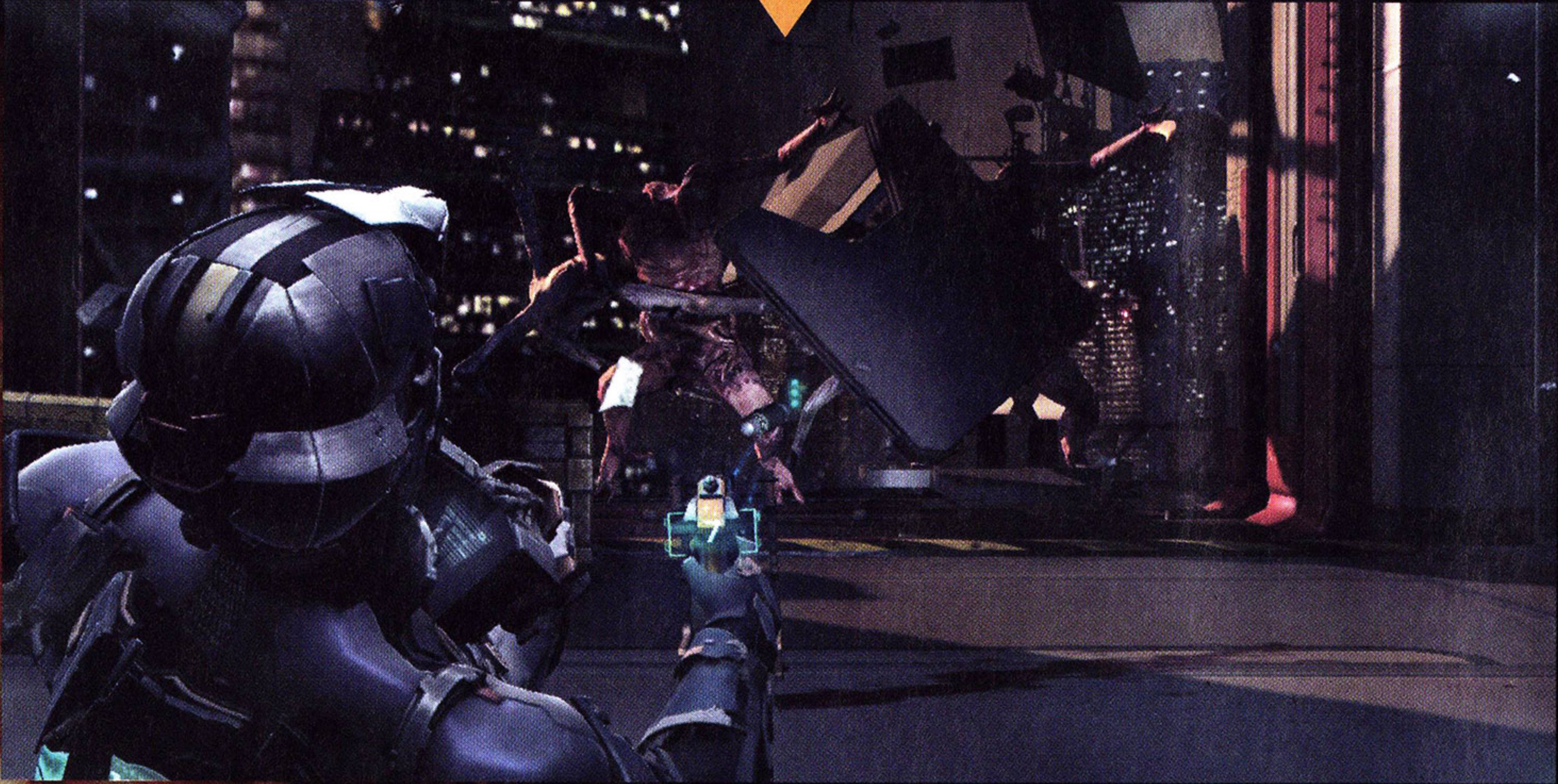
While that may be all the team wants to say on the subject, we can reveal one more interesting tidbit: the concept art we were shown for multiplayer clearly depicted a co-op scenario, with three human characters facing off against a tide of necromorphs. Two of the characters were shooting into the crowd, and the third appeared to be hacking a computer terminal to unlock a nearby door. While this scenario may not make it into the final game, it does present a window into some of the tantalizing possibilities of *Dead Space 2*'s online multiplayer.



The Church of Unitology will play an even larger role in *Dead Space 2*



Using the environment to your advantage will be important. Shooting out this window decompresses the entire area and takes care of the advancing horde. The only drawback is that you will need careful aim to engage the safety mechanism before Isaac gets sucked out himself





Upgrades to Isaac's suit will be more distinct than last time, ranging from a standard engineering rig to this futuristic combat suit

Connective Tissue

The original *Dead Space* was an excellent standalone experience, but dedicated fans had the option to expand their understanding of the events through other media. A six-issue comic series and a full-length animated feature detailed the discovery of the Marker on the colony, as well as what happened when it was brought aboard the *Ishimura*. *Dead Space: Extraction* (the prequel rail-shooter released for Wii) went even further by exploring the plight of a small band of survivors on the ship just prior to Isaac's arrival. Will *Dead Space 2* feature a similar cross media approach to fleshing out the story for those who are interested in the lore? "I think we really are motivated to continue in that tradition," replies executive producer Steve Papoutsis. "There's nothing concrete to announce, but we definitely enjoyed it as a development team, and it's a great way to connect with people."

"We're trying to build a game where people need to feel scared, so they need to feel that really horrible things can happen"

Wright Bagwell – creative director

continued from page 38

Superman. What we do want to do is try to do everything we can to make the controls not get in your way. In this game, we want you to feel like you're much more limited by your own skill than by the design and tuning of the controls."

THE TASK AT HAND

Empowering the player is difficult if they don't have objectives that showcase their abilities. For all of its cool combat and creepy atmosphere, the structure of the original *Dead Space* consisted of Isaac taking orders from other characters and going to all corners of the ship to press a wide variety of buttons. As soon as one task was finished, someone came up on your communicator to tell you that something broke someplace else. "You get the sense that everyone else in the world is sitting on a chair drinking coffee and watching you on a security camera," laughs Bagwell. "You get the sense that you're the only one who is doing any work."

With his newfound personality, you'll learn that Isaac dislikes menial tasks as much as you do, and won't put up for being an errand boy this time around. "I'd love to do this gag in the game," says Bagwell. "Somebody says: 'Hey, Isaac! To get this machine running, we're going to need a gas can. I'll stay here why you go get the gas can.' I'd love to have Isaac say: 'F--- you! You go get the gas can!'"

As the *Sprawl*'s only expert on necromorph

mutilation, it's more likely that Isaac will be the one sending other survivors on the fetch missions, reserving himself for the tasks that require a specialist's touch. The team is hesitant to reveal too much about specific objectives since so many are tied into the story, but we know that they will require more than just finding a keycard to unlock a door.

"We're trying to make the objectives a lot more intuitive," says Bagwell. "It will be more like Isaac will figure out what he needs to do to solve a problem, and it will have a more intuitive solution." For instance, if a machine isn't functioning, Isaac will need to figure out why, how to get it running again, and then find (or improvise) the necessary components. He won't just be flipping whatever switch someone tells him to anymore.

BUILDING SUSPENSE

Rumors point to a 2010 release date for *Dead Space 2*, but EA and Visceral aren't ready to confirm a solid timeframe. "We're committed to delivering this game at the highest quality level possible," Papoutsis declares. "It's going to ship when it's ready." While we'd certainly prefer to play the game as soon as possible, rushing a horror experience is never a good idea. Few things are as lame as a movie that tries to be scary while failing in execution. Tense moments, sudden thrills, and creeping terror all take time

to balance in order to give gamers the scariest experience possible, and that's what *Dead Space 2* is all about.

"We're trying to build a game where people need to feel scared, so they need to feel that really horrible things can happen," says Bagwell.

"When you break it down, the horror coordinates every discipline," Papoutsis elaborates. "You have to work with the lighters, the effects guys, the audio guys, the designer who's scripting it, and even the engineers to make sure that the scares happen. It's easy to fall back on 'push a button, something happens, and we'll just put some creepy sound effects over it.' It was a goal from the get-go to push it as hard as we could to make a scary game. The team is built around that."

Horror aficionados know that sequels are inevitable. However, unlike the same slasher movie being recast in different molds time and time again, video games have an advantage: They make players participants, not just observers. The team at Visceral Games is capitalizing on that distinction, evolving terror alongside gameplay to produce the new ideal in survival horror. After *Dead Space 2*, there may be no going back. ♦

Go to gameinformer.com/mag throughout the month for deeper insight into the world of *Dead Space 2*, including video interviews with the team and a detailed look at Isaac's new suit.



MASS EFFECT 2

Mordin spends most of his time aboard the Normandy SR2 in the tech lab. He's arguably the most intelligent crewmember – something he isn't afraid to flaunt



The date is set. On January 26, Commander Shepard returns. Two years have passed since he averted the Reaper invasion, an act that protected all organic life and catapulted humanity's standing in the universe. But now on the outer edges of occupied space, a new threat is abducting human colonies. The assailant and its motivation are blanketed in mystery. Humanity is calling upon Shepard to save the day once again. Only this time, the universe is not responding to his cries for help. With other conflicts tearing the cosmos apart, Shepard's only hope rests with Cerberus, a rogue black ops organization linked to ghastly genetic experiments and the massacre on Akuze.

In a surprising twist, Shepard can't count on his loyal crew or his trusted starship from the first game. Rather, he must travel the

cosmos to recruit a crew for his new ship, the Normandy SR2. Shepard boards this vessel after the introductory events in Mass Effect 2, leading us to believe the game begins with the destruction, desertion, or theft of the original Normandy. As of the time of this writing, the whereabouts of Shepard's crew are unknown. Did they go down with the Normandy? Were they abducted by the mysterious threat? Did they turn their backs on Shepard after he sided with Cerberus? This is a twist we didn't see coming, especially since a tight bond was formed between most of the crew.

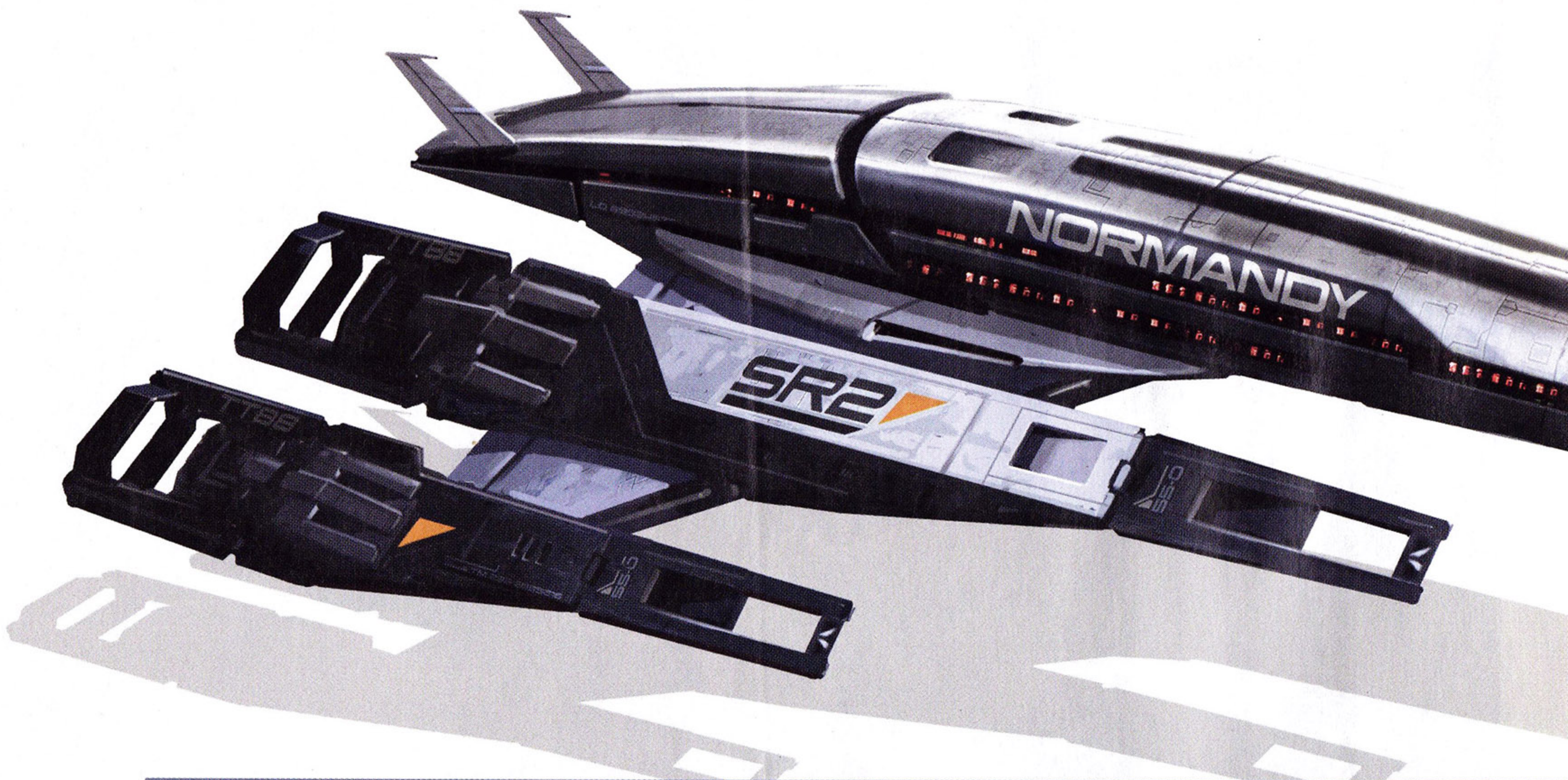
During our demo, only Jeff "Joker" Moreau and Doctor Chakwas still remain a part of Shepard's crew. Joker (voiced again by Seth Green) reprises his role as pilot, but this time he isn't the voice you'll be hearing the most

throughout the ship. The Normandy SR2 is a much larger vessel and sports the latest in upgrades, including an Electronic Data Interchange program that runs the ship. The EDI is a virtual intelligence that keeps tabs on the ship's functions and can verbally communicate with the crew.

Like all starships outfitted with VI, this one offers a calming female voice (played by Tricia Helfer of Halo 3: ODST, *Battlestar Galactica*, and soon *StarCraft II* fame). Where the Normandy felt like it belonged in the same fleet as a ship like the *Millennium Falcon*, the Normandy SR2 falls more in line with a vessel like the *Enterprise*. Shepard's new starcharter is considerably larger than the previous iteration, although it retains a similar aesthetic.

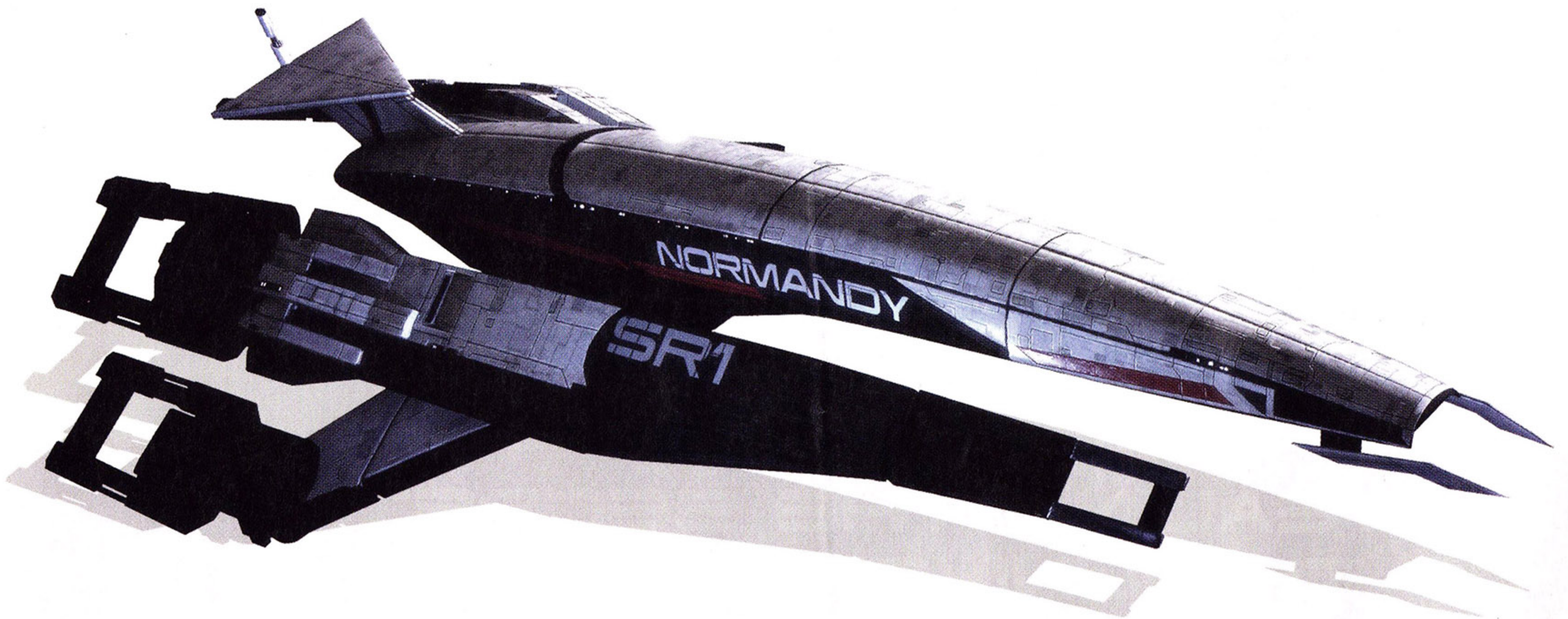
REVEALING THE SECRETS OF THE UNIVERSE

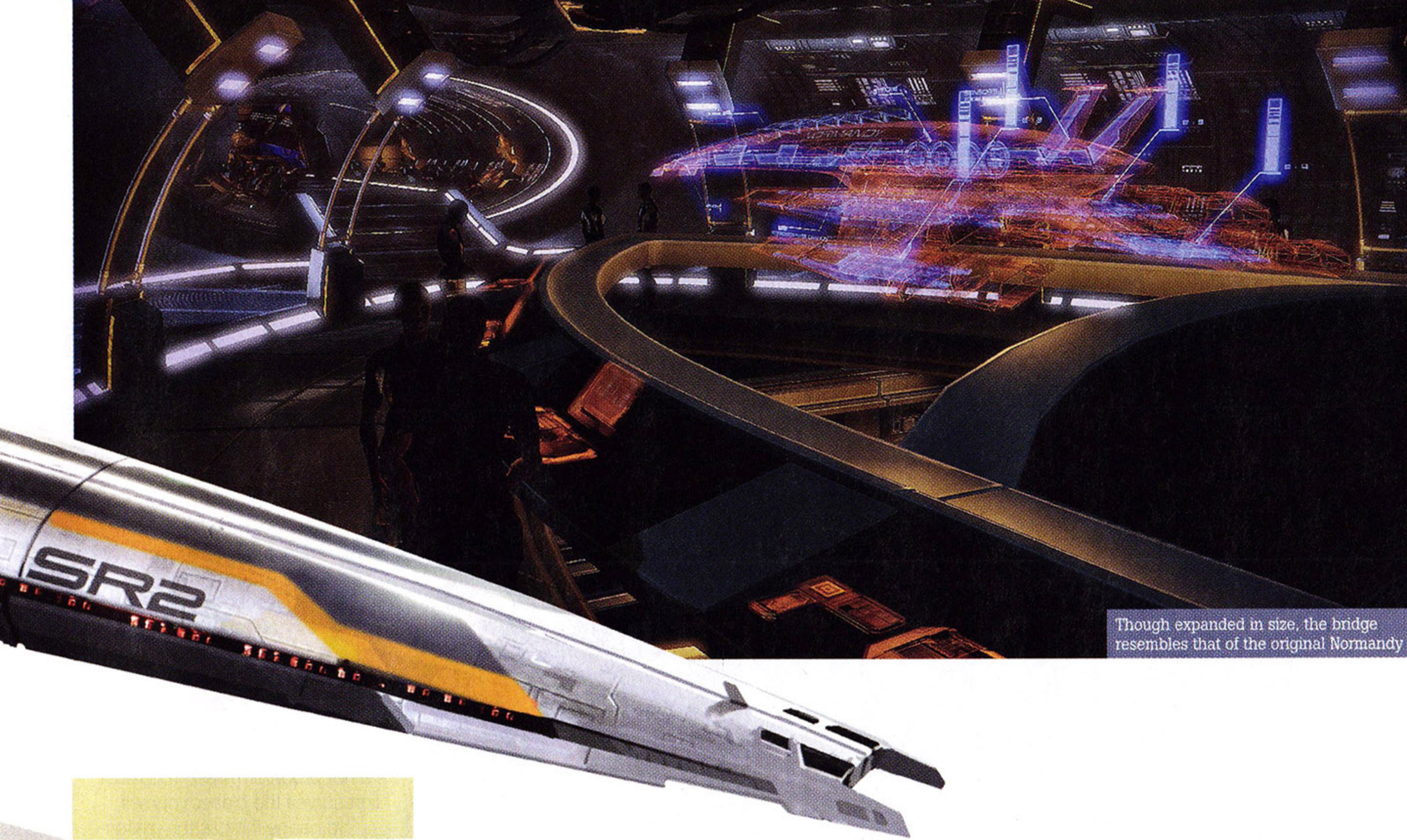
An exclusive first look at Commander Shepard's surprising new ship and crew by Andrew Reiner



EVOLVING THE NORMANDY

Commander Shepard's standing in the universe is uncertain at this point, but his association with Cerberus has its perks, as evidenced by the Normandy SR2. Unlike the original ship, this enhanced version is an intergalactic fortress, housing a larger crew and the capacity to travel deeper into the universe.





Though expanded in size, the bridge resembles that of the original Normandy

The *Enterprise* comparison extends far beyond size – it is a home for the crew, not just a sterile workplace. Divided into four decks, the Normandy SR2 is outfitted with everything you'd expect to find on a vessel that can spend extended amounts of time in dead space.

The first level is the captain's deck. While Shepard comes off as person who puts the well being of his team first, his posh and sprawling quarters could make an appearance on *MTV Cribs*. When you enter the room, two gigantic fish tanks greet you. In our demo, neither tank held any fish. This is the state the tanks are in when players first venture into this room, as BioWare sees this as another element of the game players can customize to their liking. On specific planets, Shepard can purchase fish and sea life to bring aboard the ship.

Another corner of Shepard's room holds a massive trophy case, where players can place relics and rewards from missions for all to see. This area also houses two computer terminals. The first allows players to chart their progress on Achievements, while the second tracks Shepard's standing with each teammate and shows the weapons and powers with which they are outfitted.

Next to Shepard's bed, which will undoubtedly be used for more than sleeping (this is a BioWare game after all), is a closet. While this may seem

like an ordinary sight for any bedroom, this particular closet allows players to customize both their casual and armored looks. If you find a new helmet on a mission, yet don't want to wear it because it clashes with your armor, you can enter this closet to change its color to make the entire ensemble match. Unfortunately, this option is only available for Shepard. The remainder of the crew will have to make do with mismatched attire.

The second deck houses the combat information center. As the name implies, this is where all of the ship's critical systems are held, such as the war room, flight navigation, armory, and administration. One of the many new faces employed by Shepard is Kelly Chambers, the Normandy's administrative assistant. She keeps tabs on comm chatter and keeps you informed of missions and incoming data.

Depending on what moral choices you make throughout the game, you may want to steer clear of conversations in the armory, as it is headed by Jacob Taylor, a morally ambiguous character who first appeared in *Mass Effect Galaxy*. Tough as nails and difficult to read, you'll want to keep an eye on this guy. The armory itself is dedicated to customizing weapon loadouts.

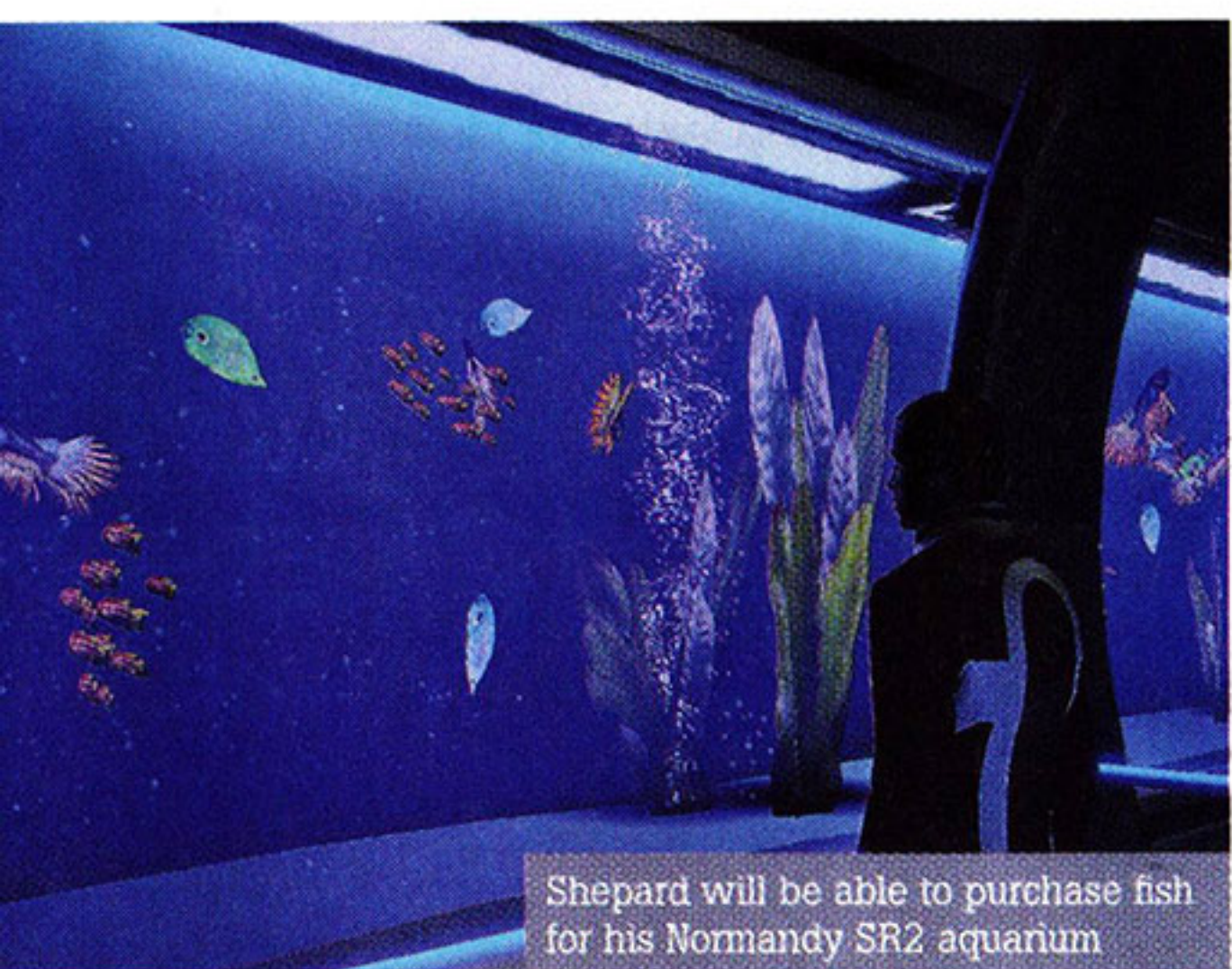
This deck also houses the tech lab, home to *Mass Effect's* quirky HK-47-like playable character Mordin. From the brief exchange of dialogue we saw between Mordin and Shepard, Mordin seems to think he is superior to Shepard on an intellectual level – which brought about a few chuckles. Mordin oversees all of the ship's research. This time around, minerals collected from mining serve a purpose. You can use them to upgrade your guns, clips, biotic powers, health, and shields.

Outside of the few exceptions listed, most of the shipmates are found in the crew quarters on the third deck. This is where the vessel feels the most alive. In their downtime, the crew frequents a cafeteria run by a hard-nosed cook reminiscent of Mel from *Alice*. One of the side missions has Shepard running ingredient errands for the cook. This floor is also home to Miranda, another

playable character who debuted in *Mass Effect Galaxy*. Miranda has invested heavily in genetic manipulation and biotics, which BioWare is opening up for Shepard as well. When asked by Shepard if she thought she was perfect, Miranda said she never could be since she is still human. Again, this may be a character you want to walk on glass with during conversations.

The lowest deck contrasts with the rest of the ship. The main attraction in this engineering wing is the ship's core, a massive floating sphere. We may be reading too much into this, but this technology seems especially alien compared to the rest of the ship. Could it tie in with the plot, or is it Reaper technology?

All four of the ship's decks are connected by an elevator system. Before you let out a moan, BioWare made it a point to shorten these rides considerably. The brief amount of time you spend on them is also accompanied by extensive data and imagery.



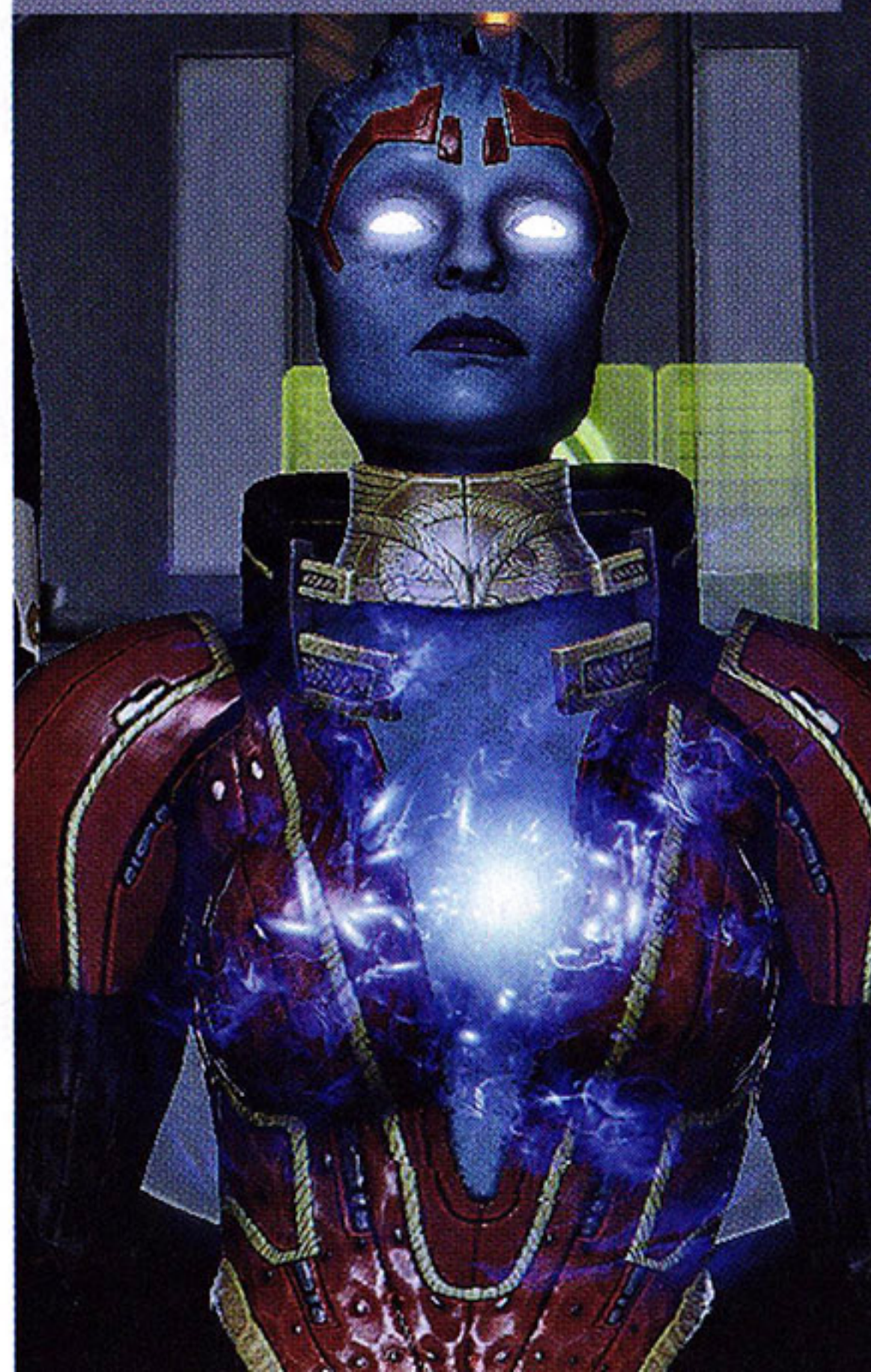
Shepard will be able to purchase fish for his Normandy SR2 aquarium



If You Played Mass Effect...

If you choose to recover your save file, the choices you made during that quest greatly affect the journey ahead. Obviously the larger decisions you made change the direction of the game, but even minor things like the crazed fan on Citadel come back into play. If you talked to a character in the first game, they'll remember you in *Mass Effect 2*.

Samara joins your party after a shocking introduction



GRUNT

Whether or not you killed him in the first game, Wrex's fate is up in the air. You may not miss him, as new Krogan teammate Grunt brings a fiery temper to the battlefield.



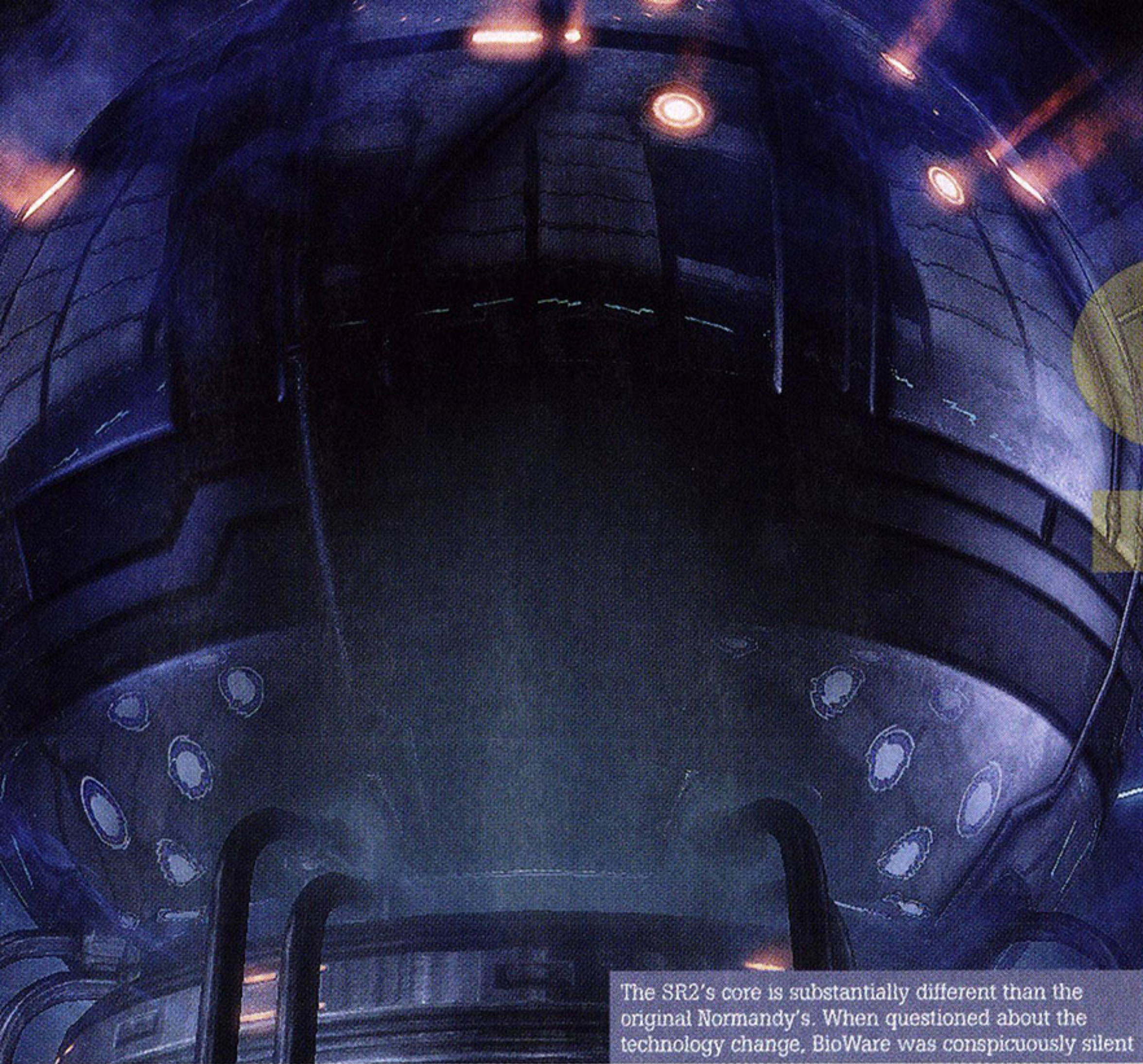
In Mass Effect 2, players pilot the Normandy SR2, but as of now only for travel within a solar system. The star chart works much like it did in the original game – zooming in from a universe-wide view to galaxies and solar systems. When you venture to a new solar system, which is once again presented through an all-encompassing pan view, players can maneuver the Normandy manually to discover planets, moons, and ships.

Descending into an uncharted planet's orbit brings up a static screen that provides that planet's historical documents. This time around, however, the options to mine it or land on it are not predetermined. You must first survey the planet yourself to gauge if it has the materials you need. This function is handled through a scanning minigame. By moving a radar across the three-dimensional planet's surface, your scanner will fluctuate when one of the four elements (iridium, platinum, palladium, or element zero) is detected.

The elements' presence is represented by a seismograph-like analysis. When one of the meters spikes, you can send out a probe to mine the elements. As you scan the planet, players can also pick up comm chatter or note anomalies. Most of these lead to landing destinations. Some simply require a dropship, while others necessitate the maneuverability of the heavily upgraded Mako, which BioWare didn't want to show just yet.

From the galaxy screen, which often houses multiple solar systems, the Normandy SR2 is once again controllable, only this time it has limited fuel. In our demo, the ship had 1,000 fuel, which drained quickly. BioWare wouldn't reveal details in this area, either, but we can only imagine that the fuel tanks will be upgradeable, allowing for longer journeys that will lead to new solar systems.

Overall, the galaxy is much larger than it was in the original game. The time you spend here now has meaning, as it directly affects your characters' progression. BioWare also says that taking the time to survey the universe will not only add side stories, but also tie directly into main plot.

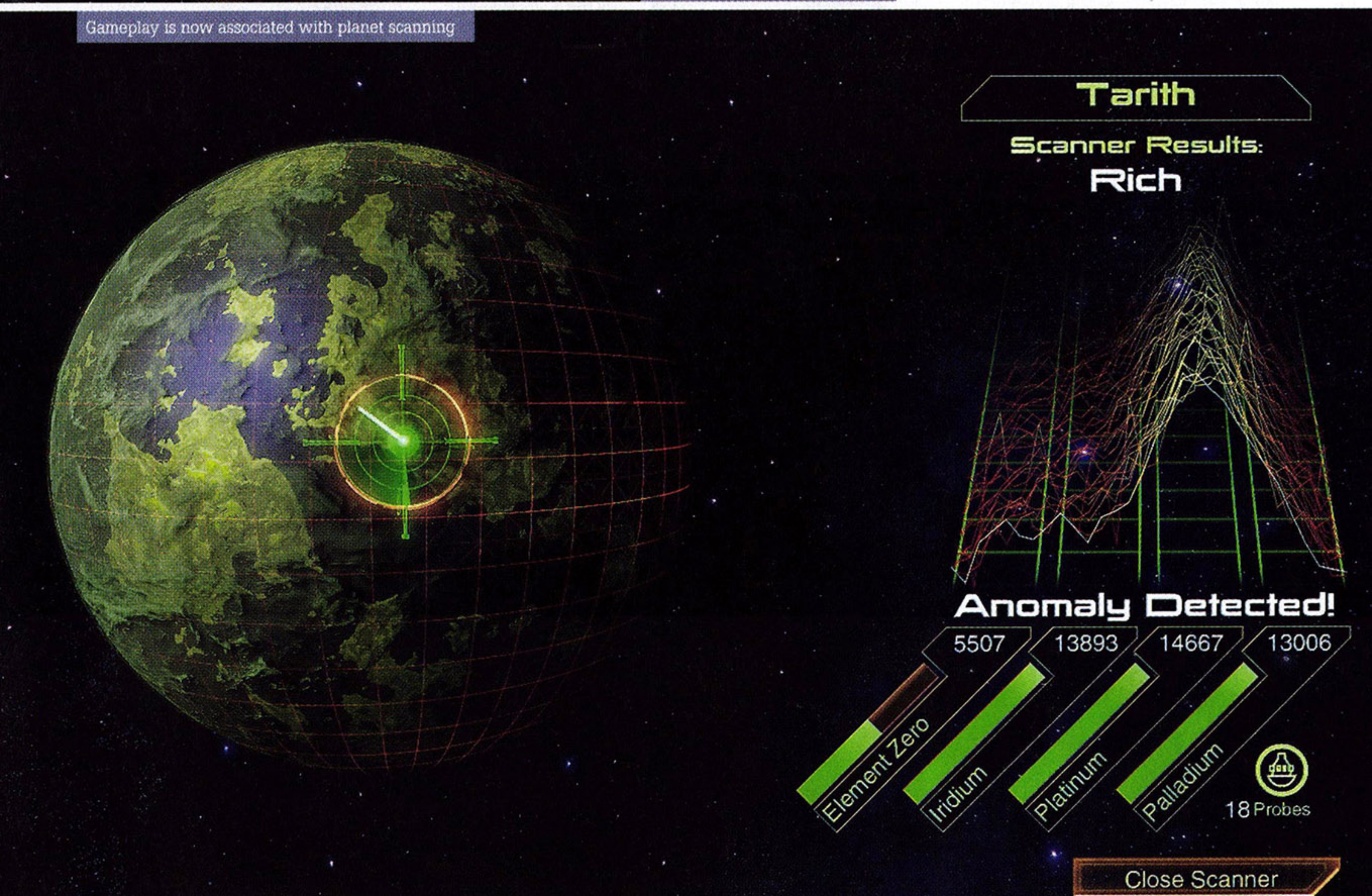


The SR2's core is substantially different than the original Normandy's. When questioned about the technology change, BioWare was conspicuously silent



The Klixen is one of many new adversaries in Mass Effect 2

Gameplay is now associated with planet scanning



Shepard's list of adversaries across the universe has grown significantly, and so have the means to taking them down. All enemies now feature specific hit zones. If you shoot a robot in the leg, there's a chance you'll amputate it, causing the machination to collapse and crawl after you. Your teammate AI has improved dramatically as well. Their class, weapon selection, and race will dictate their moves. One new character, Grunt, is a Krogan just like Wrex. Where Wrex's movements were limited to the standard tactics of everyone else, Grunt has the power to bull rush enemies.

Players direct teammate movements individually by hitting left or right on the d-pad. Shepard's movements are also much easier to use, as powers can be assigned to buttons. BioWare hasn't locked down the exact number of assignable buttons, but it sounds like it will be at least three.

In the few hours we spent with the game, we walked away feeling overwhelmed by the sheer amount of content, and we only saw a fraction of it. Even with a month of development time left, the game feels polished, something we felt both the original Mass Effect and Dragon Age: Origins needed.

Although much of the plot remains shrouded in mystery, one theme kept emerging in the plot threads we saw – humanity desperately needs help, and almost every decision Shepard makes brings an air of uncertainty. That "I have a bad feeling about this" sensation is always present, and even conversations bring a nail-biting level of intensity. Will Shepard and humanity survive? For Shepard, at least, that decision is left up to the player. ♦

See more screenshots and movies at www.gameinformer.com/mag

Ditch The Phaser

Shepard ably wrought plenty of carnage with only four weapon types in the first game. This time the good captain has 19 varieties at his disposal, upping the tactical element. If that sounds like too much to manage, new weapons lockers allow mid-mission gear customization. You're going to welcome the storage space, because the plethora of weapons you'll inevitably hoard have varying clip sizes and fire rates, and are more worth hanging on to than in the first game.



Assault Rifles

Still a worthy and reliable tool of destruction, the assault rifle shines when augmented with disruptor ammunition that tears holes in robotic enemies. If high recoil causes your muzzle to climb off your kill, try one of the new burst-fire ARs.

Pistols

Quick and reliable, these trusty side arms still do the trick in a pinch. BioWare hasn't announced anything new, but we expect some big changes for this weapon class.

Shotguns

Still bestial damage-dealers at close range, shotguns spray death upon any hostiles you encounter. Available in pump or automatic varieties, there's no better option for clearing out gluts of Geth fodder.

SMG

Smaller and lighter than assault rifles, SMGs are a good choice when you're willing to sacrifice range for an increased fire rate. Throw in the ability to pump your foes full of incendiary rounds and you have a quick, deadly little weapon.

Sniper Rifles

Extremely high damage comes at the price of demanding marksmanship, forcing sniping-inclined commanders to look the devil (or Krogan) in the eye. Make your shots count, because the reload times can be significant.

Heavy Weapons

Arguably the most devastating new weapon class, this variety encompasses grenade and missile launchers. From clusters of volatile space aliens to well-armored gunships, these explosive armaments effectively decimate your foes to space dust. You'll relish every round of ammunition you collect.



TRANSFORM WAR FOR C

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

by Phil Kollar

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

» **Style**
1-Player Action (Online TBA)

» **Publisher**
Activision

» **Developer**
High Moon Studios

» **Release**
2010

"I've been a fan of Transformers since I was a little kid watching Saturday morning cartoons," says Matt Tieger, game director at High Moon Studios.

Lead concept artist Jim Daly has also loved the Transformers for a long time, but has his own unique story for the origins of his obsession: "The first time I saw them... my brother and I got caught shoplifting one of them." He laughs and continues, "When I was 14 years old, I got into an argument with my dad because I wanted Galvatron, and he thought I was too old to have it. He thought I should be thinking about girls or something."

ERS: BERTRON





I

If you ask around the office, almost every employee of High Moon Studios has a personal story of how their love affair with the legendary robots in disguise began. It's no surprise that the developer took advantage of the Transformers game license owned by Activision, its new parent company as of the Activision-Vivendi merger in 2007. Over a year ago they pitched the concept for Transformers: War for Cybertron to Hasbro.

ROLL OUT

Tieger sums the project up as "the game I've been waiting 25 years to play." War for Cybertron is not tied to a specific movie, TV show, or comic, yet is deeply invested in the lore of the franchise. To reach Transformers fans and gamers alike, High Moon made it a priority to build a game that has engaging single-player, co-op, and multiplayer modes, a mature, developed plot, and explosive action gameplay. And it all begins in the past.

Whether you're a hardcore fan of the original '80s cartoon or a more recent robot convert

from Michael Bay's live-action blockbuster films, you should be able to follow the story. Transformers: War for Cybertron slides into virtually any of the myriad franchise continuities as a prequel. As the title suggests, the game primarily takes place on Cybertron, the Transformer home world where a civil war is raging between the Autobots and the Decepticons.

True Transformophiles already know where this story ends – with both the Autobots and Decepticons leaving Cybertron and crash-

landing on Earth – but this is the first time anyone is telling the story of what happened on Cybertron leading up to the exodus, a tale that Hasbro is adopting as canon for the franchise. Likewise, the game has the first detailed visualization of the Transformers' home planet in this era. While the technological marvel has been featured in the cartoon and comics, it's never been the focus.

Players can explore the various regions of Cybertron through two campaigns, one for each side of the war. But unlike many previous attempts at bringing Transformers to video games, the single-player stories are linked. Although you can start as the Decepticons or Autobots, the Decepticon plot takes place before the Autobot campaign.

Tieger says the tales have different themes: "The Decepticon campaign is a story of power; the Autobot campaign is a story of hope." Like an episode of the classic cartoon, War for Cybertron begins with Megatron hatching an evil plot to gain more power – in this case a search for Dark Energon that will help him finally control Cybertron. By the end of the Decepticon campaign, he will have more or less succeeded, leaving the Autobots in a desperate situation at the beginning of their story. It will be up to a new hero named Optimus Prime to step in and save the day.

MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE

How do you bring this epic robot drama to life on a video game console? Tieger says the team has faced "interesting challenges" in translating the Transformers to video games. Looking at Activision's last two movie-based Transformers games, this statement is not shocking. As simple as it would seemingly be to translate giant robot battles into an engaging button-mashing experience, multiple developers have struggled to fulfill this promise.

High Moon insists that it's not just going to hide behind the license and hope that's enough to generate interest. "Gamers are savvy," Tieger says. "They know what a good game is." The team is focusing on core gameplay and shooting first and foremost, and they have embraced the aforementioned "challenges" (such as transforming into a number of different vehicles at any time) as strengths rather than weaknesses.

Tieger points to the Gears of War series as the most immediate inspiration for War for Cybertron's third-person, over-the-shoulder shooting. From what we've seen so far – and considering that High Moon is utilizing the Unreal engine – this is a fair comparison, but the game should not be mistaken for Gears with giant robots. The added mobility of the Transformers, both in and out of vehicle form, makes for a very different experience than slamming into cover as Marcus Fenix.

In the portions of gameplay we saw, cover didn't seem very important. In the first level for the Autobots, Optimus, Bumblebee, and Ratchet must defend their home city of Iacon from a devastating Decepticon attack. Rather than ducking behind a barricade to avoid enemy fire, Optimus and company constantly move, jump, and transform.

In vehicle form, the Transformers can speed past enemies and still have access to weapons. Players can choose to transform at any time and in any location. Though certain areas will push players toward one form or another, for the most part it's entirely up to the player whether he or she prefers robot or vehicle form.



What's In a Sound?

Perhaps more than any other '80s cartoon, Transformers is easily identified by its iconic sound effects. Whether it's the whiny pew-pew that once signified futuristic lasers or the bizarre morphing noise that we all accepted as the sound of transformation as kids, there's a rich aural history to draw on from the series. High Moon lead sound designer Rob Burns is keeping that tradition in mind as he crafts sound effects for War for Cybertron.

For transforming specifically, Burns looked for sounds that evoke the feeling of the cartoon rather than the sterile mechanical whirring of transformations in the recent movies. To help achieve this, Burns came up with a unique idea: He brought in his guitar amp and recorded the sounds of various power tools distorted through the amplifier. Kitchen appliances such as blenders filled with razor blades were also used. This process created sounds that strike a chord of nostalgia even though the effects are mechanical in nature and not as abstract as the cartoon's noise.

Each Transformer has its own unique transformation noise in the game, but don't expect to be able to pick out which power tool was used for which Autobot. Each second of sound contains numerous layers of different noises serving the overall feel. Another example Burns gave from his transformation sound recordings was the noise of a piece of metal being hit like a bell. That sound was then reversed and amplitude modulated to emulate the noise of metallic parts rearranging and coming together.

Redesigning Robotic Legends

MEGATRON: The villainous leader of the Decepticons exemplifies the new look for the evil faction of robots. Note the sharp, triangular metal pieces jutting out of his suit and the glowing red eyes. This style will define the Decepticons and their dark home of Chaon.

OPTIMUS PRIME: The hero of the Autobots and his home city of Iacon in the background are much softer on the eyes. Brighter colors, rounded edges, and better use of light make these characters and this location a lot more inviting.



The Transformers' weaponry is probably the element most comparable to Gears of War. Despite the giant space robot factor, most of the guns we saw were standard third-person shooter weapons such as machine guns, shotguns, and rocket launchers. Enemies drop ammo, and Transformers can take new weapons and automatically graft them onto their arms, allowing them to switch as needed. Health regenerates when you avoid damage for long enough, as has become the standard in the genre.

Jet-based missions add a whole new level of strategy. Since flying Transformers maintain the ability to transform at any time, they can attack the enemy from above or behind much easier. In one mission, we watched Thundercracker, a Decepticon, enter a large circular area with platforms on multiple levels. He flew between platforms, leaping into and out of jet form with ease to better position himself for each new wave of enemies. We've never seen this kind of verticality pulled off in a shooter before; if High Moon can keep it fun and not too chaotic, the jet levels will help the game stand out from the crowd.

Size and scope are also extremely important parts of High Moon's design philosophies. With huge robots, players expect giant explosions and even bigger bosses,

and the studio plans to deliver. We got to witness the beginning of the final boss fight for the Decepticon campaign, where the metallic baddies face off against the powerful Autobot protector Omega Supreme. This impressive opponent towers over the player-controlled Decepticons, attempting to decommission them with an equally huge laser blast that slowly, but surely wrecks the environment around him. We watched several bits of cover get destroyed in a minute of battle, and Tieger promises that by the end of the encounter, the whole area will be a mess.

WAGING THE BATTLE TOGETHER

As with any good Transformers story, all the missions we saw featured a number of Autobots or Decepticons working together to achieve their goals. For each mission you can select any of the primary characters, and you'll have a reason to be choosy. Each Transformer has two special abilities that make their play experience slightly different. These abilities run the gamut – cloaking yourself to launch a surprise attack, dropping a sentry gun for defense, draining enemy's health bars to recover your own, and many more. Players deploy these abilities by press-

ing the right or left bumper. You can use abilities multiple times per level, but they're on a cooldown, so you need to use them strategically. The special abilities could also make for some interesting character customization in War for Cybertron's mysterious online mode (see sidebar).

In solo play the robots you didn't choose fight alongside you under the control of AI, but the game also features a co-op mode. High Moon remains coy about how many players can join in for co-op, but it's worth noting that all the missions we saw featured at least three main Transformers running through the levels. Whatever the final number, this should lead to some legendary fights over who gets stuck playing as Bumblebee.

High Moon hopes to make the game Transformers fans have wanted for 25 years, and the team seems to be on the right track. The mix of lore and solid gameplay should be enough to pull in anyone who's curious about the history of the never-ending battle between the Autobots and Decepticons. Whether that same formula or the promise of exploring Cybertron will be enough to draw in gamers who weren't raised on the cartoon is still up in the air, but High Moon has until the game's planned 2010 release to plead its case. ♦

Taking the War Online

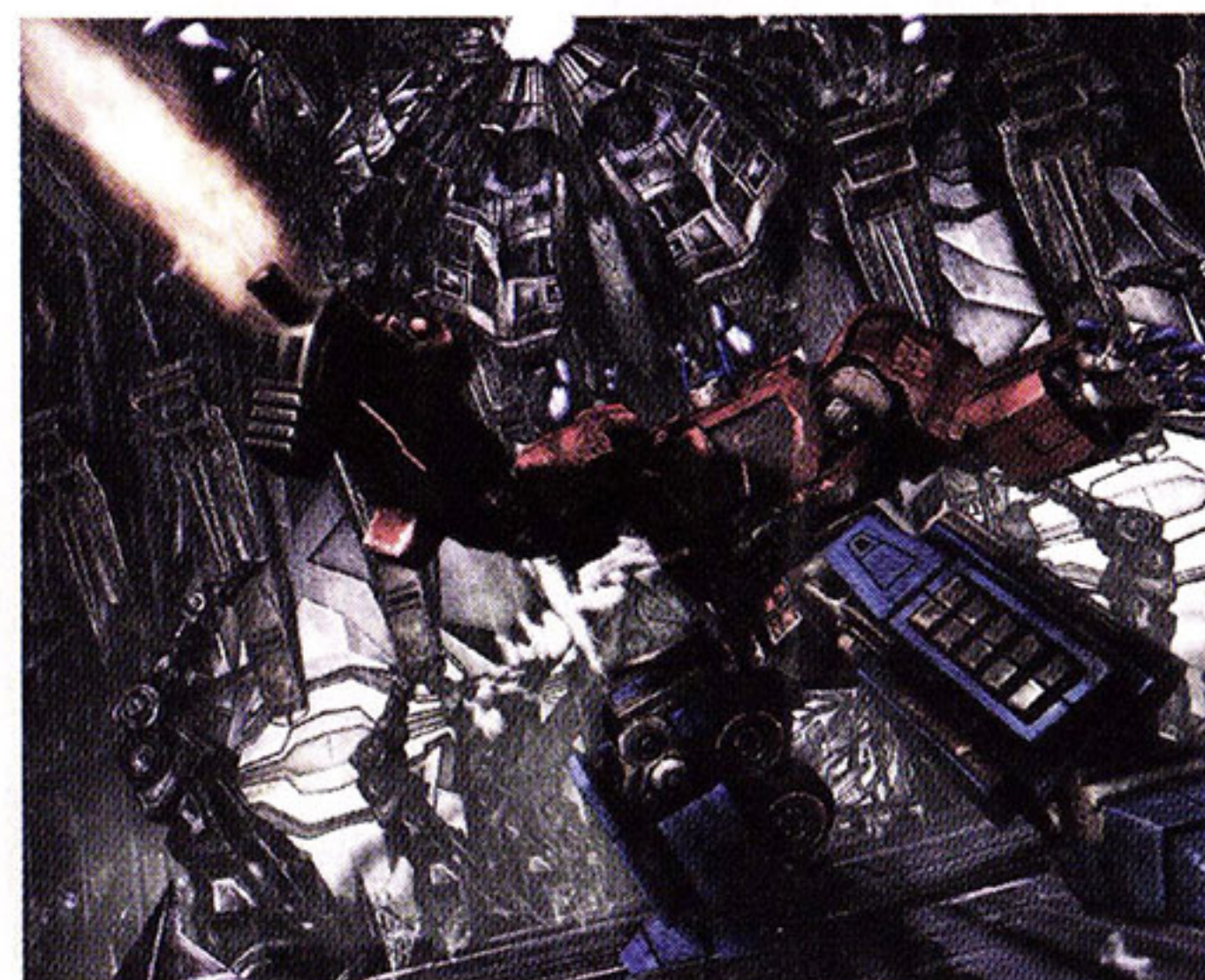
Though High Moon isn't ready to show off any of the game's online modes, director Matt Tieger assures us that the team has been working on multiplayer since they started, and it's one of the main priorities for the game. Here's what we're expecting from a game that hopes to rule the online universe:

With the different types of vehicles available, it is extremely important for War for Cybertron to be balanced with transforming in mind. Making sure a shotgun or rocket launcher feels powerful enough without being unstoppable is one thing, but when you add tanks and jets into the mix, things get a little crazy. We could easily see air-based Transformers dominating if High Moon doesn't put in some carefully-placed checks on their increased battlefield mobility.

Most importantly, we hope they take some notes from Activision's most successful online series to date, the Modern Warfare games. The unique Transformer abilities seem like they could operate similarly to Modern Warfare's perks, with new and more powerful abilities being unlocked through leveling up or skillful use of the lower-level abilities. And who wouldn't want to reach max level and be awarded the Matrix of Leadership?



Keep an eye on gameinformer.com/mag throughout this month for several video looks at War for Cybertron, featuring interviews with the director and artists, a time-lapse clip of concept art in creation, and even trivia with High Moon's biggest Transformers savant taking on members of the GI staff

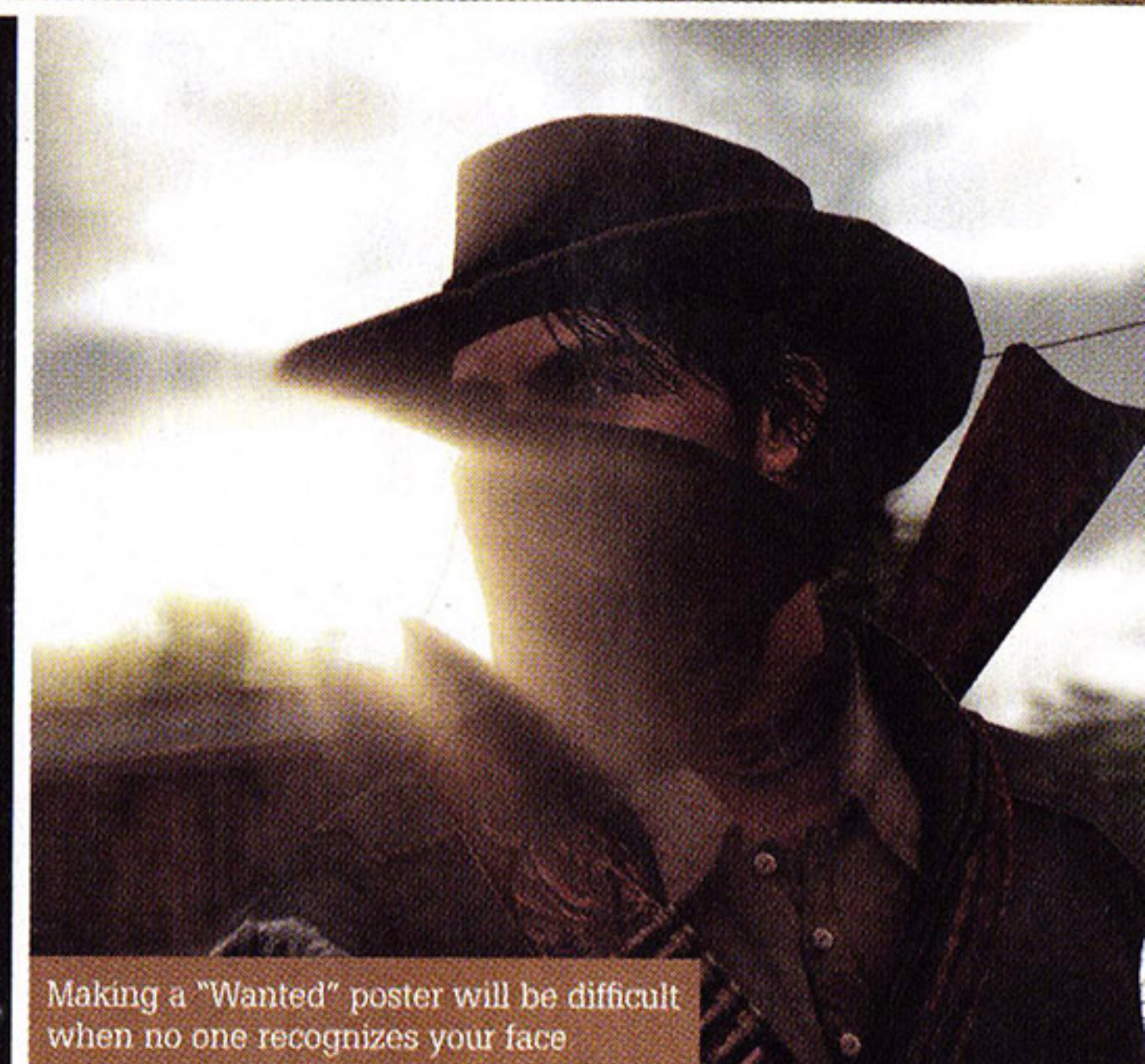


Red Dead Redemption

Turning the desolate West into sandbox gaming's new frontier



Little does he know the gold dial and lock are worth more than anything in the safe



Making a "Wanted" poster will be difficult when no one recognizes your face

» **Platform**
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360

» **Style**
1-Player Action
(Multiplayer TBA)

» **Publisher**
Rockstar

» **Developer**
Rockstar San Diego

» **Release**
First Half 2010

The lawless West is bleeding out. A dispute being settled with a bullet becomes less likely with each setting sun. Sure, you can still shoot a man for looking at your daughter the wrong way – the devil's eyes need to be punished after all – but as just as your actions may seem, newly organized government watchdogs, the Bureau, will make you pay for your crime. They're bringing order to the frontier. They're turning gunslingers into ghosts, and pushing those who can dance around bullets to the backcountry.

Industrialization is changing the way city folk live, but in the backcountry, the heart of the unruly world still has a pulse. Here, every man and woman lives by his or her own sense of justice. Overturning a rock could gift you with a

buried treasure or a rattlesnake bite. Stopping to help someone in need could end with you receiving a bullet to the chest. This dangerous territory is where developer Rockstar San Diego hopes gamers spend a significant amount of time while playing Red Dead Redemption.

While offering a story path designed much like Grand Theft Auto's mission structure, Red Dead Redemption puts just as strong of a focus on exploration and side activities. Even if you accept a mission, you can veer off of the critical path to spend as much time as you want tackling other things, such as hunting rare animals, tracking down wanted fugitives, or partaking in randomly scripted events. Some are as simple as saving someone from being executed by lawmen, others could be as lengthy as a full-

blown village shootout.

Treasure hunting is the most lucrative side activity. Treasure maps play off the player's memory and eagle-eyed vision. Of the two maps we saw, both detailed the location of a treasure with terrain landmarks – such as a uniquely sculpted rock or a narrow cliff path. If you can locate the landmarks, you should have no problem finding the buried goods. Rockstar says every treasure is different. One treasure, which was found beneath a pile of loose rocks, held a gold bar and another treasure map.

As you gallop along the open trail, there's a random chance that someone will run up to you and plead for help. In this demo, lending a hand backfired. As soon as protagonist John Marston dismounted his horse, the man pleading for

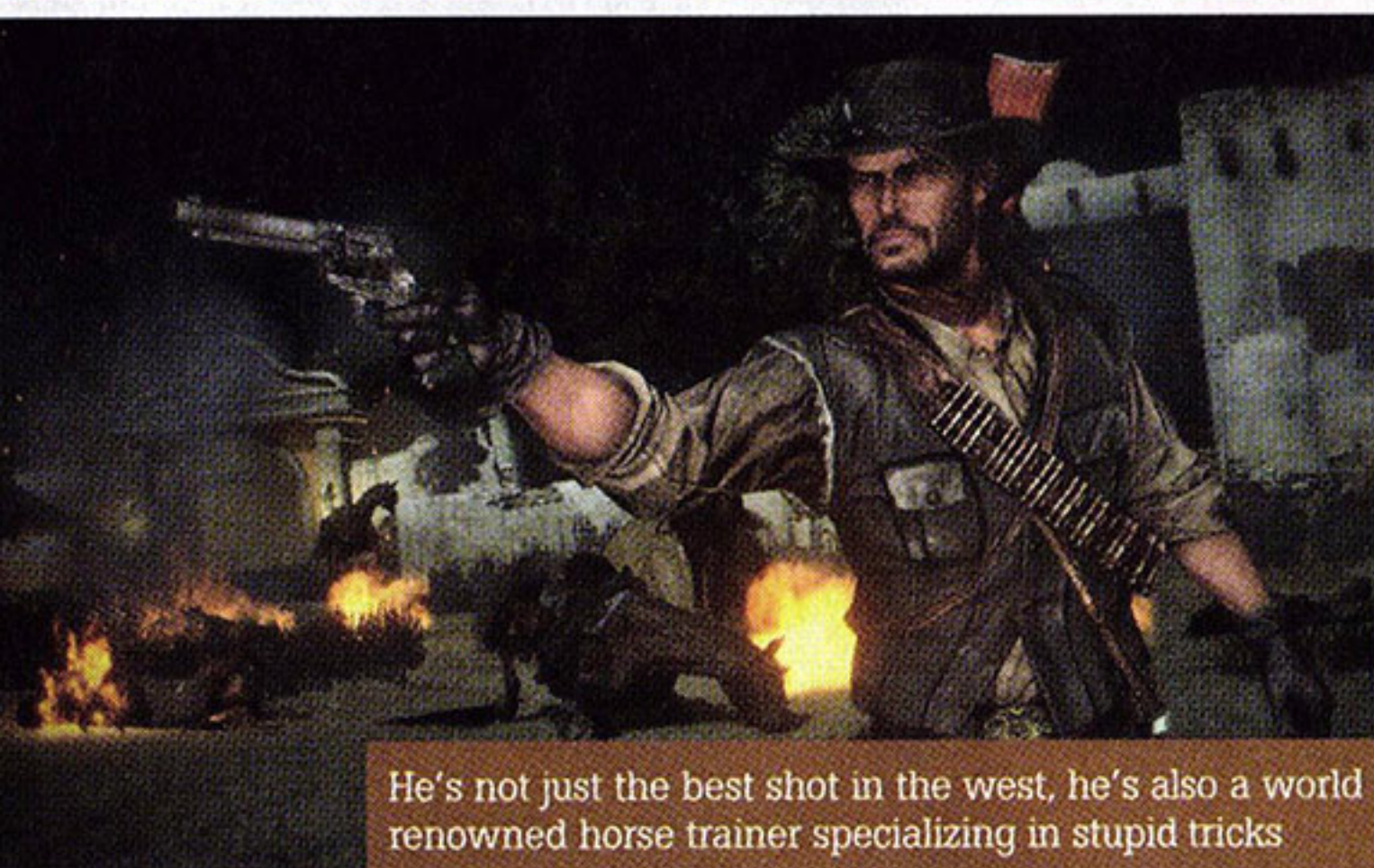


This looks like a great spot to set up camp for the night

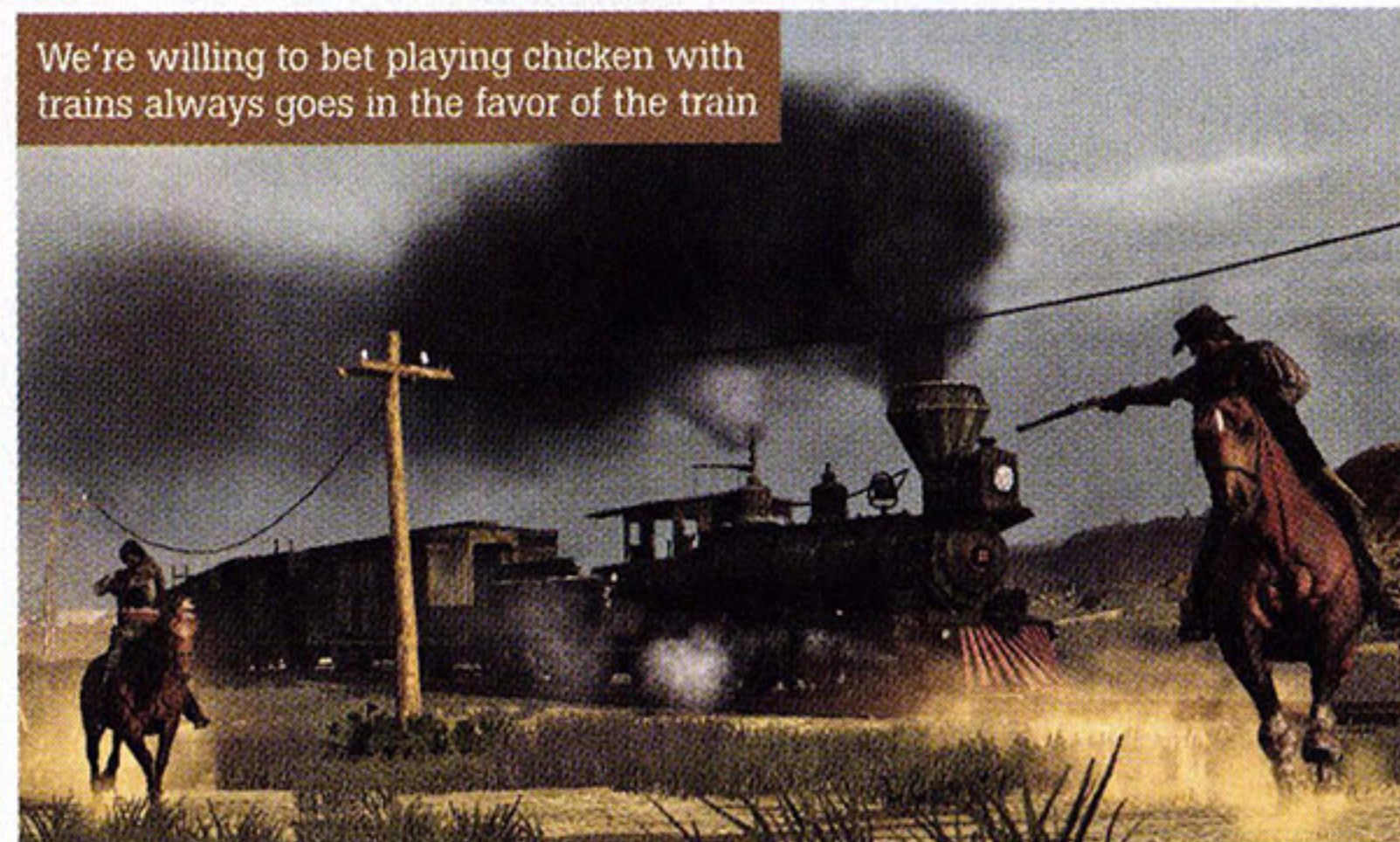


The Lasso

John Marston's talents extend far beyond his ability to tap into the Dead Eye shooting mechanic. He can also lasso enemies to the ground from horseback. Once an enemy is caught in the lasso, John dismounts his horse to quickly tie up his lassoed foe. Depending on how you play the game, you may want to bring wanted men to justice rather than killing them. You can throw him on the back of your horse and ride 'em back to town, or return him to the traveling lawman from whom he escaped.



He's not just the best shot in the west, he's also a world renowned horse trainer specializing in stupid tricks



We're willing to bet playing chicken with trains always goes in the favor of the train



help jumped on the horse and rode away with a devilish laugh. Thankfully, this particular horse is obedient to John. As the bandit rode off, John whistled – handled in the same way Niko hails cabs in GTA IV – and the horse bucked the bandit. As the bandit lay on the ground, John put a bullet in his chest, then looted his body. The whistle command also summons your horse, which is a necessary skill for quick get-aways. Just be warned, if you ride your horse too far off the beaten trail, there's a chance he may get spooked by a rattlesnake.

If you spend too much time on the plains, you can set up camp. This allows you to save your game, regenerate health, and, if you purchase camp upgrades, earn other rewards like ammo regeneration.

Red Dead Redemption strips away the linearity of finishing one task at a time as in GTA. When you eventually get around to completing a mission, side goals completed along the way can be cashed in as well. For example, after returning to the informant who gave you a mission for a reward, you could collect the bounty for wanted fugitives and cash in pelts from your hunts. In a way, the backcountry dictates what you're doing – one journey could bring a dozen distractions stretching across hours of time, whereas another could bring only a few opportunities that you respectfully decline for the fear

that they'll affect your character's standing in the world.

Though Marsten's tale is ultimately a scripted journey of revenge and redemption, players can influence his public perception by acting honorably or dishonorably. Monetary rewards and different opportunities arise when you fall on either side. This standing is mostly dictated by the way you handle situations. Do you save someone who faces execution from a Mexican army firing squad? When the villagers in town are calling the sheriff out for evil doings, do you join their protest and bring him down or side with the sheriff and violently restore the order? If you've earned enough honor to become famous, a third option presents itself in that you can convince them to walk away with no bloodshed.

Players can also adopt the role of a bandit by donning a bandana that masks your personality. If you kill a villager while in disguise, you'll gain a wanted level that raises the bounty on your head as you kill more people. At this point, you can fight to your last breath, or in the exact same fashion as GTA IV, try to get outside of the search radius. Once you are in the clear you can remove your bandana, which will lower your wanted level much quicker. Escaping town doesn't mean your crime goes without penalty. Once a day, the village where your crime was committed will send out a posse to hunt you down. To stop the daily

harassment, Marsten must earn a Monopoly-like "Get Out Of Jail Free" card in the form of a pardon letter by completing virtuous tasks, paying the bounty himself, or bribing a law official into making your crime disappear.

Cities are just as big of time sinks as the open world. One sun-baked Mexican town we visit, called Chuparosa, is buzzing with life, with a fish merchant slicing fish into three pieces and throwing the tasty bits into a bucket, and a blacksmith putting his back into sharpening blades. All of these people can be interacted with, some offering you missions or items to buy, like chewing tobacco or a rabbit's foot. The tone of the town changes at night, as the citizens abandon their posts for the cantina. The bars also attract a seedy clientele and offer new ways to spend your money – perhaps take a seat at the poker or blackjack table, or escort a woman of the night to her room?

Red Dead Redemption is currently slated to be released in the first half of 2010. Rockstar openly injected that everything we've seen so far is just a small fraction of the game, and that the yet-to-be announced online plans will be a huge part of this open world experience. » **Andrew Reiner**

See Red Dead Redemption in action in new videos at www.gameinformer.com/mag

God of War III

Behind the scenes of the God of War III demo



» **Platform**
PlayStation 3

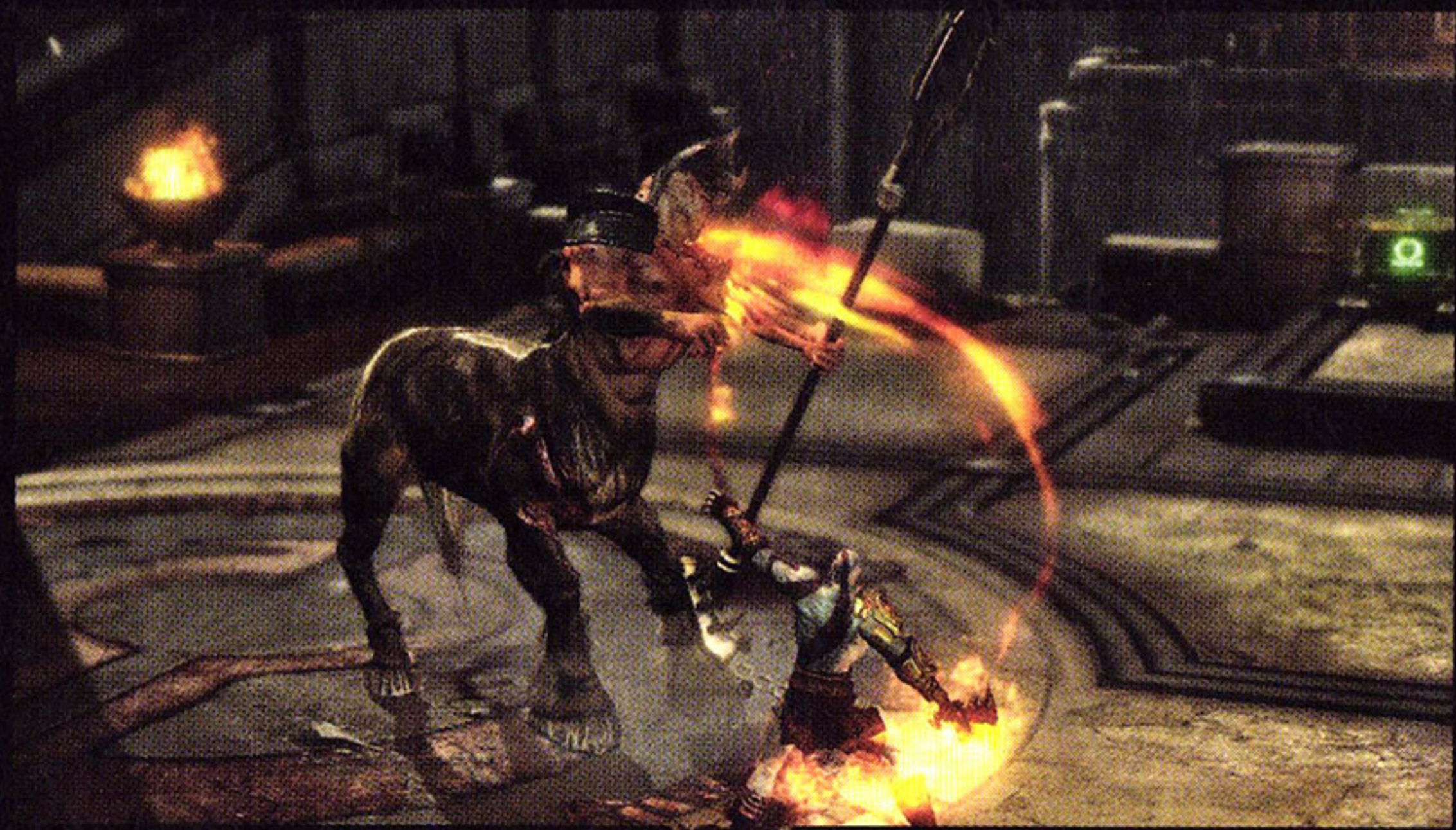
» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Sony Computer
Entertainment

» **Developer**
Sony Santa Monica

» **Release**
March

Most hardcore God of War fans have gotten their hands on the demo for Kratos' third outing by now, likely via the purchase of the God of War Collection. The demo gives players a taste of the gameplay Sony showcased at E3 2009, including a fight against a stone titan, flying with the wings of Icarus, and a grisly scene with the sun god Helios. Even if you've ripped off Helios' head 100 times, you still don't know everything there is to learn about the demo; we contacted the team at Sony Santa Monica to get the inside story behind all of the crazy events and effects players witness during the course of the action-packed demo. » **Joe Juba**



CENTAUR GUT RIP

When I first heard that they wanted to be able to actually rip open characters, I told them they were crazy and thought that would be the end of it. I mean, this was something that had never been done in the studio before and would definitely hit the engine from a memory standpoint. But of course, I couldn't help thinking how awesome it would be. Eventually, I pulled one of my guys aside and had him start doing the R&D. In the end, that's one of the things that makes God of War great; we all have this masochistic desire to punish ourselves if it means making the game better. Thanks to the talented work of the brilliant guys on my character tech art team, we eventually developed what we like to call Zipper Tech – we now had the ability to give characters gaping wounds. After we saw it working, we decided to take it even farther and add another new feature we call Gut Tech – all the animated and modeled giblets you see when splitting open the Centaur.

–Giovanni Luis, supervisor, technical art group





FIRE TITAN

We devoted a great deal of time to making the background feel more alive for our E3 demo. We took advantage of all the characters in the level – Helios, legionnaires, harpies, and of course the fire titan – in order to create a more interesting and believable world...with the Titan being the largest and most difficult to animate. It was really important for Stig [Asmussen, game director] not to fall into the traditional slow-mo method of animating large characters. We felt slowing down the titan's movements in order to sell his size made him feel more robotic and less alive. In the end it was more a mix of big, deliberate movements like the titan's exit, and quicker attacks such as the Helios grab after he is hit by the ballista. Unfortunately, since this was the first time we were bringing an area up to this level of polish, it took a lot longer than we would have liked. But getting this under our belts was a great experience for knowing what it would take to get the whole game polished to the quality we want.

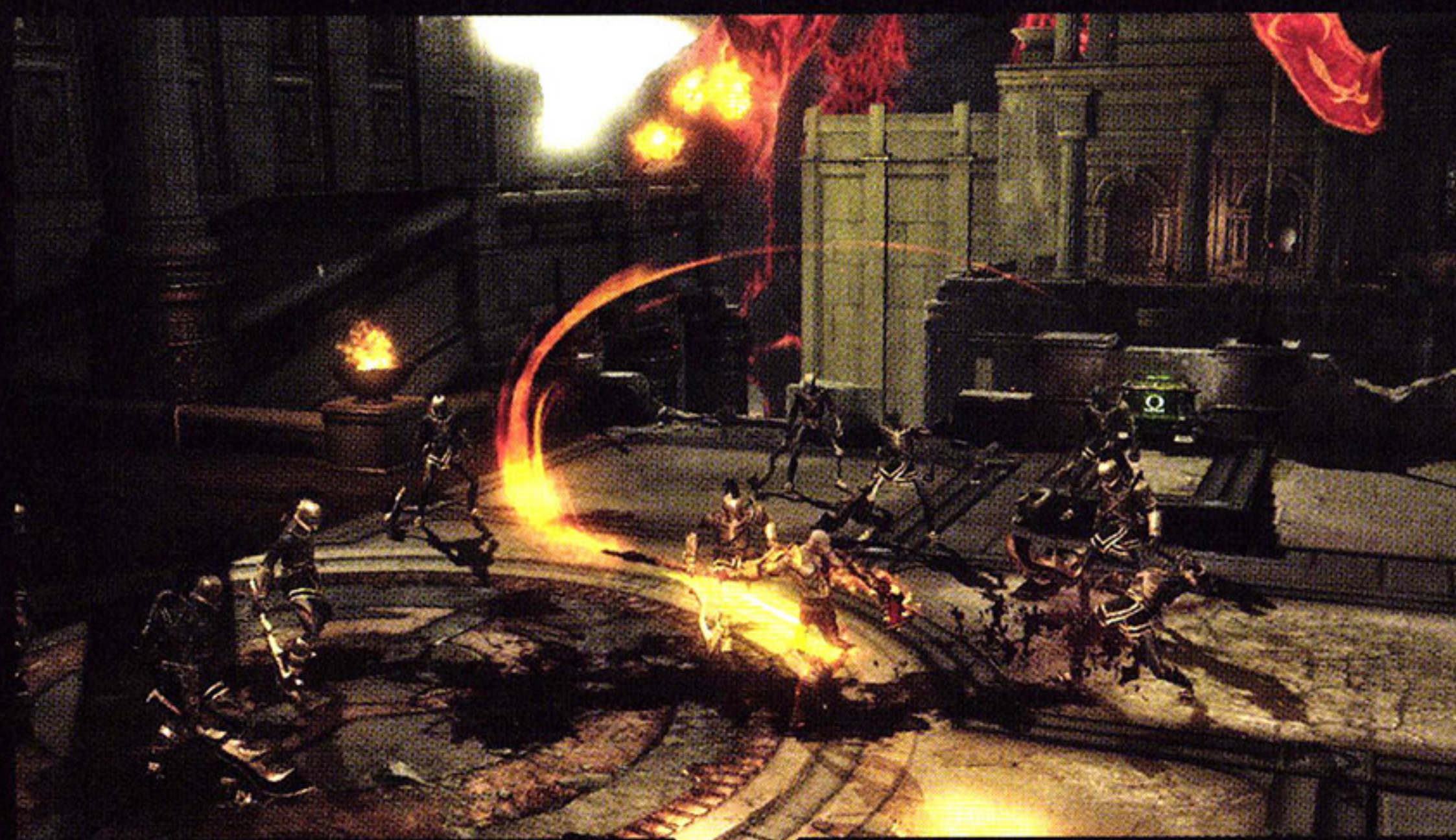
–Jason Hall, senior animator



ICARUS WINGS ASCENT

When this was first pitched, the idea was to have Kratos stay still and scroll the level instead. I didn't want to do this, as I felt we'd have more issues trying to fix a faked flight than a real one. One of the biggest issues with the ascent was that we would be traveling thousands of meters and it would kill the artist, John Palamarchuk, to have to build that much level art. The way we worked around this was by designing about 20 different pieces (outer walls, falling objects, beams, etc.) that could then be fitted together. Once we started flying around, we had these really cool cinematic cameras that followed Kratos through the level in a way that looked amazing. However, it wasn't very playable, so we changed them to a camera directly behind Kratos. I missed the first camera, but being able to fly without smashing into stuff more than made up for it. When we knew that this would be the final section of the demo, we decided to end it in a big way. The titan moment that we ended up doing made me very happy. This was on the original list of moments that I wanted to do, but had been cut due to the amount of time and resources it would take. I was thrilled that we got to add it back in.

–Justin Hendry, senior designer



GRUNT RANDOMIZATION

In God of War III, we are greatly increasing the number of enemies that Kratos fights at one time. In the previous game, if you had five or so enemies that looked the same it wasn't that big of a deal. As soon as we got 20 on the screen we realized that this was a problem we would have to fix. No one wants to fight an army of identical-looking guys. Our solution was to implement randomization into the undead soldiers. Each one would have different levels of decay, different armor pieces, and different weapons randomly generated. The first pass of this I hacked into the engine myself. The problem with this was there was too much randomization; you would turn a corner and all the grunts would look different than they did a moment ago. Each grunt was changing five or six times before they would die. Luckily, programming stepped in and implemented a permanent code solution. After we got the visuals working, we also decided to randomize some of their animation so they wouldn't all fight the same. A good example of this is when they dog pile onto Kratos. When he throws them off into the air, we have six different animations the engine can choose from so it will look more natural.

–Jason McDonald, senior combat designer



HELIOS' HEAD

We knew from the start that we wanted to kill Helios in a way that was special, and I think the head rip ended up being that. We have a lot of limbs being removed throughout the game, but they're all very clean looking. Helios was our attempt to bring that to the next level. After watching a lot of zombie movies, we decided that being able to see the skin actually stretch, rip, and tear would add a really great visceral touch. In order to do this we had to have the programmers implement new code so we could do the texture animations that were needed. Since Helios is the god of the sun, we played around for a while with having sunlight pour out of him as you rip off his head, but this ended up obscuring what was happening too much, so we stuck with the more classic "lots of blood" approach.

–Ken Feldman, art director

Kane & Lynch 2: Dog Days

A voyeuristic new take on the psychopathic duo



The entire game takes place during a frantic 48-hour window in Shanghai

» **Platform**
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360

» **Style**
1 or 2-Player Action
(2-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Eidos

» **Developer**
IO Interactive

» **Release**
2010

While Kane & Lynch: Dead Men featured intriguing protagonists and slick presentation, shoddy controls and myriad glitches brought down what could have been a great game. IO Interactive is aware of the issues Dead Men had, and is looking to rectify them with Dog Days. Inspired by the look of amateur YouTube videos and films like Cloverfield, the biggest departure comes in its presentation. In lieu of standard cinematic angles and storytelling methods, you'll see shaky, grainy footage of these men of questionable morals as they shoot their way through the seedy underbelly of Shanghai.

Since we last saw the mercenary and the psychopath, Lynch has been enjoying success as a henchman in Shanghai and Kane has become a troubled journeyman. This time around, the story is told from the perspective of the former, who gamers play as during the solo playthrough. Lynch's psychotic nature caused him to occasionally hallucinate in the first game, and game director Karsten Lund says: "We are having a lot of fun exploring Lynch as a character and pushing the boundaries in all areas." We can only imagine this will result in some interesting reality-bending sections of Dog Days.

Unrefined controls and subpar gunplay were the biggest issues with Dead Men, and the developer is working hard to refine the experience and add new elements to the gameplay.

While the exact changes haven't yet been detailed, any improvement to the gameplay should be welcome for those irked by the original's troublesome mechanics.

Despite the promised improvements, the most immediately apparent change of direction regards the aforementioned shift in presentation. "Gritty" was the key word IO kept repeating during the Dog Days' cutscenes, and for good reason. They want you to feel as if an unknown party is following and filming Kane and Lynch throughout their exploits, and the erratic movements and abrupt zooms couple with effects like lens flare and blood splatter to complete the illusion. One potentially annoying implementation of this approach is how damage is indicated to the player. Instead of the now-standard directional damage marker, Dog Days instead features camera glitches in the direction of your attacker. Get shot from the left and you'll see broken purple pixels fill that side of the screen. It fits in with the presentation style, but video glitches are always unpleasant to see, regardless of whether they're intentional or not. Maybe it's just because of my experience with editing video, but seeing these broken pixels evoked a natural feeling of frustration whenever I saw them in the game.

While most of the new features in Dog Days are based around cosmetics and tweaking the core gameplay, brand new gameplay features are being introduced as well. When you take

enough damage, your character will go into a state known as "down but not dead" that allows you to continue the fight from the ground or retreat to cover. Similar to Last Stand in Call of Duty, this gives you an opportunity to dispense a few more rounds into the chest of a baddie in a last-ditch effort to save yourself.

Online multiplayer returns in the form of co-op play and the Fragile Alliance mode. In the latter, players compete to escape heists with more cash than their cohorts. IO wants the mode to play off the gamer's "natural greed," meaning you can backstab and rob your friends just before they escape with the loot. A nice added twist is the new undercover cop feature, which allows one player to stealthily take out the criminals from the inside. The only way to ascertain the identity of the cop is to physically see him murder a teammate. It doesn't take a psychic to predict that once outed, the undercover agent will be going down in a hail of gunfire.

It's refreshing to hear IO acknowledge Dead Men's problems, because they were impossible to overlook. If this new approach to the duo succeeds and the gunplay drastically improves, perhaps we'll have an entertaining gameplay experience to go along with the intriguing characters. » **Dan Ryckert**

For a look at the presentation style Dog Days will be emulating, check out gameinformer.com/mag

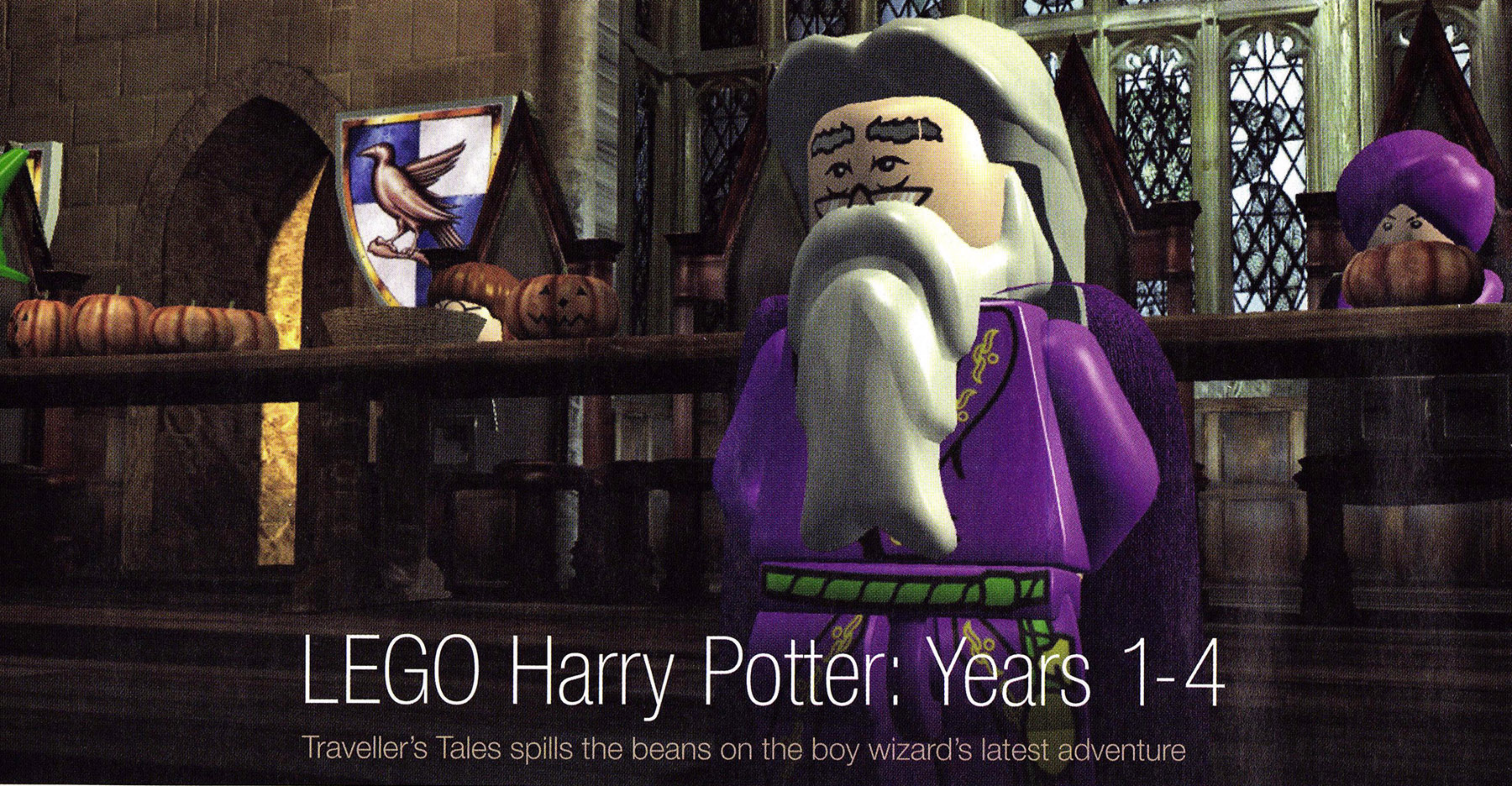


The new "down but not dead" mechanic can save you from the brink of death



Dog Days will be presented from Lynch's perspective this time around





LEGO Harry Potter: Years 1-4

Traveller's Tales spills the beans on the boy wizard's latest adventure

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

» **Style**
1 or 2-Player Action
(2-Players Online)

» **Publisher**
Warner Bros. Interactive

» **Developer**
Traveller's Tales

» **Release**
2010

The LEGO franchise is known for turning epic blockbusters into addictive collect-a-thons that appeal to children and adults alike. So it came as no surprise when Traveller's Tales announced that its next LEGO-infused adventure would tap the rich lore of Harry Potter. Besides an E3 trailer and some early screens that reveal the franchise's charming humor is still intact, little is known about the project. We interviewed Loz Doyle, producer of LEGO Harry Potter, to fix that.

» **Jeff Marchiafava**

How closely will the game follow J.K. Rowling's original fiction? Are you taking any liberties?

With such an incredible story to play with, and as big fans of the books, we very naturally follow the fiction very closely. We do it in a LEGO way, of course! So while we're faithful to the core story elements and scenes, we do like to make the player laugh – and add in some new twists suited to the LEGO world.

Are you separating the years into individual story arcs? Will there be new content for Harry Potter fans as well?

Yes, each year will be treated separately, so you will be able to play through the individual stories of years 1, 2, 3, and 4. As always, there are many different characters for players to unlock, which means that you'll also be able to play as characters that you normally would not expect to be in a particular story year. For example, you can take Professor Quirrell into Year 4. While we're not introducing new story content...there will be many areas within Hogwarts that weren't necessarily featured heavily in the films and you'll have a chance to play around and explore those areas as well.

Will LEGO Harry Potter feature a hub world similar to the one introduced in Indiana Jones 2?

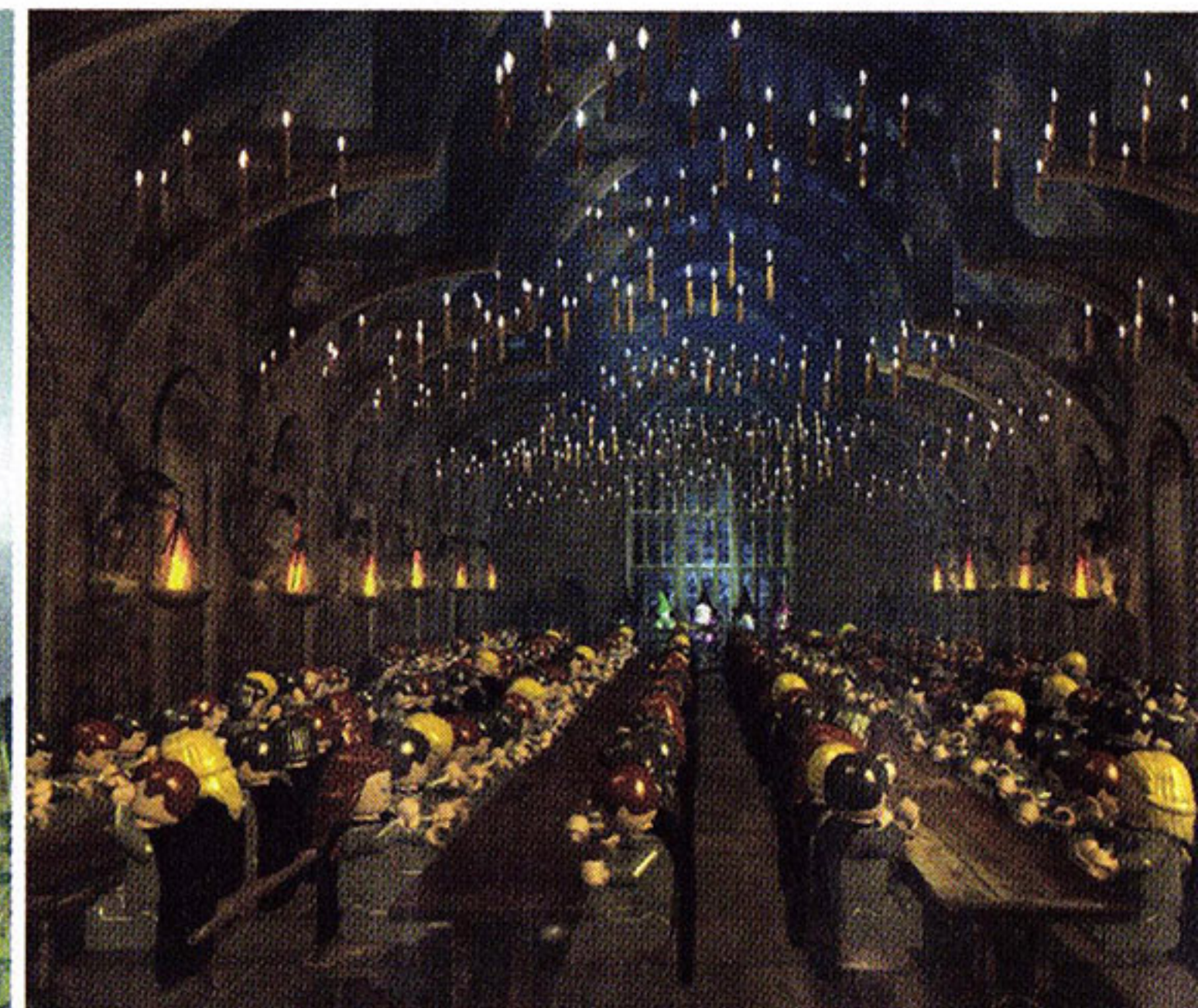
Once you're at Hogwarts in a specific year, you're essentially living out that year, as in the films. Hogwarts is a rich environment, with all

of the rooms and areas that you would expect to find there: The Great Hall, The Forbidden Forest, Gryffindor common room, and so on. The lessons and levels are all triggered from within Hogwarts. There's no going to menus or to different hubs from within that story – it's all there. Diagon Alley is where we have all of the shops, so you can buy characters, access the customizer, and select which year you want to play in from there.

How is magic being handled in the game? Will your magic affect building blocks?

Harry Potter is all about magic and spells, so that's the primary focus of the gameplay. We have a large variety of spells and potions that you learn over the course of the four years you spend at Hogwarts. Some spells are locked to specific characters, as are some special magical abilities. But we have a powerful new in-game LEGO building system using the Wingardium Leviosa spell, which you learn very early in the story, and which almost all characters use. The

What Harry Potter video game would be complete without Quidditch? Harry, Ron, and Hermione will all have different riding abilities and styles





What sick abomination did Ron just create? Kill it with fire!

spell enables you to lift individual LEGO blocks and stack them up in any way you wish. This gives us a powerful tool for creating new kinds of puzzles with more depth than you've seen before in a LEGO game.

As well as the Wingardium Leviosa building system, we have a new LEGO building spell, enabling you to use your wand to combine and build LEGO pieces into new objects. You may have to find and collect all of the pieces first, at which point they are all magically summoned over to the place that you need them, and built into a new form.

What are the character archetypes for the game? Will you be controlling different versions of Harry Potter with different magic abilities, similar to LEGO Batman? Or will different students use different spells?

As you go through each year, you'll learn more and more spells and potions, so your main characters will become more powerful over time,

just as they do in the fiction. Some characters will be better at some spells than others; some spells will be locked to specific characters, and some will have special abilities that are suited to their character. Harry, for example is excellent at flying broomsticks, but when Hermione learns to fly, she spends half her time hanging underneath the broom! However, Hermione is an expert at spells and she can often carry them out faster and more accurately than other students.

You mentioned potions – is potion crafting merely a minigame, or will the potions you create affect gameplay as well?

Yes, potions are an integral part of the gameplay, and we've got a really fun new system in place for them. They are not minigames and are instead another part of the main gameplay. You have to find the ingredients in the environment, which often involves its own set of puzzles, and then you mix the ingredients together. You might sometimes mix the wrong potion though, which can have all kinds of different results – the caul-

dron might blow up in your face or you might drink your concoction and manage to turn yourself into a frog!

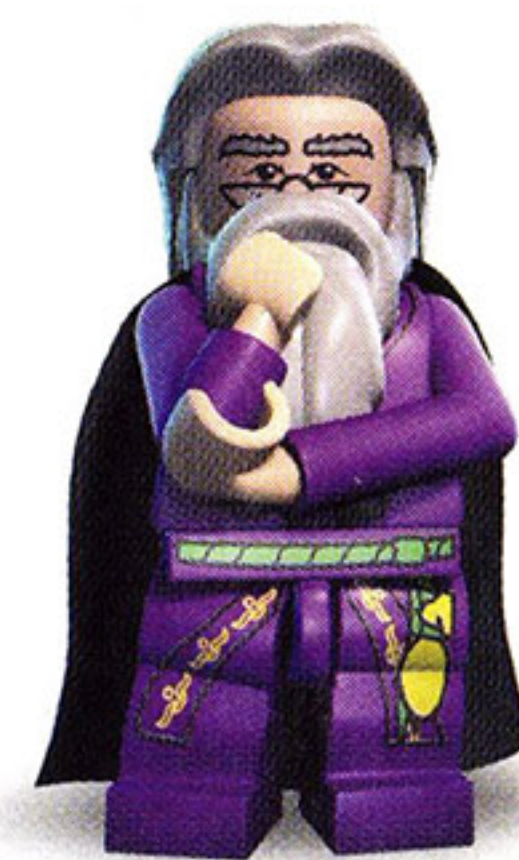
What kind of collectibles will players be looking for in the worlds? Are you bringing back mini kits?

As anyone who's played our games will know, we do love collecting things. So in addition to the classic LEGO studs, we will have red bricks and other collectibles throughout Hogwarts in each year. There are also over 100 characters to collect, and lots of spells and potions to learn, so by the end of the game you'll have a huge collection of things to play with.

Sounds like a lot of fun. Any secrets you want to tease our readers with?

Look out for LEGO Fang as a playable character!

To view a trailer for the game, go to gameinformer.com/mag



The game will feature other vehicles besides broomsticks... which this awkward-looking kid might want to look into



Players will be able to collect over 100 characters

3D Dot Game Heroes

Atlus retells a nostalgic legend with charming 3D pixels



With the character creator you could replicate almost any gaming icon

» **Platform**
PlayStation 3

» **Style**
1-Player Adventure

» **Publisher**
Atlus

» **Developer**
From Software, Silicon Software

» **Release**
May 11

If you think Dante's Inferno is the most flagrant case of game-cloning today, you have not seen 3D Dot Game Heroes. This 2D-adventure-inspired title is a tongue-in-cheek homage to one of the most influential series in gaming history, The Legend of Zelda. The reasoning behind this concept? If you do a good enough job imitating something awesome, you end up with a gem.

Atlus's newest publishing venture is a near perfect mirror of Miyamoto's masterpiece. Where you would normally see hearts representing health in Zelda, here you see apples. Collect four pieces of an apple, and you gain an extra apple of life. Hiking from area to area in the overworld causes the screen to briefly pause, then transition to the new location. Listening to the 8-bit-infused soundtrack will no doubt bring a wistful tear to your eye, as it channels more of that memorable theme than the most recent Zelda games. I cannot overstate the similarities enough.

3D Dot Game Heroes unabashedly borrows Zelda's established formula of a legendary hero slaying an evil demon. The hero then takes his

powerful sword and relinquishes it to a protective stone hidden away in a forest. Years later, the king of Dotnia proclaims he is tired of his land being two-dimensional, and makes the transition to 3D. You are then tasked to return to the woods, reclaim the hero's sword, and rescue six elders from various dungeons.

The tribute to classic Zelda titles continues with its retro art style. Though the character models and environments are inspired by classic sprites, each pixel is rendered into a 3D cube. In this unique visual presentation, every object is composed of tiny, colorful bricks that burst from defeated enemies and destroyed environments. Sprite editing even allows for custom character creation, letting you put yourself or whatever character you can imagine in the game. Players can also tweak their camera perspective, which accommodates everything from a close-up, character-focused angle to a panned-out view displaying a large chunk of surrounding world.

Combat also emulates the basics of Link's swordplay, while adding needed depth. Players

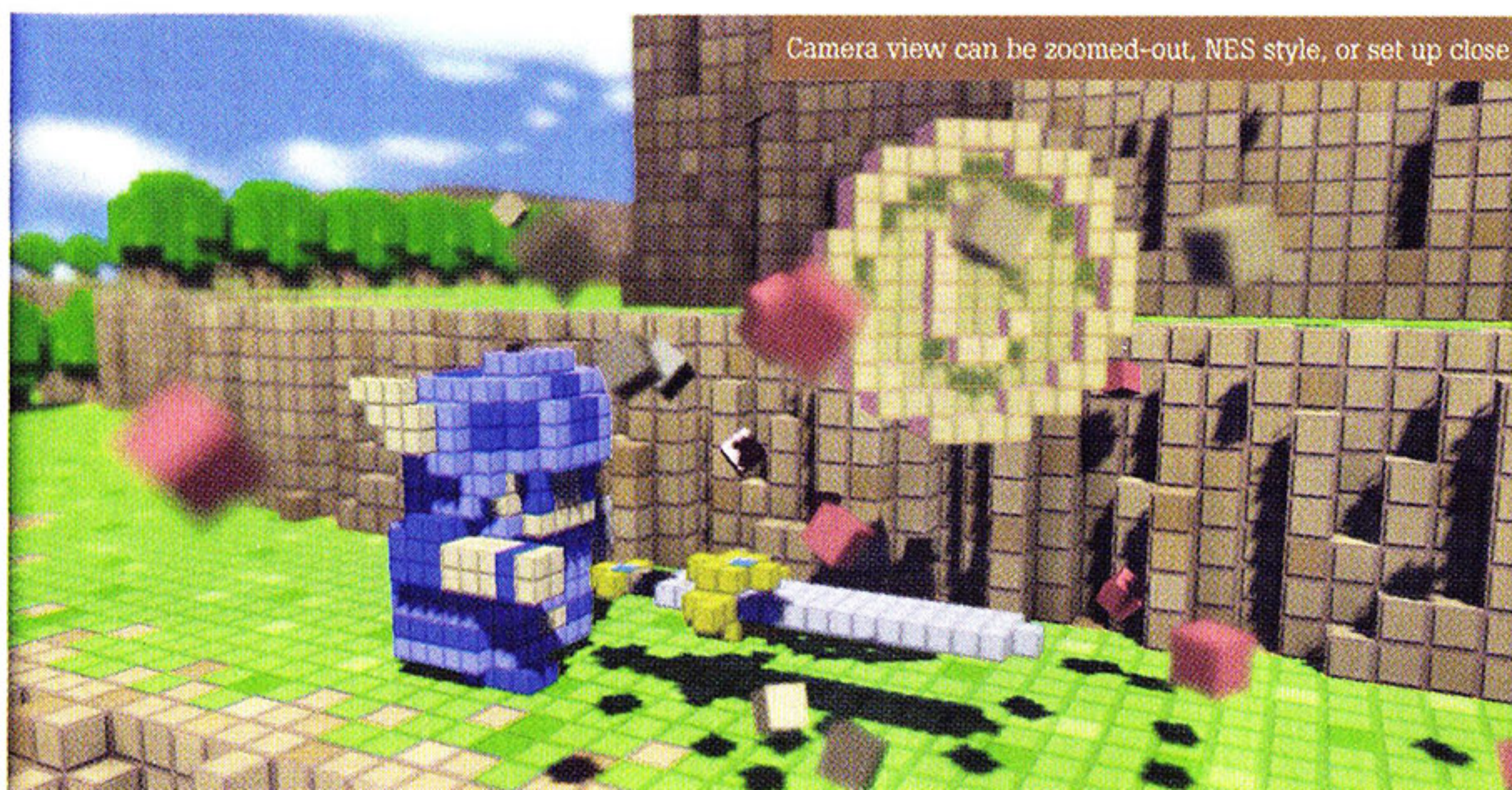
can upgrade attributes such as sword width, length, and piercing ability at blacksmiths, resulting in a much badder blade. At full health the sword fills the screen, creating geysers of spilled pixels. A giant sword comes with a false sense of security that can easily get you killed. Crews of déjà vu-inducing enemies include giant bugs, skeletons, goblins, and human-swallowing slimes. Just like the oftentimes-punishing games of yesteryear, one misstep in a fight can result in the loss of valuable life. To further aid in battle, players have a shield for blocking projectiles and eventually acquire old standbys like a boomerang and bombs.

Overworld travel is a familiar affair, with recognizable enemies and locations sprinkled across the massive map. Lava-soaked mountains, booby-trapped desert plains, and multiple dungeons lay in wait to test your mettle. Refuge can be found within the towns scattered about, complete with merchants and inns to patronize.

Dungeons are filled with enemies to destroy, keys to find, and puzzles to solve. Magical pendants can be used on special walls to reveal secret routes, and lanterns can be lit to light the way through darkened rooms. Bosses cap off each dungeon, presenting a hefty challenge to cocky gamers thinking it's enough to mindlessly hack to victory.

It's clear that the developers at Silicon and From Software have a deep appreciation for the ancestral roots of video games. It's hard to argue with a fresh, old school rendition of Zelda that ditches the Ocarina of Time recipe the latest entries have been recycling. If my brief time with 3D Dot Heroes is any indication, the retro renaissance is still alive and well. » **Tim Turi**

Check out gameinformer.com/mag to check out the trailer



Camera view can be zoomed-out, NES style, or set up close

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Arc Rise Fantasia

RPGs find hope on the Wii

» **Platform**
Wii

» **Style**
1-Player Role-Playing
Game

» **Publisher**
Ignition Entertainment/
Marvelous
Entertainment

» **Developer**
Imageepoch

» **Release**
Summer

Role-playing games haven't been well served on the Wii, though the same might be said of any genre that doesn't revolve around minigames. Just because there haven't been many good RPGs for the system doesn't mean Wii owners don't deserve them, and one of the most promising prospects is Arc Rise Fantasia. Developed by Imageepoch (which is also responsible for the Luminous Arc series on DS), the game features a twist on turn-based battles and focuses on the relationships between the main characters. We talked with Imageepoch president Ryohei Mikage and Marvelous Entertainment producer Hideyuki Mizutani about what makes Arc Rise Fantasia unique and why the Wii was chosen as a platform. » **Joe Juba**

This is Imageepoch's first console project. How was the decision made to move away from handhelds for this particular game?

Ryohei Mikage: We had started our company with young developers, and we've been engaging game titles for the handhelds. Over the years, our dev team has grown enough to challenge a new platform, so we took the opportunity to develop Arc Rise Fantasia for the Wii to

help us prepare for PS3 and Xbox 360 games someday in the future when we are ready. Why Arc Rise Fantasia for Wii? In a single phase, it's "because no one has done a real RPG for it."

In the U.S., there are not many role-playing games on Wii. How would you describe the current health of the genre on Wii in Japan?

Hideyuki Mizutani: The RPG genre has always been the most popular and favored game genre in Japan, and I believe it's changing into a world-wide shareable style. It's been said the Wii platform is a difficult landscape, especially for RPGs in Japan. But RPGs cannot fail on any platform, because people love them.

What do you see as the defining elements of the world you've created in Arc Rise Fantasia that set it apart from other fantasy role-playing games?

Mikage: Arc Rise Fantasia doesn't have a classic RPG story where a hero saves the world by defeating a demon king or whoever threatens to destroy it. The world in Arc Rise Fantasia still has swords and magic, but we tried to focus on the bonds between the characters by carefully depicting their personalities.



What can you tell us about the battle system?

Mikage: The classic (orthodox) turn-based combat has been used in big Japanese RPG titles and people feel comfortable with it, we all know that. Arc Rise Fantasia has been challenged to make a new one which is much more strategic and still simple enough for anyone to understand. Its AP-based combat is a tactical system constructed by the three points; "when to do," "what to do," and "where to do it." During combat scenes in Arc Rise Fantasia, players are always asked how they want to defeat enemies, and it makes the continual battles much more fun and entertaining.

Yasunori Mitsuda is a fan-favorite composer who has worked with Marvelous Entertainment in the past, and is doing so again with Arc Rise Fantasia. How did this collaboration begin?

Mizutani: Games that I've produced recently have been placing a big emphasis on music. When people remember their favorite games, they also recall the music they loved in it. I believe unforgettable RPGs can be created only by a harmonious combination of fun gameplay and great music. Regarding Mr. Mitsuda, I have always been in love with his music. His works are noble, poetic, and filled with fugaciously transparent sounds. Those are just purely beautiful and get along with RPGs the best. We worked together for the first time on Luminous Arc and I had no reason not to ask him to work on Arc Rise Fantasia. Really, I had none.

The U.S. release of the game will come nearly a year after the Japanese release. Will there be any differences in terms of content between the two versions?

Mizutani: Nothing really changed. I am personally looking forward to seeing how people in the U.S. like the game.

Go to gameinformer.com/mag to get even more Arc Rise Fantasia info by reading our full interview with Ryohei Mikage and Hideyuki Mizutani

Sin and Punishment 2

For hardcore Wii gamers, spring can't come soon enough



The local co-op is quite fun, but the second player only controls an extra aiming reticle instead of a full-on character



The original Sin and Punishment became a cult import hit in the years following its Japan-only release on Nintendo 64 in 2000, and the game finally made its U.S. debut via Wii's Virtual Console in 2007. By that time the game's rudimentary 3D graphics had shown their age, but the appeal of its over-the-top rail-shooter action in the vein of Panzer Dragoon, Space Harrier, and Rez got many players past the visual barriers. Last year, recent and longtime fans were pumped to hear that a sequel was in the works from original developer Treasure.

Sin and Punishment 2 is out in Japan, and we've played through the entire campaign. Holy crap, it's insanely fun and challenging. The dialogue isn't in English yet (a Japanese game with Japanese dialogue? Go figure), so story details are sparse. We do know a sinister group called G5 is after the female character, Kachi, and Isa is helping her go on the lam.

The game begins inside the duo's ship after it crash lands on the roof of an underground city. Players learn the ropes as they fight their way through the ship's corridors to escape from invading forces. Gamers familiar with the first game's controls will enjoy the ability to aim and move with the dual sticks on the Wii's classic controller or the GameCube controller, but I switched halfway through to the default remote and nunchuk scheme and ended up preferring it because of the faster, light gun-style aiming.

The first full level gives you a taste of the craziness of an average stage. You start out running along a highway in the previously mentioned underground city. The screen is clouded with things that can be shot and/or are shooting at you. Guys on turrets, military choppers, flying fish, and walking tanks are constantly bombarding you. A large hovering helicopter halts your forward momentum, and you must blast it apart piece by piece as it fires at you and deploys

scores of soldiers. Next you come across a huge white bird that swoops in and sends dozens of mutant crabs rolling toward you. After it goes down, you fly upside down for a bit, then follow a few trucks with turrets on the back. Then you circle around a tall tower with laser cranes sweeping across large sections of the screen, forcing you to use the quick dodge move with relish. After that, you come upon a landing pad filled with troops to clear.

Once you land, a super soldier who can block all of your shots with his sword drives out on a truck. You must kill all of his cronies, dodge his lunges, and return the favor with some melee attacks. Next a creepy G5 member appears with his electric lasso. He doesn't have a ton of health, but his impenetrable shield makes attacking tough. This forces you to lure him into melee range or wait for him to fire missile so that you can swat them back into his face. The final segment has you follow a massive turtle creature down an endless hole as it fires projectiles up at you. Eventually it halts part way down the tube, biting and clawing at you as it breathes flames. It's even got a smaller creature on its back that drops an avalanche of rocks on your head. Once this guy's down, level one is finally over.

All seven main stages in the game are just as crammed with massive bosses, constantly changing gameplay and camera angles, and overwhelming odds. Players will battle huge eels throughout an undersea tunnel, tear through a death factory in a Contra-esque sidescroller, sprint through a dark forest full of ninja creatures guided by a flashlight, ride a speeding lizard down a hazardous desert highway, and more.

The most surprising thing about Sin and Punishment 2 is that I can't recall a single instance of slowdown no matter how many enemies and bullets are onscreen. This is definitely one to watch for hardcore Wii players come springtime. » **Bryan Vore**

» **Platform**
Wii

» **Style**
1 or 2-Player Shooter

» **Publisher**
Nintendo

» **Developer**
Treasure

» **Release**
Spring



Cast

Sin and Punishment 2's protagonists are a guy named Isa and a girl named Kachi. Isa uses some kind of golf ball-looking jetpack to fly around, and his charge shot is a single large explosive blast. Kachi flies around on a hoverboard, and her special enables painting multiple targets or focusing all shots on a single target. Players who prefer manual aiming should go with Isa, while those who appreciate an automatic lock-on should choose Kachi.

A variety of online leaderboards lock in your high score for all to see. Maintain a high multiplier and look for hidden targets to earn the most points



Avatar

James Cameron's epic sci-fi tale contains some tough choices

» **Platform**
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360

» **Style**
1-Player Action/
Adventure (Online TBA)

» **Publisher**
Ubisoft

» **Developer**
Ubisoft Montreal

» **Release**
December 1

Nowadays, a lot of games offer players choices. Do you want to be a gallant knight or a backstabbing thief? Will you help a desperate beggar with some mundane errand or ignore his plight and pursue your own success? While some games present players with more meaningful choices than others, rarely do your decisions carry long-standing consequences. With the video game adaptation of the upcoming film *Avatar*, Ubisoft hopes to change this by placing the outcome of an interspecies war in your hands.

If you're worried about movie spoilers, you might want to stop reading. While the game doesn't simply regurgitate the film's plot, it appears to follow the same basic premise. You play as a human named Ryder who is assigned to the Resource Development Agency, a group intent on mining the planet of Pandora for valuable resources. Before they jump into the action, players can choose their character's appearance and gender. Early on in the game Ryder must make a decision: continue working for the RDA, or side with the Na'vi, a native tribe of blue-skinned aliens whose existence is threatened by the encroaching operation. Humans also use the Na'vi as vessels via a mysterious Psionic Link Unit that transfers the consciousness of the two beings, so choosing sides also affects the gameplay. If you stick with the RDA, you will continue the game as a human. Betray your kind, and you will spend the remainder of the game in

the body of your Na'vi host. Additionally, you will interact with different characters, carry out different missions, and explore different environments based on your actions.

In a parallel of the movie, the stunning scenery in the game steals the show. The lush environments are striking both visually and in their scope, offering 16 maps to explore. While we only got a chance to see a few of these areas in our hands-on preview, we were impressed with how big each one was, as well as the creativity they exude. Many sci-fi games fail to take advantage of the thrilling prospect of exploring a new planet (*cough* Mass Effect *cough*), but this appears to be *Avatar's* strong suit. Even the sometimes-underwhelming character models and rough animation of the preview build couldn't squelch *Avatar's* atmosphere. An option to play the game in 3D will undoubtedly make a handful of gamers with stereoscopic-enabled televisions very happy, but you don't need a cutting edge display to appreciate the game's glamour.

Missions mainly consist of the standard go-collect-something/go-kill-something variety, but some light RPG elements and the ability to upgrade weapons, armor, and special abilities breaks up the monotony. A turn-based strategy element (see sidebar) adds another layer of depth not often seen in games based on movies. Each map also features plenty of side missions to perform and collectibles to hunt down, and can be revisited at any time. This should keep com-

pletists happy – if the gameplay can keep them engaged. In this early build the controls were unremarkable, and some modes of transportation – such as riding on the back of a dragon-like Banshee – felt downright broken at times.

Playing as the two different factions feels appropriately different. As a Na'vi you must rely primarily on melee weapons to dispatch your enemies, whereas soldiers pack a substantial arsenal and excel at taking out enemies from afar. While it was interesting playing as both sides, the storyline felt decidedly black and white; it's hard not to feel like the bad guy when you're playing as the RDA and slaughtering a native tribe to exploit their planet for its natural resources. It is an interesting twist when the humans end up being the bad guys, but as someone who was hoping to explore a complex issue from two different and understandable viewpoints, I was disappointed.

Players expect very little from licensed offerings, but it's clear the developers at Ubisoft are trying to create an innovative video game that stands on its own. If they succeed, buying the game may be the easiest decision you have to make. » **Jeff Marchiafava**

Like many complex sci-fi games, Avatar sports plenty of made up terminology. But some words seem strangely familiar. Are they homages to other video games or are we just crazy? Judge for yourself at gameinformer.com/mag

Global Domination

One of the most surprising additions to *Avatar* is a turn-based strategy meta-game available to players via transportation hubs scattered throughout the world. This mode, dubbed War Room, allows players to battle for control of the numerous territories of Pandora in a style similar to the board game *Risk*. Players move their troops around a holographic globe, playing as the faction they side with during the main game. Three types of units are available for deployment, as well as factories and defensive upgrades. The gameplay is rather simple, but what makes it more than a throwaway minigame is how this mode interacts with the main campaign. New troop deployments are bought with XP acquired during the main game, and health and weapon upgrades earned from conquering certain territories boost your character upon returning to the real world...the real game world, that is.



FYI: Your Na'vi tribal armor doesn't stand up too well against bullets. Expect to die...a lot





Jedi Consular

Star Wars: The Old Republic

LucasArts and BioWare introduce the final two classes

If history has taught us anything, making an MMO is a tricky business. For every success story like World of Warcraft, there is a mountain of disappointing Age of Conans. When BioWare announced The Old Republic after much rumor and speculation, gamers rejoiced in the possibilities of what could come. Up until now, we've just had bits and pieces of information on the game, but LucasArts is finally revealing some meaningful details.

"The key ingredients that we feel are important to making a good role-playing experience are combat, exploration, progression, and story," producer Blaine Christine tells us. "We've really been working on bringing that BioWare and LucasArts storytelling style to the game." The standout differentiator separating The Old Republic from all of the other MMOs is that last word on the list: story. Setting the game 3,000 years before the original films gives BioWare a huge blank canvas for storytelling in a compelling and familiar universe.

One of the ways BioWare is crafting this player-driven story is by using familiar Star Wars archetypes as character classes. The smuggler is modeled after a Han Solo, the bounty hunter takes after Boba Fett, and so on. The final two classes, Jedi Consular and Sith Inquisitor, are

also inspired from within the universe. Both of these classes rely more on Force powers than their lightsabers during combat. Unlike the Jedi Knight and Sith Warrior classes, which mimic melee heavy characters like Mace Windu and Darth Maul, these new classes are your playable versions of Yoda and Emperor Palpatine.

Our demo had us taking the role of a young Sith Inquisitor fresh and ready for some evil action. The starting world for both the Inquisitor and the Sith Warrior is Korriban, the Sith stronghold you may recognize from the Knights of the Old Republic series. The mission structure is similar to World of Warcraft, except in this game you actually engage in voice-acted conversations with the NPCs to advance the story. Using the game's Mass Effect-like dialogue system, we start a hostile conversation with our mission giver (which is probably how all Sith talk to each other).

The combat in The Old Republic also feels akin to World of Warcraft. Considering the level of refinement Blizzard has implemented over the years, this is good news for MMO players. BioWare has definitely given the game its own flair with creative new abilities. Among the few of the evil force powers we try with our Inquisitor is a Lighting Drain that roots an enemy as it drains health. The standout of the bunch is the Overload

attack, which sends our Inquisitor into a spectacular front flip before she jams her lightsaber into the ground, causing a devastating area effect that knocks enemies onto their backsides and stuns them for a short time. This instant favorite is great for mopping up grouped baddies.

The other major reveal was not actually present in our demo, but LucasArts shared some juicy tidbits about the companion system. Companions are pets that characters can summon to aid them during their adventures. For example, the Inquisitor can gain a combat-focused ally named Xalek, a fierce Kaleesh warrior. Hardcore Star Wars fans may recognize that race; the infamous General Grievous was originally Kaleesh before he became an insane four-armed cyborg.

If anyone is up to the task of competing with Blizzard, it's BioWare. The strong sense of storytelling and great combat systems that make its other games so successful could also be the key to success on this scale. We're excited to see more of the game, but as far as a release date goes, LucasArts and BioWare aren't ready to talk about a timeframe just yet. » **Nick Ahrens**

To watch our video interview with BioWare about The Old Republic, head to gameinformer.com/mag

» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
Massively Multiplayer
Online Role-Playing
Game

» **Publisher**
LucasArts

» **Developer**
BioWare

» **Release**
TBA



Sith Inquisitor

The Full Class List

LucasArts and BioWare finally revealed the last classes from The Old Republic. Listed here is the entire cast including the last two reveals: the Jedi Consular and Sith Inquisitor. You can see images of the rest of the classes on gameinformer.com



REPUBLIC

Jedi Knight
Smuggler
Trooper
Jedi Consular



EMPIRE

Sith Warrior
Imperial Agent
Bounty Hunter
Sith Inquisitor

PLAY IF YOU LIKE...

Lightsaber combat
Stealth and gadgets
Ranged attacks
Force powers



Dark Void

Jetpack mayhem brings relevancy back to the y-axis

Capcom's upcoming rocket-fueled adventure brings a bevy of new gameplay elements, an interesting new setting, and plenty of metallic menaces to riddle with bullets. We've explored four important facets of this brand-new IP to help flesh out what sets it apart from the plethora of other third-person shooters out there.

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

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Capcom

» **Developer**
Airtight Games

» **Release**
January 12



Tripping the Void

Dark Void's story follows two marooned companions: an ex-military pilot Will and his former love interest Eva, who stumble into the Bermuda Triangle. Fighting homicidal alien-robots called Watchers every step of the way, the duo eventually encounters Nikola Tesla. The eccentric inventor has been hard at work creating myriad crazy gadgets for use in the human Survivors' fight against the oppressive Watchers. Naturally, our protagonists receive jetpacks and take up arms. It's a safe bet that we're going to see Will go from apathetic zero to praise-worthy hero as the plot matures.



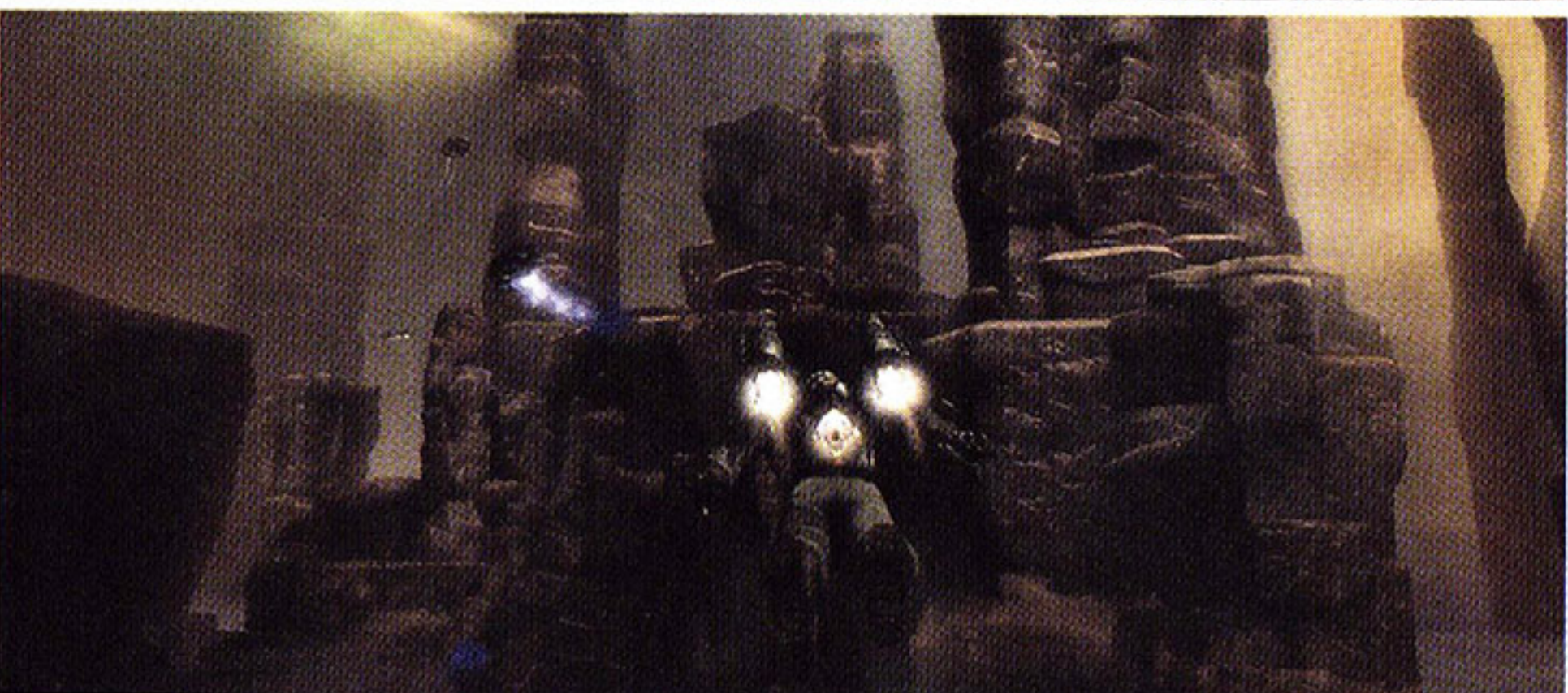
Vertical Combat

Gunplay is a reliable, standard affair. Like many popular over-the-shoulder third-person shooters, you do a lot of shooting, grenade throwing, and taking cover. How you take cover, however, is entirely different when you throw in a jetpack. Vertical battlegrounds come into play quite often, whether you're ascending or descending a precipice. Will frequently flies to ledges, gripping to the bottom for shelter while enemies descend from above. What would otherwise be standard firefights are intensified as the robotic shells of your defeated enemies careen downwards and gravity turns your own grenades against you.



Jetpack Hovering

One of the first jetpack abilities you acquire is hovering above the battlefield. When the ground combat gets a little too intense for Will, he's free to zoom away and lick his wounds until his health regenerates. The ability to take flight on a whim is also useful for performing aerial flanking maneuvers on your enemies. You haven't known true satisfaction until you've unloaded a full clip into your enemy while descending towards them from the sky, only to deliver a coup de grâce melee finisher.



Rocketeer Dogfights

Hovering and boosting to ledges may be fun, but the game's full-on jet fighter-esque combat catapults it into another genre entirely. Dogfight basics like barrel rolls and loop-de-loops allow Will to evade enemy plasma fire while countering with high caliber machine gun rounds. You're free to shoot down or hijack enemy "hubcaps," which are gyroscopic flying saucers. The beauty of being a human fighter jet is that you're free to jump between ground combat, hovering, and all-out flight on the fly, allowing you to approach any situation however you please. Watch your head if you're daring enough to take flight indoors, however. That can get messy. » **Tim Turi**

Check out gameinformer.com/mag for additional Dark Void coverage



The visual tone is more "dude in a mascot costume" than cartoony.



Naughty Bear

Wet developer goes from killer babe to killer bears

Anyone who enjoys watching cute cartoon characters meet a grisly end à la TV show *Happy Tree Friends* has a game to watch come summertime. In *Naughty Bear*, players control a demented, scruffy teddy bear who goes on a sadistic rampage against his fellow stuffed animals as payback for not being invited to a birthday party. Totally understandable.

A proper British narrator eggs Naughty into several devious deeds and notifies him of the location of kitchen knives, baseball bats, and guns. Even though straight-up murder is always

an option, players earn more experience for setting up a big scare. Fans of Burger King advergaming *Sneak King* will be familiar with the setup, except now instead of getting a Whopper, victims will go crazy with fright and may even blow themselves up, sending stuffing everywhere.

As players level up, they earn upgrades and unlock new sections of the Island of Perfection. Collectible party favors are strewn about the world, and custom costumes like ninja, robot, and cop grant special abilities.

Online play includes both co-op and versus,

so you can antagonize alongside or against friends. Standard match types like capture the flag and base defense are included, albeit with the cuddly/violent stuffed animal aesthetic of the main game. Apparently, developer A2M (known for semi-decent-shooter *Wet*) is already planning downloadable content, so gamers looking for some extra naughtiness should be able to find it soon after release. » **Bryan Vore**

Check out gameinformer.com/mag for the *Naughty Bear* debut trailer

» **Platform**
PlayStation 3, Xbox 360

» **Style**
1-Player Action
(4-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
505 Games

» **Developer**
Artificial Mind & Movement

» **Release**
June

Inversion

The TimeShift developers turn off gravity

Idyllic near-future utopias never last; there is always some alien race or extra dimensional army prepared to invade and conquer the planet. Fortunately, when this kind of war breaks out there will always be a lone soldier or rookie cop ready to tip the scales in humanity's favor.

When a mysterious enemy called the Lutadore start wrecking every metropolitan city on the planet and kidnap Davis Russel's daughter, the brash young cop does the only thing that makes sense to a short-tempered fellow in a stressful situation – he grabs the nearest experimental gravity weapon, tells his neighbor to tag along, and starts cracking alien skulls.

Inversion's entire campaign is co-op friendly, allowing players to take control of Russel and Leo Delgado. While both characters have access to a variety of high-powered rifles, the duo might find that the easiest way to take out a nest of Lutadore is by throwing a bus at them.

Inversion's featured weapon, the grappler, functions similarly to *Half-Life's* gravity gun. By manipulating the planet's gravimetric fields, players can manipulate objects within the environment to create impromptu shields when the game's destructible cover fails them, or to fire cars like bullets. You and your friend won't be the only ones playing with gravity. The Lutadore have made a mess of Newton's laws, creating zero-g

pockets all over the city. In addition to traditional third-person action, players must use the grappler to solve environmental puzzles and navigate their way through weightless environments.

Saber's last game, *TimeShift*, didn't turn out as well as we'd hoped, but it was filled with cool concepts. It sounds like *Inversion* has a few crafty ideas of its own, so maybe this time it all comes together. » **Ben Reeves**

For more exclusive screens of *Inversion* and a Q&A with Saber Interactive CEO Matthew Karch, go to gameinformer.com/mag

» **Platform**
PlayStation 3, Xbox 360

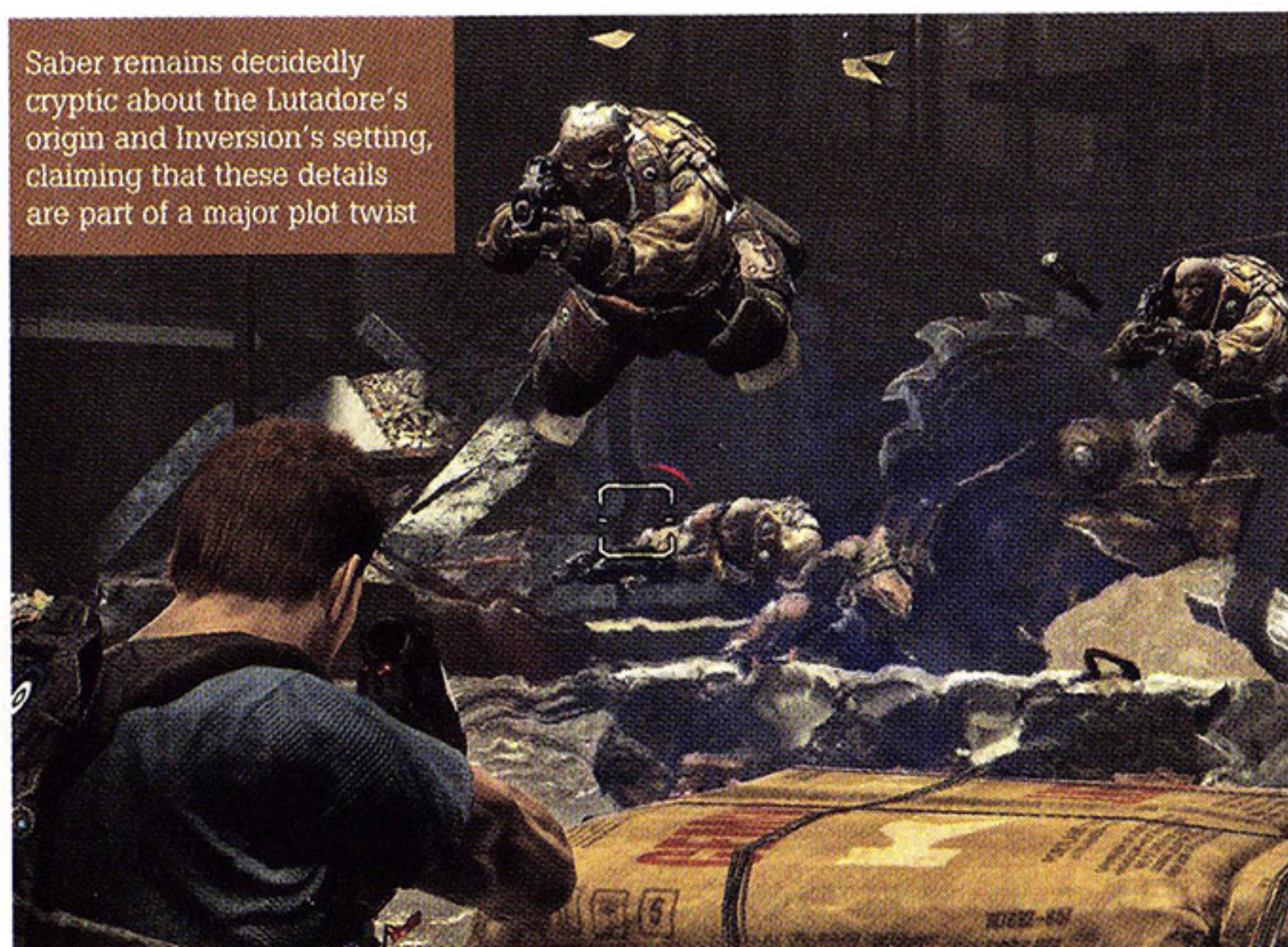
» **Style**
1 or 2-player Action
(Online TBA)

» **Publisher**
Namco Bandai

» **Developer**
Saber Interactive

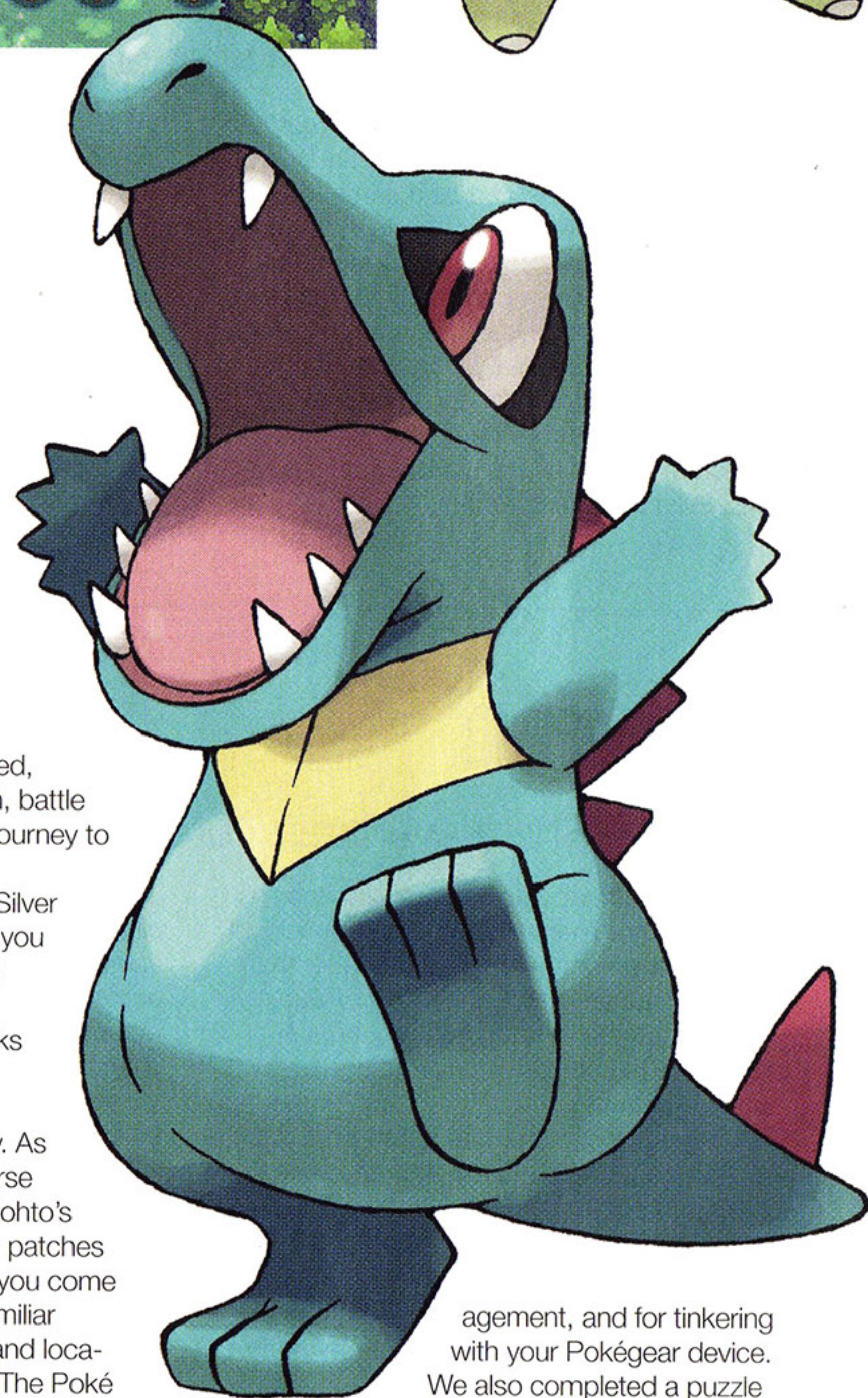
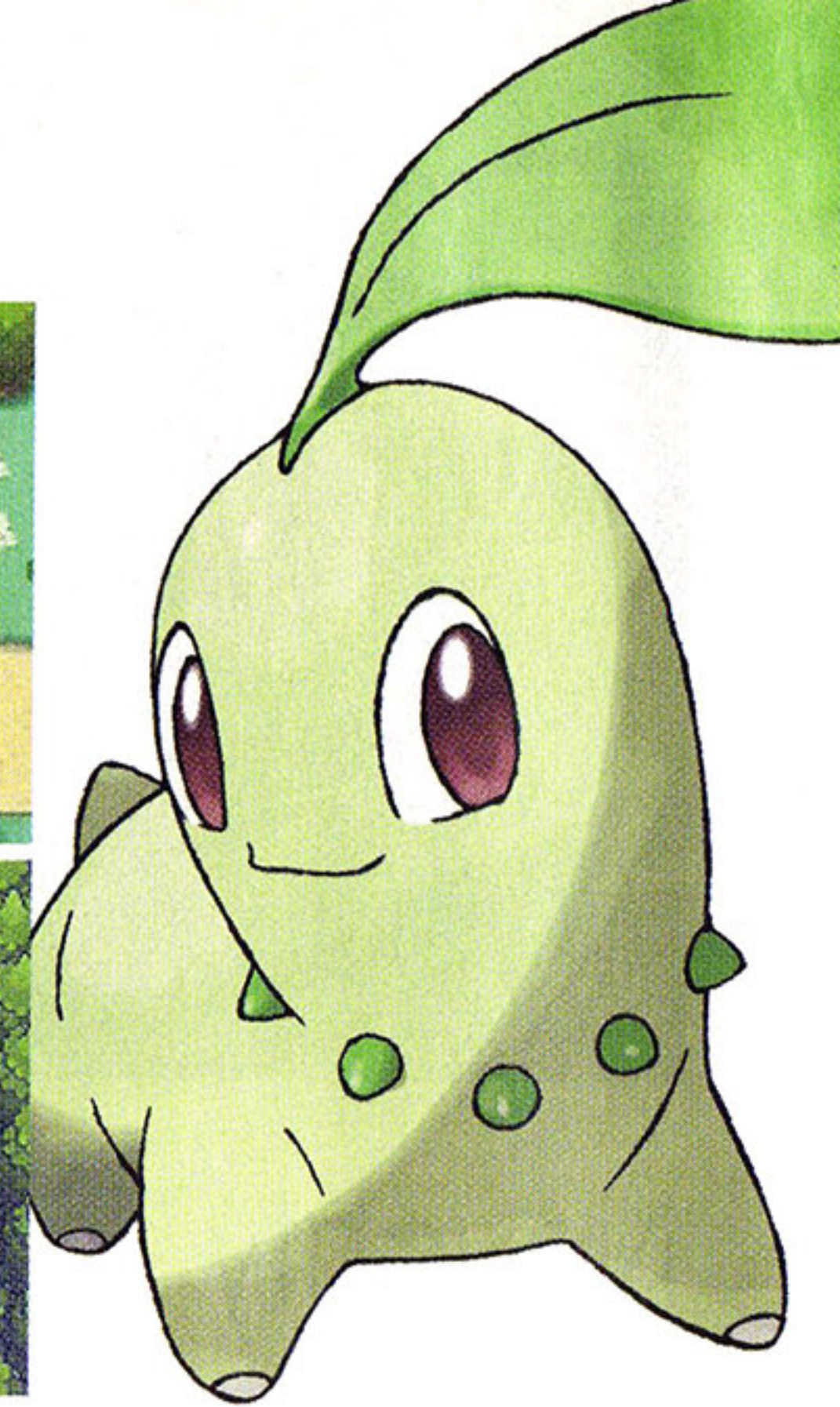
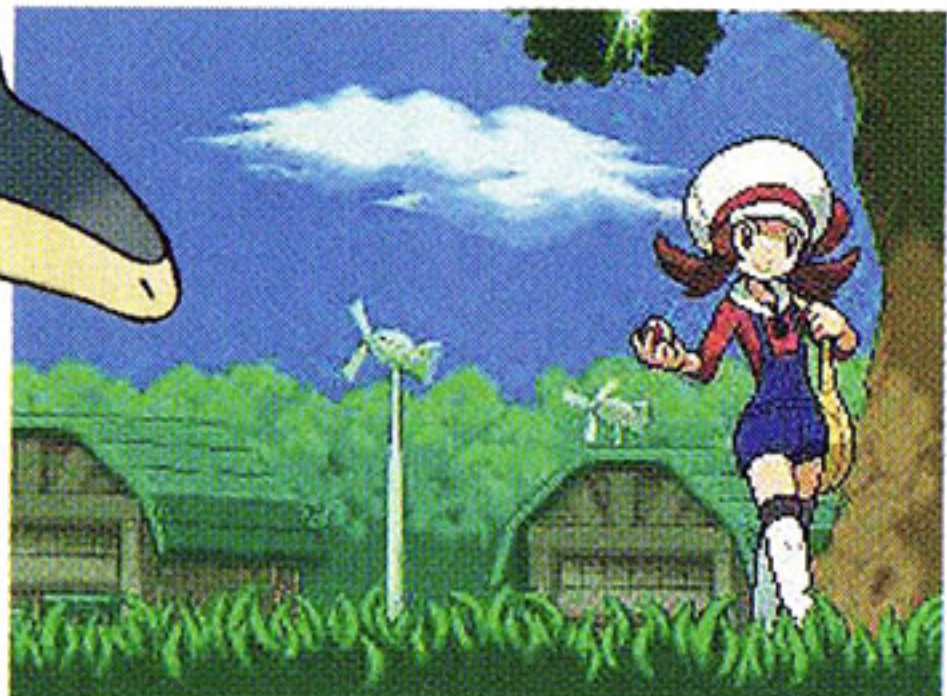
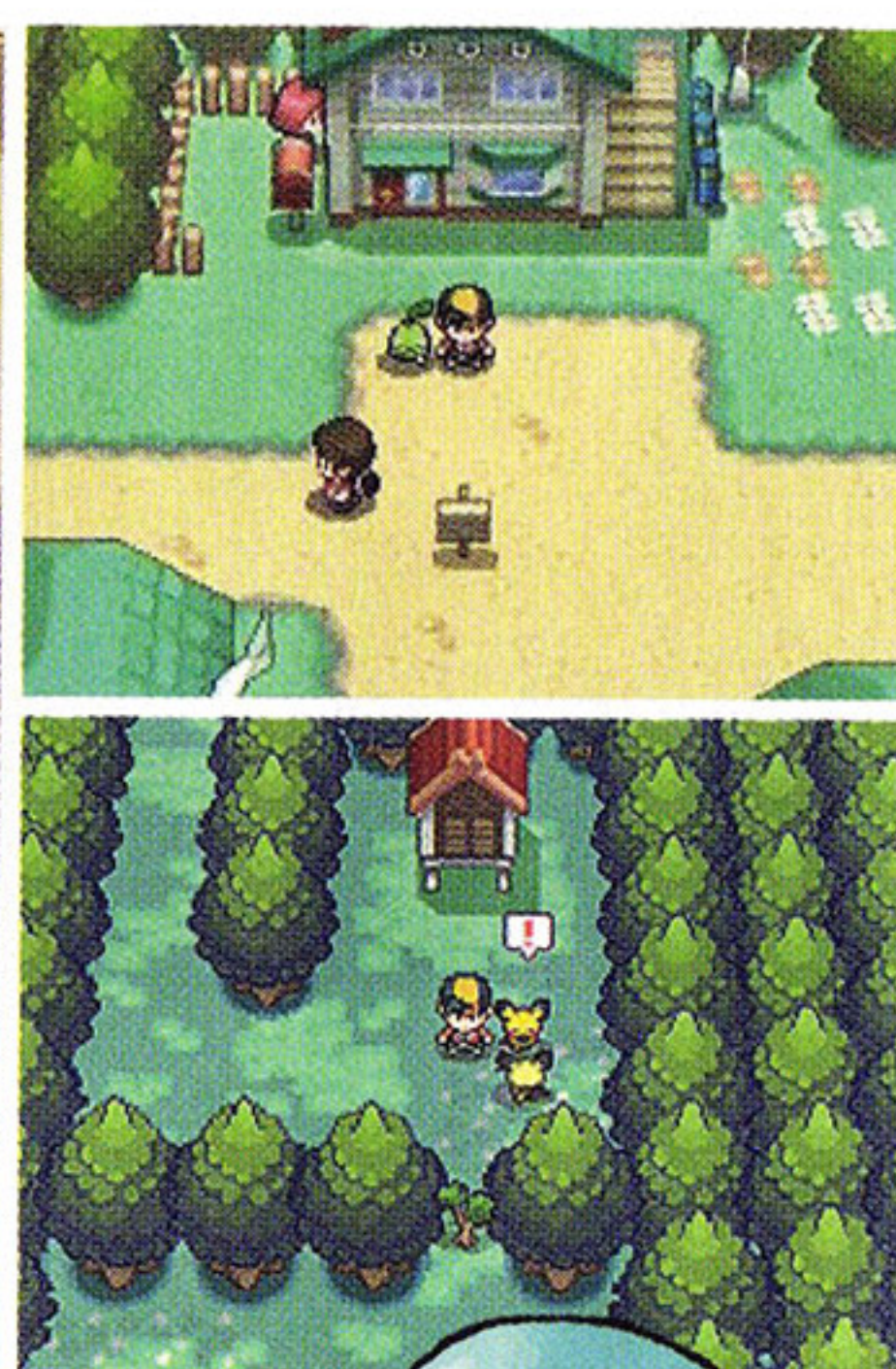
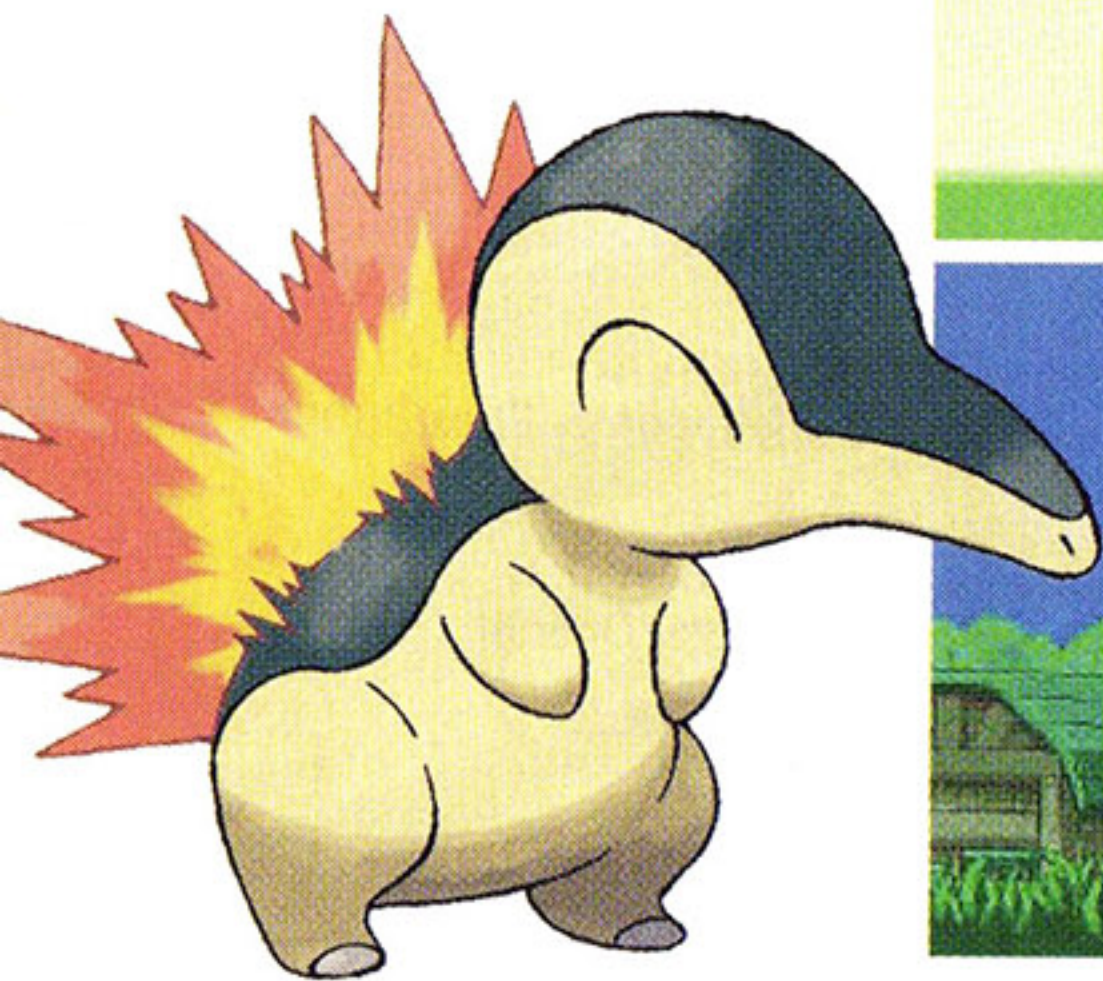
» **Release**
2010

Saber remains decidedly cryptic about the Lutadore's origin and *Inversion's* setting, claiming that these details are part of a major plot twist



As one of the developers who helped design the Havok Destruction physics engine, Saber Interactive is taking full advantage of the software's capabilities





Pokémon HeartGold

Gotta catch 'em all over again in Gold remake

» **Platform**
Nintendo DS

» **Style**
1-Player Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
Nintendo

» **Developer**
Game Freak

» **Release**
Spring 2010

It's been more than 10 years since the original Pokémon titles first hit Japan and made the series one of Nintendo's most popular (and most profitable) franchises. Now developer Game Freak has dozens of titles in its repertoire, with two more en route to American shores this year.

Pokémon HeartGold and SoulSilver are the latest in the monster collecting series. With slightly altered titles, these are enhanced remakes of Pokémon Gold and Silver that originally appeared on Game Boy Color. Though we were only able to get our hands on a Japanese version of HeartGold, we didn't have to understand the dialogue to see the similarities.

HeartGold returns players to the Johto region. At the outset, you choose between a male or female trainer, and then just like in the original, you choose between three Pokémon: Totodile, Chikorita,

and Cyndaquil. Once you've decided, you must catch and train Pokémon, battle rivals, and collect badges on your journey to become the ultimate trainer.

Story sequences from Gold and Silver have remained the same; however you

will come across a few tweaks in graphics and gameplay. As you traverse through Johto's abundant patches of grass, you come across familiar routes and locations. The Pokémon Mart, Pokémon Center, and gyms have been renovated over the past decade. Environments and character models have received a facelift, and the sound quality of music has improved.

HeartGold makes use of the touchscreen as a menu for inventory, Pokémon man-

Take your Pokémon for a walk

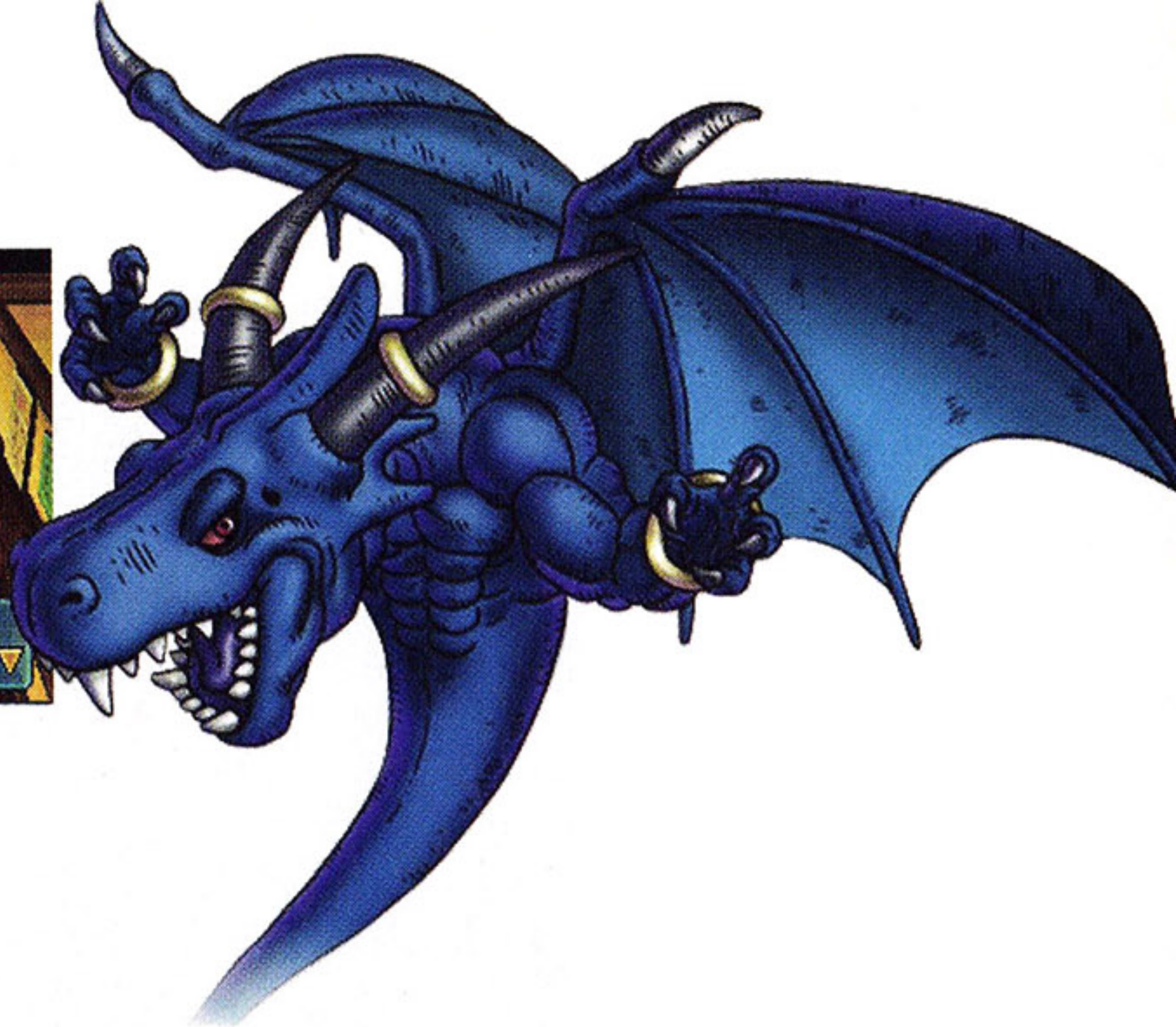
The Japanese version of Pokémon HeartGold is bundled with a pedometer-like accessory called a PokéWalker. The device, modeled after a Pokéball, allows you to wirelessly transfer your captured creatures from the game to the accessory for training on the go. From what we've gathered, each step taken with the PokéWalker allows the transferred Pokémon to gain experience points. These Pokémon can also collect items and battle other creatures for capture, all of which can then be transferred back to the DS game. As of press time, it has not been confirmed whether the U.S. version of HeartGold will include the PokéWalker.



agement, and for tinkering with your Pokégear device. We also completed a puzzle using the stylus that required us to slide around and rotate panels to fit into an incomplete Kabuto image. Implementation of the DS technology definitely helps add variety to the remake, however we hoped for more creative uses.

Though we're unsure if these minor enhancements are enough to re-engage players of the original, if you're a newcomer to the series or a fan looking to relive golden memories, HeartGold may be worth checking out when it hits retail this spring. » **Annette Gonzalez**

Check out gameinformer.com/mag for additional character art and gameplay video.



Blue Dragon: Awakened Shadow

Another Blue Dragon title, another gameplay style

Despite generally positive reviews, the Blue Dragon series has struggled to find an audience. The first game was an epic turn-based JRPG exclusive to the Xbox 360 that spanned a whopping three discs. Its successor, Blue Dragon Plus, was an underwhelming RTS for the DS that stressed the loyalty of returning fans instead of winning over new ones. The third installment of the Blue Dragon series arrives stateside next year, and although the platform is the same, this DS exclusive features yet another genre shift, sporting real-time action.

The story of Awakened Shadow is still largely a mystery to Western audiences (the game is already out in Japan), but we do know it takes

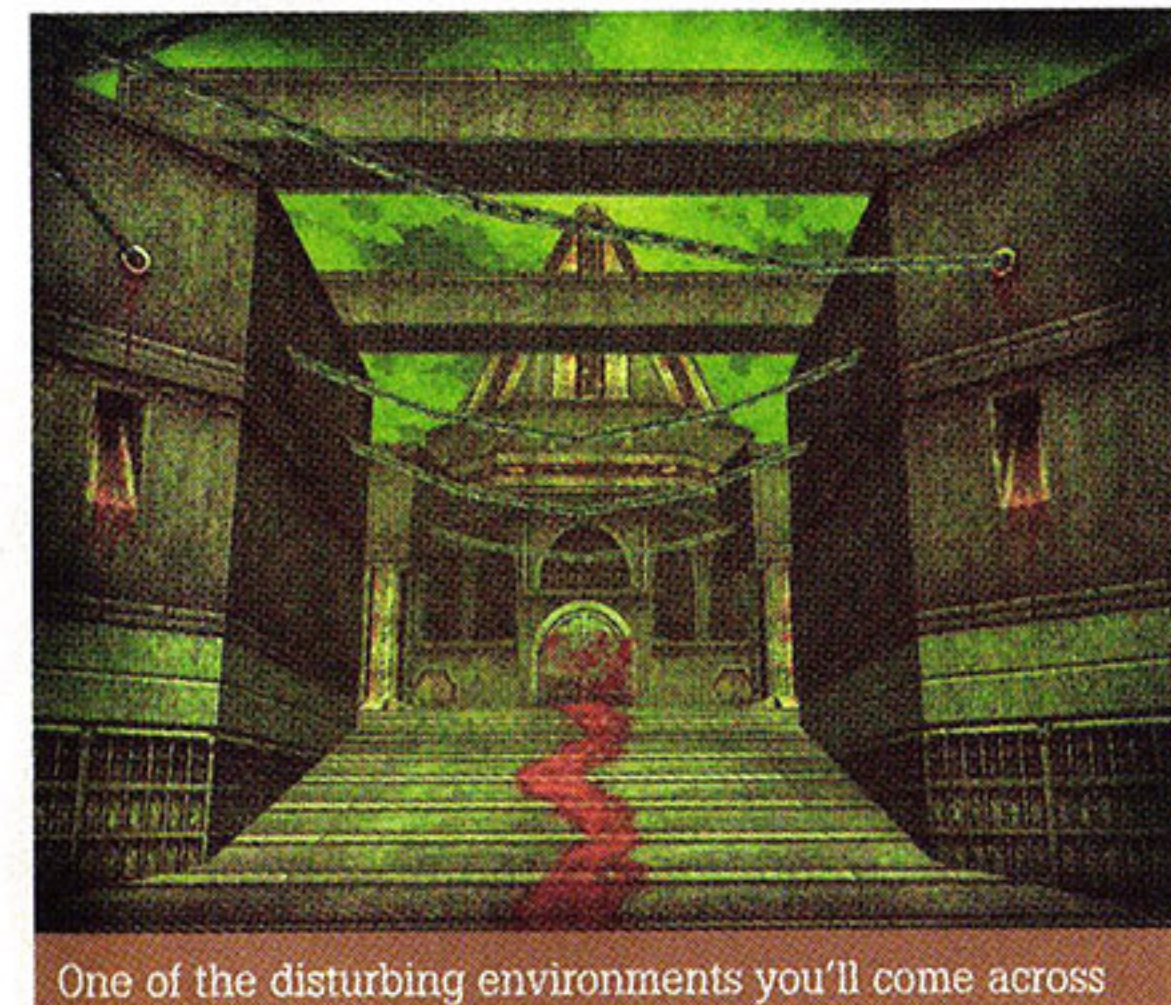
place a year after the events of Blue Dragon Plus. Players must once again use the titular Shadows, the magical embodiments of various creatures, to battle enemies. Main characters from the series (including Shu and his legendary Blue Dragon Shadow) return once again to help fight off evil. But for the first time in the series, players can create their own main character by customizing gender, hairstyle (a must for JRPGs), face, and voice features. Weapons and armor you equip are also visible on your character, making your protagonist all the more unique.

Players lead their character through the environment with the stylus and attack creatures by tapping on them. A more traditional control scheme (d-pad for movement, A button for

attack) is thankfully available as well. All the action happens in real time, allowing players to dodge, attack, and use their charged Shadow attacks on the fly. AI characters accompany you and contribute in battle without direction, but these characters can be swapped out for up to three of your friends. This new multiplayer focus, along with the game's art style, will undoubtedly draw comparisons to Dragon Quest IX (as will the use of a quest system). But the action-oriented gameplay and unique storyline that the series is known for should put Awakened Shadow in a class all its own. » **Jeff Marchiafava**

To see more hand-drawn art from the game, visit gameinformer.com/mag

- » **Platform**
Nintendo DS
- » **Style**
1-Player Role-Playing
(4-Player Online)
- » **Publisher**
D3
- » **Developer**
Tri-Crescendo
- » **Release**
2010



Dementium II

Survival-horror creeps its way onto DS in this mature title

Renegade Kid's follow-up to Dementium: The Ward is another bloodcurdling shooter on Nintendo's handheld. Like its predecessor, Dementium II guides players through varying stages of psychosis. Murder and mystery lend itself to the game's story, which doesn't require a playthrough of the first to follow the chilling plot. We got some hands-on time with Dementium II and found several notable gameplay improvements to the horror series.

We first gain control of our leading man in prison. You play as William Redmoor, an amnesiac inmate confined to a treatment center for the criminally insane after being convicted for murdering his wife. As we roam the facility's dark halls, the dynamic sound system adds greatly to the sense of foreboding; the music changes whenever something may be lurking around the corner. To defend ourselves against the demonic onslaught, we pick up a shank to slice up any morbid creatures that may cross our path.

During our exploration of the decrepit prison, we come across our first boss, The Gnaw. This beastly quadruped scurries along walls and ceilings, occasionally spewing hazardous bile from its gaping mouth. Once it drops down from the ceiling you can chase the beast by double tapping any direction of the d-pad to run toward it and give it a good jab with the shank.

After the encounter, we fast-forwarded to a later part of the game to try some of the other

weapons available: a sledgehammer, revolver, and shotgun. Unlike its predecessor, Dementium II allows you to dual-wield weapons with a flashlight, which is handy in dark areas.

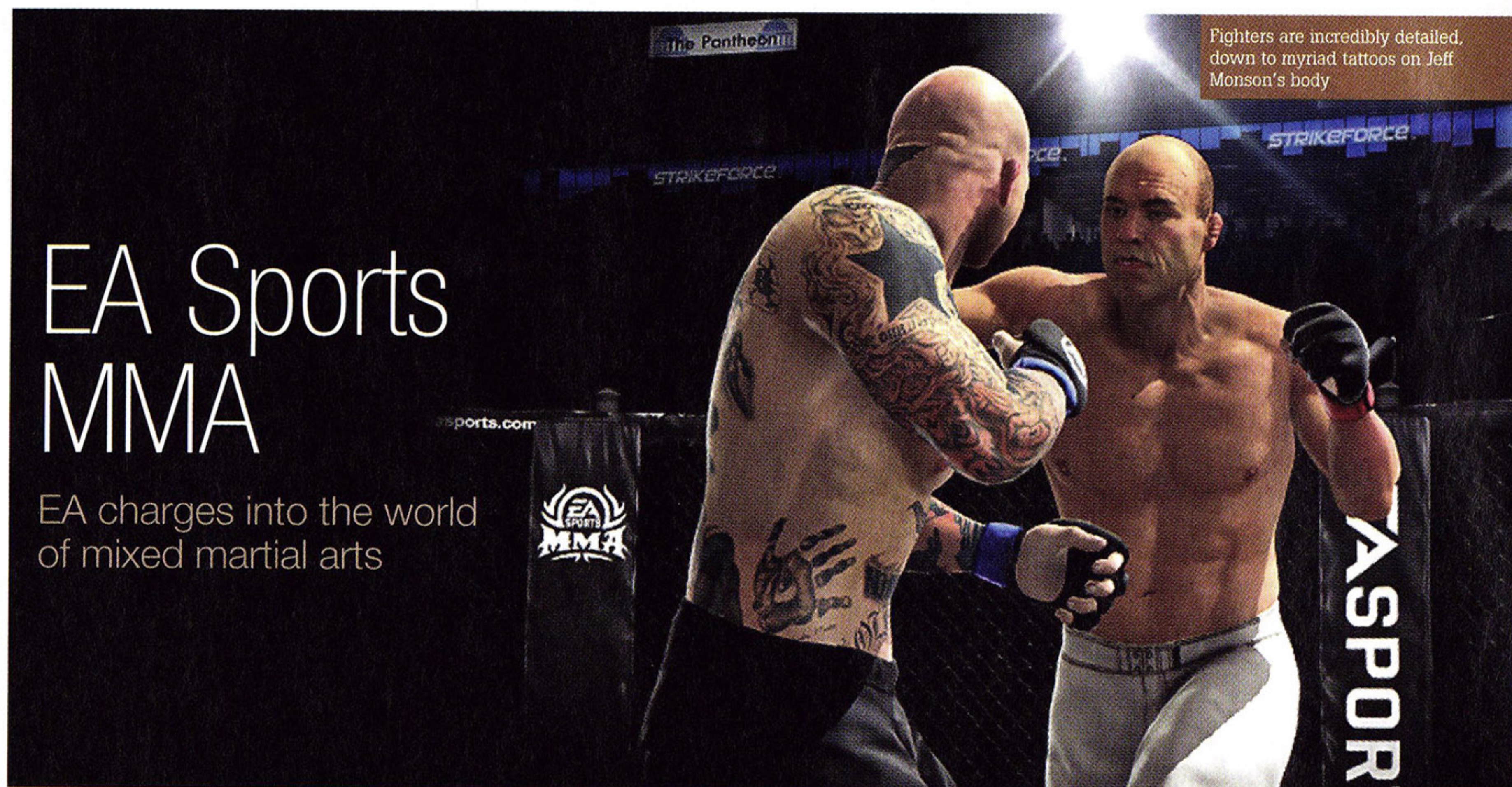
As we move through the darkness with our new weapons, we come across another boss, Wendigo Witch. We stand in the center of a dark room, listening carefully for our foe. Finding her glaring red eyes in the darkness is key to discovering from which direction she'll attack. Whenever she lunges out of the darkness we nail her with a shotgun blast, at which point she responds with deadly light beams.

Even though we played on normal difficulty, the bosses still proved to be tough. Adding to the difficulty was a convoluted control scheme. Working the d-pad and trigger buttons to navigate and shoot while controlling the camera with the stylus can be rough in tight situations. Accidental double taps when working the camera also caused William to jump at inopportune moments. Thankfully, Renegade Kid added an autosave feature so you won't have to backtrack much if you run into trouble.

SouthPeak and Renegade Kid aim to deliver a survival-horror experience worthy of a home console in this portable title. With these gameplay improvements over the first title, we'd say they're on the right track. » **Annette Gonzalez**

For additional art and screenshots visit gameinformer.com/mag.

- » **Platform**
Nintendo DS
- » **Style**
1-Player Shooter
- » **Publisher**
SouthPeak
- » **Developer**
Renegade Kid
- » **Release**
February



EA Sports MMA

EA charges into the world of mixed martial arts

» **Platform**
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360

» **Style**
1 or 2-Player Fighting
(Online TBA)

» **Publisher**
EA Sports

» **Developer**
EA Tiburon

» **Release**
2010

When Peter Moore took the stage at E3 2009 and announced EA was working on a mixed martial arts game, the news ignited a firestorm in the MMA world. THQ had just released UFC Undisputed 2009, and skeptics wondered why the company was hopping onto this particular bandwagon. UFC president Dana White dumped kerosene onto those flames when he said that he tried to meet with EA before and was ignored after EA told him MMA wasn't a real sport. Never one to mince words, White had an ultimatum for fighters: Anyone who appears in EA's game wouldn't be in the UFC anymore. That was before we'd even seen the first screenshot.

Months later, we finally saw the game in action. The game looks great, which is no surprise considering it's built with a modified version of the engine behind the astonishingly good looking Fight Night Round 4. The demo featured Fedor Emelianenko and Brett Rogers, fighters who faced off in a recent Strikeforce event. Their digital counterparts were convincingly detailed, down to the scar on Fedor's brow.

That said, is there room for two MMA games? After talking to the producer and seeing a presentation of the game, we have to say there is. Aside from obvious differences in rosters and venues, each game approaches the sport from a slightly different angle. The good news is that EA appears to be taking it all very seriously.

EA Sports MMA's executive producer Dale Jackson isn't shying away from comparisons between his game and UFC Undisputed. "It definitely makes us run that much harder," he says. "I have to deliver an experience that's going to be compelling for everyone and make sure that I'm delivering the best possible game. And someone has a head start. But I love competition. I love winning. I look forward to finding ways to win this competition."

One of the tools that might help EA win out is the game's affiliation with Strikeforce. The MMA association is a premier league in the game, bringing a number of high-profile fighters with

it. In addition to Fedor and Rogers, Strikeforce middleweight champion Jake Shields and Jason "Mayhem" Miller are other notable fighters. Frank Shamrock and Mauro Ranallo deliver the commentary, while ring announcer Jimmy Lennon Jr. and referee "Big John" McCarthy provide in-ring support.

The demo, which ran on an Xbox 360, highlighted some of the game's depth and strategy. Despite what some might believe, MMA fighting is substantially more complicated than two guys clawing at each other in a cage. There's an incredible amount of strategy at play, such as knowing your opponent's strengths and weaknesses, figuring out how best to approach him, and reserving your stamina so that you don't run out of gas in the middle of a fight.

EA Sports MMA hopes to deliver that strategy in some exciting ways. As much as we tend to focus on a game's graphics, Jackson makes it clear that there's more to the game than what you see. "Visuals aren't the most important thing, but they're the foundation that lays the groundwork for authenticity, so that you're never taken out of the experience by the visuals. Gameplay is where that authenticity is really going to come in."

It starts with something as relatively simple as a fighter grabbing his opponent's foot during a poorly timed kick attempt. Depending on who you're playing as, you can throw a strike from that position or use it as an opportunity to take your opponent to the mat. On defense, the character with the caught foot can push out of the position before any damage is done.

At one point, the two fighters are grappling on the mat, with one in a dominant position. As Fedor smacks Rogers' head from above, Rogers returns punches simultaneously. "There's no control loss ever in our game," says Jackson. "You're not going to have to wait for someone to finish an animation that they're doing before you can take control and do it. So you can throw strikes at the same time, top and bottom, it doesn't matter. You're in control at all times."

Situational awareness is key. Fedor attempts to take Rogers down from a standing position at one point, but because he is too far away Rogers is able to read the move and respond by kneeing Fedor in the face. As with Fight Night Round 4, simply throwing up a guard isn't a guarantee that you won't be exhaling blood. Positioning is imperative, and well-placed punches can snake through sloppy defenses to devastating effect.

Damage modeling and blood was turned off in the demo out of respect for the fighters (who were facing off in real life the next night), but we saw a glimpse of how it works in the game. Players can focus attacks on particular limbs or body parts, which can leave their opponent vulnerable. Rogers' leg was injured, which Fedor exploited with leg strikes. Because his leg was weakened, Rogers reeled back slightly and pivoted on his heel. That reaction was just what Fedor was looking for. "A reaction like that's going to open a window," Jackson says. "If Brett has to step back or turn on that leg, it opens a window for counterstrikes or a takedown, so it changes the strategy of the game based on what you've set up throughout the game. You're seldom going to win a fight with leg kicks, but you can set up an opening that will let you get to victory through other means."

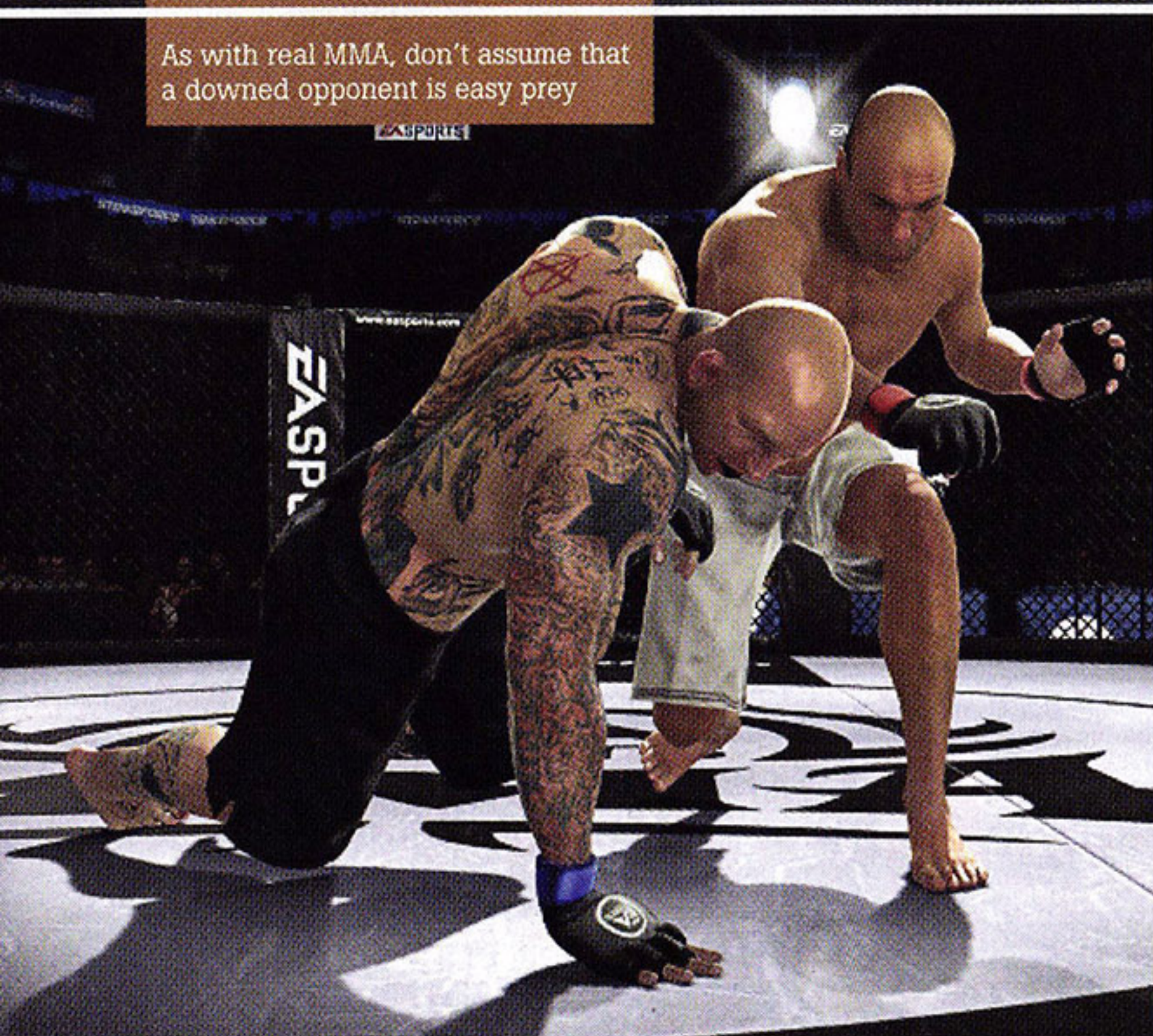
In spite of all the interleague drama, it appears gamers will benefit from having the choice between MMA and UFC titles. "We're all big fans of the sport," Jackson says. "Like everybody, I think we were starved for a good experience, and I think [UFC Undisputed 2009] delivered OK. It delivered the UFC experience. The nice thing is that we're going to be able to deliver more than a singular experience, so I'm really looking forward to that." » **Jeff Cork**

For video of the game in action and a screenshot gallery head to gameinformer.com/mag



Grappling looks impressive, and clipping doesn't seem to be an issue at this point

As with real MMA, don't assume that a downed opponent is easy prey



"Big John" McCarthy presides over ref duties. Let's get it on!



The Force Behind Strikeforce

CEO Scott Coker discusses his upstart MMA league

On Strikeforce's beginnings:

"Kickboxing was a highly rated program on ESPN, so when ESPN2 launched we got the call and we started providing martial-arts programming for ESPN in '93, and that's when Strikeforce was born – but it was a kickboxing brand. We got a call from the California state athletic association in November 2005, and they said we're going to do mixed martial arts in California. Before that, it was illegal; you couldn't do it in the state. You could do it in Nevada, you could do it in New Jersey, but you couldn't do it in the state of California. So I sat down with my partners, and I said, 'You guys, this is a great opportunity. We could be the first sanctioned mixed martial arts fight in the state of California.' And that happened March 10 of '06. So we did the first sanctioned fight in the state. It was Frank Shamrock fighting Cesar Gracie, and that's when Strikeforce mixed martial arts was born. It was a well-attended fight – I think we had 18,000 people in the building. And we didn't have a TV deal at the time, so we just did it at the live event. It was amazing."

On the future of martial arts:

"When I was growing up, the taekwondo guy didn't like the judo guy, and the judo guy didn't like the kung fu guy, and the kung fu guy hated the boxer, and the boxer didn't like the jiu-jitsu guy. No one got along. It was like, 'This is our style, we have the best style in the world.' Now, everything is kind of melding, and people understand that it's becoming an eclectic style that's the new generation of fighting, and a new generation of martial arts is going to be this eclectic format."

On threats to fighters getting banned from UFC for appearing in other games:

"Give me a call. Give me a call. [laughs] That's what I say. Give Strikeforce a call."



Reviews

PC Game of the Month



King's Bounty: Armored Princess

gameinformer
GAME OF THE MONTH

76 Assassin's Creed II

The talented development team at Ubisoft Montreal took all the things that were great about the first Assassin's Creed and improved them for the sequel. More importantly, they took all the things that were frustrations and fixed them. The result is an ambitious adventure steeped in the intrigue and excitement of Renaissance Italy, but deeply tied to the ongoing story of the Assassins and their mysterious order. Read our full review on page 76.

THE SCORING SYSTEM

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

AWARDS

gameinformer PLATINUM	Awarded to games that score between 9.75 and 10
gameinformer GOLD	Awarded to games that score between 9 and 9.5
gameinformer SILVER	Awarded to games that score between 8.5 and 8.75
gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH	The award for the most outstanding game in the issue

DISTRICT 9

"IT WILL BLOW YOUR MIND. IT'S A MUST-SEE MOVIE."

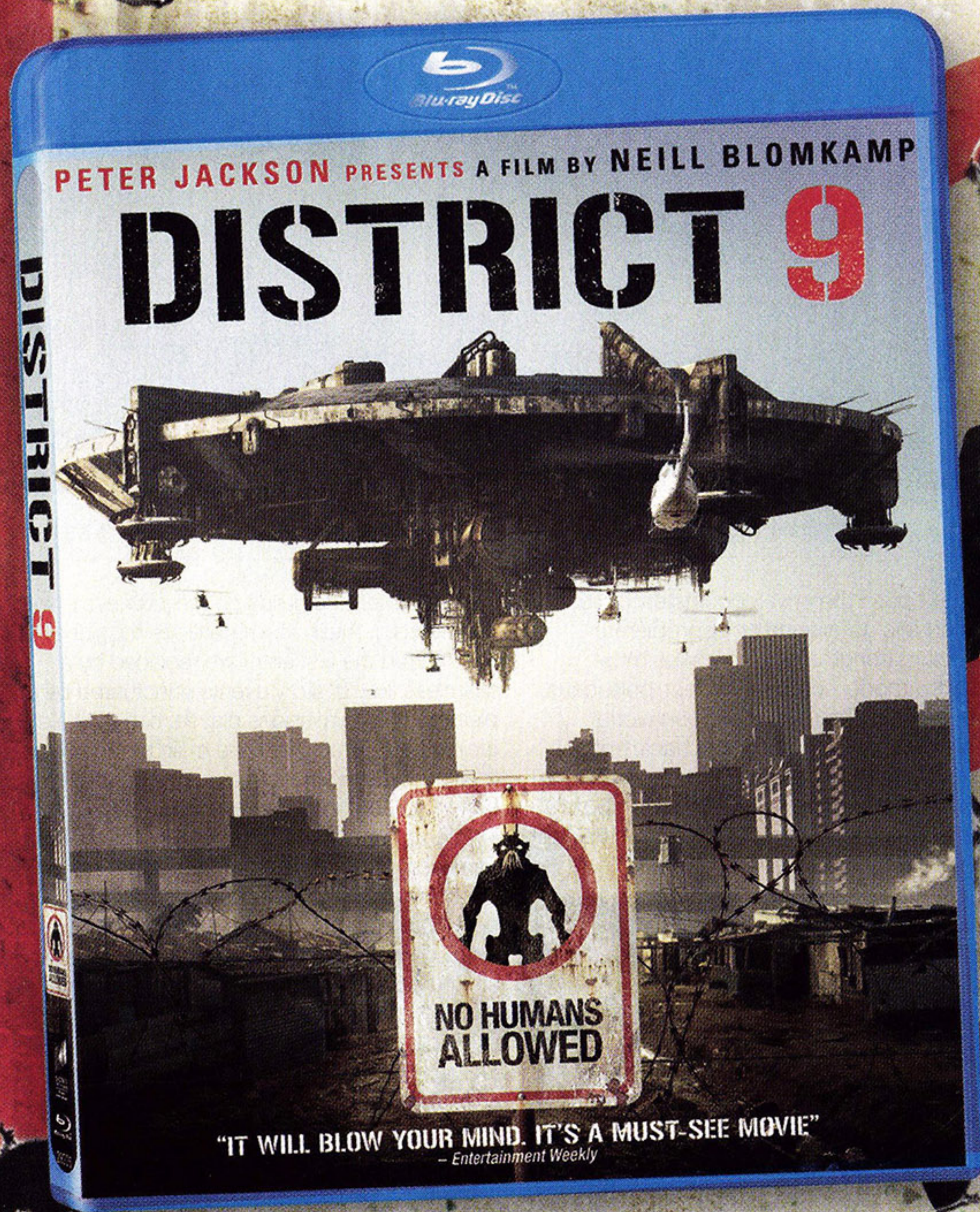
- Entertainment Weekly

"A simply stunning, edge-of-the-seat, adrenaline-charged sci-fi action thriller that will leave you breathless."

- Paul Fischer, DarkHorizons.com

"One of the best sci-fi films I've seen since *The Matrix*."

- Scott Chitwood, ComingSoon.net



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Assassin's Creed II

Ubisoft gets the sequel right

9.5

PS3 • 360

» **Concept**

Combine the best of the first game with features borrowed from more traditional open world design to great effect

» **Graphics**

Stunning Renaissance architecture and perfectly flowing animation highlight this gorgeous world

» **Sound**

Another fantastic score from Jesper Kyd, and quality voice work throughout

» **Playability**

Once you grasp the unique puppeteer controls, the game is responsive and smooth

» **Entertainment**

This amazing historical fantasy features gameplay that draws you in for hours of fun

» **Replay Value**

Moderately High



Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Ubisoft **Developer** Ubisoft Montreal **Release** November 17 **ESRB** M

Assassin's Creed II shatters expectations. It's bigger, more complex, better looking, and more fun to play than its predecessor. That first game set the bar for innovation in action games, establishing a unique control mechanic, a nuanced and clever approach to plot development, and an overriding concept unlike anything in the gaming milieu. In many ways, the sequel is far less innovative. Ubisoft Montreal improved all of the standout features,

but it didn't push the envelope. Instead, the team used this go-around to fix problems, perfect their strengths, and, perhaps most importantly, model some of the tent-pole ideas of other games. The pacing of open world crime games, the upgrading mechanics of a great RPG, the reward-based hidden items and unlockables of an exploration game, the puzzle elements of a classic adventure game – they all merge flawlessly in Assassin's Creed II.

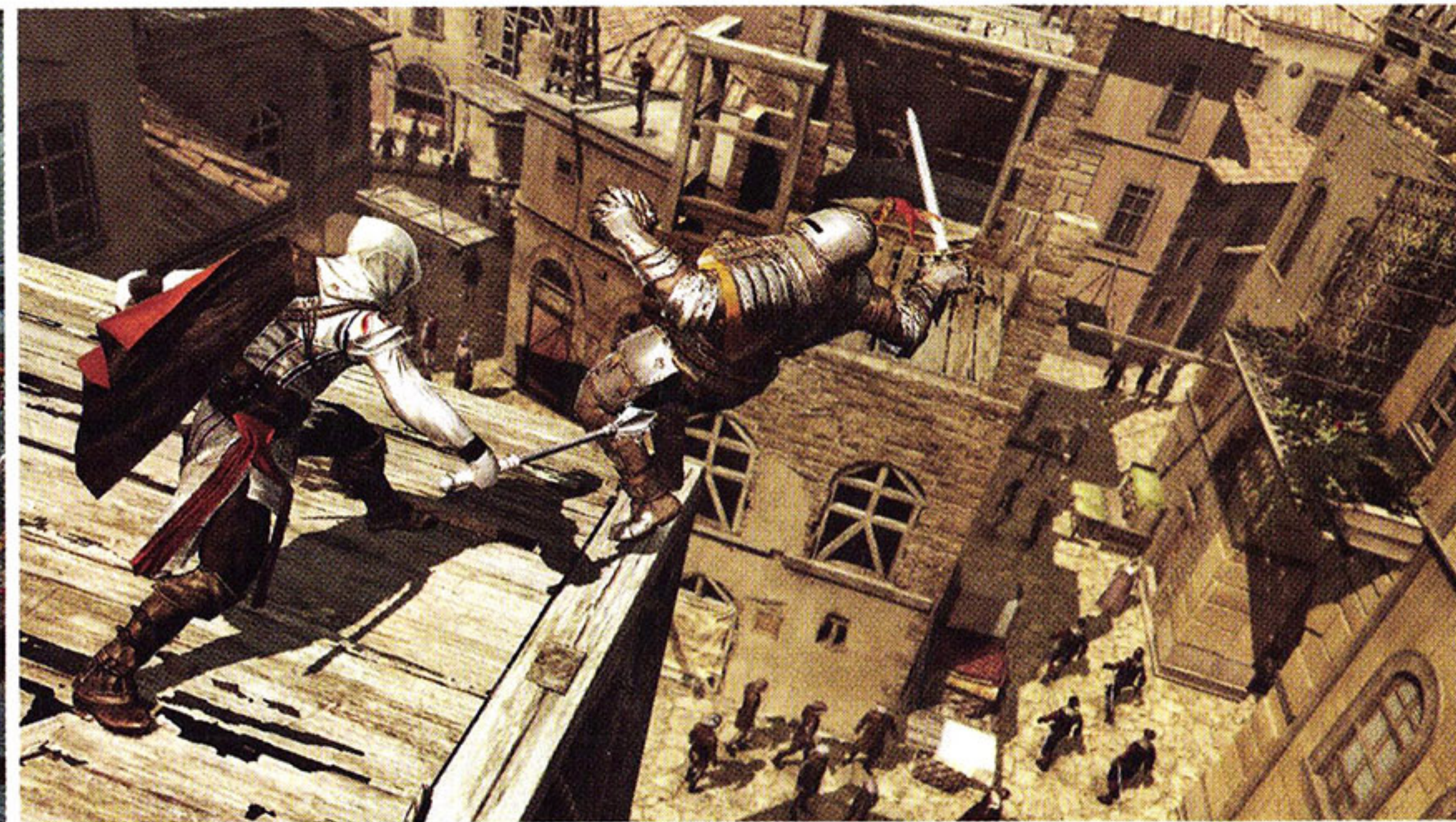
Ezio's adventure builds on the journeys of his predecessor, Altair. The repetitious missions that marred the first entry are replaced by a seamless flow of story events punctuated by a plethora of side missions players can tackle at their leisure. Structurally, the main plotline is more linear, but players might not notice as they move between varied activities. Hundreds of collectible items are scattered throughout the Italian Renaissance cities. Every one of these pick-ups either increases your wealth or ties directly into developing the story. Half a dozen fantastic platforming levels hidden throughout the game world are the best palette cleansers; these brief stages are a blast, and lead to one of the game's most desirable unlockables. A short puzzle game is implemented for those who want to embrace the conspiracy theory angle of the Assassin's Creed lore – the less spoiled about this intriguing plot the better.

World navigation, exploration, and free-running remain the highlights of the game experience. The puppeteering control model has been tweaked to be more intuitive, which makes running across the rooftops of Venice and Florence an amazing experience. It certainly doesn't hurt that the backdrop is one of the most architecturally significant and breathtaking locations in the world. Ubisoft Montreal has done a stellar job of capturing the mystique of these fabled cities.

By adding an economic system into the mix, the game employs a role-playing approach to upgrades and character development. Weapons, armor, medicine, clothing color, and even an extensive collection of actual Renaissance art are all available for purchase. The game also offers players the chance to simulate an entire



Ezio's adventure spans the breadth of Renaissance Italy



Platforming and free running remain highlights in the second installment



town's construction over the course of the decades-long storyline. The rebuilding of Ezio's villa becomes an extension of his character development, and also provides some major monetary gains.

The story also feeds off Altair's adventure, rewarding devoted players who know the fiction well while at the same time presenting information in ways that allow new players to pick up the thread. The wider plotline hinted at in the first installment is torn open this time around, revealing an interconnected storyline that stretches across history – one that is so well told and integrated into the true events of the past that there are times that it is hard not to believe the beautifully wrought lie. Ezio Auditore is a brash new protagonist – part Casanova, part ninja, and part Michael Corleone. He looks dangerously cool and his personal development into a master assassin across the game is believable and engaging. Like many open-world games, the

story has the potential to feel fragmented as you play a mission and then do something else; this disconnection is exacerbated by the vast spread of time over which the game unfolds. Transitions between major sections sometimes feel abrupt, but it's the worst that can be said about an otherwise engaging narrative.

As the franchise moves forward with a brand-new historical hero, the futuristic tale of Desmond steps up in intensity. Though there are fewer sequences in the near-future world of Abstergo and the Animus, the sequences that occur are more meaningful and give exciting insights into what lies ahead for the franchise.

Combat features strong new additions like disarming techniques and an expanded array of weapons. Countering and special skills remain a blast, and the new techniques and weapons make defensive fighting more enjoyable than ever. However, enemy AI is often questionable; guards will stand and stare without attacking for

too long or ignore you completely when they're fighting your allies. In addition, I'd love to see a more engaging way to handle attacks initiated by the player. Most enemies auto-block any frontal assaults, so it's hard to bust out into a flurry of motion to take them down. The combat is still thrilling, but it needs some work to stand toe-to-toe with the best action games.

Stepping back from the many disparate elements of the game, the picture that emerges is impressive. Assassin's Creed II is a complex, mature, and engaging journey from beginning to end. It stands as a benchmark for design that combines innovative ideas with tried-and-true techniques to create one of the great games of this generation. » **Matt Miller**

To see brand new videos of Assassin's Creed II in action, go to gameinformer.com/mag.

Second Opinion 9

To anyone with mixed feelings on the original, I'll say this: They fixed Assassin's Creed. With clinical precision, Ubisoft Montreal has addressed the list of issues that interfered with the first outing. The repetitive missions are gone, the heavy-handed exposition is cut short, and the formulaic structure has given way to a natural narrative flow. With these legacy problems swept aside, Assassin's Creed II puts an intriguing focus on new protagonist Ezio, his lethal set of skills, and the Templar plot surrounding him. For the most part, it all blends together wonderfully; the Renaissance setting is visually and historically compelling, and striking down your foes from the shadows still imparts a primal satisfaction. New weapon types and a currency system build a little on the first game's foundation, but the excellent core gameplay is essentially unchanged. In light of these additions and improvements, Assassin's Creed II should be leagues beyond its predecessor, but I didn't enjoy it as much. It is superior on a mechanical level, but the story and tone have taken steps back. Through cutscenes and conversations, the first game fostered a chilling connection between the hunter and the hunted, lending gravity to each kill. That sensation is totally gone now, replaced by scenarios that require you to fight your way to what-ever generic old guy the Dan Brown-like conspiracy points you toward. Assassin's Creed II is still a fantastic game, but it feels like the team listened too closely to people who didn't like the original, losing some of what made it special in the process. » **Joe Juba**

The Saboteur

Pandemic's stylish swan song reinvigorates World War II games

8

PS3 • 360

» **Concept**

Liberate open-world Paris from ze Germans by blowing up all their stuff

» **Graphics**

I can't decide which I like better – the stylish black and white treatment of Paris under German occupation or the colorful world it becomes once you liberate a neighborhood

» **Sound**

French Resistance? More like International Resistance – this game has enough foreign accents to rival BBC World News. A great 1940s jazz soundtrack accompanies your street carnage

» **Playability**

While the driving, shooting, and climbing get the job done, they lack the polish of superior experiences

» **Entertainment**

A fresh take on World War II that should appeal to fans of sandbox action games

» **Replay Value**

Moderate



Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Electronic Arts **Developer** Pandemic Studios **Release** December 4 **ESRB** M

Gamers can't escape World War II. We've stormed the beaches of Normandy, fought the Battle of the Bulge, and liberated Stalingrad a hundred times over, yet developers keep dangling Nazis in front of our gun muzzles. Thankfully Pandemic isn't interested in making us relive these historical triumphs again.

Rather than trying to encapsulate the drama of the entire European Theater, *The Saboteur* earns points for concentrating its efforts on a specific location with a specific storyline.

Sean Devlin wasn't always a revolutionary fighter. The smarmy Irish racecar driver would rather spend his time in bars and bedrooms. But when a Nazi officer steals a race from him, kills his best friend, and aids the invasion of Paris, he puts his leisurely pursuits on hold and takes up arms with the French Resistance. That's not to say he's carving a new identity for himself – Devlin still makes time for the occasional race and romp, but instead of hanging out at bars in between exploits, he's hanging off Nazi towers planting explosives to drive the Wehrmacht back to Germany.

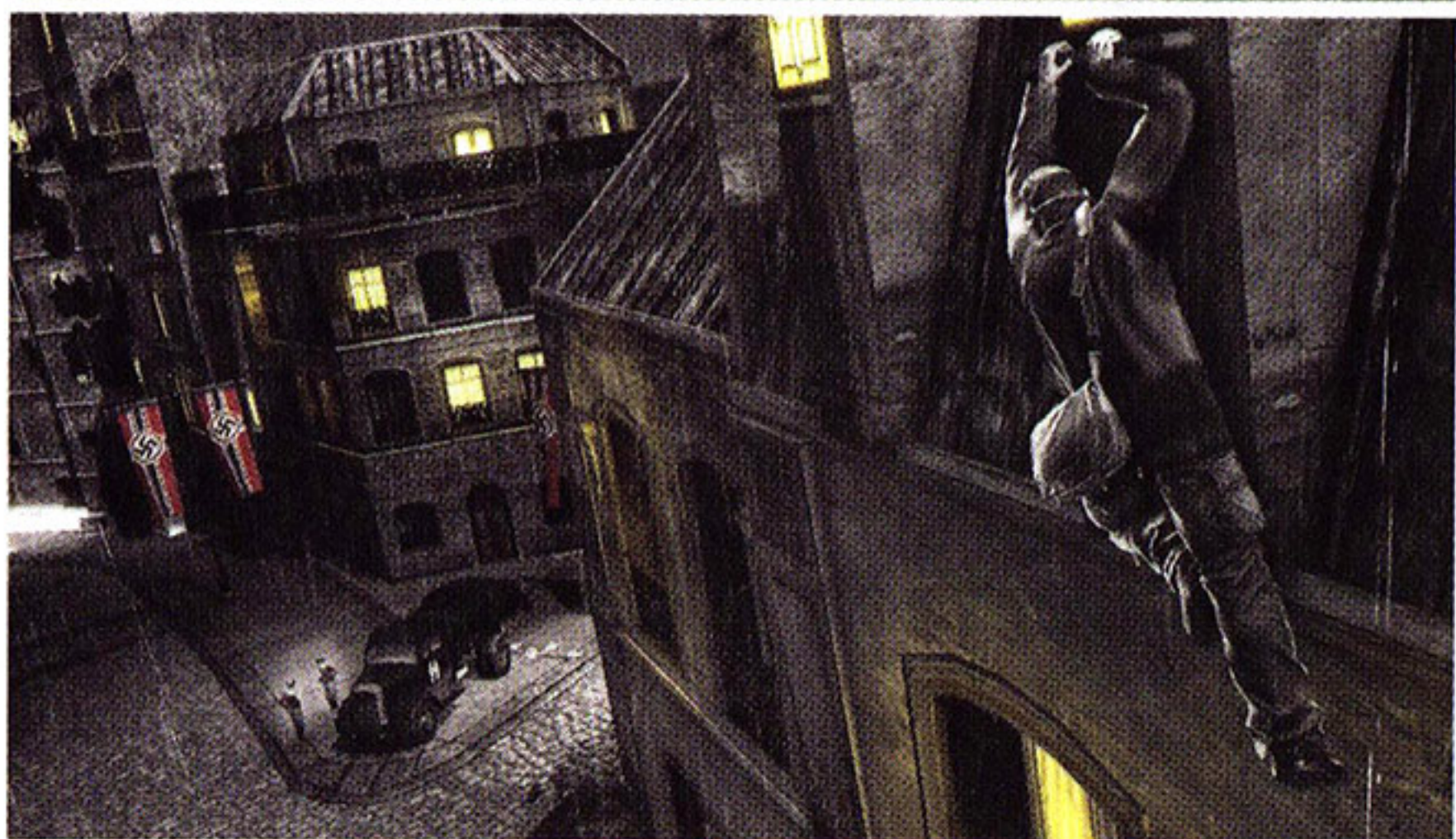
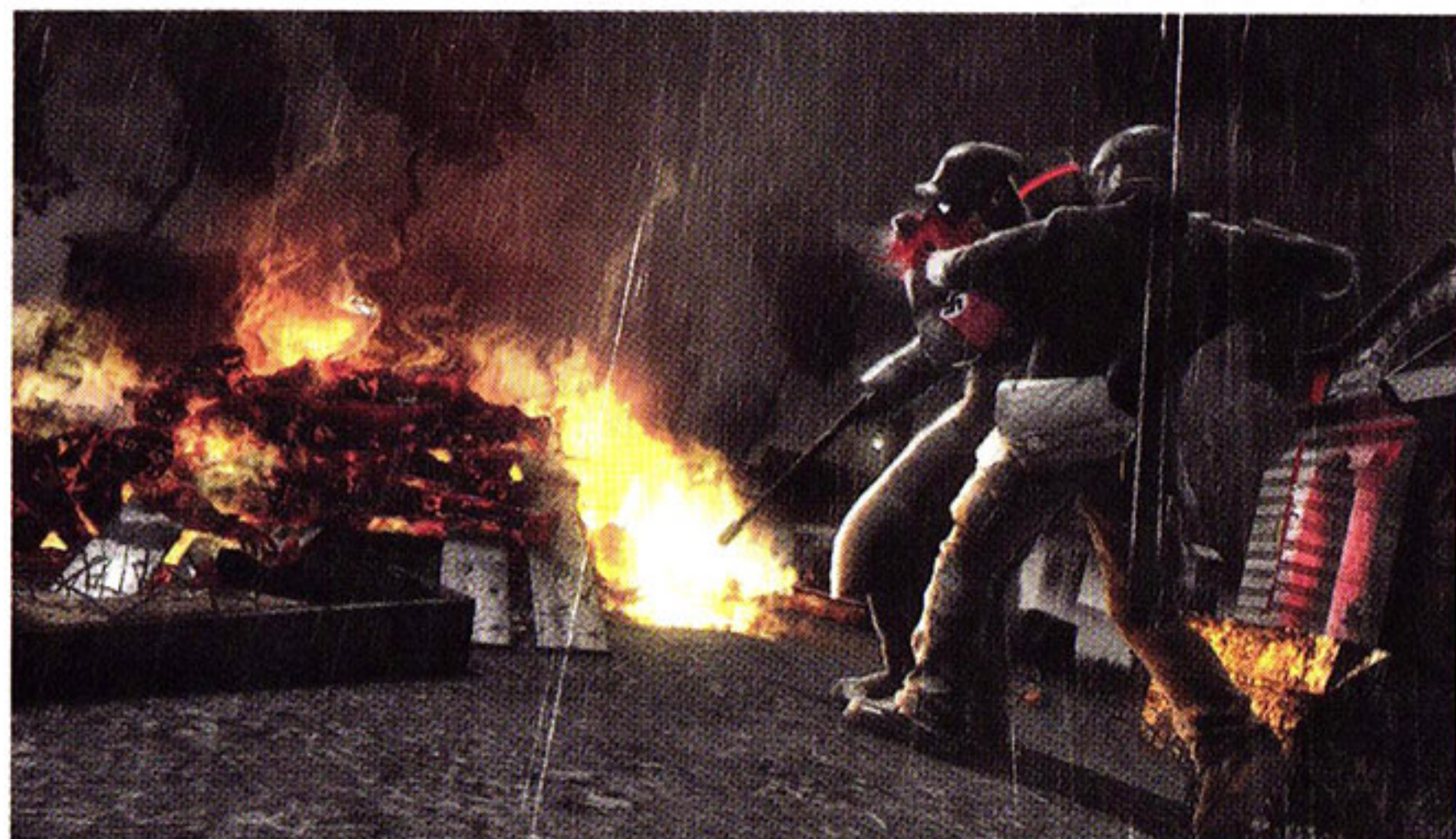
As befitting its brash leather jacketed protagonist, *The Saboteur* bleeds cool. Like *Sin City*, Parisian neighborhoods stifled under German occupation have no color save for the yellow light emanating from building windows and the bold red banners of their Nazi oppressors. With German soldiers harassing Parisian citizens and even lining up impromptu execution squads on the streets, the oppression is palpable. As Devlin rids the area of Nazi tanks, watchtowers, AA guns, and encampments, color comes back to the area and its citizens will start openly defying the German squads stationed around the city. While much of the *joie de vivre* Paris is well known for is stifled above ground by barbed wire and Nazi propaganda, the underground is full of life, with sexy showgirls at Parisian cabarets who take you into hiding, wily black marketeers eager to sell you new weaponry, and intellectuals turned revolutionaries in need of Devlin's help to

drive the Germans from their homeland.

The Saboteur isn't afraid to borrow concepts from its contemporaries. An amalgamation of the open world sandbox of *Grand Theft Auto*, the chaotic freeplay of *Crackdown*, the climbing of *Assassin's Creed*, and the zipline and rooftop traversal of *Infamous*, the game wears its influences on its sleeve. While these game mechanics work, like the French resistance they seem to have been done on the cheap. The sluggish car controls seemingly turn on an axis in the middle of the vehicle, which takes practice to master. Climbing frustratingly requires you to jam on the A button for each movement up the building. The gunplay has a sketchy auto cover system and the weaponry lacks the punch of more visceral shooters.

Other areas of the game also lack the polish of a groundbreaking title as well. Pandemic questionably buried the map three clicks into the menu system, which is a major faux pas for an open world game that requires you to place waypoints to navigate the large city. Cars take damage from bullets, but you'll need to run over an entire city block of benches before you start seeing any wear and tear on the chassis. The Germans were bold enough to overtake Paris, but given the braindead and lackadaisical nature of their infantry, it doesn't take much to drive them from individual posts.

The Saboteur may lack the polish of the contemporaries it boldly mimics, but protagonist Sean Devlin's quest for revenge and an alluring 1940s Paris make this a World War II memory worth making. » **Matt Bertz**



Band Hero

Pop music gets its own hero



Style 1 to 4-Player Rhythm/Music (8-Player Online) Publisher Activision Developer Neversoft Release November 3 ESRB E10+

Band Hero could have easily (and more clearly) been titled Guitar Hero: Pop. Perhaps Activision felt that another Guitar Hero release in such close proximity to so many others would feel exploitative, or maybe someone decided that the new pop flavor demanded its own branding. Any which way, this is a re-skinning of Guitar Hero 5 filled with Top 40 hits instead of hard rock. Given that, the game does an excellent job of highlighting these popular super-hits.

I'm always hesitant to get into judgment calls about the music choices in a music game – my personal tastes aside, this is a diverse mix of fun pop songs culled from several decades. You

know already whether you want to sing along with Taylor Swift, bang the drums to a Maroon 5 tune, or strum along with KT Tunstall. But as familiar and catchy as these songs are, they frequently feature repetitive and simplistic note charts. Endless chorus repeats, single-phrase bass lines, and sing-along friendly vocal parts rarely correlate with complex and interesting gameplay. Then again, it's hard to fault Neversoft for being faithful to the source material.

Guitar Hero 5's bonus objectives make a return, giving experienced players something extra to achieve in a given song. The jump-in-jump-out party play option is even more valuable to this installment, so I was glad to see it included.

Plus, a sing-along karaoke mode is a great way to leverage what many will like about the game. Band Hero's robust 65 song setlist is also bolstered by the ability to export and import tunes to and from the other recent Guitar Hero games.

It's hard to take Band Hero out of the context of its recent music game brethren. Band Hero is the least innovative of the bunch, but that certainly doesn't make it bad. For players who found previous releases too hard-edged for their tastes, Band Hero is exactly what they've been waiting for. » **Matt Miller**

Watch videos revealing some of the superstar unlockable characters from Band Hero at gameinformer.com/mag

7.75

PS3 • 360

» **Concept**
Guitar Hero filled with radio-friendly pop hits

» **Graphics**
Neon visuals and prepped-out characters may remind you of Jem – they're truly, truly, truly outrageous

» **Sound**
The on-disc songs are toe-tapping, head-bopping pop success stories that saw more radio airplay than you've lived years of life

» **Playability**
Nothing has changed in the ubiquitous gem-falling gameplay

» **Entertainment**
Note charts are too simplistic, but the songs are pop gold

» **Replay Value**
Moderately High

Guitar Hero: Van Halen

Strange guest acts and an old engine bring Van Halen down

Style 1 to 4-Player Rhythm/Music (8-Player Online) Publisher Activision Developer Underground Development/Neversoft Release December 22 ESRB T

Not one to look a gift horse in the mouth, I, along with many other music game fans, bought Guitar Hero 5 and received Guitar Hero: Van Halen for free over two months in advance of its official December release. After playing through the game, I can see why it was used as a freebie.

Don't get me wrong, the collection of 25 early Van Halen hits is a blast to play. Eddie's three additional solos "Cathedral," "Eruption," and "Spanish Fly" offer old school Guitar Hero challenge, and Diamond Dave's wild vocal delivery will have party players reaching for the "no fail" toggle. Eddie's character model even showcases his signature tapping technique and grinds on strings with a power drill.

Authenticity takes a hit when it comes to rewriting history or totally excising it altogether. Sammy Hagar's decade-plus of hits with the band are nowhere to be seen, and Eddie's teenage son, Wolfgang, replaces longtime bass player Michael Anthony. The latter is particularly strange when you finally get to play as the classic hair and spandex character models and Wolfgang appears in a silly handkerchief when in reality he wasn't even alive yet.

It seems that Van Halen had little to no contribution to the making of this game. Neversoft staffers are credited with all of the motion capture and there are no video interviews with any of the band members. Perhaps the most blatant indicator of Van Halen's hands-off approach

is the guest artist set list, which includes such incompatible tracks as "Stacy's Mom" by Fountains of Wayne and "Pretty Fly For A White Guy" by The Offspring. Nothing against these songs, but they would fit much better on the pop-focused Band Hero instead.

What's most baffling, however, is the fact that GH: VH uses the old Metallica engine even though it comes out after the updated GH 5 and Band Hero. This means no awesome party mode, no saving fellow members from failing out the whole band, and no separate star power storage for each member. Van Halen deserves better. » **Bryan Vore**

7.5

PS3 • 360

» **Concept**
Create a band game with unclear participation from the band in question

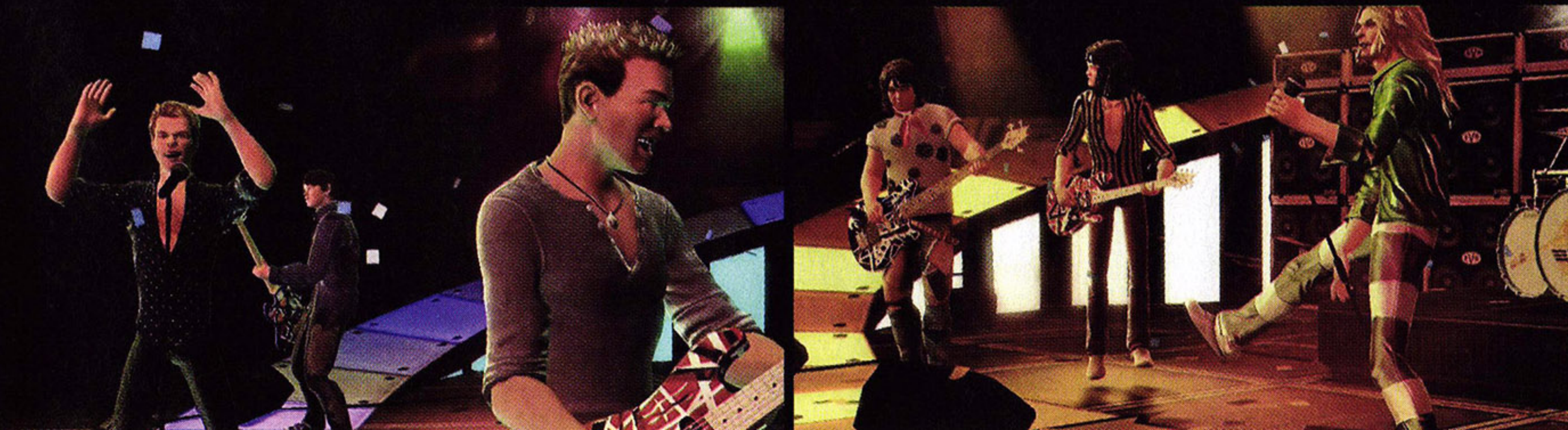
» **Graphics**
Most of the time you're stuck playing as middle-aged Van Halen

» **Sound**
The Van Halen tracks are great. Most of the guests don't really fit

» **Playability**
Eddie's solos will destroy your pinky

» **Entertainment**
Yes, if you like Roth-era Van Halen

» **Replay Value**
Moderate



God of War Collection

Sony makes an offering you can't refuse

9.5

PS3

» **Concept**

One disc, two games, and countless mutilations

» **Graphics**

The refined graphics look great – you'll have trouble believing these were originally PS2 games

» **Sound**

Yep. Still awesome

» **Playability**

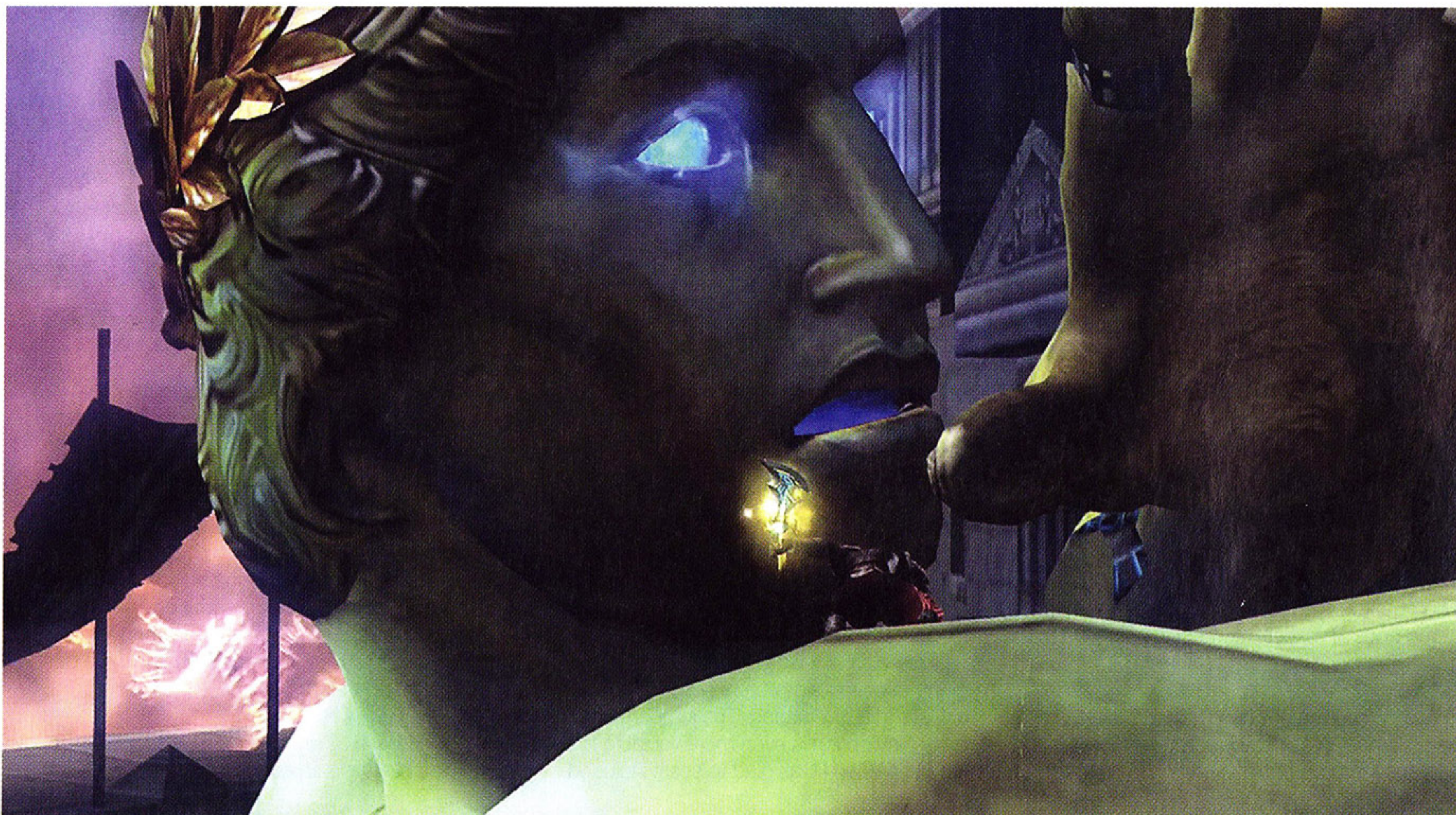
Gaming has evolved since these titles originally released, but they hold up incredibly well

» **Entertainment**

Combat is as fun and fluid as ever, and violently executing mythical beasts still sends a tingle down my spine

» **Replay**

Moderately High



Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Sony Computer Entertainment **Developer** Sony Santa Monica **Release** November 17 **ESRB** M

probably can't tell you much about the first two God of War games that you don't already know. As soon as the series burst onto the scene in 2005, it transformed the action genre and established Kratos as one of the gaming industry's biggest power players. The original featured brutal combos and huge foes that redefined the phrase "epic battles" for the era,

while the sequel cemented that legacy and pushed the technical capabilities of the PS2 to the limit. When taken alone, each of the two God of War games are amazing achievements. When compiled onto a single disc, they form a package that every PlayStation 3 owner should own.

The God of War Collection includes both of the

series' PS2 iterations in their entirety, but they haven't been unceremoniously dumped onto a Blu-ray. The games have undergone some visual improvements to make them look even better than before. When I go back to play an older game, I'm sometimes surprised how the harsh reality of the visuals are at odds with my memory. That doesn't happen here; this collection makes these games look like you remember them, not how they would actually look if you plugged in your PS2. I can't exactly say that the graphics have been updated, but they have been optimized for HD and given a silky smooth framerate that would put plenty of current-gen titles to shame.

For fans that need an incentive to revisit these masterpieces, each one has a full list of trophies rewarding your accomplishments. However, apart from the included God of War III demo, don't expect anything in terms of new content. Thankfully, the old stuff is still good – the combat feels familiar without getting stale, and the visuals are classic but not outdated. Only cutscenes using the in-game engine stand out as strange; they weren't redone to fit with the new crisp and clean graphics, resulting in grainy and terrible-looking breaks in the action, particularly in the first God of War.

Ultimately, this collection isn't much more than the sum of its parts, but that is hardly a bad thing considering the quality of the parts. If you still haven't played the God of War series, you aren't just missing out on great games. You're missing pieces of gaming history. » **Joe Joba**



You get both God of War and God of War II for a reasonable \$40

Call of Duty: Modern Warfare: Reflex Edition

Getting the job done as best it can



Style 1 or 2-Player Shooter (10-Player Online) Publisher Activision Developer Treyarch Release November 10 ESRB M

After seeing this Wii port of the original Modern Warfare up and running on our giant television in the conference room, several editors independently dubbed it “Modern Warfare: Gag Reflex.” Many gamers shared a similar sentiment when the project was announced, complaining that the Wii’s processing power simply couldn’t handle a title as graphically intensive as this legendary FPS. While they aren’t wrong, they are missing a much bigger and more crippling problem: the Wii Remote.

Make no mistake, Reflex is oftentimes a downright ugly game. At its best, the graphics are passable – good even, if you include the caveat “for the Wii.” At its worst, Reflex would have trouble competing with even a mediocre FPS for the original Xbox. Playing the game side by side with the 360 version of Modern Warfare made me woefully aware of the visual chasm. Almost all lighting and shadows have been stripped from Reflex, as have a lot of graphical flourishes. In one mission, a security monitor your comrade tells you to watch – which is supposed to reveal an enemy fleeing the scene – just displays a static test pattern instead. Telling your allies from your enemies is harder than ever, because everyone looks faded and indistinct, as if they had been partially digested before being regurgitated onto the Wii.

Still, Reflex proves a game as amazing as Modern Warfare is still good even without the flashy graphics; I don’t question Treyarch’s porting skills. Clearly, the developers were faced with a difficult decision; they could either alter the gameplay to fit the Wii by changing the missions and scaling down the original game’s vision, or they could strive to keep everything intact at the expense of how the game looks. After playing through the two versions together, I don’t fault them for their decision; every skirmish is included, every square foot of terrain, every plot twist and line of dialogue. Nothing from the story was compromised, which is certainly a commendable feat.

Treyarch didn’t skimp on the multiplayer either, which ends up being the most impressive part

of Reflex. While the action is limited to 10 players, the matchmaking works well and removes the need for annoying Friend Codes. The ranks, perks, and awards of Modern Warfare are all included, and are as addictive as ever. You’ll find yourself saying “just one more match” again and again as you try to reach the next rank to unlock more guns, game modes, and challenges. Additionally, the subpar graphics matter even less during multiplayer – the spirit of competition makes it enjoyable, and although Reflex’s multiplayer can’t compete with the original’s online experience, it fills a massive void for Wii owners.

The one Wii shortcoming for which Treyarch couldn’t compensate is the controls – an ultimately fatal flaw. The problem is twofold: First, the Wii remote doesn’t have enough buttons. Even with the nunchuk, the Wii remote can’t accommodate MW’s complex control scheme, and when using the irregular controller as a pointer, the majority of its buttons are out of reach. Reflexive actions are ironically no longer reflexive, and trying to press the correct button to perform a melee attack or pick up and throw away an enemy grenade will often leave you staring at the ceiling, the ground – or just plain dead.

Second, using the Wii remote as a pointer for first-person shooters sucks. When playing an FPS with a traditional controller, the majority of the time your aiming stick is at rest – you make minor corrections via minute taps to control where you are looking. Conversely, the Wii remote requires you to constantly aim at the center of the screen, lest

your POV sways around like a drunkard falling off of a barstool. Rotating is performed by moving the cursor towards the edge of the screen, and although Treyarch included a handy button to freeze your view and aim as if you were playing a light gun game, the combination simply isn’t an acceptable solution. It’s clear that Treyarch did the best it could: the button configuration is completely customizable, as are the scrolling speed, dead zone, and numerous other variables for the camera. But after playing with all of them, controlling my character still felt like a struggle – a shame when the original MW controlled so smoothly.

Even a clunky, hard-to-control Modern Warfare is better than no Modern Warfare, and Reflex may be fun for Wii owners who haven’t played – or seen – another version of the game. Ultimately, however, Reflex is proof that if there’s a way to make an FPS work on the Wii, no one has found it yet. » **Jeff Machiafava**



6.5

Wii

» Concept

Bring one of the definitive FPSs to the last current-gen console on the market – come hell or high water

» Graphics

Like the original, there is a lot happening onscreen at any given time – and all of it is ugly

» Sound

The dialogue is all intact, and the sound effects are adequate

» Playability

Someday a developer might come up with an FPS control scheme that works on the Wii. Today is not that day

» Entertainment

If you can live with its shortcomings, there’s plenty of time-tested content to enjoy

» Replay Value

High

Tony Hawk: Ride

A halfpipe filled with frustration

5.75

PS3 • 360 • Wii

» **Concept**

Try and replicate the success of Guitar Hero's peripheral gameplay with skateboarding

» **Graphics**

The Saturday morning cartoon look is not offputting, but it's not interesting either

» **Sound**

The top-notch soundtrack is the highlight of the experience

» **Playability**

It ranges anywhere from "that worked" to "four-letter fury"

» **Entertainment**

Watching other people play? Definitely

» **Replay Value**

Moderate



Style 1 to 8-Player Action (4-Player Online) **Publisher** Activision **Developer** Robomodo **Release** November 17th **ESRB** E 10+

I'm pretty good at Tony Hawk: Ride. I don't want to brag or anything, but I scored like 53,000 points in the halfpipe on my first try. How did I do this? Not too sure exactly, but it happened. For better or for worse, this seems to be a standard experience in the new skateboarding title from Activision. Just when I thought I was starting to master a certain mechanic, the inconsistent gameplay inevitably turned each session into whirlwind of tears and frustration. While the skateboard-as-game-peripheral idea may have sounded like a hit on paper, the truth of the matter is it doesn't translate into the real world.

Starting a game of Ride feels pretty familiar. Players begin their careers creating a new custom skater from a set of templates, which they can then edit at any time. The standard fare of unlockable items is present, so a skater can eventually be decked out from head to toe in custom gear. Like many Tony Hawk games before it, Ride's main character is an

up-and-coming pro that hangs with the best of the best in skateboarding – P-Rod, Stevie Williams, and even the Bird Man himself. Traveling to six cities along the path to stardom, each destination contains around four areas to ride. These are broken down into speed, trick, and challenge runs, with the occasional special event like a competition or demo. Upon completion, players get points towards clearing out an area to unlock the next. It's a fairly short, linear career that could easily be taken down in a day.

Many perceive Tony Hawk: Ride as a skate game on rails, which is true for the easier difficulty settings. The player chooses a path based off of on-screen arrows and a yellow path. At any given time, there are up to three choices when the path branches and different lines are created. Choosing a line without the game changing its mind on you requires an uncomfortable, awkward lean either forwards or backwards. It rarely goes as planned.

I'd like to point out that the \$120 price point for this plastic skateboard is more than twice as much as a real skateboard complete with all of the fancy trimming like trucks and wheels. The controller has a bevy of embedded sensors that try to determine what actions the player is attempting. Steering and ollies use accelerometers, while grabs use visual sensors. Advanced tricks like 360 flips rely on both types of sensors simultaneously. The build quality is surprisingly high, and for the most part these sensors work pretty well. Unfortunately, your intended actions ultimately get lost in translation.

Since I've been skateboarding for well over a decade, I thought I would have a leg-up on this game. Not so much. Flip tricks, one of the most basic skateboarding techniques, require the most advanced movement – popping the

nose up and leaning forward or back. Clearly this was done to try and bridge the game's control with real life movements, but your pissed-off ankles won't care after a few sessions. The only tricks that truly resemble real skateboarding are reverts and manuals. One of the big reasons most of the tricks in skateboarding work so well is because of forward momentum. With manuals this is especially true. While the stationary-friendly shape of the controller helps, manuals are still muscle-tightening battles with gravity. Play long enough and the cavalcade of confusion that your body goes through eventually turns into a strange, yet familiar awkwardness.

Totally rad skaters can use the hardcore mode, which ditches the rails and lets you skate your heart out. Developer Robomodo added the ability to loosen or tighten the steering, but in the end, trying to skate a planned line requires so much focus and concentration you'd be hard-pressed to find some fun along the way. Instead, the reward is usually a quick, painful faceplant into a wall.

As a skateboarder and as a gamer, Tony Hawk: Ride is a curious idea but a letdown in practice. The huge level of frustration is not worth the time it takes to master the awkward gameplay idiosyncrasies. Instead, it's more tempting – even as someone with experience – to just spam the waggle movements for a passable high score. With the huge price tag and uncertain future of software support for the peripheral, Activision has one of the toughest sells in video games in a very long time. » **Nick Ahrens**

For video of us playing Tony Hawk: Ride, head to gameinformer.com/mag



New Super Mario Bros. Wii

Manic multiplayer introduces a chaotic twist to a classic formula



Style 1 to 4-Player Platforming Publisher Nintendo Developer Nintendo Release November 15th ESRB E

9.25

Wii

» **Concept**

Take the side-scrolling Mario action everyone loves and make it four player

» **Graphics**

Classic Mushroom Kingdom baddies look great, and environments are lively and vivid

» **Sound**

A massive assortment of memorable tunes and sound effects

» **Playability**

If you've played a Mario title before, you're set

» **Entertainment**

Single-player is as fun as the series has ever been, and multiplayer offers a brand new way to enjoy Mario

» **Replay Value**

Moderately High

It's no surprise that New Super Mario Bros. was a runaway hit on the DS. Longtime Nintendo fans loved the nostalgia value and familiar gameplay of the first true 2D entry in the series since 1995's Yoshi's Island, and a new generation of gamers discovered why the plumber is the most iconic character in the industry. With the success of the Wii and its focus on local multiplayer gameplay, New Super Mario Bros. Wii is a no-brainer. Take the classic series that gamers young and old adore, introduce four-player gameplay for the first time, and watch it fly off the shelves.

New Super Mario Bros. Wii takes the stellar core gameplay of the DS version, introduces far more creative and challenging stages, and includes riotous multiplayer gameplay. I hesitate to call it co-op gameplay, simply because of the sheer number of times you'll accidentally (or sometimes, intentionally) screw your friends over in hilarious fashion. Mario games focus on running and jumping; and coordinating difficult platforming segments with three other people often-times means at least one of them is going to get stomped in mid-air, sending them to their death. Once that unlucky player comes back to the action, he or she can easily get revenge by picking up their killer and throwing him or her directly into a Goomba. It's

these chaotic moments that result in punched shoulders or players getting banned from future multiplayer sessions.

The Wii's latest Mario game is far more than just a nostalgia act, as the level of quality is on par with the best from the NES and SNES days. Some stages are simple endeavors that give you experience with a new power-up, while others truly test your platforming skill. Later levels fill the screen with Bullet Bills, cannonballs, angry Crowbers, and parachuting Bob-ombs, ensuring that you won't have a moment's rest. Even the airships from Super Mario Bros. 3 return, complete with their memorable and ominous background music. Once you reach the end of the game, you'll be treated with what might be the best boss fight in any 2D Mario title.

Playing with a few friends adds a new element

to the Mario experience, but it's not without its frustrations. Accidentally falling to your doom is funny when you have a healthy stash of lives, but later stages require precise platforming, and it's much harder to perform quick, accurate jumps when there are three others trying to do the same thing.

Some gamers may be concerned about the addition of motion control, but like Super Mario Galaxy the game implements it sparingly and it's never too gimmicky. Quick shakes let you pick up items or spin jump, and tilting the controller manipulates platforms and cannons. My only real complaint with the motion controls is that their inclusion means this game can't be played with the Classic Controller. It's a shame, as it would have been a perfect fit. There are enough buttons on the Classic Controller to handle the game's various actions, and the L and R shoulders could have handled the platform tilting.

It doesn't matter if your first gaming system was the NES or DS; New Super Mario Bros. Wii proves that 2D platformers are still a blast. Longtime gamers will love the countless throwbacks to previous titles, and the multiplayer gameplay is fantastic (albeit hectic) fun for everyone. » **Dan Ryckert**

For a video look at how motion control is incorporated, check out gameinformer.com/mag



Second Opinion 9.25

New Super Mario Bros. Wii is a joyous, chaotic return to the series' side-scrolling roots. In retrospect, simultaneous multiplayer is such an obvious addition to the game that it's hard to believe that Nintendo didn't do it earlier. Single-player is fantastic, but having three more along for the ride profoundly changes the game. It was a lot more fun once I'd resigned myself to the fact that I was going to die a lot, and that many of those deaths would come courtesy of my so-called teammates. It's a shame that a game that trades on tight controls forces in some wobble gimmickry, but it doesn't take much of the sheen off one of this year's most flat-out fun experiences. » **Jeff Cork**

8

Wii

» **Concept**

Abridged retellings of classic Resident Evil games through simple arcade play

» **Graphics**

Dead Space: Extraction – another recent rail shooter for the Wii – set the bar high. While Darkside’s cutscenes fare well, the in-game graphics leave a lot to be desired

» **Sound**

Familiar voice acting and music help to ground the game within Resident Evil fiction

» **Playability**

Point, shoot, and shake to reload. It’s as easy as that. Get too enthusiastic and your reticle may take a short vacation, but it isn’t gone long enough to severely complicate gameplay

» **Entertainment**

The real joy comes from being entrenched in the Resident Evil universe, but menacing foes and challenging bosses help to shake up encounters with vanilla zombies

» **Replay Value**

Moderate

Second Opinion 7

Though a solid repurposing of Resident Evil’s past, Darkside suffers from a few viruses.

The on-rails shooter is clearly designed for two players – attempt to fight the infected on your own and prepare for defeat thanks to your unreliable AI partner. The *Blair Witch*-esque shaky cam induces motion sickness more than fear and makes the reticle a challenge to track. The game features standard weapons mapped to the d-pad on the Wii remote, however, the inability to map health items makes you access the menu for aid during tough battles, which disrupts the flow of gameplay. Environmental textures and overall graphics look rather dated and could use more polish, but in the end Darkside Chronicles delivers a fun co-op refresher course in Resident Evil canon. » **Annette Gonzalez**

Resident Evil: The Darkside Chronicles

Capcom delivers a fresh and familiar zombie-laden experience



Style 1 or 2-Player Shooter Publisher Capcom Developer Cavia Inc. Release November 17 ESRB M

If you’ve played Resident Evil: The Umbrella Chronicles, you know what to expect from its darker sibling. Action is around every corner in this rail shooter, and the game retains its winning formula – unapologetic RE fan service augmenting uncomplicated arcade play.

Whether you’ll enjoy Darkside Chronicles more than its predecessor ultimately comes down to personal taste. Instead of a string of definitive gameplay improvements, Capcom and Cavia have made many trade-offs. I am a big fan of the newly introduced sub-screen, which allows for weapon configuration and the deliberate use of recovery items, but would have loved to see the nunchuk-enabled camera control stick again. I like the streamlined reticle sans ammo indicator, but wish the simple two-button grenade lob hadn’t been left for dead. The shaky camera adds a level of authenticity, but makes it notably harder to pull off headshots.

Gameplay refinements aside, Chronicles excels at reimagining and abridging past Resident Evil games. Darkside follows the events of Resident

Evil 2 and Resident Evil Code: Veronica, while adding an all-new South American mission. Starring Leon Kennedy and Jack Krauser, the new campaign fleshes out the events leading up to Resident Evil 4 and feels right at home in the world of Umbrella’s unleashed horrors.

While seeing fan-favorite Leon Kennedy in a new adventure will be the largest draw for some, others will revel the chance to have him work in tandem with Claire during the Resident Evil 2 set piece – my personal favorite of the three. Here Capcom did a fantastic job of reworking key plot points of both Claire and Leon’s playthroughs, making the single integrated campaign feel fresh and familiar. The result is a comprehensive look at the entire RE 2 narrative, albeit a condensed one. The same can be said for the Code Veronica adaptation, where the scenarios are adjusted to facilitate a cooperative experience. It feels natural for Claire and Steve to work together against the omnipresent Alfred Ashford. When you factor in additional appearances by Albert Wesker, Ada Wong, and Chris Redfield,

you get a game steeped to the bone in classic Resident Evil lore.

All three episodes are comprehensive, resulting in a surprisingly long game. Even on the default difficulty setting, this is compounded by the challenge offered by bottlenecks of infected creatures and bosses. Expect to die a few times, especially if playing alone – something I don’t recommend as single-player feels unbalanced. Darkside Chronicles is obviously optimized for teamwork, but even a pair of reticles can’t stop a few frustrating cheap shots. These troublesome sections are the only times the on-rails gameplay feels restrictive – but at least the save points are forgiving.

Collectables provide a strong incentive to keep picking up the controller. Shooting environmental objects yields Umbrella tokens and gold. Once a chapter is complete, tokens unlock archives – character and enemy bios, movies, and even journals and diaries unchanged from their original debut. Gold can be used to upgrade weaponry for your next adventure.

Being on rails and having a handgun with infinite ammo at your disposal negates the fear associated with tank-like controls and limited resources from the early Resident Evil games, so real scares are few and far between. Quick turns of the camera try to catch you off guard, but I wouldn’t call Darkside Chronicles scary. Intense seems to be a more accurate descriptor, especially when describing the numerous back-to-back boss fights.

Resident Evil: The Darkside Chronicles acts as a fantastic primer for those who started with the more action-centric Resident Evil iterations, while simultaneously providing fan service and fun for dedicated followers. Novices and veterans alike would be doing themselves a disservice by passing up this game. » **Meagan Vanburkleo**

Visit gameinformer.com/mag to check out our video walkthrough of a level within the RE 2 campaign





6.5

Wii

» **Concept**

The presence of cop cars chasing you is about the only thing of note here. Otherwise, it fails to stand out in the racing department

» **Graphics**

The race graphics that stream along the environments from the lead car don't lend as much character as I would have liked

» **Sound**

The wave of licensed sounds and car audio is nothing to get your engine revving

» **Playability**

The game accepts several different control schemes, but as is usually the case with Wii titles, the motion-only controls aren't the best. I'd go with the full nunchuk setup

» **Entertainment**

Drifting through the corners is one of the few fun things this game has to offer. Otherwise, the staid racing does not live up to the Need for Speed moniker

» **Replay Value**

Moderately Low

Need for Speed: Nitro

Need for Speed: Nitro is on the wrong track

Style 1 to 4-Player Racing **Publisher** Electronic Arts **Developer** EA Montreal **Release** November 3 **ESRB** E10+

When EA split off the Need for Speed franchises into different streams, with Nitro being the more fun, arcadey title as opposed to Shift's more realistic focus, it made sense. I didn't agree with the decision, but at a minimum I could see how it might imbue the series with a clear focus that it seemed to have lost in recent years – albeit in two separate titles. Given that mandate, I expected Nitro to come out screaming with a vengeance, but this is far from the distilled essence of NFS's cops-and-cars.

Need for Speed: Nitro takes place on a series of confined tracks. Not only will you repeatedly visit them throughout the game, but the lack of freedom they give you makes battling the cops

no fun at all. In fact, not having freeform cop chases seems like an anathema to the series. Furthermore, a scant two kinds of power-ups (one for repairing your car and the other to sic the cops on other racers) don't do much to invigorate the moment-to-moment racing. The car customization features (which carry over into your graphics being imposed upon the tracks as you race) also aren't anything to hang your hat on.

The game's bronze, silver, and gold cups take you to the same five cities through the game, so the variety comes more in the race types such as elimination (last place car is knocked out per lap), drift challenge, drag racing, time attack, circuit, and speed trap. The latter was the most

interesting, as you have to carry as much speed as you can through certain sections of the track in order to clock the highest total speeds. Drifting was also fun, and doing it in all types of races is beneficial since it gets you an extra star towards your career progression.

Make no mistake about it, Need for Speed: Nitro's competitive advantage shouldn't be the motion controls – it should be the series' penchant for arcade racing, supercharged cop chases, and edge-of-your-seat racing. Unfortunately it doesn't even come close to delivering on these fronts. But, by all means, have some motion controls. » **Matthew Kato**

Final Fantasy Crystal Chronicles: The Crystal Bearers

Square Enix spins off in a bad direction

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Square Enix **Developer** Square Enix **Release** December 26 **ESRB** T

And you thought Dirge of Cerberus was stupid! The Crystal Bearers is the worst game I have played that bears the once sacred Final Fantasy name. Despite the series' reputation, don't believe for a second there is anything remotely role-playing about Crystal Bearers; it is a generic action game through and through, with a few Final Fantasy monsters tossed in to lure unsuspecting fans.

I had high hopes going into this game. I wasn't a big fan of the previous Crystal Chronicles entries, but I thought that moving away from the co-op centered gameplay toward a single-player, story-driven experience would put Crystal Bearers in territory where Square Enix has more expertise. Instead, players get a mishmash of awful mechanics delivered alongside a predictable and obvious story.

The worst of it comes in combat, where players are tasked with targeting objects and enemies and flinging them around using telekinetic powers. Thanks to the imprecision in



registering motions, you can never count on your actions being interpreted properly. When I managed to grab a rock and throw it at the enemy I intended, it felt more like luck than skill. Rather than wrestle with this problem, the development team just decided to make everything painfully easy, removing the challenge altogether. This also holds true during occasional minigame breaks, where you do things like fly airships and surf down tunnels. You can't fail these events, but the game keeps track of your times so you can (ugh) go back and try to beat your score.

I wish I could say that the story makes the suffering worthwhile, but that would be a dirty lie. After a cool introductory sequence, things go



downhill immediately. Players will have the whole plot figured out light years before the moronic main character, and every member of the supporting cast got on my nerves. The dialogue is particularly heinous, with stilted and wooden exchanges that make you wince every time anyone opens their mouth.

To its credit, Crystal Bearers hits its target graphical style dead on, with cool character designs and a world that fuses fantasy and technology in visually interesting ways. Unfortunately, you would actually have to play the game to enjoy the art, and that is something I just can't recommend to anyone. » **Joe Juba**

5.5

Wii

» **Concept**

Put the final nail in the Crystal Chronicles coffin (I hope)

» **Graphics**

Environmental textures are bland and repetitive, but the characters and enemies are some of the best looking things you'll see on the Wii

» **Sound**

I can't blame the voice actors for the terrible delivery. No one could make dialogue this bad sound good

» **Playability**

Some sequences are less aggravating than others, but nothing actually controls well

» **Entertainment**

The only fun I had was terrorizing townspeople with my powers. That gets old after a few minutes, leaving you with nothing

» **Replay**

Low

Silent Hill: Shattered Memories

Konami's intriguing remake is bogged down by phantasmal motion control

6.25

Wii

» **Concept**

Visit Silent Hill for the first time again, this time armed with only a twisted psyche

» **Graphics**

The worst shadow effects I've ever seen detract from an already rough-looking game

» **Sound**

Great voice acting and tone-setting music are spoiled only by the horrendous grinding sounds emanating from the Wii remote

» **Playability**

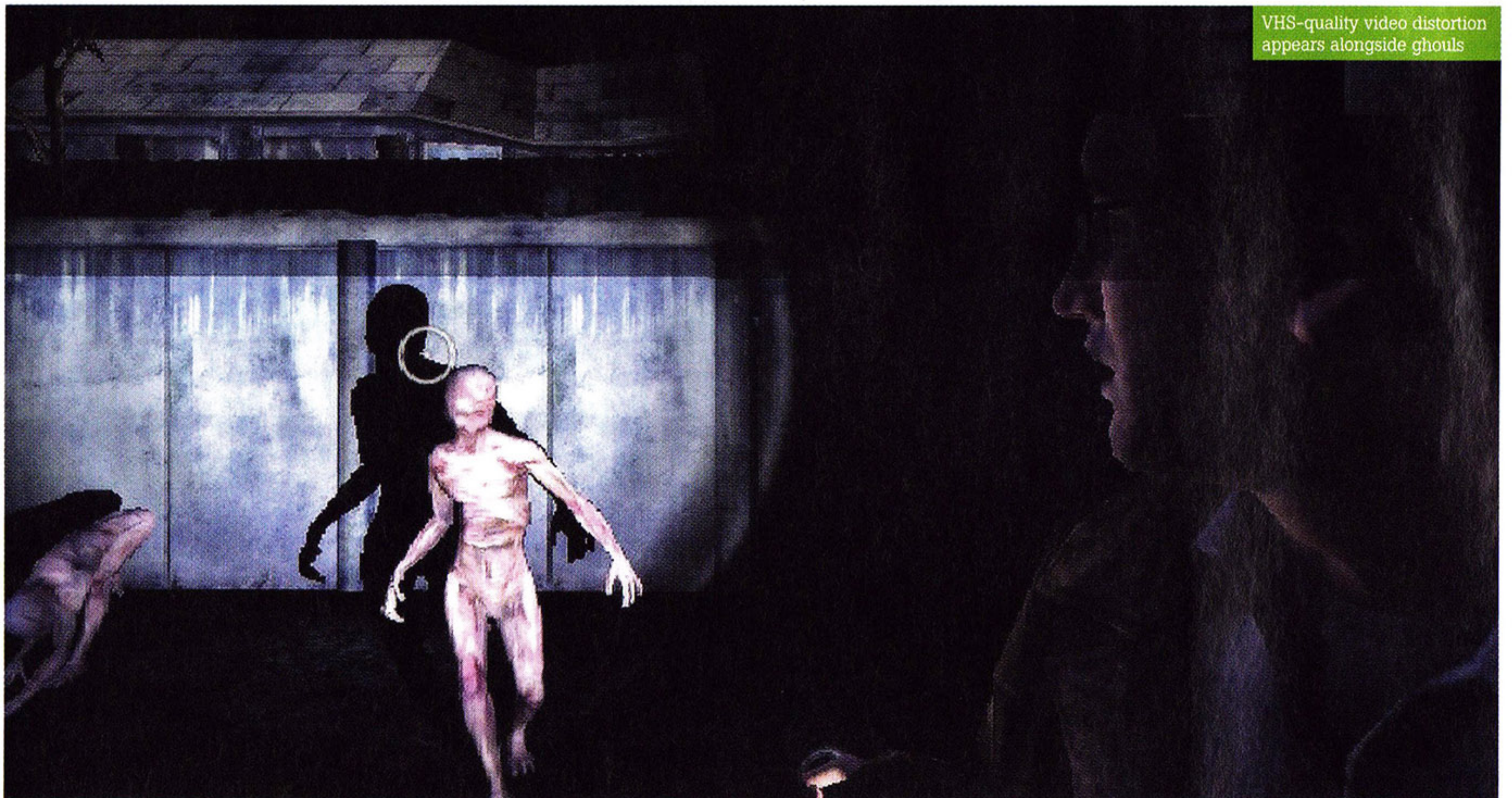
Controlling Harry with the Wii remote is sloppy, and manipulating motion-controlled puzzles can be a trying process

» **Entertainment**

There is fun to be had here for true Silent Hill fans, but they're going to have to endure a gauntlet of clunky gameplay

» **Replay Value**

Moderate



Style 1-Player Adventure Publisher Konami Developer Climax Studios Release December 8 ESRB M

When players first visited the town of Silent Hill in 1999, they encountered a twisted, decayed nightmare crawling with monsters requiring loads of ammunition to kill. Now it's 2009, and Konami's remake of the survival horror gem has ditched the original's industrial deterioration, combat, and weapons in exchange for corrupting ice, pacifism, and a flashlight. Mix in psychological profiling and *Shattered Memories* is a very different game, for better and worse.

As in the first game, Harry Mason is looking for his daughter Cheryl after a car wreck near Silent Hill. This is the spot where the two games fragment into different experiences. In *Shattered Memories*, Harry lives in the creepy town, and the entire place is buried in snow. Some familiar names return, but the characters aren't exactly

as you remember them. Dahlia is a seductive young lady with a complicated past involving Harry, and Dr. K takes on the role of the player's psychoanalyst. The residents of Silent Hill feel real, and I couldn't help but become emotionally invested in them. A narrative smacking of *M. Night Shyamalan* is a welcome departure from the ludicrous and confounding plot of the original.

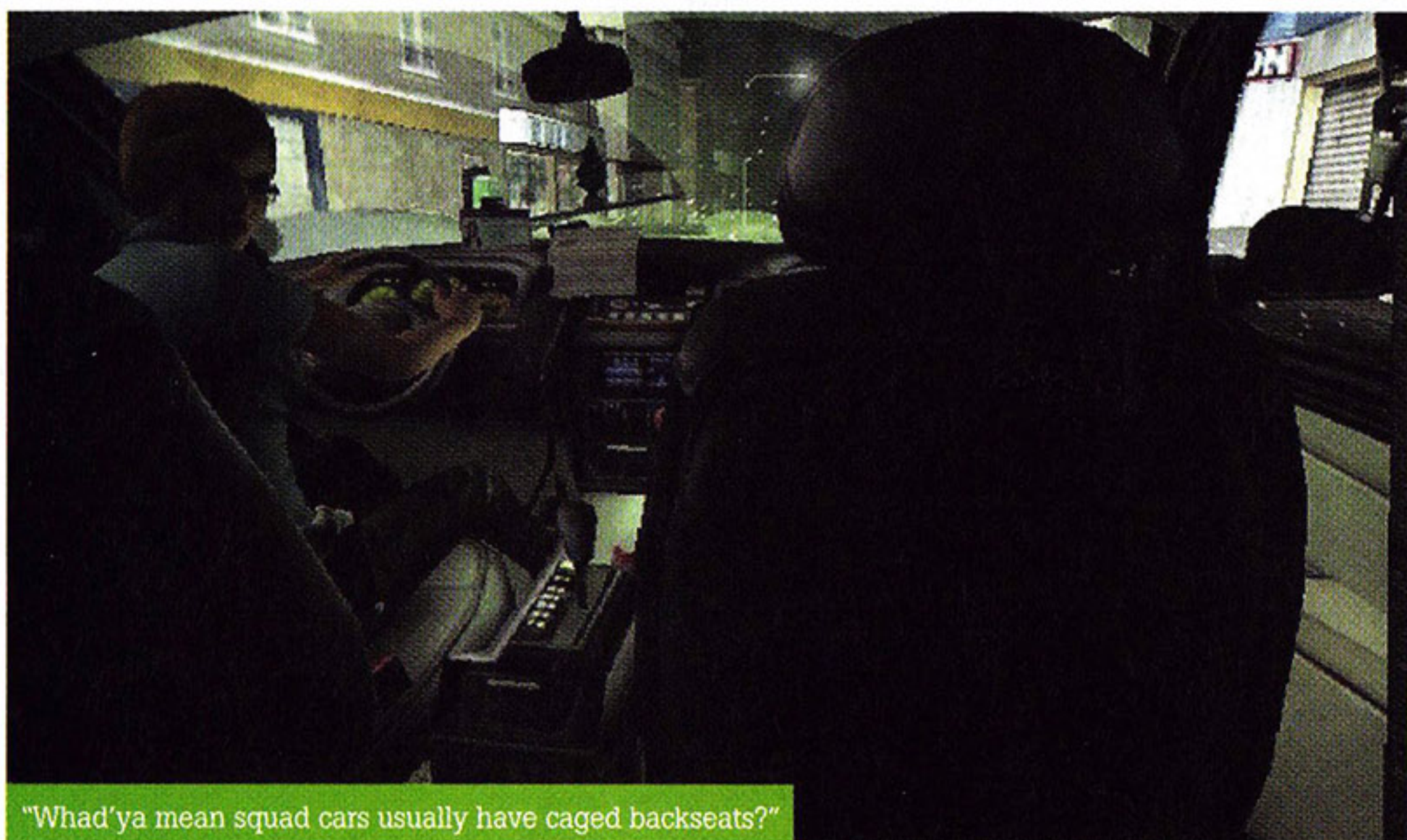
Shattered Memories also features an intriguing psychological profiling element. You begin the game by filling out a surprisingly personal questionnaire that pries into everything from your virginity to your faithfulness. Harry's disposition, characters' appearances, routes through town, and even the monsters stalking you undergo noticeable changes based on your answers. It's not enough to disturb you to the core of your psyche, but it definitely warrants another playthrough.

Good thing the story is so redeeming, because most of the gameplay is divided into mediocre exploration and infuriating evasion. In the effort to find his daughter, Harry trudges through the town at the speed of a 40-year-old pickup truck with flat tires attempting to ford a swamp of molasses. Clunky, tank-like movement is dictated by the nunchuk, while the Wii remote directs the flashlight's imprecise beam, and thus Harry's dubious trajectory.

Controlling Harry is an awkward affair that's exacerbated by instances when you're chased by meat monsters. Just when you thought negotiating your escape through the confusing environments couldn't get worse, the underwhelming monsters pounce on you, initiating a frustrating and unresponsive motion-control prompt. Miming the action of throwing off enemies after being dogpiled taxes your patience, which is further amplified by Harry's decreased speed after surviving an encounter. Instead of guns or rusty pipes, you're reduced to using flares to temporarily stave off the creatures. These chase segments grow tired very quickly, leaving you missing weapons or any other option to dispatch your pursuers.

Harry's fancy phone plays a big part in navigating the convoluted town, with your reliance on it rivaling that of the annoying guy who texts during movies. Mysterious calls require you to lift the Wii remote to your face like an idiot, effectively annoying anyone in the room with the noises its tinny speaker produces. In contrast, interesting new layers of interactivity involving phone number puzzles and capturing pictures of ghosts exercise your brain to satisfying results.

Shattered Memories' frustrating control flaws and dull pacing make it a hard game to recommend. Its engaging characters, improved story, and unique profiling mechanic only make it worth checking out for diehard Silent Hill devotees willing to wade through the muck. If you're a Silent Hill fan interested in a fresh take on the stale formula, this Wii entry may be the Cheryl you've been searching for – but it comes at a cost. » **Tim Turi**





6

Wii

» **Concept**
Shaun White and his hipster boarder friends hit the slopes again, but this time they're not just chasing powder – there is some actual competition involved

» **Graphics**
Shaun's hair deserves some better rendering software, and it's pretty obvious that Ubisoft is hiding the Wii's mediocre graphics with a speedy blur effect

» **Sound**
Keep your iPod playlist on repeat; there is almost nothing worth listening to on this disc

» **Playability**
Using the balance board is an interesting novelty, but if you want to actually win a few events use a standard Wii controller

» **Entertainment**
While World Stage is more fun than cracking your head against a tree, I've still had more thrills riding ski lifts

» **Replay Value**
Moderately Low

Shaun White Snowboarding: World Stage

Shaun's idiot friends try to stay up on the Wii balance board

Style 1 to 4-Player Sports **Publisher** Ubisoft **Developer** Ubisoft Montreal **Release** November 8 **ESRB** E

The sequel to last year's Road Trip struggles off the bunny hill and into the competition. The game starts with Shaun tagging along as a few of his schlubby friends drive to the airport, ready to embark on a multi-tiered global competition. However, the second his friends reach their gate, Shaun sprints off to polish his medals and make Red Bull ads. You play as Shaun late in the game, but most of the time you're riding without him. It's unfortunate, because his friends – and the game in general – could have benefited from some professional expertise.

Up to three friends can join in at any time and co-op progress transfers over to your single-player game, but you might not feel like

progressing through this skin-deep snowboarding sim. Shaun's trick set was pretty thin last year, and Ubisoft hasn't done much to teach him anything new. The shallow gameplay suffers because trick recovery and railgrinding are still too forgiving.

Ubisoft mixes up the action with a variety of half-pipe challenges, timed scoring challenges, and pure speed races. The new streamlined courses seem more conscious of the fact that you are using a motion controller, letting you concentrate on stringing tricks together rather than having to focus on preventing your player from plowing straight into the course fence.

One new feature is World Stage's create-a-trick mode. If you have a Wii MotionPlus you

can design your own moves by having your boarders replicate the motions you make with the Wii remote. It's a nice concept but it's hard to translate your trick ideas into the real thing. The other Wii peripheral World Stage uses is the Wii Balance board, but you should just stick to using the standard remote. You might as well ride a peanut-butter covered skateboard down an elephant's back for how impractical and testy Shaun's controls become on the balance board.

Shaun may have walked away with the gold, but his games still can't qualify. » **Ben Reeves**

Want to know more about World Stage's development? Check out gameinformer.com/mag for more concept art, movies, and developer diaries.

Your Shape Featuring Jenny McCarthy

Familiar routines with a new face

Style 1-Player Lifestyle **Publisher** Ubisoft **Developer** Ubisoft Barcelona **Release** November 24 **ESRB** E

When Ubisoft showed off its fitness game at E3, I was reminded of Sony's EyeToy Kinetic. Both games encouraged players to sweat it out in a variety of routines while a camera peripheral silently judged. After gasping through a few workouts, I realized it had more than a little in common with Ubisoft's own My Fitness Coach, which was released way back in January 2009. Once all the blood had returned back to my brain I realized that yes, it was basically the same game as My Fitness Coach, which in turn was nearly identical to 2004's Yourself!Fitness. The only real differences between Your Shape Featuring Jenny McCarthy and its predecessors are the camera and that

the trainer Maya has been axed in favor of the bubbly Jenny McCarthy.

The camera is a nice addition, and it's incorporated well throughout the game, from the initial set up to the actual workouts. In previous games, I'd have to use a tape measure to determine exactly how fat I am. Your Shape Featuring Jenny McCarthy made the process a breeze by using its camera to "scan" my body to create a pudgy, textureless humanoid figure. It was nothing if not an inspiration to get to work.

After entering in my goals and desired workout length, the game created routines for me. Every step turn and heel kick took me back to a time when Spider-Man 2 was burning up the box office and Ashlee Simpson was capturing America's heart. I cannot stress this enough: These are the same routines as in 2004's Yourself!Fitness. The camera was helpful, turning part of my screen into a virtual mirror and showing me side by side with Jenny as I huffed and puffed along. When my moves matched up, I was told I was "nice" and "perfect." Missteps were met with helpful words of encouragement and suggestions that I visit the tutorial modes.

The camera eliminates one criticism from previous iterations, the lack of any feedback, but it doesn't address others. Some of the exercises are difficult to perform while looking at the



7

Wii

» **Concept**
Work out in front of your television with an animated trainer, and have your performance monitored with a new USB camera accessory

» **Graphics**
Jenny's onscreen version doesn't look anything like the real deal, but the overall presentation is clean and simple

» **Sound**
Jenny barks out encouragement over a variety of generic workout tracks and Rihanna's "Umbrella"

» **Playability**
The camera does a decent job of monitoring your motions, but you'll probably need to practice a few of the exercises before they click

» **Entertainment**
If you don't think hopping around your living room is fun, Your Shape probably won't change your mind

» **Replay Value**
High

King's Bounty: Armored Princess

Russians ably revive a classic strategy/RPG hybrid

8.75

PC

» Concept

Recruit fantastic creatures into your army, uncover powerful artifacts, and level up as you save your father's kingdom one turn-based tactical battle at a time

» Graphics

The latest and greatest use of shaders this isn't, but careful detail and artistry create a lush world

» Sound

The battle sounds add a nice physicality to special attacks

» Playability

The manual doesn't tell you this anywhere, but do yourself a favor and press ALT. It switches the interface between modes I've thoughtfully dubbed "gimptastic" and "useable"

» Entertainment

I never thought that I'd get something that could live alongside Heroes of Might & Magic III in my heart, but this delivers

» Replay Value

High



Style 1-Player Strategy/RPG Publisher 1C Company Developer Katauri Interactive
Release November 20 ESRB T

Heroes, Kings, and History

Why compare King's Bounty: Armored Princess to Heroes of Might & Magic? Gameplay similarities aside, the titles share common roots. New World Computing design guru Jon Van Canaghem created the original King's Bounty in 1990, the formula for which is largely followed by Armored Princess and its predecessor, 2008's King's Bounty: The Legend. Van Canaghem then adapted the design to a 4X-like paradigm, and thus Heroes of Might & Magic was born. New World Computing was bought by 3DO in 1996, and imploded along with the rest of that ill-fated publisher in 2003. Ubisoft picked up the rights to everything Might & Magic related in the ensuing fire sale, while Russian publisher 1C purchased the King's Bounty IP. Confused yet? Who cares; the upshot of all of it is that we've got a great game to play out of the deal.

Before playing King's Bounty: Armored Princess, I'd have called you a dirty liar if you told me a second-tier Russian company buying the rights to the classic title would result in a great game for Heroes of Might & Magic fans. I'm ecstatic to be proven wrong. This title is a solid followup to last year's under-the-radar King's Bounty: The Legend, tweaking many things for the better and providing a fabulous setting in which to adventure. The turn-based tactical combat is as entertaining as anything HOMM ever did, and exchanging that series' empire building for a single-hero RPG-like approach works better than expected.

From your humble beginnings as the god-sent princess of a fantastic kingdom, you'll slowly become the kind of world-dominating conqueror that sends brutal usurpers running in fear. Adventuring through the game's many unique

continents reveals enough quests, monsters, treasures, and secrets to make a Baggins blush. As your princess grows in experience, she gains the ability to lead more powerful troops and grant better bonuses to them in combat. Each level also grants a certain number of runes, which can be spent to advance along three parallel skill trees. You can customize your progression along the Might, Magic, and Mind paths to become a mighty warrior, wise leader, skilled mage, or some combination thereof. Every choice you make impacts your battle strategies, as well as how you build your army. Magic-focused characters can make exceptional use of troops with unusual powers or disabling attacks, whereas emphasizing martial prowess allows you to dominate battlefields with beefy melee troops.

Combat is a carbon copy of HOMM, with a few additions. Troops take actions according to their initiative, moving along a small hex grid as they bite, shoot, immolate, and otherwise assault the enemy. The princess (and her enemy, if she's facing an army led by an opposing hero) can cast a single spell per round, ranging from simple protective wards to army-incinerating fireballs. The big twist here is the Rage system. As blows are exchanged, the rage meter fills. Your pet

dragon (who has been leveling alongside you the whole time) can consume that rage to unleash awesome powers. Depending on how you've customized its abilities, the dragon can build walls, drop eggs that hatch into huge troops of disposable allies, or even raise volcanoes to burninate your enemies. Using your army's special abilities, spellcasting, and rage effectively in concert is necessary to overcome King's Bounty's significant challenges.

This surprising title does so many things right that it's easy to forgive its minor flaws. A few gems of clever writing peek through in the story, but the plot is often conveyed in dry text boxes and hackneyed prose. Some battles feel similar to one another, leading to unpleasant déjà vu as you crush one encounter after another using the exact same tactics. I appreciate the encouragement to fight efficiently and minimize attrition, but no matter how strong your strategy is, you'll regularly have to run back to town and replenish your depleted army. Still, in the grand scheme of strategy gaming, the tedium King's Bounty subjects its players to is well within acceptable limits.

This is the latest example of the European development community stepping up its game as American PC studios flock to consoles on a seemingly daily basis. Complain all you want about Rage or Call of Duty relegating their PC versions to second-class status. With outstanding creative titles like this coming from the most unexpected sources, I wouldn't trade my PC for anything. » **Adam Biessener**





League of Legends

DotA clone is faithful to a fault

Style 1-Player Strategy (10-Players Online) **Publisher** THQ
Developer Riot Games **Release** October 27 **ESRB** T

The list of mods that are arguably more popular and influential than the base game starts with Counter-Strike and ends with Defense of the Ancients. Valve hired the Counter-Strike crew. Part of the Defense of the Ancients brain trust started up Riot Games. Existing players will welcome League of Legends' improved interface, graphics, and variety. However, despite a fair amount of effort on Riot's part, it's nearly as impenetrable to newbies as the notoriously unfriendly original.

The basic schtick is to use a single champion unit, which starts at level one

to that goal, and riding that power curve is great fun.

Early game jousting lasts for about 10 minutes. If nobody has done anything stupid enough to get themselves killed and thereby pushed an enemy ahead of the power curve, the next 15 or so minutes almost invariably determine the match as the kills and bounties pile up. Then you get to act out a script for the next half hour while one side slowly grinds down the other. Comebacks can and do happen, but rarely enough that the end-game slog is painful for the losing team to play out.



with just a handful of gold, to turn the tide of battle between two NPC armies that continually spawn at opposite corners of the map and run headlong into each other. You're constantly struggling to stay ahead of the power curve as experience (and more importantly, gold) improves every champion on the field over time. Purchased items have a massive effect on champion power; it's not uncommon for a "carry" player (someone fed gold and protected by his team with the goal of becoming overpowered in the endgame) to consistently two- or three-shot champions toward the end of a round. There's a lot of room for strategy in how you get

of Legends' matchmaking system helps a bit in this regard, but not enough.

It's too bad that Riot Games didn't take more chances with League of Legends, because the basic premise is good enough to have made Defense of the Ancients a subgenre unto itself. The window dressing – the persistent upgrade metagame, much-improved interface, and solid matchmaking – is a significant step forward. The core gameplay is identical, and shares the same problems. As flawed as it is, at least Demigod presented some new ideas. League of Legends is for Defense of the Ancients veterans and few others. » **Adam Biessener**

7.75

PC

» Concept

Dominate your opponents by farming faster than them and avoiding stupid early deaths in this ultra-competitive 3v3-to-5v5 real-time strategy title

» Graphics

Warcraft III with higher-res textures and more polygons. In other words, inviting but hardly cutting-edge

» Sound

Unit voiceovers start grating 20 minutes into a 45-minute match

» Playability

Little touches like the vastly improved shop interface make this noticeably friendlier than the Warcraft III-based original

» Entertainment

This is undeniably better than vanilla Defense of the Ancients, but no more accessible

» Replay Value

Moderately High

Free To Play, Mostly

League of Legends is free to download and play, but you'll have to pay with real money or slowly accumulated in-game points to unlock champions beyond a rotating group of 10 available to everyone. The runes used as half of the persistent upgrade metagame (the other half simply follows your experience level) are acquired similarly. The free content is more than enough to play for months if you dig the gameplay, though.

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The Legend of Zelda: Spirit Tracks

Derailing the classic formula

8

DS

» **Concept**

The introduction of a train and the removal of overworld exploration negatively affects a classic experience

» **Graphics**

Just as colorful as Phantom Hourglass, but the textures in the train segment are far too pixelated and repetitive

» **Sound**

Exactly what you would expect – classic sound effects, annoying sighs and groans from Link, and a wonderful score

» **Playability**

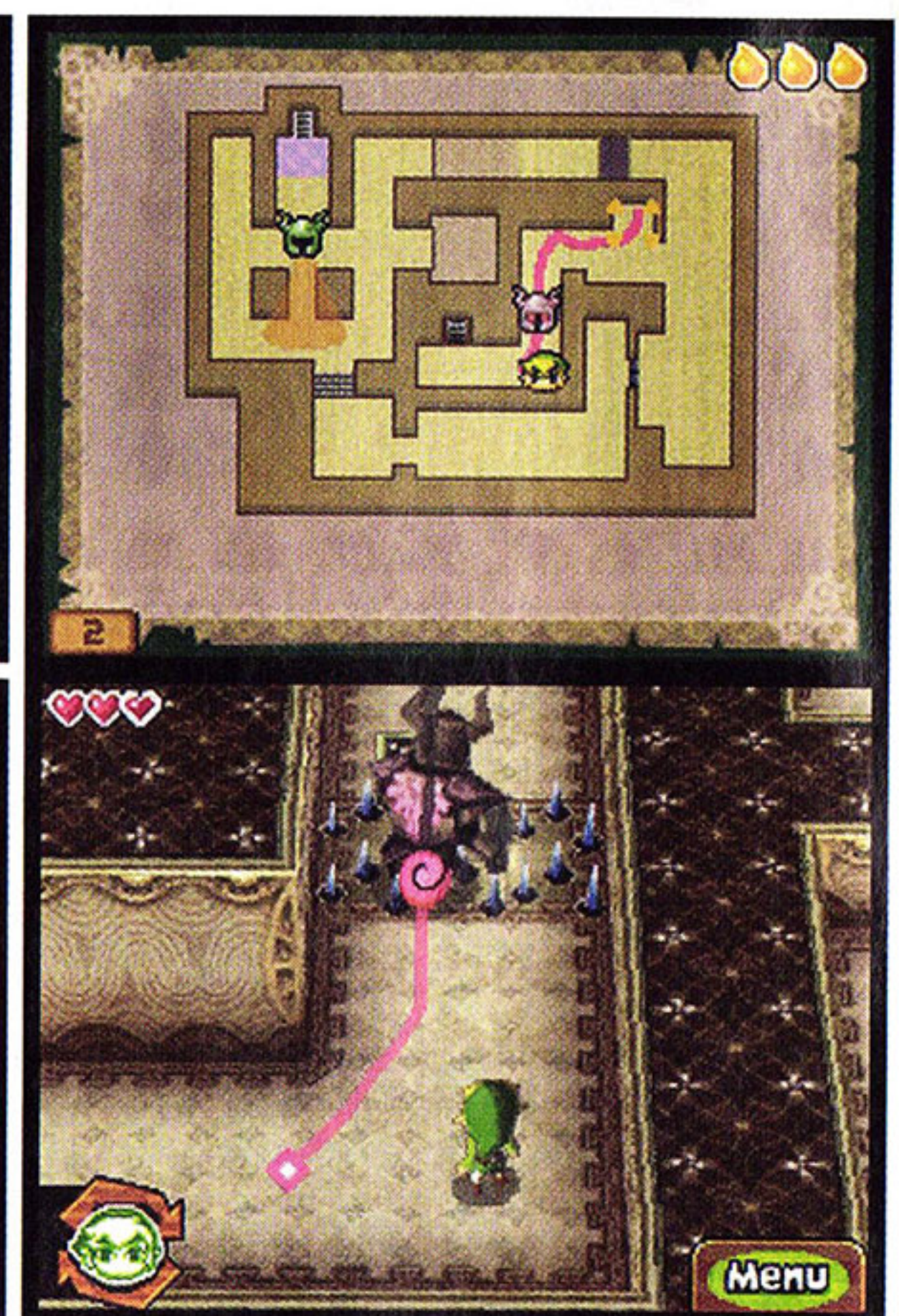
The stylus-based mechanics are solid, but lack precision

» **Entertainment**

Engaging and fun...in the dungeons. Outside of them, it can be a drag

» **Replay Value**

Moderately Low



Style 1-Player Action (4-Player Local) Publisher Nintendo Developer Nintendo Release December 7 ESRB E10+

Second Opinion 8.25

Spirit Tracks is a mixed experience the likes of which hasn't been witnessed from the legendary franchise since *Zelda II: The Adventure of Link* on the NES. Like that entry, this handheld adventure is sure to win over some with its quirky charm and brilliant dungeon design. But first those fans will have to get over the linear fetch-questing made necessary by the train, a design decision that lends the game a unique mode of transport while simultaneously robbing it of the thrill of exploration that is the core of every other game in the franchise – even *Zelda II*. I'm glad Nintendo is playing with the *Zelda* formula, but *Spirit Tracks'* innovations tend toward the mundane rather than the fantastic. » **Phil Kollar**

It'll just come out and say it: *Spirit Tracks* is my least favorite *Zelda* title yet – and this is coming from someone who fell in love with *Wind Waker*, the *Zelda* game most commonly cited as the series' lowest point. If you've made the unfortunate misstep of riding a train across the United States, you'll have a good idea where this game goes wrong. On the railway, Link's adventure embraces lengthy stretches of countryside travel with little in terms of action or variation.

You're probably saying, "this is exactly what I hated about *Wind Waker* and *Phantom Hourglass'* sailing segments." Thematically they are similar, but the sailing retained the series' thrill of exploration – allowing players to veer off of the beaten path to explore any nook and cranny – whereas the train is railroaded into predetermined paths. This linearity removes exploration from the *Zelda* equation, making the world and progression feel as sterile as moving from world to world in a *Mario* game.

The train does offer a few standout moments, primarily a clever spin on the series' trademark *Lost Woods*. The train's touchscreen controls are nicely designed, allowing players to place precision cannon shots while keeping tabs on speed and track switching. You can also lay on its horn as much as you want – something I would rightfully abuse on a real train. While showing just a hint of promise, the train doesn't fit with the *Zelda* formula. When it's in play, it saps this journey of its excitement and wonder.

When the conductor hat is thrown to the side, Nintendo shows us that it hasn't lost a step in dungeon and puzzle design. Once again, Link's staple items – the boomerang, bombs, etc. – are used in ingenious ways. I especially love how the boomerang channels elemental properties. Moreover, many of the "stumper" puzzles require a fair amount of on-screen note taking, and are unlike any riddles in any other *Zelda* title.

Adding Princess *Zelda* as a controllable character further enhances puzzle and dungeon complexity. Players control the princess by drawing her movement paths. This can be as simple as weaving in and out of geometry to avoid tripping a trap, or can be as complex as having her flank an enemy and attack from behind as you distract it with Link. Occasional pathing issues lead to her getting stuck on geometry or stopping in her tracks, but she does comply without error most of the time.

Link's obsession with the worst music instruments in the world continues with the introduction of the pan flute. The functionality of this device couldn't have been better, as you play it like a real flute by moving the pipes to your lips and blowing into the DS's mic to activate a note. Unlike *Wind Waker*, this instrument is used sparingly, mostly when you see visual clues.

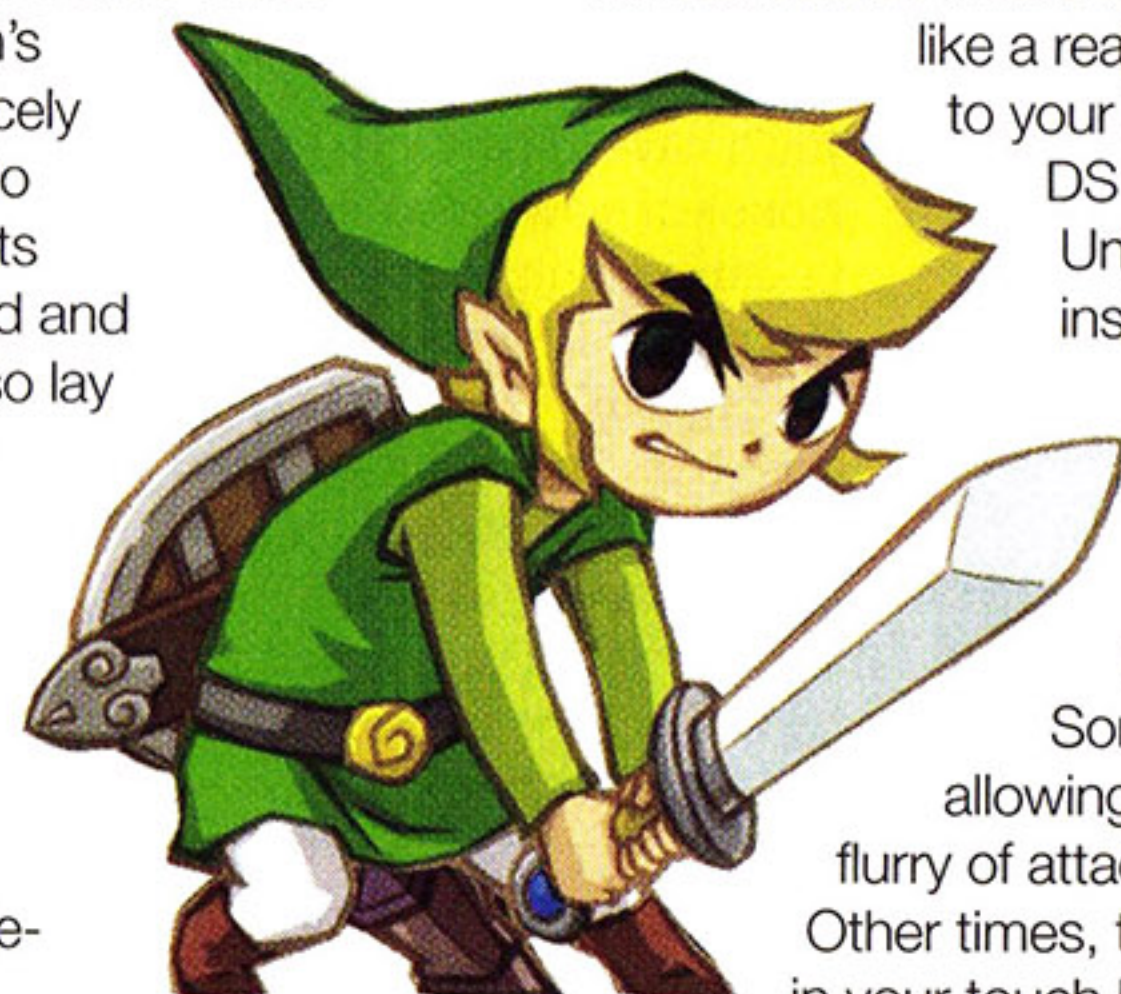
The stylus-based combat is identical to *Phantom Hourglass*.

Sometimes it feels great, allowing you string together a flurry of attacks from enemy to enemy. Other times, the slightest miscalculation in your touch leads to Link rolling off a

cliff or running into fire. It hits more than it misses, but I still don't understand why Nintendo doesn't include a standard control option for people, like myself, who would prefer to play it like a traditional *Zelda* title.

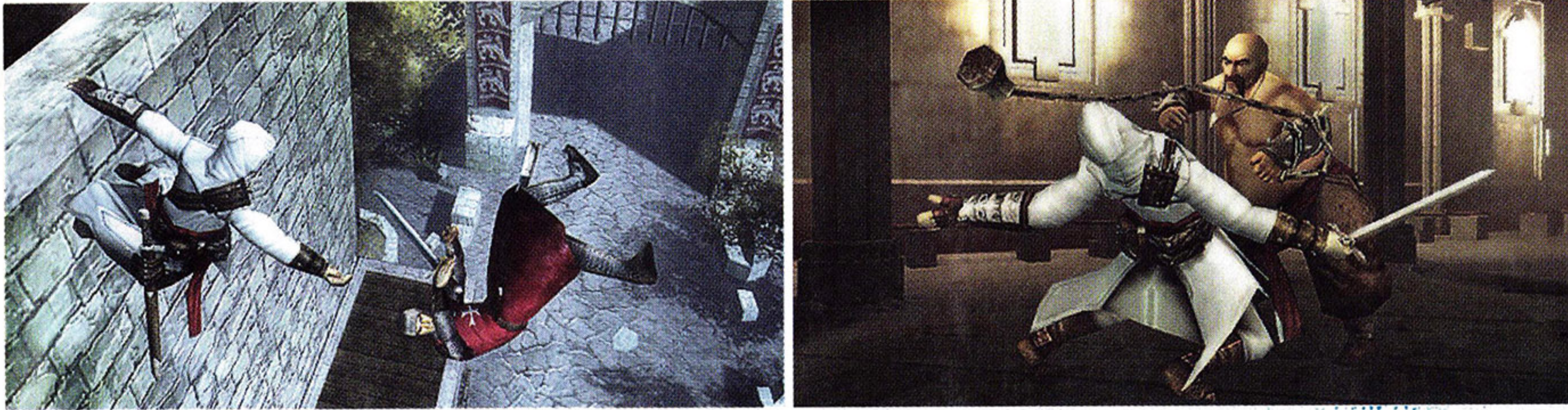
Narrative-wise, *Spirit Tracks* derails in a peculiar way. The initial story set-up is good. The new antagonist, a smarmy chancellor that you'd think was plucked from George Lucas' trade dispute stories, is only on screen for a few seconds before you want to whack him with your sword. Mysteries tied to Hyrule's past and the train tracks keep you engaged, and the breadcrumb trail of answers is nicely paced from start to finish. The problem is tied solely to Princess *Zelda*. Now that she's at your side for an entire adventure, she essentially becomes your narrator. Her bubbly personality isn't what I expected. She comes across more like a teenage-angsty Hannah Montana than the calm-yet-troubled princess I knew in previous series iterations. Place her rambling tantrums next to Link's inability to do anything other than sigh, and the adventure is further taken off course. Multiplayer, while fun, doesn't offer enough to bring players back.

In my tenure as a game critic, I haven't come across a game that fluctuates between highs and lows as frequently as *Spirit Tracks*. I often found myself taken aback by an amazing puzzle, only to be bored to death on a train moments later. Even though the path is rocky, this is still a good game. Fans shouldn't be afraid of it. The train segments could use a shot of adrenaline, and *Zelda* needs to shut her trap, but the puzzles and dungeons retain the classic charm that keeps us coming back for more. » **Andrew Reiner**



Assassin's Creed: Bloodlines

Portable installment loses the magic



Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Ubisoft **Developer** Griptonite Games **Release** November 17 **ESRB** M

Assassin's Creed: Bloodlines is meant to be a companion piece to Assassin's Creed II. The loose story ties between the two games are the most enticing elements in an otherwise lackluster project. Bloodlines tries hard to be like its console big brother, but is thwarted by poor level design, ludicrous plot development, and tiresome gameplay on a portable system that just isn't up to snuff.

Gamers who longed for another go around with Crusades-era assassin Altair get their wish in Bloodlines. Picking up soon after the conclusion of the first game, the game tells the tale of Altair's trip to Cyprus and his continued struggles against

the Templar. It's fun to see the familiar hero again, but it doesn't take long to realize his journeys aren't going to tell you anything you don't already know. The thinly stretched plotline that sends Altair running across Cyprus' cities is nonsensical, acting purely as a vehicle to deliver gameplay.

Sadly, that gameplay doesn't hold up for very long. Combat is too simplistic, and the unintelligent AI governing your enemies doesn't help. Poorly implemented boss battles feel out of character for the series. The free running platforming works well at times, but the limitations of the analog nub frequently result in awkward control. Even once you get moving without stumbling,

the game areas are so small that you'll soon be seeing a loading screen. Missions are rarely more than a slog through repetitive objectives and situations you don't really care about or understand.

The basics of Assassin's Creed core gameplay are present in this PSP installment, and it's impressive to see the game running on a portable system. Unfortunately, all the finesse, intrigue, and excitement that makes the franchise worth playing got left behind in the Holy Land. » **Matt Miller**

Learn how Assassin's Creed: Bloodlines can interact with the PS3 version of Assassin's Creed II at gameinformer.com/mag

6.5

PSP

» **Concept**

Take another journey with Altair, with drastically downgraded graphics, options, and fun

» **Graphics**

The game looks good on the PSP, boasting some impressive animations

» **Sound**

Numerous sound glitches plague the game, and most of the music appears to have been borrowed from the franchise's first entry

» **Playability**

The awkward PSP analog nub and the lack of a second stick dramatically hurt the control experience

» **Entertainment**

Bloodlines lacks the thrills and historical detail of its console brethren

» **Replay Value**

Moderately Low

Atelier Annie: Alchemists of Sera Island

Multiple genres synthesized into lackluster alchemy game



5

DS

» **Concept**

Lazy girl turned item synthesizer mixes things together and manages resorts

» **Graphics**

Anime-inspired character animations during dialogue are appealing, but character models look like bobbleheads

» **Sound**

Though each environment has its own music, the repetition when backtracking for items will make you want to turn down the volume

» **Playability**

Challenging items are fun to synthesize, though the novelty quickly wears thin

» **Entertainment**

Interactions with other characters result in lengthy reading sessions. Lack of depth in alchemy and exploration leaves much to be desired

» **Replay Value**

Low

In games like Dragon Quest and Kingdom Hearts, players can tap into alchemy to conjure powerful weapons and items that complement the overall adventure. Though usually an afterthought in these RPGs, developer Gust has built an entire game around item synthesis and thrown in elements of resort management for Atelier Annie. Yes, it is as strange as it sounds.

The game follows Annie, a lethargic young woman with no desire to work and whose only goal in life is to "marry up." Her lazy behavior leads her family to cast her off to Sera Island to work on a resort development project and participate in an alchemy competition. The game requires you to complete six assignments over a span of three years using your skills to synthesize requested items and return the final product by specific deadlines. To collect items for your assignments, you must visit small "gathering points" the size of the DS touchscreen. Navigation to these points simply requires selecting the location on a menu, eliminating any sort of world map exploration. Once there, you'll mash the A button wherever you see an item bubble until it disappears. That's it.

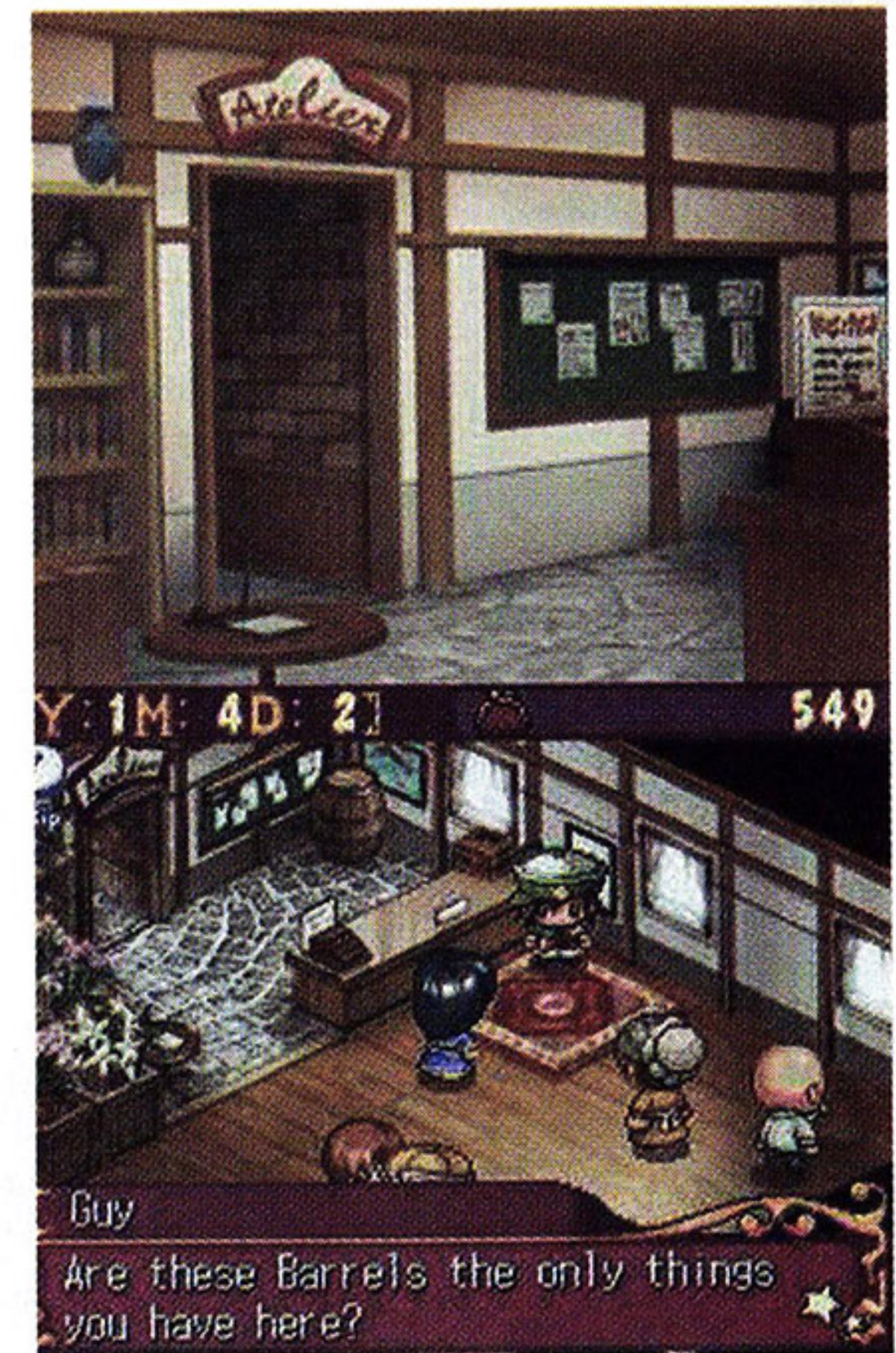
While gathering, turn-based battles randomly occur to break up the monotony. Players take up arms against creatures using their own synthe-

sized weapons, or ones purchased at the shop. Like most turn-based battles, you can choose between standard attacks and items in a menu to take on your foes. While familiar, this overused system could have set itself apart by incorporating more alchemy into battle mechanics.

Completing missions results in monetary awards that can be used for development. In between assignment deadlines you can buy new facilities such as theaters and hotels, and increase their popularity by completing alchemy fetch quests and simple minigames. Used as a vehicle for players to practice alchemy between the six main quest assignments, resort management feels awkwardly included to no benefit in the game. Meeting assignment deadlines requires strategy, as each step in the alchemy process takes a few days off the in-game calendar. This can be fun when dealing with more complex items near the end of the game, but at that point it's too late.

While Atelier Annie offers some entertaining strategic elements, the lack of depth, exploration, and compelling battles keeps the game short of a winning recipe. » **Annette Gonzalez**

Head over to gameinformer.com/mag for exclusive character art and additional screenshots



Jak and Daxter: The Lost Frontier

Jak journeys to the end of the world in this solid sequel

7.75

PSP

» Concept

Continue the Jak and Daxter series with a different developer, new airplane battles, and exploration

» Graphics

The visual style is on par with the PS2 series, though it won't blow you away

» Sound

The voice acting is still strong, but the unimpressive music sometimes cuts in and out

» Playability

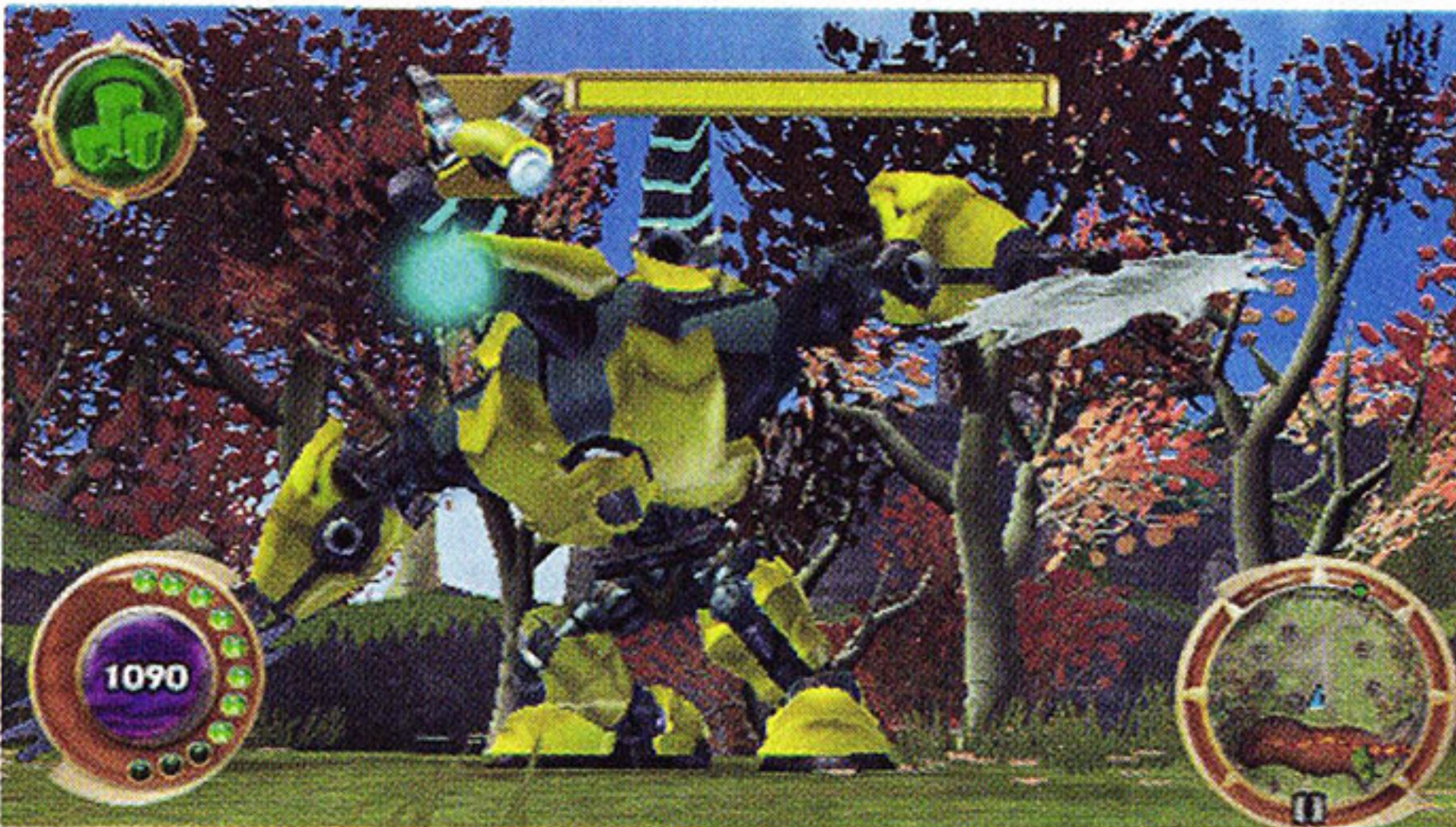
Fun combat and puzzles are marred by the handheld's limited control options

» Entertainment

A fun adventure with tons of extra stuff to do makes this outing better than expected

» Replay Value

Moderately high



Style 1-Player Action/Adventure **Publisher** Sony Computer Entertainment **Developer** High Impact Games **Release** November 3 **ESRB** E10+

went into Jak and Daxter: The Lost Frontier with low expectations considering the Jak saga already received a satisfying ending with Jak 3. For a developer other than Naughty Dog to continue the game's narrative seemed silly and unnecessary. Though I was not impressed by demos of this PSP continuation of the series, developer High Impact Games has turned my opinion around entirely with the full game.

As with Jak 2 and 3, The Lost Frontier features a large open world to explore. Unlike those titles, though, the open part largely takes place in the sky. Early in the game, Jak gains access to a large airship that he can steer toward five different zones. Once in a zone, he can take to the sky in a handful of smaller vehicles that allow him to explore and land on different islands.

The air combat portions are suitable – like Ratchet & Clank's take on battling in space, it's nothing special, but it gets the job done – but fans are probably most interested in the ground missions. Though High Impact's level designs

aren't quite up to Naughty Dog's hyper-polished standards, they emulate the latter's mix of platforming and gun combat extremely well.

Jak has four different guns at his disposal, and he also gains various magical Eco abilities throughout the game that can be used both for puzzle solving and combat. For example, the red Eco ability releases a ball of energy that blows up when shot. This explosion can expose hidden pathways or open sealed doors in the environment, or it can be used to deal extra damage to a particularly tough baddie. It's easy enough to breeze through the game just using your guns for combat, but the abilities provide room for experimenting with more interesting strategies.

The combat would be the highlight of the game if not for some annoying camera control and aiming problems. Because the shoulder buttons are devoted to spinning the camera, there's no way to lock on to enemies or strafe, so expect to run in circles a lot hoping for your auto-aim to catch nearby bad guys when you have a chance to stand still and fire. It's also frustratingly difficult to switch Eco abilities or guns using the d-pad in the midst of an intense battle.

Jak's exploration and combat sequences are split up by the occasional Daxter level. In the Lost Frontier, these come in the form of "Dark Daxter" stages, where Jak's cute sidekick transforms into a giant furry monster. In his new form, Daxter must

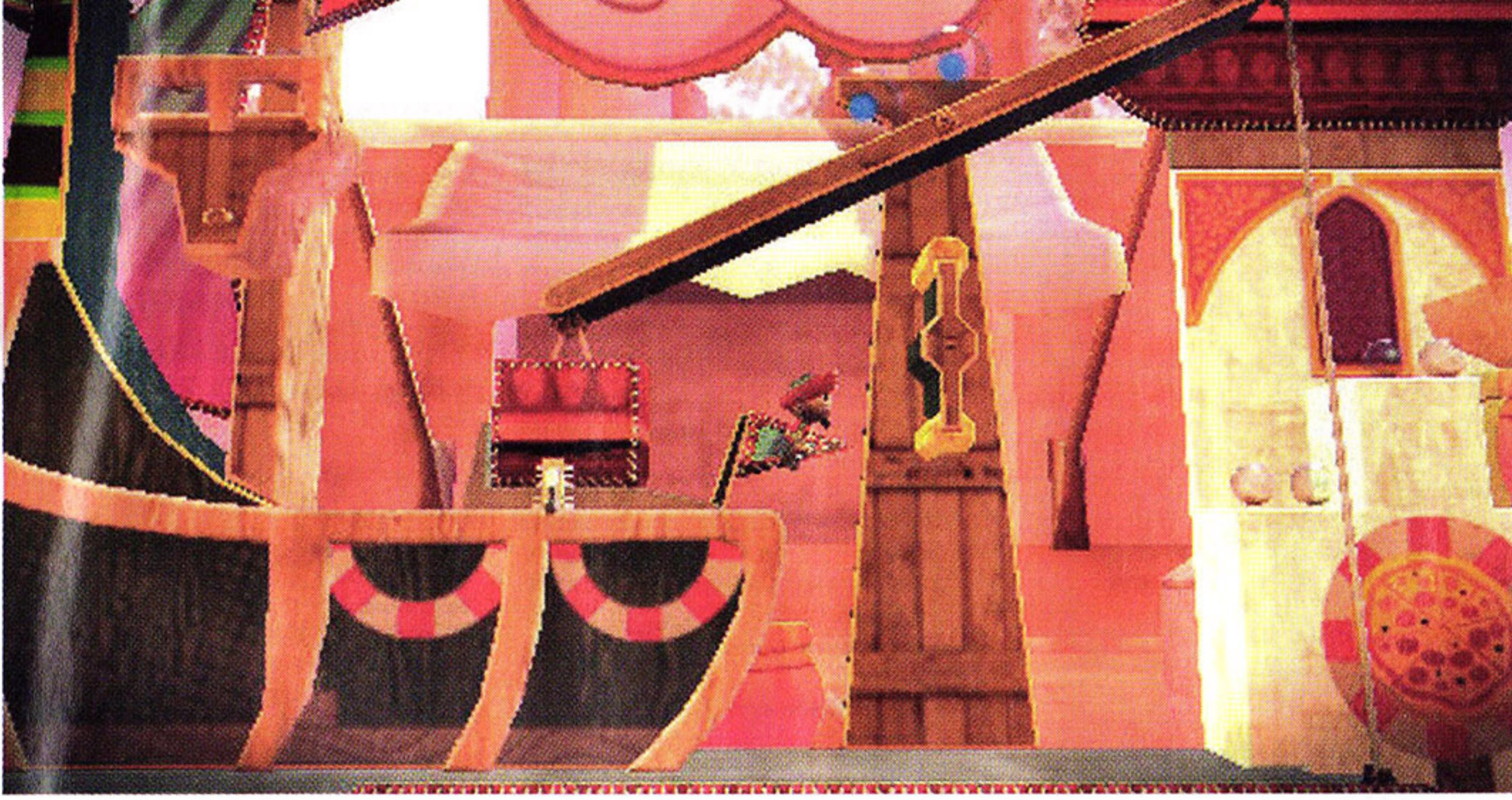
bash waves of enemies and solve environmental puzzles. These portions of the game had the most potential to suck, but I was shocked to find myself enjoying them. High Impact uses these levels just sparingly enough and implements smart enough puzzle designs that they're more a breath of fresh air than a frustrating annoyance, even if Dark Daxter is a dumb idea.

The most surprising aspect of The Lost Frontier is how much customization High Impact has crammed into the game. You purchase new modifications and upgrades for your hangar full of ships with scrap metal earned during dog-fights. You buy new Eco powers from four separate upgrade chains. You gain gun mods and better armor through chests scattered around the world. Add in tons of sidequests that can be completed or ignored at your leisure, and this seven-hour journey has a lot of extra depth.

As you might expect from a new developer's take on a series with such history, The Lost Frontier doesn't feel essential. If you miss this game, you're not going to be missing any major plot movements or character development in the Jak universe (and don't even get me started on the snoozer of a bad guy). But if you've been jonesing for the gameplay that made you fall in love with the series in the first place, The Lost Frontier more or less delivers. » **Phil Kollar**

Missed out on the Jak series? Check out gameinformer.com/mag for a look back at the previous games from one of Sony's leading men.





LittleBigPlanet PSP

LittleBigPlanet impresses in its handheld debut



Style 1-Player Action/Platform
Publisher Sony Computer Entertainment
Developer SCE Cambridge Studio **Release** November 17 **ESRB** E

8.5

PSP

» Concept

A new handheld LittleBigPlanet title that lacks multiplayer, but delivers amazing platforming

» Graphics

On the smaller screen, Sackboy isn't as striking. I also missed the vivid cloth textures of the original PS3 game

» Sound

Once again, LittleBigPlanet delivers a vibrant and diverse mix of original tunes and licensed tracks. It's a wonderfully done soundtrack

» Playability

Perhaps due to the PSP's unresponsive nub, the platform physics have been radically toned down. For players, this cuts down on some of the frustration

» Entertainment

The second time around isn't as magical, but what's left is a rock-solid and creatively designed 2D platformer

» Replay Value

High

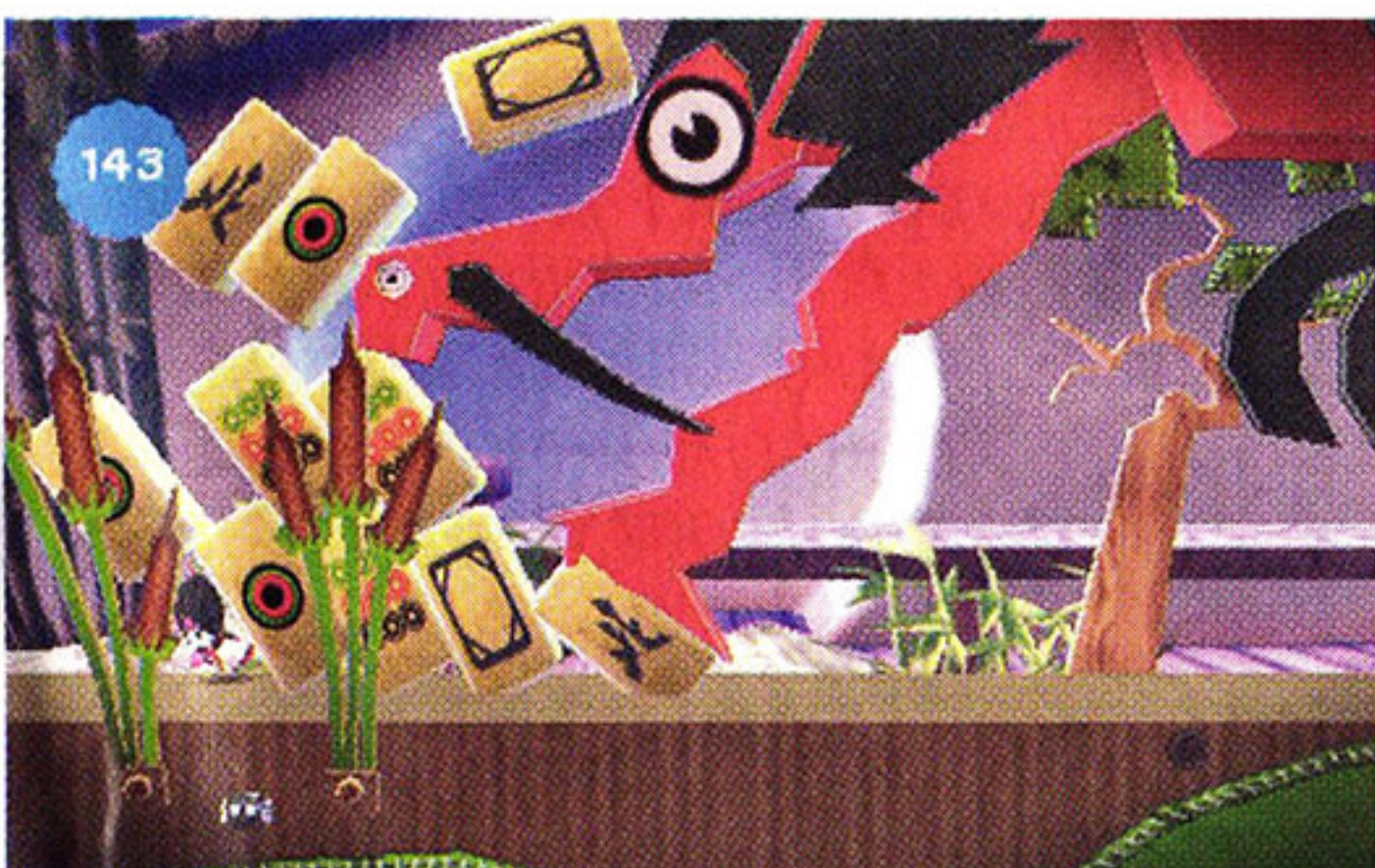
Lightning doesn't strike twice, so I was a little skeptical as to whether a game that relied as much on surprising, offbeat charm as LittleBigPlanet did could work a second time around. The news that multiplayer (one of the most loved modes of the first game) was being taken out of the PSP version didn't do much to raise my hopes. I'm glad to report that while it might not be the classic that the original is, LittleBigPlanet PSP is something we see far too rarely on the system: a well-made and captivating platformer.

I won't lie: a bit of the magic that made LBP the toast of the video game press is gone. On the PSP's smaller screen, Sackboy and the environments don't have the same impact, lacking the realistic, cloth-like textures that made the original one of the most visually arresting PS3 games. While you can say that graphics are just window dressing, this visual downgrade effectively neutralizes one of the original's most infectious features – dressing up and interacting with your Sackboy. The customization is still there, but when he's shrunk down to the size of a pea, I found it hard to care what pair of microscopic glasses he was wearing. I feel the same way about the level creator. It works well and offers nearly the amount of features the original does, but

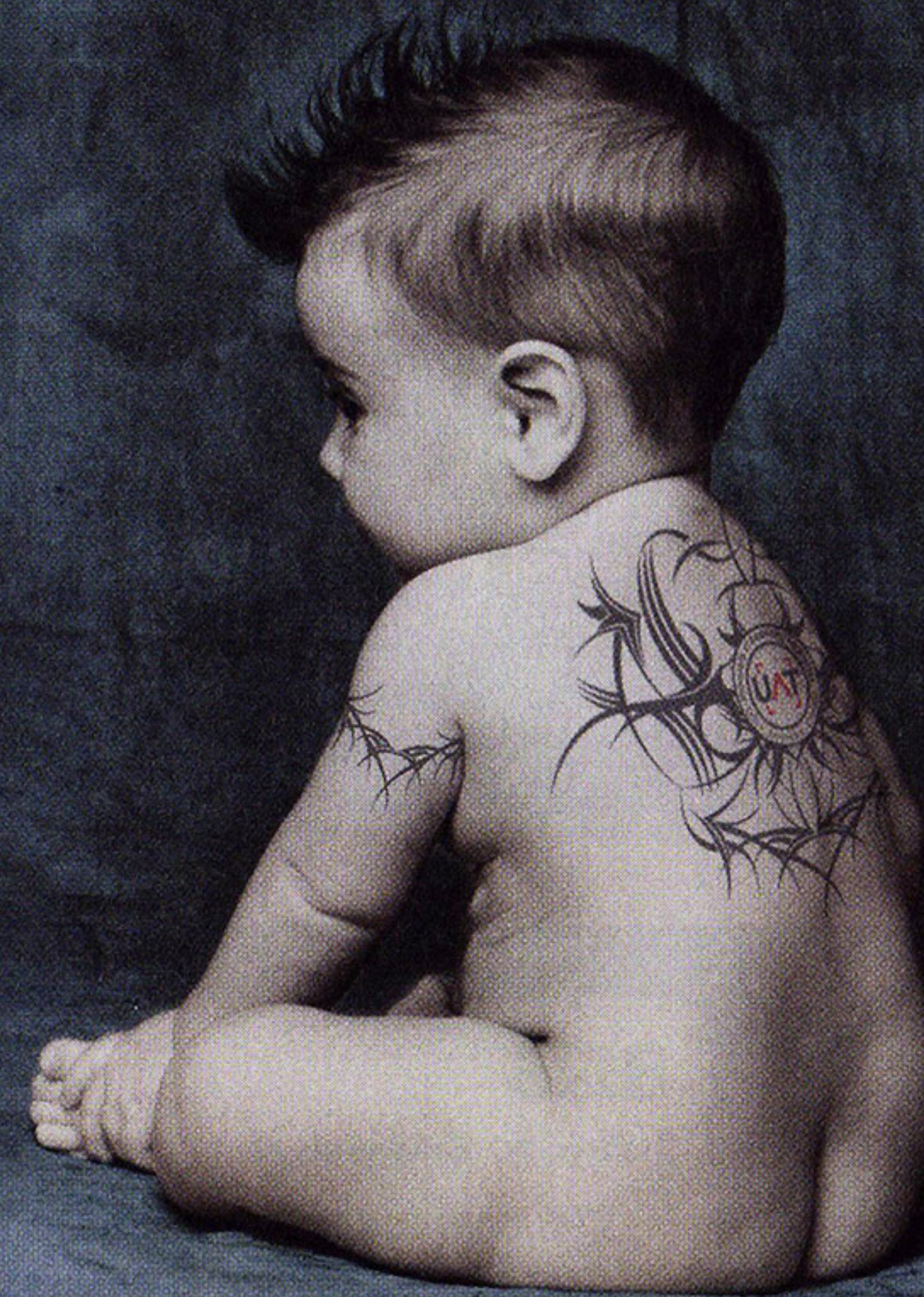
honestly I don't have the time or the talent to make really good levels. I just want to play the cool stuff other people make, and I don't see many of the best LBP geniuses taking the time to make levels for this version when they could be doing it on a PS3.

While it isn't as striking as its predecessor, this is still one hell of a 2D platformer. The brilliantly designed levels (which are all new) crisscross the globe, leading up to a Hollywood-style ending that casts Sackboy as a stuffed action hero. Many of them exceed the standards set on the PS3, particularly in the switch puzzles, which seem to be a bigger focus for this game. Aside from the predictably great art design, every level throws an ingenious new spin on familiar jumping and swinging mechanics. Those who were frustrated by the sometimes wobbly controls will be pleased to note that the physics on platforms has been radically toned down, making this play more like the precise, old-school platformers we grew up with.

There's so much that can still be done with this genre, and Cambridge Studio maintains a high standard of quality from beginning to end. Great platformers are a rare breed these days, so I hope PSP owners take a chance on this pint-sized powerhouse. » **Matt Helgeson**



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the score

8.75 | Torchlight

Platform PC Release October 27 ESRB RP

The core of the game is its combat and character progression, and both of those are outstanding. Torchlight might not be breaking any new ground, but the soul of Diablo hasn't been so ably captured in years. You won't find much that approaches Torchlight's worth at its \$20 price point.—Adam Biessener

URL: www.gameinformer.com/mag

7.25 | NCAA
Basketball 10

Platform PS3 • 360 Release November 17 ESRB E

While NCAA Basketball 10 sharpens its skills on the court, gamers with hoop dreams of a hardcourt experience that rivals the depth of NBA games will have to wait a few more semesters.—Matt Bertz

URL: www.gameinformer.com/mag

4.25 | C.O.P.: The Recruit

Platform DS Release November 3 ESRB T

The game features a surprisingly varied number of activities to complete on missions, but when it gets down to the core gameplay, none of these are actually any fun.” —Phil Kollar

URL: www.gameinformer.com/mag

7.5 | MX vs. ATV Reflex

Platform PS3 • 360 Release December 1 ESRB E

There are undoubtedly some great racing moments in MX vs. ATV: Reflex, but this seems to be a case where the game's technical ambitions get in the way. The positive possibilities of the reflex racing with the right analog are clearly there, they just haven't been mastered yet.—Matthew Kato

URL: www.gameinformer.com/mag

5.5 | Mario & Sonic at the
Olympic Winter Games

Platform Wii Release October 13 ESRB E

In general, the minigames work about as well as Wii games always do: just enough to prevent me from calling them broken. Functional, but not fun, Mario & Sonic at the Winter Olympic Games is a product that's destined to sell...and destined to be forgotten.—Matt Helgeson

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8.5 | Pro Evolution Soccer 2010

Platform PS3 • 360 Release October 23 ESRB E

It's tough to say which is better, Pro Evolution or FIFA, given that the former has more depth while the latter comes off as the sexier experience. Perhaps these two will continue to do what they've done in the past — appeal to slightly different sets of players, which means that the war for soccer supremacy wages on.—Matthew Kato

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9.75 | Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2

Platform PS3 • 360 • PC Release November 10 ESRB M Issue Dec '09

Modern Warfare 2 is a masterpiece of careful iteration, with an unmatched presentation and a well of content that will take months to run dry.

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9.25 | Ratchet and Clank: A Crack in Time

Platform PS3 Release October 27 ESRB T Issue Dec '09

This series is the closest video games come to having a noteworthy serialized adventure. A Crack in Time shows a good idea and consistent execution is all it takes to keep interest high.

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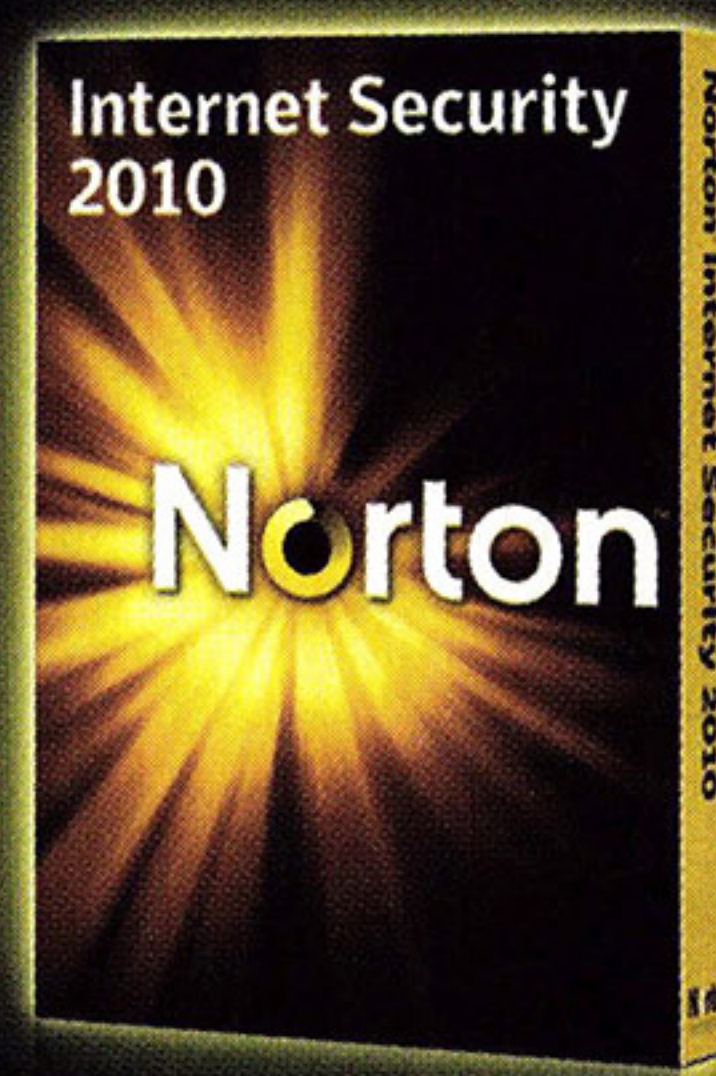
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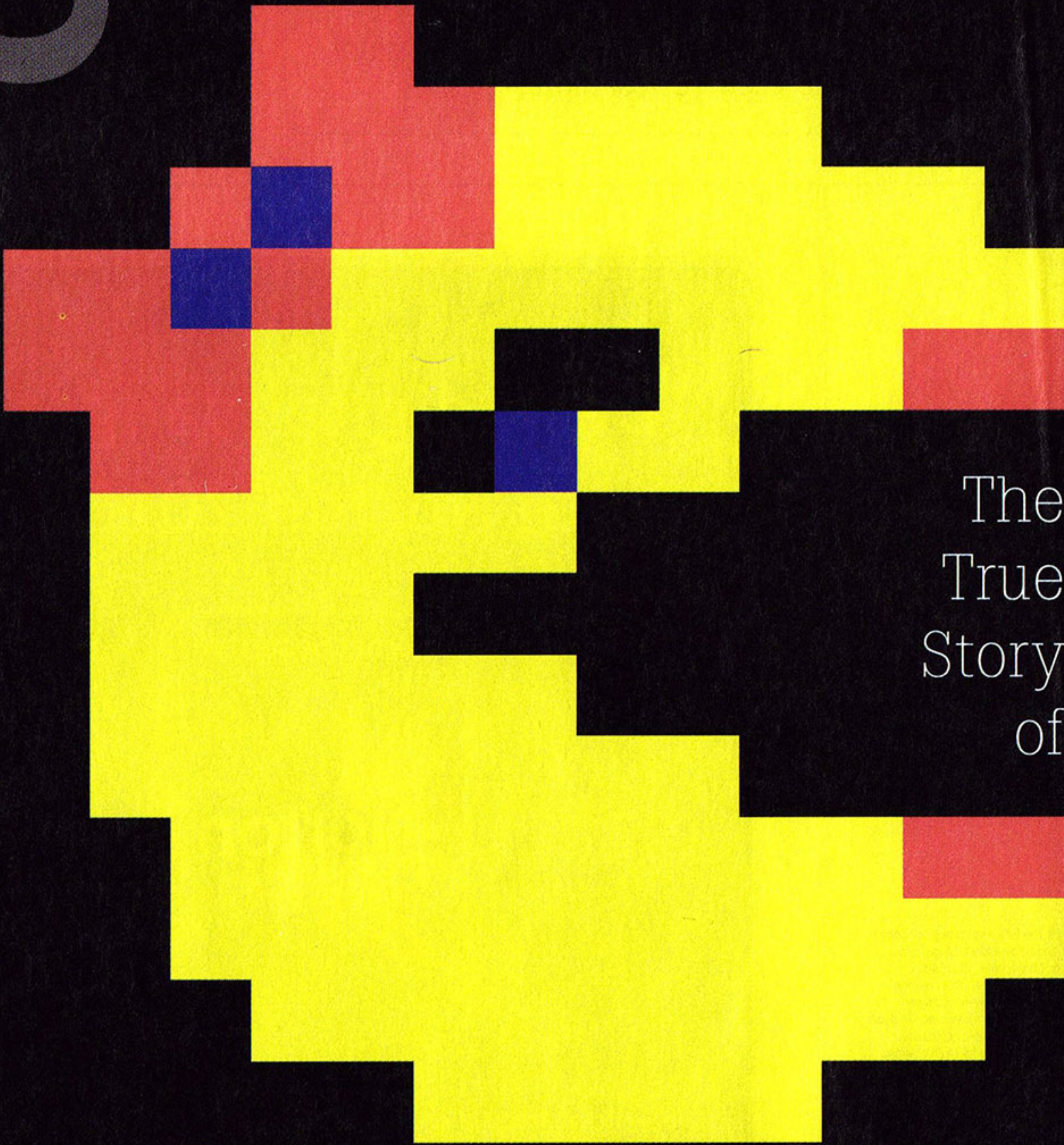
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classic

How A Couple
MIT Dropouts Built
A Video Game
Empire, Avoided
Two Lawsuits,
And Created The
Biggest Arcade
Game Of All Time

by Ben Reeves



The
True
Story
of

Ms.

Pac-Man is a very Japanese game from a Japanese game maker, so it may seem strange that the seeds for its superior sequel grew on American soil. Then again, the story behind Ms. Pac-Man is far from normal. Throughout the years, the legend of Ms. Pac-Man has grown to almost mythical proportions. It's been said that the game was originally an illegal hack created by two MIT students. Then there was its connection to the urban legend about a Pac-Man-with-legs game, a rare cabinet that was rumored to have floated through the wilds of American arcades during the '80s. Not every rumor about arcade's first lady is true, but the truth – as it turns out – is far more impressive than any fiction. “We've never made an attempt at correcting things,” says Doug Macrae, General Computer Corporation co-founder and one of the men who helped create Ms. Pac-Man. “But maybe it's about time.”

The Massachusetts Institute of Technology has changed a lot in the last three decades, but one thing has stayed the same: Its students still take time away from their busy class schedules to blow off steam with video games. As students, Doug Macrae and Kevin Curran spent a fair number of quarters in the arcade during their off hours. Except this was 1977, so it was pinball eating away their pocket change, not Street Fighter.

During his sophomore year Macrae inherited a pinball machine from his older brother. Nothing if not an entrepreneur, Macrae set the machine up on campus hoping he could earn a little pocket change. The machine proved to be so profitable that Macrae asked Curran to join him as a busi-

ness partner, and the two expanded the business to more than 20 pinball machines and arcade cabinets. Macrae and Curran practically owned MIT's arcade.

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some modification if they wanted to keep making money with Missile Command. Within the arcade business of the era, an underground market developed for something called enhancement kits. Also known as speed up kits, these circuit boards plugged into preexisting arcade cabinets, interrupting the original game's programming and laying new code on top of an old game. Enhancement kits were not always legal, but they were far cheaper than buying an entirely new arcade cabinet. Since these kits altered a game's mechanics by adding new weapons, enemies, and power-ups, it was often all an arcade owner needed to see renewed interest and fresh quarters pumping back into a stalling cabinet.

and with the help of four friends began work on Super Missile Attack.

The Super Missile Attack kits were an instant success. So successful, in fact, that the duo began circulating four-color ads for sale in trade magazines like *Play Meter* and *Replay Magazine*. This immediately attracted the attention of Missile Command's publisher, Atari, who filed a temporary restraining order against General Computer Corporation. “We ended up in court with Atari,” Macrae remembers. “Atari didn't understand what we were doing and why we did it. Many people were copying ROMs at the time, and I think that was their initial assumption.”

The Atari suit lasted through part of the

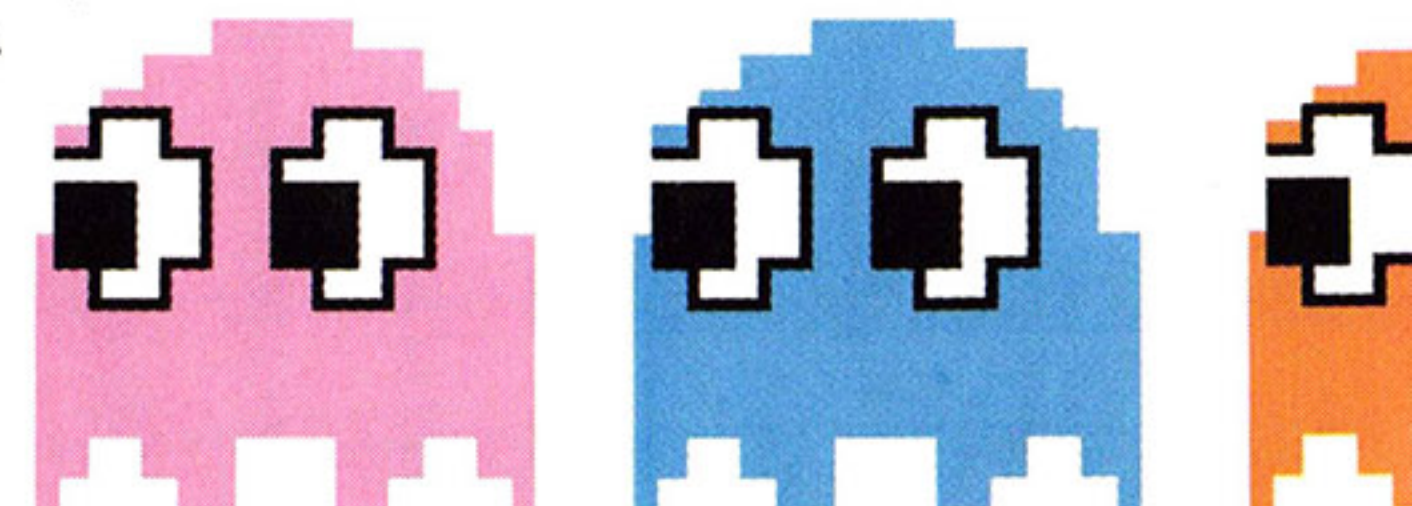
Pac-Man

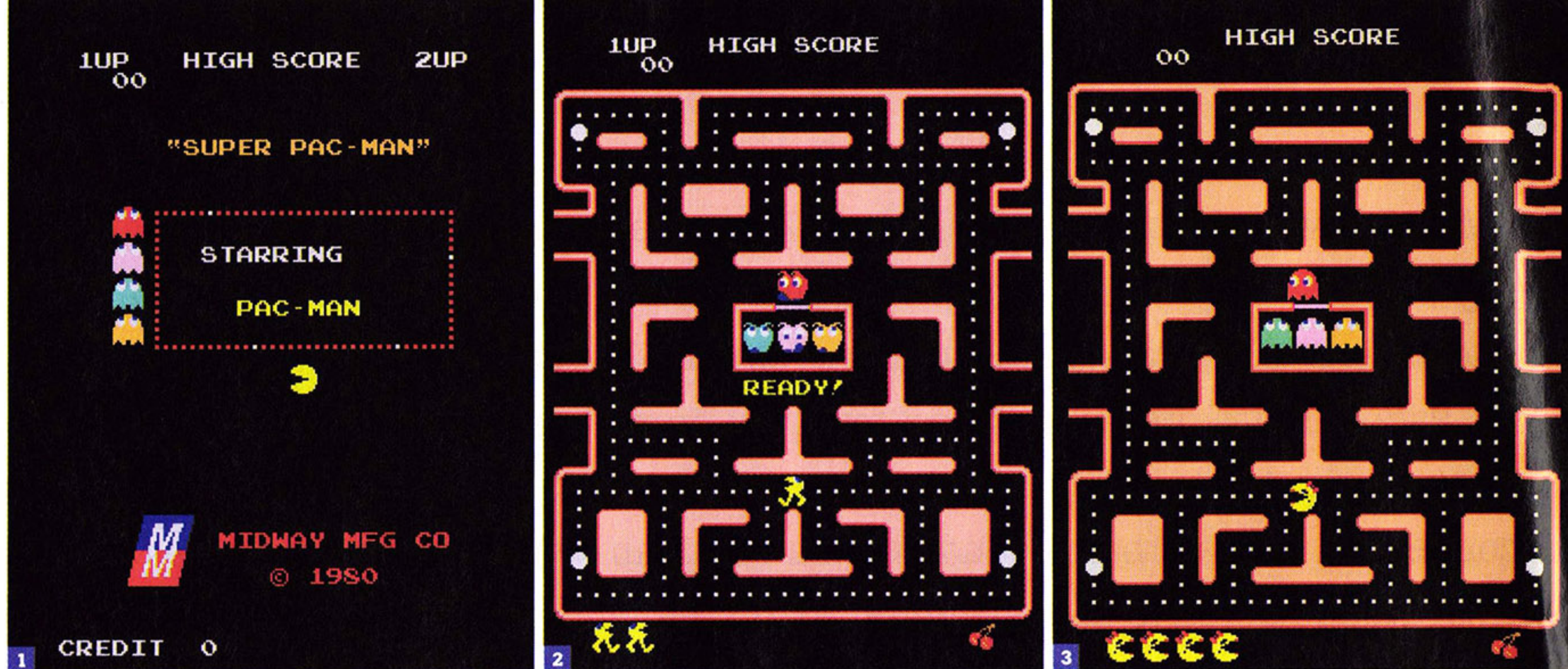
Macrae and Curran looked for an enhancement kit to Missile Command, but no one had yet figured out how to create one for the game. “This was a more sophisticated game back in that day,” explains Steve Golson, one of Macrae's longtime friends and an eventual business associate. “Missile Command required an intricate knowledge of how the program worked in order to enhance the game and make it more difficult. No one had cracked the code yet.”

Not to be discouraged, Macrae and Curran took matters into their own hands and made their own enhancement kit for Missile Command. Within a few days the two students had filed paperwork to incorporate a new business called General Computer Corporation, bought a microprocessing development system,

summer of 1981, but out-of-court negotiations began when Atari realized that it would rather have this group of ambitious students (though many of them had dropped out at this point) working for them, not fighting against them. “They dropped the case with prejudice,” explains Macrae, “meaning they admitted they should not have sued us.

At the same time we entered into a development agreement to develop games for them, which was our original goal anyway.”





- 1 For a time Ms. Pac-Man was called Super Pac-Man
- 2 Crazy Otto
- 3 Ms. Pac-Man

The Legend of Crazy Otto

The week of January 18, 1982, Time magazine ran a cover story called "Games That Play People."

Time commissioned a photographer to take several pictures of Pac-Man arcade cabinets around the country. "There were something like 90,000 Pac-Man cabinets in the U.S. at the time," explains Steve Golson, one of the game's primary engineers.

"There were only three Crazy Otto machines, which Midway was using for market research."

Somehow the photographer ended up taking photos in the only Massachusetts arcade that contained a Crazy Otto cabinet.

The photos that Time printed helped reinforce the urban legend that somewhere out there was an elusive arcade cabinet where Pac-Man had grown legs.

In a matter of months Macrae, Curran, and the few programmers they had hired to help build Super Missile Attack found their fortunes turned around. They were no longer starving college students running a home-brew business in a showdown with a multi-million dollar company. Suddenly they found themselves financed by an industry giant, developing consumer products that would sell millions. Under the General Computer Corporation name Macrae, Curran, and their expanding team of programmers went on to produce 76 different titles for Atari's home consoles, including memorable arcade ports of Centipede, Dig Dug, Robotron, Pole Position, and Galaga. That same team even contributed to the hardware design of Atari's 7800 home console. However, another enhancement kit made by Macrae and Curran would prove to be the duo's most lasting mark on the video game world.

Deconstructing Pac-Man

During the summer of 1981, while the Atari legal battle was still raging, GCC began working on its second enhancement kit. "With Missile Command we sort of hit the market too late," says Golson. "The Missile Command craze had already peaked by the time Super Missile Attack came to market, but Pac-Man had just come out when we began working on the kit for that." An enhancement kit for Pac-Man had the potential to be big, sure, but no one really understood how big.

As Macrae and Curran saw it, Pac-Man was a good game, but it had its flaws. The patterns of the enemy ghosts were too easy to memorize. An enhancement kit could fix that by giving Pac-Man's enemies random routine algorithms. The original Pac-Man also had only one game board, which made the game feel repetitive. They could fix this too by adding in a few new mazes. Macrae and Curran also decided to make the fruit, a high

point item, more of a challenge to collect by making it move across the field. The finished kit even featured little animated sequences between each map that showed their Pac-Man meeting a female Pac-creature, falling in love, and having a baby. Not wanting to infringe on any trademarks, GCC decided it was best to change the main character's design, so they took the familiar Pac-Man image and gave him legs. The team christened their creation Crazy Otto.

By early October of 1981, Crazy Otto was complete, but GCC didn't want to face the same legal troubles they dealt with over Super Missile Attack. Namco created Pac-Man, but back in the early '80s the Japanese company didn't have a U.S. presence and had contracted Pac-Man's North American distribution rights to Midway. If GCC wanted to do anything with Crazy Otto in America, it needed Midway's blessing. Curran picked up the phone and cold-called the president of Midway, David Marofsky.

On the very same day that GCC signed an agreement to make games for Atari, Macrae, Curran, and Golson drove across town to a covert meeting with Midway. There were high-level employees at Midway interested in suing General Computer, but Midway was facing a financial crunch at the time. Pac-Man had been a huge success for the company, but it had nothing prepared to follow that game up. Crazy Otto had come along at just the right time.

Midway entered into discussions with GCC to buy Crazy Otto and change the name to Super Pac-Man. Midway wasn't interested in making any gameplay changes, but the company thought the Crazy Otto protagonist should go; the game needed to feature a more recognizable Pac-Man creature. After some discussions it was determined that the game would focus on the

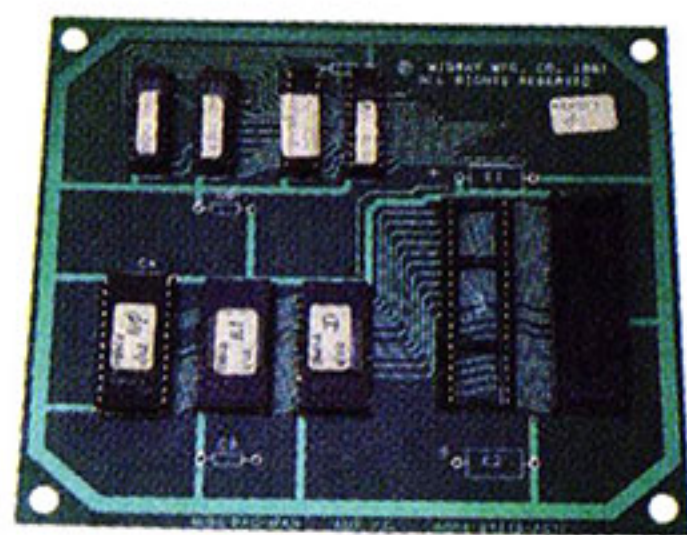
female Pac-creature seen briefly in Crazy Otto's animated sequences.

The two companies worked together to come up with a new design for Pac-Man's female counterpart. Using the Pac-Man icon as a template, the character was given small beady eyes, a beauty mark, a bow, and long red hair. "They wanted to call it Miss Pac-Man," says Macrae, "but we quickly pointed out that maybe it should be Ms. Pac-Man since the third animation of the game has them having a baby together." Not interested in alluding to the birth of any illegitimate Pac-babies, Midway agreed and quickly sent off a demo tape of Ms. Pac-Man to Japan. Namco president Masaya Nakamura took one look at the design and told Midway to immediately remove the hair. Otherwise, Ms. Pac-Man had a green light to release as soon as arcade cabinets could be built.

"I remember saying, 'if this makes 20,000 [sales], I'll be happy. But if it makes 40,000, that's a big hit. I'd be really happy if it sold 40,000,'" recalls Golson. "At that point, I think Asteroids had sold something like 76,000, and that was just a stratospheric mega hit."

Ms. Pac-Man released toward the end of 1981 and eventually went on to sell over 119,000 units, making it the most popular arcade game in history. Ms. Pac-Man remains one of the most widely distributed arcade cabinets across the United States. Her image has become so recognizable that she's appeared on t-shirts, cartoons, and lunch boxes. Perhaps most impressive, her gameplay remains so enthralling that you can now find her everywhere from Internet web portals and game consoles to cell phones. But that much we already knew.

For more images of Crazy Otto and videos of the game in action go to gameinformer.com/mag

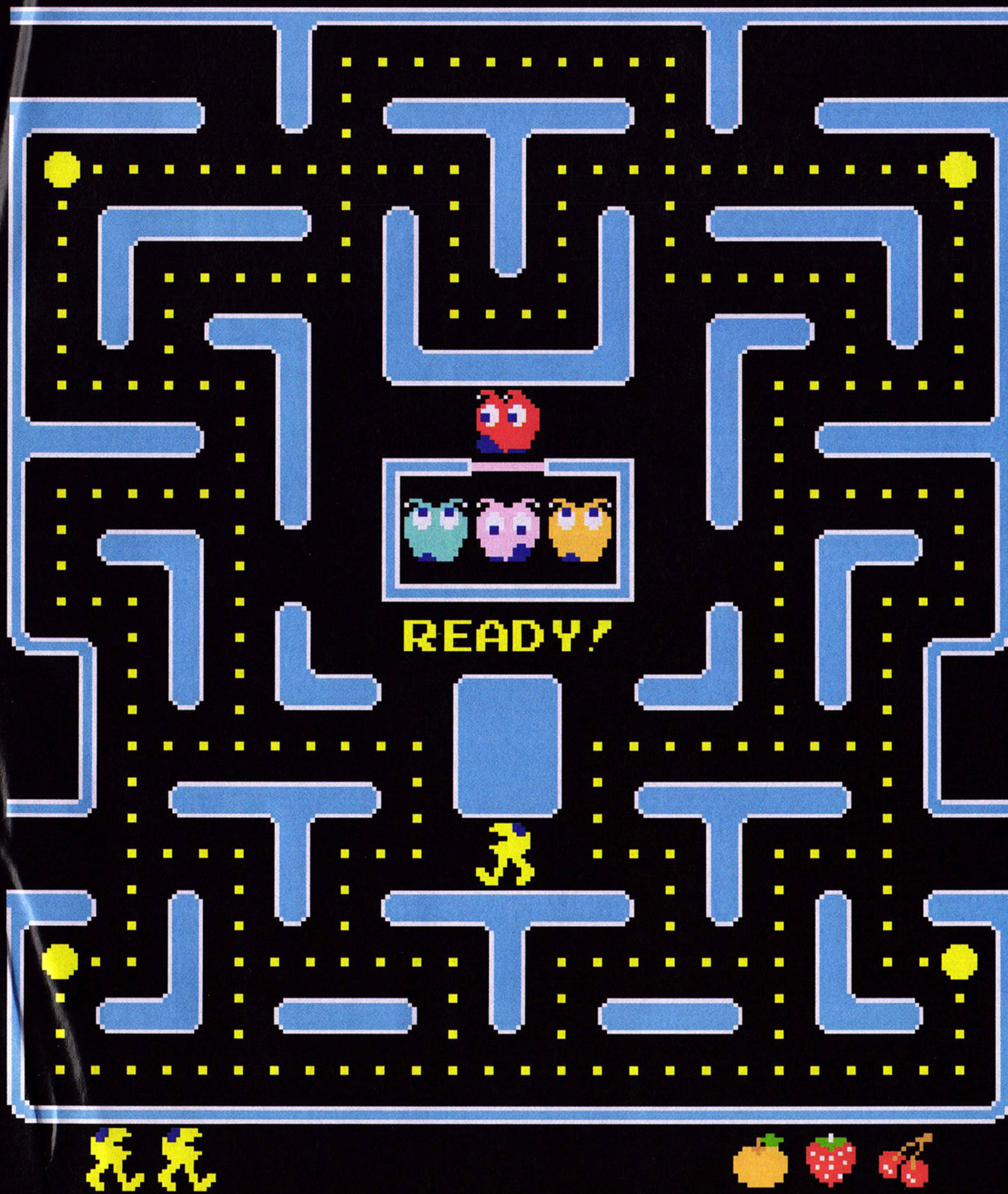
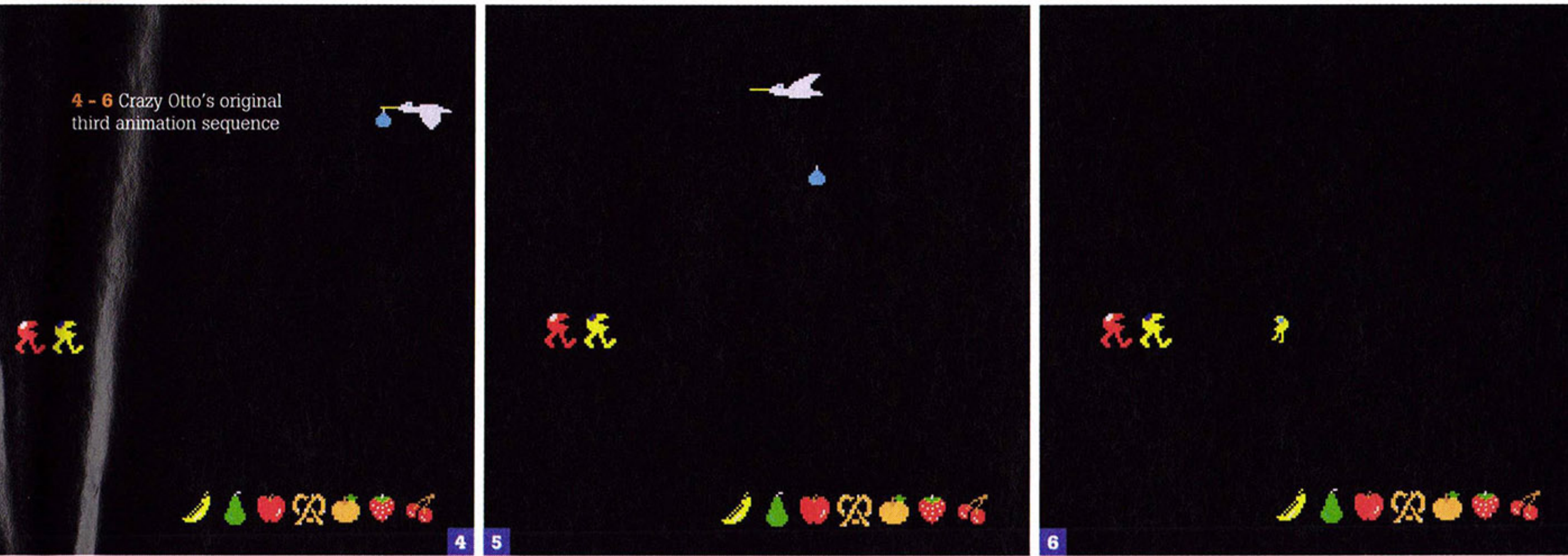


In order to get Ms. Pac-Man into production quickly, the final cabinet featured a little auxiliary board that plugged into the original Pac-Man chipset. That means any of the Ms. Pac-Man arcade cabinets that are out in the world today can easily be turned back into Pac-Man cabinets



The original six developers of Ms. Pac-Man at last year's GCC reunion. From left to right: Doug Macrae, Kevin Curran, Steve Golson, Mike Horowitz, Chris Rode, and John Tylko

4 - 6 Crazy Otto's original third animation sequence



Pac-Man Evolution

Below is a list of the changes CCG made while working on Crazy Otto. With the exception of the main character, every aspect of Ms. Pac-Man played exactly like the original Crazy Otto mod.

Mazes: Pac-Man featured a single maze, which was quickly memorized by players. Crazy Otto introduced four new mazes, adding significant variety to the gameplay.

Ghosts' Algorithms: The ghosts in Pac-Man always did the exact same thing in response to a player's actions, making the game easy to memorize the patterns. The ghosts in Crazy Otto were "smart" in that there were less predictable patterns in their chase and evade algorithms.

Main Character: The main character of Crazy Otto was a version of a Pac-Man with legs.

Cartoon Animations: Three animations in the game told the story of the Pac family's creation. In the first, the male and female characters meet. In the second, the male and female characters chase. In the third, a stork greets the male and female characters to deliver their baby.

New Ghost: A new ghost was introduced with the name Sue. Sue also happens to be Doug Macrae's sister's name.

Music & Sound: Crazy Otto featured totally new music.

Level Indicators: The level indicators (often fruit icons) were given intelligence so they would move throughout the maze, making them more challenging to capture.

Marquee: An animated movie marquee was added to the attract mode to introduce the characters.

Programmable Array Logic: GCC developed and patented copy protection circuitry built into the Crazy Otto hardware.

A TASTE OF TRIVIA

Think you know your Semtex from your stun grenades, do ya? See if you can pry yourself away from the slew of stellar holiday titles long enough to take on these trivia questions.

1. What do the first letters of each mission spell out in the original Dead Space?

- a. USG Ishimura
- b. Nicole is dead
- c. Save the marker
- d. Visceral Games

2. Which of the following characters appeared in all four numbered entries in the Metal Gear Solid series?

- a. Big Boss
- b. Revolver Ocelot
- c. Otacon
- d. Colonel Campbell

3. To turn the castle upside down in Castlevania: Symphony of the Night, what item needs to be equipped while fighting Richter?

- a. Shield rod
- b. Ring of Arcana
- c. Mystic pendant
- d. Holy glasses

4. Who is the creator of Tetris?

- a. Alexey Pajitnov
- b. Ivan Drago
- c. Vladimir Kozlov
- d. Garry Kasparov

5. Which Resident Evil title first featured the quick 180 degree turn?

- a. Resident Evil 2
- b. Resident Evil 3: Nemesis
- c. Resident Evil: Code Veronica
- d. Resident Evil 4

6. Outside of Yoshimitsu, which Tekken fighter has made an appearance in the Soul Calibur series?

- a. Armor King
- b. Lei Wulong
- c. Paul Phoenix
- d. Heihachi Mishima

7. How much do Zora's flippers cost in Zelda: A Link to the Past?

- a. 50 rupees
- b. 100 rupees
- c. 500 rupees
- d. 1,000 rupees

8. Which musician did NOT play a radio DJ in Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas?

- a. George Clinton
- b. Axl Rose
- c. Chuck D
- d. Lemmy Kilmister

9. Which James Bond movie title was also a multiplayer mode in Goldeneye 007?

- a. License to Kill
- b. A View to a Kill
- c. Live and Let Die
- d. Thunderball

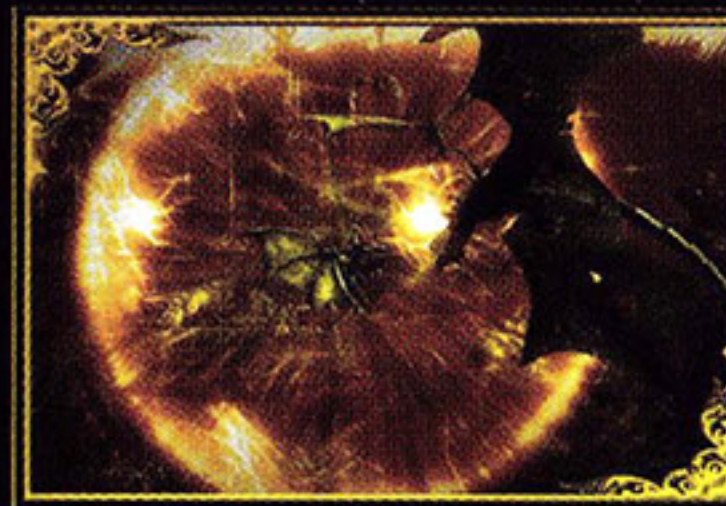
10. Which Fallout 3 expansion lifted the level cap to 30?

- a. Operation Anchorage
- b. The Pitt
- c. Broken Steel
- d. Point Lookout



ANSWERS:

- 1-b, 2-b, 3-d, 4-a, 5-b, 6-d,
- 7-c, 8-d, 9-a, 10-c



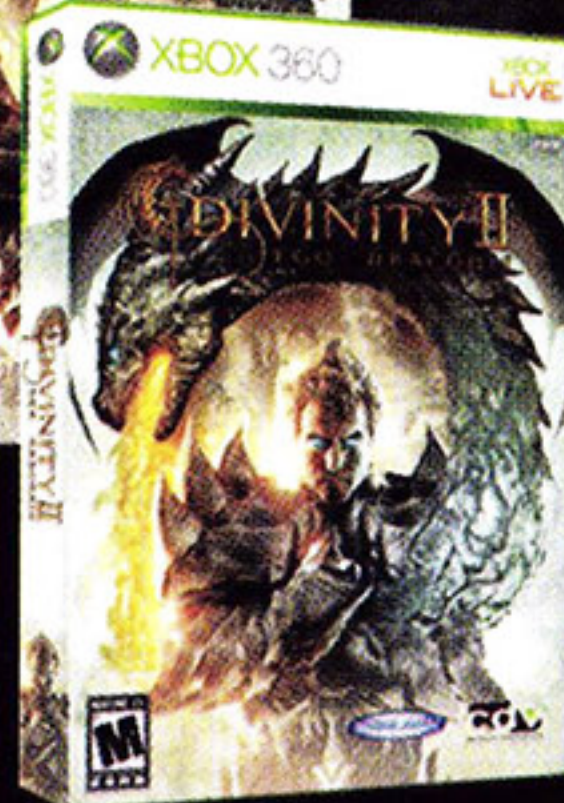
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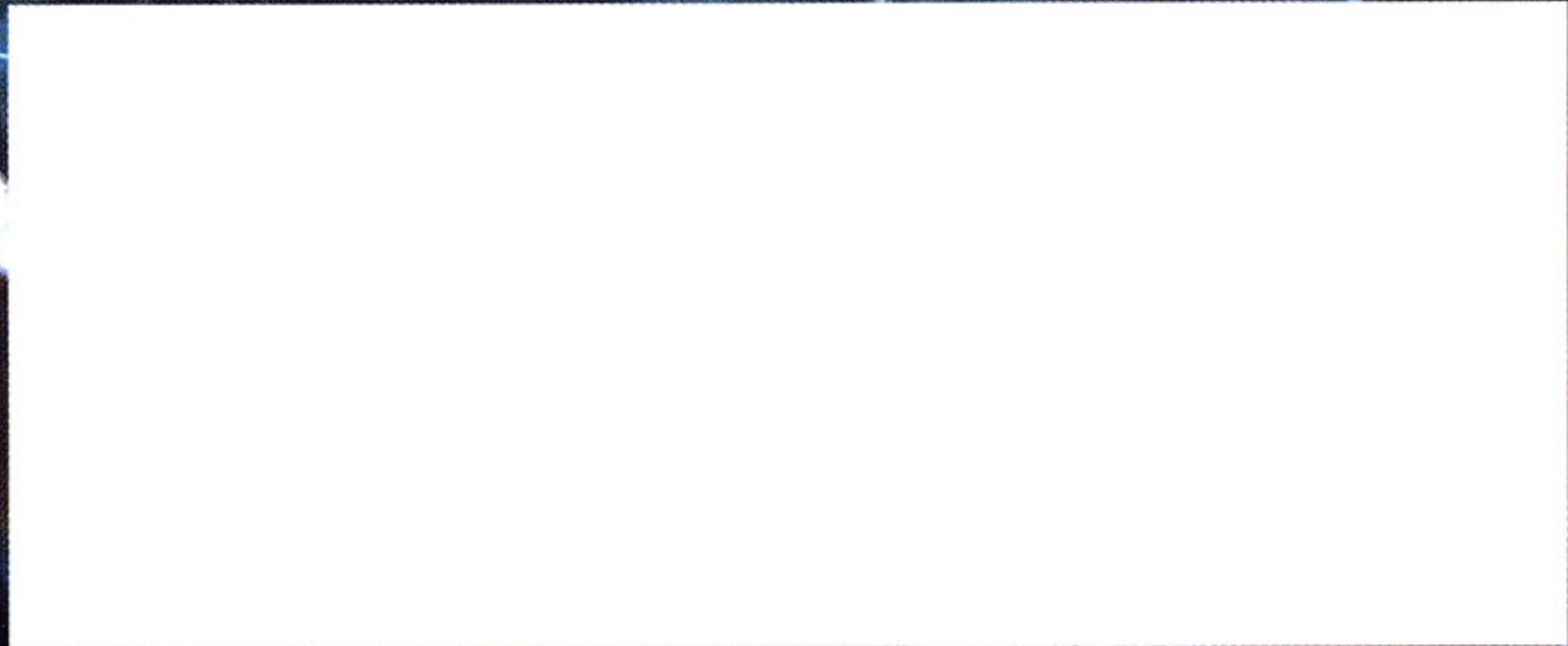
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