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SQUARE ENIX.

The Industry Is At A Crossroads



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

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comment on this letter at
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Having just returned from the DICE Summit in Las Vegas, where most of gaming's best and brightest gathered to discuss the issues of the day, I found it odd that so many of the answers proposed about the future direction of gaming were so polarized.

From pontificating on the puzzling success of Farmville to discussions on the route to successful downloadable content, just about everyone I spoke to had a different idea of our industry's future. The problem I see with where we are today is that everyone keeps declaring that his or her future is the only future that can possibly come to be. I don't think that things need to be so binary.

I know my tastes, and I'm presuming the tastes of many who read this magazine, are geared toward the blockbusters. These big-budget, massive undertakings define the game consoles as they are today, and have been for years. But even though my tastes are defined and driven by these games, that doesn't mean I can't love the games that appear on Xbox Live, PSN, or WiiWare. In fact, it's quite the opposite. I find these games charming and surprisingly refreshing, as game developers can take more chances and create products that would never make sense to risk a \$40 million budget to create.

The same can be said for the mobile or browser-based gaming experiences. Ultimately, games are games, but I don't think that just because I love a game on my phone that console games are going the way of the dodo as I so often hear. Hollywood delivers both blockbuster movies and low-budget TV programming. So can games.

As gaming continues to define itself as the entertainment medium of today and tomorrow, many new and exciting doors will open to this industry. But just because we open new doors doesn't mean that we have to close old ones. Sure, Farmville has 80 million users, but don't forget that Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2 made over a billion dollars for a reason.

The industry needs to stop saying there is only a singular future, and embrace the fact that games are in demand anywhere and everywhere they can be found, and will be for the foreseeable future.

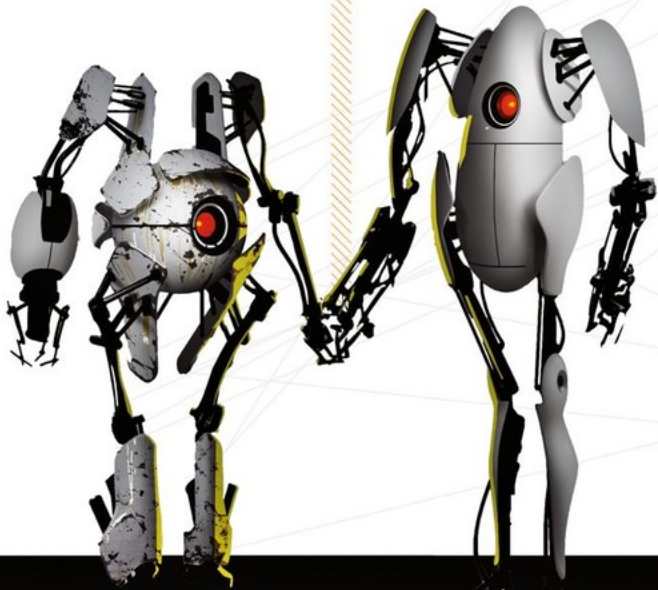
Enjoy the issue. Cheers.

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Portal 2

Fresh out of school, the tiny Portal team at Valve made one of this generation's defining adventures. To see what they're doing with a full-on production staff and a serious budget, check the story inside.

by Meagan VanBurklee





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Readers ask for more World of Warcraft, we give surfers the mocking they deserve, and Alistair's chumphood is called into question

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Tim Turi isn't the only one out there excited for the return of classic Sonic gameplay, we're pretty sure. Read the details on Sonic the Hedgehog 4 inside

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There's a little game called God of War III coming out. Maybe you've heard of it? by Joe Juba

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God of War III





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got milk?

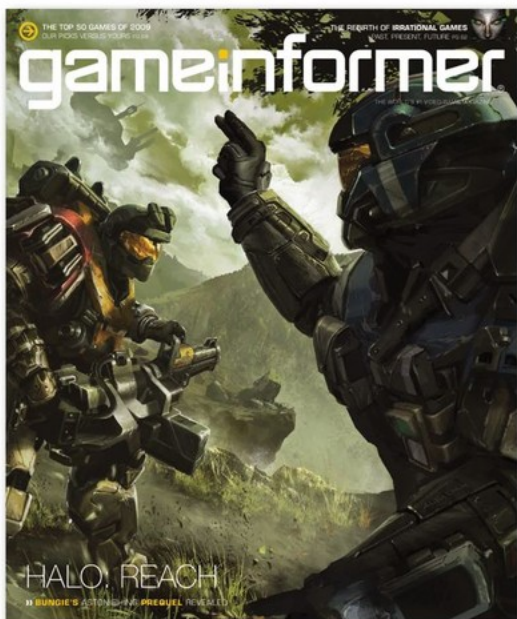


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This month in Feedback we chat about World of Warcraft, poke fun at surfers, examine why bad games happen, and laugh as readers defend Alistair's honor.

Out of Reach

I just spent five straight minutes staring at your Halo: Reach cover. Even the Halo games don't seem to come close to the coolness of the artwork on the front of issue 202. Thanks a lot for causing my heart to ache so many months before Reach comes out!

Ryan McLelland
Ewing, NJ

Warning: Prolonged staring at awesome Halo art has been proven to cause dementia, acute Spartan envy, and loss of appetite. **Recommended treatment:** Check out our dedicated Halo: Reach hub at gameinformer.com/halo for all of the special features, character profiles, and interviews that we couldn't fit in the magazine.

Wipe Out

Why hasn't there been any more surfing games after Kelly Slater Pro Surfer and Transworld Surf? I thought both of those games were sick, and there still haven't been any sequels that I'm aware of. Are any being made right now? Or are people just giving up on making games for this sport entirely?

Roland Bargiel
via email

We double-checked to make sure this letter wasn't originally sent in 1993, but apparently some people are still interested in surfing games these days. While we can't confirm the existence of any new titles, Activision has declared that it wants to find more applications for the ridiculous skate-

board peripheral included with Tony Hawk: Ride. Surfing seems like a natural fit, though Ride's base \$120 investment is pretty high. For a surfing game to be successful, the core audience would have to stop watching *Point Break* long enough to get a job.

GI on Wheels

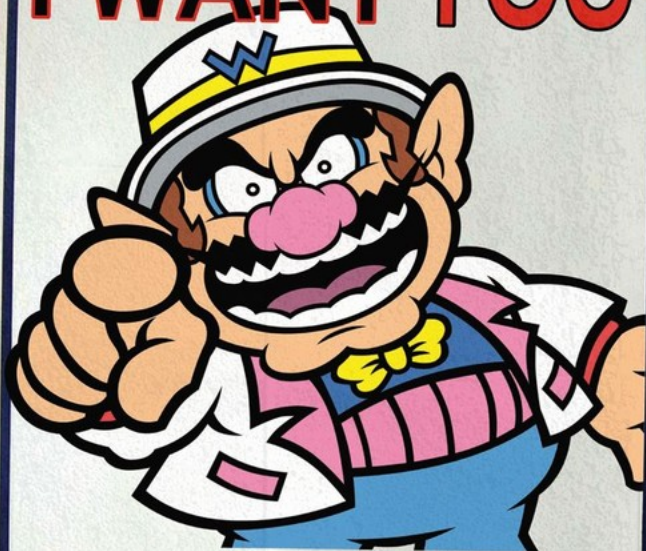


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Osage, Minnesota
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Worst News Tips of the Month

- I'm very concerned about a pressing issue.
- hello, im just wondering if playstation 2 coming to a end?
- Do yourselves a favor and fire every single game reviewer on your staff, and get some real reviewers.

More, Please!

I had been exclusively playing console games for 24 years until a 10-day free trial of World of Warcraft literally changed that overnight. Now, I'm always excited to see anything concerning WoW in your magazine. My only complaint is this: It's not enough. I think it would be fantastic if you could have a monthly article or review of this highly addictive game. World of Warcraft (and other MMORPGs) are in a constant state of development, and are therefore in greater need of consistent assessment.

Brett Baker
Dundee, NY

Most Corrected "Mistake"



In our Timeline section last month (the same page where we claimed John Cusack is a good actor with an illustrious career), we said that the upcoming *Clash of the Titans* remake was a shameless rip-off of *God of War*. This resulted in many readers informing us of our ignorance. While we appreciate the tips, we know that *God of War* did not actually invent Greek mythology; that happened when the original *Clash of the Titans* came out in 1981.



Though *WoW* is popular, we do our best to avoid cramming it down anyone's throat. In terms of its audience, *WoW* is a little bit like *Lost*; the people who care can't get enough, and the people who don't care really don't care. If you fall into the former category, you'll want to check out our **Massive** column this month on page 38 for a rundown of the latest patch. If you still want more, head over to gameinformer.com and listen to our regular *World of Warcraft* podcast, *Respec Radio*. If that still doesn't sate your hunger, maybe you should turn off the computer for a while and go for a walk.



Bad Vibes

I recently read your reviews for *Rogue Warrior* (which scored a 1.5 out of 10) and *Raven Squad* (a 2 out of 10). With the high quality of the most popular games in recent years, I'm always amazed that a game can actually score so low. In this day and age, how is that even possible? Aren't the people designing these games gamers themselves? How can these other horrible games be explained?

Marco Goicochea
Baltimore, MD

No developer deliberately sets out to make a bad game; most development teams are comprised of men and women who are just as enthusiastic about gaming as you are. However, it takes more than enthusiasm to make a great game. Factors like time frame, budget, experience, management, and team size all impact the finished product. The reality is some studios just don't have the resources or the expertise to make a game that lives up to expectations. Even if a project has gone totally sour, a publisher will sometimes release the game anyway in an attempt to recoup some of its investment...which is why you still see games like *Rogue Warrior* and *Raven Squad* on the shelves. Luckily, we're happy to play those disasters so you don't have to.

gi spy



(Left) Meagan, Dan, and Ben enjoy some of Portal's Black Forest cake. Shortly after, they were executed (Right) Bryan celebrates his victory in a Fatal Fourway in SmackDown vs. Raw 2010, while the rest of the gang and WWE superstar Ted DiBiase sulks

CANDID PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY



GI SPY
continued on page 10



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On Your Mind



A Dorkis Defense

I was very caught off guard with one of your picks for Top 10 Dorks of 2009. I saw Alistair on the list and I thought, "Aw, he is such a dork, but in a good way." But then I continued reading and noticed that it went on saying that he isn't funny and he's only entertaining when you're making fun of him. You clearly never got to see the Alistair I did. Alistair was very much a gentleman and he was shy and it was cute. I loved how they made him not super-macho or the super-annoying cocky, overconfident type; Alistair is the anti-stereotype of male characters in video games, and I really enjoyed playing Dragon Age because of him.

Aly
via email

This is concerning what you unwittingly – or should I perhaps say dim-wittedly? – wrote regarding Alistair, the best game character of all time, in your list of Top 10 Dorks. While I will not dispute Alistair being a dork, I find that absolutely adorable. Alistair is not the "new Carth." He is quite different from Carth, and he is hunkier. As for calling him a "cry baby," it is true that Alistair is vulnerable. This combination of strong manliness and sweet vulnerability is what makes him so irresistible, and a wonderful character.

Maria Velovich
via email

We were going to use this opportunity to make fun of Alistair yet again, but if dozens of women are willing to write in to defend his honor, the dude must be doing something right.

This could be an important revelation for all you single gamer guys out there: If you want the ladies to think you're adorable, all you need to do is act like a stupid wiener.



Xbox Live GM Looks Toward the Future of Social Entertainment

The Wrong Question

I took interest in your interview with Xbox Live's general manager, Marc Whitten, in issue 201. Unfortunately, I didn't see the question all of us wanted to see: Now that Sony has lowered the price on the PS3, would Microsoft consider lowering the cost of Xbox Live's Gold membership in order to stay competitive? Or is the 360 going to be the next Sega Saturn?

Robert Osvalds
Streamwood, IL

We didn't ask that question because it is based on a faulty premise. Contrary to what you may have learned on the Internet, picking a single non-issue (like Xbox Live's pricing) and blowing it out of proportion doesn't make it any more relevant. Xbox Live only costs about four bucks per month, which is pretty reasonable – and certainly not expensive enough to deter most potential 360 buyers. Additionally, calling the Xbox 360 the next [insert failed console here] went out of style several years ago; a system that has already sold 39 million units worldwide isn't going to go out with an unceremonious whimper.



GI SPY

continued from page 8

(Left) Tim and Dan meet Fable creator Peter Molyneux at X10. Peter's publicist informed us that Peter is doing that with his face on purpose (Center) After writing a blog saying he was done with gaming nostalgia, Matt hands over his copy of Sonic's Ultimate Genesis Collection to Tim Turi (FYI: Tim really sleeps with that Sonic doll) (Right) KD&E's Kevin Lee and DC Comics' Jessica Cha get ready to enjoy a Lady Gaga concert at Madison Square Garden

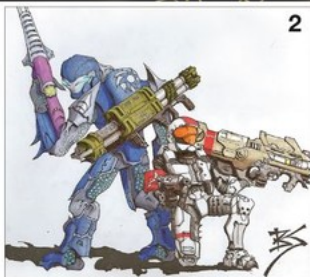




WINNER 1 Sita

Duncan: We'd sure like to see Midna in another Zelda game. As long as we're dreaming, it would also be nice if Link weren't such a wuss all the time **2 Bryce Sahagun:** This was one of our favorite scenes from Mass Effect **3 Katrina Le:** Any drawing of Prototype is cooler than the game, and this one is no exception **4 Roy Rueda:** Zombie love is the second-best form of forbidden love, right behind fire love **5 Michelle Colbaugh:** It's the Sackboy of life! The burlap hero gets ready to audition for a role in The Lion King.

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



Send to:

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Reader Art Contest
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Mpls, MN 55401



(Left) The Portal 2 team rolls mad deep, yo (Right) Activision's Claire Gregory, Kato, Ben, and Mike Mejia hang with Matt Helgeson's dog Dot, who has unfortunately contracted a case of Jawa Eye Syndrome



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games

Platinum Games Announces Vanquish

Resident Evil creator Shinji Mikami unveils his newest creation

Platinum Games and Sega just released Hideki Kamiya's Bayonetta to rave reviews, and the companies are once again teaming up for Vanquish – a new title with a pedigree that's just as impressive. Resident Evil creator Shinji Mikami is directing the game, with Okami and MadWorld producer Atsushi Inaba reprising the same role for Vanquish. Few details are known about the game at this time, but it will come out for the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 later this year. The title is the last of Platinum's four-game deal with Sega. The previous titles were Bayonetta, Infinite Space, and MadWorld.

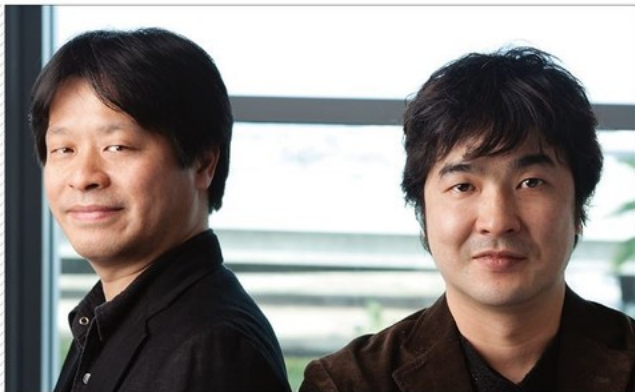
Vanquish's story centers around an alien invasion of the U.S. in the future. You're a highly trained soldier using cutting-edge weapons and acrobatic melee combat with bullet time-like slo-mo moves to take down the invaders. Early screens of the game also show off punches from our armor-suited hero powerful enough to crack enemy armor. With its mix of futuristic shooting and quick melee moves, Vanquish looks like it could be Halo meets Bayonetta.

We'll have more on Vanquish shortly, so stay tuned.



The Making of Final Fantasy XIII

After years of anticipation, the release of Final Fantasy XIII is finally upon us. Few video game franchises command the loyalty and devotion of so many gamers around the world, which serves as both a blessing and a curse for Square Enix's flagship series. A dedicated fanbase practically guarantees sales, but the Final Fantasy name also carries certain expectations. We talked to two of Final Fantasy XIII's creators, producer Yoshinori Kitase and director Motomu Toriyama, about some of the choices and challenges involved with creating the newest entry in the revered Final Fantasy series.



(Left) Yoshinori Kitase and Motomu Toriyama (right)

Final Fantasy XIII's engine was unveiled as the White Engine, but later the name changed to Crystal Tools. What prompted the switch?

Yoshinori Kitase: The White engine was created specifically for Final Fantasy XIII. From there, we changed the concept of the engine to make it more adaptable to other projects (such as Final Fantasy XIV), which is the reason for the name change.

If you could make the decision again knowing what you know now, would you recommend building an all-new engine for Final Fantasy XIII?

YK: I think that instead of developing something completely new, we would try our hand at improving upon existing technology. Tools and engines improve through a process of trial and error and countless revisions, and that's what really makes them more efficient.

Was adapting the game to the Xbox 360 a difficult process?

YK: Transitioning Final Fantasy XIII to multiplatform was not a huge obstacle, as the Crystal Tools engine was created with multiplatform development in mind. The game data and CG data were shared between the two platform versions as well,

so the workload for this part of development never increased. Of course, that doesn't apply to the programming staff that was a part of developing the Crystal Tools engine, as well as engines specific to each platform – they gave up their holidays and went above and beyond in dedicating their time to development.

With the increasing quality of real-time graphics, do you still see CG cutscenes continuing to play an important role in Final Fantasy games?

Motomu Toriyama: We worked closely with the CG team, constantly exchanging data with them in order to decrease the gap between the

real-time cutscenes, battle graphics, and CG cutscenes. With the advancement in technology, I am sure that the quality of real-time graphics in games will continue to progress, but it is important to note that CG technology is still evolving as well. I think that there is still room to differentiate between one or the other, depending on a creator's vision. We never decide on the content of the cutscenes based on the graphical options available – these methods fall into place depending on what it is that we are trying to portray.

When creating a new Final Fantasy, how do you decide which series traditions to keep or leave out?

MT: The goal of each Final Fantasy development team has been to create something new and different every time, both in terms of systems and technology. There were even titles in which the crystal, a major symbolic element of the Final Fantasy world, did not appear, so it's safe to say that there are no requirements that limit the creative freedom of the development staff. It is this ideology that allows the series to continue to evolve. Many of the staff working on Final Fantasy titles are fans themselves, but even they do not consider it a requirement to include Chocobos or Cid in every installment.

Which aspects of Final Fantasy XIII do you see as pointing toward the future of Final Fantasy?

MT: The battle system of Final Fantasy XIII keeps the best parts of command-style combat alive with a strong strategic element, while also adding some fast-paced action elements. The direction of the series changes depending on the development team, so it's difficult to say how Final Fantasy battles will evolve in the future. It's safe to say, however, that as the technological



means of expressing battles advances, the liveliness and tension associated with high-intensity action will probably become a key component.

Does traditional turn-based combat even have a place in Final Fantasy anymore?

MT: If we were to implement a turn-based system on a high-def system, the time that characters stand completely still on standby would seem too long, and the battle scenes would not seem visually realistic. Final Fantasy XIII's battle system maintains the strategic element that is key to the turn-based experience with the realization of the Paradigm system, so there were no considerations during development to return to the traditional turn-based style. The team's focus and challenge was to create a new type of strategic experience wherein players must adapt to ever-changing battle circumstances. This is not to say that style of turn-based battles will never return in the future; the battle system could change depending on the type of hardware that is selected. However, it may not be as simple as bringing back the original system as-is.

At what point in the development process of Final Fantasy XIII was it decided that players would not be exploring towns in the same way as previous games in the series?

MT: In Final Fantasy XIII, Lightning and the other main characters are persecuted and on the run within their world as dangerous l'Cie. The concept of exploring towns and shopping did not make sense in light of the plot, so from the very start of development we had decided that "towns" would be incorporated in the form of a handful of large cities. Instead of adhering to the traditional style of RPG gameplay, we wanted to

involve players by presenting one dramatic situation after the other. The residents of each town are fully voiced, which is something new to the series, and something we hope fans will have fun with.

The last game in the series, Final Fantasy XII, was one of the more complicated entries. Was there a deliberate effort to make FF XIII easier to play than FF XII?

MT: Final Fantasy XIII's system was more about trial-and-error in the preparations prior to battle. In Final Fantasy XIII, we placed emphasis on the strategic aspect of combat, having players respond to ever-changing battle circumstances in real-time, and also implemented very intuitive controls. Both battle systems provide equally challenging and satisfying experiences, just in different ways.

Final Fantasy XIII was unveiled over three years before its actual release. Is that too long to keep fans waiting, or is it the right amount of time to build up excitement for the title?

YK: It's a bit of both. We definitely don't enjoy making our fans wait, but felt it was necessary to give players ample time to get to know the characters and the world. Lightning was probably the character that became most recognizable prior to the game's launch.

Can you clarify the relationship between the stories of the titles in the Fabula Nova Crystallis project? Do they just share common themes, or are there more direct ties between them?

YK: While the characters and world of each game are completely unrelated, there is a single

Crystal Mythology that exists as a backbone to all three. Fragments of this mythology appear in each title. In Final Fantasy XIII, there is mention of the deities' names.

The currently announced Fabula Nova Crystallis titles are Final Fantasy XIII, Final Fantasy Versus XIII, and Final Fantasy Agito XIII. Do these games represent the entirety of the project?

YK: Please look forward to future announcements.

For a while in the Final Fantasy series, gamers only had to wait a couple years between installments. For FF XII and FF XIII, however, the wait was longer. Is the shorter distance between the releases of FF XIII and XIV an indicator that Square Enix is making an effort to deliver Final Fantasy games on a more consistent basis?

YK: The development period for Final Fantasy XIII was longer than our standard, mainly because it was the first time our teams created a game for high-def systems, as well as because the game was developed for multiple platforms. Final Fantasy XIV is an online game and developed by an entirely different team, so I can't speak on the pace of development. However, now that we have completed Final Fantasy XIII and have gained a tremendous amount of knowledge regarding high-def systems, we are hoping for an increase in development speed for future projects. » *Interview by Joe Juba*

Is Rock & Roll Dead?



Will 2009 be remembered as the year the music died? Despite standout titles such as The Beatles: Rock Band and Guitar Hero: Metallica, instrument-based music games didn't fare as well as expected in 2009. Were expectations too high? Did publishers put out too many games and bundles? Last year's over-saturation may have signaled a turning point in the genre, and Guitar Hero maker Activision in particular is responding by only putting out two music games in 2010: new Guitar Hero and DJ Hero titles. Game Informer surveyed 1,685 readers* to find out what you think about music games and what the future may hold.

news

Game Informer's sound check

by Matthew Kato

What feature in a future music game would most excite you?

More realistic
gameplay & peripherals

32.3%

Different
music genres

35.7%

Improved
music creation

17%

Don't change
a thing

15%

FREQUENCY
50.6%

Think the number of music games
being released is just right

Gamers are looking forward to new songs and experiences from their music games (see above). Sixty percent say they'd buy new instruments if they came with new functionality. An almost equal percentage says they're excited about the future of the genre.

*Number of respondents per question varies because some questions may have been skipped

Have you bought a band-specific music game?

YES
36.5%

NO
63.5%

More people said they like to just watch someone else play – 10.2 percent – versus those who like to play bass – 7.1 percent

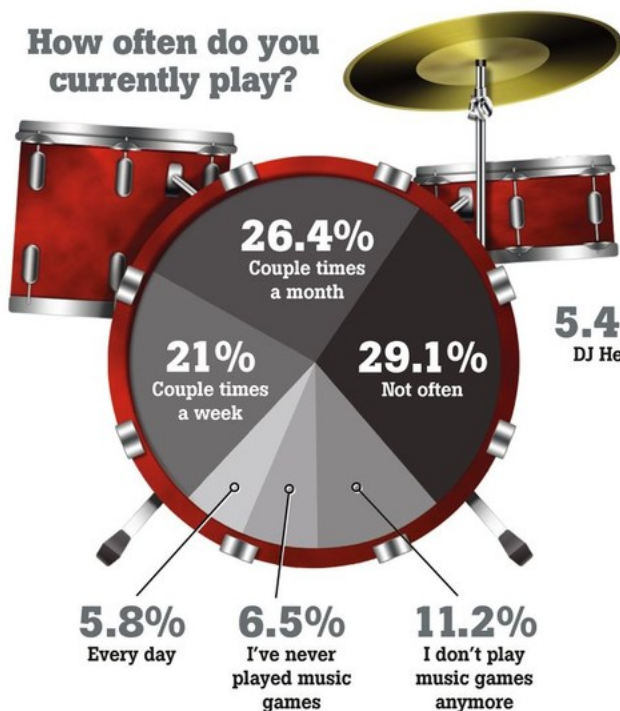
Do you buy downloadable music for your games?

YES
38.9%

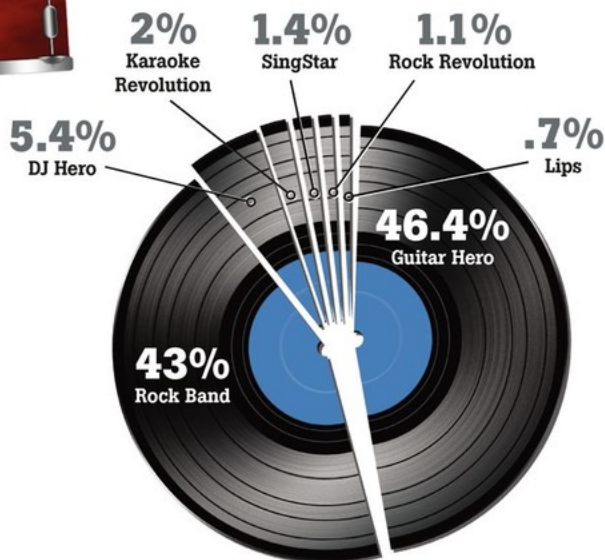
NO
61.1%

Forty-six percent of those surveyed said they've bought songs they otherwise wouldn't have just to have it at a party

How often do you currently play?



What is your favorite music instrument franchise?



The Gender Gap

Too often, game developers give female protagonists short shrift. We find out why

by Meagan VanBurkleo

Ask gamers who their favorite video game heroine is, and a few names will likely garner the majority of the vote.

Samus Aran, Lara Croft, and Joanna Dark are three early icons whose rareness catapulted them to stardom and helped keep their respective franchises afloat for more than a decade. Who could forget the surprise when *Metroid*'s protagonist removed her helmet to reveal long locks? Players never looked at masked heroes the same again. The exploits of cyber "it-girl" of the late '90s, Lady Lara Croft, became a multi-million dollar brand that spawned film adaptations, a comic run, and endorsements deals for everything from energy drinks to luxury cars. With such prominent female leads appearing in the early stages of the interactive entertainment phenomenon, the video games industry seemed well on its way to creating abundant gender diversity.

But since the glory days of Lara Croft, progress has seemingly halted. Sure, recent years have given us the occasional female leads in blockbusters like *Uncharted 2* and critical darlings like *Bayonetta*, but in general the fairer sex has been all but M.I.A. in action titles. Some games even neglect to include a female character when allowing players to choose among multiple protagonists. While some genres like role-playing and fighting games normally offer a level playing field, others seem to be treading water.

We chatted about the gender selection process with members of several prominent development studios and learned that the decision between XX and XY isn't a frivolous one. Demographics, cultural norms, technical constraints and more must be considered. So when narrative, setting, or historical context doesn't dictate the gender of a character, why are females noticeably absent from the action?

Lilith | *Borderlands*

The Numbers Game

First and foremost, numbers matter. Perhaps the most influential factor in regards to core design decisions is player demographic. An NPD survey detailed a five percent increase in female console gamers (23 percent to 28 percent) between June 2008 and 2009. A similar Nielsen Company study showed that females 25 and older now make up the largest segment of PC gamers – holding strong at 46.2 percent. The number of female gamers is obviously growing, especially in relation to specific platforms and genres. This being said, female gamers are still the minority, even if not to the grossly overestimated degree perceived. If there is any truth to the notion that individuals identify closer to characters of their own gender, then it's somewhat expected that we see a disproportionate ratio of males to females.

"The game industry is constantly collecting information about who is buying games, and what types of games they're buying the most of," explains Jennifer Wildes, art director at Gearbox Software. "If these statistics suggest that your game will sell more copies within your demographic if the majority of the player characters are big hulking males, then it's obviously a bit risky to decide they should all be female instead."

Wildes also points out that while modern games may not have a new female protagonist on the level of Samus or Lara Croft, it is getting better. "It's important to note that only a few years ago, the male to female [character] ratio in these types of games was four to zero. We may be moving slowly, but we are getting there."

Girls With Guns

The fact is gender roles still heavily influence decisions in regards to character development. While games that draw from historical events or modern day military shooters have leeway because their goal is to reflect contemporary culture (you're off the hook, Call of Duty), the trend bleeds heavily over the majority of other action titles. Some developers credit the lack of female Special Forces characters in games to the deficiency of press or awareness about them in the real world.

"Perhaps the perception about war and combat is that there are seldom ever women in the thick of it, even though there are many strong women who choose to serve their country on a regular basis," muses Cliff Bleszinski, design director at Epic Games. "It's kind of sad that the two female soldiers who received the most memorable public attention in the last 10 years are Jessica Lynch, who was known for being 'rescued' like a princess, and Lynndie England for her involvement in Abu Ghraib. It would be nice to call out some women who perform heroic actions and kick ass in the field once in a while. I'm sure they're out there!"

While public perception may dictate character gender in games rooted in reality, even titles that exist in new fictions devoid of cultural constraints struggle with implementing the female gender as a protagonist. One of our favorite leading ladies from last year, Lillith from Gearbox's *Borderlands*, was almost a man.

For *Borderlands*, the four protagonists were evolving throughout the production process. Gearbox constantly tweaked each of them until they felt right. "Initially all four player characters were male, and the character who eventually became the Siren started life off as a dry, pompous, genius sort named the Scientist," recalls Wildes. The Scientist's skill set was similar to that of Lillith's, but the ability combined with a dry, narcissistic personality resulted in a character that no one liked. A simple gender swap was the remedy. "The character became a bit more interesting when he was changed to a female," she explains. "What's better than a powerful, humorless, super-genius chick? Turns out: a powerful, mostly unstable one – they're infinitely more fun to hang out with. Who knew?"

Some developers have excelled in including women in their games. Halo architect Bungie has been a leader, making a point to include female combatants in their games and expanded lore. Halo 3 multiplayer offers players a chance to choose their Spartan's gender, and Bungie allows gamers to unlock Veronica Dare, a female intelligence officer, to use in Halo 3: ODST's Firefight mode.

"At Bungie, we're all fans of great sci-fi war stories such as Joe Haldeman's *Forever War* and Heinlein's *Starship Troopers*," says Joseph Staten, writer and creative director of Halo 3: ODST. "These stories (as well as many others in the genre) place women squarely on the front lines. It's a simple answer, but giving women an equal share of the courage and sacrifice required to battle the Covenant just felt like the right thing to do. In the 1990s, U.S. military female aviators finally earned the right to fly combat missions; extrapolating 500 years in the future, we thought, why wouldn't women do everything men could do on the battlefield?"

"...we thought, why wouldn't women do everything men could do on the battlefield?"



Veronica Dare | Halo 3: ODST



Rejected Female Agents | Crackdown



Kat-320 | Halo: Reach



Female & Male Hero | Fable II

It's... **Complicated**

Demographics and cultural values aside, the technical concerns of creating gender diversity in video games can be equally influential. While creating a female avatar isn't any more difficult than a male counterpart, including both genders as playable characters is a monumental commitment, requiring double the render work, motion capturing, and voice acting. Close attention also needs to be paid to dialogue and ambient chatter so to avoid gender-specific references. This increased workload demonstrates why it's easier for developers to allow superficial tweaks to a single character rig rather than creating a new one entirely.

Crackdown is a perfect example. Augmented with cybernetics to enhance speed and strength, there is no contextual reason as to why the ethnically diverse Agents are all men. This is a fact of which Crackdown 2 lead producer James Cope and creative director Billy Thomson are well aware.

"We did have female characters in Crackdown originally," Cope explains. "Sadly, we had to take them out. We were met with increasing time pressures and had to get the game finished." As producer, Cope is held responsible for getting the most bang for the company's buck. In Crackdown's case, splitting the animation team across two sets of playable characters wasn't feasible. "The best decision we could come to – even though we weren't particularly happy about it – was to take one of the player types out. At the time the male character was more complete, so he won."

Thomson concurs that removing the female Agents was undesired, but necessary. "We risked ending up with something that was just kind of average, or instead, really focusing on one," he says. "We had five models built, textured, and skinned for the female – and she looked really cool. But we just couldn't do it."

This particular design limitation appears to be a shared one amongst developers. "[Epic] also takes technical concerns into account, like our animation budget," echoes Bleszinski, speaking about the flagship Gears of War franchise. "Characters that shoot and take cover outside of cinematic sequences share the same skeleton, which would look odd with a female body." This underlying principle is why there are only playable male characters in the Gears of War games and females are limited to cinematic sequences or audio roles.

While Borderlands went the extra mile to create a female protagonist, Wildes affirms that it takes a lot of work. "It's definitely harder to develop both male and female player characters. Even though Lilith would be going through the same range of motions as other player characters, we had to make a unique rig to fit her proportion and then motion capture a unique set of animations. It turns out that women are shaped differently, they move differently, and they sound different. It's kind of a pain. In the end, though, if these aspects aren't considered, you end up with a character that is less than you deserve, or have made tradeoffs in the development process that you may regret."

The Ugly Truth

If the stars align and a developer decides to include playable heroines, new challenges await. One of the more prominent obstacles relates to physical appearance. Let's be honest – sex sells, and there is a stigma against less attractive female characters in games. Men, not so much. Leisure Suit Larry is “endearing,” but the same traits transposed onto a female character would be viewed as a poor marketing move. Given this institutional constraint, developers are less willing to take risks on female characters. What if a game has an unusual art style that doesn't lend itself to traditional beauty standards? Do they conform female characters to said art style, or eliminate the risk of poor reception by sticking to the more flexible gender?

Fable developer Lionhead Studios is a unique example in this regard, making no gameplay distinctions between genders in Fable II. Male and female heroes can dress how they want, sleep with whom they desire, and behave as they please – despite what gender norms stereotypically dictate. Similarly, both genders share the same physical progression. Women bulk up just as much as the men when certain stats are maxed.

How were these muscular heroines received? We ferreted out several interesting threads from various gaming forums, all trading tips on how to keep their female heroes demure – even if the tradeoff was a drastic reduction in brute strength. One contributor lamented, “She's weak, but at least she's sexy.” Fable staffers aren't oblivious to this sentiment, even if they aren't willing to cater to it entirely.

“It's funny how much harder it was to make the female,” elaborates Thomson, head of the Fable franchise. “On the one hand, we want her to be appealing. On the other hand, we don't want to stereotype women.” Murray admits that as a woman playing Fable II she wasn't fond of the wide shoulders and extra bulk her heroine carried – she wanted a combination of traditional beauty and brute strength. Fable figurehead Peter Molyneux echoed the sentiment himself at Microsoft's recent X10 event, describing the leveled-up females as “looking like Russian shot-putters.” Murray admits that the poor reception of female progression has been factored into character development in Fable III – making clear though that Lionhead would never take away the players ability to make an ugly character.

Crackdown devs Thomson and Cope cite the same standards as one of the speed bumps that led to female Agents being eliminated from their game. The complicated visual representation of skill level increases in female Agents caused them to lag behind male characters in the development process.

“For a long time we were trying to do these mockups to capture the overall style and skill and shape the female

“It's definitely harder to develop both male and female player characters.”



Alex Brand | Gears of War comic

character across the five different levels,” explains Thomson. “And we were having real problems about how she would level up. With the male it was easy; we just increased the bulk and gave him a different suit. But when you did that with the female it didn't work quite as well. You lost that sleek and quite desirable shape for something that was really large and cumbersome. We ended up with something that didn't look nearly as nice at the top levels as it did at the first level.”

Epic's Bleszinski echoes the same concerns about finding the perfect female protagonists. “The real trick for creating a female playable character is roughly the same for any playable character, which is to make them relatable so that both male and female players want to play as them,” he says matter-of-factly. “But for a female character, they have to be attractive (but not slutty), kick butt (but not too butch), and smart (but not too nerdy).”

While we don't yet know much about Halo: Reach's female Spartan Kat, Bungie is trying hard to avoid getting

ensnared in the expectations of what a female action star should look like. The brief glimpse we've got of her without a helmet shows a believable, battle-hardened veteran. “Kat-320 is definitely not ‘just one of the guys,’ nor is she a flimsy female stereotype showing a bare midriff through her armor,” says Joe Tung, executive producer of Halo: Reach. “She's a battle-tested, tactically brilliant Spartan III Lieutenant Commander. We wanted to build a strong female character who is just as tough as the men in Noble. You only have to look as far as her arm to know she has seen her share of combat and hardships.”

Risks and Rewards

With light shed on the inner workings of the gender selection process, it's easier to understand that committing to character diversity doesn't come easy. However, that knowledge doesn't entirely sate our desire to see more female characters in games – playable or otherwise. With the gamer demographic diversifying and committed developers willing to take more risks, the future is now. Till the practice becomes standard, our simple request remains: More, please. ♦

To read the expanded feature, including full developer interviews and additional commentary, visit gameinformer.com/mag

GROWING GEARS

Epic Games design director Cliff Bleszinski offered several legitimate reasons why female Gears are missing in action, but that hasn't stopped ancillary media products from crafting lore to bridge narrative gaps.

“We don't want to bog down our summer blockbuster pace trying to explain everything that is going on in the world,” explains Bleszinski when asked about how females fit into the Gears of War universe. “We want the player to hit the ground running in a Gears game and to feel like he's on a nonstop fun thrill ride.”

Through two Gears novels and an ongoing comic run, it's revealed that women fought as fiercely as men on the frontlines of the Pendulum Wars. Emergence Day and the subsequent Hammer Strike forced humanity back into somewhat primitive roles, however. Individuals who aligned with the fragmented Coalition of Ordered Governments were promised some semblance of security – at a cost. Able-bodied men became Gears and fertile women were tasked with producing new ones.

“It was all men now, near enough,” reads a passage from Aspho Fields, the Gears novel by Karen Traviss. “The Pendulum War days of women in uniform were largely over. As Hoffman left, a girl in a sober blue business suit stood at a filing cabinet with her back to him. When she closed the drawer and turned, he could see she was several months pregnant. That was a priority job now, not just replacing engine parts and weapon components, but replacing humans.”

Neither station in life – an expendable asset or a reproductive one – sounds particularly appealing. But it makes for an intriguing story and something we'd love to see migrate into the interactive branch of the franchise.

Change may be on the horizon. In the most recent run of Gears comics, Epic and WildStorm introduced Alex Brand, a tough and believable female Gears with a surprisingly practical hairdo and impressive scar. Turned away from the breeding farms after being identified as infertile, Alex has helped to set a precedent for female Gears in the modern Gears of War timeline. Here's to hoping that she makes an appearance in the inevitable franchise follow-up. Remaining coy when asked directly, Bleszinski seems to share our opinion. “You'll have to wait and see. It could be really amazing to see a girl crush a Locust head with her boot...”



January Top 20

Rank	Game Title (System)	Rank Last Month	Months in Top 20
1	New Super Mario Bros. Wii (Wii)	1	2
2	Mass Effect 2 (360)	—	—
3	Wii Fit Plus (Wii)	2	3
4	Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2 (360)	4	2
5	Mario Kart (Wii)	7	22
6	Wii Sports Resort (Wii)	3	5
7	Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2 (PSS)	5	2
8	Army of Two: The 40th Day (360) Despite low scores from critics, EA's Army of Two franchise once again connected with gamers. It'll be interesting to see if this game's sales rise or fall on the chart next month. Has its fanbase grown since the first one, or is it just the loyal buying it?	—	—
9	Just Dance (Wii)	20	1
10	Darksiders (360) Amidst a sea of already released titles and entrenched video game favorites, Darksiders and Bayonetta represent a pair of "gamer's games." It's good to see them stake a claim in the sales charts.	—	—
11	Army of Two: The 40th Day (PSS)	—	—
12	Wii Play (Wii)	6	36
13	MAG (PSS)	—	—
14	Darksiders (PSS)	—	—
15	EA Sports Active (Wii)	—	6
16	Mario Kart DS (DS)	17	52
17	Bayonetta (360)	—	—
18	New Super Mario Bros. (DS)	12	45
19	Mario & Luigi: Bowser's Inside Story (DS)	10	4
20	God of War Collection (PSS)	—	—

Listings based upon NPD data of units sold for January 2010



Mac Gets Its Steam On

Valve preps May launch on Apple platform

People think of Apple as an industry leader when it comes to the iPhone and iPod, but its gaming reputation is laughable. Half-Life and Left 4 Dead developer Valve is looking to give Mac gamers a boost by bringing its Steam digital distribution network to Macs. Valve will start a beta program this spring, with a full launch targeted for May. The company says it plans to have approximately a dozen Valve titles and some from

third parties at launch, including first-party hits like Left 4 Dead (shown), Team Fortress 2, Portal, Half-Life, plus Half-Life 2 and its two episodes. All of the service's features – including friends, the developer-side Steamworks platform, community, and achievements – will be included in the Mac version. And if you already have a Steam account but want to use it on your brand-new Macbook, for instance, your Steam keys will still work. — by Matthew Kato



The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

NEWS WITH A SARCASTIC SPIN

grand theft auto

Episodes From Liberty City

(ABOVE) PlayStation 3 and PC owners can get their hands on Grand Theft Auto IV: Episodes From Liberty City on March 30. The once-Xbox 360 exclusive Lost and Damned and Ballad of Gay Tony content can be bought for \$39.99 as a retail disc, or downloaded on the PlayStation Network for \$19.99 apiece.

the good

(ABOVE) Vegas. Vegas never changes. Bethesda announced that Fallout: New Vegas will hit shelves this fall for Xbox 360, PS3, and PC. The Obsidian-developed title (with help from devs from the first two Fallouts) features Rangers from the New California Republic and a glittering Sin City spared from the nuclear holocaust.

the bad



The new Call of Duty may have a subscription fee

(ABOVE) Publishers Activision and Ubisoft went on the offensive and declared that they want to push through new iterations of Call of Duty and Assassin's Creed this year. Ubisoft went as far as to say that it wants each of its franchises to come out with new games every 12 to 18 months. While that sounds like it could be great fun, we wonder if the quality of these franchises will dip as they are milked for every dime.



(ABOVE) You know it's bad when even EA Sports is canceling games. The venerable publisher/developer is benching NCAA Basketball for the time being, and the series' future is under review, according to EA. A couple of years ago, rival 2K Sports dropped its superior College Hoops franchise, yet NCAA Basketball still couldn't solidify its spot in EA's lineup.

the ugly

EA CEO John Riccitiello is under fire

(LEFT) The chief investment office of Becker Capital Management – which holds around a million shares of Electronic Arts stock – said in a Business Week article that the credibility of EA's management is “nonexistent right now.” Under EA CEO John Riccitiello's watch, EA's stock price has dropped 68 percent over 11 consecutive quarters

(LEFT) Activision announced plans to lay off several development staffers and close at least one studio as it scales back operations after revealing a quarterly loss of \$286 million. Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen developer Luxoflux has been closed, and rumors are swirling that original Guitar Hero publisher RedOctane was shuttered, but we couldn't officially confirm this by press time. After bleeding Guitar Hero to death, the company's move toward fewer music titles has resulted in layoffs at Tony Hawk/Guitar Hero development house Neversoft. The creator of Prototype, Radical Entertainment, is also facing cutbacks.



I'm concentrating on creating something really good! I am working on condensing the valuable time of my short life and the valuable energy of my staff without any regrets.



Mistwalker's Hironobu Sakaguchi gets philosophical about developing The Last Story, his new Wii RPG for Nintendo



Mass Effect 2

It can't be easy to mess with a formula that was as highly praised as the original Mass Effect, but BioWare didn't just tinker with a few of the game's mechanics – the developer fearlessly altered the way people would play the series. We sat down to talk about these changes, Mass Effect's lackluster minigames, and more with Mass Effect 2 director Casey Hudson.



The game's inventory and character upgrading systems were restructured quite a bit. Were you worried that people might miss some of these more traditional RPG elements?

We decided to take an extremely pragmatic approach, with the intention of making whatever changes we felt were needed to make Mass Effect 2 the best possible game. The challenge we faced regarding RPG elements was that we wanted to honor that aspect of the experience people enjoyed from the first game, but to do so in a way that was more intuitive and could be used to its fullest potential by all players. In some ways, making things more intuitive can create the impression that there's less to do, versus a punishingly complex inventory screen that can make your options feel overwhelming. Take, for example, the weapon customization. In Mass Effect you could add modifications to weapons, choose which one to equip, and set your weapon to use incendiary ammo – all on the inventory screen. It was a complex interface, so while all your options were available in one place, it was a handful to manage. In Mass Effect 2, you do the same activities: you add modifications to weapons in the science lab, you choose which one to equip in your armory, and you toggle your ammo to incendiary ammo from the power wheel. Further, since the ammo type can be mapped to a button, you can even toggle it in real-time during combat. You have a similar level of customization, but because these activities are more intuitively woven into the gameplay, you may never realize how much depth you're accessing.

Why did you decide to remove the Mako entirely instead of tweaking what was there in the first game?

The interesting thing we've observed is that while people were interested in seeing a new develop-

ment of the Mako, they're also seeing the game experience as being quite complete without a vehicle. This sets up what we're planning for the new vehicle really well, since we always hoped that the vehicular sections would be seen as a value-add versus part of the core experience. To that end, we've been working on a new vehicle that will appear in future DLC and potentially Mass Effect 3. Players can look forward to that vehicle, and several missions for it, as part of a DLC pack that will come free as part of Cerberus Network.

It's pretty impressive to see how the Mass Effect 2 story ties back to the first game via saves. Was making the game's story this elastic a challenge?

It's really the hardest challenge we have in the design of the Mass Effect games. We also see it as something that's non-optional. Mass Effect is a trilogy that centers on a single character and the concept of decisions and consequences. It wouldn't really be an interactive story if we didn't allow the consequences of one game to shape the next.

Side missions seem a little more important this time around. Did you have a team dedicated to side missions? What was your favorite one?

Our team in Montreal did most of the work on the missions that you'll find when you explore the galaxy. There are some really different missions out there. It was an opportunity to explore other story or gameplay concepts than you can't experience elsewhere in the game. An interesting example of that is a mission where you explore an old shipwreck teetering on the edge of a tall cliff, as it creaks and rocks in the wind.

At the same time, your party members play a more important

role in the overall story. What made you decide that you wanted to focus on players' relationships with the rest of the cast?

It was a way for us to tie in most of the subplots into the core story of the game. If you are facing a suicide mission, you'll want the best team with you, and you'll want them to be loyal and well equipped. That simple concept implies a huge set of missions to get ready for the endgame, where even a sentimental story-based subplot can affect the outcome of the main game if it means earning a squad member's loyalty.

Certain party members from the first game can be recruited in Mass Effect 2. Does that mean we'll see characters from this game make a return in ME 3?

You will definitely be able to see characters from Mass Effect 2 in Mass Effect 3, as long as they're alive in the end of your story. It's a challenge for sure, but it's also going to be a huge payoff for players of the Mass Effect trilogy to see what happens with all these characters and storylines started by the first two games.

Since players can finish the game with Shepard dead, does that mean ME 3 will have a new star altogether? Or will those who ended the game with Shepard dying simply not be able to import their save into Mass Effect 3?

Nope. Dead is dead. Mass Effect 3, as with the rest of the trilogy, is Shepard's story. If you have a dead Shepard at the end of Mass Effect 2, that save game won't import into Mass Effect 3. You can play Mass Effect 3 if you died in Mass Effect 2 of course, but you'll have to create a new Shepard. Harsh? Yes. But we wouldn't be serious about the concept of a suicide mission if you couldn't die and your death didn't have serious consequences.

The hacking minigames didn't seem as polished as the rest of the game and seem like a last-minute addition. What happened there?

Minigames can take on a life of their own and take a surprising amount of work, since they can quickly become full games in their own right. The challenge is to keep them light yet engaging. In Mass Effect we had very basic minigames, and for Mass Effect 2 I think we were able to improve on them significantly.

It seems to take a long time to mine for minerals, and the mechanics for that section of the game aren't very compelling. Did you consider changing up the mechanics for mining or adding more upgrades that would make this process more fluid? Is there any chance that a future patch or DLC could make mining faster?

We've had lots of feedback on the orbital minigame, and a frequent comment is that it's "strangely addictive." We keep an eye on player suggestions for tuning however, so it's certainly a possibility that we could include adjustments to the speed or balance in a future patch or title update.

Up until now Mass Effect has been exclusive for the Xbox 360. Do you think PS3 fans will ever get to play through the trilogy? Mass Effect 2 is only available on Xbox 360 and PC.

The gameplay changed a lot from Mass Effect 1 to Mass Effect 2. Do you expect that Mass Effect 3 will go through similar overhauls, or do you feel like you have the basic mechanics of the game nailed down?

It's hard to say at this point. We'll do the same thing we did before, however, starting the design by listening to player feedback. ♦



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feature

10 Years Of The Sims

by Joe Juba

For many people, gaming is an escape that allows them to get away from normal life and experience something fantastic. A game about building houses, buying furniture, and going to work hardly sounds like a game at all. However, The Sims proved this unconventional formula was not only viable, but that it was the recipe for creating the best-selling PC franchise in history. In celebration of The Sims' 10th anniversary, we chat with creator Will Wright and take a look back at this revolutionary series.

- Timeline**
- 2000**
 - The Sims (PC)
 - The Sims: Livin' Large (PC)
 - 2001**
 - The Sims: House Party (PC)
 - The Sims: Hot Date (PC)
 - 2002**
 - The Sims: Vacation (PC)
 - The Sims: Deluxe Edition (PC)
 - The Sims: Unleashed (PC)
 - The Sims Online (PC)
 - 2003**
 - The Sims (PSP, Xbox, GC)
 - The Sims: Superstar (PC)
 - The Sims: Makin' Magic (PC)
 - The Sims: Bustin' Out (PSP, Xbox, GC, GBA)
 - 2004**
 - The Sims 2 (PC)
 - 2005**
 - The Sims 2: University (PC)
 - The Sims 2: Nightlife (PC)
 - The Sims 2 (PSP, Xbox, GC, DS, GBA)
 - The Sims 2: Holiday Edition (PC)
 - The Sims 2: Holiday Party Pack (PC)
 - The Sims 2 (PSP, Mobile)
 - 2006**
 - The Sims 2: Open for Business (PC)
 - The Sims 2: Pets (PC)
 - The Sims 2: Family Fun Stuff (PC)
 - The Sims 2: Glamour Life Stuff (PC)
 - The Sims 2: Pets (PSP, DS, Wii)
 - The Sims 2: Happy Holiday Stuff (PC)



Will Wright

In 1997, no one could have guessed that Maxis would create the most popular PC franchise of all time. Founded by Will Wright and Jeff Braun, the studio had received widespread acclaim for its SimCity series, but the string of less successful titles that followed put Maxis in a difficult financial position. This led to the developer's acquisition by Electronic Arts, which was the beginning of a new age for Maxis and PC gaming as a whole. In 2000, after being allowed unprecedented creative freedom within EA, Maxis released The Sims.

Since its release, The Sims has grown into a sales juggernaut and full-blown cultural phenomenon. But during its development, the team at Maxis was just trying to create a fun simulation that let people live virtual lives. "Creating the original The Sims game, no one on the team really knew what type of phenomena it was going to be," Wright says. "You can't predict a phenomenon, but you can hope."

Most developers wouldn't dare hope for the kind of success The Sims has achieved over its 10-year lifespan. The franchise has sold over 100 million copies, and grossed more than \$1.6 billion. This puts it just shy of James Cameron's *Titanic*, which grossed \$1.8 billion at the box office.

While the series has been a consistent success, the development team has tried to ensure that new iterations build on the core concept. Yes, you'll find multiple expansion packs full of new furniture, but each core game in the series moves the simulation genre forward in new ways. "When the game first came out, we really started to understand that this was a whole new genre of game," explains Wright. "There were so many things about the original game that had never been done before. There was no business model to look at. Each iteration of The Sims has been of a similar magnitude. The Sims 2 added aging and took the game to 3D. With The Sims 3 we



took your Sims out of the house and into the neighborhood and gave them traits, personalities, and lifetime wishes."

New features and expanded social options are great additions for fans of the series, but the key to The Sims' success isn't in its mechanics. It's in the concept, which is familiar and relatable to almost anyone whether or not they happen to be gamers. "The Sims is unique in that it is so universal. It represents life," Wright tells us. "You can go to any country in the world and people play The Sims and they can find themselves in it. It is a game that transcends borders, demographics, and gender." This wide appeal is a major factor in the series' success; through its extensive use of graphical cues and intuitive interface design, The Sims ensures that players can easily navigate and interact with the world. Even if you don't have an extensive experience with video games, you can still pick up The Sims and draw on your real-life experience to figure things out.

THE SIMS FUN FACTS

- + The first object ever created in the prototype for The Sims was a toilet
- + New hairstyles are the most popular downloaded content
- + Will Wright engineered a pandemic – a virus that swept through the world of The Sims. By collaborating and sharing information online, players eventually identified the source: pet guinea pigs
- + The Sims 2 has been translated into 22 languages
- + Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs inspired the multiple facets of life that players must balance to keep Sims happy
- + The Sims 2: Pets is the most popular expansion pack in the series' history

In the world of gaming, a franchise running strong for 10 years is rare. The Sims has reached that milestone, but does it have another 10 years in front of it? That depends on the team's ability to keep creating compelling ways for players to interact with their simulated universe. According to Wright, that won't be a problem: "For the last 10 years The Sims has grown as both a game and a creative experience," he says. "Throughout the history of the franchise, the team tried to introduce concepts and content that allowed more and more of people's everyday life as well as their fantasies to be reflected in the game. They tried to stay connected to the changing times, and just like we as people are continuing to evolve, so will The Sims." ♦

Go to gameinformer.com/mag to read our full Q&A with legendary game designer Will Wright



WHAT ARE THEY SAYING?

The incomprehensible language spoken by the Sims is called Simlish. While it takes inspiration from several actual languages (like Navajo, Ukrainian, and Tagalog), the alphabet and grammar do not draw from any single source. You may recognize a few phrases here and there (many are consistent from one entry to the next), but Simlish is basically untranslatable.



GI'S TOP 3 WAYS TO MAKE SIMS MISERABLE

Everyone knows about deleting the pool ladder and piling wooden furniture up by the stove, but here are some of our favorite lesser-known ways to make life hard for your Sims.

1. Human zoos (The Sims 1, 2, and 3): Lure your neighbors into a 2x2 room by inviting them to sit on a couch with you. As soon as they do, get up and leave the room, then delete the door. Once your captive stands up, delete the couch. Install windows on the enclosed cell's walls and view at your leisure.
2. Lazy Sim Ping-Pong (The Sims 1): Build two bedrooms, each with a blaring stereo. Leave a lazy sim on autopilot, and eventually they'll try to sleep, heading to one of the bedrooms. The music will wake them up instantly, but they'll be too lazy to actually turn off the stereo. Instead, they'll try to sleep in the second bedroom, laying down for a few seconds only to stand up and grumble about the loud noise. Then it's back to the first bedroom, where the process repeats until they fall asleep on their feet in the hallway.
3. The Misanthrope (The Sims 3): Create a sim with an appalling personality, then inflict your presence on everyone you see. Barge into homes, shout, start fights, steal food, and sleep in other people's beds. Also, never shower. You can practically see the disgust on your neighbors' faces whenever you approach.

2007

- The Sims 2: Seasons (PC)
- The Sims 2: Celebration! Stuff (PC)
- The Sims 2: Deluxe (PC)
- The Sims 2: H&M Fashion Stuff (PC)
- The Sims 2: Bon Voyage (PC)
- The Sims 2: Castaway (PS2, PSP, DS, Wii)
- The Sims 2: Teen Style Stuff (PC)

2008

- The Sims 2: FreeTime (PC)
- The Sims 2: Double Deluxe (PC)
- The Sims 2: Kitchen and Bath Interior Design Stuff (PC)
- The Sims 2: IKEA Home Life (PC)
- The Sims 2: Apartment Pets (DS)
- The Sims 2: Apartment and Garden Stuff (PC)

2009

- The Sims 3 (PC)
- The Sims 3: World Adventures (PC)
- The Sims 3 (iPhone, Mobile)

2010

- The Sims 3: High-End Loft Stuff (PC)



BattleBlock Theater
Xbox Live Arcade

The Behemoth goes to the theater, and two classic franchises return *by Matt Miller*

Castle Crashers continues to be one of the top sellers on Xbox Live Arcade, and for good reason. The cooperative fantasy beat-em-up is stylish, hilarious, and a blast to play. That's why I'm so excited about **BattleBlock Theater**, the newly announced third game from Castle Crashers developer The Behemoth. The game certainly maintains the visual styling of the studio, with cute animated characters juxtaposed against violent action. BattleBlock is set on a strange and mysterious island, where you've been shipwrecked with your best bud, Hatty. Your friend promptly betrays you, and you're captured by the locals and forced to perform in plays – to the death! With the island's inhabitants looking on from the comfort of their seats, you and a friend can play through the deadly action/platforming campaign on the same screen, which combines cooperative and competitive elements. Four players can jump in over Xbox

Live, and with over 200 collectable playable characters, everyone should be able to find a suitable avatar to reflect their mood. I'm pretty stoked about this one. It's currently scheduled for a release later this year.

In the nearer term, Live Arcade plays host to a familiar face for anyone with fond memories of the N64. **Perfect Dark** was one of the most lauded and well-loved early console FPS titles. This revamped version has been reformatted for HD, with 1080p resolution running at 60 frames per second. The original campaign remains in place – when rival defense contractor dataDyne becomes embroiled in the conflict between warring interstellar aliens, one of the Carrington Institute's best agents, Joanna Dark, must disrupt the conspiracy. The new version preserves the four-player spitscreen multiplayer, but also adds online competition and leaderboards. For gamers only familiar with the more recent Perfect Dark Zero, you owe it to yourself to check this

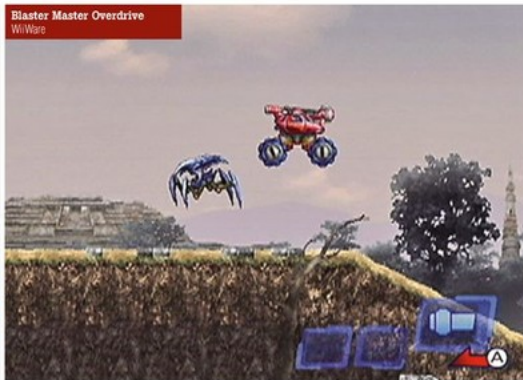
one out. The original remains one of the highest-rated video games of all time.

The Xbox 360 isn't the only console picking up long-dormant and beloved franchises. Sneaking under the radar until only days before its release on WiiWare this February, **Blastar Master Overdrive** is a sequel to one of the most engaging games on the NES. A parasitic virus that transforms much of the animal life into vicious mutants and puts many humans into a coma-like sleep has invaded Earth. Viral biologist and all-around hero Alex isn't having any of it, and he's got a giant four-wheeled engine of destruction to back him up. I played the first few hours of the game and came away impressed with its clear emulation of the original formula. Players split time between driving a wheeled tank vehicle through side-scrolling exploration levels and hopping out to engage in some top-down action sections on foot. Like Metroid, the game demands that you find numerous power-ups to your vehicles and weapons in order to progress. For those who are wondering, Overdrive employs updated remixes of the well-loved music from the NES classic.

*For additional coverage of downloadable games, check in at gameinformer.com/mag for weekly updates. In addition, you can read our review of one of this year's most anticipated downloadable games, *The Misadventures of PB. Winterbottom*, on page 92*



Perfect Dark
Xbox Live Arcade



Blastar Master Overdrive
WiiWare



loose talk

New Platforms & New Homes

A lot is always 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 goes on behind closed doors and what might be in store for the future.

New Nintendo DS?

Rumors of new Nintendo hardware have been floating around for a while, but an unidentified developer has told CVG that the company is working on a new Nintendo DS with motion-sensing capabilities and more. "It's genuinely the best thing I think I've ever worked with," said the developer. "I can tell you that it's got a tilt function that's not dissimilar to iPhone, but does a lot more. We know that The Pokémon Company are getting special attention with it." The source goes on to say that they don't expect the new handheld to be announced until after March sometime, perhaps at E3.

Criterion's Black Team is Back

Remember Criterion Games' PS2 FPS Black? Some of the core development team members behind that game have split off from the studio and are making a game called Body Count. Codemasters is handling the title, but it's unknown at this time if it will be an FPS like Black or if it handles its action in a different manner. We'll have to wait to hear more about Body Count once Codemasters figures out its plans for the U.S. market. The UK-based publisher recently laid off some employees of its U.S. branch as part of a reorganization.

Mickey Goes Multiplatform?

A lot of gamers were disappointed when Disney announced that Epic Mickey would only come out for the Wii, but the company might be changing its mind. "We have a very large audience base that has Wiis in their home," said Disney executive Graham Hopper, "that's not to say that we won't go to other platforms." Epic Mickey utilizes the Wii's motion controller for its ink and paint mechanic, and Hopper insinuates that had the timing of Microsoft and Sony's motion controllers occurred earlier in development, the game might be coming out for those systems.

TidBits

Fun Facts About
BioShock 2 By 2K Games



- At one point, Sander Cohen was planned to reappear in BioShock 2 as a 20-foot-tall Freudian monster bunny.
- Other discussed names for the Rumbler Big Daddy included Howie, Bomber, and Professor Shootbombs.
- The flooding sequence from the first level of the game was originally built as throwaway work for an early proof of concept demo. It proved to be too popular and iconic to be removed from the game.
- The X-ray that appears in the Inner Persephone level is actually a real X-ray of lead environment artist Hogarth de la Plante's shattered left humerus following a hang-gliding accident.
- Before he was given an official name, Gil Alexander was referred to as The Guilt Navigator – a punning reference to Dune.
- Sheryl Lee, who played Laura Palmer in *Twin Peaks*, appears as several bit Splicers in the game. Due to a scheduling mishap, she showed up in the recording studio instead of Sheryl Lee Ralph, who plays Grace, so the team had her record a few lines.
- The team went through several rounds of scratch voice acting while the game was in production. For one of them, every line in the entire game was recorded by a single production intern, who recorded it all at his desk in under two days.
- Dionysus Park was the first level begun by the team. Adonis Luxury Resort was the last.
- Error messages for empty containers (like ashtrays and crates) were written as haiku and appeared in the game until well after beta.
- The title was developed across five countries in five different time zones.
- There were a total of 78 hires to bring 2K Marin from the original core eight-person team in November 2007 to peak development size.



Final Fantasy XI

In order to get a full 1250 gamerscore in Square's time-sucking MMO, you have to achieve level 75 with every class in addition to numerous other insane tasks.

How long did it take you to unlock the FF XI achievements?

It took me about 1,200 days of play time. I started playing the game on PlayStation 2 and migrated to the Xbox 360.

Was it worth it?

In my experience, it was not worth it. I wasted a lot

of time getting these achievements. I had fun when I played, but it annoyed a lot of my friends.

What tips would you give other gamers looking to unlock these achievements?

These achievements are incredibly tough, but if you want them, don't give up. Unlocking some of the achievements will take months of work for five points.

This month, Game Informer tracked down some of Xbox 360's most difficult achievements and two dedicated gamers who have unlocked them.

by Phil Kollar



Star Ocean: The Last Hope

To get the Ultimate Battler achievement and a meager 10-point boost to your gamerscore, you need to win a total of 900 battle trophies in the game, many of which are only available through random circumstances that can be extremely difficult to recreate.

How long did it take you to unlock the Ultimate Battler achievement?

I started the game on February 28, 2009, and got the final battle trophy achievement on July 24. Of course, I didn't play literally every day, but I think at most there were about 30 days that I didn't touch the game at all. The amount of time I played varied from virtually all day to just an hour a day.

Was it worth it?

Not in the slightest. You don't get anything but a sense of accomplishment (as well as a sense that you've wasted a good amount of your time doing it). I'd advise most people to not bother.

What tips would you give other gamers looking to unlock this achievement?

My biggest tip is to have a lot of patience, some paper, a pen, and a calculator. Some of the battle trophies that involve doing a specific amount of damage (or specific amount of HP recovered) will require a lot of testing and using items to slightly tweak your stats to accomplish the specific values. A lot of math can be involved. An in-game tip is to not sell anything and to save your stat-increasing items to help when going for those trophies.

The most difficult trophy is to beat the Ethereal Queen in 10 minutes with Lymle. Be sure to bulk up all your characters with good equipment, and make sure you go for this trophy during your first fight with the Queen — the second and third time she will increase in strength, making it more difficult, if not impossible. Anyone that has been through the Wandering Dungeon knows that it takes quite some time to get through, and it really sucks wasting an hour on each attempt at the trophy, but there's no easy way.



Stephen Acey

Handle
Hells Abyss

Age
18

Hometown
Connellsville, PA



DaVaughn Potts

Handle
Dy

Age
27

Hometown
Pasadena, CA



**WHAT FATHER NATURE USES
WHEN MOTHER NATURE IS
OUT OF TOWN AT ANOTHER
ONE OF HER CONFERENCES.**

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Raiding the Vaults

Good Old Games offers DRM-free PC classics *by Matthew Kato*

You've heard the legends about games like the original *Fallout* or *Psychonauts* a thousand times, as friends swear by them and reminisce about all the great moments they had playing them back in the day. Now it's your turn. GOG.com is selling almost 200 PC classics for cheap prices ranging from \$5.99 to \$9.99. Even better, these titles come 100 percent DRM free. Once you buy them, they're yours to do whatever you want with, re-download as many times as you need, and play without an Internet connection. Moreover, GOG.com offers enticing add-ons, such as guides and soundtracks. Every title is also optimized for newer operating systems like Windows 7.

Good Old Games recently added Activision to its stable, offering *Arcanum: Of Steamworks and Magick Obscura* and *Gabriel Knight: Sins of the Fathers*. We talked to Marcin Iwinski, co-founder of GOG.com and *The Witcher* developer CD Projekt about how the company goes about bringing us these once-lost gaming gems.



GOG.com just inked a deal with Activision to bring *Gabriel Knight: Sins of the Fathers* and other PC classics to the download service

Here's a select list of a few of the 190 titles that GOG.com currently offers:

Advent Rising
Arcanum: Of Steamworks and Magick Obscura
Beyond Good & Evil
Blake Stone: Planet Strike
Caesar 3
Commandos 2 & 3
Descent 1 & 2
Duke Nukem 3D: Atomic Edition
Earth 2140 Trilogy
Earthworm Jim 1 & 2
Fallout 1 & 2
Fallout Tactics
Far Cry
Gabriel Knight: Sins of the Fathers
Ghost Recon
Giant: Citizen Kabuto
Gothic

Ground Control & Expansion
Heroes of Might and Magic 2: Gold Edition
IL-2 Sturmovik: 1946
Jagged Alliance
MDK
Mob Rule
Myst: The Masterpiece Edition
Oddworld: Abe's Exodius
Oddworld: Abe's Oddysee
Painkiller: Black Edition
Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time
Psychonauts
Rainbow Six
Republic: The Revolution
Riven: The Sequel to Myst
Settlers 2: Gold Edition
Space Quest 4 & 5 & 6
Tex Murphy 1 & 2
Tropico Reloaded
UFO: AfterShock
Unreal Gold
Unreal Tournament GOTY

What kinds of bugs and problems do you usually encounter as you try to get these old games running on the newer operating systems?

The first one that comes to mind – the most common problem – is that a given game just does not want to run at all on a given system. That's usually easier to handle, as we know from the start what's going on and can work on it. The most difficult problems to handle are definitely the ones buried deep in the game that show up after several hours of gameplay on a particular system – let's say Windows Vista in 64-bit mode only. Then we start digging into the game, and after days or sometimes even weeks of work we manage to solve it. Most games have smaller issues that we can sort out rather quickly, but we have had a few with which it's taken us weeks to find and remove the bugs so that they work on all the modern systems.

How is switching the games to Windows 7?

Since Windows 7 is not a major change from Vista, we haven't faced any major issues here. The real challenge, however, was Vista. We've spent thousands of hours fixing and testing the games on that OS. I am sure our QA team could write a book about it!



Co-founder of Good Old Games, Marcin Iwinski

What are some games you don't have now that you'd love to get?

Some of us would love to have the great adventure games from LucasArts, like *Monkey Island*, *Full Throttle*, and *Grim Fandango*, while some dream about strategy games like *Warcraft* or *Total Annihilation*. I personally would love to have all the good old RPGs – although I have already plenty to play with the *Fallouts* and *Might & Magic* series available on GOG.com.

Are there other extras you'd like to offer for these games?

There is definitely more we would like to have, and we are working on it as we speak. We're going to put together videos that give gamers a better idea of how a certain game looks and plays. There will be way more game guides and soundtracks. We are also working with the creators on fan-interviews – we had a few cool pieces on some fan-favorite games, and we think it's a lot of fun to hear what developers think about their five-plus year old "babies" and how they

were made. Also, for some titles where the community/mod-scene is still alive, we are linking our users to appropriate materials. So let's say if you are a *Freespace 2* fan, we will offer you links to community-made mods. We have a lot more ideas, and whenever we think that something would work for a given game, we do our best to put it up on GOG.com. Still, if any of you have some cool ideas, do visit us and drop us an e-mail or post on our forums.

Are you afraid of the publishers that are offering their games on GOG.com turning around and making these games available on their own sites?

I do not think this will happen, as it commercially would not make much sense. GOG.com offers quite a unique model – our pitch to our business partners from the very beginning has basically been, "Hey, you have a lot of old and very old titles that are gathering dust. Why not dust them off and generate some revenue? There are a lot of people out there who would love to play them, and you're not selling them through retail anymore, are you?" The amount of work that has to go into these games can be rather significant, and I just don't think most publishers have the resources. Why would they need them if someone like GOG.com can do the work?

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GOOD OLD GAMES

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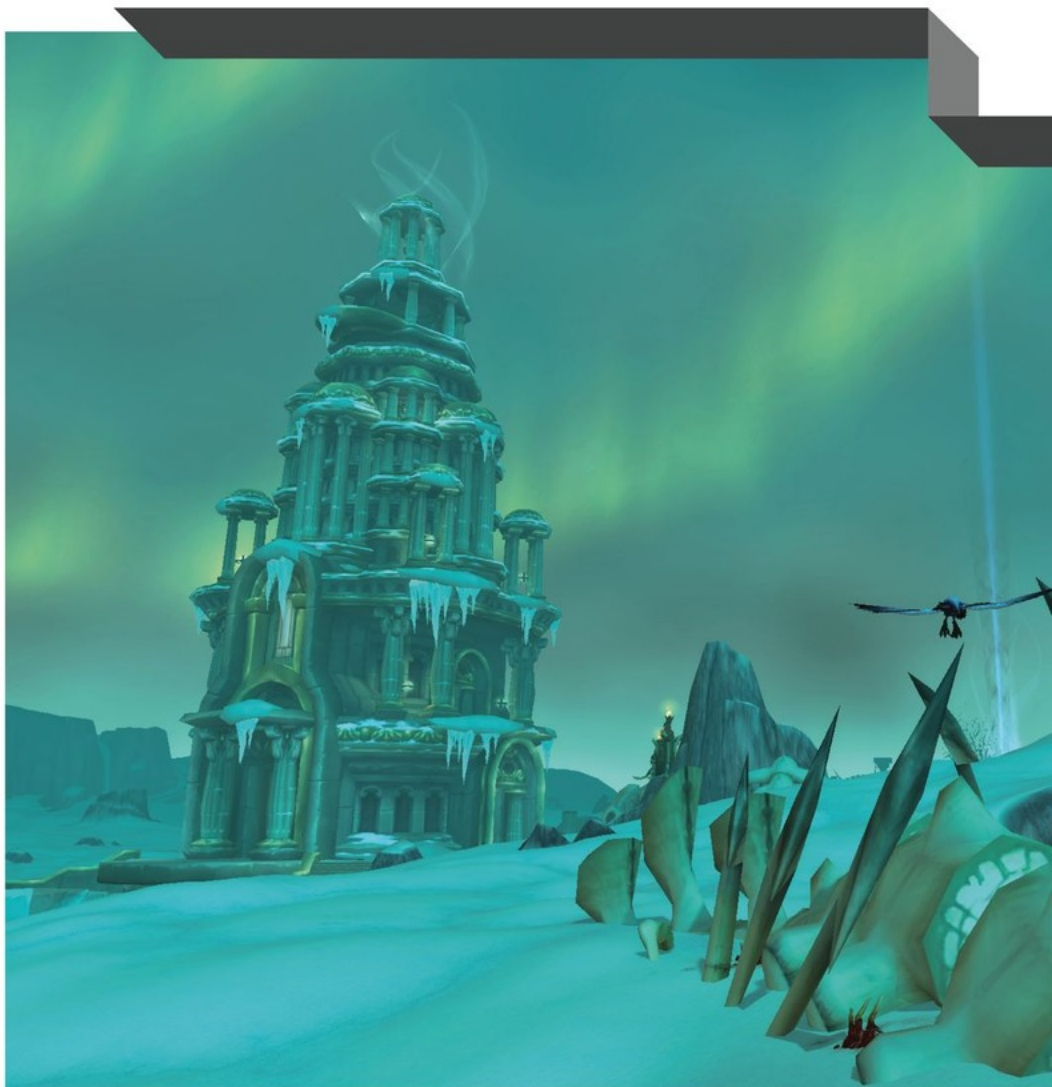
Blood
Drug Reference
Language
Sexual Themes
Violence



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massive



Wrapping Up The Lich King

Reflections on World of Warcraft's last expansion *by Adam Biessener*



The Lich King is dead. Long live the Lich King! The epic saga that started in Warcraft III and continued through six years of World of Warcraft has drawn to a close. What shape did the Wrath of the Lich King leave Azeroth in?

The central theme was a shift toward providing fulfilling content for people beyond high-end raiders and arena junkies. Blizzard no doubt has reams of stats to back this up, but any casual observer can see that WoW's success is built on a horde of social players. The raids are leet and the balance is (generally) tight, but how many guild members do you have who spend \$15 a month to chase pet achievements? Or who log in to chat, fish, and play the Auction House for a little while before putting their kids to bed? How many entire guilds on your server consist of this kind of player? Lich King made life in Northrend much better for these folks. Heirlooms, non-raid or PvP-related achievements, vastly improved storytelling via questlines – all of these were massive wins for the social crowd. Given the success of this aspect of the game, I'll auction my epics if Cataclysm doesn't continue in a similar vein.

Several trends from The Burning Crusade continued through Arthas' tenure as Warcraft's big bad. Easy content like five-man dungeons and normal-mode raids got easier, while hard raids stayed challenging. Some hardcore types will argue that Lich King raiding never hit the glorious heights of the Sunwell, but I'd retort that the design behind raid compositions and class interaction has mostly taken the game out of finding the perfect mix of Rogues and enhancement Shaman and into crafting and executing strategies.

Where the Horde-side Nagrand meta-questline involving Thrall's return to his ancestral homeland was once the pinnacle of WoW storytelling, it would fit right alongside any zone in Northrend. I thought I'd seen the best Blizzard had to offer when I finished up Dragonblight and saw the Wrathgate cinematic, but piloting a mountain-sized golem and exploring Arthas' backstory alongside an echo of his childhood personality topped even that. Wrath delivered pre-endgame content unrivaled in the MMO space, and there's no debating it.

You may have the impression that I'm a big fan of Lich King, and in general you'd be right. I've had a fantastic time leveling three characters to 80, hardmode progression raiding, and getting my Titanium Seal of Dalaran. The journey was hardly smooth sailing start to finish, though.

For all the progress that Blizzard made in removing tedium (flasks), the grind can still crush my will to play. It's great that the awful Sons of Hodir rep grind was eventually patched into triviality, but going through it on my main and first alt in its original form was horrible. Heroic five-man badges have evolved from a nice gear door prize for those unable or unwilling to raid into a near-mandatory slog through old content in order to perform anywhere

near optimally in progression raids. It's a credit to the dungeon design team that I actively enjoyed my first 30 trips through Gun'drak. The fact that I suffered through another 50 for badges that I felt I needed is a damning indictment of another aspect of WoW's design. The less said about The Oculus, the better.

Wintergrasp is another idea that sounded great on paper and mostly failed in practice. The first two months after the expansion's launch, Wintergrasp was a fantastic slugfest with unusual gameplay, neat rewards, and a reason to socialize with the rest of your faction. Then the rest of the server finished leveling to 80 and started jumping into the zone. Blizzard eventually had to capitulate and instance it from the world to maintain playability, largely defeating the purpose of having an open-world PvP zone. Either way, I suppose it's still better than sitting through an hour-long Warsong Gulch turtle.

Arenas, where I'm informed that all the true PvPers go when they're not jumping on the bandwagon

of whatever flavor of the month game is going to "do it right," haven't changed much since The Burning Crusade aside from the hilariously overpowered Death Knight and Paladin situations that went on for far too long. The introduction of a new, broken arena setting didn't help either. At least there weren't a million people AFK'ing along on 1300-rated teams for welfare epics this time around, and the balance eventually settled into respectability.

Oddly, the thing that I suspect will have the biggest long-term ramifications came at the very end of Lich King's run. The brilliant cross-realm Dungeon Finder is a stunning technical achievement that makes having suffered through Blizzard's previous LFG failures (remember the first incarnation of Meeting Stones?) worth it. Convincing players to explore the social aspects of an MMO without overtly punishing them for soloing has been one of the genre's great challenges, and making small-group dungeons two clicks and a short wait away with the Dungeon Finder is an incredible solution. We're all going to have a heck of a time going back to the old chat-spamming routine in other games after getting used to this.

I don't agree with all the decisions Blizzard made over the course of Wrath of the Lich King. I have, however, had hundreds upon hundreds of hours of fantastic experiences. Who would have thought we'd go from doing Molten Core with single-group totems and no blessings to begging Paladins to tank for catform Druids in progression content? I may never want to see another Relic of Ulduar in my life, but I can't wait for the Cataclysm to hit. ♦

Check out our Afterwords on Lich King with Blizzard's Tom Chilton at gameinformer.com/mag

"You may have the impression that I'm a big fan of Lich King, and in general you'd be right"

TOP 10 EVIL CORPORATIONS

By Tim Turi

Shinra Electric Power Company – Final Fantasy VII

Think offshore oil drilling is bad? Shinra's core business revolves around harvesting the planet's life force to turn a profit. While the corporate executives live in the posh upper crust of Midgar, they force the poor citizens to rot away in the sunless slums. Not bad enough for you?

Shinra also has an Injecting Human Fetuses With Monstrous DNA Division. However, none of these foul deeds compare with the company's labyrinthine headquarters and its soulless keycard system. We can never forgive that.



Umbrella Corporation – Resident Evil Series

Since the revelation of Umbrella's bio-weapon engineering research facility hidden beneath Raccoon City, the company has been exposed, infiltrated, and exploded more than a few times. These are but minor setbacks for Umbrella, as it always ends up playing a role in the latest zombie-related mishap. Constant infighting among key Umbrella figures established the company's rocky foundation, and Umbrella's tenacity in bio-weapon research ended up being its own undoing. Apparently, routinely zombifying your employees cuts down productivity.



Aperture Science – Portal

Tampering with dimensional portals is questionable enough, but where Aperture really takes the cake lies within its corrupt governing AI. Yes, GLaDOS malfunctioned and killed the entire Enrichment Facility staff with a deadly neurotoxin. With the staff's stupid morals out of the way, the sentient housekeeper is able to exact Aperture's research uninhibited. Read our coverage of Portal 2 on page 50 to find out what happened after GLaDOS' victory cadence.



RaptureFarms –

Oddworld: Abe's Oddysee

This meat-processing conglomerate is the biggest on Oddworld. They specialize in turning the local fauna into delicious treats like ScrabCakes and Paramite Pies. Not even dwindling species can stop this capitalistic machine, as slaver Molluck the Glukkon soon realizes the full and delicious potential of his indentured staff. We've heard of capitalistic cannibalism, but RaptureFarms turning its own Mudokon workers into popsicles takes the idea to a literal level.



Abstergo Industries –

Assassin's Creed Series

Some corporations will do whatever it takes to rise to the top. In the case of Abstergo, they abduct their rivals and force them to travel back in time to relive their ancestors' pasts and retrieve relics that grant them mind-control powers.

Pretty basic stuff, really. The kicker is that Abstergo has been fudging up history for its benefit from the beginning of time, and may have been responsible for that little "oops" called World War II. At this rate, Assassin's Creed III will reveal them as responsible for chain e-mails.



Ultor Corporation –

Red Faction/Saint's Row 2

Ultor is so devious that its malicious business practices could not be contained within a single video game series. Ultor anchored its corrupt roots in Saint's Row 2, making seedy deals with street gangs and investing in mysterious mining equipment. Strong brands stand the test of time – even the evil ones – and Ultor took its business to Mars in the late 21st century. Miners looking to start a new life on Mars were greeted with inhospitable living environments and practically no human rights. At least the business practices of the future are familiar!



Union Aerospace Corporation –

Doom

Any corporation guilty of opening the gates of Hell is guaranteed a spot on this list, regardless of intentions. Sure, in the early Doom games the UAC was simply testing teleportation technology and accidentally unleashed hell on Mars' moons and eventually Earth. In Doom 3, however, the corporation operates on the red rock to avoid Earth learning of their experiments on the foul creatures of Hell. The UAC would have likely placed higher, but it clearly has a soft spot, leaving cutting-edge weaponry like the BFG-9000 laying around for Doom Guy to use.



The Agency –

Crackdown

On the surface, The Agency seems like a savior. Dismantling dangerous gangs, quelling violent riots, and dispersing citizen-helping Peacekeepers are all common practice for The Agency. These kind deeds sour when you learn that the organization actually brought the gangs to power in the first place to legitimize the city's need for counterfeit heroism. With Crackdown 2's militant usurpers and mutant abominations vying for control of the Pacific City, we're looking forward to seeing what sinister tricks The Agency is willing to pull in order to reclaim dominion.



Fontaine Futuristics –

BioShock

All evil corporations make a profit off exploiting others some way or another, but the underwater utopia of Rapture housed a real shark of a businessman. On the surface, Fontaine's practices look benign; he processes fish, raises and educates orphans, and conducts genetic research. In reality, Fontaine Futuristics recovers parasitic slugs from fish and implants them into little girls to harvest Adam for genetic modification research, from which the organization profits. The Little Sisters are Fontaine-produced walking shadows of their former innocent selves.



Armacham Technology Corporation –

F.E.A.R.

Sure, there's another corporation on this list that exploits little girls in the name of research, but the young lady Armacham tested on is a doozy. As if genetically modifying soldiers for military superiority wasn't bad (and clichéd) enough, Armacham artificially impregnated the ESP-capable daughter of one of their very own scientists to give their armed forces psychic abilities. Alma, the creepy little girl, predictably developed a lust for revenge, which she satisfied by scaring the crap out of us. Armacham owes us a new pair of trousers.





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THAT'S NOT A FINGER Pg. 62

CABELA'S 2010:
THE MOST DANGEROUS GAME Pg. 72



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BIG DADDIES

THEN CAME
BIG SISTERS

NOW PREPARE FOR
BIG GRANDPA

BIOSHOCK 3

jointly developed by



P A R O D Y

feature 37

Less And Improved



DARTH CLARK
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Read my column online or follow @GI_Darth

Well, it was a long process, but the results speak for themselves. Welcome to the new Game Infarcer.

You'll notice some big changes in our redesign. It wasn't easy deciding what parts of our old format to keep and which ones to cut. Well, honestly, some of it was kinda easy...like firing all of the other reviewers. Let me explain why.

As video games continue their meteoric rise in popularity, the gaming journalist is becoming a more important part of our culture. In fact, game critics are the foundations upon which the entire industry is built. It is we who decide which games succeed or fail; we say a game is good, and it is so. Who the hell are you? Just a gamer. I'm a professional, and therefore my opinion inherently carries more weight.

All you need to do is read my snarky reviews or my insightful blog posts on game-related cakes, and you'll agree that video game journalism has, as an art form, surpassed the games themselves. People no longer care if a game is good...they merely want to hear what I have to say about it. That is an enormous responsibility, and I'd be doing the Game Infarcer readership a great injustice if I let anyone else tell them what to think. That's why, as of this issue, I am the only Game Infarcer employee - your lone voice in the darkness.

Cheers,

Darth Clark

Darth Clark

gamer

Tony Hawk: Ride

GAMERTAG		
GameInfarcerMag		738245
1	TonyHawk	554012
2	YouTubeDawg	533118
3	TonyHawk guest1	
4		
5		
6		
7		
8		
9		
10		



Tony Hawk

» Handle
TonyHawk

» Age
41

» Hometown
San Diego, CA

Accomplishments:

Tony Hawk has maintained the number one spot on the Tony Hawk: Ride leaderboards across every available gaming platform. "That skating bulldog from YouTube was tough to stay ahead of for the first week," Hawk recalls. "But I guess his owners were cited for animal cruelty so they had to return their copy."

Tips:

"First, to be on the leaderboards, you have to go to a store and buy Tony Hawk: Ride. A lot of people seem to be confused on this point," Hawk says. "Then you just flop around on the board for literally three minutes, and you'll instantly make it into the top five. No one beats the Hawkman, though!"

news

A Closer Look At The Nintendo WiiDS

Last month Nintendo revealed that its surprise hardware announcement was not an HD Wii as many had speculated, but instead a hybrid of handheld and console gaming: the WiiDS (pronounced "weeds"). After some hands-on time with the system, we break down all of the key features and improvements.



SPECS

a. Visuals

The graphics will look the same as those on Wii and DS, which are already basically indistinguishable.

b. Game Slot

Not compatible with any previous Wii or DS games, the WiiDS uses a proprietary format that only allows you to play downloaded Virtual Console titles. This will result in practically no change in Nintendo fans' current gaming habits.

c. Compact size

The WiiDS is about the same size as the DSi XL, but less portable. This means that it will take up minimal space as it sits unused in your entertainment center.



awkward or romantic?

DRM With A Human Touch

The gaming community has made no secret of its dislike of digital rights management (DRM), which often limits the number of times owners can install games or requires them to be connected to the Internet in order to play. Ubisoft recently struck a blow to these draconian tactics with the announcement of its new DRM strategy: the Ubi-Buddy.

The plan is simple: With each Ubisoft game you buy, you'll receive a fully grown Ubisoft employee responsible for escorting you home and supervising your playtime. While your Ubi-Buddy comes at no extra charge, you must provide them with food and unsupervised access to a restroom. Gamers will also be held responsible for lost or stolen Ubi-Buddies.

By silently standing by to ensure you aren't doing anything illegal, the Ubi-Buddy eliminates the need to install additional intrusive software. When you're done with your session, you can mail the employee back in a pre-paid styrofoam container. If you want to start playing the game again, simply submit your request to Ubisoft and wait four to six weeks for your next Ubi-Buddy to arrive.



where's Barry?

Resident Evil 6 Goes Retro

Heartened by the success of retro downloadable titles like Mega Man 9 and Bionic Commando: Rearmed, Capcom has announced plans to take the popular Resident Evil franchise back to its old-school roots. The upcoming sixth installment will reportedly return to the glory days of the series, before it worked or was fun.

RE 6 features five fully evadable enemies, tank-like controls, and the original terrible voice cast. Players must also contend with hilariously cramped inventory space and can only save a few times during the game. These improvements are sure to please longtime Resident Evil fans who won't shut up about the PSone iterations – especially those who resent the compromises the series has made in the interest of not sucking. "Load times this long aren't even technically possible on current-gen hardware," laughs Capcom's Keiji Inafune. "The team is actually altering the code manually in order to make doors open absurdly slowly, thereby delivering the true classic RE experience."



bargain bin

Natal's Stupid Launch Titles Unveiled

After unveiling the device last year at E3, Microsoft finally announced the first 10 games that will be available at the launch of Natal. "Some gamers were afraid Natal would just be a cheap gimmick without real games. I think we're going to make them eat their words," boasted Phil Spencer, corporate vice president at Microsoft Game Studios.

Project director Kudo Tsunoda then took the stage and demoted some of the new games, starting with Porch Light. "Rare has been working on this one for six years," Tsunoda said, turning a light on and off by waving his arms. "Their development prowess really shows." Next, he demonstrated the Avatar Games Handshake, Family Picture, and Hula With The Stars, all of which utilize varying ranges of erratic motion. As his presentation ended, a visibly exhausted Tsunoda collapsed on the stage, grasping feebly at the nearby podium.

The other 5 launch games

- Grocery Store Checkout
- Let's Jump!
- Total Calibration
- Avatar Closet Plus: Walk-In Edition
- Is This A Butt?

DataFile

Sega: "More Olympics!"

The International Olympic Committee has rejected a petition from Sega to hold the revered worldwide sporting event on a monthly basis. "I'll tell you who the committee's decision hurts most: gamers," says Sega president Hisao Oguchi. "By unfairly limiting the number of times per year consumers can purchase a new version of Sonic and Mario at the Olympic Games, the committee has shown how little regard it has for keeping the spirit of the competition sacred."

PSP Somehow Gets Worse

Following the poor reception of the PSP Go, Sony is working on yet another iteration of its handheld system called the PSPsp. In addition to the lack of a UMD drive, the screen and d-pad have been removed to make the unit smaller, sleeker, and more expensive. "It's an elite item," says Sony's Jack Tretton. "Whether you want to listen to your favorite movies and games, press the triangle button, or open and close the unit, the PSPsp is perfect for people with no better way to spend \$600."

TidBits

Fun Facts About Game Party 3

- We didn't originally have Lawn Darts in the game, until one of our programmers suggested it in a meeting. Then we put it in.
- There was a fire drill during development. It was a false alarm.
- Our lead designer locked his keys in his car one night. It's funny now, but at the time he was very, very angry.
- We pulled a lot of hilarious pranks in the office.
- We originally wanted to incorporate Wii MotionPlus into the game, but then we didn't for some reason.
- One of the QA guys brought his dog in, but HR made him take it home during lunch.
- No babies were born during development, but someone adopted a dog. Not the QA guy, though. He already had that one dog.
- Some of the guys around here really get into *Last*.

Mass Effect 3

Import anyone!



» **Platform**
Xbox 360 • Not PS3 • PC

» **Style**
1-Player More
Shooter Than RPG

» **Publisher**
Electronic Arts

» **Developer**
BioWare

» **Release**
The Hounds

Allowing players to import their original Commander Shepard into Mass Effect 2 was such a popular feature that BioWare is taking it even further in the trilogy's final entry. In Mass Effect 3, not only can you import your character from Mass Effect 2 — you can import any character from any game, ever.

Want to see your star quarterback from Madden save the galaxy? Done. What about watching Lara Croft make out with blue chicks? Easy. Would you like to see Master Chief in a sci-fi story that's actually good? Now you can! The revolutionary import tool will ensure that all of your character's stats and accomplishments will carry over and be rewarded in Mass Effect 3...even all that wussy crap Sora did in Kingdom Hearts.

With this technology, Mass Effect 3 may also allow you import more than just your protagonist. You could replace all of the game's supporting cast and townspeople with characters from other games, resulting in a nonsensical orgy of obsolete gaming has-beens. When asked about this possibility, project director Casey Hudson scoffed, "Please. We're Mass Effect, not Smash Brothers." » **Darth Clark**

Left 4 Dead 3

Expanded, not expansion



» **Platform**
Steam and Only Steam

» **Style**
Several-Player
Zomboslaughter

» **Publisher**
Valve

» **Developer**
Some studio
Valve bought

» **Release**
Under The
Zombie Moon

Just when you thought you might be getting tired of Left 4 Dead 2 (or the original Left 4 Dead if you're one of those whiny petitioning brats), Valve proves that it isn't going to let you rest for a second. Before the ink has even dried on the release announcement for the second game, the third entry in the hit zombie franchise is on its way.

Left 4 Dead 3 is packed with so many features and options, no gamer could possibly claim it is just a glorified patch. Several new game types are in development, including a mirror mode that lets you play the exact same levels as L4D 2, but flipped. Players will also have the ability to swap the color palettes on their characters, substitute novelty sound effects for gunshots, and activate zombie big-head mode.

Our sources are telling us that gamers will have even more to look forward to, as Valve is currently planning to release Left 4 Dead 3 on the same day as another major title: Left 4 Dead 4. While Valve's Gabe Newell wouldn't comment on the rumor, he did remark: "PS3 sucks!" » **Darth Clark**

Darksiders II

Hot off the success of the first game, THQ released another blatant amalgamation of popular titles. We sat down to talk about Darksiders II with Vigil Games.

Going into the sequel, what did you want to do differently?

For the first game, we stole mainly from Zelda and God of War. For the sequel, we really wanted to cannibalize a broader spectrum of other people's ideas.

Some gamers have said that ripping off Need for Speed and Tiger Woods Golf is a poor fit for Darksiders.

First of all, War doesn't play "golf." It's Hellball, which Tiger Woods has never played! And War might drive a Porsche through portions of the game, but what do you expect after he was transformed into a Porscheman of the Apocalypse? It wouldn't make sense to have him on his horse after that.

Okay...but why are there so many minigames?

We tried to fit in ideas from classic games, too — changed to fit in the universe, of course. Hellaxion, Hellkanoid, and Hell Frogger are my favorites. I also like Monkey Helltrack.

Is that the one that plays exactly like Super Monkey Ball?

I'm not familiar with the game you mentioned, but in Helltrack you control War after he's been trapped in bubble by one of Lucifer's binding spells. Despite the name, I don't believe monkeys are actually involved.

Aren't you also collecting bananas?

No, those are lost souls.

But they look like bananas.

They may look like bananas, but they're lost souls.



EA and Visceral Present: GATSBY

In the year XX20



Style 1-Player Respectful Treatment
Publisher Electronic Arts **Developer** Visceral Games
Release Unfortunate **ESRB** M

9.5

Xbox 360 • PlayStation 3
Book

» **Concept**
Make a crusty old story tolerable

» **Graphics**
More boos than the entire Internet

» **Sound**
Every sentence of dialogue has the f-word. Awesome!

» **Playability**
Scrambling across rooftops, assassinating people with a hidden wrist scythe — nothing else plays like this

» **Entertainment**
Seriously, so many boos

» **Replay Value**
Better than reading

In a follow up to their ass-kicking revamp of *Dante's Inferno*, EA and Visceral turned their creative brilliance toward F. Scott Fitzgerald's boring book *The Great Gatsby*. The decision to move the setting from 1920s New York to the near future was awesome. Who knows what the original Nick Carraway was like, but the team has pumped him up to be super-kickass, setting him on an amazing quest to become an assassin. Here's the catch: He can only learn to be an assassin with the assistance of the GATSBY machine, which allows him to enter the bodies of ancient ancestors, reliving their lives and acquiring their talents. As the mystery unfolds, you'll meet teammates like hot scientist Daisy, nerd-with-attitude Tom, and the GATSBY operator Jordan. Thanks to EA and Visceral, high school students have a fun alternative to reading online summaries of the book; you could just play this game and get all the relevant info. » **Darth Clark**



Demon's Souls 2

No game this hard can be bad

Style 1-Player Impossible
Publisher Either Atlus or Aksys or Xseed
Developer From Software **Release** Cathartic **ESRB** M

10

PlayStation 3

» **Concept**
Earn the right to call yourself a hardcore gamer

» **Graphics**
I didn't get to see too many of the environments, but the game over screen looks great!

» **Sound**
You might think those are screams of frustration, but that's actually joy

» **Playability**
If you don't like it, you are wrong

» **Entertainment**
Return to an age when developers used difficulty as a substitute for design

» **Replay Value**
A Hundred Times

I knew I was in love the second time *Demon's Souls 2* crashed and erased all of my saved games. Only the most refined discerning gamers could appreciate the hardcore experience *Demon's Souls 2* offers. I squealed with joy when my mage's staff acted as a lightning rod and fried me, and I couldn't wait to lose hours of progress when I learned the door to the inn was really an epic-level pit fiend in disguise. *Demon's Souls 2* provides countless moments like these, combining the best in trial-and-error with some of the most rewarding punitive measures in gaming. Whether your sword randomly turns itself into a deadly viper or your character is catapulted into space without warning, there's always another fantastic moment to look forward to in From Software's latest masterpiece. Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to make sure my character isn't getting ganked while he's offline. » **Darth Clark**

classic

Remembering PlayStation Home

In just three short years, Sony's Home went from a vague announcement to a distant memory. Over the course of the virtual whatever's lifespan, literally dozens of users spent real money on Ed Hardy knockoff apparel and waited in line to play emulated Flash games.

Originally conceived as a...thing that would let people meet between playing games, the service developed into something far less. A virtual movie theater let people meet up and watch trailers for old games. Individual apartments could be redecorated by sliding furniture to the left or right. Developers such as EA, Namco, and EA Sports created in-game areas for players to visit, crouch behind one another, and type "SNIFF LOL."

Looking back, Phil Harrison, former president of Sony Computer Entertainment Worldwide Studios, says he's proud of what Home accomplished. "We managed to combine the most mundane parts of reality with the worst of online communities," he says. "And they said it wouldn't be possible." ♦

Notable Dates In Home's Life

- March 7, 2007: Phil Harrison announces Home
- December 11, 2008: Home launches
- April 1, 2010: Sony shuts down Home servers



interview



Photo: Brett Beaulieu

PopCap Founder And Bejeweled Co-Creator Brings Casual Games To Hardcore Gamers

Chief creative officer and co-founder **Jason Kapalka** has helped PopCap become a giant in the casual games space.

In our interview, Kapalka looks to the future of social and casual gaming.

How did Bejeweled come about?

It was actually done really fast. It was the first game we did as PopCap, so we really weren't thinking that hard about stuff. A lot of games at that time – web games – you had to do really fast. Do one in a couple months and move on to the next one. What happened was John Vechev had seen a game on the Internet, a Java script game called Colors Game. It just had colors and you actually had to hit the refresh button to make it move. There was no animation or scoring. It was really bad. But it was using the basic "match three" rules. There was something kind of interesting about it. He was playing it a bit and we started to wonder if we could do a better job with something like that. So Brian [Fieta] started writing a better engine in Java to make a game like that, and I went off to make a theme and graphics for it.

The first version was called Diamond Mine. I was listening to a Canadian band called Blue Rodeo and they had a song called "Diamond Mine." The first version had a very light mining theme, so when the game ended it said "Cave In."

How many copies has Bejeweled sold now?

I think we just sent out a press release saying 50 million.

Did you have any idea that it would be a phenomenon?

No. Even after we finished Bejeweled we didn't think it was anything special. We thought it was cool, but when we went out to sell it nobody was very interested. We asked for \$25,000 or \$30,000 and no one wanted it. We showed it to Microsoft and they didn't want to buy it, but they said they'd license it for their website for \$1,500 a month. So we said yes. Then, a few months later we checked in on the Microsoft site and it had 20,000 to 30,000 people playing it at any one time. It was actually becoming popular.

How did you get out of the Microsoft deal?

We didn't get out of the deal, actually. That was around 2000 when the Internet was going to hell, so we were actually quite happy to be getting \$1,500 a month. Microsoft was having trouble with their site, because even though they had 20,000 people playing it at a time, they had no way of making money from them.

That's when we thought, "What the heck do we do now?" Someone suggested making a shareware version of the game to see if they would buy the full version. In retrospect, we were lucky we came out during the second coming of shareware. In 2001, people were just getting used to the fact that you could put your credit card in and get something out of your computer. Digital distribution was just starting to come around, and we were there at the right time.

So we put it out, and the story we always tell is that Brian made a little program that would

make a little "ka-ching!" sound whenever we made a sale. John was sitting on the couch talking with his aunt and she was telling him to go get a real job. She said he would never make any money sitting on his ass. Then, of course, there was a "ka-ching!" from the other room and he held up the phone and said, "I can't make money sitting on my ass? I'm making money right now!" [Laughs]

What is your development process like? It seems like it must be difficult, because when a game is simple, the importance of every detail is magnified.

I was talking to Tim Shafer at a conference and he said, "I don't want to make casual games – those are hard! It's easier to make core games because you just make a big, fat world and hire lots of artists." That's a bit of an exaggeration, but there's some truth to it. Alexey Pajitnov, the creator of Tetris, has done some good games, but nothing that will eclipse Tetris. Who knows? We've done some good games at PopCap, but it seems quite likely that Bejeweled will remain our flagship title. Inventing simple things is quite difficult. There's no perfect system to it. Some of it is just luck.

Do you have a long, elaborate testing process since your games are designed to stand up to a lot of replay?

I think we have a lengthy testing process, but I don't think I'd call it elaborate. We don't have any labs or focus groups where we do testing of that nature. We've thought about doing it, but it doesn't feel like it really works properly. If you get a bunch of people in an office with a guy with a clipboard asking them questions, that's the opposite of a "casual" experience. We test it ourselves and we also find what we call "new user groups." Our teams test on their girlfriends or families. Ideally, it's people who've played no games at all, especially not our games. The theory is that if they can understand and enjoy it, then we're good. We also have to trust ourselves. If the people at PopCap are playing it and talking about it, that's a good sign. If they're not, that's dangerous.

What is your best platform in terms of sales?

There's always a constant balancing act between all the different platforms. Behind our classic downloadable games on PC, mobile games are the biggest one. That includes the classic Nokia-type phones and the iPhone. The iPhone is doing really well for us. It's relative though, because there are 10 million iPhones out there and 300 million regular phones. But it's really important because the iPhones sell a lot more apps per phone than most other phones. It's clearly pointing the way towards the future.

Home consoles are interesting because the guys that own them are pretty hardcore gamers. It's really rewarding to see people that play Gears of War are willing to play Peggle. There was

this idea that casual games were the enemy of hardcore gamers, but the truth is that hardcore gamers can play casual games. The other way around is less clear. Does Bejeweled become a gateway that turns people into World of Warcraft players? That's a little less certain.

You got an investment from Meritech Capital Partners of \$22 million. What do you plan to do with that money?

The biggest thing we were looking to do was to invest in some new media things, specifically social media. That could change, but the impetus was to fund new development or possibly acquisitions of companies in that space. We've done some things like that with Bejeweled Blitz, but our efforts in that space are pretty small in comparison to a company like Zynga. [Farmville, Mafia Wars developer - Ed.]

Games like Farmville and Mafia Wars are very popular, but a couple months ago we interviewed Bobby Kotick of Activision and he said he didn't see where the business model was in social games.

There are some people that are making a lot of money in the social space. If you look at a company like Zynga, they aren't public. They're clearly making a lot of money, but trying to figure out how much they are spending versus how much revenue they are bringing in is hard to parse. We're not making a lot of money on Bejeweled Blitz because we haven't put any of the e-commerce stuff in, but that's coming.

But I've seen enough of the other companies in the space to know that there's some real money there. There's a reason Electronic Arts paid \$300 million for Playfish. There is a business there. I'm not saying that PopCap is going to abandon everything we do to go into it, but it's in the same spot that casual games were a few years ago. A lot of the media dismissed casual games as not being "real" games. Now, people look at stuff we do as legitimate. I think that's happening right now with Farmville and Mafia Wars. People say, "Those aren't real games; they don't count." Well, when there are 70 million people playing a game on their computer, maybe it's something that does count.

Looking towards the future, are you going to move into more hardcore, ambitious games or stay in your casual niche?

I think we are going both directions at once. Plants vs. Zombies is not the type of thing we would have done five years ago. In many ways, it's one step away from being a hardcore RTS. Then, when you look at iPhone or iPad or social games, those things are going in an even simpler direction. Mafia Wars is really a throwback to bulletin board games from the 1980s. It's interesting to see [things] going in the opposite way in some cases. My job is to make sure we don't go too far in one direction or the other. They can both coexist.

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

1983 BLACK MARKET

Growing up in Canada, Kapalka obtains a hard-to-find Apple II computer from an expatriate Vietnam draft dodger who was selling computers out of his house

1993 A SCRIBE

While attending the University of Alberta, Kapalka writes a review of the PC game Cannon Fodder for a small online site. He submits the review to *Computer Gaming Weekly*. The magazine runs his review and rewards him with more freelance work

1995 NEW FRONTIERS

Kapalka follows CGW editor Chris Lombardi to the upstart dot-com Total Entertainment Network (TEN), an online PC gaming service

1996 STRATEGY

Kapalka helps write strategy guides for some of the site's popular games, including its flagship online title Duke Nukem

1998 A BIG CHANGE

TEN rebrands as Pogo.com, switching its focus from hardcore online PC gaming to easy-to-play, simple browser-based games. "I went from doing Total Annihilation tournaments to designing bingo in one week," recalls Kapalka

2000 GOING CASUAL

Along with John Vechev and Brian Fieta, two developers he'd worked with on a game called Arc while at TEN, Kapalka founds a company, called Soxy Action Cool, with the intent of making high-quality games

2001 A PHENOMENON

After ditching Soxy Action Cool for the more mature name PopCap, Kapalka and company released Bejeweled. It quickly becomes an international hit

2007 ANOTHER HIT

PopCap releases Peggle, one of its most addictive titles to date

2009 PLANT LIFE

The company releases Plants vs. Zombies, a comedic real-time strategy game that is perhaps its best and most ambitious title to date

gear

Big gaming potential slimmed down for real-world portability

Alienware is known for two things: making fast computers, and making large computers. The m11x takes the fast and shrinks it down to a manageable 11.6-inch size that lands it firmly in ultraportable/netbook country. It also has a split personality: On one side, you have a speedy portable workbook that can squeeze out almost six hours of battery life for those long flights. But with the press of a button, the machine turns into a diminutive gaming beast that plays current high-end titles at decent settings.

The battery life takes a hit with the GeForce GT 335M dedicated graphics activated, but the results are impressive. Modern Warfare 2 multiplayer matches at 30 fps? No problem. We also played Trine and Dawn of War II with great results, proving the m11x has the chops to keep up. The rest of the specs are equally impressive: 500GB hard drive, up to 8GB of DDR3 RAM, and a 720p LED backlit display with an HDMI out. With a price that doesn't break the bank, the m11x has located a previously unfound sweet spot for portable PC gaming.

SUPER

\$799

www.alienware.com



Alienware
m11x

by Nick Ahrens



1 | Freelander Pro

While solar technology is nothing new, past products have been pretty temperamental (and expensive). The times have changed, and now solar power is more accommodating and much more affordable. The Freelander Pro takes the power of the sun and puts it in just about all of your portable devices via its solar cell-powered battery. The device compatibility list is downright impressive: PSP, DS, iPhone, iPod, and just about anything that charges via USB. The included CamCaddy even charges your digital camera batteries. The Freelander Pro can also fill up its powerful battery with the wall charger, giving you alternate charging options for rainy days and assuring you'll never be stuck with dead batteries again.

\$79.99
www.solartechnology.co.uk

2 | Nixon Newton Digital

If Isaac Newton were alive, surely he'd love this ultra modern watch from skate and snowboard fixture Nixon

Watches. A company known for its push in alternative styles, Nixon applied a simple interface together with basic, clean lines to form one of the coolest watches in its lineup. The polycarbonate wonder comes in seven color schemes, giving it the fashion flexibility to be worn by males and females alike.

\$100.00
www.nixonnow.com

3 | Neca BioShock 2 Figures

The toy specialists at Neca have you covered for all of your BioShock figure needs. These figures are carefully crafted and would look good on any desk, regardless of whether you live in a small dorm room or have a huge corner office. Whether you choose the classic Big Daddy, Subject Delta, or the Big Sister, you cannot go wrong in bringing a little piece of Rapture into your home.

\$19.99-100.00
www.necaonline.com

4 | Wacom Bamboo Pen & Touch

Whether you're a professional graphic designer, aspiring artist, or just like to get creative, Wacom's Bamboo series has everything you need to bring your ideas to the digital world. The latest pen tablet in the series features full multi-touch compatibility for an improved workflow in programs like Photoshop and web surfing. Any iPhone user will be right at home with the Bamboo's pinch and zoom abilities. The sleek, slim, and durable unit is even reversible for left-handed users. As a bonus, the Bamboo also comes with a copy of Photoshop Elements for both PC and Mac so you can get started right away.

\$99.99
www.wacom.com

Head over to gameinformer.com/technic to read Nick's blog on gear and technology

MEDIA SHELF



HALO LEGENDS

From tales of Master Chief to chronicles of the rivalry between the Spartans and ODSTs, *Halo Legends* delivers seven new stories from Bungie's sci-fi universe. The Blu-ray also includes a *Making of Halo Legends* feature.

\$27.95
www.warnervideo.com



MST3K XVII

We can't get enough *Mystery Science Theater 3000*. Joel, Mike, and the wise-cracking robots return with four more full-length films never before seen on DVD.

\$45.99
www.shoutfactorystore.com



MASS EFFECT REDEMPTION

BioWare's space epic has more story than most seasons of television, but there's even more out there. The *Redemption* comic series from Dark Horse further explores the galaxy we have come to love.

\$3.50/issue
www.darkhorse.com

A Changing Battlefield

Modern Warfare 2 online multiplayer is a glitch-filled mess. For Infinity Ward, it's time to explore new tactics



by **Matt Bertz**
content manager,
Game Informer

Having problems finding a decent match while playing Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2? You're not the only one. The list of competition-crippling bugs in the game is so long it looks like a tracking sheet of known issues from an alpha build. First it was the javelin glitch, an exploit that allowed players to become a suicide bomber, taking several enemies with them to the afterlife upon the explosion. Not to be outdone by the javelin, the akimbo shotguns came next, a fearsome dual-wielding kit with the range of an assault rifle that resulted in impossible long-distance deaths every round. And who could forget the nuke boosting, super speed care package knife deaths, players hiding in walls, elevator glitch, unlimited ammo, private matches that earned people experience, and the Ground War/Rust map bug?

A lot of these could have been avoided had Activision set up a public beta, which many shooters (including the original Modern Warfare) employ to discover and eliminate major issues before the games ship. Even the best quality assurance testers in the world can't match the unpredictability that arises when the public gets its hands on a multiplayer game and starts jumping into objects, unearthing imbalanced weapon/perk combinations, and discovering new exploits. Without the benefit of the beta, Infinity Ward was caught with its pants down in front of an audience of millions.

The talented studio is doing its best to address glitches as they arise, but anyone who logs onto Modern Warfare 2 on a regular basis will tell you the inmates are running the asylum. As soon as one glitch or hack is addressed, another arises to take its place. The stat-chasing cheaters have rendered leaderboards meaningless, the glitches have destroyed the competitive balance, and lobbies sound more like support groups for disgruntled fans than a place where people are having fun. It should not have spiraled this far into oblivion.

In a sense, Infinity Ward has become a victim

of its own success. As of mid-January, Modern Warfare 2 had already amassed a mind-boggling \$1 billion in sales — more than game publisher Capcom made for the entire fiscal year. A game of this magnitude crosses out of the niche population of many online shooters and into the mainstream, a new problem for any game not named Halo. In the same way Windows faces more threats to its stability than the infinitely less used Apple OS, games this popular tend to attract a much larger pool of annoying gamers hell bent on hacking and grieving their way to victory.

The old reactionary model of addressing bugs incrementally via patches and title updates no longer suffices for this large a community. When a game is under constant duress like Modern Warfare 2, maybe it's time to hire a full-time staff trained in policing hackers, stomping out bugs, scrubbing leaderboards to eliminate the cheaters, and refining game balance. If Microsoft wants to keep encouraging people to use (and pay for) Xbox Live, it needs hold up its end of the bargain as well, giving studios the ability to release patches in a timely manner and more aggressively banning users of modded Xbox 360s.

Though the Call of Duty franchise is a cash cow, Activision likely won't sign off on extended post-release support without some kind of monetary kickback. Given the problems that the Modern Warfare 2 multiplayer has faced, perhaps the shooter community would not be as jilted toward throwing in a few extra dollars toward fixing the problem as one might expect. If Infinity Ward could deliver glitch-free action, balanced gameplay, a steady flow of new content, I for one would be more than willing to shell out a few dollars a month for an evolving standalone multiplayer experience.

Whatever decision Infinity Ward comes to for its future releases, I hope the team doesn't just settle with the unsatisfactory strategy it is currently employing. A less-hyped game would have lost all credibility had it shipped with so many issues. An industry-leading game as popular as Modern Warfare 2 deserved better, and so do the fans.

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3D Gaming On The March

Why this new technology is unstoppable, and why I hate it

by Phil Kollar
associate editor,
Game Informer

I know others have had this experience. You head to the theater with friends, looking forward to seeing the latest blockbuster movie. As you purchase a ticket, you're handed that most dreaded of movie theater accessories: 3D glasses. "But I just want to watch *Up* without wearing uncomfortable glasses and straining my eyes," you murmur. Your cries go unheard amidst the steady march of technological progress, however.

If you think the only way to escape the looming menace of 3D entertainment is to stay home, you're wrong. Games, my friends, are not safe. People who purchased *Sly 3* back in 2005 opened up the packaging to discover a flimsy pair of tear-out 3D glasses usable in a handful of the game's levels. More recently, the video game adaptation of *G-Force* also came bundled with glasses, and *Avatar: The Game* was built with 3D in mind. These examples may seem isolated, but they point to an undeniable trend, an evolution of how we consume our entertainment that some high-ranking industry executives view as the future of gaming.

In our March issue, we covered the 3D technology on display at the 2010 Consumer Electronics Show. Sony, in particular, stepped forward as a champion of this new (old) technology, promising a large lineup of first- and third-party 3D games on the PlayStation 3. What this all adds up to is that Sony wants all of us to be gaming in 3D soon, which (for most consumers) includes buying a new high-end TV and a pair of

expensive and goofy-looking 3D glasses.

It's easy enough to complain about the glasses and the extra costs associated with creating and consuming 3D entertainment, but there's a much more relevant complaint that won't change even as technology becomes cheaper: It's extremely easy to make these 3D additions gimmicky as hell. We've all seen the movies where they advertise a huge 3D experience,

but the only change from standard viewing is that every once in a while something flies out of the screen at the audience.

Sony's offerings at CES were on par with those classic movie gimmicks – 3D versions of existing games like *Gran Turismo* and *Super Stardust HD* that offered a brief, sort-of-cool sensation of visual depth without altering the gameplay. To its credit, Sony has promised to build some future games from the ground up with 3D in mind, but how many other publishers can we expect to do that? How much more likely is it that 3D will normally be an afterthought slapped onto regular games that aren't enhanced by it at all?

For an indicator of how things might turn out, look at the first couple years of the *Wii*'s existence. A handful of amazing titles put the motion controls to good use – mostly developed

by Nintendo – and then third parties hoping to take advantage of the popular new tech flooded the market with PS2 or GameCube-style games with wobble grafted on.

We're likely to go through the same growing pains later this year with new motion control devices for Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3. Do we really want to face the awkward adaptation to a new technology again this generation?

If past technologies are any indicator, many future titles will likely have 3D as an option, something you can toggle on and off, but that just highlights how unnecessary it is. To convince me that 3D technology is worthwhile to the future of gaming, it's going to take ideas that take full advantage of the added dimension and games that couldn't possibly be realized without 3D. To be honest, I have no idea what form those ideas could take, or how they'll be financially viable until a lot more people have 3D-ready televisions.

But for all my concerns and distaste, I have accepted that 3D is the inevitable future of gaming, whether it begins now or in the distant future. After all, if there's one constant in our industry, it's that we're all obsessed with and fascinated by shiny new technology. The early iterations of 3D tech in gaming are a long way from the *Holodeck*, but I just hope somebody gets it right fast.



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

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More Glee for Your Soul

Remember *Glee*? No? Here's a refresher: It's that stupid show about a bunch of high school showboats — you know, the kids that you wanted to punch in the face when you were in high school. Still not ringing any bells? After all of your friends told you how great this show was, you watched one episode, then turned off your television in disgust and deleted your friends' numbers from your phone. Anyway, new episodes of *Glee* start today.

It's Like Dynasty Warriors: The Movie

Warlords stars Jet Li as a general who blindly mashes buttons to mow through an entire army during an ancient Chinese rebellion. If this is the theatrical counterpart to *Dynasty Warriors*, we'll watch Jet do this for eight hours. Judging by Jet's expression in the movie poster, this is obviously the case.



Splinter Cell: Conviction



Sherlock Holmes vs. Jack the Ripper

After Night Comes Day

In DC Comics' superhero zombie event, *Blackest Night*, nearly every deceased character in the universe returned. The shocking conclusion to this story gives way to DC's next story, the 26-part *Brightest Day*. The plot remains a mystery, but if the title says anything, expect to see Batman and Robin on a picnic, Aquaman sun tanning, and Clark Kent rocking crotch-riding short shorts. This yearlong event kicks off today with the release of issue zero.

Not-So-Super Heroes

What's everyone's least favorite part about superheroes? The powers, obviously. Comic nerds don't care about heat vision or telekinesis; they just want to see regular people put on ill-fitting costumes and fight crime. Well, that's what you'll get with *Kick-Ass* when it opens in theaters today. You may think you're going to see a superhero movie, but you're actually just watching teenagers cosplay. Gross!



Flip's Twisted World



ULTIMATE COMICS AVENGERS 2 #1

MARVEL.COM

New Releases

- FIFA World Cup 2010 (PS3, 360, Wii, PSP)
- Red Dead Redemption (PS3, 360)
- Super Street Fighter IV (PS3, 360)



02
fri



New Releases

- Monster Hunter Tri (Wii)
- Montessorri Music (DS)
- Splinter Cell: Conviction (360, PC)

06
tue

Only Losers Go to Movies

You might think *The Losers* is a movie about you and your friends (zing), but it's really about your mom and her *Friends* (double zing). In truth, this film is an adaptation of the Vertigo comic of the same name focusing on a black ops group out for revenge against their government. Boring! Remember when we made that joke about your mom? That was classic.

09
fri

New Releases

- Dead to Rights: Retribution (PS3, 360)
- The Lord of the Rings: Aragorn's Quest (Wii, PS2, PSP, DS)
- Quantum Theory (PS3, 360)
- Sherlock Holmes vs. Jack the Ripper (360)

13
tue

13
tue



14
wed

16
fri



New Releases

- Beat City (DS)
- Dementium II (DS)
- Flip's Twisted World (Wii)

20
tue

A Dark Alternative

When an assignment is deemed "too controversial" for the Ultimates to tackle, Nick Fury hands the mission off to his secret black ops team, the Avengers. Which heroes don't mind getting their hands dirty? Marvel won't say just yet, but we have a feeling this series will explore the secret dark side of several of Marvel's most beloved characters. The first issue of this new ongoing series hits comic shelves today.

21
wed



Red Dead Redemption

27
tue

Movie of the Year

The *Nightmare* on Elm Street series saw so many installments that Freddy Krueger became more of a punchline than a terror-inducing fiend. Today the striped-shirt slasher returns to the big screen with *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, a reboot of the classic franchise. The film stars an actor as Freddy, but you'll probably recognize him as Rorschach from that crappy *Watchmen* movie.

30
fri



» **Platform**

Xbox 360 • PC • Mac

» **Style**

1 or 2-Player Puzzle
(2-Player Online)

» **Publisher**

Valve

» **Developer**

Valve

» **Release**

Fall



“Oh, it’s you...”

“It’s been a *long* time. How have you been? I’ve been *really* busy being dead. You know...after you *murdered* me? Okay look, we both said a lot of things that you are going to regret. But I think we should put our differences behind us. For science. *You monster.*”

PORTAL 2

by Meagan VanBurkleo

An **Unexpected** Triumph

When Valve approached a team of students from the nearby DigPen Institute of Technology with job offers and the opportunity to flesh out their senior project – Narbacular Drop – back in the summer of 2005, it did so cautiously. Measured steps were taken to minimize risk. The team was kept small. Art assets were reused, drawing heavily from prefabricated pieces of the Half-Life universe. Then the final product, Portal, was released as part of the Orange Box.

The investment paid off. With over 70 industry honors, and 30 Game of the Year awards, it’s impossible to deny Portal’s success. Portal was, and still is, unlike anything else in Valve’s stable of action-centric titles. Valve knew it had something special, but didn’t anticipate the degree to which fans would gravitate toward the budding franchise. Their only complaint? They wanted more.

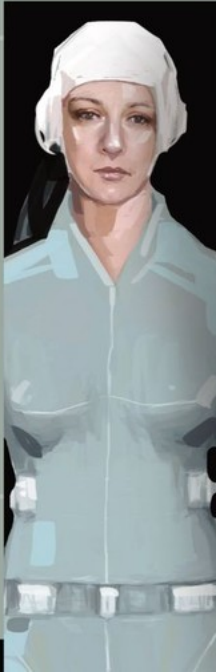
“Portal was so short because it was a trial,” explains Doug Lombardi, vice president of marketing at Valve. “We paired it with [Half-life 2] Episode 2 and Team Fortress 2, which were recognizable and safe. Then

we had this Portal thing, and we had no idea if people would dig it, even though we thought it was a cool idea. So it was put out there safely in the Orange Box, and the results came back wilder than we could have ever imagined.”

It didn’t take long for legions of Valve fans to embrace it. Within months, “the cake is a lie” memes were all over the web. Valve started receiving videos of high school choirs singing “Still Alive,” and the song even found its way into the Rock Band catalog. “There was no way we could have planned for it,” says Lombardi. “So we knew we had to double down and give them more. Portal was a test bed. Portal 2 is a game.”

The trial by fire is over – the safety net removed. Portal’s endearing antagonist, quip-filled dialogue, and mind-altering gameplay are proven commodities. A rabid fan base is established. Now it’s time to up the ante. Instead of merely hoping for the best, Valve is now banking on Portal 2’s success. The fiercely independent studio is investing more time, more capital, and more risk into a standalone, full-price retail release.

While the team dynamic changed when lead designer Kim Swift left Valve for a job at Airtight Games, Valve's investment in Portal 2 is evident. The staff size has increased from 8 to 28 dedicated staffers, and they've already got two years of headway on the title



Party **Submission** Position

Though instances when Chell views herself through a portal are uncommon, we were keenly aware of her prison-like garb in the original Portal. For the sequel Valve is redesigning Chell's threads to better reflect her station as a lab rat. While not finalized, this concept art gives a good idea as to the direction Valve is taking

"We are pleased that you made it through the final challenge where we pretended we were going to murder you," chirps GLaDOS, the homicidal computer and antagonist of Portal, adlibbing after Chell sees through her shallow attempt at encouraging self-incineration. "We are very, very happy for your success. We are throwing a party in honor of your tremendous success. Place the device on the ground then lie on your stomach with your arms at your sides. A party associate will arrive shortly to collect you for your party. Make no further attempt to leave the testing area. Assume the party escort submission position or you will miss the party."

In the original Portal, GLaDOS' casual disregard for Chell's safety was a constant. For many, however, this moment was a memorable one; it was at this instant Chell took back control over her destiny.

This exchange has recently come into new relevance, providing a bridge between Portal and Portal 2 through a retroactive update Valve released on the sly. Astute fans may have noticed that a patch for Portal launched recently with no press release or fanfare. Several cosmetic updates play second fiddle to a short but significant change to Portal's ending.

"The thing that is interesting for us is we've never really had a game that's been focused on single player and narrative that released so close together," explains Erik Johnson, senior project manager at Valve. "Half-Life and Half-Life 2 were obviously about 15 or 20 years apart, or that's at least what it felt like [laughs], but now we have Steam, and Portal was only released in 2007. So we still have a really strong tie to the first game. The update seemed to be the perfect way to re-energize Portal and link the games together."

The seemingly dismissive reference to a "party associate" now provides a perfect segue. In the most subtle of alterations, Chell is now thanked by a disembodied voice for assuming the party escort submission position as she lays passed out in the Aperture Science parking lot, seconds before she is dragged off by an unseen force. This definitive chain of custody over Chell makes it possible for her to resume her role as a lab rat in Portal 2, despite an extraordinary change in circumstances between games.

Still Alive



Valve doesn't intend to elaborate on the Half-Life connection because of tonal differences between games. We are aware, however, that Portal 2 takes place well after the events of Half-Life 2. Perhaps Chell is safer inside

It doesn't take an Aperture scientist to piece together that GLaDOS resumes her role as the omnipresent antagonist in Portal 2. The lark-like melody "Still Alive" at the end of Portal was evidence enough. Chell's fate, however, remained a wildcard until the aforementioned update. Previously, we saw Chell catapulted to freedom following GLaDOS' demise. Assuming she avoided any grievous injuries, her escape was fathomable. Now we know better. She's back in captivity once again.

One new detail complicates Valve's carefully implemented continuity – Portal 2 takes place hundreds of years after the original game. We assume the party associate stashed Chell in some sort of stasis chamber in which she's quietly passed time.

While Chell appears relatively unscathed, the Aperture Science facilities haven't fared as well. Centuries after the explosion, no one has been around to repair the sprawling campus. Overgrown areas are interspersed with cold and clinical test chambers, now in various stages of decay. As far as we (and Chell) can tell, no one has stepped foot in the derelict labs for decades. But loneliness won't overtake you, as a cast of slightly less organic characters has thrived in GLaDOS' absence.

At the end of Portal, illuminated by a flickering candle atop the fabled cake, rows upon rows of personality cores were awakened. These spheres are the same as those Chell ripped from GLaDOS' breast as she incinerated her captor one piece at a time. Introducing this new "species" allows Valve the chance to integrate unique AI personalities without introducing human peers. It also addresses the concern that returning to an isolated GLaDOS and Chell relationship would feel too much like a retreat.

Migrating from their sublevel confines throughout the centuries, these spheres have carved out sections of the neglected facility as their own. Wheatley, one such personality core, proves to be the perfect tour guide to lead us through our first glimpse of Portal 2 gameplay. Concerned about the building's deteriorating conditions and tired of his limited mobility (personality cores are appendage-less and thus confined to rails on laboratory ceilings), Wheatley ponders his odds of surviving a jump from his lofty position, ultimately deciding that he wouldn't go unscathed. Instead he awakens Chell from her slumber and propositions her for help. Promising to share his knowledge of an escape route, Wheatley hesitantly puts his faith in Chell to catch him. His fears become justified when Chell fails the simple task.

Quick to forgive – and fueled by self-preservation – Wheatley navigates Chell throughout the facility from his new station in her hands, all the while blabbering incessantly. He proves useful for more than a laugh, however. Chell can plug Wheatley into various ports throughout the labs, allowing him to access the mainframe and bypass obstacles. Wheatley's a bit gun-shy, though, making clear that he can't perform with Chell watching.

As the duo make their way through the defunct facilities, the extent of the damage becomes clear. Debris often blocks the path as they traverse a massive cylindrical room populated with breaker switches. Here Wheatley warns that only the switch to power the escape pod should be flipped – or else. When Chell can't spot the switch amongst hundreds, she instead pops Wheatley into another port so he can do the dirty work himself. Almost instantly, the neglected equipment malfunctions, and the floor below them

reveals itself as an elevator that begins ascending, flipping all the switches on the periphery in the process. Acutely aware of the damage that's been done, Wheatley scrambles to find an abort password, forgoing a practical algorithm for a sequential brute-force strategy, "AAAAAA? No, that's not it. AAAAAAB? No? AAAAAAC? You've got to be joking!"

The climb halts as the platform comes flush with the floor of a chillingly familiar location: an overgrown courtyard now housing the soulless shell of GLaDOS. Having no luck with the password, Wheatley trembles in fear at the first rumblings of a returning foe. We all knew the GLaDOS-less respite wouldn't last long. Slowly reborn in a bath of sparks and debris, GLaDOS awakens. Recognition crests immediately.

"...Oh, it's you," accuses GLaDOS in the throaty, sultry voice she first slipped on at the end of Portal. She continues, punctuating each short sentence with a drip of venom. "It's been a long time. How have you been? I've been really busy being dead. You know...after you murdered me?" Collecting her thoughts with another brief pause, an exaggerated and very human exhalation follows. The menace dissipates and she carries on. "Okay look, we both said a lot of things that you are going to regret. But I think we should put our differences behind us. For science. You monster."

The short exchange is chilling, even after GLaDOS makes it obvious that she's more interested in resuming your relationship than revenge. With Chell once again a pawn in Aperture Science's grasp, the tests recommence. Even though the playing field is drastically different this time around, the odd couple falls back into routine like old lovers.

An Intimate Affair


As far as relationships between sentient robots and unwilling test subjects go, GLaDOS and Chell have had a fairly exclusive fling. Trapped in a mad funhouse of science, circumstances gave Chell little choice other than to play along. The evolving relationship positioned GLaDOS as the game's sole authority figure, training and nurturing Chell while simultaneously becoming an architect of her own demise.

In the early ideation stages of Portal 2, Valve played around with scrapping Chell altogether, starting a new relationship with a fresh test subject. Valve opted to keep the near-tangible history intact for several reasons.

"Portal 1 told a very intimate story video game-wise," explains Portal writer Eric Wolpaw. "It was you and GLaDOS. We never even mentioned Chell. People pulled her name out of the model files. We wanted her to be you, the player – more so even than Gordon Freeman. We wanted you to have this very intimate connection with this AI that changes and evolves over time, leading up to the point that you betray her and do the most intimate act you can do with someone – murdering them in cold blood. So we didn't want to rebuild this relationship with GLaDOS. It starts where you left off."

Although there are an undisclosed number of new denizens in Aperture Science's ruined facilities, Valve intends to keep the focus on the player. Personality cores won't ignore Chell to bicker amongst themselves. This player-centric focus will help the game remain grounded in intimacy – despite the forfeited monogamy.





Valve isn't ready to commit an hour count to their new title, but they assure us that it is significantly longer than the original

Thinking With Portals

Explaining the concept of Portal's mind-bending puzzles to a layman would likely result in head scratching, but the game did a wonderful job of building up difficulty and teaching players new ways to think about problem solving as they progressed through the facility. Getting players to reach the elevated level of consciousness needed to "think with portals" in a way that doesn't frustrate them isn't easy, so Valve makes it immediately clear that augmented mechanics and new gameplay elements in Portal 2 haven't been created to make you pull your hair out.

"It's worth clarifying our approach to Portal 2," Johnson begins. "It's less about putting a portal on the wall and walking through it and more about making people think differently while they are playing the game. And making people feel smart while they are playing the game. And really surprising people with this kind of video game. We're not aiming to make this an action or twitch game – that seems way off track. There are many more elements that we are adding to Portal 2 – it's a bigger game and stands on its own – but it isn't about making a really hard game. It's more interesting to simply reward your thinking."

To keep players in the realm of familiarity, your Aperture Science Handheld Portal Device remains unchanged in the sequel. Valve realizes that two connecting portals remain the best way to communicate with your environment.

The original Portal used repetition and pitch-perfect pacing to train players to understand a very foreign concept. After some training, players began to associate objects with mechanics. Boxes designated a nearby button. Angled concrete slabs indicated flinging was in order. These types of associations are expanded upon in Portal 2, largely because of a new approach to environmental design.

"The world was a series of constraints telling you what you couldn't do in Portal – you could place a portal here and couldn't place a portal there," Johnson explains. "In a lot of ways it was a very binary interaction with the world. In Portal 2 the surfaces and objects in the world have a bunch of different states. The surfaces themselves can be changed to alter the way you can navigate through the world. And then there are other physical forces that you can use as well. To put it simply, you can send physics through the world."

Portal physics is a game changer. Now physical forces can bleed through carefully placed portals, resulting in an increased number of ways to interact with your environment. Continuing our demo, Valve walks us through a string of carefully composed test chambers to illustrate these new mechanics. Vital Apparatus Vents – connected to the pipe network as a means of distributing objects to test chambers – produce strong suction where they terminate. Now Chell can use this to her advantage. Placing a portal under the tube and another under an unsuspecting turret, the threat is immediately leeched upwards and eliminated. During the demo, we watch this concept applied to a test chamber littered with objects. When Chell places the portal in the center of the mass, it creates a swirling vortex of debris.

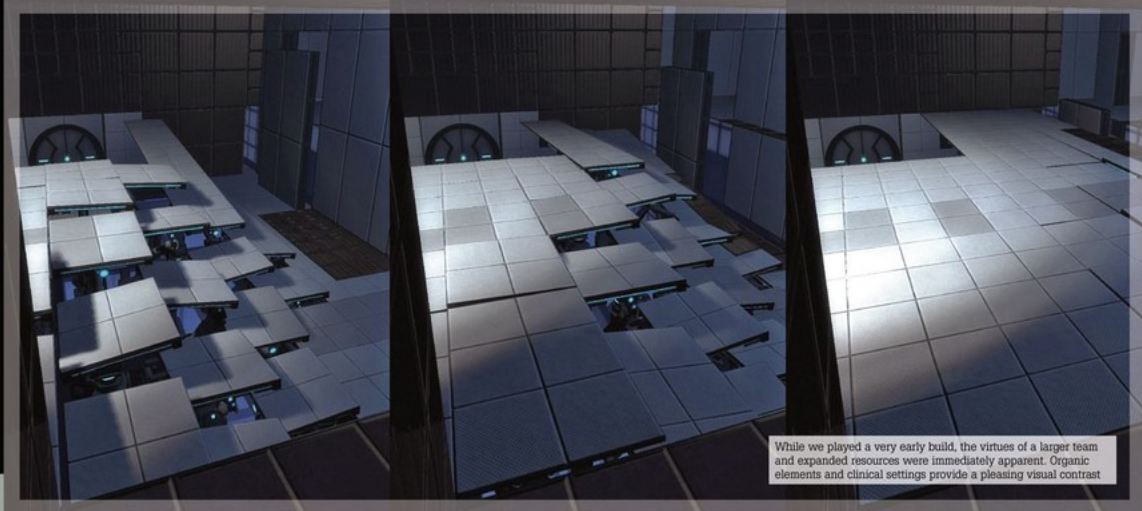
The tractor beam, another new addition, acts in a similar manner. A cylinder of oscillating blue rings, tractor beams can be combined with portals to transport Chell or objects to otherwise unreachable areas. Projected bridges – a translucent but solid walkway – can also be redirected through portals. These two additions indicate that flinging may be less of a crutch in this iteration.

The most significant physics upgrade Valve introduces is the concept of paint, which gives players more control over their environment than ever before. Toward the end of the demo we come upon a test chamber slick with an orange substance across the floor. Upon closer inspection, we discover that walking on the surface will rocket Chell to high speeds, allowing her to vault over pits or reach the far end of a long expanse quickly enough to best a ticking clock. These liquids are dynamic and play quite well with portals. Placing a portal under a paint vent and another on a wall, we were able to coat specific areas of the chamber in order to progress past an obstacle.

A second paint type is introduced in another puzzle. Blue paint transfers its properties to any object it touches, giving them a trampoline-like surface. Coating parallel walls on either side of a large pit, Chell ricochets back and forth across the gap. Plastering paint all over a weighted storage cube causes it to barrel across the room, shattering glass and taking out turrets in its path. The expanded gameplay produced by these two paint types alone is staggering, and Valve indicated a willingness to include more if it sees fit.

A few smaller mechanics also join Chell's arsenal. Redirection Cubes – similar in size and shape to a Weighted Storage Cube, only with reflective surfaces on each face – allow players to redirect laser beams into awaiting receptacles. Aerial Faith Plates are an exercise in trust. These platforms fling Chell high into the air, allowing her to bridge massive gaps or place portals in otherwise inaccessible areas. Weighted Storage Balls are the last new feature on the roster, which function exactly like their cube counterparts, except they are paired with buckets instead of buttons.

continued on page 58



While we played a very early build, the virtues of a larger team and expanded resources were immediately apparent. Organic elements and clinical settings provide a pleasing visual contrast



Poking around behind the scenes will provide the player more insight into Aperture's corporate history. Valve assures us that they haven't jumped aboard the audio diary train, however

Behind The Curtain

Despite its short length, Portal's unique puzzle gameplay made it a fulfilling experience. Much of this had to do with Valve's intentional pacing. Chell began her journey guided by the hand through a very controlled environment. As the story progressed, Chell became more autonomous and GLaDOS conversely became untinged, subtly alluding to trouble behind the scenes. At the pinnacle of her skills, Chell then pulled back the curtain and proceeded into the great unknown. Not wanting to rely on the same formula, Portal 2 unfolds at a staccato pace, not a crescendo.

"We've had the idea in Portal 1 that the labs were reconfigurable through this modular system, but we were never able to show it," laments Wolpaw. "Because the fiction dictates that the labs were destroyed at the end of Portal 1, She [GLaDOS] is having to rebuild things as she is putting you through these tests. So the labs reconfiguring is going to play a much bigger role in the game itself."

The extensive damage to the test chambers is too much for GLaDOS to repair unaided, but she refuses to delay resuming her tests. This means she will begrudgingly allow you behind the scenes of Aperture Laboratories in order to reach the next testing chamber. This will result in a less predictable progression, allowing you to periodically escape her sphere of influence. Or so we think. Panopticon-inspired paranoia will probably keep the player intensely aware of GLaDOS' silent omniscience. Is Chell ever really alone?

Testing Your Limits

We know it's difficult to grasp the innovative portfolio of new features without some hard-hitting visuals. Here you'll find several informative posters demonstrating how best to take advantage of new Aperture Science technology.

APERTURE LABORATORIES

In mid-trust exercise

Aerial Faith Plates are part of a larger trust experiment designed to help the Enrichment Center discover whether the capacity for trust is affected by being catapulted into space.

Aerial portion of trust exercise nearing conclusion

Aerial Faith Plate
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TESTING ELEMENT

50,000 foot-pounds of force

APERTURE LABORATORIES

Weighted Pivot Cube

Drop Shadow - This is decorative

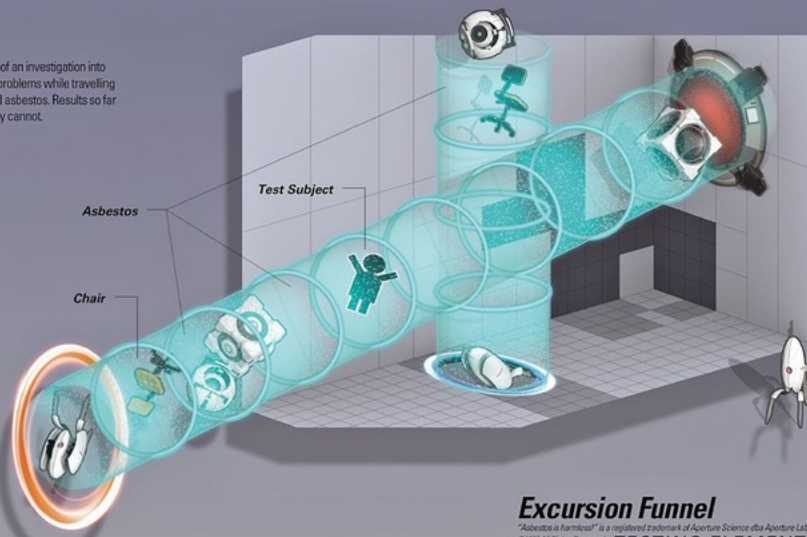
Thermal Discouragement Beam
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TESTING ELEMENT

Turret - Thermally discouraged

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Excursion funnels are part of an investigation into how well test subjects can solve problems while traveling through a churning funnel of liquid asbestos. Results so far have been highly informative. They cannot.

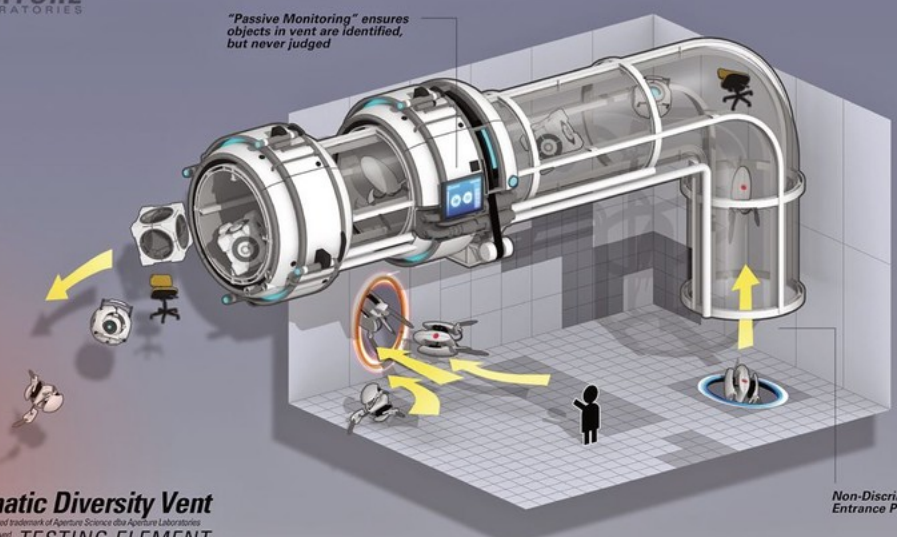


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"Passive Monitoring" ensures objects in vent are identified, but never judged

To Diversity Furnace



Pneumatic Diversity Vent
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Non-Discriminatory Entrance Port

You, And Me, And GLaDOS Makes Three

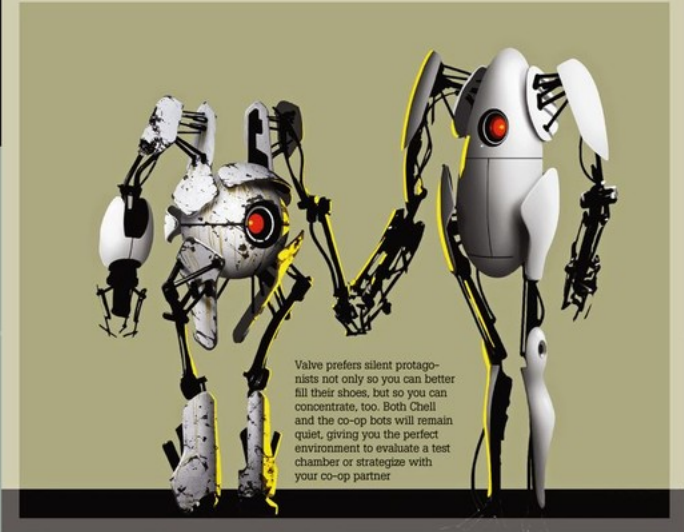
Co-op coming to Portal 2 was a given – primarily because the bulk of Portal fans already acted as if the functionality was native. Friends, siblings, and significant others often sat together on the couch, pointing and placing portals until they mutually solved a puzzle.

“When we shipped Portal 1, it was really common to hear that people already played co-op,” Johnson reveals. “It was really interesting. It was the most common girlfriend game and it also wasn’t unusual for moms to watch their kids play. So it made sense for us to put a controller in that other person’s hands.”

Cooperative gameplay is undisputedly the most significant addition to Portal 2, and is being implemented through a separate, full-length co-op campaign. Fitting logically within the single-player narrative of Portal 2, players can choose which story to tackle first.

Since Chell has a deficiency of human companions, she isn’t the star of the co-op campaign. Instead, Valve created two new characters – bipedal robots modified from a personality core and a turret – to star in the complementary mode. We know very little about these characters, though Valve is considering making one masculine and the other feminine. They also like to hold hands. But don’t go writing fanfics yet – the gesture is a sign of innocence more than an indication of romance.

Each co-op player has his or her own portal gun and the capacity to transport through their companion’s portals. Doubling the number of passageways, however, doesn’t necessarily make besting chambers a breeze. While Valve wants to ensure that the single-player campaign tests your brain over reflexes, they



Valve prefers silent protagonists not only so you can better fill their shoes, but so you can concentrate, too. Both Chell and the co-op bots will remain quiet, giving you the perfect environment to evaluate a test chamber or strategize with your co-op partner.

feel a bit more comfortable pushing players in co-op.

“When you are playing single-player and get frustrated, we consider that a failure,” proclaims Josh Weiler, project leader and programmer on Portal 2. “We don’t want you to hit that point. But in co-op it’s really easy to bounce ideas off each other, so complicated ends up being more fun.”

Both brains and sets of thumbs will be needed to best what GLaDOS throws your way. Communication will be key, and Valve has implemented several handy features to help in that regard. Splitscreen will be available for those who prefer couch co-op, with a picture-in-picture option catering to remote play. To augment voice communication, Valve is working on a system of contextual commands that will allow you to place icons throughout the environment, instructing your partner to shoot a portal here or look over there.

While the single-player and co-operative campaigns share the same puzzle elements, things get hairy quickly when we try out the co-op. Early rooms

train us to think with two sets of portals, tasking us with reorienting a laser towards a row of successive concrete slabs with a provided cube. Next, all four portals are needed to clear a pathway from the laser to the receptacle at the other end of the room, which subsequently opens the exit. Easy enough.

In the next room, things get complicated. The chamber divides the players from the start. While one player uses a redirection cube to guide a laser to multiple receptacles scattered about the room, each lifting a particular hazard out of the way, the other player must traverse the dangerous obstacle course. Many of these hazards, such as a massive concrete block adorned with spikes, begin to fall once the laser stops fueling the corresponding receptacle, requiring precise actions by players in order to progress. After completing each level, GLaDOS commends you in her own way; goading each of you into thinking the other player is dead weight. GLaDOS doesn’t feel any particular kinship with these robots, to be sure.

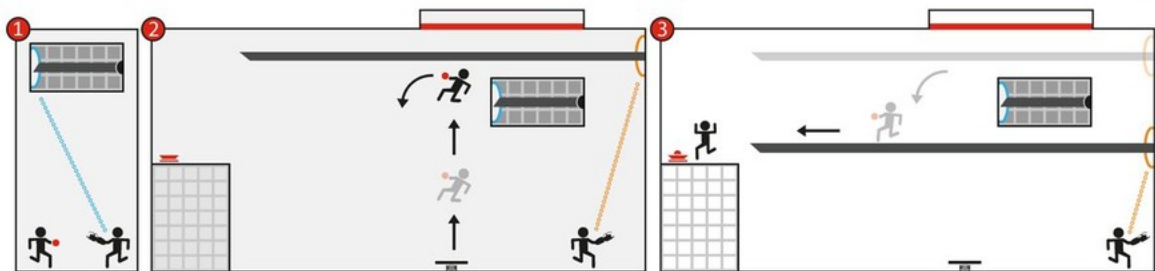
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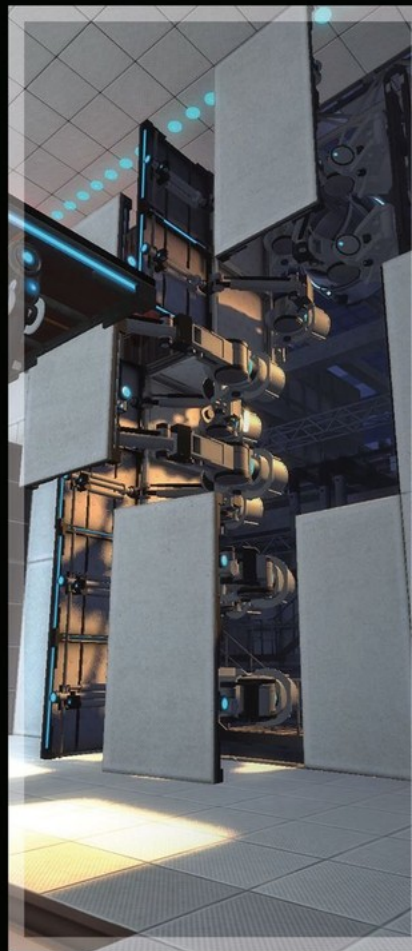
Bridging The Gap

The last chamber we had a chance to test is a doozy. Allotted 30 seconds to press four buttons at various heights in a chamber, we are forced to divide and conquer. Once the requirement is met, a weighted storage ball releases, which then needs to be escorted to a ledge high above the chamber floor. An aerial faith plate is found flush to the floor and a projected bridge is tucked away in a recessed alcove. We notice the bridge can be reoriented to allow a player to walk safely across to the awaiting bucket. Problem is, a fuzzer field (the luminous field at the end of a level that eliminates cubes, ball, and portals) blankets a recessed section of the ceiling that looks impossible to avoid when the faith plate launches a player uncontrollably to the bridge. If the threshold is crossed, the ball disappears.

To help illustrate the solution, we’ve whipped up a completely unofficial diagram. This isn’t aimed to be an exact replica of the room, rather an abstract interpretation to help to clarify the basic concepts of the puzzle.

1. Player 1 secures the ball. Player 2 fires a blue portal at the projected bridge occupying the recessed alcove.
2. Player 1 launches into the air via the aerial faith plate. Player 2 quickly fires the orange portal immediately below the fuzzer field, preventing player 1 from crossing the threshold and losing custody of the ball.
3. Player 1 begins to descend. Player 2 swiftly redirects the bridge by placing the orange portal below player 1, catching them and providing a clear path across the room to the bucket.



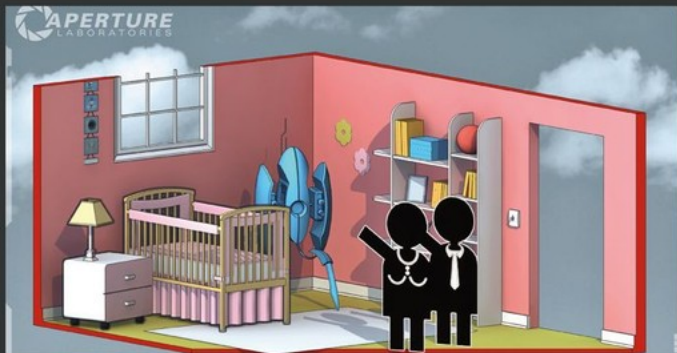



Funny Business

Humor was an important aspect of the original *Portal*, and that isn't changing for the sequel.

Veteran *Portal* writer Erik Wolpaw is returning, joined by fellow Valve scribe Chet Faliszek, lead writer of *Left 4 Dead* and *Left 4 Dead 2*, and Jay Pinkerton, a new recruit who honed his considerable talents while writing for *National Lampoon*. The challenge will now be uniting these three unique voices into one: a disgruntled computer system with an affinity for neurotoxins. This humor is already evident in some of the early art we've seen from the game, helping to set the mood until gamers have a chance to check out *Portal 2* in action. The below pair of Aperture Science posters are a prime example, illustrating the merits of using a turret to ward off potential baby snatchers.

As for the more memorable moments in the original *Portal*, the cake may, in fact, be a lie in the follow-up. Not willing to rest on their comedic laurels, the writing staff refuses to beat a dead horse by reusing memes from the original game.





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Smooth Operator

Ambient noise and the occasional mood-setting music in the original *Portal* may not have left much of an impression (there was music?!), but we assume that, like the rest of us, Jonathan Coulton's "Still Alive" was stuck in your head for weeks after completion. Valve is aware of the fan connection to *Portal*'s now iconic anthem, and plans to integrate music into *Portal 2* in more deliberate and surprising ways.

"The music was something that so many people identified with in the first game — it was the last thing they saw," Johnson recalls. "So yes, Coulton is going to be involved. When we sat down to work on *Portal 2* it was clear that music had to be a bigger part of the game. There is going to be ways in *Portal 2* that you can find and discover new songs. It's not going to be a musical, but it's not going to be a simple case of having a new song at the end of the game."

Though Coulton is already collaborating with the team to infuse his flair into the project, they remain quiet about the exact applications of his music, primarily because they don't want to ruin the surprise.


"It was kind of surprising that there was a song at the end of *Portal*," Johnson elaborates. "And while we're 99 percent sure that we'll end with a song again, we can't recapture that moment. So we spent quite a bit of time thinking about where and how we could use music throughout *Portal 2* to surprise people."

We happened across one such bolt from the blue in our demo session, although not one that utilized Coulton's skills. Feeling particularly punishing, GLaDOS attempted to use smooth jazz as a weapon to keep us in line. It worked.

From Trial To Triple-A

With its augmented length, fresh puzzle elements, polished presentation, and new cooperative campaign, *Portal 2* hardly needs to be tucked into a value package. From what we've seen of the sequel, this is a fully featured game that will be right at home amongst other high-profile titles at retail. Due out this fall, you won't have to wait too long to spend more time with GLaDOS. She can't wait to rekindle the relationship. ♦

*Want to learn more about the sordid history of Aperture Science? How about the process of creating a challenge room? Or a more extensive peek at *Chell*'s redesign? Visit gameinformer.com/portal2 for all that and more as we roll out an entire month of *Portal 2* coverage.*

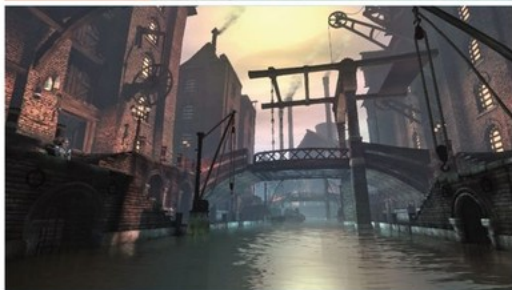


“We’re a lot alike, you and I.
You tested me. I tested you.
You killed me. I—oh, no, wait.
I guess I *haven’t* killed you
yet. Well. Food for thought
during this next test.”

previews



Not all characters will end up big and bulky like in previous titles



The manner in which you use a weapon determines its appearance



Fable III

Molyneux makes the promise of power

The new "touch" system will be a key part of gameplay

Peter Molyneux is over the clichéd "coming to power" narrative device used by most video games. To prove his point, he lists dozens of RPG and action games built around a weak protagonist who gradually grows stronger and stronger until he or she is prepared to take on a seemingly insurmountable foe. Once you're finally powerful enough to thrust the Master Sword through Ganon's face, what's left for you to do? "Just when you feel powerful, the credits roll," he says. With Fable III, Molyneux and Lionhead Studios aim to fix that.

"Fable III is all about power. It's about feeling powerful," Molyneux says. "I want you to feel like you can right all the wrongs in the world." To do so, Lionhead Studios is taking the climax of most games and placing it firmly at the halfway mark of Fable III. The story begins with a tyrannical leader named Logan ruling over the land of Albion. The world is experiencing an industrial revolution, and Logan clearly puts more emphasis on profitability than human happiness.

"Your job at the beginning is to go out and make people follow you and believe you," Molyneux says. "Whatever the price, man. Whatever promise you have to make, just make it so you can overthrow that guy, to be the rebel who takes over. You're gonna promise to get rid of crime, you're gonna promise to turn all the factories into schools, you're gonna promise to get rid of starvation. And then when you defeat Logan and become king, you have to sit on the throne and start delivering on your promises."

The second half of the game determines whether you become a true savior of Albion or an even worse ruler than your predecessor. Do you fulfill your promises and become a man of the people, or do you abandon your ideals in favor of greed and self-indulgence?

To let your ruler interact more socially with his or her denizens, Lionhead Studios has developed a new "touch" system. The A button serves as a context-sensitive command that determines how you interact with other citizens of Albion. In one scenario, your wife informs you that your daughter is lost. Upon finding her, you can either

scold her via the touch system, resulting in her sulking away sadly, or you could use the same context-sensitive command to console your daughter and lead her home by the hand.

Molyneux uses this type of interaction to draw the gamer further into the experience. He wants you to literally guide your daughter by the hand, not just run home and hope her A.I. tags along accordingly. Even the process of leading her home can alter her behavior; attempt to sneak into a pub for a drink, and she'll voice her disapproval.

The touch system also affects your relationship with the underclass. If a vagrant comes to your throne begging for cash, you can either help the poor soul or drag him to your dungeon by the collar and slam the door. If you encounter a similar situation on the street, you have the option of taking the beggar by the hand just as you would your daughter. He'll inquire whether or not you're "taking him to dinner," just before panicking and fighting back when he realizes you're taking him to a factory to sell him into slavery.

In a continuation of Molyneux's quest to move away from long-followed RPG traditions, Fable III ditches health bars, opting instead for a shooter-style regeneration system. Molyneux realizes that this will draw the ire of longtime RPG purists, saying "RPG fans will come up with 10 reasons why they think it needs a health bar," but he doesn't seem to mind in the least.

Leveling up is also handled in a different manner than most peers within the genre, as Fable III replaces the arbitrary point system with a number of citizens who support your quest. These followers are crucial in your quest for power, and influence numerous decisions throughout the story. That gorgeous peasant girl may seem like a fine wife, but the revolting daughter of a politician may do more to advance your social standing and earn you more followers. Molyneux didn't go into the details about how this system works, but he assured us that it is an integral part of the Fable III experience.

Your character's appearance still changes as you progress through the story, but in a more

specific manner than previous Fable titles.

Molyneux is aware that every character in previous installments of the series looked huge and bulky when leveled up, even describing high-level females as "looking like Russian shot-putters." In Fable III, gamers will have more control over the eventual look of their character. If you want to be bulky and strong, use heavy axes and swords. Is being lithe and graceful more your style? Use guns. If you're going for a more mysterious and mystical look, use spells frequently.

The customization doesn't end there. Even the weapons change as you use them. "To be perfectly honest, we're bored of making more weapons for you," Molyneux sighs. He's tired of just adding an arbitrary amount of weapons for a press release bullet point. Rather, he wants your weapon to reflect your character. If you're using a scythe primarily for killing hobbes, the blade will feature more jagged edges, and even the texture will change accordingly. If you're using your scythe to kill civilians as well as hobbes, it may be named "(Your gamertag)s Evil Scythe Of Hobbe Slaughter." If you've performed an unforgivable amount of evil deeds with it, it may even drip with blood or glow with an ominous aura. Its length, size, width, and weight are all determined by how many enemies have met their fate under the blade. Even your gamerscore affects the appearance of your weapon. Level it up and you can sell it online for a good price via the in-game auction house. Once it's sold, it retains your gamertag in the name of the item, letting others know exactly who morphed the blade into its current state.

Like any Peter Molyneux title, Fable III is nothing if not ambitious. Fable II was well received by most gamers, but Lionhead isn't content to simply rest on its laurels. The game presents even more world-altering choices than its predecessors, and if Molyneux has his way, it'll give gamers a sense of power never before felt in the genre. — Dan Ryckert

To see our video interview with Peter Molyneux, check out gameinformer.com/mag

- » Platform
Xbox 360
- » Style
1 or 2-Player Action/
RPG
- » Publisher
Microsoft Game Studios
- » Developer
Lionhead Studios
- » Release
2010

Alan Wake

This year's scariest game lurches from the shadows

The unanswered mystery is what stays with us the longest." These words from Alan Wake's opening sequence describe the buzz around Remedy's latest title perfectly. Up until now, Alan Wake's gameplay has been as mysterious as the titular author's phantom manuscript. As the best-selling author's latest piece of thrilling literature comes to life in the quaint town of Bright Falls, Alan is forced to be as inventive in combat as he is in his fiction. When the sun sets and nightfall strangles the small town, the game transforms from creepy adventure to terrifying action. With a pistol in one hand and the other gripping a dying flashlight, we spent a night in Bright Falls and are alive to talk about it.

Alan Wake is segmented into light and dark sections of gameplay. During the daytime Alan wanders through town piecing together the enigma of his new book-he-doesn't-remember-writing-turned-reality. During his trip to a local greasy spoon Alan patronizes an overeager fan, chats up some old bikers, and has a rendezvous with a shady character for the key to his getaway cabin. Even the shortest interaction with Bright Falls' inhabitants showcases the game's emphasis on colorful characters. Each new stranger feels as though they've been transplanted from the pages of a psychological thriller.

A nighttime scene later on shows Wake driving down a winding road through Bright Falls' dense forests when his car collides with an apparent hitchhiker. When Alan leaves his vehicle to examine the body, the felled accident victim vanishes. The story then jumps forward to the car teetering precariously over a cliff's edge and a lightly injured Wake recovering from the nearby wreck. Alan sets his sights on a distant gas station, deciding it's his best chance for help. During his trek the author begins to find scattered pages of his manuscript throughout the woods, each harrowing entry making writer's block sound more and more appealing.

One page of his unfinished manuscript – which he explains via narrative monologue – reveals that his estranged story's next twist involves a deranged axe murderer. Sure enough, as Wake continues down the dark path towards the gas station a shadowy figure jumps in and out of the darkness. A frenzied chase ensues in which we stumble upon a flashlight and pistol. Facing the shadowy stalker once more, we fix our flashlight on it to drain it of its dark power. As our spectral nemesis attempts to dodge we struggle to keep the beam trained on them, similar to the ghost bustin' mechanics of other games. Seconds later a candescent shower of sparks bursts from our foe and we pump him full of lead to finish him off.

"You definitely can't survive in Alan Wake without a light source," says Sam Lake, lead writer for Alan Wake. Weakening darkness-enrouded enemies by dowsing them in light is fundamental to gameplay. Though

your flashlight is always trained on whatever you're looking at, it's not until you squeeze the left trigger that the real damage is done. This drains battery life, however, so you must be careful how many batteries you burn through lest you run out of juice. Fleeing from your enemies while waiting for your last battery to recharge is a terrifying exercise in survival.

Meager flashlights aren't the only tools to use against the darkness, however. Blinding flashbang grenades and powerful flare guns can decimate groups of enemies, road flares can be dropped to provide improvised sanctuary, and floodlights or car headlights can deliver powerful blasts of brightness. In one scene Wake frantically cranks an overhead floodlight's generator as several assailants encroach upon him from the shadows. With each frantically timed button press the player is forced to choose between running for his life or getting the generator to sputter to life at the last second. I can't wait to see what other dire moments Alan Wake has to offer in its dusk 'til dawn battles.

More hazards await Alan than mere possessed townfolk, however. The darkness corrupting Bright Falls is capable of manipulating vehicles, huge trees, and anything else that it can use to assault Alan with. At one point we witnessed a tremendous tornado of debris composed of everything from dump trucks to huge cable spools tear through the woods towards us. From what I saw, the evil stacked against Alan Wake appears insurmountable.

Bright Falls' murky nighttime engenders a deeply foreboding atmosphere. During my playthrough I trekked through the claustrophobic woods and found myself jumping at every subtle sound and movement. The game's sharp sense of dread managed to penetrate the crowded X10 show floor and make me feel desperately alone. My paranoia translated to constantly scanning the foliage for the next axe-wielding spectre. My nervous behavior was exemplified onscreen perfectly by Wake, who shined the flashlight around him with all the confidence of a sheep in a wolf den. Remedy capitalizes on this tension. The camera will unexpectedly pan out to reveal enemies closing in on you from all angles, creating an overwhelming feeling of hopelessness. I felt like I was surviving by the skin of my teeth with each passing moment, and I loved it.

At this point in development Alan Wake's gameplay hits the scary gaming sweet spot; it enables players to effectively fight their foes but not overpower them to the point that it dissolves tension. If you've been disappointed by the direction of this generation's scary games so far, Alan Wake may be the light at the end of your tunnel. » Tim Turi

Check out gameinformer.com/imag for an interview with lead writer Sam Lake.





- » Platform
Xbox 360
- » Style
1-Player Action
- » Publisher
Microsoft Game Studios
- » Developer
Remedy Entertainment
- » Release
May 18



Next on DLC

Alan Wake's framework closely mirrors popular TV shows. Plot recaps summarize what's happened so far each time you continue your game, and you can think of this first title as the first season. Remedy also says that future "episodes" of Alan Wake will be available via downloadable content.

What About PC?

Alan Wake was originally destined to release on the Xbox 360 as well as PC. Recently, however, Microsoft went on the record saying that the Xbox 360 is "the most compelling way to experience Alan Wake." Microsoft believes that Remedy's psychological action thriller is best experienced with a larger screen and controller rather than a mouse and keyboard, so the PC version was canceled.



- » Platform
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • PC
- » Style
1-Player Action
(Multiplayer TBA)
- » Publisher
Rockstar Games
- » Developer
Rockstar San Diego
- » Release
April 27

Red Dead Redemption

We take the reins of Rockstar's gritty western



Use vultures for target practice in a spontaneous mini-game

As a huge fan of Westerns and Grand Theft Auto, it's an understatement to say that Red Dead Redemption is in my wheelhouse. Each time Rockstar swings by the office to give us a glimpse my enthusiasm increases, so it was with great anticipation that I took hold of the revolver for our first hands-on session.

For those of you late to the party, Red Dead Redemption is Rockstar's first fully realized foray into the Wild West. While the company best known for Grand Theft Auto picked up the publishing rights from Capcom for Red Dead Revolver and overhauled it for release, Redemption has been built from the ground up with an open-world experience in mind.

The story follows John Marston, an outlaw who has a change of heart when he gets severely injured during a heist and his fellow outlaws leave him for dead. After living three years on the straight and narrow, a shady government law enforcement group that plays by its own rules give Marston an ultimatum – hunt down his old posse or sacrifice his wife and son instead.

For our first hands-on action, Rockstar jumps us to a different point in the game. Marston and his horse trot into the quaint, dusty desert town of Armadillo in search of Bill Williamson, a former partner in crime who is rumored to shack up in the area. To locate him, I must enlist the help of the town marshal. Before he'll agree to help, however, Marston must accompany him in hunting down a local group of bandits terrorizing the town.

After spotting one of the bandits stumbling out of the saloon and mounting up, I whistle for my horse. As the horse trots up, I hit the Y button to get in the saddle and start following the petty criminal to the group's hideout. Controlling the horse takes getting used to, but it handles well once you learn the nuances. By double-tapping the A button, Marston digs in his spurs and the horse picks up speed. A quick tap of the right shoulder button pulls back the reins, signaling the horse to slow or stop. Press the left shoulder button and Marston shifts his firearm for use on horseback. As I gallop toward the hideout with the marshal, the bandits spot me and open fire.

Anyone familiar with Grand Theft Auto controls will feel right at home in Red Dead Redemption.

Jumping off the horse and into combat, I pull up the weapon wheel with the left shoulder button to select the rifle, then dive into cover by pushing the right shoulder button. Sensing a lull in the enemy fire, I pop from cover to take aim with the left trigger, line up a headshot, and fire.

The gunplay is nothing if not visceral – the Natural Motion animation further cements the feeling that you wouldn't want to be on the other end of these gun barrels. My next attempted headshot misses its intended target, but the bullet drives into the bandit's shoulder, the force of the shot sending him twisting emphatically just like in the old spaghetti western flicks. I spot another bandit scurrying away out of the corner of my eye, train the sights on him, and pop him in the leg. The impact sends him face first into the ground, and he frantically crawls toward cover with his lame leg dragging behind. Before he finds refuge, I send him to an early dirt grave with a shot to the back of the head.

With most of the enemies neutralized, I switch to the shotgun and charge the house. The few remaining enemies pour out the door of the nearby house, but I push them right back in with the explosive blasts from my gun barrels. The enemy hideout is cleared, and the marshal thanks Marston for his help.

After taking down the gang, Rockstar fast-forwards to another mission. This time Marston crosses paths with a drunken Irishman who owes him a Gatling gun. Our renegade cowboy has heard this shtick one too many times and he's run out of patience. Rather than wait for the vagrant to sober up and deliver the weapon, he demands that the drunk saddle up and take us to it immediately. The alternative, Marston promises, isn't pretty, and that vague threat is enough to help the bumbling idiot sober up. As we ride out, our guide rattles off a list of excuses as to why he hasn't followed through on his promise yet, and warns us it won't be easy to recover the gun.

The Gatling gun is located in a heavily guarded mine, and as the pair approaches the site, two mounted guards trot out to meet them. At the sign of first gunfire, our cowardly guide rides off, promising to return with a wagon to transport the



As a bounty hunter, it's up to you to provide transportation back to town



gun. It's up to me to take down the encroaching party. Using the slow-motion Dead Eye ability, I down one rider with a pistol and then procure our lasso for a more creative takedown on the second guy. As he rides toward me guns blazing, I toss the lasso, yank him to the ground, and move in to gut him with a knife.

Moving past the downed guards and around the bend, bullets start whizzing by Marston's head; the miners have taken arms. The Gatling won't trade hands without a lot of bloodshed, and I'm more than happy to oblige. Moving into the mine, the environment offers several ways to take out groups with earth-shattering explosions,

and a well-placed shot can send a hanging gas lamp onto a nearby enemy, setting him ablaze for a fiery death. Once I clear the mine of enemies and locate the gun, I load it onto a rail cart and push it out the mine. Once Marston makes it to daylight, the Irishman pulls up with the wagon and we make our getaway.

My experience with Red Dead Redemption has me chomping at the bit to spend more time in the gritty Western setting. Rockstar says the game is content complete, and the next few weeks will be spent fine-tuning the gameplay. In the meantime, check gameinformer.com for new details about the multiplayer as we lead up to the April 27 release. » **Matt Bertz**

Wild, Riled West

Riding the vast prairies in between townships sounds boring, but you'll rarely be left alone on the plains. Marston comes across ambient activities that offer the chance to earn extra money, find treasures, collect animal skins, or shoot some men behaving badly at nearly every bend in the dusty road. In our short time riding through the wilderness, we helped a farmer save his kidnapped daughter from a gang of bandits, hunted a pack of wolves for their pelts, engaged in a sharpshooting challenge by shooting vultures, and helped recover a man's stolen stagecoach. The towns also offer a host of random activities. Locals will bet you money on a friendly competition of five-finger fillet or Texas Hold 'Em, and you may have to stop a drunken saloon patron from roughing up a lady of the night. The NPCs also react naturally to the random chaos you can cause in the world. After we beat up a man who looked at us funny in the Armadillo saloon, he returned later with a gun and opened fire on us right in the bar.



This is not the type of cougar Marston was hoping to meet on the dusty trail



Sonic the Hedgehog 4: Episode 1

Sonic & Knuckles' first true sequel arrives 16 years later



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

» **Style**
1-Player Action/
Platforming

» **Publisher**
Sega

» **Developer**
Dimps

» **Release**
Summer

Being able to highlight your strengths while downplaying your weaknesses is a valuable trait. Unfortunately, Sonic's dash into 3D did not play to his strengths. Despite repeated failures, the hedgehog was shoved through a gauntlet of terrible games until he was left weeping inconsolably in the fetal position (which looks like a really slow, pathetic spin dash). Sega seems to have realized that 3D is not Sonic's strong suit, as the series is finally returning to its 2D roots.

Sega noticed how many gamers still play the classic Genesis-era Sonic titles and decided on delivering Sonic the Hedgehog 4 in downloadable episodes. "We realize that a sizable fanbase of the 2D Sonic style lives in the download space, and we wanted to offer them a new Sonic experience they could enjoy," says longtime director of the Sonic series and producer of Sonic 4, Takashi Iizuka. Why release the games in episodes? "There are limitations to what we could do with a downloadable-only title. For example, you are limited by the amount of storage and this limits what the game can be," Iizuka says. He also doesn't see consumers shelling out \$60 for a retail Sonic 4 release.

To return the franchise to its roots, Sonic 4 takes place immediately after the events of Sonic & Knuckles. "After Eggman failed the plan of Death Egg," Iizuka explains, "we started the new plan for world domination—and this story begins." Sonic still has a score to settle with Eggman, and the scope of Episode 1 focuses solely on these two enemies. What about Tails and Knuckles, you ask? Iizuka says fans will be

very pleased with the cast in Episode II. He also tells us to consider Episode 1 a prologue to the rest of Sonic 4.

Sonic may lack backup from his allies, but his arsenal of classic moves returns in full force with the help of a newer, non-werehog-related trick. Sonic can perform his signature rolling attack and charged spin dash, and his homing attack from the Sonic Adventure games survives the transition from 3D. "I wanted the user to enjoy an easy-to-play feeling by the attack sequence that this [homing attack] action allows, and find the fun routes in the air," Iizuka explains. Shields also return in Sonic 4, but Episode 1 only includes the basic one-hit-protection barrier—just enough to secure your rings for that next Special Stage.

Speaking of Special Stages, they return within Sonic 4's "classic timeline." Each holds one of the coveted Chaos Emeralds and Eggman so desperately struggle to control. Remember the Try Again ending from the first Sonic if you failed to acquire all the colorful gems? According to Iizuka, Sonic 4 also has a cliffhanger at the end that is only viewable after you collect all the Chaos Emeralds. No word on whether or not Sonic can super-ize himself, but I'm crossing my fingers.

Four of the game's other stages have been revealed so far: Splash Hill Zone, Casino Street Zone, Lost Labyrinth Zone, and Mad Gear Zone. Splash Hill Zone marks the return of the mandatory lush green intro level from early Sonic games. Old school ladybug and hornet badniks from Green Hill Zone also return for another stab at the blue hedgehog. Series staples like loop-

de-loops, springs, and floating platforms are scattered throughout the first level, offering the perfect training ground for rusty gamers to re-familiarize themselves with the classic gameplay.

Fans worried that Sonic 4 will incorporate the floaty, physics-based gameplay of recent platformers like LittleBigPlanet can rest easy. "As this is a continuation of the Genesis-era gameplay we will have classic platforming elements, but it will be mixed with classic Sonic speed," Iizuka assures us. Expect this game to play as tightly as the old games, but with a glossy coat of HD paint splashed over it.

"We need to support HD consoles," Iizuka states, "so we wanted to have HD-quality graphics from the beginning." If the screenshots haven't convinced you that this is the right move for the series and you crave retro 16-bit graphics, you're in for an interesting revelation. "Sonic 1 was originally aiming to have 'CG-like graphics,'" Iizuka reveals. "For Sonic 3 some parts used CG, so it was pretty natural for us to draw all these Sonic 4 environments with CG pre-render."

If you're still skeptical about Sega's resurrection of the original Sonic formula, Takashi Iizuka understands your hesitation. "Sonic 4 was created to be the game that could remind those [reluctant] people of the enjoyment and exhilaration of Sonic again," he says. He concludes by saying if Sonic 4's return to form is "the Sonic experience you have been waiting 16 years for, then we strongly encourage you to try this."

» **Tim Turi**

Spin onto gameinformer.com/mag for more Sonic 4 coverage



Sonic's homing attack should add an interesting new dynamic to the classic gameplay



No classic Sonic tunes will return for Sonic 4, but the soundtrack will remind fans of classic Sonic music



Capable Sonic Advance developers Dimpis are helming the redemption of Sega's mascot instead of Sonic Team





Lost Planet 2

Hands-on with Capcom's surprisingly revamped shooter

» **Platform**
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360

» **Style**
1-Player Shooter
(16-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Capcom

» **Developer**
Capcom

» **Release**
May 18

Fans of the original *Lost Planet* are in for a shock with the upcoming sequel. We've played the first several hours, and plenty of major changes slap you in the face right out of the gate.

The focus has been swiped from single player and aimed directly at co-op. Former protagonist Wayne has been replaced by nameless squads of snow pirates from various factions. Offline play is buried in the menus, while online co-op is easily accessible. Things now feel a lot more like *Left 4 Dead*, where playing alone with AI bots rather than co-op partners is an obviously lesser experience.

Lost Planet 2 is split into six episodes, giving players reign over a different pirate faction in each one. Episodes break down into chapters, which split into a few maps. You'll start in a classic snowfield environment for the prologue, but things quickly transition into a jungle backdrop in Episode 1 and eventually end up in a fiery industrial area for Episode 2. Mission types we've seen so far include "get from point A to point B" objectives, massive boss slayings, and versus mode-inspired attack and defend setups. The first of the latter category is a large mining facility you must overrun to switch on its five generators. Once it's up and running, you and your pals must then defend the facility and keep it online for 90 seconds.

Instead of having "lives," you and your co-op partners share one Battle Gauge that dwindles every time a player or bot dies. To prevent this, you must use the new Harmonizer that slowly regenerates health over time or can be turbocharged if you hold down the start button. This uses thermal energy, so you'll still have to collect orange orbs even though it's not cold outside anymore. Data points now act as spawn points when you die, and they fill in the minimap, which is otherwise blank. When any player crosses the glowing red gateway at the end of an area it starts a 10-second count-

down to push everyone to the next map.

Rather than loading the next area right away, the game grades you on each zone based on several factors like how full your Battle Gauge is or how many "Good Job" side missions you've completed. Loads of GJ tasks populate every map - sometimes you have to activate all the data posts, get a 10-soldier kill streak, or complete a mission without losing a life. All of this contributes to your career points, which boost your level for that episode's pirate faction. After you play through five of the episodes you'll likely have five different faction characters ranging from level 10 to 15. You don't earn rewards with each level earned, but we received a new costume once our first character reached level 10. According to Capcom, every faction character has a unique reward tree.

Fully customizing and upgrading your characters is the carrot on the stick of replay incentive. In addition to earning new interchangeable cosmetic parts, you can spend cash at a slot machine to earn weapon upgrades, tons of silly emotes, in-game titles (my favorite so far is "Action Gamer"), and new specialized abilities. Two abilities can be equipped at once that you can cater to your play style, like beefing up your critical hit percentage or reducing thermal energy draining. While it sucks to randomly win a new title when you're looking for a better machine gun, it looks like there is a password system in place as well to allow for more direct purchases.

Lost Planet 2's drastically reworked campaign is a lot to digest, and we haven't even covered online versus play yet. If the full game continues to deliver new set piece moments, intriguing career progression, and replay incentives, this could be a very exciting summer indeed. » **Bryan Vore**




Chain hats - a great accessory for silently sneaking through the jungle



This boss is a complete bastard

Blur

Bizarre Creations' latest racer kicks into high gear



Power-ups are shown on your rear bumper, and you'll also get warnings when an opponent is throwing certain attacks your way

Blur didn't have a very good debut at E3 back in June. The action racer's kart-like system of offensive and defensive power-ups worked fine, but it just wasn't exciting to play. Getting behind the wheel in Blur now compared to back then is like night and day. Though it's fundamentally the same game, the racing has been refined so that it now leaps off the screen with its glossy power-up effects, great sense of speed, split-second strategy, and thrilling action.

Blur takes it a step beyond the simple kart racer formula. The game features a host of real-world cars including the Audi TT and street-racing video game mainstays like the Dodge Viper. These can be upgraded to handle up to five power-ups (including more than one of the same power-up), and to become a successful driver you must pick up and activate the power ups in the right situations. Some of the eight power-ups have all-fire options where you can deploy them ahead of you instead of behind (or vice versa). One devious use of this is to fire a mine just beyond an upcoming row of power-ups so that when an opponent drives through one they will drive right into the mine hidden behind it. In our time with the game, the Shunt (a homing missile), Barge (a close-range radius blast), and Bolt (a trio of energy rounds that nudge opponents) were our favorites.

Though the game has offensive power-ups, most of the time you'll be playing defense. With 20 racers on the track at once, you'll have to use

all the power-ups in your arsenal to counter and survive the chaos being thrown at you. The game also lets you choose from up to eight mods before a race, each of which gives you an advantage, such as extra car health when you're hit while a shield power-up is engaged. Bribes gives you a random power-up before everyone else. Mods can be arranged and labeled into pre-set formations of three based on their purpose. For instance, mods like Fan Favorite can be assembled with similar mods because they get you more fans per race.

Fans are earned by successfully using power-ups and where you place in the race, basically serving as the game's XP system. You get fans for stringing together racing moves on the track and completing the game's slew of challenges, which might ask you to Shunt 10 cars or wreck someone while in mid-air. During a race players can also tackle Fan Demands, an optional mid-race side-mission that triggers criteria for you to complete to receive a boost in fans. Players also receive post-race awards that chronicle their accomplishments.

Blur may have gotten off to a slow start, but now it's up to full speed and armed to the hilt. **» Matthew Kato**

Want to participate in Blur's exclusive Beta? Head over to the contest page at gameinformer.com


» Platform
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360

» Style
1 to 4-Player Racing
(20-Player Online)

» Publisher
Activision

» Developer
Bizarre Creations

» Release
Spring



The single-player mode will feature boss battles at the end of each tier



Online Mayhem

Blur's fast-paced power-up slinging is perfect for online multiplayer. With support for up to 20 players, the mode is a free-for-all. Developer Bizarre Creations is holding a limited beta in March, with a wider one in April, which lets gamers rank up their drivers, take on 60 challenges, and race 30 tracks. One vital aspect of the game is the ability to use Twitter or Facebook to blast all of your in-game achievements to your friends (including custom messages). You can even use them in the single-player mode to send challenges to friends — even if your friend has yet to unlock the car or track the challenge is based on.



Pokémon SoulSilver

Connect with Pokémon using bundled pocket-friendly device

- » **Platform**
Nintendo DS
- » **Style**
1-Player Role-Playing
- » **Publisher**
Nintendo
- » **Developer**
Game Freak
- » **Release**
March 14

Game Freak is no stranger to enhanced Pokémon remakes. Back in 2004, the team took the original Red and Blue and added improved visuals and new features to deliver FireRed and LeafGreen. Its latest projects are HeartGold and SoulSilver, remakes of the Game Boy Color's Gold and Silver versions, respectively. The revamped titles not only bring back familiar gameplay elements and story sequences from their predecessors, but also include a Pokéwalker device for training on the go.

HeartGold and SoulSilver are nearly identical with the exception of the types of Pokémon you'll encounter. If you want to catch 'em all, you'll have to play both. Just like in HeartGold, SoulSilver sets you on a journey to travel across vast expanses of land where you'll capture exotic creatures and battle other Poké-enthusiasts as part of your quest to become the ultimate trainer. Early on, Professor Elm explains the importance of walking with Pokémon, and the vital connection it has to their growth and evolution. While walking Pokémon in previous installments only

involved your in-game avatar, you can now take your captures with you using the included Poké Ball-shaped pedometer.

Players can tweak all Pokéwalker-related options in the main menu. Once accessed, you can choose which Pokémon to store in the pedometer (only one can be stored at any given time). This list is generated from Pokémon stored in the in-game PC, which you can customize at any one of Johto's Pokémon Centers.

Once a creature is selected, you're prompted to choose the walking route. In the preview build, only Refreshing Field and Noisy Forest were available. Each route has a different theme and unique Pokémon types to encounter, and the selected Pokémon will gain experience points based on how far you walk.

Players can eventually unlock more routes using Watts, which is the Pokéwalker's currency that you earn by walking with the device. Watts can also be spent within the Pokéwalker to access different minigames. One minigame, for example, allows you to search for hidden items, while another allows you to search for, battle,

and capture wild Pokémon.

The Pokémon catching minigame is a small-scale version of the battle system in SoulSilver, and is executed entirely on the Pokéwalker. This simplified process still requires weakening the Pokémon and catching with a Poké Ball. You can hold up to three captured Pokémon and can later transfer them and all the items you've collected to a save file through your DS system.

The Pokéwalker is just one of the connectivity options we came across in the preview build of SoulSilver. Kiosks in the game's Pokémon Centers suggest connectivity options with other DS devices for wireless Pokémon battles with friends as well.

Though SoulSilver is just a remake of Game Boy Color's Silver with a visual makeover and limited touch screen functionality, these added features could be enough of an incentive for players of the original to give it another go. » **Annette Gonzalez**

Check out gameinformer.com for additional screens



3D Dot Game Heroes is a full-featured title, but its initial \$40 price tag will feel like a discount

3D Dot Game Heroes

Atlas' heroes may be square, but they're old school cool

From Software's new title may be suffering from multiple personality disorder. At times this top-down, sword-swinging adventure is reminiscent of the early antics of Nintendo's green tunic-wearing elf. In other areas, it references Street Fighter and Final Fantasy. Now that we finally got our hands on 3D Dot Game Heroes' charming profusion of classic video game tropes, we can break down some of the more exciting features.

upgraded, swords will quite humorously stretch across an entire screen. More than 20 swords appear in the final game, and each one has its own special abilities. Players aren't locked into using a sword, either. One axe makes fallen foes drop extra money, and a spear we used could pierce geometry within the environment, attacking enemies on the other side. We even caught glimpse of a weapon that looked suspiciously like a lightsaber.

better equipment. From what we've seen the minigames are so polished they might be just as entertaining as the main quest.

- » **Platform**
PlayStation 3
- » **Style**
1-Player Action/Adventure
- » **Publisher**
Atlas
- » **Developer**
From Software
- » **Release**
May 11



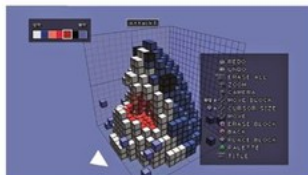
Tools of the Trade

Players have plenty of dungeons to explore and puzzles to solve as the protagonist traverses a giant overworld, but a hero is only as good as the tools he or she uses. While our 3D hero have access to familiar Zelda mainstays like hookshots, boomerangs, and lanterns, the most distinguishing tool in his arsenal was his sword. By visiting blacksmiths players will be able to power up many of the game's weapons. Once fully



Minigames

Like any great action/adventure title, 3D Dot Game Heroes is stuffed to the gills with minigames. During our demo we checked out two of these games: a racing game that had our hero sprinting around a track using dash boots, and a tower defense strategy game. Like most tower defense titles, we helped our hero build up various defensive turrets to defeat oncoming waves of enemies, which gained us access to



Character Building

3D Dot Game Heroes' blocky art style isn't just a gimmick; the simple LEGO-like building blocks that make up everything in the world allow From Software to include a rich character creation system. Players can piece together their own heroes brick by brick, and even alter their characters' various attacks and victory poses. If that sounds like too much work, players can also modify pre-existing characters from the game's database of avatars, which includes everything from Dwarven warriors to sharks. Our hero? Robocop in a tuxedo. » **Ben Reeves**

For extra screens and the newest trailers go to www.gameinformers.com/mag



Medal of Honor

Following Call of Duty's footsteps, EA's shooter enters the modern age

» **Platform**
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360

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

» **Publisher**
Electronic Arts

» **Developer**
EA GAMES/DICE

» **Release**
Fall

With over 10 titles set between 1939 and 1945, many point their finger at the Medal of Honor series as one of the primary culprits when discussing the oversaturation of World War II games. It's been a blast ever since Wolfenstein, but first-person Nazi slaughter had to wear out its welcome at some point. Call of Duty eventually shifted gears and saw massive success with its first foray into modern warfare, and EA's Medal of Honor is next in line to put the past behind it.

EA has prided itself on the authenticity of the franchise from the very beginning, even enlisting *Saving Private Ryan* military advisor Dale

Dye as a consultant. This new entry in the series (currently referred to as simply Medal of Honor) puts you in the shoes of a Tier 1 Operator. This branch of the military is shrouded in secrecy, and their soldiers are hand-picked from the best of the Navy SEALs and Army Rangers. Steering away from the clearly fictional approach used by *Infinity Ward*, this new MOH brings the very real Afghanistan conflict to gamers for the first time. You won't be shooting at a generic, fictionalized, terrorist group either - you'll be hunting down al-Qaeda operatives.

As you search and clear terrorist strongholds, you'll be surrounded by destructible scenery on

all sides. Like *Battlefield: Bad Company*, walls can be destroyed and doors can be shattered. These elements aren't the only thing the game has in common with *Bad Company*, as *Battlefield* developers DICE are sculpting Medal of Honor's multiplayer mode.

It's easy to accuse Medal of Honor of simply trying to replicate Modern Warfare's success, but EA's dedication to authenticity, the Afghanistan setting, and the veteran DICE team at the helm of multiplayer might make this an experience all its own. » Dan Ryckert





More On Multiplayer

The last big splash *Dead Rising 2* made was with the unveiling of its Terror Is Reality four-player, *American Gladiators*-inspired multiplayer mode. Though no new details on this mode have surfaced, Blue Castle confirmed that we can expect to see around 2,000 zombies on screen at once during T.I.R.'s biggest bouts. When asked about possible interactivity between multiplayer and single-player game modes, Blue Castle simply said "it'd be cool."

Dead Rising 2

A zombie outbreak is the true mother of all invention

Any zombie fanatic worth their brains believes they could hold their own in an undead uprising. Much like a would-be zombie survivalist daydreaming about the inevitable apocalypse, I've speculated that I would be a more than qualified zombie slayer if zapped into the role of *Dead Rising 2*'s protagonist, Chuck Greene. I recently had the opportunity to put my zombie elitism to the test during my hands-on with the game's single-player.

Starting out I am thrust into a plain-looking hallway, occupied by a few random items and a pair of zombies. Armed with only a sledgehammer, I practice the familiar light attack, heavy attack combat on the first mindless enemy. The next weapon I reach for is the pistol, a rather uninspired weapon for the series. Immediately upon aiming the gun at the first shambling corpse I realize how much smoother the aiming mechanic is this time around. Lining up headshots for silky-smooth kills feels more natural than in the first game.

Upon clearing the halls of foes I make my way towards the exit, noting a workbench along the way. I slip through the exit and emerge in an alleyway leading to the Vegas-like Fortune City strip. Drones of undead stand between me and the glitzy neon lights. Reevaluating my nearly empty pistol and well-worn hammer, I sink back into the hallway. These weapons simply won't do. Using Chuck's skills as a handyman, I grab a kayak paddle and chainsaw, throw them onto the worktable, and whip together a

mean saw paddle. Noting that I finally have my crap together, the game reveals my first objective: earn 20,000 PP (Prestige Points) by finding clever ways to kill zombies. I then proceed to slice through the obstructing mass of zombies like Darth Maul through a sea of Qui-Gon Jinn's.

Like every weapon in the *Dead Rising* universe, good times come to an end when the saw paddle breaks. Thirsty for more zombie blood (not literally, that's gross), I spot the strip's local pawnshop. The owner had taken the outbreak of undead into consideration and revamped the place with protective barbed wire cages. I peruse his improvised instruments of doom as he watches me from behind his defenses.

I use a mixture of kitchen knives and boxing gloves to craft intimidating claw-mitts that would give Wolverine an inferiority complex. Strapping them on, it takes no time to quickly mow through throngs of baddies. After milking the gloves for all the PP they're worth, I purchase a *Dead Alive*-inspired lawnmower weapon, which is basically the base of a lawnmower with 2x4 handles attached. I rack up the experience by swinging the spinning death through crowds, and in doing so I discover the combo weapon's devastating heavy attack. By holding down the attack button Chuck places the lawnmower above a single zombie's head and pushes down until the ghoul is reduced to a crimson puddle. After that, I electrify more undead with a car battery-charged rake and bomb them with a nail-covered propane tank. Each combo weapon I purchase at

the pawnshop unlocks the schematics for future D.I.Y. projects.

My PP hits 18,500, but I am starting to run out of options. Desperate for another combo weapon to reach my goal, I jog down the strip looking for items. An action movie poster catches my eye, and I stop to appraise its generic hero as he fires his flamethrower. In doing so Chuck has an onscreen epiphany, and I too learn the seemingly benign watergun and gasoline tank's true potential. After one quick trip to the workbench, I'm sweeping dozens of zombies with fire. My PP shoots through the roof with each toasty body that hits the ground.

I finally hit my goal of 20,000 PP and my reward is revealed. Chuck walks up the ramp of a truck, opening its doors to reveal a dirtbike with chainsaws strapped to its handles. Luckily *Dead Rising 2*'s protagonist is an ex-motocross racer. I immediately race down the length of the strip, carving through the remaining zombies like a jet ski on a blood ocean.

Before I sat down with *Dead Rising 2*'s single-player, all I was thinking was how much I wanted to be playing its awesome multiplayer. When my hands-on with *Dead Rising 2* concluded, however, my interest in the game's single-player was reinvigorated. They say what happens in Fortune City stays in Fortune City, and *Dead Rising 2*'s addictive zombie annihilation will ensure you never want to leave. » **Tim Turi**

Check out gameinformer.com/mag for more *Dead Rising 2* info.

- » Platform
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • PC
- » Style
1-Player Action
(4-Player Online)
- » Publisher
Capcom
- » Developer
Blue Castle
- » Release
August 31

Alpha Protocol

Obsidian's action/RPG hybrid is still on track

» **Platform**
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360

» **Style**
1-Player Action/
RPG

» **Publisher**
Sega

» **Developer**
Obsidian Entertainment

» **Release**
Summer

Sega's promise of a modern day espionage RPG has been enticing gamers ever since it was announced, but with every attempt at redefining a genre, unforeseen problems can arise. Alpha Protocol has now seen a year's worth of delays, the last of which was quietly announced the day the game was supposed to be released. The title's future became even more unclear when an internal memo from Sega was accidentally uploaded to the company's website. The memo expressed concern over the state of the game, describing it as too difficult, and "barely RPG."

time.... We refined our systems and the RPG feel a lot over the spring and summer of 2009, so when that came out both the Sega production group and Obsidian didn't feel the criticisms remained valid."

After playing several hours of the new build, I was more than satisfied with Alpha Protocol's RPG elements. The game has a full-fledged XP system. Similar to the original Mass Effect, the skills you can upgrade are a mixture of simple stat boosters and new abilities based on cooldown timers. The abilities I unlocked drastically changed the gameplay: Being able to per-

tension of an espionage movie, so we decided to force the player to make decisions in real-time... there is more branching and reactivity [in Alpha Protocol] than in any of our previous games."

The conversation system was the most surprising aspect I saw of Alpha Protocol. The limited response time not only results in smooth-flowing dialogue, but actively engages you in the conversations. The game trades meticulously weighing dialogue choices for gut reactions. At times I felt like Jack Bauer, having only seconds to decide whether to kill a potential informant. Other times I felt like James Bond, attempting to talk my way out of deadly situations when I was the one in the crosshairs. What could have easily been an overlooked aspect of the game truly captures the essence of a spy movie.

On the impact of your choices:

"...the story has an immense number of branches and outcomes. Almost everything you do in the game is going to affect something else, and once players start to see the ramifications of their choices, they're going to be amazed."

Clever dialogue doesn't mean much if your choices don't impact the story. Luckily, this is another area where the game doesn't disappoint. While the levels are largely linear, each mission presents several key choices to which players must react. The options are still oftentimes binary, but have a significant impact on future missions and the overall story. A results screen after every level details the decisions you make and the consequences of those actions. I felt like I was sculpting the story, rather than being led toward an inevitable outcome.

On possible sequels:

"The world we've developed for Alpha Protocol is much larger than what a player will experience in the game itself, and opens itself up to a lot of possibilities.... The direction the series takes will be determined by its publisher, Sega. Obsidian Entertainment has expressed interest in both a sequel and DLC, and has submitted ideas and proposals for both. At this time the most important thing is that Alpha Protocol launches well and is well received by our fans."

Parker is right. It's still too early to tell how the game will turn out, much less to start talking about sequels. For everything the game does right, we still ran into some significant balance issues – playing as a stealthy assassin feels great until a plot twist plunges you into the middle of a full-scale firefight. Some rough animations and aiming reticules the size of barn doors also hindered our enjoyment from time to time, but being a preview build, we hope these aspects will be further revised. This is a necessary evil for any game that attempts to break new ground. » **Jeff Marchiafava**

Check out the rest of our interview with Chris Parker at gameinformer.com/mag



We recently talked with Alpha Protocol's producer, Chris Parker, who gave us the reasons he believes gamers have nothing to worry about and why they'll still be impressed come summertime. Then we tried out a new preview build of the game for ourselves to see if we agreed with him.

On the leaked QA memo:

"...the document being referred to contained criticisms on a demo that was quite old at the

form critical hits from behind cover or slow down time to queue up multiple shots transformed me into a stealth assassin instead of an assault rifle-toting commando. An impressive number of weapons, armor, and upgrades help refine your style of play even further.

On Alpha Protocol's conversation system:

"When we started work on AP's dialogue system, we knew we wanted to embrace the



NBA Jam for XBLA or PSN?

EA says that the game's currently only for the Wii, but that it's "exploring options" for other systems due to the high number of requests.

NBA Jam

EA updates a classic

Believe it or not, EA Canada's remake of NBA Jam didn't start out as an NBA Jam game. A year and a half ago, the developers started working on a new arcade basketball title. Although EA already had the NBA Street series, creative director Trey Smith didn't like how the game made the player rely on AI teammates. Yes, NBA Street was well received, but the team felt that the street ball focus got too far away from the primetime NBA razzle-dazzle that people who don't even watch basketball appreciate. Instead of revamping the brand, Smith felt that they should make a new title that returned to that 2-on-2 or 1-on-1 gameplay where full-on human multiplayer was a lynchpin to the experience.

In developing the game, the team naturally kept referring back to the genre's high water mark, NBA Jam. That's when creative director Trey Smith got on the phone to the NBA. "You guys wouldn't happen to know what's going on with the NBA Jam license, would ya?" Smith asked. "That's when they said, 'You know, that's a really good question, let's get back to you.' The next day they called me and said, 'It's ours, and if you guys want it you guys can have it.'"

Luckily, integrating the license didn't necessitate major changes. Even with a year of development already under their belt, Smith and the team had built the game around a simple core experience – the same formula that made the original Jam so successful. EA's version shares many of the same features that made the former Midway franchise such a sensation. The team even met with original Jam creator Mark Turmell during development after he joined EA as a creative director. The mammoth dunks (plus some new ones), secret and legendary players, Big Head mode, catching fire, codes – it's all here.

More importantly, the game captures the pick-up-and-play spirit of arcade Jam with intuitive Wii waggle play. Whether you're on offense or defense, you have two motions (plus modifier

buttons) – that's it. Within these simple controls, however, the game adds a spin move not in the original that counters the defensive shove. Unburdened with complexity, and yet balanced with a simple rock-paper-scissors strategy, even in the early tech demo we played months ago the game is fast and fulfilling. If wagging isn't your thing, you can also turn the Wii Remote sideways and use the buttons. Smith says the team hasn't decided yet whether to utilize the Wii MotionPlus peripheral.

NBA Jam is broken up into two modes. The first delivers the same worst-to-first campaign as the original, albeit with all the graphics, animation, and AI upgrades (no more rubberbanding) that 17 years of developmental progress offers. The second, however, attempts to put a new stamp on the series' legacy. Unlike last summer's Punch-Out!!, which mimicked its beloved source material well but didn't expand into new areas, NBA Jam offers Remix mode.

Smith describes Remix mode as "Dynasty mode if Nintendo designed it. Meaning, you never know what you're going to match up with for that next game." Remix offers surprises via rule tweaks, different cameras, and maybe even power-ups. This is just a guess, but we expect a match in Remix to require you and your partner to win by executing the new-to-Jam alley-oop move. The mode may also call for you to strategically use different players and their abilities depending on the situation.

Too many half-baked Wii sports titles are watering down the competition; but, in bringing new pieces to the table like the Remix mode, NBA Jam looks like a real contender. With so many of the series' fundamental pieces in place, the game has a chance to appeal to both nostalgic fans and bring in those who never got to catch fire with the arcade title. **Matthew Kato**

For more screens go to gameinformer.com/mag



» Platform
Wii

» Style
1 to 4-Player Sports
(Online TBD)

» Publisher
EA Sports

» Developer
EA Canada

» Release
Fall



Kobe vs. Bird. A new Celtics/Lakers rivalry is born



Despite its multiplayer focus, online play is still up in the air



Bigger weapons do more damage but swing much slower; smart hunters will find a balance



Monster Hunter Tri

Prettier environments and more loot, but the same old monster-hunting action

- » **Platform**
Wii
- » **Style**
1-Player Action
(4-Player Online)
- » **Publisher**
Capcom
- » **Developer**
Capcom
- » **Release**
April 20

Although it doesn't share the same level of popularity in America, Capcom's *Monster Hunter* series is a sensation overseas, delivering a mix of resource gathering, dinosaur smashing, and co-op teamwork that the Japanese find addictive. With such a successful formula, Capcom isn't likely to switch things up too wildly, and my recent hands-on time with *Monster Hunter Tri* confirmed the game is very similar to its predecessors.

As with the original, you begin by creating a character and choosing to enter either the Village or the City. The City is your online hub for hooking up with buddies to search for targets that require two or more heroes to topple. Those looking to venture solo should head to the Village, which is being terrorized by an enormous sea monster called the Lagiacrus.

The promise of an epic confrontation with this threatening creature – a bizarre cross-breed of a crocodile, dinosaur, and electric eel – provides the carrot on the stick to continue pressing forward through solo quests. The Lagiacrus battle will feature underwater combat, the biggest addition to the series in *Tri*.

In a series already known for having touchy controls, underwater exploration adds another layer of complexity. Thankfully, it's not too difficult to handle. While diving, simply aim the camera

and move forward. Your character will automatically swim in whatever direction the camera is aiming, so to submerge or ascend you just point the camera down or up accordingly. The added dimension of movement makes hunting monsters in the ocean depths a bit trickier, but most of the water-based beasts I faced are slower than their landlocked counterparts. As with land encounters, careful dodging, measured sword swings, and/or bowgun blasts will eventually put you on top.

Before characters can jump into the fierce underwater battles, they must first learn the ropes. *Monster Hunter Tri*'s guild quest system is a slow burn, with each quest or task for each villager teaching you the basics of hunting and trapping wild beasts, scavenging for food and materials, and forging more impressive armor and weapons. That last one is especially important, as gaining new loot is the primary means of powering up your character. Grinding out drops for the next armor upgrade can be just as important as completing quests, especially since bigger weapons often swing incredibly slowly and leave you vulnerable to attack.

The standard Wii remote/nunchuk control option for the game proved unwieldy, requiring you to move the camera by using the awkwardly placed d-pad on the remote. Luckily, we also

had a chance to play using the new Wii Classic Controller Pro, a beefed-up classic controller that will be bundled with *Monster Hunter Tri*. This setup provides a much smoother experience, allowing camera control via the right analog stick, though it seems that you still need to break out the Wii remote occasionally to register monsters in your Hunter's Notes.

Tri also employs another Wii peripheral that you may have forgotten about: the Wii Speak microphone accessory. Originally bundled with *Animal Crossing* and long believed dead, *Wii Speak* enables voice communication when playing with friends online, something that the first *Monster Hunter* for PS2 lacked and *Tri* didn't have for its original Japanese release. This should help with the intricate strategies required to survive the most difficult co-op quests.

Despite its focus on taking down gigantic, incredible-looking critters, *Monster Hunter Tri* is not a typical action game. Most of the *Monster Hunter* faithful who are psyched about *Tri*'s release are comfortable with the slow-paced, thoughtful combat that Capcom has employed from the start. It's not very approachable, nor is it likely to draw in tons of fresh-faced Wii owners, but for the specific niche Capcom's created, it's well on its way to being another satisfying adventure. » **Phil Kollar**



Hunters will need to take to the ocean to complete some quests





WarioWare D.I.Y.

Build it and they will come

WarioWare built its following on hyper-speed flurries of simple yet addictive microgames. In fact, some of them are so simple you might be tempted to think you could make a game just as good. WarioWare D.I.Y. gives you a chance to put your money where your mouth is.

This time around, Wario has stolen Dr. Crygor's Super Makermatic 2.1, a gadget that allows him to produce his own DS cartridge and, of course, get filthy rich. One problem: Wario's much too lazy to do the work himself. That's where you come in.

While you can still play pre-made microgames in a manner similar to past WarioWare titles, the real fun is in the D.I.Y. Studio, which is a surprisingly robust development tool. This isn't just a level creator; the D.I.Y. Studio allows you to craft every element of your microgames from the music to the AI. You can also play microgames made by other users.

Thankfully, Nintendo and Intelligent Systems have figured out an interface that makes this complex-sounding process surprisingly accessible. In the tutorial (going through the tutorial is absolutely necessary), the process of making a game is broken down to four components: background, actors, music, and script. The game encourages you to think of your game as a play where you control all the action onscreen.

First off, you create a background using various tools like paintbrushes, background patterns, geometrical shapes, and stamps for objects like rocks and trees. It's a simple enough process that recalls the NES game Mario Paint. This is the canvas on which your microgame eventually takes place.

The second step is creating your "actors," which in this case means all the objects that either move or are interacted with onscreen. I draw a picture of a giraffe that looks like it was created by a slightly deranged second grader. I then draw another giraffe on a second frame of animation, just slightly off of the position of the first. The game automatically cycles between frames (you can make up to four) to simulate a walking motion.

Next up was the music, which you can comprise with a dot-placement system similar to Apple's GarageBand software. With four music tracks and one rhythm track, I create a fairly complex hip-hop beat.

The last part of the game is the AI. Basically every object on the screen can be given a script that tells it when, where, and how to move. You can also set conditions (or "switches") for winning and losing. It's all accomplished in code-like sentences that say "When X happens, then Y." It's a remarkably easy way to accomplish programming.

Soon enough I have a little microgame featuring a pooping, deformed giraffe. I'm an idiot. But the team behind WarioWare D.I.Y. is not; this is one of the most unique and intriguing DS titles I've seen in a long while. » **Matt Helgeson**

- » **Platform**
Nintendo DS
- » **Style**
1-Player Puzzle
- » **Publisher**
Nintendo
- » **Developer**
Nintendo/Intelligent Systems
- » **Release**
March 28



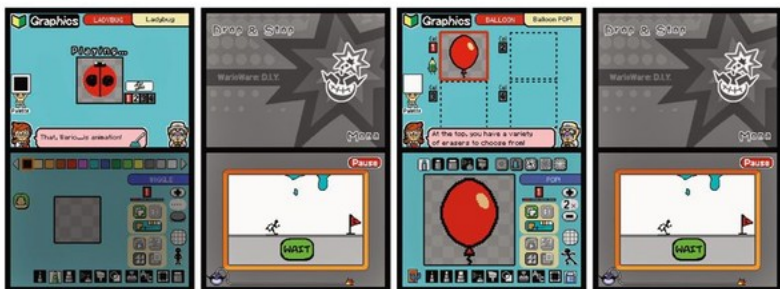
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Skate 3

EA introduces a new city and new ways to play



» **Platform**
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360

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

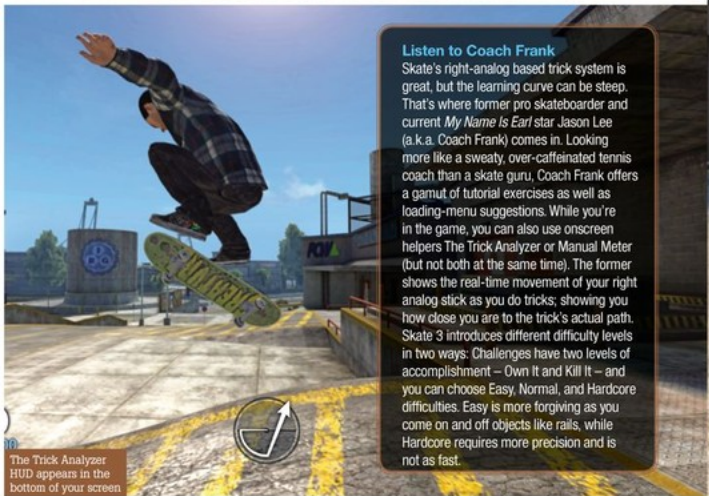
» **Publisher**
Electronic Arts

» **Developer**
Black Box

» **Release**
May

The Skate franchise's core mechanics don't need an overhaul, but that doesn't mean Skate 3 doesn't have new things to show both long-time fans and those dropping in for the first time. We got our hands on a preview build and went from one end of the game's new city, Port Carverton, to another in search of new adventures. » **Matthew Kato**

For videos of Skate 3 in action, go to gameinformer.com/mag



The Trick Analyzer HUD appears in the bottom of your screen

Listen to Coach Frank

Skate's right-analog based trick system is great, but the learning curve can be steep. That's where former pro skateboarder and current *My Name Is Earl* star Jason Lee (a.k.a. Coach Frank) comes in. Looking more like a sweaty, over-caffeinated tennis coach than a skate guru, Coach Frank offers a gamut of tutorial exercises as well as loading-menu suggestions. While you're in the game, you can also use onscreen helpers The Trick Analyzer or Manual Helper (but not both at the same time). The former shows the real-time movement of your right analog stick as you do tricks; showing you how close you are to the trick's actual path. Skate 3 introduces different difficulty levels in two ways: Challenges have two levels of accomplishment — Own It and Kill It! — and you can choose Easy, Normal, and Hardcore difficulties. Easy is more forgiving as you come on and off objects like rails, while Hardcore requires more precision and is not as fast.

Red Cobra



BS Boardslide

x1.5 **450**
LINE: 600

Blue Laser

Skate Sessions

Skate 3 offers several ways to play with your friends online. You can create a team to knock down team challenges, compete against other teams, invite your friends to complete single-player challenges in co-op fashion, or simply freeskate. Unfortunately, in freeskate the whole city is not open as one uninterrupted environment. Instead, your sessions are restricted to discrete areas. Moreover, the rosters of your single-player and online teams are separate. Although some of the challenges might be the same, the best you can do is having your online friends imported into your single-player team as an AI skater. Whatever you end up accomplishing in Skate 3, you can blast it out to everyone with the Twitter-esque skate.feed feature.



skate.PARK

[L1] Duplicate

[L2] Fine Tune

Terrain

Props

Lock Axis [R1]

Rotate [R2]

Parks & Rec

While you're skating, you're constantly earning up to 400 objects for your four customizable skate parks. If you don't feel like setting up your own park, Skate 3 lets you download up to 100 user-created parks as well. Given how active the Skate community has been through two games, we can't wait to see what innovative parks they come up with. Skate 2 gave fans the ability to drag in-game objects to spontaneously create their own spots, but Skate 3's Object Dropper takes things a step further. This lets you spawn a variety of objects out of thin air, so you're not reliant on what's in your immediate surroundings to create a sweet new spot.

[X] Place

[A] Delete

[B] Back

Newbies vs. Veterans

Whether it's your first time with the Skate franchise or you're an old hand, Skate 3 has something for everyone.

Newbies might like...

- The Trick Analyzer & Manual Meter
- The help of AI teammates in contests
- The wide-open accessibility of the University District
- Being able to download up to 100 pre-made skate parks from other players

Vets might like...

- The harder "Kill it" criteria for challenges
- Creating impromptu skate parks with the new Object Dropper
- Improved blunt slides
- The high-risk, high rewards of the Industrial District



gameinformer
★ GAME OF THE MONTH
88 God of War III

Kratos is back, and nothing on Olympus is safe. The jaw-dropping third installment in the God of War series features the Ghost of Sparta exacting his vengeance by cutting through every man, beast, and god he encounters. The combat is more fluid and the deaths are more brutal, but the real highlight of God of War III is the sheer scale and technical ambition. Sorry Santa Monica may be closing the book on Kratos, but this title opens new doors for the future of gaming.

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	Flawed. 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	The goggles do nothing!

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

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Resident Evil 5: Gold Edition

A bevy of extras make Gold a great package

9.5

PS3 • 360

» Concept

Lump loads of new content in with the core RE 5 campaign

» Graphics

Same snazzy engine from the original

» Sound

The creaks of the Spencer manor bring back that classic RE 1 atmosphere

» Playability

Outside of melee attacks, the new characters play the same as Chris and Sheva

» Entertainment

This is the only version to buy if you don't already have RE 5

» Replay Value

Moderately High



Style 1 Or 2-Player Action (4-Player Online) Publisher Capcom Developer Capcom Release March 9 ESRB M

Resident Evil 5's fantastic co-op gameplay, great bosses, intriguing environments, and addicting upgrade system made it one of the best games of 2009. Now Capcom has bundled the original game in with a long list of extra content similar to "Game of the Year" editions seen with other hit titles. While some add-ons are better than others, the overall value here impresses.

Two new stages are the biggest draw. Lost in Nightmares, a flashback to Chris Redfield

and Jill Valentine's raid of the Spencer manor, is the better of the two. Nostalgia is the focus here. You start out creeping around a dark and seemingly empty mansion, finding crank handles and passwords to unlock new areas. Camera swoops through doorways as you transition to a new room cleverly evoke those classic load screens without making you wait around. Once you get underground, however, combat ramps up. A new non-Majini enemy type provides a nice challenge, especially in tight corridors. If you're playing alone, however, your AI partner can annoyingly block your only escape route in these halls, resulting in a cheap death at the hands of these creatures. The final two sections involve a clever environmental kill puzzle room and a challenging battle with Wesker (as seen in the flashback cutscenes in RE 5).

Desperate Escape, the second new stage, follows Jill and Josh Stone during the main RE 5 timeline as they make their way to the endgame helicopter. Since this is set in the same world as the core game, a full set of standard Majini, chainsaw guys, and chain gunners are available for the shooting. A brief rocket turret set piece provides something new, but most of the stage is

about surviving waves of enemies while sticking around in one location. Keeping your AI partner alive on the last rooftop can be a complete pain in the ass. Unless you take out the most dangerous enemies ASAP, you'll constantly be reviving him or watching the dreaded "Your partner died" screen.

Each of these stages takes around an hour to complete, and a variety of achievements and trophies provide some nice replay incentive (see sidebar). Unfortunately, you can't bring any of your upgrades from the main career into these levels, which sucks because the progression system is one of my favorite things about RE 5. Who cares if I want to rocket the hell out of everything? At least give me the option on a second playthrough.

I wasn't a huge fan of the original Mercenaries mode, where you chain together Majini kills for a high score within a certain time limit, but the new Mercenaries Reunion spices up the old formula. Utilizing new crazy costumes for Chris and Sheva along with corresponding alternate weapon loadouts, Reunion allows players to use overpowered weapons like Chris' chain gun in a Merc context. Plus, this is the only way to play as Excella Gionne and classic characters Barry Burton and Rebecca Chambers. Reunion won't necessarily convert Mercenaries haters, but it's amusing to check out if only to see Barry's interpretation of "Miranda Rights."

The last piece of Gold content is the online versus mode that's been available as DLC since shortly after the original game's release. This mode isn't amazing, but it's nice to have for completeness' sake. » **Bryan Vore**

DLC Alternative

If you already own Resident Evil 5, it's smart to download the content separately. If you download all of the content, it comes to \$14, instead of \$30 for the packaged Gold Edition. The Mercenaries Reunion characters come included with the four DLC packs so you won't have to pay extra for that mode. If you want all of the content on one disc, the PS3 edition is your only option. The 360 version comes with a download token for the Gold features, since it won't fit on a DVD. Most importantly, downloading means you can play everything before Gold Edition hits retail on March 9.

February 17 (360/ 18 (PS3)

- ▶ Lost in Nightmares - 400 MSP (\$5)
- ▶ Costume Pack 1 - 160 MSP (\$2)

March 3 (360/ 4 (PS3)

- ▶ Desperate Escape - 400 points (\$5)
- ▶ Costume Pack 2 - 160 points (\$2)

Trophies/Achievements

Lost in Nightmares

- ▶ Beat Lost in Nightmares
- ▶ Earn an S rank on LiN
- ▶ Beat LiN on Professional difficulty
- ▶ Do a set amount of damage to Wesker
- ▶ Shoot all 18 hidden score stars in LiN

Desperate Escape

- ▶ Beat Desperate Escape
- ▶ Earn an S rank on DE
- ▶ Beat DE on Professional difficulty
- ▶ Kill 150 enemies
- ▶ Kill 3 Agitator Majini



Sonic & Sega All-Stars Racing

Sonic finally stars in a decent game



Fun power-ups like view-obscuring rainbows and shields litter the track

Style 1-4 Player Racing (8-Player Online) **Publisher** Sega **Developer** Sumo Digital **Release** February 23 **ESRB** E

Some say that landing second place in a race is simply being the first loser. When you're Sonic the Hedgehog, however, ranking right behind your long-time rival after over a decade of poorly received titles is a big achievement. Sonic & Sega All-Stars Racing is a blatant Mario Kart rip-off, but the hedgehog's emulation actually executes parts of the kart racing formula better.

I'll spare you on the specifics of the gameplay because you've done it all before. Firing power-ups, nailing boosts, and drifting around corners are easy to do with the game's simple, tight controls. Where Sonic's racing breaks from the pack is in its creative level design. These tracks are packed with ludicrous jumps, destructible environments, and hazards such as robotic crabs. Cruising around the glitzy casino courses and gorgeous Sonic Adventure areas puts other arcade racers to shame.

Sonic Racing offers a ton of choices when it

comes to characters. Problem is, most of them suck. Sega even called in backup from Rare with celebrities Banjo and Kazooie (360 exclusive) to pad out the lacking roster, but that won't stop you from groaning at the sight of Shadow the Hedgehog or Billy Hatcher. However, bowling through the likes of Dr. Eggman, Alex Kidd, and Ryo Hazuki as a powered-up Super Sonic is redeeming.

Whether playing online or via four-player spitscreen, Sonic Racing is best enjoyed with friends. Racers tired of hassling with friend codes and waiting five minutes to get a race going will love the game's breezy online setup. Once you're in a game, Sonic Racing's welcome battle modes, such as capture the flag and chaos emerald collection, offer variety to otherwise-by-the-numbers combat.

Despite being a solid kart racer, Sonic's new ride isn't without its share of flat tires. While the game contains a ton of fun and engaging tracks,

more theme varieties outside of the Dreamcast-era titles would have been nice. Many courses fall victim to their own extravagance, with some tricky turns being poorly indicated. Having a variety of cars, winged craft, and motorcycles is nice, but giving the players the option to choose from multiple carts for a given racer would lend the game some much needed variety. If you tend to ride a hog (no pun intended), for example, you're stuck looking at Shadow.

Sonic & Sega All-Stars Racing polishes the fundamentals of kart racing without adding any stupid gimmicks. If you're looking for the next big thing in wacky racing games beyond a capable online framework, don't look here. If you're looking for straightforward Mario Kart clone with a glossy Sega veneer, then this game is for you. **» Tim Turi**

Check out gameinformer.com/mag for a review of the Wii version

7.75

PS3 • 360

» Concept Sonic rides Mario's coattails past the finish line

» Graphics Sonic Racing's courses are lively and teeming with color

» Sound The commentary is god-awful, and some classic Sonic tunes would have been great

» Playability It's nice using a conventional controller to play an arcade racer for a change

» Entertainment Simple and frenzied fun for anyone looking for a non-Nintendo kart racer

» Replay Value Moderately High

Major League Baseball 2K10

Still can't catch a ball, but it can role-play with the best of them

Style 1 or 2-Player Sports (2-Player Online) **Publisher** 2K Sports **Developer** Visual Concepts **Release** March 2 **ESRB** E



Chicago Cubs Hall of Famer and baseball ambassador Ernie Banks famously said, "It's a great day for a ballgame; let's play two!" This quote sprang to mind as I recorded the final out in my MLB 2K10 debut. For some of you, this quote may fall into the category of "well, duh, who doesn't play two games in a row?". For those of you who spent time with MLB 2K9 — a game that helped increase the sales numbers of rival product MLB: The Show — this quote brings hope back to a series that was in danger of becoming an unintentional parody of the sport...like Roger Clemens.

In Visual Concepts' second year of development in this series, a firm foundation is established in both the feature set and gameplay. The biggest addition, which happens to be my favorite aspect of this game, is a new mode called My Player. While My Player draws heavy inspiration from MLB: The Show (I'm talking Pablo Sandoval heavy), player development isn't a guided tour like it is in the competition's game. Your player doesn't have to complete goals that work against his true strengths. Rewarding different experience points for pitching, batting, fielding, and baserunning allows gamers to sculpt a player's

attributes the way they want. This is a subtle difference between the two games, but My Player's approach speeds up player growth and rewards the gamer with a great sense of ownership over the experience.

I should point out that My Player manager logic needs serious work. Most of my pitcher's appearances ended in complete games (even with 130-plus pitches). In one outing, the faulty logic led to my pitcher being sent to the plate during a ninth inning tie with two runners on and only one out recorded. Other than this, My Player shines.

Franchise mode incorporates 40-man rosters and Minor League play into the mix, but still struggles with simulated statistics. Every pitcher has a bloated WHIP, and every batter ridiculously high stolen base and home run totals. Regardless, I did enjoy injecting prospects into my season play.

That brings us to gameplay. Visual Concepts has done a phenomenal job capturing both pitching and batting. The additions of a defensive swing and batter's eye allow players to work counts, and if they use them to their fullest extent, actually draw walks in a video game. The refinements made to the series' trademark

gesture-based pitching translate to a higher level of finesse (and hardly any meatballs).

Fielding remains a major sore spot. The AI has problems recognizing what plays to make — instead of turning an inning-ending double play, they'll throw the ball home to get one out. The game also does too much fielding work for the player. Whether it's a soft grounder or a popped up bunt, your player is always in position or breaking to make the play before you give him input. In most cases, I just threw the ball. While many of the animations are lifelike, most games bring hilarious moments where a player initiates a flashy move in an ordinary situation. Derek Jeter's leaping sidearm toss is seen just as frequently as a standard throw.

MLB 2K10 is heading in the right direction, but it's not quite where it needs to be yet. If you only have an Xbox 360, don't hold back from diving into My Player. I had a blast with this mode.

Since the focus is just on one player, the fielding annoyances are rarely seen. If the system doesn't matter, and your interest lies solely with gameplay, The Show is still the way to go. **» Andrew Reiner**

7.75

PS3 • 360

» Concept Visual Concepts' slagger makes progress, but is still playing .500 ball

» Graphics The new lighting effects change the conditions of play. Transitional animations don't always line up, which can sometimes turn a beautiful slow-motion replay into a comedic moment

» Sound John Kruk is the god of stats. The other commentators could learn a thing or two from him. It still sounds like you are hitting the ball with balsa wood

» Playability Fielding is still weak. Pitching and batting are excellent

» Entertainment My Player is the attraction. Problems with fielding hold the gameplay back from its true potential

» Replay Value High

Just Cause 2

An open world game packed with spontaneous excitement

9

PS3 • 360 • PC

» **Concept**

Create chaos in an open world playground that spans more than 600 square miles

» **Graphics**

The only thing more beautiful than the diverse locations are the explosions that blow them up

» **Sound**

The voice acting is utterly ridiculous, and the soundtrack is unremarkable

» **Playability**

The controls require practice, but feel great when you get the hang of them

» **Entertainment**

One of the most entertaining sandbox shooters ever created

» **Replay Value**

High



gameformer
GOLD

Style 1-Player Action Publisher Square Enix Developer Avalanche Studios Release March 23 ESRB M

The original Just Cause was a unique but flawed open world game. A variety of bugs, boring missions, and a complicated control scheme soured the fun of exploring the game's gigantic tropical island. Avalanche's second installment not only fixes these problems, but presents one of the most enjoyable sandboxes for players to experiment in this side of Grand Theft Auto.

Those who played the first Just Cause will be familiar with the premise. Rico Rodriguez once again finds himself trying to overthrow a maniacal dictator on a tropical island. To do this he performs missions for three different gangs to create Chaos, the currency that unlocks the main story missions that advance the plot. The story is Just Cause 2's weakest link: It only becomes vaguely interesting towards the end when bosses (and ninjas) start showing up. Aside from their ridiculously bad and borderline offensive accents, the game's characters are forgettable and one-dimensional.

Virtually everything else is improved, including the missions. You still won't care who you're supposed to be chasing down an informant or blowing up a missile as it launches into the stratosphere, but you'll have a blast while doing it. Even the most formulaic side missions are still fun, thanks to impressive visuals, Hollywood-tuned physics, and smooth controls for the numerous tricks at your disposal.

The grappling hook and parachute still take center stage, and make navigating the environment a cinch. Whipping through tree tops and propelling yourself over cliffs and buildings with

only inches to spare is exhilarating – especially when leaving countless explosions in your wake. After a period of acclimation, the controls allow for a level of precision that puts web slinging and bionic wife arms to shame.

The new ability to tether two objects together is less handy during combat, but can be a lot of fun when goofing around between missions. After toppling a statue of the island's dictator by tethering it to my helicopter, I spent a good 20 minutes trying to swing the still-attached stone head into the traffic below me like a wrecking ball. An unseen overpass ended the hilarity in a fiery explosion, but not before giving me a dozen other ideas of things to try out.

Unlike franchises like Modern Warfare or Gears of War, Just Cause 2's best moments are completely unscripted, the result of player-driven experimentation. It's something the game actively encourages: There's no penalty for dying outside of missions, and generous checkpoints during missions keep frustration to a minimum when something unexpected happens. Perhaps most importantly, the ability to call in a helicopter for extraction cuts down on mindless travel time when traversing the gigantic playing area.

The new island of Panau is not only big, but sports a ton of variety. In addition to jungles, you'll swing your way through forests, desert plateaus, and snow-covered mountains. Zooming out on your map to reveal the game's total real estate is overwhelming, and while I'm not sure if it's the largest open world game to date, the attention to detail is unparalleled and makes open-world games that focus solely on urban

environments feel downright mundane.

Which is not to say Just Cause 2 is lacking in concrete, either, with a whopping 368 locations to discover and explore. You can check each location off your list by blowing up anything with the government's insignia on it and collecting crates that upgrade your weapons, vehicles, and armor. Some of these locations are small fishing villages with just a few upgrades to find, while others are sprawling military bases with dozens of targets to blow up, or full-fledged cities filled with skyscrapers from which to base-jump. Rarely will the trip to a mission not get diverted by a new settlement to pillage, a high-ranking colonel to assassinate, or just a cool-looking vehicle to chase down and hijack.

In the end only a few disappointments surfaced. Until you upgrade your weapons or get your hands on some heavy-duty firepower, the gunplay feels underwhelming. Ammo for the more powerful weapons is usually scarce, limiting your time with the best of Just Cause 2's arsenal. Later in the game the difficulty ramps up to levels that border on frustrating, with enemies spawning endlessly until your Heat level diminishes, transforming you from a lethal acrobat to a bullet magnet.

The biggest disappointment by far is the lack of multiplayer, which is understandable given the game's ambitious scope, but a missed opportunity nevertheless. But none of these issues diminish the countless memorable moments Just Cause 2 provides, born out of the spontaneous chaos the player creates while simply exploring the world. » **Jeff Marchiafava**

MAG

An impressive player count can't overcome generic gameplay



Style 256-player Online Shooter **Publisher** Sony Computer Entertainment **Developer** Zipper Interactive **Release** January 26th **ESRB** T

After eight hours of working my way up the Valor ranks and unlocking the 256-player Domination mode, my first order of business was to pull up the map screen to get a sense of what I was stepping into. I was fully expecting to see a flurry of movement over a large area, but the sheer amount of activity still surprised me. Clusters of blue dots swarmed around red objectives across a massive map in a singular effort to take down an enemy facility.

That's when I realized how rewarding MAG could be when people are working together, and how much it can fall apart when they're focused on individual achievements. For fans of highly-organized tactical shooters, playing with 127 like-minded teammates is an experience no FPS to date has offered. Those who would rather work on their personal kill-to-death ratio are making things harder for themselves as well as bringing down the experience for hundreds of other gamers.

The most impressive aspect of MAG is how well it fulfills its promise of 256-player online gameplay. Lag rears its head from time to time, but no more than in multiplayer FPS games of a much smaller scale. It's organized in a smart manner, giving squad leaders and commanding officers easy access to the various orders they can issue. Once you're eligible for a squad leader position, it only takes a couple button presses to paint an air strike location or point your team toward a specific objective.

Your character improves as you work your way up through the ranks, earning skill points to unlock new abilities and weapons. Unlike Modern Warfare 2, you aren't limited to a set number of perks or upgrades at one time. Because of this, players of a higher level have an absurd advantage over those just starting out, with dozens of upgrades and abilities to give them an edge.

Many multiplayer FPS titles give you plenty of XP simply for participating in matches, but you must earn your stripes in MAG. Perform poorly in a match and you'll have spent a good half hour earning next to nothing. This works in MAG's favor, however, as commanders and squad leaders must earn the ability to apply for the position through playing well rather than simply playing often. Its mechanics and controls don't hold your hand either; they're just as skill-based as the ranking system. Don't expect auto-aim or any other form of assistance to help you when that Raven commando is charging you with guns blazing. It's all up to you and your reflexes.

Playing a game with over 200 people sounds overwhelming, but the gameplay is compartmentalized into local skirmishes. Your 128-person team is split into four platoons, with each platoon being home to four eight-player squads. Each team of eight is responsible for tackling a particular objective that contributes to the overall endgame (e.g. "Destroy the S.V.E.R. facility"). Whether you're securing cooling towers or taking down anti-aircraft guns, each squad acts as a small but vital part of the overall mission. You may not get the full scope of the battle at first, but a quick glance at the map screen will show you just how many things are happening at once.

Choosing which faction to align yourself with is a much bigger decision in MAG than in other titles of its kind. When you select Raven, Valor, or S.V.E.R. at the outset of the game, you're pledging your allegiance to them unconditionally for the foreseeable future. Raven features high-tech, almost futuristic weaponry, S.V.E.R. is more of a ragtag insurgent force, and Valor falls in the middle in terms of abilities and weaponry. If your faction is performing extremely well in one game type, they're granted the contract for it, resulting

in XP bonuses and other rewards. Be sure that you and your friends are on the same page when you pick your side, because you won't be able to play together if you belong to different factions.

How much fun you have in MAG is directly tied to the people you're playing with. If you're with a squad where everyone is communicating intelligently with each other, it can be a blast. Unfortunately, anyone who has ever played an online FPS knows that these sessions are the exception rather than the rule. Even on the rare occasion that you're with a strategic, team-focused squad, there's no guarantee the other squads on your side are doing the same. Your squad could be doing everything right in an effort to win the match, but if every other squad is filled with run-and-gun idiots off doing their own thing, it won't matter. A 30-minute match can seem like an eternity if your team isn't working together and you have no forward spawn points. When this is the case, the game devolves into a tiresome "run for a while, get shot, wait for respawn, and repeat" sequence.

Visual and audio sacrifices were clearly made to accommodate 256 players to the point that the entire experience lacks the visceral impact that its peers offer. Rockets explode into unimpressive puffs of smoke with hardly a sound effect, and revived players go from lying to standing with no transitional animation.

MAG's player count is an impressive technical achievement, but the game world feels oddly mechanical. Outside of the high player count, the uninspired world fails to stand out from the pack. If every gameplay mechanic were kept intact and shrunk down to a 16- or 32-player game, MAG would be an experience as generic as its title. » **Dan Ryckert**

7

PS3

» **Concept**
Expand FPS gameplay to an unprecedented scale

» **Graphics**
Stages and character models are as generic as can be, and explosions leave much to be desired

» **Sound**
Phoned-in voice acting performances and canned sound effects take you out of the big battle experience

» **Playability**
Controls are responsive, but cycling through equipment can be a pain

» **Entertainment**
Matches feel almost robotic and the experience lacks any sort of visceral impact, but it shows glimpses of what could have been when your team is working together

» **Replay Value**
Moderately High



God of War III

Sony Santa Monica brings down the mountain

10

PS3

» **Concept**

Finish the bloody tale of Kratos in an unbelievably epic way

» **Graphics**

The graphics and camera work are among the very best gaming has to offer

» **Sound**

As always, the music is excellent. The voice cast is the real surprise, including the likes of Malcolm McDowell, Rip Torn, and Kevin Sorbo

» **Playability**

Combat is fluid and responsive, and the context-sensitive sequences are even better without the buttons overlaid on top of the action

» **Entertainment**

You'll pounce from one explosive moment to the next as Kratos delivers his grim brand of justice to the denizens of Olympus

» **Replay Value**

Moderately High



You'll actually want to use the new weapons Kratos picks up in God of War III instead of sticking solely with the blades



Style 1-Player Action Publisher Sony Computer Entertainment Developer Sony Santa Monica Release March 16 ESRB M

Words like "visceral" and "brutal" are used to describe many violent games these days, but they wield the fullness of their meaning in God of War III. No other terms so completely convey the gut-wrenching sensation of eviscerating a mythical beast, decapitating a deity, or carving up a titan. While moments like these have defined Kratos over the years, God of War III isn't amazing just because it's violent; it's amazing because it conveys these experiences in ways you have never seen before.

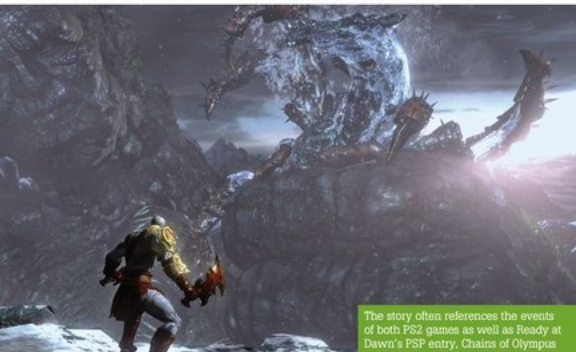
Kratos' stylishly elaborate combos and vicious context-sensitive kills have been adapted and emulated many times, making the video game

landscape a bloodier and more epic place. In the years since God of War II, while others were chasing the shadow of Kratos' fighting style, the team at Sony Santa Monica was elevating the scale and intensity to a level that once again proves Kratos is the undisputed king of the genre.

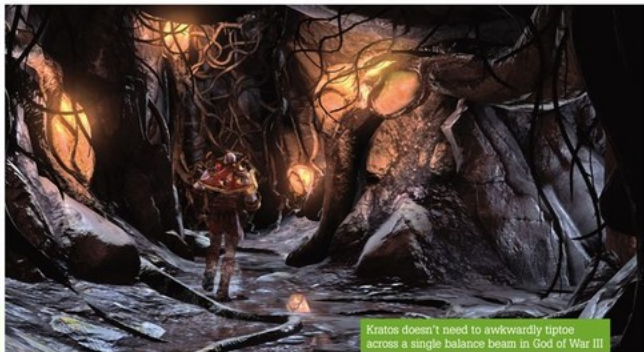
Something awesome is constantly happening in God of War III. Monsters slink from the shadows, titans break through walls, and gods launch divine assaults – and it's all woven seamlessly into the gameplay. Just when you think you know what's coming next, you'll encounter a unique sequence or mechanic – if only to be

used once – just to keep the experience fresh. Even the context-sensitive kills take on a new cinematic life, especially during the grisly deaths of the bosses (each of which will leave you picking your jaw up off the floor).

God of War III recaptures the one thing that God of War II was missing for me; it forced me to once again reconsider what I thought was possible for a video game to accomplish. I'm hesitant to ruin any of the moments here (spoiler: Kratos kills a lot of dudes), but let me put it this way: Remember the fight against the Colossus of Rhodes at the beginning of God of War II? At least three moments are just as astounding in



The story often references the events of both PS2 games as well as Ready at Dawn's PS3 entry, Chains of Olympus



Kratos doesn't need to awkwardly tiptoe across a single balance beam in God of War III



God of War III, with cinematic camera work even more impressive than Naughty Dog's feats with *Uncharted 2*.

God of War III takes the biggest strides forward in its cinematic presentation, but the nuts and bolts of the combat are also more refined. If you've played the previous games in the series, you'll find everything you love about Kratos' blade-slashing style intact, but even better than before thanks to the seamless integration of items. This new equipment (usually ripped from the dead fingers of a fallen adversary) allows you to dash, stun enemies, and perform ranged attacks – and they all draw from a rapidly recharging power source. This gives you the freedom to use these versatile tools instead of

conserving them, opening new combo possibilities. Used in conjunction with the sweet new weapons (I love the Cestus!) and maneuvers (I love the ranged grab!), these additions make Kratos feel like an even more fluid and capable combatant.

The only area where *God of War III* didn't blow away my expectations is the story. Previously, Kratos was driven by a thirst for vengeance against a single target – a concept that kept the narrative focused. In *God of War III*, that singular purpose is diluted by the number of characters, agendas, and objectives on the playing field at once. The plot isn't bad or difficult to follow, but it also doesn't have any standout revelations or developments; Kratos hunts down the gods, kills

them, and steps over the corpse to reach his next target until Olympus is in shambles. It isn't a major problem, however, because the real joy isn't in the events themselves, but rather in the astonishing ways those events unfold.

The fury, destruction, and murdered gods – it's all been leading up to this. When I first took up Kratos' blades back in 2005, I thought I was embarking on a simple quest for vengeance. After leaving a trail of bodies spanning four games and three systems, that quest has finally reached its end. Not even in my wildest dreams could I have imagined such a powerful, cinematic, and breathtaking conclusion to the saga of the Ghost of Sparta. » **Joe Juba**

Second Opinion 10

With heads, entrails, and limbs flying through the air like confetti, Kratos' thirst for revenge is the beating heart of *God of War III* – thumping faster and louder than we've seen or heard before. The development team reveals in Kratos' bloodlust, channeling his brutal sense of justice to create a journey that unfolds like a highlight reel. Gods fall, and they fall hard. We even witness one of their deaths from the eyes of the victim. From the murderous deeds to the towering level designs, creativity runs rampant throughout the entire game. The gameplay still retains the classic *God of War* charm, but is strengthened with the new weapons, not to mention the over-the-top scale of the boss encounters. As you'll learn in the bloodiest way possible, an average-sized man can topple a thousand-foot-tall giant. This level in particular is one of the coolest I've seen in any game, yet it simply blends with the rest of this adventure. The only blemish on this masterpiece is a puzzle that incorporates the PlayStation icons into Kratos' world. Outside of this minor misstep, *God of War III* is a whirlwind of violence that begins with relentless chaos and concludes with the most satisfying punch in video game history. » **Andrew Reiner**

MLB 10: The Show

A champion is crowned



9.5

PS3



Style 1 or 2-Player Sports (2-Player Online)
Publisher Sony Computer Entertainment
Developer Sony Computer Entertainment
San Diego Release March 2 ESRB E

» Concept
The most realistic baseball simulation to date

» Graphics
Everything, right down to the tiniest details like the stitching on the jerseys, is beautifully rendered. The animations are among the best in gaming

» Sound
The commentary team is dry and often oblivious to the action on the field. Thankfully, users can input their own sound and music

» Playability
The mechanics haven't changed, but a year's worth of tuning makes a hell of a difference

» Entertainment
This year's Show makes me feel bad for other sports games. The bar has officially been raised

» Replay Value
High

In the Menus

The one area where this series loses a bit of its allure is in the mode selection. With the debut of My Player in MLB 2K10, the Road to the Show mode is now antiquated to a certain degree. Being able to call the game as a catcher is a cool touch, and I love the new pitching exercises, but the weekly goal format could use a shot of the realism that the rest of the game exhibits. Having my pitcher work on improving his bunting ability before his fastball is an odd thing for a manager to ask. Don't get me wrong; Road to the Show remains a blast, but it's mostly the same song and dance as last season's game. Franchise mode allows players to manually set player injuries (I guess this is cool if you want your Franchise to sync up with the actual MLB season). CPU logic for trades and sim roster management is also much better this year.

Super Monkey Ball: Step & Roll

This monkey's not evolving



6

Style 1-Player Action Publisher Sega Developer Sega
Release February 9 ESRB E

Wii

» Concept
It's the same old Monkey Ball with Wii Balance Board support

» Graphics
Looks remarkably similar to previous Monkey Ball games. It's almost as if the Wii was just the guts of a GameCube thrown in a fancy white box...hey...wait a minute!

» Sound
Vaguely tropical digital muzak; the end credits songs aren't edgy enough for a Lifetime Original Movie

» Playability
You can play by tilting the Wii remote, or using the Wii Balance Board. Neither work as good as the old analog stick controls

» Entertainment
As Monkey Ball with motion control goes, it's fine. But adding new, problematic control schemes just isn't enough

» Replay Value
Moderately Low

I fell in love with Super Monkey Ball's simple concept of tilting the playfield to maneuver a ball-encased monkey through several challenging levels when it debuted at the launch of GameCube in 2001. But that was nearly 10 years ago, when games like Grand Theft Auto III, Metal Gear Solid 2, Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 3, and the original Halo were dominating sales. In video game years, that's an eternity.

While much has changed in the last decade, Monkey Ball has shown little growth. Nothing is wrong with sticking with what works, but it's pretty clear that this is just product for the sake of product. I can't detect any inspiration outside of a handful of clever levels; this Step & Roll seems content to go through the motions.

The new minigames range from pleasant to forgettable. The new levels present clever spins on the now-familiar tilting and rolling gameplay, featuring stop, back, and forward buttons for gates or revolving, clockwork-like parts. Sega also removed the boss battles that gave gamers fits from the last Wii title, Banana Blitz. But by and large, it's just a matter of rolling around, collecting bananas, and passing through the gate before time runs out.

The balance board certainly doesn't help the game's cause. Monkey Ball requires precision, especially as the difficulty ramps up, and I could barely cope with the rudimentary levels of the first world. Using the balance board to tilt balls around might work fine in a Wii Fit minigame, but Monkey Ball requires incredibly tight navigations. While it feels like the Balance Board is accurately transferring my motions onscreen, it's very difficult to stop and reverse the momentum of your legs and torso quickly enough to feel like you've got anywhere near adequate control. I'm no yoga master, but I'm not a total klutz either, and I would be curious to hear if anyone out there can even come close to completing this game with the Balance Board. If you can - hats off to you. For me, it felt a bit like eating Cheerios with a fork - different, but not advisable.

You can also play with the Wii remote, which is serviceable but still too inexact. At the end of the day, I'd still rather play with the good old GameCube controller or the Wii nunchuk analog stick (neither one is an option, unfortunately). It's pretty sad when the two major innovations that have occurred in the latest game in the series have made the gameplay worse, not better. **» Matt Helgeson**

Endless Ocean 2: Blue World

A peaceful, if plain underwater adventure



Style 1-Player Simulation (2-Player Online) Publisher Nintendo Developer Arika Release February 22 ESRB E10+

The first *Endless Ocean* was a peaceful, albeit directionless, underwater experience. Arika's second attempt at a scuba-diving sim for the Wii once again delivers the lazy tranquility, but also includes a globe-spanning adventure for the player to undertake. The story centers on the mysterious Song of Dragons, a strange call heard by divers around the world. Your quest to discover the song's true source takes you on a ridiculous adventure that features absurd characters and poor dialogue (at one point a character actually says "hasta la pizza" before leaving). The story also gives the game a much needed focus, and introduces more varied environments and some

simple puzzles to change up the gameplay.

The sequel packs a ton of extra activities. Players can snap pictures of wildlife for magazines, guide tourists around their favorite diving spots, and salvage buried treasure to make money. This money can be used to upgrade your equipment and buy various flora for your private diving reef. There are also about a billion fish to catalogue and add to your aquarium, as well as land animals to discover and poisons to befriend. The new pulsar gun allows you to scare off dangerous predators, or, in a confounding twist, heal injured fish. The seabed is littered with rare coins to collect, and your journal is constantly updated with new side missions to

undertake. Whatever body of water you find yourself in, there's always plenty to do.

In the end, the only criticism that can be lodged against *Endless Ocean 2* is that it's a scuba diving sim; the glacial pace at which you paddle around in the ocean will bore most gamers. Aside from a few sharks (that swat you with their tails instead of biting) and some timed puzzles near the end, this adventure is light on excitement. However, for gamers who dig the underwater exploration or are looking for a quality, family-friendly title, *Endless Ocean 2* offers a treasure trove of stress-reducing content. » **Jeff Marchialava**

7.5

Wii

» **Concept**
Trade action and violence for underwater exploration and education

» **Graphics**
Despite the low-res graphics, quality modeling and animation make for realistic fauna

» **Sound**
None of the dialogue is voiced, and the unique soundtrack gets repeated far too often

» **Playability**
Your character swims as slowly as a real-life scuba diver, but the controls are fine

» **Entertainment**
Endless Ocean will either pique your love of exploration and item collecting or cure your insomnia

» **Replay Value**
Moderately High

Calling

This cell phone-focused horror adventure gets poor reception

4.5

Wii

» **Concept**
Want to interact with the dead and transport to different environments? There's an app for that

» **Graphics**
In-game visuals and environmental backgrounds are rough around the edges

» **Sound**
The voice acting and ghost moans are amateurish

» **Playability**
Passable controls take some getting used to. Plenty of save points remove the frustration of restarting an episode after failed events

» **Entertainment**
Wandering dark hallways becomes stale rather quickly. Uninspiring puzzles are sparingly sprinkled in and hardly break up the monotony

» **Replay Value**
Low

Hudson's latest adventure kicks off with a group of teens that convene in a chat room to discuss a rumor about The Black Page, a website that allows users to communicate with the dead. Chat room participants mysteriously get sucked into the "Mnemonic Abyss," a cluster of locations where the deceased walk among the living. You'll play as different characters through multiple episodes to uncover a plot as poorly executed as most straight-to-DVD horror releases.

As the title implies, *Calling* involves use of cell phones to communicate with the dead and travel between three desolate locations within

the abyss: an old house, school, and hospital. You'll receive calls from the departed where less-than-stellar voice actors deliver eerie messages through the Wii remote's tinny speaker. Dialing phone numbers you receive on your journey will transport you to other areas in the abyss.

Most of your time is spent navigating dark, repetitive hallways in search of key items. Microscopic items littered across levels are easy to overlook, as they blend into the background's static textures. A faint glimmer would have been helpful, especially when roaming without a light source. Once all proper items are collected, events occur that typically involve shaking off

a ghost with the Wii remote, a sequence usually preceded by a load screen that interrupts gameplay flow and eradicates any feeling of suspense. Warding off ghosts unsurprisingly requires a few quick shakes of the remote.

Exploring *Calling*'s generic locales to interact with countless objects and engage in uneventful set pieces is hardly enjoyable. The game suffers from slow pacing throughout the eight-plus hour experience, which fittingly ends with an anticlimactic scene. You should just hit the ignore button on this one. » **Annette Gonzalez**

Head over to gameinformer.com for additional screenshots





The Misadventures of P.B. Winterbottom

An old-timey villain in a cutting-edge puzzler

8.5

360 • PC

» Concept

Steal pies and bend time in a stylish setting

» Graphics

Excellent art direction drives the style, but the main character is often too small on the screen to fully appreciate

» Sound

The soundtrack is a great fit, though some variety would help keep the tracks from getting repetitive

» Playability

Controlling P.B. is simple. The difficulty (and satisfaction) comes from figuring out what he should do

» Entertainment

The five main levels are a clever series of puzzles, while the optional time challenges are far less engaging

» Replay Value

Moderate



We're back... mind the numbers, you Buttwit.

Style 1-Player Puzzle Publisher 2K Games Developer The Odd Gentlemen Release February 17 ESRB E

Video game villains these days all have an endgame – some elaborate plan involving unwitting pawns and world domination. P.B. Winterbottom comes from a simpler time, where cartoonish capers and a diabolical moustache were all one needed to become

a pinnacle of infamy. Winterbottom lives in an age when pie theft is a deplorable offense, and insults like “buttwit” are the height of vicious wordplay.

While *The Misadventures of P.B. Winterbottom* draws its antiquated antihero and silent film aesthetic from a bygone era, the game doesn't feel remotely outdated. On the contrary, its devious puzzle design, entertaining writing, and striking artistic style earn Winterbottom its place as one of the best downloadable titles since *Braid* and *Castle Crashers*.

Players control P.B. Winterbottom, a notorious pie thief who has obtained the ability to manipulate time to create clones of himself. Fitting in with the old-timey movie theme, you'll record your actions, generating a P.B. doppelgänger who performs the recorded sequence in an endless loop. This concept is at the core of every puzzle, governing P.B. and his temporal copies as they flinch pies across the game's five levels. It sounds simple, but when you're managing several clones in a multi-pie gambit, things get delightfully tricky.

Once you master the basics, the game switches things up by adding a fresh set of conditions or restrictions. Sometimes P.B. needs to nab pies in a specific order. Sometimes only your clones can collect pies. Sometimes your clones are evil and kill you on contact. These twists on the formula aren't just to make things complicated; by periodically changing the rules, developer The Odd Gentlemen has ensured that you aren't just reusing the same tricks on an escalating scale. The variety makes every puzzle feel like a unique hurdle, making the experience satisfying without feeling bloated.

Since Winterbottom is a 2D puzzle game involving time, it invites comparisons to Jonathan Blow's *Braid*. However close they may sound in concept, don't make the mistake of assuming Winterbottom is just *Braid* in a different skin. It has its own clear identity, forged not only by distinctive puzzles but also by the charming writing delivered via interstitial poems and “hints” at the bottom of the screen (which quickly devolve into blatant antagonism). Complementing the quirky language is a stylized black-and-white Victorian setting. The union of the two is ultimately what makes the whole silent movie motif come together so successfully.

While I had a great time working my way through Winterbottom's bizarre world, as I neared the end, each success was met with a mixture of satisfaction and disappointment. Most scenarios are clever and fun to solve, but the puzzle design never gets a chance to bare its fangs. I'm not saying the game is easy; the challenges still require plenty of brain bending. However, the game never throws down the gauntlet with any “you expect me to do *what?*” situations that push the mechanics to their limit. This left some of the final scenes unsatisfying – though they are cool in other ways I won't spoil.

The entire quest will probably take most gamers between three and four hours to complete, which could be an issue for some people. If you're one of them, I encourage you to stop whining. The greatness of a game isn't decided by length. *The Misadventures of P.B. Winterbottom* impresses with its puzzle design, offbeat humor, and sheer style. Hopefully P.B. has more hinks in his future, because I already miss the ol' buttwit. » **Joe Juba**

Most of the time you're only managing a few clones. This area lets you use a lot more



They say self-sacrifice is the noblest virtue.

The art style fits perfectly with the silent movie aesthetic.



Déjà vu, Winterbum? Press X to smack switches.



8.75

PC

» **Concept**

Jump into the shoes of France's five-foot general and conquer Europe

» **Graphics**

Battles are best viewed up close and personal, where you can see the violent aftermath of a cannonball landing in a sea of soldiers and the dramatic clashes of bayonet-armed infantry

» **Sound**

A fantastic operatic score chronicles Napoleon's rise and fall

» **Playability**

The serviceable turn-based interface from Empire Total War returns, as do many of the legacy UI, diplomacy, and AI issues

» **Entertainment**

The Napoleonic campaign and historical battles will test your strategic might, and the promise of online multiplayer is finally fulfilled

» **Replay Value**

High

Napoleon: Total War

Conquer Europe through the eyes of one of history's great generals



Style 1-Player Strategy (8-Player Online) Publisher Sega Developer The Creative Assembly Release February 23 ESRB T

Napoleon Bonaparte once said, "One must change one's tactics every 10 years if one wishes to maintain one's superiority." The talented team at The Creative Assembly would be wise to heed the words of their latest game's namesake. Like the European conqueror, The Creative Assembly's signature blend of turn-based conquest and real-time battle ranks among the elite in its field, but as Napoleon: Total War demonstrates, persistent legacy issues have started to weaken the game's standing.

The centerpiece to the latest chapter in the Total War series is the Napoleonic campaign, in which you assume the role of the French conqueror as he develops an influence through theaters of war in Italy, Africa, and Europe proper. In addition to managing armed forces, players must juggle diplomacy, building construction, trade, and technology research in classic Total War fashion. Much like the Road to Independence campaign in Empire: Total War, each scenario takes place on a smaller tract of land without sacrificing the map scale players are used to with the series' famed global theaters. Concentrating on smaller segments of land is a smart move, as it allows the developers to deliver much more varied terrain for battles and stress the importance of maintaining supply lines for frontline armies. If your platoons stray too far from home or march through uninhabitable land, units won't replenish and attrition will compromise their effectiveness.

The challenge of meeting the objectives in each campaign is heightened by the strict timeframe in which Napoleon must triumph and the variation in tools at his disposal. The African map, for instance, robs you of all diplomacy as an invader in a foreign land, tasking you to make your way from Cairo up to the heart of the Middle East under the constant barrage of insurgent resistance. These enjoyable twists forced me to leave

my comfort zone and employ new strategies to accomplish the goals laid out before me.

The campaign's *pièce de résistance* is the European theater, where every prominent nation is gunning for your head as you stretch the French influence across the continent by adopting protectorate nations, pillaging fallen cities, and threatening those who oppose your expansionist goals. Managing a large empire is a delicate proposition, and unfortunately the diplomacy options aren't up to the task. As in past Total War games, negotiations with opposing and allied factions still don't offer meaningful feedback, leaving you to guess in frustration as to why your cease-fire agreement or request for military access is being rejected.

The campaign culminates in the near impossible finale at Waterloo, which challenges you to succeed where Napoleon failed in a battle tilted heavily in Britain's favor. It's not easy. After a dozen unsuccessful tries, I sullenly resigned myself to Napoleon's fate in the face of the overwhelming odds.

Another game mode features 10 historical battles that let players relive some of Napoleon's biggest triumphs. Players can attempt to match Bonaparte's military process by mimicking his tactics, or strive for personal glory with more unconventional strategies. These battles were sculpted with real-world tactics, and they feel more rewarding and realistic than the more spontaneous skirmishes found in the campaigns that are sometimes plagued by dumbfounding AI. In a couple campaign battles I watched in disbelief as the opposing general ran for the hills *toward my army* before the infantry even clashed, making it extremely easy to cut the head off the opposition and break their morale before the cannonballs started flying. None of these flaws reared their head in the historical battles.

If the questionable enemy AI drives to you

auto-resolve almost every battle like me, Napoleon offers another solution. The new drop-in battles now allow a human opponent to take the reins of an opposing army in your campaign provided the number of troops is relatively even. Players interested in pick-up matches can join the queue through a multiplayer menu, but be forewarned. The matchmaking doesn't convey any information about your army's composition or the battle terrain beforehand, so you won't know what you're getting into until you accept the match.

Perhaps the biggest addition to Napoleon: Total War is the multiplayer campaign, a Risk-like mode that pits two players against one another in the European theater, each vying for unquestioned reign over the continent. The mode thankfully includes customizable settings that allow you to turn on or off real-time battles and adjust the difficulty for both players before the match starts, which helps to speed up the turns and even the playing field, respectively. Since one turn in a game this detailed can take a player a considerable amount of time, Creative Assembly smartly allows the other player to peruse the map, check out building queues, and even schedule more construction while they wait their turn. Our campaign ran relatively lag free, though the game hiccupped and froze a few times in between player turns.

Napoleon: Total War may not rewrite history, but its subtle gameplay refinements, tactical variety, and new multiplayer campaign do more than enough to offset the litany of legacy issues hindering this otherwise impressive strategy game. If Creative Assembly wants to match the strategic legacy of the famed French general, however, it's time to address battle AI and diplomacy feedback before they compromise the franchise's integrity. » **Matt Bertz**

Second Opinion 8

Few gamers pull off the sense of scale and epic conflict that Total War does so well. Reliving the exploits of Lord Nelson as he struggles to clear the west coast of Europe of Spanish and French navies is an amazing experience — and that's a tiny part of the ongoing struggle against Napoleon's aggression. I love the feeling of true continent-spanning conflicts that I get when I play Total War, and the stories that any grand campaign spawns. This installment captures this epic feel as well as any. At the same time, I lament that a game that does so much so right can also be so unforgivably wrong in other ways. The AI is still hilariously broken at times in both the battle and strategy layers, fortress sieges are as buggy as ever, and legacy issues with the interface slowly drive me berserk every time I play. I like Napoleon for what it is, and I'll have a good time with it now and again until the next Total War release; if I'm proved enough that I'll play this over Empire, Rome, or Medieval. However, I don't know how much longer my tolerance for the constant bugs and AI issues that have plagued this series is going to last. » **Adam Biessener**

Supreme Commander 2

In standardizing its approach, Gas Powered's sequel sacrifices its identity

8

PC

» **Concept**

Dial back some of the first game's more aggressively unusual designs to make a large-scale RTS that more people can understand

» **Graphics**

Explosions are pretty enough, but you'll spend a majority of your time zoomed out to the point that the war is being fought by icons

» **Sound**

The lasers on the tanks go pew pew pew

» **Playability**

The fantastic possibilities for automating your units and factories are ingenious, but I have to wait for the tooltip to make sure I'm building a laser turret instead of a mass extractor

» **Entertainment**

This sequel finds itself in a no-man's-land between the ambitious original and traditional RTS. Sending hundreds of robots to their doom is still amusing, though

» **Replay Value**

Moderate



Style 1-Player Strategy (8-Player Online) Publisher Square Enix Developer Gas Powered Games Release March 2 ESRB E 10+

What about the 360 version?

Due to the staggered release – SupCom 2 releases two weeks later on 360 – we were unable to review version of the game. When we have that opportunity, we will evaluate it separately and report on any substantial differences between the two versions. Any updates will be posted immediately to gameinformer.com, so you won't have to wait until the next issue to find out about any discrepancies between the PC and 360 versions.

Supreme Commander 2 suffers from an identity crisis. The first game threw out the real-time strategy rulebook and forged in a bold new direction with a smooth income/expenditure economic model and maps so huge you could literally nuke an entire base and only put a dent in your opponent's overall war effort. It made some missteps along the way, but fixed many of them – most notably the unfortunate interface – in the Forged Alliance expansion. Developer Gas Powered Games has since shied away from some of its unique aspects while attempting to retain the game's core concept of building huge robot armies and watching them blow each other up. While that central amusement factor is still there, and I deeply appreciate the extensive unit rework, much of the strategic overlay that made the original compelling has gone out the window in favor of a more standard approach.

The monstrous scale of Supreme Commander 2, while not as gargantuan as its predecessor, means that your limited time is best spent on planning overarching strategies rather than focusing on unit micromanagement like in many other real-time strategy games. It's suicide to give a big mob of mixed units a general attack-move order in StarCraft, but it's standard procedure in SupCom. Most of your time will be spent pondering larger issues like claiming new mass deposits and managing your research and production to counter your

enemy. For the most part, SupCom 2 plays a lot like a zoomed-out version of a traditional RTS game. The gameplay lost by ditching unit micromanagement is made up for by the capability to execute grand strategies using multiple battlefronts and giant robots. There's little to find fault with in the basic gameplay; it is very competent.

The problem is that "competent" is the best word to describe Supreme Commander 2. Where the original imaginatively invited players to approach economy in an entirely new way, the sequel falls back on genre norms. Rather than the slow resource drain of a working factory or engineer, SupCom 2 makes you pay for everything up front when you order its construction. This destroys the ever-expanding model of the first game, where the rate of your economic expansion is often more important than its moment-to-moment output. It's still possible in theory to boom a sprawling economy past an opponent via buildings that convert energy to

mass, but you'll likely be pounded to oblivion long before you can make that strategy work.

I'm disappointed by the sequel's shift in vision on the big things, but other aspects of the game received much-needed improvements. Rather than having a full suite of unit types in each tier, your existing forces improve as you research better technology. This means that there is a lot less minutiae to track as a match progresses. Research has been similarly changed, moved from upgrading individual buildings to a global tree where you spend points garnered over time. While there are some boring but effective upgrades like "15% increased damage," much of the available tech results in dramatic effects like adding shields to all your air units or unlocking impressive experimental units. The experimentals themselves are much more useful than in the original, with more available to each faction and a greater variety of roles on the battlefield.

It's too bad that Supreme Commander 2 betrays so much of what made the original unique, as the iterative design and fine-tuning improvements across the smaller facets of the game are outstanding. Except for that whole "Square Enix is going to help us make a good story this time!" thing – the plot is lame as ever.

You can have a good time with Supreme Commander 2. It's just not all that different than the enjoyment to be found in any other solid RTS of the last decade. I would love to see someone mod SupCom 2's units and research into the original's overall structure. » **Adam Biessener**



Hit up gameinformer.com/imag for an exclusive Afterwards interview with Gas Powered Games

Dragon Age: Origins – Awakening

The tale of the Grey Wardens continues



Style 1-Player Role-Playing Publisher Electronic Arts Developer BioWare Release March 16 ESRB M

The Archdemon is dead, the Blight is quelled, and peace is restored to Ferelden.

For a Grey Warden who specializes in saving the world, what else could you possibly accomplish? As a full expansion to Dragon Age: Origins, that's the question Awakening is called upon to address. Unfortunately, the answer seems to be "not much."

I'd be the last person to complain about getting more Dragon Age; I still love the core gameplay, so Awakening's additional quests, skills, and items are all the reason I need to start killing darkspawn again. However, as an expansion, Awakening doesn't contribute much beyond simply lengthening the time you can spend as a Grey Warden. It feels like a direct-to-video film sequel, shuffling the core components of the Dragon Age world to create a new story in a familiar skin.

With the major darkspawn threat neutralized in Origins, you're left with clean-up duty in Awakening. By importing your old character or creating a new one, you'll assume the position of Warden Commander in Amaranthine and deal with the aftermath of the Archdemon's

death. The darkspawn that didn't retreat have begun fighting each other, and you need to get to the bottom of the conflict and restore order to the region. The premise is cool – especially since you are essentially the feudal lord of the Amaranthine – but it doesn't evolve the basic formula.

All of the features where Awakening could have built on the Dragon Age foundation are sidelined, like the team at BioWare knew where to expand but didn't have the time to flesh them out. Building up your base at Vigil's Keep is just a handful of simple upgrades. Governing the region is handled in a single sequence where you mete out justice. Unraveling a conspiracy

against your rule is a brief sidequest. Maybe a 15-hour adventure isn't enough to time to dig into these concepts, but they feel pretty hollow and unsatisfying as implemented.

Despite some disappointments, Awakening is still worth playing for the devoted Dragon Age fan. The tactical combat hasn't gotten any less entertaining, and the story reveals an interesting twist on the world's compelling lore. Awakening enriches the universe with new revelations and characters (two of the new party members are particularly awesome), but only makes half-hearted attempts to improve the basics. » **Joe Juba**

7.75

PC

» **Concept**
More Dragon Age!

» **Graphics**
Why can't I find a single piece of headgear that doesn't make my mages look absolutely ridiculous?

» **Sound**
Pretty much the same music and voice actors, all of which are good

» **Playability**
Strategic pause-and-play battles are still the heart of the game, and control as well as ever

» **Entertainment**
Provides the same brand of fun found in the original. Unchanged, but also unimproved

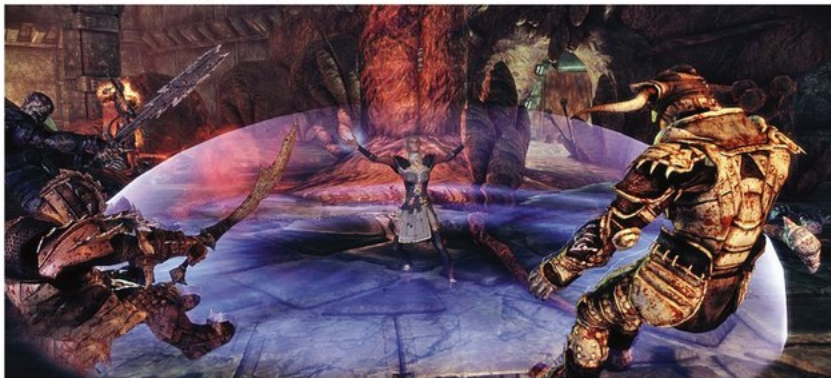
» **Replay Value**
Moderate

The Warden Commander

The origin stories were a distinguishing feature of Dragon Age, giving players a chance to learn their character's backstory and motivation. If you create a new character in Awakening, you don't get a new origin story, leaving the new Warden Commander a silent cipher. Vague references are made to your past in the neighboring nation of Orlais, but none of it is explored or explained.

PC Only?

Awakening will also release for PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360 on March 16. EA was not able to provide us with reviewable copies for this issue, but we will evaluate the console versions separately and review them in the future if warranted. Otherwise, please consider this our definitive review.



9.5 | Heavy Rain

Platform PS3 Release February 23 ESRB M
Issue Mar '10



Taking the right lessons away from its previous title, *Indigo Prophecy*, developer Quantic Dream has shown away most traditional video game trappings from *Heavy Rain*. What remains is an innovative journey through an engrossing and well-paced mystery.

PLAYSTATION 3

Avens vs. Predator	5.75	Mar-10	Guitar Hero Smash Hits	8	Aug-09	Saboteur, The	8	Jan-10
Army of Two: The 40th Day	6.5	Feb-10	Guitar Hero: Van Halen	7.5	Jan-10	Sacred 2: Fallen Angel	7.75	Jun-09
Assassin's Creed II	9.5	Jan-10	Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince	7	Sep-09	Saw	6	Nov-09
Avatar	6.5	Feb-10	Heavy Rain	9.5	Mar-10	Star Ocean: The Last Hope - International	7	Mar-10
Band Hero	7.75	Jan-10	Heroes Over Europe	6.5	Oct-09	Tekken 6	8.75	Dec-09
Batman: Arkham Asylum	9.5	Sep-09	Ice Age: Dawn of the Dinosaurs	6.5	Sep-09	Terminator Salvation	5.5	Jul-09
Battlefield 1943	8.5	Aug-09	Infamous	9	Jun-09	Tiger Woods PGA Tour 10	8.5	Jul-09
Battlefield: Bad Company 2	9.5	Mar-10	Jurassic: The Hunted	6	Feb-10	Tony Hawk: Ride	5.75	Jan-10
Bayonetta	9	Feb-10	Kataman Forever	7.25	Nov-09	Tornado Outbreak	6.75	Dec-09
Beastie: Rock Band, The	8.75	Sep-09	King of Fighters XII, The	7	Sep-09	Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen	6.25	Sep-09
Bigs 2, The	7	Aug-09	LEGO Indiana Jones 2: The Adventure Continues	6.5	Dec-09	UFC 2009 Undisputed	8	Jun-09
BlockShock 2	8.25	Mar-10	LEGO Rock Band	8	Dec-09	Uncharted 2: Among Thieves	10	Nov-09
BlackLine: Calamity Trigger	7.75	Jul-09	Madden NFL 10	8.75	Sep-09	Virtua Tennis 2009	7	Sep-09
Borderlands	9.25	Dec-09	Marvel Ultimate Alliance 2	8	Nov-09	Watchmen: The End is Nigh	5.5	Sep-09
Brital Legend	8.25	Nov-09	Matt Hazard: Blood Bath and Beyond	7.75	Mar-10	Wet	7.5	Oct-09
Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2	9.75	Dec-09	MX vs. ATV Reflex	7.5	Jan-10	White Knight Chronicles	7.25	Mar-10
Call of Juarez: Bound in Blood	8	Aug-09	NBA 2K10	8.25	Nov-09	Wolfsenstein	7.25	Oct-09
Damnation	3	Aug-09	NBA Live 10	7.5	Nov-09	WWE Smackdown vs. Raw 2010	8.25	Nov-09
Dante's Inferno	7	Mar-10	NCAA Basketball 10	7.25	Jan-10	X-Men Origins: Wolverine	8	Jun-09
Dark Void	7	Feb-10	NCAA Football 10	8.5	Aug-09			
Darksiders	8.5	Feb-10	Need for Speed: Shift	8	Oct-09			
Demon's Souls	9	Dec-09	NHL 10	9.25	Oct-09			
Dev 2	8.5	Oct-09	NHL 2K10	5.5	Oct-09			
DJ Hero	9	Dec-09	Ninja Gaiden Sigma 2	8.5	Nov-09			
Dragon Age: Origins	8	Dec-09	Operation Flashpoint: Dragon Rising	7	Dec-09			
Dynasty Warriors 6 Empires	6.25	Sep-09	Overlord II	6.5	Aug-09			
FIFA 10	8.5	Nov-09	Pro Evolution Soccer 2010	8.5	Jan-10			
Fight Night Round 4	9	Aug-09	Prototype	7.25	Aug-09			
Final Fantasy XIII	9.25	Mar-10	Ratchet and Clank: A Crack in Time	9.25	Dec-09			
Fuel	7.75	Jul-09	Red Faction: Guerrilla	9	Jul-09			
G-Force	7.75	Sep-09	Rogue Warrior	1.5	Feb-10			
G.I. Joe: The Rise of the Cobra	3.5	Sep-09						
Ghostbusters	8	Jul-09						
God of War Collection	9.5	Jan-10						
Guitar Hero 5	8.5	Oct-09						

XBOX 360

Avens vs. Predator	5.75	Mar-10
Army of Two: The 40th Day	6.5	Feb-10
Assassin's Creed II	9.5	Jan-10
Avatar	6.5	Feb-10
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Battlefield: Bad Company 2	9.5	Mar-10
Battlestations Pacific	6	Jul-09
Bayonetta	9	Feb-10
Beastie: Rock Band, The	8.75	Sep-09
Bigs 2, The	7	Aug-09
Bionic Commando	6.25	Jun-09

7 | Risen

Platform 360 Release February 23 ESRB M

Struggle through the admittedly bad third-person action, and you'll find a role-playing experience well worth your time. But I won't blame you for not being willing to put up with this shoddy technical execution when there are so many great RPGs out there, either.—Adam Biessener

URL: gameinformer.com/mag

6.75 | Metal Slug XX

Platform PSP Release February 23 ESRB T

This is nearly an exact port of *Metal Slug 7*, which released in late 2008 on the DS. However, *XX* corrects the DS version's ultimate sin of lacking *Metal Slug's* trademark two-player co-op.—Bryan Vore

URL: gameinformer.com/mag

8.75 | Mega Man 10

Platform PS3 • 360 • Wii Release March ESRB E

It offers all the nuts and bolts a diehard blue bomber fan could want in another retro sequel, boasting even more content than *Mega Man 9* with all its DLC combined.—Tim Turi

URL: gameinformer.com/mag

7.5 | Vandal Hearts: Flames of Judgment

Platform PS3 • 360 Release January 20 ESRB T

It's shorter and uglier than most strategy RPGs that have come before, but it's also unique in a way that some will find charming.—Phil Kollar

URL: gameinformer.com/mag

4.5 | Last Rebellion

Platform PS3 Release February 23 ESRB T

Whether you're looking at the tiresome combat, the empty environments, or the incomprehensible translation job, everything about *Last Rebellion* comes off as a bargain bin RPG that has learned nothing from the last four years of game releases.—Phil Kollar

URL: gameinformer.com/mag

7 | Rooms: The Main Building

Platform Wii • DS Release March 23 ESRB E

Gimmicky objects add almost too much variety to *Rooms'* sliding-tile puzzles. Solving many of them relies on trial and error, which is stalled by slow animations. Stick with it and you'll find a unique puzzle game that's quirky enough to redeem most of the bad bits.—Jeff Cork

URL: gameinformer.com/mag



Asteroids Deluxe

(Arcade, 1980)

The simple but endlessly challenging gameplay of Asteroids served as the blueprint for many early titles in the shooter genre. Asteroids Deluxe maintains most of the basic features of the original game – a small onscreen ship attempts to blow apart passing asteroids and alien saucers before getting destroyed. This semi-sequel added ship shields, introducing a new defensive layer of strategy to the game, not to mention a snazzy new background to go with the vector graphics.

Lunar Lander

(Arcade, 1979)

Lunar Lander has a straightforward concept – pilot a spaceship to a safe landing on the moon. Despite being one of the very early arcade games, it boasts complex gameplay elements like managing thrust and adjusting for gravity and drift. Challenging controls demand careful maneuvering to reach the highest point value landing zones – often laid out along steep hillsides. The original game features a sneaky feature that helps to gobble up quarters – players can pilot their ship until fuel runs out, but additional quarters refill your supply. The concept was adapted to any number of other games in future years.

Back to Basics

We reminisce over
the first batch of
titles for Microsoft's
Game Room *by Matt Miller*

This spring, Microsoft is releasing the Game Room, a new destination on Xbox and Windows Live for retro gamers and those interested in playing famous titles from gaming's past. The service provides a nostalgic return to the glory days, with modestly priced titles that preserve the original graphics and audio. Starting with a variety of Atari 2600, Intellivision, and arcade entries, Microsoft says the Game Room will house an ever-expanding collection of classic titles, with new ones releasing every week. The game room itself is free, but players will have to pony up 240 Microsoft points (\$3) to purchase a game for either the Xbox 360 or PC. Throw down 400 Microsoft points (\$5) and you can play them on either platform. We've examined the first 30 titles, and here are the staff's favorites to help get your retro collection started.



Crystal Castles

(Arcade, 1983)

Crystal Castles gets credit for being one of the earliest arcade titles with a story that actually came to an end, in contrast to the norm of the day – indefinite play until your quarters ran out. The original arcade version uses an unusual control input for a character action game: a trackball navigates the cartoon bear to gather gems and avoid enemies around the geometric courses. Newer versions, including the Xbox Live one, make due without the trackball, but the colorful environments, catchy music, and unique stage layouts remain engaging.

Centipede

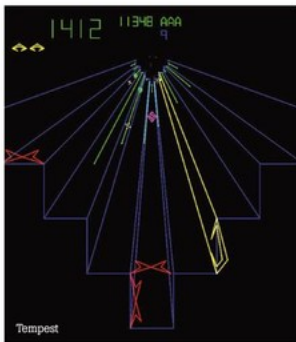
(Arcade, 1980)

This 1980 coin-op classic's simple formula has held up for 30 years, remaining a staple of arcades since its introduction. As the player navigates a shooter at the bottom of the screen using a trackball, a centipede descends from above. Every time it hits an object, the centipede drops down and switches direction. Players must destroy the centipede before it reaches the base of the screen, all the while dodging other enemies like spiders and fleas. Centipede's success inspired a sequel, Millipede, which is also on the list of releases for the new Microsoft Game Room.

Yar's Revenge

(Atari 2600, 1981)

The best-selling game of all time on the Atari 2600, Yar's Revenge is a fascinating and unusual game created by Howard Scott Warshaw. A surprisingly colorful backstory accompanies Yar's Revenge, with the insect-like Yar aliens out to avenge the destruction of one of their planets. Gameplay involves navigating your Yar about the screen while trying to take down the barriers protecting the enemy Qotile as it shoots blasts of energy to take you down.



Tempest

(Arcade, 1981)

The popular and well-remembered Tempest was an early attempt at communicating three-dimensional environments. Players control a spaceship that can move around a field of parallel tracks. Monsters inhabit each segment, and the goal is to shoot them down before they touch your ship. By allowing players to start a new game at a later level based on their previous performance, Tempest included one of the earliest iterations of the "Continue" concept.

Combat

(Atari 2600, 1977)

When the Atari 2600 launched in 1977, Combat was one of the nine titles that came along for the ride. The game remained a bulwark in the console's lineup for years, and was included as a pack-in until 1982. The game pits two players against each other in a contest of wills and luck. A big part of the game's longevity was its many modes; there were 27 different ways to play the game, including tank, biplane, and jet versions, each with slightly different rules of engagement. Some of the best and most exciting variations include invisible tanks and another with shots that bounced off walls. Many a sibling rivalry was stoked in the fires of Combat. However, newer gamers might find that Combat hasn't aged as well as other games on this list.

The Rest of the Best

These titles are also scheduled for availability when Game Room launches, with dozens more promised over the coming months.

Adventure

(Atari 2600, 1979)

Armor Battle

(Intellivision, 1979)

Astrosash

(Intellivision, 1981)

Battlantis

(Arcade, 1987)

Finalizer

(Arcade, 1985)

Football

(Atari 2600, 1979)

Gravitar

(Arcade, 1982)

Jungler

(Arcade, 1981)

Millipede

(Atari 2600, 1987)

Mountain Madness:

Super Pro Skiing

(Intellivision, 1988)

Outlaw

(Atari 2600, 1978)

RealSports Tennis

(Atari 2600, 1983)

Red Baron

(Arcade, 1980)

Road Fighter

(Arcade, 1984)

Scramble

(Arcade, 1981)

Sea Battle

(Intellivision, 1980)

Shao-Lin's Road

(Arcade, 1985)

Space Armada

(Intellivision, 1981)

Space Hawk

(Intellivision, 1981)

Star Raiders

(Atari 2600, 1982)

Sub Hunt

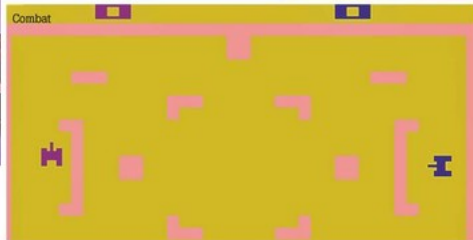
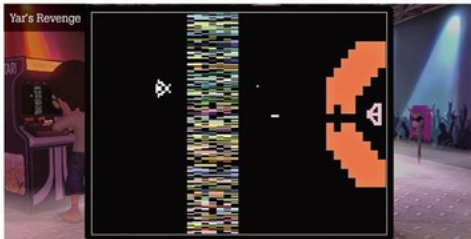
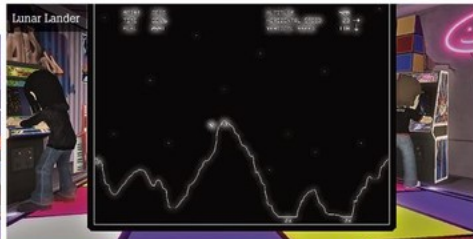
(Intellivision, 1981)

Super Cobra

(Arcade, 1981)

Tutankham

(Arcade, 1982)





THINGS YOU DIDN'T KNOW ABOUT...

DAVID CAGE

Most people know Quantic Dream's David Cage as an outspoken advocate of storytelling in games. His pioneering work on titles like *Indigo Prophecy* and *Heavy Rain* have earned Cage a place as one of the prominent figures in game development, but gamers don't know much else about him. Did you know that he was a professional musician? Or that "David Cage" isn't even his real name? Read on to learn more about this fascinating industry icon.

+ "My real name is David De Gruttola, but when I started working in this industry with English and Americans, absolutely no one was able to pronounce my name right. So after months hearing all possible variations of my name, I decided to use the name of an aunt to make sure no one would have problems with my name anymore. It worked 95 percent of the time. **Sometimes people call me Nicolas Cage...but that's fine.**"

+ "I always managed to be reasonably successful at school without having to work too much. In fact, **I was more interested in becoming a professional musician.** When I was 14, I started working in sound studios in parallel with school."

+ "I left university after three months, having signed a contract with a record company in Paris."

+ "I draw my inspiration from everything - books, comics, movies, theatre, painting, and TV. **But the best source of inspiration is always life.**"

+ "Looking back at my career (I am still a little bit young to do this), there is nothing I am really proud of. **I feel my career is incredibly slow and painful**, to be honest."

+ "When I started working on *Omikron: The Nomad Soul* 12 years ago, I thought that games would become art in a couple of years. Here I am, 12 years later, saying the same thing with the feeling that nothing has changed and that the industry makes the same games."

+ "[Team Ico's] **Fumito Ueda is probably the interactive creator I admire most.** I think he is definitely one of the few authors in our industry with a very personal universe and tone. Five guys like him, and the face of the industry would be changed forever. Unfortunately, I don't think there are two."

+ "If power goes out in my home, I would spend the afternoon playing with my kids, playing piano, and reading a good book. **I could live without computers and video games.**"

+ "You cannot imagine the amount of bugs flagged 'cannot reproduce' that are left in released games. Everybody knows there is something wrong, but they were seen only once and no one has a clue about how to reproduce them."

+ **"I remember a bug [in *Heavy Rain*] that was deforming the characters** making their heads turn around top down, stretching their members, and giving them huge eyeballs. The result was quite scary, but I thought it could be considered as some kind of temporary art."

+ "I have spent a completely unreasonable amount of time playing **Tekken** games."

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