MapleStory

A New Year, A New Challenge

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Games are reaching more people than ever, be it through social websites, consoles, PCs, handhelds, mobile phones, or whatever platform is your avenue of choice. With each passing day more people are playing games than ever before, and the trend shows no signs of stopping.

With so many platforms available, not everyone is playing games the same way anymore. Somewhere, someone who wouldn't even consider him or herself a gamer is playing Farmville on Facebook for endless hours. In another corner of the world, college students are gathering around a giant monitor to play Halo: Reach late into the night. The weird guy down the street is sitting on the porch playing Bejeweled on his phone.

Gaming is everywhere. As a result, game developers have some interesting challenges and choices ahead of them. They must first establish which type of gamer they are making their game for, and, if they want to preserve their standing in the long term, not fall prey to the allure of the quick dollar.

Typically, developers of social and mobile games know their audience, as the games feature simple game mechanics and aren't slaves to the graphics race (yet). The console and PC markets, however, are facing this challenge head on. As game budgets balloon, publishers and developers have started to feel the need to ensure that their games can reach as many people as possible regardless of whom the game is supposed to please.

This is evident in the recent slew of games that don't require the gamer to do anything to find success. Players can complete a Call of Duty: Black Ops level without firing a shot, race though Joy Ride without steering, and run an offense in Madden without having to call a play. The games are literally playing themselves. Victory is given to the player, not earned.

Creating games that lack true challenge isn't the only way this problem is expressing itself. Publishers who bleed their franchises of their value by publishing new installments year after year are doing so because of pressure to cash in while you can, not to ensure that gamers are getting the best product.

The biggest franchises in gaming history haven't left behind the gamers who made gaming what it is today to reach new markets, or bled franchises for every dollar until the husk is dry. The greats attract players with entertaining gameplay.

It is not a movie, nor is it a tech demo. It's about challenge. It's about chasing the old Wide World of Sports tagline, "the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat." Since I'm already dispensing fortune cookie wisdom, I'll throw in another apropos adage, "Absence makes the heart grow fonder." Remember that just because you can sell a yearly installment to a franchise, doesn't mean you should.

Enjoy the issue.

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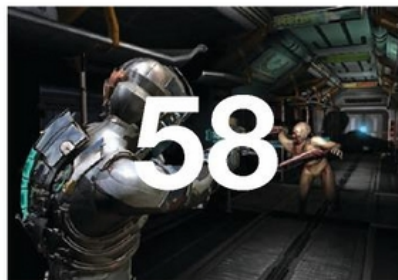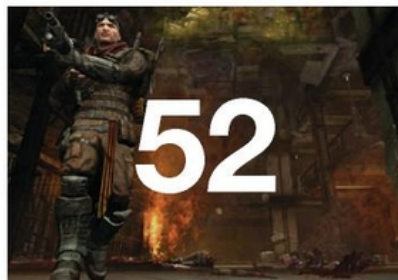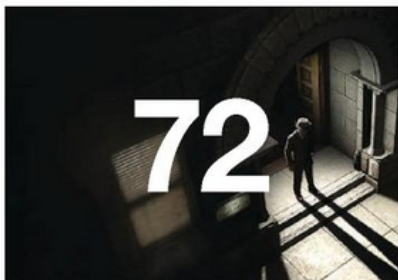
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This month in Feedback we revel in our readers' hate for the Sacred Cow Barbecue, stop potential boycotters in their tracks, find out whether Halo: Reach lived up to the hype, and commit the ultimate nerd faux pas.

Game Informer's Third First Annual

sacredcow BARBECUE

It's back! Just when video game icons thought it was safe, the Sacred Cow Barbecue returns with a heaping help-ing of hatin'. While the last two BBQs focused on some of the all-time classics in gaming history, this time around we've focused on some more recent hits. Why? Because games today suck just as bad as they did in the golden age. So read on to find out which of your favorite games are headed for the garbage dump of history. These six deserve all this and worse, believe us.
by GI Staff • artwork by Zander Cannon

Is Nothing Sacred?

I bet Game Informer got thousands of emails concerning that Sacred Cow Crap Fest your morons for a staff wrote for this November's issue. But you should, because you guys wouldn't know a popular game if it hit you in the head. Yes, I agree with things like the rip-off God of War and Braid, and things like KOTOR that just need a major revision. But when you talk about games with millions of fans, you really don't have a say. World of Warcraft may not be a classic, but it's a game that us gamers say wins! So shut up you jocks and stop picking on us nerds. There's nothing you can say or do to change the fact that WoW is chosen by the people, for the people, and it's in the Hall of History.

Jordan
Via Email

So, I got my new Game Informer and I came across your Sacred Cow Barbecue. I read through it and saw Pokémon, Resident Evil 4, and God of War. All I have to say is this: F--- you! I unsubscribed to you guys a few years ago because you're completely f---ing bias, now I'm doing it again. You wouldn't know a good game if it hit you in your [expletive deleted]! F--- you and your stupid-ass magazine.

Collin Haines
Perryton, Texas

When you hold your Sacred Cow Barbecue, you inevitably get hate mail threatening to unsub-scribe due to your roasting of someone's favorite game. Do you get the same fuzzy feeling that I do knowing that the average IQ of your readers goes up each time one of these people sends you such a letter?

D.J. Gorra
Windsor, Connecitut

Thank you for writing the Sacred Cow Barbecue articles. I have enjoyed reading all three of them and while it hurts (seeing as many of these games are favorites of mine), I must admit that almost every point you make is valid and true. I realize you probably get all sorts of hate mail when you do articles such as these, but here is a big "thank you" from gamers who aren't too proud to see the bad in all the good.

Sam Rasmussen
Via email

As much as we enjoy taking the industry's most beloved video games down a peg when they deserve it, our favorite part of writing Sacred Cow Barbecue is the angry flood of emails we get from cranky fanatics who don't get the joke. It warms our hearts, like we're starring in some bizarro version of *How The Grinch Stole Christmas*, except the Grinch stays evil at the end.

Gaming For Everyone

I have never written in to your magazine before, but after reading "It's All Temporary" in issue 211, I felt compelled to do so. As a wheelchair-bound individual, it was refreshing to have someone bring to light an issue I have been dealing with for quite some time. With inventions like Xbox's Kinect and PS3's Move, I have been afraid that more and more developers will be steered in that direction, effectively shutting me (and other gamers like me) out. Thank you so much for advocating (to fellow gamers and publishers alike) on our behalf, because as you so elo-quently put it, "our health, physical prowess, and mental faculties are all only temporary."

Aimee Lupo
Via email

Question Of The Month:

Who would win in a fight between Kevin Butler and Chuck Norris, and more importantly, why?

[Via Roger McLane]

Contact Us

feedback@gameinformer.com

Scaredy Pants

I was reading your last issue when I stumbled across your review of a game I had never heard of: Amnesia. So, like your mag said, I fired up Steam and "did the right thing." Let me tell you, I have never been so scared in my life! This game draws you in and hits all the right strings. It has you so tense that when something does happen, you crap your pants and want to turn it off, just so you can stop looking over the back of your computer chair into the darkness that lurks there. It's a very chilling game that I would recommend to anyone.

Anthony King
Via Email

We're glad you enjoyed it, Anthony. Our only advice: If you do happen to pass on a glowing recommendation of Amnesia to your friends, you might want to leave out the bit about you crapping in your pants. That way, they'll still want to be your friends!

Crossing The Streams

As a geek myself, I thought I had to defend my kind after reading a Feedback response in the October issue. I almost have a sneaking suspicion that you guys did this on purpose, but I wanted to point out that in your response to Scott Shively, you insulted him and Star Wars fans everywhere when you threatened him with a Vulcan nerve pinch. As you probably already know, Vulcans are a Star Trek reference, and not a Star Wars one. To the real Star Wars fans, you mock us by referencing Star Trek. It's the equivalent of telling Mario that Doctor Robotnik is after him.

Randy Haney
Via Email

Rest assured, Randy, we would never intentionally mix up our sci-fi lore in hopes of antagonizing one of our delicate readers. If you sent out a Cylon raiding party in retaliation for our blunder, please recall them to your Death Star. We won't let it happen again.

Dedicated Fans

I am just sending a very special "thank you" for the support you and your staff have provided my PLT, and in the long term my company, as we pass your mags around for all to read. It is great to read the articles in each issue, and we look forward to the next one keeping us updated with the gaming world and using it as our way to get away from the job we are here to do. I have attached a picture of a few of my guys so you can see the other side of our life from day to day, just having any kind of fun we can.

SFC Michael Parker
Camp Wilson, Afghanistan

The 595th Eng. Company poses with the latest issues of GI. (Center) Pvt Pontus J. Adams, (Middle Left) SGT Zachary L. Clifford, CPL Jonathan Gaddy, SSG Freddie Torres, (Top Row Left) CPT Cody Davis, Pvt Jeremy Morgan, SFC Michael Parker, SPC Archie Johnson

gi spy

(Left) Christmas came early for Annette when Edelman's Angella Wong and Microsoft's Kudo Tsunoda showed up with Kinect games to play **(Center)** After showing off Microsoft's new wares, Kudo strikes his best centerfold pose on GI's luxurious Wampa rug **(Right)** GI reader Ben Turner and Meagan pose next to Kerrigan at this year's BlizzCon

CANDID PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

Great Expectations

In issue 211, we asked readers if Bungie's last entry into the Halo franchise lived up to their expectations. Here are some of the answers we received.

I think Reach has one of the best Halo stories to date, especially with its epic cinematics. Also, Forge World is amazing! Reach is lacking in the online gameplay and excitement, though. When you build a franchise around online play, you have to make sure that you can keep dedicated fans attached to its multiplayer experience. While things like Firefight and campaign matchmaking are cool, the arena system is not as fun. It was awesome when you could say "I'm a 50 in Halo 3." Now you don't have that.

Brandon N.

Halo Reach is a decent game overall, but to me it was kind of a disappointment. The campaign is excellent, but the gameplay was a drastic step back. I'm a die-hard Halo fan, but the reason why I've always played Halo is for the awesome gameplay experience (especially multiplayer matches)! Reach has no dual wielding and they dropped most of the weapons. I know they did it to keep with the storyline, but it just sucks!

Jonathan Walden

All in all, I'm just as in love with Halo: Reach as I was with the previous titles. The storyline took me through the mind and selflessness of a Spartan and left me astounded at the end. The only thing I'm unhappy with is the inability to party-up with your teammates after a good online match. Please bring a party-up option with the new patch, Bungie!

Richard Renz

Halo: Reach was the best that anyone could ask for in a series-ending prequel. It is the opinion of this gamer that arguments involving the integrity of Master Chief as a heroic character and the validity of advanced weaponry are all nerd-babble. Halo: Reach is entertaining, and that is what a game is supposed to be. I am addicted to completing daily challenges on Halo: Reach just so I can gain credits to increase in rank and alter the appearance of my character. Halo: Reach provides the closure which all Halo fans have anxiously awaited.

Brandon S.

On Your Mind

- ■ Readers Who Are Happy With Halo: Reach **34%**
- ■ "What's up with Sacred BBQ?!" **30%**
- ■ Letters ending with the words "unforgivable," "slap in the face," or "shame on you" **12%**
- ■ Readers Disappointed With Halo: Reach **10%**
- ■ Zombie Oversaturation **9%**
- ■ The difference between Minecraft's creepers and zombies **5%**

Boycott COD?

I really love Modern Warfare and Modern Warfare 2, but I have a dilemma. I'm excited for Black Ops, but I am still angry about Activision's treatment of its golden team, Infinity Ward. As much as I want to play Black Ops, I feel like I should boycott it. What should I do?

Joel
Via email

Activision's handling of Infinity Ward was an ugly affair, but there's no reason to boycott a title just because it shares the Call of Duty moniker. The developers at Treyarch try just as hard as IW does to make a great game, so why punish them and yourself by refusing to play Black Ops? If you want to send a message to Activision, or any other publisher for that matter, then buy the games you enjoy and skip the bad ones.

(Left) NFL Blitz dev Sal Divita performs a stunning reenactment of his motion-capture performance for Mortal Kombat 3's Nightwolf **(Center)** The GI crew hangs out before a recent WWE "Wrasin'" event with pro wrestler Mark Henry **(Right)** Dan proudly shows off his homemade sign during the show, as Tim lurks creepily in the background

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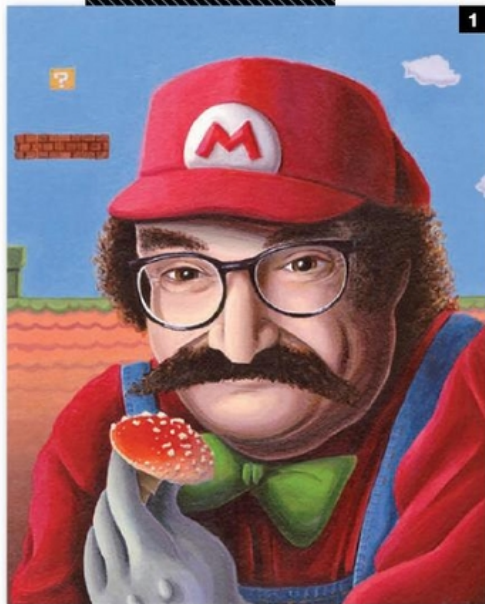
WINNER 1 Kara Zisa We knew Gene Shalit was leaving *Today*, but didn't anticipate the gaming industry to be his next career path **2 Tanner Fredlund** This welded mini-Lancer doesn't actually shoot anything, but we'll still find some way to annoy Joe Juba with it **3 John Osborn** Somebody ignored the "don't bring a knife to a gunfight" rule, and it appears to have worked against Drake **4 Nelson Diaz** Chuck may think he has a nice selection now, but he'll ditch all of it once he mixes a flashlight and diamonds to make a lightsaber

This month's winner will receive a copy of Disney Epic Mickey
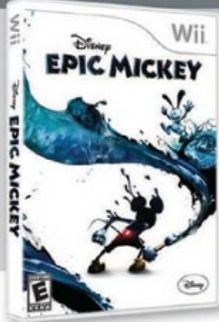
Epic Mickey brings Disney's iconic mouse back into the world of video games in a Wii-exclusive experience. Armed with a magic paint brush that can create and destroy the world around him, Mickey Mouse travels through the Wasteland of forgotten cartoons and lost Disney memories.

GI SPY

(Left) Link (David Clapp) and Zelda (Kia Ose) easily won the prize for best costume at Tim's Halloween party **(Center)** Meanwhile, there was a faceoff for worst costume between Dan, dressed as Business Casual Batman... **(Right)** And Jeff M, dressed as Mustache Jeff

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And The Band Played On

Viacom selling off Rock Band developer Harmonix

by Matthew Kato

Media conglomerate Viacom bought Rock Band developer Harmonix in 2006 for $175 million just as the music game genre was about to burst wide open. Four years later, amidst relatively declining sales, it's getting rid of the company. In a low-key announcement accompanying its third-quarter fiscal reporting, Viacom said it was getting out of the music game business entirely and multiple suitors were in negotiations to purchase Harmonix.

Pairing Harmonix with Viacom's MTV Games label seemed like a match made in heaven at the time, but Viacom clearly soured on the partnership as the years went on, and it became clear that the Rock Band franchise wasn't performing as Viacom had hoped – unrealistic expectations or not.

Even though the Rock Band franchise (containing two Rock Band games, The Beatles, and Green Day) and its DLC garnered $1 billion through the beginning of this year, Viacom has grown increasingly unhappy with the situation. In 2009 multiple events converged for the worse. In mid-2009, Viacom bemoaned the overall decline of music game sales as well as the fact that even with two million units under its belt Rock Band 2 was selling less than expected. Moreover, the company was having a hard time coming to grips with the fact that the landscape of the genre was changing. It was making less money on the big-ticket peripheral bundles as fans were purchasing more standalone software and DLC.

Furthermore, in February 2010, Viacom CEO Philippe Dauman noted that high royalty costs were affecting the bottom line. Surely this was a reference to The Beatles: Rock Band, another game that sold well (almost two million worldwide) but not well enough in Viacom's eyes considering the cost of licensing the band's music. In an interview with UK video game magazine *Edge*, Harmonix founder/CEO Alex Rigopulos admitted that while the sales of the game were good, they weren't to the level of either Rock Band 1 or 2.

Coming off of The Beatles: Rock Band's holiday 2009 release and Harmonix laying off 39 members of its total staff (13 percent), the relationship got dicey. Viacom filed with the SEC to reclaim an unspecified portion of a $300 million performance-based royalty payment the company paid out to Harmonix as part of the original 2006 acquisition. All of this served as background noise while Harmonix prepped Rock Band 3 and Kinect launch title Dance Central.

However, even with the promise and critical regard of those games – not to mention the new instruments and the accompanying bundles for Rock Band 3 – Viacom is ready to move on (Harmonix says it'll continue to support both titles). COO Tom Dooley said that Harmonix lost about $65 million in the last quarter while it was developing Rock Band 3 and Dance Central with no new product on the shelves making money, and Viacom had to take a hit on the overall value of Harmonix. In a conference call to investors, Viacom reduced the value of the developer by $30 million in a write down and took on a $230 million goodwill impairment charge for the over-evaluation of Harmonix's value.

Perhaps Viacom expected too much from Harmonix or simply got into the business at the wrong time. Either way, CEO Dauman admits the company didn't have the stomach to ride out the sometimes-volatile video game market. "Our decision to exit this business reflects our strategy of focusing entirely on what we do best," he said. The console games business requires expertise and scales we don't have."

Going For A Song

Some potential Harmonix buyers

Electronic Arts

EA had a distribution deal with Viacom's MTV Games for the Rock Band franchise that ended this year with Green Day: Rock Band, and EA had to post a $450 million revenue decrease because of the deal's expiration. Buying Harmonix could recapture some of that cash flow, but a distribution deal where you're playing to your strengths in the retail space is different than being on the hook for development, peripherals, etc. Moreover, you have to wonder if EA already had the chance to buy Harmonix back in 2006, and passed in favor of the distribution deal instead.

Bethesda

The Fallout 3 developer and its parent company, ZeniMax Media, have been throwing around money as of late, including acquiring id Software and most recently Machinegames Sweden (a studio formed by ex-Starbreeze members). Rock Band and music games in general are certainly outside of its core expertise, but that could be exactly why it might consider buying Harmonix.

Microsoft or Sony

Grabbing the exclusive services of Harmonix and therefore a large chunk of the music game market must be very attractive for both console manufacturers – companies who are certainly no strangers to overseeing peripheral manufacturing.

Both Sony and Microsoft have their own advantages. Harmonix's Dance Central was front and center at the Kinect launch, and we've heard that the developer was very helpful to Microsoft with the device. Sony, on the other hand, also has a history with Harmonix: Sony helped fund the development of PlayStation 2 exclusives Frequency, Amplitude, and EyeToy: AntiGrav.

Konami

Harmonix also has history with Konami – it developed the first few games for the Karaoke Revolution franchise. However, the pair have also traded lawsuits regarding the original Guitar Hero, Konami's Guitar Freaks, and DrumMania franchises. Although Konami must be considered a dark horse in the Harmonix sweepstakes, it would be kind of cool to see Konami buy the developer after all the work it has done through the years with music games (including the DanceDance Revolution series) long before the genre became popular.

Activision

Activision may control Rock Band's rival franchise (and former Harmonix IP) Guitar Hero, but it would make a lot of sense for Activision to try and effectively corner the music market. Doug Creutz, industry analyst with Cowen, thinks this is a great idea. "Activision's best option at this point would be to approach Viacom with [the] idea of merging the Guitar Hero and Rock Band franchises through a sale of joint venture agreement."

Activision's own Bobby Kotick also thinks the pair can make beautiful music and money together. Earlier this year he publicly stated he regretted not buying Harmonix back in 2006. At the DICE summit he talked about acquiring original Guitar Hero publisher RedOctane and the IP, but not developer Harmonix: "We really didn't even think, 'Hey, we should go to Boston and meet these Harmonix guys and see what they're up to.' Of course, had we gone, I think the world of Guitar Hero would have been rewritten and it would be a lot different today, and probably a profitable opportunity for both of us and an opportunity where you'd have even more innovation in the category."

Harmonix

What if Harmonix paid off Viacom and remained independent? Although it would take the developer back to its beginnings, perhaps Harmonix grabs the reins and starts to control its own destiny. It could self-publish its next title, or it could turn to an unknown, much like it did with Red Octane back in the beginning of the Guitar Hero franchise. It would be a difficult undertaking, but Harmonix has a history of self-conviction that's gotten it where it is at so far, and this could serve them well in the future.

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persian market

How Iran navigates the often tricky territory of rating games

by Jeff Cork

How do nations reconcile their citizens' desire for foreign goods against the need to maintain their own cultural identity? And how do you inspire creativity so that your countrymen can tell their own unique stories? An organization in Iran is dealing with these very issues. We talk with a representative to learn more.

One of the common ways American gamers categorize games is by using an East versus West mentality. Games developed in Japan and other Asian nations fall on one side, and European and North American development land in the other – often with their own cultural idiosyncrasies and references added in to suit their audiences.

But what about everybody else? Countries such as Iran import many of their games from the West, which creates an entirely different set of concerns beyond localization. As a predominantly Islamic nation, Iranian citizens – and their government – are more sensitive to content that might otherwise go unnoticed here. We talked with Dr. Behrouz Minaei, managing director of Iran's National Foundation of Computer Games, the organization that oversees Iran's ratings board, to get his perspective on game ratings and to learn more about the challenges his organization faces.

What's appropriate here in the United States may not go over as well in other countries. For example, we're not as sensitive to Nazi iconography appearing in our games as the German government, which prohibits such displays in games. Likewise, games with references to alcohol that might earn an E10+ rating through the ESRB might be banned entirely through an Islamic nation's ratings board.

These are some of the issues that Iran's Entertainment Software Rating Association faces. The independent, nonprofit organization was founded in 2007, and is tasked with rating foreign and domestically developed games based on cultural, religious, and sociological criteria.

"We talked with the Iranian government and said that we can come up with a new ratings

Garshasp

system for it," Minaei says. "We had a very long and scientific process to determine what the differences were between Iranian culture and American culture or Japanese culture."

The result was a ratings system that ranks games on a six point scale. Minaei says games under review are played by professional gamers, and specialists are brought in to evaluate games for content such as violence, sexual stimuli, hopelessness, and sacrilege. Unlike the ESRB's scale, which maxes out at the elusive AO rating – reserved for games that should only be played by gamers older than 18 – ESRA's scale affects gamers up to 25. Some games are banned entirely.

We looked at some of ESRA's literature, and much of it is universal. Parents worldwide have expressed concern about the effects of media on their children throughout the years, and having an easy-to-understand way of judging content is helpful. Iran's ratings board differs from the ESRB in a subtle but significant way. In the U.S., our ratings board doesn't try to make a determination as to whether or not games affect a child's development. Instead, the organization flags certain content – comic mischief, tobacco references – and assigns ratings based on the type and severity of those flagged items. ESRA begins with the sociological assumption – for better or worse – that children are affected by media and should be protected at critical points in their development.

Some of that reasoning is obvious, considering ESRA's evaluation criteria, while other responses are more obscure. Minaei says that ESRA is sensitive in areas where Islamic values are violated, such as attacking Muslim countries,

which is one reason that Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare was banned. Other entries in the series that didn't take place in Middle Eastern nations – fictional or not – didn't face a similar reaction. Most Americans would find little objectionable in the E-rated NBA 2K10, for example, though the game was banned in Iran for reasons we weren't able to determine. On the other hand, Need for Speed Hot Pursuit's lawbreaking violence earned the game an E10+ rating in the U.S. In Iran, the game cruised by at a +3.

It's easy for us to take our ideas of what is and isn't appropriate for granted. Other countries don't necessarily have that luxury. As Minaei says, Western games are exceptionally popular among Iranian gamers, particularly titles such as Prince of Persia and God of War. We don't hear about them very often, but Minaei says that there are more than 10 million gamers in his country, playing games on PC, console, and social-networking sites. It's up to Minaei and his organization to ensure that his countrymen at least know what they're getting into when they play our games. ◈

ESRA's Ratings

Here are ESRA's ratings, along with the agency's brief content descriptors and Western games that fall in that particular category.

3 — Does not distinguish between the imagination and reality.
Example games:
Cars Race-O-Rama, Gran Turismo 4

7 — Reacts physically and emotionally against fear and violence
Example games:
LEGO Indiana Jones, Toy Story 3

12 — Dependence on others decreases and feelings of independence increase
Example games:
Ratchet & Clank: Size Matters, Spider-Man: Friend or Foe

+15 — Ideological games featuring discrimination and religious sacrilege don't create problems because individuals of this age can reconcile contradictions
Example games:
Warriors of Might and Magic, Halo Wars

+18 — Can play most games without problems, though games with sexual stimuli should be avoided
Example games:
Call of Duty: World at War, Rogue Warrior

+25 — No limitations
Example games:
Prototype, Midnight Club: Los Angeles

Games Rated by ESRA (as of 2010)

+3	+7	+12	+15	+18	+25	Banned
3,289	7,152	12,324	15,267	18,336	25,134	144
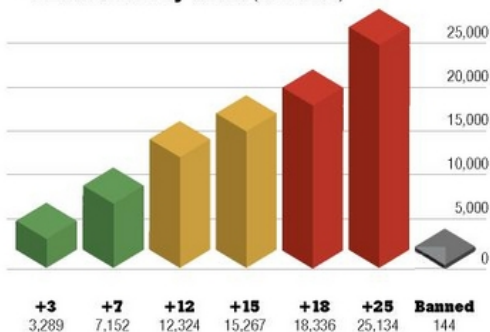
Civilization V

The fifth numbered installment in the legendary strategy franchise brought a host of radical changes to the game. We talked to the title's lead designer, Jon Schafer, to get his thoughts on his own Civilization revolution now that the dust has settled.

How did you approach what to cut and what to keep from previous versions of Civilization?

Our goal from the very beginning was to develop a new Civilization game that was clearly in the lineage of the series, and not to simply add some more stuff to Civ IV. So, a lot of options were on the table. The features we felt most comfortable bringing back in Civ V were those that have been in all previous versions of Civ – basic staples such as turns, tiles, units, techs, cities, and so on. These most basic elements we never considered removing or changing in a dramatic fashion.

From that base we decided what we wanted to add. Combat was obviously a large focus, and we felt that minor powers could be a really interesting addition, and so the city-states were born. The game was built up fairly organically from that base. The role of gold was defined during development, and the form the social policies took also evolved over time. When making a game iteratively, you do your best to "follow the fun," changing components that aren't that interesting, while expanding on those that are.

The AI has caught a lot of flak from players. What led to the strategic and tactical AI shipping in the state they did?

Civ V is a pretty complex game, and developing an AI that can handle everything in a strategy game is quite a challenge. The combat in particular was a major project. Changing from armies as stacks of units to armies as forces spread out with no more than one unit per tile was like upgrading the military side of Civ from playing Risk (where you slide a stack of pieces from one territory to another) to chess (where each

individual piece's exact position is critical). The issue that surfaced after we made this change was that humans quickly appreciate this new depth and make adjustments, but that training the AI to play this "chess game" well was going to be a real challenge. We had to allocate many more months to developing and testing the Civ V tactical AI than for previous games in the series.

We have dedicated an entire software subsystem to scrutinizing the actions of the other players in the game. This diplomatic AI makes sure that each AI civilization performs a full assessment of each of its neighbors. Each turn this analysis includes noticing which players are trying to grab open land, which ones have particularly large armies, and also making a guess about which type of victory each opponent is pursuing. So warmongering for instance, will be noticed by the AI right away. This information is then critical to how the AI chooses its friends and enemies and also to how it picks its own path to victory.

All in all, we're proud of what we accomplished, and like we have with all versions of Civilization, we'll continue listening to fan feedback and making improvements.

What took priority over AI for development resources?

Everything in game development is a trade-off, no matter how big or small. Since Civ V is a PC exclusive, we have a lot to balance, so everything factors in somehow: AI, graphics, writing, interface, and gameplay depth. We devoted a significant amount of time and resources to the AI. It's not really possible to, for instance, calculate that two artists equal a 20 percent smarter AI or

anything like that. By comparison though, the Civ V team had roughly the same proportion of artists to programmers as Civ IV did.

What was the reasoning behind making those decisions during development?

Like most game developers, we look at what we ultimately want to accomplish, and balance the priorities accordingly. When we get to the execution phase of development, we take a step back and plot out the elements that will make the game great. Then we prioritize those elements and make decisions based upon what we think will deliver the best gameplay experience.

In hindsight, do you feel that your decision to make diplomatic modifiers less transparent was the correct one?

As I noted before, we had a pretty organic process when creating the game. A lot was added as we went along, and this style of development typically gives you the best game possible in the end. Every time you release a game to thousands of players, you uncover new things about the game, sometimes fun things and sometimes things you'd like to tweak. We've heard lots of helpful feedback on diplomacy and will use that to make improvements as we move forward. *[Editor's note: Since this interview, 2K announced an in-development patch that makes more under-the-hood diplomacy information visible to players.]*

The community has been very vocal since Civ V's launch. What kind of insight have you gained from the community's reaction?

Well, beyond a shadow of a doubt it shows that fans are passionate about their Civ games! We've defi-

nitely been making changes based on community feedback, and continue to do so. We certainly appreciate feedback and constructive criticism, and use it as much as possible to improve our games in the future.

Did anything from the critical or community reactions take you by surprise?

You always learn a lot about your game when it goes from a hundred regular players to a hundred thousand overnight. We did know ahead of time that there were going to be some long-time players who wouldn't agree with our decisions. Civ IV was a great game, and that's what happens when you take some risks changing things up as we did. But we've also heard from a lot of players who've loved Civ for a while that find Civ V a big step up. It's simply a "what's your cup of tea" kind of thing. Every game in a franchise will pick up new fans and lose others.

Are there any design decisions you've ultimately gone back on based on post-launch feedback?

Anyone who subscribes to the iterative design process is never completely locked-in on anything, unwilling to change. There are certainly things I'd like to revisit, just as there were a year ago, long before the game was even announced. I think the ability to change your mind and utilize as much feedback as you can is vital to making games. Nobody has a single perfect view of a game's final state, so the more input you're willing to accept the better. That having been said, I'm very proud of what the team has accomplished.

Out of the more radical changes to the Civ formula in Civ V, what do you feel really worked?

I think the combat system is the best example of a new feature that's worked well. It added a lot of depth to warfare, and presented a lot more options and tough decisions to players. The city-states have also done a lot in spicing up the playfield. It's nice having more going on in the world, especially with players who aren't focused on beating you. I'm excited to see how future updates and mods will take the game as well!

Seeing how everything is playing out, are there any more legacy systems you wish you'd taken out behind the woodshed?

Nothing immediately springs to mind. At this stage we try to look at it as much as possible as "the current state of the game," and what we can do to improve it, rather than comparing it too much with earlier versions. We definitely looked at some of the legacy systems (like the commerce slider) and decided to go a different direction, but that was still early on when Civ IV was fresher in our minds than Civ V. While the game has only been out for a couple of months now, some members of the team have been fiddling with it for nearly three and a half years, so that makes earlier versions of the game seem pretty distant. ◈

Spyware sneaks onto your computer

and begins collecting bits of information

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banking passwords and recipes

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while you face another day of bounced checks

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Analyzing Our Industry
Weathermen

Taking a closer look at the future of video games

by Annette Gonzalez

Forecasting the future of a constantly evolving industry is no easy task. Even with ample data and a nose for numbers, predicting software success or hardware price drops takes hundreds of hours of research and analysis. Widely quoted analysts Jesse Divnich of EEDAR and Michael Pachter of Wedbush Securities explain the process of formulating a prediction and what it takes to become a headliner.

Jesse Divnich
EEDAR Vice President, Capital Research & Communications

The Canada native earned a B.A. in business management from Eastern Michigan University after seven years of attending school and working full-time. Divnich always wanted to be part of the video game industry and applied video games to basic business principles when studying. He cites one example of an economics class where he replaced every mention of the word "widget" in his textbook with "video game" (he aced the course). One year, Divnich sold his television to buy a ticket to E3.

Michael Pachter
Wedbush Securities, Managing Director, Equity Research

Pachter earned a bachelor's degree in political science from California State University, Northridge, an M.B.A. from the Anderson School at UCLA, a J.D. from Pepperdine University, and an LL.M. in Taxation from the University of Florida. Pachter began as a tax lawyer, worked finance for an oil company, and eventually broke into the industry with Wedbush Securities.

Making predictions

Divnich: Our forecasts do differ slightly from other analysts. By leveraging our database of more than 30 million internally collected facts going back to 2000 and converging the data we receive from our partners, we are able to run very high precision models. Yes, it does sound that boring. There is no magic eight ball, no crystal ball, just a bunch of computers and analysts. I do note, however, that the expertise of the EEDAR staff plays a very crucial role.

For example, if you threw Guitar Hero into our model five years ago, the results probably wouldn't be grand. No computer model could have predicted the success of Guitar Hero with precision. But that is where EEDAR's expertise comes in to play. By examining the product, analyzing the potentials, and looking at the direction of our industry, we can correctly adjust for these unforeseen industry trends.

Most importantly, the numbers I release to the press are not necessarily based on these models. The numbers I speak about in the media are more of a high precision educated guess. But to be fair, those educated estimates come from 60 hours a week, multiplied by eight years, of nothing but crunching numbers.

Pachter: There's no real magic to my forecasts. I try to forecast as much as possible, with as much detail as possible, in the hopes that my forecasts will help investors make decisions. For example, if I forecast that Red Dead Redemption would sell three million units and it ultimately sold nine million, my bad forecast would keep the publisher's stock down (Take-Two, in this example) until the game launched, and when it became clear I was wrong, the stock would go up. If an investor disagreed with my forecast, he might have been emboldened to buy Take-Two stock before the release. If he agreed with my forecast, he may have sold Take-Two stock before the release.

Over the long term, I generally make a number of mistakes that offset one another, and the sum of all of my mistakes comes out very close to zero. So, in order to do my job well, I don't have to be right ever; I can be wrong with all of my predictions, so long as the low estimates are offset by the high estimates, with the total being very close to my estimated total. Fortunately for me, that's the way it usually works, and I'm generally in the top tier of analysts for earnings accuracy.

Consumer feedback

Divnich: Nothing delights me more than those who question my qualifications. I was that same person eight years ago. Despite their anonymity and questions of their own intelligence, I try to read as much feedback as possible. Sure, 98 percent of what is said on forums is completely useless and can be written off as banter, but the insight from the other two percent more than makes up for it. Never underestimate the wisdom of the

crowds, even if it is layered beneath six inches of dog pile.

But let's be fair: I don't get a penny for being quoted in the media or for appearing on television. What I do with the media I do because I feel consumers and gamers alike need to know.

Sometimes my interviews will get picked up by the core media outlets, even though my intended audience was that of another kind. The mainstream outlets don't necessarily need to know the granular details of the industry, a simple "Call of Duty will be a best-selling title" is sufficient for the mainstream crowd, but to the core community, it comes off as a "No s---, Sherlock!" statement.

Pachter: I think it's healthy for people to question things they don't understand. My job is not to talk to journalists, it's to talk to investors. If I say that a Wii HD is coming, it outrages fanboys who think that Nintendo always knows better, but it doesn't particularly outrage investors. It's healthy that people disagree, and I am always interested in opposing viewpoints.

There are a handful of readers who make personal attacks, and I would tell them that I have no stake in the outcome of anything I talk about (I don't invest in the companies I cover), and most of what I say is just opinion. I don't say things because I hope they come true; I say them because I think that they will come true. Since my job is to get the big picture right, I can afford to be wrong often on the small stuff.

Missing your mark

Divnich: One missed prediction was actually printed in Game Informer last year. I said Grand Theft Auto V would have its unveiling at E3 2010 with a 2011 release date. Little did I know that Rockstar was delaying Max Payne and L.A. Noire into 2011, leaving no room for a GTA V. There were thousands of articles about it. I just simply had to wipe the yolk off my face on that one.

In terms of backlash, I can honestly say I've never had any. My personal batting average and that of EEDAR is quite high. Anytime you attempt to predict the future it comes with an understanding that sometimes you will just be plain wrong. I am certainly right more than I am wrong, and the day my batting average drops below .700 is the day I hang up my tie – not out of shame, but out of respect for the industry.

Pachter: I don't think I've gone a week without having an incorrect prediction. I model units for every game made by each of the seven companies I cover, by platform, so I make around 200 sales predictions a year. As far as I know, I've been right once (Spider-Man 2 sales in 2004). I predict NPD sales by company and usually predict five to 10 game unit sales each month, as well as sales by hardware platform. That totals around 20 predictions a month, or a total of another 240 wrong predictions. I'm not sure what my batting average here is, but it's below 10

percent. Nobody cares if I'm right, except fanboys. My clients are merely looking for a benchmark in front of numbers so that they can assess whether the stocks of the companies I cover will go higher or lower.

Highs and lows

Divnich: The hours and deadlines can be tough. After a while it begins to take a strain on you, not just mentally, but physically. Working 80 hours a week for a month straight will drive just about anyone bonkers. Then again, that is true for most jobs.

The most rewarding aspect of my job is anytime a project we worked on becomes successful. For being an analyst, and a businessman, I really couldn't care less about the money. Absolutely nothing beats the emotion of knowing you are part of a company that improves how games are made.

Pachter: The hardest part of the job is the time commitment. I arrive at work at 4:30 a.m., leave around 4:30 p.m., and work around an hour each night and two hours each weekend day. When we have earnings (19 companies each report four times a year, so 36 times a year), I work three or four hours longer. I also travel around 65 nights a year, so my average week is really long.

The best part of the job is that I'm paid to do something that is really fun.

Career advice

Divnich: The advice I'd give is no different than any other career. Start young and start early. But it also depends on who you are, where you live, and what resources you have access to. You certainly have a much better chance in making it big if you go to an Ivy League school, get an M.B.A., and land an internship with a prestigious financial institution, but that road is not available to many of us. As someone who has succeeded in this industry without those resources, I can say the challenges in front of you often seem impossible to overcome. The disparity between the resources one has and the accomplishment one achieves is ultimately due to the sacrifices one is willing to make.

Pachter: The odds of being a video game analyst are pretty steep. There are only 35 of us, and that means that there are only 5 openings or so each year. It might not be as competitive as being a baseball player, but suffice to say that most games analysts started out as something else, and worked their way into the position. The best advice I can offer is to get as much education as possible, and perform as well in school as possible. The skills required include writing, modeling (finance), and speaking skills. I'd suggest an M.B.A. at minimum. ◆

For full interviews with Divnich and Pachter, check out gameinformer.com/mag

by Matt Miller

New independent studios are a lot of fun to follow. Unshackled by previous publishing relationships or existing franchises, a new developer can stretch its legs and dive into brand new territory. **Skulls of the Shogun** is the brainchild of just such a team; Haunted Temple Studios formed up from a small group of EALA expatriates. Their first game promises something rarely achieved – a deep and rewarding strategy game featuring an approachable action vibe and easily understood mechanics. The studio brought the game by the GI offices for a short visit, or so they thought. I couldn't stop playing all day.

On the surface, Skulls of the Shogun draws a lot of easy comparisons. The stylized, cartoon art style and characters recall Castle Crashers. The turn-based strategy battles have the simple mechanics of a Worms or Advance Wars game, but the addition of resource gathering and leveling calls to mind more complex titles like Final Fantasy Tactics or Valkyria Chronicles. Haunted Temple impressively finds a way to combine all these elements in an inviting package that's easy to pick up and play. New players can compete with veterans after only a few games, and the systems are all easy to understand so combat becomes a matter of pure strategic competition.

Players control a mighty samurai general who is struck down by an unknown assailant at the moment of his greatest victory. When he arrives in the Land of the Glorious Fallen, the shogun is intent on delivering justice to his murderer and reclaiming his lost honor. As he sets out, he encounters other aimless fallen warriors who join him on his quest.

The game has seven unique classes, from infantry soldiers and cavalry to long-distance archers and healing monks. As expected, each unit has its own strengths and weaknesses, like excellent movement but low armor, or excellent attack but limited mobility. As the shogun's forces grow, he faces other skull-faced warriors who stand in his way. Strike them down, and any of your soldiers can devour the enemy skull to level up, eventually gaining additional attacks and abilities. Moving across a level, characters can haunt rice paddies, the game's main resource. Haunt a nearby shrine, and your accumulated rice can summon new units to fight at your side.

The game is a careful but fast-paced march across the gorgeously drawn levels, as each player aims to bring down the powerful enemy general. Rather than sticking everyone to a grid, movement, attack, and defense are all handled with a circular range system that radiates out from each unit. It's easy to move about within your circle to the perfect spot to exact a devastating attack. Scoot close to a friendly unit, and you'll form up into a defensive wall that benefits both characters.

The lengthy single-player story stretches across four lands, one for each season of the year. The newest dead samurai warriors appear in the idyllic spring, but only the most powerful ascend into the dark hierarchy of winter. Players can also dive into the hefty multiplayer component with up to four generals at once. One particularly smart design feature lets players drop in and out during a game, allowing the AI to take over during a bathroom break or other irresistible call. Skulls of the Shogun jumped onto my radar in a big way this month, and the team still has months left to polish the gameplay and hone the witty dialogue. Keep your eye on this one as it nears its spring release.

Bionic Commando Rearmed 2 features more of what I loved about the first game while fixing the things I didn't. At least, that's the impression I got after swinging through the first couple of hours. The biggest change may sound like heresy to old fans, but Nathan Spencer can now jump, offering far greater mobility and easing the level navigation. Plenty of crazy bionic body flinging still exists, along with the expected mix of new weapons and enhancements. Sporting a

Skulls of the Shogun
Xbox Live Arcade

WE'VE BEEN STUCK HERE FOR AGES, CAN YOU LEAD US INTO THE AFTERLIFE?

ORDERS LEFT:

CAVALRY
HP 10/10
GRASS

RICE 9

ORDER

a daring new moustache, Spencer's potent sense of bravado and humor add life to the story, indicating developer Fat Shark isn't taking things too seriously. An awesome 8-bit style soundtrack underpins the action, which is filled with bright colors, big explosions, and deep background environments that seem to stretch into the distance. The two-player co-op returns, and remains the best way to play the game presuming high challenge isn't your sole priority. I'm stoked to play the full experience when it releases early next year.

PlayStation Network has a cool exclusive arriving in the next few weeks in **Explodemon**. This 2.5D action game features a mix of environmental puzzles, combat, and platforming. The main character is a malfunctioning prototype robot

that becomes the last line of defense for an alien planet after the invasion of the villainous Vortex forces. Unlike the Mega-star that the character most closely resembles, Explodemon can blow himself up to combat enemies, fling himself into the air, and solve platforming challenges throughout the world. Unabashedly claiming a heritage from SNES era platformers, Curve Studios has been developing the game for almost five years, and it shows through polished visuals and smart design. Classic platformer enthusiasts should give the game a look.

It's been awhile since I've run into a creative new take on the twin-stick shooter genre, but **Microbots** fits the bill. You play a microscopic robot as it is sent into a human body to hunt down older, faulty versions of the robots that are

already infesting the body. Along the way, you'll move through blood, bones, lung, and brain, powering up as you go with upgrades to attack, defense, and propulsion. Up to nine upgrade slots are available, so every player can design his or her own unique avatar. In one cool twist, the body's systems react to your presence. For instance, white blood cells will generally help you take down the invasive enemy microbots, but if you attack them, they'll turn on you as well. There's also a cool dynamic of fluid space, as the body's liquids sometimes push and pull you through areas. The fact that I can play the game with a buddy through local co-op only increases my interest. We'll see how the game plays over the long-term when it releases this winter. ◆
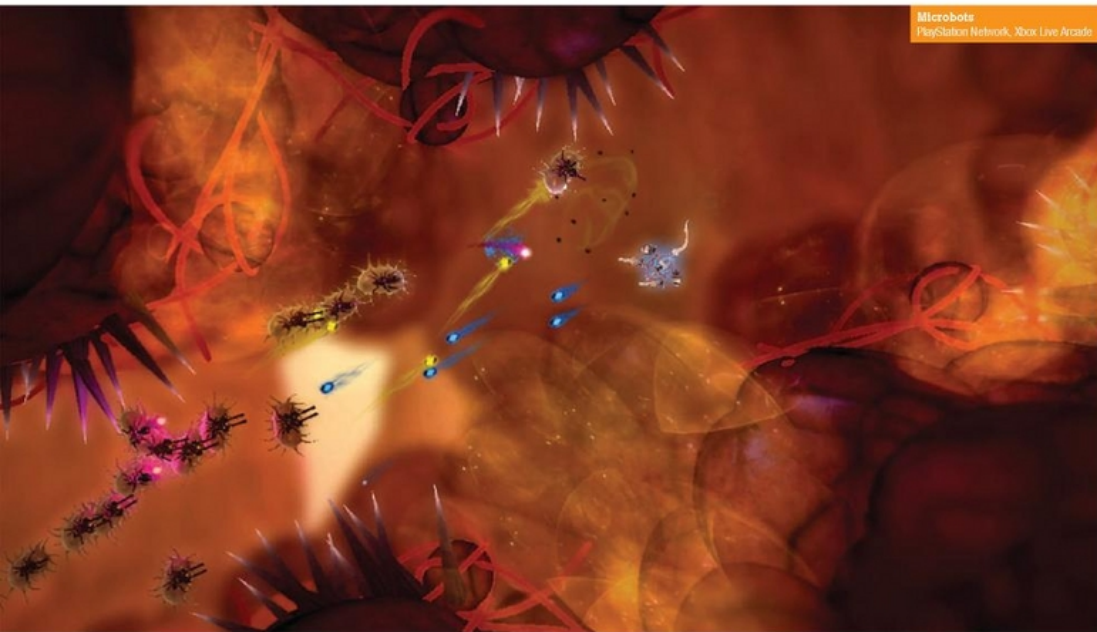
For more on downloadable and independent games, dig into gameinformer.com/impulse, where you'll find the newest updates on your favorite titles, details on new projects, and reviews of games as they release. For more downloadable game coverage in this issue, don't miss our exclusive first look at Double Fine's **Stacking** *on p. 62, as well as our reviews of* **Pac-Man Championship Edition DX** *(p. 78),* **Marvel Pinball** *(p. 81),* **Ilomilo** *(p. 87),* **A World of Keflings** *(p. 87), and* **Bejeweled 3** *(p. 88).*

A video game's success is typically measured in numbers. Quantifiable information like low review scores and poor sales are clear-cut ways to argue a game's lack of worth — but some poorly received games are adored by gamers. These games didn't move units like Modern Warfare or GTA IV, but they struck a powerful chord with a smaller group of gamers, creating post-release buzz without strong marketing campaigns. Here is a collection of modern games from the last two generations that have garnered cult followings. » *by Tim Turi*

Cult
MODERN CULT

Deadly Premonition
Release: 2010 | Platform: Xbox 360

This bizarre title published by Ignition Entertainment materialized on video game shelves like a ghost emerging from the netherworld. Deadly Premonition is a surreal experience and feels like a last-gen game on a modern console. Gameplay is plagued with muddy aiming, dull level design, and agonizing driving segments, but persistent gamers are rewarded for their patience. With an imaginary friend named Zach and an all-encompassing love for film, the enigmatic Agent York gradually becomes a charming and likable character. The small town he visits has a *Twin Peaks* vibe, with paranormal crimes, unique characters, strange locations, and unforgettable twists. Mix in an alarmingly catchy, offbeat soundtrack and you've got a recipe for a rich experience buried under a layer of sour mechanics.

Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem
Release: 2002 | Platform: GameCube

This criminally overlooked GameCube title ditches the morbid monsters and cookie cutter haunted warehouses common in so many other horror titles. Instead, protagonist Alexandra finds a haunted tome which transports her to varying places in time, assuming the role of interesting characters from a Roman centurion to a Canadian firefighter. The innovative sanity meter influenced gamers to overlook the surrounding mediocre gameplay. Terrifying enemies and situations compromise each character's mental wellness, causing believable effects like hordes of hallucinated enemies, walking on the ceiling, and randomly lowered volume levels. A sadistic trick in the form of a fake corrupt save data error convinced countless gamers that they lost all their progress, ensuring that the game would not be forgotten by a committed crowd. Many are still asking for a follow-up.

No More Heroes
Release: 2008 | Platform: Wii

Travis Touchdown is an introverted nerd who's obsessed with games, pro wrestling, and swinging a lightsaber. Maybe gamers identify with Travis, causing No More Heroes to secure a sweet spot in their hearts – or maybe it's the quirky, humorous story about an unlikely fighter battling outlandish rivals, like a wannabe superhero named Destroyman. Suda 51's stylish, hard-as-nails Wii title achieved its modest sales goals, but what's more impressive is the rabid, beam-katana-addicted fans it produced. No More Heroes' fan following was enough for Ubisoft to release a sequel in 2010.

Beyond Good & Evil
Release: 2003 | Platform: PC, PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube

We know Beyond Good & Evil's unimpressive sales performance isn't what kept the game on fans' minds for years. The game continues to garner praise for its strong female protagonist, Jade, and its dark, otherworldly setting of a planet besieged by hostile aliens. Jade stands apart from the gun-toting space marines usually saving mankind from extraterrestrial invaders, not only because she's a kind-hearted woman raising children orphaned by war, but because she does so with wits, courage, and a camera. Beyond Good & Evil's innovative design and one-of-a-kind heroine made it a cult hit. Without the power of fans' unflinching love, we wouldn't be able look forward to the game's sequel and HD remake.

Earth Defense Force 2017

Release: 2007 | Platform: Xbox 360

Even at first glance, it's obvious that the EDF development team was working with low production costs. The voice acting is laughably bad, power-ups are generic 2D cardboard cutouts, and many of the weapons are utterly useless. These obvious flaws are enough for some to dismiss the game outright. For others, the low level of polish results in B-movie charm, and the arcade gameplay combined with split-screen co-op is fun enough to pull the messy package together. It's hard not to appreciate the irony of defending Earth from alien bugs while simultaneously leveling city skylines with stray rockets. With its sheer destructibility, bugs that explode in geysers of green, and so-bad-it's-good dialogue, it's no wonder that EDF invaded the hearts of gamers. Earth defenders will be able to continue their mission in the upcoming sequel, Earth Defense Force: Insect Armageddon.

Katamari Damacy

Release: 2004 | Platform: PlayStation 2

Sometimes a game is so quirky that you can only imagine that the development team was crafting a cult classic from the beginning. Gamers were exposed to the absurd visage and humor of The King of All Cosmos before they even got their hands on Katamari's clever junk ball-rolling mechanic. The passive aggressive patriarch wiggled his way into the memory of PlayStation 2 owners with his Shakespeare-on-LSD outfit and awkward, codpiece-emphasizing poses. As if the game's irresistible soundtrack and surreal presentation weren't enough to earn praise, the zen-like simplicity of rolling the world into a sphere sealed the deal. Katamari Damacy may have undersold according to initial expectations, and the 360's anemic Beautiful Katamari possibly injured the adored series' reputation with gratuitous DLC, but the initial fervor surrounding the Prince and his Katamari is the definition of a video game cult classic.

Psychonauts

Release: 2005 | Platform: Xbox, PlayStation 2, PC

Tim Schafer, a man famous for designing underappreciated games, escaped the tropes of generic 3D platformers (like ice worlds, fire worlds, etc.) with the cerebral creativity of Psychonauts. The game was an underperformer on the shelves, but those who did play it loved it. Fans enjoyed using Raz's psychic abilities to fight through the shell-shocked mind of a militaristic coach, and jumping through the organized minimalism of a scientist's genius brain. Psychonauts has memorable characters, witty writing, and unforgettable settings, which ensures diehard fans will be clamoring for a sequel for years to come.

Ico

Release: 2001 | Platform: PlayStation 2

Despite not breaking a million units sold, Team Ico's premiere offering gained a staggering amount of critical acclaim and devout followers. The simple tale of a young horned pariah and his quest to guide a captive girl through a perilous castle seized the hearts of gamers. This early PlayStation 2 title evoked a strong emotional response from players with its expansive and detailed vistas, intricate-yet-intuitive puzzle design, and Ico and Yorda's fragile union. Ico immediately became a favorite, and its cult following ushered in the release of a spiritual sequel with Shadow of the Colossus, which fostered comparable praise. The Ico legacy further lives on with The Last Guardian, which looms on next year's horizon. ◆

TOP TEN OUTSPOKEN DEVELOPERS

by Matt Bertz

David Jaffe

Blogs, forums, YouTube, Twitter – no avenue is safe from Twisted Metal and God of War mastermind David Jaffe's stream-of-conscious soapbox diatribes. Whether the topic is Sarah Palin, the dangers of capitalism, anonymous developer blogs, or game reviewers, you always know where he stands, and his vitriolic commentary is never boring.

Gabe Newell

Half-Life creator Gabe Newell doesn't mince words. Upon its launch, the Valve boss called the PlayStation 3 a "waste of everyone's time" and "a disaster on many levels." Later after he reversed course and embraced Sony's platform, he gave Microsoft a taste of his famous spitfire, saying that Xbox Live is a "train wreck." Don't ever change, Gabe.

Tomonobu Itagaki

Like the diva NFL wide receiver and failed reality show star Terrell Owens, Itagaki loves him some him. The former Team Ninja leader never misses a chance to praise his work, once saying that simply demoing Ninja Gaiden II would "make all other developers lose their motivation." Like TO, he's also known to trash his former employers from time to time, calling his former Tecmo boss dishonorable.

Keiji Inafune

Mega Man creator Inafune is the leading dissenter over contemporary game development in Japan, going as far to say, "Japan is over. We're done. Our game industry is finished." After telling the *New York Times* that "Capcom is barely keeping up. The ideas, gameplay, design – there's no diversity, no originality," he abruptly left the company. Tell us how you really feel, Keiji!

Denis Dyack

Silicon Knights founder Denis Dyack has championed video games as a powerful storytelling medium, but when Too Human was panned by the press and public, he went on the offensive, saying that the haters "just don't get it" because it was too "innovative and different." Like when Kevin Costner defended *Waterworld*, no one but him bought it.

Ken Levine

As a former screenwriter and 15-year industry vet with titles like BioShock and Thief on his resume, people listen when Ken Levine talks. He's not afraid to tell it like it is either, scolding the games industry for being too star struck with its Hollywood rivals and lambasting decisions to shoehorn multiplayer into predominately single-player experiences. Sage advice if we've ever heard it.

Peter Molyneux

Lionhead Studios' Peter Molyneux is no stranger to generating headlines, having battled for years with the bad habit of over-hyping features that his games ultimately fail to include. Regardless of the unfulfilled promises, the charming Brit's endearing mannerisms and eye towards innovation keep him a fan favorite.

Cliff Bleszinski

One of the industry's few creative minds who has crossed over into the mainstream, Gears of War architect Bleszinski is no stranger to the late-night talk show circuit. When he's not touting his latest over-the-top action game, he's engaging fans on Twitter and speaking out against harmful practices like tabloid game journalism.

Tim Schafer

Grim Fandango creator Tim Schafer isn't just one of the funniest game developers; he also has a vitriolic side. Schafer publicly feuded with Activision over its treatment of Brütal Legend, calling Activision CEO Bobby Kotick a "total prick." He later proposed a truce after Kotick returned the pot shots by criticizing Schafer's ability to meet milestones and create good games.

John Romero

Who can forget the legendary Daikatana ad campaign that famously proclaimed, "John Romero's About To Make You His Bitch"? Unfortunately for Romero, the game bombed, making the former id Software star its bitch and putting a black mark on an otherwise impressive resume that includes the revolutionary FPS titles Doom and Quake.

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly
NEWS WITH A SARCASTIC SPIN

the **good**

Blizzard has posted job listings for an unannounced "Diablo-related concept for consoles." The developer is quick to hedge its bets and remind everyone that Diablo III is not necessarily coming to consoles, but whatever it is, we'll take any and all Diablo we can get.

(ABOVE) BioWare has released this lone shot from a new game that could be Mass Effect 3. At the time of this writing we don't know much about the title, and if it is Mass Effect 3, we wonder if this screen's gritty look means a new direction for the final installment in the trilogy.

(BELOW) Ubisoft further delayed already-delayed titles Ghost Recon: Future Soldier and Driver: San Francisco (shown). The games were supposed to come out in 2011, but now they may not hit shelves until as far away as March of 2012. That's a long time from now – plenty of time for another delay.

the **bad**

(ABOVE) EA Sports and developer EA Canada put NBA Elite out of its misery and canceled the beleaguered game for the year. The series is also picking up stakes and moving to Madden developer EA Tiburon. It's not a good sign by any means, but it's better to admit defeat and live to fight another day than foist another $60 of garbage onto the public.

the **ugly**

Medal of Honor publisher EA admits that Medal of Honor didn't do as well as expected due to quality reasons, but then VP Patrick Soderlund tells Eurogamer that the game was "judged harsher than it should be." Medal of Honor's multiplayer producer, DICE's Patrick Liu, also thinks that some of the bad reviews were due to the Taliban controversy. Maybe they should have spent more money on the game and less on beard marketing.

(ABOVE) Activision has closed Blur (shown) and Project Gotham racing developer Bizarre Creations and is considering selling off the studio. Activision bought the Liverpool studio back in 2007, and it blames the move on the poor sales of Blur and the declining racing market in general. Interestingly, the developer just completed James Bond 007: Blood Stone for the publisher – an action game removed from the studio's racing expertise. Was Blood Stone its last chance with Activision? Will that experience make Bizarre Creations more well-rounded and suited to develop different kinds of games? We hope it all turns out okay in the end for the team.

> " I'm leaving Capcom with the intention of starting my life over...There's nowhere higher for me to go [at Capcom]. "

Mega Man designer and all-around video game genius Keiji Inafune resigns from his many duties at Capcom

Sonic Fan Remix

Longtime Sonic fans were excited by Sega's announcement of Sonic 4, as a true 2D return to form had been long overdue. While it received generally positive reviews, a fan-made tribute to old-school Sonic has drummed excitement comparable to the official sequel. Sonic Fan Remix (available for free at sonicfanremix.com) was created by two hardcore fans of the hedgehog – Pelikan (artist) and Mercury (programmer). We talked to them about the excitement surrounding their labor of love.

interview by Dan Ryckert

One of the most striking elements of Sonic Fan Remix is the fact that it's visually superior to the Sega-made Sonic 4. How was a team of two able to make a better-looking game than a major game studio?
Pelikan: In the past, game engines like Unity and UDK have not been available to the public for free, and those engines can produce high quality results and they are really easy to use. Sonic 4 and SFR have very different art styles and many people have complained about SFR's "busy" look, so comparing them is not simple.

Mercury: I think that SFR succeeds where Sonic 4 fails because it's more surprising. There are so many details that you're just not expecting to see, and that's what makes it so exciting.

Did you start development on Sonic Fan Remix before or after the announcement of Sonic 4?
Pelikan: I started working on the game around 10 days prior to Sega's announcement. When I heard they were working on a 2D Sonic I felt both excited as a Sonic fan and a bit disappointed. I did consider

stopping work on SFR at that point as I felt there might be no place for it.

Has Sega contacted you in any way in regards to the game (praise, legal threats, etc.)?
Pelikan: No.

What's the plan going forward? Are you going to release a full version at some point, and will it remain freeware?
Pelikan: Yes, it can only be freeware as it's a fan game, and I will release each zone as soon as it's done, along with updates to the previous zones.

Do you guys have aspirations of breaking into the industry full-time, or is this something you just enjoy doing as a hobby?
Pelikan: I have been working in games for the past few years as a freelance artist, but my big goal would be to make my own games.

Mercury: For me it's purely a hobby. I wouldn't want to work in the industry, mainly because the type of project I like to work on isn't something that's commercially viable.

What is the team's favorite Sonic title?
Pelikan: Sonic 2.

Mercury: Sonic CD.

When do you think Sega started to lose its way with the Sonic series?
Mercury: Sonic Adventure. It took pretty much everything I loved about the series and threw it out.

Pelikan: I have to agree with Mercury, although I really enjoyed the game at the time. Sega made some choices for Sonic from gameplay to visuals to voice acting that never clicked with me and seem to have stayed with Sonic ever since.

Sonic's movement physics have changed over the years. What do you think about some of those changes?
Mercury: Keeping strictly to the 2D games, I think some changes make sense. Sonic Advance – being on a handheld system with a small screen – reduced Sonic's jump height so that the player wouldn't lose sight of the ground when he jumps. In Sonic Rush, the rolling physics were changed to make rolling up less useful, because they wanted to emphasize the boost move. Other changes

like Sonic's newfound ability to destroy breakable walls by just walking through them at any speed, I find to be outrageous. They seem more like mistakes or lazy design than intentional modifications.

So far, these stages are remade versions of existing Sonic levels. Have you ever considered making an entirely original Sonic game?
Pelikan: For the time being, the only Sonic game I plan to work on is SFR. I intend to create original zones for it though.

Mercury: I have. In fact, after SFR, that's exactly what I'm going to be working on.

Have you considered remaking any non-Sonic games?
Pelikan: Well, I have some original game ideas that I would love to create. As far as remakes go, I would love to see Streets of Rage make a comeback.

Mercury: Yes, actually. My other favorite game series besides Sonic is Phantasy Star, and I'd love to remake Phantasy Star I and II in the future.

A Legal Matter:

We ask a constitutional law expert about the Supreme Court video game hearing

by Matthew Kato

Last month the Supreme Court heard oral arguments in *Schwarzenegger v. EMA* (Entertainment Merchants Association), the California law that restricts the sale or rental of violent video games to people under 18, and requires that such titles show a 2x2-inch "18" sticker on their front covers (see "Enemy of the State" in issue 210 for more). The EMA is challenging the law with the First Amendment – a strategy that has already been successful in this case with the lower courts – but the Supreme Court is not bound by those decisions. We've read the transcript of the proceedings and talked to professor Dale Carpenter, who teaches constitutional law and First Amendment issues at the University of Minnesota Law School, about what the Court may decide.

The Arguments

Lawyers for both the state of California and the EMA took their turns laying out their respective cases before the court and answering questions from the justices. Zackery Morazzini, the supervising deputy attorney general for California, went first and stated that the California law was constitutional based on a previous Supreme Court ruling – 1968's *Ginsberg v. New York* – which says that a state can restrict material from minors even if it is not objectionable to adults. Paul Smith represented the EMA, who wants the California law struck down on the grounds that it violates the First Amendment because it restricts distribution of games based on their content – essentially classifying video games as a protected form of speech.

The Questioning

Both sides came under heavy scrutiny as the justices often cut off the lawyers and tried to pick apart their arguments. Morazzini especially was grilled on the vagueness of the law on several counts.

Justice Antonin Scalia pressed Morazzini on how to define "deviant" video game violence. "What's deviant – a deviant, violent video game? As opposed to what? A normal violent video game?" When Morazzini answered that there were established norms, the justices asked why video games – and not movies or books – should be singled out and restricted.

"Suppose a new study suggested that movies were just as violent," offered Justice Elena Kagen. "Then, presumably, California could regulate movies just as it could regulate video games?"

Not only were the law's definitions and enforcement options scrutinized by the Court, but so was its constitutionality under the First Amendment. Justice Scalia again offered some sharp commentary. "You are asking us to create a whole new prohibition which the American people never ratified when they ratified the First Amendment. What's next after violence? Drinking? Smoking? Movies that show smoking can't be shown to children?"

The crux of EMA attorney Paul Smith's argument relied on the First Amendment, but that didn't mean he was free from the Court's scrutiny. At one point in the proceedings, after Chief Justice John Roberts shot down Smith's assertion that parental controls on consoles and TVs were adequate ("…any 13-year-old can bypass parental controls in about five minutes."), several justices cornered Smith with his heavy reliance on the First Amendment and the assertion that there more or less wasn't a problem with minors getting their hands on violent video games.

"Let me be clear about exactly what your argument is," said Justice Samuel Alito. "Your argument is that there is nothing that a state can do to limit minors' access to the most violent, sadistic, graphic video game that can be developed. That's your argument?"

Smith didn't answer the question to Alito or the Court's satisfaction, leaving Chief Justice Roberts to ask, "Can I have a simple answer?"

Smith replied, "The answer is yes, your honor."

Furthermore, Smith relied on the First Amendment and the vague wording of the California law (and future laws) to such an extent that he dared the Court and any state to come up with a correctly worded law that could survive a challenge of the First Amendment. "There is no way that, in fact, anybody is going to be able to come back and draw a statute that gets to what they claim," Smith argued, "because the English language is not susceptible at that level of precision."

The Prediction

"My sense just listening to the oral argument is that there's probably a majority to strike down the California law," said University of Minnesota Law School professor Dale Carpenter. "And then the interesting question will be on what grounds do they do it and how much ground do they leave for future legislative efforts." The court won't render its decision until March at the earliest and the end of June at the latest.

Carpenter declined to predict how each justice would vote, because that's too up in the air. "In a case like this, you are not necessarily going to get a 5-4 split along the familiar ideological lines on the court. For example, it seemed to me in the oral arguments, Justice Stephen Breyer [who's considered a more liberal justice – Ed.] was more sympathetic to the state than some of the other justices. You could have an unusual lineup at the end of the day."

Carpenter believes that the EMA's best strategy would be to stop these laws from getting adopted at the state level to begin with, but that ultimately in this instance its First Amendment strategy will succeed. "I think this court is by and large what we might call libertarian about the [First Amendment]. That is, it is pro-free speech; it is anti-government regulation of speech. I think that the state to some extent recognizes the difficult position it is in trying to defend this law, and is actually asking for the Court to stretch its own First Amendment doctrine to let it regulate these games."

Still, there is no such thing as a clear-cut win for the industry even if the Supreme Court rules against the state. The Court's decision could encourage future laws to be more effectively written so they may succeed. "That happens all the time where the court says a law is written too broadly," Carpenter explained. "You need to write it more narrowly to focus on the precise problem you've identified. The court might hint that just a few changes in the law and it's going to be fine. Or it might hint, 'There's not really much you can do here but you can give it a try.' So it may just depend on how much room the Court seems to leave the state to regulate."

PlayStation's New Portables

Uncharted game already in the works for PSP 2?

Sony is currently working on a successor to the PlayStation Portable, and unlike the disaster that was the PSP Go, this unit is meant to be an evolution for the platform and not just a peculiar sidestep. However, the PSP 2 isn't the only initiative that Sony has planned. The company also has a rumored smart phone in development known as the PlayStation Phone. What's the difference? Why make two devices when one would sound totally awesome instead? Here's a quick breakdown of what we know so far.

PSP 2
(Codename Veta)

It's hard to separate the truth from rumors when it comes to the PSP 2, but whatever the final product ends up being, Sony is definitely building the unit. Moreover, sifting through the rumors out there and from what we've heard ourselves, there seem to be a couple of consensus features (see right).

The developers we talked to described the PSP 2 as a very powerful machine, and we've even heard that a new Uncharted spin-off – which could even stand in for a full-on Uncharted 3 – is in the works. That alone is news, but it also speaks to how powerful the graphical capabilities are for the handheld. Website Kotaku has heard that the PSP 2 has more internal memory than the Xbox 360, and the PSP 2 could have 1GB of RAM – much more than the current PSP's 64MB.

Third-party developers are currently working with the handheld, and it looks like everything is pointing to a holiday 2011 launch. From what we can tell, developers have been given plenty of time to craft software to do the handheld justice. We can only hope this translates into a robust launch lineup and games that make use of everything from the touch panel on the back (which we imagine you use with your forefingers as you hold the unit) to the PSP 2's rumored 3G connection.

Here's an artist's rendition of what the unit may look like. Although the final form factor of the PSP 2 is unknown at this time, there are early leaked photos you can see at gameinformer.com showing different analog stick placement, etc.

» Dual analog sticks, d-pad, and face and shoulder buttons

» A touch-sensitive panel on the back of the unit

» Larger form factor than the current PSP

» Larger screen than the current PSP capable of high-def graphics

» No more UMDs. Games will be on memory sticks

PlayStation Phone
(Codenamed Zeus)

This Android 3.0 phone will also play games with its d-pad and face, shoulder, and start/select buttons. The unit will likely come out in 2011, and tech website Engadget says it's already gotten its hands on the unit (shown). The slider phone is being made through the Sony Ericsson joint venture and other internal Sony divisions, and Sony has already stated that it wants to bring the PlayStation Network to Ericsson devices such as this phone.

Developers are rumored to be making games for the PlayStation Phone – including talk of high-profiled first-party Sony titles. The unit, which supports microSD cards (and which will have up to 1GB of internal memory) will reportedly have a 1-GHz Qualcomm MSM8655 processor, 512MB of RAM, 1GB of ROM, a camera, a screen up to 4.1 inches, and more.

Why don't you just make one device?!

While we'd love it if Sony combined the PlayStation Phone and PSP 2 into one kick-ass utilitarian device (check out Andy's editor's letter in issue 211), sifting through the rumor cloud it seems like these two initiatives are distinctly different. Perhaps Sony is approaching this like Apple does the iPhone and iTouch. Having two separate devices means that those who don't want to deal with the standard two-year phone contract (or don't want to or can't leave their current carrier) can still enjoy some sort of a PlayStation-branded handheld.

Although the PlayStation Phone will play games, it sounds like the PSP 2 will be a much more powerful machine with the technological advantage of being geared specifically towards games instead of possibly having to function as a jack of all trades, master of none. Creating two devices also means you can cater and sell to different markets and types of consumers. While we'd like one device to rule them all, we don't want to be side-talkin' N-Gage style, either.

Kinect
Fitness Test

How do Kinect's exercise games shape up?

by Annette Gonzalez

With motion controls, a balance board, and the idea that fitness can be fun, Wii Fit had mass appeal. Nintendo's fitness offering became one of the best-selling games in the console's history, so it's no surprise other companies want a piece of the sugar-free pie. With Kinect's full-body tracking capabilities, publishers have taken the opportunity to bring fitness games to the next level. We broke a serious sweat putting each game through its paces to judge which Kinect fitness game is the best fit for you.

EA Sports Active 2

» **Publisher:** EA
» **Developer:** EA Canada
» **Release:** November 16
» **Number of Players:** 1-2

EA Sports Active first debuted on Wii with tremendous success, leading to an add-on that offered users additional workouts. Now EA Canada provides a controller-free entry on Kinect with a bundle that includes a heart monitor, which can be tracked on screen during workouts, as well as a resistance band. The bundle makes EA Sports Active 2 the most expensive of the bunch, coming in at $100.

THE GOOD: Setting up the bundled heart monitor is easy. The accessory fits comfortably on your left arm and syncs with your Xbox 360 to display heart rate levels on screen to maximize your workouts. The game offers two programs: a three-week introductory cardio program that helps users build stamina, and a nine-week program that offers routines for full-body conditioning. You can customize your experience to determine workout length, focus areas, and difficulty.

Among Kinect's fitness offerings, EA Sports Active 2 has the greatest workout variety. Your customizable avatar will compete against NPCs in on-foot races, ride a bike on a hilly path, engage in step aerobics, boxing, and dodgeball, protect a goal in soccer, and more. Each routine moves at a solid pace, quickly switching between exercises to retain interest from beginning to end. The constant changes in setting keep you both physically and visually stimulated. At the end of each workout, EA Sports Active 2 provides stats including calories burned (put toward weekly goals), average heart rate, and total workout time in both numerical and chart form to help visualize where your performance peaked during sessions. All data automatically uploads to easportsactive.com to conveniently keep track of progress from a home computer as well as interact with other community members.

THE BAD: Spotty detection will occasionally give you credit for a move even if you're standing still, allowing users to cheat – but in doing so you're only cheating yourself, right? There was also noticeable lag in jumps during bike sequences, making those sections a pain. In addition, aside from a few annoying verbal cues from the virtual trainer, the game does a poor job of providing feedback on form compared to other offerings, and watching your avatar onscreen doesn't aid in this, either. The avatar attempts to mimic your movements, but if you move too quickly, your avatar looks like it's having a seizure. Recognition problems also occasionally caused the game to boot me from my profile mid-workout requiring me to sign in again.

FINAL WORD: EA Sports Active 2 offers a wealth of fun, varied workouts that will keep you coming back, but only if you can overlook its technical problems.

Zumba Fitness

» **Publisher:** Majesco
» **Developer:** Pipeworks Software
» **Release:** November 18
» **Number of Players:** 1-4 (4 Online)

Zumba teaches participants Latin dance techniques to a sizzling soundtrack that will cause you to get fit while getting your groove on. Zumba's popularity sparked an international craze with classes in 90,000 locations across more than 100 countries. The dance fitness program went from live classes to a best-selling DVD series, and is now supported by Kinect.

THE GOOD: You'll Cumbia, Salsa, Samba, and Merengue your way through beginner, intermediate, and – if you're feeling frisky – expert routines that get your heart pumping while having a good time. You'll have the option to choose between 20 and 45-minute routines, and an in-game workout calendar will keep you on track.

THE BAD: The only way to follow along with dance routines is with a mute onscreen dancer, and though he or she will occasionally point at a body part or direction as a clue of what's to come, prompts like Dance Central's flashcards that scroll alongside the action would've been far more effective. What really hindered the experience, however, is the confusing way feedback is represented. The onscreen dancer's silhouette rapidly changed colors (yellow, green, red) to indicate how I was performing. The colors changed so quickly that it was hard to tell how I was doing at any given time. The soundtrack, though fun to dance to, occasionally became repetitive as the same songs kept popping up across routines. Finally, a calorie counter would've been a great addition.

FINAL WORD: Zumba is an undeniably fun way to get a good cardio workout, but the Kinect entry is probably not your best bet. If you want to get your heart rate going and burn a couple hundred calories, I would suggest Dance Central instead, which has a workout mode.

Your Shape Fitness Evolved

» **Publisher:** Ubisoft
» **Developer:** Ubisoft Montreal
» **Release:** November 4
» **Number of Players:** 1-4 (4 Online)

Your Shape Fitness Evolved is the current entry in Ubisoft's flagship workout series, and is sponsored by programs from *Men's Health, Women's Health,* and fitness expert Michelle Bridges.

THE GOOD: Your Shape Fitness Evolved offers a modest range of fitness options, including specialized workouts for men looking to beef up and women who want to shed off pounds from pregnancy. There are specific routines to help shape arms (you can use weights), or get you to squeeze into your skinny jeans. The game even offers something for the older crowd looking for a low-intensity workout. Of all of Kinect's fitness offerings, Your Shape Fitness Evolved performed best in motion tracking and feedback. Your form is represented by a silhouette of your body that appears to be smothered in slime for a fluid representation of movement. With your figure placed alongside your trainer, it's easy to see how you compare. You can also refer to the top right corner of the screen that will clearly display if you need to lunge lower, lift your knees higher, etc. Your Shape users are tested on rhythm and form, and aside from a few hiccups in motion detection linked to loose clothing, the game rarely missed a beat.

THE BAD: Though best in motion tracking, Your Shape Fitness Evolved offers the least variety. The specialized programs are a nice touch, but you'll find several of the workout offerings repeat across routines, challenging motivation to continue. Regardless of program, there is an unusual absence of warm up, cool down, and floor exercises. Yoga, Zen, and boxing activities complement your chosen program, but unfortunately higher difficulties of each are locked at the outset causing advanced users who want to jump right in to go through a series of lighter workouts first. Users have the opportunity to track progress and engage in community features in yourshapecenter.com, something I would've liked to see integrated into the game's otherwise minimal menu.

FINAL WORD: Your Shape Fitness Evolved makes a good complement to another existing workout program, but doesn't have enough features out of the box compared to other offerings to stand on its own.

LEGO Universe

The LEGO license crafts a unique MMO experience

by Phil Kollar

Being a game critic who plays MMOs has its challenges. Not only am I tasked with sinking hundreds of hours into games that are incredibly big and complex, but the genre is also flooded with me-too fantasy games searching desperately for the success that World of Warcraft found. Some months, I feel like I'll scream if I have to swing my virtual sword at another level five goblin.

Some months, I get a total breath of fresh air like LEGO Universe.

LEGO Universe is an MMO unlike anything I've ever played before. It has the varied zones, quests, and social interaction we've come to expect from the genre without traditional leveling up. Grinding is non-existent (unless you want to build up your money reserves), and the focus is entirely on collecting LEGO pieces to create your own unique vehicles and areas.

The structure re-imagines the traditional 3D platformer as an MMO. Combat is a part of the formula, but you'll spend most of your time exploring for new pieces. LEGO Universe has more in common with console LEGO games than World of Warcraft, as you must scour each zone for parts, flags, special bricks, and several other collectibles, destroying everything in sight for coins and the opportunity to build more useful items.

Quests push you through each zone but remain fairly simple, with many falling into the tried and true "kill X number of bad guys" style. The most interesting tasks ask you to find specific parts to modify a minifig or to put together a new rocket or a race car for your personal use. Quests also guide you to the social elements of the game – co-op and competitive minigames, such as surviving waves of enemy attacks or racing.

After clearing out the first couple of zones, you choose between one of four factions that will help determine the direction of the rest of your adventure. Sentinel and Paradox characters will focus on combat, while Assembly characters are largely about building. My choice, the Venture League, is centered on exploring every corner of LEGO Universe.

Another important and unique aspect of LEGO Universe is introduced even earlier than the factions. At the end of the Avant Gardens zone, you gain access to the Block Yard, a property that you can use to build with the various LEGO pieces you've been gathering. Once you've created something worth showing off, you can open your property to the public for visiting and rating.

Don't think of it like LittleBigPlanet; there isn't a lot of playing to be done with something once you've put it together. The real fun of the Block Yard lies in visiting properties just for the spectacle of seeing what players have created. In one fantasy-themed property, a user placed a basket that was pulled through the sky on the wings of a giant dragon. Elsewhere in the same area, a LEGO cat was poised to pounce on a cheeseburger.

I didn't gain any gameplay rewards in these user-created zones, but the joy of discovery was enough. The only downside is that each property you visit has to be downloaded individually, meaning sometimes it'll take longer to load up a location than you'll actually spend exploring it.

Though LEGO Universe does an excellent job of building its own identity, it still has some growing to do. Some quests provide vague or confusing goals, particularly for younger players. Even though you may spend some extra time solving those cryptic missions, the game's content is currently very limited, with less than 10 full zones available at launch. One of the bonuses of the LEGO license is that developer-created zones can cover everything from old-school sci-fi to pirates to Atlantis – they just need more of them represented in the game.

LEGO Universe was clearly created with intentions of being a family-friendly MMO, but don't mistake that to mean that it's just for kids. Still, I have to wonder if the future of the game is free-to-play (it currently costs $10 per month). That change would make it much more accessible to a younger audience as well as to uncertain adults who think they might be interested. It would also make a slow drip of new zones more forgivable.

Whatever its future, LEGO Universe is off to a very solid start. Whether you enjoy platformers, have grown tired of raiding dragons, or simply have the perfect idea for a virtual LEGO property, NetDevil's new MMO is worth giving a chance. ◈
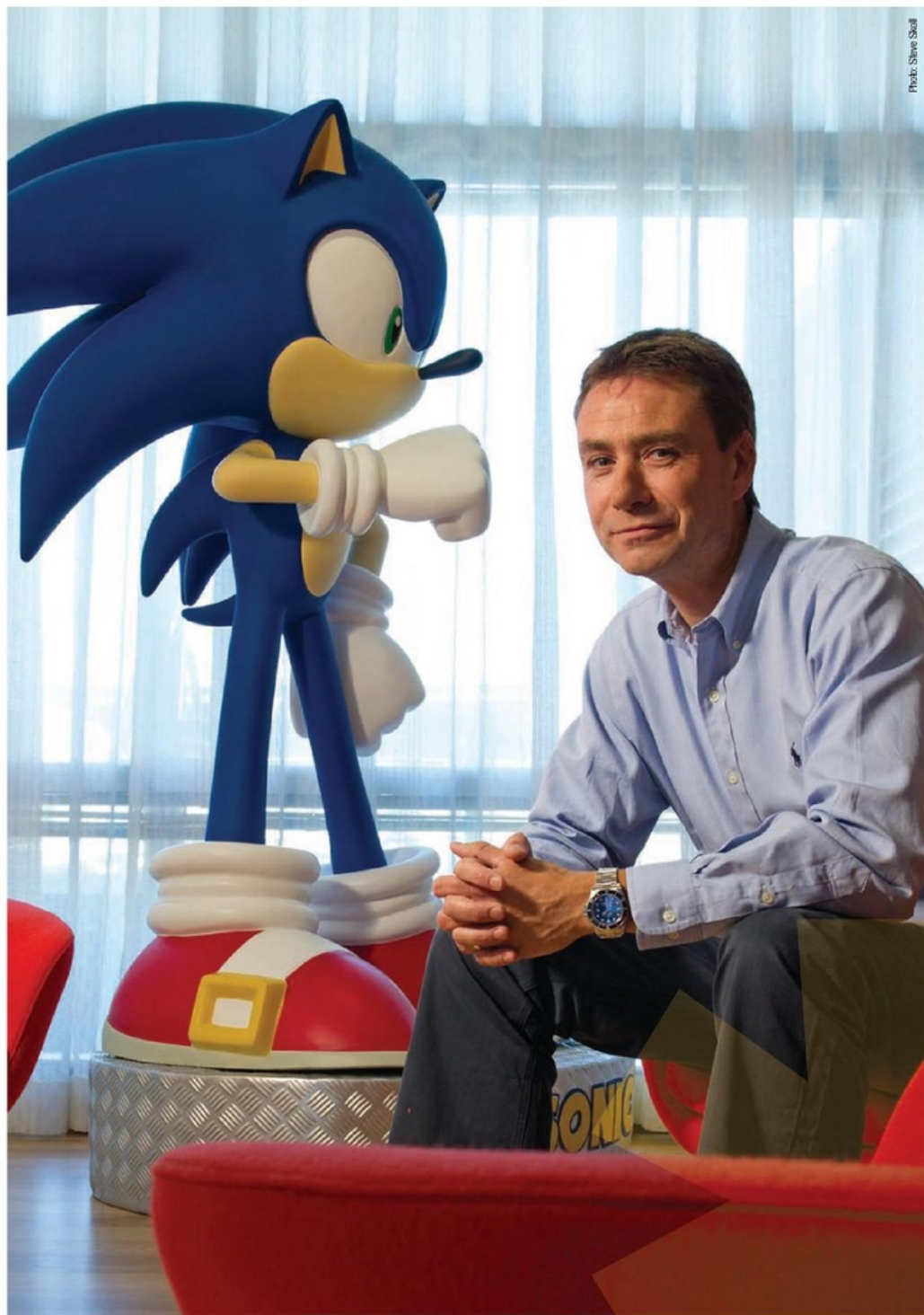
Charting A New Course For Sega

Alan Pritchard brings a wealth of experience from companies like Disney Interactive and EA to his work as executive vice president of sales & marketing at Sega of America. We recently spoke to Pritchard, who was frank about the company's strengths, weakness, past failings, and plans for the future.

Sega seems like a company that's going in a lot of directions at once. You have the legacy products like Sonic, the Marvel licensed products, attempts at Western games like Alpha Protocol, and then more Japanese games like Yakuza. What is Sega's identity as a company?

It's an interesting question. Going back to 2003 and 2004, the objective of the company was to try to bring out quality games while at the same time driving market share. Our objective was to be a top five publisher in five years. To do that, we felt that we weren't able to rely on our own existing IPs like Sonic, Monkey Ball, and Virtua Tennis. That's why we acquired some studios like Creative Assembly and Sports Interactive. At the same time, we needed to get into genres that other top five publishers were doing well – the likes of Activision, Ubisoft, and THQ had film-licensed properties. We felt like that was something we needed to gain market share. Hence, the Marvel deal. Sega's own franchises are casual games and character based. We didn't have any shooters, RPGs, or RTSs. So, we went out aggressively to look for other licenses and external developers to have products in those genres on platforms that work well for those genres. Since then, things have changed slightly. The focus now is profit and not market share. I think that we've had some mixed success.

If the strategy has changed, what was it about the old strategy that wasn't working?

Well, the film-licensed category has been a bit of bad luck for us. Maybe we jumped into it at the wrong time. That's a category that's been in decline over the last three years as we brought our titles to market. That's something out of our hands. There are no further plans for us to extend that partnership beyond the five-film deal with Marvel.

In general, the games did not get strong reviews. Was it the decline of the movie game genre in general that hurt those games, or was it poor quality?

It's probably both, to be honest. The way games are being reviewed and looked at by the press – especially on PS3 and 360 – the core gamers are looking for a different experience. Part of it is the category, but part of it is that we have to put our hands up. We brought to market below-quality games. As we started to work with third-party developers on platforms that were new to Sega, we struggled a little bit. Iron Man 2 is a prime example. That Metacritic score is down to a 47 or 49 now, which is not great. We think we're a good way to addressing that with Thor and Captain America. They will both be a good bit higher than that.

The core gamer today expects a lot in terms of production values and polish. You talked about profitability. Alpha Protocol was not a success, and a game like that is such a huge bet. You can't do a game like

that on the cheap. Looking forward, knowing the risks, are you still committed to triple-A, core games moving forward?

We're definitely still committed, and that's the success of our stronger selling titles like Football Manager, Total War, Mario & Sonic, Virtua Tennis, where we have achieved high levels of profitability that have allowed us to take some of these risks. We intend to continue to look at new IP and in core games. Aliens vs. Predator was a success for us, and we're developing an Aliens franchise roadmap, so there will be subsequent Aliens games.

Aliens: Colonial Marines is still coming out?

Colonial Marines is still on. We've been working closely with Gearbox behind the scenes, and we'll be able to tell you a lot about that in the next couple of months. It won't be November 11th [as previously reported]. We haven't announced a date yet. This was kind of a pickup for us, with Activision acquiring Vivendi and us having the Aliens license. With the state of the code available to us with Aliens vs. Predator from Rebellion, that kind of forced us and allowed us to slightly alter our Aliens roadmap and strategy. It made sense to release that first. We have a further title to announce from Platinum Games as well. We'll also have a core title coming from Nagoshi-san's [Super Monkey Ball creator Toshihiro Nagoshi – Ed.] internal studio in Japan. It's a shooter.

Sonic is the icon for Sega. There have been a lot of Sonic titles over the last few years. Some have been better than others; it's a bit of a mixed bag. What is your long-term strategy for Sonic?

You're right. We have been guilty of bringing too much Sonic product to market. Where we're trying to move to now is – we have Mario & Sonic, which is our party Sonic title. Then, we're looking to improve the quality and focus of a pure Sonic platform gaming experience. We have released Sonic 4 digitally, which has reviewed very well. Last week, we released Sonic Free Riders on Kinect. That's us being involved in the launch of a platform. Historically, Sega does very well in the launch timeframe of platforms. We did very well at the launch of PS3 and Wii. Free Riders was really about being a part of the launch of Kinect. Then, we have Colors, which is our pure Sonic gaming experience. That's had some high scores. It's also the highest pre-selling pure Sonic title we've had ever. That's a good indication. With the quality of the game, we're confident of that. That's our pure platforming Sonic. But to your point, we have some announcements in the early part of next year that will further support and add to this strategy. There will be two or three big Sonic announcements in the early part of next calendar year.

The 3DS seems like a great fit for Sega.

The 3DS was great. I don't know anyone who went to E3 that wasn't excited about it. We're

obviously waiting to hear a lot of information from Nintendo. We have announced Super Monkey Ball for 3DS, which will be a launch title. We have a number of 3DS titles in our line-up for next financial and calendar year. There's four or five existing franchises, one or two from the old Sega IP locker, and we're looking at one or two new IPs as well. Sega has always done well on Nintendo platforms in Nintendo and Europe.

Wii has been a tough nut to crack for third-party publishers. You did The House of the Dead: Overkill, The Conduit, and MadWorld. How challenging has Wii been for you, especially with these core-oriented games?

Yeah, it's hard for the core titles. Going back 12 or 18 months when we released those titles, it was a risk. Nintendo was supportive of the strategy. There was an intent to take the Wii console a little older, and make a more core machine. So games like MadWorld, House of the Dead, and Conduit fit that strategy. House of the Dead is a more established and casual franchise, and that did very well. Conduit 2 is getting a good buzz.

How did MadWorld do? It got great reviews. Was it successful?

Review-wise, it was. Commercially…the answer has to be no. It was a huge risk that we really believed in at the time, but the title did not sell well.

Moving forward, will you be a little more realistic about what the Wii audience will buy?

Absolutely. We've got Conduit 2 still to release. MadWorld was a big risk. Was it on the wrong platform? I don't know. Would it have done better on 360 or PS3? Possibly. I think we will look at some of those slightly more risky type opportunities, but very, very carefully. We've still got high hopes for Conduit 2. The Wii as a platform is in a strange place. We've got the economic situation. It's hard for retailers, and consumers are buying fewer products. The Wii had such a massive amount of success for three years; things are different now.

Former Sega designer Yuji Naka recently said he'd like to work with Sega on a Dreamcast 2. The rumors that you are getting back into the console business seem to pop up regularly.

The Dreamcast fans are very devoted. You see on eBay people are still buying the games and system. We actually have a Dreamcast collection coming out soon. We are looking to bring some of the old Dreamcast games to market digitally and packaged. The titles are still to be announced. But, unless there's something I don't know – no one has told me about getting back into the console business. [Laughs]

interview by Matt Helgeson

Windows Phone

here to play

Can the new Microsoft phone operating system that boasts Xbox Live functionality match the elegance and versatility of the iOS and Android?

It has taken forever, but Microsoft's overhauled mobile platform is finally here. The stakes have changed drastically since its last major update. Smart phones have taken over as the mobile device of choice for consumers, with the Apple iPhone and Google's Android OS duking it out for supremacy. So does Windows Phone 7 have what it takes to make this a three-way battle? Yes and no.

Most of the basics – seamless contact and calendar syncing, GPS, an app marketplace, Netflix support, and smooth web surfing – are in place. But given its late entry into the market, the lack of features like multitasking, copy and paste functionality, universal search, and threaded email is a head scratcher. Though Microsoft plans to deliver some of these missing options in the near future, it's not easy to make a splash when your brand new OS isn't up to par with the competition.

by GI Staff

Windows Phone 7's two-dimensional homepage uses large, bright thumbnails rather than the smaller icons found on iPhones and Android phones. It's not the prettiest interface, but the vibrant, clean design is very easy to navigate. The rest of your apps are tucked onto the Apps hub on a second page, which you'll access often since the homepage houses a fraction of the apps found on other smart phones.

Setting up the phone takes less time than it does to boot up a PC – we had our Gmail, Facebook, Netflix, and Windows Live accounts synced with the phone, including our contacts list and calendar, in a matter of minutes. Rather than offering a separate Facebook app, Microsoft chose to mesh the Facebook experience with your contacts database in the People hub. On the plus side, this system grabs images of your contacts from Facebook, but it also fills your contact database with people from high school you probably never want to speak to again.

The Xbox Live integration is supposed to be a big selling point for gamers, but after playing around with it a while we don't think it's fleshed out enough to convince Xbox 360 users to migrate to the new platform just yet. From the hub you can peruse your list of mobile games and view your gamerscore and avatar. To check out your friends list, customize your avatar, or send and receive messages you need to download the Xbox Live Extras add-on. Once downloaded, you have to open the Xbox Live app, then wait for Extras to load each time you want to perform any of these operations. We're not sure why Microsoft would force us to essentially open two programs to perform these basic functions, but it's annoying.

The biggest drawback to Xbox Live thus far is the small and relatively expensive game library. The addition of achievements isn't justification enough to price gouge players for $4.99 to play Bejeweled when its rough equivalent costs $2.99 on the iPhone. Strangely, Xbox Live also doesn't let you go head to head with friends, either. This compromised feature set isn't enough to make us switch over right now, but we'll be keeping our eye on the platform to see if the game library grows with more Arcade-style games and Microsoft adds the missing multiplayer functionality.

The same can be said for Windows Phone 7 as a whole. The new operating system is a major upgrade that shows a lot of promise, but as it stands, the phone is merely trying to keep pace with Apple and Google.

People

Outlook

DEAD SPACE: SALVAGE

After the events of the first game, the *USG Ishimura* vanishes. Both the government and the Unitologists believe the ship still contains the Red Marker, and both will stop at nothing to get it back.

$17.99
shop.idwpublishing.com

INCEPTION

Christopher Nolan (*The Dark Knight, The Prestige*) tells a tale about a group of thieves who jump into people's dreams to steal corporate secrets. It's so entertaining you won't care if it makes sense.

$35.99
wbshop.com

SHERLOCK SEASON ONE

A modern retelling of Sherlock Holmes that ran on PBS sounds like a disaster, but Steven Moffat (the current show runner for *Doctor Who*) help put this together and it would be a shame if you missed it.

$39.98
bbcamericashop.com

1 | T-Mobile HTC HD7

Like the Evo 4G and HD2 before it, this wide-bodied HTC phone sports a massive 4.3-inch display. The capacitive touchscreen is responsive and the additional real estate is great for web surfing, but it doesn't match the high-resolution image quality of the iPhone 4's Retina display. If you're a Netflix and Zune Pass subscriber you won't need to carry a lot of media on the device, and the 16GB of storage should be plenty of room to store the photos and HD video you're capturing with the 5-megapixel camera. Our phone calls were crisp, but don't expect to make too many of them in a given day. Like the older iPhone models, the HD7's short battery life had us scrambling for the charger toward the end of each day. If you're a heavy user, you may want to find a Windows Phone 7 model with a larger battery.

AVERAGE

$199.99 (with contract)
t-mobile.com

2 | Logitech Revue

This set-top box in concept is supposed to merge the world of cable TV and Internet TV into one ultimate package under the Google TV banner. The execution at this point, however, falls short of the dream. NBC, ABC, CBS, Fox, and Hulu have all blocked access to Google TV. So what can you watch? At the time of this writing, we were able to view streaming video on sites like ESPN, MTV, and Comedy Central, and access Netflix streaming. The best part of the Revue is by far the slick keyboard with integrated mouse touchpad. It's so awesome we wish it were available separately for PCs.

LIMITED APPEAL

$299.99
logitech.com

3 | Star Wars Dart Board

While the dart board may provide more entertainment, we bet its packaging caught your eye first. The dartboard's case is silk screened from the lithograph *Last Daughter of Alderaan* by artist Adam Hughes, and features Princess Leia in her iconic metal bikini. While the set doesn't come with actual darts, it does include custom Rebel or Alliance flights to customize your current gear.

$164.99
gentlegiantltd.com

4 | Microsoft Kinect

Motion-based gameplay has been spotty in the past, but Kinect proves to be a responsive piece of hardware. Voice and gesture-based commands work surprisingly well in both menu navigation and video playback, though you won't be able to use controller-free navigation in Netflix and for standard DVD playback. Pack-in game Kinect Adventures provides hours of fun, and third-party titles like Dance Central do a great job showcasing the technology's capabilities. The unit needs at least six feet of space to deliver the optimal experience, which leaves Kinect out of households where space is at a premium. Even though Kinect's current lineup is largely casual, we're hoping for continued support past the novelty stage. Overall, the controller-free experience is surprisingly satisfying and worth trying if you're looking for something new in the realm of motion technology.

VERY GOOD

$149.99
xbox.com/kinect

Everything's A-OK

The first games from Warner Bros. and Sesame Workshop's partnership are out. Are they worth your kids' time?

by Jeff Cork

It's hard to believe, but it's been more than a decade since the Sesame Street gang visited dedicated game systems. While Elmo, Ernie, and Bert have made a few appearances on VTech's educational computers, they haven't strolled down traditional gaming avenues since the days of Nintendo 64.

Warner Bros. Interactive and Sesame Workshop set out to change that at the beginning of the year, with an announcement of a licensing deal between the two companies. The first titles from that partnership have been released in the form of Cookie's Counting Carnival and Elmo's A-to-Zoo Adventure. I was curious to see if the games were up to Sesame Workshop's typical standards, so I took them home to give them a shot.

I barely made my way through the door before I was intercepted by my three-year-old son. "What's that?" he asked as he noticed the boxes. After he saw Elmo's smiling face, I knew it was over. I wasn't going to have much luck in testing these out alone.

We started out with the Wii version of Cookie's Counting Carnival. First, we had to slip a special Cookie Monster sleeve over the remote. It serves two purposes (three, if you consider "looking adorable" a viable role). First, its fuzzy fur and rubberized back provides a good gripping surface for younger hands. In a clever move, the cover also obscures the controls that aren't necessary for play—a great way to keep new players from being intimidated or confused by all those tiny buttons.

The interface is as simple as can be. When Cookie needs players to ring a bell at the carnival a set number of times, for instance, kids just need to gently move the remote down with both hands like they're using an air pump. My son preferred to pretend he was swinging a giant hammer, but what can you do? In instances when kids need to select one of several options, tipping the remote from side to side cycles through those choices. A press of the 2 button provides confirmation.

Neither of the games are graphical powerhouses, but my son was mesmerized, nonetheless. It's easy for us older players to forget how amazing it is to interact with something on a television – particularly when your only previous exposure to the device is as a passive form of entertainment – even if they look a bit like Flash games.

Did my son like the games? A few days later, I came home with a Kinect and a copy of Kinectimals. I thought I'd be a shoo-in for some kind of father of the millennium award. After petting his virtual cub for a few minutes (and having a great time), my son turned and asked if he could play "that Cookie Monster game" again.

My wallet may have shed a tear at that moment, but as a father I was more than happy to accommodate him. ◈

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Two Worlds II

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Mass Effect 2

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LittleBigPlanet 2

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Dead Space 2

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01 Join the Collectors
Looking to blow your holiday money on cool things? DC Direct's Mass Effect figures just hit store shelves, and will likely sell out quickly. The first series of Mass Effect figures consists of Grunt, Commander Shepard (male version), Thane, and Tali. In a few months, DC Direct will release a second series with Garrus, Legion, Miranda, and the loveable Mordin.

04 New Releases
› 18 Wheels of Steel: Extreme Trucker 2 *(PC)*
› *Battlestar Galactica: Season 4 (Blu-Ray)*
› Emergency 2012 *(PC)*
› Get Fit *(360, Wii)*
› Ghost Trick: Phantom Detective *(DS)*
› Lost in Shadow *(Wii)*
› Mario Sports Mix *(Wii)*
› Plants vs. Zombies *(DS)*
› Sherlock Holmes: Mystery of Osborne *(DS)*
› Star Raiders *(PS3, 360)*
› Two Worlds II *(PS3, 360)*

06 The Most Metal Comic You'll Ever Read
Adult Swim's hilarious *Metalocalypse* cartoon starts up again in September, but if you can't

wait that long, you can read the Dark Horse comic book today by series creators Brendon Small and Jon Schnepp. In this issue, Dethklok creates the ultimate concert venue: a train three stories high and eight car lanes wide.

07 Season of Uh-Oh
When you think of Nicolas Cage, what role first pops into your mind? If you pictured him as an eccentric writer, an alcoholic, or kidnapper, you are living in the past. He no longer accepts good roles, opting instead for crap like today's theatrical release, *Season of the Witch*. In this film, a long-haired Cage fights a hot witch. It might sound like a rehash of last year's *Sorcerer's Apprentice* and for all we know, it is. We didn't see it. We stopped going to Nic Cage movies in 2002.

11 New Releases
› Kingdom Hearts: Re:Coded *(DS)*
› Mass Effect 2 *(PS3)*
› *Piranha 3D (Blu-Ray)*
› Test Drive Unlimited 2 *(PS3, 360, PC)*

14 Another Classic Franchise
The Green Hornet opens in theaters today. You

probably aren't familiar with this franchise, because you were born after the creation of cool super heroes. You can tell the movie studio has faith in Seth Rogen's performance, as they've dumped the film into the movie wasteland of January. Previous January hits include *Space World*, *The Wedding Planner*, and *Torque*.

18 New Releases
› LittleBigPlanet 2 *(PS3)*
› Mindjack *(PS3, 360)*
› Touch 'N' Play Collection *(DS)*

19 Iron Man Turns 500, Discovers He Has A Son
The latest craze in comic book scripting is turn super heroes into mothers and fathers. Batman has a son he didn't know about, Wolverine has a son he didn't know about, and Hulk has a son he knew about but thought he lost. In the 500th issue of *Invincible Iron Man*, Tony Stark learns he has a son. He also doesn't remember having him. Amnesia and sleeping with every moving thing can do that to you. Marvel Comics hints at his spawn being significant through the question "Who is Tony Stark's son?" Our guess? Spider-Man Jr.

25 New Releases
› Dead Space 2 *(PS3, 360)*
› Paws & Claws: Marine Rescue *(DS)*
› You Don't Know Jack *(PS3, 360, DS)*

Happy Dead Space 2 Day!
If you forgot to take today off, call in sick and tell your boss you contracted the necromorph virus – it's like twice as bad as swine flu. Now that you are freed up of responsibility, run out to your local retailer and snag a copy of Dead Space 2 for either PlayStation 3 or Xbox 360. While you're there, also pick up Dead Space 2. Aftermath, a full-length animated film that picks up right where Dead Space 2 left off!

28 More Like "The Rong"
The Rite, which opens today, tries to lure people into the theater with the phrase "based on a true story." If you believe that, you're an idiot Hollywood will say anything to try to build up buzz; remember when you thought The Blair Witch was real? If you go see *The Rite*, do it because it stars the awesome Anthony Hopkins as an exorcist... or because you confused it with a documentary about the delicious soda sensation Diet Rite.

Her passion for antiquity was inescapable. Lara Croft was groomed from a young age to look to the past before the present, forgoing traditional holiday gatherings in favor of family excursions to archeological digs. This methodical upbringing had its intended effect on the young Croft, instilling a love of the unknown that drives her to uncover rational explanations for the most heavily ensconced mysteries.

While Lara's affinity for the ancient is effortless, she often finds herself struggling to carve an identity of her own from under her parents' influential shadow. She comes from money, but refuses to flaunt it. Her name garners respect, but she craves to earn it. She dreams of proving herself, but wants to pursue her passion on her own terms. To that end, she unexpectedly turned down an open invitation to Cambridge and enrolled at a lesser-known university to immerse herself in real-world experiences. This time was crucial in molding Lara into a practical and levelheaded young woman, grounded in a way that her parents' itinerary would have never allowed.

TOMB RAIDER

Now 21 and fresh from academy, Lara is eager to prove herself to the world – and perhaps to her parents. This drive places Lara aboard the salvage vessel *Endurance* with Captain Conrad Roth, an ex-Royal Marine commando known for his willingness to bend (or break) the law to secure a prize. Together, the crew sets off on a voyage to search for lost relics off the coast of Japan. This first adventure was intended to be a definitive moment in a young and inexperienced Lara's career, a chance to change history with a discovery of significance.

Before they reach the isle, the expedition is derailed by a massive storm that cleaves the *Endurance* in two, leaving an unprepared Croft lost in a sea of blackness. Instead of finding respect and renown, Lara will be pushed to the limits of human fortitude. A very mortal Croft must endure both physical and emotional trauma to survive.

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

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Square Enix

» **Developer**
Crystal Dynamics

» **Release**
TBD

by Meagan Marie

Teflon Beauty

Love her or hate her, in the late '90s you couldn't ignore Lara Croft.

The buxom beauty vaulted to cyber-stardom among a sea of male protagonists, and with her iconic ponytail and dual pistols she quickly eclipsed the franchise that spawned her in popularity.

It's hard to deny that the phenomenon of Lara's success stemmed partly from her nature as a projection of both power and sexual fantasies. There was no overlooking the cinched waistline and impossible curves, the inflated lips and elongated legs, or the excessive flexibility and effortless grace. Some embraced Lara as an inspiration. Others shunned her as a chauvinistic objectification.

Perhaps attacks against her physical eccentricities could have been deflected with arguments for her strength of character, but careful inspection often uncovered little more than bullet points for a personality. Lara Croft was strong, independent, athletic, intelligent, and ultimately, a façade. Still, Lara maintained a rabid following – an icon that transcended her flaws. Lara Croft was who fans wanted her to be, and for a time, that was more than enough.

As everything does, Lara eventually lost steam. Her games suffered, her brand capital diminished, and her reign eventually came to an end. Crystal Dynamics managed to halt the franchise's steady decline with a trilogy of solid releases, but even the studio recognized that Lara hadn't evolved with the times. Lara Croft had become an empty idea. New and substantial leads had risen to take her place who didn't need unlockable bikinis to garner attention. With the industry evolving and demanding meaningful experiences, Crystal knew it was at a crossroads.

The decision to reboot the Tomb Raider franchise through an origin story wasn't so much a choice as an act of necessity. "Iconic characters, whether they are heroic or not, are obvious products of their time," says Timothy Longo Jr., franchise director at Crystal Dynamics. "Specifically with franchises, they need to evolve with the times. When they don't, you can tell. They will fail. Crystal was bold in saying 'We have to do something big. Something different.'"

How exactly to implement that reboot, though, was another issue entirely. When researching potential avenues for the redesign, careful examination of the character yielded a recurring sentiment. Lara's biggest downfall was her Teflon coating. This nonstick surface may have worked in an age of superficial fun, but when no amount of physical exertion, pain, or heartache would break through Lara's veneer, it further condemned her as a character of style without substance. Crystal realized it needed a new, younger Lara. A human Lara – one that players would identify with and care about.

"This is a survival story. This is an origin story," Longo continues. "Our goal is to take a very human and relatable character, and break her down before we rebuild her – to put her through survival challenges and have her come out a changed person, someone the player will relate to."

Crystal Dynamics set out to craft a character not as a sex symbol or an ode to empowerment, but an entirely new Lara Croft born out of something we've never seen before.

Desperation.

To build Lara Croft into a culturally relevant hero worthy of the attention that once came so effortlessly, Crystal must break her first. This Lara isn't a shadow of her predecessor, nor the game a precursor to her later adventures. While she echoes the intelligence, strength, and beauty of Teflon Lara, she is a woman all her own. This Lara won't be invincible. She bleeds and bruises, trembles and cries, but ultimately pushes forward. Her coy and knowing smile may have been replaced with a grimace of pain and fear, but it's all part of the process.

What doesn't kill Lara will sure as hell make her stronger.

A Fresh Face

Redesigning Lara Croft was as difficult a task as reimagining and repositioning the franchise itself. With her iconic look so engrained in popular culture, changes to her visage had to be meticulously considered. Crystal Dynamic's biggest challenge was finding a middle ground between familiarity and freshness, vulnerability and strength, and the all-important trifecta of brains, brawn, and beauty.

"For me, every character design starts with who that person is and what motivates them," explains Brian Horton, senior art director at Crystal Dynamics. "What we chose to do very early on with Lara was not start with the surface qualities and instead really work on who she was as a character."

"After crafting the biography, our goal was to make her as believable and relatable as possible," Horton continues. "We wanted to make a girl that felt familiar, but still has a special quality about her. Something about the way her eyes look and the expression on her face that makes you want to care for her. That was our number one goal. We wanted to have empathy for Lara, and at the same time show the inner strength that made clear she was going to become a hero."

Starting with a barrage of concepts as simple as silhouettes, the artists added physical features after carefully studying the elements that made Lara iconic. They retained the M-shape of her lips, the spatial relationship between her eyes, nose, and mouth, and the iconic ponytail. All the elements were then packaged together in a softer, rounder face, forgoing the hardness for which Lara was traditionally known.

"We knew we wanted to bring her into a more believable proportionality and surface quality, so that was another big push for us," Horton says in speaking to Lara's usually exaggerated physique. "We wanted to bring her into the real world and ground her as much as we could."

Part of what roots Lara in reality is her wardrobe. In the early years, Lara's contextual ensembles and unlockable outfits were key selling points. Crystal intends to instead focus on functionality over form in the Tomb Raider reboot.

"She is on this expedition and has practical clothing – cargo pants and layered tank tops and boots – because she is in and among a group that share the same values," Horton explains. "The end result was a look that is both contemporary and timeless. We didn't want the look to be too trendy or too hip, but she still needed to feel youthful and relevant."

What of Lara's legacy of overt sex appeal? "As far as sex appeal, we're always looking to make a character that people want to play, and part of that is a level of attractiveness and being drawn to Lara," Horton says. "But we don't want to play up sexuality for sexuality's sake. Context and motivation are paramount in this project. I think what's going to be compelling, and what our version of sexy is, is the toughness through adverse conditions, with a beauty and vulnerability showing through. That is sexy in its own way."

While this story marks the new Lara's debut to the world, some early tests indicate that Crystal may be hitting its mark. Eye tracking studies of the new Lara versus the old revealed that instead of looking at Lara's arsenal or curves, most participants spent their time gazing at her piercing brown eyes.

Crystal doesn't see Tomb Raider as a reboot of the gaming property only, but of the entire franchise. All ancillary products, media ventures, and promotional practices must fit in line with Lara's new vision. One of the first things on the cutting room floor? Live-action models won't make a return

Lara comes to after the shipwreck in a most traumatic way.

The nothingness that engulfed her is first broken by the sound of something heavy dragging across wet sediment, punctuated by soft groaning and the dripping of water. The blackness yields to the hazy imagery of a poorly lit room. Just as Lara begins to regain her senses, the world shifts off-kilter, followed by the sound of rope protesting as it is pulled taut. Lara regains consciousness with a gasp, her chin visibly trembling before panic overtakes her. She finds herself imprisoned inside a canvas sack, suspended upside down from a lofty height above a cavern floor, only her head exposed.

Lara Croft is naked in a figurative sense; she has no tools or weapons at her disposal. Dangling beside her is another captive – one who has already died. Drawing motivation from her fear, Lara begins to struggle with aid from the player, able to do little more than sway back and forth. "I can't die like this," she protests with an edge of hysteria.

As she builds momentum, Lara crashes into the sack next to her, unintentionally lighting it on fire from a sea of candles. The deceased inhabitant drops to the floor below. This small string of actions is Crystal's way of introducing the player to Tomb Raider's physics-based world and establishing a vocabulary of tools that Lara can exploit to help her survive. Lara knows an obvious truth – cloth and rope burn. If she can do the unthinkable, there is a way out of her plight. "This is going to hurt," she mutters to herself, swinging until her own restraints ignite. Lara screams as the flames engulf her and braces for the freefall to the floor below.

Lara Croft is no longer the epitome of grace. The camera slows to a crawl, anticipating her arrival from the perspective of the floor. A metal spike comes to focus in the foreground. As foreshadowed, Lara lands on her back, the object skewering her side. Another scream erupts from her wrenched lips.

The echoing outburst gives way to incoherent muttering, as the player must aid Lara in pulling the spike from her side. The screen flashes as the spike pulls free, and all sound is drowned out by Lara's frantic heartbeat. With the object discarded she stands up wearily to show us the full extent of her condition. Mud cakes her face, arms, and chest, with only sweat and tears exposing small rivers of bare skin. Her hair is pulled back, but disheveled; her rugged pants are soaked and covered in grime. Blood clearly marks the spike's entrance and exit wound on Lara's gray top. Another noteworthy detail about her appearance is what's missing, however. A Lara Croft without twin pistols is an unconventional sight.

"What?" Lara stutters, the single word elongated. "What is this place?" Pushed forward by fear and adrenaline, the player navigates Lara through the cave's narrow corridors, searching for a way out of the desperate situation. The serpentine walls give way to a large room lit by candles, but the waning claustrophobia does little to alleviate tension. A human corpse is strung up in front of a sacrificial altar. The most unnerving realization is that the body is still fresh, unlike

Tomb Raider is still an action adventure title at heart, but Crystal refers to it fondly as an "action survival" experience

Not so Quiet

Animations are extremely organic and believable. As Lara squeezes through a particularly narrow opening, she grazes her wound and instinctually reaches to hold her side

Crystal is full motion capturing simultaneous body, face, and voice performances to secure an impressive level of detail, emotion, and realism

Desperation

the skeletal companions perched amongst treasure from a variety of cultures and centuries past. "God no! What did he do to you?" Lara questions the lifeless form, barely lucid from pain. Alarmed by the sound of footsteps, Lara lets loose an expletive before picking up a torch from the wall and pressing on. She doesn't give the relics that litter the room a second glance. Lara is focused on survival. Professional curiosity will have to wait.

A weave of cloth and debris obstructs Lara's path, and from prior experience the player knows the torch will burn it away. In a similar case of cause and effect, by passing through a veil of water, Lara loses her flame. After relighting her torch in an adjacent room, Lara drops to her knees to crawl through a narrow tunnel, only to find her legs ripped from under her as a man – one of the scavengers native to the underground dwelling – grabs her from behind. While the player struggles to regain her footing, the mysterious figure tries to calm her with reassurances. "Stop! Stop it! Shhhhh!" He echoes. "Help. Help. I'm trying to help!"

If you give in and cease the struggle, the deranged man will pin Lara to the ground before plunging a makeshift blade into her chest, his free hand closing her lifeless eyes and continuing to coo softly in her ear. Next to nothing has been revealed about these antagonists or their motivations, but Lara was right to be wary. These foes aren't simple beasts. They are conniving creatures and the embodiment of the island's hostility.

If the player wards off the attacker, Lara escapes the small space just as it caves in, putting distance between her and the pursuer. The prospect of moving forward isn't any more attractive than sticking around, as Lara must now navigate through a flooded corridor housing only a small pocket of air. Holding her head at an extreme angle to secure oxygen and preserve her fire, she loses her footing every few steps, dunking down below the surface and emerging with a panicked gasp. The camera work here is cinematic – intentionally poised behind Lara so we see her anxious face every time she looks back to ensure she isn't being followed.

Drawn to an expansive room by the sound of breaking waves, Lara is introduced to a franchise staple, what would be traditionally described as a puzzle. "Puzzle" isn't the best way to characterize these challenges, however, as Crystal Dynamics' prime directive is to interpret all core mechanics through a lens of survival. "The main philosophy of Tomb Raider is to take the key action adventure pillars that all games in the genre are held up to, and to put them through our filter of survival and action," explains lead designer Daniel Neuburger. "Survival being thematic and having some gameplay implications, and action being the overall pacing and tone."

As a result these "survival escapes" are less contrived than traditional puzzle scenarios. While rooms of relics make obvious that the island has history, the chance of Lara stumbling upon long lost and wholly functional mechanisms – of ferreting out keys and pulling levers to timed doors – is significantly less. Lara must instead re-appropriate practical devices for her own means.

This scavenger's den seems to have purpose – a space for the natives to sift through flotsam and jetsam for usable items carried in with the tide. A light source indicates an exit from the seaside cave but is blockaded by a row of explosive barrels. The quickest exit would be to light the barrels on fire with her torch, but in such a confined space the consequences would most likely include death.

Lara has alternate means of lighting up the barrels, however. "This is a dynamic world," Neuburger continues. "We are living by the rules of a real world even though it is an unreal situation. We still live by fire, water, and physics. Lara has to be smart, resourceful, and solve her way out of these various survival challenges we put in front of her."

The room is cluttered with objects large and small, including many buoyant cloth-covered crates. Lara could light the crates on fire and let the escaping tide pull them toward the barrels, but she quickly discovers a waterfall along the path that would extinguish her traveling torches.

Lara finally spots a rusty shark cage used as a sorting device for scavenged items. Enough experimentation uncovers a means to manipulate the cage through a counterweight system. Lara loads several crates inside and redirects them to drop atop the explosive containers. A massive explosion welcomes in fresh air.

The illusion of triumph lasts only moments, as Lara's careless use of explosives triggers a cave-in. Sprinting toward the light that signifies salvation, Lara tumbles down a fissure in the collapsing pathway and must scramble up a steep path to escape. The player is in control through the entire ordeal, frantically alternating between shoulder buttons to move up the incline, dodging falling boulders with button prompts, and trying to find a safe path through the chaos with analog controls.

As if the escape wasn't desperate enough, the scavenger finds Lara once more, grasping for her legs while continuing to maintain that he only has the best of intentions. If you are successful in helping Lara kick free, the man will fall victim to the rapidly collapsing tunnel. If you are unsuccessful, a massive boulder pins Lara's legs, giving her a moment of conscious thought to reach toward the camera before another bolder crushes her skull. It is a shocking and ultimately disturbing moment. If it isn't obvious at this juncture, Tomb Raider is openly embracing an M rating. To make people care about Lara again, she can't wear that Teflon coat. She has to be human. Fragile. Mortal. The consequences for failure must be real, and they must be jarring.

Successfully avoiding death this time around, Lara breaks through to the surface before collapsing. Her birth from the cramped tunnels isn't one of inherent safety, however. Before Lara is a scene of terrifying grandeur. Stepping slowly towards a cliff's edge, we get a view of a breathtaking ocean vista littered with ships, planes, and wreckage from centuries past. While Lara now has room to breathe, she seems to have jumped out of the frying pan and into the fire.

As Lara scrambles up the incline, the camera jostles and is caked with dirt, making the encounter as disorienting for the player as it is for her

Survival of

Addressing Combat

The last of Tomb Raider's pillars is still veiled in mystery. Combat has been a contentious subject for Tomb Raider fans throughout the years, and is an obvious point of interest in the reboot as a result. Crystal's approach is three-pronged – to make combat fresh to the franchise, competitive amongst peers, and relevant to the story.

The biggest change is a concession: removing the archaic lock-on system. "We've been putting a huge amount of effort into the combat, a much larger emphasis than we've put into any of our previous titles," says Crystal Dynamics studio head Darrell Gallagher. "The free aim system will help to make Tomb Raider competitive amongst our peers in the genre, while maintaining a unique flavor."

Crystal Dynamics believes the new free-aim system will foster a raw, brutal, and desperate combat style. With the success of a skirmish tied to skill, the player has something on the line, and must prove his or her own strength as a survivor.

The desperation stems directly from Lara's unfamiliarity with violence. She is often scared and not equipped with the right tools. "At that age, fresh out of college, not many girls have been thrust into a situation where they have been forced to kill somebody," explains Karl Stewart, global brand director at Crystal Dynamics. "It's pretty traumatic to do it for that first time, irrespective of the reasons you were forced to. That isn't taken lightly in the game at all. That is a defining moment for the character."

Stewart reinforces that combat will have weight to it. For Lara, combat is a function of survival, not sport. As she grows and becomes more capable, killing won't get any easier from a physiological standpoint. Despite this, the player will feel assured that Lara can handle whatever the island throws at her.

As for weapons, Crystal isn't talking specifics, but it's safe to say that necessity will drive items to become multifaceted in their use. Lara Croft has always been resourceful, and we expect the line between tools, gear, and weapons to blur. We also speculate that the island's colorful history will provide her with an unconventional arsenal to draw from. Lara's official concept art alone depicts her with a bow, pistol, and shotgun.

Lara's evolution into a survivor isn't one she will make in isolation.

The island is populated by more than just hostiles. A handful of survivors from the *Endurance* have managed to keep breathing. Cutting to a new scene, we find Lara no longer in denial of her situation, but not necessarily better equipped emotionally or physically for the hardships ahead. Returning to camp in a cliffside village, Lara hovers over the body of her mentor, Conrad Roth, who has been gravely injured and rendered unconscious. Lara patches up Roth with supplies she's scavenged, hoping for the best, but painfully aware that the situation is out of her hands.

Roth wakes to a storm raging outside their base camp, commending Lara for the fine work she did on his wounds. Gently prodding, he states the obvious – he isn't going anywhere anytime soon. Both Lara and Roth know the silent implications of the statement. The pair had plans to travel to a radio tower high above the village in hopes of signaling rescue. That task now falls squarely, and solely, on Lara. The vertical climb is rife with unsound footing and derelict structures. Lara has reason to be distressed.

"Yeah, I was afraid you were going to say that," confesses Lara in a candid moment of self-doubt. She looks away from Roth, as if embarrassed. While Lara has latent strength of character, she's made a habit of relying on other people. Roth is an imperative character in Lara's growth and self-discovery, and makes a meaningful attempt at reassuring her, reminding her that she is, in fact, a Croft. Roth hands Lara a blood-red climbing axe, fiercely sharp on one end. "I don't think I'm that kind of Croft," counters Lara, accepting the tool and the burden with a look of defeat. "Let's hope I'm a fast learner."

As the pivotal moment draws to a close, the player regains control of Lara, the blinking tower in the far distance indicating her goal. Now, player-driven exploration, discovery, and dynamic traversal all come into play. Crystal's goal? To eliminate illusion.

"I think that the major difference between this game and the old is the concept of smoke and mirrors," begins Darrell Gallagher, the studio head at Crystal Dynamics. "There was an illusion of freedom because of streaming and loading that would pop you out in a different location, but this is absolutely real. You can literally go any direction that you see and carve your own way to the finish line instead of being guided."

While open world isn't the right way to describe Tomb Raider, the experience isn't about navigating from point A to point B in a linear fashion. Narrative and character development are still paramount, so scripted moments should be expected. The island is littered with incentive to explore, however, and Lara is free to revisit locations as she grows.

That character growth is tangible for the first time ever in a Tomb Raider title. Crystal realized that a character couldn't evolve from a narrative standpoint without that progression being mirrored in play. Lara will become stronger, better, and more fit for survival with each obstacle she overcomes. "It was important in the game to not only deliver the character arc of Lara Croft emotionally, but to deliver it in gameplay as well so the player gets to grow into a hardened survivor," says experience director Noah Hughes. As the game unfolds, Lara will scavenge new tools and gear that augment her abilities. Lara's athletic prowess will also evolve. Some areas begin inaccessible due to physical limitations or scarce supplies. With the right skills and gear, however, the island is Lara's for the taking.

Base camps aren't simple window dressing, but

the Fittest

rather a mechanic that ushers in these new and exciting features. At any camp, Lara can combine salvage from her inventory to create new items, and access a skill system to enhance her abilities. Base camps also offer fast travel to help minimize backtracking, encouraging the player to fully explore an area at his or her preferred pace.

While information about the scavenging mechanic is still tightly guarded, Crystal Dynamics made clear that Tomb Raider won't delve into simulation territory. Gathering food, water, and other valuable resources is intended to ground the game in realism and, again, facilitate exploration. "We aren't treating survival as simply not dying," Hughes says.

"This isn't about walking around an island and picking berries," Neuburger expands. "But it is giving a reward for exploration that can feed back into the action pacing of the game. We want these systems to have flexibility for different player types. The action gamer can pay less attention but still get something out of this, and people who like to explore will be rewarded with something more fulfilling." These rewards will include uncovering new items, resources, and clues as to the island's mystery.

Surprising even herself, Lara proves capable of climbing to the radio tower, although an undisclosed stretch of time has passed. Lara awaits an incoming plane that responded to her S.O.S., her heart filled with hope. The sound of sputtering engines signals the craft's arrival, but a glance over Lara's shoulder makes it obvious that the plane isn't poised for landing. Lara begins to sprint at full speed, hurling herself head over heels down a steep slope, the wreckage in hot pursuit.

Marking one of Crystal Dynamics' high action set-piece moments, the player remains in full control as the scenario unfolds, something that would have been traditionally reserved for a cutscene. Lara gains momentum as the player navigates her to relative safety, trying to find a path in the hillside that will leave her the least bruised and broken. If she survives without being pancaked by a turbine or impaled on debris, one final command will secure her grip on the cliff's edge, keeping her from plummeting into the ocean below. After the plane's husk ejects to the ocean, Lara climbs to solid ground. She's survived another attack by the island.

Her rescuer wasn't so lucky, and we're left pondering the mystery of the island once more. Why is it impossible to escape the isle's gravitational pull? Why has its shore become a graveyard of dilapidated vessels? What do the natives want from the remaining *Endurance* crew? Lara's fate is inextricably tied to unearthing the secrets of her geological captor, and as she becomes more adept, there is no doubt she will discover the truth – rational or otherwise.

Lara Croft's multimedia empire may have been built on a foundation of antiquity, but Crystal Dynamics is single-mindedly focused on the horizon. Its goal of crafting a relevant character for a new age in gaming is an ambitious one. We may think we know who Lara Croft is, but she is discovering herself as much as we are. Through desperation and defiance, tragedy and triumph,

Changing weather conditions, Lara's physical evolution, and her influence on the island itself are intended to keep locations feeling fresh when revisited.

an icon will be reborn.

RED FACTION: ARMAGEDDON

F ROM THE MOMENT WE LEARNED EARTH WAS AN INSIGNIFICANT SPECK IN AN EVER-EXPANDING BLACK VOID, WE DREAMED OF TRAVERSING THE STARS. DRIVEN TO UNLOCK THE SECRETS OF THE UNIVERSE, WE LEARNED HOW TO FLY. WE WALKED ON THE MOON. WE TURNED MARS INTO A SECOND HOME. WE THOUGHT OUR ACTIONS WERE GUIDED BY OUR IMAGINATIONS AND HUNGER FOR KNOWLEDGE. WE THOUGHT WE WERE LEADING OUR PEOPLE INTO A NEW ERA. NO MATTER HOW GIANT OF A LEAP WE MAKE FOR MANKIND, WE LAND IN THE FOOTPRINT OF OUR ANCESTORS. THOUSANDS OF YEARS OF INTELLECTUAL GROWTH AND SCIENTIFIC ADVANCEMENT DIDN'T CHANGE WHO WE ARE. OUR PEOPLE ARE NOT EXPLORERS. WE ARE CONQUERORS. DESTROYERS. WE CONQUERED EARTH. WITH THE NEXT STEP WE TAKE, WE CONQUER MARS.

In a foolish haste to expand our empire, we settled Mars in the name of humankind, never once looking to see if it was under another species' claim. For generations, we waged war with each other, splattering our blood on Martian stone as we mined its precious resources. Wars came and wars went. With Earth's minerals nearly depleted, we tunneled deeper into Mars' crust.

As we drilled into the planet, a great war raged on the surface. The terraforming device that made Mars' surface habitable was destroyed. Lightning storms and super-tornados devastated our colonies. We were forced underground. The tunnels have become our homes. Our fight for life forced us to drill deeper and deeper. Inching closer to the heart of Mars, we learned we were not alone.

In Red Faction: Armageddon, you play the role of Darius Mason, grandson of Alec Mason and Samanya, two pivotal players who tried to bring peace and freedom to the people of Mars, but in the end, only provided temporary relief. Like his grandfather, Darius enlisted with the Red Faction army. He was a soldier in the battle that ravaged the surface. In its aftermath, Darius lowered his gun, leaving the military to become a miner. He takes on jobs no one else will take. Jobs deemed deadly.

On one assignment, Darius is contracted to breach a wall in an unstable area. In completing his task, Darius stumbles upon a lost world – an ancient pocket of life that earns the apt name "hell." The environment is unlike anything mankind has seen before. It's a world within a world, making Jules Verne's imagination seem prophetic.

Massive crystalline stalactites hang ominously overhead. As Darius walks beneath them, their razor-sharp points deliver a warning, almost like a god pointing a stern finger at anyone foolish enough to walk in these lands. The screeches of alien life echo through tunnels ahead, and the shadows surrounding him appear to be inching closer and closer.

With a shotgun that kicks like a steroid-fed mule gripped tightly in both hands, Darius proceeds deeper into this uncharted land. He is not welcome. The sounds around him are not of a species going about its daily life. He's been warned to turn back, but that explorer's instinct pulls him forward.

With his next step, life forms erupt from the darkness. Some appear on the path in front of him, while others scurry on the stalactites above. Pebbles rolling down the cavern walls indicate countless others crawling on the rock, positioning themselves strategically for attack. The creatures' eyes are large and red. Their scaled bodies appear to be reptilian, but their blade-shaped appendages and massive teeth make them look like horror movie monsters designed with one goal: to kill in the most brutal ways possible. Volition has aptly named this beast the creeper.

This scenario illustrates how Red Faction: Armageddon distances itself from the series' heritage. This isn't a massive open world populated by warring human factions. The level design is linear, allowing the story to dictate the tone and pace. The environment is intentionally suffocating. Darius cannot run off in any given direction to take a defensive standpoint. He is helpless, standing toe-to-toe against a new threat.

With a roar, the creatures strike with a ferociousness that is hard to track with the eyes. They leap effortlessly from stalactite to wall, and from wall to Darius' location with the intent to maul him into submission. The Martians remaining on the perimeter volley acidic attacks.

The assault is relentless and terrifying. The atmosphere that this combat scenario projects is more in the vein of a game like Dead Space than Red Faction. From this point on, any dark corner or gap in a wall will be approached with apprehension and a finger on the trigger. Although Darius is traversing unexplored terrain alone, his eyes aren't the only ones seeing this world for the first time. Darius is joined by an intelligent female artificial intelligence named S.A.M. (Situational Awareness Module). S.A.M. obviously doesn't provide the answer Darius wants when he nervously asks "what the hell was that thing?," but just hearing another voice does seem to be calming and therapeutic to him. S.A.M. can also overlay a virtual path in the environment (just like in Dead Space) for Darius to follow to his objective.

Darius has Mason blood running through his veins. On the battlefield, this means that he wields a hammer and enough explosives to level most of Mars. That's the Mason way, and it continues in Armageddon. But in this particular combat situation, Darius doesn't open fire or swing his lumber to knock the threat away. Instead, he stands his ground, and with a wave of his hand sends forth a powerful nanotechnology-infused shockwave that launches every foe in front of him high into the air.

Shockwave is just one of the many powers stored within Darius' prized family heirloom, the Nano Forge. In the midst of battle, the Nano Forge's functionality can be switched. Darius uses Shockwave to stun and scatter his foes, and then switches to Impact – a Nano Forge burst that propels nanites at 1,000 meters per second – to finish them off. Any object the nanites come in contact with is immediately vaporized, and this applies to Martian organics as well. In one spray of Impact, man-made pipes, the creatures clinging to them, and the concrete walls they are attached to deteriorate in seconds flat, leaving nothing but a satisfying orange glow in their wake.

Two creepers remain: one perching on a rock 20 feet ahead, and the other sprinting directly toward Darius. To dispatch the most serious of these threats, the sprinter, Darius turns to his magnet gun. The sole functionality of this weapon is to pull one object to another. In this encounter, Darius shoots the creature with the first shot. Aiming upward, he tags a stalactite with the second. As soon as this shot lands, the creature is propelled upward toward the stalactite. The beast's spine slams into the crystalline structure with enough force to shatter it. The greater the distance the magnet gun is fired from, the greater the momentum and impending impact. The magnet gun calls for a bit of creativity on the player's part. What would happen if a car is pulled to a smoke stack? Or if a giant lumbering Martian is magnetized to a bridge?

Darius' first dance with this deadly new race ends with a carefully placed rocket blast. The impact of the rocket is vibrant and messy, leaving no definable evidence that a Martian once stood here.

Although the rocket didn't affect the hard Martian stone at all, destruction is once again the driving force behind Red Faction: Armageddon. The atmosphere is taut like a suspenseful thriller, and the corridors Darius frequents are often claustrophobic and dark. But still, in this unlikely environment, Volition finds a way to deliver massive amounts of destruction.

///// A ravager on the surface means bad news for humankind

of LEGO bricks, sending debris and most of the wraith troops into the darkness below.

With the bridge gone, Darius cannot make it to his desired destination. Since the game has adopted more linearity in its level designs, there is no alternate path or long way around. The solution to this problem rests with the Nano Forge. In addition to dispensing punishment, this tool can also repair. With a flash of his hand, Darius can send out a repair grenade that fixes anything in the splash range of the grenade's blast. To fix the bridge, however, he holds his hand straight out to emit a continuous burst of repair spray. As he walks forward, the sections of bridge that plummeted into the chasm below rematerialize. The power to restore anything in the world proves to be just as powerful of a tool as the ability to destroy.

In a city-based battle against creepers, wraiths, and heavies (a muscle-bound titan that would be Red Faction's Martian equivalent to Marvel Comics' Hulk) Darius uses the repair functionality to save himself. A heavy clobbers him, sending his body ragdolling through a poorly fortified human home. With death likely coming from the next attack, Darius retreats further into the human structure. As creepers scurry toward him for the kill, Darius holds out his hand to repair a concrete wall between him and the approaching threat. With the wall up, the creepers have no way to get to their prey. Darius is allotted the time needed to regroup, heal, and formulate a return assault.

Destroying structures like the one Darius just crashed into offers the reward of salvage – the form of currency in Red Faction that can be used to upgrade weapons, and unlock other bonuses like revealing enemy health indicators, and improving Darius' overall health. In many environments, the stations that offer these upgrades are in ruin and must be repaired before they can be accessed.

With the Martian creatures leaking out of the opening Darius created like water from a hole in a dam, much of Armageddon's destruction takes place underground, mainly in the colonies mankind crafted beneath the surface. Any human-made object – ranging from small canisters to gigantic cavern-based buildings – can be destroyed, leveled, and reduced to unrecognizable junk. Even a staircase that Darius must ascend can be transformed into a heap of rubble. In one gameplay sequence, Darius uses a rickety metal bridge to pass over a chasm. Before he can cross it, a swarm of wraith (a swift and particularly nasty Martian foe that possesses the ability to teleport) populate the far end of the bridge. They close in quickly, a few forgoing conventional movement to teleport behind Darius. Rather than unloading on the beasts on the bridge, Darius melts away the bridge's supports, a move that catches the wraith by surprise. The bridge cracks apart like a stack

///// The Nano Forge can create a shield that protects Darius from the Martian's unnatural attacks

Despite his efforts to contain the menace he unleashed, Darius is viewed as a threat by certain human factions. They blame him for the outbreak, and would rather see him dead than standing at their side helping them fight off the Martian scourge.

As he battles the beasts emerging from the depths of hell, Darius will also raise his weapon against his own people. He'll even be using their most prized weapons in his fight. One of these weapons is a massive four-legged mech that Volition has yet to name. This lumbering tank can walk unscathed through almost any structure. The power of its legs make military strongholds collapse like a house of cards. The swarmer missiles it dispenses decimate entire squadrons of troopers with one mighty blast, sending their charred corpses flying chaotically through the air like an explosion of confetti.

No matter where Darius runs, death follows. The planet has turned on him. His people have turned on him. His fate falls into your hands. ◆

///// Are the humans wearing armor made of the Martians? Or is there something more sinister at play here?

previews

Dead Space 2

Prepare yourself for terror

» Platform
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360

» Style
1-Player Shooter
(8-Player Online)

» Publisher
Electronic Arts

» Developer
Visceral Games

» Release
January 25

The horrifying mutants in the Dead Space series kill everything brutally and indiscriminately. The mere sight of them can drive a person mad – but if the Necromorphs are so frightening, why are we excited to see them again? With the release of Dead Space 2 on the horizon, horror game fans are having trouble containing their enthusiasm for EA and Visceral Games' chilling follow-up. Though the full game isn't ready for review quite yet, I got my hands on a few chapters early in the campaign. I won't spoil any of the story moments, but here are five things you should expect from your single-player journey through the Sprawl.

1. It's Scary

When Dead Space 2 was announced, the team at Visceral talked about striking a better balance with the pacing. This led some concerned fans to conclude that Dead Space 2 would stray from its horror roots and become another sci-fi shooter. Rest assured, that hasn't happened. The team's philosophy toward pacing seems focused mainly on injecting variety into the action rather than changing the feel of the gameplay. Instead of just walking down corridors waiting for something to jump out, I visited more zero gravity areas, guided Isaac as he rocketed toward a runaway tram, and played a sequence where I had to fight off Necromorphs while hanging upside-down. While these segments add flavor, the classic Dead Space gameplay – complete with its signature dread – is still intact.

2. The Sprawl Is Different

Dead Space took place in the cramped corridors of a mining vessel, but the sequel is set on a populated space station. The change in venue provides more variety in the scenery; I found myself in an apartment building, a shopping center, a church, and floating in deep space – and that's just in the early chapters. The areas aren't just corridors, either. Each section has different colors and spaces, so I got more of a feeling of moving from one distinct place to another. In one open plaza, I noticed some clever fake advertising, like a poster for a horror movie called *The Clogger* featuring bloody wooden shoes, as well as an ad for Lightspeed Carbonated Hard Bars, whatever those are. Dead Space 2 certainly isn't going for comedy, but these elements add levity to an otherwise tense atmosphere.

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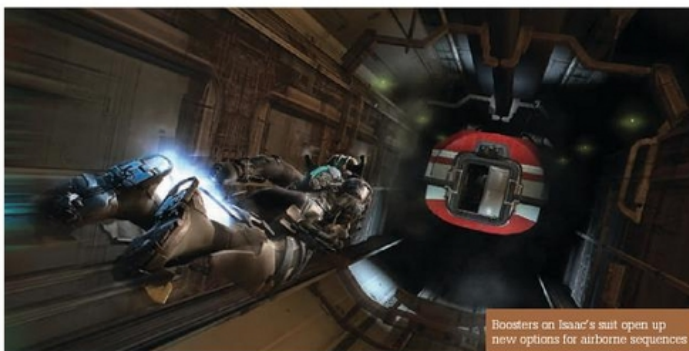
Boosters on Isaac's suit open up new options for airborne sequences

You'll see Isaac's face more often, but not always under the best circumstances

The Sprawl has more visual variety than the *Ishimura*

Ammo is limited and your enemies are numerous, so dismemberment still plays a major role in combat

3. Kinesis and Stasis Are Better

Isaac's guns are still his main weapons, but his secondary tools have seen improvements for the sequel. Stasis, which slows down enemies, now slowly recharges. You still need to carry stasis packs to replenish your meter mid-combat, but in the time between encounters, you can bank a couple uses of the ability for when the fighting starts again.

Kinesis has seen some tweaks, too. It's a viable combat tool now, good for grabbing environmental objects and hurling at your foes. At this point in development, it's still not perfect; in a pile of dead Necromorphs, I had difficulty controlling whether Isaac would grab useful sharp bits or slabs of meat. Regardless, the ease and speed with which you use kinesis is a noticeable upgrade from the original.

4. Necromorphs Have New Tricks

Making my way through the Sprawl, I saw plenty of familiar (and ugly) Necromorph faces, like deformed babies and guys with blades for hands. I also saw some new enemies that made my skin crawl. The most challenging encounter I had was against a group of stalkers, mid-sized Necromorphs that hunt in packs and use ploys to distract Isaac. Just as I lined up a shot on one peeking its head around a corner, another one charged me from behind and knocked me to the ground. Then, they both fled, making it difficult to launch a counterattack. To defeat stalkers, I had to play mind games with them, drawing one out and using stasis as it charged to get a clear shot, all the while making sure his friends weren't launching an attack of their own. Fighting stalkers is harrowing, and they are a great addition to the enemy line-up.

5. Isaac Is Not Okay

At the end of the first Dead Space, Isaac destroys the Marker that caused the Necromorph outbreak on the *USG Ishimura*. Unfortunately for him, that didn't lead to a happy ending. The Markers aren't just monolithic symbols; they twist the minds around them into a Lovecraftian nightmare, and Isaac was afflicted. In addition to fighting violent abominations in Dead Space 2, Isaac also fights against his warped perception of reality. He experiences bizarre hallucinations (usually involving his onetime girlfriend, Nicole) as he travels across the Sprawl. Special bulletins paint Isaac as a fugitive, describing him as "delusional and dangerous." In the early part of the game, Isaac's main goal is to meet up with a woman named Daina who has promised him a cure for his disturbing visions. » **Joe Juba**

Operation Flashpoint: Red River

Codemasters cleans up its thinking man's shooter

Last year military FPS fans eagerly awaited the release of Operation Flashpoint: Dragon Rising, but spotty AI and game-ending glitches marred the return of the realism-oriented franchise. With its second attempt at creating a tactical military shooter, Codemasters is rebuilding the series from the ground up, focusing on story, co-op gameplay, and customization while maintaining Flashpoint's unwavering dedication to authenticity.

Players once again take control of a four-man squad of U.S. Marines in a fictional conflict. In Red River's near-future storyline, the military has pushed Afghani insurgents into the mountainous nation of Tajikistan, a country that borders on Afghanistan and China. As the fighting continues east, China's military, the People's Liberation Army, steps into the fray. They have no interest in having the insurgents spill over into their country, and aren't about to rely on the U.S. military to defend their border. As both militaries push further into Tajikistan, conflict between the two superpowers becomes inevitable, and soon players are waging war on two very different fronts: small-scale, close quarters encounters with the Afghani insurgents, and larger battles with the superior PLA forces. The latter missions fall into the franchise's specialty of mid- to long-range combat.

With no shortage of enemies threatening your existence, having adept allies is key to your survival. Thankfully, the campaign is designed specifically for four-player co-op, and includes drop-in/drop-out support. If you're short on human allies, the improved AI automatically steps in and follows your orders via a refined command wheel. Two additional four-person fire teams, Alpha and Charlie, also assist your squad. You won't have direct control over these NPC squads, but they automatically help you complete objectives and cover your flanks.

Red River's creative director Sion Lenton demonstrated the improved AI for us on a level that takes place in a small market town built out of repurposed shipping crates (based on a real town that Codemasters documented on a trip to the country). As he made his way through the village, his squadmates automatically sought cover and suppressed enemy fire while he effortlessly issued more complex orders, such as defending target areas. Even if you don't touch the command wheel, your autonomous squadmates prove to be a big help.

Players also have more customization options this time around. Each of the four classes (rifleman, grenadier, scout, and auto rifleman) has its own set of weapons, as well as unlockable equipment and gun attachments for customizable load-outs. You can choose two perks from a wide variety of class-specific abilities whenever you spawn, while a separate skill point system allows you to permanently upgrade

your soldier's core skills. Codemasters hopes these additions will lead to greater replayability, as players create and upgrade a diverse roster of soldiers to utilize in different modes or with different friends. Whether you're playing the campaign or one of the four multiplayer modes, you will always be earning XP that can unlock equipment and level up your skills.

One of Dragon Rising's most praised features was its sense of realism, and Codemasters isn't resting on its laurels. All of the guns have been completely remodeled to reflect realistic wear and tear, and every gun features authentic damage, audio, bullet drop, recoil, and gun climb. Red River even simulates realistic ricochets and bullet fragments, as well as a variety of explosion types. Our demo featured the detonation of a 2,000 pound bomb (called in by the player), and even in its pre-alpha state, the particle effects and sense of scale were impressive. Codemasters tells us that the final game also includes destructible environments and more detailed character damage, including ragdoll physics, limb loss, and "explosive disintegration."

The realistic damage doesn't just apply to your enemies. If you get shot, your character will start bleeding out, requiring you to patch yourself up with field dressing (every class has healing capabilities this time around) to limit the damage. Once the bleeding stops you can continue, but the injury will affect your performance; a leg wound causes you to move slower, while a shot to the arm causes your hip fire accuracy to suffer. You can fully heal the injury at any point, but it will require you to remain defenseless for a longer period of time.

Despite this realism, Codemasters is expending a lot of effort to make Red River accessible to fans of more action-oriented first-person shooters, acknowledging that accuracy doesn't mean much if the game isn't fun to play. To that end, players are provided with a number of assists, including last-known-position radar, an improved HUD, and several aiming assists. All of these supporting features can be turned off for tactical FPS veterans looking for greater challenge.

As for multiplayer, one of the modes, Last Stand, tasks you with defending a position against waves of increasingly powerful enemies (similar to Gears of War's Horde mode). However, a novel twist on scoring gives the mode a unique feel. In order to save your score, you must call in an extraction helicopter to flee your opponents; if you and your squadmates all die before the helicopter arrives, your score is lost. This creates a constant gamble between striving for a higher score, and saving what you already have. The actual gameplay felt a lot more tactical than other horde modes, and the enemy forces were far from the typical cannon fodder. After sniping a few enemies from a rooftop, the opposing troops pinned down my location with

a barrage of constant gunfire. Setting up in a new location provided a brief respite (enemy AI also works on last-known-position tracking), but I had few clear shots, as my foes hung back out of range, hiding behind cover. As soon as two of my squadmates died, the enemies took advantage of the situation, simultaneously ambushing my location and flanking my last remaining ally. I've been outgunned by AI opponents in plenty of first-person shooters in the past, but rarely have I been so quickly outsmarted.

Our biggest question about Red River is whether or not Codemasters can avoid Dragon Uprising's mistakes and deliver a bug-free experience to gamers at launch. At this point it's far too early to tell, but if you prefer a healthy dose of strategy in your shooter, Red River is a game to keep your eye on. » **Jeff Marchiafava**

Codemasters has completely rewritten Operation Flashpoint's graphics engine, which utilizes the same lighting system as its Dirt racing series

Although Codemasters has improved close quarters combat, the game will still focus on mid- to long-range combat

Smarter AI means no two firefights will play out the same

Red River features a perk system that will help assist different styles of play

Stacking

Double Fine embraces another new world

The creative developers at Double Fine had a surprise for us this month in revealing the second downloadable Live Arcade and PlayStation Network game they are making in partnership with THQ. With Costume Quest out the door, the team has shifted its focus to Stacking, a gorgeous adventure game set in a world of stacking Russian dolls.

Players assume the role of Charlie Blackmore, the youngest child in a large family of chimney sweeps. "He also happens to be the smallest doll in the world," explains project lead Lee Petty. "He's often overlooked and thought of as too small to be of any use, but when an evil industrialist, known only as the Baron, conscripts his father and siblings into cruel and unusual hard labor, he sets out to save them."

Charlie's quest is a classic adventure game in which players must solve different challenges that stand between him and the recovery of his family. However, unlike most adventure games, Charlie isn't scouting hidden items or fetching keys to progress. Instead, he's stacking into other dolls to gain their abilities. "Because Charlie is smaller than any other doll, this allows him to jump, or stack, inside of other, larger, dolls,"

Petty tells us. "Once inside another doll, Charlie's determination to save his family overwhelms his host, giving Charlie complete control. He can command the larger doll's actions, then jump inside even larger dolls, or use their special abilities to help him on his quest to reunite his family."

The game's core mechanic is intriguing, and the unusual setting and art style only add to the allure. The world looks like a living diorama, with many of the objects in the world lending to the sense that this entire place is a miniaturized version of reality. "The game is set in a parallel world to our own," Petty says. "Its world is full of charm and humor with a distinct vintage feel based loosely on the Victorian and art deco eras. The game begins in the Royal Train Station, and the player embarks on different trains to a variety of levels, each themed around a different form of vintage travel, but taken in a new and unusual direction."

The game's challenges are broad in scope, but open to multiple solutions. Petty explained one amusing setup in which Charlie inhabits the Meriwether Malodor doll and must use its "flatulate" ability to herd other dolls into particular areas. In one challenge, Meriwether unleashes

his unique scent through a ventilation fan, causing the crowd within the room beyond to scatter and thus opening the way to a new path. This is only one of several solutions to the problem; dedicated players can explore multiple victory conditions and attain special rewards for their diligence.

Unlike Costume Quest, Stacking has no discrete combat mechanic, instead focusing on the sense of exploration and collecting that comes from solving challenges and gathering more dolls. That's not to say that nothing unites the two downloadable titles. "Stacking is similar to Costume Quest in that they both embrace a lot of Double Fine's core interests – namely a focus on characters, story, humor and personality," Petty says.

These gorgeous screens support that statement, and reinforce that idea that Double Fine has struck out on its own to try new ideas and game concepts that branch in unique directions. We're excited to see how Stacking comes together as we move closer to its spring launch. » Matt Miller

Other dolls in the world each have unique abilities; Charlie can stack with them to surmount the challenges he faces

There are only so many ways to carry something when you have no arms

The game has a fascinating art deco style that helps it stand apart from the crowd

Dead Rising 2: Case West

Capcom's downloadable epilogue shows the truth is out there

We're not sure what exactly this thing is, but we want one. Now

This jar might be the most humiliating way to bludgeon a zombie

Great American heroes or greatest American heroes?

Never let it be said that Phenotrans isn't a classy joint

» **Platform**
Xbox 360

» **Style**
1 or 2-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Capcom

» **Developer**
Blue Castle Games

» **Release**
December

Dead Rising 2 ended on a seemingly happy note, but Chuck Greene isn't satisfied with only saving his loved ones from the undead menace. After all it has done to his family, Chuck is ready to expose the dirty dealings of pharmaceutical company Phenotrans. It's a huge task, so he's getting a little assistance from someone who has experience on the subject. Chuck Greene, meet Frank West.

Case West picks up after the events of Dead Rising 2, simultaneously serving as an epilogue and giving fans another glimpse of the series'

original hero. "From a gameplay perspective we always wanted to incorporate Frank into the Dead Rising 2 experience, but the direction we took with the main game didn't allow this," says Shin Ohara, the game's lead producer. With Case West, Frank can show off his photojournalism skills while helping Chuck. "The photographs that Frank takes provide evidence of what Phenotrans has been doing and how it is involved in the Fortune City outbreak," adds Ohara.

If you're expecting to import the character into Fortune City, guess again. Case West takes place in the Phenotrans facility, an all-new environment located in the desert just outside of Dead Rising 2's casino paradise. Unlike the cooperative experience in Dead Rising 2, which threw two Chucks into the world, Case West will have players taking on one character or the other. If you're starting out solo, you'll be playing as Chuck. If you want to step into Frank's stylish shoes, you'll have to join someone else's game – there's only one Frank West, after all.

As with Dead Rising 2's downloadable prequel, Dead Rising 2: Case Zero, Case West will be a standalone download available exclusively on Xbox Live. Players won't have to own Dead Rising 2 to check it out, either. There will be multiple endings in Case West, and if Case Zero was any indication, it should take a few hours to see one.

A pharmaceutical company may not seem like the ideal location; setting is key in Dead Rising, and offices and factories don't immediately make us think about improvised weapons. After seeing some of the screens from Case West, we're a little less worried. One shot appears to

be from a laboratory, with Frank gripping a glass jar containing a zombie's head. Another image shows the pair battling the undead in a tiki-themed lounge. Capcom promises new items, enemies, and combo weapons, too (in addition to Frank's camera).

Capcom is definitely one of Frank West's biggest fans, putting him in Lost Planet 2 and Tatsunoko vs. Capcom. Dead Rising 2: Case West is shaping up to be a solid new dose of the character, for both existing fans and potential admirers alike. » **Jeff Cork**

The Cursed Crusade

Could the worst Crusade make for a great game?

In the entire sordid history of the Crusades, the Fourth Crusade was arguably the least successful. Started by Pope Innocent III as an attempt to retake Jerusalem by going through Egypt, these European soldiers ended up fighting other Christians, sacking the city of Constantinople, and getting excommunicated. It was far from an example of shining heroism, which makes it a fascinating topical choice for The Cursed Crusade, an upcoming action-adventure from French developer Kylotonn Entertainment.

Players take on the role of Denz, a Templar who joins up with the mercenary Esteban. The two warriors engage in brutal combat with a huge variety of weapons like swords, axes, spears, and more. All in all, over 130 weapons are being integrated, and each provides different bonuses on the battlefield. For example, a sword may deal more damage, while a mace is better at breaking an opponent's armor. Best of all, you can combine the two, dual-wielding any combo of one-handed weapons you want.

Solo players only control Denz, though they can order Esteban to help out. If you're willing to bring in a second player, the co-op partner takes control of the mercenary. The game has been designed from the ground up for cooperative play, so you can work through all 40 missions as a duo if you want. Denz and Esteban come from very different places in the story, but they join forces when they're both pulled into the Fourth Crusade and discover that something more sinister is going on behind the scenes.

The setting is more than just an interesting backdrop. Kylotonn is going out of its way to incorporate real historical locations and figures wherever possible. While Denz and Esteban are fictional, other characters are plucked from the history books, such as Boniface de Montferrat, one of the leaders of the Fourth Crusade.

Kylotonn also promises realistic virtual interpretations of cities like Constantinople, which they've researched extensively to make historically accurate. The best-case scenario is that we'll end up with something along the same lines

as Assassin's Creed II's impressive rendering of Renaissance Italy. In fact, the developer lists Assassin's Creed among its influences, alongside unexpected co-op titles such as Army of Two.

Of course, not everything is strictly based in reality. When Denz isn't solving environmental puzzles or fighting regularly, he can activate the Templar's Curse, a special mode that plunges the world around him into hellfire. This power is useful for both the action and adventure portions of the game. It makes Denz more powerful in combat, and it allows him to see items needed to progress that he could not find otherwise. Kylotonn dropped hints that frequent use of the curse could lead to bad things as the game progresses. The Templar's Curse power suggests that there may be a supernatural element to the plot.

Despite being based around a conflict initiated by the Catholic church, Kylotonn doesn't seem too concerned about religion being an important or overbearing factor in The Cursed Crusade. Since the Fourth Crusade never really gets to the point of Christians fighting Muslims, the game deals with more universal themes like greed and the hunger for power, exploring what could lead these crusaders to fight against others with similar religious beliefs.

Kylotonn says its primary goal with The Cursed Crusade is to create something different – a sword-fighting game not entirely based in fantasy. Besides some brief glimpses in a teaser trailer, I have yet to see the game in action, but with more than two years of development time behind them and a unique historical setting, I'm intrigued by its potential. » Phil Kollar

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

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

» **Publisher**
Atlus

» **Developer**
Kylotonn Entertainment

» **Release**
Summer

Kylotonn is going for a brutal, realistic flow to combat that avoids the comic book violence of many action games

Killzone 3

Guerrilla adds new maps and tricks to Killzone's multiplayer formula

It may not have made the impact of a new Call of Duty or Halo, but when Killzone 2 arrived for the PS3 in early 2009, it provided an addictive and deep multiplayer experience. Guerrilla Games is ready to do it all over again with Killzone 3 next year, and I got an early look at some of the tweaks and changes coming to multiplayer with the ongoing beta test.

While Killzone 3 multiplayer carries over some of the best parts of its predecessor – such as Warzone, the awesome mode that mixes up objectives on the fly as you play – it also plays with some of the basics. Last time, each class had to be unlocked as you leveled up through hours of play. All five core classes – engineer, marksman, tactician, infiltrator, and medic – are available from the start now, and you choose which to focus on and purchase unlocks for.

The Operation mode provides a noteworthy addition. While the gameplay in this mode is made up of fairly traditional attack/defend scenarios, the experience is improved by occasional cutscenes that tell the story of the ISA/Helghast conflict and showcase the best players. While the scenes are generally brief and inconsequential, they provide bragging rights for the winners and a healthy dose of added embarrassment for the losers.

Of the new maps, Frozen Dam is probably the least interesting, although it's also the most played. The map contains two small bases with several floors and various bridges and catwalks connecting them. As with Killzone 2, Guerrilla designed many of the maps with vertical play in mind, so be prepared to be nervously checking the walkways above and below you constantly.

Corinth Highway, a much bigger map, features a nice gimmick in the form of giant mechs that spawn occasionally in the midst of the devastation and can be piloted by players. These powerful machines sometimes lead to frustrating situations, such as one match where a skilled enemy player pinned my team down in our base for a good five minutes, but in general they make the match more interesting and help swing the balance back and forth.

Finally, there's Turbine Concourse, a map that drove me insane until I realized I was approaching it incorrectly. Another heavily vertical level, this one offers (and practically demands) the use of Killzone 3's new jetpacks. If you don't grab a jetpack on your way out of the base, it's likely that you'll be picked off from the sky as soon as you step into the open air. Just to keep players on their toes, Turbine Concourse also features a huge EMP generator in the middle of the map. When it starts powering up, players have to scatter or risk being insta-gibbed. Once the EMP goes off, jetpacks and radars will be offline for a short period of time.

For those worried about the controls, rest assured that Guerrilla Games has put significant work into tightening them. General movement still feels slower than most online shooters, but not to the extreme degree that turned some people off from the previous game, and aiming speed has definitely been increased.

While my short time with the beta has been fun, Guerrilla has some balancing to work on. The infiltrator class, for example, has the overpowered ability to disguise themselves as members of the opposite team. Unless you're a tactician, who can reveal enemies with the recon ability, it's all too easy for infiltrators to pose as an ally, get in close, and launch into an automatic melee kill. In most matches, this is a minor inconvenience, but when you go up against a team that has three or four infiltrators, it can quickly kill any sense of progress or skill. The new melee kill animations look great, but some way to counter them would help balance encounters.

Whatever quirks are left to be ironed out, Killzone 3 is already undeniably fun and absolutely gorgeous. With an improved leveling and unlock system and the Operations mode adding more incentive to perform well, the game's multiplayer is packed with content to keep fans playing for months beyond its quickly approaching February launch. » **Phil Kollar**

Equipping a jetpack removes access to other skills and weapons, but can give you an advantage in open areas

The new Operation mode emphasizes defending objectives as the Helghast and relentless assault as the ISA
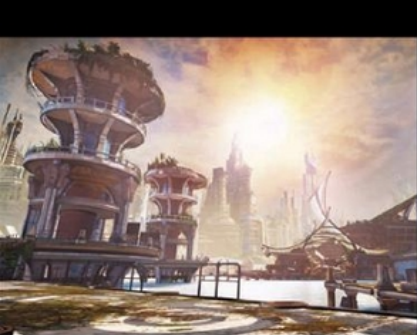
In Anarchy mode, players assume the role of Dead Echo recruits looking to earn their way onto the killing squad

Bulletstorm

Leave no bullet unshot

When we first glimpsed Bulletstorm, we were immediately drawn in by its crass sense of humor, playful combat, and sci-fi pulp vibe that would be right at home in a Robert Rodriguez flick. That was just the single-player campaign. Given that the bombastic shooter bears the Epic Games stamp, we knew it would come strapped with some creative complementary modes as well. Enter Echoes mode.

Bulletstorm's skillshot system offers a natural benchmark for competition: who can rack up the most impressive streak of creative kills? Echoes mode strips the single-player campaign of its story-based elements and boss battles, leaving you with a destructive playground filled with baddies just begging for your bullets. Players choose their arsenal before heading into battle, and must run through the levels racking up as many creative kills as they can in a set amount of time. If you finish early, you'll earn a time bonus. Once you make it through the gauntlet, the game tallies your points, gives you a star rating, and uploads your score to a leaderboard.

The level I played, called The Hideout, takes place in a tropical, vertical industrial complex filled with cranes and rusted sheet metal structures. With campaign companion Ishi along for the ride, I maneuver through the level trying to cook up the most creative ways to fill enemies full of lead. My best results come when I use the leash to slam enemies into the air and then fire a flail gun round that detonates in midair, taking out all the enemies around the poor sap wrapped in the grenade belt. Using the environmental objects to generate higher scoring skillshots also comes in handy. In one scenario, I kick a door off its hinges and it pins the hapless foes behind it to the far wall. I end up with two out of three

stars – not bad for a first run, but if you want to earn all three stars you'll have to be especially crafty with your skillshots.

In addition to Echoes mode, Bulletstorm also features a new online only four-player co-op mode called Anarchy that encourages you to work together to pull off insane team skillshots. Playing as a group of recruits who are trying out for General Serrano's feared Dead Echo killing squad, your team must earn a skillshot benchmark to progress to the next level. Like Echoes mode, the bullets are your paint, and the enemies are your canvas. Your best bet is coor-

dinating team skillshots to generate points, but they take timing and coordination. For instance, the Drawn and Quartered skillshot requires all four players to grab a limb with a leash and pull at the same time to dismember the unfortunate enemy at the center of attention. To beef up the experience, Anarchy mode features a separate progression system from the single-player mode that allows you to spend points to tweak uniforms and upgrade weapons.

Gamers will get the chance to show off their skills in these new modes on February 22.
» Matt Bertz

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

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

» **Publisher**
Electronic Arts

» **Developer**
People Can Fly/Epic Games

» **Release**
February 22

THERE IS A MARE THAT VISITS ME NIGHTLY, A DREAM IN WHICH I AM ALONE, BROTHERLESS.

ONLY A DREAM, SISTER. AS I STAND HERE NOW, I WILL NEVER LEAVE YOUR SIDE.

ALMORICA CASTLE

This castle was once the seat of government in Old Almorica. It was taken over by...

The Gates of Almorica

Day 2 of Godscale

ON THE SOULS OF MY DESTINED WIFE AND HER MOTHER, I SWEAR YOU WILL NOT LIVE TO SEE ANOTHER DAWN!

HAVE YOU THE WILL TO WAGE WAR UPON HER?

1. THAT I CANNOT DO.
2. I SHALL DO WHAT I MUST.

Assign units to the battle party

CURRENT/MAX
10   10

SIRENS, LEVIATHANS... ANY MAN OF THE SEA WORTH HIS SALT'S SEEN ONE.

BY PHILANA, DID YOU TRULY SEE IT!? WHAT DID THE MONSTER DO NEXT?

Tactics Ogre: Let Us Cling Together

Updating a beloved classic

Before there was Final Fantasy Tactics, there was Tactics Ogre. When the small team that made the classic Super Famicom strategy/RPG was bought out by Square Enix to take its juggernaut franchise in a new direction, FFT created an enduring fanbase and a sub-genre unto itself. Reunited under director Yasumi Matsuno, the core team that put its stamp on gaming in 1995 is updating its magnum opus for a re-release on PSP. New characters, a vastly improved localization, far more detail on Tactics Ogre's complicated political intrigue, and an unusual time-rewinding

THE STAR SEER REMAINS LOST IN THE MISTS OF SLEEP. BUT HE DRAWS BREATH AND IS WHOLE OF BODY.

AND LANSELOT! HAS HE NOT RETURNED?

The dialogue avoids the faux Middle English patterns that mar Final Fantasy Tactics: War of the Lions

Equip units, learn skills and spells, and organize your party

Party

43855

system are the cornerstones of this remake.

Though Tactics Ogre can't claim a fraction of the fans that FFT has, and has gameplay so similar they are as close as siblings as video games can be, it is in many ways a superior game. The storyline has dozens of branching paths, giving players a great deal of authorship over how the complex conflict at the heart of the plot unravels. Having over two-dozen units per side in a single battle is typical, lending a grander scale to combat. As hilarious as it is to use clever ability combinations to have a character that can single-handedly dismantle the toughest challenges (and dual-wielding Excalibur and Save the Queen while parrying literally 97 percent of all incoming attacks will always have a special place in our hearts), that kind of game-breaking abuse is impossible in Tactics Ogre's better-balanced systems.

They don't make for sexy preview copy, but this remake's localization improvements and revealing of expanded details on the already-fascinating plot will likely be the most significant changes. The mid-'90s were a spotty time for American releases of complex Japanese games, and the fact that Square Enix has tasked an experienced localization team with re-translating the U.S. release from the ground up is heartening.

On the other hand, the Wheel of Fortune system is the most obvious change and carries the greatest gameplay implications. This time-bending framework encompasses both the combat and story-driven parts of the game. By taking advantage of it, players can play out alternate scenarios without the hassle of repeatedly saving and reloading.

Outside of battle, players can go back to any point at which the plot branches. The story has dozens of permutations as previously mentioned, so tracing a different route involves a serious time investment even with the Wheel of Fortune at your disposal. You'll still have to maintain a save

for the furthest-progressed game you have along each individual path if you want to play through multiple scenarios simultaneously, but this is nonetheless a big improvement for completionists or anyone interested in sampling the many delicious plotlines Tactics Ogre has to offer.

The in-combat application of the Wheel of Fortune system is more controversial. A tap of the L button at any point during battle allows players to reset the game state to any point in the last 50 turns. This carries an obvious risk of cheapening the experience, especially in a game with permanent character death. Why not take bigger risks when you can rewind time at your leisure if things go poorly?

Square Enix is counting on two things to keep this from dumbing down the delightfully strategic battles. For one, the random number generator isn't reset, so the same series of actions will give identical results every time. This hopefully means you'll have to try dramatically different tactics to move the outcome much in the desired direction. Additionally, while 50 turns seems like a lot, in practice it won't be much more than two rounds given that there are 25 or so units on each side.

Despite these mitigating factors, I have serious reservations about the possibility of the Wheel of Fortune robbing the tense battles of their gravitas. Strategy/RPGs have traditionally only allowed in-battle saves to be "soft" saves (meaning that they're wiped upon loading the game to prevent cheese tactics) for good reason. The Wheel of Fortune is a massive leap in the opposite direction. I'm holding out hope that it doesn't end up as much more than a quicker way to retry tough battles in practice, because Tactics Ogre is a brilliant title that deserves as broad an audience as possible. Unfortunately, there's no way to tell how it shakes out without spending significant time with the game, and we've yet to get our hands on it. » Adam Biessener

Monster Tale

Metroid meets Pokémon in this promising mash-up

If you keep your eye on the portable platforming scene, you probably remember 2009's Henry Hatsworth in the Puzzling Adventure on DS. The game cleverly blended challenging plaforming on the top screen while a match-three puzzle game continually ran on the bottom screen. Hatsworth had a ton of character and showed plenty of potential, but it missed the mark in a few key areas. Following the release, key leads Peter Ong and Ryan Pijai left EA Tiburon to start their own company, DreamRift.

Monster Tale is the company's first project, and it's easy to see the connection to Hatsworth on first glance. The cute and vivid sprite animation, the tight melee and ranged combat, and the unique mixture of genres all showcase the developer's signature style.

Players control blue-haired young girl Ellie as she wakes up in an unfamiliar world. She soon witnesses a creature hatch from an egg and promptly names it Chomp. Getting these two to work together is the main hook; Ellie can shoot projectiles and perform melee combos, while Chomp floats around like a familiar attacking enemies. If he loses health in battle, you can send him to the monster sanctuary on the bottom screen to heal. From there Chomp can interact with any items you collect, either gaining experience and attribute points or using the object to attack foes on the top screen. For example, he can use a catapult on the bottom screen to launch metal balls at enemies on the top screen. Ellie can also directly command Chomp to perform special actions like shooting a series of spread shots, forming a shield, or turning into a bouncy platform.

Rather than collecting hundreds of different monsters, players must evolve and advance Chomp. A tree of 30 different evolutions allows you to push him in the direction you prefer. We tried out the defense focused Ballista form and the powerful-yet-slow Sentinel. All of the forms so far have exclusive special moves, and if you use them enough to master them, you can perform them in any of Chomp's forms.

The world is designed to encourage exploration, and the pause screen features a handy Super Metroid style map. The next objective is always highlighted, so we never felt lost while navigating the world. Of course, plenty of obstacles block your path, so you'll have to remember to return once you've upgraded enough to progress. Throughout our time with Monster Tale, we scored things like a longer projectile shot, a melee combo, and a ground roll that gets Ellie through tight spaces. So far, this definitely scratches the itch for a 2D Metroid.

» Bryan Vore

» **Platform**
Nintendo DS

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Majesco

» **Developer**
DreamRift

» **Release**
March

No More Heroes: Heroes' Paradise

The crazy adventures of Travis Touchdown move to PS3

Though No More Heroes was held back by some significant design flaws, Japanese gamers received an improved HD port in the form of Heroes' Paradise in 2010. PS3 owners in North America have yet to be introduced to this wild franchise, though. Thanks to Konami, that's about to change, and the game will receive some further improvements before it reaches our shores again.

No More Heroes follows the exploits of Travis Touchdown, an anime-obsessed young man who gets pulled into an attempt to become the top-ranked assassin in the world by femme fatale Sylvia. Heroes' Paradise follows the same plot as the original game, but the graphics have been beefed up to HD and Konami added new modes, such as the creepy Very Sweet Mode, which puts the female characters into more revealing alternate outfits.

Unlike in the Japanese release, Heroes' Paradise in North America features motion control support via the PlayStation Move controller. According to producer Tak Fuji, playing with Move feels a little different than with a Wii remote, but it will mostly be a direct translation. Though Fuji recommends experiencing the game with Move, players can choose a traditional PS3 control scheme as well.

In addition to Move support, Konami is adding in some further graphical flourishes. Performance issues that were reported with the Japanese release will be fixed by the time the game launches here. Most impressively, this release of Heroes' Paradise includes new bonus bosses brought over from No More Heroes 2. Marvelous Entertainment, the Japanese publisher for the series, claims to have no current plans for a similar HD port/upgrade for No More Heroes 2, so this may be the closest that PS3 owners can get to playing the sequel.

Fuji assured us that he's "a fanatic" for the series, and Marvelous Entertainment considers the Move-enabled version of Heroes' Paradise to be the "final cut" of the first game. If you're an Xbox 360 owner who's feeling left out, Fuji also let us know that Konami is currently working to come up with "a fully satisfactory control scheme for Kinect." Hopefully soon all gamers will be able to experience their first outing with Travis Touchdown, no matter where you live or which console you prefer. » Phil Kollar

» **Platform**
PlayStation 3

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Konami

» **Developer**
Feelplus

» **Release**
2011

Using the PlayStation Move controller, players will know what it's like to wield a beam katana

EA eliminated the haymaker punch in favor of a heavy punch modifier that can be more seamlessly used during combos

Fight Night Champion

Building a better boxer

Defending the belt is a dangerous proposition. You can keep doing what got you there, but your movements and punch combos become predictable over time and opponents will inevitably expose your weaknesses. To avoid losing their standing atop the boxing world, champions must constantly reinvent themselves, adopting new tactics and shoring up weaknesses while at the same time preserving their unique talents that landed them atop the rankings.

EA Canada is facing a similar dilemma with Fight Night Champion. How do you improve a game that won universal acclaim? The development team went to the tape to find some hidden flaws, and discovered the telemetry data showed players threw a considerably higher amount of left-handed punches than they did right-handed. It's not hard to understand why – moving the right analog stick to throw a right uppercut or right hook forces your thumb to contort in unnatural ways. To bring the stats back in line with true boxing, the team decided to reinvent the Total Punch Control.

The new punching system still uses the right analog stick, but instead of swinging the stick with different gestures to create different punches, you now just need to flick the stick in a specific direction. Different angles determine different punches, and the new system has allowed EA to cram twice as many punch types into the stick. With all of these new punches being added to Fight Night, EA Canada went back to the mo-cap studio to recreate more signature punches from star fighters like Manny Pacquiao and Mike Tyson.

Throwing winning combos is only one aspect of becoming a winning boxer. To improve its defense, EA also implemented a new reflexive blocking system that changes the way you play defense and counterattack. Instead of holding down the block button and swinging the analog stick to the appropriate blocking location, you now can either tap the trigger to block a punch right before impact or hold down the button to rely on the boxer's reflex ratings. This also frees up the directional control to let players to punch from the guard position for the first time in the series.

Perhaps the most dramatic change EA is making to Fight Night is the increased impor-

tance of stamina. In past games you could indiscriminately and continually throw a flurry of punches. The new stamina system drains and refills more quickly, encouraging fighters to be smarter about when to unleash a long combo. Other changes include one-punch knockouts, a 20-point leveling system for each type of punch, and the ability to choose where you train to earn more stat boosts.

Taken together, the list of improvements and tweaks to Fight Night Champion is impressive. We can't wait to go a few rounds in a few months to see if the changes result in a more impressive boxer in the ring. » Matt Bertz

A Turn For The Dramatic

Boxing is no stranger to drama – critically applauded films like *Rocky* and *Raging Bull* have captured the brutality of the sport both in and out of the ring to great effect. EA hopes to conjure some of its own storytelling mojo in the new Champion mode. The story opens with a bang, as the main character gets clocked in the head and falls to the mat. After he comes to his senses and his eyesight adjusts, you realize this isn't any old boxing match. The protagonist is going head to head with a tattooed skinhead in a state penitentiary as inmates watch and cheer beside the ring. Don't expect this to be a happy-go-lucky tale, as the dev team says Fight Night Champion will be the first M-rated game in EA Sports history.

de Blob 2

Viva la color revolución

A revolutionary's work is never done. After battling the evils of the INKT Corporation in his first game, THQ's paint sponge, de Blob, discovers other populations suffering under the rule of monochromatic dictators. The Color Revolution sends de Blob to a new metropolis called Prisma City. It seems that the inhabitants of Prisma City have been duped into voting for a religious zealot by the name of Papa Blanc. Under Papa Blanc's leadership, Prisma City has been drained of all its vibrancy. De Blob will not only have to bring color back into the city, but he'll have to topple the regime if he wants to return the town to its colorful roots.

Like the first de Blob, players repaint Prisma city one section at a time. De Blob finds paint canisters of various colors scattered across the city. After absorbing their color, de Blob can literally paint the town red by slamming himself against its black and white skyline. The open world structure of de Blob's levels allow him to choose from a variety of missions, which have him fighting off a monochrome army, painting structures specific colors, or liberating civilians by colorizing them.

De Blob will discover a few new tools to help him destroy the armed forces repressing all that color. For example, a new Hazmat suit – which is really just a big bubble – surrounds de Blob and protects him from the menace of black ink and the deadly effects of fire and electricity. Shields allow de Blob to take a single hit from the INKT army without losing color, and another power-up turns de Blob into a solid lead ball, which allows him to sink to the bottom of lakes in order to reach special collectibles or power-ups.

Blue Tongue has promised a co-op mode similar to Super Mario Galaxy, but the company isn't ready to talk about specifics

A different kind of adventure lies hidden under the surface of Prisma City. Some missions send de Blob into the interiors of Prisma City's buildings. These levels offer up 2D platforming challenges that provide a change of pace from the open world atmosphere of the rest of the game. Many of these sequences require de Blob to liberate captive citizens without losing any of his color. For example, de Blob might need to paint a switch purple, so he'll have to find and consume both red and blue paint canisters without falling into a pool of water or triggering the sprinkler system, both of which would wash off his color.

One of the biggest changes for the series is its movement to multiple systems. Gamers who complained about having to shake the Wii remote to jump or attack in the first de Blob will want to check out the PS3 or Xbox 360 versions of de Blob 2 (although THQ has mentioned the possibility of PlayStation Move support for players who like shaking their controllers). The first de Blob's Pixar-inspired cutscenes and paint-by-numbers gameplay showed a lot of promise, and with all of the additions Blue Tongue Entertainment is bringing to the table for the sequel, de Blob 2 could be one of 2011's early hits. » **Ben Reeves**
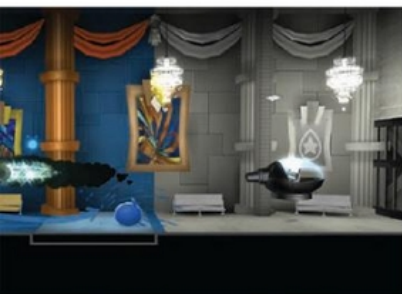
The Bamboos, a funk band from Melbourne, Australia, did the music for the first de Blob, and it sounds like the band's jazzy beats will be returning for the sequel

As you can see, the game has the classic noir vibe down pat

L.A. Noire

Another look into the seedy world of L.A. Noire

Our cover story on L.A. Noire gave the world its first real look into Rockstar and Team Bondi's L.A. Noire. As the writer, I got to see both the game (in demo form) and the groundbreaking facial capture technology that Team Bondi created to make it. I came back from my trip excited about the game, and I hope that the finished product can live up to the very high bar that Rockstar and Team Bondi have set. Recently, we were able to get another look at the game; Rockstar brought by a brand-new live gameplay demo that showed off another mission in the career of LAPD detective Cole Phelps.

This case occurs during Phelp's stint on the traffic desk – but it's a more sordid tale than a mere speeding ticket. It starts with Phelps and his partner Stephen Bukowski getting a call to investigate a car crash. Two women, actresses June Ballard and Jessica Hamilton, have apparently driven their car off an embankment and into a Coca-Cola billboard. Things get a little more interesting when Phelps arrives at the scene to interview Ballard, who claims they were drugged and put in the car as a set-up.

From here, this seemingly open and shut case drags Ballard into the seedy underbelly of 1940s Hollywood. Ballard, a veteran b-movie actress and moll to mobster Guy McAfee, appears unreliable. She's intent on fingering producer Mark

Bishop for the crime, but then warns Phelps to let her and her husband "settle the score." She's clearly shifty, but Phelps knows there's definitely more to this story when he finds an unsettling piece of evidence on the scene: a torn pair of women's underwear. A fellow detective also shows him a fake shrunken head, presumably stolen from a movie set, that was used to wedge down the car's gas pedal.

From there, Phelps goes to interview the other passenger, Jessica Hamilton, at the hospital. Her doctor informs him that there is evidence that Hamilton was drugged and possibly sexually assaulted. Speaking with Hamilton, it's clear that she's a naive girl who wants a break into acting so badly that she's easy prey for the predators that populate the movie industry. While she has little memory of what happened and is scared to talk, Cole cajoles some information out of her. It's interesting to see how the player has to judge the character of each witness. Here, Phelps takes a much softer approach than he did with June Ballard, perhaps sensing Hamilton's fragile makeup.

Throughout the case, Phelps makes constant notes of clues – bits of interviews, objects in the environment, photographs, letters, and more. Each clue will open up more lines of questioning during your interviews, so it's wise to gather as much information as possible. You'll frequently have to use documented clues and facts to contradict a witness who is lying.

After interrogating Hamilton, the case takes

While much of the game centers around interrogating witnesses, there is a healthy dose of gunplay

a turn into dark territory. First, Phelps does a tail mission on June Ballard, who makes a call at a diner telling her husband to "take care" of Bishop. After Ballard gives up Bishop's address, Phelps arrives at the producer's apartment just in time to get in a fight with some Mafia thugs who are presumably there to rub out the producer. After dispatching the goons and interviewing Bishop's wife, Gloria, a sinister picture appears to take shape: Bishop is somehow involved in a ring that takes aspiring young actresses and makes them sexual prey for depraved Hollywood types.

While we won't spoil the solution to the case, suffice it to say that this game might feature some of Rockstar's grittiest content ever. However, before you accuse them of being shock merchants, consider the fact that every case in the game is actually pulled from the newspapers of 1940s Los Angeles. This stuff really happened; it's just been adapted and slightly altered for the game (most of the time this involved writing endings for unsolved cases). In addition, we got a few hints of the game's larger, overarching plots, which seem to center around Phelps' struggles to combat internal corruption that plagued the LAPD during this time in history. At one point, Phelps has an interaction with a vice cop that suggests the lines between cop and criminal in L.A. are very blurry indeed.

This case also gave us a better window into the game's pacing. While it's important to note that this is not GTA in period drag – expect to spend a lot more time in tense conversation than in gunfights – Team Bondi does seem to do a good job of injecting action sequences at logical points in the story. During the mission we witnessed the brawl in Bishop's apartment, the tail mission, and a car chase – plus a fairly elaborate gun battle.

However, the real meat of the L.A. Noire experience comes from the investigations. Once again, the character animation (accomplished through

Team Bondi's groundbreaking camera-based facial capture system) looks as good as anything we've seen in a game. It needs to be; with so much emphasis placed on the interrogations, it's the true-to-life expressions that allow you to really feel invested in the experience.

L.A. Noire is a risky proposition for Rockstar. While the painstaking recreation of 1947 Los Angeles is as richly detailed as any of the open world environments the company has envisioned, this game has a distinct, deliberate pace that's quite different from anything else it's done in the past. Based on what we've seen so far, L.A. Noire has the potential to be something very special. Will Rockstar's audience be ready to embrace it? » **Matt Helgeson**

L.A. Noire's soundtrack balances period music and original scoring

Twisted Metal

Eat Sleep Play brings car combat back from the dead

Prior to this year's E3, Eat Sleep Play had been quietly developing a title that was never directly revealed. The only thing we knew for sure was that David Jaffe was steadfast in claiming that his game was not Twisted Metal. However, there were David and Scott Campbell riding on stage in an ice cream truck by the end of Sony's press event, proudly displaying the newest installment of their car combat classic. We talked to the team about the upcoming multiplayer-heavy reboot.
» Dan Ryckert

When did you first get the urge to revisit the series with a full-scale console release?

David Jaffe: It evolved. I think it evolved in the best way something could evolve. We started Eat Sleep Play and said, "Let's make small games. Let's be a premier PSN developer." We originally were gonna make Twisted Metal like a $9.99 or $12.99 download game and that was it. I think what happened was, as development started to come online, there was a sense that the foundation was solid and fun, and it was like "Hey, I remember Twisted Metal! This could be really, really cool." There was sort of a continual adding to the scope and ultimately the budget and the schedule because Sony and Eat Sleep Play was like "You know, I think we should set our sights higher." It actually began as a much

smaller experience that we said "Let's make this for the hardcore Twisted fans that we know are still out there, let's try to bring some new fans in there as well." As we started development, there was a sense of, "Hey, we could entertain a lot more people with this, but it means we're gonna have to have more levels, more cars, more modes." Every four or five months we'd have meetings with Sony and be like, "We really need a single-player [mode] now, and we really need some more multiplayer modes." By the end of it, it kind of evolved into what it is now. I think it evolved because what we saw so early seemed to have so much potential.

In terms of online player count, what do you think the sweet spot is in a title like this? Was it ever tempting to say "screw it, we're doing 256 players online," or did you always intend on keeping it somewhat limited?

DJ: For me, there are two ways to make a Twisted Metal game online. One is to be a total purist about it and say we're designing this game from the ground up to be like Mortal Kombat online...one on one. I still think if we're fortunate enough and the fans really enjoy what we've done with this game and we get to do downloadable content or we get to do a sequel, I would love to sort of take a corner of that design and make something similar to the last Call of Duty's Spec Ops mode. We'd just say "We're just gonna make eight levels and a number of weapons and modes that are just one-on-one" because I do think that really represents a sweet spot. But I think as we've also gotten into development and design on this game, certainly there is a case being made that you can make a really fun Twisted Metal game with more than one-on-one. I don't think 256, I don't. I don't think 256 with humans...as impressive as a game like Resistance 2 or MAG is...I think they do a lot of work to curb the chaos, but I still think you really want to be able to wrap your brain around what you're doing. To me, with Twisted Metal I'd say the sweet spot is anywhere from 5-on-5 to 8-on-8 depending on the game mode that you're playing.

Scott Campbell: I think when David and I are kind of talking about online and multiplayer, it needs to feel like it used to. Some of those classic TM battles didn't really involve a lot of players. The more intimate battles became more memorable and required a lot more thought and skill.

DJ: It's funny because especially with new generations of players coming up, I absolutely love the Last Man Standing mode of this game. I know we have guys on the team that are into the hardcore shooting games that are like "Oh, we f---ng hate that." I'm like "Why do you hate that?" They say "Oh, I don't want to die and sit in a lobby." But dude, that makes your life valuable, that means health matters, that means playing defensively matters. I'm glad we can support those modes,

Health semis add a new layer of challenge when it comes to repairing your vehicle

The turret mode on helicopters can lay waste to cars below

because I love modes like in SOCOM or Rainbow Six or now in Twisted Metal where you have a couple of lives or one life and when you're dead you're dead. Yeah, you might have to wait in a lobby for five or six minutes to wait for the next game, but when the next game comes you're going in with this sense of tension and caring about your survival that I think just totally ratchets up the immersiveness of the experience.

Twisted Metal 2 had somewhat dark, sometimes violent endings with a cartoonish art style. Twisted Metal Black was more realistic, featuring much darker themes and far more gore. Where will the new Twisted Metal lie on this spectrum?
DJ: Black had kind of decent CG for its time, but the new ones aren't CG, and they aren't 2D Flash cartoons. They're live action, sort of a cross between full-motion video and comic books come to life. The visual style is unique. In terms of comparing it to the tone of the other two games, I would say these aren't as dark as Black in the sense that they're really pushing

boundaries of taste. We don't have a preacher crucifying himself to a wall or drowning a baby, we're not going to that level. But the actual stories themselves and the characters themselves are actually more sad and darker and twisted, and the stories are a little more psychological *Twilight Zone* than they were in Black. The endings aren't as goofy as they were in Twisted 2. It's kind of its own thing, but it takes elements of both of them. You still have Calypso there, you still have him granting wishes, and you still have contestants that really need to be careful what they ask for because they end up getting it. I think it's got a bit more psychological creepiness to it than the full-blown gorefest that Black was.

So nothing like the campy deleted endings from the original game?
DJ: Ideally, they won't be campy at all. We finished production, and we were in the mindset of "We cannot be cheesy." Even though we had that mindset, lo and behold we had people saying "These are kind of cheesy in parts." So we spent the last couple of months going "Let's

get rid of this, let's get rid of that shot." We don't want these to come off as campy at all, that's not the intent. There are some endings that are kind of sick and twisted and funny and others are a little more sad and disturbing and darker. They're not all "ha ha" one-joke gimmicks, although there are a few of those. They run the spectrum.

What about in-game comedy, like shooting the kid into the swimming pool in New York or running over mimes in Paris? Will it stay more serious in-game as well?
DJ: We do let you launch a gurney out the back of an ambulance and you can steer it with a patient on it screaming with TNT strapped to him. That's in there. We've got a number of things embedded into the core experience that we feel represent that Twisted style. You have a car with a magnet on the front that can pull a car in and you can charge it up and launch an enemy at another enemy, and you hear them screaming as they fly through the air. That's represented, and I think destroying environments that people hold near and dear...the fact that you can drive cars and monster trucks into a grocery store or a church or a high school I think represents that. So yeah, that's always been in our mindset.

David and Scott had plenty more to say. Be sure to check out the full interview at gameinformer.com/mag

HI SCORE
1.500.830

SCORE
1.200

4:20

POWER UP

SPEED UP
GAME SPEED
25

04

Poker

88

Bejeweled 3

gameinformer
★ GAME OF THE MONTH

78 Pac-Man Championship Edition DX

If you think Pac-Man hasn't changed since his early days in the arcade parlor, you haven't seen his latest appearance on Xbox Live Arcade and PlayStation Network. Championship Edition DX takes the fantastic gameplay of the classic, layers on the smart timed mazes of the first CE, and adds some thrilling improvements of its own.

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**	Worse than elbowing your toddler in the face while playing Kinect.

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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Pac-Man Championship Edition DX

Far better than you think

SCORE 588.770
HI SCORE 588.770
1:28
SPEED UP
GAME SPEED 40
23
22

Purists will cry foul, but this is the most accessible and fun Pac-Man game in the character's long history. Numerous mazes and modes, completely customizable audio and visual experiences, and several unique twists on the familiar gameplay combine to make this installment thrilling. By expanding on the experience established in 2007's Championship Edition, which was itself an evolution of the original classic, this new DX version shines as one of the finest pure arcade experiences available on today's consoles.

There's nothing wrong with the addictive formula that made Pac-Man a household name in the '80s. Chomp pellets; flee the ghosts. Eat a power pellet; chase the ghosts. It was such a polished and simple mechanic that developers have struggled to find worthwhile ways to improve the experience in the intervening years. The original Championship Edition finally succeeded with timed mazes and a more strategic, shifting playfield. DX adds a few simple but game-changing mechanics into the mix. When those dastardly ghosts get close, time slows down and gives canny players the opportunity to change course and keep the action flowing. When even that fails, a cache of bombs are at your disposal; these blast the chasing specters back to their base, and give you a chance to escape. Finally, dozens of ghosts now train after one another in a long snake behind you, encouraging a careful route plan through the increasingly crowded maze. Combined, these features make the game easier to enjoy for new players, while offering experienced Pac-Man addicts the opportunity for incredible point totals. You

haven't lived until you've taken down 40 baddies in one frenzied power pellet run.

Lest you fear that all the challenge has gone, let me ease your mind. Pac-Man DX ascends to mind-shattering speeds in a hurry, demanding fast minds and thumbs both. Several of the courses are built around pattern recognition, and the ability to trace the most expedient path is key to victory over your friends' scores. Eight excellently designed courses each have unique challenges attached, from achieving the highest ghost combo to numerous time trials. Plus, every game mode you play lets you choose the Pac-Man visuals you like best, from the stark pixelated original to modern-day 3D effects. Whether on PSN or XBLA, this phenomenal revision of the classic franchise has video games' original hero ready for another day in the sun. » **Matt Miller**

Bombs let you send the ghosts back to base for a last second save

Every stage layout includes multiple game modes

Nail'd

A world of dangerous speed

Style 1-Player Racing (12-Player Online or Local) **Publisher** Deep Silver **Developer** Techland **Release** November 30 **ESRB** E10+

Recent arcade racing titles like Split/Second, Pure, and Blur have tried to make racing about more than just crossing the finish line first. Because of this, I've admired those games and how they expanded the lexicon of racing titles. Nail'd is not one of those games. Nail'd is not trying to redefine the traditional racing experience, but rather fulfill its original promise: If you go really fast and make it to the finish line first, victory is yours. However, that doesn't mean that Nail'd is any less exciting than those other games. In fact, Nail'd attempts to capture what is fundamental about the genre in its own way, leaving the player with a powerfully distilled experience.

Imagine you're on a speeder bike from Star Wars and you're bombing through Yosemite Park and Greece. You have had 1,000 heart attacks after the number of near-misses you've survived, but you've gotten used to flying by the seat of your pants. Trade out the speeder bike for an ATV, and you get the picture of what Nail'd is like. Polish developers Techland (Call of Juarez) have captured lightning in a bottle with this game's sense of speed, and have smartly positioned other aspects of the game in service to the glory of higher mph.

The game's tracks do an excellent job of combining set-piece moments, speed-building straightaways, strategically placed gates that give you turbo boost, and enough twists and turns to keep things very interesting. My favorites are the races that consist of one long course rather than a lap format, simply because everything you experience is new from moment to moment. Although Nail'd doesn't

match the over-the-top craziness of Split/Second, there were enough boulder avalanches, hurtling trains, and giant swinging sawblades to keep things deadly and exciting.

Courses are also spiced up by the fact that you can steer your bike up, down, left, and right while you're in midair. This doesn't sound like much, but the way that this functionality is merged with the tracks' design and the overall sense of speed amplifies the thrills to gravity defying proportions. Many of the jumps in the game require some sort of mid-air adjustment. Choosing where to go is often a leap into the unknown and part of the fun. Sometimes you have to decide pretty early on whether you're going to pull up for more air or dive down to avoid getting smacked in the face with a tree. Other times there are multiple routes around a level to choose from, and the game gives you the luxury of deciding while you're flying several stories up in the air. Nail'd's claustrophobic, fish eye-like camera complements the onscreen adrenaline rush, and even though it can leave you blind occasionally, there are enough environmental cues to steer you in the right direction – even when you're turning almost 180 degrees in midair.

Techland's single-minded focus on delivering a high-speed, thrilling experience comes at the expense of the game's overall breadth. The career mode consists mainly of the same come-in-first race type, punctuated by Stunt Challenges. These are basically the same as a normal race, only the winner is determined by who can perform a limited roster of stunts – which are not like ATV vs. MX-style tricks, but are simple feats like landing on other riders or making huge boost jumps. Of course, Nail'd is not supposed to be a trick-based title like Pure, but I wish it found a way to augment its speed rush with more gameplay options and variety. At least there's day-one DLC featuring a Detonator mode that requires you to perform a boost move in order to get a bomb off your back. Still, Nail'd is not a game with great depth.

Creating a fast racing experience sounds like a fundamental requirement of any racing title, but Nail'd isn't just a game that blows by low expectations. It's a focused experience that sticks to a tight racing line and captures the essence of speed in a flash. » **Matthew Kato**

Mid-air course corrections are often needed for survival

Steep drops add to the game's sense of speed

Tron: Evolution

404 error: Fun not found

4.5

PS3 • 360

» Concept
Fill in the gaps between the original *Tron* film and the sequel, *Tron: Legacy*, through an all-new story

» Graphics
Sparse and clinical like the films, with the added disadvantage of being ugly

» Sound
The light cycles make a neat humming sound, but that's about the only memorable thing in the audio department

» Playability
The controls are touchy, the platforming is awful, and the levels are uninspired

» Entertainment
This game is why gift receipts were invented

» Replay Value
Low

Stay away from light cycles if you're on foot. Seriously, stay away from them

Style 1-Player Action (10-Player Online) **Publisher** Disney Interactive Studios **Developer** Propaganda Games **Release** December 7 **ESRB** T

When it debuted in 1982, Disney's *Tron* offered an incredible glimpse of the potential power of computer-generated animation. Decades later, a sequel is hitting theaters – alongside the inevitable video game companion. Set between the events of the first movie and its sequel, *Tron: Legacy*, Tron: Evolution makes it clear that some gaps don't need to be filled.

Players take on the role of Anon, a digital everyman purposefully devoid of personality or other distinguishing characteristics. He's a virtual emissary of sorts for Kevin Flynn, Jeff Bridges' character from the films. Evolution assumes that players have recently seen *Tron*, offering little in the way of a plot summary or expository dialog. If you don't know your ISOs from your Basics, prepare to be completely dumbfounded by the story, such that it is.

As a beta version of the Grid System Monitor, Anon can upgrade his abilities and wield a variety of different discs in combat. These include bomb attacks, which cause splash damage and can break open weakened structures; stasis fields, which temporarily freeze enemies; and corruption discs, which cause debilitating damage. There are a handful of different enemy types, each vulnerable to different attacks.

On its surface, combat, like everything else in Tron: Evolution, sounds satisfactory at the least. Unfortunately, the execution is bungled up to the point where it's barely functional, let alone fun. Targeting is erratic, particularly when facing groups of enemies – a frequent event – and camera issues compound the problem. It's especially bad when you backflip close to a wall and the camera freaks out trying to determine where Anon went.

In addition to backflipping, Anon has to traverse the game's world using other acrobatic means. Wall-runs and mantle jumps are commonplace, and navigating those sections is one of the more frustrating experiences I've had in years. Anon is a touchy fella, prone to rolling off of ledges and falling into oblivion. I'm all for games with agile characters who can create exhilarating, fast-paced moments. Tron: Evolution leans too much on the acrobatic sections, particularly since Anon moves like a drunken missile.

Aside from the awful on-foot sections, sometimes Anon finds himself at the helm of a light cycle or light tank. Where the core game is frustrating and twitchy, the vehicular segments are dull and boring. The light cycle segments give players an excuse to rip down a straightaway and dodge obstacles – never mind those iconic

Light tanks may be menacing when you're on foot, but you can easily hop on top of them and safely clobber them with your disc. It's time consuming but safe

arena battles from the first movie. The tank portions are plodding exercises in creeping ahead and shooting at the occasional enemy. Both of these diversions last way too long, though they're a nice change of pace from de-rezzing blindly off ledges.

Tron: Evolution's multiplayer is a high point, mostly because it's the only part of the game that actually feels like *Tron*. Up to 10 players can battle in arenas, which make good use of the game's weapons and vehicles. Players can summon their light cycles at will with the press of a button, and it's cool to jump into the air as a person and land as a vehicle (a situation that never happens in the campaign). Unlike the campaign, the light cycles function as they did in the movie, leaving semisolid bands of color that damage anything that touches them.

Tron: Evolution will probably have a handful of defenders, but I can't reasonably suggest that anyone play it. It's a shoddy experience that ultimately isn't much fun. Tron superfans would do better simply watching the movie again and calling it a day. **» Jeff Cork**

Here, Anon looks at the edge of a cliff while contemplating his inevitable demise

Marvel Pinball

Zen's licensed pinball tables shine

Video pinball has never been my thing; I miss the pop of the flippers and the reality of that little silver ball bouncing haphazardly off the bumpers. That changed with Zen's efforts to bring the experience back to its roots. While Zen may not be able to transform my game room into an arcade parlor, they've finally managed to nail what makes pinball so much fun. The development team has made the most of the Marvel license and crafted a number of awesome new pinball tables that should satisfy even the most skeptical pinball fans.

Spider-Man, Iron Man, Blade, and Wolverine each have a dedicated pinball table, and every one of the four could absorb a player for endless hours of discovery and score improvement. Each table bows to the style of the character – Spider-Man, my personal favorite of the four, is filled with soaring ramps and amusing voiceovers. Wolverine has the ability to rage and turn nearly every shot on the board into a high score jackpot. Iron Man transforms from Tony Stark into his armored alter ego for the most dangerous missions. Blade features a day/night cycle that completely changes the feel of play. No matter the table, each hero is matched up against three or four of their greatest nemeses, from the Green Goblin to Whiplash. These unique missions are fun to trigger and easy to understand, though it would have been nice if the tables had their own gimmicks rather than all of them being tied to supervillain fights. I also don't always like when onscreen events occur that wouldn't be possible on a real table, like the Goblin's exploding pumpkin multi-ball. The game is at its best when the illusion of true pinball is maintained.

Without exception, the four tables are excellently designed, and fantastic ball physics make the game worth repeated play. A metagame ties the tables together; your combined score across all tables shows the definitive leaderboard king among your friends. Pack in some highly detailed options for customizing your game experience, from table tilt alterations to camera view, and there's a lot to love. Given this stellar effort, I can't wait to see how Zen's pinball collection continues to expand. » **Matt Miller**

The Edge

Though the two consoles have identical tables, the play experience is quite different on Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3. On Sony's platform, Marvel Pinball is a standalone game. On Xbox 360, the four Marvel tables fit comfortably as an expansion into the expanding array of pinball tables available in Pinball FX2. Since part of the fun comes from building up scores and competition across all your tables, it's hard not to recommend the 360 option.

8.5

PS3 • 360

» **Concept**
Take four of Marvel Comics' greatest heroes and give them each a well-designed pinball table

» **Graphics**
Excellent comic art and highly detailed visual effects make each table pop with energy and color

» **Sound**
The jaunty musical themes aren't going to blow you away, but some of the character voiceovers are fun

» **Playability**
The best video pinball physics ever combine with tight and responsive flipper controls

» **Entertainment**
If you enjoy either pinball or comic superheroes, you can't go wrong

» **Replay Value**
Moderately High

Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 1

This is why kids should stay in school

In the final book of J.K. Rowling's juggernaut franchise, Harry strikes out to foil Voldemort's plans, leaving the iconic wizard academy of Hogwarts behind. This narrative break from tradition works well in the books, but introduces a major problem for the game version of Deathly Hallows. Wandering around the school and interacting with its students were the primary redeeming factors in the last two entries, which raises the question: Can a Harry Potter game be fun without Hogwarts? Apparently not.

Instead of exploring the castle grounds and going to class, Harry is shuffled from one tedious shootout to the next, flinging spells at Death Eaters in ruins and forests. I don't mind that the old free-roaming gameplay is gone. What bothers me is the third-person shooting mechanics that replace it are staggeringly horrible.

Harry is confronted with a constant stream of moronic bad guys, who he dispatches by shooting various spells that all do pretty much the same thing. If the game worked, you'd be switching spells on the fly, strategically confusing or paralyzing one enemy while blasting the next. In reality, changing spells slows the action to a crawl since you need to bring up the weapon wheel every couple seconds, so you're better off sticking with one or two spells for entire encounters. Even then, the complete lack of variety in enemies and tactics makes every fight a bore.

Things would be bad enough if Harry just had to contend with dark wizards, but stealth sequences give you a whole new reason to hate Deathly Hallows. Despite the fact that *you own and use an invisibility cloak*, Harry can't seem to stay hidden to save his life. Your inevitable detection doesn't necessarily mean game over, but it usually triggers a firefight against nearly insurmountable odds. You can just die, try again, and slowly give in to the dull hopelessness of Deathly Hallows.

The Harry Potter games were getting better. By focusing on the simple joys of exploring Hogwarts and casting spells, EA almost came within reach of making its last two entries entertaining. With Deathly Hallows, Harry regrettably returns to his roots by offering atrocious gameplay that no fan could enjoy. Like a Quidditch player falling from a broomstick midmatch, this installment loses all forward momentum and goes plummeting toward a faceplant at top speed. » **Joe Juba**

The Edge

Even though the 360 version has exclusive Kinect challenges, they're just timed rail-shooting sequences that barely work. If you must buy Deathly Hallows, both versions are equally bad, so feel free to pick your poison. EA would not send us an early copy of the Wii version, so we will evaluate it after release and provide a separate review if necessary. Otherwise, consider this our definitive review.

5.5

PS3 • 360

» **Concept**
Watch Harry flounder and fail without the charm of Hogwarts to protect him

» **Graphics**
The main character models look like their corresponding actors, but a lack of enemy variety means that you're blasting the exact same punks over and over again

» **Sound**
Expect to hear lots of shouting of ridiculous spell names

» **Playability**
Nothing works well, from the camera to the cover system. Even switching spells is a pain

» **Entertainment**
All enjoyment is buried under a suffocating mess of poor controls and tedious combat

» **Replay Value**
Moderately Low

Create

In need of some inspiration

5

PS3 • 360 • Wii
PC • Mac

» **Concept**
Construct contraptions to solve challenges in an array of themed worlds

» **Graphics**
Simple, stylized, and one of Create's only strong suits

» **Sound**
Folksy guitar tunes and carnival music may be contextually appropriate, but that doesn't make them enjoyable

» **Playability**
Controls are iffy and the UI is invasive, making it difficult to appreciate the creative experience

» **Entertainment**
Inherently flawed, Create isn't engaging enough for adults or intuitive enough for children

» **Replay Value**
Low

While EA Bright Light positioned its puzzle game Create as a sandbox for imagination and toolset for ingenuity, I often felt uninspired and outright frustrated while playing. Given that LittleBigPlanet nearly perfected this type of experience already, my largest qualms are not conceptual, but mechanical.

Most of the puzzle challenges are solved through repetition rather than resourcefulness. These bouts of trial and error require you to set up scenarios and tweak contraptions until the stars align and you fulfill a bizarre completion clause. In one instance, I spent a half hour slowly repositioning a ball so that it would hit a toaster with just enough force to vault some burnt bread at the perfect trajectory to land on a plate atop an in-motion vehicle.

While the physics are realistic and impressive, solving each puzzle is often a happy accident rather than a show of skill, a factor compounded by poor controls. I attempted nearly all the challenges using both Sony's Move and a standard controller, and neither provided me with the precision needed to make minute manipulations to a ramp's positioning or the angle of a fan. While using Move, I frequently found myself twisting my wrist at annoying angles to rotate and scale objects as needed.

The gameplay experience is also marred by long load times and an invasive user interface.

Objective boxes often obscure the build area you need to access in order to solve a challenge. I also found myself referencing the manual repeatedly, trying to remember a path through unintuitive menus in order to access sky stickers, paint patterns, world objects, and more.

Completing challenges rewards you with unlockable items like wall clocks and lamps, which you can use to decorate the background of each unique challenge world. EA provides little incentive to adorn your stage, however, as the system of decorating simply feeds back into the other non-compelling mechanics.

I identify myself as a right-brain thinker, but instead of being inspired by EA Create, I felt my creativity restricted by flawed controls and frustrating challenges. If pushed and polished, Create could have been a rewarding experience. Instead, it feels like EA Bright Light needed some inspiration of its own. » **Meagan Marie**

Blood Drive

You'll deserve a cookie after putting up with this blood drive

4.5

PS3 • 360

» **Concept**
Take the Twisted Metal car combat concept and add zombies

» **Graphics**
We've seen worse this generation, but Blood Drive still looks like a budget title

» **Sound**
The music is generic and the voice acting is grating, but the classical music that plays during the pause menu is incredibly amusing

» **Playability**
The controls are too slippery to be accurate, but there are so many zombies scattered across the field that it almost doesn't matter

» **Entertainment**
If you enjoy throwing your hands up in frustration after spinning out of control and suffering a cheap death, then Blood Drive could be your game of the year

» **Replay Value**
Low

America can't get past its zombie obsession. We have more zombie movies, TV shows, and video games than ever before – we zombified versions of action figures, superhero comics, and Jane Austin novels. And now we have Blood Drive, a zombified Twisted Metal rip-off. While running over hordes of undead in cars built to shred steel and bone isn't a terrible premise, this killer car combat title is as fun to drive as a classic car that's been trashed by years of neglect.

After the zombie apocalypse, the Vegas-like town of Las Ruletas plays home to a car combat reality show starring a group of mentally disturbed caricatures so out-of-this-world that they'd be out of place on a WWE pay-per-view event. These Blood Drive tournaments are vehicular gladiatorial matches where contestants battle each other across obstacle courses littered with the undead. The tone is playful, and the subject matter is ripe for comic mischief, but the story is superficial at best and we're given little

context for each event. Since there really is no story and the single-player game only consists of timed challenges and tournaments with AI racers, the offline experience is nearly the same as what you'll find online (good luck finding online opponents, by the way).

Blood Drive has a mixture of challenges: explosive destruction derbies, checkpoint races, and score competitions that require you to run over the most zombies. However, they begin to feel repetitive after a few hours. The game's mix of weapons is unbalanced, but the bigger problem is how these Frankenstein vehicles control. Most of the cars take corners about as well as a shambling corpse, and the smaller, more agile vehicles have trouble standing up to the more tank-like vehicles. You need to be able to absorb a lot of damage, because you won't be dishing out too much of it. Aiming – or even driving in a straight line – is often a challenge. If you hit so much as a pebble, your car ends up jerking off-course. Bigger collisions can send you floating into the air for several seconds, making you an easy target for the hawkeyed AI.

Anyone looking for a quick car combat fix before next year's Twisted Metal might be able to waste a few hours on this title, but they won't be wholly enjoyable hours. Since you can't save in the middle of a tournament, and some of the later cups last a couple hours, the game eventually tests your endurance. I'd rather give bone marrow than sit through this Blood Drive again. » **Ben Reeves**

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Kinectimals

An adorable adventure with a surprising amount of depth

8

360

» **Concept**
Explore the island of Lemuria with the help of adorable cubs in a variety of fun challenges

» **Graphics**
The lush and gorgeous island environments mesh perfectly with the realistic and detailed cubs. They're absolutely precious

» **Sound**
Everything from the whimsical soundtrack to the warm purring of the cubs will induce a smile

» **Playability**
Players of all ages can participate in the different minigames

» **Entertainment**
Enjoyable for kids and adults alike

» **Replay Value**
High

Style 1 to 4-Player Simulation **Publisher** Microsoft Game Studios **Developer** Frontier Developments **Release** November 4 **ESRB** E

A t Microsoft's 2010 E3 press conference, a precious little girl took center stage to show off Kinectimals for the first time. The girl and her baby tiger, Skittles, showcased the depth of Kinect's interactivity, as the cub responded to her every word and command. Though we scoffed at the ridiculous name and brushed it off as just another pet sim, Kinectimals proves to be far more than just an adorable, furry face. Frontier Developments has delivered an entertaining and lengthy adventure with a surprising amount of depth. Also, it's really, really cute.

Kinectimals tells the story (yes, it has a story) of a kind and gentle pirate in search of a fantastic treasure. While living on the island of Lemuria, he recruited a few native cubs to help find fragments of a treasure map to lead him to his fortune. He never found the treasure, and now it's up to you to embark on this quest with a variety of cubs to earn discovery points, complete challenges, and open new parts of the island to explore. As opposed to a series of static mini-games, Kinectimals plays out like an early morning kid's show, featuring a cute creature named Bumble and gorgeous cinematic presentation.

Each of the 30-plus challenges makes excellent use of the Kinect technology. You can feed, wash, and pet the cub with a few simple hand swipes. Playing games like volleyball or soccer with your pet or teaching it tricks also shows off the impressive gesture and voice recognition capabilities. The game almost always accurately recognized my commands, though there were a few minor hiccups with gesture-based cat training. These activities will earn players a few discovery points, but the most entertaining way to progress is through the challenges.

When moving to new areas, Kinectimals presents a minigame challenge for you to complete for a high score. Race an RC car around an obstacle-filled track, kick soccer balls to knock down different objects, shoot targets with a water gun – the list goes on. Though some of the challenges are repetitive, later challenges take familiar mechanics and ramp up the difficulty and complexity to keep things fresh.

With around 20 hours of gameplay, Kinectimals offers plenty to do. You can play with your cub, shop for new items, decorate your house with trinkets found on your adventure, complete challenges, have friends join in to beat your high scores, and more. If you're looking for a rich gameplay experience jam packed with adorable creatures, look no further. » **Annette Gonzalez**

The more the animals play the dirtier they get. Keep them clean

Kinect Sports

Rare takes full advantage of its extra experience with Kinect

Style 1 to 4-Player Sports (4-Player Online) **Publisher** Microsoft Game Studios **Developer** Rare **Release** November 4 **ESRB** E10+

Kinect Sports isn't the first game to bite Wii Sports' style, but it's one of the few to best it in execution. All of the sports here control naturally and intuitively with very few duds in the mix. The collection features a variety of straight sports replications and a few fun minigame twists as well.

Soccer is the most complicated event and probably the weakest. Your on-field player doesn't run at all. They just stand still and try to pass to the next teammate without letting the ball get blocked. Shots on goal (and blocking as the goalie) are the best part since the ball seems to go where you want it.

Bowling is even easier to grasp here than in Wii Sports since you don't have to worry about releasing the ball. You simply reach out, grab a ball, and toss it. You can even strafe side to side to line up your shot and put spin on the ball with a twist of your arm. Up to four players can take turns bowling, and it's really nice not having to pass around a remote. My favorite trick is to throw the ball like a shot-put and take a huge divot out of the nice clean lane.

Track and field blends five different events into one long tournament. Sprinting and hurdles both have you run in place with the latter throwing in jumps. While the javelin toss includes running before the throw, the discus event doesn't allow you to spin around before you throw. This is probably for the best since dizzy players would be plowing into their coffee tables. Long jump works as one would expect, so get your Van Halen split jump ready. Playing through this section made me long for online leaderboards similar to those in Pinball FX2 where you're constantly taunted by your friends' scores.

Boxing tracks your arm movements pretty well and lends itself to some strategy. If someone just flails wildly, it's not tough to block and counter. You also get bonus power added to your next punch every time you block a hit. Opponents get blown back a little after a big hit, so you can't just combo endlessly until they fall down.

Volleyball was the biggest surprise for me. Bumping, setting, and spiking works very well, and the automatic movement always seems to put you in the right place. It's especially fun to co-op with another player and set up super spikes against the computer-controlled team.

I thought table tennis would be a little strange without a real paddle to hold, but it works just fine. In single-player you can even strafe from side to side to get the best angle on the ball. Versus mode gets a little crowded, but I managed not to smack anyone in the head so far.

Additional minigames that take a single aspect of a sport to an extreme round out the collection. I had a blast throwing an endless series of bowling balls at regenerating pins or blocking a barrage of soccer balls. If you've got a big group of people to play with, you can check out a random assortment of these in quick succession within Party Mode. This is the best way to play local multiplayer since you're doing a lot more playing without having to navigate a bunch of menus.

There isn't much of a career for single-player fans outside of a basic leveling system. You'll get experience every time you play under your profile and earn a new badge and avatar awards every 10 levels. That's about all there is to it.

In the end, if you're looking for a way to show off your new Kinect, this provides a great complement to the pack-in title, Kinect Adventures. **» Bryan Vore**

8

360

» Concept
Make the Kinect equivalent of Wii Sports

» Graphics
A clean cartoony vibe permeates the whole experience

» Sound
Surprising licensed tunes from Beach Boys to Lady Gaga appear as bumper music

» Playability
All of the various games work like they're supposed to for the most part

» Entertainment
A great accessible way to show off the new Kinect hardware to your friends

» Replay
Moderate

Kinect Adventures

Delivering a solid launch experience

7.5

360

» Concept
Get a taste of what Kinect can do through a series of fast-paced minigames

» Graphics
Everything is bright, clear, and cartoony. Avatars have a tendency to freak out when reading some arm gestures, however

» Sound
It's largely forgettable, though you will hardly notice over the yelling and jumping

» Playability
Kinect Adventures is a great showcase for the technology, and interactions quickly become second nature

» Entertainment
There's something cool about playing a game without a controller, but whether or not there's enough meat in here to keep players going after the gee-whiz factor wears off is debatable

» Replay Value
Moderately High

Style 1 or 2-Player Party **Publisher** Microsoft Game Studios **Developer** Good Science Studios **Release** November 4 **ESRB** E

Kinect Adventures is exactly the kind of all-in, jump around experience that Microsoft must have envisioned for its Kinect peripheral. The game invites players to push the furniture out of the way, take off their serious gamer hats, and simply have a good time. As a pack-in title, it does a brilliant job of demonstrating what the tech can do.

As with other Kinect titles, you'll need to clear out a little space before you start this one up. More specifically, the game scans your playing area before starting, determining if you have an optimal space or one that's merely good. It's an important distinction, since the latter restricts you to the single-player mode. Since so much of Kinect Adventure's success rides on the frantic multiplayer, it's worth taking whatever steps are necessary to make enough room.

Once you're in the game, you can play one of five main minigames in a standalone free-play mode or in a series of events called adventures (aha!). Five might not sound like a particularly large number – and it's not – but there are enough subtle variations of each game type to keep things from growing stale immediately.

Rallyball was one of the earliest implementations of Kinect shown to the public, and for good reason. It's conceptually simple and easy to understand. You stand at the end of a boxed-in hallway and have to destroy boxes and targets by serving a rubber playground ball toward the objects. The ball bounces around the enclosure and returns, and you have to swat the ball back using your hands, head, and legs to keep it in play. River Rush and Reflex Ridge are similar, putting you on platforms and having you either work to grab objects (in River Rush's case) or avoid getting pummeled by them (in Reflex Ridge) by jumping and ducking. In Space Pop, you have to float around in zero gravity to pop bubbles. Finally, 20,000 Leaks throws you in a glass undersea box in which you must move to fill in leaks and cracks with your body.

It's remarkable how well everything seems to work, and after a while you take the controller-free experience for granted. At first, playing River Rush co-op was an exercise in near collisions and unintentional pratfalls. After a few rounds, my teammate and I were able to navigate through the rapids with ease, leaning and jumping in tandem. As with a lot of Kinect games, after each round you're treated with still images of yourself jumping, squatting, and generally looking like a goofball. The gimmick works well in the roller-coaster world, and it's just as effective here.

By now, most of us have played games that use glorified webcams, but they lack the precision and fidelity that Kinect offers. Being able to move around precisely in 3D space in Space Pop or 20,000 Leaks is incredible, and it speaks to the hardware's potential. Avatar implementation isn't flawless, on the other hand, as the characters have a tendency to freak out when you move your arms behind your head.

Kinect Adventures is a perfect game for in and out party-type play, but as the adventures become longer they can get tedious and exhausting – particularly Reflex Ridge's sadistic "squat, jump, sidestep, repeat" gameplay. That said, Kinect Adventures is sure to be a family hit as people gather for the holidays. **» Jeff Cork**

Joy Ride

A close approximation of racing

Style 1 to 4-Player Racing (8-Player Online) **Publisher** Microsoft Game Studios **Developer** Big Park **Release** November 4 **ESRB** E

Second Opinion 6.5

Joy Ride started as a traditional Xbox Live Arcade game, and it probably should have stayed that way. The steering works pretty well once you get past the odd feeling of gripping an imaginary wheel, but I missed not having control over braking and accelerating. In that way, it feels a lot like Tony Hawk's Downhill Jam, which is not a compliment. The sloppy controls make the game more difficult at times than it might otherwise be. Blow a turn in the middle of a drift by leaning too far or not far enough, and you'll career around track barriers like a pinball. When Kinect inexplicably fails to read your gestures during an airborne stunt section, you'll sail through the air doing nothing. Racing games, from sims to kart racers, require a degree of precision to be fun. Joy Ride is simply lacking on that front. » **Jeff Cork**

Kinect has proven that controller-free gaming is possible, but it hasn't shown us that controller-free gaming is possible with established genres like FPS or racing. Yes, from a conceptual standpoint, Big Park's Joy Ride is a racing game. It offers cars, tracks, and sophisticated driving maneuvers like drifts and boosts. What it doesn't offer are the basics of racing. As the manual points out: "Turn the wheel to steer. Don't worry about accelerating or braking – the game handles those for you."

Without the ability to adjust your speed, the sensation of controlling your car is never fully realized. Sure, it's amazing that Kinect can recognize you are holding an invisible steering wheel and can pick up the subtlest movements of your hands. Leaning into a turn to apply a drift works without fail. Twisting your hands or lowering them to rotate your car as it soars through the air is a great way to perform tricks. The functionality is sound, and from the perspective of the player being the controller, largely entertaining.

Even at Joy Ride's highest peak of excitement, I found myself thinking that this experience would be so much better with a controller. Unless you memorize every turn and straightaway, you're bound to run into moments where you'll want to pepper the brake to ease into a corner or let off the gas to glide into a shortcut. These moves are racing 101, and every gamer or person who has driven a car instinctually uses them. Without these actions incorporated into Joy Ride's gameplay, you have to live with bouncing off of walls or flying past that shortcut. While the car cruises at a set speed, I never felt like it was just being pulled through the course; I

spun out on turns, and also slammed into walls headlong, bringing me to a complete stop.

I got a kick out of holding up items in my room so that the game could duplicate the color of said object on my car, but the need to switch cars never arose. Since speed isn't a factor, all of the cars accelerate and cruise at the same velocity. A crappy ice cream truck has just as much horsepower as a sports car. The long load times and extensive menu navigation required before each race compounded my lack of desire to enter the vehicle selection menu.

Joy Ride offers plenty of depth in its seven modes. In a similar vein to Rock Band's approach to unlocking venues, new tracks for each mode type are earned through the number of fans you bring in. Your performance on the track dictates how many fans join you after each event. With an average race netting around 160 fans, and unlocks coming in the tens of thousands, you'll definitely get bang for your buck.

While I begrudgingly played the three basic racing events (pro race, battle race, and Xbox Live race), and thought about knocking myself out so I didn't have to play the trick events (all you do is pose yourself in hilarious ways as your car soars though the clouds), I lit up every time the game presented a new stunt, smash, or dash event. All three of these events require pedal-to-the-metal speeds. Stunt is comparable to the trick park in the Nintendo 64 San Francisco Rush games, where you must launch off of ramps and string together as many tricks as you can to earn a high score and medal. The stunt events successfully plant that addictive "I can do better" hook, yet don't offer much variation

in course design. Should Big Park decide to make a sequel, I wouldn't mind an entire game of stunt events.

The smash event embraces high-speed drifting, and ends up being fun even though I spent most of my time in the car viewing the screen sideways since a great performance requires that you hold your drift (by leaning to the side) for as long as you can. As you drift, you must knock over hundreds of wooden characters to up your scoring multiplier.

If you want racing broken down to the absolute basics of just flipping your wrist to make your car automatically hop into the next lane, dash mode is fun and surprisingly intense. With obstacles littered on a straight track, it can be comparable to the Death Star run in a Star Wars game. The faster you get to the finish, the higher your score.

Maintaining speed is everything in Joy Ride, but finishing the race in first place doesn't mean that you will earn a gold medal. Medals are only awarded if you beat the best time, which I found to be defeating. Placing is challenge enough, but unlocking gold medals requires extensive playing, memorizing shortcuts and boost zones, and not messing up once.

In the right modes, Joy Ride pumps out excitement. In the less desirable avenues of play, it only brings frustration due to its inability to deliver a full video game racing experience. A close approximation of racing in a market loaded with great racing experiences like Burnout, Project Gotham, and Forza just doesn't cut it. » **Andrew Reiner**

Ilomilo

This cute puzzler packs a serious punch

Style 1 or 2-Player Action/Puzzle **Publisher** Microsoft Game Studios
Developer Southend Interactive **Release** January 4 **ESRB** E

8.75
360

Ilomilo's visuals will draw comparisons to LittleBigPlanet – like that classic platformer, the main characters are adorable blobs that instantly charm the player. That's where the comparisons end. Ilomilo is an action/puzzle game – one brilliant in design and fiendish enough that, on the night of my second day of playing, I actually dreamt about it. That's a testament to its addictiveness, especially considering the other games I can recall seeing in my sleep are Tetris and Rock Band.

The set-up is simple. Both characters (Ilo and Milo) are placed on different cubes in a three-dimensional world. You goal is to reunite the two by getting them to adjacent blocks, at which point they do an adorable happy dance. While the concept is simple (like every great puzzle game) negotiating the perspective-twisting levels is a complex task. You're not given much to work with, just a small number of blocks that you can pick up and place in gaps on the boards. Some are just blocks used only for filling in a gap. Others have special abilities, like expanding to fill three-block gaps, moving up and down like an elevator, or twisting on an axis to allow you to step off on another plane. A number of obstacles also exist, like sock creatures that grab and spit out the block you were carrying, spring plates that send you flying to another block, or creatures that pop out like a jack-in-the-box to block your path. From here, everything is in your hands (and head). Switching off control between Ilo and Milo, you'll slowly work your way together by making the correct moves and placements to reunite the duo. The difficulty is not extreme, but by the end you'll find serious challenge, even frustration as you try to wrap your head around

solutions that often require thinking in three or four different planes at once. For example, placing an elevator block going "up" on one plane might work as a ferry for a character on perpendicular plane. In forcing you to challenge your assumptions and think beyond the obvious, Ilomilo reaches a level of sophistication that belies its cute exterior.

In many ways, Ilomilo recalls Valve's classic Portal. Both games present everything you need to solve the puzzle onscreen – it's just a matter of teasing out the line of logic. Both give you a very simple and limited set of tools and rules, then require you to apply them in the correct manner by following "if/then" logic.

While Southend's concepts and level designs are nearly flawless, I have a couple of complaints.

One, the camera system is sometimes problematic – I often felt like I was switching between two unsatisfactory viewpoints. This is especially true on the expansive later levels, where you need to get an accurate view of the area. While Ilomilo is well suited to co-op play – if only to have someone to bounce ideas off of – I wish there was the option to have a friend drop into your existing career. As it stands, you have to start over from the first level for co-op. Also, while the turn-based co-op works fine, I think an online mode that allows both players to move concurrently would be a great addition to a possible sequel.

Still, these are minor quibbles. The overall experience of playing Ilomilo is absolutely addicting; it's as much fun as I've had with a puzzle game in ages. » **Matt Helgeson**

» **Concept**
Reunite two cute critters on a 3D playfield made of blocks. Sounds easy, right? Wrong!

» **Graphics**
You might be forgiven for looking for the Media Molecule label on this game. Sackboy resemblance aside, the visuals are vibrant and charming

» **Sound**
A whimsical and tuneful score fits right in with the game's overall vibe

» **Playability**
I have some problems with the camera and the feel of the controls, but the puzzles are finely tuned

» **Entertainment**
As good a puzzler as you'll play this year. Hats off to Southend Interactive

» **Replay Value**
Moderate
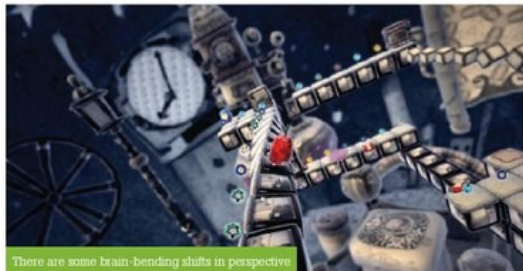
There are some brain-bending shifts in perspective

This block animal runs a set pattern until you disrupt his path

The visual style is as cute as it gets

Builder keflings will carry your components and even construct buildings you've made before automatically

A World Of Keflings

Ninja Bee's sequel builds on a solid foundation

8.25

360

» **Concept**
Build a few towns and collect resources in this relaxed city-builder

» **Graphics**
No mind-blowing spectacle here – just simple, cartoony visuals doing their job

» **Sound**
I found myself humming the pleasant background music to myself, though it could use more variety

» **Playability**
I ran into some slowdown and jerky animations in especially crowded areas, but otherwise the game controls and performs well

» **Entertainment**
A low-pressure way to experience the joy of creating a thriving civilization

» **Replay**
Moderately High

Style 1 or 2-Player Simulation (4-Player Online) **Publisher** Ninja Bee **Developer** Ninja Bee **Release** December 22 **ESRB** E10+

A Kingdom for Keflings surprised me when it released in 2008. What I thought was merely a gimmick to showcase Xbox Live's stupid avatars turned out to be a charming simulation that addicted me instantly with a laid back approach to building a bustling city. A World of Keflings, the sequel to Ninja Bee's downloadable sensation, keeps everything I loved about the original, but tweaks to the gameplay make it even better.

All of the fun of Kingdom for Keflings is still intact. I love the process of ordering my keflings to collect resources, then streamlining and refining production. When things get rolling, A World of Keflings conveys the same joy of constructing a well-oiled machine, augmented by new blueprints and three separate areas to strip-mine and harvest to depletion.

Ninja Bee has addressed practically every complaint from the previous title, and the experience flows much better because of it. You no longer need to backtrack constantly to build structures thanks to a cadre of devoted flunkies carrying components right to you (they'll even erect some buildings themselves). If you don't like where a structure ends up, you can just push it to a new location without having to break down and reassemble it.

Towering over the other improvements is the presence of local co-op, which was missing the last time around. Now you and your friend (or your kid) can sit on the same couch and go through the entire game together – a process made even easier with the split-screen and drop-in features. The game supports up to four players over Xbox Live, but playing with more people in either multiplayer mode doesn't really change your approach. It's just more fun than plowing through the linear campaign solo.

Though optimizing your supply lines and customizing your buildings is satisfying, the process ends up being too shallow to compete with the giants in the city-building genre. Additional layers of village governance, branching development paths, or a free-play sandbox mode would have been great additions and given the simple formula more depth. However, A World of Keflings still succeeds at being a unique and accessible simulation that serves as an excellent first step into a larger world. » **Joe Juba**

Local co-op adds more fun and less hassle to the multiplayer

Bejeweled 3

PopCap takes its flagship series in unexpected new directions

9

PC • Mac

GAME INFORMER
GAME OF THE MONTH
GOLD

Style 1-Player Puzzle **Publisher** PopCap Games **Developer** PopCap Games **Release** December 7 **ESRB** E

» **Concept**
Match some gems to make them disappear. A variety of modes stretch this mechanic to its limit

» **Graphics**
Simple, crisp, and clean – it's a PopCap game, after all

» **Sound**
Audio has always been a reliable utility player in Bejeweled, but Bejeweled 3's excellent sound design is the best in the series

» **Playability**
Experts can mouse away until their desktops smoke with nary a hitch

» **Entertainment**
Whether you're a casual player looking to relax or a twitchy expert ready to blast your way to the high-score table, there's something for everyone here

» **Replay Value**
High

B ejeweled has become nearly ubiquitous over the years. In less than a decade it's gone from a tiny Flash game to something you can play on mobile phones, consoles, and even the backs of airline seats. There's a good reason for its success, too. Bejeweled offers a concept tantalizingly simple to understand – match three similarly colored gems to remove them from a shifting playfield – yet impossible to truly master.

With the first full-fledged sequel in more than six years, PopCap has taken the core concept and stretched it to its limits. Rather than simply offer slightly prettier gems (which Bejeweled 3 does), the latest installment adds a variety of clever riffs on the formula that change the experience in substantial ways.

There are eight main modes, a few of which are holdovers from previous versions. Classic is the vanilla Bejeweled you either love or don't; Lightning is essentially Blitz from Bejeweled Twist, which offers a race against the clock; and Zen is a lot like the no-pressure endless mode, with the addition of optional relaxation cues built in.

Of the new games, I enjoyed Butterflies and Diamond Mine the most. Once you get past Butterfly's cutesy name and presentation, you'll find a challenging game in which winged gems inch their way to the top of the screen after each turn. If one creeps to the spider at the top of the screen before it's removed, the game is over. Diamond Mine has you blasting your way down by matching gems. You have to chip away all the earth beneath a white line before the timer counts down. As a longtime Bejeweled player, I liked how quickly these two modes play and how challenging they can become. If you don't plan ahead in either game, you'll find yourself overrun in no time.

I wasn't as fond of the other two main attractions, Poker and Ice Storm, though I can see their appeal. Matching gems to create winning hands is a clever idea, but it didn't keep me interested for long. Ice Storm's rising pillars of ice create tension, but I'd rather stick to Lightning if I want a hectic game. Quest offers a nice tour of all the modes, giving players a reason to sample each of them by providing challenges. Most decent players will tear through Quest in an hour or so, but it's a fun time – and I beat several of the challenges by the skin of my teeth.

If Bejeweled has become part of your evening ritual, Bejeweled 3 deserves a prominent spot in the rotation. Core gamers may scoff at the idea of playing something so simple, but they'd be missing out by not giving it a shot. Sure, it's pretty, but it's also one of the purest, most addicting – and, yes, challenging – games around. » **Jeff Cork**

Sonic Colors

Sonic drops the ball juggling the second and third dimensions

Sometimes the amount of onscreen action makes it easy to lose track of Sonic

Style 1 or 2-Player Platforming **Publisher** Sega **Developer** Sonic Team **Release** November 16 **ESRB** E

7

Wii

Mario blew gamers' minds when he blasted to space in 2007's sublime Super Mario Galaxy. Now Sonic is taking his platforming antics to the stars with Sonic Colors, but unlike Nintendo's plumber, this hedgehog is stuck floating in a gaping void of mediocrity.

This time, Dr. Eggman has built a gigantic galactic theme park he's using to capture colorful aliens called wisps. It's up to Sonic and Tails to free these critters while cracking self-aware jokes that poke fun at the series' absurdity. Sonic Colors sports the wittiest writing I've ever heard in a Sonic game, and even the surliest Sega fan will chuckle.

Like Sonic Unleashed, Sonic Colors frequently shifts between 3D and 2D gameplay, but instead of offensively bad combat, this game features the predictable on-rails running we've known since Sonic Adventure. While these guided rollercoaster rides show off stunning environments like a park made of sweets or a lush alien planet, their limited control either left me yawning or dead as the action abruptly shifted back into my power. During several fast-paced stretches Sonic is supposed to perform quick sidesteps, but the move is unresponsive and the game never clarifies when you need to maintain momentum by pressing forward on the analog stick.

Sonic's adventure enjoys some marginal improvement in the 2D sections. Wisp power-ups do well to spice up gameplay variety, but for almost every useful ability there is a complete dud. Transforming into a drill, rocket, or ricocheting laser results in the most enjoyable action I've played in a console Sonic game in years, but the wall-clinging buzzsaw and frenzied berserker powers control like you're holding the nunchuk upside-down. Handling the hedgehog becomes even more frustrating when you combine his floaty physics with precious, life-giving rings that disappear unreasonably fast after getting hit.

Sonic Colors is plagued by uneven difficulty. At its best you'll be blasting across water and dismantling gigantic starships. At its worst you'll be repeatedly falling into surprise pits or groaning as a joyous run is halted by a jarring section with moving spring platforms. A two-player mode in which two Sonics share a screen is available, but you don't want to play that crowded mess.

Sonic Team's most recent Wii offering is evidence that it's attempting to claw its way out of a deep grave crammed with disappointing titles. Some diehard Sonic fans with unlimited patience may find enjoyment here, but the rest of us should pick up one of Sonic's fully 2D titles until they get it right. » Tim Turi

» **Concept**
Sonic copies Mario by going into the galaxy and trying on some ability-altering power-ups

» **Graphics**
Myriad locations show off some of the most vibrant and beautiful graphics the Wii has to offer

» **Sound**
The orchestral tunes sound like good Super Mario Galaxy rip-offs and the voice acting is improved from previous titles

» **Playability**
Sonic's movement is floaty, and not because he's in space. This becomes troublesome during dangerous platforming sections

» **Entertainment**
There are some clever jokes and exciting boss battles, but they're buried beneath inconsistent difficulty and repetitive level design

» **Replay Value**
Moderately Low

Epic Mickey

A colorless history lesson

» **Concept**
An interesting Walt Disney history lesson featuring a wealth of classic characters and long-lost footage

» **Graphics**
The paint and thinner effects look fantastic. Junction Point also captured every detail from Walt's older cartoons

» **Sound**
Easily one of the best soundtracks of the year. Given how much dialogue and cutscenes are in the game, it seems odd that none of the characters speak

» **Playability**
The painting and platforming mechanics are sound, but the camera tracking couldn't be much worse

» **Entertainment**
A lengthy game with plenty of secrets to find, but little in terms of engaging gameplay

» **Replay Value**
Moderately High

Epic Mickey is Junction Point's thank you letter to Walt Disney. The life's work of this legendary creator is on display throughout the game's museum-like worlds. As Mickey's adventure unfolds, he bounds through the black and white cartoons that put both him and Walt on the map, explores Disneyland's most recognizable landmarks, and even takes a second to gaze wide-eyed at a bronze statue of Walt.

As a tribute, Epic Mickey hits most of the right notes. After soaking up the nostalgic sights and sounds, I tracked down and watched old Mickey cartoons. Thanks to this game, I've developed an appreciation for Oswald, the Lucky Rabbit. For those of you not up to speed on Disney trivia, Oswald is the first character created by Walt. Due to copyright issues, he was shelved and forgotten until his revival in Epic Mickey.

Watching Mickey and Oswald interact is one of the game's most surprising allures. Mickey is mischievous, yet ultimately innocent. Oswald is the exact opposite. He's bullheaded, and most of his dialogue expresses a harsh cynicism. Though they only share the screen mostly toward the end of the adventure, it's worth the journey for Disney devotees.

The game begins with Mickey sneaking into a wizard's workshop and accidentally spilling paint thinner on a miniature world. As the thinner spreads, Mickey is pulled into this peculiar land. He sees that it has been turned into a wasteland, sapped of its life and color. After spending a few minutes here, Mickey realizes that he's standing in a twisted version of Walt's greatest creation, the Magic Kingdom. The residents of Main Street are miserable, the rides in Tomorrowland are malfunctioning, and Mickey's accident is to blame. He has to clean up the mess, and the task won't be easy. The thinner has taken on physical form, and continues to corrupt the land.

Epic Mickey clings tightly to one cool gameplay gimmick – Mickey's ability to apply paint and thinner to the environment. Channeling a little magic like he did in Fantasia, Mickey wields a magic brush that can spray mighty streams of both paint and thinner. Paint revitalizes objects. Thinner removes them from the world. With one flick of his wrist, Mickey can transform a dilapidated house on the verge of collapse into a pristine work of art that shines with life. He will also be forced to temporarily remove objects from the world to gain access to areas that will help with the repair. For instance, spraying thinner on a rooftop will give him access to the interior of the building. When his task is completed, he can restore the building with a blast of paint.

Junction Points uses this paint and thinner mechanic to create a variety of clever puzzles and combat scenarios. Objectives are rarely clearly telegraphed, which leads to paint and thinner being tossed around liberally. The hunt for solutions is the heart of Epic Mickey's gameplay. One spray of thinner could reveal a secret area, and a blast of paint could reanimate a machine that changes the complexity of the entire level.

While combat encounters are few in number, most of the foes Mickey squares off against demand different attack strategies. Blotlings, creatures infected and/or created by Mickey's thinner disaster, melt into a puddle if you pour thinner on them or become docile if you splatter them with excessive amounts of paint. Beetleworx enemies require thinner to expose their weakness, but can only be finished off with a spin attack by Mickey. Some enemies roll at you, forcing Mickey to leap into the air, and quickly spin around to establish another steady stream of thinner. No matter what creature I was squaring off against, the battles proved to be exciting tests of skill and precision.

All of this spray functionality is handled beautifully on the Wii remote – just aim and shoot. Fans of Super Mario Sunshine should feel right at home.

While offering exciting propositions for both combat and exploration, the entire experience is plagued by an uncooperative camera. As Mickey strafes around an enemy, the camera could catch on a wall, causing it to lose frame of the action, or freak out to the point that it's impossible to gauge what is going on. The platforming segments, which send Mickey up perilous towers and across moving contraptions, are marred by the camera tracking, sometimes locking in a position that blinds you for the next jump. The camera can be realigned and the player can also zoom into first person, but sometimes the game just won't let you alter the angle. Frustration abounds in almost every world. This is a shame, as the worlds are teeming with well-hidden secrets, such as body parts to construct bizarro versions of Donald, Goofy, and Daisy. With the camera working against me, I often felt the secret wasn't worth the effort. Death often means you have to start an entire level over again.

As much as I loved the artistry in the worlds and the general vibe of the game, many of the missions Mickey is sent on are the very definition of mundane. Miserable talk-intensive fetch quests periodically rear their ugly heads, and challenges like "shoot the glowy bits on seven passive thinner tentacles" do little to get the blood pumping. As imaginative as the worlds are, the quests feel tacked on, and sometimes come across as time sinks to extend the length of the adventure. The end result is a game that offers fun gameplay mechanics that are sapped of life due to the mind-numbingly boring nature of the challenges.

I got a kick out of the side-scrolling levels, which turn Mickey's oldest and most memorable cartoons into fun (albeit challenge-free) platforming sequences, but getting to them meant slogging through the larger worlds. Epic Mickey goes out of its way to show gamers Walt Disney's body of work, but rarely fires on a level that turns this beloved content into exciting gameplay. » **Andrew Reiner**

Second Opinion 7.75

The return of Mickey Mouse to video games leaves me torn between two extremes. I'm overjoyed to see such an imaginative and exciting take on the worlds of Disney. As a land of forgotten Disney characters, The Wasteland is a fantastic setting and a breath of fresh air for the long stagnant fiction. Vibrant environments are filled with secrets and surprises, many of which include nods to Disney history. A pitch-perfect musical score sets the right tone between playful and frightening, accentuating the twisted cartoon-gone-wrong landscape. Gameplay values exploration over anything else, and it offers a genuine sense of discovery. Even with all this great content, the game struggles in key areas that threaten to bring down the fun. An uncooperative and finicky camera is the worst offender, sticking at odd angles that can lead to disastrous jumps. While the quest structure is open-ended and often has multiple solutions, many of the actual objectives involve tedious item collecting and backtracking. At other times, the quests seem directionless. Furthermore, the innovative paint and thinner concept makes for some great puzzles, but the mechanic is strained by targeting problems. Pull it all together, and you've got a good game that probably isn't the revelation for which many Disneyphiles hoped. But as a first step to making Mickey Mouse relevant once more, this is a better direction than the little guy has gone in decades. » **Matt Miller**

Tron: Evolution Battle Grids

Not exactly an evolution after all

This Wii tie-in for the upcoming *Tron: Legacy* doesn't even try to pull off the spectacle of the 360 and PS3 games, much less the excitement of the film. Instead, it strings together a handful of minigames based on competitions within the Tron universe with the weakest of plots. This wouldn't be the worst decision if these events were a lot of fun to play, but with most of them being entirely forgettable, the game settles on mediocrity.

Whether you're competing in the story mode to become the Game Grids Champion or playing in a tournament with a couple of friends, Battle Grids' biggest problem is that its minigames are a mixed bag. Events like hyperball, where you try to dissolve your opponent's platform by ricocheting balls at each other's feet, control well and offer genuine excitement within their structured gameplay. Alongside the passable events, however, is garbage like the iconic light cycle races. These events are plagued by broken steering mechanics (you hold the controller sideways and tilt it to turn), and I exploded so frequently that I wanted to drive into my own light trail just to make the misery end.

Each event has multiple variations that change gameplay in fun ways, and you can set up your own custom tournaments. Choosing your lineup of events helps you avoid the worst minigames,

and playing with friends alleviates some of the frustration of playing against the computer.

The Wii isn't known as a graphical powerhouse, but even in a room full of ugly ducklings, Battle Grids has reason to feel self-conscious. The character models sport a cartoony style reminiscent of *Star Wars: The Clone Wars*, but the fuzzy visuals and minimal detail take away from the charm. I know the game is supposed to

take place inside Tron's cyber world, but some of the digital environments are so basic that I thought I was playing an N64 game.

Battle Grids may not be able to compete with the Wii's more robust minigame collections, but if for some reason you can't get enough of *Tron*, this family-friendly title is a better choice than the 360/PS3 adaptation. » **Jeff Marchiafava**

6

Wii

» **Concept**
Skip the big-budget movie tie-in for a collection of Tron-based minigames

» **Graphics**
Worse than the special effects in the original 1982 *Tron*

» **Sound**
The voice acting is rough, but the techno soundtrack isn't that bad

» **Playability**
With the exception of the horrible racing segments, most of the action controls just fine

» **Entertainment**
Half the minigames are entertaining, and the others are forgettable

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

Ghost Recon

One of these ghosts is not like the other ones

Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon franchise made a name for itself by embracing squad-based tactical warfare over the *Rambo*-style, go-it-alone military shooters that dominated the landscape upon its debut in 2001. In bringing the franchise to the Wii, Ubisoft and developer Next Level Games abandon most of the traits that made the series successful in favor of a questionable third-person/ rail shooter hybrid.

This only area this version of Ghost Recon stays true to its namesake is with the near-future plot, which takes place directly after a group of power-hungry ultranationalists stage a coup in Russia. In a move to appeal to the casual Wii crowd, Next Level Games ditches the hardcore

tactical elements in favor of traditional rail shooting. Players do not control soldier movements save for pointing them to the next cover position, and enemies predictably flood in as soon as you reach your new entrenchment. The Ghosts deploy different arsenals depending on the circumstances, with your secondary weapon often rotating between a silenced sniper rifle, rocket launcher, or M249.

Ghost Recon doesn't split the screen for local co-op. Instead, Next Level implemented a terrible scope mechanic that places your telescopic sight in the lower corner of the screen. Given the small size of this picture-in-picture display, it is difficult to line up a shot quickly, which exposes your position and leads to trouble. Throwing grenades is equally flawed, as they take too long to properly aim, and once you toss them they often fall short.

To break up the monotony of the cover leaping levels, Next Level included several missions where you man a gun emplacement in a vehicle or control the weapons of an unmanned ground vehicle. Other levels require the Ghosts to move stealthily while methodically taking out groups of enemies with silenced weapons before they have a

chance to react to your presence and fire off a warning flare. These stealth missions devolve into exercises in frustration thanks to your questionable AI comrade, who doesn't operate with the necessary sense of urgency or prioritize the most dangerous threats. These situations are more manageable in co-op mode, where you two can determine who is responsible for which enemies.

Like many games for the network-challenged Wii console, Ghost Recon doesn't include online co-op. Your only option outside of the campaign's 12 missions is a simple arcade mode with online leaderboards that increases your score multiplier as you take down hostiles and punishes you for taking fire. You can either play with or against a friend, but its predictability hardly makes it a destination mode.

In stripping Ghost Recon of its best-known traits, Next Level Games does the franchise a disservice. This Wii shooter is hardly worthy of its namesake, delivering a predictable and ultimately forgettable shooter hampered by poor controls and uninspired level design. Let's hope Future Soldier has a more promising battle plan. » **Matt Bertz**

4.5

Wii

» **Concept**
Deliver a forgettable Ghost Recon for the Wii that features elements of both third-person and rail shooters

» **Graphics**
Blocky graphics with washed out textures make Russia look drabber than it does in real life

» **Sound**
The "reloading!" echo will ring in your head long after play sessions

» **Playability**
Sketchy scope implementation and wildly inaccurate grenade mechanics make an already difficult game more challenging

» **Entertainment**
In abandoning the traits that made Ghost Recon successful, the Wii iteration comes off as yet another uninspired shooting gallery

» **Replay Value**
Moderately Low

Michael Jackson The Experience

Plenty of fan service in an otherwise shallow experience

6.5

Wii

» Concept
Michael Jackson meets Just Dance

» Graphics
Each song's stage is themed around its respective video. The blurry Jackson silhouette can be jarring to watch

» Sound
Fan-favorite dance tracks like "Bad," "Billie Jean," "Smooth Criminal," "Beat It," and "Thriller" are perfect fits. Ballad selections from Jackson's library are an odd choice for the dance-only game

» Playability
With the Wii remote as the only source of movement detection, you can get away with cheating, which is not nearly as fun as actually performing the moves

» Entertainment
There's only so much you can do when dance detection is focused on one arm's movements

» Replay Value
Moderately Low

With Michael Jackson The Experience, Ubisoft wants to give fans a chance to learn performance techniques used by The King of Pop. While the PS3 and Xbox 360 versions (available in 2011) will offer a full experience with both singing and dancing that utilizes the entire body, the Wii entry only offers the dance component that feels more like timed arm swinging than an actual performance.

If you've played Ubisoft's other Wii dance offerings in the Just Dance franchise you know what you're getting. Michael Jackson The Experience lacks any sort of career mode, so players can jump right in. As either Jackson or a backup dancer (move sets are slightly different for each) you'll dance through the game's 20-plus tracks from the likes of *Bad, Dangerous, Off the Wall,* and *Thriller.* The gameplay basics are simple: Hold on to the Wii remote and follow the stick figures scrolling along the left hand side of the screen that display what move you'll need to perform next. The prompts were confusing at times and the stick figures occasionally stopped appearing, which caused a few missteps on my end.

Getting perfect marks on your moves requires timed movement of the Wii remote, so you can easily get by full-on dancing, or just standing still and moving the remote-equipped arm accordingly. Of course, the latter way is far less fun. To get the most of the experience, just let loose as you play through your favorite songs, something fans will have no problem with. On the downside, the game is brutal with performance scoring, so despite earning many good and perfect marks, I rarely passed the three-star point at the end of my performance (you can get up to five). Earning stars unlocks training videos that look like they were shot in the '80s with live action choreographers teaching some of Jackson's more advanced moves. This is a nice touch for fans interested in brushing up their moves, as the set offered in actual gameplay are fairly simplistic regardless of difficulty. There's only so much you can do with remote waggling.

In regard to the soundtrack, you'll perform zombie-like moves in "Thriller" and attempt a mean lean in "Smooth Criminal," which makes these tracks some of the more entertaining

choices. However, you'll also come across ballads like "Earth Song" that are odd selections for the dance-only Wii version. These slower tracks would be best served with a karaoke gameplay mode.

Despite being modeled on one of the best performers of all time, Michael Jackson The

Experience on Wii puts on a fairly lackluster show. Still, if you're a die-hard Michael Jackson fan with the Wii as your primary console, you may find something to like here. The rest of us will be left wanting a more well-rounded experience. **» Annette Gonzalez**

Ys: The Oath in Felghana

I can't pronounce the name, but I enjoyed the game

Style 1-Player Action/RPG **Publisher** Xseed Games **Developer** Nihon Falcom **Release** November 2 **ESRB** T

8.5

PSP

Full disclosure: I had never played a Ys game before being assigned The Oath in Felghana. I heard lots about the long-running series, but this was my first experience with its old-school hack-and-slash gameplay. As it turns out, it was a perfectly pleasant introduction.

Ys is an isometric action/RPG that plays similarly to Secret of Mana. You cut up enemies, level up, and collect items to speed you along on your quest to save the troubled town of Redmont. The game sticks to a classic formula, but battles are kept fast and fun, and new powers are introduced frequently.

In addition to the obvious increases in defense or attack power provided by new equipment, accessories give new abilities, such as wading through lava without taking damage. If you want to uncover all of Felghana's secrets, you need to revisit dungeons once you've gained access to each new power. This backtracking is optional, but it builds the world in an enjoyable, almost Metroidesque way. Each area feels like it's hiding many secrets for when you return at full power.

Oath features a few interesting characters – particularly the devious (and awfully named) Chester – but since the game is a remake of the generally disliked Ys III, the plot is what you'd expect for a game that originated in the '80s. Silent protagonist Adol Christin has little motivation, but the story is really just an excuse to keep you moving swiftly around the small region of Felghana, and I was thankful for the brisk pace. You'll never spend longer than a few minutes in dialogue before you're back to sparring with bad guys.

Though I enjoyed the relatively simple old-school gameplay of

Oath, elements of it will frustrate some gamers. Success in Ys depends on trial-and-error and offers less instruction than many modern games. Giant bosses require numerous deaths as you learn their patterns. At other points, you'll even run into regular enemies who you can't harm until you've acquired a certain weapon or spell. Be prepared for a challenge, and Ys will not disappoint you.

No prior knowledge of the series is required to jump into Oath in Felghana, though a fondness for 16-bit-era RPGs helps. As a newbie, this entry sold me on the series, and I'll be digging into the archives to check out more Ys as a result. **» Phil Kollar**

» Concept
A little Secret of Mana, a little Zelda, and a lot of old-school awesomeness

» Graphics
This sprite-based, top-down world won't blow anyone away, but it provides a colorful backdrop for dungeon crawling

» Sound
The voice acting runs the full range from fantastic to awful, but the music is incredible

» Playability
Simple combat makes it easy to pick up and play, though some of the deadlier bosses require skill

» Entertainment
The scale may not be as huge as some RPGs, but Ys provides a lot of enjoyment in a style that isn't explored often enough

» Replay Value
Moderate

Platforming works better than you'd expect given the camera perspective

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Sonic Colors

Dimps crafts another amazing 2D Sonic game

8.5

DS

Style 1-Player Platforming (2-Player Online) **Publisher** Sega **Developer** Dimps **Release** November 16 **ESRB** E

» Concept
An encore by the only developer capable of making good Sonic games

» Graphics
Noticeably improved since their last Sonic DS game, and the cinematics are very clean

» Sound
The best Sonic tunes I've heard in years. The special stage music still gets me pumped up

» Playability
Sonic's boost and homing attack make the controls smooth like butter

» Entertainment
Sonic fans will be running, jumping, toe-tapping, and smiling all the way to the credits

» Replay Value
Moderately High

Any self-respecting Sonic fan will tell you that Sega's premier franchise has spiraled downward over the years. However, an important distinction must be made here: While the console games have been awful, the handheld titles quietly retain impeccable quality. Developer Dimps has been leading the handheld charge with terrific Sonic platformers from GBA to DS, and it continues its run of entertaining titles with Sonic Colors.

Sonic Colors captures the most fluid sense of speed I've ever experienced in a Sonic game. Players blaze through bright and gonzo levels at the push of a button thanks to a holdover from the Sonic Rush series – the boost gauge. The classic spindash still exists, but boosting retains momentum better and makes tearing through double screen loop de loops and zipping across water fast and easy.

The boost ability is joined by a plethora of multicolored powerups called wisps, and each adds an interesting new gameplay mechanic without succumbing to Werehog-itis. Sonic frees captured aliens, gaining abilities like a drill, ricochet laser, and rocket. My favorite transforms Sonic into an all-consuming black-hole, which allows him to vacuum up enemies and coins, becoming huge in the process.

Boss fights are handled similarly to the Sonic Rush titles, which infuse a 3D element to create more depth in perspective and strategy. These fights shine brightest when Sonic is dismantling a gigantic spacecraft by destroying turrets or challenging Dr. Eggman to a dramatic, multi-stage final battle. Sonic Colors also features the series' most addictive and well-balanced special stages. Players steer Sonic with the stylus through halfpipe collect-a-thons, reminiscent of Sonic 2, which make going back for chaos emeralds more of a treat than a chore.

While the core game is a riot, the experience ends just as it approaches blissful levels of fun. Sonic Colors can be completed in a few hours, about the same time as one of the Genesis-era titles. Replay incentives such as time trials, item-collecting missions, by-the-numbers multiplayer, and unlocking wisps in earlier stages are nice additions, but become too repetitive.

If you're craving more after Sonic 4, looking for a great DS game, or just want to experience an awesome platformer, don't let Sonic Colors pass you by. **» Tim Turi**

Sonic Colors has huge moments that eclipse any other Sonic game I've played

reviews archive

the score

9 | Pinball FX 2

Platform 360 **Release** October 27 **ESRB** E

Pinball FX 2 brings the excitement and authenticity of modern pinball to Xbox Live Arcade. Banging around the silver ball is a blast in and of itself, but the social options turn this experience into an addiction. Not since Geometry Wars: Retro Evolved 2 have I had this much fun competing with friends on Xbox Live.
— Andrew Reiner

6.75 | Time Crisis: Razing Storm

Platform PS3 **Release** October 19 **ESRB** T

Ultimately, the compilation's two light-hearted rail shooters will entertain gamers who don't mind a healthy dose of absurdity mixed in with their action. The titular Razing Storm, on the other hand, will disappoint and frustrate virtually anyone who has played another FPS in the past 10 years.
— Jeff Marchiafava

3 | Babysitting Mama

Platform Wii **Release** November 5 **ESRB** E

It's hard to even call Babysitting Mama a game, as the only real interactivity comes in the form of slightly moving a doll around, pushing an analog stick in a particular direction, and manic controller waggling (even by the Wii's standards). If real kids are anything like this, then this is gaming's version of a contraceptive. — Dan Ryckert

4 | DanceMasters

Platform 360 **Release** November 4 **ESRB** E10+

Kinect was developed with movement in mind, so dance games make a perfect fit, but only if done right. DanceMasters makes an attempt at creating a controller-free version of DDR that unfortunately fails to replicate the addictive quality of that series. From one dance fan to another, I'd say pass on this one and get Dance Central instead.
— Annette Gonzalez

6.5 | The Fight: Lights Out

Platform PS3 **Release** November 9 **ESRB** T

Accomplishing its goal, The Fight delivers a more robust fighting experience than is currently offered by other motion-controlled titles. My aching muscles are a testament to the workout I received, but the recognition problems and repetitive gameplay made it an ugly fight not worth bragging about. — Jeff Marchiafava

7.75 | Divinity II: Flames of Vengeance

Platform PC **Release** November 4 **ESRB** M

This expansion pack builds on the successes of Divinity II while mitigating its failures.... The writing is better than ever, the plot setup is far more interesting than the base game's vanilla fantasy, and the combat is slightly less annoying and unbalanced. Even so, I only recommend this to gamers who have the patience to deal with rough edges in the gameplay itself. – Adam Biessener

3.5 | Flip's Twisted World

Platform Wii **Release** October 19 **ESRB** E

Back on the N64, the world-twisting gimmick may have been enough to make Flip's Twisted World stand out. These days, though, it feels like a one-off idea that Super Mario Galaxy 2 might have used on a single level before abandoning for even wilder gameplay tricks. In fact, being in such incredible company on the Wii is possibly the game's biggest mistake; on a console flooded with platformers, Flip's Twisted World is among the worst. – Phil Kollar

6 | The Shoot

Platform PS3 **Release** October 19 **ESRB** T

I enjoyed The Shoot's accurate aiming controls and level variety. I can even live with having to shoot lame cardboard cutouts instead of real enemies and the morbidly obese director insulting my performance every five seconds. The fact that you have to post annoyingly high scores just to unlock the next level or play with a friend, however, is unforgivable. — Jeff Marchiafava

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DECRYPTING

A Look Back at the Storyline and Development of the Role-Playing Juggernaut   by Matt Miller

> One of my first jobs at Bethesda was helping with the CD-ROM version of Arena in 1994. Every time there was a new build, I took it upon myself to finish the main quest. I can probably finish that game faster than anyone. The "Passwall" spell, which lets you literally carve your own path through dungeons, is still cool.
>
> — Todd Howard, *Game Director*
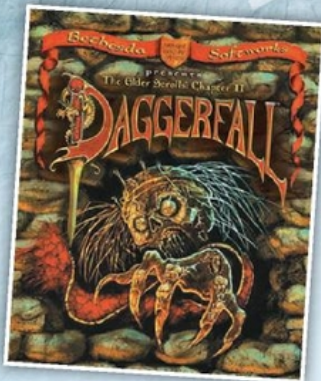
> Daggerfall in my memory is mostly flavored by how large it was. It was something we really struggled with during the project. We were never sure if it was big to just be big, since it was randomly generated. We could dial up or dial down the size very easily. But it became the sum of its parts. You could do so much. It's also the Elder Scrolls game that introduced the skills system, and the whole "you improve by doing" paradigm, which I think defines the series in many ways. You really felt like the character you played was up to you, and not the game. – Todd Howard

> I was hired during the final throes of Daggerfall's long development. Nobody had a lot of time to train or supervise me, so I was pretty surprised to be this brand new rookie designer basically doing whatever I wanted. Luckily I was still young and responsible, so I didn't take (much) advantage of my freedom. This was also my introduction to the magic of game development – I still remember my amazement at being able to put together a dungeon or quest, fire up the executable, and see what I'd just done right there on my computer screen in an actual game. I'm still occasionally floored by that magic, even after all these years. – Kurt Kuhlmann, *Senior Designer*
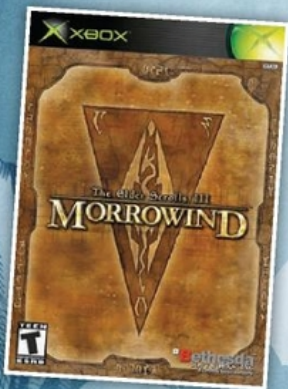
> Morrowind was a real reboot not just for the Elder Scrolls, but for Bethesda. We built a game while building up a development team. We had shrunk to maybe six people in development, and this was probably our last chance. I coded the initial demo of the game by myself and designed the editor when we started. I felt the whole game hinged on having a great tool we could build and tweak the game with, and The Elder Scrolls Construction Set was born. I took the name from the Apple 2 program, "Stuart Smith's Adventure Construction Set." To this day, I think what the modders have done with those tools has helped define the series. – Todd Howard

THE ELDER SCROLLS

The tale of the Elder Scrolls began in recent years for many fans, as they explored the massive nation of Cyrodiil in The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion. However, that popular entry was only the latest chapter of a sprawling epic that began way back in 1994. As we wait to see what will come next for the vaunted Elder Scrolls series, we decided to look back at both the in-game and out-of-game stories that have shaped these incredible role-playing experiences. We asked longtime Bethesda developers to share their knowledge and memories.

Todd Howard asked me to create and present a quest line for the Thieves Guild. I put together a rambling presentation of the 20 quests I had planned. In the meeting I got one sentence out before Todd stopped me. "Tell it from the player's point of view," he said. I had gotten so wrapped in my back story I was telling that rather than the player's story. By the end of the day, almost half the quests had been cut, making it much better. Since then, I've never forgotten that we make stories for the player, not for ourselves.

— Bruce Nesmith, *Design Director*

We started in 2002 with Oblivion, right after Morrowind. The easy thing would have been to do a two-year sequel, but I somehow persuaded upper management to let me take four years and make a next gen game for consoles that didn't exist yet. That was a stressful time, since we only had final hardware for maybe the last six months. So almost all of Oblivion's development was spent thinking, "I'm not sure this is ever going to actually work." I was really influenced by the Lord of the Rings movies at that time. It felt real, almost historical, and that's something I think is key to The Elder Scrolls. – Todd Howard

E3 was coming up and we were scrambling to get the Oblivion demo done in time. The plan was to show a detachment of Imperial soldiers attacking an Oblivion gate. It was close to being polished and I was feeling pretty good. This was Friday night and the demo needed to be ready early the next week. Then Todd called me over to see something that Istvan Pely had prototyped – a fight through a ruined city. Todd: "This is what we're doing. How long will it take you to get it working?" Me: "......." (I may have yelled something unprintable as I walked out of the office.) It turned out to be the right decision – this was the Kvatch demo we showed at E3, and the original Legion fight ended up in the game as a random encounter near an Oblivion gate. – Kurt Kuhlmann
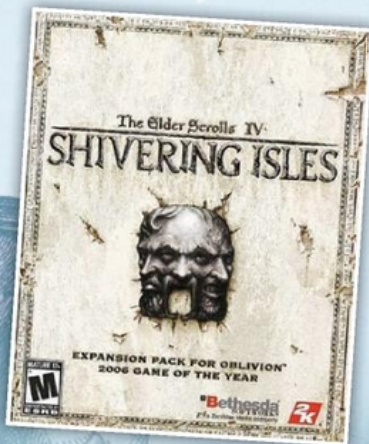
I've always found it interesting that the art style for each game is a direct reaction to the previous game. After finishing Morrowind I wanted to take the Elder Scrolls in a more realistic direction, with some high fantasy elements. I brought this to Todd's attention and surprisingly I found out we were on the same page. Similarly, at the end of Oblivion I felt the art style could go in a completely different direction, which drove the look for Shivering Isles. Once again, Todd was excited about a stylistic change and we ended up with our most unusual aesthetic since the Elder Scrolls series began. I think changing the visual style between games helps keep the series interesting for us as developers and for the people who play it. – Matt Carofano, *Art Director*

ELDER LORE

"We've always treated the world of Tamriel as a real place, a place you can make a difference in. It's the connection of the people, the Empire, and their gods. How does one affect the other? Do we, the people, hold our destinies in our hands, or are we part of something larger? That idea is embodied in the Elder Scrolls themselves, which speak of the past, present, and future in one voice." – Todd Howard

TAMRIEL

*Each entry in the series ties into a single deeply intertwined story.
Senior designer Kurt Kuhlmann walked us through the installments
and how each connects to the next.*

1. The Elder Scrolls: Arena (1994)

"Emperor Uriel Septim VII is betrayed by his battlemage, Jagar Tharn, and imprisoned in a realm of Oblivion. The player travels across Tamriel searching for the pieces of the Staff of Chaos in order to rescue the Emperor and defeat Jagar Tharn."
■ **Impact?** "During Jagar Tharn's reign, the Empire was weakened by a series of wars, one of which plays into the story of Daggerfall. More details of Jagar Tharn's plot against the Empire were revealed in Battlespire."

2. The Elder Scrolls Chapter II: Daggerfall (1996)

"The player is sent to the city of Daggerfall by the Emperor…[The player recovers] the Totem of Tiber Septim, the key to controlling the Numidium, a giant golem used by Tiber Septim to forge the Empire hundreds of years before. The game has six different endings depending on who the player chooses to give the Totem to." ■ **Impact?** "The game ended with what became known as 'The Warp in the West,' with the six possible endings all happening or not happening simultaneously."

3. Battlespire: An Elder Scrolls Legend (1997)

"Set during the same time as Arena, the player is an apprentice battlemage who gets caught up in Jagar Tharn's betrayal of the Battlespire to the daedra lord Mehrunes Dagon." ■ **Impact?** "Battlespire sets up Mehrunes Dagon as an enemy of the Septim Empire, and his defeat provided him the motive of revenge in Oblivion's story."

4. The Elder Scrolls Adventures: Redguard (1998)

"Unlike other Elder Scrolls games, in Redguard you play a particular character, Cyrus, who travels to Stros M'kai in search of his missing sister. In the process, he gets caught up in Tiber Septim's attempted conquest of Hammerfell. In the end, Cyrus rescues his sister and drives the Empire off of Stros M'kai."
■ **Impact?** "The Empire withdrew from Hammerfell after its defeat at Stros M'kai. Later, Hammerfell joined the Empire voluntarily in the Treaty of Stros M'kai, negotiated by (now) Queen-Regent Iszara."

5. The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind (2002)

"The player is a prisoner, sent to Morrowind by the Emperor ostensibly to work as an Imperial agent, but in fact to help investigate and perhaps fulfill a prophecy and become the reincarnation of the Nerevarine, a long-dead hero. You learn the origins of the Tribunal, the revered god-heroes of Morrowind, and their struggle with the immortal Dagoth Ur. Dagoth Ur and his Sixth House cult are the source of a supernatural blight that threatens to overwhelm Morrowind. By fulfilling the prophecies, the player is finally able to confront and defeat Dagoth Ur in his fortress in the crater of Red Mountain."

■ **Impact?** "When the Heart of Lorkhan was released from the mortal plane, the power of the Tribunal was broken forever, which indirectly led to the fall of the Ministry of Truth and the devastation of Vvardenfell (as described in the novel *The Infernal City*)."

6. The Elder Scrolls III: Tribunal (2002)

"The player is put in the middle of a struggle between Almalexia, one of the members of the Tribunal, and the ruthless King Helseth. The player is eventually sent to deal with the threat of the crazed Sotha Sil, but in fact it is Almalexia who has gone insane and has to be destroyed." ■ **Impact?** "With the death of two of the members of the Tribunal, the authority of the Tribunal Temple is unlikely to survive. This may herald the return of the Dunmer to their ancient tradition of daedra-worship."

7. The Elder Scrolls III: Bloodmoon (2003)

"The player learns of the Bloodmoon Prophecy, in which the daedra lord Hircine stages a ritualistic hunt. The player joins the Skaal tribe and eventually becomes the prey of Hircine's great hunt, possibly becoming a werewolf along the way." ■ **Impact?** "Nothing substantial changed, the story was more personal to the player."

8. The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion (2006)

"The game opens with the assassination of Emperor Uriel Septim VII by unknown assassins…The player has to find Martin Septim, the last heir to the Septim throne, and help him relight the Dragonfires in order to stop Dagon's invasion. In the end, Martin is forced to use the Amulet to take the form of the god Akatosh in order to defeat daedric prince Mehrunes Dagon." ■ **Impact?** "Martin's apotheosis permanently sealed the barriers between Oblivion and the mortal world, forever preventing the kind of invasion attempted by Mehrunes Dagon. The end of the Septim Dynasty heralded the end of the Third Era. The fate of Tamriel and the Empire in the Fourth Era remains to be seen."

9. The Elder Scrolls IV: Shivering Isles (2007)

"A mysterious gate opens on an island in the Niben Bay. It leads to the realm of the Daedric Prince of Madness, Sheogorath, who is looking for a mortal champion to help fight the onset of his nemesis, Jyggalag, the Daedric Prince of Order. In the end, Jyggalag and Sheogorath turn out to be one and the same -- Jyggalag was cursed long ago by the other daedric princes to be Sheogorath. By defeating Jyggalag, the player breaks the curse and assumes the mantle of the Prince of Madness." ■ **Impact?** "Jyggalag is now freed from his curse of madness. Although defeated, he will eventually resume his place as the Prince of Order, with unknown ramifications for the complicated and opaque balance of power within Oblivion."

Morrowind

Tribunal

Bloodmoon

Oblivion

Shivering Isles

*To read more about the history of the Elder Scrolls, visit gameinformer.com/mag
for our full interviews with the developers at Bethesda, including expanded story
details and central characters from each franchise entry, as well as accounts of the
technical advancements made in each game.*

Things You Didn't Know About...

ADRIAN CHMIELARZ

People Can Fly's Adrian Chmeilarz isn't putting half of the crazy things inside his head into Bulletstorm. Here are a few things you didn't know about Bulletstorm's creative director, in his own words.

+ **I wanted to be a politician.** I studied all the books. I was always up to date on the latest local and worldwide events, and I had hundreds of political disputes. Then one day I realized I just didn't give a s---.

+ In the '80s, I started saving for the ZX Spectrum even though I had never ever seen it. All it took were two blurry images of Knight Lore in some newspaper. I stared at them for hours, every day, for months. When I had half of the money, **my brother found it and bought himself a soccer ball.**

+ People Can Fly is a very peculiar bunch. From the start, we wanted Bulletstorm to be one crazy game. Mike Capps, the boss of Epic, said: "If you aim for crazy, you'll **spiral out of control.** Knowing you, aim for realistic, you'll end up with crazy anyway." The man was right.

+ I am a guy who can **party hard, Polish style,** but also thinks that a good book is a great way to spend an evening. No surprise, then, that as creator of shooters the other genre I love is adventure. My dream is to kidnap Ron Gilbert and force him to do the next Monkey Island.

+ Even though I love pure gameplay, the thing that interests me most in games is their escapism factor. **I'm never going to be a Navy SEAL or a space pirate.** I'll never be able to watch c-beams glitter in the dark near the Tanhauser Gate. Thanks to games, I can.

+ Not being an English speaker, I was convinced that Painkiller was the most badass word ever. Pain. Killer. I googled it. First result: Judas Priest's song about a **cyborg fighting hordes of evil.** Bingo! It was only a year later when someone told me it's just a bloody pill.

+ I was a hardcore QuakeWorld player. From 28.8K modem to broadband, **I played this game for five years straight.** It didn't have any unlocks, upgrades, or levels. The dream of owning someone 50 to -5 was all I needed to keep me going.

+ When I was in high school, I rolled my eyes whenever my parents and their friends partied to the music of their youth. Old farts. **I promised myself I would never be like that.** Forget it. Nothing beats the '80s.

+ I have a smart and beautiful wife who understands my passions and doesn't bend my ear as often as she could. I always wanted a boy – so of course we have a girl. She's a two-year-old essence of awesomeness. **I could not be happier.** People think they know what kind of joy it can be when you have kids. Until you do – no, you have no idea.

+ I am excited that Bulletstorm excites me. After two years of making Painkiller I was tired of the game and wanted to do something different. After four years of making Bulletstorm I feel like **the journey has just begun.** It's all still fresh and thrilling to me. I have the best job in the world.

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