gamer

ISSUE
200

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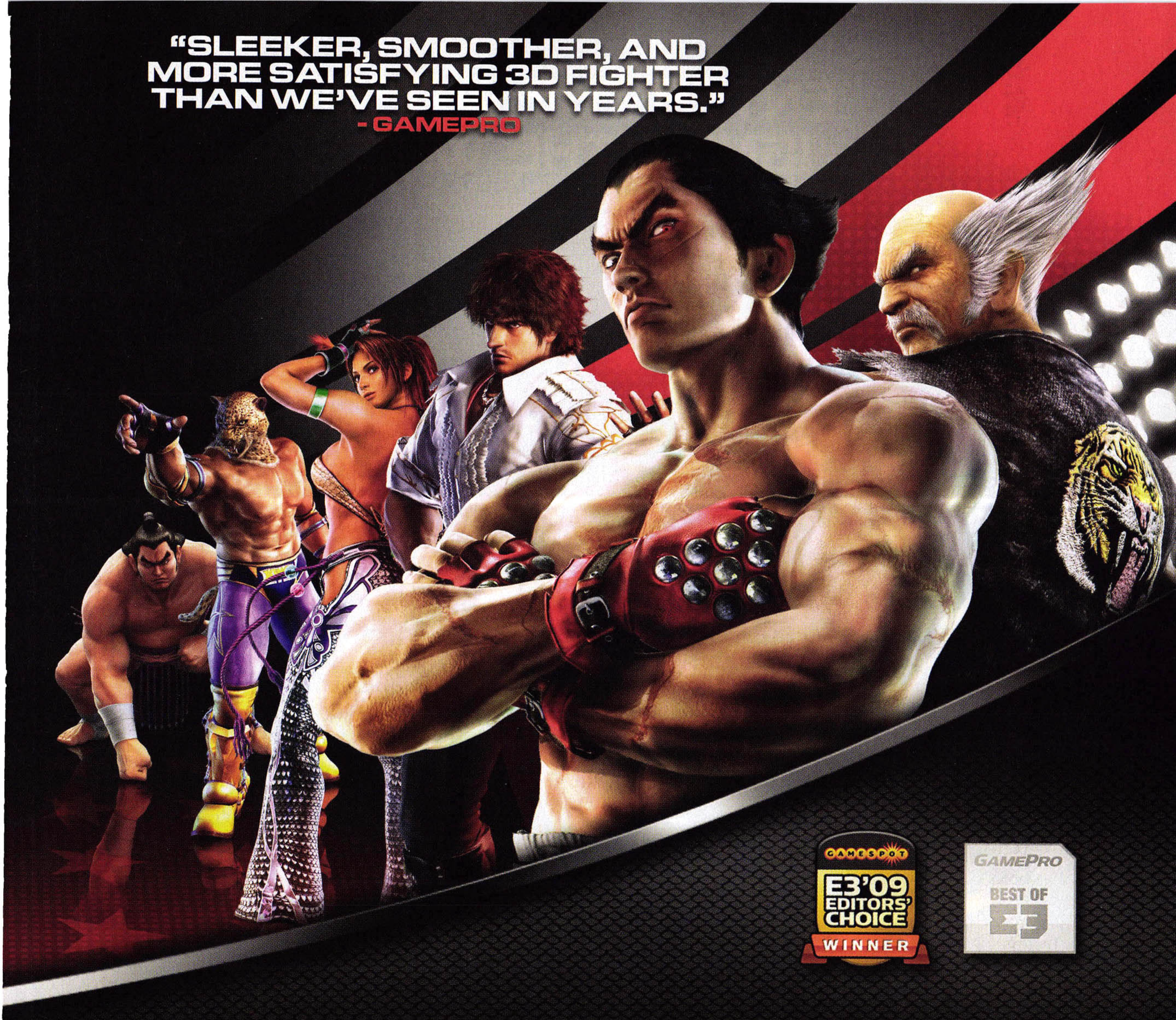

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Animated Blood

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So Who Wants To Argue?

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

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

In celebration of our 200th issue, we thought it would be fun to revisit the Top 200 games of all time. Fun being a loose term here, as any time a list is created the knockdown, drag-out fighting begins.

Here in the office we have thrown all sorts of insults back and forth. Friendships were put into question, and even the ultimate gamer diss, "you aren't a real gamer," which we all know is uncalled for, made an appearance. Everyone is in danger of getting mud thrown in their face when it comes to a list as big and important as the Top 200 Games Of All Time.

The debate was so large in magnitude we couldn't even agree on how to keep score, with the end result being a hybrid of voting tallied by a clever computer application and a series of heated meetings to parse the results.

Trust me when I tell you plenty of worthy games didn't make the list (most likely including your favorite game of all time). We know you are going to let us have it, spamming hate mail and knocking over magazine racks in disgust. If the complaint isn't about a game that didn't make the final cut, it will surely be about the ordering or one of a million other things.

Ultimately, isn't that what makes a list like this fun?

Before I leave you to the issue and the arguing, I want to take a moment to thank everyone, and I do mean everyone, for making it possible for Game Informer to hit this amazing landmark. When I worked on my first review of Sonic the Hedgehog all the way back in 1991, I never in a million years dreamed that Game Informer would hit 200 issues (or enjoy all the success we have over the years).

So thanks to all in the industry and out of it for your continued support over all these years. Cheers.

44
cover story

8 collectible covers

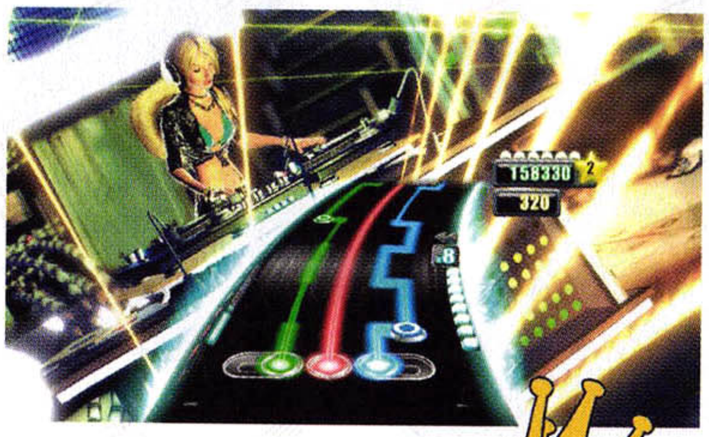
HBG '09

26

121

92 **The Legend of Zelda: Spirit Tracks**

114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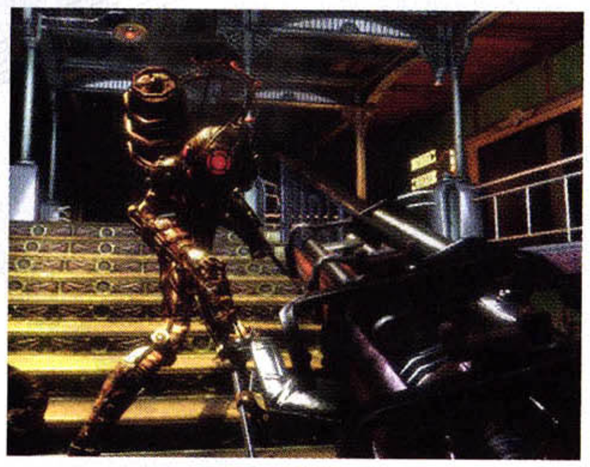
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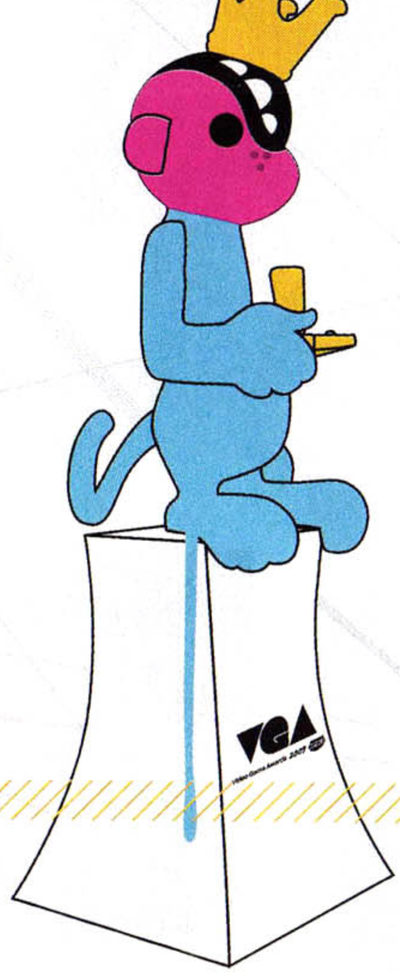
119

123

54

Top Ten Games That Could Have Been



14
news

21
connect

regulars

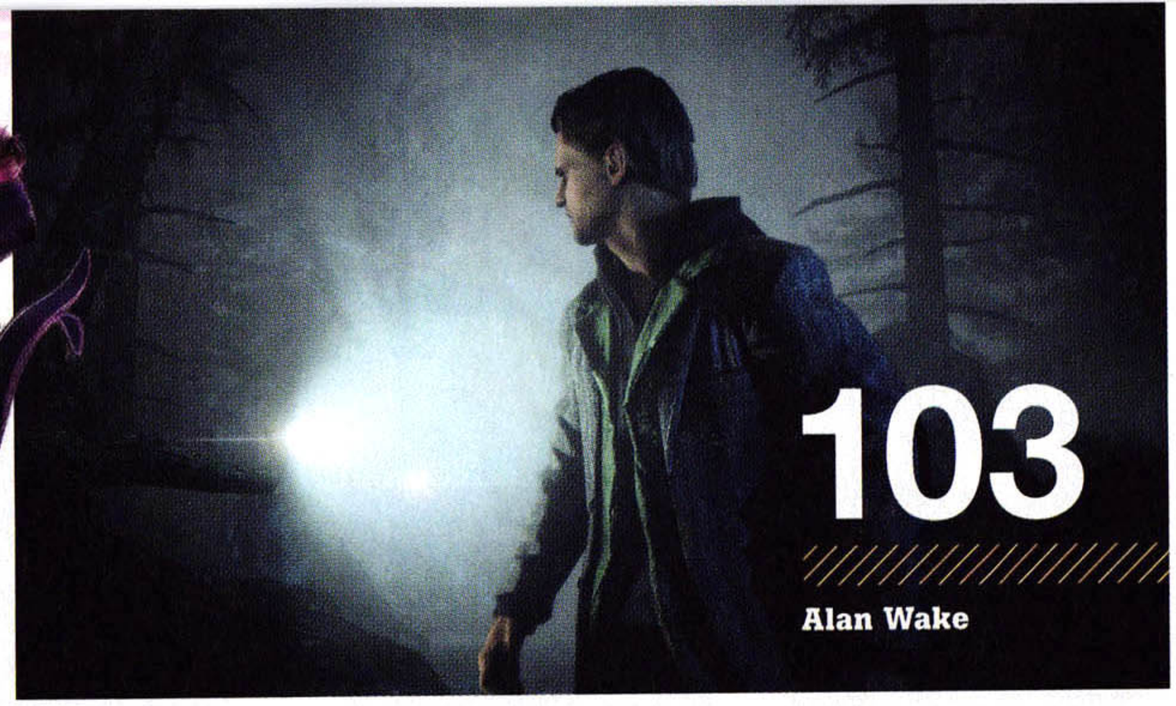
8 Feedback
Did we get bought by Disney? Apparently you all want to know, and we answer

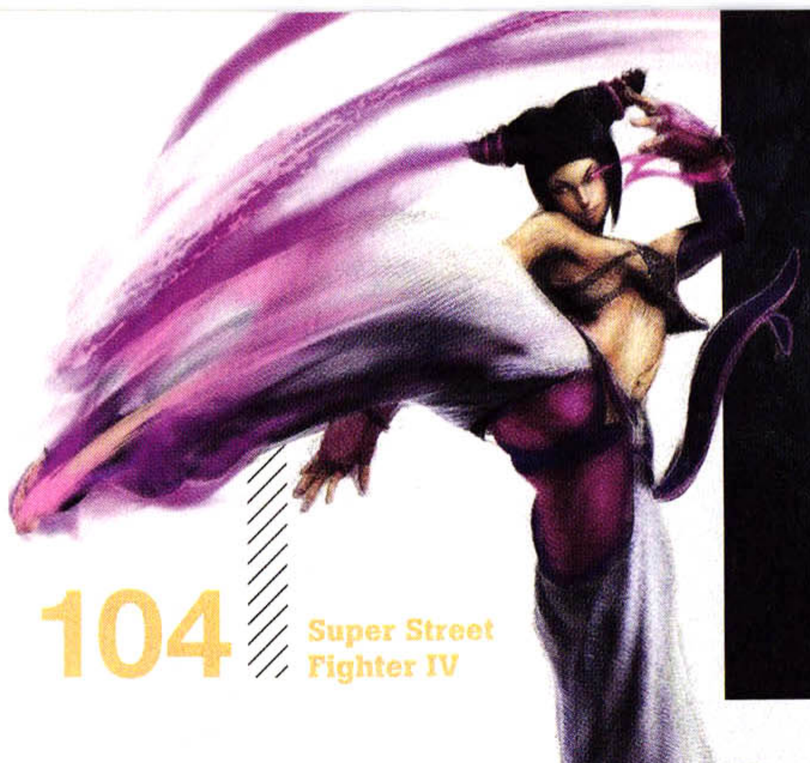
14 Connect
What's the deal with the Video Game Awards? Are they relevant? This look at the upcoming 2009 show and retrospective on past years answers this and more
by Bryan Vore

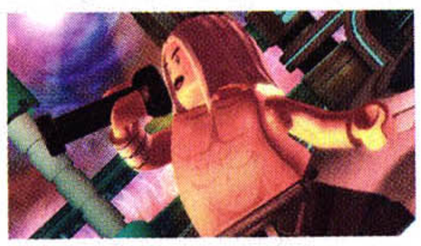
90 Previews
A battle with BioShock 2's Big Sister, the fighting styles of Tatsunoko vs. Capcom, and new plot points from the highly anticipated Final Fantasy XIII

114 Reviews
Does Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2 live up to the hype? Inside: a full breakdown of single-player, co-op, and the hotly anticipated multiplayer
by Adam Biessener

136 Game Over







games index

Ace Attorney Investigations: Miles Edgeworth . . 113
Alan Wake 103
Army of Two: The 40th Day 106
BioShock 2 90
Borderlands 118
Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2 116
Dante's Inferno 107
Dawn of Heroes 113
Dead Rising 2 110
Demon's Souls 128
DJ Hero 120
Dragon Age: Origins 123
Drawn to Life: The Next Chapter 132
Everybody's Sukkiri 113
Final Fantasy XIII 96
Gran Turismo 5 94
Grand Theft Auto IV: The Ballad of Gay Tony 121
Half-Minute Hero 133
Hikari No 4 Senshi: Final Fantasy Gaiden 112
Hot Shot Tennis: Get a Grip 113
Just Cause 2 105
Kingdom Hearts: Birth by Sleep 109
Left 4 Dead 2 119
Legend of Zelda: Spirit Tracks, The 92
LEGO Indiana Jones 2: The Adventure Continues 126
LEGO Rock Band 125
Lost in Shadow 99
Ninety-Nine Nights II 102
Operation Flashpoint: Dragon Rising 122
Quantum Theory 112
Rabbids Go Home 131
Ratchet & Clank: A Crack in Time 129
Risen 130
Splinter Cell Conviction 100
Star Trek Online 108
Star Wars Battlefront: Elite Squadron 133
Super Street Fighter IV 104
Tatsunoko Vs. Capcom: Ultimate All-Stars 98
Tekken 6 124
Tornado Outbreak 127
Whirlwind 109
Wii Fit Plus 131

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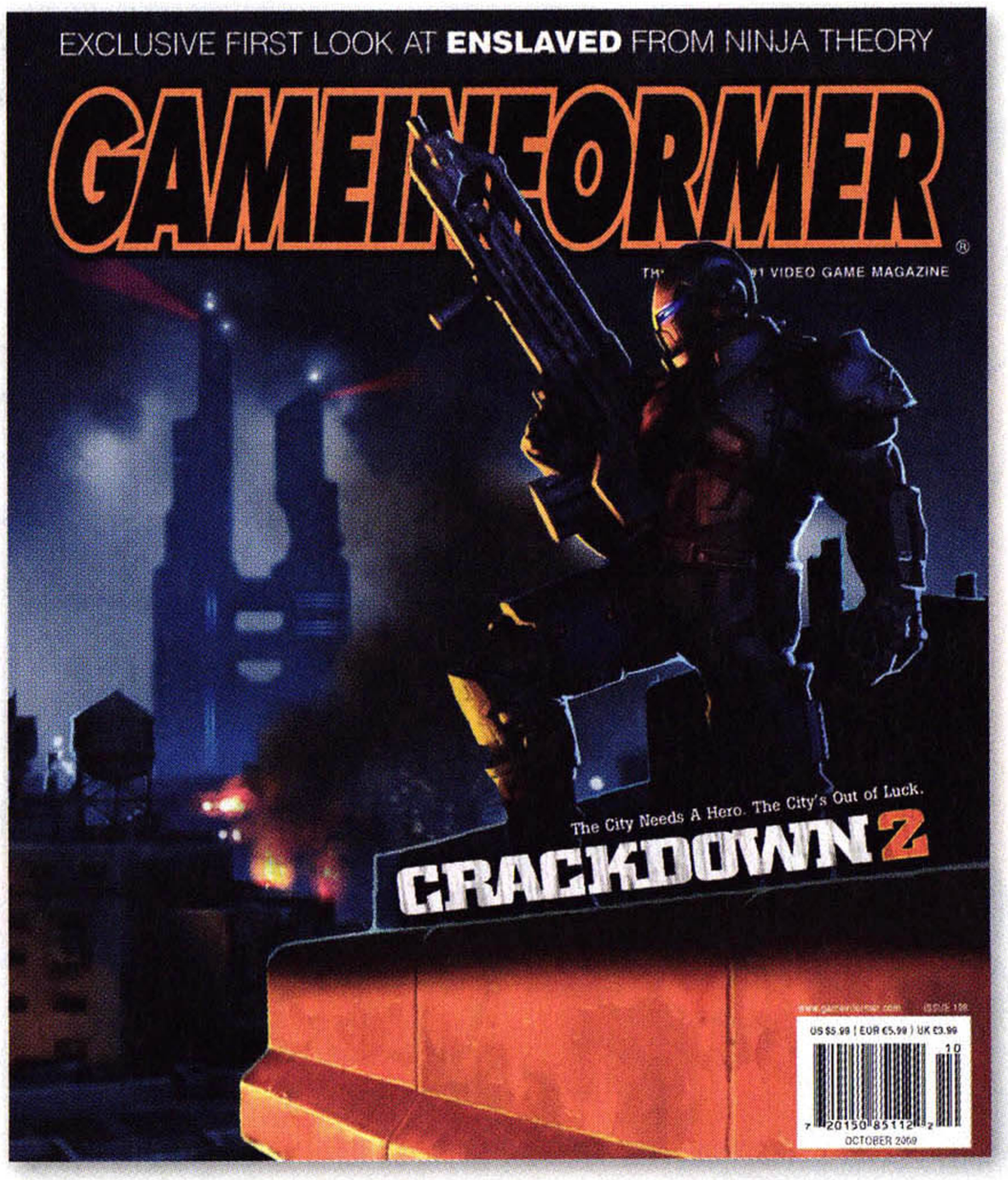

This month in Feedback we celebrate our 200th issue, sound off about bad AI, grant a royal pardon to so-called "console traitors," and don't get bought by Disney.

Gaming And Grown-Ups

As a gamer and parent of two young girls (ages 3 and 10), I was very glad to see the Parent's Perspective article in issue 198. Since the original gamer generation has grown up and had kids, I'm sure a lot of people are looking for exciting games to play with their children. I've found a few gems like Super Rub A Dub on PSN and The Munchables on the Wii, but I still feel there is a lack of quality games to enjoy together. I hope to see more columns like this in the future.

Michael Richards
via email

I just want to say a job well done on Jeff Cork's Parent's Perspective column! I am not a parent, but I am a nanny and I've been gaming since I was four. I grew up playing games like Kirby's Dream Land and Super Mario World, but with the increase in the number of violent and disturbing games, parents should make it a higher priority to know what their children are playing and what titles are appropriate. Show some initiative!

Vanessa Galvan
Columbus, OH

I just wanted to thank you guys for the Parent's Perspective article in issue 198. My boyfriend and I just had our first child a month ago, and video games are an issue that we will have to worry about sometime in the future. It is good to know that we are not the only ones that are worried about this and that someone at your magazine is looking out for all of the gamer parents out there. P.S. We named our son Raiden after the Metal Gear series.

Katie Brown
via email

The response to Parent's Perspective was so positive that we decided to make it a monthly feature. Be sure to look for the column under its new name, All Ages, if you want an analysis of issues facing parents in the world of gaming. In this month's installment (on page 30), Jeff looks at games that allow you to filter out questionable content like gore and swearing. Unfortunately, it looks like he may have to use next month's column to explain why you shouldn't name your kids after mentally unstable cyborg ninjas.

The Big Two-Oh-Oh

Congratulations on reaching issue 200. You've come a long way, and it's good to see a magazine make it so far. Hope you can keep it going to 300.

Ken McCall
via email

Thanks, so do we! Be sure to check out our array of features celebrating this milestone, including a look at our cover stories (page 86), notable quotes from the last 100 issues (page 80), and our look at the top 200 games of all time (page 44).

Get Smart

Why is that when you increase the difficulty in a game, it never means "let's make the AI smarter"? Instead, it's always "let's have this guy take three head shots, ten shots in the torso, and two grenades before he dies. Oh, and if he gets shot in the head, he doesn't stumble – he walks through it and pistol whips the player in the neck." Losing like this makes a game frustrating, not fun, and it makes players less likely to try completing a game on higher difficulty settings. A defeat would be more acceptable if it happened by being outsmarted, as opposed to facing an HP-pumped, guard-breaking, demigod AI. I'd prefer a challenge of the mind and less of a challenge of chance and endurance.

Tyrell Zimmerman
Richmond, VA

The sad, short answer is that good AI is difficult to create, but it's easy to give enemies more hit points. When developers are making games, they need to prioritize their efforts. It doesn't make sense to painstakingly craft a realistic AI that only a fraction of players will see on extreme difficulties; that time and those resources should probably be spent tuning the aspects that more gamers will experience. Even in light of that reasoning, however, we totally agree with you. The thrill of outsmarting an intelligent opponent is far more gratifying than just filling a meat shield full of lead, and we'd love to see more games (not just shooters) implement more cunning AI at all difficulty levels.

Out of Context

"I'm not a person that encourages chain-sawing infants"

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27 E3 AWARD NOMINATIONS

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Reader Gibberish

"WY dos Microsoft solves the xbox re lights problem?"

"come on you are gamer site and none of gamer is so dump that he doesn't know how to blog?"

"hey watz up how come u guys do not tal bout game-cube anymore"

Genuine Draft

Have you ever wondered why in the real-life NFL Draft teams occasionally find a superstar in the late rounds (like Tom Brady, 199th pick overall), but in the Madden NFL Draft all your guys after the second round are terrible? Why can't EA put that in Madden? Why must they all stink?

Patrick M.
Franklin, TN

Sorry to break it to you Patrick, but you seem to be suffering from a serious disorder doctors have dubbed "you suck at the draft." Either that, or you're playing last year's version of Madden. The latest iteration, Madden NFL 10, simulates the exact phenomenon you describe, handcrafting draft classes to ensure that you have the potential to land early-round losers and late-round superstars. If that isn't happening for you, the bad news is you need to improve your scouting and strategy. The good news? There's always next season.

Switching Sides

I've been wondering for a long time now, how do you guys view traitors? By "traitors" I mean people who were diehard fans of one company, then dropped them and went to another. The reason I've been wondering is because I am one of these traitors. I used to be a Sony fan, but I couldn't afford the PS3… so I got a 360 instead and fell in love with it. To this day I feel guilty that I went over to what I always considered the Dark Side.

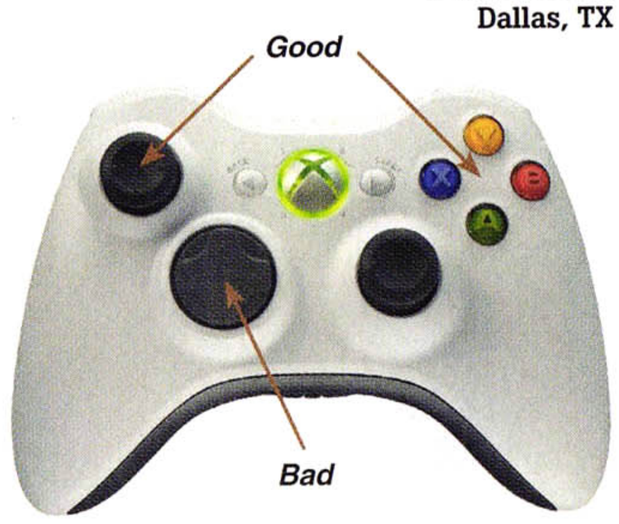
Joseph Caggiano
Gloversville, NY

Hear ye, hear ye! Let it be known that all gamers branded "traitor" by friends, family, and forum-goers are hereby forgiven their trespasses and absolved of any wrongdoing! Look, people: The Xbox 360, PS3, and Wii are products, not spouses. You don't owe any one of them your lifelong faithfulness; as game consoles, their purpose is to let you play the games you want to play. If one of those systems can do that better than another, your choice should be obvious. Anyone who willingly denies themselves great games out of some delusional desire to remain loyal to a gargantuan multi-national corporation needs to rethink some things.

The Wrong Direction

The "Then and Now" classic feature in issue 197 was funny and nostalgic, but there was one thing that confused me. How is the Xbox 360 controller a "bad d-pad"? All my friends agree that it's the best gamepad yet designed. I'm by no means an angry Microsoft fanboy, I'm just a bit puzzled. What makes it so bad?

Jamason Finn
Dallas, TX



We weren't taking a jab at the whole Xbox 360 controller. It's pretty great overall, with one glaring flaw: the directional buttons (a.k.a. the d-pad) are terrible. Instead of controlling the action, it feels like you're just suggesting which way your character should move. The d-pad considers your input, weighs its options, and settles on a compromise. "You want to move up? Hmmm…how about up-left instead!" As is always the case with compromise, nobody wins.

Mouse In The House

While reading issue 198, I noticed Mickey Mouse on a promo for the magazine redesign. Did Disney buy Game Informer? If so, that's cool. I wonder what it has in store for GI and how much it will change your magazine. I hope they don't mess it up too bad.

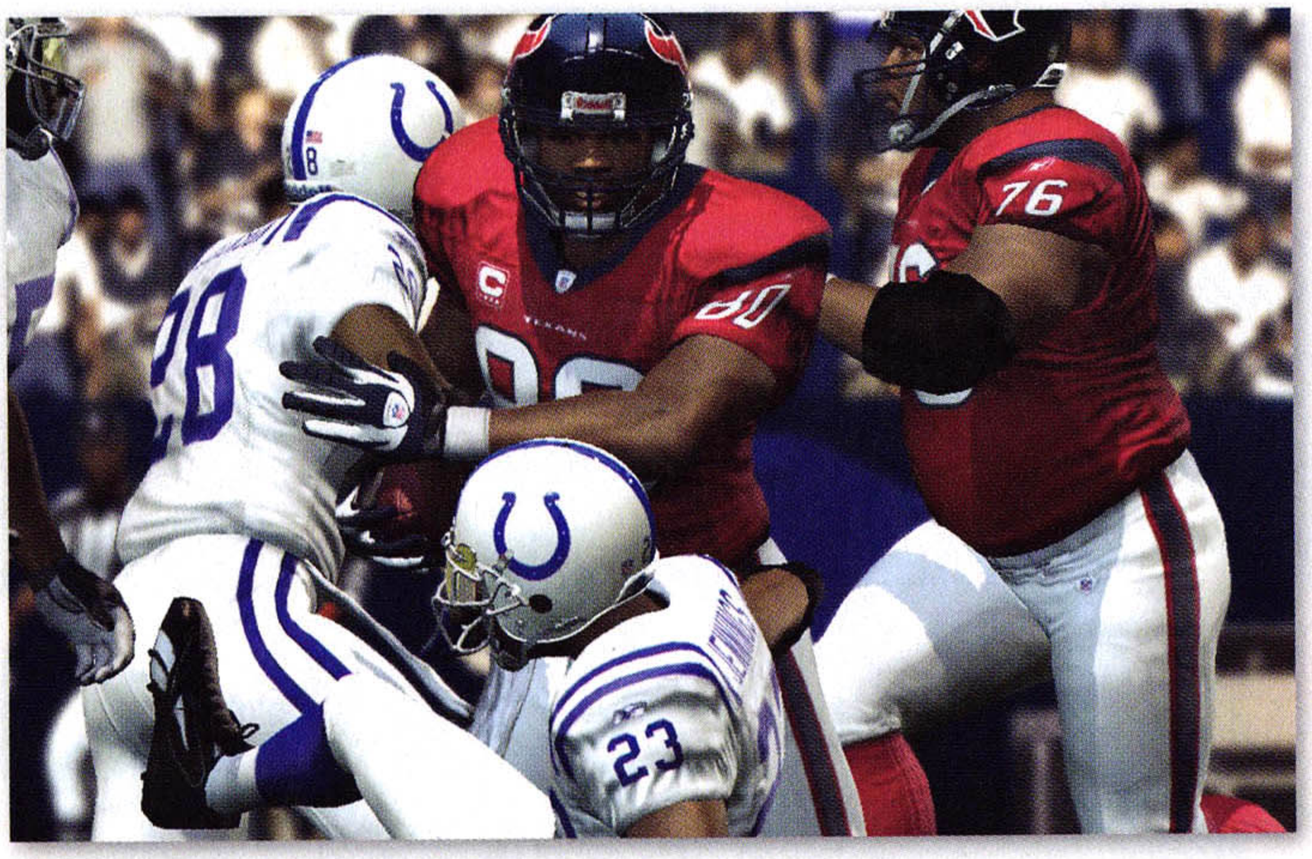
Joel Figueroa
via email

I saw your "something epic is brewing" page, and noticed a little copyright symbol and the word "Disney" next to it. This was soul crushing, especially after hearing that Disney just bought out my favorite comic book company, too. I hope you continue to cover normal games in addition to Disney ones.

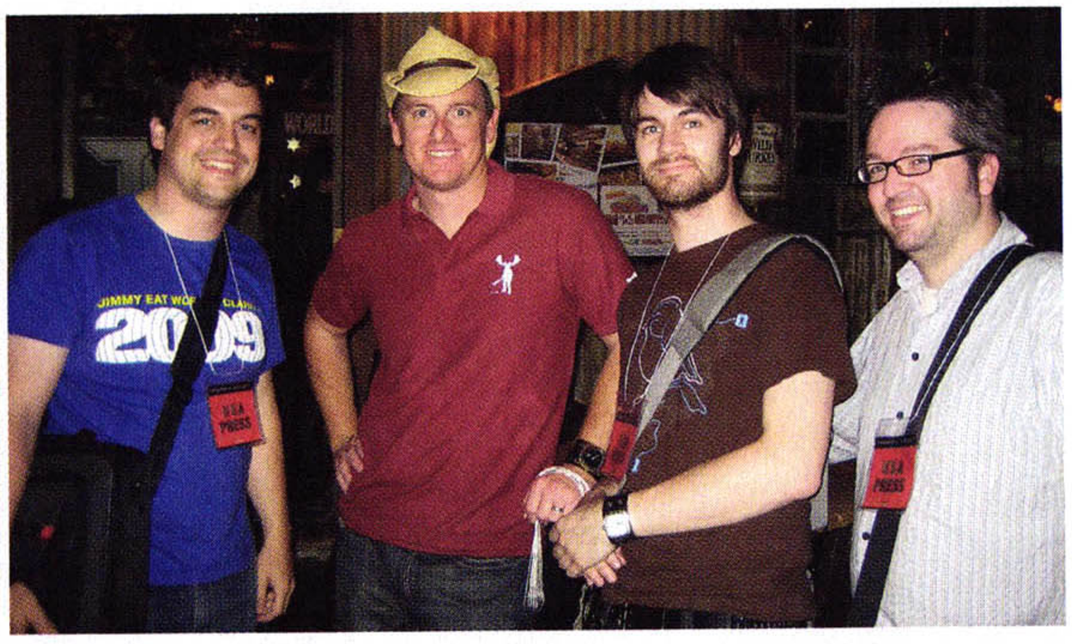
Brent Becker
via email

Things We Learned

- If you tease a Mickey Mouse cover story, thousands of people will assume Disney bought you
- People like to see pictures of Ben getting beaten up
- A few gamers remember that Parasite Eve: The 3rd Birthday is still in the works



GI Spy



(Left) The Skate 3 posse rips it up for the GI Spy cameras **(Right)** Bryan, Nick, and Jeff Cork help Capcom's Chris Kramer test out his new "cowboy chic" look outside of Zest Cantina in Tokyo

CANDID PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

GI SPY
continued on page 12

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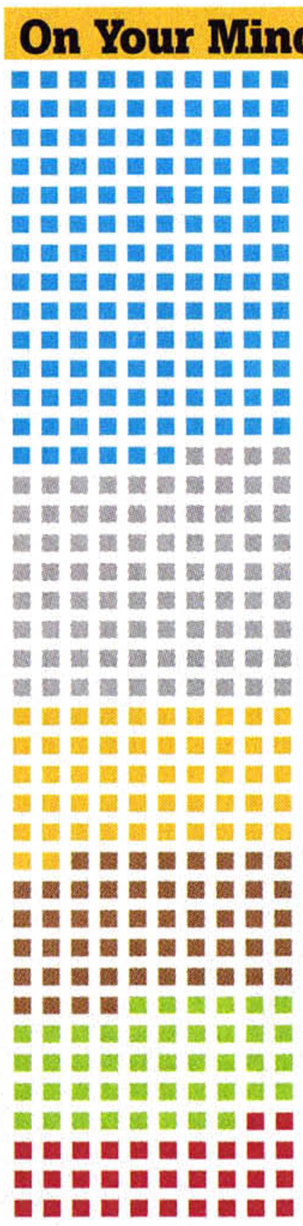
BOWFLEX

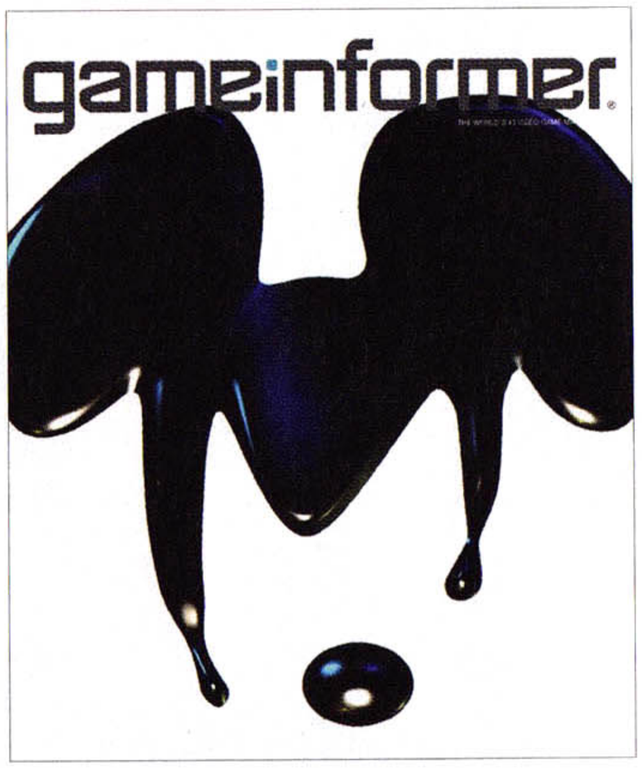
I just got done reading issue 198, and one thing kept me from enjoying the entire magazine: I swear in the name of everything that is good and pure, if Game Informer got bought out by Disney I will stop reading! You said something "epic" is coming, then you showed a cover of GI with a painted Mickey Mouse on it. That would be it for me – Game Informer would officially suck! If Disney comes in and ruins GI with its censoring and kid-friendly material, I wont be able to enjoy it. Don't let them take over please!

James Roseman
via email

On Your Mind



- Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2 **34%**
- Uncharted 2 is awesome! **21%**
- The new GameInformer.com **13%**
- Where are the classic reviews? **13%**
- Is Bobby Kotick the devil? **11%**
- Alpha Protocol delay **8%**



Despite a certain editor's affinity for wearing mouse ears and large-button pants (hint: it's Miller), Game Informer has not been purchased by Disney. The entertainment conglomerate's recent acquisition of Marvel probably helped fuel the rumor, but the presence of Mickey-related imagery in issue 198 was only a tease for the following month's Epic Mickey cover story. On an unrelated note, have you considered taking a trip to Disneyland, "The Happiest Place on Earth!"™? Naw, just kidding. Travel is too much work; you should stay home and play games!

Undead Overload

It never fails. No matter what game you play, there seems to be at least one zombie in some way, shape, or form. You buy a simple game just wanting to duke it out, and all of sudden, bam! Zombies everywhere. And the ridiculous concepts get worse every time. I mean, scantily clad chicks running around chopping zombies? Nathan Drake shooting zombies? Zombies in Vegas? Am I the only one who thinks zombies in games are getting out of control?

Sam Norman
Bedford, IN

Zombies are totally the new ninjas. Enjoy the hordes of undead while you can, because it won't be long before some other character archetype spikes in popularity and takes their place. We've already had secret agents and space marines, so in a few years we'll probably be getting letters about how baby-cops in games are getting out of control. Yep, we're calling it: baby-cops.

GI SPY
continued from page 11

(Left) Jack Black, dressed as Brütal Legend's Eddie Riggs, terrorizes the Jimmy Kimmel Live audience with the power of metal (and a giant ax) **(Right)** Valve's Scott Dalton, Chet Faliszek, and Charlie Burgin let GI's exuberant Tim Turi in on the secrets of Left 4 Dead 2 (the secret is: Don't die, and kill zombies… keep that under your hat)

gallery

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

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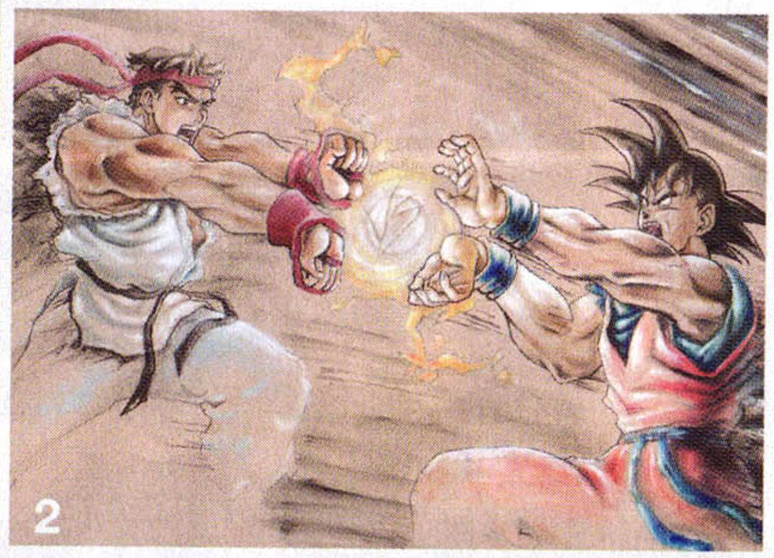
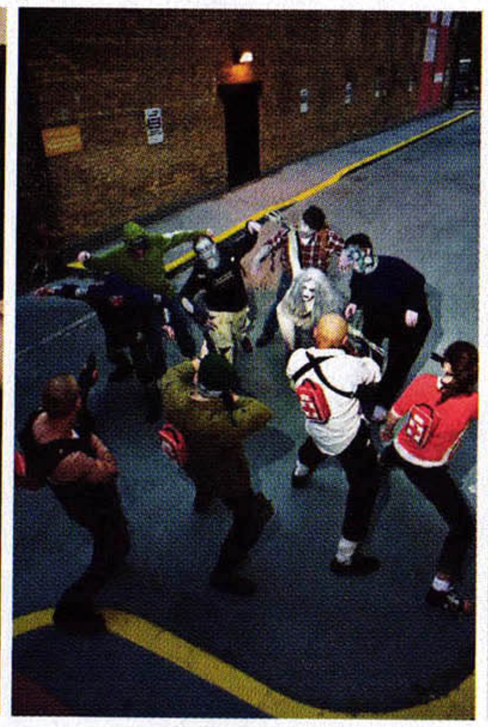


WINNER **1 Justin E. Scott** It takes the fury of Kratos to handle an entire packet of Big League Chew **2 Oràl Anderson** Wow! If you cover up half of this picture, it's pretty cool! **3 Jung Sang** Looks like Wolverine finally landed the part of Mufasa in that musical production of The Lion King. Can you feel the Bub tonight? **4 Luisa Ventura** Finally, some Sephiroth art where he a) is wearing a shirt, and b) isn't making out with Cloud **5 Chad Borgschatz** Two guys, three girls. Are you thinking what we're thinking? That's right, intramural basketball team!

CORRECTIONS:

In last month's GI Spy, we incorrectly referred to the Ninja Theory co-founders Nina Kristensen, Tameen Antoniades, and Mike Bell as Team Ninja. We are so sorry – please don't cut us to ribbons. In the same issue, we incorrectly stated that World of Warcraft has 11.5 subscribers. In reality, it's a little higher than that: 11.5 million.



(Left) Jeff, Bryan, and Meagan enjoy some of the world's largest burgers in Germany. Don't worry; they do a low-carb version without the bun for people on a diet **(Center)** A macabre scene from the Zombie Pub Crawl in Minneapolis. Zoey (Meagan) and the other Left 4 Dead survivors do their best to fend off an undead horde, including a hunter (Tim) and an uninspired common infected (Dan) **(Right)** Meagan uncovers ZOMBIE SONIC! (Hey, that's a Sonic game we might actually want to play)

contents

NOTABLES

return of the VGAs 14

impulse 20

penn jillette interview 21

afterwords 24

massive 26

gamer 28

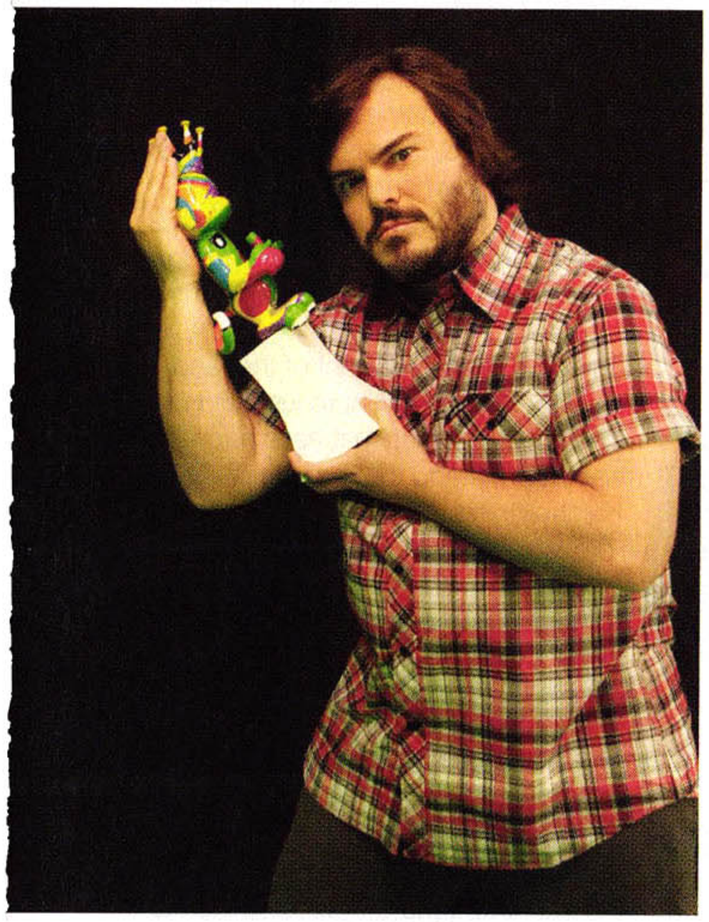
all ages 30

interview 32

holiday buying guide 34

timeline 42

Eliza Dushku presents an award with the help of a silvery angel at last year's Spike Video Game Awards show. The 2009 VGAs airs live on December 12 from L.A.



news

Return of the VGAs

Gaming Awards Organizers Reflect On Past Shows And Look Forward *by Bryan Vore*

The Spike Video Game Awards bring different things to the minds of gamers. Some recall lame celebrity jokes that fell flat. Others remember it as the first time they saw the full trailer for God of War III. And others still will never forget the nearly naked models painted in Halo and BioShock designs. The VGAs have experienced their ups and downs in ratings and tone, but it's tough to argue the incremental increases in quality over the years. We spoke with some of the people behind the show as they respond to criticism and tout successes.

"They are an interesting beast," says Chris Morris, longtime gaming journalist who has worked at CNN, *Forbes*, and most recently *Variety*. "[The VGAs] get maligned by the hardcore gamers on a pretty regular basis, but they're some of the best widespread exposure the industry gets in the mass media. While the execution of the awards sometimes leaves a little bit to be desired, I think that ultimately it does the industry good."

The VGAs first debuted back in 2003, only a few months after TV network Spike launched. "This was the first piece of business that we did when we started the network," says Casey Patterson, senior vice president of event production and talent development for the network. Spike is, after all, a network targeted at 18- to 34-year old males, making gaming a natural fit with that demographic. "Going in – I'm just being very honest – that's all we knew," Patterson remembers with a laugh. "We didn't know a ton about who our audience would be yet, and the video game business was just getting the mainstream awareness as this genre to be paid attention to from this artistic point of view. So we really are sort of growing up together with the business in that way."

The first couple of years were rough. "The problem that Spike had early on with this broadcast is they tried to make it a little too hokey," Morris says. "There were forced interactions between the presenters and the gaming world, or they tried to wedge a gaming joke into a celebrity's introduction, and it just always came across as weak."

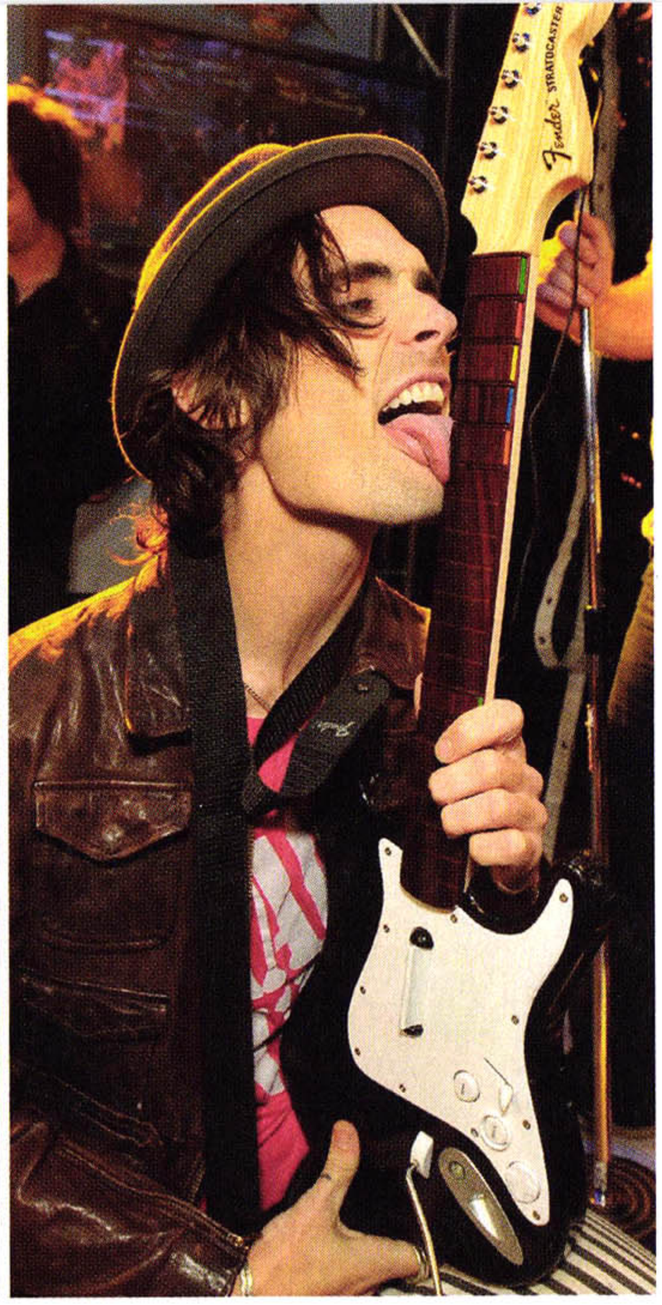
But every year Patterson and the show's developers took input from gamers and critics to improve things. The first major move was to ensure that the awards went to the most deserving candidates, so they installed a panel of approximately 30 gaming journalists from a variety of print and online outlets to decide the nominees and ultimately vote on the winners. [Full disclosure: Game Informer participates in this panel.] Next, Spike needed to expand its presence in the gaming world beyond simply dipping in once a year for an awards show.

Viacom purchased website GameTrailers.com in 2005 and launched a weekly show, *Game Head*, which eventually became *GameTrailers TV with Geoff Keighley*. This constant connection to the gaming world resulted in more relevant content in the awards show and, most importantly, created a relationship that opened the door for world premiere game trailers and announcements inside the VGAs.

"It became a natural fit for me to get more involved with the production of the [VGAs] and try to bring a lot of those world premieres that we book every week on the show in a bigger way to the VGAs and really just combine forces and build the show into what it can be," says Geoff Keighley, host and executive producer of *GameTrailers TV* and consulting producer on the VGAs. "I'm really excited about how the show has evolved over the past couple years, and I think last year was a huge step forward from what we did the year before. This year is going to be even better."

Last year's show included high profile trailers from God of War III, Uncharted 2, and Mafia II. It also blended in far more game industry personalities with the usual cadre of celebrities. For every Neil Patrick Harris there was a Peter Moore, and Kiefer Sutherland got the same amount of stage time as Will Wright. This was a far cry from the

(Upper left) 2008 host Jack Black. (Above) 50 Cent



(Clockwise from top left) Spike's Casey Patterson, All-American Reject Tyson Ritter, and Kevin James

celebrity-heavy shows of years past. "I remember in 2004, Snoop Dogg had to interact with a CGI Snoop Dogg that was appearing in some long-forgotten game at this point, and it was just a painful thing to see," remembers Morris, who was on the journalist panel at the time.

"I'm sure there are some people that would say, 'They shouldn't have any celebrities on the show. It should be a bunch of tables and developers giving awards to developers,'" Keighley says. "And I think there's actually a time and a place for that. I think that's great at GDC [Game Developers Conference], but when you're trying to make a big mainstream award show that's going around the world and costs a lot of money and is a big initiative, I think there's room to involve the larger entertainment world in a meaningful way."

To the show's credit, most of the featured celebrities do have some kind of connection to gaming. Last year's host Jack Black appears in Brütal Legend and did a bit on stage with creator Tim Schafer. Mike Tyson announced the Fight Night Round 4 trailer. Presenter Eliza Dushku voiced protagonist Rubi from Bethesda's Wet. Even the musical acts either appeared in their own game (50 Cent) or were featured prominently in music games (Weezer).

"Nowhere else are you going to see Megan Fox giving an award to Jeronimo [Barrera, of Rockstar Games]. There is a cool cachet to me of that happening," says Keighley. "Spike is the only network that's going to allow [gaming industry] folks to have camera time and actually put them beside these celebrities and try and elevate what they're doing."

One possible changeup to the formula this year could see the removal of a celebrity host altogether. "On *Scream* and *Guys Choice* [Spike's other award shows – Ed.] we actually don't have a host. I don't know that it's the most important thing to our audience," says Patterson. "We don't go down a long list of people saying, 'Oh my God, we need someone.' I think it's more like, 'Is there someone out there that's really invested right now that should be the ring leader for the night?' If not, the games, the presenters, and the world premieres – they're the stars."

Ratings for the initial VGAs broadcasts have topped out at over a million viewers, but they've had trouble hitting that mark in recent years. The 2008 awards reached 680,000 viewers, a low number that may have had a lot to do with the Dallas Cowboys vs. New York Giants football game that aired at the same time to the highest numbers in *Sunday Night Football's* then three-year history. "Obviously sports is a killer, and the season itself is just really tough to dodge around, because you don't necessarily know where the games are going to land," Patterson says. "Whether the ratings are up or down we continue to invest more and more every year, whether it's production dollars, on-air promotion, more content on GameTrailers, the level of talent – we will not be stopped no matter what."

Spike, like rival network G4, is also quick to point out that Neilson ratings don't tell the full story. "It's not just the one airing," Patterson continues, "with DVR and with the way that people watch things online, the way that we calculate success is very different than it was even four or five years ago."

One major component that Spike now takes into account with the awards ratings is online traffic. The premiere trailers garnered two million views the first day they were posted on the GameTrailers site, and Spike's VGA site hosted five times as many unique visitors in the week following the show than the previous year. With this big focus on online, does that mean we'll see a live online streaming broadcast of the show sometime in the future?

"That's something that we've talked about," Patterson says. "It does come up. I don't know that we're quite there yet, but it's not out of the question."

Perhaps the key question about the VGAs, however, is how do you get gamers to pull themselves away from their favorite games to watch the show. After all, it broadcasts during the holiday season when all of the triple-A hits are out in the wild, Modern Warfare 2 multiplayer sessions are straining Xbox Live servers, and World of Warcraft raids are running in perpetuity.

"I think we're all cognizant of that and that's why we don't want to just kind of reflect on the games that have happened this past year and that's all we do," Keighley says. "We really have to bring breaking news and world premiers to the table – content that's compelling enough to cause someone to put their game on pause."

Spike has a couple new tricks up its sleeve for this year's airing. The VGAs will broadcast worldwide in over 60 countries for the first time ever thanks to the power of parent company Viacom's media reach. Additionally, fans can vote online for all award categories for the first time alongside Spike's traditional panel of video game journalists for a blended result.

"All of us are invested in getting as many people to tune into this show as possible, because this is the one show on TV that the industry has," Keighley continues. "And hopefully the industry will galvanize around it and say, 'Hey, let's get as many folks to tune into this show and celebrate gaming as possible.' Because the other option is nothing."

This is the first look at the 2009 VGA trophy, featuring a custom paint job by last year's Studio of the Year winner Media Molecule. Going forward, the winning studio will be asked to design the award for the following year.

(Clockwise from top left) EA's Peter Moore, Spike's Geoff Keighley, and Sim legend Will Wright

news

Halo Into the Future

Beyond Halo: Reach

Like all its predecessors, the series' latest title, Halo 3: ODST, is a hit. According to Microsoft, the game has moved over two million units in its first two weeks. Now what? With franchise creator Bungie moving in different directions, the venerable franchise is also heading to new horizons. Here's a quick primer on Halo and the principals involved.

HALO: REACH

The game's trailer debuted at E3 this year, and we now know that the fall 2010 title is a prequel to the first game. The game covers the same territory as Eric Nylund's similarly titled book *Halo: The Fall of Reach*, which details the origins of Master Chief and the SPARTAN program.

BUNGIE

Bungie is developing Halo: Reach, but it could be the last Halo game the company makes. This summer, senior designer Lars Bakken told CVG, "…in terms of Bungie-produced Halo games, ODST and then Reach is probably all you're going to get." The company is working on new projects, including new IP. Bungie became independent in 2007. However, since Microsoft still has a stake in Bungie it is expected that the companies will work together in some capacity for future Halo titles, even if Bungie isn't making them directly.

MICROSOFT

Holder of the Halo intellectual property, Microsoft says that it has a six-year plan in place for the franchise. Former Bungie employee Frank O'Connor is now creative director of the newly minted 343 Industries, Microsoft's internal division responsible for all things Halo, whether it's games or clothes.

Recently, 343 Industries unveiled Halo Waypoint, an Xbox Live channel covering news, trailers, media, and more related to Halo. Waypoint is more than an info service, however, as it features its own career system that allows players to tie together their game achievements and stats across Halo 3, Halo 3: ODST, Halo Wars and any DLC into a single ranking. Halo Waypoint is free now, but will require an Xbox Live Gold account after November 26. » *by Matthew Kato*

TidBits

Fun Facts About **Uncharted 2: Among Thieves**

- We spent over 30 days on our soundstage recording motion capture performances, which resulted in over 90 minutes of cinematics, along with a ton of in-game animations.
- Our daily backup of data averaged over one terabyte towards the end of the project, and that covers only Uncharted 2 assets and data.
- We drank a &#$%ton of soda – over 30,000 cans – and one bottle of bourbon during the two years of production on Uncharted 2.
- We had a texture-streaming bug that we were fighting with right up to the day before the big Uncharted 2 stage presentation at the Sony E3 press conference. If it had happened while on stage, all of the polygons would have turned purple. We had a second person playing backstage so we could switch in an instant if the bug cropped up.
- We switched our video compression from m2v to DIVX and back in the last week before we gold mastered because we weren't sure we could fit the game on the Blu-ray disc (25GB!).
- Some of the billboards and posters on the walls in the Nepal level started from photos of team members.
- If you look carefully you can spot the Naughty Dog paw logo hidden in several places throughout the game.
- Though the train level was one of the very first things we started working on, it was also one of the very last stages that came together. It incorporated almost every new gameplay mechanic and rendering technique added to Uncharted 2 from the first game.

THE TOP 10 GAMES THAT ALMOST WERE

01 StarCraft: Ghost
(revealed 11/2002)

Two developers. Four years of on-again, off-again announcements. In March 2006, the circus behind this troubled third-person shooter concluded when Blizzard announced development was on "indefinite hold." We never got the chance to play this game, but elements from it are emerging in Blizzard's other works: a novel by Keith R. A. DeCandido, and as a plot thread in the upcoming StarCraft II.

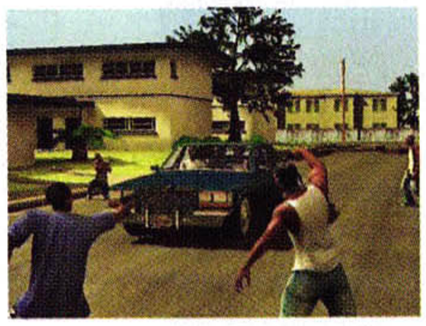
02 Oddworld: The Brutal Ballad of Fangus Klot
(revealed 04/2005)

The Hand of Odd. Squeek's Oddysee. SligStorm. Munch's Exoddus. The Brutal Ballad of Fangus Klot. All canceled or shelved. Just a month before meeting the reaper, Fangus Klot came close to landing on Game Informer's cover. The game's darkly toned depiction of the war between cats and dogs showed promise, but troubles with publishing partners EA and Majesco led to the game's unfortunate demise.

03 Star Fox 2
(revealed 06/1995)

The game was completed and just a week or two away from production. Yet Nintendo decided to shelve this highly anticipated sequel. The reason had nothing to do with the game's quality. With the launch of Nintendo 64 initially planned for the next holiday season, rumor has it Shigeru Miyamoto wanted to create a gap between 3D games on the Super Nintendo and Nintendo 64. And you wonder why we don't get more Mario and Zelda games?

04 Fear & Respect
(revealed 01/2005)

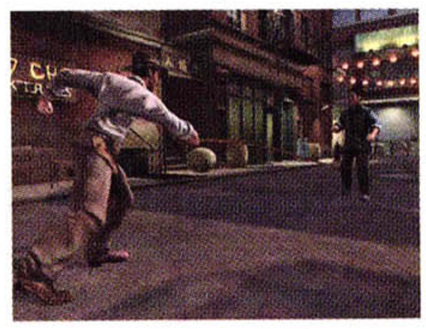


In the wake of the Grand Theft Auto phenomenon, Midway began development on an intriguing, open-world urban crime drama called Fear & Respect. The game was a partnership between Midway and acclaimed *Boyz n the Hood* director John Singleton starring rapper Snoop Dogg as an ex-con negotiating the dangerous world of gang-infested Los Angeles. Sadly, Midway's financial woes and development difficulties led to the game's cancellation. Game Informer saw a demo build of the game running while doing our January 2005 cover story, but little more was seen after that.

05 The Lord of the Rings: The White Council
(revealed 02/2007)

Game Informer originally intended to put The White Council on its cover. In fact, senior associate editor Matthew Kato had just put the finishing touches on his cover story, only to find out minutes later (seriously minutes) that the game was officially canceled. Without a game for the cover, Andy McNamara decided to move the Top 50 Games of the Year feature up a month. While we can't reveal specifics regarding the game's details or cancelation, we can say fans of The Elder Scrolls: Oblivion and co-op gaming would have found this story an interesting read.

06 Indiana Jones
(revealed 06/2006)



Announced as the first game to utilize NaturalMotion's Euphoria technology, LucasArts' original plan was to release this game at the same time as the theatrical disaster, *Indiana Jones and the Crystal Skull*. Delays in the movie's production left the game in limbo. Ultimately, concerns over the game's quality led to its demise. A pale shadow of the original design ended up on Wii as the disappointing Indiana Jones and the Staff of Kings.

07 Tiberium
(revealed 01/2008)

EALA's attempt to combine Command & Conquer's RTS play with traditional FPS conventions proved to be too steep of a design challenge. On September 30, 2008, EA issued a statement pertaining to Tiberium's suspended status stating "the game was not on track to meet the high quality standards set by the team and by the EA Games label." Development stretched two years, and in that time Game Informer had the chance to see the game numerous times. While the troop commands worked well, the wars lacked variety and excitement.

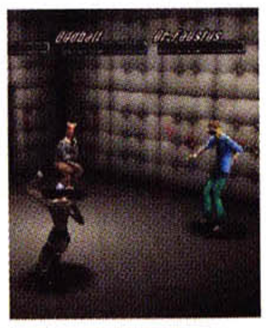
08 B.C.
(revealed 10/2001)

What interaction could the creator of Fable bring to a prehistoric world? With B.C.'s development ceasing in 2008, we'll never know, but we'd like to think Fable's "flip the bird" action would work against a Tyrannosaurus rex. Molyneux's design focused heavily on mankind's fight for survival in a dangerous world. Producers on the project were confident that B.C. would stretch far beyond one game, announcing the sequel would be a Live-enabled multiplayer experience. Whoops.

09 Fear Effect Inferno
(revealed 02/2003)

After Fear Effect 2's steamy elevator sequence between two female characters, interest in a third installment, Inferno, was obviously high. Early concept art showed the two female protagonists embracing with guns ablaze, hinting that this title would be even more controversial than the last. Unfortunately, Inferno's timing couldn't have been worse. Eidos, having just released a handful of sub-par games, instituted a new quality assurance program. Inferno was the first game to be analyzed by this team. Looking back, this game didn't make the cut, yet all of the Tomb Raiders did.

10 Thrill Kill
(revealed 09/1997)



Back when Electronic Arts viewed itself as a beautiful butterfly that would never enter the dark world of M-rated games, it canceled Thrill Kill, a game dubbed by gaming enthusiasts as a potential "Mortal Kombat killer," solely for fear of it hurting the company image. While looking like a bad business decision back then, Thrill Kill wasn't that great of a game – a 6.5 out of 10 according to a Game Informer review that never ran. Its cancellation is the only legacy it could have achieved.

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

NEWS WITH A SARCASTIC SPIN

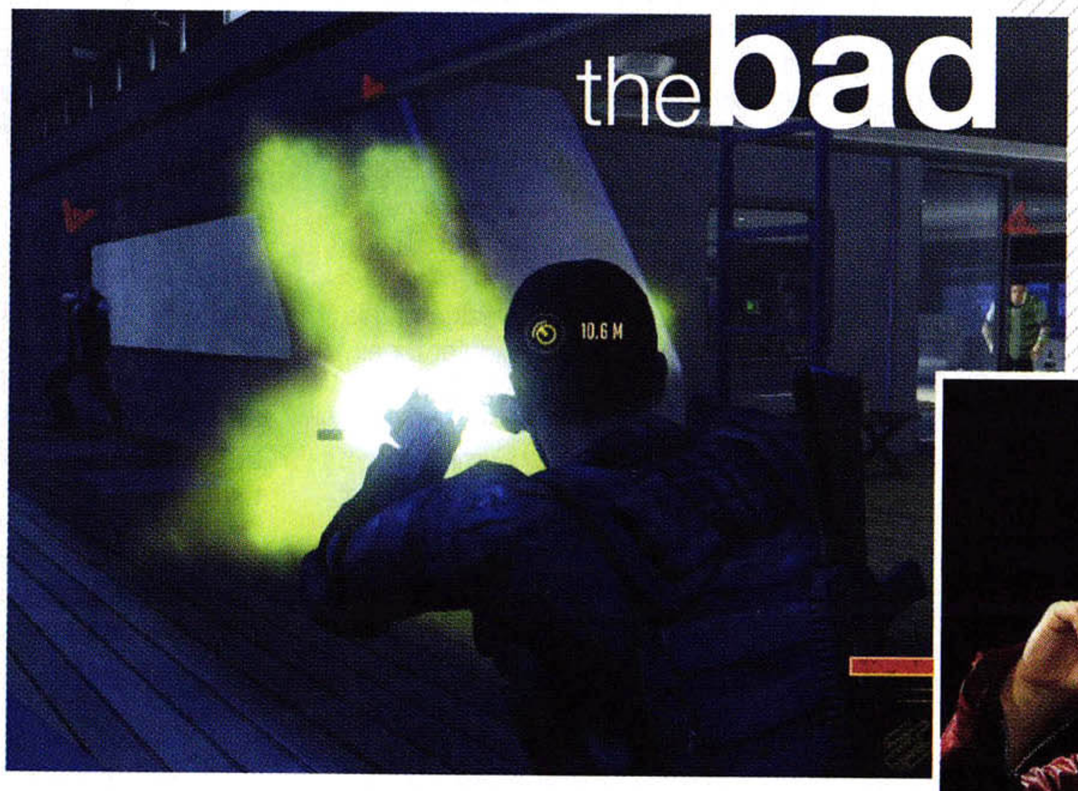
(RIGHT) There have been a few unofficial sightings of sequels recently, including Resistance 3 (seen on a billboard on the set of an upcoming movie), Infamous 2 (tabbed courtesy of Cole MacGrath's new voice actor), and Ghost Recon: Predator (the subtitle of which has possibly been spilled by the Australian ratings board).

(BELOW) Microsoft and Lionhead Studios bigwig Peter Molyneux made waves with his Milo Project Natal demonstration at E3, and now Molyneux is bringing his Natal know-how to Fable 3. The developer also revealed that the title will have in-game stores where players can buy items using Microsoft points without having to step out to Xbox Marketplace.

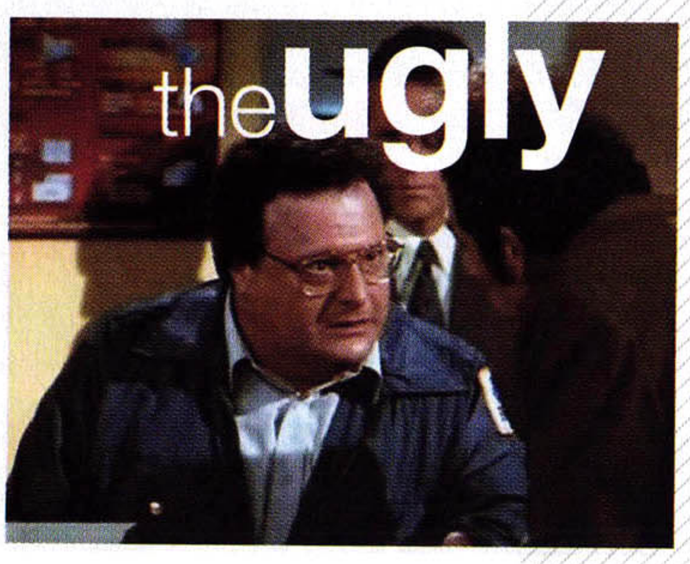
I cannot make a promise about time. However, I can promise a sequel.

Hideo Kojima on the prospect of Zone of the Enders 3

(RIGHT) It was obvious last month that Alpha Protocol wasn't going to hit its early October release date when a review copy of the game never showed up on our desks. But that's nothing compared to the surprise that gamers experienced when they tried to buy the game on its release date only to find out that publisher Sega switched it to spring of next year without telling anyone.



(BELOW) John Lennon once claimed the Beatles were bigger than Jesus, and now U2 is hoping to be bigger than the Beatles. U2 is considering a career-spanning music game, similar to what Rock Band did for the Fab Four. The difference is that U2 has twice the ego but none of the talent.



(LEFT) Reginald Johnson, a former Philadelphia-area postal worker, was arrested for stealing 2,200 video games from the GameFly video game mail order service. Johnson will be serving at least a year in jail for the crime. We're sure he'll be playing games in prison, but holding on to the soap isn't nearly as fun as playing Call of Duty.

Excitebike: World Rally
WiiWare

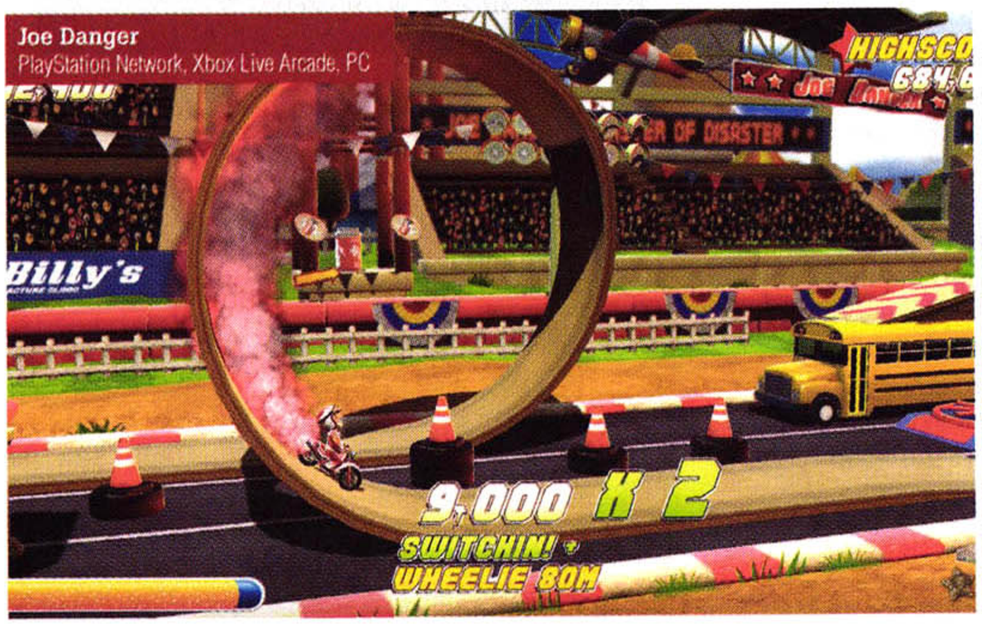
A Nintendo classic returns on WiiWare, charity and games collide, and Joe Danger catapults onto the scene.

I don't even need to hype **Excitebike: World Rally**, other than mentioning it exists. Newly revealed by Nintendo, the game is an incredibly faithful and enjoyable renewal of the NES classic. Developed by Monster Games, the minds behind Excite Truck and Excite Bots, the new WiiWare Excitebike game keeps things simple. You drive along a 2D track, controlling speed and the tilt of your bike as you maneuver for position in the lanes and hit jumps and obstacles. Managing a turbo button and your bike's overheat is central to success, and special areas along the course let you immediately cool your vehicle. Turbo jumps show up only in certain lanes, demanding quick navigation to the appropriate one. Power-ups on the course alter the topography ahead, wrecking opposing bikers and usually delivering a stellar jump. Careful juggling of your tilt during takeoffs and landings can give tiny boosts in speed as well. There's also a cool camera angle adjustment, allowing for the traditional side-on view, or panning behind the bike to give a better view of upcoming obstacles. The short and sweet game progresses through several quick championships, but the robust track creator and online races extend the replay value. The game is no revelation in game design, but for accessible fun in the tradition of a classic, this one gets my praise.

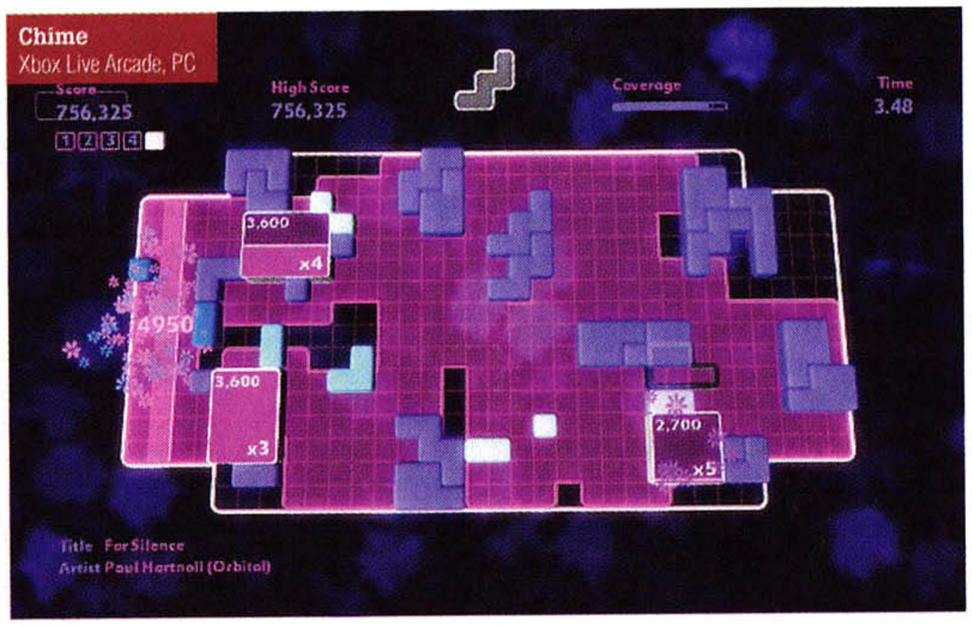
Those without a Wii needn't worry about missing the stunt-bike action. The folks from Hello Games are happy to help you out with their first upcoming game, entitled **Joe Danger**. The small British studio includes team members behind games like Burnout and Black, but this new downloadable project has a lighter tone. Stunt biker Joe Danger ducks obstacles and leaps giant vehicles as he makes his way through insane courses filled with looping jumps and shark tanks. Players have an unrealistic level of control over the bike, making Joe Danger play as much like a platformer as a racing game. Constant level unlocks contribute to the sense of fast, unrestrained insanity. The action is non-stop, fueled by bursts of '80s style music accompanying the old stuntman's antics, and a constant barrage of combo notices flashing wildly at the bottom of the screen. Currently slated for Live Arcade, PSN, and PC, we'll have to wait until next spring for a final version.

Fans of Tetris and Lumines should take a look at **Chime**, a charming and addictive puzzle game courtesy of publisher OneBigGame. Strangely shaped blocks appear on a grid of squares, and you can twist and move the blocks to lay them anywhere you like. Subsequent pieces need to be placed in an orientation to create quads – 3 x 3 or larger squares that subsequently fill that area of the grid and give you a percentage completion of the full board. Combos are completed through quick and clever placement, expanding your quads before they are finalized. Meanwhile, dreamlike music from the likes of Moby and Paul Hartnell of Orbital builds in the background as you play, responding to your block placement and growing as the level advances. The game is fun in its own right, but it's worth noting that the entire project was created as a children's charity project – at least 60-percent of the profits go directly to respected organizations like Save the Children. OneBigGame was founded as an attempt to mobilize the gaming industry to aid such ventures, and all parties involved in the game's creation have completed their work pro bono, including developer Zoë Mode. Chime is short and simple, with only five playable song levels, but I loved what I saw of the project – and there are worse ways to spend a few bucks this holiday season.

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



Joe Danger
PlayStation Network, Xbox Live Arcade, PC



Chime
Xbox Live Arcade, PC

Penn Jillette Is Tired of the Video Game Bulls---

Penn Jillette is a master entertainer. For years he and partner Raymond Teller have wowed audiences through their live magic acts and various television appearances. In a recent episode of the duo's Showtime program *Bulls---*, the two explored the hot topic of video game violence. We took a moment to talk with Jillette about his opinions on the subject and his history with interactive entertainment.

Recently you guys did an episode on video games.
We did our defending a video game show. You know, it was about time; it had been on our list for a while. It just seems to be such prominent bulls---. With anything that kids like, there is some ass---- that will come along and take it down. Same argument has been used for comics, and rock 'n' roll, and everything.

How did you guys decide that this was the year that it needed to be done?
You know right now we're working on season seven, and all seven years everyone puts down a list of what they'd like to do on the show. Video games have been on my list, Teller's list, and the producer's lists for at least five years. What happens is you get down to the 10 to 13 shows you are going to do in a season, and depending on what the producers are interested in and who we can get interviews with, we choose what we're actually going to do. Video games have been right near the top for five years or so, so we decided it was about time.

You mentioned how comics and rock 'n' roll went through similar stages of misunderstanding. Do you think it is just a fundamental flaw in humanity that we fear new things and misunderstand new art forms?
I don't know what it is. The phrase I use all the time is, "the kids are alright," from The Who. You know, I'm 54 years old, and it's amazing to me watching my peers turn into these cartoons. They say s--- like, "Well you know, when we were kids we weren't this rude, and we wouldn't say this stuff. I would have never done this." It's absolute f---ing bulls---. We certainly have records going back thousands of years that adults always hate the younger generation. Adults always find a reason to hate people that are 20 years old. I don't know why it is. Clearly every generation gets better. Every generation gets healthier, smarter, more sophisticated, and that's always been true. Twenty year olds are just better than us. Old people just can't seem to get it through their heads that things are getting better and that's wonderful. Not only do young people not have polio, not only are young people less racist, less homophobic, and less violent – not only is all that true, but they also have some really, really cool art.

If you've never heard Bob Dylan, and someone listened to him for 15 minutes, you're not going to get it. You are just not going to understand. You have to put in hours and hours to start to understand the form, and the same thing is true for gaming. You're not going to just look at a first-person shooter where you are killing zombies and understand the nuances. There is this tremendous amount of arrogance and hubris, where somebody can look at something for five minutes and dismiss it. Whether you talk about gaming or 20th century classical music, you can't do it in five minutes. You can't listen to "The Rite of Spring" once and understand what Stravinsky was all about. It seems like you should at least have the grace to say you don't know, instead of saying that what other people are doing is wrong.

It seems so simple, and yet I'm constantly in these big arguments with people on the computer who are talking about, "I would never let my kid do this and this in a video game." These are adults who, when they were children, were dropping acid and going to see the Grateful Dead. I mean, the Grateful Dead is provably sh---y music. It's impossible – it's theoretically impossible – to make a video game as bad as the Grateful Dead. I throw that out there as a challenge.

Flipping that on its side, do you think it's possible that video games, or any other kind of medium, might actually encourage violence?
You know this is the problem: People in the arts self aggrandize so much that they get themselves backed into a corner. When you are in the arts you like to feel like you can change the world, and if you believe that, state it, and actually push it in, you can change the world for the worse. The truth of the matter is there's been so many popular songs that have been about peace and love, and they haven't turned the world into complete peace and love. Violence still happens. So the bad news is you can't just put out "All You Need Is Love" by the Beatles and get world peace, and the good news is that first-person shooters don't turn people into killers.

In the mid '90s you guys started working on the Sega CD title Smoke and Mirrors.
We worked on it very seriously, and one of the things that was there was a thing called Desert Bus, which was an answer to Janet Reno. Janet Reno, during the Clinton administration, was very against video games, and she suggested that there be video games that prepare people for real life. So our answer to Janet Reno, besides "f--- you," was to do a video game that did pattern real life. This was a real-life bus driver driving from Phoenix to Las Vegas on an eight-hour route with no stops and nothing interesting happening between. The bus pulled a little to the right, and a speedometer limited you from going over 55 mph. That was our performance art version of a video game.

Seems like a hefty investment. Did you expect anybody to actually play through it when it came out?
Well we expected some nuts to do it just for fun, and it turned out there was a group in Canada that does it for charity. In the end they got up to eight points, and if you think about it, it takes eight hours of driving just to get one point. You get an idea of how long they play, but they play for charity. They raise money to buy video games for sick kids and hospitals. They raised like $25,000 to buy video games for sick kids, and they do it by doing this marathon Desert Bus game.

You also just released Chat Magic Trick for the iPhone, which is an AI program that tricks people into thinking they are chatting with Penn and Teller. Was this a resurrected idea from Smoke and Mirrors?
Not at all. We were both buying apps for our iPhones like crazy, and we had also bought every app that had to do with magic. Teller really came up with this idea that he thought would fool the s--- out of people. We got together with a guy named Perry Freedman who's done a lot of stuff with different apps, and he's a friend of ours and we started talking about it, and we got people playing with it and beta testing it. It was actually a stripper at Philadelphia who would do the trick with every lap dance who really sent us all the notes on the timing. She's astonishing at the trick. She can do the trick so well that I think she could fool me with it.

You've said that you don't really play games, so why do you think you've been so close to the industry in so many different ways?
I don't know. I just think the people involved in gaming have always been people I get along with. They have similar sensibilities. I think that I have more in common with them than I do with magicians. A lot of my friends are in the computer world and the science world, and the computer and science world tends to overlap more with gaming than with magic. So it's just the kind of people you gravitate to. It's odd that I'm not a gamer, but it's not odd that gamers are the kinds of people that I get along with. » *Interview by Ben Reeves*

Want to hear Penn swear about video game politics and artistic expression some more? Check out www.gameinformer.com/mag this month

"It's impossible – it's theoretically impossible – to make a video game as bad as the Grateful Dead. I throw that out there as a challenge."
–Penn Jillette

September Top 20

Rank	Game Title (System)	Rank Last Month	Months in Top 20
1	**Halo 3: ODST** (360)	–	
2	**Wii Sports Resort** (Wii)	2	1
3	**Madden NFL 10** (360)	1	2
4	**Mario & Luigi: Bowser's Inside Story** (DS) It's a banner month for Nintendo's "other" platform – the DS. Bowser's Inside Story is one of three solid titles for the system debuting strong in the charts this month.	–	
5	**The Beatles: Rock Band** (360)	–	
6	**Madden NFL 10** (PS3)	3	2
7	**Marvel: Ultimate Alliance 2** (360)	–	
8	**Batman: Arkham Asylum** (PS3) Given that the installed base of the PS3 is smaller than the 360's by millions, you have to wonder if the PS3's exclusive Joker DLC contributed to this version's higher chart placing over the 360.	5	2
9	**Guitar Hero 5** (360)	–	
10	**The Beatles: Rock Band** (Wii)	–	
11	**Batman: Arkham Asylum** (360)	4	2
12	**Kingdom Hearts 358/2 Days** (DS)	–	
13	**Scribblenauts** (DS)	–	
14	**NHL 10** (360)	–	
15	**Need for Speed: Shift** (360)	–	
16	**Need for Speed: Shift** (PS3)	–	
17	**Marvel: Ultimate Alliance 2** (PS3)	–	
18	**Professor Layton and the Diabolical Box** (DS)	16	2
19	**Wii Fit** (Wii)	8	17
20	**The Beatles: Rock Band** (PS3)	–	

Listings based upon NPD data of units sold for September 2009

news

Netflix to PS3

Sony expands system's free online features

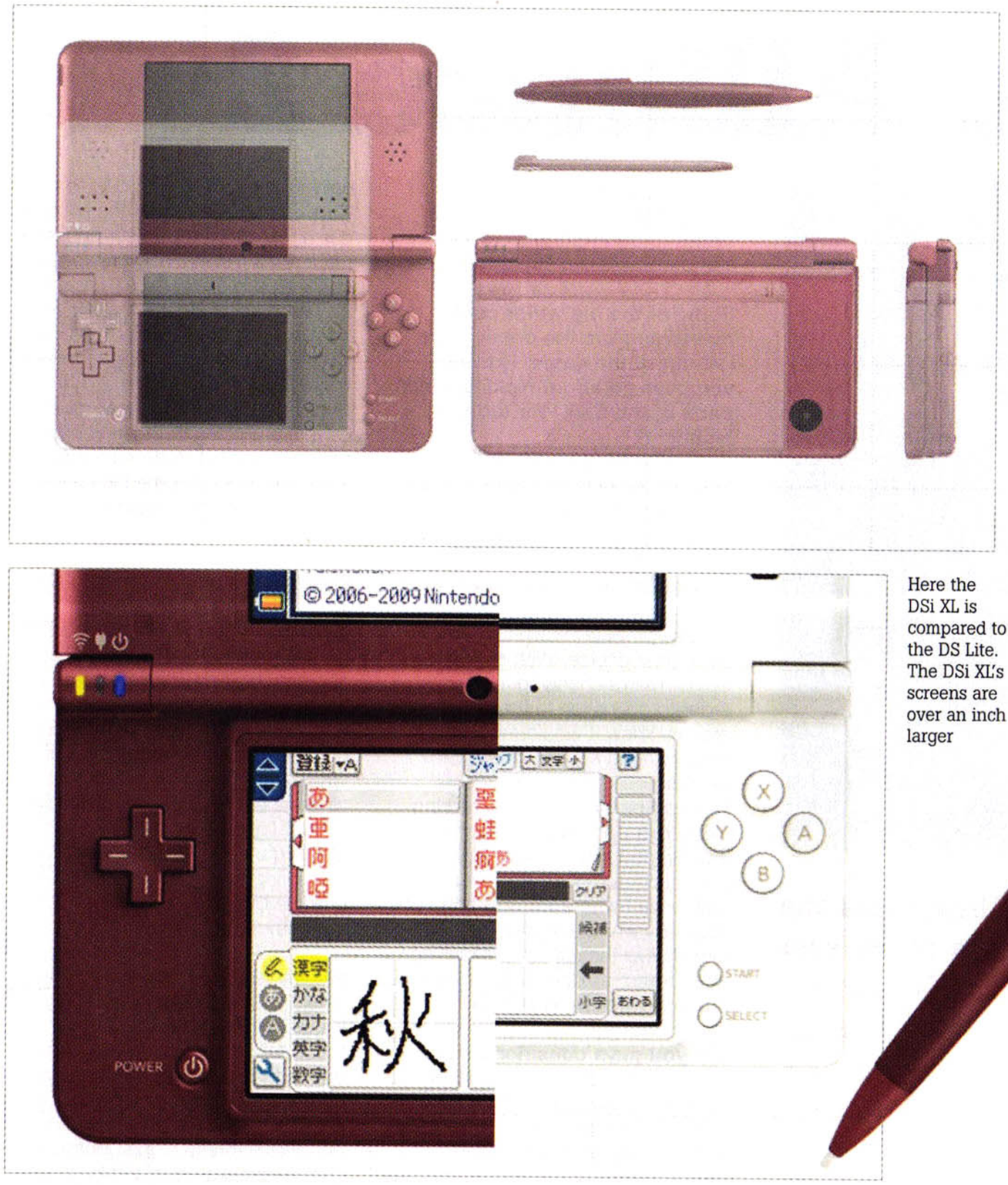
It's been rumored for a while, and now the PlayStation 3 has broken the Xbox 360's monopoly on popular movie rental service Netflix on game consoles. Starting some unspecified time in November, Netflix members will be able to stream content for no additional charge. At the moment, Netflix says that thousands of TV shows and movies are available for instant viewing. To enable the feature, PS3 owners must use a free Blu-ray disc available via the Netflix website.

Although the PS3 is also a Blu-ray player, users will only get HD-quality streaming content via Netflix as long as their connection is up to the task – similar to how the service currently runs on the Xbox 360. The PlayStation 3 does have one distinct advantage to the 360, however, in the fact that this new Netflix streaming feature doesn't cost them anything outside the cost of a Netflix membership. The Xbox 360's Netflix service requires a paid Xbox Live Gold membership. » *by Matthew Kato*

news

Nintendo Unveils New DS

The DS Grows In Size



Here the DSi XL is compared to the DS Lite. The DSi XL's screens are over an inch larger

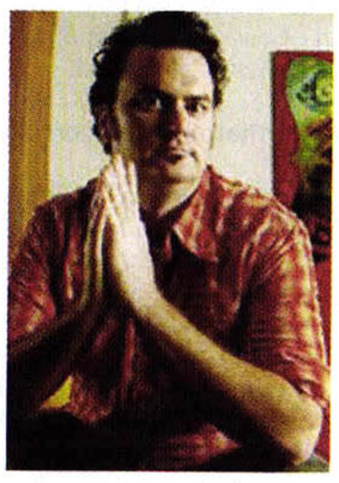
It wasn't long ago that Nintendo introduced the DSi with its two cameras. Now, the company is bringing out yet another new version of the hardware with the DSi XL. The handheld's screens are more than an inch larger than those on the DS Lite (and exactly an inch bigger than those on the DSi). The stylus has also grown, evolving into a pen-like tool.

The DSi XL releases in Japan (where it's called the DSi LL) on November 21 for roughly $220 in dark brown, wine red, and white. A price and release date has not yet been announced for the U.S., but Nintendo says it expects to put out the system in the first quarter of next year.

Nintendo has had great success in the past with releasing different iterations of its handhelds, and was no doubt emboldened by sales of the DSi, which are over 10 million globally. However, are bigger screens alone enough to convince consumers to buy yet another DS? There are also important questions as to how DSiWare titles will transfer to the new handheld, and whether old titles' graphics will scale to the new screens. Hopefully, Nintendo's official unveiling of the product will provide these details and more. » *by Matthew Kato*

The stylus has been beefed up significantly

FiveQuestions With Tim Schafer Game Designer of Brütal Legend



Go to www.gameinformer.com/mag for our full chat with Tim Schafer

1 On the Double Fine website you have a lot of cool minigames. Have you thought about making smaller games between major releases?

Oh definitely. I would love to do that. It's just really hard to focus on anything else when you're doing one big game. I think it's kind of all consuming. We have a little time now to think about what we're doing next, and I think there are definitely some opportunities to do something like that.

2 You said you wouldn't be opposed to returning to the world of Brütal Legend. What is it about that setting that makes it personally interesting?

I like Eddie Riggs. I really like him as a character. I guess I always like our characters, like I really liked Raz and Manny Calavera. I like that character, and the world of heavy metal and fantasy is wide open; you can explore a lot of crazy things. I feel like we've kind of scratched the surface, but we could have gone even more metal.

3 Even more metal?

Even more metal. I think we went pretty metal, but I feel like now that we know what we're doing and made our first multiplayer game, we can really react to the response to this game and make improvements and make it better. If we could come back again, it would be awesome.

4 Making sure you had all your bases covered musically sounds like a fun, but terrifying challenge. How was it?

Yeah, it was fun to pick, and we actually even used Internet forums; we would release a couple songs, like, "Oh, we have Mötley Crüe in the game" and on the forums there'd be some metal fan going, "Yeah, I figured they'd have that top ten s--- in the there – they'll never have anything as cool as 'Enslaved.'" And I'd be like, "Oh, what's 'Enslaved?' Hold on let me go check that out" [Laughing]. And sometimes they were bad, but sometimes they were really good like "Enslaved" and we put them in the game.

5 When you picked the songs, were you trying to find songs that evoke a particular mood or were you just kind of looking for tracks from specific artists?

Well that's how we make our bucket of songs originally. Like, "Here are my favorite Sabbath songs we've got to use." But when our music director Emily was scoring it all, I think she was more looking for, "OK, I need a really sad song here, I need a really happy song – I need something upbeat, but something that turns dark in the middle." So she would start just listening to tons and tons of metal to find the perfect songs out there.

Marvel Ultimate Alliance 2

Raven Software's Marvel Ultimate Alliance was one of the best comic based video games we've ever played, and Marvel Comic's 2006 Civil War storyline was one of the biggest comic events in recent history. Combining the two seemed like the perfect fusion. But comic fans are notoriously hard to please. While MUA 2's explosive action and technical improvements left some gamers happy, others wondered if the game was faithful enough to its source material. We posed a bunch of tough, reader-generated questions to Vicarious Visions president and co-founder Guha Bala.

Fusion powers were a big focus this time around. How did that idea come about, and how did you guys go about deciding how each Fusion would perform?
GUHA BALA: We're all big comic geeks, so the idea of getting in a "heroes combine their powers" mechanic was just too tempting to pass up. After we had a general idea of what kinds of Fusions we wanted to do, a lot of our work was in identifying exactly what kind of encounters each Fusion would be good for, and where they would be less effective. We wanted to make sure Fusions played a real tactical role in the game, rather than just being interchangeable 'super moves.'

Fusion attacks seem overpowered. Did you find it difficult to balance these super attacks?
GB: Well, Fusions are the result of super-powered beings working as a team, so we certainly wanted them to look overpowered. From a nuts-and-bolts gameplay standpoint, though, we think they're balanced very well – unless you're a truly elite player, there are a number of encounters in the game (especially on Legendary) that require skillful use of particular Fusion types to keep your party from getting utterly destroyed. If players fritter away their Fusions on encounters where they're not needed, or consistently use the wrong types of Fusions at the wrong times, they're going to be reloading a lot.

With Marvel Ultimate Alliance 2 there is less of a focus on combos and enemies that require special takedowns. Why did you guys tone down these aspects of the game?
GB: We tried to provide a context for special takedowns, rather than having characters that were totally invulnerable until being tripped or stunned once. They still exist, though, in the form of shielded foes that need to be disarmed or tripped before you can hurt them. We also have a number of entirely new enemy types who require special tactics to deal with, like helicopters and power-sharing enemy groups.

Some of the big water cooler moments from the comic were left out of the game. How did you guys go about picking which parts of the Civil War story to highlight?
GB: We definitely reviewed all of the big moments and tried to figure out which ones would work in an interactive medium and which were likely to fall flat. We knew we wanted a playable Thor, so that meant that a Thor clone, which goes out of control, probably wasn't going to be a great choice. With regard to Spider-Man's changing allegiance; in order to do justice to that character arc, we knew it would require a lot of storytelling support in the form of cutscenes, etc., and it would elevate Spidey's role to something much more primary. As much as we love Spidey and acknowledge his importance in the Civil War comics, that wasn't where we wanted to go. We really wanted to have the player directly feel the difficulty of making that choice, as opposed to watching someone else struggle with it.

Did you guys consider including a level based off the New Warriors Stamford incident? It seems like that would have been a cool playable moment.
GB: We strongly considered this and wanted the players to be "doing" instead of "watching." However, no matter which way we came at this particular event, it seemed like the Stamford explosion had to happen, and forcing the player to either cause it or fail to prevent it seemed like it would feel bad and frustrating. It would have also been a poor choice to invest the time and effort to make the New Warriors playable and then kill them a third of the way through the game, removing them from the player's roster. Avoiding the yanking of characters from the player's roster was a design goal that often sent us in different narrative directions than the original comic material.

The last third of the game transitions into a story that wasn't covered in the comic. Why did you guys decide to go off book?
GB: From a storytelling point of view, the Civil War comics were designed to be somewhat open-ended and to send the Marvel Universe into a new direction, which would be fodder for all kinds of new stories. Conversely, our story was designed to provide a satisfying, close-ended conclusion for the player. The ending in the comics (spoiler alert) wasn't going to work for us – a huge battle in New York City in which the Anti-Reg forces are gaining the upper hand, only to have Captain America look at the collateral damage and effectively surrender. It made for a fascinatingly unexpected conclusion in the comics, but as a player on either side of that outcome, it's not going to feel good if we stick to canon. Either you're being forced to feel like you're losing the fight only to have the enemy suddenly give up, or you're winning but then you're forced to unexpectedly surrender. We knew we needed some big changes to that ending for the game no matter what.

From a more practical point of view, it was clear from very early on that it just wouldn't be feasible to branch the story into Pro and Anti threads and stay branched for the rest of the game. It would have been the equivalent of trying to create two games instead of one, neither of which would likely have been at all polished. So we were given the task of figuring out how to give the player the choice in Civil War but then bring things back together into a single thread for the last part of the game.

We wanted a very big threat that would overshadow the Civil War, and we also wanted it to feel organic to that conflict; something that came out of it, as opposed to some completely unrelated external force popping up. We wanted it to relate to our overall theme of individuality vs. unity. There was also a strong desire to have both faction leaders share the blame for this new problem. I'm not sure it was picked up on by most players, but some may have noticed that the threat we eventually used was created by the Pro-Registration leaders, but released by the Anti-Registration team. This was part of our overarching effort to avoid demonizing either side.

Why aren't there more alternate costumes?
GB: Speaking in terms of graphics, the leap between MUA 1 and MUA 2 is astronomical. Our characters are vastly more detailed than characters in previous iterations of the franchise. This makes them much more expensive to make, and each model is so complicated that we can't get away with low-scope solutions for alternates like simple re-skins. It came down to a choice between delivering one extremely high-quality alternate costume for each character or several low-quality alternates, cutting into other game features to free up the resources for more alternate costumes. We decided to err on the side of extremely high quality.

Check out our full interview with Guha Bala at www.gameinformer.com/mag

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Bait And Switch

Aion launches with equal parts fun, grind, and gold spam *by Adam Biessener*

NCsoft's fancy triple-A fantasy MMO has finally gone live in the States. Purporting to give PvP-hungry players somewhere to go where their skills will matter and their victories have impact, Aion makes no bones about the relative hardness of its core. The problem is that you have to play several dozen hours of a mediocre World of Warcraft clone to gain access to the juicy factional warfare that makes up Aion's elder game.

"Aion has the best directed PvP endgame available today."

Aion is a rock-solidly executed game. After pouring copious resources into its development, NCsoft let the game simmer in its native Korea for almost a year before launching the Western version. The polish and iteration shows; even Blizzard could learn from some of the little touches in Aion (one-button loot-all is the greatest thing ever). Discussing the nebulous "feel" of an MMO is an inexact science, as it's a subjective combination of server stability, latency, combat mechanics, and interface feedback. However you arrange that equation, though, Aion gets top marks.

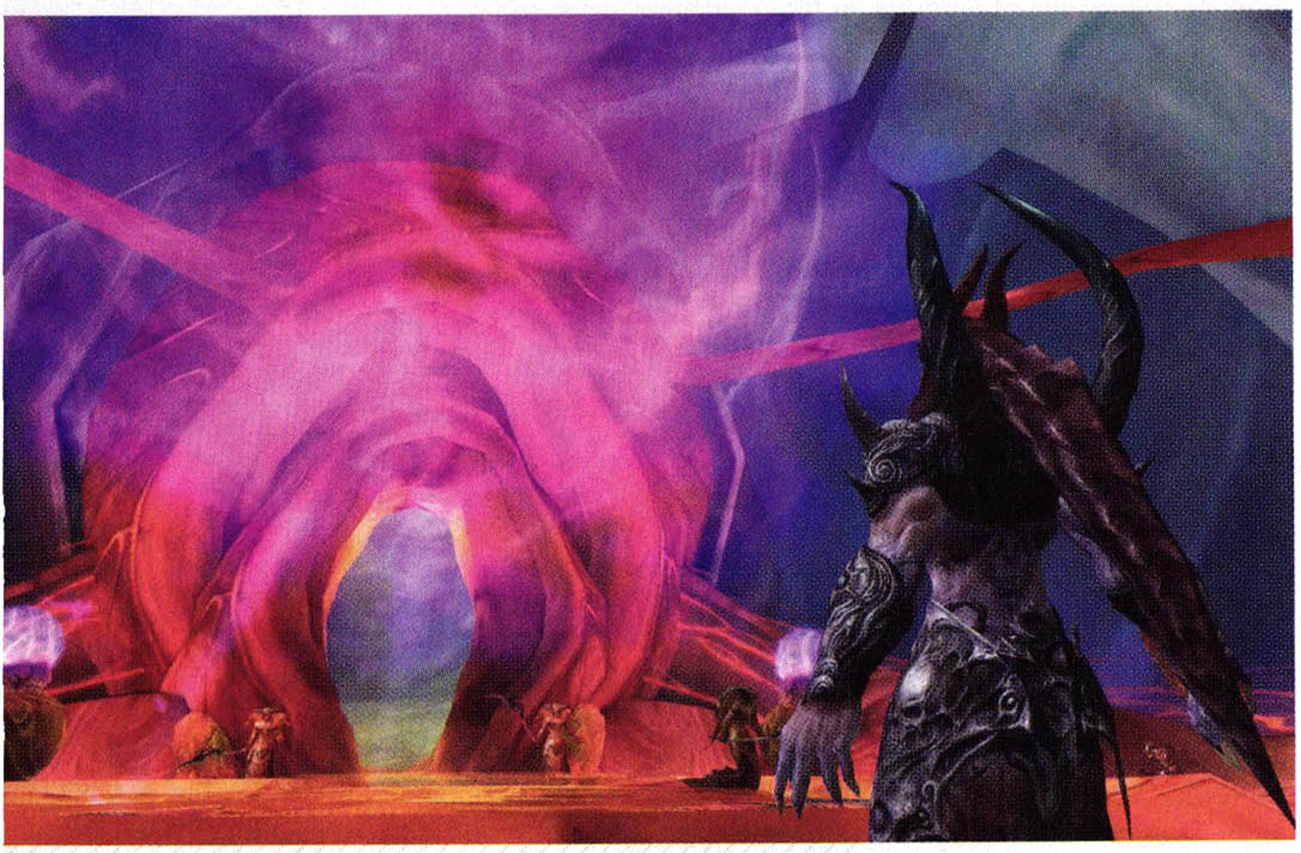
It's a good thing that the act of playing Aion feels right, because the grind wears thin even with this excellent execution. Depending on how much grouping you do, you'll be left high and dry with no quests to bridge the gap to the next level more or less often. At these points – and you will find yourself in them – there's nothing to do but buckle down and grind out XP in whichever mob camp is easiest for your class. Want to do any crafting? Better get out there and slaughter for as long as you can stomach it, because you're going to need an awful lot of random drops and money to make anything worthwhile.

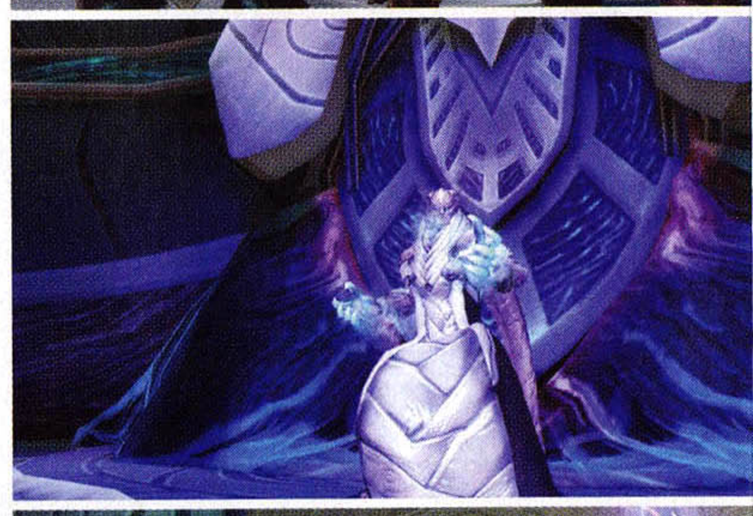
Aion's saving grace is that all this grinding comes with commensurate rewards. Getting your crafting skills high enough can be a brutal slog, but life at the top is good. Everyone wants those sweet potions and equipment, and you can make a lucrative business out of supplying the demanded goods. Achieving level 25, finding a good guild (ahem, "legion" in Aion-speak), and learning your character backwards and forwards means you get to participate in the Abyss. An area of constant conflict between the player Elyos and Asmodean armies as well as the NPC Balaur forces, this open PvP zone offers fantastic rewards and engaging gameplay in the form of sieges and massive faction-based PvP warfare. Success in the Abyss grants powerful equipment rewards, social recognition, and a slew of faction-wide bonuses for everyone on your side. Aion has the best directed PvP endgame available today.

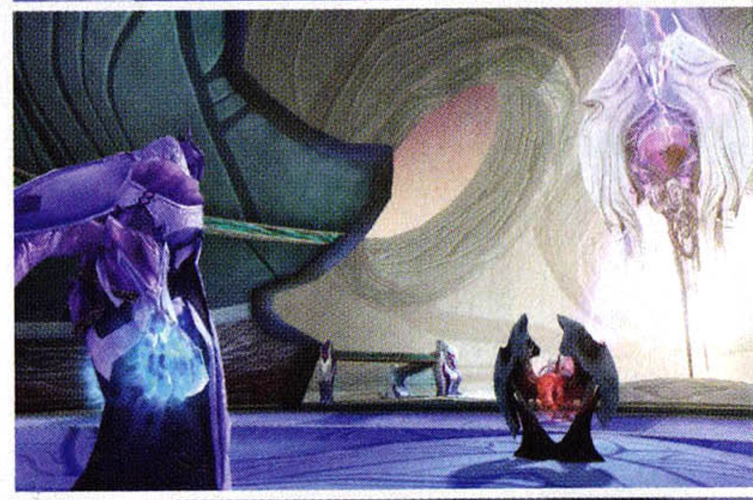
The same cannot be said for the leveling game or the group PvE. Instanced dungeons are boring treks through uninteresting waves of mobs that grant substandard rewards. Only one path of leveling content exists per faction, which means that bringing up any alts or rerolling has you trudging through the exact same quests every time unless you switch factions. The way Aion makes you deal with dozens of hours of mediocre-at-best solo or grouped PvE in order to participate in the genuinely well-crafted endgame is unconscionable. The PvPers will slog through the bad content, but to pretend that Aion is a viable game for someone who isn't interested in the Abyss is insulting.

I wish I could end my impressions there, but I can't in good faith give NCsoft a pass on its unacceptable lack of response to the gold spam that has infested the game since launch. There are days where every single chat channel is literally unusable on my server because of the constant advertisements from spambots with names like "dsdsdsf." The official community managers have tweeted that they've got game masters "dealing with the problem," but I haven't seen any improvement as of press time. Hopefully NCsoft figures it out sooner than later, because the situation as it stands is completely intolerable.

Even with all my gripes about the game, it serves its chosen audience (hardcore PvPers) well. Aion lacks the kind of casual appeal needed to realistically aspire to anything approaching WoW numbers, but it has the potential to be a satisfying MMO for gamers who dig its unique charms for a long time to come.







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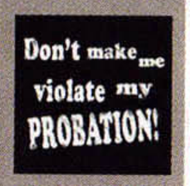

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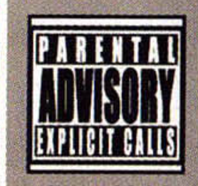

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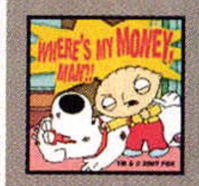

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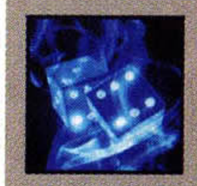

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Themes

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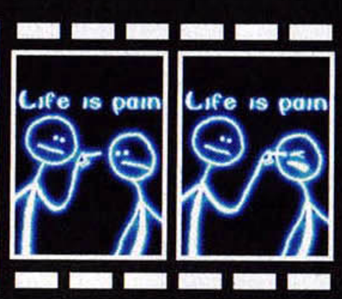

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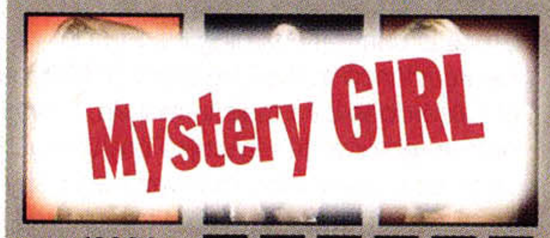

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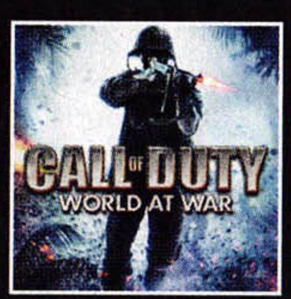
Games *



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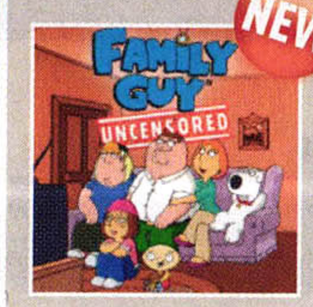

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Black Eyed Peas - I Gotta Feeling	song6968
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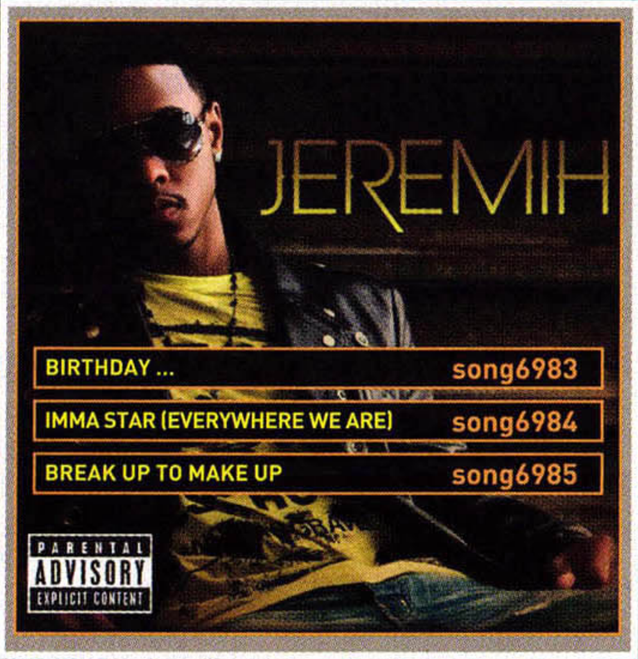
Drake - Best I Ever Had	song6970
Drake Ft. Kanye Wayne Eminem - Forever	song6971
Fabolous - Throw It In The Bag	song6972
Jay Sean - Down	song6973
Keri Hilson - Turnin Me On (feat. Lil Wayne)	song6974
Kid Cudi - Day ,N' Nite	song6975
Lil Kim - Download	song6976
Mariah Carey - Obsessed	song6977
Mario - Breakup (ft Gucci Mane)	song6978
Sean Kingston - Fire Burning...	song6979
Soulja Boy Tell'em - Kiss Me Thru The Phone	song6980
Soulja Boy Tell'em - Turn My Swag On	song6981
Twista - Wetter	song6982



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Trials HD

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

Accomplishments:
As of press time Bob Smith is ranked number one overall on complete career points, beating the next player by 200,000. He's ranked number one in all four Extreme difficulty tracks and most of the Hard tracks. Smith is number one in six out of eight tournaments, including the Ultimate Endurance tourney. He's one of 11 people in the world to earn the Marathon achievement, which involves beating 24 tracks in a row without any wipeouts.

Origin of Skills:
Smith first got into the series in the PC-only Trials 2: Second Edition, where he also topped the leaderboards. He also is one of 38 players to earn the coveted True Fan achievement that can only be bestowed by developer RedLynx.

The Key to Victory:
Smith cites the famous quote, "The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results," in describing a common issue that trips up players. "Experiment. If you're crashing repeatedly at the same obstacle, try a different technique," he says. "Watching the replays is always a good tip, but unless you can appreciate why the player applies a certain input at the precise moment they do, replays are useless."

The Best Ride:
"For pretty much any track above beginner difficulty, there's no competitive choice other than the Phoenix [Evo 250cc]," Smith says. "Plus it actually looks like a motorcycle trials bike, which is good. But one day I'll see how far up the leaderboards I can get using only the Micro Donkey just for kicks."

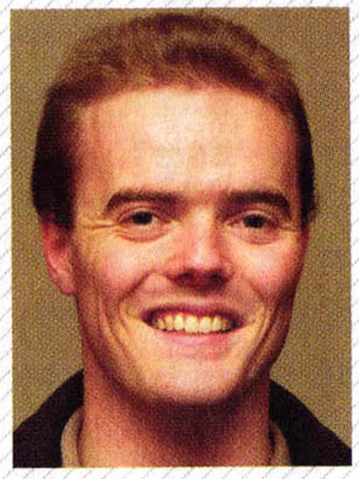
Practice Time:
When he was initially shooting for the top records, Smith put in over 30 hours a week.

Life Outside Trials HD:
Smith is currently earning his PhD in Neuroscience at the University of Melbourne. He also does bike trials in real life. "I was put onto a motorcycle trials bike pretty much as soon as I could walk, but was never any good at it," Smith says. "In 1999 I bought my first bicycle trials bike, and began competing at both state and national level. I got as high as 2nd at the National Championships in the premier 20" bicycle class four times ('03, '05, '06, '07), but never managed to win the title."

Other Favorite Games:
Resident Evil 5, Counter-Strike: Source

What Should Be in the Next Trials?
"My wish list would be outdoor environments, and a 'simulation' mode," Smith says. "The current physics model is perfect because it's a simple left – right – accelerate – brake, so anyone can pick it up and play, then there's infinite space for honing your skills with just those four controls. But imagine having up and down as well as forward and backward movement of the rider, throttle and clutch, gearbox, independent brakes. It'd be insane."

Go to www.gameinformer.com/mag to watch replays of Lestropie's most amazing runs



Bob Smith

Handle
Lestropie

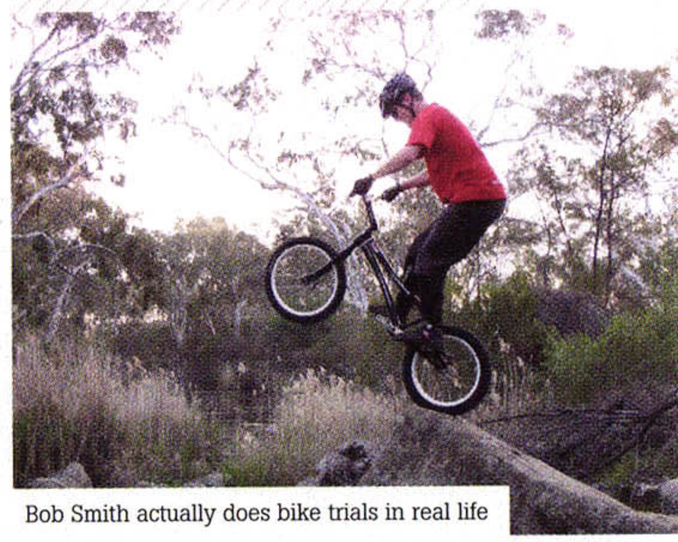
Age
25

Hometown
Melbourne, Australia

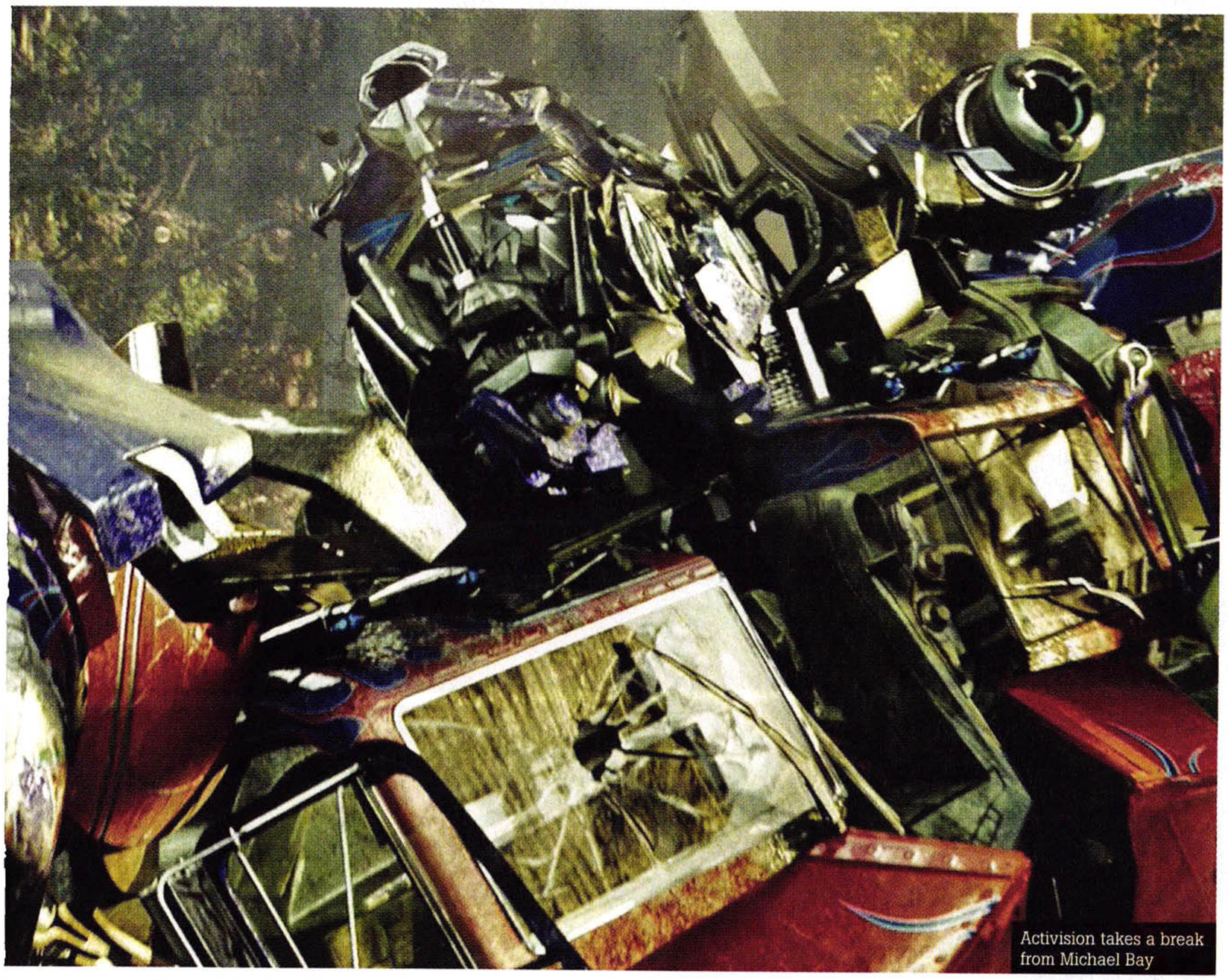
Favorite Track
Inferno II

Most Hated Track
Unfair Bombardment

Rivals
AsleepMeunier, Creativ ManceR, sIKZz, kiFkOo 09



Bob Smith actually does bike trials in real life



Activision takes a break from Michael Bay

loose talk

License to Thrill

Deals & Development Going Down

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

Transformers Transformation

Activision's movie-based games are known for strictly adhering to the template of the films, often to those titles' detriment. However, Loose Talk is hearing rumors that the publisher/developer is hard at work on another Transformers game, and we're told that this one isn't tied to the Michael Bay films. Could this be the Transformers game that fans have deserved all along? Movie-based games typically don't get the development time they need due to the need to meet the film's release date, and film tie-ins can hamper the storylines the game can explore as well. This Transformers game sounds like it will get the freedom it needs.

THQ on the Verge?

THQ has already announced its deal for the Dmitry Glukhovsky novel *Metro 2033*, but word has it that THQ is on the verge of signing more game deals, including a couple of highly popular licenses. In addition, the company is also looking to expand its stable of wrestling games with a new title. As one of the biggest publishers not named Electronic Arts or Activision Blizzard, THQ has done pretty well for itself with a mix of new IP and licensed titles.

Chip Wars

News of the next generation of consoles always excites gamers, and rumors have been floating around regarding what's under the hood of the next versions of the Nintendo DS and the Xbox 360. Hardware blog Bright Side News has reported that Nvidia's Tegra System-On-Chip processor will be used for the DS successor. The Tegra line is now used for devices such as Microsoft's Zune HD. According to tech blog Fudzilla, the next Xbox platform will use ATI graphics processors. ATI currently supplies GPUs for the Wii and Xbox 360.

Contact us with insider info at loosetalk@gameinformer.com and we'll be all ears

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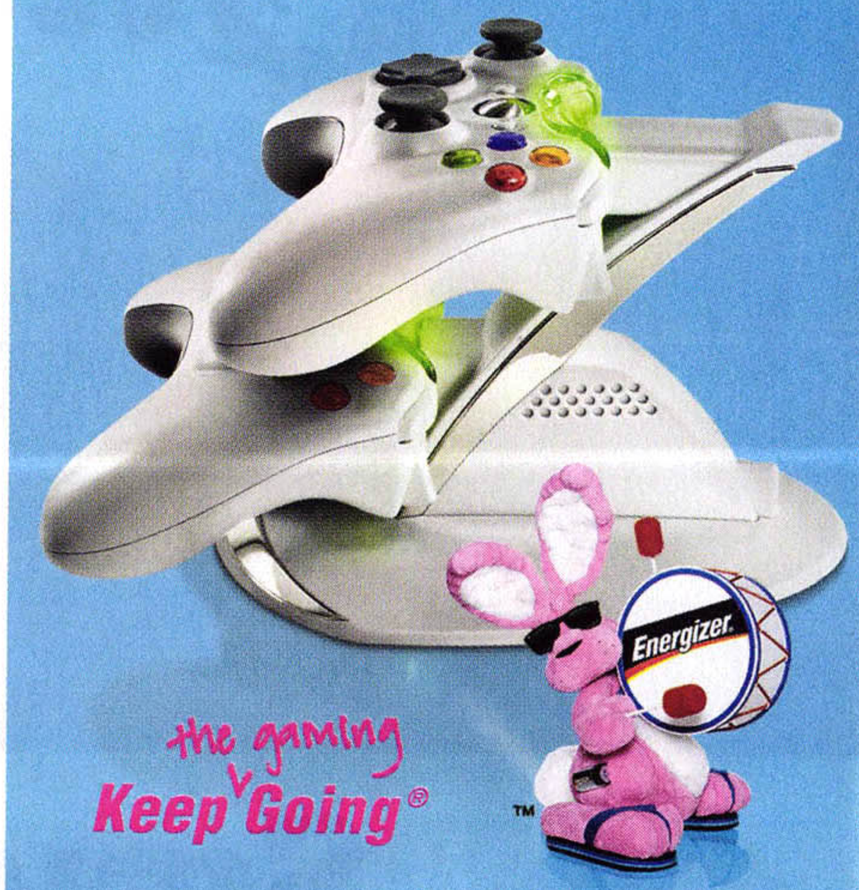

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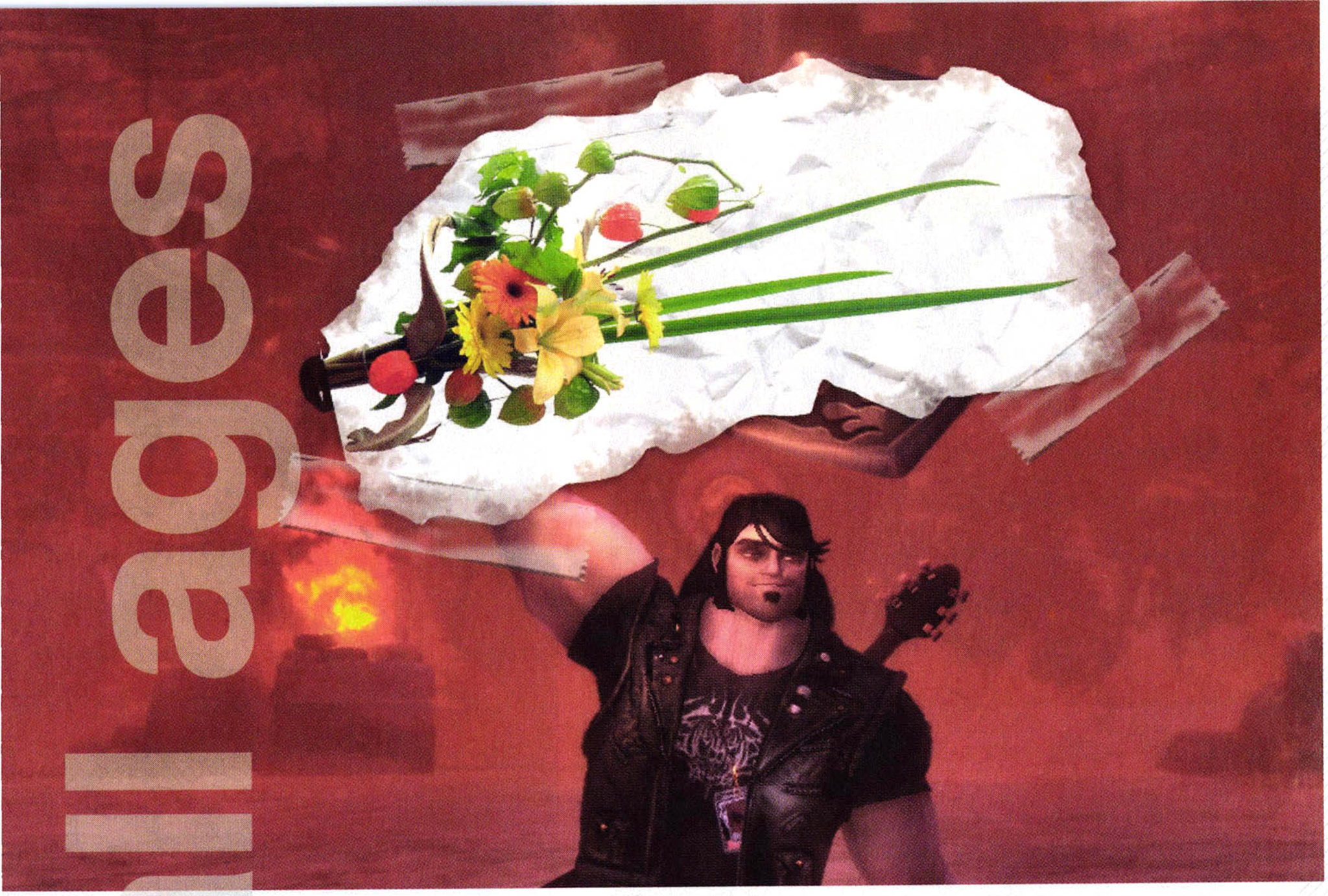

Squelch the $@&*+!

by Jeff Cork

Imagine having someone over for dinner with your family. He's a lot of fun, but he has a potty mouth and poor impulse control. The conversation is flowing nicely until your companion unexpectedly starts telling sexually graphic stories and jamming gory photos in front of your kids. As a parent, you'd probably kick the guest out immediately or at least make sure they don't come over again until your kids are tucked in bed.

TV, movies, and games are a lot like that guest. They can be great company until they blast out content that your family doesn't like. For some parents raised on horror movies, depictions of violence aren't that big of a deal once their children are older, and it can actually be used to start conversations about what is and isn't real, consequences of violence, and more. Those same parents might get annoyed by frequent profanity, though. It's certainly an option to bar media entirely, but wouldn't it be great if you had tools with a bit more finesse at your disposal?

Fortunately, gamer parents have more options than ever to help maintain a comfortable balance — and they're more sophisticated than the "hide the power cord" technique from years past. Aside from the built-in parental controls that consoles feature (more on that in a future column), developers are adding their own filters into games. It's nothing new; players have been able to swap out "blood" for "sweat" in games for years, and Perfect Dark on the N64 let players cut out profanity. Now that many of the people who grew up with those options (probably ignoring them) are having children, there's an increasing awareness of their importance.

Double Fine's Brütal Legend has a pair of filters that allow players to disable some of the game's cartoonish (but graphic) violence and harsh language. "I got a letter from a guy who played Psychonauts with his kid, and he just wanted to say what a great time he had playing Psychonauts with his son," recalls game design legend Tim Schafer. "And I was like, 'Oh man, I hope this guy plays Brütal Legend – but, ooh... He's not going to want to play that with his nine year old.' And so we put that stuff in there basically for him."

Epic's Gears of War 2 shipped with similar options, turning the blood from kills into sparks. Serious Sam HD has a tongue-in-cheek option that replaces geysers of gore with rainbows, candy, and flowers. The gameplay is the same, but the violence is significantly toned down in each example. Some parents might find any violence unacceptable, sparks, blood, candy, or not, but others will welcome these filters as a way to bridge a gap that would otherwise keep kids from playing — or watching their parents play — altogether.

If you'd like to see if a game has these kind of filters, check out whattheyplay.com. It's an excellent resource that provides deeper explanations behind ESRB ratings, as well as information about available filters. It's easy to say, "Don't play games if you don't want the rough stuff," but as a parent I'll take these optional controls over an all-or-nothing alternative.

PLEASE DON'T, GO

Where the Wild Things Are is a classic example of how not to treat a license. Casting aside the book's brilliant simplicity and the film adaptation's serious look at childhood, Warner Bros. Interactive has created a soulless cash-in that should be avoided. None of the themes from the movie have made their way into the game, but perhaps that's because there wasn't any room after the 3D platforming clichés were jammed in. Each fetch mission and bee battle reminded me of how much potential had been squandered.

The first Cars game told the Pixar movie's story while simultaneously earning its stripes as a decent game. The game adaptation of Disney's Bolt wasn't nearly as successful on a gameplay level, but it tried to expand on the license as best it could by having players experience adventures from the character's action hero persona. Where the Wild Things Are tries to follow the movie's storyline, but it does so without a real understanding of just what that story is. If a game couldn't faithfully represent the beastly, complicated characters shown in that story, perhaps the project should have been shelved entirely. Kids are smarter than we give them credit for, and they can see projects like these for the cynical money-grabs that they are.

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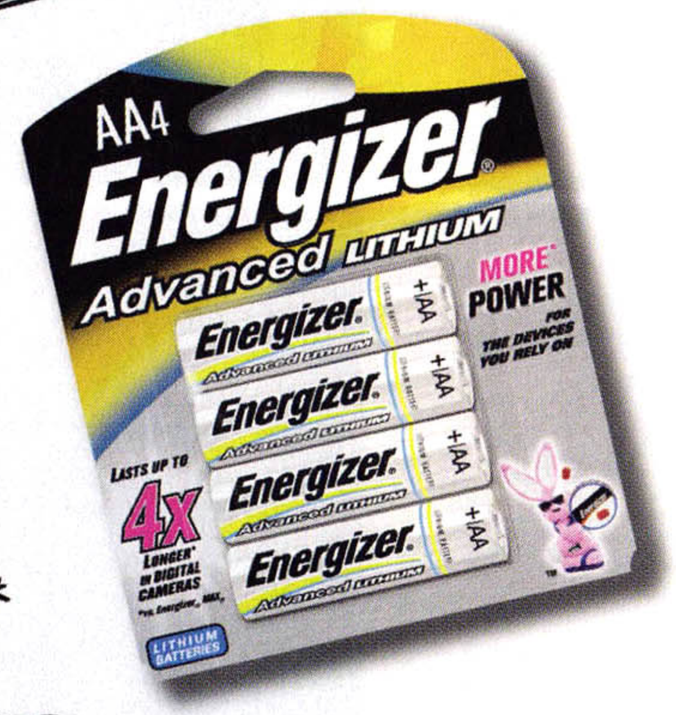

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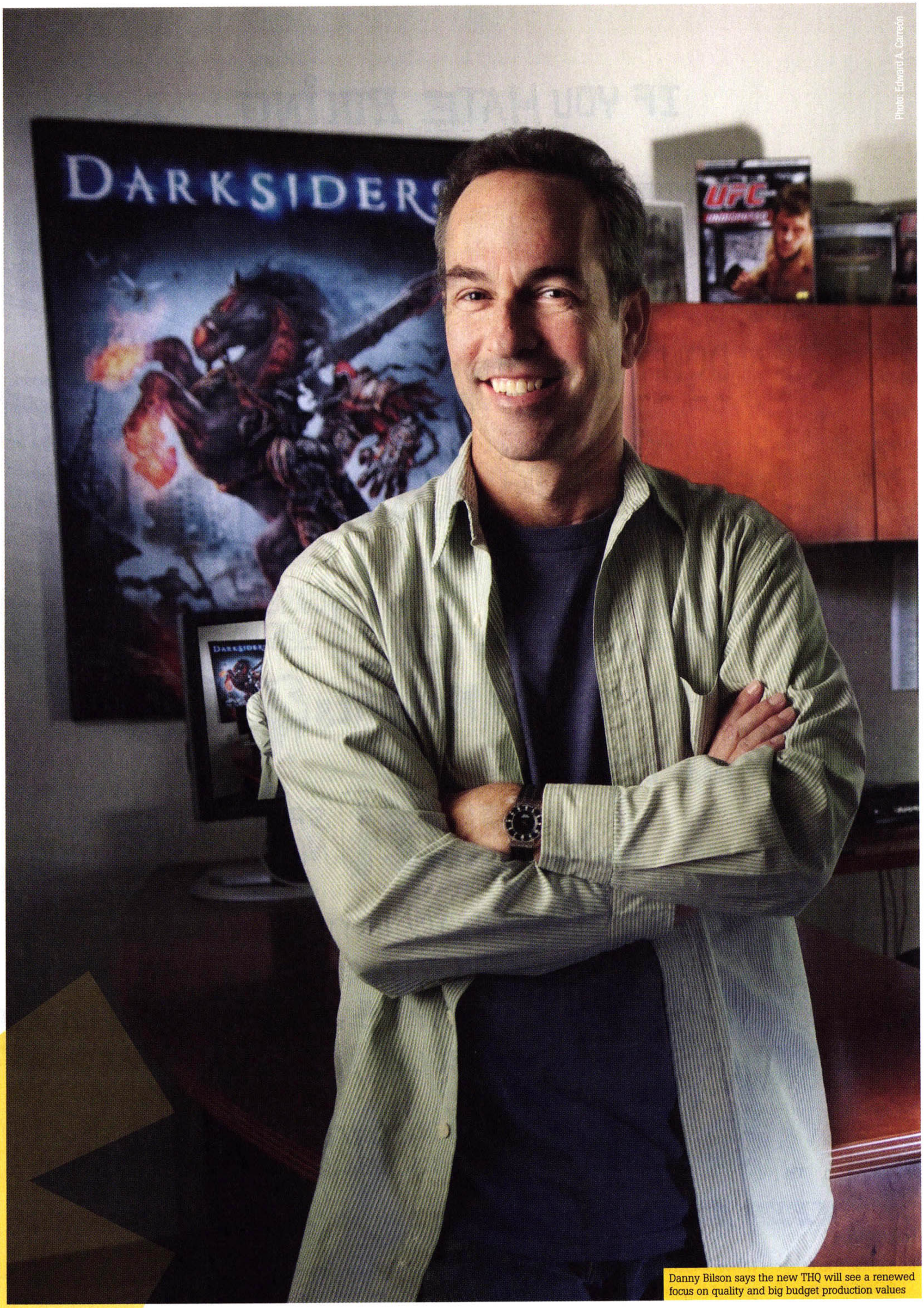
INTERVIEW



Danny Bilson says the new THQ will see a renewed focus on quality and big budget production values

THQ's Core Game Boss Aims For Number One

With a background that spans the entertainment industry from writing films to development at Electronic Arts, Danny Bilson brings a unique and outspoken perspective to his new position at THQ. We recently spoke with Bilson about his vision for the company following its recent internal reorganization.

You have a background at EA, and obviously it and Activision Blizzard control so much of the market. Is it hard to find a place to thrive in between those giants?
I'll tell you why I don't think so. It's not about them; it's about the games. The killer app will flip the whole thing. Remember when Activision was in the toilet a few years ago? They acquired a few properties. I worked with the Call of Duty guys back when they were on Medal of Honor: Allied Assault. A company can change on a Grand Theft Auto. A company can change on a Call of Duty or Guitar Hero. Our side of the business is the blockbusters. What that means is some of them are going to die, some are going to do okay, and some are going to kill. If you don't have any that kill, you're going to die.

It all goes back to the software. I can't ship my shooter – Homefront – without considering everything that happens on November 10th with Call of Duty. My team has to look at that software. We can't say: "Well they're a juggernaut, we can't compete with them!" If you can't compete with them, well, I'll shut you down. Because the consumer doesn't care – he pays 60 bucks for this or 60 bucks for that! We have to compete with them. We will or we won't ship. This is a different THQ from the really old THQ. I think the evolution has been going for years, since before I got here.

How difficult is it to balance taking risks on new IPs with keeping up your established brands like WWE and UFC?
We are balancing that. There are two that you mentioned – WWE and UFC – but there are two other properties that I would call safer bets than new IPs that we are in negotiations on right now. You will recognize those immediately and you'll say: "Oh, THQ is going there? Cool." That's balancing Homefront and other things we're going to announce soon that are original and expensive. You're also going to hear about some deals we'll be making that hopefully make some of our original IPs less "original" when they hit because they've already been brand-extended first. And I don't just mean some paid-for comic book or some bad Film Roman TV DVD.

So you're talking about movies based on your game properties that come out before the game does?
Or day and date. This isn't a secret; I just haven't told Wall Street a lot about it. I'll greenlight a game whether there's a greenlit movie or not. If they meet me at the finish line – great. If not, so what? I didn't have a movie anyway. We know how to sell games without them. But if it happens, all of a sudden you have a "movie game" that's actually a great game. You have a 90 Metacritic movie game, because we spent three years and a ton of money on it and all I'm looking at the movie as a big commercial [for the game]. I see video games as the center of the universe.

Volition has had a lot of success recently with the Saints Row and Red Faction series. Is Volition getting to the point where they need to expand to be able to tackle multiple games at one time?
Well they already are doing two. You're talking about a third game at once. We're talking about things for the next Red Faction and Saints Row right now, and those are games that require massive head counts. We want to expand them to a third title down the road for sure, but we're figuring it out right now and trying to come up with some efficiencies. But they are a great studio and a juggernaut. What I can tell you is that Saints Row 3 is mind-blowing. And I'm not a huge Saints Row guy; I like it, I get it, but…

I liked those games and gave them positive reviews, but I think they were rightly seen as…
B-movies?

Well, I'd say "me too" products to Grand Theft Auto. They were fun, but they weren't perceived as a leader in that genre.
Right, but now I think Saints Row is positioning itself as a parody of crime. It's an absolute over-the-top, stupid… almost a comedy. We're pushing it farther in that direction – wilder and crazier. I was talking to the Volition team about a month ago and they are always worried about GTA. I'm a big GTA fan. But I just don't think that we have much to do with that game other than it's crime and it's an open city. I know the fiction of the new game. I've seen what the new game looks like and I've seen some of the mechanics that will be debuting at E3 this year. It's more towards crazy. [Rockstar] are going more towards what I call the "Martin Scorsese graphic novel" – and I totally respect that. We're like in cartoon land, but really well produced and fully realized cartoon land that's all about fun – a particularly expensive cartoon land. [Laughs]

So you see the series as more gonzo comedy?
Yeah, that's the right word…in the best sense. You're also going to see an insane tech upgrade to where now it's gonzo but it also looks badass. I'm very, very excited about Saints Row 3. And I'm very honest if you get to know me. It's great, and that's not even a franchise I've particularly played a lot of myself. But when I see it, I get very excited. I'm not going to go down my whole portfolio and tell you how excited I am about everything. But we're talking about Volition. The next Red Faction…[directed at PR people in the room have we announced Red Faction? We haven't even announced Red Faction. [Laughs] We're not doing another Red Faction; I don't know what we're doing…but if we were doing a sequel, we've solved a lot of issues. Even though it's an 85-rated game that I love, we've come up with stuff that's way different and way better. If we were doing it.

Xbox Live Arcade has been very successful. We're starting to see triple-A quality titles like Braid and recently Shadow Complex. Are you looking towards making more ambitious XBLA games?
Yes, that's another piece of our new strategy. You're going to see us supporting our brands with some cool games based on our core [franchises] in the Arcade. You're also going to see us giving games away. You're going to see us making games on a brand out of the marketing budget, so to speak. What we could do is give away codes based on pre-orders at exclusive retailers. One of our experiments is a really awesome game based on an IP that we could do as a pre-order bonus, and then 30 days later they could buy it for like five bucks. The whole thing for me with pre-orders is I ask myself: "Why would I pre-order a game?" What gets me in is what if you could say: "Hey, come in. Put your five bucks down; go home; go to Xbox Live and put this thing in and get a good game."

What's the five-year plan for THQ? Where do you want to be?
In five years, I want you to be asking me, "Wow, how the hell did you get here where your stock price is at $40 and Bobby Kottick is asking you for a job?" [Laughs] Hey, you know what? If someone asks me what Metacritic I'm shooting for with a game, I only have one answer: one hundred. So, when you ask me what our aspiration is, it's to be number one. I've seen the other guys do it. I made the Bobby joke because the guy is unbelievable. He took that place from where they were to number one and he did it in about five or six years. If they can do it, so can we.

» *interview by Matt Helgeson*

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

1977 THE BEGINNING

Bilson's life as a gamer begins in the Christmas of 1977, when his parents give him an Atari 2600 console. He quickly begins a lifelong obsession with gaming

1990 FASTER THAN A SPEEDING BULLET

After studying theater in college, Bilson begins a career as a writer in Hollywood. One of his early projects was short-lived cult TV superhero series *The Flash*

1991 ROCKET SAUCE

Bilson and his writing partners create the script for the big budget film adaptation of the comic book property *The Rocketeer*. The film features ex-James Bond Timothy Dalton and Jennifer Connelly in an early starring role

1996 NEW NETWORKS

Bilson produces and writes for *The Sentinel*, an action TV series for UPN Network

1997 CHANGING GEARS

While helping to create a new studio for Paramount in Vancouver, Bilson has a chance meeting with Electronic Arts' Don Mattrick on a plane. The two become fast friends

1999 SIM-PLY IRRESISTIBLE

Bilson takes a position at EA, helping to write and craft concepts for Will Wright's then-in-development The Sims Studio

2003 VICTORY AND ADVENTURE

Bilson helps oversee internal development at EA, and earns credits as a writer and designer on James Bond 007: Everything or Nothing and Medal of Honor: Rising Sun

2004 DISAPPOINTMENTS

Bilson goes to EA's new LA studio to work as an executive producer on GoldenEye: Rogue Agent. Disillusioned by the poor quality of the final product, Bilson leaves EA

2008 BACK IN THE GAME

After an aborted attempt to create a new studio for THQ, Bilson is recruited to join the company's internal development organization. In 2009, reorganization in THQ promotes Bilson to head of core development

HOLIDAY BUYING GUIDE

It's that time of year again – a season when the American economy relies on us to buy more than we can afford to propel ourselves out of economic turmoil. Need some help spending that holiday cash? You've come to the right place.

COMIC GEEKS

-1-

Batman Black and White Statue

Batman is a colorful character, but you wouldn't know it based solely on DC Direct's newest line of statues. This first statue in the Black and White line stands 7.5-inches tall and is based off Ed McGuinness' work on *Superman/Batman: Public Enemies*.

$80.00

-2-

Games

X-Men Origins: Wolverine Uncaged Edition

PS3, 360 • $49.99

Infamous

PS3 • $59.99

Batman: Arkham Asylum Collector's Edition

PS3, 360 • $99.99

-3-

Marvel Comics Wall Décor

Surface View's attractive wall art does the impossible – making your house look stylish while proudly broadcasting your geekery. Check out its extensive list of Marvel related wall murals and prints on its web site. Home décor doesn't need to be limited to flower patterns and baby pictures.

Starting at $120 per sq meter

-4-

Penny Arcade: The Card Game

The Internet's video game jokesters finally have their own card game. This starter set includes a rulebook, 18 Life Counters, and both Gabe and Tycho decks. It's everything two people will need to play and talk about video games with angst-fueled rage.

$24.95

-5-

Media Shelf

Gunnerkrigg Court: Orientation by Tom Siddell

$26.95

Marvel Animation: Six Film Set

$49.98

Mice Templar by Michael Avon Oeming and Bryan J. Glass

$17.99

Spider-Woman, Agent of S.W.O.R.D. Motion Comic Season Pass

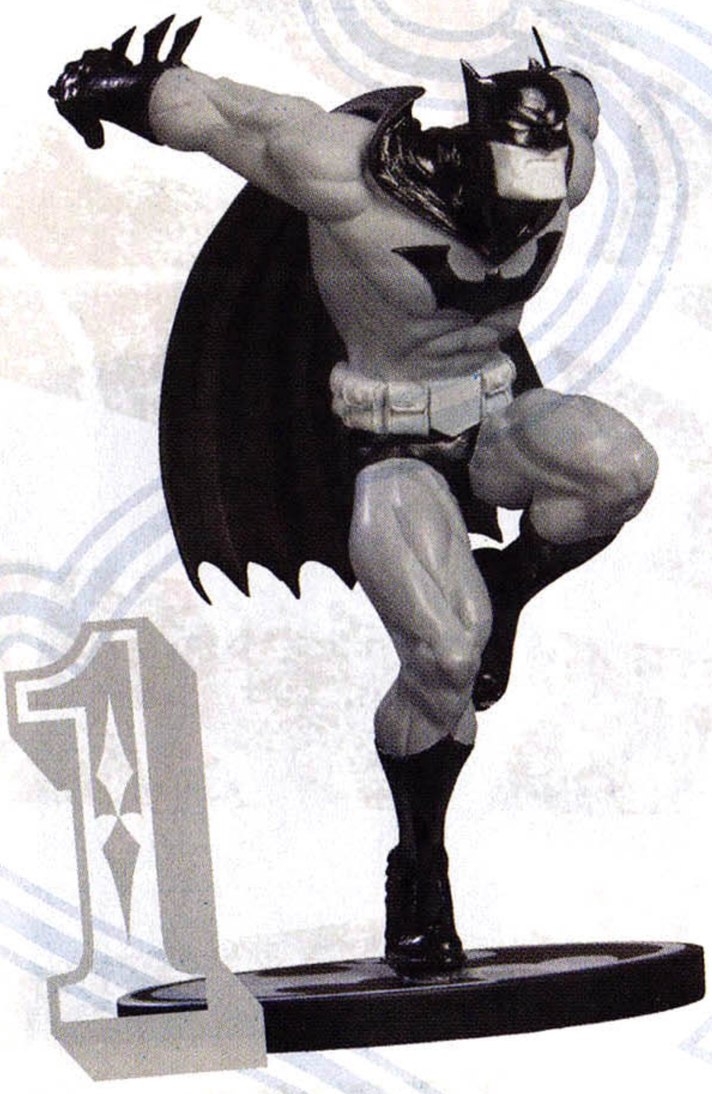
$8.99

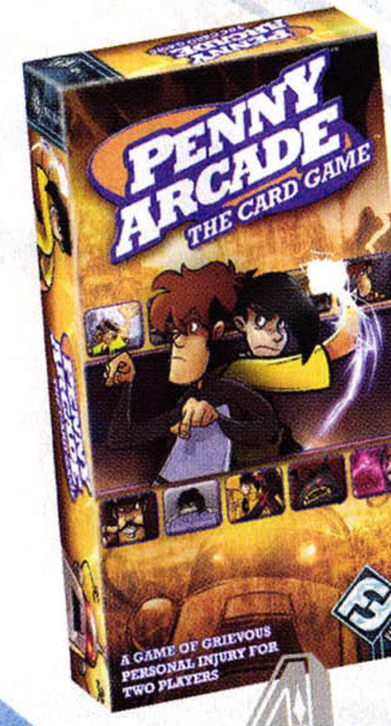
-6-

The Umbrella Academy Six-Piece Figure Set

Umbrella Academy by Gerard Way and Gabriel Bá was one of the most refreshing comics we've read in recent years. This six-piece figure set is just what we need to tide us over until the sequel *Hotel Oblivion* starts up sometime next year.

$39.99





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EVERYMAN

-1-
Viper SmartStart System

Imagine this: It's cold, or rainy, or you're just feeling lazy. You don't want to wait for your car to warm up. So you pull out your iPhone, open your SmartStart app, and with the flick of a button your car starts up. Congratulations, James Bond is jealous.

$499.99

-2-
HP Mini 311

Do you need power and portability? HP's newest line of netbooks has you covered on both ends. The 311's 160GB hard drive, speedy Wi-Fi support, and three USB ports will surely come in handy while you're tooling around town. More importantly, the system's Nvidia Ion technology means that this little book is powerful enough to output HD quality videos on its widescreen display or over HDMI.

$399.99

-3-
Games

Professor Layton & The Diabolical Box

DS • $34.99

Grand Theft Auto IV: Episodes From Liberty City

360 • $39.99

Uncharted 2: Among Thieves

PS3 • $59.99

-4-
Gama-Go Shirts

Geek fashion isn't a term you hear referenced with pride very often, but Gamma-Go may change that. Their selection of quirky printed tees, hoodies, and accessories could make a nerd of any gender look socially acceptable.

$28.00 (tees), $48.00-$64.00 (hoodies)

-5-
PSPgo

Sony's new handheld is almost an excuse to travel. With its ultra portable design and 16GB of flash memory, the PSPgo will help keep your suitcase light. And thanks to the system's wireless PlayStation Network support you'll have access to new comics, TV shows, PSP original games, and PlayStation Classics almost anywhere you go.

$249.99

-6-
Media Shelf

30 Rock Season Three

$49.98

Boardwalk Empire: The Birth, High Times, and Corruption of Atlantic City

$17.95

Lost: The Complete Fifth Season Dharma Initiative Orientation Kit

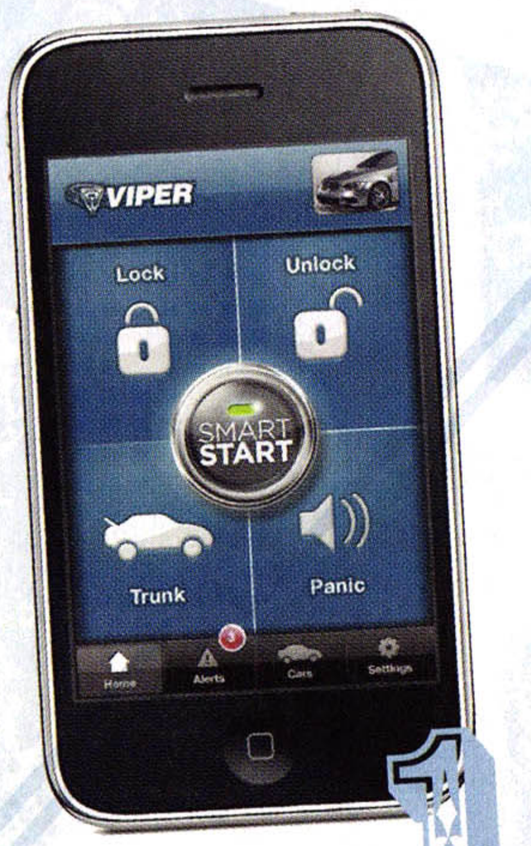
$130.00

Up DVD/Blu-ray Combo

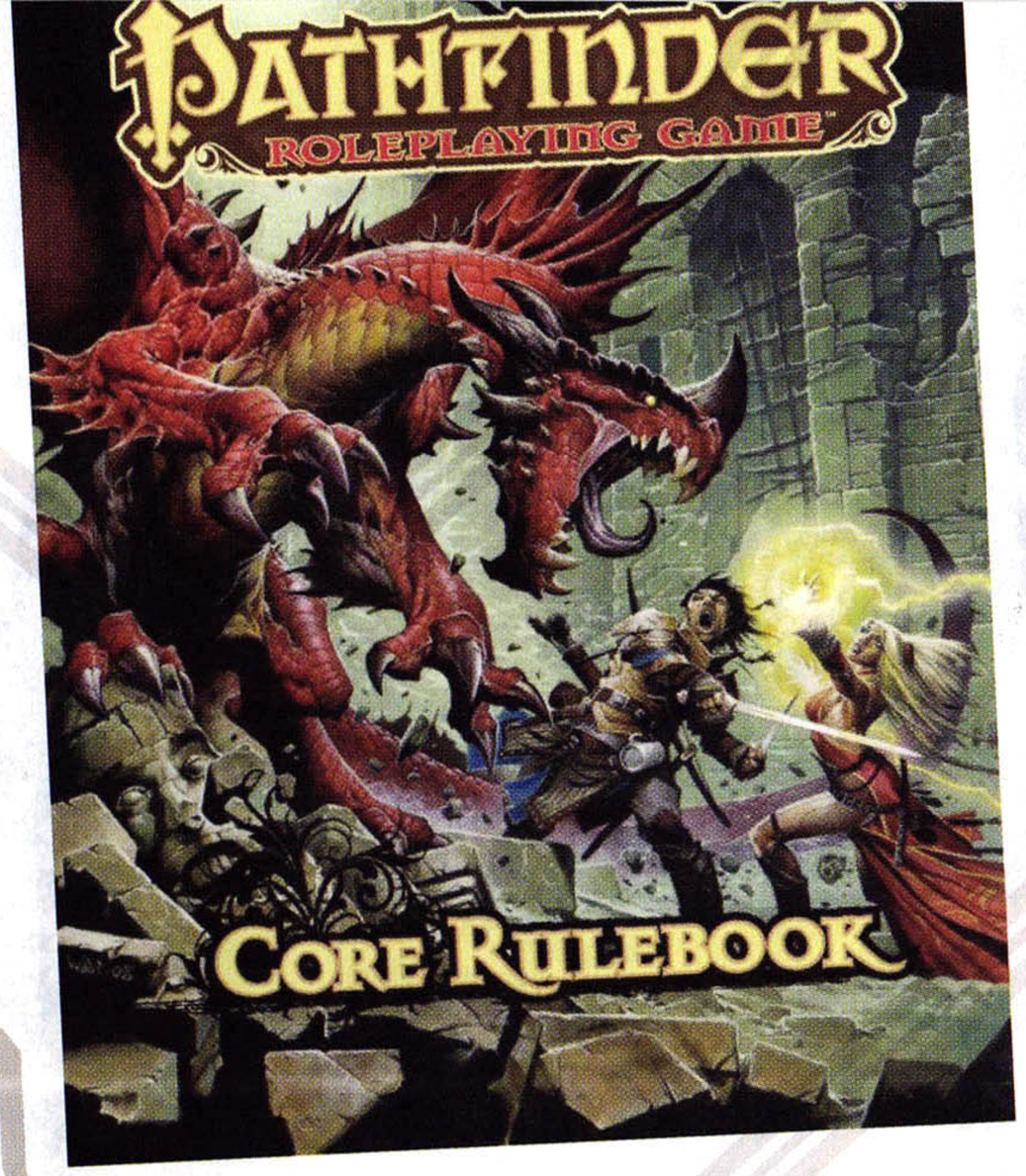
$45.99

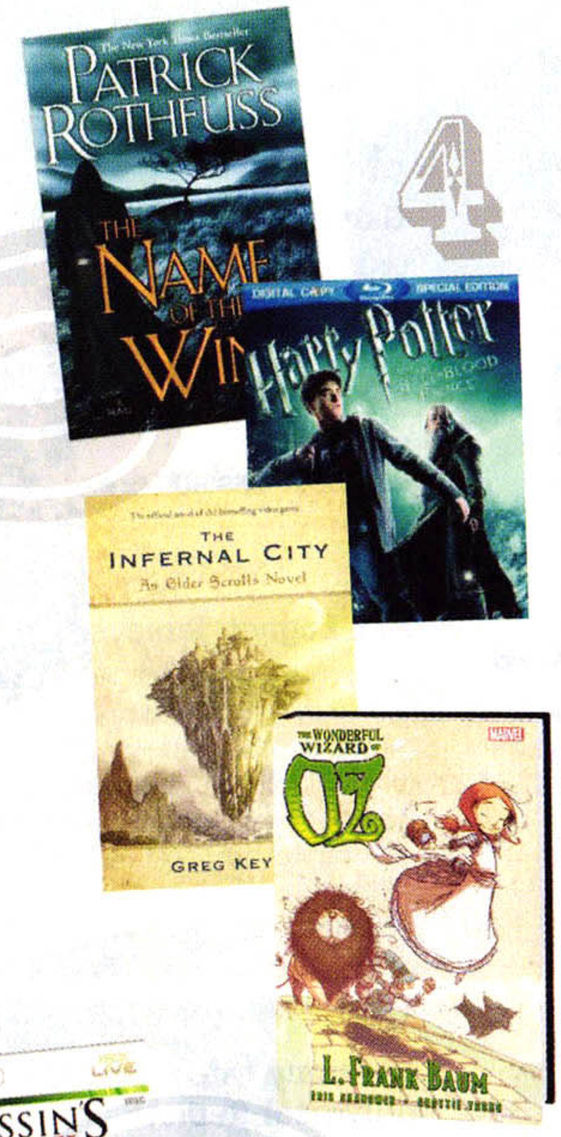
The Write Environment

$14.99



FANTASY FREAKS





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Pathfinder Roleplaying Game: Core Rulebook

This huge role-playing book includes all the info you need to get started and have a blast with your friends. A smarter skill system, improved classes, and streamlined combat systems highlight the list of gameplay to explore. Gorgeous art and smart, revised design ideas fill the pages, but everything is compatible with the old D&D 3.5 edition rules through only minor alterations. If you're ready for something new, don't miss out on 4th edition D&D. But if dramatic changes to your role-playing hobby terrify you, Pathfinder should be right up your alley.

$49.99

-2-
Final Fantasy Creatures Kai Volume 1

Square Enix rounds up some of the most fearsome monsters from the Final Fantasy series in its new miniatures line. This set includes Bahamut Sin (Final Fantasy VII Advent children), Magitek Armor (Final Fantasy VI), Zalera the Death Seraph (Final Fantasy XII), Brothers (Final Fantasy VIII), and Valefor (Final Fantasy X).

$39.99

-3-
Assassin's Creed Costume and Sword

Ditch the modern fashion; Jerusalem 1191 AD was so chic. Museum Replica's Altaïr attire might cost you an arm and a middle finger, but imagine how cool your new Facebook profile will look.

$1,111.50

-4-
Media Shelf

The Elder Scrolls: The Infernal City by Greg Keyes
$14.00

Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince DVD/Blu-ray
$35.99

The Name of the Wind by Patrick Rothfuss
$16.00

The Wonderful Wizard of Oz
$29.99

-5-
Games

Assassin's Creed II
PS3, 360 • $59.99

Dragon Age Origins Collector's Edition
PS3, 360, PC • $69.99

God of War Collection
PS3 • $39.99

-6-
God of War and Devil May Cry Swords

United Cutlery has created some truly wicked ways to poke out your own eye. These fully licensed collectibles are replicas of Kratos' Blade of War from God of War and Nero's Red Queen from Devil May Cry. Both blades are made from high quality metals and come with their own stands.

$224.00 (Blade of Chaos)
$417.00 (Red Queen)

-1-

Games

Dirt 2
PS3, 360, PC • $59.99

Madden NFL 10
PS3, 360 • $59.99

NHL 10
PS3, 360 • $59.99

-2-

AFL Legacy Jerseys

Own a piece of history with these AFL 50th Anniversary throwback replica jerseys. The eight original AFL teams boast some of the best-looking (Oilers, Chargers) and worst looking (Broncos) jerseys in the NFL's storied past. You might as well wear your history with pride…unless you're a Bills fan.
$79.99

-3-

Harmony One Advanced Universal Remote

A weekend warrior needs a hefty tool to get the most entertainment possible out of a Sunday afternoon. Logitech's Harmony One controls up to 15 video, audio, and gaming devices, features one touch multi-device turn on, a full-color touchscreen, and comes with a rechargeable base. Give your other remotes their pink slips.
$249.99

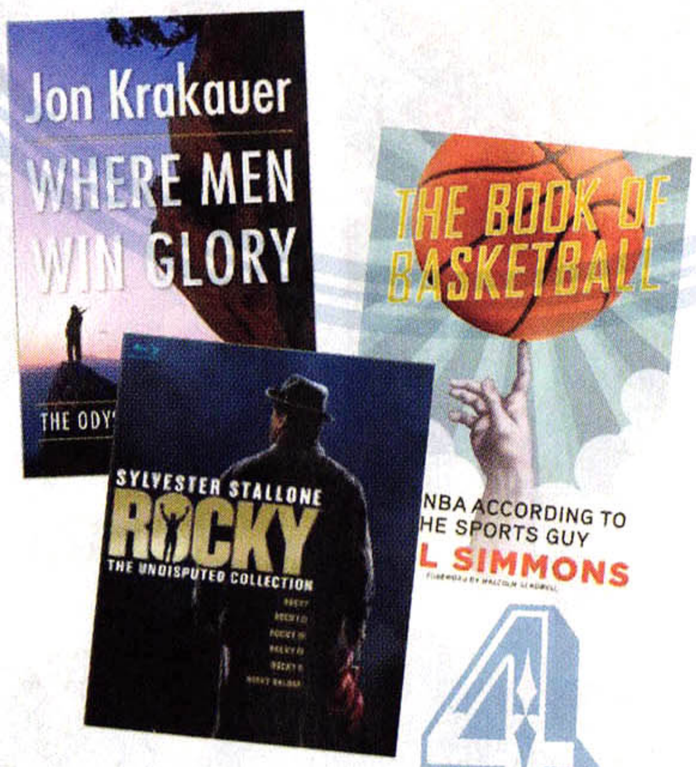
-4-

Media Shelf

The Book of Basketball: The NBA According to the Sports Guy by Bill Simmons
$30.00

Rocky: The Undisputed Collection
$99.98

Where Men Win Glory: The Odyssey of Pat Tillman by John Krakauer
$27.98

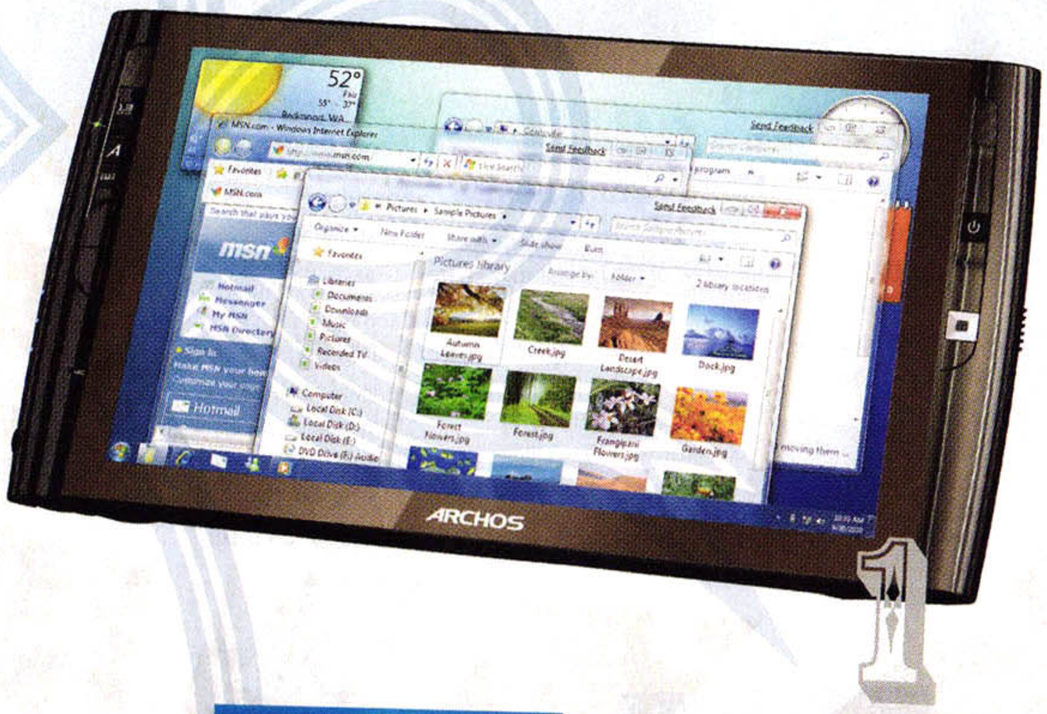


-5-

Dell MLB Design Studio Laptops

Wear your team's colors wherever you go with Dell's new line of MLB stylized laptops. Dell lets you decorate any of its Studio notebooks with a coat of MLB paint. With over 30 team logos and a variety of styles for each team, it shouldn't be hard to find a laptop worth rooting for.
$85.00

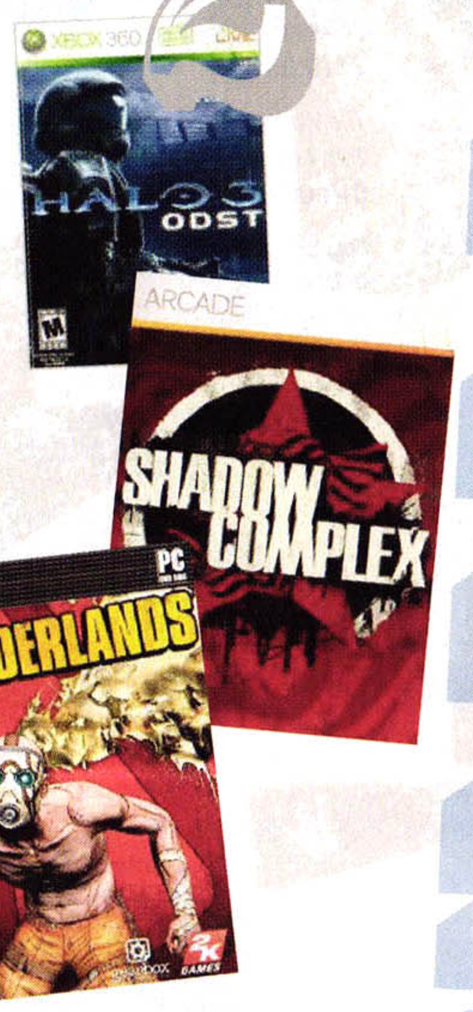
Sci-Fi Gift Guide



-1-
Archos 9

Anytime someone in a sci-fi film hands another person a report or diagnostic, it's always on some awesome futuristic computer tablet. Tablet PCs have been around for a while, but they're finally starting to get exciting. The Archos 9 features a futuristic design, touchscreen interface, Windows 7, Wi-Fi, and all the on-the-go features you could ever need.

$500.00



-2-
Games

Borderlands
PS3, 360, PC • $59.99

Halo 3: ODST
360 • $59.99

Shadow Complex
360 • $15.00

-3-
Media Shelf

Battlestar Galactica: The Plan
$39.98

Futurama: The Complete Collection
$159.99

Halo Encyclopedia
$40.00

Mystery Science Theater 3000: XVI Limited Edition
$64.99

-4-
Star Trek USB Flash Drive

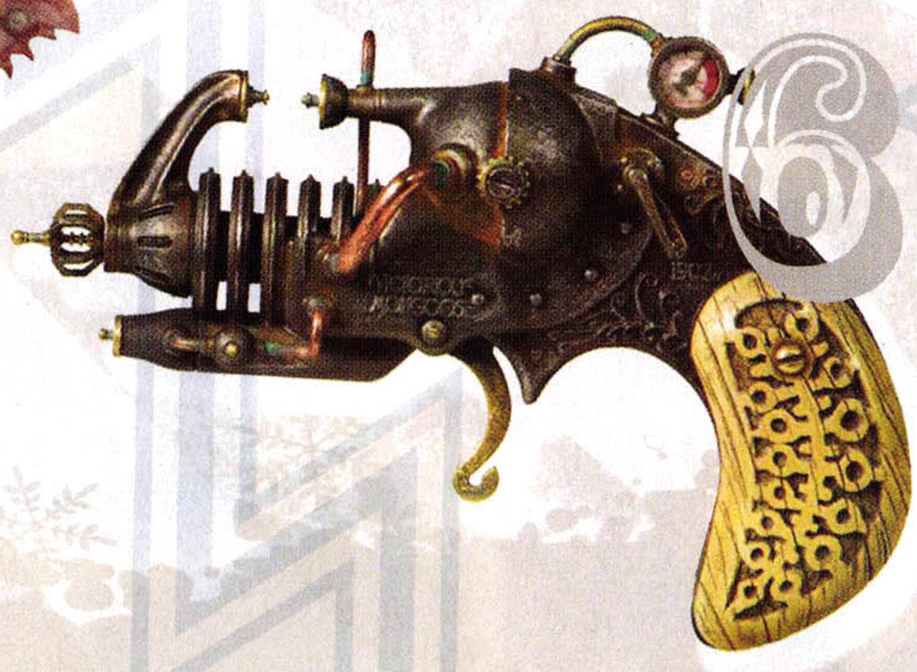
Boldly go where no movie has gone before. This individually numbered, limited edition USB drive sports 4GB of storage space and comes loaded with JJ Abram's lauded Trek relaunch. The DIVX file also comes with an option to burn a DVD so those without a media server can watch it on their TVs. There are no current plans for another run, so this makes a great collectible.

$17.99

-5-
Light Up Marcus Fenix Series 2

We're suckers for Neca's line of toys, and you will be too after seeing this 12-inch Marcus Fenix with LED lights. The highly detailed figure also comes with a COG pistol and Lancer. The head is a brand-new sculpt based on Marcus' character model from Gears of War 2.

$24.99



-6-
Victorious Mongoose Mini

It looks like Weta has listened to everyone and made an affordable collectible! Sure, it may only be 3.1 inches long, but we like things that are miniaturized. If you're into steampunk, pick this up for the perfect desk accessory. It's dainty but deadly.

$49.00

TYKES

-1-

Games

Boom Blox: Bash Party
Wii • $39.99

Mario & Luigi: Bowser's Inside Story
DS • $34.99

Ratchet and Clank Future: A Crack In Time
PS3 • $59.99

-2-

Halo RC Vehicles

Halo fans know the UNSC Warthog is sturdy enough to travel over just about anything, including your neighbor's dog. These NKOK RC vehicles are modeled after Halo 3's vehicle fleet. Roll over Covenant troops with the M12 Warthog and the Mongoose, or take to the skies with the Hornet.
$24.99 (Warthog, Mongoose), $34.99 (Hornet)

-3-

Media Shelf

G.I. Joe A Real American Hero: Complete Collector's Set
$179.99

The Warlock of Firetop Mountain - 25th Anniversary Edition
$14.00

SpongeBob SquarePants: The First 100 Episodes
$99.99

Transformers: 25th Anniversary Matrix Of Leadership Edition
169.99

-4-

Squeeballs Party from PDP

Over 150 minigame challenges will have you blowing up, cooking, slicing, batting, bowling, shooting and bouncing a group of demented looking fluffy animals. Isn't that what kids like to do?
$29.99

-5-

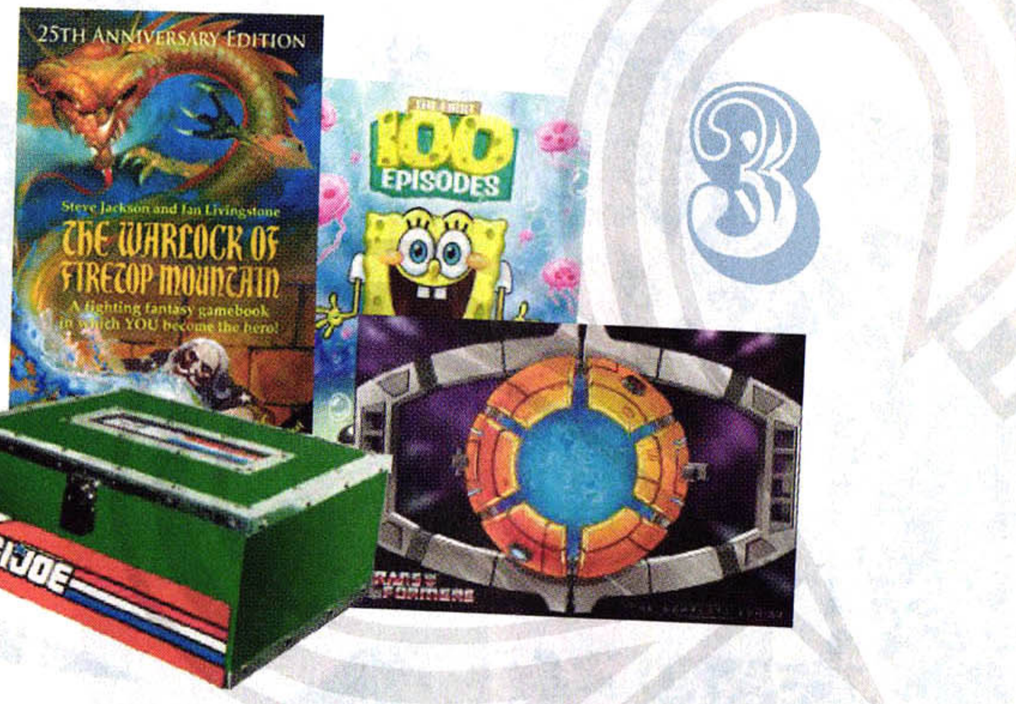
Bakugan 7-in-1 Maxus Dragonoid

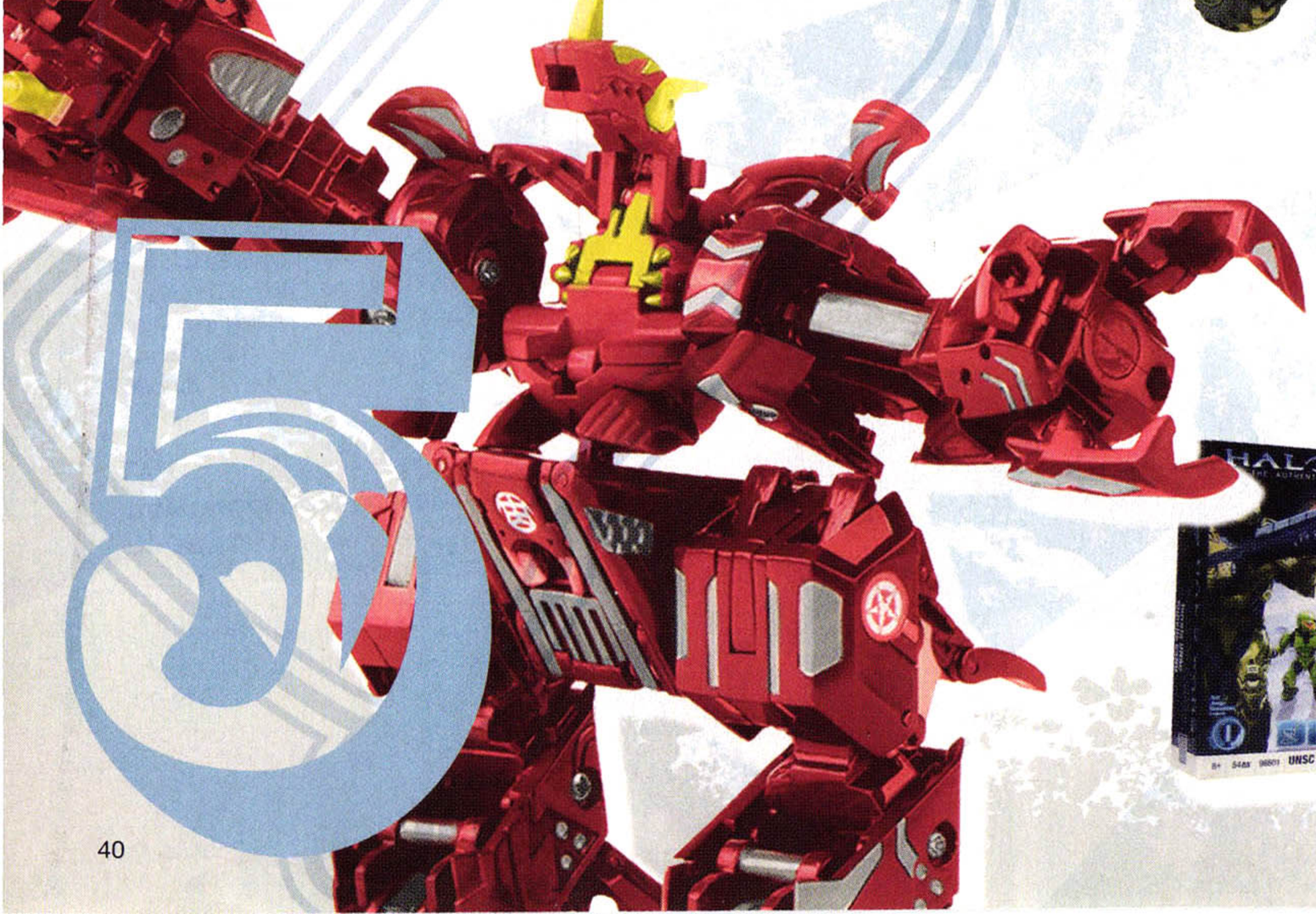
These marble-like transformers are some of the hottest toys in America. You'll be able to dominate the Bakugan arena with this Devastator-like Maxus Dragonoid. How does that saying go? "Transform and roll out"?
$39.99

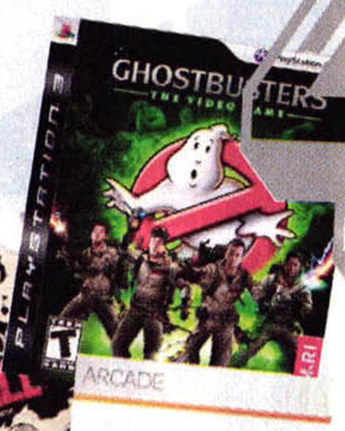
-6-

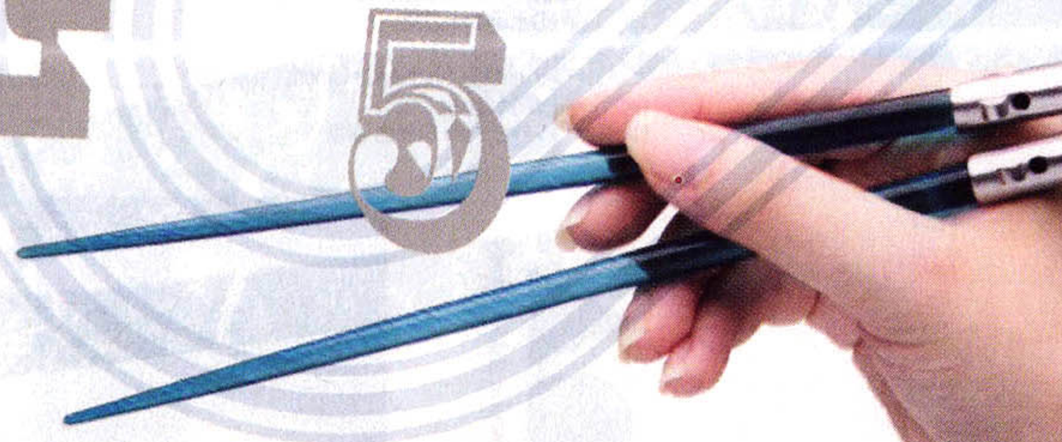
Mega Bloks Halo Wars

You can't trust Master Chief to keep a Scorpion tank in one piece. Maybe it's time to show him how they're built. Mega Brand's like-LEGO-but-bigger Halo Bloks let you construct some of Halo's most iconic vehicles, including the Scorpion, Ghost, and Warthog.
$9.99-$49.99









-1-

Super Mario Chess Collector's Edition

The first Nintendo-authorized chess game features all our favorite Mario Bros. characters and comes packed in a sweet collector's tin. But here's the best part. Guess who the queen is? His name rhymes with Fuigi.

$39.99

-2-

Red Shirt Star Trek Cologne

You might as well smell good before you get vaporized. With this Star Trek branded cologne, you can smell like places where no man has gone before. This fragrance features hints of green mandarin and lavender. If you don't get beat up while using this, you're not wearing enough.

$29.99

-3-

Star Wars Tauntaun Sleeping Bag

Remember that scene from *The Empire Strikes Back* when Han Solo saved Luke's skin by cramming the whiny Jedi wannabe between the intestines of a Tauntaun? Remember how your older brother said, "Cool, I want to do that!"? He was talking about being Han Solo, but have fun getting laughed at on your next camping trip.

$99.99

-4-

Games

Ghostbusters: The Video Game
PS3, 360, Wii, PC • $39.99

House of the Dead: Overkill
Wii • $29.99

'Splosion Man
Xbox Live Arcade • $10.00

-5-

Kotobukiya Star Wars Chopsabers

Ever wish you could enjoy your leftover beef and broccoli and feel like you were locked in a deadly battle with a Jedi warrior at the same time? Kotobukiya heard those lonely fanboy dreams and created sets of Darth Vader, Luke Skywalker, and Yoda themed lightsaber chopsticks.

$19.99

-6-

Media Shelf

The Hangover
$27.99

It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia: It's A Very Sunny Christmas
$26.00

Last Words: A Memoir by George Carlin
$26.99

Robot Chicken: Season Four
$29.98

The Mel Brooks Collection Blu-Ray
$139.99

JOKESTERS

timeline

DEC 2009

From the Creators of *Tinman*...
Have you seen the trailer for Syfy's *Alice* yet? Someone at the network must have put up its April Fool's Day trailer early. The concept is too terrible to be true: a modern-day *Alice in Wonderland* starring Kathy Bates, Tim "Still Not Cool Without Lipstick" Curry, and a girl. This four-hour event (yes, four hours!) airs tonight. Suddenly, Syfy's dinosaurs-from-the-future movies look good!

New Releases
- 7 Wonders II *(DS)*
- Avatar *(PS3, 360, Wii, PC, PSP, DS)*
- Legend of Kay *(DS)*
- MX vs. ATV: Reflex *(PS3, 360, PSP, DS)*
- Picture Perfect Hair Salon *(DS)*
- Playmobil Pirates *(DS)*
- Resident Evil Archives: Resident Evil Zero *(Wii)*
- Storybook Workshop *(Wii)*

01 *tue*

Games are Art!
Hideo Kojima is a firm believer that video games are not art, but we have a feeling he'll change his tune when he sees his beloved creation, Solid Snake, artified in vinyl form. You're seeing it with your own eyes. Video games and art mixing into a figurine available today for only $79.99. Too much for a figure? Yes. For art? No.

03 *thu*

06 *sun*

New Releases
- Bookworm *(DS)*
- The Saboteur *(PS3, 360, PC)*
- Silent Hill: Shattered Memories *(Wii, PSP)*
- Windchaser *(PC)*
- World Party Games *(Wii)*

08 *tue*

11 *fri*

If You Want to Cry in Public...
Not content to end the Lord of the Rings saga with *Return of the King*, Peter Jackson is returning to Middle-earth in his latest film, *The Lovely Bones*. Frodo's descendant, Susan Sarandon (or is it "Saurondon"?), is haunted by the ghost of Christmas Past...at least that's what we got out of the trailer. Or would have gotten, if we had watched the trailer with sound.

Video Game Awards 2009 SPIKE

12 *sat*

Spike TV's 2009 Video Game Awards
Tonight, Spike TV bestows awards on 2009's top games and developers. Our guesses as to who will win? Game of the Year goes to Uncharted 2: Among Thieves, which will be a surprise since we believe Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2 will win almost everything else. We also think Cliff Bleszinski will be featured as the "hey, you know me!" guy. If this show is anything like last year's, expect to see several new game announcements and trailers.

New Releases
A majority of game publishers delay or move up game release dates to avoid releasing on the same day as juggernauts like Call of Duty or Grand Theft Auto. Today is no different. Every developer has deemed December 15 suicide, as they would have to go against the only game releasing today, Learn Geography for the Nintendo DS. Make sure you call your local retailer to see if they will be holding midnight releases for this obvious hit.

15 *tue*

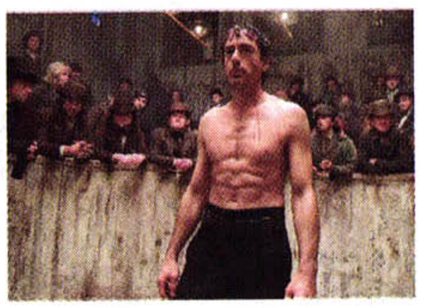
18 *fri*

Save the CG Rainforests!
Remember that awesome scene at the beginning of *X-Men II* where Nightcrawler storms the White House? So does James Cameron. His new movie looks like a spin-off of that scene, with Nightcrawlers everywhere. Except instead of kicking ass, they're whining about the rainforest. Ugh. Don't worry – after this movie comes out, we won't have to put up with James Cameron for another 10 years.

GUITAR HERO VAN HALEN

New Releases
- Guitar Hero: Van Halen *(PS3, 360, Wii, PS2)*
- Kamen Rider Dragon Knight *(Wii, DS)*

22 *tue*

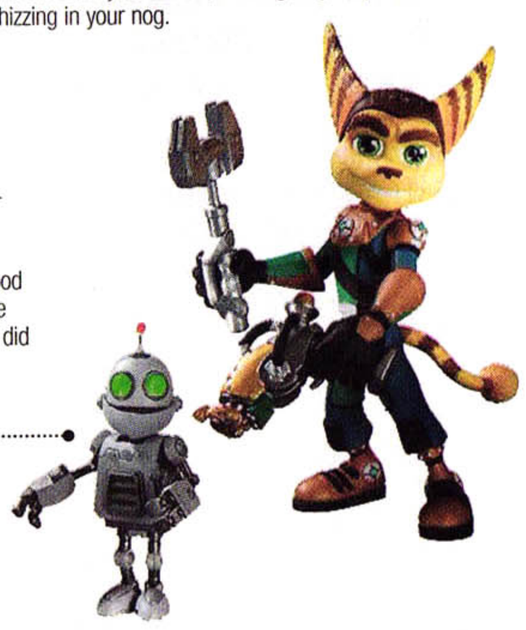


25 *fri*

Sexy Holmes or an LSD Trip?
Now that *Avatar* is out of theaters, you can go see two films that won't give you 3D poisoning. *The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus* (Heath Ledger's final movie) and *Sherlock Holmes* (Robert Downey Jr.'s final movie. What? He could retire!) will both enchant feast-bloated theatergoers today. While you're watching these movies, burglars will be in your house, stealing all your presents and whizzing in your nog.

26 *sat*

Celebrate Christmas a Day Late
Did your parents buy you a bunch of useless stuff as presents? Are you looking to exchange them for something cool? In a festive move, Square Enix is releasing the Wii game Final Fantasy Crystal Chronicles: Crystal Bearers today. Now that we think of it, it might be a good idea to ask for stuff you don't want, so you can use the gifts as currency to get this game. Don't say we never did anything for ya!



29 *tues*

OMG! OMG! OMG!
Enjoy the trash weird, ugly, expensive vinyl Snake! Our obsession with you is over! We now want to empty our bank accounts on the first series of Ratchet & Clank action figures. In addition to the dysfunctional duo, this line consists of Captain Quark and Dr. Nefarias. Each figure comes with a mini-fig (such as Clank or a Zoni), and are reasonably priced at an estimated $16.99. Sold!

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MATURE 17+

M

CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Blood and Gore
Intense Violence
Suggestive Themes

PS3 PlayStation 3

PlayStation Network

XBOX 360

XBOX LIVE

VIGIL

THQ

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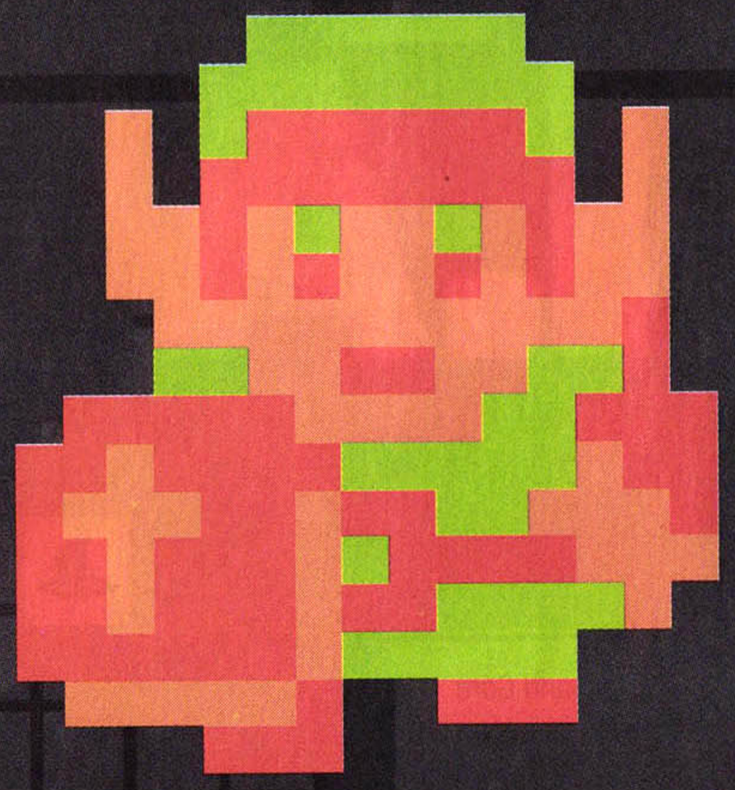
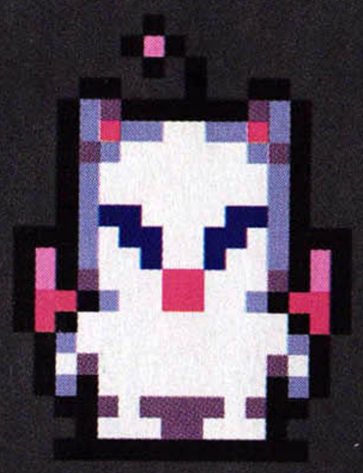
THE TOP 200 GAMES OF ALL TIME





We argued. We agreed. We dismissed Ben's ideas outright. Creating a list like this wasn't easy, but we felt the 200th issue of Game Informer was the perfect time to highlight the best games of all time. Taking into account quality, cultural relevance, and industry impact, the staff voted with their hearts and minds to create our definitive list chronicling the best of the best. Have fun debating the results!

A Celebration of 200 Issues

The Top 200 Games of All Time 46

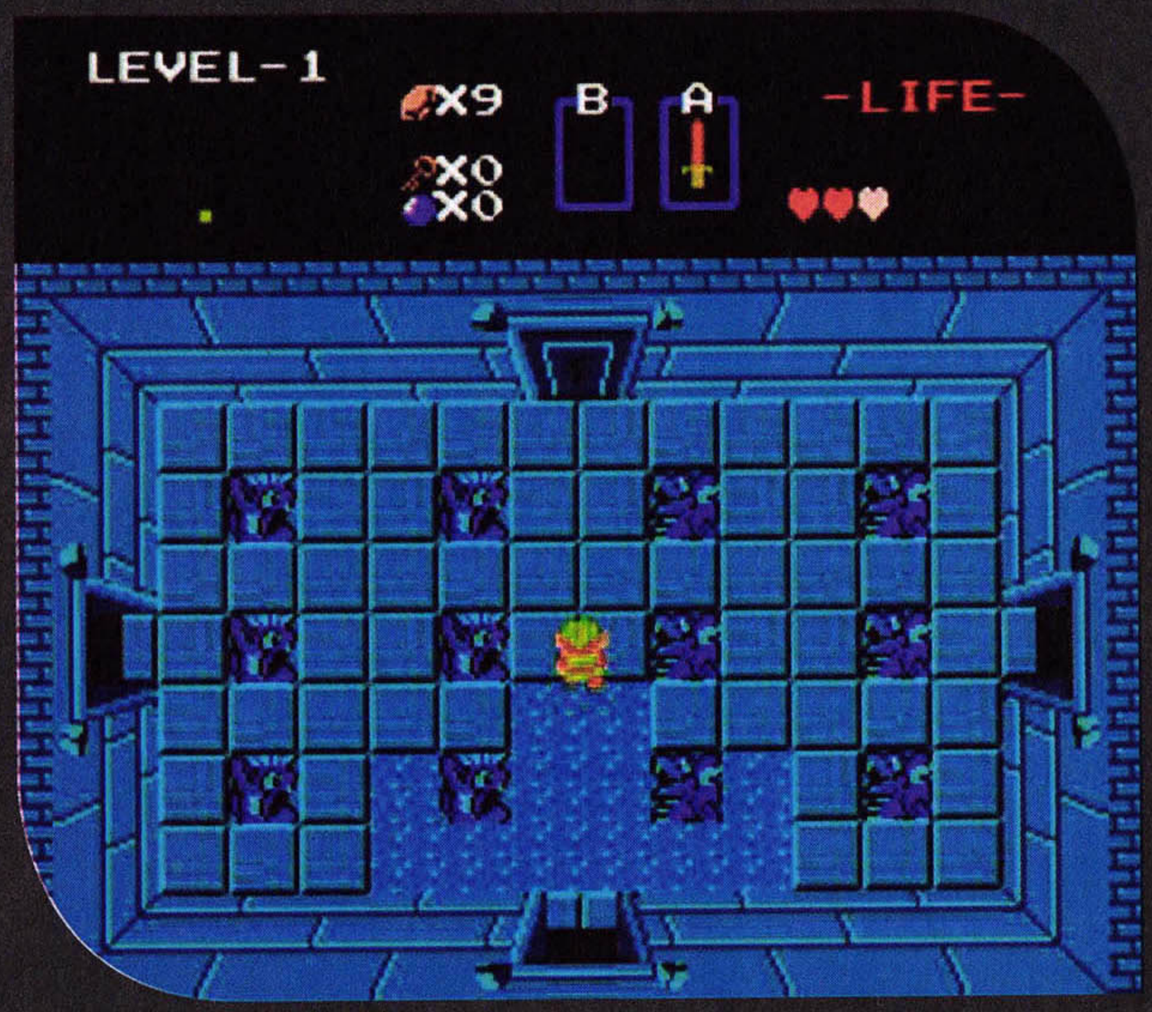
Going Through Game Informer's Past: Quotables 80

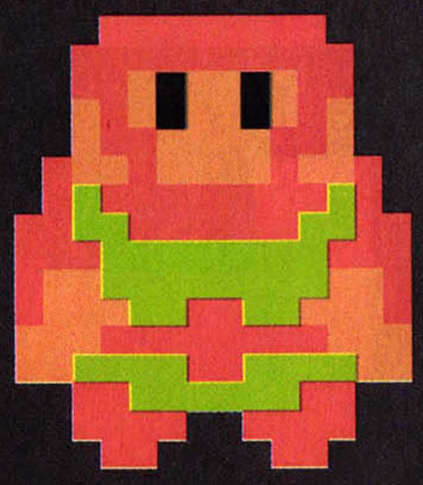
In Their Words 84

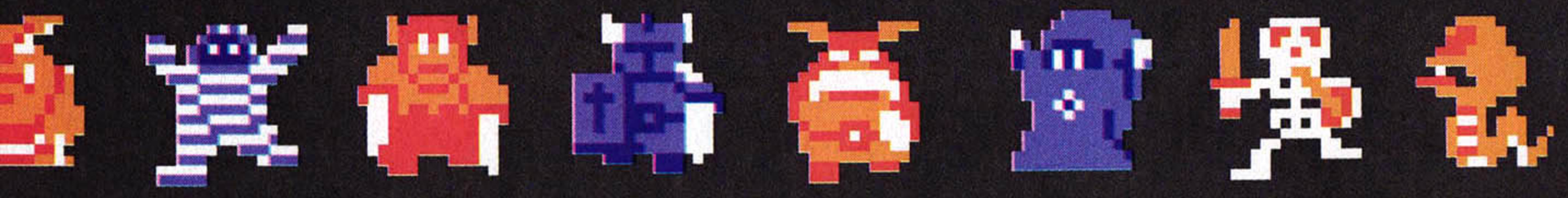
Greatest RIPs 86

Breaking Down the Covers 88

Just the Numbers 136





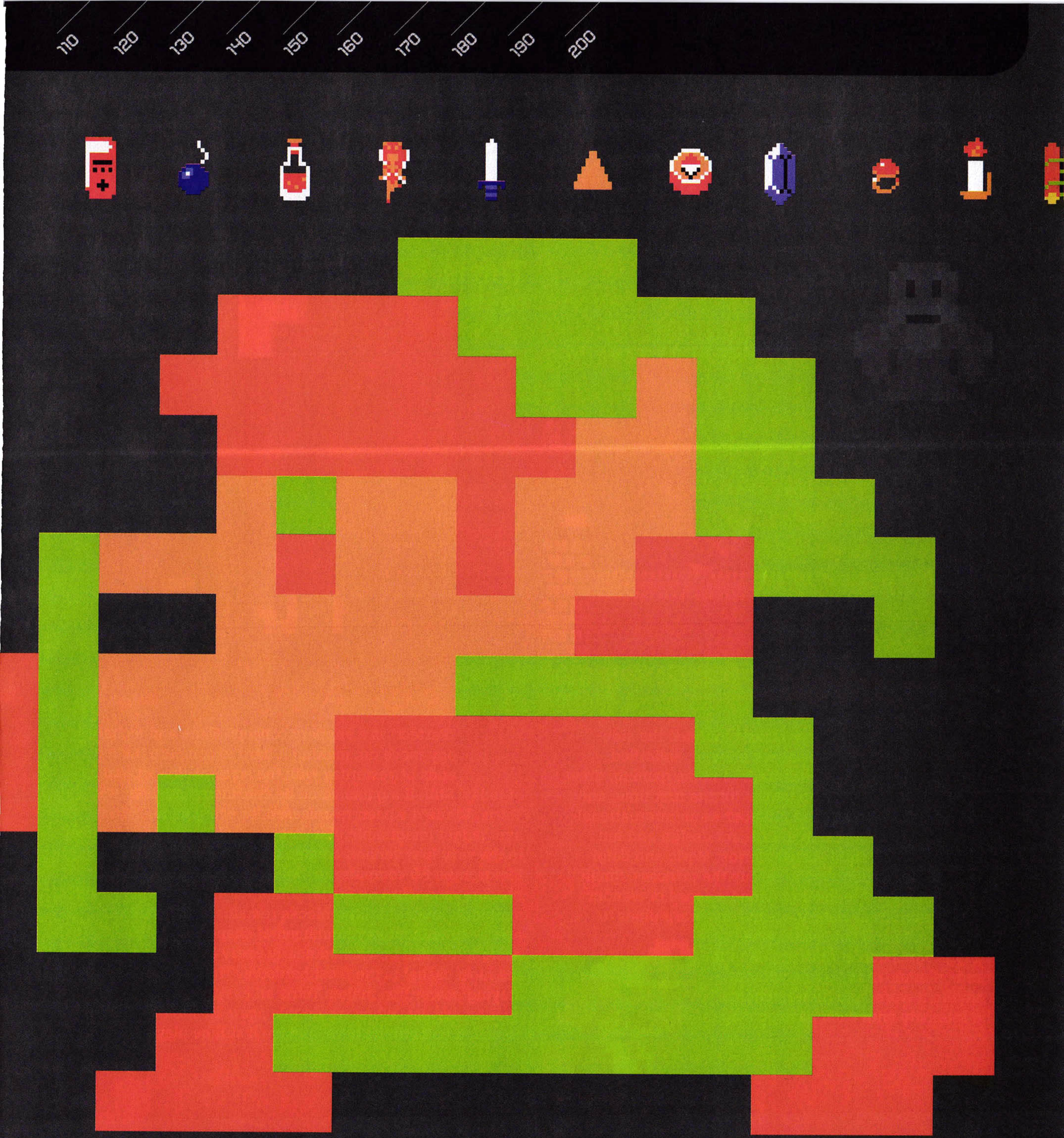


1

The Legend of Zelda

NES • 1987

How many lifelong gamers did Shigeru Miyamoto's masterpiece create? How many developers – many of them legends in their own right – cite The Legend of Zelda as a beloved inspiration? It's difficult to overstate its impact on the development of video games as entertainment, art, and cultural phenomena. On a mechanical level, very few games to this date can claim such a perfect fusion of elements as diverse as exploration, collection, puzzle solving, combat, and storytelling. From a right-brain perspective, few works capture the transcendent spirit of whimsy and adventure that The Legend of Zelda effortlessly expresses. Ahead of its time by years if not decades, Zelda is responsible for significant chunks of design that we take for granted in nearly every genre. We all owe a great debt as gamers to Miyamoto and everyone else at Nintendo who made this title possible. The Legend of Zelda is no less than the greatest game of all time.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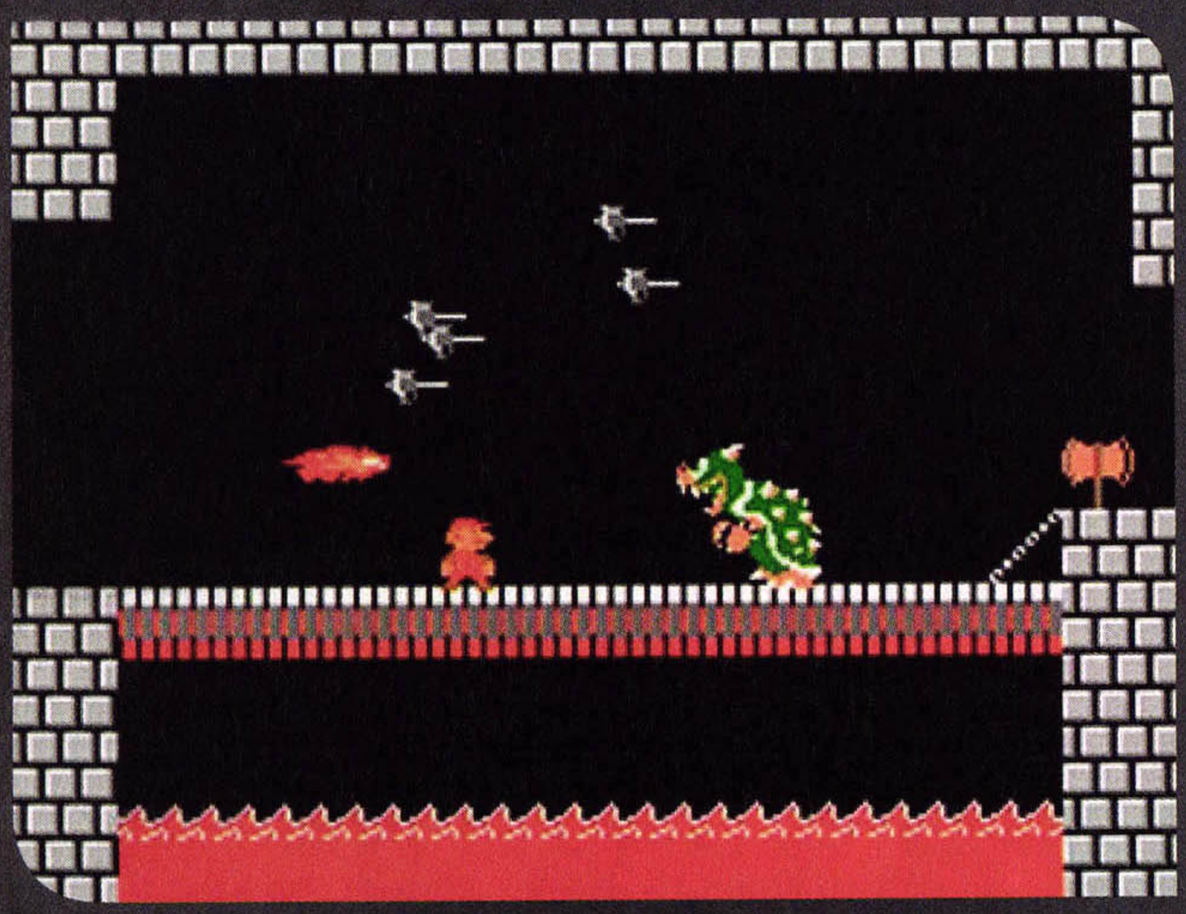
2

Super Mario Bros.

NES • 1985



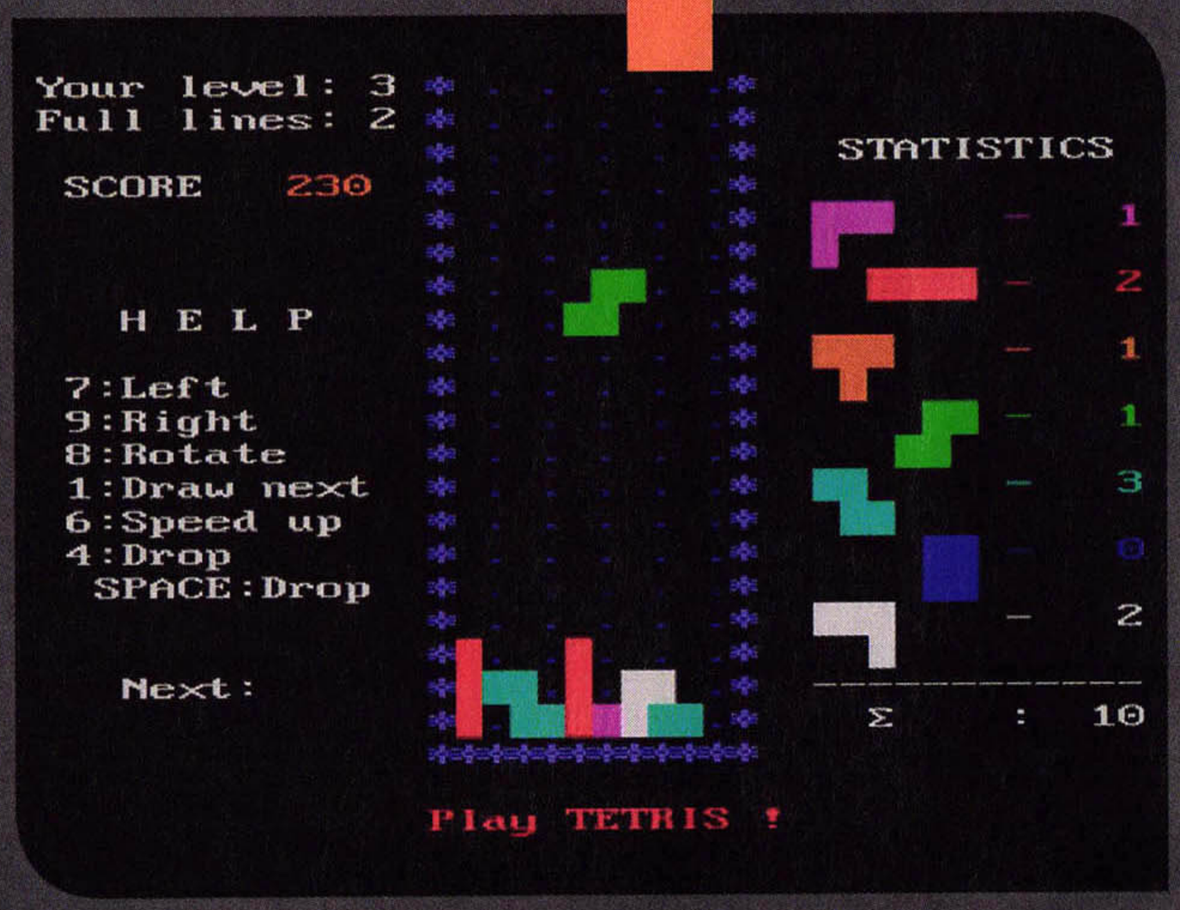
Miyamoto's definitive classic founded the side-scrolling platformer as we know it, solidified Nintendo as the benchmark in home gaming, drew millions of players into video games for the first time, and established the moustachioed plumber as an international icon. It remains a monument to brilliant design and fun gameplay. Through eight varied worlds, Mario and Luigi leapt and sprinted their way to rescue the princess. Small variations from level to level provided a sense of wonder and exploration, from watery oceans and warp pipes to darkened nights and concealed vines.

A steady progression of difficulty taught the fundamentals of the game without ever saying a word, and then ratcheted up the intensity with each passing stage.

3

Tetris

PC • 1984

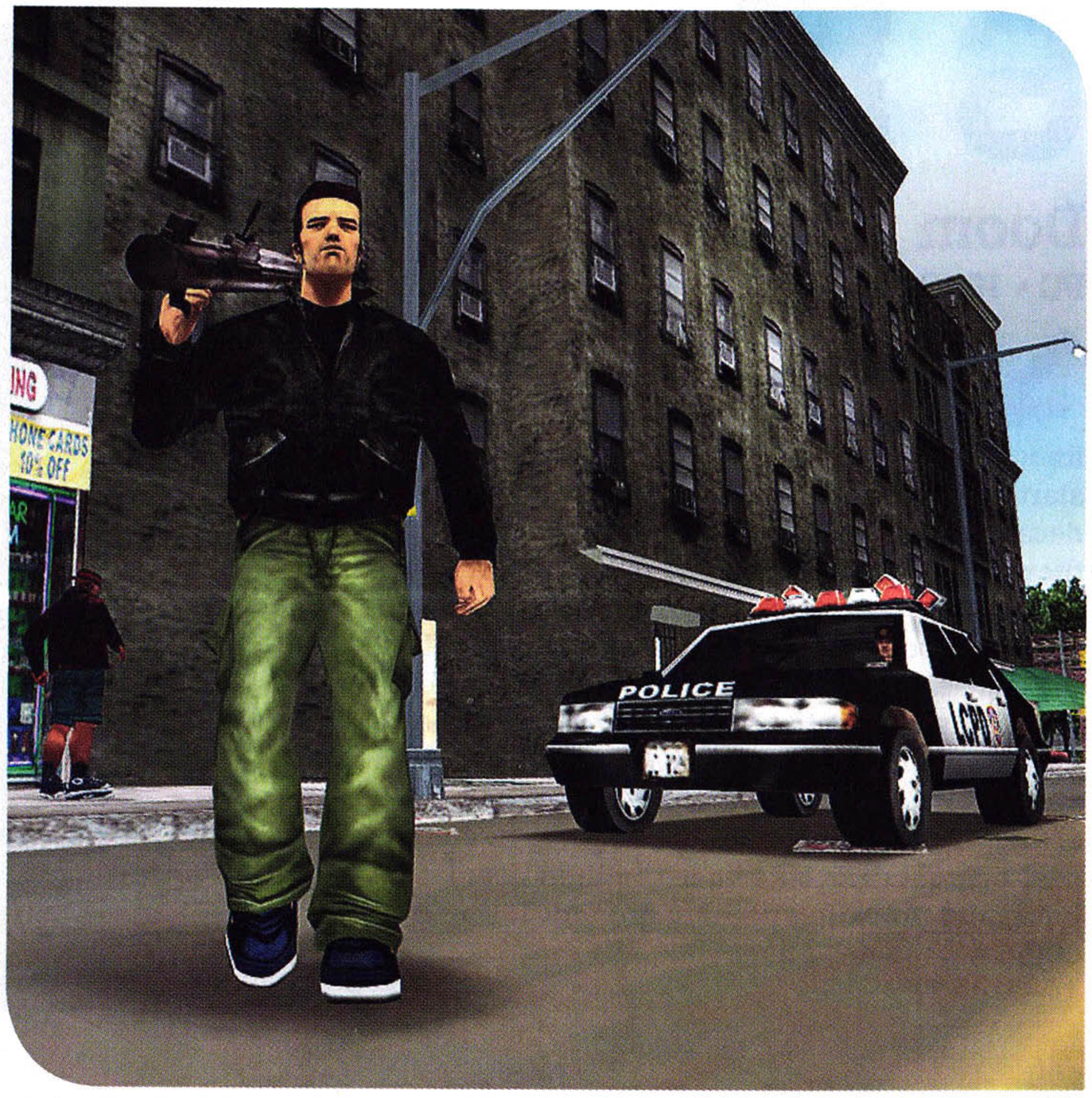


"Perfect" is a slippery concept. Time and technology move on, making it hard to compare the legends of yesterday with the state-of-the-art games of today. Still, if a game could be considered ageless, it's Tetris. While it's been re-released for every game system and gadget imaginable, the core gameplay remains identical to the very first version created by Alexey Pajitnov on an Elektronika 60 computer in 1984. Think about it. From an obscure monochrome Soviet computer to the iPhone, Tetris' simple formula of falling blocks remains as addictive as ever – all without any fundamental change to the basic design. It's also bewitched nearly every kind of gamer, from the most casual to the most hardcore. That's the kind of staying power that makes Tetris an easy pick for the third spot on our list. When we do this again in another 200 issues, it will still be here, and we'll still be playing.

4

Grand Theft Auto III

PS2 • 2001



No one left a bigger innovative footprint during the PlayStation 2 generation than Rockstar Games. Grand Theft Auto III changed the gaming landscape forever with its immersive open world sandbox that let gamers wreak havoc on a level previously unimagined. Blending elements of driving and third-person action games, the nonlinear format encouraged gamers to freely explore Liberty City and toy with its foul-mouthed citizens. With a reckless police force ready to chase you down at a moment's notice, the crowning achievement of playing GTA III wasn't finishing the smartly scripted story, it was creating enough mayhem to get a six star wanted level, at which point the National Guard hunted you down with tanks and M16s. From copycat games like Saints Row to the new era of open world sandboxes demonstrated in Infamous and Crackdown, Grand Theft Auto III's stamp on game development is everywhere.

5

Half-Life 2

PC • 2004

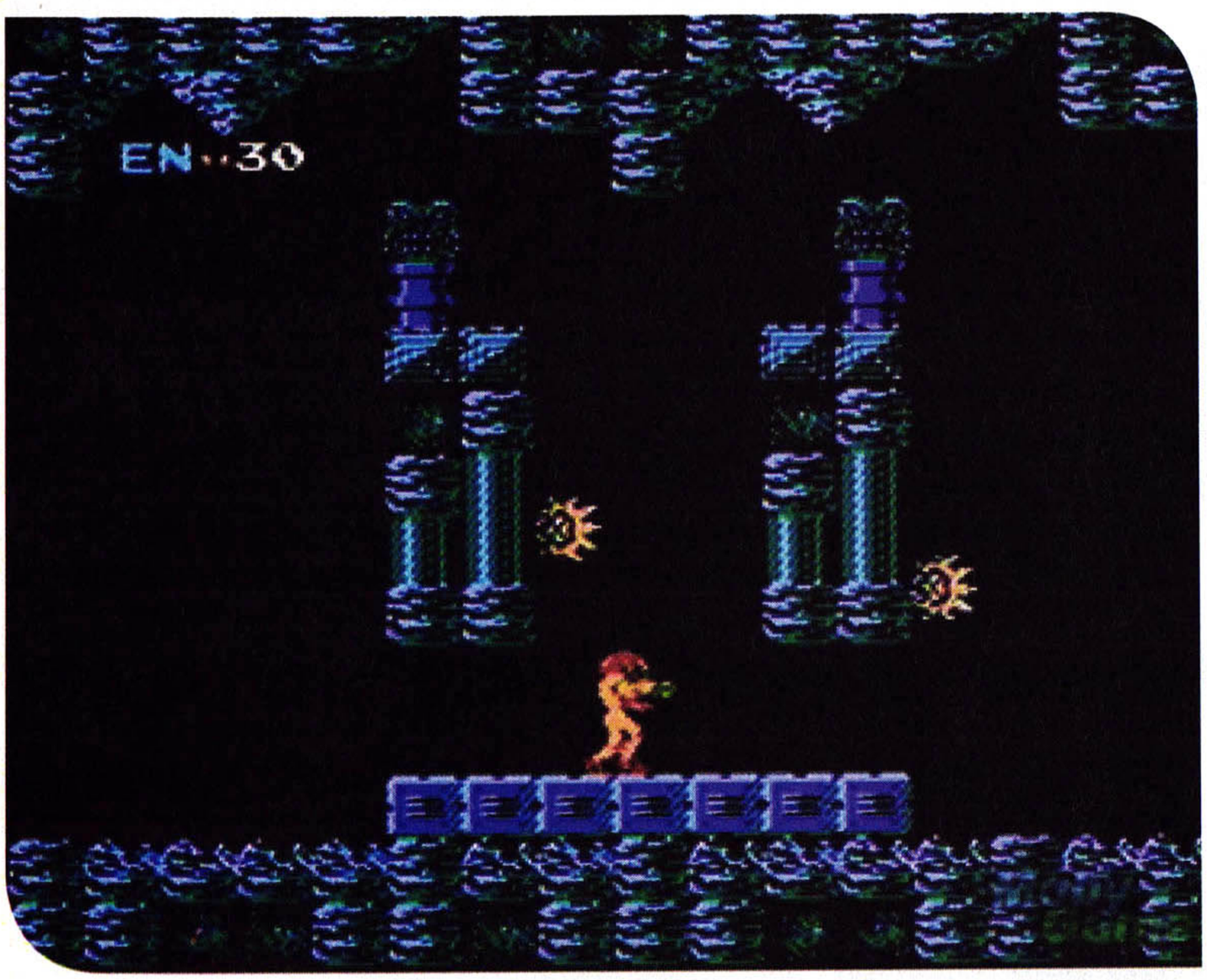
With Half-Life 2, Valve redefined the way first-person shooters were created. Other FPS games had great stories (the original Half-Life not least among them), but with Valve's masterful mix of character development, pacing, and set pieces, Half-Life 2 was the first to stand the test of time. Characters like Alyx, Barney, and Eli all featured personalities so developed that we actually started caring about them. With amazingly moody and intense levels like City 17 and Ravenholm, Valve crafted an oppressive Orwellian world the likes of which had never been realized in a video game before – and has yet to be duplicated. Developers across the world have taken note, and you should as well.

6

Doom

PC • 1993

Id Software's Wolfenstein 3D threw out the first pitch when it came to popularizing the first-person shooter, but Doom knocked it out of park, giving the genre the kick start it needed to rule the gaming landscape two decades later. Who could forget the first time they chainsawed a demon or pulled the trigger on the BFG9000? More important than the awesome weapons and setting is the inception of Internet-enabled deathmatches; legend has it that Doom co-creator John Romero coined the term. Opening up John Carmack's brilliant engine to the masses started the first widespread modding community, resulting in endless user content distributed over bulletin board systems, and providing training grounds for many of today's top designers.

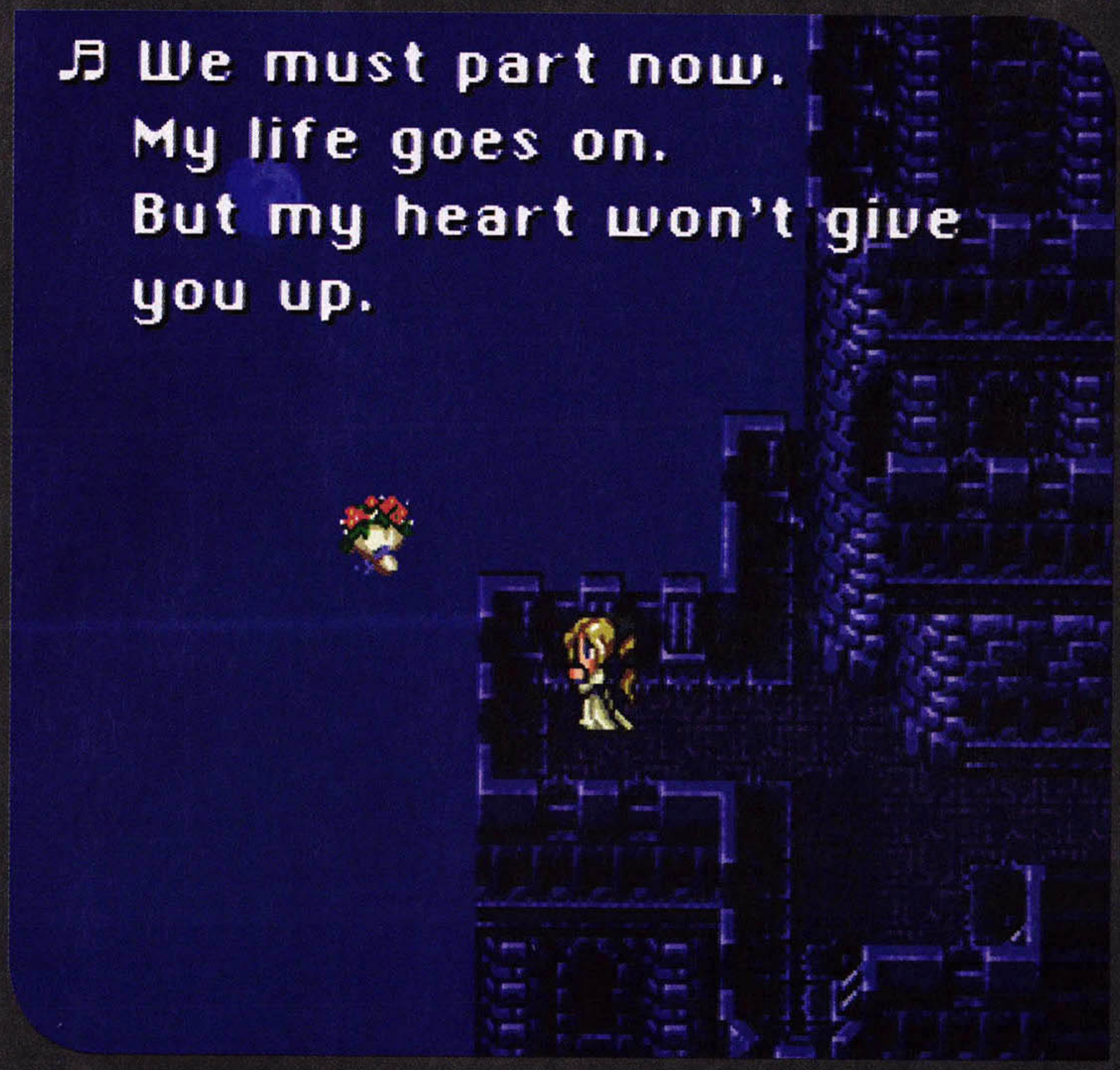


7

Metroid

NES • 1986

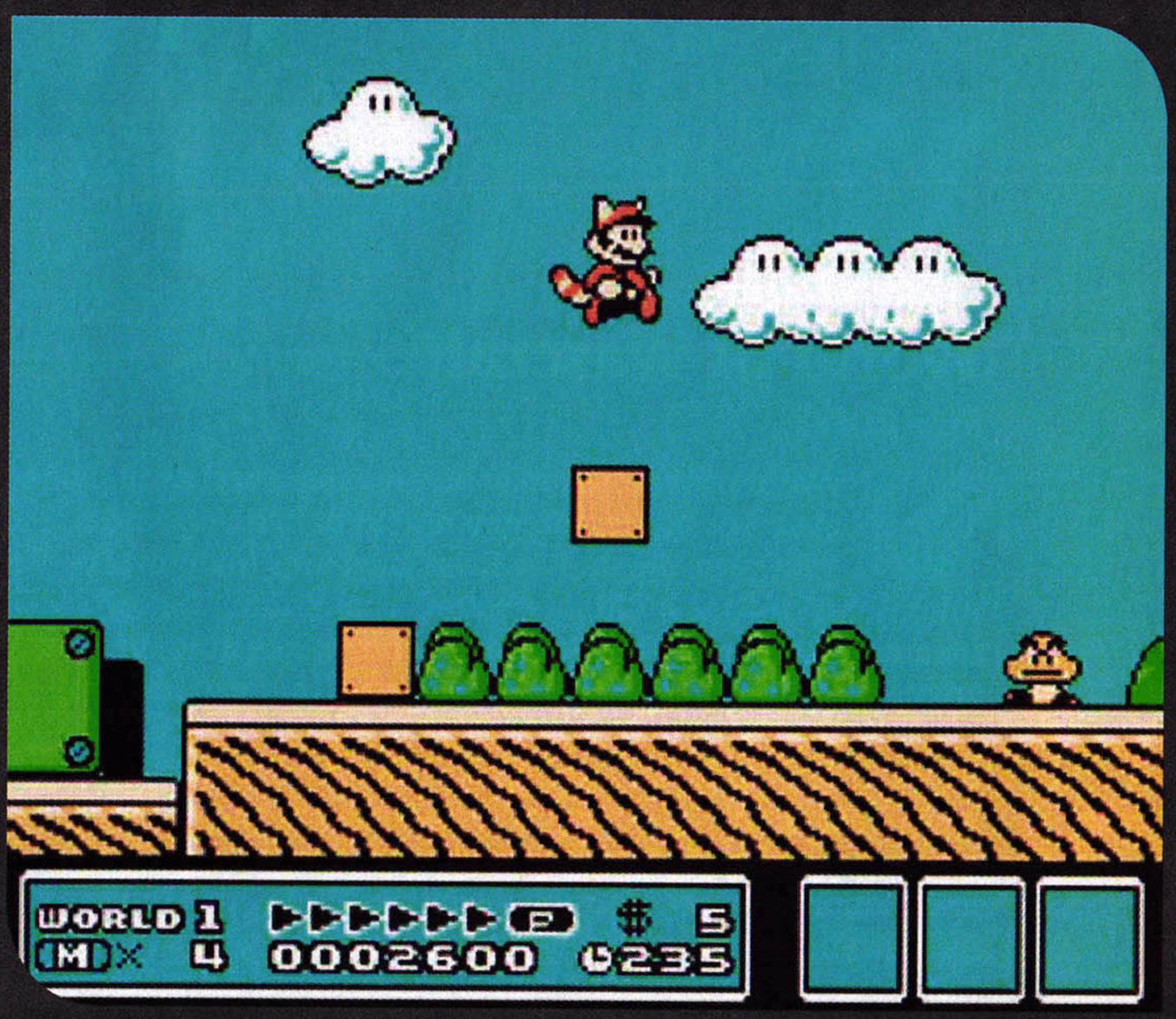
Back when most games progressed in a linear fashion, Metroid came along with its giant alien landscape and let players run in any direction. Super Metroid may have done everything bigger and flashier, but its NES brother started the concept of open exploration in games. Whether it was the first time we got our hands on the ice beam, the jaw-dropping reveal that Samus was a woman, or abusing the power of the Justin Bailey code, the original Metroid gave us some of our favorite gaming moments.



8 Final Fantasy III

SNES • 1994

Each entry in the long-running Final Fantasy series adds new features, gets prettier graphics, and innovates on the RPG genre, but they are all chasing the glory of Final Fantasy III. This installment (also known as Final Fantasy VI) perfected the 2D role-playing game. An amazing cast of characters with unique abilities gave battles unprecedented depth, the soundtrack set a new standard in video game music, and just when you thought the story was getting predictable, the whole world got destroyed. Packed with legendary moments like the opera house sequence, flying a Mode-7 airship, and confronting an angelic lunatic jester, Final Fantasy III was the best role-playing game of its day – and no one has topped it yet.



9 Super Mario Bros. 3

NES • 1990

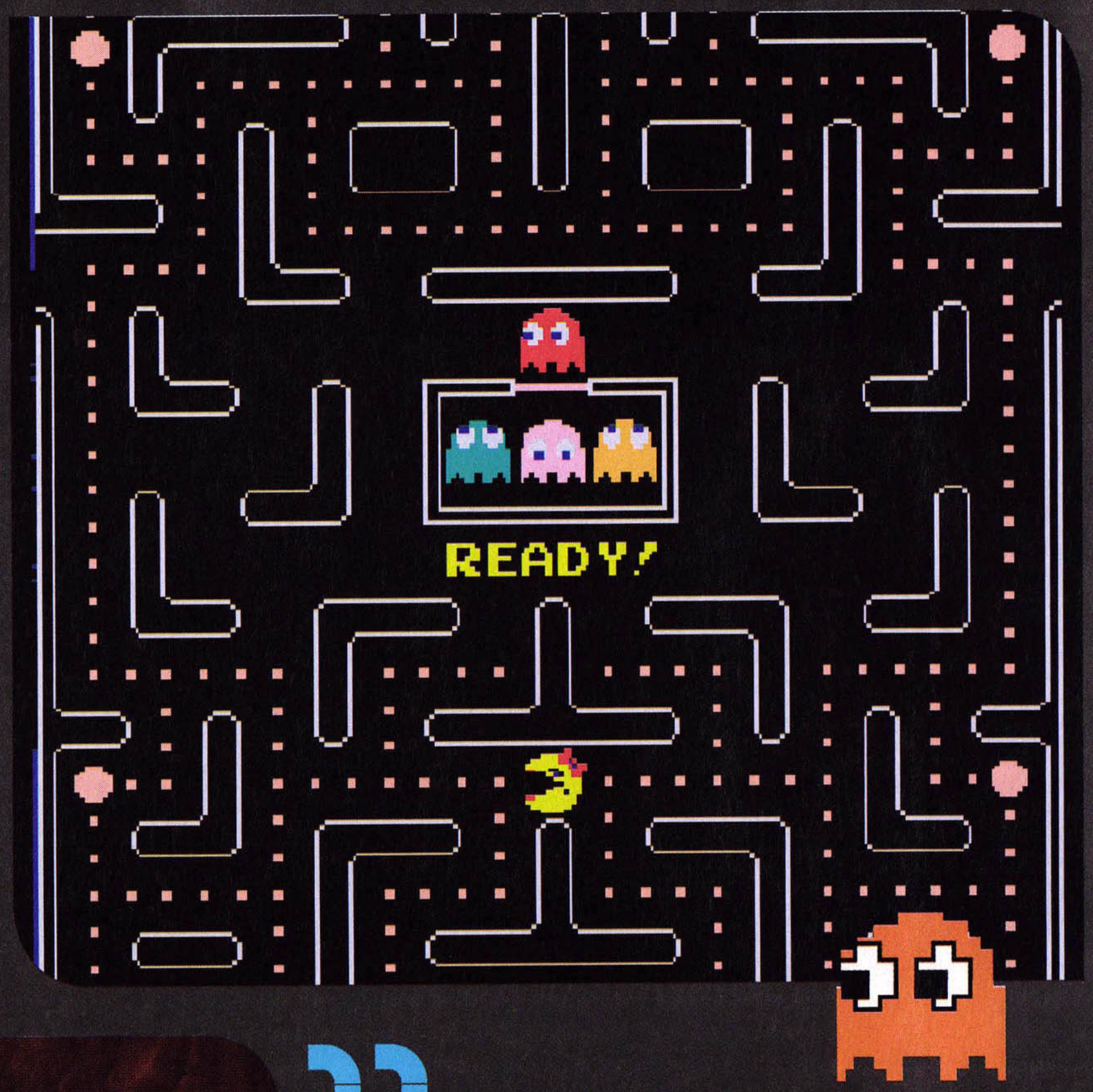
Super Mario Bros. 3 was an instant hit. Nearly 20 years later it's no surprise the game has sold more than one million units on the Wii Virtual Console alone. The unforgettable level design is still the blueprint for modern-day 2D platformers. Minigames were introduced to earn power-ups, a feature still seen in Mario titles today. The game's signature power-up, the Super Leaf, modeled the moustachioed plumber as a raccoon and propelled him above clouds to find the game's hidden treasures. With addictive platforming, colorful foes, multiple costume changes, and a bevy of secrets to uncover for added replay value, SMB 3 is a game with incredible lasting power that we won't soon forget.

10

Ms. Pac-Man

Arcade • 1981

Sometimes a great game takes months and months of hard work from a team of hundreds of specialized people, and sometimes a great game is simply made by modding a pre-existing one. When two MIT students first created a bootleg hack of Pac-Man, who knew they were helping create such an iconic symbol for girl power? With multiple maze layouts, speedier gameplay, and improved ghost AI, Ms. Pac-Man trumped her male counterpart in nearly every way. Since Ms. Pac-Man cabinets can still be found in bars, restaurants, and college campuses across the country, it's hard to argue against its lasting cultural relevance.

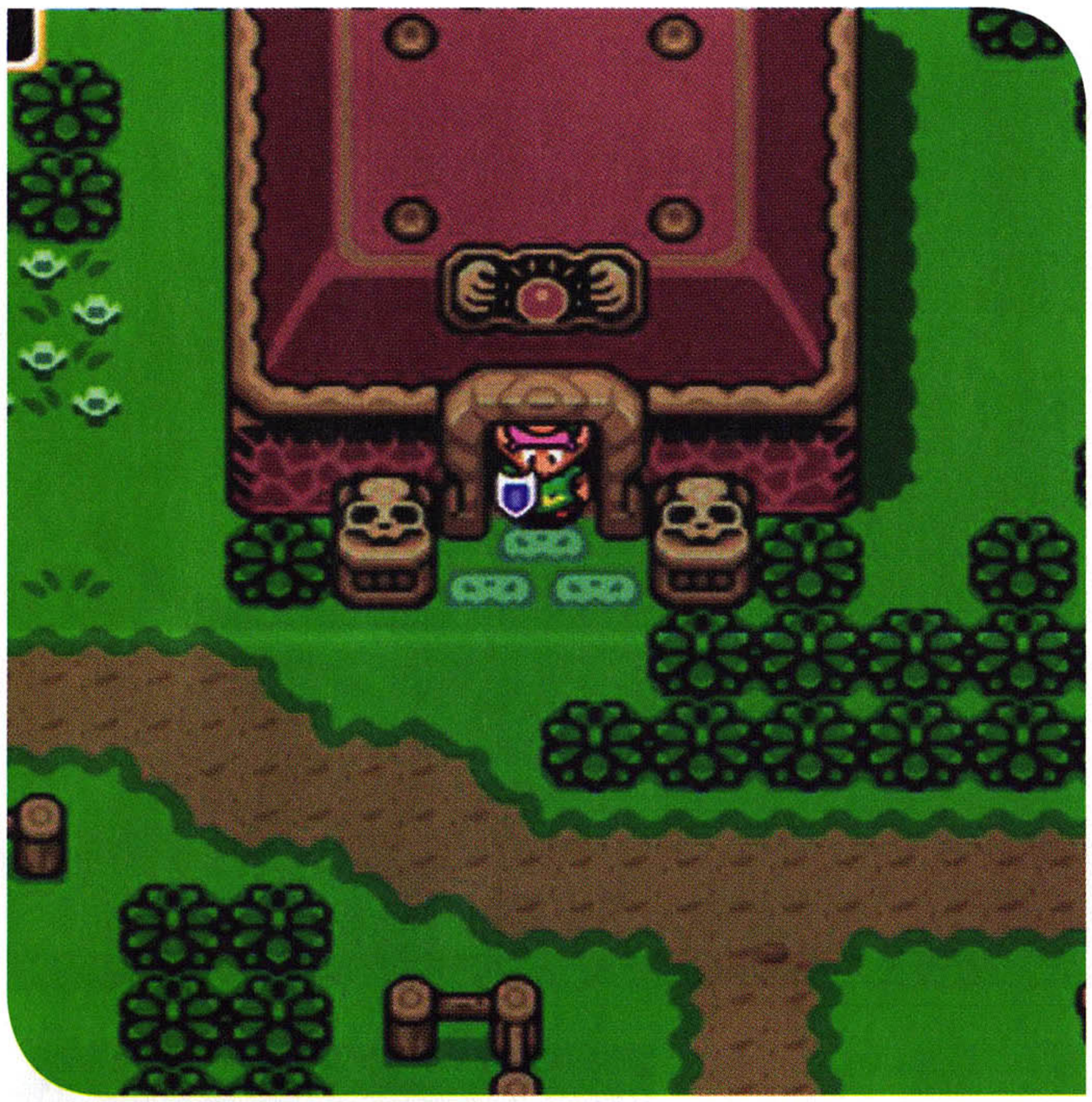


11

World of Warcraft

PC • 2004

World of Warcraft may be the most successful clone ever. For all its refinement and polish, Blizzard's MMO was created by EverQuest fans to do everything that EverQuest did, but better. Thankfully, "better" meant a number of huge improvements to questing, UI, and solo play. Blizzard also used its expertise in creating drool-worthy loot from the Diablo series to cement WoW's addictive nature. Additions to the game from the Burning Crusade and Wrath of the Lich King expansions have helped the player base continue its steady rise while allowing Blizzard to expand the genre through narrative-driven questlines and user-friendly raiding. Many gamers have five years of WoW time under their belts and still aren't ready to stop. How many other games can claim as much?



12

The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past

SNES • 1992

The original Zelda had a tremendous impact on gaming, but the franchise's SNES debut polished and improved upon its core elements to a degree few could have expected. Link still scoured dungeons for keys, bested giant bosses, and saved the girl, but it was done on a much larger scale than the original. The overworld was bigger and littered with countless secrets, the visuals were stunning, and the alternate Dark World introduced an element of gameplay not seen before in the series. Thankfully, gamers had access to an arsenal of fun weapons and gadgets to help them on their quest to defeat Ganon. A sure-fire sign of a great game is its ability to stand the test of time, and Link to the Past remains a blast today.

13

Super Mario 64

N64 • 1996

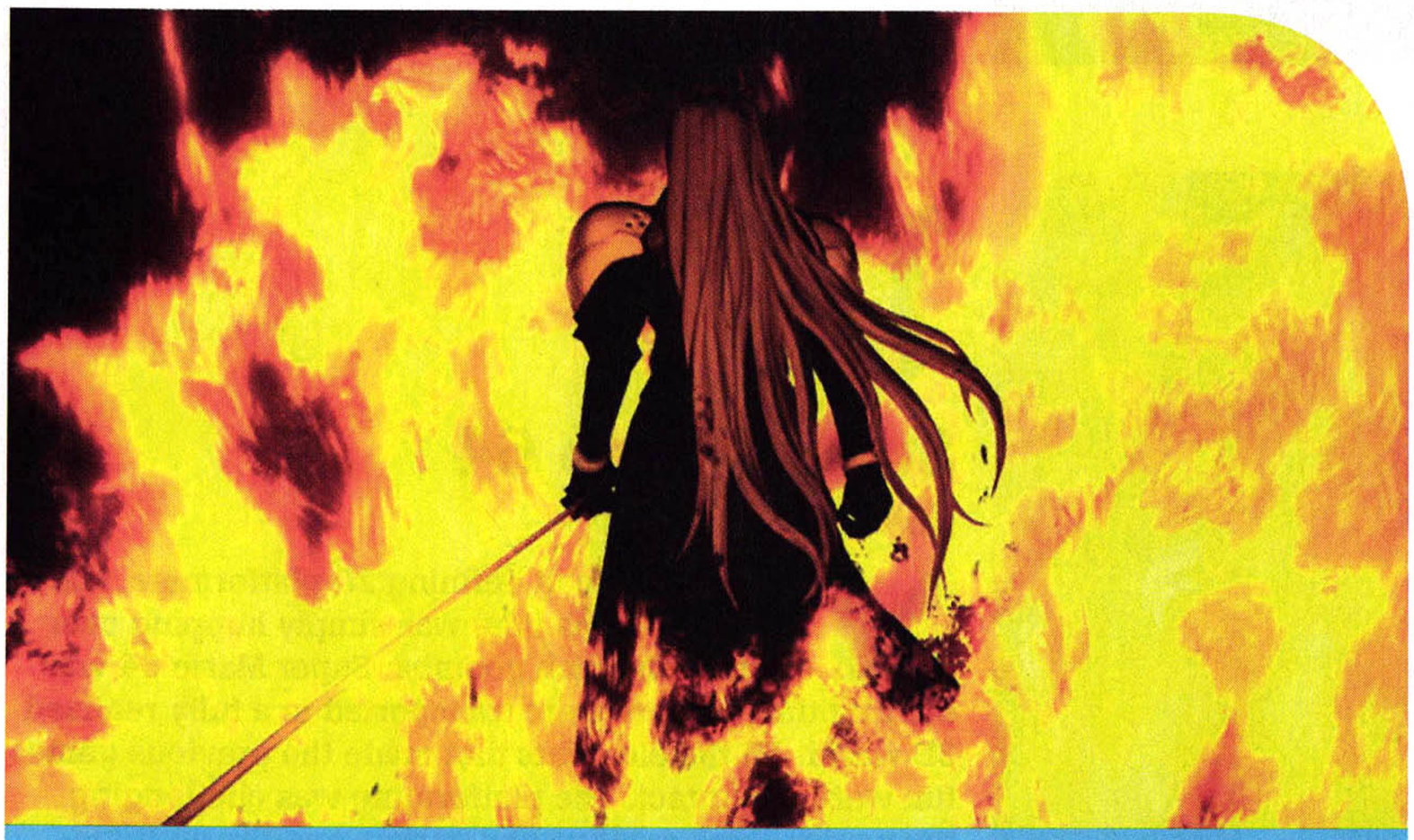
After a decade of defining 2D platformers, Mario leapt into 3D as if he was simply hopping over another sluggish goomba. Super Mario 64 was the first time players were transported to a fully realized 3D world. All the elements that made the previous games fun were still intact. The platforming was challenging, the worlds were creative and varied, and the multifaceted gameplay captivated gamers to the very end. Koopa troopas, piranha plants, and countless other classic characters also made the transition, including a gargantuan Bowser that finally fit the role of gaming's biggest villain. Only "I always getta da shaft!" Luigi was missing from this groundbreaking title.

14

Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare

PS3, 360, PC • 2007

Modern Warfare left a crater in the gaming landscape large enough to unseat the Halo juggernaut as the most-played game on Xbox Live. The multiplayer won over the hardcore with its best-in-class controls, addictive level progression, creative game modes, and customizable weapon loadouts. As great as the multiplayer is, the watercooler moments took place in the balls-to-the-wall single-player campaign. The sniper mission, the nuclear blast, the AC130 – Modern Warfare's frantic action set pieces created a new high bar for craftsmanship in video games.

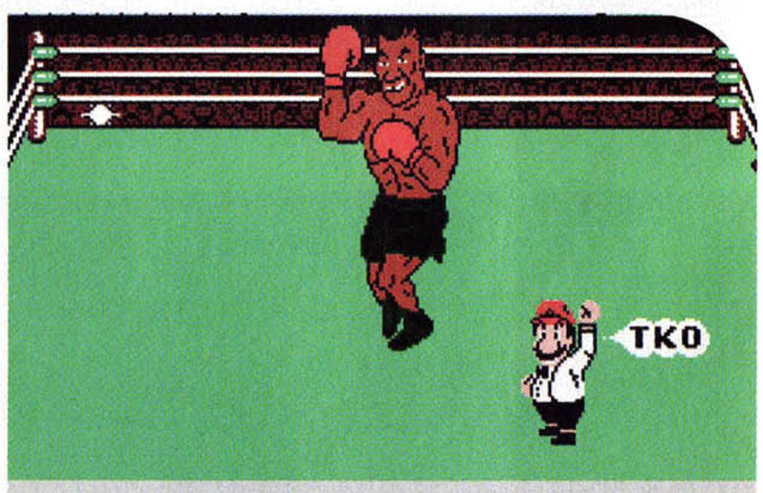


15

Final Fantasy VII

PSone • 1997

We could talk about how Final Fantasy VII's CG cutscenes ushered in a new era of video game storytelling, or how the awesome materia system gave players tons of flexibility in managing character abilities. We could even talk about how the visually outstanding summon sequences – some of which clock in at nearly a full minute – opened gamers' eyes to the possibilities of 3D visuals. Regardless of how many of this game's redeeming qualities we point out, it will always be remembered best for one word: Sephiroth. With a long black coat and a lady friend-killing katana, Sephiroth played the part of the megalomaniacal, godlike supervillain like no one before or since. Oh, and Cloud was alright, too.



16

Mike Tyson's Punch-Out!!

NES • 1987

It's bizarre in retrospect, but Mike Tyson was the star of a first-party Nintendo game. Before the controversy, Iron Mike starred in one of the most charming games ever made. Punch-Out took boxing far beyond reality to a place where odd, semi-magical cartoon characters exchanged blows with a little squirt named Mac. Punch-Out's genius lies in the fact that it wasn't really a sports title; each boxer's patterns and timing created an odd mix of the puzzle and rhythm genres. By forcing you to crack each character's pattern, then pull off the moves correctly, the game was impossible to resist. Two decades on, we still remember how to KO a charging Bald Bull – a testament to this game's staying power.

17 Chrono Trigger

SNES • 1995

Calling Chrono Trigger a JRPG is a disservice. While it fits nicely into anime design conventions and features turn-based battles, this ground-breaking SNES game also eschews many of the elements that drive people away from the genre. Between the lack of random battles and the surprisingly well-written time-travel story, there's plenty here for even those who typically dislike JRPGs to fall in love with. If the great plot and fast-paced fights aren't enough to convince you, Square also used Chrono Trigger to introduce the idea of "new game plus," opening the game up to multiple replays in order to unlock a dozen possible endings.

19 Metal Gear Solid

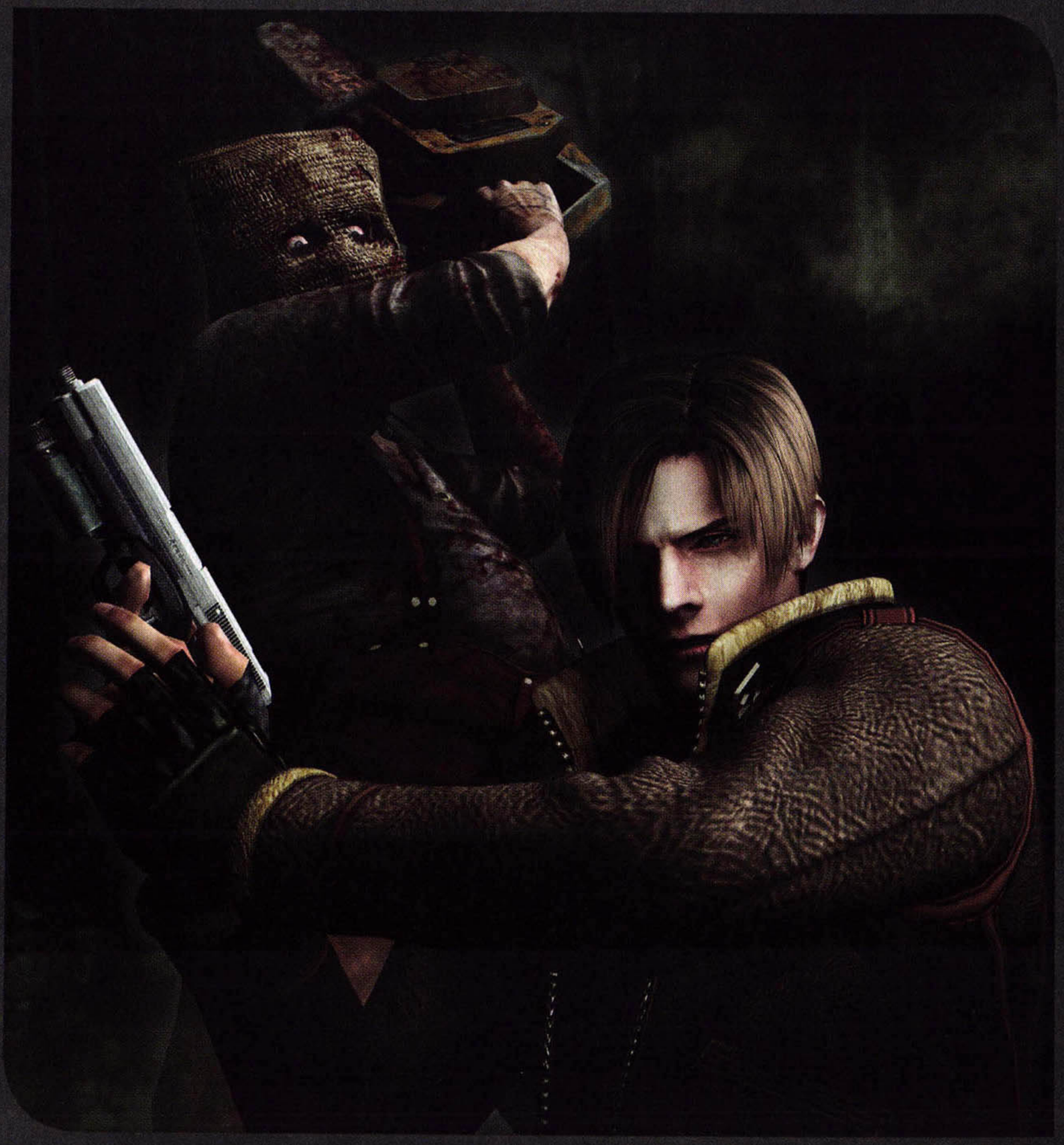
PSone • 1998

Prior to Metal Gear Solid's release in 1998, high-quality cutscenes were scarce and voice acting was nearly non-existent. With Snake's infiltration of Shadow Moses, gamers got their first glimpse at a future where games featured production values nearly on par with big-budget action blockbusters. This first adventure in the Solid saga introduced Revolver Ocelot and Liquid Snake to the Metal Gear universe, along with the eccentric collection of bosses known as FOXHOUND. Anyone who has played it surely has fond memories of sneaking around in the iconic cardboard box or Psycho Mantis moving their DualShock via telekinesis.

18 Resident Evil 4

GameCube • 2005

Influential video game series are driven into the dirt regularly, but rarely does a game rise like a phoenix from those ashes like Resident Evil 4. This former GameCube exclusive reinvented the series that popularized the survival horror genre and simultaneously introduced a fresh third-person shooting mechanic still seen in many games today. Cutting fat from the original RE games, RE 4 focused on intense shooting and action segments. The tension was amplified when Capcom traded the shambling, dim-witted zombies for the quick and intelligent Las Plagas. Resident Evil's Spanish excursion was a far cry from a traditional Resident Evil game, but the fun it packed completely blasted away any regret over the franchise's change in vision.



20

The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time

N64 • 1998

A massive critical and commercial success, Ocarina of Time became the standard to which all other action/adventure games were held. Fans of the franchise were enraptured by their first chance to explore Hyrule in 3D. The improved graphics also allowed for more complex and creative puzzles – the most notable being those that exploited the time traveling mechanic. New abilities inherent to a mature Link were balanced by challenges solvable only by the pint-sized version of the protagonist, resulting in dozens upon dozens of missions and sidequests between the alternate existences. Combined with Koji Kondo's unforgettable melodies, challenging dungeons, inspired boss battles, and an epic finale, few can forget their lengthy and immensely satisfying time in Hyrule.

21

Super Metroid

SNES • 1994

Samus Aran's first adventure may have broken barriers, but her outing on the Super Nintendo established a framework that would inspire franchises from Castlevania to Shadow Complex. Super Metroid delivered a perfect storm of upgrades and secrets, and provided players with an unparalleled freedom to explore an entire world of unearthly curiosities.

22

Contra

NES • 1988

In the days of the NES there was no finer simultaneous co-op experience than this. Nothing helped even the odds against the hordes of Red Falcon like Contra's magnificent spread gun, except perhaps the most famous cheat of all time: the Konami Code. The average player needed all 30 lives to make it past the barrage of deadly bullets, trecherous waterfalls, spiked crushers, massive bosses, and killer shrimp.

23 Galaga

Arcade • 1981

Many people believe Galaxian is the sequel to Galaga. This is a common mistake, but it's the other way around. Galaxian was a fine game, but it didn't set the world on fire or steal or quarters like its superior sequel did. Riding pitch-perfect intensity from stage to stage, this shooter put gamers' skills to the test, and offered a unique risk/reward element where you could let an enemy beam away your ship with the hope that you could intercept it before it left the screen. If you liberated your ship, you received its support, meaning double the firepower. Today, Galaga has lost none of its luster. This is a timeless masterpiece that brings out competitive spirits and reminds us that Space Invaders' protective shields are for noobs.

24 Castlevania: Symphony of the Night

PSone • 1997

The formula was invented by Metroid, but this reinvention of the Castlevania franchise might be the most successful reboot to date. By jazzing up the exploration and fast-paced combat it cribbed from Samus with RPG-like depth in character progression and item drops, Symphony of the Night delighted Castlevania stalwarts while introducing a whole new generation to the classic series. The supremely campy dialogue, which may as well have been written and performed by programmers, just makes SotN all the more beloved.

25 Street Fighter II

Arcade • 1991

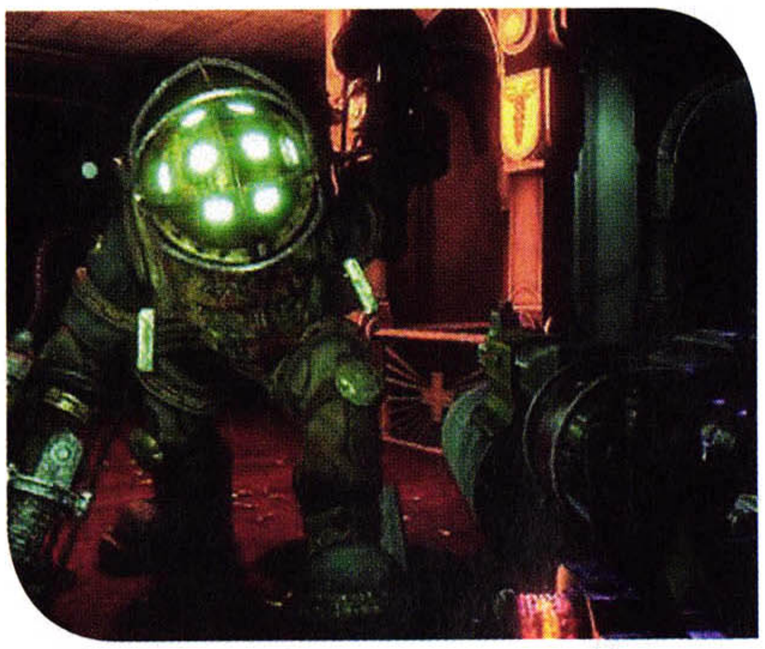
This is where the fighting craze began. People crowded into arcades to watch frenzied bouts between Street Fighter II's world warriors, waiting for a turn to demonstrate their skills and put their quarters on the line. All eight fighters had a diverse arsenal of special moves that could be executed in a flash with specific joystick motions and button presses. It may not sound revolutionary now, but that's because every fighting game since owes its existence to Street Fighter II.

26

God of War

PS2 • 2005

Kratos redefined the term "epic" in this blood-soaked revenge tale. God of War used context-sensitive button-presses (before they were everywhere) to treat gamers to visceral and cinematic kills, but even the regular combat was full of gorgeous, fluid action. Swinging his chain blades and mutilating anything that got in his way, Kratos allowed gamers to unleash their dark sides through his wanton acts of brutality against beasts and deities alike.



27 BioShock

Xbox 360, PC • 2007

A simple request for aid over an old-time radio signal took on a whole new meaning in 2007's atmospheric adventure, and BioShock catapulted into the status of an instant classic. Brilliantly paced storytelling, vibrant environments, and mature philosophical themes melded to set a new standard in the medium. Frantic firefights with hulking Big Daddies and disturbing encounters with vulnerable Little Sisters framed a powerful and strikingly original gameplay model. Andrew Ryan's dystopian vision may have been a terribly flawed and misguided dream, but BioShock promised a bright future for gaming.

28 Diablo II

PC • 2000

Just one more level. Just one more weapon upgrade. Just one more legion of demonic enemies dead at my feet. If you've ever touched Diablo II, you know this feeling all too well. We're all addicted to gaming, but it's rare for a single game to inspire this many sleepless nights of endless clicking, looting, and grinding through hell over and over again.

29

Half-Life

PC • 1998

Half-Life almost didn't find a publisher because the game was seen as too ambitious, but a dedicated group of ex-Microsoft employees took the concept of a story-driven FPS filled with puzzles and platforming elements and delivered on every front. Half-Life told a mature, subtle narrative about a theoretical physicist's harrowed escape from a secret underground research facility, but Half-Life's most notable contribution to the form was its use of scripted sequences and a storytelling structure that never took control of the game away from the player.

30

The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion

360, PC • 2006

Upon its release, The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion redefined the term "next-gen." Bethesda's masterpiece was a massive world filled with wonders and magic, allowing players to go anywhere, steal anything, and be as mean or nice as they wanted. The world really was your oyster (or mud crab). Bethesda also used the game to experiment with the then-unknown world of DLC and helped define what it is today.

31

Tecmo Super Bowl

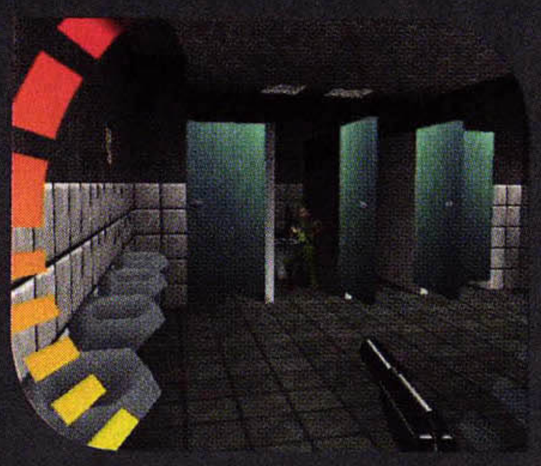
NES • 1991

There are sports games, and then there is Tecmo Super Bowl, a gaming experience so pure and addictive that hardcore fans still upload new team rosters and play it online to this day. The first football game to use the NFL and NFLPA licenses in tandem was also responsible for several other firsts in sports games – player attributes, substitutions, editable playbooks, injuries, a season mode, a Pro Bowl, and stat tracking among the most important.

32

GoldenEye 007

N64 • 1997



Many 20-somethings neglected mounds of homework in their junior high years thanks to Rare's take on Pierce Brosnan's Bond debut. Escaping the notoriously terrible reputation of movie-to-game adaptations, GoldenEye 007 adhered to the plot of the film while delivering a rock-solid console FPS experience. Multiplayer kept gamers playing long into the night, and countless fights were likely started over someone's jerk friend picking Oddjob.

33 Super Mario Kart

SNES • 1992

Combining wacky combat racing with adorable characters and inventive tracks was so successful that Super Mario Kart created a genre that remains a gaming stalwart to this day. The design skillfully walks the tightrope between "fun for all ages" and "victory is solely determined by a die roll" that so many games of all eras and genres fail to achieve. Super Mario Kart is one of the all-time greats at entrancing a group of friends on a couch, Mode-7 graphics or no.

34 Sonic the Hedgehog

Gensis • 1991

Sonic the Hedgehog ran circles around Mario when he debuted as Sega's new mascot, single-handedly carrying the Genesis through the early console wars. The blue blur took fast-paced platforming and great stage design to a new level, topping the experience off with a polished soundtrack and robust Robotnik boss fights. This spry rodent left the entirety of the early '90s choking on his dust and edgy 'tude.

35 StarCraft

PC • 1998

How many games are played competitively more than a decade after their release? True mastery of StarCraft's delicately balanced blend of metagame strategy and twitch skill is an ideal yet to be attained; there is always a way to improve one's game, even for the pros. Like all the great competitive games – video or analog – there's always another layer or a new winning strategy to be found in StarCraft. And there's always a Korean player online waiting to crush you with it.

36 Civilization

PC • 1991

Sid Meier's masterpiece put the turn-based strategy genre on the map. The novelty of guiding a culture from the prehistoric era to the nuclear age by exploring surroundings, expanding borders, researching technology, building cities, and warring with rival nations was an enthralling experience unlike anything else of its time. Almost two decades later, the ingenious gameplay still stands as one of gaming's great achievements.

37 SimCity

PC • 1989

When SimCity released, kids no longer wanted to grow up to be astronauts or sports stars – they were suddenly exclaiming, "I want to be a city planner!" As designer Will Wright's first big success, SimCity's intricacies of zoning, traffic control, and budget management made for an undeniably addictive and entertaining experience. Its popularity cemented the simulation genre as an industry staple, and the its design continues to influence game development today.

38 Mega Man 2

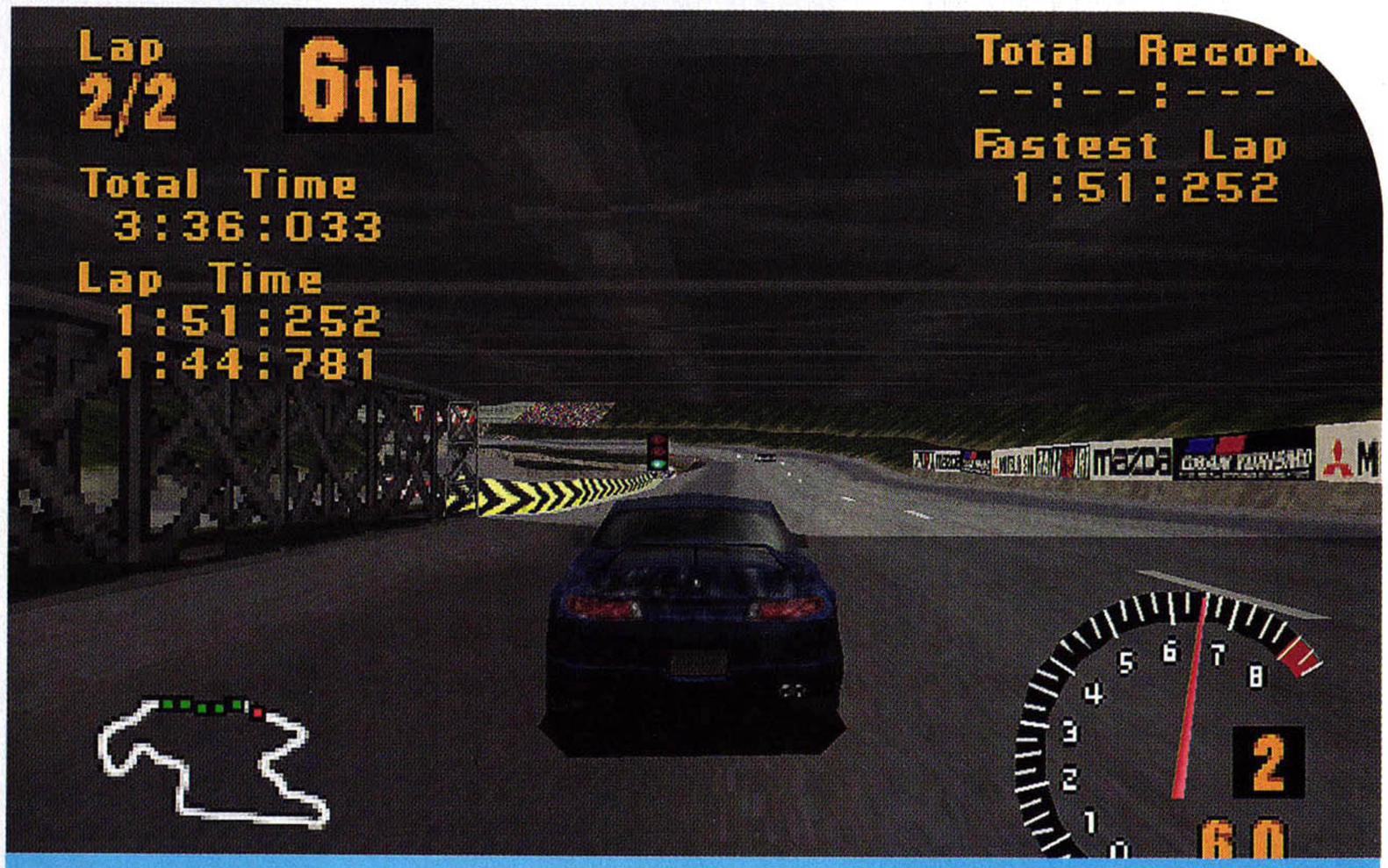
NES • 1988

Mega Man 2 was condensed perfection of what the classic action-platforming franchise was all about. Eight worlds ruled by tenacious robot masters such as Air Man and Wood Man awaited challenge-hungry gamers. A polished boss vulnerability cycle allowed knowledgeable players to fell the myriad nemeses with ease after you killed that chump Metal Man. Throw in amazingly catchy music, a Wily fortress that's actually fun, and the faux-twist ending, and you easily have the best Mega Man game created.

39 Halo: Combat Evolved

Xbox • 2001

The title that made Microsoft a player in the gaming industry brought countless new gamers into the modern era of shooters. Halo gave Xbox owners a perfectly balanced adventure through a brand new sci-fi universe filled with ancient alien ruins and a deadly threat to humanity. A stunning and evocative musical score set the tone for Master Chief's adventures, in which the battles were frenzied and the enemies ruthlessly efficient. An immaculately tuned multiplayer component set the standard for that generation of systems, and millions learned the joy of LAN parties for the very first time.



40 Gran Turismo

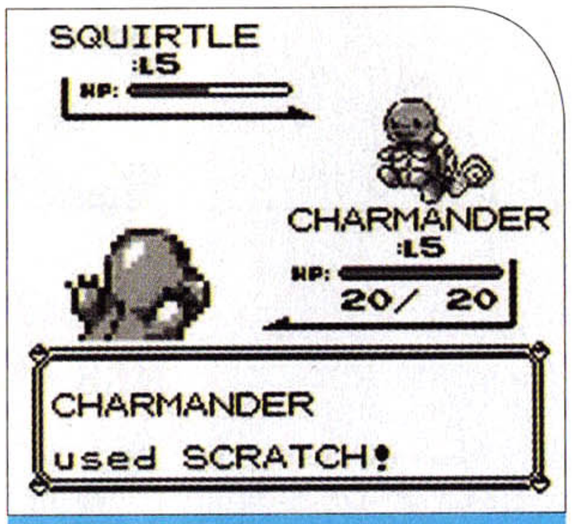
PSone • 1998

Simulation-based racers are the way they are because of Gran Turismo. With a car list in the hundreds, faithful replications of real-life tracks, and (for the time) gorgeous graphics, this game set the standard for the sub-genre. Gran Turismo made driving your Dodge Neon fun because the game's physics engine put the torque and HP of its 500 cars – including concept cars and other exotic rides – totally in your control.

41 Resident Evil 2

PSone • 1998

The first Resident Evil started the survival horror craze, but Resident Evil 2 showed us how to do it well. As the T-virus began to overwhelm Raccoon City, rookie cop Leon Kennedy and Chris Redfield's college-age sister Claire got caught in the chaos. Strict management of your inventory was necessary to push through RE 2's oppressive atmosphere, but dedicated players were rewarded with a slightly different experience when they played through a second time with a different character.



42 Pokémon Red and Blue

Game Boy • 1996

Pokémon Red and Blue was the beginning of the hysteria that turned into a multi-billion dollar franchise. The games engaged players with monster collecting, battling, and a trading system that introduced a new level of interactivity between portable game systems. Once thought to be a fad, the series has maintained success through dozens of releases and shows no signs of fading.

44 EverQuest

PC • 1999

EverQuest was so good that a significant chunk of the industry has been remaking it in the decade since its launch. By learning a few key lessons from Ultima Online and creating a truly 3D online world, EQ was solely responsible for an unprecedented spike in the popularity of the massively multiplayer online role-playing genre. A lot of people around the world have strong feelings about it, but whatever else can be said about EQ, you can't deny its impact on gaming history.

45 Final Fantasy Tactics

PSone • 1998

When Square brought in the team that created Tactics Ogre (see entry 199) to give the Final Fantasy name a top-tier strategy game, it became an unforgettable blend of deep story and polished gameplay. Building and customizing your army in anticipation of the battle ahead was addictive, and the chess-like battles would last over an hour yet feel like a few minutes. The epic, engrossing story that kept us hooked was classic Square through and through.

43

Final Fantasy X

PS2 • 2001

Final Fantasy X will forever be remembered for setting a new technological bar for the series. FF X's graphics exceeded the standards set by predecessors and peers alike, making it nearly impossible to forget the first time we saw Yuna, a bead of sweat falling from her brow as she stumbled from the Chamber of Fayth. Graphical prowess, the series debut of voice acting, and the simultaneously epic and nuanced story made FF X the most engaging and cinematic RPG of its day. Top off the title with innovations in combat and the addition of the sphere grid, and players couldn't help but come back and save the world of Spira time and time again.

110 120 130 140 150 160 170 180 190 200

46 Grand Theft Auto IV

PS3, 360 • 2008

Niko Bellic's bastardized twist on the American Dream blew our minds with its vastly improved combat, intelligently written story, and chaotic multiplayer. But the biggest draw was exploring the fully realized NYC doppelganger, Liberty City. Hit the strip club with a friend, watch *Republican Space Rangers* on TV, go on a date to a comedy club – the options for killing time between killing criminals are endless.

47 Super Mario World

SNES • 1991

Incredible graphics, sound, and gameplay signaled that lightning could strike twice on Nintendo's second home console. Since players could finally save their progress, Nintendo crammed Super Mario World with loads of content. Many stages had multiple exits that unlocked secret paths – most notably the unusual and challenging Star Road. And don't forget the first appearance of Mario's dino pal, Yoshi.

48 Deus Ex

PC • 2000

Few settings approach the cohesion and verisimilitude of Deus Ex's near-future Earth. Fewer still have the gameplay chops to flesh out such a world into a deeply compelling interactive experience. Each individual element of Deus Ex could have been a good game in its own right, from the stealthy (and/or explosive, depending on how you play) first-person action to the gripping, player-driven story. Taken as a whole, the game is an unquestioned masterpiece.

49 Guitar Hero

PS2 • 2005

Who knew the niche music game market could ever turn into the behemoth industry force it has become? Neither music peripherals nor falling gems were new ideas in 2005, but Harmonix's pitch-perfect implementation of the rock star fantasy certainly was, and the crowds poured in. Great covers of rock classics and an addictive progression of difficulty made this the title that showed millions of non-gamers the joys of the hobby. Four years later, the fundamental gameplay model remains largely unchanged.

50

Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty

PS2 • 2001

Following up the original Metal Gear Solid seemed like an impossible task, but this sequel honed the stealth/action formula to a razor-sharp edge. The graphics were amazing, the boss fights were the epitome of cool, and the storyline took gamers down the rabbit hole with multiple layers of double-crosses and hidden agendas. Once you got over the shock of Raiden as the new protagonist, the surprises just kept coming.

51 Super Mario Galaxy

Wii • 2007

Mario's intergalactic effort on the Wii delivered perfect platforming to hardcore Nintendo fans hungry for the plumber's next big excursion. Between running upside down on miniature planets, rocketing through space toward other stellar bodies, and flying around as an adorable bumblebee, Super Mario Galaxy injected new and exciting life into a genre which had collected dust. The game was so well received that it spurred Nintendo to announce Super Mario Galaxy 2 only two years later.

52 Pac-Man

Arcade • 1980

One day, Toru Awatani looked down at a pizza that had one slice missing. In that moment, gaming's first icon was born. Pac-Man didn't kick off the video game craze; games like Space Invaders were there first. However, Pac-Man gave games something they'd never had before: an identifiable character. The craze spawned lunch boxes, T-shirts, and a cartoon series, paving the way for every game franchise to come. This game's brilliant gameplay remains as engaging as it was the day it hit arcades.

53 Battlefield 2

PC • 2005

Piggybacking off the popular Desert Combat mod for Battlefield 1942, Battlefield 2 took the already innovative multiplayer shooter series to new levels. With the addition of progressive online stat broadcasting, item unlocks, and the squad system, BF 2 reset the mold for how multiplayer shooters are designed. The massive maps, giant vehicle roster, and huge community meant that each match was an epic fight full of mayhem and destruction from every direction.

54 Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic

Xbox • 2003

Star Wars fans can argue about which film in the original trilogy is the best, but there is no debate regarding which Star Wars game reigns supreme: it's Knights of the Old Republic. BioWare's vision of a galaxy far, far away finally let players wield the true power of a Jedi against the backdrop of a planet-spanning story with one of the greatest twists in gaming history. The Force is strong with this one.

55 Ico

PS2 • 2001

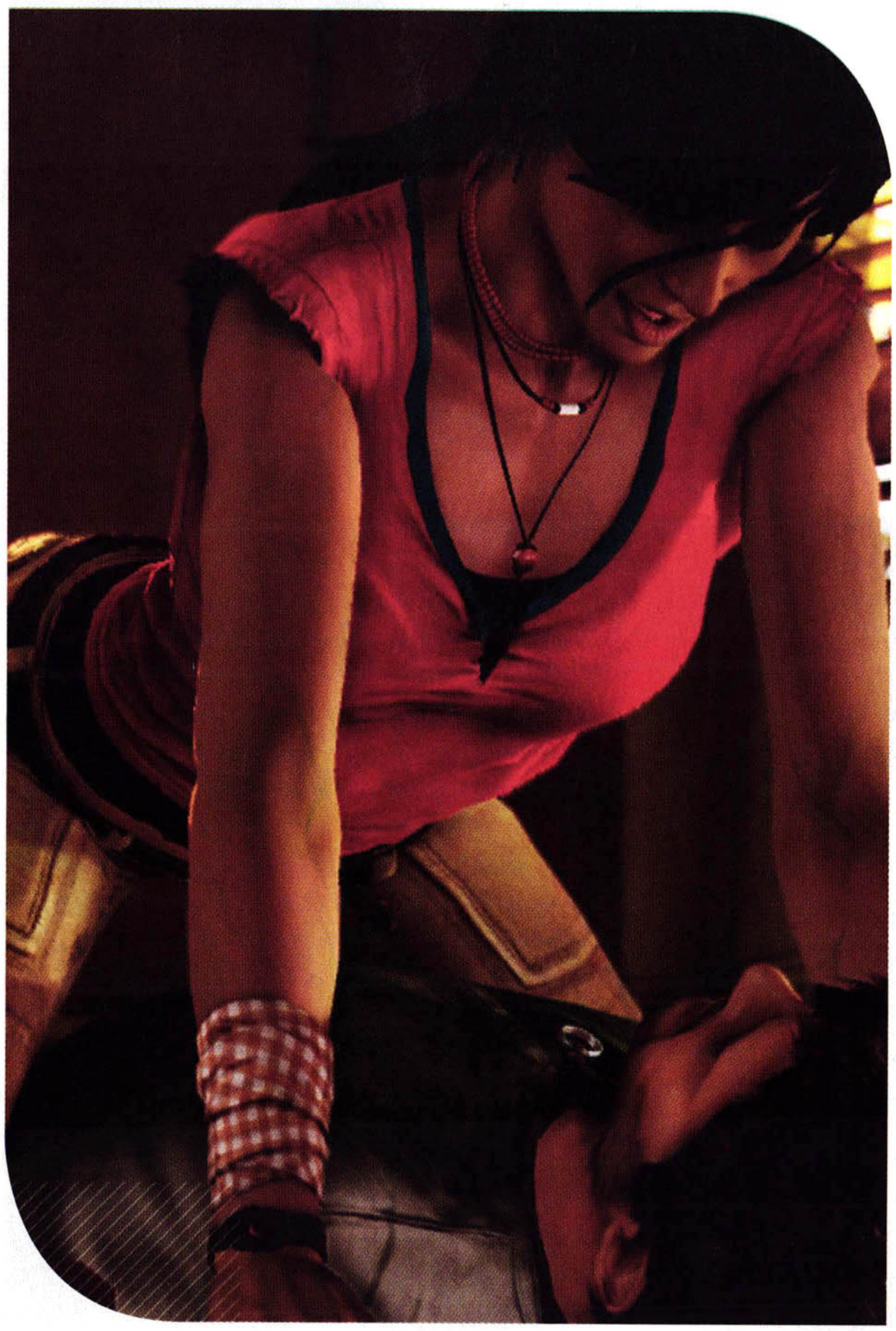
Developer Team Ico's namesake established the artistic presentation and focused gameplay for which the studio is renowned. Players lead young girl Yorda through challenging and diverse puzzles, all the while fending off evil shadow beasts. Critically acclaimed yet commercially overlooked, Ico's rich environment, memorable characters, and heart-wrenching ending still have gamers mulling over the game.

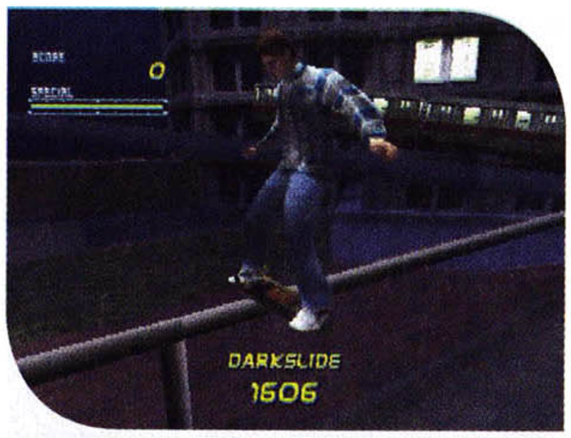
56

Uncharted 2: Among Thieves

PS3 • 2009

While innovation is great, sometimes it's just a matter of doing it better than everyone else. Building off of the success of games like Tomb Raider and Prince of Persia, Uncharted 2 weaves an adventure tale that would be at home in any multiplex. With engrossing storytelling, thrilling platforming, taut gunplay, and inventive multiplayer, it's one of the greatest action experiences ever created. Thanks to Naughty Dog's technical acumen on the PS3, it's also the best looking.





57 Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 2

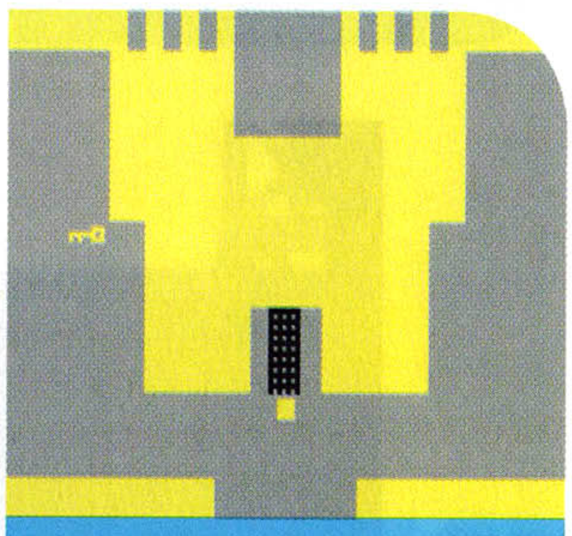
PSone • 2000

Way before Activision made the series a punchline with endless sequels, the Tony Hawk franchise delivered revered gameplay that brought insane skating trick combos to life. It was like making magic with your fingertips. While the first game in the series came out of nowhere, this sequel added depth with the ability to create your skater and edit your skate park. It also took your tricks to a new level thanks to the ubiquitous combo stringer, the manual.

58 Mass Effect

360 • 2007

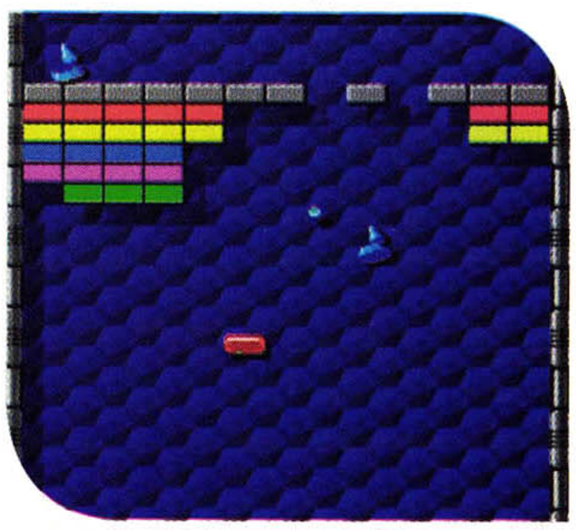
Dune, Star Wars, *Battlestar Galactica* – BioWare's space opera deserves a spot near the top of any list of sci-fi epics. Exploring Mass Effect's galactic map of hundreds of planets was nifty, and the game's innovative conversation system helped draw us into every barroom chat, but it was Commander Shepard's ruthless pursuit of the traitor Saren and the mysteries behind the ancient Prothean race that made Mass Effect one of the greatest interactive tales we've ever experienced.



59 Adventure

Atari 2600 • 1980

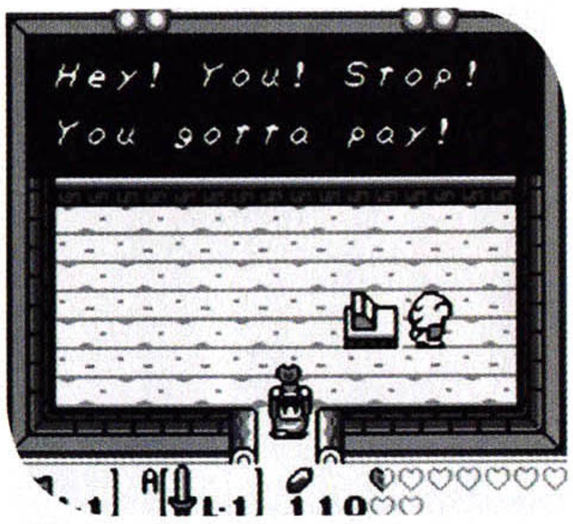
It wasn't much to look at (your hero was a lowly yellow rectangle), but games of nearly every genre owe a king's fortune to Adventure. It introduced players to item management – no mean feat considering the 2600's limited interface – as well as the concept of Easter eggs, thanks to a disgruntled programmer. We'll never forget the thrill of racing to the castle with a duck-like dragon in hot pursuit. Now, where did we leave that sword?



60 Arkanoid

Arcade • 1986

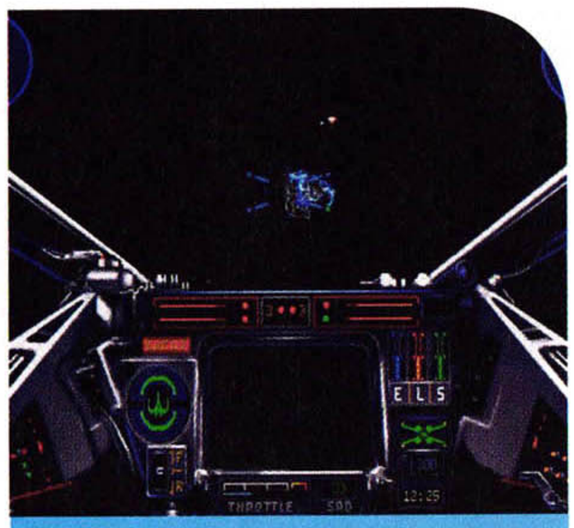
Taito lifted the basics from Atari's Breakout, but it added plenty in return. Every level had a new pattern of destructible blocks, each bringing players closer to the Easter Island head-inspired boss, DOH. Thankfully, the players' paddle could earn offensive capabilities, giving them something to do as they waited for their block-smashing ball to bounce back. Arkanoid was simple, effective, and ultimately addicting.



61 The Legend of Zelda: Link's Awakening

Game Boy • 1993

Link's first handheld adventure showed that size didn't matter, at least when it came to Nintendo's beloved series. Filled with lighthearted characters and situations – an early sidequest required Link to find a bow for a Chain Chomp's head – the story contained enough melancholy to stick with players long after their four AA batteries ran out of juice. There's a reason that people still talk about it more than 15 years later.



62 Star Wars: X-Wing

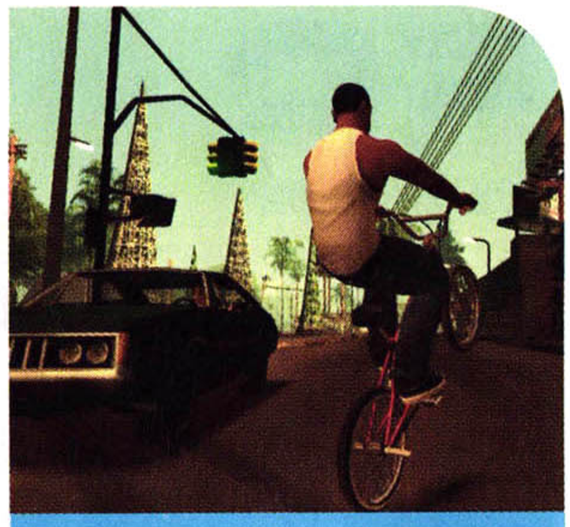
PC • 1993

In the early 1990s joystick sales exploded thanks to this celebration of the Rebellion's iconic starfighter. X-Wing put players in the cockpit of Rebel ships in all-out space battles. To survive the Star Destroyer batteries and waves of TIE Fighters, players had to wisely manage their ship's blaster, shield, and engine resources. TIE Fighter continued the LucasArts space combat legacy, but X-Wing was the pioneer.

63 The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask

N64 • 2000

Zelda fans often split their fan allegiance between Ocarina of Time and Majora's Mask, its darker follow up. The story begins with an ominous sign of the apocalypse, and an air of menace hangs over the entire game. The inventive *Groundhog Day* style storytelling allowed Link to revisit characters and change their fate, as well as engage in one of the most ingenious trading quests ever. With this game, there was more than a princess at stake.



64 Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas

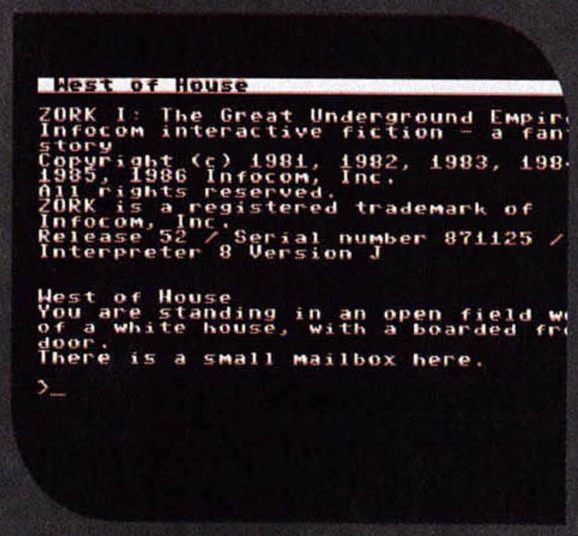
PS2 • 2004

GTA games are big to begin with, but the three cities and a countryside offered in San Andreas redefined what gamers expected from open world games. While still clinging tightly to the gameplay born in GTA III, the increase in scale set the stage for new kinds of creativity in the missions and vehicle choices. This is a perfect expression of Rockstar's huge ambitions.

65 Fallout 3

PS3, 360, PC • 2008

The original Fallout games are classics, but when Bethesda got a hold of the franchise and brought it into 3D, they created something new and powerful. Walking into a virtual version of a future Washington D.C. devastated by nuclear explosions is an experience we'll never forget. With tons of sidequests and hours of quality add-on content, Fallout 3 is also one of the longest and most satisfying games we've ever played.



66 Zork

PC • 1980

Believe it or not, games once required players to use their imaginations. Instead of displaying fantastic worlds through the power of computer-generated animation, Infocom's text adventures let players fill in details themselves. Fortunately, the sharp writing and clever puzzles made the process a blast. It also taught legions of players the craft (and importance) of making maps on graph paper.

Soul Calibur

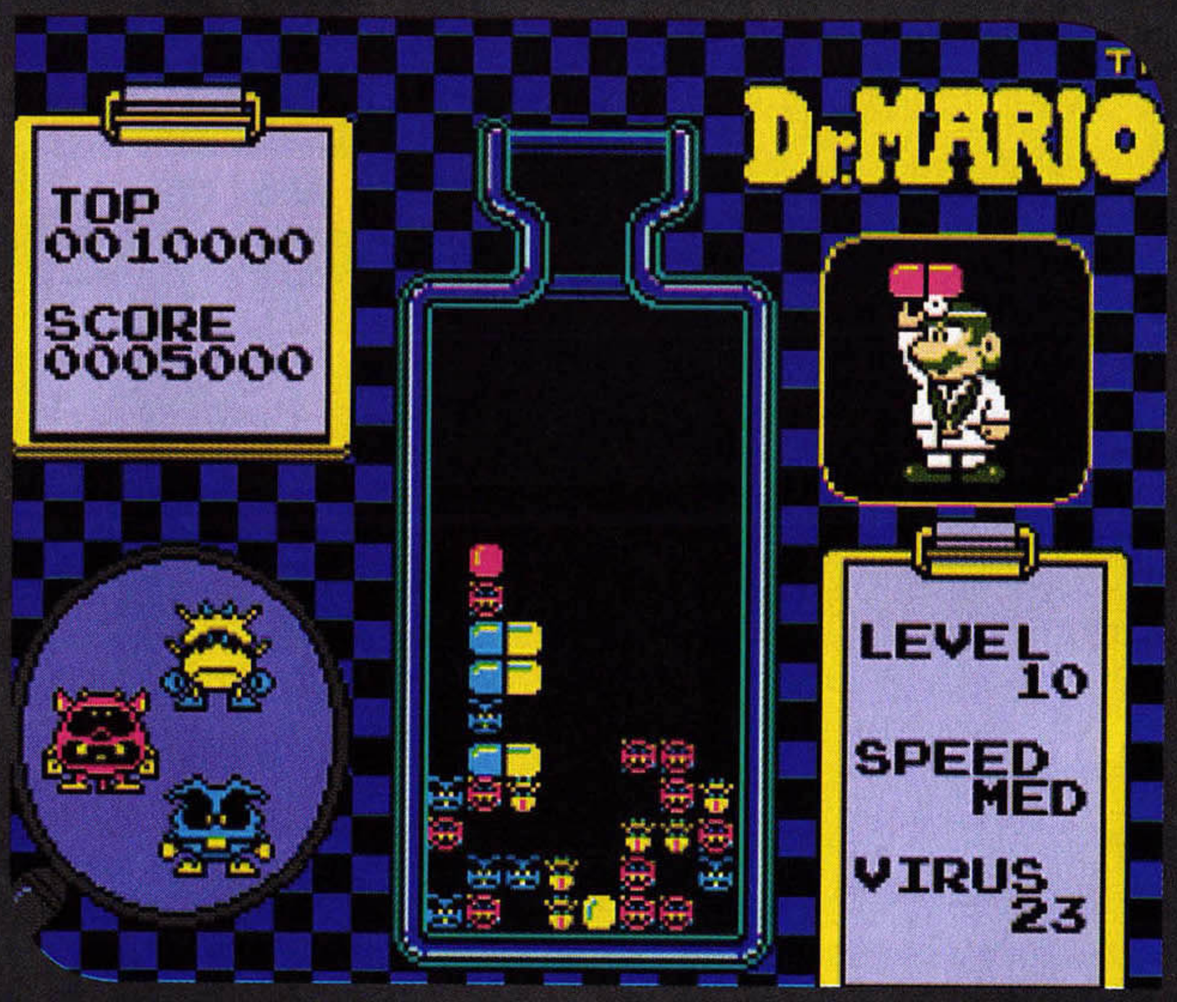
Dreamcast • 1999

While other launch titles such as Sonic Adventure proved the Dreamcast had a clear graphical advantage over the PSone and N64, none had the impact of Soul Calibur. "Arcade-perfect" was no longer an applicable term, as this version was superior to the arcade in every conceivable way. Flowing, accessible combat and a great cast of characters combined with the stunning visuals for a must-play fighting experience.

68 Double Dragon

Arcade • 1987

This ultimate co-op brawler inspired gamers (and imitators) for years after its release. Billy and Jimmy Lee punched their way through street thugs, whip-cracking ladies, and beefy Abobos to rescue the gut-punched damsel Marion. No problem couldn't be solved by a knee to the head, barrel to the face, or toss off a cliff. The brothers even turn this philosophy on each other in the final throw down.



69 Dr. Mario

NES • 1990

While we seriously doubt his credentials are genuine, Dr. Mario's prescription for fun is above reproach. Beneath the straightforward formula lies frenetic, addictive gameplay that simply refuses to get old. The charming visuals (viruses have never looked so cute) are topped only by the funky, unforgettable soundtrack. If Tetris ever had a competitor it was Dr. Mario; that they were combined for the SNES in '94 shows just how valued this classic puzzler was.

70 The Sims

PC • 2000

Great game concepts can come from the most unlikely places. Who would want to play a game about living an ordinary life? Just about everyone, as it turns out. The Sims was a phenomenon, prompting gamers and non-gamers alike to enter a virtual world to build dream homes, throw parties, and customize every aspect of their digital lives. Sequels in the series have continued to build on the formula, but the original Sims deserves credit for being the title that started it all.

71 Age of Empires

PC • 1997

The later half of the 1990s was the golden age of real-time strategy, and Age of Empires is a big part of why. Slower, more strategy-focused gameplay than the 'Crafts and C&Cs of the world and an unheard of scope distinguished it from a sea of competition. AoE's colorful and engaging historical setting beckoned players to explore a simplified history of warfare and civilization. This game showed us that RTS can be more than a twitchy slugfest, and we owe developer Ensemble (R.I.P.) a great debt for that.

72 Mortal Kombat II

Arcade • 1993

When it was released in 1992, Mortal Kombat drew more attention for its over-the-top violence and gore than for its actual gameplay. Its sequel expanded even more on the bloodshed and dismemberment, but it also refined the combat significantly. Friendships and Babalities were introduced, beginning the series' rapid slide into outright silliness, but there was a truly solid fighting game at its core.

73 Rock Band 2

PS3, 360 • 2008

Harmonix struck it big with Guitar Hero and brought the group together with Rock Band, but its crowning achievement of elegant, can't-put-it-down fun is Rock Band 2. Polishing the front end menu navigation, upping the ante of great and varied on-disc songs, and continuing an ever-expanding library of downloadable music – all were features that transformed Rock Band 2 from another holiday game into a veritable music platform.

74 Tomb Raider

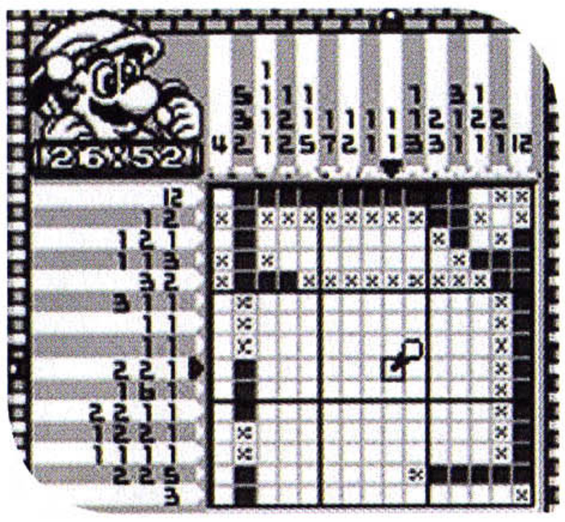
PSone • 1996

Lara Croft's debut wowed gamers with cutting edge graphics, ingenious level design, engaging puzzles, and an atmospheric soundtrack. Hands down the most recognized female face in gaming, Lara Croft has been heralded by some as an icon of strength, and disparaged by others for her curvaceous physique. Even though the franchise has fluctuated in popularity throughout the years, the fallout from Tomb Raider's stunning debut can still be seen throughout the industry.

75 Super Bomberman

SNES • 1993

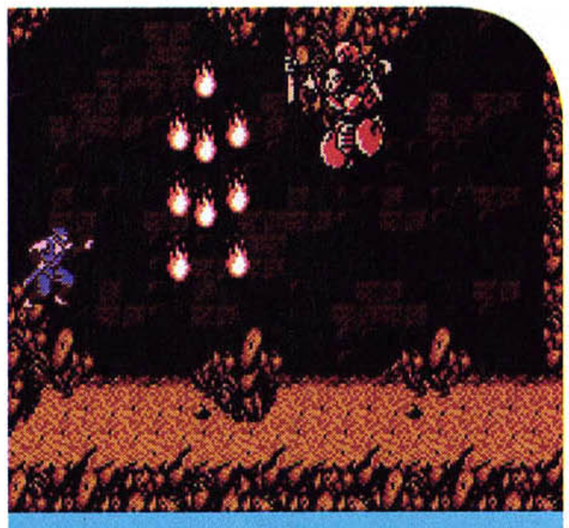
Before it became a genre, "party game" was synonymous with Super Bomberman. In fact, Super Bomberman was often what created the party in the first place. If you bought a multitap, it was for Super Bomberman. The game has reappeared on countless platforms thanks to the endless gratification that comes from trapping friends in the middle of a string of bombs, and laughing maniacally as they explode. More games need that.



76 Mario's Picross

Game Boy • 1995

Mario's Picross is yet another example of Nintendo's ability to turn a simple concept into a brilliant game. First released for the Game Boy, Picross tasks players with uncovering pictures by placing boxes on a grid based on the numbers on the top and left side. An ingenious variation on crosswords and Sudoku puzzles, it has captivated gamers for years with this simple, challenging formula. The mix of art and logic tweaks both sides of the brain, resulting in one of the classics of the puzzle genre.



77 Ninja Gaiden

NES • 1989

Two ninjas duel in the moonlight. One falls. So begins one of the most captivating stories in 8-bit games, and the first successful use of cutscenes. These clips enticed players to overcome Ninja Gaiden's immense difficulty (hello, 6-2) to see where the tale of mystery, betrayal, and redemption would go next. Mastering wall jumps and the devastating spin slash was the only way to ultimately take down the string of bosses and those damn jetpack ninjas.

Command & Conquer

PC • 1995

The war for Tiberium has been fought for years all over time and space, but it all started with Westwood's 1995 real-time strategy trailblazer. Gamers could play as either the Global Defense Initiative or the cult-like Brotherhood of Nod, led by the charismatic Kane. This first entry in the long-running series is credited with popularizing the RTS genre, and was the first game of its kind to feature competitive multiplayer.

79

Kingdom Hearts

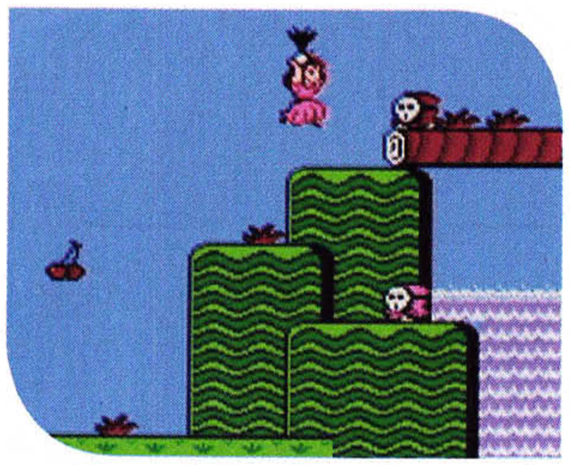
PS2 • 2002

Squaresoft and Disney Interactive found a winning combination in the eyes of consumers and critics with Kingdom Hearts. Stunning art direction united familiar yet foreign worlds, and Final Fantasy staples joined iconic Disney characters in a struggle against darkness. With addictive and evolving action/adventure gameplay, Kingdom Hearts managed to uphold Disney's wholesome mantra while engaging the most hardcore of gamers.

80 Final Fantasy II

SNES • 1991

None of the early console RPGs captured gamers' imaginations like the adventures of Cecil and his band of heroic friends. A huge cast of characters kept this story of redemption and love compelling for hour upon hour of monster slaying goodness. The expansive game world included everything from an underground landscape of stone and lava to a thrilling conclusion on the moon.



81 Super Mario Bros. 2

NES • 1988

Yeah, yeah, we know that Super Mario Bros. 2 was a different game in Japan than in the West. Even though it was an odd footnote in Mario's history, the unique veggie-tossing gameplay was a blast. The action was accompanied by one of Mario's best soundtracks, too. Mario 2 also introduced Toad and Princess Peach as playable characters. Not that anyone ever used Toad, so players can aim their thanks (or blame) in its direction.

82 Left 4 Dead

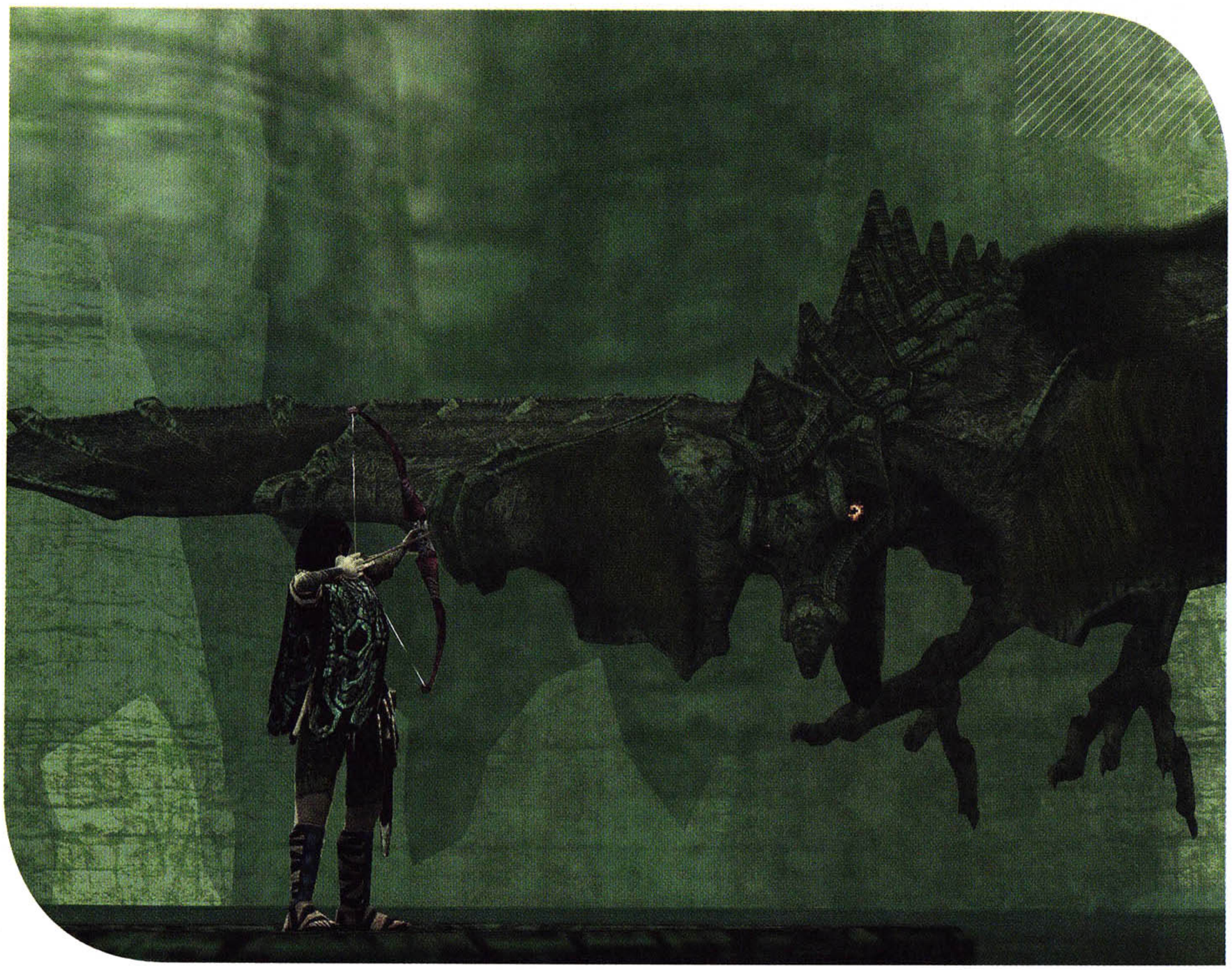
PC • 2008

Zombies have appeared in video games in many forms, but nobody ever nailed the full-on zombie apocalypse until Valve's Left 4 Dead. The intense four-player online co-op experience utilized a dynamic "AI Director" to adjust the undead onslaught according to player performance. Toss in memorable characters, an intriguingly sparse plot, and an online versus mode, and you had the penultimate test of mettle for any zombie-crusader worth their salt.

83 Okami

PS2 • 2006

Okami's jaw-dropping visuals were a treat. Players set out on an epic journey following a stunning white wolf, Amaterasu, who wielded a celestial brush that added interesting elements to combat and exploration. With Legend of Zelda-style gameplay, a unique storyline, and water-color art style, Okami is one of the best (and most aesthetically pleasing) PS2 titles of all time.



84 Shadow of the Colossus

PS2 • 2005

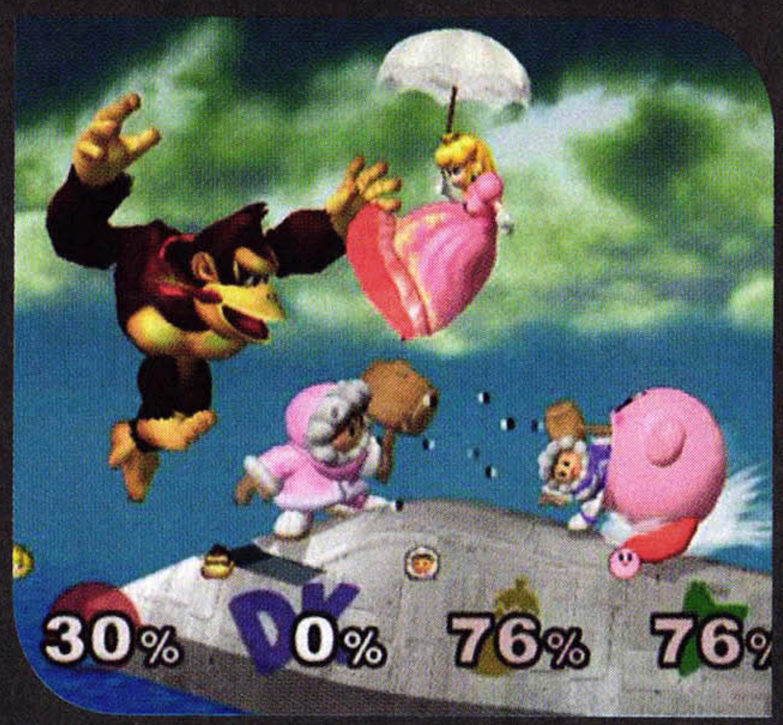
Anyone who complained about the emptiness of the huge world in Shadow of the Colossus missed the point. This brilliant follow-up to Ico placed you in a desolate open world where your only challenge was to hunt down 16 giant creatures. Your goal was to resurrect a female companion at a temple, but as the game progressed, things turned much more sinister.

110 120 130 140 150 160 170 180 190 200

85 Metroid Prime

GameCube • 2002

November 17, 2002 was a big day for Metroid fans. After an eight-year hiatus, Nintendo didn't just give its followers a new Metroid game – it gave them two. While Metroid Fusion was far from a disappointment (see entry 128), Metroid Prime took the series in a new direction. Those who complained that Metroid wouldn't work as a first-person game quickly shut their mouths when Retro Studios dropped them in the center of Tallon IV's moody, puzzle-filled world.



86 Super Smash Bros. Melee

GameCube • 2001

Although it debuted on the N64, Nintendo's mash-up fighter didn't hit its stride until it landed on the purple box. Its frantic pace and layered gameplay was accessible enough for new fighters while providing enough depth for tourney-level play. Featuring a ton of the big N's most beloved characters (along with a host of obscurities), it let players settle the age-old dispute, "Who would win in a fight? Mario, Princess Peach, or the Ice Climbers?"

87 Warcraft II: Tides of Darkness

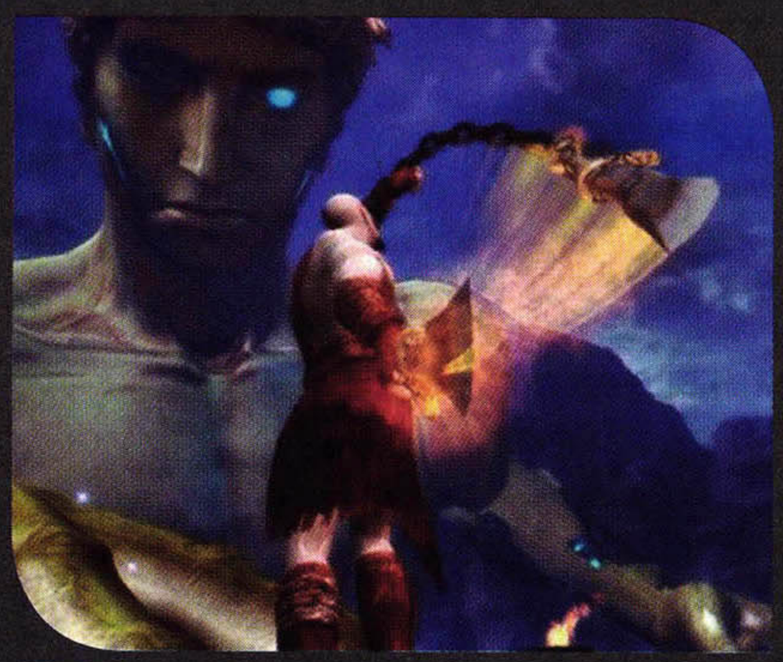
PC • 1995

It's 2 a.m. and your eyes are bloodshot. As the chorus of axe throwers beats down on the puny human outpost, you smile – just another night playing Warcraft II on the PC. Blizzard's follow up to its debut RTS was so good that it's still played by many today. With a huge roster of units and deep upgrading options, gamers around the world logged countless battles and chopped endless amounts of trees. A later update also introduced the world to Battle.net, one of the first services dedicated to multiplayer gaming.

88 Baldur's Gate II: Shadows of Amn

PC • 2000

The best Dungeons & Dragons video game ever made, BG II is a sprawling epic that did nearly as much to explore the Forgotten Realms as anything R. A. Salvatore ever wrote. BioWare's first bona fide masterwork takes the best mechanical parts of D&D – fantastical monsters, world-bending magics, feuds between warring gods, and deep tactical combat – and wraps them around a high fantasy tale more engrossing than most fantasy novels.



89 God of War II

PS2 • 2007

God of War II starts off with a battle epic enough to make most end bosses weep with envy. Antihero (and Ares' replacement) Kratos storms the city of Rhodes, where he battles its now-animated colossus. In a fight that spans the length of the entire first level, Kratos systematically dismantles the beast, gouging out its eyes, and slashing its face, before destroying it from the inside out. And that is just the beginning.

90 The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess

Wii • 2006

Twilight Princess doesn't always get the respect it deserves because it's very much like a next-gen version of Ocarina of Time. That said, who wouldn't want more Ocarina of Time, especially when it's this polished and fun? Serving as our introduction to Nintendo's new Wii motion controls, Twilight Princess proved right off the bat that hardcore standbys could be successfully translated to this new method of control.

91 Ratchet & Clank: Up Your Arsenal

PS2 • 2004

Insomniac brought the platformer into the modern era with the Ratchet & Clank franchise, and Up Your Arsenal remains its masterpiece. By combining a host of imaginative weapons and powerful gadgets, the game offered as much depth as more adult-oriented titles. It also brought a huge variety of gameplay, incorporating space flight, old-school 2D levels, the hilarious Godzilla-inspired "Giant Clank" segments, and robust multiplayer. Tying it all together was an inspired story written with a light comic touch.

92 Medal of Honor: Allied Assault

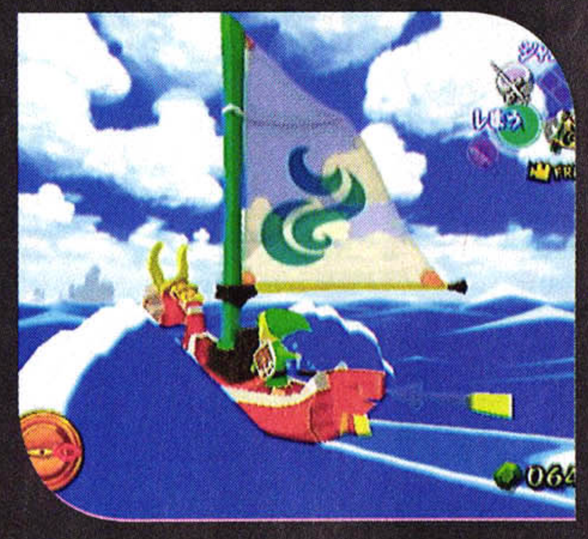
PC • 2002

Thank Allied Assault for the endless stream of World War II shooters publishers shove down our throats every year. Inspired by *Saving Private Ryan*, the cinematic infantry combat game won over players with its recreation of the film's Omaha Beach landing mission. Allied Assault also served as the proving ground for Vince Campella, Jason West, and Grant Collier – the trio that went on to form Call of Duty developer Infinity Ward.

93 Skies of Arcadia

Dreamcast • 2000

Skies of Arcadia offered RPG fans an intriguing storyline that followed a ragtag group of pirates across the lush world of Arcadia through land and sky. Players fought battles on foot and at the helm of an airship, taking down enemy aircraft and colossal bosses. Critically acclaimed as one of the greatest RPGs of its time, Skies will be remembered by Dreamcast owners as a breath of fresh air for the genre.



94 The Legend of Zelda: Wind Waker

GameCube • 2003

Of all of the Zelda releases, this one is the most polarizing. Some people condemn the sailing as the series' worst gameplay mechanic. Others praise it as one of its greatest. Moreover, some people hate the shaded visuals. Others view them as a work of art. No matter which side of the fence you fall on, it's hard to argue about the adventure itself. The dungeons are remarkably designed, and the final blow Link lands on Ganon is one of the top "Hell yeah!" moments in all of gaming.

95

Silent Hill 2

PS2 • 2001

A dead woman mails her widowed husband a letter from the mysterious town of Silent Hill. This premise set the tone for the eerie return to Konami's frightening survival horror series. Silent Hill 2 deserves a spot on this list for the debut of iconic horror game villain Pyramid Head alone. The tension created by wandering aimlessly through James' tortured memories for hours amidst falling snow and macabre mannequins never dulled. Silent Hill 2 set the bar for psychologically terrifying gaming.

96 Counter-Strike

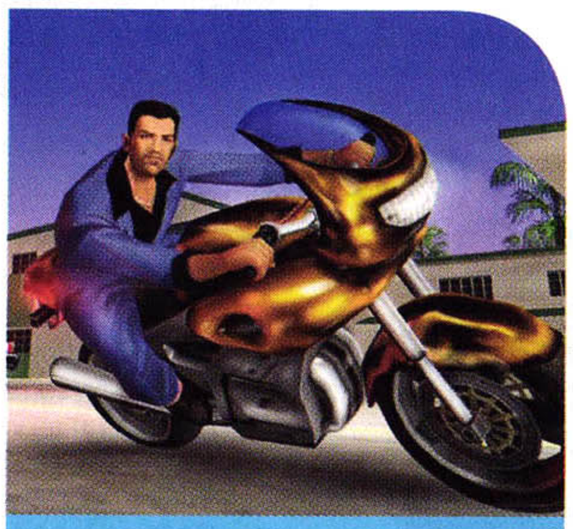
PC • 1999

Counter-Strike was one of the first examples of a mod becoming more popular than the game from which it sprouted. This intense online experience is still being played by many today.

97 Sonic the Hedgehog 2

Genesis • 1992

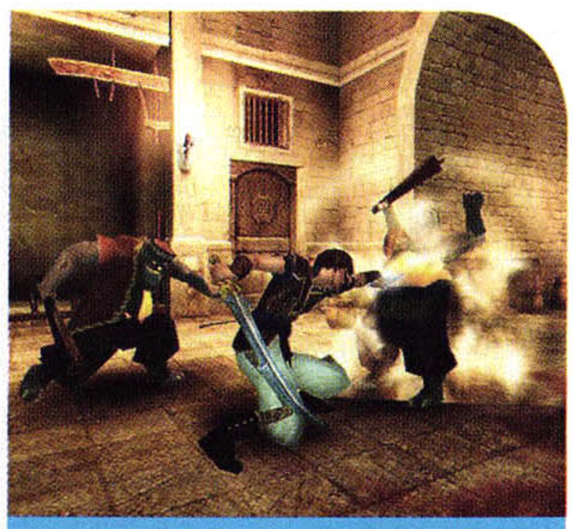
Releasing only a year after the debut of Sega's new mascot, Sonic 2 bested its predecessor in almost every way. A more vibrant color palette, the cute second player Tails, and streamlined level design made certain the cartridge would remain firmly lodged in the Genesis for years to come. The introduction of Super Sonic also made collecting all the chaos emeralds littered amongst the awesome faux-3D special stages well worth your trouble. This is Sonic perfected.



98 Grand Theft Auto: Vice City

PS3, 360 • 2009

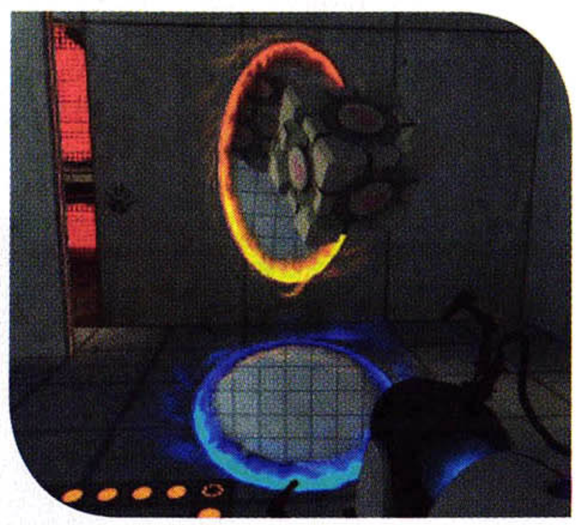
Vice City took GTA III's open-world gameplay into the darkly comical heart of the 1980s. Inspired by *Scarface* and Michael Mann's *Miami Vice* TV series, the game poked loving fun at the cocaine-fueled excess of period south Florida with an incredible script, all-star voice cast, and one of the greatest game soundtracks of all time.



99 Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time

PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube, PC • 2003

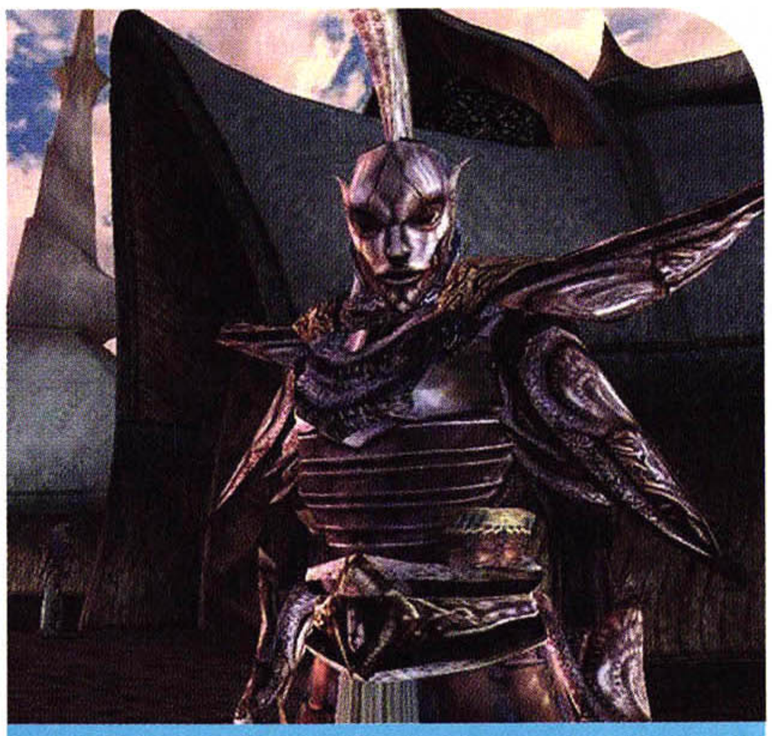
Sporting the smoothest animations and a stunning game world of ruined spires and decayed palaces, Sands of Time reinvigorated the original classic platforming adventure. Intuitive and clever puzzles mix with sublime jumping and acrobatic sequences to create an unforgettable journey through a foreign land of magic and danger.



100 Portal

PC, 360 • 2007

It's easy: You make two portals, and anything that goes through one comes out the other. The deceptively simple premise of Portal translates into a gauntlet of devious and mind-bending challenges that players must complete under the gaze of a deranged AI named GLaDOS. In addition to a warped and refreshing take on puzzle-solving, Portal introduced a few bizarre phrases ("the cake is a lie") that gamers now exchange knowingly like secret handshakes.



101 The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind

PC • 2002

Dubbed the offline MMO, Morrowind opened new doors for game development in terms of scale. The massive amount of content included literally hundreds of hours of open-ended RPG gameplay.

102 Heroes of Might & Magic III

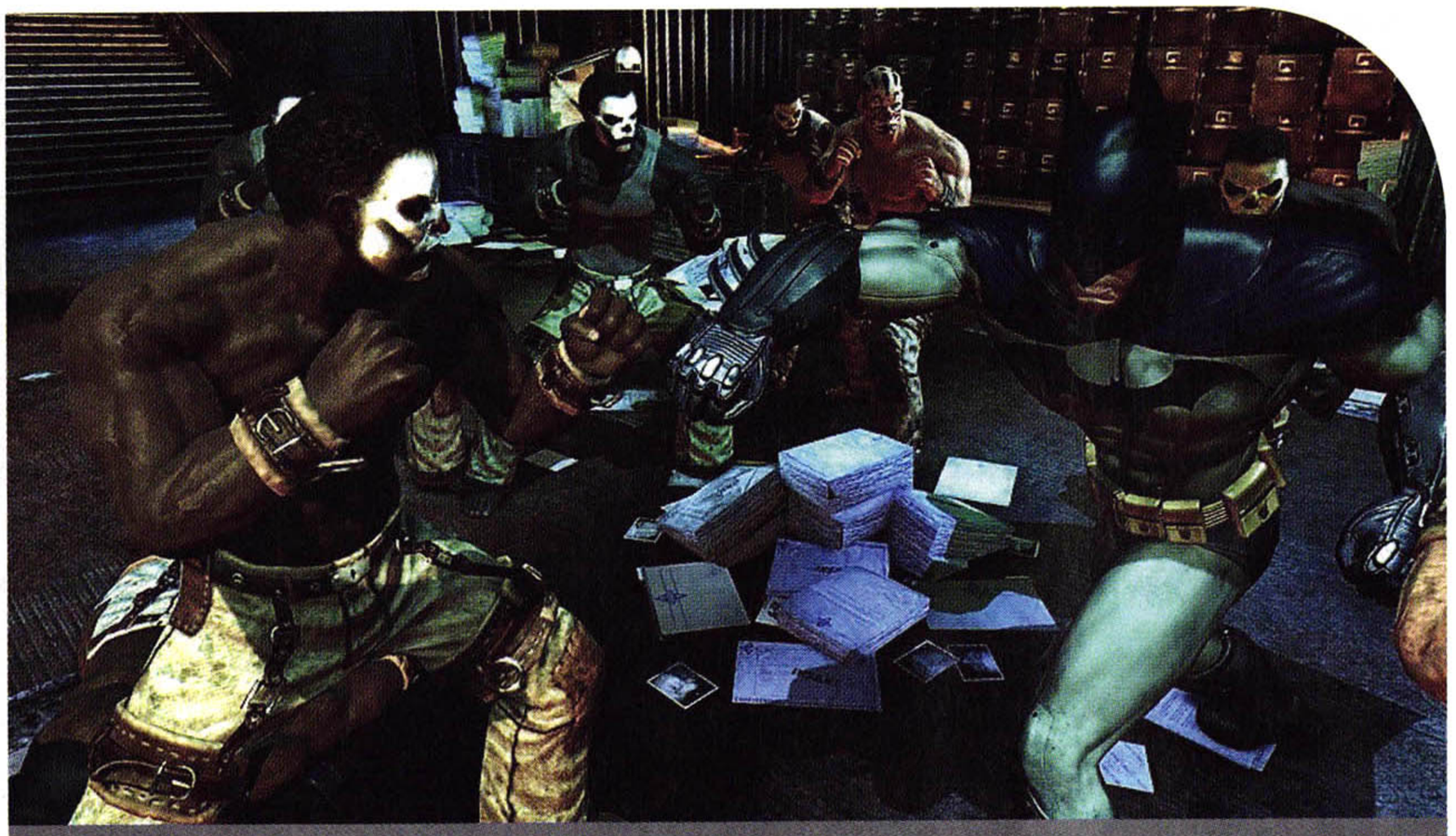
PC • 1999

The unique style of turn-based strategy found in Heroes of Might & Magic III blended exploration and battle into a highly addictive formula that became a cornerstone for later entries and imitators that followed.

103 Donkey Kong

Arcade • 1981

Shigeru Miyamoto's nearly 30-year old legacy in video games all started here. Mario was bashing barrels with hammers as "Jumpman" in this first appearance, long before his days in the Mushroom Kingdom.



104 Batman: Arkham Asylum

PS3, 360 • 2009

Arkham Asylum is the first Batman game that truly understands the caped crusader. He's a detective, a gadget guru, and a martial arts expert. Along with three unforgettable confrontations with Scarecrow, the asylum itself emerges as one of this game's crowning achievements. Similar to Bioshock's Rapture, the asylum is instrumental in setting the tone and keeping the player in a state of awe.

105 System Shock 2

PC • 1999

Before Ken Levine created the underwater city of Rapture, he sowed the seeds of its ingenuity aboard the spaceship *Von Braun*. Fusing the first-person shooter with role-playing elements in an immersive sci-fi horror environment, System Shock 2's tale of artificial intelligence gone awry served as the foundation for BioShock's creation years later.

106 Resident Evil

PSone • 1996

Horror games come and go, but Resident Evil left such an impact on the industry that it created the survival horror genre. It's hard to look back fondly on RE's tank controls, but exploring its zombie-inhabited mansion was a well-paced fright.

107 Gears of War

360 • 2006

Gears of War exploded into the consciousness of gamers worldwide in a shower of blood and gore, kicking off a co-op renaissance in the process. The unyielding action, visceral combat, and fine-tuned cover mechanics made for one of the most intense titles in shooter history.

108 Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots

PS3 • 2008

MGS 4 is a dream for fans of tactical espionage action. This entry closes the book on the story of Solid Snake, but the legendary soldier is sent off in style with revamped mechanics and the astounding (and lengthy) cutscenes that provide answers to all of the series' burning questions.

109 Crash Bandicoot: Warped

PSone • 1998

Crash Bandicoot blended 2D and 3D platforming in a way that combined the best of the genre's past and future. In doing so, Crash helped establish Sony's PSone as a legitimate console. Warped is Crash's best work, and ably demonstrates the craft and polish Naughty Dog would bring to later series like Uncharted.

110 Halo 2

Xbox • 2004

The original made Microsoft a player in gaming, but the sequel made Xbox Live the online service to beat. Alone or with a co-op partner at your side, Halo 2 was filled with water cooler moments like an orbital ride aboard a ticking bomb and the revelation of a new and surprising protagonist halfway through the game.

110 120 130 140 150 160 170 180 190 200

111 Tetris Attack
SNES • 1996
While the name may be misleading because the game barely even references the classic puzzle title, Tetris Attack could make even the most quiet and reserved friends turn into smack-talking competition freaks.

112 Final Fantasy XII
PS2 • 2006
A tale of political intrigue surrounding a delicate armistice between continent-spanning empires, FF XII is a welcome break from the classic heroic journey that so many RPGs rely on as a backbone. Its gambit system shattered expectations, greatly rewarding those who put the time into mastering its nuances.

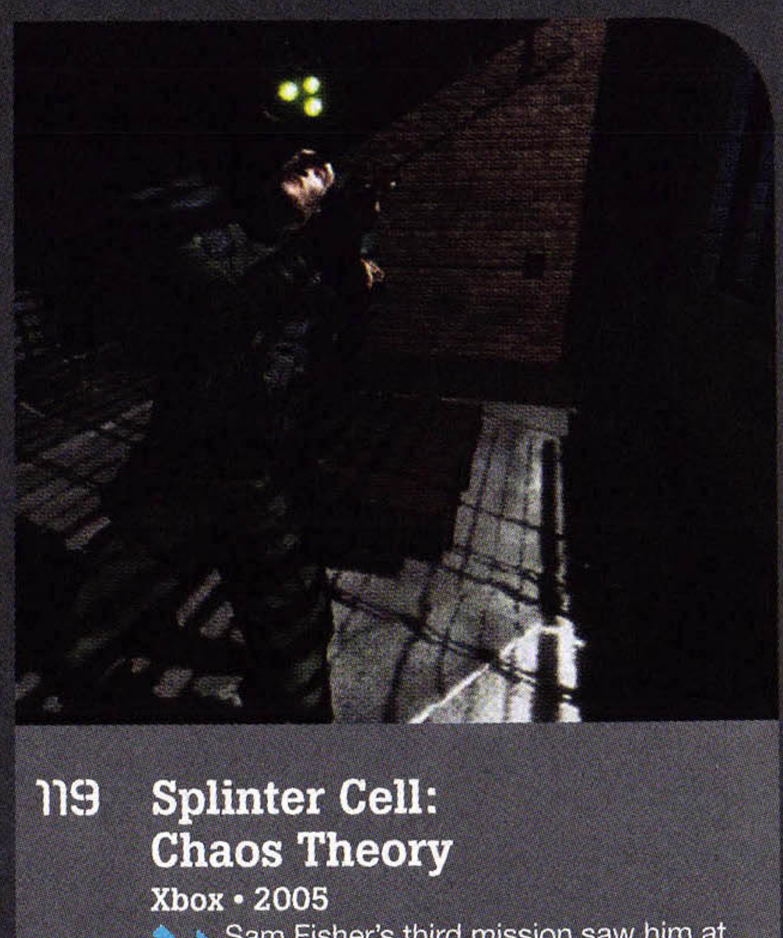
114 Sid Meier's Alpha Centauri
PC • 1998
Taking the Civilization formula into space and adding customizable units, alien lifeforms, and much greater factional diversity was such a great idea (by Brian Reynolds, despite the game's title) that Alpha Centauri still has fans who argue it's the best Civ-esque title ever.

115 Command & Conquer: Red Alert
PC • 1996

116 Advance Wars
GBA • 2001

117 Fallout
PC • 1997

118 Team Fortress 2
PS3, 360, PC • 2007
Valve dropped its early hyper-realistic design for TF 2 in exchange for a cartoony, stylized look that worked wonders. Add in loads of free downloadable content (for the PC at least), and you've got one of the best class-based online shooters ever.



119 Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory
Xbox • 2005
Sam Fisher's third mission saw him at the height of his career. The refined multiplayer, addition of stealthy co-op, and the most compelling single-player campaign the series had seen made one of the best games on the original Xbox.

113 Earthbound
SNES • 1995
Known as "the game with the big box," Earthbound shipped with a strategy guide, scratch and sniff insert, and one of the most charming games around. Ness and friends saved the planet while staying in touch with mom and dad in this hilarious RPG.

120 Mega Man X
SNES • 1994
This futuristic offshoot ushered the franchise into the 16-bit era and came into its own, sporting around the same number of entries as Mega Man proper. New mobility options like dash movements and wall slides, plus new armor options, helped X make an impressive debut.

121 **Lemmings**
PC • 1991

122 **Panzer Dragoon Saga**
Saturn • 1998
With its distinct fantasy setting, unique art style, and original combat system that let players fly around their opponents, Saga is widely considered the best Saturn game ever made, which only makes us wonder why Sega has let this series collect dust.

123 **NHL '94**
Genesis, SNES • 1993
How could a hockey game get so famous when it doesn't even have fighting or blood? The one-timer. The addition of this lethal quick-fire shot helped make an already great sports experience even better, and NHL '94 is one of the reasons that hockey is a cherished video game sport even by people who have no interest in the real thing.

124 **Warlords**
Arcade • 1980

125 **Shadowrun**
SNES • 1993

126 **Twisted Metal 2**
PSone • 1996
Vehicular mayhem has never been as chaotic or fun as it was in this car combat classic. Opening up a whole new section of the Paris level by blowing up the Eiffel Tower is still one of the most memorable moments in the series.

127 **Oddworld: Abe's Oddysee**
PSone • 1997

128 **Metroid Fusion**
GBA • 2002

129 **Homeworld**
PC • 1999

130 **Kingdom Hearts II**
PS2 • 2006
Kingdom Hearts II successfully abolished platforming in favor of unadulterated action. The sequel also fruitfully retained the trademark themes of friendship and self-discovery so endearing to fans. Due to the carefully crafted sequel, Kingdom Hearts has flourished in popularity and remains one of Square Enix's most adored franchises to date.

131 **Pilotwings**
SNES • 1991
One of the early examples of the Mode-7 tech, Pilotwings let players earn their wings in smoothly scrolling and scaling landscapes. The variety of aircraft and challenges made it easy to look past how suspiciously flat everything was.

132 **Quake II**
PC • 1997
While the first Quake was a revolution in 3D games, the follow-up did the same for competitive online multiplayer. The new features were so popular that developer id Software dedicated the next game in the series exclusively to online multiplayer.

133 **Star Wars Jedi Knight: Dark Forces II**
PC • 1997

135 **Final Fight**
Arcade • 1989
Haggar, Cody, and Guy had their work cut out for them beating down the most diverse street gang known to man including urban cowboys, Andre the Giant wannabes, and a wheelchair-bound, crossbow-toting millionaire.

136 **Star Fox**
SNES • 1993

137 **Madden NFL '99**
PlayStation, N64, PC • 1989
Madden NFL 99 saw the introduction of two Madden institutions – franchise mode and 3D modeling. Back then Sony's GameDay was still a going concern, but this version of Madden pulled away from the competition and never looked back.

138 **Call of Duty 2**
360, PC • 2005
Cinematic set piece moments, polished next-generation graphics, and riveting multiplayer made Call of Duty 2 not only a great PC game, but an early destination for multiplayer fans eager to test the Xbox 360's revamped Live.

139 **Wolfenstein 3D**
PC • 1992

134 **Borderlands**
PS3, 360, PC • 2009
Borderlands may only be a month old, but its millions of unique weapons, deep RPG elements, and unabashed loot-a-thon mentality make this role-playing shooter an instant classic.

140 **Diablo**
PC • 1996

141 **Civilization IV**
PC • 2005

142 **Maniac Mansion: Day of the Tentacle**
PC • 1993

143 **Assassin's Creed**
PS3, 360 • 2007

144 **Burnout 3: Takedown**
PS2, Xbox • 2004

145 **Unreal Tournament 2004**
PC • 2004

146 **Power Stone 2**
Dreamcast • 2000

147 **Super Castlevania IV**
SNES • 1991
Spinning stages, screen-filling bosses, and one of the best soundtracks to ever grace a video game made Super Castlevania IV one of the finest 16-bit action/platformers. Purists laud its devotion to perfecting the formula created by the 8-bit original, and the creativity in the level and enemy design cannot be denied.

148 **Super Mario RPG**
SNES • 1996
A match made in heaven is probably the best way to describe the story-driven Super Mario RPG. Both Square and Nintendo were in their primes and putting Mario into a turn-based RPG worked out perfectly, spawning the Paper Mario series.

149 **Warcraft III: Reign of Chaos**
PC • 2002

150 **ActRaiser**
SNES • 1991

151 **Fable**
Xbox • 2004
Fable isn't the first game to explore the concept of players shaping their standing in the world, but it is the first to truly grasp what this experience could entail. Depending on their mood or interpretation of a situation, players can shift between being good, bad, or neutral.

152 **Xenosaga Episode I: Der Wille zur Macht**
PS2 • 2003

153 **Asteroids**
Arcade • 1979
Asteroids' crisp vector graphics were perfect for the outer space setting, creating a distant and sterile look. Slamming into a rocky fragment taught more about the perils of momentum than a day spent in a physics classroom.

154 **LittleBigPlanet**
PS3 • 2008

155 **Crackdown**
360 • 2007

156 **Gauntlet**
Arcade • 1985
Gauntlet taught us an invaluable lesson: Don't shoot food! It also taught us that four-player hack-and-slash arcade games are the perfect activity when friends are involved.

157 **Devil May Cry**
PS2 • 2001

158 **Pong**
Arcade • 1972
In the beginning there was Pong. This is gaming in its purest form – just two paddles and a bouncing ball. That simple design was enough to launch gaming as an international hobby. The craze may have subsided, but its appeal and impact remains to this day.

159 **Battlefield 1942**
PC • 2002
Swedish developer DICE burst onto the gaming scene with this multiplayer trailblazer. Featuring 64-player battles, character classes, vehicular combat, and an ingenious new Conquest mode that stressed teamwork, Battlefield 1942 changed the online multiplayer landscape forever.

160 **Thief**
PC • 1998
Created by industry luminaries such as Warren Spector, Ken Levine, and Harvey Smith, Thief was a revelation for the stealth action genre. Making brilliant use of sound and shadows, the game gave players a host of options to take out the uncannily smart enemies.

161 Geometry Wars: Retro Evolved
360 • 2005
Xbox Live Arcade's first hit, this game's silky smooth framerate, intuitive dual-analog control, and relentless enemy assaults come together to create the ultimate modern day shooter.

162 Far Cry
PC • 2004

163 Robotron: 2084
Arcade • 1982

164 X-COM: UFO Defense
PC • 1993
Defending the Earth from an apocalyptic alien invasion isn't so easy with assault rifles and fighter jets. It's a good thing that X-COM incorporates researching stolen alien technology, upgrading your bases, and developing your grunt soldiers into elite warriors via experience. Brilliant turn-based tactical squad combat is just the start of things with X-COM.

165 Peggle
PC • 2007

167 Doom II
PC • 1994

168 Tempest 2000
Jaguar • 1994

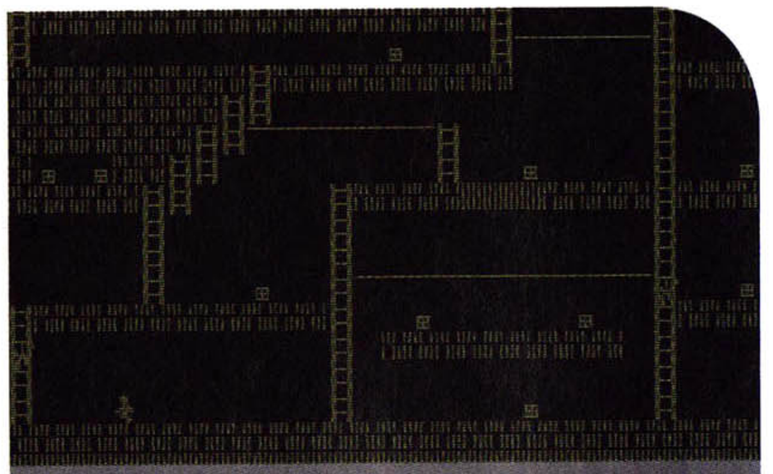
169 Braid
360 • 2008
Terms like existential and postmodern were rarely applied to games until Braid. The game's philosophically complex storytelling and time-twisting puzzles are spare and ingenious – a study in clever, efficient design and joyous "aha" moments.

170 Ridge Racer
PSone • 1995

171 Bully
PS2 • 2006
With Bully, Rockstar showed that it could work its open-world magic in a less adult setting. The mix of Wes Anderson sensibilities and middle school mischief left us eager for a second term.

172 Ikaruga
GameCube • 2006

166 King's Quest VI
PC • 1992
The crown jewel of Sierra's adventures, King's Quest VI's clever puzzles and gorgeous areas make it fun to explore, and the supporting cast (which includes a malevolent genie and the Lord of the Dead) lend it an unforgettable charm that holds up even today.



173 Lode Runner
Apple II • 1983
Lode Runner combined platforming and puzzles to create an absorbing title wonderful in its simplicity. Whether you were making your own levels or just tunneling into them to escape enemies, Lode Runner's gameplay inspired freedom and creativity with just a few commands.

174 Gunstar Heroes
Genesis • 1993

175 Dig Dug
Arcade • 1982
Dig Dug had everything an '80s arcade junkie could desire, boasting freeform subterranean excavation, dragons, and brutal murder-by-air pump. Many a greasy quarter was spent on this classic in dirty pizza parlors.

176 Castlevania
NES • 1988

177 Tekken 3
Arcade • 1997

178 Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney
Nintendo DS • 2005

179 NBA Jam Tournament Edition
Arcade • 1993

180 Max Payne
PC • 2001

181 Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2
PS3, 360, PC • 2009
Doing what Call of Duty does best – huge set piece sequences – and making them co-op is an impressive feat. Tack on the single-player campaign's inclusion of one of the most powerful and controversial moments in gaming, plus greatly expanded multiplayer progression, and MW 2 is a brilliant iteration of a great formula.

182 **Samurai Shodown**
Neo Geo • 1993

183 **NFL 2K5**
PS2, Xbox • 2004
Some consider NFL 2K5 the best football game ever. Visual Concepts' NFL swan song was a masterpiece that in some ways rival Madden is still trying to beat. Its presentation was top-notch, animations superb, and it even offered amenities like The Crib and custom stadium music.

184 **Vagrant Story**
PSone • 2000
Vagrant Story was more than just a dungeon crawler. The game masterfully combined real-time and turn-based combat, magic, and weapon and enemy affinities to produce an engrossing experience that's a cut above most Japanese RPGs.

185 **Super Mario World 2: Yoshi's Island**
SNES • 1995
Despite being released when most of the gaming world's eye was on the newer 32-bit systems, this Yoshi-centric sequel lived up to its pedigree. Many gamers have Baby Mario's shrill cries stuck in their heads to this day.

186 **Marble Madness**
Arcade • 1984

187 **Infamous**
PS3 • 2009

188 **Planescape: Torment**
PC • 1999
Torment allowed players to ally with or antagonize many factions, develop talents in multiple areas of expertise, and influence the plot to an unheard-of degree for 1999. Immortal protagonist The Nameless One, despite his amnesia, is still one of the most complex and interesting main characters ever.

189 **Kid Icarus**
NES • 1986

190 **The Chronicles Of Riddick: Escape From Butcher Bay**
Xbox • 2004

191 **Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater**
PS2 • 2004

192 **Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem**
GameCube • 2002

193 **Jak 3**
PlayStation 2 • 2004
This dark action adventure brought the original Jak trilogy to a satisfying close by polishing the open-world, mission-based gameplay of Jak 2 and adding in tons of new weapon modifications and plot twists.

194 **Marvel vs. Capcom 2**
Dreamcast • 2002

195 **Ultima**
PC • 1981

196 **Call of Duty**
PC • 2003
After leaving EA, the team responsible for Medal of Honor: Allied Assault formed Infinity Ward and released Call of Duty, an unrelenting war experience that set the new high bar for World War II games with its army of computer-controlled allies fighting alongside players across the European Theater.

197 **NHL 09**
PS3, 360 • 2008

198 **Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow**
Xbox • 2004

199 **Tactics Ogre**
PSone • 1997
This strategy/RPG rarity laid the groundwork for much of the genre's future with its challenging but rewarding battles, deep character customization, and epic player-determined storyline.

200 **Beyond Good and Evil**
PS2, Xbox, GameCube • 2003
Armed only with a camera, Dai-Jo stick, and unyielding resolve, reporter Jade helmed a game still heralded today for its compelling story and noteworthy characters. Carefully crafted and seamlessly integrated dialogue removed the need for cutscenes, and the beautiful graphics left the desire for them in the dust. The groundwork laid by Michel Ancel has rocketed the pending sequel to the top of fans' consciousness and merits the original a well-deserved spot on our list.

FROM THE ARCHIVES:
GOING THROUGH GAME INFORMER'S PAST

Overstating It

"If you buy just one PC game in your life, make sure it's Allied Assault."

– Medal of Honor: Allied Assault review, February 2002

"It's a feast for the eyes that clearly illustrates that video games could, in fact, sit alongside Andy Warhol and Claude Monet in an art gallery."

– Viewtiful Joe review, October 2003

"This is one of the best MMOs yet released."

– Age of Conan review, August 2008

"It's worth getting a PS3 just for this game."

– Resistance: Fall of Man review, December 2006

"It seems likely that Enter the Matrix will eclipse the success of the motion picture universe it extends from."

– Enter the Matrix cover story, December 2002

"There is almost nothing negative to say about this game."

– Gears of War review, December 2006

"There are no flaws in Resident Evil 4."

– Resident Evil 4 review, March 2005

"Sam [Fisher] is easily the most complex character in gaming."

– Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow review, May 2004

Too Bad

"I would rather delay a game to make sure it's good – no matter what. In the end, I would rather be known for delays than bad games."

– Silicon Knights' Denis Dyack, January 2007

"Ubisoft and Peter Jackson are about to change the way you think about movie licensed games forever."

– King Kong cover story, August 2005

"LucasFilm invited me to visit Skywalker Ranch, view a slew of upcoming Star Wars material, then talk to the man himself, George Lucas. Of course, I cannot divulge any details as to what took place, but I can say that the future of Star Wars absolutely rocks."

– Reiner, editor blurb, September 2001

"[Uwe] Boll, [Mark] Altman, and [Dan] Bates clearly understand the importance of horror in a zombie flick."

– "The Making of *The House of the Dead*," July 2002

Everyone Makes Mistakes

"As super trooper Master Sergeant you take the lead role in an intergalactic war."

– Halo review, November 2001

"The Revolution uses a touch screen as its controller"

– Connect, April 2005

"Game Informer has a hunch that [the next GTA] will take place in Las Vegas. Grand Theft Auto: Sin City, anyone? We ain't braggin, but remember that we did guess Vice City before it was announced…"

– News, January 2004

"What Xbox needs is a slew of high-profile games that console gamers will die for, since I don't think Dead or Alive 3 or Halo (though amazing titles) will be enough."

– Andy, Letter from the Editor, September 2001

"According to an Infogrames press release, [*Terminator 3*] will be 'one of the most popular movies of all time.'"

– Data File, September 2002

"Quotables"

A lot has happened in the video game industry since Game Informer's 100th issue back in August 2001. New consoles have hit the market. Hundreds of great and terrible games have released to the delight and disgust of gamers everywhere. Classic development houses have closed their doors, and new ones have emerged as the trendsetters of the modern era. Gaming has changed, and we've had the pleasure of watching it happen. These excerpts – culled from Game Informer's last 100 issues – provide a window into the industry's evolution over the last eight years. So take a stroll down memory lane with analysis, commentary, general weirdness, and (of course) criticism regarding the games and events that have shaped the current gaming landscape.

Take Me Higher

"Rumors in Japan point to the [PS3] debuting at the initial price of previous PlayStations: 39,800 yen ($368), but that cannot be confirmed."

– Connect, July 2005

"Financial analysts at Merrill Lynch Japan are estimating that Sony's PS3 will debut for $399 – $100 more than the believed retail price of the Xbox 360."

– Loose Talk, September 2005

"Sony is keenly watching how the Xbox 360's launch goes with consumers, and will use it as test marketing to see how attractive or unattractive a $399 price point is."

– Connect, October 2005

"Sony has displayed formidable business acumen in the past, and it's hard to believe that the company would price itself out of the market before next-gen gaming hits its stride."

– Dear GI, May 2006

Five-hundred and ninety-nine U.S. dollars.

– Sony's Kaz Hirai, July 2006

Some Things Never Change

"Comprised of 90% Hunters and 100% pansies, the Alliance is 'teh weaksauce.' Did you blockheads know that it isn't mandatory to have a naked Night Elf dancing on every mailbox? It's true…but you'd know that if you weren't playing on easy mode. /moo"

– 2005 Dorks of the Year, January 2006

On Second Thought

"We don't expect Activision to nickel and dime you for new levels and clothing [in Tony Hawk]."

– Microsoft's J Allard, September 2002

"There are going to be all sorts of transactions online. But the game developers are ultimately the ones who are going to decide if they are going to nickel and dime."

– J Allard, May 2005

Shady Business

"They had informed workers that everything would be okay as they were deleting computer records in their offices, moving all of their furniture while in view of the workers, and trying to scam money off workers' insurance benefits without the acknowledgement of the employees."

– Anonymous source on the death of Acclaim, November 2004

Music on the Rise

"The only good thing concerning this title is the wedding song minigame. It's about the closest thing to a home release of Guitar Freaks we'll get in America."

– Ephemeral Fantasia review, September 2001

"I desperately hope that this game garners enough attention to afford some sequels."

– Guitar Hero review, December 2005

"People have always viewed peripheral games as niche, and music games as niche. People are realizing now that this is the best example of the hardcore game made for the mass market."

– Red Octane producer John Tam, June 2006

"Guitar Hero is one of those crazy ideas that somebody thought up, and they developed it, and it's almost f------ perfect. Almost too perfect. One of those one-in-a-million ideas that gets through and is just brilliant."

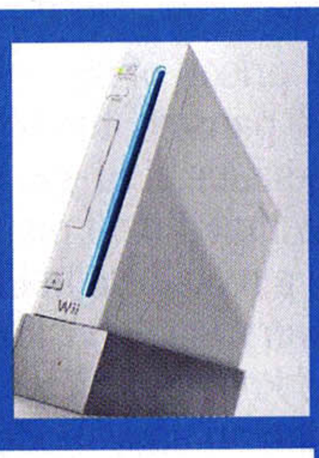
– Guitarist Slash, October 2007

Wait, What?

"We saw [Tobey Maguire] last year at Sony's pre-E3 party, and the dude is one tiny little ball of acting ability. Man, Tobey's so short you can see his feet in his license photo! Oh, man, he's so short he can play handball on the curb! Aww, snap. Yo, Tobey's so short he can do backflips under the bed! That sucker's so short he models for trophies! You may be asking, 'What is the purpose of this little outburst?' Well, we simply mean to illustrate that, because he is short, it would be extremely hard for you to step into Tobey Maguire's shoes, as they are probably very small."

– Spider-Man: The Movie preview, January 2002

Revolution Road



"The effort to produce machines with better technology has reached its limit. If things continue, they may lead to the decline of the entire game industry. We're reaching the limits of how far we can appeal to consumers by boosting the machine's performance or providing more compelling graphics or sound."

– Nintendo's Satoru Iwata, August 2002

"Nintendo of America expressed a firm commitment to hardware successors for the GameCube and Game Boy Advance for the first time. Previously, the company had openly debated the need to stay in the hardware market, mulling a future where it would only make software."

– News, January 2003

"We will not retreat – we are staying in the console business."

– Satoru Iwata, July 2003

"[The Revolution] is a place where the best ideas – not the biggest budgets – will win."

– Satoru Iwata, May 2005

"Nintendo president Satoru Iwata quickly cut through all the speculation when he revealed an actual working prototype of the Revolution controller. Needless to say, it was nothing like we imagined it."

– Connect, November 2005

"Nintendo certainly did what it said it was going to do – it has changed the way games can be played. The real question is: Are gamers and the rest of the world ready to make this leap?"

– Andy, Letter from the Editor, November 2005

"Don't kid yourself. You're going to see more gimmicky, crappy, cheap, 'I wish I hadn't bought it' gimmick games based around that controller than you can ever possibly imagine."

–Epic Games' Mark Rein, January 2006

Our Mortal Enemy?

"There's no conspiracy going on here – except, of course, the one against Carrot Top."

– Kato, editor blurb, June 2003

"Not a single 'celebrity' who appeared in this game would even accept a free copy. Except maybe Carrot Top."

– Celebrity Deathmatch review, January 2004

"[Pitfall Harry] is a character that makes Carrot Top look cool."

– Pitfall Harry review, April 2004

"As fun as Carrot Top is attractive"

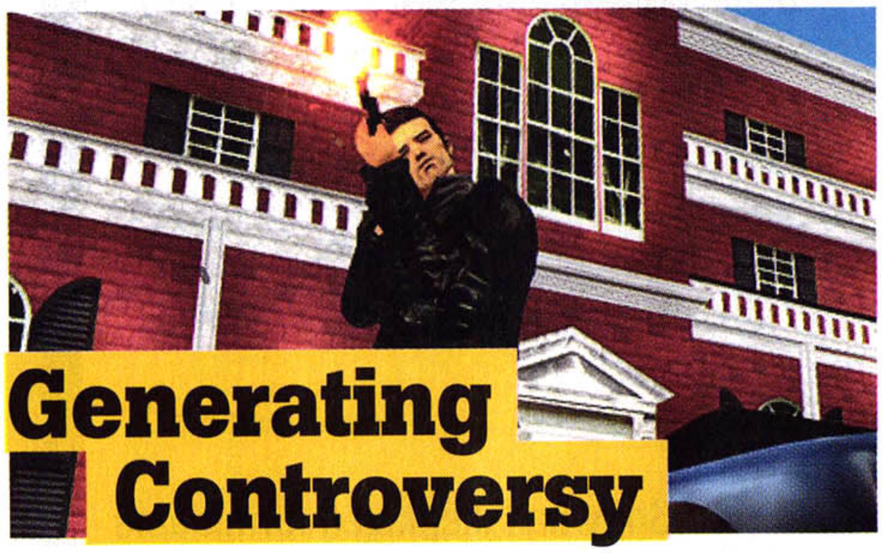
– Capcom Fighting Evolution review, December 2004

"Carrot Top will do anything for a dollar. Anything."

– News Top 10, March 2005

"1 – Carrot Top. A game so obnoxious and worthless it fills even itself with an unbearable, crushing shame. It also uses prop gags to little effect."

– Scoring System, December 2005



Generating Controversy

"I don't think we sold any copies because of the hookers; I genuinely don't – because nobody spends $50 to see a car bounce up and down."

– Rockstar's Terry Donovan, September 2002

"Rockstar's ultraviolent title Manhunt has the distinction of being the first video game ever banned in New Zealand."

– Data File, February 2004

"Older generations always attack the media of the generations that follow. Ten years from now, if not sooner, we're going to have people in congress and state legislatures and editors of newspapers and producers at television stations who grew up playing Grand Theft Auto."

– ESA president Doug Lowenstein, February 2006

Quotables" "Quotables" "Quotables

The Debate

"There's a total lack of understanding that games are an art form."

– Rockstar president Sam Houser, January 2005

"Personally, I'm convinced games are art. Objectively, I'm confused."

– I am 8-Bit founder Jon Gibson, May 2006

"I believe that games are not art, and will never be art."

– Hideo Kojima, July 2006

Red Ring

"Reports have circulated of 360 owners having problems including overheating and faulty hard drives…Microsoft says the 360 is under the three to five percent defect rate that is normal for all consumer electronic products."

– Connect, February 2006

"Microsoft is only now admitting that its initial batch of Xbox 360s were defective (yeah, that red semi-circle is not normal)."

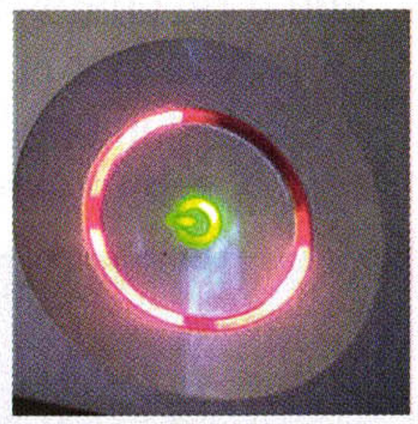
– Connect, November 2006

"After two years and who knows how many red rings of death, Microsoft is finally addressing the high failure rate of the Xbox 360. The console manufacturer has changed its warranty for those afflicted by the three flashing red lights, which signifies a general hardware failure. The coverage is now effective for three years past the initial date of purchase."

– News, September 2007

54.2%: The failure rate on Xbox 360s according to a reader survey.

– Connect, September 2009



Fall of Rare

"Nintendo had the ability to continue its exclusive relationship with Rare, but in looking at the company's recent track record, it became clear that its value to the future of Nintendo would be limited. In other words, we passed on this opportunity for very good business reasons."

– Nintendo's Peter MacDougall, November 2002

"How could Rare, creator of some of the most beloved games of all time, put out…this? My theory is that someone in its office got really messed up on cough syrup and read all one million *Goosebumps* books in a row."

– Grabbed by the Ghoulies review, December 2003

"I'm very bullish on Rare. We're certainly expecting great things from them. Players should expect that, too."

– Microsoft's Shane Kim, June 2004

"Let's not mince words: Rare is a company badly in need of a critical and commercial hit."

– Kameo preview, September 2004

"Rare was acquired because they are one of the most magnificent developers the world has ever seen, and they don't lose that overnight."

– Microsoft's Peter Moore, April 2005

Roar!

"Nintendo – usually known for its conservative style – got an unusual injection of machismo in the form of its new executive vice president of sales and marketing, Reggie Fils-Aime… A man of impressive stature and a penetrating glare."

– Connect, July 2004

"My name is Reggie, and I'm about kicking ass. I'm about taking names, and we're about making games."

– Nintendo's Reggie Fils-Aime, July 2004

"Dislikes: Being afraid of Nintendo's Reggie"

– Reiner, editor bio, July 2004

My name is Reggie, and I…am…happy.

– Reggie Fils-Aime, September 2007

"Quotables"

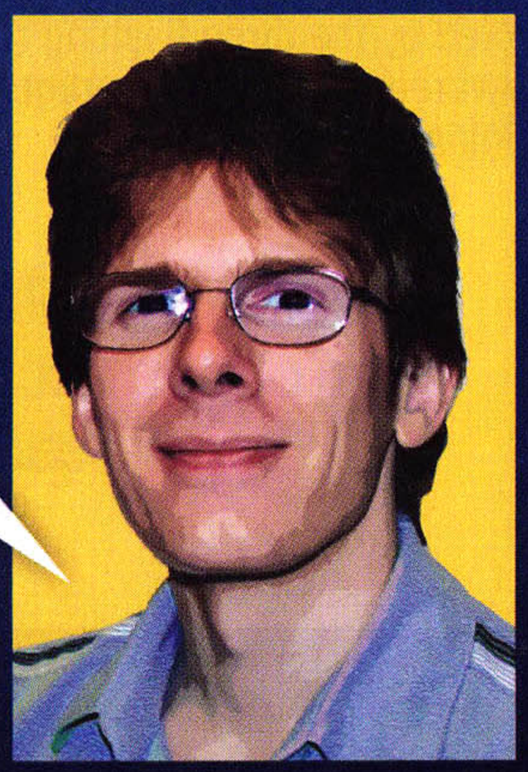
In Their Words

Dancing on the Grave

"We killed 'em on football. They could give that thing away for free, Scotch taped to a ham sandwich, and we're still going to beat them."

– EA's Jeff Brown on Madden versus NFL 2K5, November 2004

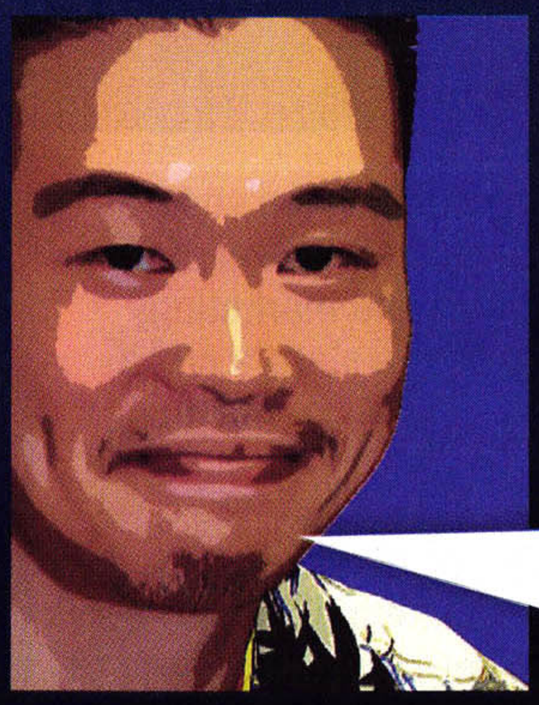
Simple Idea, Lots of Fun



I think the core premise of Doom has always been something that you can sum up in a sentence and it resonates really well. And that is, 'marines against demons.'

– id's John Carmack, October 2005

Zombies and You



With zombies, they're straightforward – they're vegetables that exist to feed. But with people, you don't know whether they're your friend or your enemy.

– Capcom's Keiji Inafune, July 2005

Mulligan!

"The PS3 is a total disaster on so many levels. I think it's really clear than Sony lost track of what customers really wanted and what developers wanted. I'd say, even at this late date, they should just cancel it and do a 'do over.'"

– Valve's Gabe Newell, February 2007

Customers do not want online games.

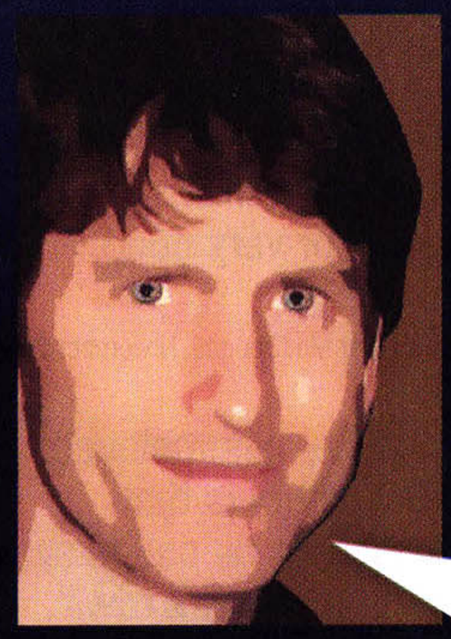
– Nintendo's Satoru Iwata, February 2005

Thanks, Microsoft

"[We] do not view this as a $60 title, and not in any bad way. It's a great value pack thing that we want to do. We're going to make it worth a lot – we just don't want to charge a lot for it."

– Bungie's Joseph Staten on Halo 3: ODST, December 2008

Picture It



Everybody always says that – 'We're approaching photorealism' – but we're really not.

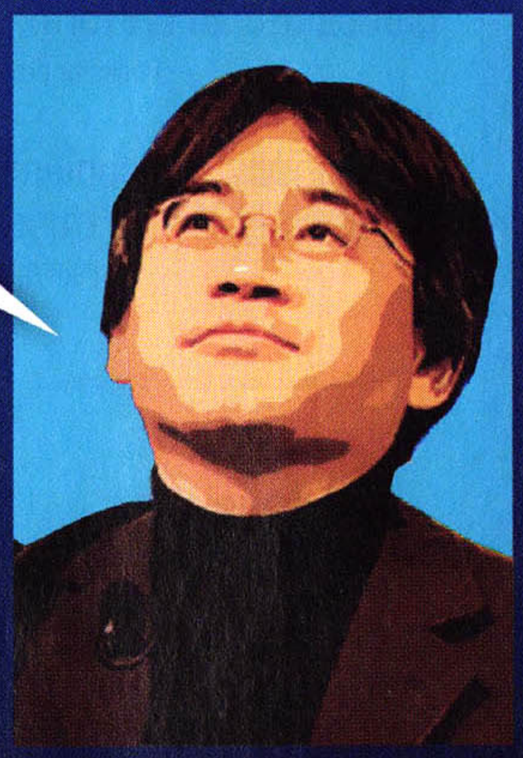
– Bethesda's Todd Howard, April 2007

On Peripherals

"You know, if it was left up to me, I would raise the prices even further."

– Activision's Bobby Kotick, October 2009

It's a Fad



Step 3: Profit

"Tidus was created from the following keywords: main character, seventeen years old, energetic, a profession related to water, jock, looks different from others."

– Square Enix's Tetsuya Nomura, January 2002

Oh, Really?

"[The DS] leans toward a younger demographic. Whereas the PlayStation Portable is something that I think has mass appeal."

– Sony's Kaz Hirai, July 2004

"Quotables"

On Creativity

"I think that's a misconception, that people don't want unique games…I just think the public isn't being offered a lot of good things."

– Double Fine's Tim Schafer, December 2004

The Cost of War

"No other company could survive losing money in perpetuity. It's just because Xbox is a division of the larger company that they are able to do this. Entering this market for them has come at a huge expense."

– Nintendo's Perrin Kaplan, July 2003

> I got to see and touch and love the PSP – I want to rub my b---- on it.
>
> – Epic Games' Cliff Bleszinski, July 2004

Cliffy Likes It

No Faith

"Don't count on the public that made Clay Aiken's *Measure of a Man* double-platinum to care much about soul."

– Journalist Steve Kent, May 2004

How Nice

"Games are to make children happy."

– Sonic Team's Yuji Naka, July 2003

The Legend Speaks

"Hip-Hop culture is not a subset of pop culture anymore. It is pop culture. So it's natural for gaming to reflect that."

– Director John Singleton, January 2005

> I doubt that there is anyone in this world who can accurately imagine what kinds of conversations are had when members of Bungie and Team Ninja meet up…Do you honestly believe there is anything out there that can't be accomplished with the technologies of Bungie and Team Ninja put together?
>
> –Tomonobu Itagaki, November 2005

Itagaki!

> I have grown bored with the graphics in DOA 3. Please imagine the graphics that a man who can say this would create.
>
> – Tomonobu Itagaki, September 2003

Harsh

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

– Nolan Bushnell, December 2007

Nothing but Lies

"This is a new IP, and there are going to be follow-on products – sequels and other things, absolutely."

– BioWare's Ray Muzyka on Jade Empire, November 2004

If You Say So

"The people at Eidos are real juggalos."

– Violent J, Insane Clown Posse, July 2004

D&D Meets MMO

"I'll be blunt: I think they're trying to copy D&D on the computer."

– Dungeons & Dragons co-creator Dave Arneson on MMORPGs, March 2005

> I could make Halo. It's not that I couldn't design that game. It's just that I choose not to. One thing about my game design is that I never try to look for what people want and then try to make that game design.
>
> – Shigeru Miyamoto, July 2007

Behold Oz

For Never!

"We are absolutely the first to admit that this project is an industry joke at this time. There's no doubt about it."

– 3D Realms co-founder Scott Miller on Duke Nukem Forever, July 2007

"Quotables"

Greatest **RIPs**

Down the Toilet

"Damn. I feel like somebody took a dump in my soup."

– Funkmaster Flex Digitial Hitz Factory review, October 2004

"*Voila*! You've got a freshly baked crapcake."

– 25 to Life review, March 2006

"Blood Will Tell? More like 'This Game Smells – like POOP!'"

–Blood Will Tell review, November 2004

"To be honest, I didn't play this for very long. But does a food critic need to eat a dozen dog poop and sauerkraut sandwiches before he writes he doesn't like the taste?"

– Cy Girls review, March 2004

"I did enjoy the different speeds of the bike classes, but that's similar to liking a turd sandwich because of the bread."

– Motocross Mania review, September 2001

"I named my dog after Steve Martin's in *The Jerk*. That was entertaining. This game is not."

– Reel Fishing III review, July 2003

"Talking to fish and playing 'Hide the Sardine' with Lagoon Boy wouldn't go over too well with gamers. When it comes to the digital world, Aquaman isn't the king of the sea. He's a turd in a pool."

– Aquaman review, October 2004

"This is only suitable for small children who don't know any better and those who like to be tickled by Mario mustache rides."

– Super Mario Strikers review, December 2005

"Shadowrun is the type of game you would expect to find as a prize in a box of cereal."

– Shadowrun review, August 2007

"Okay, what we're dealing with here is a racing game that doesn't let you steer. DO YOU UNDERSTAND THIS!?"

– Grooverider: Slot Car Thunder review, September 2003

"Games this bad only come around a few times in a lifetime, so let's all cherish Simpsons Skateboarding for being a shoddy, painfully unfunny, totally inept example of an extreme sports title gone horribly, horribly wrong. By 'cherish,' I mean 'point and laugh at,' not 'purchase.'"

– Simpsons Skateboarding review, December 2002

"This doesn't suck as bad as most Matt Groening-related video games, but that's kind of like saying someone is the least smelly person in France."

– Futurama review, September 2003

"To serve, protect, but more realistically, to suck."

– RoboCop review, May 2003

"The real-life players that inhabit the AFL teams in the game weren't man enough to even sit on the bench in the NFL, and yet here we have a video game based on their failures as pro athletes. Great."

– Arena Football review, April 2006

"Kengo is a tall glass of garbage water – the viscous, beige fluid that collects at the bottom of trash bins…the refuse of waste."

– Kengo: Legend of the 9 review, December 2007

"Has all the explosiveness of a wet firecracker lit by the dim spark of low ambition."

– Dead to Rights: Reckoning review, August 2005

"Is that the magic of Nintendo? Well, I don't believe in fairies."

– Mario Strikers Charged review, September 2007

"Highland Warriors is as forgettable as that time I backed into a parked car and immediately drove away."

– Highland Warriors review, March 2003

"187 is just plain mediocre. Oops, I meant mediocrizzle. My bad, playboy."

– 187 Ride or Die review, October 2005

"Take it behind the woodshed and do what needs to be done."

– Bomberman: Act Zero review, September 2006

"I was able to invent a new fashion accessory I've named the 'crotch hat.' That was fun. Sadly, the charms of a genital Stetson only go so far."

– Samurai Western review, July 2005

"Like pouring gasoline on your pancakes"

– Star Fox Assault review, April 2005

"I literally won a match just bashing the controller against my ass. I wish I was joking, but the score is seriously Kabuki Warriors zero, my ass one."

– Kabuki Warriors review, December 2001

"Athletes, pack your bags and go home. The Olympics are officially ruined."

– Mario & Sonic at the Olympic Games review, December 2007

"When you enter a bathhouse while hunting for information about your girlfriend's abduction, your welcoming committee is a band of half-naked men dressed only in towels who chase you with shotguns through the inviting hot tubs and steamy saunas…I'm not making this stuff up."

– Red Steel review, January 2007

"Can someone explain to me why a bunch of bird people would need to use planes? They've got freaking wings for arms!"

– Wing Island review, May 2007

"During my time playing this game, I had to take a break. I ran an errand to the Minnesota Department of Motor Vehicles, and the freaking DMV was less taxing than this frustrating experience."

– MacFarlane's Evil Prophecy review, August 2004

"Even Stinkor would think that this game stinks. Just spending a few seconds with this miserable title is like getting double-teamed by Ram-Man and Fisto."

– He-Man: Power of Grayskull, Worst Games of 2003, January 2004

"If you're going to make a 'respectful' update of one of cinema's most cherished films, it's probably a bad idea to a have cutscene that features two rapping boy band rejects on rollerblades."

– Seven Samurai 20XX review, May 2004

"When presented with a shoebox of receipts and the siren song of long division, go with the trusty companionship of a 1040 form over Haunting Ground."

– Haunting Ground review, May 2005

"Like Joey Harrington, this game is… not worth $40."

– Madden NFL 06 (DS), November 2005

"You could fit the amount of innovation this game has in Yoda's shoe. What's that you say? Yoda doesn't wear shoes? Exactly."

– Star Wars Trilogy: Apprentice of the Force review, October 2004

"Rarely outside of the E-machine aisle at Best Buy do I see something that screams, 'The absolute minimum amount of money was spent in the creation of this product.'"

– Combat: Task Force 121 review, June 2005

"The battle system chugs more than Lee Marvin at a whiskey party."

– RPG Maker 3 review, August 2005

"With all the wit and sagacity of a dead kitten, Catwoman spouts more clichéd idiocy than you'll know how to handle."

– Catwoman review, September 2004

"Poised to bring 1999 back into the spotlight of gaming, behold Winback 2, the game that time forgot!"

– Winback 2 review, June 2006

"For each minute you can play it without knifing your own kneecaps, award yourself a point. If you get three points, just put the controller down. You win."

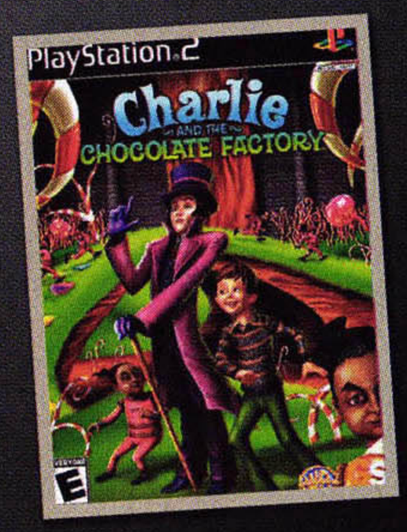
– Romancing SaGa review, November 2005

"Yes, Mr. Durden, I may not be a beautiful and unique snowflake, but you are in a crappy video game, so go stuff that up your soap-hole."

– Fight Club review, January 2005

"The only part of this game that I didn't completely despise was the main menu screen, which features some green lasers."

– Fuzion Frenzy 2 review, April 2007



"Charlie and the Chocolate Factory puts the 'Wonka' back in 'wonky controls' and the 'Willie' back in 'willie, willie cwappy wevel design.'"

– Charlie and Chocolate Factory review, September 2005

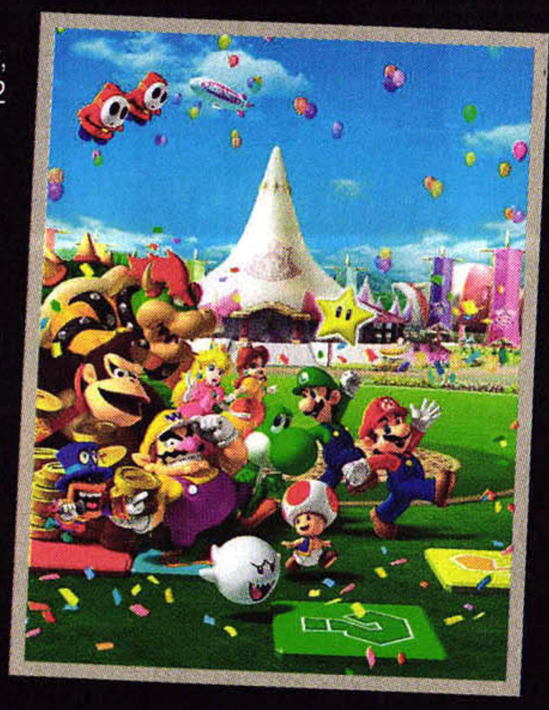
We Hate Mario Party

"When I see games like Mario Party 4 hit the market, I begin to question my spirituality, wondering if Satan is actually working at Nintendo on this godforsaken series."

– Mario Party 4 review, December 2002

"I'll be the first to admit that I'm a jaded butthole, but that doesn't mean that Mario Party 4 (or any Mario Party game) is a well-made piece of software."

– Mario Party 4 review, December 2002



"Once again, enough people bought the last Mario Party for Nintendo to justify a sequel. Thanks a lot, geniuses!"

– Mario Party 5 review, December 2003

"[*Stay Alive*] is a movie about an online game that kills its players in real life. We didn't know Mario Party was going online."

– Data File, June 2005

"When I was a kid I liked to throw rocks at things. Does 'rock throwing' deserve a 9/10? Actually, rock throwing is pretty great – way better than this collection of decent-to-aggravating minigames built around the most annoying, dull, and arbitrary board game in the history of mankind."

– Mario Party 7 review, December 2005

"Is there anything more pathetic than a grown man reviewing a Mario Party game? Well, I guess I'm going to find out."

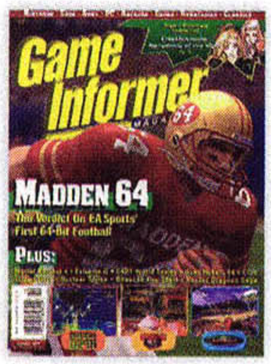
– Mario Party 8 review, July 2007

BREAKING DOWN

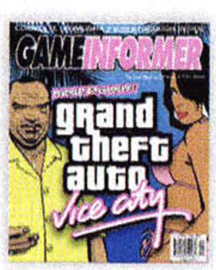
Looking back over the last 200 covers, we enlisted the help of the statistical wunderkinds at EEDAR to parse the information and find interesting trends. Here's what we found:

Most Featured Publishers

Activision
15.19%



Electronic Arts
14.09%

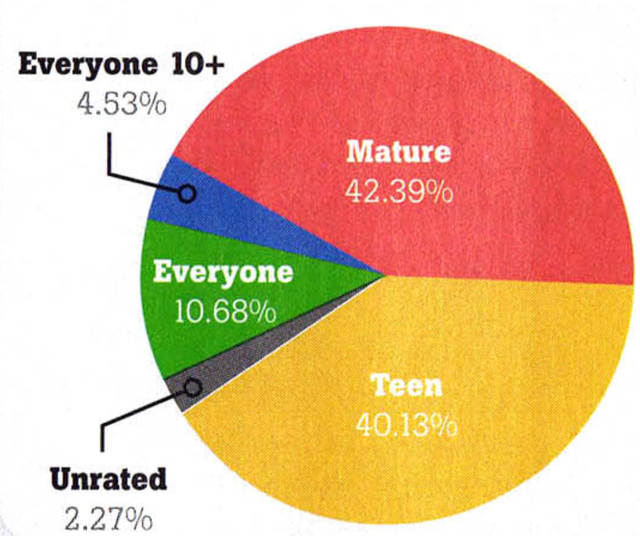


Rockstar Games
8.29%

Ubisoft
6.91%

Capcom
5.80%

Breakdown By ESRB



EEDAR Review Scores

Cover Game Average

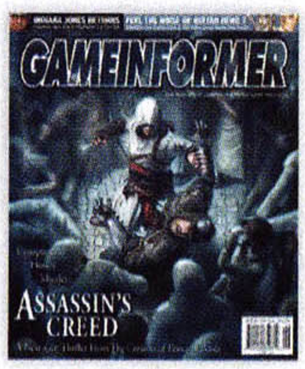
78.89

Industry Average 2000 - 2009

67.73

Most Featured Developers

Neversoft Entertainment
5.25%



Ubisoft Montreal
4.70%

Capcom
2.76%

Midway Games
2.49%

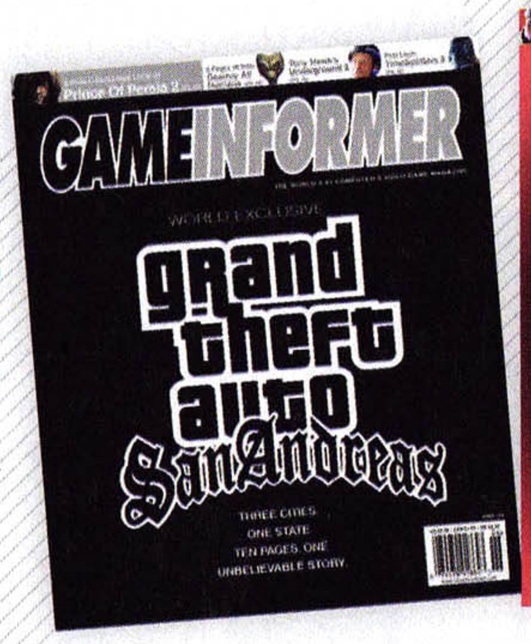
Raven Software
2.49%

Rockstar North
2.49%

Cover Rarities

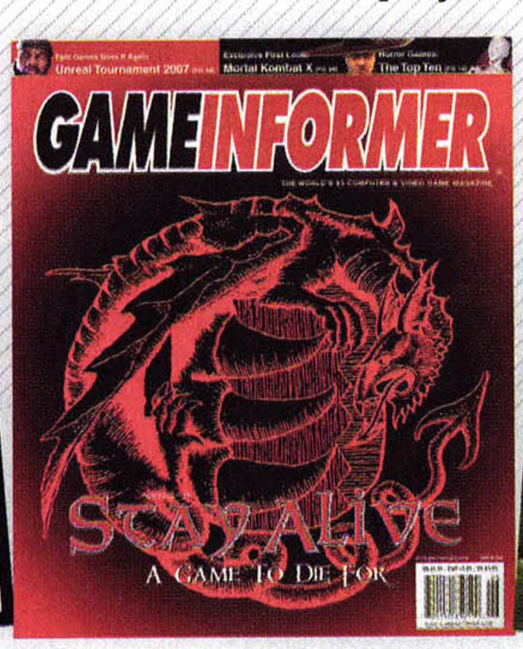
Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas (Issue 134)

Only lucky attendees of the 2006 E3 received this alternate cover



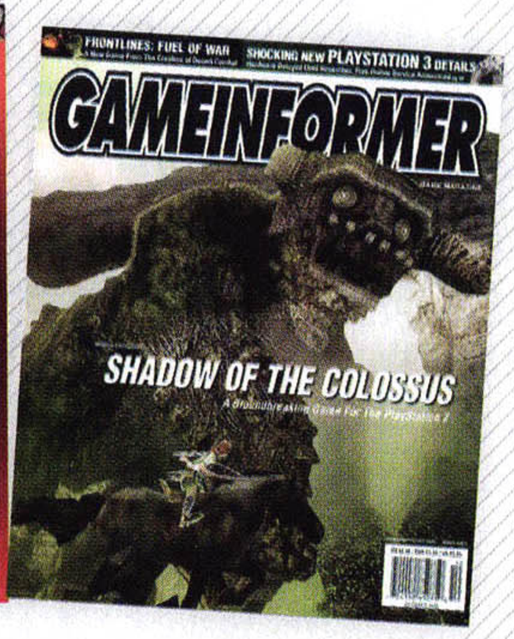
Stay Alive (issue 146)

This alternate cover of our Gears of War issue was created for use in the eponymous 2006 horror film



Shadow of the Colossus (Issue 150½)

This ultra-rare Game Informer cover was made for the Adam Sandler film *Reign Over Me*. In the movie the characters played by Sandler and Don Cheadle bond over the revered Team Ico game



THE COVERS

The Cover Game Has...

Zombies
12.40%

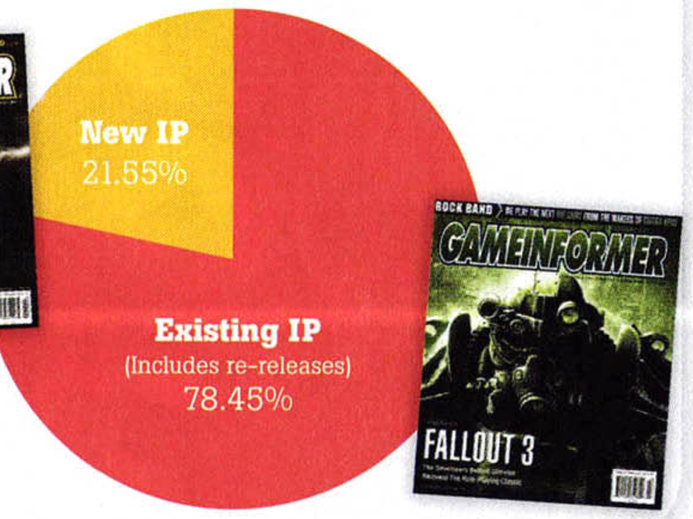
Ninjas
5.79%

Vampires
3.86%

Nazis
1.93%

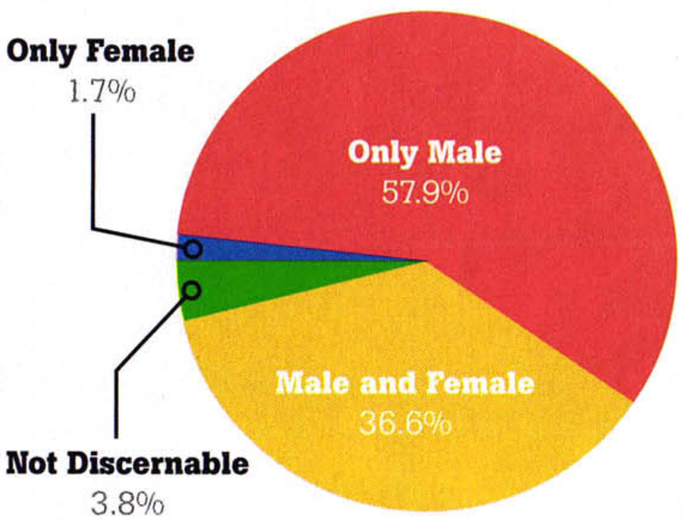
Pirates
1.10%

New IP vs. Existing Franchise

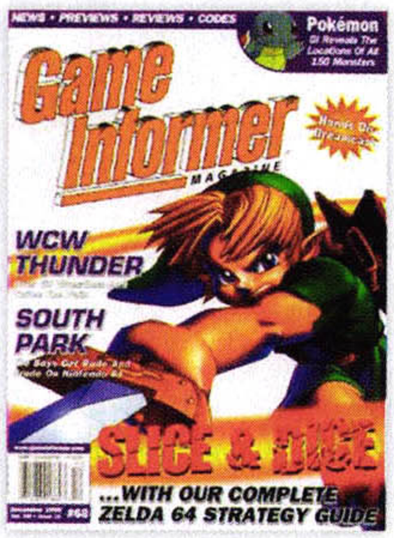


First Party vs. Third Party

Male / Female / Not Discernable



Who's On The Cover?



Person
71.65%

Animal
8.40%

Vehicle
7.87%

Undead Entity
3.67%

Creature / Monster
(unicorns, dragons, harpies)
3.15%

Robot
3.15%

preview

Splicers are fired up

BioShock 2

Hands-on demo reveals new enemies and greater choice

The fallout of Jack nosediving into Rapture had a ripple effect still felt by the city's inhabitants 10 years after he (and the Little Sisters) left. Now it's 1970 and the underwater dystopia is in even worse shape thanks to Big Sister. More terrifying than any foe in the first game, the agile and powerful Big Sister will viciously hunt you down if you do anything to disturb Rapture's twisted equilibrium. Maybe that's why the team at 2K Marin put players in control of a lumbering Big Daddy instead of a regular human. "Jack wouldn't survive BioShock 2," says creative director Jordan Thomas.

We got a chance to explore this dangerous new vision for Rapture in a hands-on demo that takes us through an early segment of the game. As we ride a train car to Ryan Amusements (a carnival complete with eerie music and animatronic figures of Andrew Ryan), the voice of Augustus Sinclair chimes in over our radio. That name should be familiar to fans of the first game; Sinclair was one of the key figures in Rapture's scientific community before the city fell, and has managed to survive the harsh environment in the years since.

Incoming radio feeds from key characters still serve as story guides and assist with gameplay progress. As we move through Rapture, Big Daddy receives feeds from Sinclair and one of the game's antagonists, Sofia Lamb, an early political rival of Ryan's with strong utilitarian ideals. Her ultimate goal is to rebuild Rapture in a way that preserves the common good over good of the self by controlling the Adam supply.

Once we arrive at Ryan Amusements, audio diaries scattered around the park suggest something has gone terribly wrong. Blood adorns the crumbling walls and mutilated floors. Decaying animatronic displays of scientists and families come to life when approached to tell short stories of Rapture's history. Moving through the grounds, we encounter two enemies new to the BioShock universe. The Brute Splicer is a muscular and frenzied creature that can do quite a number on you if not taken down quickly. We also encountered a brand new breed of Big Daddy, the Rumbler. The Rumbler can shoot rockets and surround itself with protective mini turrets, creating a powerful perimeter that can be hacked by the player.

The hacking system has received an overhaul for the sequel. Players can shoot special darts to remotely hack from a distance, which no longer involves a frantic pipe puzzle. Instead, a metronome-like needle ticks back and forth past a series of colors. Press a button when the needle touches green on multiple passes and you have a successful hack. Though the new system is simpler, it happens in real time, so you are susceptible to Splicer attacks. Hacking health stations, vending machines, and turrets to work in your favor is still a vital survival tactic.

While taking advantage of your environment will help you keep Splicers at bay, you'll need more than a rogue turret to take down BioShock 2's primary foe. In our demo, Big Sister makes a grandiose entrance, letting out an inhuman scream before she is even in sight, giving players a few precious moments to gather resources and brace for a tough fight. When she finally leaps out in front of you, she pauses for an instant, letting you catch a glimpse of what you're up against: a teenage girl encased in a mechanical diving suit, armed with an Adam-gathering needle, a spear gun, and Adam-fueled abilities beyond those possessed by anyone in Rapture.

As Big Sister slowly lifts her mechanical arms, objects in the environment respond to her telekinetic call and float around her. She heaves them straight at us – some we manage to dodge, while others we catch with our own telekinesis plasmid and hurl back at her. We try to run for it, but there is no hiding from Big Sister; she chases our Big Daddy through the amusement park and savagely leaps at us, attacking with her sword-like needle and then backing off to use her spear gun at range.

Everyone's Big Sister encounters will be different, since players can use a variety of weapon and plasmid combinations to stave off the assault of this formidable foe. Though she is not impossible to defeat, she can definitely put up a fight, and will undoubtedly result in a few trips to the Vita-Chamber. We wonder how Big Sister will develop as the game progresses to maintain that level of fear and difficulty.

Many gameplay and story details are still shrouded in mystery, but we look forward to seeing how the tides will turn when the game drops in February. After the incredible success of its predecessor, BioShock 2 has a big diving suit to fill. » **Annette Gonzalez**

Visit gameinformer.com to read our interviews with BioShock 2 creative director Jordan Thomas and the multiplayer team at Digital Extremes, plus our hands-on multiplayer preview

The Big Sister looks like a hybrid between a Big Daddy and a Little Sister. She will attack anyone to protect Little Sisters and the Adam supply

» Platform
Playstation 3
Xbox 360 • PC

» Style
1-Player Action
(10-Player Online)

» Publisher
2K Games

» Developer
2K Marin, 2K Australia, Digital Extremes, 2K China

» Release
February 9

BioShock 2 Multiplayer

BioShock 2's multiplayer mode features a narrative that serves as a prequel to the original game. Set during the fall of Rapture, players are plasmid test subjects for Sinclair Solutions. The game offers five modes, plus two variations of two of the modes. Only Capture The Sister, Civil War, and Survival of the Fittest modes were revealed at press time.

Capture The Sister plays much like "capture the flag" where teams battle to be the first to pick up the sister in the level and drop her off in a vent. In Civil War and survival modes players fight for the most kills. Multiplayer modes take place in the reworked iconic locations from first BioShock, including Kashmir Restaurant and Mercury Suites.

All modes support 10 players. In addition to tools used in the single-player game, multiplayer-only plasmids (Houdini, Geyser Trap, and Aero Dash) and weapons (nail gun) are available. Other multiplayer-exclusive plasmids and weapons have yet to be revealed.

The Legend of Zelda: Spirit Tracks

An old friend joins Link's latest quest

Throughout the Zelda series, a huge cast of characters has assisted Link on his quests. From the old man lending him a sword at the beginning of his first adventure to Midna, Tingle, Gorons, and Zoras in the later 3D titles, he's had no shortage of companions. However, he's never had a true partner by his side throughout an entire quest. Fans got a taste of Link and Zelda's partnership while escaping the sewers in Link to the Past and the castle in Ocarina of Time, but Spirit Tracks marks the first time the princess tags along for the entire experience.

Those who played the game at E3 had a chance to check out a segment featuring Link ordering a "phantom" around, using him to distract guards and the like. What was never explained was why the phantom is helping you out. During our recent visit to Nintendo, the company unveiled the story elements leading to this gameplay mechanic.

Early in the game, Link is en route to his graduation ceremony to become an engineer. He's scheduled to receive his license from Princess Zelda herself, but it's in danger of being rendered useless thanks to Hyrule's mysteriously disappearing Spirit Tracks. Strange storms are forming around the Tower of Spirits, the hub of all of Hyrule's tracks. As the tower itself falls apart and strangely reassembles out of balance, an ominous train appears from the clouds. Chancellor Cole, an odd little man with two green top hats, steps out and reveals that he's actually a horned demon with sinister intentions. He uses his power to knock Zelda out, hitting her so hard that her spirit separates from her body.

Cole kidnaps Zelda's physical body, but her spirit form remains with Link for the rest of the adventure. She acts as a guide in the same fashion that Link's faeries have in the past, but she'll have far more impact on the gameplay than his former partners. Early in the game, she inhabits the body of the phantom seen in the E3 demo. The player can switch back and forth between the characters easily, controlling Link in the same fashion as in Phantom Hourglass (although the roll has thankfully been re-mapped to a double-tap of the stylus). When you switch to Zelda, it's a matter of drawing a path for her to follow. She'll attack enemies, distract guards, and interact with objects.

These segments feel less like an extended escort mission and more like a cooperative one-player experience. Utilizing both Link and Zelda is crucial in the Tower of Spirits. You don't control both characters throughout the entire game; she only inhabits the phantom in certain areas. Dungeons are more of a traditional Zelda experience, with Link handling all the combat and puzzles. In these areas, the princess operates as a guide for the player rather than a controllable partner.

One of the primary complaints against Phantom Hourglass involved the repetitive Temple of the Ocean King segments that players were constantly forced to revisit. Spirit Tracks has similar areas in the Tower of Spirits, but their focus is more on progression than repetition. Fighting through each floor over and over isn't required as you reassemble the tower; instead you go directly to the newly restored floor without trudging through those below it.

While Zelda's involvement in Spirit Tracks brings a new element to the series' standard gameplay, it's still filled with old trademarks. Dungeons involve collecting keys and items, grabbing the Big Key, and using your newly acquired weapon to take out the boss. We played through the Forest Temple, which is where Link receives the Whirlwind item. By aiming it and blowing into the microphone, you can clear clouds of poison gas and affect certain enemies.

Link's quest to restore the Spirit Tracks is looking like a worthy and exciting addition to the Zelda series, introducing plenty of new elements while not straying too far from what makes the franchise so beloved. » **Dan Ryckert**

» **Platform**
Nintendo DS

» **Style**
1-Player Action/Adventure

» **Publisher**
Nintendo

» **Developer**
Nintendo

» **Release**
December 7

Gran Turismo 5

Teaching an old dog new tricks

» **Platform**
PlayStation 3

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

» **Publisher**
Sony Computer Entertainment

» **Developer**
Polyphony Digital

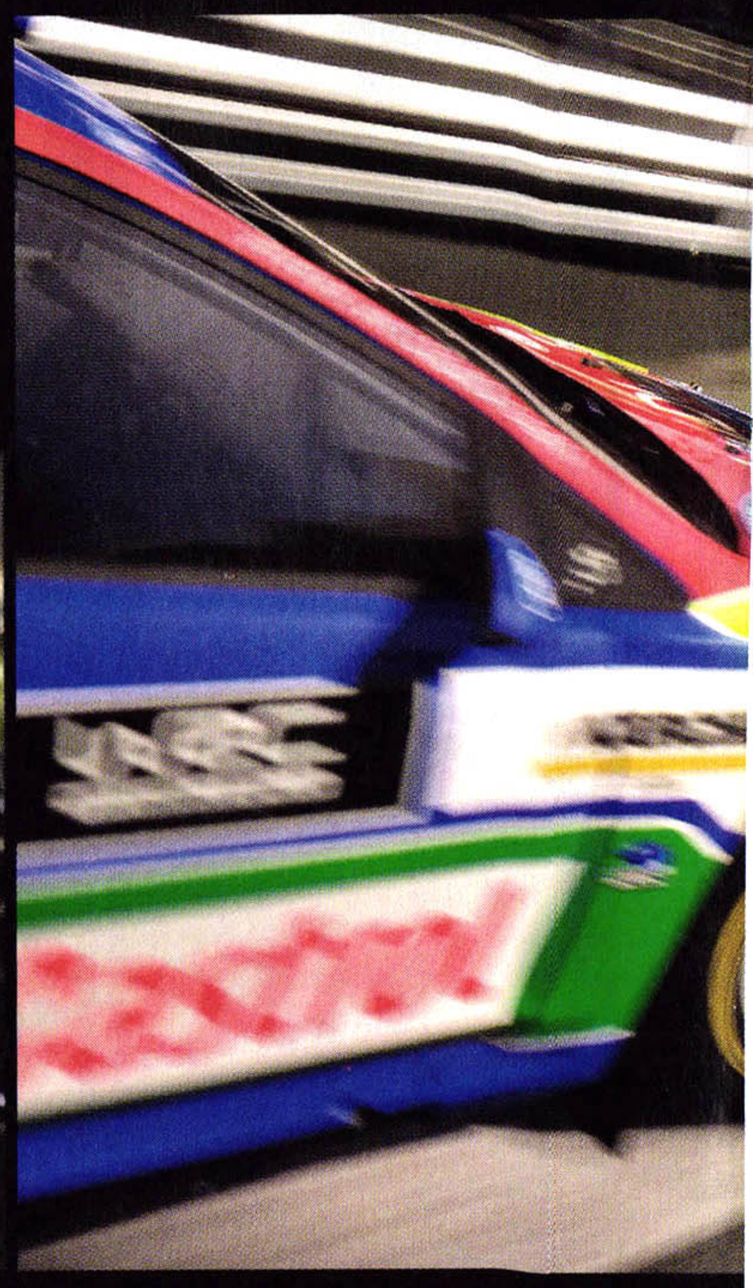
» **Release**
March 2010

Gran Turismo is nothing if not dedicated to realism. Polyphony's attention to detail is completist – the Ferrari you're driving is faithfully recreated right down to the proper stitching on the car's interior. Fans of the series are also all-too-aware of the fact that this leads to a very long wait between releases.

Over the last few months, Sony has revealed bits and pieces about the game – the inclusion of the World Rally Championship and NASCAR licenses being the standouts thus far. When we asked Polyphony Digital studio head and series producer Kazunori Yamauchi about working with such hardcore licensees, he was up front about the challenges. "The most difficult part is actually NASCAR," he says. "Their rules are really, really complex. It's almost the difference between soccer and American football. I'm not quite sure of just how much of NASCAR's rules we'll be able to implement into the game, but we're going to try."

The other standout feature we've yearned to learn more about is damage. While other game series' have included car damage for a while now, Gran Turismo always opted out in the past. That changes with GT 5. "The damage physics are going to be applied to things like a bent suspension arm, tires hitting the wheel wells of a car, deformation of the body affecting alignment, the loss of power to the engine," Yamauchi says. "We're actually still working on setting the sensitivity level of the damage. You can have it so if you have a single hit your car isn't going to be able to be driven anymore. It's a matter of adjustment."

We saw video of a rally car that was pretty banged up. The bumper was dragging on the ground and the fenders torn to shreds. The driver door was actually completely gone, revealing the high level of detail applied to the driver model inside. While our hands-on demo didn't include damage, we're confident that



Polyphony's obsessive development style will find a good balance.

The biggest news Yamauchi dropped? There are 950 cars available to drive in Gran Turismo 5. This means that every single one of the 800 cars in Gran Turismo PSP is in the game, plus 150 more. Players that already have GT PSP can also import their unlocked, tuned, and upgraded cars into GT 5. Among those 150 cars exclusive to the PlayStation 3 game are something brand-new: electric vehicles (EVs) and hybrids. Before you scoff at the idea of driving a little Prius around Nuremburg, there's a lot more to this than you may think. Companies like Tesla are making high-performance sports cars that run on pure electricity.

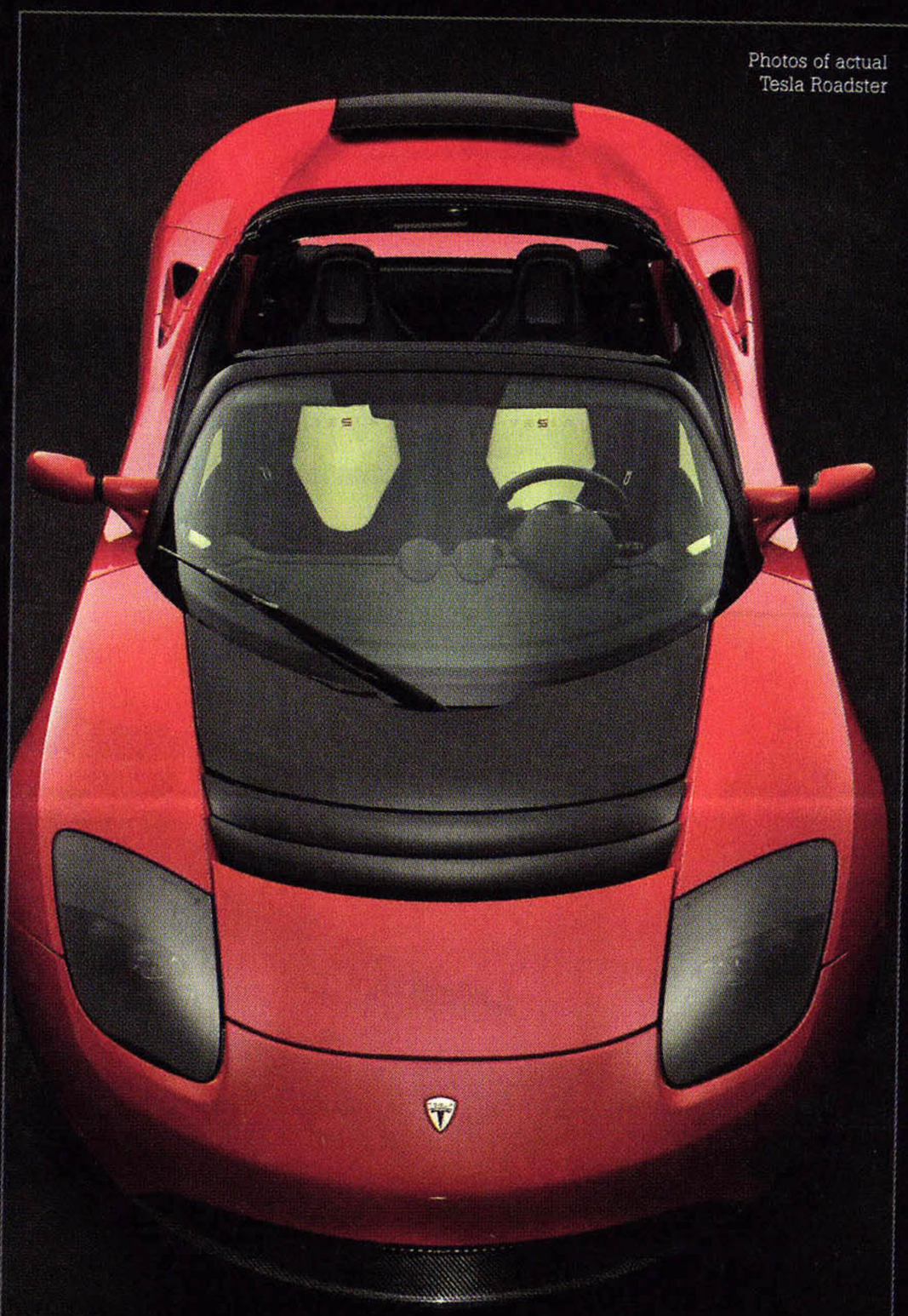
"You just hear road noise and the sound of the wind, really," Yamauchi starts. "One thing about it is that Sony is one of the major producers of lithium ion batteries. We were in close contact with a team that develops those batteries, and we've taken in their knowledge and information, and that's how we went forward with development." The painstaking detail that Polyphony puts into every car won't be lost on this new wave of hybrids and EVs. The company is also working with companies like Toyota, which have been pioneers in hybrids.

Along with the 20 locations and 70 track variations, Gran Turismo 5's massive amount of content aims to reset the bar the series has been taking control of each time it releases a title. The new damage system is a welcome addition, and the WRC and NASCAR licenses are sure to draw in an even broader audience. While there's no firm date yet, we're told to rev our engines for the game's release next March. » **Nick Ahrens**

Head over to www.gameinformer.com/mag to learn more about the Tesla Roadster and other EVs

Doors are for suckers!

Photos of actual Tesla Roadster



A New Kind of Speed

One of the exciting new cars coming to GT for the first time is the Tesla Roadster. For the first time ever, gamers get to drive a next-generation automobile. This speed machine is 100-percent electric powered. Unlike gas engines, the Roadster's 375-volt power plant peaks at 276 ft/lb of torque from 0-4500 rpm. In layman's terms, that's maximum power instantly, something traditional engines cannot physically accomplish. The engine is also rated at 185 KW, which comes out to around a cool 248 HP. It's good that companies like Tesla aren't letting the future of cars be limited to boring little sedans.

Final Fantasy XIII

Square Enix sheds light on reclusive title

» Platform
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360

» Style
1-Player Role-Playing

» Publisher
Square Enix

» Developer
Square Enix

» Release
2010

When a seven-minute FF XIII trailer debuted in Japanese not long ago, we sat back in awe of the visuals, gripped by a story and dialogue we couldn't understand. The dubbed version made an even bigger impression when it made its way state-side, revealing more details about the reclusive title than ever before. Combined with a recent hands-on session, our knowledge of all things Final Fantasy XIII has grown exponentially.

The first and most surprising tidbit is that the main protagonist, Lightning, has a sister named Serah, who is engaged to the rugged male lead, Snow. The couple takes a leisurely hover bike ride at the beginning of the trailer, chatting about the news of their engagement. Their words are tinged with sadness, however, as Serah divulges she has been marked as an l'Cie.

The l'Cie are central to the plot of FF XIII. These individuals are marked by a great crystal (manifested as an intricate tattoo) to fulfill a higher destiny. The problem is that each l'Cie's destiny is very specific and comes with a great cost. Although never explicitly aware of what they must achieve, if an l'Cie fails to fulfill their destiny within an allotted period of time they will die and transform into a terrible monster. It's not a pretty fate, so we understand Serah's concern.

Aside from the looming threat of a fate worse than death, being an l'Cie isn't all bad. They are gifted with the ability to summon Eidolons. The majority of the FF XIII cast are marked as l'Cie, and the trailer highlighted three of their unique summons. Each creature has a standard form and a vehicle form – one that the character can ride to amp up their attacks. We've already seen the impressive showing of Odin's horse form (via Lightning) and Shiva's motorcycle incarnation (via Snow), but the trailer introduced a third Eidolon who bears a slight resemblance to Ifrit in terms of color and an affinity for fire. The creature, named Brunhild, is entirely new to the series, however. Summoned by Sazh, Brunhild transforms into a hotrod and spews flames from its exhaust pipes.

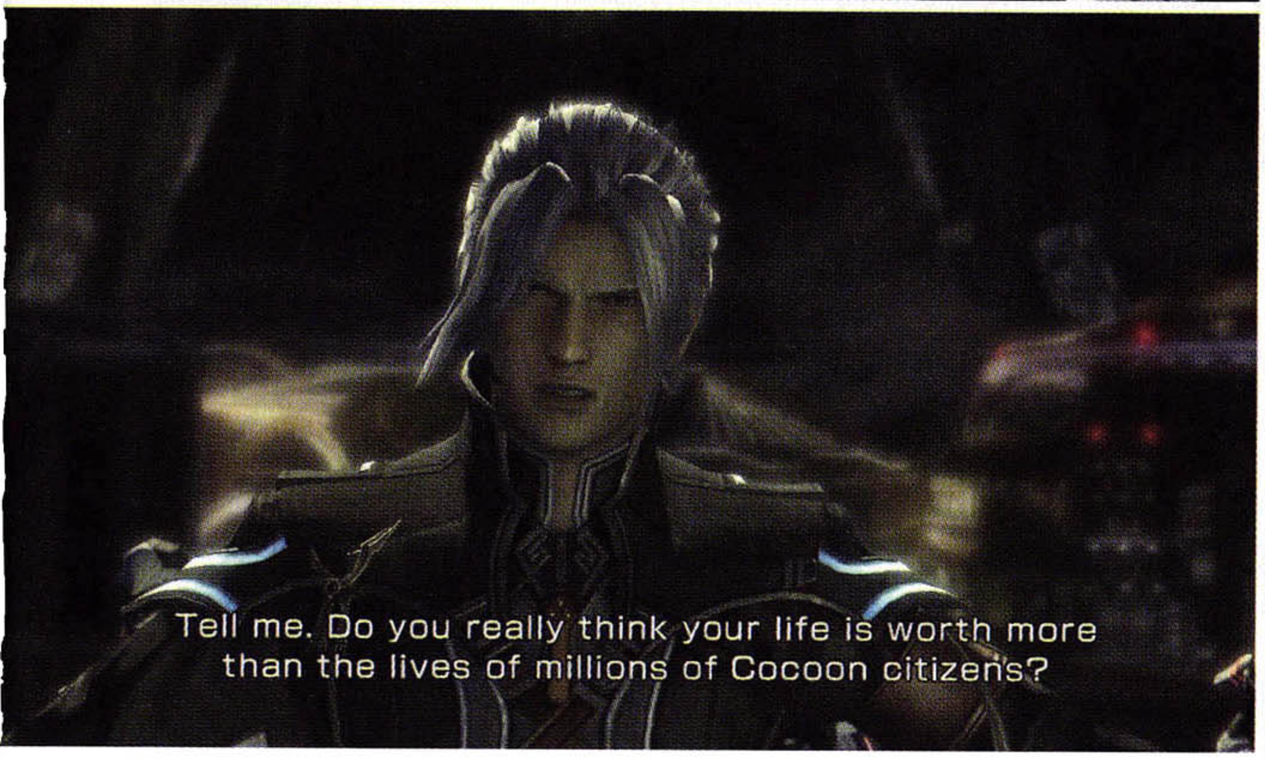
So who are our heroes fighting? The world of FF XIII is divided in two, the majority being the wild and untamed Pulse, and the remaining mass a floating paradise named Cocoon. Led by one of the primary antagonists, Yaag Rosch, an army has been created to deport those influenced or tainted by Pulse and to take out the l'Cie, who are seen as a threat to the entire existence of Cocoon. Rosch appears to be a multifaceted and conflicted antagonist. Other characters introduced are less so, including the mysterious Jihl Nabaat, who seems able to justify any atrocity due to her single-tracked vision of the world. In the trailer we learn Sazh has a young son, who Nabaat threatens to kill with no apparent remorse.

For our hands-on session, we take control of Snow, Sazh, and Vanille, and we found it easy enough to pull off standard and magic attacks. Our demo begins in an industrial area rife with wild animals, soldiers, and treasures hidden around every corner. After a few small battles using some of the more complex commands, we manage to best the beast after summoning Shiva and initiating her drive mode. The transition is a sight to behold. Although the concept seems peculiar, watching the pair of ice queens transform into a super-powered motorcycle makes that Transformers-loving fan in all of us giddy. After taking out the boss, the team pushes onwards and finds an airship, which they secure despite some forces trying to halt their escape. Then the cutscenes began, which ate up the remainder of the demo.

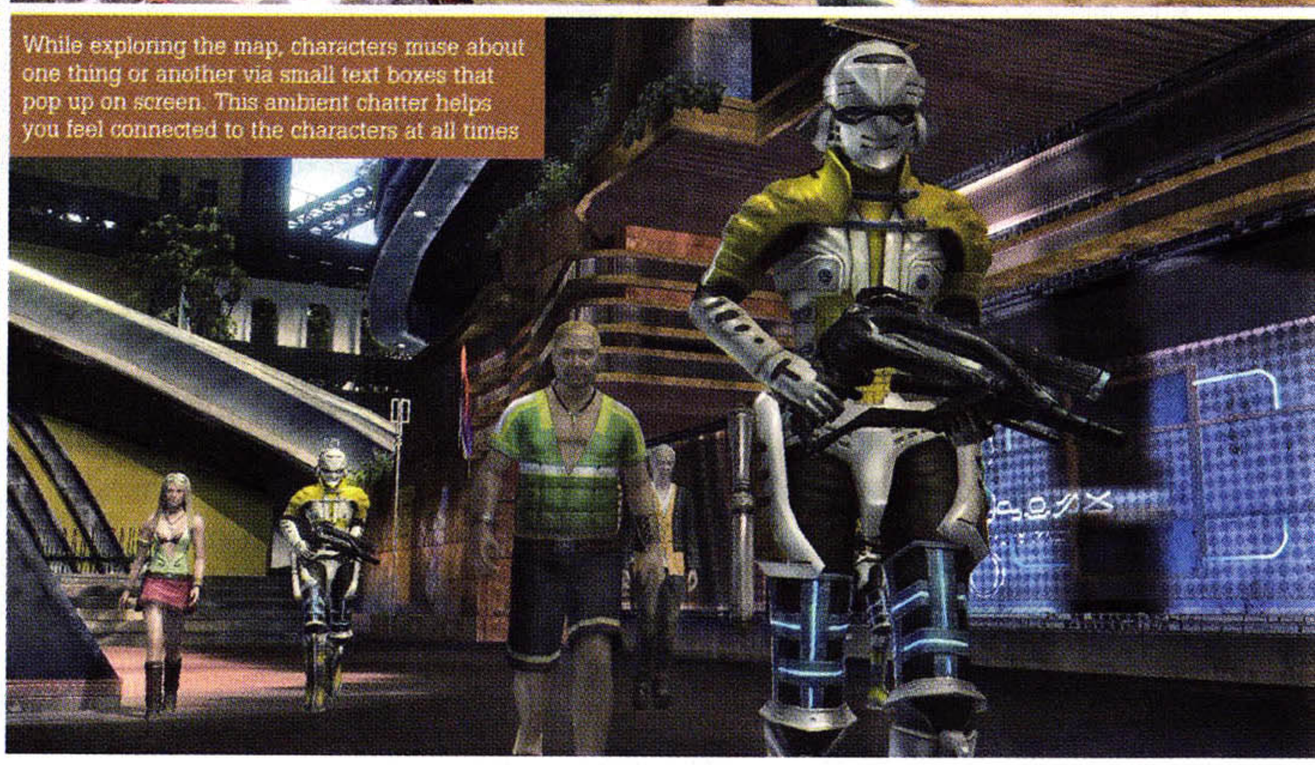
From epic air battles to skirmishes with behemoth war machines, the trailer and demo were obviously full of eye candy. Now that more details about the enigmatic game have come to light, it's getting tougher to contain our enthusiasm. The fanfare of the pending Japanese release is sure to fan the flames even more. **» Meagan VanBurkleo**

Visit www.gameinformer.com/mag to watch the seven-minute FF XIII trailer mentioned above.

A new playable character named Oerba Yun Fang has also been introduced, another I'Cie who summons the Eidolon Bahamut



While exploring the map, characters muse about one thing or another via small text boxes that pop up on screen. This ambient chatter helps you feel connected to the characters at all times



Tatsunoko vs. Capcom: Ultimate All-Stars

All new U.S. characters profiled

» Platform
Wii

» Style
1 or 2-Player Fighting

» Publisher
Capcom

» Developer
Fighting

» Release
January 26, 2010

Wii fighting game fans have been eagerly awaiting a North American localization of Tatsunoko vs. Capcom since it was released in Japan at the end of last year. To help make the wait worth it, Capcom is adding in four new characters and incorporating online multiplayer. We got the full rundown on all of the new characters from Capcom senior community manager and fighting game expert Seth Killian. » **Bryan Vore**

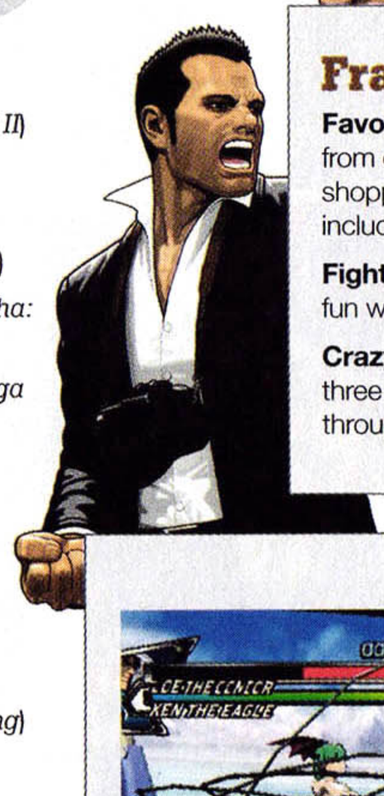
Catch videos of the new characters in action at www.gameinformer.com/mag

Zero

Favorite Moves: "Fans of Zero from the Mega Man series will be very happy. There are tons of moves involving his Z-Buster and Z-Saber, but my favorite is probably his "dragon punch" move, which hits everything and is super fast. Ryu will be jealous."

Fighting Style: "[For] players that like to be in your face – Zero is the new 'rushdown' king of Tatsunoko Vs Capcom."

Crazy Supers: "He's got a 'rainbow' super where he pounds the ground and then multicolored hellfire rains down from above. He also has a special 'shadow' super where his moves are all repeated by a double, for twice the damage and some great setups."

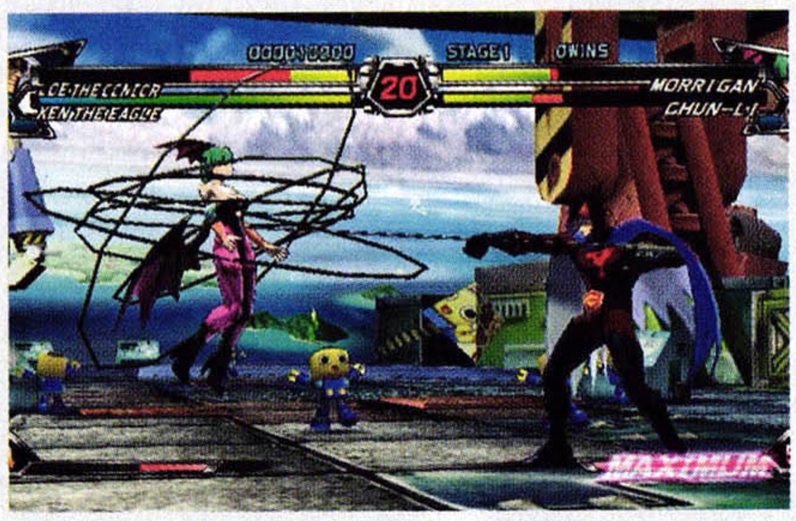


Frank West

Favorite Moves: "Definitely the zombie attacks. Frank can call in zombies from either end of the screen, down from the sky, or send them at you in a shopping cart. Once they're on the screen, they'll attack anyone near them, including Frank himself."

Fighting Style: "If you played Doronjo in the original TvC, you'll definitely have fun with Frank. I think Guile players might like him as well."

Crazy Super: "Frank definitely captures the fun of Dead Rising. In his level three super he slaps a Servbot head on his opponent and rushes them through a crowd of zombies before slamming them into the ground."



Joe the Condor

Who?: "His name is Joe Asakura, and he's the dark and brooding second-in-command of the Gatchaman team. While Ken is an ace with the boomerang and Jun uses a yo-yo, Joe's specialty is the pistol, and you'll see it throughout his moveset."

Fighting Style: "He shares a team uniform [with Ken and Jun], but that's where the similarities end. Ken is balanced overall, and Jun is great at middle range, while Joe (who specializes in the pistol) can be dangerous even from all the way across the screen. He's got a lot of great ranged attacks, including special throws and plenty of projectiles."

Crazy Super: "He's got a super where he fires off some feather projectiles and ends with a flying punch, and another where he calls in the Gatchaman team's jet, the GodPheonix. It lays down some suppressing fire, then launches a giant missile that destroys anything touching the ground."

Tekkaman Blade

Who?: "Tekkaman Blade's crystal is his Tek SystemBox, a.k.a. a TeknoCrystal, which is involved in the transformation of a human into a Tekkaman. But you don't need to know any of that to enjoy the giant laser blasting your opponent into oblivion."

Fighting Style: "'Blade is nearly 100% percent different from the original Tekkaman. Their moves are totally different, and they have totally different strategies to win. Blade has some unusual dashes but a lot of range and lots of side-switching tricks, plus some of the fastest supers in the game."

Favorite Moves: "His bird rush super is one of the best in the whole game, but my favorite move is his dragon-punch-esque lance twirl – it covers nearly half the screen."

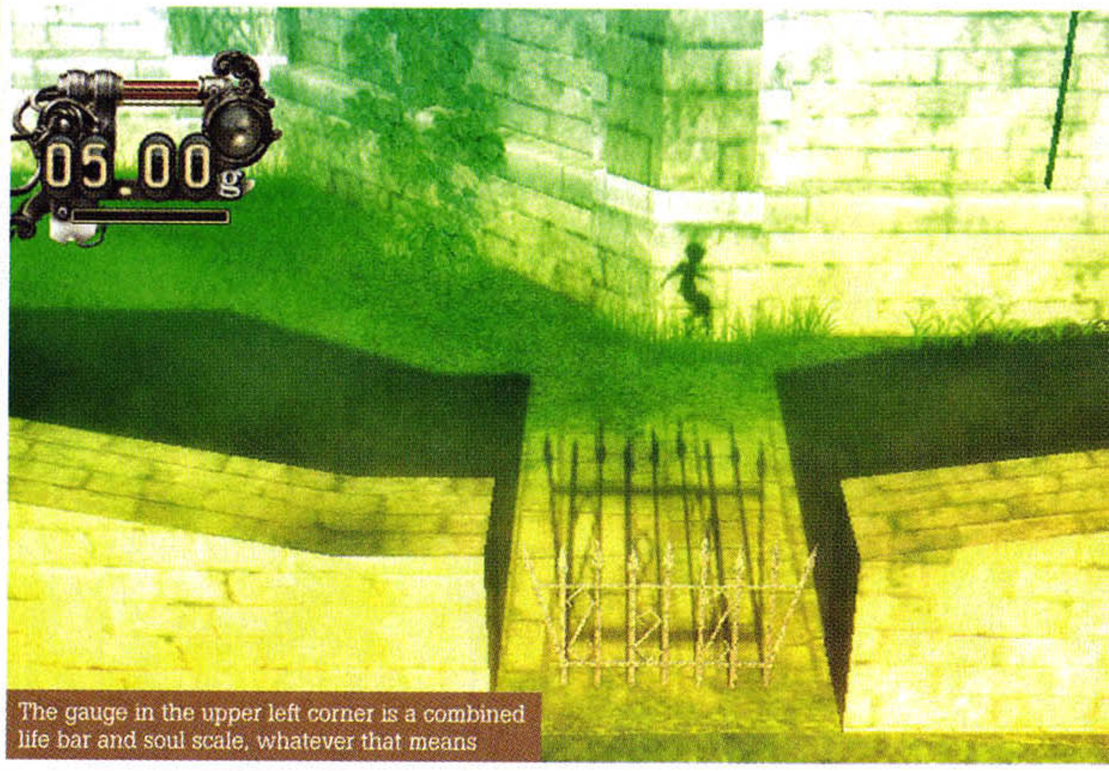
Full Playable Character Roster

Capcom:

- Ryu (*Street Fighter*)
- Chun-Li (*Street Fighter II*)
- Batsu (*Rival Schools*)
- Alex (*Street Fighter III*)
- Morrigan (*Darkstalkers*)
- Kaijin No Soki (*Onimusha: Dawn of Dreams*)
- Mega Man Volnutt (*Mega Man Legends*)
- Roll (*Mega Man*)
- Saki (*Quiz Nanairo Dreams*)
- Viewtiful Joe (*Viewtiful Joe*)
- PTX-40A (*Lost Planet*)
- Frank West (*Dead Rising*)
- Zero (*Mega Man X*)

Tatsunoko:

- Ken the Eagle (*Science Ninja Team Gatchaman*)
- Jun the Swan (*Science Ninja Team Gatchaman*)
- Joe the Condor (*Science Ninja Team Gatchaman*)
- Yatterman-1 (*Yatterman*)
- Doronjo (*Yatterman*)
- Casshern (*Neo-Human Casshern*)
- Tekkaman (*Tekkaman: The Space Knight*)
- Tekkaman Blade (*Tekkaman Blade*)
- Polymar (*Hurricane Polymar*)
- Karas (*Karas*)
- Ippatsuman (*Gyakuten! Ippatsuman*)
- Gold Lightan (*Golden Warrior Gold Lightan*)



The gauge in the upper left corner is a combined life bar and soul scale, whatever that means

Lost in Shadow

Hudson grows up with a compelling adventure

Hudson is mostly known for lighthearted party games like Bomberman, Mario Party, and Deca Sports. Next year, the developer/publisher is heading in an exciting new direction with Lost in Shadow. Players take the role of a young boy's shadow that has been separated from his body. In order for the two to reconnect, he must ascend a mysterious tower, platforming across its multitude of shadows. The game wears its influence on its sleeve, borrowing both visually and narratively from lauded titles Ico and Shadow of the Colossus.

"I personally wanted to make something that's a little darker than [the Kororinpa marble series] which was completely and utterly cutesy," says Osamu Tsuchihashi, director and creator of Lost In Shadow. He's also looking to one of the early gaming animation pioneers for inspiration: "The basis comes from the SNES version of Prince of Persia. The first time I played this game when I was a child, I couldn't believe that I was actually making this character move."

Tsuchihashi adds that the birth of his first child was an inspiration as well. While thinking about the games he would eventually teach his son, one called shadow tag stood out. Instead of tagging players through touch, you step on their shadows. "I remembered that when we played this game, our silhouettes looked like they were running on an alternate 2D field other than the ones we were on," Tsuchihashi recalls.

The shadows players traverse in the game are much more maneuverable and distorted than traditional solid objects, which is where the opportunity arises for intriguing platforming puzzles. "The field will drastically transform with just a mere change in the angle of the object or the direction of the light," Tsuchihashi says. For instance, the object may be just a pillar, but its shadow may turn into a hidden flight of stairs when light hits it at the right angle. A platform may seem too high, but by tweaking the environmental lighting with the help of a small sprite named Spangle, it may come within your grasp when the new shadows take shape. The hero can also affect the environmental geometry in the foreground to bend shadows to his advantage.

Even though the entire game takes place within the ominous tower, Tsuchihashi promises plenty of level variety. "The main stage is within a tower, but there are various areas within it, like the factory and living complex," he explains. "It might be simpler to just say that this tower is like a whole town, except stacked up on itself."

The boy's shadow carries a sword to deal with smaller enemies, but the game's focus won't be on melee combat. Rather, players must use their heads to transform light and shadows to destroy foes. Will this include bosses? "We are also considering a boss battle, since it's always necessary to place a period for transition," Tsuchihashi says. "The details are still vague at this point, but we intend on making it more like a puzzle to defeat the boss rather than a full-on head-to-head."

Speaking of vagaries, the story is still under wraps at this early stage. "I don't intend on focusing my full attention to the story, since this is, first and foremost, to be enjoyed as a game," Tsuchihashi says. "But I will still like to make the story into something that you may ponder years after you finish playing." » **Bryan Vore**

Go to www.gameinformer.com/mag for more screens

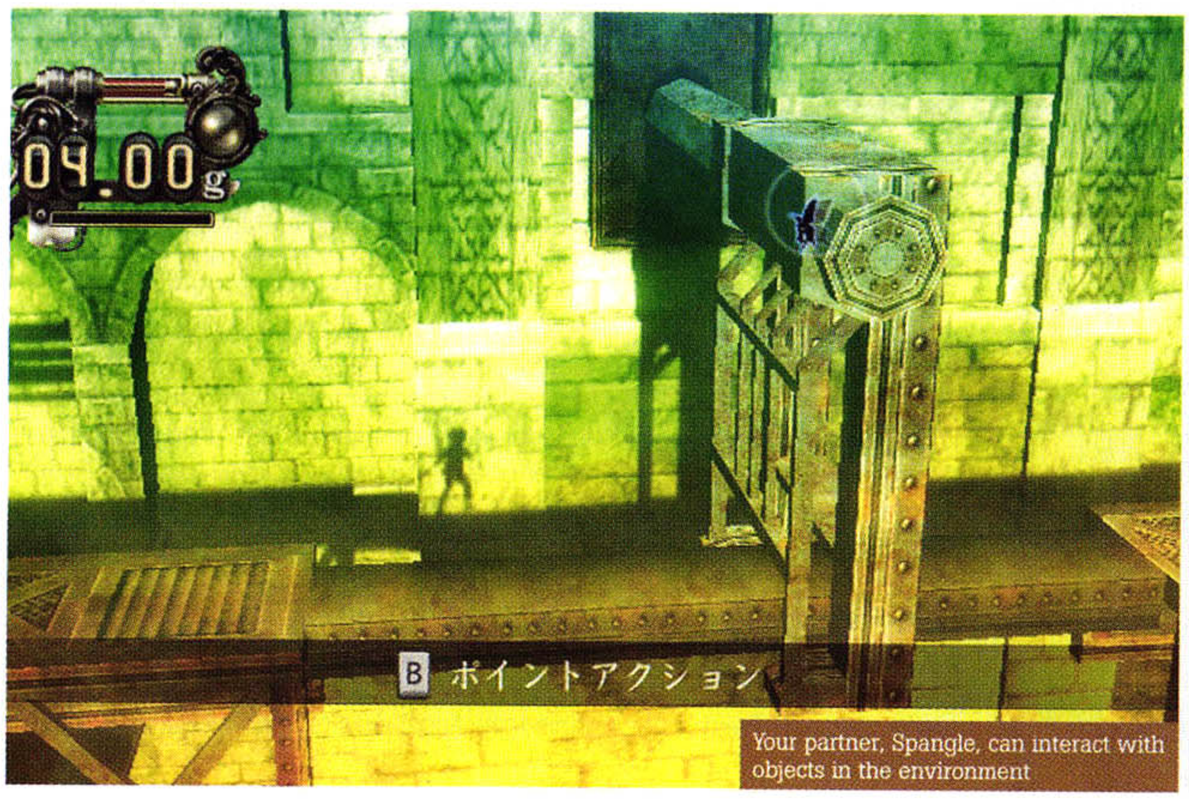
» **Platform**
Wii

» **Style**
1-Player Platforming

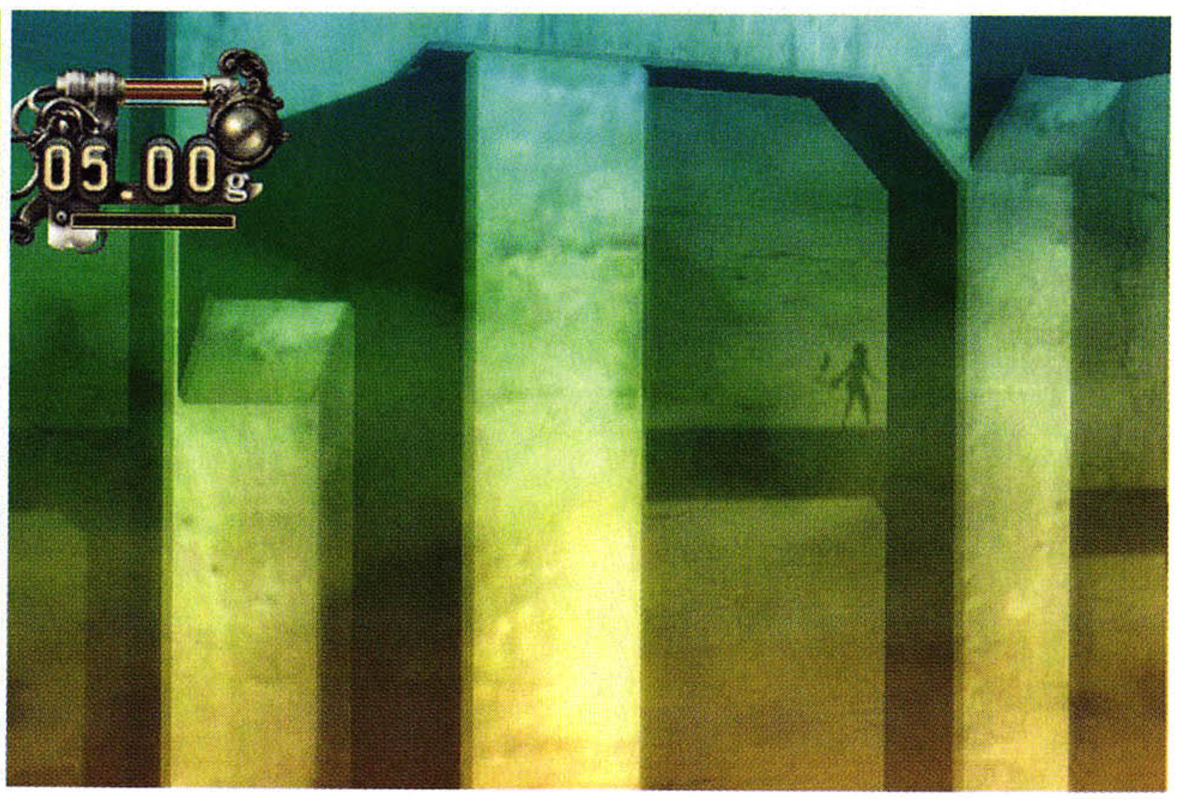
» **Publisher**
Hudson Entertainment

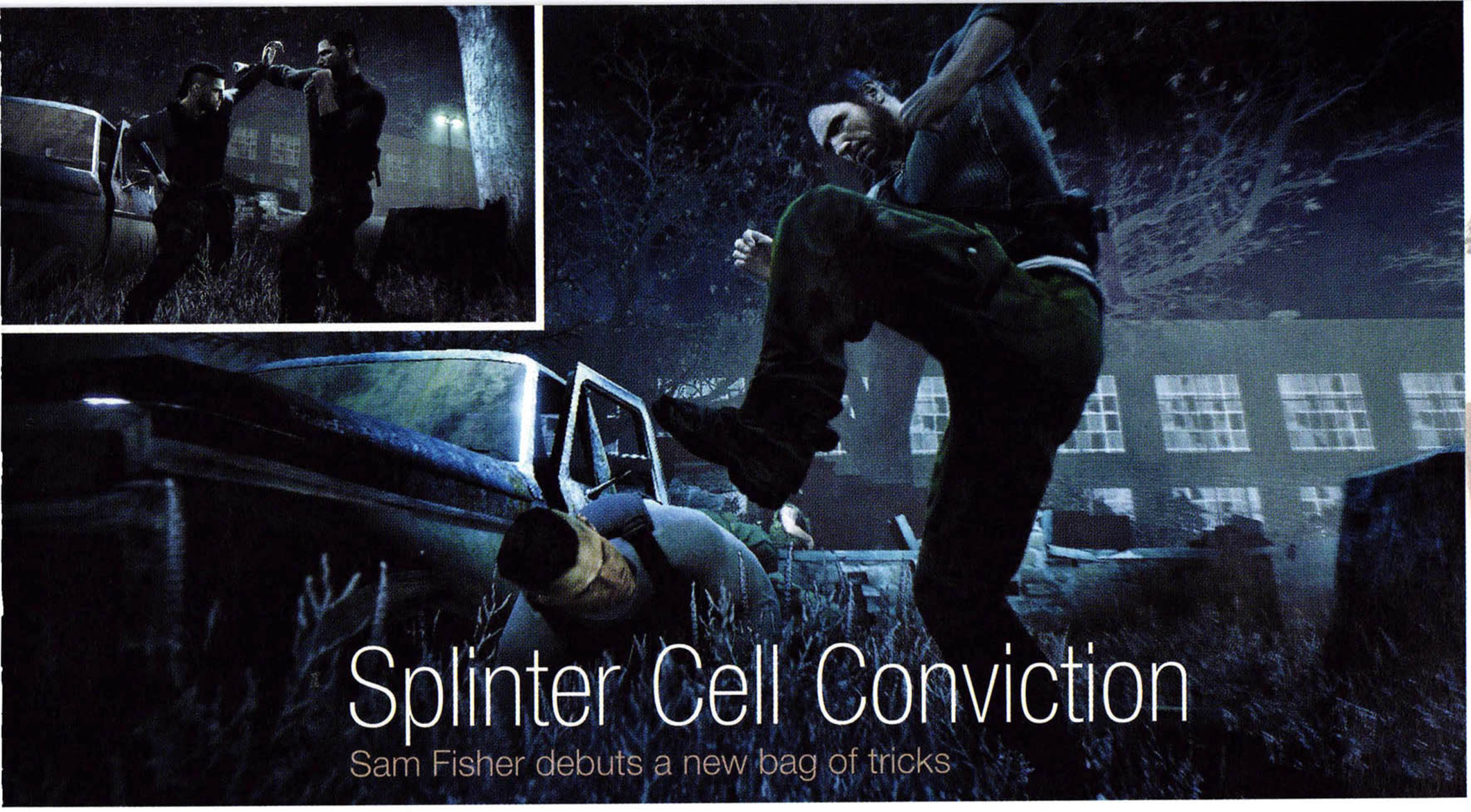
» **Developer**
Hudson Soft

» **Release**
Summer 2010



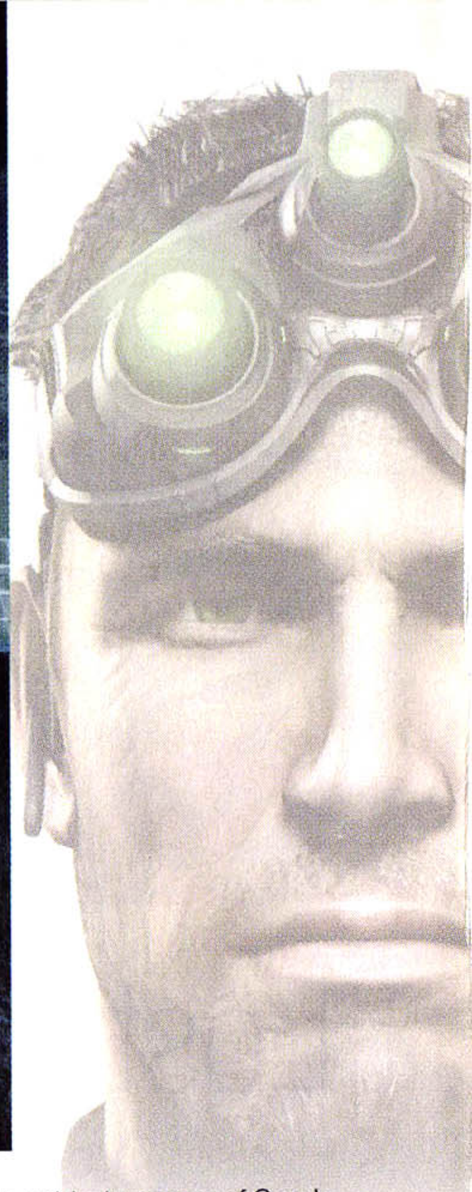
Your partner, Spangle, can interact with objects in the environment





Splinter Cell Conviction

Sam Fisher debuts a new bag of tricks



» **Platform**
Xbox 360 • PC

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

» **Publisher**
Ubisoft

» **Developer**
Ubisoft Montreal

» **Release Date**
February 23

Any good operative knows that when the situation looks grim, it's time to go dark and wait for a better time to strike. After waiting in the shadows for a bit, Splinter Cell Conviction performed a surgical strike on the crowd at Microsoft's E3 press conference with a gameplay demonstration that quickly became one of the most buzzed-about of the show. It was an amazing demo, but as we all know, sometimes you can't always believe what you see – especially in the world of international espionage.

Playing is believing, and after getting our hands on a one-level demo of the game, we are most definitely believers. The demo was a fairly simple scenario – the bad guys from the Black Arrow organization have a scientist and an EMP bomb that's set to knock out the Washington, D.C. area unless Sam stops them in time. The mission is set sometime in the middle of the game, and perfectly demonstrates how some of the new mechanics and improved gadgets operate in the field.

We begin by sneaking up a driveway leading to the warehouse grounds. A few Black Arrow guards are keeping watch around some broken-down cars. As we approach the scene, we see a mission update projected on the side of the building. While this new method of eschewing a traditional HUD looked great in the videos, it works equally well in the context of the gameplay. It not only lets you know what you need to do, but also gives you a visual cue as to the right direction to go and, most importantly, relays this information instantly without taking you out of the experience.

From here, we check out what will likely be the game's signature gameplay mechanic – the new Mark and Execute system. Our mission is to interrogate a Black Arrow operative who is surrounded by some low-level lackeys. By a simple tap of a bumper, we mark two enemies while sneaking up behind a third to perform a close-quarters stealth kill. It's important to note that pulling off the stealth kill is crucial – the game does not allow you to mark and execute without performing one first. The end effect is simply marvelous. With a couple simple presses, we take out one guard from behind, and then dump two silenced shells into the skulls of his comrades.

With our quarry now helpless, we begin to practice the not-so-subtle art of persuasion. Grabbing the Black Arrow soldier by the collar, we beat the truth out of him, bashing his head into trees, cars, and any other solid object we can find. Sadly, he is still not convinced, forcing us to pin his hand to a tree stump with our trusty knife. Suddenly, his tongue loosens up and we are on to the warehouse armed with new information.

In the warehouse, we got to try some of Sam's other toys, many of which augment the effectiveness of the Mark and Execute maneuvers. After shooting out the lights to provide a safer working environment, we get the drop on some enemies with the sonar goggles. These basically allow you to see through walls and other obstacles by sending out sonar waves that reveal the position of your foes. Once again, these can also be used in conjunction with Mark and Execute, giving you the drop on the enemy before you rush through a doorway.

Another handy tool is the sticky cam, which is familiar to those who have played previous games in the series. While it also works as a remote explosive, the ability to use it with Mark and Execute makes it shine in Conviction. Now, you basically have the ability to tag enemies from anywhere in the environment – as long as you're close enough to one to make the mandatory stealth takedown. If you exercise your tactics correctly, the feeling of playing Conviction is probably the closest you'll experience to what it must be like to be Jason Bourne, dispatching enemies with blinding speed and precision.

It's equally as important to find out how the game plays when things don't go according to plan, something a few key mistakes allow us to experience for ourselves. After a good start in the warehouse, we blow it and alert the guards to our presence. While Conviction is clearly not meant to be a hectic shooter, you can manage to survive on your wits and trigger finger if events go south. We scrape by and finally kill all the enemies in the room with a combination of shooting and stealth. Using a series of concrete underground trenches, we disappear into the shadows, leaving the guards pursuing the ghost-like onscreen outline of our last known position – another one of the game's clever touches. From here we Mark and Execute and perform a cool stealth kill where we hang from a railing and pull an enemy down to his doom.

This brief slice of the game gave us the feeling that Sam Fisher is indeed back, and that Ubisoft will have another blockbuster action title to follow up this fall's Assassin's Creed II. » **Matt Helgeson**

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Ninety-Nine Nights II

Epic fantasy battles are back, but can it escape its button-mashing reputation?

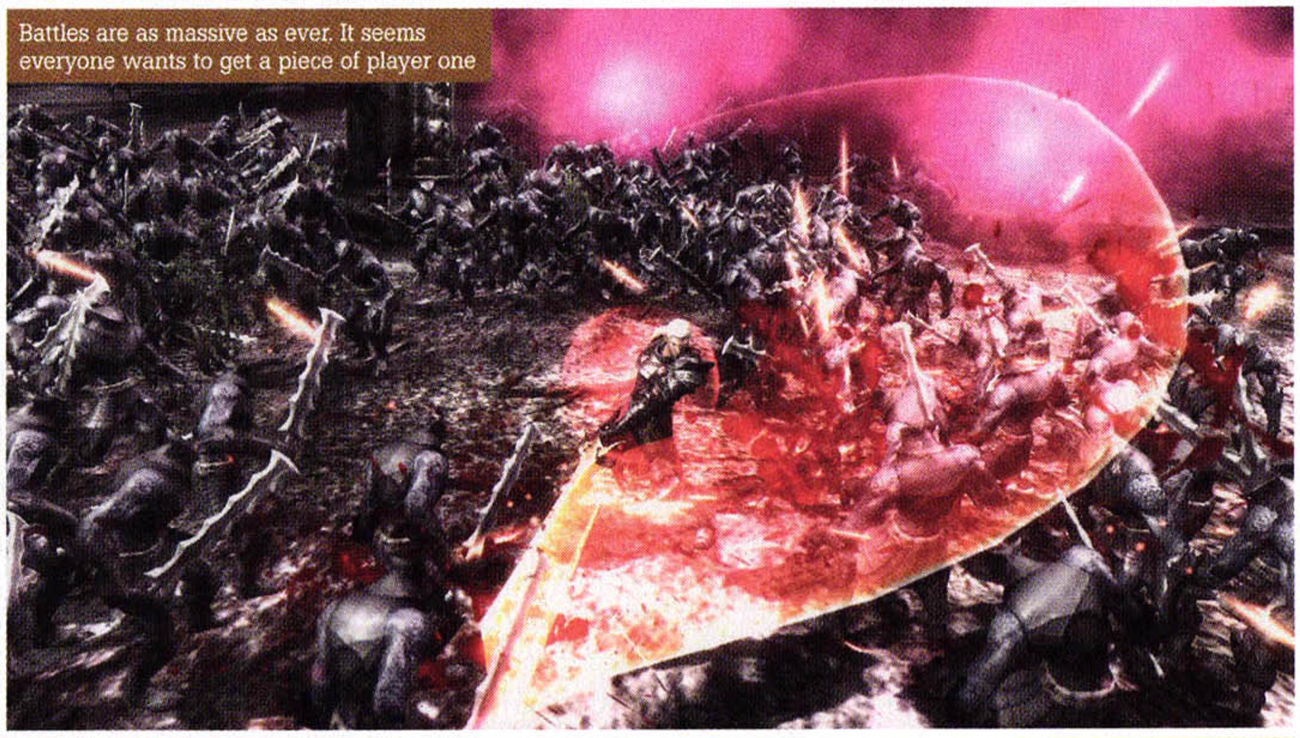
» Platform
Xbox 360

» Style
1-Player Action

» Publisher
Konami

» Developer
Q Entertainment/
Feelplus

» Release
2010



Battles are as massive as ever. It seems everyone wants to get a piece of player one

Bosses are a little more intimidating this time around. No giant frog here...

The first Ninety-Nine Nights is a manifestation of the term "eye candy." Released just a year after the Xbox 360 launched, the game showed off the new hardware's graphical capabilities. The game put hundreds of enemies on the richly detailed battlefields simultaneously, and players tore through them with a handful of playable characters and their eye-popping special attacks. It was certainly good-looking, but its repetitive gameplay left most people hungry for something a little more substantial.

It was too easy to write Ninety-Nine Nights off as another Dynasty Warriors clone – and far from accurate. The hack-and-slash combat against swarming armies bore more than a passing resemblance to Koei's workhorse, but Ninety-Nine Nights told a mature and nuanced story about the reasons behind and consequences of revenge. The game's storyline filtered through the perspectives of different characters, each bringing individual points of view. An attack on a goblin village looked much different when played through the eyes of a human bent on slaying savages versus a young goblin who watches in horror as his home is pillaged and family murdered.

The storytelling again has us interested in the upcoming sequel. While the first game dealt with the horrors of war, it also had borderline whimsical boss encounters with giant butt-slamming frogs. The follow-up appears to have a visual style that matches the dark subject material. Enemies look more brutal than before, with crudely fashioned armor and serrated blades. The pair of boss fights we've seen are also more epic in scale, with a tentacled beast and a towering Balrog-esque demon. From the trailer it looks like the goblin Dwingvatt is returning, along with new characters such as a young, cloaked girl and a warrior who appears to have lost a female companion in a bloody castle raid.

RPG elements are still present, with characters leveling up their moves as they progress. With more than a dozen different attacks and combos per character, it'll probably take a while to master the intricacies of battle. If you're just looking for some mindless killing, button mashing is still as effective as ever, though.

It remains to be seen if the story will continue to be as impressive as its visuals. People who weren't impressed with the original title will probably want the combat to be as deep as it is plentiful. With so much of the game depending on the battlefield mechanics, it would be a shame if it plays as repetitively as the first one. **» Jeff Cork**

Go to www.gameinformer.com/mag for more screens and information about Ninety-Nine Nights II

Battle orbs help players unleash insane spells to help with crowd control

Alan Wake

Remedy shows off a new midnight chase sequence

As we approach the five-year anniversary of Alan Wake's initial announcement, we're finally nearing the home stretch. Let's recap what we know thus far: the game, inspired by TV shows like *Twin Peaks* and *The X-Files*, uses a serialized episodic format for its level design. Novelist Alan Wake is staying in the peaceful Pacific Northwest town of Bright Falls at the behest of his wife Alice in hopes that it will help him get over his two-year old writer's block. She inevitably disappears, and a bunch of crazy stuff starts happening that appears to be directly tied to a manuscript that Alan doesn't remember writing.

During a recent look at the game, the town's deputies pursue Alan through a dark and creepy pine forest. Over the radio you can hear an FBI agent named Nightingale barking orders at the cops. He's dead set on nailing you for the disappearance of your wife and will stop at nothing to bring you in. As lights dance around in the distance and a helicopter flies overhead, Alan dashes through a ravine.

As you cross under a bridge, cops look down from above. A flare goes up, casting a bright light over your position. Someone shouts, "I see him!" and you sprint to find some darkness. Some strange whispers blend in with the wind. A cop car suddenly goes flying past as if some massive beast threw it. A woman sergeant calls for a status update over the air and is met with radio chatter flooded with the screams of police getting attacked by something terrible. She argues with Nightingale over the use of her police force, indicating that she may be an ally later on.

Dog barks echo through the forest as Alan clambers up a hill. A chopper rises out of nowhere and snags you in its spotlight. Over the loudspeaker the cop orders you to surrender or face the consequences. Before you can react, a swarm of dark creatures overtake the chopper and bring it down. Just when it looks like the coast is clear, a group of possessed townspeople surround Alan. Unfortunately, the scene fades out and we'll have to wait to see how things pan out when the game releases this spring. Given how long the wait's been so far, a few more months is nothing. » **Bryan Vore**

Check www.gameinformer.com/mag for additional screens

» **Platform**
Xbox 360

» **Style**
1-Player Action

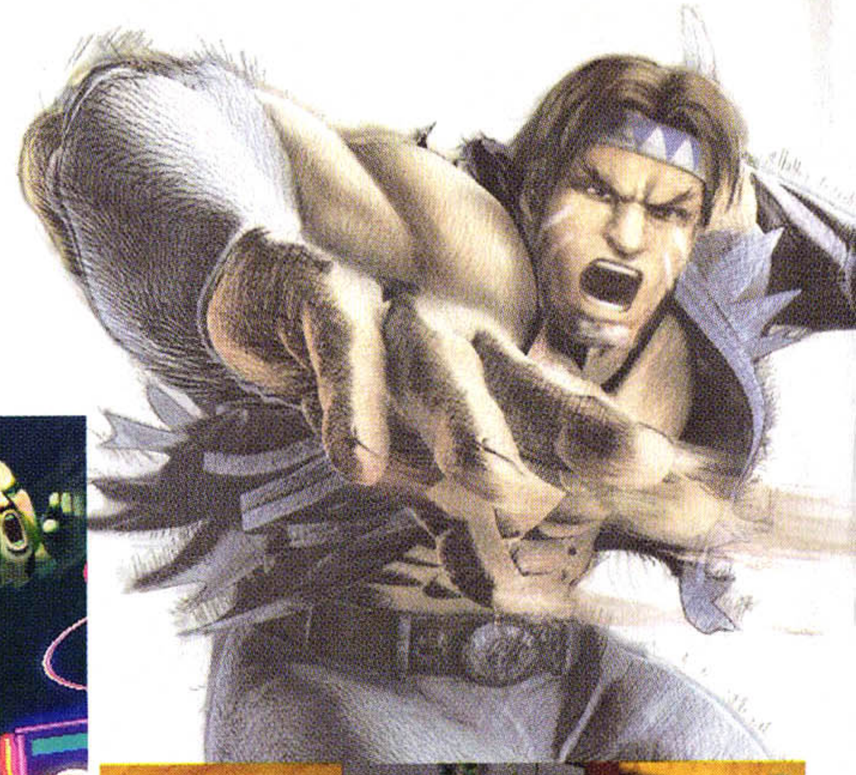
» **Publisher**
Microsoft Game Studios

» **Developer**
Remedy Entertainment

» **Release**
Spring 2010

Super Street Fighter IV

Capcom promises this update will be worth it



» Platform
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360

» Style
1 or 2-Player Fighting

» Publisher
Capcom

» Developer
Capcom

» Release
Spring 2010

You didn't really think Capcom was going to leave Street Fighter IV alone, did you? At least in this day and age, the company seems to realize that it can't get away with releasing five versions of the same game (see sidebar). I spoke with producer Yoshinori Ono to get the rundown on the new features.

"When you look at something like this, your first assumption might be that it would be downloadable content," Ono says. "But, to be honest with you, there's not going to be. There's simply too much going on with this update. It will be a full disc release, but it's not going to be like the old days where we charge you $75 for each successive iteration of Street Fighter. This won't be a full priced game. I'm not going to promise you a $5 game or anything like that, but it's going to be a price that's appropriate to the amount of new content included."

According to Ono, about eight new characters are joining the 25-person roster from the original game. The first three to be announced are the remaining alumni from Super Street Fighter II, Dee Jay and T. Hawk, and an all-new character named Juri. This female fighter specializes in kicks and has a crazy glowing purple eye (see sidebar).

One of the biggest headaches in the original game was going through the process to unlock every character. Will we have to start from scratch and do it all over again? "You might be happy to hear that there are no unlockable characters in the game this time around," Ono says. "It might be fun to play through over and over and say, 'Hey, what did I unlock this time?' But we're going to sacrifice that this time around for the sake of having everyone playable and accessible from the start, right out of the box. There are other ways to keep people playing, other than things to unlock."

A roster update isn't all that's in store. Online play is up for some big changes. "A lot of people made it quite clear that they wanted to play in larger groups rather than a one-on-one sort of environment," Ono says. "And they also wanted to get an idea how other people were playing. They wanted to see what was going on with other people." This hints heavily at lobbies, a spectator mode, and possibly replays.

What about those cheesy animated cutscenes? "If you're the type of person that really likes good storyline in your fighting games, you can look forward to brand new openings and endings for all the characters," Ono promises. "We have paid careful attention to the reviews and what people are saying. We're aware that people weren't exactly thrilled by the less than stellar quality of the opening and ending animations in the previous version of IV. We're man enough to admit that and as an apology we're remaking them entirely."

Most importantly, what's going to be done with that ridiculous opening theme song? "Yeah, you don't have to worry about being indestructible anymore [laughs]," Ono says. "We're fixing that." **» Bryan Vore**

Go to www.gameinformer.com/mag to watch videos of the new characters in action.

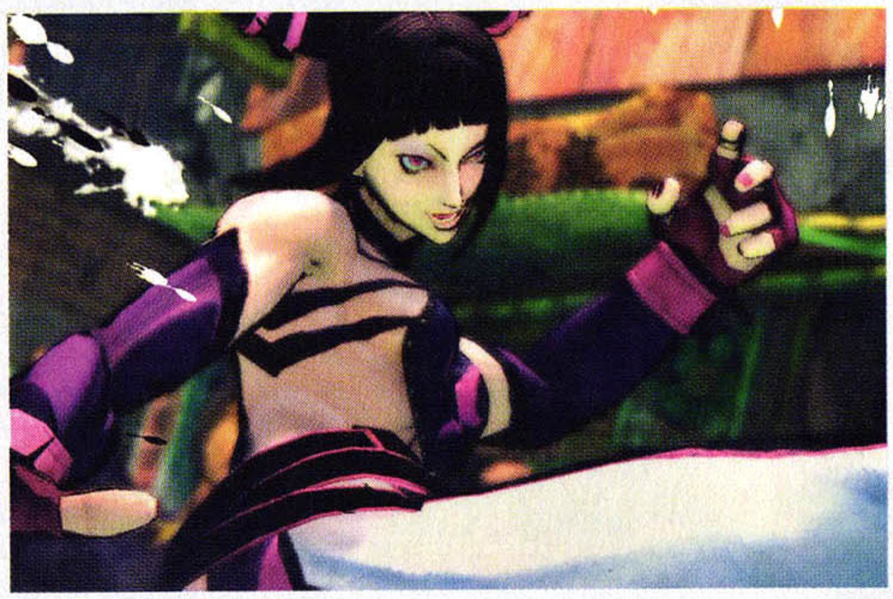
The Street Fighter II Series

While Capcom has a ways to go before it reaches the excessive Street Fighter re-releases of yesteryear, this is what can happen when things get out of hand. Keep in mind that these are only the arcade editions.

- Street Fighter II: The World Warrior (1991)
- Street Fighter II – Champion Edition (1992)
- Street Fighter II – Hyper Fighting (1992)
- Super Street Fighter II (1993)
- Super Street Fighter II Turbo (1994)

Ono on Juri

"There's a lot to talk about when it comes to Juri. She represents a lot of firsts for the Street Fighter universe. She's the first Korean character in a Street Fighter game. She's the first user of taekwondo. A lot of times when you have a new character added to a fighting game it's natural to make them the good guy. Make them a friend of justice. This time we decided to go a different route with this character. She's kind of nasty, kind of mean. Perhaps evil in fact. You'll notice her left eye glows when she does some of her moves and that was an artificial eye implanted in fact by S.I.N. – the weapons manufacturer run by Seth, the boss everyone loves to hate. As you may imagine she does have a major role in the main storyline of Super Street Fighter IV, so you'll definitely be seeing a lot more of her."



Just Cause 2

Eidos unveils a tourist destination for armed and dangerous thrill seekers

Just Cause was a classic example of an ambitious studio's first attempt at crafting a great game. It had the fantastic concept of creating chaos and starting a revolution on a fictional Caribbean island nation, but it was held back by a lack of focus and occasionally buggy gameplay. Luckily, this flawed effort showed enough potential to warrant a second chance from publisher Eidos. After our first hands-on with the sequel, many of the problems with the first game are being addressed.

Avalanche understands the elements that made the first game fun and has built on them considerably. While the game may still contain sub-missions that involve racing or finding hidden packages – we didn't see any in our play session, but we can't say for sure – the digital destruction is much more pronounced and all-encompassing. Every major action you take in the game generates chaos, Just Cause 2's well-named form of currency.

Creating chaos is as easy as dropping into a settlement anywhere in the brand-new setting of Panau and opening fire. You can blow up fuel depots and satellites, shoot military thugs, or just start grappling random items and characters together to see what happens. Earning enough chaos allows you to unlock new missions and progress through the game.

The grappling ability adds an element of action movie awesomeness that the game greatly benefits from. Not only can you use the grappling hook to hurl yourself at nearly any enemy or surface, you can also grapple bad guys or vehicles to other bad guys, vehicles, and items in the world. Need a fast way to end a car chase? Put one end of your grappling hook into the enemy's Humvee and the other into a bridge and watch in glee as they get tossed over. An even better instrument of chaos we quickly became obsessed with was attaching unsuspecting enemies to propane tanks that can then be shot to send them both flying into the air.

Players perform these feats of insanity in much more interesting and varied locales than the original game. Panau is another tropical island setting, but the island includes desert regions and even a snow-capped alpine mountain. In the middle of it all, two giant casino towers sprawl over the landscape, somewhat reminiscent of the towers at the center of Crackdown's Pacific City. Oh yes, you can climb them, and you will inevitably find yourself base-jumping from their highest point. During such long falls the game updates you in real time on the height you've fallen without opening a parachute. This is just one of many info dumps designed to urge players into trying more wild stunts.

Though the game world covers a lot of territory, it's helpfully split into a whopping 300 bases and settlements, each of which has a separate progress tracker letting you know how many things you've destroyed or collected from that area. No matter how random your path of destruction, the game rewards you with constant feedback and bonuses. Completionists and high-score seekers alike are going to be very busy searching through every corner of Panau for more settlements to disrupt.

The focus on destruction above all else could have the annoying side effect of making the story missions a bit too similar. The few that we checked out have some variety – one featured an escort segment, while another had us scaling a skyscraper in order to plant bombs on some satellites at the top. It would be easy for Just Cause 2 to fall into a trap where nearly every task involves shooting a bunch of faceless bad guys and causing a big explosion. Not that there's necessarily anything wrong with that.

After our hour of messing around in Just Cause 2, the biggest surprise came when we were informed the game world is about exactly the same size as the original. The verticality of the environment and the sheer number of things to do (and destroy) make the game seem much larger than its predecessor. This densely packed virtual world left us wanting more, and we suspect we'll be returning to it much more eagerly than last time around. » **Phil Kollar**

How does the original Just Cause hold up three years after its release? Check out www.gameinformer.com/mag for a second look at the open-world action game.

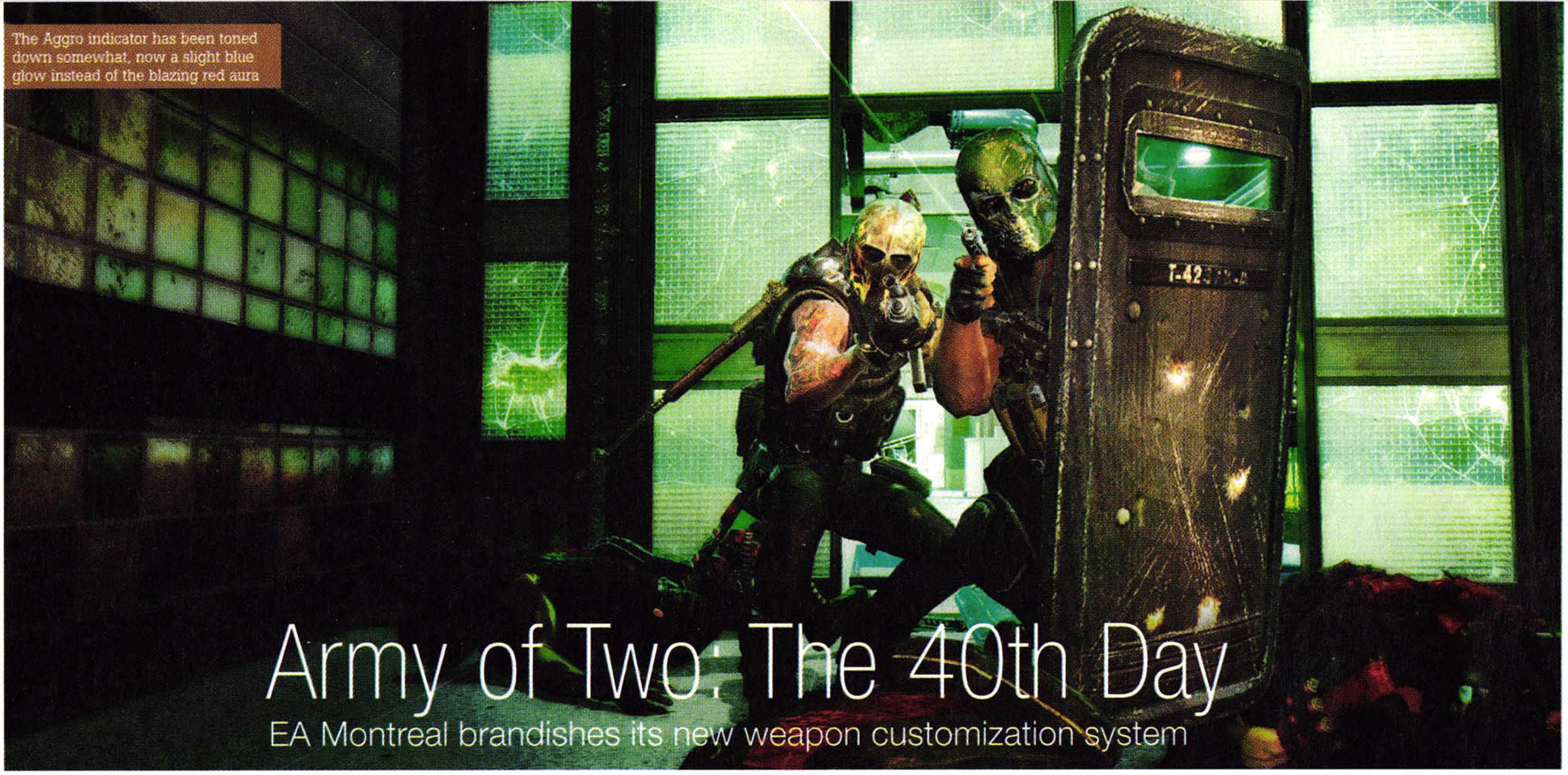
» **Platform**
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Eidos Interactive

» **Developer**
Avalanche Studios

» **Release**
2010



Army of Two: The 40th Day

EA Montreal brandishes its new weapon customization system

» **Platform**
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360

» **Style**
1 or 2-Player Shooter
(Multiplayer TBA)

» **Publisher**
Electronic Arts

» **Developer**
EA Montreal

» **Release**
January 12

It's been a while since we checked in on Army of Two: The 40th Day, and from what we've seen it is progressing nicely. At a recent event hosted by EA in Tokyo, we got our hands on the game and explored the revamped weapon customization system.

Level design director Benoit Richer narrated the demo scenario for us while two EA staffers played co-op via a vertical split screen. The gameplay snippet takes place early on in the game, unfolding in an industrial area at night. Little is divulged about the story, other than that the main antagonist, Jonah, has a vision for Shanghai, and it's not in line with how the metropolis currently stands. He and his army, dubbed The 40th Day Initiative, plan to rebuild the city as he envisions after leveling it with little concern for its inhabitants. Knuckleheaded mercs Salem and Rios are simply in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Upon the start of the demo, the duo is presented with a moral decision. With members of The 40th Day Initiative holding several civilians hostage, Salem and Rios can either mow down everyone indiscriminately, or tag a baddie before carefully taking them out. The EA staffers opt for the latter, counting down out loud before taking the foes out in tandem, leaving the civilians unscathed.

The two mercs then move into a sprawling metal courtyard. Here, working together becomes even more important. Surrounded by troops, the real-life team communicates enemy locations to clear the area as efficiently as possible. They even team up behind a riot shield to quickly gain ground. During this skirmish we are introduced to the first of several heavy unit types. Each heavy unit is introduced in a manner that makes their inherent weakness obvious. The Heavy Shotgun unit carelessly leaves his head uncovered, making him relatively easy to take out if his deadly blast area is avoided.

After the demo, we sat down with Richer to chat about new features and get our hands on the game. While he couldn't talk much about the morality system and how it will affect gameplay, he confirmed that doing good deeds (saving hostages and so on) results in rewards such as cold cash or weapons parts. Richer wouldn't speak on the pros of taking the less ethical path, other than saying the availability of some missions depends on your moral alignment.

One thing Richer would speak to, however, is the new weapon customization options. In the original Army of Two, players spent cash to upgrade their barrel, stock, and cartridge or to add enhancements like a front mount, suppressor, or shield. Players could also pimp their guns out in gold, skyrocketing the firearm's aggro level. This time around, customization is nearly limitless. Now you can swap out the aforementioned parts and accessories with any other pieces from guns in your arsenal. The team is intentionally allowing players to create guns outside the constraints of reality. The goal is to keep the feature multifaceted enough to appeal to hardcore fans, without sacrificing the fun of crafting unique weapons.

As before, you can also change the style of your selected firearm. This time you can coat your weapon in everything from gold to a zebra print. Front mounts have also become more creative, allowing you to attach found items like a screwdriver or a kitchen knife. Picked up a discarded Coke can? Use it for a silencer. Over 8,000 custom firearm combinations can be found in The 40th Day. That's quite an upgrade from the original.

With EA sharing details on the imposing new story, refined co-op mechanics, and revamped weapons customization system, multiplayer is the final and most mysterious frontier. We asked about it, but EA Montreal isn't quite ready to divulge information. With the January release date nearing ever closer, the full reveal of the versus modes should surface shortly. » **Meagan VanBurkleo**

Head over to www.gameinformer.com/mag to check out screens of some creative weapon customization.

Dante's Inferno

When epic poetry meets epic action

Dante's Inferno has a bad reputation. Whether it's literary snobs who are upset that EA is mining the contents of *The Divine Comedy* for a video game or game snobs scoffing at its likeness to God of War, everyone seems to have issues with Visceral Games' latest project. But when I actually got my hands on the game, all the controversy melted away. What the detractors don't want you to know (or don't yet know for themselves) is that Dante's Inferno is actually very fun.

For those who think it's crass for EA to adapt this literary classic, the first question that must be asked is whether you've read "Inferno" yourself. Visceral has put in tons of material either referencing or directly drawing from the original poem just for those who have read it. In fact, they often compare their game to one of the visual maps of hell that the poem inspired in the 14th century. Those familiar with *The Divine Comedy* will immediately notice Virgil's contributions – he serves as a narrator, describing each layer of Hell in lines lifted from the poem – and the Shades, sinners trapped in Hell whose vices are pulled word for word from Dante's text.

Of course, this is an adaptation, and EA takes liberties in many areas to serve the game narrative. Many of the monstrous creatures Dante faces are new interpretations based on the sins in each circle. For example, Lust is filled with temptresses – naked, hyper-sexualized female demons that attack Dante with strange claws extending from body parts most games never reference. Some might view this as opportunistic and offensive on EA's part, but it's also a valid way of transforming a sin into a flesh-and-blood enemy. These writhing, moaning mistresses attack Dante with their sexuality quite literally, and in the context of a game exploring a man struggling against sin, it makes sense.

Those who can't get over the God of War likeness may be slightly harder to convince. It's true that Dante's Inferno plays more or less exactly like Sony's mega-franchise – you mix light and heavy attacks with magic to string together brutal combos. Dante even has a "Redemption meter" in the lower left corner of the screen that fills from successful combos, similar to Kratos's "Rage of the Gods" ability. However, there are a lot of extra layers adding depth to the fighting system that have been ignored. For example, your combat skills will also be aided by relics, hidden treasures that you can find if you carefully search the game's environments. Relics grant certain bonuses, such as healing when you pull off special attacks. Over 30 relics are littered through the game, but you can only have three equipped at a time, so you'll need to make a strategic choice on what bonuses to take into battle.

During combat you can also use the Righteousness System, which lets you judge the demons. According to Visceral, this component of the game is meant to recall the epic poem's message of free will. In the game, you freely decide whether to condemn or redeem enemies by doing special attacks. Choose to punish your enemies, and you'll tear them apart with your scythe. If you choose absolution, you'll use your cross to save their soul. As in real life, choosing the holier path is more difficult; absolutions require more time and are likely to be interrupted by other enemies. The good and evil paths have separate experience bars, allowing you to upgrade your abilities along two distinct trees.

It would be blasphemy to suggest that EA's action game interpretation of Dante's Inferno will measure up to the poem's cultural impact, but the lit-loving folks at Visceral clearly adore the source material. If that enthusiasm rubs off on the audience and inspires them to dig into the 14th century classic, then maybe this is a revival Dante could be proud of after all. If not, at least we'll get a kick-ass action game out of it. » **Phil Kollar**

Check out www.gameinformer.com/mag for video of some of the new layers of hell in Dante's Inferno, including EA's controversial version of Lust

» Platform
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • PSP

» Style
1-Player Action

» Publisher
Electronic Arts

» Developer
Visceral Games

» Release
February 9

First boss Minos is totally blind but can smell sin from across the first circle of Hell

Choosing to bless enemies instead of destroy them offers up rewards for the risk

Star Trek Online

How to live long and prosper in Cryptic's upcoming MMO

» Platform
PC

» Style
MMORPG

» Publisher
Atari

» Developer
Cryptic Studios

» Release
2010

The cliché would be that Cryptic wants Star Trek Online to boldly go where no other MMO has gone before. Now that I've had some hands-on time with the game, though, maybe that's not exactly true. The first thing that most MMO players will realize about Star Trek Online is that despite its sci-fi origins, the game is rather familiar.

The game features 16 ship configurations, each with a mystifying name that hardcore Trekkies will surely recognize. Those with MMO experience, however, will quickly understand that the ships fit into a handful of classes we've all seen before. Escort ships deal damage, Cruisers are well-armored and perfect for tanking, and science class ships provide support by lending their energy to allies (healing, essentially). Likewise, player characters fall into three careers – tactical (DPS), engineering (tanks), and science (support).

Within whatever career path you choose, you'll advance up five ranks – lieutenant, lieutenant commander, commander, captain, and admiral – each of which has 10 classes, essentially giving the MMO a 50 level cap. Your rank and class are determined by how many skills you've bought and upgraded. Between all three careers, there will be a total of over 100 skills to choose from, and every skill will have 10 ranks for upgrading. Cryptic's hope is that every 20 to 30 minutes, players will level, get a new skill, or rank up an old skill, providing a constant sense of accomplishment and growth.

Guilds are fleets. Crafting comes in the form of data-mining. For every MMO convention, Cryptic has placed a convincing Star Trek equivalent in their virtual world. Of course, it's the actual content that determines how successful MMOs are, not whether or not they break the mold. The content in Star Trek Online is split across four major story hubs (in order of level): Klingon, Romulan, Cardassian, and Borg. Each hub will contain at least 14 "episodes" centering around one of the universe's races.

The episode is Star Trek Online's version of a story mission. Players will be able to take on random exploration and patrol missions that don't have much narrative, but the real push through the content will come from these episodes, which will play out like an episode of one of the Star Trek TV shows. A hub's episodes will expand and resolve similar to a season of a TV show, complete with minor and major story arcs and one-off episodes. Most of this story content can be soloed, but if players push through to the Borg hub, Star Trek Online's current end-game, they'll discover what Cryptic is calling "raidisodes," episodes that require a full five-man team to clear.

I got to test one mission that Cryptic said represented the structure for many of the game's episodes. While flying through space, I received a distress call from the broken-down ship *Azura*. Upon approaching the ship, I had to fend off Orion raiders that were attacking.

The 3D space combat took some getting used to, but after a few minutes of figuring out how to control pitch and acceleration, it started clicking. As in the Star Trek films and TV shows, space battles are slower-paced and more tactical than in many sci-fi franchises. In Star Trek Online, the battles are all about your positioning compared to enemy ships. Certain lasers and weapons can only be fired from behind or in front of the enemies, so I was constantly moving and repositioning to get the most out of my weapons.

After clearing out the enemy ships, I beamed onto the broken vessel to rescue survivors and try the ground combat. My character was equipped with a phaser and an assault rifle that could be swapped on the fly. Both guns had a short burst attack and a more powerful attack that required time to charge. When enemies got in close, I was also able to use melee to knock them down. After blasting my way through the ship, I went back into space to fight another wave of Orion raiders, including a big battleship that served as a "boss" to the episode.

Although this latest look at Star Trek Online made it much clearer how the game will progress, I still have a lot of questions. Biggest of all, Cryptic wasn't yet ready to show off the Klingon faction, though they hinted that their side will have a lot less narrative, instead focusing on PvP to advance.

There may still be a lot of blanks to fill in, but Cryptic deserves some kudos for their smart use of standard MMO mechanics. Trying to cram regular class roles and a level grind into the Star Trek universe could have been clumsy, but they've managed to make it seem like a natural fit… for MMO players at least. Whether it will live up to the Trekkie standard remains to be seen. » **Phil Kollar**

Want an update on what's happening with Cryptic's other MMO, Champions Online? Check out http://www.gameinformer.com/mag for our interview with Bill Roper

Aqua, Ventus, and Terra

Kingdom Hearts: Birth By Sleep

PSP title aims to resolve Kingdom Hearts II's mysteries

Now that Kingdom Hearts 358/2 Days is out in the wild, it's time to turn to the next entry in the series. Birth By Sleep refers directly to the title of the secret movie at the end of Kingdom Hearts II that shows three armored keyblade wielders wandering through a desert plain surrounded by thousands of keyblades stabbed into the ground. The Japanese-only edition, Final Mix, shows the three battling a powerful bald man and his apprentice. We now know that these events took place around a decade before the first Kingdom Hearts game, and that Birth By Sleep is the direct follow up to KH II featuring new worlds, characters, and combat options.

The three, Terra, Ventus, and Aqua, all share protagonist duties in the game, and are obvious parallels to Riku, Sora/Roxas, and Kairi respectively. Their master dispatches the group to track down Master Xehanort, the villain from the KH II movie. Featured stages this time around include new areas such as Cinderella's house and castle, the woods from Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, and sci-fi spaceships in Stitch's world.

Players tired of bashing through the same old Heartless and Nobody foes will be glad to know that these new enemies predate the aforementioned creatures and are completely different. During some hands-on time we found them to be slightly faster and creepier. Combat is action-focused rather than relying on cards like Chain of Memories. Terra's special moves include a crystal freeze, a flaming keyblade, and blast of fragmented energy that spreads out to hit multiple foes. With Ventus we brought up a first-person targeting reticle by holding down the L and R triggers that eventually unleashes a crazy combo that attacks every enemy in range. He finishes with an impressive energy-based area attack. My brief time with Aqua involved visiting Snow White after she is knocked out by the poison apple.

Birth By Sleep hits Japan in January so expect a U.S. release in mid to late 2010. » **Bryan Vore**

Check out more screens at www.gameinformer.com/mag

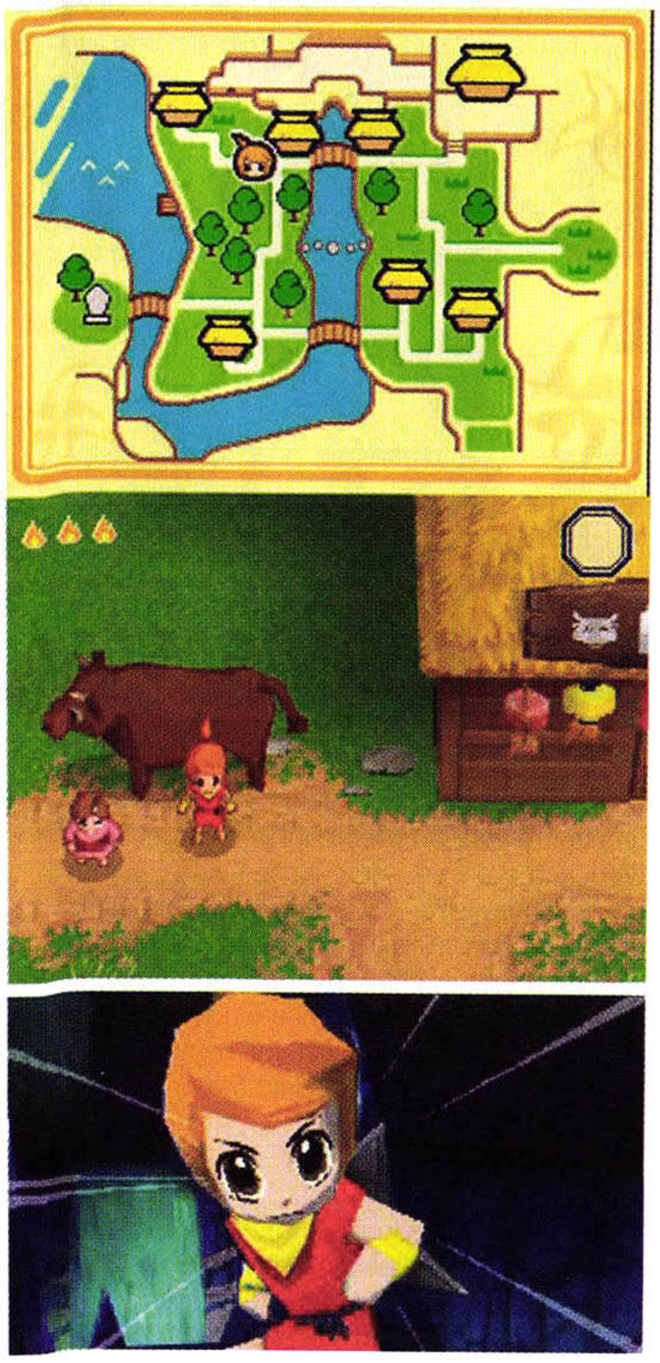
» **Platform**
PSP

» **Style**
1-Player Action/RPG

» **Publisher**
Square Enix

» **Developer**
Square Enix

» **Release**
2010



Whirlwind

EA tries its hand at Japanese development with Zelda-style DS adventure

As one of the largest companies in gaming, Electronic Arts has a portfolio of games that spans a huge variety of genres and markets. However, until now, the company has never devoted serious assets to games oriented toward the Japanese market. At the Tokyo Game Show, this changed with the announcement of Whirlwind (titled Tsumuji in Japan), a new DS action/adventure developed by the company's internal Japanese studio. The game is headed up by Takahiro Murakami, a veteran of the Japanese game industry who cut his teeth on the Hamtaro series and also was an engineer on Sony's Aibo robotic dog project.

Nintendo's classic Zelda series is one of Whirlwind's clear influences, which Murakami admits. "I wanted to make a kid's title," he says. "Growing up I played Nintendo, Square, and Enix games. As an adult, I want to make a game for the kid that I was." Judging from some brief demonstration of the game, Murakami's team seems to be hitting the mark. Whirlwind's star is Tsumuji, a cute, doe-eyed ninja in training who discovers a large shuriken in the forest one day. Perhaps predictably, this find results in his village being attacked by evil ninjas and turned into stone. From there, it's a classic video game quest to free his town and unravel the mystery of the shuriken.

As with recent Zelda handeld titles, all movement and attacks are done through the touch screen. While there are always issues with this control scheme, so far Whirlwind seems to be handling it well. For basic attacks, you draw the route of your shuriken onscreen. Things eventually become more complex when the shuriken takes on new, magical forms, like a gourd that can suck up fire, water, and air and spit them back, or two giant demon arms that allow Tsumuji to perform powerful melee attacks.

As with Zelda, the emphasis is often on puzzle solving and information gathering. Tsumuji will use his stealth skills to sneak through narrow crawlspaces (displayed on the top screen of the DS) in order to eavesdrop on villagers to find out information about how to solve puzzles and open doors.

While Whirlwind doesn't sound particularly groundbreaking, it looks to be a work of high craftsmanship that hits that balance of accessibility and depth that is so typically Japanese. It's certainly an interesting experiment for EA as it tries to find a foothold overseas. » **Matt Helgeson**

» **Platform**
Nintendo DS

» **Style**
1-Player Action/Adventure

» **Publisher**
Electronic Arts

» **Developer**
EA Japan Studio

» **Release**
TBA

Dead Rising 2

Big money! Big prizes! I love it!

» Platform
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360

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

» Publisher
Capcom

» Developer
Blue Castle Games,
Capcom

» Release
2010

Even though players were rarely alone in Dead Rising, it was a generally lonesome experience. Maybe it was because the majority of the people Frank West encountered during his adventure were zombies desperate for his blood. Maybe it was because the actual humans he met were either crazed killers or desperate sad sacks.

That's all changing with Dead Rising 2. The sequel is adding multiplayer to the mix — and it's not what you might expect. At least part of Dead Rising 2's multiplayer takes place on a television show set within the game's fiction. Called *Terror is Reality*, the program is a mix of American Gladiator-style challenges and WWE theatrics, with scores from individual events building up to crown a big winner. Here's a look at some of the events featured in the show, along with some strategies that might help you not only stay alive, but earn prizes and glory along the way.

RAMSTERBALL

What is it? The game starts with each of the contestants stuck inside their own spherical cage. At the beginning of the match, one of the four players is marked, putting them in the position to earn points by knocking themselves into bumpers scattered across the sloped arena or by slamming into the aimlessly wandering undead. The other players do their best to tag that designated player, earning them the coveted position. The game is timed, as are the other modes in *Terror is Reality*.

Strategy The best way to take control from the scoring player is to resist the temptation to bank up the sides of the arena and stick to the low ground. It's easy to overshoot your target otherwise, and every second counts. Once you're in the scoring position, an effective way of getting people off your tail is to steer toward bumpers at slight angles, which will propel the balls off in unpredictable directions that are hard to track. Scoring players can also use the banked walls to their advantage, zipping up into the air and soaring above hapless pursuers.

HEADACHE

What is it? In Headache, the battle between human and zombie gets personal. Contestants race around an arena, grabbing blender-equipped helmets from dispensers and placing

the deadly headgear on their undead victims. Hoofing it over to the side of the arena and pressing an oversized button puts the blades in motion, creating gallons of zombie soup. Players can also sabotage their opponents' efforts by tossing sticks of dynamite at the zombies that they've marked.

Strategy Headache is classic risk/reward gameplay. Cautious players can earn points by placing three hats and activating them. Having more hats in play before activating them increases the points exponentially, making it worth the extra effort. Doing so is certain to attract the attention of your rivals, who can clear your color-coded claims with a well-placed explosive blast. Your best bet is to jam at least six blender helmets onto zombies before pressing that button. It's a manageable number that's easy to recover from if sabotaged.

POUNDS OF FLESH

What is it? Ready, aim, charge! Contestants in Pounds of Flesh don headgear that's even more bizarre than the blenders in Headache. Each player faces a crowd of zombies milling about in front of an industrial scale. Using their helmet-mounted antlers, it's up to them to knock as many of the monsters onto the platform, where their weight will be tallied. A reset button at the start of the runway dumps fresh walking corpses onto the playfield when supplies run low. It's that easy!

Strategy The biggest tip in Pounds of Flesh is to know when to back off. It's tempting to try to knock every last ghoul onto the scale, but it's also counterproductive. You'll make most of your goal weight within the first or second pass. After that, hit the button and bring in some new blood. The odds are on your side when you try to knock groups onto the scale. Even if a few don't make it, enough will to make it worth your while.

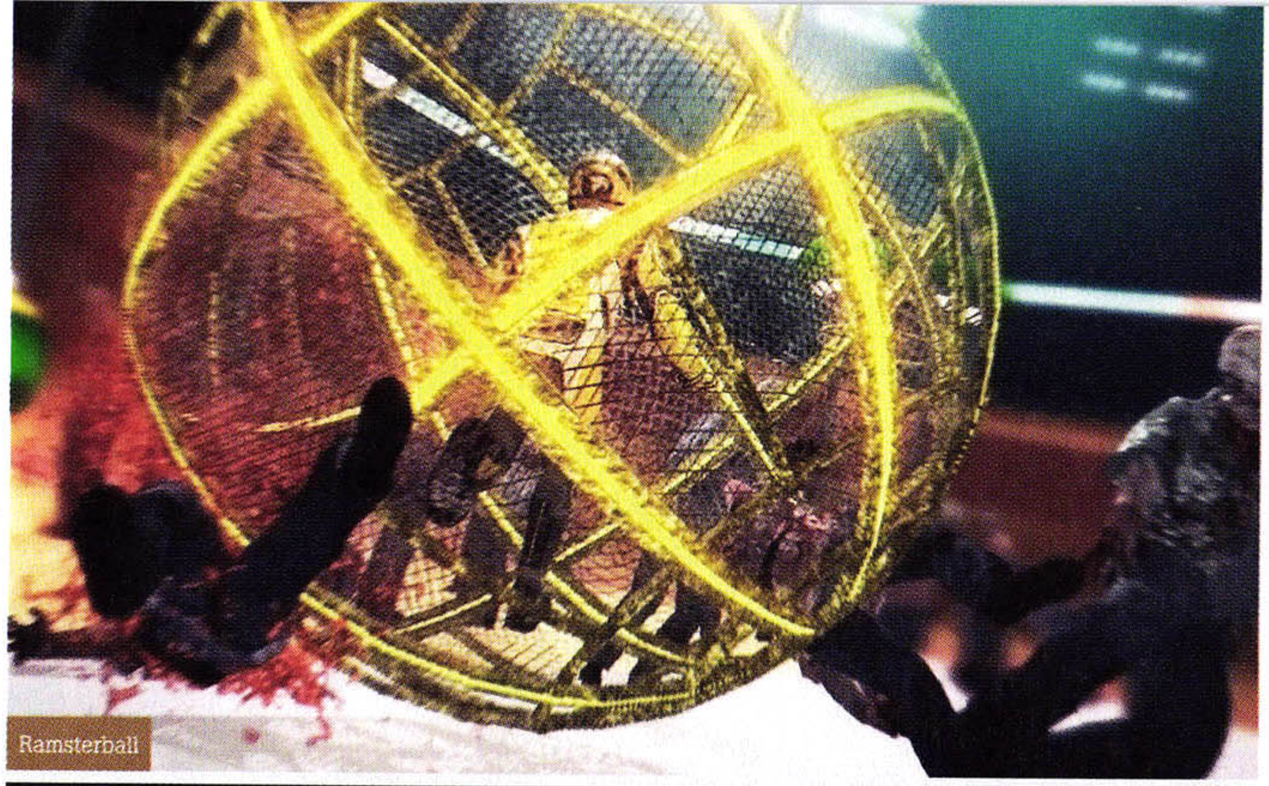
SLICECYCLES

What is it? This is what it's all been building up to! Before the final event starts, points from the previous games are tallied. The winner gets a head start on the rest of the players, who join based on their overall points position. In Slicecycles, players ride chainsaw-enhanced motorcycles through shuffling mobs of zombies. Points are awarded for kills, with specially marked zombies netting bonus points. After one minute, a bonus mode starts, which adds even more zombies. The spawns get to be insane, with hundreds of the things littering the screen (and bleeding on the ground). Once the timer runs down, points are awarded (again) and an ultimate winner is named.

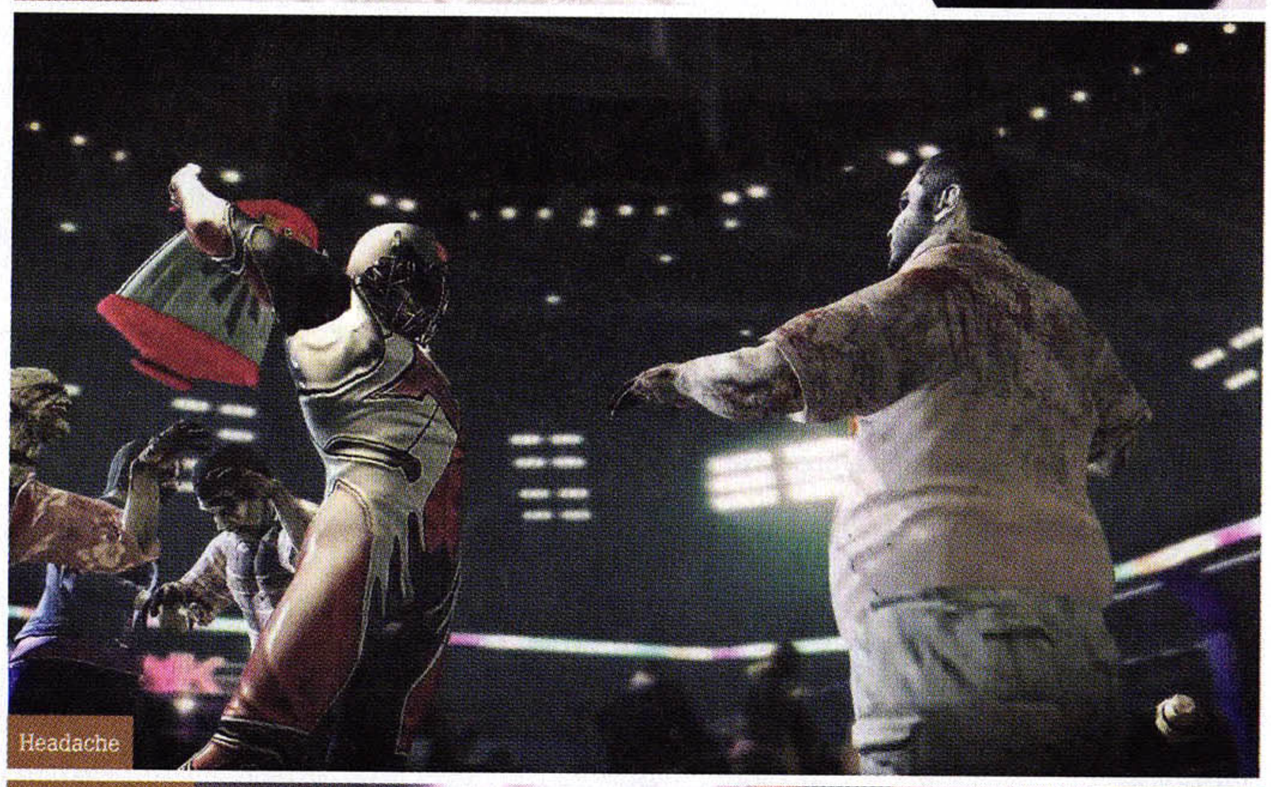
Strategy Even though the arena is banked, you'll lose valuable time rolling up its sides. Instead, do a tight turn before you pass through the crowds and keep your momentum going. Other than that, keep an eye out for the bonus zombies and thin out the herd as best you can. Good luck!

Those are just a few of the brutal and hilarious events that are included in Terror is Reality. Capcom says it's shooting for around a dozen total, and if these are any indication, there's even more ridiculousness to come. » **Jeff Cork**

Missed Dead Rising? Need a refresher? Go to www.gameInformer.com/mag for a rundown of the first game, including speculation on where the sequel is headed



Ramsterball



Headache

Pounds of Flesh

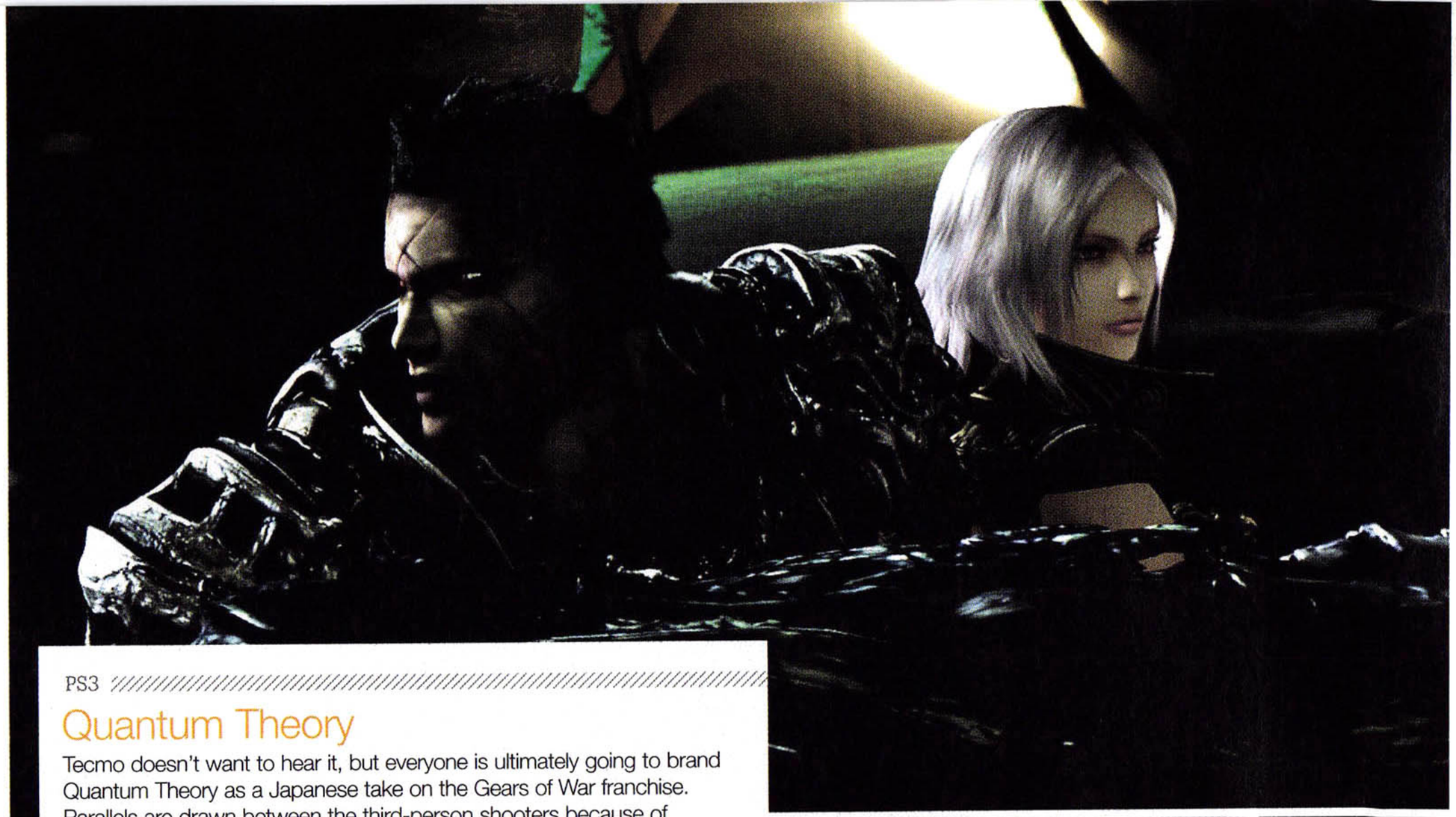
Slicecycles

Who Is Chuck Greene?

When Capcom revealed Dead Rising 2 would star a new character, fans had some questions. What happened to Frank West? Would the sequel explain his absence? More importantly, who was this Chuck Greene guy? We might not know the answer to the first few questions, but the little details we know about Greene are starting to coalesce.

Dan Brady, the game's producer and manager, says "it'll become clear right away why we chose this character, and there are very, very clear reasons." We know now that he was a contestant in Terror is Reality, and he has the skillset to match. His dirtbike prowess makes him a pro at Slicecycles, and he's even managed to scrape together a decent enough chainsaw/motorcycle combo for use in Fortune City. He's also an ace with a stuffed moosehead, clearing out crowds with efficiency that must have made him the envy of his Pound of Flesh competitors.

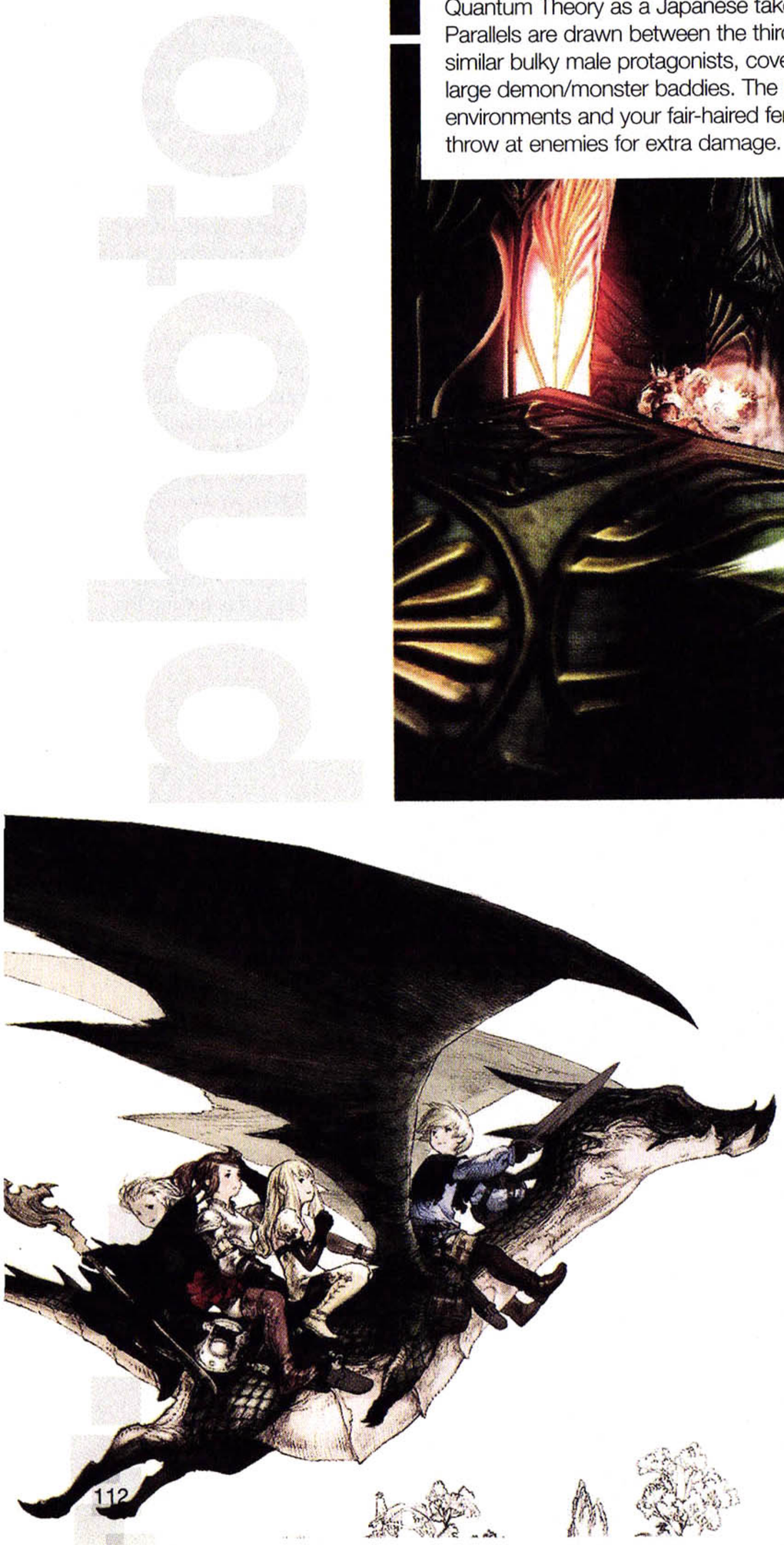
We know that Greene has a daughter, and it being a video game, it's probably relatively safe to assume that whatever he's doing is for her benefit. This being Dead Rising, we wouldn't be completely stunned to learn that she was one of the 50 children used to unwittingly spread the virus behind the zombie plague.



PS3

Quantum Theory

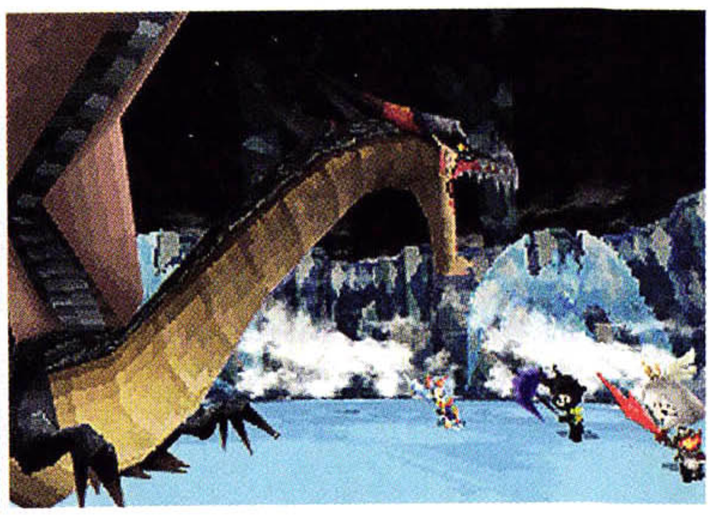
Tecmo doesn't want to hear it, but everyone is ultimately going to brand Quantum Theory as a Japanese take on the Gears of War franchise. Parallels are drawn between the third-person shooters because of similar bulky male protagonists, cover mechanics, and enemy fodder – large demon/monster baddies. The big difference is the eerie gothic environments and your fair-haired female partner, who you can pick up and throw at enemies for extra damage. Niiiiiice.



DS

Hikari No 4 Senshi: Final Fantasy Gaiden

A teaser leading up to TGS first put this title on our radar, which is commonly being translated as The Four Warriors of Light: Final Fantasy Gaiden. Gaiden follows four youths on a grand adventure led by the will of a crystal. A job system is employed in the game, dubbed the "crown system." Jobs affect your character stats and the corresponding crowns can be modified to make available new abilities or level up your character. Hikari No 4 Senshi: Final Fantasy Gaiden isn't yet confirmed for the United States. With its nostalgia-inducing gameplay and the large DS install base out West, we expect the announcement to come soon enough, however. Gaiden hits Japanese retail October 29.



PSP

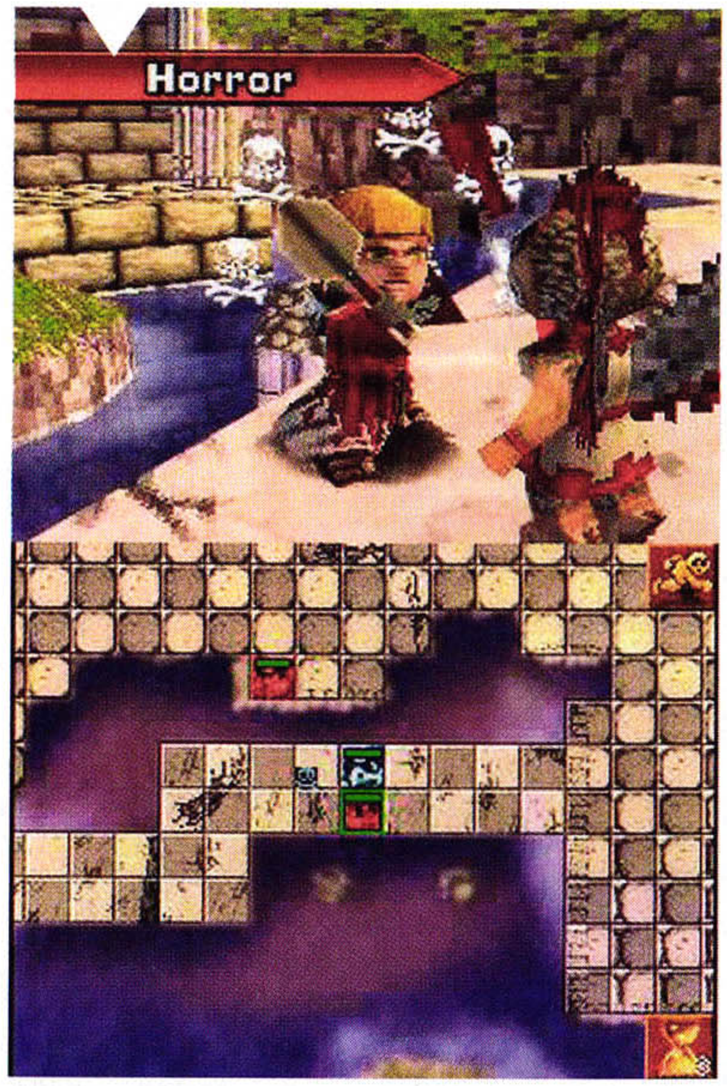
Everybody's Sukkiri

Hot Shots developer Clap Hanz is currently working on a minigame compilation that lets players perform household chores. Sounds fun right? While some of the 12 minigames actually appear to be daily household occurrences such as vacuuming or organizing books, others like sword fighting, baseball, and karate sound a bit more energetic. Hot Shots Golf characters are rumored to make an appearance in the game. This title is not yet confirmed for North America

DS

Dawn of Heroes

A classic handheld RPG full of archetypal characters, combat, quests, and puzzles, Wicked Studios' Dawn of Heroes prides itself in its (self-proclaimed) hilarious dialogue. The story unveils the once vast and great kingdom of Brimthule that now suffers after the loss of its lord and champion, who sacrificed himself to entomb a threatening beast. This means it's time for a new dawn of – you guessed it – heroes. Boasting 3D graphics, 50 missions with branching paths, and 25 playable classes, this tactical RPG launches in December.



DS

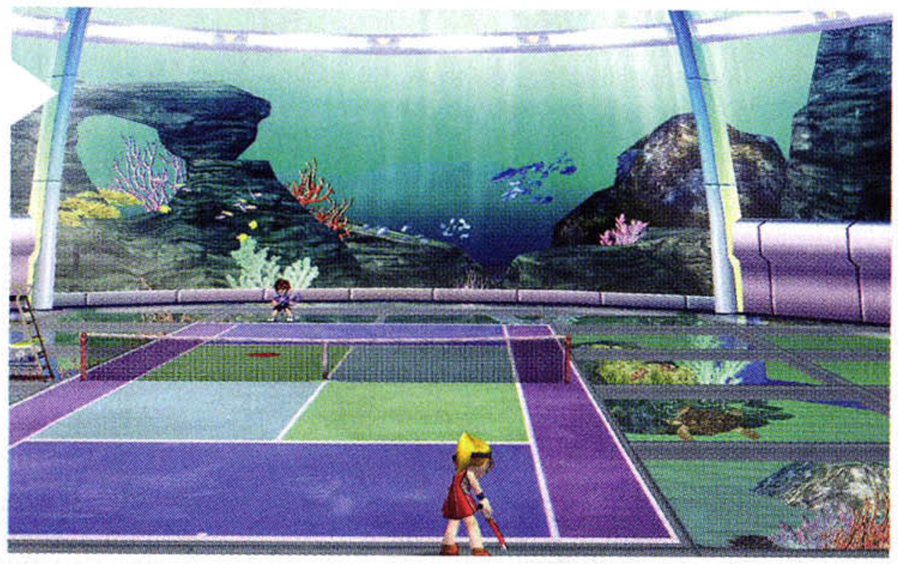
Ace Attorney Investigations: Miles Edgeworth

We scored some brief play time with Edgeworth's standalone title, jumping in immediately after a murder took place in his office. Players can use the d-pad or the touch screen to navigate, but our vote is with the former. During our session we spent time gathering clues and connecting the dots by linking together pieces of found evidence. Confronting suspects feels very similar to the action in court, so we feel safe in saying you won't miss the courtroom scenes.

PSP

Hot Shots Tennis: Get a Grip

Clap Hanz is also hard at work on Hot Shots Tennis for the PSP. Fans of the PS2 iteration will be able to revisit the title with new characters, courts, game modes, and more. Challenge mode lets friends match up and play via ad-hoc technology, and players will be able to customize and power up their characters as they unlock collectibles throughout the game.



Page 2

PC Game of the Month

119

Left 4 Dead 2

gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH

116 Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2

The Internet ran out of compliments to pay the first Modern Warfare. How do you follow that up? Infinity Ward chose to add a massive co-op mode, blow out the persistent online progression that everyone fell in love with, and craft a brand-new story campaign that contains what will be one of the most talked-about moments in gaming.

THE SCORING SYSTEM

10	Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.	5	Passable. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.
9	Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.	4	Bad. While some things work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
8	Very Good. Innovative, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.	3	Painful. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
7	Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.	2	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
6	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.	1	So bad that a poorly written online petition against it will be signed by at least 1,000 real people and 100,000 more fake names.

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

SEEN
BE SMOOTH
BE YOURSELF
BE NOTORIOUS
BE REAL
BE HEARD
BE TOGETHER
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Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2

Multiplayer reigns supreme in game of the year candidate

9.75

PS3 • 360

» Concept
Bigger explosions, better online support, and more variety help this sequel live up to its gargantuan expectations

» Graphics
Sixty frames per second of visuals as good or better than anything on the market

» Sound
As ever, contextual voiceovers aid in battlefield awareness in both single- and multiplayer

» Playability
The control scheme hasn't changed, and it doesn't need to. After a while you'll forget that there's a controller between you and the game

» Entertainment
Some of the shine may have worn off of the spectacle of Modern Warfare, but that's about the only complaint you can fairly level

» Replay Value
High

gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH gameinformer PLATINUM

Style 1 or 2-Player Action (24-Player Online) **Publisher** Activision **Developer** Infinity Ward
Release November 10 **ESRB** M

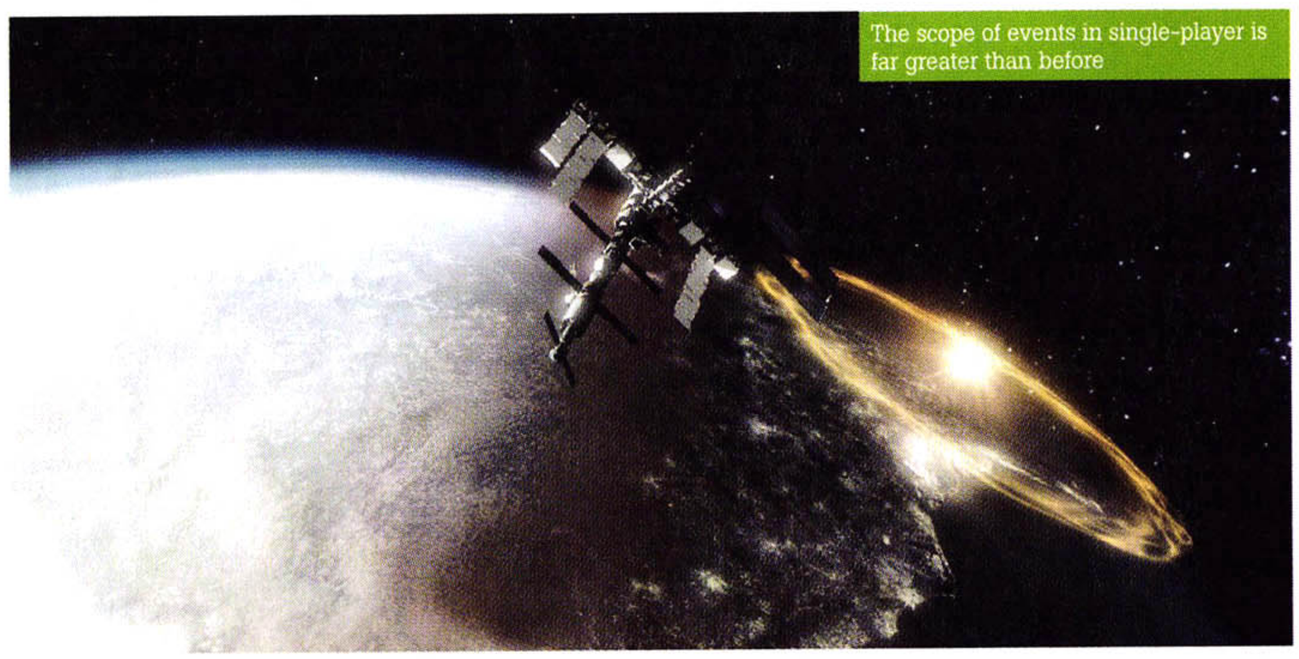
Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare was, in a word, superlative. Fawned over by critics and rabidly defended by its massive fan-base, the game was an instant blockbuster that topped sales charts and spawned an online community the likes of which are rarely seen outside of timeless classics like Counter-Strike and StarCraft. Developer Infinity Ward is aware of the microscope that Modern Warfare 2 is under. Only a few flaws show up under even the greatest scrutiny, though. Modern Warfare 2 is an unqualified triumph.

MW2 takes the concept of action-packed first-person combat, plops a live grenade at its feet, and mows down its friends with an incendiary minigun. If you have time to breathe, it's because you're being flanked. Every reload is a tense few seconds of unwelcome defenselessness. Each enemy dispatched yields a surge of adrenaline that soon gives way to fear as his allies eagerly unload in your direction.

To excel, you have to master the use of various tools, starting with smoke grenades, thermal vision, Claymore mines, and Predator drones. It's extremely helpful to familiarize yourself with each weapon class; assault rifles, LMGs, SMGs, pistols, and explosives all have vital roles. In the co-op Special Ops mode (and the single-player campaign, to a lesser extent), even more diverse skills come into play. Targeting allied support units like Stryker APCs, defending hardpoints with sentry guns, and directing the overwhelming firepower of an AC-130 or helo-mounted minigun are all necessary.

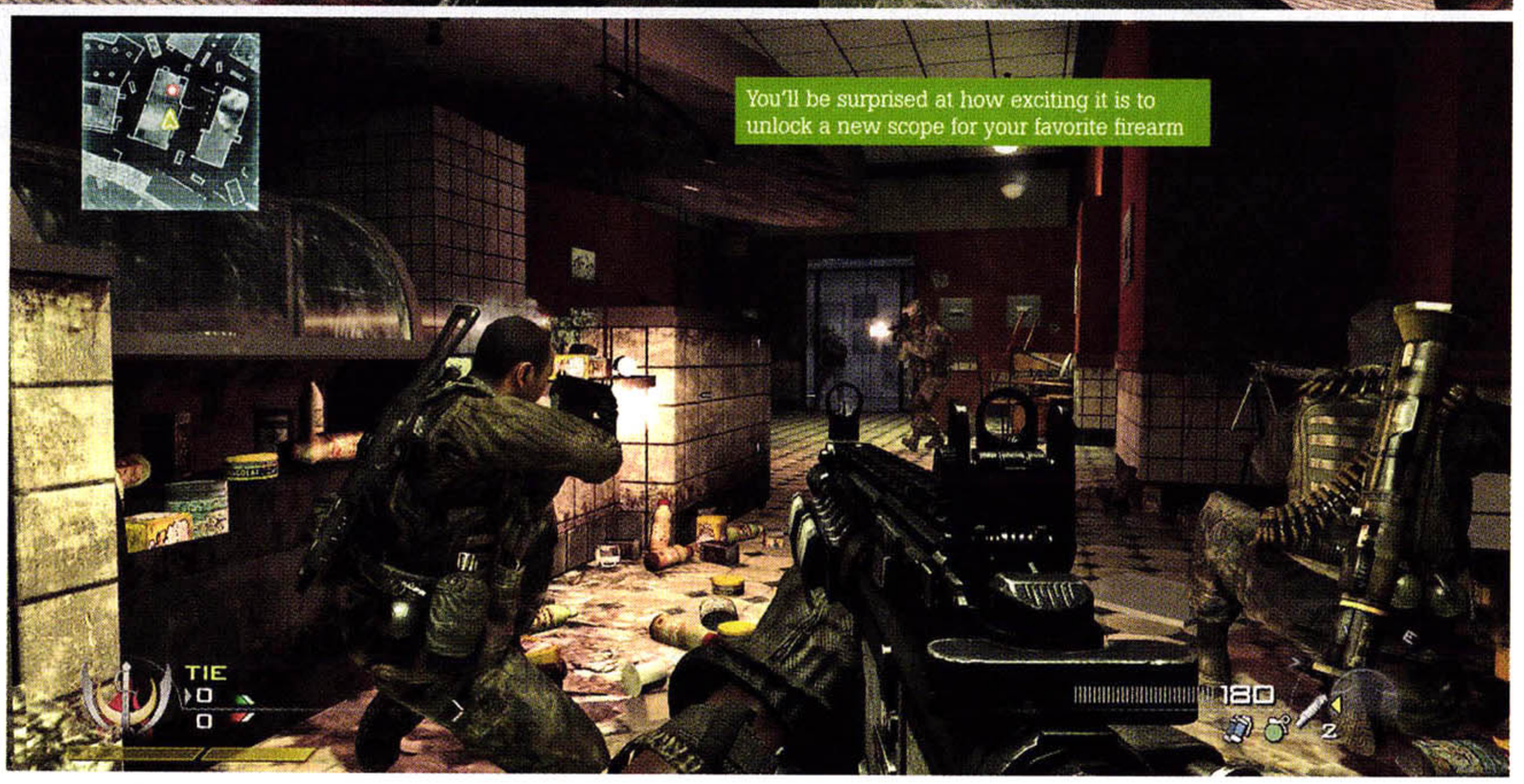
Modern Warfare 2's competitive multiplayer offering is the soul of iterative design. New ideas arise like third-person play and death streaks, but nothing substantially affects the core gameplay. On the other hand, the tweaks are almost uniformly great. Weapon-specific unlocks, cosmetic titles and callsigns, and upgraded "pro" perks contribute to a dramatic increase in the depth and breadth of persistent progression. The strategic variance of each map invites hours of study and experimentation. Included due to the mountain of feedback, the playlists (preset rotations of maps and modes for groups to play through) offer delightful bouquets of varied-yet-similar gametypes for all tastes.

To get a sense of how the subtle changes to Modern Warfare's online formula have profound effects, consider Headquarters Pro mode. In


The scope of events in single-player is far greater than before

Opting Out

Upon starting a new game, players are given the choice to opt out of a morally gray mission with no penalty to their Achievements or Trophies, and with no effect on the story. The option is there for a good reason – the mission in question makes the player a part of truly heinous acts. If you're on the fence about letting your child play this M-rated game, this will likely push you over the edge. On the other hand, the mission draws the morality of war and espionage into sharp focus in a way that simply shooting the bad guys cannot. It is presented and handled in a mature way that avoids feeling tasteless. By choosing to skip this controversial scene, you'll be missing the most emotionally affecting moment I've experienced in a game this year, and possibly ever. The subject matter is mature in a fashion that goes far beyond a topless lady or a messily curb-stomped alien; it deals with issues like the relative worth of a human life and the idea of heart-rendingly difficult sacrifices for the greater good. If this mission felt in any way exploitative or tasteless, I'd be the first to call for Infinity Ward's head. The skill with which it is handled in the game, however, makes me proud that our medium can address such weighty issues without resorting to adolescent black-and-white absolutes.



the original game, a team simply had to gain uncontested control of the hot zone to earn a point. Now, you've got to hold it for a short time to score. With this simple alteration, the mode is about positioning and teamwork rather than twitch skills and a mad rush to the designated spot. Locking down an area for half of a minute is a much different task than briefly clearing it. Infinity Ward went for this kind of change rather than rocking the boat with player-controlled vehicles or some kind of persistent world battlefield, and it works. Modern Warfare is arguably the most beloved online FPS of this generation, and MW2 surpasses it in nearly every way.

The most significant change in this sequel is the addition of two-player co-op in the form of Spec Ops missions. The lack of co-op in the story-based campaign is disappointing, but Spec Ops successfully adapts what Call of Duty does best to a cooperative setting. Most of the missions involve the kind of spectacular setpieces that Infinity Ward is known for, while still capturing the tension of a battle against overwhelming odds. These single-shot challenges range from providing aerial overwatch for a buddy on the ground to assaults on fortified enemy positions and stealthy infiltrations. Since there are no AI companions in Spec Ops, it all comes down to you and your buddy's skill and rapport. Spec Ops deftly captures the spirit of teamwork that all the best co-op experiences have, from Left 4 Dead to Rainbow Six.

It's easy enough to storm a collapsing and Russian-infested Golden Gate bridge with a skilled friend at your side on Regular difficulty. Cranking it up to Veteran is much harder, but still very doable. Staying alive on a tight urban street against a dozen swarming, aggressive, flanking foes while waiting for your buddy's helo to circle back around to a decent firing solution is much harder. Taking down the super-tough Juggernaut enemies (we're talking multiple assault rifle clips to drop) blitzing your limited cover while being suppressed by snipers and machine gunners is a brutal challenge. Spec Ops offers all this and more. Only elite players will complete all of the Spec Ops scenarios on Veteran. The process is fantastic entertainment regardless of skill level, though.

To a greater extent than the other modes, the campaign suffers from the fact that Modern Warfare's spectacle has lost a little of its shine. The pacing leaves something to be desired, with some sections feeling like slogs through clearing streets and houses while waiting for the next awesome setpiece. Lackluster ally AI often results in cheap-feeling deaths when your compatriots fail to shoot the guy right in front of them or forget to clear a room they pass. The high points, however, are as powerful and impressive as anything. One particular scene, which I can't discuss without spoiling, will be one of the defining gaming moments of this year. I would still lay out the purchase price for the single-player campaign, but it's definitely the least impressive of the three ways to play Modern Warfare 2.

There's not a lot to complain about here. I still disagree with gaining quantitative advantages via perk upgrades in multiplayer, the AI missteps in the single-player are irritating, and the controversy over the lack of PC dedicated servers is a shame. They're not anywhere near enough to make more than superficial dents in the game's overall brilliance, though. Modern Warfare 2 is a masterpiece of careful iteration, with an unmatched presentation and a well of content that will take months to run dry. » **Adam Biessener**

Hop online to listen to our special edition Modern Warfare 2 podcast at www.gameinformer.com/mag

What's Up With PC?

Infinity Ward says that the PC version is functionally identical to the PS3 and 360 builds that we played for review. However, we were unable to spend hands-on time with the PC game. When we have that opportunity, we will revisit Modern Warfare 2 and publish a separate review if there are any substantial differences. Until then, please consider this our definitive review for all platforms that the game appears on.

Borderlands

Stellar co-op and a masterful blending of genres make the apocalypse fun again

9.25

PS3 • 360

» Concept
Play through the apocalypse with full RPG and shooter elements, with no skimping on either

» Graphics
Vibrant environments and visually interesting characters complement the quirky sense of humor

» Sound
Great voice work from both protagonists and enemies. Music is subtle most of the time, but gets intense when appropriate

» Playability
Both elements of the gameplay (RPG and shooter) are fully developed and work together brilliantly

» Entertainment
Great fun when played alone, but it becomes an unrivaled co-op experience when friends join in

» Replay Value
Very High

gameinformer GOLD

Style 1 or 2-Player Shooter/RPG (4-Player Online) **Publisher** 2K Games **Developer** Gearbox Software **Release** October 20th **ESRB** M

A scoped revolver that sets enemies on fire. An acid-spewing shotgun. A golden sniper rifle that shoots electric bullets. Throughout your time in Pandora, you'll experience many brief love affairs with the various (and ridiculously numerous) weapons you come across, only to discard them like yesterday's newspaper once you level up and find the next best thing. That amazing incendiary SMG that saved you from hordes of Mutant Midgets or Badass Psychos usually ends up being sold back for pennies, as there's always something better around the next corner in Borderlands. It's this intense focus on weaponry that keeps Gearbox's take on the apocalypse exciting long after you'd shelve most action games.

Like open-world epics Fallout 3 and Oblivion, it's possible to wander for hours, transforming your active missions log into an ever-increasing "to-do" list. Take on one mission that involves harvesting crystals in a cave, and you may get distracted on the way by a nearby town, a legless man in need of assistance, or any one of the entries on the absurdly long list of XP challenges. Borderlands would be a fantastic title to get lost in even if it was limited to single-player. Get two or three friends to join you, and it becomes one of the best cooperative experiences in recent memory.

Multiplayer co-op has been in the limelight in recent years thanks to popular titles such as Left 4 Dead and modes such as Call of Duty: World at War's Nazi Zombies, Halo ODST's Firefight, and Gears of War 2's Horde mode. While all of these experiences were great fun with friends, Borderlands takes every aspect of cooperative gameplay and makes it more convenient and enjoyable than ever before. If I see a lower-level friend of mine struggling while taking on Skagzilla, I can easily bring my character (complete with full stats and inventory) into his game to save the day. Let's say we take the massive beast down, causing him to drop a rare weapon that we're both pining for. A quick gentleman's agreement and a couple slaps to the face later and we have a duel for the item. After the battle and loot collecting, I can give the guns I don't use anymore to my friend in lieu of selling them for a quick buck. Every aspect of the cooperative experience is designed for maximum convenience and ease of use. Want to join the game of a friend who is significantly farther ahead in the story? No problem. You'll get a ton of XP for taking on the advanced enemies, and any missions you complete while in this alternate timeline will be reflected when you reach that point in your own game.

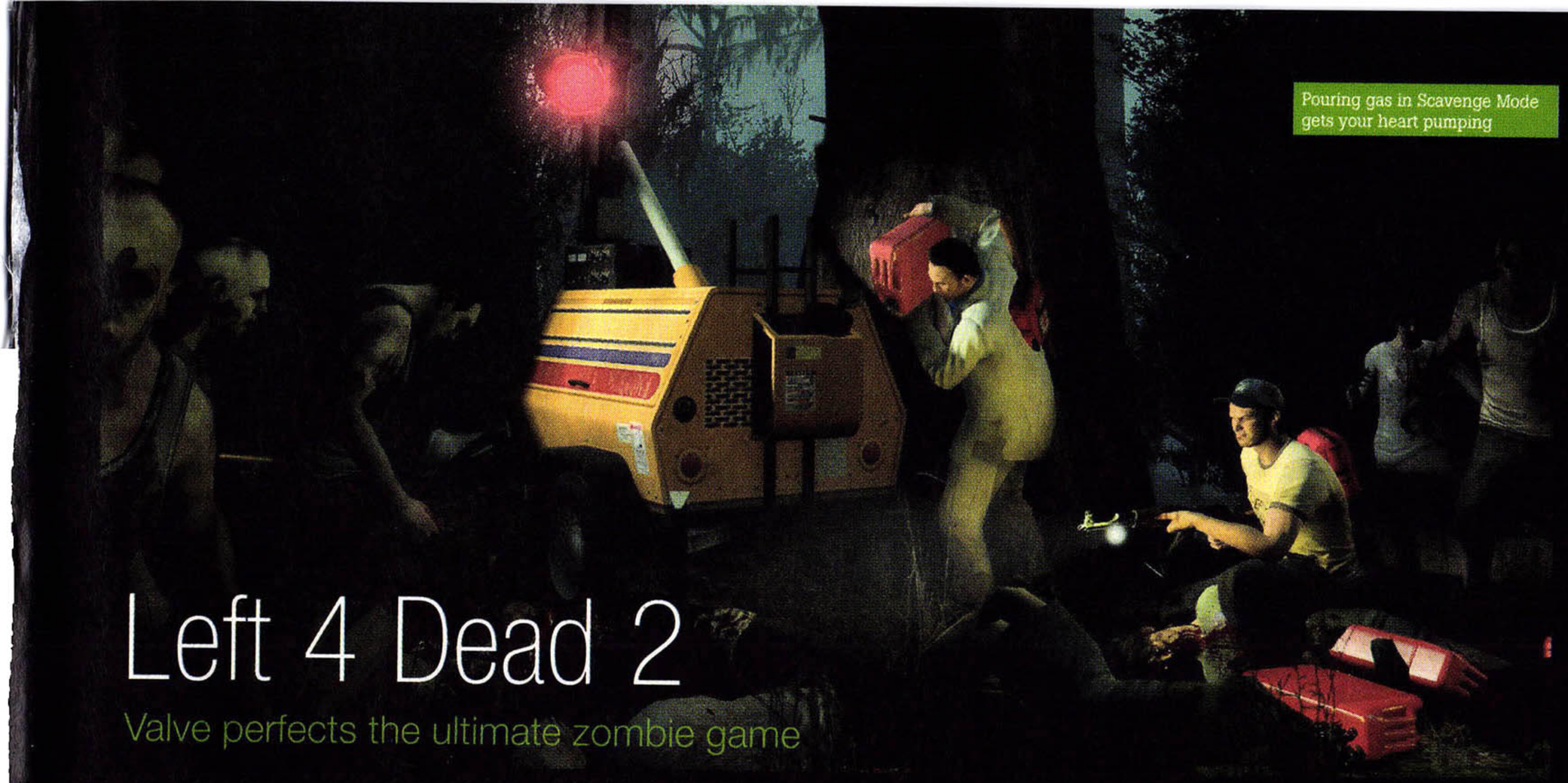
While Borderlands and Fallout 3 share a similar apocalyptic, *Road Warrior*-esque setting, the former does a much better job of making you feel like a wasteland scavenger. Very few story elements are present, so you don't have a constant "I better get back to the main quest" feeling hanging over your head. There's no disappearing family members or ominous government forces making you feel the need to progress through the story, only the desire to grow stronger and survive the myriad creatures populating Pandora. No matter which character you choose, you're not the offspring of a brilliant scientist or politician and you're not the only hope for humanity... you're just a journeyman with a gun (and ideally a few friends).

Borderlands attempts many things, which in this medium can often end with a laundry list of features but no fully-developed ones. This is one of the rare occasions where all of the new experiences a game brings to the table work out splendidly, especially when viewed as an entire package. Co-op is a blast, the variety of weaponry lends an addictive quality to the game that's rarely seen, and it maintains a distinct sense of humor and personality. It's a long-lasting experience that manages to stay fresh throughout, and the ability to easily jump into a friend's game at any time only lengthens the appeal of an already stellar title. **» Dan Ryckert**

For details on how to get some free loot and the rare "And They'll Tell Two Friends" achievement in an Xbox 360 play session with Dan, check out www.gameinformer.com/mag

Second Opinion 9.5

Gearbox's first stab at a role-playing shooter is a resounding success. Borderlands takes the best gameplay aspects of RPGs (leveling up your character, unlocking new skills, and amassing endless mountains of loot) and marries them with spot-on FPS controls. The ridiculous arsenal cache is everything you want it to be (save for customization), and taking down overly powerful enemies has never been more gratifying. Some players will hate the grind Borderlands occasionally requires, but when grinding involves torching enemies with incendiary ammo, gibbing them with bazooka shotguns, and racking up an endless string of headshots, I ain't complaining. My only criticism is that despite all of its great RPG elements, your interaction with the characters and world of Pandora is still as shallow as a generic FPS. I would've liked more options for sorting weapons too, but these small gripes don't change the facts: This RPS is heaven for fans of FPSs and RPGs. **» Jeff Marchiafava**



Pouring gas in Scavenge Mode gets your heart pumping

Left 4 Dead 2

Valve perfects the ultimate zombie game

gameinformer PC GAME OF THE MONTH gameinformer GOLD

Style 1 or 2-Player Shooter (8-Player Online) **Publisher** Valve **Developer** Valve
Release November 17 **ESRB** M

9.5

360 • PC

Torrential rain hits hard just as we double back through the Witch-infested sugar field. With visibility reduced to nothing and the thunder drowning out Coach's orders, we get separated in the thick crops. I stare in dismay as a rotten waterfall of corpses pours over the side of the mill we're running towards. I align the barrel of my shotgun head-level with the charging crowd and fire every shell into the obscuring vegetation. Suddenly, a blood-curdling scream fills the air, followed quickly by another. It's already too late by the time we realize we've startled two Witches...

Left 4 Dead 2 is swollen with action that will leave your controller sweaty and worn, and emerges as one of the most powerful online co-op experiences I have ever had. This trek into zombieland boasts more intense combat, finales, crescendos, settings, enemies, and game modes than last year's title. Four players banding together for survival is still the focus, but the conditions have become far more chaotic.

Left 4 Dead 2 drops four new charismatic zombie-killers in the Deep South, where they endure five uniquely awe-inspiring locales. Players gleefully hack and blast their way through everywhere from abandoned carnival grounds to The Big Easy itself, with each campaign carrying a distinctly different atmosphere of dread. Dynamic battles, such as a mobile fight along rollercoaster tracks, liven up the standard dig-in-your-heels horde defense of the original. The tense finale of one campaign has the survivors defending a bandstand stage while utilizing a famous rock band's pyrotechnics to simultaneously ward off the undead and signal a rescue chopper.

Littered across each new setting are brand-new saliva-inducing melee weapons like the katana and frying pan. You have not experienced ghoul-gibbing bliss until you've been bum rushed by infected and spun in a circle while wielding a chainsaw. Melee weapons fit so naturally into L4D2 that you'll wonder how you ever managed the first game without them.

Other useful items and firearms equally expand gameplay. Use a defibrillator on a fallen friend, pump yourself with adrenaline for a life-saving speed boost when you're in the red, or throw a vial of boomer bile at a charging tank and laugh with twisted delight as nearby zombies tear it to shreds. The standard weapon types of shotgun, automatic, and sniper rifle now feature a broader variety with unique characteristics as well. All these additions combined with the brand new grenade launcher allow your band of survivors to methodically customize your strategy like never before.

Don't expect the new goodies to allow you to mow through infected like grass; the undead legion has mutated into a stronger beast. The Hunter, Boomer, and Smoker are now joined by three new devastating special infected that add welcome depth to the enemy roster. The Charger plows through the survivors like an irate freight train, the Spitter projectile vomits a pool of noxious acid which does area of effect damage, and the Jockey mounts a human's shoulders and steers them into nearby hazards. New "uncommon common" infected like the flame-retardant HazMat suit zombies and heavily armored SWAT team zombies put a challenging twist on the generic rabble.

The augmentation of both the infected and survivors makes for some of the most enthralling, white knuckle multiplayer you'll play this year. Versus stays fresh and balanced with six special infected types to choose from instead of the original game's three, and even more maniacal laugh-inducing coordinated strikes. The new competitive multiplayer mode, Scavenge, has survivors scrambling to collect gas cans to stop a countdown timer across six maps, with the infected doing everything in their power to stop them. Glorious chaos routinely erupts around the generator as the desperate humans struggle to pour gas into it. As a survivor, you'll cry out in anger as the tie-breaking gas can explodes after a Spitter pukes on it. As the infected, you'll cheer as a Charger pummels a gas can out of Coach's arms during the suspenseful overtime. This fast-paced, round-based multiplayer will have you lurking in game lobbies (which have been greatly improved) until the actual apocalypse hits.

Last November, Valve spread a pandemic infection across Xbox Live and PCs everywhere with the original Left 4 Dead. The newest chapter in the undead uprising now oozes with even more of the proven developer's trademark personality and polish. If you are among those who think the sequel is coming too soon, prepare to eat your words like so many brains. Left 4 Dead 2 is everything a sequel should be: perfected, expanded, and an absolute riot. » **Tim Turi**

Hop online to www.gameinformer.com/mag to check out details about my visit to Valve's studio

» Concept
Make one of the best multiplayer games of last year even better

» Graphics
At one point an explosion propelled a zombie over my head with its intestines trailing behind it like a party streamer

» Sound
The characters' banter is hilarious, and the L4D theme sounds awesome with a southern twang

» Playability
Clobbering waves of zombies with a frying pan never felt so natural

» Entertainment
The new enemies, campaigns, multiplayer, and weapons make for the most addictive zombie-slaughtering fun I've ever had

» Replay Value
High

The Midnight Riders are rock gods in the south

DJ Hero

Activision reinvents the music genre with DJ Hero

9

PS3 • 360 • Wii • PS2

» Concept
Brilliantly reinvents the "falling gem" formula with amazing cut-and-scratch gameplay and a well-built turntable peripheral

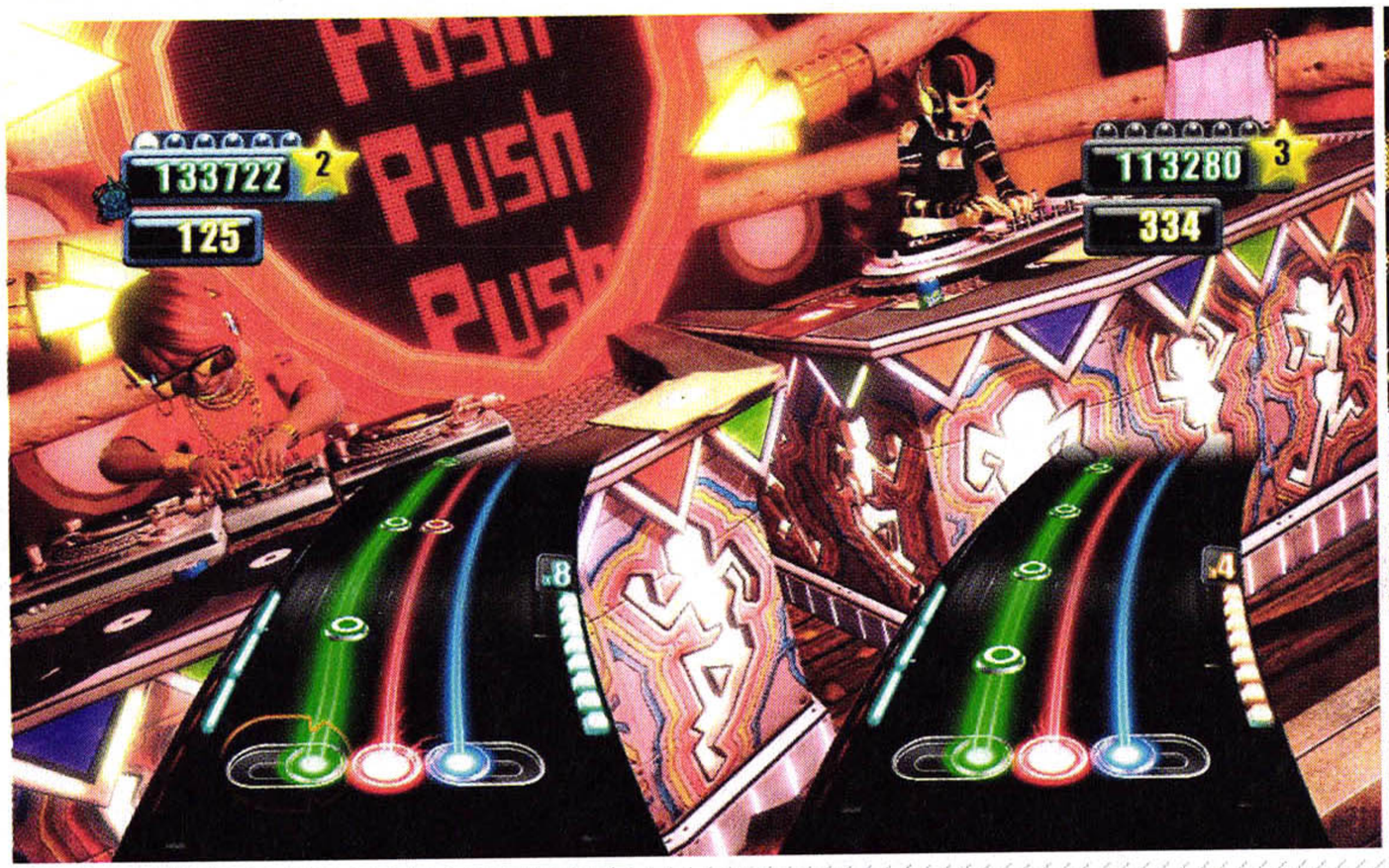
» Graphics
From a technical standpoint, the graphics are solid, but will we ever see an end to the hideous character designs that plague Activision's music games?

» Sound
More than just a great selection of tracks, these all-new mash-ups and remixes put a new spin on old favorites and obscure gems alike. Very inspiring stuff

» Playability
Even veteran Guitar Hero players will have a learning curve, but mastering a new gameplay style is an exhilarating experience

» Entertainment
While The Beatles: Rock Band and Guitar Hero 5 chronicle rock's past and present, this game feels more like the future of the genre

» Replay Value
High



gamefrormer GOLD

Style 1 or 2-Player Rhythm/Music (2-Player Online) **Publisher** Activision **Developer** Freestyle Games **Release** October 27 **ESRB** T

Activision has taken a lot of heat in gamer circles for its perceived shameless exploitation of the Guitar Hero franchise. A lot of gamers have been more sympathetic to Harmonix (the originators of both Guitar Hero and Rock Band), a stance reinforced by the company's classy handling of its DLC catalog and The Beatles: Rock Band, especially in contrast to Acvitision's botched handling of Kurt Cobain's likeness in Guitar Hero 5. Against this backdrop, DJ Hero is an even more impressive feat of game development. Not only does it succeed in being much more than a cheap cash-in on the "Hero" brand, it's the most innovative and inspired new music title since the original Rock Band.

While the basic "gems and runway" onscreen display reflects the tradition of Guitar Hero, the gameplay and the new turntable controller transform the template into something radically different. The turntable and its three face buttons handle the cuts, scratches, and rewind effects that cascade down the three-track runway. But the real challenge comes from using the crossfader to switch rapidly between different samples when a track makes an immediate left or right turn on the two outside tracks. At first it's like trying to rub your belly and pat your head at the same time, but the learning curve should be manageable for most music game fans. However, some expert Guitar Hero players will have to swallow their pride and start on the medium difficulty. For this reason, the entire game plays in "no fail" mode. Some hardcore players might balk at this, but I think it was the correct decision. Still, perhaps it would have been wise to at least include a mode that allows you to fail for the expert set.

The gameplay is exhilarating, providing the illusion that you are in command of the mix as you juggle beats, lay down scratches, squelch frequencies with the knob, and interject custom sample sound bites in the freestyle sections of the track. The game transforms on higher difficulty levels, as added directional scratches lend the game another layer of complexity. My only small complaint is I wish the crossfader control had a stronger "notch" in the middle, making it easier to find the default position during hectic sections.

Musically, this is the most adventurous music game released to date. Instead of a simple tracklisting of classic rock tunes, these fresh mixes offer an entirely new listening experience. Familiar tracks are blended with obscure DJ cuts to often thrilling results. In DJ Hero, the delicate '60s psych of the Zombies is melded with Chuck Brown's go-go classic "Bustin' Loose," while jazz producer David Axelrod gets down with Eric B. and Rakim's hip-hop epic "Eric B. is President." Finally, a music game that's not simply regurgitating the past, but transforming it. While the mixes sometimes rely too heavily on pop hits or well-known artists, the soundtrack feels remarkably true to the cut-and-paste aesthetic of DJ culture.

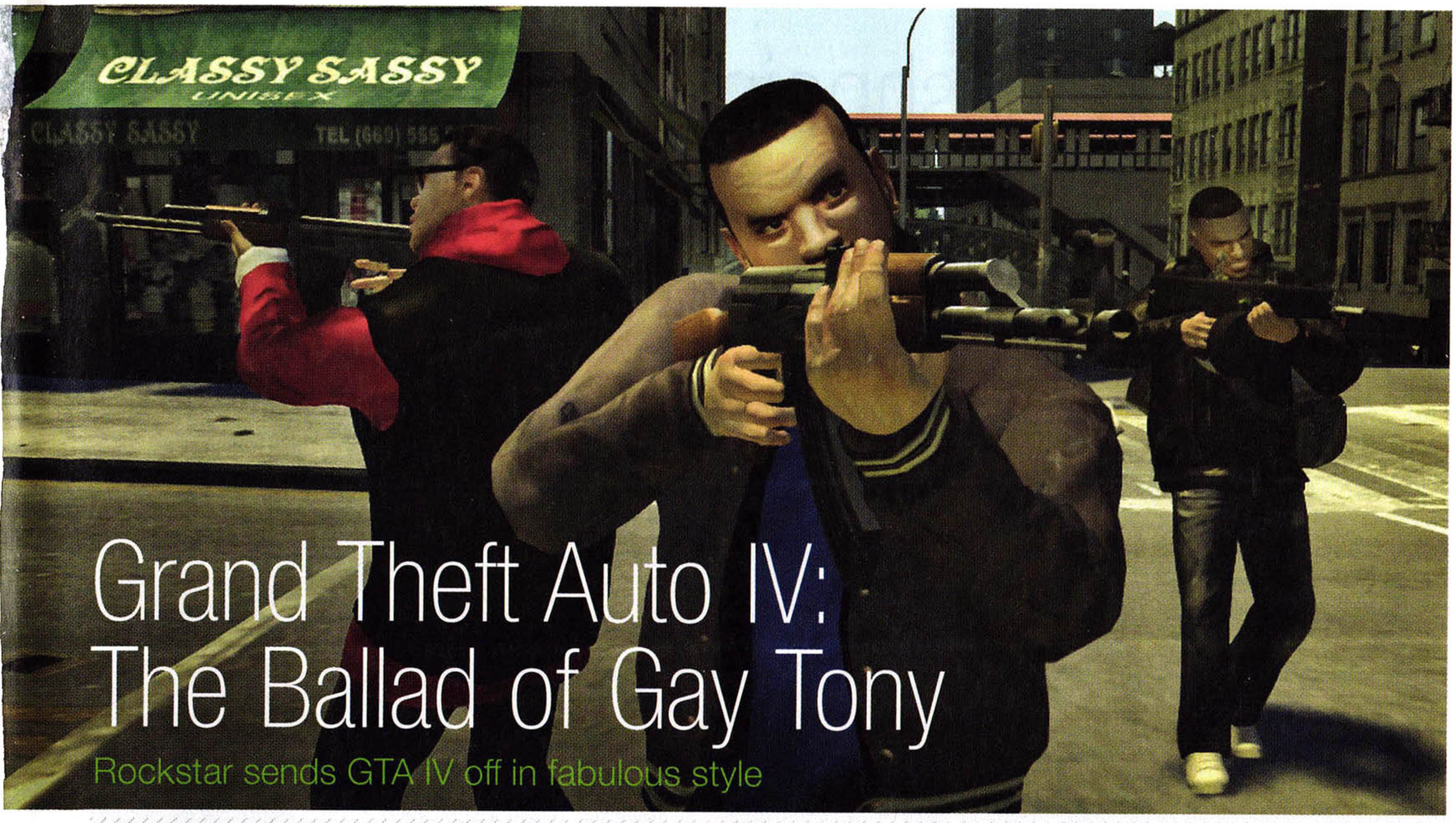
As might be expected in a game that tries to do so many new things, not everything works. A few mixes, like DJ Yoda's awkward mash-up of "Tutti Frutti" by Little Richard and "Beats" by Shlomo, sound like audio car crashes, leaving you feeling confused by the jumble of edits and hyperkinetic scratches. Other times, it's clear that marketing has taken precedent over artistry. The Jay-Z set is a disappointment, eschewing classic early Jay breaks for inferior latter-day material. The freestyle samples – brief soundbites that can be deployed with the middle button – are fairly corny, and often do little but disrupt the groove. Also, the guitar-and-DJ multiplayer duets are more novelty than fun, though perhaps this can be improved with better DLC in the future.

The presentation is also a mixed bag. While the graphics and impressively rendered environments are state of the art, the horrible character designs that we've come to expect from Guitar Hero continue to annoy in DJ Hero. From stripper-like females to faux "rednecks," there's not a dumb stereotype these fuggly Muppets don't cover. Thankfully, you can unlock a good number of genuinely respected real-life DJs like Grandmaster Flash, DJ Shadow, and Jazzy Jeff – although DJ AM's bio weirdly neglects to mention the fact that he recently died.

Despite these complaints, I'm hooked on DJ Hero. In many ways, it feels like a new beginning for the music genre. Freestyle Games has pulled off an impressive trick, crafting a game that holds true to its sister franchise while at the same time putting a unique spin on both the gameplay and the music. This is a great start, and I hope that Activision follows through with robust DLC support. With so much of the classic rock catalog depleted, this genre needs to look to new and creative ways to keep the experience fresh. DJ Hero is a great first step. » **Matt Helgeson**

Second Opinion 8.75

DJ Hero is the most interesting music game this year, even if it's not conclusively the best. The presentation, character designs, and number of overall gameplay options lag behind the more familiar titles that released earlier this fall. However, for anyone looking for a new challenge and new arenas of music to explore, this is the far better choice. The turntable game mechanic is incredibly addictive, not to mention surprisingly challenging. The difficulty curve up to Expert is smooth and balanced well; it encourages harder settings since you can't fail songs – you can only fail to unlock new content. The soundtrack will be a revelation for many, showing off the complexity inherent to hip-hop, dance music, and turntable music creation. Even for those already into that vibrant musical scene, the wealth of never-before-heard mixes in the game make it worth checking out. The original songs these mixes are culled from are at times more mainstream than might be necessary, but I can understand the desire to include recognizable tunes. Even with some freshman stumbles, DJ Hero is exactly the shot of adrenaline the music genre needs. » **Matt Miller**



Grand Theft Auto IV: The Ballad of Gay Tony

Rockstar sends GTA IV off in fabulous style

gameinformer GOLD

Style 1-Player Action (16-Player Online) **Publisher** Rockstar Games **Developer** Rockstar North **Release** October 27 **ESRB** M

At the beginning of Grand Theft Auto IV, Eastern European immigrant Niko Bellic starts his pursuit of fame and fortune at the bottom of the social ladder. It's only fitting that Rockstar Games ends its latest impressive run of open world masterpieces at the other end of the spectrum. The Ballad of Gay Tony is Rockstar North's song of excess, showcasing Liberty City's drug-addled trust fund elite, promiscuous socialites, nitro-fueled luxury sports-cars, and military-grade weaponry.

New protagonist Luis Lopez may roll with the elite, but he certainly isn't one of them; the Dominican ex-convict grew up pulling off petty crimes in the rough neighborhood of Northwood until legendary nightclub owner Tony Prince took him under his wing. Lopez quickly finds out that a two-bit corner boy and a personal assistant to the rich and famous aren't so different. As Gay Tony's once-powerful nightclub empire spirals out of control due to his excessive drug use and outstanding debt to shady loansharks, it's up to Lopez to do the dirty work and keep the clubs afloat.

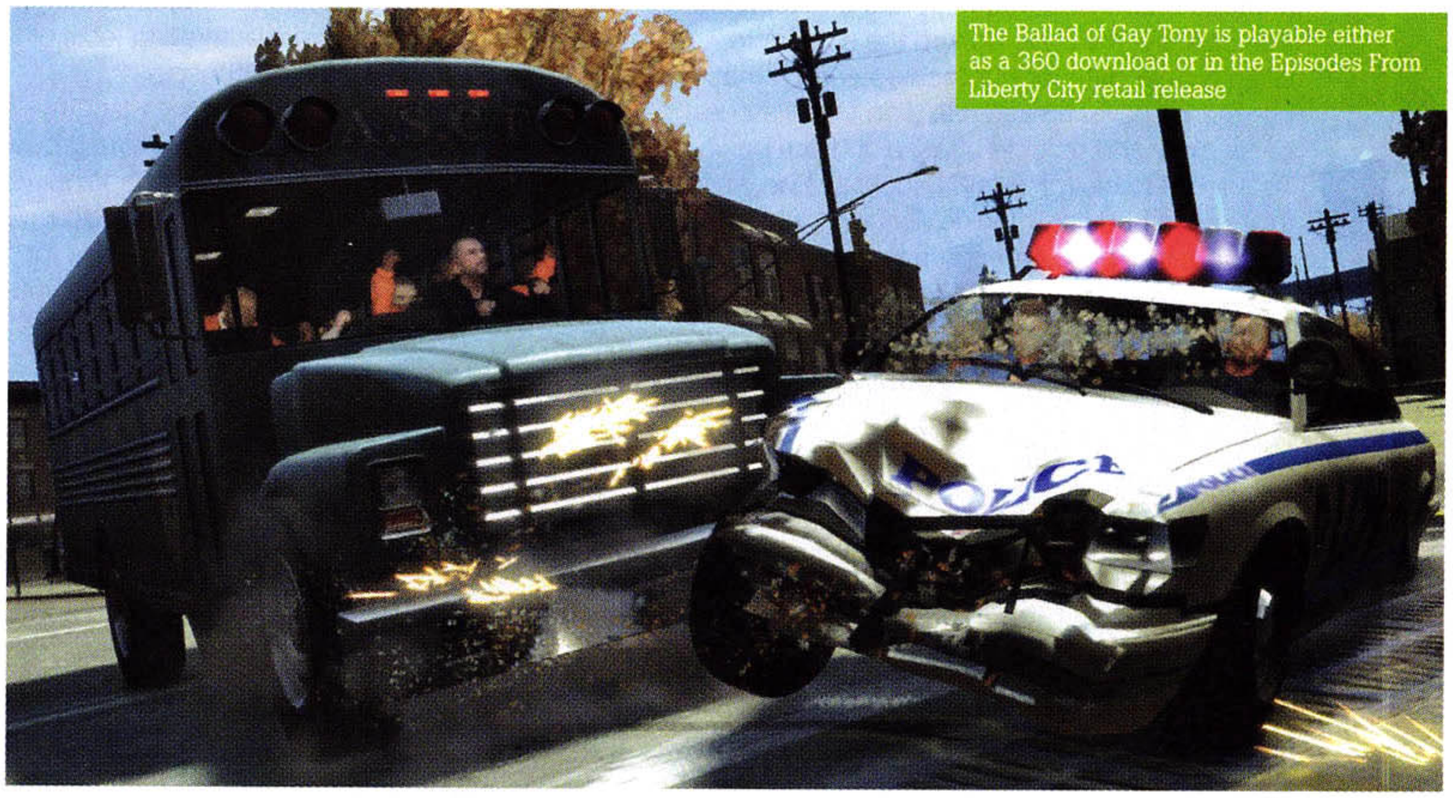
Rolling with the rich has its benefits when it comes to crime. Forget the slow progression to explosive weapons most Grand Theft Auto games follow, Lopez has almost immediate access to the finest arms dealers have to offer – attack choppers, APCs, explosive shotguns, sticky bombs, and my favorite, the P90 assault rifle. The creative new missions Rockstar North crafted put these destructive new toys to good use; one minute you're sinking a luxury yacht with the missile-launching attack chopper, and the next you're parachuting from 10,000 feet to infiltrate the high-rise offices of the crooked Russian owner of the Liberty City Rampage hockey team. The outlandish nature of most of your missions almost always attracts the attention of the cops, guaranteeing more thrills than your typical GTA fare.

Throughout the story, Luis is torn between his allegiance to the lavish new lifestyle Tony provides him and the family and friends he's left behind in Northwood. Players won't feel as bad leaving his disgruntled mother and hoodrat friends in their wake. The drug war shootouts Lopez gets into with his childhood friends may be made from traditional GTA bread and butter, but I found myself ignoring them in favor of the more explosive missions from Gay Tony or spoiled Arab playboy Yusuf Amir.

Luis may feel conflicted hanging in the old neighborhood, but he's clearly in his element when the drinks are flowing and the dance floor is bumping at the nightclubs. In the clubs, players can remove troublemakers, do shots with bartenders, shower friends with champagne in the VIP room, and dance with the ladies on the dancefloor. Show her all the right moves and she'll likely show you hers in the bathroom stall. Make sure you work at least one management shift at the nightclub as well; your office employee in the short skirt will make it worth your time.

When Luis isn't taking orders and doing favors for his out of control friends, players can indulge in the fantastic base jumping and cagefighting side missions or go on a rampage with the attack chopper or APC. The multiplayer also gets new content to amp up the action; the frantic GTA races now feature nitro boosts, and the new deathmatch maps focus on close quarters combat.

While I preferred the tight-knit story of brotherhood and betrayal in The Lost and Damned, The Ballad of Gay Tony delivers more explosive weapons, death-defying missions, and off-the-wall characters. Don't miss your chance to close out the GTA IV experience in style. » **Matt Bertz**



The Ballad of Gay Tony is playable either as a 360 download or in the Episodes From Liberty City retail release

9.25

360

» Concept
Wrap up Grand Theft Auto IV with an explosive storyline featuring attack choppers, APCs, and skydiving

» Graphics
Gay Tony's neon-lit nightclubs and high-rise apartments showcase a world very different from those of Niko Bellic and Johnny Klebitz

» Sound
New radio personalities DJ Paul, DJ Karl, and Crookers turn up the bass with great club-friendly tracks

» Playability
Gay Tony doesn't stray from the solid GTA IV controls, though tweaking the helicopter navigation would have been welcome

» Entertainment
A must play considering Gay Tony is the last time Rockstar plans to visit Liberty City for the foreseeable future

» Replay Value
Moderately High

Operation Flashpoint: Dragon Rising

The war for oil becomes a war against glitches

7

PS3 • 360

» Concept
A realistic war simulator that shines in battle, but is plagued by bugs and stretches of vast nothingness

» Graphics
The impressive draw distance allows you to see troops over 500 meters away. The farther away the enemy, the better; the soldier animations are laughable at best

» Sound
The game's biggest triumph is its weapon sounds. You can hear where shots are coming from and by what weapon (the .50 cal made me freeze in my tracks). The soundtrack is also a highlight that stuck with me afterward

» Playability
The weapon play is solid, but AI mishaps and bugs galore assault the battlefield more than your squad

» Entertainment
When the gameplay is firing as it should, this is a fun co-op experience. When problems arise, prepare to hear every curse word known to man screamed into your headset

» Replay Value
Moderately High

Style 1-Player Shooter (8-Player Online) **Publisher** Codemasters **Developer** Codemasters **Release** October 6 **ESRB** M

I knew this valley would be a deathtrap. Rolling grass for six hundred meters, high tree line perches on the perimeter, moonlight glare turning helmets into fireflies – this is a sniper's hunting trail, and I just ordered my men into the heart of it. But there's no point in being hard on myself. I had no choice. Our birds were on their way. The only way to provide cover was to cross the valley and take out the SAMs. We almost made it. We could have made it. Even with death looming from every direction, I suppressed the snipers long enough for my squad to sprint into cover. Sure, my efforts rewarded me with a bullet to the chest, but the blow shouldn't have been fatal. From the blackened tree canopy, my boys flanked the snipers to open a clear path for our medic to patch me up. But he never arrived. He didn't take a bullet of his own, and he didn't freeze up from panic. As I lay there bleeding out, I could see he was stuck on a boulder, running aimlessly in place, unaware that his current path was taking him nowhere. It wasn't a bullet that killed me. It was a damn bug.

Such is life in Operation Flashpoint: Dragon Rising. When this game is working the way it should, the intensity is nearly unbearable. You can feel your character's heart racing through the controller's vibration, and if you catch the glimpse of a tracer bullet going overhead, you thank the makers that you are given a second to drop into the prone position. From 300 to 400 meters, enemies are cunning strategists, spreading out into different formations and flanking at opportune times. Countering assaults with tactics of your own is easily handled through a slick menu system. Again, when the functionality is working, the simulation-like battles are enthralling tests of skill unlike any you've seen on console.

The entire campaign (which spans 11 lengthy missions) can be played cooperatively by a group of four. This is the ideal way to play Flashpoint. Yes, it is an empowering experience to tell your AI squad to assault a building or to cease fire for a stealth operation, but you never know what you are going to get from them. They may malfunction, read a situation wrong to the point it makes them seem suicidal, or worse yet, ignore everything you say. Human teammates reduce the frustration and make the game all the more enjoyable.

But playing this way doesn't fix the game completely. My team lost the ability to use health packs, would respawn with invisible weapons, and would finish levels only to find out we failed an objective along the way but were never told. While enemies are intelligent from a distance, you can see their AI buckling in close-quarters skirmishes. Sometimes they'll just stand there like mannequins taking bullet after bullet.

The realistic scale is instrumental in opening the doors for strategies, but to a fault. Most levels are bogged down with vast amounts of walking. Vast as in most of your time in specific levels is dedicated to the trek leading up to the fights. Vehicles are a rarity, and even if one can be found, the slippery controls often spell suicide for your team. Running 1.5 km to an evacuation point with no conflict along the way is not a fun way to spend an afternoon.

Nor are the competitive modes, Annihilation and Infiltration. Spawn points are too far removed from the action, and only having eight human-controlled players on these vast maps doesn't make for exciting engagements. Throwing idiotic computer-controlled soldiers into the mix and refusing players a choice of weapons before rounds doesn't help either.

Basically, only play this game if your friends are willing to run at your side. When the game is functioning as intended, it can be brilliant. But don't let your guard down. Problems will arise, and your most difficult challenge may be combating a bout of boredom » **Andrew Reiner**

See videos of Operation Flashpoint 2: Dragon Rising at www.gameinformer.com/mag

Depth in Tactics

The AI may show signs of being possessed by the *Exorcist* demon, but when your allies are listening to you (and not glitching), your control over their movements allows for almost any strategy to be concocted. You can order them into tight, combat, and normal spreads, as well as vee, wedge, column, and line formations. Flanking to the left or right is executed with just the press of a button, and urgency can also be applied with the "move fast" order. But sadly, most of these orders fall on broken ears. Even the simple command "follow me" doesn't seem to work 90 percent of the time.

Dragon Age: Origins

Dragon Age is a different beast on consoles

Style 1-Player Role-playing Game **Publisher** Electronic Arts **Developer** BioWare/Edge of Reality **Release** November 3 **ESRB** M

This is the strangest case of video game déjà vu I've ever experienced. After playing through the PC version of Dragon Age last month, I know these characters, I've seen these locations, and I've done these quests. In terms of content, everything in the console versions of BioWare's epic fantasy RPG is practically identical to the PC release. On the other hand, the gameplay drastically changes the contours of the combat, creating a new landscape littered with familiar landmarks. By no means is it the same game, but it remains a great adventure.

When it isn't being measured against the successes of its PC counterpart, this iteration of Dragon Age stands on its own as a mix of real-time battles and tactical combat. Instead of executing strategies using the classic pause-and-play approach (a hallmark of the Baldur's Gate and Neverwinter Nights series), you spend most of your time in the trenches activating abilities and firing off spells in rapid succession. Pausing to issue commands is still available, but fights seem tailored to be action-oriented and less about considering your options – especially since the lack of an isometric view means that you rarely have a solid awareness of the whole battlefield.

Powers are mapped to the face buttons, which works particularly well for characters with a modest selection of skills, like fighters and rogues. You'll wade into a group of enemies, use your powers, then attack normally until your cooldowns are ready to go again. If you plan on playing as a mage or carefully managing your ally mages, you should expect to pause combat regularly in order to select the most appropriate spell from the clunky menu system.

Battles have a more freewheeling style thanks to the shift away from pause-and-play, so you'll want to be confident that your party members aren't doing something stupid where you can't see them. Constantly juggling control among your various allies throws a wrench in the otherwise smooth flow of combat, so I'd recommend spending lots of time with your AI scripting so your pals can fend for themselves. As an unexpected benefit, I felt more of a connection to my created characters since I spent more time controlling them directly rather than managing my party as a whole.

In streamlining combat for consoles, developers BioWare and Edge of Reality also dialed back the punishing difficulty. Fights that I won by the skin of my teeth in the PC version were a breeze this time around, largely because friendly fire is disabled on the normal difficulty setting. You can spew gouts of flame and conjure lightning storms with relative impunity, which removes all of the risk from casting high-level spells. I thought this was lame at first, but it isn't without charm; I got lots of laughs using attacks and strategies that wouldn't be viable if my allies were in harm's way.

Tossing a fireball into a crowded melee is entertaining, but it represents the biggest problem with this incarnation of Dragon Age. The action-focused, low-pressure encounters are fun, but they rarely force you to truly test your skills. Though you'll mow down hundreds of darkspawn and thugs, you'll rarely feel the satisfaction that comes with a hard-won victory. Even the spoils of battle are a pain, since cramped inventory is a pervasive problem, and the only way to truly solve it is to shell out seven dollars for the Warden's Keep DLC, adding a sorely needed storage chest for your excess items. This feature is a genre standard that should have been in the core package, and holding it back to make players buy it on launch day is pathetic.

Despite differences in the mechanics, the land of Ferelden is just as vast and intricate in the console versions of Dragon Age. The involved history behind the characters and organizations lends the world surprising depth, though technical hiccups (like an uneven framerate and occasional glitches) and an awkward interface can hamper your enjoyment of the content. Your dialogue and interaction options eschew the traditional good-versus-evil dynamic, instead embracing a more ambiguous view of morality. The story and its multiple branches will grab your attention, and the combat – while different in style – delivers plenty of thrills. I prefer the PC iteration, but it's still good on PS3 and 360, and way better than not playing Dragon Age at all. » **Joe Juba**

Look at more Dragon Age: Origins screens and check out videos at www.gameinformer.com/mag

8

PS3 • 360

» Concept
Make some concessions to bring BioWare's newest RPG to a wider audience

» Graphics
Most of the textures and facial models are sub-standard. This is the company that brought us Mass Effect?

» Sound
The voice acting rates above average, and the score sets the appropriate mood

» Playability
The controls sacrifice strategy to preserve an action-oriented feel to combat, which works if you aren't controlling a mage

» Entertainment
A must-play if you've enjoyed any of BioWare's previous games, though you should get the PC version instead if you have the option

» Replay Value
High

Try this game if you like...

Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic

Fable

Baldur's Gate II: Shadows of Amn

The Witcher

Tekken 6

A lackluster campaign can't keep this polished fighter down

8.75

PS3 • 360

» Concept
A new King of Iron Fist tournament featuring more combatants and polish than ever before

» Graphics:
Most of the one-on-one stages look spectacular, and the fighters animate beautifully. The same can't be said for Scenario Campaign's uninspired locales

» Sound:
Stage music doesn't depart from the series' previous offerings, and the voice acting is passable

» Playability
Extremely rewarding combat for longtime fans, but button mashing still works (to a degree) for newcomers

» Entertainment
The robust movesets and varied fighters help this installment live up to the franchise's reputation

» Replay Value:
Moderately High

gameinformer SILVER

Style 1 or 2-Player Fighting (2-Player Online) **Publisher** Namco Bandai **Developer** Namco **Release** October 27 **ESRB** T

Considering the first Tekken was released soon after the PSone's debut, and Tekken Tag Tournament accompanied the PlayStation 2 at the console's launch, it's surprising to see the franchise make its current-gen debut so far into the lifecycle. The wait has proved worth it, as this sixth installment is the most refined since the almost universally loved Tekken 3.

One of the first things you'll notice is the comically huge character select screen. For the standard arcade, versus, and ghost battle modes, players have access to every fighter from the very beginning. This includes dozens of returning favorites, as well as some new faces. Apparently there's a rule that every new fighting game has to feature a fat, surprisingly agile blonde American, as Tekken's rotund Bob joins Street Fighter IV's Rufus in this role. Dr. Bosconovitch's creation Alisa appears a polite young girl at first, at least until her chainsaw arms and robot wings pop out (and it only gets worse when she pulls off her own head and uses it as a weapon).

Newcomer Lars is the focus of the new Scenario Campaign mode, which is the weakest aspect of the game. Cutscenes are surprisingly long considering they make little to no sense and feature (surprise!) a spiky-haired protagonist with a case of amnesia. This mode has its own built-in version of arcade mode, featuring CG endings for characters after a few short fights. Going back to the lazy beat-'em-up levels of Scenario Campaign is rough after a few traditional one-on-one fights, as the colorful and interesting locales of the latter are replaced by the cut-and-paste docks and bland environments of the former.

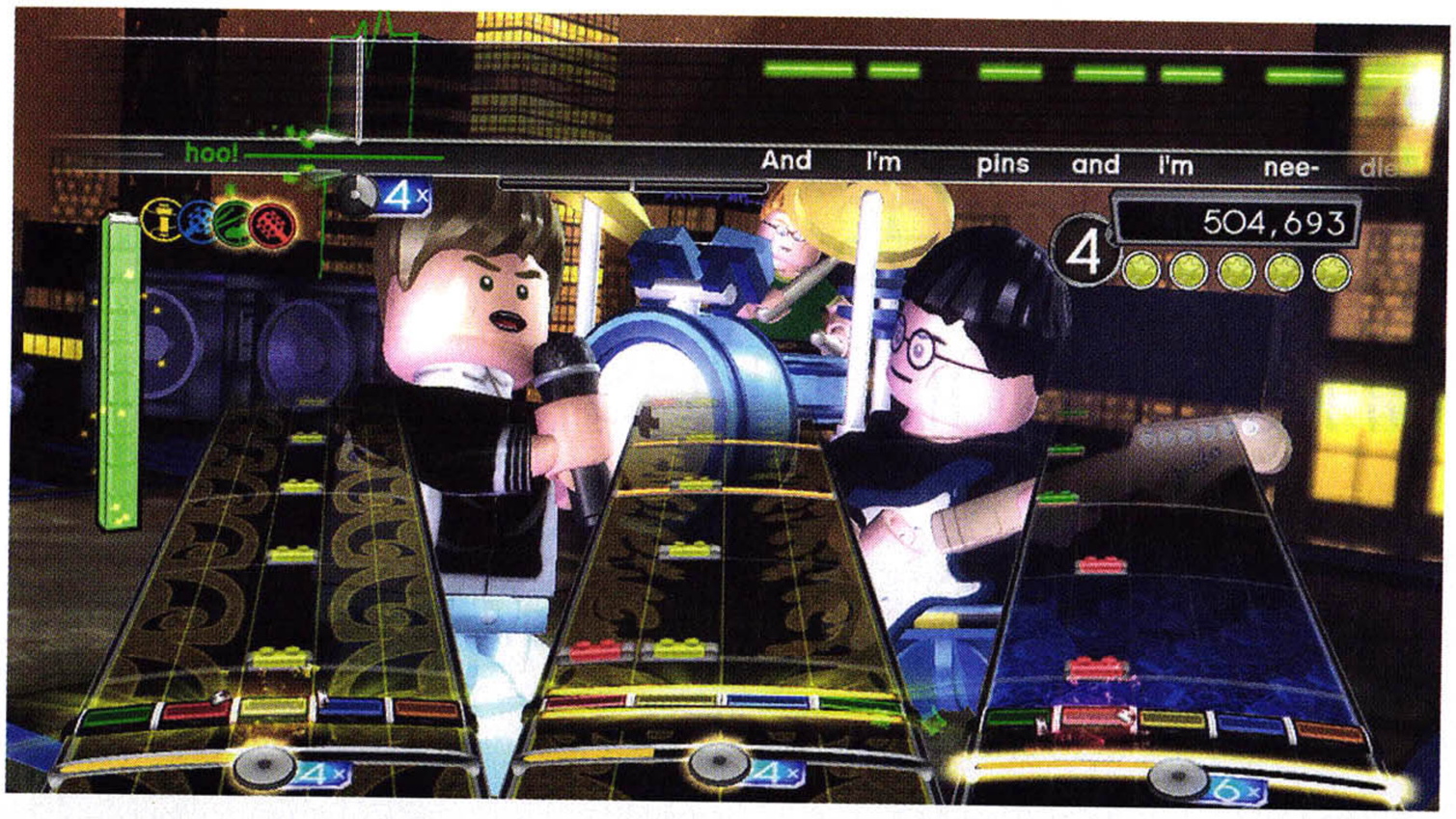
Worst of all, your movesets are castrated in the Scenario Campaign, which is a shame considering how robust they are in standard fights. After learning their various tweaks, Tekken veterans will feel right at home with returning characters. Combat is focused on a heavy dose of combos and juggling, although it's still entirely possible for newbies to pull out a win by frantic button mashing. Part of the fun of a fighting sequel is learning the unique styles of the new combatants, and it'll take some time getting used to the snake-like kicks of Zafina or Miguel's quick and powerful combos.

Online play performs relatively well compared to other fighters, but lag still rears its ugly head every once in a while. However, the lag isn't exactly choppy; it's more of an overall slowdown of the fights. Your inputs still register as you intend, albeit a little slower than in single-player. The overall online setup offers a few more features than Street Fighter IV's bare-bones approach, but it's nothing substantial. Lobbies and matches connect almost immediately, and you can even upload replays and "ghosts" of your performances for others to download.

As a fighting game, Tekken 6 proves why it's been a consistent success for over a decade. Controls and combos are incredibly tight, and the entire package is dripping with polish. Despite the lackluster Scenario Campaign, it's still a solid purchase for fighting fans. **» Dan Ryckert**

For a look at how the GI staff fared against the ludicrous final boss, check out www.gameinformer.com/mag

The Mishima clan returns in full force



LEGO Rock Band

Family-friendly tone works even when other aspects don't

Style 1 to 4-Player Rhythm/Music **Publisher** Warner Bros. Interactive
Developer Harmonix/Traveller's Tales **Release** November 3 **ESRB** E10+

8

PS3 • 360 • Wii

» Concept
Mix the Rock Band formula with kid-friendly LEGOs

» Graphics
Streaming notes are now LEGO blocks

» Sound
Songs are very hit or miss this time around

» Playability
New Super Easy mode is great for young kids

» Entertainment
Without any downloaded songs on your hard drive, you're stuck playing the same tracks over and over

» Replay Value
Moderate

It's easy to be skeptical of LEGO Rock Band as a quick cash grab, but Traveller's Tales' trademark LEGO silliness blended with a few interesting new mechanics from Harmonix elevates the game to a level fans of both series shouldn't brush off.

The LEGO influence is immediately noticeable, as the game replaces the arena venues of other Rock Band games in favor of classic LEGO sets like a medieval castle, pirate ship, and spaceship. Even though unlocking new clothing in most music games is old hat at this point, something about earning new LEGO characters, vehicles, and items for your rock den makes it exciting again.

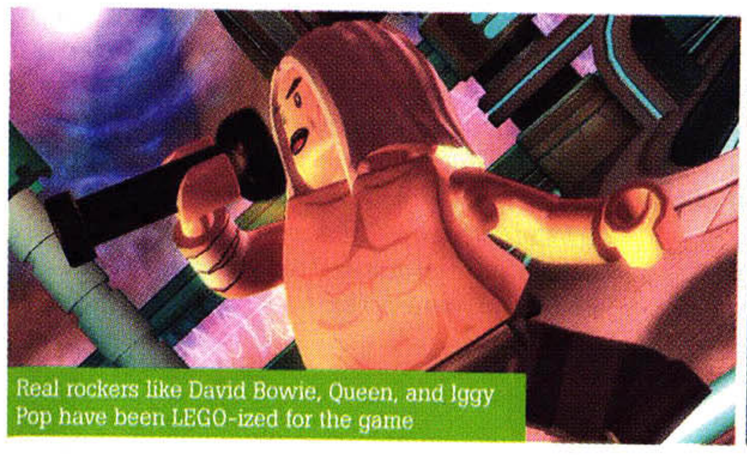
A new Super Easy difficulty and short song option cater to newbies and those with short attention spans. In the main career you can't really fail out, no matter the difficulty setting. Just like LEGO Star Wars, you spend studs to get back in on the action, which doesn't detract too much from the overall challenge. Expert difficulty is still expert difficulty, after all. The exception to the no fail rule is the new Rock Power Challenges that play out like a music video, in which your band escapes from a T-rex or kick starts an alien spaceship. Bad performances boot you out of the song with a humorous video of your failed objective. The challenges play out normally in single player, but band play grants sporadic breaks to watch the background antics and admire your friends' shredding skills. It's an interesting change of pace, but some ho-hum song choices for these epic sequences hurt the impact.

LEGO Rock Band's song list turned out weak in my opinion. Though the game has certified classics from the likes of Jimi Hendrix and Tom Petty, there are several throwaway tracks you'll forget the instant they're over. For every guilty pleasure like "The Final Countdown" or "Ghostbusters," there's an absolute horror like Korn's take on "Word Up!".

The career mode is structured similarly to Rock Band 2, which means you'll be forced into a lot of mystery/custom set lists to progress. RB 2 had 84 songs to keep things fresh. LEGO RB has only 45. If you've got a lot of downloaded songs it lessens the blow of repetition, but either way you're going to be stuck playing more KT Tunstall and Rascal Flatts than you ever imagined. The worst offender is the run to the final challenge, in which you must earn 90 stars from the same pool of songs you already played the crap out of.

Even if you're not sold on LEGO Rock Band, the fact that you can rip the track-list into Rock Band 2 for $10 is certainly a plus. **» Bryan Vore**

See videos of Lego Rock Band in action at www.gameinformer.com/mag


Real rockers like David Bowie, Queen, and Iggy Pop have been LEGO-ized for the game

{newbie}

{alpha geek}

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LEGO Indiana Jones 2: The Adventure Continues

The new series direction falls flat

6.5

PS3 • 360 • Wii • PC

» Concept
Return to the first three movies, add on the fourth, and get building and bashing through another LEGO adventure

» Graphics
Sharp, colorful graphics and an increased focus on unique animations make this the best looking LEGO game

» Sound
It's hard to argue with John Williams' fantastic movie scores

» Playability
Simple on-foot controls, but piloting vehicles is awkward

» Entertainment
The new approach to gameplay isn't as fun as the original, but the LEGO creator feature is a strong addition

» Replay Value
Moderate

Style 1 or 2-Player Action **Publisher** LucasArts **Developer** Traveller's Tales **Release** November 17 **ESRB** E10+

Whether exploring levels with my young nephews or furiously harvesting new characters on my own, I've developed a great fondness for the LEGO adventure games. But I can't endorse the dramatic and unfortunate new direction in Indy 2. While I appreciate the desire to try something new with the game structure after so many titles, the resulting mishmash of ideas is frustrating, repetitive, and unfriendly to both kids and adults.

Collecting studs and bashing enemies over the head until they break apart both remain central to the moment-to-moment gameplay – only the wider context of levels and progression have changed. For the sequel, Traveller's Tales returns to the earlier movies. But in a weird twist, every movie has brand new levels in place of those from the first game; in most cases, these shorter levels are built around a single small area and bound within a large hub designated for each film. The new movie, Kingdom of the Crystal Skull, is allotted the other half of the new levels.

Beyond the obvious strangeness of playing through new encounters in scenes we've already acted out in an earlier game, several other unusual design decisions left me shaking my head. The arena-like environments lose any sense of adventure and exploration, and instead introduce tedium with strings of identical enemies to fight and oddly confusing boss battles. Occasionally you gain control of an unwieldy vehicle and go spinning about the world bumping into things – rarely the things you hoped to bump into, mind you. Once you emerge from one of these small levels, you're faced with a large, lifeless hub world and given little direction about what happens next in the story or where to find that next plot piece. Were it not for a nice selection of hidden items in these central stages, I'd call the sections a complete waste of time.

Some bright spots shine through, including improved visuals. This is the best looking LEGO game yet. There are lots of items, vehicles, and weapons to uncover, many of which have unique and humorous animations connected to them. Gathering new characters is also important, since each one usually has a default item that comes in handy in certain situations. I also love the inclusion of a level creator – a huge bonus for folks who may have been wondering why it took this long for one of these games to include such a feature.

The versatile level creator opens many possibilities for fun, but the simplified approach to laying one item after another means that creating any meaningful, playable stages takes a long time. Unlocking parts to use in the creator also gives something extra to spend your studs on, but would-be levelmakers may be frustrated that they don't have a more robust set of items from the start. I also thought the adventure creation tool was pretty neat – a few simple choices help you craft your own story level, albeit one mostly based on stages you've visited in the main game.

If you've been waiting to explore these creative features, LEGO Indiana Jones 2 delivers in a big way. For other LEGO enthusiasts, keep collecting those studs in LEGO Star Wars or find that last unlockable LEGO Batman character. Indy's newest adventure wasn't built to last. **» Matt Miller**

Interested in the new LEGO Creator features? Check out Lucasarts' walkthrough video of this new mode at www.gameinformer.com/mag

Build up a large tornado to take down larger structures

Tornado Outbreak

Katamari-style gameplay with a meteorological spin

Style 1 or 2-Player Action **Publisher** Konami **Developer** Loose Cannon Studios
Release September 29 **ESRB** E10 +

6.75

PS3 • 360 • Wii

If you've ever played the original item accumulation game, Katamari Damacy, then Tornado Outbreak feels all too familiar. Instead of a magnetic ball, you play a tornado named Zephyr chosen to save the world by destroying everything in its path.

Each of Tornado Outbreak's levels, which take place everywhere from trailer parks to a Vegas clone, requires multiple passes to continue. Players must harness the power of the tornado to uncover the hiding places of Fire Fliers, fire-based creatures that have stolen the orbs of anti-matter hero Omegaton that need to be returned. In two passes across the environment, Zephyr must uncover 50 of 100 fliers housed within each level. You start as a small tornado that at first can only destroy plants and tumbleweeds, but can eventually take down entire amusement parks. Tearing through structures and leaving nothing but dust in your wake is quite enjoyable.

As part of the challenge, Zephyr must stay away from harmful solar rays. To aid the Wind Warrior, an object called a L.O.A.D. Starr casts a shadow for a limited time. It is imperative to collect the fliers and return to the shadow caster before time runs out, but without any sort of mini map, it can be difficult to find the location of the Starr in the level before time is up. Fail and you must restart the level.

Once players collect the Fire Fliers, they enter the totem battles. After racing through vortex gates to gain size and speed for the upcoming encounter, you must cross the battlefield while staying in shade spots to approach the totems and take them down with rapid button presses. Each level follows the exact same progression path, and this dull repetition ultimately makes what could have been a great tornado game nothing more than a funnel cloud. » **Annette Gonzalez**

Visit www.gameinformer.com/mag for additional screens, character art, and concept sketches.

Collect 50 out of 100 Fire Fliers to complete each level. This also adds seconds to the clock

Approach totems to engage in Totem Battles. Take them down with quick button presses

» Concept
Build a young tornado's strength by collecting smaller items to rip through environments and help save the world

» Graphics
The cutesy graphics and cartoon-like cutscenes are average at best

» Sound
The booming sound of powerful wind gusts destroying level structures is satisfying

» Playability
If you've played Katamari Damacy, this will seem very familiar

» Entertainment
This short game can be finished in one sitting, but there isn't enough gameplay variety to maintain interest

» Replay Value
Low

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Demon's Souls

From Software gives RPG players tough love

9

PS3

» Concept
Resurrect the King's Field series, brutal difficulty and all, but add in crazy multiplayer options

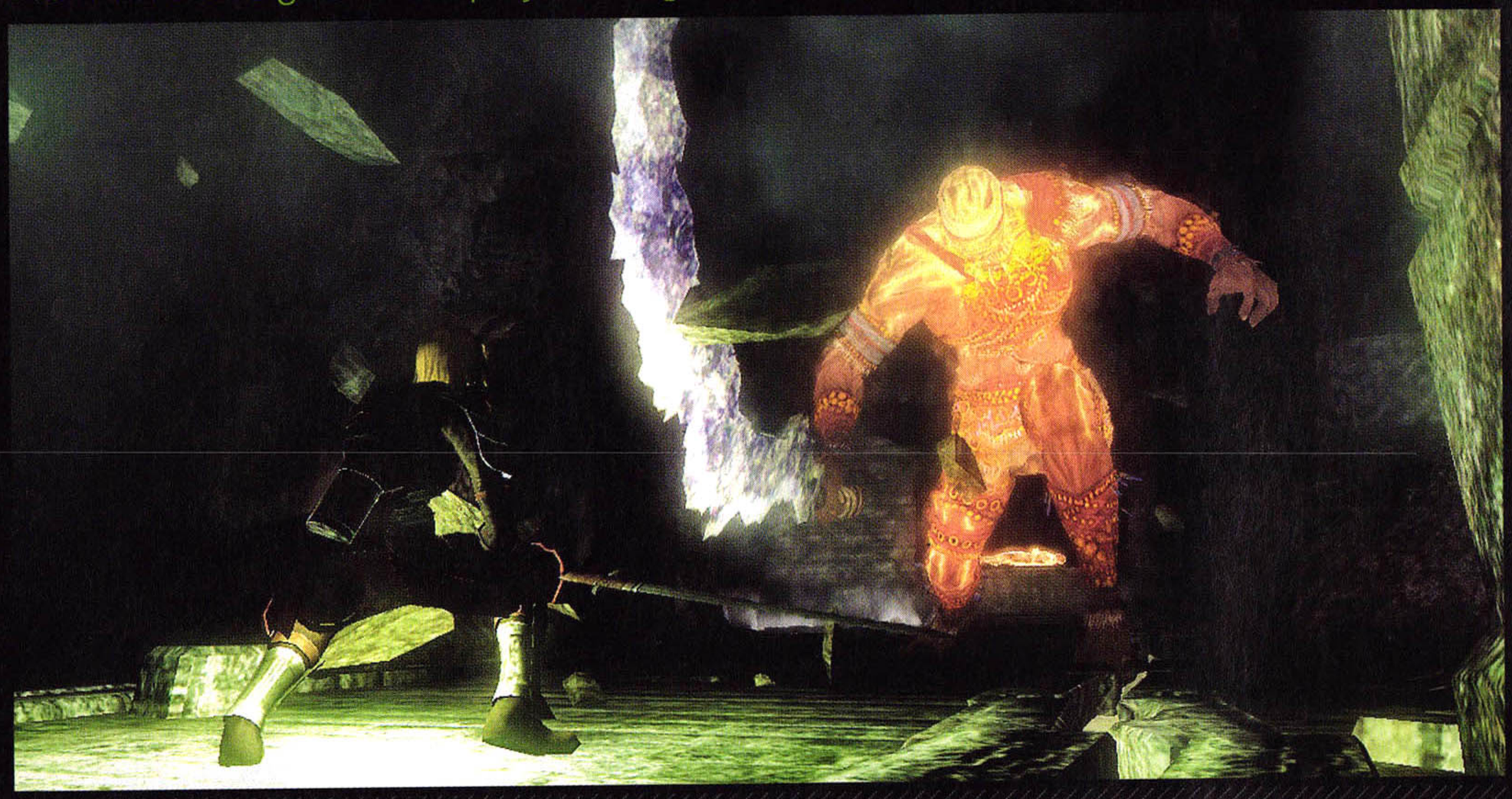
» Graphics
Character models are a bit uninspired, but everything else from armor and weapon design to the levels and demons themselves look amazing

» Sound
Big fantasy soundtrack with lots of creepy background noises and realistic weapon clanging

» Playability
The slow combat takes some getting used to, but you have much more control than you might think at first

» Entertainment
If you can get used to dying a lot, you're set; this game rewards patience

» Replay Value
High



gameinformer GOLD

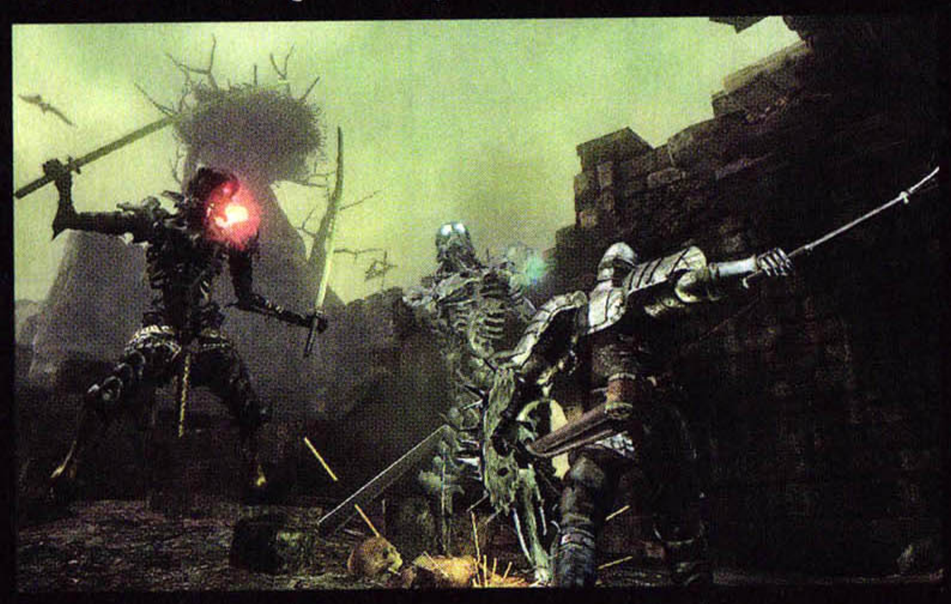
Style 1-Player Action RPG (4-Player Online) **Publisher** Atlus **Developer** From Software **Release** October 7 **ESRB** Rating M

On the second stage of Demon's Souls, I conquered a dragon. I encountered the beast in the very first area during a tense set piece where I had to dodge blasts of fire while sprinting across a bridge. It was in the second stage that I realized I could actually hurt the gigantic creature. I climbed up a tower and proceeded to spend 15 minutes taking pot shots at the dragon with my weak "Soul Arrow" spell every time it took a pass at the bridge below. Slowly but surely I chipped away its health until it crashed to the ground.

The whole of Demon's Souls' experience is easily compared to this battle of attrition. This isn't a game where you perform amazing feats by tapping a few buttons in a quick time event. If you want to accomplish anything, you need to dig in your heels, roll up your sleeves, and stubbornly tell the game: "I will defeat you." If that's intimidating, let me assure you that I, too, was scared. But in this case, the sense of pure satisfaction from doing something like killing a dragon – a task that seems downright pedestrian in many games – is so great that time and time again it completely toppled any frustration I was experiencing.

The biggest reason that Demon's Souls succeeds in the face of overwhelming difficulty is pure excellent design. Each of the levels – split into five "worlds" of three to four areas each – feel like real places. The ramparts and walkways of Boletaria Palace look like they were once bustling but were only recently abandoned for some sinister reason – especially once you begin meeting the few members of the kingdom left alive. The third world, Latria Tower, is a prison for the damned that completely creeped me out and stood out as one of the most disturbing locations ever realized in a video game.

The sense of difficulty and desperation that Demon's Souls creates is aided greatly by the game's unique use of the PlayStation Network. Rather than hooking up with other players through a menu or your PSN friends list, you can summon random "blue phantoms" (other characters who are currently dead) in any area where they've dropped a summoning stone. Though there's no easy way to communicate with your ally, it works out because the goal is always the same: Kill the demon at the end of the level, which will allow you to progress and allow the blue phantoms to be resurrected in their own game.



The helpfulness of the blue phantoms is balanced out by the terror of black phantoms, online enemies randomly placed into the world of another player who they must hunt down and kill to be resurrected. The atmosphere of Demon's Souls is already intense and moody, but when you receive a flashing message notifying you that "Black Phantom Noobkiller3000 has invaded," it's hard not to start sweating.

In the end, though, the game's PvP works for the same reason that the regular demon-hunting does: You are always in full control. The action is much slower and more measured than most action games, but no matter how incredibly big or powerful your opponents seem, you have the tools to defeat them within your grasp. When you die in Demon's Souls, nine times out of 10 it's because you made an identifiable mistake, and one that you know to avoid next time around. The game only falls back on trial-and-error laziness in one or two regrettable levels, and even those can be overcome with perseverance.

Demon's Souls has received a lot of hype for being monstrously difficult, and while it's clearly not the kind of game you can pass in a weekend, its finer points shouldn't be lost in all the fear. This game is tough, but also rewarding, interesting, evocative, and, in its own special way, brilliant. Add in extensive new game-plus options and the strangely compelling multiplayer, and Demon's Souls is one of the first truly great Japanese RPGs of this generation, and certainly the most remarkable. » **Phil Kollar**

Why did From Software make such a brutally difficult game? Check out www.gameinformer.com/mag for our interview with the developer to find out.

Devil's Advocate

The "Other" Perspective

For every great triumph you experience in Demon's Souls, you should also be prepared for a devastating setback. The smallest mistakes or single bad encounters with the game's touchy camera can end with your character cut to pieces. Even worse, if you die on the way back to your body, all the experience points you'd accumulated but not yet spent on leveling are gone. Warn your television to watch out for flying controllers before you risk trying to tackle this beast of a game.

Ratchet and Clank: A Crack in Time

A good idea goes a long way

gameinformer GOLD

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Sony Computer Entertainment **Developer** Insomniac Games **Release** October 27 **ESRB** E10+

Ratchet believes he is the last of the lombax race. He is wrong. In A Crack in Time, another lombax emerges from the shadows. His name is Alister Azimuth, a general who served in the war that nearly brought the lombax to extinction. Ratchet has been searching the cosmos for information pertaining to his people and his history. Azimuth has been searching for a way to turn back the clock to undo the terrible fate that befell his race. In Azimuth, Ratchet has found his source of information, Azimuth has gained a supporter to his cause. The Great Clock, a device created to preserve unity in the universe, is believed to be capable of altering time, but at what cost?

The riveting plot doesn't just answer questions players have had since first smashing a crate with Ratchet's wrench; it unifies the series' mythology and lifts its characters up onto a much higher and more meaningful stage. After playing this game, I now have a cohesive view of both Ratchet and Clank. Bringing back former antagonists, as opposed to creating a new foe for each game as Insomniac has done in previous entries, gives the universe a true threat that balances the scales between good and evil. Although maintaining a whimsical tone, this fiction now has a defined villain like Darth Vader.

Through this strong narrative, the quest for answers (and in some cases, conclusions) is heightened through the gameplay. In many levels, time is bent, stretched, rewound, and thrown in directions my feeble mind couldn't even begin to comprehend. With the series' trademark combat remaining as explosive as ever, the concepts surrounding time manipulation give sections of the game a Braid-like feel. This is most prominently on display in the Clank levels.

Yes, Ratchet's tin sidekick is still around, but throughout most of the adventure he is on his own. In a twist of luck that helps his furry companion, Clank's journey of self-discovery takes him into the heart of the Great Clock. Here, most of the challenges are navigation puzzles. Tricky platforming and amazing combat sequences are sprinkled in, but you're mostly tasked with manipulating time sequentially to open doors, lower platforms, and dispose of enemies. To do this, Clank can record past and present versions of himself that, as confusing as this may sound, run concurrently in time. Think of it as programming AI routines that work together. These enjoyable mind exercises escalate in difficulty as the game progresses. In past games, Clank has had his moments, but these sequences are far and away his most enjoyable contribution to the R&C experience.

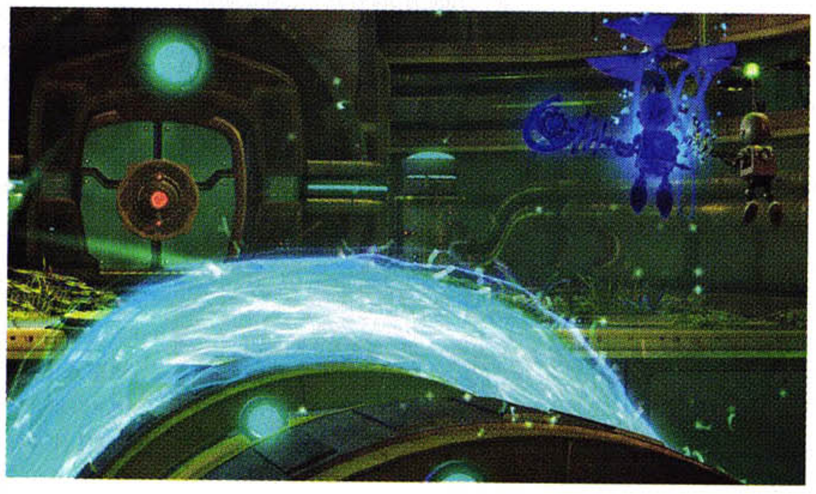
For Ratchet, time is abused in ways that show players certain worlds in the past, present, and future. Seeing how civilizations progress through time is interesting, but above all else, it's something Insomniac uses to create amazing level design and mission objectives. With that said, the excitement tied to Ratchet's gameplay remains largely about the weapons and gadgets he wields. While many of the armaments' functionality fall into the classification of a shotgun, rocket, or machine gun, the creative spin on each weapon deserves a tip of the hat. I especially love how the destructive power of a species' mating call is transformed into a shotgun-esque weapon. With enemies throwing curveballs at you like magnetic tethers or shields that must first be removed, the combat maintains a fresh appeal while still fitting like a glove you've worn since childhood [Reiner's hands are *tiny!* – Ed].

As for the gadgets, series staples like the swingshot and magnetic boots return, but are largely overshadowed by the new hover boots, which greatly enhance Ratchet's standard movements and add a layer of intensity to the platforming sequences.

The one area where A Crack in Time stumbles is in its aerial combat. Being able to explore a galaxy via spaceship adds hours of exploration and gameplay, but the ship-to-ship combat drew nothing but a yawn from me. Not only are these sequences far too easy, the lack of mobility goes against the complexity captured in the other gameplay mechanics.

Regardless, this series is the closest video games come to having a noteworthy serialized adventure. A Crack in Time shows a good idea and consistent execution is all it takes to keep interest high. Keep 'em coming, Insomniac! » **Andrew Reiner**

Read my interview with Ratchet & Clank mastermind Brian Allgeier at www.gameinformer.com/mag



9.25

PS3

» Concept
A serialized sequel that breathes new life into this long-running series with new time-bending segments

» Graphics
Stunning worlds, a consistent framerate, particle effects, and explosions galore

» Sound
Doesn't stray from the series' heritage, but still fits the onscreen action perfectly. However, Qwark's one-liners are not as witty this time around

» Playability
The massive arsenal never becomes cumbersome, and the platforming controls are as solid as ever

» Entertainment
A great quest accented with tons of replay and secrets

» Replay Value
Moderately High

Second Opinion 9.25

It should surprise no one that a new entry in the Ratchet & Clank series is filled to the brim with inventive weapons, stellar production value, and top-notch platforming. A Crack in Time maintains the quality the series is known for, and throws some new elements into the mix. Ratchet's hover boots make it quick and easy to cover ground, and the Clank sections are the best puzzles seen in the series to date. These incredibly clever areas are the stars of this installment, and I would love a standalone DLC title that expands upon them with new challenge rooms. Space exploration is a bit of a yawn this time around, but the Mario Galaxy-esque platforming areas can be a lot of fun. As a total package, A Crack In Time surpasses both Tools of Destruction and Quest for Booty as the best R&C experience on the PS3. » **Dan Ryckert**

Risen

German RPG defies expectations

8.5

PC

» Concept
Explore a high-fantasy island in distress in this third-person RPG

» Graphics
Environments are second to none, with lush jungles, dirty cities, and foreboding caves providing fascinating high-adventure backdrops. Faces have a weird zombie thing going on, though

» Sound
There's voice for everything, and it's good! The orchestral score fits the game's various moods as well

» Playability
The timing-based combat is poorly balanced and barely engaging. Interacting with the world works beautifully, though

» Entertainment
This is the anti-Diablo – lame action, but great story, characters, and setting. Know what you're getting into and you won't be disappointed

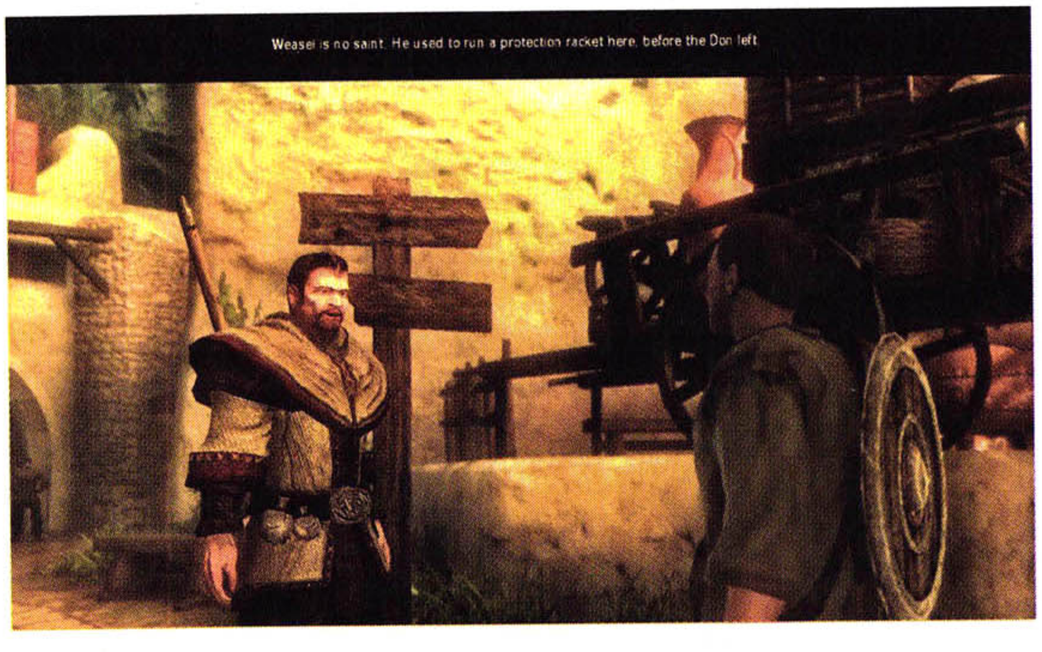
» Replay Value
Moderately High

gamelnformer SILVER

Style 1-Player Role-Playing Game **Publisher** Deep Silver **Developer** Piranha Bytes **Release** October 2 **ESRB** M

Balancing the kind of freedom that western RPG series (like The Elder Scrolls) are known for with a directed narrative is tough. Risen developer Piranha Bytes, best known for its long-running Gothic series, has been doing this for a long time. This latest effort skillfully walks the tightrope without the crippling bugs that Gothic has often launched with, and delivers an RPG experience worth exploring.

As a castaway on an island beset by all manner of supernatural threats, players must find their own way through Risen's hostile world. The gameplay itself is very much third-person Oblivion, with block-and-counter melee combat complemented by a selection of ranged and magical options and a world stuffed full of items to grab. By dedicating yourself to some mix of martial and magical study, you'll cut your own bloody path through the horrible events afoot. Risen does an outstanding job of allowing players to feel smart by finding alternate solutions around most challenges; do you turn a stolen artifact in to the fascistic authorities, fence it for some much-needed coin on the black market, or give it to the part-mobster part-patriot resistance movement to earn their trust?

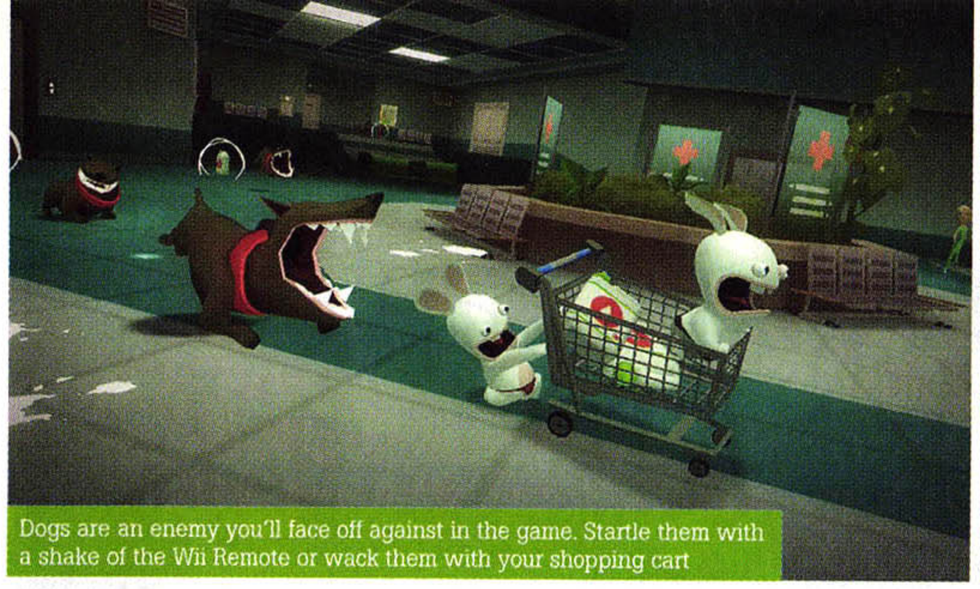


Each path has genuine consequences; picking sides will deny you access to some vendors and trainers while opening other, unforeseen doors. Avoiding conflict and trying to find a middle ground is a viable path as well. Not ticking anyone off has a certain value, but with no true friends you may find yourself without valuable allies later on. I felt in charge of my own destiny to an impressive degree in my time with Risen.

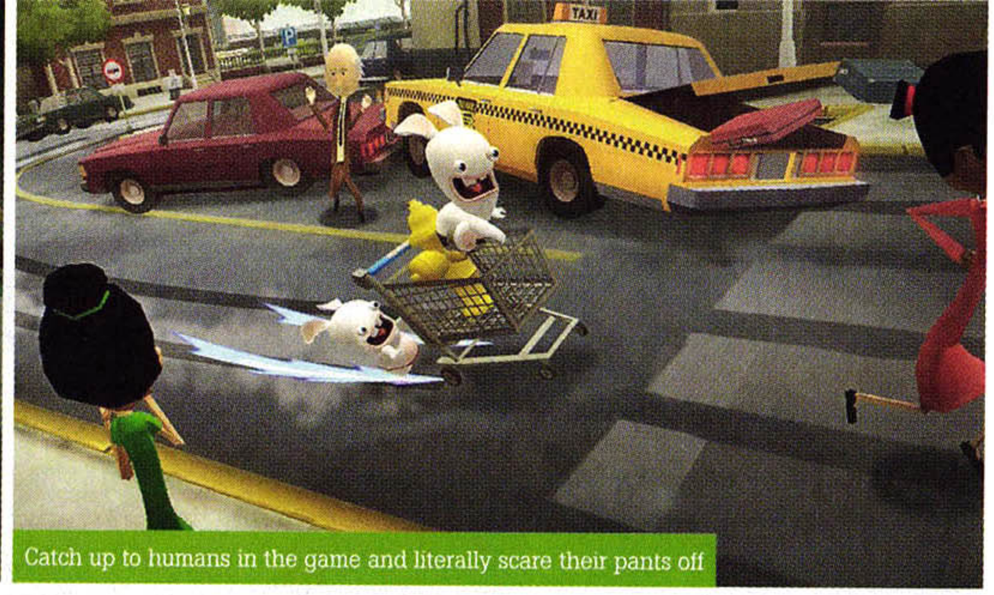
Risen boasts dialogue, characters, and voice acting as believable as anything in any form of media. Judicious use of curse words and adult themes like prostitution and poverty grounds the story without being sophomoric or tawdry. Most NPCs you meet act and react according to their own personal goals – their personalities feel genuine, despite being scripted along branching event trees. These well-written interactions, along with a world and plotline that has sometimes-brutal consequences, present a convincing illusion of a self-directed story.

One scenario that you're likely (but not guaranteed) to encounter along the main plotline involves a set of sought-after ceremonial armor plates that are in the possession of a few dockworkers in a downtrodden harbor town. These guys have done you no wrong. They're just trying to make a buck to literally feed their families when they offer to sell you their loot for a few hundred coins. You probably don't have much cash, though, and the people that want these armor plates can do you favors well beyond the means of these poor schlubs. You can ambush them at night and take the goods, making them and their friends justifiably upset with you. You can come back later after busting your hump to make the money they're asking for by means honest or shady. Alternatively, you can move on with your life and leave them to find another buyer. The genius of Risen is that any of these approaches has advantages and consequences. There is no "right" way to do things, just the way that you choose, which in turn shapes your story moving forward.

For all the artistry on display (and the presentation matches the fantastic story), Risen's lack of polish can be off-putting. Combat is poorly balanced and executed, leading to a lot of quicksave/quickloads when catastrophe strikes through no fault of your own. The interface works, but leaves much to be desired when it comes to tracking the game's many intersecting quests. Character progression is nothing to envy; assigning skill points and gaining levels is a bland approach to take. Nobody will be awarding Risen any trophies on its technical merits. Is that why you play an RPG, though? Or are you in it to explore a story in which you have genuine input over the outcome? Risen can be awfully frustrating on a technical level (though rarely broken, like Gothic 3 before it), but it's a damn good RPG. » **Adam Biessener**



Dogs are an enemy you'll face off against in the game. Startle them with a shake of the Wii Remote or wack them with your shopping cart



Catch up to humans in the game and literally scare their pants off

Rabbids Go Home

Rabbids ditch minigames for a fun item-collecting adventure

Style 1 or 2-Player Action **Publisher** Ubisoft **Developer** Ubisoft Montpellier **Release** November 1 **ESRB** E10+

In Rabbids Go Home, the titular creatures have ditched the minigame blueprint of previous Rabbid games for an entertaining platformer with a shopping cart.

The Rabbids want to go to the moon, and must create a giant pile of random items in order to climb there. Two Rabbids man a shopping cart and traverse the game's levels to collect nearly everything in their path. The action is quirky if nothing else. You can literally scare the pants off of humans by shaking the Wii remote to gather their clothing, chase down a cow then flush it down a toilet to add it to your stock, grab a sick hospital patient in a bubble bed to help you float toward hard-to-reach items, and more. The fast and frenetic action is fun at first, but cow racing and other sequences become repetitive as they make multiple appearances in the game.

Angry dogs, turrets, and Verminators (men in puffy Hazmat suits) stand in the way of item collecting, but these encounters aren't challenging. Verminator skirmishes require you to simply knock off their suit with the shopping cart. Though they have varying abilities based on the color of their suits (spin attack, pounce, etc.) it would have been great to see more enemy variety overall.

A second player can join in on the action with one player handling the cart while the other hurls a Rabbid housed inside the Wii Remote at enemies. Players can also customize Rabbids using stamps and items unlocked by collecting a certain number of items in the game. Though co-op isn't particularly stellar, watching a customized Rabbid in a thong and makeup run amok through grocery stores, chemical plants, and corporate offices is quite the sight to behold.

Rabbids Go Home, though at times repetitive, is a fun game with laugh-out-loud animations. Any game with Rabbids in fisticuffs over a pouch of Capri Sun is okay in my book. » **Annette Gonzalez**

Check out www.gameinformer.com/mag for an exclusive interview with creative producer Jacques Exertier on some of the game's quirky features.

7.5

Wii

» Concept
Collect as many items as you can with two Rabbids and a shopping cart. Rayman not included

» Graphics
Not the best quality, but Rabbids are still strangely cute

» Sound
Rabbid sounds and NPC dialogue will surely get laughs. Music soundtrack includes "Louie Louie," "Kingston Town" and other fun tracks

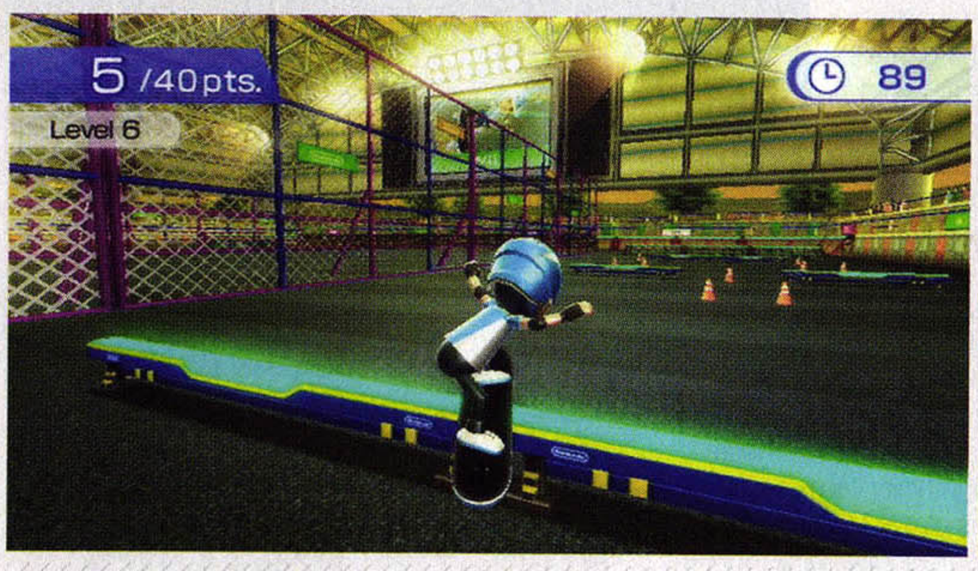
» Playability
Shopping cart handles very well even in tight situations

» Entertainment
Despite repetitive sequences, Rabbids Go Home is an entertaining item-collecting game

» Replay Value
Low

Wii Fit Plus

More to love



Style 1 to 4-Player Lifestyle **Publisher** Nintendo **Developer** Nintendo **Release** October 4 **ESRB** E

The signature balance board title, Wii Fit made players think about balance in new ways while nudging them toward healthier lifestyles. Those who made the game's fitness activities part of an overall routine, however, quickly found exercises in frustration. The lack of any playlist functionality made it impossible to set up routines, so players found themselves taking breaks every two to three minutes to slog through yet another set of menus.

Nintendo clearly took those criticisms to heart, adding both canned and customizable routines to Wii Fit Plus, a pseudo-sequel that has the feel (and price point) more along the lines of a software update than a substantial new release. That's not to say that it's missing anything. Everything from Wii Fit is in Wii Fit Plus, along with a whole lot more.

Some of the additions are silly, like adding the ability to weigh babies or pets. Others, like a new food journal and the aforementioned routines, make strides toward helping users create new habits and stick with them. I enjoyed the new games, particularly the skateboarding activity. The balance board makes a great skateboard substitute, and gliding around an arena, grinding rails, hopping over obstacles, and skating up ramps is a lot of fun.

Ultimately, Wii Fit Plus is basically the same game, slightly expanded. If you liked the first game for a while but lost interest, it's hard to say that this one will keep you coming back. If your idea of fitness centers more on losing weight than lowering an imaginary "fitness age," there are other titles out there to help you meet those goals without making you flap madly like a chicken. » **Jeff Cork**

8

Wii

» Concept
Get in shape via a slew of exercises and fitness minigames

» Graphics
Pleasant, but nothing that'll inspire you to call your friends over

» Sound
New age-y music and silly sound effects get the job done

» Playability
Controls are easy to figure out, and there's minimal configuration between each activity

» Entertainment
Wii Fit Plus is essentially an expansion pack, but it's a must-buy for people who liked the first one

» Replay Value
High

Drawn to Life: The Next Chapter

Platformer boasting user-generated art better suited for a stylus

5.75

Wii

» Concept
A platformer that allows you to draw your own platforms

» Graphics
Levels look like pages out of a preschooler's coloring book adorned with your own pixilated creations

» Sound
Music across worlds is uninspiring and repetitive

» Playability
The Wii remote makes drawing a chore

» Entertainment
Drawing elements don't translate well to the Wii version. The game also feels unpolished, with countless load screens and framerate issues

» Replay Value
Low

Style 1 or 2-Player Platforming **Publisher** THQ **Developer** Planet Moon Studios **Release** October 27 **ESRB** E

When Drawn to Life first hit the scene on the Nintendo DS, players created their own hero and level elements using the stylus as a drawing tool. After playing Drawn to Life: The Next Chapter and dealing with the frustrating inaccuracy of the Wii Remote as a drawing tool, it's clear the stylus is a far superior choice.

As you traverse worlds in The Next Chapter you come across easels that open the game's drawing program after a slow load. In this mode you're encouraged to hold the Wii Remote as you would a paintbrush; however, doodling with no direct contact to the surface on which you're drawing is as difficult as it sounds. Creating something as simple as the sun (basically a yellow circle) was a free-hand nightmare. A variety of drawing impements, stamps, and fill tools are helpful for those of us with the artistic talents of a kindergartner. But even with this toolset, the poor Wii controls make creating anything with even the slightest detail a chore. I found myself frequently using the game's pre-generated templates to avoid drawing altogether. Adding your personal touch to Drawn to Life was the title's biggest draw, but in practice it's the most discouraging activity in this game.

The Next Chapter's 2D levels are mostly standard platforming fare, with plenty of items to collect including coins, stamps, and stickers. In addition to drawing platforms to get across these levels, you can also design utility items that may or may not work, such as claws to scale walls, hot air balloons to fly over rooftops, or a monkey tail that allows you to swing across gaps. To add variety to the levels, Planet Moon added the new Action Canvas to the Wii version. When dotted lines in the form of a square or rectangle appear overhead, your scribbles in these spaces will create new ways to traverse based on the ink color you use. Blue ink creates steady platforms you can jump on, red ink creates dropping platforms you can use to climb, and green ink creates a trampoline platform to catapult you to higher areas. To get the most use of these platforms you'll need a steady hand and luck, because the poor controls turn most of your rectangular drawings into deformed hexagons that do little to help your progression. It usually takes multiple tries before you finally create something that can help you get across.

Drawn to Life: The Next Chapter's multiplayer lets two players compete head-to-head in sports minigames. Players can engage in soccer, hockey, volleyball, and basketball, as well as design their own uniforms and equipment. These games, though short and seemingly misplaced, are a fun diversion from the frustrating single-player game.

The idea of empowering user-generated art as a gameplay element is a concept that works well on the DS. However, with poor execution and clumsy controls on the Wii, you'll find more fun with a coloring book and a 64-pack of crayons than you will in Drawn to Life: The Next Chapter. **» Annette Gonzalez**

Check out www.gameInformer.com/mag for images of my very own creations in Drawn to Life: The Next Chapter

Half-Minute Hero

A novel concept makes for a solid pick-up-and-play experience

Style 1-Player Action/RPG (4-Player Local) **Publisher** Xseed **Developer** Xseed **Release** October 13 **ESRB** E10+

One of the traditional RPG trademarks is the time-consuming process of leveling up your character. Most have in-depth character development, vast inventory systems, and extended periods of experience grinding. Half-Minute Hero takes these conventions and squeezes them into bite-sized chunks to provide a unique gaming experience.

It's a novel idea for sure, but that doesn't always translate into a solid game. Thankfully, Half-Minute Hero isn't just a gimmick; it's fun. Hero 30, the RPG experience, is definitely the most inspired game mode. From the moment each quest starts, there's no time to spare. Most begin with a brief XP grind, accomplished by quickly wandering the overworld looking for a fight. Once it starts, you sit back and watch as your hero bumps into his enemy over and over until one of you is dead. You'll never interact with these fights unless you're using a healing item or holding circle to hurry the process. After a few of these "battles," you're probably running a bit low on the half-minute clock. This is when it's essential to duck into a nearby town, causing time to stop. You can take a quick breather, buy some healing items, and even pay the "Time Goddess" to reset the clock. Depending on the mission, you may need to obtain a specific item or enlist the help of an NPC to defeat the Evil Lord in the castle. It's usually pretty obvious, as townspeople will blatantly tell you what you need to do...it's just a matter of getting it done on time.

Half-Minute Hero also has three other modes. Dark Lord 30 is essentially an RTS-lite, Princess 30 is a fast-paced shooter, and the Knight 30 segments play like escort missions. Out of these three additional modes, Princess 30 is easily the most entertaining. Dark Lord and Knight still feature the half-minute gimmick, but they never feel as inspired as the Hero mode.

Half Minute Hero doesn't attempt to deliver a full RPG experience, but fans of the genre will appreciate its sense of humor and the developer's obvious appreciation of the games it parodies. » **Dan Ryckert**

For a screenshot gallery from Half-Minute Hero, check out gameinformer.com/mag

8

PSP

» Concept
Condense standard RPG activities into 30-second chunks

» Graphics
In-game sprites resemble RPGs of the early '90s, with detailed illustrations filling in the story

» Sound
Music is clearly inspired by the 8- and16-bit titles it references

» Playability
Hero 30 and Princess 30 are great, fast-paced experiences, but Dark Lord 30 and Knight 30 don't have the same appeal

» Entertainment
Half of the package is funny and inspired, while the other half is entirely forgettable

» Replay value
Moderate

Star Wars Battlefront: Elite Squadron

LucasArts needs to check the batteries in these blasters

Style 1-Player Shooter (16-Player Online) **Publisher** LucasArts **Developer** Rebellion **Release** November 3 **ESRB** T

I've never believed that portable gamers should have to settle. Just because a handheld system is less powerful and features a less favorable control scheme than a console doesn't mean that the entertainment it provides should be watered down. If a company tailors its games for handhelds, there is no reason portable games should feel second rate.

Which brings us to Elite Squadron. The PSP can't deliver the same Battlefront experience that you find on PC or consoles, but LucasArts tries to cram as much of that experience onto the system anyway. In the process, it sacrifices much of what makes the series fun.

The story in Battlefront has always been a joke. Elite Squadron is no different, except now the punchline is longer. Elite Squadron's more elaborate story has you taking control of X2, a Clone Trooper spawned from the DNA of a Jedi Master. Most of the game follows his shenanigans as he follows his brother's coattails through every major battle in the six Star Wars films.

If you're playing this game by yourself, you're missing the point; Battlefront is meant to be played online. From a technical standpoint, Elite Squadron gets the job done. Battles feel more expansive this time around because each level now features land and space combat. After ticking off a few frags on the ground, you can hop in an X-wing, fly into space, take down some TIE Fighters, and/or dock with a Star Destroyer and dismantle the mothership from the inside.

Elite Squadron's big problem is its controls. The game has a couple control schemes, but I couldn't find one that didn't feel both clunky and inaccurate. Moving your character through battle is as trouble-free as sending the Millennium Falcon into hyperspace. Even the Jedi hero characters – which should be awesome – are frustrating to play with because melee combat is as slow and choppy as Comcast's cable signal. I know Star Wars fans usually eat these games up, but maybe it's time to rebel against this Empire. We deserve better than this. » **Ben Reeves**

Visit www.gameinformer.com/mag to read our Q&A with the LucasArts designers behind Elite Squadron.

6.75

PSP

» Concept
Take the Battlefront formula and shrink it down onto the PSP...again...and throw a half-cooked story on top

» Graphics
Those who thought Battlefront II looked good on the PSP should have nothing to complain about here, unless they also believe that graphics should improve over time

» Sound
From the authentic Star Wars soundtrack to the recognizable blaster fire, everything sounds familiar

» Playability
I hate to shaft a game for a system's button layout, but the PSP wasn't built for shooters and Elite Squadron doesn't do enough to adapt itself to the PSP controls

» Entertainment
I might have found the offline combat more challenging if the AI didn't walk in circles like a group of blaster-strapped Roombas

» Replay Value
Moderate

You're about to download a first-person shooter that kills your credit score.

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PLAYSTATION 3		
Batman: Arkham Asylum	9.5	Sep-09
Battlefield 1943	8.5	Aug-09
Beatles: Rock Band, The	8.75	Sep-09
Bigs 2, The	7	Aug-09
Bionic Commando	6.25	Jun-09
BlazBlue: Calamity Trigger	7.75	Jul-09
Brütal Legend	8.25	Nov-09
Call of Juarez: Bound in Blood	8	Aug-09
Chronicles of Riddick: Assault on Dark Athena, The	9.5	May-09
Damnation	3	Aug-09
Dirt 2	8.5	Oct-09
Dynasty Warriors 6 Empires	6.25	Sep-09
FIFA 10	8.5	Nov-09
Fight Night Round 4	9	Aug-09
Fuel	7.75	Jul-09
G-Force	7.75	Sep-09
G.I. Joe: The Rise of the Cobra	3.5	Sep-09
Ghostbusters	8	Jul-09
Godfather II, The	5.5	May-09
Guitar Hero 5	8.5	Oct-09
Guitar Hero Smash Hits	8	Aug-09
Guitar Hero: Metallica	8.75	May-09
H.A.W.X.	8.75	Apr-09
Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince	7	Sep-09
Heroes Over Europe	6.5	Oct-09
Ice Age: Dawn of the Dinosaurs	6.5	Sep-09
Infamous	9	Jun-09
Katamari Forever	7.25	Nov-09
King of Fighters XII, The	7	Sep-09
Madden NFL 10	8.75	Sep-09
Marvel Ultimate Alliance 2	8	Nov-09
MLB 09: The Show	9	Apr-09
NBA 2K10	8.25	Nov-09
NBA Live 10	7.5	Nov-09
NCAA Football 10	8.5	Aug-09
Need for Speed: Shift	8	Oct-09
NHL 10	9.25	Oct-09
NHL 2K10	5.5	Oct-09
Ninja Gaiden Sigma 2	8.5	Nov-09
Overlord II	6.5	Aug-09
Prototype	7.25	Aug-09
Red Faction: Guerrilla	9	Jul-09
Resident Evil 5	9.5	Apr-09
Sacred 2: Fallen Angel	7.75	Jun-09
Saw	6	Nov-09
Stormrise	4	May-09
Terminator Salvation	5.5	Jul-09
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 10	8.5	Jul-09
Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen	6.25	Sep-09
UFC 2009 Undisputed	8	Jun-09
Uncharted 2: Among Thieves	10	Nov-09
Virtua Tennis 2009	7	Sep-09
Watchmen: The End is Nigh	5.5	Sep-09
Wet	7.5	Oct-09
Wheelman	8.5	May-09
Wolfenstein	7.25	Oct-09
WWE Legends of WrestleMania	8.5	May-09
WWE Smackdown vs. Raw 2010	8.25	Nov-09
X-Men Origins: Wolverine	8	Jun-09

XBOX 360		
Batman: Arkham Asylum	9.5	Sep-09
Battlefield 1943	8.5	Aug-09
Battlestations Pacific	6	Jul-09
Beatles: Rock Band, The	8.75	Sep-09
Bigs 2, The	7	Aug-09
Bionic Commando	6.25	Jun-09
BlazBlue: Calamity Trigger	7.75	Jul-09
Brütal Legend	8.25	Nov-09
Call of Juarez: Bound in Blood	8	Aug-09
Chronicles of Riddick: Assault on Dark Athena, The	9.5	May-09
Damnation	3	Aug-09
Dirt 2	8.5	Oct-09
Dynasty Warriors 6 Empires	6.25	Sep-09
FIFA 10	8.5	Nov-09
Fight Night Round 4	9	Aug-09
Forza Motorsport 3	8.5	Nov-09
Fuel	7.75	Jul-09
G-Force	7.75	Sep-09
G.I. Joe: The Rise of the Cobra	3.5	Sep-09

9.25 | Grand Theft Auto: Chinatown Wars

Platform PSP **Release** October 20 **ESRB** M

Regardless of the game's mechanical simplicity, Rockstar has created an addictive, bite-sized serving of its patented "breaking the law" gameplay. Chinatown Wars jams an entire metropolis in your handheld that's just begging to be exploited. – Matt Bertz

URL: www.gameinformer.com/mag

6 | Cars Race-O-Rama

Platform PS3 • 360 • Wii • DS • PSP • PS2
Release October 12 **ESRB** E

If there's anything nice to say about Race-O-Rama, it's that it provides a teachable moment for parents: Sometimes it's best to leave well enough alone. – Jeff Cork

URL: www.gameinformer.com/mag

6.5 | Cooking Mama 3: Shop and Chop

Platform DS **Release** October 20 **ESRB** E

Cooking Mama 3 fails to innovate notably on past games in the series, with its "new" recipes not feeling very fresh. Its newest feature is a grocery shopping mode where you struggle to steer Mama via finicky touchscreen controls, dodging multiple minigame-doling customers like Pokémon Trainers in a dungeon. – Tim Turi

URL: www.gameinformer.com/mag

6 | Fairytale Fights

Platform PS3 • 360 **Release** October 27
ESRB M

Inevitably compared to XBLA hit Castle Crashers, Fairytale Fights fails to provide a fraction of the entertainment delivered by Behemoth's masterpiece – but still grasps desperately to the full retail sticker price.– Meagan VanBurkleo

URL: www.gameinformer.com/mag

5.5 | Star Wars The Clone Wars: Republic Heroes

Platform PS3 • 360 • Wii • PC **Release** October 6
ESRB E10+

Even if your child runs around the house, yelling, "I love Snips!", this title's frustrating gameplay will be a hard sell. If you have such a child in your household, I would do everything in my power to ensure he or she never catches wind of this game. – Andrew Reiner

URL: www.gameinformer.com/mag

10 | Uncharted 2: Among Thieves

Platform PS3 **Release** October 13 **ESRB** T **Issue** Nov '09

Uncharted 2 is a ringing testament to the power of both games and storytelling. It pulls you in, keeps you engaged, and concludes with a thunderous bang.

Ghostbusters	8	Jul-09
Godfather II, The	5.5	May-09
Grand Theft Auto IV: The Lost and Damned	9	Apr-09
Guitar Hero 5	8.5	Oct-09
Guitar Hero Smash Hits	8	Aug-09
Guitar Hero: Metallica	8.75	May-09
H.A.W.X.	8.75	Apr-09
Halo 3: ODST	9.25	Nov-09
Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince	7	Sep-09
Heroes Over Europe	6.5	Oct-09
Ice Age: Dawn of the Dinosaurs	6.5	Sep-09
King of Fighters XII, The	7	Sep-09
Madden NFL 10	8.75	Sep-09
Magnacarta 2	8.25	Nov-09
Marvel Ultimate Alliance 2	8	Nov-09
NBA 2K10	8.25	Nov-09
NBA Live 10	7.5	Nov-09
NCAA Football 10	8.5	Aug-09
Need for Speed: Shift	8	Oct-09
NHL 10	9.25	Oct-09
NHL 2K10	5.5	Oct-09
Ninja Blade	7.5	Jun-09
Overlord II	6.5	Aug-09
Prototype	7.25	Aug-09
Red Faction: Guerrilla	9	Jul-09
Resident Evil 5	9.5	Apr-09
Sacred 2: Fallen Angel	7.75	Jun-09
Saw	6	Nov-09
Section 8	6.5	Oct-09
Stormrise	4	May-09
Terminator Salvation	5.5	Jul-09
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 10	8.5	Jul-09
Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen	6.25	Sep-09
UFC 2009 Undisputed	8	Jun-09
Velvet Assassin	5.25	Jul-09
Virtua Tennis 2009	7	Sep-09
Watchmen: The End is Nigh	5.5	Sep-09
Wet	7.5	Oct-09
Wheelman	8.5	May-09
Wolfenstein	7.25	Oct-09
WWE Legends of WrestleMania	8.5	May-09
WWE Smackdown vs. Raw 2011	8.25	Nov-09
X-Men Origins: Wolverine	8	Jun-09

Wii

A Boy and His Blob	8	Nov-09
Bigs 2, The	7	Aug-09
Boom Blox Bash Party	8.75	Jun-09
Broken Sword: Shadow of the Templars – Director's Cut	7	Jun-09
Conduit, The	7	Aug-09
Dead Space: Extraction	7	Oct-09
Excitebots: Trick Racing	8.5	Jun-09
G-Force	7.75	Sep-09
G.I. Joe: The Rise of the Cobra	3.5	Sep-09
Ghostbusters	6.5	Jul-09
Grand Slam Tennis	7	Jul-09
Guitar Hero Smash Hits	8	Aug-09
Guitar Hero: Metallica	8.75	May-09
Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince	7	Sep-09
Ice Age: Dawn of the Dinosaurs	6.5	Sep-09
Indiana Jones and the Staff of Kings	5	Jul-09
Ju-On: The Grudge	3	Nov-09
Klonoa	7	Jun-09
Let's Tap	5.5	Jul-09
Little Kings's Story	8	Jul-09
Madden NFL 10	6	Sep-09
Madworld	9	Apr-09
Major Minor's Majestic March	3	May-09
Marvel Ultimate Alliance 2	8	Nov-09
Metroid Prime Trilogy	9	Oct-09
Muramasa: The Demon Blade	7.75	Oct-09
New Play Control Pikmin	8	May-09
Overlord: Dark Legend	7.5	Aug-09
Professor Heinz Wolff's Gravity	6.75	Jul-09
Punch-Out!!	9	Jun-09
Sonic and the Black Knight	5	May-09
Spore Hero	7	Nov-09
Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Smash-Up	7.75	Nov-09
Tiger Woods PGA Tour10	8.5	Jul-09
Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen	5	Sep-09
Virtua Tennis 2009	7	Sep-09
We Ski & Snowboard	6.75	May-09
Wii Sports Resort	7.5	Sep-09

PLAYSTATION 2

Guitar Hero Smash Hits	8	Aug-09
Guitar Hero: Metallica	8.75	May-09

PC

BattleForge	6	May-09
Battlestations Pacific	6	Jul-09
Call of Juarez: Bound in Blood	8	Aug-09
Chronicles of Riddick: Assault on Dark Athena, The	9.5	May-09
Codename: Panzers – Cold War	6	May-09
Company of Heroes: Tales of Valor	7.5	May-09
Cryostasis	8	Jul-09
Damnation	3	Aug-09
Demigod	8	Jun-09
Dragon Age: Origins	9	Nov-09
East India Company	7	Sep-09
Empire: Total War	9.5	May-09
Godfather II, The	5.5	May-09
Heroes Over Europe	6.5	Oct-09
Saw	6	Nov-09
Section 8	6.5	Oct-09
Sims 3, The	9	Jul-09
Tropico 3	8.75	Nov-09
Velvet Assassin	5.25	Jul-09
Wolfenstein	7.25	Oct-09

NINTENDO DS

Avalon Code	7	May-09
Dark Spire, The	7	May-09
Flower, Sun, and Rain	5.5	Jul-09
Gardening Mama	6.5	May-09
Grand Theft Auto: Chinatown Wars	9.25	May-09
Kingdom Hearts 358/2 Days	8	Oct-09
Knights in the Nightmare	7	Jun-09
Legend of Starfy, The	7	Aug-09
LEGO Battles	7.5	Jul-09
Mario & Luigi: Bowser's Inside Story	8.75	Oct-09
Might & Magic: Clash of Heroes	7.75	Nov-09
My Pet Shop	5	May-09
Nostalgia	8	Nov-09
Peggle: Dual Shot	8.25	May-09
Pokémon Platinum	8.5	Apr-09
Professor Heinz Wolff's Gravity	5.5	Jul-09
Professor Layton and the Diabolical Box	8.25	Oct-09
Rhythm Heaven	7.5	May-09
Scribblenauts	8.75	Oct-09
Shin Megami Tensei: Devil Survivor	8	Jul-09
Shin Megami Tensei: Persona	8	Oct-09
Tokyo Beat Down	7	May-09

PSP

Dissidia: Final Fantasy	6.5	Sep-09
Gran Turismo	7	Nov-09
MotorStorm Arctic Edge	7	Nov-09
Pangya: Fantasy Golf	7	Sep-09
Patapon 2	7	Jun-09
Resistance: Retribution	8.75	May-09
Rock Band Unplugged	8	Jul-09
Soulcalibur: Broken Destiny	7.5	Oct-09
Star Ocean: Second Evolution	7	Feb-09

8 | A Boy and His Blob

Platform Wii **Release** October 13 **ESRB** E **Issue** Nov '09

The lush environments, charming characters and the infinite power of the hug button make it impossible to stay upset for too long. Like its namesake predecessor, a couple of days after setting the controller down, it's hard not to look back on A Boy and His Blob and smile.

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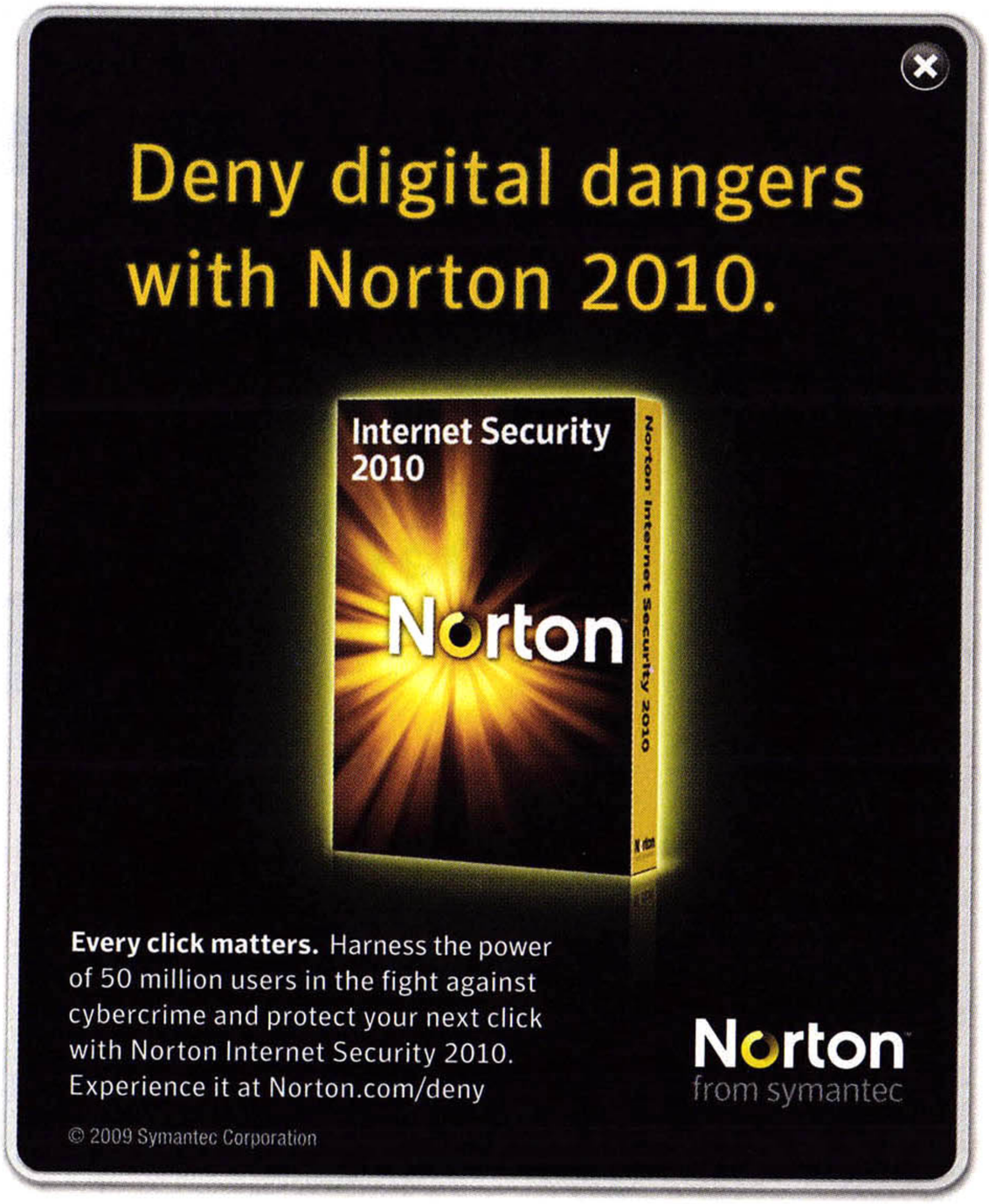

JUST THE NUMBERS

Statistics are fun – at least when they're about games. Check out our analysis of our top 200 games of all time. While we had to make judgment calls on some of these figures, this still should give you a pretty clear idea of how the best games in history break down along numerical lines.

Go to www.gameinformer.com/mag to read about editor favorites that failed to make the Top 200 list

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The Top 200 Games
Of All Time

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