EXCLUSIVE MASS EFFECT REVIEW INSIDE PG.151

GAMEINFORMER®

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WORLD EXCLUSIVE

BRÜTAL LEGEND

A Rock N' Roll Roadshow Through The Twisted Mind of Tim Schafer

FEATURING JACK BLACK AS ROADIE EDDIE RIGGS

ISSUE 175 NOVEMBER 2007

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ORCHESTRATE THE PERFECT OP.

22:01 Eliminate soldiers near ambassador.
22:02 Suppress fire on left building.
22:03 Cover northwest corner for extraction.

22:01 Eliminate enemy on balcony.
22:02 Provide covering fire.
22:03 Move in to extract ambassador.

www.socomtacticalstrike.com
www.us.playstation.com/psp
www.seal.navy.mil

TEEN
T
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Drug Reference
Violence

SOCOM: U.S. Navy SEALs Tactical Strike ©2007 Sony Computer Entertainment America Inc. "PlayStation," "PSP" and the "PS" Family logo are registered trademarks of Sony Computer Entertainment Inc. Internet connection and Memory Stick Duo™ may be required. Player responsible for Wi-Fi fees. The U.S. Navy provided technical support, but does not officially endorse this product.

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U.S. NAVY SEALS

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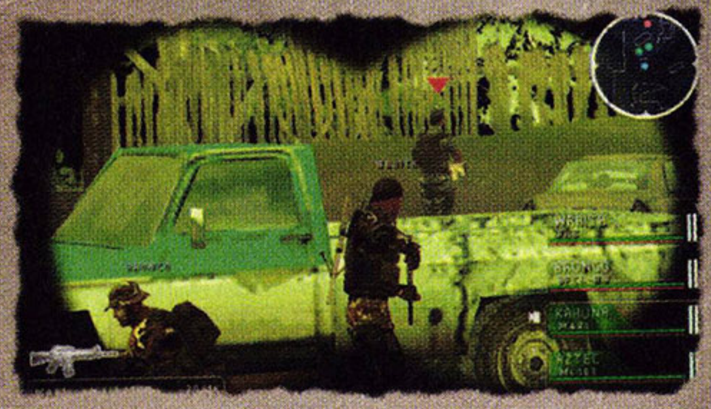
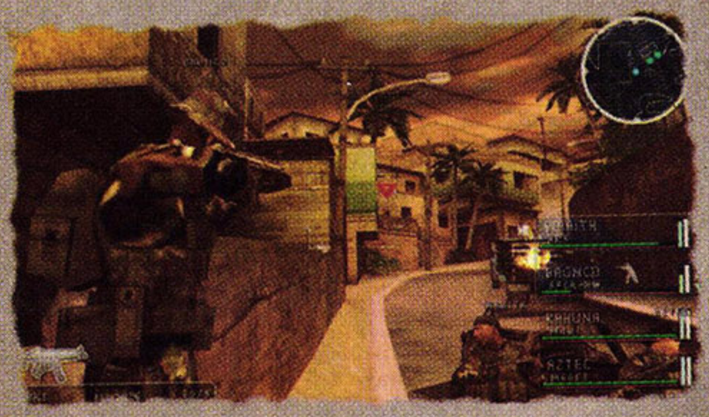


Play as a team. Experience the action from each SEAL's perspective.



True combat simulation, where tactics determine the outcome of each encounter.

Evaluate the situation, plan your approach and execute on your command.

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22:01 Engage enemy soldiers.
22:02 Eliminate all enemy threats.
22:03 Cover team's extraction.

22:01 Fire grenade at machine gunner.
22:02 Move to secure ambassador.
22:03 Escort ambassador to rendezvous point.

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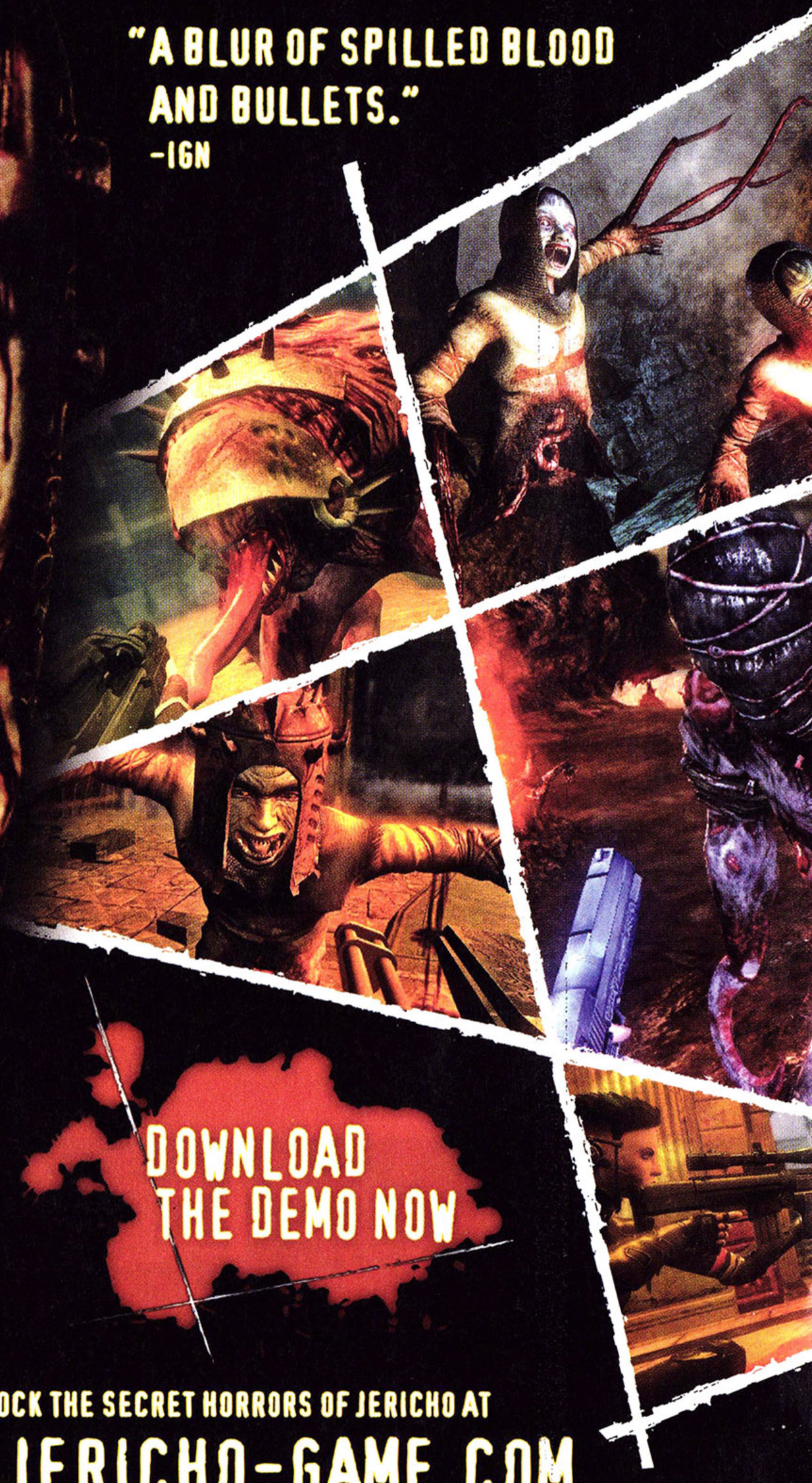

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Blood and Gore
Intense Violence
Sexual Themes
Strong Language

XBOX 360 LIVE

Games for Windows

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cover story

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The lauded creative visionary behind Psychonauts and Grim Fandango is prepping his wildest adventure yet. Tim Schafer and Double Fine Games have pulled back the curtain on Brütal Legend, a surreal ode to the mythology of rock and roll starring the talents of Jack Black and a stable of heavy metal legends. Flip to this month's cover story for the world-exclusive first look at the most exciting offbeat game in development.

features

TOKYO GAME SHOW 2007

GI traversed the mighty Pacific to make the annual pilgrimage to Japan's capitol for TGS. We've got seven full pages of coverage on everything you need to know about the show, so come on over!

METAL GEAR SOLID 4: GUNS OF THE PATRIOTS

Snake is coming soon to a console near you, and Kojima-san has at long last granted us the opportunity to get our hands on MGS 4. We gladly present every last detail we could dig up on this PlayStation 3 exclusive.

ASSASSIN'S CREED

What's not to love about our extensive hands-on report on one of the hottest games of this holiday season? We dive into what Assassin's Creed truly is, and why the criticism leveled at the E3 demo doesn't tell the whole story.

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STAFF

People Who Actually Get Paid To Play Video Games

THE CROSSROADS

ANDY McNAMARA
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

One of the most difficult things about reviewing video games is that the products, while most certainly entertainment, also have a certain execution level that must be met. It's a piece of software, so to some degree the program must function, then from there wade its way into the realm of artistic mastery.

The long-time debate as to whether games are art or not exists due to this tight rope that games must navigate. Take this issue's Game Of the Month, Halo 3, for example. In production and functionality, it is impressive. Sure, there are times when the artificial intelligence is more artificial than intelligent, but at its core Halo 3 is great to look at, it has myriad features like the Forge and Theater, and has a multiplayer component that is incredibility well balanced. These pieces all read like software that is well made – be it a new version of Word or Excel or a triple-A video game. However, at its core, there is an art to what the team shaped from nothing. No one would argue that the game wasn't masterfully crafted. However, the story and narrative – the very definition of art, and which is the heart and soul of what the Halo 3 experience and world is about – ultimately falls short.

Obviously my disappointment in the Halo 3 campaign mode is my own, and ultimately doesn't change the fact that I think Halo 3 is a phenomenal game. So, I find myself sitting at the crossroads. Wanting to argue that games are indeed art, but unable to deny the fact that sometimes just making good, well-produced software can be fantastic regardless of the "art" factor.

In the end, it's just a question of what the developer wants from its creation, and what it considers to be art. BioShock is a very different experience than Halo 3, as both of them are from any of other game you wish to use as an example. I do believe games are art, but sometimes the craft is forgotten for the sake of functionality, and sometimes you just have to reward games for doing what they do, instead of what you wish they could be or how they make you feel.

There will always be programs in video games. I just love it when games cross that divide and become something grander: When video games become art.

Cheers,

Andy >> *andy@gameinformer.com*

Handle: The Game Hombre **Expertise:** RPGs, Action/Platform, Driving, First-Person Shooters **Interests:** Paul, The Pro Player: I Love You And Will Miss You Terribly – Game Informer Just Isn't The Same Without You **Dislikes:** Not Getting Call Of Duty 4 Into This Month's Issue (I Want To Play Through This Game So Badly), People Who Don't Understand That I Ribbed Sony In Last Month's Letter Because I Like The PS3, Not Hate It **Current Favorite Games:** Project Gotham Racing 4, Mass Effect, World Of Warcraft, Halo 3, Call Of Duty 4: Modern Warfare, Picross DS, Final Fantasy Tactics: The War Of The Lions

Reiner >> *reiner@gameinformer.com*

Handle: The Raging Gamer **Expertise:** RPGs, Action, First-Person Shooters, Strategy, Sports, Fighting **Interests:** Being Compared To Lex Luthor (Turns Out Most People Don't Talk About Endgames & Conquering The World), Halo 3 & Call Of Duty 4's Multiplayer (My Nights For At Least The Next Two Years), *Death Proof* **Dislikes:** Master Chief's Soda Not Being Green (Would The Hulk Get Red Soda? No!!!), People Thinking Babies Are Innocent (They Poop To Disrupt Gaming Sessions) **Current Favorite Games:** Mass Effect, Halo 3, The Orange Box, Ace Combat 6: Fires Of Liberation, Syphon Filter: Logan's Shadow, Blue Dragon

Matt >> *matt@gameinformer.com*

Handle: The Original Gamer **Expertise:** First-Person Shooters, Action/Platform, Action/Adventure, Action/Sports **Interests:** I Just Wanted To Use This Space This Month To Say Goodbye To Paul Anderson, Who Was My Friend And Coworker For Many Years. Paul Was A Great Person And Will Be Missed By Many, Myself Included **Dislikes:** Saying Goodbye, Weirdo Soundguys At The Turf Club Who'd Rather Play Passive Aggressive Mindgames Instead Of Mix A Show, Not Having Enough Money To Buy All The Records I Want **Current Favorite Games:** Juiced 2, Dirt, BioShock, Scrabble

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Adam >> *adam@gameinformer.com*

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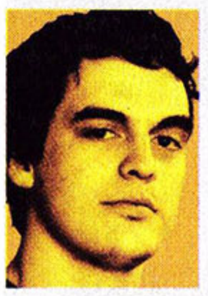
Bertz >> *mattbertz@gameinformer.com*

Handle: Lord Gamington III **Expertise:** First-Person Shooters, Sports, Action, RPGs, Strategy **Interests:** *Curb Your Enthusiasm* Season 6, Adrian Peterson's Viking Debut (Finally, Something to Cheer About), Sumo Wrestling Championships, The U.S. Map Shortage **Dislikes:** Kevin McHale, Chinese Manufacturing (Enough with the Lead!), Crocs (Vacation Footwear for Gnomes), Urban Bicyclists (You Are Not A Car, So Stay Out Of The Car Lane!) **Current Favorite Games:** Call Of Duty 4: Modern Warfare, Mass Effect, Medieval II: Total War Kingdoms, Halo 3, Enemy Territory: Quake Wars

Ben >> *ben@gameinformer.com*

Handle: Your Friendly Neighborhood Gamer **Expertise:** Action/Adventure, Action/RPGs, Platform, Survival Horror, First-Person Shooters **Interests:** Becoming A Teen Idol In Atlanta, 73" TVs, Seattle, *Planet Terror* (Why Did I Wait To See It?) **Dislikes:** Getting Knife Slashed By Seattle Construction Signs, Cars That Take A Month To Fix, Allergies **Current Favorite Games:** Halo 3, Mass Effect, The Orange Box (Especially Portal), Metroid Prime 3: Corruption, Bioshock, Call Of Duty 4: Modern Warfare



Bryan >> *bryan@gameinformer.com*

Handle: The Gamer's Advocate **Expertise:** Action/Adventure, RPGs, Survival Horror, First-Person Shooters, Rhythm **Interests:** New *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, *It's Always Sunny In Philadelphia*, Seafood In Bellevue, Kickball, Holiday Games Season **Dislikes:** This Year's Golden Gopher Football Team, Games That Only Have One Save File, Jerks Putting The Halo 3 Ending On YouTube (Great, Now We're Going To Have To Review Halo 4 At Gunpoint) **Current Favorite Games:** Halo 3, The Orange Box, Phoenix Wright Ace Attorney: Trials & Tribulations, BioShock, Rock Band, Picross DS

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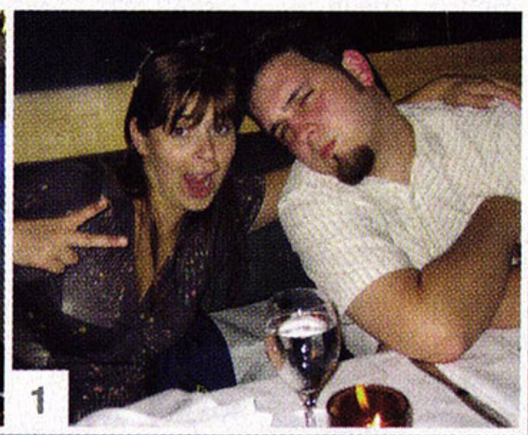

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1 Teresa Tyndorf of 47 Communications and Adam put their game face on at Lobster on the Santa Monica pier **2** 2K Sports' Lily Atkins and Ben Bishop show off NHL 2K8 to GI's checking line: Matthew Kato, Matt Bertz, and Andy Reiner **3** Some gaming celebrities (and us) politic at the GameStop Manager's Convention in Las Vegas. From left to right: Koei's Jarik Sikat, *Newsweek's* N'Gai Croal, Reiner, Chair Entertainment's Laura Mustard, and Tribune Media's Jonathan Carter **4** GI's Nick Ahrens and Bryan Vore rock out with Rock Band at Leipzig with the help of Harmonix's Mallika Sundaramurthy on lead vocals and EA's Bryce Baer on the skins **5** Nick Ahrens, GI Online's resident exxxtreme athlete meets Mr. Tony Hawk, who's like the George Washington of skateboarding. He's also the William Henry Harrison of frozen orange juice concentrate – don't ask us to explain! **6** Joe and his Mysterious Baseball Hat of Destiny™ hangs with Ready at Dawn's Garret Foster, Dana Jan, and Marc Turndorf **7** Madame Tussauds at The Venetian in Las Vegas debuts its Master Chief wax figure with the help of Fall Out Boy's bassist and "guyliner" pioneer Pete Wentz

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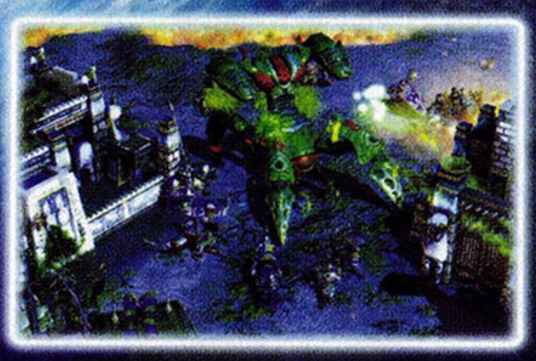

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Blood and Gore
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DEAR GI

The Readers Strike Back

GI COMMUNITY

Game Informer has a thriving online community, and this is where they can sound off about issues facing the gaming industry today

THE QUESTION:
What is your pick for the sleeper hit of the next six months?

I'd have to go with the PS3's Folklore. Imagine Pokémon, Ghostbusters, and Irish spook stories rolled into a Japanese RPG. Brilliant.

King Süshi

I'm going to go with Eternal Sonata. Blue Dragon and Mass Effect seem to be the heavy hitters in the RPG market this fall, but I could very easily see this becoming a cult classic à la Beyond Good & Evil.

Cheech11

Phoenix Wright: Trials & Tribulations will easily be forgotten about under the hype and release of The Legend of Zelda: Phantom Hourglass. To that I say, "Objection!"

God_of_Destruction

Braid – Jonathan Blow's genius, gorgeous puzzle platformer – is going to be the best game out in the next six months. Braid's one of the few indie games getting mainstream attention, and with any luck, will be as big of a hit in the non-indie gaming scene as it deserves to be.

mitch_the_switch

■ **Braid**

Geometry Wars: Galaxies, I think, has a lot of potential. It looks even more intense than the original, and a few new things push it forward. Along with the Wii controller, I'm sure it will be one of the best arcade-style shooters to date. Awesome? Yeah.

Myrtle_the_Turtle

■ **Geometry Wars: Galaxies**

Army of Two will be awesome. Blowing up trucks, tanks, and hopefully buildings alongside a partner should be fun. I'm also ready to see all the moves you and your partner can do in this butt-kicking game.

supersnake

Do you want to make your voice heard? Weigh in with your opinion at www.gameinformer.com/forums

JUSTIN BAILEY WEEPS

I was just playing Metroid Prime 3, and I scanned a control panel on the Pirate Homeworld Research Facility. The text read, "Experiment status report update: Metroid project 'Dread' is nearing the final stages of completion." After reading this, I remembered you mentioned the game Metroid Dread leading up to E3 2005. It was supposed to be a 2D Metroid adventure for Nintendo DS, right? I thought it had been cancelled, but this seems like proof that it's still in the works!

Tyler Jason Roberts
Grafton, Wisconsin

■ **Metroid Fusion**

■ **Interesting find! However, Metroid fans shouldn't get their hopes too high; it looks like this reference is more of an inside joke than insider information. In the wake of people finding (and getting extremely excited about) this little tidbit in Corruption, Nintendo set the record straight by flatly denying that a 2D Metroid title is in production. If that's the line they want to take, okay, but it doesn't make much sense to us. Metroid Fusion and Metroid Zero Mission were two of the best games on the GBA, admirably carrying on the legacy of Super Metroid. Other series, most notably Castlevania, have managed to stick to a classic 2D formula to great success. With the conclusion of the Prime series, why can't Metroid go back to its roots?**

NOT READY TO LAUNCH

I thought it couldn't happen to me; my 360 recently got the red rings of death. Thankful that Microsoft is fixing this problem free of charge, I shipped off my 360 to the repair center last week. But something horrible just dawned on me: I won't have my console back in time for Halo 3. At this point, even if it takes a little less than the predicted four to six weeks, I'll still miss the launch day excitement. What am I supposed to do? Watch the rest of world bask in the awesomeness of Master Chief?

Jordan Innerarity
Via hotmail.com

■ **We understand your pain, as do all 360 owners who have stared into those three blinking red lights. We can't fill the void left by Halo 3 (which is awesome, by the way. Check out our review on page 146). All we can do is urge gamers to help each other out: If you have a friends whose 360s are off at the repair center for any of this holiday season's big releases, invite them over! They will get you drinks, fluff your pillows, and wipe the sweat from your brow as you play, toiling endlessly for the vague promise of little hands-on time with the likes of Master Chief. Or, if you don't like treating your friends like slaves, you could just be a pal and hand over the controller. Both are good options.**

FOR ADULTS ONLY

After reading your debate column on AO games, I could not help but wonder why a game developer would limit their market and sales by creating an AO game. I understand the concept of artistic freedom, but it seems somewhat foolish to know you will miss out on thousands of sales opportunities. If the AO content is so important, why don't developers make multiple versions? It could be like a movie's theatrical release versus its edited-for-TV cut.

Mikey C.
Via yahoo.com

To blacklist a game because of its rating is absurd. Microsoft, Sony, and Nintendo have no right to deny any media offering. AO gaming is the future; video gaming finally has reached that pinnacle point in society as being accepted as a viable media, following in the footsteps of radio and television. Let Wal-Mart and Best Buy not carry any AO-rated games. The fledgling AO gaming market will survive much like the adult movie market does, with sales from the Internet and in the back rooms of true gaming retailers.

Landon Williams
El, Paso Texas

I think there was an issue that was ignored in your recent debate about AO games. Many developers can simply remove certain elements, like blood and gore, to receive an ESRB rating suitable for a younger audience. A game rated Teen could have just as much gunplay as one rated Mature, except that people don't bleed. My concern with these "scrubbed clean" games is that they depict the same acts, but without the consequence. Doesn't that teach gamers that violence is clean and fun rather than the bloody mess it truly is?

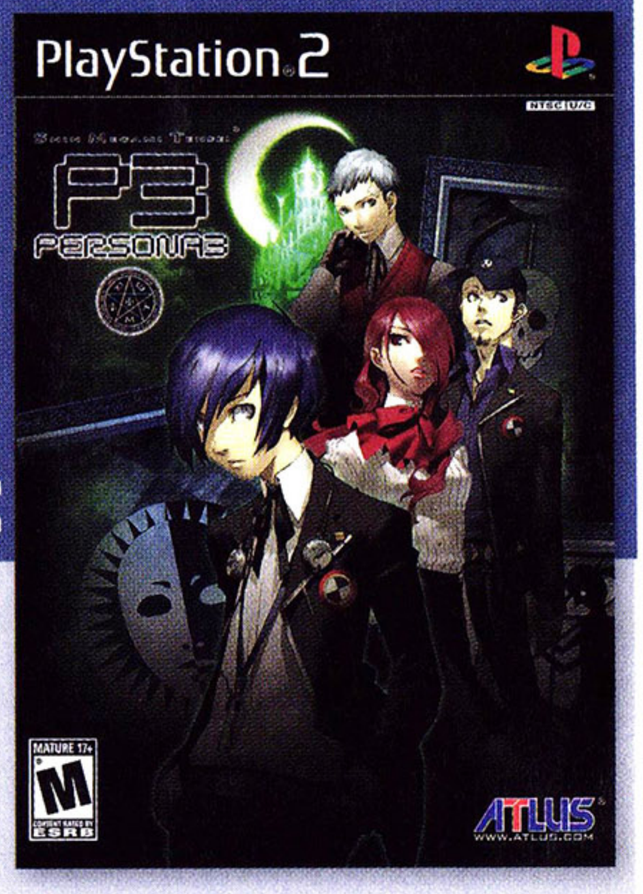
Koya Oneda
Via email

■ **It seems like every time Rockstar releases a game, discussions like these spring up among the gaming community. There are varying opinions on what developers have the right to make, what retailers have the responsibility to sell (or not sell), and whether gamers should be denied certain kinds of content altogether. It is a complex issue that can be seen from multiple angles, and the controversy isn't likely to die down soon. As video games continue to occupy a growing space in home entertainment, the ESRB ratings will remain a hot topic. Thanks for sending in your thoughts.**

BLOOD MONEY

We were light on cash last month, so my boyfriend went to go give plasma so we could afford to buy Persona 3. The ordeal left him with a huge bruise on his arm that proceeded to grow past his elbow, but he drove to the game store (despite the doctor's orders) and bought Persona 3 with his hard-earned money. At home, bandaged and exhausted, he sleepily asked me to put the game in the PS2 for him. All he could do was watch the intro before he fell asleep...but at least he could rest content. Atlus should be thankful they have fans of this caliber.

Nina
Via yahoo.com



■ **Thanks for the story, Nina! Games from Atlus may not sell millions of copies, but you're right: You can't accuse its fans of being unsupportive. Even so, this kind of unflinching dedication is almost unheard of. The closest we've seen is that time we duped Miller into believing Sony made hamburger-flavored Blu-ray discs. The poor guy stayed up all night tasting every PS3 game and Blu-ray movie in the vault. Even *Stealth*!**

Send your comments to Game Informer. Snail Mail: Game Informer Magazine • Attn: Dear GI • 724 North First St., 4th Floor • Minneapolis, MN 55401 Email: deargi@gameinformer.com

HUMAN HISTORY JUST GOT
A LITTLE LESS HUMAN.

WE LOVE THE WRENCH

In your most recent issue of GI, I read your review on Bioshock and must say I disagree on some points. Don't get me wrong, I love BioShock, but I do not believe it worthy of a 10. It doesn't have any online multiplayer. Heck, it doesn't even have offline multiplayer! In order for a game to be perfect, it has to have some kind of multiplayer aspect.

Adam Cotton
Via yahoo.com

I agree wholeheartedly with the dual tens that you gave BioShock. FPS games have become white noise of late, and they were in desperate need of something amazing to keep them from growing stagnant. As such, it really bothers me that so many people have taken it upon themselves to knock this game down from its perch. They split hairs about things that have inconseuntial impact on the experience, like the Vita-Chambers, the enemy spawns, or the lack of multiplayer. I'm sure those people will write to you to tell you the game didn't deserve a 10, so I just wanted to throw my opinion into the mix.

T.J. Fisher
Via sbcglobal.net

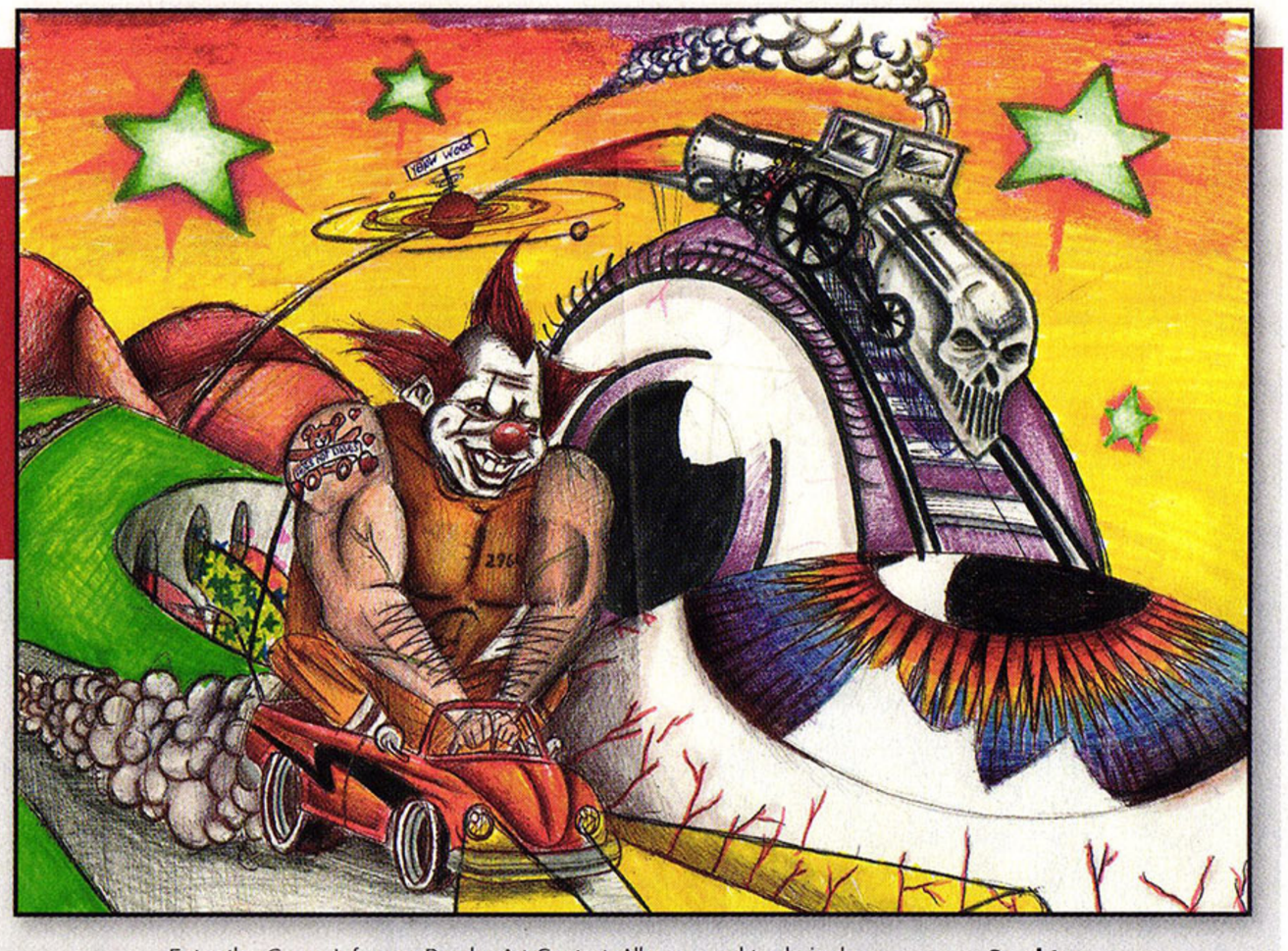
I love BioShock! Who hasn't wanted to shoot bolts of lightning from their fingertips, Palpatine-style? Then there's the Chemical Thrower! And the Insect Swarm Plasmid! And the Incinerate Plasmid? Every time I turned a corner in BioShock, I was doing something I always wished games would let me do. I commend the team at 2K Boston, and I am grateful to have played their masterpiece.

Louis W.
Via email

GI 155 March 2006

Is it just us, or is everyone playing BioShock? There aren't many titles that have brought people together from all sides of gaming like this one has. Since the experience differs from person to person, it seems like everyone has a different tale of electrocution, wrenching, and general burnination to share. Kind of like the days where you could just assume that anyone with a Super Nintendo had played Super Mario World, BioShock is quickly becoming common ground for 360 owners. If you haven't played it yet, you should...unless you're one of those "tragically late to the party" gamers. If that's the case, how's The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past going?

READER ART



NOVEMBER WINNER!

TRAVIS MAHAFFEY
Clowns, choo-choo trains…this is like a kid's paradise!

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.

Send to:
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Reader Art Contest
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4th Floor
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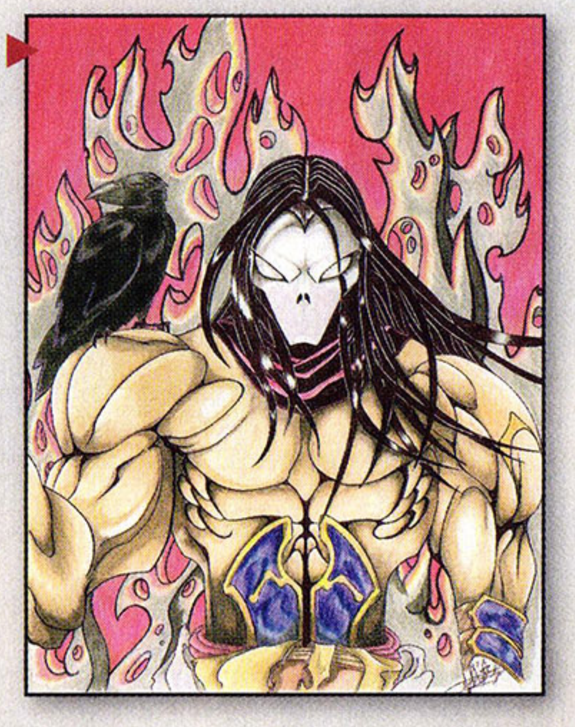
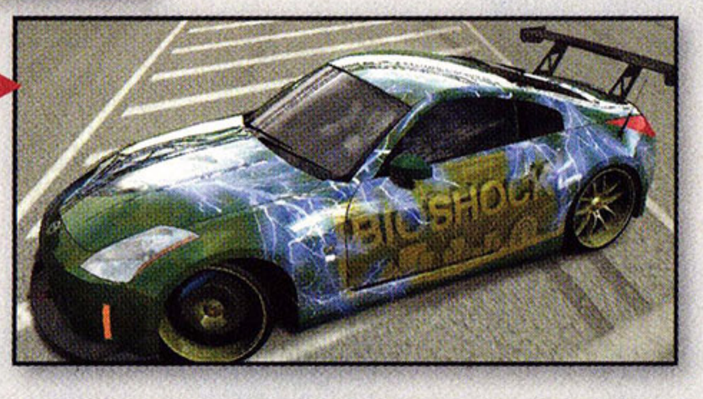
ROBERT SANFORD
If Mario is a wolf in the Twilight Realm, Luigi probably transforms into some kind of feral sidecar

MIGEUL ANGEL SANTIAGO
You'd think a bird could find a safer place to perch than the shoulder of one of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse



JACK THARP
This BioShock car was customized with the in-game editor. If you see a Big Daddy crossing, just floor it



REN WEST
"This flashing blue thing must be the 'everything's fine' indicator."

JONATHAN CONTRERAS
For a good laugh, try saying "Wallace Shawn is Sam Fisher" in your best movie announcer voice

JOSE GADDIEL DIAZ
It's nice to see Link wearing something cool instead of those sissy pajamas

"...easily the PlayStation 3 (system)'s premiere, must-have title."

-Game Informer

"...a highly playable action game that will satisfy even the most demanding FPS junkies."

-GamePro

"5 out of 5"
-G4

"9.5 out of 10"
-Game Informer

MATURE 17+
M
Blood and Gore
Intense Violence
Strong Language
ESRB CONTENT RATING www.esrb.org
Game Experience May Change During Online Play.

INSOMNIAC GAMES

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R F O M . C O M

RESISTANCE
FALL OF MAN

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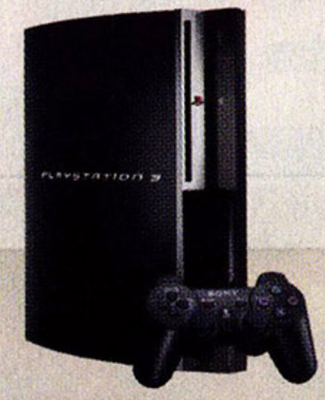
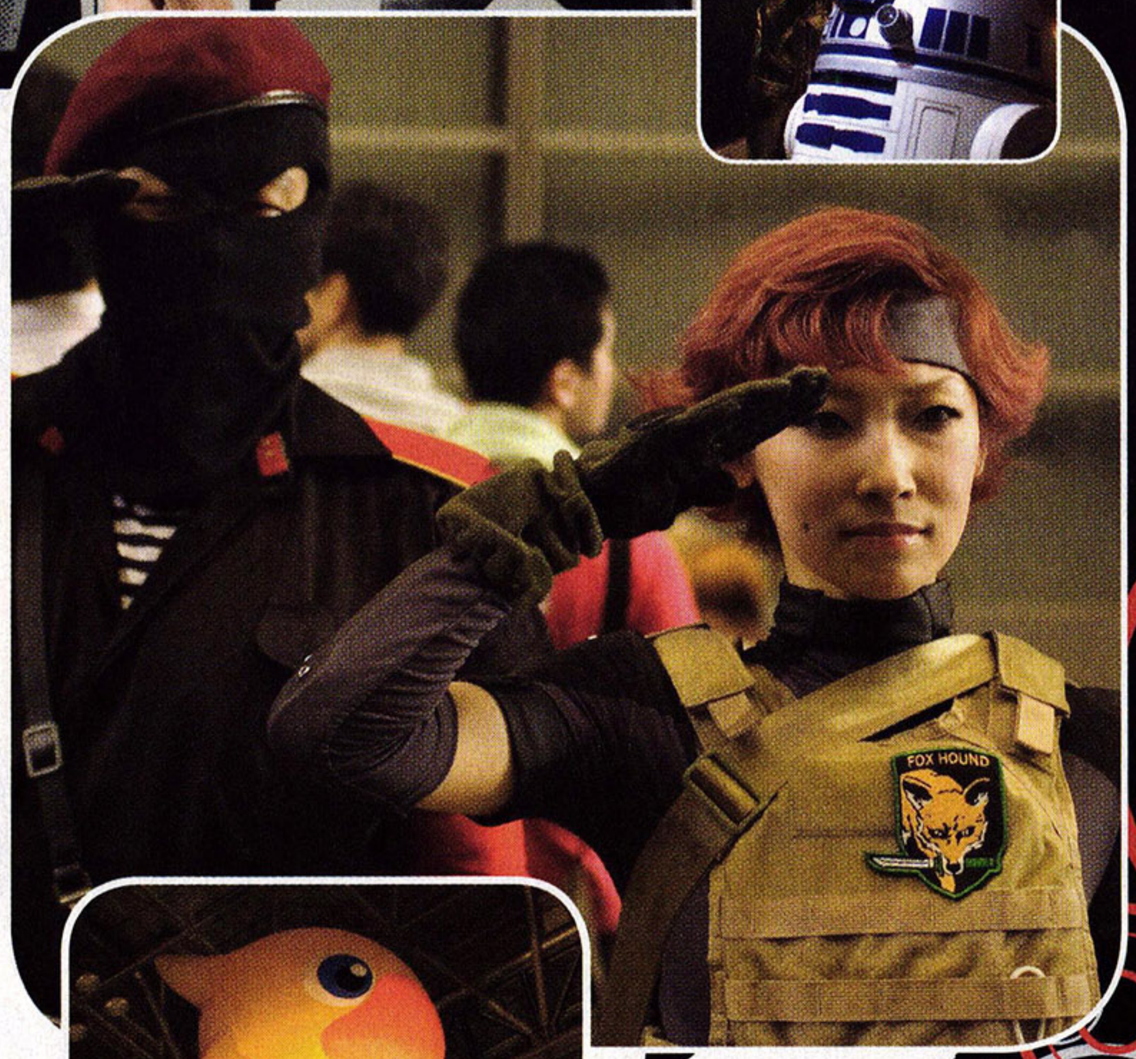


PLAY B3YOND

ONLY ON PLAYSTATION 3

Tokyo Game Show 2007

Games, gear, and more from Japan's yearly gaming convention



Game Informer braved the sweltering heat and packed crowds of this year's TGS to bring you the news you need to know. As always, Sony was the centerpiece of the festivities at Makuhari Messe. While Tokyo's hometown hero made headlines, mainly due to the delay of Home and the unveiling of its DualShock 3 controller, we were most enthused about seeing more of White Knight Chronicles, getting hands-on time with Patapon, and cementing the Gran Turismo 5 Prologue release date as December 13. Sony also announced that the PlayStation store is now accessible via PC.

Square Enix once again blew minds and ramped up excitement with the new trailers of Final Fantasy XIII, Final Fantasy Versus XIII, as well as the unveiling of three new Kingdom Hearts games: Kingdom Hearts: Birth By Sleep for PSP, Kingdom Hearts: 358/2 Days for the Nintendo DS, and Kingdom Hearts: Coded for mobile phones. You can read more about the Final Fantasy games further in this section, but details on the three Kingdom Hearts games have yet to be revealed.

Despite speculation to the contrary, Nintendo once again skipped TGS, but that's not to say the presence of the Wii and DS were not felt. Following in the footsteps of the big N, both Konami and Namco Bandai announced titles aimed to cash in on the fitness fever. Namco's Wii-based trainer, tentatively titled Family Trainer: Athletic World, uses a Wii remote and mat interface to get families jumping and moving through more than 10 minigames. Konami, on the other hand, debuted Wii Fitness and Dance Dance Revolution Hottest Party. Konami also plans to bring the exercise craze to the DS with its Yoga, Pilates, and Skin Basic titles.

On the non-fitness front, the biggest Wii-related announcement of the show was Ubisoft landing the U.S. publishing rights to No More Heroes, a saber-based action game created by Suda51 of Killer 7 fame.

Microsoft once again tried to jumpstart its woeful console sales in Japan by focusing on its stable of Japan-friendly games, including Mistwalker's Lost Odyssey, Tecmo's Ninja Gaiden II, and the Square Enix/Tri-Ace project Infinite Undiscovery. Only time will tell if these intriguing titles by familiar names will help the Xbox 360 gain some footing in Asia, but one thing is clear: The Japanese gaming industry is creating some compelling next-generation content. Read on for more info about our favorite games of the show.

MASTER TIME TO
BECOME THE ULTIMATE WEAPON

MATURE 17+
M
Blood and Gore
Intense Violence
Language
ESRB CONTENT RATING www.esrb.org

PC DVD-ROM SOFTWARE

PLAYSTATION 3

XBOX 360 LIVE

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Shock and Awe

Sony brings rumble back with the DualShock 3

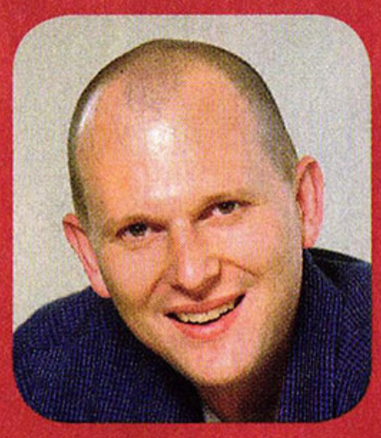
The gamers wanted rumble, so Sony responded by announcing the DualShock 3 controller for the PlayStation 3. The new control retains the classic design of the Sixaxis. The only major difference will be a slight increase in the weight. Phil Harrison also claims that the analog sticks have slightly improved sensitivity as well. The DualShock 3 will debut in Spring 2008 as a standalone accessory. Once the production has ramped up enough, Sony will begin to bundle the DualShock 3 with PS3s and discontinue the Sixaxis. The controller will be backwards compatible with every game that supports rumble in the PS2 and PSone back catalog. Many PS3 games will also support the new functionality via a downloadable patch.

Phil Harrison:

Sony's president of Sony Computer Entertainment Worldwide Studios talks about PlayStation's future

Let's talk about downloadable content versus retail. Warhawk was available in both ways, yet Wipeout HD has been slated for download only. What reasoning goes into choosing which games make it to retail and which ones end up as download-only titles?
Each game has its own set of circumstances. Sometimes it's a technical issue – the file size, the overall size of the game, the kind of features you can put on the disc versus what you can put on the network, and also whether the game, like Wipeout for example, which is easily segmented into tracks, where it can be easily extended over time. It makes perfect sense to do it on PSN. GT 5 Prologue will be both, and they will be identical. About 50 percent of PS3s are connected to the network; it's growing fast but it's not 100 percent. By having both strategies it allows us to reach the largest possible audience.

The video marketplace is doing a fair amount of business for Xbox Live. How far along is Sony with its plans to offer downloadable films and television?
We have no announcements to make on that today, but we're very aware of the commercial opportunity of distributing digital content on the PS3. It's a matter of public record that we are looking into this area with a lot of detail right now.



"Gran Turismo 5 is a billion dollar IP for us, and it's a system mover."

Changing gears, are there any plans to bring the GPS functionality and Lonely Planet travel guides you offer on the PSP in Europe to the US?
I think the travel guides are well suited to PSN digital distribution. We're going to bring those titles to the PSP that way. We've announced GPS products for Japan and Europe; we are studying the U.S. at the moment. There are some slightly different map licensing issues we have to address.

Looking toward the future, when you look at the game lineups after March 2008, we're not quite sure what the future holds. Could you give us an idea of what we can expect from Sony in 2008?
I can give you three to chew on. Gran Turismo 5 is a billion dollar IP for us, and it's a system mover. LittleBigPlanet is quite rightly getting everyone's attention, and it's going to be a title that may potentially be a global hit. The third game is Killzone 2. Then follow up with some of the franchises we have yet to bring to PS3 that are important to our platform, and think about some of the sequels to the games that have already shipped that will be coming in 2008. There will be another MotorStorm coming along very soon. Also, White Knight Chronicles is getting huge excitement and anticipation. And then Home is going to play a role throughout the year. I'm very comfortable with the lineup we have coming.

The Long Way Home

Sony's social networking hub delayed into 2008

Looks like we may have to wait until spring to get our hands on Sony's ambitious social networking hub. During his TGS keynote, Sony Computer Entertainment president and CEO Kaz Hirai announced that Home has been delayed until early 2008. This is another blow to Sony's shaky holiday lineup, which has already lost Grand Theft Auto IV to 2008 and may potentially lose Unreal Tournament III as well. Sony still plans to start general beta testing this holiday.

Portable Puppetmaster

Take control of your PS3 game with the PSP while on the road? Why not?

One of the more intriguing new plans discussed during the Sony keynote was the extended PSP Remote Play functionality, which PS3 owners should get via system update some time during 2008. Similar to a place-shifting device like the SlingBox, PSP Remote Play allows users to turn on their sleeping PS3 via the PSP to stream media content from the console to the portable device no matter where you are in the world. This allows users to play PSN and PS3 games from afar in addition to listening to stored music and viewing images and video stored on your hard drive. That's right, you'll be able to play your console games on your PSP! Once you start the game, the PS3 creates a 480 x 272 video stream that plays the in-game action back to the PSP. Sony has yet to clarify how this will work with games that heavily utilize the buttons found on the PS3 and not the PSP, but PSN games should be a natural fit for this type of experience. Expect to see games take advantage of this new technology in the coming year.

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A RELENTLESS WILL TO SUCCEED.

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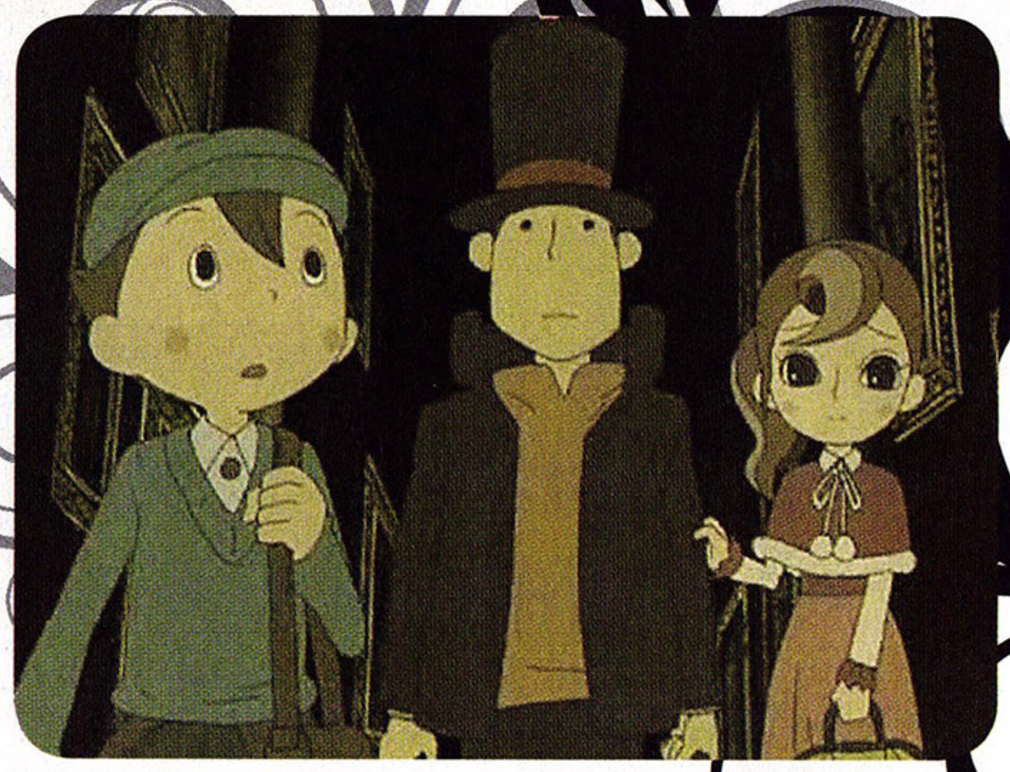
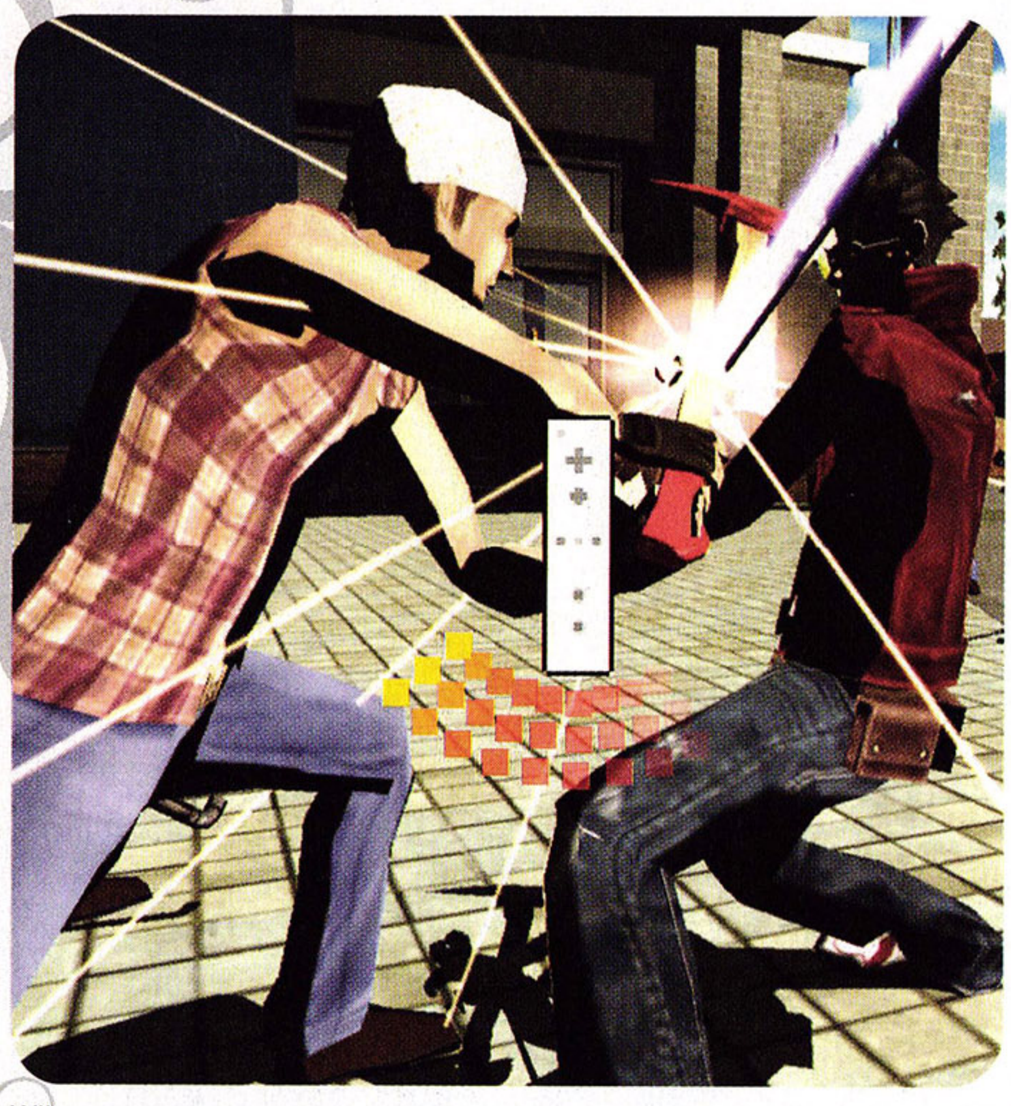


Nintendo DS

Professor Layton and the Devil's Box

Imagine if the immense wonder of a Hayao Miyazaki film could be distilled into a tiny handheld console. That's essentially what Level 5 has done with the storybook-styled Professor Layton series. The game combines the plot and storytelling of an adventure game with a variety of puzzles that you must solve as you travel with Professor Layton and his conspicuous top hat. This is actually the second entry in the Professor Layton series; American gamers will be playing the first one, Professor Layton and the Curious Village, later this year courtesy of Nintendo.



Wii

No More Heroes

In the world of game developers, you won't find anyone closer to a mad scientist than Suda51. The Killer 7 developer and his team at Grasshopper have recently been devoting their efforts to this stylish, bloody, and funny action title for the Wii. As you control violent assassin Travis Touchdown, you may be surprised to find that you aren't constantly waggling your arms around. That's because No More Heroes makes smooth and intuitive use of the buttons on the Wii remote, requiring you to use the motion controls only for satisfying power moves. It looks like No More Heroes will be another compelling blend of style and substance when Ubisoft brings it to our shores in February.

Xbox 360

NINJA GAIDEN II

One of the first rules of life is to never piss off a ninja, but apparently someone didn't heed that valuable advice. The main plot of Team Ninja's sequel to Ninja Gaiden is still under wraps, but we do know that someone has angered Ryu Hayabusa, and not even an army of bloodthirsty beasts armed with guns and swords can keep him from exacting his revenge.

Ninja Gaiden's lightning fast combat and amazing visuals are back in full force, and to give the action a cinematic flare Tecmo is introducing new finishing sequences that zoom in close as Ryu dispatches villains in gruesome fashions – including severing their limbs and executing decapitations. The battles get so bloodstained that Ryu often must shake the dripping blood off his instrument of death before sheathing it.

Speaking of Ryu's arsenal, he now has two new weapons: a set of Wolverine-like claws that allow him to get some hands-on time with his foes, and a Grim Reaper-like scythe. Ryu can also stick with his battle-tested sword if you prefer. Players can now switch weapons in mid-battle without leaving the action by using the quick weapon selection system.

Ninja Gaiden was known for its unrelenting difficulty, and the sequel will be no different for sadists looking for some punishment. Luckily for more casual gamers, Tecmo has also taken steps to make the game more accessible, most notably with the regenerative health system that allows Ryu to recover a portion of his lost health after swordfights.

Nintendo DS

Ninja Gaiden: Dragon Sword

Tecmo's hit Ninja series is making the leap to the DS as well, and the results look promising. Dragon Sword allows you to move through the world, engage in swordfights, and use Ninpo by entering different strokes on the DS with the stylus. During our hands-on time, the combat was responsive and easy to pick up; we were dispatching groups of thugs with the speed and grace of a ninja in no time. Tecmo wouldn't specify how, but it revealed that Dragon Sword will also share some connections to Ninja Gaiden II as well.

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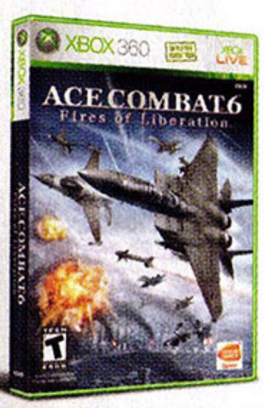

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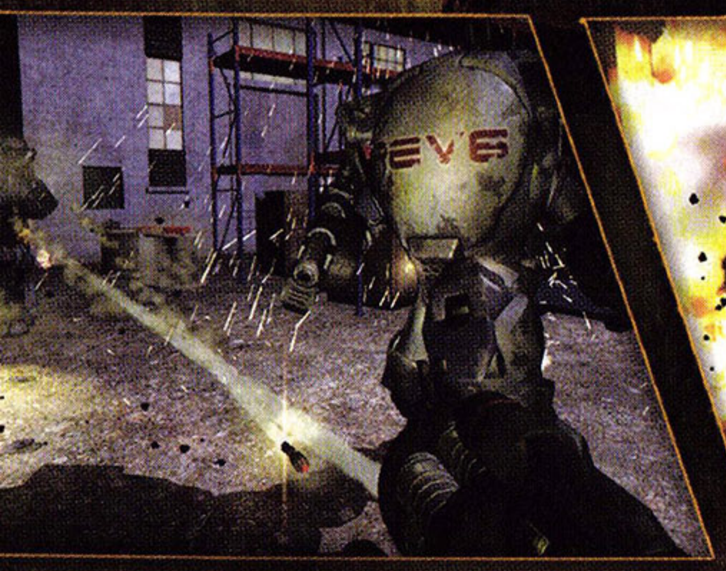

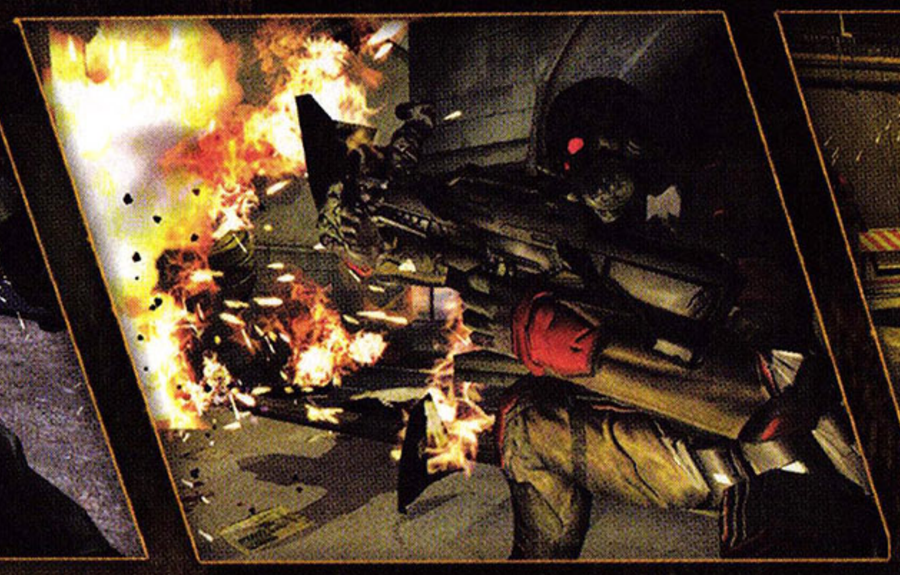

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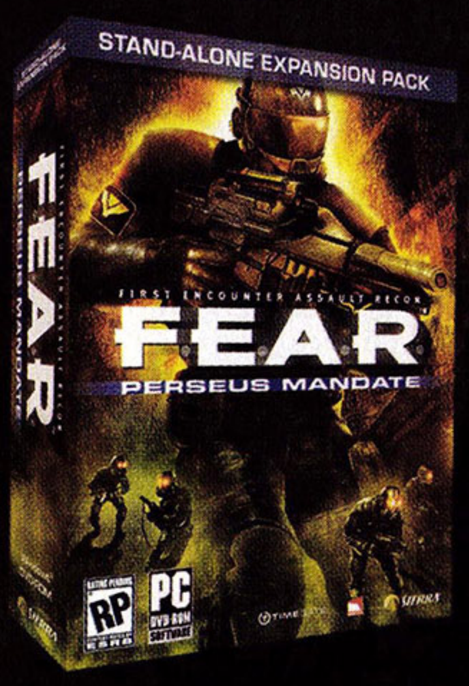

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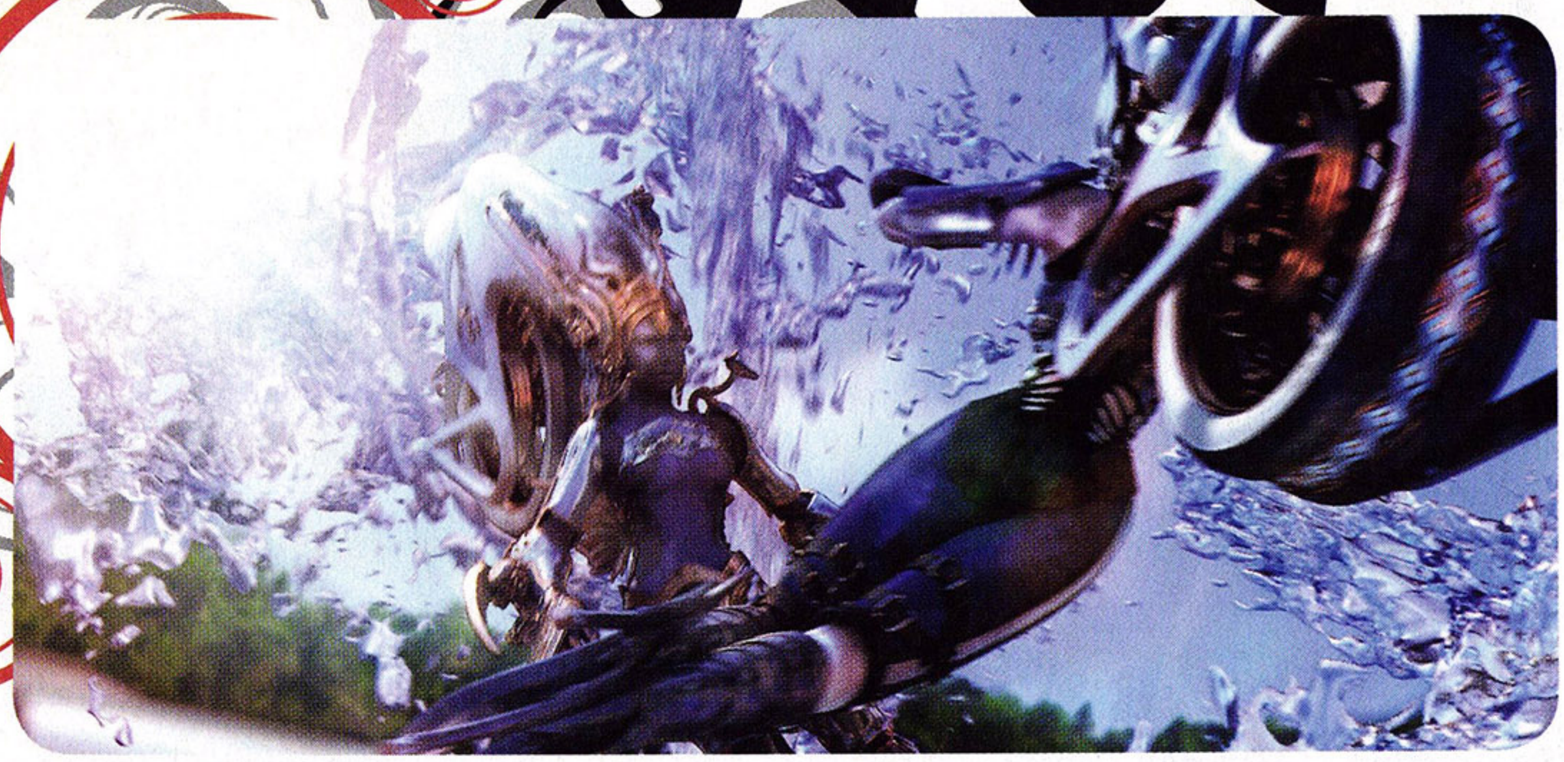


PlayStation 3

Final Fantasy XIII

The next numbered entry in the Final Fantasy series is always a big deal, but it would be nice to know the year in which we can expect its release. Even so, it's hard to stay mad at Square Enix when they release footage that shows off such gorgeous action and sets up such a compelling game world. Dealing with the separation of two areas – the floating city Cocoon and the outer land of Pulse – characters in the game will have to struggle against a system that wants to keep them down. The main protagonist, Lightning, fights back with extraordinary combat skills; one of Square Enix's goals is to create a battle system that, while fully controllable, will also be incredibly cinematic. As the centerpiece for the Fabula Nova Crystalis project, high hopes clearly rest on Final Fantasy XIII. Even though the game is only being shown in bits and pieces, nothing we have seen indicates it will provide anything less than what fans have come to expect.

PlayStation 3

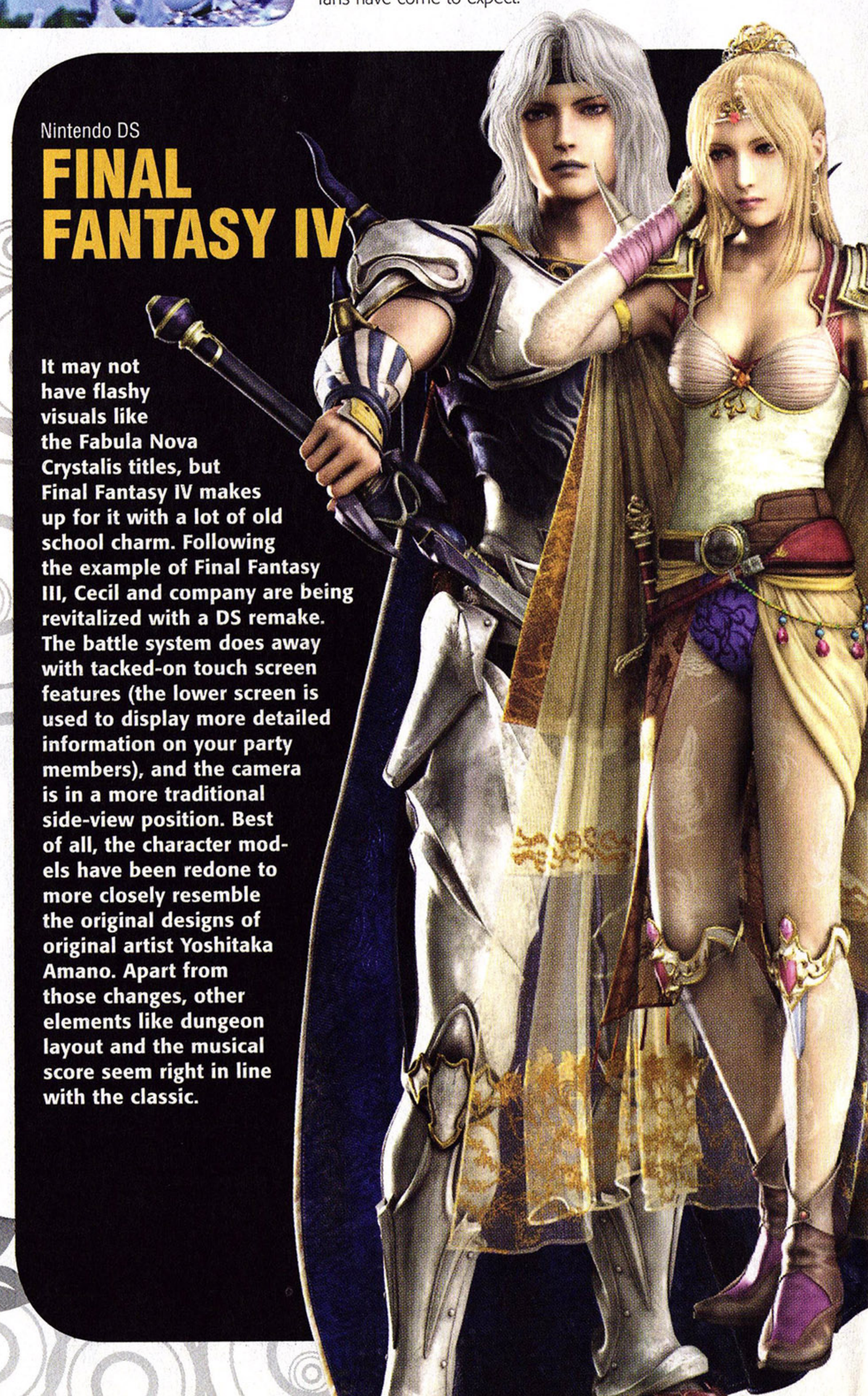
Final Fantasy Versus XIII

For a title that has yet to demonstrate any actual gameplay, Final Fantasy Versus XIII sure knows how to keep people interested. The new cinematic sequences showcase the remarkable beauty of this enigmatic world, depicting a futuristic yet fantasy-rich city in amazing detail. The silver-haired character from the previous trailers is the central figure, though he encounters a big-nosed companion and a long-haired woman with whom he clearly has a history. The climax of the action-heavy trailer depicts the man and woman meeting in a street before each materializes an otherworldly sword from thin air. Exactly why these characters must fight is a mystery, but they both look grieved as they confront each other. Director Tetsuya Nomura has said that Versus XIII could be one of the darkest Final Fantasy titles, so there are definitely other themes at work under the surface.

Nintendo DS

FINAL FANTASY IV

It may not have flashy visuals like the Fabula Nova Crystalis titles, but Final Fantasy IV makes up for it with a lot of old school charm. Following the example of Final Fantasy III, Cecil and company are being revitalized with a DS remake. The battle system does away with tacked-on touch screen features (the lower screen is used to display more detailed information on your party members), and the camera is in a more traditional side-view position. Best of all, the character models have been redone to more closely resemble the original designs of original artist Yoshitaka Amano. Apart from those changes, other elements like dungeon layout and the musical score seem right in line with the classic.



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PlayStation 3

Valkyrie of the Battlefield: Gallian Chronicles

As one wanders the show floor of TGS, there is no shortage of anime-inspired cutscenes on any monitor. However, Sega's Valkyrie of the Battlefield managed to distinguish itself by combining a striking visual twist on the familiar style. While the art direction is definitely the most attractive part of this title, it also uses an interesting hybrid tactical combat system. Players can maneuver units over the pseudo-historical battlefield in standard strategy RPG fashion, but when it comes time to act, they can take direct control over units to maximize the turn. Unfortunately, no U.S. release date has been announced.

Xbox 360

Infinite Undiscovery

In a role-playing game, when someone says that you look just like a legendary hero, there are usually two possibilities: You are the hero (but with amnesia) or your dad was the hero. Infinite Undiscovery, a 360-exclusive action/RPG from Tri-Ace, introduces a new possibility. What if you're just an inconspicuous bard who happens to look like a legendary hero?

Starting with this premise, the game will follow the journey of the hero look-alike (named Capel) as he travels, expected to perform heroic deeds. Using a battle system similar to Star Ocean: Till The End of Time, battles will take place in real time, with seamless integration of combat into the exploration of the world. As you gather companions, their actions in battle will be handled by AI. Eventually Capel crosses paths with the true hero, Sigmunt, and they join forces to confront a villain who plans to destroy the world. Along the way, as the odd title suggests, discovery will play a large role; the kinds of secrets you uncover can have a permanent impact on the world around you.

It's difficult to ignore the fact that Microsoft is hoping to make greater gains in Japan, and Infinite Undiscovery represents another effort – following in the footsteps of Blue Dragon and Lost Odyssey – to court that market. However, regardless of its position in Microsoft's strategic portfolio, Infinite Undiscovery is one of the big RPGs on the horizon, and developer Tri-Ace has proven that it knows how put distinct twists on the genre.

Xbox 360 | PlayStation 3

SOULCALIBUR IV

The battle between Soul Calibur and Soul Edge will soon come to a climax in Soulcalibur IV, but for now we're content with new info regarding the latest game in Namco's popular series.

While many of the classic characters in the series are once again itching for battle, Soulcalibur IV will feature some new blood in its ranks as well. The dual-wielding warrior Hilde is joining the fray. Unlike many of the other characters, Hilde uses both of her weapons, a spear and a short sword, at the same time. This allows her to fight effectively whether she is in close with her opponent or at a distance. She is also notable for her figure. While every other woman in the game is well endowed and scantily clad, Hilde rocks a full suit of armor. There will be other new contestants in SC IV as well, but Namco is keeping them under wraps for the time being.

Soulcalibur IV will feature online fighting for the first time, as well as a new character creation mode that allows you to sculpt a fighter that suits your style.

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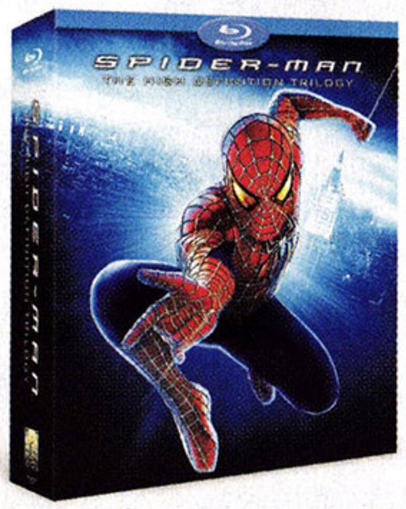

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PG-13

SONY PICTURES HOME ENTERTAINMENT

Nintendo DS

Time Hollow

Forget anything H.G. Wells might have told you. All you need to travel through time is a glowing green pen. In this hand-held adventure title from Konami, players take up the role of Hokio, a student who is able to draw holes in the space-time continuum with a magical writing implement. Of course, this is accomplished in-game by drawing a circle on the DS touch screen with a stylus. Once the rifts appear, you can see through them and interact with the past world – even alter it. This kind of meddling may sound like a bad idea, but there are strange events happening in Hokio's life, and each thread he can unravel brings him closer to figuring out why.

PSP

Patapon

In the vein of the quirky PSP game LocoRoco, this clever and striking title had a brief appearance at Sony's E3 press conference this year. While that video was only enough to get a taste of the unique visual style, some hands-on time with Patapon has shed a lot of light on this creative and experimental title. At first glance, Patapon appears to be a rhythm game. By pressing buttons to a beat, you will produce a sequence of sounds. For instance, square makes the "pata" noise, and circle makes a "pon" sound. Upon completion, a cute little character on the screen echoes the sound, and begins to move forward. This call-and-response forms the core of the gameplay, but it looks like players will eventually be controlling entire armies and fighting off dragons with phrases like "pata pata pata pon!"

PlayStation 3 | Xbox 360

Devil May Cry 4

By now, watching Nero fight Berial and the Frosts is old news. The demo level at TGS was the same as the one at Leipzig and E3, but a stylish new trailer gave action fans more to look forward to in the future. The most shocking revelation was a scene in which both Trish and Lady (characters from DMC 1 and 3, respectively) are meeting with Dante at his store. Apparently the three of them are working together to hunt demons, which puts them at odds with newcomer Nero. We also learned that once Dante becomes a playable character, he will have access to all four of his styles from DMC 3. While all of that is good news for fans, there is one disappointment in store: Producer Hiroyuki Kobayashi has confirmed that Vergil will not play a role in the story.

PlayStation 3

WHITE KNIGHT CHRONICLES

Even though 2007 has been a great year for gaming, most companies' big titles for 2008 and beyond are still nebulous. White Knight Chronicles is an exception; even in its early state, it seems clear that this one is going to be one of the games to keep an eye on.

Developed exclusively for the PS3 by renowned studio Level 5, White Knight Chronicles follows a group of young warriors trying to save the world as they come to grips with an awakening power inside them. By using special gauntlets and knives, they can transform from ordinary humans into towering, armored juggernauts. While in this form normal foes don't stand a chance, but that doesn't mean there won't be any challenge; many bosses will be equally sized, so gamers can look forward to titanic Godzilla-like battles using the game's real-time, combo-based battle engine.

Your party members won't be able to retain this massive form indefinitely, but you still have plenty of options as a puny human. Using three rows of what the team calls Function Slots, each member of your group can be outfitted with a custom string of combo moves earned throughout the quest. This way, as you press the X button to attack in combat, you travel down the combo chain and execute the moves in whatever order you have set them.

Level 5 has been on a roll during the last few years, and with cool premise at its core and a highly modifiable battle system, it doesn't look like White Knight Chronicles will be breaking the streak.

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news

THAT NEW IP SMELL:

GAME INFORMER DISSECTS NEW INTELLECTUAL PROPERTIES

Everyone's clamoring for new, original IP (intellectual property) – games that aren't sequels, spin-offs, or based on a license. But does being an original IP guarantee success? Are publishers afraid to try new things like we all seem to think? After all, Halo and God of War were once wet behind the ears and unsure if success would follow. Besides, all sequels aren't bad. Who wouldn't want to play a game as good as Halo 3?

We here at Game Informer have even tried to introduce new IPs on our cover – some good and some that ended up being not so good. Of course, making a hit game – whether it's original or based on a hit movie – is no easy task, so we decided to take a quick look (this is by no means a definitive list) at how games that aren't sequels, spin-offs, or based on a license fared the past five years at a handful of publishers*.

*Analyses of companies' game releases was restricted to major releases, and does not include companies' entire portfolio of titles released in the U.S. from 2002 to the time we went to print. Definition of new IPs constitutes titles that were not license-based, spin-offs of an existing property, or sequels.

SONY

Total New IPs Since 2002: 36 (including Sony Online)

- The Mark of Kri (PS2, 2002) Review Score: 9
- The Con (PSP, 2005) Review Score: 8
- Shadow of the Colossus (PS2, 2005) Review Score: 8.75
- Heavenly Sword (PS3, 2007) Review Score: 8.75

- In 2002, 2004, and 2005, Sony published at least one triple-A series that is still going on strong today: Ratchet & Clank (2002), SOCOM: U.S. Navy SEALs (2002), Killzone (2004), and God of War (2005). 2003 was a down year, apart from the EyeToy.

- For the launch of the PlayStation 3 in late 2006, Sony only had one original IP first-party offering: Resistance: Fall of Man.

MICROSOFT

Total New IPs Since 2002: 25

- Kakuto Chojin (Xbox, 2002) Review Score: 6.25
- Voodoo Vince (Xbox, 2003) Review Score: 8.5
- Gears of War (Xbox 360, 2006) Review Score: 9.5
- Mass Effect (Xbox 360, 2007) Review Score: 9.75

- Microsoft's most famous original IP, Halo, debuted with the Xbox in 2001, while the next two years saw a number of new IP attempts by Microsoft ranging from Brute Force to Blinx to Mech Assault.

- As Microsoft prepared for the launch of the Xbox 360 in 2004 and 2005, a total of only five original games were released: Fable, Sudeki, Jade Empire, Forza Motorsport, and Kameo.

- Microsoft was batting a sweet review average of 9 for its original 2007-published titles. That is, until Vampire Rain checked in with its horrible score of 3, dropping that average down to 7.5.

UBISOFT

Total New IPs Since 2002: 28

- Beyond Good & Evil (Multi, 2003) Review Score: 8
- Brothers in Arms: Road to Hill 30 (Multi, 2005) Review Score: 8.5
- Red Steel (Wii, 2006) Review Score: 7.5

- Ubisoft leads all third-party publishers on this list, and the secret seems to be the company's PC catalog – an area that Ubisoft appears to take some more chances in, with games like Alfred Hitchcock Presents The Final Cut, The Political Machine, Far Cry, Paradise, and more.

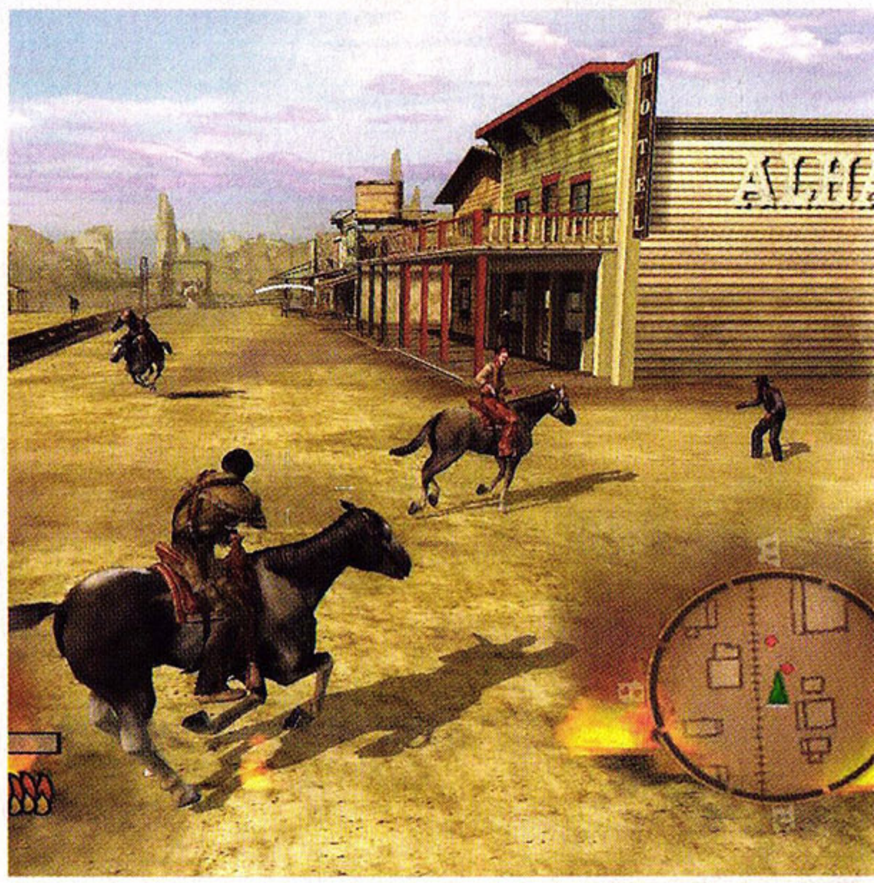
ACTIVISION

Total New IPs Since 2002: 7

- Medieval: Total War (PC, 2002) Review Score: 9.25
- Call of Duty (PC, 2004) Review Score: 9
- Gun (Multi, 2005) Review Score: 8.75

- Out of the 50 major games released by Activision since 2002, only 14 percent are original IP.

- Although our review scores for The Movies, Gun, and True Crime: Streets of LA averaged 8.5, these franchises are now dead.



ELECTRONIC ARTS

Total New IPs Since 2002: 13

- Battlefield 1942 (PC, 2002) Review Score: 8.5
- Sled Storm (Multi, 2002) Review Score: 7
- Black (Multi, 2006) Review Score: 8.5
- Skate (Multi, 2007) Review Score: 8.75

- Some upcoming new IP slated from EA: Army of Two, Spore, Crysis, and SmartyPants

- EA introduced seven new titles in 2002 – a banner year. Among them, including Shox, Earth & Beyond, and Ty the Tasmanian Tiger, only Battlefield 1942 still exists in some franchise form.

LUCASARTS

Total New IPs Since 2002: 7

- Gladius (Multi, 2003) Review Score: 9.25
- Mercenaries (Multi, 2005) Review Score: 7.5
- Thrillville (Multi, 2006) Review Score: 7.75

- LucasArts had a pre-2002 Golden Age of new IP where they introduced The Secret of Monkey Island, Maniac Mansion: Day of the Tentacle, Sam & Max Hit the Road, Grim Fandango, and Full Throttle.

- 2002: The All-Star Wars Year. Furthermore, 2004, 2005, 2006, each saw only one new IP that wasn't Star Wars related.

NINTENDO

Total New IPs Since 2002: 17

- Animal Crossing (GameCube, 2002) Review Score: 9.5
- Electroplankton (DS, 2006) Review Score: 7
- Excite Truck (Wii, 2006) Review Score: 7

- Franchises debuted just before this study include Pikmin, Advance Wars, and Golden Sun. Of course, Nintendo has also given us some of the most successful original IP in all of video game history, so its track record's pretty good.

- Despite publishing some new franchises for the launch of the Wii at the end of 2006 and third-party acceptance of its platforms, so far this year, Nintendo has published only one new title that's not a sequel, spin-off, or licensed game: Wii Play – which is a slight pack-in offering when you buy an extra Wii controller.

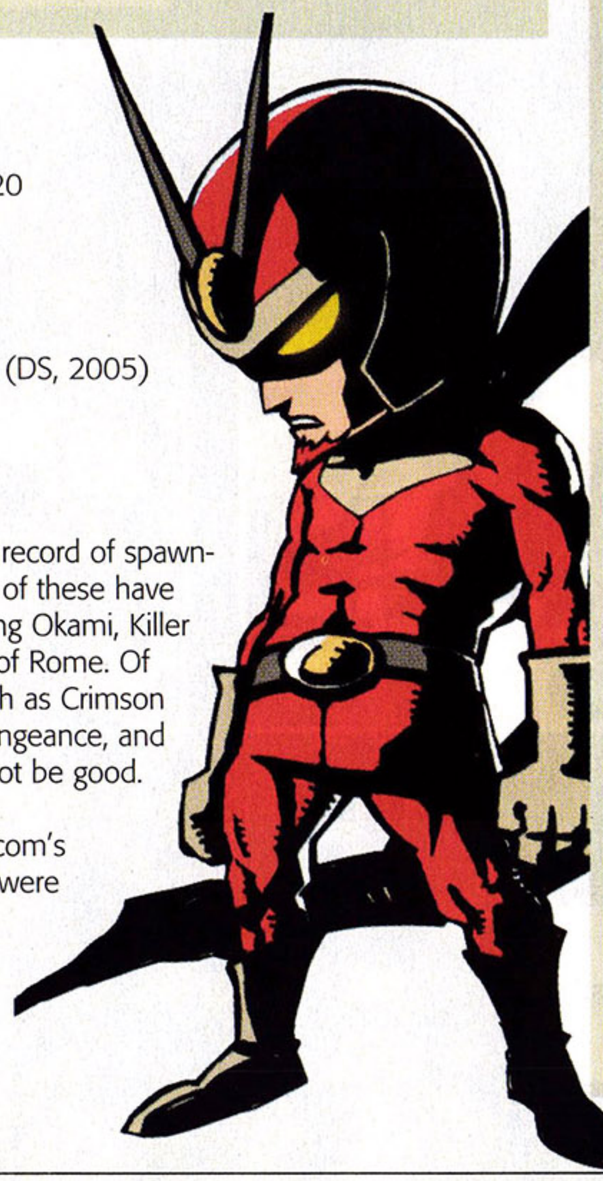
CAPCOM

Total New IPs Since 2002: 20

- Steel Battalion (Xbox, 2002) Review Score: 9.5
- Viewtiful Joe (Multi, 2003) Review Score: 9.5
- Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney (DS, 2005) Review Score: 7.75
- Okami (PS2, 2006) Review Score: 9.5

- While Capcom has a healthy record of spawning new IP recently, very few of these have garnered sequels yet, including Okami, Killer 7, Dead Rising, and Shadow of Rome. Of course, with dead-end IP such as Crimson Tears, Beat Down: Fists of Vengeance, and God Hand, the odds might not be good.

- In 2005, the majority of Capcom's prime releases (57 percent) were new IP.



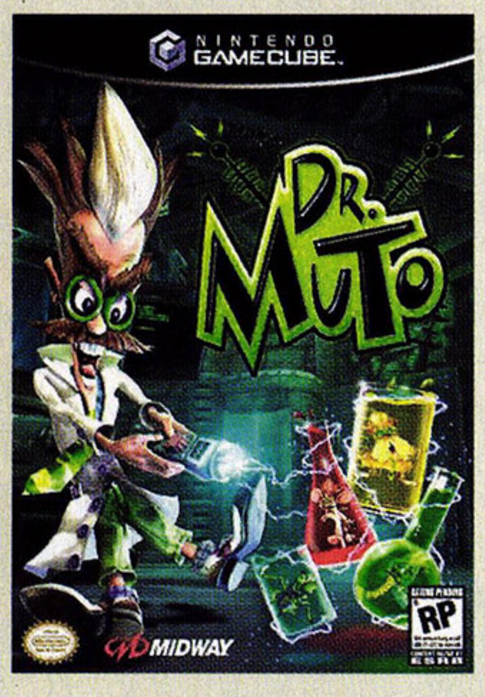
MIDWAY

Total New IPs Since 2002: 12

- Haven: Call of the King (Multi, 2002) Review Score: 8.25
- The Suffering (Multi, 2004) Review Score: 8.25
- Dr. Muto (Multi, 2002) Review Score: 8

- Some cancelled new IP offerings since 2002: Crank the Weasel, Doomsday Rescue, and Fear and Respect (starring Snoop Dogg)

- You can't say Midway hasn't tried. Regardless of boasting a dozen original IP titles since 2002 – not bad for a third-party – the average score of these games is only 6.5



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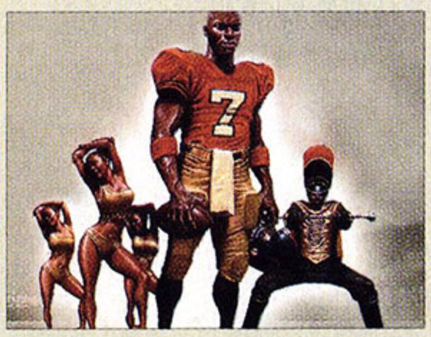
MORE COLLEGE FOOTBALL UNCOVERED

Nerjyzed Game Studios is bringing the college football action of over 40 Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) to your PC in November in BCFx. The game utilizes the Unreal Engine 3, and captures the action and culture of three HBCU conferences and several schools within the MEAC – including an interactive half-time show that puts you right on the drum line.

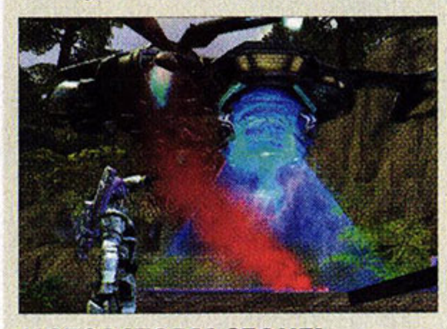


THE NEW PS2

Sony has not given up on its workhorse console the PS2. The company has announced a limited edition white PS2 bundled with karaoke title SingStar Pop and two USB mics. The bundle goes on sale this November for $149.99.

NCSOFT'S PS3 PLANS

Mentioned all too briefly at Sony's E3 press conference was the company's partnership with lauded PC developer NCsoft (Tabula Rasa, shown) for PS3 titles. Recently, NCsoft CEO Robert Garriott said the first product hopefully will be ready by next holiday season, with new IP taking "two to three years minimum."



MOTORSTORM SEQUEL

Sony has bought MotorStorm developer Evolution Studios, adding it to its roster of world-wide teams. Also scooped up in the deal was Evolution's subsidiary, Pursuit Force developer Bigbig Studios. Both franchises are expecting new sequels for 2008.

Wii GAMES EXPLODE

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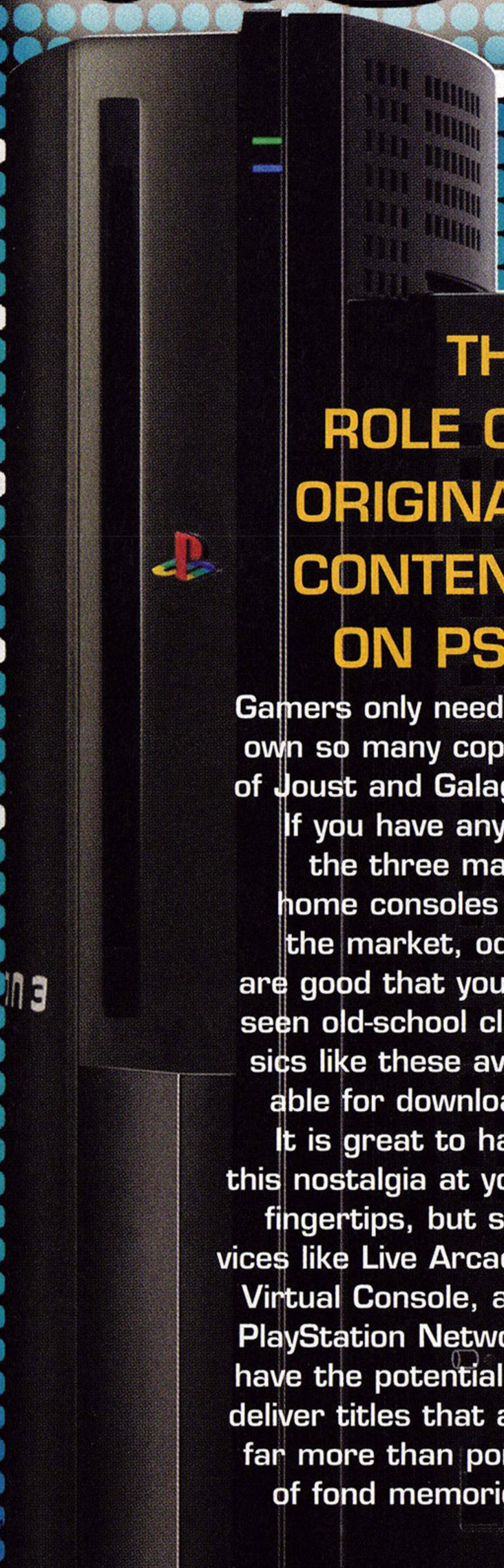
An Expanding Network



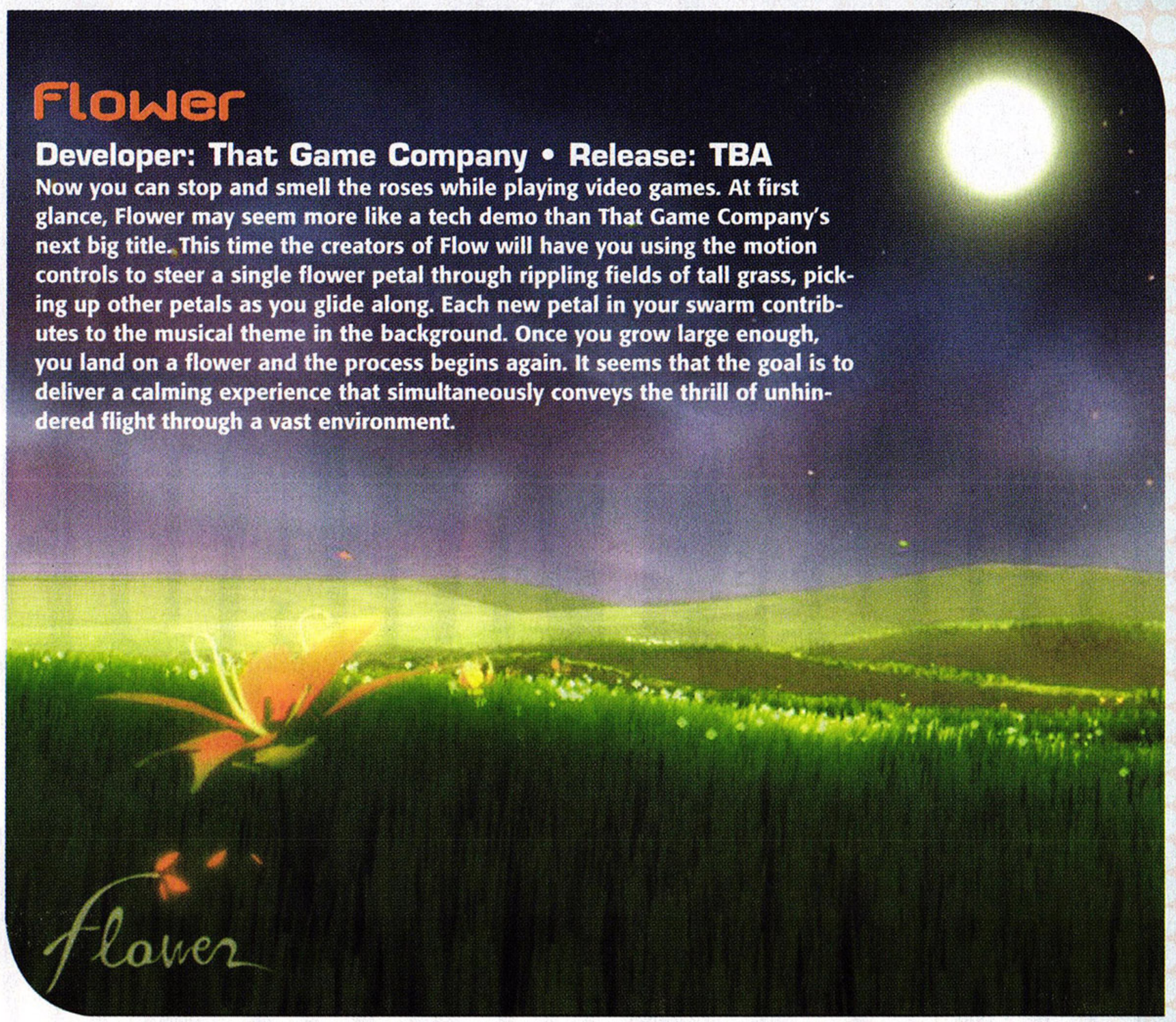
THE ROLE OF ORIGINAL CONTENT ON PSN

Gamers only need to own so many copies of Joust and Galaga. If you have any of the three major home consoles on the market, odds are good that you've seen old-school classics like these available for download. It is great to have this nostalgia at your fingertips, but services like Live Arcade, Virtual Console, and PlayStation Network have the potential to deliver titles that are far more than ports of fond memories.

Of the three major publishers, Sony has distinguished itself in offering original content through the PlayStation Store; last month we examined how Everyday Shooter, a game created from the ground up by lone developer Jonathan Mak, found its way onto PSN. This year has also seen the online release of titles like Warhawk, Flow, and David Jaffe's Calling All Cars. Even though Sony will offer its full support to third-party publishers who want to release classic games on PSN, the company has made the decision to focus first-party publishing efforts on original titles that provide something unique.

"Our goal is to create new experiences," explains director of external production John Hight. "This is part of our charter: Let's take part of Sony's investment and fund some of these new developers – or even larger studios – and let them try out some new ideas. We're going to get a lot more variety in games that will allow people to find the game that is just right for them."

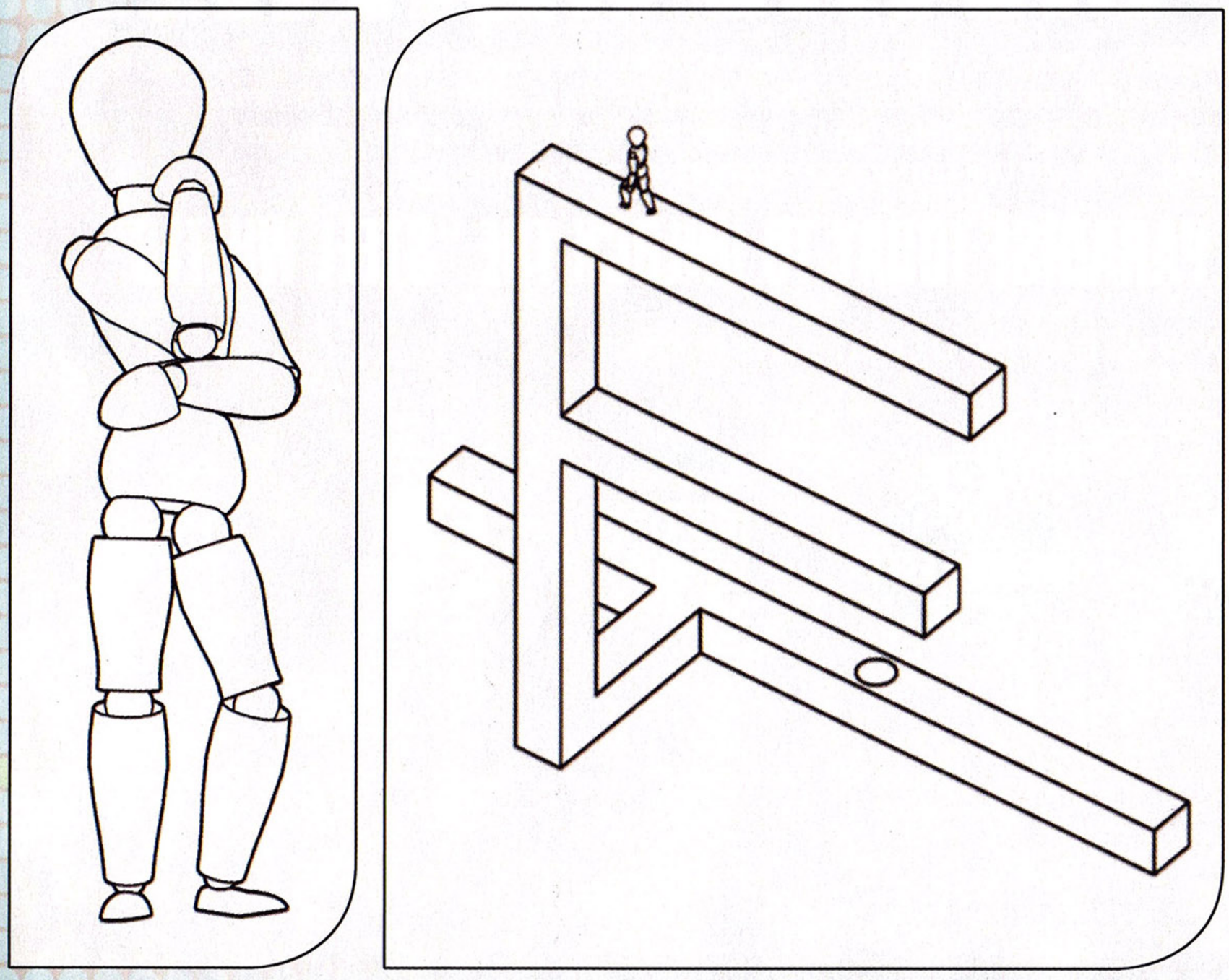
Some games are best used for relaxation, others for competition. If you only have 10 minutes to spare while you're waiting for a ride, there's probably a game ideal for that as well. If you're the type of gamer who is willing to experiment with different titles and the various spaces they can occupy, check out the list below to see what you have to look forward to on PSN in the months ahead.



Flower

Developer: That Game Company • Release: TBA

Now you can stop and smell the roses while playing video games. At first glance, Flower may seem more like a tech demo than That Game Company's next big title. This time the creators of Flow will have you using the motion controls to steer a single flower petal through rippling fields of tall grass, picking up other petals as you glide along. Each new petal in your swarm contributes to the musical theme in the background. Once you grow large enough, you land on a flower and the process begins again. It seems that the goal is to deliver a calming experience that simultaneously conveys the thrill of unhindered flight through a vast environment.



Echochrome

Developer: Game Yarouze
Release: TBA

After only a short trailer, Echochrome had everyone talking at this year's E3. Inspired by works of M.C. Escher, the development team behind this puzzle game wants to focus on the importance of subjectivity. In other words, everything in the game depends on the angle from which it is viewed. If your character is approaching a hole, you can align the camera so a platform is beneath. As long as there is ground under your feet, you won't fall – even if it doesn't seem to make sense spacially. This subjectivity applies to five aspects of the visually stark levels: falling, jumping, climbing stairs, existence, and non-existence. If your vision gets blurry trying to navigate these puzzles, you can take a break with the level creator and share your twisted reality with other users. No official release date has been announced for this artistic venture, but we will probably be playing it sometime in 2008.

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INTERNET CONNECTION required for online play. Online play requires Internet Connection and Memory Card (8MB) (for PlayStation 2) (each sold separately). Online access requires broadband Internet service and a wireless access point or LAN. Certain limitations apply to Wi-Fi connectivity. User is responsible for Internet service fees. Online features may not be available on all platforms. See product pack for details. © 2007 Electronic Arts Inc. All rights reserved. Electronic Arts, EA, the EA logo and Burnout are trademarks or registered trademarks of Electronic Arts Inc. in the U.S. and/or other countries. All rights reserved. Microsoft, Xbox, Xbox 360, Xbox LIVE, and the Xbox logos are trademarks of the Microsoft group of companies. "PlayStation", "PLAYSTATION" and "PS" Family logo are registered trademarks of Sony Computer Entertainment Inc. All other trademarks are the property of their respective owners.

XBOX 360 LIVE

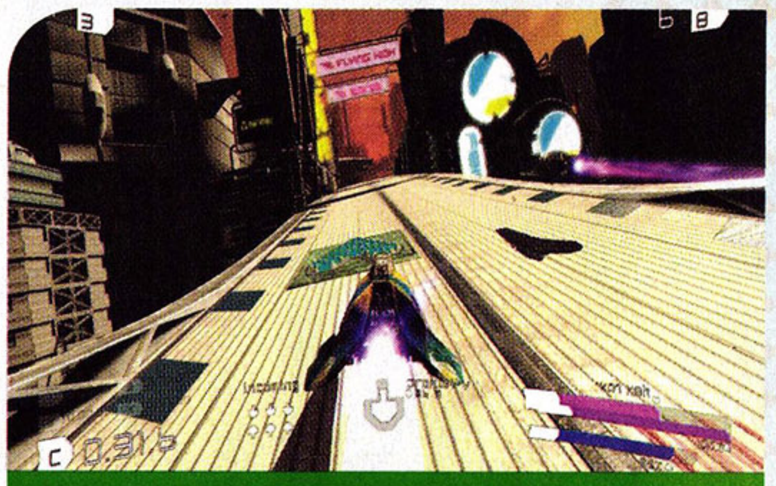
BURNOUT™ PARADISE

PLAYSTATION 3

PixelJunk Monsters

Developer: Q-Games
Release: November

The next title from Q-Games is a radical departure from the studio's last release, PixelJunk Racers. Taking a shot at tower defense-style gameplay, PixelJunk Monsters lets you control a tribal leader charged with protecting his followers. By transforming nearby trees into various forms of artillery, you will fight off 20 waves of enemies in each map before progressing. Improve your defenses by spending gems (dropped by defeated foes) in the tech tree, or just use those resources to buy back your followers if enemies breach your defenses. The game holds true to the studio's goal of making titles that fit on one screen; there is no scrolling around to different key points on the map, and all of the action is always visible.



Wipeout HD

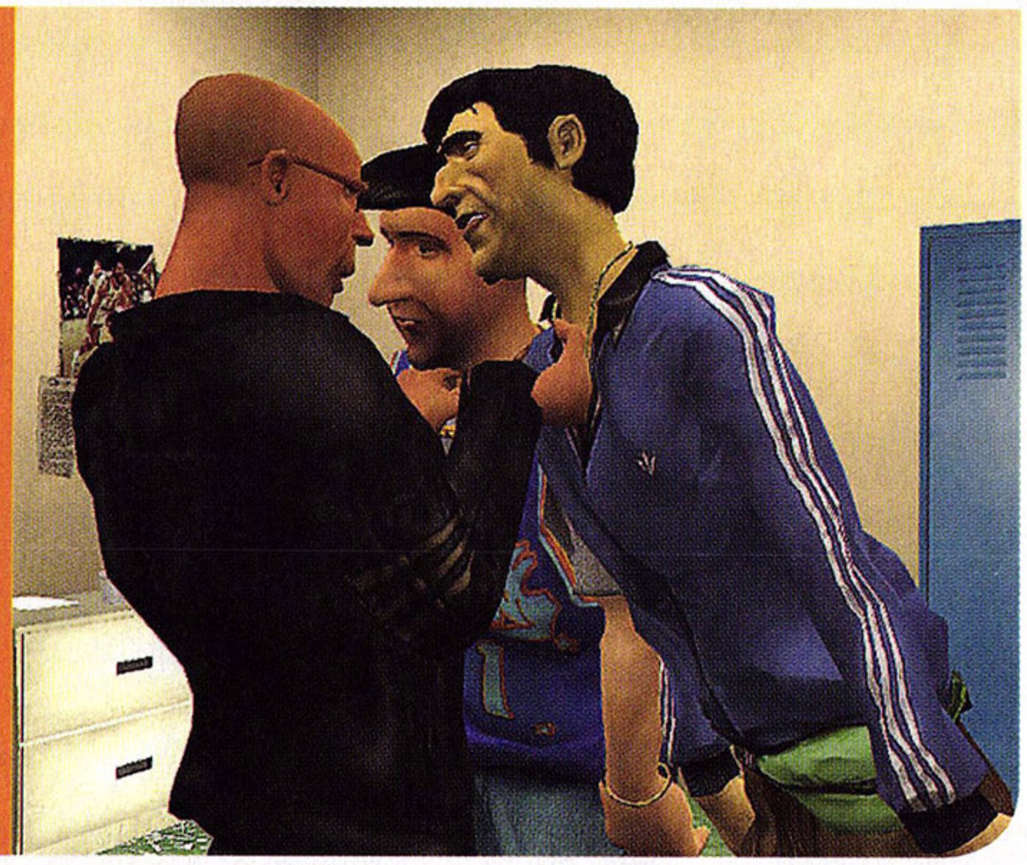
Developer: SCE Studio Liverpool
Release: December

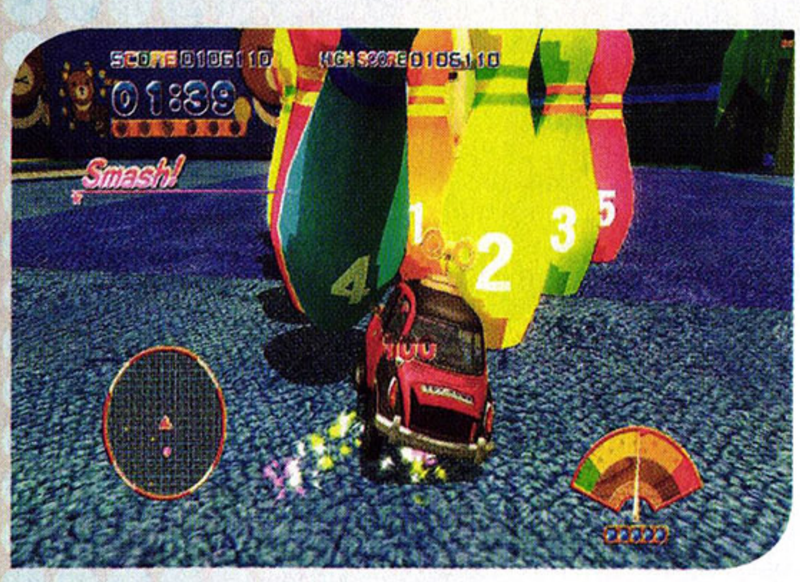
There is a full-fledged next-gen version of Wipeout on the way, but futuristic racing fans can grab this version to hold themselves over. The eight tracks are meant to be a "best of" compilation from previous Wipeout titles, and will integrate new weapons and seven modes of play. Up to eight players can race at once, and the action promises to be smooth since the game will run in 1080p and at 60fps. All of that is just the initial offering; in the future, Wipeout HD will feature new ships and tracks as downloadable content. The team at Studio Liverpool is even hoping to allow you to use MP3 files from your hard drive for the soundtrack.

Rat Race

Developer: Super-Ego
Release: December

Tapping into the workplace malaise of popular shows like *The Office*, Rat Race is an episodic adventure game about nine-to-five drudgery. The first episode begins as protagonist Tina Brooks begins her new job at Bigg Co., a sinister business conglomerate. Gameplay is intended to feel like an interactive sitcom; Tina gets trapped in awkward conversations, is sent on pointless errands, and must pretend to like certain people to get ahead. Gamers can report for duty in December, episode two hits a month later in January, and three will follow in February.





Toy Home

Developer: Game Republic
Release: January

If you were a kid that only built castles out of blocks for the satisfaction of smashing the precarious structure with a dumptruck, then Toy Home is for you. Exclusively using motion controls, players steer a wind-up car through seven tracks spanning kitchens and playrooms, crashing into everything along the way. Every block, toy, and doo-dad is powered by the Havok physics engine, so items in your path will scatter and bounce believably, knocking over other junk in the process.

Go! Sports Ski

Developer: Yukes • Release: October

Go! Sports Ski is exactly what it seems to be: a rather simplistic downhill skiing game. There are only two tracks, but since each one contains numerous shortcuts and alternate paths, it will take multiple runs to explore your options and find an optimal path. You'll find more replay value in multiplayer, which supports two players in split-screen and four online.

Continuing Trends

Once a game goes live on PlayStation Network, it isn't necessarily the end of the story. Amid the all-new content that is hitting, here's a sneak-peek at two expansion packs on the way for two of the most successful PSN games.

Flow Expansion

Developer: Supervillain Studios
Release: December

Original Flow developer That Game Company has its hands full with Flower, so Supervillain Studios has taken up the reins. A new playable creature, the Puffer, has been added to the mix this time around. A new soundtrack is also in the works, and the multiplayer mode will now allow each player to control a different creature.

Warhawk Expansion

Developer: Incognito
Release: December

There aren't any screens available yet, but we saw an early version of this expansion pack in action. The big news is the addition of a new vehicle: the dropship. Armed with six missile turrets and the ability to pick up ground vehicles (like tanks), the dropship will definitely change the face of battle – so much so that previous zones will be modified slightly to integrate the new vehicle.

⚠ WARNING: Use Extreme Destruction

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XBOX 360 LIVE

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MATURE 17+

Blood
Drug Reference
Intense Violence
Strong Language

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PLAYSTATION 3

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IN-STORES NOVEMBER 2007

Which Console Is Right For You This Holiday Season?

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With three powerful and attractive consoles out on the market, it can be a challenge to choose which one is right for you if you're getting into games for the first time, coming back after a long absence, or purchasing for a child or other family member. Take a look at our quick primer on the subject, and go to Game Informer Unlimited to check out our complete list of game releases planned for each system. It should be noted that all the games we mention here are available now or are planned for release before the end of 2008 (about a year from now).

SYSTEM	XBOX 360	PS3	Wii
Marquee Titles	For a huge amount of variety, and a spread of titles that appeal to all ages and experience levels, the 360 is a great choice. Major exclusive titles include Halo 3, Mass Effect, Halo Wars, Fable 2, Gears of War, Blue Dragon, Lost Odyssey, and Crackdown. Non-exclusive titles include BioShock, Madden NFL 08, Grand Theft Auto IV, Guitar Hero III, Rock Band, Assassin's Creed, Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare, Fallout 3, Resident Evil 5, Devil May Cry 4, Burnout Paradise, and the Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion.	The PS3 has an excellent selection of games that are also available on the 360, but few of the exclusive titles for the PS3 have been as strong as they could have been. Major exclusive titles include Resistance: Fall of Man, Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots, Final Fantasy XIII, LittleBigPlanet, Killzone 2, Uncharted: Drake's Fortune, Ratchet & Clank Future, and Heavenly Sword. Non-exclusive titles include Madden NFL 08, Grand Theft Auto IV, Guitar Hero III, Rock Band, Assassin's Creed, Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare, Fallout 3, Resident Evil 5, Devil May Cry 4, Burnout Paradise, and The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion.	Most gamers will concede that the many games that are available on all three systems play worst on the Wii, due to the lowered quality of both the graphics and the occasionally incongruous controls. Games made exclusively for the Wii are where the system shines, and Nintendo has some of the biggest exclusive licenses around. Major exclusive titles include The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess, Super Paper Mario, Metroid Prime 3: Corruption, Super Mario Galaxy, Super Smash Bros. Brawl, Mario Kart, and Wii Sports. Non-exclusive titles include Madden NFL 08, Guitar Hero III, Rock Band, and Rayman: Raving Rabbids.
Downloadable Games	Dozens of smaller original and classic games are available for download on Xbox Live Arcade. Among the best are Geometry Wars: Retro Evolved, Pac-Man Championship Edition, Castlevania: Symphony of the Night, Lumines Live, Bejeweled 2, and Puzzle Quest.	While not yet as impressive a library as the 360, the PS3 is rapidly building up a nice collection of downloadable titles that within a few months could give Xbox Live Arcade a run for its money. Some of the most noteworthy are Flow, Warhawk, Everyday Shooter, Blast Factor, and Super Stardust HD.	For classic old-school games, the Wii has you covered with its Virtual Console. Boasting downloadable games from the original NES, the SNES, the Genesis, and the Turbo-Grafx 16 all the way up to N64 games, it's a treasure trove of old favorites. It doesn't have any new content of much worth, though. For that classic vibe, you can download Super Mario Bros., Punch-Out!!, Metroid, The Legend of Zelda, Donkey Kong Country, Mario Kart 64, Sonic the Hedgehog, and dozens of others.
Movies	A built in DVD player works great, but you'll need to shell out another $180 for the high-def experience of the attachable HD-DVD player.	Capable of playing both normal DVDs and Blu-ray, this is the clear choice for home theater enthusiasts for whom games are only a secondary concern.	Hopefully, you have a separate DVD player connected to your TV. The Wii doesn't support disc-based films at this time.
Online	Of the three major consoles, Microsoft has the most fleshed out online strategy. Xbox Live is incredibly flexible, easy to use, and offers seamless support for online gaming, in addition to delivering easily accessible game demos, videos, movies, and TV shows.	A free online service delivers smooth online play, and this feature will only get better in the coming months with the introduction of Home, a virtual world where you can gather with friends and interact.	The Wii has online support, but only supports Wi-Fi out of the box. It also has a clumsy method of connecting with friends, and only a few games that support online in any genuine way.
Youth Appeal	**Moderately High.** The availability of numerous simple Live Arcade games, as well as a large libary of kid-targeted games like LEGO Star Wars, Cars, and Viva Piñata make it a great system for kids. Online play can be pretty shady for the youngest players, but some good parental controls help eliminate the issue if you're concerned.	**Moderately High.** A few strong downloadable games are good for younger audiences, and the full library of old PSone and PS2 games will play on the PS3. Almost all the familiar sports titles are available for the PS3. The popular Singstar karaoke experience is great for little singers, and the PlayStation Eye camera should deliver some neat ways for children to interact with their games. You'll want to investigate the helpful parental control options before sending your kids online, and be aware of the built-in web browser.	**High.** You don't need us to tell you that kids can't get enough of the crazy motion-controls of the Wii. Great family get-together games like Wii Play, Rayman: Raving Rabbids, Boogie, and Excite Truck are all a lot of fun in limited doses, while the presence of Mario and Pokémon are perrenial favorites you won't find anywhere else. One bright side of the poor online support is that parents won't need to worry too much about bad experiences playing games online, but be aware that the Wii has a fully functioning web browser.
Future Proof?	**Moderately High.** The 360 has some powerful tech in it, but the lack of built in high-definition movie support may make it the wrong choice for some. It has also been plagued by hardware failures. Thankfully, a strong warranty offers at least some insurance.	**Moderately High.** The Blu-ray player gives a lot of life to this system, and most agree that its technology is the most forward-looking in terms of delivering high-end graphics. However, the system needs to prove itself with a few more killer game titles before it can claim to be the system to carry you for the next 10 years.	**Moderately Low.** The Wii has captured the attention of the country with its fun motion controls and simple party games. However, the technology behind the system isn't great, and it's hard to see it having the endurance to last many years.
Price	**Moderately High.** The 360 doesn't come cheap, especially once you factor in the yearly cost of Xbox Live Gold membership, which you really should spring for if possible.	**High.** The PS3 is the most expensive system available today. With that said, you are getting an excellent built in Blu-ray player and free online service included with the cost of entry.	**Moderately Low.** Nintendo has wisely priced their system within the grasp of most families in America. In addition, it's noteworthy that individual games are usually around $10 less apiece than the other two systems.
The Big Picture	Microsoft's console remains the machine of choice for most hardcore gamers at the moment, even if the machine's failure rates are a major frustration. A great library of games and a fantastic online strategy are the system's strong points.	The PS3 is an impressive piece of technology. It runs quiet, it looks great (both the box and the games it delivers), and it's an ideal choice for a movie player in any home theater. On the game side, it has yet to prove its superiority over Microsoft's machine, and doesn't have the quirky innovation of the Wii.	This is a clear winner for families with young children and gamers who love their old-school characters like Mario and Zelda. Its motion controls are innovative and extremely exciting at first, but the tech behind the games themselves is lacking, and delivers graphics far inferior to either of its competitors. It also has almost no true multimedia capabilities.

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LOOSE TALK

Hot Gaming Gossip

HERE WE GO AGAIN!

Square Enix's Crisis Core: Final Fantasy VII for PSP has us thinking of Final Fantasy VII – and not just because Crisis Core is a prequel to the classic PSone title. If you beat Crisis Core, start it up, and beat the game again, you'll see the Final Fantasy VII PS3 tech demo from E3 2005 with the words, "To be continued in Final Fantasy VII." While it makes sense to show this trailer and this message because Crisis Core is a prequel, it's a little odd that they'd show you footage from what Square Enix says is not a game, but just a tech demo. Is this game for PS3 actually being made? Well, we can't say we feel any closer to the truth, unfortunately.

LEGENDS TO RETIRE?

Football gamers everywhere cheered when developer Visual Concepts announced that it was coming back to the sport with All-Pro Football 2K5. But if game sales are to be believed – and they range from okay to not good – All-Pro and its legends might be put out to pasture. Early speculation from sources is that the game's got a 50-50 chance of returning for another

WHAT'S NEXT FOR BUNGIE?

By now you've likely finished the single-player for Halo 3, and astute eyes have picked up on what might be an indicator for Bungie's next project. The company may be going back to the beginning and resurrecting the Marathon series for a full next-gen experience. The original intent was for the Master Chief and Marathon's protagonist to be one in the same, with the first Mac game taking place 250 years after Halo. In Halo 3 there are other hints, such as the game's ending and a Marathon-related Achievement.

PIKMIN COMING TO Wii?

Nintendo keeps rolling on the patents, this latest batch from Japan includes the following names: Mii Contest Channel, Nintendo Magic, Wii Body Controller, Mii Audition, Wii Handle, and Soma Bringer. Also included in this latest round of patents is a renewal of Pikmin.

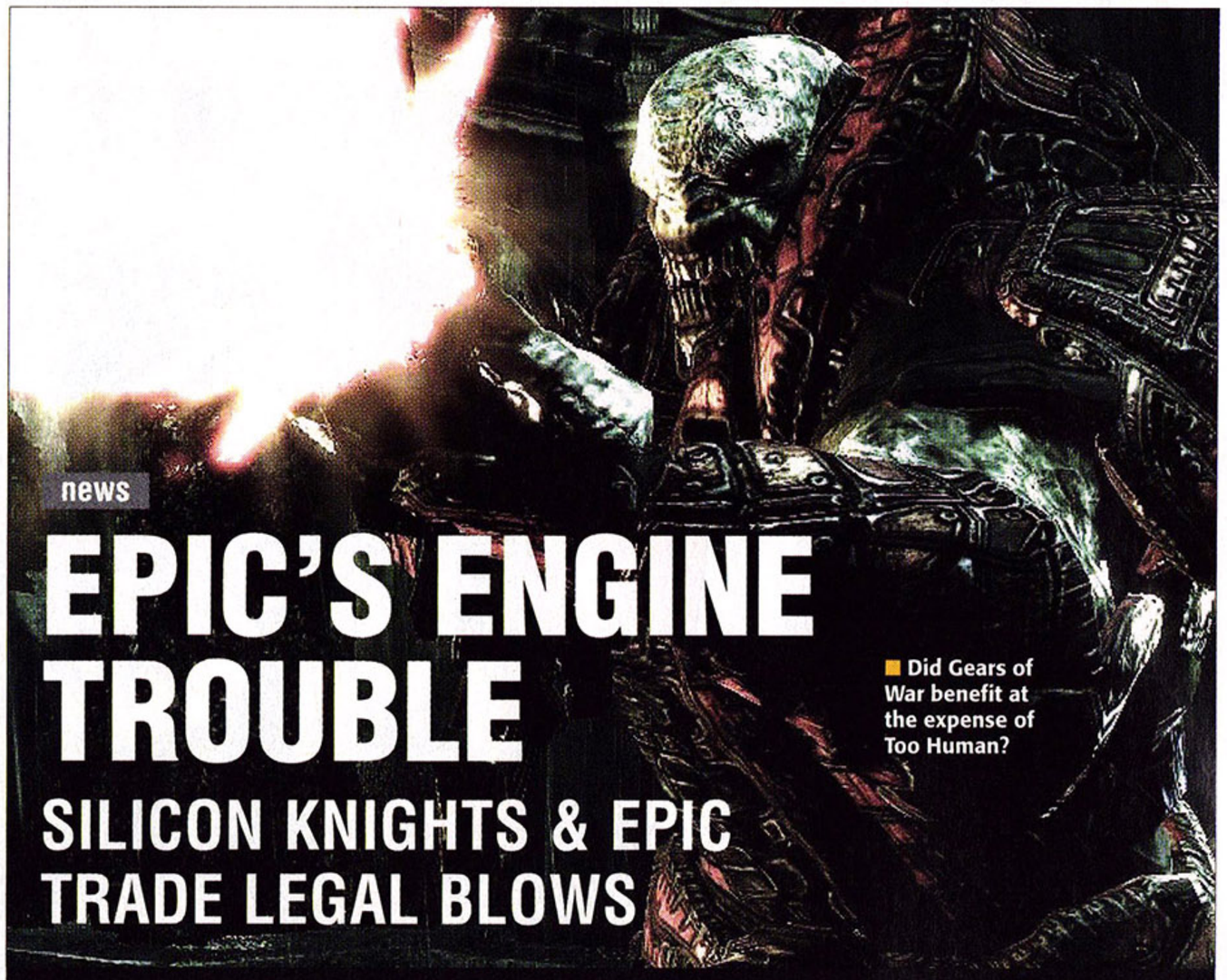
Got some insider info? Email us at loosetalk@gameinformer.com and we'll be all ears.

NAME THAT GAME

Test Your Sight

This month's Name That Game doesn't sound or look like a business sim, but it is. This Xbox Live Arcade game came out close to the system's launch, and it tasks you with helping your customers and creating profit via space stations that you build attachments upon. The key is being able to maintain the balance between power, profit, and repair concerns. The original version of this game came out for PC in 1994.

(Answer on page 60)



news

EPIC'S ENGINE TROUBLE

■ Did Gears of War benefit at the expense of Too Human?

SILICON KNIGHTS & EPIC TRADE LEGAL BLOWS

Silicon Knights and Epic are waving briefcases at each other after Silicon Knights filed a lawsuit against Epic regarding that company's Unreal Engine 3 and how Silicon believes it has hampered development of Too Human. Epic has since tried to dismiss the lawsuit, and in return, Silicon Knights has even attempted to dismiss Epic's own motion to dismiss.

"Silicon Knights Took Epic On Its Word"

Silicon Knights suit charges that Epic was supposed to deliver the fully functional engine before March 2006, but it did not show up until November 2006. Because it didn't have the full engine on time, the Canadian developer says it hampered Too Human's E3 showing in May of 2006 – which was not well received at the industry event. Instead, the developer says that Epic was too focused on Gears of War's showing at E3 – where media like *Game Informer* awarded Gears of War Game of the Show accolades – to the detriment of partners like Silicon Knights.

Part of Silicon's complaint involves the fact that it believes Epic didn't provide enough support for the engine, including the belief that Silicon was not made aware that Epic would not be providing engine updates. In court documents found by Gamasutra, Silicon says that had it known that updates wouldn't be coming, it "would never have executed the purported license to the engine in the first place."

Finally, Silicon denies that it was trying to build a competing engine for sale to others like Epic contends. Silicon says it does not have the resources to undergo its own licensing program. However, because of the problems with Epic's engine, Silicon Knights was forced to start on building its own engine for Too Human in May of 2006, which it says "is completely independent of Epic's engine and certainly derives no benefit from the unworkable source code provided by Epic."

■ Who is to blame for Too Human's poor E3 2006 showing?

The Case for the Defense

For its part, Epic denies Silicon Knight's charges, stating, "We continue to be committed to fully defending against Silicon Knights' unfounded allegations. Having exploited Epic's intellectual property to its advantage, Silicon Knights now seeks to renege on its payment obligations under the license agreement."

Epic refutes Silicon Knights' understanding of the due date for the engine, saying that it was not required to deliver a "fully operational" engine by March 2006, rather Epic was only obligated to "demonstrate" that the engine would work on the Xbox 360. Epic produced email messages that purported to show how Epic was updating Silicon Knights on the engine's realistic status.

In general, Epic says it simply has no reason to cheat the Too Human developer since under the license agreement between the two, Epic would only stand to monetarily benefit from the game being successful.

It remains to be seen how this legal sparring will be resolved, but in an age where more and more publishers and developers utilize engines such as Epic's, bad relations between licensor and licensee could have wide-ranging impact on the industry.

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TALKIN' 'BOUT A REVOLUTION!

A NEW GENERATION OF SOCIALLY CONSCIOUS DEVELOPERS ARE BRINGING POLITICS TO GAMING

Throughout their history, video games have provided us with a dazzling number of ways to escape the drudgery of our daily lives. Whether it's engaging in epic battles with the Flood exploring the magical realms of Hyrule, or testing our skills in a packed NFL arena, games give us the chance to experience things that would never be possible for us in the real world. But does this have to be the case? For decades, other mediums – be it books, film, or music – have dealt head-on with some of their day's most controversial political and social issues, often affecting real changes in public opinion. As video games become today's dominant medium, an increasing number of independent game developers are hoping to make video games a powerful force for social and political change.

At the center of this growing movement is Games For Change, a non-profit organization that helps to organize and foster a community of game designers that are attempting to use interactive experiences to help educate and influence on political topics ranging from immigration to the environment. Started in 2004 as a sub-group of the Serious Games Initiatives (a larger foundation that focuses more broadly on educational, health, and social uses for gaming), Games for Change holds an annual festival that highlights some of the most notable activist-oriented games of each year, as well as panel discussions that feature many of the political gaming scene's developers, critics, and scholars. Since its first conference in 2004, which hosted only 40 people, the organization's listserv now boasts well over 1,000 members.

Although gamers are often skeptical of attempts to inject politics or social commentary into the medium, Suzanne Seggerman, president and co-founder of Games for Change, feels that the games can sometimes be the most ideal way to illustrate a complicated issue.

"I think that they're really good for exploring complex systems," observes Seggerman. "Film is really a single narrative; a game allows users to fiddle with different levers to see how various issues affect each other. That's incredibly powerful for issues like the environment or poverty or global conflicts, where there are many variables that are dependent on each other. Say you are thinking about the environment and you want to explore what happens if you turn your light off everyday for a year. What happens when an entire city keeps their lights off when they go to work for a year? At the same time, let's say they stop using their hoses and sprinklers. You can fiddle with all sorts of outcomes and see what effect that has on the weather or what effect that has on the water level in a way that a film isn't always able to do."

For Ian Bogost, founder of Persuasive Games, one of political gaming's most respected developers, games have an ability to help us see different sides of an issue more powerfully than other media. "[There's the] experiential nature of games; the idea of taking on a role in which your behavior is constrained in the way that we've defined the system around you. That's something that's really powerful. All video games do this. But most of the time, that's a very powerful role or a fantasy role. Instead, we can imagine playing a role of someone who is divested of power or is in a situation that is very different from our own. So we have the potential to create a tremendous amount of empathy in. That's a yet-untapped power of the medium, because we focus so much on escapism."

The fruits of this philosophy are demonstrated in the wide variety of (largely free) games that embrace political or social agendas currently available on the Internet. Some, like the very popular Darfur is Dying, which raises awareness about the current genocide occurring in the Sudan, are little more than brief minigames. Others, like Persuasive Games' Oil God or the United Nations-sponsored Food Force, poignantly illustrate the international oil market and humanitarian aid efforts through fairly robust, SimCity-style gameplay. Breakthrough's ICED: I Can End Deportation, criticizes U.S. immigration laws by allowing players to live the life of an illegal alien in a proper 3D environment.

Of course, the mere fact that a medium many Americans see as trivial is embracing such touchy subjects has led to controversy. Early this year, organizers pulled Super Columbine Massacre RPG, a 16-bit style recreation of the tragic school shootings, from the annual Slamdance festival's Guerilla Gamemaker Competition, causing many other

developers to withdraw their games in protest. More recently, a Fox News piece on ICED raised concerns that the game demonizes the U.S. Immigration Service and helps give "tips" on how to avoid immigration laws.

However, Ian Bogost feels these controversies say more about how many in the mainstream media think about video games than they do about the games themselves. "The sad truth is that there is a very low level of video game literacy in the general public and certainly in the mass media," comments Bogost. "It's the problem of misunderstanding of what games are and what it means to play a role in a game.... You're exploring the constraints around them and the experience of someone else – all that good stuff. The whole idea of making a game about Columbine or a game about a [serious] topic that seems that it would be at odds with the very notion of video games. It's really important that we resist that, because if video games are a true form of art then no topic should be off limits; just like no topic is off limits to the written word or to film."

"[Games are] really good for exploring complex systems...[they] allow users to fiddle with different levers to see how various issues affect each other."

– Suzanne Seggerman, Games for Change

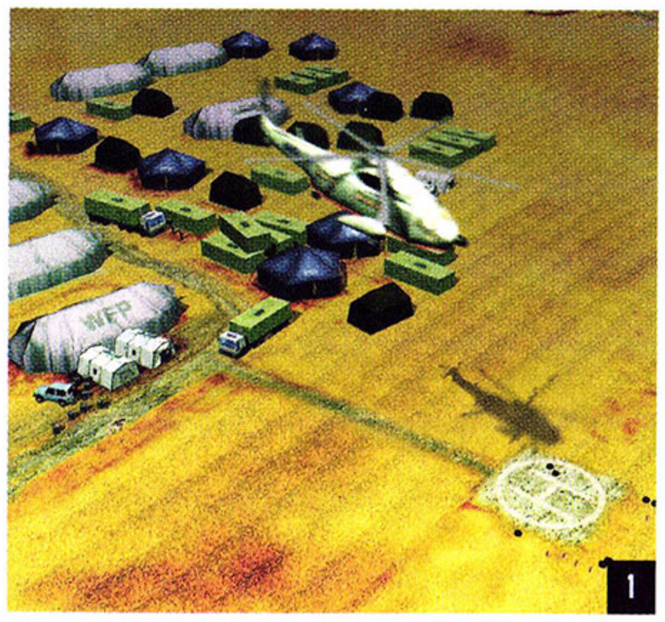
However, with this increased media attention also comes the opportunity for political games to take their message to a larger audience. Seggerman notes that Darfur is Dying and Food Force have both been played over a million times. In addition, Games for Change recently announced a partnership with Microsoft for the Xbox 360 Games for Change Challenge, which will provide students in more than 100 countries a chance to create a game based on the theme of global warming using Microsoft's XNA Game Studio Express software. Winners will receive cash awards to be used for their education, as well as the chance to present their entries to Microsoft for inclusion on Xbox Live Arcade.

"What's really exciting is that we're not just going to support a new series of Xbox games about the environment, but we're going to seed a whole bunch of game ideas across the world," comments Seggerman. "Most of these kids have never heard about serious games or thought about serious games. It's a great opportunity to reach out and empower a new generation of gamemakers."

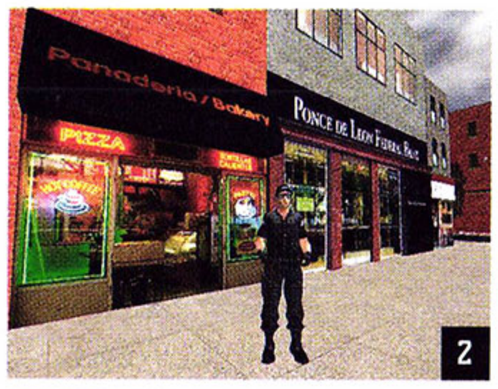
However, despite the increasing attention, Ian Bogost remains a bit more skeptical about partnerships like this, fearing that the messages will become tempered as corporate involvement increases. "We've had a number of conversations with [Microsoft] over the years, and I think they're afraid of politics in games," he comments. "I think they don't want to touch it; or, if they are going to do it, they want to be watered down and very safe. I'm not willing to do that. Moreover, I'm not willing to let the licensors dictate the kind of work I do. The whole first-party licensing regime is really a problematic one. It's difficult for a lot of reasons, but I think it's one of the factors that creates tensions between us and the commercial industry."

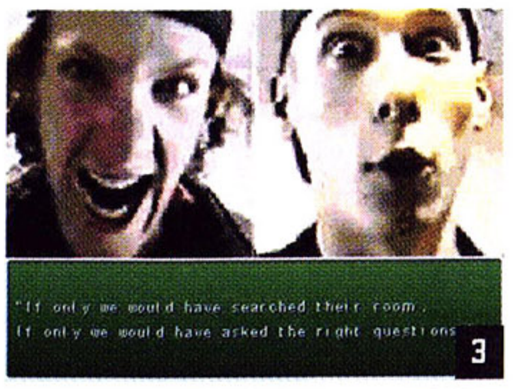
However the relationship between the mainstream U.S. video game industry and political gaming scene ends up, it's clear that gaming as a whole is quickly rejecting the notion that it shouldn't deal with serious, real-world topics. Although at times critical of the industry, Bogost singles out a number of games like Grand Theft Auto, BioShock, and Will Wright's Sim games as examples of big budget titles that manage to include some degree of social commentary within an entertainment context. Looking forward, he hopes that the work that companies like Persuasive Games are doing will someday help propel the industry towards more innovative and important games.

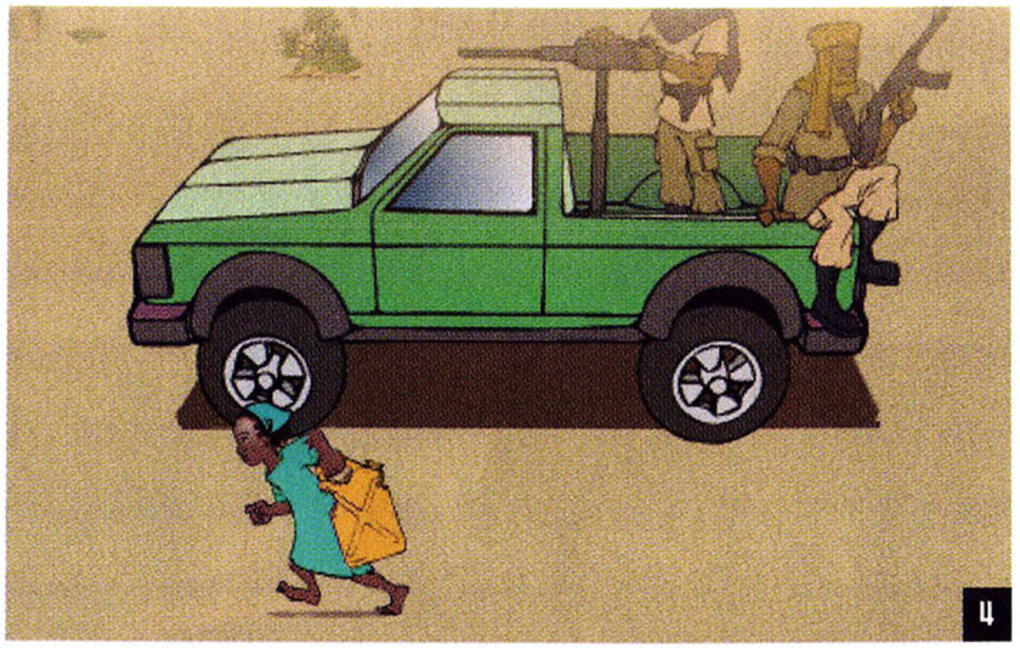
"I think that's it's actually vital that [gamers] recognize that pushing at the edges of the medium is something that helps everybody," observes Bogost. "It's not just that you stirred the pot by making a game about Columbine or that [it] shouldn't happen because then someone is going to try to legislate my ability to play Grand Theft Auto. That's very small thinking. We need more games and we need them to be more meaningful and socially relevant so the medium in general grows." ■ ■ ■

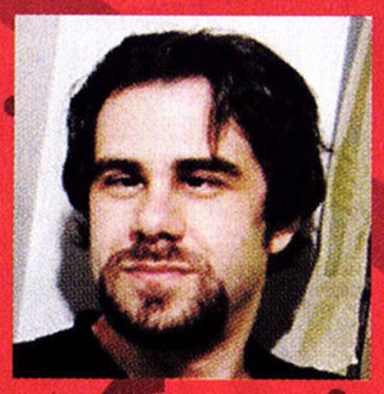


1 **Many government and charitable organizations are spreading their message through specially created games like the U.N.'s Food Force 2 Breakthrough's ICED: I Can End Deportation explores the tensions and problems surrounding illegal immigration in the U.S. 3 Super Columbine RPG caused a great deal of controversy when it was pulled from the Slamdance game festival 4 Darfur is Dying has been one of the most played political games released to date**







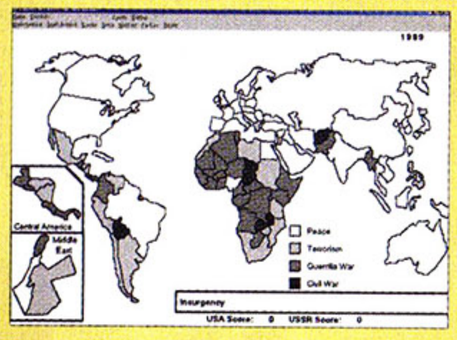


If video games are a true form of art then no topic should be off limits; just like no topic is off limits to the written word or to film.

– Ian Bogost, Persuasive Games

GAMES WITH A MESSAGE

Here are a few titles worth checking out as you begin to explore the world of political video games



BALANCE OF POWER

Both Ian Bogost and Suzanne Seggerman note Chris Crawford's Balance of Power, released in 1985, as the beginning of the serious games movement. The early PC title commented on the geopolitics of the Cold War, letting players assume the role of the U.S. or Soviet Union. Websites: http://www.erasmatazz.com, http://members.chello.at/theodor.lauppert/games/bop.htm

DISAFFECTED!

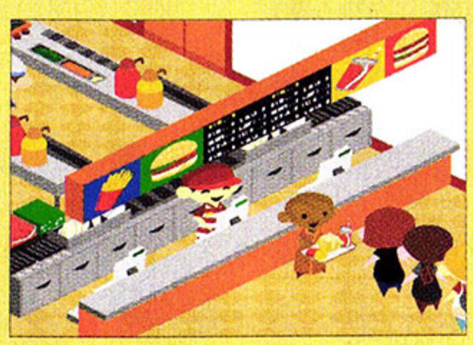
One of Persuasive Games' most successful titles, Disaffected! explores the often-maddening frustrations of the modern day service industry, forcing players to deal with working a particularly aggravating shift at a Kinko's copy center. Website: http://www.persuasivegames.com/games/

PEACEMAKER

This title makes a compelling game out of one of the world's most tragic political situations: the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. The strategy title weaves real pictures into the game, making it all the more poignant. Website: http://www.peacemakergame.com/

LOS DISNEYS

Created by artist Jay Kristopher Huddy, Los Disneys has recently been re-released for PC. Although Huddy stresses that he doesn't have an explicit political agenda, this game's violent sci-fi vision of a Disney-owned Florida is in a rich tradition of gonzo, satirical commentary on American culture. Website: http://www.losdisneys.com/



THE MCDONALD'S VIDEO GAME

This Italian title uses cartoonish graphics to portray the often vicious practices of the world's largest restaurant company. From plowing down rainforests to killing cattle in a slaughterhouse, the hamburger business can be as scary as anything in Manhunt. Website: http://www.mcvideogame.com/

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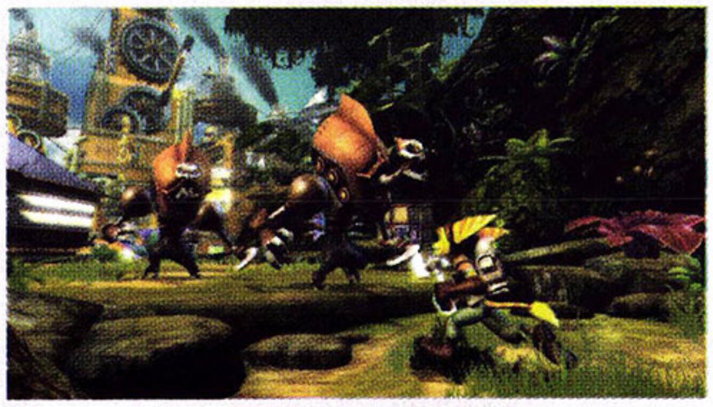

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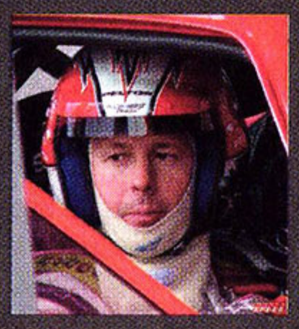


For over 10 years, Colin was part of the Codemasters family and it was a privilege to have a man recognized as a true legend on the team. He will never be forgotten by all at Codemasters.

– An excerpt from Codemasters' statement on the death of rally driver Colin McRae in a helicopter accident on September 17, 2007

■ The original Master of Magic, 1994

GOOD

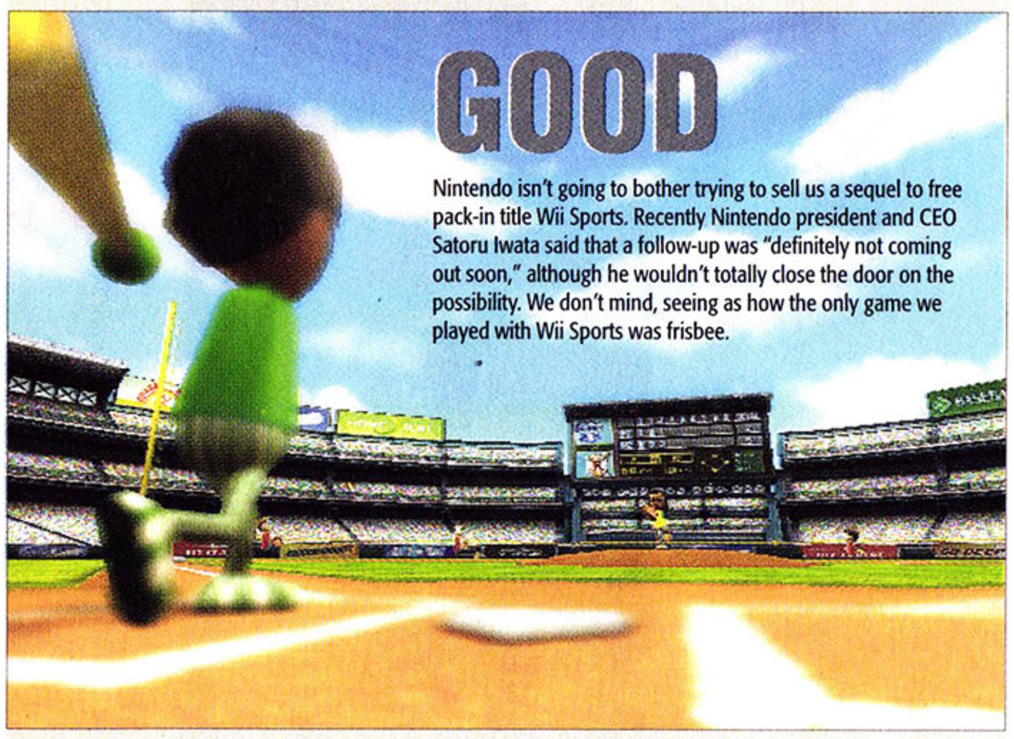
Stardock CEO and president, Brad Wardell, has assured fans that the company is going forward with a sequel to the cult turn-based strategy title Master of Magic. Wardell expects the game to hit shelves in 2009, and he says that Stardock plans to accept player-created mods which will be vetted and then downloadable to other players.

BAD

Games Media Properties has cancelled The World Series of Video Games after two years, including the remaining 2007 events in Los Angeles, London, and Sweden due to monetary concerns.

GOOD?

For the first half of this year, the Entertainment Software Association reports that it has spent $1.43 million on its lobbying efforts – a 24 percent increase from the latter half of 2006. The ESA has also said that it is tackling the issue of the taxation of virtual-property, but curiously has not stated which side it is on.



GOOD

Nintendo isn't going to bother trying to sell us a sequel to free pack-in title Wii Sports. Recently Nintendo president and CEO Satoru Iwata said that a follow-up was "definitely not coming out soon," although he wouldn't totally close the door on the possibility. We don't mind, seeing as how the only game we played with Wii Sports was frisbee.

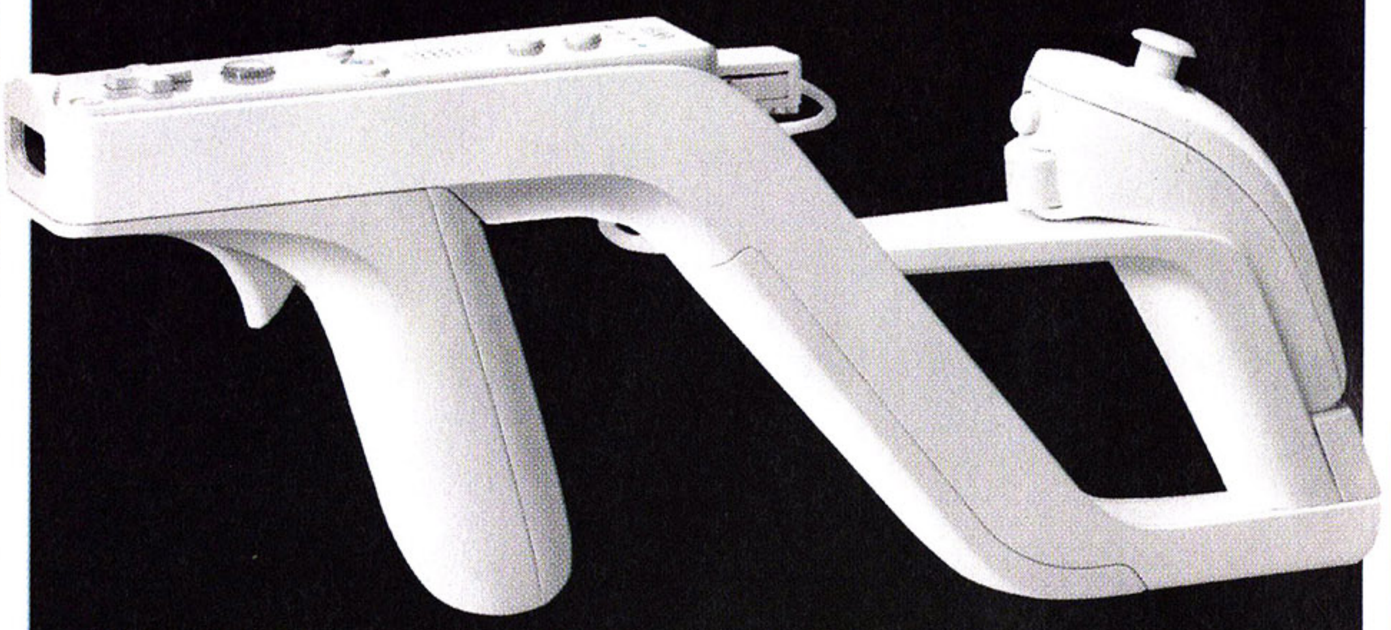
BAD

Shadowrun, Crimson Skies, and MechWarrior developer FASA Studio has closed its doors, with around half of the company's staff being relocated within Microsoft Game Studios. Microsoft acquired FASA in 1999.

games

NINTENDO ZAPPER PACKIN' HEAT

FREE GAME ANNOUNCED

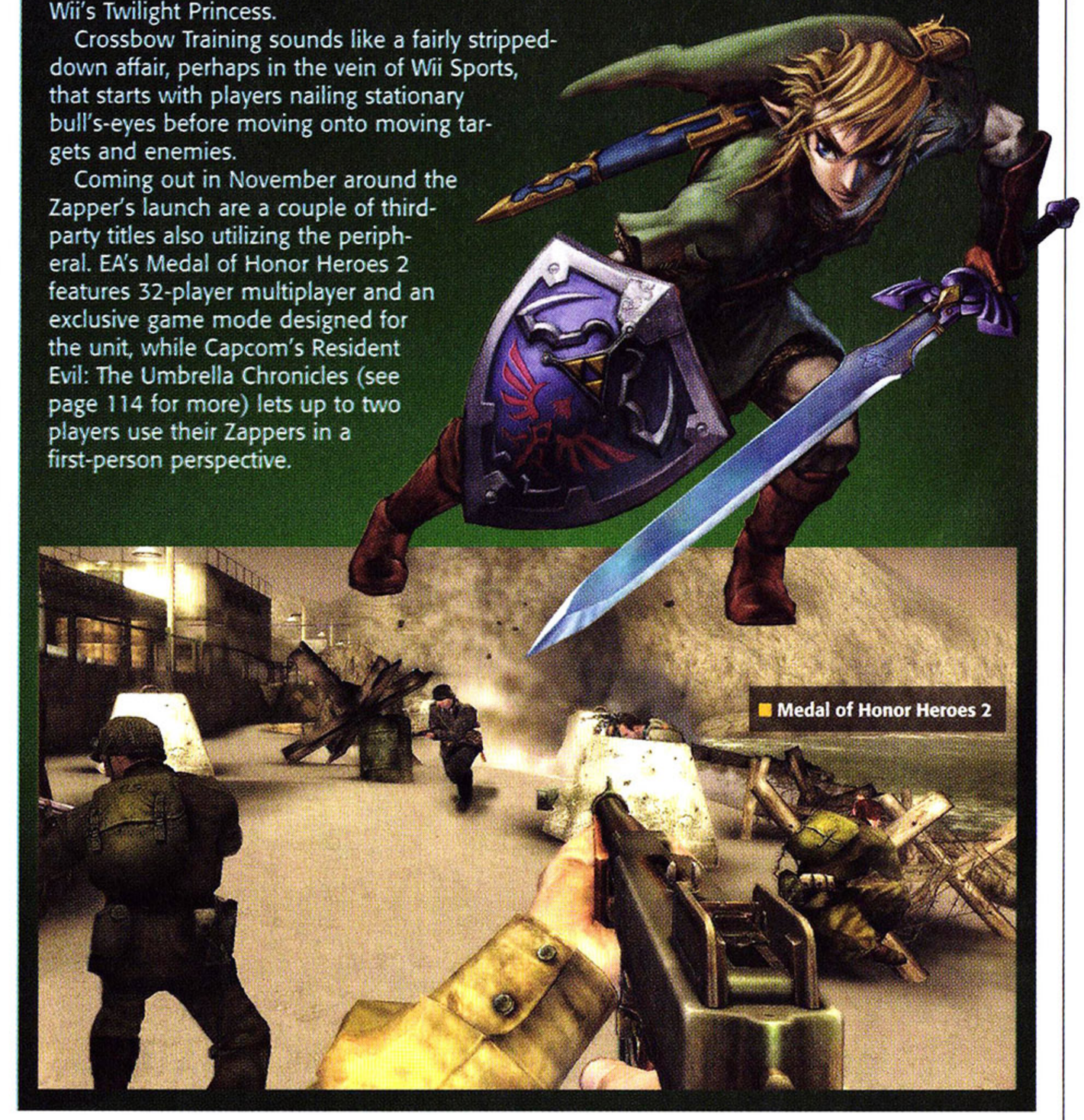


Nintendo's Wii Zapper gun peripheral was one of the few new announcements at the company's E3 press conference this year, and now Nintendo has stated that the Zapper will go on sale on November 19 for $19.99.

Since the unit's announcement, it was rumored that Nintendo would bring back NES's Duck Hunt – a title that seemed like a natural fit for the Zapper's gun functionality, which houses both the Wii Remote and Nunchuk controllers. The title does indeed revive an old classic, but it's The Legend of Zelda – not Duck Hunt. The Zapper will come with a pack-in game entitled Link's Crossbow Training, which, according to Nintendo, replicates the style of Wii's Twilight Princess.

Crossbow Training sounds like a fairly stripped-down affair, perhaps in the vein of Wii Sports, that starts with players nailing stationary bull's-eyes before moving onto moving targets and enemies.

Coming out in November around the Zapper's launch are a couple of third-party titles also utilizing the peripheral. EA's Medal of Honor Heroes 2 features 32-player multiplayer and an exclusive game mode designed for the unit, while Capcom's Resident Evil: The Umbrella Chronicles (see page 114 for more) lets up to two players use their Zappers in a first-person perspective.



■ Medal of Honor Heroes 2

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the top 10 worst-non-licensed-most-annoying-anthropomorphic-animal-mascots-with-'tude

In the early '90s, something terrible started to happen to our favorite cartoon characters. Marketing teams across the country were not happy to lose their favorite cereal sellers to a steadily aging audience, so in desperation they made a bad decision that would rattle through society for years to come. They made our cartoons radical, awesome, jazzy, and punky. Video game characters were not immune to this alarming trend. While these characters may have seemed hip during those angsty years when your mom was yelling at you about your hair color, the sad news is that they were never your friends.

1 Bubsy the Bobcat

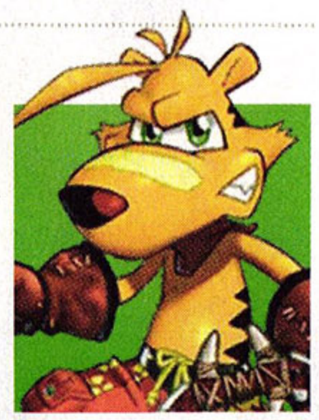
Bubsy was a small cat with big delusions of adequacy. He started off in a side scrolling platformer called Bubsy in Claws Encounters of the Furred Kind for the SNES and Genesis. Two sequels later he made one of the worst 3D games for the PlayStation. And a bad 3D game by 1996's standards is impressively appalling indeed. While the shirt may say "I'm an individual who bucks conventional fashion trends," that smile says "I'm secretly a kitten molester."

2 Blinx the Cat

Blinx was Microsoft's defunct mascot with no eye for fashion. Unfortunately, Blinx's time-bending gameplay was promising enough that it warranted a sequel, which turned out to be an even bigger disaster than the one before, cementing the nails in Blinx's coffin. There hasn't been a funeral yet (not that we'd attend), but we've been sending Microsoft emails for years telling them we'd approve of one.

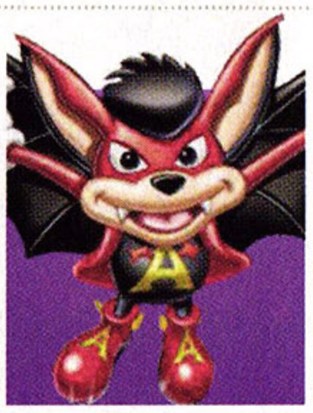
3 Awesome Possum

Awesome Possum's expert team of creators encapsulated everything important about the character into his design. The sick pit you get in the bottom of your stomach when you look at him is the exact same feeling you'd have if you were playing his game. It also happened to have one of the worst titles in history: Awesome Possum Kicks Dr. Machino's Butt! The game had activist undertones encouraging kids to clean up the environment, but opossums are trailer park dumpster rats. We think this opossum is actually the one thing teenagers hate most: a poser.



4 Ty the Tasmanian Tiger

During his trilogy of PS2 games, every time Ty opened his mouth and subjected his audience to that terrible accent he diminished the sum total of human intelligence by a small fraction. Ty's dress and demeanor were so ridiculous that it was probably culturally insulting to Australians everywhere, but since Ty also came across as a mindless dufus, most people laughed it off as an amusing antics of someone who didn't know any better.

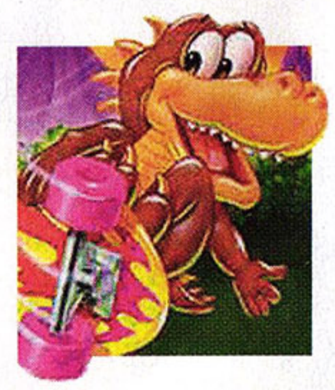


5 Aero the Acro-Bat

There was nothing right about Aero that even reincarnation could save. He had a sidekick named Zero the Kamikaze Squirrel and a villain who was even more absurd, an ex-clown named Edgar Ektor. Aero's 16-bit gameplay was almost as tired as the spunky-tempered protagonist fad that spawned him. He didn't just suck the lifeblood of happiness and joy out of everyone who played his game; he pretty much just sucked.

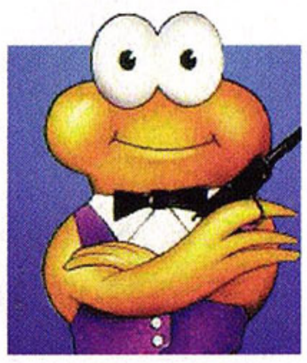
6 Punky the Skunk

Punky is a modest creature, with a lot of reasons to be that way. This PSone disaster wasn't even finished when it was released. And even though Punky was played off like this extreme-sports-loving Skunk full of attitude, if you actually played the game you'd know that that image is about as real as an American Idol winner's. What do you think it does to a mascot's self-esteem when its own developer has to lie about it to make it more attractive to children?



7 Radical Rex the Tyrannosaurus

We've never killed a videogame franchise, but we've taken great pleasure in many of their failures. Thus, Radical Rex was a source of great joy for us. Skateboarding can be radical, and breathing fire is defiantly radical (and quite possibly tubular), but a fire-breathing dinosaur that skates through graveyards and underwater caverns is a failed cartoon concept from the '80s. We'd like to know who lost a bet at Activision and had to make this game.



8 James Pond

James Bond is a pretty cool guy, so anything based on him is bound to have some factor of cool to it, but with diligence and hard work James Pond was able to overcome this issue. His early '90s platform-like game and its two sequels featured levels with names like "A View to a Spill" and "Leak and Let Die." Warning: the groans this game produced were known to induce intestinal disorders in many gamers.

9 Jazz Jackrabbit

Long before Gears of War came along, designer Cliff Bleszinski used his talents to create the freeware game Jazz Jackrabbit for Epic (then called Epic MegaGames). The game itself was pretty solid, but its 90-pound green alien star was not. We asked a twelve-year-old if they'd like to play a game where the main character was an odd amalgamation of Rambo and Bugs Bunny, and he slapped us.

10 Gex the Gecko

In their day Gex's games weren't really that bad, but they haven't aged well, and neither has Gex's smarmy, lizard-like sense of humor. Sure, back then he seemed pretty unique with his references to pop culture and movies. Now, he's just like some dude that won't stop quoting ancient *Caddyshack* quotes at a party. Sorry Gex, you're a dork and no amount of sunglasses-wearing will make us feel otherwise. Plus, we partially hold you to blame for those annoying Geico commercials. Oh Gex, so much to answer for.

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news

GUIDING GAME DEVELOPMENT

HOW EEDAR WANTS TO HELP THE INDUSTRY

With over 10 years in development and in the industry – including the fact that he was one of the original EverQuest designers – Electronic Entertainment Design and Research's (EEDAR) president and COO Geoffrey Zatkin wants to help developers and publishers help themselves.

Started two years ago, the EEDAR is a company comprised of researchers with an industry background that are using hard, quantifiable data to inform companies about games on the next-generation systems. By showing clients how factors such as ESRB rating, genre, online play, multiplayer, and other feature sets affect game sales and success, EEDAR hopes to help developers and publishers understand the market better so as to create titles that best serve their desired audience, including, as Zatkin points out, some niche areas that aren't being served.

Some highlights from EEDAR's recent *Console Intelligence Briefing 2007*, which uses 219 retail games and 187 downloadable games as part of its analysis in delivering 100 "key findings for the video game industry" include at right:

- 45 percent of all retail games and 65 percent of downloadable games are still not utilizing any online functionality
- Games which allow users to play with each other online earn close to twice that of those which do not
- With 154 titles, the Wii had more than twice the total number of game titles released (retail and download) than either the PlayStation 3 or Xbox 360 during the first seven months respectively of launching each platform, accounting for 38 percent of all games in the period
- Mature-rated retail game titles have both the highest average Metacritic Metascore (76) and the highest average gross sales in the U.S. at $18.5 million. This is despite not being offered for sale at some major retailers

If we can help somebody steer towards their core features, it then gives them more time to innovate because they know they have the basics taken care of.

– Geoffrey Zatkin, president and COO of Electronic Entertainment Design and Research

We talked with Geoffrey Zatkin about EEDAR, and how it is helping to improve video games. "I can't tell you the name of who it was, but I was working on a project a while ago. It was a licensed property, and going in we were like, 'Oh great, it's a licensed property. They are going to know who their target demographic is.' They had no clue. It's like, how do we make a game for you if you don't know what your people like?"

How did EEDAR start up and what are its aims?

One of the things that's always really frustrated me is that I've never been able to get hard data at the beginning of a game when we're building it. We get all these people with theories. It's like, "Oh, you're building one of those types of games. You have to have multiplayer or this type of character advancement." And it's always just opinion. It's some other designer, or some other publisher or executive coming in with their pet theory of the week. So, a lot of what we're setting out to do here is get quantifiable data, collect large amounts of it, and statistically back it up. We're not looking to tell people how to design a game, we're just looking to tell them how to not go in blind. There are a lot of base assumptions people have that we're going out and statistically saying, "Yes, this correlates; that doesn't." We want to be able to, when you're making a game, say, "Here's some stuff that's going to help you make it. The design is still up to you, but we're at least going to give you a real competitive advantage."

Are there grey areas where the research can't draw straight conclusions?

It's hard to always tell the difference between correlation and causation. For example, Mature-rated games per capita on [next-gen consoles] bring in more money. We're not necessarily saying that the Mature rating is what causes the game to make more money, but currently there is a correlation. The fact that they are Mature and make more money go hand in hand.

We know that the NPD retail sales data doesn't include sales numbers from some store chains. If you're using this data as fact, how do you account for the possibility that it might not be totally accurate?

What they do is they have mathematical models put together by economists who say, "Based on our sample size of this many chains, here's what we therefore expect the rest to be selling." In a lot of cases, that's good enough for us because we can get a correlation between how well a game does. Say they're off by a couple hundred thousand. In the long run, that really doesn't matter. We're getting fairly accurate volume of sales, and so far they've been pretty good to work with. They're not perfect – nobody's data collection is. That's actually been one of the interesting things when we started…was figuring out how often there were discrepancies between reputable sources. We want to make sure we're never presenting something that isn't factual.

But if the NPD sales numbers are off, could this discrepancy make the difference between whether a sequel is green-lit or not, for example?

It could. But we work with them, and they seem to be really good so far. But in some cases, the amount of revenue is just part of it. Say you are talking about a sequel. Part of it comes down to is, "What was your development cost?" Because if you get a game that pulls in $30 million dollars and it cost $40 million to make, obviously that's a no go. But if it was a $10 million game that made a three-to-one profit margin… There are a lot of factors other than just pure, raw money. But that being said, it always comes down to money on the publisher side [laughs]. Which is sad, but true, especially as the cost goes up. Talking about that, that's one of the things we're tracking. In six of seven months from now we really expect to be able to see correlations between sequels and other things for how a game did. What kind of effect did the branding have on it, etc.

TOP FIVES

Favorites From Industry Pros And GI Readers

DEVELOPER
STEVE STAMATIADIS
Creative Director, Krome Studios

1 **World of Warcraft: The Burning Crusade – PC**
2 **Lost Planet: Extreme Condition – Xbox 360**
3 **The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess – Wii**
4 **Elite Beat Agents – Nintendo DS**
5 **Power Stone Collection – PSP**

READER
JA'RON KIRKLAND
Layton, UT

1 **Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater – PS2**
2 **Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas – PS2**
3 **Tenchu Stealth Assassins – PSone**
4 **Street Fighter II – SNES**
5 **Final Fantasy VII – PSone**

Send Top Fives and a photo of yourself to:

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(attach digital picture)

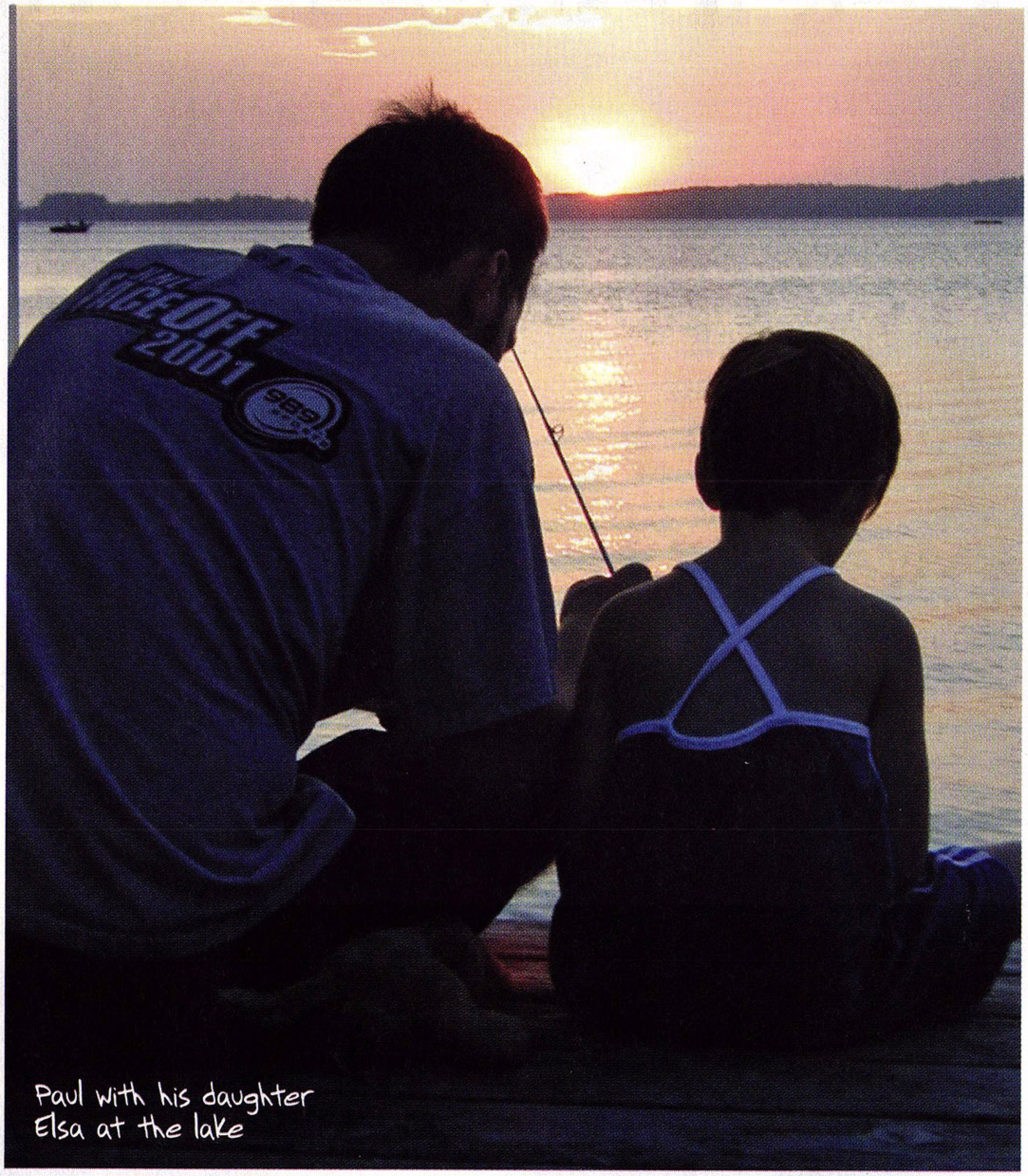
TOP TEN

Lists…Everybody Loves Lists…

GI's Top Ten Failed Get-Rich-Quick Schemes

10 Two Worlds Mountain Dew
9 Smuggled "Dullshack 3s" from China
8 Wii Play: Now Without Remote!
7 Producing *Tetris: The Live Action Motion Picture*
6 Tickle-Me Kratos Doll
5 "Men of Game Informer" 2008 Swimsuit Calendar
4 Solid Snake Chia Mustache – Watch it Grow!
3 Wii Smoking
2 LEGO Grand Theft Auto – Rated "E" For Everyone
1 N-Gage

Name That Game Answer: Outpost Kaloki X



Paul with his daughter Elsa at the lake

This August, Paul Anderson, friend and staff member of Game Informer magazine, passed away after a long battle with ALS, or as it is more commonly known, Lou Gehrig's disease.

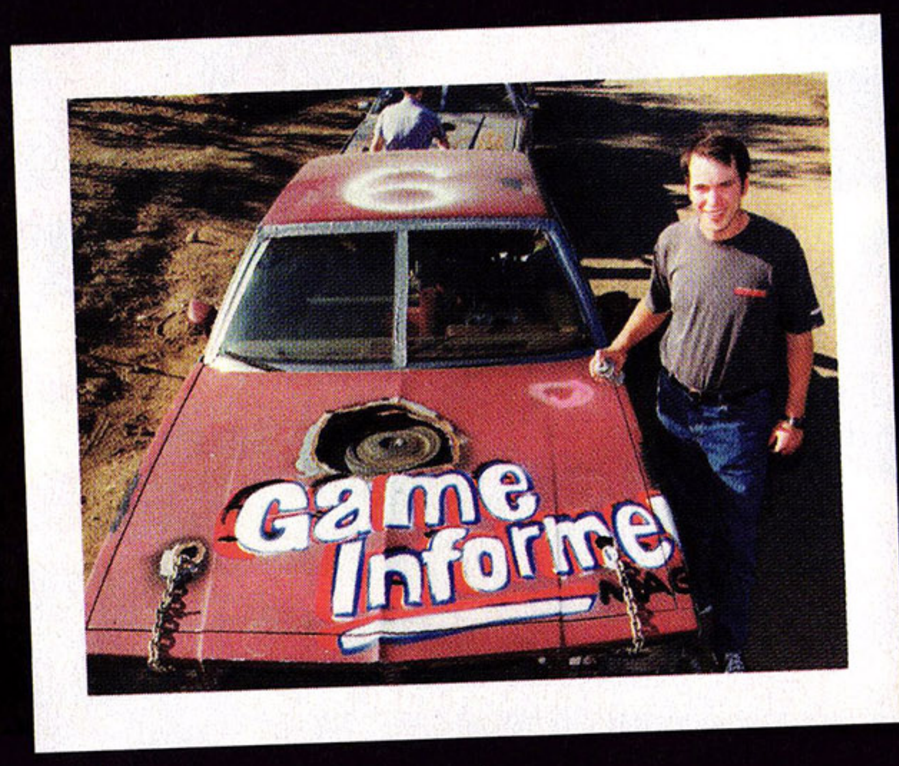
Paul began his career at Game Informer as a writer with issue number five in 1992, where he kept a watchful eye on the industry until he moved to the circulation department in 2001. As the circulation manager at Game Informer, Paul was instrumental in moving the magazine from its humble beginnings to the 23rd-largest consumer magazine in the country.

His contributions to our company and to our lives are unmatched. He was a dear friend, and will be greatly missed by all who were lucky enough to have known him. From Paul's classic reviews of Resident Evil to his involvement with our forum community, Game Informer would not be what it is today without his passion for games and gamers.

Paul was 38 years old, and leaves behind his wife Sarah, daughter Elsa, and son Beck. Words cannot express how much we love and will miss Paul.

To find out more about ALS or to help find a cure, please visit www.alsa.org. A fund has also been set up for Paul's family, and if you are interested in donating please make checks out to "Anderson Children Trust" and mail them to our offices at:

Game Informer
Attn: Anderson Children Trust
724 N. 1st St, 3rd Floor
Minneapolis, MN 55401



Paul at a Twisted Metal 4 event in 1999 where he got to play real-life demolition derby with a Game Informer car

in memoriam

paul anderson

1969 – 2007

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Games for Windows LIVE

DR. RICHARD MARKS

SENIOR RESEARCHER, SCEA R&D

>> A robotics scientist by trade, Richard Marks has become Sony's resident inventor of sorts, and is most known for the innovative and successful EyeToy. We spoke with Marks about his next-gen plans for the PlayStation Eye, and some of the exciting possibilities it will open up for gaming. <<

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

1990 ▶ Taking Flight

Marks graduates from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Originally a computer science major, Marks had switched to the more interesting field of avionics, working on airplane and spacecraft electronic control systems

1995 ▶ The Doctor

After a move west, Marks completes his PhD at Stanford, where he focused on the complex field underwater robotics

1995 ▶ Under the Sea

In partnership with Stanford, Marks does important work at the Monterey Bay Aquarium, where he helped researchers develop better control systems for underwater robots and automatic cameras to study aquatic life

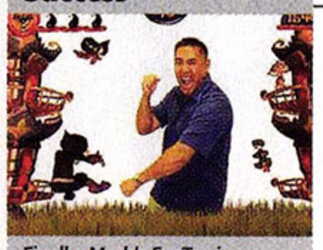
1996 ▶ Video Visions

Marks takes a position at the tech company Teleos. Here he helps develop powerful video processing software for the PC. Unfortunately, the company is purchased by Autodesk, which soon disbands the division that Marks worked in

1999 ▶ A New Horizon

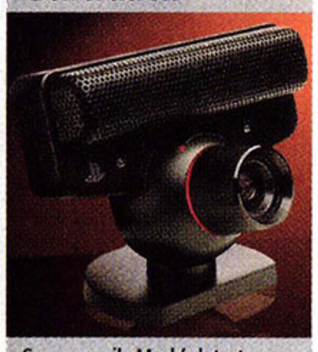
Sensing big opportunities on the new PlayStation 2, Marks joins Sony's internal research group. Here, with the full support of Phil Harrison, Marks begins working on the concepts that would become the EyeToy

2003 ▶ Eye Opening Success



Finally, Mark's EyeToy is a reality. The camera peripheral releases packed-in with the infectious party game EyeToy: Play. The title is one of the year's surprise hits, and goes on to sell millions of units worldwide

2007 ▶ The Next Generation



Sony unveils Mark's latest creation, the next-gen version of the EyeToy, dubbed the PlayStation Eye. The new unit, set to release on October 23, features increased resolution and tracking quality, and a powerful built-in microphone

We've seen the new version of the EyeToy for PS3. Can you talk about some of the technical aspects of the hardware that have been upgraded?

The new one is called the PlayStation Eye. We really wanted to make sure that all the features that were difficult to use with the EyeToy were addressed. The biggest difficulty is the low-light performance. If the lighting isn't good, the EyeToy is a really frustrating experience for people. So the design of the new one was to have as good low-light performance as we could get out of a low-cost camera. The next thing is that, once you start to get higher resolutions, compression effects start to become a bigger issue. We wanted to get rid of [that], so the new one puts out an uncompressed format. Those are the two biggest things, but it can also go to 120 frames per second.

But the human eye can't perceive the difference between 60 frames and 120 frames per second, correct?

Yeah, TVs don't even have the ability to display that. But the processor inside can see the individual frames and get an answer twice as often. It can use all of that extra data to create a smoother tracking experience. The biggest side-feature we added is the microphone array, which is the big bar across the top of it. It has four microphones, which gives you the ability to filter out noise and get a really great audio input signal.

Obviously the EyeToy was very successful with the Play series, using it for very brief minigames. Do you hope that developers will use the PlayStation Eye for deeper, more complex gaming experiences?

Some of the things the London group has been trying with it are different from the old games. The beauty of the old style [games] was that you could step in front of it and instantly know what to do. It's hard to make [a] deep game that is also accessible…. I do want to see something different with the new camera. There's already some new technology we have here that will hopefully get turned into some interesting products.

Could you give an example?

Well, for example, now that we have a higher resolution and no compression artifacts, you can track finer features much better. Now, we can track faces very well. We're actually leveraging technology from other parts of Sony; some of the digital still cameras have face detection built in now for doing autofocus. We've been bringing that into the PlayStation platform to do it for games.

So you'd be able to analyze facial expressions?

One thing you could do is expressions. But just knowing where the head is [located] is a huge piece of information. Once you know where the head is, you can figure out the rest of the body. Also, [you're] able to distinguish between different people from their faces.

Will this make it able to track body position more accurately?

If you could track the head as it leans to the left, you could effectively strafe your character in a first-person shooter. The camera is locked to your head, so these subtle movements of your head shift the camera. [It's] a really neat effect and gets rid of a set of buttons. It's very natural to just peek around the corner. Where it used too much power on the PS2 to actually be a used in a game, on the PS3 it could potentially be [viable].

> ***"I think of it as mixing the real and virtual worlds in a very seamless way."***

Sony has very ambitious plans for its Home online service. Are there plans to use the PlayStation Eye as a part of that?

Definitely. We currently already support A/V chat. The new camera already works with A/V chat, even though it's not available at retail yet. It provides a better experience than any other device we've supported so far, mostly because the audio quality is so good. We actually use it in our meetings every week with Japan – we have a video chat with them using a PS3. We use the camera for the audio as well. It's very convenient. Then, when you have a special device that allows you to do more video processing on top of that, we could do things that customize the video chat. There have been different things purposed, like where you could control an avatar instead of seeing live video, things like that. Other companies have done that on the PC, and we could definitely see that happening on the PlayStation 3.

As someone who's interested in alternative input ideas for video games, what's your take on what Nintendo has done with the DS and Wii?

I'm a fan of all these kinds of alternative technologies. This stems from when my parents had a video game retail store. Whenever we got a new peripheral for one of the game systems, like the Coleco hand controller, it was always a really exciting moment. I still think that these things breathe excitement into the platforms, even if they're not huge commercial successes. The Wii is great because it has been a commercial success for them. I think that it's very fun to use. It's interesting to me, because they put everything on the line and took a risk with a brand new input device. That's extremely risky. It's worked out and I think that's great, but I imagine it was a very difficult decision for them.

Sony has a lot of innovative games like LittleBigPlanet and Echochrome for the download service. Are you working on smaller experiences for EyeToy that might be available as downloads?

Definitely one of the plans for how to distribute content for the PlayStation Eye is the download service. It makes a lot of sense for minigames. Maybe you have a really good single minigame, but you don't want to make a full disc for it. Now, it can be available for download. I know that Worldwide Studios has been preparing some of those.

Where do you see your work evolving in the years to come? People have always fantasized about a "virtual reality" gaming experience; is that the ultimate endgame for you?

For me, the ultimate endgame isn't what people think of as virtual reality, where everything is completely artificial and you're completely submerged in an artificial world. I think of it as mixing the real and virtual worlds in a very seamless way. EyeToy is the most basic, simple example. There's a video of you and there are graphics pasted over the top of it as a game. But more interesting examples are what happens in movies now. In a very controlled way, they mix real actors with virtual things all the time and you can't tell the difference. That's a really powerful thing. My son, who is a really big Spider-Man fan, should be able to say, "Spider-Man!" and [suddenly] he's wearing a virtual Spider-Man costume and is able to shoot webs out of his hands. You can have this mixed reality experience. That's one of the things I'm striving to see happen.

Photo: Steve Skoll

LIVING OUTSIDE THE BOX

Richard Marks hopes the next-generation PlayStation Eye will open up a world of new possibilities for gaming both on- and offline

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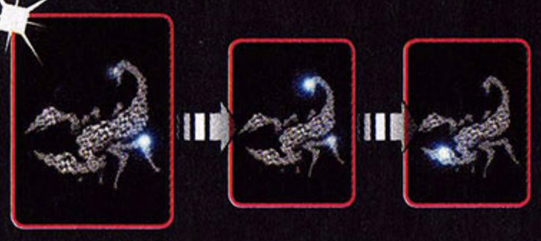
SCREENSAVERS

move7168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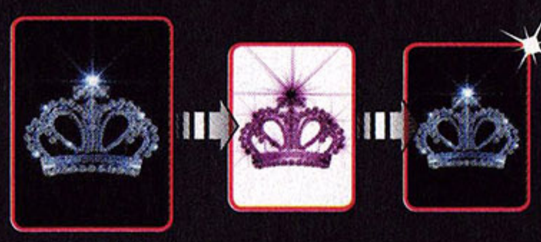
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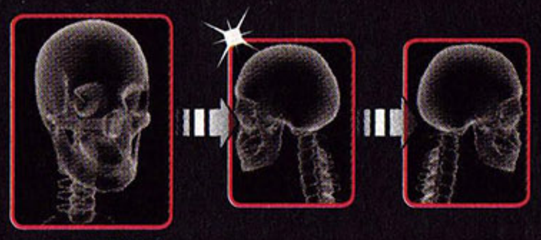
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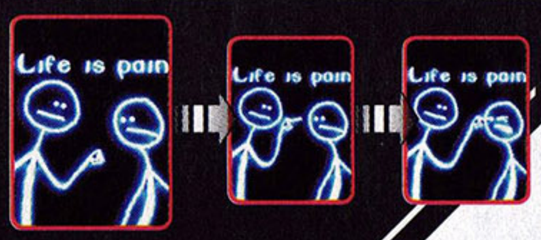

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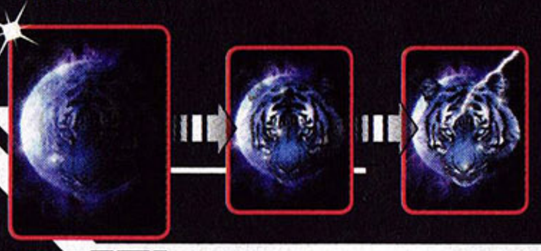
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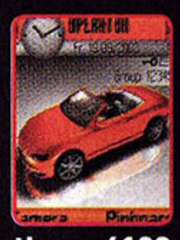

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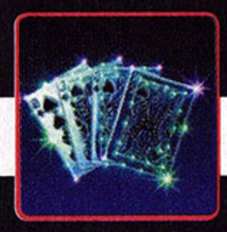
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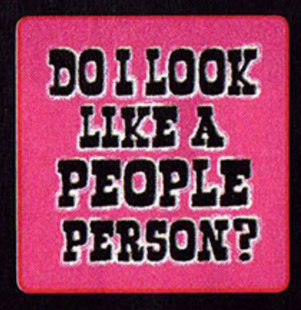

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REALTONES

Crank That - Soulja Boy Tell Em	true 8797	My Drink n' My 2 Step - Cassidy	true 8806	Hip Hop Police - Chamillionaire	true 8815
A Bay Bay - Hurricane Chris	true 8798	The Way I Are - Timbaland	true 8807	Can't Tell Me Nothing - Kanye West	true 8816
Bartender - T-Pain	true 8799	When You're Gone - Avril Lavigne	true 8808	Wall To Wall - Chris Brown	true 8817
Beautiful Girls (Main Chorus) - Sean Kingston	true 8800	Can't Leave Em Alone - Ciara	true 8809	Pop, Lock & Drop It - Huey	true 8818
Stronger - Kanye West	true 8801	Money in the Bank - Swizz Beatz	true 8810	Int'l Player's Anthem (Ft Outkast) - U.G.K.	true 8819
Make Me Better (Ne-Yo Chorus) - Fabolous	true 8802	Lean Like A Cholo - Down AKA Kilo	true 8811	Walk It Out - DJ UNK	true 8820
Party Like A Rock Star - Shop Boyz	true 8803	Hey There Delilah - Plain White Ts	true 8812	Theme - The Simpsons	true 8821
Sorry, Blame it on Me - Akon	true 8804	Do You - Ne-Yo	true 8813	Corporate Thuggin' - U.S.D.A.	true 8822
White Girl - USDA	true 8805	Big Girls Don't Cry (Personal) - Fergie	true 8814	Umbrella - Rihanna	true 8823

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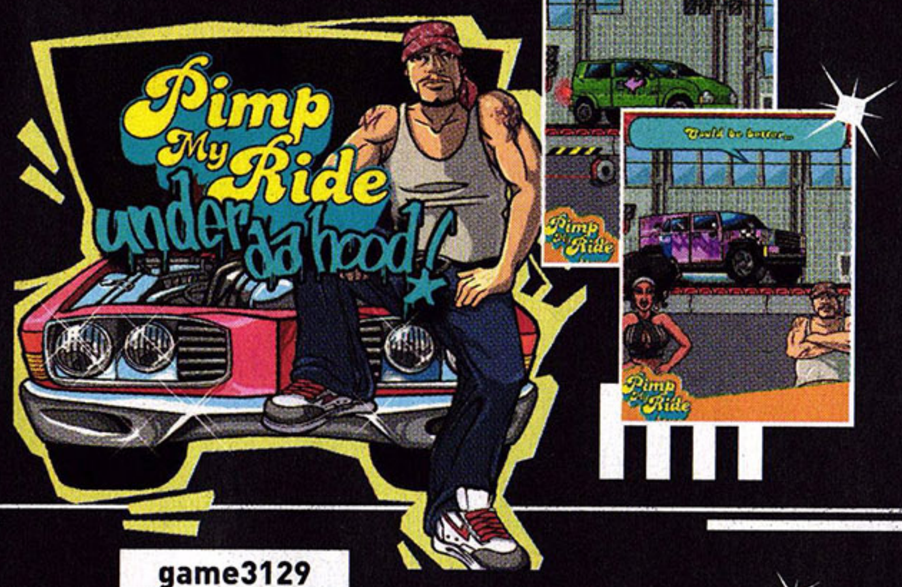

game3129

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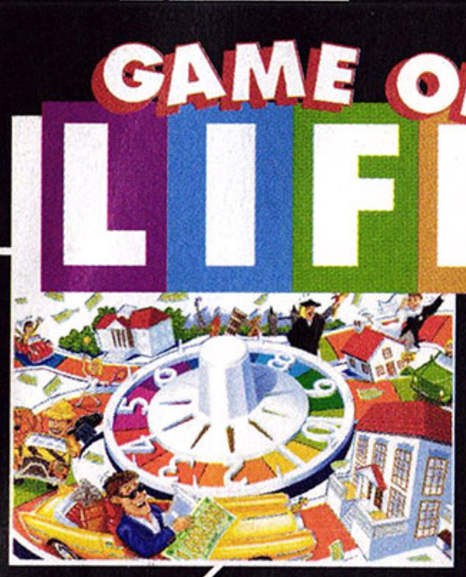

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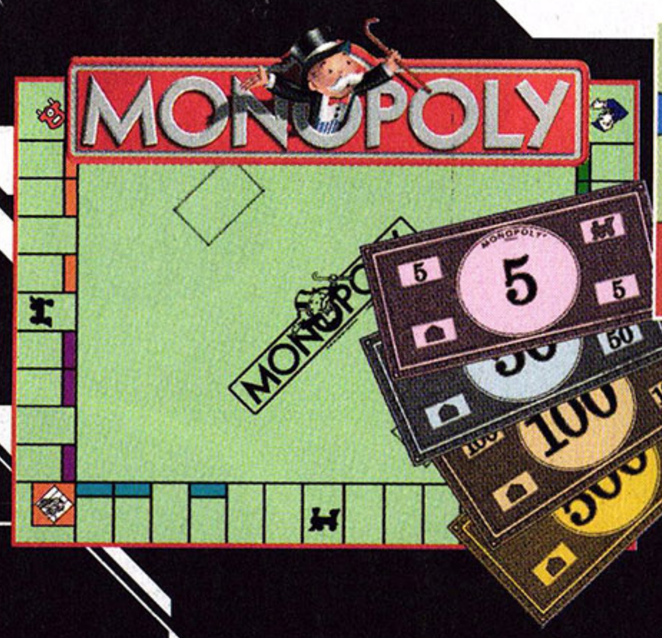

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MICROSOFT CHATPAD

GOOD

If your 360 controller started getting freaky with your PC keyboard, the offspring of their passion might be the Chatpad. This controller attachment crams a full QWERTY layout into the palm of your hand. The additional bulk does change the feel of the controller somewhat, but thankfully the keys are large enough and feel good. This package also includes a special headset with on-cord volume controls. Unless you don't mind juggling between a keyboard and controller, this is the best combo we've seen so far.

$29.99 • www.xbox.com

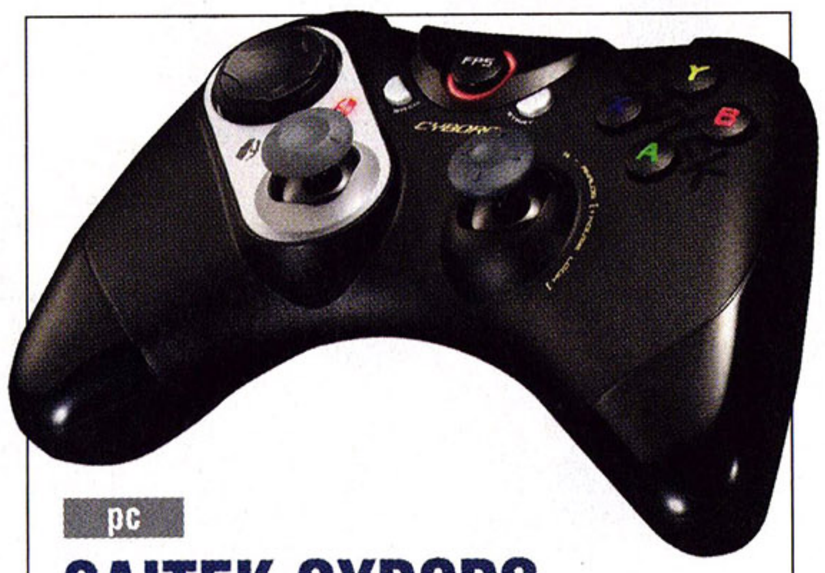
PC

MICROSOFT SIDEWINDER MOUSE

GOOD

Like the mouse's vertical side buttons, the Sidewinder's look and feel take a bit of getting used to. But even if you don't dig its style, its long list of features might turn your head. We particularly like the feel of its large metal scroll wheel. Programmable macros, adjustable weight, and on-mouse DPI display round out the other notable features. The Sidewinder's large rear end will probably appeal to those with big hands, but it's still a great mouse.

$79.95 • www.microsoft.com/hardware



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SAITEK CYBORG RUMBLE PAD

AVERAGE

At first glace, Saitek's new PC controller stands out due to its solid construction and the unique ability to swap the positions of the d-pad and left analog stick. Unfortunately, the Cyborg suffers from some rather basic flaws that ruin the overall experience. The pad's cord is so short that many will need an extension cable, and the overall design feels a little too chunky. Even a great innovative feature can't justify this controller's price.

$34.99 • www.saitek.com

PC

LOGITECH G9 LASER MOUSE

OK

The G9 comes with two different shells that conform differently in your hand. They both feel great, but don't change the mouse's overall small size, which might turn some away. The G9 does feature DPI adjustment buttons, but they are awkwardly placed. Other features include a speedy MicroGear scroll wheel and adjustable metal weights. Overall, this is a decent mouse, if a little pricey.

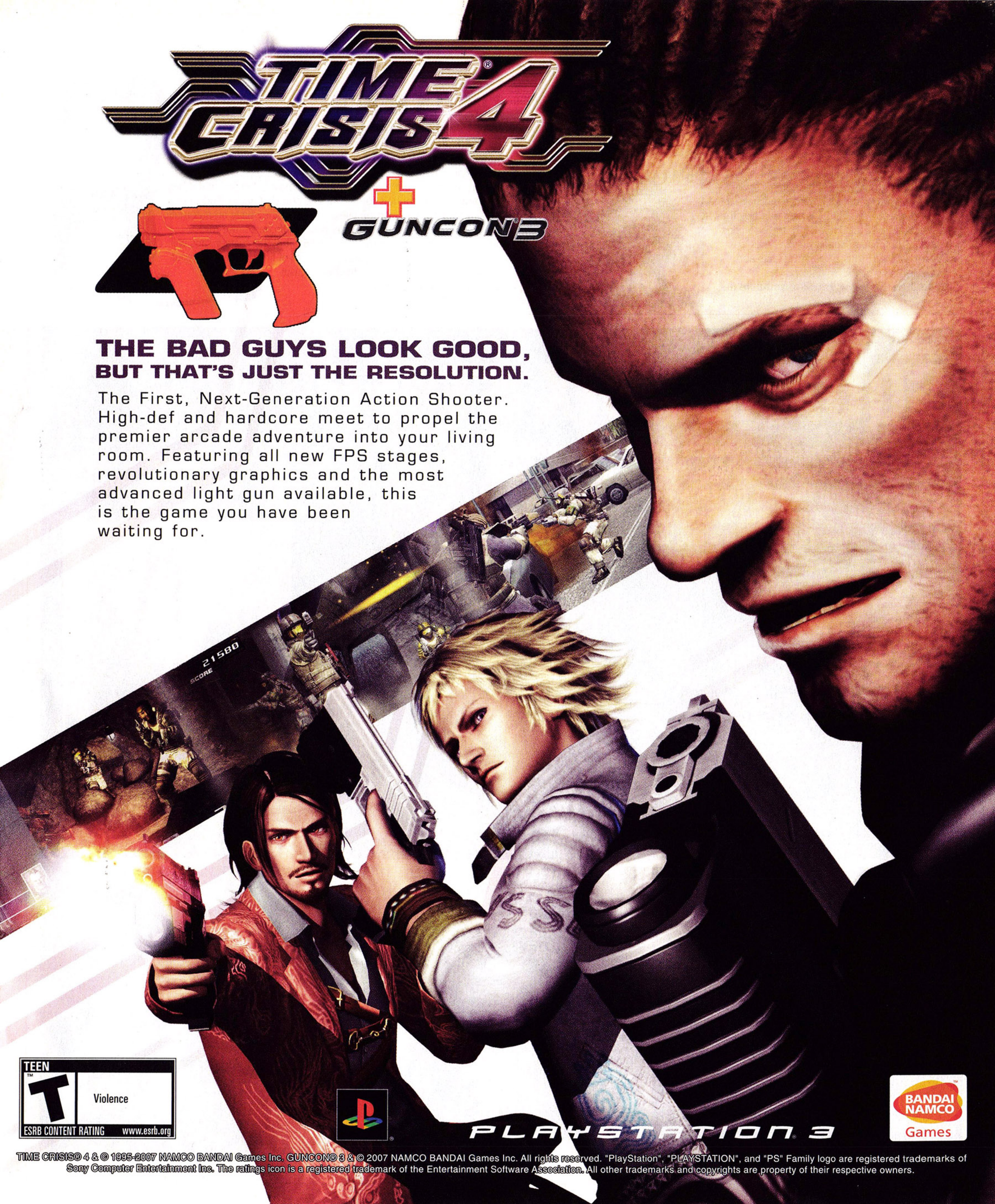
$99.99 • www.logitech.com

TIME CRISIS® 4

+ GUNCON®3

THE BAD GUYS LOOK GOOD, BUT THAT'S JUST THE RESOLUTION.

The First, Next-Generation Action Shooter. High-def and hardcore meet to propel the premier arcade adventure into your living room. Featuring all new FPS stages, revolutionary graphics and the most advanced light gun available, this is the game you have been waiting for.



TEEN
T
Violence
ESRB CONTENT RATING www.esrb.org

PLAYSTATION 3

BANDAI NAMCO Games

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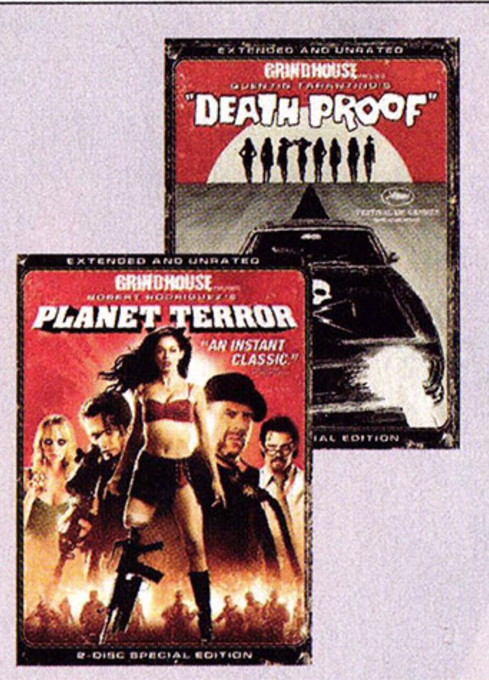
dvd

DEATH PROOF AND PLANET TERROR



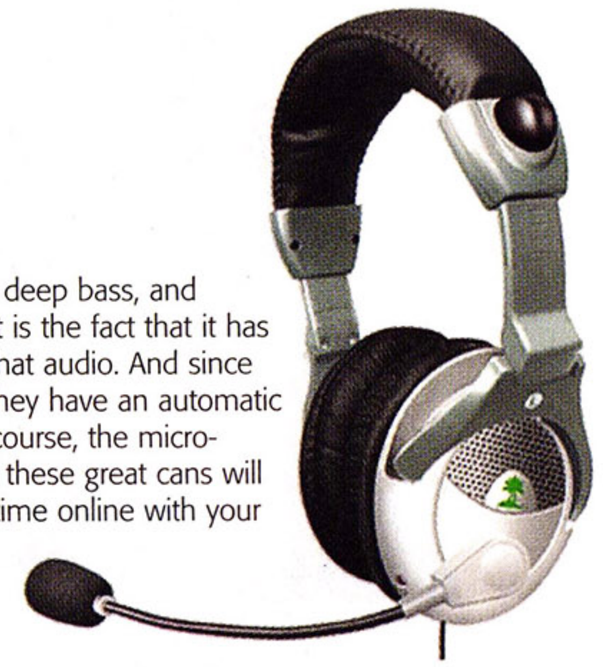
Quentin Tarantino and Robert Rodriguez's theatrical opus *Grindhouse* may not have done well in theaters, but that doesn't mean it wasn't worth seeing. Humanity will have a second chance to right its wrong and buy the films when they hit DVD. Sadly, the two titles must be purchased separately, but they are still loaded with tons of great features and extended cuts of the original movies.

$29.95 each • www.grindhousemovie.net

peripherals

TURTLE BEACH EAR FORCE X3

VERY GOOD



The X3 produces some great clear sound with deep bass, and feels comfortable, but the feature we like most is the fact that it has different volume controls for both game and chat audio. And since the headphones can also be used wirelessly, they have an automatic shutoff that helps conserve battery power. Of course, the microphone is designed specifically for the 360, but these great cans will work with other devices. If you spend a lot of time online with your Xbox, these are definitely worth checking out.

$99.95 • www.turtlebeach.com

toys

SQUARE ENIX STUFF

Square announced the launch on their U.S. online store back a few month ago. The site features some great toys and figures for fans from some of the best Square Enix games, but what makes the site really worth it is the fact that it's the only place to find some of these great items. Here are the highlights.

www.square-enix-shop.com/usa

Final Fantasy Tactics: The War of the Lions Figures

$29.99 (set of four) • Release: Winter 2007

Final Fantasy VII and Final Fantasy VII Advent Children Figures

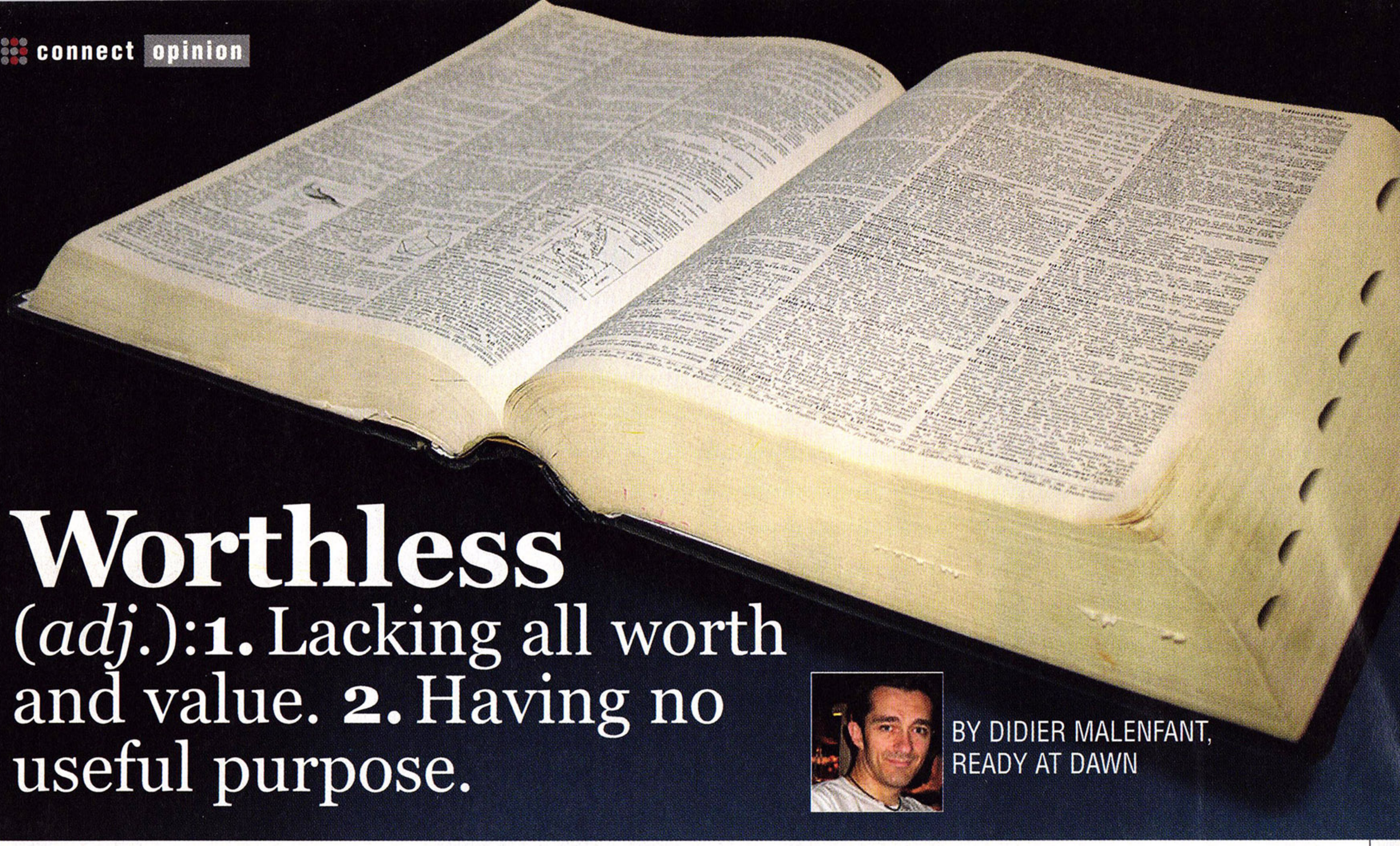
$24.99 each (Figures), $79.99 (Hardy Daytona set)
Release: December

Sculpture Arts Final Fantasy VII Advent Children

$200.00 • Release: October

HELLGATELONDON.COM

THEY KICKED ME IN THE TEETH,
TORE MY GIRLFRIEND IN HALF
AND TOOK AWAY THE SUN.
I'M GOING TO LONDON.



Worthless (*adj.*): **1.** Lacking all worth and value. **2.** Having no useful purpose.

BY DIDIER MALENFANT, READY AT DAWN

What makes something valuable? I remember this subject in philosophy class, questioning whether things with no value (i.e. free beer,) are de-facto worthless. Think about it. Of course, there's more to value than just cold hard cash, but I think the way you treat certain things often betrays how much value you perceive them to have.

As you might have recently heard, we're developing a new intellectual property (IP) here at Ready At Dawn with the possibility of maybe one day making a game based on it. What has been interesting in this process is to see, in some cases, how differently IPs can be treated depending on who created them in the first place. Most developers take it for granted, for example, that anything they create when they make a game is going to be owned by the publisher since they're the ones taking the financial risk by lending the money to make the game in the first place (developers end up paying for the game's development out of their royalties). As we found out, this is far from true and there are a large number of publishers out there who understand that IP ownership does not affect their balance sheet. Game rights do.

But what of the other publishers out there? Interestingly, I don't think any of them think twice about not retaining IP ownership when signing a licensing deal with a big Hollywood movie studio. In those cases the only rights exchanged are, once again, game rights. In both cases, game developer IP and Hollywood IP, the publisher will take the same financial risk lending money for the game's development. In Hollywood's case they might actually even end up paying a huge guarantee upfront, increasing the risk. So why the double standard? Some argue that, in the case of a big Hollywood or sports IP, what you get with it is of course awareness and a huge marketing campaign associated with the property itself (movie, sport season, TV, etc…). As most people would see it, this makes the external IP way more 'valuable,' thus the willingness to take the same risk without owning the IP outright.

So let's look at the numbers. According to NPD, and out of the top 150 biggest-selling games of all time, only 29 are based on movies or cartoon IPs. Only one is in the top 10 (Goldeneye), two in the top 20, and only seven in the top 50. Ouch. So the big bucks must come from sports licenses, right? Wrong. They do slightly better, but still fail to impress. In the top 150, only 45 are based on sports/wrestling/extreme sports IPs. Only three are in the top 10 (all Madden games), six in the top 25 (again, all Madden titles) and only 10 in the top 50 (Tony Hawk finally comes to the rescue). Where do all the other IPs come from? Game developers, of course. How many of these IPs are owned by game developers or were valued enough to be sold by the developer instead of given away? Not enough, that's for sure.

So, going back to our definition of value, how valuable are these IPs if they fail to produce the top-selling games? Your mileage may vary, but according to my personal definition, that's not a lot of value. Risk and value are relative things, and the truth is, developer-created IPs are historically more successful, therefore more valuable and less risky. They're also less risky because developers will always do a better job at turning their own ideas into games as opposed to being forced to work on whatever the last boring movie tie-in or next iteration of last year's sports game is. Game creation requires passion, and you won't get more passionate people than the ones who work on their own concepts. Three birds, one stone.

> **"Risk and value are relative things and the truth is, developer created IPs are historically more successful, therefore more valuable and less risky."**

So why are some developers still under the impression that it's OK to give their creations away for nothing? As we all know, games and movies are merging. And the truth is movies, as a skill set, are a subset of what we do when we make games. It will be much harder for the movie people to learn all the stuff we already know as game makers than for us to finish getting to their level in terms of production values for our stories and storytelling techniques. Movie people know that. The freshest ideas, concepts and creations also are coming from us, not them. They know that too but, somehow, a lot of us still don't realize our own potential.

As you will have understood by now, this is not a rant on publishers or developers. In fact, it's not even a rant. It's just an honest reminder of the incredible creative talent we, as an industry, have managed to put together. It's a reminder that we would all, as an industry, benefit from valuing the creations coming from within our industry and grant the same worth that less-successful creations coming from outside are granted. It would be incredibly short-sighted not to, for as the big entertainment merger keeps rolling forward, we would then force ourselves to the bottom of the relevance pile. When all is said and done, we really don't want to end up perceived by anyone as worthless. ■■■

The views and opinions expressed on this page are strictly those of the author and not necessarily those of Game Informer Magazine or its staff.

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

HellgateLondon.com

They impaled my dog
and drenched everything in blood.
It's time to return some pain.
I'm going to LONDON.

sun | mon | tue | wed | thur | fri | sat

november

Gears of War – 11/06

LEGO Star Wars: The Complete Saga – 11/06

06-08

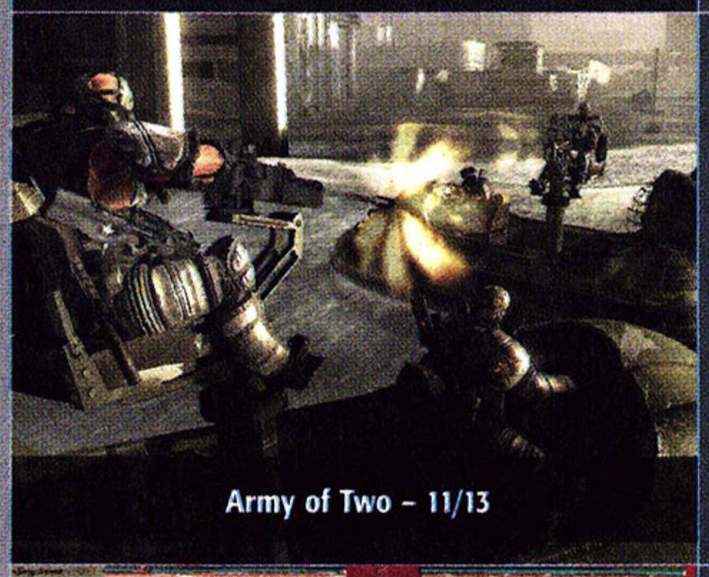
NEW RELEASES

- BlackSite: Area 51 – PS3, 360, PC
- Bladestorm: The Hundred Year War – PS3, 360
- Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare – PS3, 360, DS, PC
- College Hoops 2K8 – PS3, 360, PS2
- Company of Heroes: Opposing Fronts – PC
- Dance Dance Revolution: Disney Channel – PS2
- Dragon Quest Monsters: Joker – DS
- Empire Earth III – PC
- F.E.A.R. Files – 360
- Fire Emblem: Goddess of Dawn – Wii
- Gears of War – PC
- Geometry Wars: Galaxies – Wii, DS
- Ghost Squad – Wii
- High School Musical: Sing It! – Wii, PS2
- LEGO Star Wars: The Complete Saga – PS3, 360, Wii, DS
- Medal of Honor 2: Heroes – Wii, PSP
- My Life Coach – DS
- My Word Coach – Wii, DS
- Ontamarama – DS
- Pursuit Force: Extreme Justice – PSP
- Silent Hill: Origins – PSP
- SingStar – PS3
- SOCOM: US Navy SEALs: Tactical Strike – PSP
- Supreme Commander: Forged Alliance – PC

09

SUPERMAN 670

About a year ago, Superman heard rumblings of a third Kryptonian living on Earth...a female. Who could she possibly be? We're only going to give you one guess, and if you don't say Superwoman, you will have to live the rest of your days with Krypto humping your leg.

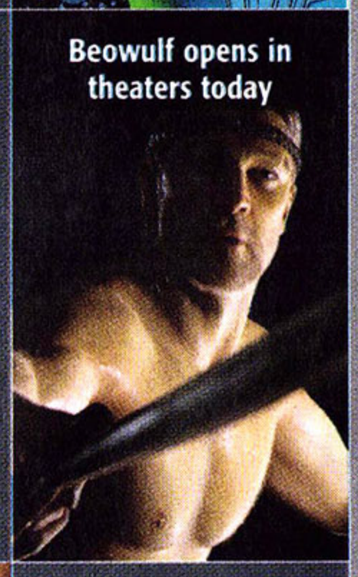


Army of Two – 11/13

13-16

NEW RELEASES

- AMF Bowling Pinbusters – Wii
- Army of Two – PS3, 360
- Assassin's Creed – PS3, 360
- Beowulf – PS3, 360, PSP, PC
- Brothers in Arms: Hell's Highway – PS3, 360, PC
- Cabela's Monster Bass – PS3, 360, PS2
- Contra 4 – DS
- Cruisn'n – Wii
- Crysis – PC
- Dragon Ball Z: Budokai Tenkaichi 3 – Wii, PS2
- Draglade – DS
- EverQuest II: Rise of Kunark – PC
- Foster's Home for Imaginary Friends: Imagination Invaders – DS
- Godzilla Unleashed – Wii, PS2
- The Orange Box – PS3
- Kane & Lynch: Dead Men – PS3, 360, PC
- Medal of Honor: Airborne – PS3
- Mercenary Wars – PC
- Monster Truck Jam – 360, DS
- Mortal Kombat – DS
- Nights: Journey Into Dreams – Wii
- Nitrobike – Wii
- Orcs & Elves – DS
- Petz Catz 2 – Wii, DS, PS2, PC
- Petz Dogz 2 – Wii, DS, PS2, PC
- Petz Hamsterz Life 2 – DS
- Petz Horsez 2 – Wii, DS, PS2, PC
- Rayman Raving Rabbids 2 – Wii, DS, PC
- Resident Evil: Umbrella Chronicles – Wii
- The Simpsons – PSP, DS
- Smarty Pants – Wii
- Soldier of Fortune: Payback – PS3, 360, PC
- Sonic Rivals 2 – PSP
- Soul Calibur Legends – Wii
- Star Trek: Conquest – Wii
- Super Mario Galaxy – Wii
- Swashbuckers – PS2
- Trauma Center: New Blood – Wii
- Unreal Tournament III – PS3, PC
- World in Conflict – 360
- WWE SmackDown Vs Raw 2008 – PS3, 360, Wii, PS2, PSP, DS



Beowulf opens in theaters today

Mario & Sonic at the Olympic Games – 11/20

20-21

NEW RELEASES

- CSI: Hard Evidence – Wii
- Final Fantasy XII: Revenant Wings – DS
- Haze – PS3
- History Channel: Battle for the Pacific – PS3, 360, Wii, PS2, PC
- Hornie Rollerz – DS
- Indoor Sports – Wii
- Mario & Sonic at the Olympic Games – Wii, DS
- Mario Party – DS
- Mass Effect – 360
- My French Coach – DS
- My Spanish Coach – DS
- Phantasy Star Universe: Ambition of Illuminus – PS2, PC
- Rock Band – PS3, 360
- Sea Monsters – PS2
- SpongeBob: Atlantis SquarePants – Wii, PS2
- Suzuki Superbikes – DS
- Time Crisis 4 – PS3
- Uncharted: Drake's Fortune – PS3
- Warhammer 40,000: Squad Command – PSP, DS

Mass Effect – 11/20

24

ARTFX MASTER CHIEF STATUE

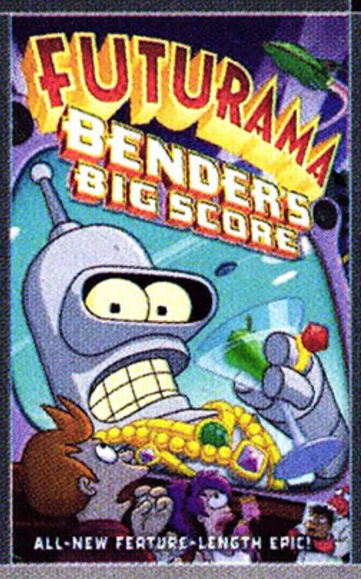
This is the prize in any Halo fan's collection. This statue, retailing for approximately 100 clams, comes with a variety of weapons, including the energy sword! The Chief stands at 12 inches in height, and can be gently caressed as much as you want.

Haze – 11/20

27

NEW RELEASES

- CSI: Dark Motives – DS
- *Futurama: Bender's Big Score – DVD*
- Nintendo Magic – DS



29

MARVEL ATLAS

The first volume of this world-revealing comic takes fans through Europe, Asia, and most of the Pacific. This means you'll get a close look at Muir Island, Symkaria, Madripoor, Lemuria, and Dr. Doom's pimp pad in Latveria. Hopefully, DC follows this great idea with an Atlas of its own.

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

HELLGATELONDON.COM
10/31/07

FIRST I'M GOING TO ~~C~~ COAT THE STREETS
WITH THEIR BILE, THEN I'M GOING TO STACK THEIR
ROTTEN DEMON CORPSES ON THE SIDEWALKS.
AND I'M GOING TO ENJOY IT.

I'M GOING TO LONDON.

MATURE 17+
M
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
Blood & Gore
Mild Language
Violence

PC DVD-ROM SOFTWARE

flagship studios
Games for Windows
pingo
BANDAI NAMCO Games
PLAYS BEST ON
Play to win with intel Core 2
THE WAY NVIDIA. IT'S MEANT TO BE PLAYED
EA

HELLGATE LONDON

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BRÜTAL LEGEND

Roadshow of Destruction

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360
> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION/ADVENTURE (MULTIPLAYER TBA)
> **PUBLISHER** SIERRA
> **DEVELOPER** DOUBLE FINE
> **RELEASE** 2008

"There's something about roadies I've always liked. They're kind of like rock stars, in that they live the rock and roll lifestyle. But they don't live it from a place of privilege up on a pedestal. They live it down in the trenches. They're getting the work done; they're wiring the amps. But they still live in this fantasy world of rock and roll. There's something noble about that. They don't get all the glory, but they make it all happen. A roadie is a hero that doesn't fit the modern world. He wants to do big King Arthur-type stuff. What if that guy got a chance to be that kind of hero? If he could enter this sort of fantasy world, but he could bring his Camaro and his music with him? Making a world for that guy – that's really what this game is all about. It's about a roadie named Eddie Riggs."

– Tim Schafer

Tim Schafer is a man who takes the ordinary and twists it around into a surreal version of itself, molding the common into the uncommon – making the familiar into something wildly unpredictable.

It's not hard to imagine his characters and the worlds they populate bursting forth from the side of his head like something out of a Greek myth, discontent to remain jostling around inside. And whether through happenstance or cleverness, he's also a man who's managed to surround himself with people who have the propensity to do the same. The small team at Double Fine overflows with creativity and eccentricity, and right now it's all getting channeled full force in the direction of a heavy metal roadie, his cursed belt buckle, and a world where rock and roll comes to life.

It's only moments after we arrive at Double Fine that Tim Schafer bustles into the room to hold a t-shirt up to see if it's the right size for us. He doesn't mention his name, even though we've never met. Within minutes, he's ushered us into a nearby meeting room, where he whispers to us conspiratorially while the team leads discuss the current game build. "The name was one of the very first things I thought of, over fifteen years ago. I was riding a bus, thinking about a game that would be the complete opposite of what we were working on, The Secret of Monkey Island. And Brütal Legend leapt into my head. I've been hanging on to that name ever since," explains Schafer excitedly. "The other thing that happened around that time was that I met a friend of a friend's boyfriend, and he was a roadie from Megadeth. He was the craziest nut I'd ever met. He was super funny. He was telling all these stories about life on the road, rock shows, and girls, and drugs, and all these larger than life stories, and I thought: 'This would be an awesome guy to make a game about.'" It's the first of many times during our visit to Double Fine, the studio Schafer founded after departing from LucasArts, that we hear about ideas that sprang from the most mundane scenarios – a homeless man on the street as the inspiration for a game character, or a painting at a friend's house sparking the art style for an entire level. Throughout his career, the results have been lauded as some of the funniest and most original content in the world of gaming. Brütal Legend ups the ante with the team's biggest game yet, both in its outlandish concept and massive game world.

Eddie Riggs is the definitive roadie. When a band wants to throw the ultimate show, they call him. One night, while tuning a guitar before the big performance, events conspire to start him on his adventure, but in a way no other video game hero has yet experienced. "He has a cursed belt buckle, but he doesn't know it," Schafer explains matter-of-factly. "He gets injured, and his own blood gets into the mouth of this hideous beast on his belt buckle; it comes to life and pulls him backward in time to this world where humanity is enslaved by demons." We nod appreciatively to Schafer, assuring him that this all makes sense so far. Then he gets to the weird part. Unlike the history recorded in books, the world into which Eddie is flung is actually the mythic land of rock and roll legend. Here, great metal titans once ruled, but their musical power became so profound that they ascended from Earth to rock on in new dimensions, leaving behind the remnants of their might. To the humans and demons left behind, these strange relics are the greatest of mysteries. To Eddie Riggs, these artifacts are the building blocks of the lifestyle he loves. Those aren't half-buried bone carcasses – those

■ The land of Brütal Legend is a strange and often hilarious mix of Nordic fantasy and heavy metal symbols

■ Ancient garages dot the landscape, where Eddie can pull in and upgrade his Deuce with new weapons and abilities

■ Many of the units that start out as enemies will eventually become yet another troop type in your growing army

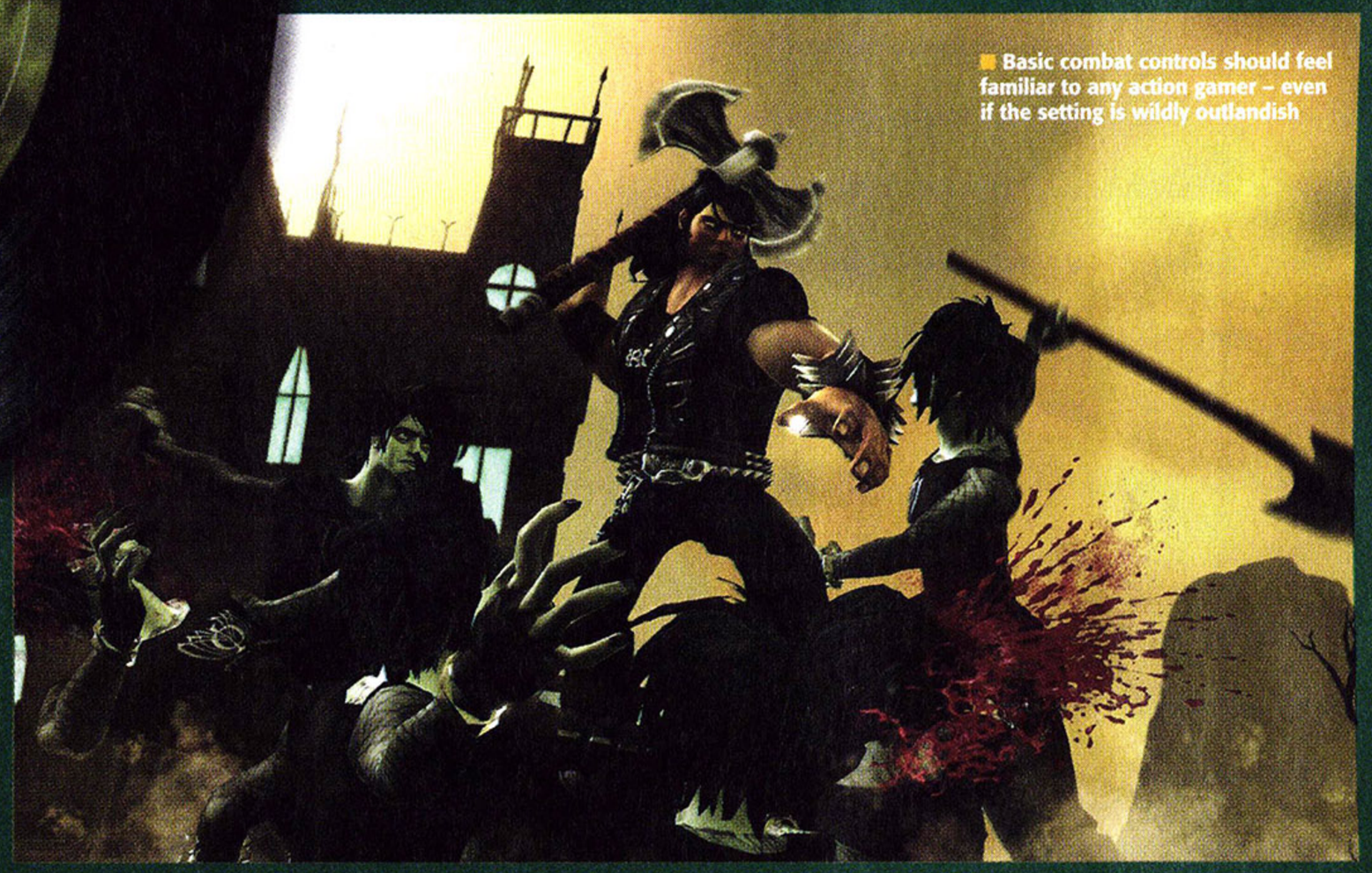
are exhaust pipes for a kickass motorcycle. Those aren't hieroglyphics on the ground – that's guitar tablature.

Only moments after arriving, Eddie spies a huge battle axe, and discovers to his surprise that he's actually pretty great at axe combat. Believe it or not, there's actually a good reason for this, but we don't want to spoil anything. His newfound skills come in handy as he fights his way out of the strange temple he has appeared in, after which he unearths a motley group of oppressed humans. Hearing of his origin, they beg him to teach them the intricacies of modern warfare. Eddie is completely oblivious on this point, but he does know how to put on a good road show. "Oh, and he also has a photographic memory of every heavy metal album cover ever made," Tim concludes. With this knowledge as a blueprint, Eddie sets out to put together the most destructive and insane music tour ever, and in the process throw off the yoke of the demonic forces that plague humanity.

To hear Tim Schafer describe it, it's all perfectly normal. What's remarkable is how quickly this unreal story begins to come alive when you start to look at the game. Grounded in the familiar, the third-person action of Brütal Legend pulls the player back from the strange and into the conventions any action gamer is familiar with – at least at first. The battle axe serves as the primary melee weapon of the game. A focused forward attack sends Eddie swinging ahead at targets like the latex-clad demonic battle nuns in the opening level, while a wider slashing attack takes out more plentiful surrounding foes, like a charging horde of half boar/half motorcycle Razorfires. "He also has a guitar

continued on page 81 >>

■ Eddie learns that his blood hides a dark secret (can you guess?), and the wings that sprout from his back are the proof. A whole new world opens up when flight becomes part of the gameplay



■ Basic combat controls should feel familiar to any action gamer – even if the setting is wildly outlandish

■ The game will have a full day and night cycle, changing the lighting and the look of the landscape

What's a Scrum?

No, it's not some strange creature in Brütal Legend. Scrum is a development process that's gained a lot of attention from developers across the world in recent years, and Double Fine has adopted the approach for its projects. The name comes from the concept in rugby, where a scrum is the tightly packed knot of players surrounding the ball as it moves up and down the field. In regards to game development, Scrum encourages group ownership of the project and regular periods of re-evaluation to speed up development and prevent lost time on unnecessary work. Instead of months of pre-production, involving only a small part of the team, Double Fine attempts to involve the entire team from early on, creating a playable version of the game much earlier than in more traditional approaches.

"What happens during typical development of a game is that you move down a path for so long that you have to use that asset or gameplay mechanic," explains Sierra senior producer Kyle Peschel, who brings his extensive game background to bear in moving the game forward. "Because you poured so much damn work into it, you feel like you can't leave it behind, even though it sucks." In contrast, Scrum lets the team reanalyze the game every several weeks, dropping mechanics that don't work, and zeroing in on successful ideas. Every several months, the game has a "release" – the game in its entirety, sort of like what it would be if the game had to come out that day. "In the landscape of Double Fine, it keeps individual employees from being lost in the shuffle. Everybody comes together and plays the build," Peschel tells us. Team members see the product as a whole on a regular basis, and can see how their work fits into the larger experience. Double Fine isn't the first team to adopt this approach, but it is certainly pleased with the results thus far.

■ "Eddie and Ophelia have a complicated relationship," Tim Schafer tells us about the primary rock and roll romance of the game

continued from page 79

he's brought with him – he was tuning it when he was pulled back," Schafer details. "But in this crazy heavy metal world, it can actually blow things up." It's a powerful tool indeed – a high-caliber weapon of war. This second, very different kind of axe serves as his primary area and ranged assault. Pull it out and Eddie will play a guitar solo in response to your combo-style button presses. "When he plays a face-melting guitar solo, it actually melts faces," Schafer relays. Another solo might call down a pyrotechnics display, and gouts of flame will burst from the ground nearby to engulf your attackers. A third solo might summon your last and largest primary weapon – the Deuce, the remarkable hot rod that Eddie builds right after he arrives. Pulling pieces together that the denizens of the world saw as only disconnected steel, Eddie knows they can be put together into much more, and assembles his Deuce drop-top coupe. This awesome ride will double both as a weapon to run down his foes as well as his primary means of navigating the huge continent that is the game world.

The universe of Brütal Legend is born from a perfect melding of Nordic fantasy landscape with heavy metal mythology – a meeting point that isn't so odd if you've looked at more than a few heavy metal record covers. "This is the land that heavy metal came from. It's the land where heavy metal was all true," Schafer says. Huge forests crop up throughout the world, but some might be made of giant tires, as if pulled from some impractically large muscle car. Where a cliff should rise up as the face of a mountain, a stack of blaring amplifiers stands instead. Giant spiders roam the countryside, but these eight-legged terrors are made of chrome, and spin silk that can be harvested as magical bass guitar strings. V8 engines and giant Viking swords are buried in the ground in equal measure. Where another game might send down a light from the sky as your objective marker, Eddie will seek out the points highlighted by actual stage spotlights built into the landscape.

With an environment like that as a backdrop, it's only fitting that the world be populated by characters that extend the rock homage even further. Even before escaping from the imposing and latex-wrapped Temple of Ormagöden where he appeared in the world, Eddie encounters soon-to-be love interest, Ophelia, a name that has more than its fair share of tragic romantic overtones for anyone who's read a little Shakespeare. After a harried boss fight with a giant three-tongued lamprey, (tongues which Eddie runs over one by one with his Deuce), the two escape the demon's clutches by fleeing across a collapsing bridge to join the faltering remnants of humanity on the other side. There they meet brother and sister Lars and Lita Halford. Lita is characterized by how protective she is of her brother, and a strange fascination she has with the newly arrived roadie. Lars is young and charismatic, but unsure how to guide his people. Eddie knows that Lars has the look and the power to be a rock star, and sets out to make him one – the genesis of the road show they'll put together to take down the demons. Their first stop is the Crushing Pit, where many of the young men of the village have been abducted in order to mine for ancient car parts. Without tools, they're left to endlessly bang their heads against the wall, building up grossly disproportionate neck muscles. Lars wonders aloud what can be done with a bunch of listless kids who only know how to bang their long-haired heads up and down all day. "Start a revolution," Eddie solemnly intones in response.

Freeing the headbangers and giving them hope with a few rockin' guitar solos, players will encounter the next major gameplay element of Brütal Legend. The headbangers are the first of dozens of minion types which you'll gather together as an ever growing armada with which to do battle. One by one, you'll free these unit types from bondage – each new addition carries its own involved back story that is established through gameplay, not unlike individual characters in an RPG. Simple squad commands, mapped to the d-pad, will send your army charging ahead into combat, defending or following you, or running to a waypoint you designate. Beyond these familiar commands, each of the unit types has a special cooperative move you may trigger at any time. The headbangers will gather around you into a deadly mosh pit, protecting you at its middle and tearing down the enemies that get in your way. The first targets of your ire are the traitorous "headbangers with fluffy hair and accessories." These hair metal sellouts are led by General Lionwhyte, a man whose hair is so long, luscious, and fabulous that he can use it to fly.

Not long after that, Ophelia is horribly injured, and you'll find yourself climbing to the top of a mystical mountain to meet the Kill Master, a shamanistic bass player whose grooves are so powerful that they can heal your troops as he circles the battlefield on his motorcycle. Over time, more and more troops will join your cause. The Runaways are dancer slave girls who escaped Lionwhyte's pleasure tower. Now they ride into battle on your shoulders to take their revenge. The fire barons roar into combat on their hogs as their engines spit out a trail of flame, letting you encase your enemies in a ring of fire. Bouncers with giant fists hammer into your opponents. Roadies join the crew, as they shoulder a pile of amplifiers that spit out killer feedback.

The first act of the story deals with these familiar rock archetypes, before Eddie moves on into a darker part of the continent filled with black-clad humans who've abandoned all hope. "These are people who drink from the sea of black tears. It's made of pure sorrow. It gives them incredible power, but also makes them look dead," Schafer states. It's definitely not just a phase they'll grow out of, so Eddie employs their dark-tinged power as well. The gravediggers form a brooding speartip for the infantry, even while the pale Bride walks slowly into combat, a stormcloud ceaselessly hanging over her head. Fear-inducing reapers will join the fray. "Then there are the demons themselves – those of the tainted coil. They're also into S&M. They're S&M demons. They're more organized. We see them more like a church," Schafer tells us. "Or a record company," he adds. Secretly wishing to be more like the humans, these malformed beasts zip themselves up into form-fitting latex – self inflicted bondage to appear the way they want the world to see them.

Throughout the game, you'll be wandering a fully open world – one massive continent to circle. The bridge that collapses early on is the only easy route to the demon's home base. Now, only by taking your roadshow on a full circuit the opposite way will you be able to confront their leader, Doviculus, and save humanity. Primary story missions are peppered throughout the land, along with optional secondary quests to increase your strength. The overflow of music references continues in the tasks you'll face. Schafer hints at some of them. At some point you'll ride the lightning. Another mission may have you running to the hills. The game is being designed to be fun and hilarious for the

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■ **Music will dynamically respond to the action. In essence, you want to be close to your army because that is quite literally where the music's at**

■ **The game focuses on large scale conflicts with many enemies at once**

Double Fine has crafted dozens of remarkable creatures that fill the game world – Treeback here is yet another monstrous creature that joins your ranks

When you're not in the middle of the action, the camera will automatically shift and reveal the best epic angle on the scene – the goal is for every screenshot to look like an album cover

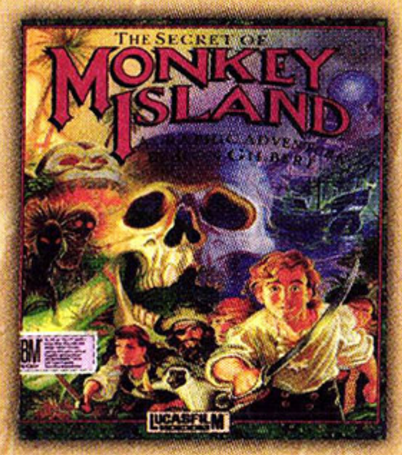
Eddie's guitar is not unlike a magic system – its wailing solos actually melt faces

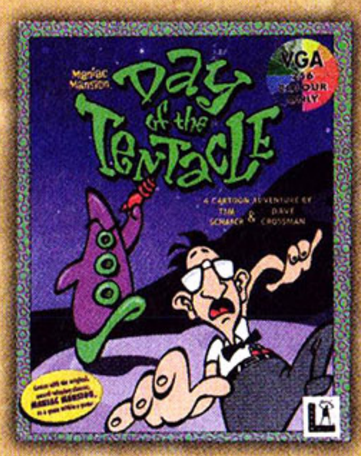
A History of Originality

Tim Schafer has a long history of unique titles to his name, each with their own brand of humor and style.

The Secret of Monkey Island

Schafer worked beside project helmer Ron Gilbert along with fellow designer Dave Grossman on this landmark LucasArts title. The adventure game, first released on floppy disc in 1990, detailed the humor-soaked adventures of Guybrush Threepwood, a young castaway who hopes to become a pirate, must learn to handle insult swordfights, and inevitably falls in love. Along with its 1991 sequel, Monkey Island 2: LeChuck's Revenge, the game remains a landmark of how well humor can be captured in the adventure genre.



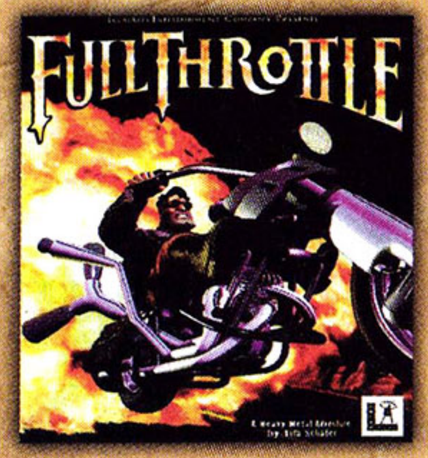


Day of the Tentacle

Released in 1993, Schafer once again worked beside Grossman to craft this sequel to the earlier LucasArts hit, Maniac Mansion. The game has returning character Bernard Bernoulli heading back to the mansion, along with his buddies Laverne and Hoagie. To stop a purple tentacle bent on world domination, the three travel through time to both the past and the future. Fans might recognize some eerie similarities between Hoagie and the heroic roadie of Brütal Legend – a testament to how long this idea has been brewing in Schafer's mind.

Full Throttle

Tim Schafer was the project lead on this unusual 1995 game detailing the story of motorcyclist Ben Throttle, along with his imprisoned biker gang, the Polecats. In addition to its humorous dialogue, the game was distinguished by its inclusion of licensed music and an extensive cast of experienced voice actors, a relative rarity at the time.

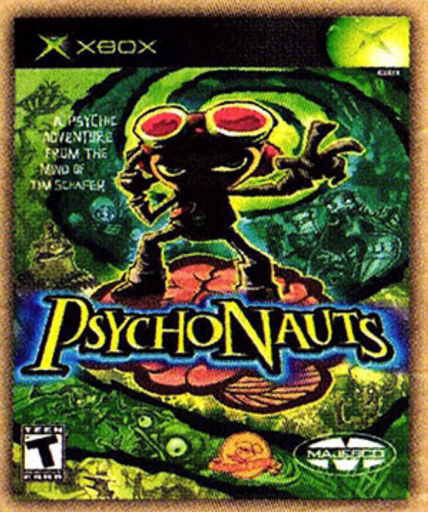


Grim Fandango

This wildly original game was the last Schafer would complete for LucasArts. First released in 1998, the game used the Mexican tradition of the Day of the Dead as inspiration to tell the tale of a skeleton named Manny Calavera as he journeys through the netherworld. Melding the skeletal calaca characters with an unexpected film noir style made this one of the most refreshing games of the '90s.

Psychonauts

After departing LucasArts to form Double Fine, Schafer finally released Psychonauts in 2005. Almost universally embraced by critics, the game even received a British Academy Award for its screenplay. The story of young psychic Raz and a summer camp for people with his unique skills was charming and fun, and featured some of the most intriguing level designs in memory, as you jumped and fought through the twisted minds of various camp denizens. Unlike many on this list, you shouldn't have too much trouble tracking this one down at your local game store, and it's definitely worth the effort.



The entire game is packed full of heavy metal homage

■ Through an as yet unexplained game mechanic, you'll acquire fans, many of whom will flock to your side in response to a kicking guitar solo. You'll maintain their interest by building them a merchandise booth

■ Brütal Legend certainly has an insane premise, but the action is surprisingly grounded in familiar gameplay ideas – albeit with their own surreal twist

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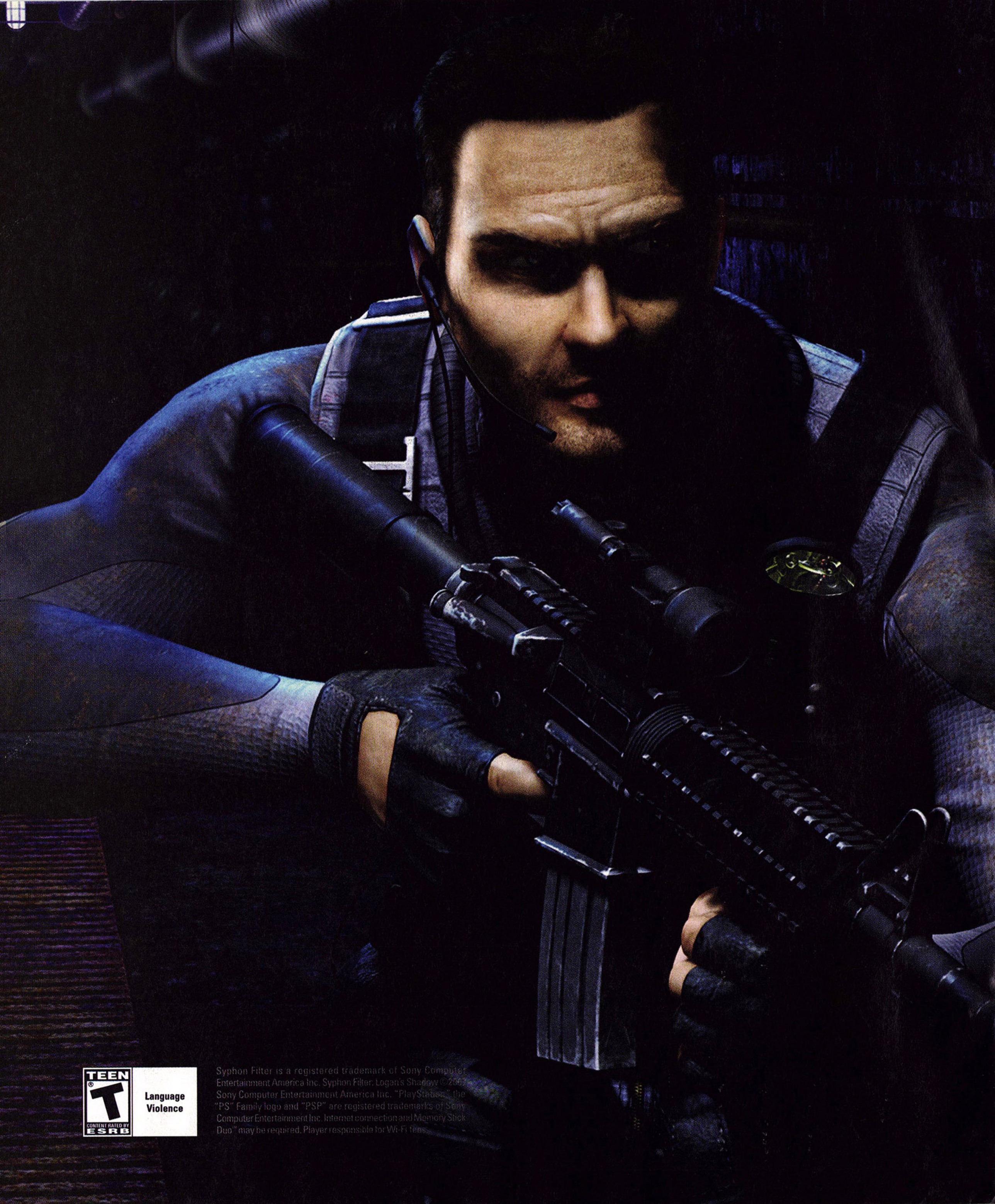
average gamer – but the well-versed metal fan will see a whole extra layer.

It's a far bigger production than the critically hailed Psychonauts, and the voice talent connected reflects the higher profile. Headlining the game is actor and comedian Jack Black, whose longtime love and evangelizing of rock couched in humor matches seamlessly with the game. A host of heavy metal's finest will also join the fray. Motörhead's founder Lemmy will play your ever-present healer and bassist, the Kill Master, a name that makes a lot more sense when you realize that Lemmy's last name is Kilmister. Rob Halford of Judas Priest brings his wailing tones to the voice of the villainous General Lionwhyte. Black Sabbath's Ronnie James Dio will also bring his voice talents to an as yet unannounced character. In addition, an ever-growing stable of heavy metal bands are contributing songs to the game, including tracks from Black Sabbath, Kiss, Candlemass, and Killenstein. Several artists are so enthused about a game that offers such high tribute to metal that they're planning on writing brand new music just for the game, including Rob Halford, Zakk Wylde, Skold, Wolfmotther, Judas Priest, and Ronnie James Dio, not to mention brand new extended guitar solos from Judas Priest guitarists Glenn Tipton and KK Downing. Add to that a surprising number of as yet unannounced Hollywood stars that are being targeted for the other lead roles, and you begin to see the epic scale of the production.

Like much of that voice talent, one other component of the game isn't yet ready for public consumption – online multiplayer. However, Schafer and the rest of the team are quick to point out that it's a part of the game that has already received just as much attention as the single-player campaign. Details remain under wraps, but it's not hard to imagine what might emerge in a game with multiple unique hero characters, a huge number of minion unit types, and a game engine that is designed to handle tremendous army-size battles.

The hardest thing to communicate about Double Fine's latest project is the depth of its creativity and humor. Even in its early form, trademark Schafer moments are scattered plentifully throughout the script, and the simple yet slightly absurd style of the art catches the eye in a way that the glut of ultra-realistic action games this year fails to do. Everything in Brütal Legend is layered in an almost dreamlike allegory, and Eddie Riggs makes for a strangely appropriate hero in this world in which he finally fits. "This is everything he's ever wanted. He loves it here. He was made for this world," Schafer tells us. Before we depart from our visit to Double Fine, Schafer reiterates his formula – he aims for each of his games to be the opposite of the ones before. It's a truth that is evident in this dark rock and roll world when compared against the idyllic psychic summer camp of Psychonauts – alike only because both worlds are so unique, detailed, and packed with excitement that it's hard to resist their pull. ■■■



TEEN
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CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Language
Violence

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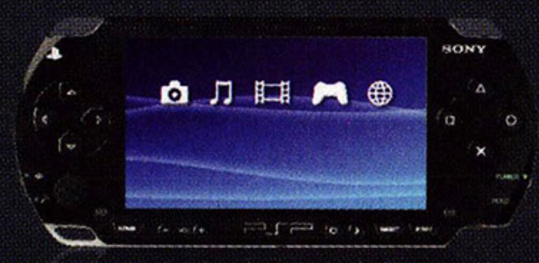

Somewhere within the fears of your enemies lives the world's deadliest Precision Strike Operative – Agent Gabe Logan. In this sequel to the critically acclaimed Syphon Filter™: Dark Mirror, Logan finds himself alone in a battle where no one can be trusted. He must fight his way through a world so full of betrayal it could only have come from the mind of best-selling writer, Greg Rucka. So get ready to discover why your enemies are afraid of the shadows.

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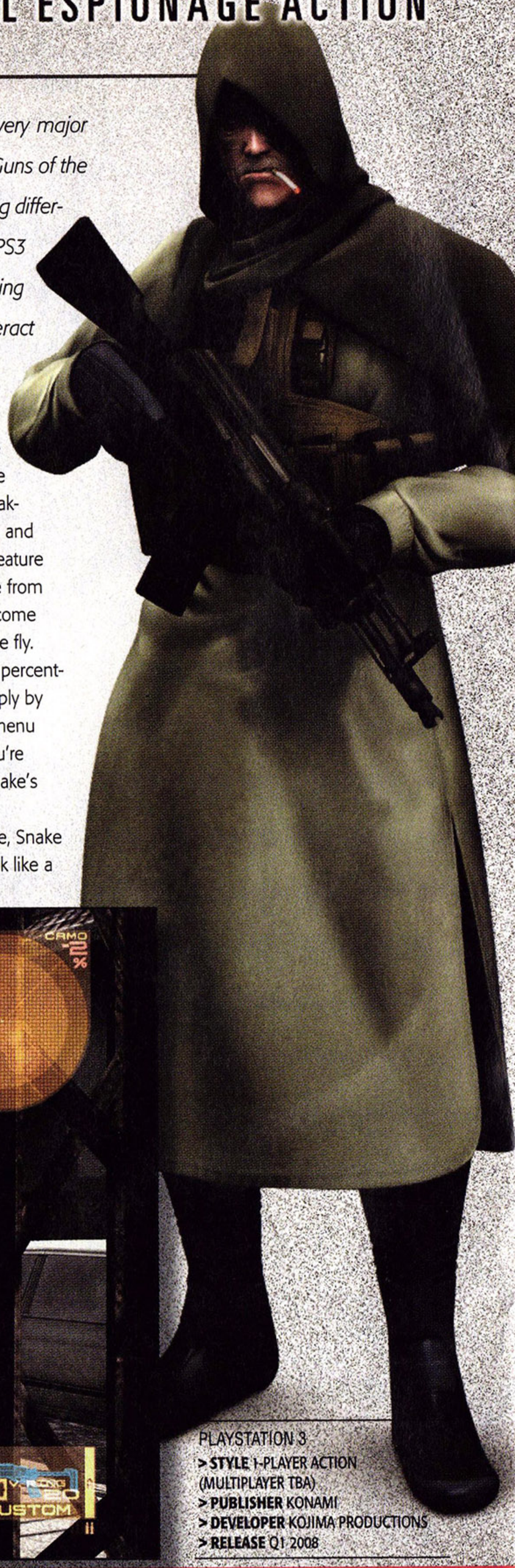
METAL GEAR SOLID® 4

GUNS OF THE PATRIOTS TACTICAL ESPIONAGE ACTION

Since it was first announced, trailers for Hideo Kojima's final Metal Gear Solid title have been the talk of every major gaming convention. This year's Tokyo Game Show was no different in that respect; a new Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots video drew awed crowds to Konami's booth to see the latest reveals and fake-outs. There was something different this time, though. Instead of shuffling away, wondering what the future may hold for this much-anticipated PS3 exclusive, we finally got our hands on the controller. After playing the game, it's clear that Solid Snake is receiving much more than a graphical upgrade; the changes to the gameplay, in addition to new ways Snake can interact with the battlefield, will ensure that the saga of this legendary solider ends with a bang.



Even for combat-hardened fans of the franchise, the first few minutes with MGS 4 will require you to become familiar with the control scheme, since many of Snake's moves are brand new or dramatically altered. This will come as welcome news to gamers who criticized the previous entry for using a control setup popularized on the PSone. "I love Snake Eater…but the controls were confusing," admits assistant producer Ryan Payton. "I think it's time we bring the controls into the next gen."

The most noticeable result of this evolution is the way Snake's overall mobility has been simplified. Instead of just having two forms of movement (walk and crawl), there is now a third: the stealth-run. This mode is entered by tapping X, and which point Snake crouches as usual. However, if you move the stick forward in this position, Snake will no longer start crawling...he just advances in a style similar to Gears of War's roadie run. This mode is perfect for moving quietly behind crates, under windows, and other kinds of waist-high obstacles. You are still able to crawl, but in order to do so, you need to deliberately hold the X button down, which means you will no longer find yourself on your belly at inopportune moments.

That isn't to say that lying prone won't have its advantages. When you are pressed up against a surface (either the ground or a wall), the octocamo built into Snake's sneaking suit will assume the patterns and colors of its surroundings. This feature entirely replaces the camouflage from Snake Eater, allowing you to become one with the environment on the fly. You are still given a camo index percentage, but it can be improved simply by lying still and blending in – no menu screens required. Plus, while you're down there, you can test out Snake's new ability to play dead.

By holding triangle while prone, Snake will go limp in an attempt to look like a

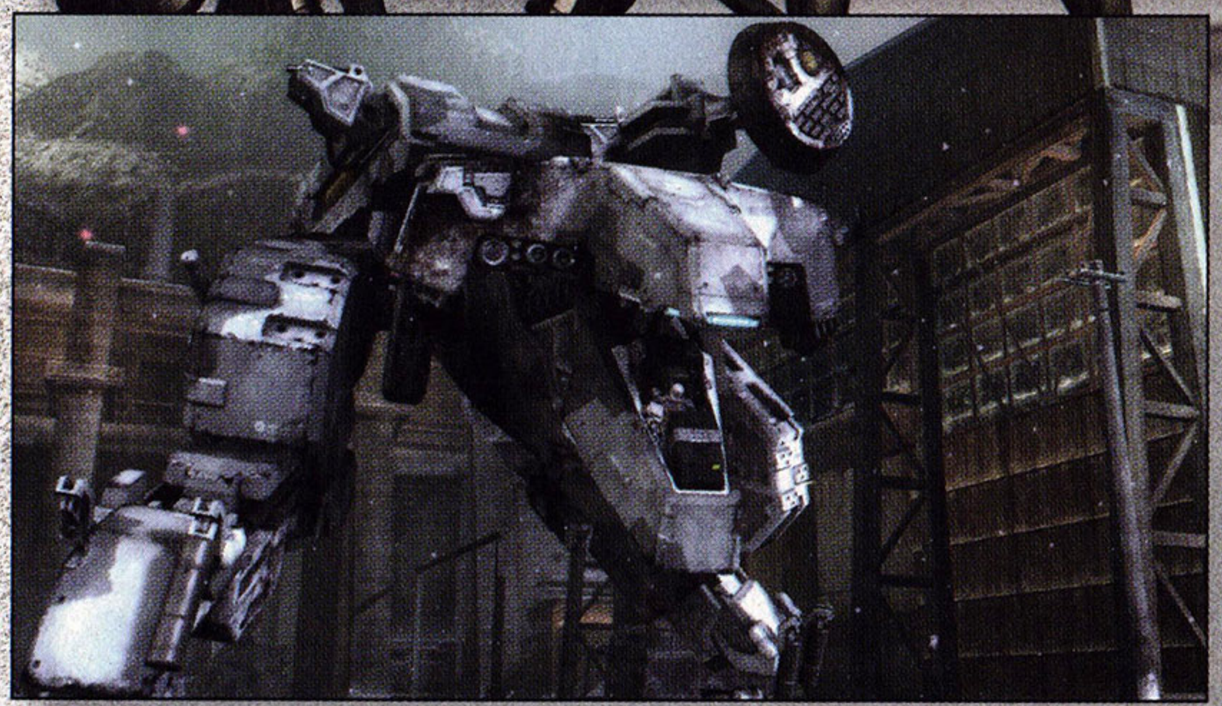
■ Pressing the square button toggles between auto-aim firing and the over-the-shoulder mode, shown here

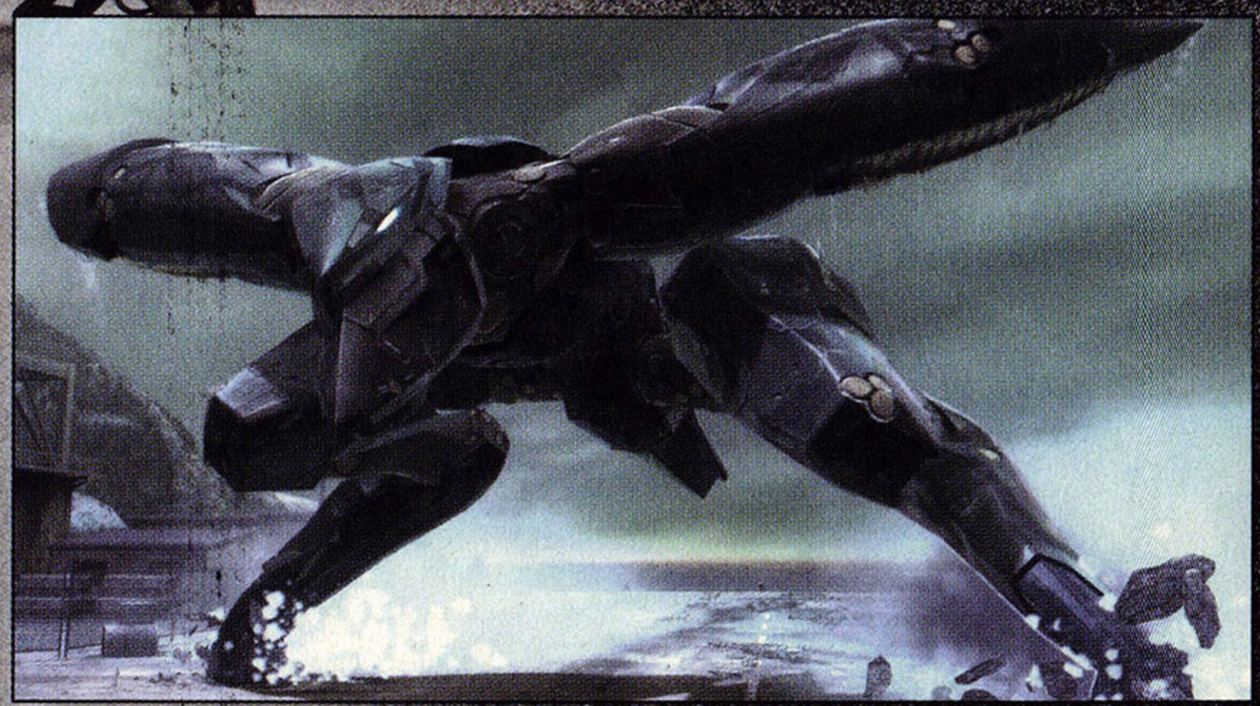
PLAYSTATION 3
> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (MULTIPLAYER TBA)
> **PUBLISHER** KONAMI
> **DEVELOPER** KOJIMA PRODUCTIONS
> **RELEASE** Q1 2008

THE BEASTS

You just can't have a Metal Gear game without a cadre of strange and powerful super-soldiers to challenge Snake and put his skills to the test. In Metal Gear Solid 4, this role is occupied by the intimidating Beauty and the Beast unit. These once-gorgeous women are not your typical foes; they were innocent bystanders caught up the war in their homeland. Instead of becoming victims, the women adapted to the harsh reality of combat, encasing their bodies in Metal Gear-like suits of armor and fighting back.

Fans of the series will notices that each of the four ladies (Laughing Octopus, Screaming Mantis, Crying Wolf, and Raging Raven) has an animal callsign that parallels a Foxhound member from the original Metal Gear Solid. Whether this is just a nod to the past or a more significant connection has yet to be seen.





casualty of war. Payton clarifies: "As long as the soldier doesn't see you start to play dead, and you're not in his direct path, you can just go to the side of the street and they'll think you're another dead soldier on the battlefield." As you can imagine, this skill is incredibly useful in getting through the occasional alert phase.

Of course, as any Metal Gear fan knows, you would ideally be able to avoid these alert modes. Thankfully, one of the new interface features will be invaluable in keeping you out of trouble. The threat ring, a thin circle of light surrounding Snake, takes the place of the radar system seen in MGS 1 and 2. You will not magically be able to perceive your foes' vision cones; instead, the threat ring acts as a sort of 3D radar for trouble. By changing the shape and color of the line, the ring will indicate the distance and direction of nearby hostiles. This allows you to plan your

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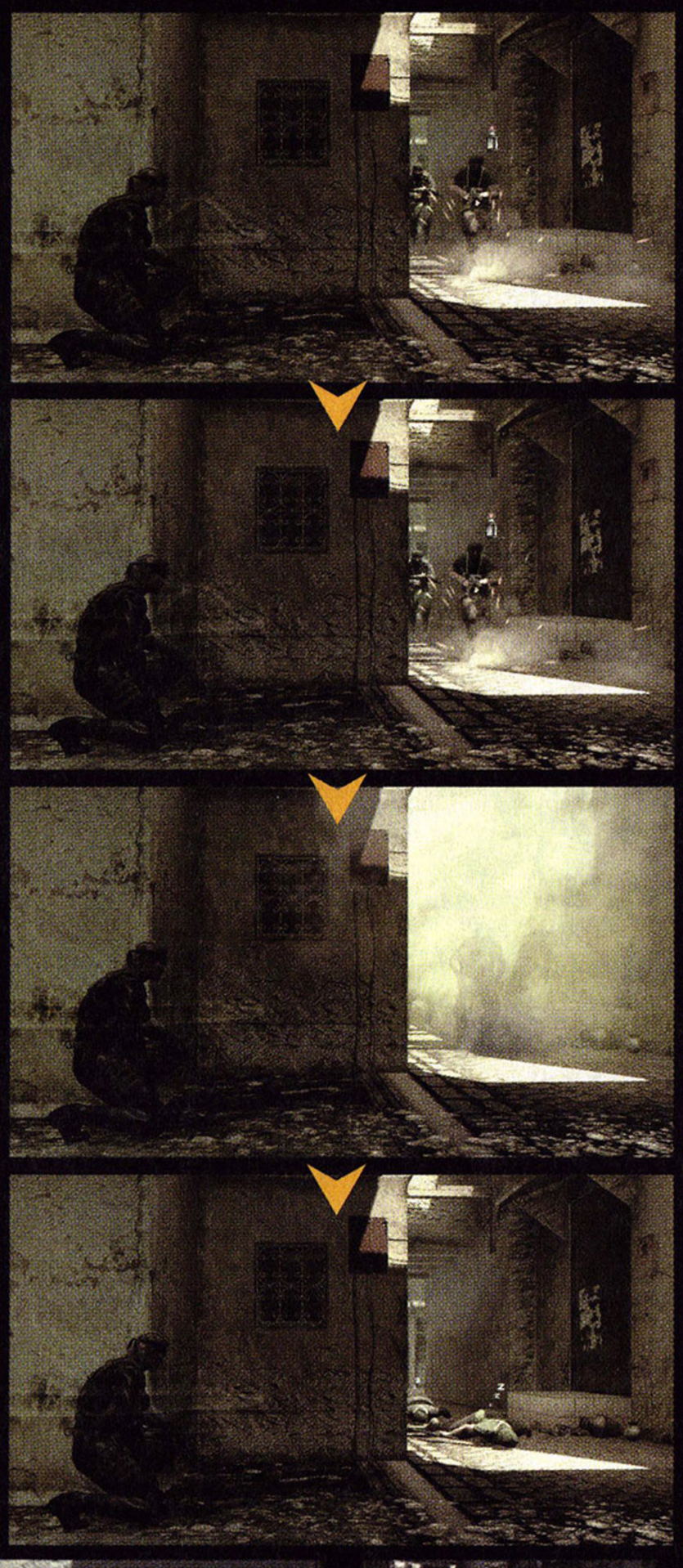
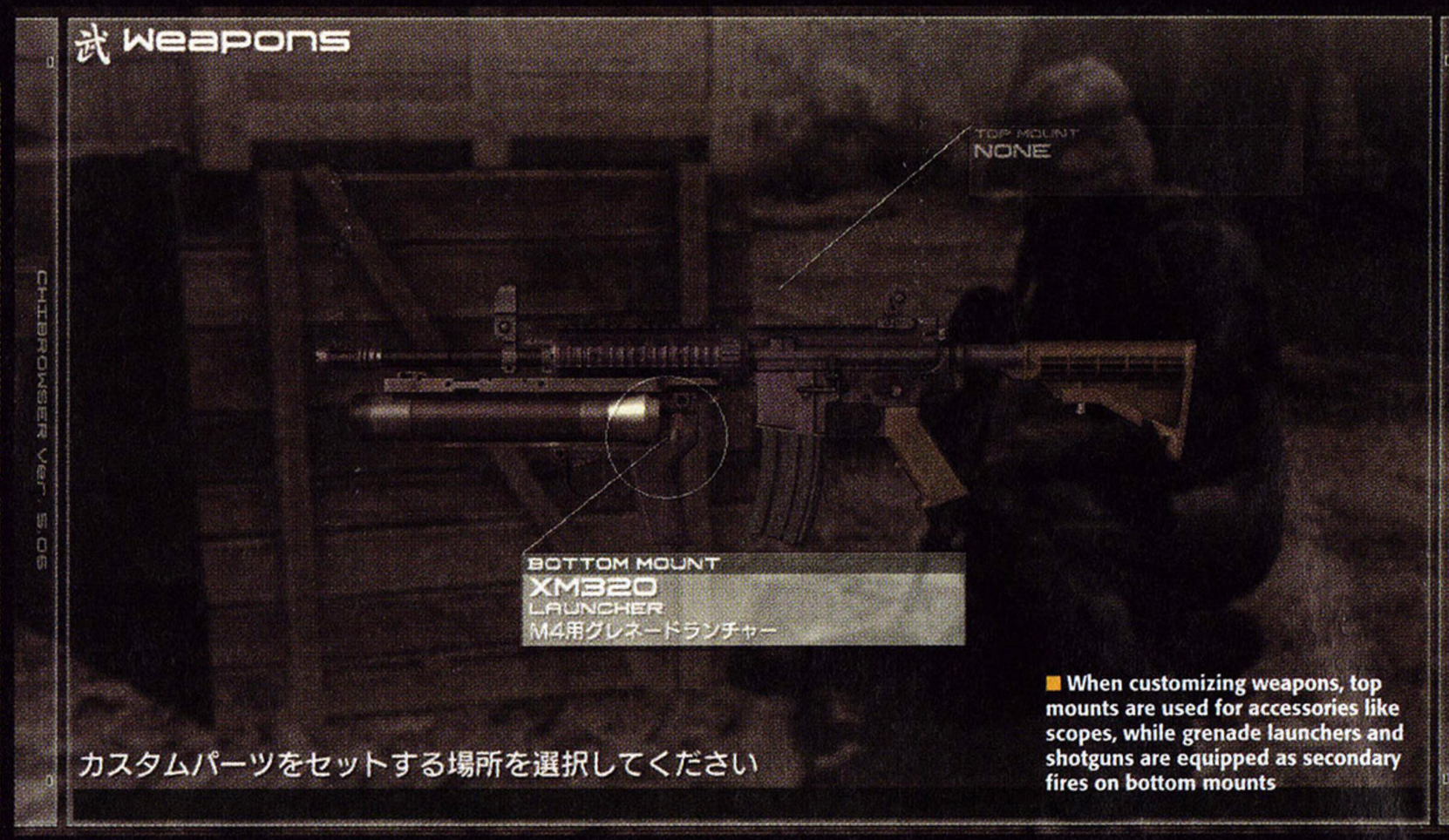
■ **The new Foxhound: Ed, Meryl, Jonathan, and the conspicuously masked Johnny Akiba**

Sleep grenades are one of the many new items Snake can find in the war zone





■ When customizing weapons, top mounts are used for accessories like scopes, while grenade launchers and shotguns are equipped as secondary fires on bottom mounts

■ One of the members of Beauty and the Beast, Crying Wolf, wreaks havoc on a tank

■ Snake and Naomi pose with Little Gray, the pet of the arms dealer Drebin

■ Sunny, Olga Gurlukovich's daughter, was kidnapped by the Patriots during the events of Metal Gear Solid 2

■ It isn't as quiet as a cardboard box, but the barrel has some offensive capabilities

<<< Continued from page 89

approach with more accuracy than the technologically sparse MGS 3, but it still retains the tension of not knowing exactly what to expect.

If you do happen to wander into an enemy's sight, you will also notice some changes to the way they react. In previous iterations, the guards would immediately radio headquarters calling for backup, and the game would enter into a lengthy three-stage alert phase. "I don't know about you, but I would basically check my e-mail while I was waiting for those things to go down," jokes Payton. "We're getting rid of that. We still have an alert mode, where all the soldiers come looking for you. That's when your threat ring turns red. If it's white, you're in normal mode."

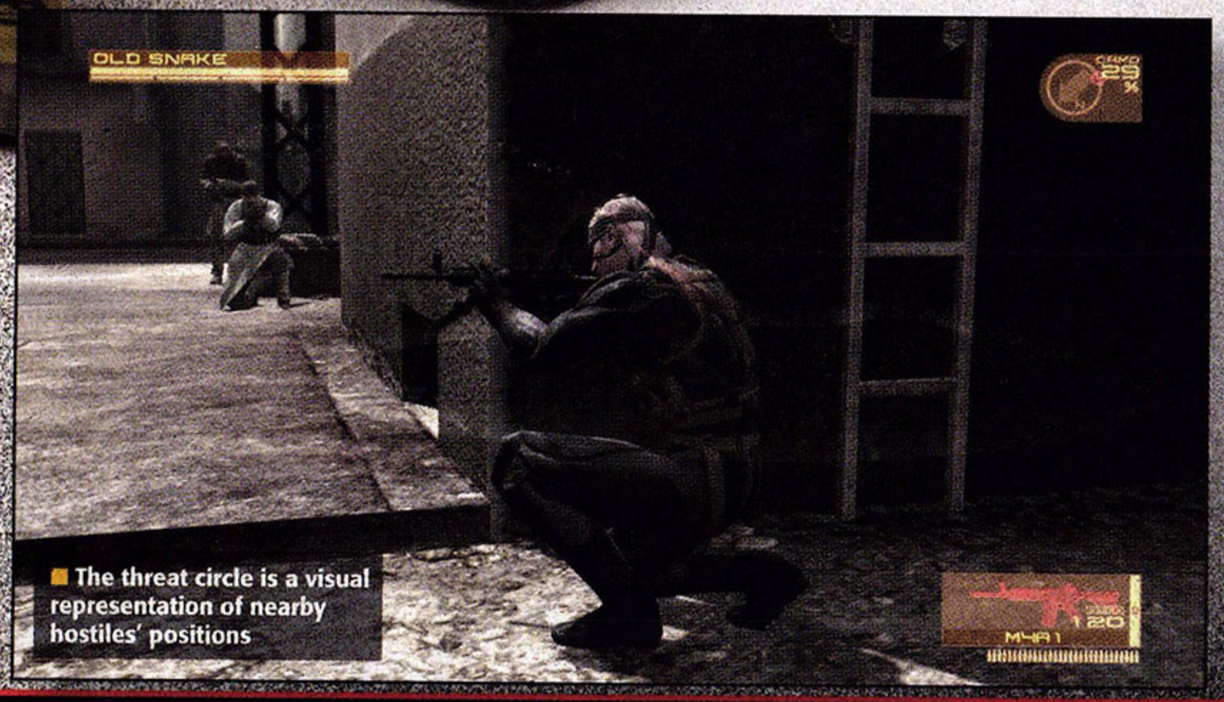
Our experience with MGS 4 shed light on several other previously unknown mechanics. For instance, practically all of Snake's weapons will be customizable, so items like scopes and grenades launchers can be attached to almost any gun. This also means that most weapons will feature secondary fire options, another first for the series. CQC moves will be available to use with two-handed weapons (like assault rifles), and a new stress meter can give Snake a temporary combat high when things are at their worst.

Details like these, when considered alongside the larger changes to the gameplay, clearly demonstrate that the coolest Metal Gear info to come out of the Tokyo Game Show isn't found in the mysteries of the trailer. Yes, the newest footage is awesome, and raises some intriguing questions about the adventure awaiting Snake (like "How is he piloting Metal Gear Rex, and can I control it?"). Even so, the nuances of how the experience will actually play is where this game has grown the most in recent months. Streamlined controls, a more intuitive interface, and new ways to carve out your niche on the battlefield are positioning Guns of the Patriots to be a fitting conclusion to one of the most inventive sagas in gaming. ■■■

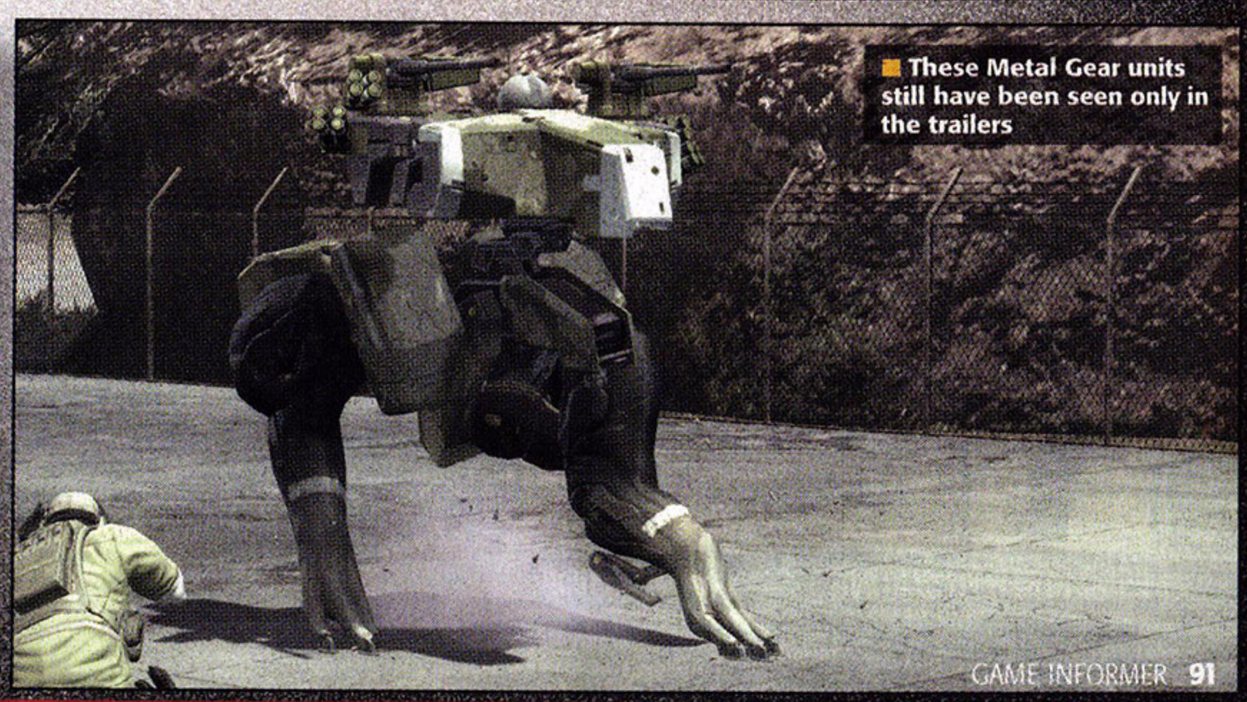
MORE GEAR

Metal Gear Solid 4 may be the most prominent upcoming title in the series, but it isn't the only chance gamers will have to spend some time with Snake in the coming months. The PSP expansion to Portable Ops, simply called Portable Ops+, will be hitting shelves later this year, and a new installment of the Metal Gear Solid

Digital Graphic Novel (following the events of MGS 2) is also planned. Lastly, the mysterious Metal Gear Online -- a source of some confusion since its announcement -- has been revealed to be the online multiplayer mode for MGS 4. A starter pack for MGO will be included with that game, but whether it will be expanded in the future, and through what avenues, is still to be determined.



■ The threat circle is a visual representation of nearby hostiles' positions



■ These Metal Gear units still have been seen only in the trailers

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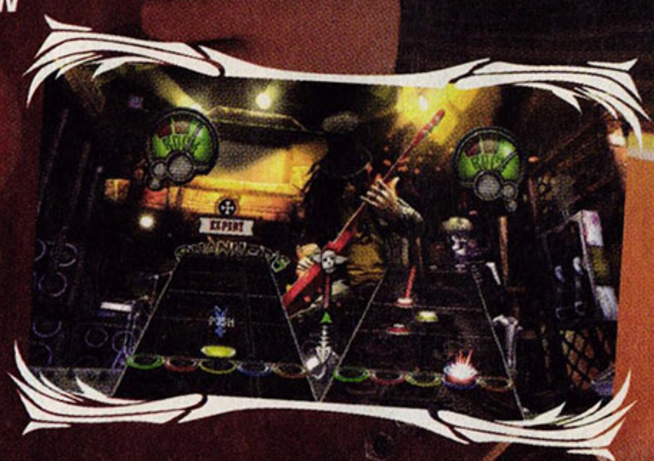

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> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION/ADVENTURE
> **PUBLISHER** UBISOFT
> **DEVELOPER** UBISOFT MONTREAL
> **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 13

That's how long we got to play Assassin's Creed this month. And it could have been five minutes for how much it left us longing for more. Like getting dropped into the middle of a great book for three chapters before having the pages spirited away, Assassin's Creed is a game that's hard to put down. In short, it is every bit as epic in scale and remarkable in its storytelling as we hoped it would be.

The Crusades serve as a dramatic backdrop to the complex story that plays out in Ubisoft Montreal's big holiday release. Altaïr is a member of a mysterious organization that feels as much like a school for ninjas as a Middle Eastern military force from medieval times. These strange killers, the original assassins, are out to surgically strike down targets throughout the Holy Lands, firm in their belief that the death of these few will bring about peace for all.

The scope of the game is massive. Dozens of minor Templar targets are scattered throughout the world. Hundreds of collectible flags dot the land and cityscape, not unlike hidden packages in other games. Repressed citizenry cry out for help on the streets as you pass. A vast countryside connects three equally massive cities – ripe for hours of exploration.

One feature we hadn't seen before was one part of that exploration. In the beginning, most of the sprawling map of the Holy Land will be grayed out. When Altaïr spies an eagle circling a high lookout point, he'll be able to ascend to that point and survey the sweep of land around him. Beyond the exciting vista, this will open that section of the map, revealing mission locations, hiding places, and enemies. In addition, you can always make a death-defying leap from these vantages to some soft point below. Even after trying it several times, the thrill of careening from the highest tower of a cathedral manages to be exciting every time.

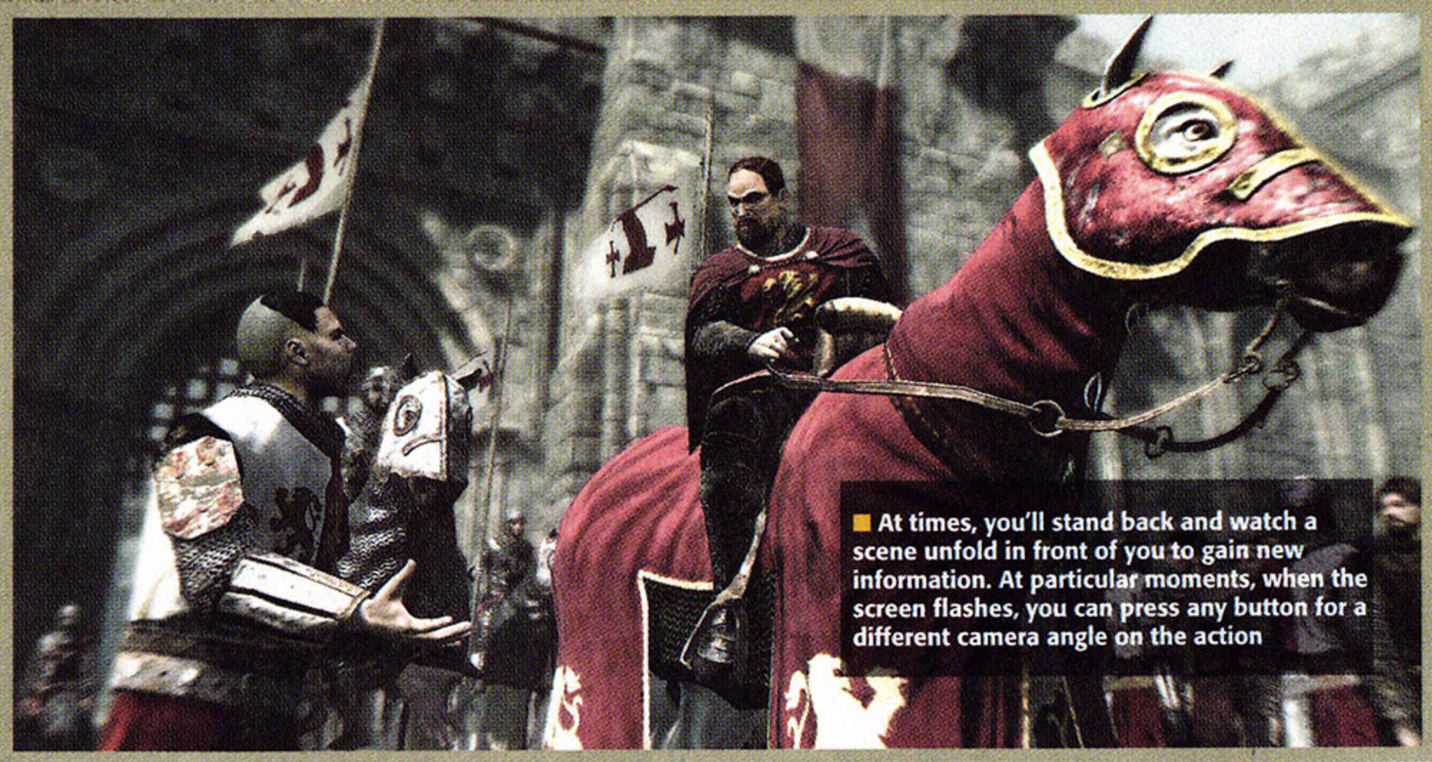
(Continued on page 97)

■ Players must seek out view points throughout the world to gaze down on the action below, thereby filling in the map for that area

Creed

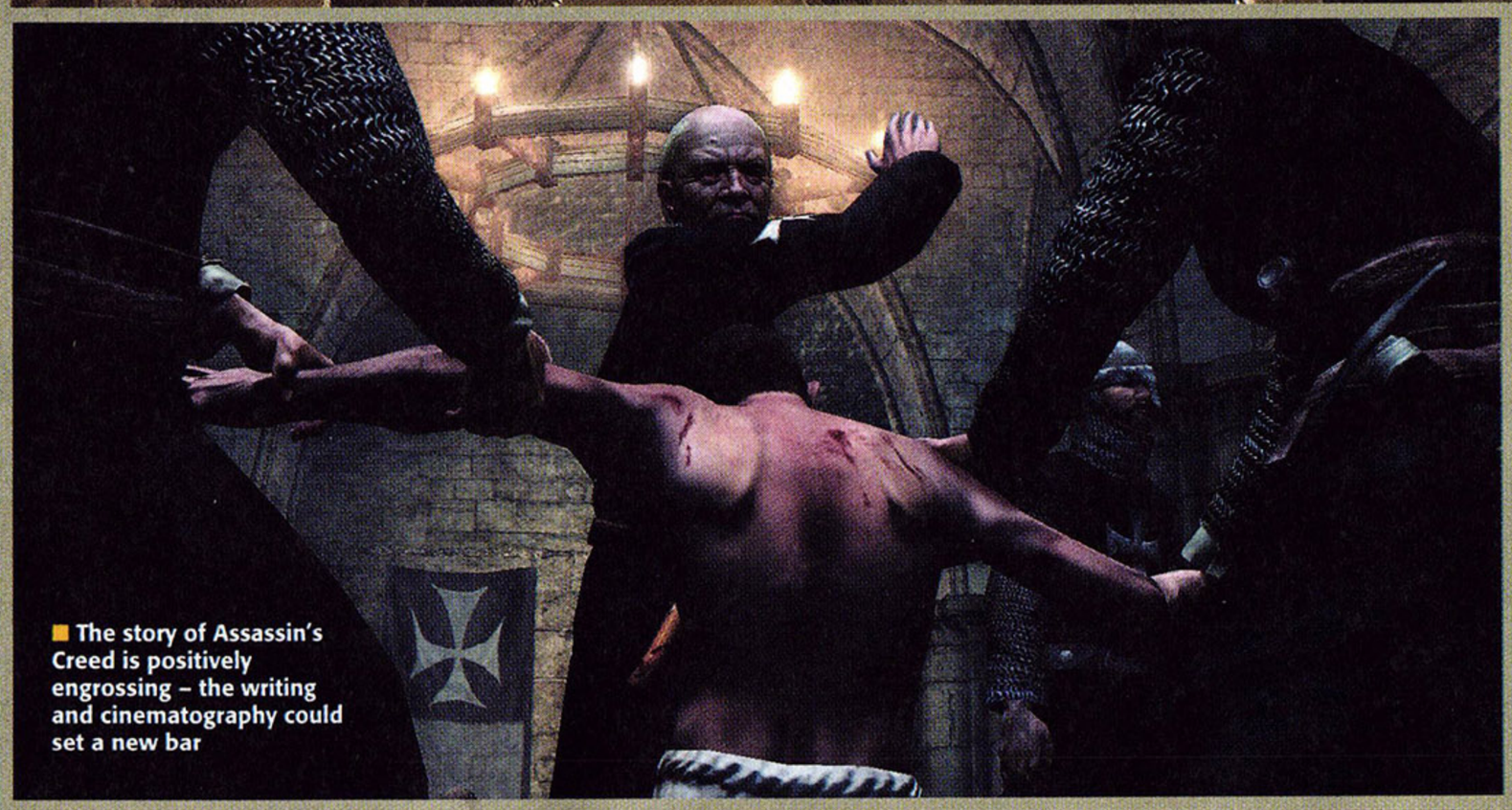
Guards and other protection surround primary targets – you'll need to investigate extensively before going in for the kill

The game is as much about restraint as it is about action. There's a time for careful observation and stealthy movement, and a time for drawn blades and leaps off rooftops



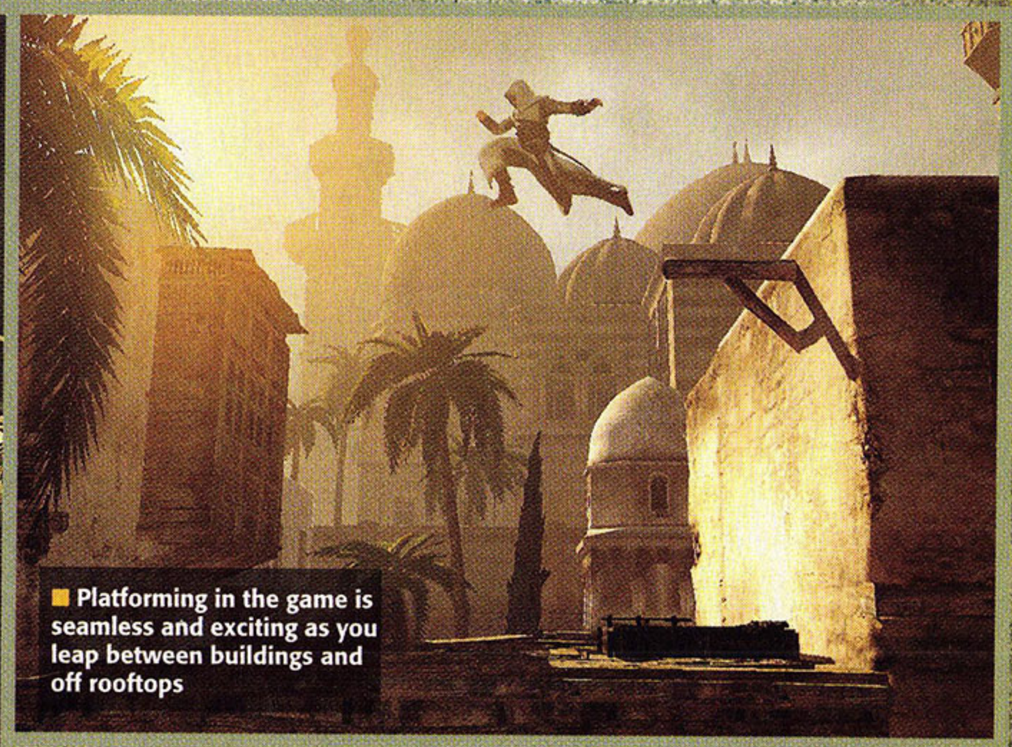
■ At times, you'll stand back and watch a scene unfold in front of you to gain new information. At particular moments, when the screen flashes, you can press any button for a different camera angle on the action

■ The marionette-style controls are unlike traditional third-person games – Altaïr moves with ease through any situation based less on individual actions you want him to do, and more about how you want him to do them

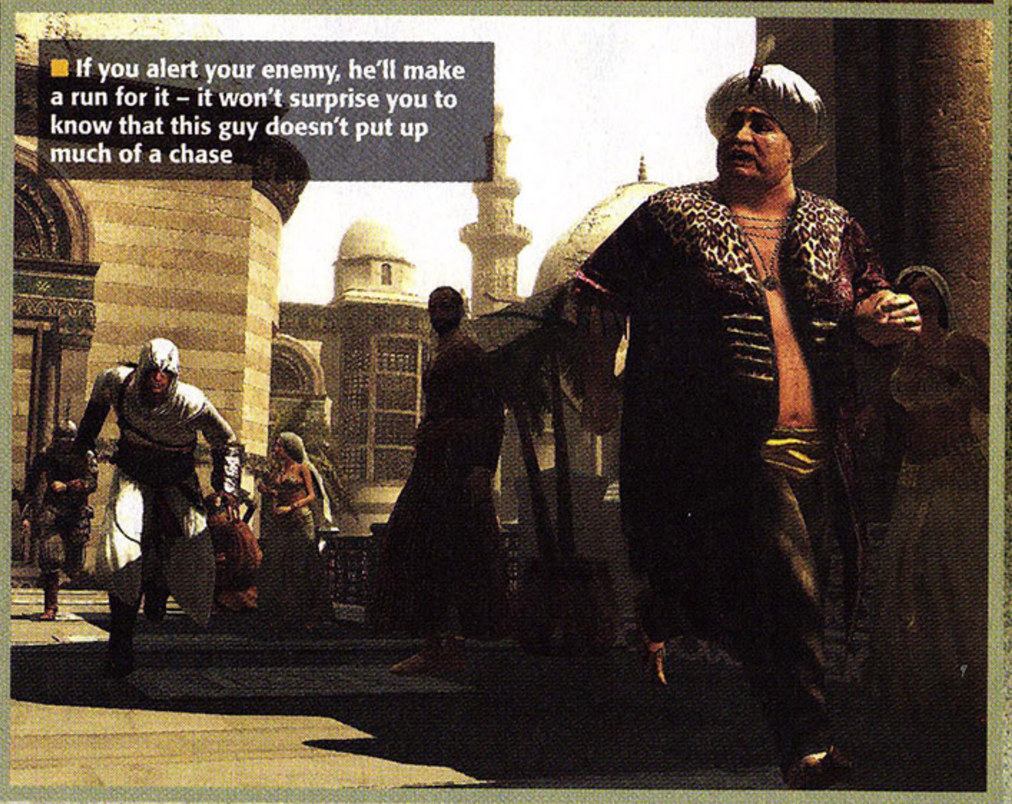


■ The story of Assassin's Creed is positively engrossing – the writing and cinematography could set a new bar

You'll invade the home of this merchant king of Damascus during a party where the host's intentions are not what they appear to be



Platforming in the game is seamless and exciting as you leap between buildings and off rooftops



If you alert your enemy, he'll make a run for it – it won't surprise you to know that this guy doesn't put up much of a chase

(Continued from page 94)

The primary gameplay arc is an extended one, eschewing traditional level design and instead encouraging players to tackle a problem their own way. With one of the nine primary targets in mind, you'll investigate extensively before the kill through activities like pickpocketing, eavesdropping, and interrogation. For every target, there are a number of these smaller mini-missions. You can complete all of them or just three or four – enough to get permission from the local assassin's bureau to begin your infiltration. You'll then sneak in and eliminate your target. In the moment between life and death, the dying man will impart to you some part of the greater mystery of the story before you are rudely flung back into reality, and a flight for your life. With this info, you'll return to the assassin's home fortress of Masyaf and report in, thereby ranking up and acquiring new weapons, skills, or other upgrades.

Technically, the game is coming along quite nicely – some incredible strides have been taken since E3, even if there are still some common glitches and balance issues popping up. Most noticeably, the random chases through the city seemed to occur too often and last too long for our tastes, where even the most minor infractions send dozens of guards out to take you down. It's a neat feature, but we're hoping it gets toned down a little bit so as to not be a distraction in the final version.

Assassin's Creed has a depth and accuracy to its historical drama on a whole new level, even while the more fantastic elements of the story are weaving together into one of the most high concept plots we've seen. And for everything you already know about its intricate story, there's at least one huge secret about the way the game plays which gamers will have to discover for themselves when it comes out. ■■■

PLAYSTATION 3

XBOX 360 LIVE

MATURE 17+
Blood and Gore
Intense Violence
Strong Language
ESRB CONTENT RATING www.esrb.org

PC DVD-ROM SOFTWARE

NINTENDO DS

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Condemned 2: Bloodshot

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (MULTIPLAYER TBA) > **PUBLISHER** SEGA
> **DEVELOPER** MONOLITH > **RELEASE** SPRING 2008

HELLO SLEEPLESS NIGHTS

■ "While you're up there, would you mind replacing that bulb?"

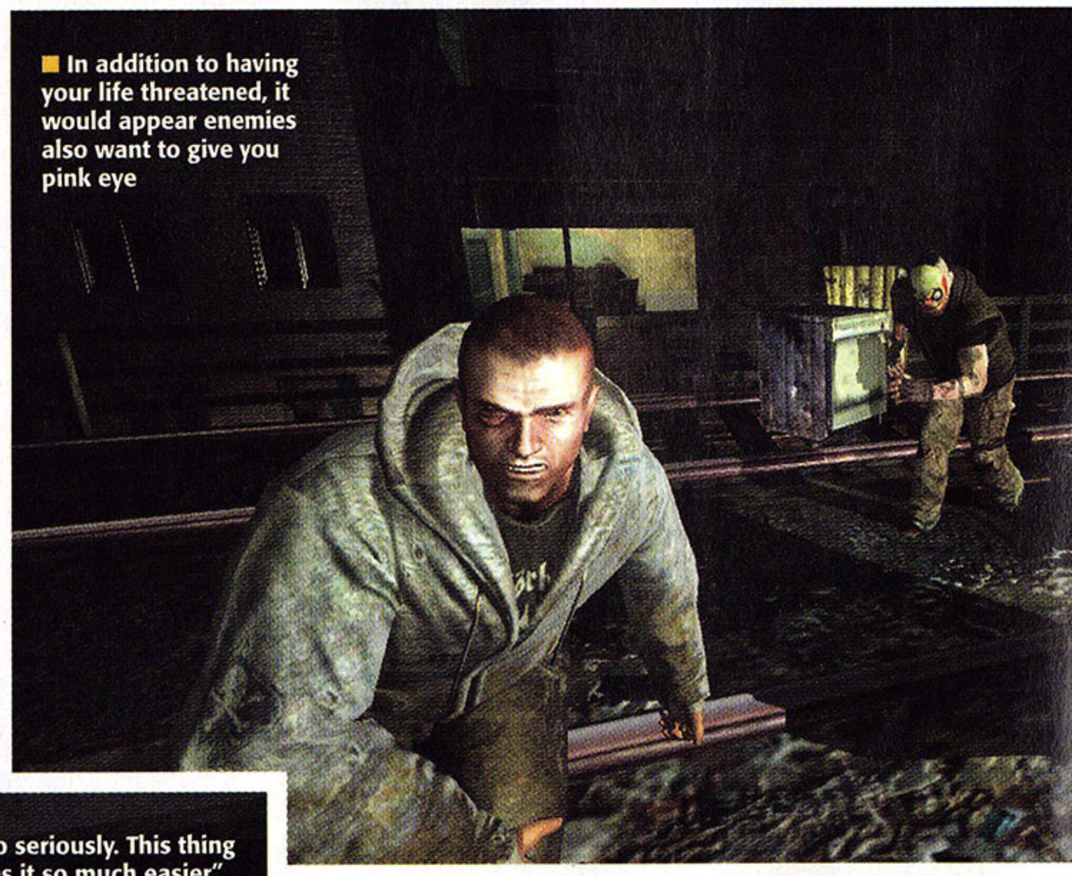
Break out the nightlight, drop to your knees, and pray that you don't dream about Condemned 2: Bloodshot. Sega swung by the Game Informer office for an exclusive hands-on demo with this highly anticipated sequel, and after working our way through the first level, we can tell you that it makes the first game look like a picnic on a sunny day. It's shaping up to be one of the most terrifying and cerebral experiences in gaming.

As BioShock has recently illustrated, storytelling can be used as a tool to create atmosphere and drive the player forward. The original Condemned struggled to convey a clear picture as to what was really going on. Any questions you may have had will likely be resolved very quickly in this chilling follow-up. Sega doesn't want us to reveal much of the plot just yet, but we can tell you that you'll learn of the significance of the birds, and who – or what – is behind the madness.

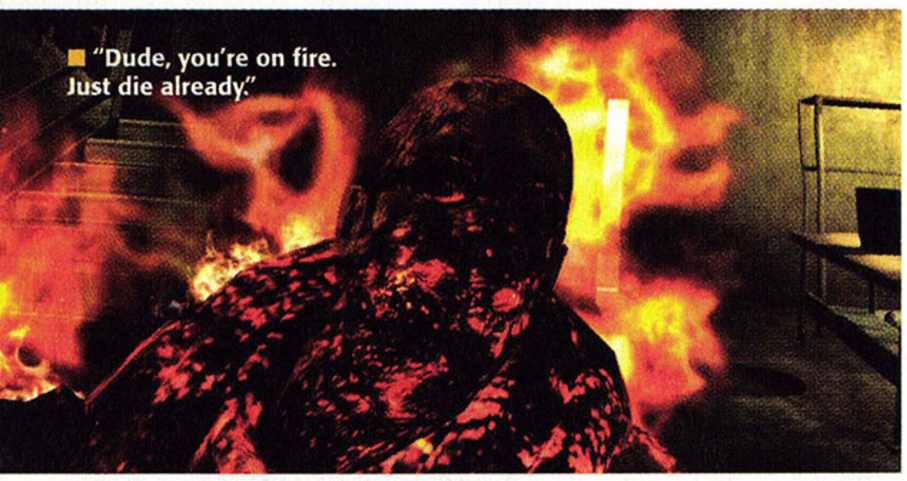
In the year that has followed since Ethan Thomas' life went to hell, he's become a raging alcoholic. He's an emotional wreck, and the only solace he can find is in a bottle. Rather than just having his dependency on alcohol magically disappear when gameplay commences, you'll see Ethan struggle with the shakes when he tries to hold a firearm steady, and he may even start seeing things that aren't really there. Monolith is going to great lengths to make this character feel real, and it will be interesting to see how his character develops as this story unfolds.

The story is also very much in the player's hands. Through an emotional response

■ In addition to having your life threatened, it would appear enemies also want to give you pink eye



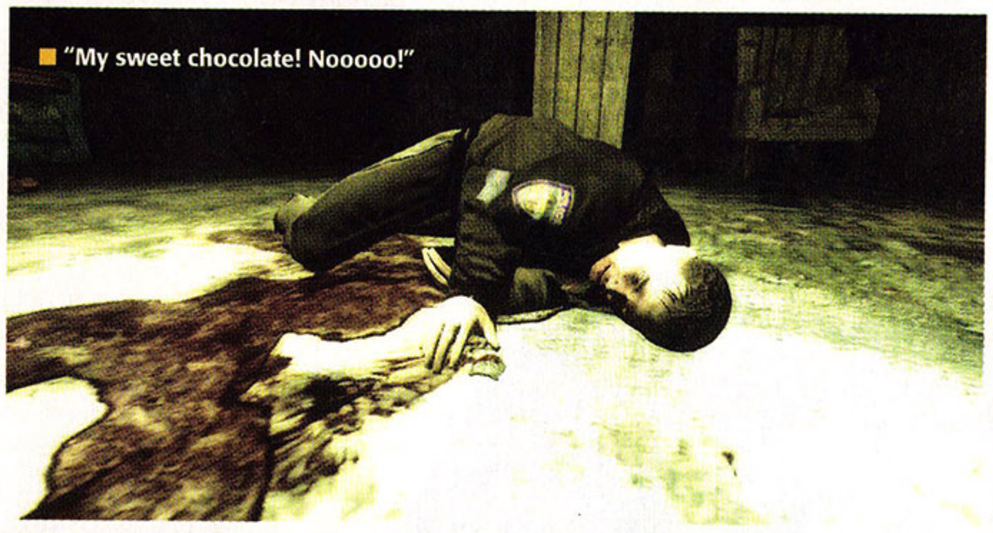
■ "Dude, you're on fire. Just die already."



■ "No seriously. This thing makes it so much easier."

■ "So, I think we can safely say that your dog doesn't like me."

■ If you thought the original game was scary, Condemned 2 will likely make you poop your pants twice



■ "My sweet chocolate! Nooooo!"

■ How cool would it be if you could customize your character for multiplayer?

■ If you can time your punches correctly, you can get a chain going

system, players will have a split second to hit a button that flashes up on screen. If someone insults you, the emotional response would be to flick him or her off. If someone tries to help you up off of the ground, the emotional response is to grab his or her hand. If you don't hit the button, the dialogue or direction of the scene will change.

This high level of interaction is present throughout the entire game, especially in the combat system. The left and right shoulder buttons function as your arms. If you click the left shoulder button, you'll throw a punch with your left arm. Click both buttons together, and Ethan will raise both of his hands to block. Attack while sprinting, and Ethan will throw out a fierce forearm. Pull back on the analog stick, and he'll perform an uppercut. Of course, razor-sharp axes and blunt lead pipes are still a part of the mix, but rather than just swinging them, Ethan can throw them at his assailant. You can really feel the impact and weight behind the throw, and you almost feel sorry for your foe as they stand dazed or holding their shins. If you really want to take down an enemy in style, Monolith has incorporated over 40 finishing moves into the game. If you see a TV set, you can smash your attacker's head through the screen. An exposed pipe doubles as an impaling tool, and a dumbwaiter, well, you'll just have to wait and see what that brings.

Being aggressive and creative in combat is beneficial, as players are rewarded at level's end with points that can be used for upgrades that range from brass knuckles and steel-toed boots to a shoulder-mounted flashlight and a bulletproof vest. The game will be much longer this time, and Monolith expects players to clock roughly 12 to 15 hours in it. The story is only part of the experience, however, as Monolith has huge plans for multiplayer and a new mode tentatively called Fight Club. No details are being revealed at this time for the online component, but Fight Club looks like a place where you can spend hours upon hours just bashing in people's skulls and completing timed arena challenges.

Condemned 2 has already hit its alpha state, and Monolith is now going through the game to make it as scary as can be. It'll street this spring for both PS3 and Xbox 360, and will come packaged with a highlight video that walks players through the events of the first game. ■ ■ ■

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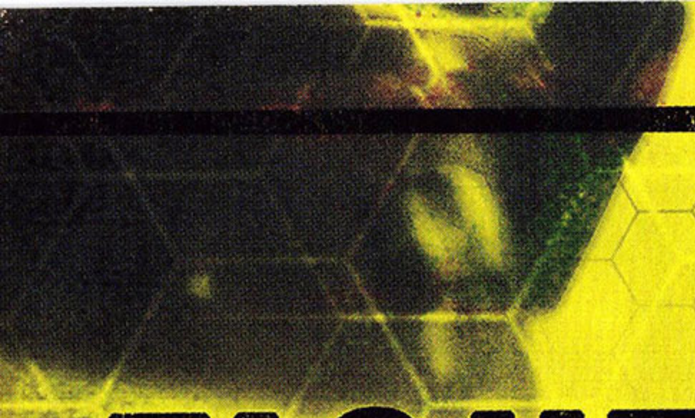

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God of War: Chains of Olympus

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT > **DEVELOPER** READY AT DAWN STUDIOS > **RELEASE** MARCH 4

THE WILL OF THE GODS

One of the criticisms often leveled at the PSP is that it is just a smaller version of the PS2. That may make PSP owners reluctant to pick up ports of console games, but when it comes to delivering the thunderous action of God of War, it's a blessing rather than a curse. We got our hands on an all-new level in Ready at Dawn's prequel to God of War, and Kratos' next adventure is getting ready to raise the bar for handheld action games. In the words of Ready at Dawn's director of production Marc Turndorf, "We try not to compare ourselves to other PSP games. We're just trying to make a great God of War game."

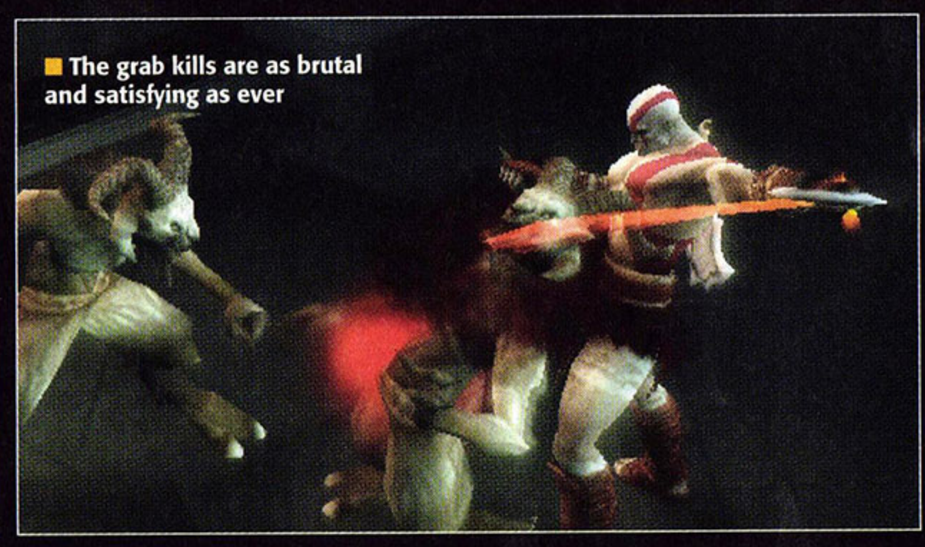
The story takes place before the original God of War, but after Kratos has become the Ghost of Sparta. In this period, he was a servant to Olympus, doing the gods' dirty work on Earth. The plot setup may be different, but the gameplay is strikingly familiar. The layout and feel of the controls are remarkably similar to the PS2 games, and even improved in the case of using magic. Instead of selecting a type of magic with the d-pad, the R button acts as a shift trigger, enabling the use of magic with the face buttons. In other words, if you hold R and press triangle, Kratos will unleash one kind of magic, but if you press circle he will use another. Afterwards, you can just release R and go back to swinging your blades.

It looks like the only hang-up with this revised control scheme could be overworking the two shoulder buttons. Independently, L and R are the block buttons. However, since the PSP doesn't have a second analog stick, you need to hold both L and R while flicking the nub in order to dive away from attacks. Add to that the fact that L is used to initiate power attacks (which can't be interrupted by blocking) and R is for casting magic, and sometimes Kratos isn't doing exactly what you want. For the most part, though, the build we played was responsive and fluid.

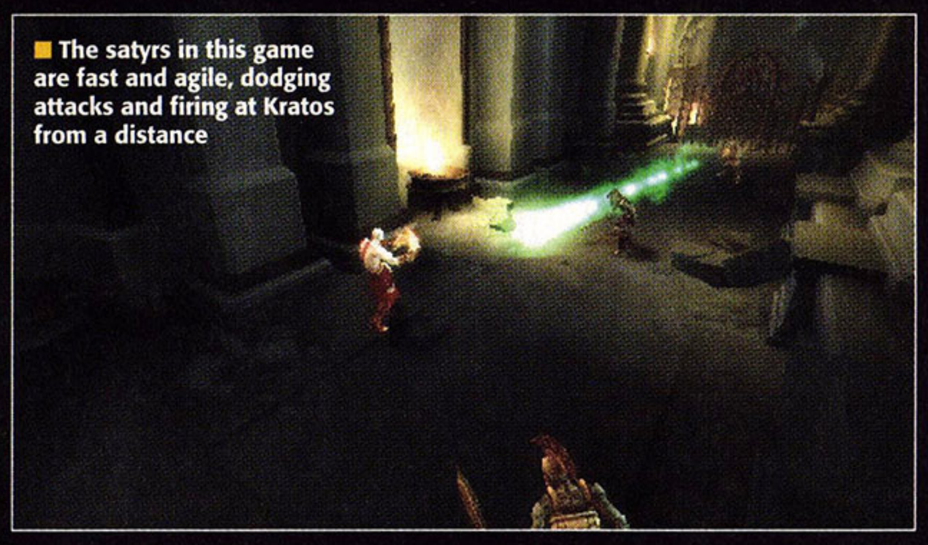
Most of the basic moves and combos from God of War II have found their way back into Kratos arsenal. In the cases where it wouldn't make sense to have the exact same ability (like magic or the Golden Fleece), a similar mechanic has been substituted. The Sun Shield, found in Helios' Temple, can parry attacks if pressed at the right moment. You'll also encounter a brand new selection of spells. We played a boss fight against the Persian King, and after his grisly defeat (Kratos crushes his skull by repeatedly hitting it with a treasure chest), we earned the fiery Efreet magic. To top it all off, there will also be a weapon option in addition to the Blades of Chaos. Ready at Dawn wouldn't tell us exactly what the new weapon is, but we know that you'll get it about halfway through the game, and it can be used to break stones in order to open up secret areas.

The full version of Chains of Olympus isn't hitting until March, but you can get a taste of the action right now with a demo disc. If you don't believe the God of War experience can be faithfully moved to handheld, you shortly may find yourself reevaluating that stance. "In every aspect of the game – the combat, the puzzles – it's God of War," states Turndorf. "It just happens to be on the PSP." ■■■

■ **Most of the basic combat moves are the same as in God of War II, with a few variations**



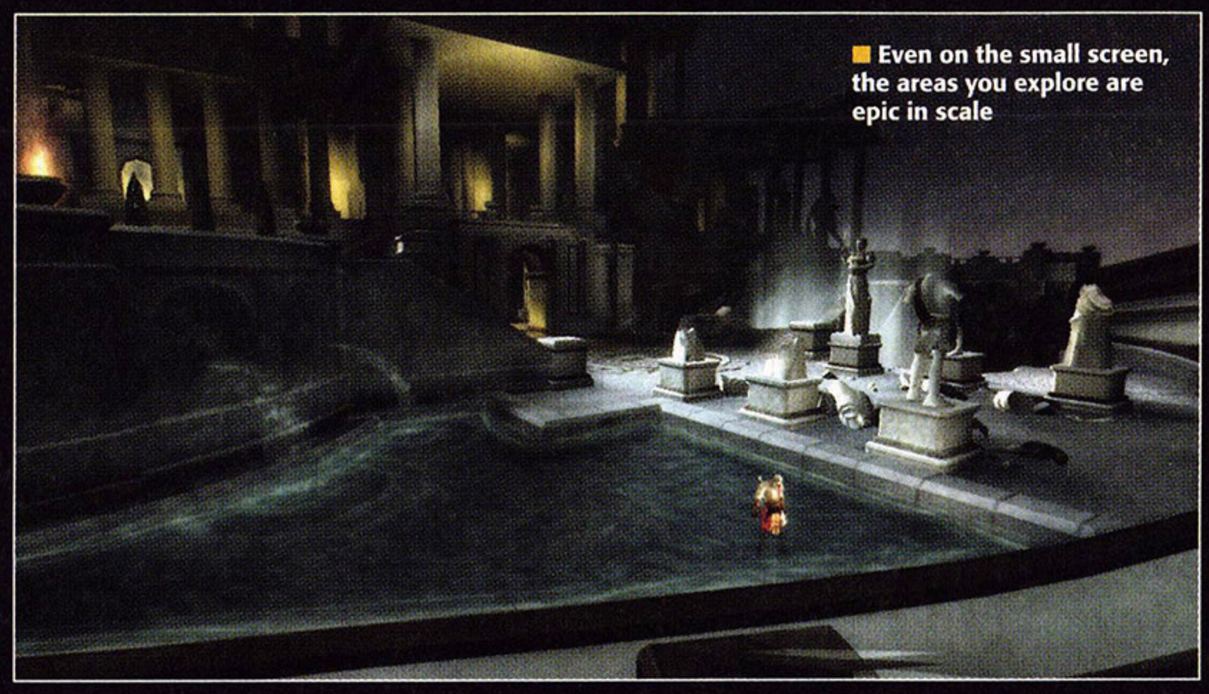
■ **The grab kills are as brutal and satisfying as ever**



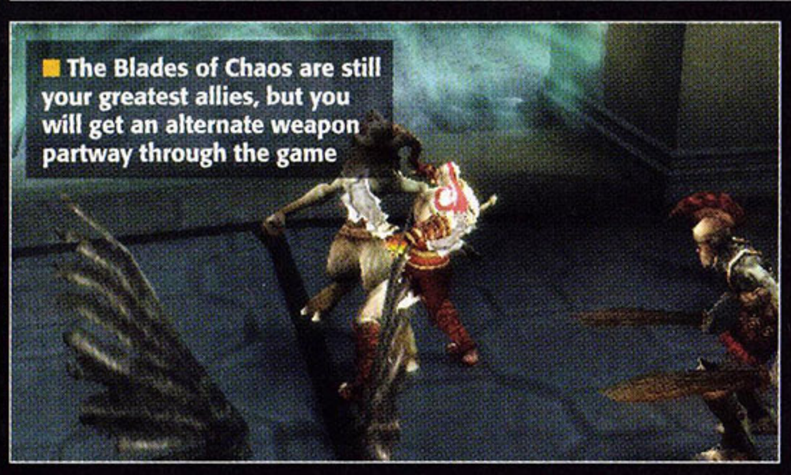
■ The satyrs in this game are fast and agile, dodging attacks and firing at Kratos from a distance

KEEP SWINGING THE CHAINS

After the first two entries in this series, gamers have come to expect a few rewards upon completing a God of War title. Ready at Dawn is continuing this tradition by implementing numerous incentives to play the game for a second and even a third time. "After you beat it, you'll be able to take your whole gamut of weapons and upgrades with you for another playthrough," explains programming director Garret Foster. In fact, there are certain areas you can't even access in the first playthrough, much like God of War II. You may even encounter other surprises as you replay: "There will be one variation on one of the weapons...but that's beside the point," Foster teases.



■ Even on the small screen, the areas you explore are epic in scale



■ The Blades of Chaos are still your greatest allies, but you will get an alternate weapon partway through the game

■ Efreet magic summons a fire demon for an area-of-effect burst of flame

■ Kratos obtains the Sun Shield in Helios' Temple. It is used to parry enemy attacks, which will then allow you to counterattack

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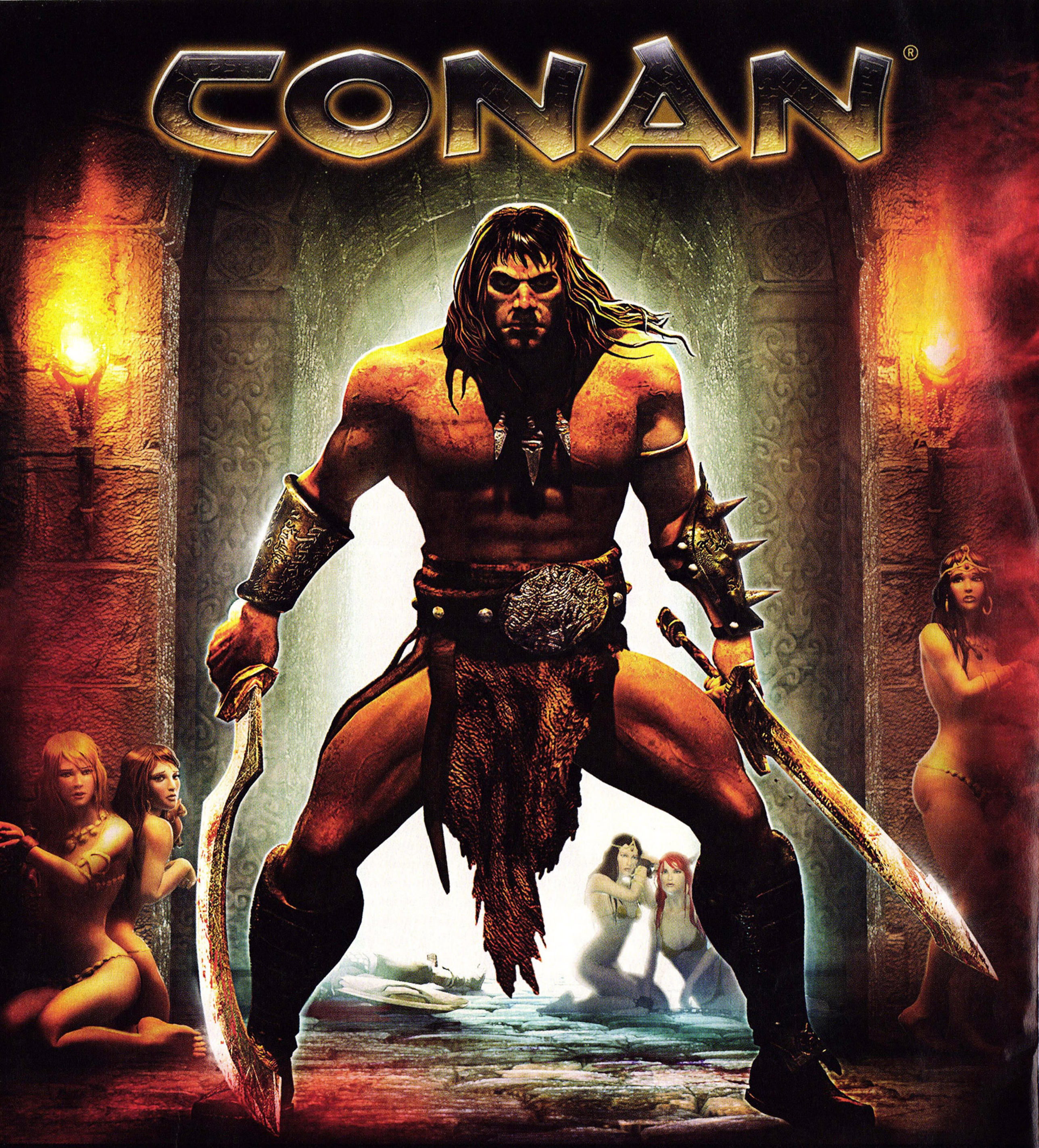

MATURE 17+

Blood and Gore
Intense Violence
Nudity

ESRB CONTENT RATING www.esrb.org

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Battlefield: Bad Company

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 24-PLAYER VIA PLAYSTATION NETWORK OR XBOX LIVE) > **PUBLISHER** ELECTRONIC ARTS
> **DEVELOPER** DIGITAL ILLUSIONS CE > **RELEASE** 2008

BLOW IT ALL UP

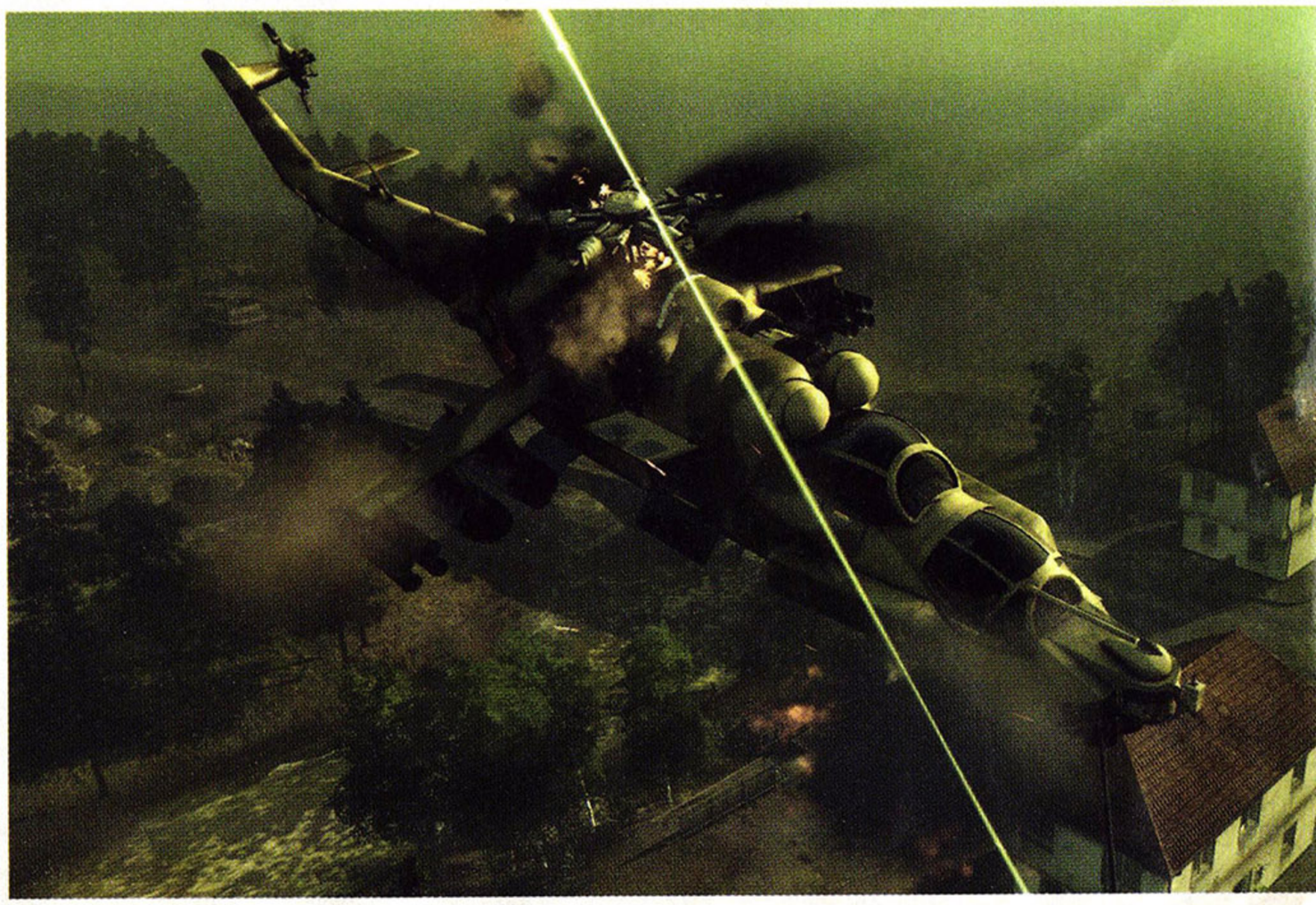
■ Total destruction includes mother nature as well

From the time we debuted the game last year (issue #161), Battlefield: Bad Company has long surpassed its original "Spring 2007" release date. But all of the extra work seems to be paying off. DICE's proprietary Frostbite engine looks to be living up to its promises with impressive detail and destruction alike – especially for an open world game.

Previously under wraps story details are finally starting to emerge. Sure we know the game is inspired by movies like *Three Kings* and *Kelly's Heroes*, but we haven't really met the characters until now. Players will take the role of Preston, the greenest member of Bad Company, who basically gets bossed around by the others. Sarge is close to retiring from the military, Haggard is good with explosives, and Sweetwater is the brains of the operation. The squad has been sent to their inevitable deaths on the frontlines by their commanders in a war with Russia and a Middle East coalition. Rather than accept their fate, the squad goes AWOL in a search of hidden caches of gold on a sprawling battlefield that spans miles and miles.

Players are given objective locations on the map and can choose any route they want to get there. To cut down on travel time and increase firepower, players can utilize land, air, and sea vehicles. In a recent gameplay demo, we saw Preston and company hop into a Humvee and book it to a military checkpoint. While he could have thinned the enemy ranks with a sniper rifle or ran in with guns blazing, Preston instead pulled out a radio that had been previously stolen from the enemy. With a quick rattling off of coordinates, we soon had the enemy launching a mortar strike against its own forces. As he stormed the panicked base, the main road through the center looked to be the sole dangerous option. But thanks to the destructible environments he was able to tunnel through buildings, blowing holes through the walls with a trusty grenade launcher.

In another area, Preston dodged a hail of

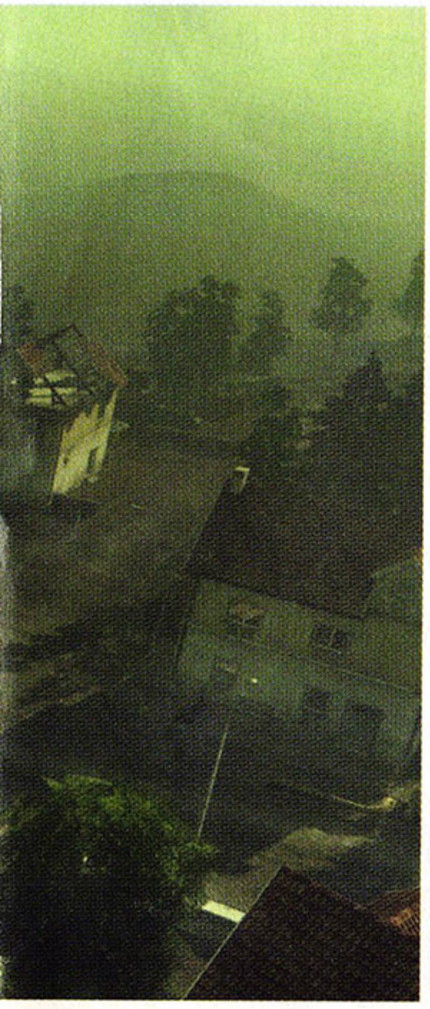


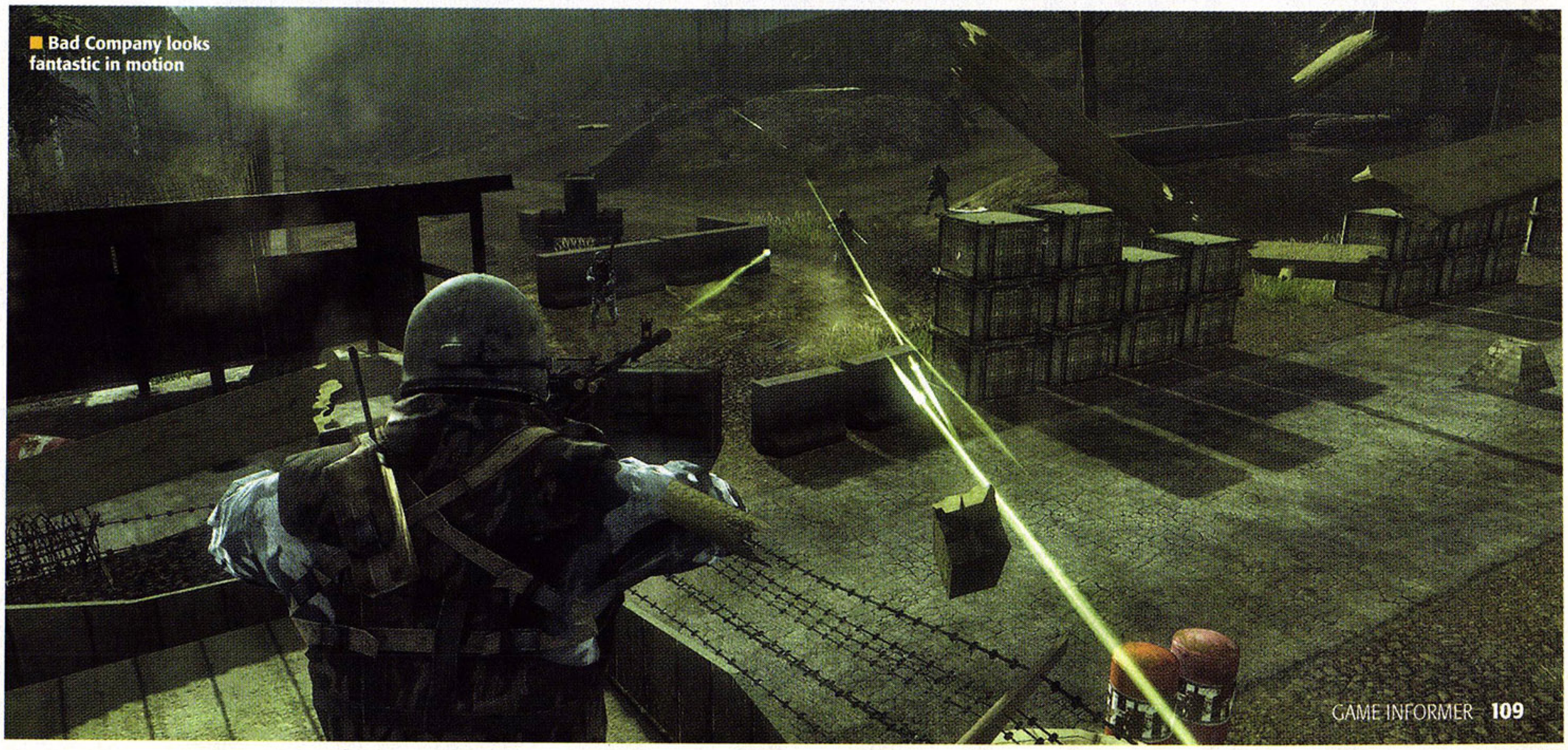
■ Create your own paths through Battlefield's open world

helicopter bullets while running through a clearing. He quickly came across a source of salvation – a concrete turret platform. After feeling the heat of return fire, the chopper swoops behind some towering pines. No matter, our turret chews the trees to pieces to expose the flying menace. With a few more well-placed shots, the helicopter goes down in a trail of smoke and flames. As it crashes into the remaining forest below, trees snap and topple over.

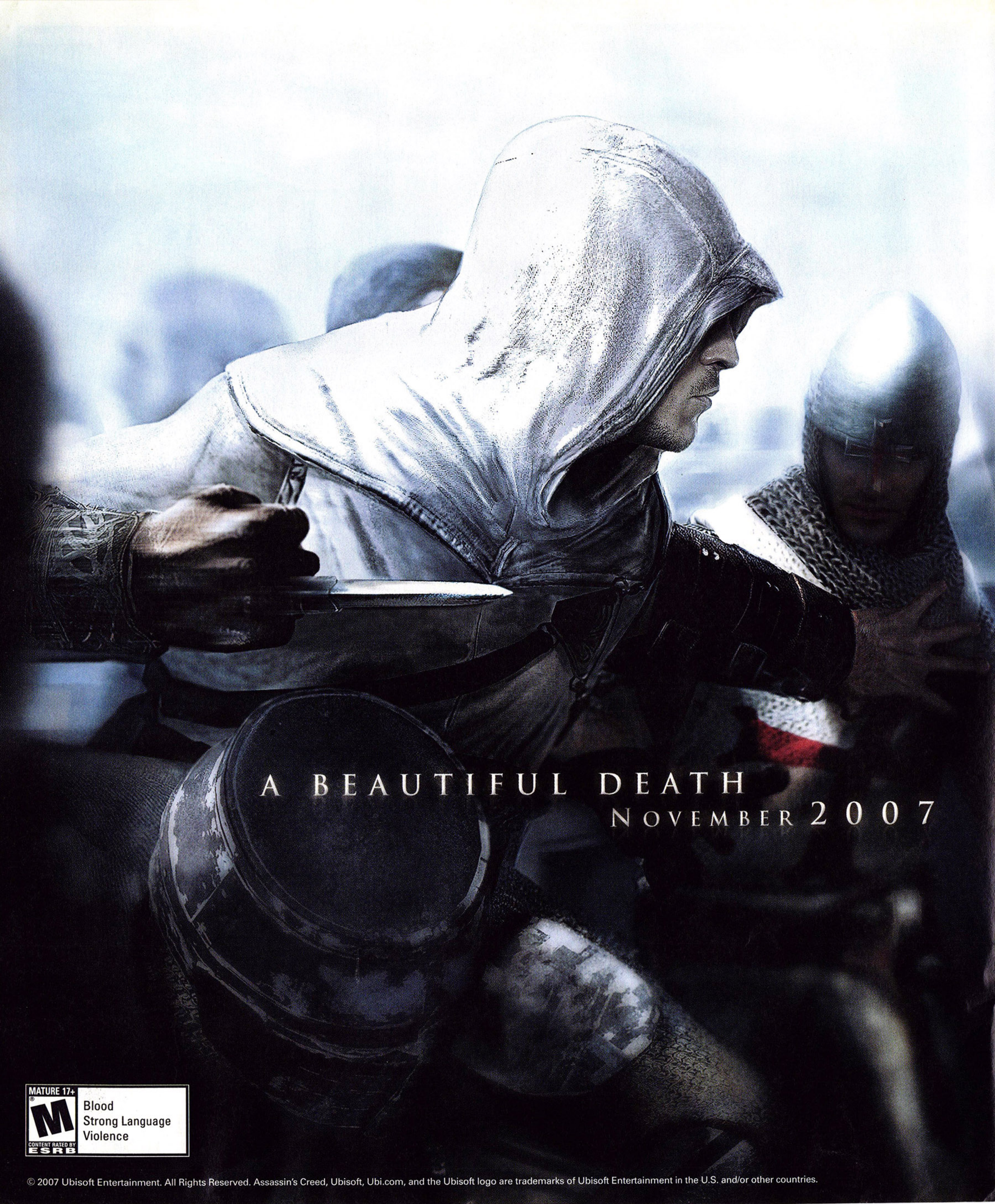
Despite the fact that you'll always be part of a squad in Bad Company, DICE still won't comment on the possibility of co-op gameplay. Competitive multiplayer remains a mystery as well, with little more information than the inclusion of full destruction and a 24-player cap. All of this will come as we get closer to the release date, however. Let's just hope it makes an early 2008 timeframe rather than next holiday. ■ ■ ■

■ The guided missile cam. Hell yes





■ Bad Company looks fantastic in motion



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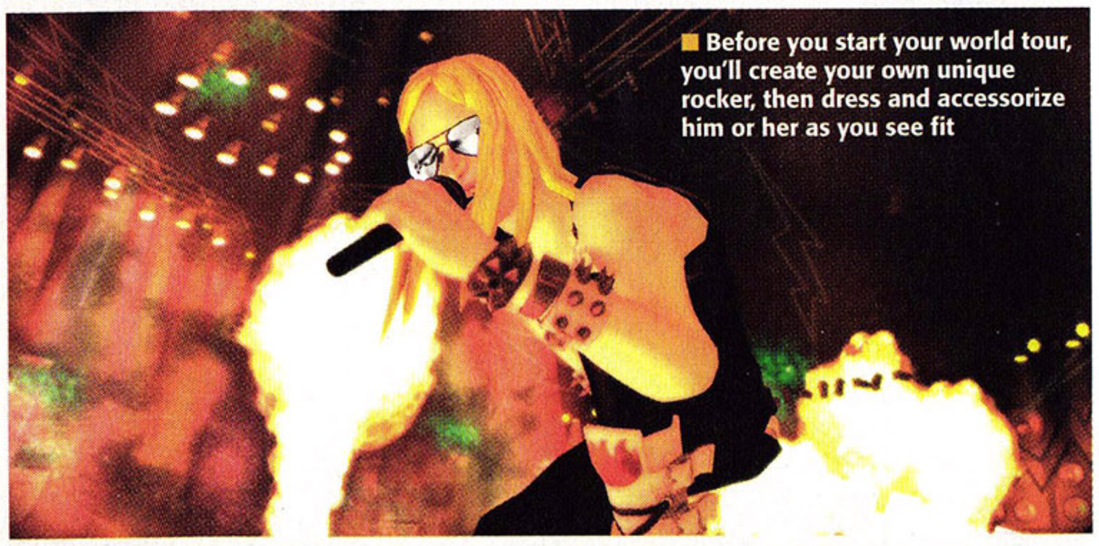
PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360

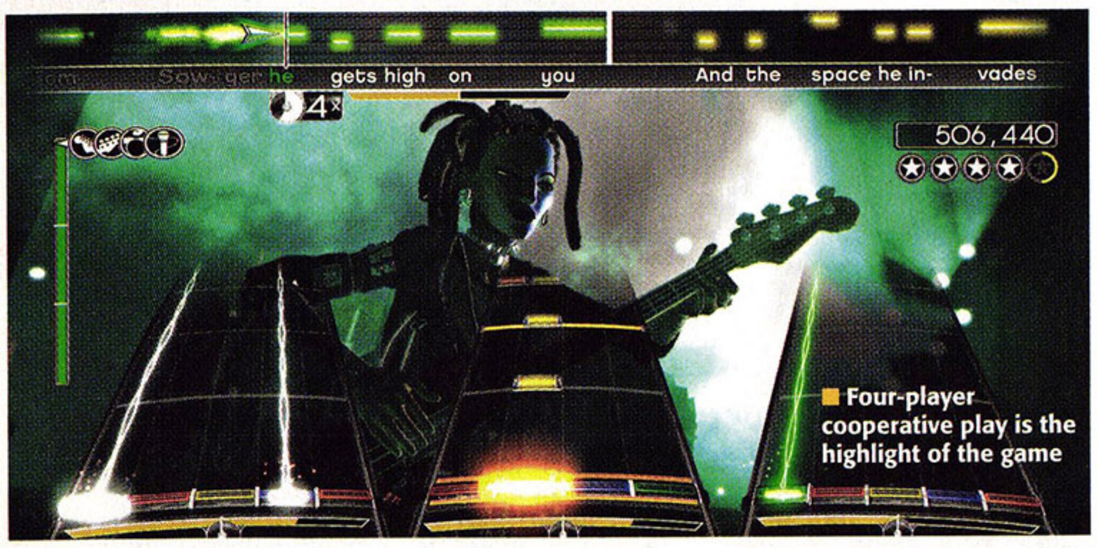
Rock Band

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

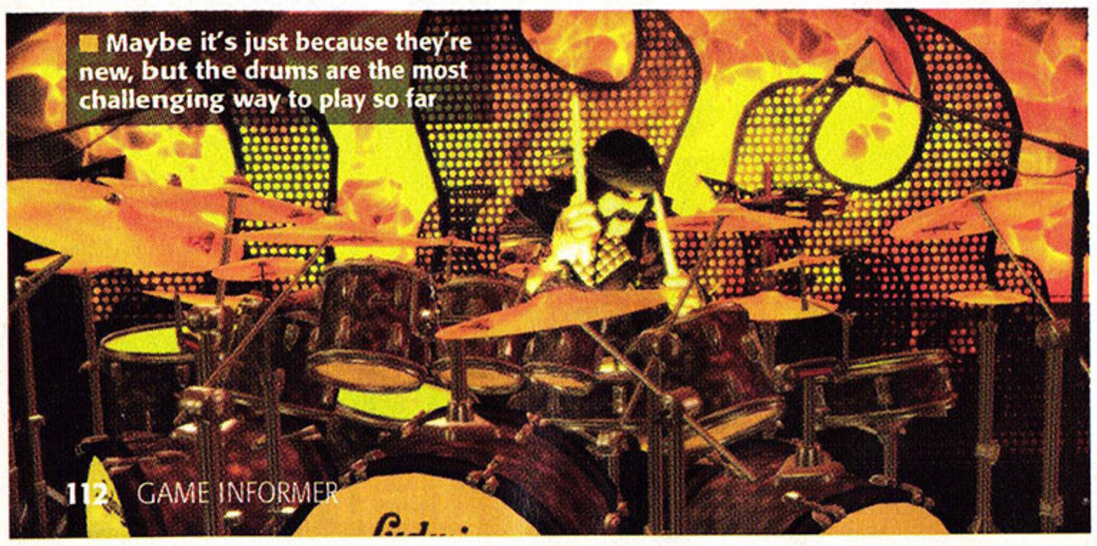
THE FULL BAND



■ Before you start your world tour, you'll create your own unique rocker, then dress and accessorize him or her as you see fit



■ Four-player cooperative play is the highlight of the game



■ Maybe it's just because they're new, but the drums are the most challenging way to play so far

At long last, our final Rock Band instruments showed up at the office this month, along with an almost complete version of the final game, and we got right to work on our big world tour. Between the different instruments, the dozens of performance venues, and the fleshed out character customization, there was a lot to see.

In recent months, we got a look at a scaled back version of the character creator. Now, that feature is almost complete, and we took advantage of the chance to make some truly screwed up characters. While there weren't a huge number of individual faces and haircuts to choose from, the clothes and tattoo options help to make up for the lack of variety elsewhere. In particular, we were amazed by the options for inking your rocker. An array of real-life tattoo artists have their work represented in the game. Once you pick among the many options, the tattoo can be scaled and stretched to fit the dimensions you desire, and unique colors can be chosen.

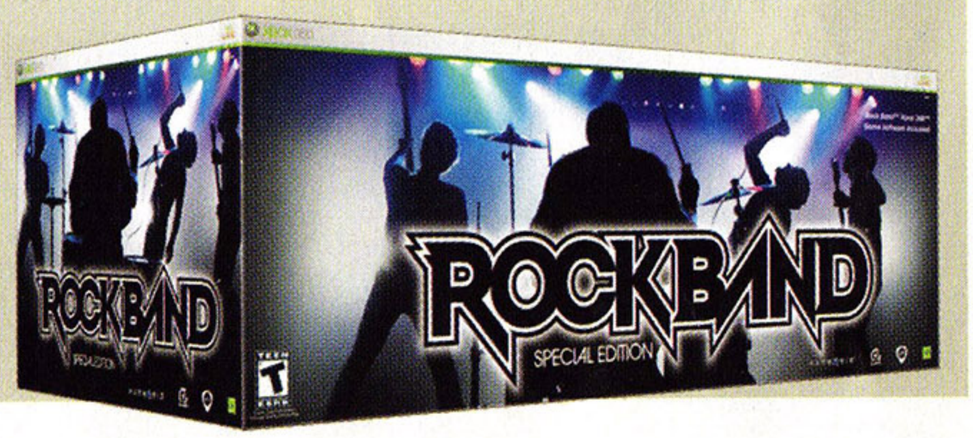
Once your band is decked out, you'll head out and start performing gigs. For every performance, the number of stars you acquire will go toward unlocking new venues and songs. Sometimes you'll have mystery song sets that come in as requests, and at other times, you'll arrange your own set list or simply choose individual songs. We don't love the fact that you end up having to repeat songs you've already played in order to get enough stars to progress, but it certainly extends the length of the game, for better or worse.

Each instrument plays a little differently. Guitar tracks have special solo lines you have to nail for extra points. Drummers need to nail fills and the crash at the end to trigger the yet again renamed "Overdrive" (still works like "Star Power"). Bassists can drop into a bass groove for huge multipliers – as high as 12x. Finally, singers have to nail particularly important vocal lines to build their Overdrive power. If everybody triggers their special power simultaneously, you'll get a huge score boost for unison play.

Drumming seems to be the place where hardcore players are likely to find the biggest challenge this time around – some of the rhythmic lines on Expert are killer. Guitar parts remain fun, but still not as challenging as we'd like. However, unlike in Activision's recent Guitar Hero III, the available time frames for hitting notes hasn't expanded, so you'll need to be as precise as you were with the early GH games. Overall, Rock Band plays like a dream, a fact that every one of us will be able to experience together when we start playing online in late November. ■ ■ ■

THE WHOLE SHEBANG

While the exact details of pricing and packaging for individual instruments remain under wraps as of the time of this writing, we did manage to get a confirmation from the game makers on a price for their most extravagant package. For $200, you'll be able to get the game, a guitar, a set of drums, and a microphone for either the PS3 or the Xbox 360. However, the packages aren't identical. The guitar included with the PS3 will be wireless. Unfortunately, the same can't be said for the Xbox 360 guitar, which will ship as a wired peripheral. On the bright side, included in this $200 Xbox 360 version will be a USB hub, so all the instruments can plug in without a problem. Of course, whether you're playing on a Microsoft or a Sony console, you'll still need to go buy one more guitar for the four part experience – presuming you don't already have a compatible guitar from Guitar Hero II or III.



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You'll have a companion with you through large sections of the game – one of the most important is Elena here

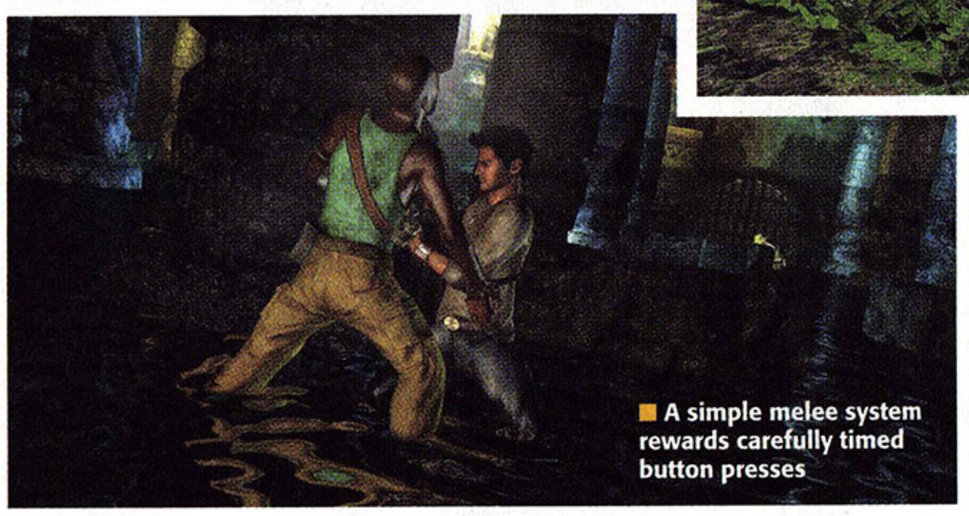
PLAYSTATION 3

Uncharted: Drake's Fortune

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION/ADVENTURE > **PUBLISHER** SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT
> **DEVELOPER** NAUGHTY DOG > **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 20

SO MUCH TO DO, SO LITTLE TIME

The gunfights have come a long way in the last few months, and are now a lot of fun to play – just the right mix of insane action and challenge



A simple melee system rewards carefully timed button presses

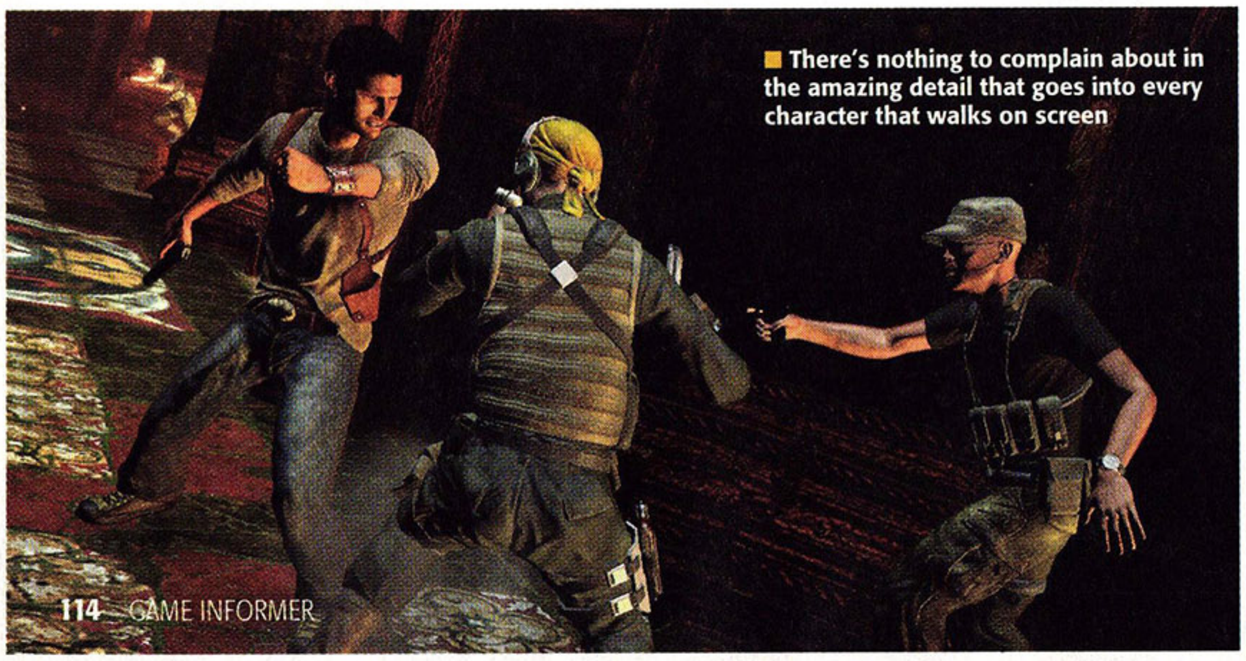
Uncharted looks like it has the potential to be one of the coolest games in years – amazing visuals, a script on par with the best Hollywood pulp films, a huge variety of gameplay mechanics, and some positively fascinating levels. The big question we have at this point is how in the world Naughty Dog is going to manage to pull the entire thing together in these final months before release.

We recently got some extended hands-on time with the game, and were struck both by the exciting potential of the title and the huge steps that still need to be taken to bring the game past the finish line. As a whole, the world of the game appears astonishing – lush foliage fills the jungle environments, and interiors are filled with tantalizing rays of light where they sneak in from outside. Meanwhile, some areas appear to have a huge amount of work ahead in order to complete before release, with vast empty zones and incomplete battles. Gameplay reveals the same strange dichotomy of polish and mess. Targeting is loads better than in the E3 build, and enemies react much more realistically. Simultaneously, balancing still needs a huge amount of work, with some situations way too easy and others almost impossibly hard. Of course, as any developer will tell you, the game's not done until it's done. Naughty Dog has a very strong track record in delivering quality products, and even if we saw some rough patches, they were all the more noticeable because the rest of the game is already in such phenomenal shape. We're more than willing to hold off judgment until we see the final game – a lot can happen in just the last few months of development.

Among the elements in great shape was the storytelling. We played through a huge chunk of the beginning of the game, and the cinematics and writing have just the right mix of comedy and action to evoke the feel of properties like *Indiana Jones* or *National Treasure*. A great score by Greg Edmundson, the music writer for the cult sci-fi hit *Firefly*, only adds to the high production values. Even early on in the game, it's clear that the team has embraced the feeling of those classic pulp adventures in the breadth of environments – half the excitement lies in how quickly things change, and the surprise locations around the next corner. Consequently, we're trying hard not to spoil anything for you. However, it shouldn't ruin too much to tell you that we got to play through a few cool vehicle sections. One crazy chase had us manning the back turret of a Jeep as it sped away from some marauding pirates. We also checked out the jet ski, which will apparently be involved in some high speed flights up a lost jungle river.

Even with some major gaps waiting to be filled in, some small touches add a lot to the moment-to-moment gameplay. Timed button taps during melee maximize the hurt you put on your foes. When exploring, a tap of L2 swings the camera around to the next location you should be heading for. Even Sir Francis Drake's diary, the opening clue of the mystery, has some remarkable details – the team traveled to Oxford to scan the real historical journal of the explorer for inclusion in the game.

Sony only has a few exclusive heavy hitters coming up to bat this holiday season, and so Uncharted has to be ready for the holidays no matter what. In our conversations with the folks on the team, they appear supremely confident that the game will be polished and ready to go on time. We're rooting for them. ■ ■ ■



There's nothing to complain about in the amazing detail that goes into every character that walks on screen

Many of the highlights of the game are the gorgeous locations through which you'll run and leap

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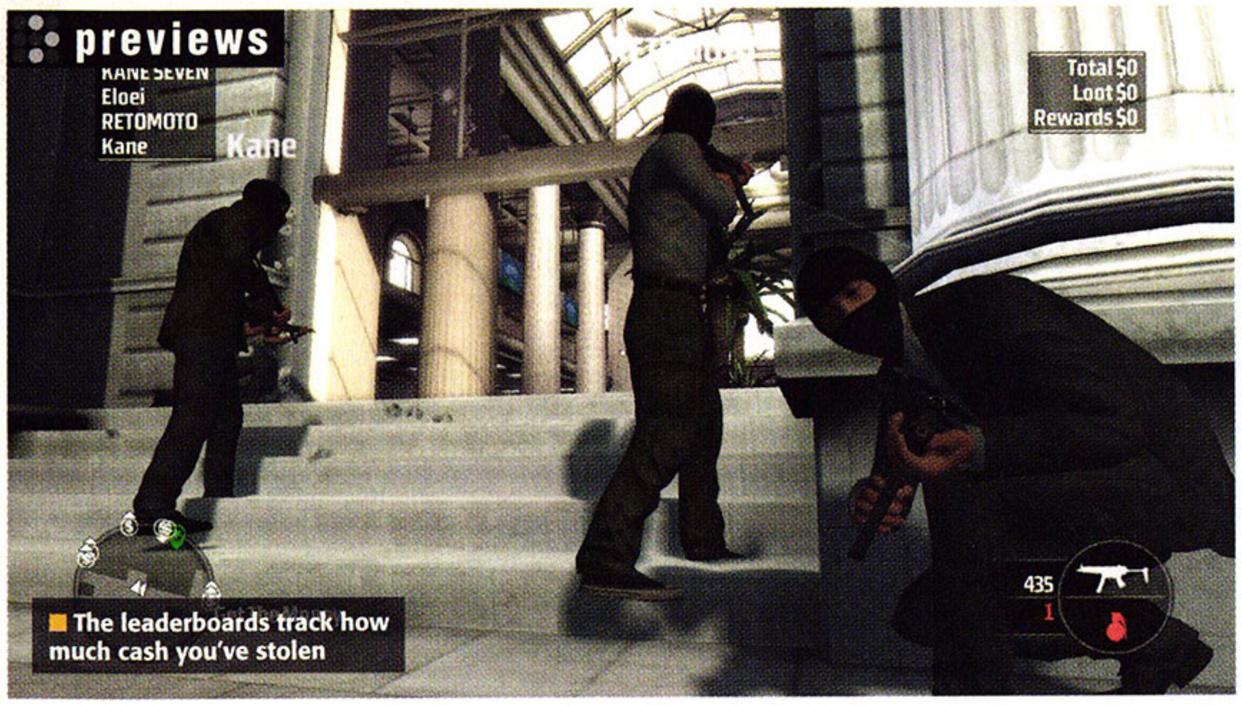
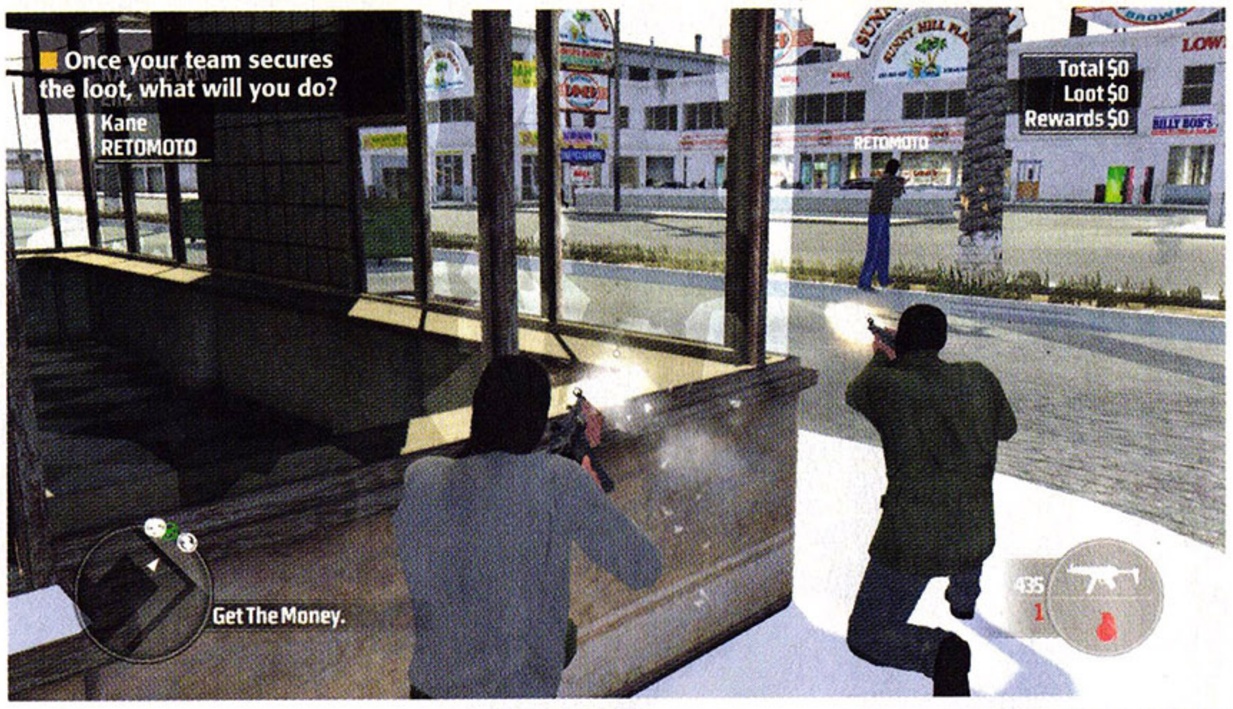




XBOX 360 I PC

Kane & Lynch: Dead Men

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

MERCS "R" US

Eidos finally gave us the green light to speak about our favorite element of its upcoming crime caper Kane & Lynch: Dead Men — the multiplayer. Instead of inundating gamers with another flaccid offering of capture the flag and team deathmatch, IO Interactive created an entirely new experience named Fragile Alliance.

"We wanted to create this dog-eat-dog criminal environment and put this into the context of a multiplayer game," says Eidos' senior marketing manager, David Bamberger. The result is a unique cooperative experience that teams up to eight players together to pull off a big heist. Fragile Alliance features four scenarios that task you with robbing a mall jewelry store, violating the vault of a major bank, highjacking a Yakuza cocaine deal, and intercepting laundered drug money at a diner. Your band of mercenaries must work together to fend off the forces in your way and secure the loot. Once the team has the goods secured, all bets are off.

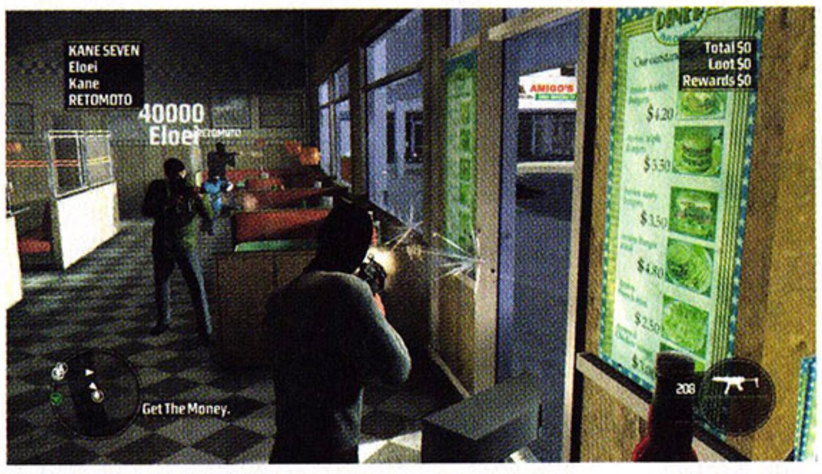
All of the mercs who make it out alive receive a cut of the action, but if one player hauls in a particularly large score he may decide to off his partners in crime instead of playing nice and sharing. Once you kill one of your allies, you become a traitor. Traitors do not share any of their winnings, but now they are a target, because anyone who kills a traitor receives an instant reward. Once you die from friendly fire or a cop's bullet, you will respawn once as a guard. Your job then becomes to stop the criminals from escaping with the score. Guards who recover the loot will receive a 10 percent finder's fee.

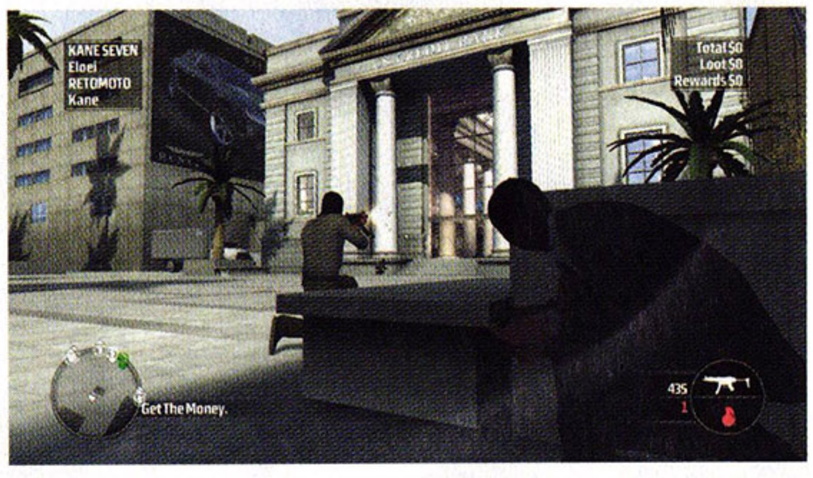
At the end of a round, the winnings can be spent on new weapons or upgrades to your existing gun. Options include sniper rifles, shotguns, handguns, and machine guns. You can also upgrade the grenades you bring to each heist.

After playing through a few heists, this mode easily earns its place as the Kane & Lynch feature we are most excited about. Feeling out the motivations of your loosely knit band of bandits early seems like the right thing to do, but as any criminal will tell you, the double cross is always a looming possibility. Working to secure the loot and escape with your team intact is a rewarding experience in and of itself, but if someone is hauling the majority of the score back to the getaway vehicle the temptation of greed is often too much to overcome.

Your devious deeds will affect your TrueSkill ranking on the leaderboads, which tallies how much money you have heisted, how many traitors you have killed, and how many times you've made it out alive.

Though Kane & Lynch will only ship with four maps, Eidos confirms that more maps will be available via Xbox Live Marketplace down the road. ■ ■ ■





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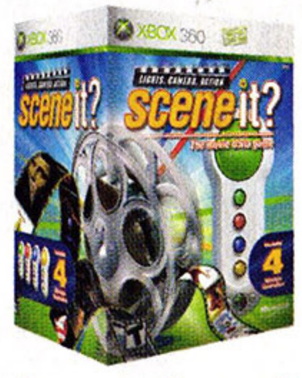

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Jump in.

XBOX 360™

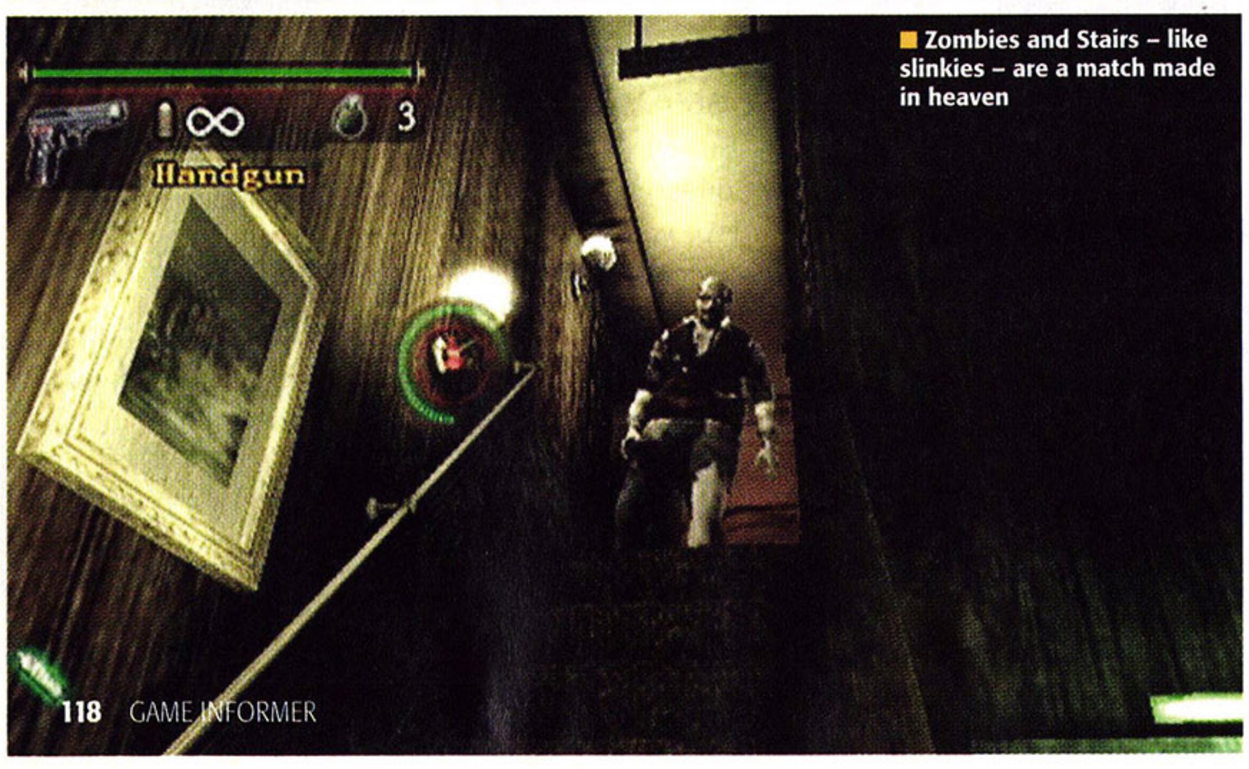
In true Resident Evil fashion, some of the boss encounters are pretty epic

Don't scoff, she's prettier than a lot of girls Chad has dated

You'll see many familiar enemies from the previous games

Bad fashion idea 236: Fire Pants

Keep an eye out for herbs and other items that will aid you along the way



Zombies and Stairs – like slinkies – are a match made in heaven

Wii

Resident Evil: Umbrella Chronicles

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** CAPCOM > **DEVELOPER** CAPCOM > **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 2

RE ROUNDUP

How did Rebecca Chambers get separated from bravo team and end up at the mansion? What happened to Albert Wesker at the end of the first game? And what's the difference between a tyrant and the Nemesis? Maybe it's time for a Resident Evil refresher, but instead of playing through the first four titles in the series, it might be easier to just check out Resident Evil: Umbrella Chronicles, the action/shooter hybrid that covers much of the ground laid by RE's Zero, 1, 2, and 3.

We got a chance to shoot through several zombie-infested levels ourselves. We saw familiar environments like the speeding runaway train, the sprawling Victorian mansion, and the ruined streets of Raccoon City, but we expect to see a few new locations in the final version of the game. The shooter controls feel pretty good. All the action takes place on rails, but there are some branching paths that offer up a little variety, and the camera never feels constraining since using the nunchuck's analog allows you to wiggle the view a bit.

But Resident Evil wouldn't be the same if it didn't have a variety of different weapons with which to blow off zombie heads. Your arsenal of shotguns and machineguns can be shuffled through on the fly, but it's also a good idea to conserve ammo when fending off some of the smaller enemies. Holding down the A button and swinging the Wii remote lets you use the combat knife and cut smaller nuisances out of the air.

Capcom's previous attempts to adapt Resident Evil into a shooter give us some reason to be nervous about how this one will turn out, but the game seems to be making good use of the Wii's controls. If Capcom keeps adding plenty of references to the classic entries in the series, this could at least be a fun flashback for many fans. ■■■

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PC

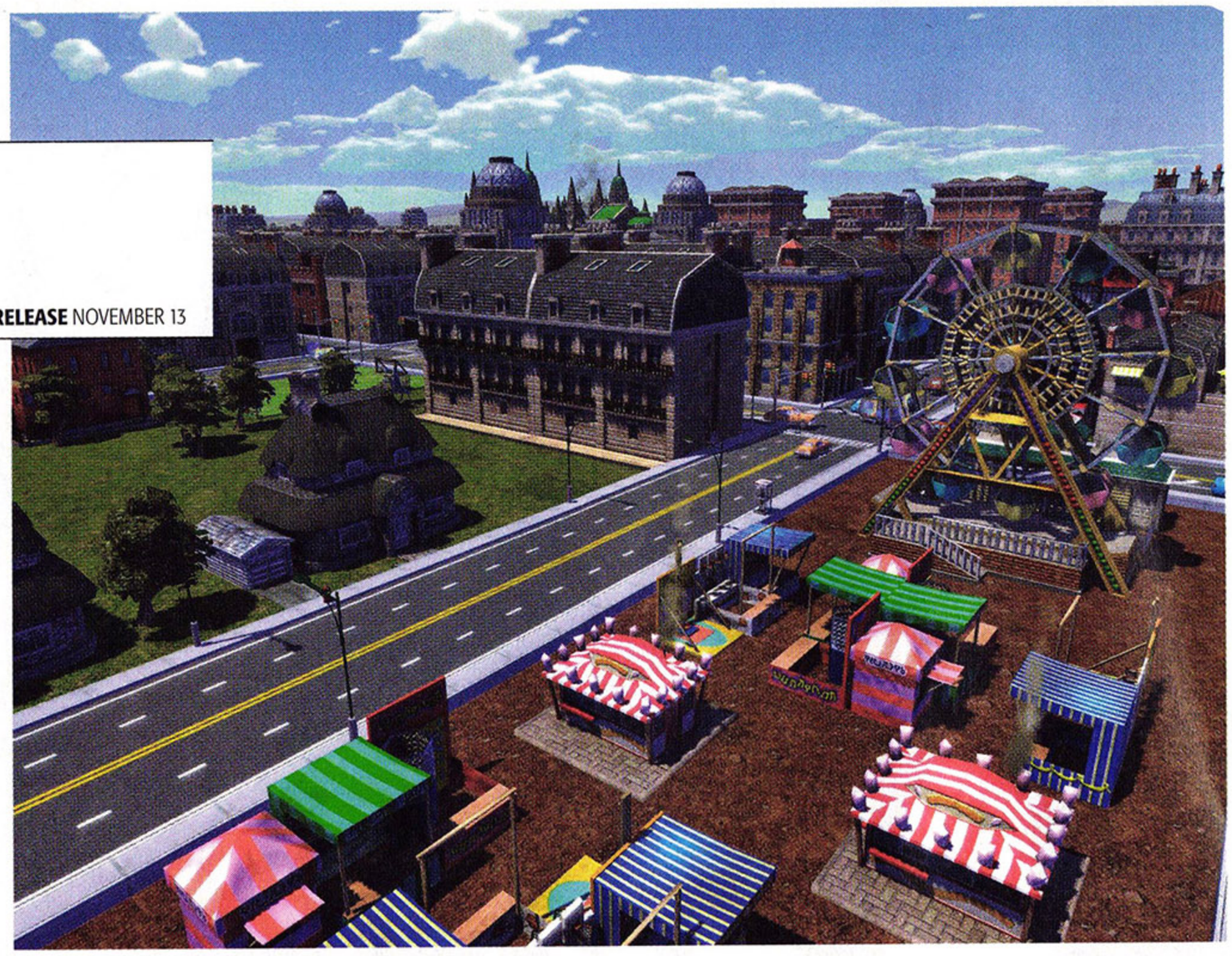
SimCity Societies

> STYLE 1-PLAYER SIMULATION **> PUBLISHER** ELECTRONIC ARTS **> DEVELOPER** TILTED MILL **> RELEASE** NOVEMBER 13

MAJOR RENOVATIONS

Okay, Mayor, you need to clean off your desk. Throw away those reams of intricate budget calculations, and don't concern yourself with those reports on power lines or water pipes. It's time to roll up your sleeves and start governing the people! Whether you choose to stimulate their minds with encouragement or stifle their resistance with oppression, you can't escape the fact that you're running a different kind of city now.

The new direction in which SimCity Societies takes this classic series will surprise a lot a people, and probably even disappoint a few. Developer Tilted Mill Entertainment (Caesar IV, Children of the Nile) has scrapped things like zoning and the power grid in favor of elements that let you deal with your population on a different level. Instead of the complexities of city planning, the player's role in Societies is more of a social engineer. This is made possible by allowing you to deliberately place every building. The days where you could just say, "I want some commercial businesses in this area" are gone; now you choose which businesses are in your city, what kinds of houses your sims inhabit, and what values drive your civilization forward.



In order to build anything, you will obviously need money. However, there is a second important currency in SimCity Societies called social energy. This is the term given to feelings and attributes that you can foster in your community, like creativity, knowledge, and authority. For instance, building iron fences, art deco sculptures, and outdoor TVs (spouting state propaganda) will increase the authority energy. Once you have amassed enough, new buildings like the ominous State Amphitheater become available.

If ruthless totalitarian rule isn't your style, you can focus on other social energies instead. Each one is enhanced by buildings with distinct visual themes – from small-town farms to cyberpunk skyscrapers. If you stick to one primary social energy, your city will maintain a unified visual style as it develops.

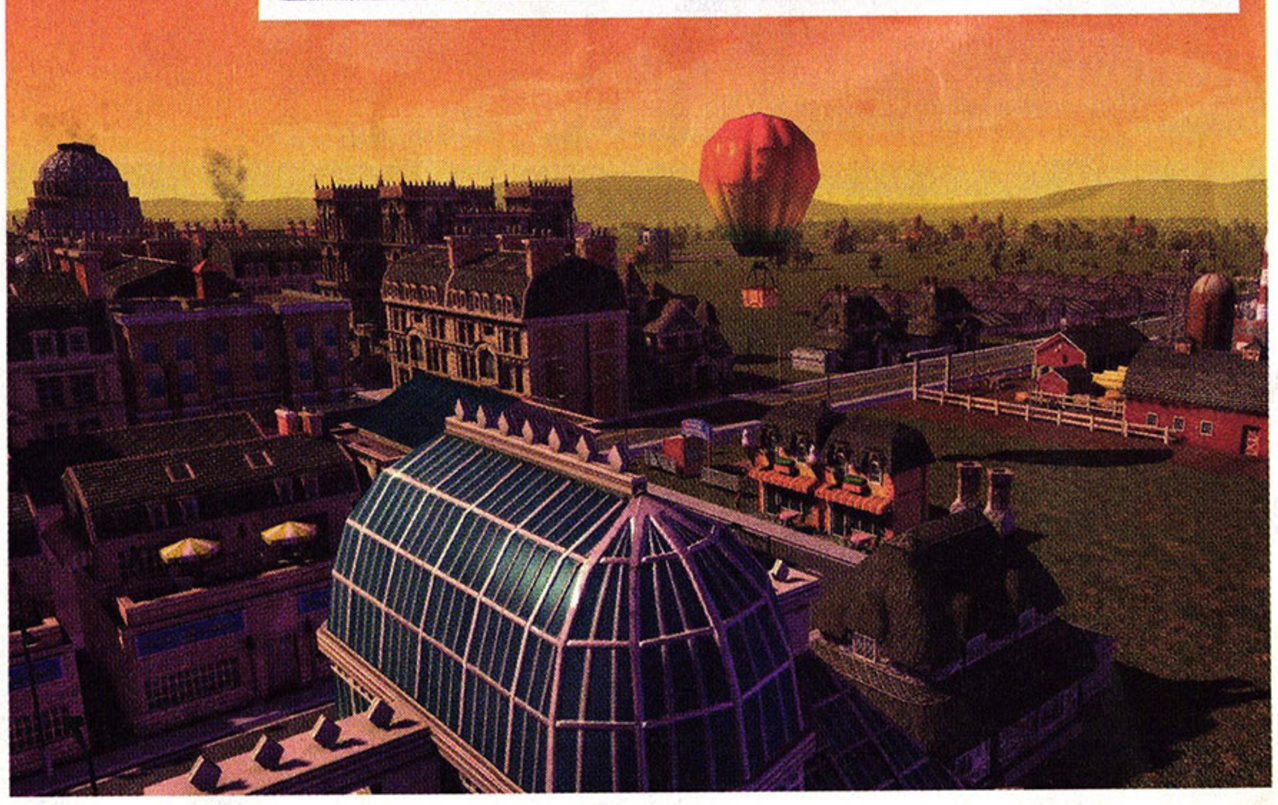
■ A meteor shower is one of the disasters that can befall your city

You aren't railroaded into a single design scheme, though; you can build anything if you meet the requirements.

As we played the opening hours of Societies, we definitely felt that there was even more lurking underneath the surface. While many of the mechanics have changed, the game seems to maintain the addictive charm the series has had for years. It may be a new kind of city-builder, but it's still unmistakably SimCity. ■ ■ ■

■ Buildings in the authoritarian style have names like "Ministry of Thought" and "Re-education Center"

■ Actual citizens populate your city. You can view them from afar or track them individually



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10/10 OXM

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Games for Windows LIVE

■ Rather than using base building, EndWar doles out resource points for kills and captures

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360

EndWar

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

GIVE THE ORDER

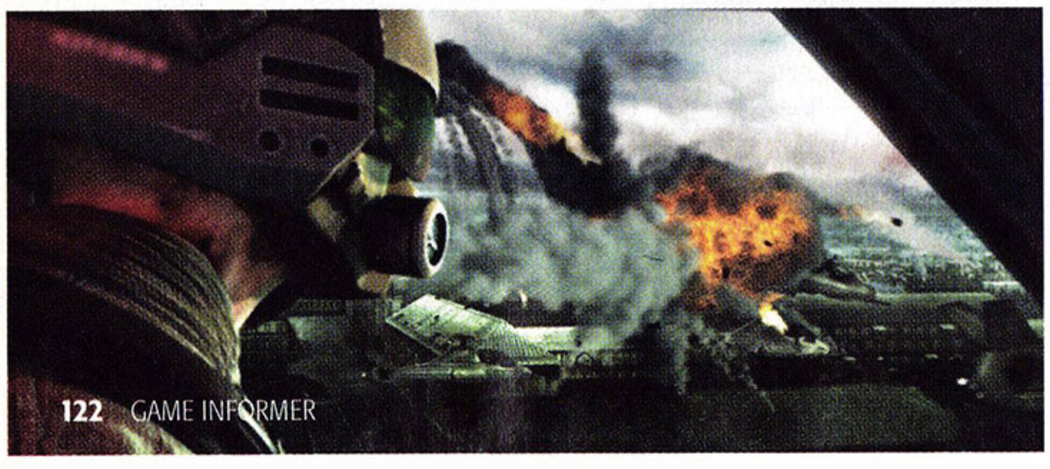
Until now, Ubisoft has only shown EndWar through screenshots and a pre-rendered trailer. But we've recently seen the Tom Clancy RTS in playable form, and its streamlined interface looks to be well-suited for consoles.

The game takes place decades in the future when a worldwide missile defense system has quelled the threat of nuclear strikes for some time. Now that peace is threatened, as these defense systems have become the target of militant forces. Players can command U.S. Joint Special Forces (founded by GRAW's Scott Mitchell), a European federation army, or Russian forces, with a fourth (supposedly) unplayable terrorist faction to serve as the villain. Outside of the main story-based campaign, thousands of players can team up online to compete for control of a persistent global battlefield, though few details on this mode have been revealed.

Every unit has the potential to level up, so it will be worth it to keep your forces safe as you move from battle to battle. As you capture more points and kill enemies your forces will also gain reserves that can be used to call in new units or summon air strikes. Once you capture a majority of the points on the field, you can unleash the titular "endwar" mass destruction. We saw a satellite light up the battlefield with space missiles, but you'll also be able to use devastating weapons like microwave energy and giant lasers.

The camera is set right in the middle of the action. Players can zoom in and out and pan around units or take in the entire battlefield from a satellite view. But the most interesting camera trick is tied to voice commands through the headset of your particular console of choice. Rather than blindly searching the battlefield for specific units, you can simply call out something like "Unit Two Camera" and the view will swoop instantly to that location. As you speak, command menus flash briefly onscreen to confirm what you've requested and offer a brief glimpse at what other order options you can dish out.

Voice commands extend well beyond camera angles, however. You can use them to form groups mixing units like troops, tanks, jeeps, and helicopters, make them attack or take cover, or instantly command specific unit types to take action ("All tanks attack hostile 3"). Your forces will perform these actions whether the camera is directly on them or not, so it really allows players to focus on multiple fronts with ease. We can also verify that the game recognized every command without even the smallest hiccup. This just scratches the surface of what the voice commands can do. These work hand in hand with a traditional control scheme loosely based on GRAW's squad command system to create what could be the smoothest console RTS control scheme yet. But, for now, we'll hold off judgment until we can bark orders ourselves. ■ ■ ■



■ Troops will automatically seek out cover after being ordered to a location

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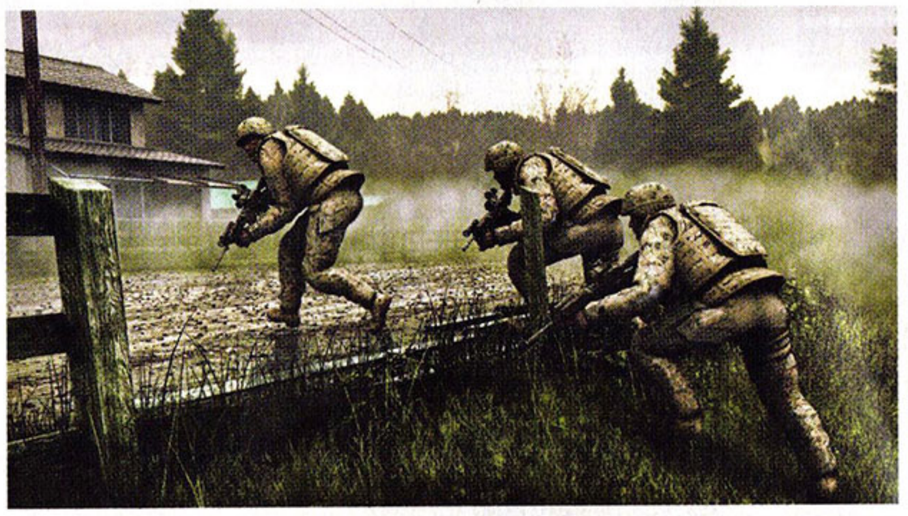
"Dookie spotted up ahead!"



PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360 | PC

Operation Flashpoint 2: Dragon Rising

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (MULTIPLAYER TBA) **> PUBLISHER** CODEMASTERS **> DEVELOPER** CODEMASTERS STUDIOS **> RELEASE** LATE 2008

WAR, CNN-STYLE

When Operation Flashpoint: Cold War Crisis originally came out in 2001 on PC it was hailed for its realistic sim approach, expansive game world, and flexible mod tools. Unfortunately, by the time it came out on Xbox four years later, the gameplay and graphics just didn't hold up. This time around, however, console gamers can get in on the ground floor of a whole new level of Operation Flashpoint realism.

While original developer Bohemia Interactive Studios will not be returning (having branched off to release ArmA: Combat Operations with Atari in May), Codemasters has recruited a few of the key members from the team. OF 2 boasts Codemasters' largest internal development team yet, and will run on the Neon engine, which first appeared in Dirt. While we'll be interested to see how Neon performs in combat scenarios, the vehicle handling in OF 2 should be top-notch.

Unlike the first game's '80s Cold War setting, OF 2 takes place in modern times. The location is loosely based on the Pinnacle Islands in the East China Sea and the real-life diplomatic battle for territory and oil reserves between China and Japan. However, Codemasters has focused the chain into one island, named Skira, and shifted the conflict to Russia versus China. A small troop of U.S. Marines protects the American oil interests on the island, but they're no match for a sudden rush of invading forces. Players take on the role of a soldier in the Rapid Reaction Task Force in an attempt to defuse the conflict between China and Russia before it expands to a global scale.

Despite the fictional scenario, the primary goal of OF 2 is realism. "You're not an action hero," says brand manager Andrew Wafer. "It's less like when you watch a Hollywood movie and more like when you're watching a news report on guys in Afghanistan or Iraq. That's the ultimate goal we're trying to achieve."

A large part of this non-cinematic style is the damage system. Although Codemasters isn't going into specific details just yet, they're already dismissing the possibility of automatic health regeneration. Somehow damage will be represented differently for various bullet calibers, projectiles, and explosions. To prevent bleeding to death, players will have to receive some kind of medical attention. "We want to present a believable model of what weapons can do to show the brutality of it," says Wafer. "Because when these things do happen it's pretty nasty."

Gameplay includes such elements as infantry skirmishes, special ops stealth, tank battles, and helicopter air strikes. All of these facets are key elements of single player, co-op, and competitive multiplayer in the game. Also promised is a deep map editor to hopefully inspire another robust mod community. We're looking forward to getting some hands-on time with OF 2 to see how all of the elements come together, and can only hope that it lives up to Codemasters' ambitions. ■ ■ ■

All images on this page are target renders

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on this day it is hereby declared that:

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(MY COMPUTER).

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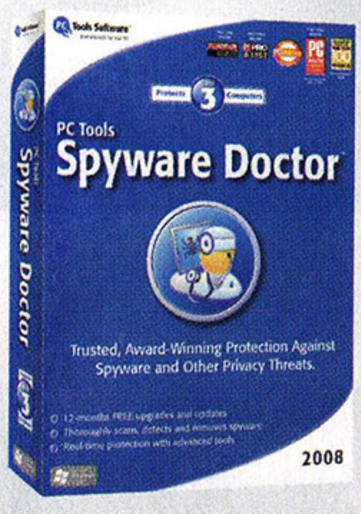

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PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360 | PC

Alone In The Dark

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION **> PUBLISHER** ATARI **> DEVELOPER** EDEN GAMES **> RELEASE** MARCH 2008

THE MACGYVER OF SURVIVAL HORROR

Alone in the Dark fans have been waiting patiently for this fifth iteration in the series ever since it was announced back in 2005. That wait appears to be ending this spring. We recently saw a technical demonstration of the game in action that showed off the weapons system, which consists entirely of everyday objects and what could be the most realistic fire to appear in any game to date.

"It takes place in 2008 and you'll be playing Edward Carnby, who's actually the first Edward Carnby from the 1930s," says producer Nour Polloni of the original AITD protagonist. "He finds himself in today's world and he hasn't aged a bit. So what happened during this whole period of time?" Though specific story details are still under wraps, strange things are afoot in New York's Central Park. The entire game takes place within the park's painstakingly recreated 843 acres, and features such well-known landmarks as the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Belvedere Castle. AITD will be presented like a 10-episode TV series chock full of mysteries and cliffhangers. In fact, every time you quit or return to the game, a teaser or recap will be displayed. Think "previously on Alone in the Dark."

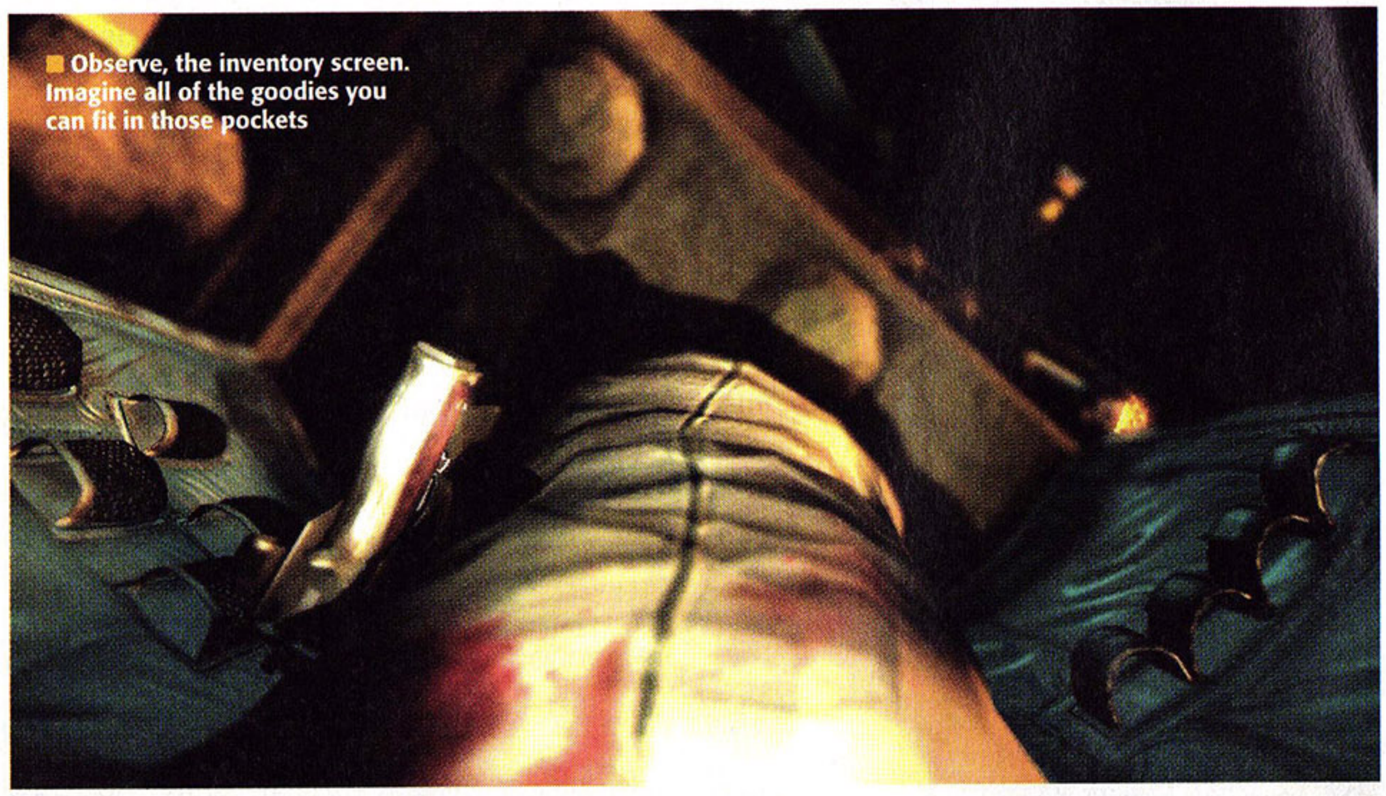
Perhaps the most ambitious element of the game is the weapons system. Edward will use objects found in the environment and combine them in various ways to fight off monsters. The inventory is entirely in-game, with a view from Edward's perspective looking down as he opens up his jacket and peers at its many pockets full of trinkets. The most obvious combo is taping a light to your pistol. But what if you combine a bottle of fuel with your gun? This makes Edward cock back the bottle like he's going to toss it. Once you find a target, he'll chuck the bottle and automatically shoot it in midair to create a huge explosion. The list of combinations goes on and on (see sidebar).

This doesn't include melee weapons like metal poles and wooden chairs, which are completely controlled by the right analog stick. Players can swing the stick back and forth quickly for melee attacks or manipulate it gently to remove an electrical wire from a pool of water. We saw Edward touch the chair to some fire and watched as it became a massive torch. Then he set this down by a wooden beam and flames crept up it and spread to the scaffolding above. Once the scaffolding burned for a bit, it began to collapse piece by piece and fell onto a table below, which also caught fire. Edward used a fire extinguisher to put it out and the wood was still glowing slightly like charcoal.

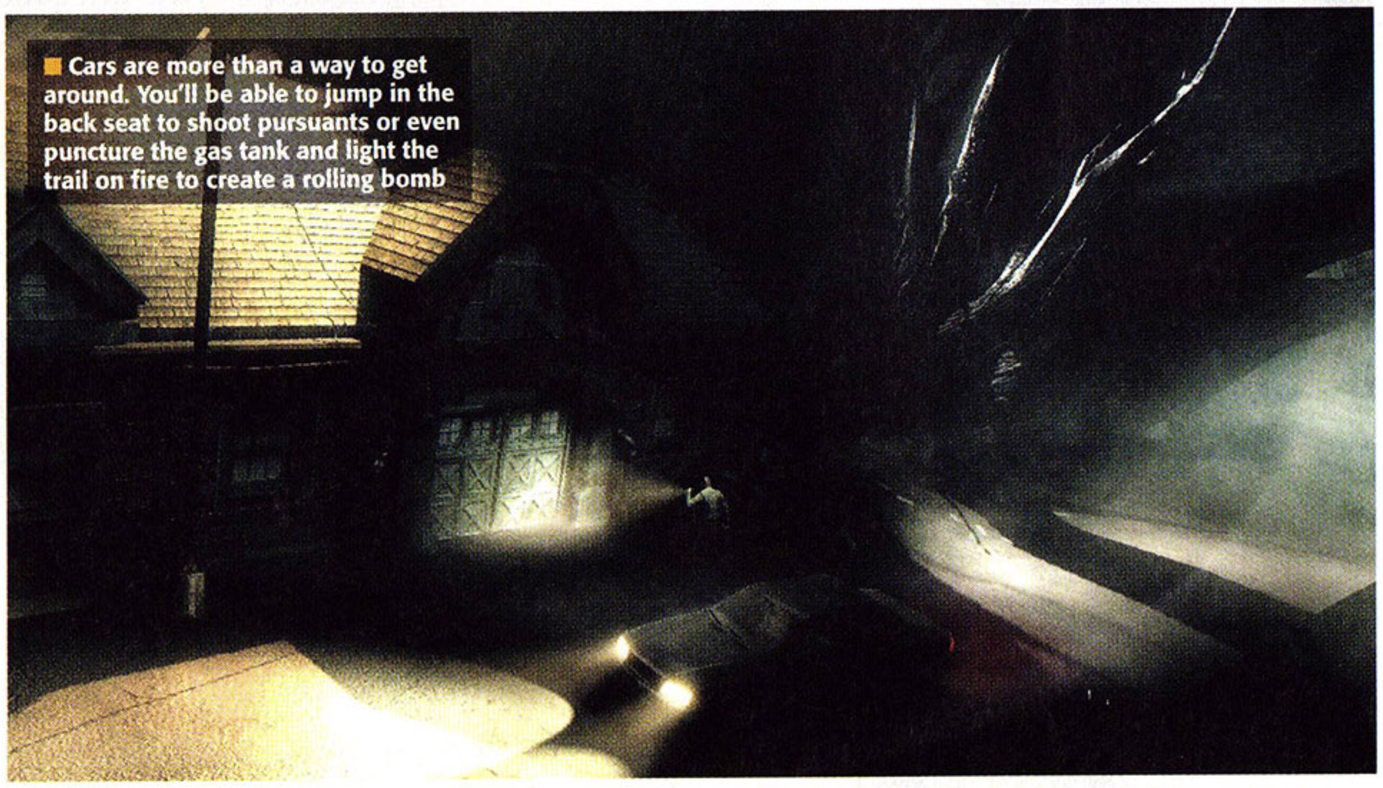
It's still too early to tell if all of these elements will come together with an interesting plot to create an overall awesome experience, but the tools for intriguing combat and creative puzzles are there. We're really hoping Eden can make it happen and bring Alone in the Dark back to its former glory. ■ ■ ■

USEFUL COMBOS

- Mix tape and glow sticks and throw them at walls or possessed rats to light your way
- Stab a bottle, throw it at an enemy, and light the trail of fuel
- Combine healing spray and a lighter for an impromptu flamethrower
- Puncture a blood packet and throw it at an enemy. Bloodthirsty monsters will tear him apart
- Use empty bottles for extra ammo storage or add some gasoline to the mix to make a shrapnelicious bomb
- Add fuel to an ammo box to create flaming bullets



■ Observe, the inventory screen. Imagine all of the goodies you can fit in those pockets



■ Cars are more than a way to get around. You'll be able to jump in the back seat to shoot pursuants or even puncture the gas tank and light the trail on fire to create a rolling bomb

SIGNAL LOST

SIGNAL LOST

SIGNAL LOST

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SIGNAL LOST

S.O.S.

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"DILEMMA" DOESN'T BEGIN TO DESCRIBE IT.

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M

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Partial Nudity
Sexual Themes
Violence

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Lost Odyssey

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ROLE-PLAYING GAME **> PUBLISHER** MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS **> DEVELOPER** MISTWALKER/FEEL PLUS
> RELEASE FEBRUARY

TIME MARCHES ON

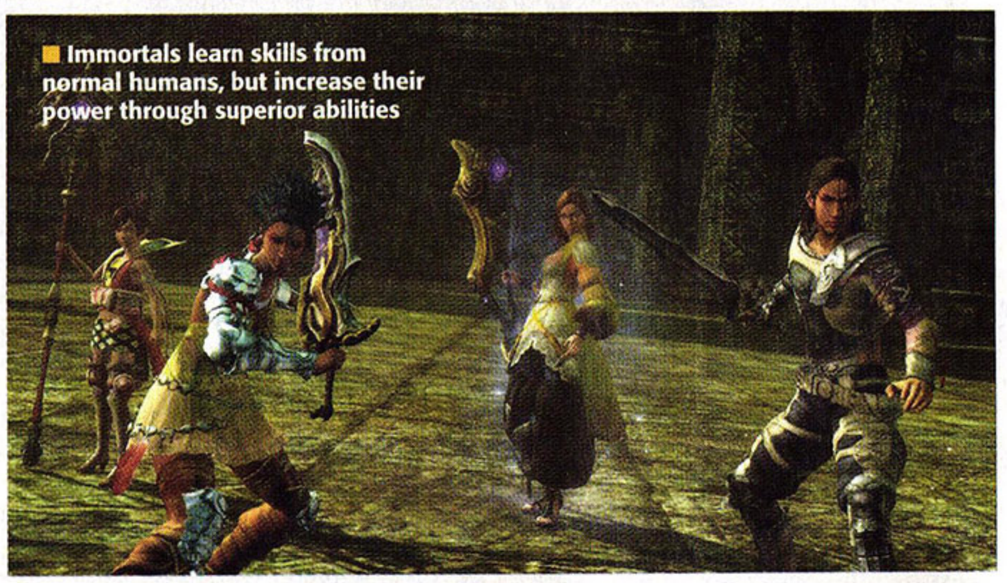
Now that gamers have gotten their hands on Blue Dragon, the first title from Hironobu Sakaguchi's Mistwalker studio, the time has come to look toward the future. For the company's next project, Lost Odyssey, players will control an immortal named Kaim through an adventure that will leave many of the carefree themes of Blue Dragon behind.

"The goal of Blue Dragon is for users to feel a warm, positive energy from the hero and his friends by the end of the game. It's like the accumulation of courage and optimism, as well as an energy that is not crushed easily in the face of adversity," explains Sakaguchi. "The aim for Lost Odyssey is to be able to experience the appearance and innermost emotions, as well as the splendor and ugliness of people as the story of a man who lived for 1,000 years unfolds."

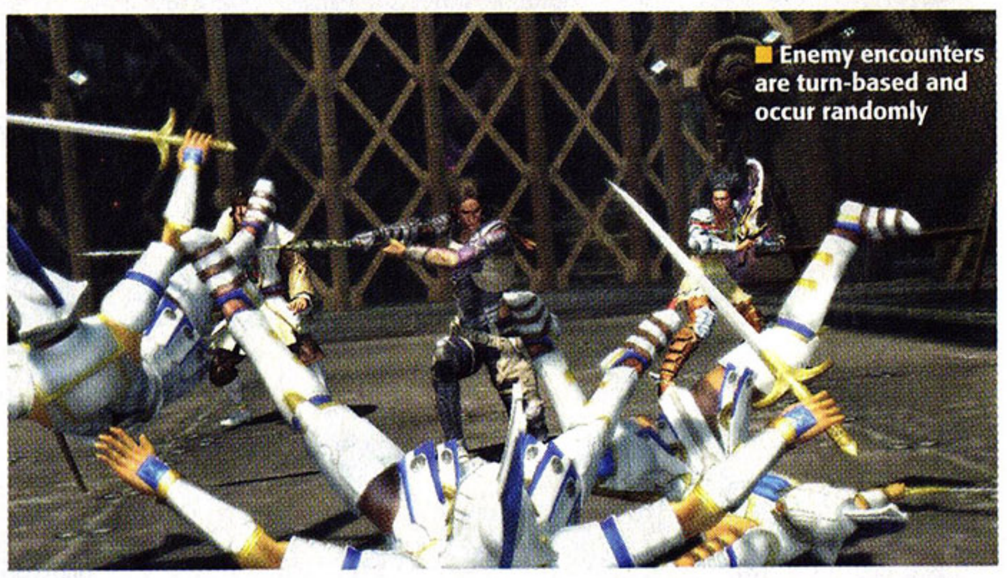
The existence of immortals in the world of Lost Odyssey is one of the game's big mysteries; Kaim is one of four such beings in the world, and he will encounter others during his journey. Some of them have even started families over the years, but while they stay young, their family tree continues to age and branch. This gives rise to one scene in which two children sing a mystical song to heal a young-looking immortal woman who is actually their ancestor. Sakaguchi tells us how these kinds of ties will be important to the underlying story: "As a result of living for 1,000 years, various blood relations have been created. It also results in the skipping and reversal of people's age. The secret of the scene with the two children is concealed within the mystery of that kind of generational intertwinement."

In terms of gameplay, players shouldn't expect any radical renovations to the traditional RPG approach. That isn't to say that everything will be totally familiar; much like Blue Dragon, Lost Odyssey will attempt to put a new spin on classic concepts. Many combat skills will use a timing-based trigger system that will increase their effectiveness, and your characters' positions (like front or back row) will play a large part in the strategy. The boss battles also appear to have a tactical element, and aren't just about unloading as much damage as possible.

There is a perception among some gamers that RPGs are created with the Japanese audience in mind, and later brought over to North America. Sakaguchi tells us that Lost Odyssey, with its U.S. and Japan release dates only a couple months apart, is simply made for people who love the genre: "It was created for RPG fans, who are, for the most part, the same in Japan or overseas." ■■■



■ Immortals learn skills from normal humans, but increase their power through superior abilities



■ Enemy encounters are turn-based and occur randomly

■ Mistwalker won't say anything about downloadable content, but the 1,000 years of Kaim's life prior to the beginning of Lost Odyssey could be fertile ground for episodic releases

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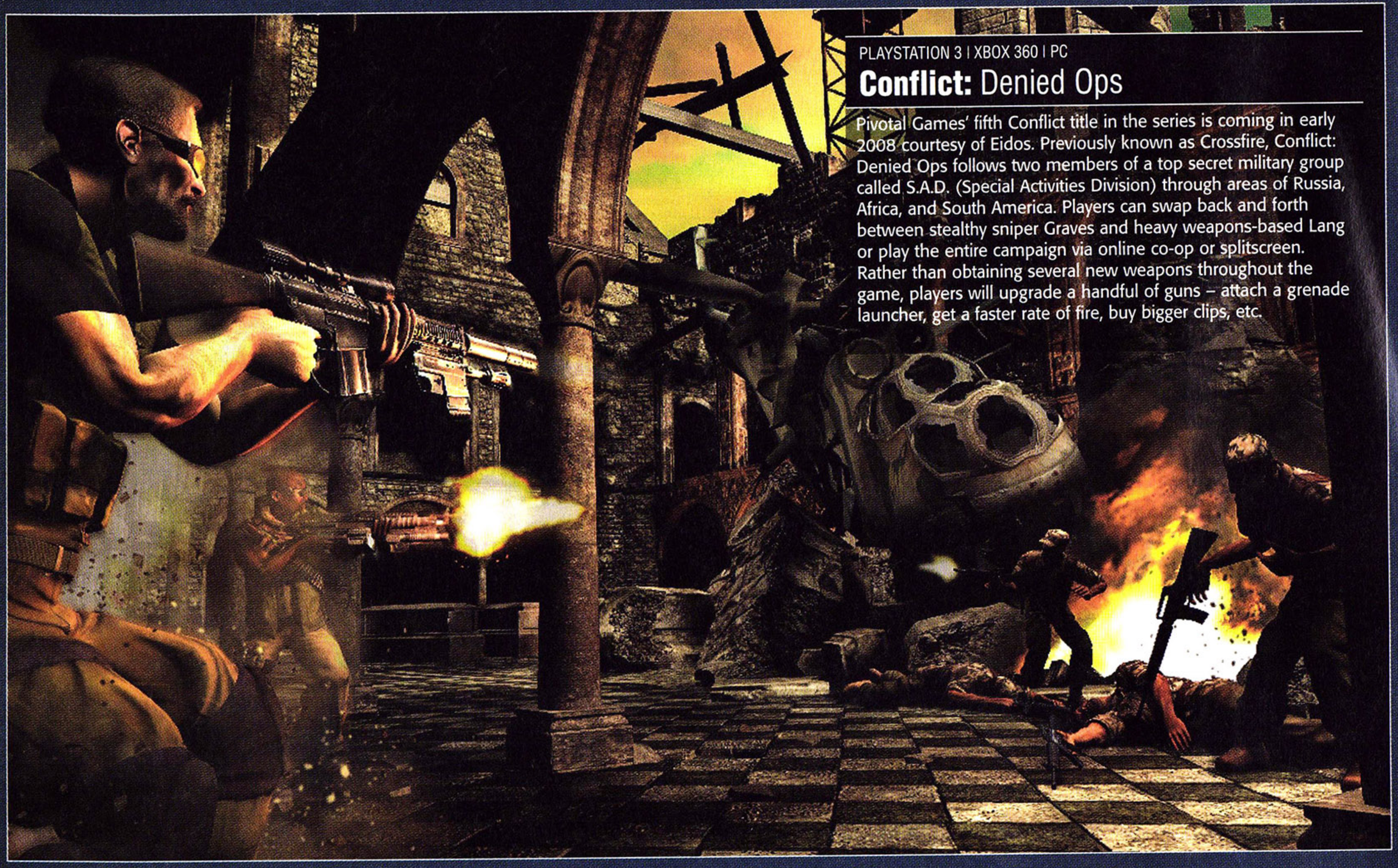
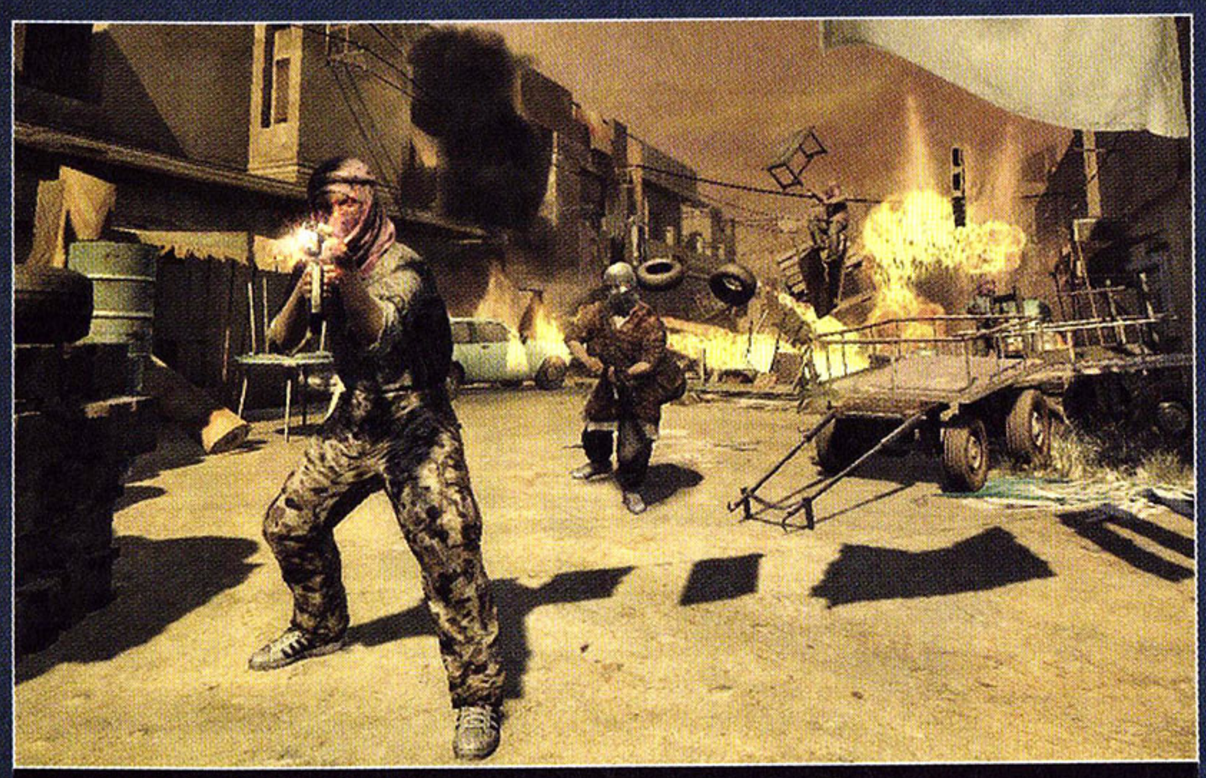


PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360 | PC

Conflict: Denied Ops

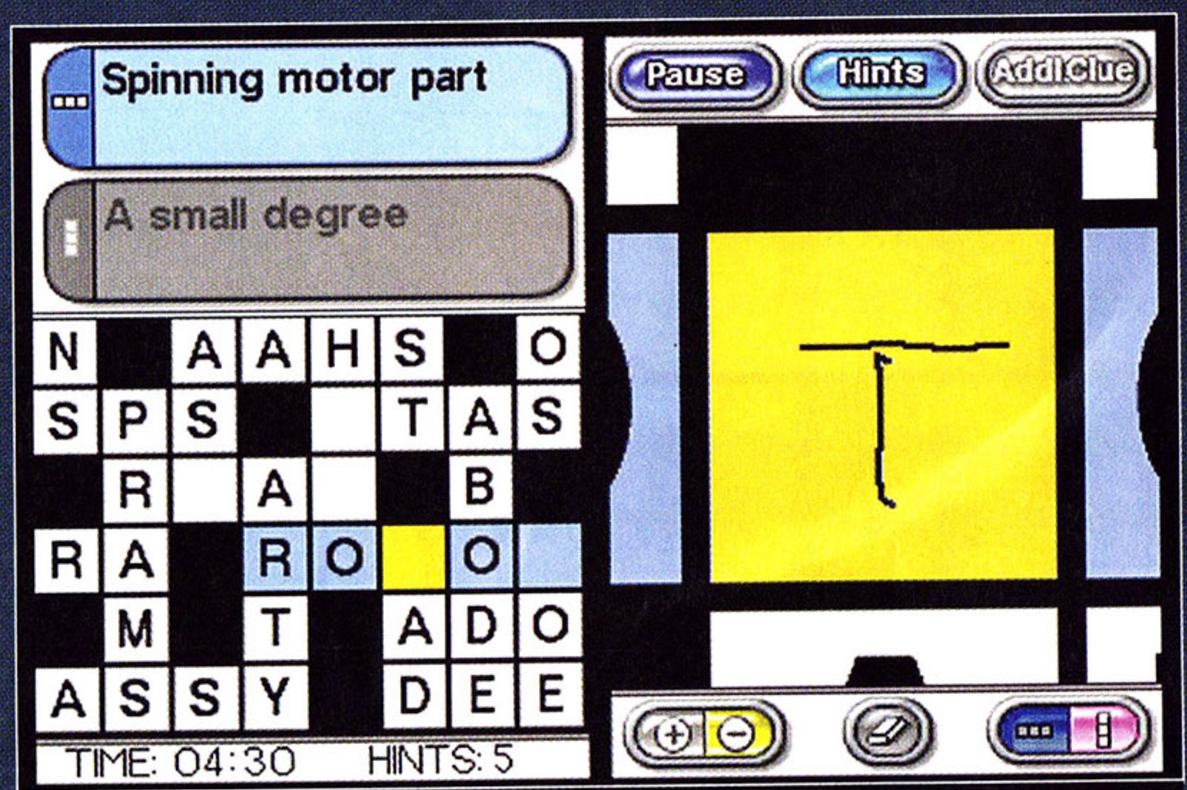
Pivotal Games' fifth Conflict title in the series is coming in early 2008 courtesy of Eidos. Previously known as Crossfire, Conflict: Denied Ops follows two members of a top secret military group called S.A.D. (Special Activities Division) through areas of Russia, Africa, and South America. Players can swap back and forth between stealthy sniper Graves and heavy weapons-based Lang or play the entire campaign via online co-op or splitscreen. Rather than obtaining several new weapons throughout the game, players will upgrade a handful of guns – attach a grenade launcher, get a faster rate of fire, buy bigger clips, etc.



PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360 | PC

Soldier of Fortune Payback

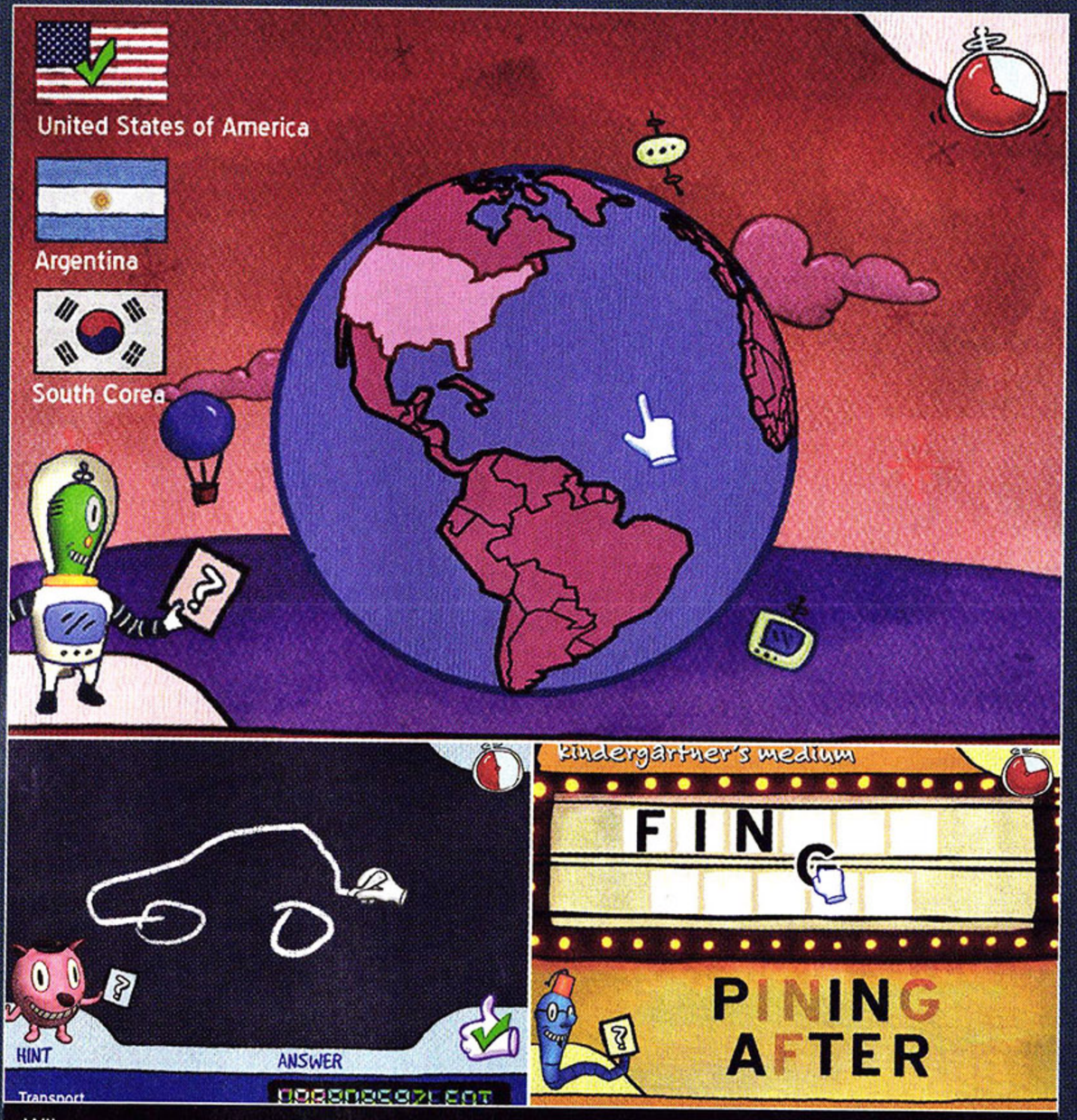
It's been a long time coming, but Activision is finally set to release the third entry in the first-person shooter series Soldier of Fortune. Revolving around the mercenary group known as "The Shop," Payback looks to focus on providing a more realistic experience. With its new modeling system, enemies will react to weapon's fire in very realistic ways, so players will need to manage their equipment of 30 military grade weapons effectively. Players looking to overthrow an extremist plot and travel to exotic real world hotspots should suit up for action on November 14th.



NINTENDO DS

Nintendo Crossword [working title]

Honestly, we don't know much about this game other than what's revealed in these screens. Even the name – Nintendo Crossword – isn't final, and there's no official release date (although we hear rumors that it will be shipping by the end of the year). Still, based on what we do know, this seems like a no-brainer. Crossword puzzles work great on the DS (as evidenced by the recent New York Times Crosswords title that released for the system) and Nintendo makes a habit of crafting well built, deep, yet simple-to-use puzzlers for the handheld. So it's pretty much a match made in heaven. W_ _ook f_rw_rd t_ p_ay_ng th_s p_omis_ng t_tl_.



Wii

Cranium Kabookii

More than likely you are familiar with the board game Cranium, seeing as it's sold more than 22 million units worldwide. Ubisoft is obviously hoping this means people aren't sick of the game since it's bringing Cranium Kabookii over to the Nintendo Wii. Kabookii will continue the Cranium theme of testing all the corners of your brain with 15 activities that vary from drawing to word problems to geography questions, and much more. The game will also come packaged with a special set of goggles that allow their wearer to see hidden hints on the TV screen. You'll only need one remote to play, but we are guessing you'll want a lot of friends involved when this game comes out this December.

Wii | PLAYSTATION 2

Star Trek Conquest

Trek fans have it a little rough these days. They face a choice between reliving old romances with movies and series where the spark has gone out, or they can go out to find comfort in the arms of other sci-fi series. But don't worry. Bethesda is charging to the rescue of your Star Trek love affair with a new strategy game for the Wii and PlayStation 2 set in the Next Generation era. There's a turn-based element of building and managing your burgeoning galactic federation/empire, and then real-time starship combat when you inevitably clash with some alien culture. Pick between the Federation, Klingon, Romulan, Cardassian, Dominion, and Breen – all playable with their own unique traits, ships, and abilities. Sure, this may not be the next big step forward for Trek, but it's better than those midnight liaisons with Battlestar Galactica in that motel on the edge of town. Have you seen his teeth?

PC

Codename: Panzers – Cold War

The Codename: Panzers series has carved out its own niche in the World War II RTS genre. Now with the new Gepard 3 engine, developer Stormregion hopes to take the presentation and destruction physics to the next level. Set in a fictional 1949 where the Cold War turns hot, players will battle through 18 missions in the single-player campaign. However, this challenge can also be tackled via online co-op with two players each controlling half of the same army. Cold War features competitive multiplayer as well, with 20 maps to battle it out on. Publisher 10tacle Studios is planning for an early 2008 release.

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Suggestive Themes
Violence

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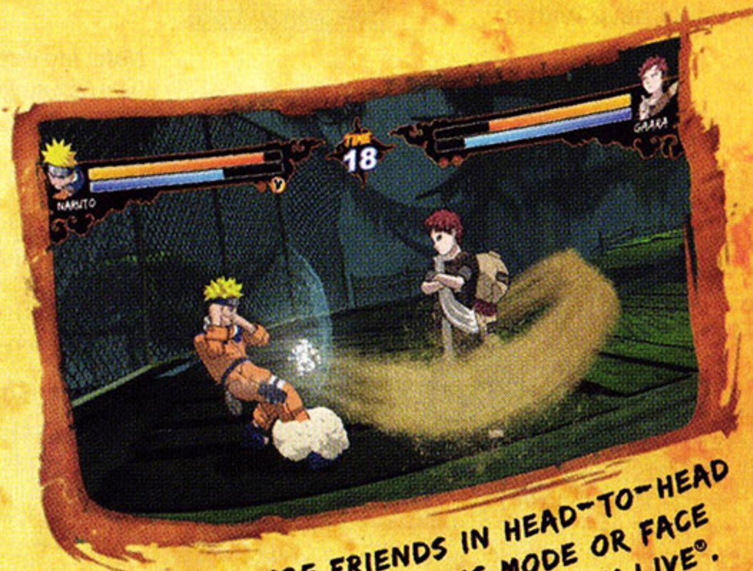

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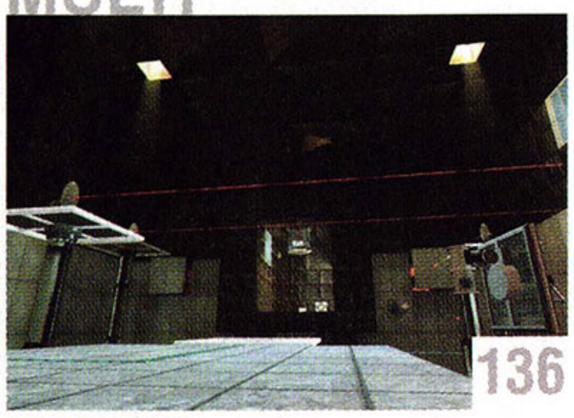
We Play The Crap So You Don't Have To

MULTI



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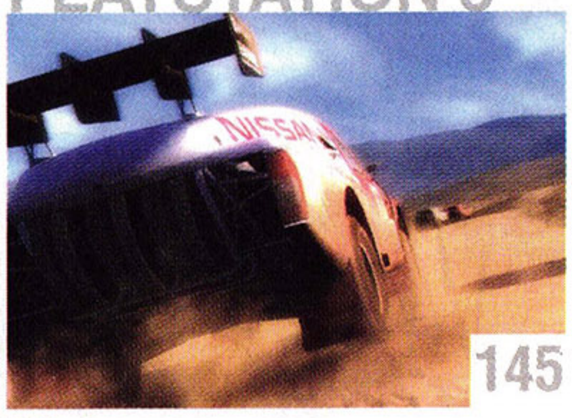
The Orange Box

PLAYSTATION 3



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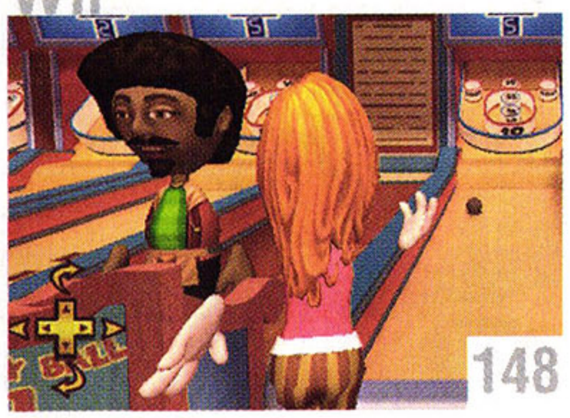
Dirt

Wii



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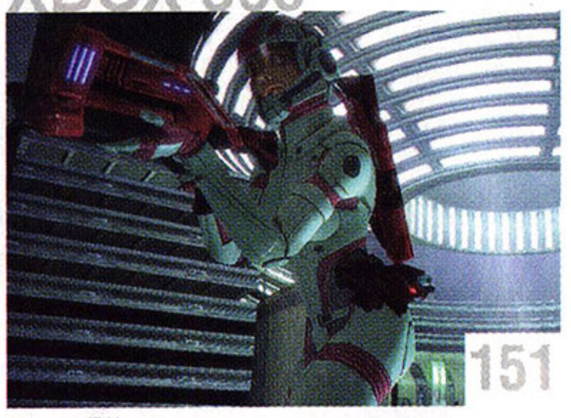
Carnival Games

XBOX 360



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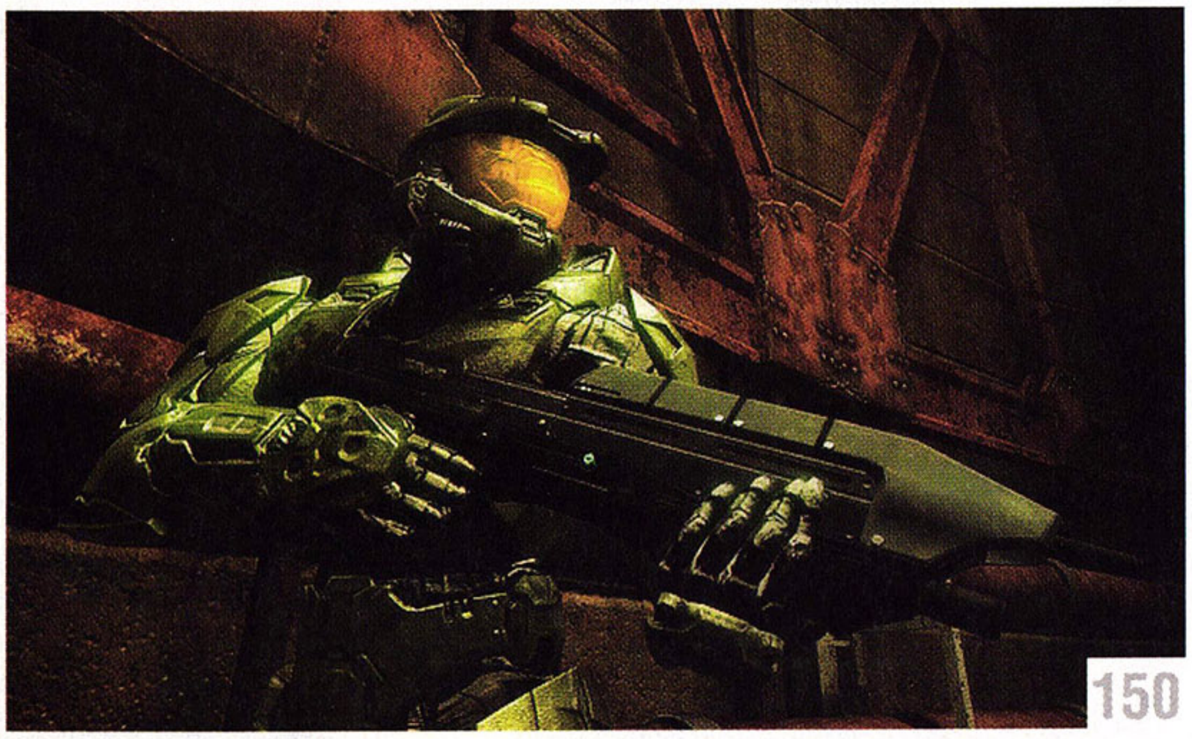
Mass Effect



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GAME INFORMER GAME OF THE MONTH

Halo 3

With three games receiving 9.75s across the board, deciding this month's standout title was extremely tough. The Orange Box had to be disqualified simply because much of its content has already appeared on PC. Mass Effect is a triumph and will truly go down in gaming history as one of the best. But after some serious thought and discussion we chose Halo 3. It's just about as fun as you could possibly have with a console FPS. Head to page 150 for the details.

160

GAME INFORMER HANDHELD GAME OF THE MONTH

Syphon Filter: Logan's Shadow

If you own a PSP, you already know that Syphon Filter: Dark Mirror delivered some of the best action known to Sony's handheld. Thankfully, Gabe and company have returned to bless us with another globetrotting adventure. It's the same Syphon Filter you know and love, but with a few new tricks.

Note: *Two excellent games reviewed this month, Disgaea: Afternoon of Darkness and Final Fantasy Tactics: The War of the Lions are essentially ports of previously released titles, and are not eligible for Game of the Month.*

Our crack (or crackhead, we can never decide which) review team rates games in a number of categories to help you sort out the great from the stuff you'll hate. Most games are reviewed by two staff members, and you will find both their opinions on each review. To make things a little easier we have put together some definitions of what the numbers mean, what we look for in a game, and also a cheat sheet so the newbies can understand our advanced video game jargon. It is important to note that the Game of the Month is determined only by the main review score, not an average of the two opinions.

THE SCORING SYSTEM

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

> Concept: What new ideas the game brings to the table and how well old ideas are presented.

> Graphics: How good a game looks, taking into account any flaws such as bad collision or pop-up.

> Sound: Does the game's music and sound effects get you involved or do they make you resolve to always play with the volume down?

> Playability: Basically, the controller to human interface. The less you think about the hunk of plastic in your hands, the better the playability.

> Entertainment: Flat out, just how fun the game is to play. The most important factor in rating a game.

> Replay Value

High – You'll still be popping this game in five years from now.

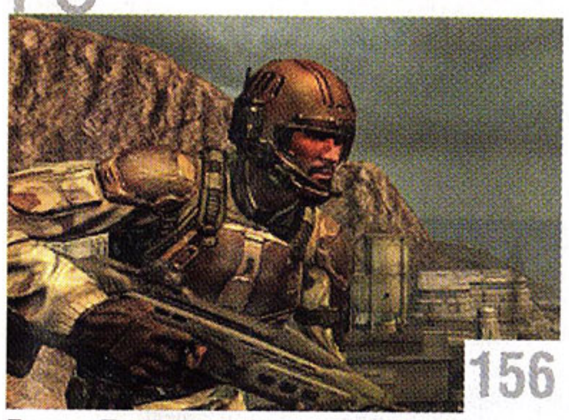
Moderately High – Good for a long while, but the thrills won't last forever.

Moderate – Good for a few months or a few times through.

Moderately Low – After finishing it, there's not much reason to give it a second go.

Low – You'll quit playing before you complete the game.

PC



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HANDHELD

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GAME INFORMER PC GAME OF THE MONTH

Neverwinter Nights 2: Mask of the Betrayer

Riding high on a wave of technical improvements to the base game, this expansion pack takes it a step further by delivering an outstanding high fantasy tale and a huge amount of additional content. Exploring the new base and prestige classes, experimenting with new tactics made possible by the added feats and spells, and delving deep into the twisting plotline of Mask of the Betrayer all add up to the one of the best PC role-playing experiences in recent memory.

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theedge

When All Games Aren't Created Equal

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

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

All ESRB

For our newer readers, here is a glossary of terms and acronyms that commonly appear in the magazine. Video game veterans should move along (these aren't the droids you are looking for).

1080i – A resolution specification used for HDTV. 1080i stands for resolution of 1920x1080 pixels. The "i" means that the video is being interlaced

480p – Progressive scanning, this option ("p"= progressive), creates a picture signal with double the scan lines of a conventional interlaced picture, 480i (i = interlaced), to create a noticeably sharper image. The 480p image offers higher picture resolution and eliminates virtually all motion artifacts in a 640x480 pixel resolution setting

720p – A resolution specification used for HDTV. 720p stands for resolution of 1280x720 pixels. The "p" means that the video is in progressive format

40,000,000q – At the rate things are going, the resolution you'll be playing games at next year

action – A term we use for games like Devil May Cry and Viewtiful Joe

ad hoc – A type of wireless connection that connects you with other players in your immediate vicinity

adventure – A term we use for games like Myst and Escape From Monkey Island

AI – Artificial Intelligence. Usually used to refer to how well the computer reacts to a human opponent

bloom – An effect that simulates the soft, blurred glow of bright light reflecting off of surfaces

board – A term we use for games like Jeopardy! and Mario Party

cel shading – A technique used to create 3D rendered objects that resemble hand-drawn animation cels

E3 – Electronic Entertainment Expo. The world's largest convention for video games

fighting – A term we use for games like Mortal Kombat and Dead or Alive

first-party – A game made by a console manufacturer's internal development teams exclusively for its own system

FMV – Full Motion Video. Usually refers to an animated CG cutscene

FPS – Frames Per Second. How many animation frames happen in one second. Also used to denote First-Person Shooters like Halo, Doom, and Call of Duty

framerate – The frames of animation used to create the illusion of movement

frontend – A game's menus and options

GBA – Game Boy Advance

GC – GameCube

HDTV – High Definition Television

infrastructure – A type of wireless connection that uses the Internet to connect with other players over long distances

isometric – Three-quarters top down view, like StarCraft or Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance

ISP – Internet Service Provider. The company that provides you with access to the Internet

jaggies – Graphical lines that are jagged when they should be straight

LAN – Local Area Network. Connecting computers or consoles together within a small space to allow communication between them. Provides fast, simultaneous gameplay

MMO – Massively Multiplayer Online. Usually applied to role-playing titles, we use this term for games with persistent, multi-user online worlds like EverQuest and World of Warcraft

motion blur – Phantom frames follow an object to give the impression of realistic speed

normal mapping – A graphical technique in which a hi-res skin containing 3D information, revealed by light reflecting off the surface, is wrapped around a low-res model

NPC – Non-Player Character. Those people and creatures you see wandering around in games that are not being controlled by actual humans

particle effects – Things like smoke or sparks created in real-time

platform – A term we use for games like Super Mario and Crash Bandicoot

pop-up – When objects onscreen suddenly appear, typically due to poor draw distance

PS2 – Sony PlayStation 2

puzzle – A term we use for games like Tetris and Puyo Pop

racing – A term we use for games like Gran Turismo and Mario Kart

RPG – Role-Playing Game. A game that involves character improvement through collecting and spending points. A term we use for games like Final Fantasy and Xenosaga

shooter – A term we use for games like Ikaruga and Gradius

sports – A term we use for games like Madden NFL

strategy – A term we use for games like La Pucelle and Front Mission

third-party – Something made for a console by a company other than the console manufacturer

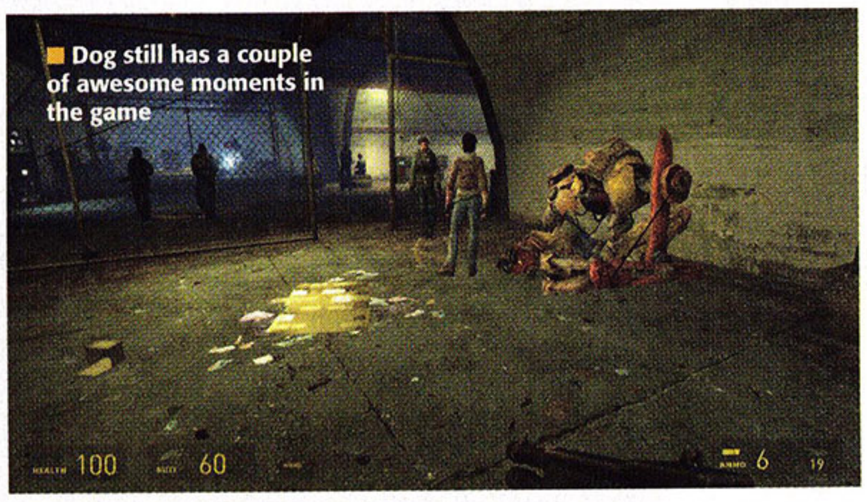
XBOX 360 | PC

The Orange Box

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 16-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE OR UP TO 24-PLAYER VIA PC INTERNET) **> PUBLISHER** ELECTRONIC ARTS
> DEVELOPER VALVE **> RELEASE** OCTOBER 9 **> ESRB** M

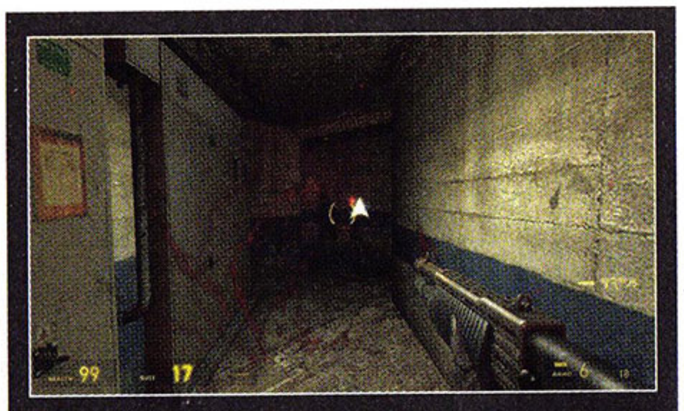
JUST BUY IT

Half-Life 2 originally came out almost three years ago. With cutting edge graphics, a stunningly realistic physics system, and amazing game design, it's no wonder why it was such a masterpiece on PC. The game was so ahead of its time that it doesn't seem like a three-year-old title, and now that console hardware has caught up, we are able to get the full, undiluted experience onto our TVs. So if you haven't played the original Half-Life 2 and Episode One before, then you need to read my headline again. For those who have played both, don't worry – there is still $60 worth of new content in this package, so you too should go ahead and re-read that headline, because you shouldn't have to read this whole review to understand why The Orange Box is probably the best videogame deal ever. —**BEN**



Dog still has a couple of awesome moments in the game

The new Hunters are fierce – and scary – foes



EPISODE TWO – ALMOST A SEQUEL

Failings first, Episode Two is mostly a retread of all the ideas in Half-Life 2. There's sort of one new weapon, only a few new enemies, and more of the same FPS action and puzzle solving we've come to expect. Then again, when the standard gameplay is this awesome, it's hard to complain that you're getting more of it. Valve's storytelling is top-notch. Characters seem to express real emotion, and you really feel like you are a part of a world that's bigger than what you can see. Plus there are so many great moments in the game – like the last half-hour – that you'll probably want to make sure a friend is playing EP2 in parallel so you can talk about them afterwards.

PORTAL – THE CAKE IS A LIE

I went into Portal not knowing what to expect, but it turned out to be my favorite part of The Orange Box. The concept is simple. You have a gun that creates portals; place two on opposite sides of a room, and use them to bypass deadly obstacles. In practice, Portal turns out to be a mind-bending, wholly rewarding puzzle game. You play as a test subject trying to complete a series of experiments; the story isn't really all that important, but the journey is made hilarious by the constant sound bites of a snarky malevolent computer who watches your every move. I recommend that you play through Portal first, not only because it's the best part of Orange Box, but also because it's referenced a little in Episode Two.

TEAM FORTRESS 2 – FAN FUNCTIONAL

I'm sure there will be plenty of Team Fortress fan boys who hate me for saying this, but TF 2 is sort of the weak link in this golden chain. There is no deathmatch, instead each of the six maps feature some kind of territory or CTF game. The game type is locked to the map, and TF 2 feels a little limited in this way. But what doesn't work for maps works great for the player classes. All nine characters feel different and balanced against each other, so if you don't feel skilled at aiming with the Sniper or Soldier you can try healing people with the Medic or building turrets with the Mechanic. Or, if you want a more involved experience, try infiltrating the enemy base as a Spy. In short, TF 2 can be a lot of fun, but I'm glad it's not packaged by itself.

theedge

When All Games Aren't Created Equal

Both version look, sound, and taste very much alike. The controls come down to a matter of preference. Would you rather play with a mouse or a controller? The only edge we can give to the PC version is the added benefit of being able to utilize the mod community. We can't wait to see what people do with Portal. Valve did hint that it might have some things in the works for 360 fans, but that certainly is no guarantee.

BOTTOM LINE 9.75

> Concept: Cram five amazing games into one fair-priced package

> Graphics: Crisp and detailed; Half-Life 2 is several years old and still looks better than some of today's games

> Sound: You'll be cracking up during Portal's end credit song, and then it'll be stuck in your head for days

> Playability: The FPS controls couldn't be much better, and they work great for both action and puzzles

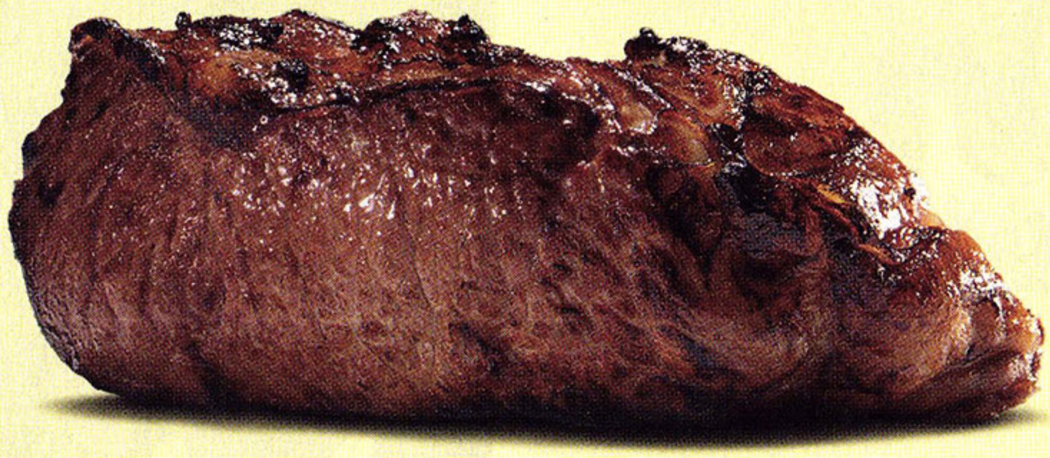
> Entertainment: The Half-Life world will suck you in and absorb many of your waking daily moments

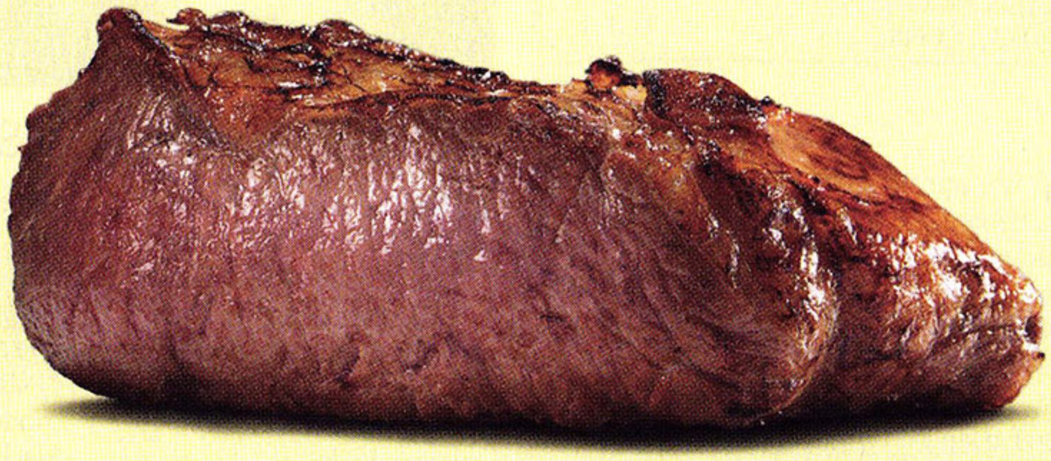
> Replay Value: High

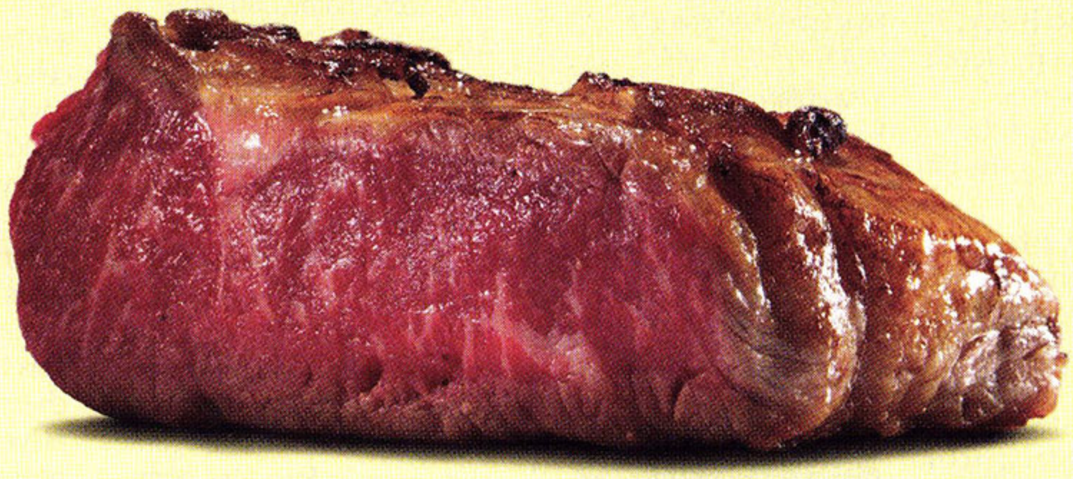
Second Opinion 9.75

Think of Orange Box as a delicious Thanksgiving dinner. Half-Life 2 is the big juicy turkey and Episode One is the stuffing. Some people will be discovering this masterful combo for the first time while others probably haven't feasted on this staple since last year (or three). Half-Life 2 finally gets the console port it deserves with graphics and loads identical to the PC version, slick controls, and a host of sweet achievements. Episode Two is like mom trying a tasty new mashed potato recipe. It's a mix of over-the-top set pieces strung together by bursts of horror and stirring drama. And the final battle is probably the most intense yet in the Half-Life universe. Team Fortress 2 is the cranberry sauce – many will love exploring the class variety while others will get hung up on the limited number of maps and game types. Portal is apple pie that everyone should try with its groundbreaking gameplay, a hilariously sinister robot guide, and surprising depth.—**BRYAN**

CIVIC







IT'S REALLY RARE. The limited-edition Civic Mugen Si Sedan. Lowered, with forged aluminum 18-inch wheels, aero body package, Mugenified sports exhaust system and suspension tuning. All of it backed by Honda. It's meaty, but it's not for everyone.

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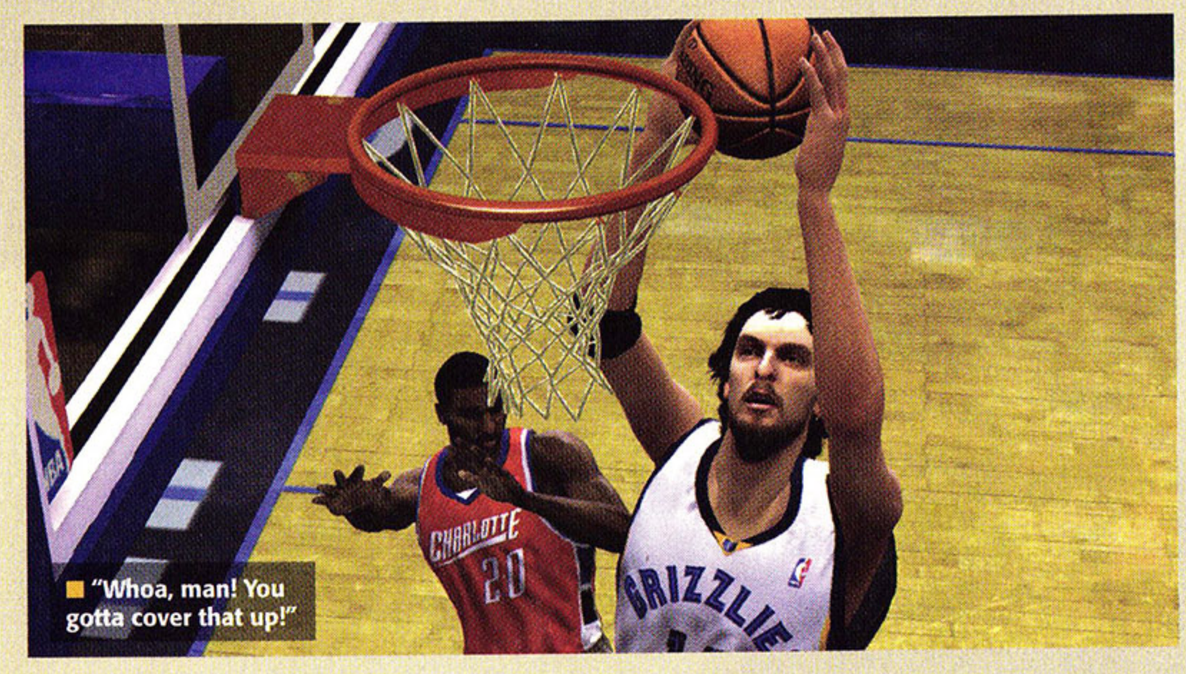


"Whoa, man! You gotta cover that up!"

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360

NBA Live 08

> STYLE 1 TO 4-PLAYER SPORTS (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE OR PLAYSTATION NETWORK)
> PUBLISHER EA SPORTS **> DEVELOPER** EA CANADA **> RELEASE** OCTOBER 9 **> ESRB** E

REDISCOVERING ITS TOUCH

The past few years, NBA 2K has dominated NBA Live like Hot Sauce schooling Joe Juba in a Rucker Park pickup game. But with NBA Live 08, EA has got its groove back and fans of the series can put away their online petitions in favor of a game controller.

Everything about NBA Live feels completely revamped. EA ditched the baseline camera in favor of a broadcast-style view. On the court, the new right analog stick controls respond much more fluidly than the former, clunky Total Freestyle Control. The new Hot Spots feature lets you find the places on the court where your players excel offensively at the push of a button, which aids your strategy in key situations.

The AI is also improved. Opposing teams will actively use their subs to rotate in valuable bench players, and if you go on a run they will call timeouts to slow the pace of the game and readjust their strategy. All of this adds up to a much more enjoyable basketball experience than last year's farce.

But not all is perfect on the hardwood. The game still suffers from clipping —player arms cut through the glass behind the basket and passes go through the defenders' arms. Players seem hesitant to grab loose balls, the rebounding can be sporadic, and players miss too many easy lay-ups, even if you're using a stud like Gilbert Arenas. The fast-break game also needs tweaking. Breakout passes are often poorly placed and require your running player to stop to receive the ball instead of attacking the rim in stride.

In addition to the great Dynasty mode, EA has expanded the game with the FIBA World Championships, a Quick Pick Play mode that lets you assemble a roster from the entirety of the NBA for a pickup game, and Scenario Play that allows you to test your mettle in tough user-created game situations. You can also set up online leagues with friends, but this mode isn't nearly as full blown as NBA 2K8.

In all, NBA Live 08 is a vastly improved game that is nearly ready for primetime. With another year under its belt, NBA Live may be contending for the championship.—**BERTZ**

BOTTOM LINE 7.5

> Concept: NBA Live delivers it's first next-gen effort worthy of a NBA roster spot

> Graphics: The great player models finally have the silky-smooth moves of their real-life counterparts

> Sound: Steve Kerr and back-biting Marv Albert serve up a solid dose of commentary

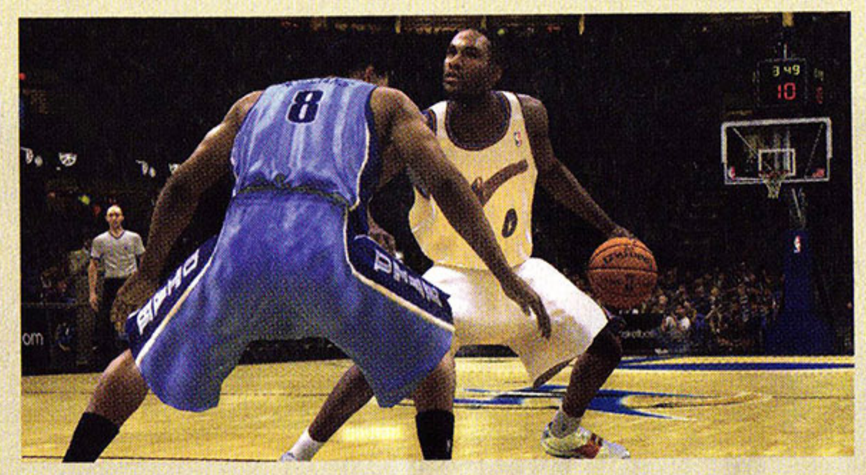
> Playability: The new Quickstrike Ballhandling feature gives you more control over players than freestyle ever did

> Entertainment: With the improved game on the court and the solid offering off it, NBA Live finally finds its sweet spot

> Replay Value: High

Second Opinion 7.75

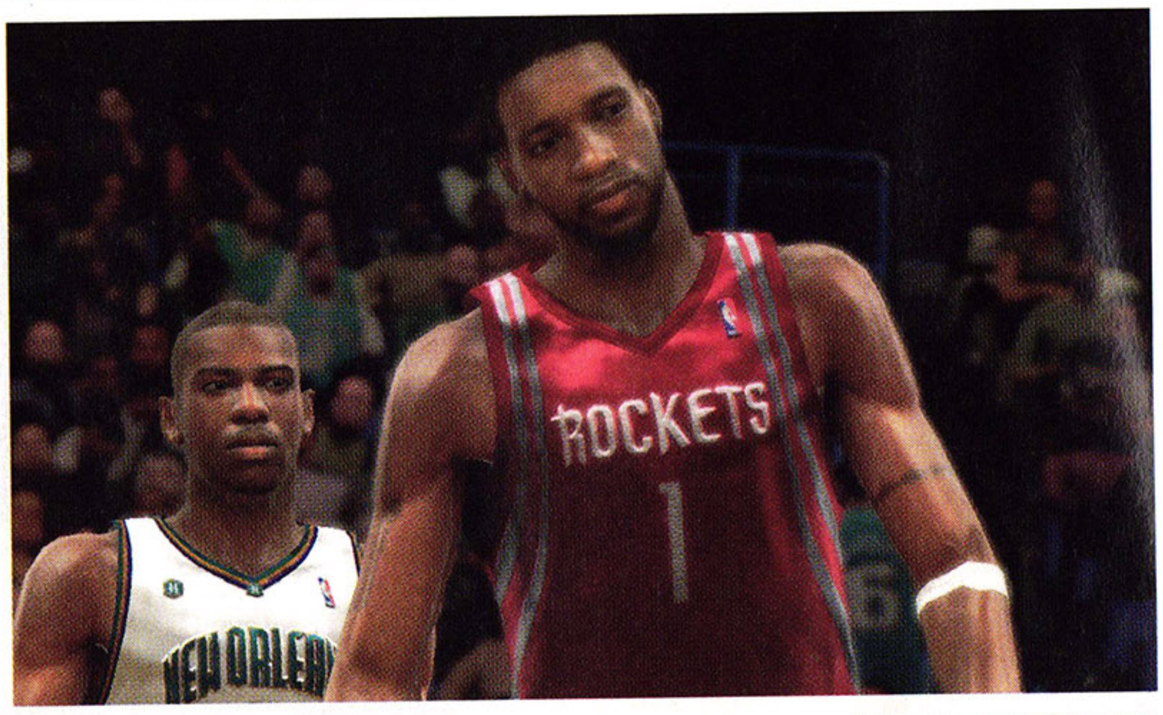
It's good to see EA crawl back from the dead to deliver a Live title that actually resembles real basketball played here on planet Earth. No longer are the players and the ball itself subjugated to floaty or looping Moon physics. You can even pull off a fake step or special move with confidence. Before we get carried away, however, I'd like a few things shored up, including a tighter defensive focus. Sometimes your defense feels like it's caught in an animation you can do nothing to stop, making you a bystander as your opponent goes from perimeter to basket with no resistance. This also affects your ability to snag defensive rebounds, although Live has always been tilted towards offense. But hey, at least this series is pointed in the general direction of quality for a change.—**KATO**



PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360

NBA 2K8

> STYLE 1 TO 4-PLAYER SPORTS (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE OR 5-PLAYER PLAYSTATION NETWORK)
> PUBLISHER 2K SPORTS **> DEVELOPER** VISUAL CONCEPTS **> RELEASE** OCTOBER 9 **> ESRB** E



SCHOOL IS NOW IN SESSION

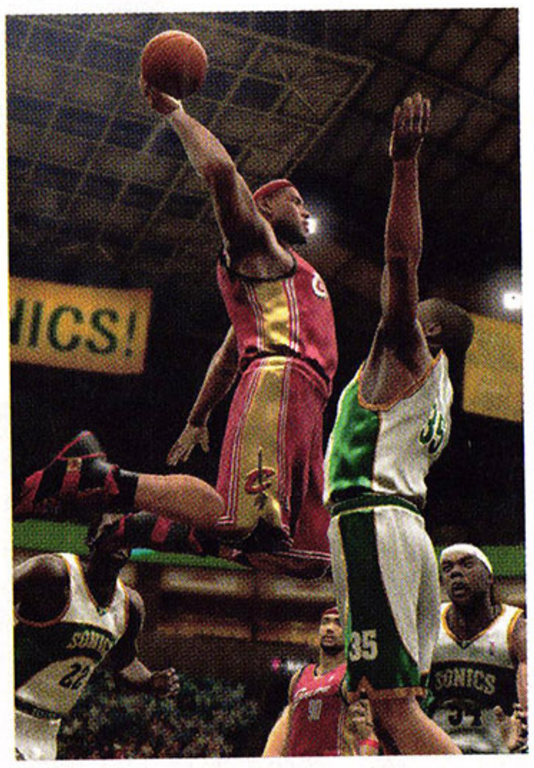
The reigning hoops champ hasn't taken any time off to enjoy its success, and the result is the continuation of a basketball dynasty that rivals the likes of Bird's Celtics and Jordan's Bulls.

In many ways, NBA 2K8 is a hardcore hardwood fan's dream. If you're into running and gunning, you're probably better off playing NBA Live; this is a thinking man's game. With its retooled AI, you must mix up defenses, feed your hot shooters, and run effective offensive plays to win. Keep dishing to a cold shooter, spend too much time in isolation offense, or stay in man-to-man defense all game and you're in for a long night. The new AI is so cutthroat that newcomers may find the gameplay too brutal. You will pay for leaving stars open, and role players can also burn you when left unguarded. Holding an opposing team to under 50 percent shooting on the pro difficulty setting may be a goal in and of itself for newbies.

Thankfully, the game features great court controls to counter the tough opposition. The dribbling mechanic is best in class, the new off-the-ball controls allow you to set up quick plays without the hassle of running complicated set pieces, and the hot zone icon will help you find your players' sweet spots. The only snag in the action is the quirky post play, which isn't as versatile or easy to master as NBA Live's system.

NBA 2K8 ditches the 24/7 mode in favor of the new NBA Blacktop mode, which features a slam dunk contest, three-point shootout, and pickup games with hoops stars and celebrities. The Association is back and is still the deepest franchise mode you'll find. This year focuses on managing team personalities. Your coaching and front office decisions will affect how players feel about the organization. This turn can affect team chemistry, your ability to resign players, and your attractiveness to free agents.

While NBA 2K8 may have some kinks to work out in its post game, it's still the best basketball sim on the market.—**BERTZ**



BOTTOM LINE 8.25

> Concept: Rework last year's best hoops game to challenge gamers with the toughest basketball AI known to man

> Graphics: The new animation system is fantastic, but the player models look jaggy and awkward when standing still

> Sound: A lively crowd and the great voice of Kevin Harlan immerse you in the basketball experience

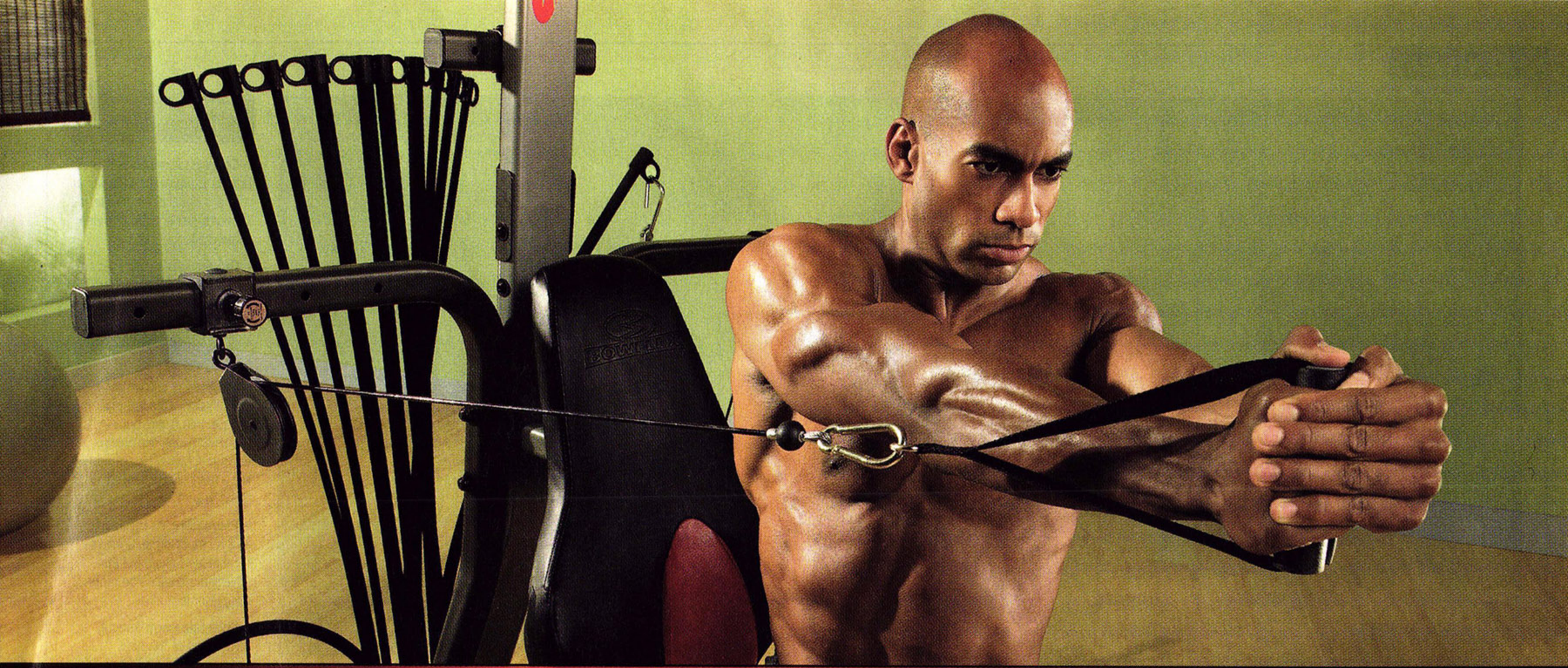
> Playability: The dribbling control is unrivaled, but the low-post game gets called for three in the key

> Entertainment: The deep Association mode and online leagues should give ballers hours of hoops enjoyment

> Replay Value: High

Second Opinion 8.5

They say that all dynasties must fall, but change is just as inevitable – and that's just what 2K8 does in order to avoid becoming stale and losing its spot atop the NBA heap. Fake steps, crossovers, etc. feel smooth and responsive, arenas teem with activity, and the defensive and strategic options simply can't be beat. The introduction of a lock down trigger on defense feels great, and 2K8's momentum/hot spot indicator for players is much more useful than NBA Live's version of the mechanic. I was a big fan of last year's revamped 24/7 mode, and I'm disappointed that its replacement, NBA Blacktop, isn't nearly as satisfying. However, given how this franchise is adapting to stay on top, I have no doubt that it will do whatever it takes to stay there.—**KATO**



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Most enemies are heavily fortified, and will block everything you throw their way until their shield is broken

"Woops."

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360

Conan

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION **> PUBLISHER** THQ **> DEVELOPER** NIHILISTIC SOFTWARE **> RELEASE** OCTOBER 23 **> ESRB** M

BEATING ON THE BARBARIAN

Conan has a better grasp on the art of impaling than he does the art of speaking. His veins run red with rage, and his eyes only see destruction. He doesn't serve women. He services them. He doesn't use herbs to mend his wounds. He drinks the pain away gallon by gallon. If you are brave enough to raise a sword against him, your final moments will be spent looking down in disbelieve at your detached arms. This barbarian's violence is untamed, unmatched, and unmerciful, and believe it or not, is instrumental in carrying a troubled game to a moderate level of enjoyment.

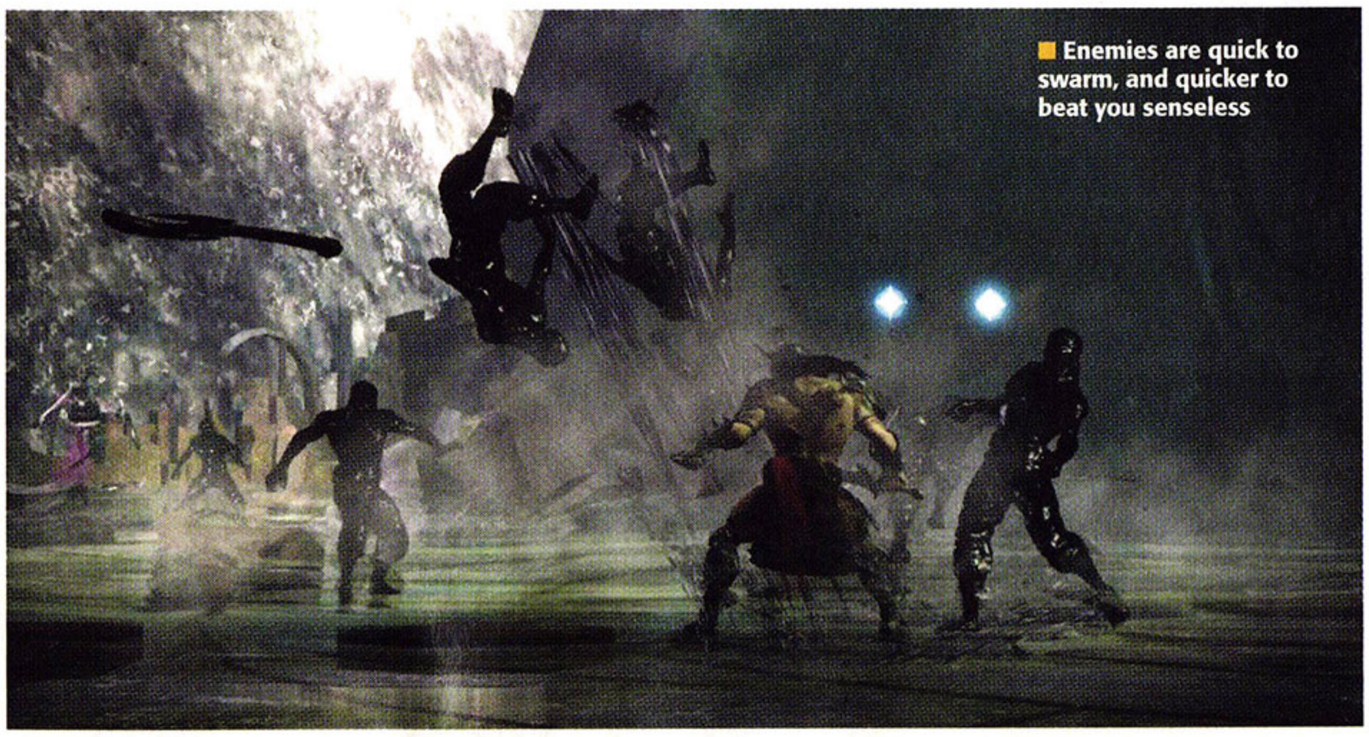
If I could paint a picture that depicted Conan's place in the world of video games, it would show him groveling at Kratos' feet, begging for gameplay wisdom. Developer Nihilistic Software has done nothing to hide the fact that this game draws most of its gameplay inspiration from God of War. The parallels are unmistakable, but like most understudies, Conan feels like a second-rate interpretation.

As gratifying as it is to see a soldier's shield explode under your assault or a squid's tentacle spew blood, the gameplay never clicks like it should. Conan's movements are swift and the button presses for combos are timed nicely to his animations, but no matter how magnificent your combat prowess may look, one subtle jab from an enemy can make you look like a dummy used for sword practice. For some reason, enemy attacks always disrupt yours. This even goes for wimpy human soldiers who barely look strong enough to lift their swords. If you are airborne, this enemy's weak counter may knock you off of a ledge, which will prompt a Game Over screen that is followed by a lengthy load time before restarting at a checkpoint. When you have foes approaching from all sides, you often find yourself getting throttled in ways that feel unfair, especially since you are usually locked in combat with one of them already. Something can be said of strategizing to find openings, but it really doesn't work when your combo gets interrupted and you get knocked back into the hornet's nest you so carefully tried to avoid.

In a roundabout way, the pain you endure makes victory taste that much sweeter. When an enemy interferes with a combo, you would like nothing more than be given the opportunity to cut his head clean off. This is where joy in Conan comes from. When you depart a battlefield, it's usually littered with body parts. The moveset you have at your disposal isn't designed to simply hurt an adversary. Every strike has enough force behind it to mutilate a foe. Conan's primary weapon is a sword, but he can also pick up axes, spears, and dual wield blades. I grew fond of the baseball swing decapitation, but also had a soft spot in my heart for the dual-sword strike that takes off both of your attacker's arms.

There certainly isn't much of a story to digest, but this tale does take Conan to some amazing places. You'll find yourself traversing the beautiful architecture of forgotten ruins, burning the homes of a primitive culture, and thanks to evil magic, standing beneath the sea. Each level has a fair amount of eye candy, but more impressively, a nice variety of creatures to combat. With the exclusion of the last boss, who may be the biggest pain in the ass in video games, most of the boss battles are interesting in design, and fun to take down.

If your blood pressure can withstand beatings that may seem unfair, there's a lot to like about Conan's combat system and adventure. In an afternoon, you'll turn civilizations into amputees, you'll likely sleep with all of their women, and at the end of it all, you'll learn just how much stress your body can withstand.—**REINER**



Enemies are quick to swarm, and quicker to beat you senseless

BOTTOM LINE 7

> Concept: As much as this brawler explores the Cimmerian warrior's brutal combat style, it shows us just how brutal video game challenges can be

> Graphics: The cutscenes are a bit crude, but the world is extravagantly detailed. Monster designs look great, and Conan's animations are as smooth as can be

> Sound: The percussion in the orchestrated score will make you run into battle, but why is Conan throwing out one-liners during battle? He sounds like a mentally challenged Duke Nukem

> Playability: As frustrating as it is empowering, Conan's combat feels great, but the adversaries couldn't be more troublesome

> Entertainment: Roughly eight hours of "Ha ha! I chopped his arm off!" and "No way! How did he hit me?"

> Replay Value: Moderate

Second Opinion 7.25

There are a lot of great ideas at work in Conan, particularly in the robust combat move system that upgrades throughout the game. But even better is how well Nihilistic has captured the Conan universe. From the fierce soundtrack filled with primitive drums and ancient-sounding melodies to the exaggerated tone of Conan's testosterone-fueled dialogue and bloody battles, it has captured the vibe of Robert E. Howard's original stories. Sadly, the gameplay doesn't hold up for very long. Repeated waves of enemies stand around, often attacking only in response to your actions, and blocking your attacks far too frequently to make the combo system as fun as it could be. Instead, most battles result in a few simple strikes before you have to pause to block or run away, and the true fury of Conan's attacks can rarely be brought to bear. Never is this more apparent than in the final level of the game, at which point the fights are way too long and frustrating, and a slow down effect during particularly noteworthy strikes happens so often it actually seems like the game is jamming up. This is a gorgeously realized game world, but without the action to keep pace.—**MILLER**

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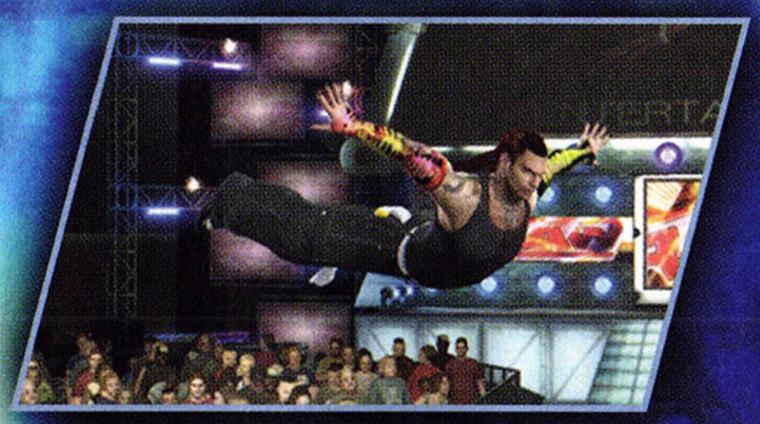

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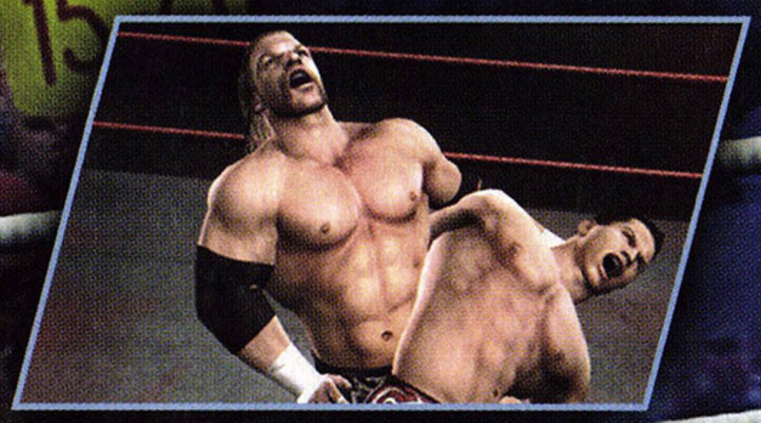

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A number of missions have you flying side by side with a huge number of allied aircraft

XBOX 360 | PC

Blazing Angels 2: Secret Missions of WWII

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 16-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE) **> PUBLISHER** UBISOFT **> DEVELOPER** UBISOFT ROMANIA **> RELEASE** SEPTEMBER 18 **> ESRB** T

THE WAR YOU DON'T REMEMBER

Just because you don't recall the giant dogfight over the Great Pyramids against a helium-filled German zeppelin doesn't mean it didn't happen. Or so the re-imagined Blazing Angels would have us believe. Boasting fantastic locales from Cairo to the Himalayas and strange experimental fighters never seen in the history books, the titular secret missions in question are pretty unbelievable. The exaggerated weapons and battles are actually the most exciting and engrossing aspect of the title; much of Blazing Angels 2 veers heavily into frustration and obfuscation.

The starting point for feeling out any game are the controls, and this is a game that teeters back and forth between intuitive ease and controller-smashing irritation almost constantly. Lining up your shot to hit the tail of a passing plane is a thrill – the camera that locks you onto him makes you feel like you're leaning from your plane to get a bead and turning to match speed and trajectory. Moments later you've crashed into a tree because you tried to speed up and instead steered headlong into the ground.

The action is incredibly intense because so much of it occurs very near to the earth – only rarely will you find yourself floating above the clouds. Instead, expect dogfights that barely skim the building tops over Moscow or Paris. And while the fights themselves are harrowing, the mission design is an absolute chore. Checkpoints placed too far apart and unclear objectives delivered via your com channel will have you tearing out your hair. It's a kind of difficulty that often veers from genuine challenge into that frustrating feeling of "why did that even happen?!" While I applaud the attempt to offer variety in the missions, it irks me if new mechanics simply aren't explained, like when I had to use the radar blips of a sinking submarine to track her down amid a huge ice flow. Cool idea, but it could have used a little more description before you set me on a time limit.

Still, there's a lot of creativity at play here, something I'd much rather see than another stale WWII rehash. I'm also very pleased to see some extremely robust multiplayer offerings in place, from solo competitive dogfights, to epic team-based objective games, and even a large portion of the campaign for four-player co-op. Even with the frustration, that may be enough to bring a few players in the door who might otherwise skip this altogether. A little more user-friendliness and I might join that crowd.—**MILLER**

You'll fly experimental aircraft never seen in the real historical conflicts of WWII

This is a game that doesn't mind reaching into elements of fantasy from time to time

BOTTOM LINE 7.5

> Concept: Remember when those submarines attacked the Golden Gate Bridge with rockets during World War II? Take a flight into historical fantasy as a hotshot fighter pilot

> Graphics: Beautifully detailed backdrops mix famous city landmarks with plumes of smoke and exploding planes – an impressive display

> Sound: Some of these melodies are trying a little too hard to be like Star Wars, but that's okay

> Playability: Smart ideas, like the target camera, mix with bad ideas, like having yaw or roll and throttle on the same analog stick

> Entertainment: Frustrating almost from beginning to end, but with some fun moments

> Replay Value: Moderately Low

Second Opinion 7.75

If your ears perk up like Spock's whenever you hear someone mention Crimson Skies, then you may want to take a gander at Blazing Angels 2. This history-bending game delivers the feeling of a World War II game, but the challenges are greatly exaggerated, and some of the enemy's vehicles look like were stripped from a science fiction movie. Blimps are armed like Star Destroyers, the skies and seas are often overflowing with vessels, and the safety of the world is always left solely up to you. The missions offer a ton of variety, and each level takes place in a stunning locale. This game paints a beautiful picture, and offers content you could easily fall in love with, but your appreciation comes at a price. The game's difficulty is taxing, and victory often requires flawless execution and memorization of enemy locations. It's easy to lead targets this time around, and the yaw works well, but you really have to have nerves of steel to make it through this game. If you are up for the challenge, there's some great fun to be had.—**REINER**

MULTI QUICKIES

XBOX 360 | Wii | PS2

Crash of the Titans

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION/PLATFORM
> PUBLISHER SIERRA ENTERTAINMENT
> DEVELOPER RADICAL
> RELEASE OCTOBER 26 **> ESRB** E10+

BOTTOM LINE 7.25

Crash has had a few rough years lately, and while he still hasn't achieved the same heights of his early PSone days, he might finally be edging in the right direction. Crash of the Titans certainly doesn't do anything new or exciting, but it is a well-polished platformer. There are fifteen different monsters in the game that Crash can now possess and use to smash through the levels. Their different abilities and special moves add some nice variety to the gameplay. Still, the action grows tired pretty quickly. With its juvenile humor and low difficulty this is probably targeted for kids, but it's a decent holdover until Super Mario Galaxy comes along.—**BEN**

Wii | PLAYSTATION 2

The Legend of Spyro: The Eternal Night

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION
> PUBLISHER SIERRA ENTERTAINMENT
> DEVELOPER KROME
> RELEASE OCTOBER 23 **> ESRB** E10+

BOTTOM LINE 6.25

Every time Spyro opens his mouth I can't help but picture Frodo. It's not that Elijah Wood does a bad job – he's fine – his voice is just too distinctive. If only Sierra had spent as much money on game development as they did on presentation. Spyro's gameplay is as old as Wood's career, so if you've played a platformer since Super Mario 64, then you'll probably get tired of double jumping across empty canyons and button-mash attacking waves of enemies. Nothing in the game feels particularly broken. Spyro's gameplay works just like it's suppose to – just like it has in every other game in the last decade, so it feels like the development team just phoned this one in.—**BEN**

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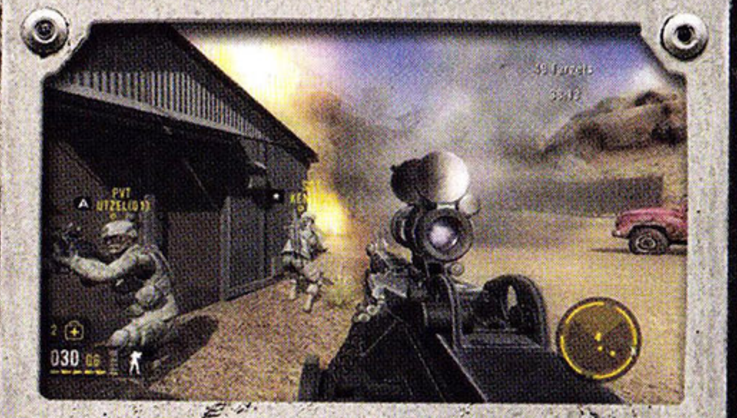

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TEEN T CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
Blood
Violence

U.S.ARMY
ARMY STRONG.

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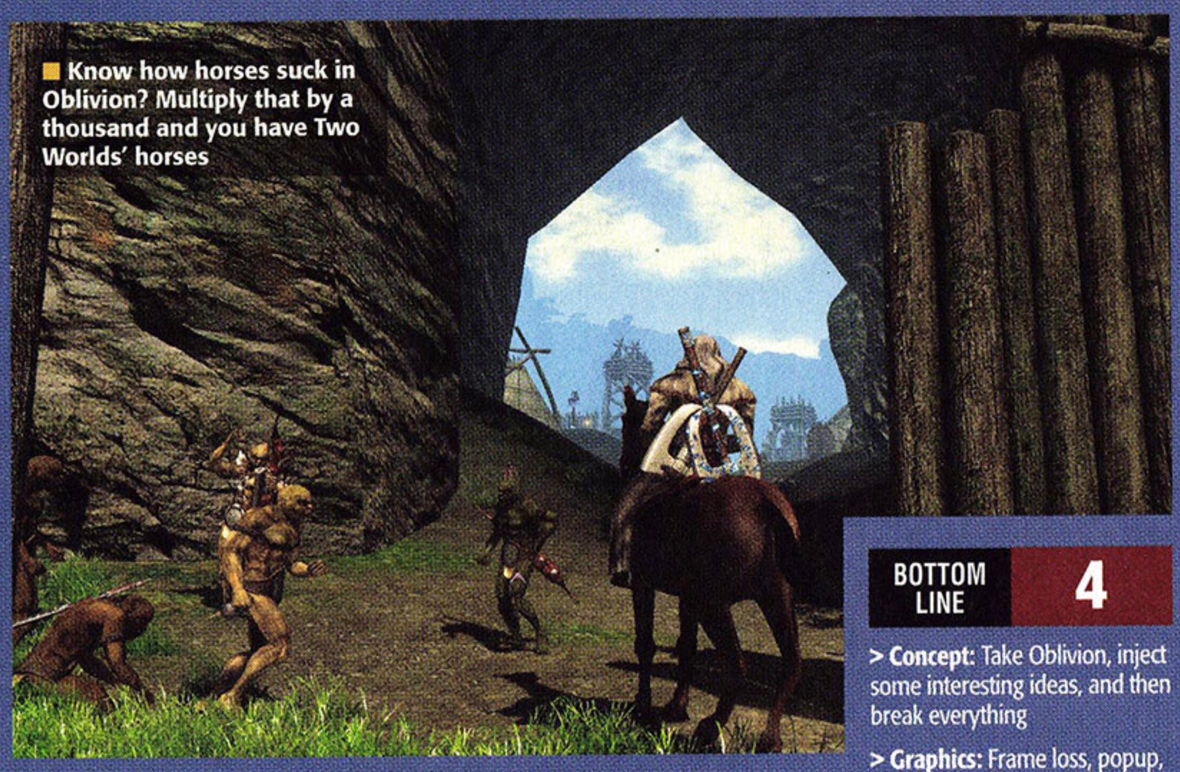
XBOX 360 | PC

Two Worlds

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION/RPG (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE OR PC INTERNET OR LAN **> PUBLISHER** SOUTH PEAK INTERACTIVE **> DEVELOPER** REALITY PUMP STUDIOS **> RELEASE** AUGUST 23 **> ESRB** M



■ Know how horses suck in Oblivion? Multiply that by a thousand and you have Two Worlds' horses

BROKEN AND POINTLESS

There is one and only one good thing to say about Two Worlds: the game truly gives you the freedom to align with any faction and change the gameworld by your choices. Everything else – and I mean *everything* else – sucks. The rest of Two Worlds is not merely mediocre or lacking polish. It flat out sucks.

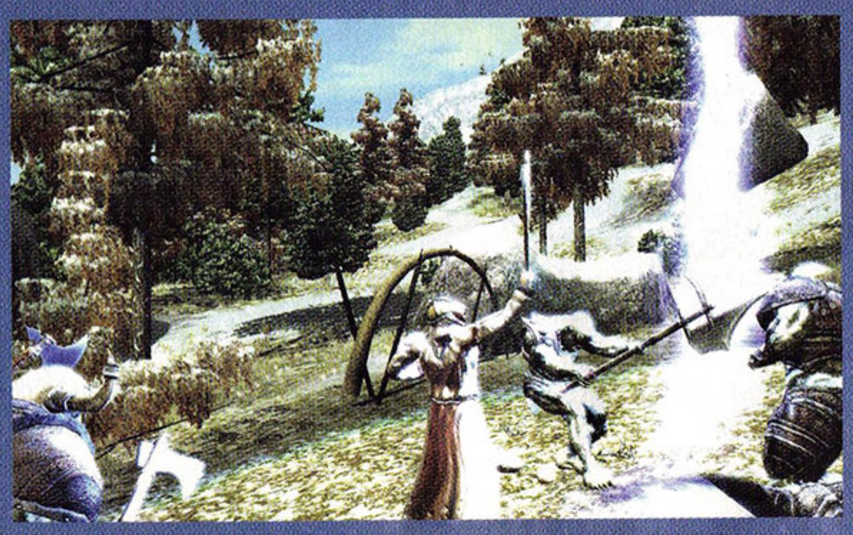
In an action/RPG in the Elder Scrolls/Gothic vein, one would expect some free-roaming environments, lots of combat, and a bit of character progression. Two Worlds does indeed have those, but they're all broken. Environments are bland. The combat is worse than Gothic III's unplayable mess, with terrible sword- and spell-play layered on top of a badly imbalanced system. Leveling up through the Diablo-like skill set could have been decent, at least – if it were in a better game.

If, somehow, you're able to get past the game's many flaws, there is some measure of fun to be had in the later content. It's still not anything special, but at least the world opens up a bit and you can exercise the freedom to explore whichever particular piece of poorly executed content you feel like. I'd still recommend picking up Gothic III in the bargain bin if you're into that sort of thing, though – at least that title has some gorgeous vistas and an interesting world to go along with its awful combat. Two Worlds doesn't even have that.—**ADAM**

theedge

When All Games Aren't Created Equal

While sharing all of the design-related problems of the PC version, the Xbox 360 game is almost unplayable due to horrendous controls, a headache-inducing menu interface, and even worse technical problems with the framerate and draw-in.



BOTTOM LINE 4

> Concept: Take Oblivion, inject some interesting ideas, and then break everything

> Graphics: Frame loss, popup, and buggy shadows are inexcusable in a title this mediocre-looking

> Sound: If you're not laughing at the horrid gameplay or visuals, you'll be rolling on the floor from the terrible voiceovers

> Playability: Bad on a mouse and keyboard, nearly unplayable on a 360 pad. What a choice!

> Entertainment: Why don't you just give yourself a nice paper cut and pour lemon juice on it?

> Replay Value: Low

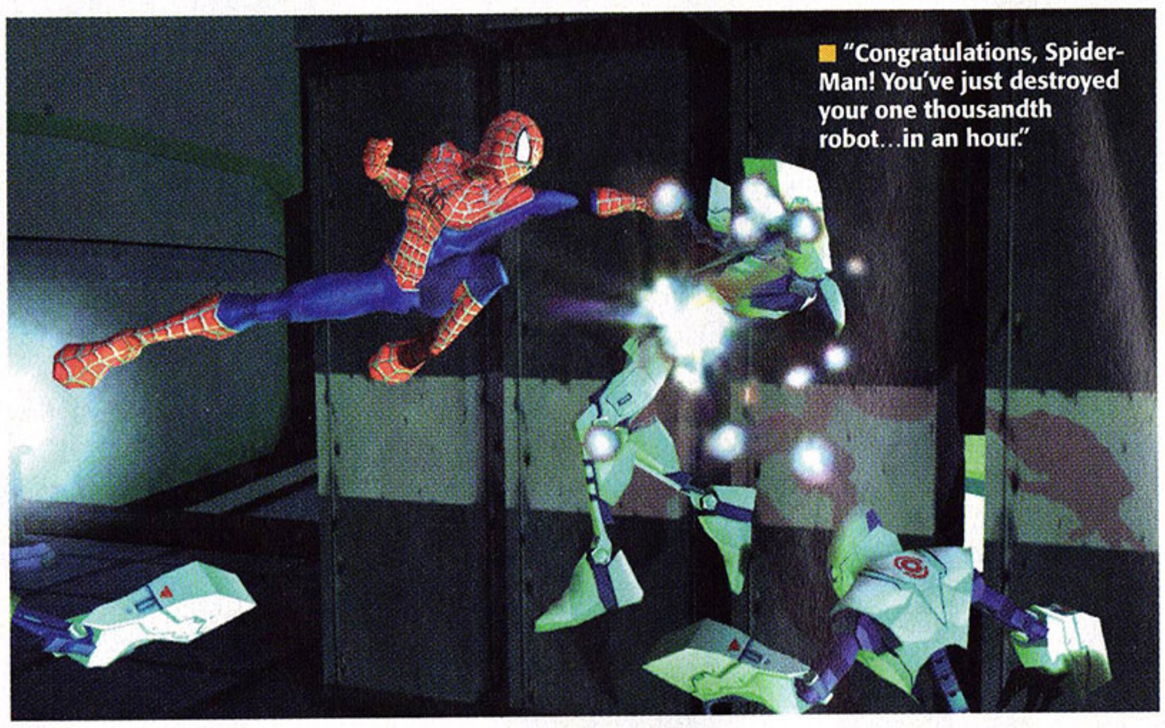
Second Opinion 2

There's an adventure here somewhere, hidden beneath the fog of broken gameplay, performance glitches, and characters talking about the evil Taint in unintentionally hilarious ways. The main character is an embarrassment to gaming, and isn't even believable enough to be considered for a Renaissance fair's cast. As much as I enjoyed seeing him take a sword to the face, most enemies would appear to have extreme cases of glaucoma, as they swing and miss most of the time, and have a difficult time navigating around walls. Sadly, even with an impressive stock of weapons at your disposal, your combat prowess isn't much better. The choppy animations, inconsistent framerate, and inopportune loads make it nearly impossible to navigate the battlefield with effective grace. The game's only redeeming qualities, deep spell and weapon systems, just go to waste in this abysmal quest. If you've spent a lifetime sinning, by all means, trek into this world to get a taste of what awaits you in Hell.—**REINER**

XBOX 360 | Wii | PLAYSTATION 2

Spider-Man: Friend or Foe

> STYLE 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION **> PUBLISHER** ACTIVISION **> DEVELOPER** NEXT LEVEL GAMES **> RELEASE** OCTOBER 2 **> ESRB** E10+



■ "Congratulations, Spider-Man! You've just destroyed your one thousandth robot...in an hour."

AND YOU THOUGHT KIRSTEN DUNST WAS BAD?

This has been a difficult year for Marvel's wall crawler. In the comic book continuity, he foolishly revealed his secret identity to the world. This, of course, led to his loved ones getting slapped around. In the movies, he played jazz piano and bawled his eyes out in a battle of tears against Sandman. Never has a hero looked so stupid. As catastrophic as these missteps are, they pale in comparison to Spidey's egregious video game blunder, Friend or Foe.

Next to watching Spider-Man sleep, I don't think there could be a way to see this acrobatic character do such mind-numbingly dull things. This brawler's combat is so limited in its scope and so dependant on jamming on one button that playing a single level feels like a lifetime of tedious work. You simply have to pummel passive aggressive enemies with a couple of different combos until a new path opens. Most paths just lead to another combat area stuffed with the same baddies you've been tangling with for hours. This is an exercise in monotony that can destroy a soul. Toward the end of the game, I was hoping my 360 would flash its glorious red rings of death.

The only sliver of joy comes from unlocking new sidekick characters. Since their move sets are just as pathetic as Spidey's, I didn't necessarily enjoy playing as them, but I did get a chuckle out of their strange appearances. Doc Ock looks a bit like Rosie O'Donnell, and Black Cat's face has a Toxic Avenger quality to it. Two-player cooperative play is usually something I look forward to, but most of the editors here wouldn't even stick around for a complete level.

Friend or Foe may bear the likeness of one of comics' most popular characters, but it doesn't feel like a Spider-Man game at all. At the end of the day, this is an unfortunate stain on the tights of a character that has had a fairly respectable video game career.—**REINER**

■ Finally there's a game with the quality suitable for characters like Iron Fist

BOTTOM LINE 4.5

> Concept: Strip away all of Spider-Man's high-flying maneuvers and make him punch the same enemies for eight hours

> Graphics: Clearly designed to take advantage of the PlayStation 2 hardware. The Wii and 360 games look exactly the same

> Sound: Terrible voice work, but Spider-Man seems fully aware that his game sucks when he says, "Do you think it ruins the excitement with us always winning?"

> Playability: I completed most boss battles without dodging any attacks. Turns out rockets to the face really don't harm Spider-Man

> Entertainment: The old live action TV series was a more believable Spider-Man property

> Replay Value: Low

Second Opinion 5.5

It's like they have a recipe for superhero games, but they wanted to make this one with a shortened ingredient list. Once you leave out strong production values and quality gameplay, what do you have left? A sad marketing ploy aimed at those who won't know any better, that's what. It's not that the game is broken, but the unimaginative levels, button-mashing fights, and repeated waves of enemies certainly don't bring you crawling back for more. Some of the character animation is solid, but what's with the lack of textures on the environments? Friend or foe? Well, I'll give you a hint: friend has been taken off the table.—**MILLER**

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360

Juiced 2: Hot Import Nights

> STYLE 1 OR 2-PLAYER RACING (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA PLAYSTATION NETWORK OR XBOX LIVE) **> PUBLISHER** THQ
> DEVELOPER JUICE GAMES **> RELEASE** SEPTEMBER 18 **> ESRB** T

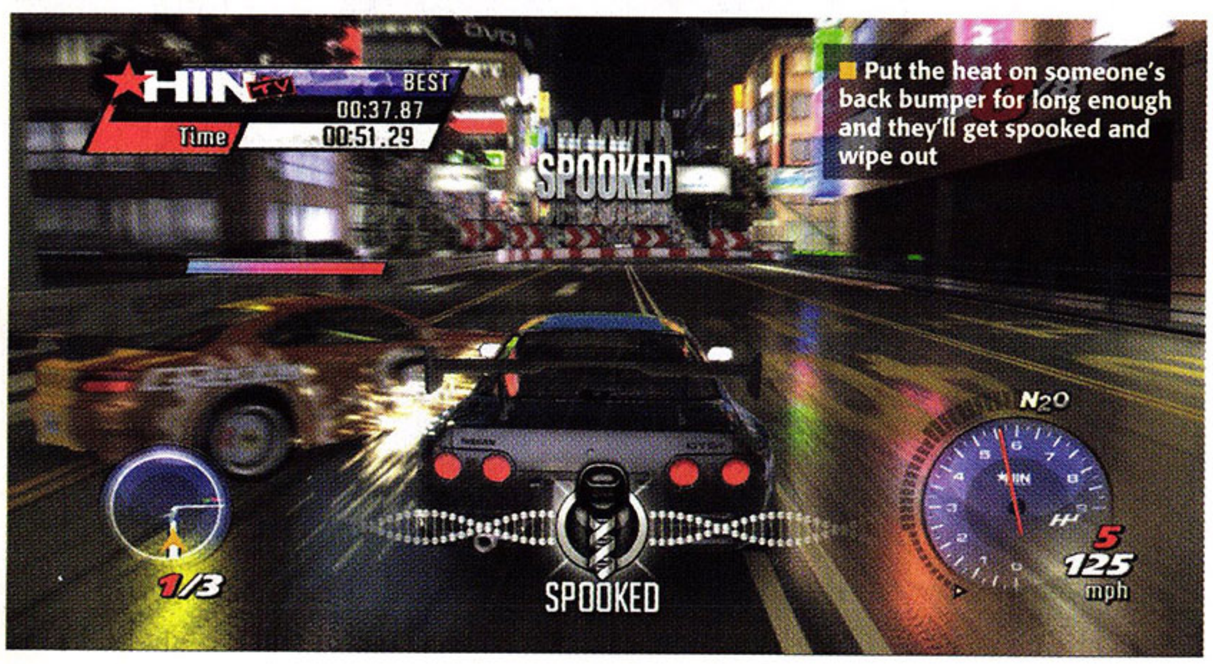
HOT IMPORT DELIGHT

Like the custom rides that populate the tuner events that give Hot Import Nights its name, this title is not your average factory model. It's packed with special little details that set it apart and give it an edge on the competition. Sure, some of the game's features aren't exactly the equivalent of a whole-new engine, but at least Juiced 2 is doing whatever it can to find that last ounce of speed.

The career structure of Juiced 2 is similar to Dirt in that it's structured in tiers. The crucial difference, however, is that promotion up the ladder isn't predicated on how many events you finish or points you accrue, but rather which goals you've completed. These include getting a certain amount of drift points, earning someone's pink slip, and more. The key here is that multiple races can be used to complete any one goal, and that multiple goals can be completed in any one race. So you can finish a betting, drift, and team challenge all in the same race. You could even race your entire career online against a field of other players if you wanted to. These races, by the way, can also have their own conditions, such Last Man Standing, where you have to outlast the rest of the field by not hitting any track barriers.

The game's emphasis on choice continues off the track. You can customize your car, of course, but I like how the title gives you enough cash and tells you exactly how much you can customize each car before it maxes out its stats and becomes obsolete. No longer will you wonder if you're just wasting your time and money on a dead-end car. I also love how you don't just buy upgrades; you have to earn them through finishing a challenge first – like the pink slips and betting, it's one of those details that keep this title from being average.

Juiced 2's progress in numerous areas is blunted only by the short, uninspired tracks, which can affect the quality of the racing itself – something that's no small matter, I know. I find Project Gotham tracks have done better in giving player bite-sized, drift happy courses, but overall this game is the burst of speed that this genre needs.—**KATO**



■ Put the heat on someone's back bumper for long enough and they'll get spooked and wipe out

BOTTOM LINE 8.25

> Concept: Juiced 2 has the glitz to spice up what would otherwise be some staid racing

> Graphics: The game tries to throw all manner of visual effects at you to varying degrees of effectiveness

> Sound: Like Dirt, Juiced 2 makes use of a menu narrator that's cool to hear

> Playability: The feel is a little loose like the first Juiced, but it's not too bad

> Entertainment: Although it doesn't have the best racing out there, the game is still exciting at every turn

> Replay Value: Moderately High

Second Opinion 8.5

The first Juiced seemed like a cheap and sleazy street racing wannabe, so color me shocked at how much I like the sequel. Every aspect of this game has been radically upgraded, from the gorgeous graphics to the expertly designed career mode (offered both online and off). The sheer variety of events and challenges is impressive, and organized in a much better fashion than the in the last game. The side betting is back, and more fun since you're not being penalized for in-race damage to your ride. The racing is solid, if not as thrilling as Midnight Club, and will really put your drifting skills to the test. Some of the presentation is still a little cheesy, but it's a lot easier to ignore when the meat of the experience is so well done. Kudos to Juice Games for putting a lot of well-spent time and effort into revitalizing this franchise.—**MATT**

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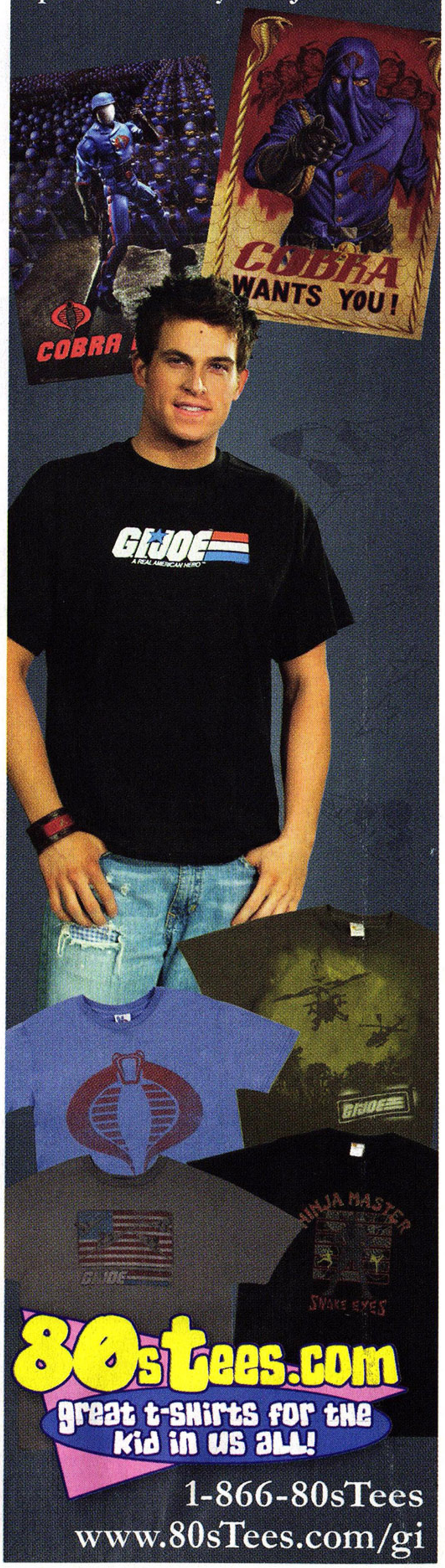
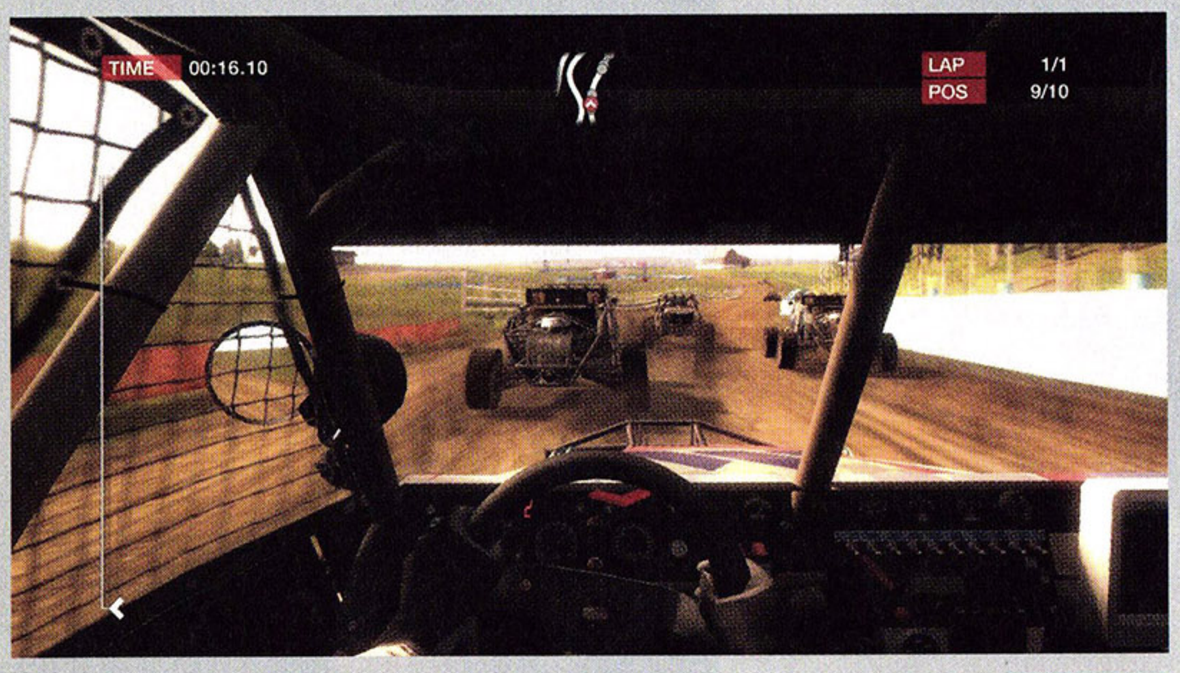


PLAYSTATION 3

Dirt

> STYLE 1-PLAYER RACING (1-PLAYER VIA PLAYSTATION NETWORK) **> PUBLISHER** CODEMASTERS **> DEVELOPER** CODEMASTERS **> RELEASE** SEPTEMBER 11 **> ESRB** E

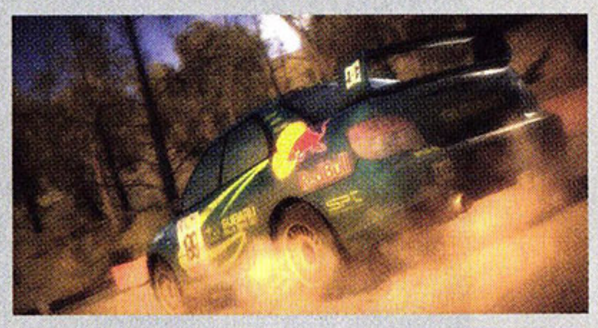


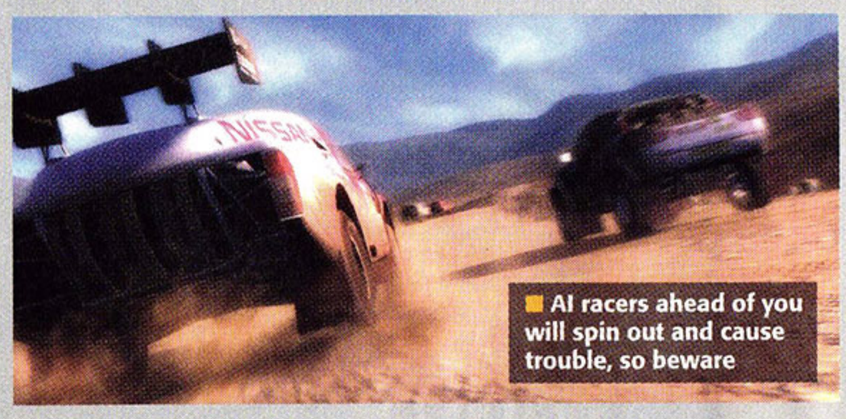
DIALED IN

For me, rally racing is about thinking without having to think. The only way to survive at high speeds on a dusty trail that's barely wider than my car is to simply do what my co-pilot tells me to. "Left four over jump 100." But I have to do it without listening – because the second I think too much about the upcoming turn, I let go of my racing instincts and inevitably screw up my run. This grey zone where instinct and intellect co-exist to produce fluid, breakneck racing is right where Dirt resides. The game's emphasis on pure racing has already helped make it a hit on the Xbox 360, and this version is no less accomplished.

Dirt is about celebrating off-road racing in various forms. Its tiered pyramid career structure is filled with rally races, bouncing and barreling trucks, and other racing delights. I like being able to choose what I get to race to earn a promotion to the next pyramid stage, but it's apparent early on that Dirt very quickly lays all its cards down on the table. Because elements of the game such as buying cars and trucks for your garage are underdeveloped, Dirt – as fun as it is – ends up being a very what-you-see-is-what-you-get experience. Unlike Juiced 2, for example, Dirt's failure to make even buying and upgrading hot cars alluring is a mistake that keeps gamers from being tightly connected to the game, and which prevents it from being great. This de-emphasis on the cars is also evident in the fact that many of the rides feel alike no matter what racing surface you're on.

Despite its limited focus, Dirt's single-minded pursuit of racing serves the game well and creates a strong foundation for the future. I guess I can't blame it for tuning out the rest of the world while it whips around dusty tracks at scary speeds. As we know, getting dialed into the zone is everything.—**KATO**





■ AI racers ahead of you will spin out and cause trouble, so beware

BOTTOM LINE 8

> Concept: The Colin McRae rally series goes more broad – like Codemasters' other franchise, TOCA Race Driver

> Graphics: Just as good looking as the Xbox 360 version, including some of the pop up

> Sound: I love how the car and environment sounds bounce off the canyon walls in rally races

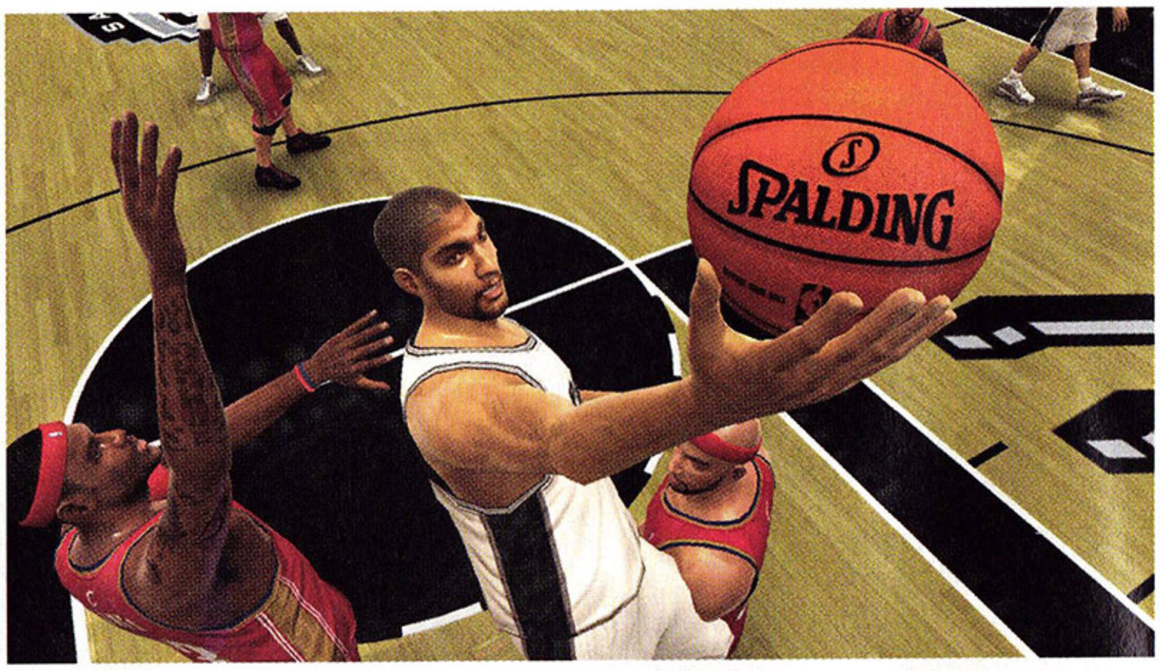
> Playability: The cars feel like they swivel on a pivot more than you'd expect from a Codemasters title

> Entertainment: Not as hardcore as past Colin games, but I guess that's why many will like it

> Replay Value: Moderately High

Second Opinion 8.5

Rally racing isn't very popular in America, so don't feel bad if phrases like "Caution...60.... crest and left two" sound like gibberish to you at first. But trust me, Dirt will soon convert you to one of the most thrilling forms of video game racing. Rally's twisted courses require your full attention at all times; one false move can doom you to last place in a split second. Dirt definitely gives you plenty to love. The single-player career is long and exhaustive, throwing you a huge variety of vehicles, events, and courses. The control is excellent, although the car physics make you feel like you are turning on a pivot instead of a four-wheeled vehicle, making sliding a little frustrating at times. I also bemoan the lack of multi-car online races (you can only compete solo, then test your times against others). Still, most of this game is as good as it gets. With a few tweaks, the next edition of Dirt could be a classic.—**MATT**



PLAYSTATION 3

NBA 08

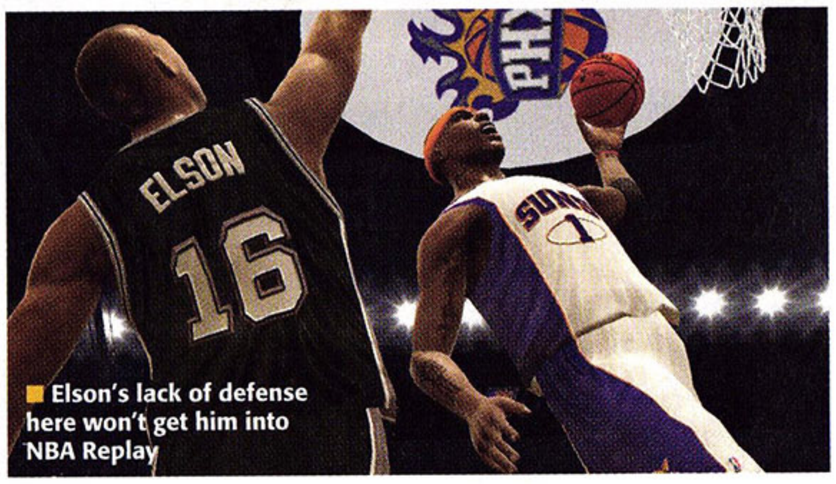
> STYLE 1 TO 4-PLAYER SPORTS (2-PLAYER VIA PLAYSTATION NETWORK) **> PUBLISHER** SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT **> DEVELOPER** SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT SAN DIEGO **> RELEASE** OCTOBER 2 **> ESRB** E

PURE VANILLA

It's one thing to be a dark horse in the yearly hard court war among the NBA titles, but you don't get to the top by taking the long way around. This series is totally off everyone's radar – and there's a reason. Current-gen's The Life mode aside, this franchise's gameplay has always been its weak link, and this year's edition – while containing improvements – is not yet up to snuff. I love this series on paper simply because of its cool feature set, but it's not long before I want to take my ball and go home.

The more this series tightens up its gameplay, the more the little things stick out to the eye. The ball's collision field and that of the basket can produce some odd moments, and the game has a hard time blending its animations. Players will pop in and out of various movements in an unnatural way, and this extends to the ball itself. Since it doesn't act independently on its own you'll see it bounce oddly at times as it vacuums into a player's hands. Although I did notice that on offense the AI can do some pretty stupid things (don't dish the ball outside when I give you a totally open lane), I liked how it was smart enough to steal the ball easily every time I tried to force a pass where it didn't belong.

As strong as the feature set of NBA 08 is, it's not enough to overcome the gameplay. Getting to play real-life NBA scenarios in bite-sized chunks beats slogging through a whole season, and the create-a-player is bested only by Tiger Woods. I particularly appreciate how I can earn points to boost my attributes and buy stuff in every nook and cranny in the title – yet another example of how I played this game almost in spite of itself.—**KATO**



■ Elson's lack of defense here won't get him into NBA Replay

BOTTOM LINE 7

> Concept: This franchise is still content to not set its bar very high

> Graphics: In 1080p and with better models, but this game still isn't the best-looking basketball game

> Sound: Actually having announcers is a big addition for this series. They're alright

> Playability: Contains some collision problems

> Entertainment: There are some intriguing features here, but the gameplay is what needs the most work

> Replay Value: Moderately High

Second Opinion 6.25

Sony's latest hoops effort isn't as discombobulated as last year's, but it still plays more like Michael Olowokandi than Michael Jordan. To its credit, the defense is tighter and the game now includes color commentary. To its detriment (and ours), it severely lacks branching animations, good graphics, and sound gameplay. In comparison to NBA Live and 2K, the strategy is still lacking and the low post game is downright laughable. The highlight of this series, The Life, is absent again, and there is no dynasty mode to give the game any depth. Instead, you'll have to kill time creating a new player and upgrading him while completing NBA Replay challenges. The game is so lackluster you wonder if Kevin McHale would trade a few draft picks for the rights.—**BERTZ**

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Game Experience May Change During Online Play

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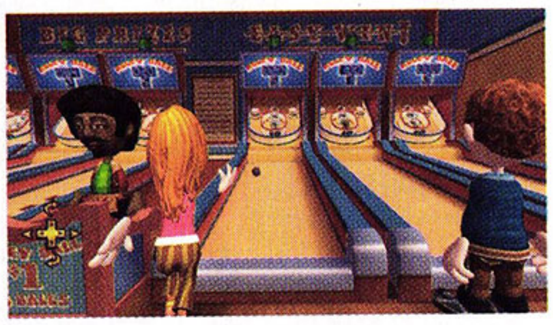
Wii QUICKIES

Wii

Carnival Games

BOTTOM LINE 5.5

> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** GLOBAL STAR > **DEVELOPER** CAT DADDY GAMES
> **RELEASE** AUGUST 27 > **ESRB** E



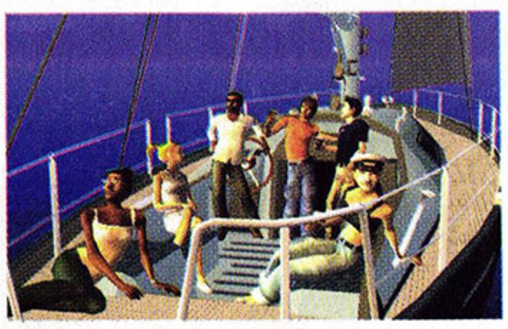
I'm a little disappointed, because I thought this was going to be a lot more fun. When I first saw Carnival Games, it looked like the kind of game that, if you got enough friends to crowd around your TV, it would prove to be a decent party-like distraction. Undoubtedly, there will be a small market of people who do just that, but I think they'll find that none of the 25-plus minigames are remotely as compelling as anything in Wii Sports. Popular carny pastimes like Milk Jugs, Dunk Tank, and Ballon Darts are all here, but their challenge ranges from basic kindergarten motor skill tests to challenges the Devil himself has stacked the deck against you. Usually it's the latter due to a physics system that is almost as believable as a Woody Woodpecker cartoon. Just like a real carnival, you'll feel cheated more that once playing these virtual simulations, but the real carny scam might be trying to sell this "discount" title for $40.—**BEN**

Wii

The Sims 2: Castaway

BOTTOM LINE 7.25

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER SIMULATION > **PUBLISHER** ELECTRONIC ARTS > **DEVELOPER** THE SIMS DIVISION
> **RELEASE** OCTOBER 22 > **ESRB** T



Castaway brings a touch of adventure and exploring to the Sims formula, clearly taking inspiration from TV's *Lost*. Your character winds up shipwrecked on a beach and must forage for food, make fire, and build shelter with the ultimate goal of crafting a ship to leave the island or creating a transistor to call for help. I had fun crafting shorts out of palm fronds and sailing rafts to new islands, but there is just way too much berry picking, monkey hugging, and clumsy fish spearing. Even though the Wii controls work extremely well, you'll spend most of the game mashing the Z button to harvest every stick, stone, and pineapple you see. Plus, the graphics are way nastier than any black smoke monster.—**BRYAN**

Wii

Victorious Boxers: Revolution

BOTTOM LINE 6.75

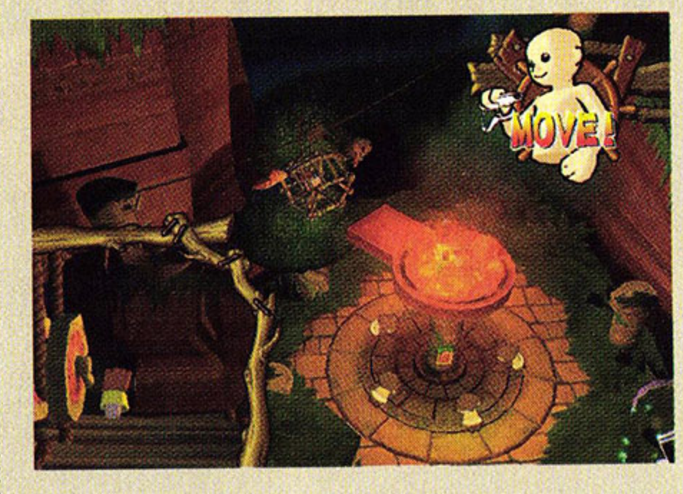
> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER SPORTS > **PUBLISHER** XSEED GAMES > **DEVELOPER** GRAND PRIX / CAVIA
> **RELEASE** SEPTEMBER 25 > **ESRB** T

Victorious Boxer's difficulty has some crazy mood swings. A particular fighter might have me on the ropes for several rounds before taking me out of the match altogether, but then in our rematch, I'll knock him out halfway through the first round. It's not like I've changed up my tactics much. Laying on the jabs then following through with a well-timed right hook or special attack usually does the trick. That said, the Wii motion controls fell pretty good after you warm up to them, and it helps that there are six different control schemes to pick from. Even though the plot has been trimmed down worse than a Harry Potter film, I actually got pulled into the Japanese manga-based story. Sure, the PSone-like crowds look terrible, but Wii Boxing fans finally have a meatier boxer to obsess about than Wii Sports.—**BEN**

Wii

Zack & Wiki: Quest For Barbaros' Treasure

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER PUZZLE > **PUBLISHER** CAPCOM > **DEVELOPER** CAPCOM > **RELEASE** OCTOBER 23 > **ESRB** E

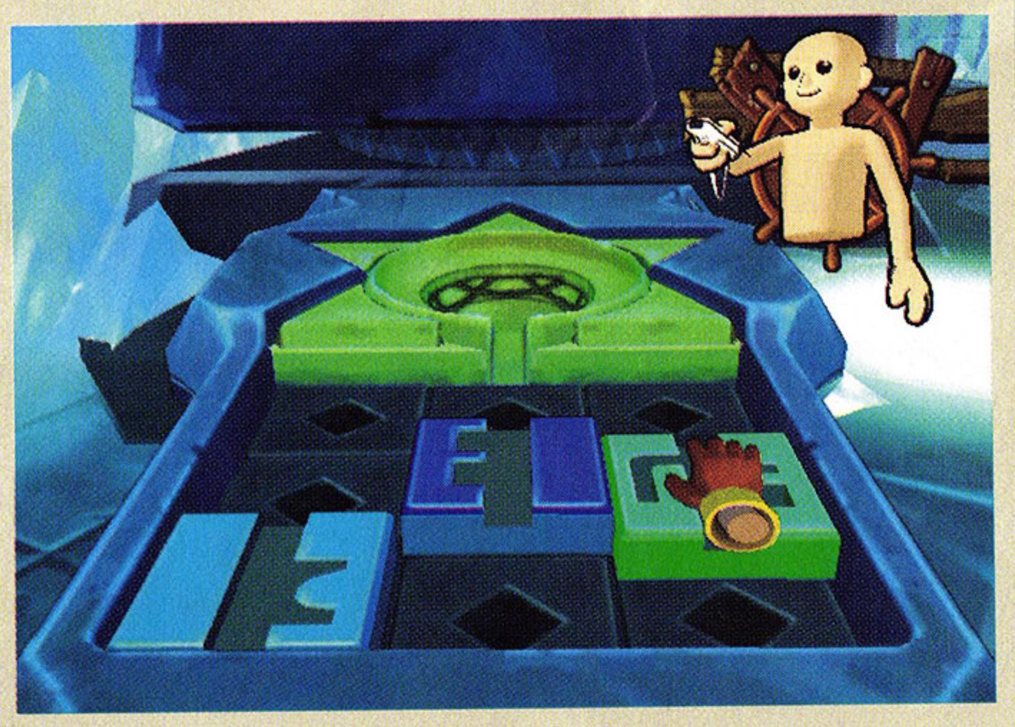


AHOY, PUZZLE NERDS!

The first 15 minutes of Zack & Wiki are going to send many 18 to 34-year-old male gamers running for the hills. This game is extremely cute – anime cute. Our chibi pirate hero, Zack, is on a quest to find untold riches with his flying golden monkey pal, Wiki. After plenty of wacky antics, the duo crash lands on an island and finds the floating head of Captain Barbaros. The head promises Zack a fancy ship and tons of gold if he'll collect the remaining 16 pieces of the old pirate's body. While the intro can be jarring, the characters do eventually become tolerable and maybe even a little bit charming.

Players will traverse jungles, ice caves, volcanoes, and a haunted house to seal the deal and collect loads of treasure along the way. An intuitive mouse-style point and click interface moves Zack around puzzle stages of increasing size and complexity. Shaking the remote briefly transforms Wiki into a ringing bell that will change certain enemies into useful tools (centipedes become saws, frogs turn into bombs, etc.). Once you click on interactive objects, the camera switches to first-person mode and allows you to do things like pull levers, twist keys, and hammer spikes. Most of these actions work without a hitch and really sell the interactivity, but some motions are hit or miss – I had particular trouble with fishing and music motions.

You'll be ranked on every stage based on how quickly you figured out the puzzles, how many hints you used, and how many lives you lost. Good scores will increase your pirate ranking, and cash rewards allow you to purchase the services of a treasure scout (there are hundreds of things to collect) or buy more lives and hints. The difficulty ramps up nicely, with early stages ranging from 10 to 20 minutes and later puzzles running over an hour. It's extremely satisfying to deconstruct each level piece by piece, and the hint system minimizes hair pulling. Plus, the later ship battles add a welcome dose of action to the generally slower-paced gameplay. In the Wii's expansive gutter of shoddy third-party ports and minigame garbage, Capcom is showing that it's possible to make something original and fun. I just hope that the presentation doesn't kill Zack & Wiki's chances.—**BRYAN**



BOTTOM LINE 8.25

> **Concept:** Hide serious puzzle challenges under a super cute veneer

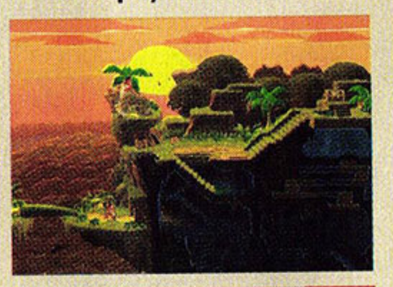
> **Graphics:** Crisp cel-shaded characters and imaginative environments definitely impress

> **Sound:** You'll want to strangle Wiki to silence his high-pitched baby voice

> **Playability:** Puzzles utilize a wide variety of motion controls, some of which work way better than others

> **Entertainment:** If you can get past the wacky vibe, these innovative puzzles will fry your mind

> **Replay Value:** Moderate



Second Opinion 7.75

If you love that slightly odd, classically Japanese sense of humor that Capcom brought to such titles as The Misadventures of Tron Bonne, I have a feeling that Zack & Wiki is going to be right up your alley. It's certainly charming, and its Wii remote controlled action/puzzle gameplay is nothing if not unique. At its best, it gives you a mix of intriguing puzzles and novel motion-based minigames that's like nothing else out there. However, this game is frustrating as often as it's fun, and at times the Wii control features seem to be doing little more than making the gameplay sloppier and less exact than it should be. It's an interesting concept that could have used a bit more polish.—**MATT**

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(s07)

XBOX 360

Halo 3

> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 16-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE)
> **PUBLISHER** MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS > **DEVELOPER** BUNGIE
> **RELEASE** SEPTEMBER 25 > **ESRB** M

GAME INFORMER GAME OF THE MONTH

COMING FULL CIRCLE

Almost two years after the Xbox 360's release, Microsoft's marquee franchise finally comes home. With a satisfying campaign closure to the series' epic story arc, unprecedented multiplayer options, an innovative video recording feature, and heretofore unseen console mod tools, Halo 3 lives up to every bit of its ever-expanding reputation. However, a few small disappointments chip away at the game's shot at perfection.

Every enemy type from the first two Halo games returns here smarter than ever, especially on Legendary difficulty. Since Elites are now your friends (the Arbiter and two generic Elites fill out a four-player co-op team), you won't be fighting this classic enemy. Brutes do take on some Elite traits, like cloaking and their own answer to the Plasma Sword – a Gravity Hammer. However, an advanced form of a certain enemy group near the end proves to be the most challenging adversary.

Almost all of the old weapons are back (assault rifle ftw!) in addition to more new guns than ever. I especially like the detachable turrets, even if they do slow you down a little. A new power-up slot spices up the traditional melee, guns, and grenades mix. The Mongoose and Chopper complement previous Halo vehicles well, but the best addition is a powerful UNSC answer to the Banshee.

Halo 3's multiplayer has really outdone itself this time. Countless modes and variants always keep the 11 maps fresh. In addition to standard modes like capture the flag, deathmatch, and king of the hill, several new creative modes abound – an especially cool one makes 25 percent of players "zombies" with plasma swords who must "infect" the remaining players.

The Forge is basically "modding lite" and makes the already expansive multiplayer even more unlimited. At any time during these unranked matches players can turn into a Monitor and add, move, or remove any object in the game. This can be a collaborative creation process, or you can have just one person with editing capabilities serve as a multiplayer DM of sorts. Think of what can happen during a heated battle when the editor decides to drop a Scorpion tank right in the middle of the fray.

Four-player co-op is fun as hell. Playing on Legendary is definitely a must, but even this extreme single-player challenge is severely watered down when you introduce other players. There's also an unlockable campaign scoring system based on kills, headshots, and difficulty setting that can be enacted in single player and co-op. Online leaderboards provide a great incentive to come back to the campaign again and again like never before.

■ Who knows what kind of craziness players will craft in The Forge

I also really dug the new Theater feature. It basically auto saves your last 25 campaign levels or multiplayer matches and allows you to watch them from any player perspective or from a floating camera, edit clips, take screens, and send them through Xbox Live. After playing around with this you'll want it in every game.

However, Halo 3 does have a few small problems that are primarily located in the campaign. First off, full-on boss battles are noticeably absent. Sure, you'll fight a few massive enemies, but none of them really feel like a true boss. And the last major fight is more like a quick interactive cutscene than a knock-down, drag-out fight. This is especially disappointing because there is one obvious candidate Bungie could have used and didn't. Also, there is plenty of trudging back and forth through the same environments in addition to the whole "Okay, we deactivated this tower. Now let's take care of the next one with the exact same layout." There are a few other nitpicky issues I have, but these are all relatively minor when you look at the big picture.

Overall, Bungie has crafted another masterpiece that serves as a fitting end to the trilogy (no big cliffhanger here). Of course, not every mystery of the Halo universe is answered, but it does look like the next game is moving in a very interesting direction. Until next time, Chief!—**BRYAN**

BOTTOM LINE 9.75

> **Concept:** Somehow live up to the hype of Halo in the series' first next-gen outing

> **Graphics:** Vehicles, enemies, and most environments look fantastic, but human faces and some textures are just plain embarrassing

> **Sound:** There's nothing like hearing Halo's signature "da-da-da-duuum" as you rush into a squad of brutes

> **Playability:** Some of the tightest console FPS controls in the biz

> **Entertainment:** Deep feature set will keep multiplayer and campaign fans alike playing well into 2008 and beyond

> **Replay Value:** High

Second Opinion 9.75

I'm 1,500 miles from my own bed, and tired from jetlag and the marathon gaming sessions that have kept me up past 2 a.m. the last couple days. I'm fueled by Mountain Dew, my eyes are bloodshot, and I'm beginning to get a headache. And I don't care. Because the only thing I can think about is that I have to wait two whole weeks before I can get my hands on this game again. Halo 3's multiplayer hits a new benchmark. It's hard to feel that the game hasn't lived up to the hype with its arsenal of new weapons, well-balanced environments, and sea of customizable options. Even so, Halo 3 offers up so many other rich experiences that it's easy to forget about deathmatch and CTF while you're altering a level in the new Forge or editing your game videos. About the only knock I can give this game is that the single player hasn't evolved much since the series' inception, and you'll occasionally get lost running the wrong way in one of the repeated environments. Bungie's storytelling hasn't changed much either, so you'll probably find yourself in one of two camps either devotedly absorbed by Halo 3's plot or wondering why other people are so devotedly absorbed by Halo 3's plot. But these complaints are pretty nitpicky, because Halo 3 is so good they could probably charge people a $130 and it would still sell.—**BEN**

■ You can issue commands to your teammates, but you won't be able to take control of them

XBOX 360

Mass Effect

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION/RPG > **PUBLISHER** MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS
> **DEVELOPER** BIOWARE > **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 20 > **ESRB** M

THE ADVENTURE OF A LIFETIME AWAITS

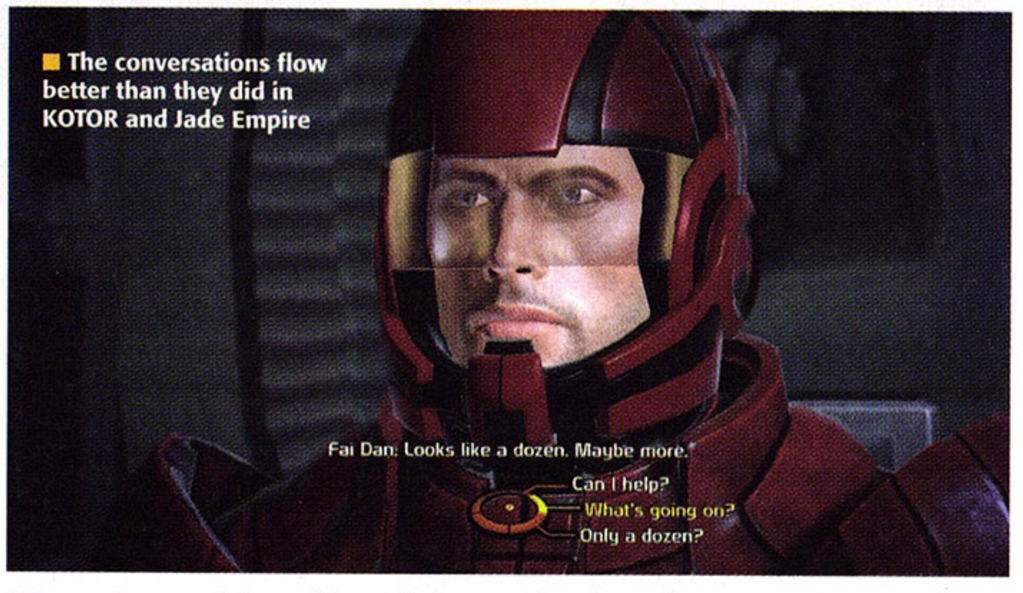
Not since Star Wars made its theatrical debut in 1977 has there been a universe so full of wonder and awe. Mass Effect is a science fiction tale so galvanizing it makes you question the very existence of humanity, how moral choices can affect a person, and whether or not there's a holy entity watching over us. Just like that galaxy far, far away, this game's accomplishments are as far reaching as they are revolutionary. It's an amazing work of fiction, a visual work of art, and a property that is so fully realized and so rich in its backstory that its content could fill countless games, books, and movies.

This is the next big franchise for science fiction junkies to latch onto, and a huge step forward for video games. It rings in a new age of interactive storytelling, and delivers an experience that you'll want to live again and again just to see how different decisions can alter the path ahead. The exceptional detail in the story makes the relationships feel real – you care about your crew, and you really feel like you have a voice that resonates throughout the galaxy. As the plot progresses, and a war to end all wars looms dangerously close, the believability of the content makes the decisions you are forced to make all the more difficult. Never before have I spent so much time thinking deeply about the choices I have to make, and the ramifications they will have on future events. One command, which may seem like the right course of action at the time, can potentially lead to a political disaster, the death of a beloved crewmate, genocide, or perhaps even the destruction of the entire galaxy.

Mass Effect shares a similar design to Bioware's previous work on Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic and Jade Empire. However, by comparison, both of these remarkable games now seem like test runs. The developers at Bioware have grown mightily as storytellers and have honed this craft to make every second of the content seem important. Even the side missions, which have players traveling across the stars to different solar systems, planets, and moons, is either relevant to the conflict at hand or used to help the player better understand the universe and how it came to be. You feel like you are on a mission of the greatest importance, and everything you do affects the cause. Part of what makes the story so inviting is how well acted it is, and how cinematic just an ordinary conversation can be. Characters convey realistic emotions, their lip-syncing is perfect to the point that they don't seem like CG creations, and they all have little quirks that you attribute to being alive.

■ You can create your own male or female lead. The stories for each offer different content, such as love interests

■ You can veer off of the beaten path to explore the universe. You may discover long lost relics, and if you choose, you can study scientific data for each of the planets



■ The conversations flow better than they did in KOTOR and Jade Empire

Now, you've probably noticed I haven't talked much about the gameplay. Mass Effect's run-and-gun warfare is certainly ambitious, and it has the potential to be incredibly powerful. However, most of the skirmishes, which begin and end in the blink of an eye, run into balancing issues, problematic AI, and a difficulty in comprehending what is transpiring. Tapping into the Force-like biotic powers can lead to enemies spinning through the air in slow motion and robots turning on their own kind. But as you look on in joyous disbelief, out of the corner of your eye, you may see one of your teammates blindly firing at a wall two feet in front of him. Or perhaps a foe, who you didn't even know existed, drain your shields from a location off your radar.

The deep character and weapon customization can create some lethal and amusing blends, but after a few hours, you'll have seen it all. The gameplay is certainly fun, and it controls admirably, but it doesn't live up to the large stage the story sets or the standards you've come to expect from action games and RPGs.

You'll want more from it, but by no means does it hold the experience back, nor does it make you wish you were playing something else. In fact, I think you'll agree that Mass Effect is one of video games' greatest treasures. It's an adventure that is so captivating that you'll be counting the days for the sequel. It takes interactive storytelling to new heights, and brings the player closer to content than ever before. It's easily one of the year's best titles, and one of the most impressive games to date.—**REINER**

BOTTOM LINE 9.75

> **Concept:** One of the greatest science fiction stories ever told, and a new benchmark for video game storytelling

> **Graphics:** Every second of gameplay offers the visual quality you have come to expect from Final Fantasy cutscenes

> **Sound:** One of the most memorable and unique soundtracks in gaming. It's inspired by '80s sci-fi, yet sounds like nothing you've heard before. The game also features an amazing ensemble of voice actors

> **Playability:** Functional and fun, but something always seems to be amiss with the AI and balancing

> **Entertainment:** An expansive quest (18 to 30 hours) that toys with your emotions, and keeps you engaged

> **Replay Value:** High

Second Opinion 9.75

It's a common RPG phenomenon to find yourself acting the tough guy, carefree of the consequences. I've experienced it dozens if not hundreds of times before, but Mass Effect stopped me dead in my tracks. I'd just chastised one of my companions for doing something stupid, then she looked back up at me with big round eyes full of shame, and I felt an emotion that a game's never drawn out of me before: guilt. There is something special about the conversations in Mass Effect. They are a little less like cycling through a dialogue tree and a little more like actually talking to a person. Bioware's epic also has the richly detailed environments of Gears of War, the deep exploration of Oblivion, and a fictional universe almost as compelling as Star Wars. It sounds like the perfect game. And it comes damn near close. The one thing that might turn a few people off is the combat, which has a lot of little nuances that take a while to get used to. When they all come together the action is breathtaking. Problem is, certain powers/weapon combos allow you to steamroll through waves of enemies, making the game feel easy until the dice rolls turn against you and you find yourself dead within seconds. I want to call this a balancing issue, and I suggest you save often since the auto save isn't great. Still, Mass Effect could very well represent the future of entertainment, and its few flaws shouldn't stop anyone from enjoying that experience.—**BEN**

SHOPPING SPREE

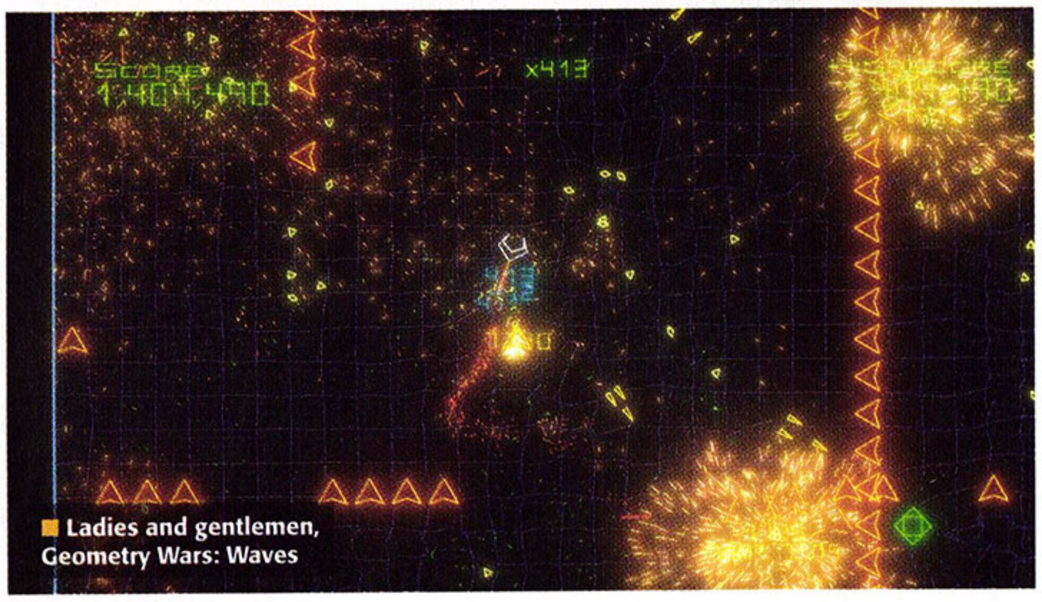
New to PGR 4 is the PGR Shop. Instead of buying cars with credits, you buy car packs, different races, and odds and sods with kudos. The car packs are well-timed with where you should be in terms of skill and your career progression. Here's a quick list of just some of the items in the store.

- Bulldog Race Mode (30,000 Kudos): Unlock this multiplayer mode
- 3D Glasses Cheat (55,000): Enables 3D photo filter for Photo Mode
- Street Bikes (100,00): Three bikes from Triumph, Yamaha, and MV Agusta
- Ultimate Ferrari (185,000): Four Ferraris, including the F50 GT
- Gamer Picture Pack (1 million): The gamer with "more Kudos than sense" gets an exclusive gamer picture

XBOX 360

Project Gotham Racing 4

> STYLE 1 OR 2-PLAYER RACING (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE OR SYSTEM LINK) **> PUBLISHER** MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS **> DEVELOPER** BIZARRE CREATIONS **> RELEASE** OCTOBER 2 **> ESRB** E



Ladies and gentlemen, Geometry Wars: Waves

BOTTOM LINE 8.75

> Concept: Combine good racing with a great career mode. Why is this so hard in the racing genre?

> Graphics: The rain effects on your car show up in replays or photo mode more than while you're racing

> Sound: The soundtrack is a cool smorgasbord of genres and known artists, including Mozart, My Chemical Romance, Lily Allen, Lupe Fiasco, and more

> Playability: The bikes are okay, but certainly not my preferred method of racing

> Entertainment: This semi-simulation based racer does it right in almost all areas

> Replay Value: Moderately High

PROJECT: SUCCESS

I think the racing genre's lost sight of itself a little in the past few years. While I'm glad that, now more than ever, we have a wider range of titles available to us from super-sims to car-on-fire nitro-burners, those of us looking for something that needs neither a gear ratio calculator or a fire suit – and who just want some fun, honest racing – have been ill supplied. Thankfully, Project Gotham Racing 4 solves this by offering the best all-around racing experience in recent memory.

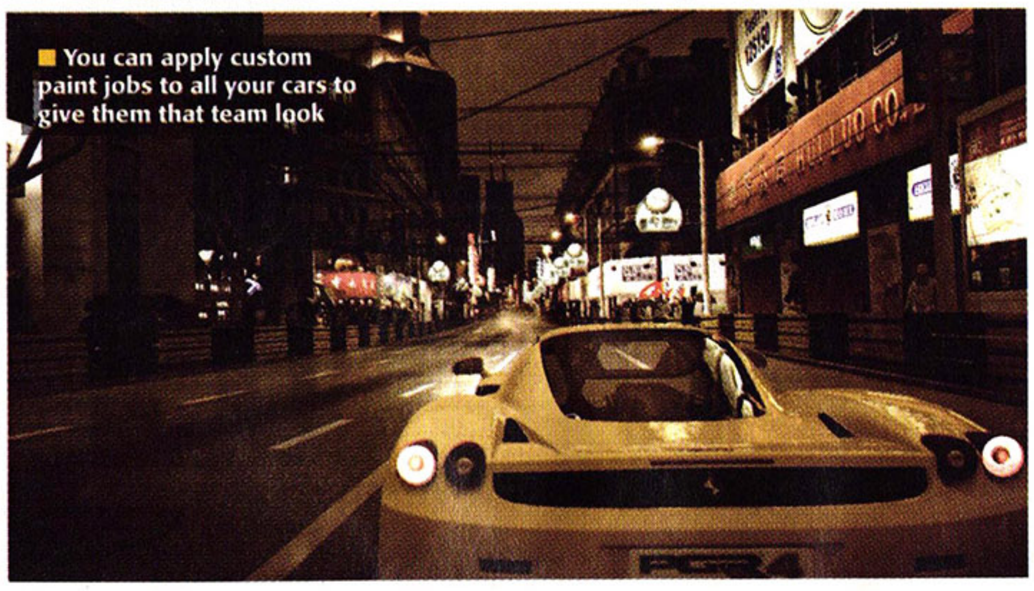
A big part of what makes racing so fun in PGR 4 is the course layouts. Apart from the spectacular cityscapes and well-done situational weather (which even takes course elevation into account), the game throws a lot at you: changing track widths, tight city chicanes, and a good amount of variety. The tracks don't race themselves, though, and PGR 4 has enough sim-racing blood in it to make you change your racing styles on these challenging courses to account for the capabilities of your different cars. Grease monkeys will be disappointed that you can't upgrade or tinker with your car, but the game was balanced enough that I never thought I was losing races based on anything other than my skill – or lack thereof.

Although the on-track racing is similar to the last PGR in feel, developer Bizarre Creations has smartly restructured its previously dull career mode. Not only is your progress broken into four categories (from Amateur to Master), but you must work your way up the leaderboard based on the points you accrue from events on your race calendar. This leaderboard isn't static, either, as you're constantly competing with others on the track also making their way to the top. It's a small detail, but it helps give the game personality and continually spurs you on, both on the track and off. As much as I was invested in my career, the game's promise of delivering an emotional component to racing via fans and teams is basically non-existent. Augmenting the leaderboard system is the events calendar. While it's linear, I like it and the way it's tied to the PGR shop (see above), and it's way better than PGR 3's staid progression system.

I'd love to see a car damage system of some kind implemented, larger field sizes, and an online component that is more than adequate (In contrast, Forza 2's car auction system is a glimpse into the future), but Project Gotham Racing 4 has blown its own doors off and finally grown from being a bite-sized, almost niche racer into a full-fledged experience that all racing fanatics should enjoy.—**KATO**

Second Opinion 9.25

I've always enjoyed the PGR series, but this year's edition is a thing of beauty. It's as if all the stars aligned in the series to bring us this one shining moment. The revamped Gotham Career mode follows a calendar format, but the thing that makes it work is that it lets you just race. Lose a race? No big deal, you aren't going to win them all; move onto the next track, earn more kudos, and get better at driving as there is always next year. Which is what I love about this game – it really just lets racing be fun. The cars follow this same mantra; they feel realistic to a degree, but they also feel fast and you can throw them into a corner without too much worrying, which is the thing that ultimately wears me down in racing "simulators." This is the best racing game I've played this year, hands down.—**ANDY**



You can apply custom paint jobs to all your cars to give them that team look

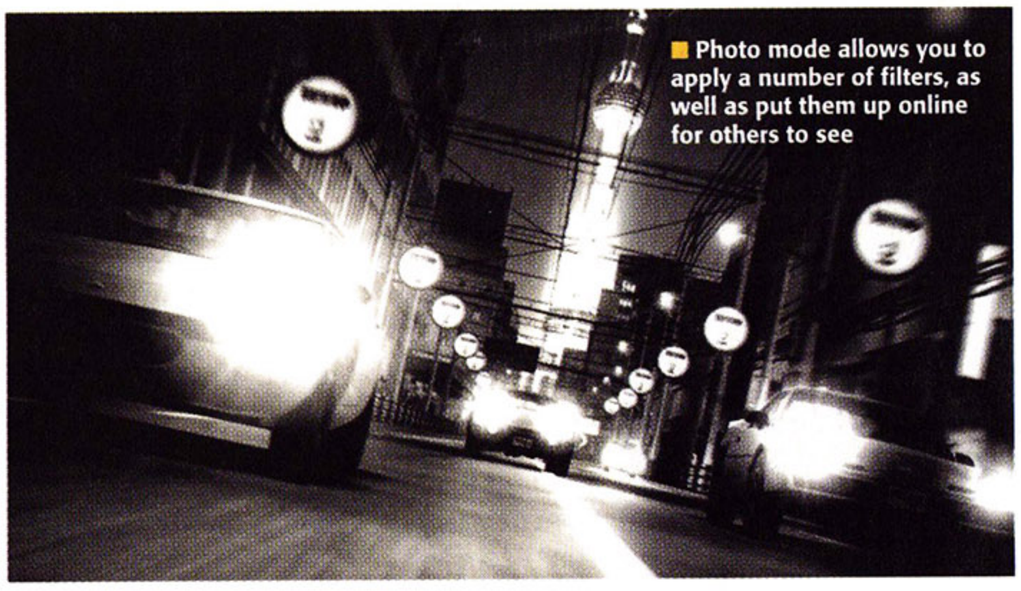


Photo mode allows you to apply a number of filters, as well as put them up online for others to see

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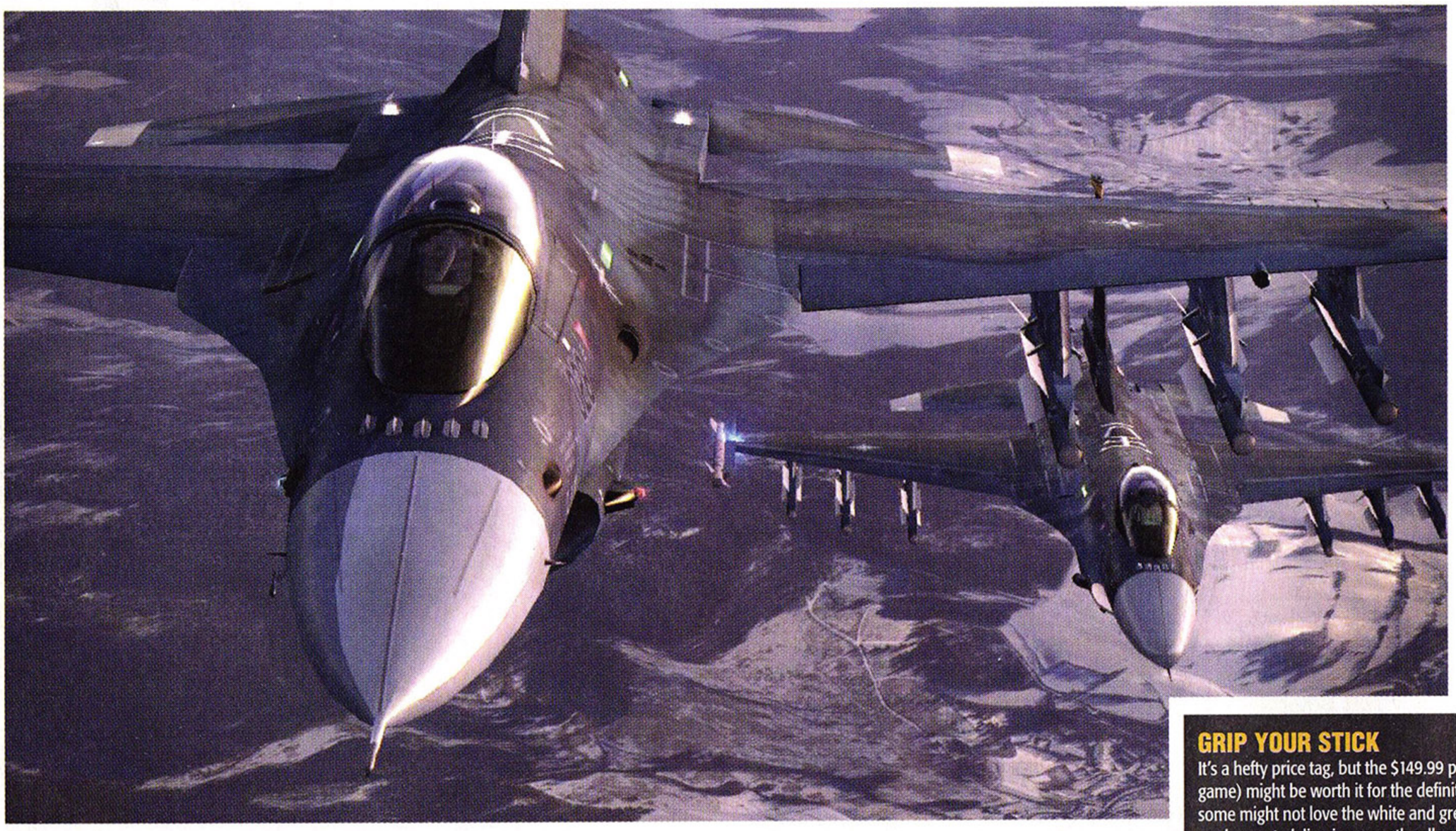
Games for Windows



XBOX 360

Ace Combat 6: Fires of Liberation

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 16-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE) **> PUBLISHER** NAMCO BANDAI **> DEVELOPER** NAMCO BANDAI **> RELEASE** OCTOBER 23 **> ESRB** T

BEYOND PHOTOREALISM

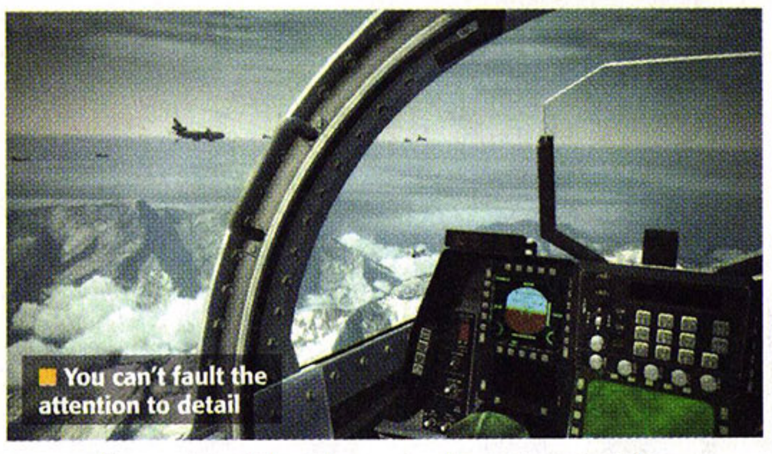
Even as we speak, a number of games are butting up against an interesting graphical ceiling – one where objects onscreen appear basically identical to their real-life counterparts. At this point, there arises an interesting challenge when adding new, non-realistic elements into the framework. For instance, how do you make a giant flying manta ray-shaped aircraft carrier believable beside an eerily realistic version of the new F-22 jet?

That's exactly the challenge facing the wild flight antics of Ace Combat. This entry in the series, more than ever before, reveals the skill with which the developers are blending realistic visuals and gameplay tone with fantasy and fun playability. Spinning wildly through the skies above a meticulously crafted city or river valley, firing off dozens of missiles that miraculously manage to fit into your jet, turning at speeds and angles that would tear the most powerful war plane in two, your incredulity will be completely submerged beneath the fun of it all. It's this game's greatest success.

Missions are a satisfactory mix of air-to-air dogfights, bombing runs, and a few ridiculous assaults on implausibly large war machines. As always, a progression of unlockable rides and weapons delivers new thrills pretty steadily. In terms of the flow of gameplay, you're a much more powerful force of destruction in the game world than in previous installments. Part of that comes from the wide availability of incredibly powerful multi-target missile systems, which often have you dropping half a dozen foes with one well-placed shot. Even more devastating are the new allied support attacks. Complete enough of your objectives and your battlefield allies will free up from their initial tasks and lend aid at your request on some new sequence of targets. That array of several dozen anti-air guns along the harbor is a lot less imposing when you can call in a massive strike from your nearby tank division.

■ Like all the Ace Combat games, there's a good bit of tech-driven fantasy floating amid the ultra-realistic backgrounds

The story, told largely through some impressively directed CG cutscenes, is enjoyable on its own merits. I was a little disappointed that the main dramatic arc of the plot revolved around lives of the characters on the ground, while the drama in the air remains pretty scarce. It all ties together in the end, resulting in a well-told story about the horrors of war, even if the conclusions reached seem a little naïve.



■ You can't fault the attention to detail

Undoubtedly, the coolest addition to the formula in Ace Combat 6 is the online multiplayer. Large-scale dogfights are going to be a blast once the game releases, and a number of modes maintain variety, including a few cooperative missions and a cool siege mode where one team defends a bunch of ground targets while the attackers attempt to destroy them. I'm not sure why the game doesn't include a cooperative campaign option – can I voice my request for inclusion of that on console iteration number seven?

I'm still not totally convinced I would recommend this Ace Combat or any of the other excellent series entries to absolutely everyone – a certain fascination with flying and an undisguised lust for military aircraft are prerequisites. But if Fires of Liberation doesn't catch your eye, I'm not sure if any game of this ilk ever will.—**MILLER**

BOTTOM LINE 8.75

> Concept: Fly through drop-dead gorgeous worlds as a jet pilot in a game where the action makes it feel like a simulation, even though the reality is arcadey to the extreme

> Graphics: Positively phenomenal detail on everything from the planes to the individual trees you'll be skimming by – this is a visual tour de force

> Sound: A strong, but often repetitive, score is accompanied by strong but often repetitive voicework

> Playability: Given the flexibility of the flight and combat options, the controls are remarkably fluid and friendly. However, beginners will still need an hour or two to ramp up to speed

> Entertainment: Perhaps a tad easier than some of the games in the series, but arguably the best overall package we've seen from this franchise

> Replay Value: Moderate

GRIP YOUR STICK

It's a hefty price tag, but the $149.99 point of entry (including the game) might be worth it for the definitive 360 flight experience. While some might not love the white and green color scheme, the stick itself works great, delivering smooth rolls and vibrating shakes from those nearby missile strikes. Sure, the game might be a little harder this way, but it's hard to argue with the fun of seeing your afterburners light up onscreen as you slowly edge the throttle forward. Not interested? Don't worry; you can buy the game sans flight stick at the expected $59.99 price.

Second Opinion 8.75

Loud, large, and a welcome kick in the teeth, Ace Combat 6 takes players on a testosterone-fueled flight. Every mission unfolds through a continuous string of water cooler moments. You'll battle heavily armed flying fortresses; rocket through caves at mach 5; and even come face to face with a weapon that will turn the sky to fire. The graceful gameplay certainly empowers you with the feeling of ownership over the skies, but it's the wildly imaginative missions that really make this game soar. The skirmishes are much larger than in previous offerings, which leads to simple, yet highly rewarding strategic warfare. If your focus is on the bogeys in the sky, you have the ability to order ground troops to attack other targets for you. Ace Combat 6 has the entire package. Its cinematic narrative is just as gripping as its gameplay, and its online component is just as polished as its campaign. Don't discredit it as just a flight game, this is one of video games' most exciting options.—**REINER**

XBOX 360

FlatOut Ultimate Carnage

> STYLE 1 TO 8-PLAYER RACING (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE) **> PUBLISHER** EMPIRE INTERACTIVE
> DEVELOPER BUGBEAR ENTERTAINMENT **> RELEASE** OCTOBER 2 **> ESRB** T

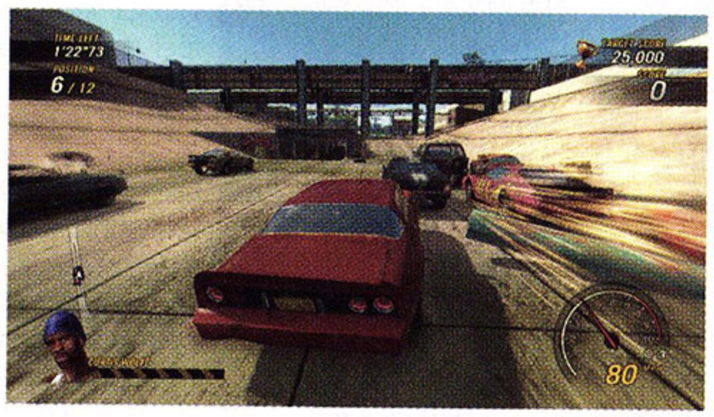
OUT OF GAS?

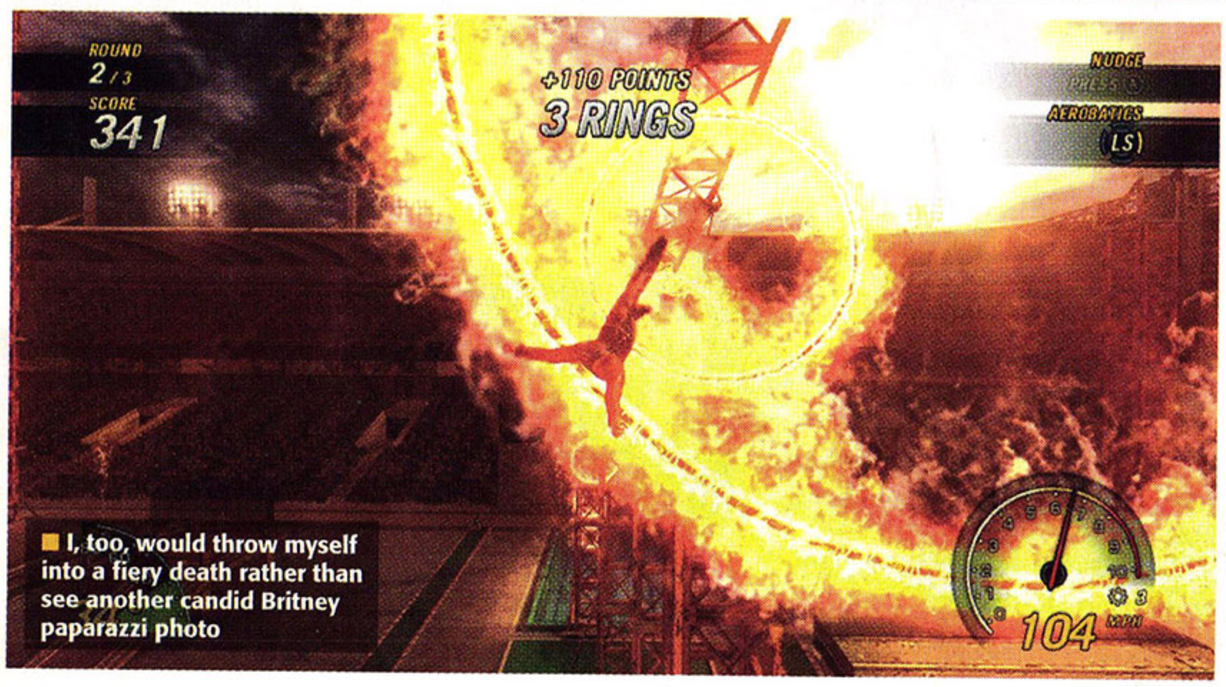
This may be a nearly identical copy of FlatOut 2, which came out on the original Xbox just over a year ago, but it's clear that Ultimate Carnage has benefited from being put out on the 360. While it's not like you're tearing up Forza 2-quality looking rides, the step up to the next generation makes all the flying debris and mayhem pretty alluring.

A good synopsis of what this title is all about is the new Carnage mode, which unlike the career tier structure of FlatOut mode, is more bite-sized and not as arduous. Carnage mode gives you a selection of all kinds of different races, stunt games (see photo below), demolition derbies, and other wreck-filled challenges.

While some races ask you to finish high, others simply want you to mess stuff up. The game excels at those moments when the two objectives merge and all hell brakes loose, with competitors wrecking in front of you, environmental debris everywhere, and suddenly a huge explosion fills the screen. The only problem I had is that, as a racer, I prefer the sense of speed and car physics of the Burnout series, and I was disappointed in the seeming inconsistency regarding which objects in the environment you could or couldn't bowl over – I swear it changed from lap to lap. Not only that, but even shortcut jumps could be risky because you might unexpectedly biff the landing.

I wouldn't suggest buying this game if you've already got FO 2, but it's a great intro to the series for everybody else.—**KATO**





■ I, too, would throw myself into a fiery death rather than see another candid Britney paparazzi photo

BOTTOM LINE 7.5

> Concept: An almost exact replica and repackage of the Xbox's FlatOut 2

> Graphics: Upgraded. You'll enjoy the full-screen flame effects, for sure

> Sound: Not notable in any way, shape, or form. Where's the Supergrass? Just kidding

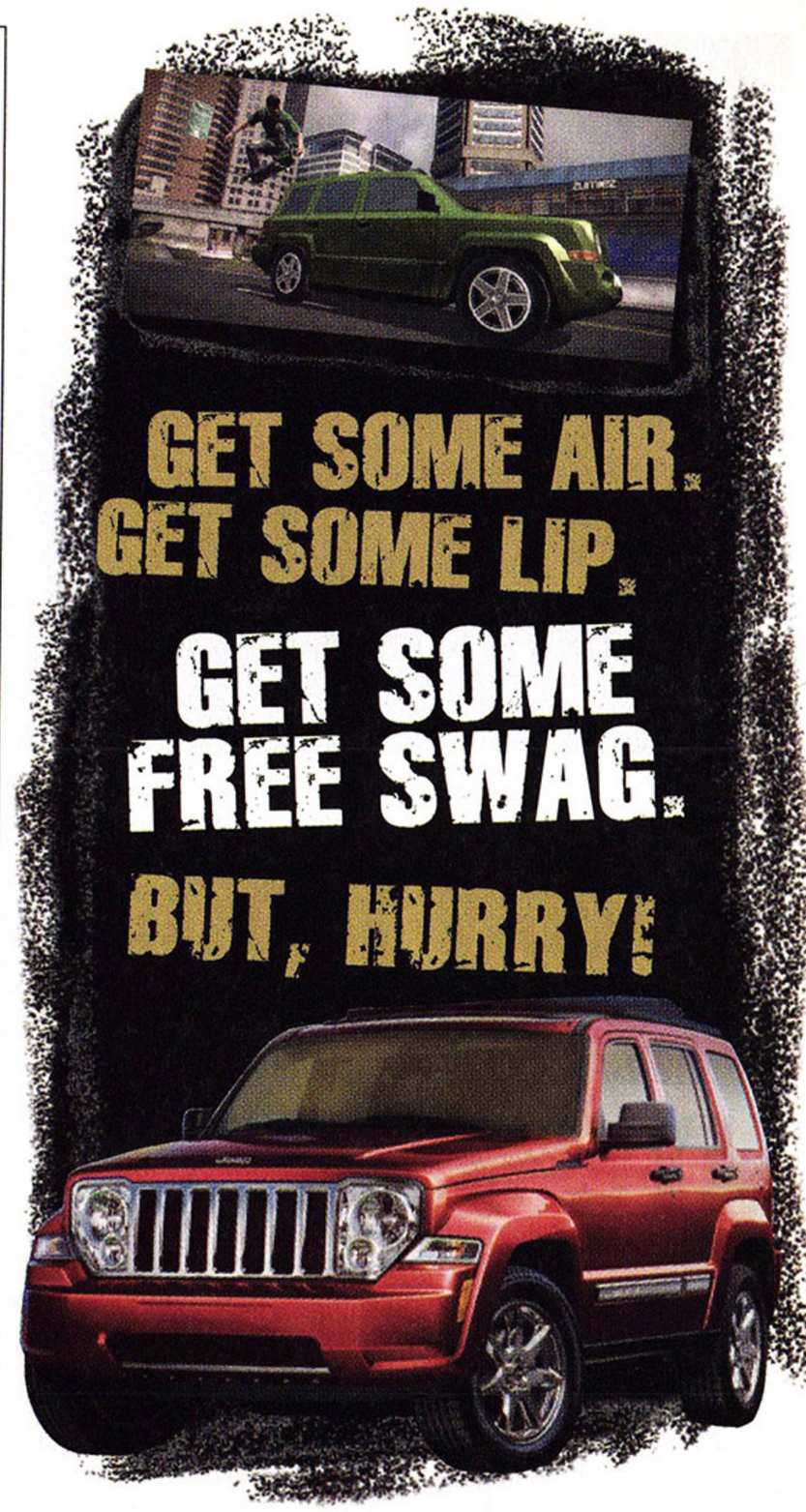
> Playability: The flying environmental objects are both a blessing and a curse

> Entertainment: Like your average action flick, the big bangs are a little less impressive the second time around

> Replay Value: Moderately High

Second Opinion 8.5

With school buses plowing through buildings and human beings being used as bowling balls, FlatOut offers up a tasty blend of wanton destruction and unimaginable hilarity. Every race is a showcase of glorious environmental destruction and hostile AI. Great attention has been paid to the track designs. If you're not bumping and grinding down a narrow straightaway, then you're probably soaring through the air like Superman toward a building. As exciting as the racing portion is, FlatOut also delivers large thrills within its destruction derbies, timed challenges, and of course, its unique and highly humorous events centered around ejecting the driver from the car. This series has always had a nice sleeper hit quality to it, but with the gameplay coming together so nicely in this installment, it is now deserving of the spotlight. If you enjoy the Burnout games, this off-the-wall racer will most definitely satisfy your hankering for vehicular mayhem.—**REINER**



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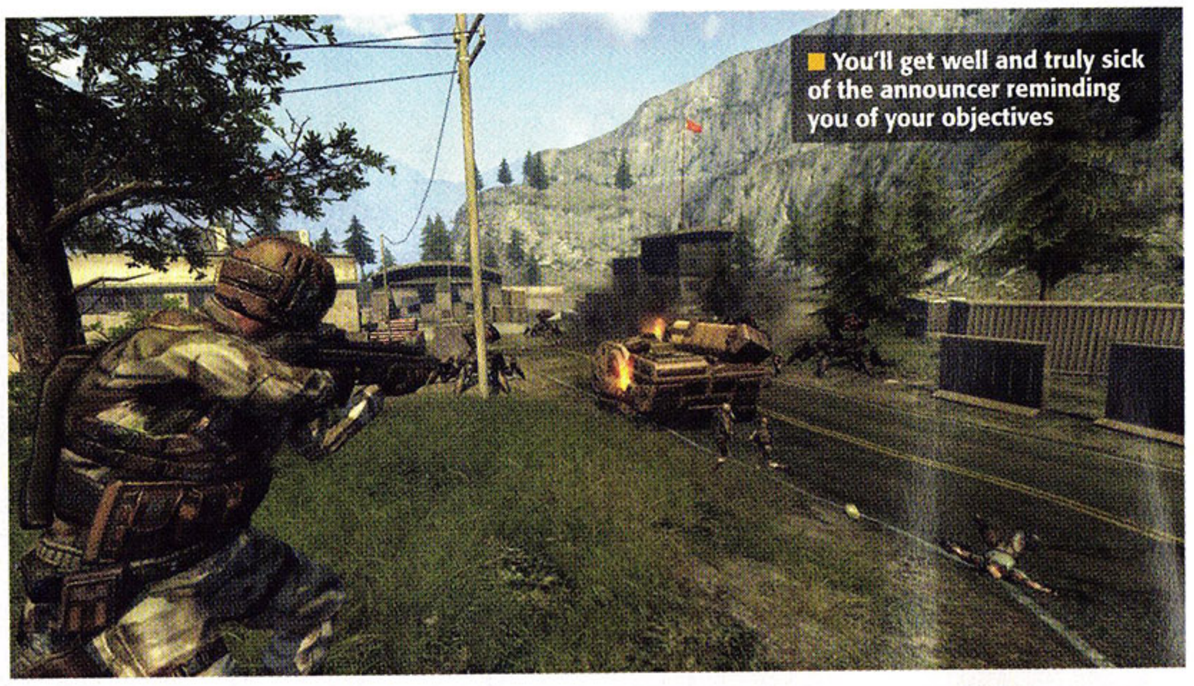
Using vehicles for cover works wonders to prolong infantry life expectancy



You'll get well and truly sick of the announcer reminding you of your objectives

PC

Enemy Territories: Quake Wars

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 24-PLAYER VIA INTERNET OR LAN) **> PUBLISHER** ACTIVISION **> DEVELOPER** SPLASH DAMAGE/ID SOFTWARE **> RELEASE** OCTOBER 2 **> ESRB** T

THE BATTLEFIELD OF THE FUTURE

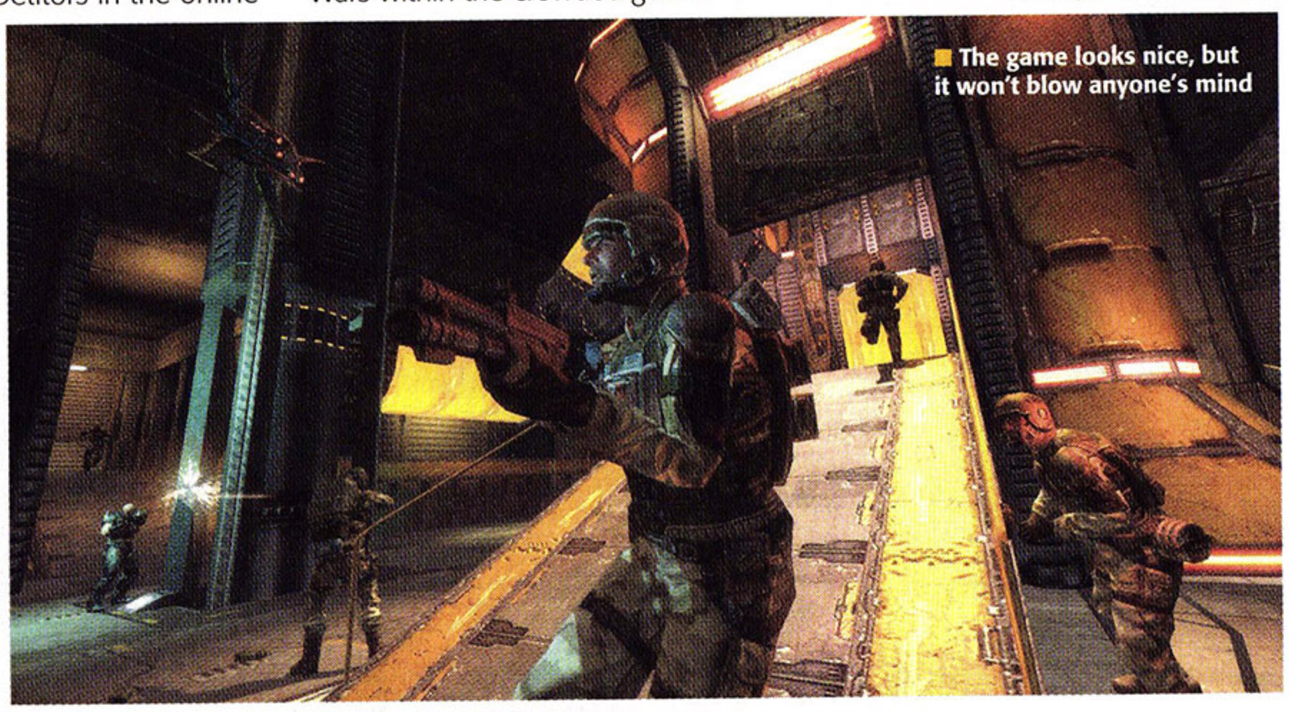
Developer Splash Damage got its foot in the door with Wolfenstein: Enemy Territory, a free spinoff of Return To Castle Wolfenstein's multiplayer that featured diverse classes and attack/defend gameplay similar to Unreal Tournament's Assault mode. Quake Wars is more or less a direct sequel to that title, with players choosing classes and duking it out over sets of linear objectives. The formula has evolved quite a bit here, with deployable devices and a whole mess of vehicles at the player's disposal. And, like Wolf: ET before it, Quake Wars punishes newbies with a steep learning curve as much as it rewards veterans with deep and nuanced gameplay.

Much more so than its competitors in the online FPS space, Quake Wars emphasizes teamwork. The gameplay is asymmetric; humans and Strogg have slightly different abilities and vehicles, and each round has one team trying to achieve its objectives while the other tries to stop them. Standard FPS skills will serve you well, but working together effectively with the other classes results in a synergistic death machine that utterly dominates unorganized squads. Each of the classes is very powerful in its own right when used well, but achieving their full potential requires the support of teammates and their varied skills. While it's tough to learn the many relationships between the skill sets, using them to your advantage in a well-oiled team is one of the most rewarding and enjoyable online experiences available.

The biggest curveball that Quake Wars throws at the genre is the introduction of deployables. Each class can summon one or more emplacements that can redefine the battlefield, from antipersonnel turrets to artillery pieces. Understanding how these relate to each objective, each other, and the different classes and vehicles is key. This additional layer of strategy works well and helps define Quake Wars within the crowded genre.

As in any competitive multiplayer game, balance is of prime importance here. Happily, Quake Wars never feels unfair for long. Like a good fighting game, layers of strategy are revealed as you learn to counter what seem like "cheap" tactics at the time. In a strategic game such as this, this means life or death for the entertainment value – and Splash Damage has definitively nailed this aspect of the game. Weapons, classes, vehicles, and deployables all feel relatively equal in power, and the circle of counters (machine guns beat infantry, handheld rocket launchers beat vehicles, etc) is well defined and intuitive.

The missteps that Quake Wars makes are mostly minor, but worth mentioning. Lack of integrated voicechat is asinine with the emphasis on teamwork. No matchmaking means finding a good server to play on can be a bear, and the run-and-gun gameplay sometimes feels too fast and "spammy" for the strategic metagame. Still, the game executes its ideas well and has no glaring flaws. Whether you prefer this, Battlefield, or some other title will come down more to personal preference regarding gameplay style rather than an issue of quality one way or the other.—**ADAM**



The game looks nice, but it won't blow anyone's mind

It's not shown here, but tags over friendlies' heads help cut down on teamkilling

Protip: Sniper rifles do jack all against vehicles, ya newb

BOTTOM LINE 8.5

> Concept: Enemy Territories, Quake-style. In other words, class-based, objective-driven multiplayer FPS with Strogg

> Graphics: This certainly looks nice, but it's no revelation in PC graphics

> Sound: Terribly voice-acted short messages are no replacement for integrated voicechat

> Playability: Vehicles control fine, but seriously – not having voicechat in this kind of game is beyond lame

> Entertainment: Getting over the learning curve is worth it if you dig a more strategic online FPS experience

> Replay Value: High

Second Opinion 8.5

Fraggers starving for a new multiplayer fix can finally take the safeties off their guns. Enemy Territory is back, and this time it's bringing the Strogg. Quake Wars melds together the objective-based strategy of Wolfenstein: ET with the frantic action of Unreal Tournament and the sophisticated ranking and achievement system of Battlefield 2 to create a fast paced, well-rounded fragfest. The dynamic frontline keeps the action focused, and the two warring factions' weapon arsenals and class systems are different enough to make playing on each side a rewarding experience. The only major weaknesses in QW are the maps themselves. Many feel eerily similar to one another in structure and they all place the same emphasis on armor and infantry rather than mixing up the battle styles. I would have also loved an embedded chat system similar to BF 2 and persistent, unlockable weapon upgrades, but these are minor cons to an otherwise solid shooter.—**BERTZ**

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Medieval II: Total War Kingdoms

> **STYLE** 1-2 PLAYER STRATEGY (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA ONLINE) > **PUBLISHER** SEGA
> **DEVELOPER** THE CREATIVE ASSEMBLY
> **RELEASE** AUGUST 28 > **ESRB** T

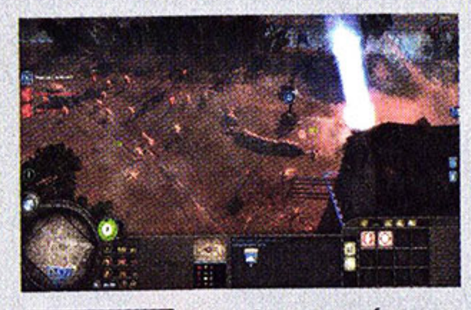
BOTTOM LINE 9

The Middle Ages may have been rough for the average serf, but gamers are reaping the rewards of a historical period fraught with bloodshed. The Kingdoms expansion adds an unprecedented amount of new content to an already deep turn-based strategy game. The four new campaigns – the battle for Britainnia, the Teutonic War, The Crusades, and the New World – focus on regional conflicts that defined the era. Each features a "magnifying glass" map that expands the scope of the skirmishes, adds several new units, and comes with its own distinct production values and rule sets. And for the first time ever, you can tackle a campaign with a friend. About the only thing this amazing expansion is missing is the Knights Who Say Ni!—**BERTZ**

PC

Company of Heroes: Opposing Fronts

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER STRATEGY (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA INTERNET OR LAN) > **PUBLISHER** THQ
> **DEVELOPER** RELIC ENTERTAINMENT
> **RELEASE** SEPTEMBER 24 > **ESRB** M



BOTTOM LINE 8.25

Yep, Company of Heroes is still awesome. If you haven't played it yet, do so unless real-time strategy holds no interest for you. This standalone expansion, on the other hand, doesn't do anything terribly interesting outside of adding two new factions (a defensive British division and a highly mobile German counterpart). The added campaigns are very average, but will no doubt be entertaining enough to satisfy the needs of offline-focused players. By all means, grab Opposing Fronts if you simply need more CoH – just don't expect anything particularly revolutionary here.—**ADAM**

High-level wizards are unfair, but so is fighting gods

PC

Neverwinter Nights 2: Mask of the Betrayer

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ROLE-PLAYING GAME (UP TO 64-PLAYER VIA INTERNET OR LAN) > **PUBLISHER** ATARI
> **DEVELOPER** OBSIDIAN ENTERTAINMENT > **RELEASE** OCTOBER 9 > **ESRB** T

GAME INFORMER PC GAME OF THE MONTH

FLIRTING WITH GREATNESS

Epic levels in Dungeons & Dragons are silly. Characters are so vastly powerful at level 20 that pushing it any farther is madness – delicious, overpowered madness. And yet, the crew at Obsidian Entertainment has created a campaign full of challenges worthy of a party of these über-heroes. Mask of the Betrayer is much more than merely a vehicle for creative abuse of D&D 3.5 edition rules, though. A deep and engaging story in the rich Forgotten Realms setting, interesting multifaceted NPCs to interact with, and a polished technical execution make this one of the best expansions to grace gaming in a long time.

Forget about the problems that the original NWN 2 shipped with. That game's frustrating AI bugs, crappy interface design, and questionable performance have all been fixed in the year since its release. Mask of the Betrayer (and the latest patch for the base game as well) plays like NWN 2 always ought to have. The difference is massive.

Picking up where the official campaign left off, the hero finds him or herself alone in a barrow in distant Rashemen, shorn of companions. Immediately, a Red Wizard with a murky past shows up and kicks off the epic story. Just to put it into perspective, one of the first things you do is piss off an ancient bear god by beating down his spirit form – and not long after, you'll find yourself raiding the vault of a dead death god. Exploring the high end of D&D lore has never been so entertaining. Equally as nice is the fact that resting and traveling are significantly less trivial in the expansion's campaign.

Piles of new feats, spells, and classes will give even seasoned D&D vets plenty to explore, either in the official campaign or custom scenarios built by the community. Likewise, builders can benefit from the ever-improving toolset and (supposedly) fixed persistent-world implementation. All of the additions are integrated well into the existing content, and offer plenty of new abilities and character builds to explore. There are even decent prestige classes for arcane casters!

Mask of the Betrayer delivers on all fronts: tactical battles, exceptional story, and great characters. It's truly remarkable how far NWN 2 has come. It's not perfect, but as far as I'm concerned the smooth execution and excellent new content in this expansion make this the best electronic D&D experience since Baldur's Gate II.—**ADAM**

BOTTOM LINE 9

> **Concept:** Harness the power of epic levels to settle an argument between gods and mortals in the Forgotten Realms

> **Graphics:** If your PC has the power to crank it, this is one fine-looking RPG

> **Sound:** Lots of good voice acting enriches the story immensely

> **Playability:** This interface is leagues better than what shipped with the vanilla NWN 2

> **Entertainment:** The best PC RPG in years? If D&D is your bag, yes

> **Replay Value:** High

Second Opinion 8.5

Any D&D player who has flipped through the Epic Level Handbook knows that some seriously awesome things start to happen to a character around level 20. It's like puberty, but instead of turning into a gangly teen, you're ascending to godhood. Mask of the Betrayer deftly harnesses this high-end content to give the player an array of intriguing challenges. Whether you prefer the straightforward style of fighter or the subtlety of a caster, you'll appreciate the tweaks to interface that make it easier for you and your allies to execute appropriately epic attacks. Those adjustments, along with an excellent storyline involving the Red Wizards of Thay, make Mask of the Betrayer a rare expansion that actually surpasses the base game in terms of gameplay, implementation, and design.—**JOE**

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PSP

Syphon Filter: Logan's Shadow

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA AD-HOC OR INFRASTRUCTURE) > **PUBLISHER** SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT
> **DEVELOPER** SONY BEND > **RELEASE** OCTOBER 2 > **ESRB** T

THE OLD STANDBY

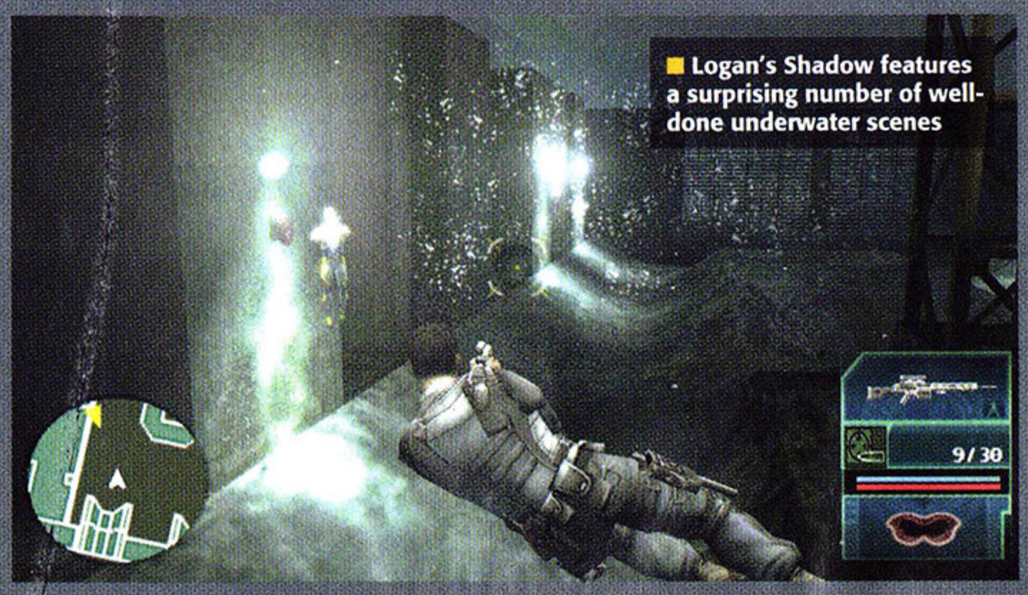
Poor old Gabe Logan. He's the Rodney Dangerfield of video games. Syphon Filter has been a solid and strong-selling series since the original PlayStation, yet you hardly ever see it mentioned in lists of "triple A" franchises. Personally, I've grown attached to Gabe's overly serious, stiff delivery of his lines. In Logan's Shadow the second I heard him portentously declare, "It's an enigma...I've got s--- to do," it was love all over again.

The story, which dangles the possibility that longtime ally Lian Xing is a double agent, is the usual stew of double-crosses, surprise twists, and generic Middle Eastern and Russian terrorists. While the quality of the cutscenes is impressive for a handheld, let's just say this won't make you forget BioShock any time soon.

So let's put the focus where it should be, on the fact that Syphon Filter manages to deliver a very enjoyable third-person shooting experience like few other PSP titles. I'm not a fan of using the face buttons for aiming, but this game's pace – most scenarios revolve around advancing towards cover, eliminating the targets, then advancing again – is more suited to this configuration than more frantic action titles. I also like the new advanced grappling, stealth kill features, and brief God of War-style button mashing sequences. Even more surprising was the new emphasis on underwater levels – I usually hate swimming in games, but I have to admit Logan's Shadow pulls it off admirably.

My only real complaint is the enemy AI, which varies radically from good to flat-out brain dead. But perhaps we can chalk that up to the technical constrictions of doing a full-out action title on a handheld. Add to this the fact that you can engage in four-on-four team matches in an impressive number of online modes, and what we have here is another great performance by one of video games' most underappreciated series.

Gabe might not get the respect of the Solid Snakes of the world, but Syphon Filter fans will always know where to go for a less cerebral brand of sneaking and shooting.—**MATT**



■ Logan's Shadow features a surprising number of well-done underwater scenes

BOTTOM LINE 8.75

> **Concept:** A globetrotting follow-up to one of the PSP's best action titles delivers more of the same, with a few new tricks

> **Graphics:** It's definitely in the top tier of PSP titles in terms of graphics

> **Sound:** I love the dramatic soundtrack, which is worthy of a major motion picture. Gabe's voiceovers are loveably stiff as ever

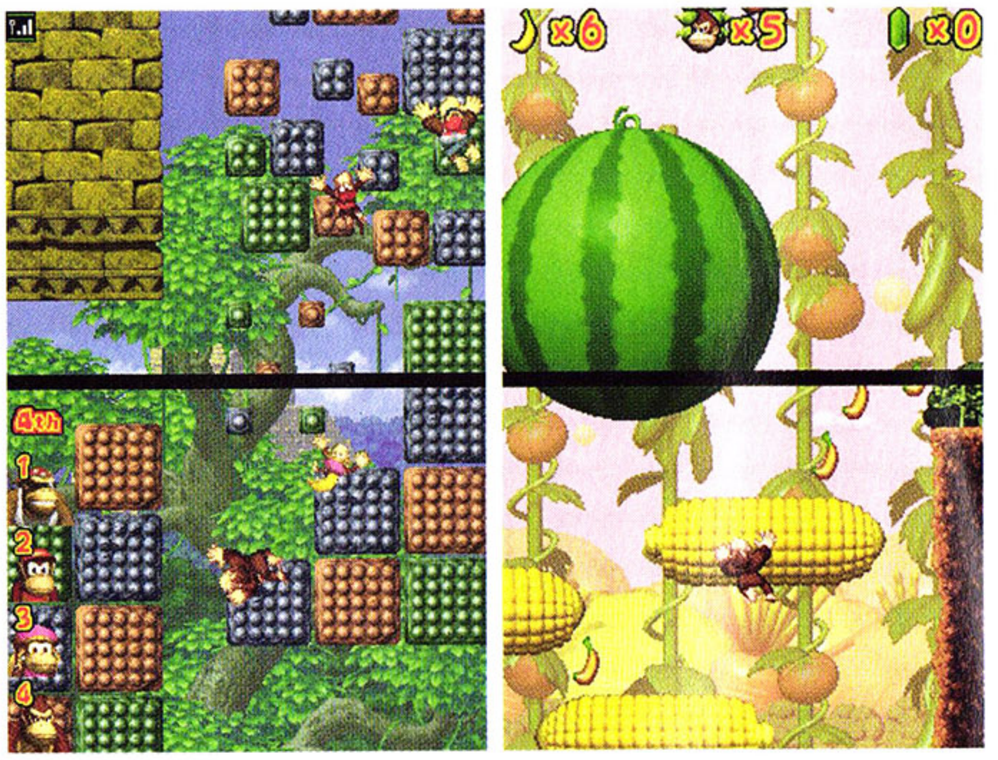
> **Playability:** Syphon Filter deals with the lack of a second analog about as well as any title on the market

> **Entertainment:** It's not groundbreaking by today's standards, but this is solidly executed action on a system that needs more games of this quality

> **Replay Value:** Moderately High

Second Opinion 9

Exhilarating, adroit, and unstoppably fun, Logan's Shadow fires direct hits with nearly everything it attempts, and gifts the PSP with one of most accomplished espionage thrillers in recent memory. This experience is carried mostly by the innovative gameplay, which has players firing rocket rounds from sniper rifles, leaping out of the water like Jaws to stealthily grab a terrorist on a dock, and even pounding out timed button presses for cinematic action sequences. Sony Bend has always had a keen eye for level designs, but these are easily the company's best. Logan's Shadow is what every sequel should be – a giant step forward that shows a mastery of its craft.—**REINER**



NINTENDO DS

DK: Jungle Climber

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 4-PLAYER VIA WIRELESS) > **PUBLISHER** NINTENDO
> **DEVELOPER** PAON > **RELEASE** SEPTEMBER 10 > **ESRB** E

GO BACK TO YOUR BONGOS, PAL

King K. Rool and his Kremlings are back to interrupt Donkey Kong's vacation and steal enchanted crystal bananas. DK and friends are tasked with helping an alien banana man (who speaks in banana fanna fo fanna language) recover the magic bananas. Obviously, people don't play Donkey Kong games for the nuanced plots. It seems to be more about wacky control schemes these days i.e. bongos, Wii bongo simulation, and total shoulder button platforming (first shown in DK: King of Swing on GBA).

The latter control scheme returns in DK: Jungle Climber, and for those who've never given it a shot, it works like this: players use the L and R buttons for everything from jumping to grabbing pegs to swinging around a pivot point like a sped up hand on a clock. However, what may have passed for slightly innovative the first time around feels stale and unwieldy now. Stages that would be easy with tight, traditional platforming controls are now a smorgasbord of cheap deaths due to the headache-inducing mechanics and DK's limited attack power.

Ridiculous amount of bananas, DK coins, oil barrels, K-O-N-G letters, banana coins, and jewels are sprinkled throughout the stage. You'll try to grab most of this stuff for the first few levels, but after awhile you'll start to skip all of that crap. It's just not worth dying and having to pick it all up again, especially considering that they only unlock cheats and extra annoying levels.

Challenge mode offers a few uninspired minigames like banana catching and log hopping. Multiplayer consists of four-player offline barrel races and speed climbing runs, but I can't see any group of friends tolerating these games for more than five minutes. In the end, Nintendo would have been smart to make a new Donkey Kong Country rather than revisit this franchise. DK's latest adventure is neither "fun" nor "easy to play," despite what the back of the box may claim.—**BRYAN**

BOTTOM LINE 5.75

> **Concept:** Bring the DK: King of Swing experience to DS

> **Graphics:** It turns out that pegboards don't make the most compelling backdrop

> **Sound:** Funky Kong attempts to rip off Lil Jon's trademark "okaaaaay!"

> **Playability:** Remember that "like it or hate it" shoulder button swinging mechanic?

> **Entertainment:** Only for serious DK fans...and people who are sick of using the d-pad

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion 6.75

This game's predecessor, DK: King of Swing, took a simple concept (using shoulder buttons to swing Mr. Kong around environments filled with pegs) and turned it into some solid fun. DK: Jungle Climber proves that that there's only so far you can go on a single premise. While it's not bad – "mediocre" is a word that this game brings to mind – there's just no sense of discovery or freshness to this title. It works; it has levels you can play and have a decent time while you're doing it. That's about it. But, respectfully, I can't really see myself remembering I even played this game in three months. I doubt even the most ardent Donkey Kong fan will be able to claim otherwise.—**MATT**

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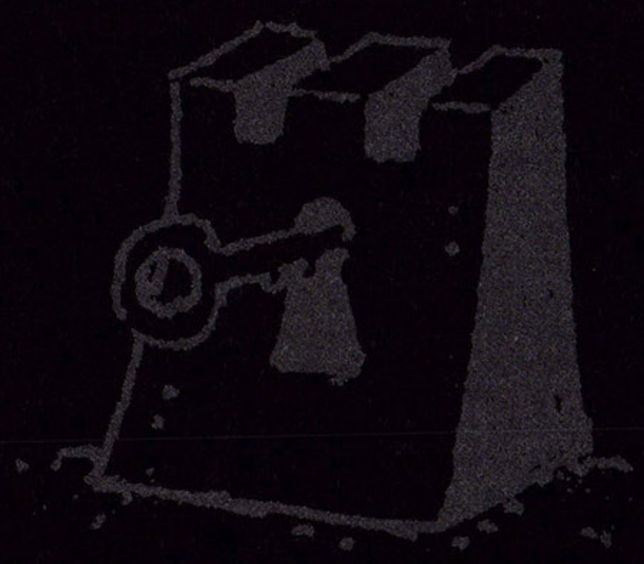

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NINTENDO DS

Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney Trials & Tribulations

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ADVENTURE **> PUBLISHER** CAPCOM **> DEVELOPER** CAPCOM **> RELEASE** OCTOBER 23 **> ESRB** T

THE DEFENSE NEVER RESTS

One of Phoenix Wright's most endearing qualities as a lawyer is his ability to transform a dubious situation into a resounding success. Trials & Tribulations is similar to its title character in that respect; it may be hard to imagine that the third installment of a text-heavy, barely interactive adventure series can maintain its charm and momentum, but this conclusion to Phoenix Wright's story arc is just as satisfying and entertaining as the previous titles. In fact, Trials & Tribulations is my favorite Ace Attorney so far.

All of the major gameplay advances from Justice for All are present and refined. The Psyche-locks are back, but you have more clues as to when you are equipped to take them on, giving the investigation segments a much better flow this time around. You also won't find any of the first game's grueling three-day trials, which again aids in the pacing. There is still just as much content, but it is delivered in denser, less segmented chunks, so it's easier to get wrapped up in the action.

For a game that is basically a visual novel, these improvements to the story experience go a long way. Even so, Trials & Tribulations isn't a reinvention of the series; it doesn't contain any features that really utilize the touch screen, and many old problems persist. There are still infuriating moments in court when you've made the logical connection and are forced to choose between presenting two equally plausible pieces of evidence – like the picture of a coffee cup at the crime scene versus the cup itself. The second those moments pass, however, you're back to loving the game – it's impossible to stay mad at Phoenix.

For those familiar with the story of the first two games, you can look forward to all of the loose ends being tied up by two related timelines (past and present), quirky new characters, and tons of entertaining testimony. Knowing that the next game in this series will star a new up-and-coming defense attorney, Trials & Tribulations is a fun and fitting farewell to Phoenix and company.—**JOE**

BOTTOM LINE 8.25

> Concept: Object, point your finger, and unravel mysteries as Phoenix Wright comes into his own as a defense attorney

> Graphics: Interesting character design set against static backgrounds, some of which are carry-overs

> Sound: Many of the classic themes return, along with equally good new ones

> Playability: Apart from a few maddening trial moments, the puzzles are intuitive and clever

> Entertainment: Living on the brink of failure is kind of a rush, and the writing is as hilarious as ever

> Replay Value: Moderate

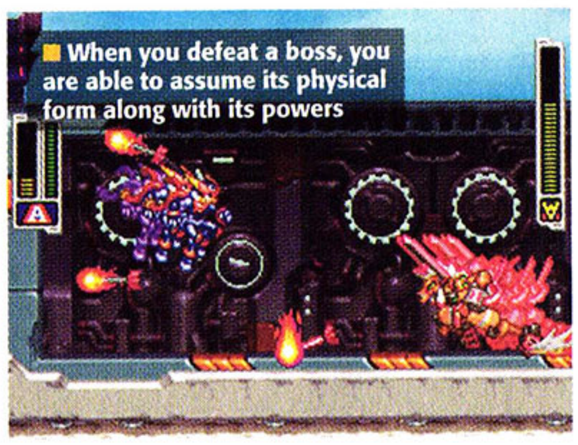
Second Opinion 8.25

It wasn't long ago the Capcom was staging a "contest" to get fans to convince them to release the third Phoenix Wright game in the U.S. Boy am I glad that worked out. Trials & Tribulations brings the saga to a fitting close by ratcheting up the humor and drama, tying up all of the loose ends from the earlier games, and bringing back some surprising characters (playable and NPC). Sure there are no new gameplay elements, but Phoenix has always been about crazy mysteries and characters more than anything else and T&T delivers on both of these fronts. Look for insider references to *Entourage*, Kelis, and even Final Fantasy IV as you play through.—**BRYAN**

NINTENDO DS

Mega Man ZX Advent

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (2-PLAYER VIA WIRELESS) **> PUBLISHER** CAPCOM **> DEVELOPER** INTI CREATES
> RELEASE OCTOBER 10 **> ESRB** E


When you defeat a boss, you are able to assume its physical form along with its powers

The obligatory time-stopping power in full, useless effect

PSEUDOROID RAGE

If you're one of those gamers who has fallen out of step with Mega Man over the last few years, this would be a good time to start paying attention again. The series may have spread out in some questionable directions (like Star Force and Battle Network), but the spirit of the original classics still persists in Mega Man ZX Advent.

Many of the problems that dragged down last year's Mega Man ZX have been addressed (though not completely eliminated) in this sequel. Navigating the zone-based world isn't nearly as frustrating as before thanks to the much-improved map on the touch screen. However, your diligent exploration will often be wasted once you see that "Game Over" screen unless you constantly backtrack to save points.

The heart of any Mega Man game, absorbing enemy abilities, is better than ever in Advent. Instead of just gaining a new gun or a new suit, you actually become the defeated Pseudoroid (a fancy-pants word for "robot master"). Along with new Biometals, there are 14 forms to assume, each with abilities to consider beyond basic firepower. Some are more maneuverable, some are larger (and therefore easier targets), and one is even made specifically for underwater mobility. Every time I fought a boss, I thought "I can't wait to control that guy!"

The depth these forms add to the Mega Man formula is impressive. Some minigames and multiplayer round out the functionality, but Advent is most entertaining when it sticks to the basics. Fight some robots, find some secret rooms, and enjoy the evolution of one of the most memorable heroes in gaming.—**JOE**

BOTTOM LINE 8

> Concept: In a shocking turn of events, Mega Man fights evil robots and takes their powers

> Graphics: Anime cutscenes add some cool flair, but the gameplay visuals are nothing special

> Sound: There's some sporadic voice acting, for better or worse

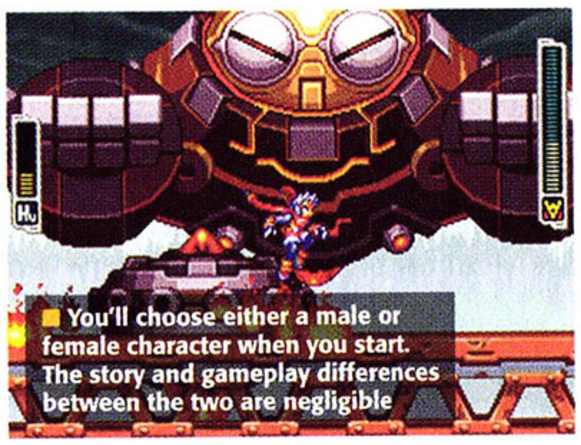
> Playability: The maps and stats on the touch screen make navigation much easier this time around

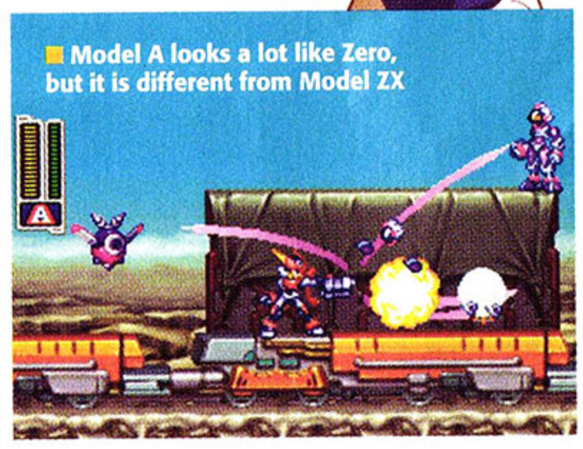
> Entertainment: If you like jumping, dashing, and shooting, this is a lot of fun. If you don't, then you probably don't play many games

> Replay Value: Moderate

Second Opinion 7.5

Outside of the trite plotline and one-dimensional characters, there's nothing really wrong with ZX Advent – and who faults Mega Man for not delivering earth-shattering narrative? Regardless, there's not much here to get excited over, either. The gameplay formula is largely the same as it has been in the Mega Man Zero series for years, the difficulty is still high, and the bosses are exercises in pattern-recognition as always. This mix of elements has predictable results, and ZX Advent is a solid side-scroller. In the absence of truly creative level design or player abilities, though, I have to admit being a bit lukewarm on the game despite my long-standing affection for the franchise.—**ADAM**


You'll choose either a male or female character when you start. The story and gameplay differences between the two are negligible


Model A looks a lot like Zero, but it is different from Model ZX

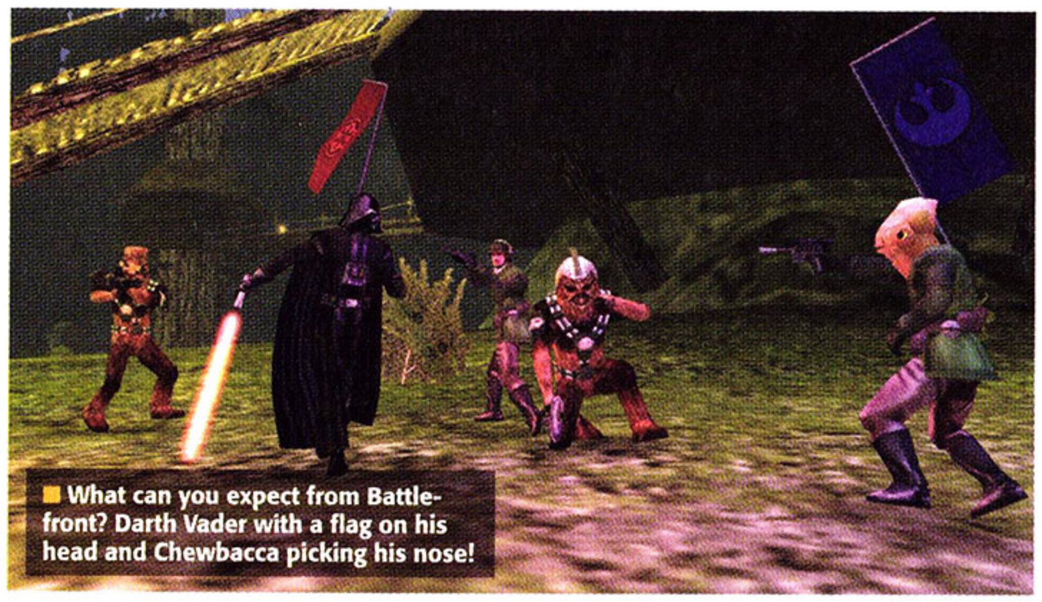
PSP

Star Wars Battlefront: Renegade Squadron

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA AD HOC OR 16-PLAYER VIA INFRASTRUCTURE)
> PUBLISHER LUCASARTS **> DEVELOPER** REBELLION **> RELEASE** OCTOBER 9 **> ESRB** T

IT'S A TRAP!

While filming the original *Star Wars* trilogy, if George Lucas would have panned the camera a few feet to the left or right, there's a good chance we would have caught a glimpse of the Renegade Squadron – a team hand-picked by Han Solo that went on to play a significant role in most of the Rebellion's victories over the Empire. They helped out with the evacuation of Yavin 4; they held back the Empire on Hoth; and they gave the Rebellion the edge it needed to win the Battle of Endor. Throughout the course of this game, players will experience these lost moments first hand, and will likely come to the same conclusion as I: The Renegade Squadron is a laugh-out-loud farce. This team latches onto the glory of *Star Wars'* most beloved characters, and usually accomplishes its missions in the most foolish of ways. I don't want to ruin the story for you, but it has to be noted that one of their big schemes is to trap the Emperor in a cave by dropping rocks in front of the entrance.

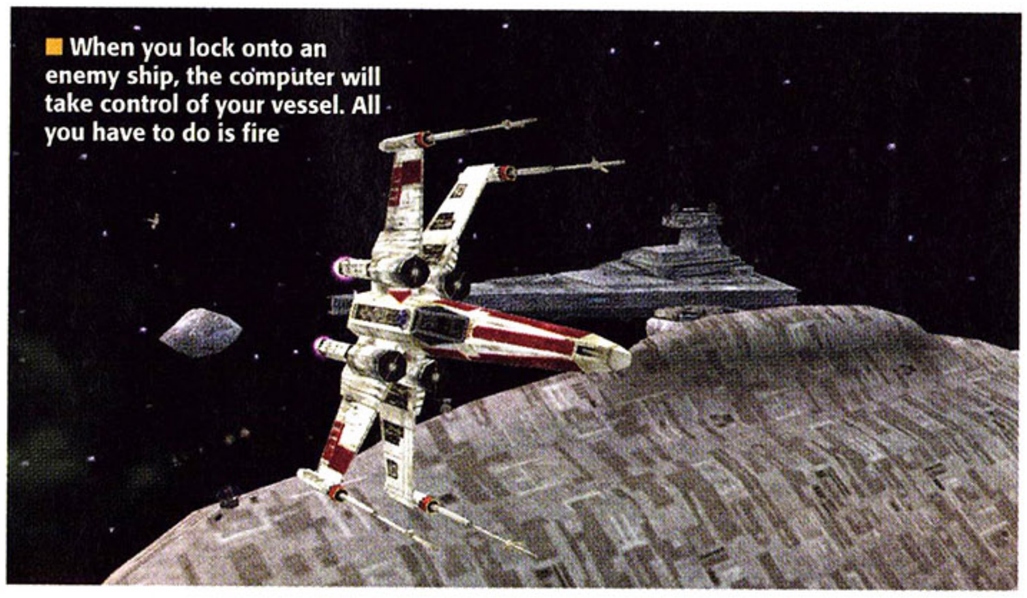


■ What can you expect from Battlefront? Darth Vader with a flag on his head and Chewbacca picking his nose!

The ridiculousness of the story isn't the only thing that cripples Campaign mode. The missions mostly consist of painful errands; the axis never really throws a threat your way; and the space battles are so bad that you'll likely cry more than you did when you watched *The Phantom Menace* for the first time.

As tiresome as the single-player component can be, LucasArts has made strides forward with the multiplayer. It still doesn't deliver the huge battles you found on consoles, but the game does function well with 16 players. The standout feature is the customizable characters. You can alter everything, right down to the weapon load outs, the amount of health or agility you have, whether or not you bring a jet pack, and even what insignia you wear on your shoulder. With millions of combinations at your disposal, you can create some interesting classes, which you can tailor for the different match types like Capture the Flag and Conquest.

The controls are still a bit sluggish, but the auto-lock feature does take some of the stress out of the mix and still allows for some exciting firefights. If you are looking for a handheld multiplayer experience, and are willing to tolerate some control aggravations, you may want to take a gander at Renegade Squadron. But if your desire lies anywhere outside of this, these are not the droids you are looking for. Move along.—**REINER**



■ When you lock onto an enemy ship, the computer will take control of your vessel. All you have to do is fire

BOTTOM LINE 7

> Concept: Your inner fanboy will die a little bit from the atrocious storytelling, but some thrills can be garnered from the retooled multiplayer experience

> Graphics: The detail isn't where you would want it, but the scale of the battles certainly is

> Sound: From the recognizable orchestrated score to the familiar laser blasts, this is music to Star Wars fans' ears

> Playability: The online battles can be fun, but you'll still find yourself wrestling with the sticky controls

> Entertainment: A disappointing single-player experience, but its online functionality is impressive, and capable of delivering some enjoyable battles

> Replay Value: Moderate

Second Opinion 7

It is a dark time for the Rebellion. This series continues to be a fairly shallow experience (despite the cool new customizable load out feature) that lacks a comfortable control scheme on the PSP. I finished the strategy-poor Galactic Conquest mode in one sitting, making me think that I was facing off against Admiral Ozzel. This series has failed me for the last time.—**KATO**

HANDHELD QUICKIES

PSP

Crazy Taxi: Fare Wars

> STYLE 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION (2-PLAYER VIA AD HOC) **> PUBLISHER** SEGA
> DEVELOPER SNIPER STUDIOS
> RELEASE AUGUST 7 **> ESRB** E10+

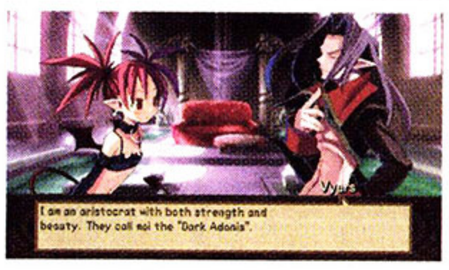
BOTTOM LINE 5.75

Fare Wars packs the original Crazy Taxi and Crazy Taxi 2 games onto one nostalgia-filled disc. Add the ability to record your amazing cabbie runs and use a customized soundtrack of songs stored on your PSP and you would think this is a cab to be hailed, right? Unfortunately, these new features don't overcome the horrible driving controls, laughable braking, poor draw distances, and the complementary pop up. Only die hard fans of the Dreamcast series should give this game a look. The rest of us are better off walking.—**BERTZ**

PSP

Disgaea: Afternoon of Darkness

> STYLE1-PLAYER STRATEGY/RPG
> PUBLISHER NIPPON ICHI
> DEVELOPER NIPPON ICHI
> RELEASE OCTOBER 30 **> ESRB** T



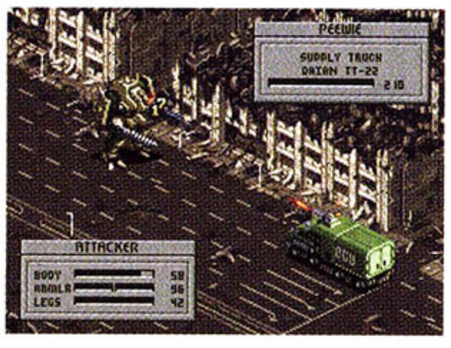
BOTTOM LINE 9

This cult classic has lost nothing – and gained quite a bit – in the translation to PSP. The original witty quest is wholly intact, and remains a must-play for all strategy fans. The writing and voice acting are as charming as ever, and the endlessly deep character customization and huge variety of maps and objectives in this grid-based battler are still top-of-the-line. The addition of Etna Mode, which tells an alternate story through new scenarios, is enough to make playing through Disgaea again more than worth your time. Rarely does a strategy game deliver such pure, unadulterated fun.—**ADAM**

NINTENDO DS

Front Mission 1st

> STYLE 1-PLAYER STRATEGY/RPG (2-PLAYER VIA WIRELESS) **> PUBLISHER** SQUARE ENIX
> DEVELOPER SQUARE ENIX
> RELEASE OCTOBER 23 **> ESRB** E10+



BOTTOM LINE 7

As a Front Mission fan, there's not much to complain about in this DS remake of the original game – it's an absolutely solid, faithful port with decent controls. As a strategy/RPG enthusiast, however, the archaic design pales in comparison with recent efforts. The various interlocking systems (pilot experience, wanzer customization, and grid-based combat) work well together, but are extremely simplistic by today's standards. It's entertaining enough to plow through the two campaigns, but the fact that there are fairly clear-cut optimal solutions to all three facets of gameplay makes this nothing more than a mildly enjoyable look at part of the genre's history.—**ADAM**

NINTENDO DS

Sonic Rush Adventure

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (2-PLAYER VIA WIRELESS OR NINTENDO WI-FI CONNECTION)
> PUBLISHER SEGA **> DEVELOPER** SEGA
> RELEASE SEPTEMBER 18 **> ESRB** E

BOTTOM LINE 7.25

Sonic Rush Adventure begins with Tails and our blue hero flying a biplane straight into hurricane and waking up on a beach. Yes, there are a lot of silly cutscenes in SRA, a fairly decent sequel to Sonic Rush, but at least you can skip them all and get straight to the mostly 2D stages to collect building materials. Players can use these to create sea faring vessels and play amusing 3D minigames to access new islands. Multiplayer now includes online play, but most people will probably focus on bettering their online time trial rankings.—**BRYAN**

PSP

Final Fantasy Tactics: The War Of The Lions

> STYLE 1-PLAYER STRATEGY/RPG (2-PLAYER VIA AD HOC **> PUBLISHER** SQUARE ENIX
> DEVELOPER SQUARE ENIX
> RELEASE OCTOBER 9 **> ESRB** T

BOTTOM LINE 9.5

The original Tactics is simply one of my favorite games of all time, and this enhanced edition for the PSP is spectacular. From the gorgeous never-before-seen cinematics to new gameplay updates, The War of The Lions is worth a play through from both fans of the original (there are new story details, jobs, and characters) and tactics aficionados. Be warned, it's not an easy game, but there are literally hundreds of hours of play in Tactics. Combine its lengthy single-player experience with the new co-op and head-to-head modes, and you can't help but love this classic reborn.—**ANDY**

CHARTS

An In-Depth Listing Of The Best Selling Games

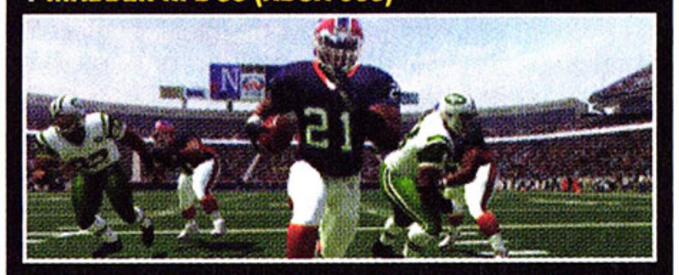
TOP 20

Listings Based Upon NPD Data For August 2007 Based On Units Sold

Rank	Title	L. Mo.	System	Score	Release
1	Madden NFL 08	N/A	360	8	08-07
2	Madden NFL 08	N/A	PS2	N/A	08-07
3	BioShock	N/A	360	10	08-07
4	Madden NFL 08	N/A	PS3	8	08-07
5	Wii Play w/remote	3	Wii	7	02-07
6	Metroid Prime 3: Corruption	N/A	Wii	9.5	08-07
7	Mario Strikers: Charged	12	Wii	7.25	06-07
8	Guitar Hero II w/guitar	9	PS2	9	11-06
9	Mario Party 8	5	Wii	7.25	05-07
10	Guitar Hero Encore: Rocks the 80s	2	PS2	8.25	07-07
11	Madden NFL 08	N/A	XBOX	N/A	08-07
12	Madden NFL 08	N/A	Wii	N/A	08-07
13	Brain Age 2: More Training in Minutes a Day	N/A	DS	8.25	08-07
14	Two Worlds	N/A	360	4	08-07
15	Pokémond Diamond	7	DS	8.25	04-07
16	High School Musical: Makin the Cut	N/A	DS	N/A	08-07
17	Guitar Hero II w/guitar	10	360	9.25	03-07
18	Madden NFL 08	N/A	PSP	N/A	08-07
19	Pokémon Pearl	11	DS	8.25	04-07
20	Tiger Woods PGA Tour 08	N/A	360	9	08-07

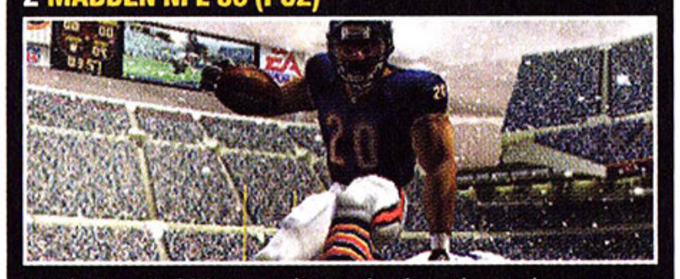
Source: The NPD Group/NPD Funworld®/TRSTS™ • David Riley 516-625-2277

1 MADDEN NFL 08 (XBOX 360)



The world of gaming journalism exploded this month after the disastrous performance given by Madden during the G4TV awards. Madden, who had a stage show prepared for the event, clearly didn't know his choreography during the performance and had to lip-sync many of his own plays. "I think he made me look good," said Microsoft spokesperson Jeff Bell.

2 MADDEN NFL 08 (PS2)

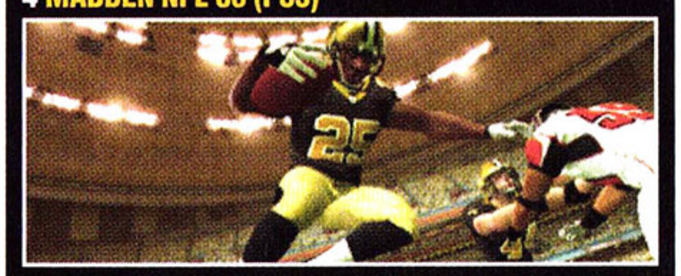


But the worst criticism may be coming from those who are calling Madden a fat, aging game. It's true that Madden isn't as young and fit as he once was, but is the criticism being piled on him really necessary? "Some games have over-inflated egos from becoming famous at such a young age," said industry analyst Ida Pissedmaself, "but that doesn't mean they shouldn't be loved."

3 BIOSHOCK

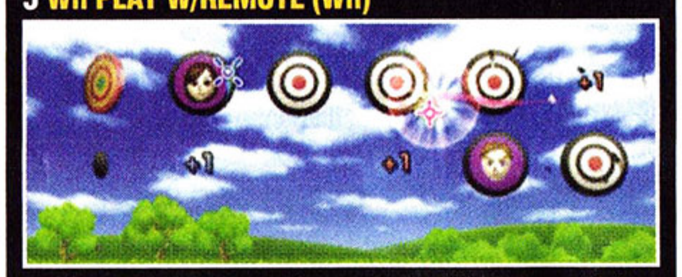
More shocking is the fact that Madden's performance might only be the sign of a bigger, more alarming trend in our nation's games. Recent starlet BioShock was seen flashing college sophomores early last week before being arrested for DUI. We talked to BioShock's ex-boyfriend, Lee Keypants, who went on record as saying, "Yeah, she's a tramp."

4 MADDEN NFL 08 (PS3)



But the Madden debate continues after he allegedly yelled, "Stop following me," to a reporter when asked to tell his side of the story in the restroom of a 7-Eleven. He refused further comment, so we may never know what he had to say or what exactly he was hiding behind his back as he left. Madden has gone under the radar, taking some time off to deal with a custody battle over his love child with rapper Kevin Federline.

5 Wii PLAY W/REMOTE (Wii)



In other news, Wii Play has become Japan's largest teen idol. The country is slated to award the game with high honors at a ceremony where he will be crowned the "Coolest Thing Ever," succeeding past favorites such as Buddha, sex, and David Hasselhoff. We talked to a random Japanese man on the street, Dum Pinshoe, who said, "Why are people still buying that lame game?"

TOP 10 JAPAN

Rank	Title	System
1	Another Century's Episode 3: The Final	PS2
2	Final Fantasy: Crystal Chronicles – Ring of Fates	DS
3	Mario Party 8	Wii
4	Sengoku Musou 2: Mushouden	PS2
5	Bladestorm: The Hundred Years' War	PS3
6	Gundam Mahjong + Z	DS
7	Grand Theft Auto: Liberty City Stories	PS2
8	Ganbaru Watashi No Kakei Diary	DS
9	Wii Play	Wii
10	Wii Sports	Wii

2

5

TOP 10 GI

Rank	Title	L. Mo.	System
1	Halo 3	N/A	360
2	Mass Effect	N/A	360
3	The Orange Box	N/A	multi
4	Project Gotham 4	N/A	360
5	Metroid Prime 3: Corruption	1	Wii
6	BioShock	2	360
7	Ace Combat 6	N/A	360
8	The Legend of Zelda: The Phantom Hourglass	3	DS
9	Neverwinter Nights 2: Mask of the Betrayer	N/A	PC
10	Medieval Total War II: Kingdoms	N/A	PC

2

7

The Staff's Favorite Picks

TOP 10 PC

Rank	Title	L. Mo.	Price
1	World Of Warcraft	1	$22
2	Civilization IV: Beyond the Sword	N/A	$25
3	World Of Warcraft: The Burning Crusade	2	$37
4	The Sims 2 Deluxe	3	$37
5	The Sims 2 H&M Fashion Stuff	4	$20
6	The Sims 2 Seasons	5	$29
7	Nancy Drew: The White Wolf of Icicle Creek	6	$20
8	Age of Empires III	N/A	$30
9	Warcraft III Battle Chest	N/A	$39
10	Battlefield 2	N/A	$11

2

8

Based On Monthly Units Sold

REVIEWSARCHIVE

PLAYSTATION 3

All-Pro Football 2K8	8	Aug-07
Armored Core 4	6.5	Apr-07
Bigs, The	7.5	Jul-07
Darkness, The	8.75	Aug-07
Dynasty Warriors: Gundam	5	Oct-07
Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion, The	9.5	Apr-07
F.E.A.R.	8.25	May-07
Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer	5	Aug-07
FIFA 08	7.75	Oct-07
Formula One: Champion Edition	8	Apr-07
Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter 2	8.5	Oct-07
Godfather: The Don's Edition, The	7.5	May-07
Guitar Hero III: Legends of Rock	8.75	Oct-07
Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix	6.5	Aug-07
Heavenly Sword	8.75	Oct-07
Madden NFL 08	8	Sep-07
MLB: The Show	7.5	Jul-07
MotorStorm	8	Apr-07
NCAA Football 08	8	Aug-07
NHL 08	8.5	Oct-07
NHL 2K8	7.75	Oct-07
Ninja Gaiden Sigma	9	Jul-07
Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End	6	Jul-07
Rainbow Six Vegas	9	Aug-07
Skate	8.75	Oct-07
Spider-Man 3	8	Jul-07
Stuntman Ignition	8.5	Oct-07
Surf's Up	6.5	Aug-07
Virtua Tennis 3	7	May-07
Warhawk	8.25	Oct-07

XBOX 360

All-Pro Football 2K8	8	Aug-07
Armored Core 4	6.5	Apr-07
Bigs, The	7.5	Jul-07
BioShock	10	Sep-07
Blue Dragon	9	Sep-07
Call of Juarez	7.25	Jul-07
Command & Conquer 3: Tiberium Wars	8.5	Jun-07
Dance Dance Revolution Universe	7.5	Apr-07
Darkness, The	8.75	Aug-07
Dirt	8	Aug-07
Dynasty Warriors: Gundam	5	Oct-07
Earth Defense Force 2017	8	May-07
Elder Scrolls IV: Shivering Isles, The	9.5	Apr-07
Eternal Sonata	8.25	Sep-07
Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer	5	Aug-07

BioShock – Xbox 360 – Sep-07

Fatal Inertia	7.5	Oct-07
FIFA 08	7.75	Oct-07
Forza Motorsport 2	8.25	Jul-07
Fuzion Frenzy 2	2	Apr-07
Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter 2	8.75	May-07
Guitar Hero II	9.25	Apr-07
Guitar Hero III: Legends of Rock	8.75	Oct-07
Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix	6.5	Aug-07
Hour of Victory	2.5	Sep-07
Madden NFL 08	8	Sep-07
Medal of Honor Airborne	7.25	Oct-07
Monster Madness: Battle for Suburbia	7.5	Jun-07
NASCAR 08	7.75	Sep-07
NCAA Football 08	8	Aug-07
NHL 08	8.5	Oct-07
NHL 2K8	7.75	Oct-07
Overlord	7.5	Aug-07
Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End	6	Jul-07
Project Sylpheed	7.75	Sep-07
Ratatouille	6.75	Sep-07
Rayman Raving Rabbids	7.25	Jun-07
Samurai Warriors 2: Empires	4.75	Apr-07
Shadowrun	6.5	Aug-07
Shrek the Third	5.25	Aug-07
Skate	8.75	Oct-07
Spider-Man 3	8	Jul-07
Stranglehold	7.25	Oct-07
Stuntman Ignition	8.5	Oct-07
Surf's Up	6.5	Aug-07
Tenchu Z	6.5	Aug-07
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 08	9	Sep-07
TMNT	7.5	May-07
Transformers	7.25	Sep-07
UEFA Champions League 2006-2007	7.5	Apr-07
Vampire Rain	3	Sep-07
Virtua Tennis 3	7	May-07
Warriors Orochi	5.75	Oct-07
Wartech: Senko No Rondi	3.75	Sep-07

Wii

Alien Syndrome	6.25	Oct-07
Big Brain Academy	7.5	Aug-07
Boogie	7.75	Oct-07
Cooking Mama: Cook Off	6.75	May-07
Dewy's Adventure	7	Oct-07
Godfather: Blackhand Edition, The	6.5	May-07
Guilty Gear XX Accent Core	7.75	Oct-07
Guitar Hero III: Legends of Rock	8.75	Oct-07

Metriod Prime 3: Corruption – Wii – Oct-07

Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix	6.5	Aug-07
Heatseeker	7.5	Jun-07
Kororinpa: Marble Mania	8	May-07
Madden NFL 08	7.5	Oct-07
Mario Party 8	7.25	Jul-07
Mario Strikers Charged	7.25	Sep-07
Medal of Honor: Vanguard	4	May-07
Mercury Meltdown	6.5	Jul-07
Metroid Prime 3: Corruption	9.5	Oct-07
Mortal Kombat: Armageddon	7.5	Jun-07
My Sims	8	Oct-07
Pokémon Battle Revolution	5.75	Sep-07
Prince of Persia: Rival Swords	8.5	May-07
Ratatouille	5.5	Sep-07
Resident Evil 4	9.5	Jul-07
Shrek the Third	5.25	Aug-07
Sonic and the Secret Rings	5.5	Apr-07
Spider-Man 3	6.5	Jul-07
SSX Blur	8.5	Apr-07
Super Paper Mario	9.5	Jun-07
Surf's Up	6.5	Aug-07
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 07	6.5	May-07
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 2008	7	Oct-07
TMNT	7.5	May-07
Transformers	7.25	Sep-07
Wii Play	7	Apr-07
Wing Island	5	May-07

PLAYSTATION 2

.hack//G.U. Vol.2: Reminisce	5.75	Jul-07
Arena Football: Road to Glory	6.5	Apr-07
Atelier Iris 3: Grand Phantasm	6.5	Jun-07
Burnout Dominator	8	Apr-07
Chulip	3	Apr-07
Dawn of Mana	7	May-07
God of War II	9.75	Apr-07
Grand Theft Auto: Vice City Stories	7.75	May-07
GrimGrimoire	7.75	Aug-07
Guilty Gear XX Accent Core	7.75	Oct-07
Guitar Hero Encore: Rocks the '80s	8.25	Aug-07
Guitar Hero III: Legends of Rock	8.75	Oct-07
Hot Shots Tennis	8.25	Jul-07
Lair	7.25	Sep-07
Lumines Plus	7.5	Apr-07
Madden NFL 08	8	Sep-07
Medal of Honor: Vanguard	6	May-07
Meet the Robinsons	7	May-07
MLB 07: The Show	8.75	Apr-07
NASCAR 08	7.75	Sep-07
Odin Sphere	8.5	Jul-07
Ratatouille	5.5	Sep-07
Raw Danger	4.5	Jun-07
Shin Megami Tensei: Persona 3	8.5	Aug-07
Shining Force EXA	7.5	Apr-07
Shrek the Third	5.25	Aug-07
Singstar Pop	8	May-07
Soul Nomad & The World Eaters	7.75	Oct-07
Stuntman Ignition	8.5	Oct-07
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 08	9	Sep-07
TMNT	7.5	May-07
Tomb Raider Anniversary	8.5	Jul-07
Tony Hawk's Downhill Jam	4	Jul-07
Transformers	7.25	Sep-07
Warriors Orochi	5.75	Oct-07
Wild Arms 5	6.5	Oct-07

PC

Command & Conquer 3: Tiberium Wars	8.5	May-07
Elder Scrolls IV: Shivering Isles, The	9.5	Apr-07
Halo 2	8	Aug-07
Infernal	4	Jun-07
Lord of the Rings Online: Shadows of Angmar, The	8.5	Jul-07
Medal of Honor Airborne	7.25	Oct-07
S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl	8.25	May-07
Shadowrun	6.5	Aug-07
Sid Meier's Civilization IV: Beyond the Sword	9.5	Sep-07
Silverfall	6	May-07
Supreme Commander	9	Apr-07
Surf's Up	6.5	Aug-07
Titan Quest: Immortal Throne	8	May-07
Vanguard: Saga of Heroes	7.5	Apr-07
World in Conflict	9.25	Oct-07
World of Warcraft: The Burning Crusade	9.75	Apr-07

NINTENDO DS

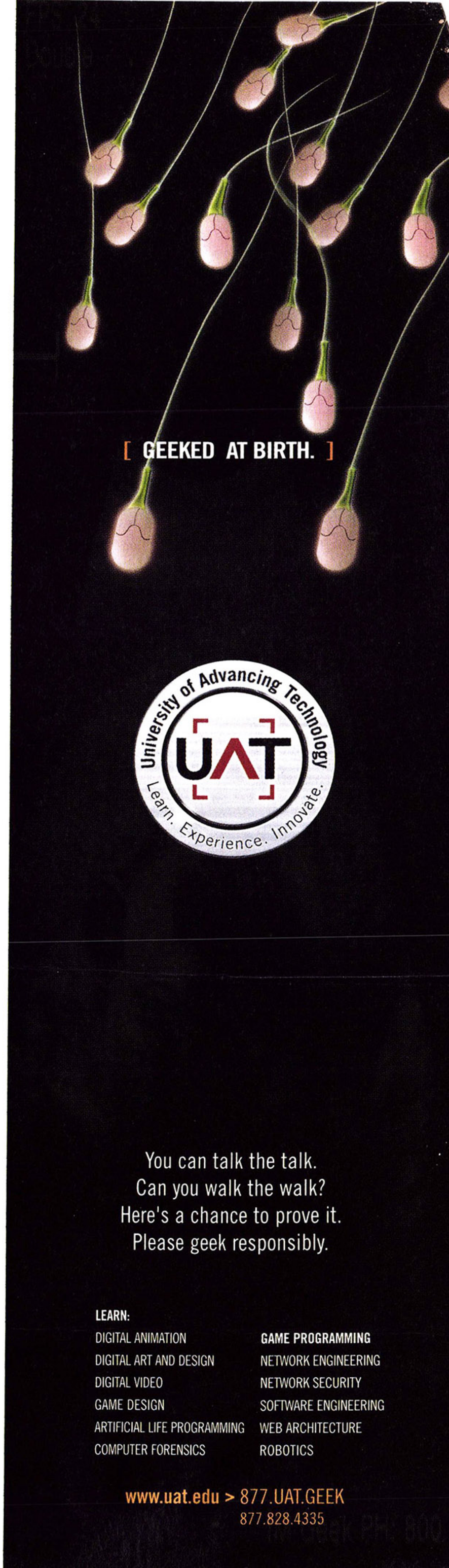
Brain Age 2: More Training in Minutes a Day	8.25	Sep-07
Brain Buster Puzzle Pak	8	Apr-07
Brothers in Arms DS	6.75	Sep-07
Cake Mania	6.5	May-07
Cookie & Cream	7	Aug-07
Death Jr. and the Science Fair of Doom	7	Jun-07
Diner Dash	7.25	Jun-07
Drawn to Life	7	Oct-07
Dynasty Warriors DS: Fighter's Battle	6.5	Jul-07
Etrian Odyssey	6	Jun-07
Final Fantasy Fables: Chocobo Tales	6.5	May-07
Heroes of Mana	5	Sep-07
Honeycomb Beat	7	May-07
Izuna: Legend of the Unemployed Ninja	3.5	Apr-07
Konami Classics Series: Arcade Hits	7.75	May-07
Legend of Zelda: Phantom Hourglass, The	9.5	Oct-07
Lost In Blue 2	6.5	May-07
Luminous Arc	6	Sep-07

The Legend of Zelda: Phantom Hourglass – Nintendo DS – Oct-07

Lunar Knights	8	Apr-07
Meteos: Disney Magic	7.75	May-07
New York Times Crosswords	8.25	Aug-07
Picross DS	9.5	Sep-07
Planet Puzzle League	8.25	Aug-07
Pogo Island	6.5	Apr-07
Pokémon Diamond/Pearl	8.25	Jun-07
Puzzle Quest: Challenge of the Warlords	8.25	May-07
Quickspot	7.5	Apr-07
Rune Factory: A Fantasy Harvest Moon	5.75	Oct-07
SimCity DS	8.25	Aug-07
SNK vs. Capcom Card Fighters DS	6.5	Jul-07
Spectrobes	6.5	Apr-07
Time Ace	6.75	Jun-07
Touch of the Dead	7	Jun-07
Trioncube	6	Apr-07
Wario: Master of Disguise	7.25	May-07
Worms Open Warfare 2	7.5	Oct-07

PSP

300: March To Glory	6.25	Apr-07
Aedis Eclipse: Generation of Chaos	6	Jun-07
After Burner: Black Falcon	7	May-07
Brave Story: New Traveler	7.25	Sep-07
Brooktown High	6.75	Jun-07
Call of Duty: Roads to Victory	6	May-07
Capcom Puzzle World	7.5	Apr-07
Castlevania: The Dracula X Chronicles	7	Oct-07
Chili Con Carnage	7	Apr-07
Coded Arms: Contagion	6.75	May-07
Cube	5.5	Jun-07
Dead Head Fred	6	Sep-07
Dragoneer's Aria	5.75	Oct-07
Driver '76	5	Jul-07
Dungeon Maker: Hunting Ground	6	Aug-07
Dungeons and Dragons: Tactics	6	Aug-07
Final Fantasy II: Anniversary Edition	6	Aug-07
Final Fantasy: Anniversary Edition	7.5	Jul-07
Full Auto 2	7.25	May-07
Gurumin: A Monstrous Adventure	7	Apr-07
Hot PXL	6	Oct-07
Innocent Life: A Futuristic Harvest Moon	7.25	Jul-07
Jeanne d'Arc	8.5	Sep-07
M.A.C.H.	6.5	May-07
Marvel Trading Card Game	7.5	May-07
Monster Hunter Freedom 2	7	Sep-07
Naruto: Ultimate Ninja Heroes	6.75	Oct-07
PaRappa the Rapper	8	Jul-07
Puzzle Quest: Challenge of the Warlords	8.25	May-07
Ratchet & Clank: Size Matters	9	Apr-07
Sid Meier's Pirates!	8	Apr-07
Smash Court Tennis 3	8.5	Sep-07
Tales of the World	7	Aug-07
Warriors, The	8.5	Apr-07
Zendoku	6	Jun-07



SECRET ACCESS

Codes, Strategies, Hints, Droids, And Tips

UNLIMITED ENABLED

Heavenly Sword

PS3

Tip of the Sword

By Nina Krisensen, Co-Founder & Chief Dev Ninja

Heavenly Sword is a combat-based action adventure game. It incorporates thousands of combat moves, which, with the dynamic cinematic camera, can make each and every fight look like a choreographed action movie. It is designed to be beautiful, elegant, and deadly.

Heavenly Sword features a combat engine that takes you from one-on-one fights against tough enemies who will match you blow-for-blow to scenarios where you have to battle through thousands of enemies at a time. The key to success, and therefore to getting the most out of the game, is to play with as much style as possible. Here are a few of my tips and tricks to boost your style.

STANCES

Nariko is able to instantly switch among her three stances; Speed, Power, and Range so you can always get into the best stance for any situation. Learn to spot how the different enemies react to each stance and choose the right stance on a hit-by-hit basis. You'll earn more Style Points and have more fun this way than if you choose your favorite stance and wade in mashing buttons.

Speed Stance is the deepest and most rewarding stance, but there are a few things to be aware of. The deeper combos deliver the most damage (and generate the most amount of Style Points), but only if your enemy is still there to be hit, so keep an eye on the bad guy when attempting a deep combo. This will ensure that you are not left vulnerable without a target if they die before the big hit. If the earlier hits kill your opponent, either end the combo at that point or, even better, re-target the end of the combo onto another victim. Speed Stance is also the fastest stance, so use it when you need to land the first blow.

Range Stance looks great and works a treat against large numbers of the weaker bad guys. It does the least amount of damage of all the stances but hits the most numbers of enemies per blow. It is especially useful when a group of bad guys try and hit you simultaneously. Correct timing of your Range Attack will hit them all when they are at their most vulnerable and see the attack thwarted.

Power stance is the daddy. It has big combos that deal out lots of damage, plus it smashes through many enemies' attempts to block. But it is slow compared to the other stances. Extensive reliance on Power will see the faster bad guys rolling under your attacks and hitting you with ease.

A mixture of stances will give you the best results, so try using Power Stance to break a shieldman's block and then unleash a long Speed combo to finish him off. Or stagger a swordsman with speed and then crush them with a massive Power Attack.

COUNTERING

So the stuff I've shared with you so far talks very much about the offensive side of the combat. But you'll need to also employ good defense tactics. Stance selection is vital for effective defense. Get into the habit of watching for the telltale 'flashes' that signify which stance the enemy is using to attack. Nariko will instantly switch stance when you press the shoulder buttons, so always be in the right stance to block the blow. The reason for this is two-fold. First, you won't get damaged so much, and second you'll be given the chance to counter attack.

Practice, practice, practice is the key to getting the timing for counters correct. And when you do you will be able to deal with any encounter without problem. If you counter correctly, the bad guy is killed with one button press. Standing in the middle of a group of enemies and countering them as they attack is the easiest and best way to rack up all the Style Points you need to unlock everything in the game. It also fills your Superstyle Bar the fastest. So choose the right stance for the enemy but don't get complacent as most enemies have additional power or super-power attacks.

BOSS STRATEGIES

Whiptail is a slippery customer. She is evasive and will constantly swim to safety in order to launch a wave of attacks towards you. Pin her down with your fastest moves and evade frequently. Watch her carefully as she winds up for her wave attack as they differ for horizontal and vertical varieties. Try and progress towards her while fending off the waves with ranged attacks, as she will be vulnerable when she finishes the move. Attack her with your most powerful attacks or start an aerial combo for guaranteed hits. In the air she's like a fish out of water and very susceptible to damage.

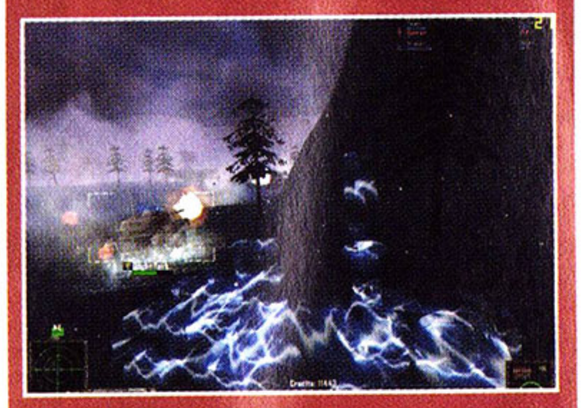
Roach is armored like a tank and will not be susceptible to your speed attacks until you stagger him with some power moves. Care must be taken as his attacks pack a big punch and he will often attack you back regardless of whether or not you're already hitting him. His attacks are heavy and will start breaking Nariko's guard on consecutive hits. Evade is your friend here. Be wary of his rolling attacks as they are quite pacey and must be evaded at the last second to be most successful. He has a tendency to roll straight into things – just make sure it's not Nariko. Wear him down and he will smash the ground in frustration. Be sure to target him from behind and tear off his protective armor.

Flying Fox likes to attack from the air where he is safe. Or is he? Counter his speed and power projectiles and return them to him with added interest. Take heed of the projectile trails for a telltale sign of which stance to use in order to counter. Make the most of when he is on the ground and do as much damage as possible. The sly Fox is quite inventive and will mix up his speed and power attacks. Be sure to be in the correct stance to block. Against his power attacks beat him to the punch with speed or pummel him with block-breaking power attacks. Flying Fox has a bit of a split personality. He will eventually swamp you with attacks from all directions. If you can, use a bit of range to make some breathing space and then take him/them out with a move focused combination.

King Bohan is both powerful and quick. You must block then evade consecutive attacks, as his combination attacks will break Nariko's block. His attacks are mostly power attacks, but he will often poke in a speed attack to break Nariko's power guard. With his newfound powers, Bohan will fire balls of lightning at Nariko, which can be countered if timed correctly. Bohan will eventually take to the air, gaining added safety and maneuverability. Observe his ascent into the sky, as you can tell whether he is going to swoop or fire lightning attacks. Evade him if he swoops towards Nariko. On his lightning attack, keep an eye on his charge up to determine which stance to be in to counter. Counter all his air lightning balls to knock him out of the sky for additional hits when he hits the deck. In the final stages, Bohan will mix up his attacks by fighting both on the ground and in the air. Be sure to change your strategy accordingly. He will also introduce a new attack, 'A Murder of Crows.' Time your range attacks to annihilate this deadly feathered assault.

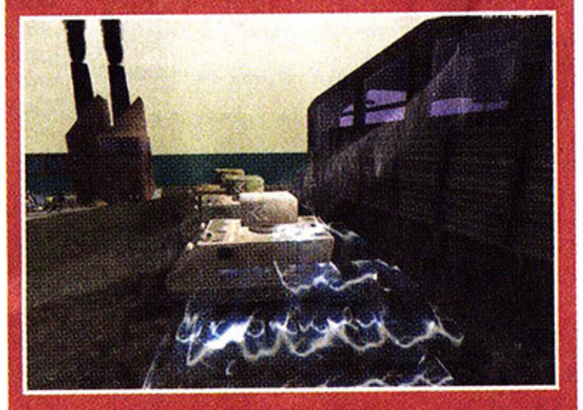
Mod World

RED ALERT: A PATH BEYOND
http://www.apathbeyond.com



Somebody actually played Command & Conquer: Renegade! No, seriously. And they even liked it enough to come up with a freeware game based on it – only better. Red Alert: A Path Beyond is a totally free multiplayer FPS that ostensibly fixes up Renegade gameplay to be, well, better. They've even added things like bloom and normal maps to make it look a bit less dated. The recently-released beta is available for download on the above site.

A Path Beyond has all kinds of C&C goodies in its Battlefield-style multiplayer package. Mammoth Tanks, V2 launchers, flamethrowers; you name it and it's probably here and available for purchase at your base. Depending on the map, you'll have access to different units, from submarines to Tesla tanks.

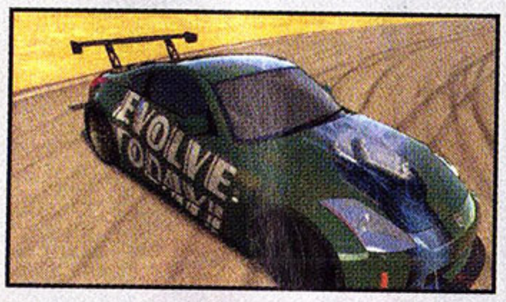


No, you can't play as Tanya and singlehandedly blow up the entire Soviet army. On the plus side, the community on the official site is very active, and the official servers keep rankings and stats for everyone who logs in to play. The game's legal status is a bit murky, since it's technically running on code that's probably owned by Electronic Arts. The publisher hasn't done anything about it, though, and it's not like A Path Beyond is hiding in some dim corner of the 'Net.

Attention All Cheaters!

Cheat codes, by their very nature, are in many cases buggier than Virginia in August. So unless you don't mind re-doing those 70 hours you put into the latest game, do yourself a favor and back up your save before using any codes.

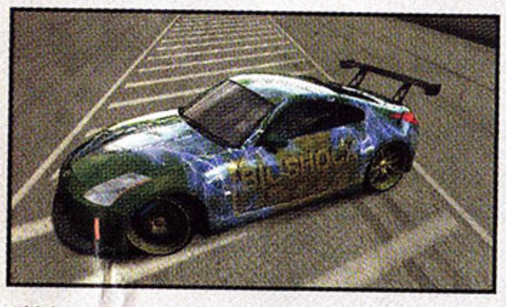
On a lighter note, you can send your codes to secretaccess@gameinformer.com for a chance to be featured here and win a prize!



Reader Tips on Crafting Custom Forza 2 Cars

I tried to do something original by just using generic shapes to create an image. Something that I like to do is to only apply vinyls on one side of the car with a generic gray background. The reason for this is that the camera is much easier to manipulate when the car is at the side view. When you have your desired vinyl complete, just remove the gray background and "highlight all vinyls." This allows you to manipulate the vinyl's size, orientation, or in my case, cutting it out then pasting it onto another part of the car, as I did here with the hood. By using the "highlight" and "cut/paste" feature you can make an image once and then place it as many times as you'd like. This saves a ton of time.

Jack L. Tharp
Grand Blanc, MI



Think you have an awesome game strategy or a tip that every player should know from one of today's hot games? Send it in to secretaccess@gameinformer.com and maybe we'll feature it in a future issue.

Code of the Month

Disgaea: Afternoon of Darkness

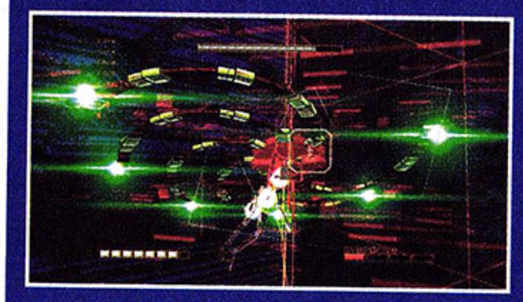
It's great that strategy/RPG fans that missed out on the original have another chance to place this great game. Even better is the fact that this version comes packed with a new Etna Mode, but you don't have time to play through the game and read every diary chapter to unlock it, do you? No, you want the easy way out and we don't blame you. To unlock it instantly enter the following code at the title screen while the pointer is on New Game. You'll hear Etna's voice signaling that you entered the code correctly.

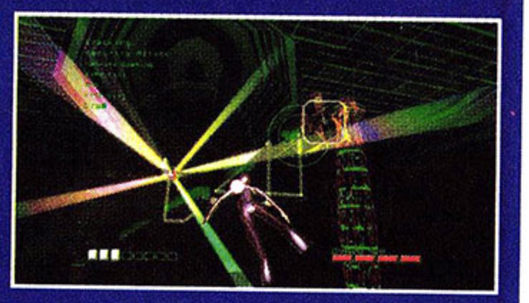
Unlock Etna Mode – △, □, ✕, △, □, ✕, ○

Jonathan Soweidy
Boulder, CO

Xbox Live Arcade Spotlight

Rez





This is going to come as huge news to a few people while the rest of the gaming public is going to scratch their head and wonder what the big deal is. Rez originally released in 2002 for the PlayStation 2 to mixed reviews. A cult following grew up around the game, which mixed 3D shooting with rhythm and music in a way that really hadn't been done before. That cult following may be about to explode, since the game is set to release for Live Arcade in the coming months. Psychedelic visuals (sharpened up for the 360) accompany you on your visit into a massive computer network, where your strange wire-framed character will shoot down targets as the music and lights respond in rhythm with your actions. Amid the craziness, you might also find some surprising allusions to religion and philosophy in the story of a newly self-aware AI called Eden and its own search for meaning. Deep stuff – and one reason that the game is well deserving of another shot at the limelight – this time as it downloads onto your 360's hard drive.

XBOX 360

Two Worlds

To open the code menu hold down LB + RB and hit A. A small text box will appear. Tapping X will open the keyboard menu. Enter "twoworldscheats 1" first. This will disable Achievements, but allow you to enter the codes below.

Armor of Darkness – 9728-1349-2105-2168
Aziraal's Sword of Fire – 9470-4690-1542-1152
Create a Lockpick – Create Lockpick
Create a Teleport Stone – Create Personal_Teleport
Extra Experience – AddExperiencePoints X (where X is the amount of experience desired)
Extra Gold – AddGold X (where X is the amount of gold desired)
Extra Param Points – AddParamPoints X (where X is the amount of Param Points desired)
Extra Skill Points – AddSkillPoints X (where X is the amount of skill points desired)
Great Shield of Yatolen – 9470-6557-8820-9563
Level Up – ec.dbg levelup
Makes all skills available – ec.dbg skills
Reveal Map – ResetFog
Spear of Destiny – 9144-3879-7593-9224
The Great Bow of Heaven's Fury – 9447-1204-8639-0832
Walk through doors and walls – PhysX.Door.RemoveAll 1

PSP

Crazy Taxi: Fare Wars

Crazy Taxi

Start up the original Crazy Taxi then input these codes while the character screen is loading.

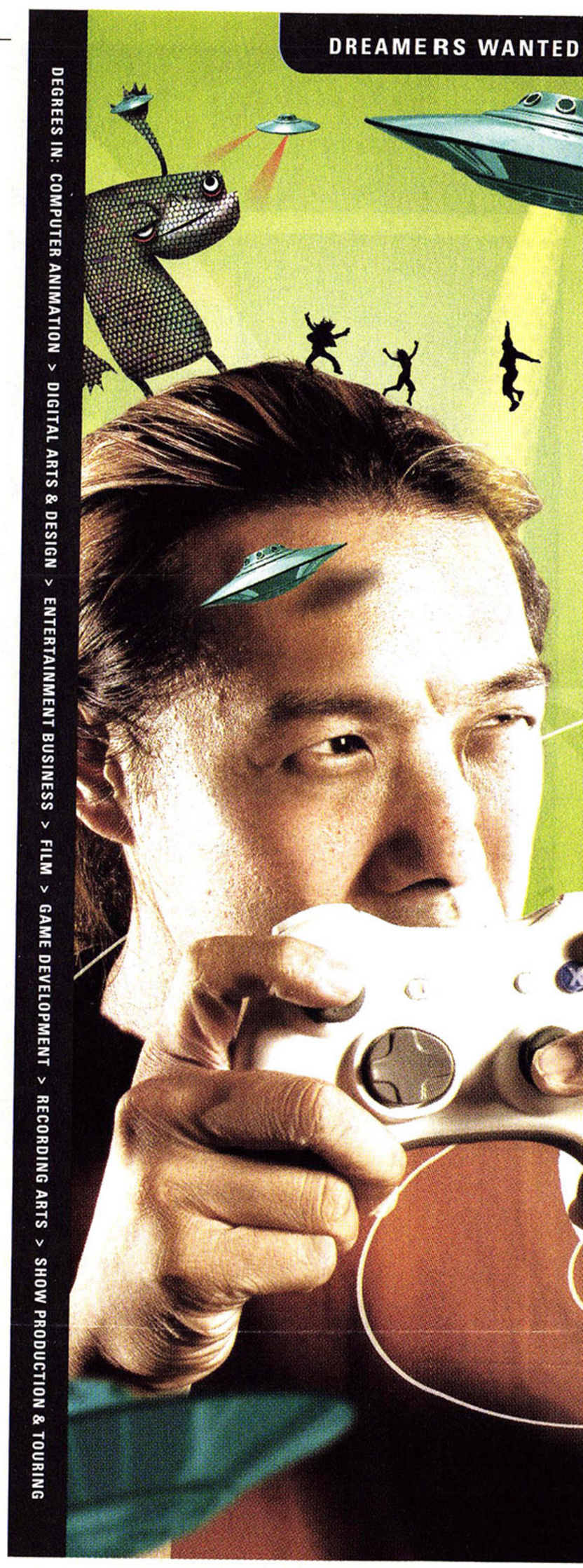
New Start Location With New Fares – R, then hold R
Drive The Taxi Bike – L and R x3
Expert Mode – Hold L, R and Start
No Arrows – Hold R and Start
No Destination Markers – Hold L and Start

Crazy Taxi 2

Start up Crazy Taxi 2 then input these codes at the character selection screen while you select your character.

Expert Mode – Hold s and Start
No Arrows – Hold Start
No Destination Markers – Hold △

"GI Droid" (location unknown – last seen buying government cheese on ebay)



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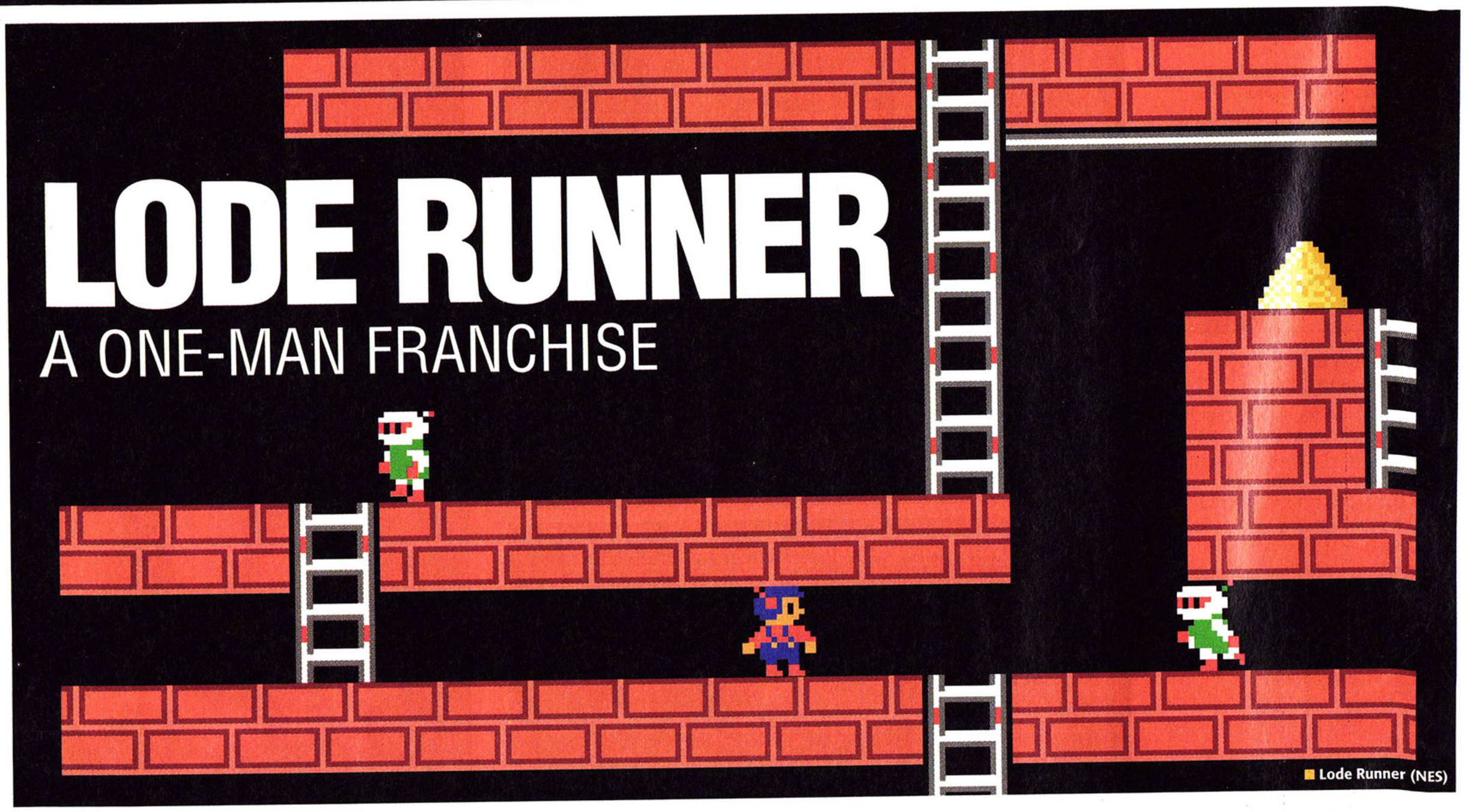
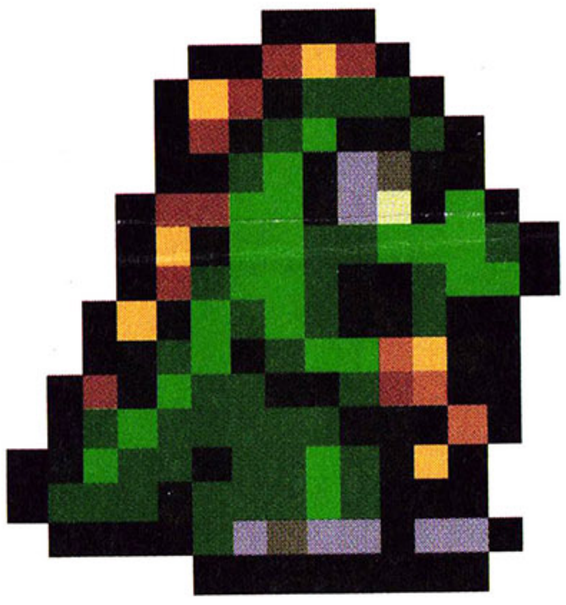
LODE RUNNER

A ONE-MAN FRANCHISE



Lode Runner (NES)

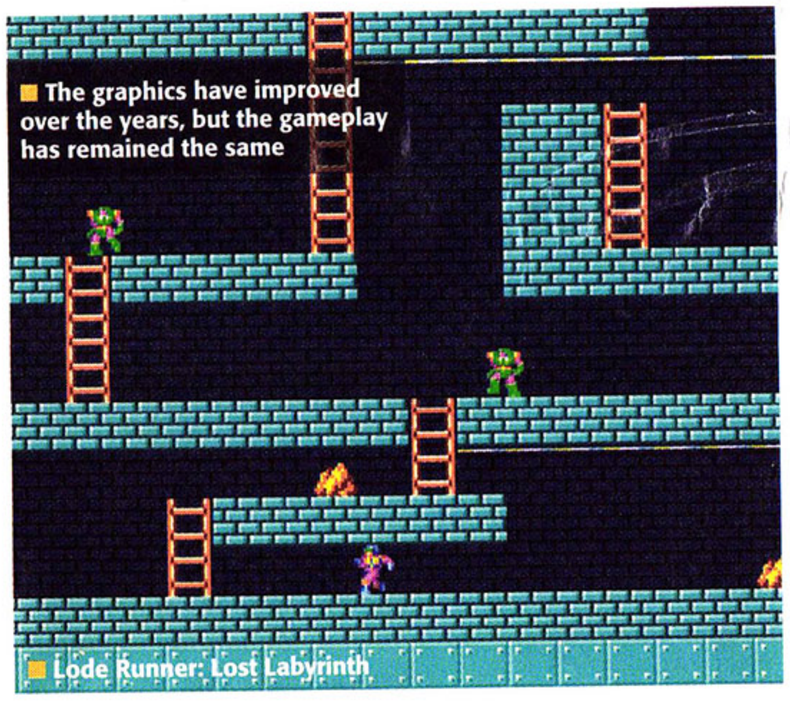


In the early 1980s, a student at the University of Washington by the name of Douglas E. Smith started work on a pet programming project on the school's mainframe. Having ironically been denied admittance to the university's computer science program, Smith worked on his crude ASCII game – originally titled Kong for its similarities to Donkey Kong – in his free time. Of course, the university wasn't interested in students coding video games on its equipment, so Smith named the program "graph" and required users to input a secret password (which was well-known to students around campus) to access it. According to one account, tracking reports on the system would frequently show 80 percent of its users running "graph."

After getting access to an Apple II+ machine, Smith ported the nascent game to that platform and renamed it Miner. Toward the end of 1982, Brøderbund rejected Smith's submission of a black-and-white version of Miner that only accepted keyboard input. Not to be deterred, Smith got hold of a color monitor and joystick, reworked the game to use those then state-of-the-art peripherals, and submitted it again. This time, the publishers were interested: Brøderbund offered Smith a contract, he signed it, and work began on Lode Runner.

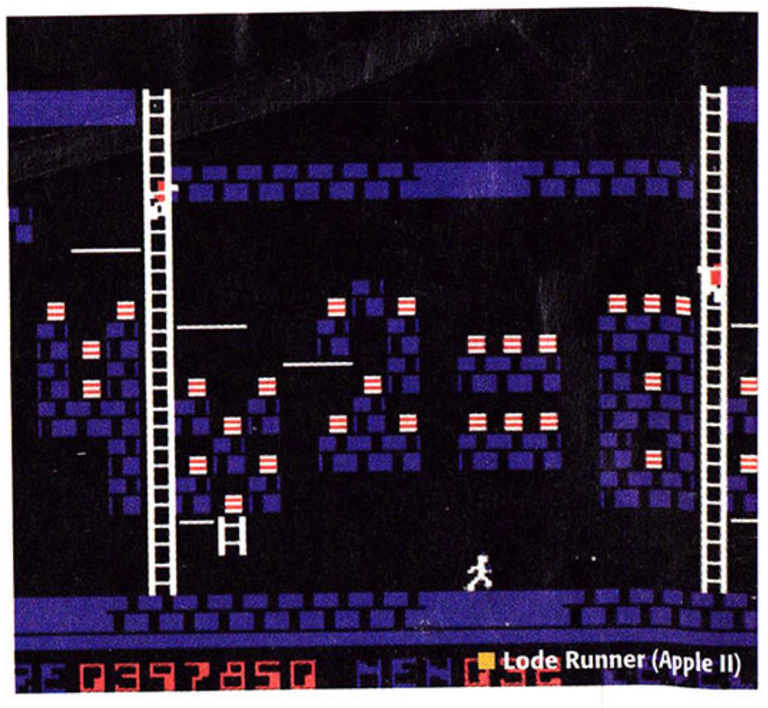
Smith dropped out of school for the spring semester of 1983 to work on Lode Runner full time, but his promise of 150 levels for the retail release of the game proved too tall an order for one man. Smith invited kids from around the town to come in and use the level editor to create new challenges, paying them for each completed one. By mid-year, the game was ready.

Lode Runner was a massive hit for the Apple II and



The graphics have improved over the years, but the gameplay has remained the same

Lode Runner: Lost Labyrinth

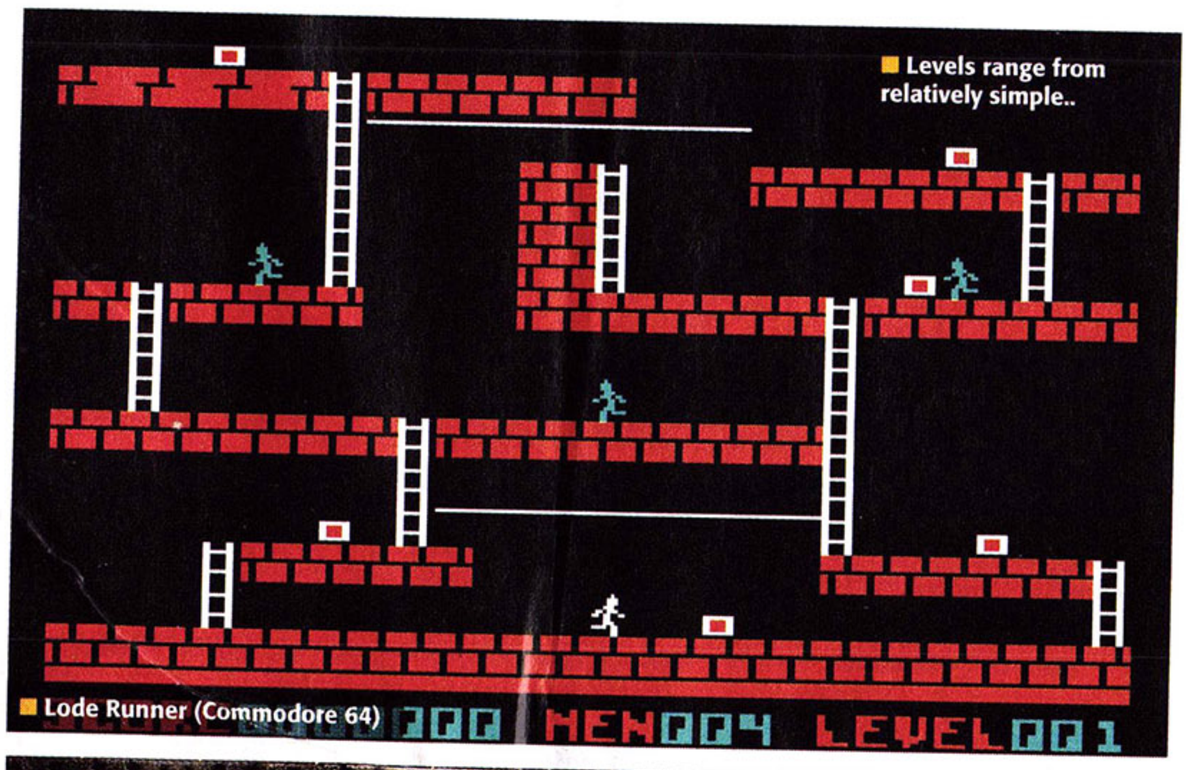


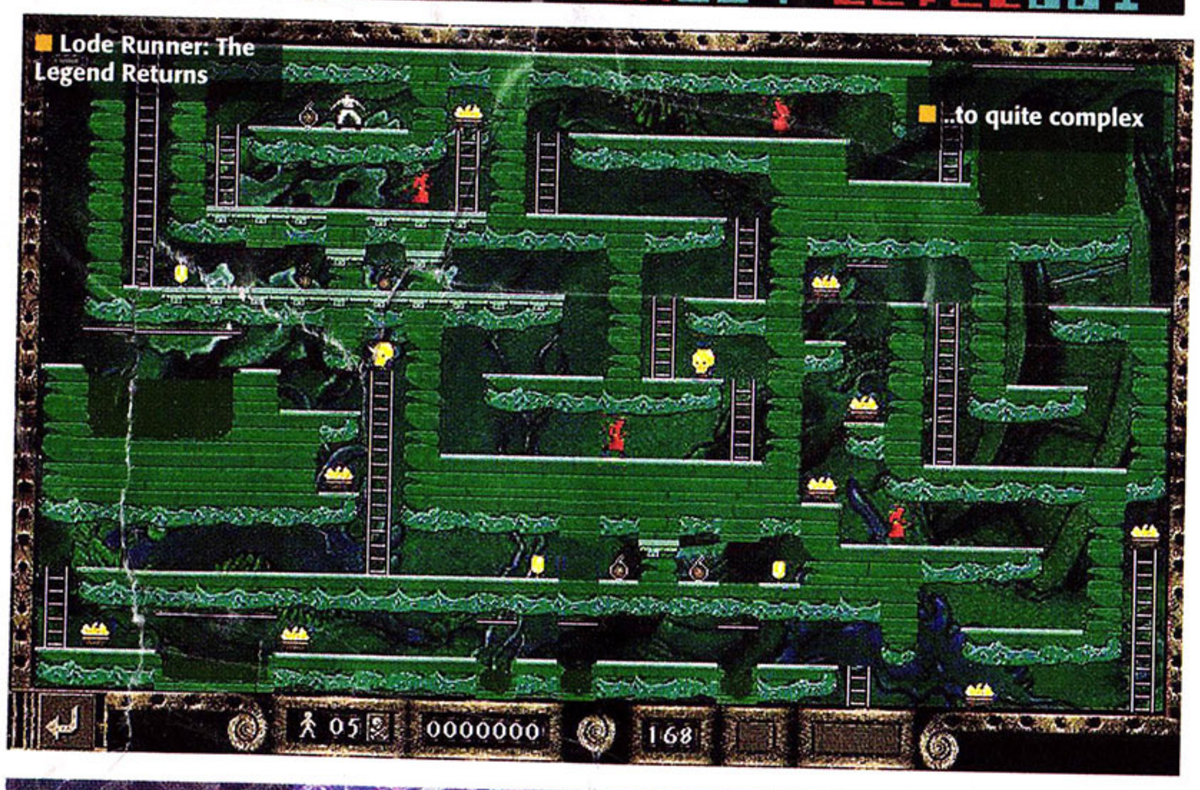
Lode Runner (Apple II)

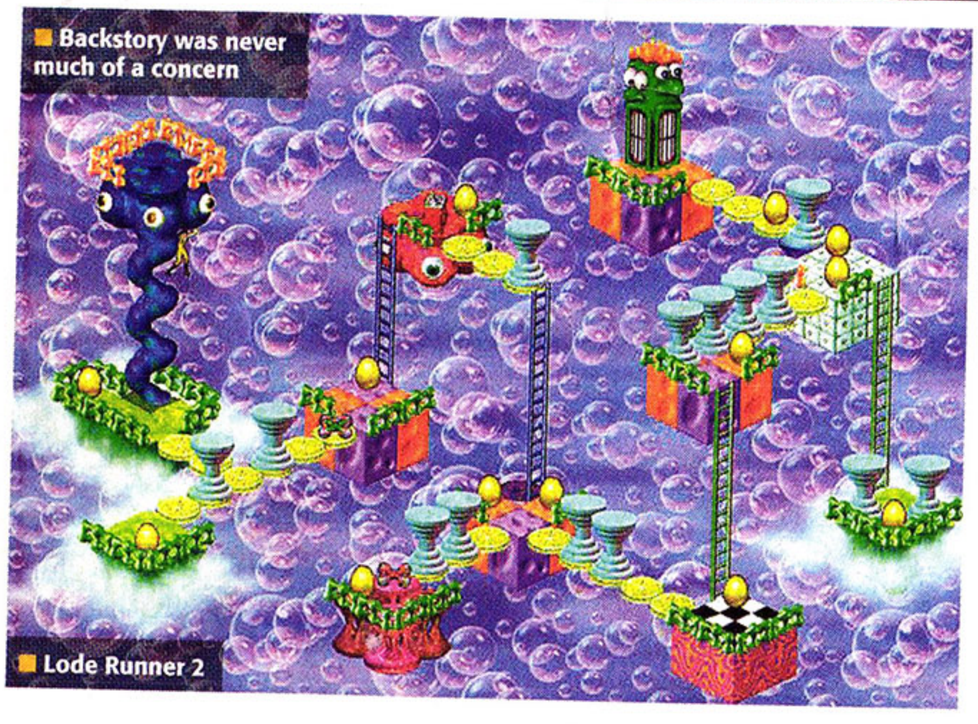
Commodore 64. All the action took place on a single screen, with the player controlling a 7x10 pixel figure attempting to collect all of the gold in the level while avoiding several enemies. Rather than just avoiding the bad guys Pac-Man style, players could dig holes to trap them temporarily. This central mechanic played into the level design, with some sections of some levels being impervious to digging while others were trap doors that would dump players and enemies to a lower platform.

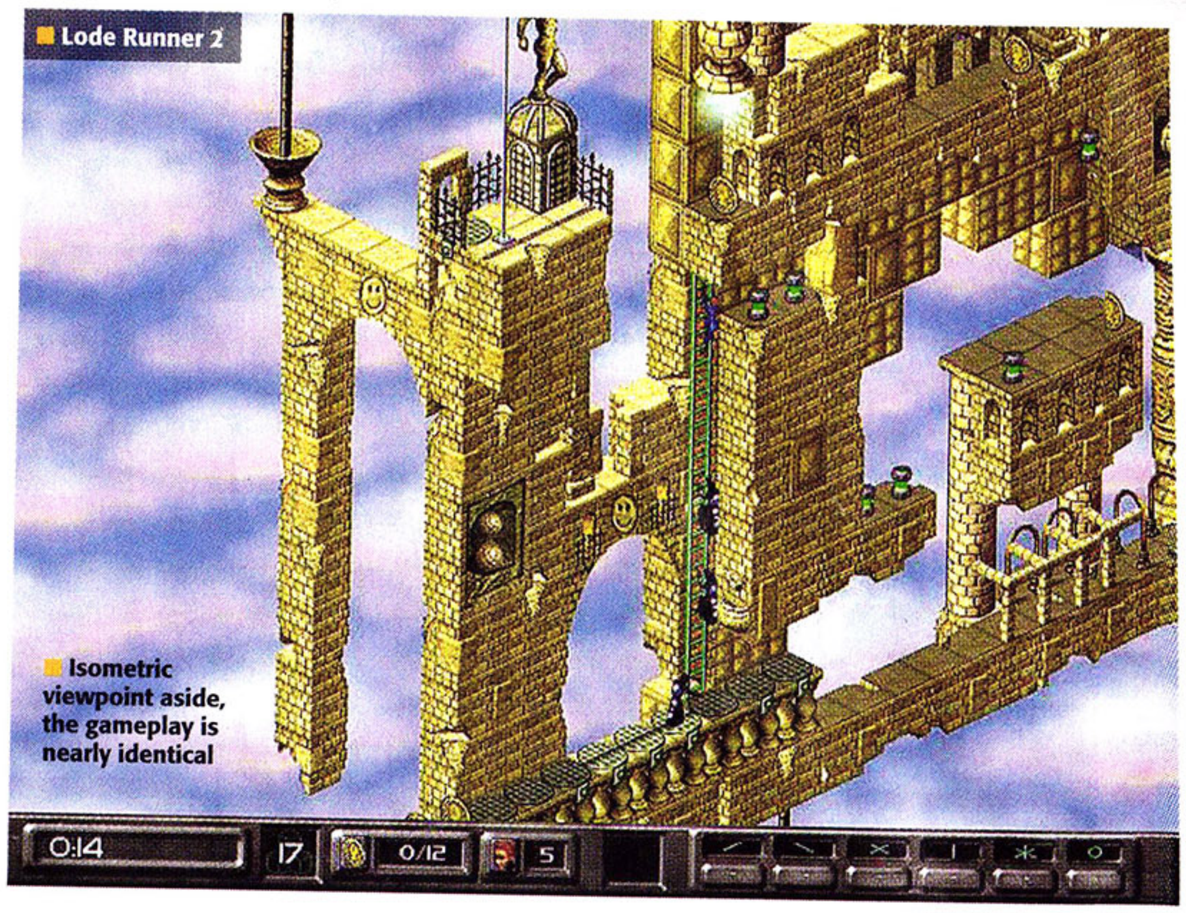
With no jumping ability but freedom to fall an unlimited distance without taking damage, planning out routes in advance is key to success in Lode Runner. The game has the same addictive qualities found in the best action/puzzle titles, and its fans will be happy to relate the numerous reasons why Lode Runner is a better game than Mario Bros., Donkey Kong, or Pac-Man. We leave that determination to the reader, but regardless of personal preference, Lode Runner deserves a place in video game history right next to those classics. The aforementioned level editor was also packaged into the retail release, and marked one of gaming's earliest forays into user-created content – and further cemented the title's claim to historical importance.

Douglas E. Smith saw massive profits from his generous cut of Lode Runner's sales, but never saw his name attached to any other successful games. ■ ■ ■



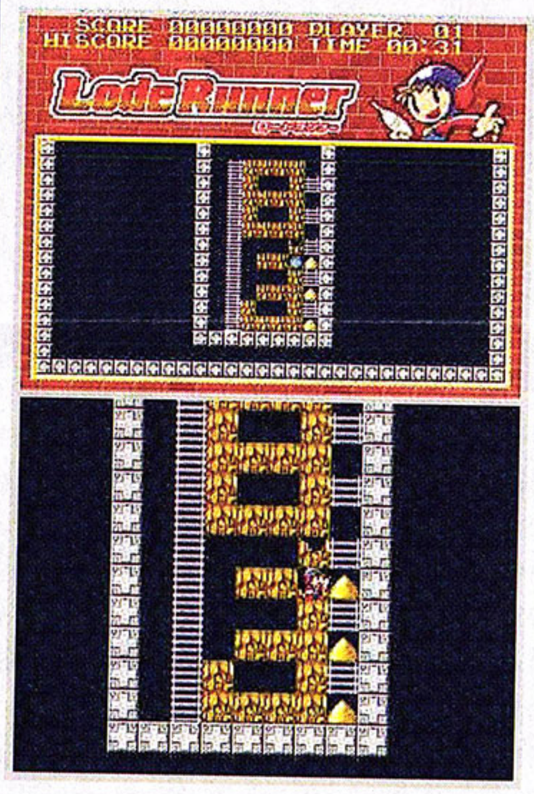






Whatever Happened To Brøderbund, Anyway?

Like many others, we remember Brøderbund fondly for livening up our primary school days with classics like Karateka, Prince of Persia, and most notably Where in the World is Carmen Sandiego?, not to mention a little game called Myst. Despite such a lineup of well-regarded and successful classics, however, gaming became marginalized within the publisher due to the success of its Print Shop and Living Books software and a lack of hot new games. Eventually, Brøderbund was bought out by The Learning Company in 1998 (and saw some 500 of its employees let go) following the decline of those products. The Learning Company was bought by Mattel in a move that Mattel couldn't really afford, and subsequently had all of its game-related assets purchased by Ubisoft for pennies on the dollar – which is why you see Ubisoft putting out new Prince of Persia and Myst titles. However, the Brøderbund name went to an Irish software company named Riverdeep, which now publishes its Print Shop, Carmen Sandiego, and Living Books series under the venerable label.

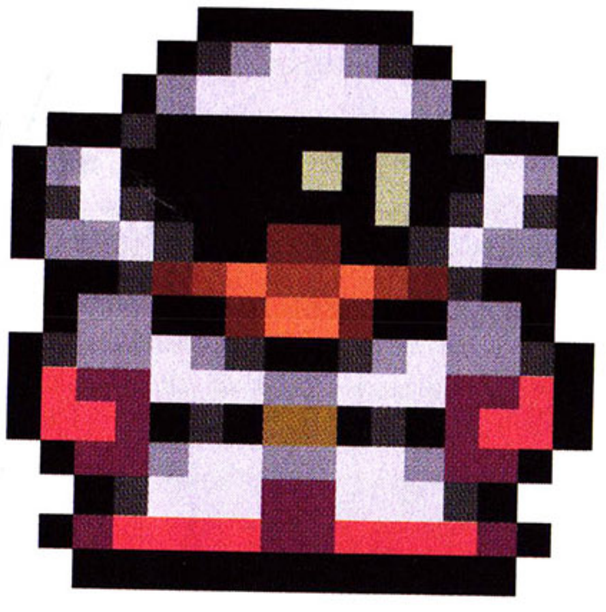


Further Endeavors

As with any successful title, Lode Runner saw its share of sequels, spinoffs, and ports. The original title made its way onto the NES, Macintosh, Atari home computer, Game Boy, Sinclair Spectrum, and was even licensed to a Japanese company for that country's MSX system. Championship Lode Runner, Lode Runner 2, Lode Runner's Rescue, Lode Runner: The Legend Returns, and many more made their way onto platforms from PC and Macintosh to PlayStation and Nintendo 64. Some stayed 2D, while others rotated the view to a quasi-3D isometric perspective. Bombs, goo, snares, and other items were introduced in various versions, but the core gameplay remained largely the same throughout. The original title is possibly the best of any of these releases on the strength of its streamlined, simplistic sensibilities.

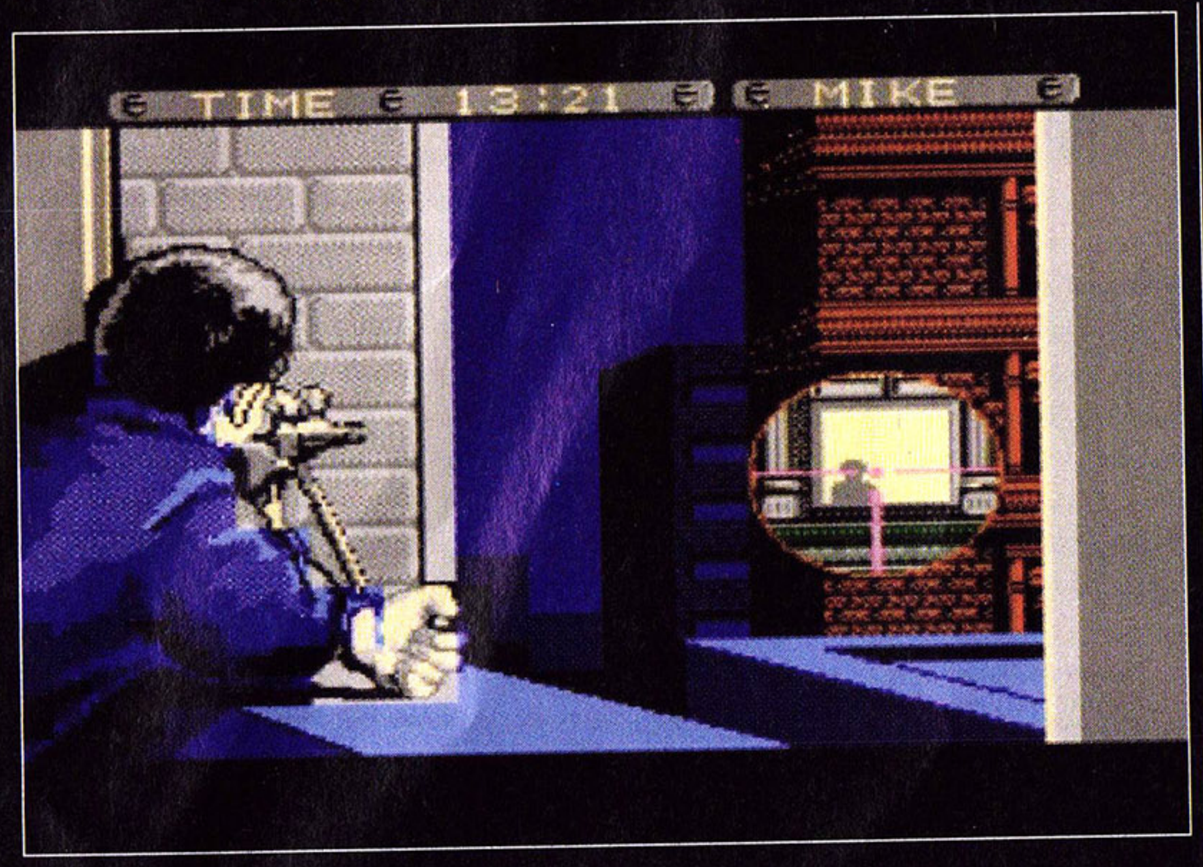
Living In The Present

Hudson Soft has two versions of Lode Runner for modern platforms. Nintedo's Wii Virtual Console saw a re-release of Battle Lode Runner, which has the classic 2D gameplay and includes a versus mode for head-to-head play. The company has also announced a Lode Runner DS title for Japan, though no U.S. release has been mentioned for that game.



This Month In Gaming History

In November of 1998, Nintendo released the Game Boy Color in the U.S. The handheld featured an infrared port for wireless multiplayer, twice the processor and memory of its predecessor, and of course a color display. Most importantly, though, was its backward compatibility – the massive Game Boy library was instrumental in keeping the GBC in a distant, overpowering first place in the handheld market.



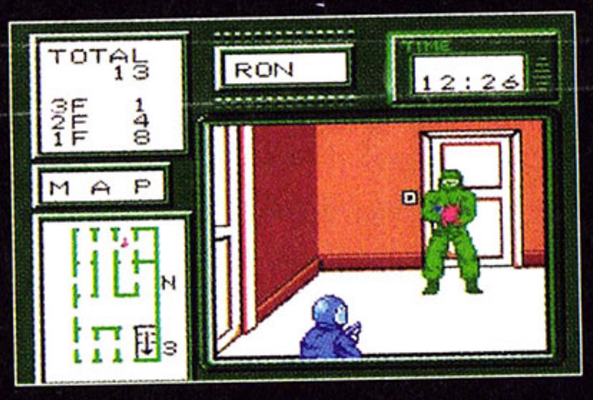
NES

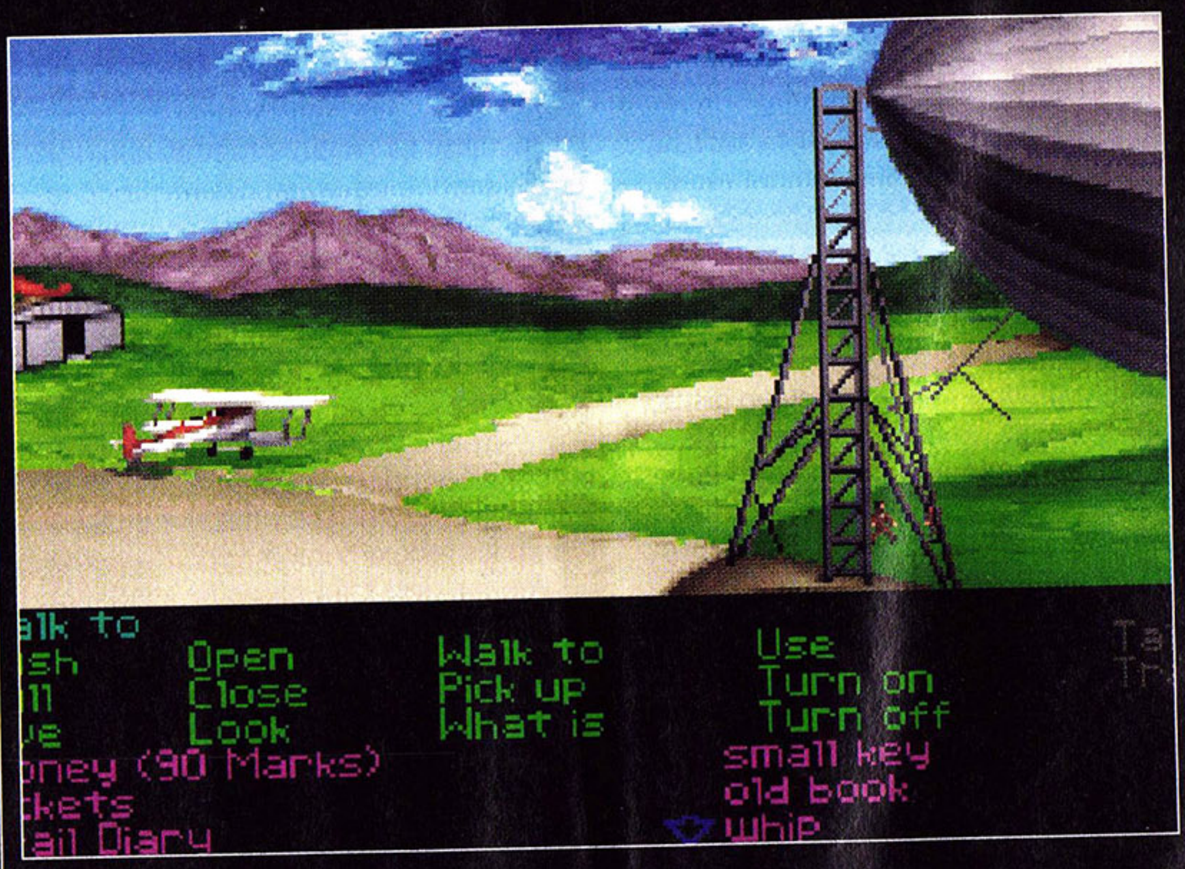
RESCUE: THE EMBASSY MISSION

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION **> PUBLISHER** KEMCO **> DEVELOPER** SEIKA **> RELEASE** 1990

RETRO RATING
NOW 7.5
THEN N/A

Rescue may have paved the way for tactical shooters like Rainbow Six, but it gets tripped up by one major flaw. The setup is simple: terrorists have taken hostages in an embassy and it's up to you to stop them. The most difficult part of the game is actually in the beginning where you must avoid spotlights (and instant death) by rolling, crawling, and hopping behind bushes. If at least one of your three guys survives, he can snipe a few terrorists from across the street. Once the enemy's ranks have been thinned, a chopper drops Ron, Dick, and "Kemco" onto the embassy roof where they can rappel and crash through the windows. This last section of gameplay has players gunning down terrorists from a quasi-FPS view similar to the old Bard's Tale games. Unfortunately, no matter how fun, innovative, and challenging Rescue is, the fact that you can beat it in literally five minutes kills its chance of being a true classic. Sure you can scale up the difficulty, but it's the same damn sequence over and over. What a missed opportunity.

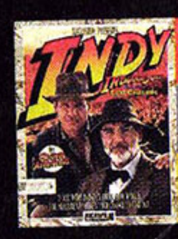




PC

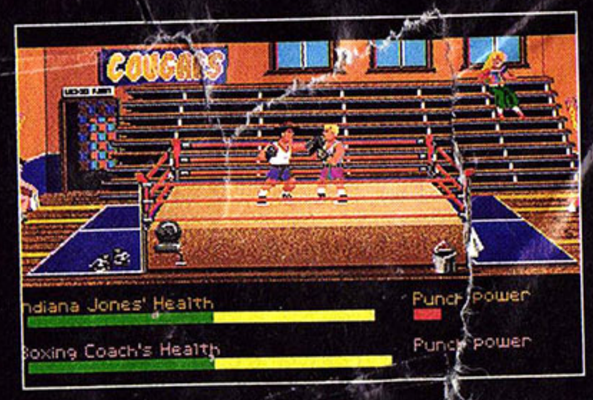
INDIANA JONES AND THE LAST CRUSADE

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ADVENTURE **> PUBLISHER** LUCASFILM GAMES **> DEVELOPER** LUCASFILM GAMES **> RELEASE** 1989



RETRO RATING
NOW 9
THEN N/A

Everyone knows that Indy can swing a whip and take a punch like a champion, but did you know his puzzle solving and inventory management skills are second to none? This licensed adventure game has players following the events of the classic film and interacting with the world using Lucasfilm Games' clever action interface. Instead of simple "use" and "look" commands, Indy has more specific actions at his disposal, like "pull," "push," and "turn off." It also has the conversation trees that Lucasfilm adventure games are known for, branching off and leading to different outcomes. But Indy can't smooth talk his way out of every sticky situation, and conversations gone awry often turn into fist fights that utilize a simple (yet challenging) combat system. With its intriguing puzzles, excellent writing, and even some branching story paths, Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade is an adventure gaming classic. It's not as pretty or well-known as The Fate of Atlantis, but it is one of the few games where you can bamboozle the Führer into signing an unrestricted travel permit for you.



PSone

SPIDER

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION/PLATFORM **> PUBLISHER** BMG INTERACTIVE ENTERTAINMENT
> DEVELOPER BOSS GAME STUDIOS **> RELEASE** 1997

RETRO RATING
NOW 6.75
THEN 5.5*

Spider was a unique platformer in that short era that had a lot of 2D games in partially 3D environments. You play a scientist whose conciousness has accidentally been stuck into the body of a spider. Now, the simple task of crossing a room to escape becomes a life-or-death struggle. Short levels have you traversing sink counters and piles of cardboard boxes while other tiny spiders, wasps, and creatures are out to get you. What sets the game apart is described quite adequately in the title of the game. You're not limited to horizontal surfaces, but you can also travel along walls and ceilings. From above, you can even drop to the ground below or swing back and forth before you release to go flying across the room. Unfortunately, like a spider, you quickly learn how easy it is to get squashed, since threats seem to show up out of nowhere, sometimes even from offscreen. Level design is also pretty bland, often forcing you to walk along as slowly as possible, just to recognize where danger might arise. It's by no means one of the worst PSone platformers, but it certainly doesn't stand the test of time.

*Score given to the game when it first appeared in Game Informer. Spider (GI #47 03/97)

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LEGENDARY BRUTALITY

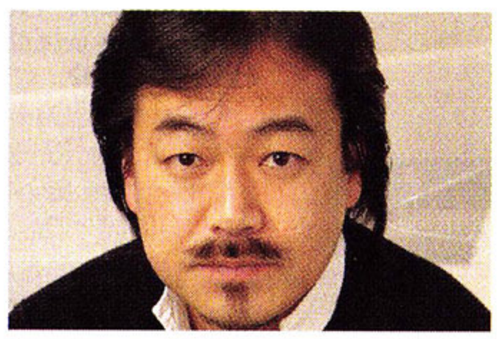
Read more about Brütal Legend and scope out additional assets of Tim Schafer's rockin' new title.

A Man For The Ages

In memory of Paul Anderson, we present a recap of one of the biggest campaigns in U.S. history: Paul For President.

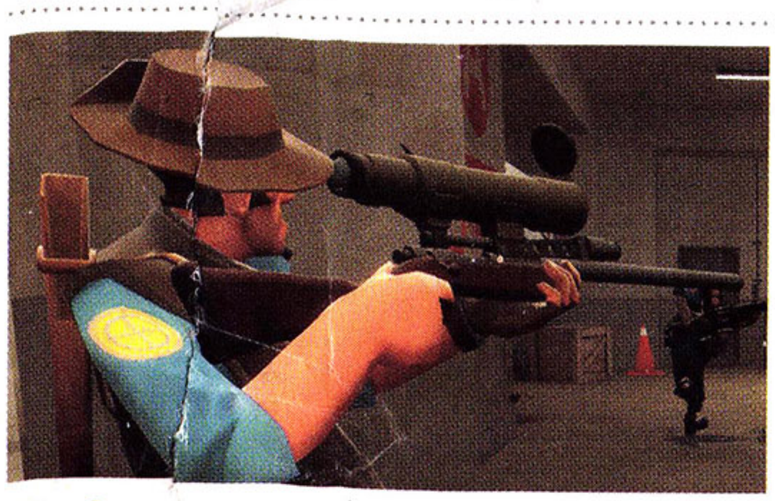
Console-ation

Still not sure which next-gen system is right for you? Check out our full list of all the games out for each of the major systems.



Sakaguchi-San

Final Fantasy creator Hironobu Sakaguchi sits down with Joe Juba-san to shed more light on his upcoming RPG Lost Odyssey.



The Orange Box Interview

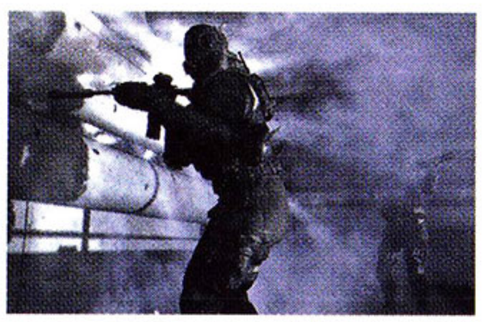
Read more about Valve's latest masterpiece in our exclusive interview.

Heavenly Tips

Go deeper into our developer tips for Heavenly Sword with this extended addendum.

ALSO ONLINE THIS MONTH:

Keep up to date with the latest blockbuster reviews during the busy holiday season.



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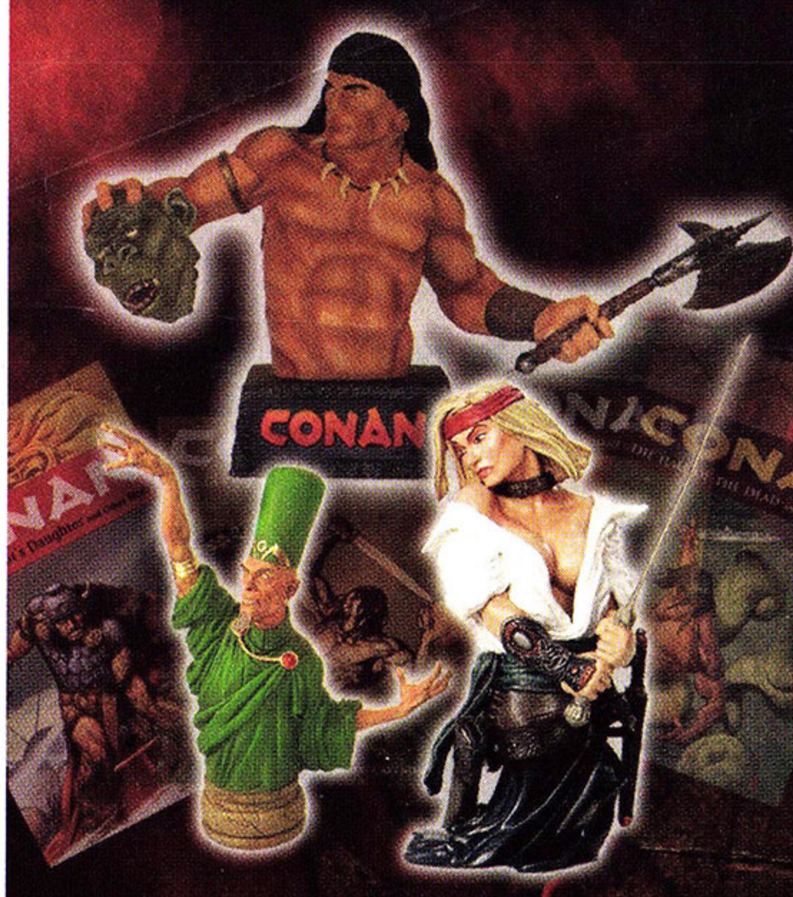

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GAMEOVER

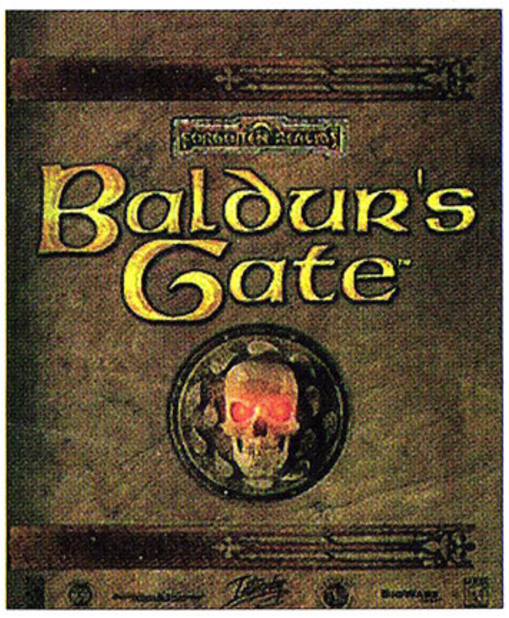
The Maidens Question Your Virility

VIDEO GAME TRIVIA

Some pop stars drop out of the limelight for years, and then attempt to make a stunning comeback, but the public just doesn't care anymore. Believe it or not, video game characters often attempt to do the same thing, with similar results. Take the following quiz to find out which long-lost character revival you wish won't ever happen.

1 A lot of people hail Baldur's Gate as one of the great PC RPGs. Are you one of them? Then you should know which of these was an NPC in that game.

A. Alain
B. Ajantis
C. Cade
D. Zyloth

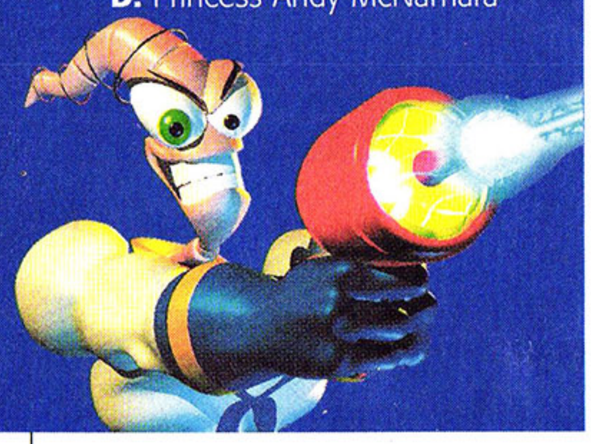


2 What year saw the release of the first game with both of the words Madden and NFL in the title? (Remember, the game is usually named for the upcoming season).

A. '92 (Madden NFL '93)
B. '93 (Madden NFL '94)
C. '94 (Madden NFL '95)
D. '95 (Madden NFL '96)

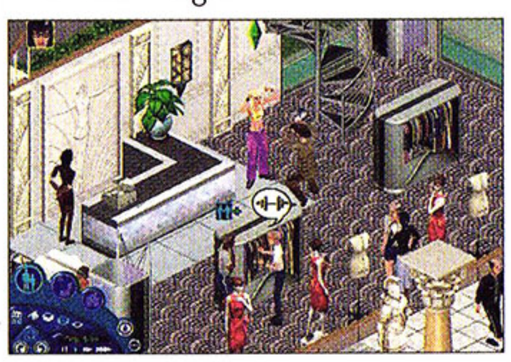
3 Who are you out to save in Earthworm Jim?

A. Princess Slug for a Butt
B. Princess Banana Split
C. Princess What's-Her-Name
D. Princess Andy McNamara



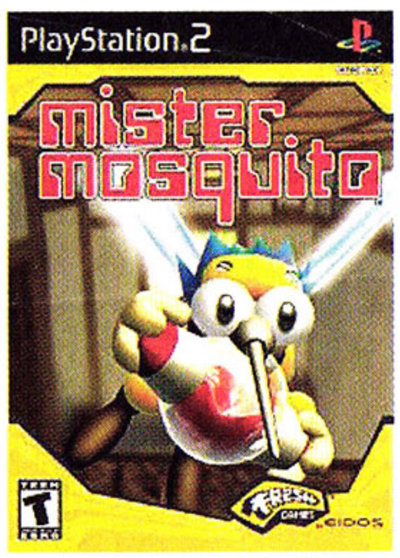
4 What was the first expansion to the original The Sims game?

A. Hot Date
B. Unleashed
C. Makin' Magic
D. Livin' Large



5 What family did Mr. Mosquito torture

A. Yamada
B. Suzuki
C. Chiba
D. Toyama



6 Shaun Murray was all kinds of extreme and got his own extreme game for what sport?

A. Surfing
B. Wakeboarding
C. Skateboarding
D. Tiddlywinks

7 Which of the following best characterizes the game Alundra?

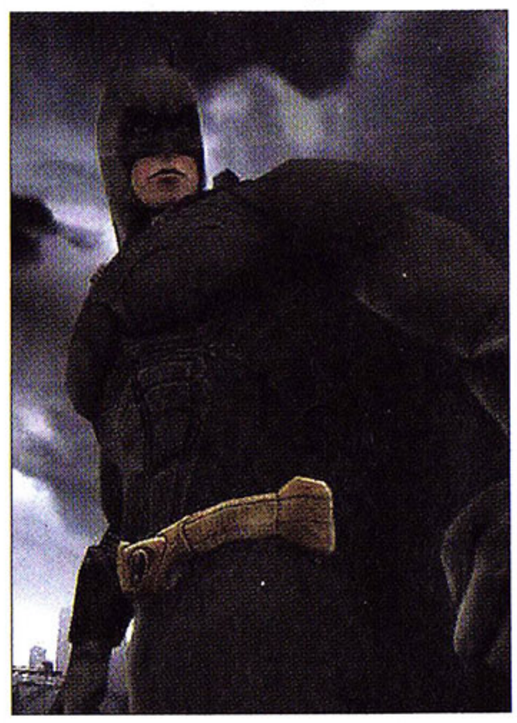
A. Futuristic Shooter
B. Colored-Block Puzzler
C. Fantasy Action/RPG
D. Text-Based Adventure

8 Who was not a character in the original Dead or Alive?

A. Ayane
B. Lei Fang
C. Tina
D. Mitsurugi

9 Batman has had so many great video games, it's hard to pick just one. How about you try picking which one wasn't a video game?

A. Batman: Dark Tomorrow
B. Batman: Revenge of the Joker
C. Batman: Rise of Sin Tzu
D. Batman: The Long Halloween



10 Have you ever pretended not to hear when a parent or significant other called you to dinner while you were in the middle of that really sweet part in that one game?

A. Yes
B. No

BREAKDOWN

11.8 billion dollars is the estimated size of the game market in 2011, as predicted by Strategy Analytics in a recent report

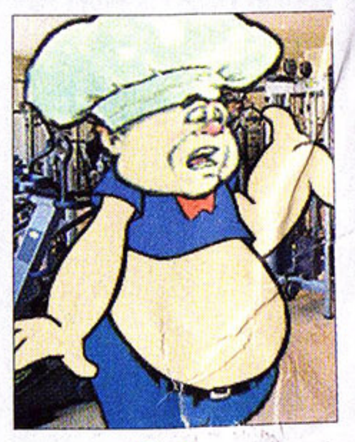
10 games based on Hanna-Barbera characters are planned in the new deal between Deadline Games and Eidos. They'll be smarter than the average game

2 million individual songs have been downloaded for Guitar Hero II on 360, according to a September announcement from Activision

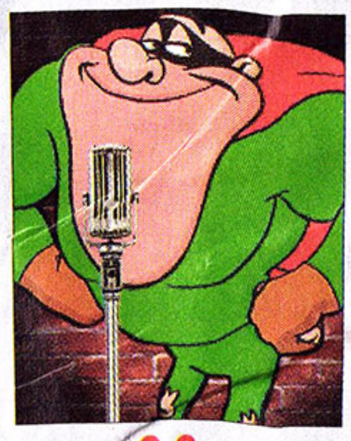
100 percent of our Halo 3 discs were scratched when we opened them. We're not kidding.

Infinity + 1 is how high we can count, and we totally bet you can't count any higher

★ Trivia Score & Rank ★

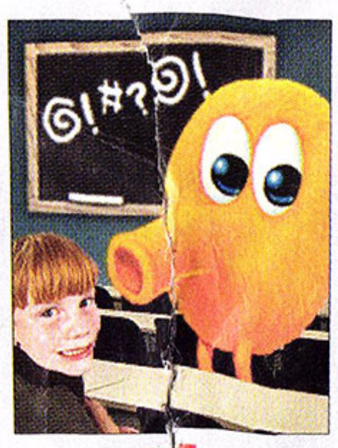


0-1:
Peter Pepper's DietTime



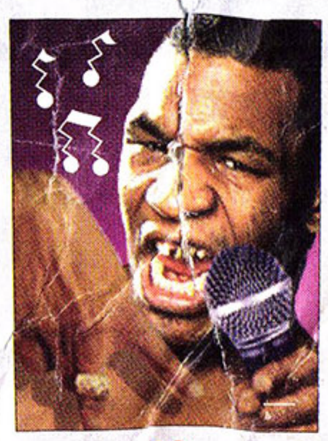
2-3:
Boogerman: Still Funny After All These Years

4-5:
Bubsy 4: Rehab



6-7:
Learning to Speak With Q*bert

8-9:
Ecco: Combat Evolved



10:
Mike Tyson's Karaoke Punch-Out

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Video Game Trivia Answers: 1. B 2. B 3. C 4. D 5. A 6. B 7. C 8. D 9. D 10. A

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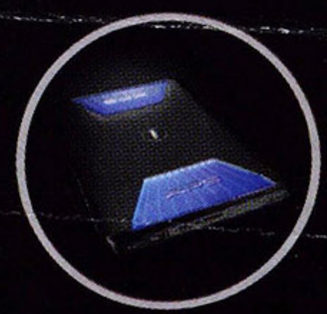

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