GAMEINFORMER

STARRING
**INFAMOUS
SECOND SON**

Indie Gaming is Here to Stay

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

As we near E3 and the full reveals of the next Xbox and the PlayStation 4, we are at an interesting crossroads. Big games from big publishers aren't going away, but the rise of independent game developers is pervasive.

In the mobile and PC spaces, small independent teams have gone from starving no-names to cutting-edge developers rolling in cash overnight thanks to the power of self-publishing, leaving the old trappings of big publishers in their wake.

In this issue we offer insight into some of the mistakes Microsoft has made in courting these developers with Xbox Live Arcade (p. 16), and hear Sony's vision of the future of independent game development and how it could become an important part of the success of a platform (p. 54).

It is pretty obvious to me that any platform – be it Wii U, Ouya, iTunes, PSN, Steam, or Xbox Live – needs the support of the independent community to create content to engage its users. Any company that doesn't open its doors and its wallet to these developers will most certainly crash.

While the Microsoft story is incomplete (I'm sure it will change its approach to indies with the announcement of the next Xbox), there are a lot of interesting lessons to be learned as independent game developers rise in power and the old-guard publishers learn to navigate, produce, and promote games in a much louder software space.

The good news is that all of this change benefits the player. The more creators there are, the more likely we will see innovation in gaming. This means more choice, more variety, and hopefully more people engaged in gaming as it continues to grow as an entertainment medium.

Cheers,

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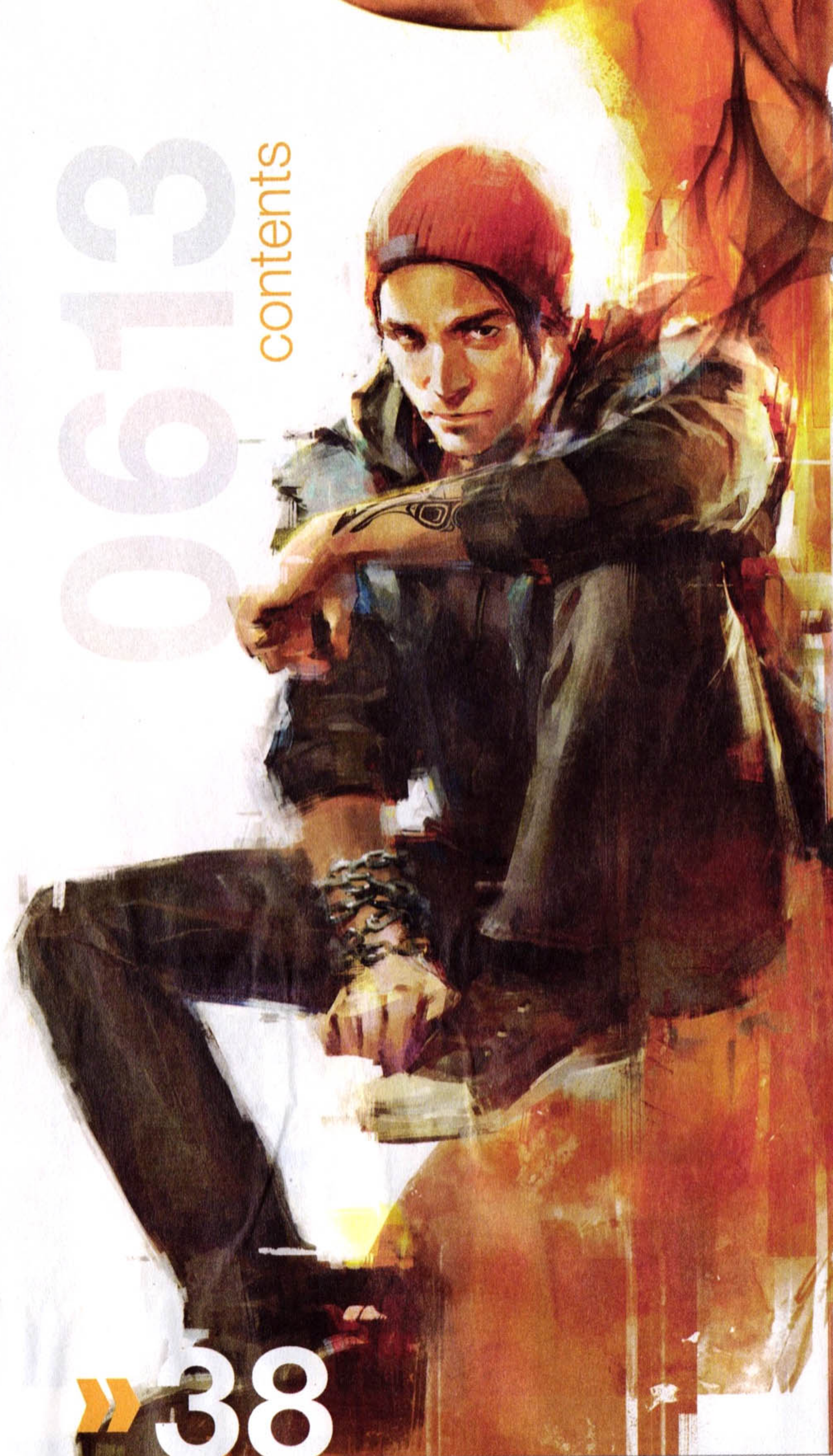
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The PlayStation 4 Issue

Sony has pulled back the curtain on its next-generation console, showing us what we can expect from the new PlayStation and the next generation of video games. We detail the specs of the PlayStation 4, hold its prototype controller in our hands, and check out upcoming games like Knack, Destiny, Killzone: Shadow Fall, DriveClub, and the next project from Media Molecule. We also visit Sucker Punch to get an in-depth look at the next entry in the Infamous franchise with Second Son.

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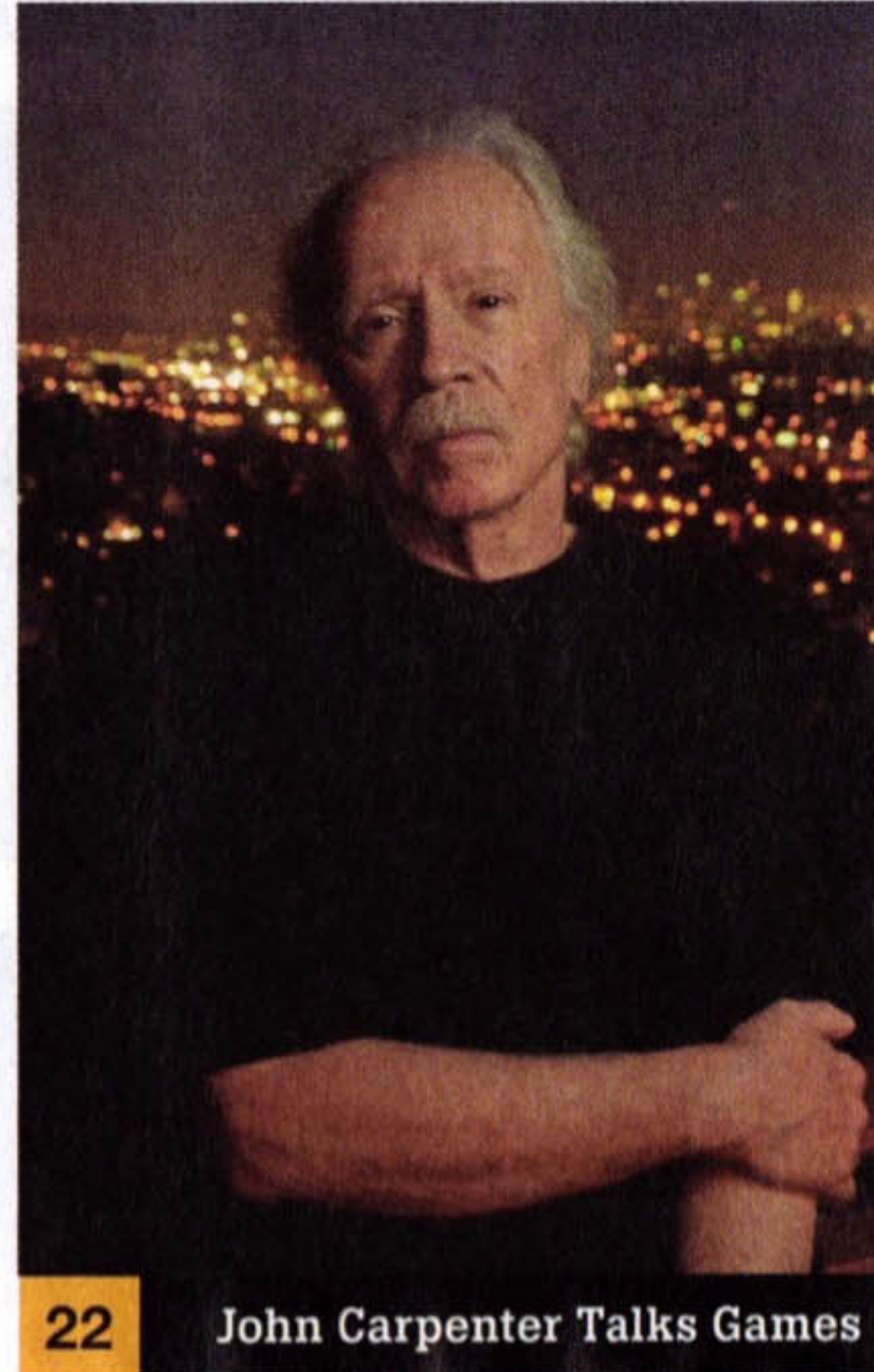
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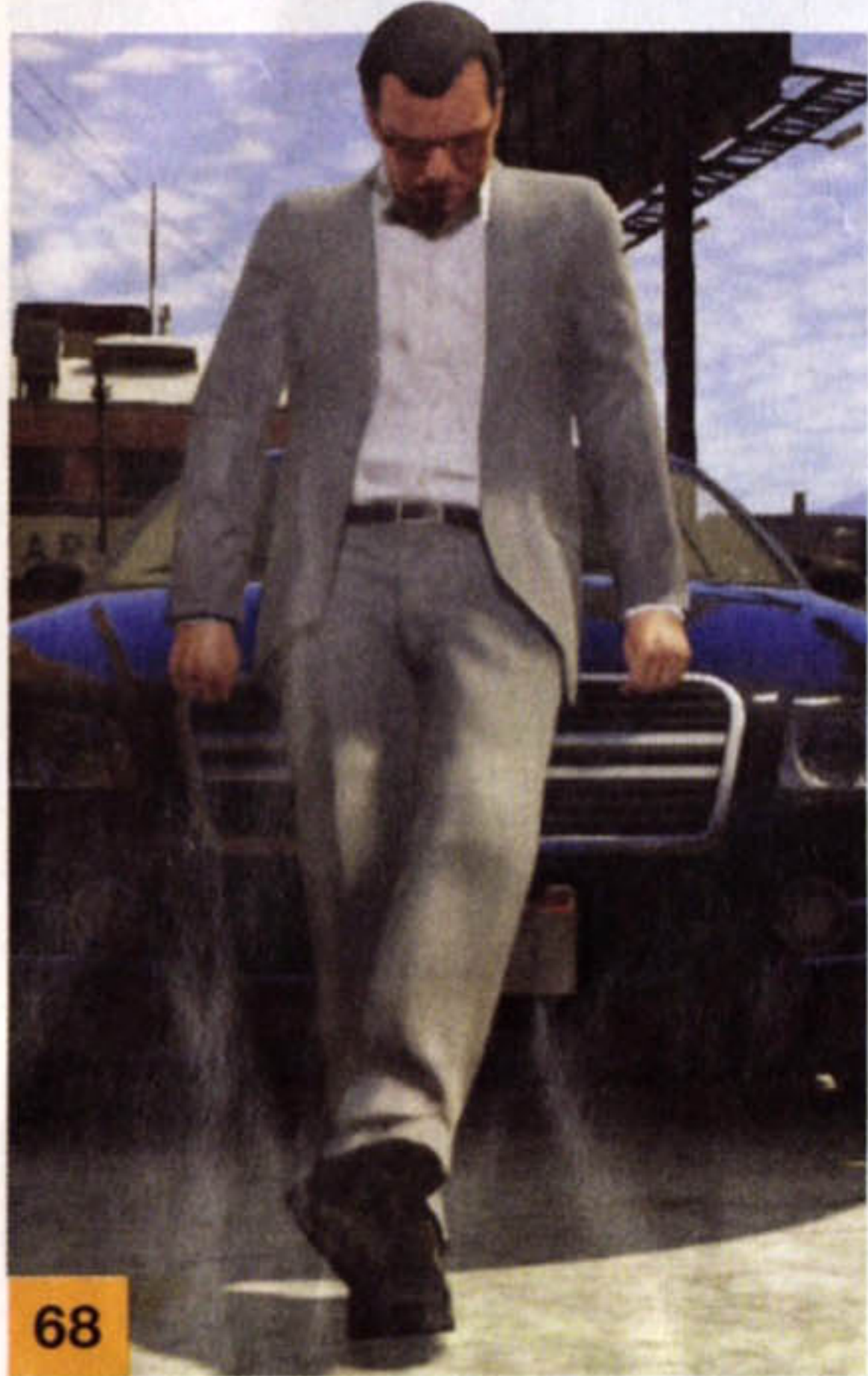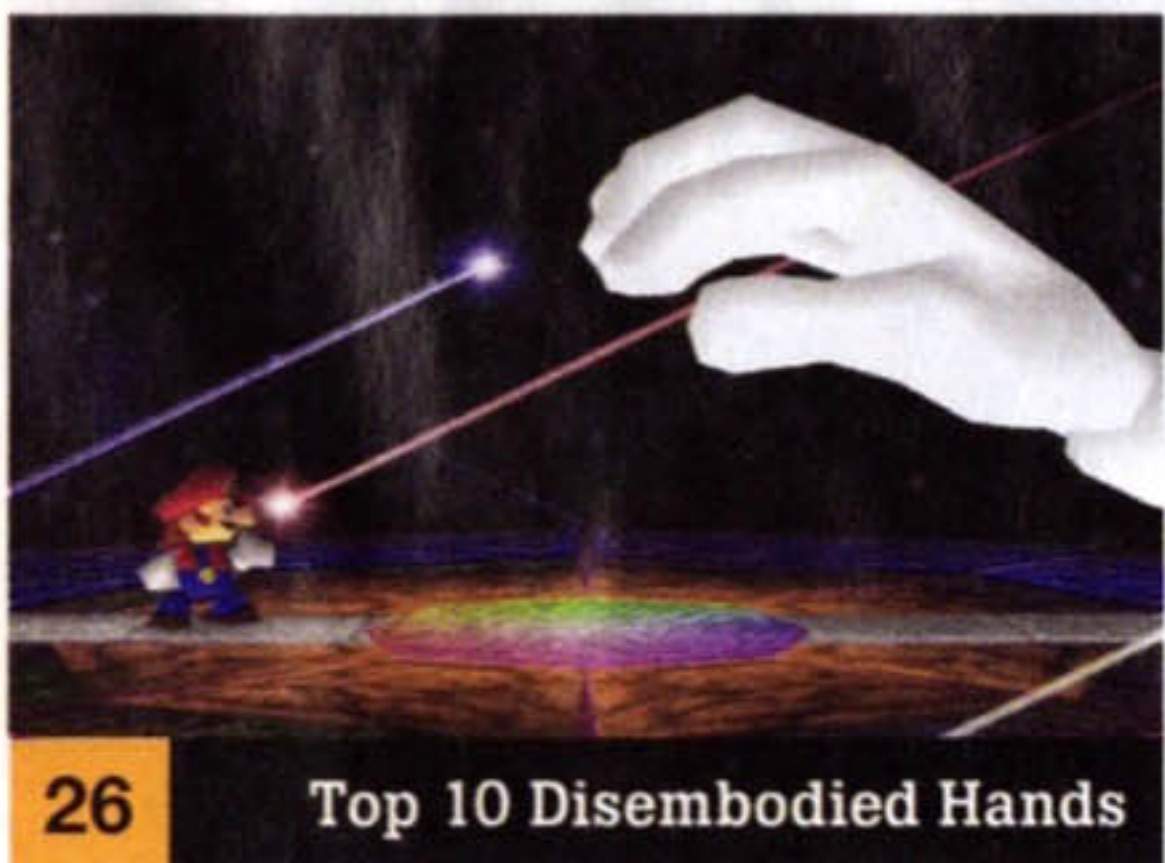
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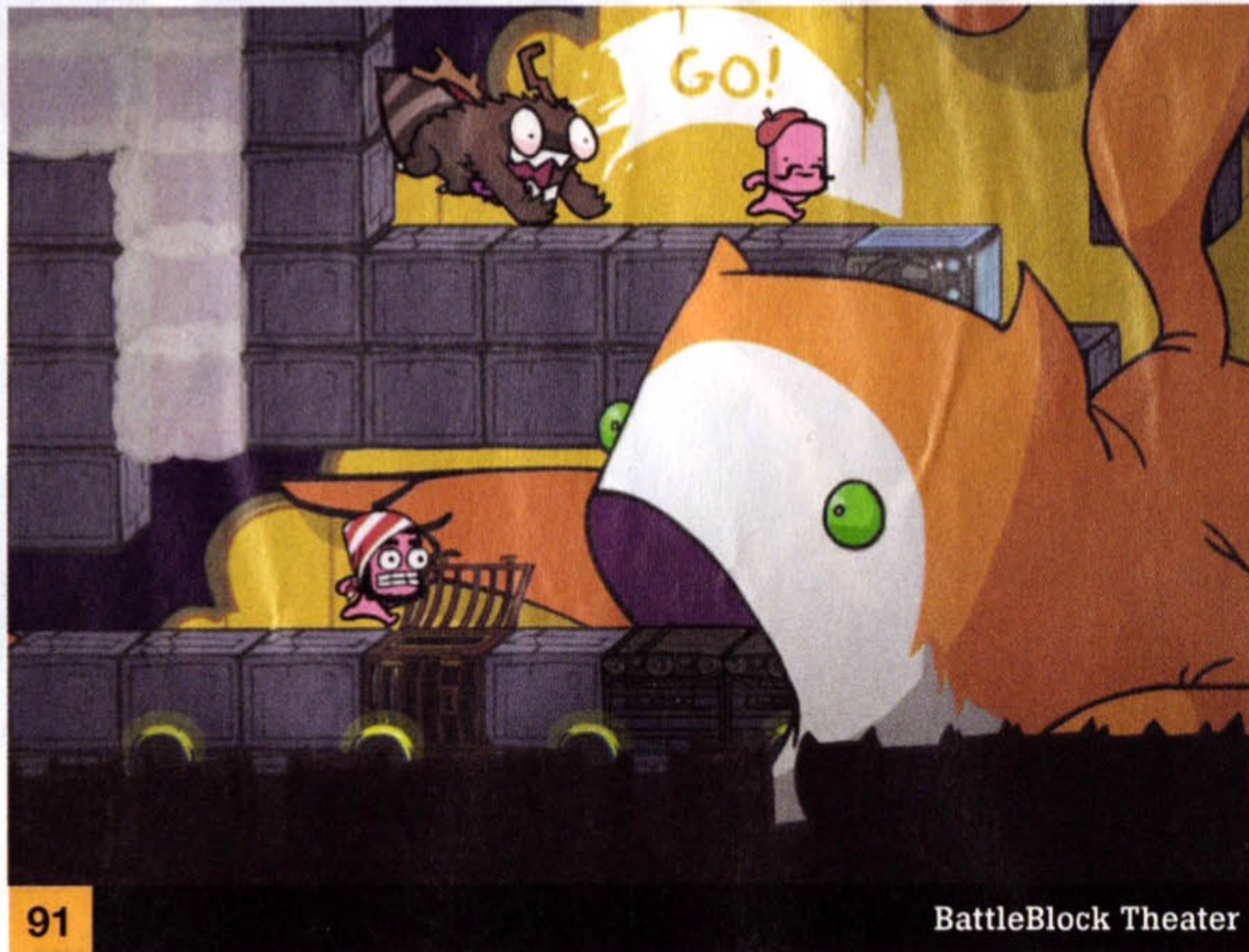
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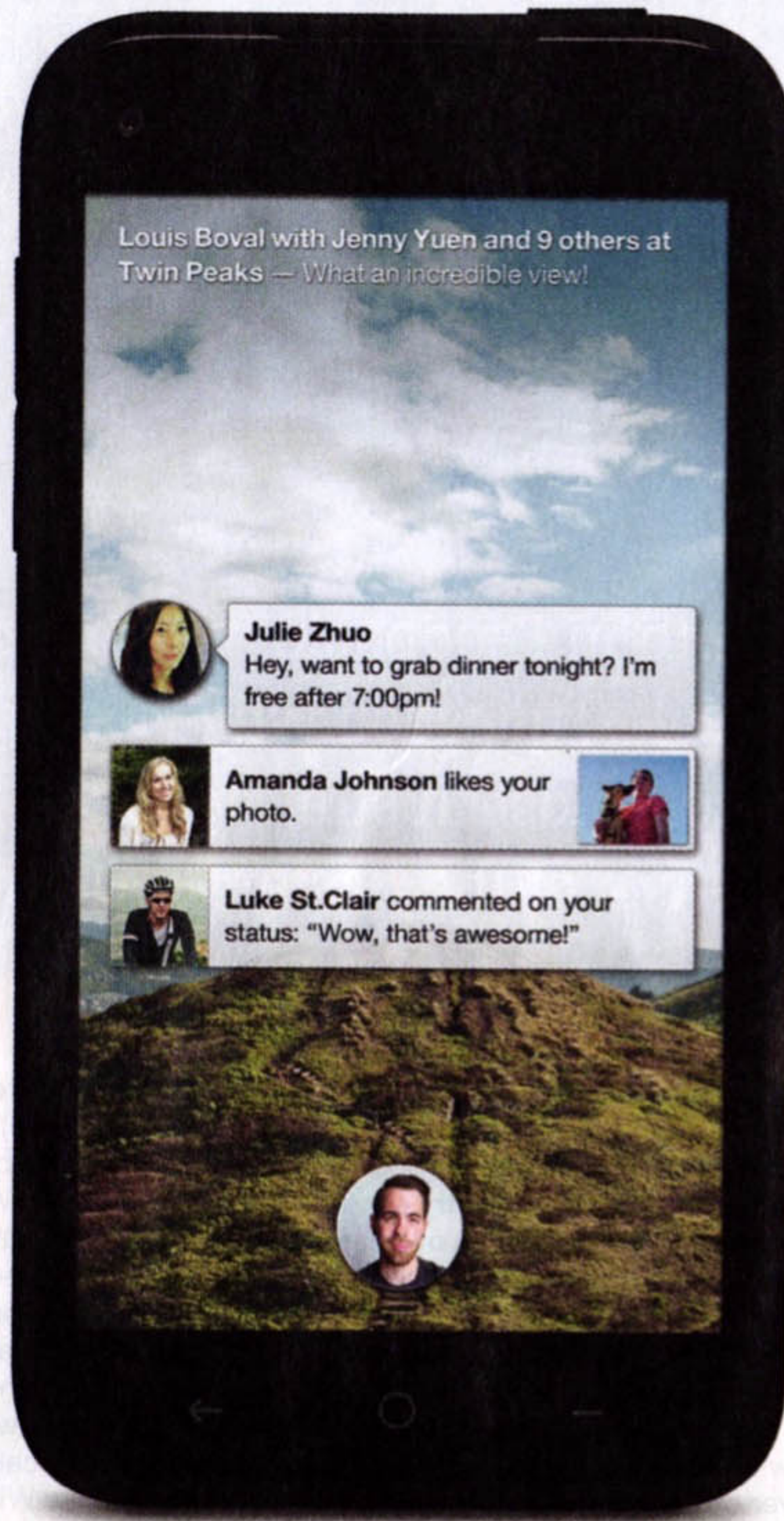
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feedback

This month in Feedback, readers fret over online-only games and consoles, question why video games have to be so violent, share their most frustrating video game memories, and revel in the return of the dastardly Darth Clark.

Out of the Shadows

I just got my April issue in the mail. I couldn't believe it when I saw the Thief cover art. I have always loved the Thief series and I cannot begin to express how happy I am that they are making a new game. Your magazine has made my day, and I now have a game that I am really looking forward to for next year.

Kristi Kountz
via email

I can't even begin to tell you how thrilled I was to see Garrett adorning the cover of your latest issue. I've been keeping up with what little Thief 4 news was released over the last three to four years. Your article was the first time I was really able to read and learn about the reboot, and for that I thank you. I just have one question: Do you have any idea whether Stephen Russell will be returning to his role as Garrett? I really can't picture him (hear him?) being voiced by anyone else.

Krista Roscovius
via email

This month a lot of readers expressed excitement at the prospect of slinking through the shadows with Garrett again. For better or worse, they'll have to adjust to a new voice; Romano Orzari is taking over the role of Garrett, and was chosen by Eidos Montreal for his ability to do stunt work during integrated voice- and motion-capture sessions.

Killing Creativity

I just finished reading Jeff Cork's editorial "Destroy All Humanoids?" (issue 240) and I can't agree more with what he said about the industry's overreliance on violence. While I do enjoy games like God of War and the new DMC reboot, I enjoy these games more for their stories than the violence they contain. It's tedious to see so many games that just involve shooting and killing. Where are the innovative games like Journey or Flower? How about more colorful and magical games like Ni No Kuni: Wrath of the White Witch? I think developers need to grow up and think outside of their comfort zone.

Stacy Moscariello
via email

I want to thank Jeff Cork for his "Destroy All Humanoids?" article. Developers and publishers in the industry hate it when people write video games off and say they're not art or a true storytelling medium. Maybe if those same developers stretched their imaginations a bit and stopped making games that cater almost exclusively to hormonal teenage boys, gaming would be taken more seriously. Developers can create almost anything they can imagine. It's time to explore new themes and embrace the unique possibilities that the medium provides.

Zak T.
via email

The Wait is Over

I both thank and scorn you for this month's wonderful Game Infarcer (issue 240). I have nearly lost my job and my family hardly knows me after the time I've devoted to organizing the Church of Saint Darth Clark. Your take on the modern gaming industry strikes a chord that shatters my funny bone. I look forward to seeing the responses that follow.

Tyler Conlon
via email

I love Game Infarcer, but what I love even more are the people who read the articles and fail to see the giant letters at the bottom of the page that say "PARODY." Is it bad that I almost enjoy the hate mail people send in more than Game Infarcer itself? Go Darth Clark!

Chance Taylor
via email

While most readers recognized our satirical sendup of the gaming industry this year, Darth Clark's provocative views once again got the better of some readers. Here's a sample of the hate mail we received – read more at gameinformer.com.

You Got Darth Clark'd

When I saw Darth Clark's "Stop Enjoying Your Games" editorial, I thought his picture alone was a heads-up that he is an ignorant young kid. But I gave him a chance and read it. Though I respect his opinions, it came off as a childish rant about how gamers should thank him for "his sacrifices." He speaks as if he's above everyone for being a game journalist. News flash, buddy: You're not. I usually love the pieces in Game Informer, but I have to say that this piece – from someone who apparently deserves my thanks and respect because he's so much better than everyone else for going to college and learning about games – is absurd. It was his choice to "give up a normal life" to be a game journalist. I'm not going to thank him for that – he's getting paid; that's enough. Just because he made a career of it, doesn't make this pious a--hole any better than the rest of us who play games but have other respectable careers.

Alexis Agosto
via email
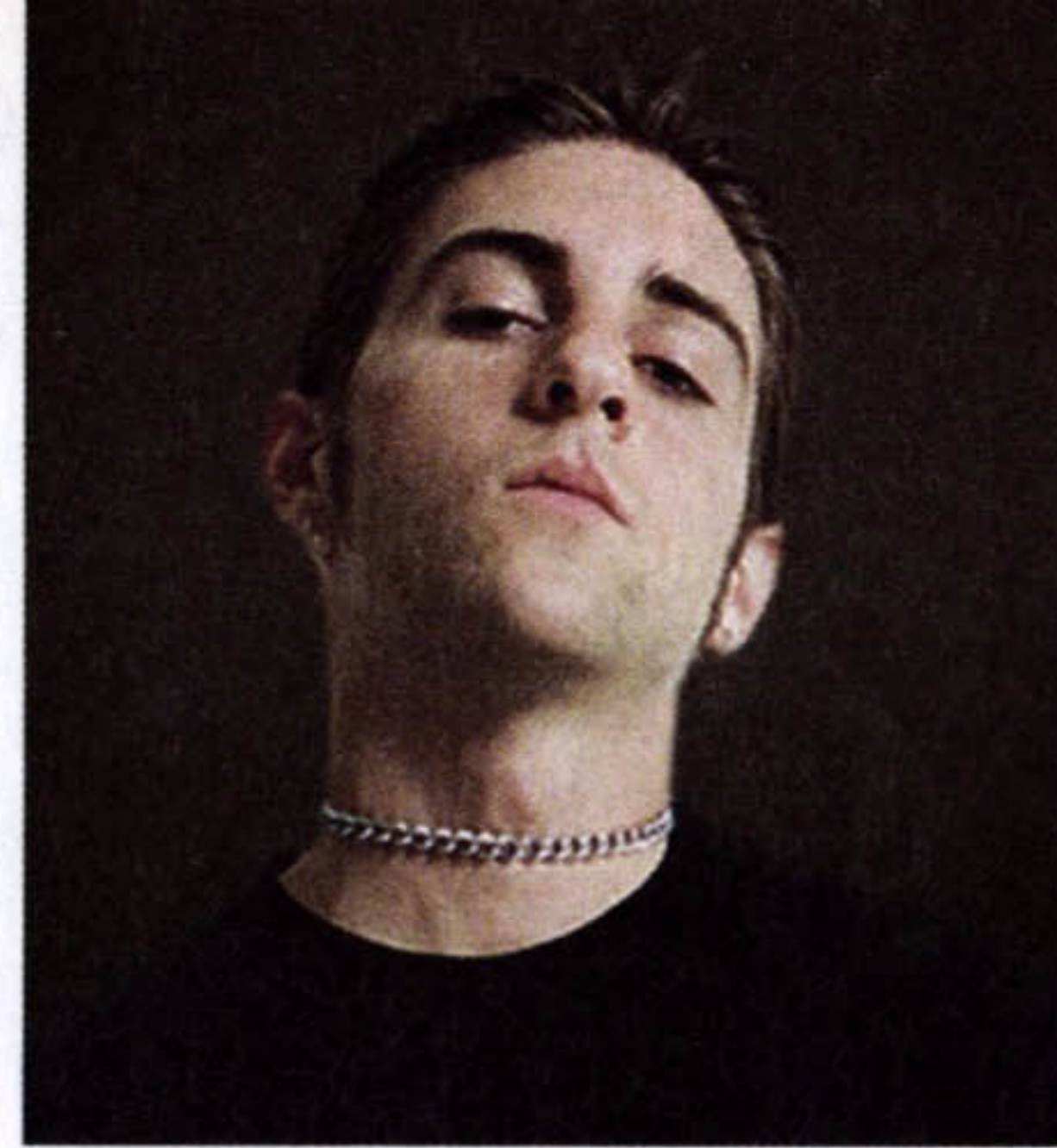
First off, I'd like to say that I have great respect for the magazine. That being said, relay this to Darth Clark: When I read your article "Stop Enjoying Your Games," you struck me as a cynical a--hole that feeds off of others' misfortunes. Of course you're supposed to enjoy games! I don't play for my health, a--hole! What kind of d--- tries to make everyone an unloved a--hole like yourself? You know what? Find a hole and die in it.

Max Hansen
via email

Thank you, Darth, for your invitation to approach video games on a deeper, intellectual level. I am a 44-year old gamer and have organized an independent study to revisit my college major: logic and philosophy. One of the topics I plan to investigate is how video games reveal so much more than just the entertainment they provide. They are a window to our culture and social world (Darth's challenge: "What does this game say about humanity and modern society?"). Also, games like Portal require outside-the-box thinking to solve problems from unexpected perspectives. Sometimes we do need mindless games just to help release our stress from the day, but Darth's article is so relevant to how video games and how we view life can be closely linked.

Barbara Brouillette
via email

Wait a minute...not only does Barbara seem genuinely pleased with Darth Clark's inflammatory editorial, but her response brings up a lot of good points. Now we're just confused – is this how Game Infarcer makes our readers feel? Because we don't like it!

gi spy

CANDID PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

(Left) This year at GDC, Andy saddled up to the bar with 2K Games' Mike Salmon.
(Top Right) Andy also caught up with Hit Detection's Justin Blankenship, Yahoo Games' Ben Silverman, and Spike TV's Jeremy Hoffman.
(Bottom Right) Also in attendance at GDC: IGN's Casey Lynch and consultant Tom Russo.

GI SPY
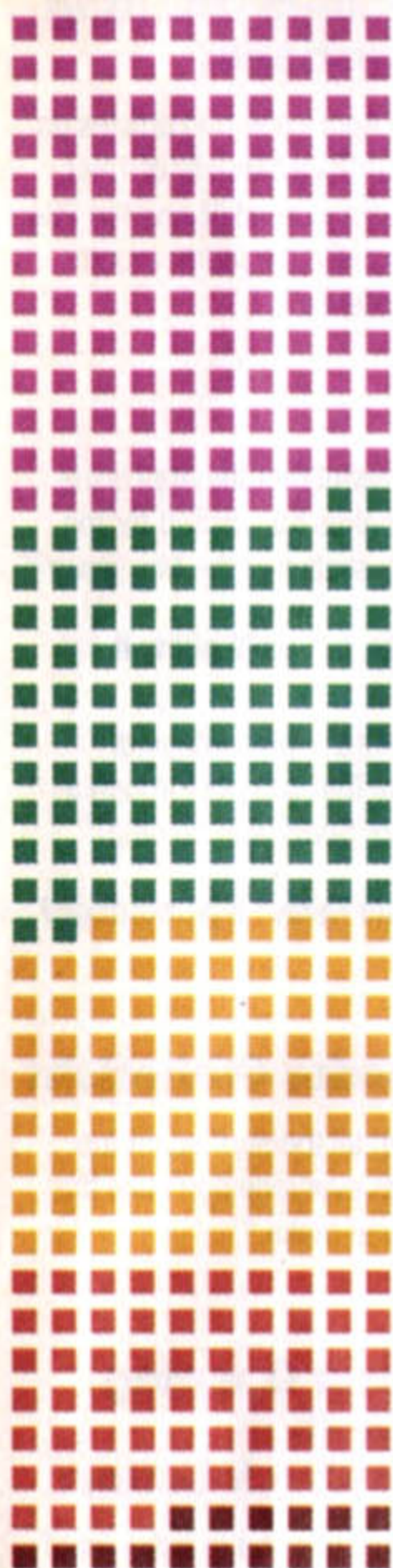
- **32%** Your Biggest Gaming Frustrations
- **26%** Thief Excitement
- **22%** Darth Clark Hate Mail
- **16%** Bored With Violence in Video Games
- **4%** Readers Defending Charizard as a Dragon

Get It Off Your Chest

In issue 240, we asked readers to share their most frustrating gaming experience with us. Countless readers used the opportunity to vent their anger; our favorite responses are included below.

The most frustrating experience I've had with gaming is that I've been trying to beat The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask since I was very young. I'm 16 now and I'm still stuck on the water temple.

Megan Roark

I was playing Dead Space 2 on hardcore mode, which only gives you three saves for the entire game. I died in a very stupid way around chapter 12, and I hadn't saved for a very, very long time. Something in me snapped and I couldn't control myself. My arms were flailing in anger as I yelled many things that I can't remember, and then my head slammed into the wood on my bunk bed. I fell back into my chair dizzy and angry at Dead Space 2.

Charlie Wilson

The most frustrating moment I've ever experienced was trying to beat the cursed book in Tales of Symphonia. It's a multi-level dungeon with different requirements to pass each level, and a single mistake can send you back to the beginning. It took my friend and I six hours to finally beat it, and we were both so frustrated that he threatened to break the game and pee on it.

Audrey Higginson

Bungie's New Destiny

When I read your article on Destiny (issue 240), I was astonished. Not just by the exciting features of the game, but the ambition of Bungie as a developer. To leave the Halo franchise behind and begin a project like this shows the determination and confidence Bungie has in itself to succeed.

Kristi Kountz
via email

I am super pumped for Bungie's next endeavor. However, I am concerned with Destiny's online requirement. Obviously Bungie has a good idea of what they're doing, but if I'm forced to be online, can someone reassure me that they will avoid the pitfalls and server issues of the early weeks of games like Diablo III and the new SimCity?

Lucas Harjung
via email

The excitement for Bungie's reveal of Destiny was diminished for some of our readers by the announcement that it's an always-online game. While a few readers said they're willing to give Bungie the benefit of the doubt, others called it a deal breaker. For what it's worth, Bungie has expressed confidence that it can avoid launch day problems titles like SimCity have suffered from.

Eighty-Sixing Offline?

What are your thoughts regarding the rumors of the next Xbox requiring an online connection to play games? I understand if Microsoft believes a constant Internet connection should be commonplace, but doesn't that leave the door open for a lot of customer service issues? I have been an Xbox user for more than a decade now, but at this point the PS4 is looking more and more appealing.

Raphael Martines
via email

The rumors that Microsoft's next console requires a constant Internet connection have been reported by multiple sources. We won't know for sure until the console is officially revealed (or even later, as Microsoft may not want to boast about such a feature at a press event), but we doubt you're the only Xbox fan factoring that decision into their next-gen purchasing plans. Frankly, we don't blame you.

(Left) Extra Life founder Jeromy Adams greeted former GI intern Jack Gardner, Tim Turi, and Ben Reeves at Gillette Children's Hospital Specialty Healthcare for their support in last year's marathon. **(Right)** The mystery surrounding who broke Game Informer's sign has taken a surprising twist thanks to this photographic evidence of Robotoki's Robert Bowling and Dan "caught red-handed" Ryckert.

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WINNER

1 Desiree Becker
Is Koopa Troopa or Yoshi the Vin Diesel of this situation?

2 Jay Walsh
You can take off the Batman mask, Kratos. You're not fooling anyone.

3 Tristan Wani
We kinda wish Predator would have killed Alien before Colonial Marines was allowed to happen.

4 Chris Humphries
Falcon knocks some of Kirby's teeth out. Wait...Kirby has teeth?! Gross.

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(Left) While checking out Batman: Arkham Origins, Bryan and Miller teamed up with WB Montreal's Martin Carrier and Ben Mattes, and WB's Kehau Rodenhurst and Kelly Ekins for a picture with the Dark Knight.
(Right) Afterwards, everyone had to give Mattes and Bruce Wayne some alone time.

NOTABLES

A DAY LONG
REMEMBERED
Disney Closes LucasArts

by Matthew Kato

When Disney purchased Lucasfilm last October, the Star Wars film and merchandising empire was the driving force behind the deal. LucasArts – the struggling video game publisher that had a long and proud history with gamers – was naturally an afterthought by comparison. At the time, Disney chairman and CEO Bob Iger said LucasArts' new masters would "look opportunistically at console" gaming, but likely focus on mobile titles and license out LucasArts' properties like Star Wars to other companies. Thus, the writing was on the wall for LucasArts as a video game developer and publisher the day the deal was signed. Just as the Disney takeover of Lucasfilm meant the end of George Lucas' formal involvement in the company he founded, the deal also meant the end of the games division he created back in 1982.

"After evaluating our position in the games market, we've decided to shift LucasArts from an internal development to a licensing model, minimizing the company's risk while achieving a broader portfolio of quality Star Wars games," read a statement sent out by Disney after the closure on April 3. "As a result of this change, we've had layoffs across the organization. We are incredibly appreciative and proud of the talented teams who have been developing our new titles."

The end of LucasArts means laying off almost 200 people according to *The Wall Street Journal*, and the possible end of games like Star Wars 1313 and Star Wars: First Assault, which were being developed in-house at LucasArts. However, Disney isn't ready to write their epitaphs yet. "Our other unannounced titles are fine," a source within LucasArts told us. "It just got to a point where, from a business standpoint, we couldn't continue developing those internally and keep up with the direction that the company was going. We're just looking at different models rather than internal production. There's always a possibility that [Star Wars 1313] can still come out via licensing."

A source told CNET that first-party development over at Disney Interactive remains a possibility, but this is by no means a saving grace for these games, as Disney Interactive has a long history of management troubles and internal studio closures. Subsidiary Junction Point Studios (the Epic Mickey series) was recently shuttered, and before that the publisher was in the process of getting out of console games with the closure of Black Rock Studio (Split/Second) and Propaganda Games (the

never-released Pirates of the Caribbean: Armada of the Damned RPG). The sole survivor is Disney Interactive's Avalanche Software, which is currently developing the Skylanders-esque Disney Infinity.

"Disney had mixed results with outsourcing," says Billy Pidgeon, market research analyst at Game Changer Research. Pidgeon describes Disney as being "very risk adverse," and believes the difficult matrix for Disney with LucasArts' properties is deciding how much risk it is willing to accept.

"If they are not willing to take the risk, then they are going to have to share the risk and share the profits as well," he says. Pidgeon thinks that Disney could have success if it turns to mega-publishers like Electronic Arts, Ubisoft, or Activision because of these companies' broad shoulders and stables of development studios. Disney has already turned to Warner Bros. and Traveller's Tales for Lego Marvel Super Heroes, demonstrating the company's current appetite for tapping external partners.

Star Wars may be the belle of the ball, but LucasArts' franchises like Grim Fandango, Indiana Jones, and Maniac Mansion are also twisting in the wind. We have no way of knowing what worth Disney has assigned to these series or its desire to see them live on. Unfortunately, from his perspective, Maniac Mansion mastermind Ron Gilbert isn't hopeful about getting the hold of the rights of the games he helped create. "I don't think this changes my chances for getting the rights to [Monkey Island] back at all," he says. "It might make it a tad more likely, but not much."

Pidgeon agrees that we shouldn't hold our breath that Disney sells off these franchises. "Disney doesn't do stuff like that," he says. "That's not their modus operandi. When they get something, they keep it. Once it goes Disney, it doesn't go back." Still, he thinks gamers could still see something from these smaller LucasArts properties if they were done on a small scale in order to turn a profit.

The closing of LucasArts is unsettling in many regards. While the company did not always manage its portfolio well, its history with gamers – from X-Wing and Dark Forces to Full Throttle and Monkey Island – is deep. Disney's stewardship of LucasArts' franchises could prove to be a fruitful next chapter or an ignominious end, but it will be a fate that LucasArts was never able to realize on its own terms. ◈

OVERHEA

"The industry has been male-dominated for so long, but we're currently witnessing an early process of changing."

— *Media critic Anita Sarkeesian*

"Both the costumes and activities witnessed at the party – we apologize and agree. It doesn't agree with our core values as an organization."

— *IGDA executive director Kate Edwards on the controversial appearance of scantily clad dancers at its party*

"We can get partway to where I think we're capable of going as a medium by borrowing from other mediums, by studying and stealing from them, but we can only go so far. We need some original ideas, tough problems solved. You have the opportunity, even now, 30 years after the creation of this medium, you have the opportunity to determine what it's going to become, and change the world."

— *Deux Ex co-creator Warren Spector*

"Our Shakespeare won't be a teller of tales, but a crafter of characters. Someone will make characters you want in all your games... as a companion for life...World of Warcraft is going to be here for 20 years, 30 years. What should we do when characters die? Should we bury them? Or should we pass them on to our descendants? Think of a world where the best way to know our ancestors is through their virtual companions."

— *Carnegie Melon University professor Jesse Schell*

"There is a whole world out there beyond games, and maybe we should pursue more of that world all of the time. The most successfully interesting games tend to emerge from a conversation that occurs between games the medium and the world."

— *Georgia Institute of Technology professor Ian Bogost*

"Our audience is leaving us behind. The world is changing, it has already changed, and we have not been doing a very good job of keeping up."

— *Microsoft Studios narrative designer Tom Abernathy*

RD

With thousands of programmers, animators, and producers in attendance, the Game Developers Conference is a great place to take the pulse of the industry. This year, much of the chatter had to do with challenging the game industry to move out of its comfort zone, whether that be escaping well-worn game design conventions, embracing more diverse characters, or making the development culture more inclusive to women. Here are some choice quotes.

"The people who tell you to fight back won't get your death threats for you. They won't get your hate mail. The problem is that...not everyone wants to get gored."

— *Storm8 game designer Elizabeth Sampat on standing up to misogyny in gamer culture*

"I know so many game developers, and so many of them are wonderful, smart, creative, considerate, and adult. Somehow those personalities are not always reflected in the games that we make."

— *Gears of War writer Susan O'Connor*

"We all know diversity is good for business. But to get there, we have to evolve and promote a new kind of culture."

— *Journey producer Robin Hunicke*

"Please change it so that I can work at a place where I can bring [my daughter] and she can say, 'I'm proud of where my mom works,' and feel that she will be safe there and not gazed upon."

— *Wizardry co-creator Brenda Romero*

"I think we need to get to a point where we maybe get to writing about characters that are not so bloodthirsty. It's up to us as writers to make a game with more options."

— *Spec Ops: The Line lead writer Walt Williams*

AT GDC

Barreling Into **NEXT-GEN**

interview by Matt Bertz

Ubisoft Montreal CEO Yannis Mallat talks about PlayStation 4, the free-to-play revolution, and welcoming former Assassin's Creed and Prince of Persia creative director Patrice Désilets back.

What were your thoughts on the PS4 announcement? It seemed like they came out of the gate pitching a very developer friendly system.

Yeah, it was so relieving. It still is a very long cycle – we were hoping for the usual five-year kind of thing, so at some point we had no other choice but to rely on ourselves and our own vision of what next-gen could be. So, we did start on high-end PCs a while ago following our own vision – connected, immersive, and social. We were very happy, and then the architecture came as a candy on the cake.

Ubisoft hit a home run with Assassin's Creed. Do you think you can capture lightning in the bottle twice with a blockbuster new IP for next-gen?

That's the goal. I think each new transition is a good moment to bring new IPs, that's for sure. When I see the buzz around Watch Dogs and all the excitement, I think we are holding something there. I'm very excited.

Where do you think gamers will notice the biggest leap forward with next-gen consoles? Will it be with graphics, AI, or emotional storytelling?

It's a very large question. I think that amount of power gives a lot of freedom to our creators, and then it's up to them to tailor and tame that power to what suits the game the best. You know Ubisoft – it's a bottom-up company and I used to say that I only know one recipe to make AAA games. You gather the best team then you give three things – faith, means, and insane challenges. After that it's up to them to craft their own creative vision and then be able to exploit all this power. It's really on a game-by-game basis. I think minds will be blown

by the graphics as a hook, as an entry door. To me, what's lying beneath that or beyond that will keep our players involved. When you think about that, even on current-generation systems it always takes some time for developers to tame the machine – especially the PlayStation 3. This time we may see creating amazing games on the visual side of things very quickly, but to me the social complement and connected thing will be the next-gen experience compared to the current generation system. That being said, you'll be blown away by graphics.

The biggest topic of GDC seems to be the free-to-play model. From the perspective of someone who makes blockbuster games with deep emotional experiences, do you believe the free-to-play model can be merged harmoniously with the types of games you make?

The short answer is yes. The longer answer is, and you hinted about that, it really has to do with where does the game bring value? It depends on the game. Truly, we can have our creatives thinking about many ways to expand the experience of an Assassin's Creed or Far Cry. When the gamer feels that it's okay for him to have a microtransaction or explore a world in a free way and then want more that I think it will be fine. I think it's tough to initially put those things as non-coexistent. We'll see as a game per game basis.

Many older gamers like to lose themselves in the escapism of the game, and having to think about your wallet every 15 minutes is a very jarring experience that pulls you out of that fantasy. Another entire generation is growing up playing games on the iPad

where that may not be as big of an inhibitor. How do you bridge that gap?

Well, think of it this way. The gamer's market was 300 million people years ago, and now it's probably two billion playing games. There are 1.5 billion people playing who just weren't into games before. That's probably their first step into this form of entertainment. My wife is playing Candy Crush. I like to think of that as her Pac-Man, just late. It will just help grow the pie.

Do you think we're going to see another massive spike in team sizes for next-gen projects or do you think the evolving tool-sets will help mitigate that and allow teams to be more efficient?

Well, we're pretty efficient already. It's a brand per brand thing, at least from our point of view. You have to have this critical mass of success and appeal with gamers, fans, and community before investing more because you need to make sure the gamers really love what you do so they'll buy more. This is how we approached our brands starting with Assassin's Creed. So, yes, chances are that if you can enjoy enough success then it's less risky to give more to those guys and this is what we've been doing. The key thing is being cautious on delivering quality games. I think Far Cry 3 is a great example. Now that we have that game and that many people enjoying it, chances are we will continue to grow the brand.

You have a reunion taking place right now with [Assassin's Creed creator] Patrice Désilets. When did you hear Ubisoft won the bid for his studio and projects?

That was during Christmas break for me. So, early January. Right now, [Patrice's team] are all a part of Ubisoft, and the 170 guys are hard at work on Ubisoft's unannounced project.

You mean 1666...

It's public, right? So yeah, we're really happy to welcome those guys. More specifics on that when we're ready to communicate.

Ubisoft also picked up South Park: Stick of Truth in the THQ auction. Which part of Ubisoft is overseeing the project?

The third-party department in San Francisco. I've seen some of the game and it's...wow. Get ready [laughs]. It's cool; it's really cool. It's South Park on steroids.

We haven't heard anything in a while on Rainbow Six Patriots. When can fans expect to get another glimpse of that?

Trust me, I can't wait. It's true, there has been a change of leadership and we can't wait to communicate more on this one but right now the team is hard at work on something great. ◈

Boarding Columbia

THE STORY OF BIOSHOCK INFINITE CONTINUES WITH **THE SIEGE OF COLUMBIA** BOARD GAME

by Matt Miller

Much of the video gaming world has spent recent weeks exploring the city of Columbia in Irrational's long-awaited BioShock Infinite. The adventure of Booker DeWitt and Elizabeth in the dysfunctional floating city has proven to be one of the best game experiences in years. For those hungry for more opportunities to explore Columbia, Plaid Hat Games is set to release BioShock Infinite: The Siege of Columbia board game this summer.

Plaid Hat isn't one of the biggest companies in tabletop gaming, but its lineup of titles in recent years has proven its worth. Its stellar cooperative game, Mice and Mystics, and its recent sci-fi gang war title, City of Remnants, both garnered critical acclaim. Someone at Irrational must have enjoyed those games, as Plaid Hat was entrusted with the keys to Columbia. "I don't know what exactly caused them to go with us over some of our bigger, more prominent competition, but I'm incredibly grateful that they gave us a chance," says Plaid Hat Games president Colby Dauch. "I think the product will speak for itself that they made a good call there."

The Siege of Columbia fits comfortably as a partner game to BioShock Infinite. The events of both games coincide, but we get a whole new perspective on the action. "We knew from the beginning that we didn't want it to be about playing as Booker and going around Columbia, fulfilling the events of BioShock Infinite. That's already in the video game," Dauch explains. "We wanted to do something different, so instead we put players in the role of the Founders and the Vox Populi." Players control leaders from each faction, and in the war that ensues, each player fights to take control of the city. Dozens of miniatures represent the handymen, mechanized patriots, boys of silence, and other iconic denizens. Special mini leader figures like Daisy Fitzroy and Comstock also wander the board, able to help turn the tide of a fight. The special figures for Songbird and the airship offer opportunities to fly to new locations and devastate opponents.

One of the most interesting features in Siege of Columbia is the inclusion of game piece miniatures that represent not only your troops in the war, but also the roving characters of Booker and Elizabeth. Even as you engage in combat with opposing forces, Booker and Elizabeth independently move around the board. The duo acts as an additional force for chaos, attacking both sides of the conflict. Early in each turn, a new event card is drawn that changes the state of the city, but also dictates Booker's movements. Using a personalized hand of cards, players can spend cards to vote whether the event will occur, guiding Booker's aggressive abilities in one direction or another. Alternately, an event might bring Elizabeth close enough that one side could take control of her or have her open up a tear that provides much-needed supplies to whichever faction is near enough to capitalize.

Cards that aren't used to vote on events can be played toward upgrading your army, adding new units, and enacting special abilities during combat. Players are faced with the tactical choice each turn of using cards for money, influence, or battle. "How I spend those cards each turn is the crux of the strategy in the game," Dauch says.

While the Risk-style deployment of army units follows a traditional board game structure, innovation is introduced through one of the familiar elements from the video game. "Moving is one of the cool parts of the game because of the skylines and the way we've worked those in," Dauch says. Rather than the comparatively slow movement of pieces to adjacent locations on the board, units can hop onto the skylines and zip to distant spaces. Each time they do, a bad roll of the dice might mean those forces tumble to their deaths.

Beyond some fascinating gameplay mechanics, The Siege of Columbia may draw in a lot of players through the force of its gorgeous presentation, art, and materials. Fifty-plus miniatures are all sculpted in painstaking detail, new original art is based directly on the memorable designs from the video game, and in-game text and cards are bolstered by the cooperation of Irrational. "Right up until the end, they were adding their little flourishes," Dauch tells us in reference to his team's cooperation with Irrational. "'Instead of saying the girl Elizabeth, say the Lamb Elizabeth. Instead of calling this card Booker, call it False Shepard.' We knew some of those things, but it really helped to smooth over those last pieces of theme and polish."

The worlds of tabletop and video games share a common pool of players, so it's intriguing to see how each medium can capitalize on a given fiction. The Siege of Columbia looks like a love letter to fans who can't get enough of BioShock Infinite's enticing premise. Can the board game live up to the legacy established by its virtual sister project? We'll be ready this summer to find out.

XBLA
EXOD
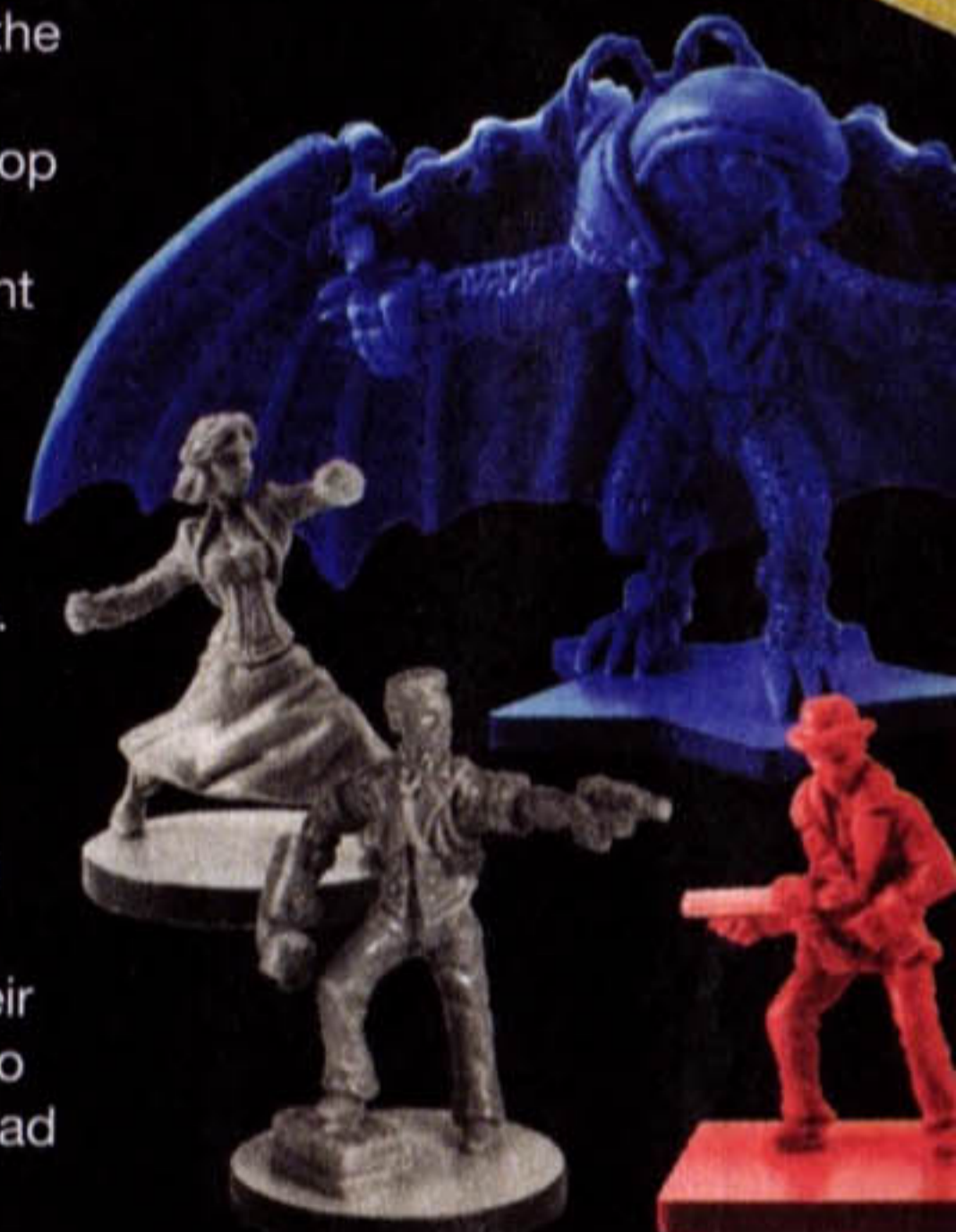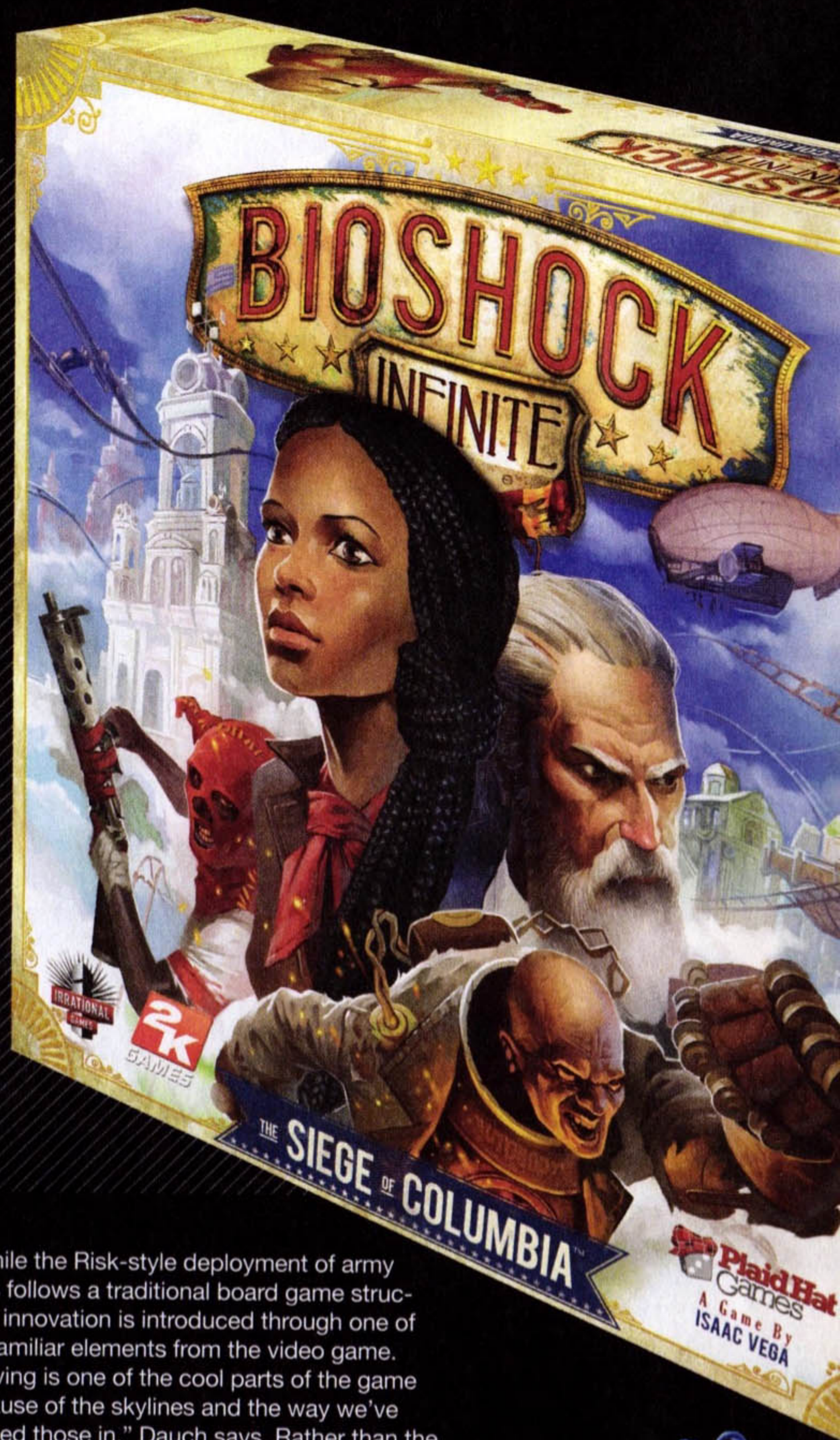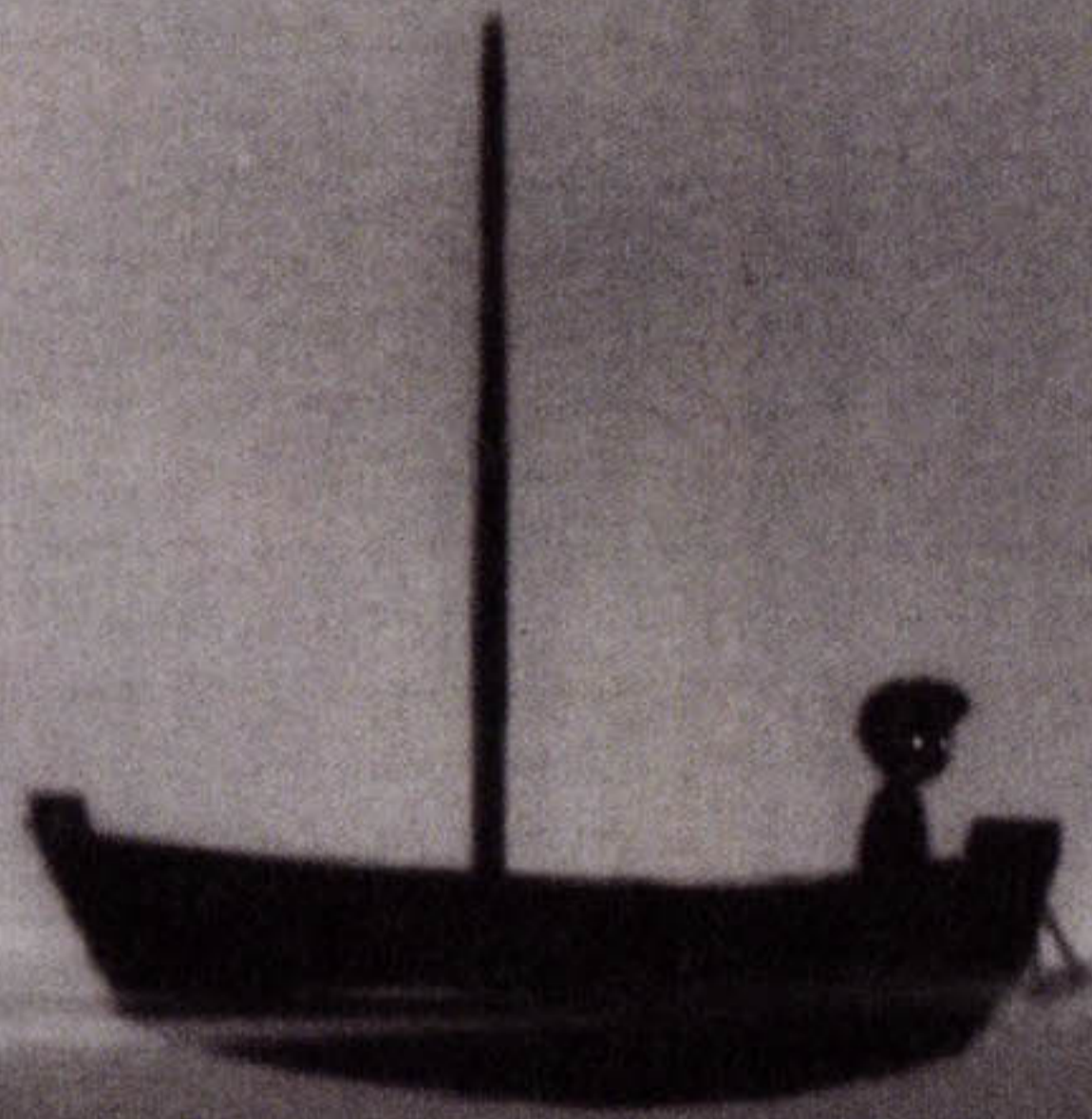
AS INDIE DEVELOPERS FLOCK TO OTHER PLATFORMS, CAN MICROSOFT REINVIGORATE XBOX LIVE ARCADE?

US

Brian Provinciano knew he did not want to release his game, Retro City Rampage, 24 hours after New Year's Day. When doing his homework almost two years ago at PAX, the independent developer asked everyone he could about the Xbox Live Arcade marketplace, and he didn't hear good things about the release window near the celebratory date.

The developer doesn't know why it is a bad date (though one can speculate that it has to do with the influx of new retail games out for the holiday season, or people more concerned with going out to celebrate than buying a new downloadable game). Unfortunately for Provinciano, his game came out on January 2, and he didn't have a choice in the matter. Microsoft gets to choose when a game releases on XBLA, not the developer. Some games end up releasing during busy holiday seasons, or so suddenly that developers don't have time to put together their own marketing initiative.

Provinciano eventually made Retro City Rampage, his love letter to Grand Theft Auto and the Nintendo Entertainment System, available for the widest possible market. This meant jumping through all the necessary hoops to port the game to WiiWare, Xbox Live Arcade, PlayStation Network, PC, and the Vita. After selling 100,000 units and taking some time to reflect on the process, Provinciano says he won't spend the time and energy needed to put another game on a Microsoft platform.

"It's just so needlessly difficult to get your game out on XBLA, and at the end of the day your game is feature-identical on all of the platforms," Provinciano says. "The XBLA one was over a year total of work, and I don't know how many man-months of work, but it was a lot of time and money. The Xbox sales really got hurt by Microsoft's policies, which were trying to benefit [Microsoft]."

Provinciano isn't the only developer to feel this way, and it's causing Microsoft — once a mecca for indie developers — to lose games to other platforms such as Steam, the PlayStation Network, and iOS.

by Louis Garcia

Super Meat Boy
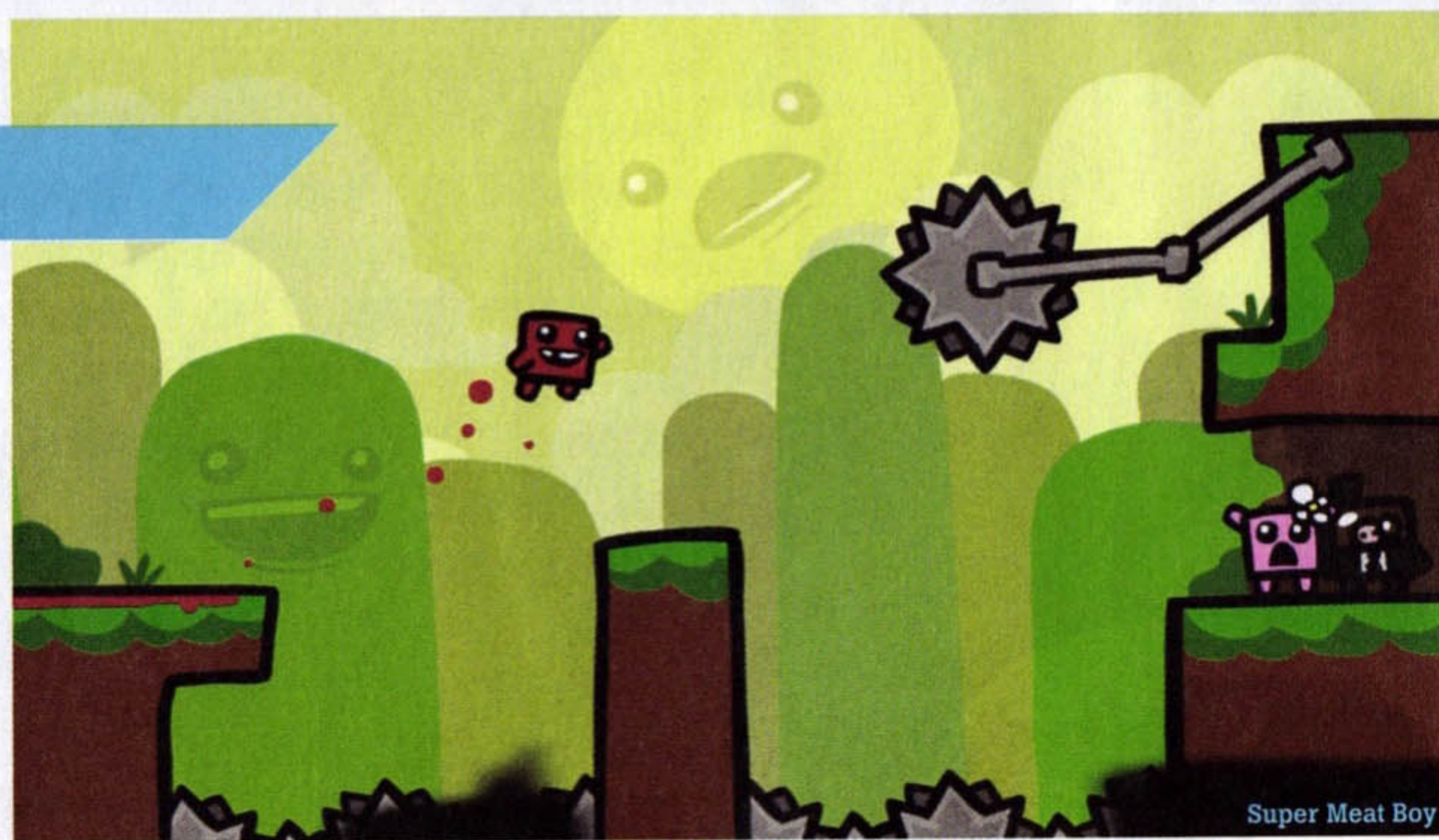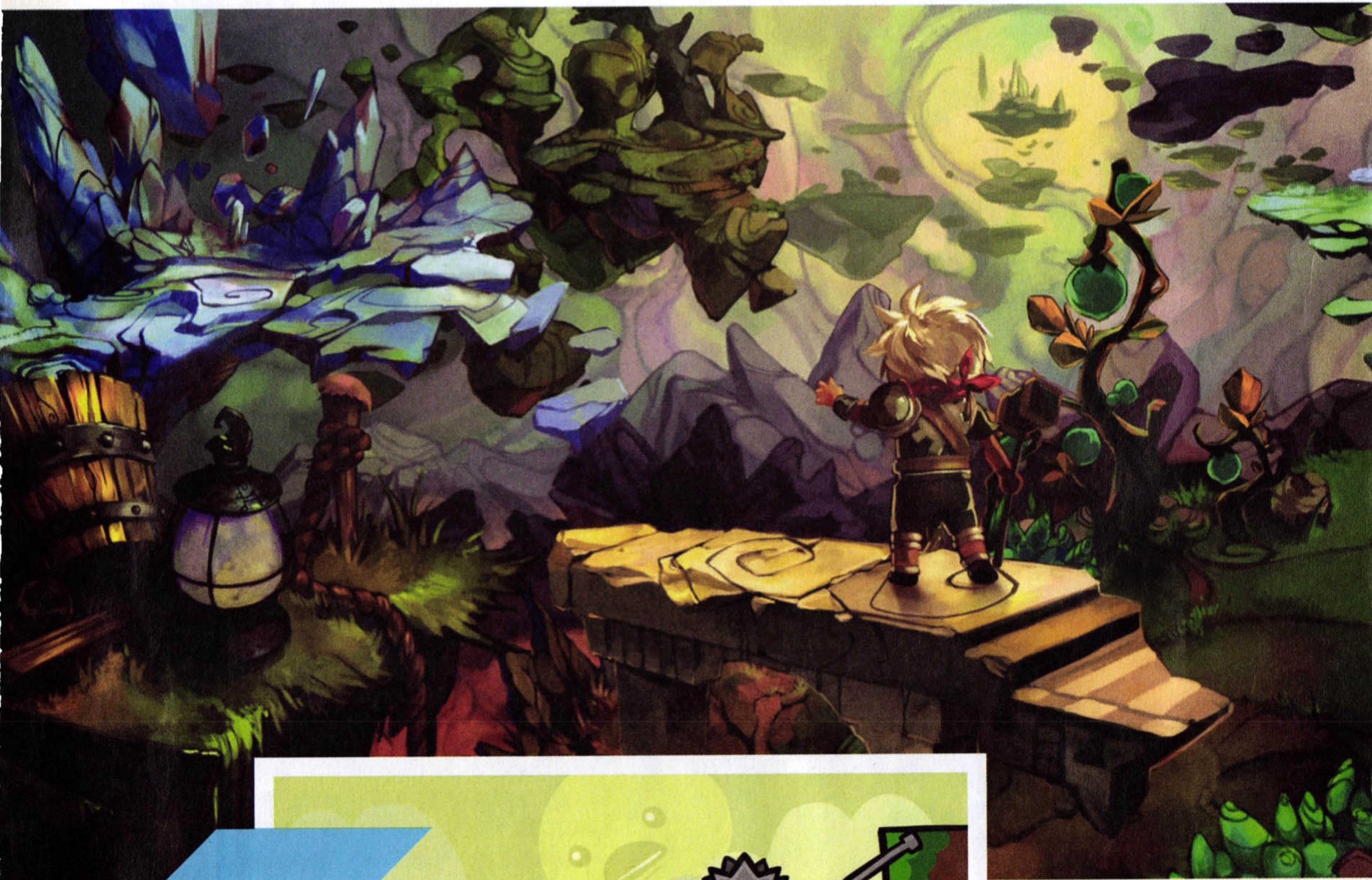
THE REBIRTH OF INDIE

Downloadable games didn't hit their stride on consoles until the 2005 version of Xbox Live Arcade on Xbox 360. For the first time, there was a way for independent developers to widely distribute a video game for a console.

Though a few titles like Geometry Wars found success early on, the moment Xbox Live Arcade found wider acceptance can be traced back to the Summer of Arcade promotion in 2008. Jonathan Blow's Braid and The Behemoth's Castle Crashers released during this promotion – two of the most successful indie games of all time, both critically and commercially. Braid turned Jonathan Blow into an overnight millionaire, and more than 2.6 million people have

purchased Castle Crashers to date.

Games like these paved the way for more indie success stories such as PlayDead's Limbo and Team Meat's Super Meat Boy.

"Back then, Xbox was the only console you could make money off of realistically," says Team Meat's Edmund McMillen. "It was the only console platform."

PlayStation Network, Steam, and WiiWare were ramping up at the same time, and though World of Goo did well on the Nintendo platform, the service never found the widespread success XBLA enjoyed.

"The games that did well on the Wii sucked sales-wise compared to stuff on Xbox Live because this was back when Steam was just still building steam," McMillen says.

XBOX LIVE ARCADE ALLURE

When everything goes right, Microsoft unearths a gem of a game, finds a good release date for the indie developer, offers the chance to be seen by countless gamers in promotions like the Summer of Arcade, and puts the game in front of millions of console owners eager to buy the next big title. Braid and Castle Crashers were featured in Xbox marketing promotions, and both became popular quickly thanks to the Microsoft-driven marketing and premier placement on the Xbox 360 dashboard.

Developer Andy Schatz of Pocketwatch Games enjoys crafting games for the Xbox 360 because of these benefits Microsoft offers developers.

"On Xbox Live [Arcade] what they're trying to do is maintain a high level of quality for everything that they launch so that customers have an expectation that what they get will work with all the features that they're trying to push," Schatz says.

He built his game, Monaco, for XBLA because the marketplace is strong and has a big audience. He also likes the prevalence of headsets among 360 gamers, because Monaco is a great cooperative experience whether you're sitting on the same couch or connecting online. For Schatz, releasing the game on XBLA make sense, but it does present unique challenges.

Bastion

Fez
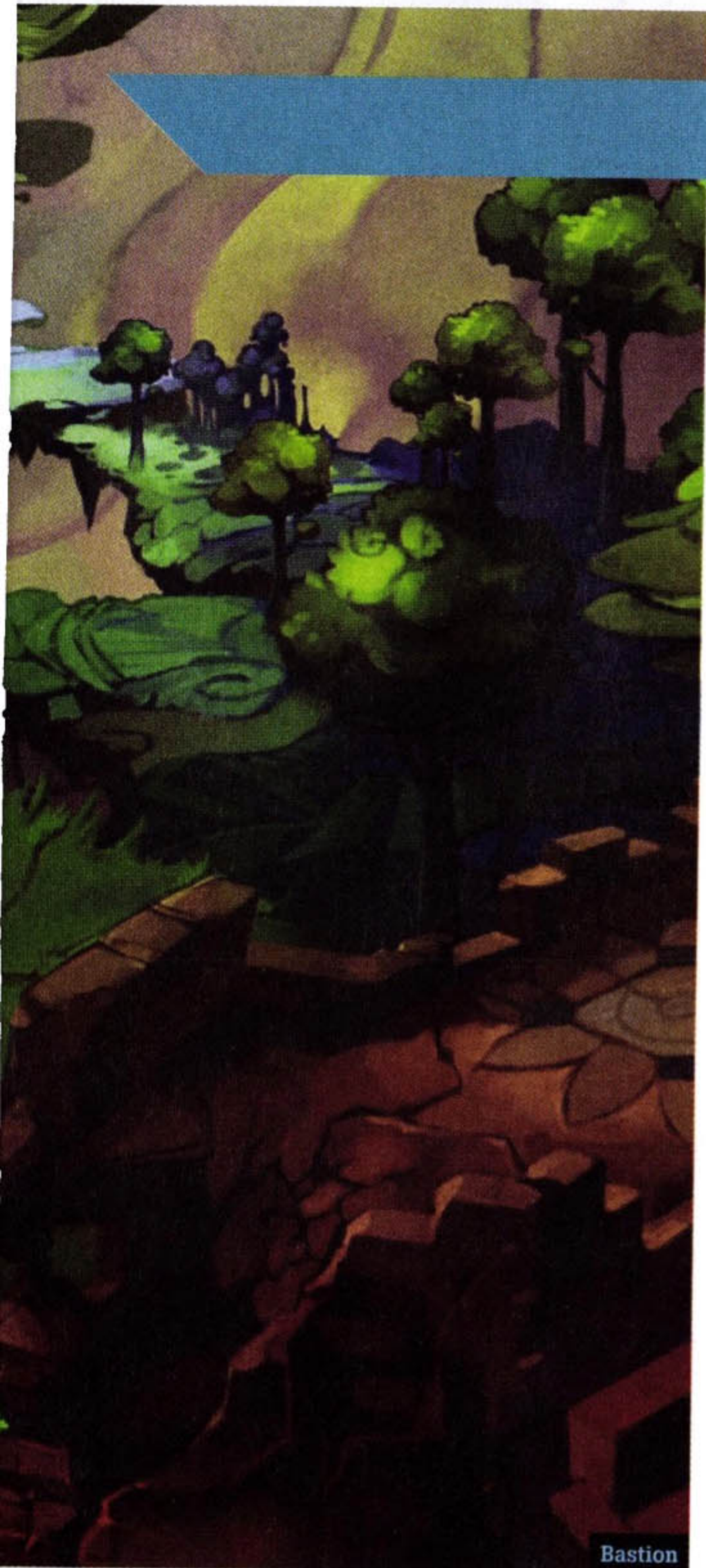
"The big difference is certification," Schatz says. "On the PC and Mac side you have a lot more freedom to push out a broken build, or push out something that's incomplete or doesn't have the full variety of features to support the whole ecosystem. That's really just a different sort of corporate policy on the side of Steam versus XBLA."

Each platform has its own policy quirks, though some are more lenient and friendly than others. But not all developers have good experiences dealing with Microsoft.
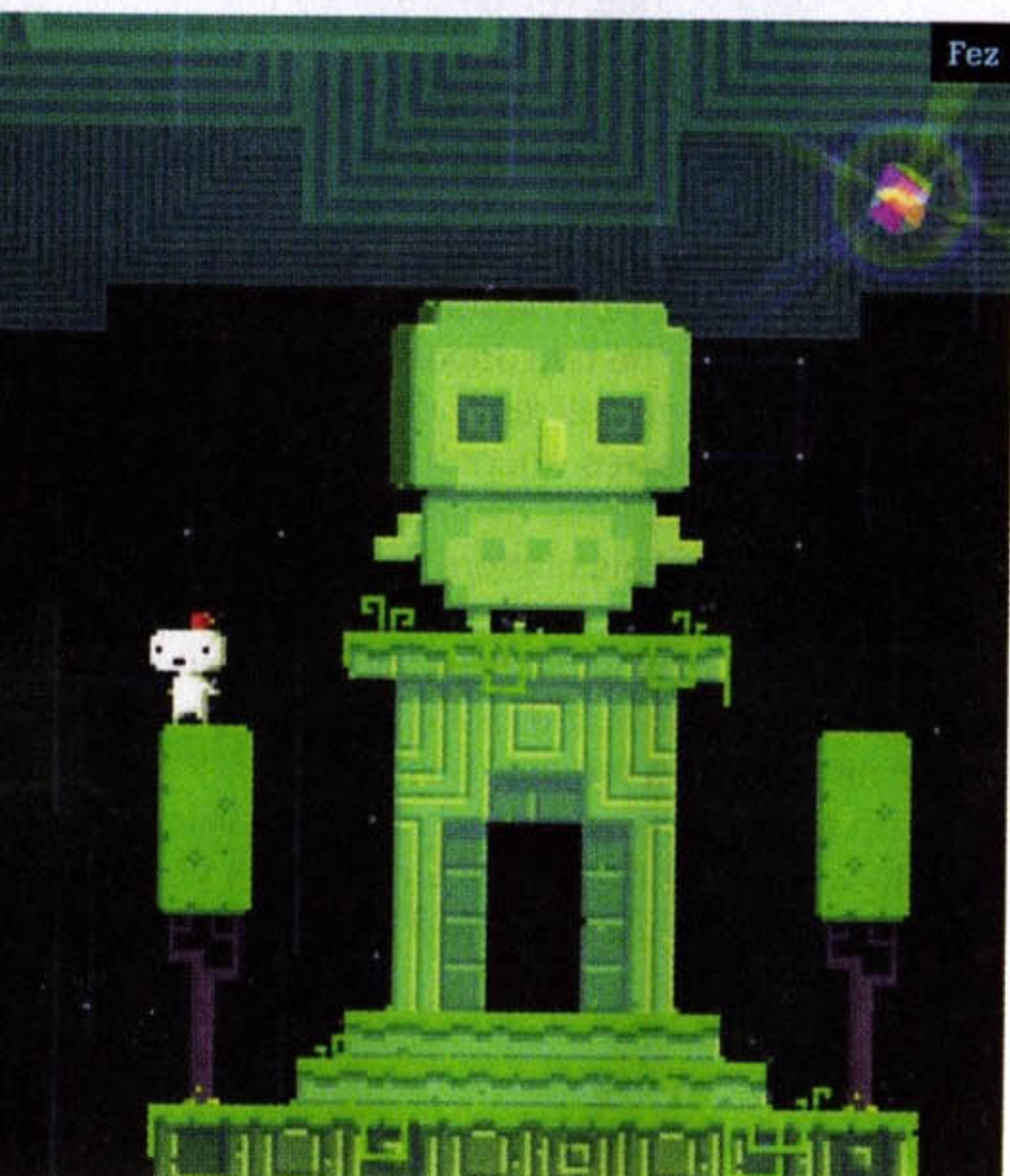
XBLA HALL OF FAME

Check out some of the highest-scoring and most-liked games that have come to Microsoft's downloadable platform.
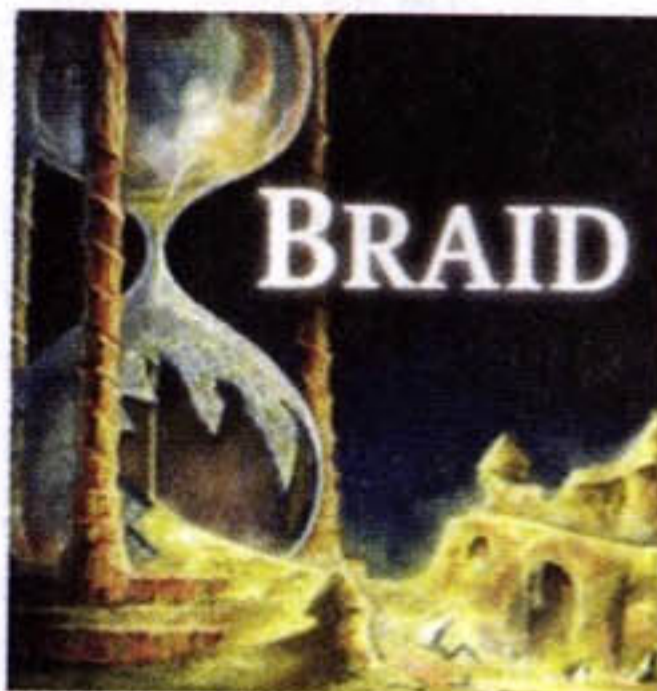
Braid
GI SCORE: N/A*
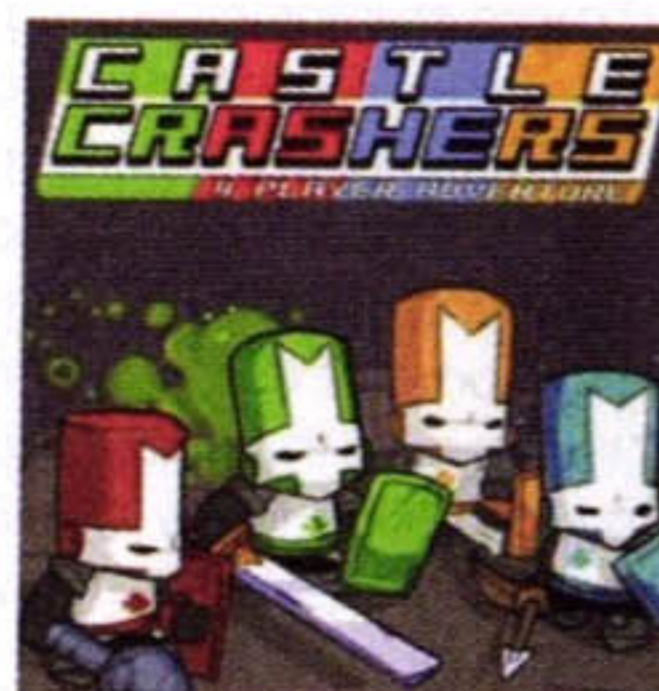
Castle Crashers
GI SCORE: N/A*

Shadow Complex
GI SCORE: N/A*
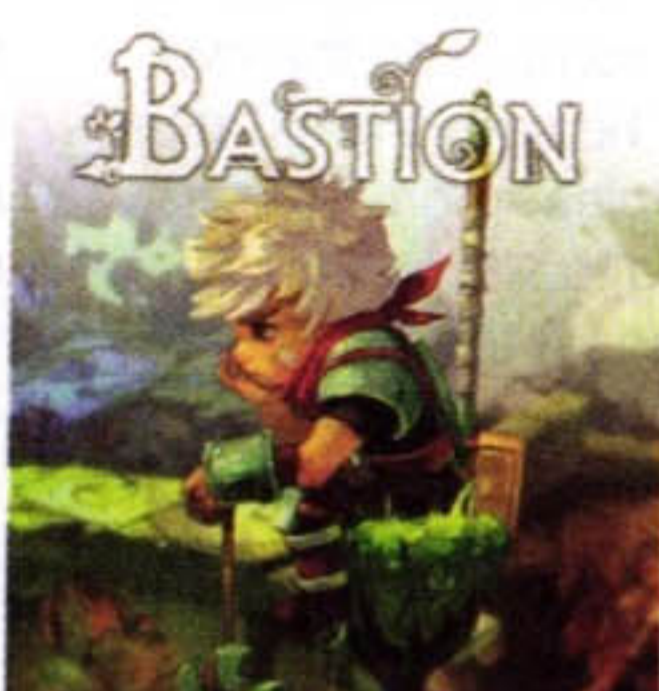
Bastion
GI SCORE: 9.25

Fez
GI SCORE: 9.25
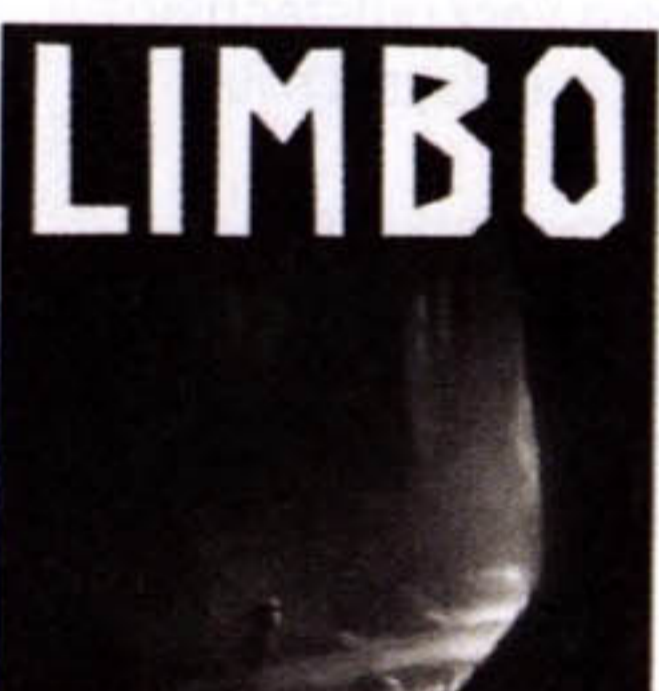
Limbo
GI SCORE: 9

Super Meat Boy
GI SCORE: 9
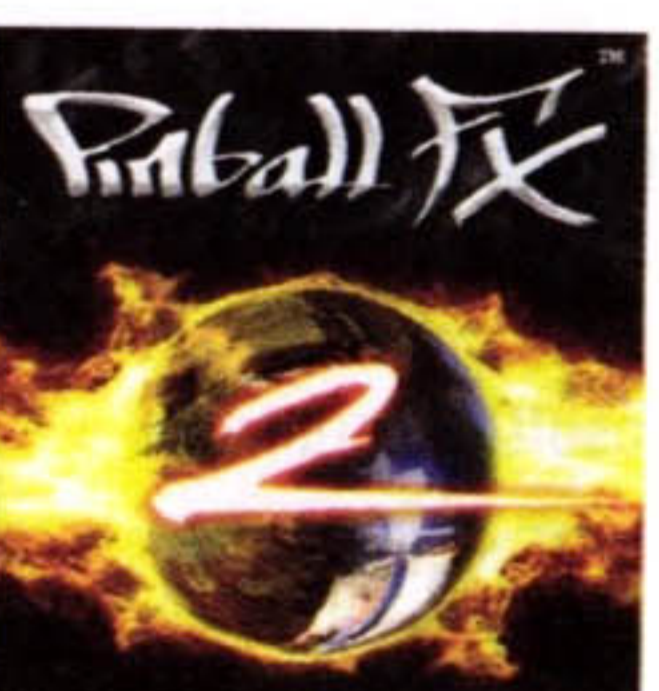
Pinball FX2
GI SCORE: 9
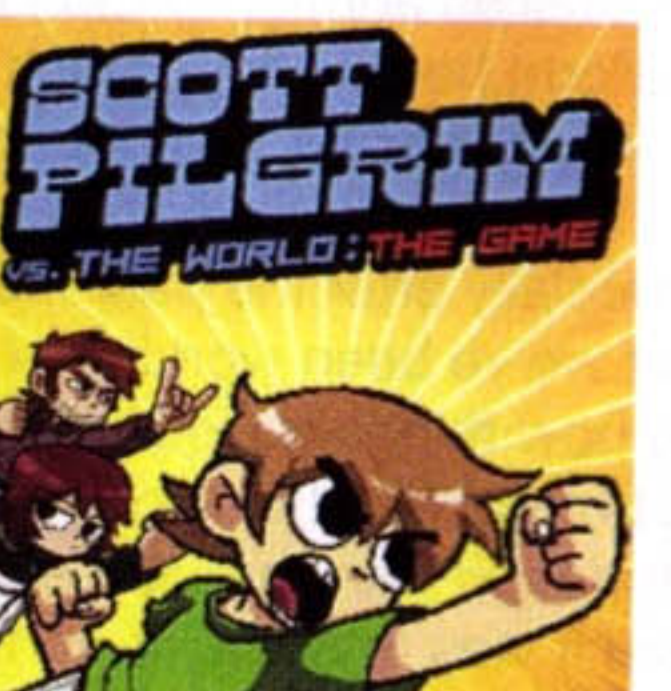
Scott Pilgrim
vs. The World: The Game
GI SCORE: 9

Mark of the Ninja
GI SCORE: 9

*Game was released before Game Informer began reviewing downloadable titles

ALIENATING INDIES

Though XBLA still receives a number of releases each year, an indie exodus is underway as developers are heading to greener pastures with less strict policies.

The beginning of development is when one of the hardest steps comes into play: getting the green light from Microsoft to put your game on the service. Provinciano says there are really only two ways onto XBLA for an indie developer: get a publishing deal with Microsoft, or sign a deal with a third-party publisher.

Both paths are difficult. Going through Microsoft can lead to a months-long procession of pitches before eventually hearing a yes or no. "If they say no, as I've seen [with] many developers, you're screwed, because you just wasted nine months," Provinciano says.

The alternative is going through a third-party publisher and taking a slot Microsoft has allotted it for XBLA titles. With this approach, you have to give the publisher a cut or pay them for services like testing – something indie developers already do themselves on platforms like Steam.

"You're pretty much faced with either timed exclusive and some other strings, or you go through a third party-publisher and give them a cut," Provinciano says.

Even once contracts are signed, circumstances can change on a whim.

Team Meat, which launched Super Meat Boy as a timed exclusive for XBLA, learned its lesson the hard way. The developer duo of McMillen and Tommy Refenes now stays away from publishers in general and Microsoft specifically.

The team faced all the same struggles as Provinciano, but also felt they didn't get an honest deal from Microsoft. Things started to go sour during the final months of developing Super Meat Boy. Team Meat worked hard to get the game done in time for a marketing blitz similar to the Summer of Arcade called Game Feast, a fall dashboard promotion slated to feature XBLA games prominently on the Xbox 360's main menu.

After all Team Meat's hard work preparing the game in time, it didn't get into the promotion because Microsoft cut the marketing campaign short before it was Team Meat's turn to be featured. "That sucked more than anything you can imagine," McMillen says. "From that point on it really seemed like it was out of the hands of the people that we were working with and went into the hands of the people who control the people we were working with, and those people simply don't care. It's a business thing. We never got anything – even though we did everything we were told."

For Team Meat, it was an eye-opening experience that ensured it does its due diligence when signing contracts. By McMillen's admission, the studio was too trusting of Microsoft. "For the most part we got f---ed over," McMillen explains plainly. "We got really f---ed over."

Once a game is released, Microsoft makes it hard for developers to patch their games or release new downloadable content. Fez creator Phil Fish was involved in one of the more infamous examples of this situation. When it launched, Fez featured a number of bugs in need of fixing. Fish released a title update, but some players who downloaded it experienced a save-state bug. In order to release a newer version of the patch without the bug, Microsoft wanted to charge Fish a lot

of money to fix it – and this was after they had done testing for him to find such issues.

Fish chose not to release another patch because of the cost requirements. Double Fine's Tim Schaefer once estimated that a patch costs around $40,000 – a significant fee to an indie developer.

Downloadable content is also a major issue after release, with more and more studios relying on it to drive additional revenues. Robot Entertainment released Orcs Must Die! on Xbox 360 before its debut on PC. The studio also created downloadable content, but not all of it made it to the console. Some of that has to do with the platform not seeing the kind of sales it used to with the growing popularity of Steam. Robot Entertainment didn't even release the sequel to the popular Orcs Must Die! on the 360, keeping it a PC title.

Financial influences swayed Robot's gradual movement away from XBLA. Robot Entertainment CEO Patrick Hudson won't give specific dollar amounts, but when comparing the two versions of the first game, he says the PC one made "many times – multiples" more in sales. The added cost of creating the Xbox 360 version just didn't make sense for the sequel.

"It was difficult, it was time consuming, and it was expensive relative to PC," Hudson says. "We had trouble justifying being back on XBLA for that added effort. So it's those things and the market, as far as number of customers we had, was substantially larger on PC than it was on XBLA."

It's disappointing for Hudson because he believes XBLA "used to be a very outstanding place to find games, and these days it's just different than it used to be.

"XBLA is probably not as prominently featured as it used to be on the console. Microsoft used to do, in my opinion, a really great job of promoting XBLA as a channel for unique and innovative games. It seemed like over time the XBLA games didn't surface to the top of the UI on Xbox nearly as often as it used to and [it] became harder to discover new XLBA games outside of the Summer of Arcade. They weren't promoted in the same way."

THE CURIOUS CASE OF XNA

Bolstered by the success of Xbox Live Arcade, Microsoft announced its ambitious XNA Game Studio development suite at the 2004 Game Developers Conference.

"XNA underscores Microsoft's commitment to the game industry and our desire to work with partners to take the industry to the next level," said Microsoft founder Bill Gates at the time.

Microsoft envisioned XNA as the solution to making the development of games for Xbox, Windows, and Windows mobile devices a much simpler affair. To help both fledgling and veteran studios along, Microsoft gave creators tools to streamline networking, audio authoring, and controller interfaces, making many development tasks easier.

Games like Polytron's Fez and Zeboyd Games' Cthulhu Saves the World used the XNA platform, but even though the initiative had proven successes, they weren't numerous enough for Microsoft to continue supporting the toolset. Microsoft backed away from the project over the years, first by no longer supplying a community manager for the Xbox Live Indie Games channel, and then announcing the discontinuation of future versions of the platform altogether starting April 1, 2014.

STIFFENING COMPETITION
Other platforms have learned from Microsoft's mistakes. While WiiWare and the PlayStation Network were once also difficult in their own ways, both platforms are changing to be more developer friendly.

Nintendo no longer requires developers to have an office. A developer can also set its own prices and run its own sales for games released on Nintendo's eShop. Steam has become popular because it is an open platform where creators can do all the testing themselves, set prices, and patch without extra costs. In the mobile market, iOS developers take about 70 percent of the profit when their games are sold. Sony has also made drastic changes to the way it approaches independent developers (see "Sony Gears Up for Indie Gaming" on page 54), going as far as letting developers dictate their own release date and pricing strategies.

Provinciano says getting Retro City Rampage to PlayStation 3 and PlayStation Vita was simple, and these platforms made the most money for him. Cases like these are leading many to migrate away from Microsoft to its chief console competitor.

Perhaps Sony sensed the chance for a coup in the indie console space. Recently, developers have taken to Twitter to describe how Sony representatives reach out to them out of the blue to see how they can make their game a reality on Sony's handheld or console. Sony was very open to working with Provinciano, especially on the Vita platform.

"I was actually pretty happy with how they approached it because they didn't pressure me to add any touchscreen-specific stuff or whatever to RCR, and that was something that I liked," he says. "As a gamer I remember the first-gen DS games: they were kind of taking GBA games, canceling those, putting them out on DS, adding touch stuff, and kind of ruining them. From my experience on my end they've [Sony] been really open about just saying, 'Do what makes sense.'"

The change in approach to the indie scene comes as a surprise to some developers, but is welcomed enthusiastically. "Both Nintendo and Sony have changed a great deal," McMillen says, having had experience with both.

"They're going above and beyond," Refenes adds.

Both Team Meat developers agree that these kinds of forward-thinking business practices are needed to make it easier for indie developers to acquire the means to develop for the respective platforms.

"The result of that [is] it makes it easier for everybody," Refenes says. "They're making smart, progressive-thinking moves in order to stay relevant in this market that's now dominated by Apple."

McMillen admits he didn't expect the platform holders' approach to mature after seeing what he's seen during his years in the industry. "It's been honestly surprising, especially after the past X amount of years that we've been working in the industry, seeing how things go, seeing how hard it was just to get Meat Boy on Xbox; and then what happened with that and everything else, how hard it was to get a kit, all the requirements that went into that," he says. "With Microsoft it's still the same, but with Sony and Nintendo it's such a drastic change. From some of the stuff I've seen with Sony and hear with Sony, it's pretty surprising. It seems like Sony really focuses on getting games."

Braid
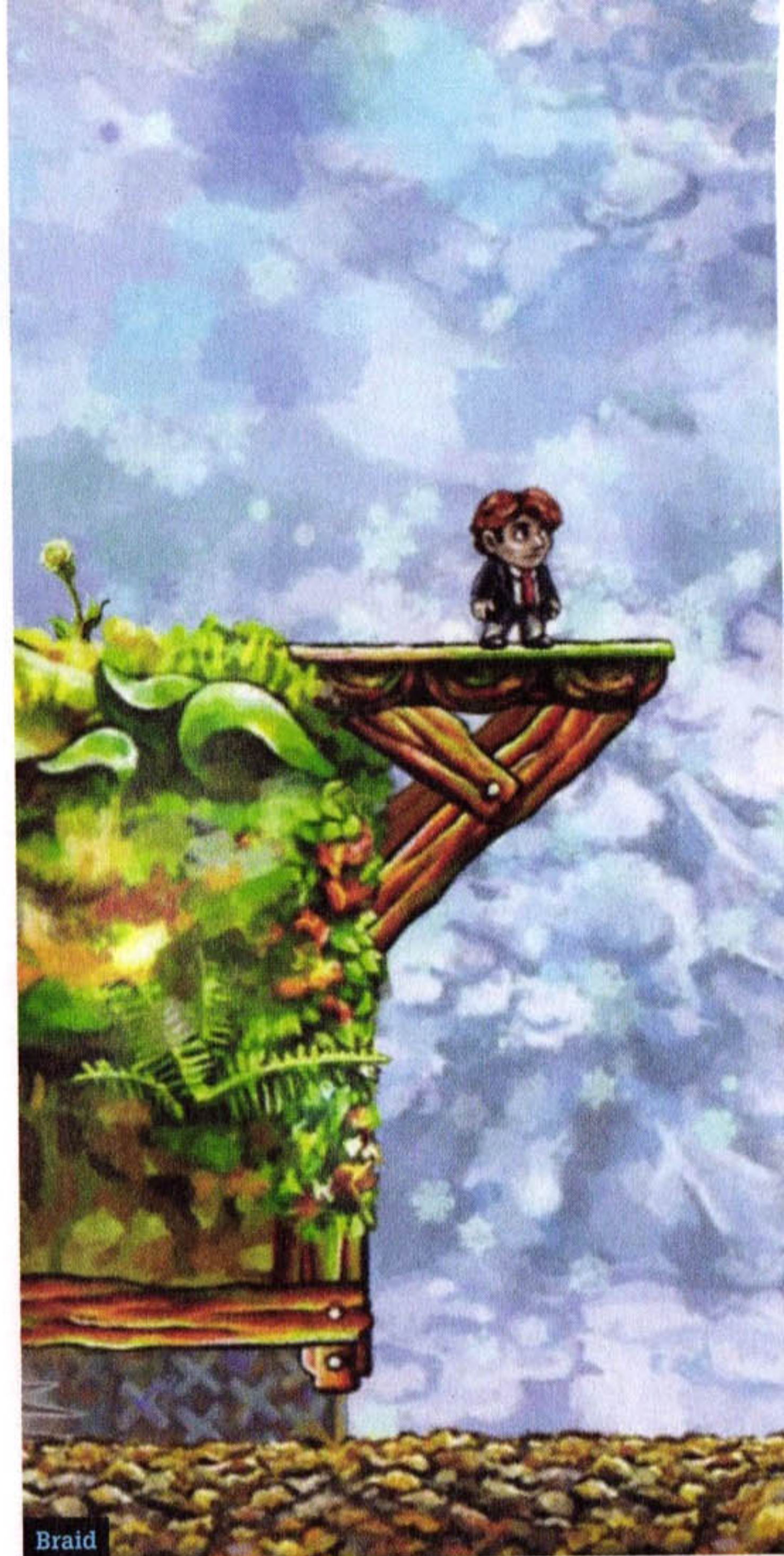
Refenes says that he's hopeful about the change started by the two Japanese giants, but says plainly that it all really depends on how well their consoles do, or how much a PlayStation 4 costs. Indie developers need people to own consoles before they can sell their games.

"As much as Sony is pushing for, 'Hey, here's a kit, just mess with it and make something for us'…it all hinges on the final business decisions up above those people that we're talking to as to whether or not it will be a success or not," Refenes says. "Hopefully it all works out, but time will tell."

SCORE POINTS!

Carjacking · Hit & Run · Stomp 'em! · Throw 'em! · Knock 'em! · Hit 'em! · Shoot 'em! · Burn 'em!

TIP! Chain attacks for a score multiplier!

MULTI X2

YOU

00:58

WEAPONS
Fist . . . . . .
Baseball Bat . .
Baton . . . . .
Sword . . . . .
Golf Club . . . .
Spanker . . . .
Shovel . . . . .
Willy Mop . . .
Mariachi . . . .
Scythe . . . . .
Biffarang . . . .
Pistol . . . . .
Uzi . . . . . .
Shotgun . . . .
Ion Tapper ASS
Flamethrower . .
Grenades . . . .
Dynamite . . . .
Grogotovs . . .
Bomb . . . . .
BioClaw . . . .
Rocket Launcher
????

Retro City Rampage
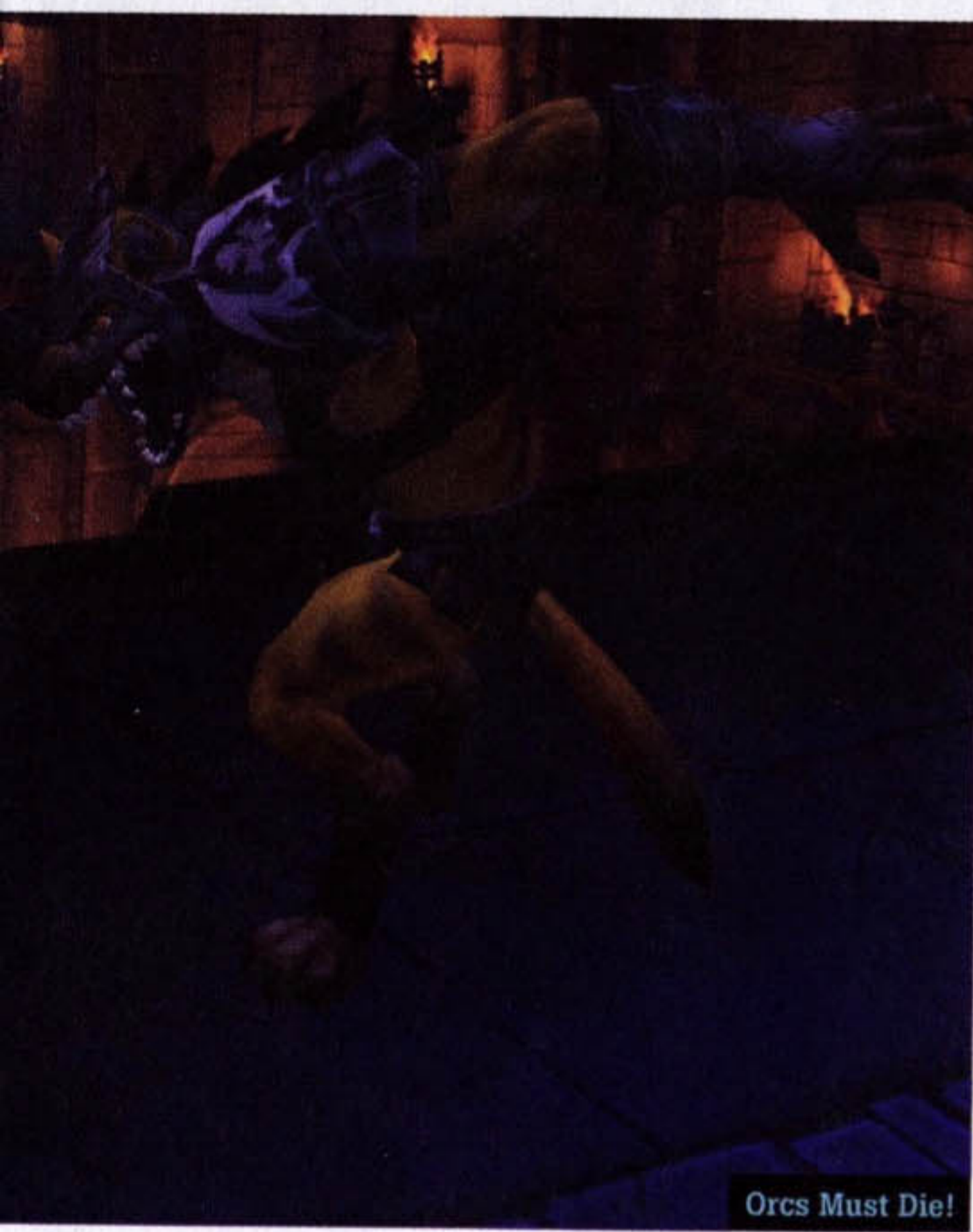
Orcs Must Die!

YOUR MOVE, MICROSOFT

Microsoft plans to announce the new Xbox later this year, and soon after the world will likely learn how the company intends to transform its approach to the downloadable game platform. Hudson thinks it's a big opportunity the console giant needs to get right.

"I think from a player's perspective and from a developer's perspective, there's a massive opportunity there," Hudson says. "I don't know if Microsoft is willing to embrace that with the next-generation console that's coming. I hope they do, because if they do, I think there's a very ripe market for it."

Microsoft senior director of marketing for Xbox Live Craig Davison says the digital platform has always been one of the Xbox's pillars and will continue to be an important part of the future.

"Microsoft has been a pioneer in the digital distribution space, and our digital games and video business on Xbox 360 continue to grow," Davison says. "Our members love Xbox Marketplace and we're investing to improve the service – that includes continuing to support Xbox Live Arcade as well as many other game genres, ensuring we continue to be the best place to purchase games, add-ons, consumables, and more from the comfort of the living room. We encourage all developers to create the games they've always imagined by ensuring they have the resources that will help them be successful. Some indie developers have achieved success in securing Xbox Live Arcade contracts to enjoy a wider release of their games."

With all the talk of Microsoft not being the go-to place for indie games anymore, Schatz thinks that maybe the positive aspects of XBLA sometimes get lost. In fact, he thinks the platform really isn't losing as many developers as people think.

"I don't think that there's really strong data on that," Schatz says. "I think that there is this kind of groundswell opinion that the PC is the place for downloadable games right now. I don't necessarily think that that's the case."

Schatz says the PC has an advantage because it's more likely connected to the Internet, thus linking gamers to a store page much easier. He also points out that Minecraft, an insanely popular PC title, has become one of the best-selling XBLA games in the platform's history, selling six million units as of last March.

"I think that it would be wrong to assume that there's any sort of fade in the console downloadable market," Schatz says. "It will definitely get stronger as time goes by because more big-budget games will be coming out as downloadable games as well. I would not say that consoles are declining in any way whatsoever, but I do think that there are some aspects in which they're probably playing a little bit of catch-up because they're not an open platform. I think that there are certainly things from a store perspective that all of the console platforms could do better."

The stark reality of indie development on consoles is that it has been difficult and expensive compared to more open platforms. Though the PC is currently flourishing, it too faces stiff competition from tablets and phones.

"You're just reaching more people when you design and make something for tablets and phones," Refenes says when explaining why Team Meat's next game, Mew-Genics, will be on iPad.

"When you make a game you want as many people to play it as possible," McMillen adds. "You want to make it for the system that the majority of people are going to play."

That philosophy may not be shared by every indie developer, and that's why the diversity of platforms available is something that Schatz says is good for them.

"Do I want everyone to look like iOS? Do I want everyone to look like XBLA? Do I want everyone to look like Steam? No," Schatz says. "I think that there's room for all of those platforms because there are customers that want everything just to work. There are customers that care more about their Xbox Live presence – they care about their achievements. Yet there are people that would prefer to have rougher products with more updates, and those people will play on Steam."

No matter what platform a developer chooses, Provinciano has advice for them: Don't release a game near New Year's Day. ◈

Talking games with the master of horror

JOHN CARPENTER

by Tim Turi

Legendary horror-film director John Carpenter's work has had an obvious influence on video games. The persistent, stalking threat of *Halloween*'s Michael Myers lives on in spirit through antagonists like Silent Hill's Pyramid Head. *Escape from New York*'s eye-patched agent Snake Plissken inspired the design of Meal Gear Solid's Snake. The morphing abominations of Resident Evil or Dead Space wouldn't be what they are without *The Thing*.

Visceral Games' homage to *The Thing* is even more apparent with Dead Space 3's frozen planet setting. The similarities are strong between Isaac Clarke's quest to stop the necromorphs on Tau Volantis and R.J. MacReady's battle against a mutating alien on an Antarctic research base. My curiosity was piqued when I saw John Carpenter (@TheHorrorMaster) tweet "Dead Space 3 is the first great game of 2013." I knew he served as a narrative consultant for Day 1 Studios' F.E.A.R. 3, but was surprised to learn he's so personally invested in the medium.

During a recent conversation with Carpenter, I asked the 65-year-old filmmaker about his gaming origins.

"My son got me involved in games when he was growing up," Carpenter says. "He and I spent time together playing. He got me hooked on it. I remember the incredible Sonic the Hedgehog when it came out. I said 'My god, look at this.' Because when [gaming] first started, I was playing Asteroids and Pong, so this was a big step forward. My son got hooked on Mega Man. Oh god [laughs]. Well, those are truly hard."

Carpenter continued playing video games through the years, both with his son and independently. He references recent favorites like Dishonored, Assassin's Creed III, and the God of War Collection.

"I enjoy horror games and science fiction games," says Carpenter. "I'm a general all-around consumer of games. Good games."

Looping back to the subject of Dead Space 3, Carpenter explains his passion for Visceral's horror series. "You know it's great. The first game was more – I guess it was like *Alien* – but not quite. It was a little different than that. I maintain that Dead Space would just make a great movie because you have these people coming onto an abandoned, shutdown space ship and they have to start it up and something's on board. It's just great stuff. I would love to make Dead Space [into a film], I'll tell you that right now. That one is ready-made."

Speaking of the *Alien* franchise, I brought up Gearbox's long-awaited blunder, Aliens: Colonial Marines. I asked Carpenter what he felt, as a filmmaker, about a beloved horror-movie franchise being handled so poorly. "It's all about money," he says. "It's not that something is being mistreated, it's just another marketing issue. They're trying to get you to buy the game, which I stupidly did."

On the topic of games and movies, I asked Carpenter if he thinks horror games have the possibility to be scarier than films due to their interactivity. "They are just so different, you can't compare the two," he says. "It's a different experience. In a movie, you're passive. You're watching a movie and you're doing different psychological things with a movie. You are projecting your feelings and your cares on characters you see on the screen."

The more I pressed Carpenter on the relationship between games and movies, the more it became apparent he appraises them on completely different levels. When he plays games, he removes his director's hat and purely enjoys the experience as a gamer. Fans of Carpenter's films may love uncovering kernels of his influence in games, but when he sits down to play BioShock Infinite, he's just in it for the game. ◈

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Ace Patrol (iOS)

Dive Left
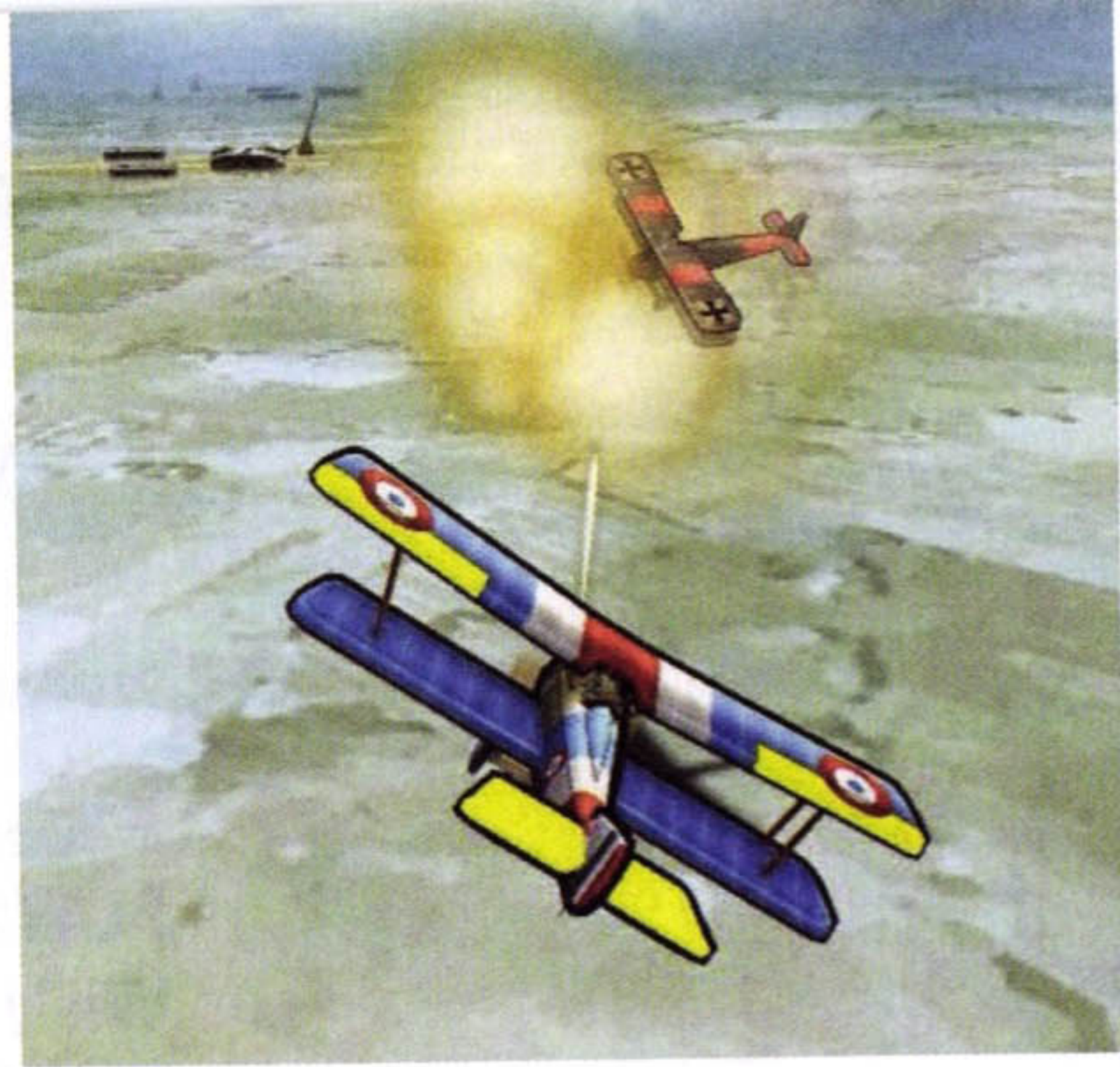
The Makers of XCOM: Enemy Unknown
Unveil Two New Strategy Games

by Matt Miller

Few games in recent years have garnered the sort of support and love as XCOM. Firaxis handled the relaunch of the strategy series with aplomb. Luckily, we don't have to wait long to play more strategy titles from the acclaimed developer. The studio recently announced two new iOS games that should be out around the time you read this. Taken together, they show that turn-based strategy can tackle all sorts of settings.

Ace Patrol is under the direct supervision of lead designer Sid Meier. The World War I setting fascinates me. Players control a squadron of biplanes and pilots, each of which comes to the turn-based battles with its own collection of abilities, maneuvers, and stats. "You'll need to choose your maneuvers carefully each turn in order to protect your squadron and pilots, get the drop on the enemy, and succeed in your mission," Meier says. "Along the way you'll be upgrading your aircraft and trying new aircraft models, as you experience a variety of missions along the Western Front."

Missions are built to be quick and digestible for mobile sessions, playable in five to fifteen minutes. Longer connected campaigns offer continuity between battles, during which damaged planes must be repaired, and captured pilots remain unavailable.

Ace Patrol also maintains continuity through a regular flow of upgrades for sights, armor, weaponry, and newly learned maneuvers (like Immelmans, skids, and slips). Pilots keep a journal of their battles and improve over time, echoing the personal connection players developed with their XCOM soldiers. Moreover, the game has a complete campaign for both the American and German side of the conflict.

Turn-based strategy traditionally maintains tension and excitement through the use of cover and environmental features, and Ace Patrol is no different. "We actually did find cover in clouds, and we found buildings in the various targets around the world, such as anti-aircraft gun emplacements, which make certain areas dangerous or safe to fly in," Meier explains. "Part of the strategy might be luring the enemy into range of your anti-aircraft guns, so the map actually has a really good sense of safety, danger, and cover – all the basic elements that cover provides you in a ground combat game. There's also positioning in whether you're lower or higher than your target, and that has implications for attacking and maneuvering."

Ace Patrol also features asynchronous multiplayer against an online opponent, or a more immediate pass and play option. Firaxis plans to release the game in the coming weeks with a free-to-try model, letting you check out a few missions before laying down cash for individual campaigns.

Firaxis is doubling down with another iOS title. **Haunted Hollow** shares a number of fundamental ideas with XCOM, but with a dramatically different backdrop. The cartoonish game puts players in charge of a haunted house filled with spooks and monsters. An unsuspecting town waits nearby, and your goal is to scare as many of its residents as possible, represented by houses and neighborhoods. An opposing haunted house across town is aiming to do the same, so you have to strategically deploy your supernatural baddies to induce the most fear. Haunted Hollow is primarily designed as a one-on-one multiplayer game, but you can also play against the AI.

Like XCOM, players build up an antfarm-style base of operations. Your mansion is filled with rooms that open up different monsters and upgrades, but unlike XCOM, you simultaneously deploy monsters around town.

While you build bigger and better monsters at home, you can also wander the nearby town on each turn. Fighting-oriented monsters aim to take down your opponent's creatures, while other scarier monsters claim neighborhoods for you. Players can even create special monsters like goblins, which can be sent to wreck your opponent's haunted house. Once the town gets fed up with your assaults, a mob of angry villagers will pour out of the church to start burning down claimed houses and attacking any monsters it encounters.

Firaxis wants Haunted Hollow to stand on its own as a free-to-play game. Pay options exist to customize your mansion, and to acquire new monsters and items. I love the idea of bringing turn-based strategy into a family-friendly art style, and I hope this monetization approach allows new players to get their feet wet in the genre. Between Ace Patrol and Haunted Hollow, I'm crossing my fingers that the quality bar for strategy games on mobile is about to move up several notches. ◈

Haunted Hollow (iOS)

The Good

BETHESDA AND SHINJI MIKAMI,

creator of Resident Evil, are teaming up for a survival horror game titled The Evil Within. The game will appear in 2014 for the PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, and PC, and is being developed by Mikami's Tango Gameworks studio (which is owned by a branch of ZeniMax, the company that owns Bethesda). This is Tango's first title.

The Bad

PIKMIN 3

has been delayed again. The game was originally scheduled to come out for the Wii U during the console's launch window, but was then moved to a June release date. The game is now coming out on August 4.
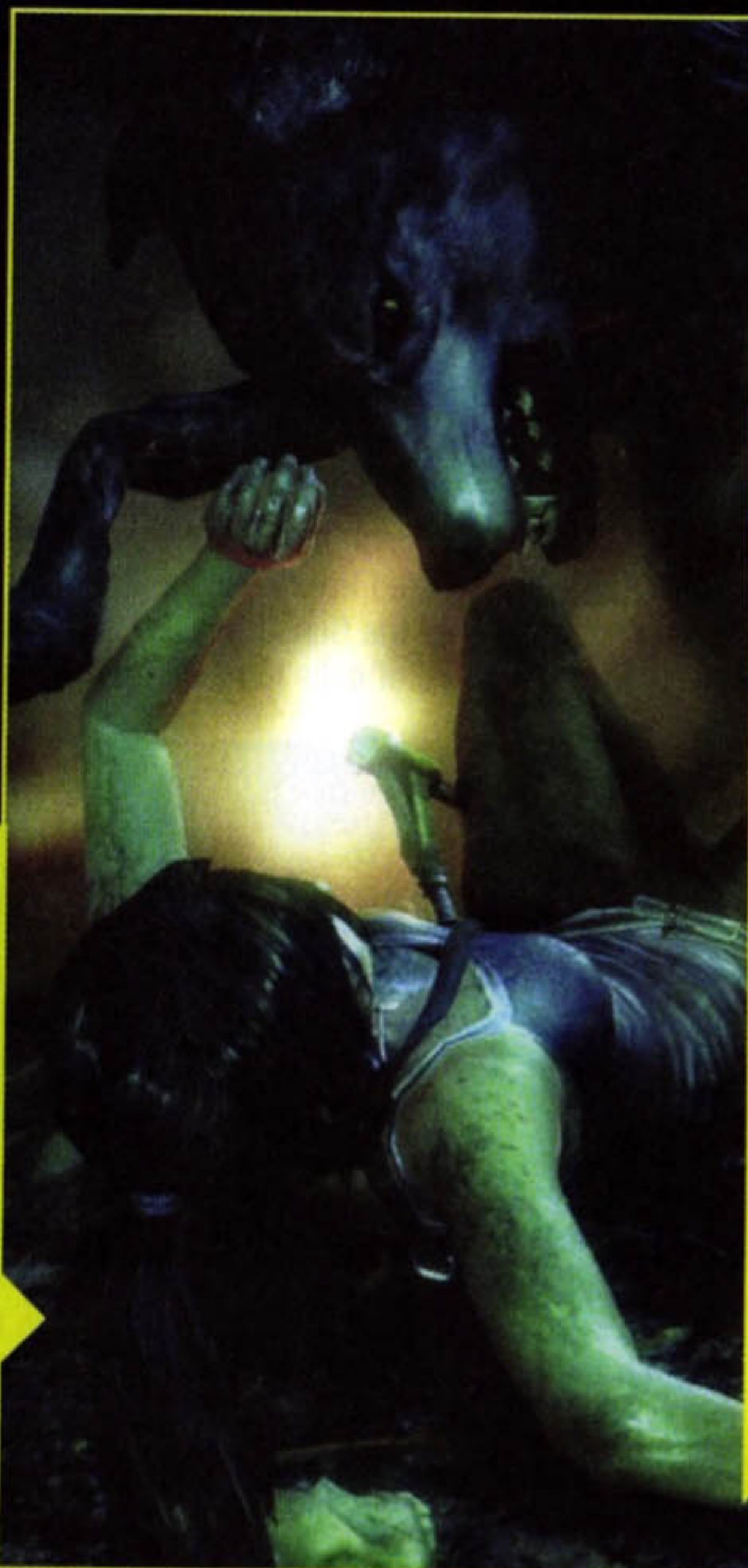
SQUARE ENIX

president and CEO Yoichi Wada has stepped down in the wake of a disappointing financial forecast and what the company sees as poor sales numbers in Western markets for Tomb Raider (3.4 million units sold), Hitman: Absolution (3.6 million), and Sleeping Dogs (1.75 million). Square Enix is going through a complete company restructuring, which has resulted in the loss of jobs at the publisher/developer's Los Angeles office.

The Ugly

Quotable

"Sorry, I don't get the drama around having an 'always on' console. Every device now is 'always on.' That's the world we live in. #dealwithit"

— Former Microsoft Studios creative director **Adam Orth**, who resigned from the company shortly after this tweet. Orth was responding to rumors that the next Xbox would require an Internet connection

DISEMBODIED HANDS
by Tim Turi

01

0% 300H.P

Master Hand
Super Smash Bros.

This giant, floating right hand isn't the first ever, but it's the fiercest. Master Hand hits every trope in the disembodied handbook. This final boss shoots bullets when it pretends to be a gun. It walks across the stage on two fingers. It grabs characters and squeezes them. It even flicks fighters into oblivion like anthropomorphic boogers.

Wallmaster - *The Legend of Zelda*

Wallmaster is equal parts terrifying and annoying. Working through the complex dungeons of Zelda is hard enough without this menace. In certain rooms a shadow looms over the head of unsuspecting lollygaggers. The shadow grows larger until a big hand descends on Link and whisks him back to the front door.

Glover - *Glover*

Once the 32-bit era's 3D capabilities were introduced, articulated floating hands were everywhere. Hasbro Interactive even decided to make a platformer starring one of them. Unfortunately the game was less about being a sentient glove and more about awkwardly bouncing, rolling, and tossing a rubber ball.

Eyerok - *Super Mario 64*

Can you think of anything better to guard an ancient tomb than a pair of giant stone hands? Nintendo couldn't. Eyerock slumbers deep inside Shifting Sand Land's pyramid. Sadly the first and final thing the old hands see upon opening their strange palm-eyes is Mario's fist.

Human Hand - *The Gunstringer*

Like something out of a Monty Python film, a huge pair of human hands consistently harasses the marionettes of Twisted Pixel's Kinect title. These big, meaty mitts try to stop the Gunstringer by crushing you or clapping near a herd of bulls to make them stampede.

Giant Robot Hand - *Sonic & Knuckles*

Sonic is just minding his own business running through a volcano when a gigantic mecha-hand bursts through onto the screen. This classic platformer boss fight forces players to keep moving or risk being squashed.

B.J. Blazkowicz's Hand - *Wolfenstein 3D*

Gamers have spent more time staring at the floating hands of first-person shooter protagonists than any other detached limbs. The sight has become commonplace since B.J. Blazkowicz's pixelated hand first clutched his German pistol. Every modern hand owes its existence to this Nazi-killer's paw.

Yami - *Okami*

Amaterasu's endgame nemesis, Yami, changes forms a whopping five times before becoming a giant hand with an eye on the palm. Protruding from a giant sphere like the creepiest snail ever, it crawls along the ground, rolls on its round casing, and fires energy blasts.

Grabby Hand - *Calling*

The concept of a disembodied hand is inherently unsettling, which this Wii thriller fully embraces. This mysterious hand is typically found where it shouldn't be, like inside a vending machine or protruding from the floor. Even worse, the hands snatch away items like phones from the player.

Dancing Hand - *Persona 3*

These pink-gloved freaks saunter through dungeons on their fingertips. The dainty digits are contrasted by the bizarre skull thing sticking out from the top. Deal enough damage to these monsters and they fall to their knuckles like a warrior collapsing to its knees.

The Missile Commander

On March 15, Victor Sandberg of Stockholm, Sweden, set out to break a 31-year-old Missile Command record. Fifty-six hours later, after battling fatigue, sore muscles, and sleep-deprivation hallucinations, Victor capped out a score of 81,796,035 points using just a single coin. We chatted with this Twin Galaxies-verified record holder about the rigors of game marathons.

What made you attempt to beat a 31-year-old record for Missile Command?
Originally I wanted a Donkey Kong or a Pac-Man record because of the *King of Kong* documentary, but DK is unfortunately very rare and expensive in Sweden so I practiced Pac-Man on the computer. I became pretty good and could do a perfect game for the first ten levels, but Pac-Man didn't inspire me – partly because the skill of the game consists of mainly executing pre-planned patterns. Secondly, there are already five or six people who have performed a perfect game and I wanted my own record. When I learned about this old record that was thought to be impossible to beat, I turned my focus on Missile Command.

At any point did you feel like you might not make it?
I felt hopelessness at several points during the marathon. As always, my back and shoulders started to hurt after less than an hour; its feels impossible to continue knowing you need to play for 50-something hours with that pain. At about hour 20, my legs and butt started to hurt in a weird way. At about hour 35, my skills started to decrease quite rapidly. This was the worst threat, since skill reduction ended my first marathon.

How did the sleep deprivation affect you?
I felt as if there was an evil presence behind me, like someone was standing behind me spying on me. I also had all kinds of weird thoughts that were hard to describe in words. But you don't think rationally. It is sort of like dreaming – weird things in the dream appear to be completely normal. The sounds and surroundings also began to change. At one point my voice on the live stream sounded like different voices that were not my own. At first I thought the computer had been on so long that something was wrong with the audio, then I thought that maybe someone had hacked my computer and was trying to mess with my mind or something.

Were you able to take breaks during the attempt?
There is no pause button, so when I take breaks I lose cities. It is possible to build up to 256 cities, and at that point I could afford to take some breaks. However, I never took a break longer than five minutes because of the risk of losing track of the city count. Knowing how many extra cities you have in reserve is an integral part of avoiding certain glitches that can end your game.

What kind of glitches?
The score multiplier goes from one on the easiest level up to six at level 11 and beyond. In other words, from level 11 up to 256 (the kill screen) you get around 10,000 to 15,000 points if you play a level well. The glitch at the kill screen makes the score multiplier go up to 256, which makes it possible to get up to 900,000 points. This also means you will gain a lot of bonus cities, since you get a bonus city every 10,000 points. If you are not careful, you can get so many bonus cities that your game resets because of another glitch that occurs if your bonus city count comes close to 256. So you need to plan in advance before the kill screen to have the right number of cities to avoid the reset. It is sort of complicated, but I start to plan my strategy about 100 levels before the kill screen.

What did you do the day after beating your record?
I don't remember exactly since I was still very knocked out from the marathon. But I think I just relaxed, ate a bunch of ice cream and chocolate, and relaxed with some movies. I also read all the wonderful messages and e-mails from the arcade and gaming community. The reception was really great and it inspired me to dedicate myself for a new challenge – Tempest. ◈
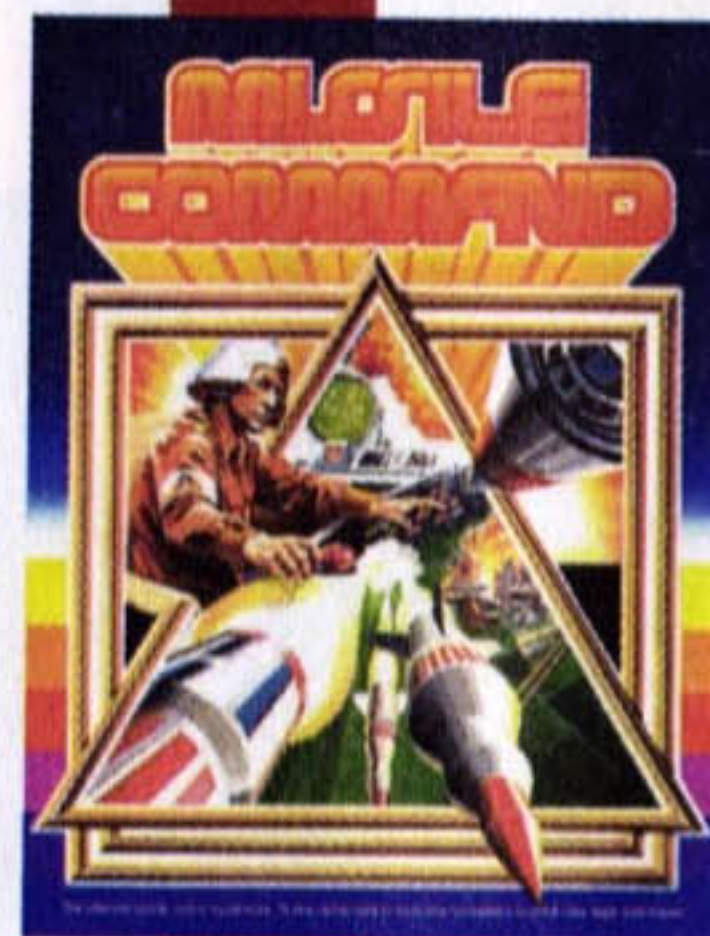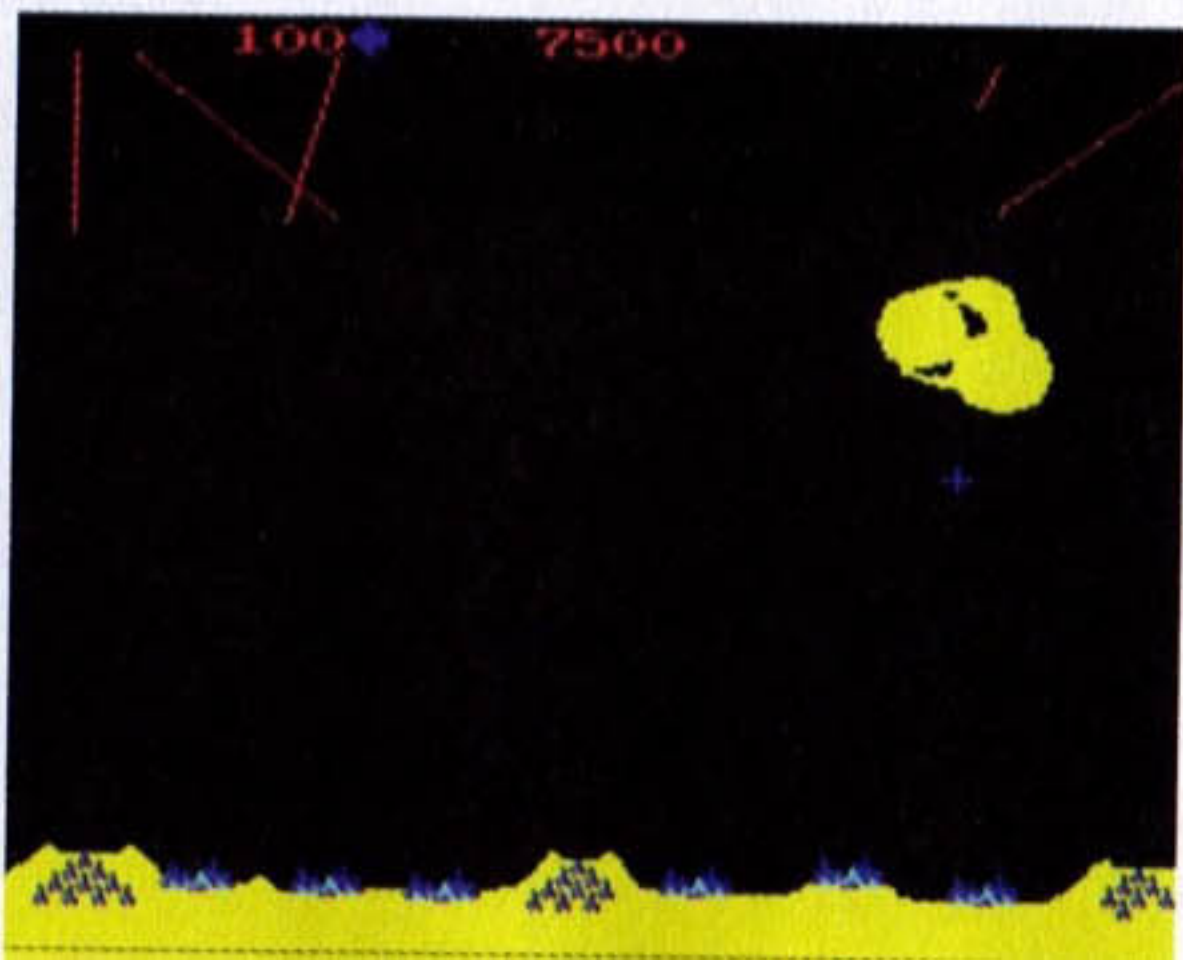
DEFIANCE

THE AGE OF THE MASSIVELY MULTIPLAYER CO-OP SHOOTER IS UPON US

Trion has finally released its long-in-development MMO shooter, Defiance, which coexists alongside the SyFy cable series of the same name. Though it's not the first shooter we've seen with a massively multiplayer infrastructure, Defiance offers two things you can't find elsewhere: console versions and lots of cooperative content. Those are two mighty big features for a lot of players, and make up for a lot of Defiance's less thrilling features.

by Adam Biessener

Dropped into a post-apocalyptic San Francisco and its environs, Defiance players are faced with a dizzying array of activities to lend context to the endless murder parade of an action-packed shooter. Main-line missions offer directed cutscenes with competently written and voiced dialogue, though the story starts out terrible and never rises above the level of average boilerplate adventure sci-fi. Minigames challenging the player to kill waves of enemies with a certain weapon or race their vehicle of choice through a series of checkpoints are fun diversions. The vast majority of the game, however, consists of thinly veiled minor variations on defending an NPC or attacking a group of entrenched enemies, sometimes with some clicking of objects sprinkled in. Whichever flavor the current mission is, it always boils down to killing a whole bunch of bad guys.

One of Defiance's biggest mistakes is in how long it takes to reveal the full brilliance of its tight gunplay and wonderful weaponry to new players. You can spend 15 hours shooting the same handful of mutant types with the same boring basic weapons if you try to clear out all the sidequests, and 14 hours of that is tediously boring. Do yourself a favor and power through the story missions exclusively, at least until you make it to the second area with its new enemies and better storylines.

Once you make it there, Defiance's combat is beautiful. The world is conveniently laid out as a series of interconnected battlegrounds, each with its own opportunities for cover, high ground, killing fields, and hiding spots. Enemies are exceptionally aware of the environment, and do a good job of seeking cover from hostiles and flushing out or flanking enemies – especially since the AI can't "cheat" by knowing which direction players are going

to come from, what weapons they have, or even how many of them there are like in a traditional linear shooter. Combat responsiveness is top-notch on PC; the Xbox 360 and to a lesser extent PlayStation 3 versions have had some growing pains that Trion has steadily improved upon since launch. Network lag artifacts like warping players or enemies, goofy hit detection, and jerky movement have been conspicuously absent from nearly my entire time with Defiance.

Defiance's best feature is its weapons. The variety within each of the usual shooter categories is incredible. Shotguns, for example, come in almost too many varieties: pump-action, semi-automatic combat, sawed-off, grenade-launching, single high-damage slug firing, extra-wide horizontal spread, and more. The same is true across pistols, SMGs, LMGs, rocket launchers, grenade launchers, assault rifles, and alien-tech beam guns. Combined

with the various types and rarities of mods that you can fill the four modification slots with, an astounding spread of choices awaits every player. Randomly triggered effects like damage-over-time fires, slowing biological goo, and armor-reducing radiation add yet another layer. My high point of Defiance is the process of experimentation and tweaking that goes into creating a set of loadouts that fit the way I like to play.

My first 20 or so hours with the game had me exclusively using a bolt-action sniper rifle paired with a pump shotgun. The extreme lethality of sniper-rifle headshots is hilarious against distant targets, and the shotty's high burst damage demolished anything that dared approach. That slowly evolved into replacing the shotgun with an SMG that is terrible at hip-fire but exceptional when aimed, then using a scoped assault rifle instead of the sniper, and kept on changing. I went through dozens of configurations as I found new weapons, and I still change it up on a regular basis. Figuring out a way to make the exotic weapons work is pure joy; the grenade launcher that fires manually detonated sticky grenades that explode into more grenades repays the investment with absurd damage output.

Players have access to one of four special powers as well: cloak, decoy, overcharge, or blur. Overcharge's damage boost and blur's movement/melee increases are of questionable utility compared to the absurdity of cloak and decoy's excellent instant panic button, but all serve their role in tight spots. I don't love their impact on PvP – more on that shortly – but they're fun in co-op, especially since the inconsistent mission design regularly throws absurd odds at you.

The mad variety of weapons is a wonderful thing for Defiance, because its other methods of persistent progression are lacking. Perks can be unlocked and customized as you level up, but they're all of the "you take five percent less damage when below an enemy" variety and are thus easily overlooked. I honestly couldn't tell you if any of my perks materially affected the outcome of a single fight I had in dozens of hours with the game.

Player-versus-player combat comes in two flavors, neither of which I find compelling. Regular matches are typical deathmatch-style affairs sadly dominated by cloaked players one-shotting whoever is waiting for their cloak cooldown to be up with shotguns. Shadow War rounds attempt to bring in some of the MMO flavor into balanced-team matches with elements like hostile NPCs and larger maps, but the general PvP imbalances between powers and weapons bring the experience down. PlanetSide 2 is a far superior PvP shooter MMO, and dozens of traditional shooters offer better match-based gameplay.

Cooperative play, however, is seamless whether you're on a story mission, sidequest, co-op instance, or engaging a massive dynamically generated arkfall event with dozens of other players. The number and toughness of enemies scale with local players, loot is distributed individually, and everyone gets credit for any action by a nearby player, so you're never upset to see a fellow human in the world. However, player concentrations are so low for anything but arkfalls that I found myself soloing more often than not.

More concerning than low player concentrations – heck, sometimes I want to solo and there's always an arkfall or a co-op dungeon if I'm in the mood – are the frequent errors and bugs in mission scripting. I often had to log out and back in to access my next mission, and several times had to abandon and restart a quest or even wait for a server reboot to progress thanks to a malfunctioning script. I expected better out of Trion based on the company's excellent work on Rift and high level of MMO expertise.

I likewise expected better out of Defiance's

interface. The HUD is clean, which I appreciate, but hiding vital information like remaining clip size and health/shield status in the corner of the screen is a mistake. Outside of combat, navigating the menus for character management, inventory, crafting, and social interactions is unforgivably terrible. The PC version feels like an up-rezzed console interface that requires three times as many clicks as it should, while the console versions have their own idiocies like having to scroll through text windows to access critical top-level information about weapons. It's all pretty with its artist-crafted sub-windows and slick sci-fi veneer, but the functionality is atrocious.

I don't care much about Defiance's cable-TV ties, though the additional (and temporary) questlines that roll out with episodes of the (so far mediocre) show are a fine way to do ongoing content. Neither do I care for its PvP, or many of the ways it integrates MMO elements like social, inventory, and crafting systems. I find myself forgetting all of that when I'm blasting away at evil robots with a radioactive shotgun, recharging a buddy's shield with an alien beam weapon that shoots chain lightning, or setting entire groups on fire with an extended-mag flare pistol. As a co-op game with an effectively infinite gear grind, occasionally amusing storylines, and a sweet hot pink Mad Max dune buggy to tool around in, Defiance works perfectly well. ◈

No Subscription

Defiance's $60 price of entry may seem steep, but its lack of a monthly subscription price is reassuring – especially since the cash shop currently doesn't sell any must-have items. The cosmetic items and boosts to XP gain and the like are expected and not concerning in the slightest. I would be upset about the ability to buy grab bags of items with real money in a different game, but Defiance's gear variance is more about variety than raw power – and I've had no problems finding a ton of weapons and mods to experiment with through normal play.

Gears of War: Judgment

Epic recently released the final Gears of War title for the current generation of consoles. With this prequel, the team made some bold changes to the traditional Gears format. We spoke with lead designer **Jim Brown** about the process of creating Judgment.

How has the community reacted to Baird as the protagonist of Judgment? Is there a vocal group that wanted to play as Marcus and Dom again?
I've fielded this question numerous times from journalists, but never once from our players. Granted, I'm only one point of contact within Epic, but I think that says a lot for the strength of Baird as a leading character, especially once you get some quality time with him and see how the game plays out. Baird's one of those guys that people can easily identify with, and it's worth noting that the reason we put him in that role to begin with was due to fan feedback.

What inspired the change to the campaign format?
The new storytelling point of view meant changes to the world, and how stories are told. Are the character's memories of what happened 100 percent reliable, or on the second or third retelling did you notice some small changes? We tried to capture the essence of that "flawed memory" concept in the campaign. In addition, we really wanted to up the intensity of the Gears experience with Judgment. We wanted the Locust to feel scary again, to be as unpredictable and imposing to our players as to the characters who are seeing them for the first time. This inspired our smart spawn system, changes

to balance, AI improvements, and ultimately, to a shift in tone and pacing as well. Judgment's campaign format embraces all of those changes but still maintains the context and feel that Gears of War is known for.

What do the metrics show when it comes to Declassified missions? Are most players turning modifiers on, or are they opting for the standard approach?
Looking at the stats over the first couple weeks, we can see that almost everyone is at least attempting the Declassified missions. About half of our players have completed half of the declassified missions. A good number were even brave enough to complete them all. I'm no stats wizard, but that tells me that there's a good variety of choices going on, which is exactly what we hoped for. We wanted people to be able to play the way they wanted to play, and to have control over when and how often they went for those modifiers. Players have enough options to ensure that their replayable experience is markedly different than their initial one.

More than before, it seems that the focus is on action rather than frequent narrative breaks. Was this a conscious decision from the team?
The focus was never meant to just be "more action." We wanted players to tell their own story without us telling them how it was supposed to be. In that regard, we consciously went down the road of more in-game storytelling and fewer cinematic moments to break immersion. This also supported one of our

other main goals, which was replayability. We didn't want people to replay the same experience over and over, we wanted them to have a new experience every time they played. So [our new spawn system] changes the enemies, Declassified missions change the conditions, and new scripting and AI techniques mean we can have different narratives happening in-game with each playthrough. All told, this allowed us to step away from some of the more traditional "on rails" narrative and cinematic systems.

Was the intention from the beginning to make a prequel, or did the team flirt with the idea of making a post-Gears of War 3 story?
We always knew we wanted to make another Gears game, but we also knew we didn't want to make "just another Gears game." We're immensely proud of the original Gears trilogy, and we felt very strongly that the story had reached a good conclusion. Just tacking on more to that story would have felt too forced and too predictable. For Judgment, we wanted to try something fresh and new that built upon the strengths of the Gears universe without taking away from the impact of what was already there.

It seemed like a risky move to get rid of proper Horde and Beast modes, but critical reaction to the new Overrun mode has been positive. Are players responding well to it?
The reaction to Overrun has been fantastic. It's proven to be one of our most popular game types, and shown that Gears can be so much more than the sum of its parts. Horde and Beast

were cooperative game types, and now we have Survival to capture that audience. TDM and domination are competitive game types, and we still have a strong offering in that regard as well. But Overrun actually manages to capture both of those player bases at the same time, so it has a much broader appeal and much more depth than anything we've ever done in the past.

Key developers Cliff Bleszinski, Rod Fergusson, and Adrian Chmielarz left the company before the game was completed. Did this have much of an effect on the product?
Those guys were always known for being the outward-facing members of the company, but Cliff was always the first to point out that our games are the products of an immensely talented team all working together. That hasn't changed. All of the people you mentioned were involved in the projects long enough to make their mark, and their contributions are woven into the fabric of the franchise as a whole. If anything, their departures pulled us together even stronger, as it opened new doors of communication and led to people really focusing on working as a team.

It's clear that this will be the last Gears title on the current generation of consoles. Have fans of the series already seen its swan song, or is there hope for a return on next-gen consoles?
I'm not so sure that anything is really clear at this point. Epic has a long tradition of supporting its players with continued updates and downloadable content, and that holds true for Judgment as well. We're actively focused on creating new content for this game, so we haven't even had time to move on to whatever's coming next. ◆

photo: Jason Henry

Zynga's New Vision

As Zynga's president of games, Steve Chiang brings a wealth of development experience, including over 15 years at EA helping to guide its Tiburon sports studio. We spoke with Chiang about Zynga's efforts to expand its portfolio and target more core gamers.

interview by Matt Helgeson

Coming from many years at EA, what was the opportunity that you saw at Zynga?
In FIFA 09, we had the first version of FIFA Ultimate Team. It had the card packs for one dollar, 50 cents, and a quarter. You tried to build your ultimate team to compete on the field. The mode itself did not ship with the game, so that cost $10. There were the card packs you could buy. What we saw very quickly was that the revenue from the microtransaction content surpassed [the sales of] the $10 mode. When you think about the math, you say, "I need to make this cost less so more people play and I need to get it out earlier and closer to launch." We saw then that microtransactions were happening.

I was a hardcore World of Warcraft player for a while. I was staying up until four in the morning and taking my kids to school at seven in the morning. As much as I wanted to play, I couldn't live on three hours of sleep. So, this idea of social gaming – playing with your friends in short sessions, [along with] free-to-play, felt to me like it was the future of gaming. I looked at it like, "Do I want to be a record label executive in the 2000s?" That's what I felt like. I loved EA, but I felt like the business was changing so fast that if I didn't become part of the change, I'd be the dinosaur.

As someone who's come up in the traditional games business, what's your perspective on the current social games space? How does it need to evolve?
What gets lost is that social games really have to be strong game designs and they have to be very compelling. Otherwise, people won't play. What Zynga pioneered was, number one, the social aspect. Number two was the accessibility. Accessibility comes in the fact that you don't have to buy a console or buy a disc. It's all on the browser and it's free. It's like what Warcraft is in the MMO space. In Ultima Online, you were grinding really hard. In Warcraft, by level seven you're killing zombies and orcs. It's super accessible and super social. When you look at it in those dimensions, we think of the Ville games as simulation games [that are] very mass market.

How much of your business is in the "Ville" games?
I don't know what our exact breakdown is. We reorganized all the game studios around four genres. We're really focused on building franchises. The segments that we have built out are "invest and express" games, which are the Ville games. We have the mid-core, which really signals a new era for Zynga in the sense that we're going to be building more traditional games in the Zynga fashion, which means accessible and social. You're starting to see it with our recent announcements of War of the Fallen, Battlestone, and Solstice: Arena. The third genre is casino. We have one of the biggest poker games in the world on Facebook and mobile. The last one is our mobile, casual games. Our top games there are Words With Friends, Draw Something, Bubble Safari and things like that. That's our portfolio view. Certainly, our history has the more Ville style games, but our growth, we believe, is in "midcore" as one of our big genres.

Is mid-core an attempt to reach out to more traditionally engaged gamers?
That's the right way to characterize it. Certainly, audience is important. We're thinking about mid-core with some games that are going to surprise many people. They don't look like traditional Zynga games. What we're excited about is going after that audience, and I include myself in that category, who played a lot of core games growing up – when they had time. We want to focus on the accessibility and the social aspects – the short sessions and making it so you can get in and play. It's tailoring it for a mobile experience, which might be a five or ten minute experience when you have time. And also making it social, so you're playing with your friends. The trick for us is to figure out the right balance. It can't be watered down. We want to be that accessible core gaming experience in a shorter session.

So you're trying to engage players that aren't engaged by the Ville games or the poker games?
Yeah, there's a large segment. Thinking of it as "mid-core" instead of hardcore really starts to open up the audience. There is a part of the Farmville audience that will play and there is a part of the hardcore audience that will play, and I think there are a lot of lapsed gamers who will play. That's how we're thinking about it. Farmville really opened up gaming to an audience that did not consider themselves gamers, but if you looked at their play patterns, they were as hardcore as any gamers.

Zynga and Facebook have been close partners, and it's helped both companies thrive. The relationship changed in 2012 – maybe even cooled. How important is Facebook to your business?
Facebook is a huge partner for us. They are super important. We have an incredible relationship with Facebook. As you mentioned, we've really helped each other grow over the last few years. We announced that we'd amended our agreement with Facebook in quarter four of 2012. What we were focused on was giving ourselves the ability to build out our Zynga.com experience. We wanted to make sure that we had that flexibility to go after and build our own user base. The reality is that the business is shifting to mobile and it's shifting to mobile very fast. I believe that the tablet is the new console, but just like console gaming, I don't think Facebook gaming is ever going away. They have a huge audience and a huge user base.

How disruptive has the iPad been in the casual and social game space?
I think it's just starting. The tablet is going to be a really interesting experience as we see this grow. We're literally watching it and you must see it in your own experiences – watch kids on tablets. I start my day with the tablet. I play games on the tablet. I go to bed playing games on the tablet. It's just so convenient, and the form factor is really good for gaming, with the touch UI and detailed graphics. You start to think, "There's nothing this thing can't do."

Some rumors indicate that the next-gen consoles, PlayStation 4 and the next Xbox, might be more open to different sorts of business models. Are you planning for consoles?
In the free-to-play space, the business is really just the funnel. It's about how many players play. As you probably know, less than five percent actually pay. So, there are a ton of users who get a ton of value playing the games for free. So it's about having a large audience who would be interested in content. As more game platforms become ready, and we have seen Sony and Microsoft do more free-to-play experiments, I absolutely think those become viable possibilities.

Are you still looking to grow through acquisition, or are you going to build up your internal studios?
We're doing both. Talent is talent and great game-making talent is fundamental to everything we do. We've been really fortunate to have hired some great guys like Mark Turmell, the creator of NBA Jam, and Jon Tobias, the co-creator of Mortal Kombat. We have Ian Cummings, who was the creative director on Madden football. Then, on the flip side, acquisitions like New Toy and Words with Friends and OMGPOP with Draw Something have been strong acquisitions for us.

Accusations of plagiarism have dogged Zynga for a long time. How do you respond to that, and how do you address that moving forward?
I've been around the game business a long time. We've seen games like Wolfenstein 3D come out as really the first first-person shooter, then Doom, then Unreal, and along to every iteration thereafter. The important thing is focusing on "how do we move this genre forward?" and "how do introduce innovation and great mechanics and features?"

Do you feel that those complaints were overblown?
I take all that stuff really seriously. That's certainly not our aspiration. As we move forward, we're focused on building franchises. We want to make sure that our difference and our innovation is clearly defined and visible. ◆

RAZER EDGE PRO

Tablet titles like Infinity Blade and Year Walk are a lot of fun, but sometimes you want to sink your teeth into a larger, PC-centric experience like BioShock Infinite. Razer's gaming-optimized Windows 8 tablet is designed with this in mind, and it should appeal perfectly to the kind of gamer who can't wait to get home before digging into the latest AAA release.

The Edge may look like an unassuming tablet from a distance, but it's immediately distinguishable once you pick it up. The unit weighs over two pounds and has a girth of .80 inches, which is large for a tablet. This heft is necessary, however, because the Edge houses an Intel Core i7 Dual core processor, an Nvidia GT 640M LE graphics card, and 8GB of DDR3 memory.

Cramming these PC specs into a tablet allows the Edge to run demanding games like Crysis 3 and Witcher 2 well at moderate settings. Crysis 3 even maintained a steady framerate of 30 fps on low settings. The system also supports the new touch controls for games like Civilization V.

Not every game supports touch controls, which is why the Edge Pro comes bundled with a gamepad controller casing. This slightly awkward chassis clips over the Edge and provides gamepad-like inputs for PC titles. After getting used to the wide spacing of the handgrips, this became my preferred way to play the Edge, but you can also sync the Edge with a Bluetooth keyboard and mouse, or other third party gamepads.

Games and movies look good on the 10.1-inch, 1366x768 multi-touch HD display, but its density of 155 pixels per inch is outshined by many tablets already on the market. The biggest problem with the display is the touchscreen, which occasionally feels unresponsive.

The Edge has a few other big flaws as well. It runs loud and hot, and the battery only provides a little over an hour of gaming. You can buy an extra battery ($69) for the controller casing, which doubles the time you can spend away from a power socket.

Razer's Edge is a worthwhile purchase if you really want to play high-end games on a tablet, but it has a few awkward edges that need to be sanded down before it becomes a practical product for the masses.

AVERAGE ■■■■■■■□□□

$1,299 (128 GB) $1,449 (256 GB) | *razerzone.com*

by Ben Reeves

34
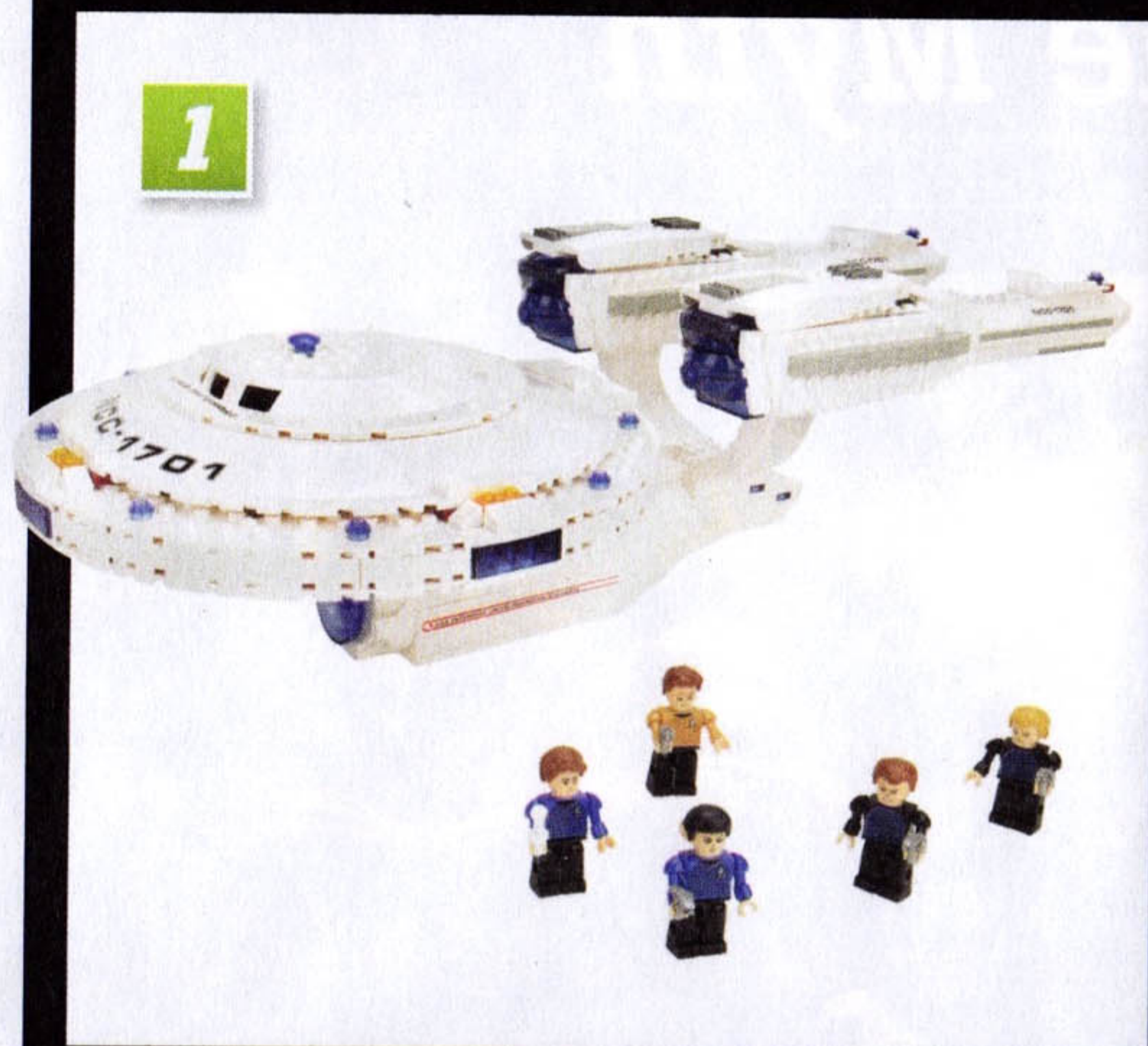
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Kre-O Star Trek U.S.S. Enterprise Construction Set
Kre-O may be the RC Cola of Legos, but Star Trek is the RC Cola of Star Wars, so this might be the perfect combination. Even so, this U.S.S. Enterprise Construction Set looks great. The full set includes 430 Kre-O pieces, 5 Kreon figures, and an instruction guide. Once built, the saucer section opens to reveal a command bridge illuminated by LightTech technology, so you can watch the Enterprise crew engage in awkward fistfights and social commentary-laden adventures.

$49.99 | hasbro.com/kre-o

2

Energizer Recharge Value Charger
Why keep buying new batteries for your controller every month when you could just get a good set of rechargeable cells? We put Energizer's newest set of rechargeables to the test over the course of several weeks. Energizer's Value Charger system recharges both AA and AAA nickel-metal hydride batteries. During our tests, we got both on- and off-brand batteries to charge quickly overnight. Both sets of batteries held their charge well and provided up to 10 hours of juice for our Xbox 360 and Wii controllers.

VERY GOOD ■■■■■■■■□□

$14.95 | energizer.com/batteries

3

Black Label Classic Wood Consoles
Analogue Interactive's new Black Label service builds custom video game consoles and arcade sticks out of wood. Each order is custom built, which allows you to pick from classics like hickory and mahogany or more exotic fair such as cocobolo (featured) or East Indian rosewood, among others. Analogue Interactive currently only builds Neo Geo systems, but the company hopes to offer other classic consoles soon.

Starting at $649 | analogueinteractive.com/black-label
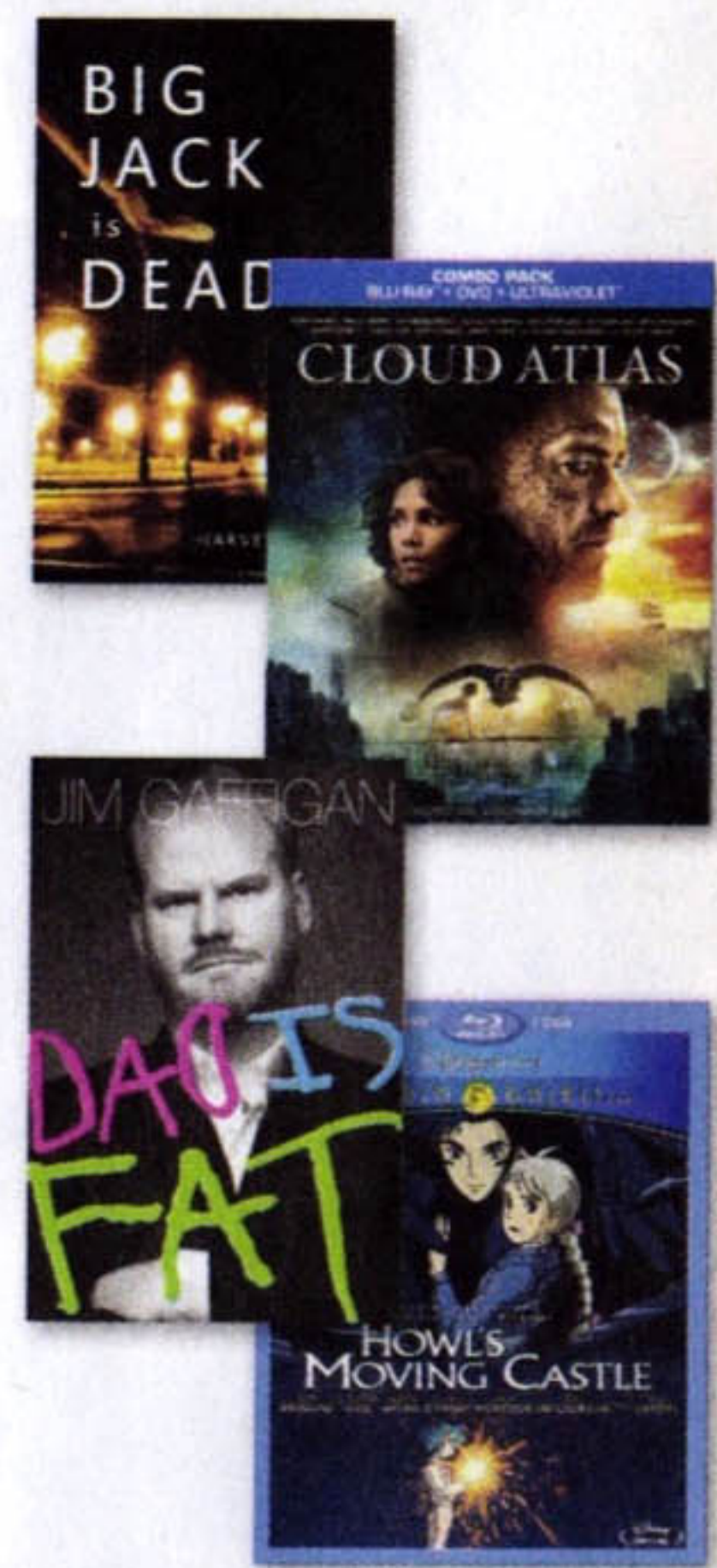
BIG JACK IS DEAD
BY HARVEY SMITH

Capturing the vibe of a small Texas town, game designer Harvey Smith (Dishonored) tells the story of Jack Hickman, an antisocial software exec whose father commits suicide, forcing Jack to confront the ghosts of his past as he buries a father he hated.

$12.99
witchboy.net

CLOUD ATLAS

The Wachowskis bring one of the most inventive novels of the last decade to the big screen in an exploration of how individual lives impact one another across time. One act of kindness ripples across the centuries and inspires a revolution.

$35.99
wbshop.com

DAD IS FAT
BY JIM GAFFIGAN

Stand-up comedian Jim Gaffigan is known for his food-based humor, but in this personal narrative he expresses his frustrations, joys, and horrors of feeling outnumbered while raising five young children.

$25.00
randomhouse.com

HOWL'S MOVING CASTLE

Disney finally brings one of Studio Ghibli's best films to Blu-ray. After a vengeful witch transforms young Sophie into an old woman, she sets out to find a cure, eventually winding up in the mobile castle of a mysterious and handsome wizard named Howl.

$39.99
disneydvd.com

Dispelling the Myth

Today's High-End PC is Not True Next-Gen Gaming

by Torbjorn Olsson

When Sony revealed the PlayStation 4, I read some of the comments regarding the console online and noticed that one persistent myth kept appearing – current PC games are already next generation. That's simply not true.

The reality is that high-end PC is a small market for developers and publishers, although it has seen some significant growth over the last few years. I played Crysis 3, and it's a beautiful game. However, at its core Crysis 3 was designed to also run on current consoles and less-powerful PCs. Every graphical enhancement you see on a high-end PC, no matter how pretty it is, is just eye candy. Crytek could not design levels and enemies that would impact gameplay unless those elements would also work on Xbox 360 and PS3. Core design has to work on all systems, which limits developers working on today's consoles compared to those who are working on next-generation consoles.

Games like Diablo III, Watch Dogs, and Destiny are going to look better on the next generation of consoles. However, they are not, at their core, going to be very different from today's games unless exclusive content is released for the new consoles. For example, Destiny's PS4-exclusive content might be something that pushes gameplay that wouldn't be possible on current consoles.

It's hard to convey how games will fundamentally change with the next generation without coming across as marketing jargon. Each time a new generation of consoles is released, it makes new things possible in games. When the Xbox 360 and PS3 came along, players were introduced to physics-enabled gameplay. Physics have been a part of gameplay since the original PlayStation and Saturn days, but when Half-Life 2 came out gamers saw the impact that more advanced physics could have on gameplay by the right developers. Creating proper destructible cover in shooters was just not possible until the current generation of consoles. These achievements were huge turning points; these days we take them for granted.

Other changes from the last generation that made a huge impact were bigger and more advanced worlds, more on-screen characters capable of behaving realistically, and advanced animation systems. The current generation of machines allow for experiences like LittleBigPlanet to feature real physics-driven gameplay and focus on user-created content. Even "simple" games like Journey rely on the current system specs to truly create unique experiences. A game like Mass Effect, which relies so heavily on player choice, would be very hard to achieve on a system less powerful than the Xbox 360. I'm not just talking about downgrading the graphics; you would have to downgrade the whole experience in order to run it on the previous generation of consoles.

When Heavy Rain creator David Cage took the stage at Sony's PlayStation 4 event and attempted to use a metaphor comparing game development to feature-film production, as a developer I understood what he was trying to say. Conveying emotion on the current systems – while not impossible, as shown by a number of titles – is still a very difficult task, especially if you want to approach realism without going the stylized route like Ico and Shadow of the Colossus. Those games are two beautiful and emotionally engaging experiences, but to use David Cage's metaphor, two very well-executed versions of a silent film. If we want developers to truly express themselves and deliver a range of powerful experiences, be it action or something more profound, they need as much power as hardware manufacturers can afford to give them.

What else is going to be possible on the next systems that might be easy to overlook? Fluid dynamics will, for the first time, be implemented into actual gameplay that directly affects what's going on in your game. A well-designed game using fluid dynamics could play out differently each time you play it, forcing players to constantly adapt to the results of their choices. Some studios have made crude forays into fluid dynamics on current systems, but the next generation will be able to do so much more.

Dynamics in general will receive a massive change and be able to impact players more than they ever have before. Massive crowd simulations will operate on a level not possible currently. Having worked on crowd simulations for films, I know that it takes intensive computational power to make crowds behave intelligently rather than just appear like a bunch of meat-fodder clones like in the Dynasty Warrior games. Current-generation games have done a bit of this, but so much more will be possible on the new consoles, and it could have a tremendous impact on gameplay.

The next generation is about so much more than just prettier graphics. Now, it's up to us developers to really take advantage of this extra horsepower and deliver experiences that just weren't possible before. ◈

Torbjorn Olsson is a technical 3D artist with 16 years of experience in games, broadcast, and feature film. He's worked on the PlayStation, Dreamcast, PS2, Xbox, Xbox 360, PS3, and the PC on games like Mass Effect 2, Star Wars: The Old Republic, and Brothers in Arms: Hell's Highway. He currently runs his own development company Selective Abstraction and is working on a new game.

02
Remember Me

07

09
Animal Crossing:
New Leaf

11.1
Dark

11.2

14

14
The Last of Us
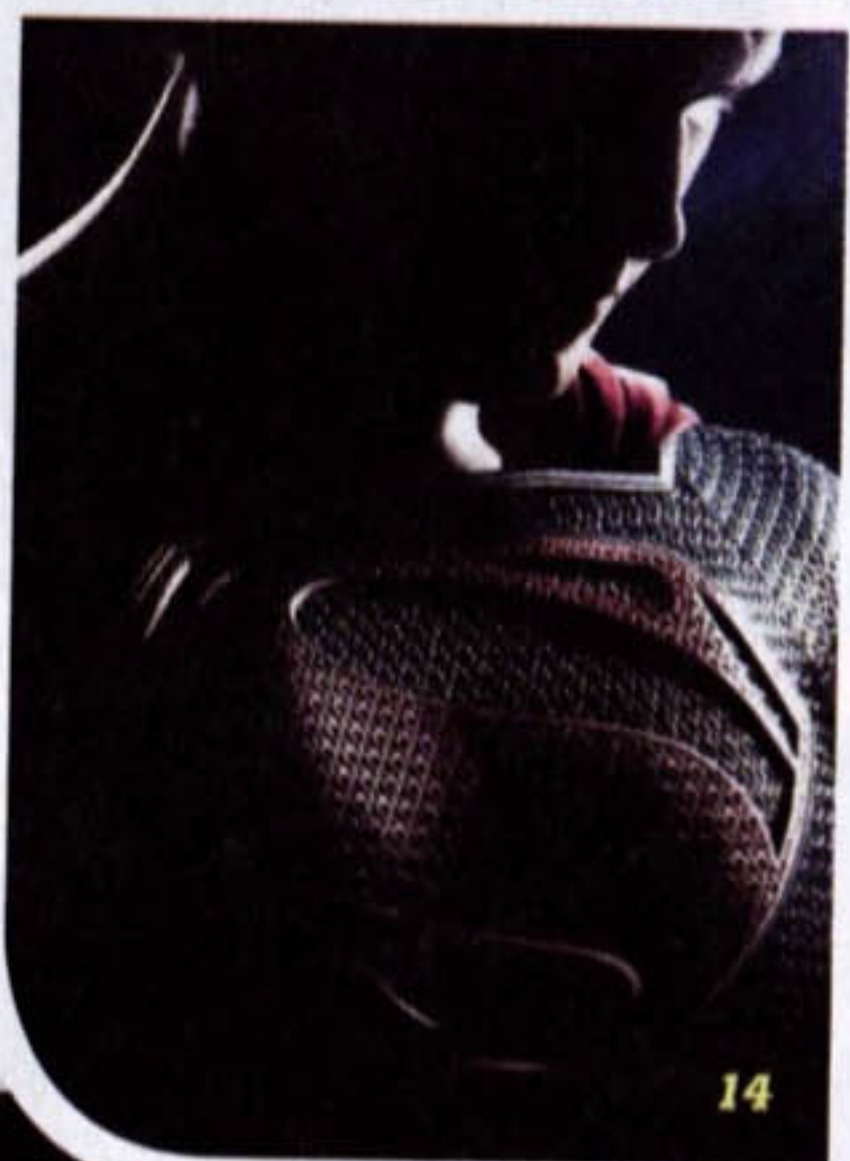
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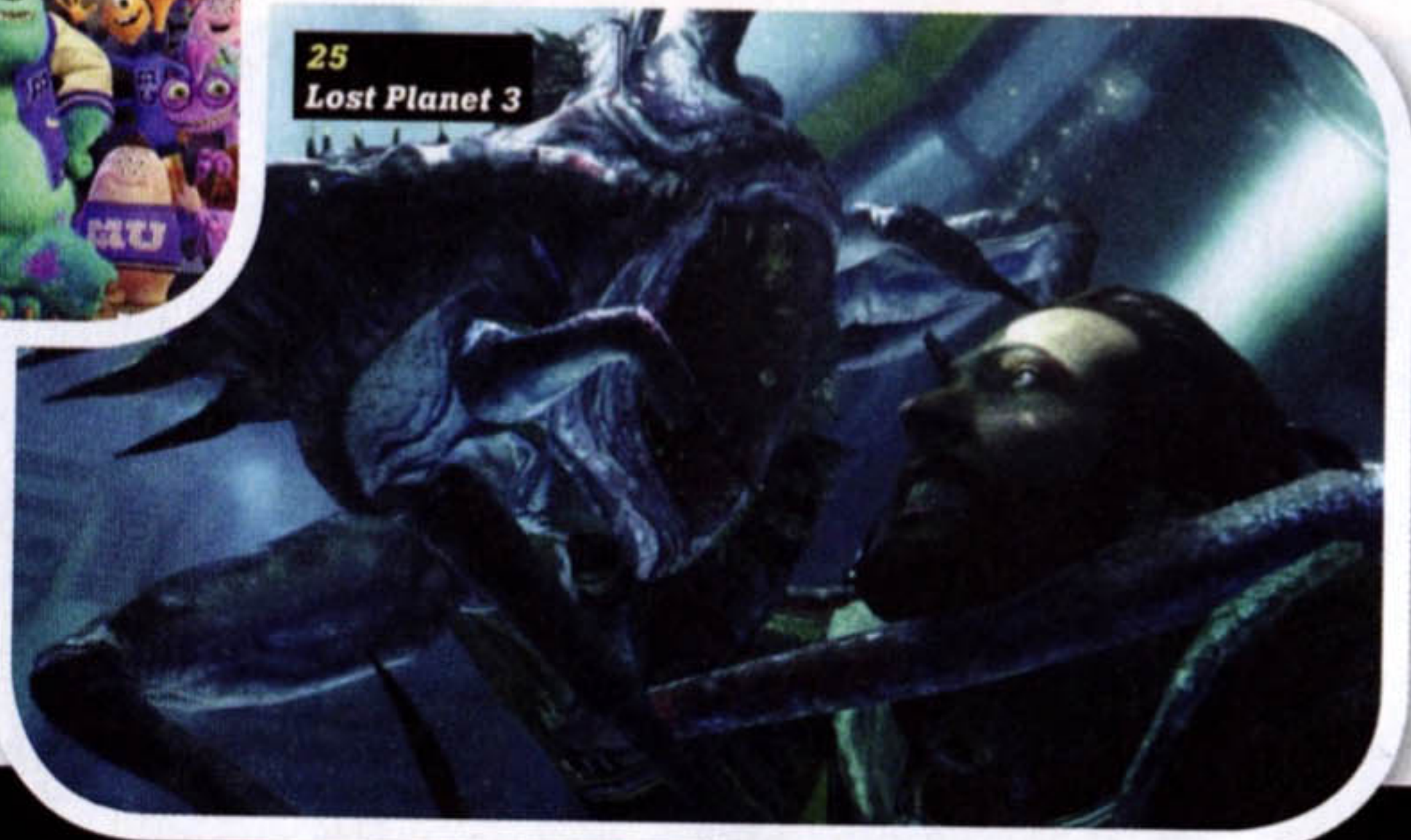
25
Lost Planet 3

June

2013

02 New Releases
› Remember Me *(PS3, 360)*

**05 Kick-Ass:
The Trilogy?**
Mark Millar's costumed high school kids don't return to theaters until August 16, but comic book readers can dive into the third chapter of their violent superhero story in *Kick-Ass 3*. This eight-issue series is the last for Kick-Ass and Hit Girl. Here's hoping it ends on a happy note.

**07 Earth After
The Walking Dead**
After Earth, Will Smith's latest blockbuster, hits theaters today. Writer Gary Whitta worked on Telltale's The Walking Dead game and penned *The Book of Eli*. The director, M. Night Shyamalan, hasn't made a good movie since

Unbreakable. We can already guess the twist ending: It's a sequel to *The Last Airbender* disguised as a Will Smith movie.

09 New Releases
› Animal Crossing: New Leaf *(3DS)*

11.1 New Releases
› Dark *(360, PC)*

11.2 E3 2013 Kicks Off
This year's Electronic Entertainment Expo promises to be one of the best, giving gamers a good look at the next generation of video games. Most of Sony and Microsoft's hardware plans are expected to be revealed at the show, and the video game press should get their first hands-on with these consoles' launch games. Check out gameinformer.com for minute-to-minute updates from the show floor.

14 Superman Again
Zach Snyder's Superman reboot, *Man of Steel*, is this week's big theatrical release. Can the alien wearing blue tights and a red cape captivate a 2013 crowd? Superman escapes a dying planet again, struggles with his humanity again, and probably falls in love with Lois Lane again. If this version isn't successful, maybe they'll get it right with the next reboot in a few years.

14 New Releases
› The Last of Us *(PS3)*

21 A Double Feature Day
Theaters welcome *World War Z* and *Monsters University* today. One movie has Brad Pitt battling millions of zombies. The other has a one-eyed college kid trying to make his mark on an animated world. Both films have a lot of buzz behind them, but if you can only see one, go for the one starring

Hollywood's biggest heartthrob: Billy Crystal. He was dashing in *When Harry Met Sally*.

25 New Releases
› Company of Heroes 2 *(PC)*
› Lost Planet 3 *(PS3, 360)*
› Muramasa Rebirth *(Vita)*
› The Sims 3: Island Paradise *(PC)*

30 New Releases
› Lego: Legends of Chima *(Vita, DS)*

THE FUTURE IS NOW

Sony Casts Its Eye Toward
The Next Generation With PlayStation 4
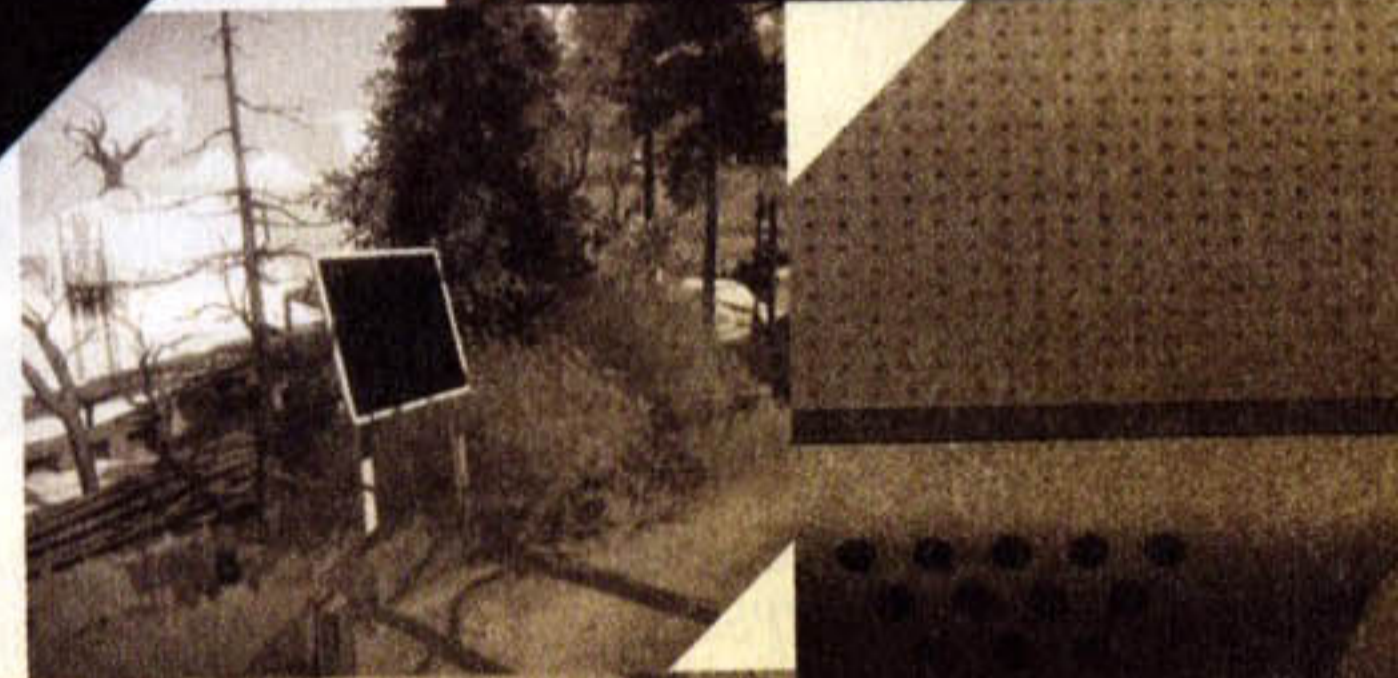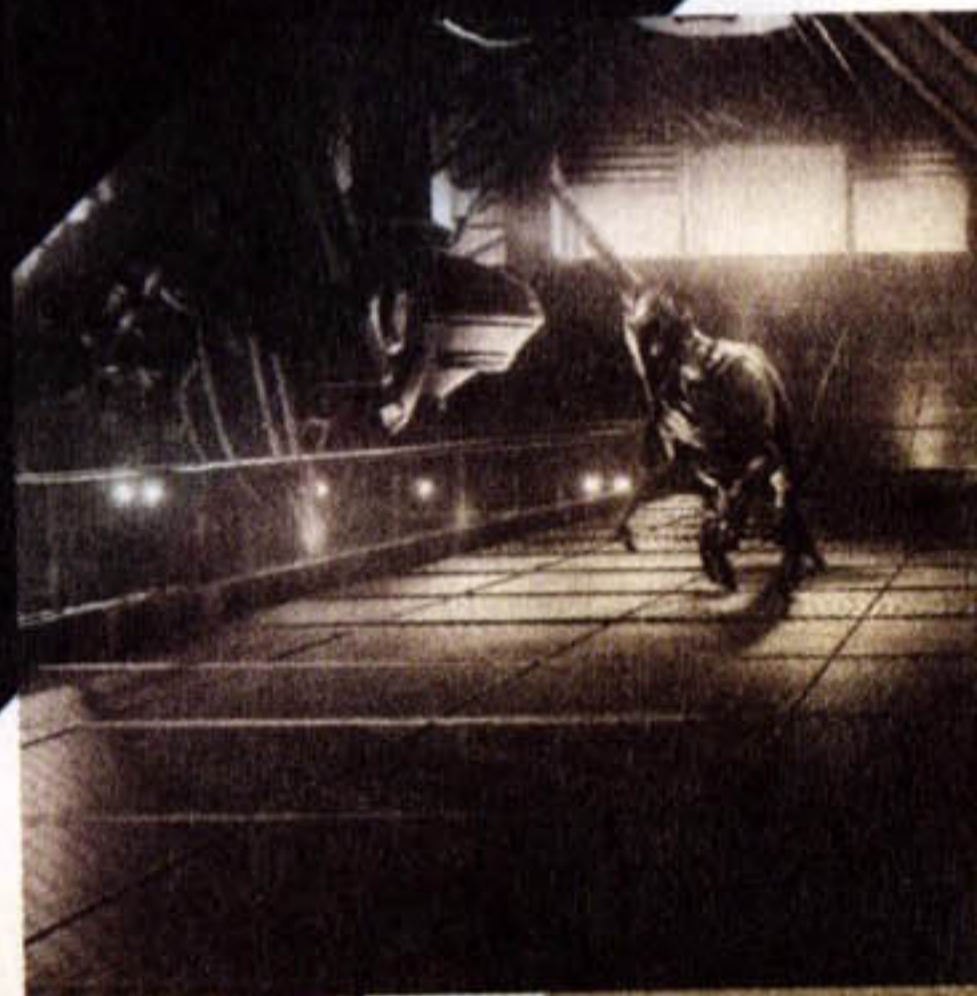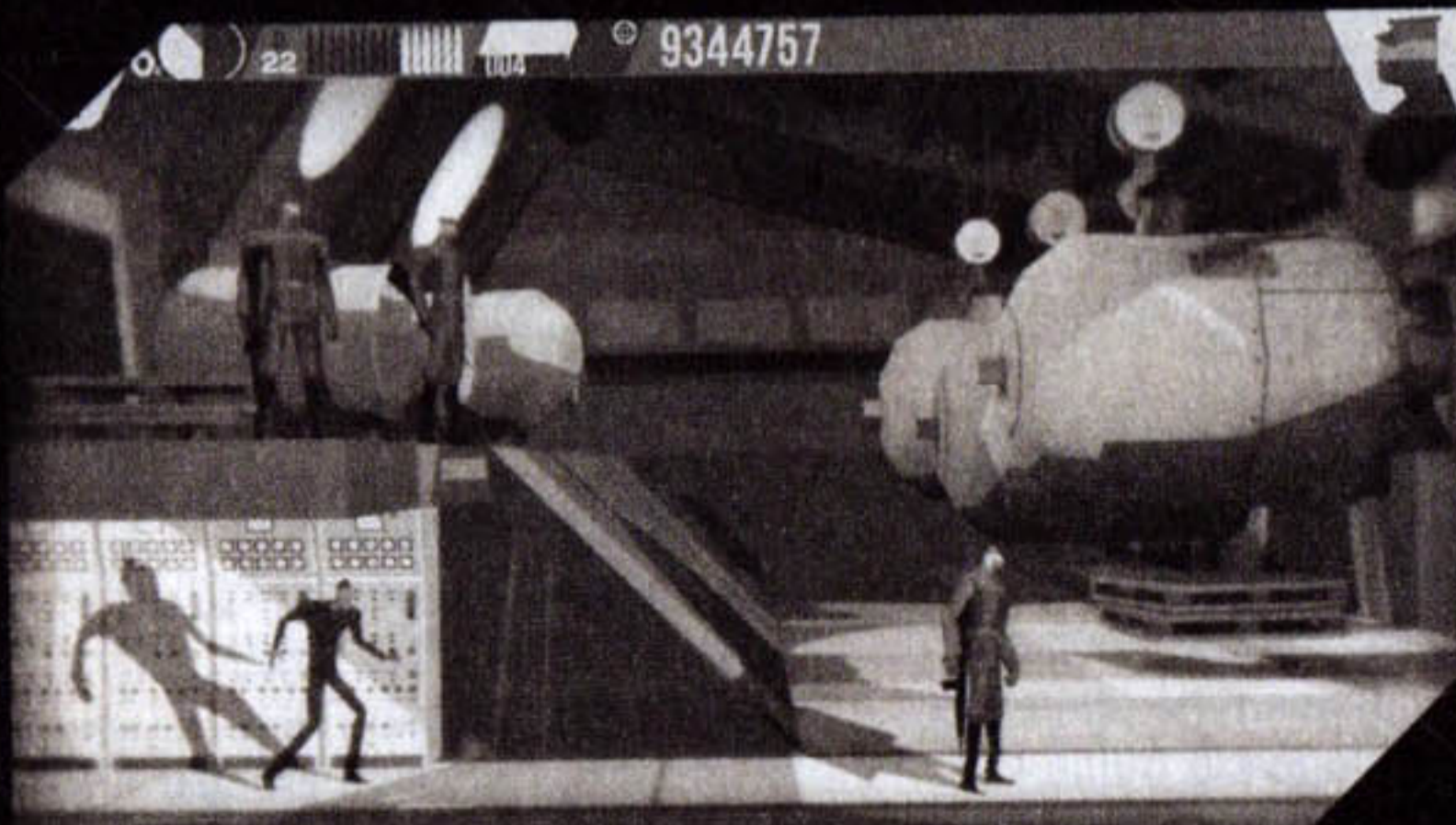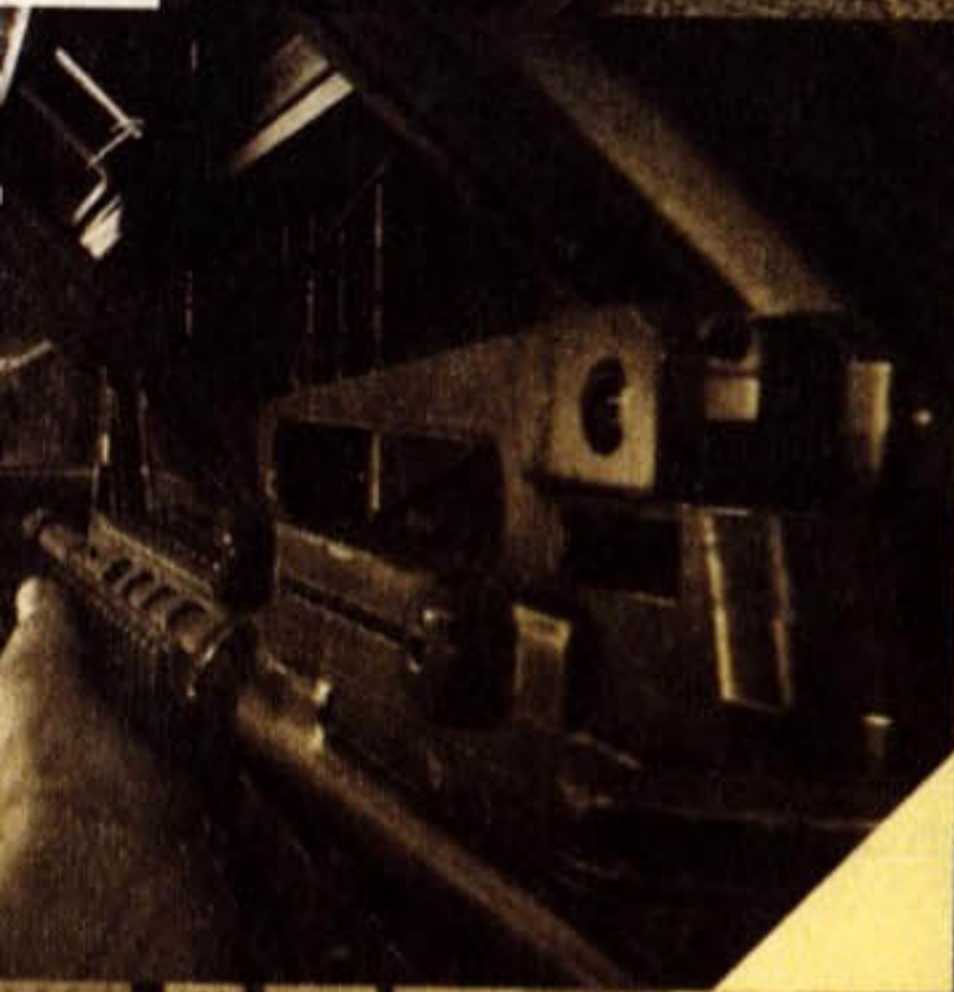
Armed with powerful developer-friendly hardware, a new controller, a welcoming pitch to indie developers, and a fresh crop of games, Sony is primed for the next generation. To give Game Informer readers a better glimpse at the company's plans, Sony opened its doors for an unprecedented amount of access to the talent driving PlayStation into the future. These 28 pages of coverage dive into nearly every aspect of Sony's approach.

First, we get you up to speed regarding the PlayStation 4 specs. Then, we sit down with Shuhei Yoshida, Sony's president of worldwide studios, to learn more about the new console. Following this discussion, check out our hands-on

impressions of a prototype model of the new DualShock controller to see how it stacks up to previous iterations.

No next-gen console feature would be complete without an extensive look at the games on the horizon. For starters, we take a deep dive into the brave new surveillance-heavy world of Infamous Second Son. Once you're caught up with Sony's flagship open-world game, listen to vice president of publisher and developer relations Adam Boyes and several developers talk about out how Sony is evolving its pitch to indies (with glimpses of some of the new games in the pipeline). We top off the coverage with new information and screenshots for Knack, Destiny, Killzone, DriveClub, and Media Molecule's new project.

THE PLAYSTATION 4 PRIMER

Sony hasn't released any new information regarding the PlayStation 4 since its February event, but here's everything we know right now. It's important to note that two of the most important facts about the console – release date and retail price – are still unknown. However, Sony did say that it's targeting this upcoming holiday season for the PS4 launch. *by Matt Helgeson*

The Hardware

The internal design of the PlayStation 4 represents an about-face for the company; Sony clearly heard complaints from developers who felt the complex Cell chipset of the PS3 was too difficult to harness. The PS4's internal architecture is much different. At its core, the components are very similar to those found in many modern PCs. The core CPU is a custom AMD eight-core "Jaguar" coupled with a 1.84 teraflop AMD Radeon GPU. The best news for developers? The 8GB of internal RAM – a huge step up from the PlayStation 3's paltry 256MB XDR RAM and 256MB video RAM. This additional memory allows developers to make bigger, more interactive, and more complex gaming experiences. The PS4 also boasts a brand-new DualShock controller with a touchpad (for more, check out our hands-on preview on p. 42) and a built-in Move motion sensor that works with a stereo camera peripheral.

The Social Console

The PlayStation 4 places a heavy emphasis on the social aspects of gaming. The most notable effort in this area is the controller's "Share" button, which allows you to instantly upload screenshots or gameplay footage to Facebook. Sony has also partnered with third-party streaming services like Ustream to integrate spectating. Even more impressive is the planned ability to allow your friend to take control of your game remotely to get past a particularly difficult sequence.

An Open Platform

The video game business has changed a lot, and Sony says the PlayStation 4 is much more open to emerging business models. Sony says free-to-play games will be a big part of the PS4 lineup. Sony is also offering independent developers the option to self-publish games on the PlayStation 4 – including Braid creator Jonathan Blow, who's bringing his new game The Witness to PS4 as a self-published game. To learn more about Sony's courtship of the indie scene, read our feature on p. 54.

Cloud Gaming Comes Home

Sony bought the cloud-based streaming gaming service Gaikai for $380 million in 2012, an investment driven by its PlayStation 4 plans. Gaikai founder Dave Perry got a lot of stage time at the PS4 announcement, and said that instant cloud gaming is a major focus for the company. The new hardware makes backward compatibility incredibly difficult, so Sony plans to make the extensive PlayStation back catalog available via cloud-based streaming. Perry didn't mention whether or not new releases would be available on the cloud as well.

The streaming technology is also used in the PSN store. Instead of having to download a game demo, you can test a streaming version of the game for a period of time before making your purchasing decision.

A Personalized System

Sony is making your PlayStation 4 experience centered on your gaming and entertainment interests. You can quickly browse games and information being played or shared by friends, and prediction technology allows the system to suggest content – both entertainment and games – based on your playing and purchasing habits. The system can even predict your next purchase and have the game loaded and ready to go before you buy it.

The user interface is customizable, and as expected, is open to a large number of outside entertainment services for streaming and on-demand media such as Netflix.

The PS4 Specs

CPU
Low power consumption eight core x86-64 AMD "Jaguar"

GPU
1.84 TFLOPS, AMD next-generation Radeon-based graphics engine

Memory
8GB GDDR5 unified RAM

Storage
Hard Disk Drive (Size TBA)

Optical Drive
BD 6xCAV/DVD 8xCAV (read only)

Input/Output
USB 3.0, AUX

Communication
Ethernet (10BASE-T, 100BASE-TX, 1000BASE-T), IEEE 802.11 b/g/n, Bluetooth 2.1 (EDR)

A/V
HDMI, Analog-AV out, digital output (optical)

Instant and Streaming Gameplay

Sony is pushing cloud technology in a big way on PlayStation 4, which could offer considerable benefits to gamers. The system allows for a sleep state "suspend mode," which basically means you can keep the system on in a low-power state, and then boot it up to instantly pick up where you left off in a game. You can also seamlessly switch between gameplay and applications, like the web browser, without losing your progress in a game. PlayStation 4 also offers background downloading, so you can play a game while another downloads, and digital titles are playable while the rest of the game downloads.

This streaming capability also allows the system to use the PlayStation Vita as a display and control device. Sony plans for all PlayStation 4 titles to be playable on the Vita via Wi-Fi streaming, similar to the Wii U's ability to play some games with the GamePad. In addition, Sony will release iOS and Android apps that connect your tablet or smartphone to the system. These apps will provide secondary content like real-time game maps, allow players to purchase games and items from the PlayStation Network remotely, and let players watch shared gameplay streams.

INTERVIEW:
SHUHEI YOSHIDA
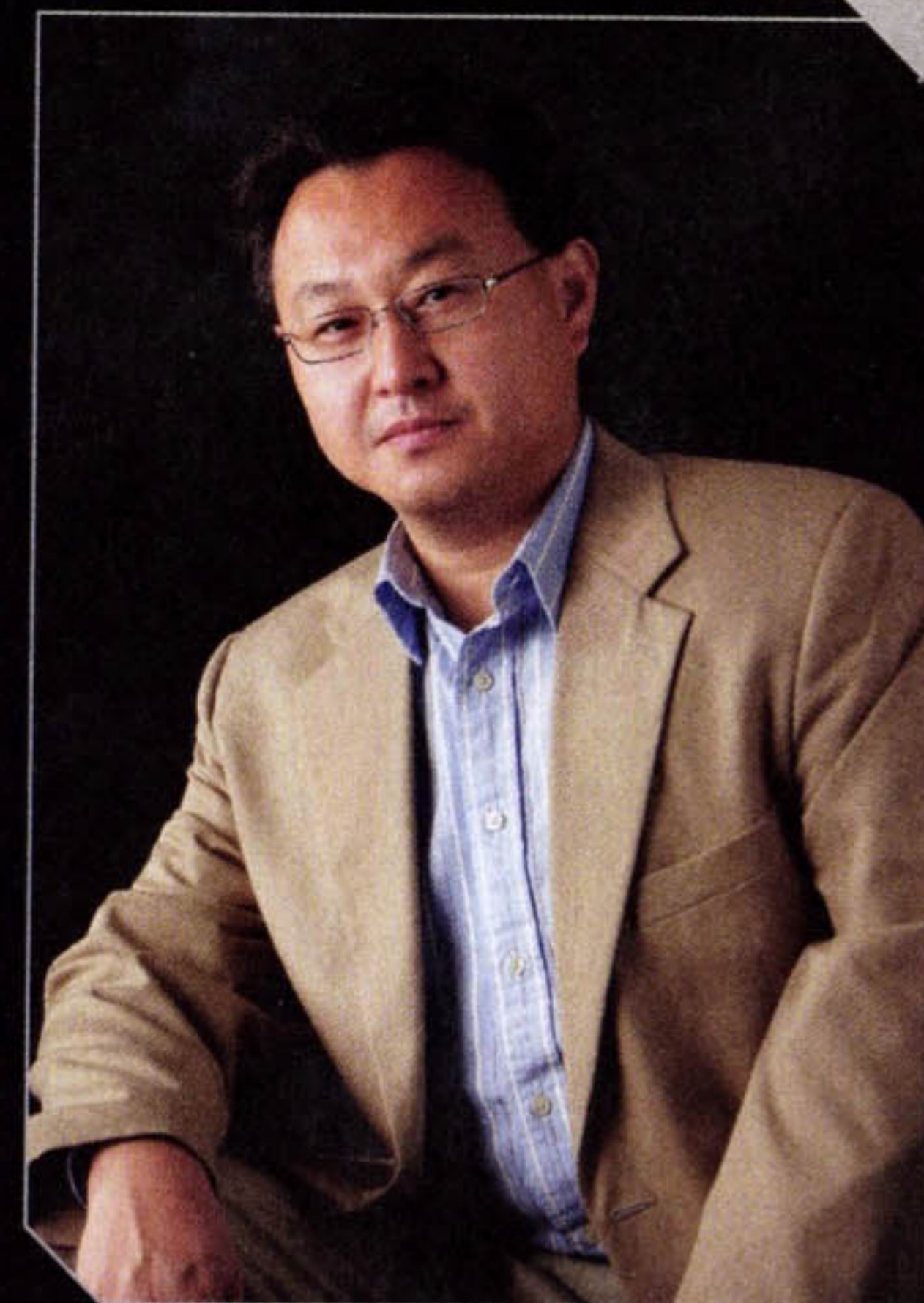
A s Sony's president of worldwide studios, Shuhei Yoshida is one of the people who most directly decides the company's strategy for game and content distribution. We recently got the opportunity to speak with him about PlayStation 4 and how it will bring change to the gaming landscape. *interview by Jeff Marchiafava*

In an earlier interview with us, you mentioned that the PS4 will allow for a variety of publishing options including free-to-play games, subscription-based games, and episodic games. Is Sony considering any of these different models for its first-party offerings?
Yeah. We are developing a free-to-play type of game, but we haven't announced it yet. We don't have any subscription-based games in development, but we are not crossing out any type of game; if it makes sense for a particular project, we'll look at adopting different models. We are open for any types of models. Overall, we are increasing investment in the digital side of development, either through digital titles like Journey that we've been doing, but also trying to add more service-based models to our games going forward, like DLCs or additional features post launch.

This generation, Sony released a large number of first-party titles while Microsoft focused on a few core titles. What are your plans for PS4? Do you plan to approach first-party development as aggressively this generation?
Of course we have a large group of studios both internally and working with external independent developers as well. The types of content and types of distributions will change as we move forward with the industry. We have the same level of strong commitment to continue to produce first-party titles.

Do you plan on expanding the number of first-party studios that you have for the next generation?
We are not talking about any specific numbers of studios or titles, but you are aware that some of our studios are growing and adding more teams. That hopefully will increase the amount of output from these studios that we are investing in.

Developers typically use the launch of a new console to release new IPs. How are you splitting your focus for your first-party studios? Are the majority working on new IPs or sequels to existing series?
[It's] like the four titles we announced at the event – two are new IPs, and two are existing. We believe in a good balance, continuing with some of the franchises while at the same time trying out new IPs and new ideas, because like you're saying, the launch of a new platform is a great opportunity to launch new IPs because people are more open to new ideas.

Do you think one or the other is more important?
No, both are of great importance.

The cost of triple-A game development is a growing concern for many developers. Do you plan on having any more of your first-party studios focusing on smaller, downloadable games, like Sony Japan Studio and Sony Santa Monica have?
We are big fans of these smaller, digitally distributed titles, because developers can try out some totally new concepts – of course Journey being the best example. But there are many titles we are proud of that we released last year, for example, Sound Shapes, The Unfinished Swan, or Tokyo Jungle. These are all digitally distributed titles by small teams that had really distinct ideas that they wanted to materialize. The small development is the form to try out new concepts, so we'll continue to support these projects. Last year was a huge year for indies, both for teams who were funded by publishers, as well as real independent titles.

With so many digital titles becoming available, how is the PlayStation Store going to change on the PS4 so that consumers can find the games that they want?
That's a great question. When you look at the new PS3 store, you can tell how the discoverability of content has improved. By choosing content, all of the content related to the content that you have chosen is laid out in front of your eyes, so that becomes much easier to find related content. Moving forward on PS4, we are taking it to the next level, where the system menu that you see when you boot the PS4, at the beginning, where you can select your content on your system. Once you highlight one icon of a game, for example, you see lots of different information about the game, whether it's your friends' activities and what they're doing on the game or what new content is available on the store that's related to that game. [It's] pushing forward more content in front of your eyes based on what you have or what your friends are doing, so that it becomes easier for consumers to find relevant content that people are interested in. We call that personalization, which is one of the five principles that we talked about at the New York event.

Rumors claim that Microsoft's console will require an always-online Internet connection to play games. In previous interviews, you've stated that that's not the case with the PS4. Did you ever consider an always-online connection for the PS4, and if so, why did you decide against it?
Did we consider it? No, we didn't consider it. The main reason being that many countries don't have robust Internet connections. It makes sense for people to have

Internet connections to play online games, but for offline games there are many countries that we saw do not really have robust Internet.

So that wasn't even a consideration?
Right. We didn't even consider that.

A lot of the streaming services and sharing services seem to rely a lot on Gaikai. Is that the reason you bought that company?
They really provide the cloud-gaming services, and they're the experts in the industry – so of course we wanted their expertise and their team to be able to provide the service. The most important aspect of working with Gaikai is they are ahead of the cloud. Everybody is working on cloud-based services these days, but in order to serve in-game content from the server side, they have been focused on providing the best experiences to consumers. We are so happy to be able to work with them. Initially, of course, the thinking was how to add the cloud-based gaming services to PlayStation offerings, but as we worked with them we realized that they can also provide the tech to use, for example, the Remote Play to play PS4 content on PS Vita. That's a great addition to our team.

Media Molecule has focused on allowing gamers to make their own content and share that. Is that something that you think you'll expand in first-party titles from Sony on PS4?
That's true. Really, since LittleBigPlanet, not just ourselves but the industry have embraced the idea of giving consumers tools so that they can create and share content. We love what consumers create. Personally, I like making Sound Shapes levels based on popular Japanese pop songs. It's really fun to do creation when the tools are very easy to use and get feedback from people who try my content. I think it's a win-win proposition, so that people who want to express themselves by doing some creations can do that, and people who are not into making [content] can enjoy way more by user content than what the original team has created. I think that's great.

Will the PS4 make it easier for developers to offer that to players?
Yes, because there is more and more encouragement for people to be always connected on PS4. The patching or adding content or discovering or sharing is going to be better supported by the system's software of the PS4 and services. That encourages more developers to allow consumers to create and share, I think. ◈

GETTING TO KNOW THE
PS4 CONTROLLER

by Dan Ryckert

For 15 years, PlayStation controllers have remained largely the same. The PS2 version featured pressure-sensitive buttons, and PS3's introduced Sixaxis motion controls, but they've all shared the same iconic design introduced with the original DualShock in 1998. With PlayStation 4, Sony is keeping many elements that gamers love about the company's controllers while introducing some potentially exciting new features.

What developers are saying about the PlayStation 4 controller

Sony reached out to a wide variety of developers to get their feedback while designing the new controller. Here's what a few of them had to say about it:

"We have very high framerate on the analog controllers and things like that, so we get much more accurate steering response. All the items like the touchpad and the lips on the control sticks make the new controller much better to use than the previous iterations."
– DriveClub game director Col Rogers

"We were less worried about new features and more concerned with things like reducing lag and having a good feel to the controller. We've seen some pretty wild experiments over the years where we were experimenting with various things, but we're very happy with the new things like the touchpad and the light bar and how they can be used for gameplay."
– Killzone: Shadow Fall game director Steven ter Heide

"We've been working with Sony for 15 years, and this time is different. That's just fact. It's crazy the level of involvement relative to prior generations. The head of the hardware team has visited us multiple times. It's not like Sucker Punch is magical. It speaks to their process this time around, and it's helped us be in a position to where we're really excited for the platform."
– Infamous Second Son producer Brian Fleming

"Sony's hardware design team was great. They contacted us early in the process to get feedback on the DualShock 4. We make action games, and our feedback was simple. We wanted to make sure that the DS4 really paired up well with Destiny's gameplay. For us, that meant the controller needed to feel more substantial, and the triggers needed to be concave."
– Bungie COO Pete Parsons

While visiting Sucker Punch for our Infamous Second Son cover story, I got to hold a version of the controller the developers are using for game testing. Some components of the prototype controller (such as the d-pad and the overall weight of the unit) are still being refined, but I got a good sense of what to expect from the final product.

One of the complaints that gamers (especially FPS fans) had about previous controller designs was the large dead zone on the analog sticks. This has been greatly reduced on the new controller, and both sticks feature stiffer resistance. When holding previous PlayStation controllers, your thumbs could bump into each other if both analog sticks were leaned toward the center. The new controller makes this a thing of the past thanks to wider spacing between the two.

Unlike the rounded, convex tops of previous analog sticks, the PS4 controller's analog sticks feature a ridged, concave top that should prevent your fingers from slipping during tense gameplay sessions. Some gamers prefer the asymmetric d-pad/left analog stick placement of the Xbox 360, but Sony stuck with its traditional positioning for a reason: If the left analog stick and d-pad were swapped, it would make it difficult to interact with the new touchpad without unintentionally jostling the left stick.

This new touchpad sits high in the center of the controller, replacing the traditional start and select buttons. It's smaller than a typical laptop touchpad but is still capable of multi-touch gestures. This should prove handy for browsing on the console, as well as for other game-specific uses.

Sony made several other subtle tweaks as well. The ridge at the end of the trigger buttons grasps your fingers instead of letting them slide off. A small speaker sits above the PS button and below the touchpad. A light at the top of the controller allows the system to track your position and adjust split screens accordingly when used in conjunction with the stereo camera peripheral.

At first glance, the PlayStation 4 controller may look like a DualShock with a touchpad in the center. After holding it and learning about what has changed, however, I'm excited about the improvements. Even though the version I saw was a non-final developer unit, the controller felt comfortable and sturdy. From the looks of it, it's yet another big reason that gamers should get excited about the next generation that's arriving this holiday. ◈
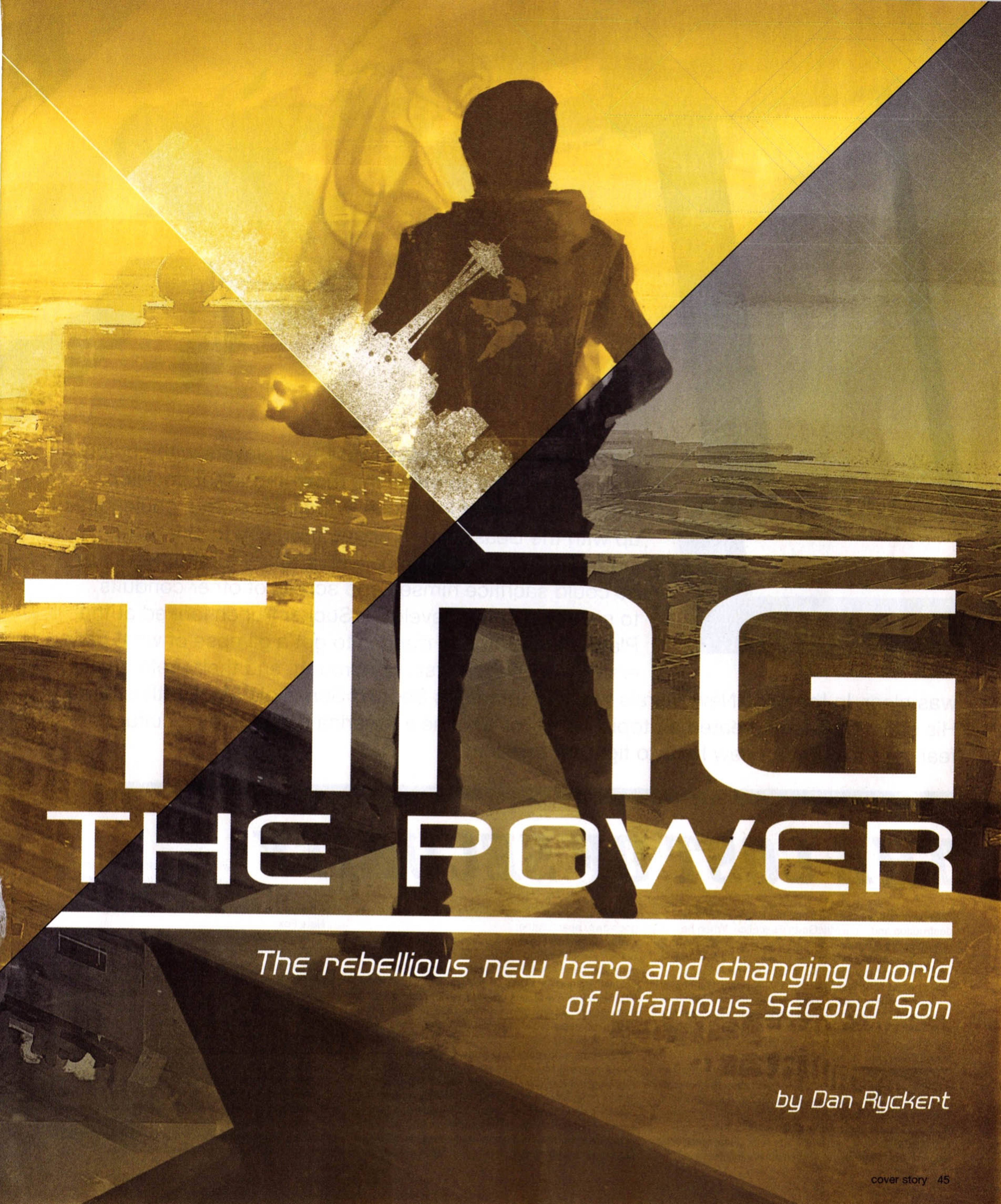
TING
THE POWER

The rebellious new hero and changing world
of Infamous Second Son

by Dan Ryckert

I n a series that has always presented players with choices, fans were forced to make the most important decision of all at the end of Infamous 2. Cole MacGrath could join up with the Beast and rampage from city to city creating more conduits (humans with supernatural powers), or he could sacrifice himself and scores of other conduits to save humanity. Developer Sucker Punch looked at the PlayStation 3 trophy metrics to get a glimpse of what players chose on their first playthrough, and their preference was clear. In the post-New Marais world of Infamous Second Son, Cole MacGrath is dead. His sacrifice hasn't created a utopia, however. This new America is fueled by a culture of fear, and it's up to a new hero to fight for freedom.

THE COST OF SECURITY

Seven years have passed since the Beast's path of destruction and Cole MacGrath's sacrifice. When he activated the RFI device at the conclusion of Infamous 2, countless conduits around the world perished. Those who survived have been demonized by the American news media, and average citizens live in fear of them. No longer referred to as conduits, they're now known as bioterrorists. While those who witnessed Cole's sacrifice in New Marais are aware of his heroic deeds, the rest of the country sees "The Demon of Empire City" as a villainous character in our nation's history.

In the aftermath of New Marais, the U.S. government introduced a new bureaucratic organization to keep tabs on conduits. For seven years, the Department of Unified Protection has watched over the public, actively identifying conduits and holding them without trial in dedicated containment facilities. Known for its fast response to perceived threats, the organization's full might is demonstrated when a standard transport operation goes awry near Seattle.

After a transport vehicle crashes because of reasons Sucker Punch wouldn't reveal, the conduits inside the vehicle escape and become highly sought-after individuals. Trained for exactly these kinds of situations, the DUP sweeps in and sets up roadblocks around Seattle that prevent anyone from entering or leaving the city.

With the assumed-dangerous conduits on the loose, the DUP quickly deploys a massive amount of security systems. In a matter of weeks, Seattle is turned into something that resembles an enormous airport. Elevated walkways equipped with searchlights and security cameras help the DUP constantly monitor the activity below. Checkpoints and scanners slow both automobile and pedestrian traffic, requiring citizens to place their thumbs on devices that detect whether or not they have supernatural powers. "It's a culture in which it's very acceptable to report your neighbor [to the authorities] for the greater good, because that's what you're supposed to be doing," says game director Nate Fox.

The parallels to real-world, post-9/11 America aren't exactly subtle. Ever since the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, D.C., anyone who has taken their shoes off at an airport or stepped through a full-body scanner is familiar with the increased security meant to prevent additional attacks. Even those who don't travel are aware of the controversy surrounding the detainment of suspected terrorists without trial at Guantanamo Bay. Infamous Second Son deals heavily in the debate of security versus freedom, replacing real-world terrorism with the comic-book stylings of superpowered conduits. "The DUP is the TSA," says producer Brian Fleming. "It's a new organization with broad powers to detain and control American citizens if they're suspected. I don't think we want to get on to a soapbox, but we're dangerously close to a soapbox."

Smoke is only the first power that Delsin acquires, although the studio is keeping his other abilities under wraps for now

Supernatural Foes

Most of the DUP guards feature behavior that's in line with SWAT teams or trained military police. However, others appeared to utilize some kind of supernatural ability to shield themselves and move quickly around the battlefield. Sucker Punch wouldn't elaborate on how these DUP enemies acquired their own powers, but it seems possible that some conduits may be within the organization's ranks.

Both previous games in the Infamous series placed a heavy emphasis on player choice. Some decisions divided clearly down the good-versus-evil line, while the moral waters of others were murkier. Sucker Punch says players will have many tough decisions to make throughout the course of Second Son, but declined to offer any direct examples.

During a gameplay demo, we saw one DUP officer attempt to surrender to Delsin's power. Considering the player was given the choice to kill him anyway or let him live, it looked like an example of some kind of karma system during gameplay. More substantial choices may have to be made when Delsin confronts other conduits, but we don't yet know the ramifications of these. Perhaps players must choose between sacrificing conduits and gaining their power, or letting them live and opting not to receive them.

A NEW KIND OF HERO

With the DUP representing security, the new protagonist of Infamous Second Son is meant to represent liberty. A 24-year-old Native American, Delsin Rowe has always been the artistic type with a chip on his shoulder. A fan of anti-authoritarian street art, he's fond of tagging buildings with his own personal pieces. Despite his artistic leanings, his rebellious reluctance to jump through the hoops of "the system" has led to an unremarkable life.

His average, unaccomplished existence changes drastically when the conduit-transport vehicle crashes near his hometown. He witnesses the wreck, and instinctively moves in to help those wounded. Upon dragging an injured conduit from the wreckage, something unexpected happens to Delsin. He suddenly learns that he's been a conduit all along, and his ability is a unique one that opens the doors to many possibilities.

After attempting to save the injured conduit, Delsin realizes that he's somehow obtained the power to control smoke. His conduit abilities aren't confined to something that simple, however. His natural power is to absorb the abilities of other conduits. Coming into contact with this smoke conduit has imbued Delsin with one new power, but it won't be the only property the new hero can control in Infamous Second Son.

Unlike the brooding Cole, Delsin seems genuinely thrilled by his newfound abilities. Previously, he was a young man full of ideas but without the means to follow through on anything of significance. Now that he's aware of his potential, he can't wait to take his power to the streets and make a difference.

Controlling smoke may only be the beginning of Delsin's capabilities, but it's the only one that Sucker Punch demonstrated for us during a live gameplay demonstration. As Delsin explores Seattle, he has the opportunity to take out various forward-operating bases run by the DUP. Bum-rushing these walled fortresses is always an option, but brute force won't be as effective as systematically taking down security systems with Delsin's smoke powers.

Making a Statement

While no one knows for sure what he looks like or what his name is, street artist Banksy has become well known via his graffiti and the documentary *Exit Through The Gift Shop*. The anti-authority sentiments of his art are echoed in many of the themes of Infamous Second Son, and his style serves as an inspiration for the game's 2D cutscenes. The previous games' cutscenes were clearly modeled after comic books, but Sucker Punch believes Delsin's graffiti hobby and views on society are better represented through the Banksy-esque stenciled style.

Delsin's chain makes for some brutal up-close attacks

To reflect the DUP's need to quickly set up and tear down architecture, Sucker Punch drew inspiration from the materials roadies use for concerts

Who's In Charge?

The Department of Unified Protection is the primary force Delsin goes up against in Second Son, but Sucker Punch declined to point to any singular antagonist at the helm of the organization. The debut trailer shows the back of a red-haired woman, speaking calmly while staring at a wall of security monitors. At one point, she raises a finger to her ear and says, "I want him alive." This character's mysterious presence in the trailer seems to hint at her playing a large role in the game.

It didn't take long for the DUP to set up its installations after the transport crash, and players can take them right back down just as quickly. We watch as designer Jaime Griesemer turns Delsin into an anti-authority wrecking ball, causing all kinds of trouble for the oppressive government agency. Using his standard smoke projectile, he destroys security cameras with ease. With a smoke-dash maneuver that will remind comic book fans of Nightcrawler, Delsin disappears into an air duct at ground level and quickly emerges on a building's rooftop. These ducts are frequently found in Second Son's version of Seattle, and should make navigation a fun and speedy affair. Those who loved climbing everything in sight as Cole MacGrath don't have anything to worry about, as Delsin is just as adept as his predecessor.

From his elevated vantage point, Delsin rains down smoking fireballs on walkways in the base below. They crumble to the ground, causing DUP agents to fall and demonstrating some of the new environmental destructibility. Leaping over the base, Delsin forcefully descends in a manner similar to Cole's thunder drop. Agents scatter as Delsin continues to pepper the startled enemies with smoke projectiles.

Now in the middle of the base, Delsin demonstrates some crowd control. A minigun-toting heavy emerges from a DUP van and quickly becomes Delsin's main priority. Before he can focus on the big baddie, the numerous agents surrounding the protagonist need to be dispatched. Delsin unleashes a smoke cloud that causes all agents in its area of effect to be temporarily immobilized. With them out of the equation for now, he takes out the heavy with a barrage of smoke. As the coughing guards recover, they barely have time to get their bearings before being disoriented by Delsin's constant smoke dashes and attacks.

Delsin is a powerful conduit (who naturally grows stronger as the game progresses), but his powers are finite. Like Cole, he needs to replenish his supply from the environment. Electricity was found everywhere in Empire City and New Marais, so Cole essentially had an unlimited supply of ammo wherever he looked. With smoke being less omnipresent, Delsin has to be more creative.

Chimneys offer an ample supply, which fill Delsin's smoke reserves if he feels like traveling to the rooftops of Seattle. If he needs a quick fix on the ground, destroying a car is always an option. As the automobile's wreckage burns, he can absorb its smoke and get right back to the action. He can also turn the DUP's own tactics against them. Not all of their soldiers fully understand Delsin's powers, so that tear gas canister meant to disable the protagonist can essentially turn into an ammo stash.
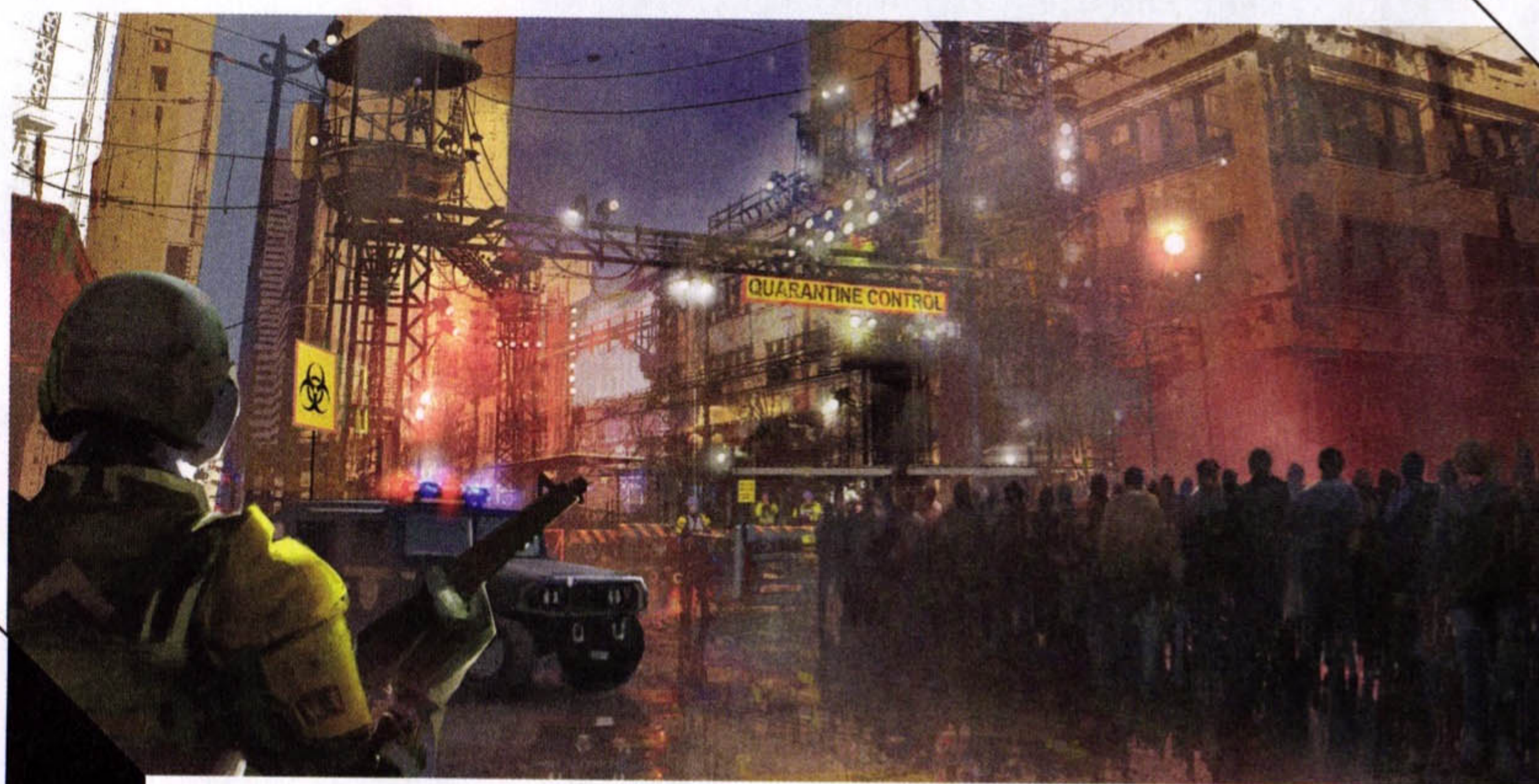
The Move to PlayStation 4

As Sucker Punch prepared to release Infamous 2, the studio knew that it wanted to move to the next generation of consoles for its next title. Without knowing specifics about the technical capabilities of the then-unnamed PlayStation 4, the team made an educated guess and began work anyway.

Brief in-engine clips that the team showed us demonstrated the impressive capabilities of the PlayStation 4. Small details, such as individual leaves blowing in the city's many trees, make for impressive sights. Second Son has a heavy focus on smoke, and these effects (as well as other particles) behaved realistically thanks to the powerful game engine.

One video we saw consisted of panning shots of Second Son's version of Seattle tourist attraction Post Alley. Textures on the rocky walls of the alley look incredible, and an assortment of puddles on the street beautifully reflect the neon lights above. The videos are in-progress tech demos, but Second Son will do a great job of showing off the PS4's power if the final game can match their level of detail.

Chain of Command

Delsin is far from useless when he runs out of smoke power. If he needs to defend himself while searching for the next source of smoke, the chain that he wraps around his fist does the trick. Between smoke attacks, we saw the new protagonist take out plenty of DUP agents by flailing this deadly weapon around.

As of this writing, the method in which players absorb smoke is tied to the PlayStation 4 controller's touchpad. Pressing both thumbs down on the pad causes smoke to swirl into Delsin's body, but this isn't the only unique way Sucker Punch is using the new hardware. The same DUP fingerprint scanners that are used to identify conduits also open the containment cells that hold them. To deal an additional blow to the DUP's presence, players can approach these cells and free the imprisoned suspects, foiling the DUP's investigations At the end of the demo at the base, we saw one more use of the

touchpad while taking out a large piece of DUP machinery. Delsin has to pull up on a brightly lit control module with one hand, blasting at it with the other. This is accomplished by swiping a finger up on the touchpad, followed by repeated taps of the trigger button with the player's other hand.

Throughout the skirmish at the DUP base, Griesemer explains a new philosophy that the team is bringing to Second Son. "We want to create simple mechanics," he says. "The powers and abilities aren't these complicated, multi-step control schemes that take three

buttons to activate. One of my criticisms of Infamous 2 was that any action took multiple button presses to execute. Even if you wanted to shoot, you had to enter an aim mode first. That allowed for a large amount of powers, which is great because you can get all kinds of powers out of the controller, but it also creates this kind of hitch when you're trying to execute something and it doesn't feel completely natural. Simplifying controls actually allows for more complicated, nuanced gameplay than really complicated controls."

Infamous 2 gave players many choices when it came to button mapping, but a certain amount of management was required. Instead of constantly making sure you have the desired power assigned to the right button, Second Son allows players to switch between entire sets of powers that complement each other. Sucker Punch declined to elaborate on how these sets can be organized, but we wouldn't be surprised if each set revolved around a specific power type or element that Delsin absorbs from other conduits.

Our demo of Second Son merely scratched the surface of Sucker Punch's next open-world adventure. Being introduced to Delsin and learning about the state of the Infamous universe is enough to get us excited, but the real joy will come from exploring Seattle and discovering the new powers firsthand. Many unanswered questions remain about the title, and Sucker Punch wants to keep an air of mystery around specific plot points and powers. We know Delsin is hunting other conduits, but to what purpose remains unknown. He could be organizing a resistance, he could be hunting them down in an effort to absorb their powers, or he may have another goal in mind altogether. Whatever his intentions, the prior games in the Infamous series and Sucker Punch's great track record make us confident that Delsin's ride could be one worth going on. ◈

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For the entire month of May, check out gameinformer.com/infamous for tons of video content and additional exclusive information about Infamous Second Son

A long-range smoke projectile was the most commonly-used power we saw
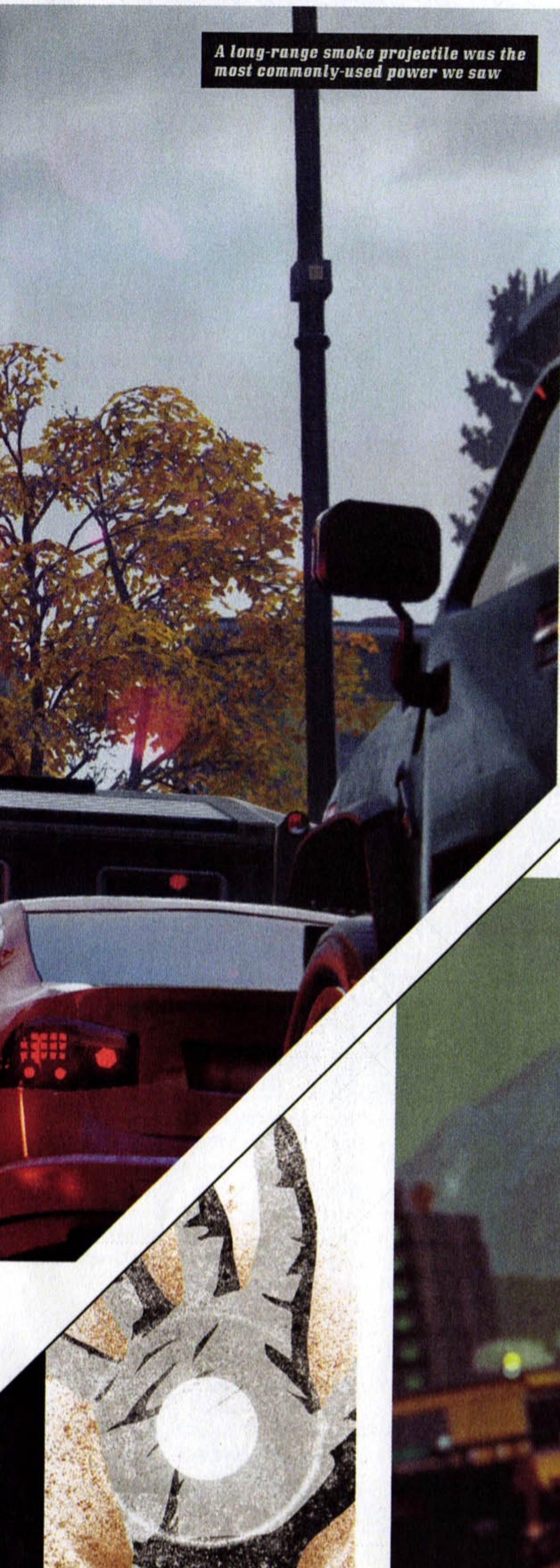
A Real World Playground

Previous entries in the series were set in fictional locations clearly modeled after real-world counterparts (Empire City was New York City, and New Marais was New Orleans). Sucker Punch could have opted for a similar approach with Seattle, but the team decided to abandon the fictitious naming convention when it came to their hometown. "We didn't want to make the Galactic Needle," says producer Brian Fleming. "We wanted to make the Space Needle, and at that point you're in Seattle."

Moving the action to the Pacific Northwest marks a significant visual change from the concrete jungle of Empire City and the swampy-yet-lively New Marais. Rather than bordering the playable areas with water as Sucker Punch has done in previous games, forests signal the edge of Second Son's world.

Unlike the strict street-by-street accuracy of games like The Getaway and L.A. Noire, Sucker Punch opted to recreate the feel of the city rather than the specific road layout. Seattle residents may notice that not everything is in the exact spot as it is in real life, but the general architecture of the city, as well as landmarks like the Space Needle and Mount Rainier, have been faithfully recreated.

SONY GEARS UP FOR INDIE GAMING

by Jeff Marchiafava

When Sony announced the PlayStation 4 in February, the company shared a wealth of information about the new hardware and games with viewers. Amidst the triple-A game reveals and talk of the next-gen console's exciting new features, Sony pledged to expand its support for indie games, a statement easily overlooked given the rest of the evening's flashier announcements. However, Sony wasn't just paying lip service to the industry's smallest and oftentimes most creative developers; the company has been quietly working behind the scenes to ensure indie game fans will have plenty to play on PlayStation 4.

Sony's embrace of indie games isn't exactly new. Even while XBLA titles like Braid and Castle Crashers established the Xbox 360 as a destination for premier indie titles early in this console generation, Sony was busy making its own inroads into the downloadable space with Q-Games' PixelJunk series and incubating the development of Thatgamecompany's early titles Flow and Flower at SCE Santa Monica Studio.

Sony also launched two indie-focused initiatives, which have delivered a small but steady stream of downloadable titles for the PS3 and Vita. The PlayStation C.A.M.P. (Creator Audition Mash-up Project) program provides the opportunity for indie Japanese developers to co-develop games with SCE Japan Studio, and has resulted in titles like Echochrome, Tokyo Jungle, and the upcoming Rain. Sony's second program, Pub Fund, provides back-end financial support and marketing to indie developers in exchange for timed exclusivity. Pub Fund has helped support titles like Joe Danger, Tales from Space: About a Blob, and Papo & Yo, along with the recently released Guacamelee (read our review on p. 88).

Sony's efforts have gradually paid off over the years, as more and more indie developers adopt the PlayStation 3 as their platform of choice. Last year alone, Sony released three unique and critically acclaimed indie hits, all of which SCE Santa Monica Studio collaborated on: Sound Shapes, The Unfinished Swan, and Journey. The latter game won six awards at this year's Game Developers Choice Awards and eight awards at the DICE Awards, taking the game of the year crown from both.

Now Sony aims to bridge its momentum onto the PlayStation 4 by making it an easier and more attractive platform for indie developers. The new system already has one fan; during Sony's press conference, Braid creator Jonathon Blow took the stage to announce that his next game, The Witness, will be a timed exclusive for the PS4. ◈

For more on the indie games featured in this article, including developer interviews, head to gameinformer.com

SONY'S INDIE EDGE

Creating a stable of acclaimed indie titles means searching the industry for interesting projects and gifted developers. As vice president of publisher and developer relations, Adam Boyes helps Sony scout new talent and keep them happy when they sign on. We spoke with Boyes to find out how Sony's approach to working with indie developers has changed over the years, and what advantages the PlayStation 4 offers smaller studios.

What is Sony doing to secure indie games on its systems, and where are you finding these indie games?
Our team's in charge of Pub Fund, and so what developer relations does is we go out to a variety of different shows, consumer-oriented shows, internal ones as well, and we look around at what the cool stuff is. It's also going on Steam, downloading mobile games on iOS and Android, and seeing what developers are up to. We have a team in our region of about nine people that are full time, dedicated to scouring the earth for cool stuff.

We've heard Sony reached out to a number of developers for their feedback while designing the PS4. Did you speak with indie developers as well?
Yeah, absolutely. It was a big focus. Once we started talking to different developers, what we did is we would bring a bunch of indie developers together and we would meet with them in a group to get their feedback. We prioritized them as highly as larger publishers because we knew that a lot of innovation and creativity is born out of the independent studios. Their feedback absolutely went into a lot of the key decisions as we built the hardware.

Sony has invested heavily in Pub Fund. What kind of return have you seen from that investment so far?
We've seen great returns. We've been extraordinarily happy with the results. We are a business at the end of the day, so if a certain program isn't working then it's not like something that we maintain, but it's been very successful for us.

How do you measure Pub Fund's success?
We judge it in multiple ways. Revenue is obviously critical to the business. It's also about the awareness of these titles. We also do customer satisfaction with the gamers and users, and then we talk to partners. The bottom line is no program can be successful if people don't want to come back to it or if they publically speak out that it didn't work for them. That's where I think accountability is such a critical part of it.

I've read that you're willing to waive fees for some indie developers and provide extra assistance. How do you decide who gets that extra help?
We haven't charged a patch fee to any independent developer in the last three years, so that sort of defines our process quite well. It's really about what the makeup of the team is, right? Obviously for a big project, when it's a big huge patch that's going to involve a ton of testing, then it's something that we obviously have to apply a lot of resources, but for many of the smaller titles then we have the ability to waive those.

Sony has stated that indie developers can self-publish on PS4 and set their own prices for their games. Does that include free games and subscription-based games?
Yeah, absolutely. Free, subscription-based, microtransaction – any [type] of game that they want to release.

Does Sony have any concerns about allowing devs to set their own price, especially if you're providing assistance or waiving fees during the development process?
No. I mean, again if they want feedback on different categories of what pricing could be, but what we often do is just point them back to the store to show them what other titles with a similar scope are priced. Ultimately, they always have their own choice in price and they also have the ability to change the price at their whim.

One of the major criticisms lodged at current-gen consoles is that indie games tend to get buried by other titles in digital marketplaces. How do you plan to get indie developers more attention on the PS4?
That's something we're looking at multiple, multiple ways to do that. Obviously one thing is the storefront – how do we promote content? Right now we are doing our Spring Fever campaign on the PlayStation 3 store, and we've got four games that are all by indie developers releasing each week. So that's a great way to show them off. The recommendation engine obviously is a big one that we want to focus on to ensure that you know what your friends are playing. We think the share functionality on the PlayStation 4 is a huge one, being able to share the video and show your friend what you are playing. We think it's going to drive a massive amount of awareness around games.

A lot of indie developers we've spoken to are frustrated by not having any say over when their games are released on consoles – they submit their game and are eventually told when it will be released, usually with little advanced warning. Are you addressing that for PS4?
Yeah, we actually – once the game has been submitted for QA and gets approved, the developer gets to choose what day they come out, which week on the store. They actually get full autonomy to choose exactly the day they come out, which Tuesday.

What is the final goal of Sony's indie games initiative?
I think the most important thing is to create an intimate conversation with the content creators and allow them to directly talk to their gamers. [That way] we just basically purely provide a facilitation platform where they are able to talk to them, patch them, update them, and have those conversations with gamers, improve their games, change their games, and really just basically have the best platform for game creators and gamers. That's really the big goal. By working with smaller teams, we have that intimate relationship and are able to make more effective and efficient changes faster and evolve the entire platform. Because content is king, that is really the bottom line. That's what we're focused on. ◈

FOSTER CITY STUDIO
TAKES THE STAGE

Over the past 15 years, SCE Foster City Studio has aided in the production of some of Sony's biggest series, including Uncharted, Ratchet & Clank, Resistance, and Infamous. During that time, the studio has shied away from the public limelight, encouraging developers like Naughty Dog and Sucker Punch to speak about their own games.

Now Foster City Studio is poised to make a name for itself in the downloadable space. The developer is moving to a new building that features an internal development wing, and has created a program with Carnegie Mellon University to collaborate with and nurture a handpicked group of talented students that will one day become a new team inside Sony.

Foster City Studio has also begun collaborating with a number of small independent studios on downloadable games for PS3, Vita, and PS4. Foster City Studio executive producer Alex Lee describes these relationships as symbiotic; the independent developers get access to the vast resources and tools Foster City Studio has at its disposal to improve the quality of their games without increasing staff size. In exchange, Foster City Studio is learning a faster and leaner style of production, where development is measured in months, not years – a skillset that will come in handy as downloadable games continue to grow in popularity. Lee shared the first two of these projects with us: a 2D cover-based shooter steeped in the spy mythology surrounding the Cold War, and a quirky tale from the creator of ToeJam & Earl starring a robot on a mission to learn about humanity.

COUNTERSPY (Working Title)

» **PLATFORM** PlayStation 3 • Vita • TBA » **PUBLISHER** Sony Computer Entertainment » **DEVELOPER** Dynamighty » **RELEASE** 2013

Created by LucasLab founders David Nottingham and John Elliot, Dynamighty is a 10-person studio based out of San Francisco. The developer's first game, tentatively called Counterspy, puts players in charge of a secret spy agency tasked with preventing the U.S. and USSR from engaging in all-out nuclear warfare. That ever-present threat is represented by the Doomsday Clock, and players roll back the time by going on missions that keep the two superpowers in check.

These dynamically generated missions play out in the form of a 2D cover-based shooter. Slipping behind cover causes the camera to seamlessly shift to a better angle for targeting and shooting down foes, and sneaking up on enemies lets you take them out with a stealthy snap of the neck.

The constant threat of the Doomsday Clock follows you into the missions as well; the more time you spend exploring the level, the closer you come to nuclear Armageddon. However, you have incentives to stick around and complete miniquests. You may, for instance, uncover blueprints that allow you to assemble a new weapon back at HQ, which makes subsequent missions that much easier.

Dynamighty is building Counterspy to be highly replayable. Levels change each time you play them, offering different items, enemy configurations, and routes to explore. The game also features asynchronous multiplayer, allowing friends to compete on the same level. Reach the point where your friend died, and you can nab his or her items. The developer

hopes these features keep the gameplay fresh and interesting no matter how many times you play through a level.

Dynamighty is also creating a mobile version of Counterspy, but isn't attempting to water down the gameplay of the PS3 and Vita game. Instead, the mobile title enhances the main experience by allowing players to perform away missions and check in on their friends' progress and performances.

While the preview build we saw is still very early, Counterspy's stylized art direction and playful tone provide an entertaining homage to spy mythology of the '50s and '60s, and the constant time pressure has the potential to recreate the high-stakes tension of the Cold War. ◈

DOKI-DOKI UNIVERSE
(Working Title)

» **PLATFORM** PlayStation 4 • PlayStation 3 • Vita • TBA   » **PUBLISHER** Sony Computer Entertaiment   » **DEVELOPER** HumaNature Studios   » **RELEASE** 2013

Doki-Doki Universe is the debut game from HumaNature Studios, a small indie developer founded by ToeJam & Earl creator Greg Johnson. HumaNature's professed goal is to create "charming and playful" games that appeal to a broad audience, a fact readily apparent in the studio's unique art style.

In Doki-Doki Universe, you assume the role of a robot whose model line is on the verge of being discontinued for its lack of humanity. All hope is not lost, however; an extraterrestrial named Alien Jeff has been charged with evaluating your ability to understand humans, and is willing to help you learn more about Doki-Doki Universe's strange inhabitants.

Starting Doki-Doki Universe drops the player into an unexplored universe filled with planets and satellites. Each planet has its own theme – such as New Hawaii or Mecha – and is loaded with unique items to collect. HumaNature's simple art style allows the developer to create a vast amount of items, all of which have distinct characteristics, similar to Scribblenauts.

Once you land on a world, you're free to interact with its inhabitants in any way you see fit. Observing and chatting with characters teaches you more about them, such as their likes and dislikes. You can then use your collection of items to help solve their problems, make a good impression, or annoy them. For example, a character who enjoys music might take a liking to you if you summon a guitar player, while that dead fish in your collection would probably infuriate a character who hates smelly things and the color blue.

As you play around, Alien Jeff evaluates your actions and offers insight into your personality. On a Halloween-themed planet, an undead character named Zombee greets us, stating, "I'm dead, by the way." When we

choose "bummer" from a list of replies, a message from Alien Jeff pops up telling us how sensitive we are. Satellite planets extend the psychoanalysis with humorous personality quizzes, which also award custom objects to decorate your own homeworld with, similar to LittleBigPlanet.

Doki-Doki Universe also contains its own communication system, which allows players to send messages to their friends both in the game and via a mobile app or Facebook. As you type out a message, the program automatically recognizes words and inserts associated animated objects from Doki-Doki's immense library of art based on their characteristics, which you can then customize. For instance, the word "go" may be replaced

with a character being shot out of a cannon, or an airplane spinning its propellers. Received messages play when you open them, and are more like watching a custom animation than reading an email.

Doki-Doki Universe may sound simple. From a gameplay standpoint, it is. However, much of the appeal lies in its adorable and humorous art style, which is augmented by the enormous breadth of unique content. We found it impossible not to smile while taking Doki-Doki's silly personality quizzes and meeting its cast of oddball characters. You won't have pay to see if HumaNature's unique project is for you; the game will be free when it launches later this year. ◈

MORE INDIE GAMES ON THE HORIZON

In addition to the games from Foster City Studio, Sony has announced four more indie titles, all of which are in development for the PlayStation 4 and take advantage of the variety of publishing options the new console is offering developers.

BLACKLIGHT: RETRIBUTION

» **PLATFORM** PlayStation 4 • PC » **PUBLISHER** Zombie Studios
» **DEVELOPER** Zombie Studios » **RELEASE** TBA

This science fiction-themed multiplayer shooter from Zombie Studios debuted on PC last April, accruing over one million players since its release. Like its PC counterpart, the PS4 version is free-to-play, making its money via microtransactions for weapon unlocks and upgrades that can also be earned by playing the game. Blacklight: Retribution launched to generally positive reviews, and Zombie has continued to support the game with a variety of improvements over the past year. Updates have included a complete revamp of Blacklight: Retribution's weapons system and balancing, and the addition of a co-op survival mode titled Onslaught.

Blacklight: Retribution's graphics are already impressive for a free-to-play title, but Zombie Studios creative director Jared Gerritzen tells us the PS4 version features a healthy visual jump since the studio won't have to worry about accommodating the minimum specs of the PC version or different hardware combinations. Zombie Studios is experimenting with the PS4's unique features – particularly the controller's touchpad – but Gerritzen reassures us that they won't shoehorn in functionality that isn't fun or compromises gameplay. Gerritzen also expressed excitement over the PS4's social features, and describes the system's built-in spectating options as a game changer – not surprising, considering Blacklight: Retribution's focus on fast-paced, competitive action. ⑥

PRIMAL CARNAGE: GENESIS

» **PLATFORM** PlayStation 4 » **PUBLISHER** Lukewarm Media
» **DEVELOPER** Lukewarm Media » **RELEASE** TBA

Revealed at last month's GDC, Primal Carnage: Genesis is an episodic FPS survival game being developed by Lukewarm Media using Epic's Unreal Engine 4. Primal Carnage: Genesis is meant as a single-player origin tale to Lukewarm's multiplayer-only downloadable action title, Primal Carnage, telling the story of how the series' island setting became overrun by dinosaurs. Unlike its multiplayer predecessor, Primal Carnage: Genesis won't be focused solely on action, offering stealth, exploration, and puzzle-solving sequences in addition to plenty of armed standoffs against packs of ravenous dinosaurs.

Lukewarm Media founder Ashton Andersen tells us the studio has roughly 20 employees working on Primal Carnage: Genesis, and that each episode introduces new environments, features, and dinosaurs. Each also ends with cliffhanger events. Anderson says the episodic format allows them to take player feedback and requests into consideration, and let players try the game without paying upfront for a full retail game.

When asked what games Lukewarm is drawing inspiration from, Andersen cited a variety of elements from popular games: Amnesia for its atmosphere and suspense, Dear Esther for its visual storytelling and immersion, and Far Cry 3 for its exploration and action. Andersen also names Jurassic Park: Trespasser as a great dinosaur game that was ahead of its time, and that fans of Michael Crichton's medium-spanning franchise will find plenty to love. ⑥
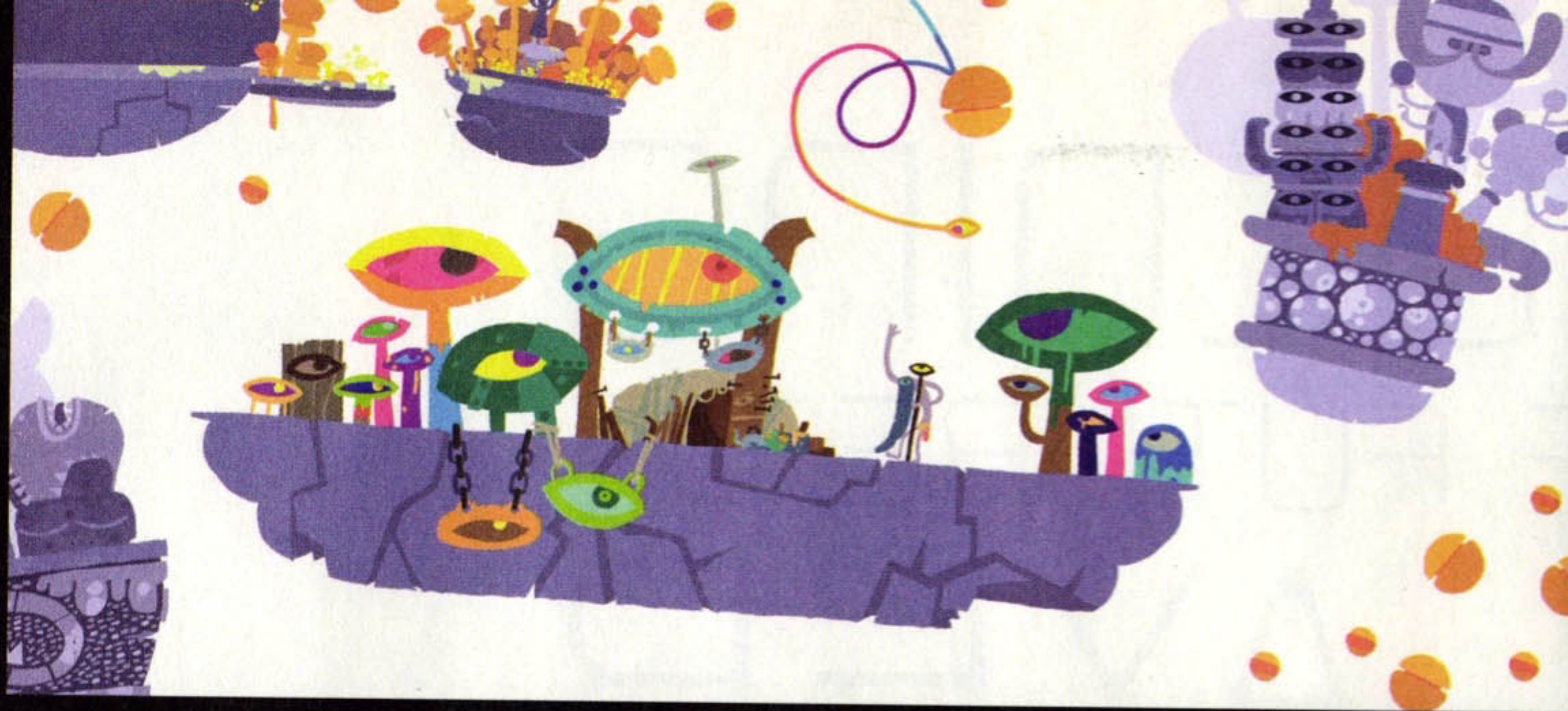
HOHOKUM

» **PLATFORM** PlayStation 4 • PlayStation 3 • Vita » **PUBLISHER** Sony Computer Entertaiment » **DEVELOPER** Honeyslug » **RELEASE** TBA

A collaboration between developer Honeyslug and artist/designer Richard Hogg, Hohokum's vibrant art style and open-ended gameplay wowed IndieCade goers back in 2011 and was an Independent Games Festival Awards finalist in the category of Excellence In Visual Art. Players control the Long Mover, a colorful snakelike creature. Designer Ricky Haggett says manipulating the floating creature feels "a little like doodling in the air with a kite."

Describing Hohokum is rather tricky; Honeyslug says that the game doesn't have a traditional plot, and that each area has its own unique goals. One level involves rescuing a scattering of eccentric characters located on floating islands while dodging spikey enemy cannons and missiles. Circling around a windmill on one floating island lights up a nearby electrical field. When the player flies through it, the Long Mover becomes temporarily

charged and can shock enemy cannons – as well as the characters the player is trying to rescue. While some areas like this one contain puzzles elements, others simply encourage the player to experiment and have fun. "We really want Hohokum to be a game where the player feels comfortable just moving around spaces in a playful, expressive, creative way," Hogg says. "What is the 'main goal' of someone who is snowboarding or flying a kite?"

Honeyslug's vision for Hohokum captivated Santa Monica Studio's Nathan Gary, who played the game at IndieCade. "It was a whimsical playground with gorgeous, gorgeous art," Gary says. "And it came across immediately."

Gary chatted with Honeyslug for over an hour while watching other attendees play the game; after the show he spoke with the rest of his team back at Santa Monica

Studio, and the deal came together shortly thereafter. The two studios have been collaborating ever since, and like many of the indie developers that we spoke to that are working with Sony, Honeyslug is happy with the experience. "What [Santa Monica Studio has] brought to the game in terms of creativity, enthusiasm, design expertise, and moral support has been fantastic," Hogg says. "It is a really good collaboration."

"There's that indie rhetoric about 'the publisher ruining your game,' but our experience has been the opposite," Haggett says. "We've been working with incredibly experienced, thoughtful people who provide a sounding board from the perspective of being a little bit removed from the day-to-day development process...We've never felt that Santa Monica Studio wants to stamp their own vision onto Hohokum." ◈

THE WITNESS

» **PLATFORM** PlayStation 4 • PC • iOS » **PUBLISHER** Thekla, Inc. » **DEVELOPER** Thekla, Inc. » **RELEASE** TBA

Getting timed exclusivity for The Witness on the PlayStation 4 is a major achievement for Sony, but the announcement didn't come without a little criticism from the game's creator. When lauded indie game designer Jonathan Blow took the stage after action-packed demos of Killzone: Shadow Fall and Infamous Second Son at the PS4 press conference, Blow sarcastically quipped, "I really don't know what I'm going to do to follow up after all those explosions, but we'll see what happens."

The trailer Blow showed for The Witness provided the audience with a peaceful alternative to the industry's obsession with violent video games, and a reminder of why indie developers are so revered in some gaming circles. Described by Blow as "a game about epiphany," The Witness has been in development by Thekla, Inc. for three and a half years, and drops players onto a deserted island housing a mystery behind a series of unique puzzles.

During the presentation, Blow describes how Thekla

is taking the opposite approach to game design as a triple-A developer might. Instead of creating the largest play area possible, the team is creating a compact open world where you can walk to three or four differently themed destinations within 20 seconds no matter where you are. Puzzles are similarly condensed, with no repeat solutions or filler content. Despite the lack of padding, Blow says The Witness provides 25 hours of pure gameplay. ◈

MOLDING
THE FUTURE OF
PLAYER
CREATED CONTENT

MEDIA MOLECULE DISCUSSES ITS UNNAMED PS4 PROJECT

*L*ittle Big Planet developer Media Molecule recently showed a tech demo for the PS4 that featured a clay-molding simulator and a group of puppets performing a rock concert. The studio still isn't ready to announce a name for its upcoming project, but we chatted with studio co-founder and creative director Mark Healey about how the PlayStation 4 is changing Media Molecule's approach to game design. *by Ben Reeves*
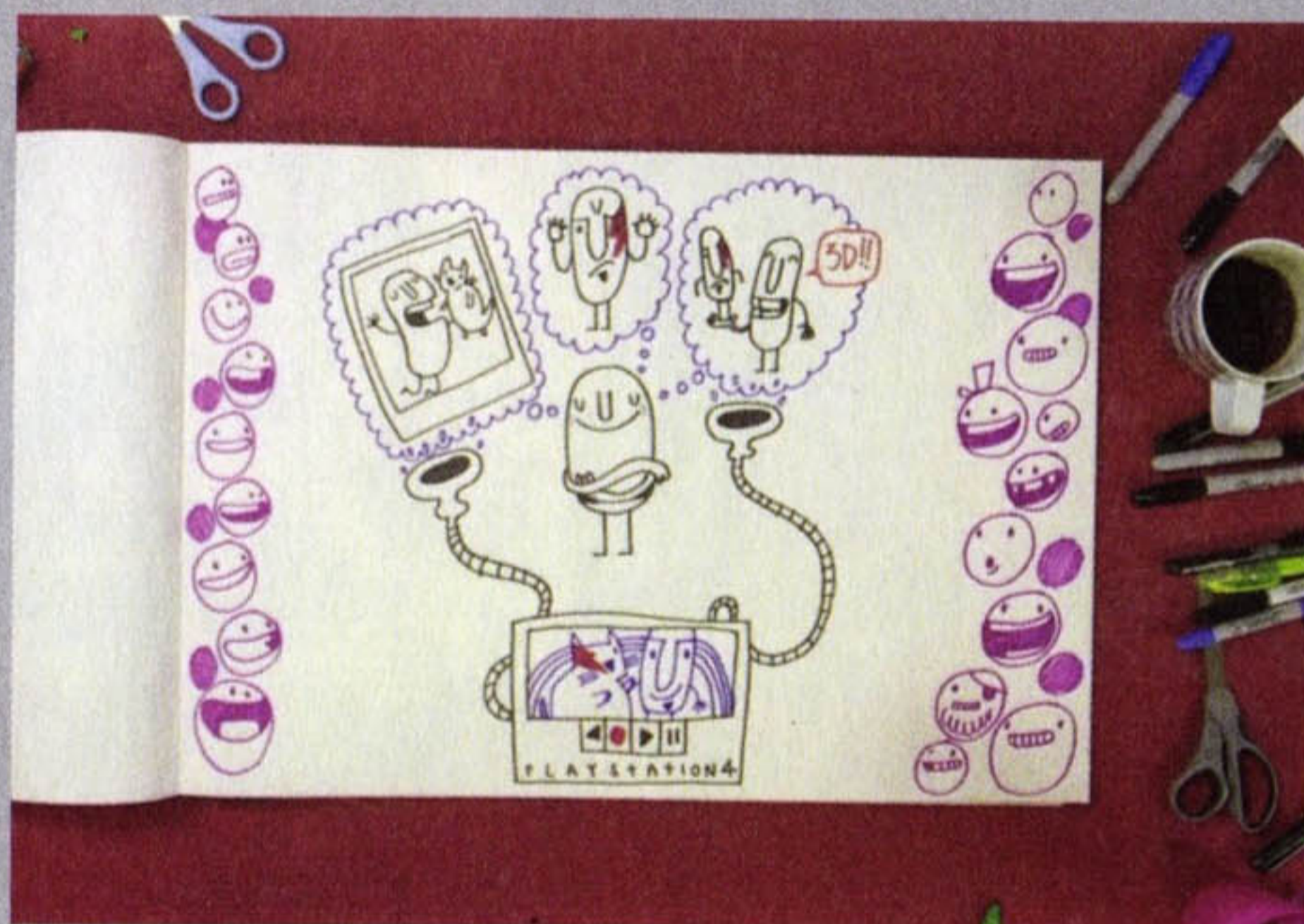
When did you guys first hear about the PS4 and start to mess around with it?
Probably about two years ago or something. I've got a very vague memory for time, but it was at least that long. Mark Cerny was the guy that was leading the hardware design, and there were lots of conversations up here – it was a constant back and forth. That was more with the programmers, it was more to do with the technical side of things, but there was a very open dialogue. We think Sony this time is very keen to make sure that it is nice to develop on and have the various features and things that they wanted.

What is it that made you guys gravitate toward the Move controller as opposed to a more traditional controller?
We started before the PS4 controller ever existed. We kind of said to ourselves, if we're going to do user-created content that allows you to make 3D content, it's the only device that we know of that's actually a 3D input device. With sculpting or even just positioning an object in 3D space, traditionally you have to look at something that looks like a technical drawing and then move it on one axis and then move it on the other axis. With the Move controller it's just a direct thing. You get to move your hand how you want the thing to move, so it's much more intuitive.

For the sculpting and those kinds of things it's perfect. We are going to experiment with using the new PS4 controller for these things as well, but that's what we've been focusing on. We appreciate that we've got battles to fight. We know that previously no one's really made a great Move controller game – that's my honest opinion. The fact is it is actually a very precise, amazing piece of technology, and it feels criminal to me that no one's actually done it justice. So we've just said f--- it, we'll take those battles

and we're going to prove that there's an experience you can have with this thing that no one's had yet.

I think in the past a lot of Move games tried to emulate what the Wii was doing, which is the wrong way to go in my opinion because the Move controller is actually really good at very small, precise movements. Things like sculpting are a great example of that.

So you guys are also looking at how the PS4 controller might fit into the game as well?
Yeah. We'd be silly not to. What we're saying to ourselves is that we want to allow people to make things, such as movies, game experiences, music – that kind of thing. There's two sides to this: people that make stuff, and people that consume the things that are made. Obviously, you want to be able to play things that have been made with this tool with the DualShock 4. On some level it will definitely support the controller; it will have to.

What was the initial concept when you started designing?
The best thing I could say is "Play, Create, Share Evolved" was our tagline. We feel that with LittleBigPlanet we kind of put our flag in the sand: This is how we think Play, Create, Share should be done. That was pretty successful. It's worth getting forward with that concept, but without having to carry forward some of the baggage or corners that we've built ourselves into with LittleBigPlanet.

People were confused about how you guys were controlling things during the PS4 reveal. Can you explain how the controls work and what you guys were doing on stage?
This is something that I should never do, but I'm looking through forums to see what kind of feedback

there was, and some people thought, "Okay so they showed this sort of sculpting thing and then they showed something that looked like Rock Band." They were just totally confused. The thing that maybe didn't come across as clear was that rock performance at the end, what we were showing is that there was puppeteering. That was the essence of it, the fact that we chose to do a rock show was incidental really. We tried to make it clear that we were controlling those characters. There was a lot of speculation of how fake it was, and it wasn't fake at all. That was a genuine Move controller performance that we did with those puppets. That was the key thing about that – we've got this amazing puppeteering technology. It's just amazing how emotive it can be. All the things a skilled puppeteer can do with a puppet, you can do with these virtual puppets. We can add the magic of what computers can do, too. It's just fantastic.

Is this new game basically going to be a puppet game?
No, that's just one aspect of it. That is what we were demonstrating there – a way that you can animate characters. We will exploit that in any example content that we make, but I wouldn't want to say it's a puppet game; not yet anyway.

Do you still think it's a game, or do you think it's more of a creation software kit?
It would depend who you ask. Very early on in LittleBigPlanet we had many arguments on whether we were making a game-creation tool or whether we were making a platform game and it ended up somewhere between the two. Maybe history will repeat itself, maybe not, I don't know. We definitely want to make something you can come to and you have a fun experience with; that's the key thing.
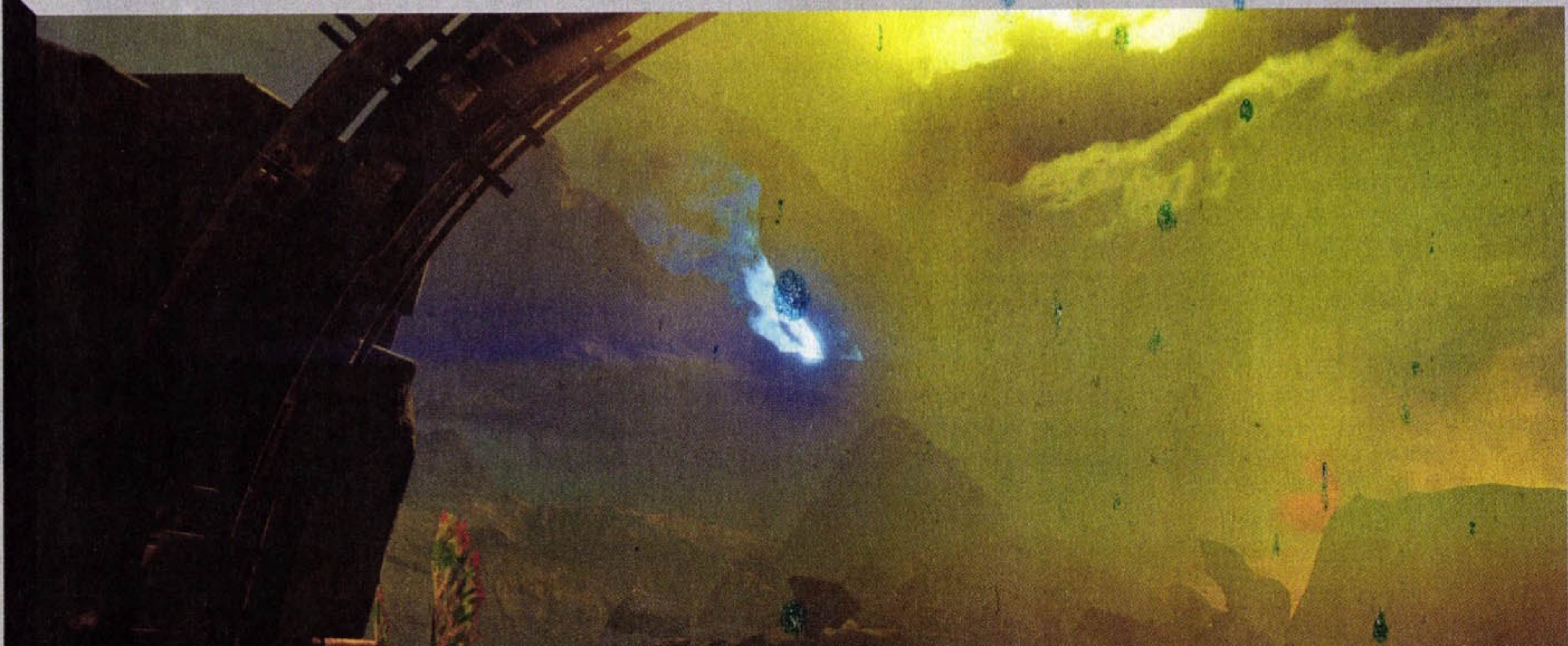
BUNGIE SPEAKS ON
PLAYSTATION 4'S DESTINY

Having Bungie develop for the PlayStation 4 is one of Sony's most potent bragging points as it steers toward the launch of its new console. Bungie's Halo series has always been a Microsoft-exclusive experience, and many have argued that the Halo: Combat Evolved release on the original Xbox saved that system from ignominy. We talked with Bungie senior engineering lead Chris Butcher and COO Pete Parsons about the studio's choice to release on the PlayStation 4; they offered insight into the game and its potential on next-gen hardware. *by Matt Miller*

Were there features of the previous Sony architecture that you wanted to see addressed in this new generation of consoles?
Butcher: It's very important to us that there are no obstacles in the way of players experiencing the social world of Destiny. That means the platform has to be smooth, simple, and easy to get online. Also, we're building a living world that will be continuously updated with new code and content. So we've been working hard with Sony to make sure we'll be able to deliver new game experiences to our players in a swift and seamless fashion.

As developers, what can you do with the PlayStation 4 that you couldn't have done on the Xbox 360 or PlayStation 3?
Butcher: The PlayStation 4 is a big leap from what came before. It has a tremendous amount of processing power, and that power is readily available to developers using familiar and efficient tools. Just like every generation before it, there will be a learning curve over several years to achieve the maximum potential of the hardware, but we think there will be immediately noticeable benefits right away. Game developers will be able to increase graphical resolution, expand character counts, and add fidelity to their world simulation. That's very exciting for us, because we've always believed great AI and a rich physically-simulated world lead to more interesting gameplay, and it will be much easier for this generation of console games to push the boundaries of what's possible in those areas.

Do you consider Destiny to be a MMO? Is it a more traditional cooperative shooter? Where does it fit on that spectrum?
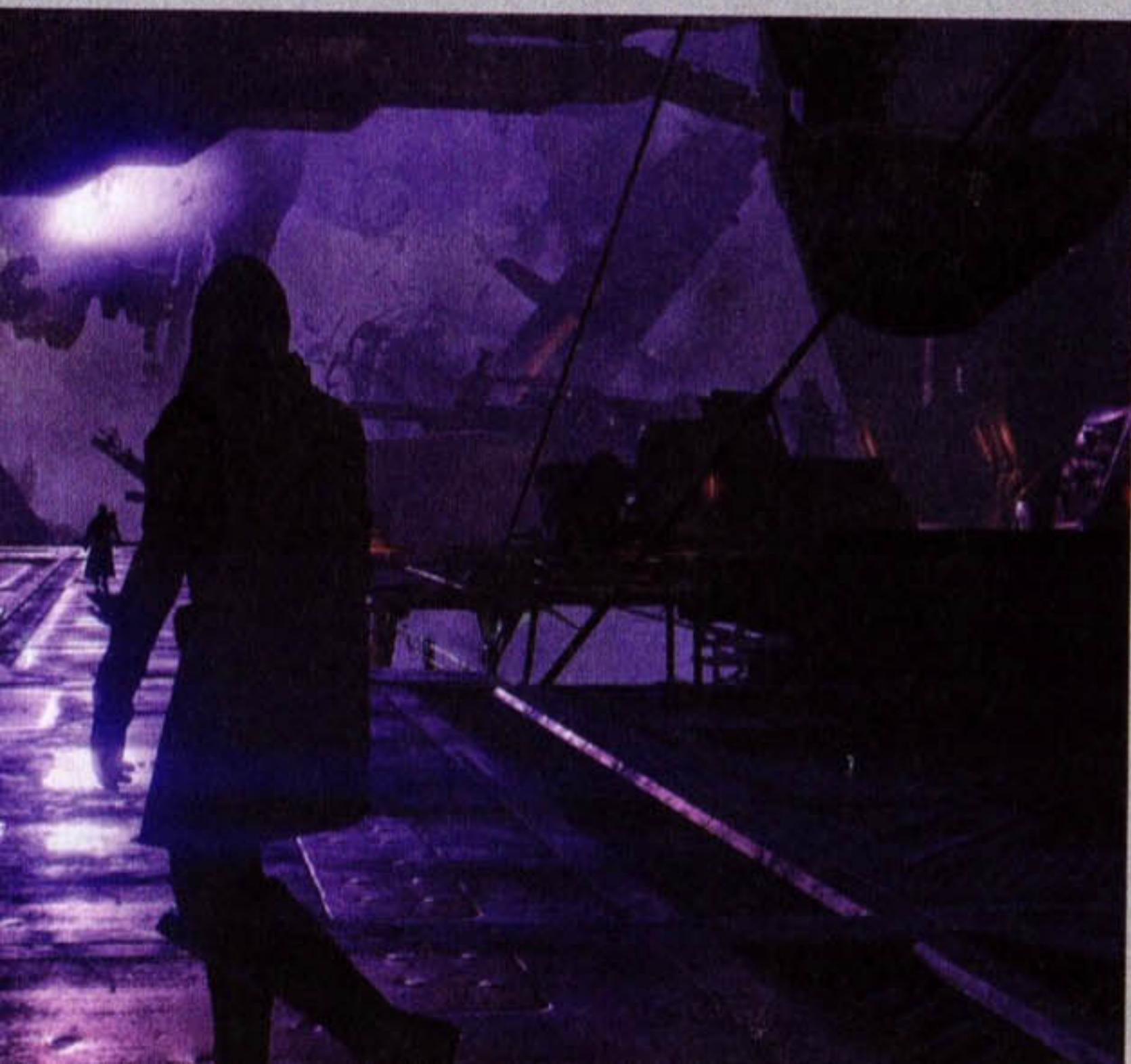
Butcher: First and foremost, Destiny is a first-person shooter. Everyone will approach it initially as an action game, because those are the core mechanics of what you're doing second to second. But pretty quickly you start spending time in the world, interacting with players and having shared experiences, and you realize it's something more.

Parsons: If you love Bungie action games, and everything they bring to the table – from rich storytelling, to cooperative action, to intense competitive experiences – we think you're going to love Destiny. We are also bringing in some of the things we love about role-playing games and traditional MMO titles into the mix.

How important is character customization and upgrades to the fun of Destiny?
Butcher: Your character is at the heart of our game. Everything you do feeds back into upgrading and modifying your character, and changing the gameplay tools you have access to. You'll choose activities based on how their rewards can help you, which provides natural short-term and long-term goals that add a new timescale to your engagement with the game.

Parsons: We want players to create their own unique character, and then grow and change it over time. We want the gear and weapons they earn, tweak, and

upgrade to tell a story about where they've been, what they've done, and maybe even who they've aligned themselves with. It's already become a super fun element of Destiny, it drives a lot of the post playtest discussion around the studio, and it's absolutely a vital part of what we're building for story and for multiplayer.

Each generation of games and consoles helps to push forward the medium. In what ways do you hope that Destiny can push video games forward?
Butcher: With Destiny, we've taken great action game mechanics and embedded them in a living, social world. When you create your own persistent character, and then play that character through a visceral action experience, you become very attached to all the choices you make. That attachment to your persistent character feeds back into the game and makes your future experiences more meaningful.

All of these elements work together to create a living game world that we hope players will care about in a different way than has been seen before on consoles. If we can succeed with that, then we'll have an opportunity to continue telling stories and growing the world of Destiny over a long period of time, which is the most exciting part of the whole project, and what makes it all worthwhile.
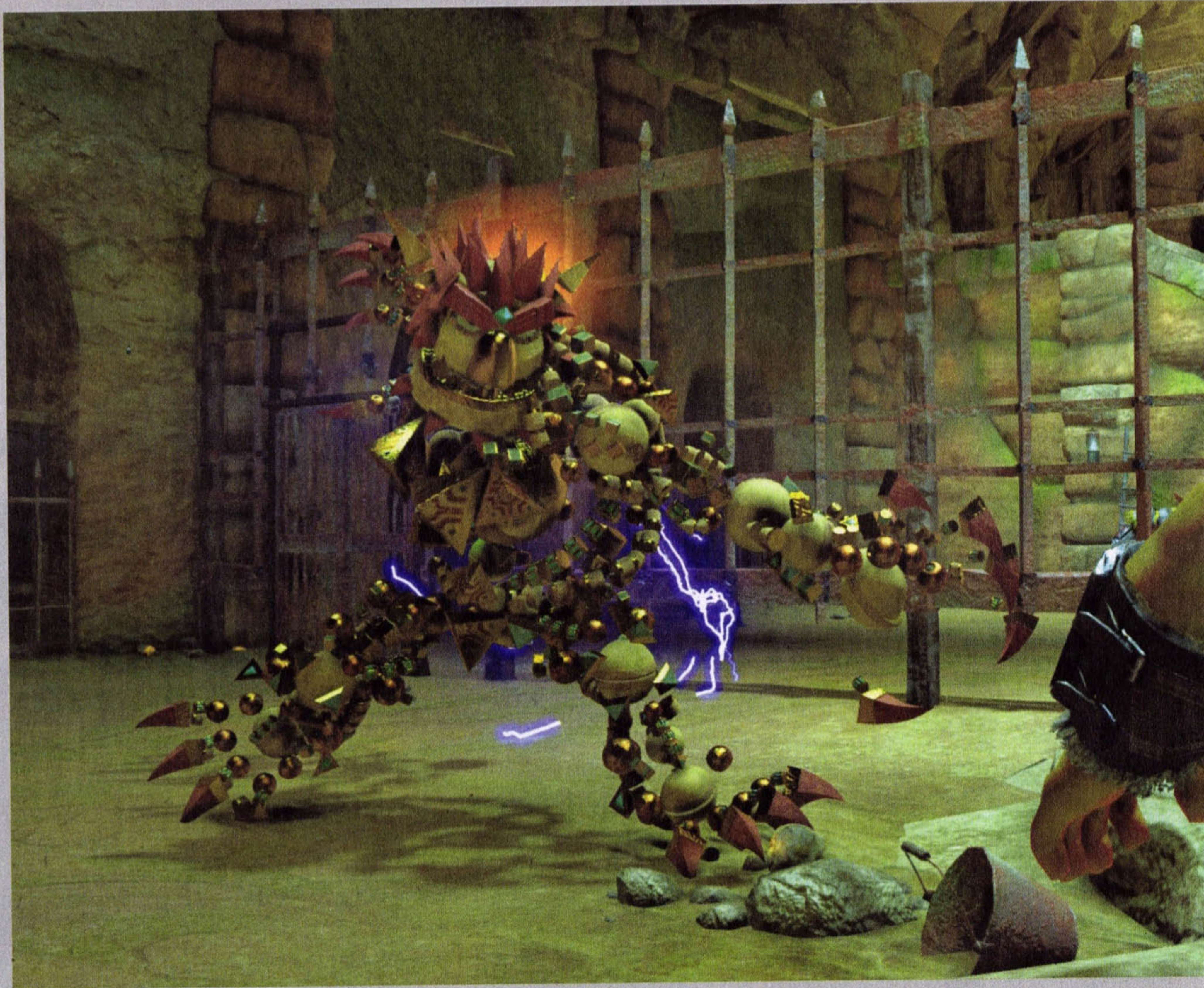
CHARACTER ACTION
FOR A NEW GENERATION

KNACK

Mark Cerny is the lead architect of Sony's PlayStation 4, and he's also one of the most respected game developers in the industry. Cerny's career goes back decades, from developing the classic Marble Madness in his teens to his work on such franchises as Sonic the Hedgehog, Crash Bandicoot, and Jak and Daxter. In addition to guiding the creation of Sony's new console, he's also making a new game for the system, a creative new character action game called Knack. *by Matt Helgeson*

"We've been asked, 'Why make a character action game?'" Cerny says. "For my part, I'm thinking back to the joy of play I remember from the early PlayStation days. There was this fun factor that was an intrinsic part of the PlayStation DNA."

Despite the fact that the character action genre has largely fallen to the wayside in the console space, Cerny observes that the market is still strong for colorful, character-driven design that's driven by simpler gameplay formulas. "In the mobile world, [they've sold] 100 million copies of Angry Birds…If we look at it historically, games have been getting more complex for a decade, maybe 15 years. For the last year or two, there has been an outpouring for smaller titles that are a bit simpler to play. If you look at Journey, that's a two-button title, and that was the game of the year at the Game Developers Choice awards. I think it's a very good time to have something that is trying to tap into that joy of play."

To that end, Knack is being crafted to offer both simple, engaging base gameplay and impressive next-gen features.

Knack is named for the main character, a small robot created by a scientist. In the game's universe, humans have coexisted alongside a race of goblins, who have – until now – lived a primitive lifestyle in the rugged rural areas. However, the goblins have mysteriously got their hands on advanced military vehicles like planes and tanks. A team has been assembled to go out into the hinterlands and discover how the goblins have attained this technology – and to eliminate the threat.

The team includes some human adventurers, but the player assumes the role of Knack, a small robot with some very interesting abilities. Knack starts out the game as a small bot – not far from the size of Ratchet from Ratchet & Clank.

However, Knack is imbued with the power to grow large by incorporating small crystal-like objects in the environment (as many as 5,000 individual shards) – enabling him to grow as large as 30 feet tall, nearly 10 times his original size. These objects are held together by an invisible force generated by orbs, which also allows him to shed his larger form in order to become small and dodge various security measures like moving lasers that you may encounter.

By collecting "sunstones," Knack unlocks various super moves, like a shockwave melee attack, which play heavily into the combat. Cerny stressed that while there are platforming elements, Knack focuses on pitting you against dozens of unique enemy types.

The main character's unique ability to grow and shrink his body through thousands of individually modeled pieces is one aspect that speaks to the power of the PlayStation 4, but Cerny says the real eye-opening experience has been how the system's easy-to-use architecture has quickened the development process.

"Personally speaking, I think the PS4 is going to make a big impact on games, because it makes the process of creating those games much easier than [previous] PlayStation hardware," Cerny says. "As chief architect of the console, I did a tremendous amount of evangelism and that was part of it. When I started making Knack, I really had to laugh because it's true – development is easier. I think making this game for PS4 saved us a year; it's that much easier to move from concept to implementation."

Backed by the considerable pedigree of Cerny and Japan Studio, Knack should be among the more intriguing new franchises for PlayStation 4.

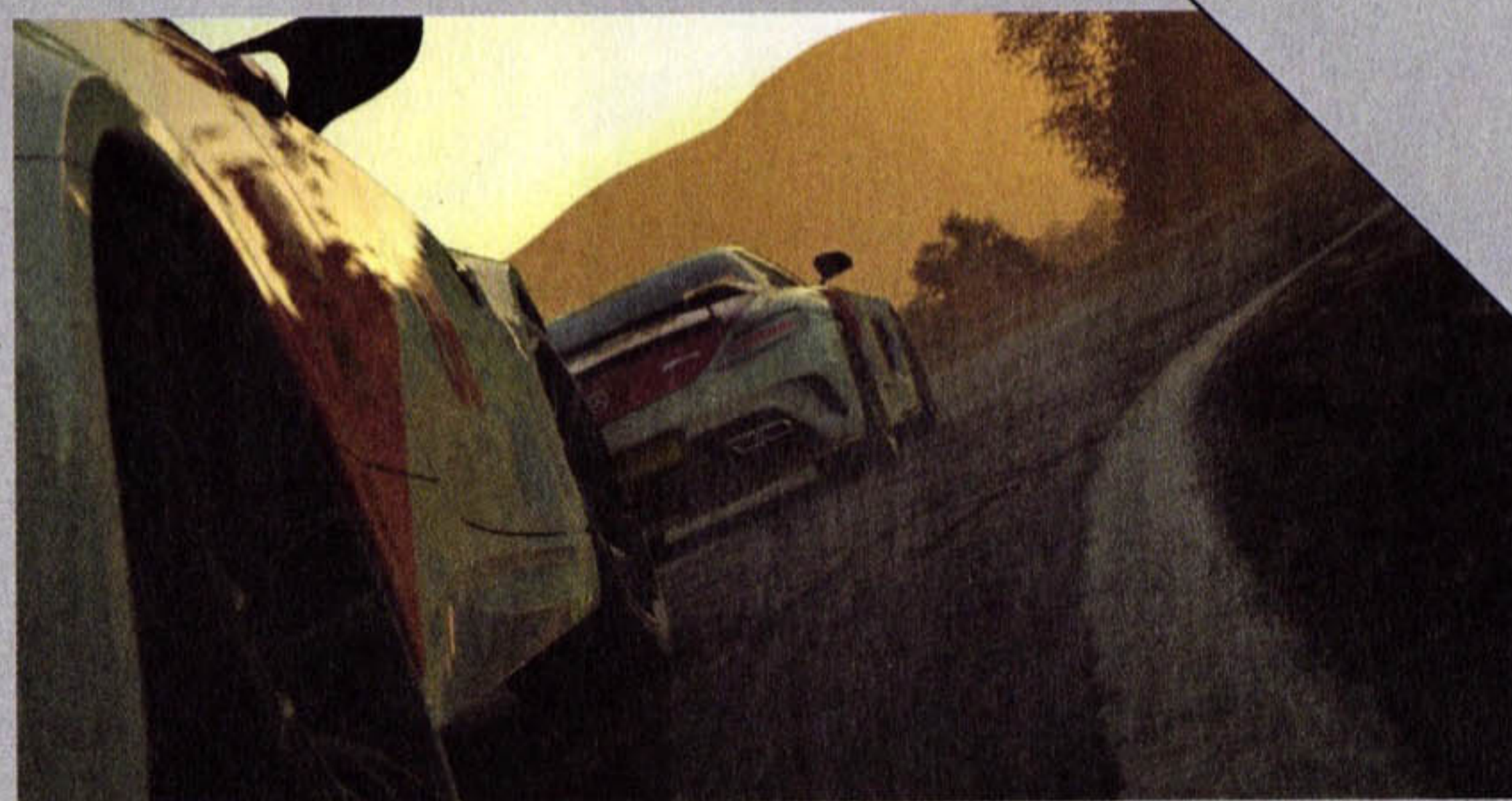# SONY PUTS A NEW FRANCHISE IN THE POLE POSITION

DRIVECLUB

Gran Turismo is the racing franchise most associated with the PlayStation brand. Given that series' penchant for long spans of time between releases and the natural evolution of the genre, perhaps the time is right for a new title to grab the mantle. DriveClub was made for this moment. The game has been living in the mind of first-party Sony developer Evolution Studios (MotorStorm) for years, waiting for the system capable of executing it. Now with the PlayStation 4 – a console the team gave input on – Evolution is creating DriveClub, a title that its director Col Rogers thinks is "really going to change the way that people look at and think about racing games." *by Matthew Kato*

DriveClub is a team-based, online-focused racing game that encourages user-created race challenges to fuel your status in the world. You can play the game offline or as a single player, with everything you do regardless of where you are in the game tracked by a single profile. When you join a team, your accomplishments funnel into the larger success of the group, and inter- and intra-team racing (including three-on-three team challenges) will keep you striving to do your best.

Rogers says the team wants the user-created race challenges to be "a playground for people who like to play racing games." As such, events can be created with numerous parameters such as car type, track, time of day, weather, etc. Users can also create lengthy multistage affairs over multiple days with hundreds of teams and thousands of participants. Within any race, winning small-scale accolades such as clocking the fastest lap, drifting 1,000 meters, and going 0 to 60 the quickest add to the XP and prestige of your team. Challenges can be created with apps outside of the game, and your accomplishments and media can be pushed via social media. Developer Evolution plans to create its own season of league racing via weekly online race events.

Creating a fully online-integrated racing world is nothing new. Fellow U.K. developer Criterion and its Need for Speed franchise has used Autolog to power its games, and the Forza series' car clubs have created a community of racing and shared content such as user-created liveries and gifted cars. DriveClub's team focus expands the possibilities of an online racing environment by enriching the experience with a mix of competition and cooperation as you create and complete challenges with others.

At the game's unveiling, its online capabilities weren't the only thing to take center stage. Evolution went to great pains to talk about the visual fidelity of the cars, but Rogers says DriveClub won't sacrifice other areas of the game just to grab that new-console-wow-factor with its graphics. "The impact of the visuals really can't be overstated on the PlayStation 4, either," he says. "We've actually built the game around huge open landscapes with huge draw distances and all that kind of thing. Tracks are very much set up to give the player the best and most challenging experience while still remaining accessible, and the AI players are a very big part of that. There's nothing that's been left without any attention to it. The gameplay is as absolutely important to us as the visual fidelity."

The studio's status as a first-party developer earned it early access to the PlayStation 4, and Evolution pushed Sony to include 8GB of unified GGDR5 RAM, which should give games more power for graphics, AI, and more. "Sony really wanted to get it right from a development perspective," Rogers says. "We knew pretty loosely the specifications of the console fairly early on, and so we were building to that specification from day one. The dev kits are obviously still evolving as we go on, but the hardware is locked now. We've been building for this console specification from the start."

As for DriveClub's use of the PS4's controller, the studio also gave input on its new features from a racing perspective, and is very satisfied with the result (see page 42 for more). The controller's touchpad is used primarily for menu navigation. Rogers says the team is also considering using it for DriveClub's cameras, but no final decisions have been made at this stage in development. The February demo stressed the importance, visually and gameplay-wise, of a first-person perspective, but the title features many different camera views, including new ones that Rogers thinks will improve the driving experience.

Despite the team's commitment to creating a first-class racing game, DriveClub is not a simulation-based racer. While the studio's MotorStorm series is of a different flavor, Rogers says that franchise's aggressive AI is the kind of touchstone that we can expect in DriveClub, which should lie somewhere between being an arcade racer and a full-on simulation experience. Unfortunately, although the cars take damage from the minor to the major, it won't influence how they handle.

DriveClub features high-end manufacturers such as Koenigsegg, Maserati, Pagani, and Hennessey, but players start off with slightly less glamorous, but still cool, cars. Thankfully, you aren't driving a Civic hatchback like Gran Turismo. As you race and your fame and funds increase, you get better cars and bigger crowds come see you race. Rogers says the team is still trying to figure out what kind of other rewards to gift successful racers – including the possibility of cars being passed from team to team or within a team. More cars will also be available via future DLC, which Rogers boasts will be "one of the biggest titles for Sony from a DLC perspective."

Car games are often included in the launch lineups of consoles because they are easily accessible titles that usually show off the graphical horsepower of the system. DriveClub certainly fits that bill, but its embrace of team-based racing, user-created challenges, and a persistent online profile look to give it more traction than simply an early adopter curiosity. ✦
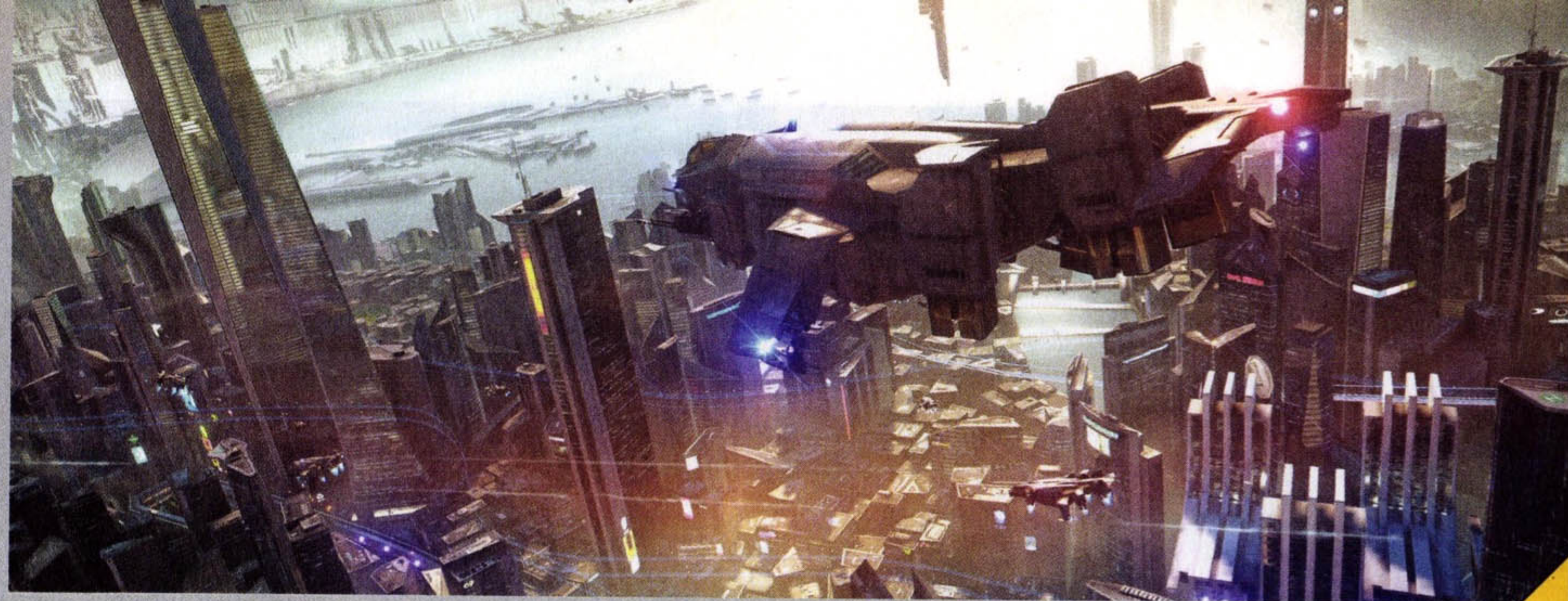
For almost two-and-a-half years, Guerrilla Games has been on confidential lockdown. From when Sony approached the developer about designing for the PlayStation 4 until the system was announced in February, the studio was under a strict legal agreement to not talk about the new console with anyone. *by Ben Reeves*

"That did freak me out a little because we have such a large team to keep from leaking," says game director Steven ter Heide. For example, the PS4's Share button provides developers with new opportunities to quickly share content via social media, but prior to the system's unveiling an accidental press of that button could easily have blown Sony's surprise.

Now that the studio is able to talk freely about the new console and its software – without fear of Sony's legal hammer – we sat down with ter Heide to glean some deeper insights into the Killzone: Shadow Fall demo the team gave during Sony's PlayStation 4 announcement.

TELLING A BETTER STORY

When Guerrilla first started working on Shadow Fall, the team knew that they wanted to do something a little different than what they had done on the PS3. In order to gain some distance from the studio's previous Killzone projects, the team decided to set Shadow Fall 30 years into the franchise's future.

"Something that really resonated with us was the idea of an Iron Curtain in space – the idea of a cold war. That means we don't have to have every battle cranked up to 11 all the time, and that gives us a lot more time to tell our story and soak up the background," says ter Heide.

The game opens on the Vectan home planet. As Killzone fans will remember, at the end of Killzone 3 the Helghast home planet was left virtually uninhabitable. Since then, the Vectan authorities have allowed the Helghast to move in next door on their home planet. However, differences ultimately cause the two cultures to butt heads. "The Helghast are fighting for their right to have a home and the Vectans want to keep their way of life safe," says ter Heide. Sounds like the perfect recipe for another space war.
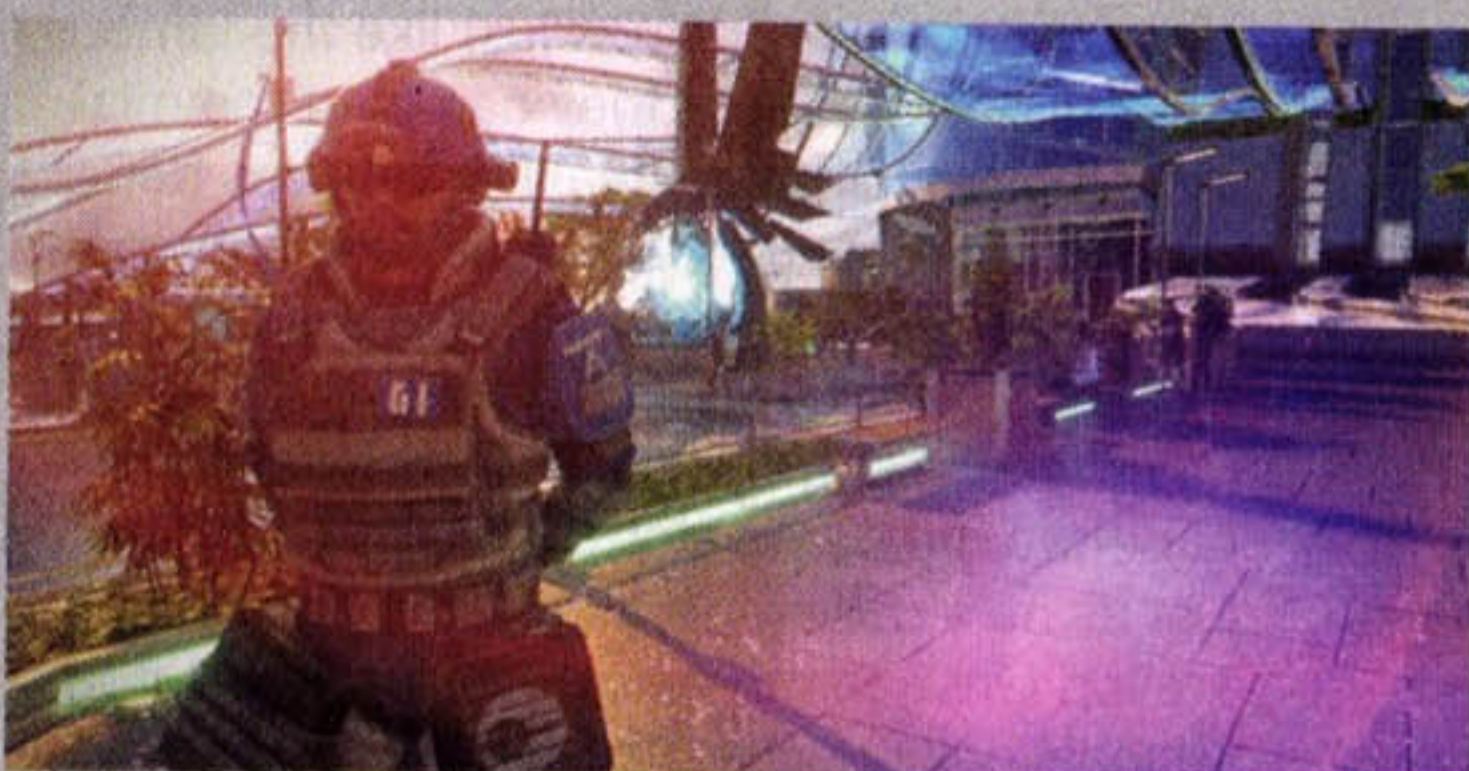
NO NEED TO CHEAT

Every console generation, game budgets and team sizes tend to balloon. Guerrilla believes that it has been able to keep this growth from spiraling out of control thanks in part to the PlayStation 4's designer-friendly architecture. "Game development is always trying to push boundaries to see how much you can squeeze out of a system," says ter Heide. "A lot of that involves cheating to make things look like something is happening when you don't have the horsepower to really make whatever that is really happen." Sony's new system allows developers to improve the visual fidelity of a game's environments and get closer to a designer's ultimate vision for its game.

RETHINKING WEAPON DESIGN

Guerrilla isn't ready to talk about many of the improvements to Shadow Fall's combat, but ter Heide admitted that they are looking to expand on many of Killzone's existing systems. For example, when looking at new ways to incorporate melee combat, Guerrilla decided to allow players to drop down on enemies and execute death-from-above maneuvers.

"There has been a lot of tinkering with the mechanics," says ter Heide. "In Shadow Fall, you can switch modes on your weapons. So you might be using something that works well in close range, like a submachine gun, but with the press of a button the scope flips up and it will switch over to a long-range weapon that you can use to take out enemies from a distance." These kinds of concepts aren't entirely original to Killzone, but Guerrilla is looking to make an array of tweaks that will hopefully add up to big gameplay changes. ◆
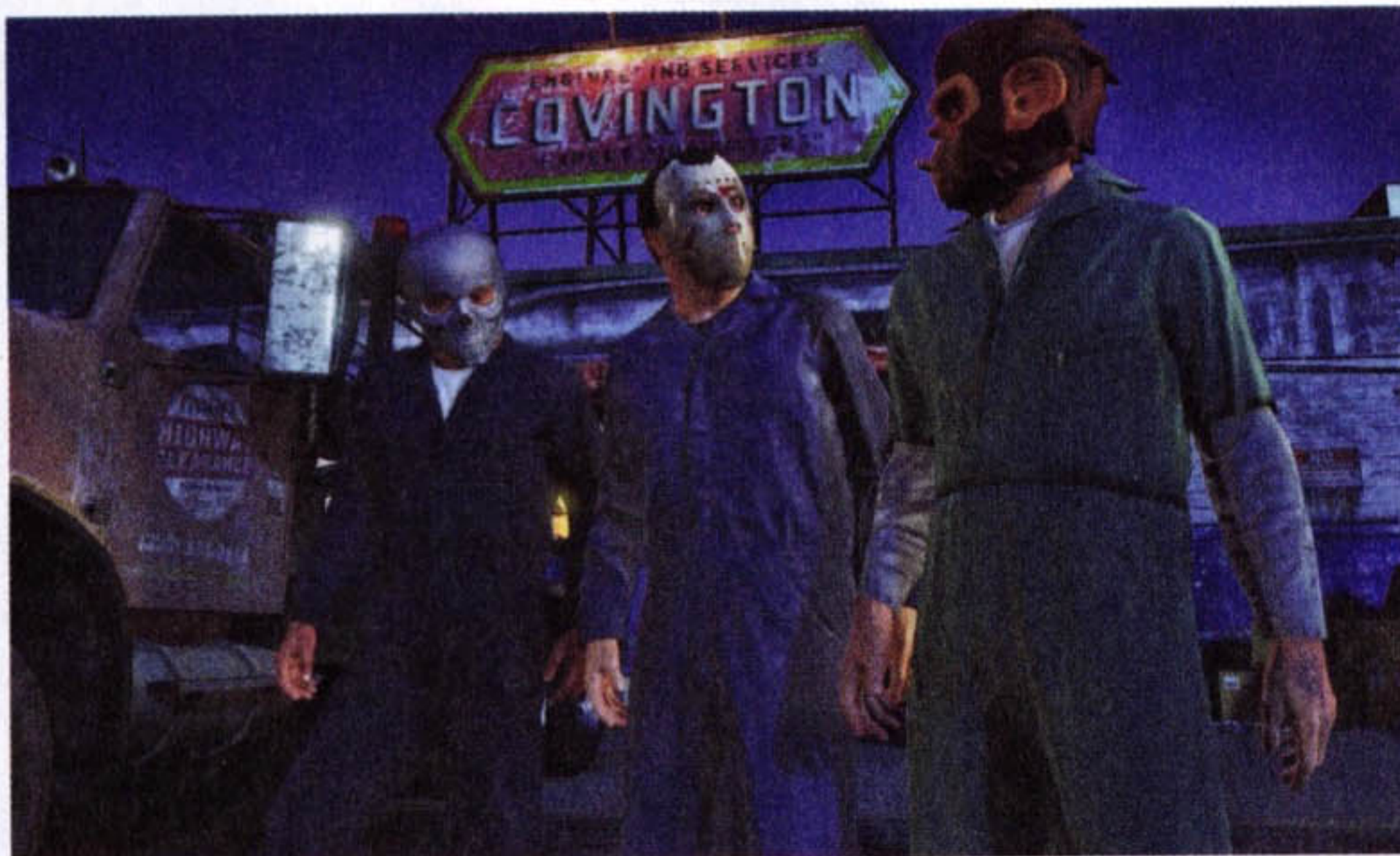

» **PLATFORM**
PlayStation 4

» **STYLE**
1-Player Shooter
(Online TBA)

» **PUBLISHER**
Sony Computer
Entertainment

» **DEVELOPER**
Guerrilla Games

» **RELEASE**
TBA

Grand Theft Auto V

The art of the heist

You can make decent money knocking over liquor stores, arms trafficking, or carrying out hits in Los Santos, but why be a small-time crook when you can go for the major score? Grand Theft Auto V protagonist Michael thought he made enough to retire from a life of crime, but after his family squanders away most of his ill-gained earnings, he's forced to jump back into the game with fellow playable characters Trevor and Franklin. The only way he's going to regain his financial footing is by thinking big.

An aficionado of Vinewood action films, Michael also loves the thrill of big heists. GTA V peppers five or six of these big jobs throughout the story, each requiring careful preparation and execution. If you successfully pull off these jobs, you can walk away with millions of dollars to spend on luxury vehicles, helipads, properties, businesses, weapons, or even car customizations.

These major heists typically begin with a meeting of the minds. As Michael, Trevor, and Franklin kick around ideas, the player is presented with options on how to approach the proposed mission. For instance, you could enter a building stealthily from the roof or bust through the front door, guns blazing. The choice you make completely changes the dynamic of the heist, and thanks to the ability to replay missions you can experience both approaches if you want.

The more complex missions require the help of specialists like a wheelman, extra muscle, or a hacker. You have cheap and expensive options, but you get what you pay for. The cheaper hacker may take longer to hack the security network, leaving you with only 30 seconds to collect all the money you can carry instead of the full minute you may have received had you spent more to get a seasoned pro. The drawback to hiring an expert

is they demand a bigger cut of the take. If your hired hands survive the mission, they will improve and perform better the next time you need their expertise.

Once you lock down your approach and hire any specialists you require, you must perform a series of sub-missions. In the mission Rockstar showed us (which isn't a major story heist, but a one-of-a-kind mission that shares structural similarities), the crew plans to rob an armored security truck just like the famous scene in *Heat*. Before they can start the mission, the player must steal the vehicles being used for the job, find a place to stash the getaway vehicle, and buy some boiler suits and masks to wear during the heist.

With these sub-missions already taken care of before the demo starts, we join Franklin just as he's pulling up to meet Michael and Trevor. Once the three exchange pleasantries, Michael outlines the plan. Trevor needs to

A Game of Skill

Players loved the ability to level up their characters in San Andreas, but Rockstar shelved the skill system for GTA IV. For the return trip to Los Santos, this popular feature is back. Though Michael, Trevor, and Franklin start off with different skill levels, you can max out each of their abilities. Currently, the game has strength, shooting, stealth, flying, driving, and lung capacity, but Rockstar says these are still subject to change.

In addition, each character has a unique special ability. Michael wields the slow-motion Bullet Time feature borrowed from Max Payne. Franklin can slow time when driving to navigate through sticky situations. Trevor has a rage mode that allows him to deal double the amount of damage while taking less damage. During his rage fits, he also has a unique melee attack.
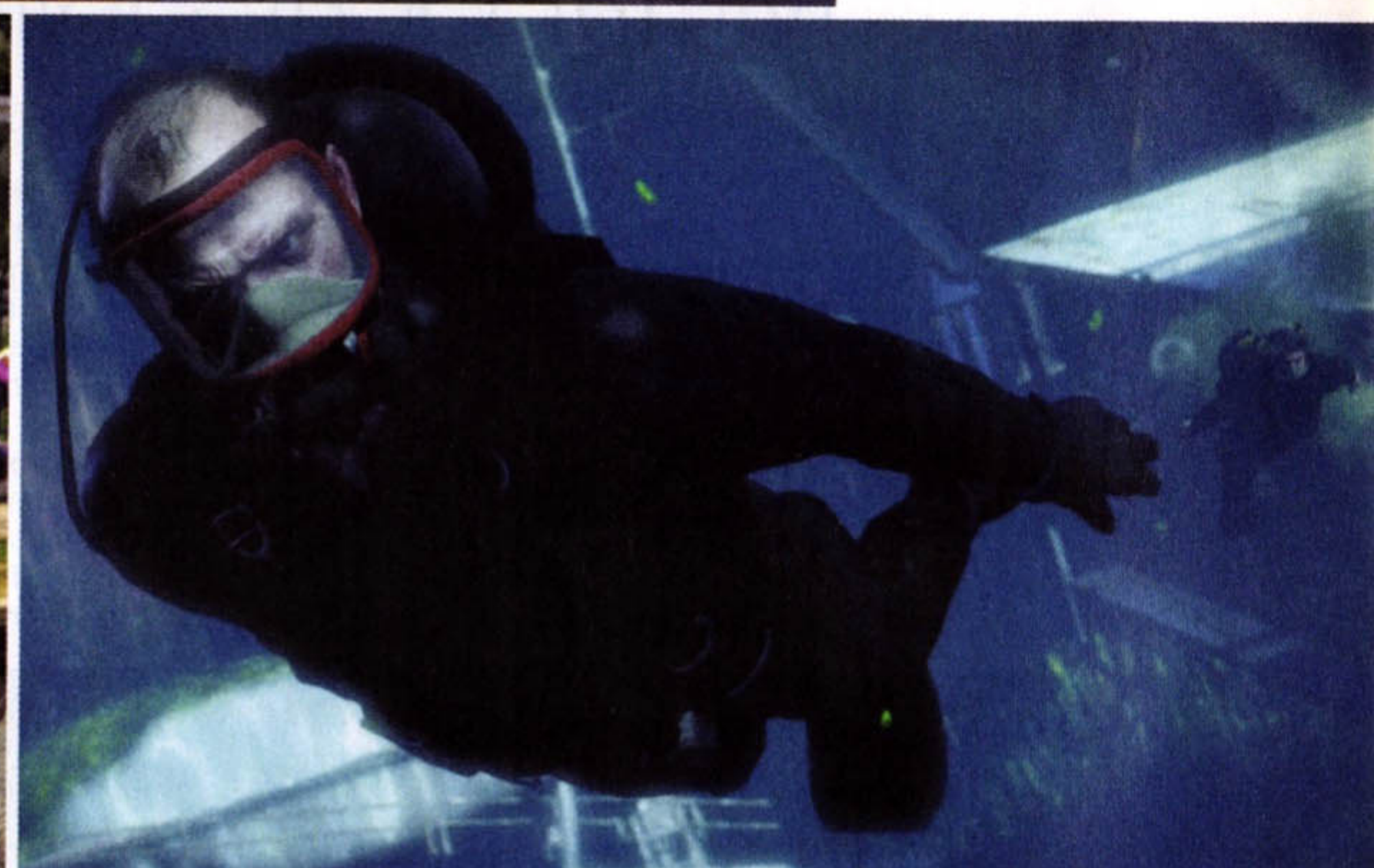
find an elevated perch and serve as the lookout, notifying the other two when the security truck is nearing the site of the attempted robbery so they can block the road.

The job starts with the player controlling Trevor in a first-person view as he looks at the oncoming traffic through a pair of binoculars to locate the armored truck. Once he spots it, the camera zooms out and places the player in control of Michael in the garbage truck, who maneuvers the vehicle to block the entire street.

When the garbage truck is in place, a cinematic sequence shows the armored truck approaching the roadblock and screeching to a halt. Now the camera jumps to Franklin's first-person perspective behind the wheel of the tow truck. The play tester steps on the gas and rams into the target vehicle at full speed. Another cutscene shows the powerful impact of the crash, which tips the armored

vehicle on its side.

The player stays in control of Franklin, who walks over and places explosives on the back door of the overturned truck. After detonation, Michael joins Franklin and the guards emerge with their hands up. The alarm is already sounding, and police sirens scream in the distance. The team doesn't have time to collect all the cash, so they take defensive positions and wait to open fire on the LSPD.

At this point in the mission the player is given the ability to swap between Trevor, who is perched in an elevated position with a sniper rifle and an RPG, and the two other characters, who are both armed with machine guns near the truck. When the characters are this close together, player-activated switching happens nearly instantaneously, with the world slowing down for a split second so the player can reorient before rejoining the fray.

To showcase the speed of these transitions, the play tester fires a rocket with Trevor and switches immediately to Franklin. Before the rocket even reaches its intended destination, he's in full control of the new character.

After disposing of several waves of cops, a brief reprieve allows the crew to gather the money and make off in the getaway vehicle, marking the end of a thrilling score.

Jumping from one character to another repeatedly may sound disorienting on paper, but watching Grand Theft Auto V in action quells any worry I may have had about the system. Smooth transitions make it easy to orient yourself after a switch, the cinematic sequences add another layer of drama to the proceedings, and being able to rotate between the characters gives the players a new level of control in dictating their play style. For Rockstar, this may be the greatest heist of all. » **Matt Bertz**

Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain

Kojima continues the story of Big Boss

» **Platform**
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Konami

» **Developer**
Kojima Productions

» **Release**
TBA

When it was originally unveiled, The Phantom Pain was supposedly being developed by the enigmatic Moby Dick Studios – but nobody was fooled. In the days following the announcement, mounting evidence pointed to the game being more than a great-looking title from an unknown developer. Though Konami continued the charade for several months, Hideo Kojima's appearance at the 2013 Game Developers Conference confirmed what fans already knew: The Phantom Pain is Metal Gear Solid V. A trailer and gameplay demo have provided plenty of fuel for speculation, but few things are certain about the latest chapter in the life of Big Boss. If you want a better idea of what to expect from the story in MGS V, these are the key points to consider.

The prologue
The previously announced Metal Gear Solid: Ground Zeroes is related to the story told by The Phantom Pain, but happens earlier in the timeline. Hideo Kojima clarified the relationship between the games in a tweet: "Ground Zeroes is a prologue of MGS V. Nine years after that event will be The Phantom Pain." Despite this connection, the titles are separate products, though whether Ground Zeroes is a full game or a smaller-scale episode (like the Tanker episode of MGS 2) remains to be seen. Both of them take place in the timeframe between the events of Peace Walker and the original Metal Gear.

Before and after
A nine-year gap between games makes sense in the context of The Phantom Pain's story. During Ground Zeroes, it appears that Mother Base (the home of Big Boss' mercenary army, the MSF) is destroyed. During that attack (or events related to it), Big Boss is critically wounded and falls into a coma. The Phantom Pain begins with him waking up nine years later. His muscles have atrophied, his left arm has been replaced by a prosthetic, and the world outside has moved on without him. With the help of a fellow patient named Ishmael, Big Boss escapes the hospital and becomes affiliated with a new organization called Diamond Dogs.

Returning characters
Metal Gear games feature a stable of recurring characters, and The Phantom Pain is no exception. Footage from the trailer suggests that Revolver Ocelot and a young Psycho Mantis make appearances, as well as Kaz "Master" Miller. Some fans have even speculated that Colonel Volgin is somehow returning. Whether or not all of these characters appear in both Ground Zeroes or The Phantom Pain is unsure, since the line between the two games is still blurry.
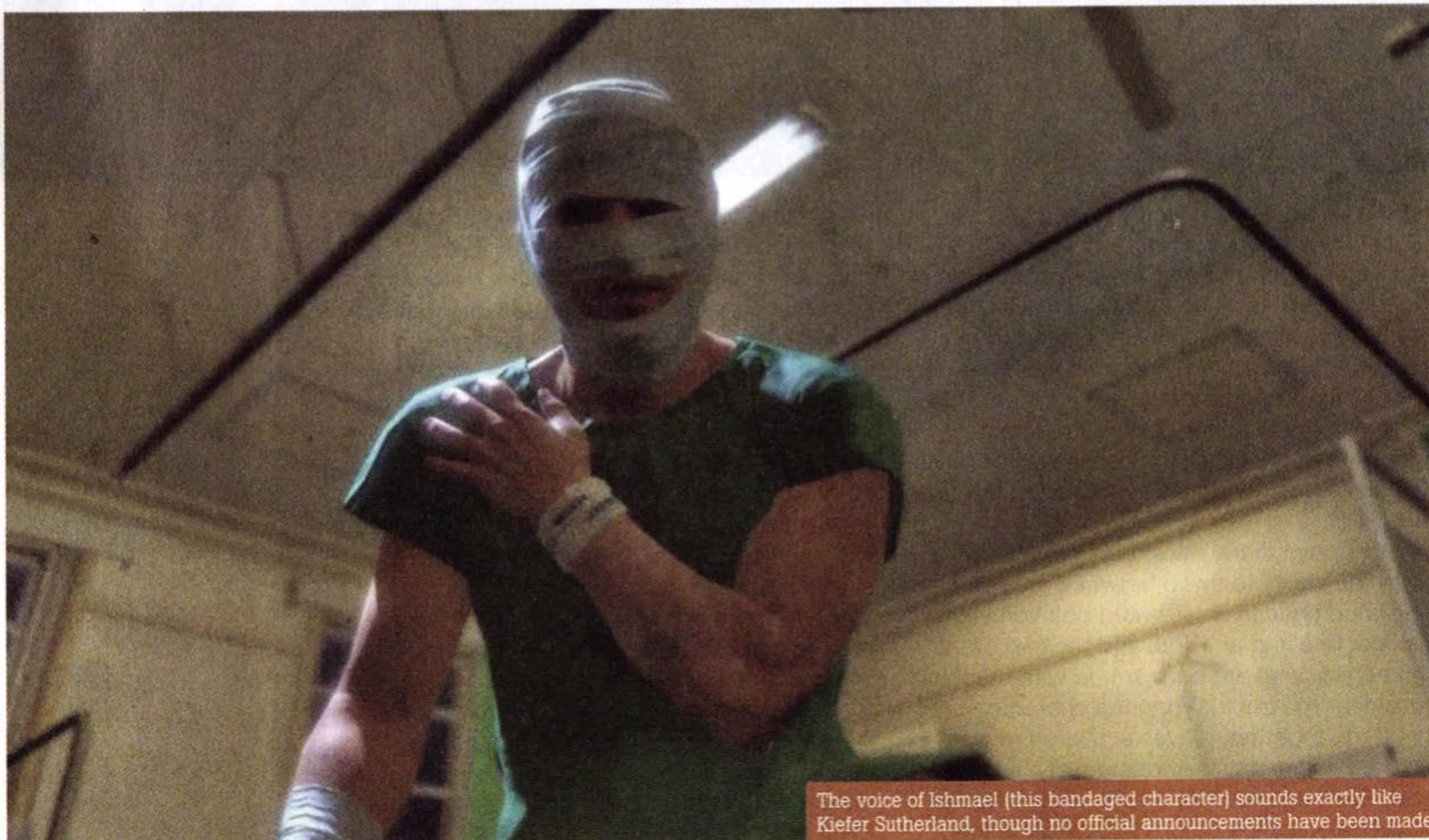
The voice of Ishmael (this bandaged character) sounds exactly like Kiefer Sutherland, though no official announcements have been made

Is this a young Psycho Mantis?

This fiery figure could just be a hallucination, considering he is later seen riding atop a flaming horse

Veering from reality

If Psycho Mantis is indeed returning, that might explain some of the strange sights in the released footage of The Phantom Pain. A flaming whale soaring through the sky and a phantom horseman chasing Big Boss through the woods are just a couple examples of the bizarre things in store. Realism has never been a primary concern for this series, but these events are too outlandish to be real – even for Metal Gear.

Baby snakes

The Les Enfants Terribles experiment – the project that spawned Solid, Liquid, and Solidus Snake – occurs when Big Boss is in a coma. When he wakes up in The Phantom Pain, his cloned sons already exist somewhere in the world. Their exact ages and potential roles in the story are debatable, but they are still key elements of the series that are technically in play. » **Joe Juba**

Big Boss falls into a coma at the end of Ground Zeroes, and The Phantom Pain begins nine years later

Madden NFL 25

EA Tiburon concocts a gameplan for the future

E A Sports, and the Madden franchise in particular, did not handle the last console transition well. It took the series years to recover and then start pushing the sport forward. EA Tiburon and Electronic Arts do not think that will happen this time around, and their talk about the next three or so years for the franchise suggest that many of the initiatives – certainly the technical ones – will carry forward no matter which console we're talking about. That makes Madden NFL 25 (the series is celebrating its 25th anniversary) less the last gasp of the old systems as a preamble to what's coming.

If there's an overarching statement about the gameplay changes revealed in my hands-on time with an early build of the game, it's that the actions of every player on the field should be different in some way – starting with fundamental movement. The developer wants to do away with the feeling of swerving when running (which feels like you're driving a car), giving players more cut moves with a more noticeable shift in momentum.

I could feel this change particularly in the running game while trying to navigate traffic in the interior running game or making that decisive foot plant before turning the corner on a sweep. Speaking of such running plays, EA redid the blocking yet again, from the execution of plays to the blocks themselves. My limited time with the game didn't allow me to fully investigate how well it performs in this department, but on sweeps in particular, I didn't notice any obvious blocking gaffes.

One of the most dramatic changes announced so far is the addition of the left trigger as a move modifier, turning the normal ball carrier right-analog moves like jukes into bigger actions. This includes sweeping the right analog in quarter turns for spins and the ability to combo any move off of another. Anything you do when carrying the ball depletes a stamina gauge shown under your player's feet. Deplete it on a play or over the course of a game and you'll become less effective and maybe even prone to fumbling.

In practice, I wasn't struck by the power of these moves but rather how they affected defenders. A rock-paper-scissors style interplay now exists between runners' moves and defenders (who have new dive tackles, the ability to close on a runner by holding the tackle button, and can breakdown for open field tackles). This is reflected not only by whether someone is tackled or not, but for instance if a running back's stiff arm jolts a defender to the ground or they merely struggle as the back is slowed and steered out of bounds instead.

These interactions use the refined Infinity engine, which seems to have tuned out some of the weirder-looking animation flops during plays from last year. I still saw some postplay strangeness when players were on the ground, so hopefully this is addressed in the remaining development time.

Stay tuned for more Madden information in the future, where we'll learn what's next for Connected Careers and other features.
» **Matthew Kato**
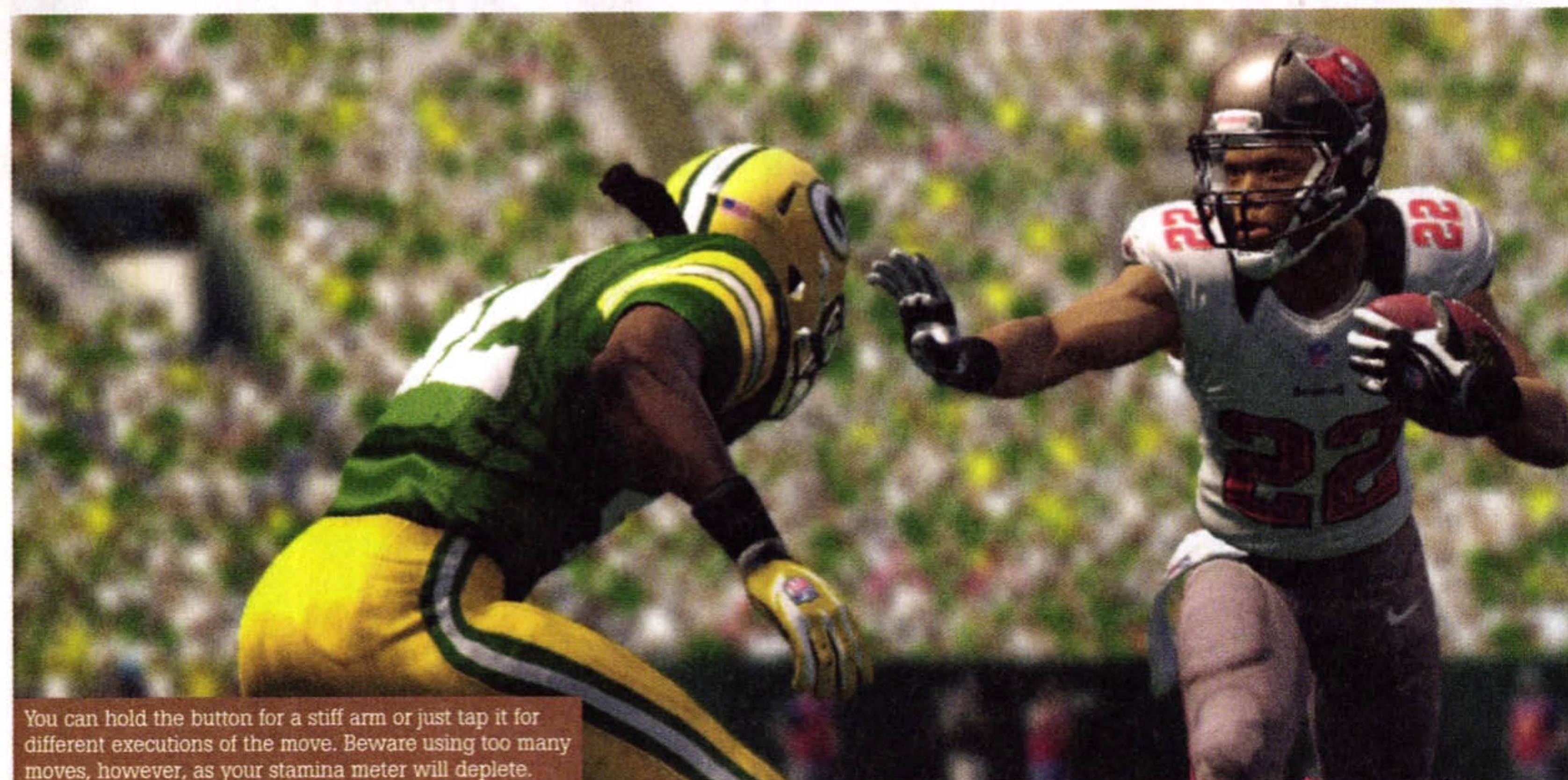
You can hold the button for a stiff arm or just tap it for different executions of the move. Beware using too many moves, however, as your stamina meter will deplete.

Deadpool

Jumping headfirst into the Deadpool

Deadpool is a comic character with a loyal and passionate fan base. Those who love him have likely already paid off their preorders for High Moon's upcoming game adaptation. Unfortunately, an even greater number of people don't know anything about Marvel's insane Merc with a Mouth. Thankfully, after playing a nearly finished version of the game we walked away with the impression that Deadpool could appeal to any gamer who loves the intense combat of DMC or the crass humor of South Park.

Approximately three-fourths of the way through the main story, Deadpool makes his way to Genosha, a South African island-nation that was once a mutant utopia and is now a post-apocalyptic wasteland. In Genosha, Deadpool runs into Cable. Whenever Deadpool encounters another popular character from the Marvel universe, a prompt appears onscreen offering more information about that character's history. Players unfamiliar with Marvel lore may find this feature extremely helpful, but even comic fans might want to make use of it, as Deadpool breaks into an amusing song that explains his history with that character.

Cable has time-traveled from the future to bring Deadpool a dire warning. Mr. Sinister has knocked out the X-Men, and the entire world depends on…something that players will never know, because as Cable continues his explanation of the plot Deadpool's internal monologue continually interrupts to complain about how this conversation bores him. Deadpool doesn't need a deeper explanation, as he is still sore at Mr. Sinister over a botched assassination. Earlier in the game, the villain stepped in and killed one of Deadpool's contracts before he was able to eliminate his target. Therefore, when Deadpool learns that Sinister is on Genosha, he rushes off to settle the score.

Deadpool wades through a lot of minions along the way. Fortunately, his gun-fu is strong. He has access to a wide array of sword combos and ranged weapon attacks. As he tears through his opponents, he acquires DP points that can be used to purchase other guns – such as shotguns and rifles – and new melee weapons like dual sai or a pair of slow but deadly hammers. The action is fast and fluid, and I had a lot of fun switching between Deadpool's various guns and melee weapons

on the fly. A quick tap of the dodge button activates Deadpool's teleporter, which helps him close the gap on opponents or get out of a hot zone in a blink.

During combat, Deadpool also has four special attack bars, called momentum meters, that slowly charge. Once any one of these meters is full, Deadpool can unleash a larger room-clearing attack that changes depending on the weapon he uses. For example, a move called the Equalizer has Deadpool draw two uzis and perform a spinning attack like a move from *Underworld*. Another momentum attack has Deadpool tornado across the floor in a break-dance-like spin with his dual katanas.

Deadpool ad-libs his way through most of the action. At one point, after stabbing a guy with his sai, Deadpool says, "I said, 'Just the tip.'" During another sequence, Deadpool complains to the player about how he's handling the camera. Thankfully, these quips didn't seem repetitive, and add to the overall charm.

We won't know if Deadpool's quips get grating until we spend more time with him, but right now we're looking forward to a whole game with the guy. » **Ben Reeves**
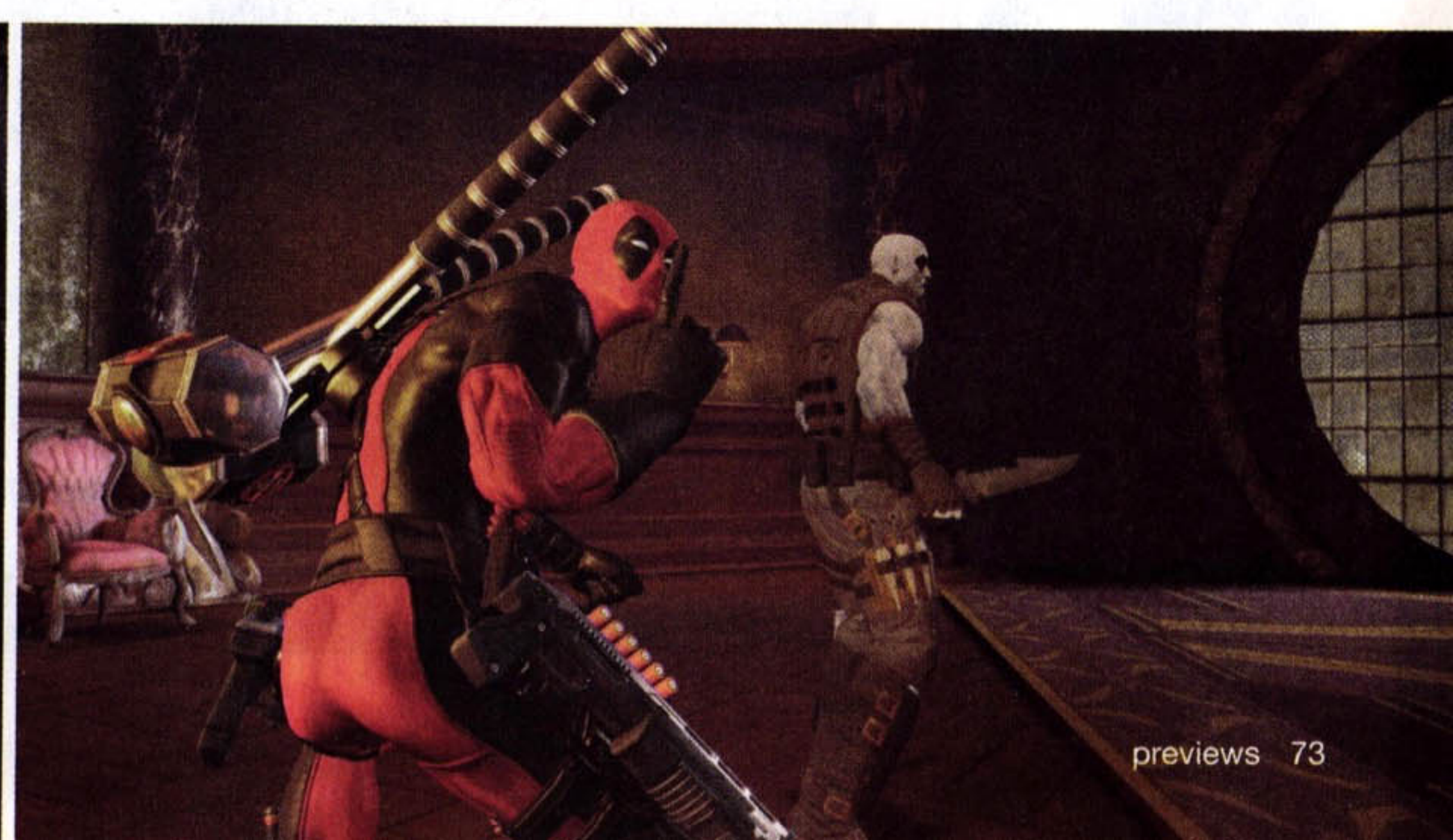
» **Platform**
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Activision

» **Developer**
High Moon

» **Release**
June 25

Shin Megami Tensei IV

Challenging your mind and soul

After playing the opening of Shin Megami Tensei IV, I can already tell the journey is deeper than what you see on the surface. Thought-provoking premonitions start the adventure, with two distinct characters offering me different paths. Walter urges me to make a world where anything can be changed with will. Jonathan, on the other hand, wants me to choose everlasting peace. Suddenly, a vision of a girl begging for revival flashes in, and I'm left to ponder its meaning. Tragedy? Power? Heroics? Anything is possible in the dark SMT universe, and the fourth installment shows promise of continuing the series' pristine legacy.

SMT IV begins in the eastern kingdom of Mikado, with buildings reminiscent of medieval Europe's majestic stone structures. Here you must take part in the Gauntlet Rite, a ceremony that grants you samurai status and allows you to live in the Mikado castle. The ceremony is simple – touch the gauntlet and it accepts or rejects you. Your character and his friend's fates for a different life all hinge on this moment. The tension is palpable as your friend is rejected and you earn your right to be a samurai.

"We kept the punk-rock soul of SMT alive by exploring mature themes, non-traditional fantasy settings, and our own canon that pulls from different mythos and religions," says director Kazuyuki Yamai. As the themes wax philosophically, choices branch off into the classic SMT law/chaos morality system.

Eventually, the tale takes you to modern-day Tokyo, but Yamai wants players to experience this themselves rather than give away plot points. "Modern-day Tokyo is presented as seen through the eyes of someone from of the Eastern Kingdom of Mikado," Yamai says. "The problems our society holds will be made very clear through your eyes as a visitor." Yamai thought seeing realistic problems like government distrust, class division, and the disillusionment of youth would "bring more reality to the game."

Social issues aren't the only sources of conflict. True to SMT, demons are at the root of a catastrophe, and you must defeat them while finding out why they're invading the lands. Exploring the first dungeon, it's clear that punishing battles return to SMT IV. The labyrinth is full of dead ends, collectable relics, and deadly foes. Sneaking up on enemies and engaging them from behind grants a preemptive strike. However, if they ambush you, expect to start the battle at a disadvantage.

Demon recruitment is essential to your survival. With close to 500 demons, options to alter your party are around every corner. Demons acquire experience regardless of battle participation, but beware that putting them on the bench gives a reduced EXP rate. Leveling up demons teaches them new skills, which can be passed to the main character. This is a great way to customize your skills, but only a limited number can be brought into combat. Four equippable skills are available at the onset, but more slots open up throughout the journey.

SMT IV preserves the press turn system that originated in Nocturne, where you can pass turns to the most desired character for the fight. Striking a demon's weakness uses up just half a turn, while using a skill they are strong against will expend two turns. One new element in battle is that enemies smirk – an indication that a critical is approaching. The warning gives you time to defend or kill the enemy off before it unleashes a deadly attack.

If the daunting battles concern you, fear not. Dying more than twice unlocks the option to turn down the difficulty, which can be adjusted outside of battle at any point. "That doesn't mean we made the game easier and toned it down, though," Yamai says. "We, the development staff, understand the essence of each game system in the SMT series. We lowered the hurdle for newcomers, yet made sure to maintain the soul of SMT."

After my brief sojourn with SMT IV, I want more. The standout dialogue, engaging storyline, and hell-raising battles make the wait until July that much harder.

» **Kimberley Wallace**

Infinite Crisis

DC Comics enters the MOBA scene

B etween Christopher Nolan's excellent Batman trilogy and the superb Arkham series started by Rocksteady, it's hard to imagine how we could fit more of the Caped Crusader in our lives. Despite this, developer Turbine is delivering three unique versions of Batman with its upcoming multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) game, Infinite Crisis. The free-to-play game revolves around a DC Comics arc where multiple versions of popular characters cross paths in one cataclysmic event.

Gotham by Gaslight's steampunk Batman can team up with or face off against *Batman & Dracula*'s vampiric Nightmare Batman. Turbine says many characters have alternate versions, including Green Lantern and Catwoman. These iterations feature unique move sets, like Nightmare Batman's stealth ability and Gaslight Batman's sonic pistols. For my hands-on demo with Infinite Crisis, I chose to play as the obese butcher version of Joker from *Gotham by Gaslight*.

Gaslight Joker uses a massive cleaver and swarms of rats to harm his foes. This tank-class character is great at soaking up damage while his teammates secure checkpoints. My favorite of Gaslight Joker's abilities involves chucking a piece of rancid meat into a group of enemies to stun and damage them.

In addition to its diverse cast of iconic DC characters, Infinite Crisis distinguishes itself from the MOBA pack with destructible environments. Players can throw cars at each other or call down meteors to devastate the opposition. These meteor strikes can render sections of the map impassable, changing the flow of battle. I liked seeing increased interactivity within a MOBA map, but tossing minivans into Batman's face has universal appeal.

Turbine wants to make Infinite Crisis more approachable than other MOBAs out there – a sentiment echoed by many developers exploring the profitable free-to-play space. The tide of battle changes in a matter of

seconds during MOBA matches, which can create a stressful environment for newbies. Infinite Crisis includes built-in recommendations for newcomers to follow, giving them basic guidance when upgrading abilities or purchasing stat-boosting items. These training wheels are welcome additions, but fresh-faced MOBA players should expect to invest several hours learning the ropes.

Players can look forward to three maps and a multitude of characters when Infinite Crisis launches on PC later this year. Turbine will also roll out new characters for purchase after the launch. The MOBA market gold rush is a tempting frontier for publishers like Warner Bros. seeking success on the level of League of Legends or Dota 2. The real key is appealing to a broad audience without diluting the hardcore experience that attracts hardcore MOBA players. Turbine's blend of beloved DC characters and beginner-friendly tutorials hopes to strike the right balance. » **Tim Turi**
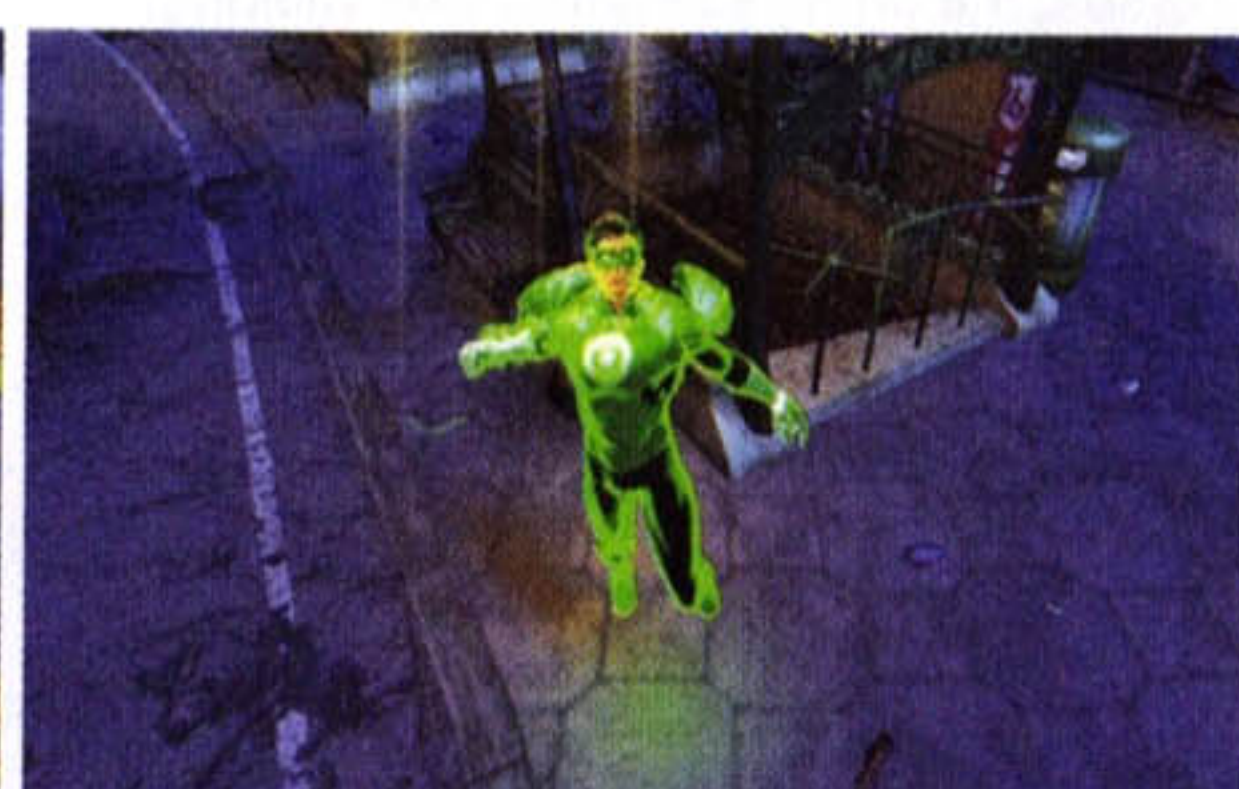
» **Platform**
PC

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

» **Publisher**
Warner Bros. Interactive

» **Developer**
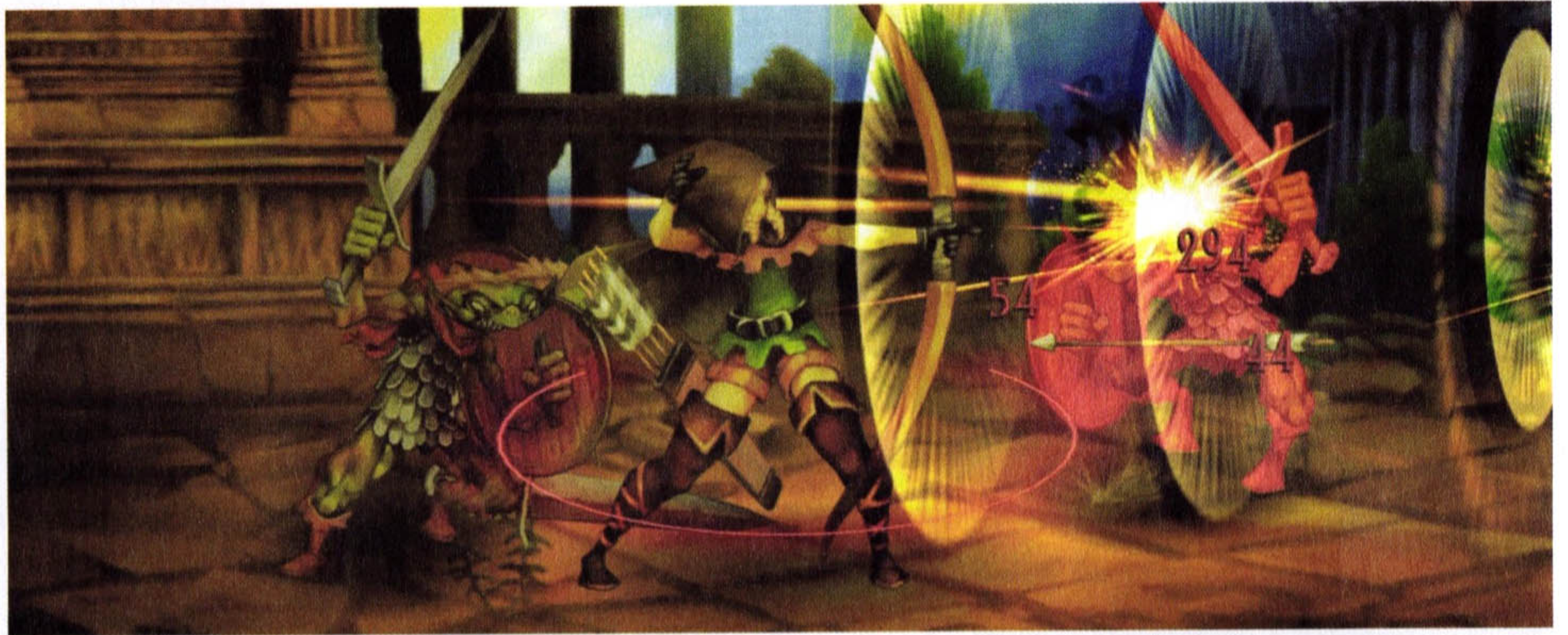Turbine

» **Release**
2013

Confirmed Characters

- Nightmare Batman
- Doomsday
- Flash
- Gaslight Batman
- Gaslight Catwoman
- Gaslight Joker
- Green Lantern
- Poison Ivy
- Shazam
- The Joker
- Wonder Woman
- Zatana

Dragon's Crown

The brawler modernized

» Platform
PlayStation 3 • Vita

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

» Publisher
Atlus

» Developer
Vanillaware

» Release
August 6

After years of glimpsing its provocative and beautiful art style, I finally witnessed an extended demo of Vanillaware's upcoming brawler. The game is a clear homage to the best side-scrolling brawlers of the '90s, but a number of features ensure that Dragon's Crown is far more than a throwback experience. While several of the playable characters, customization features, and upgrade mechanics remain under wraps, my playtime rocketed my feelings on this title from tentative enthusiasm into the must-play category.

Dragon's Crown is a love letter to Dungeons & Dragons fans, filled with monsters and other elements that recall the roots of the iconic role-playing game. More specifically, Dragon's Crown shares a number of traits with the classic Capcom D&D brawlers (see this month's Classic GI on p. 98). It's no coincidence; Vanillaware president George Kamitani was part of the team that created those old D&D games, and this new title echoes their design and structure.

Players begin by choosing one of six classes: the armored fighter, axe-wielding amazon, agile elf, spell-flinging sorceress, gruff dwarf, and mysterious wizard. Classes have their own tutorials, since they all have a distinct battle style and controls. I checked

out the fighter, whose straightforward tactics put him on the front line in a multiplayer game or allow him to hold his own playing solo. Controls are flexible and varied, offering much more than standard single-button attacks. Directional button presses in combination with a sword swing have the fighter sliding and leaping around the screen, while a separate button slams his sword into the ground for a damaging shockwave to all surrounding enemies. Afterward, the sword remains stuck in the ground for a few seconds, and the fighter can swing his fists in fast jabs and uppercuts while he waits.

In contrast, a few minutes with the sorceress shows off a dramatically different playstyle. Basic attacks create a magical burst at close range, but leap into the air and she fires off a cascade of magic missiles. On the ground, she wields a number of different ice-focused spells to slow down and damage enemies, but she's best served by staying back from the thick of the action.

The game opens in a large city filled with shops, stables, and other areas not available for exploration yet, but all of them speak to features that promise to add customization and replayability. Out in the countryside, a gorgeous rotating map offers a number of

levels to explore.

With a fellow editor playing at my side, we dive into the first few levels. Drop-in multiplayer is available for up to four players, and can be played either locally or online. The early battles we fight are against cowering humanoid monsters and lizard people, but their difficulty scales to the number of players in the game. Occasionally, massive riding mounts become available, like a striped saber-tooth cat or a fire-breathing dragon.

From time to time, paths open up to the side, allowing for brief trips into hidden rooms, or even a separate branching path through the level. As we battle, both of us can use the right analog stick to direct a small arrow reticle around the screens, seeking out flashing hidden nooks that hide treasure and power-ups. A seventh non-playable party member, Rannie the rogue, sprints out of the shadows to grab treasures, unlock doors, and investigate secrets as our reticles find them onscreen.

Between stages, a treasure screen pops up that lets us spend gold to identify magic items, sell unwanted loot, and equip new weapons and armor. It's the first hints of what looks like a robust suite of tools to make a character your own. The menus indicate other fun features, like the presence of some sort of character creator, as well as multiple difficulty settings that alter the experience point totals that characters receive.

The hyper-sexualized character models and exaggerated monster designs may not be for everyone, but there's no denying the incredible detail and animation work that has gone into the game. Dragon's Crown is a sight to behold in motion, filled with colorful spell effects and towering sprites.

Brawler games aren't known for their length, so I remain curious about how much we'll end up getting out of Dragon's Crown, especially since it's a retail release. But if gameplay quality and visual fidelity are your priorities, this title proves that the brawling genre still has something new to offer. **» Matt Miller**

Battlefield 4

Battlefield returns with yet another approach to single-player

Few shooter fans question the pedigree of the Battlefield multiplayer experience, but the single-player campaigns haven't matched that level of quality. Bad Company featured an open world, but there wasn't much to do and players had to travel long stretches between objectives. Bad Company 2 tightened the experience, and while it may not have brought any innovation to the fray, at least the humor was endearing. Battlefield 3 went straight to the Call of Duty playbook, with tightly scripted sequences that offered little wiggle room for players accustomed to the choose-your-own tactics of the multiplayer experience. For its fourth attempt, DICE is trying yet another approach.

Well aware that few players developed emotional bonds with Staff Sergeant Henry Blackburn or the rest of the Battlefield 3 characters, the studio went back to the drawing board with its narrative approach. During the campaign unveil event at GDC, DICE executive producer Patrick Bach said the team is trying to create a dramatic experience that focuses on the soldiers in the middle of the war rather than the geopolitics surrounding the event. While the 17-minute live demo shown didn't exactly pull at our heartstrings, a few gameplay changes hint that the dev team learned some vital lessons from its previous campaigns.

After a rendezvous from recovering a piece of intel in Baku, Azerbaijan, a U.S. Special Forces unit is forced to high tail it out of the city with Russian soldiers giving chase. The deliberately paced evasion sequence builds the tension of the scene, but eventually the mission unfolds into a wide-open skirmish in a micro-sandbox. Here, players choose which tactics to apply to the battle. You can sit back and snipe from a distance, order your fellow soldiers to concentrate suppressing fire on enemies for an opportunity to flank, hop in a vehicle to use a turret, or call in airstrikes from a supporting helicopter. This feels much more in line with the classic Battlefield experience than previous games.

The most impressive element of the demo, however, was the Frostbite 3 engine. Its predecessor wowed gamers with its great lighting effects and high-resolution textures, but many fans decried the toned-down destruction. Judging from the footage we've seen so far, Battlefield 4 puts demolition back into the spotlight with both the micro-destruction at the heart of the Close Quarters expansion and the full building wreckages of Bad Company 2. In one sequence, a soldier uses a shotgun to blow through a wooden barrier, then equips a grenade launcher to create a flanking route through a concrete wall.

Other engine enhancements driving Battlefield 4 include improved facial animation, 60 frames per second action (at least on PC), particle effects, a cinematic Bokeh effect, reflective surfaces, and impressive water technology that allows it to approximate the violent waves of the open seas.

With the single-player reveal out of the way, now DICE can turn its attention to the information true Battlefield fans are waiting for: multiplayer details and the inevitable announcement of the PlayStation 4 and new Xbox versions. » **Matt Bertz**

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

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

» **Publisher**
Electronic Arts

» **Developer**
DICE

» **Release**
Fall

The Social Campaign

DICE opted against making the Battlefield 4 campaign a cooperative experience, but plans to encourage replay by integrating signature elements of the traditional multiplayer experience, like leaderboards and stat tracking. Similar to the Autolog prompts in Need for Speed, social challenges appear during the campaign that you can engage for bragging rights. These could include anything from collecting the most dogtags in a mission to completing a sequence faster than your friends.

Might & Magic X: Legacy

Everything old is new again

Huge open worlds full of magical dangers and epic adventures weren't invented in the current generation of consoles. New World Computing's Might & Magic series played as crucial a role in the formative years of gamers of a certain age (i.e., old folks like me) as Oblivion or Skyrim have to a younger generation. Ubisoft's recently announced Might & Magic X: Legacy revives the form of my adolescent adventures with its turn-based combat, keyboard-driven riddles, and monsters that don't pull any punches on lower-level heroes. This is a warm blanket of nostalgic comfort for some of us older gamers, but the joys of exploration and player

agency that made people like me fall in love with gaming in the late 1980s are eternal.

Gameplay mechanics like moving along a grid in first-person view may appear archaic, but the core concepts that have enthralled me since childhood remain just as relevant. Might & Magic has taken place in gigantic settings that take hundreds of hours to fully explore ever since the 1986 original, and Limbic promises a similarly huge world. The studio assures us that it is filling that world with the same kinds of adventures that populated the old games, without compromising the series' soul in an attempt to dampen complexity or challenge in pursuit of modern design trends.

Character growth is a perfect example of this philosophy. Creating your four-person party (and perhaps picking up a pair of hirelings to help them out) is just the start. Leveling up grants skill points for spending and increased base stats, but heroes who wish to progress further must track down trainers hidden throughout the world who can develop their abilities to godlike extremes. Even greater prowess awaits within advanced classes, but those powerful professions are locked behind epic quests that aren't available until the hero in question reaches certain requirements.

Dungeon diving has always been intrinsic to Might & Magic, and Might & Magic X aims to recreate the challenge and complexity that made the series special in the first place. Puzzles require everything from pulling levers in the correct sequence to natural-language keyboard input to answer riddles. Battles take place on the same main screen as the rest of the game, so bad guys don't politely wait their turn until you've finished your last encounter. Incautious parties can easily find themselves surrounded and cut down if they do something stupid like charge into an open area full of enemies. On the other hand, drawing foes into a long corridor can let you thin their ranks with ranged attacks as they close the distance.

The series has always taken advantage of its open, nonlinear world to create epic adventures far beyond simply clearing a tomb of restless undead. Limbic says it's following the same approach, though there are none of the sci-fi elements that fans remember, as Might & Magic X takes place in Ubisoft's purely fantasy world of Ashan. Regardless, expect to find hints and keys for puzzles that are located halfway around the world, and questlines that follow your group through large portions of the game. Running off to find the dragon lair that houses the treasure trove you just learned the magical passcode to might not be a great idea, though. The world may be open, but monsters don't scale to your level.

Might & Magic X is full of interactions beyond fighting. Townsfolk have quests to complete and intrigue to unravel, hirelings join your group for a fee, and the expansive world of Ashan contains much hidden treasure. Finding a shop filled with unique goods or a trainer who can teach your fighter legendary swordsmanship can be as thrilling a discovery as a hidden dungeon. Your group's makeup and development plays a role in this as well, with some challenges keyed to the abilities of the party member you assign to interact with them.

If Limbic and Ubisoft follow through on the grand promises they're making about Might & Magic X: Legacy, I look forward to a new generation of gamers experiencing the same sense of wonder and excitement that shaped my growth in the hobby – just not as much as I anticipate reliving those glory days without the restrictions of ancient interfaces, tiny resolutions, and programmer-drawn static 2D art.

» **Adam Biessener**

Check the shield in the background – a subtle nod to New World Computing's Enroth?

Civilization V: Brave New World

Firaxis Games takes global domination to a brave new world

Since Civilization V released back in 2010, gamers have poured innumerable hours into world domination. This July, the second major expansion, Brave New World, brings a full menu of improvements to the title.

As you might recall, Civilization V offers multiple paths to victory. Warlords can roll over opposing empires, scientific superpowers can be first in space, the political bunch can win diplomatically, and trendsetters can sweep the world with their cultural superiority. In an effort to deepen the experience and bring a sense of wonder to the often-routine late game, Firaxis is making some significant changes.

The introduction of tourism changes the way players pursue a cultural win. By bringing blue jeans and rock and roll to the furthest reaches of the world, civilizations can hold sway over their neighbors. Great artists populate museums and opera houses with their works to bolster an empire's standing. The new international trade system helps deliver tourism and religion (introduced in the Gods & Kings expansion) around the globe.

Diplomacy sees an overhaul with a new World Congress, which enables players to propose global policies and, possibly, use peaceful methods to deal with military conflict. An enhanced user interface is available to guide players by pointing out how the world's leaders will react. You aren't going to make militant enemies happy by proposing a standing army tax, but it might just keep them off your back.

To carry the sense of wonder of the early hours through to the end of each campaign, the new archaeologist unit makes "antiquity sites" visible. These landmarks appear where battles were fought and cities were razed. Exploring them adds a "great work" to the civilization and boosts tourism. It's a clever way to create an emergent narrative and remind players of their empire's primitive beginnings..

In addition to its gameplay enhancements, the expansion brings two new scenarios, the American Civil War and Scramble for Africa. The latter has the familiar shape of Africa, but the terrain and resources are randomized for each game. Nine new leaders and civilizations, including fan favorite Shaka of the Zulu, join the fray, bringing the total number to more than 40 (including those available for sale individually and the rulers packaged with the Gods & Kings add-on).

With additional balancing, improved diplomacy AI, and a greatly enhanced late-game experience, Brave New World is set to draw Civilization addicts back in for "just one more turn" all over again. » **Mike Futter**

» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
1-Player Strategy

» **Publisher**
2K Games

» **Developer**
Firaxis Games

» **Release**
July 9

Wasteland 2

Back to the future of mankind

» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
1-Player Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
Inxile Entertainment

» **Developer**
Inxile Entertainment

» **Release**
October

Interplay's post-apocalyptic RPG Wasteland introduced an entire generation of players to non-linear gameplay, and the 25 years since that game's release have done nothing to dim their enthusiasm. Though it lacks the trendy genre, setting, or visual style that today's video game publishers demand in the projects they fund, Inxile Entertainment's Wasteland 2 found crowdfunding success via Kickstarter. The project more than tripled its funding target at nearly $3 million pledged last spring, and Wasteland 2 is starting to take shape as it nears its projected October launch.

Wasteland 2, like the original, is built on two pillars. The deeply realized world is full of secrets to find and NPCs to interact with, and the turn-based tactical combat stretches your mind as you pit your party of fully customized rangers against the mutants, megafauna, and worse that roam the nuclear wasteland of a destroyed America. The old-school overhead view remains constant through exploration, conversation, and combat, though the 3D modeling, real-time shadows, and lighting are welcome concessions to modern gaming.

The gameplay that Inxile recently showed off illustrates the depth that all the moving parts under the hood lend to the game, which is the special sauce that makes Wasteland such a fan favorite. A regular drip of narrative descriptions in the scrolling text log accompanies the rangers as they explore the map in real time. Impatient gamers can ignore them, but the developers hide clues about the world in this text. Attentive players are pointed to alternative routes, and rangers with high perception skills can learn tendencies and vulnerabilities of enemies.

As the fog of war rolls back to reveal enemies, combat doesn't start immediately. Instead, foes have visual perception ranges (noted by a cone if your rangers are observant enough) or can be alerted through sounds like gunfire. Rangers are elite wasteland scouts, and have keen senses and long-range firearms. Cautious players can set up ambushes, initiating combat with one or more of their characters opening fire before the enemies even know they're there. Once the bad guys are tipped off, the game enters turn-based mode and tests your tactical acumen with its deep combat system.

Where XCOM: Enemy Unknown presented an elegant and easy-to-understand battle system with clear options and few stats under the hood to worry about, Wasteland 2 embraces complexity. Each ranger has six stats that affect their capabilities, equipment with its own set of attributes, and a store of points that can be used for a variety of actions each turn. Enemies are similarly outfitted. The outcome of a simple gunshot is determined by range to the target, the firing character's skill, the weapon's stats, the size and speed of the target, and any cover or obstructions along the way. Moving along the hex grid, finding cover, and maneuvering your rangers into high-percentage shots are just the tip of the tactical iceberg.

Interactions with Wasteland 2's world go far beyond combat. Conversations proceed based on keywords the players select, and learning new keywords opens up additional dialogue paths. Manually typing in keywords of your own can lead to secrets as well, like typing in story-critical names from the original game. Because there is little voice work, Inxile can write reams of conditional dialogue so that NPCs respond appropriately to the rangers' gender, skills, actions, and more.

The team is dedicated to recreating the beloved concept of offering multiple solutions to problems from the first game. The simple example is a locked door. You can pick the lock, bash it down, or blow it up with an explosive. If you've been paying attention to the narrative descriptions, you might be clued into the easiest way, like a gate being noted as rickety and ready to fall apart. Inxile hasn't fleshed out further examples, but much of the creative talent from the original is back on board for Wasteland 2, so it's easy to give the developers the benefit of the doubt for now.

What Inxile has shown of Wasteland 2 is a nostalgic gamer's dream brought to life. The developers are saying all the right things about staying true to the concept of player-driven interactions with a richly detailed world. That formula never tarnishes with age, even though the graphics and the interfaces get better every year. The true test lies in building high-quality content that players can dig into over dozens of hours. Inxile appears to be on the right track. » **Adam Biessener**

Using your perception skill on objects in the world gives narrative flavor and can serve up gameplay clues as well

Two prominent early NPCs are named after wealthy Kickstarter backers

Kathy Lawson · Goodbye · Killer tomatoes

Highpool · Rangers · Ranger

Kathy Lawson: Wasn't the deal we made with you, "We give you food, you give us protection?" Well, you're looking pretty goddamn well fed, but we've been up to our tits in killer tomatoes for eight hours and not a ranger in sight!

The Swapper

Wrap your head around this indie puzzler

At PAX East, Finnish developer Facepalm Games situated itself in a small section of the Indie MegaBooth. Despite the unassuming presentation, the game I played shows as much promise as any other title on the show floor. It only takes a few minutes of seeing The Swapper in action to appreciate the possibilities of its core gameplay mechanic.

An astronaut crash-lands on a mysterious planet, and quickly gains abilities that you must use to solve a series of puzzles. By clicking and holding the right mouse button, up to four clones of yourself are created and placed in the environment. These copies move when you move and jump when you jump, which proves helpful for standing on switches and navigating the Metroid-like world map.

Your clones are more important than simple mindless husks, as you can fire a swapper ray at any of them (provided no obstructions stand in the way) and take over their body. Things become tricky when differently colored lights come into the equation, as the swapper ray can't fire through pink or red light. Creating clones won't work in blue light areas, but switches turn the limiting light off.

Puzzles involve more than just standing on switches, which was evident in one area that required me to reach a platform several screens above my character. My jump wouldn't get me that high, and there were no platforms or ladders to help me ascend. After staring at the situation for a few seconds, I tried something that I assumed wouldn't work. Creating a clone high above me, I swapped to him as he began to fall. I quickly created another clone above me, swapped to him, and repeated the process until I was on the ledge. A pile of dead clones laid at the bottom of the room, but my character was safely where he needed to be.

This swap mechanic looks to be as critical to the game as the portal gun is in the Portal series, and just as versatile. Several puzzles seemed impossible when I first encountered them, but some trial and error always got me past them. The best puzzle games make you feel like a genius when you solve a particularly tricky mental challenge, and The Swapper is poised to offer that feeling frequently when it releases on PC later this spring. » **Dan Ryckert**

» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
1-Player Puzzle

» **Publisher**
Facepalm Games

» **Developer**
Facepalm Games

» **Release**
Spring

Transistor

Supergiant introduces its next stunning tale

If you were simply looking at screenshots of Supergiant Games' upcoming Transistor, you'd be forgiven for assuming that it has a passing resemblance to the developer's previous game, Bastion. Upon getting my hands on it, I had similar thoughts when I saw its isometric angle and gorgeous hand-drawn visuals. Within a couple of minutes, however, it became clear that this is an entirely new experience that's every bit as impressive as the studio's first game.

Players assume the role of Red, a famous singer in the city of Cloudbank who has been targeted by a group of assassins for reasons unknown. After being attacked, she wakes to find herself on the other side of the city. Plunged into a nearby dead man is the same sword that the assassins used to attack her. Red pulls it out of the corpse, discovering that the dead man's voice and consciousness are now tied to the sword itself. It speaks to her, but doesn't offer any explanation about why she's become a target. She can't have much of a conversation, since the assassins have somehow taken Red's voice.

Almost immediately after wielding Transistor (the sword), Red is attacked by robotic enemies. She starts with basic attacks, but quickly learns several new abilities. I was confined to strikes at first, but unlocked an evade called Jaunt and a projectile called Spark before my time with the game was done.

Out of the abilities I saw, the most useful (and interesting) by far was Turn. By pressing the right trigger, I was able to pause the action and plan Red's attacks. It's a finite system, and each action and movement fills a bar at the top of the screen. Once it's completely full, you can't queue up any more attacks. With another press of the right trigger, Red jumps into action.

Stabbing enemies in the back does more damage, so I frequently employed a useful strategy made possible by Turn. When a large enemy appeared, I'd pause the action, Jaunt behind it, then queue up numerous attacks. Once the action resumed, Red executed the plan perfectly and took out the enemies before they knew what hit them. This power comes at a cost, however, as your standard abilities become locked until a cooldown period expires.

Transistor looks absolutely beautiful, with detailed and gorgeous designs for the city, enemies, and Red herself. Bastion's vocalist Ashley Barrett is returning for this title, and the soundtrack sounds superb. Supergiant currently has the game slated for early 2014, and this demo showed me that its release can't come soon enough. » **Dan Ryckert**
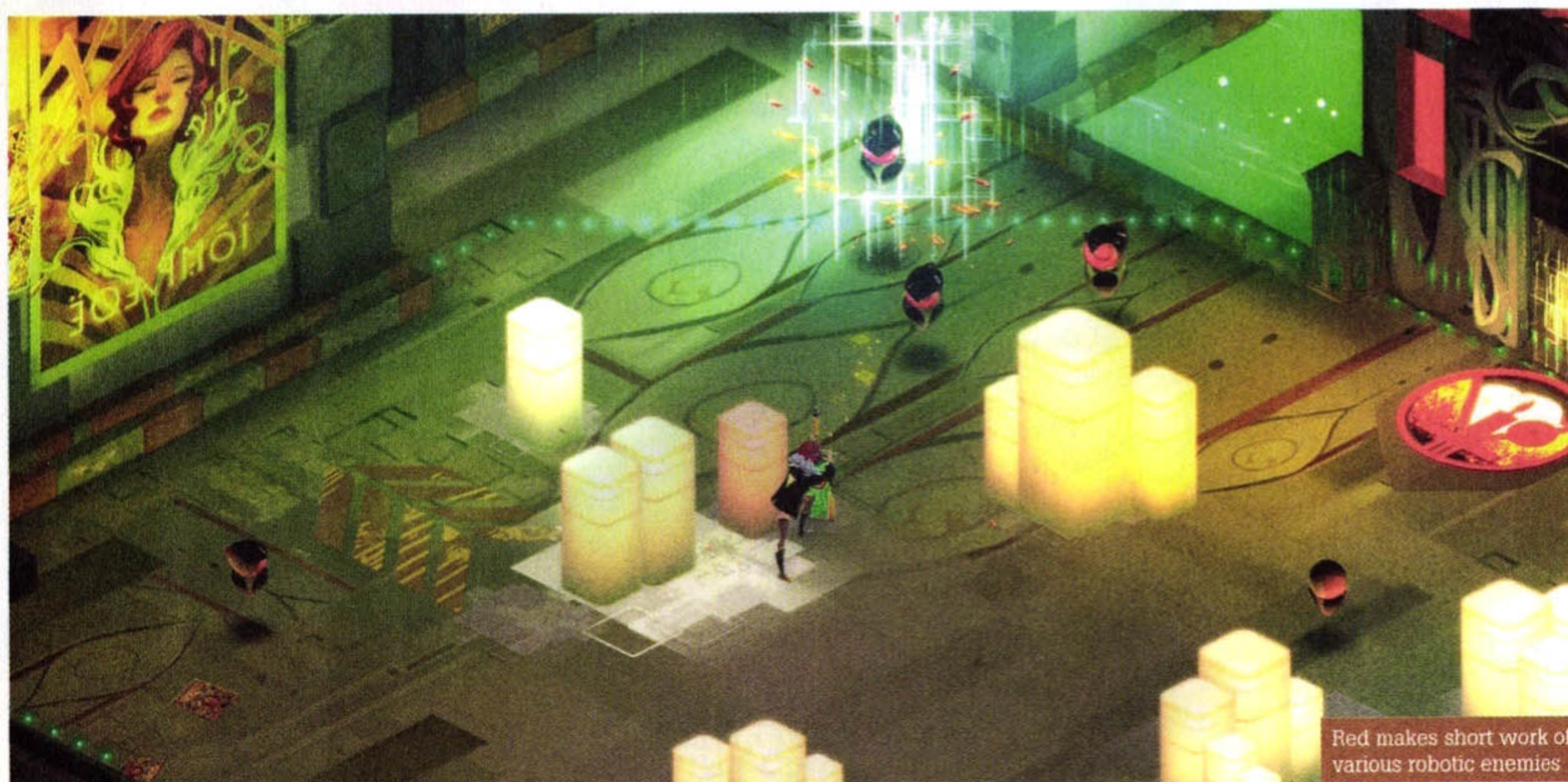
Red makes short work of various robotic enemies
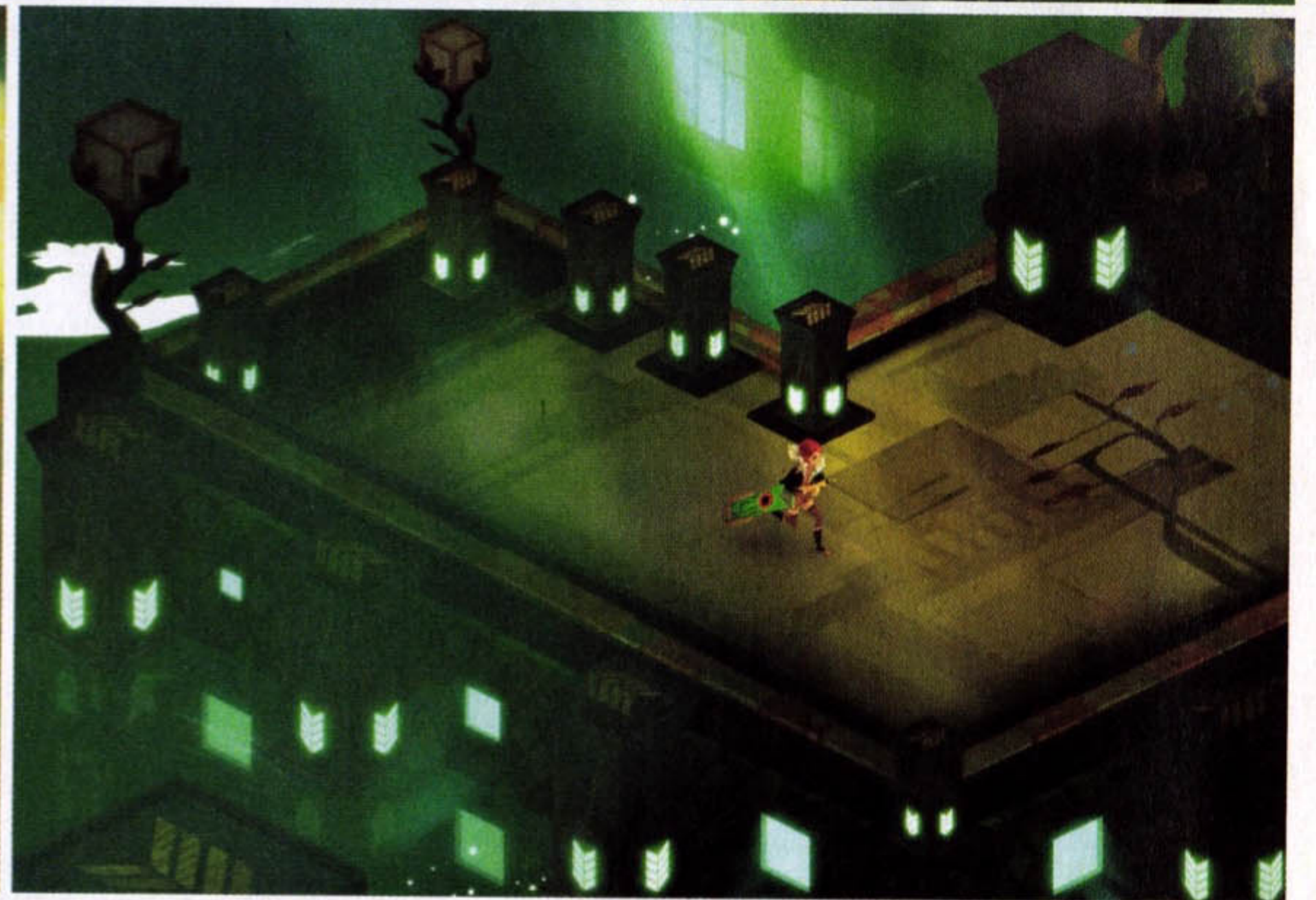
This giant foe can be taken down much easier with the Turn ability

GAME OF THE MONTH

86 Injustice: Gods Among Us

Game Informer faced the tough task of picking a game of the month between three titles that scored 9 of out 10: Guacamelee, Battleblock Theater, and Injustice. Though each is worthy of the accolade, like the Highlander, there can be only one. The buzz around the office tilted the scales in favor of NetherRealm's stellar DC-based fighting game.

THE **SCORING** SYSTEM

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

AWARDS

gameinformer **PLATINUM**	Awarded to games that score between 9.75 and 10
gameinformer **GOLD**	Awarded to games that score between 9 and 9.5
gameinformer **SILVER**	Awarded to games that score between 8.5 and 8.75
gameinformer **GAME OF THE MONTH**	The award for the most outstanding game in the issue
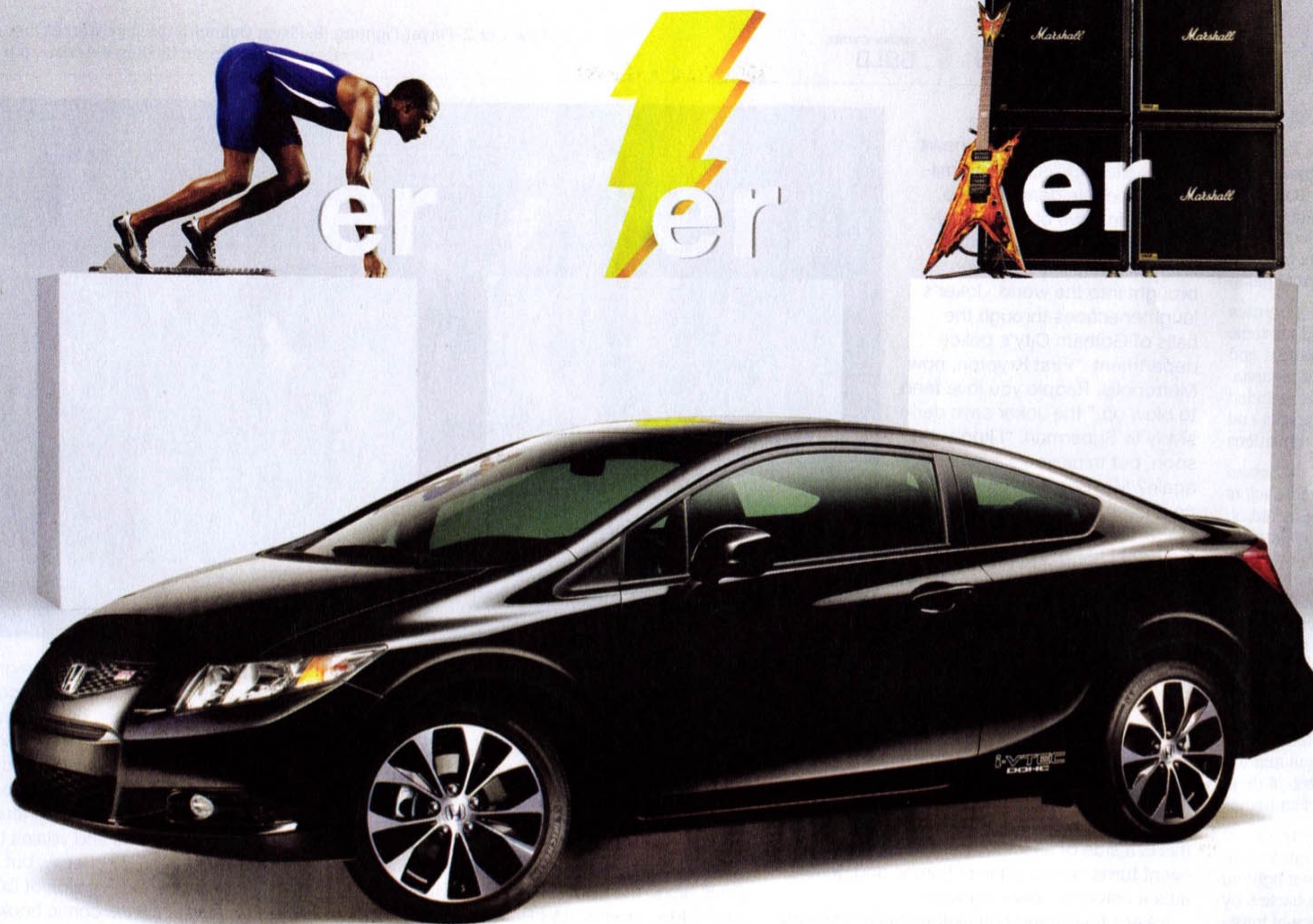
We made the best Civic even better.

Introducing a quicker, flashier, ear blasting-er Honda Civic Si. Quicker, with tighter steering for even higher performance. Flashier, with a new carbon-weave interior and mean aerodynamic-body styling. Ear blasting-er, with USB integration[1] and Pandora® compatibility.[2] And with standard features like *Bluetooth,*®[3] SMS texting[4] and rearview camera, it's basically everything...er.

Injustice: Gods Among Us

Super-powered kombat

9

gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH   gameinformer GOLD

Style 1 or 2-Player Fighting (8-Player Online) **Publisher** Warner Bros. Interactive
Developer NetherRealm Studios **Release** April 16 **ESRB** T

PS3 • 360

» **Concept**
A finely tuned fighter that embraces DC's universe's powerful heroes and villains just as much as it focuses on the best elements from the latest Mortal Kombat game

» **Graphics**
The sights of the DC universe are beautifully captured and destroyed. An exceptional amount of detail is included in the super attacks and environment transitions

» **Sound**
Many famed voice actors reprise their roles, including Kevin Conroy as Batman. While Mark Hamill is nowhere to be found, Richard Epcar's Joker isn't half bad. The banter between characters with shared histories is a highlight

» **Playability**
The combat mechanics fit like a glove for any MK fanatic. Characters are unique and the powers tied to each of them provide a wealth of strategies

» **Entertainment**
NetherRealm once again delivers a great fighting experience backed by an abundance of must-see content

» **Replay Value**
High

The Joker detonates a nuclear device in the heart of Metropolis, leaving millions of people dead and the city in ruin. Two of the casualties are Superman's family: Lois Lane and the son they brought into the world. Joker's laughter echoes through the halls of Gotham City's police department. "First Krypton, now Metropolis. People you love tend to blow up," the Joker says derisively to Superman. "I know it's soon, but think you'll ever love again? Maybe you won't kill your next family." Superman's eyes ignite, turning a hellish red. He raises his hand and plunges it into Joker's chest. As the screen fades to black, The Joker laughs maniacally, but not loud enough to bury the sound of Superman ripping out his heart.

This is how Injustice: Gods Among Us begins. For NetherRealm Studios, the developer behind all of the decapitations and spinal injuries in the long-running Mortal Kombat series, Superman's heart-crushing descent into madness is a routine event. For DC Comics, this is a side of an iconic hero rarely seen. The event turns heroes against heroes and generates a universe-spanning war.

Joker's final stand has NetherRealm's bloody fingerprint all over it, but it isn't indicative of Injustice's overall tone. Outside of this shocking incident, the game plays out like a DC comic book, with little blood and gore. The famed capes and cowls of the DC universe take center stage, and NetherRealm pays homage in the arenas and through extensive comic book-related fan service.

Whether Doomsday is knocking Superman into the core of the planet or Bane is breaking Batman's back, a stratospheric level of violence accompanies almost every fight. The carnage towers over the combat seen in NetherRealm's previous venture in spandex, 2009's Mortal Kombat vs. DC Universe.

Injustice nails the spectacle of a superhero brawl. If Superman punches an opponent with all of his might, that character is rightfully launched into space. NetherRealm treats this gawk-worthy blow as an event, stopping the fight so the player can sit back and view a cinematic shot of planet Earth jettisoning a small speck from its atmosphere.

Most arenas look dramatically different by the match's end; environmental destruction doesn't just come at the hands of the two combatants – the world behind them is often being torn asunder by warring heroes. I didn't catch all of the little touches NetherRealm gave the backdrops until I watched other people play the game. Being a spectator is just as rewarding as being in the ring.

The combat mechanics follow NetherRealm's well-worn blueprint. If you aren't familiar with DC's characters, you'd probably think it was another Mortal Kombat game. In a way, it is. The combatants move the exact same way as they do in Mortal Kombat, and players access their superpowers by tapping two directions followed by a button press. Sweeps, jump kicks, the ability to knock opponents into hidden arenas, and Batman saying "Get down here" when shooting his grappling hook all bring back memories of MK games. Regardless of the familiarity, the combat is frantic, fun, and deep. The super-powered fury each character unleashes gives it flavor.

Environmental interaction generates a surprising amount of strategy for the different character classes. Shazam can easily lift a missile and throw it across the arena. Nightwing doesn't possess that kind of strength, but he can perform a flip off of the missile, potentially catching a foe off guard. These little touches are the difference between feeling like a god-like character or an ordinary person in tights.

While most of the combat relies on light, medium, and hard attacks, the designated "power" button gives each character a unique ability. These powers are game-changers that, depending on the character, can create more devastating combos or generate much-needed defense.

The wager system is the only combat element that didn't click for me. Giving the player health back by simply sacrificing meter energy is a cheap way to prolong a fight. AI foes annoyingly use it right before a final blow can be dealt.

NetherRealm always includes a wealth of content in each of its games, and Injustice is no different, offering a variety of modes each consisting of unique challenges and rewards. Story mode serves as a great introduction to Injustice's crazed combat. The opening moment shared by Superman and Joker made me think the plot would be as cerebral and dark as a David S. Goyer and Christopher Nolan Batman treatment, but most of the events that happen after it are excuses to get heroes and villains to fight. The reasons are pretty cheesy, but it plays out like an ultraviolent version of DC's famed *Crisis on Infinite Earths* comic book series. I enjoyed the bevy of comic references, and found some of the banter between specific characters entertaining.

S.T.A.R. Labs mode hooked me the most. This is where NetherRealm has the most fun with all of the heroes and villains. For every regular versus battle, you have unique opportunities to play as Catwoman's cat, Isis; to see if Flash can beat Superman in a race around the planet 200 times; and to smash through asteroids in a side-scrolling shooter sequence with Shazam. The difficulty tied to many of these challenges is brutal. I'm also not a fan of all the challenges for each character being lumped together.

Every match fought generates experience and the chance to rank up and unlock new hero images, icons, and banners for an online profile. Online multiplayer is handled exceptionally well. The daily challenges are fantastic, and the ability to create personal rooms can keep a group of friends together. I ran into a bit of lag in several matches, but the game was quick to recognize the problem and terminated the bouts.

NetherRealm clearly had a blast creating Injustice. The team's appreciation of the DC universe blends nicely with their well-worn Mortal Kombat formula to create an experience that is a success on both fighting and comic book levels. » **Andrew Reiner**

Dead Island Riptide

Zombie-killing bliss with some rough edges

Style 1-Player Action (4-Player Online) **Publisher** Deep Silver **Developer** Techland **Release** September 23 **ESRB** M

Some of this generation's most beloved open-world games are riddled with bugs. Even the truest fans of Skyrim, Fallout: New Vegas, and Assassin's Creed III must concede their lack of polish. Deep Silver's 2011 hit, Dead Island, also falls into this camp. The sequel, Dead Island Riptide, suffers the same affliction. The changes to its zombie-slaying formula improve the action, but this follow-up also comes with more issues than the original.

For better and worse, Riptide plays almost exactly like its flawed-but-fun predecessor. The melee-centric gameplay is still weighty and satisfying. Landing deliberate blows on a zombie's head or limbs feels great, especially when you break an arm or lop off a head. Dead Island's undead are just threatening enough to keep you on your toes without ever becoming too frustrating. I love watching damage points tick away above enemies' heads as I dismantle them. Leveling up and progressing through each character's skill trees is addicting. Teaming up with three friends makes slaughtering the hordes of shambling dead even better. No matter how seasoned your teammates are, all players see enemies

scaled to their level, removing the headache from matchmaking.

After Riptide was announced, some confusion spread over whether the game was a true follow-up or an expansion. Riptide is indeed its own standalone sequel to the original Dead Island. The survivors of the Banoi Island incident end up on another island in the same archipelago riddled with zombies. The story is still crudely delivered through in-engine cinematics that make the bottom-barrel horror films on Netflix look like works of genius. Thankfully, Riptide's narrative mostly stays out of your way, allowing you to focus on the joy of slaying zombies.

Between the multiple characters and bountiful side quests, Riptide packs hours of entertainment. New elements make battling the resurrected dead more intense. Boating through a flooded jungle while your teammates beat back waterlogged zombies is thrilling. The new hand-to-hand specialist character is the most enjoyable of the bunch, with punishing claws and a sprinting kick that sends zombies flying. Defense scenarios are an engaging change from the series' bread-and-butter fetch quests, requiring you to place barricades or man turrets as zombies rush the fortifications.

Despite the additions, Riptide suffers from the same bugs and blemishes as the first game – and then some. Enemy behavior is erratic, but not in a purposefully scary way. Zombies spend minutes tearing at a barricade, only to wander away the moment it falls. Foes phase through obstacles, glide up walls, and land hits from improbable distances. The mini-map is geographically

barren, and objective pathways flicker on and off, requiring you to frequently pull up the full map. Even worse, your treasured and customized weapons can inexplicably disappear from your inventory – a rare but frustrating problem.

Riptide's framerate is worse than its predecessor. Things slow to a crawl when the action heats up, especially after tossing an explosive near a large group of zombies. One strange bug occurred when an online teammate left the game, sucking the remaining three players into a choppy vortex of looping deaths that only stopped after resetting. These issues may sound insurmountable, but the game's highs still compensate for most of the embarrassing lows.

Riptide's flaws are many, but they couldn't hold me back from having a blast. Few games nail the visceral feel of melee combat and co-op fun like Dead Island. At its worst, an annoying hiccup breaks the immersion of the grizzly trek through a zombie-infested paradise. At its best, Riptide hits the same high notes as the original. » **Tim Turi**

8

PS3 • 360 • PC

» Concept
Follow up 2011's sleeper hit with a sequel that adds a new character and campaign without fixing the original's issues

» Graphics
Varies between ugly and gorgeous depending on how close you are to a given texture or character model

» Sound
The '80s horror flick-style synth tracks are perfect. Zombies' distorted bellows sound appropriately unnerving

» Playability
Combat feels natural and is a lot of fun, but the wonky map, enemy AI, and framerate issues sully the experience

» Entertainment
The new character is an empowering beast, but the overall lack of polish holds it back
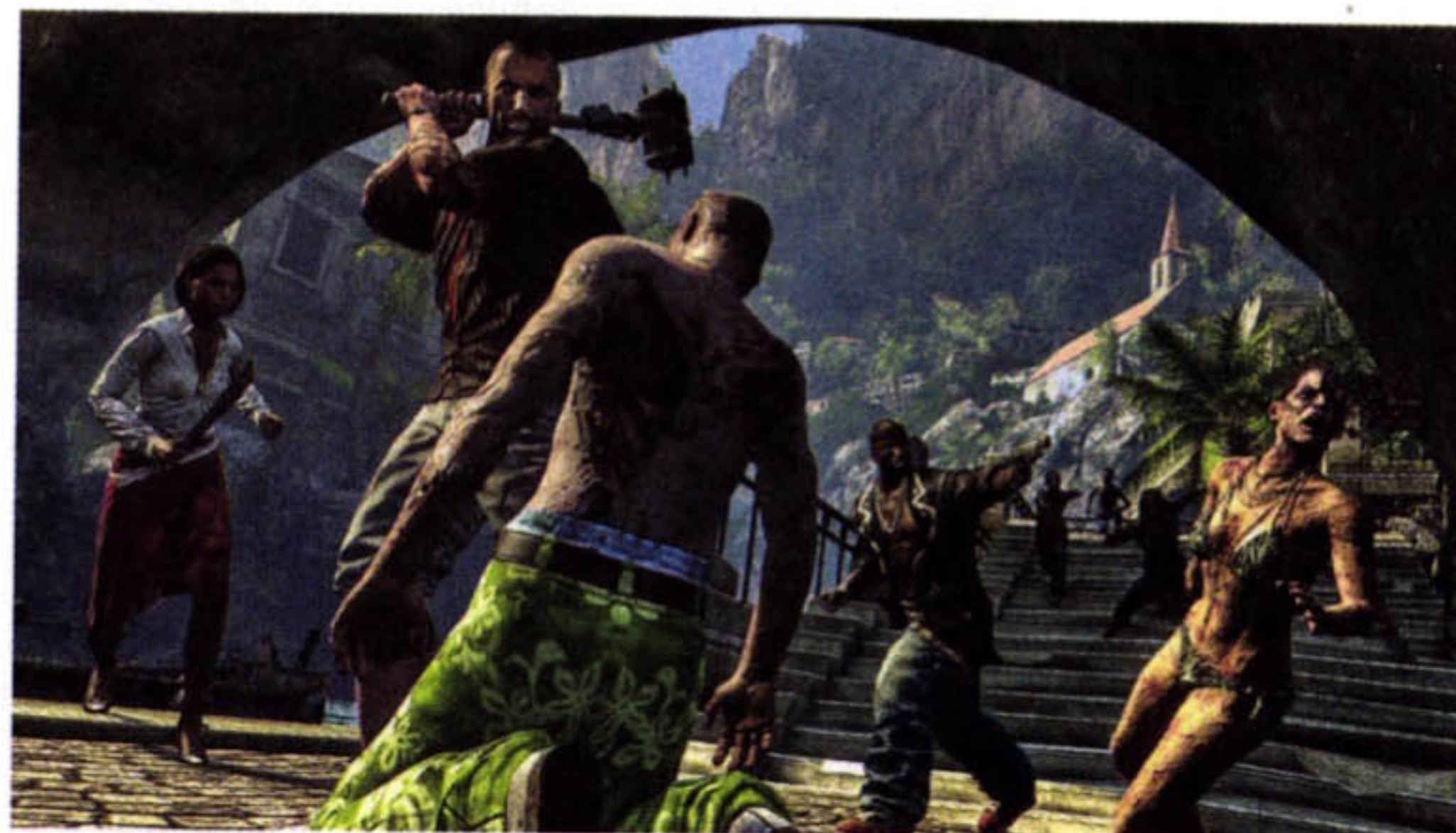
» Replay Value
Moderately High

The Edge
I found distracting bugs in all the versions of the game, but playing Riptide on our high-end gaming PC results in a smoother framerate and improved visuals.

Importing Your Survivor

Players can import characters from the first Dead Island – whether you beat the game with them or not – as long it's on the same profile. These characters transfer over with nothing but their previous skills and level. This is great for dedicated players who maxed out their Dead Island characters, and there are even a few new skills to learn. If you're starting fresh in Riptide or your previous character is fairly low-level, you can start a new character with 15 skill points free to allocate how you see fit.

Guacamelee

Drinkbox returns with high-flying fun

9

PS3 • Vita

» **Concept**
Blend the Metroid formula with traditional Mexican culture and folklore

» **Graphics**
Striking art and animation from the studio that brought you the Tales from Space series

» **Sound**
The upbeat mariachi music instantly lifts your spirits

» **Playability**
The platforming and combat controls are equally tight

» **Entertainment**
With a lighthearted tone, surprising depth, and an intriguing world, Guacamelee is easy to love

» **Replay Value**
Moderately High

gameinformer GOLD

Style 1 or 2-Player Action **Publisher** Drinkbox Studios **Developer** Drinkbox Studios **Release** April 9 **ESRB** E10+

When Drinkbox Studios decides on a theme, it goes all the way. First showcased with kooky '50s sci-fi in its Tales from Space games (About a Blob, Mutant Blobs Attack), now the team has turned its sights toward traditional Mexican culture.

Players control an average guy named Juan who is sent to the Land of the Dead by evil charro skeleton Carlos Calaca after he tries to rescue childhood sweetheart "El Presidente's Daughter." Juan becomes a powerful luchador who battles chupacabras and Day of the Dead-inspired skeletons – all while accompanied by catchy mariachi tunes. Everything is brought to life with a colorful, cartoony art style and fluid animation.

Guacamelee is a 2D Metroid-style game through and through. A detailed map helps you keep track of where you're going and various secret areas. Color-coded blocks wall off special items like treasure chests or heart pieces, restricting access until you gain specific powers. Throughout most of the game, you receive new powers from "Choozo" statues (one of Guacamelee's numerous gaming and pop culture nods) that expand both Juan's platforming and combat skills.

A deceptively deep combat system is what distinguishes Guacamelee from its exploration/adventure predecessors. Juan's ever-growing arsenal of melee combos, air juggles, ground pounds, grabs, throws, and wrestling slams gives players loads of options in battle. It starts out with basic attacks, but gradually trains you to be a master luchador who can easily dish out satisfying 80-hit combos. A variety of super moves – like a flaming uppercut or powerful headbutt – are highly effective and easy to perform. Since they're tied to a recharging

stamina meter instead of ammo, I used them constantly. Ingenious use of a color-coded enemy shield system encourages you to keep every super move in the mix instead of relying on a few favorites.

Platforming is simple in the beginning, but later sections reach a level of challenge reminiscent of Super Meat Boy. Plenty of wall jumping and tricky triple jumps litter the stages, but the toughest business crops up when you gain the power to swap between the world of life and death at the touch of a button. This makes platforms and walls phase in and out in deviously crafted ways. At several points, I could picture what I needed to do, but it took many tries to get my fingers to perform the proper complex series of button presses. Don't let the difficulty deter you; the occasionally frustrating platforming sequences are nothing that some practice can't overcome. Headaches are eased greatly by the fact that you're instantly teleported out of a death pit to the last platform you were on with no health penalty, and the challenges are tweaked regularly so you're always doing something fresh. The sense of accomplishment upon completing some of the later setups is tremendous.

Boss battles are plentiful and entertaining. Characters like a flame-headed cowboy or a jaguar man show up and harass you long before you get to fight them, offering an insight into who they are and building up a traditional wrestling feud (sweet versus posters flash onscreen before every battle). These showdowns feel like they're from the glory days of the 8- and 16-bit platformer era. Most bosses beat you

down out of the gate, but once you observe their patterns, you learn how to chip away at their health and eventually experience the thrill of victory.

Drop-in, drop-out local co-op play is supported throughout the entire game (the second player controls lady luchador Tostada), though I preferred going solo for the most part. When one player dies, they turn into the standard New Super Mario Bros. bubble after a brief respawn period. A second skilled player is great for extra firepower in combat, but the challenging platforming segments are only muddied. Battling for camera control and adding another failure condition in the already nasty jumping sequences is best avoided. Co-op isn't the best way to play, but giving players the option to team up is a nice touch.

Even with its platforming frustrations, Guacamelee is an excellent addition to the genre, retaining important classic elements and introducing several fresh additions. The main campaign took me around seven hours (with a decent amount of secret-searching). The pacing is just right, sending you from one adventure to the next without any bloated, boring spots. If you've got a PS3 or Vita, go suplex this into your system now. » **Bryan Vore**

Crossplay

Anyone who purchases Guacamelee receives both the PlayStation 3 and Vita versions. The two editions are practically identical (Vitas can't co-op with other Vitas, and you have to swipe the screen to transform into a chicken), and the cross save functionality works great. It's awesome to play the game on your TV and bring it with you on the same save.

Far Cry 3: Blood Dragon

Ubisoft loves the '80s

Style 1-Player Shooter **Publisher** Ubisoft **Developer** Ubisoft Montreal **Release** May 1 **ESRB** M

8.5

PS3 • 360 • PC

Creating compelling single-player downloadable content has proven to be a tricky endeavor for game publishers. Instead of resorting to convenient crutches like random side stories and new costumes, Ubisoft Montreal thought outside the box for Far Cry 3. Blood Dragon leverages the high technology of its predecessor to channel the spirit of the era when Arnold Schwarzenegger dominated box offices.

Blood Dragon pays homage to the action films, cartoons, and games of the '80s and '90s with its paper-thin plot, explosive action, and unapologetically sophomoric humor. From the names of weapons to the 8-bit cutscenes, each subtle flourish demonstrates an admiration for a time when entertainment products weren't overly concerned with political correctness or insightful thematic messages. This game starts and ends with robot armies, cheesy dialogue, and lasers.

Blood Dragon's neon veneer and synth-heavy soundtrack may call to mind B action movies, but this retro aesthetic is slapped on top of the state-of-the-art Far Cry 3 engine. The tight gunplay, open-world exploration, animal hunting, and wealth of side activities all return with slight modifications to fit the totally radical motif.

Only a handful of story missions chronicle Sgt. Rex Power Colt's revenge tale (including a hilarious and explosive finale), so players spend the majority of the time capturing garrisons, completing rote side missions, and finding collectibles. The repetition of these activities is tedious to the point where even Rex utters, "Yep, another one. What the f--- am I doing?" Unfortunately, these quests are necessary evils if you want to unleash the fury of the amazing end-game weapons.

As you check these tiresome tasks off your list, you get closer to attaining a few weapons destined for the first-person shooter hall of fame. Explosive sniper rifle rounds can take out a jeep and all nearby soldiers in one shot. The quadruple-barrel shotgun can even make short work of the extremely dangerous blood dragons. The best weapon of all, however, is the Killstar, a *Krull*-like glaive that allows Rex to shoot a devastating laser beam from his hand.

Like many of the '80s action flicks it mimics, Far Cry 3: Blood Dragon has the potential to alienate people with its crass sense of humor, repetitive one-liners, and uninspired missions. But if you long for an era when smart-mouthed badasses were more concerned with making things go boom than catering to political correctness, Rex Power Colt is your man and Blood Dragon is your game. » **Matt Bertz**

» **Concept**
Borrow the basic elements of Far Cry 3 to create a standalone shooter themed around '80s action films

» **Graphics**
From laser beams and neon skies to cyber heroes and Star Wars-style box art, the visuals scream nostalgia

» **Sound**
Power Glove's synth-driven soundtrack fits the aesthetic perfectly

» **Playability**
Far Cry 3's stellar controls drive this unique offshoot

» **Entertainment**
Repetitive side missions and base captures slow the momentum of the otherwise hilarious send-up to the age of *Robocop* and *Krull*

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

Monster Hunter 3 Ultimate

The hunt continues on familiar turf

Style 1-Player Action/RPG (4-Player Online) **Publisher** Capcom **Developer** Capcom **Release** March 19 **ESRB** T

8.75

Wii U • 3DS

Monster Hunter 3 Ultimate is largely inaccessible without the helping hand of an online guide, tutorial, or patient veteran. It's a tough nut to crack, but gamers who do will discover an addictive, challenging, and ultimately rewarding adventure.

At first glance, Monster Hunter 3 Ultimate could be dismissed as a simple expansion to 2010's Monster Hunter Tri on the Wii. That would be a mistake. It has a bevy of new content – quests, items, areas, and monsters – adding hundreds of hours of content. Monster Hunter veterans with keen eyes will recognize a lot has simply been borrowed from previous iterations, and the majority of the new content might take dozens of hours to get to, but it expands the series considerably.

The short list of ramped-up features from Tri are the inclusion of previously omitted weapon types like the dual blades, an additional AI-controlled comrade, and three all new G-Ranks which add a higher level of difficulty (and the spoils to match). New monsters such as the Brachydios and various sub-species make their debut, and several existing monsters have gained additional attacks and patterns at higher mission ranks. The customizable second screen improves the interface immensely, and puts previously buried commands just a tap away.

Co-op is the lifeblood of the Monster Hunter series. Assuming different roles in combat with an experienced group to take down a seemingly insurmountable foe is exhilarating. As fun as co-op is, this entry does little to improve the online functionality beyond what was established in previous efforts. Stability is still solely dependent upon the host's connection; if they leave the game for any reason, the entire party is disbanded and booted back to the game's main menu.

In order to fully experience and enjoy Monster Hunter, there is a considerable amount of commitment required. However, old vets and fair-weather fans alike will find an enriched experience with a hefty amount of new content. Coupled with the online capabilities and graphics overhaul, this is well deserving of the title "ultimate." » **Jason Oestreicher**

» **Concept**
Track down and carve up badass monsters, make gear out of their bits

» **Graphics**
The jump to HD is impressive at a glance, but close inspection reveals some blurry textures

» **Sound**
The driving score instills urgency during major fights

» **Playability**
Cross-play, saving between the Wii U and 3DS, and handy second screen shortcuts increase versatility. There is still a major learning curve for newcomers

» **Entertainment**
The grind borders on tedium, but crafting new gear and taking down massive monsters is hugely satisfying

» **Replay Value**
High

The Handheld Difference 8.5

The 3DS version is identical to the Wii U in terms of content, but it takes a hit in execution. The process for getting online is more of a hassle on the 3DS, and the visuals aren't as crisp. Even worse, if you're playing on the 3DS XL, the fonts are barely readable due to the upscaling. No voice chat is another downside to this version.

Dragon's Dogma: Dark Arisen

Gransys gains a deadly new playground

8.5

gameinformer
SILVER

PS3 • 360

Style 1-Player Role-Playing
Publisher Capcom **Developer** Capcom
Release April 23 **ESRB** M

» Concept
Re-release the action/RPG with a host of extras including additional endgame content

» Graphics
Bitterblack Isle has its own unique look, but the rest of Gransys is varied and full of surprises

» Sound
The pawns are still chatty, though you now have the option of hearing their original Japanese voices

» Playability
Character building is deep and rewarding, and the enhancements are good for new and veteran players

» Entertainment
Dark Arisen skillfully treads the line between so-called Western and JRPGs, carving out its own identity in the process

» Replay Value
Moderately high

In this age of scaling difficulty and dumbed-down gameplay, I appreciate Dragon's Dogma for its uncompromising vision. Capcom created an action/RPG where you could easily wander into places you didn't belong, and you would die. When the sun came down, tougher monsters awoke and if you weren't prepared, you would die. Also, you could scale giants and battle them while scurrying across their bodies. Or you could throw your allies off cliffs. While Dragon's Dogma wasn't for everyone, it provided a great time for people willing to meet it halfway. Capcom isn't capitulating with Dragon's Dogma: Dark Arisen, but the expansion provides a good launching-off spot for new players and additional adventuring opportunities for veterans.

Bitterblack Isle is Dark Arisen's main draw, a cursed island thankfully off the shores of Gransys proper. While you could conceivably drag a fresh new face to its depths, you're going to want to bring a leveled character if you hope to survive. Capcom recommends your hero to be at least 50, and after facing off against some of the new enemies, I'm inclined to agree. My favorites include the Gore Cyclops, a towering beast protected in spiky armor – a twist that requires players to mix up their typical scale-the-baddies approach to combat – and an even larger variant of the Beholder-like Evil Eye. Death pops up from time to time, too, putting unsuspecting adventurers to sleep and killing nappers with a single scythe swipe. I appreciated how cool his swirling, foglike robes looked, but learned to give him a wide berth.

Dragon's Dogma took its share of lumps for the way it handled fast travel, and Dark Arisen makes concessions in that department. There are now three fixed locations that players can warp to (compared with the one that players used the majority of the time in the vanilla release), which should alleviate some of those complaints. I enjoyed hoofing it across Gransys, and I felt that I was getting to know the place instead of just warping via a series of menus. If adding a few portals is enough to get more people into the game, however, I'm all for it.

Some quests that originate from Bitterblack Isle populate Gransys with new creature types, but most of the new content is corralled offshore. For instance, I took a mission that sent me back to Soulflayer Canyon, which was home to a new not-so-friendly face.

Dark Arisen is a great expansion for a game that was already loaded with content. If you've beaten the game and moved on, there's enough new stuff to explore that it warrants another playthrough. And for those who are looking for a quirky RPG with epic moments (and pig-throwing hijinks), here it is in one neat bundle. **» Jeff Cork**

Army of Two: The Devil's Cartel

Flawed and fun co-op mayhem

6.5

PS3 • 360

Style 1 or 2-Player Shooter (2-Player Online)
Publisher Electronic Arts **Developer** EA Montreal
Release March 26 **ESRB** M

» Concept
Introduce new characters, a new engine, and the new Overkill mode to the co-op shooter

» Graphics
Frostbite 2 doesn't do much to improve the experience

» Sound
Despite the attempt at a more mature tone, there's still plenty of bro speak

» Playability
Shootouts are fast-paced and satisfying. Devil's Cartel doesn't take any real risks

» Entertainment
Devil's Cartel explores co-op possibilities less than its predecessors, but it doesn't suffer for it

» Replay Value
Moderate

When we featured Army of Two: The Devil's Cartel on the cover of our magazine last year, it was pitched as a new direction for the series. Visceral Games would be handling the creation of the game with a new Montreal-based studio. New protagonists would take center stage, and they'd be more serious than the air-guitar-playing, fist-bumping Salem and Rios. To go along with the more mature tone for the characters, the game would tackle the deadly serious Mexican drug cartel situation in a respectful manner. Playing through The Devil's Cartel, I wondered if it was the same game that we had featured.

Alpha and Bravo may not play air guitar, but they still fist bump and make jokes about getting "bullet cancer." They're not at the level of silliness as Salem and Rios, but they aren't exactly somber, ultra-professional mercenaries. As for the cartel-based storyline, don't go into this game expecting a narrative that's any deeper than any other generic action game on the market. And Visceral? Outside of two brief mentions buried in the credits, there's no indication that the studio known for Dead Space touched this game.

Once you're past the fact that the finished game isn't quite what was promised, The Devil's Cartel delivers some silly thrills. Alpha and Bravo build a rage meter as they destroy enemies and the environment around them, and they can unleash the ridiculous Overkill mode once it's full. In this state, you're granted invulnerability, infinite ammo, and you never have to reload.

Outside of the awesome Overkill sequences, not much separates The Devil's Cartel from other co-op shooters. A system is in place that rewards you for flanking or distracting enemies, but it's entirely possible to blast through the game without ever thinking of team tactics.

Glitches reared their head occasionally, but rarely required a restart. One prevented custom masks and outfits to load, so our characters were nothing more than floating heads, arms, and feet. Others caused line-of-sight issues and floating environmental objects. At one point, after a thorough search of the environment yielded no further enemies, my co-op partner and I had to restart the whole fight because the game didn't think we had cleared the area.

Army of Two: The Devil's Cartel is a tricky game to recommend. On one hand, the lack of polish and the glitches deserve a less-than-stellar score. On the other hand, I can't deny that my co-op partner and I were laughing and enjoying ourselves for the large majority of the campaign. As a mindless co-op shooter, it delivers. If you're looking to grab a friend and have some fun while slaughtering hundreds of drug runners, you won't be disappointed with The Devil's Cartel. **» Dan Ryckert**
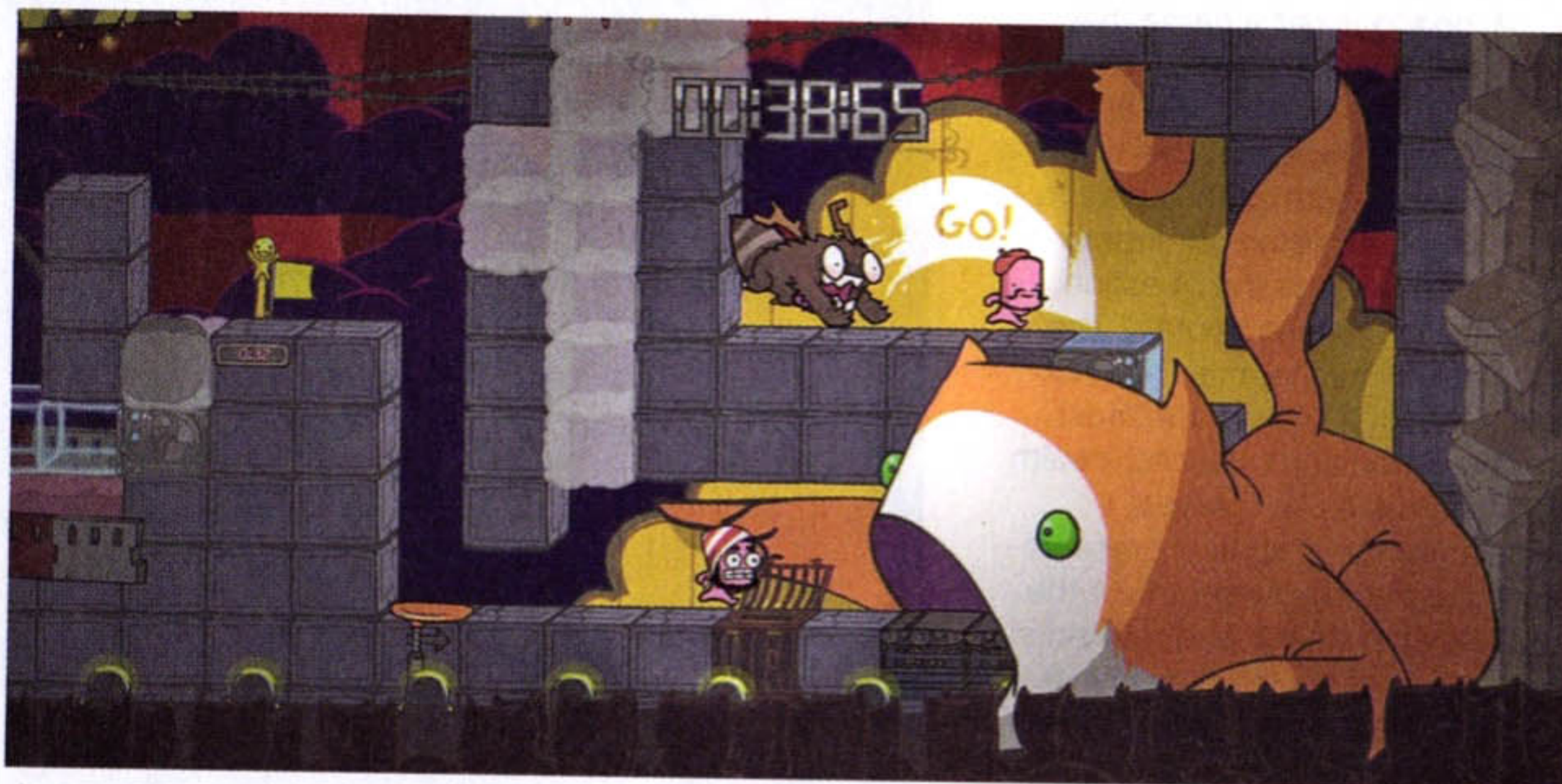
BattleBlock Theater

Platforming at its best

The makers of Castle Crashers have not been idle in the seemingly interminable five-year period since their last release. BattleBlock Theater takes the simplest of gaming conceits and polishes it to near perfection. The platforming campaign by itself is as robust as a full-fledged Super Mario game in scope and size. Those same levels are redesigned for play with two partners, doubling the fun and replay. Stack on an impressive suite of silly (but skill-based) arena games, and The Behemoth's new project is easily its most ambitious. Gamers are in for one of the most challenging and engaging entries in the genre since Super Meat Boy.

The story of a shipwrecked group of friends, a theater run by voyeuristic cats, and a magic evil hat is ludicrous. That lunacy is communicated through an ever-present narrator/announcer, who pops off poop jokes and puns like they're going out of style. The humor is in keeping with The Behemoth's established tone, and I found myself chuckling and groaning in equal measure. Thankfully, players who get fed up with the ridiculous commentary can adjust his interruptions in the options menu, up to and including silence.

The theater's feline caretakers are fascinated by watching their prisoners navigate deathtrap-packed mazes, and your unfortunate shipwreck survivor must jump and die for their pleasure. I wondered about the name of the game until I played it for the first time; gameplay focuses on learning the traits connected to a wide array of different blocks that make up the game world, and players use those traits to navigate the many challenges. The game moves at a desperate clip while still forcing players to consider the best path to proceed. Most puzzles are built to be solved by trying and dying, but a generous checkpoint system gets you back into the action right where you left off. As a result, there's no fear of trying for that hard-to-reach gem or yarn ball.

Those two currencies are spent to expand your collection of character heads and weapons – dozens of options are available, assuring ample content for collectors to enjoy. The game even includes a trading post, in which players can exchange heads and other items during multiplayer in classic baseball card trades.

The solo campaign shines, and is especially challenging in the latter half. Players must complete precise moves with little forgiveness, which may be too frustrating for less-experienced players. Those same levels are redesigned for the two-player cooperative campaign – my favorite feature of the game. The cooperative levels demand players work together to progress, bouncing and flinging each other to otherwise impossible-to-reach ledges. The pacing here is immaculate, keeping both players engaged with the puzzle solving and progression. Few games I've played offer such a true interpretation of cooperative play – these are not levels built for two solo players to run through side by side. Instead, each stage makes you think as a team, and win or lose through your partnership.

If you've had enough of platforming and puzzling, the arena modes offer more action-focused enjoyment. Playable by four players on- or offline, this collection of levels and game modes is wacky, varied, and initially confusing. Characters punch and shoot at each other at frantic speeds, stealing souls, painting blocks, and scoring baskets, depending on the game mode. While chaotic and hard to follow, labeling these battles as button mashers would be a mistake. Time spent in each game reveals twitch skills and smart strategies that can lead to victory, and fans of arena brawlers should find a lot to love. These same modes can even be confronted cooperatively as a team of four against AI bots, though it's not as enjoyable as the real thing.

On top of all this, The Behemoth includes an excellent level editor that takes advantage of the simple design premise. Because everything is built on uniform square blocks, a new player can easily hop in and create new stages to entertain the world. The game is new, and so it's impossible to evaluate these community features at this phase, but a smart system of organization is in place to assure that the best content rises to the top over time. I predict a long life of new content for players to return and discover as the months pass.

Don't be fooled by BattleBlock Theater's downloadable format and low $15 price tag; this is a massive game filled with opportunities for exploration, collection, and fun. Solo players can look forward to a great campaign that is only improved with a friend at your side. If no buddies are available, a smart matchmaking system assures you can explore even the story mode with an appropriate online partner. The low-brow humor, unflinching speed, and high late-game challenge may not be for everyone, but longtime platforming fanatics are in for a big treat. » **Matt Miller**
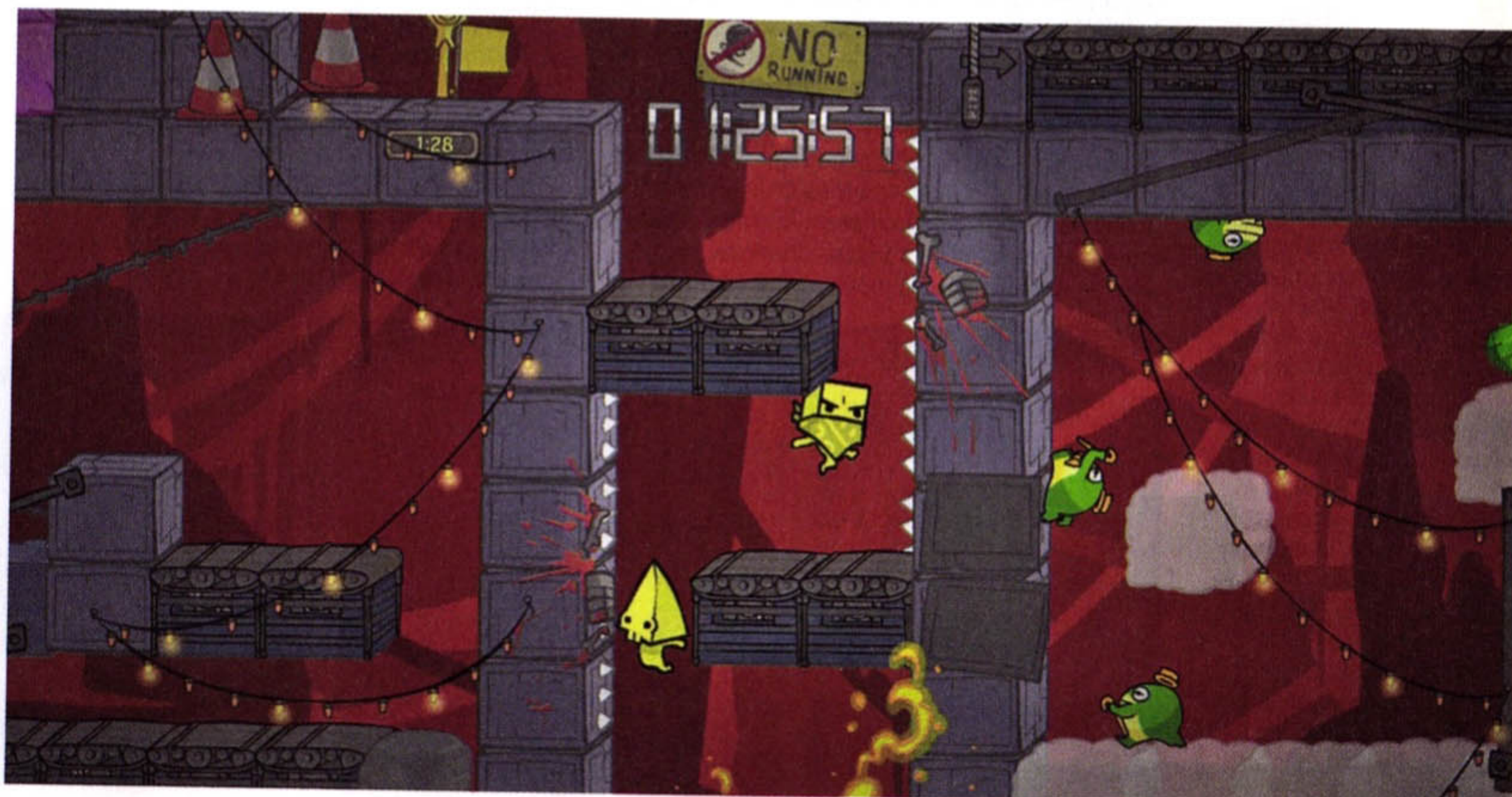
Monaco

Embrace the heist fantasy

8.75

360 • PC

» **Concept**
Complete one classic heist after another as a cooperative team of criminals

» **Graphics**
Blocky pixel graphics are accompanied by a sophisticated lighting system that reveals line of sight

» **Sound**
An adaptive piano soundtrack from Austin Wintory keeps the tension high

» **Playability**
Simple controls, but learning how all the game's systems interact takes time

» **Entertainment**
Careful stealth punctuated by frantic action is especially fun when played with a group

» **Replay Value**
Moderately High

Monaco is not a game that sells itself well upon first glance. Blocky pixel art and the darkened blueprint of a building greet new players as they enter a level, and the seemingly simplistic gameplay begs the question, "What's all the fuss about?" The more you play, the more Monaco reveals itself as one of the most sophisticated and nuanced stealth games around. As I played, I warmed to the graphical presentation, grasped the strengths of the multiple characters, and reveled in the fantasy of having every heist movie I've ever seen pulled together into one place.

Played from a top-down perspective, Monaco starts out with a gameplay style reminiscent of Pac-Man. Shining gold diamonds are scattered around the level, and sending your character scampering about to pick them up is easy. Outrunning the guards, who trundle after you in pursuit, is just as simple. The floors of each building are darkened until you turn to enter them. At that point, a cone of light reveals what your character can see, blocking off views around corners or darkened underground passageways. Levels pass quickly as you clean them out and continue on your merry way. Decrypting the art style can be tricky early on, but the more you play, the more you grasp what individual objects look like on screen.

The complexity is layered on gradually. New security systems block your way. Pick-up items add a strategic advantage, from sleep crossbows to dynamite. Guards carry heavier firepower. Medical kits become rarer. Objectives lay many floors higher in a building. As the levels progress, cleaning out a stage becomes the real challenge. Completing a level is rarely a great feat, but are you really the kind of criminal willing to settle for a smaller score? Moreover, looting everything is the only way to unlock a second, harder series of levels; during these new sections, a different narrator retells the story with some dramatic changes, and we see the events in a new way. By the end,

individual levels are devilishly challenging, filled with twitchy trigger-fingered enemies and constant electronic surveillance. Only the canniest burglars will make it out alive.

Gameplay alternates minute-to-minute between delicate sneaking opportunities and inevitable moments of getting caught. Unlike many stealth games, raised alarms don't equal a game over. In fact, sometimes it can be the best strategy to cause a loud distraction. While the forgetful AI guards aren't exactly realistic as they leave off pursuit and return to their posts, players are rewarded by trying multiple strategies to find out what works best.

Success is dependent on knowing the various characters and their unique talents. Do you need the Cleaner to knock out unsuspecting foes? Or does the Hacker manipulate the museum's laser detection grid? Maybe the Redhead can distract that machine-gun toting embassy soldier? The eight heist artists are each fun in their own right, and since you can only bring in four at once, completing a level with a new mix of characters offers a brand new challenge.

The solo game is enjoyable, but later levels are often exercises in frustration – a lone infiltrator bites the dust too easily, especially once those levels extend to lengthy half-hour

affairs. When you die, you re-enter with a different thief, but you can't take advantage of multiple class abilities simultaneously. That's why Monaco reaches its zenith only when more players begin to drop in. Up to four companions can tackle a stage together, each bringing unique talents to distract, steal, and escape the scene of the crime. I adore the cooperative vibe as you race and sneak about each floor, occasionally backtracking to revive a fallen comrade. The layering of different character's abilities adds even more strategic options, as you work together to confront ever-more challenging security. The Mole might dig through the nearby wall so that the Locksmith can open the safe in record time. Developer Pocketwatch Games also deserves praise for catering to its players; online and offline play options are both seamless and fun.

Whether you're all on the same couch or meeting up online, Monaco offers a multiplayer experience unlike any other game on the market. The text-based story that unfolds between levels is great fun, especially once you begin to see the different perspectives on the tale that unlock as you play. Rule out impatient players and graphics snobs when picking your team, but everyone else should gear up for the big heist. » **Matt Miller**

The Edge

The 360 and PC versions of Monaco play almost identically, and you should be guided by where you can convince the most friends to be your partners in crime. However, the PC version has a planned level editor that will launch just a few days after the game releases. If you're interested in building your own robberies, or tracking down new stages from friends, the PC version is the clear choice. The editor is smartly designed and highly flexible, but expect to spend a good while learning its many tricks.

Deadly Premonition: The Director's Cut

Reopening a closed case

7.75

PS3

According to many of the conventional criteria – like graphics, controls, and animation – Deadly Premonition is a bad game. However, when it originally released on Xbox 360 in 2010, the cult hit from the mind of Hidetaka Suehiro (aka Swery) demonstrated that those things aren't all that matter. Gamers able to see past its technical shortcomings were treated to a rare and quirky murder mystery set in a haunting town full of strange characters. Deadly Premonition is more about the larger experience than the individual elements, and the director's cut faithfully translates the whole mesmerizing affair to the PS3 – with a few improvements.

Everything that fans love about the original is intact. Agent York is delightfully odd, the residents of Greenvale are endearing, and a *Twin Peaks* vibe runs through everything. The only new piece of story content is a series of cutscenes framing the narrative, in which an old man is telling his granddaughter the events of the game. Even though these scenes don't alter the core plot, the last one adds a new angle to the tale's conclusion that fans will appreciate. It's a nice reward if you've been wanting to replay Deadly Premonition anyway, but it doesn't justify buying the game a second time.

Beyond the extra scenes, you won't find any new quests or major gameplay features. The controls are the biggest improvement; they are intuitive instead of clunky in this version, falling in line with traditional third-person controls that gamers expect. Possible additions discussed prior to the game's release – like York buying a house, and extra quests – did not make the final cut. However, other changes make Greenvale a more hospitable place for newcomers. The graphics have improved slightly, and a minimap reduces the amount of time you need to spend pausing the game to reorient yourself. These tweaks don't magically make Deadly Premonition a different game; the visuals are still conspicuously outdated, and navigation remains problematic since you can't place waypoints or even zoom out to see the whole map.

Deadly Premonition has its faults, but the quirky dialogue, self-directed exploration, and perfect pacing form an addictive and fascinating mystery unlike anything else in gaming. If you're a newcomer to Agent York's adventures in Greenvale (or found the controls too awful to tolerate on Xbox 360), you should definitely try Deadly Premonition: The Director's Cut. It asks players to overlook a lot of problems, but if you can do that, it pays even greater rewards. **» Joe Juba**

» **Concept**
A *Twin Peaks*-inspired adventure that has players investigating a grisly small-town murder in the Pacific Northwest

» **Graphics**
You can tell the difference if you directly compare screens, but the improvements are not drastic. This version may even have more framerate issues than the original

» **Sound**
One of my favorite (and certainly among the most bizarre) soundtracks of this generation, though occasional audio glitches crop up

» **Playability**
The tank-like controls of the original have been replaced with a layout more appropriate for third-person action

» **Entertainment**
If you can forgive some archaic design and technical issues, the story and characters at the heart of the Deadly Premonition are wonderful

» **Replay Value**
Moderately High

They Made The Cut?

The addition of 3D support and Move controls are exactly the stupid bullet points they appear to be and don't add anything noteworthy to the experience. Thankfully, they are both optional, so they don't do any damage, either.

Lego City Undercover: The Chase Begins

Feel free to race past this scaled-down prequel

6

3DS

Lego City Undercover: The Chase Begins systematically dismantles all of the parts I loved about the Wii U game to the point where I wonder why Nintendo even bothered. Compartmentalized tracts of land replace the original's large open world. Missions are simplified beyond even Lego standards. And in its biggest crime, hero Chase McCain and the rest of Lego City are largely rendered silent.

McCain and his buddy Frank Honey are fun characters, and I enjoyed chasing after villain Rex Fury with them in the Wii U game. In The Chase Begins, McCain is on his own, leaving him without a steady comic foil. Voiced cutscenes pop up from time to time, which add a desperately needed spark. I like when the game shows how Chase got along with love interest Natalia Kowalski and the interactions with then-deputy police chief Dunby, but these clips are a rarity. The rest of the time, dialogue is flatly presented as text. TT Games used to get away with this kind of miming, but it simply doesn't work when tied to an original story.

The 3DS hardware doesn't seem capable of providing a seamless open world, either. Instead, you're stuck watching a series of loading screens as you follow mission objectives across segments of Lego City in a full-on Silent Hill smog. Once you guide McCain to his destination, you can count on reliably dull missions. Monotony quickly crept in as I slogged through the same "break this, defeat him, assemble that" loop. With few exceptions, these tasks take place outside in the city, unlike in the interior spaces and other virtual sets that past Lego games have used. The city offers few motivators to explore; I'm hopelessly addicted to finding every doodad in Lego games, and didn't feel any of those urges here.

Chase has the same outfits found in the Wii U version, including farmer, criminal, and astronaut duds. I enjoyed testing the various skills that each provided. The astronaut can use a jet pack to reach higher spots, for instance, while the farmer can use his chicken as either an egg-launching cannon or a way to slowly descend from heights. It's the same stuff as before, only on a smaller screen.

The Lego City Undercover: The Chase Begins experience is like asking for a complex Lego set for your birthday and finding a box of Duplo under the wrapping paper instead. It's technically similar, but the differences are critically important. **» Jeff Cork**

» **Concept**
Show what Chase McCain was up to before Lego City Undercover in this portable prequel

» **Graphics**
Lego City is smoggy, but objects in the world look okay – once they've popped into place

» **Sound**
Aside from a handful of voiced cutscenes, characters are disappointingly mute

» **Playability**
Chase's expandable wardrobe makes the 3DS transition intact, as does the constant costume swapping

» **Entertainment**
The Chase Begins is a scaled-back version of the Wii U game, losing most of what made its predecessor so much fun

» **Replay Value**
Low

Shin Megami Tensei: Devil Summoner – Soul Hackers

A lost classic still makes a strong impression

8.75

3DS

» **Concept**
Fight your way through dungeons to stop demons from stealing people's souls

» **Graphics**
The character models look great, but the dungeon design leaves much to be desired

» **Sound**
Music captures the futuristic atmosphere perfectly and enhances scenes. The voice acting is top-notch; every character makes an impression

» **Playability**
Controls are easy to grasp, but there's no hand-holding to master the deeper mechanics

» **Entertainment**
Soul Hackers is unique, thrilling, and lives up to the SMT name with punishing battles that are both exciting and frustrating to conquer

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

[Carol J] Hey hey, it's Carol J! You saved me the trouble of having to go find you myself.

I challenge you! My name is Judah Singh! By my honor, I shall claim your life!

Bite the Dust

Frost! If it is your bidding, Master!

Mudola

Murmur HP 487 MP 174
ATLUS HP 621 MP 0
Cerberus HP 373 MP 191
Nemissa HP 422 MP 310
EMPTY
EMPTY

Murmur HP 487 MP 174
ATLUS HP 621 MP 0
Cerberus HP 373 MP 191
Nemissa HP 422 MP 296
EMPTY
EMPTY

gameinformer SILVER

Style 1-Player Role-Playing **Publisher** Atlus **Developer** Atlus **Release** April 16 **ESRB** M

Shin Megami Tensei has made a name for itself catering to the mature and hardcore RPG crowd. Statistics, elemental weaknesses, and demon fusion keep battles intensely strategic alongside complex stories and memorable characters. Soul Hackers helped create this legacy in 1997 on the Sega Saturn, but it never made its way to North America. Now with an enhanced 3DS version, admission is finally open to the futuristic tale about technology going awry. The wait was worth it. Soul Hackers is an addictive journey with a gripping storyline and cerebral combat.

The story about a soul-stealing virtual city is intriguing and full of twists, and the futuristic backdrop also works well. The idea of exploring a cyberpunk city is not new to RPGs, but the atmosphere immersed me from the get-go, with inhabitants dressed in flashy, high-tech gear and computerized beats blaring through the city.

Even with a great setting, where Soul Hackers makes its biggest impression is with its cast. One character has two disparate personalities in her body, and the well-written banter between them adds levity. The mature tale also touches on dark themes, but it stands out by focusing on the importance of family and its hardships. For instance, it has some great interactions with an angsty character

and his father struggling to communicate and understand one another. It also handles loss in a compelling way, and watching these multi-dimensional characters confront tough issues is a high point.

Soul Hackers hooked me with its demon recruitment, which adds layers to its traditional combat. You lure demons to your side by choosing the correct dialogue responses or giving them items. Additionally, demon fusion provides plenty of opportunities for more powerful combatants. You can even fuse demons for more powerful swords. Not much strays in battle from the classic SMT/Persona formula. The party consists of two regular characters and four slots for demons; the four demons allow for party customization, letting you take on skills your main characters lack, or buff up on valuable powers like healing. Experimenting with different party combinations is fun, and kept me power-hungry for better demons.

Demon personalities also play a role in strategy; those with kind personalities prefer to heal, while wild types fancy attacking. If you select the opposite, sometimes they won't follow your orders and use the turn to their preference. This can be infuriating, but the unpredictability forces you to adjust your strategy around their potential insubordination.

Soul Hackers isn't for the faint of heart; boss

battles are harrowing and demon selection can make or break battles. For instance, one boss with a weakness to magic blocks it after two turns. That means you have to capitalize on those first turns to stand a chance. Still, the bigger battles gave me an adrenaline rush, causing me to think and study my party before each turn. I can't say many turn-based systems have caused me to consider the consequence of misusing a turn like Soul Hackers.

Dungeon design wasn't at its high point in 1997, and this is clear in Soul Hackers. Dungeons are bland and the places you visit, mostly factories and warehouses, aren't that exciting. However, a few make an impression, like the art museum where you jump into paintings and the haunted house with story narration. To its credit, even with all the required backtracking, the grind doesn't wear on you because of the option to talk your way out of combat. It helps not being forced to fight every battle, as does the reasonable encounter rate.

Soul Hackers isn't an easy fight, but it's worth every moment that it beats you down. It became my addiction; I was completely enamored with besting bosses, recruiting demons, and finding out where the storyline would go next. I still can't believe that a game that came out in 1997 feels so fresh and exciting over 15 years later. » **Kimberley Wallace**

Dillon's Rolling Western: The Last Ranger

Rolling against the clock

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Nintendo **Developer** Vanpool **Release** April 11 **ESRB** E10+

The original Dillon's Rolling Western released a little over a year ago as a 3DS eShop exclusive, which means despite its quality and good review scores, it disappeared into the relative obscurity of Nintendo's download store faster than it should have. Developer Vanpool was not dissuaded however, releasing a follow-up to the rock monster-fighting armadillo's adventure a little over a year later.

The Last Ranger is split into two gameplay styles. The first has Dillon exploring large open levels setting up tower defenses and searching for useful materials. The other is combat, which has players using the touchscreen to slingshot Dillon into enemies. Attacking enemies this way gives Dillon's fun fighting style a feeling of originality that can't be emulated with buttons. Both combat and exploration use the same slingshot mechanic on the touchscreen. Regardless of what you're doing, controlling Dillon is always entertaining.

Things become less fun when you realize that everything is on a timer. While exploring, you desperately roll around the world trying to grab as many things as you can before the sun goes down and the Grock monsters begin to march. Once they're present, the game becomes even more frantic as you bolt from battle to battle. Even minor things like side quests and purchasable equipment have their own timers. Equipment wears down and if you don't finish an elected side quest in time, you are punished. You rarely get a chance to simply enjoy the environment, or have fun breaking down the intricacies of combat; you're constantly on the move.

Dillon's Rolling Western: The Last Ranger stands alone with few comparable games. The original title blends genres well with fantastic music and appealing characters. The biggest shortcomings are the timers and restrictions on nearly every aspect of the game. I wanted to spend more time beating up Grocks and exploring, but just when I found my stride, I was pushed towards the next section whether I was ready or not. » **Kyle Hilliard**

7.75

3DS

» **Concept**
Take tower defense and stylus-controlled combat, place them inside a western-themed box, throw some anthropomorphic animals in it, shake it up, and enjoy

» **Graphics**
Dillon and pals look sharp with a cel-shaded look. Witnessing the changing colors of the environments as the sun sets is impressive

» **Sound**
Spanish guitar and ambient whistling provide a pleasant western atmosphere

» **Playability**
The slingshot mechanic of controlling Dillon is a blast, even if it does cause some minor wrist cramping

» **Entertainment**
Controlling Dillon while exploring and battling the Grocks is executed well, but the restrictions on exploration are frustrating

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

Donkey Kong Country Returns 3D

A more accessible banana-hoarding challenge

Style 1-Player Action (2-Player Online) **Publisher** Nintendo **Developer** Monster Games **Release** May 24 **ESRB** E

Donkey Kong Country Returns on Wii would have sold well on nostalgia value alone, but Nintendo made the right move by putting the talented Retro Studios on the project. The end result was a challenging and beautiful platformer that eclipsed the entries in the Super Nintendo series. Its 3DS version maintains the high quality bar set by the original, and adds some new features that make its daunting challenge more accessible.

Upon starting a new game, you have the option of choosing original mode or new mode. The former is the same as the Wii version, while the latter helps those that aren't great at platformers. Instead of the two hearts Donkey Kong usually starts with, you begin with three. In addition (and more importantly), new items at Cranky Kong's shop greatly help the ape on his quest for bananas.

Crash guard allows your cart or rocket to take two free hits, green balloons save you from falling into pits, and DK barrels summon Diddy Kong and refill your hearts at any point in a level. Once you beat the standard eight worlds, you can even purchase the orbs needed for the Golden Temple if you don't want to spend the time getting every KONG letter.

While I enjoyed the extreme challenge of collecting all the letters and conquering the Golden Temple in the original game, I feel that these items make the game more enjoyable without taking away too much of the difficulty. None of them beat the levels for you, so you still need to memorize the layouts of mine cart levels and make sure you're paying attention to boss patterns.

Some tradeoffs have been made in the downsizing. If you're playing on the standard 3DS, your character and the enemies are a bit too small when they're shot into the background of stages. If you have a 3DS XL, it certainly helps with this problem. Characters and stages still look great, but the framerate isn't as smooth as the Wii original. Outside of these two slight issues, it's largely the same game. Co-op play is back as well, allowing you to play with a local 3DS owner.

Fans of the original should find themselves enjoying this 3DS release, as it's great to perform DK's various moves without the use of any motion controls. It also features eight solid post-game bonus stages that weren't in the Wii version. For those who haven't played the fantastic original, you'll find one of this generation's best platformers in Donkey Kong Country Returns 3D. » **Dan Ryckert**

8.5

3DS

» **Concept**
Bring the nerve-wracking action of the Wii platformer to 3DS

» **Graphics**
Donkey Kong is a great-looking game, but it doesn't always run as smoothly as the original

» **Sound**
I can't complain about this great, nostalgia-drenched soundtrack

» **Playability**
Both the circle pad and d-pad do an admirable job of controlling the apes

» **Entertainment**
Just as solid as the original, and more inviting to newcomers

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

reviews archive

8 | Terraria

Platform PS3 • 360 **Release** March 26 (PS3), March 27 (360) **ESRB** T

The combat and controls could use more polish, but a nearly infinite well of items and randomly generated worlds make up for those faults. A lot of games try to hold your hand through a scripted experience, but Terraria makes a good argument for the merits of directionless creation. – Ben Reeves

7.75 | WRC 3 FIA World Rally Championship

Platform PS3 **Release** March 26 **ESRB** E

It's commendable that WRC 3 aims to give a full rally experience – complete with the need to repair between stages – and not dilute it with other forms of off-road racing. Despite this commitment to the sport and the fact that the game has some fun moments, its middling execution only gets it so far. – Matthew Kato

6 | Dungeon Hearts

Platform PC • iOS **Release** March 28 **ESRB** N/A

Dungeon Hearts' basic mash-up of ideas and charming aesthetic could have set it on the path to casual-game stardom, but fun gameplay would have done a whole lot more. – Adam Biessener

6 | Pandora's Tower

Platform Wii **Release** April 16 **ESRB** T

Pandora's Tower has plenty of interesting concepts, but it feels more like a rough cut than a polished game. – Kimberley Wallace

5 | The Walking Dead: Survival Instinct

Platform 360 **Release** March 19 **ESRB** M

Survival Instinct sinks its infected teeth into monotony and carelessly chews away at it to deliver a repetitious experience that lets a few cool ideas go to waste. – Andrew Reiner

8.75 | Resident Evil: Revelations

Platform PS3 • 360 • Wii U • PC **Release** March 21 **ESRB** M

Revelations has a lot to offer fans of the series and players looking for a more evenly paced, thoughtful shooter. The new content, including an entertaining challenge-based two-player co-op mode, along with dual-analog stick control make this the definitive version of Resident Evil: Revelations. – Tim Turi

8.25 | HarmoKnight

Platform 3DS **Release** March 29 **ESRB** E

HarmoKnight is among the best the 3DS eShop has to offer. With its diverse levels, rhythm-focused gameplay, great music, and charming characters, HarmoKnight will be a memorable experience for those lucky enough to discover it. – Kyle Hilliard

Skulls of the Shogun	8.5	Feb-13
Skylanders Giants	8	Dec-12
Sonic and All-Stars Racing Transformed	8	Jan-13
Tekken Tag Tournament 2	8.5	Nov-12
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 14	8.5	May-13
Tomb Raider	9.25	Apr-13
Transformers: Fall of Cybertron	9	Oct-12
Walking Dead Episode 3: Long Road Ahead, The	8.5	Nov-12
Walking Dead Episode 4: Around Every Corner, The	8.25	Dec-12
Walking Dead Episode 5: No Time Left, The	8.5	Jan-13
Wreckateer, The	7.5	Oct-12
WWE '13	9	Dec-12
XCOM: Enemy Unknown	9.5	Nov-12

Wii U

Cave, The	7.75	Mar-13
Chasing Aurora	6.5	Feb-13
Epic Mickey 2: The Power of Two	5.75	Jan-13
Lego City Undercover	8.5	Apr-13
Little Inferno	8.5	Feb-13
Need for Speed: Most Wanted	8.5	May-13
New Super Mario Bros. U	9.25	Jan-13
Nintendo Land	7	Jan-13
Rabbids Land	4	Jan-13
Rise of the Guardians	6.5	Feb-13
Scribblenauts Unlimited	8.25	Jan-13
Transformers: Prime	6.5	Feb-13
ZombiU	5	Jan-13

Wii

Epic Mickey 2: The Power of Two	5.75	Jan-13
La-Mulana	8.5	Dec-12
Skylanders Giants	8	Dec-12

PC

A Valley Without Wind 2	6.75	May-13
Aliens: Colonial Marines	4	Apr-13
Antichamber	9	Apr-13
BioShock Infinite	10	May-13
Call of Duty: Black Ops II	8.5	Jan-13
Cave, The	7.75	Mar-13
Crysis 3	8.5	Apr-13
Dishonored	8.75	Dec-12
Dollar Dash	6	May-13
Elemental: Fallen Enchantress	8.25	Jan-13
Far Cry 3	9	Jan-13
FTL: Faster Than Light	8	Dec-12
Hotline Miami	7.75	Jan-13
Impire	5	May-13
King's Bounty: Warriors of the North	7.75	Jan-13
Medal of Honor: Warfighter	5	Jan-13
Omerta: City of Gangsters	6	Apr-13
Orcs Must Die 2	9.25	Oct-12
Realms of Ancient War	4	Dec-12
Runner2: Future Legend of Rhythm Alien	9	Apr-13
SimCity	6.5	May-13
Sniper Elite: Nazi Zombie Army	8	May-13
StarCraft II: Heart of the Swarm	8.75	May-13
Torchlight II	9.25	Dec-12
Walking Dead Episode 3: Long Road Ahead, The	8.5	Nov-12
Walking Dead Episode 4: Around Every Corner, The	8.25	Dec-12
Walking Dead Episode 5: No Time Left, The	8.5	Jan-13
XCOM: Enemy Unknown	9.5	Nov-12

NINTENDO DS

Pokémon Black & White	7.5	Nov-12

3DS

Aero Porter	5	Mar-13
Brain Age: Concentration Training	6	Apr-13
Castlevania: Lords of Shadow – Mirror of Fate	8.5	Apr-13
Code of Princess	7.5	Dec-12
Crashmo	8.5	Feb-13
Crimson Shroud	7.5	Mar-13
Epic Mickey: Power Of Illusion	5	Jan-13
Etrian Odyssey IV: Legends of the Titan	8	May-13
Fire Emblem: Awakening	9	Mar-13
Liberation Maiden	7	Jan-13
Luigi's Mansion: Dark Moon	8.5	May-13
New Super Mario Bros. 2	8.25	Oct-12
Paper Mario: Sticker Star	8.75	Dec-12
Pokémon Mystery Dungeon: Gates to Infinity	6.75	May-13
Professor Layton and the Miracle Mask	8	Dec-12
Resident Evil: Revelations	9	Feb-11
Shinobi	6.5	Feb-11
Zero Escape: Virtue's Last Reward	8.75	Dec-12

VITA

Assassin's Creed III: Liberation	7.75	Jan-13
Call of Duty: Black Ops: Declassified	3	Jan-13
Dokuro	6	Dec-12
Jet Set Radio	6.5	Nov-12
Knytt Underground	7.5	Mar-13
LittleBigPlanet PS Vita	8.75	Nov-12
Persona 4 Golden	8.5	Jan-13
PlayStation All-Stars Battle Royale	7.5	Jan-13
Retro City Rampage	7	Dec-12
Sly Cooper: Thieves in Time	9	Mar-13
Sound Shapes	9	Oct-12
Zero Escape: Virtue's Last Reward	8.75	Dec-12

iOS

Beastie Bay	7.5	Apr-13
Final Fantasy Dimensions	7.5	Nov-12
Hundreds	8	Mar-13
Joe Danger Touch	8.25	Mar-13
Middle Manager of Justice	6	Mar-13
Year Walk	8.75	May-13

The Forgotten Capcom Brawlers

You remember Final Fight fondly, but do these brawlers ring a bell?

When many think back to the days of arcade gaming, they maintain nostalgic memories of cooperative brawlers like Double Dragon, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, The Simpsons, and X-Men. Those titles undoubtedly helped popularize the genre, but were they the greatest examples of the form? The 1990s brought a wave of arcade brawlers from Capcom that many American gamers might never have encountered, but among brawler faithful, they offer the pinnacle of the genre's quality.

In the late 1980s, amid the growing challenge of competing against home console gaming, Capcom sought a way to continue its arcade presence but limit the significant expense of separate arcade boards for each game released. In 1988, that goal gave birth to the CP System, a highly flexible arcade board that could support multiple games, reducing costs in both production and for arcade owners. The CP System proved lucrative and adaptable, resulting in 27 different arcade games, including the fighting genre-defining Street Fighter II.

By 1993, the success of the CP System spawned a second arcade board, which proved to be even more prolific. The CP System 2 had only a few minor technological improvements, but was especially notable for its aggressive piracy protection. Unlike its predecessor, bootleggers were stymied for years by the CPS2 hardware and its ability to "suicide" when tampered with. In the meantime, the CPS2 hosted an astounding 41 games between 1993 and 2003.

While it can be hard to track down the original arcade units, an online community of emulation fans still actively embraces some of our favorite lesser-known beat 'em up brawlers that released on the CP systems. Capcom recently revealed plans to release Dungeons & Dragons: Chronicles of Mystara (a two-pack of both D&D arcade games) as an upcoming downloadable title, so the hope to see more official re-releases of these classic games remains alive. Here are a few of our favorites.

by Matt Miller

CAPTAIN COMMANDO (1991)

In an effort to offer some more identifiable branding for its games, Capcom created Captain Commando as a would-be mascot in the second half of the '80s (players may recall his appearance in many NES instruction manuals). By 1991, it was clear that Captain Commando would never rise to the heights of Mario or Sonic, but that didn't stop Capcom from giving the character his own dedicated brawler. Like in the better-known Final Fight, players punch their way through an array of levels, and pick up items and weapons along the way. Captain Commando also allows for up to four-player simultaneous play. The game was ported several times to home consoles with varying degrees of quality. Captain Commando later made surprise appearances in games like Marvel vs. Capcom, but his real moment in the sun came in this fun cooperative brawler.

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS: SHADOWS OVER MYSTARA (1996)

Dungeons & Dragons: Tower of Doom deserves credit for bringing the iconic role-playing game into the beat 'em up scene, but the greatly improved Shadows Over Mystara eclipses the original with better controls, more interesting stages, and a wider array of playable characters. While still a brawler in structure, Shadows Over Mystara borrows a number of features from the role-playing genre, including characters that level up, and special moves and spells at their disposal. Several branching paths give the game tremendous replay value, and the sprite-based animation work is particularly striking. Vanillaware founder George Kamitani (Odin Sphere) worked extensively on Shadows Over Mystara; this year's upcoming Dragon's Crown is undoubtedly a spiritual successor to this classic brawler.

WARRIORS OF FATE (1992)

Boasting three-player cooperative play, the original Japanese version of Warriors of Fate cast players as warriors during China's bloody Three Kingdoms period. In keeping with that dark historical era, the brawler is commonly cited for its intense and brutal gore, including decapitations and other maimings. The unbridled violence was a rarity at the time. The English translation abandons the historical context and the worst violence, opting instead for a more palatable fictional backdrop. The game is also notable for several secret hidden items and weapons available to players who know the convoluted tricks to reach them, and for the ability to summon massive warhorses.

ARMORED WARRIORS (1997)

Few gamers remember the relatively rare Armored Warriors, but it remains one of the best and most innovative brawlers of the '90s. Players control massive walking mechs in the latter half of the 23rd century as they battle an army of cyborgs commanded by a mad military traitor. Battles include fights against other towering mechs, but also depict enemy infantry who scramble about to get out of your way, lending a sense of scale and power to the experience. Armored Warriors' coolest feature is the customization available to your mechanized walking tank. Arms, legs, and weaponry can all be switched out on the fly for a different experience, helping the game stay fresh through its seven large levels.

ALIEN VS. PREDATOR (1994)

While the Alien vs. Predator property has a sordid history with gamers, there's no debating the fun of the 1994 brawler. Players control either human cyborg colonial marines or Predator heroes as they stab and shoot their way through hordes of xenomorphs. Gorgeous animation and art sells the sci-fi universe, and the distinct nature of each character's ability offers great replay value. The combination of melee and ranged combat is excellently balanced, and the pure insanity of punching an alien with a cybernetic arm is hard to beat.

BATTLE CIRCUIT (1997)

One of the last arcade Capcom brawlers was also the zaniest of the bunch, so it should come as no surprise that the game never had an official US release. Players pick between five playable characters, including a catgirl fashion model, and a giant sentient pink ostrich ridden by a young girl named Pola Abdul (we're not kidding). These bounty hunters' quest to stop a mad scientist draws on a number of inspirations, including superhero comic books, anime, and '50s science fiction tropes. However, the insane animations, colorful art, and tight combat help the game stand the test of time. New moves for each character are obtainable between levels, making this one of the most sophisticated and complex brawlers to master, despite its seemingly inane subject matter. Battle Circuit is a real treat for American gamers, if only because it's virtually guaranteed you've never seen anything like it before. ◈

Want to see some of these great brawlers in action? Check out video of the GI editors engaging in some serious multiplayer brawling at gameinformer.com/mag

10 Things You Didn't Know About...

Siobhan Reddy

Media Molecule studio director Siobhan Reddy has experienced a whirlwind couple of months. In addition to prepping the PS Vita exclusive Tearaway for release on October 22 and ramping up production on the studio's PlayStation 4 project, she was recently named the Austrilian woman of the year in the U.K. and included on the BBC Radio 4 Women's Hour Power 100 list. Read on to learn how she got into video games and how she would like to see the industry evolve.

+ The first game I fell in love with was Donkey Kong on the Game & Watch.

+ I have always had an overactive imagination, which was fed regularly with a well-stocked dress-up box, art, theater, and literature by my mum from when I was a little girl. These were the genesis of my teenage hobbies of fanzines and making short films. I can remember the first time I encountered the Internet at school and I realized that no one really knew what it was yet, but each day something new happened. I really wanted to move out of home after I finished school, so whilst I was waiting to find out about film school I accepted a job at a web development

company where they were trying out interesting things and I was hooked by the time I got into the film school. I guess **that was the moment where I made that decision to pursue a career in interactive entertainment.** So, there wasn't really a plan, I just had a sort of tunnel vision about the things I was interested in.

+ I grew up in the bushy suburbs of Western Sydney, Australia. After spending my teenage years obsessing about music, film and web tech, I moved to England, where I had a friend who had worked in the games industry. He suggested to me that it was a good fusion of what I was interested in.

+ I finished high school, but didn't go to university. **I got my first proper job in the industry at Criterion when I was 19.** I got that job because of the personal projects I had worked on and that I had a whole bunch of jobs that reflected the things I was interested in – working at a record store/label on weekends, the web company, etc. Games production requires on the job [training]; it's more of an apprentice-ship than something you can actually be trained for outside of a team, so in some ways I consider Criterion my university years.

+ I've been very lucky to have a lot of very inspiring people in my life, especially my older sister, Sharon, and her husband, Danny. They are the reason I got into music and they always supported the mad things I wanted to do. From a work perspective, **Fiona Sperry's mentorship throughout my Criterion days was incredible.** As corny as this will sound, my boyfriend (Fireproof Studios director) Barry Meade has been a constant guide throughout my career.

+ My raison d'être as a studio director/producer is to work with people whose creative vision chimes with me in enough of a way that I want to help them manifest that into a reality. **I am inspired by music producers like Rick Rubin, Bones Howe, and Butch Vig** (plus lots of others), as they are good examples of producers who work with creative people (e.g. Beastie Boys, Tom Waits) to manifest what's in their imaginations. Artist-wise I am inspired by so many. I'm very into sassy ladies and salty fellas! I very much like people with a take on the world (real/fantasy), who work through the thousands of various little things that need to be solved and figured out when making something new and who are rock 'n' roll enough to just do their thing, expressing some part of themselves. People like David Simon, Björk, Patrick White, Frida Kahlo, and Tom Waits are in my top 10.

+ When I'm not working with the Molecules, I love throwing parties and generally feeding the senses! I love playing dress-up. I practice millinery (hat making), and I love cooking big feasts for our friends. When I'm not doing those more debauched things, I do wholesome things like walk my dog constantly, read books, faff about on the Internet, and cook chocolate puddings.

+ The last great game I played was The Room, and if that's not allowed then I'd say I really loved playing Dishonored. I am a very good sniper.

+ I can't choose just one person in the game industry I would love to collaborate with. I dreamt up a dream team recently that involves people from Fireproof, Double Fine, Capybara, Media Molecule, Ubisoft Montreal, Respawn, Majesco, Disney, Naughty Dog, and Guerrilla to name a few.

+ If I could improve one thing in the game industry, I'd increase the number of women on development teams. There are too few, and it impacts the diversity of the projects that get made. I'd like that to change. ◈

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