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THE WORLD'S #1 VIDEO GAME MAGAZINE

CONVERSE CONS

THE CONVERSE CONS STAR PLAYER PLUS SNEAKER

Connecting To Kinect

I can't get any voice-command devices to work. Apple's Siri randomly calls people from my contacts whenever I ask for directions. If I ask for the score from a sporting event, Siri is sure to start playing a track from a band I haven't listened to in ages.

I have the same problems with Kinect's voice commands. Sometimes some commands work, other times they do not. I have no idea why – I don't have a particularly thick accent. It seems to have a mind of its own. I share my frustration with voice control because I want you to know I'm biased. I hate the Kinect.

For all my dislike for the product that makes "you" the controller, I admit Dance Central was an amazing piece of software. That game, and thus far that game alone, figured out how to make the Kinect an interesting gaming device.

So when Microsoft announced that a new and improved Kinect would be sold with every Xbox One at a higher price point than its competitors, I immediately thought Microsoft was crazy.

But what do I know? I've been wrong about plenty of things before. Microsoft must have all these great examples of the hardware making amazing software available. But at the Xbox One launch we got Fighter Within, which currently carries a Metacritic score of 23. For those who don't use Metacritic, that's real bad.

On the horizon we have… ummm, I can't think of a title on the horizon save for Harmonix and Disney's Fantasia, which magically got delayed. When I ask third-party developers how they are leveraging Kinect for their new games, most laugh out loud, like it is a punchline to a joke.

Sure, Microsoft has used the Kinect in other ways. Plenty of people love its entertainment options, especially the way it integrates with their cable service. Others enjoy the little touches, like how it recognizes you and automatically logs you in or allows you to rouse zombies in Dead Rising 3 by making a sound in real life. The Kinect is not without its moments.

But at this moment, none of these positives are required for doing what most people purchase an Xbox One for – playing games. Microsoft is resolute in keeping the Kinect in the box. I wish it were optional. I literally can't make it a part of my home entertainment system where I play games, as my consoles are too far from the TV. For consumers like myself, who want that option, we are basically throwing away extra dollars to choose the Xbox One with services and hardware we don't want or need.

Perhaps Microsoft has an ace up its sleeve that will show the power of Kinect and why it needs to be a part of every Xbox One sold, but I wish it would just move on, make it optional, and get us back to the business of playing games.

Cheers,

ANDY McNAMARA
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
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Read my column or comment on this letter at gameinformer.com/mag or follow @GI_AndyMc

contents

Batman: Arkham Knight

We've spent plenty of time walking through and flying above the streets of Gotham City, but for the first time in the Arkham series, Batman is bringing along his Batmobile for the ride. For his new-gen debut, Rocksteady returns to take back the mantle, and we have the first look. *by Bryan Vore*
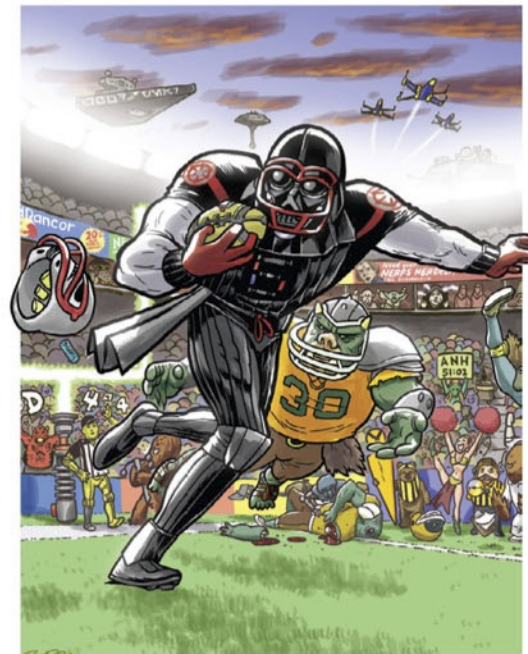
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CORRECTION: In issue 250's Fall of the Empire feature, a caption on the photograph of a statue incorrectly identified the subject as Ray Harryhausen posing with a model of King Kong. In actuality, the statue depicts Harryhausen's mentor, Willis H. O'Brien.

If you're playing with cigarettes, you're harming your teeth.

Smoking cigarettes can cause serious gum disease that makes you more likely to lose your teeth than someone who doesn't smoke.

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Last month's Top 50 brought forth the expected amount of hate mail, as readers share their jilted picks for the best of 2013. Readers also weigh in on the best new-gen controller and ask what it will take to fix Battlefield's single-player offerings.

New Game Plus

I love how your cover stories don't just give us the basic information about a new game; they also take the time to explain the history of how the game came to be. A great example of this was the in-depth explanation of how Turtle Rock Studios overcame what seems to be dozens of obstacles in order to finally create Evolve, a game that I am greatly looking forward to. It really makes me stop and appreciate the massive amount of effort people put into a game just so I can kill off the remainder of my brain cells. It also makes me stop and think how some of my most memorable moments in gaming came dangerously close to never happening. Thank you for giving me an insight to the extraordinary people who craft my extraordinary adventures.

Aaron Allen
via email

It's easy to forget that video game developers aren't just faceless companies; they're made of passionate individuals who try their best to create entertainment that they hope their fans will love. Players should remember that the next time they fire off a hate-filled email over some aspect of a game they don't like. To learn more about the creators behind Evolve, watch our History of Turtle Rock video documentary at gameinformer.com/evolve.

Like Clockwork

There are two issues of GI every year that I absolutely love to receive: Your Top 50 issue and the one after that. Your Top 50 always sheds light on new games and clues me in on what to look for. If not for this year's issue, I'd have never found gems like The Stanley Parable and Device 6. Then there's the issue after the Top 50, where I get to read all kinds of joy-pukingly neurotic rants, like "Where are my Nintendo games," and "I'm canceling my subscription," and "Why didn't you include Game X (which eerily is almost always a Sonic the Hedgehog game)?" Thanks for providing such great reading material; it's easily in my top 4,000, maybe even 3,700. Certainly not 3,600, though.

Doug Coolidge
via email

Oh crap, is it that time of the year already? Just kidding! We could never forget about the annual backlash to our Top 50 list – mainly because our inbox is full of it. Here's a brief assortment of the angry letters we received…

Nixed Picks

I feel you guys should apologize for not including Saints Row IV on your Top 50 list. The pop-culture references, the music, the gameplay variety, even the story – it was awesome, and reminded me of the goodness that was *Army of Darkness*. I feel like Saints Row IV was game of the year – way better than GTA V, which felt so stale in comparison, no matter how good the story was. You even put Assassin's Creed IV on that list, and it had a lower score than Saints Row IV. What gives?

Christopher Cavanaugh
via email

Come on, Game Informer, Splinter Cell: Blacklist should have been on your Top 50 list. It's hands down the second-best Splinter Cell of all time. With a great story, the return of Spies vs. Mercs, and co-op, Blacklist was great. Do you really think Lego City Undercover is a better game than Blacklist? Not even one of your editors chose it. So why no love for Sam?

Shavarda Scott
via email

I just read your Top 50 list, and I am simply baffled by the absence of Shin Megami Tensei IV. Please give me an explanation for why this game was not included. While I can agree with most of the list, not putting that game in there just isn't right. Instead, you put in Battlefield 4 and Call of Duty: Ghosts, two of the most overrated games in history! I know you feel that it is one of the best games of 2013, because you gave it a very good review score, so why isn't it in there? P.S. I am happy with 75 percent of the list.

Trevor Pickett
via email

This year's abundance of great games made it harder than ever to trim our list down to just 50 entries, and the sheer variety of gameplay experiences led to a lot of disparate opinions even among the GI staff. We still consider that kind of diversity to be a good thing, but if you don't agree, just remember that there's no shame in being wrong.

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Still Disappointed

In the Top 10 Disappointments of your Top 50 feature, you talked about Nintendo not having a universal friend list, and annoying friend codes. The Wii U does have a universal friends list that can be accessed from any game that wishes to use it, like Call of Duty, Monster Hunter, etc. Also, the Nintendo Network does have a friend code feature, but you don't actually input them. They're for Nintendo's security reasons, and users have usernames just like PSN, Xbox Live, and Steam.

Matt Neal
via email

I saw that Nintendo was on your Top 10 Disappointments list for its gimped online infrastructure. However, your complaints were a bit misinformed. The Wii U does have a universal friends list and does not use annoying friend codes. Now, that doesn't mean that the infrastructure still doesn't suck. It is incredibly unintuitive to send someone a message or a game invite. I can't just click on someone's Mii from the friends list and invite them to come play; I have to sit through another loading screen to get to the Miiverse, then send them a message, and then they have to stop their game and sit through the same loading screen to read that message (which they probably missed anyway because the only notification is the flashing blue circle on the GamePad). This is a horrible system. Regardless, the next time you critique a video game console you should try to give the impression that you have actually turned it on.

Curtis Puryear
via email

While we admit our description of Nintendo's online shortcomings was confusingly worded (our complaints weren't meant to be read as specific to the Wii U), our criticisms still stand. Nintendo's friends lists don't carry over between systems (i.e., between Wii U and 3DS) the way Sony and Microsoft accounts do, and hence are not universal. Additionally, whether you are dealing with Friend Codes on 3DS or Nintendo Network IDs on Wii U, Nintendo's approach to adding and interacting with friends is still annoying.

GOTY

In the Top 10 Editor Picks, I was pleased to see The Last of Us in the top two for 16/18 of your staff members. Even Kyle had it at as number four, (I don't agree, but every person has their own taste). But Ben Hanson, what the hell is your problem? It wasn't even on there! Was The Last of Us too mainstream for you, dumbass? You really thought f—ing Luigi's Mansion was better? You disgust me. Good day.

Max Hansen
via email

Obviously, there will be several hundred forlorn readers complaining about your pick for Game of the Year, and I will continue the trend. I understand that The Last of Us is an amazing game that appeals to an array of players, but 13 of your editors said it was the best game of 2013! Of the five that didn't, three of them thought it was the second-best game. Come on – where's the objectivity? I enjoy the magazine immensely, but would love to see a more diverse group of opinions. Didn't anybody have GTA V, Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag, or anything else over The Last of Us? Again, I understand they are opinions, but I was just a bit disappointed in the lack of variation.

Mikey Howell
via email

Picking The Last of Us as game of the year was the least controversial part of our list, as readers were equally keen on Naughty Dog's masterpiece. The fact that so many editors found it to be their favorite game of 2013 is as close to "objectivity" as you can get. Like Ben Hanson, we're not going to pretend to like a game for the sake of conformity or diversity, and we're not going to apologize for our choices, either.

Short Answers To Readers' Burning Questions:

"I was wondering if I could have your support on boycotting all Zynga games?"

No.

"Was it a happy accident or pure twisted genius that your Top 50 article started on page 50?!"

We're going to go with pure twisted genius.

"How come there was never a 64-bit console?"

There was. It was the Nintendo 64.

Worst Subject Line To A Feedback Letter:

"Are Y'all Drunk?! RE: Top 50 2013 Picks"

Question Of The Month:

What's the most important characteristic a video game villain should have and why?

gi spy

CANDID PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY
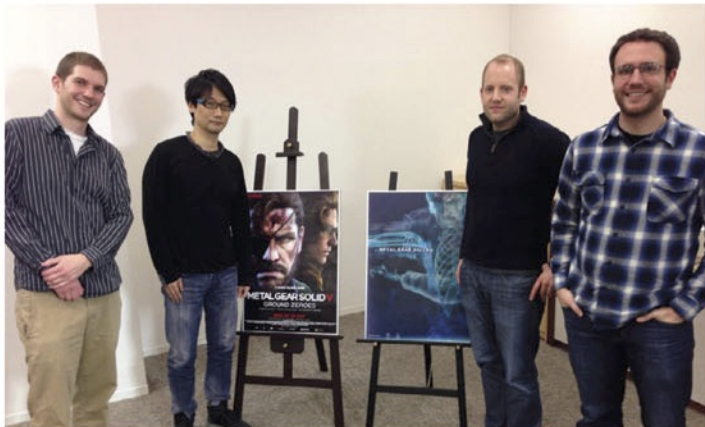
(Left) Last month Ben Hanson, Tim, and Dan interrogated famed Japanese developer Hideo Kojima for new Metal Gear Solid V intel. Find out all about the game at gameinformer.com/mgsv
(Right) Later, the trio tranced out with a robot in a Japanese dance club. They were deported the next day

GI SPY

The Company You Keep

Between Battlefield 3 and Battlefield 4, I've read countless reviews (including GI's) blasting DICE's single-player campaigns. While I agree that they have been lacking, what I never see are any suggestions as to what reviewers would actually like to see from them. We know you don't like them; how about some more ideas in the feedback just once?

Doug Newton
Brooklyn, NY

DICE already has an excellent blueprint of what we'd like to see from Battlefield's single-player campaigns: more Bad Company. The spinoff series' wide-open levels, destructive environments, vehicular combat, and entertaining characters were a great alternative to the standard military shooter formula. After all of Battlefield 4's troubles, bringing back DICE's foursome of misfits and making it a cooperative affair might be exactly what the series needs.

- ■ **38%** Best Controller Debate
- ■ **28%** Top 50 Omission Complaints
- ■ **16%** Evolve Love
- ■ **10%** Fall of the Empire Praise
- ■ **08%** Alien: Isolation Excitement

In Control

In issue 251, we asked readers which new system has the better controller. While both systems received plenty of love, Sony's DualShock 4 edged out Xbox One's controller with 60 percent of the vote. Here are some of the responses.

I bought the PS4 and Xbox One both on launch night, so I've had ample time with each. From what I've played, the PS4 controller is hands–down the best controller of the two. I have severe arthritis in my right wrist, and playing the PS4 controller hurts my wrist a lot less than Xbox One does.

Benaiah Burns

In my opinion the Xbox One has the better controller. I was fortunate enough to purchase both consoles at launch. While the DualShock 4 is a major improvement over the DualShock 3, Microsoft still has the advantage. The controller just feels more comfortable to me personally. I also think the DualShock's light wasn't a wise choice as it drains the battery at a much more accelerated pace than I would like.

Cedric Jenkins

I'm going to be that guy and say Wii U GamePad. Before you put me under "Worst Way to Open a Letter," hear me out. The GamePad is clunky and way bigger than other controllers, but its second screen has actually helped me out a lot and makes me enjoy the games I play more. I've had friends over to play games on the Wii U and they all were really surprised at how light it is despite its size, and how the touchscreen is a huge help in games like Splinter Cell. I'm not saying the Xbox One and PS4 controllers aren't good, but I prefer the GamePad.

Bradly A. Taylor

(Left) Who needs superheroes when you've got the crew at Rocksteady, who assembled to give us our first look at Batman: Arkham Knight?
(Right) We also sat in on a mo-cap session with Rocksteady's cinematic director Paul Boulden and senior cinematic animator Art Lenavat

WINNER
1 Jason Linder
We have to assume that Cranky is telling boring stories and Funky is super wasted

METAL GEAR SOLID

2 Demosthenes Wiggin
Neku has always hated the paparazzi

3 Michael Barrett
At this point, we think Snake is auditioning to take over in the "Most Interesting Man in the World" ads

4 Hyde Ruth Franco
For a dude who lives in a sparkly puffball world, Kirby pulls out those angry eyes an awful lot

(Left) Naughty Dog's Christophe Balestra and Evan Wells had plenty to be happy about at this year's D.I.C.E. Summit, after The Last of Us swept the show's awards ceremony **(Right)** Later, Andy found some appropriate mood lighting to chat with Bethesda's Todd Howard

Looking Toward The Hor

izon

Industry insiders discuss the burning issues facing gaming in 2014 and beyond

FOR PUBLISHERS AND DEVELOPERS, it used to be so much simpler. You selected your target platforms, created the games, and released them to brick and mortar retail stores. But in today's landscape, where new platforms are constantly emerging, digital distribution has opened up new revenue models, and developers don't even need a publishing partner to get their games made, the number of choices is downright dizzying. Do you stick to the tried-and-true consoles, or do you forgo them altogether to pursue the much larger install bases on mobile phones and tablets? Do you stick with a traditional price model, or test the waters with free-to-play or paid alpha programs? What is one to make of emerging, unconventional platforms with intriguing potential like virtual reality headsets?

To gain a better sense of where the businessmen and creative minds behind the games we love are at, we pulled several of them aside at the annual D.I.C.E. Summit in Las Vegas to hear their thoughts on some of the bigger questions facing the game industry.

by Matt Bertz

Will this new console generation have more or fewer new IP than the previous one?

When Sony and Microsoft launched the PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360, publishers came out of the gate with an avalanche of new franchises. Over the first three years of the consoles, gamers were inundated with bold new concepts, from legitimate blockbusters like Assassin's Creed and Uncharted to critical darlings like BioShock and Portal. But as the years dragged on and mid-tier publishers like THQ started biting the dust, publishers began relying on established franchises rather than pushing innovation with new games.

With two new consoles offering developers untapped power, we expect creativity to pick up again in the early years of the PlayStation 4 and Xbox One. But will we see the depth of bold new ideas that we enjoyed last generation, or will market conditions dictate that major publishers take fewer chances with their lineups?

"I think you're going to see the same thing you've seen before as far as the AAA space where initially you're going to see a lot of new IP, and then it's going to slow down drastically as the generation continues," says Naughty Dog creative director Neil Druckmann. "The successful ones will stay, and maybe if a few fail then you might see a couple new ones, but it won't change a lot toward the end."

Naughty Dog game director Bruce Straley thinks that the steep financial investments attached to large-scale game development makes it tough for publishers to take as many chances as they did in the past.

"The triple-A [publishers] still have the issue of the budgets – they have to create that scale of game versus the profit they have to turn around to justify that development again," Straley says. "We have a luxury at Naughty Dog that Sony trusts us and we're able to push and challenge ourselves in what kind of games we want to make. But my understanding – and I don't know because I've worked at Naughty Dog forever – is it doesn't sound like other people really have that kind of flexibility. That will be interesting and definitely affect whether or not you will see more sequels or new IPs – whether or not the upper management of those companies feel comfortable in trying and testing new ideas. Maybe that comes down to scope of game. Maybe if the scope is reduced down they can justify smaller teams, smaller development cycles, and getting something out the door a little bit faster [when] there's not as much at stake. So maybe it's not about new IPs, it's about new scoping of games."

With both Sony and Microsoft making inroads to creating more inviting platforms for non-established developers to release their games on the consoles, some creators think that – even if we see less new IP from the big publishers – a new era of innovation could spring from these smaller teams.

"One thing that's interesting right now is there are indie developers that had their first big hit last generation like Braid or Bastion, and they're making their follow-up games now, and almost none of it is like Braid 2 or Bastion Returns," says The Fullbright Company co-founder Steve Gaynor. "They are creating new IPs to follow their successes. Obviously, there's still going to be continuations; there will be more Mass Effects. At the same time, year-over-year, there will be more new prominent IPs that are going to come out."

Will Steam Machines seriously disrupt the PC market?

Valve finally revealed the first lineup of Steam Machines at this past CES, and many were left scratching their heads at the strategy. Introducing 14 different consoles ranging from $500 to upwards of $6,000 gives consumers a lot of choice, but it also could potentially create confusion around the platform. Why spend all that money for a system that has a much smaller game library than the Windows-based Steam?

"That's one machine I don't quite get yet," says Ed Fries, the former vice president of game publishing at Microsoft. "When I've talked to Gabe [Newell] about it or heard Gabe talk about it, [Steam Machine] was done sort of as a defensive measure against a fear that [Microsoft] would close down the Windows platform in kind of the same way Apple has to some degree closed their platform. They didn't close the Mac, but their portable devices are closed. It's kind of a hedge against that. As a strategy, it makes sense. As a consumer point of view, I have a Windows machine and I have Steam. I don't need this box."

The majority of developers we spoke with shared Fries' sentiments.

"I'm kind of skeptical just because there are 14 of them coming," says Media Molecule's creative lead Rex Crowle. "It just feels a bit like 3DO or some other systems that really didn't quite work out."

But even though many don't understand what need the Steam Machines are potentially filling, not everyone is ready to outright dismiss Valve's endeavor.

"It's sort of hard to really predict where it's going to go," says CCP CEO Hilmar Veigar Petursson. "I'm not sure we need another console. It seems it will have to be very expensive to even compete with a PlayStation 4 with its crazy memory architecture and all that. And they backed away from the crazy controller. I just don't know. But what I know is it's going to become something. Valve has a thing in their head, and nobody knows where it's really going to go."

Can second-screen gaming be anything more than a marketing gimmick?

With the proliferation of mobile and tablet devices over the last several years, more and more studios are brainstorming ideas that allow gamers to use their other devices while playing console or PC games. Battlefield 4's second screen app allows you to tweak loadouts mid-match or assume the role of commander. Ubisoft's upcoming open-world shooter The Division also leverages the second screen to give a player control of a drone, working in tandem with his or her friends playing on console.

These concepts are certainly interesting, but ultimately seem more like a back-of-the-box bullet point than a game-changing feature. We asked other developers what they thought of this concept. Some find it very intriguing.

"I'm quite interested in it because to me we have to remove some user interface from the screen," says Media Molecule designer Christophe Villedieu. "I never like blinking things when I'm playing. I love games when there is no UI at all and you're trying to guess what's happening. It depends on the game, because some games you can't take your eyes off the screen or you're dead. I think it's something new – we haven't explored it yet. I think that's a new way of playing."

While the concept holds potential, the fact that you need a player who owns the console to have another device could limit the effectiveness of this approach.

"To have this additional experience you need to have mobile or tablet hardware, and that's great and everything, but that means that by its very nature, it's going to be an optional feature," says The Fullbright Company's Steve Gaynor. "If your feature is optional, there's only so much of an impact it will have on the overall design."

Naughty Dog's Bruce Straley agrees.

"Everything I've seen so far – maybe I haven't seen enough of those games – has been a little gimmicky," he says. "I think it's going to take someone to find a feature that really has depth. The problem is if it's always this optional thing, then no one is going to invest resources into making it integral to the experience. If it's not integral, then you ask, 'Well why do I have it at all if it's just optional?' Maybe it will take someone who makes it integral – you have to have the second screen and then people will see the value in that, and then really invest and find a feature that's worthwhile."

Games like Blacklight: Retribution (left) and Warframe (top right) are testing the waters on console for the freemium model, which Clash of Clans (bottom right) proved so lucrative on mobile devices

Can the free-to-play economic model gain widespread acceptance on consoles?

Over the past few years, more and more publishers have experimented and found success with new economic models for digital games on PC and mobile platforms. Success stories like Supercell, which generates roughly $2.4 million per day from just two games – Clash of Clans and Hay Day – are spurring the old guard to think about packaging their games in new ways instead of simply sticking a $60 pricetag on each game.

With Blacklight: Retribution, Warframe, and DC Universe Online already testing console gamers' appetites for these types of experiences on the PlayStation 4, the tide for free-to-play is rising. Whether or not this approach will take hold on consoles is still a charged topic of debate within the industry. Some believe the change is inevitable.

"The numbers are very clear – the old models are continuing to decline," says EA founder Trip Hawkins.

While any bottom-line oriented businessmen can't help but think this is the future given the massive success stories, many of the developers we talked to were less convinced.

"There need to be some new methods created in the game design to support it because it feels like nearly all free-to-play games are the same core model re-skinned and reused again and again," says Media Molecule's Rex Crowle. "I do not enjoy playing them myself at all because for me it's always been about investing in the game, and if it's great you are getting more value for your money and you enjoy it more. It's noble. Whereas with that model it's like the more you are enjoying it, the more it costs you."

Naughty Dog's Bruce Straley is wary of the model as well.

"I'm not a huge fan of freemium, what that means to players, maybe where that takes games, and more specifically what that means for single-player, narrative based games," Straley says. "I hope that never becomes a hindrance to us and the kind of games we like

making. I'm a little fearful of that."

Making such a drastic change to a valuable, moneymaking franchise is a daunting task. Games where the majority of their users play online, like Call of Duty and Battlefield, seem to be natural candidates for conversion to freemium, but doing so could endanger their standing with the current fan bases. EA Studios executive vice president Patrick Söderlund told MCV this past November that he doesn't anticipate flagship EA franchises to wholly adopt a free-to-play model any time soon. "When I pay $60 for Battlefield, I know what I am getting," he said. "And I think there are players that prefer that. And it's not a case of one or another; they can both exist, and there may be hybrids, too."

Their hesitancy could open the door for a competitor to make a bold move.

"It's hard to detach from $60 until you're really sure you're going to come out ahead," says Trip Hawkins. "Take World of Warcraft – they run a subscription model. It's not as potent in the MMO market as free-to-play with virtual goods. Blizzard made the mistake of waiting too long and having competitors do it to them instead of them disrupting themselves. I saw a list recently of the most lucrative games and Warcraft was number seven. It used to be a really dominant number one. Everything ahead of Warcraft is free-to-play with virtual goods. They kind of blew that window."

"So when does it happen with a Call of Duty type game? Maybe it will happen with a disrupter. Then they'll say, 'We're losing that $60 anyway because nobody is playing the game, I guess if you can't beat 'em you better join 'em.' But the smart guys just finally say 'Screw it, let's take the risk, let's make the commitment, let's make shift and just believe in it.' It's just hard for people who have an established interest to let go of what they have. You can tell that all the big companies continue to struggle. They have a hard time trying to pry their hands off the old way of thinking. It's human nature; I can see why it's so difficult."

The most likely scenario is full-priced blockbusters, cheaper downloadable games, and free-to-play titles will find room to co-exist on the new consoles.

"The good thing about digital distribution taking off and moving away from just buying boxed games at a retailer is it affords for all kinds of different games," says Naughty Dog's Neil Druckmann. "Different game lengths, different kind of pricing models for games, and that's good for gamers because you can allow all these creators who gravitate to different experiences to get it directly to the fans. Yes, because of that you will see more freemium games taking off, but hopefully that's balanced with the big AAA experience, with smaller indie games – that they all can be successful in this market."

Starbound

Will major publishers adopt the paid alpha model espoused by indie developers?

Notch first started making Minecraft in his free time, and he didn't have a lot of money to support the project. Instead of seeking out a publisher or venture capital like many developers do, he took a new approach by opening up the game to the public and charging for access to the alpha. Even though the game still had years of development to go, curious gamers flocked to the world building game, making it a runaway success well before its "official" launch in 2011.

DayZ

Given the extreme criticism a game like Battlefield 4 received after having a rough launch, it's hard to imagine major publishers opening up early versions of its games to the public and charging for access. But looking at the Steam top sellers chart, several alpha titles like DayZ, Rust, 7 Days to Die, and Starbound constantly rank in the top 10. Clearly a market exists for games that are a little rough around the edges.

"I can't imagine that platform holders and publishers are not looking at the success of things like the DayZ alpha," says the Fullbright Company's Steve Gaynor. "That was alpha, alpha, alpha, yet it was the top seller throughout the entire Steam holiday sale at full price over all of the games that were discounted. They made money, and their game isn't going to be at 1.0 for a long time.

"In some ways, that's been the model for MMOs for a long time. When did World of Warcraft hit 1.0? Its experience is very different three years after release than it was on release. They continue to refine it, change things, and add features, yet they are making money the entire time. Again, it seems like something that with these consoles that are always connected, there's not a huge reason that we can't have downloadable games from the PlayStation Store that have a flag on it that says 'Hey, this is an alpha.' Maybe it's discounted or maybe it's not. I don't see a reason why it couldn't work in the same way it works on Steam."

The market clearly exists for these types of games, but to some developers, the concern about this approach goes beyond the business model. Introducing players to your world early on and receiving feedback could affect the rest of the development – for better or worse. This could be a double-edged sword for products that already have a clear vision.

"I think as a developer it's quite risky because sometimes you can end up with a different game if you show the game to anybody," says Media Molecule's Christophe Villedieu. "Is it better? I don't know. I think it's sharing the experience with the players and fans. The sharing aspect I like. We have a strong community with LittleBigPlanet who support us, but do we want them to have tons of input in the next thing? It's a tricky thing. Sometimes you want it both ways, sometimes you don't. There are already some betas on consoles, but alphas are a bit too [rough]."

Even if publishers and developers are keen to adopt the paid alpha approach to game design, it's still ultimately up to the platform holders whether or not they want to allow these types of experiences on their consoles. Microsoft and Sony have traditionally had closed platforms with quality control, and alphas cut against the grain of that philosophy.

"This is a bigger conversation than [Naughty Dog], but if I were in some room with a bunch of dudes talking about what the projections are for what our culture is that we're trying to create for the platform, do I want to create this sort of open-ended feeling [that] the community is integral and part of this iteration loop, or am I trying to say when you get a game on this console it is the best f---ing game you're going to get?" asks Naughty Dog's Bruce Straley. "It needs to be polished and it's well executed and only certain games are even going to make it on this console – where are the boundaries, where is the line that you draw that says good enough?"

This is a question we're likely to see answered by Sony and Microsoft in the next few years as PC games and mobile games continue to push the paid alpha model forward.

Will streaming services ever gain traction?

Streaming services have had a hard time making headway in the gaming space thus far. Despite lining up more than 50 publishers for its cloud gaming service and building a considerable server network across the United States, OnLive failed to catch on with gamers. It's hard to pinpoint one exact reason why it failed, but it likely came down to a combination of inconsistent performance, an underwhelming game library, and general lack of interest from consumers.

This past January, Sony officially unveiled its Gaikai powered streaming service, dubbed PlayStation Now. When it launches later this year, the service will stream back-catalog gaming content to Sony branded televisions, mobile devices, the Vita, PS3, and PS4. Users can pay for access to PS3 titles on a per-game basis, or sign up for a subscription service. In the future, Sony plans to offer PSone and PS2 games, and could leverage the technology for game demos of upcoming titles as well. The plan is certainly ambitious, and given that of the PlayStation users number in the hundreds of millions, Sony already has a large install base. So is this the year streaming takes hold? Some believe the change is inevitable.

"Everyone's so used to that model now with Spotify and Netflix that it feels like a natural step," says Media Molecule's Rex Crowle. "I would be way more interested in a model where you're paying a subscription and you can just jump into a library and play whatever you want to play rather than getting into free-to-play games."

But not everyone sees it as a winning idea.

"I've always been a skeptic about this cloud play kind of thing," says Ed Fries. "As a way of playing retro games for backward compatibility, that could be nice, but this idea has been around for a long time and it's never really made sense.

"My problem is it makes less and less sense every year. The hardware is getting faster and faster and cheaper and cheaper, so having local hardware run your game and have instant response with no latency problems and no network problems is a great thing. Why would you park something up in the cloud and have those problems? I don't see what problem it is solving. I see what problems it is creating. I think the speed of light to Los Angeles to New York is like nine milliseconds or something like that, which is almost a frame at 60 frames per second. And that's like a direct line with no switches in between. Speed of light is a real problem and it won't go away."

Will VR headsets go mainstream or are they destined to be niche devices?

The momentum behind virtual reality has steadily increased over the past few years. Sony is working on its own VR headset, Valve is actively exploring the potential, and Oculus Rift continues to grow supporters from within the industry. In the past six months, it lured legendary game developer John Carmack away from id Software to become its chief technology officer and brought on former EA Partners chief David DeMartini to spearhead the company's publishing division. Internal expectations are incredibly high, with Oculus founder Palmer Luckey boldly proclaiming that VR headsets will go down as "one of the most important technologies in the history of mankind."

But even with all the hype, several questions still surround the device. How much will it cost once it launches later this year, will Oculus be able to procure a must-play game that will serve as a system seller, and will the install base grow large enough to attract more developers? All of these questions need to be addressed if Oculus wants to move beyond being a niche device and tread into the mainstream consciousness. Several technological hurdles need to be overcome, as well.

"I think it's going to be a long time before you get the framerate and the quality of graphics up so that it could become a truly accessible device for mass market appeal," says Naughty Dog's Bruce Straley. "On the indie side of things there is a huge desire to make something for the VR headsets, and I am extraordinarily intrigued by the possibilities. We've talked about, 'Could you imagine being in Pittsburgh in The Last of Us with the headset on and listening for a clicker or overhearing conversations?' It would be the most intense experience ever."

Another potential deflating issue facing virtual reality headsets is the user experience. People who wear glasses don't have a comfortable experience wearing a headset on top of their frames, and users being subjected to motion sickness isn't an easy challenge to overcome.

"I'm still in the skeptical camp on that one," says Ed Fries. "I've only seen the low-resolution version of Oculus and felt sick pretty quickly. I had a lot of technical issues with it. It was hard for me to see past that. I hear the HD version is better, and the motion blur is better. Even with all of that stuff – and I'm probably wrong on this – but trying it made me see all of the problems with it. You can't really use your head turning to navigate, because your head only goes half way. So you have to have a controller anyway to get around. You're using your thumbs to get around, not your head, and so your body feels like it's moving one way and it's not moving. Your head seems like it's moving, and that's what makes you sick. I don't know how they get around that. No matter what, if you're going to move, you're body is not going to be moving. Your inner ear is not going to be moving, but your character will feel like he is moving. Making it so real amplifies the problem. If you can't move, that's a fundamental problem."

Pairing a VR headset with haptic feedback could be one way around this problem, but that type of experience isn't very conducive to a home environment filled with obstacles like couches, coffee tables, and lamps. In an era where experiences like the Nintendo Wii and Guitar Hero have brought more people into the fold of gaming, some are also resistant to the idea of going back to a reclusive experience where wearing a headset cuts off your interactions with other people in the room.

"I think the immersion aspect is something really new, and if it's nicely done it could change everything, but I don't see myself playing with that at home with my wife coming in and looking at me like 'What the f--- is he doing?'" says Media Molecule's Christophe Villedieu.

Perhaps the true potential for virtual reality technology isn't in the home, but rather in the dusty old arcades that players have largely abandoned over the past few decades.

"Maybe this could be the rise of arcades again, of actually going somewhere to put these on," says Media Molecule's Rex Crowle. "It becomes more of a social thing then, kind of like going to the gym or something like that where you meet up and all put your headsets on and accidentally punch each other in the face as you're flailing around fighting dragons. It may be some kind of weird mash-up between an arcade, a gym, and LARPing." ◆

Surviving THE Game

After years of developers holding the hands of gamers with tutorials and dynamic difficulty, unforgiving challenge has returned to video games

by Daniel Tack

With so many modern game experiences over the past few console generations turning into interactive movies that push a player through a clearly defined set of goals and objectives that require little effort, the pendulum has swung violently back in the other direction. From unforgiving action games like Demon's Souls to the rebirth of roguelikes with FTL: Faster Than Light and Dungeons of Dredmor, these throwbacks remind players that the tougher the challenge, the sweeter the achievement.

One of the most popular modern expressions of challenge in video games is the survival genre. These games offer players the freedom to fail, and fail often, while seeking food and shelter and preparing for unpleasant evenings spurred by enemies, other players, or both. Whether you're being hacked to pieces for your rock supply in Rust, having your setup blown up by a Creeper your "friend" brought home in Minecraft, or starving to death during a harsh winter in Banished, these games test a player's resolve and willpower.

In a world where game failure had become a missed button press on a quicktime event that can be quickly reloaded and completed, the shift toward player-crafted experiences and permadeath with real interactions, consequences, and rewards isn't that surprising. While they're not for everyone, survival games unapologetically bring the challenge back. This is a look at some of the titles that are pushing the boundaries in the genre.

Rust

Rust may be the most "pure" of the current crop of survival game options. The title has become somewhat notorious for its gangs of roving, naked men that accost players for food, materials, or their lives. Player will likely experience this in the first few minutes of gameplay. The core of the game is trying to create shelter, forming communities, and assembling advanced weaponry to stay alive. There's no end boss to defeat, and no way to "beat the game."

Interaction in the open world is almost completely player driven. Players are free to do whatever they wish, from building heavily guarded compounds to roving around in the nude demanding goods from unlucky travelers.

"Our aim is to give the player more tools to play with," says Garry Newman, director of Facepunch Studios. "We're huge on enabling emergent gameplay. That's what Rust is about. For the most part we want to stay as far away as possible from defining gameplay. Our job is to give the player the tools they need, or at least the tools they need to get the tools they need."

With Rust and games like it, players have no real guidance. They're simply thrust into the thick of things for better or worse.

"I think it's something that people have wanted for a long time," Newman says. "It feels like a lot of games are very 'friendly.' They really hold your hand, they don't expect you to learn to play the game yourself, the whole game is a big tutorial. I think we've missed games that kick you in the face. That you have to really work at to get anywhere."

Said face-kicking can occur immediately and violently in Rust, whether the new player is chewed to death by a mutant bear or brought down by the unforgiving rocks or rifles of fellow players.

"Any emotion that a game evokes is probably a good thing," Newman says. "Even if that is immense anger and frustration. You need the dark to see the light. Making friends with someone in game, helping them and having them help you back, that all means a lot more if they can blow your head off and steal everything you own."
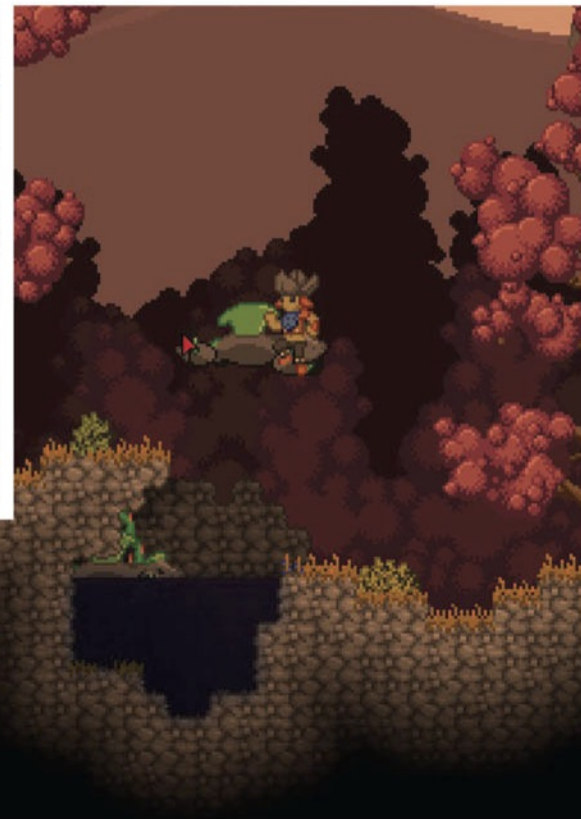
Starbound

Building upon the 2D styling of Terraria, Starbound lets players journey across the galaxies and attempt to survive a multitude of bosses and deadly planet denizens. While gaining access to more powerful weapons and tools over the course of journeying from the relatively mild early-game zones to Sector X, players have to deal with powerful alien species and dangerous planet environments, including lack of oxygen, meteor showers, risky asteroid fields, poisonous liquids, frozen ice planets, and volcanic explosions. Players can choose from a variety of different races and engage in generally co-operative multiplayer as they traverse the stars. Starbound's difficulty ranges from currency drop on death to permanent character death. The early access build is currently available on Steam.

Don't Starve

Minecraft may have brought the "Get some food and hide because night is coming" experience to the mainstream, but other titles have taken this philosophy to new levels. Klei Entertainment's Don't Starve makes survival the ultimate goal, with challenges that continue to ramp up and additional resources that must be managed carefully in addition to heat and hunger.

In Don't Starve, players can lose to a huge roster of dangerous monsters or by simply going insane. The game doesn't embrace the dark heart of humanity by including multiplayer functionality, but it doesn't have to. It's already a punishing experience that has all kinds of variables in any given playthrough.

The procedural generation makes every attempt a journey into unexplored territory, as players encounter massive killer trees, spider queens, or even the Christmas demon Krampus. A collection of unlockable characters, each with signature abilities, adds a progression aspect to the many deaths a player will endure. While nighttime is often a cause for alarm in survival games, it's an absolutely lethal experience in Don't Starve.
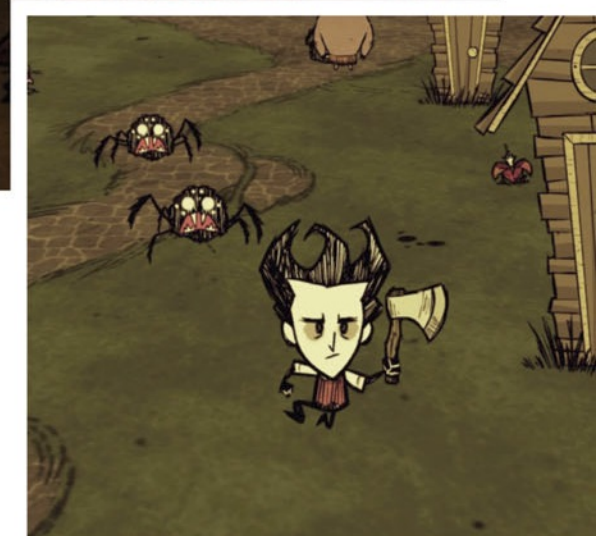
Terraria

Platform: PlayStation 3 • Xbox 360 • PC • iOS • Android
Developer: Re-Logic

Terraria takes the building and exploration aspects from Minecraft and adds a healthy layer of adventuring and combat to the mix. Dangerous bosses and spectacular weapons and armor give this 2D survival game goals and objectives within the world. Players can select various server rulesets to enhance the difficulty level of the game significantly, ranging from a small currency penalty on death to permanent character death.
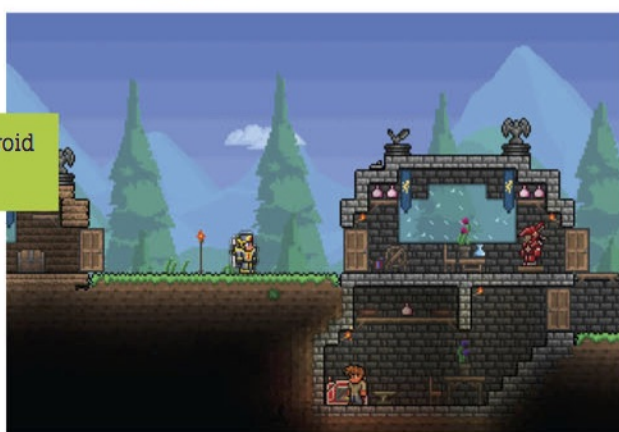
The Survival Sims

A number of single-player survival games have their roots in the classic PC game Dwarf Fortress. These "priority based" survival city-builder simulations often focus on the creation and sustainability of a city or town. Players take a top-level view and assign or push tasks indirectly to their workers and citizens.

They can feature monsters and dungeons as part of the experience as in Towns or Gnomoria, or simply have the player squaring off against the elements, as is the case with the new title Banished (see review on page 90).

Gaslamp Games is attempting something bold within the confines of this genre later this year by adding multiplayer elements into the mix with Clockwork Empires (see preview on page 77).

DayZ

Platform: PC
Developer: Bohemia Interactive

The survival genre owes much to DayZ, which started off as an Arma II mod. Creator Dean Hall teamed up with Bohemia Interactive to create the current standalone title, available in early access form on Steam. While zombies permeate the landscape, the real gameplay revolves around interacting with other players, both positively and negatively. Will you group up with friends and take over a town? Are the two people approaching you friend or foe – and will you shoot first and questions later? As with other titles in the genre that feature player-vs-player aspects, survival quickly becomes less about zombies and more about dealing with other humans who are also in need of food, shelter, and weapons. ◈

Should Nintendo Port Its Games To Mobile Platforms?

The recent rise of the mobile market has provided publishers such as Rockstar, Capcom, Square-Enix, and EA with new opportunities for financial gains. To date, Nintendo has not explored mobile development. Some argue that the rich mobile economy would solve many of Nintendo's financial woes, while others fear that a mobile shift would diminish the company's strengths. Like a typical debate club, our editors have been assigned to defend a position whether it agrees with their personal views or not.

PRO

Nintendo's current business strategies are failing. The company recently announced an operating loss of roughly $15 million during the last nine months of 2013. In that same time period, the company sold less than 2.4 million Wii U consoles. Comparatively, Sony shipped nearly twice as many PS4s in only two months. Nintendo needs a new business plan.

Many industry analysts and fans are encouraging Nintendo to explore the rich mobile market. Apple customers spent over $10 billion in iOS apps alone last year. Unfortunately, Nintendo doesn't know how to approach the mobile market. The company recently announced that it had tasked a "small, select team of developers" to release free mobile videos and minigames that it hopes will attract consumers to Nintendo's console offerings. That is not how a company takes advantage of a rich new market – that's just marketing.

Nintendo nostalgia runs deep in our culture. We slap Mario's pixelated form onto our shirts, coffee mugs, keychains, and phone cases; we just can't play official releases of his games on our phones. This is a shamefully untapped market.

Nintendo's best strategy would be to shift a selection of its classic games over to iOS and Android. In a recent interview with *Game Informer*, industry analyst Michael Pachter estimated that if Nintendo shifted as few as 10 classic titles over to the mobile space, it could theoretically wipe away its financial losses from the previous year.

Nintendo wouldn't have to stick to the classics either. Many of its popular brands could easily be adapted to fit mobile sensibilities. The auto-run genre worked well for Rayman; there's no reason to think that it couldn't work for Mario. A mobile app would make training and trading Pokémon with friends easier than ever. And I'd much rather manage the quiet town of Animal Crossing from my phone than any tiny tower.

I love Nintendo. I love Nintendo games, but there might not be a Nintendo for much longer if it keeps its current strategy. A mobile push would give Nintendo the solvency it needs to continue making the games we love, for every platform. » **Ben Reeves**

CON

Though Nintendo could use mobile to woo its lapsed fans, I am certain that shoveling its back catalog onto our phones isn't the answer. Hardware doesn't make Nintendo a valuable company. It's the characters and games that keep fans coming back for more.

"If I was to take responsibility for the company for just the next one or two years, and if I was not concerned about the long-term future of Nintendo at all, it might make sense for us to provide our important franchises for other platforms, and then we might be able to gain some short-term profit," Nintendo president Satoru Iwata told *CVG* in August 2013. This is most true in a mobile environment.

Mobile has two core effects that do not fit in Nintendo's philosophy. Mobile would offer a burst of cash, but in the long run would make full-priced retail games and the hardware on which to play them a tougher sell. Nintendo would first need to develop internal resources (or outsource) the capacity to create mobile versions. It would also need to develop the knowledge base to compete in a market defined by crushingly low prices that would obliterate the value of its characters.

Quality is the bigger problem. Even when Pokémon X & Y had a rare game-breaking bug, the company identified the issue quickly, shared a workaround, and issued a patch quickly. In a mobile environment, Nintendo doesn't control the operating system or the growing number of devices in that space. Diagnosis and repair could be slowed considerably.

Mobile controls are often clumsy, diminishing the experience. For Nintendo, a company concerned with delivering a positive user experience, these are all unthinkable compromises. Nintendo won't (and shouldn't) take steps that would devalue its characters and tarnish the reputation of quality. The company should use mobile to its advantage, but the answer isn't to flood the app stores with games we've already played. » **Mike Futter**

The Good

HITMAN

developer IO Interactive says it's working on a new Hitman title for the PS4, Xbox One, and PC. The game features the largest levels in the series that encourage players to tackle their objectives in different ways sans checkpoints. IO Interactive has not mentioned a release time-frame yet.

The Bad

IRRATIONAL GAMES

strips down to a 15-person operation, with studio head Ken Levine reimagining the studio as a "smaller, more entrepreneurial endeavor." Levine says he wants to make replayable, narrative-driven games that are exclusively downloadable. In the future, 2K Games will handle the BioShock franchise.

The Ugly

CANDY CRUSH SAGA

creators King have filed to trademark the word "Candy" in what it says is an attempt to protect its IP from copycats. King have also gotten into a legal wrangling over developer Stoic's use of the word "Saga" in its game The Banner Saga (shown), claiming that Stoic's tactical PC title is "confusingly and deceptively similar" to King's match-three title Candy Crush Saga. Ironically, indie studio Stolen Goose says that King has ripped off its Scamperghost game with King's own Pac-Avoid. In 2009, King negotiated for Scamperghost, but ultimately Stolen Goose decided to take its game elsewhere. ◆

Quotable

"To be honest, I don't think the franchise could be in better hands."

– **Cliff Bleszinski** on Epic selling the Gears of War franchise to Microsoft. Series vet Rod Fergusson is overseeing the franchise at the Microsoft internal studio Black Tusk.

Game Development's
GREAT WHITE NORTH
Montreal, Canada's Video Game Mecca

Despite the frigid climate, Canada has become home to many major players in the game industry. Since the late '90s, when French publisher Ubisoft opened up a branch in Montreal, the city has become a major North American hub of game development. At least part of this is due to the fact that the Quebec government helps cultivate the industry in the form of heavily subsidized jobs and other economic incentives for game companies.

1 Behaviour Interactive - Formerly known as A2M/Artificial Mind & Movement, Behavior has made a name for itself in ports and creating games based on popular licenses, like recent games Brave: The Video Game and Ice Age: Continental Drift.

2 BioWare Montreal/EA Mobile This division of BioWare opened in 2009. It's currently working on an upcoming Mass Effect game. It shares a building with EA Mobile Montreal. Army of Two studio Visceral Montreal, which also shared this office, was shuttered in 2013.

3 Compulsion Games - This indie studio recently released the arty adventure game Contrast.

4 Cyanide - Founded by ex-Ubisoft employees, Cyanide has created two games in the epic Game of Thrones universe, an RPG and a strategy game entitled Game of Thrones: Genesis.

5 Funcom Montreal - Funcom, based in Norway, opened a Montreal branch in 2009. The company's Montreal studio has helped create the MMO The Secret World and the Rise of the Godslayer expansion for Age of Conan.

6 Gameloft - Gameloft has ties to Montreal, as its president and CEO Michel Guillemot was also a co-founder of Ubisoft, which helped create the Montreal gaming boom.

7 Hibernum Creations - Hibernum is a development and consulting company that specializing in mobile and social platforms. It has assisted in the development of some huge mobile properties, including Lego City: My City and Assassin's Creed: Freedom Cry.

8 Minority [Note: shares building with Spearhead] Minority, headed by Vander Caballero, is best known for its emotional, conflicted game Papo & Yo, which explored Caballero's relationship with his alcoholic father.

9 Polytron - Polytron's controversial founder Phil Fish created a phenomenon with Fez, a mind-bending puzzle game. Though Fish canceled Fez 2 because of Internet criticism, Polytron is still operating.

10 Red Barrel - This upstart indie studio is behind the chilling, critically acclaimed horror game Outlast.

11 Spearhead Games [Note: shares building with Minority] A new studio formed by veterans of projects like Army of Two and Assassin's Creed, Spearhead Games recently released Tiny Brains for PlayStation 4.

12 Eidos Montreal - Now owned by Square Enix, Eidos Montreal won accolades for Deus Ex: Human Revolution and is currently working on the highly anticipated return of the Thief franchise.

13 Strategy First - This long-running publisher has been around since 1988, specializing in niche PC strategy franchises like Jagged Alliance.

14 Tribute Games - Founded by two members of Ubisoft's Scott Pilgrim vs. The World team, Tribute is currently developing the very promising Mercenary Kings.

15 Ubisoft Montreal - The big dog of Montreal development, Ubisoft's studio has been a juggernaut in recent years. This studio was responsible for rebooting Prince of Persia, creating the Assassin's Creed and Splinter Cell series, and improving on Far Cry with the third installment and Blood Dragon. Its upcoming game slate also includes the highly anticipated Watch Dogs.

16 Warner Bros. Interactive Montreal - Headed by ex-Ubisoft Montreal head Martin Tremblay, Warner Brother's studio focuses on the company's DC licenses, including the recent Batman: Arkham Origins.

by Matt Helgeson

Metal Masters **Avenged Sevenfold** Set To Conquer Mobile Games

by Matt Helgeson

The popular metal band Avenged Sevenfold is familiar to gamers thanks to the prominent placement of songs like "Beast and the Harlot" in the Guitar Hero games and a gonzo post-credits performance in Call of Duty: Black Ops II. Now, lead singer M. Shadows is spearheading the development of **Hail to the King: Deathbat**, a rock-infused dungeon crawler coming to iOS and Android in late spring.

What's your background as a gamer?
I was the same as most people. My grandma bought me a Nintendo and I remember having Duck Hunt and Mario. From then out, I was limited by my parents to only play a certain amount of time because all I wanted to do was play games. I used to ride my bike down to the local arcade back when they had actual arcades. As I got older, I took a break but got back into it when I got my Xbox 360. I had all the Nintendo systems up until then, but that's when I got into first-person shooters and started playing in a clan.

What clan do you belong to?
The Apostles. It's in Call of Duty. We still play. We competed in the MLG. We did really well; we had two teams, one ranked 17th and one ranked 49th. That was for Call of Duty: Black Ops II. When the next Call of Duty comes out and it gets competitive again, we'll do it again. The Infinity Ward ones are a little different. When Treyarch puts out another game we'll get into it again.

What was the genesis for Hail to the King?
Basically, I was writing a triple-A game. Two summers ago, I spent the whole summer writing it. Someone I look up to a lot in the gaming world is Mark Lamia, the president of Treyarch. I was telling him about the game, and he said, "You know, Matt, that's a $200 million game you want to make." He ran me through the process and said, "If you really want to get into this you should start on something smaller and learn the ropes and see what being a lead on a game is really like."

I went back and said, "You're right, the band is my first priority anyway." Then, I went to Southeast Asia and saw everybody on their mobile devices on a bus ride to the hotel, and I thought, "What if we did an Avenged Seven-fold game, a mobile game?" I started thinking about the imagery we've created through album art, song titles, and artwork we've used, and I thought there could be a story there. I started jotting stuff down and brought it to the band and they said, "Yeah that's awesome. Let's do it."

The game looks like a Diablo descendent. Was that one of your inspirations?
At first, it was going to be more of a three-dimensional thing, but the way the virtual controls are it's just so out of control. It's really hard to use both your thumbs on virtual sticks with buttons at the same time on a touchscreen. We tried ideas with different camera angles. That's what we ended up on, which we felt had the most cohesive controls. We looked at the mechanics of the game and figured out that this is what works best for our control scheme.

What areas of the game are you focusing on?
I actually wanted to focus a lot on the storytelling and the puzzles. I'm a huge fan of Zelda; it's my favorite gaming franchise of all time. We didn't want it to be a pure hack n' slash. I'm not a really big fan of just sitting there and hacking at things and leveling up. You do have that aspect in the game. You can get more powerful weapons based on a coin system. All your swords correlate with the magic that you can use. [But] It's not about hacking your way through it; it's about being smart while fighting. It's a little bit deeper and there is a big story, so dialogue, NPCs, and side quests push the story along.

What role do you play in development?
At this point, I go in two or three times a week and sit there for about 12 hours. We go through the levels and enemies. I have builds sent to my house daily. I [look at] the weapons, how the characters look, how the game plays, the life system, how much swords cost. I have friends who work at video game companies and I'm sending them my PC builds. They're sending me back feedback about things that are overpowered.

How are you incorporating the imagery, lore, and music of Avenged Sevenfold into the game?
What we wanted to do was, when you fight bosses, you get an instrumental version of some of our big songs. For example, the song "Nightmare." That's the first level of the game.

When you fight the boss, you're fighting to an instrumental version of that song. The theme music for each level is written by us and is organically real instruments, but we've layered 8-bit sounds on top of it. It has a throwback to the old Contra and Castlevania music. The game has eight original songs and nine old tracks that are instrumentals.

Does it feel like it's starting to come together in the way you hoped?
It's really awesome. I love playing through it. One of the craziest things to me [is] watching others play it. They do things you'd never expect them to do. [It's] cool and fulfilling. ◈

M. Shadows

photo: Colin Douglas Gray

Embracing Chaos

Julian Gollop Reboots A Classic

Famed game designer Julian Gollop is best known as the creator of X-COM: UFO Defense, a series revitalized in recent years by Firaxis Games. However, X-COM is not the only beloved tactical strategy game from Gollop's past. For over two decades, fans have been pleading with him to revisit Chaos: The Battle of Wizards, a multiplayer-focused, turn-based strategy title released for the ZX Spectrum back in 1985. After leaving Ubisoft in 2012 to delve back into indie game development, Gollop is finally giving fans their wish with Chaos Reborn – and recruiting their support to make it happen.

by Jeff Marchiafava

DESCENDING INTO CHAOS

Despite its simple 2D character art, Chaos: The Battle of Wizards was well ahead of its time. The game pits a mix of up to eight players and A.I.-controlled wizards in a turn-based battle to the death. Each player starts with a random mix of single-use spells, including attack spells, offensive and defensive buffs, and object spells that affect the environment. The real draw, however, is the large pool of creature summons, which run the gamut from bears and lions to dragons and vampires. Summoned characters are controlled by their creator in subsequent turns, and each has its own unique stats and attributes.

Each player can cast a single spell on his or her turn, and all spells have a lawful, chaotic, or neutral association. Successfully casting a spell affects the overall balance of law and chaos in the world, which in turn affects the success rate for casting future spells. However, the game also incorporates a bluffing element; players can forgo the success roll by summoning a creature as an illusion. Illusionary creatures have the same stats and attributes as a normal creature, but can be instantly dismissed with a reusable disbelieve spell. The result is a highly replayable and unpredictable multiplayer game that's still fun today despite the obvious technological limitations of the time.

THE RIGHT TIME FOR A REBOOT

Gollop officially announced Chaos Reborn on his website in 2012. Like Firaxis Games' XCOM reboot, Chaos Reborn is an intriguing mix of classic gameplay and new ideas. The empty, rectangular arena of the original Chaos has been replaced by procedurally generated battlefields made of hexagonal tiles. Gollop is also expanding the multiplayer offerings for Chaos Reborn. "One of the things I wanted to extract from the original Chaos was that a lot of players like to play co-op versus A.I. or co-op with A.I. players," Gollop says. "They also like to play multiplayer with many players. I want to have these elements reflected in different game modes more formally in the game."

In addition to classic free-for-all deathmatches, Chaos Reborn features various team-based matches and co-op battles against ultra-powerful A.I.-controlled wizards. Weekly knockout tournaments provide players an extra incentive to keep coming back. "Tournaments will be a big feature of the game," Gollop says. "…They'll have prizes which will be some kind of equipment or magical artifact, which you can then use in your single-player questing or other multiplayer battles."
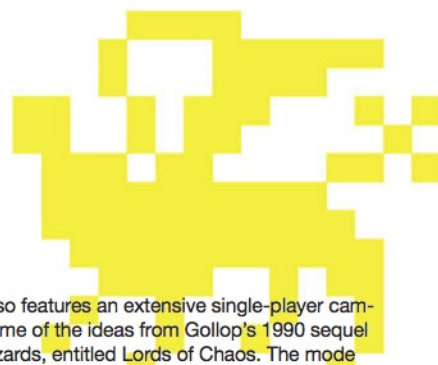
Chaos Reborn also features an extensive single-player campaign, based on some of the ideas from Gollop's 1990 sequel to The Battle of Wizards, entitled Lords of Chaos. The mode is called Realms of Chaos, and tasks players with exploring procedurally generated kingdoms to defeat a Wizard King and his Wizard Lord minions. "It has certain adventure, strategy, and puzzle elements to it, on top of the wizard battles themselves," Gollop says.

Players accumulate experience points and spells as they progress, and can equip and upgrade a variety of gear. Like the multiplayer modes, Realms of Chaos is being designed with replayability in mind. "Every day you will have some new realm that you can explore and battle in," Gollop says. "And as your wizard level increases, you get access to higher level realms which have more interesting opponents, more interesting spells that you can get from them, and more interesting equipment." Co-op fans can also invite friends into their realm to help with difficult battles.

KICKSTARTING A CLASSIC

Gollop is set to launch a Kickstarter for Chaos Reborn on March 14, but has been soliciting feedback from fans on his personal website and the game's forum since its announcement. The famed developer isn't afraid to explore new ideas. Roughly half of the spells in Chaos Reborn are new, and include creature summons with unique abilities such as a giant spider that can restrict a character's movement with its sticky webbing and a Phoenix that's immune to fire and can resurrect after death. Gollop is also refining some of the core mechanics, while staying mindful of Chaos' fan base. "I don't want to upset any fans of the original game," Gollop says, "but on the other hand, there is a lot more scope within the spell system, for example, for creating some stuff which is more interesting and varied…so I have to consider the balance aspects of all the spells very carefully so that players don't perceive some spells to be crap compared to others."

Like other Kickstarter campaigns, Chaos Reborn backers have a variety of funding levels to choose from. Players can grab the game for around $20, but fans who shell out more can get interesting perks like the ability to create their own set of rare magical items via an exclusive equipment editor. "I want to give the players who back the game at these different levels something extra in the game," Gollop says. "At the same time, I don't want it to be something which gives them some kind of unfair advantage, either. Because our equipment system is procedurally generated…I thought it would be cool for players to add something more personal to their game experience." Higher backers can even have their character show up as an A.I.-controlled Wizard Lord in the single-player campaigns of other players, and reap the rewards as they battle against them. This feature is also available to non-backers, but will require time and effort to unlock.

One thing you won't see in Chaos Reborn? Microtransactions or any other free-to-play elements. "If you're going to do a free-to-play game you have to start with that in mind from the beginning and build your design around that," Gollop says. "I mean in theory, you could probably make any game free-to-play, but you'll probably screw it up in the process [laughs]. So I think free-to-play is fine for some games, but it's probably not appropriate for the audience we're going for, which are primarily PC gamers, players of the original Chaos, and players of strategy games, who have a bit more of a sense of fair play."

Gollop aims to release Chaos Reborn for PC, Mac, and Linux next spring, but expects to have a playable prototype available to backers a few months after the Kickstarter campaign ends. The developer also isn't ruling out bringing Chaos Reborn to other platforms – including new-gen consoles – if the game is successful. Given Gollop's pedigree and the enticing features he has planned, we expect that to be a strong possibility. ◈
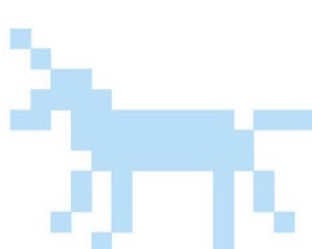
Stepping In:
A Glimpse Into Upcoming Open Worlds

With the power of the new consoles at their disposal, developers are now pushing the boundaries of their technology, making more immersive games than ever before. Many upcoming games have a common feature: an open world. Some companies, such as Ubisoft, have fully committed to world building, seeing it as an integral part of its future. In fact, five of the company's upcoming games likely feature open worlds: Watch Dogs, The Division, The Crew, plus the unannounced but surely in development Far Cry and Assassin's Creed sequels. Ubisoft is hardly the only company jumping on the bandwagon. Warner Bros. is also releasing its fair share of open-world games, such as Dying Light, Middle-earth: Shadow of Mordor, and Mad Max.

These companies aren't the only trendsetters for what new-gen consoles can do for game worlds. Open-world developers are more ambitious than ever, recreating U.S. cities, letting their imaginations run wild with fantastical lands, and even launching us into space. Here are eight diverse open worlds we're excited to visit in 2014.

by Kimberley Wallace

Infamous: Second Son

STYLE: 1-Player Action
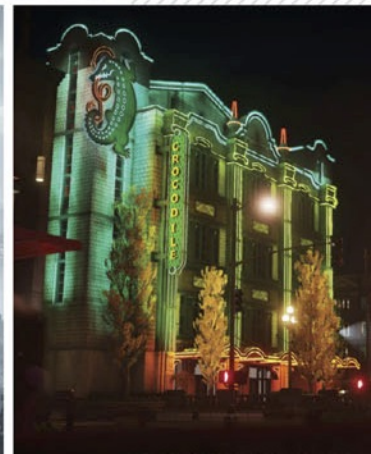**PLATFORM:** PlayStation 4
RELEASE: March 21

DESTINATION » The Infamous franchise steps into its first real-world destination with Seattle, WA serving as the hotbed for more emerging Conduits.

WHAT YOU'LL ENCOUNTER » The Emerald City under siege. The police have taken over under the guise of protecting the citizenry from Conduits, so expect towers, checkpoints, guards, spotlights, and helicopters to bring an oppressive feel to the beauty of Seattle. This digital recreation doesn't have the exact layout of the real city; Sucker Punch altered parts for the sake of gameplay, like making buildings fun to climb.

EXCITING LOCALES » Sucker Punch licensed some Seattle businesses and landmarks to make the virtual creation feel legit, like the Space Needle, Elephant Car Wash, and Lincoln's Toe Truck (a truck shaped like a pink foot). The studio changed some landmarks, like The Crocodile; in real life it's a small club, but Sucker Punch transformed it into a larger, '40s style theater. The team even hired locals to put in special Easter eggs that Seattle natives will appreciate, like graffiti and art from local artists.

DIVERSIONS » Anytime you're not doing a story mission, you're fighting for the city. The Department of Unified Protection is amidst a hostile takeover of the city. In every district of all of the different neighborhoods in Seattle sits a mobile command center. Your job is to free the neighborhoods from this oppression by destroying all the towers, bridges, cameras, and drones that they've set up for surveillance.

WHY YOU SHOULD VISIT » Based in nearby Bellevue, Sucker Punch team members spent time exploring Seattle to make the experience authentic. Next-gen tech has allowed them to do things they couldn't before with weather, lighting, reflections, and time of day. Throw in superpowers and extreme interactivity with how you traverse the world, and you have the making for a compelling open-world experience. "From day one, our goal was to make a playground for a superhuman," says art director Horia Dociu.

The Crew

STYLE: 1-Player Racing (Multiplayer TBA)
PLATFORM: PlayStation 4, Xbox One, PC
RELEASE: 2014

DESTINATION » The Crew recreates iconic American cities such as San Francisco, New York, Miami, Los Angeles, and Chicago. The journey also takes you to striking environments like the Great Plains, the Rocky Mountains, and the southern bayou.

WHAT YOU'LL ENCOUNTER » Plenty of research went into making the experience as realistic as possible. Urban cities are flooded with pedestrians, construction workers, and traffic. Air, sea, and railway transportation networks also have an impact on the experience; for instance, a train schedule could alter the route you may want to take. The different environments feature their own species of wildlife, like alligators in the Everglades and coyotes in the deserts. You can even expect to see a whale offshore while driving along the coasts.

EXCITING LOCALES » The Crew is your chance to get up close to historic landmarks like Mount Rushmore, Cape Canaveral, the Pentagon, and the Golden Gate Bridge. "I particularly love our reproductions of the Grand Canyon and of the Sebring International Raceway in Florida, mainly for the intense, yet very different, driving experiences they offer," says Ivory Tower lead environment artist David Guillaume.

DIVERSIONS » The world is full of varied skill challenges. For instance, you can race a plane taking off on the runway, try to jump across the Grand Canyon, or compete in an off-road, coast-to-coast endurance run.

WHY YOU SHOULD VISIT » The U.S. is your racing playground, and you're in full control of the path you take to cross the country. Want to play it simple and use the highway? Go right ahead, but you can also go off road through fields and forests. "We believe boundaries should be broken, literally," Guillaume says. Weather and time of day effects also impact the experience. "Playing a slalom challenge at noon in the crowded streets of New York City could prove to be much more challenging than you'd think, and more often than not, expect the road itself to surprise you," Guillaume adds.

Destiny

STYLE: Online Multiplayer Shooter
PLATFORM: PlayStation 4, Xbox One, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
RELEASE: September 9

DESTINATION » A future Earth where things aren't looking particularly rosy for the human race. As a Guardian of the last city on Earth, it's your job to stave off extinction.

WHAT YOU'LL ENCOUNTER » A world torn asunder, but one that can be redeemed. The open frontier that awaits you isn't always easy to confront. Strange, brutal enemies roam the wilderness, and bones of humanity's lost golden age are littered through it, but it also holds technology and relics of the past.

EXCITING LOCALES » Mars, Venus, and the Moon are all possibilities for your visiting pleasure. The ruins of Earth also hold plenty of discoveries, like a rocket yard in Old Russia.

DIVERSIONS » Real people exist in the world of Destiny, not just NPCs, so finding people to adventure with and against should keep you busy. Bungie also plans to curate and evolve content after launch to keep players engaged, from story-driven sequences to multiplayer combat and cooperative raids. "From there, we layer and weave in public and social activities, investment, exploration, extended-fiction opportunities, Easter eggs, and more," says senior writer and community manager Eric Osborne.

WHY YOU SHOULD VISIT » When creating Destiny, Bungie's goal was to build places that the team would want to spend time in. The worlds all have stories to tell and enemies to master. The vastness of the world and its cooperative and competitive components should keep you busy. "It's all on-demand, but it feels so slick and harmonized and, most importantly, fun," Osborne says.

The Elder Scrolls Online

STYLE: Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing
PLATFORM: PlayStation 4, Xbox One, PC, Mac
RELEASE: April 4 (PC/Mac) June (PS4/Xbox One)

DESTINATION » Tamriel, a rich, fantastical world full of humans, elves, khajit, and Elder Scrolls lore.

WHAT YOU'LL ENCOUNTER » Molag Bal is using dark anchors to pull the entire world into Coldharbour, a plane of Oblivion. As the Soulless One, the prophecies state that it's your job to stop him. Your mission will take you to the various provinces of Tamriel.

EXCITING LOCALES » Besides Coldharbour, players journey through familiar territory, with many of the places featured in previous Elder Scrolls games like Daggerfall, Wayrest, and Mournhold returning. Expect them to look different because of the timeline; TESO is set 1,000 years before Skyrim.

DIVERSIONS » The world is alive and constantly shifting, so expect to be inundated with random interactive events just like you would be in Skyrim. The province of Cyrodiil is devoted to PvP. Your faction can team up to stake a claim of land by taking farms, lumber mills, and resources. This aids in keep capturing, where you fight NPC guards and other alliances for control over the territory. Treasures are scattered across the land, including books that reveal more history of the world. In fact, the Mages Guild is devoted to finding them. The intricate crafting system encourages you to track down materials and weaponry.

WHY YOU SHOULD VISIT » The Elder Scrolls' world has 20 years of lore associated with it, and the rich ambiance has always been compelling. Now, Bethesda is letting you step into its most expansive world yet. Everything fans love about Elder Scrolls is here. The exploration is reason alone to step in; stumbling upon a random cave, dungeon, or a treasure hidden in the landscape is what makes the experience.

The Division

STYLE: Online Multiplayer Shooter
PLATFORM: PlayStation 4, Xbox One, PC
RELEASE: 2014

DESTINATION » New York City, with a twist. "We are taking the city as you know it and turning that upside down," says Massive Entertainment realization director Tobias Nyman.

WHAT YOU'LL ENCOUNTER » With a disease spreading through the city, society is in disarray. Because The Division begins on Black Friday, expect Christmas decorations, billboards, bright lights, and plenty of snow. But with the world falling apart, there's a harrowing decay to everything. "We use the environment to explain what happened," Nyman says. "It's like stories frozen in time with most of them originating from fear, panic, chaos, and desperation, but also from hope."

EXCITING LOCALES » Massive is striving to precisely replicate New York, but one of the most exciting aspects of The Division will be finding parts of the city you didn't know existed. "Since we are adding a creative aspect to our world, some places would seem new or even be brand new for the city," Nyman says. He also says to look forward to stepping into Manhattan for the first time, "It's scary and tingling, like standing on the edge of a cliff looking down. You know this place, but not in this state of chaos."

DIVERSIONS » Your mission is to restore order to New York by teaming up with other agents. However, you can also engage in PvP and trade items.

WHY YOU SHOULD VISIT » Massive spent a lot of time obsessing over every detail of New York to make the world come alive. Nyman says the team got inspiration through visiting, watching movies, and reading books and comics to create every precise detail the way we know and love it. Seeing the city in ruin should create tension, while stepping in and merely surviving should be an adrenaline rush.

Dying Light

STYLE: 1-Player Action (4-Player Online)
PLATFORM: PlayStation 4, Xbox One, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, PC
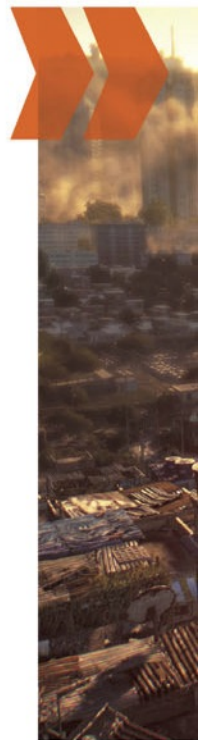**RELEASE:** 2014

DESTINATION » Harran, a fictional city quarantined due to a zombie outbreak.

WHAT YOU'LL ENCOUNTER » Keeping a community safe in the midst of a zombie apocalypse won't be easy. Narrow streets jam-packed with the infected continually stand between you and your destination. Screams of those on the edge of death ring through the town. You see the aftermath of the destruction firsthand, as objects break and fall around you, but every so often you stumble upon a scenic vista that shows life can still be beautiful amongst the chaos.

EXCITING LOCALES » While the specific locations have not been revealed, you begin in the slums and eventually move on to different destinations. Producer Tymon Smektala teases one he's sure will please gamers, "There's at least one location that – because of the sights alone – will make gamers stop for a minute and put aside their controller just to take in the view."

DIVERSIONS » According to Techland, Dying Light has more than 100 side quests, including challenges testing your agility and fighting prowess. Random events occur where you must decide to help or leave a survivor to suffer. Sometimes helping will only hurt you, other times it provides a benefit. Will you take the risk?

WHY YOU SHOULD VISIT » Techland is striving to not only make you emotionally attached to the world, but let it raise questions from the moment you enter. What happens if you leave the quarantine? Is it worth knowing what's happening on the outside if it makes the epidemic spread? Is the world outside of the city safe from zombies? Figuring out how you want to handle these situations should make the trip worthwhile.

The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt

STYLE: 1-Player Role-Playing
PLATFORM: PlayStation 4, Xbox One, PC
RELEASE: 2014

DESTINATION » A gritty fantasy world with shades of gray around every bend.

WHAT YOU'LL ENCOUNTER » Amongst the raw nature, caves, islands, and plains, society is battling social inequality, racism, and unethical rulers. How will you enact change?

EXCITING LOCALES » No Man's Land is a war-ravaged region based on Slavic mythology, complete with murky swamps and dark forests. Just the opposite, Novigrad and its surroundings emanate luxury and status, but looks can be deceiving. Underneath the veneer, it's rotting and corrupt.

DIVERSIONS » Besides running into tough choices and dealing with the consequences, monster hunting should keep you on your toes. These foes are devious, and you must experiment with tactics to discover their weak points, but the rewards make it worthwhile. All the monsters have unique backstories; some are even worshipped as local deities, giving you plenty to feel victorious about.

WHY YOU SHOULD VISIT » The Witcher has always been about choosing between different evils, but with an expansive world this time around, CD Projekt RED is making sure you can revisit places to see how your actions affected them. Perhaps you go against the status quo and it turns out for the worst – a village gets completely destroyed. Watching how your decisions shape the world should make you feel like you're not just walking in it, you're a part of it. "Geralt's world can be a really brutal and cruel place, and it's not exactly your casual destination for a sunbath and Sunday stroll," says senior art producer Michał Krzemiński. "If, however, you're up for a challenge, your sword is as sharp as your tongue…"

Watch Dogs

STYLE: 1-Player Action (2-Player Online)
PLATFORM: PlayStation 4, Xbox One, Wii U, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
**RELEASE:** Spring

DESTINATION » Chicago, a bastion of modernity and progress infected by tendrils of crime and corruption.

WHAT YOU'LL ENCOUNTER » Ubisoft brought its own interpretation to the Windy City. Expect frenetic downtown streets and surrounding low-income areas, but everything and everyone is connected by technology. "Our world reflects the hyper-connectivity of our society and the player will experience the power but also the consequence of playing with these systems," says associate producer Jean-Francois Naud.

EXCITING LOCALES » This wouldn't be Chicago without replicating its sky-scrapers. The Willis Tower, Tribune Tower, and John Hancock Center help you mark your position while you combat corruption. Ubisoft's recreation of Chicago features landmarks like the iconic Millennium Park and L-Train. Ubisoft even made sure to include a baseball field to capture the city's love affair with the sport, but says it's not based on any actual stadiums in the city.

DIVERSIONS » Side activities play off the technology-focused city. You can hack into civilians' electronics and play augmented reality games. Ubisoft is also introducing more traditional extracurricular activities like poker, street gambling, and drinking games.

WHY YOU SHOULD VISIT » As Naud emphasizes, "The city is your weapon." You can use traffic lights, ATMs, bridges, the L-Train, and more to your advantage. You must interact with the city infrastructure to achieve your goals, exploring different ways to get the job done. Everything has an impact. Citizens react based on your choices. "Causing accidents, raising bridges, and shutting down electricity are great tools, but the consequences can be deadly for anyone around," Naur says. Wielding this much power over a city is thrilling. Will you be responsible or abuse it? ◆
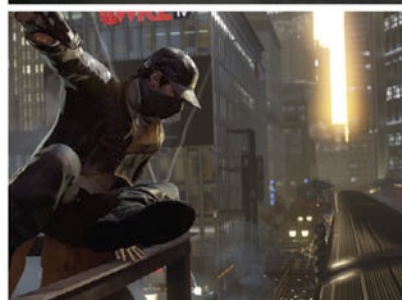
THE LAST OF US: LEFT BEHIND

Naughty Dog has released its first single-player DLC for The Last of Us, and like the original, it both confounds and exceeds our expectations. This new chapter balances two parallel stories and focuses on Ellie's relationship with her friend Riley, a character previously introduced in a spinoff graphic novel. We recently spoke with Naughty Dog creative director Neil Druckmann and game director Bruce Straley about their approach to this unique piece of post-release content. *interview by Matt Helgeson*

The Last of Us was my favorite game of last year. I thought the game's storytelling was so perfect that I had misgivings about you tinkering with the fiction. Did you share those concerns?
Neil Druckmann: Those were big fears that we had. We were really drawn to that story and filling in the gap between what happened in the graphic novel "American Dreams" and the main campaign. Even though we felt that we had a strong story that could stand on its own and show a different side of Ellie, we were always fearful that – if we don't pull this off, if it doesn't work right – we could be tainting what the main campaign is and what people took away from it.

Sometimes stories are as defined as much by what's left out of the story as by what's included. Some of these events were alluded to toward the end of the game. Was this something you always planned to do to fill out that relationship between Ellie and Riley?
ND: The opportunity to do another chapter came up pretty late in development, and it was something we were interested in doing. That's when we started brainstorming and deciding what kind of story that we could tell. Again, we were really drawn to

that event. In [The Last of Us], you get to see the events that have shaped Joel. You understand why he is the way he is when he meets Ellie. He keeps people at a distance and doesn't form any real human connections until much later. But for Ellie, she's already been bitten and set on that journey. You don't get to see her beforehand. That's why it felt like an intriguing prospect and something to fill in that gap.

Was Riley even a character when you were making the original game, or did she evolve after?
ND: We knew that when we were talking about the story, Ellie got bitten at some point and she didn't turn. It became more interesting to say, "Well, what if she was with her friend at that moment?" One turned and one didn't, and that's why she carries around this guilt. She talks about that stuff at the ending. It's stuff we had for a while and we just gave that character a name. Then, we were working on the comic book. The story of how Ellie met Riley became really interesting. With Left Behind, we challenged ourselves to see how much further we could push this relationship that wasn't explored in the comic book or hinted at in the game.

Even though you have less time to tell a story in Left Behind, you weren't afraid to let Ellie and Riley have a lot of quieter moments – playing with Halloween masks or the photo-booth scene. Why did you make that choice in terms of pacing?
Bruce Straley: One of the things that we wanted was to step out of our comfort zone a bit. With this storyline there was an available opportunity to create mechanics that would help build the bond between Ellie and Riley. Here's this girl, Riley, who the player doesn't know, who's re-entered Ellie's life. You get the sense that Ellie's a bit put off by her showing up in the middle of the night like she does and asking her to go along. So we needed to try to get the player to buy into this character just like Ellie needs to buy into Riley coming back into her life.
Our challenge was: How do we create enough of those moments so that you're creating player investment in this new character? You're seeing Riley's attitude and you're seeing her doing things like encouraging Ellie to roar inside of the Halloween store. You're hearing the dialogue and the laughter, and it's making Ellie come out of her shell and take those walls down – which is hopefully what we're doing for the player. This is

challenging, because we're saying, "Well, how far can we go with the non-combative stuff while still having intriguing moment-to-moment gameplay and keeping you as invested as possible?"

What were some of your gameplay goals that you had with Left Behind – were there any tweaks that you wanted to make?
ND: One of the reasons we added the multi-faction combat is that Ellie can't melee as well as Joel, so instead of adding more weapons or new melee moves – which is what you'd normally see in a DLC – we said, "Let's expand the tech of the enemies and how they interact with each other." As Ellie, you have a deeper strategy of how you approach the fight – whether you're skirting them or setting them off against each other, depending on who you find more dangerous or your resources.

BS: We did have sketches of multi-faction combat in the single-player campaign, and just due to time constraints and priorities, we had to let it go. But we picked up the ball again as soon as we had the ability to work on the DLC. Like Neil said, the story allowed us to add it and it seemed like it would add a new dimension of strategy in how you approach combat and add a new sense of tension – there's a sense of chaos once you start the fight. It was something we were intrigued by and we thought we should give it a shot. ◆

Five For Five
(And Younger)

by Jeff Cork

Parents don't have to settle when it comes to games for their little ones. Here are some high-quality apps to keep young players engaged.

Mobile apps are becoming the gateway into gaming for young players. Smartphones and tablets are ubiquitous, and savvy parents know how valuable the devices can be when it's time for anything from family bonding to creating an emergency distraction. Just because smaller kids are likely to play anything with bright colors, that doesn't mean they don't deserve to experience games that are actually worthy of their time.

Millions of apps are out there, so I enlisted an expert to find the most valuable experiences. Dr. Carla Fisher is a consultant and game designer who has been working with games and children for 15 years. She shared some of her suggestions for kids five and younger, and I spent a weekend playing them (and a few others) with my five- and six-year-old sons. These five were the biggest hits.

Motion Math: Hungry Guppy
» iOS

This is the most educational of the entries, but my five-year-old was as absorbed with it as he was with any of the other games. Hungry Guppy teaches basic addition via colorful bubbles and a friendly fish. Players combine bubbles – which are marked with pips or numbers – to match the guppy's particular appetite. As he eats more, he grows. Like most of the games mentioned here, Hungry Guppy isn't available on Android, but its bigger brother, Hungry Fish, is.

Highlights: My First Hidden Pictures
» iOS

My sons have always been fascinated with hidden pictures and the *I Spy* books, and this app is a great alternative to the printed page. Kids scour the busy scenes to find bananas, golf clubs, and other objects hidden within. The images are loaded with details, so parents and kids can talk about what they see and make up their own games – even when the last official missing doo-dad has been unearthed.

Toca Cars
» Android • iOS

When you have children at home, you know nothing beats large cardboard boxes when it comes to the cost/entertainment ratio. Toca Cars puts players behind the corrugated wheel of a cardboard racer, exploring the world with simple drag-to-steer controls. Better still, kids can fill up their own unique world with a variety of props in a construction mode.

Bad Piggies
» Android • iOS

I always appreciated the hidden educational message that lay beneath Angry Birds' shell. Bad Piggies expands on that physics-based gameplay in a chaotic game designed around building contraptions. Players are given a limited number of parts, which are assembled into a vehicle. Once assembled, the simulation goes live and players can see how well their creation worked. My kids have played this one for months now. If you have a Lego fan in your house, it's worth a look.

Williamspurrrrg
» iOS

Carla's too modest to recommend her own game here, but I'll do it for her. Williamspurrg is a collaborative game with a seemingly simple goal: Players work together to drag mustaches, beards, and other hipster accessories onto photos of cats. The multitouch interface makes later levels feel like Twister for your fingers. It's simple, funny, and rewards cooperation – three things I think most parents can emphatically get behind.

You can visit Carla's blog, A Gamer's Guide to Parenting, at http://carlafisher.tumblr.com/, or follow her on twitter at @NoCrusts.

Achievement Unlocked:
One Million Gamerscore

Two years ago, we highlighted the battle between two gamers (Raymond Cox and Stephen Rowe) who were racing to be the first to reach one million Gamerscore on Xbox Live. At the time, both of these individuals' gamerscores sat around 750,000. If all goes according to his ambitious plans, Cox will already be over one million as you read this. We caught up with him when he had 975,000 points, asked him what he was going to do when he broke one million, and checked to see how his life has changed over the last couple of years.

Raymond Cox
Gamertag
Stallion83
Website
1milliongamerscore.com

interview by Andrew Reiner

How does it feel getting so close? What's your stress level like these days?
I'm a lot less stressed than I have been for the last couple years, that's for sure, because the light is at the end of the tunnel. It's like a monkey off my back, that's what I'll see it as once I finally get there. It's been eight years and four months that I've been doing this. It wasn't just like a casual thing, it was something that I really had to pursue and go after.

You've been doing this for so long, are you still enjoying yourself?
I am enjoying myself. I get questions all the time: What are you going to do after? Are you going to keep going? Are you going to keep doing this? Obviously I'm going to keep gaming for the foreseeable future, but I doubt I can go like this much longer. My body will just break down.

Are you putting in more hours now that you are so close to one million?
Well, like three or four months ago I was definitely putting 12, 16 hours a day in. Right now, I kind of just chilled out a little bit. I took my foot off the gas pedal a little bit – time to stop and smell the roses.

Has Xbox One helped you get closer with the Arcade achievements going from 400 to 1,000?
It's probably slowing me down because I just want to play Xbox One. The arcade games now are 1,000, but the games are fewer. Most Xbox one games are 30, 40-plus hours. It's hard to go back to the 360.

Microsoft invited you out to Xbox One's launch. What was that like for you?
It was incredible. That was one of the best experiences of my life because I've never been out to New York City, and just the energy

of that event was just wow. I think about it every once in awhile now, and I'm like "Man, I'd like to be part of something like that again." It was just such a rush. I can't imagine how it felt for them to launch their system.

Anybody else do anything like this with you? Any publishers reach out with a game they wanted you to use for the millionth point?
Well, 2K people reached out to me. Community managers from 2K wanted me to use a 2K sports game.

Have you picked out what game you're going to do?
I've been working on getting to the point in specific Xbox One games where I'm about to unlock big achievements for four or five months. I'm just going to be honest, I want [the last game] to be Titanfall. I blaze through all of the other games and then pull out

Titanfall. The thing is, I'll be doing this before the game is even out. If I could possibly get that going, that's what I'll do. In addition to 1,000,000 gamerscore, I'm trying to earn the most gamerscore in one day, which I believe is 17,000.

If you're going for that daily record, are you playing for 24 hours straight?
Yeah, exactly, that's what I plan to do.

Obviously this has been a long journey for you. What's your takeaway from it?
I don't know [laughs]. I mean, it was a lot of work. I knew going in that it was going to take me forever to accomplish. Like, at 250,000, I was like "Okay, I'll go for a million and that will be it. I'll end it there." And some people tell me I inspired them. I know they're probably young people, younger kids and stuff, but I don't know if I inspired them to do the right thing. ◈

Chases

by Dan Ryckert and Kyle Hilliard
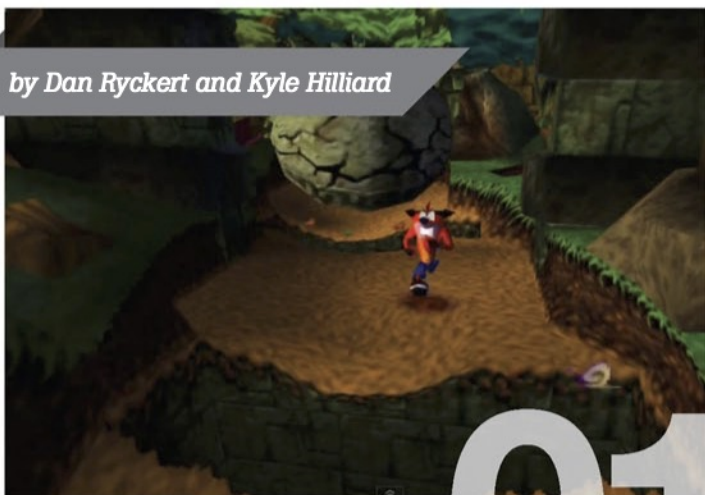
01
The Boulder – *Crash Bandicoot*

When you conjure up images of Crash Bandicoot in your head, it's impossible not to picture the colorful hero running toward the screen. Developer Naughty Dog didn't want players to stare at the bandicoot's butt for the entire game, so they devised multiple situations where he faces the screen. His iconic encounter with a rolling, Indiana Jones-style boulder is the most memorable moment.

02
Taking On Shagohod -
Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater

If this first look at Big Boss wanted to get across the point that the man has seen some action, this sequence certainly did the trick. With Eva driving a motorcycle, Big Boss hangs out in the sidecar taking out a steady stream of motorcycles, jeeps, and those crazy flying Segways, but they are no match for Big Boss' infinite ammo.

03
Five Star Pursuit - *Grand Theft Auto*

The Grand Theft Auto series is largely built on the quality of its chase sequences. We've had many memorable speed runs through its assorted cities, but none are as memorable as the chaos you create on your own. Building up to a five-star rating and staying ahead of the cops (and military) almost always creates a thrilling, high-speed experience.
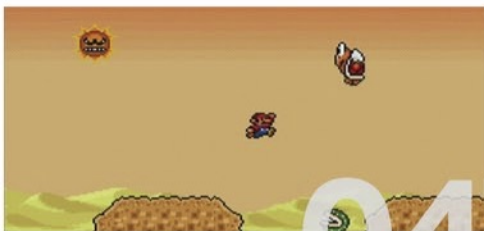
04
Outrunning The Sun - *Super Mario Bros. 3*

Not many would consider Super Mario Bros. a horror series, even when the plumber decides to explore haunted houses. When it comes to the sun tirelessly chasing Mario, however, the game becomes a nightmare generator. The Sun's angry face and relentless pursuit of vengeance (we assume) is one of video games' scariest chases.
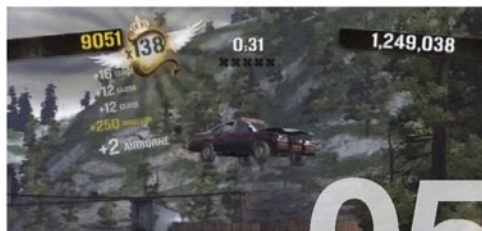
05
Aftershock Escape - *Stuntman: Ignition*

In Stuntman you aren't participating in a chase as much as you are participating in a chase sequence. As a stunt driver for the fictional movie *Aftershock*, it's your job to dodge fire and lava for one of the game's most difficult sequences.

06
Pac-Life - *Pac-Man*

Pac-Man's life is one in constant peril of capture peppered with infrequent pill-assisted recesses where the roles reverse and he becomes the chaser instead of the chased. Those moments are fleeting, as most of Pac-Man's life is spent outrunning the ghosts that plague him.

07
Treasure Chasing -
Rayman Origins

Rayman's return to 2D platforming glory in 2011 was beautiful, but some of the game's most memorable levels were tracking down the treasure chests. As Rayman, players sprint through the game's most challenging levels at full speed to corner chests and win its… skull tooth? It's about the journey, not the destination.

08
The Spider - *Limbo*

From the very beginning of Limbo, your character finds himself in a decidedly creepy world. Things go from unsettling to outright terrifying, when a massive spider begins chasing you. It eventually ties you up and continues to pursue you, but a handy boulder helps you overcome the threat.
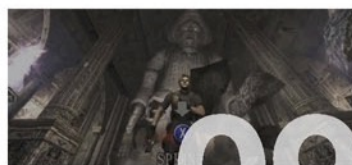
09
Outrunning Salazar -
Resident Evil 4

Resident Evil 4 is full of scary and bizarre sequences. One of the latter examples would be when a gigantic statue of the Napoleonesque Salazar chases Leon down a hallway. Why a gigantic animatronic statue of Salazar exists to begin with is a question we hope never receives an answer.

10
The Bridge -
007: Everything Or Nothing

All you need to know is Jaws must be stopped and he's driving a truck on one of the longest bridges in the world. In his motorcycle pursuit, Bond dodges enemies, traffic, and rockets, ramping off incomplete highway and overturned cars in one of the best Bond sequence from any 007 game.

Your Monthly Look At The Best In Indie Development

by Matt Miller

The developer behind the innovative Thomas Was Alone is hard at work on his next project. Designer Mike Bithell and his small team of developers are crafting a modern-day retelling of the Robin Hood legend called **Volume**. "The hero, Rob Locksley, is a thief who decides to use a piece of the government's technology to train the people of England to rob from the rich and keep for themselves," Bithell says. In this version of the story, Locksley acquires a high-tech A.I. simulator called the Volume, which he uses to infiltrate the corrupt English government run by a man named Gisborne.

Volume plays like a classic stealth game with some new twists. Locksley tries to steal everything he can get his hands on. Along the way, his primary tool for moving past the guards is distraction. "Volume is looking to do a little of the old, and a little of the new," Bithell says. "On the one hand, it looks back

to older stealth games, with their focus on precision and timing over brute force. On the other, we've really tried to pull up the pace and the rhythm to make for a faster, more exciting stealth experience. By removing any way of directly attacking the enemy, players must rely on their wit and skill to steal and get to the exit before the enemy can catch them."

To successfully infiltrate, Locksley can always whistle to draw a guard's attention, but each level also includes various gadgets that increase your options. The bugle can be deployed as a noisemaker that moves around the level. Alternately, the blackjack can be used to briefly knock out a guard for the precious few seconds it takes to sneak past. "Items in the world can also be used, be they lockers to hide in, flushing toilets to draw guard movements, or alarms to deactivate," Bithell says.

The unusual look of the game is because all of the environments are being simulated

by the Volume. "The game's environment is geometric, simplifying real world locations to aid player understanding and decision making," Bithell says. "As development continues, we've gone more and more abstract, playing with the idea of glitches and errors, reinforcing the virtual nature of the environment."

Volume includes a simple-to-use editor that allows any player to build their own levels, and then make them available to the rest of the community. "The goal with the level editor was to make a tool that everyone can use to play with stealth mechanics," Bithell explains. "I'm a Lego nut, so emulating the simplicity of that building system really appealed."

Volume has an intriguing concept that should be all the more appealing thanks to the comic voice talents of YouTube sensation Charlie McDonnell and Thomas Was Alone narrator Danny Wallace (playing Locksley and the A.I. Volume, respectively). I'm eager to rediscover many of the features of classic stealth that Volume is iterating on. Volume is coming to PS4, Vita, PC, Mac, and Steam OS in late 2014.

Volume
PS4, Vita, PC, Mac, Steam OS

Super Time Force
Xbox One, Xbox 360

Capybara Games is certainly busy. After the critical and commercial success of Superbrothers: Sword & Sworcery EP, the developer has been hard at work on two upcoming projects. We featured the team's unusual Xbox One roguelike, Below, a few months back, but Capy is also busy prepping **Super Time Force** for release. Like Sword & Sworcery, Super Time Force is clearly retro-inspired, but its frantic approach to gameplay is anything but old-fashioned.

The player controls various members of the titular military organization as it travels through time, blasting baddies as they go. At first glance, the pixelated graphics, gunplay, and platforming call to mind Contra. However, the player's time-altering abilities add a whole new dimension to play. At any point during gameplay (or when you die), you can choose to "time out" to rewind and play a section of the level over. Your previous playthrough still appears as a ghost at your side, shooting and eliminating all the enemies they killed the last time out. Moreover, if you save them from their untimely demise, you get back the life you would have lost, along with a bonus charge that makes your shots more powerful. As these various past lives layer on top of each other, the screen gets increasingly cluttered and insane.

Super Time Force includes 16 playable characters, each with their own strengths and weaknesses, from a sniper who can shoot through walls to a skateboard-riding dinosaur named Zackasaurus. Your time travelers move through six distinct time periods over the course of the game, taking out space cops, giant squids, meteors, and everything else that gets in their way. Visually, Super Time Force is one of the craziest games on the horizon; it's worth watching for when it releases in the

coming months on Xbox One and 360.

Matt Thorson's **Towerfall: Ascension** was undoubtedly the standout game of the Ouya console launch. The archery arena game garnered an enthusiastic following among the admittedly limited ranks of gamers who picked up the new system. A far broader audience will have its first chance to check out Towerfall when it releases on PS4 and PC on March 11, with some significant new additions.

Towerfall throws up to four players into one of dozens of single-screen arenas with a limited supply of arrows. Matches can play out in seconds as each player jockeys for position and line of sight, while the distinct nature

of each stage and the variety of customization options keeps the action fresh. The new release includes all the original Ouya content, plus 50 new versus arenas – bringing the total to an impressive 120. In addition to the four original archers, four new unlockable characters are available for play. The game also includes 67 distinct gameplay variations to try out. Perhaps most exciting, this new version includes a solo or two-player cooperative quest mode for times when you're ready for a break from the competition. Many who played Towerfall in 2013 labeled it as one of their favorites of the year; I'm stoked that the game is finally making its way to a new audience. ◈

Looking for more info on the best in independent games? Check out gameinformer.com/impulse for regular previews, reviews, and news. For more in this issue, check out our previews of Galak-Z: The Dimensional (p. 72), Transistor (p. 73), Next Car Game (p. 75), and Shovel Knight (p. 80). You can also read our reviews for The Wolf Among Us Episode 2 (p. 88), Mercenary Kings (p. 91), Octodad (p. 93), and The Castle Doctrine (p. 94).

Towerfall: Ascension
PS4, PC

interview

The Road Less Traveled

In 2012, a group of industry veterans struck out on their own with a new studio called The Fullbright Company. The developer earned rave reviews last year with Gone Home, a bewitching, nonviolent interactive tale. We spoke with cofounder Steve Gaynor about the company's unconventional vision.

interview by Matt Helgeson

You're based in Portland, which isn't a hotbed of game development. Do you think being separated from the Bay Area echo chamber has had an effect on Fullbright's work?
I think being in Portland has been very relevant to our experience in a lot of different ways. I mean the reason that Karla [Zimonja] and Johnnemann [Nordhagen] left the Bay Area and moved up here to make the game was, at least in part, because it's so much cheaper. We are a self-funded team, and we wanted to make a game that we believed in. We moved into a house together here in Portland and our office is the basement. The cost of living made it possible for us to make this game the way we did, without having investors or having to do a Kickstarter that would bring in hundreds of thousands of dollars. It was really important in that way. I think you are right; it's a different culture here. It's a very DIY, kind of low-key, culture relative to San Francisco [and] even Seattle. Not everybody is trying to make a startup and IPO. Portland is much more about figuring out how to make a living for yourself by doing things that you find fulfilling. Obviously for us we wanted to make a game that would do well enough that we would have enough money to make another game.

What was the original genesis of the idea for Gone Home, and how much did it evolve over time?
We had all worked on the BioShock franchise together, and we knew that we were good at the parts of those games that were the atmosphere, the tone of the experience, and the environmental storytelling. That was the stuff that really interested us the most as developers. It all just came down essentially to saying, "Well, you take BioShock, you take just the exploration, the environmental storytelling, the audio dialogue, the feeling of immersion, the atmosphere – and you don't do the combat or the loot or the powers or the leveling-up or mission objectives. You just focus on that feeling of exploring and discovering the story for yourself. That can be the entirety of the experience as opposed to just a supporting element." From there it became all questions of how do we make that? We are a small team, so we will set it all inside one location, so we don't have to build a whole city or anything. So, what is that location? A family's house would be really dense with stuff you could find to find out who they are and what's happened to them.

When the game started getting a lot of attention, some people starting questioning whether Gone Home was a game or not. Is that something you anticipated,
that people wouldn't think it was a game?
Well it's not something we thought of explicitly ahead of time. I don't think any of us thought, "Okay, people are going to think this isn't a real game and they are going to be angry about it." Which is something we've seen. We came from a point of view of thinking some people are going to connect with this, because we were happy with the game from our own point of view. Some people are going to like it. Some people are not going to be into it because, like you said, it's kind of a niche experience. It's not like everyone who touches this game is going to connect with it.

We were signed up with that. But I feel like part of the backlash came from the fact that a lot of critics and a lot and mainstream sites [liked it]. We are very grateful to have gotten very high reviews from some big sites. I think it exposed the game to a more critical audience. I think there can be this conflict in perception [because] it's not a traditional game. It's small. It's a short game with no action in it, and some people see it's getting scores that are usually reserved for Grand Theft Auto games, The Last of Us, and BioShock Infinite. Again, we are incredibly grateful for that, but it can cause this sort of misalignment for some gamers where they are like, "This kind of experience isn't supposed to be recognized in that realm. I feel betrayed because this is not the kind of thing that should get this kind of attention."

Gone Home included a lot of period pop-culture references – a note about seeing *Pulp Fiction* or a Sonic Youth poster, for example. So few games ever use real cultural touchstones in that way.
Something I love to see in games is when they take place in our own world or make direct reference to our own world. I did always enjoy the parts in BioShock where the characters referred to real world historical figures or events. Even though Deadly Premonition didn't take place in any world I've ever lived in, the main character York was really into '80s and '90s movies. You'd just be driving around and he would be reading off a dissertation about *Back to the Future* and Robert Zemeckis. We wanted Gone Home to very explicitly take place in a specific year in our own world and talk about people, bands, TV shows, movies, and historical events that we're all familiar with.

There was a small backlash over The Last of Us, which you know is a great game, getting the Outstanding Innovation in Gaming Award at the D.I.C.E. awards. What did you think about that? Is there disconnect between the awards and the indie scene?
I don't know. We were nominated for best downloadable [game] and we were really happy to see Brothers get that award. That
game is great. Starbreeze took a chance with a game that was smaller and not violent and very interesting. The Last of Us definitely won a lot of awards, but regardless of what you think of who got what award, it's not like it's the The Last of Us' fault. The D.I.C.E. awards have their own voting scheme and that's just the way it goes sometimes. What was your game of the year? I probably would have said The Last of Us. Neil [Druckmann] and Bruce [Straley] and the rest of the Naughty Dog folks that I've met are super sincere and deserve all the praise that they've gotten.

I hope that we use the resources we have and take advantage of the constraints we have to make something that was the best version of what it could have been. And I think that the value of the game like The Last of Us is they took the budget that they had – the motion capture, the animation, the effects, and the scale – and used it to make something that took full advantage of all of those resources. It could only have been made in that context, and really was one of the best versions of that kind of production that I've ever played. There are different tools for every job. It always makes me happy when I see any developers be rewarded for doing the most with what they have, whether that's a huge amount, like Naughty Dog has, or a very small amount.

You sold 250,000 copies, which I imagine was a great accomplishment for the game. It puts Fulbright in a better spot financially. What does that success change for you guys as the company and how you approach the scale of your next project?
It gives us some freedom and stability. This game has done well enough already that we can hire people and pay them salaries, pay for their health insurance. [We] have the time and resources to make our next game, and maybe expand it in scope a little bit. Gone Home took 17 months to make from when we first downloaded Unity to when we shipped, and that timeframe was dictated by how much savings the three of us that co-founded the company had in the bank. How long we could pay our rent and other expenses without drawing a paycheck?

But we also have no intention of expanding far beyond what we already built. We want to take Gone Home as our foundation and figure out what the next step is in designing that kind of experience. What do we add or change? What's the big thing that makes our next game stand on its own and be its own experience that we're excited to build, so it doesn't feel like we're doing the same thing over again? We want to continue exploring the territory that we've started with in Gone Home and see what the next step along that line is. We're looking forward to digging into that next big set of questions in our next game. ◆

SteelSeries
STRATUS

F or most game genres, the touchscreen interface on mobile platforms is a serious limitation. But since the release of iOS 7, Apple's mobile products have added controller support, making it easier than ever to play shooters and action games on the screen in your pocket.

SteelSeries' Bluetooth-enabled Stratus is the first Made for iPhone (MFi) game controller for iOS 7-based devices, and SteelSeries claims that the controller works with any controller-enabled game on the App Store. It makes games like Oceanhorn, Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas, and Sonic the Hedgehog 2 a much more enjoyable experience. The library of supported titles already seems pretty deep, and continues to grow every day. However, you need to do a quick Google search to find a full list, because the App Store doesn't always clearly list if a title supports controller inputs.

Measuring less than five inches across, the Stratus looks cramped, but the device's tiny convex analog sticks have a good amount of grip, and the pressure-sensitive buttons are more comfortable than expected. The big D-pad is also a solid alternative to using the sticks. Unfortunately, we felt claustrophobic using the four shoulder buttons. While this controller is useful for many action and racing games, its poor trigger performance makes it a bad choice for shooters and other trigger-heavy titles.

With 10 hours of battery life and stutter-free wireless performance, the SteelSeries Stratus could be a handy device for gamers who like to pack light. Unfortunately, it also lightens the wallet considerably more than the first-party controllers for Sony and Microsoft's new consoles. A controller this small shouldn't pack such a hefty premium.

by Ben Reeves

AVERAGE ■■■■■■■□□□

$79.99 | steelseries.com/stratus

1

1 Samsung Galaxy Gear

Wrist-mounted communicators have been a feature of science fiction since Dick Tracy first strapped on a radio wristwatch in the 1930s, but only recently have tech manufacturers seriously started to fulfill that dream. The Galaxy Gear pairs with select Samsung smart devices to give you a second screen with which to take calls, send texts, and interface with a small selection of apps such as Evernote and MyFitnessPal.

The device is comfortable and sleek, and features a 1.63-inch screen that remains readable in any light. We found the Galaxy Gear handy for making music selections while cooking, and used the band's 1.9-megapixel camera to catch rare candid photos.

However, the watch doesn't interface with enough mobile devices or integrate with enough apps to justify its lofty price. Most of the time, the Galaxy Gear feels like it merely offers a lazy way to check texts.

The smart watch is full of promise, but for now most of us are better off taking the extra two seconds to look at the phone in our pocket, which is a far more versatile device.

AVERAGE ■■■■■■■□□□

$299 | *samsung.com/us/mobile*

2

HALO 4

2 Halo 4: The Master Chief Resin Statue

McFarlane Toys' newest Halo statue perfectly recreates Halo 4's cover art with a 12-inch cast that shows Master Chief rising from the wreckage of *Forward Unto Dawn*. The Chief can swap out his assault rifle for a Covenant Energy Sword or a Foreunner Boltshot.

$295 | *mcfarlanetoysstore.com*

The Numbers Game

by Jeff Marchiafava, Senior Associate Editor

Gamers have always been obsessed with numbers, and it's easy to see why. Back when the power of game consoles was measured in bits, numbers signified the technical hurdles developers were overcoming to provide us with better gaming experiences. We counted the colors a system could display, the discs a game came loaded on, and the polygons character models were comprised of. Nowadays bits don't matter, and gamers have instead found new numbers to obsess over. As always, they are a lousy indicator of quality.

Gamers rang in 2014 complaining about two of the most promising multiplayer shooters on the horizon. Titanfall has received no shortage of buzz since it was revealed last year, and with good reason. Respawn's Vincent Zampella and company have raised the bar for shooters time and time again, and Titanfall's sci-fi setting, massive robots, and hectic battlefields have impressed nearly everyone who's gotten hands-on time with the game. Yet when Respawn announced the game's six-on-six player limit, gamers flocked to the Internet to complain. Only 12 players? Even last-gen shooters supported 16 players! What a rip-off.

Evolve has faced similar, albeit less fevered criticism. Turtle Rock's atypical four vs. one approach to competitive gaming has piqued the interest of a lot of gamers. But that hasn't stopped many from simultaneously expressing hope that Evolve's other unannounced modes might boost the player count higher. Apparently, five players just isn't enough.

Titanfall and Evolve both present unique ideas in a genre that's constantly berated for its copycat sequels and stagnant design. Which begs the question: Do we really want something new, or just more? MAG proved that simply upping the player count of a game doesn't result in a better product; its 256-player matches were a chaotic mess, and most gamers went AWOL long before Sony pulled the plug on the servers this past January.

Game length is another favorite red herring of value-seeking players. My recent playthrough of Bravely Default convinced me that the gaming industry needs an annual Editor Appreciation Day – despite the entertaining mechanics, the lengthy JRPG is rife with backtracking, repetition, and pointless conversations. Imagine my surprise when I came across forum threads complaining that the game is "only" 50 hours long. These fans hadn't actually played the game yet, mind you. They were simply holding it up to an arbitrary standard for the genre – the same arbitrary standard that Silicon Studio was likely padding the game out to meet. I am hopelessly confused by the mindset of these players; why would you want developers to extend a fun game with content that makes it less fun, simply for the sake of making it longer?

The trivial measuring sticks don't end there. Square Enix's release of Tomb Raider: Definitive Edition once again roused the great grumpy beasts of the Internet, this time to complain about framerates. The PlayStation 4 version of the game maxed out at 60 frames per second, while Xbox One was capped at 30 frames per second. To make matters worse, some reviewers had the audacity to assert that all those extra frames didn't warrant a big enough difference to affect their review scores! Woe is the gamer who must fix his gaze on 30 frames-per-second visuals – though it didn't seem to stop anyone from enjoying the last-gen version of Tomb Raider, or just about any other classic in the history of gaming.

But gamers aren't the only ones to blame for focusing on the wrong things. Nothing more aptly conveys the industry's obsession with false quantifications than the marketing of Beyond: Two Souls. Months before the launch of Quantic Dream's latest interactive drama, the developer sent out a mock script to media outlets. The bound screenplay contained 2,000 blank pages. The average movie script, it teased, is only 100 pages. You don't need to be a mathematician to surmise that Beyond must be twenty times better than the average movie, right? I'm sure Quantic Dream would like you to think so. However, given the criticism the game's writing has received, the massive, empty manuscript offers a different lesson, one that has soothed many a man's ego: Bigger isn't always better.
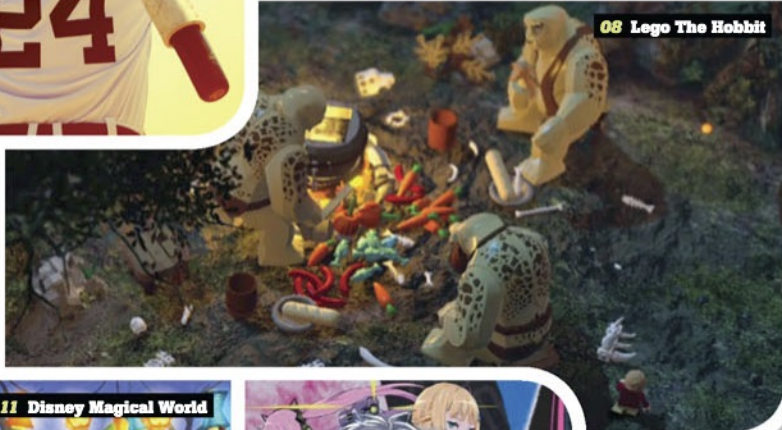
Gaming is an expensive hobby, and we all want to get the most value out of our purchases. But if we play games to have fun, then isn't a game's value really defined by how much enjoyment you get from it? That's not something you can quantify by adding up its features. Judging a game by its length, player count, or framerate is like judging a painting by its dimensions or a symphony by how many notes it contains. You'd be laughed out of the room if you tried to speak about a work of art in such shallow terms – even on the Internet.

The only real way to tell how much you'll enjoy a game is to play it, and you might be surprised by what ultimately works and doesn't work. Until you can get your hands on a game, try extending the benefit of the doubt to developers who are exploring new ideas. They might just end up being worth your time and money, even if the numbers don't add up the way you expect them to. ◆

01 MLB 14: The Show

04.2

05

09

08 Lego The Hobbit

11 Disney Magical World

15 Conception II: Children of the Seven Stars

18

22 Demon Gaze

April
2014

01 New Releases
› MLB 14: The Show (PS3, Vita)

02 Xbox News On The Way...
San Francisco's Moscone Center is home to Microsoft's Build 2014 expo, which starts today and concludes on April 4. Our sources tell us that we should hear Xbox One news dropped at this event.

04 New Releases
› The Elder Scrolls Online (PC)

04.2 Marvel's Theatrical Onslaught Continues
For years, Hollywood tried to be one of the cool kids. Fast cars, secret agents, and raunchy humor dominated the silver screen. Now, the movie industry is a total nerd, obsessed with comic books, super heroes, and tight jumpsuits. The trend continues today with the release of Captain America: The Winter Soldier. This film picks up two years after The Avengers, and focuses on a dude with a metal arm. Hey, it could be worse. Hollywood could be going through its goth phase.

05 Marvel's Big Sin
"Who is The Watcher?" is the tagline for Marvel's big summer event Original Sin. The first issue ships today. Nova is looking into The Watcher's past and what he finds will lead to what Marvel calls "The most cataclysmic event in Marvel history!"

06 Game Of Thrones Returns
If you're not tuning in to HBO tonight to catch the season premiere of Game of Thrones, you're doing life wrong. This remains one of the best shows on TV, and your friends will likely spoil it on Twitter if you don't catch it tonight.

07 Indies In The Netherlands
Today welcomes Indievelopment 2014, an indie game expo held in the Zijdebalen Theater in Utrecht, Netherlands. This year's speakers include Michael Cook, a researcher looking into software that can design games autonomously, and Paul Wier, a sound designer who is currently working on No Man's Sky. The show includes an exhibition hall where playable indie games await.

08 New Releases
› Lego The Hobbit (PS4, Xbox One, Wii U, PS3, 360, PC, Vita, 3DS)
› Kinect Sports Rivals (Xbox One)

09 A Month Of Batman
DC's newest series Batman Eternal debts today and a new issue hits every Wednesday for the remainder of the month. Penned by Scott Snyder, this story focuses on a troubled Jim Gordon. A "notorious" villain also makes his New 52 debut.

11 New Releases
› Disney Magical World (3DS)

11.2 PAX East Begins
The streets of Boston will be filled with gamers today, as Penny Arcade Expo East officially kicks off. The show is sold out, but we expect plenty of news to come from this three-day event, which will be chronicled on Game Informer's website.

14 New Releases
› Final Fantasy XIV: A Realm Reborn (PS4)

15 New Releases
› Conception II: Children of the Seven Stars (Vita, 3DS)
› 2014 FIFA World Cup Brazil (PS3, 360)

16 The Future Of Star Wars Revealed?
Star Wars' annual celebration kicks off today. While some people are attending just so they can wear their Stormtrooper armor in public for a few days, most people at this con want to hear about Star Wars: Episode VII. We can't see LucasFilm leaving Anaheim's Convention Center without dropping a few nuggets of Episode VII information.

18 Johnny Depp, Lawnmower Man
Today's theatrical release, Transcendence, Johnny Depp becomes the most powerful A.I. in the world. After watching the trailer, we're a little confused. Helena Bonham Carter is nowhere to be found, and Johnny Depp isn't wearing any freaky makeup. None of the sets look like colorful paintings, either. Wait... Did Johnny Depp make a film without Tim Burton? No way that would ever happen.

18.2 Insomnia 51
Dubbed as the "UK's biggest gaming festival," Insomnia 51 is a four-day event that offers everything from eSports events and massive LAN gaming halls to developer panels and a retro gaming room all held in the Ricoh Arena, Coventry.

22 New Releases
› Demon Gaze (Vita)

22.2 Games For Change
The 11th annual Games for Change Festival starts today and runs through April 26. The focus of this show is to highlight and discuss games that engage contemporary social issues. This year's show is held in New York University's Skirball Center. Specific events will be broadcast online for those not attending.

25 New Releases
› NES Remix 2 (Wii U)

30 New Releases
› Child of Light (PS4, Xbox One, Wii U, PS3, 360, PC)

BATMAN: ARKHAM KNIGHT

ROCKSTEADY
RETURNS
TO FINISH
WHAT IT
STARTED

THE END OF
RKHAM

by Bryan Vore

B

Before Batman: Arkham Asylum, the Dark Knight's video game reputation had been so thoroughly tarnished it was hard to believe it could ever bounce back. By succeeding with the character so spectacularly, Rocksteady went from being a relatively obscure London developer to one of the hottest studios in gaming. The sequel, Arkham City, took the series to the next level and further cemented the team's legacy. Despite all of the success and accolades, any group of creative people has to keep things fresh and tackle new challenges at some point or risk stagnation. Before it moves on to a new undisclosed project, Rocksteady wanted to create the ultimate Batman game to give the character that put its studio on the map a proper send-off. Thus, Batman: Arkham Knight was born.

EXPANDING GOTHAM

Arkham Knight takes place in the all-new central zone of Gotham City split into three islands, an area roughly five times the size of the map in Arkham City. "As we've said before with Arkham City, it's not about the scale as much as the detail," says game director Sefton Hill. "We want to make sure the world is rich and full of interesting things to do. We're not trying to create the biggest open-world game ever. We are trying to create a really rich, vibrant, dense open world."

The addition of traffic-friendly streets has essentially required a complete rethinking of world design. "Arkham City was quite claustrophobic," Hill says. "Here we have a lot more negative space between the buildings so it's much easier and more enjoyable to glide around." Buildings overall are taller than before as well. Increasing Batman's top glide speed and lengthening his hang time are just a few of the adaptations to accommodate the new world design.

In our look around the city, the level of detail is some of the most impressive we've seen in an open world. The skyline is peppered with red blinking spires, blimps, helicopters. Moonlight shines through a veil of realistic clouds. The ground level is populated with a variety of businesses like Pauli's Diner, glowing neon signs in Chinatown, and steam puffing out of the sewers. Abandoned Halloween parade balloon characters and signs hang creepily in the darkness. The constant pouring rain adds a shimmering wetness to the environment and ties the whole noir package together.
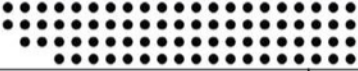
REVVING UP THE FINALE

When it came to planning the next step after Batman: Arkham City, Rocksteady Studios had a clear vision of what it wanted and sold it to parent company Warner Bros. Rocksteady innovated with freeflow combat and predator stealth-takedown sequences in Arkham Asylum. Arkham City took another giant leap forward by blowing out the contained asylum into a large open world, creating the glide and grapple traversal mechanics that are unique to the character.

With its third and final Batman game, Rocksteady knows that another significant jump is necessary. "When you think Batman, you do think Batmobile," game director Sefton Hill says. "It's the one key thing that we've really felt that we always wanted to do."

The team knew the Batmobile couldn't be your average speedy car, and the entire city structure would have to be rethought as well to accommodate the new street traffic. Hill says, "I think for us the main thing was, 'Please let us make this game. It's not going to be quick, and it's going to be quite hard, and it's probably going to be quite expensive.'"

Using a juiced-up version of Rocksteady's custom modified Unreal engine, the team decided it would need to harness the power of the new game consoles to push the game to where it needed to be. That meant leaving the PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360 behind. "It's not a challenge to move to next gen," Hill says. "The real challenge is making sure you're getting the best out of the machines. It's easy to get the game running, but it's about, 'What can we do that really pushes those machines?' Obviously, you see a lot of games that are cross-gen, and they feel a bit reined in because of that. Because we were able to make that decision quite early, we were able to be more ambitious with the design and make a real, genuine next-gen game."

Focusing purely on the new consoles freed Rocksteady to start maximizing its talents. "Our lead engine coder was saying the other day that, when you switch to next gen only, rather than saying 'no' to our artists and designers a lot he can now just say 'yes,'" says studio director Jamie Walker. "That's what the horsepower of next-gen enables us to do."

Warner Bros. supported Rocksteady's vision for the game, but all parties realized that three years was a long time for fans to wait for another Batman title. To fill in the gap, Warner Bros. Games Montreal took on 2013's Arkham Origins, set before the events of Arkham Asylum. Rocksteady provided its code and remained on call for technical questions, but stayed hands-off for the most part.

"We said, 'Make the game you want to make,' Hill says. "We didn't want to try and influence them from afar. We wanted them to be really passionate about the game they wanted to make… We didn't want to try and be directing from across the Atlantic. We were quite busy."

TRACKING A TOXIN

Arkham Knight begins one year after the events of Arkham City. The citizens of Gotham feel safer than they've felt in a long while. The Joker is dead, and crime rates have plummeted. Despite the lack of activity, Batman continues to develop new crime-fighting technology and watch over the city every night. He knows something isn't right, but without anything to go on he's stuck waiting in the rafters.

Joker's chaotic plans always kept Batman busy, but more often than not, they pitted other super villains' gangs against each other as well. This constant carnage diluted their focus and allowed Batman to gain the upper hand time and time again. With the Joker out of the picture, several key criminals have finally come together as a united front, spending the past year meticulously planning the downfall of the one thing that's always stood in their way: the Dark Knight. Each villain has his or her own mission in the city designed to spread Batman thin and tear him down one piece at a time.

To kick things off, Scarecrow has threatened to detonate bombs across all of Gotham loaded with a potent new strain of fear toxin. Not taking any chances, officials order an evacuation of the city's six million citizens. The masses shove their way into yellow school buses and join the gridlock of traffic on the major thoroughfares out of town.

Two-Face and Penguin return, but their roles in the night's plan are a mystery

THE NEW BATSUIT

Batman begins the game with his traditional suit from Arkham City. At some point early on in his latest journey he receives this darker, plated update. Outside of a different look, the suit adds new abilities like the Mark II grapple. "We wanted that continuity between the new suit and the Batmobile as well to look like the two of them have been developed side by side using a lot of the same materials," says game director Sefton Hill.

Only criminals remain behind, and they've already wrested control from Commissioner Jim Gordon's overwhelmed police force. It's up to Batman to disarm Scarecrow's bombs and unravel the villains' plot. The bat takes flight to save the city he loves once again, knowing a trap is almost certainly out there waiting.

Our demo starts on the rain-drenched streets of Gotham raging with riots and looting. "The extra horsepower allows us to do a lot more with our population in the city," says lead AI and combat programmer Tim Hanagan. "At any given time, there are between three and four times the number of thugs active in Gotham City than there were in Arkham City." Hanagan says the larger riots feature up to 50 characters smashing up storefronts, pulling down phone booths, flipping cars over, and spraying graffiti.

In the midst of the chaos, a bemused Two-Face and Penguin gun down a policeman just because they can. They've had to behave for a whole year, after all. Batman takes it all in from on high. When the bat signal appears over GCPD headquarters, he glides over to the roof and catches Commissioner Gordon in the middle of a call.

"I'm just glad you made it out okay," Gordon says. "Sorry, I gotta go. Stay safe, Barbara."

"How's the evacuation going?" Batman asks.

"Last bus crossed the city limits an hour ago. I'm just glad my little girl got out when she did. Now the real work begins."

In discussing leads on the Scarecrow threat, Gordon mentions a suspicious military vehicle that's been spotted in Chinatown. Batman agrees to investigate and hands Gordon a high tech Batphone to maintain contact throughout the night. Gordon's radio squawks to life and the dispatcher notifies of a missing squad car and possible officer down. Before he can even ask for help, Batman disappears. "Every damn time," Gordon mutters.
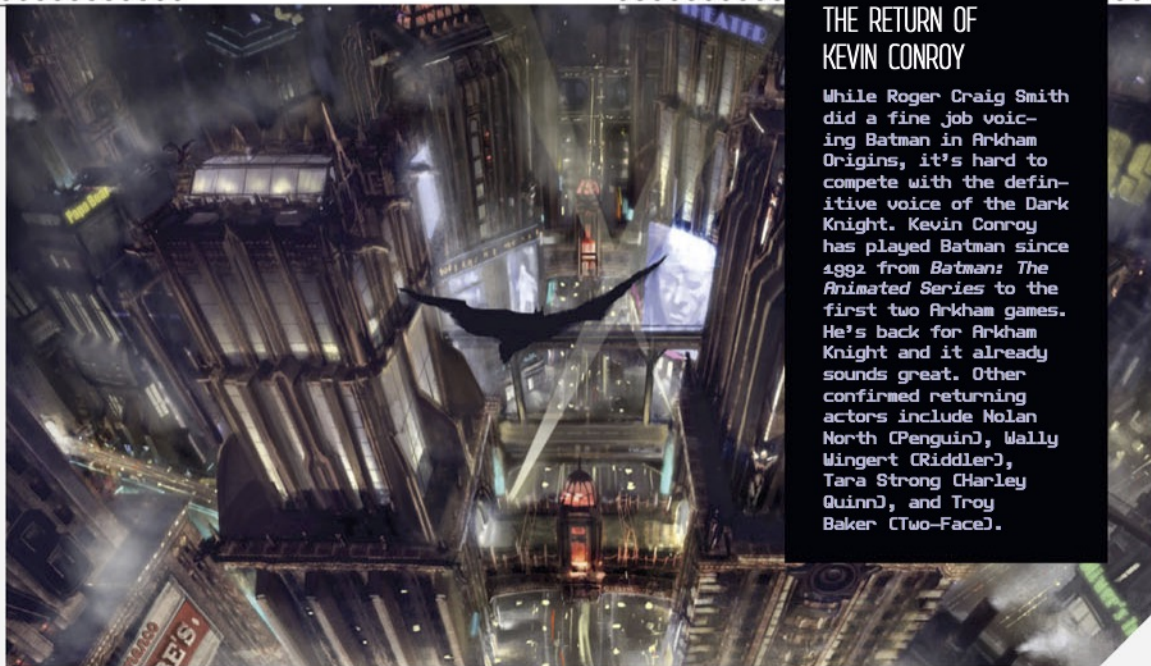
Batman can launch out of the Batmobile directly into a glide

Leveraging the power of the new consoles, each of these scenes takes place directly within the game engine – no pre-rendered cinematics. "The main thing we're trying to do in using that next-gen platform is to make the whole cinematic experience and the sequences seamless within the game," says cinematics director Paul Boulden. "We don't want the player to be pulled out. You're playing a game and then you're watching a movie. Obviously, there's the transition between those two things always. It's quite jarring. We want to try and blend that seamlessly as much as possible."

The lack of cross-generational technical restrictions allows the team to shoot for the level of detail seen in pre-rendered scenes. "At the beginning, we started making characters that were about three to four times the polygon count and texture sizes of Arkham City," says lead character artist Albert Feliu. "As we kept going with every character we just pushed it more. It's the kind of thing that sounds insane. Like one character is as big as the polygon count of Arkham Asylum, the whole environment."

The details are apparent even in this simple conversation. Individual raindrops land on Batman's suit and run down, tracing every groove. Commissioner Gordon's face shows his age, with wrinkles that crinkle as he talks. Rocksteady has also incorporated Apex cloth physics simulation software for the first time on objects like Batman's cape and Gordon's trench coat to react realistically to wind and movement.

BUSTING SOME SKULLS

On a far off rooftop, Batman taps some buttons on his wrist and brings up a projected video call from Barbara Gordon, a.k.a. Oracle. She is clearly still in the city, contrary to what her father believes.

"Oracle, I need the location of unit 247."

"Already working on it. How's my dad doing?"

"He's holding up."

"Somehow he always does. Okay, I'm sending you the squad's location. Be careful. It's not looking good out there."

Batman sprints to the nearest ledge and dives straight down, a new streamlined control option. When he reaches terminal velocity, he spreads his cape and soars high into the night sky. Rain patters and streaks down the back of his cape as he flies faster than ever before. He fires his grapple gun (which now boasts a Mark II boost upgrade) and slingshots off the building with enhanced momentum.

A crashed squad car comes into view and Batman fires the line launcher in mid-air to create an instant perch point – ziplines can now be created instantly at any time while flying around the city. From here he observes the scene below. The cop is still alive, but he won't be for long if this gang of goons keeps beating on him. Batman glides off the zipline, throws three
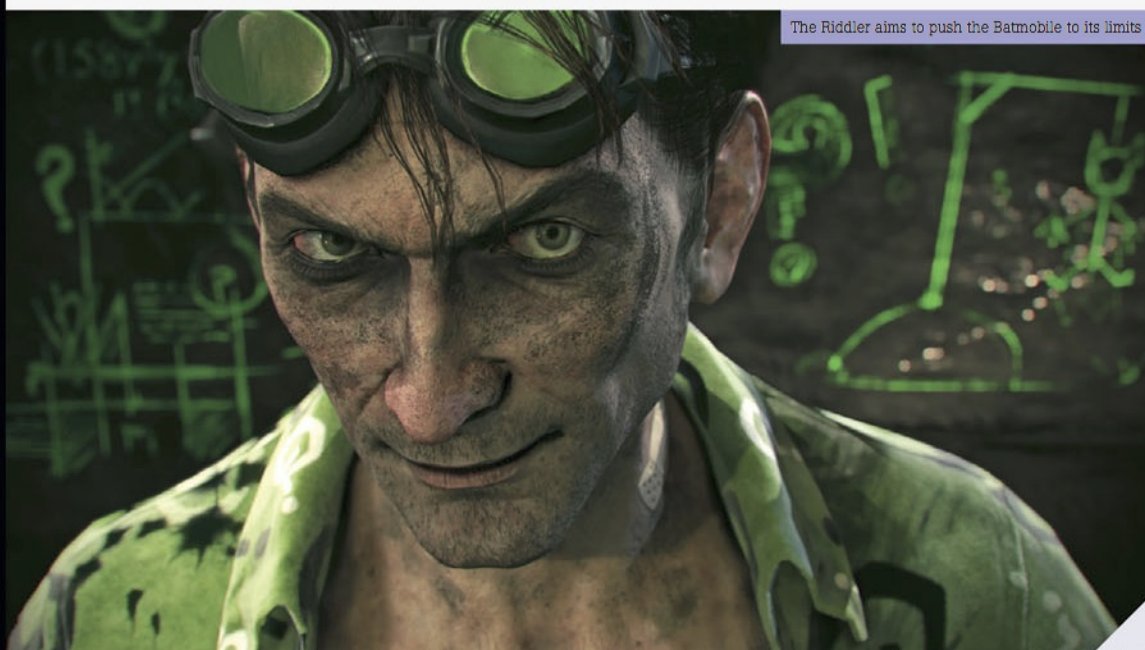
The Riddler aims to push the Batmobile to its limits

SINGLE PLAYER ONLY

Rather than play coy about the possibility of multiplayer in Arkham Knight, Rocksteady wants to be very clear. "This is a single-player game. There is no multiplayer," says game director Sefton Hill. "Right at the start this was our vision. It's going to take all of our effort for all of this time. We don't have the time to do multiplayer. We want to focus on making the best single-player experience we can. We don't feel that it needs a multiplayer element. Warner Bros. backed that up right at the start."

Enemies now riot in Gotham City

Batarangs from mid-air (all quickfire gadgets can now be used during flight), and glide kicks the nearest foe. Four thugs are stunned right out of the gate. He lays a beating on the guys that are still standing, and one comes at him with a baseball bat. Using the classic counter system, Batman steals the weapon and wallops not just him, but several of his buddies as well. The bat eventually breaks on an enemy's face, ending Batman's demonstration of a new willingness to use found weapons.

"We're really conscious of the fact that we don't want to overcomplicate the combat system, because we think a lot of its strength is in the simplicity," Hill says. "What we've tried to do is add features that experienced players will really enjoy, but don't compromise the simplicity of the system."

One of the dazed assailants comes to and starts sprinting toward Batman. In earlier games, only larger enemies could charge and tackle. Now any standard goon can attempt it, adding another layer to combat. With the right timing, Batman can do a quick backflip and launch a Batarang right into his face, which results in an immediate K.O.

Pinballing between the remaining enemies, Batman shows off a new ability to perform quick ground strikes in the midst of combat. Instead of accidentally punching the air above a downed enemy and losing a combo, he can work in a strike just like with any standing foe. Full ground takedowns are still available, but they require far more time and leave Batman open to attack.

Once the plaza is clear, he approaches the cop and out of nowhere the military vehicle screeches around a corner, driving straight toward them. Batman grabs the policeman and grapples him to the safety of a nearby roof. The vehicle plows through the crashed cop car and a pillar like they were nothing and keeps on driving.

"The city's overrun," the cop laments. "We don't stand a chance."

"Stay here. I'll send someone to pick you up," Batman replies while pressing some buttons on his wrist console.

"What are you doing?"

"Evening the odds."

As Batman dives toward the streets, a far-off engine noise gets louder. He lands in a crouching position as a glimmering black car speeds toward him. In unison the vehicle twists into a donut and Batman flips into the air. He lands in the cockpit just as the car comes to a stop and the roof slides over top and locks into place. A blast of flames out of the back sends the Batmobile rocketing into the night.
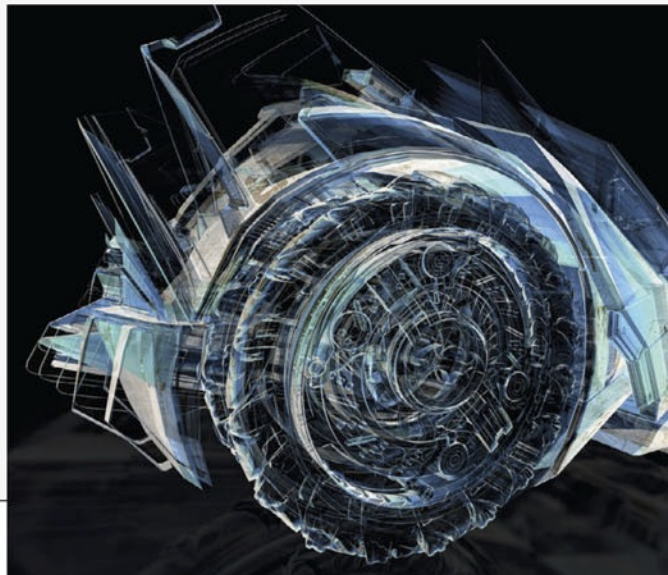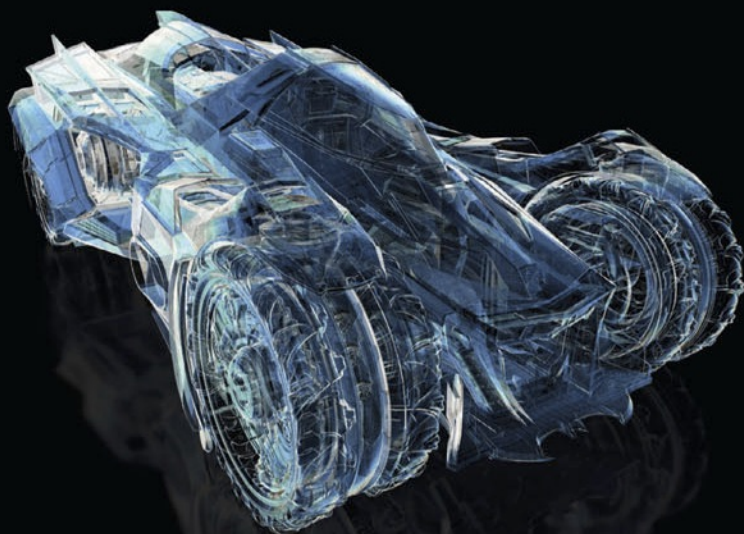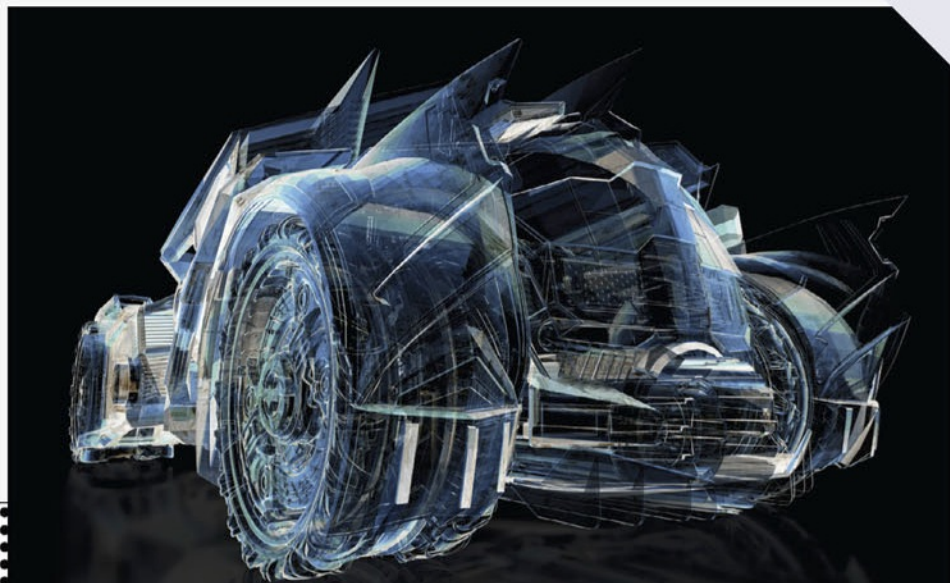
THE BATMOBILE

Rocksteady is by no means modest in its ambitions for the Batmobile. "We wanted to make the best car in any game ever," says game director Sefton Hill. "That was our mission statement right from the start."

With the new-gen power at hand, the team pushed the limits with the look. "The Batmobile in memory is like 160 megabytes or something in the game," says art director David Hego. "It will fit just about in an Xbox 360 if [that was the whole] game. There are so many textures and hundreds of thousands of polygons. It's very next gen; very expensive shaders and textures. We're working a lot with brushed metal, shiny, glossy metals. But also with high-tech surfaces like with carbon fiber."

The Batmobile is the only car Batman drives in Arkham Knight, but players will never have to worry about remembering where it's parked. At the press of a button it instantly zooms to your location. It can do burnouts, jumps, boosts, and even rotate in circles at a full stop to get you pointed in the right direction with ease. Bulletproof armor allows it to smash through barricades, trees, and even building corners like a rocket-powered wrecking ball. Enemies on the streets will do their best to dash out of the way.

Despite the excitement of driving, Rocksteady stresses the need for balance with the out-of-car gameplay. "That was something that we were very conscious of," Hill says. "We didn't want it to be like, 'Okay, the Batmobile is so good I'll just stay in that all the time.' or 'Batman is so powerful gliding around I won't be using the Batmobile.' There's a definite need to use both of those."

Rocksteady embraces the "asymmetry" between the two traversal methods. While the Batmobile has speed and damage protection, Batman enjoys more freedom of movement and has access to gadgets. Players can easily swap between both options according to whatever's best for the job at hand.

TAKING THE BATMOBILE FOR A SPIN

With the help of Oracle's tracking tech, Batman is able to find the military vehicle speeding through the streets of Gotham. A bold cop is already on the chase, despite Gordon's orders to stand down. Almost immediately, the vehicle fires a rocket and turns the cruiser into a flaming ball of wreckage. Batman evades the obstacle and maintains pursuit. By holding a steady aim, the Batmobile's systems can lock on to enemy vehicles and unleash a missile-like immobilizer that stops them without seriously harming the people inside. After a volley of projectiles back and forth, the enemy vehicle finally crashes.

Batman strides up to the overturned wreck as the driver crawls out pleading for mercy. When Batman grabs him, the thug tries to stick him with a dose of fear toxin. The Dark Knight catches his arm and twists the injector out of his hand. Through classic rough interrogation techniques, Batman learns that Scarecrow is producing the toxin somewhere in Gotham. He uploads the new strain of fear toxin to Oracle and she agrees to have the analysis completed by the time he comes by her clock tower base.

Instead of heading directly there, Batman veers off to look into what the Riddler is up to this time around. He tears through the streets in the Batmobile, crashing through barriers, rocket boosting off of ramps, and scattering any criminals unfortunate enough to be in the way. The roads aren't necessarily jammed with other vehicles since the general populace isn't around, but the few cars cruising around are sent flying when coming into contact with Batman's ride.

"Basically, you can see nothing stops the Batmobile," Hills says. "It's pretty much an unstoppable force. But one of the coolest things we've worked on is not just creating a Batmobile, but creating a Batmobile that segues perfectly with Batman and his navigational abilities. This is something that was a big focus for us. Here's probably my favorite move in the game, one that really demonstrates that fact."

A NEW VILLAIN

Arkham Knight isn't just the name of the game; it's also the moniker of a new archrival. Rocksteady is working with DC Entertainment chief creative officer Geoff Johns to create the character from scratch. That's about all they're saying about him at this point. "We hadn't in the previous games introduced someone new to the universe," says game director Sefton Hill. "We wanted to introduce someone who could really challenge Batman to go head to head with him in lots of different ways. We're not talking about those ways just yet but this guy is definitely a formidable foe for Batman."

The Batmobile navigates a Riddler challenge course

When he's within range of the destination, Batman ejects out of the speeding Batmobile just as it slams the brakes, instantly launching him into a fast glide. He spots the building full of known Riddler associates, targets the skylight on the roof, and crashes through. Batman's new ability to glide through almost any glass surface offers a surprising and flashy option to initiate combat.

The first enemy brave enough to attack has the unfortunate privilege of receiving one of Batman's new combat tactics. The throw counter grabs an attacker and tosses him into other enemies, resulting in double damage for all. In keeping with the simplicity of the freeflow combat system, players direct the left stick toward the attacker and hit the counter button to initiate the throw.

Batman can also incorporate environmental hazards into combat when they're available. This particular room happens to have a power generator that he can slam an opponent's head into for a quick shock and instant knock out. The last man standing reluctantly tells Batman that Riddler has something going on at the railway.

He drives across town and finds a suspicious-looking garage. As he pulls in, the door slams shut and the hidden elevator descends. A video projection comes to life during the ride.

"Why hello there, detective. Yes, it's me. Your most feared nemesis, the Riddler," the villain explains in his new green mechanic's jumpsuit. "Congratulations are in order, for you have arrived early for this, the next generation of my riddles. Too early, in fact. You think I just put these things together overnight?"

The villain explains that he wants to put our hero's "ego-mobile" to the test in a three-lap time trial through a series of underground tunnels. The twist is that the only way to make it through the course is to use a special radar pulse to change parts of the track.

A white wall blocks the way at the end of a straight. Players must click the left stick to get it to slide out of the way. When this happens, a red wall appears further down the line. Every click of the stick alternately slides these two surfaces in and out of the path ahead. Throughout the circuit these panels appear as driving surfaces over deadly pits, ramps you must rocket boost off of to make intimidating jumps, and platforms to catch the Batmobile on the other side. The course gets more difficult with every lap, forcing players to constantly swap panels with shortening reaction windows. During the final stretch, the track blows up before your eyes and you have to drive along the wall, up to the ceiling, and down the other side in an impressive corkscrew maneuver.

After crossing the finish line, Riddler is surprisingly okay with Batman besting his course. "Thanks to your unrelenting desire to showboat, I now have several hundred terabytes worth of performance data relating to that rocket-powered hearse you're driving," he taunts. "Naturally, I'll be using this data to calibrate and fine tune further challenges and trials."

Rocksteady is keeping the Riddler's plan under wraps, but does clarify that there other hidden caves and challenge types in addition to the racing category.
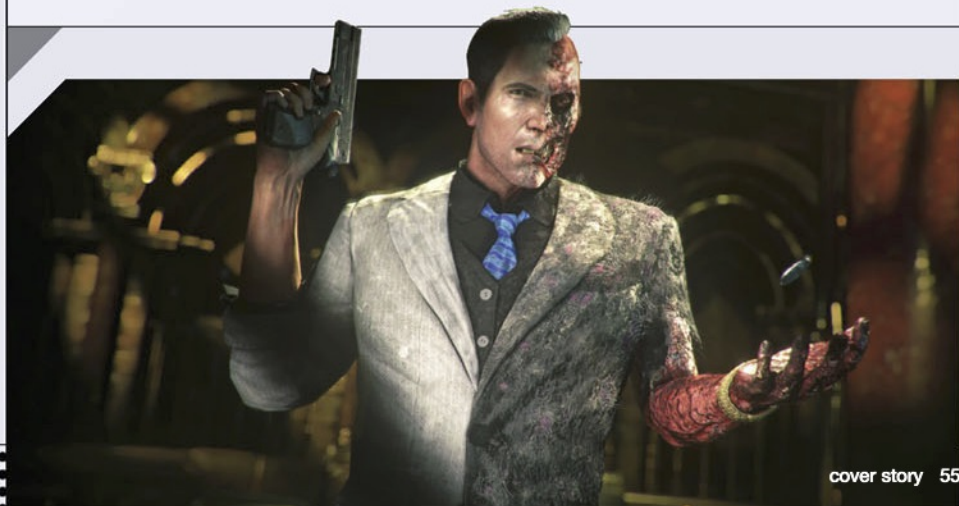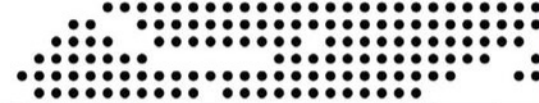
The new fear takedown can wipe out up to three enemies with a single chained maneuver

MEETING AN OLD FRIEND

Batman exits Riddler's garage and decides to check on Oracle's progress with Scarecrow's fear toxin. He grapples to the top of the clock tower and jumps into a small opening. Shelves loaded with books and trinkets fill the dim room. Like previous Arkham games, it's full of subtle references for Batman fans to pick up. A movie poster for *The Ghost Wore Gray* hangs in the background, referencing the Gray Ghost, who partially inspired Bruce Wayne's concept of Batman according to an episode of *Batman: The Animated Series*. Pale moonlight pours in through the transparent clock face, offering a view of the bustling city outside. Batman walks over to a white bust of William Shakespeare and tilts the head back. Instead of revealing a button like the classic Adam West *Batman* TV series, this statue contains an identity scanner. Upon completion, the shelves disappear into the floor and wall-sized video projections take their place. A single touchscreen console rises from the floor.

"Do I come into the Batcave and start messing with all of your stuff?" Oracle asks.

"[Oracle is] such a strong character in the universe that we really wanted to bring her to life in this game rather than have her as just that voice," Hill says. "What does she look like? Where does she work? How does she have all of this information? What's her relationship

like with Batman? She's one of the only people who knows his identity, so it gives that sort of human side to Batman. We spend so much time seeing him kick ass it's nice to see the emotional side of him underneath, and she's one of the few characters who help us bring that out."

Oracle reveals that a reaction in the new fear toxin emits a radiation spike. Batman decides that the fastest way to pinpoint these emissions and find the manufacturing site is to reconfigure a powerful antenna in the Falcone shipping yard. He turns to leave.

"Bruce, I spoke to Dad," Oracle says. "I hate lying to him. He'd kill me if he knew I was still in the city. He still blames himself for this."

She gestures toward her wheelchair. If the Arkhamverse lines up with comics continuity, Barbara was paralyzed after being shot by the Joker as part of a scheme to drive her father mad.

"We'll stop Scarecrow," Batman dodges.

"Let me know when you've reached the antenna, and I'll run a citywide scan for those radio waves."

Batman calls Jim Gordon from the top of the clock tower to let him know that he's got a lead on Scarecrow's operation. If he's feeling guilty about lying to one of his very few friends in the world, Batman doesn't show it. It's hard to imagine that the deception between these three allies won't be exposed at some point throughout the story. How that affects Batman and Jim's relationship is yet to be seen.

TRACKING THE SOURCE

Upon arrival at Falcone's shipping yard antenna station, Batman engages detective vision and sees three armed thugs guarding a single hostage inside. Based on their conversation, these enemies won't hesitate to kill their captive at the slightest provocation. A floor grate near the structure seems like the key. Batman can now access grates from far away instead of having to be right on top of them. When within range, a prompt allows you to tap a button to make Batman roll forward and immediately get under the grate.

Batman will visit Oracle's clock tower base frequently throughout the game
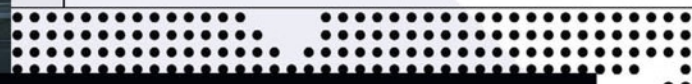
SEAMLESS FLOW

Anyone who's played Arkham City can recall running up to a building, opening the door, and staring at a black loading screen. It's not ideal, but it's so common in current-gen games that players are simply used to it. In Arkham Knight, that is a thing of the past. "We wanted that seamless flow to the whole game. It's really important to us," says game director Sefton Hill. "As a player, you would never feel that there's a transition. Obviously, from a technical point of view there's a load of streaming going on, but there is no feeling between outside and inside now. It's just one continuous experience."

The dark figure points his gun directly at Batman. "This ends tonight," he says. The screen fades to black, and a shot rings out.

THE FINAL CHAPTER

While it's likely that Warner Bros. Montreal will continue to make Batman games set in the Arkham Origins period, Arkham Knight serves as the end of the later timeline. Rocksteady isn't talking about what's next for the studio, but it is most definitely not Batman related. With this in mind, anything's possible in the final moments of the game. Will Batman die? Will he retire as in the end of *The Dark Knight Rises*? The only thing we know is that Rocksteady has had the finale in mind since the development of Arkham City.

"We knew where we wanted it to go," Hill says. "We don't work on multiple titles at the same time. We just work on the one game, and we want it to be the single best thing. We make it like it's the last game we'll ever get to make. And it felt like the right way to end the story. It felt like it brought the arcs from the first and second game, from Asylum and City, to a close. It felt like the natural fit really. We've been doing Batman games for a long while. We wanted to put everything into this one and really close the trilogy with a bang." ⬦

Visit gameinformer.com/arkhamknight for a full month of content including an interview with the composer, a look at the mo-cap process, and much more

Once he's under an enemy, Batman initiates a new fear takedown. He bursts out of the grate and takes out the first goon. The action slows down and players can pan the camera over to the next target and tap a button to dash over for another attack and so on. Fear takedowns can be used on groups up to three as long as they're close enough together and no one has spotted Batman.

After he frees the hostage, Batman attaches the uplink to the microwave tower and lets Oracle know.

He walks out the door to follow the signal and bullets ping off the ground next to his feet. Batman twists around to spot the source – a mysterious figure who is flying toward him firing a silenced pistol. Strangely, he is dressed like a militaristic Batman with what looks to be an Arkham "A" on his chest. This moment of surprise allows the attacker to land a jump kick and sends Batman to the ground. He tries to get up and the man stomps him down. "You're not going anywhere," he threatens.

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EA uses the Star Wars license to revitalize its flagship franchise

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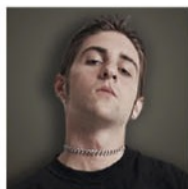
DARTH CLARK
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

For the correct opinions about the video game industry, follow @GI_Darth

Most people think I have a dream job, getting paid to play games and travel around the world to visit developers. Unfortunately, the reality doesn't always match the dream. Yes, any ordinary person (like you) would be lucky to land a gig like this, but for talented individuals (like me), reporting on such a hopelessly juvenile industry squanders my potential to an almost criminal degree. It's a sad irony: You're not a gaming journalist, but you wish you were. On the other hand, I actually am a gaming journalist – but I wish I weren't.

The boring and predictable world of video games takes a toll on a boundless creative mind like mine. Truthfully, I always saw myself as more of a fiction author (I have a pretty killer idea for a zombies-meet-technology story), but I have never been free to pursue it. Whenever I consider an exodus from the industry, my thoughts are pulled back to my fans; you click on my stories, engage me on Twitter, and watch my videos. Where would you be without my insight and guidance?

However, I don't know how much longer I can hold your hand. The gaming industry is toxic and broken. I'm sick of the fanboys and fangirls who mindlessly enjoy and appreciate things. I'm sick of entitled developers getting offended when I question the worth of their lives based on a product they have created. I'm sick of other journalists who criticize overwriting and demand that my assertions are backed up with "facts." But most of all, I'm sick of video games.

Just look back at 2013 (aka "The Worst Year In Gaming"). BioShock Infinite? Mindless shooter. The Last of Us? Hollow power fantasy. Gone Home? Worthless attempt at narrative. If this is the kind of puerile (look it up) garbage that counts for the best that gaming has to offer, then any sophisticated adult would turn away. Hell, I wish I could…but if I did, who would remain to tell people why they shouldn't like the things they like?

I suppose it's a paradox; I don't want to report on this industry, which makes me exactly the person it needs. Here is my promise to you: My contempt for video games will shine through in every piece I write, and through my brave contributions, this awful industry might get a little better.

You're welcome.

Darth Clark

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1 Gone Home – Prestige Edition

The Fullbright Company's Gone Home took the industry by surprise last year, winning numerous awards and impressing gamers with its exploratory look at teenage angst. Fans will be happy to hear the announcement of the upcoming Prestige Edition of the title, hitting store shelves this year. Packaged in a full-sized dresser drawer, purchasing this rare version gets you a cassette tape of a crappy garage band, scribble-covered newspaper clippings from the JFK assassination, and clear evidence that your mother has been cheating on your father. In addition, the package contains download codes for in-game bonuses like two new staircases, a locker that you can't get into, and a wooden duck that sits on the kitchen counter.

$130 | *gobigorgonehome.com*

2 The Last Of Us Series 10 Figures

Sony's latest line of The Last of Us action figures finally gives fans many of the characters that they've been eager to get their hands on, including that guy Nolan North played (who comes with The Turning arcade cabinet). Arctic Freeze Joel shoots water out of his mouth and comes packaged with a penguin companion, while Pizza Party Ellie is equipped with a Parmesan cheese shaker and a spinning pizza box. The new entry for the vehicle line is a battle-damaged giraffe, complete with turret-gun saddle and pile of combat hay. Collect all five figures to get the pieces to build a 12-inch Mecha Clicker.

$12.99 | *funwithfungus.com*

Gaming Legend Transcends Physical Existence

We recently had the opportunity to speak with John Carmack, former id Software figurehead and chief technology officer for Oculus Rift. The industry legend recently shed his mortal shell and entered an alternate plane of being. We arranged an interview with Carmack using the Oculus Rift set we found next to a smoldering pile of his clothing.

Mr. Carmack, why did you decide to leave your new position at Oculus Rift?
It all just boils down to my love for the Tron movies. Every career move I've made since the early Doom days has served the goal of my ascension. I think the first-person games I created at id Software show this, demonstrating a desire to be in the electronic world.

Becoming one with Tron has been your plan all along?
Exactly. From id to Oculus Rift, all of my jobs over the years have been excuses to gradually develop a way to digitally transfer my consciousness. The Oculus Rift was the doorway to this promised land.

To Tron?
Yes, Tron. This place is like heaven for nerds. Have you not seen the movies?

I haven't. Is it kind of like *The Lawnmower Man*?
[Carmack dissolves into the digital ether]

Thank you for your time.

Microsoft Reverses Position On Xbox One Release

The Xbox One suffered more than a few bumps on its road to retail, due to last-minute policy changes that included dropping the console's always-online and used-game restrictions. It turns out those changes were just a preamble to Microsoft's biggest reversal yet: the release of the console itself.

"To provide the best possible experience to our fans, we've decided to give the Xbox One more time in development before making it available to consumers," said the guy from Microsoft who replaced Don Mattrick. "Thankfully, we believe there is a lot of life left in both of the Xbox and Xbox 360, and they will keep gamers busy as we decide how to meet all expectations with our upcoming all-in-one games and entertainment system, the Xbox One."

Journalists at the press conference appeared confused. When asked how Microsoft plans to launch a console that has already been released, the spokesman became startlingly defensive. "Already released?" he asked. "No, it's not. That's what this is all about." Upon being shown one of the many readily available retail units, Not-Mattrick had the system confiscated and hidden behind a screen.

Microsoft says it's not ready to announce the official release date for the Xbox One. When asked if it would be November 22, 2013, the Microsoft dude laughed maniacally and moonwalked off the stage.

EA Announces Battlefield 5 Season Patch

DICE has been crucified by gamers for Battlefield 4's rough launch, and the developer has been scrambling to fix the online shooter's problems ever since. Luckily, publisher EA is stepping in with a solution for the sequel: the Battlefield 5 Season Patch.

"We've been listening very closely to fan feedback, and we're determined to not make the same mistakes," says an EA representative. "The Battlefield 5 Season Patch will ensure we deliver the best experience possible to our most devoted fans."

The Battlefield 5 Season Patch grants players access to a full year's worth of patches for just $29.99. "It's a great deal," according to EA, "as we fully anticipate there will be a *lot* of patches – at least one every week!"

Similar to some of Battlefield 4's DLC, Microsoft will have timed exclusivity for Season Patch updates. The focus will be on getting Battlefield 5 playable on Microsoft systems, but PlayStation and PC fans shouldn't worry; EA is partnering with Twitch.tv to show those users the streams of Xbox players who can find matches. "This is all about making sure we do right by our fans," EA tells us. "We won't let them down."

BATTLEFIELD 5
ERRORISM HAS MET ITS PATCH

PARODY

You Should Buy An Ouya

by Dexter Thorne, Ouya CEO

The Ouya is awesome! Our company set out to create the must-have home console that would disrupt the fatcats like Sony and Microsoft, and our efforts were a resounding success. It has all kinds of great games (maybe you've heard of titles like Towerfall and another one), and the controllers are definitely functional most of the time. It's also a great conversation piece; even my gamer friends who see it by my TV always ask, "What the hell is that thing?" The bottom line is this: The Ouya is great, and worth owning. The good news is, I have one that I'll sell you! It has hardly ever been used, and you can have it for super cheap. You should buy an Ouya. This Ouya. Please.

Gran Turismo 7
Sony's acclaimed racing series gets future-proofed
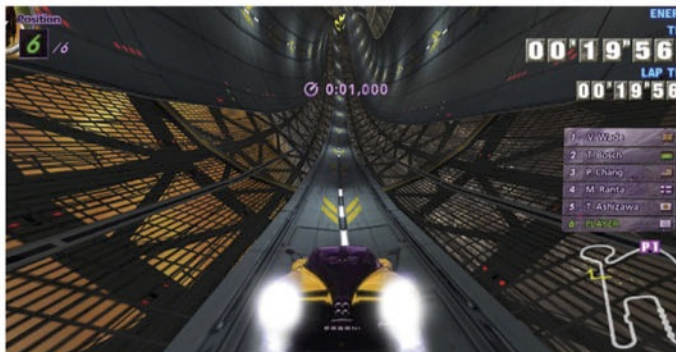
» **Platform**
PS6

» **Style**
32-Player Racing/Future Simulation

» **Publisher**
Sony

» **Developer**
Polyphony Digital

» **Release**
Holiday 2030

In the world of racing-simulation games, no developer is more respected than Polyphony Digital. The developer's painstaking attention to detail has been at the heart of the Gran Turismo series, but that dedication comes at a cost; the last installment, Gran Turismo 6, released on PlayStation 3 weeks after Sony launched the console's successor without a first-party racing game.

Rather than rush the creative genius of series producer Kazunori Yamauchi and his team, Sony is tasking the developer with future proofing the sequel so it will be relevant to the market when it releases. "We were a little late to the party with GT 6," admits Yamauchi. "So this time we want to make sure we are ahead of the curve. That is a racing analogy."

With a 2030 release date in mind, Gran Turismo 7 will feature a host of exciting new features, including flying cars, holographic road signs, and robot pedestrians. All vehicles also feature advanced damage modeling, but will self-heal after a few seconds, as Yamauchi expects cars to do in the future. Yamauchi also says the game will be packaged with a demo for The Last Guardian, which Sony expects to launch in the following months.

With its focus on the future of racing, Gran Turismo 7 sounds like the most ambitious game in the series yet. Which begs the question: Will they be ready? "When the holiday season of 2030 arrives, we will see you at the finish line," Yamauchi tells us with a coy smile. "This, too, is another racing analogy." » **Darth Clark**

Zelda: Other Z
Excuse you, Nintendo!

» **Platform**
Wii U

» **Style**
1 or 2-Player Slasher With Attitude

» **Publisher**
Nintendo

» **Developer**
Team Ninja

» **Release**
Sexual

Say what you will about Team Ninja, but the studio is extremely good at signing deals to work in franchises it has no business touching. After allowing Team Ninja to make Metroid: Other M, Nintendo has contracted the studio to give Zelda the same treatment.

Team Ninja promises that Zelda: Other Z plays to the strengths of the series. It has a plot overflowing with heavy-handed symbolism, teen angst, and barely repressed sexuality. The story begins when a ninja clan of Moblins burn down Link's hometown and kidnap the busty Princess Zelda, all while he's taking a nap in a tree. Link startles awake, sees the devastation, and then yanks the master sword out of a stone giant's decapitated head. He says "Time to rock and roll," (finally, voice acting in a Zelda game), then rides Epona into the sunset with a wink.

Other Z also allows a second player to take control of Link's best friend, Tingle. This elf wannabe's addiction to fairy dust has filled him with an insatiable bloodlust. During combat, Tingle constantly spouts one-liners like "That's going to tingle in the morning," and "You're going to be Koo-loo-limping out of here." Tingle also has a softer side; he has a complicated family past that Team Ninja vows to explore through extensive cutscenes. Thankfully, fans won't have to get their hands on Other Z, because Team Ninja has promised that they won't be "wasting time with focus tests or any kind of feedback" prior to release. » **Darth Clark**

Mario & Sonic At The Hunger Games

Deserves to catch fire

Style 1 to 4-Player Mascot Murder **Publisher** Nintendo **Developer** Sega **Release** So far ahead of the event it's based on you forget it ever came out **ESRB** YA

5

Wii U

The International Olympic Committee has pre-emptively refused to allow Sega and Nintendo to release Mario & Sonic at the Rio 2016 Olympic Summer Games, citing past games in the series as "total s---." Since then, the companies have been on the hunt for a new excuse to nonsensically toss their characters together. Now, it's the Hunger Games franchise's problem.

The whole Mario and Sonic gang battles to the death in a woodland arena while Dr. Eggman rules from his opulent Capitol. I was not impressed by the slim variety of districts the tributes hail from, like Scorched Hill Zone, Stale Donut Plains, and an obligatory ice world. Princess Peach and Sonic pretend to be in love to garner sponsor support, which is surprisingly believable; Peach has plenty of experience after leading Mario on for decades, and Sonic is clearly excited to be dating a human woman again after getting dumped by Lacey Chabert in 2006.

As with every Wii U game, the action focuses solely on terrible and kooky minigames. Since Luigi has no physical skills to defend himself, you use the Wii remote to paint camouflage on him so he can hide on a patch of moss the whole time. Another has you sawing tree branches to drop nests of Buzz Bombers on competitors below. The strangest game type, Suicide Pact, tasks players with eating those poisonous mushrooms from the Japanese Super Mario Bros. 2 at the exact same time. After playing this awful mashup, you'll want to see if your backyard has any deadly fungi to put you out of your misery. » **Darth Clark**

» **Concept**
If you don't get this after reading the title, we can't help you

» **Graphics**
Finally caught up to PS3/360

» **Sound**
Yoshi's death rattle upon taking a spear to the neck will haunt you

» **Playability**
Even though the game-pad is supposed to be the focus of the Wii U, you're still forced to use crappy motion controls

» **Entertainment**
Of course not

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

MLB 14: The Show

Yes harm, yes foul

Style 1-Player Affront To Your Sensibilities **Publisher** Sony Computer "Entertainment" **Developer** Questionable **Release** Annually **ESRB** Sports!

3

PS4

Baseball is more than just a sport; it's the American pastime, inseparably woven into the DNA of our social identity. Baseball embodies the endless struggle of the human spirit. That's why I'm so disappointed in MLB 14. The on-field action is exciting and authentic, but completely fails to live up to the other expectations I have set for it.

First of all, the game only runs at a measly 30 frames per second. Yes, that's generally how we played games for years, but I own new hardware now; as an ascended gamer, looking at such a low framerate is offensive, like garbage in my eyes. The game also doesn't run at 1080p – a fact I don't fully understand, but I know that it is bad.

The visuals aren't the only issue. It has downloadable content available (which I hate on principle), so that knocks a few points off right there. Each individual game only takes an hour or two to play, which is far too short in my opinion. Also, MLB 14 doesn't feature any women in starring roles – a baffling oversight in this day and age. Lastly, I kind of like basketball better than baseball. I wish there were a basketball mode.

These obvious faults are inexcusable. Sure, the gameplay itself is fun, and the presentation is faithful to the sport. But that isn't what's important here. Anyone who buys or plays this game is part of the problem. » **Darth Clark**

» **Concept**
Provide solid baseball, but miss the point entirely

» **Graphics**
Photorealism is so passé, especially when the developer could have gone with a stylized look that captures the soul of our culture

» **Sound**
Accurate and varied color commentary from the real-life announcers, but they fail to discuss any relevant social issues

» **Playability**
I kept looking for the "lament the state of the video game industry" button

» **Entertainment**
If you only want to play some baseball, you'll have fun here. You are also a monster

» **Replay Value**
Low

REMEMBERING JAPAN

The sun has finally set on the Land of the Rising Sun's video game industry. We take a look back at the once-influential island country's legacy.

Japanese video games set the standard for years starting in the late '80s with hits like Super Mario Bros. and The Legend of Zelda. After decades of Japanese RPGs, stylish action games, and creepy dating sims, only a few series still remain relevant…like Super Mario Bros. and The Legend of Zelda.

Some sad individuals cling to the country's former glory, wandering the massive Tokyo Game Show's empty halls for something exciting to play. While the echoing convention hall has been mostly overrun by families of deer and polite ghosts, some delusional developers cling to hope.

"We've released three new Final Fantasy games this year!" says one pallid developer. "But they were mobile-only," he added, shooing a fawn away from a dusty kiosk.

We will never forget you, Japan. 🎮

Titanfall

Respawn makes its final preparations

Respawn's flagship title received overwhelmingly positive buzz following its reveal and quickly became one of the most anticipated games of the new generation. Unfortunately for Respawn, a hiccup occurred amidst its near unanimous praise upon revealing a 12-player maximum for matches. Gamers with a "more is always better" mindset began to doubt Titanfall's potential for chaotic, intense multiplayer battles. We've since hopped in the titular Titans for one last extended hands-on play session preceding release. Our deeper dive into combat, player progression, and the newly announced Last Titan Standing mode has us more confident than ever in Respawn's premier offering.

For the uninitiated, Titanfall focuses on six vs. six first-person combat, both on foot and in the cockpit of towering mechanical Titans. The sharp A.I. of these massive robotic tanks' allows them to autonomously stand guard or follow you around while blasting enemies. A variety of robotic workers and NPC combatants wander the battlefield, frequently interacting with you or one another. These systems combine to create intense, living combat zones that someone might expect from a game with a much higher player count.

Our last round of hands-on time with the game before launch takes place on the Fracture map. Unlike the dense urban map Respawn has previously shown, this map proves that even the wealthy denizens of Titanfall's universe are not untouched by the ongoing fight for natural resources. Multi-level homes with odd, angular designs have been torn apart by geological disturbances caused by widespread fuel mining. Exposed water mains provide cover along the map's edge, grenades can be tossed through shattered skylights into the rooms below, and Titans have more open space to move around in. Only the Atlas Titan was available for this preview, as Respawn is leaving the slow, powerful Ogre and nimble glass cannon Stryder under lock and key for the final release. Titan fights frequently escalate into deadly games of catch, where players freeze their opponent's missiles or bullets in midair and attempt to toss them back. Pepper in some huge robot punches and one player's inevitable emergency ejection from their flaming rig, and there's rarely a dull moment.

Pilots can disable a Titan's primary computer by leaping on it

Impatient gamers who don't like the idea of waiting for their Titan can look forward to Last Titan Standing mode. This new match type starts out each round with Pilots already suited up in their bipedal tanks. The key to victory is crushing the other team's Titans while preserving at least one of your own. Interesting strategies emerge throughout this mode, such as disembarking a Titan and allowing it to gun down enemies in auto-mode while you assist with an anti-Titan rocket launcher. It's a fun addition to Titanfall's announced FPS staples like team deathmatch and domination.

The constant action of online batttles is enough motivation to keep playing, but Titanfall's progression system adds a tantalizing carrot at the end of the stick. Players choose from a selection of predetermined Pilot loadouts at first, eventually unlocking new weapon/ability combinations and the ability to customize their own class. Titan customization follows a similar course, eventually allowing players to tinker with perks like reduced Titan cooldown time and auto-eject. New guns and weapon parts like sights can be purchased using funds earned from battle. It's a familiar, satisfying leveling system that fans of the Call of Duty series should appreciate, which makes sense considering a sizable portion of Respawn's staff are formerly from Infinity Ward.

The newly revealed Burn Cards system allows players to tailor their play style beyond loadout customization. Burn Cards are single-use perks earned throughout the game, three of which can be carried into battle after all the slots have been unlocked. The benefits of each card last until you die, encouraging careful play to keep the kills coming. An overcharged anti-Titan grenade launcher deals extra damage to enemy robots. A prosthetic leg makes the double-jumping, wall-running Pilots even speedier. The Decisive Action card speeds up the deployment timer on your next Titan. Growing your stash of Burn Cards and strategically selecting them according to your gameplan add a new layer of depth to Titanfall's already frenetic battles.

Titanfall is an important game for not only the unproven Respawn Entertainment, but the industry as a whole. As one of the most eagerly awaited next-gen releases and a Microsoft exclusive, its success will help determine the desirability of the Xbox One. Additionally, Respawn's unprecedented decision to develop a triple-A, multiplayer-only title could start a new trend of console shooters that forgo single-player campaigns altogether. But most importantly, every moment we've had with Titanfall has been a blast, and soon we'll have the whole package. » Tim Turi

» **Platform**
Xbox One
Xbox 360 • PC

» **Style**
12-Player
Online Shooter

» **Publisher**
Electronic Arts

» **Developer**
Respawn Studios

» **Release**
March 11

Titans can be put into standby mode to provide unmanned support

Xbox 360 Titanfall Deployment Delayed

Details on the Xbox 360 version of Titanfall are still scant. Respawn Entertainment previously announced the last-gen version is being developed by Bluepoint Games, the creators of PlayStation All-Stars Battle Royale and HD ports including Metal Gear Solid HD Collection and the God of War Collection. Originally scheduled to release alongside Respawn's new-gen version, the Xbox 360 version has been delayed until March 25.

Infamous: Second Son

Exploring choices in Sucker Punch's Seattle

» Platform
PlayStation 4

» Style
1-Player Action

» Publisher
Sucker Punch
Productions

» Developer
Sony Computer
Entertainment

» Release
March 21

f nothing else, Infamous: Second Son provides players plenty of choices. Not only does the title's open-world structure offer the freedom to choose which mission to tackle next, but its karma system allows players to make good and evil choices that influence the narrative. Meanwhile, protagonist Delsin Rowe's power to absorb the abilities of any conduit he touches opens up a variety of new ways to approach combat. I felt the weight of these choices during a recent hands-on session.

The demo kicks off after Delsin runs into another conduit named Abigail "Fetch" Walker. Fetch's powers allow her to bend light into a variety of deadly laser-like attacks. In the opening act, Fetch is seen as an altruistic super being, only using her powers to take down the criminal element. However, Fetch is fairly impressionable; after Delsin incapacitates her, he has the choice to join her in her cause to clean up the city, or corrupt her, pushing her to explore the dark side of her gifts.

If Delsin sticks to the virtuous path, he and Fetch team up to take down a series of drug boats scattered throughout Seattle's harbor. Using Delsin's smoke powers, I quickly worked my way through the harbor, rescuing trapped hostages and tagging drug boats with spray paint so Fetch could light them up and send the boats to the bottom of the bay.

If Delsin corrupts Fetch, a new set of missions opens up. In these missions, the duo decides to attack a group of anti-conduit activists who have been protesting against the conduit "plague." Delsin convinces Fetch to help him harm the picketing civilians in order to draw out their activist leader.

Unlike Delsin's smoke powers – which are great for up close and personal encounters – the neon power set he inherits from Fetch offers precise laser blasts, ideal for sniper fans. The neon charge ability also allows Delsin to fire up the sides of buildings, making it the go-to power for getting across the city quickly. Switching back to Delsin's smoke powers is as easy as finding a smoke stack and absorbing its hazy essence.

Players' karma choices impact the gameplay as well. After players have firmly established themselves as good or bad, they start to earn karmic bombs, which are army-clearing powers that showcase the full extent of Delsin's power. In one evil karmic bomb based on the neon abilities, Delsin explodes in a wave of light energy, sending nearby enemies floating into the air before unleashing a stream of neon bolts that turn these foes into chaff.

To build up this devastating attack, however, Delsin needs to cause a massive amount of chaos. When Delsin's actions create enough mayhem to fill the karmic bomb meter, he can unleash his fury. But as things settle down, this meter slowly drains. If Delsin has taken the moral high road, however, he must perform a streak of good actions – such as subduing a foe instead of killing them – in order to earn a karmic bomb that subdues a large group of foes. This ability stays banked until he accidentally kills a civilian or some other horrific activity.

Sucker Punch's miniature recreation of Seattle offers players a variety of mission types to explore, and within those missions players have the freedom to accomplish objectives however they see fit. The only wrong choice would be to ignore this exciting PS4 exclusive when it releases in late March. **» Ben Reeves**
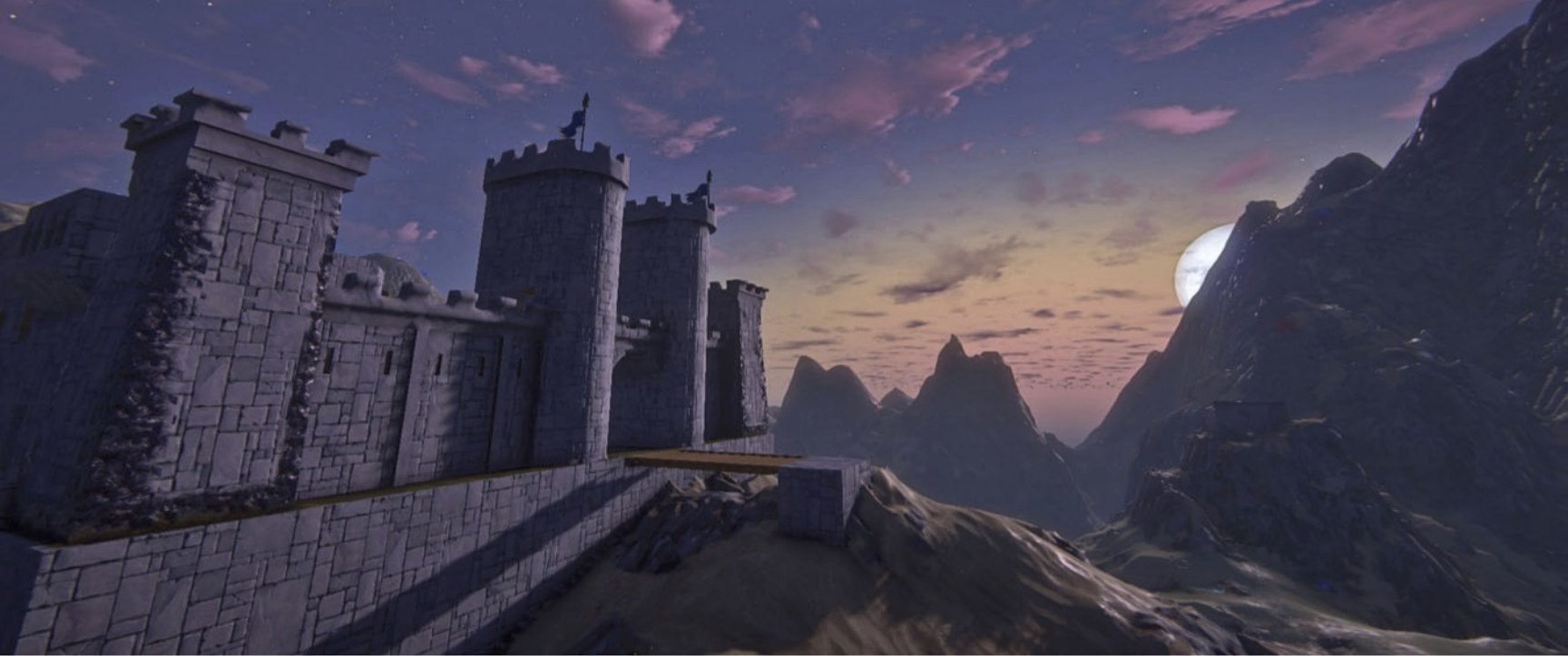
Like previous Infamous games, Delsin can choose to be good or bad, but in Second Son he can also influence other conduits' moral decisions

Some DUP agents have more advanced tech and are a greater challenge for Delsin

Delsin can charge up powerful Karmic Bombs to take out several enemies at once

EverQuest Next Landmark

Much more than a building game

The next chapter in the EverQuest franchise, EverQuest Next Landmark, is currently in an early access/alpha state, and serves as a staging ground for many of the features that will make their way into the EverQuest Next MMORPG. While the focus is currently on crafting and building, it's important to know that the current shell is on a path to become its own open-ended MMORPG, complete with combat, monsters, treasure-hunting and exploration, and an achievement-based progression system.

Because it doesn't need to operate under any specific narrative, the sky is truly the limit for EverQuest Next Landmark, as players create everything from castles and pop-culture homages to cactus armor and rocket launchers. Right now, players can lay claim to land, harvest resources, and build to their heart's content. But this is just a small taste of planned content. Eventually, players will be digging deep into the earth in search of buried treasure and battling creatures, taking on group encounters for precious loot and resources, crafting weapons and armor, and exploring areas of varying degrees of difficulty.

If crafting is your thing, you could stay in safe areas and build a massive fortress or work with a guild of other players to create something absolutely incredible. Builders can create templates that can be used to replicate the designs they've come up with and barter with other players. If you stick to the specifications outlined by Sony, the building could be eligible to be ported over to EverQuest Next.

If you don't feel like chopping down trees or hunting down ore to create buildings, you could become a treasure hunter and burrow deep into the earth with a pulverizer machine to discover riches – and guardians. Explorers can travel the land in search of challenging creature encounters and trade their spoils to crafters and builders.

For those who prefer competitive encounters, Sony plans to create PvP areas where players can lay waste to opposing keeps and castles. These zones are driven by being home to special resources and other goodies that players will want to get their hands on.

In all likelihood, most players will engage in some combination of these activities. This open-ended experience doesn't really follow the standard MMORPG model at all, since there's no "endgame" in the traditional sense.

Unlike many MMORPGs that use experience points and levels to define character progression, EverQuest Next Landmark has an achievement-based system. For example, slaying a certain amount of monsters could unlock a health bonus. Mining a certain amount of a mineral could make you a faster miner. The focus isn't on grinding achievements, but actively rewarding players for exploring and having experiences within the world. Essentially, your character improves over time simply by doing the things you like to do.

Combat in EverQuest Next Landmark takes advantage of the destructible environments. Some methods of taking out enemies could include blowing up bridges as enemies attempt to maneuver over them or blowing up areas with dynamite. Loot like swords and armor aren't exclusive to crafting, and foes drop various pieces of equipment both common and rare. Some places in the game are dangerous to go into alone, with players heading out in groups in an attempt to facilitate safer exploration. Boss monsters and world encounters may require multiple players to defeat.

Sony plans to roll out these various elements in small doses over the course of the alpha/beta process, and the developer is taking player feedback into heavy consideration. Landmark is never actually expected to be "complete;" it will be a continually changing and updating game. » Daniel Tack

Items come in different qualities with various modifiers

Flawed Mithirium Pick
Rare Pick
252.98 Size
76.27 Speed
226.93 Damage
Allows the mining of all metals and gems.
Resource Rating 11.00
0

Mithirium Pick
Rare Pick
299.73 Size
71.65 Speed
223.06 Damage
Allows the mining of all metals and gems.
Resource Rating 11.00
0

Mighty Mithirium Pick
Rare Pick
312.68 Size
76.62 Speed
257.50 Damage
23 Reach
Allows the mining of all metals and gems.
Resource Rating 11.00
0

Mithirium Pick
Legendary Pick
373.49 Size
93.33 Speed
277.10 Damage
Allows the mining of all metals and gems.
Resource Rating 11.00
0

Project Spark

Video games as a means of expression

n 2009, Microsoft released Kodu on Xbox Live's Indie Game channel. It wasn't so much a game as it was a creation tool. By visualizing programming language in a simplified way, it was eventually adopted as an educational tool. It has a curriculum and a community that continues to build games using its tools. In many ways, Project Spark is an evolution of Kodu. Studio manager and executive producer Sax Persson calls Project Spark's visualized programming language Kodu 2.0, but it's much more expansive.

Before working with Team Dakota on Project Spark, Persson was part of the Xbox Live Arcade team. He found players flocking in huge numbers to games that offered a user-generated content component. Persson singles out the original Trials' level creation tools as an example. This element of the game was never offered as a major selling point, but players loved it, using it more than expected. Persson says it had a lot to do with the game's ultimate success. "There's a pent-up demand for people to participate and do whatever they feel like with a game," Persson says. "If we can make a platform where people can actually do that? That would be amazing."

Production on Project Spark began nearly four years ago. Persson and Microsoft wanted to build a tool people could use for self-expression and explore the emotion behind creation. "We've always wrestled with the terminology," Persson says. The goal for Spark is to create a tool where players can create, and creators can play – which is the tagline the team settled on. Team Dakota hopes people will pick it up to play around with the tools, and

BIOME
Nature

What started as a blank slate turned into a difficult-to-navigate forest island of floating mountains after some light training and about 45 minutes of tinkering

walk away with a video game they've built and can be proud of.

"If you look at technology through the last couple hundred years, everything goes from the elite to the masses," Persson says. "From photography to movie making – at some point, people demand to participate."

Project Spark is currently in beta for Windows 8 and Xbox One, and the Xbox 360 version should get its own beta shortly. "It's quite complicated, but we're working on all three," Persson says. The team is inventing new tools and mechanics as it is developing the game, so it's not as simple as bringing in an additional developer to help port the game. All three versions of the game can communicate with each other. By the time the game officially releases, Team Dakota promises you will be able to create and work on any level on any platform at any time.

The tools used to create are the same on every platform, but the PC and Xbox One versions have some advantages other than the visual upgrade the two hold over the Xbox 360. Windows 8 machines equipped with touchscreens allow players to use their fingers to create, and Kinect 2.0 allows Xbox One players to add more personality to their characters. Using Kinect, players can record voiceover and animate characters in a similar way to motion-capture processes. The Kinect implementation

For The Players

LittleBigPlanet, another game that features a robust toolset, shipped with a full suite of levels created by Media Molecule. In its current state, Project Spark doesn't have a similar offering. That being said, it's not entirely out of the question, according to executive producer Sax Persson.

"We're keeping our options open in every respect," he says. "That's not to say that we are doing it or not doing it. If we thought making our own story with Spark would get more people to make their own game, I could totally see why we would go and start making a game. But it's more important to us that we inspire people to make their own game. We are way more YouTube than we are LittleBigPlanet – if you want to compare. We're more interested in allowing people the platform to express themselves through games."

It's not a level, but Team Dakota likes to check in on this user-made dragon, which has new additions every time they take a look. It started as a stationary skeleton, but now has added animation, and as you can see here, it breathes fire

has been shown before, but Persson says the feature has been completely reworked from scratch since its original iteration in order to perform and track movement better.

Since its beta began, Project Spark has gone through four releases, but player content has never been wiped and it will never be wiped. If you are lucky enough to participate in the beta (which moves from closed to open soon), everything you've created is safe. Players can already purchase cosmetic content with microtransactions without fear of it being deleted for a new version.

The beta is dictating when Project Spark will officially launch, hence its nebulous release date. Team Dakota is using the beta to conform the game to the way players want to use it, and testing the integrity of its servers. When the beta is running smoothly, the game will officially release. » **Kyle Hilliard**
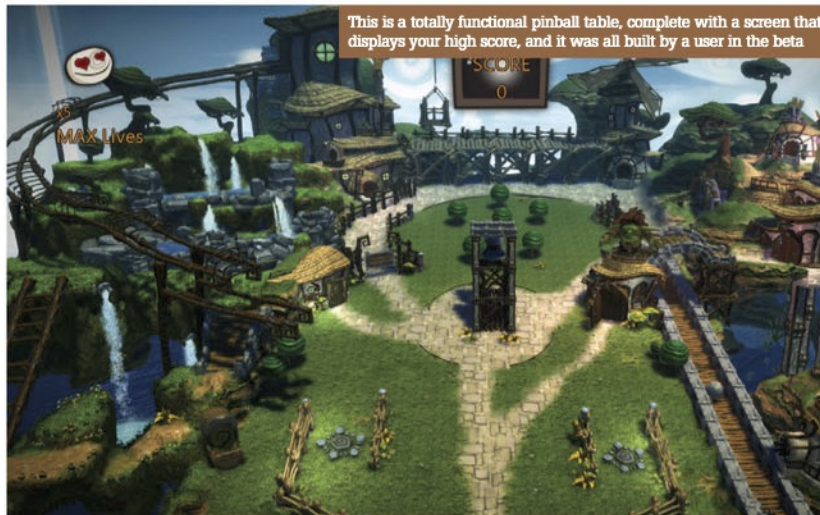
This is a totally functional pinball table, complete with a screen that displays your high score, and it was all built by a user in the beta

Some of Team Dakota's favorite creations from the beta aren't necessarily impressive for technical reasons. After releasing the beta a few days before Christmas, one user built an interactive Christmas card thanking the team for the beta. Persson doesn't know how this was accomplished

Jumping Into The Beta

My own time with the beta didn't result in a spectacular creation worthy of praise and marvel, but I was impressed with how fast I could explore the world I created. What began as an attempt to recreate Halo's Blood Gulch map turned into a completely unrelated pair of mountains and a nearby series of platforms. I began shaving away at the sides of a portion of land and building up the middle until I had a mountain I could climb. I added a dirt trail as a makeshift path, and formed a trail of coins.

After testing the boundaries by making a separate mountain as tall as I possibly could, I moved to a different section. There I built a small hill and chopped out gaps to create floating platforms. I placed a single coin at the end. This was all accomplished in a matter of minutes.

My first mountain was difficult to climb. It was impossibly huge and the platforms were poorly placed. Regardless of all that, I still built a world without much effort and I was proud of my creation. I called my level, "The greatest creation that ever existed," and decided I would ignore the feedback from fellow beta players.

Galak-Z: The Dimensional

17-Bit's topdown shooter becomes a full roguelike
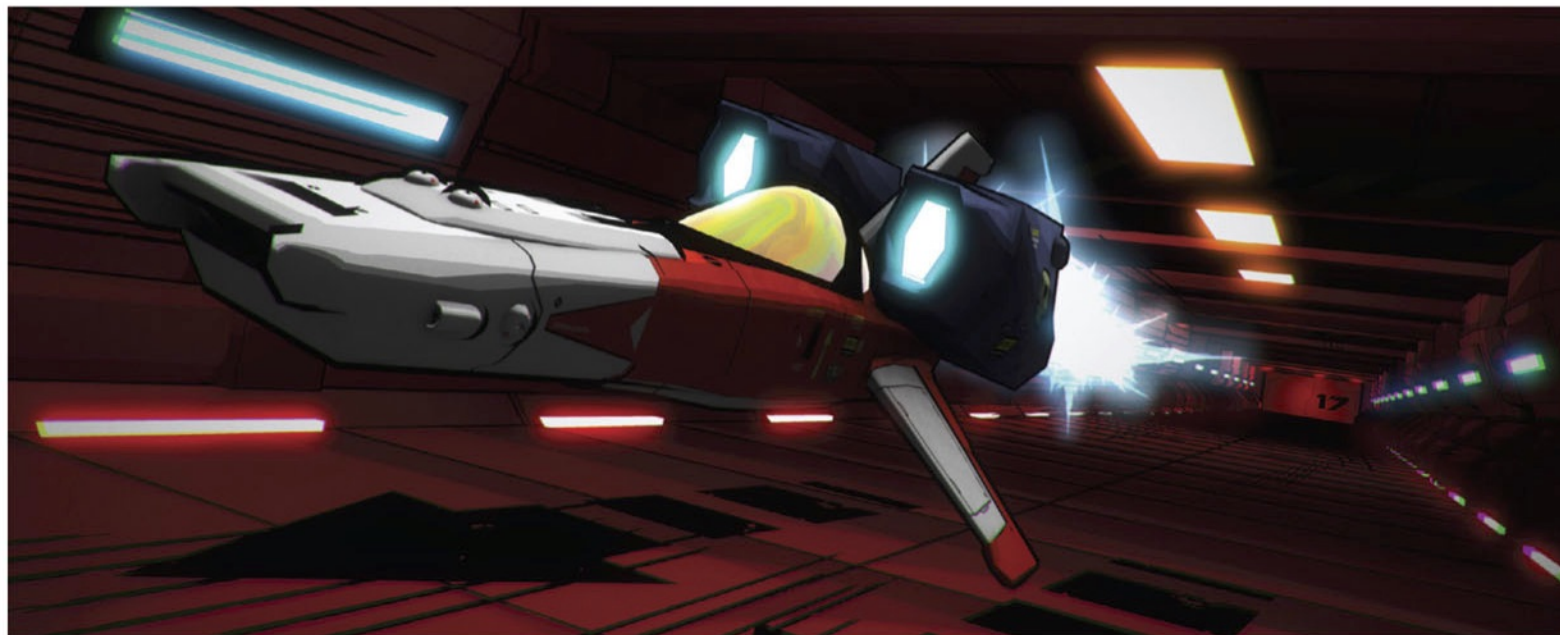
When we first got our hands on Galak-Z last September, 17-Bit had only a few basic elements in place. The one-level demo featured a hand-designed planet with a few twisting caverns and enemy types. Despite its nascent stage, the core gameplay was already engaging, and we had no problem endlessly shooting asteroids and enemy ships while 17-Bit CEO Jake Kazdal laid out his plans for things to come. After an additional six months of development, Galak-Z has transformed into a more beautiful and complex beast. The scope of the game has continued to grow as well.

For those who don't recall, Galak-Z is a modern-day homage to the old-school shoot 'em up. The game features a multilayered control scheme that allows players to independently manage front and rear thrusters, apply boosters, and perform juke moves to (hopefully) outmaneuver enemies while unleashing volleys of heat-seeking missiles and laser blasts. Every enemy is driven by its own A.I., complete with sound and vision cones for detecting the player as well as members of opposing factions. The result is a buzzing simulation of
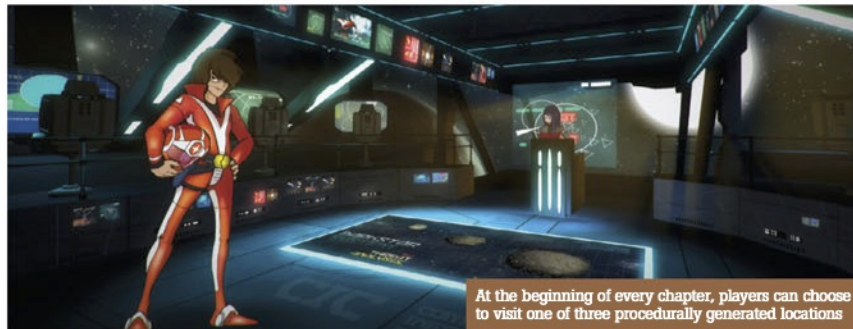
At the beginning of every chapter, players can choose to visit one of three procedurally generated locations

enemy ships, space monsters, and environmental traps that can turn the odds in your favor if you can keep it together long enough to take advantage of them.

The latest demo reveals how far Galak-Z has come since we last saw it. An additional layer of visual polish makes the hand-drawn planets and anime-inspired explosions even more beautiful. New wildlife including massive snaking centipedes and cave spiders keep us on our toes. An in-game merchant now provides an incentive for picking up the shower of items dropped by bested enemies; a variety of system upgrades and weapons are available for purchase, including a powerful triple-shot cannon and a second turret for the standard laser.

The biggest change, however, isn't as readily apparent; 17-Bit has redesigned Galak-Z to be a roguelike, and as such all levels are now procedurally generated. The developer has also implemented permadeath, making the frenetic dogfights even more intense.
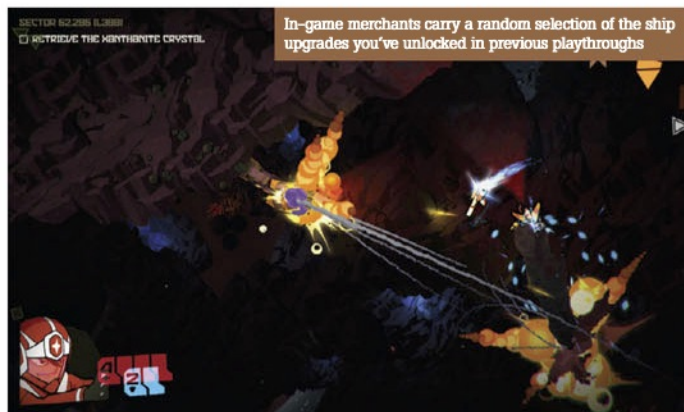
Though not fully implemented, Kazdal explains that each play session of Galak-Z is presented as its own unique episode, complete with a randomly generated title and author, a freeze-frame end credits sequence, and parody commercials. Episodes are broken down into chapters, and should last around

In-game merchants carry a random selection of the ship upgrades you've unlocked in previous playthroughs

45 minutes in total – provided you live all the way to the end.

Each chapter gives players three locations to choose from, which contain different difficulty ratings, mission objectives, and procedurally generated planets to explore. Kazdal says there are around five world types in total, and that some missions focus on other locations such as deep-space battles between opposing fleets, asteroid fields, or the abandoned husks of massive starships. Make it through the full sequence of chapters and you must take on a procedurally generated boss ship – maybe an Imperial general, a pirate captain, or both – to beat the episode. 17-Bit's goal is to have enough small cutscenes to tell a complete procedurally generated story, which Kazdal acknowledges is ambitious but still believes is doable.

A lot of Galak-Z's most interesting features are still literally on paper – Kazdal had to sketch out the mission structure in his notebook as he explained it to us. However, the same was true when we first saw the game, and with all of the main systems now in place, the project is coming together nicely. Whether 17-Bit can make all of its bold plans a reality is unclear, but what we do know is Galak-Z gets more fun every time we play it.

» **Jeff Marchiafava**

Transistor

Supergiant lives by the sword

Back in 2011, Supergiant Games caused a stir with its debut title, Bastion. The action/RPG earned acclaim thanks to its flexible gameplay, distinctive world, and excellent soundtrack. Transistor, the studio's next project, appears to have a similar mixture of those successful tenets. However, Transistor does not just retread the path forged by Bastion.

"When we set out to make Transistor, our foremost goal was to create something with its own distinct identity, to build a whole new world from scratch that players could lose themselves in, and had the potential to stick with them in a positive way long after they finished playing," says Supergiant creative director Greg Kasavin. "I think the tone and moment-to-moment play experience of Transistor will be key to giving it its own specific identity as a game."

Players control Red, a singer who has lost her voice. She wields the Transistor, a mysterious sword that is powerful at the beginning and only gets more formidable as the game progresses. The weapon also has a connection to a friend of Red's, whose soul is seemingly trapped within. This means that even though Red can't speak, the Transistor (voiced by Bastion narrator Logan Cunningham) guides her through the futuristic city.

Talking swords are unique, but the Transistor's true potential comes out on the battlefield, where players fight off robotic foes with an array of special abilities. However, the action isn't strictly about hacking and slashing. In addition to regular attacks, players orchestrate strategic assaults thanks to the Transistor's ability to freeze time and queue up maneuvers. Balancing the real-time and tactical options allows you to develop your own approach to battle.

"The game quickly introduces you to the [tactical] mode, but beyond that never tells you when or how to use it – that part is completely up to you, and we find that players intuitively and quickly pick up on it," Kasavin says. "Whether they use it to press the attack or as a last-ditch measure or for evasive maneuvers, or just for pausing and surveying, it's all viable in any proportion with the real-time combat."

How you execute your attacks isn't the only freedom Transistor provides; the specific attacks you use also have an impact. The sword can deal direct damage, but it can also force enemies to fight each other, create a diversion, and conceal your position. "A big part of the game revolves around unlocking the Transistor's various capabilities and learning all it can do," Kasavin says. "You'll find that each of the Transistor's different functions can be used in a variety of contexts and combinations, so in practice there will be a huge number of viable ways to build your character."

Red can have four functions equipped at once, but they are upgradable to provide even more flexibility. For example, you earn the functions Crash and Breach early in the game. The former is a short-range stun move, and the latter is a piercing long-range move. However, they can augment each other, allowing you to upgrade Breach with Crash's stun ability, or turn Crash into a longer-range attack. Considering the Transistor's wide variety of functions and the numerous upgrade possibilities, you shouldn't have a problem finding a style that appeals to you.

Supergiant has been relatively quiet about Transistor since its debut, leaving anxious fans desperate for more info. Don't worry – the silence is not a bad sign. "I think a lot of people have already made up their minds about whether or not they want to play Transistor just from what little we've revealed thus far," Kasavin says. "Likewise, I don't think we'll tip many people over the fence by revealing more weapons or characters or whatever. So we just keep on tinkering away at the game."

» Joe Juba

The Right Sound

Bastion had a particularly memorable soundtrack, and you should expect another outstanding effort with Transistor. It may have a different style, but the team still has the same commitment to establishing atmosphere through music. "We once again have Darren Korb our composer and audio director at the helm on this front, and we knew straightaway that we wanted the music in Transistor to be at least as significant as it was in Bastion, in its own way," says Supergiant's Greg Kasavin. "One way that's manifest is that Red happens to be a singer, so the music you hear isn't just there to be pretty, it's part of the world and part of this character. A lot of who she is is right there in the music."
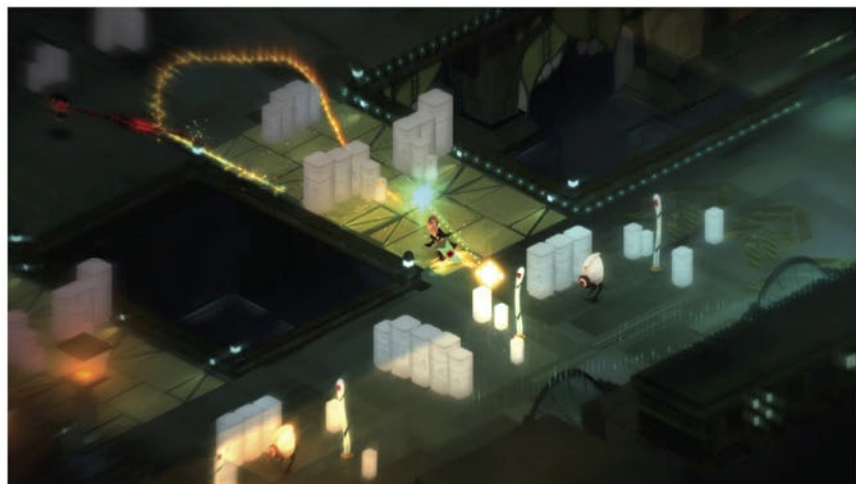
The Elder Scrolls Online

Inauspicious beginnings conceal a greater game

After a full weekend with The Elder Scrolls Online, I've got a much better sense of what to expect out of the final game. Prior to this play session, the only areas we had a chance to check out were small low-level zones that felt boxed-in and frankly a little bland. This play session allowed me to take a character past the entry-level content and into the greater world of Tamriel, exploring the expansive area around Daggerfall and diving into the skill system, progression, and beautiful open-world environments.

Elder Scrolls Online feels more and more like Skyrim with each build. Outside of the tutorial zone is a vast area containing quests, bosses, surprises, and numerous opportunities for exploration. In this way, much of the lower-level experience from levels 1-15 feels like playing a single-player Elder Scrolls title. This is a good thing, as it allows players to acquire a solid stable of abilities and learn how to use them before grouping becomes an option. It's also worth mentioning that the combat in this build has been greatly improved and significantly more engaging than the "block and smack" mechanics that defined earlier iterations of the game.

One of the most impressive and intriguing things in Elder Scrolls Online is the skill system. With so many choices it's easy to get lost, and that's a good thing. Players can invest in more traditional, class-specific talent trees, but they can also choose from a wealth of other options, from crafting and racial skills to options acquired through questing and exploring. Your participation in the guilds of the world and other various groups/affiliations can unlock passive and active ability options, which adds to the feel that ESO is grounded in its single-player RPG roots. Players have the chance to create truly unique characters.

The game remains largely quest-driven outside the beginner area, and this freeform experience is refreshing and enjoyable. Wander in any direction for a few moments and you're likely to uncover new characters to interact with or crypts to explore. The city of Daggerfall feels incredibly fleshed out and almost real, a vast upgrade from the standard MMORPG city that merely exists to serve as quest hub with vendors. You can spend hours just traversing the city and surrounding areas, and if the later areas of the game are anywhere as big, this world is looking downright enormous even by MMORPG standards.

While questing, you stick with a core team of NPC adventurers for many hours, learning a lot about them and making various storyline decisions that may have significant impact down the line.

Two of the most important things in MMORPGs – grouping and endgame – were not available to test in this session. While we won't know how these aspects turn out until after the game launches, the single-player aspects seem deep enough to keep a Skyrim fan or MMORPG enthusiast satiated for quite some time. » **Daniel Tack**

Next Car Game (working title)

FlatOut developer reveals its next destruction derby

Back in the PlayStation 2 era, Finland's Bugbear Entertainment made its name with the FlatOut series. That destruction-focused car franchise garnered a fanbase thanks to its love of shredded metal. In recent years the company has worked on some other racing franchises like Sega Rally and Ridge Racer, but now it's back with a new PC title that dials up the destruction to new heights.

Currently being developed under the working title Next Car Game, Bugbear's latest is in Steam early access, with a release expected this year. The game already demonstrates the developer's disregard for proper car care and mastery of physics and destruction. Running through a sample demolition derby ring and two racetracks on gravel and tarmac, I found the game strikes a nice balance between the fun of using your car with aggression against competitors while still preventing you from damaging out instantly. In the process, your car inevitably gets deformed, with parts and metal particles bursting into the air. The track itself ends up a junkyard of debris.

One thing I notice while playing the game with a controller is the two cars available (a prototypical American muscle car and smaller European car) seem to feel more substantial than those in the FlatOut series, which felt a little floaty and turned on a central pivot point. This is important when both racing the track as well as trying not to get too knocked around.

Car parts can be upgraded, and unlike most racing titles that feature a clear-cut parts inventory, the game has a marketplace of parts where users can sell to other players. Bugbear hasn't declared whether it plans to impose parameters on prices, or if they will let them be set by users. The parts you use won't increase an arbitrary "acceleration" rating, for instance, but change actual values like the time it takes you to go from 0 to 60. Given demand, some parts you want or need simply might not be available.

Choosing which car to use when is also important – you might not want to opt for the car with the engine in the front if you're going to be using it for ramming in a demolition derby.

Bugbear plans to craft a variety of tracks and a selection of derby arenas (including a figure-8 circuit) housed in larger career and multiplayer structures, but the studio isn't ready to talk particulars.

However, none of these details are as important as Bugbear's historic dedication to destructive racing. Ten years since the debut of the FlatOut series, the developer can leverage improved technology to truly bring its dramatic crashes and races to life like never before.

» Matthew Kato

» **Platform**
PC

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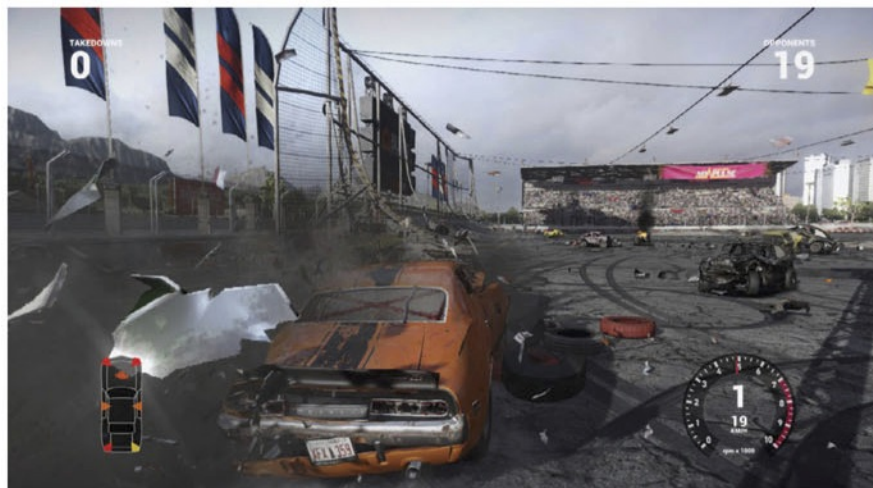1-Player Racing
(24-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Bugbear Entertainment

» **Developer**
Bugbear Entertainment

» **Release**
2014

The field is large enough that disasters like this don't grind races to a hault

Clockwork Empires

Frontier colonies and cosmic horrors collide

Get ready to manage a colony in a bold new Victorian-steampunk-Lovecraftian setting. Gaslamp Games (Dungeons of Dredmor) is taking the simulation game somewhere new in Clockwork Empires with colorful characters, crazy occult gods, and even real-time multiplayer modes for a genre that often never leaves the warm confines of single-player settings.

Players indirectly control critical characters as they perform tasks around a frontier colony, as well as lesser tier workers and lower-class pawns. You influence character behavior, but cannot directly control it. Clockwork Empires is less concerned with micromanagement than having you set policies, which frees you from making direct decisions every time. The characters and their personalities shine through regardless, which makes for interesting challenges and encounters.

Not only do players have the opportunity to advance technologically, but there are powerful forces based in mysticism and magic as well. Bold leaders may tempt fate by seeking the powers of the occult to power their colonies. Many mysterious secrets exist for players to discover. Some are spurred on by encounters with the Obeliskians, living monolith beings with tentacles that may run into your naturalist as he or she studies an old ruin or a species of beetle.

The Obeliskians may eventually make demands from your colony. If they request some bones for a project, you have to decide whether to provide them the bones and hope they leave you alone, fight back with force, or wait and see what they create with the resources. Maybe they come up with some magic engine that doubles your available technology. Maybe they summon an eldritch cosmic horror in your town square. Anything could happen, and that's just one small interaction that your colony has over the course of a game.

For those who prefer to play with others,

Clockwork Empires features a traditional asynchronous game mode, plus a more ambitious synchronous multiplayer mode where players interact with other players' settlements. These interactions can be positive or negative, and players are well advised to keep an eye on their colony and what others may bring into it, from positive trade to saboteurs to dark, loathsome things with no face that slither in the dark. Playing with friends can range from cooperative growth and development to creative backstabbing and diplomacy.

Clockwork Empires' concept is intriguing, but don't expect Gaslamp Games to delve too deep into the game before launch. The studio wants to retain as much wonder and mystery as possible. "It would have been really awesome to have people pick up the game not knowing, and just to discover things," says Gaslamp Games CEO Daniel Jacobsen. "Sadly the internet has made that really difficult. You really sort of have to opt out of information by just not looking at Twitter for a week while you play through a game. It's like those wonderful moments where you actually have to tell people about stuff that happened in a game because it was back in the day that there was no internet, and FAQ's didn't exist and you actually had to use words, and then the lore around a game would eclipse the game itself. And it's sort of our attempt at making such a thing possible again." » **Daniel Tack**

This encounter with an Obeliskian had an unfortunate ending

Heroes Of The Storm

Tychus Findlay joins the all-star Blizzard roster

Blizzard is going all out with its upcoming free-to-play MOBA-style game, Heroes of the Storm. Players can control many of Blizzard's iconic characters in fast-paced five-on-five matches featuring characters from the Diablo, StarCraft, and Warcraft franchises. This means that you can finally determine who would win in a fight between Illidan and Diablo, Thrall and Kerrigan, and many other zany matchups right out of the strangest fan fiction.

Distancing itself from other games in the same genre, Heroes of the Storm does not feature in-game stores for characters to purchase gear, and each map has special conditions that can give teams an edge.

One of the many Blizzard icons that players have access to is outlaw Tychus Findlay. This minigun-toting former soldier has a spin-up time associated with his weapon, but can dish out massive damage. Findlay also has access to frag grenades that can knock back enemies, and a choice of several heroic skills.

The Drakken Laser drill, originally used for mining operations, can be called forth to do incredible single-target damage. Findlay's other heroic ability is Commandeer Odin, which allows him to call forth and pilot the Odin mechanized armor, giving him powerful cannons, missiles, and additional protection.

Like other Blizzard heroes, Findlay has access to a number of special skins. The Infested Tychus is one such unlockable option, which turns Findlay into a Zerg-infested terror. With only a portion of the character roster announced thus far, expect more reveals as we move further into 2014. » Daniel Tack

» **Platform**
PC • Mac

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

» **Publisher**
Activision Blizzard

» **Developer**
Blizzard

» **Release**
2014

StarCraft II players might remember Tychus from the game's first teaser cinematic, walking out of the infamous New Folsom prison, only to be trapped in a different sort of jail at the whim of Arcturus Mengsk

Who is Tychus Findlay?

Former soldier. Erstwhile thief. Convicted felon. Tychus Findlay and Jim Raynor share what some might call a checkered past — the type filled with daring exploits and courageous fights doing not so courageous deeds. While no one can be sure where Tychus' loyalties lie, one thing is for certain. He's a fearsome combatant whose impact on the battlefield is anything but subtle. Tychus always goes big. Always.

Wolfenstein: The New Order

The end of the world as we know it

In 1946, the U.N. General Assembly met for the first time, President Harry Truman officially declared the end of World War II, and *It's a Wonderful Life* released in theaters. Our world was recovering.

In Wolfenstein: The New Order's alternate reality version of 1946, Captain William J. Blazkowicz's world is spiraling into an abyss after the Nazi regime develops powerful machines that rock the United States, England, and their allies back on their heels.

In the first of the three beginning chapters of the demo I played, Blazkowicz and his comrade Fergus Reid are leading an attack on General Deathshead, a foe who has also appeared in earlier installments. The mission begins on a bomber making a run at Deathshead's fortress. When the plane goes down, however, Blazkowicz is forced to face the robotic Panzerhund and heavily armed soldiers as he marches through the trenches.

Floating under the water as bullets whiz by and comrades gasp for breath is a callback to countless stormings of Normandy. Machine-gun nests bearing down on the beach keep Allied soldiers pinned as friends fall around

them. This may sound like the World War II games the industry was inundated with last decade, but the proceedings take a sharp left turn shortly thereafter. As Blazkowicz, Reid, and their squad push into the castle, the horrors of the Nazi regime are revealed.

The Nazis in Wolfenstein aren't the inept jackbooted thugs of Indiana Jones films. They are creatures of pure evil, experimenting on prisoners and crafting them into abominations. Machine Games doesn't pull any punches. The imagery in these scenes is horrific and connected just enough to the crimes of the Holocaust that Blazkowicz's personal reaction feels authentic. The Nazis are still caricatures, but believable ones. The chapter concludes with a Nazi victory, as Blazkowicz gets captured.

The transition to the second chapter, which jumps forward to a version of the 1960s dominated by the Third Reich, is more emotional than I expected from a Wolfenstein game. As Blazkowicz escapes from his prison and learns about how the United States surrendered after an atomic attack, his resolve toughens.

The gameplay blends traditional series

elements like overcharging health with pickups and equipping armor pieces scattered around. As in the original game, hidden rooms yield a variety of collectibles, including gold, letters, and enigma codes. The latter are found in pieces, with an entire set revealing game modes not yet detailed.

Wolfenstein: The New Order's progression system is smartly implemented. The four skill trees (stealth, tactical, assault, and demolition) each have a number of different perks that are unlocked by your play style. For instance, killing 10 enemies while dual-wielding unlocks an assault perk that halves the reload time when firing two guns. Killing two or more enemies with a grenade gives Blazkowicz the ability to throw enemy grenades back. I checked the perk trees often, approaching scenarios with the intention of making progress toward new unlocks.

While infiltrating the Nazi bases, keep an eye out for radio-equipped commanders. When one is nearby, an alert appears on the HUD. You won't know exactly where they are, only how close you are. Should one see you, they'll sound an alarm and summon reinforcements. A silent takedown or rapidly eliminating a commander should you be spotted (and before the alarm is fully engaged) will make your life easier.

The enemies you face are varied and interesting. During the preview, I saw grunts, flying drones, giant metallic dogs, armored German shepherds, walking mechs, and a grotesque cyborg cobbled together from human flesh and metal.

I didn't know what to expect from Wolfenstein: The New Order, which made the experience more enjoyable. William "BJ" Blazkowicz is a grizzled and emotionally scarred Captain America, and I'm looking forward to seeing how he takes back the world from the Nazis. » **Michael Futter**

Sniper Elite 3

Zooming in for the kill

The video game market is oversaturated with shooters, but like the marksmen it focuses on, the Sniper Elite series stands apart thanks to its methodical pace and focus on realism. Fans of the series will be happy to know that Rebellion is crafting an even more advanced sniping simulation for the upcoming sequel, while incorporating some helpful tweaks to stave off frustration.

Sniper Elite 3 sticks to the series' World War II roots, but this time Rebellion is turning to the war's often overlooked North African campaign to change up the scenery and gameplay. During a hands-off demo, Rebellion showed us a level set in Egypt's Halfaya Pass, which features a chain of small villages and buildings inside of a winding canyon. Sniper Elite 3's environments are larger and more open than in previous games, and accommodate multiple routes and gameplay approaches to your objective. The level also features more verticality than your average shooter, with towers and canyon walls that serve as convenient sniper nests, and trenches and caverns that facilitate fast getaways.

Rebellion is focusing on improving enemy A.I., which has been a weak point for the series. Enemy soldiers now behave differently based on their rank, with officers providing buffs to their squads and issuing orders to subordinates. Enemies also see and hear more realistically, and pursue you based on your last known location (indicated by your silhouette). Thankfully, when an enemy spots you, his comrades aren't instantly alerted – instead your location is dispersed first to nearby enemies after a believable delay, giving you time to dispatch the foe or relocate.

Various visual indicators help players navigate their surroundings undetected. A tagging mechanic similar to Far Cry 3 allows you track enemies behind cover by displaying their silhouettes when line of sight is broken. Other information such as visibility, heart rate, and
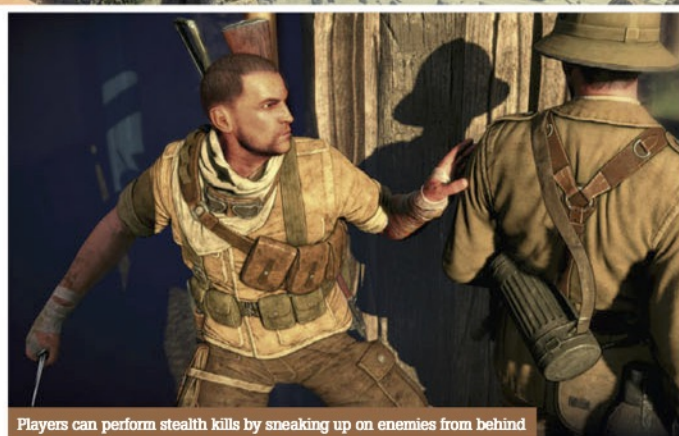
Players can perform stealth kills by sneaking up on enemies from behind

enemy awareness are conveyed by real-time icons. The most important visual cue is the alert meter, which indicates how close enemies are to pinpointing your location based on the sound of your shots. Relocating decreases the meter, encouraging players to take a few shots and then move to a new position, just like real snipers. Purists need not worry; Rebellion says you can turn off all of the visual cues for a more challenging and authentic experience.

Sniper Elite's X-ray Kill Cam has always been the series' standout feature, and it's back and gorier than ever. Rebellion has added a muscle layer to character models, along with a simulated circulatory system. The developer has even added a vehicle kill cam; shoot a vehicle's weak point and the camera switches to an X-ray view as the resulting explosion rips through its engine. The effect is a little hokier than its human-anatomy counterpart, but entertaining nonetheless.

Rebellion is adding all the bells and whistles you would expect from a modern shooter, including an XP system, customizable rifles and loadouts, and a suite of 12-player multiplayer modes. The entire story campaign can also be played with a buddy, complete with new cooperative objectives, and experience crosses over between single- and multiplayer modes.

Despite all the additions, Sniper Elite 3 is still a niche title, but not in a bad way. It eschews the everyday run-and-gun formula of triple-A shooters for a tense and tactical experience where every shot counts – exactly what sharpshooters want from a sniper game.

» **Jeff Marchiafava**

When detected, enemies convey the player's location to nearby allies first, instead of instantly alerting every soldier in the level

» **Platform**
PlayStation 4
Xbox One
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • PC

» **Style**
1 or 2-Player Shooter
(12-Player Online)

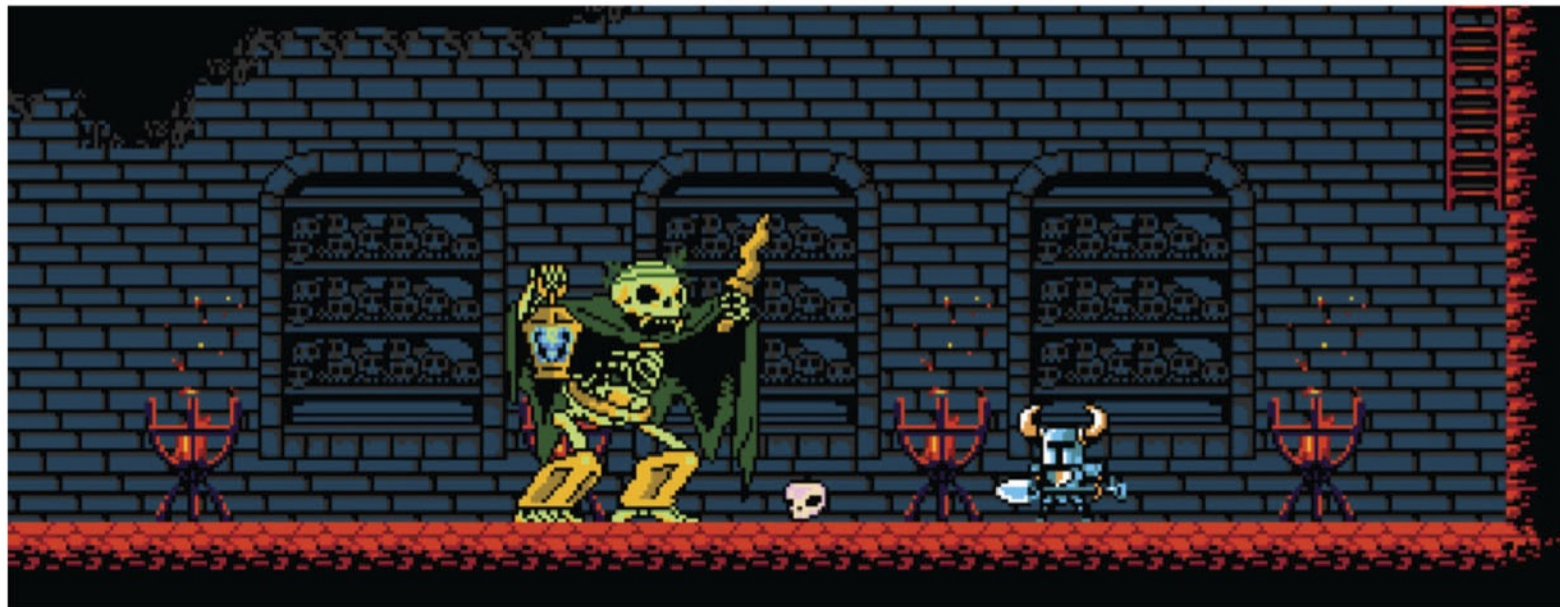» **Publisher**
505 Games

» **Developer**
Rebellion

» **Release**
Summer

Shovel Knight

Old school difficulty meets Dark Souls-esque risk/reward

Specter Knight's level features spooky graveyards and electric frogs

Shovel Knight uses a magical trinket to briefly become invincible

» **Platform**
Wii U • PC • 3DS

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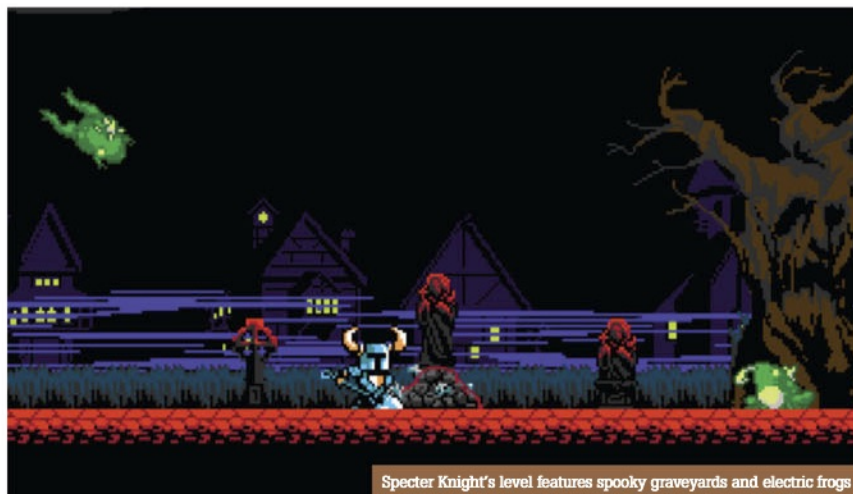1-Player Action/
Platforming

» **Publisher**
Yacht Club Games

» **Developer**
Yacht Club Games

» **Release**
March 31

Last year, developers from WayForward (Contra 4, Double Dragon Neon), split off to form Yacht Club Games. Shortly thereafter Yacht Club launched a Kickstarter campaign for Shovel Knight, a tribute to 8-bit classics like Mega Man and Castlevania with an injection of Dark Souls-style risk. I fought through the spooky graveyards of Specter Knight's world and came away with renewed excitement about this twist on the classic action-platformer genre.

Shovel Knight is ripe with nods to classic NES games, Mega Man in particular. The blocky character designs, themed levels, and instant death hazards all call back to Capcom's classic. Even the titular knight's movement feels close to the Blue Bomber, with a dose of Scrooge McDuck-inspired shovel pogoing. The gameplay is tight, responsive, and feels great even while using an analog stick as opposed to the classic d-pad. Pulling off tricky moves is satisfying, like chaining a series of pogo-jumps across tombstones or platforming through the dark using sporadic lightning cracks to light the way.

Precise platforming is key, considering the challenges waiting around every corner. Shovel Knight forgoes a traditional lives system, but the sting of death is still potent thanks to the Dark Souls inspiration. Players drop a portion of their hard-earned cash with each death, and must recover them during the following run or lose it permanently. The checkpoints bookmarking players' progress through the tricky levels also offer their own risk/reward. Leaving checkpoints intact provides a safety net, but they can also be destroyed for a sizable cash reward. The gems and treasure Shovel Knight recovers from fallen foes and hidden chests can be put toward upgrades or useful items, like a fireball power or brief invulnerability.

The aforementioned invulnerability comes in handy when facing off against the scythe-wielding Specter Knight. The boss battle plays out like an encounter with Castlevania's persistent Grim Reaper. Specter Knight tosses his bladed weapon around the battleground like a deadly boomerang, summons skeletal minions, and teleports around. It's a tough battle, but like the games of the 8-bit era, pattern memorization and twitch reflexes pay off. The invulnerability power allows Shovel Knight to become invincible for a few precious seconds (complete with Castlevania-esque sound effect), which lets him dodge Specter Knight's flying blade. Seven similar boss fights await players across Shovel Knight's other stages, including the flying Propeller Knight and fiery Mole Knight. After tackling all eight bosses, Shovel Knight must take down the evil Enchantress. Does a Dr. Wily-style fortress await tenacious players?

A few of the bosses are playable thanks to Kickstarter stretch goals met by excited backers. Other extras added during development include a new game-plus, female protagonist, and four-player battle mode featuring every boss.

A vein of nostalgic love runs throughout everything Yacht Club has shown of Shovel Knight so far. The unique infusion of a risk/reward system adds a new flavor of challenge to the retro design sensibilities. Hopefully if it's received warmly, Yacht Club will consider ports to more platforms. » **Tim Turi**

Dungeon Defenders II

Rounding into form

When last we saw Dungeon Defenders II, it lacked the dialogue and strategy that made the original game a hit. Recently, we jumped into a new map with three members of the Trendy team to see how the game is coming together, and it's in much better shape.

Dungeon Defenders II retains all of what made the original tower defense/action RPG hybrid so much fun. The original four character classes (squire, apprentice, monk, and huntress) have grown up, but their skill sets and defenses feel familiar. We perused a new sewer map located underneath the town square that was the site of our last battle. The five-wave skirmish took place in the mountains with chasms and rivers cut into the earth around the central base and sub-objectives.

We experimented with the new combos to take down new spear throwing foes that attack from long a distance and burrowing wither bugs that make defenses and objectives immensely more susceptible to attack. Combos typically require multiple heroes, like the huntress and her geyser to soak an enemy followed by the monk's lightning aura or apprentice's cyclone trap (both of which deal storm damage to provide the second half of the stunning electrocution).

Some combinations can be executed alone, though. The huntress' oil flask makes enemies more vulnerable to the magma-filled blaze balloon trap, for instance. Elementally charged loot can also play a role, providing the second half of a combo otherwise impossible with a single hero's defenses and skills. Heroes can equip a weapon and four relics that boost stats and can shape classes into different builds.

The most exciting news from the demo was how Trendy is expanding the gameplay beyond the campaign mode. Taking a page from Left 4 Dead's playbook, the studio is creating a new mode featuring a "wave director" that responds to hero selection, defenses, and other variables. The result should be less predictable and more challenging gameplay that requires players to adapt to unexpected enemies.

Trendy is still refining animations, the melee combat system, and the visual effects of equipped items before Dungeon Defenders 2 soft launches this spring, but this free-to-play sequel is shaping up nicely.
» **Michael Futter**

» **Platform**
PC • Mac • Linux

» **Style**
1-Player Action/Strategy (4-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Trendy Entertainment

» **Developer**
Trendy Entertainment

» **Release**
Spring

The Golf Club

Sculpting your favorite back nine

This year's golf landscape looks very different, with EA Sports forgoing a new title for its PGA franchise in 2014. Even if the company planned on releasing a game this year, HB Studios would still have reason enough to put out The Golf Club. This Nova Scotia-based developer, which has worked with EA Sports in the past for ports of titles in the Tiger Woods series, is bringing something to video game golf that fans have been requesting for years – course creation.

The Golf Club offers procedurally generated courses that you can edit, as well as the option to make your own course from scratch. Parameters include the number of holes, time of day, par, fairway distance, number of hazards, size/slope of the greens, and more. You can also tweak elements such as sculpting individual plots of land (like filling water hazards with grass and shrubs), pin placement, and tree location.

You can also move entire holes around or take the green you like from one hole and plop it into the middle of another hole's green to create a new par three. The game handles these changes quickly, and the surrounding landscape adapts well to your terraforming thanks to the use of the Unity engine. Once you've created your masterpiece you can share it with friends, play those curated by the community, and create tournaments and tours of your favorite courses.

On its face, The Golf Club's gameplay is recognizable, with an analog swing, draw/fade, a post-swing indicator, the ability to add spin, etc. But Golf Club producer Anthony Kyne says the team wants good shots to be more about feel than golf-by-numbers. "It feels like real life in the fact that you can pull back, and depending if you're just trying to nudge it on the green – just do a little chip and run – you get the sort of feeling you do doing that rather than just trying to hit a little marker on a power bar," he says.

By concentrating on gameplay and a feature set that fans have been asking for, HB Studios is striving to prove that there's more to a sports title than just a license. » **Matthew Kato**

» **Platform**
PlayStation 4 Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1 to 4-Player Sports (Online TBA)

» **Publisher**
TBA

» **Developer**
HB Studios

» **Release**
Spring

Sonic Boom

Sega sends Sonic west for his next adventure

In 2013, Nintendo and Sega announced a three-game deal that put Sonic exclusively on the Wii U and 3DS. The first two titles in that arrangement, Sonic: Lost World and Mario & Sonic at the Sochi 2014 Winter Olympic Games, received lukewarm receptions. The third title, Sonic Boom, closes out the deal and wisely takes Sega's mascot in a new direction.

Sega is sending Sonic and friends for a semester abroad, with two western studios at the helm. Big Red Button, founded by Jeff Lander (True Crime series) and Bob Rafei (Crash Bandicoot series, Jak & Daxter series), are handling the Wii U version. Sanzaru (Sly Cooper Collection, Sly Cooper: Thieves in Time) is manning the 3DS installment.

We saw a trailer for the CryEngine 3-backed Wii U version, and it's clear that this is going to be a very different Sonic adventure. While there are still opportunities to showcase Sonic's speed, players are also given play time with Tails, Amy, and Knuckles.

Tails relies on gadgets, Knuckles is the brute of the bunch, and Amy is agile and swings an oversized hammer. Players have access to different pairings of characters in each "wide linear" playground. Rafei says the game isn't fully open world, but each new environment offers opportunities for exploration (similar to Ratchet & Clank's planet-based sandboxes). The game is a cooperative affair, with two fixed characters in each zone and boss battles involving all four of the heroes.

The character designs have been overhauled by OuiDO!, the animation company behind a new CG cartoon that will begin airing this fall on Cartoon Network, though Sega calls Sonic Boom a new branch of the franchise rather than a replacement. The games serve as a prequel to the animated series.

Sonic's upcoming adventure is a significant departure from past titles. With Big Red Button's experience in exploration-based adventure and Sanzaru's impressive track record with character-driven platformers like Sly Cooper: Thieves in Time, we're eager to see how this journey to the west turns out.

» **Michael Futter**

Knuckles is larger, representing his role as the team's heavy hitter

All four of the playable characters will participate in speed segments

Sonic Boom offers cooperative gameplay

Sonic Boom will feature more open environments than past games

gameinformer
GAME OF THE MONTH

90 Strider

Elite techno ninja Strider returns for his third game in 25 years. Blending action platforming with 2D Metroid-style exploration, Double Helix and Capcom have created a winning formula. Since it's on nearly every platform available, you have no excuse not to download it right away.

Though Final Fantasy X/X-2 HD Remaster scored higher than Strider, its status as a rerelease makes it ineligible for Game of the Month honors.

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	Trademarking common use words.

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

Everything Your Heart Desires.

Thief

A classic stealth series returns from the shadows

8

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Concept**
Reboot the classic PC franchise by sticking close to its old-school stealth gameplay and medieval urban fantasy backdrop

» **Graphics**
One of the better-looking games for the new consoles, even if the environments are relatively tiny

» **Sound**
Garrett's new voice actor does a solid job bringing the character back to life, but the modern synth soundtrack feels out of place

» **Playability**
Zipping between shadows using Garrett's swoop ability is a blast, and the feedback is generally tight enough that if you get caught, it's your fault

» **Entertainment**
Thief's sneaking challenges are highly rewarding when you ghost through the world undetected, but will send you to the loading screen repeatedly if you're not careful

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

The Edge

All three versions of Thief play identically. The Xbox One version requires a longer installation and packs a resolution of 900p (compared to the PS4's 1080p), but the difference is not significant. Both console versions have a bit of texture popup and longer load times, so the PC version gets the edge here.

After a decade away, the Thief series' hero Garrett has returned to steal from a sickly city. This time around, he's joined by an accomplice named Erin, but their partnership is cut short when a routine mission to steal an artifact called the primal stone goes south. A mysterious, cosmic energy escapes from the stone, consumes Erin, and knocks out our hero. Garrett wakes up a year later with a magic hangover and a hunger for answers about his missing companion. The narrative features a cast of fairly interesting characters and pays homage to many of the beats in the original Thief, but mostly serves as an anchor for a string of spectacular heists.

The original Thief was a triumph that has continued to inspire stealth games over the last 15 years, so Eidos-Montreal's reboot has some big shoes to fill. At times, the developer seems ill-fitted for the franchise, but the studio has padded out this selection of classic stealth challenges with crafty cat-and-mouse moments that help intensify Thief's slow pacing.

None of Garrett's capers feel like retreads of other missions. In one moment, I was sneaking through a mansion's courtyard, diving for cover before bursts of lightning illuminated the shadows, and in the next I was barreling through a burning section of the city, dodging flames and falling girders. One heart-pounding mission had me exploring a haunted asylum in a sequence that reminded me more of survival horror games like Amnesia: The Dark Descent than a traditional stealth mission.

No matter what your objective, Thief is constantly changing up the pace. Optional objectives and a sprinkling of random jewels and rare artifacts give you plenty of reason to fully explore every level. A smattering of clever environmental puzzles force you think like a thief in order to unlock concealed safes or disable hidden traps. Missions usually feature multiple paths to success; in fact, I often stumbled upon hidden back doors while exploring the environment for loot. You're also free to explore a small city hub where you can take on side missions, which are often fun as well as a great way to earn extra cash if you need to upgrade your equipment.

Thankfully, Garrett is more than capable of overcoming all of the challenges before him. A swoop ability allows Garrett to dive from one shadow to another in the blink of an eye, while his mystical focus vision lets him locate expensive objects and sense hidden switches. I loved using Garrett's tools and talents to explore the world from the edges of every shadow before prying on the holes in guards' patrols. Removing a satchel of gold from a mansion without setting off an alarm made me feel more capable than if I had fought off a dozen guards to earn my prize.

Armed with a quiver of arrows that do everything from extinguish flames to nail ropes into high perches, Garrett is better equipped to avoid combat than dish out pain. Thief's combat system is fairly elementary; you have one attack and a dodge, but there are no combos or counter systems to help round out the action. If you get spotted, it's possible to take down a single guard, but if he alerts a few of his buddies (which is bound to happen), then you're better off fleeing. However, even when you run, it is often hard to lose your pursuers and find a safe hiding spot, which results in the dreaded trial-and-error pattern that has plagued stealth games since the original Thief hit PCs back in 1998.

If you're content to save your game every couple minutes and enjoy a slower-paced stealth game, then Thief rewards you with plenty of moments so tense you might catch yourself holding your breath. Eidos-Montreal may have adhered too closely to the series' roots, resulting in a reboot that suffers from classic problems like simplistic combat and trial-and-error sneaking missions. However, locked behind this old-school game design is a gem that stealth fans should eye up for their collection. » **Ben Reeves**

This review is for the PlayStation 4, Xbox One, and PC versions. Thief is also available for PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360, but Square Enix did not provide review copies of those versions

Final Fantasy X/X-2 HD Remaster

Worth listening to Tidus and Yuna's story once more

Final Fantasy X made its debut over 10 years ago, with leading man Tidus pleading, "Listen to my story…" His journey centered on an awkward, budding romance with a summoner named Yuna and their struggle to stop Sin, a mysterious whale-like creature destroying the continent of Spira. It introduced us to a world full of spirituality, blitzball, and the sacrifices brave souls must make to secure peace.

Focusing merely on its narrative isn't enough – Final Fantasy X changed the way we experienced RPGs with its fully voiced cutscenes adding a new layer of storytelling. It pushed boundaries and raised standards; like Final Fantasy VII, it was a cinematic turning point in video games. Square Enix is providing another chance to relive this defining moment with not only a visual upgrade, but also brand-new content previously exclusive to the international versions of Final Fantasy X and X-2.

Square Enix didn't just raise the resolution and call it a day; the visual overhaul is noticeable. Barren areas now teem with detail, color, and life. Where blurry, green landscape filled the backdrops, shrubbery now thrives. Structures follow suit with additional detail, making them more realistic.

Even the characters' faces look more life-like and expressive. The fresh coat of paint keeps everything on par with what we've seen from other PS3 games. However, tell-tale signs – like the characters' awkward mannerisms – show that these are still PS2 games at their cores.

Sparking some ire from diehard fans, Square Enix rearranged and remastered over 60 tracks from Final Fantasy X. This is most noticeable if you're intimately familiar with the original soundtrack, and the changes aren't as jarring as I expected. Some rearrangements, like the infamous "Calm Before The Storm," retain their essence with refinements, but it's not all changed for the better. "Besaid Island Theme," for instance, loses personality by ditching its memorable piano. Still, the arrangements don't rewrite the songs; most of the time, they clean up the melodies and make the tracks more powerful while adding unnecessary instruments. Square Enix obviously wanted to update the music to make the same impact as the enhanced visuals. It doesn't, but I appreciate the attempt to spruce up the collection even more.

Both X and X-2 feature content new to North America (but seen in the original international versions). Final Fantasy X adds dark aeons and the expert sphere grid, where not every character is entrenched in a set path. They all start in the middle of the grid, which makes it easier to customize characters. It doesn't drastically change the experience, but having more control over your characters' development, like setting Auron up as a healer, is a nice touch. *Eternal Calm* is also included, a short movie that provides context to how Yuna came to her decision to join up with the Gullwings in Final Fantasy X-2. It fills in some of the blanks and is a much better segue into X-2's plot than Yuna's concert.

Final Fantasy X-2's international additions include new dresspheres, a creature creator, and fiend arena-battle tournaments. Its biggest offering is the Last Mission, which takes place three months after the end of X-2. Yuna, Paine, and Rikku are brought back together by a strange message urging them to ascend Iutycyr Tower. Last Mission is a roguelike dungeon crawler, where you try to stay alive and ascend as many floors as possible. After a set number of floors, cutscenes provide insight into what the characters have been up to since they were last together. The floors aren't exciting, but the dresspheres and leveling system keep it fun. Last Mission is certainly a nice diversion, but not incredibly engaging.

Even years later, Final Fantasy X is still an exciting RPG, telling a compelling story with plenty of momentum. While the crazy girls-night-out theatrics of X-2 might still cause you to roll your eyes, the battle system is still fast and fun. For those who want the complete arc of the Final Fantasy X saga, the collection delivers. Even without a nostalgic lens, both games hold up well.

» Kimberley Wallace

More To Final Fantasys X's Arc?

This HD collection features a 30-minute audio drama teasing that the quest to save Spira is hardly over. Set three years after defeating Sin, the scenario introduces two new characters named Chuami and Kurgum. Chuami has an interesting connection to one of Final Fantasy X's main characters, and Yuna, Tidus, and other cast members reveal what they've been up to. When a new mystery emerges, it forecasts a great danger is looming again. However, the audio drama leaves it hanging. A hint to Final Fantasy X-3? Time will tell what's in store.

9

PS3 • Vita

» Concept
Provide the complete story of Final Fantasy X's cast with an HD upgrade

» Graphics
The visual improvements are noticeable. Everything is crisper and clearer, with more detailed environments and touched-up character models

» Sound
Final Fantasy X features re-mastered and rearranged tracks. Some are for the better, while others aren't as impressive. Voice acting is still hit or miss throughout both games

» Playability
Grasping the controls and getting in the groove is still easy, but also requires you pay attention to enemy weaknesses

» Entertainment
Whether you're taking a trip down memory lane or experiencing Final Fantasy X for the first time, you won't be disappointed

» Replay Value
Moderate

The Edge
The Vita version is nearly identical to its big brother, but there are some additional jaggies and other minor graphical imperfections. None of these issues impede your experience, but the difference is evident.

The Wolf Among Us: Episode 2 – Smoke & Mirrors

A dark world with darker stories

7.5

PS3 • 360 • PC

» **Concept**
Continue to investigate in pursuit of the Fable murderer

» **Graphics**
Graphics still look sharp and the new, detailed locales capture the darker tone perfectly

» **Sound**
The '80s synth matches the time period well, with other appropriate music throughout. The voices are solid, but repeating actors from The Walking Dead is distracting at times

» **Playability**
Point-and-click controls still get the job done, and action sequences are forgiving. This chapter is more about story and exploration with limited gameplay

» **Entertainment**
Telltale is crafting an engaging story in Bill Willingham's twisted Fables universe, keeping both fans and newcomers hooked to see the next thread

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

Style 1-Player Adventure **Publisher** Telltale Games **Developer** Telltale Games **Release** February 4 **Rating** M

Telltale's opener to The Wolf Among Us proved its commitment to Bill Willingham's *Fables* and its dark side. The first episode ended on a startling cliffhanger, leaving the second, Smoke & Mirrors, with some big shoes to fill. While still engaging on its own, without any groundbreaking decisions or exciting sequences, Smoke & Mirrors feels empty.

The installment slows down the action from the first episode to deliver more about Fables' universe and introduce a slew of new characters. It gets you out in the world to explore as you resume your investigation of the Fable murderer. The transition is engaging, especially seeing how twisted the Fables' world is, with strip clubs and fairy tale characters forced into prostitution.

My biggest gripe is that this episode debuts too many characters without letting them find their places. For instance, the infamous Jack from fairy tales such as Jack & Jill and Jack and the Beanstalk makes his debut, but is little other than annoying. I can only assume that the under-developed characters will get more opportunities to grow in future episodes, but their roles feel half-baked for now.

Smoke & Mirrors' gameplay is more barren than the previous episode. Remember those cool time-stopping, big decision moments from the first episode? Episode 2 doesn't feature a single one. Instead, it focuses more on relationship-building, which is about proving yourself to certain characters. This is done through interrogation sequences. Can you question a child without being too forceful? Will you break stuff around a strip club to get answers? Telltale places these choices in your hands, but sometimes they feel too guided. For instance, in the strip club, you are repeatedly presented with the option to break things; it starts to make you think the developers want you to behave in a certain way.

You're still investigating murder scenes, but it feels as though the process of connecting clues has been dumbed down. Telltale places the answers right in front of you, but also makes you confirm them through dialogue and clues numerous times. This was done better in the previous chapter, where you were connecting what happened to Toad, but piecing it together wasn't as obvious.

Episode 2 feels more like a bridge in the story than a complete chapter. Still, I can't deny that the world and the mature tone are captivating. The latest chapter doesn't tarnish my enthusiasm for where the larger story is going, especially with a new cliffhanger that leaves you just as concerned and stunned as the last one. I just wish Episode 2 had a little bit more meat on its bones. » **Kimberley Wallace**

The Edge

The PC still trumps the PS3 and Xbox 360 versions when it comes to visuals and load times. Waiting for new scenes or smaller loads within them was pretty equal between the PS3 and Xbox 360. However, the PS3 still outshines the 360 slightly in the graphics department.

The Lego Movie Videogame

Formulaic and awesome

8

PS4 • Xbox One Wii U • PS3 • 360

» **Concept**
A classically designed Lego game that provides a deeper look at the worlds and characters from the film

» **Graphics**
A visual marvel consisting of detailed worlds made entirely out of bricks. I often would sit back and look at the details. Fans of Lego's modular sets have plenty of new custom options to add to their city streets

» **Sound**
Many of the voice actors reprise their roles, and that infectious song "Everything is Awesome" seems to pop up every 10 to 15 minutes, which is a good thing

» **Playability**
The swift-moving levels and timely intermissions from the standard gameplay formula elevate an otherwise average Lego experience

» **Entertainment**
Shorter than the current crop of Lego games, but compacted with excellent world designs and snappy action

» **Replay Value**
Moderately High

Style 1 or 2-Player Action **Publisher** Warner Bros. Interactive **Developer** TT Fusion **Release** February 7 **Rating** E10+

The Lego Movie focuses on a society dictated by government and big business. Citizens are spoon-fed the same music, television shows, and overpriced beverages. These people gleefully swallow it all up, never once considering alternative options. The thinkers and dreamers who can make a difference in this world, and perhaps teach others how to unlock their individuality, are hunted and silenced by the powers that be. Under this rigid infrastructure of conformity, people's lives move like clockwork, repeating the same steps every 24 hours.

This formulaic reality is a good home for The Lego Movie Videogame. This experience is built with the same set of instructions used to create over a decade's worth of Lego games. While the Lego game experiences are skinned differently each time, the act of smashing bricks and scampering to collect all of the loose studs hasn't changed. Neither has assembly, the search for red and gold bricks, or the heavy reliance of using character-specific moves to open up new passages. Developer TT Fusion falls back on the series' tropes in this entry, and that's okay. Much like Emmet, the film's protagonist and the poster boy for obedience, Traveller's Tales' classic gameplay formula can surprise you, entertain you, and is periodically capable of amazing things.

To match the visual aesthetic of the film, almost every object in the game is made entirely out of Legos. In past games, only specific objects were made of bricks; everything else was rendered for realism and as a way to establish a divide between interactive and non-interactive pieces.

This change spotlights the developer's appreciation and mastery of the 56-year-old interlocking bricks. Almost every building is teeming with unique details that strike a balance between plastic simplicity and architectural wonder.

All 15 levels are expertly paced and designed. Repetition is rarely a problem, either. A few stages offer exciting deviations from the standard Lego formula, such as beautifully illustrated freefall sequences and the chance to play as the lumbering pirate Metalbeard – which is every bit as fun as I hoped it would be.

This video game adaptation expands sequences seen in the motion picture, but does a lousy job delivering its story. It plays out more like a selective highlight reel than a flowing narrative. Before you even consider playing it, make sure you see the movie. The gameplay stands on its own, but to truly enjoy every facet of this experience, context from the film is needed.

TT Fusion followed instructions to create this game's foundation, but the art on top of it is the work of master builders. The visuals are a surprising hook in this Lego entry. » **Andrew Reiner**

Earth Defense Force 2025

A successful infestation

Style 1 or 2-Player Shooter (4-Player Online) **Publisher** D3 Publisher **Developer** Sandlot **Release** February 18 **Rating** M

If you're familiar with Earth Defense Force 2017 (or EDF: Insect Armageddon, to a lesser extent), you know what to expect from EDF 2025. The Ravagers – an invading army of enormous bugs and robots – have descended on the planet, and you need to shoot them. The skirmishes aren't long; most of them take 10 minutes or less, and your objective for most of the 80-plus missions is "kill everything that moves." This simplicity serves the action perfectly, making it easy for you to hit the battlefield and start pulling the trigger.

Your goal may be straightforward, but EDF 2025 has some surprising depth. Strategy and careful weapon selection are critical in later missions, and four different classes – each with a massive and unique cache of weapons to collect – give you a lot of possible paths to victory. The Wing Diver, with her jetpack-enhanced mobility, is my favorite of the bunch, but all of the classes are worth experimenting with. I found the Fencer and Air Raider to be better suited to support rather than solo play, but you need to try everything if you want to collect all of the weapons, since you only earn new gear and health for the class you're currently playing.

I loved sifting through my newly collected weapons between missions, then testing them out to separate the good from the hilariously terrible. This level of freedom adds to the fun, but it is still far from a tactics-focused experience. The bad guys come at you in writhing swarms, and you blast them as efficiently as possible. It's pure popcorn action – you just have more ways to wreak havoc.

All of this is best enjoyed as a team, in theory. With split-screen and online options, you're able to play with your fellow EDF soldiers...but it makes the framerate take a dive. In the middle of the chaos, you are bound to notice some other technical shortcomings. The graphics, collision, and animations aren't up to modern standards, but they usually don't have a negative effect on the action. The occasional hiccup makes you feel more like you're controlling a low-budget sci-fi movie, though some gamers might not find the errors as charming as I do.

The bottom line is that EDF 2025 is just plain fun. It has a clueless earnestness in the mission explanations and the exchanges between your fellow soldiers, and the combat delivers concentrated and accessible action. You can find more ambitious sci-fi shooters out there, but you won't find anything else that captures EDF 2025's delightful mixture of action and atmosphere. » **Joe Juba**

8

PS3 • 360

» **Concept**
The EDF redeploys to save humanity from yet another invasion

» **Graphics**
It looks as good as it needs to, though the visuals aren't mind-blowing

» **Sound**
I lost it when my fellow EDF soldiers burst into song mid-mission

» **Playability**
Each class has a slightly different control scheme, but none of the basic actions are difficult to master

» **Entertainment**
Killing Ravagers is fun, and collecting new weapons and experimenting with the classes keep you coming back

» **Replay Value**
Moderately High

NASCAR '14

Stuck in the pits

Style 1 or 2-Player Racing (16-Player Online) **Publisher** Deep Silver **Developer** ETX Racing **Release** February 18 **Rating** E

This is the third game in the NASCAR series from Eutechnyx (now going by ETX Racing), and while it's arguably a better experience than the last two, it doesn't single-handedly elevate the franchise. This mildly iterative title evokes the dreaded specter of the yearly sequel. The good news is that Eutechnyx has created a foundation ripe to capitalize on, but I'm still waiting for it all to come together.

NASCAR '14 is not just a carbon copy of Inside Line, but most of its improvements are either minor enough or exposed by other flaws that the sum total of the experience doesn't equate to a lot of positive momentum.

For example, A.I. drivers are more aggressive in exploiting the openings you give them, and a pack of cars will freight train you if you can't hold your line – especially until you get your car up to snuff if you're in career mode. This is a good thing, but the A.I. lacks refinement; ramming its bumper down your backside like it was the do-or-die last lap even when it's the first. It's like the A.I. is following a set line, unaware of what's happening on the track. In real-life NASCAR, that would quickly create a pit brawl. Furthermore, the A.I. cars still don't know how to enter the pits safely nor how to execute good fuel/tire

strategies on shortened race lengths.

Thankfully, 16-player online leagues are available if you instead prefer the headaches real-life people bring. Here you can create a custom slate of races and keep standings for the season. Restarts are clean and overall the experience has matured. It lacks some bells and whistles, but it provides a baseline experience that's better than previous installments.

I hoped that this game would reveal a broader vision for the series, taking it beyond a few turns of the wrench. I wanted it to take some chances and make a declaration for why stock car racing is different from regular racing – which it is, and excitingly so. NASCAR '14 doesn't do this. Ironically, the overall lack of ambition and plan to update via DLC (which includes paint schemes and challenges based on real-life situations from the upcoming season) is its own self-defeating argument against yearly iterations like this.

At best, this game is a stopgap to hopefully something better in the future, because it's signaling its stagnation. » **Matthew Kato**

7

PS3 • 360

» **Concept**
The series works around the margins, improving its lap time but not really picking up the positions

» **Graphics**
Visuals look middle-of-the-road for a last-gen title. A new variant on the cockpit camera has been added

» **Sound**
The spotter is helpful most of the time, but he can break down when things get thick

» **Playability**
The A.I. is more difficult to race against, but not necessarily smarter. Also, the onscreen proximity awareness meter is harder to read than last year for some reason

» **Entertainment**
It's starting to feel like it's going around in circles, and that's not the fault of the sport itself

» **Replay Value**
Moderately High

Strider

Double Helix honors the way of the ninja

The Edge

If you've got the option, be sure to play Strider on PlayStation 4, Xbox One, or PC. These platforms have a crisper resolution and a smoother framerate. If PS3 or 360 is your console of choice, it's still a great experience as long as you don't compare it side by side with the others.

Strider is one of those awesome classic characters that for some reason Capcom never got behind fully. After the gravity-defying ninja's first arcade outing in 1989, there was only one sequel, and that was over a decade ago. With such drastic gaps between entries, it's that much more important that the new Strider game is done right. I'm happy to report that Double Helix nailed all of the classic elements of the series while launching it into the modern era.

This reboot offers so much for fans of the previous games. Strider controls fantastically and always looks like a total badass. He leans forward to sprint, kicking up dust in his wake. His attacks are a blur of death. In the rare event that he's standing still, he settles on a cool pose with his plasma scarf trailing dynamically behind him. He takes on favorites like the Ouroboros, the triplet fighting sisters, the mecha-gorilla, and several new characters in a plentiful array of entertaining boss battles.

The world is split up into many large chunks instead one cohesive 2D map. Areas range from the futuristic Soviet metropolis of Kazakh City to a mad scientist lab to dark underground caves infested with insect-possessed troops. The depth and detail in these environments is impressive – especially the outdoor areas, which convey a massive scope to the world just off your path. Hidden passages and rewards offer plenty for the curious explorer, and color-coded doors taunt you to return with upgraded equipment.

New abilities are unlocked at an ideal pace throughout the six- to eight-hour completion time, pulling you forward with an enticing breadcrumb trail and allowing you to smoothly incorporate new moves into your repertoire. The Cypher, a plasma-based blade, switches easily between four different attributes at the tap of the d-pad. Strider's scarf changes to orange to indicate explosive attacks, blue for freeze slices, and so on. The variety of armed guards, flying turrets, and venom-spewing insects are all resistant and vulnerable to different attack styles. It keeps you on your toes, and by the end you are constantly swapping attacks to stay alive.

Tricky platforming sequences add variety and challenge. Since Strider can climb on the walls and ceiling, it takes a lot to trip him up. Buzzsaws, laser grids, and crushing pistons all result in our hero's trademark phase-out death. Fortunately, he merely loses a small sliver of health and teleports to the closest safe platform. This generous respawn system, combined with the tight controls, means frustration is kept to a minimum. I never got hung up for long on one particular obstacle.

The ninja's blade could use a little sharpening in a few spots. Not that I was expecting The Last of Us, but the story isn't great. You're basically out to kill the last boss and all of his minions. You won't find much depth in Strider's cold assassin heart. The game doesn't have a traditional teleportation system, so it can be a pain to trudge all the way across the world when you're trying to mop up the last round of collectibles before the last boss. Then, when you beat the game, you have to decide whether you want to save and lose your current game or not save and shoot back to the last checkpoint. With only one save file available, you can't duplicate it and have it both ways. Some might feel that the normal difficulty is too easy, but a hard option exists if you're looking for a more intense challenge right out of the gate.

In the grand scheme of things, these complaints are relatively minor. Strider is a great reboot for old-school arcade junkies and at the same time a fresh action experience for newcomers to the franchise. » **Bryan Vore**

Boss battles are frequent and fun

Mercenary Kings

Nostalgic look, modern sensibilities

When certain games release, you find yourself wondering why more developers haven't done the same thing before. Mercenary Kings is one of those games. While few inherently new ideas are at play in Tribute's latest project, the combined whole is an impressive effort that mixes classic shooting (inspired by games like Metal Slug or Mega Man) and injects some of the customization, storytelling, and ancillary mechanics more prevalent in modern games. Whether playing alone or with friends, this massive adventure should keep most players busy for hours.

You are one of the Kings, a mercenary force brought back to life through a secret scientific formula to rid a tropical island of the terrorist threat named CLAW. Before each mission, you wander through camp purchasing first aid kits, equipping new bionic mods, and customizing equipment. Once your soldier is up to snuff, you tackle missions that have you rescuing hostages, taking down giant robotic bosses, gathering supplies, or infiltrating ancient temples. More than 100 missions are available, but many of these outings see you returning to the same maps again and again. While all of Mercenary Kings' maps are suitably large, it's a grind coming back to the same location the seventh or eighth time.

The level designs and enemy placements are top notch, exhibiting a strong eye for a gradual challenge curve that always keeps players on their toes, whether through tough platforming, challenging baddies, or a severe time limit. More than 100 distinct enemy types await your attack, constantly demanding new tactics. The shooting mechanic feels purposefully stiff, only allowing you to shoot in straight lines up and down or left and right – a direct homage to the games that inspired Mercenary Kings. Little touches like an active reload system (à la Gears of War) add a modern touch, forcing you to time your shots and movement to coincide with when bullets remain in your magazine.

While a number of boss models are repeated or show up in only minor variations, they are usually excellent fights. With time and patience, each telegraphs its movements, helping you to gain a sense of mastery. However, I'm not a fan of the odd approach to tracking down a boss. In any given stage, you might need to track your targets to one of several possible locations on the map. If they aren't there, you must run across the stage again to the next location. If they are there, they're usually on a timer, and they flee to the next location before you can finish them off. It's a frustrating mechanic that I could have done without, even though the game provides a couple of ways to work around the issue.

One of the biggest features that sets Mercenary Kings apart is its rewarding customization. After acquiring money and materials on missions, you can upgrade your character's armor for more hit points, install new bionic mods that offer effects like faster speed or higher damage, or change your outfit colors. However, the weapon system far outstrips everything else, offering around 300 distinct weapon pieces that can all be mixed and matched to create an arsenal for any occasion. By the end, you might have a handgun that shoots electric bullets, or a shotgun with a sniper-rifle scope that looks like a trombone.

As I explored Mandragora Island, my admiration for the gorgeous art, animation, and music grew. Mercenary Kings is a masterpiece of old school 2D presentation, filled with clever nods to older games, but with a distinct style to the characters and backgrounds all its own. The evocative chiptune soundtrack matches that look perfectly, and I looked forward to each new area and the character models, environments, and music I might find there.

Tribute's shooter holds up well as a solo experience, but the flexibility to play two- to four-player local or online play (but not both at the same time) makes this a great fit for group get-togethers. Since many missions include multiple objectives, it can be fun to work together and decide how best to split up the tasks in order to speed up full completion. After having tried multiple variations of play, the two-player online team-up is my recommendation.

Mercenary Kings is a testament to the idea that you can get too much of a good thing. The slick art, old-school shooting, and deep customization options are immensely fun, as are the stages that you play through – the first few times. As it is, this style of shooting action feels like it's stretched thin over such a lengthy campaign, and some of the missions might have been more fun if I hadn't already explored the maps so thoroughly. That tedium certainly isn't enough for me to warn people away from such a richly illustrated tribute to the roots of the shooter.

» **Matt Miller**

» **Concept**
Fight the forces of CLAW using an astonishing array of customized weaponry

» **Graphics**
Beautiful pixel art and animation are two of the strongest features

» **Sound**
An upbeat chiptune soundtrack perfectly matches the visual style

» **Playability**
Basic shooting mechanics are straightforward and solid, but it takes some time to familiarize oneself with the complex upgrade options

» **Entertainment**
An enormously entertaining shooter that starts to wear out its welcome after multiple repeats of the same stage maps

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

Tribute Games is composed of developers responsible for Scott Pilgrim vs. the World: The Game

The Last Of Us: Left Behind

An emotional look into Ellie's past

8.75

gameinformer
SILVER

PS3

» **Concept**
A new single-player DLC release that fleshes out some parts of the original game's story

» **Graphics**
These visuals still look better than some PS4 and Xbox One games

» **Sound**
New character Riley is played with the same level of emotional depth and subtlety as Joel and Ellie

» **Playability**
The tense, desperate combat packs a punch, and the ending action sequences are memorable

» **Entertainment**
It's not the revelation that the original game was, but it's an affecting and well-written fleshing out of the fiction

» **Replay Value**
Moderately Low

I consider The Last of Us to be one of the greatest achievements of the last generation of gaming, so I came to Left Behind wary of the prospect of Naughty Dog tinkering with the fiction. Great stories are often defined by what's left to the imagination as much as the events portrayed onscreen. Early on, Naughty Dog confirmed that Left Behind is a prequel, assuaging my fears that the studio was going to tinker with the perfect, enigmatic ending of the original game.

This claim was mostly true – a large part of the game takes place prior to the events of The Last of Us. However, there's also another plotline that hasn't been revealed – one that depicts some events that occur during one of the season changes in the original.

The core of Left Behind is the fraught relationship between Ellie and Riley, which was alluded to in the final scene of The Last of Us. Riley, excellently voiced by Yaani King, is a great addition to the game's universe, another tough-but-vulnerable kid like Ellie. As before, some of the best moments are the quietest; whether taking pictures in a photo booth, dancing in an abandoned big-box electronics store, or playing an imaginary fighting game at the arcade, Left Behind shows us how life manages to go on even in the worst circumstances. Ellie and Riley are growing up without a net, trying to survive in a hostile world while dealing with their complex feelings for each other. Once again, Naughty Dog's writing shines, letting our attachment to Riley slowly build until the bittersweet conclusion.

The other side of the story is more focused on frantic combat. Once again, you're pitted against hordes of grotesque "clickers" and vicious human cannibals, armed with a limited arsenal and your wits. For fans of the original, you'll feel right at home – hoarding ammo, sneaking behind cover to strike at your foes. The action-oriented parts of Left Behind are engaging, especially the new sequences where you have to battle clickers and humans at the same time. Here, you can use bottles or other distractions to play them against each other; I frequently used the enraged clickers to clear the room of the people hunting me before using stealth to sneak past.

At around two and a half hours long, it's not an epic experience, but another window into Ellie's life. Instead of blunting the impact as I feared, Riley and Ellie's story adds resonance to the original ending. For The Last of Us fans, this is a ride well worth taking.

» **Matt Helgeson**

Our Darker Purpose

A roguelite darkly

8.75

PC

This Tim Burton-esque romp through the nightmare dreamscapes of the Edgewood Home for Lost Children is almost everything a player looking for a modern "roguelite" could desire. Featuring achievements that matter, high difficulty, randomized dungeon crawls, and some elements of choice thrown in, this darkly beautiful title feels like the perfect evolution of the style of game that Binding of Isaac brought into the spotlight.

Budget constraints in many Kickstarter and Greenlight games can become apparent in visuals and sound design, but that isn't the case here. The strange gothic environments, bizarre enemies, and charming-yet-haunting soundtrack complement the game perfectly. It has a *Nightmare Before Christmas* feel that dulls the sting of continual deaths.

Death is permanent and frequent, but all is not lost. Crystals obtained from each level are used to purchase various upgrades. Some are permanent character boosts that make things a little easier, but the best and most interesting improvements come from the unique achievement system. Forget unlocking a meaningless amount of points or a gold trophy; you actually need to complete achievements in order to unlock and access various "courses." These courses add varied powers and abilities, and only a certain number can be equipped. The majority of achievements need to be earned by completing boss encounters in specific and often difficult ways, like defeating the ice dragon with his own ice shards or staying within the Candelabra's light radius during the entire fight duration.

The game also features a leveling system

that is reset upon each respawn. Defeating enemies gives experience points, and at each level up players can pick one of two options. Most of the time these are simple things like some additional attack damage, speed, health, and some more interesting bonuses tacked on to base stats – like additional damage to bosses or bonus chances to find special rooms. These options combined with courses allow a player some serious customization options to complement the random power-ups acquired through a character's life. Players can also choose their route through Edgewood, often having the option of picking two to three different floors to explore. These options give players some additional choices before venturing forth.

The level of difficulty is high. While some bosses and enemies can be better handled through rote memorization and practice, the random dungeons are often lethal. Step into a cloud of confusion chalk and you're likely to get killed and find yourself back at the starting line. While the villains start off rather slow and easy to walk around, this quickly changes as you delve deeper into Edgewood's mysteries. This challenge is perfect for the player that can take a beating and come back inspired to take on new challenges, occasionally becoming just a bit stronger through crystal upgrades and coursework.

Our Darker Purpose is fast-paced life-and-death frolic and provides many hours of delightfully difficult gameplay. An unforgiving game is nothing new, but the clever setting combined with the challenge and customization makes this title shine within its own niche category. » **Daniel Tack**

The Winged Overseer is one of many challenging boss encounters

» **Concept**
An action-packed RPG with permadeath, procedurally generated dungeons, and some forms of persistent progression

» **Graphics**
While they won't tax your graphics card, the visuals paint a lavish nightmarescape

» **Sound**
Chilling and charming, the sound complements the graphics well

» **Playability**
The basic controls are simple and easy to learn

» **Entertainment**
A challenging and beautiful foray into the genre. Novices can progress slowly through the upgrade system while learning the ropes; veterans can jump right in and relish the experience. A must play for Binding of Isaac fans

» **Replay Value**
High

Banished

Winter is coming

8
PC

» Concept
Exiled from your homeland, build a new town and attempt to survive

» Graphics
Not incredible, but a sight prettier than other games in the genre

» Sound
Stock chopping, cutting, and harvesting sounds. Nothing special

» Playability
Games like Dwarf Fortress and other priority-based city building games are notoriously difficult with execution of basic commands and allocations. Banished is more accessible

» Entertainment
If you're into city building games, this is one to check out

» Replay Value
High
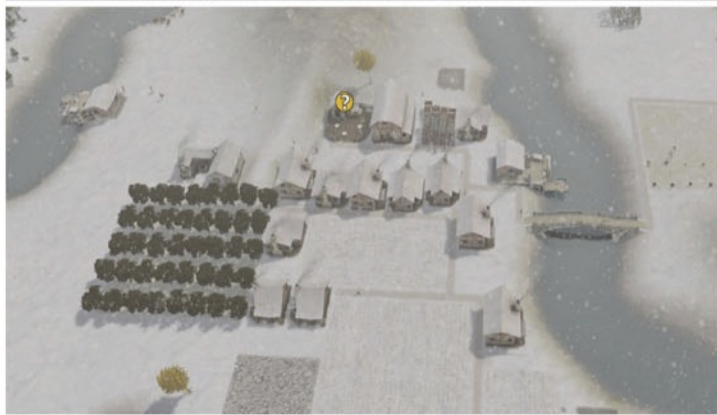
Banished takes the concepts of city builders like Dwarf Fortress and Towns and refines them into an accessible take on the survival city theme. While the genre can be difficult to get into due to clunky interfaces, obtuse or cryptic instructions, and infuriating citizen behaviors, Banished is intuitive and easy on the eyes. Players attempt to create a thriving city that can survive starvation, disease, and the elements.

Your citizens start off with a bundle of resources, and then it's up to you to decide the best route to survive and thrive. Will you build fishing docks? Farms? Orchards? You need to keep your villagers fed, but at the same time you have to commit citizens to moving things to stockpiles, chopping firewood, crafting tools, making clothes, and a long list of other options. There's no "right" way to do things, and the map seed may play a role in some of your decisions. This leads to a delicious bit of decision making each game, and as players go from game to game they find themselves learning – and applying – new tactics.

You don't have hands-on control of your citizens; you prioritize tasks and allocate people and to specific duties and roles. Alerts appear onscreen to let you know when people are hungry, freezing, dying of old age, or contracting typhus. In many cases, these warnings come too late – Banished favors the hyper-prepared and the planner. The first few games my population died from starvation and the cold. A few games later, I handled the more obvious threats and fell victim to a disease outbreak. Each attempt to create the perfect settlement gets more satisfying, and it's easy to sink hours into the title coming up with new ways to make things work.

Unlike some of the other titles in the genre, Banished does not feature dungeons or monsters to battle. The war is waged against the reality of cold winters, devastating disease outbreaks, and hungry populations. Banished is subtle in some of the ways that it can crush the player; even if you have a healthy stockpile of food and other critical supplies, time may simply win out as old age claims your populace if there isn't a younger generation to take over.

Banished is an alluring option for players looking for something in the same vein as Dwarf Fortress or Towns but want a more polished and accessible experience. **» Daniel Tack**
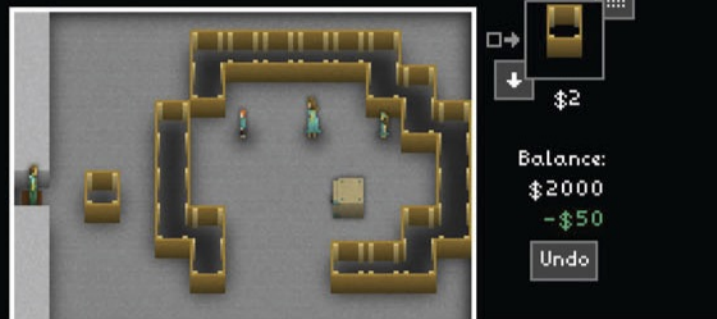
The Castle Doctrine

Only the strong survive

7
PC

» Concept
Protect your family, rob your neighbors, and watch everything go down on security cameras. Your home is your castle, and you protect it at all costs from other players

» Graphics
The pixelated simplicity is an interesting way to present some dire situations and grim consequences

» Sound
You'll probably shut the music off after a few minutes

» Playability
The controls are simple and easy to learn

» Entertainment
This is definitely a niche title, but those looking for something well off the beaten path won't be disappointed

» Replay Value
High

The Castle Doctrine is a curious MMO roguelike. To some, it may seem brutally unfair and punishing. To others, it may be exactly the kind of competitive experience they've always wanted. Players must protect their own assets while attempting to steal from others to survive and thrive; it feels like a darker player-vs-player version of 2013's Monaco while making some grim observations about the nature of society. As a strange social experiment and interesting multiplayer playground, The Castle Doctrine provides a genuinely interesting experience for those willing to look past the shoestring interface and visuals.

The concept is simple: You start with $2,000 to spend on various defensive and offensive tools like walls, guard dogs, traps, guns, saws, wiring, wire cutters, crowbars, and more. You create a lethal maze to protect your family and safe from other players who invade your home. You have to navigate your own death trap before moving on, so it must be possible to complete.

Death is permanent. Once your character dies – which can happen as a result of a botched robbery or by running out of resources and committing suicide – you respawn with a fresh character, family, and $2,000. This concept of permadeath makes each and every choice have considerable weight, and that weight only gets heavier as you accumulate wealth and growth during a character's life. On each attempt, you have the option of seeking revenge; the security cam lets you check out players as they maneuver through your traps, so you can write down the names of those who succeed and deliver vengeance.

The leaderboards display the current reigning champions and the success rates of robbers attempting to break into their caches. The closer to the top you are, the bigger a target your cache is, especially for hungry thieves with little or nothing to lose. It's a better choice to feed off the weak at first, and move up to the dangerous mansions after you have some practice and a robust sack of tools.

As I became hardened from each gruesome death, I was inspired by other players' trap factories and planned new ways to get back at intruders. When you rob other players, you may push them to virtual suicide. It's a good thing that the concepts are somewhat removed from reality via heavily pixelated graphics, because this game is incredibly dark. Will you become wealthy and powerful on the corpses of fallen victims? Will you seethe in silence planning the ruin of Jordan Michael Roberts or Hector John Herbert? Will you stop playing after losing everything?

The Castle Doctrine is a player-driven PvP paradise of well-laid traps, vengeful voyeurs, and desperate thieves. The presentation and traditional aspects like graphics, sound, and interface are rough around the edges, and it isn't deep enough to stay interesting for long. Even so, The Castle Doctrine is an intriguing diversion from uninspired copycats and clones that often plague the industry. It won't suit everyone, but I applaud its creativity. **» Daniel Tack**

Professor Layton And The Azran Legacy

Professor Layton finally attains tenure

Style 1-Player Puzzle **Publisher** Nintendo **Developer** Level-5 **Release** February 28 **Rating** E10+

After five games and a film, Professor Layton is ready to retire. This isn't the end of the franchise, but developer Level-5 says the Azran Legacy marks the last Professor Layton game featuring the titular puzzle master in a starring role.

The Azran Legacy closes out the prequel trilogy that chronologically begins with The Last Spector and continues with The Miracle Mask. The Azran Legacy stands alone, as do all of Layton's stories, but continues the relationships established in the previous games, and neatly rolls into Curious Village with a post-credits teaser. During Layton's journey to discover the mysteries of the Azran (wherein he finally does some archeological work as opposed to his usual non-academic heroics), he solves puzzles and uncovers history left behind by an ancient, technologically advanced race.

In Professor Layton's world, puzzles are traded like currency for information and favors. It makes no sense why someone would need to solve a puzzle about melting a giant ice cube in order to find a person's location, but such is the charm of the Layton franchise. Thankfully, not all the puzzles in the Azran Legacy feel so forced into the narrative as the ice cube example.

Most of Azran's puzzles involve sliding blocks and literal puzzle piece arrangement in order to unlock ancient doors. I preferred the logic puzzles and the difficult-to-define puzzle type where you examine an image looking for clues, but those are rare. If you run into trouble, the hint coin system can help you find a solution with little punishment. The puzzles are new, but the structure is the same as previous Layton games. If you've played Layton before, you know what to expect.

The story adopts a grim tone near the end, which took me by surprise. It dives into Layton's family history and ties up some loose ends explaining where characters like Layton's assistant Emmy Altava has disappeared to in the following games. A lot of poorly executed twists occur in the closing hours, some of which feel like they are present purely to surprise as opposed to advancing the narrative.

Level-5 insists this is the end of Professor Layton taking top billing. The franchise will continue in unknown directions, but The Azran Legacy offers a worthwhile conclusion that adheres closely to the same formula that made Layton so beloved. » **Kyle Hilliard**

8.25

3DS

» **Concept**
Uncover the mysteries behind Layton's largest and possibly darkest puzzle

» **Graphics**
The distinct art style hasn't changed much over the years, and no one has complained

» **Sound**
The charming violin and accordion music remains one of the more memorable aspects of the game. Some accents sound forced, but overall the voice work is quality

» **Playability**
The point-and-click interaction gets the job done. Despite the many different styles of puzzles and solutions, you won't be confused about how and where to register input

» **Entertainment**
Layton is all about puzzles and story. The former stays true to the formula, and the latter is entertaining, even if some reveals are cringe-worthy

» **Replay Value**
Moderately Low

PLAYSTATION 4

Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag	8.25	Dec-13
Call of Duty: Ghosts	8	Dec-13
Contrast	7.5	Jan-14
Doki-Doki Universe	7.5	Feb-14
Killzone: Shadow Fall	8	Jan-14
Knack	8.25	Jan-14
NBA 2K14	8.5	Jan-14
NBA Live 14	4	Jan-14
Need For Speed: Rivals	9	Jan-14
Resogun	8	Jan-14
Tiny Brains	5.75	Feb-14
Tomb Raider: Definitive Edition	9.25	Mar-14
Warframe	7.75	Jan-14

XBOX ONE

Call of Duty: Ghosts	8	Dec-13
Crimson Dragon	6	Jan-14
Dead Rising 3	8.75	Jan-14
Fable Anniversary	8	Mar-14
Fighter Within	1	Feb-14
Forza Motorsport 5	8.75	Jan-14
Killer Instinct	8.75	Jan-14
Lococycle	7	Jan-14
NBA 2K14	8.5	Jan-14
NBA Live 14	4	Jan-14
Need For Speed: Rivals	9	Jan-14
Peggle 2	8	Feb-14
Powerstar Golf	8	Jan-14
Ryse: Son of Rome	6	Jan-14
Super Motherload	6.25	Jan-14
Tomb Raider: Definitive Edition	9.25	Mar-14
Zoo Tycoon	7	Jan-14

PLAYSTATION 3

Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag	8.25	Dec-13

Batman: Arkham Origins	8.5	Dec-13
Battlefield 4	8.75	Dec-13
Beyond: Two Souls	7.75	Nov-13
BioShock Infinite: Burial At Sea – Episode 1	8	Jan-14
Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons	8	Oct-13
Bureau: XCOM Declassified, The	7.5	Oct-13
Call of Duty: Ghosts	8	Dec-13
Castle of Illusion	7.5	Oct-13
Castlevania: Lords Of Shadow 2	6	Mar-14
Contrast	7.5	Jan-14
Deadpool	6	Aug-13
Diablo III	9.25	Oct-13
Disgaea D2: A Brighter Darkness	7.5	Nov-13
Disney Infinity	9	Oct-13
Divekick	6.5	Nov-13
Do Not Fall	6	Oct-13
Dragon Ball Z: Battle of Z	7	Mar-14
Dragon's Crown	8	Sep-13
DuckTales: Remastered	8	Oct-13
Dungeons & Dragons: Chronicles of Mystara	7.75	Aug-13
Dynasty Warriors 8	6	Sep-13
F1 2013	7.25	Dec-13
FIFA 14	8.75	Nov-13
Fuse	7.75	Jul-13
Gran Turismo 6	8	Feb-14
Grand Theft Auto V	9.75	Nov-13
Grid 2	8.25	Jul-13
Ibb & Obb	7	Oct-13
Killer Is Dead	6	Oct-13
Kingdom Hearts HD 1.5 Remix	8.25	Oct-13
Last of Us, The	9.5	Aug-13
Lego Marvel Super Heroes	9	Dec-13
Ligtning Returns: Final Fantasy XIII	7	Mar-14
Lost Planet 3	6	Oct-13

Madden NFL 25	7.75	Oct-13
Magic: The Gathering – Duels of the Planeswalkers 2014	7.5	Sep-13
Metro: Last Light	8.5	Jul-13
NBA 2K14	8.5	Dec-13
NCAA Football 14	7.75	Aug-13
NHL 14	7.75	Nov-13
Payday 2	8.25	Oct-13
Pro Evolution Soccer 2014	8.25	Nov-13
Puppeteer	8.5	Nov-13
Rain	6.5	Nov-13
Ratchet & Clank: Into The Nexus	8	Jan-14
Rayman Legends	9	Oct-13
Remember Me	7.75	Jul-13
Ride to Hell: Retribution	2	Sep-13
Saints Row IV	8.5	Oct-13
Skylanders: Swap Force	8.5	Dec-13
Splinter Cell: Blacklist	9	Oct-13
Star Wars Pinball: Balance of the Force	8	Dec-13
Tales of Xillia	8.25	Sep-13
Walking Dead: 400 Days, The	8	Sep-13
Walking Dead: Season Two – Episode 1: All That Remains, The	8.5	Feb-14
Wolf Among Us: Episode One – Faith, The	9	Dec-13
WWE 2K14	8	Dec-13
XCOM: Enemy Within	9.25	Dec-13

XBOX 360

Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag	8.25	Dec-13
Batman: Arkham Origins	8.5	Dec-13
Battlefield 4	8.75	Dec-13
BioShock Infinite: Burial At Sea – Episode 1	8	Jan-14
Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons	8	Oct-13

Bureau: XCOM Declassified, The	7.5	Oct-13
Call of Duty: Ghosts	8	Dec-13
Castle of Illusion	7.5	Oct-13
CastleStorm	8.25	Aug-13
Castlevania: Lords Of Shadow 2	6	Mar-14
Charlie Murder	7.5	Oct-13
Contrast	7.5	Jan-14
Dark	2	Sep-13
Deadfall Adventures	4	Jan-14
Deadpool	6	Aug-13
Diablo III	9.25	Oct-13
Disney Infinity	9	Oct-13
Dragon Ball Z: Battle of Z	7	Mar-14
DuckTales: Remastered	8	Oct-13
Dungeons & Dragons: Chronicles of Mystara	7.75	Aug-13
Dynasty Warriors 8	6	Sep-13
FIFA 14	8.75	Nov-13
Flashback	3	Nov-13
Fuse	7.75	Jul-13
Grand Theft Auto V	9.75	Nov-13
Grid 2	8.25	Jul-13
Killer Is Dead	6	Oct-13
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Remember Me	7.75	Jul-13
Ride to Hell: Retribution	2	Sep-13
Saints Row IV	8.5	Oct-13
Sanctum 2	8.5	Jul-13
Skylanders: Swap Force	8.5	Dec-13
Splinter Cell: Blacklist	9	Oct-13
Star Trek	5.75	Jul-13
Star Wars Pinball: Balance of the Force	8	Dec-13
State of Decay	7	Aug-13
TMNT: Out of the Shadows	2	Nov-13
Walking Dead: 400 Days, The	8	Sep-13
Walking Dead: Season Two – Episode 1: All That Remains, The	8.5	Feb-14
Wolf Among Us: Episode One – Faith, The	9	Dec-13
WWE 2K14	8	Dec-13
XCOM: Enemy Within	9.25	Dec-13

WII U

Disney Infinity	9	Oct-13
Dr. Luigi	8	Mar-14
Donkey Kong Country: Tropical Freeze	9.25	Mar-14
DuckTales: Remastered	8	Oct-13
Game & Wario	8	Aug-13
Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker, The	9.25	Nov-13
New Super Luigi U	8	Aug-13
Pikmin 3	9	Sep-13
Rayman Legends	9	Oct-13
Scribblenauts Unmasked: A DC Comics Adventure	7	Nov-13
Skylanders: Swap Force	8.5	Dec-13
Sonic Lost World	5	Dec-13
Splinter Cell: Blacklist	9	Oct-13
Super Mario 3D World	9.25	Jan-14

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the score

5 | Soul Fjord

Platform Ouya **Release** January 28 **Rating** NR

It's great when free games don't beat you over the head with purchases, but it doesn't mean much if they aren't fun to play. I enjoyed the silly tone of Soul Fjord, but the rhythm-based combat system was all it took to completely sabotage the experience. — Dan Ryckert

6.5 | JazzPunk

Platform PC **Release** February 7 **Rating** N/A

I get what JazzPunk is going for – I'm well-versed in B-movies and games that are hilariously awful – but at some point bad just becomes bad again, and the game tiptoes down that line with the grace of a hippopotamus. — Jeff Marchiafava

9 | Rayman Legends

Platform PS4 • Xbox One **Release** February 18 **Rating** E

Rayman Legends is the same great game on new-gen consoles, with a few extras. Xbox One players get a few additional challenges, and PS4 owners can snap pics and scratch off tickets with the gamepad. If you haven't played it before, you have no excuse. — Jeff Cork

5.75 | Octodad: Dadliest Catch

Platform PC **Release** January 30 **Rating** N/A

It's a smart, innovative testbed for interactions, but the more it tries to be a game filled with challenging objectives and boss fights, the more Octodad reveals that underneath the suit, there's not much to get excited about. — Matt Miller

2 | Rekoil

Platform PC **Release** January 28 **Rating** M

If you want a multiplayer-only shooter without spending $60, there are plenty of options for cheap or completely free. Normally, this is where I'd reiterate that you should not play Rekoil under any circumstance, but from the abundance of deserted maps I saw, it seems that most gamers have already received that memo. — Dan Ryckert

7.25 | Atelier Escha & Logy: Alchemists of the Dusk Sky

Platform PS3 **Release** March 11 **Rating** E10+

While the characters remain stale, Atelier Escha & Logy's alchemy systems continue to get more complex and impressive. — Kimberley Wallace

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20 Years On Zebes

by Joe Juba

The continuing life of Super Metroid

For the typical gamer, Super Metroid stopped evolving a long time ago. Technology advanced after the Super Nintendo era, more sophisticated consoles released, and people moved on to newer and more cinematic titles. However, as we celebrate the game's 20th anniversary, we have not seen the last of the secrets this 16-bit classic has to offer.

Super Metroid was developed by Deer Force, an internal team at Nintendo. It released in March of 1994 in Japan, and became an instant classic. Samus Aran returning to the alien world of Zebes established an atmosphere familiar to fans of the first game, but the new flexibility of her arsenal invited players to explore every corner and corridor of the planet. Many players ran through the game more than once, hunting down items and perfecting techniques. For some, that wasn't enough.

Over the years, a devoted community of gamers has formed around Super Metroid, dedicating themselves to pushing the game to its limits. They spend hours practicing and devising unconventional tricks and strategies to get through the game as quickly as possible. You may have seen some of these individuals in action; one of the highlights of this year's Awesome Games Done Quick charity marathon was a four-way race through Super Metroid. It was streamed to 70,000 viewers, and done in under 46 minutes.

That is an amazing clear time, but the players' devotion goes beyond a simple desire to finish quickly; they have a reverence for the game and its many facets, and that's what inspired a community to grow around it. "Super Metroid was just well-designed. That's what it boils down to at its core," says Aaron Barnhart (a.k.a. Go1den), one of the commentators on the AGDQ race and a speedrunner himself. "This was a game that was designed to give the player control. They were able to give you a toolset, and give you way too many controls that you are never going to learn on your first playthrough. But by giving you that many options on how to approach the problem, you can come up with your own way to play."

Super Metroid has no tutorials. Apart from a brief explanation of items when you pick them up, you are left to experiment and discover all of the tools at Samus' disposal. Some of these are easier to find than others; if you wait at the title screen, a series of clips demonstrates tricks that are never even hinted at during the normal course of the game. Things like enhanced charge beams, using the charge beam to weaponize your spin jumps, or using a power bomb to completely refill your health, are shown without instruction to show players the possibilities. "It's a subtle thing," Barnhart says. "They're teasing you, saying, 'We put this in the game. Now you figure out how to do it.'"

Those techniques are obviously intended to be a part of the game, but the speedrunning community has discovered a broad array of tricks that most players would never encounter, even after multiple playthroughs. Though not technically glitches, many of these involve precise timing in order to take advantage of how Super Metroid functions. On this page, you see a small selection of unconventional maneuvers the game allows – intentionally or not.

Whether they involve killing bosses quickly, breaking out of the intended sequence of events, or just doing something cool, the speedrunning community is still pushing for innovation in a game that is now two decades old. Though it is born from a desire to shave away seconds, the process highlights the remarkable versatility and lasting appeal at the core of Super Metroid.

"To me, the most important thing about Super Metroid is just the exposure of the game – the run we got to do at AGDQ, for instance – and showcasing what a great platformer it was," Barnhart says. "I think a lot of people these days might not have even had a chance to play it. Super Metroid might be a lost gem for a lot of people, and whether or not you intend to speedrun it or use any of the techniques, your first playthrough is an entirely different experience. In my opinion, it's a lesson in game design." ◈

Super Metroid Tricks You Weren't Supposed To Find

MOCKBALL
The first trick that blew open the sequence-breaking doors in Super Metroid, the mockball allows you to retain your running speed while in morph ball form (which is normally much slower). This allows you to get under some gates that were supposed to block your progress, letting you prematurely access certain areas and items. It even lets you skip the Spore Spawn boss.

KRAID QUICK-KILL
A normal fight against Kraid – the first major boss – can take some time. However, this trick involves hitting the monster with a missile at just the right time to freeze its mouth open, then unloading with super missiles. When performed correctly, this ends the fight in a matter of seconds and prevents Kraid from entering the second phase of the fight.

WALL-JUMPING
Jumping up walls is a natural part of the game, but it can be used in unintended places if you have the skill. For instance, one area is a large vertical climb that you are supposed to use the ice beam to ascend, freezing enemies and using them as stepping stones. However, with practice, you can use the wall jump to climb this area instead, eliminating the need for the ice beam entirely.
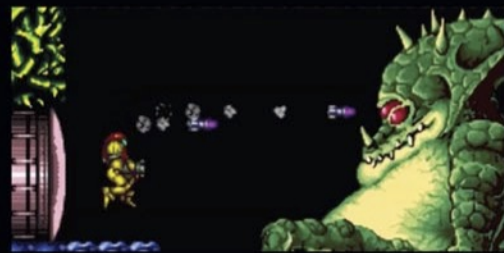

BIG METROID SKIP
The most recent trick to surface, the Big Metroid Skip lets players save time by avoiding the cutscene in Tourian where Samus is grabbed by the "baby" Metroid. Since the developers designed the encounter to make players get caught, evading the beast and escaping the room is tough, involving some intricate jumps that exploit the Metroid's movement patterns.

SHINESPARKING
When Samus runs for a certain distance, her speed booster kicks in for super-charged sprint. If you crouch during this sprint, you store a "shinespark," which can be used to propel Samus through areas. This surfaces during regular play, but what you may not know is that with some well-timed taps of the dash button, you can cheat how the game calculates when the speed booster activates, drastically reducing the space required and allowing you to store and use a shinespark in areas where it wasn't previously possible.

PHANTOON'S X-FACTOR
Dealing damage to the boss Phantoon can be tricky, because it is unpredictable and only vulnerable for short windows. Super missiles give you the most damage per hit, but they also send Phantoon into a rage. However, if you use a charged wave beam enhanced with a power bomb (which the community has dubbed the "X-factor"), you can deal damage equal to four super missiles, and avoid enraging Phantoon. You need to time this exactly, but it can save a lot of time in this challenging fight.

Is That Even Possible?
If you watch an experienced speedrunner blow through Super Metroid, you may think that the precision and skill on display is super-human. However, even the best players have yet to reach the theoretical limits of the game. Using a computer to perform ridiculous feats with frame-by-frame accuracy, a tool-assisted speedrun (TAS) can help unearth new strategies, even if they aren't humanly possible.

"This game could still see some large changes in the coming months and years," says Ivan, the winner of the Awesome Games Done Quick four-way race. "There are still things that we are not doing because it just isn't realistic for humans to be able to do some of the things the TAS does. For instance, the TAS uses a completely different route…going first to the wrecked ship for Phantoon, then down to Ridley, up to Kraid, and finishing with Draygon. Doing this involves some insane boss strategies that as of right now are not very feasible for humans to pull off."

game over

Video Game Movies By The Numbers

From *Final Fantasy: Spirits Within* to Uwe Boll polluting the silver screen with stinkers, video games and movies have had a troubled past. However, there have been some big successes as well. We looked at the box-office receipts of the major video game movies and broke down some of the biggest losers and winners. **by Andrew Reiner**

+ **Biggest opening weekend:**
Tomb Raider – $47,735,743

+ **Highest domestic gross:**
Tomb Raider – $131,168,070

+ **Highest worldwide gross:**
Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time – $336,365,676

+ **Highest production budget:**
Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time – $200,000,000 (estimate)

+ **Lowest domestic gross:**
Dead or Alive – $480,813

+ **Lowest opening weekend:**
Pokémon Heroes – $260,372

+ **Lowest worldwide gross:**
Postal – $146,741

+ **Number of theatrical Uwe Boll movies made:** 5

+ **Number of dollars lost by Uwe Boll movies:** $90,844,080

+ **Number of dollars the Resident Evil series made above production budget:** $667,934,664

data collected from Box Office Mojo, IMDB, Wikipedia, BoxOffice.com

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